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**Border Fury! The Muslim
campaigning tactics in Asia Minor
through the writings of the Byzantine
military treatise *Περί παραδρομής
του κυρού Νικηφόρου του βασιλέως***

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**Border Fury! The Muslim campaigning tactics in Asia Minor
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Abstract

In the beginning of the tenth century, with the power of the Abbasid Caliphate of Baghdad in serious decline, regional Muslim dynasties began to emerge in the fringes of the Arab world. One of them was the Hamdanid dynasty of Aleppo that was established in 944 by Sayf-ad-Dawla.¹ Consolidating his control over central and northern Syria and launching a long-term war of attrition against the Byzantine Empire, Sayf-ad-Dawla's campaigns were to last for some two decades until the fall of Antioch in 969. The kind of warfare that dominated the region of Cilicia and Syria between the years 944-955 was characterised by the seasonal campaigning of Muslim armies just north of the Taurus Mountains, with small and medium sized raiding parties cutting deep into Byzantine territory looting and devastating the countryside. The Byzantine military treatise *Περί παραδρομής* (*On Skirmishing*) was written in this political and military context around the year 969, reflecting the reality of warfare in the region as seen by the eyes of a high-ranking and experienced general.² These Byzantine military manuals formed the "legacy" of experienced and glorious generals in the warfare in the East and they reflect the practice of older and well-established strategies and tactics, along with a number of innovative ideas put into practice, and the task of the historian is to distinguish between the two.³

This paper will focus on the military treatise *On Skirmishing* – examining it strictly from a military perspective – and attempt to reconstruct the Muslim raiding tactics in south-eastern Asia Minor up to the mid-10th century. The

¹ For the Hamdanid dynasty of Aleppo, from its establishment until its fall, the classical works are: Canard, M. (1951). *Histoire de la Dynastie des H'amdaniides de Jazira et de Syrie*. Algiers: Université d'Alger; Vasiliev, A.A. (1935-68). *Byzance et les Arabes*. vol. 2. Bruxelles: Institut de philologie et d'histoire orientales.

² The translation of this treatise has been done (in French) by: Dagron, G. & [H Mihăescu](#) (1986). *Le traité sur la guérilla (De velitatione) de l'empereur Nicéphore Phocas (963-969)*. Paris: Editions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique; the present author has used the edition in English: Dennis, G.T. (1985/most recent edition in 2008). *The Anonymous Byzantine Treatise On Skirmishing by the Emperor Lord Nicephoros*. In: *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*. Washington D.C: Dumbarton Oaks.

³ Dain, A. (1967). "Les strategists byzantins". *Travaux et Memoires* (2). 317-363.

major questions that will be examined are: What different types of raids are examined by our author? What were the categories of troops that filled the ranks of these Muslim raiding parties and in what numbers? What is the kind of warfare that dominated the geographical area under consideration and what does it entail about the strategy and the strategic goals of both the Muslims and the Byzantines? What information do we get about the topography of the operational theatre of the war and in what way is this linked to the battle tactics and marching formations applied by the Muslims in this period? What were the consequences of these *razias* for the Byzantine rural communities of Cilicia and Cappadocia and what were the measures taken by the local authorities to deal with them? Do we find any signs of religious motivation in our author's work regarding these Muslim raids? What is the historical value of this military treatise compared to other Christian and Muslim chronicler sources that examine the region in this period?

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The first type of raid and the one dealt with relatively briefly by our author, most likely due to the degree of danger posed for the defenders of the border themes, was the so-called *monokoursa*:

The type of enemy raid which we call a single raid (*monokoursa*) sets out from their country without infantry. They usually ride along rapidly and keep going the whole night without camping anywhere, but make brief stops to rest their horses only in order to feed them. In general, these single raids start out with a very small but select body of troops. They make an effort to move most rapidly to the territory they want to raid.¹

This is the only place where the author deals with this type of small-scale rapid raid of the Muslims. No specific numbers are given apart from the units of the raiding party which, of course, comprised exclusively of cavalry. This may have been both light cavalry of the Bedouins and heavy cavalry of the elite units of *ghulam* (or “slave”) horsemen of Turkish and Iranian origin. Speed was of the essence, thus no infantry was travelling with them to impede their progress through enemy territory. These types of raids were usually led by a local commander of the border areas and could have been launched at any time of the year, thus no mentioning of a specific period is made by our author.

The main danger for the Imperial provinces in Asia Minor, however, was the major raids for which our author draws our full attention to:

The general should be on the alert for news about the equipping and movement of a large army, both cavalry and infantry, especially at that time of the year when one expects large armies to be assembled, usually in August. In that month large numbers would come from Egypt, Palestine, Phoenicia, and southern Syria to Cilicia, to the country around Antioch, and to Aleppo, and adding some Arabs to their force, they would invade Roman territory in September.²

These were substantial forces of troops of both cavalry and infantry made up of volunteers for the jihad as well as regular troops from the Arab lands in the interior and from the borderlands (also known as *al-thugur*).³ The towns of the *thugur* formed the bases for the mixture of the composite and multinational force of the Hamdanids, a force that based its power not just in regular troops of free Arabs, and volunteers of the Islam whose participation in campaigns was irregular in nature, but also on mercenaries and large bodies of slave-soldiers like the Daylami infantry from northern Iran, Turkish and Kurdish heavy horsemen, irregular Bedouin cavalry, Sudanese foot-soldiers and non-

¹ *On Skirmishing*, ch. 6. 4-11. p. 160.

² *On Skirmishing*, ch. 7. 4-10. p. 162.

³ Haldon, J.F. & H. Kennedy (1980). “The Arab-Byzantine Frontier in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries: Military Organization and Society in the Borderlands.” *ZRVI* (19). 79-116.

Muslim elements like Armenians, Greeks and Slavs.¹ Led by the emir himself as the leader of the jihad, such raids had both an economic and ideological function: first, its main aim was to loot and devastate the countryside, destroy the economic centres of the invading regions, disrupt commerce and everyday life and undermine the Emperor's authority.

Its other function was an opportunity for the jihadist volunteers to perform their military duties against the infidel. The expansion of the Dar-al-Islam and the constant war against the Christians was one of the five Pillars of the Islamic Faith and the religious aspect of the Byzantino-Muslim conflict is more than obvious in our treatise; the author invokes God almost in every recommendation he makes regarding strategy and battle-tactics. This is not necessarily an indication of the religious nature of the conflict in itself, as every warrior wishes to believe God is on his side whether fighting against Muslims or Christians, it is the identification of the enemy that proves my point:

For the enemy it is a matter of great importance, and they will make use of every device to assail you when you do not expect it, so that they may overwhelm you, to the harm and destruction of the people of Christ, the dishonour of the mighty Romans, and the exultation and swollen pride of the arrogant sons of Hagar, who deny Christ our God.²

In just one point in his work, our author mentions the number 6,000-12,000 for the invading force of Arabs, when referring to the Byzantine scouting parties dispatched to gather intelligence.³ These numbers of tens of thousands of men would have been well within the capabilities of Sayf-ad-Dawla to muster, as it is confirmed by the accounts of other chroniclers that examine this period like Yahya-ibn-Said of Antioch and Ibn-Zafir, although the exact numbers of different units or the ratio between the infantry and the cavalry are impossible to estimate. Thus, based on the examination of the aforementioned types of Arab raids in the region of central and south-eastern Asia Minor, the question that should follow is: what is the kind of warfare that dominated the geographical area under consideration and what does it entail about the strategy and the strategic goals of the Arabs in the region?

In the view of the wider debate between modern scholars like C.J. Rogers, J. Gillingham and S. Morillo about the term "Vegetian Strategy", I will attempt to give an answer to what degree we can characterise the Arab strategy of the

¹ McGeer, E. (1995). *Sowing the Dragon's Teeth: Byzantine Warfare in the Tenth Century*. Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks. pp. 225-46; Beshir B.J. (1978). "Fatimid Military Organization." *Der Islam* (55). 37-56; Hamblin, W.J. (1985). "The Fatimid Army during the Early Crusades", PhD thesis, University of Michigan; Lev, Y. "Infantry in Muslim armies during the Crusades." In: *Logistics of Warfare in the Age of the Crusades*, ed. by J. H. Pryor. Ashgate: Aldershot. pp. 185-206.

² *On Skirmishing*, ch. 15. 7-12. p. 198.

³ *On Skirmishing*, ch. 14. 45-48. p. 192.

period before the 960s in Cilicia and northern Syria as Vegetian.¹ By the term “Vegetian Strategy” scholars have identified a particular type of warfare in which the commander sought to avoid battle at all costs except if the chances were overwhelmingly in his favour. Instead he was to seek to defeat his enemy by other means such as the use of ambushes, harassment and blockade.² Thus, we read in our treatise:

The entire Roman army could not find the daring or the strength to restore order at the time when everything was working in favour of the Cilicians and Hamdan. It was then that one of the best generals of the day, accompanied only by the men of his own theme, relying on his intelligence and experience, took action against the enemy. He laid his plans carefully, campaigned against them [Arabs], and by himself brought the situation under control. [...] When the situation is such that they [Byzantine commanders] cannot confront the enemy directly, they may employ this method, and they will preserve both themselves and their country free from harm.³

It is clear by the terminology that we read in the aforementioned passages of our treatise which party is the aggressor and which one is the defender. The Byzantine commanders were taking action in order to preserve Imperial territory free from harm, restore order in an otherwise devastated region and launch reactive or pre-emptive campaigns against the Arab emirates of the region. The distinction could not have been clearer already in the preface of this work! But can we say that any – if not both – of the parties applied the basic principles of Vegetian Strategy?

A basic principle that we have to keep in mind is that the party who wanted to expand and conquer – the aggressor – would often be more willing to seek a decisive battle, while the party already controlling these territories – the defender – would wish to deny his enemy from doing that. Thus, what it would seem reasonable in this case is for the Arab invaders, being in an enemy territory and far away from their supply bases, would seek for a decisive battle to confirm their conquests. But was this the case for the period before the 960s?

It is your duty, General, to search very carefully for the enemy who are making a serious effort to avoid you so they can send out their

¹ Gillingham, J. (1984). “Richard I and the Science of War in the Middle Ages.” In: *War and Government in the Middle Ages*. ed. by J. Gillingham and J.C. Holt, Boydell: Woodbridge. pp. 78-91; idem. “‘Up with Orthodoxy!’ In Defence of Vegetian Warfare.” *Journal of Medieval Military History* (2). 149-58; Morillo, S. (2003). “Battle Seeking: The Context and Limits of Vegetian Strategy”, *Journal of Medieval Military History* (1). 21-41; Rogers, C.J. (2003). “The Vegetian ‘Science of Warfare’ in the Middle Ages.” *Journal of Medieval Military History* (1). 1-19.

² *Vegetius: Epitome of Military Science*. trans. by N.P. Milner. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press. (2001). Book. III. ch. 9, 22, 26, pp. 83-86, 108-10, 116-17.

³ *On Skirmishing*, p. 147 (preface); ch. 1. 4-12. p. 151; ch. 4. 36-39. p. 158.

raiding parties to plunder our lands. Your mind must be alert so that no plan or trick of theirs will ever get by you.¹

By reading this passage we get a clear view of the Vegetian strategy of the Arab raiding parties in this period. But what were their strategic aims if they were to avoid a pitched battle with the Byzantines unless the odds were overwhelmingly in their favour or as a desperate option?

When large numbers of the enemy wander about our country ravaging, destroying, and making plans to besiege fortified places, they will indeed be on their guard to avoid being ambushed by the Roman units; in fact, they will be devising plans to ambush us.²

The grand-scale military expeditions of the Muslims intended on permanent conquests in Asia Minor had long to be seen since the two failed attempts to conquer Constantinople in 674-78 and again in 717 and they had degenerated into a form of razzias on land, and piracy on the sea, with the sole purpose being the looting and capturing of prisoners.³ What our author, however, mentioned about the siege of fortified places, it should be taken as an indication regarding the taking and holding of medium-sized towns situated in strategic locations or mountain passes from where invasion routes passed through. Although it was not but in exceptional cases when the Arabs had managed to conquer large cities of the interior of Asia Minor (like the sacking of Ancyra and Amorion in 838), campaigns that targeted smaller but strategic towns like for example Harsana (Charsianon castle) and Theodosiopolis in 950, Samosata and Adata in 954 were typical of this border warfare in the region, as these cities controlled the access to key roads or river valleys that led to the interior of the Asia Minor and the themes of Cappadocia, Lykaonia, Charsianon and Isauria. But what does our source tells us about these mountainous regions that led to the interior of the Anatolian plateau and what information do we have about its topography, one of the most significant factors that shaped the strategy and battlefield tactics of any army?

The road which they may plan on taking might lead from the passes in Seleukia and the theme of Anatolikon, up to the Taurus Mountains which border on Cilicia, as well as Cappadocia and Lykandos. In addition, there are the regions about Germanikeia and Adata, also Kaisum Danoutha, Melitene and Kaloudia, and the region beyond the Euphrates River bordering on the country called Chanzeti, and the hostile country as far as Romanoupolis.⁴

¹ *On Skirmishing*, ch. 14. 4-8. p. 191.

² *On Skirmishing*, ch. 20. 4-8. p. 218.

³ Ahrweiler, H. (1962). "L'Asie mineure et les invasions arabes (VII'- IX' siecle)." *Revue Historique* (227:1). 1-32.

⁴ *On Skirmishing*, ch. 23. 7-13. p. 230.

In this short paragraph the author identifies the three major invasion routes of the Arabs from their bases at Antioch, Aleppo and northern Mesopotamia to Imperial territories through the passes of the Taurus Mountains – the natural frontier between the Anatolian plateau and Mesopotamia and Syria. The first invasion route took the armies from Tarsus, Anazarbos and Adana either south-west to the coastal theme of Isauria or north, through the mountain pass of Podandos, and then to Cappadokia, Lykaonia and Anatolikon. The second route had Germanikeia as its starting point and through the mountain pass of Adata the commander could proceed north to Caesarea, Charsianon and Ancyra. Finally, the armies leaving Melitene had to by-pass the Taurus altogether and reach the Armeniakon and Paphlagonian themes through Sebasteia and Amaseia.

The pattern of roads and network of communications in Asia Minor was subject to constraints, with armies – whether large or small – had to face several difficulties when crossing or campaigning in Asia Minor, in particular the long stretches of road through relatively waterless and exposed countryside and the rough mountainous terrain separating coastal regions from the central Anatolian plateau. These features could have been used by an intelligent commander against an invading force with great effect:

The general should take all his infantry and cavalry and again move in front of the enemy. He should occupy the mountain heights and also secure the road passing through. And since all the roads, as we said, leading to the enemy's country through all the themes which we have listed and which we have seen with our own eyes are difficult to travel, being in the mountains which form the frontier between both countries [Taurus Mountains], hasten to seize passes before they do and without delay launch your attack directly against them.¹

However, one of the basic strategies of the Byzantine commanders of this period – following on the recommendations of ancient tacticians – was not to face the raiders as they were entering Byzantine territory, but rather to shadow them while they were doing their work of looting the countryside and fall upon them on their return home as “they will then be worn out and much burdened with a lot of baggage, captives and animals. Delaying, moreover, allows time for the Roman armies to be assembled, not only from the neighbouring mountain passes but also from those further away.”² But what information do we get from our author regarding the marching and pillaging tactics of the Arabs and what does he suggest as a countermeasure?

If the Arab commander of the party is careless or over-confident, then he might allow his cavalry to march on several days ahead of the main army to achieve surprise and collect the booty:

¹ *On Skirmishing*, ch. 24. 65-77. p. 236.

² *On Skirmishing*, ch. 4. 14-20. pp. 156-58.

The horsemen, who want to ride through and plunder our country, separate themselves from the foot soldiers and move on a few days' distance ahead, since they are in a hurry to attack the inhabitants of the villages before they can be warned. The baggage train with the infantry and their equipment follow behind. After passing through defiles and difficult terrain and searching for a site which would assure their protection and safety, they pitch their tents and set up camp.¹

Separating the two arms of an invading army was a cardinal mistake underlined by every military tactician since Antiquity, either Muslim or Christian. Thus, it should have been expected for the defending units to set up traps against the Arab raiding parties, usually by having units of a hundred men attacking them while they were looting the villages – thus being at their most vulnerable:

He [commander] should then select a hundred men from that group and set them in an ambush, watching the villages near the route to be taken by the enemy [...] As they [enemy] enter the village watched by our men and dismount [thus being at their most vulnerable] and search the houses, then let those hundred horsemen lying in ambush charge out, kill as many as they can, or take them prisoner. The enemy will immediately turn to flight.²

Another method was the use of cavalry detachment to lure the enemy force into a defile where an ambush has been set, units of infantry being concealed on both sides of it and at the end of it, with the result being an attack baring down on the enemy from three sides:

Let him [general] search for a suitable and very secure location, if possible, with a fortress nearby ... Units of them [infantry] should be concealed in ambuscades on both sides of the road. Let the general take position close behind the infantry ... and with him the cavalry units. Up to a hundred selected men should be dispatched by the general to prepare ambushes. [...] At times he [officer in command] charges into them, at times he begins to run away, and he provokes them into pursuing. If they pursue up to that place in which the infantry is concealed and some of the enemy pass right by them, then our men should charge out of their hiding places and check the pursuing enemy.³

A cautious enemy commander demands an equally or more cautious adversary, thus an Arab raiding party would march along together as a group

¹ *On Skirmishing*, ch. 10. 8-15. p. 174.

² *On Skirmishing*, ch. 10. 35-45. p. 174.

³ *On Skirmishing*, ch. 11. 5-32. p. 18.

(cavalry and infantry) camping and only sending cavalry detachments each night to collect booty.¹ Our author has written down in detail his recommended plan of action in this case, which will have to be summarized as it is too detailed to be presented here. Good reconnaissance is the key to victory and the treatise repeatedly stresses the importance of gaining accurate intelligence about the size and movements of the enemy forces. Thus, depending on the size of the raiding party dispatched to plunder the neighbouring areas the commander must decide whether to engage the main force left behind in the camp, depending also on its natural or man-made fortifications, or first send a strong force to deal with the raiders while they were looting – thus being at their most vulnerable state – by blocking the roads and passes leading back to their camp. If the general decides to attack the enemy camp while the cavalry is away, the author recommends the typical Byzantine battle formation of the last five centuries of two battle-lines of cavalry; the first line (called *πρόμαχος*) having three units of equal size attacking head-on, while supporting units of flankguards and outflankers would attack the wings of the enemy; the second line of four units (called the support – *βοηθός*) would send reinforcements in case the *πρόμαχος* would fail to break the enemy line.² It is important to note, however, that not in any case does our author recommend a pitched battle with the entire enemy force, even if the Byzantines were more numerous, but rather the piece-meal defeat of the enemy forces by ambushes and surprise attacks. Finally, the general was supposed to place infantry units in concealed places guarding the routes leading back to enemy territory and attack the rear-guard of the enemy column (the *saka*), with the ultimate aim being the recovery of the booty and prisoners.³

To conclude, the most important aspect of this frontier strategy for the Byzantines was the “shadowing” of the enemy forces. Following and harassing the enemy by exploiting one’s own knowledge of the local terrain was one aspect; keeping a close watch on his column and camp, in order to attempt ambushes on forage parties was another. Large-scale expeditions launched in September and led by the Emir himself were left to invade friendly territory while being followed closely and harassed by detachments of picked men who controlled the passes through which they would return home. The invaders’ logistical difficulties should be maximized by the evacuation of the local population and the removal of livestock and crops, or even their destruction. The most crucial idea was a pincer movement designed to flush out the enemy forces by having several smaller friendly forces converging to the area from the neighbouring themes. Another distinguishing feature of this treatise is the degree of independence of the local commanders when it came to making decisions; they were encouraged to attack the enemy when opportunity arose and organize regular-raids over the border to force the enemy commander to return home and protect his people.

¹ *On Skirmishing*, ch. 14. 9-16. p. 190.

² *On Skirmishing*, ch. 16. 58-71. p. 202.

³ *On Skirmishing*, ch. 23. 65-75. p. 232; ch. 24. 3-6. p. 234.

As it would seem natural, the Byzantine commanders were not always able to respond successfully to the Arab raids. Typical example of this is Sayf-ad-Dawla's expedition of 956: entering Byzantine territory through the modern Ergani pass of the Taurus, Sayf marched towards the thema of Mesopotamia. Encountering minimal resistance, Sayf ravaged a number of localities in the region of the northern Euphrates, but during his journey back to Syria, he received intelligence that the Byzantines had occupied the mountain passes. His decision was to change his route and cross the Taurus through Amida (Diyar Bakr) where he defeated only a relatively small force defending the defile of a tributary of the River Tigris, inflicting some 4,000 casualties to the Byzantines. This classic raid of its kind vividly illustrates the difficulties faced by commanders operating in the mountainous regions of northern Mesopotamia and Cilicia; failure to shadow the invading forces in the manner described by our tacticians, along with inadequate intelligence could lead to the defenders being outmanoeuvred by an experienced commander with disastrous results.

The military treatises of the Byzantines undoubtedly present one of the most remarkable specimens of Greek literature, containing in their passages century's wisdom of fighting against different enemies of the Empire. The cardinal difference, however, between the *On Skirmishing* and other treatises of the period like Nicephoros Phocas' *Praecepta Militaria* (c. 969 AD) is that the latter was compiled for contemporary commanders familiar with the enemy and the lands in which they would be campaigning, thus making no mention of contemporary places, routes, individuals, or events. The author of the *Περὶ Παραδρομῆς*, however, re-wrote the treatise in its official version at the end of the 960s when the times and conditions it portrays were already passing into history. In it the enemy is precisely identified and a number of historical examples and geographical indications are cited to show how the tactics recorded in the treatise were put to use by the soldiers. Thus, the memory of the wars, strategies and battle tactics was preserved for succeeding generations in much more detail than in any other ecclesiastical or lay source – either Muslim or Christian – which were characterised by a number of limitations like ignorance of military affairs, the time and place of their writing, dependence on oral sources, invention and/or exaggeration based on their bias and sympathies and religious convictions, and vague or archaic terminology.

