

Byzantina Symmeikta

Vol 25 (2015)

BYZANTINA SYMMEIKTA 25



Book Review: A. AYVAZYAN, The Armenian Military in the Byzantine Empire. Conflict and Alliance under Justinian and Maurice. [Alfortville] 2014, pp. 152. ISBN: 9782917329597

Christos G. MAKRYPOULIAS

doi: [10.12681/byzsym.8887](https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.8887)

Copyright © 2016, Christos G. Makrypoulias



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

MAKRYPOULIAS, C. G. (2016). Book Review:A. AYVAZYAN, The Armenian Military in the Byzantine Empire. Conflict and Alliance under Justinian and Maurice. [Alfortville] 2014, pp. 152. ISBN: 9782917329597. *Byzantina Symmeikta*, 25, 323–326. <https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.8887>

A. AYVAZYAN, *The Armenian Military in the Byzantine Empire. Conflict and Alliance under Justinian and Maurice* [Alfortville] 2014, pp. 152. ISBN 9782917329597

This is the second (“revised and expanded”) edition of a book that was first published by the same house, Éditions SIGEST, in 2012; a French translation (*Les forces militaires arméniennes dans l'Empire byzantin: Luttés et alliances sous Justinien et Maurice*) was also published in 2013. The author, Dr Armen Ayvazyan, is the Director of the Ararat Center for Strategic Research, an Armenian Policy Institute focusing on security issues, and Senior Researcher in the Yerevan Institute of Medieval Manuscripts (Matenadaran).

The title of the book can be misleading. As the author himself admits in the preface (p. 18), it “should in no way be taken as an application for a comprehensive coverage of the numerous and diverse relationships between the Armenian military and the Byzantine Empire in the age of Emperors Justinian and Maurice”. In fact, the book consists of two parts: the first (and by far the longer of the two) is a historical-military analysis of the Armenian rebellion of 538-539 (pp. 23-105), while the latter is titled “On Imperial Prejudice and Expedient Omission of Armenians in Maurice’s *Strategikon*” (pp. 107-126). The book also contains a useful bibliography of primary and secondary sources (pp. 127-138), and an index (139-149); last but not least, it presents a set of rather informative maps: the first is in color, while the last, Map 3, is actually a pair of satellite images and a photograph of the battlefield of Avnik taken by the author during his visit there.

The aim of the first part is to give a detailed account of the events of 538-539 on Byzantium’s eastern frontier. The author studies the chronology of the Armenian rebellion, its early stages and Justinian’s counter measures, the relative size, effectiveness and leadership of the two opposing forces, the topography of the battle of Oinokhalakon and the death of the Byzantine commander, Sittas, and,

finally, the end of the rebellion and its aftermath. Since Procopius is our only source for the episode in question, English translations of the relevant passages are appended to the end of the chapter.

From the point of view of Byzantine military history, the most important contributions of this chapter are the insights it offers with regard to the topography of the battle of Oinokhalakon and the routes taken by Sittas and the Armenian rebels (pp. 68-77) — in fact, the maps at the end of the book all refer to this chapter and are a welcome addition, as well as a useful aid. Based on the etymology of the place-name Oinokhalakon (Onik being the classical Armenian pronunciation of Avnik and *kalak* a term denoting “castle” or “fortress”), Ayvazyan locates the battle near the medieval Armenian castle of Avnik (modern Güzelhisar, Turkey), known to Byzantinists from its mention in Constantine Porphyrogenitus’ *De administrando imperio* (see the photos on pp. 79 and 82). The broken terrain of the battlefield clearly affected the conduct and outcome of the battle, which evolved into a series of separate engagements culminating in the death of Sittas at the hands of the Armenian rebels.

On the other hand, the author makes a number of assertions that are hardly supported by the sources. For instance, he claims that the death of Sittas was not the result of a chance encounter during an isolated skirmish, as Procopius seems to believe, but a planned attack against the Byzantine commander. In fact, Ayvazyan dwells heavily on the notion of “targeted killings” as part of the Armenian military’s tactical doctrine (pp. 18, 28-31, 88-89); however, although he cites several ancient Chinese military classics, his references to Armenian narrative sources are inconclusive, the latter simply mentioning the death of the enemy general during an engagement. Another case in point is the question of who was the leader of the Armenian rebellion of 538-539, Artabanes Arshakuni or Vasak Mamikonean. Based on the flimsiest of evidence found in Procopius, the author seems absolutely convinced that it was the latter (pp. 54-57). Although this is far from certain, Ayvazyan goes on (pp. 84-89) to reference the battle of Avkori (481), fought by another Vasak Mamikonean, and proceeds to what he terms “a comparative analysis of Mamikonean tactics”. However, if one were to read n. 153 on pp. 84-85, one would notice that even contemporary Armenian historians were uncertain as to whether it was the earlier Vasak Mamikonean or another warlord, Babgen Suny, who led the Armenian rebels against the Sassanids. It appears that the author might be making too many assumptions in the face of limited textual evidence.

Another contentious issue revolves around the numerical size of the opposing forces. Ayvazyan puts the number of Armenian rebels at between 10,000 and 20,000, based on the supposition that they were both numerous enough to intimidate Sittas and able to defeat him in battle (pp. 57-59). We have no way of testing this assumption against hard evidence, but the author's method of calculating Sittas' troops (pp. 48-52) is clearly flawed. Although he mentions the studies of both Treadgold and Haldon in the footnotes, he mistakenly equates the generic term *numerus* with the ancient Roman legion and assuming not only that the latter still existed in the sixth century (in another passage he goes so far as to refer to Byzantine soldiers as "legionnaires"), but also that it was still 5,000-man strong (neither assumption is correct). This leads him, like Adontz before him, to grossly exaggerate the total numerical strength of the army of Armenia.

As vexing as the aforementioned issues are, however, they pale in comparison with the author's tendency to use modern terms when describing the sociopolitical background of sixth-century Armenia — terms such as "national self-rule" or "the military" functioning as an "ethno-nationally integrative" institution. Although the author holds doctoral degrees in both History and Political Science, clearly it is the political scientist and not the historian that speaks here. Particularly galling is his choice of words when describing Armenian troops. His systematic use of terms such as "the military" or "Armenian armed forces", combined with such statements as "the ancient and medieval *Armenian states and kings were naturally cultivating and institutionalizing their armed forces*" (emphasis is that of the text), is meant to convey the image of a professional fighting force, an image that is blatantly anachronistic, since it applies modern notions of a unified chain of command, universal standards of training and cohesive tactical doctrines to a group of men, undoubtedly brave and efficient, but still little more than a collection of feudal lords and their private retainues.

The author's insistence in describing sixth-century Armenia as a sort of modern nation-state united by a professional military does not allow him to grasp the real reason behind the Armenians being omitted from the chapter describing foreign enemies in the *Strategikon*, which is the aim of the second part of his book. Although Dr Ayvazyan is correct in assuming that the Byzantines viewed the Armenians in a less than complimentary light, characterizing those stereotypes as "racist" or calling Byzantium's policies towards Armenia "colonialist" is rather far-fetched. It was neither Byzantine prejudice towards Armenians nor a "conspiracy" on the part of Maurice (whom Ayvazyan assumes to be the actual author of the

Strategikon) to undermine Armenia's military potential while at the same time securing its "smooth Hellenization" that led to the omission; it was the simple fact that sixth/seventh-century Armenia was not an independent state with its own military, but a geographical region that had been divided between the Eastern Roman Empire and Sassanid Persia two centuries earlier.

Nevertheless, one must not assume our opinion of Dr Ayvazyan's work to be wholly negative. Although by academic standards the book might seem less than satisfactory to a professional Byzantinist, it should be born in mind that its component essays were originally written for the general public (a version of the first was published in a Russian/Armenian newspaper, while an earlier version of the second appeared in the popular history magazine *Medieval Warfare* II.4, 2012, 33-36); as such, they deserve to not be judged too harshly. If one views it solely as a means of introducing Byzantium to an audience unfamiliar with the military history of the Eastern Roman Empire, then the book certainly serves its purpose — provided that readers exercise due caution when it comes to its conclusions and some of its basic tenets.

CHRISTOS G. MAKRYPOULIAS
IHR/NHRF