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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 manner¹.

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 level², 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 soldiers³, ravaging imperial

¹ *Das Strategikon des Maurikios*, VIIA, pr. 45–53, ed. et trans. G. T. DENNIS, E. GAMILLSCHEG, Wien 1981 [= *CFHB.SV*, 17] (cetera: *Strategikon*).

² On this topic, cf. a short piece by J. KODER, I. STOURAITIS, *Byzantine Approaches to Warfare (6th–12th Centuries)*. An Introduction, [in:] *Byzantine War Ideology between Roman Imperial Concept and Christian Religion*, ed. IDEM, Wien 2012, p. 9–16. And an excellent book: G. THEOTOKIS, *Byzantine Military Tactics in Syria and Mesopotamia in the Tenth Century. A Comparative Study*, Edinburgh 2018, p. 26–41.

³ *Three Treatises on Imperial Military Expeditions*, (B) 72–79, ed. et trans. J. HALDON, Vindobonae 1990.

lands to cause famine⁴, or torturing and murdering captives⁵, 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 threats⁶.

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 face⁷. In late antiquity, when commanders were held accountable by the emperor for their tasks and could lose their position quite quickly⁸, 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 pestilence⁹ among enemy soldiers¹⁰ and, to some extent, against attacking the enemy at night¹¹. Apart from the above, every trick, every deceit and every method to achieve success in war, preferably with the least

⁴ *Strategicon*, VIII B, 4.

⁵ *Digesta Iustiniani Augusti*, XLIX, 16, 3, 10, ed. Th. MOMMSEN, P. KRUEGER, Berolini 1870 (cetera: *Digesta*).

⁶ *Quisquis hos artis bellicae commentarios ex probatissimis auctoribus breuiatos legere dignabitur, quam primum rationem proelii depugnandique cupit audire praecepta. Sed conflictus publicus duarum aut trium horarum certamine definitur, post quem partis eius, quae superata fuerit, spes omnes intercedunt. Ideo omnia ante cogitanda 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 adtemptant, ut integris suis, quantum possunt, hostes interimant uel 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).

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).

⁸ *Digesta*, XLIX, 16, 3, 1. The commander could lose his position just because of a defeat in a pitched battle. *Strategicon*, VIII B, 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.

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.

¹⁰ *Sylloge Tacticorum, quae olim 'Inedita Leonis Tactica' Dicebatur*, ed. et trans. A. DAIN, Paris 1938; *A Tenth Century Byzantine Military Manual. The Sylloge Tacticorum*, LIX, 1–2, trans. G. CHATZELIS, J. HARRIS, London–New York 2017 [= BBOS] (cetera: *Sylloge Tacticorum*).

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 conflicts¹², stemming from the Christian doctrine and the Roman understanding of just war, as well as the *modus operandi* of legions developed over the centuries.

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 Chatzelis¹³, although it focused on other themes, including the fascinating use of night fights as a literary topos¹⁴. 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 *De Re militari* and an anonymous work written at the beginning of the 7th century, i.e. the *Strategicon*¹⁵. These two works of undisputed late antiquity

¹² I. STOURAITIS, *Krieg und Frieden in der politischen und ideologischen Wahrnehmung in Byzanz*, Vienna 2009 [= BG.E, 5]; J. HALDON, 'Fighting for Peace': Justifying Warfare and Violence in the Medieval East Roman World, [in:] *The Cambridge World History of Violence*, ed. M.S. GORDON, R.W. KAEUPER, H. ZURNDORFER, Cambridge 2020, p. 493–494. The text below is not an attempt to systematise the studies on the issue but it may serve as a starting point for discussion. Notably, military treatises as an auxiliary source are largely used by scholars in a discussion on Byzantine war theory. For the preceding period see some general remarks in: V.D. HANSON, *The Roman Way of War*, [in:] *The Cambridge History of Warfare*, ed. G. PARKER, Cambridge 2005, p. 46–60; G. SCHMALZBAUER, *Überlegungen zur Idee der Ökumene in Byzanz*, [in:] *Wiener Byzantinistik und Neogräzistik. Beiträge zum Symposium 40 Jahre Institut für Byzantinistik und Neogräzistik der Universität Wien im Gedenken an Herbert Hunger*, ed. M.A. HÖRANDNER WOLFRAM, J. KODER, Vienna 2004, p. 408–419; H. AHRWEILER, *L'idéologie politique de l'Empire byzantine*, Paris 1975; J. KODER, *Die räumlichen Vorstellungen der Byzantiner von der Ökumene (4. bis 12. Jahrhundert)*, APHK 137.2, 2002, p. 15–34. Notably, in his studies on the concept of war and its relations with religion, John Haldon clearly indicated an alliance between the state and the Church. In his opinion, in the time following the reign of Constantine the Great, soldiers were completely accepted by the society as defenders of the faith and the Empire. J. HALDON, *Fighting for Peace...*, p. 492–512, especially 496–505, here 497.

¹³ 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.

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

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 ΤΑΚΤΙΚΑ. S. ΓΥΦΤΟΠΟΥΛΟΥ, *Historical Information gathered from the Mauricii Strategikon*, ΒΣΜ 23, 2013, p. 55–89 (here 71–74). On the author's sources cf.: Ph. RANCE, *Maurice's Strategikon and 'the Ancients': the Late Antique Reception of Aelian and Arrian*, [in:] *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 period¹⁶, it is likely that the author drew on works from the late antique period¹⁷, so much so that Vasilij Kuchma considered the treatise on strategy to be a work written in the circles of Justinian the Great¹⁸. 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 Simocatta¹⁹.

of the International Conference on Greek *Taktika* held at the University of Toruń, 7–11 April 2005, ed. Ph. RANCE, N. SEKUNDA, Gdańsk 2017, p. 217–255.

¹⁶ Cf. more at: Ph. RANCE, *The Date of the Military Compendium of Syrianus Magister (formerly the Sixth-Century Anonymus Byzantinus)*, BZ 100.2, 2007, p. 701–737; *Byzantine Military Rhetoric in the Ninth Century. A Translation of the Anonymi Byzantini Rhetorica Militaris*, trans. G. THEOTOKIS, D. SIDIROPOULOS, London–New York 2021 [= RRBS], p. 6–21; S. COSENTINO, *Syrianos' Strategikon – a 9th-Century Source?*, Bi 2, 2000, p. 243–280; D.A. LEE, J. SHEPARD, *A Double Life: Placing the Peri Presbeon*, Bsl 52, 1991, p. 28–29; B. BALDWIN, *On the Date of the Anonymous ΠΕΡΙ ΣΤΡΑΤΗΓΙΚΗΣ*, BZ 81, 1988, p. 290–293 and: L. MECELLA, *Die Überlieferung der Kestoi des Julius Africanus und ihre Überlieferung*, ed. M. WALLRAFF, L. MECELLA, Berlin 2009 [= TUGAL, 165], p. 85–144, particularly 96–98.

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.

¹⁸ The latest study by Kuchma still dates the treatise of Syrianus back to the end of the Justinian period. *О стратегии. Византийский военный трактат VI века*, trans. В.В. КУЧМА, Санкт-Петербург 2007, p. 5–51, and for a history of Byzantine warfare: В.В. КУЧМА, *Военная организация Византийской Империи*, Санкт-Петербург 2001, p. 37. Also: F. SHLOSSER, *The Reign of the Emperor Maurikios (582–602). A Reassessment*, Athens 1994, p. 79–88. Another scholar who supports the dating of Syrianus' work to the times of Justinian, but without giving any arguments, is: C. WHATELY, *The Genre and Purpose of Military Manuals in Late Antiquity*, [in:] *Shifting Genres in Late Antiquity*, ed. G. GREATREX, H. ELTON, London 2015, p. 250; J. HALDON, *Information and War: Some Comments on Defensive Strategy and Information in the Middle Byzantine Period (ca. A.D. 660–1025)*, [in:] *War and warfare in Late Antiquity*, ed. A. SARANTIS, N. CHRISTIE, Leiden 2013 [= LAA, 8], p. 381.

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 authors²⁰.

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 threat²¹. The army, in extreme situations, could march at night, but the author also advised against this, especially in winter²². Of course this rule did not apply to scouts, who were supposed to operate much more freely at night than during the day²³. 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 camps²⁴ and deploying guards²⁵. 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

show that in his work, Theophylact used sources of information very close to the army. In addition to conversations with those who participated in the events, Theophylact probably had access to the imperial chancellery, where he was able to consult military reports created after military actions in the chancelleries of the various *magistri militum*. For more cf.: T. OLAJOS, *Les sources de Théophylacte Simocatta historien*, Leiden 1988 [= ByzNee, 10], p. 128–149; H.W. HAUSSIG, *Theophylakts Exkurs über die skythischen Völker*, B 23, 1953, p. 275–462 (here: 295–300); O. VEH, *Untersuchungen zu dem byzantinischen Historiker Theophylaktos Simokattes*, Fürth 1957, p. 14–15; M. WHITBY, *The Emperor Maurice and his Historian Theophylact Simocatta on Persian and Balkan Warfare*, Oxford 1988 [= OHM], p. 97–98.

²⁰ Which is not to say, of course, that Ammianus, or Procopius, were free from operating certain ancient clichés for the purposes of their accounts. Cf., for example: G. KELLY, *Ammianus Marcellinus. The Allusive Historian*, Cambridge–New York 2008 [= CCS]; *The Late Roman World and its Historian. Interpreting Ammianus Marcellinus*, ed. J.W. DRIJVERS, D. HUNT, London–New York 1999; *Ammianus Marcellinus from Soldier to Author*, ed. M. HANAGHAN, D. WOODS, Leiden 2022 [= HRE, 16]. In the latter especially the chapter *Xenophon and Ammianus: Two Soldier-Historians and their Persian Expeditions* by Guy Williams. On Procopius' sources cf.: with an excellent list of applicable literature. L. MECCELLA, *Procopius' Sources*, [in:] *A Companion to Procopius of Caesarea*, ed. M. MEIER, F. MONTINARO, Leiden 2022 [= BCBW, 11], p. 178–193. For more on literary *topos* with a list of the applicable literature on the subject, cf.: Ph. RANCE, *Wars*, [in:] *ibidem*, p. 108–119.

²¹ For example: VEGETIUS, III, 8; III, 10; III, 22.

²² VEGETIUS, III, 2.

²³ VEGETIUS, III, 6.

²⁴ VEGETIUS, III, 8.

²⁵ VEGETIUS, III, 8.

the Romans with night strikes²⁶. 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 details²⁷. 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 night²⁸, so it is necessary to return to the old military customs. The author of *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 compile²⁹. 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 dishonourable³⁰. 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 *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 *Strategicon* features much more detailed descriptions. What makes *Strategicon* different from the work of Vegetius is the approach to night attacks carried out by the Romans.

The author of *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 *Strategicon* in quite some detail and in this aspect the text definitely stands out from the rest of the sources³¹. The author of the treatise advised to weaken the enemy's vigilance. An attack on the enemy at night could be

²⁶ VEGETIUS, I, 21.

²⁷ VEGETIUS, III, 19.

²⁸ VEGETIUS, III, 10.

²⁹ For more cf.: S. MORILLO, *Battle Seeking: The Contexts and Limits of Vegetian Strategy*, JMMH 1, 2002, p. 21–42; W. GOFFART, *The Date and Purpose of Vegetius' De Re Militari*, T 33, 1977, p. 69–88; M. CHARLES, *Vegetius in Context Establishing the Date of the Epitoma Rei Militaris*, Stuttgart 2007; Ch. ALLMAND, *The De Re Militari of Vegetius. The Reception, Transmission and Legacy of a Roman Text in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge 2011.

³⁰ LIVIUS, XLII, 47.

³¹ *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 envoys³². 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 Trajan³³. Another way to lull hostile vigilance was routine. The author of *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 Heraclea³⁴. 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 *strategos* would have rolled up camp and retreated a short distance³⁵. 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 battlefield³⁶. The *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)³⁷. Such oaths and promises were meant to bolster the morale of the soldiers going into battle, taming, at least in part, their fear.

³² *Strategicon*, IX, 2, 1–7.

³³ *Strategicon*, IX, 2, 6–7. Probably in 116 AD, near Edessa or Nisibis.

³⁴ *Strategicon*, IX, 2, 11–14. In 592, cf.: *Theophylacti Simocattae historiae*, VI, 5, ed. et trans. C. DE BOOR, P. WIRTH, Stuttgartiae 1972 [= BSGR] (cetera: SIMOCATTA).

³⁵ *Strategicon*, IX, 2, 14–17.

³⁶ *Strategicon*, XXXIX, 5–12. *The Anonymous Byzantine Treatise on Strategy*, XVIII, 112, [in:] *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*, ed. et trans. G. T. DENNIS, Washington 1985 [= DOT, 9] (cetera: SYRIANUS).

³⁷ *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 stratiotes³⁸. 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 night³⁹, so that soldiers could see something and not bump into each other while marching⁴⁰. 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 sleep⁴¹.

The army should be led to the starting positions by an experienced scout who knew the local terrain very well⁴². Syrianus added that scouts should be properly equipped with large shields, as well as shin guards and well-hobnailed boots to protect against Roman caltrops⁴³. 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.

⁴¹ For more on the phases of sleep, cf.: I. FEINBERG, *Changes in Sleep Cycle Patterns with Age*, JPsyR 10, 1974, p. 183–306.

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*⁴⁴. 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 are⁴⁵. During the attack, the enemy camp should be buried with arrows discharged by archers, both on foot and on horseback as well as javelins⁴⁶. 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 flee⁴⁷. 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 pressure⁴⁸. 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 Marcellinus, Procopius and Theophylact Simocatta several times mentioned night marches to ensure a better position for the Romans the next morning⁴⁹, but the Romans were also more than once outmanoeuvred by their enemies at night⁵⁰. Night marches mainly served the purpose of taking a better position for the next day's battle or bypassing a strong enemy grouping

⁴⁴ Literally: *win but do not overwin*. This is exactly what recommended SYRIANUS, XXXIX, 36–38. For more cf.: Ph. RANCE, “*Win but do not overwin*” – *The History of a Proverb from the Sententiae Menandri, and a Classical Allusion in St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, Phil 152.2, 2008, p. 191–204.

⁴⁵ *Strategicon*, IX, 2, 48–51. This trick has been known since ancient times, cf. for example: POLYANOS, *Strategika*, III, 13, 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.

⁴⁹ For example: *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, IV, 12, 17–20; VI, 7, 1–4, ed. G. WIRTH, J. HAURY, Leipzig 1962–1964 [= BSGR] (cetera: PROCOPIUS). *Ammiani Marcellini Rerum gestarum libri qui supersunt*, XVII, 12, 4, ed. W. SEYFARTH, Leipzig 1978 (cetera: AMMIANUS); SIMOCATTA, II, 18. But also by falling into hostile ambushes: SIMOCATTA, III, 7.

⁵⁰ The Persians, for example, did so, bypassing the Roman marching camp: AMMIANUS, XII, 8, 2. In 586, the Persian army rushing to the relief of the fortress of Chlomonon 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 papers⁵¹, 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 Simocatta⁵² and has already been discussed many times by linguists⁵³. 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 surprise⁵⁴. 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 soldier⁵⁵, keeping quiet, and giving commands in whispers one to the other⁵⁶. 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 unit⁵⁷, 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*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 rivers⁵⁹, and even smashed ice on frozen waters thus preventing barbarians

⁵¹ *Strategicon*, IX, 2, 26–33; SYRIANUS, XXXIX, 3–12.

⁵² SIMOCATTA, II, 15.

⁵³ Cf. abundant literature: P. NĂSTUREL, *Torna, torna, fratre. O problemă de istorie și de lingvistică*, SCIV 7, 1956, p. 179–188; B. BALDWIN, 'Torna, torna, phrater': *What Language?*, B 67, 1997, p. 264–268.

⁵⁴ SIMOCATTA, II, 15.

⁵⁵ SIMOCATTA, II, 15, 6–8.

⁵⁶ SIMOCATTA, II, 15, 7–9. Pointing out that the soldiers giving the command one to the other led to its distortion.

⁵⁷ SIMOCATTA, II, 15, 11–13.

⁵⁸ *Strategicon*, IX, 2, 33–51.

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.

from crossing⁶⁰. 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 surprise⁶¹. In case of combat, night very often marked the end of the struggle as both sides retreated to their camps⁶². 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 day⁶³. Night was also used by the barbarians as an asset when storming difficult positions, albeit not always successfully⁶⁴.

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 watches⁶⁵. 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 terms⁶⁶. 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 guard⁶⁷, but the sounds of battle awoke the resting enemy soldiers who joined the clash, forcing the Romans to retreat⁶⁸. 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 battle⁶⁹. He also described the clash between Persian forces, supplemented by an auxiliary Roman corps and Baram's rebels⁷⁰.

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; VIIIB, 9; XIIIB, 22; XIIC.

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 battlefield⁷¹, 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 treatises 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 soldiers⁷². One need only recall Leo VI's opinion of the Arabs, who, in his view, were not fond of confrontations after sunset⁷³. 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 stressors⁷⁴. Also Ammianus claimed that night increased fear in people⁷⁵. Fear of the dark is an atavistic fear rooted in human nature⁷⁶, 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 fear⁷⁷. Syrianus' work includes information about oaths and significant rewards for the soldiers attacking the enemy at night as a fear-dispelling enticement⁷⁸. A night attack on enemy positions required significant courage and discipline, because it was easier

⁷¹ SIMOCATTA, V, 9, 7–8.

⁷² Ł. RÓŻYCKI, *Battlefield Emotions in Late Antiquity. A Study of Fear and Motivation in Roman Military Treatises*, Leiden 2021, p. 71–73.

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*).

⁷⁴ N.E. LUTTWAK, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, Harvard 2009, p. 308.

⁷⁵ AMMIANUS, XIV, 2, 9; XI, 8, 18; XVIII, 6, 14.

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*, BPsyr 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. YADAN 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.

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.

⁷⁸ SYRIANUS, XXXIX.

to make a mistake at night⁷⁹. On the other hand, Polyænus' 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 bedding⁸⁰. 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 incompetence⁸¹.

The authors of *De velitatione bellica*⁸² and *Sylloge Tacticorum* recommended taking advantage of the fear of the night spent on enemy territory⁸³. 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 dishonour⁸⁴. Considering Roman warfare in the 10th century, though, this was antiquated thinking and no military commander launching a night attack worried about honour-related aspects⁸⁵. 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 Deacon⁸⁶.

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 flight⁸⁷. 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 alive⁸⁸. 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

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

⁸⁰ POLYAENUS, *Stratagems of War*, II, 2, 10, vol. I–II, ed. et trans. P. KRENTZ, E. L. WHEELER, Chicago 1994.

⁸¹ G. CHATZELIS, *Byzantine Military Manuals...*, p. 115–116.

⁸² *De velitatione bellica*, XXIV, [in:] *Three Byzantine Military...* (cetera: *De velitatione bellica*).

⁸³ *Sylloge Tacticorum*, XLVIII.

⁸⁴ *Sylloge Tacticorum*, XLVIII, 7; G. CHATZELIS, *Byzantine Military Manuals...*, p. 117–119.

⁸⁵ G. CHATZELIS, *Byzantine Military Manuals...*, p. 117–119.

⁸⁶ *Leonis Diaconi Caloënsis historiae libri decem et Liber de velitatione bellica Nicephori Augusti*, I, 7, ed. Ch. BENOÎT HASE, Bonn 1828 [= CSHB] (cetera: LEO DIACONUS).

⁸⁷ *De velitatione bellica*, XXIV, 14–18.

⁸⁸ 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*⁸⁹, who recommended also other methods of attacking the enemy after nightfall⁹⁰. In each of these works, the authors underlined that at night the enemy sought solace and relaxation. When comfort is replaced by sudden danger⁹¹, 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 *modus operandi* of Roman armies over the centuries.

⁸⁹ *Leonis Imperatoris Tactica*, XVIII, 112.

⁹⁰ Cf. *Leonis Imperatoris Tactica*, XVII, 10–16; SYRIANUS, XXXIX; *Strategicon*, IX, 2.

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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