

Prefazione

John Haldon

Princeton University

The context within which we can situate the writing of the so-called *De militari scientia* (thus entitled by Alphonse Dain, hereafter *DMS*) was one of fundamental political, social-economic and ideological change for the eastern Roman empire. A somewhat randomly-structured military manual, or perhaps a set of military handbook-like notes, this short ‘treatise’ dates probably to the later years of the reign of Heraclius or perhaps the first part of that of Constans II (exactly when remains a point for discussion), although a later date cannot be excluded. Yet it is one of the very few pieces of purely secular writing that can be ascribed with some degree of certainty to this period, and its importance is in consequence far greater than either its brevity or its content might at first suggest.

Following the deposition of the emperor Phokas in 610 the new ruler of the eastern Roman empire, Heraclius, had been faced with the difficult task of restoring imperial fortunes both politically and militarily as well as financially. Within a few years Avars and Slavs had overrun much of the Balkans, while between 614 and 618 the Persians had occupied and set up their own provincial governments in Syria and Egypt, pushing on thereafter into Asia Minor. Italy, divided into a number of military commands isolated from one another by Lombard enclaves, had to be left to its own devices, encouraging an increasing degree of local autonomy and self-reliance which was eventually to lead to its severance from the empire in all but name. Yet in 626, a combined Persian-Avar siege of Constantinople was defeated, while from 623 Heraclius boldly took the war into Persian territory, invading through Armenia into the Persian heartlands and, in a series of brilliant campaigns, destroyed Chosroes’ armies and forced the Persian generals (Chosroes himself having been deposed and murdered) to sue for peace. The status quo ante

was re-established, and the dominant position of the Roman empire seemed assured. But although the Danube remained nominally the frontier, the Balkans were no longer under effective imperial authority; while the financial situation of the empire, whose resources were quite exhausted by the long wars, was desperate. Almost immediately thereafter in the east a combination of incompetence and apathy, disaffected soldiers and inadequate defensive arrangements resulted in a series of disastrous Roman defeats at the hands of the newly-expanding power of Islam. Syria, Palestine, Mesopotamia and Egypt were lost within the short span of 10 years, so that by 642 the empire was reduced to a rump of its former self. The Persian empire was completely overrun and destroyed. The Arab Islamic empire was born. The reduced and impoverished East Roman or Byzantine empire now had to contend not only with an aggressive and extremely successful new foe. The insistence of the imperial government during the reign of Constans II on enforcing the official monothelete policy reflected the government's need to maintain imperial authority, yet this also brought the empire into conflict with the papacy and the western Church, as well as provoking opposition within the empire, bringing a further degree of political and ideological isolation with it. The empire now had far fewer resources at its disposal, it had lost effective control in the Balkans, and had no real power in Italy, where the military governor or exarch, based at Ravenna, struggled against increasingly difficult odds to maintain the imperial position. An attempt by the Caliph Mu'awiya to break Constantinopolitan resistance and seize the city in 668-669 was beaten back, and a major siege during the reign of the Caliphs Sulayman and 'Umar in 717-718 was defeated with great losses on the Arab side. This marked the high tide of the Arab successes militarily; but as a result of the massive losses in territory and fiscal resources – manpower and agricultural produce in particular – Constantinople was forced radically to re-structure its fiscal apparatus and its priorities, including the way the army was recruited and supported. The result was, by the later seventh century, an administratively very different state from that which had existed a century earlier.

The period from the middle and later seventh century until the later ninth century witnessed the birth and formation of the characteristic features of middle Byzantine state and culture. The transformations noted above were accompanied by shifts in the direction of both secular and ecclesiastical literary culture. Particularly apparent is the drastic reduction in all types of secular literary production, from historiography to verse, from the later years of the reign of Heraclius until the last years of the eighth century, a change which was largely a result of the transformations in urban culture and the changing character of elite society. It reflected also

changed priorities and concerns, as people had to confront and make sense of a dramatically altered world. Literature that grappled with theology and dogma, with issues of belief and the meaning of life, indeed the purpose of the Roman empire itself, came to the fore.

By the last third of the seventh century formal and traditional literary education appears to have been limited to Constantinople, and possibly one or two of the few remaining major urban centres, where private tutors might school those from families who could afford to pay; and to monasteries, where biblical and patristic texts were the staple. In the provinces, literacy was very much more limited. The Church frowned on the pre-Christian literature of the ancient world, which had a further dampening effect on interest as well as on its availability. Classical literature could be employed allegorically or formalistically, so that it retained a niche in the more explicitly and self-consciously Christian context of the fifth and sixth centuries on (a tendency which intensified during the seventh century). But the number of those equipped with this sort of cultural capital was likely quite limited, a fact reflected in the surviving literature from the period in question and its predominantly theological and religious character. Only with the expansion in the traditional classical curriculum in higher education which took place after the middle of the ninth century, partly under imperial auspices, did this picture of restricted access and breadth of education change.

Looked at in this broad context, therefore, the significance of the *DMS* lies in the fact that it represents perhaps the last instance for almost two centuries of one aspect of a late Antique secular literature as well as of a particular military cultural tradition. Based largely on the *Strategikon* attributed to the emperor Maurice (usually dated in the 590s), the text survives in only one manuscript, the *codex Laurentianus graecus* 55.4, f. 68^r-76^r, in which it immediately follows upon the text of the *Strategikon*. The initial folios are lost, so title, author and any introductory or explanatory information are missing. The text consists of eighteen chapters of very varied length, dealing with a miscellany of topics, with especial focus on cavalry formations and organisation and on the orders to be issued to the different units or officers both before and during battle. First edited and brought to scholarly attention in 1880 by K. K. Müller, it has since received some attention from scholars such as Rudolf Vári and Alphonse Dain, or more recently Sergei Ivanov and Pyotr Shuvalov, but remains the focus for considerable disagreement in respect of authorship, origins, date and sources.

Apart from its position as a witness to some of the surviving secular literary activity of the middle or later seventh century, the *DMS* is important for several other

reasons, most importantly because it serves in parts both as a key witness to an early version of the text of Maurice's *Strategikon* as well as an invaluable source of information about aspects of seventh-century military practice and organisation, warfare and attitudes to warfare. With this volume Immacolata Eramo, whose recent critical edition and translation of the *Rhetorica militaris* of Syrianus magister, among other works, more than qualifies her as an editor, presents a modern critical edition of the *De militari scientia*, accompanied by a translation into Italian and a detailed introduction. With this welcome new edition and commentary, this important seventh-century text is made accessible for the first time to a broader scientific readership and provides valuable new evidence about both the nature and structure of the tradition of military manuals as well as casting new light on a period for which secular written sources are notoriously scarce.