Night Combat in Late Antiquity in the Light of Roman Military Treatises

Abstract. The aim of the text entitled: Night Combat in Late Antiquity in the Light of Roman Military Treatises is to present the theory and practice of night combat in the 6th century. Based on source analysis (military treatises – mainly Strategikon, and Late Roman and Byzantine historiography), the author presented the theory and practice of night fighting. Apart from classical methods of analysis, the psychology of the battlefield was also used. This gives us a complete picture of how Byzantines use the night as an advantage on the battlefield.

Keywords: Night combat, stratagems, Byzantine military manuals, Late Antiquity

War is akin to a hunt. To overcome a wild animal, one needs to track it, employ snares, lay an ambush, sneak up on it and surround it, and use other stratagems, not brute force. In warfare, you should do the same, regardless if the enemies are many or few. Trying to defeat the enemy in open battle, fighting face to face, even if victory is likely, may result in heavy casualties and prove risky. Apart from a few specific exceptions, it is folly to seek out victory, whose glory rings hollow, in such costly manner.

The above excerpt of the Strategikon is straight out a definition of late Roman military science. Even if a slightly different approach to war could be observed at the strategic or state level, the commander had a specific task ahead of him. A Strategos was supposed to pursue victory at all costs and using every method available. Even if it meant deceiving his own soldiers, ravaging imperial

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lands to cause famine\textsuperscript{4}, or torturing and murdering captives\textsuperscript{5}, it had to be done. As Vegetius put it:

> It is the mark of a great leader that they always first strive to – if possible without any losses – destroy, or at least dishearten the enemy by launching raids from a concealed position, rather than seeking an open battle, where both sides are subject to the same threats\textsuperscript{6}.

This was a markedly different approach to that of the classical era, when Romans believed that the end did not always justify the means and that the enemy was best met face to face\textsuperscript{7}. In late antiquity, when commanders were held accountable by the emperor for their tasks and could lose their position quite quickly\textsuperscript{8}, the final outcome was the most important thing. The situation only began to change somewhat in the Middle Byzantine period, when treatise authors began to warn against deliberately spreading pestilence\textsuperscript{9} among enemy soldiers\textsuperscript{10} and, to some extent, against attacking the enemy at night\textsuperscript{11}. Apart from the above, every trick, every deceit and every method to achieve success in war, preferably with the least

\textsuperscript{4} *Strategicon*, VIIIB, 4.  

\textsuperscript{5} *Digesta Justiniani Augusti*, XLIX, 16, 3, 10, ed. Th. Mommsen, P. Krueger, Berolini 1870 (cetera: *Digesta*).  

\textsuperscript{6} Quisquis hos artis bellicae commentarios ex probatissimis auctoribus breuiatios legere dignabitur, quam primum rationem proelii depugnandique cupit audire praecella. Sed conflictus publicus duarum aut trium horarum certamine definitur, post quem partis eius, quae superata fuerit, spes omnes interdunt. Ideo omnia ante cogitandae sunt, ante temptanda, ante facienda sunt, quam ad ultimum ueniatur abruptum. Boni enim duces non aperto proelio, in quo est commune periculum, sed ex occulto semper ademptant, ut integris suis, quantum possunt, hostes interimant vel certe terreant… *Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus*, *Epitoma rei militaris – Abriß des Militärwesens. Lateinisch und deutsch*, III, 9, ed. et trans. F.L. Müller, Stuttgart 1997 (cetera: *Vegetius*).  

\textsuperscript{7} This was also the case with night clashes, especially ambushes, which were considered dishonourable. According to Livius, the ancient Romans did not practice war secretly, but openly, without ambushes or night attacks. *Titus Livius, Römische Geschichte*, XLII, 47, ed. et trans. H.J. Hillen, J. Feix, München 1974–2000 (cetera: *Livius*).  

\textsuperscript{8} *Digesta*, XLIX, 16, 3, 1. The commander could lose his position just because of a defeat in a pitched battle. *Strategicon*, VIIIIB, 45. This was a very different approach from that employed in the Republican era, where commanders, because of their background, were not usually punished for their failures, cf.: N.S. Rosenstein, *Imperatores Victi. Military Defeat and Aristocratic Competition in the Middle and Late Republic*, Oxford 1990; J. Rich, *Roman Attitudes to Defeat in Battle under the Republic*, [in:] *Vae Victis! Perdedores en el mundo antiguo*, ed. F. Pina Polo, J. Remesal Rodríguez, F. Marco Simón, Barcelona 2012, p. 83–112.  

\textsuperscript{9} The opposition against this practice in the Middle Byzantine period was not rooted in Christian charity, but rather in the fear of the plague spreading to the Roman army and the local population.  


\textsuperscript{11} According to the narrative sources at least, in reality no commander was reluctant to attack the enemy at night. G. Chatzelis, *Byzantine Military Manuals as Literary Works and Practical Handbooks. The Case of the Tenth-Century Sylloge Tacticorum*, London–New York 2019, p. 117–119.
possible loss of life, was allowed. Such an opportunistic approach to war was not at all in contrast to the ideological roots of the conflicts\textsuperscript{12}, stemming from the Christian doctrine and the Roman understanding of just war, as well as the \textit{modus operandi} of legions developed over the centuries.

\section*{Introduction}

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the theoretical military works of late antiquity in search of a possible complete model of the conduct of Roman troops during night fighting. A similar case study, but for a later period, was carried out in an excellent work by Georgios Chatzelis\textsuperscript{13}, although it focused on other themes, including the fascinating use of night fights as a literary topos\textsuperscript{14}. Building such a model is, of course, impossible without the use of narrative sources that can help verify the information provided by the authors of treatises. The core source base will consist of two treatises written in late antiquity – a work by Vegetius entitled \textit{De Re militari} and an anonymous work written at the beginning of the 7\textsuperscript{th} century, i.e. the \textit{Strategicon}\textsuperscript{15}. These two works of undisputed late antiquity


\textsuperscript{13} The problem of night fighting and the related challenges were presented by G. Chatzelis, \textit{Byzantine Military Manuals}…, p. 77, 113–119. He emphasised the significance of a military camp which gave the soldiers a sense of safety.

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Ibidem}. Georgios Chatzelis also indicated this when he described night attacks which, despite some moral doubts of the author of \textit{Sylloge Tacticorum}, were gladly used by Roman commanders because they resulted in smaller casualties. \textit{Ibidem}, p. 118–119.

\textsuperscript{15} It is worth noting that the title itself is an artificial creation, and that the first manuscript, in accordance with Eastern Roman practice, was probably entitled \textit{Taktiká}. S. Gyftopoulou, \textit{Historical Information gathered from the Mauricii Strategikon}, BΣυμ 23, 2013, p. 55–89 (here 71–74). On the author’s sources cf.: Ph. Rance, Maurice’s Strategicon and ‘the Ancients’: the Late Antique Reception of Aelian and Arrian, [in:] \textit{Greek Taktika. Ancient Military Writing and its Heritage}. Proceedings
will be complemented by information from a work on land warfare by Syrianus Magister. Although Syrianus’ compendium is increasingly often dated back to the Middle Byzantine period\(^\text{16}\), it is likely that the author drew on works from the late antique period\(^\text{17}\), so much so that Vasiliy Kuchma considered the treatise on strategy to be a work written in the circles of Justinian the Great\(^\text{18}\). Syrianus’ work is important in regards to night fighting since it contains quite detailed utilitarian information, not available in any other theoretical work. The image created on the basis of theoretical works will be supplemented and confronted with narrative sources, mainly from authors closely associated with late antique Roman army: Ammianus Marcellinus, Procopius of Caesarea, and Theophylact Simocatta\(^\text{19}\).


\(^\text{17}\) However, this was not a mere compilation in which the author rewrote parts of earlier works. According to research carried out by Philip Rance, the manuscript is free of copyist errors. In that case, if the treatise has been copied since the sixth century, we have an unusual situation in which none of the copyists made the slightest error in their work. In addition, the copy of the compendium included in Codex Ambrosianus graecus 139 did not undergo any modification in terms of vocabulary, which may also indicate that it was a fairly new work at the time the codex was written. This does not exclude compilation, but in such a situation we are not dealing with copying the original text or paraphrasing it, but rather with its careful and conscious interpretation, including the adaptation of the professional vocabulary to the author’s contemporary Greek. Ph. Rance, The Date of the Military Compendium…, p. 734–737. This means that the author of the treatise was Syrianus, who wrote down his work in the Middle Byzantine period, but the substantive basis of the work may have been earlier treatises that have not survived to our time. The author did not compile fragments of earlier works, but rather used knowledge contained in them and updated the vocabulary and realities.


\(^\text{19}\) Although Theophylact’s links with the army were the weakest among the above mentioned authors, contemporary historiographical studies by authors such as Terézia Olajos and Michael Whitby
The choice of narrative sources is not random, as Georgios Chatzelis had to cope with literary *topoi*, perfectly demonstrating how night combat was used to build a positive or negative image of the commanders, however, such a situation should not be the case with the above authors\textsuperscript{20}. 

Περὶ νυκτοπολέμου

In his *opus magnum*, Vegetius mentions night fighting many times. As befits a theoretician, his mentions do not have much useful value, but are nevertheless worth mentioning. Above all, in Vegetius’ work, offensive actions at night are carried out by the enemy, and the Romans must learn how to protect themselves against such threat\textsuperscript{21}. The army, in extreme situations, could march at night, but the author also advised against this, especially in winter\textsuperscript{22}. Of course this rule did not apply to scouts, who were supposed to operate much more freely at night than during the day\textsuperscript{23}. The pieces of advice offered by Vegetius provided basic information without going into detail and, in case of night combat, mainly concerned defence against hostile attacks. This is particularly evident in the paragraphs dealing with the establishment of military camps\textsuperscript{24} and deploying guards\textsuperscript{25}. Already in the first book, Vegetius, in a moralistic style, lamented the Romans’ failure to build marching camps, adding that, as a result, enemy cavalry sometimes surprised...
the Romans with night strikes\textsuperscript{26}. Enemy attacks at night are mentioned several times throughout the text as a kind of memento for commanders, the exception being paragraph IX of Book III, where the author indicated that the Romans could also use all kinds of war trickery, but without going into any technical details\textsuperscript{27}. Despite the numerous references, Vegetius’ advice can be summed up in line with the nature of his work: the Roman military faces decline, soldiers stopped building military camps while even barbarians take shelter behind their carts at night\textsuperscript{28}, so it is necessary to return to the old military customs. The author of \textit{De Re militari} warned against hostile night attacks, rather than advising this form of warfare to Roman leaders. After nightfall, the Romans could send out scouts or, if need be, move troops to surprise the enemy in the morning. This approach of Vegetius was probably due to the reception of theoretical works of the republican era, which the author was eager to use and compile\textsuperscript{29}. As already mentioned in the introduction, the authors of literary sources who wrote in the republican era suggested that Romans considered fighting at night to be dishonourable\textsuperscript{30}. It is very possible that Vegetius’ apprehension to conducting offensive operations at night was the result of the source material he used, which has not survived to our time.

Similarly to Vegetius, the anonymous author of the \textit{Strategicon} mentioned night-time activities on several occasions. The guidance of the pseudo-Maurice did not differ significantly from that of Vegetius when it came to marching at night to starting positions, using spies and scouts, or securing camps after dark, although it should be noted that the \textit{Strategicon} features much more detailed descriptions. What makes \textit{Strategicon} different from the work of Vegetius is the approach to night attacks carried out by the Romans.

The author of \textit{Strategicon} has left a fairly detailed description of how night battles are fought; this account, supplemented by Syrianus Magister’s guidance, will form the basis for further discussion. The author divided offensive operations after dark into three phases that are clearly visible in the text, namely: preparation for operations, approach to the position, and the clash itself. The first phase was presented in \textit{Strategicon} in quite some detail and in this aspect the text definitely stands out from the rest of the sources\textsuperscript{31}. The author of the treatise advised to weaken the enemy’s vigilance. An attack on the enemy at night could be

\textsuperscript{26} Vegetius, I, 21.
\textsuperscript{27} Vegetius, III, 19.
\textsuperscript{28} Vegetius, III, 10.
\textsuperscript{30} Livius, XLII, 47.
\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Strategicon}, IX, 2.
successful if the opponent was not expecting it, otherwise, the Roman ruse could have been thwarted. In order to dull the enemy’s vigilance, it was necessary to start negotiations with the enemy by sending envoys\textsuperscript{32}. The opening of peace negotiations, which were heading in the right direction, was intended to put the enemy off guard; the author of the treatise corroborated this trick with the example of the actions of the Roman leader Lusius in the time of Trajan\textsuperscript{33}. Another way to lull hostile vigilance was routine. The author of \textit{Strategicon} advised leading the army out in formation every morning to the field of battle, but then turning back to camp, feigning fear of the enemy. Such actions were intended to assure the enemy of the weak morale and low battle readiness of the Romans. After repeating the manoeuvre for several days and dulling the enemy’s vigilance, it was necessary to strike at night against an unsuspecting foe. This method was also illustrated by an example; the author used contemporary events this time when the Avars surprised the Roman cavalry near Heraclea\textsuperscript{34}. The final subterfuge involved the use of deserters as carriers of misinformation, although the author did not indicate whether or not they were aware of that. The Roman deserters were supposed to tell the enemy commander about declining Roman morale. At the same time, supposedly upon confirmation of the deserters’ information, the Roman \textit{strategos} would have rolled up camp and retreated a short distance\textsuperscript{35}. Convinced of a Roman retreat, the barbarians relaxed their discipline and abandoned their guard at night, and that was when the Romans attacked. The above example show how important it was to properly prepare the night attack. The enemy’s vigilance had to be properly dulled before striking in order to gain maximum benefit with minimum losses. As mentioned in the introduction, the Romans pursued success at all costs. An interesting addition regarding the preparations for night combat is a text by Syrianus Magister, who also recommended taking care of the morale of the Roman soldiers. According to the author, oaths had to be taken from Romans going into battle that they would fight bravely and choose death rather than flee the battlefield\textsuperscript{36}. The \textit{strategos} should also swear that, after the battle, he would reward the fighting soldiers accordingly, and that in the event of the death of any of the Romans, the reward would go to his descendant (here literally the heir – κληρονόμος)\textsuperscript{37}. Such oaths and promises were meant to bolster the morale of the soldiers going into battle, taming, at least in part, their fear.

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Strategicon}, IX, 2, 1–7.
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Strategicon}, IX, 2, 6–7. Probably in 116 AD, near Edessa or Nisibis.
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Strategicon}, IX, 2, 14–17.
\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Strategicon}, XXXIX, 11.
Once the enemy’s vigilance has been dulled enough, the Roman *strategoi* were to proceed with the second phase of operations, namely to move out into striking positions. It was a complex manoeuvre, requiring good reconnaissance and proper discipline within the ranks of the stratiotes\(^38\). Much also depended on whether infantry or cavalry was chosen for action. Although the cavalry, thanks to its speed, could do much more damage to the enemy in the last phase, it was definitely easier for the infantry to approach the enemy camp unnoticed. Operations were best conducted during a moonlit night\(^39\), so that soldiers could see something and not bump into each other while marching\(^40\). The march had to be planned well in advance, so as to allow the soldiers a moment to rest before the clash. The attack itself should begin just before dawn, when the enemy’s alertness was at its lowest and soldiers are plunged into the deepest sleep\(^41\).

The army should be led to the starting positions by an experienced scout who knew the local terrain very well\(^42\). Syrianus added that scouts should be properly equipped with large shields, as well as shin guards and well-hobnailed boots to protect against Roman caltrops\(^43\). During the march noise of any kind was forbidden and the Romans should cease communication. The author of *Strategicon*, demonstrating a great deal of experience, stated that an army marching to its starting positions should do so in a marching column, as soldiers moving into position for a night attack in battle formation, with the front advanced, made too much noise. It was only when they reached their starting positions that the columns had to be expanded into battle formation, which should not be too difficult as the troops should march one behind the other maintaining the depth of the developed formation. In extreme cases, the author advised, commands should be given by means of a whistle or by hitting the shield. That is, in a way that would not necessarily alert the enemy guards.

The transition to the final phase, the clash, was one of the more difficult ones. The *strategos* should deploy his troops around the enemy camp in such a way as to strike from three directions at once, leaving the enemy a way of retreat in accordance

\(^{38}\) *Strategicon*, IX, 2, 33–51. The need for good reconnaissance was also mentioned by Syrianus Magister cf.: Syrianus, XXXIX, 12–18.

\(^{39}\) Syrianus, on the contrary, advised operations to be conducted on a moonless night, preferably when the stars are hidden behind the clouds. Instead, the scouts were to carry specially prepared lanterns to illuminate only the marching Romans. Syrianus, XXXIX, 19–34.

\(^{40}\) *Strategicon*, IX, 2, 26–30.


\(^{42}\) *Strategicon*, IX, 2, 33–36.

\(^{43}\) Syrianus, XXXIX, 29–33. In addition, Syrianus mentioned that the march leaders should be followed by another small security detachment, whose role was to boost the morale of the scouts and to pose a silent threat in the event that the scouts decided to flee. Syrianus, XXXIX, 33–35.
with the motto νίκα καὶ μὴ ὑπερνίκα. The author of the treatise advised against complete encirclement, which could lead to the enemy closing ranks and taking up the fight. The whole attack was calculated to cause panic among the enemy to prevent hostile party from putting up a fight. The troops should attack at the sound of the trumpets, giving the impression of being more numerous than they actually are. During the attack, the enemy camp should be buried with arrows discharged by archers, both on foot and on horseback as well as javelins. Syrianus additionally hinted at the use of saboteurs. Even before the attack, the Romans were to select a few soldiers who spoke the enemy’s language and, when the opportune moment arrived, they would infiltrate the enemy ranks and, in the hostile camp, heighten the panic, encouraging them to flee. It was all calculated to create as much panic as possible. However, if the intended effect failed, the Romans should have had adequate reserves that could have been used if the clash turned into a regular night battle or if some Roman units had to retreat under enemy pressure. In this way, the Romans had sufficient support in case of any setback, provided they kept correct battle formation and were ready to receive the enemy.

Night combat in the light of narrative sources – Ammianus, Procopius, Theophylact

Most of the elements of each phase are confirmed in narrative sources dating back to late antiquity. Ammianus Marcelinus, Procopius and Theophylact Simocatta several times mentioned night marches to ensure a better position for the Romans the next morning, but the Romans were also more than once outmanoeuvred by their enemies at night. Night marches mainly served the purpose of taking a better position for the next day’s battle or bypassing a strong enemy grouping.


45 Strategicon, IX, 2, 48–51. This trick has been known since ancient times, cf. for example: Polyaenus, Strategika, III, 3, ed. et trans. K. Brodersen, Berlin 2017.

46 Strategicon, IX, 2, 18–23.

47 Syrianus, XXXIX, 43–46.

48 Syrianus was silent about the need for keeping reserves.


50 The Persians, for example, did so, bypassing the Roman marching camp: Ammianus, XIX, 8, 2. In 586, the Persian army rushing to the relief of the fortress of Chlomaron bypassed the besieging Roman troops, taking up position which placed them with the fortifications behind. On hearing the news, panic arose in the Roman camp and the army threw itself into a night flight. Simocatta, II, 8–9.
without a clash. Of course, there were also situations when Roman troops took up position for night attacks on a resting enemy. According to the theoretical papers\textsuperscript{51}, such manoeuvres were extremely difficult and required a great deal of discipline from the soldiers. The best description of this initial approach is found in the work of Theophylact Simocatta\textsuperscript{52} and has already been discussed many times by linguists\textsuperscript{53}. However, it is worth noting the technical aspects of said description.

In the year 587, the Avar army invaded Thrace. After dealing with the Roman troops, the nomads proceeded to plunder the province, which the Roman strategos Comentiolus intended to exploit. The Roman commander’s plan was quite simple, the Roman army would approach close to the poorly secured nomad camp at night and strike the enemy late at night or early in the morning, achieving complete surprise\textsuperscript{54}. Theophylact’s narrative concentrated on the element in which the Romans failed, but still included a lot of interesting additional information. So, the Romans were to march in a column to the starting position for the attack, soldier after soldier\textsuperscript{55}, keeping quiet, and giving commands in whispers one to the other\textsuperscript{56}. This was in line with what author of the Strategicon recommended. Full success was impeded by communication, as soldiers gave the command one to the other, thus the message was distorted and understood as a retreat order for the whole unit, instead of one soldier whose pack animal’s straps had become loose. Despite the retreat of the unit in which the confusion occurred, the night attack was carried out with considerable success by another unit\textsuperscript{57}, and the success was so great that even the life of the Khagan was in danger. This means that the Romans, according to the art laid out in the Strategicon\textsuperscript{58}, headed for their starting positions from at least two directions. The description included in Theophylact’s History seems to confirm some general principles for carrying out night manoeuvres, also showing their effectiveness.

Under the cover of the night, the Romans were also very eager to get their forces across rivers\textsuperscript{59}, and even smashed ice on frozen waters thus preventing barbarians

\textsuperscript{51} Strategicon, IX, 2, 26–33; Syrianus, XXXIX, 3–12.
\textsuperscript{52} Simocatta, II, 15.
\textsuperscript{54} Simocatta, II, 15.
\textsuperscript{55} Simocatta, II, 15, 6–8.
\textsuperscript{56} Simocatta, II, 15, 7–9. Pointing out that the soldiers giving the command one to the other led to its distortion.
\textsuperscript{57} Simocatta, II, 15, 11–13.
\textsuperscript{58} Strategicon, IX, 2, 33–51.
\textsuperscript{59} Ammianus, XVII, 1, 4; XXIV, 6, 5. It is also worth noting that Illyrian pirates were said to attack during the night. Ammianus XIV, 2, 2. Rome’s adversaries were also aware of this, sometimes staying up all night to ensure that the legions did not cross the river. Ammianus XVIII, 1, 10–12. Also in the work of Simocatta. Simocatta, II, 11; V, 5; V, 8.
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from crossing\(^60\). Night crossings were intended to prevent the enemy from detecting forces crossing the river in time, thus ensuring the safety of the Roman army and the element of surprise\(^61\). In case of combat, night very often marked the end of the struggle as both sides retreated to their camps\(^62\). Sometimes night was also a lifesaver for the Romans surprised by the barbarians, as was the case with the unit led by Arbition, which fell into an Alaman ambush. Ammianus pointed out that thanks to the coming of the night some of the soldiers slipped out of the trap and were reunited with their troops the next day\(^63\). Night was also used by the barbarians as an asset when storming difficult positions, albeit not always successfully\(^64\).

On the one hand, soldiers camping at night were susceptible to enemy night attacks, hence all the information about the art of setting up camp and night watches\(^65\). When troops were on the offensive, night attacks were an excellent way of decimating a larger enemy army with relatively few casualties. At times, the Romans managed to surprise barbarians in this way; barbarians, who in regular conditions would not have fought but rather retreated. The best example of this type of attack is a night expedition against Slavs under the command of Ardagast: taken by surprise in their sleep, they were forced to fight on the enemy’s terms\(^66\). This behaviour was in compliance with the general spirit of Roman military treatises, which assumed gaining any advantage by all available means. This procedure is mentioned many times in military treatises, which is a clear indication that it was an important element of a soldier’s profession.

Although night battles were rare, they are also mentioned in the analysed narrative sources. An example of these would be the night attack, described by Ammianus, led by the Gallic legions on the Persian camp during the siege of Amida, which, however, ended in defeat. The legionaries successfully defeated the Persian advance guard\(^67\), but the sounds of battle awoke the resting enemy soldiers who joined the clash, forcing the Romans to retreat\(^68\). Theophylact also left a brief description of a fratricidal night battle between the Persians, when Baram’s rebel troops smashed Chosroes’ forces in a night battle\(^69\). He also described the clash between Persian forces, supplemented by an auxiliary Roman corps and Baram’s rebels\(^70\).

\(^{60}\) Ammianus, XVII, 2, 3.
\(^{61}\) Ammianus, XIV, 10, 7.
\(^{62}\) Ammianus, XIX, 2, 14; XX, 11, 2; XXV, 3, 12; XXXVII, 7, 8; Procopius, I, 13, 38; III, 19, 31.
\(^{63}\) Ammianus, XV, 3, 8.
\(^{64}\) The Romans successfully defended their positions in the mountain passes during the assault by the Avars, and then retreated without problems to the main forces. Simocatta, V, 4–5.
\(^{65}\) Cf. for example De Munitionibus Castrorum; Vegetius, III, 2; III, 8; Strategicon, V, 4; VIIB, 9; XIIB, 22; XIIIC.
\(^{66}\) Simocatta, VI, 7. Truth be told, Ardagast found refuge in a dense forest.
\(^{67}\) Ammianus, XIX, 5, 7–9.
\(^{68}\) Ammianus, XIX, 5, 9–10.
\(^{69}\) Simocatta, IV, 9.
\(^{70}\) Simocatta, V, 9.
In the latter case, Baram’s troops intended to launch a surprise night attack on the loyalist camp, however Roman guards spotted the approaching army just in time. A regular clash ensued in which Roman discipline triumphed on the battlefield\textsuperscript{71}, although Baram’s troops avoided total defeat. All source accounts confirm that discipline was extremely important during the night marches and battles. The accounts referred to also confirm that the tricks depicted in the military treaties were indeed used on battlefields in late antiquity.

**Fear of the dark in the Middle Byzantine period**

After the source analysis, it is worthwhile to dwell on one more aspect of night fighting and how it affected soldiers\textsuperscript{72}. One need only recall Leo VI’s opinion of the Arabs, who, in his view, were not fond of confrontations after sunset\textsuperscript{73}. Fear of the dark was nothing new and should rather be attributed to every human being: a battle is a traumatic situation and an uncertain event, darkness only intensifies these stressors\textsuperscript{74}. Also Ammianus claimed that night increased fear in people\textsuperscript{75}. Fear of the dark is an atavistic fear rooted in human nature\textsuperscript{76}, magnifying other stressors and made worse by combat. It can be divided into two categories. The first would be the fear of camping in foreign territory so, to a large extent, fear of the unknown. The other category is represented by a fear of fighting at night. Roman commanders and theoreticians used different ways of overcoming night-related fear\textsuperscript{77}. Syrianus’ work includes information about oaths and significant rewards for the soldiers attacking the enemy at night as a fear-dispelling enticement\textsuperscript{78}. A night attack on enemy positions required significant courage and discipline, because it was easier

\textsuperscript{71} Simocatta, V, 9, 7–8.


\textsuperscript{73} The Taktika of Leon VI. Text, Translation, and Commentary, XVIII, 112, ed. et trans. G.T. Dennis, Washington 2010 [= DOT, 12; CFHB.SW, 49] (cetera: Leonis Imperatoris Tactica).


\textsuperscript{75} Ammianus, XIV, 2, 9; XI, 8, 18; XVIII, 6, 14.

\textsuperscript{76} Cf. for example E. Gullone, *The Development of Normal Fear: A Century of Research*, CPsyR 20.4, 2000, p. 429–451; Ch. Grillon, M. Pellowski, K.R. Merikangas, M. Davis, *Darkness Facilitates the Acoustic Startle Reflex in Humans*, BPsy 42.6, 1997, p. 453–460. A question arises if it was a fear of the dark or a fear of the night itself. Both fears are atavistic in nature; research indicates that in general, humans are more afraid of the night (i.e. in this case, the night can also be a factor magnifying fear). Cf. L. Yadon et al., *Night or Darkness, which Intensifies the Feeling of Fear?*, IJPsy 97.1, 2015, p. 46–57. Fear itself has also been defined as primal: J. Bourke, *Fear and Anxiety: Writing about Emotion in Modern History*, HWJ 55.1, 2003, p. 124.

\textsuperscript{77} The problem of night fighting and the related challenges were presented by G. Chatzelis, *Byzantine Military Manuals*…, p. 77, 113–119. He emphasised the significance of a military camp which gave the soldiers a sense of safety.

\textsuperscript{78} Syrianus, XXXIX.
to make a mistake at night\textsuperscript{79}. On the other hand, Polyaenus’ work includes information that soldiers spending the night on enemy territory would easily panic, and so the commanders had to handle the problem in various ways, the most brutal being an order given by Clearchus to kill every soldier who panicked in the night and rose from his bedding\textsuperscript{80}. A fear of the night and enemy attack was replaced by the fear of inevitable punishment. Interestingly, Byzantine historiographers took note of the art of night fighting and used it frequently in constructing their own narratives. In the case of night attack and defeat, very frequently the blame fell on the commander and his lack of experience or downright incompetence\textsuperscript{81}.

The authors of \textit{De velitatione bellica}\textsuperscript{82} and \textit{Sylloge Tacticorum} recommended taking advantage of the fear of the night spent on enemy territory\textsuperscript{83}. The Sylloge considered however the attack at night an act of honour, only if the attacking army was weaker than its enemy. Otherwise, when the forces were comparable, it was an act of dishonour\textsuperscript{84}. Considering Roman warfare in the 10\textsuperscript{th} century, though, this was antiquated thinking and no military commander launching a night attack worried about honour-related aspects\textsuperscript{85}. Nikephoros II Phokas serves as an excellent example: heading a strong invading army, he attacked the Arabs on Crete by night and won a spectacular victory, and the praise of Leo the Deacon\textsuperscript{86}.

If the enemy set up camp for the night on Roman territory, the attack had to be unexpected, in order to disrupt the enemy’s tactical organisation and damage his morale, at the same time leaving open the only safe road into the enemy territory to encourage flight\textsuperscript{87}. Launching such an attack was a demanding task for Roman soldiers, but when it did happen, the results could be outstanding. The best example illustrating that is when troops headed by Leo Phocas launched a night attack against some Magyars in the 960s. Although, according to Leo the Deacon, the Roman troops were few and unprepared for fighting, the night attack on a clearly larger force brought about an excellent result with only a handful of Magyars left alive\textsuperscript{88}. Awoken from a deep sleep, in which they were trying to rest their bodies and calm their nerves, the enemy soldiers became easy prey for the Romans. Violently roused from their slumber and attacked, they thought only of fleeing

\textsuperscript{79} The best example is an attack previously described by Theophylact Simocatta during a night march against the Avars.


\textsuperscript{81} G. Chatzelis, \textit{Byzantine Military Manuals}…, p. 115–116.

\textsuperscript{82} \textit{De velitatione bellica}, XXIV, [in:] \textit{Three Byzantine Military…} (cetera: \textit{De velitatione bellica}).

\textsuperscript{83} \textit{Sylloge Tacticorum}, XLVIII.

\textsuperscript{84} \textit{Sylloge Tacticorum}, XLVIII, 7; G. Chatzelis, \textit{Byzantine Military Manuals}…, p. 117–119.

\textsuperscript{85} G. Chatzelis, \textit{Byzantine Military Manuals}…, p. 117–119.

\textsuperscript{86} \textit{Leonis Diaconi Caloënsis historiae libri decem et Liber de velitatione bellica Nicephori Augusti}, I, 7, ed. Ch. Benoît Hase, Bonn 1828 [= \textit{CSHB}] (cetera: \textit{Leo Diaconus}).

\textsuperscript{87} \textit{De velitatione bellica}, XXIV, 14–18.

\textsuperscript{88} \textit{Leo Diaconus}, II, 2.
for their lives rather than fighting. Interestingly, according to the authors of military treatises, some nations were more susceptible to night attacks. For example, the Arabs’ fear of setting up camp for the night in foreign territory was strongly emphasised by the author of Tactica\textsuperscript{89}, who recommended also other methods of attacking the enemy after nightfall\textsuperscript{90}. In each of these works, the authors underlined that at night the enemy sought solace and relaxation. When comfort is replaced by sudden danger\textsuperscript{91}, soldiers do not respond by fighting but fleeing.

During the Middle Byzantine period, the approach to night attacks did not undergo profound changes. Though opinion of the author of Sylloge Tacticorum regarding an honourable approach to night fighting seems to suggest otherwise, it was an individual opinion, and the overwhelming majority of theorists saw nothing wrong with smashing enemy troops in a night ambush. This is evidence of the continuation of the Roman art of war from the late antique period.

Conclusions

Fighting at night was an essential part of Roman warfare, as is best evidenced by the detailed descriptions of the ways in which surprise operations were carried out after nightfall in the Roman military treaties. A large number of source references, both in theoretical and narrative works, also confirm that conducting operations at night was nothing dishonourable, and that the Romans and their opponents sought to exploit to the maximum the advantage offered by darkness. The commander’s main objective was to achieve victory with as few losses as possible; if this meant operating after dark, such risks had to be taken. Each time, however, it was a pure profit-and-loss calculation. Although the accounts of night fighting in the narrative sources are not very extensive, it does not mean that they are not numerous; they allow us to confirm that the military treaties presented a doctrine for dealing with night fighting. This is one of the few occasions when narrative sources overlap to such an extent with military treatises, while forming a relatively coherent picture of the \textit{modus operandi} of Roman armies over the centuries.

\textsuperscript{89} Leonis Imperatoris Tactica, XVIII, 112.
\textsuperscript{90} Cf. Leonis Imperatoris Tactica, XVII, 10–16; Syrianus, XXXIX; Strategicon, IX, 2.
\textsuperscript{91} The author of the Tactica even recommended simulating readiness for fighting for a few successive days and when the enemy’s vigilance was duly relaxed, a night attack should have been launched. Leonis Imperatoris Tactica, XVII, 11.
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