

Byzantina Symmeikta

Vol 31 (2021)

BYZANTINA SYMMEIKTA 31



Book Review: Byzantine Military Rhetoric in the Ninth Century. A Translation of the Anonymi Byzantini Rhetorica Militaris, London -New York 2021

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doi: [10.12681/byzsym.27858](https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.27858)

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To cite this article:

Różycki, Łukasz. (2021). Book Review: Byzantine Military Rhetoric in the Ninth Century. A Translation of the Anonymi Byzantini Rhetorica Militaris, London -New York 2021. *Byzantina Symmeikta*, 31, 503–507.
<https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.27858>

Byzantine Military Rhetoric in the Ninth Century A Translation of the Anonymi Byzantini Rhetorica Militaris, trans. G. THEOTOKIS – D. SIDIROPOULOS, London – New York 2021. ISBN 9780367902087

The work presented to the reader is the first English and at the same time the second modern¹ translation of *Rhetorica Militaris* – a piece that complements the military compendium written by Syrianos Magister. The reviewed source was translated and supplemented with an introduction and commentary by two academics: Georgios Theotokis, a Byzantine scholar hailing from the University of Glasgow, currently a history lecturer at Ibn Haldun University in Turkey; and Dimitros Sidiropoulos, a Greek historian preparing his Ph.D. dissertation at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. It is worth emphasizing that Georgios Theotokis is an established author and an expert on Byzantine and Norman military history; his most prominent works include *Byzantine Military Tactics in Syria and Mesopotamia in the Tenth Century*² and *Norman Campaigns in the Balkans 1081-1108*³; he has also edited numerous well-received collaborative pieces⁴.

The book under review is divided into two sections: an extensive introduction (further divided into part A and part B), which takes up over half of the entire book, and the translation proper. There is also an index of names and bibliography.

1. *Siriano Discorsi di Guerra*, trans. I. ERAMO, Bari 2011.

2. G. THEOTOKIS, *Byzantine Military Tactics in Syria and Mesopotamia in the Tenth Century: A Comparative Study*, Edinburgh 2018.

3. G. THEOTOKIS, *The Norman Campaigns in the Balkans, 1081-1108 AD*, London 2014.

4. *A Military History of the Mediterranean Sea - Aspects of War, Diplomacy and Military Elites*, ed. G. THEOTOKIS – A. YIDIZ, Leiden 2018; *War in Eleventh-Century Byzantium*, ed. G. THEOTOKIS – M. MEŠKO, London & New York 2021.

The introduction begins with a lengthy sub-chapter, in which Theotokis and Sidiropoulos focus on the issue of the translated work's author. I do not believe there is any scholar today that would question the fact that the entire compendium was written by Syrianos Magister. Theotokis and Sidiropoulos do a good job at presenting from a historiographical context how the author of the treatise was identified. They do not omit any stage of the process or any scholar studying the topic. The narrative is clear and cohesive, in the majority of cases reflecting the current state of knowledge and the literature of the subject.

As far as the dating of the work is concerned, we get two comprehensive sub-chapters on the subject. The first of these describes the conclusions reached by the majority of contemporary scholars studying the topic. However, one issue needs to be noted here. Theotokis and Sidiropoulos are convinced that the treatise was written in the 9th century, so they focus rather on arguments supporting this claim, at the same time somewhat neglecting other hypotheses. One criticism that may be levelled here regards the failure to include the studies of a Russian author and translator of one of the works of Syrianos, i.e. Vladimir Vasilievich Kuchma⁵, who argued for an earlier dating. Another missing piece would be the analyses by Barry Baldwin⁶; not including these only serves to reinforce the authors' arguments regarding the later dating of the treatise. Reading this sub-chapter, one is left with a clear conclusion that the translated work originated in the 9th century, with the authors' points being supported by the authority of such scholars as Philip Rance or Jonathan Shepard. However, it is worth noting that even Philip Rance, who boldly argued for the 9th century as the correct date, summed up his work with a confession that he was himself not entirely convinced about the date of writing the compendium⁷. I personally believe it is somewhat of a shame that the authors did not expand on the possibility of the text being compiled by Syrianos. We should not exclude the possibility that according to the tradition of writing military treatises, the work that probably originated in the 9th century was at least partially based on a now-lost treatise from the 6th or the 7th century. This idea was suggested, e.g. by John Haldon, in a footnote to his deliberations on the role of information

5. *Ο στρατηγικῆς. Βυζαντινὸς πολεμικὸς τρᾶκτᾶτ VI αἰᾶς*, trans. V. V. KUCHMA, Saint Petersburg 2007.

6. B. BALDWIN, On the Date of the Anonymous *Περὶ Στρατηγικῆς*, *BZ* 81 (1988), 290-293.

7. P. RANCE, The Date of the Military Compendium of Syrianus Magister (formerly the Sixth-Century Anonymus Byzantinus), *BZ* 100/2 (2007), 738.

in warfare⁸. It also bears remembering that Douglas Lee and Jonathan Shepard argue that chapters 33-47 could have been composed at a later date, around the 10th century, but the main text was written in the 6th century⁹.

The second sub-chapter devoted to the dating of the compendium is an intriguing attempt at more accurately determining the dates of when Syrianos could have written the work. The authors make an interesting and convincing case that strengthens the hypothesis of Salvatore Cosentino¹⁰, concluding that the compendium was created by Syrianos during the second part of the reign of Basil I. This final conclusion is the result of a very competent analysis of Byzantine naval actions.

Having dealt with the topic of who compiled the treatise and when, the authors move on to describe the works that served as the basis for writing *Rhetorica Militaris*. In this section, rightly so, they highlight the role of Hermogenes, an influential author readily compiled by Syrianos. Then, the authors briefly describe the *Textgeschichte* of the manuscripts, which concludes part A of the introduction.

Part B of the introduction is an extensive academic text aimed at those readers who are not so well-versed in the art of military rhetoric or improving morale before a battle. In the first section, entitled *The history of exhortation and exhortive speeches*, the authors present a short history of the subject starting with Homer, through the times of Julius Caesar, all the way to Late Antiquity. It would be difficult to expect from a couple-pages-long introduction to cover the subject in a comprehensive manner. But the authors do a competent job at presenting a certain literary tradition, as well as certain traditional battlefield behaviors. In my opinion, the introduction should make mention of the extremely interesting academic discussion about whether pre-battle speeches were an actual thing, or were they

8. J. HALDON, Information and War: Some Comments on Defensive Strategy and Information in the Middle Byzantine Period, in: *War and warfare in Late Antiquity*, ed. A. SARANTIS – N. CHRISTIE, Leiden 2013, 381.

9. D. LEE – J. SHEPARD, A Double Life: Placing the Peri Presbeon, *Bsl* 52 (1991), 29; I. ERAMO, On Syrianus Magister's military compendium, *Classica & Christiana* 7/1 (2012), 113.

10. S. COSENTINO, Syrianos' Strategikon – a 9th-Century Source?, *Byzantinistica* 2 (2000), 243-280.

only a literary *topos*¹¹, as exemplified in their classic form by Thucydides¹². Another two short sub-chapters deal with the technical aspects of making a speech before the troops, and the importance of rhetorical skills for a commander and the emperor in improving the morale of their armies. The latter sub-chapter in particular is a welcome addition, illustrating how important it was to mentally prepare the army before the battle. Both items are high-quality works in their own right.

The final sub-chapter entitled *Rhetorical topoi in bulding morale* is effectively to a large extent a philological commentary to Syrianos's piece. The authors analyze not only the contents of his work, but also look for traces of pre-battle addresses in Roman and Byzantine historiography, doing their best to comprehensively illustrate the methods of reinforcing morale through speeches.

The translation of the source material itself is outstanding. It is good to see that the authors decided to work on the edition by I. Eramo, which is markedly better than the classic one by Wilhelm Rüstow and Hermann Köchly, if only for the fact that the Italian scholar made use of codex Laurentianus LV.4. The division of text also follows the Italian edition. The translation is a pleasant read which accurately reflects the spirit of the Greek original. This is crucial because we are dealing with a work on the art of rhetoric, whose author did not shy away from complicated and in many instances ambiguous phrases. In addition to the partial commentary included in part B of the introduction, here the authors provide numerous footnotes with linguistic comments, and sometimes also the explanation of a given literary *topos*. The only inconvenience is the lack of parallel original text, which makes it impossible to easily monitor the quality of the translation.

Summing up, the first English translation of *Rhetorica Militaris* is a significant academic achievement. What we receive is a comprehensive rendition of an extremely important and oftentimes ommitted source. The introduction by Theotokis and Sidiropoulos does an excellent job at familiarizing the reader not only with the history of the manuscript, and the issue of authorship, but also with the importance of constructing speeches in Byzantine warcraft. Minor weaknesses mentioned in the review do not in any way detract from the quality of this academic achievement, i.e. the first translation of *Rhetorica Militaris* into the English language. Thanks

11. M.H. HANSEN, The Battle Exhortation in Ancient Historiography. Fact or Fiction?, *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 42/2 (1993), 161-180.

12. M. CLARK, Did Thucydides Invent the Battle Exhortation?, *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 44/3 (1995), 375-376.

to the extensive introduction any reader less familiarized with Byzantine warfare is provided with information necessary to interpret the source. The translation of *Rhetorica Militaris* is a must-have item for any scholar studying Byzantine military history and can easily serve as a benchmark for how translations of source materials should be published.

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