

GEORGE THEOTOKIS – DIMITRIOS SIDIROPOULOS, *Byzantine Military Rhetoric in the Ninth Century. A Translation of the Anonymi Byzantini Rhetorica Militaris*. Abingdon: Routledge 2021. vii, 97 pp. – ISBN 978-0-367-90208-7

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GEORGE THEOTOKIS (Ibn Haldun University, Turkey) and DIMITRIOS SIDIROPOULOS (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki) have commendably produced the first English translation of the *Anonymi Byzantini Rhetorica Militaris*. This text is thought to belong to a three-part compendium written sometime in the ninth century by Syrianus Magister. The three parts consist of the *De re strategica (taktika)*, the *Rhetorica Militaris*, and the *Naumachiae*. The extant text of the *De re strategica* begins with a discourse on public offices and the social structure of the body politic, then moves on to discuss specific tactical matters including the role of the general, siege defence, and military manoeuvres.<sup>1</sup> The *Rhetorica Militaris* broaches the topic of military rhetoric. Syrianus provides guidance on how a general should compose speeches and how they should be delivered to his troops. Finally, the *Naumachiae*, as the name suggests, examines naval tactics.<sup>2</sup> This book contains a translation of the second part of the *Compendium (Rhetorica Militaris)* along with a critical introduction divided into two parts. The first of these (Part A) addresses the authorship and the date of the work. The second (Part B) looks at the contents of the work with a special focus on the deployment of *topoi* characteristic of the Greek rhetorical tradition.

This valuable translation emerges amidst growing interest in the military literature of the Byzantine era. Recent work has highlighted the importance of military manuals.<sup>3</sup> Studies have also revealed that military literature provides information not only about Byzantine warfare, but also about

1. GEORGE T. DENNIS, *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*. Washington 2008, pp. 10–135.

2. JOHN PRYOR – ELIZABETH JEFFREYS, *Greek Taktika. Ancient Military Writing and its Heritage*. Leiden 2006, Appendix One, pp. 455–448.

3. CONOR WHATELY (ed.), *Military Literature in the Medieval Roman World and Beyond*. Leiden 2024. See also JAMES T. CHLUP – CONOR WHATELY (eds), *Greek and Roman Military Manuals. Genre and History*. London 2020.

Byzantine culture and society.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, there is something of a trend in recent scholarship to analyse military treatises not only in a military context but also in a socio-cultural or political one.<sup>5</sup> The translation under review will prove useful for research along these lines. As the authors write in their abstract: ‘This influential text offers a valuable insight into the warrior ethic of the period, the role of religion in the justification of war, and the view of other military cultures by the Byzantine elite.’

Part A of the introduction begins with a discussion on the authorship of the *Rhetorica Militaris*.<sup>6</sup> The authors note that while the text was once thought to be an anonymous treatise, CONSTANTINE ZUCKERMAN has convincingly shown that the RM along with the *De re strategica* and the *Naumachiae* all share a ‘common paternity’ and were written by Syrianus Magister.<sup>7</sup> THEOTOKIS and SIDIROPOULOS then look at the date of composition. While KÖCHLY and RÜSTOW argued in their 1855 edition that the RM belonged to the sixth century, subsequent scholars, including PHILIP RANCE, have conclusively demonstrated that it almost certainly belongs to the middle-Byzantine period.<sup>8</sup> THEOTOKIS and SIDIROPOULOS propose a plausible date of composition based on the geopolitical context of the ninth century. In particular, the inclusion of a naval treatise in the *Compendium*, they argue, would be most at home in the reign of Basil I (875–886). Next, Syrianus’ sources are examined. For anyone familiar with military literature, some of Syrianus’ debts are immediately apparent. It is clear, as the authors state, that he borrowed from Aelian in his *De re Strategica* and probably also from Philo of Byzantium and Aeneas Tacticus. His discussion on speechwriting and rhetoric in the RM makes frequent use of non-military sources. For instance, he shows knowledge of Plutarch’s *Life of Phocion*. Syrianus, however, did not blindly imitate these texts. He engaged explicitly with Hermogenes of Tarsus when he noted

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4. GEORGIOS CHATZELIS, *Byzantine Military Manuals as Literary Works and Practical Handbooks. The Case of the Tenth-Century Sylloge Tacticorum*. London 2019.

5. For instance, GEORGIOS CHATZELIS, *Wars and Cultural Wars. The Military, Cultural and Ideological Background to the Emergence of Byzantine Military Treatises (c. 800–1100)*. In: WHATELY (ed.), *Military Literature*, pp. 255–299.

6. Henceforth the *Rhetorica Militaris* will be referred to as RM.

7. CONSTANTINE ZUCKERMAN, *The Compendium of Syrianus Magister*. *Jahrbuch der österreichischen Byzantinistik* 40 (1990) pp. 209–224. See also SALVATORE COSENTINO, *The Syrianos’ Strategikon. A 9th-Century Source?* *Bizantinistica* 2 (2000) pp. 243–280.

8. PHILIP RANCE, *The Date of the Military Compendium of Syrianus Magister*. *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 100 (2007) pp. 701–737.

that he would be departing from Hermogenes by not formulating opposing arguments to war. He also criticised Apollodorus of Damascus' idea of a floating bridge for crossing rivers. Furthermore, he seems to have deliberately avoided using the myths and anecdotes commonly found *pro-gymnasmata*. Thus, it is probable that the author intended his work to be of practical use: THEOTOKIS and SIDIROPOULOS suggest that it formed a handbook for generals. Part A ends with an overview of the treatise's manuscript tradition.

Part B begins with a short history of Greco-Roman exhortation and speech-writing. The authors first point out that there were two kinds of speeches delivered by generals to their troops: the first kind was given to the soldiers in an assembly place, while the second kind was the battle exhortation delivered when the soldiers were already on the battlefield. In other words, there were pre-battle and battle speeches. THEOTOKIS and SIDIROPOULOS then review the history of military exhortation from Homer and Thucydides to George of Pisidia and Procopius of Caesarea. In doing this, they outline the literary background of the RM. The practicalities of military speeches are then briefly discussed. Battle exhortations were probably much shorter and less elaborate than our sources would suggest. If the forces were small enough (up to 2000), the speech could be delivered to the whole array before battle. If the army was larger, it would probably be written down and sent to officers who could deliver it to their unit. Delivering such speeches was typically the role of the herald or cantor. Next, the authors look at the skills of a commander as a public speaker. They rightly suggest that generals were traditionally expected to possess excellent communication skills, since they often had to inspire their troops and raise morale, and this was often done by giving rousing speeches.

Finally, the use of rhetorical *topoi* is examined. The authors look at the way Syrianus employed tropes commonly found in military literature. For instance, we find the trope of reminding the soldiers of their past victories. (It is noteworthy that this particular trope did not appear before the RM, but occurs frequently afterwards.) Syrianus also recommends demeaning one's enemies to give soldiers confidence. Additionally, he suggests that generals should proclaim that rewards await those who fight bravely. Such rewards could be either material or immaterial. The general should also appeal to the Christian faith of his soldiers. Syrianus draws a strong distinction between Christians and non-Christians. Christian soldiers should fight to defend their faith and their God. They should also fight to defend their patria and their compatriots. THEOTOKIS and SIDIROPOULOS also

detect a strong theme of neighbourly love, as well as an anti-violence motif. While Byzantine writers believed that God could and would grant victory on the battlefield, he was not understood to be a warmonger. As the two authors put it: ‘Yet, as Byzantine authors eagerly condemned the (Old Testament) idea of God as a warmonger who ordained war against other people, Christians or non-Christians, they equally denounced the notion that war could become a means to the remission of sins and hence martyrdom’ (p. 52). For Syrianus, God would grant victory only if the cause was just. The idea that war should be just is stated explicitly in Maurice’s *Strategikon*.<sup>9</sup>

There are other notable themes present in the RM which are important in the current research landscape. Several recent papers have stressed the need to evaluate military themes in political contexts. For instance, a comparison between the general and the political official, as well as an exploration of the role of the general as an orator, have been discussed in a recent chapter by DIMITRIS KRALLIS.<sup>10</sup> The overlap between the military and the political is a prominent theme in the RM. On the very first page Syrianus writes: ‘The same style of public speech as that with which a general addresses his soldiers for war may also be used by the political leader addressing the citizens, whenever he urges them to fight when the enemy is at the gates’ (p. 57). It is also worth noting that Syrianus devotes a considerable amount of space to discussing fabricated arguments as a useful tool for generals (pp. 66–69, 71–72). Such fabrications or lies could involve the general saying that he had received encouragement from the emperor or having an enemy deserter falsely report that there is wealthy city nearby to entice his soldiers. It could also involve producing fabricated documents such as forged letters. The authors astutely observe that a notable instance of this method in action can be found in Agathias’ *Histories*.<sup>11</sup> During the siege of Phasis (555/556), the Byzantine general Martin had a fake imperial messenger deliver a forged letter from the emperor which said that a relief force was on its way to the beleaguered garrison at Phasis. The letter had its intended effect. The soldiers were heartened to know that reinforcements would soon arrive. Moreover, they were eager to achieve victory before their arrival so

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9. GEORGE T. DENNIS, Maurice’s *Strategikon*. Handbook of Byzantine Military Strategy. Philadelphia 1984, VIII.2.12, p. 84.

10. DIMITRIS KRALLIS, The Politics of War. Virtue, Tyche, Persuasion and the Byzantine General. In: RICHARD EVANS – SHAUN TOUGHER (eds), Generalship in Ancient Greece, Rome and Byzantium. Edinburgh 2022, pp. 284–305.

11. For an English translation of this episode see JOSEPH D. FRENDO (tr.), Agathias. The Histories. Berlin 1975, 3.23–24, pp. 93–95.

as to claim the prizes of victory for themselves and not have them snatched away by the relief force. The news also spread to the besieging Persians who were panicked at the thought of a large enemy force on its way. Here we see the overlap between military and political texts and the importance of evaluating them side by side.

THEOTOKIS and SIDIROPOULOS' translation is excellent and is accompanied by helpful footnotes containing definitions of certain Greek terms. It is more than sufficient to fulfil its stated aim: The purpose of our translation is to make the text of Syrianos Magistros accessible to any scholar who does not have the reading skills necessary to go through the original text in the medieval Greek language, so that it can be studied together with other works of the same genre and, hopefully, shed more light on an aspect of war and political propaganda in this critical period for the history of the Byzantine Empire' (p. 56). Hopefully this translation will encourage further research on the RM, Syrianus' *Compendium*, and Byzantine military literature as a whole. One day, it would be useful to have all three parts of the *Compendium* gathered in a single volume, so that they can be read and better understood as a unified whole.

**Keywords**

military manuals; exhortation