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**THE STRATEGIKON AS A SOURCE — SLAVS AND AVARS
IN THE EYES OF PSEUDO-MAURICE, CURRENT STATE
OF RESEARCH AND FUTURE RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES**

ABSTRACT

L. Różycki 2017. *The Strategikon as a source — Slavs and Avars in the eyes of Pseudo-Maurice, current state of research and future research perspectives*, AAC 52:109–131.

The purpose of the piece *The Strategikon as a source — Slavs and Avars in the eyes of Pseudo-Maurice, current state of research and future research perspectives* is to demonstrate what the author of *Strategikon* knew about the Slavs and Avars and review the state of research on the chapter of the treatise that deals with these two barbarian ethnicities. As a side note to the description of contemporary studies of *Strategikon*, the piece also lists promising areas of research, which have not yet received proper attention from scholars.

Key words: Migration Period; Early Middle Ages; Balkans; Byzantium; Strategikon; Strategikon; Emperor Maurice; Slavs; Avars

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I. INTRODUCTION

The *Strategikon* is a Roman military treatise, written at the end of the 6th or the beginning of the 7th century. It is one of the seminal sources not only on East Roman military history but also on the Slavs, the Avars and other peoples neighboring the Empire at the onset of the Middle Ages. The language of the treatise is easily approachable Greek, with numerous Latinisms¹ and occasional instances of more obscure military jargon. It was aimed primarily at fresh commanders, who required introduction into the tactics, equipment and organizational structure of imperial armies². This in and of itself makes the work immensely

¹ There are several excellent studies available on the subject of language, particularly regarding the Latin elements in the treatise; see more H. Mihăescu (1968; 1969).

² The author wrote: “The state of the armed forces has been neglected for a long time and has fallen so completely into oblivion, so to speak, that those who assume the command of troops do not understand even the most obvious matters and run into all sort of difficulties. Sometimes the soldiers are blamed for lack of training, sometimes the generals for inexperience. We have resolved, therefore, to do some writing on this subject, as best we can, succinctly and simply, drawing part on ancient authors and in part on our limited experience of active duty, with an eye more to practical utility than to fine words” (*Strategikon, Praefatio*).

valuable, as the author intended to give a complete rundown of Roman military craft during the reign of Emperor Maurice (582–602), i.e. the period when the army was undergoing drastic changes initiated already in the times of Justinian the Great. The author of the treatise believed that in war a military leader should possess vast knowledge about the enemy, extending beyond the military aspects, and also including the customs and internal politics. As a result, *Strategikon* contains an anecdotal section on the neighbors of the Empire in the 6th century longer than in any other surviving work written in Greek³. What is more, information about the peoples bordering the Empire were most likely compiled by an experienced commander, who fought against at least some of the ethnic groups described in the work. The author of the treatise presented his observations about barbarian settlements, customs, and characteristic qualities of specific cultures. All this information provided an important context to the tactics on fighting the barbarians. This was the first time that such a comprehensive compendium was created covering the peoples that the emperors of Constantinople were forced to negotiate and fight with.

The purpose of this text is to summarize how the author of the treatise presents the Slavs and Avars and to illustrate how the parts of *Strategikon* that describe the barbarians could be valuable for historical, archaeological and philological studies (for location of the sites mentioned in the text see Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Balkans in the late Antiquity; by A. Kotłowska and Ł. Różycki

³ In the case of the Slavs, we should remember a digression in the work of Procopius of Caesarea that is at least partially similar to the later description written by the author of *Strategikon* (Procopius Caesarensis, *De Bellis*, 7. 14.)

II. CURRENT STATE OF RESEARCH

For over a hundred years the *Strategikon* has been the subject of intensive studies conducted by historians, as well as classical philologists and archaeologists. Particular attention was always given to the Slavs and Avars, two ethnic groups that were relatively new to the Balkans in the 6th century, which made it necessary for the Byzantine diplomats and the commanders guarding the Danubian limes to continuously learn about these cultures. The first modern author who focused their research on the presentation of barbarians in *Strategikon* was the Czech scholar of the Balkans and the early Byzantine Empire — B. Zástěrová, whose work on the Slavs and Avars was published in French in 1971 (Zástěrová 1971). Shortly afterwards, i.e. in 1977, J. E. Wiita defended his dissertation about the ethnic groups mentioned in *Strategikon* at the University of Minnesota (Wiita 1977). Another important work on the subject, by G. Labuda, was published in 1954 and dealt with the chronology of Roman Barbarian Wars at the end of the 6th century (Labuda 1954, 167–173). Despite the passage of years and advances in our knowledge, the aforementioned publications remain the first point of reference for any further studies on the barbarians and their image in *Strategikon*. However, it should be strongly emphasized that although at the time of publication these works were breaking new ground, today they require supplemental studies and a new research approach.

Even today many fields of study have not been fully utilized to analyze *Strategikon*. Surprisingly enough, even simple use of the comparative method yields new results — this issue will be elaborated upon in further sections of the text. There is great potential in interdisciplinary studies of the text itself, particularly from the perspective of linguistics, which would allow for a more comprehensive evaluation of the sources used by the treatise's author and make possible an attempt to clearly distinguish between the compiled and original sections of the work. Such studies, albeit with limited scope, have already been conducted; examples include the piece by V. V. Kuchma analyzing the relationship between *Strategikon* and the work of Onasander (Kuchma 1982; 1984; 1986; Różycki 2015a, 167–178). The text of *Strategikon* should also be more comprehensively confronted with archaeological sources, with particular focus on the methods of the rapidly developing field of late ancient weapon studies. There is also a lot of promise in studies using the approach of new school of military history set forth by J. Keegan (1967) in combination with the methods of social psychology, especially with regards to combat stress, battlefield psychology and the ways of influencing the men utilized by commanders. These types of interdisciplinary studies based on military treatises enable a more in-depth analysis of the ancient battlefield as seen through the eyes of a soldier and commander; a perspective, worth mentioning, that is impossible to obtain in the case of other categories of sources. A separate branch of studies

should focus on the impact that *Strategikon* had on future Byzantine military literature⁴.

The interest in studying *Strategikon* rose once again in the second half of the 1980s, which saw the publication of a translation of the treatise by E. Gamillscheg with an edited version of the Greek text by G. T. Dennis (*Das Strategikon...*) who soon afterwards translated the treatise into English (*Maurice's Strategikon...*). But it is worth noting that prior to that a Romanian (Mauricius) as well as a Russian (*Strategikon Mavrikija...*) translation were already available. The latest translation into a modern language is an excellent work by a team of Spanish philologists (*Strategikon Mauricio...*). Ever since the publication of the first modern translation, *Strategikon* has remained a frequent subject of study; however, the issues related to the barbarians are still outside of the main scope of academic discourse on East Roman military history.

Looking at the most recent studies, one must give credit to the significant analytical contributions of Ph. Rance (2004a; 2004b; 2008), who for some years now has been working on a revised edition of the treatise, which is to include a comprehensive critical apparatus. *Strategikon* has been referred to in numerous works of literature, and it is used as an excellent supplementary source by linguists, archaeologists, historians as well as epigraphists. For any scholar writing about the period between the second half of the 6th century and the first half of the 7th, the treatise is simply a mandatory secondary source⁵. A case in point would be the monograph on the Slavs by F. Curta,⁶ a breakthrough piece by W. Pohl (1988), an earlier work by A. Avenarius (1974), the recent works written by G. Kardaras (2004; 2007–2008; esp. Kardaras 2008) and A. Sarantis (2016)⁷ or the less stellar summary of the reign of Maurice by F. Schlosser (1994)⁸. We must also mention analytical works dealing with selected aspects of the contents of *Strategikon*. The recent quality ones include the work of S. Gyftopoulou (2013), who focused on the issue of historical information specifically from a philological point of view; the important study on diagrams in the treatise by C. M. Mazzucchi (1981) or the more general texts by G. Dagron (1987; 1993).

In conclusion, *Strategikon* is used as a source frequently and eagerly by academics from different fields utilizing different research methodologies. In spite of all that, relatively little has been written about the treatise itself, and

⁴ A perfect example of such work is the commentary to *Tactica* of Leo VI by J. Haldon (2014).

⁵ See the works devoted to barbarian raids and barbarian settlement in the Balkans in Early Medieval Period (Maligkoudis 1991; Whitby 1988).

⁶ See in particular the description of *Strategikon* as a source, with comments on its authorship F. Curta (2001, 50–52).

⁷ Although the work of A. Sarantis focuses on Emperor Justinian's policies with regards to the Balkans, the chronological framework of chapter V also covers the reign of Emperor Maurice and the invasion of Avars and Slavs (the narrative ends in the year 626). Sarantis rightly points out that what happened during Maurice's reign had its origins in the first half of the 6th century.

⁸ See also a short summary of the sources dealing with the Slavs in the 6th century by the same author (Schlosser 2003).

numerous aspects of the work have not been touched upon at all. This issue was also noticed by A. Kaldellis, who points out that *Strategikon* is treated by scholars in a much too positivistic manner, meaning that it is seen merely as a source of useful information about the Roman army at the turn of the centuries (Kaldellis 2013, 82). Perhaps most surprisingly, the chapter about the Slavs and Avars, which by any means should have been treated as a primary repository of knowledge and researched thoroughly by generations of scholars, still manages to surprise us and offers new conclusions, at the same time inviting further extensive studies⁹.

III. THE ISSUE OF AUTHORSHIP OF THE TREATISE

Identifying the author is important in the context of determining the work's suitability for comparative studies, especially since in many cases the *Strategikon* is the only available written source of information, which could be useful in historical, archaeological or linguistic studies. The whole genre of Late Roman and Byzantine military treatises suffers from the problem of copying classical works. It was often only thanks to the author and their personal experience that a given work contained any current information. In order to understand the process of writing a military treatise, one must understand the specifics of the battlefield in the Antiquity, and the slow changes that took place in military craft. Authors of treatises were usually theoreticians, only a handful of which had actual field experience¹⁰. Their works were in most cases summaries of and comments on previous works dealing with warfare. Some authors also introduced a few of their own ideas; however, it could also be the case that an author had nothing novel to add to the discussion and merely compiled the previously available works into a single tome.¹¹ As a result, practically any given military treatise from the Antiquity included a large antiquarian section, i.e. passages taken from other sources, which did not have any practical application at the time of copying. To give an example of this phenomenon, one needs only to look at Vegetius' comments on the republican heavy infantry (Parker 1932), or the ideas of Syrianus Magister regarding the Greek phalanx in Late Antiquity (*The Anonymous Byzantine Treatise on Strategy*, 16. 31–39). These types of situations usually occurred when the author did not have any military experience and based his writing on prominent past works, which by then were often outdated.

⁹ As I've mentioned in the introduction, the purpose of this piece is to recapitulate the current state of research on the treatise and identify possible future avenues of study.

¹⁰ The long history of Ancient and Byzantine military writing has been presented, respectively, by: Spaulding (1933), Dain (1967), Kuchma (1979).

¹¹ One example might be the treatise of a prominent Byzantine scholar Michael Psellos from the 11th century, which was a typical compilation of past works. Also worth mentioning is an earlier work entitled *Tactica* written by Emperor Leo VI the Philosopher (*The Taktika...*) which to a large extent was a compilation of the *Strategikon*.

In consideration of the above, before analyzing any given treatise it is imperative to determine the viability of its contents, and ideally to identify the author and his military experience. The most reliable treatises, which at the same time contain the least antiquarian sections, are the ones written by experienced fighting men, the best example being the Byzantine treatise *De velitatione bellica* (*De velitatione bellica...*). In the case of *Strategikon* the situation is more complicated; the author is still unknown and the work, at least partially, is a compilation of previous pieces, like the treatise by Onasander (Kuchma 1982; 1984; 1986). It is also possible that *Strategikon* contains sections of treatises that have not survived to this day (Zachariä von Lingenthal 1894; Vári 1906; Rance 2004, 270). Ideas on commanding the infantry most probably originated in the period of reconquest of Justinian the Great, which is evidenced by frequent mentions of the equipment of the Herules (*Strategikon*, 12B.4.2–3.) and the Goths (*Strategikon*, 12B.1.2–5), i.e. two ethnic groups, whose relationships with the empire strongly deteriorated at the end of the 6th century. The whole of Book XIIB was probably copied from another work describing infantry operations in the first half of the 6th century, which is evident from the aforementioned anachronisms regarding Roman equipment and from certain aspects of the language¹². Which is not to say that the fragment was copied mindlessly. The author of *Strategikon* used it as a basis, which he then supplemented with practical information clearly originating from the second half of the 6th century. On the other hand, comments on commanding the cavalry must have been taken from the Avar Period, i.e. post 581, which is evidenced by the large number of Avar equipment that had been imported into Roman cavalry gear, and by the partial adoption of nomad tactics¹³. In the case of cavalry, the author also incorporated an invaluable piece of information into the treatise, i.e. Latin commands written in Greek font that were used by officers during exercises (*Strategikon*, 3.5.).

The *terminus ante quem* for the complete work are the invasion of the Arabs, as there is no mention of them anywhere in the treatise, and the destruction of the Antes (who were described by the author of *Strategikon*) by the Avars, which most likely took place in the year 602¹⁴. So the viability of the work as a source remains questionable (Różycki 2015a), but even if we treat *Strategikon* as a partially compiled piece, it is still rooted in the reality of the end of the 6th century and the beginning of the 7th.

¹² See Zachariä von Lingenthal 1894; Vári 1906; Rance 2004, Footnote 12. Rance seems to present a stronger argument, pointing out that this cannot be a simple compilation.

¹³ On the subject of Avar heavy cavalry, see Nagy 2005, particularly 135–140. It is notable how important of a source the *Strategikon* is for the argumentation of K. Nagy.

¹⁴ Simocatta, 8.5.13. It is hard to imagine that the Antes had been completely destroyed by the Avars by the beginning of the 7th century, especially considering other sources, which suggest that the Antes still existed as a separate tribe around the year 612, when Emperor Heraclius adopted the title *Anticus* (Rósch 1978, 170), just like Maurice had done prior to that. G. Kardaras even suggests that during the reign of Heraclius the Antes were still under Roman influence and still played a role in the defense of the Danubian limes — mainly Scythia Minor (see Kardaras 2010, 85). In any case, after 602 the military importance of the Antes was marginal.

Having specified the approximate chronological framework for the creation of the treatise, which covers the period from the beginning of Maurice's reign in 582 all the way to the Avar-Antes war in 602, we may now attempt to shed some light on the author and his knowledge of military matters. There are no undisputed reasons to suggest that the treatise was written personally by Emperor Maurice, contrary to what some scholars believe (Aussaresses 1906), although we should not reject the possibility that the work was compiled at the emperor's request by some of the prominent commanders of the time. In his unpublished dissertation Wiita supports the idea that the author of the treatise was strategos Philippicus. This claim is based on the information found in the work of Theophylact Simocatta, which tells us that the commander had an interest in ancient warfare (Simocatta, 1.14.; Wiita 1977, 30–49). This is an interesting alternative to the more popular belief, but it needs to be analyzed with due care. Theophylact mentions that Scipio Africanus was supposedly Philippicus' role model (Simocatta, 2.14.), but in the whole treatise there are no references to that famous Roman general; in fact, the historical context provided in the work is rather limited. Interestingly enough, following the usurpation of power by Phocas in 602, Philippicus survived the resulting purge in the capital, and retired from politics into a monastery, so he certainly had the time to write down his military experiences. As such, this theory should not be discarded immediately, especially that Philippicus had the opportunity to fight against the Persians, as well as the Slavs and Avars, i.e. the peoples that are given the most attention in *Strategikon*. On the other hand, Emperor Maurice had also encountered both the Slavs and the Persians on the battlefield — while he was still holding the position of *magister militum* he ran successful operations against the Persians, and during his reign he personally led a military expedition to the Balkans.

As regards the origin of Book XI, which contains the characteristics of different barbarian groups, there is yet another possibility; namely that the information about the empire's neighbors did not come directly from the author of the treatise. It might be that Book XI was based on official reports of Byzantine diplomats collected in the imperial archives, which the author of the treatise had access to. Consequently, the ethnographic aspects of *Strategikon* should be treated as the second type of ethnographic descriptions of Late Antiquity as categorized by A. Kaldellis (2013, 1–2). In the past, similar reports prepared by military personnel were used by the already mentioned Theophylact Simocatta¹⁵ when describing the Roman campaign along the Danubian limes¹⁶. The practice, then,

¹⁵ Although according to A. Kaldellis the work of Theophylact belongs to the first category, i.e. pieces written from a remote perspective, heavily influenced by *topoi* (Kaldellis 2013, 1). Yet his argument does not take into account the differences between Theophylact's sources that has already been identified by Th. Olajos (1988).

¹⁶ See Olajos 1988, 128–149; Haussig 1953, 295–300; Veh 1957, 14–15. An attempt to reconstruct the structure of such a military report, which might have been used by Theophylact, was undertaken in: Whitby 1998, 97–98.

was nothing new, and assuming that the author of *Strategikon* had close ties to the court in Constantinople, it would be no trouble for him to make use of such sources. In the work of Theophylact it is fairly easy to identify passages taken from official reports, written either by the commanding officer or a member of their staff taking part in a given military operation, particularly in the case of fighting in the Balkans. It is possible that something similar happened with Book XI of *Strategikon*, in which some of the information may have been taken from diplomatic reports. Providing a detailed description of both the Slavs and the Avars extends far beyond the interests of any military commander. Specific clues suggesting that the information originated from a diplomat's report include the heavy focus on tribal politics and methods of causing chaos among the Slavs via diplomatic means (*Strategikon*, 11.4.51–63) or the mentions of Avar disregard for written agreements (*Strategikon*, 11.2.12–23), which was a major problem during the reign of Maurice (cf. Simocatta, 1.3). Descriptions of barbarians living in the Balkans were something that a typical military leader would not have focused on. What is more, they do not include many of the *topoi* that were so popular in Roman literature, which is especially true for the fragments dealing with the Slavs¹⁷.

Summing up, it should once again be strongly emphasized that the descriptions of the Avars and the Slavs, as well as any information regarding these particular barbarian tribes could possibly originate from direct observations of the author, who fought against them, or from reports submitted to the imperial administration by Roman diplomats, who had dealings with these peoples. Such a situation is extremely rare for the Antiquity or the Early Middle Ages; a historical source based on direct observation as opposed to being written in the comfort of the imperial palace is a genuine treat. This particular aspect makes the treatise immensely valuable as source material; its value surpasses even the famous description of the Slavs provided by Procopius of Caesarea (Procopius Caesarensis, *De Bellis*, 7.14.). Obviously, the author of the digression on the barbarians was not entirely unaffected by the *topoi* of Late Antiquity. Being raised in Roman-Greek culture it was difficult to avoid the classic comparisons between Avars and Scythians and, consequently, references to e.g. Herodotus. The issue of literary *topoi* present in Byzantine literature was recently analyzed by A. Kaldellis, and although his studies deal mostly with the Middle Byzantine period, they are nevertheless largely applicable to the end of the 6th century¹⁸. Luckily for contemporary historians, this common use of *topoi* allows us to separate them from factual information.

¹⁷ The description of the Avars was more schematic and subscribed to the literary traditions of the Antiquity, according to which the nomads had to be represented in a specific way that did not change from the times of Herodotus.

¹⁸ A notable chapter in the study in question is the one devoted to the Late Antiquity: Kaldellis 2013, 1–43.

IV. BOOK XI ON THE AVARS AND THE SLAVS

Book XI is a veritable repository of knowledge on barbarian tribes. The author of the treatise divided it into sub-chapters focused on specific ethnic groups who came into military contact with the empire. These peoples were described in the following order: Persians (*Strategikon*, 11.1.), Scythians¹⁹, meaning Avars, Turks and other groups, whose lifestyle was reminiscent of the Huns (*Strategikon*, 11.2.), fair-haired peoples such as the Franks and Longobards (*Strategikon*, 11.3.), and in the final sub-chapter — Slavs, Antes and the like (*Strategikon*, 11.4.). The text's structure clearly indicates that they were all, without exception, a major threat for Roman provinces at the end of the 6th century, i.e. already after the reconquest of Justinian the Great. What is interesting is that most descriptions are quite brief, focusing solely on military aspects, with a number of references to the proper contents of *Strategikon*²⁰. However, the sections dealing with the Slavs and the Antes have a decidedly different structure, being both longer and more comprehensive.

The author of the treatise depicted the Avars in manner consistent with the accounts of Roman historians. Already at the beginning, it is mentioned that: "The Scythian nations are one, so to speak, in their mode of life and in organization, which is primitive and includes many peoples". The author then goes on to highlight characteristic Avar traits: "The Avars, for their part, are scoundrels, devious, and very experienced in military matters [...] and further on: "They are very superstitious, treacherous, foul, faithless, possessed by insatiate desire for riches. They scorn their oath, do not observe agreements, and are not satisfied by gifts" (*Strategikon*, 11.2. [trans. G. T. Dennis]).

The above passages demonstrate how the author had a clear negative attitude towards the nomads; his writing was further influenced by popular Roman *topoi* and the end result does not deviate from the standard image of alien and culturally hostile barbarians²¹. Notably, when confronted with the accounts of Theophylact Simocatta about successive Roman diplomatic missions to the Avar Khan, it turns out that the image of the Avars in *Strategikon* is consistent with the descriptions of these missions. The confederation of tribes headed by the Avars was a truly unpredictable political entity, and the actions of Khan Bayan and his successors were extremely opportunistic²². The treatise goes on to

¹⁹ Although the term "Scythian" appears right in the title of the sub-chapter, the author did not attempt to imitate archaic language and later on uses the name "Avars" when referring to the Avars. However, the sole reference to the ancient tribe of the Scythians places the author among other Greek and Roman intellectuals who followed the *topoi* of classical literature.

²⁰ For example, in his description of the Avars the author suggests forming the infantry line in manner specified in Book XII (*Strategikon*, 11.2.90–92).

²¹ Mathisen 2011; also for later periods: Toynbee 1973, 411.

²² Theophylact Simocatta best illustrates the Khan's greed through an anecdote about the Avar ruler's whims, who demanded a golden bed and an elephant from the Romans, yet was never satisfied with the gifts received. Simocatta, 1.3. The nomads demonstrated their self-serving approach when demanding that Romans hand over the city of Sirmium, which for a time has been ruled by the Gepids,

describe the marching order of an Avar army, which did not move as a unified tactical unit, but was rather formed on the day of battle from smaller, scattered detachments. This explains why in one instance a relatively small Roman force was still enough of a threat for the Khagan to force him to retreat²³. This is also the source of the Avar army's mobility and the reason why it was nearly impossible make the nomads fight on Roman terms. The barbarians adopted typical dispersed force tactics that allowed for looting over a wide area, but still granted the possibility to quickly gather their main strength when threatened. It is worth noting that the Romans were at times able to force the Avars into a stand-up fight, and when that happened, the victory usually went to Rome²⁴.

In further sections of this sub-chapter the author provides an overview of the Avar style of warfare, concentrating on the tactics employed by mounted units, mobilization methods, placement of sentries and methods of fighting typical for the nomads, which the Romans knew all too well. One intriguing fact is that the author realized how the Avars were a confederation of various tribes, and suggested using this to one's advantage. In his opinion, at the end of the 6th century there was no unity among the Avar Khaganate, which easily led to discord (*Strategikon*, 11.2.74–78.). The readers were instructed to exploit this situation, encouraging the nomads to switch sides, or desert entirely. If a rift appeared in the ranks of the Avars, many were likely to leave or join the Romans. Once again, it bears mentioning that the work of Theophylact Simocatta refers to precisely such a situation, when a portion of the nomads not only rebelled against the orders of the khan, but actually changed allegiance and reinforced the Roman side (Simocatta, 8.6.1.). This drastic decision was caused by how the Avar dealt with the Antes tribe. It is likely that the graves of Avar deserters from the year 602 were discovered during archaeological studies in Corinth²⁵.

who had been defeated by the Avars. Bayan claimed that since the city was in the possession of the Gepids, whom he subjugated, it should also become part of his domain (Menander Protector, fragm. 63–66). There are countless other examples of Avar greed or situations, in which they broke previous agreements in the belief that war will be more profitable for them.

²³ This is the only way to explain the astonishing victories of taxiarchos Martyn and lochagos Kastos. Kastos launched a surprise assault on one of the camping Avar detachments and routed it completely. Shortly afterwards the forces of Martyn surprised another Avar unit near Tomis, where the Khan himself was present, and also managed to rout the nomads (Simocatta, 2.10.) The dispersed forces of the Avars were an easy target, even the Khagan's own unit, but once the Avars had gathered their strength, the Romans were forced to retreat (Simocatta, 2.11.).

²⁴ Worth mentioning here are the battles of Priscus, who clashed with the Avars on a number of occasions and was victorious each time; first, by capturing a defended river crossing, and then by defeating the enemy in open battle (Simocatta, 8.2.).

²⁵ F. Curta points out that one warrior's burial place in Corinth may be related to an episode from 602 when some of the Avars changed their allegiance and joined the Romans, and that the body laid to rest in that place was of one of the Avar turncoats; although we should bear in mind that this is not the only hypothesis regarding that particular grave. In any case, the warrior's resting place is clear proof that nomads did in some cases serve under Roman command. It also proves the attractiveness of Roman culture, being in no significant way different from typical Christian graves, which meant that for those interring the body it was not important anymore to express the warrior's nomadic origins (Curta 2005, 132).

The sub-chapter on the Avars concludes with a fragment devoted to direct engagements, in which the author gives quite a detailed description of what should be done before the battle and how to make the nomads lose their advantage. Much emphasis was placed on the role of the Roman infantry, which was to screen the mounted units on the battlefield, and in case the attacking Roman cavalry was defeated, the infantry was tasked with repelling the enemy's counter-charge (*Strategikon*, 12B.17). This was a significant change from the tactics of Justinian's reign that focused on mounted archers, made necessary by the fact that Avar horsemen were superior to the Roman cavalry in terms of quality and possibly also numbers²⁶. Additionally, the author noted that it was best to force the nomads into close-quarters combat, in which the Romans had the advantage (*Strategikon*, 11.2.52.). This idea is proven true in the work of Theophylact Simocatta, who attributed Priscus' victory against the Avars to the fact that Romans gave up trying to fight at a distance and forced the barbarians into close combat range (Simocatta, 8.2.). What is notable is that the Roman army was mostly modernized to match the Avar model (Kaegi 1979; 2003, 108–109; Karantabis 2005–2006). Some scholars claim that the suggestions listed in *Strategikon* may have been the cause of changes that took place during the reign of emperor Heraclius, although it is likely impossible to determine to what extent (Kaegi 1979, 226–227).

The author's suggestions regarding the Avars were of a practical, military character. The situation is quite different with the descriptions of the Slavs and the Antes.

V. THE SLAVS AND THE ANTES

Comments on the Slavs in Book XI comprised more than simply practical advice. Granted, the author followed a certain structure consistent for the whole Book; first a political description of the enemy; then, several sentences about everyday habits, the knowledge of which may prove useful during war; following that, a description of the enemy's methods of warfare, including favorite stratagems and overview of typical equipment; and, in conclusion, what should be the model Roman response when engaging the barbarians in question. However, much information regarding the Slavs does not fit into this structure and extends well beyond the knowledge necessary for a military commander.

Already in the introduction to the sub-chapter the author notes that the Slavs and the Antes are identical. This was the same claim that Procopius of Caesarea made just a few years prior (Procopius Caesarensis, *De Bellis*, 7.14.), and it was to indicate that the comments will apply to both tribes.²⁷ It is also worth noting

²⁶ Avar cavalry was considered an exemplary mounted force by the author of *Strategikon* and served as the basis for many reforms suggested within the treatise.

²⁷ Until the end of the 6th century, and maybe even at the beginning of the 7th, the Romans were in an alliance with the Antes (Kardaras 2010).

that the Slavs play a prominent role in the work of Procopius, particularly in the ethnographic passages, which are, however, heavily influenced by Antique *topoi* (Revánoglou 2005, 240–245). Similarly to Procopius, the author draws the reader's attention to the characteristic qualities of the Slavs and Antes: "They are both independent, absolutely refusing to be enslaved or governed, least of all in their own land. They are populous and hardy, bearing readily heat, cold, nakedness, and scarcity of provisions" (Procopius Caesarensis, *De Bellis*, 7.14).

Following this short passage, the treatise focuses on one particular quality of the Slavs, which sets them apart from other peoples; namely, their hospitality. In the author's opinion, this specific characteristic had its grounds in religion and was deeply rooted in Slav culture; to the point that the Slavs were actually willing to seek payback for any harm suffered by their guests (*Strategikon*, 11.4.8–16.). Vengeance in such case was seen as a sacred duty of the host, who failed to extend proper care to the guest. This aspect of Slav culture was still prominent during the reign of Leo VI, although the author of *Tactica*, who paraphrased *Strategikon* in his description of the barbarians, wrote about most characteristics of Slav military craft in the past tense. The only exception was the passage on slavic hospitality (Kaldellis 2013, 85). This fact may serve as proof corroborating the authenticity of the observations made by the author of *Strategikon*, which were then intentionally modified in the 9th century by Emperor Leo VI, the alleged author of the military treatise *Tactica*. Supposedly in the 6th century, Slavs used hospitality to attract others to their tribe, ensuring constant growth in numbers. Prisoners were to be treated as guests and after their release were given the option to stay among the barbarians or to leave, in which case they would even be granted gifts by the Slavs (*Strategikon*, 11.4.15–16.). This description is rather surprising, especially when set against the accounts of Slav activity on the Roman side of the Danube, such as enslaving the civilian population, which was to be quickly put to the sword in the event of upcoming confrontation with the Roman army²⁸. On the other hand, we know that there were other barbarians among the Slavs, who had been accepted into the tribe, like the Christian Gepid, who betrayed the Slav commander Musokios (Simocatta 6.8.13.). During the same episode, Theophylact mentions how Musokios was willing to risk the lives of his men in order to provide aid and hospitality to Slavs from Ardagast's routed force (Simocatta 6.9.1–2). The author of *Strategikon* points out that Slav hospitality and way of life may prove to be a serious problem, as they may be appealing to Roman deserters looking for a better life (*Strategikon*, 11.4.131–136.). The fact that this was a real issue is confirmed when looking at the advice given in the treatise — any soldiers defecting to the Slavs were to face brutal repercussions, whereas those who escaped from the barbarians were to be rewarded (*Strategikon*, 11.4.135–136).

²⁸ Simocatta 7.2. This was the fate suffered by Roman prisoners, including women and children, transported in a Slav military train that had been attacked by the Romans. Once the barbarians were certain that they would be defeated, they murdered all the prisoners.

In his description of the Slavs, the author makes the only reference in the whole treatise to the fairer sex. He must have been an avid admirer of the beauty and friendliness of Slav women, whom he calls the most tender in the whole world (*Strategikon*, 11.4.18–22).

An important aspect of the description is the issue of Slav settlement, which the author mentions a number of times. This was, of course, in relation to the pacification operations undertaken by the Roman army in the Barbaricum²⁹, but nonetheless these passages contain many interesting observations about where the Slavs located their colonies and how it was a purposeful strategy. *Strategikon* is the first source that provides an overview of barbarian settlement. The author describes the locations that the Slavs chose to occupy (near watercourses and forests, which could serve as *refugia* in the event of a raid) and the ground plan of settlements, which were to have several evacuation routes and were to be founded along rivers, close to each other (*Strategikon*, 11.4.165–172.). All these features were to improve the defensiveness and allow the Slavs to fully take advantage of each location's strengths. Establishing several settlements along a river meant that the Roman army had to stop at the first one, which gave the defenders time to evacuate their livestock and gather the local tribesmen, who then proceeded to harass the attackers with surprise strikes. In order to prevent this from happening, the Romans were instructed to divide their forces in two and assault the whole settled region from both sides, making it impossible for the enemy to organize an effective defense (*Strategikon*, 11.4.180–191.).

According to the treatise, the Slavs' favored method of fighting was setting an ambush, preferably in the woods, where the barbarians supposedly felt most confident (*Strategikon*, 11.4.23–27.). Lack of mentions about Slav cavalry in historical sources means that it did not play an important part in the tribal art of war, and the barbarians preferred fighting by means of deception (Kazanski 1999; 2009). In order to gain the advantage, these enemies were to employ various stratagems, from inciting fear to deliberate disruption of Roman formations (see for example: Różycki 2015b, 23–29). The author of the treatise confirms the opinion of Procopius of Caesarea (Procopius Caesarensis, *De Bellis*, 7.14.) and John of Ephesus (Ioannes Ephesus, *Historia Ekklesiastika*, 6.24.) regarding the poor quality of Slav equipment, mentioning only their short spears, poisoned arrows and cumbersome shields (*Strategikon*, 11.4.44–50.). It was suggested that Slavs were best engaged in winter, as during that season it was more difficult for them to hide in the woods and their tracks were easier to spot in the snow³⁰. The Roman army should include both infantry and mounted units. Considering the poor equipment and organization of the Slavs, Romans were supposed to force them into fighting on open ground and to focus on quickly

²⁹ *Strategikon*, 11.4.162–193. The last significant military operations on the other side of the Danube were undertaken by the Roman army before the usurpation of power by Phocas in 602, which also serves as an indicator of when *Strategikon* was written.

³⁰ Although the Roman army did not always agree to spend the winter in the Barbaricum, which cost Emperor Maurice his life in 602.

closing the distance into melee. It is worth noting here that despite the changing battlefield conditions, the Roman soldiers — well-versed in discipline, tactics and military training — were still superior to barbarians in close-quarters combat (Simocatta, 6.8; 7.2.).

We should also mention the author's opinion regarding the Slav tribal structure. It is emphasized several times in the treatise how individual tribes were hostile to one another and unable to organize. This is expressed most emphatically in the following passage: "Since there are many kings among them always at odds with one another, it is not difficult to win over some of them by persuasion or by gifts, especially those in areas closer to the border, and then to attack the others, so that their common hostility will not make them united or bring them together under one ruler" (*Strategikon*, 11.4. [trans. G. T. Dennis]).

It is an important thing to consider in the discussion about Slav tribal structure, especially in the context of one digression from the work of Theophylact Simocatta,³¹ in which the author suggests the existence of a central institution of an assembly (Polish: *wiec*) among the Slavs (Simocatta, 6.2.10–3.1.). *Strategikon* presents the barbarians as a people divided, and as such easier to control and exploit in terms of foreign policy. This section of Book XI demonstrates with utmost clarity how well the Romans understood the tribal organization of Danubian Slavs and how they used diplomatic means in order to weaken the barbarians. Notably, similar methods have been employed by the Romans for ages; a good example might be their policy regarding the Goths living in the Barbaricum³². Of course, despite their description in the *Strategikon*, we cannot conclude that there was a complete lack of solidarity among the Slavs. One example to the contrary is provided in the invaluable work of Theophylact Simocatta, who writes about how refugees from the forces of Ardagast,³³ who had been routed by the Romans, were then granted shelter by Musokios (Simocatta, 6.8.).

Comments on the military operations against the Slavs allow us to draw some conclusions regarding the dating of the treatise. The author does not mention anything about defending against Slav raids, concentrating rather on methods of fighting in the Barbaricum, i.e. on the other side of the Danube. He even includes advice to Roman commander on how to transport captured crops on the river (*Strategikon*, 11.4.136–140.). This may indicate that at least that part of the text was written in the 90s of the 6th century, when the Roman armies were moved from the East, following the signing of a peace treaty with Persia,

³¹ There is a trend in the literature of the subject to negate the factographic value of the passage, in which Theophylact mentions the story of the Slavs traveling with musical instruments from lands by the northern sea. Some scholars treat this anecdote as an artificial construct of ancient ethnography; compare: Barford 2001, 59–60. Most recently, this interpretation has been presented in a comprehensive and truly erudite manner by M. Wołoszyn (2014). Another interpretation of the work of Theophylact was offered by J. Probstko-Prostyński (2015).

³² On the tradition of Roman pacification operations in the Barbaricum, see Elton 2004, 234–264.

³³ I am deliberately refraining from calling Ardagast a chief, as Theophylact has not used that title even once, which leads to a conclusion that the famous Slav was actually a warlord rather than chief. This interpretation was first suggested in: Curta 2001, 329.

and commenced operations against the Slavs. After the year 602 there was no significant Roman military presence along the limes anymore, and even less so beyond the borders (Arkad'evich 1983). As such, this section of the text most likely comes from the 90s of the 6th century or a little earlier, during the first half of the reign of Emperor Justinian, when *magister militum per Thracias* Chilbudius conducted pacification operations in the Barbaricum.³⁴

VI. THE AVARS AND THE SLAVS IN THE *STRATEGIKON*

Apart from the already mentioned Book XI, we can find much information about the Avars and some comments that may refer to the Slavs throughout the whole treatise. Numerous mentions of the Avars were mostly connected to their equipment, which at least to a certain extent became the model for the reorganization of the Roman army, particularly the cavalry (Zástěrová 1971, 4–14). Because of that, today *Strategikon* holds a unique place for the weapon studies of Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages. The author of the treatise wrote eagerly about Roman military equipment, pointing out both its positive and negative features. The language used in these comments is straightforward, military-like and, notably, includes many examples of military jargon. A significant portion of Roman arms and armor had its origins in the equipment of the barbarians, which was often reflected in the soldiers' language. The typical Roman sword was the Herulian spatha (*Strategikon*, 12B.4. 2–3.), the horses wore Avar armor (*Strategikon*, 1.2.) and stirrups,³⁵ the soldiers used Avar neck-guards against chafing (*Strategikon*, 1.2.) and spears fitted with characteristic Avar heads (*Strategikon*, 1.2.), all while wearing tunics less ornate than Bulgarian ones (*Strategikon*, 12B.1.8.) and shod shoes of Goth design (*Strategikon*, 12.5.6–7.), and finally they were throwing short spears of Slav origin (*Strategikon*, 12B.5).

Granted, the above description is slightly exaggerated for the purpose of this piece, but nevertheless it remains a fact that barbarian imports were extremely important for the Roman army at the end of the 6th and in the beginning of the 7th century (Zástěrová 1971, 4–14)³⁶. It was a Roman tradition dating back

³⁴ It bears mentioning that in the face of recurring Roman raids the Slavs did unite and staged an ambush for the attacking army. According to Procopius of Caesarea, it resulted in the deaths of most of the Roman army and its commander.

³⁵ The stirrups were referred to in a descriptive manner as σκάλας σιδηρᾶς; this word did not make it into military jargon and was quickly replaced by the term ἀναβολεὺς. During the writing of *Strategikon* the stirrups were not yet utilized in combat and mostly served to aid in the evacuation of wounded soldiers from the battlefield. Notably, when mentioning the stirrups the author of the treatise did not point out that they were an Avar invention (*Strategikon*, 1.2.35–40; see also a piece about Avar horse tack: Garām 1995, 143–149).

³⁶ One important piece was written by M.-A. Karantabis, in which the author sees the tactics and the equipment of nomad cavalry as a source for the changes in the Roman army in the times of Heraclius: Karantabis 2005–2006, particularly pages 29–31. Among Polish scholars, the issue has also been touched upon by M. Wojnowski (Wojnowski 2005).

to the times of the Republic to learn from the technological developments of its neighbors and adapt them to Roman needs. Each piece of equipment has its own short description in *Strategikon*, which allows us to attempt to reconstruct the military gear of a Roman infantryman and cavalryman at the end of the 6th century³⁷. Regrettably, these notes on Roman equipment adapted from the barbarians are rarely used in discussions regarding typical barbarian equipment, on which we usually have no written sources (see, for example: Müller 2015, 58). A major obstacle in any analysis is the current state of research in the field of Byzantine weapon studies, although a lot has been going on in this area recently³⁸. Yet there is still no study that would compare the knowledge on Roman and barbarian gear presented in the treatise with what we know from archaeology.

Another interesting subject of study would be an analysis of the tactics and military stratagems in the context of *Strategikon*. Preliminary comparative analyses with the work of Theophylact Simocatta (Różycki 2016) indicate that the author of the treatise painted a reasonably comprehensive image of Slav military craft. Further studies should focus on barbarian tactics presented in *Strategikon* confronted with written and archaeological sources (Curta 2013, 811–813). It is also worth noting that considering the lack of written sources from the deep Slav territories in the Barbaricum from that period, *Strategikon* may also be used, although with due reservations, as a reference point for Slavic archaeological studies in Poland.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

Thanks to the combined efforts of archaeologists and historians we now possess an increasingly comprehensive image of the Avars³⁹ and the Slavs in the second half of the 6th century. Nevertheless, many issues demand further studies. A perfect example could be the *case study* by Georgios Kardaras (Kardaras 2005) on the siege equipment used by the Avars when assaulting Roman fortifications. These kinds of supplementary interdisciplinary studies have immense cognitive value, greatly enriching our understanding of the turn of the 6th and 7th century. The biggest potential still lies in comparative studies, especially those that set *Strategikon* against the *Historia* of Theophylact Simocatta. The authors of both these pieces present the reality of the reign of Emperor Maurice, but from

³⁷ F. Curta attempted to partially answer the question of whether the advice presented in *Strategikon* was actually applied in real life (Curta 2013).

³⁸ See Yotov 2011; 2014. And particularly in the context of weapon studies: Yotov 2004. A good rundown of the most recent developments in the archaeology of the Danubian limes for various historical periods is available in: Madgearu 2013, 4–5.

³⁹ A notable work dealing excellently with the subject is the weapon study by G. Csiky (2015, 391–399; although the author did not attempt to compare archaeological sources to written ones, mentioning the *Strategikon* only in the case of the stirrups and the length of the Avar kontos; cf. Csiky 2015, 147, 392).

different perspectives. The work of Theophylact may serve as a supplementary source to the *Strategikon* and vice versa.

We can also be hopeful about the archaeological studies of barbarians in the Balkans. Studies of settlements have already confirmed the veracity of the sections of *Strategikon* describing the locations of Slavic colonies⁴⁰. Weapon studies are another source of potentially valuable information, especially when analyzing their results in comparison with the treatise.

Although *Strategikon*, apart from the work of Vegetius, is the best researched ancient military treatise, a lot remains to be done. The treatise should become a mandatory point of reference for scholars studying the turn of the 6th and 7th century, both archaeologists and historians, as well as classical philologists. The research potential of *Strategikon* is vast, especially considering the growing number of archaeological finds.

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⁴⁰ See the classic and still relevant work on the matter: Rusanova 1976, 188–195. For some interesting remarks about locating settlements in the middle ages, see Dunin-Wąsowicz 1974, 146. Results of analyses may also be applied, with due caution, to earlier periods. More on the challenges of archaeological research regarding Slavs in the Balkans is available in the latest study: Komatárova-Balínova 2016. See also about one of the most well-known experiments regarding Slavic settlement: Pleinerová 1986. On the types of houses, see Maksimović, Popović 2005, 346.

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