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Heraclius and the Evolution of Byzantine Strategy

Abstract

The Byzantine military strategy expressed in the 10th century treatise *On Skirmishing* marked a decisive shift in Byzantine strategy and an entirely new mindset in approaching war. What is unique about this strategy is that it was not created during a war against the Arabs, but before they existed as a military power. The foundation was laid during the Emperor Heraclius's Persian campaigns of 622-628. To demonstrate the key contributions of Heraclius, these Persian campaigns shall be analyzed and compared with the advice prescribed in *On Skirmishing*. Also, the military events recorded by Theophanes of the 7th and 8th centuries will be compared with Heraclius and *On Skirmishing* to show the development of the strategy after Heraclius and how it measured up to the final form in *On Skirmishing*.

Heraclius and the Evolution of the Middle Byzantine Art of War

Bob Ekkebus

While much of the continual successes of the Byzantines in the 9th and 10th centuries after the colossal failures in the 7th and 8th centuries can be and has been attributed to the Theme system and the overall decline of the Caliphate, the untold story of success lies in the evolution and perfection of a standard doctrine of military strategy uniquely adapted to border warfare. This strategical doctrine, enclosed in a treatise called *On Skirmishing*, was written during the reign of Nicephorus II Phocas (963-969). It is, in the words of the author, "Our part by writing down these things just as our predecessors handed them on to us, as well as from our own experience which goes back a long time."¹ It is self-evident that *On Skirmishing* is the enclosure of the knowledge of Byzantine strategy from a general's perspective, and the author frequently alludes to the use of this knowledge, in one form or another, in the past.²

However, it is also clear that the Byzantines had an overall concept of skirmishing and that the treaty was not just the enclosure of many unrelated strategical concepts together, but rather a unified strategical theory which had been refined over many generations. In essence, one could describe it as the Middle Byzantine Strategy or Art of War.³ As the author explains, it was only in the 10th century when the strategy was perfected:

To the best of my knowledge, it was Bardas, the blessed Caesar, who brought this method to the summit of perfection. I do not want to enumerate all the ancient commanders but shall limit myself to those in our time whom everyone knows. When this method had completely vanished, it was Bardas who brought it back.⁴

1 Nicephorus Phocas, *On Skirmishing*, edition, translation, and notes by G. T. Dennis, *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*, CFHB (Washington D.C., 1985), 211.

2 Ibid, 147. "Nonetheless, in order that time, which leads us to forget what we once knew, might not completely blot out this useful knowledge, we think we ought to commit it to writing." For a modern interpretation of this, see Jason Moralee, "Military Requisitioning and its Consequences in the Byzantine Borderlands 500-1000" (Graduate Paper, UCLA, 1997), 19-20. "Anyone who reads these treatises eventually begins to question their historical validity. How much in them is 'tradition?' How much is 'reality?' There is no doubt that the treatises lift information from a long Graeco-Roman tradition of strategic theory, and that they are prescriptive in nature."

3 The distinct lack of contribution towards this Art of War from Belisarius and Narses, whose campaigns in the 6th century are skilled enough to still teach lessons to generals of today, show a distinct difference in the warfare practiced before Heraclius and after due to the vastly changed eastern frontier after the Arab invasions in the 7th century. Thus it is more applicable to describe *On Skirmishing* as the Middle Byzantine Empire's Art of War.

4 Ibid, 149. By referring to him as 'Caesar' it is clear that this is Bardas Phocas the Elder who was proclaimed Caesar by Nicephorus II Phocas, which fits in the time line as Bardas Phocas the Younger came after Nicephorus II Phocas, during whose reign this treatise was written. The part about the method vanishing is likely, although not for certain, referring to the late 8th and early 9th centuries under Irene and later the iconoclast disputes, when military matters were put to the side in favor of religion.

Note how he specifically phrases it as “this method” and that it was “brought to the summit of perfection” and that it was used, at least in some form, by ancient commanders. While the treatise itself may appear as a scattered list of assorted concepts which may or may not directly relate to one another, the Byzantines themselves viewed it as their method of war as a whole. Not a set of concepts, could be brought to perfection. So despite the fact that originally all the Byzantines may have gotten was a long list of various concepts at various points in time, there was a gradual amalgamation and refinement of centuries of knowledge into one final form.

This paper aims to be an initial stepping stone in the understanding of the foundation and evolution of Byzantine strategy. By highlighting this change of strategy, it is much easier to understand why Byzantium was so successful in holding their difficult position in the 7th and 8th centuries and eventually reaching a point where they could recover lost lands in the 10th. To understand the starting point of this evolution, it will be necessary to first analyze the campaigns of Heraclius. Heraclius was a key founder of the Middle Byzantine Strategy expressed in *On Skirmishing*, and shift in Byzantine strategy after Heraclius was a turning point in how Byzantines fought wars. Perhaps the most important part of Heraclius's contributions is the conscious decision against fighting at the border. Instead, it focused much less heavily on territory and much more on defeating the enemy in the most efficient manner. To analyze the shift in strategy after Heraclius, the wars of the 8th century will be examined to show that the polished strategy in *On Skirmishing* was steadily evolving during what is called the 'Byzantine Dark Ages.' The polished form of Byzantine strategy expressed in *On Skirmishing* was not born in the 10th century. Instead, the major concepts were formed three hundred years prior, and it took all of those three hundred years for it to be refined into a successful product. Various ideas that made up *On Skirmishing* were being used in the 8th century, but in an incomplete form. Logically, both the campaigns of Heraclius and those in the 8th century will be analyzed with *On Skirmishing* in mind, for that text is the culmination of Byzantine strategic thought and therefore the best guideline to measure the contributions to and evolutions of Byzantine strategy.

Modern scholarship in this specific area consists of a gaping hole. Excellent work has been done on both ends of the spectrum: in the 6th/7th and the 10th/11th centuries, but the process of linking them together has been neglected. Thus there is much to cover in this paper, and hopefully much more can be explored on this neglected subject of strategical change and evolution.

To identify the key factors and give a proper background, there will be an overview of *On Skirmishing*, Byzantine grand strategy from Heraclius and after, the eastern military situation during 7th-10th centuries, and an example of the evolution of Byzantine strategy. Following this will be an analysis of Heraclius's campaigns and a comparison of his strategies with those recommended in *On Skirmishing*. Lastly, the military events in the 8th century

covered by Theophanes will be compared with the advice in *On Skirmishing* to track the evolution of strategy.

To keep an accurate perspective, it is necessary to understand that *On Skirmishing* was one of many texts that were written in the 10th century revival of military science. The revival of military writings was led by Emperor Leo VI's *Tactica*, which was written around the year 900, the first known strategical writing since the 7th century. It was not intended as merely an academic exercise, but more so as his way to improve the difficult Byzantine military situation.⁵ In the *Tactica*, Leo restated much of Maurice's *Strategicon*, and updated the three hundred year old text to reflect the current situation.⁶ A large number of texts followed the *Tactica*, among these included *On Skirmishing*, Nicephorus Phocas's other work the *Praecepta militaria*, the three treatises of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, an unnamed treatise on Campaign Organization under Basil II, and the last being the comprehensive *Tactica* of Nicephorus Ouranos.

Despite the sheer number of quality treatises *On Skirmishing* stands alone in a couple aspects. Firstly, it concerns itself exclusively with the Empire's strategic situation on the eastern front in the continuous war against the Arabs.⁷ Secondly, it is directly addressed to the general and focuses solely on how to face the enemy. Nearly every other book before or during the military science revival paid at least some attention to either campaign or army organization. *On Skirmishing* provides the clearest picture of the Empire's strategic practices in the east, and is of the highest quality in terms of strategy dictated.⁸

5 Sean Tougher, *Reign of Leo VI (886-912) : politics and people* (BRILL, 1997), 170-1.

6 For example, the *Strategicon* had specific sections detailing how the various enemies of the empire normally act and what the best strategies to use against each are. Obviously, the Empire's enemies had changed extensively between the late 6th and 9th centuries and here Leo could add in new and useful points while being faithful to the original.

7 The author specifically refers to "the eastern regions" when addressing the subject matter of the text, and states that it was not applicable at the time of writing, for the Byzantines had dealt several stern blows to the Arabs in the late 960's. cf. *On Skirmishing*, 147.

8 The other two texts which are at this level of strategical thought are the *Praecepta militaria* and the *Tactica* of Ouranos, both of which focus much more heavily on battle tactics, something other treatises virtually ignored. They are very useful to compare with *On Skirmishing* to see how heavily psychology was a factor in Byzantine strategy as a whole. For more information on these valuable texts, see Eric McGeer, *Sowing the Dragon's Teeth: Byzantine Warfare in the Tenth Century* (Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection: Washington, D.C, 1995). McGeer also notes that "the use of stratagems and ruses to wear down a superior enemy and post-pone battle until the moment most propitious was the trademark of Byzantine warfare, and the delaying, guerrilla tactics outlined by Phokas in the *De velitatione* [*On Skirmishing*] are more typical of the Byzantine conduct of war than the battle tactics in the *Praecepta*." McGeer, 255. These texts are not being analyzed because while the Byzantine strategic situation remained similar throughout the 7th through 10th centuries, allowing the tracking of strategic evolution possible, the organization and army composition changed drastically and tracking the evolution of this is not applicable in the same way. For example, following the Arab conquests, the only *tagmata* that contained heavy cavalry was that of Constantinople's. However, in the 10th century the heavy cavalry elite known as the *kataphraktai* became crucial to the general's arsenal against many foes. For more information, see McGeer *Sowing the Dragon's Teeth*, John Haldon, *Byzantium at War: 600-1453* (Taylor & Francis, 2003),

As for the sources on Heraclius and the 7th and 8th century, the main one used is that of Theophanes, whose *Chronographia* covers the entire time span. While its attention to detail is sorely lacking at points, it gives a very good understanding overall, while other sources such as George of Psidia or the *Chronicon Paschale* can help fill in some missing blanks.

Strategic Ideas of On Skirmishing

The strategic ideas laid forth in *On Skirmishing* were essentially one large, interrelated plan explained in various pieces. On the whole, the strategy set out in *On Skirmishing* can be somewhat divided into two parts: the first is to weaken the enemy as efficiently as possible. This is done by limiting forage, harassing any vulnerable detachments, utilizing favorable terrain, and constantly shadowing the enemy. The second part, is to try to defeat them as efficiently as possible when the enemy has already been worn down. This would be done using of a variety of ambushes, night attacks, blocking the enemy's retreat, and striking when and where they least expect it. Overall, the plan revolved around the Byzantines allowing the enemy to march into their lands, while attempting to gain the most militarily efficient victories possible. What is interesting about analyzing the 8th century campaigns is that the Byzantines, in most cases, did not take all the necessary steps to achieve the best possible victories. For example, they might deny the enemy forage and put them in an easy position to be finished off, yet they would refrain delivering from the final blow. This is due to the fact that the full ideas fleshed out in *On Skirmishing* had not been developed yet. During the period of evolution the Byzantine strategy was still in its infancy, when various strategies were being tried out. However, the unified, comprehensive plan of *On Skirmishing* that would be illustrated in the 10th century was not completed yet.⁹

There is, however, a further aspect to *On Skirmishing* and Byzantine military strategy that has not been given the attention it deserves in modern scholarship yet. While there is no textual evidence of certain aspects that *On Skirmishing* suggests in Theophanes, Heraclius was the first to practice this in even a rudimentary form and the policy continues after him. A brief overview of this grand strategy shall be mentioned here, with further analysis and the relation to Heraclius made in the end of the section on Heraclius. It is an extremely important point to keep in mind throughout the entire paper because this grand strategy is the major shift made in the middle of Heraclius's reign (622) and was crucial for the overall Byzantine success.

An inherent component in the Byzantine strategy was that generals do not attempt to meet the enemy at the border. Instead, they were to give up territory

and *The History of Leo the Deacon: Byzantine Military Expansion in the Tenth Century*, translation, introduction, and annotations by Alice-Mary Talbot and Dennis F. Sullivan with the Assistance of George T. Dennis and Stamatina McGrath, (Dumbarton Oaks: Washington, D.C., 2005).

9 For more information on the final form of Byzantine strategy, see *The History of Leo the Deacon*.

to win militarily in the most efficient manner.¹⁰ It was a stressed point in *On Skirmishing*, being specifically mentioned in several places as a strategy that should automatically be incorporated. The author even said that the general should be using his available forces gather to buy time for the villagers, instead of attending to military matters first.

Realizing the risks to their own military longevity by this type of policy, the Byzantines went out of their way to preserve their economic base. The necessity of preserving the Byzantine peasants and economy is first addressed when asking this question: "What can be done if the enemy launch a sudden, concentrated attack...before the imperial forces have been assembled...?"¹¹ In this case, the general is recommended to do the following:

Dispatch the turmarch of that region, or other officers, with great speed to get ahead of the enemy and, as best they can, evacuate and find refuge for the inhabitants of the villages and their flocks...Give the enemy the impression that he is getting ready for a battle right then [at night]. By doing this he might succeed in forestalling their attack and preserve the region unharmed...He himself should advance with selected officers and good horsemen and give the enemy the impression that he has been making preparations to fight against them in order to launch an attack...If there is no river or rough ground along the road, he should still expose himself a bit and advance as though to fight...By such procedures he will save the villagers from impending assault and from captivity, and they shall keep their freedom. With great precision and foresight, let him make his appearance and charge against them with a few selected horsemen, as we have said. These will immediately turn tail and retreat to the strong place and the general...While the general is doing all this, the villagers may escape to the strong places and fortresses and be preserved from harm.¹²

10 A very valid comparison of the Byzantine 7th-10th century situation is with that of the Roman Empire in the 4th and 5th centuries. While this is a vast simplification of the complex economic, political, cultural, and military interweaving into just a strategical context for both Empires, it is a useful exercise to understand why the Byzantine strategy was so brilliant and successful. The Romans practiced a mass border defense that had worked for a number of centuries previously but began to fail in the 4th and 5th centuries. While the Romans may have defended themselves well, any major defeat on their part could lead to massive economical problems, such as the loss of Spain and Africa, and even victories or stalemates often lead to the destruction of its economic base from which it could not recover and only slide down further. The Byzantines on the other hand, were not only able to stave off destruction from an extremely perilous position, but were actually able to support themselves again and regain the offensive in just three centuries. The difference in approach and results cannot be more striking.

11 *On Skirmishing*, 12.1-3 187.

12 *On Skirmishing*, 12.5-53 187-9.

The policy of prioritizing the safety of the Byzantine economic backbone was a natural part of the Theme system¹³ that dominated Byzantine defense in the Middle Empire. However, this heavy emphasis on preserving the Byzantine ability to fight over a long period of time fits perfectly with the underlying method that makes up *On Skirmishing* of voluntarily conceding territory to fight in the most optimal way. And the results of this policy more than justify it: in the middle 7th-century, the Byzantines were on the verge of collapse, struggling to hold onto what little territory they could and barely holding off two successive sieges of Constantinople. Three centuries later, they were able to resume offensive activities and reconquer many of their lost gains because they outlasted their opponents by virtue of their efficiency and preservation of their economy.

Pre-Heraclian Strategic Theory

For this paper's purposes, the analysis and coverage of early Greek strategical texts is out of reach. However, it is still important to keep in mind and understand that the advanced level of Byzantine strategy, as scholar W.E. Kaegi says, "Did not suddenly appear in the seventh, ninth, or tenth centuries."¹⁴ Rather, it had origins far back in the earlier Greek writers such as Onasander, Aelian, Arrianus, and Aeneas Tacitus.¹⁵ It is a different and difficult project entirely to determine how much and in what areas the Middle Byzantine strategists owed their theories to these earlier writers and thus shall be left for another day. What can and should be said now is that the decision to consciously concede territory when necessary was only put into effect first by Heraclius and then by his successors. Before Heraclius, it was standard policy to meet the enemy on the border, or close as one could do so to fight for every scrap of territory and to prevent the enemy from damaging the Byzantine economy. However, this policy was thrown out the window by Heraclius after over a decade of failures against the Persians, and his successors followed his deviation for the most part. Overall, the decision to trade territory temporarily for a military advantage was by far the biggest shift in Byzantine strategy from the 6th to the 7th centuries and is of distinct Middle Byzantine origin.

The two texts closest to the age of Heraclius was that of the anonymous *On Strategy*, written sometime during or after Justinian's reign, and Maurice's *Strategicon*, written at the end of the 6th century. Of these two, the *Strategicon* was much more complete and thorough, clearly aimed at future leaders, while *On Strategy* gave more of a general perspective.

13 The Theme system was an administrative division of the Empire into numerous provinces, each ruled by a *Strategos* who had both civil and military authority. The army of each *Strategos* worked and owned land in the Theme that they defended.

14 *Some Thoughts on Byzantine Military Strategy*, 11.

15 Ibid.

A fitting intro to the overall analysis is to compare the evolution of ambushing tactics from an excerpt in *On Strategy* to the same topic in *On Skirmishing*. Despite the early age of *On Strategy*,¹⁶ it is still a very thorough description. The following is the author's take on ambushing in the 6th century:

The present-day Romans, Arabs, and many other peoples make use of ambushes, although, in my opinion, not to great advantage. They usually conceal some detachment, while the rest of the army moves out in the open to lead the enemy on. Is there a person with any intelligence who, on seeing a few men boldly advancing against a large number, will not suspect an ambush? For this reason, they will be cautious in pursuing them and will not press the pursuit far.

For these reasons, therefore, the detachments that are out in the open should give the impression that they have not come out there intentionally but unwillingly and happen to be there just by chance...To make the flight seem more plausible, the men being pursued should drop some of their own gear, sword scabbards, for example, plated with tin to look like silver, and thick saddlebags securely fastened. This helps not only in drawing on the pursers, who will believe that our men are in a state of panic, but even in stopping the pursuit altogether.¹⁷

The author has obviously seen many a failed ambush, and wishes to instruct readers on the basic execution of the tactic. The fact that the author has to illustrate specifically how “a few men boldly advancing against a large number” gives away the ambush shows the low level of contemporary understanding of ambush psychology. As he says, how could any competent person be expected to fall for such an obvious lure? To remedy this poor practice, he proposes that the ambushing body act as if came across the enemy by chance. By doing so, the feigned retreat would be more justified in the enemy's eyes. This plan is supported with fake booty, both in an attempt to simulate a real retreat and to make the enemy disorganized with their want for loot. Overall, this setup is certainly a much better approach than the rudimentary ambush the author exposes at the beginning. However, it still has flaws. When one compares the advice in *On Strategy* with a similar section in *On Skirmishing*, the difference in strategic understanding is quite clear:

Have him [an experienced commander] order a few of the men under him to dress like farmers, and mix in some real farmers

16 It was published sometime in the mid to late 6th century, at the very least after Justinian. Anon, *On Strategy*, edition, translation, and notes by G. T. Dennis, *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*, CFHB (Washington D.C., 1985), 33.33-41, 105.

17 *On Strategy*, 21.

and herdsmen with them. All of them ought to be unarmed and their heads uncovered. Some should be barefoot. All should be on horseback, carrying very short wooden staffs. Do all this to deceive the enemy and to give them the impression that these men are not from the army but just some farmers, of the sort called stewards...Our men, then, who are disguised as farmers and peasant stewards, when the enemy have begun to follow them, should hurry to reach the site of the ambushade. There the enemy who are following them, caught off their guard, will fall right into the ambush.¹⁸

While the excerpt from *On Strategy* is not lacking or incorrect by any means, it simply is a rough version made from drawing upon many failures and possibly some successes. Whereas the portion selected from *On Skirmishing* is more devious, requires better training and discipline, and could not be expected to be executed successfully by those whose men or officers were not already familiar with the practice. The former relies upon the enemy believing soldiers stumbled across them by chance, and would thus flee rather than fight an outnumbered opponent. This certainly could work in some situations, for the premise is plausible enough; however, given the excellent Byzantine reconnaissance system, an enemy commander would be justified in caution at seeing a Byzantine party randomly run into them, get noticed, and then flee into terrain where an ambush is likely. On the other hand, the suspicion of the enemy would inherently be much lower on seeing a group of peasants doing the same thing. For one, they would be more likely than soldiers to bump into the enemy unawares and give away their position, and two, their retreat into ambush friendly terrain would be viewed with less suspicion simply because they would be viewed as peasants. Thus, it makes most sense to categorize the former as a rough draft and the latter as a more finished copy. As we shall see, the mark of progress is visible on many other aspects as well even though they came from later eras than the late 6th century *Strategy* did.

Heraclius's Persian Campaign 622-628

18 *On Skirmishing*, 211-3. The focus of ambushing seems to change from *On Strategy* to *On Skirmishing*. In the former, the author plans using it against enemy armies on the march. Whereas in the latter, it assumed to be used to prevent the enemy from plundering or foraging. This represents the fundamental shift over time of what the army was capable of and from there what its aims were. That is not to say that there is no place for ambushing the enemy on the march in *On Skirmishing* though. c.f *On Skirmishing*, 183, for additional info on how to ambush in haste.

The campaigns of Heraclius, so successful that they turned a lost war with the enemy having captured all but Constantinople into a complete Byzantine victory, are the cornerstone of what would become standard Byzantine strategy in several key ways.

Modern scholarship, while praising the military brilliance of Heraclius's campaigns,¹⁹ maintains that his biggest contributions to future generations were in the form of his ideological shift of maintaining Christianity in the minds of his people,²⁰ as well as the reformation of the Byzantine army into what Cyril Mango describes as "a sort of 'New Model Army'-- an intensively trained infantry force versed in the tactics of guerrilla warfare and trained with religious fervour."²¹ While these are important concepts and certainly help add to the argument of him as a Father of the Byzantine Art of War, they are beyond the focus of this study, which is limited to the strategic components that make their way into *On Skirmishing*.

Heraclius's first campaign, although brief, started in 622, where he successfully evaded the Persian armies in Anatolia and marched into Armenia, threatening to invade Persia. Unlike in later periods, Theophanes is rather descriptive of Heraclius's military matters, although he is still a bit confused and jumbled on the time lines.²² Despite the confusion, Theophanes description of the Persian reaction in the opening is most helpful:

Evading the Persians, however, he turned round and invaded Persia [from Pontus]. When the barbarians learnt of this, they were cast down by the unexpectedness of his invasion. As for Sarbaros, the Persian commander, he took his forces and came to Cilicia that he might turn the Emperor round by his attack on Roman territory. Fearing, however, lest the emperor invade Persia by way of Armenia and cause disturbance therein, he could not make up his mind what to do.²³

Firstly, Heraclius's threat of invading Persia through Armenia, despite how badly the Persians had been winning the war, put one enemy commander in a rather nasty dilemma: try to invade deeper Byzantine territory and force Heraclius back, or pursue Heraclius to prevent an invasion of Persia. At first

19 James Howard-Johnston, *East Rome, Sasanian Persia And the End of Antiquity: Historiographical And Historical Studies* (Ashgate Publishing, 2006), viii 42.

20 Johnston, viii 44.

21 *Oxford History of Byzantium*, edited by Cyril Mango (Oxford University Press, USA, 2002), 55. See also, A. Sharf, "Heraclius and Mahommet," in *Past and Present*, No. 9 (Apr., 1956): 1, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/650039> (accessed December 12th, 2008).

22 Johnston, viii 22. See also N. Oikonomides, *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*: vol 1 1975, "A Chronological Note on the first Campaign of Heraclius (622)." Oikonomides places the campaign in July 622 based off of the eclipse that year which Pisides specifically refers to; this contrasts with Theophanes placement in the winter of 622-3, one of his many chronological errors.

23 Theophanes the Confessor, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor: Byzantine and Near Eastern History, AD 284-813*, translation, introduction, and commentary by Cyril Mango and Roger Scott, with the assistance of Geoffrey Greatrex, (Oxford University Press, 1997), 436-7.

Sarbaros tried the former, but when Heraclius failed to budge despite a threatening invasion of Cilicia, the Persian commander feared for the safety of Persia itself and was forced to follow Heraclius into the unfavorable Armenian hills. After unsuccessful skirmishing in a hostile country, Sarbaros was forced to give battle, wherein Heraclius won a clear victory with a feigned retreat.²⁴ Poor Sarbaros, as George of pisidia puts it, "Was thus dragged after the emperor against his will, like a dog on a chain."²⁵ With the Persian threat temporarily stymied, Heraclius retired to winter quarters back in Byzantium.²⁶

The willingness to abandon territory temporarily when necessary was to become perhaps the biggest hallmark and central core of later Byzantine strategy, and it all started with Heraclius in 622. While the raiding parties sent by the Arabs in the 8th century were not threatening to take land but merely steal resources, cause damage, and create chaos, the Arabs still mounted many large invasions of Byzantine territory, and true to Heraclius's example, the Byzantine generals consistently and willingly conceded territory to these invaders in order to deal with them at a more suitable place and time.²⁷ While Heraclius might have had the audacity and skill to invade the enemy lands where later commanders did not, the concept of giving up land in order to force the enemy to fight on one's own terms that was carried on in later generations much defies the common military thought before that time. One example of pre-Heraclian military thought is in the reign of Justinian, who repeatedly sent Belisarius to engage Chosroes I on the Byzantine border despite being at a great disadvantage every time. In that case, Justinian was saved by the skill of his general, but at other times this short-sighted policy ended up disastrously. This is shown even in Heraclius's time from the continuous defeats from the beginning of the war in 602-620, where the Byzantines insisted on meeting the Persian armies as soon as they could engage them, and repeatedly were sent home with a drubbing. Two notable examples include the early losses at Daras in 603-4 and Heraclius's total defeat at Antioch in 613.²⁸ Of course, these rash policies continued after

24 Theophanes, 437.

25 George of Pisidia, "*Expeditio Persica*," 357-8, quoted in Norman H Baynes, "The First Campaign of Heraclius against Persia," *The English Historical Review* 19, no. 76 (October, 1904): pp. 694-702. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/548613> (accessed December 12th, 2008), 701.

26 For a detailed analysis of the 622 campaign using George of Pisidia to account and correct Theophanes's errors, see Baynes, 694, 697-702 and Oikonomides. The latter argues that the campaign was not very significant because other sources like the *Chronicon Paschale* ignore it and Pisidia treated it like he does other unimportant events, filling the space with random matters. Oikonomides states that the campaign served as a confidence booster, helped raise the blockades in Pontus, and gave Heraclius breathing room to train his army.

27 Note that oftentimes the 'invaders' were merely raiding parties in search of booty and not out to capture territory. In this sense it is incorrect to say that the Byzantines were willingly conceding territory, for there was no enemy capturing territory! What is meant is that the Byzantines would not necessarily meet the enemy at the border but confront them later on, sometimes deep inside Byzantine lands.

28 It is very likely, although impossible to prove, that Heraclius devised his campaigns after 622 from reflecting upon his earlier failures. It would make sense that, having seen the folly of attempting to fight the enemy on their terms to reduce damage to Byzantine territory, he would

Heraclius as well, such as at Anzen in 838. This discrepancy shows two things: first in that the lure to fight the enemy as quickly as possible to minimize the devastation to one's own country is very strong and not easily resisted, and also that, perhaps due to the previous point or for other reasons, the value of Heraclius's techniques was not fully understood. Either way, while he did pave the way for the future successful Byzantine strategy, it was not universally followed in all circumstances.

While Heraclius's brief 622 campaign contained an important lesson for future Byzantine generals, his next campaign from 624-5 demonstrated his strategy in substantial depth. Like in 622, Heraclius began the campaign by threatening to invade Persia through the Armenian route in hopes to draw off the Persian armies in Byzantine territory. And again, the threat of his invasion was successful, as Theophanes records:

And on 20 April the emperor invaded Persia. When Chosroes [II] learnt of this, he ordered Sarbarazas to turn back [from Anatolia]; and having gathered his armies from all of Persia, he entrusted them to Sain, whom he commanded to join Sarbarazas with all speed and so proceed against the emperor.²⁹

Once again, a Persian army, this time under the illustrious and previously successful Sarbarazas, was forced to return to Persia from another dissuaded invasion of Anatolia to defend against Heraclius. In total, Chosroes sent three armies after Heraclius, who managed to prevent a concentration of the Persian armies and defeated them one by one.³⁰ This feat was unparalleled both in the magnitude of victory in such a small time as well as the methods used to achieve it. Previously, Byzantine armies relied upon keeping a secure line of communications, and moving to meet their opponents head on as to not endanger their communications and retreat. However, as Johnston describes, "He [Heraclius] prepared to move between enemy armies (something which was anathema to sixth-century Roman generals), confident that he could move faster and would be able to use a temporarily superior concentration of his forces to dispose of Persian armies in detail."³¹

While otherwise the following would belong in the post-Heraclius analysis, a passage of Theophanes which gives a brief allusion to the defeat of a large Muslim invasion in 740 bears great similarity to Heraclius's triple defeat of the Persian commanders in early 625. In 740, when the Arab invaders split up their extremely large army into several smaller components, two parts of it were defeated in turn by a concentrated Byzantine force that outmaneuvered and

instead want to use the same stratagem on the enemy, while letting the time-tested walls of Constantinople hold off any serious assaults.

29 Ibid, 439.

30 Ibid, 439-41.

31 Johnston, viii 36.

marched between the Arab armies. While the rest of the Arabs retreated safely, perhaps because of the fate of their friends, this battle is still notable for being one of the rare Byzantine straight up battle victories. While he does not describe anything specific, one can infer that given the size of the invasion force, the concentration of the Byzantine armies was necessary to destroy those two parts in succession.³²

Dealing with a separated army is mentioned several times in *Skirmishing* and the author gave several methods to exploit it. First, the Byzantines were to shadow the detachments and harass them to prevent them from foraging. Next, if they were plundering the countryside to ambush them, preferably near a village.³³ Lastly, they were to attack the baggage train.³⁴ However, due to the vague wording and lack of detail from Theophanes, it is difficult to discern what approach the Byzantines used to defeat these detachments. While it could be that the *strategoi* won by wearing down the armies over time in accordance with *Skirmishing* harassment strategy, there is also another, more likely possibility.

Rather than focusing on wearing down each army with Fabian maneuvers, the Byzantines also could have kept their whole army together and marched and counter marched to defeat these enemy armies one by one. This would closely mirror Heraclius's campaign of 625, where he maneuvered between and defeated three separate Persian armies one at a time. Given that Heraclius's strategy was unheard of at the time³⁵ and being a rather advanced military strategy that was only fully exploited over a millennium later under Napoleon, it is much more logical that the 740 campaign strategy was based on knowledge of Heraclius's previous campaigns.

When continuing with Heraclius, it is worth paying closer attention to the battle against Sarbaros as Heraclius's night attack tactic is also written about in *On Skirmishing*. Theophanes, unfortunately, does not go into the depth that the treatise does, making analysis awkward and limited at best.³⁶ Thus, it is more profitable in this circumstance to compare the advice in *On Skirmishing* to

32 Theophanes, 571.

33 *On Skirmishing*, 229.

34 *On Skirmishing*, 175-9.

35 Johnston, viii 36.

36 Here is the passage, which still provides some information and could match with Maurice's advice, but there simply aren't enough details to be sure: "The winter, then, having set in, and Sarbaros not suspecting anything, he [Heraclius] selected the strongest horses and the bravest soldiers and divided them into two. The first part he ordered to move ahead against Sarbaros, whilst he himself followed behind with the rest...The Persians who were there became aware of the attack: they rose up and rushed to resist, but the Romans slew all of them...When Herakleios had taken these things [loot], he moved against the Persians who were scattered in the villages. These men, on learning of the flight of Sarbaros, also fled without restraint." Theophanes, 443.

that Maurice's *Strategicon*, which is likely where Heraclius took his strategy from³⁷:

When the army gets close to the enemy, then they should rest under cover, straighten out their line and, depending on the terrain, launch their attack from two or three sides. It should not be made from all four sides, for then the enemy finding themselves completely surrounded will be forced to close ranks and fight, but one side should be left open so those who want to flee may do so...³⁸

When compared with *On Skirmishing*, there are not as many major differences between the strategies proposed as there were in the ambushing case. Maurice advises the general to not only flank the enemy from three sides, but also shows admirable foresight in the suggestion of leaving a path open for them to retreat. However, *On Skirmishing* takes this form one step further: :

You should launch your attack from the rear with infantry units. Divide the remaining infantry into six divisions; station three off to the right side of the enemy, and three off to the left...Leave open and unguarded the road, and that alone, which provides safe passage for the enemy toward their own land. After they have been vigorously assaulted and they discover the open road, beguiled by the idea of being saved, of fleeing the battle, and of getting back to their own land, they mount their horses and race along that road to escape, each man concerned only about his own safety...He [the general] should occupy the mountain heights [on the enemy's path of retreat] and also secure the road passing through...hasten to seize the passes before they do and without delay launch your attack directly against them.³⁹

First, note that the plan in *On Skirmishing* is extremely similar to what Maurice proposed. This makes it exceedingly likely that the strategy in *On Skirmishing* is something built from the. Overall, the key difference is that *On Skirmishing* advises the necessity of exploiting the enemy's retreat for maximum effect. While the *Strategicon* is content with merely executing the night attack and winning the battle, the refined form in *On Skirmishing* tries to exploit the attack

³⁷ See W.E Kaegi, *Heraclius, Emperor of Byzantium*, (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 130. For the recommendation of night attacks against the Persian camp by Maurice, see *Strategicon*, 115. For the detail of ambushing, see *Strategicon*, 94-96.

³⁸ *Strategicon*, 96.

³⁹ *On Skirmishing*, 235-7.

for maximum success by cutting off the scattered enemy's retreat to their country after the battle. While a general following the plan set forth in the *Strategicon* would win the battle and force the enemy to retreat, a general using the plan in *On Skirmishing* would win the battle and make sure to destroy as much of the enemy army as he could after the battle was over.

The difference in night attack advice is not only a improvement over time, but also an evolution in strategic thought that matches with general Byzantine strategy. The entire goal of the strategy in *On Skirmishing* is to be able to limit one's own losses while inflicting the maximum number of losses on the enemy. By comparing the differences between the advice *Strategicon* and *On Skirmishing*, one can clearly see the evolution in strategy and ideology from the 6th century to the 10th.

Despite Heraclius's great success in defeating three Persian armies and forestalling another invasion of Byzantium, he was still in a tight situation. The Emperor was forced to conduct a rapid retreat against the skilled Sarbarazas, who was attempting to encircle Heraclius and cut off his retreat, and Heraclius only barely managed to escape back to safety.⁴⁰ With Heraclius no longer threatening Persia, a grand Persian invasion of Anatolia was launched, aiming for Constantinople itself in combination with the mighty Avar host from the north.

Yet again, Heraclius ignored the threat to Constantinople and Byzantine territory and instead raced off towards the northeast to deal with another army invading from Armenia while dropping a detachment back to Constantinople to defend. Johnston describes this action as "another disconcerting move that probably took the Persians by surprise. For it was surely inconceivable that the emperor would not hurry to the defence of his capital when it was clearly under threat."⁴¹ Heraclius proceeded to defeat this army under Sain, which apparently was such an unexpected and great victory that Theophanes relates that Sain died of "his great despondency" and how Chosroes preserved Sain's body in salt to further mistreat it for his failure.⁴² While Heraclius was off defeating Sain, the siege of Constantinople was underway by an Avar host on the European side that was said to be numbered 80,000, as well as with support from the Persian army under Sarbarazas.⁴³ Yet thanks to the earlier preparations, plans, and instructions by Heraclius, as well as the detachment he sent there before setting out to defeat Sain, and of course the naturally strong defenses of Constantinople, the storm was weathered and the Avars retreated in disgrace.⁴⁴ Following his defeat of Sain, Heraclius set

40 Theophanes, 443-5. Kaegi also provides a helpful interpretation using non-Byzantine sources. cf. Kaegi, 130-2.

41 Johnston, viii 19.

42 Chronographia, 446-7. Theophanes incorrectly attributes this victory to Heraclius's brother Theodore and is overall very confused in this timeframe. For an attempt to unravel Theophanes messy chronology, see Johnston, viii 22-4.

43 For further coverage of the siege of Constantinople, see *Chronicon Paschale*, translation, notes, and introduction by Mark and Mary Whitby, (Liverpool University Press, 1989).

44 Theophanes, 446-8.

out to invade Persia once again. Theophanes briefly describes his motives, saying, "After encouraging his army, the emperor pushed on against Chosroes with a view to frightening him and making him recall Sarbaros from Byzantium [Chalcedon]."⁴⁵ This recall is of a considerably greater magnitude than the previous ones, for this time Sarbaros was all the way at Chalcedon, within close proximity to Constantinople itself. However, Sarbaros refused to return, instead assisting the Avars with the siege until its eventual failure. With the defeat of another Persian army, Heraclius invaded Persia once more in 627 and defeated a fresh Persian army at Nineveh.⁴⁶ This led to a surrender not too long after the stubborn Chosroes, refusing to accept defeat, was murdered in a coup d'etat in 628. Despite the enormous gains Chosroes had made from 602-623, Heraclius was able to reverse the situation and force a humiliating surrender in just six years of campaigning. Given his extraordinary success, it is no surprise that his techniques are prominently featured in *On Skirmishing*.

While the author of *On Skirmishing* attributes the strategy of invading the enemy homeland to Leo VI's military book, this advice directly matches with all of Heraclius's campaigns and it is quite conceivable that Leo took it from Heraclius. This counter-invasion strategy is a very significant part of *On Skirmishing* because it is the final, last resort approach in the face of a skilled opponent who refuses to fall for any of the normal traps or be weakened by harassment:

Therefore, General, when you are at a loss about how to injure the enemy with stratagems and ambushes, because they are very cautious and guard themselves carefully, or if, on the other hand, it is because your forces are not up to facing them openly in battle, then this is what you ought to do. Either you march quickly against the lands of the enemy, leaving the most responsible of the other generals behind, with enough troops for skirmishing and for the security of the themes...When the enemy hear of this, they will force their leader, even if he is unwilling, to get back to defend their own country.⁴⁷

Heraclius's campaigns mimic the scenario set forth here almost exactly. Three times Heraclius threatened Persia despite the Persians controlling and threatening a large swathe of Byzantine territory, and three times he was successful when numerous earlier attempts to stop the Persians at the gates of the Empire had failed. The first time, Sarbaros was conflicted over what option to take, but after seeing Heraclius refuse to budge from Armenia in response to a threatened invasion of Cilicia and fearing for the Persian homeland's safety, he followed Heraclius and was subsequently defeated in unfavorable territory.

45 Theophanes, 450.

46 Theophanes, 450-7.

47 *On Skirmishing*, 221.

Following this ignominious defeat, Sarbarazas was forcibly recalled by Chosroes to defend Persia, only to find defeat along with two fellow Persian armies. Lastly, the threat of invasion in 627 tipped Chosroes's hand to order Sarbaros to return despite having advanced all the way to Chalcedon, and while the latter did not due to suspicions about the King of Kings, it still shows the pull of Heraclius's strategy and why the consistent outcome of forcing the enemy army to retreat is repeated in *On Skirmishing*; it was that powerful of a maneuver, and like his triple victory through speedy maneuvering in 625, a strategy well beyond its time.⁴⁸

One last area of Heraclius's campaigns to look at is the ending, where he was able to instigate a revolt of Chosroes and get a favorable ending to the war without having to commit the large amount of resources in a siege of the great city of Ctesiphon. Winning without a costly siege is all the more remarkable because Heraclius was able to completely reverse nineteen years of disaster in just six years of his own fractured campaigning. Even as late as 626 the war was well in the favor of the Persians. Yet two years later Heraclius was able to get the Persians to revolt and topple their King of Kings who had nearly done what no Persian King ever had been near to accomplishing: the complete defeat of the Eastern Empire. A feat which surely ranks among the very greatest in the annals of Byzantine history. While there is no place in *On Skirmishing* for a lengthy offensive siege, the strategy set forth in Nicephorus Ouranos's *Tactica* bares a heavy resemblance to Heraclius's 'capture' of Ctesiphon.

According to Theophanes, Heraclius in 627 was "burning the towns and villages of Persia and putting to the sword the Persians he captured" while Chosroes was struggling to organize a new army to oppose him after the defeat of Sain and the refusal of Sarbarazas to return to Persia.⁴⁹ After some time he was able to organize a force under Razates, whom Heraclius decisively defeated outside of Ninevah. After this victory, the remaining Persian forces were left to shadowing Heraclius while the Emperor roamed around destroying palaces, capturing the Persian storehouse at Dastagerd, and marching all over in pursuit of Chosroes, who ended up fleeing to Ctesiphon.⁵⁰ Along the way, he wrote another letter to Chosroes asking for peace and after hearing another refusal, Heraclius proceeded to burn all the villages and towns within reach for an entire month. After doing so, he was contacted by dissatisfied Persians who wished to overthrow Chosroes, and Heraclius gave them his support and got Byzantine prisoners released. The coup was successful, and Chosroes' son Siroes, one of the conspirators, was placed on the throne, and he was only too glad to sign a treaty of peace with Heraclius.⁵¹ It is worth mentioning that Heraclius never

48 There is no evidence for any strategic theory of this type of strategy before Heraclius. The *Strategicon* specifically says that the two times when one should invade a hostile country are when the enemy was defeated in battle or when they are unprepared for combat. Neither of these examples fit in with Heraclius's situation, where it was only the Byzantines who were defeated in battle and neither side unprepared for combat. See *Strategicon*, 9.3 96.

49 Theophanes, 448-9.

50 Theophanes, 448-53.

51 Theophanes, 453-5.

even bothered to lay siege or even approach Ctesiphon, which would have been the normal way of approach, but instead roamed around the countryside, destroying and ravaging all of the Persian lands. While siege would have been very difficult to initiate with the Nahrawan canal providing a safe barrier of defense, Heraclius's approach towards his end goal was exceedingly efficient.

While Theophanes gives a good overview, his account requires closer examination. Here, Johnston has done a huge service in piecing together a multitude of sources to provide a clearer picture of Heraclius's final campaign. He finds that the rebellion was made possible with a combination of the Byzantine political alliance with the Turks to threaten various parts of Persia, the Byzantine religious propaganda, and most importantly, the continual success of Heraclius in the field along with his devastation of Mesopotamia and decision to press for Ctesiphon rather than liberate captured Byzantine territories. On the Persian side, Johnston has found that the combination of war weariness and economic troubles, quite natural problems for sustaining a twenty-five year long war, as well as the arrogance of Chosroes caused by his many successes, contributed most to internal grumbling. Johnston concludes that, "His [Heraclius] actions created the circumstances in which opposition to the existing regime and its policies could gather strength."⁵² To this I have to stress the decision of Heraclius to continually ravage and destroy the Persian lands, not only hurting their economy and contributing to the dissatisfaction of the land owners, but also his isolation of Ctesiphon, and the propaganda which gave room for rebellion to form. As Johnston says, even in 628 Chosroes still enjoyed an "immense advantage in material resources."⁵³ Thus, the decisive factor had to have been psychological in nature, to make the Persians believe they did not have that advantage, and that a quick rebellion and subsequent surrender would be most advantageous.

Now compare Heraclius's approach with that of chapter 65 on siege warfare in Nicephorus Ouranos' *Tactica*. Ouranos first advises to avoid attacking a strong fortress with a powerful garrison, of which Ctesiphon would certainly qualify.⁵⁴ Instead he suggests to go to all nearby regions, strongholds, and fortresses and burn their crops/harvests so that the populace is oppressed by starvation and moves to other places. While ravaging the land, the Byzantine army should also restrict traffic to the city under siege, preventing not only an commercial visitors but also any enemy food or food or reinforcements from arriving anywhere near the fortress. This should help drive the besieged to despair. Lastly, the general should give incentives for the fortress to surrender such as promising lenient terms at the first request and spreading religious dissatisfaction.⁵⁵ While the outcome is much different between Ouranos and Heraclius, that of the fortress surrendering versus fostering a rebellion, this is

52 Johnston, ix, 108-13.

53 Johnston ix, 113.

54 McGeer, *Sowing the Dragon's Teeth, Tactica*, 65.1.

55 McGeer, *Tactica*, 65.2-3, 6-10.

merely because of the difference of situations; the techniques described still apply for either goal, although rebellion may naturally be more difficult.

Ouranos may have stated that “many and varied are the means which the men of old contrived for conducting siege operations, but I have set down only the methods that our generation currently employs,” but while even if he did not get direct inspiration from Heraclius's campaign against Ctesiphon, the strategy executed by Heraclius is too similar of a match to the strategy prescribed by Ouranos to be ignored.⁵⁶ It is quite conceivable that the sources he obtained this indirect siege strategy from was part of a long tradition that originated with Heraclius, or he may have known of the link to Heraclius yet chosen not to say anything for various reasons. Yet ultimately, as with many other tenuous links in strategic evolution, we are left to wonder exactly how much and in what way the older examples influenced the later texts.

While Heraclius may not have contributed to some of very specific tactics addressed in *On Skirmishing*, he did the most important thing, which was to show the potential for a defense based on conceding territory when necessary and fighting the enemy on one's own terms. While Heraclius executed this strategy by threatening Persia itself and then defeating the various Persian armies with a combination of outmaneuvering and a set of stratagems, his successors elected to permit the Arab armies to invade Byzantine lands while wearing them down over time by attacking their stragglers and limiting their forage, then blocking their retreat. This type strategy led to the success of Leo III in almost a mirror of Heraclius's campaign in 717. With the exception of remaining in Byzantium, Leo allowed the Muslims to advance all the way to Constantinople, all while remaining on the flank and pouncing on reinforcements and foragers. Like in 626, the walls of Constantinople held, and the invading army was bled dry by a terrible winter and lack of forage, leading to a Muslim defeat of an unprecedented scale, to the extent that they never threatened Constantinople again.⁵⁷

Before entering into the analysis, it will be useful to understand the context that *On Skirmishing* was written for. Byzantium had lost their richest provinces, that of Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and Africa in the 7th and 8th centuries to the Arabs. They were permanently on the defensive, having not the economic resources to continue fighting on even footing against the numerically superior Arabs. Instead, the Byzantines fought like guerrillas, using small, well-led bands of men drawn from the province itself to wear down the enemy with efficient military actions. Speed and surprise were the themes of the day, with light cavalry being the dominant arm of the military up until the 10th century. After the defeat of several successive invasion forces, the Arabs were also generally reduced to sending in raiding parties to enrich themselves at the expense of Byzantium, and at times the Byzantines replied in kind. Overall, it was a period unlike any other in the classical world or late antiquity.

⁵⁶ McGeer, *Tactica*, 65.25.

⁵⁷ Theophanes, 546; 549. This strategy of denying forage and harassing the enemy who is besieging a city is discussed in *On Skirmishing*, 223-5.

641-800: The Second Evolution

Heraclius had shown and given an original set of principles to follow through his successful campaigns, and the early subsequent generations proved capable of limiting the large battle encounters that devastated the Empire's position at Yarmuk. This is where there are relatively few large scale battles in the immediate half a century after Heraclius's death, and it is in no small part due to the absence of any Yarmuk scale disasters that the Empire's tenuous position was held. While the level of detail given from Theophanes is often scant if even that, in those instances where he does give even the slightest bit of information we can see that the Byzantine military commanders were applying many of the later strategies in an imperfect and isolated form.⁵⁸ That is to say, they would use some good strategies but lack others needed to maximize the success, or that their imperfect combinations would lead to a defeat in a situation that later commanders would find complete victory in. This unique situation of using some of the concepts that would make up *On Skirmishing*, but never all at once, provides a good glimpse of what the strategic situation was during the era following Yarmuk: a military trying to find the answer for their continual failures by the continual implementation of various ideas in a variety of forms. Some of these ideas stuck, and some did not; it was a gradual learning process that ultimately led to the full Art of War expressed in *On Skirmishing*. So one must keep in mind while reading the analysis that in this period the Byzantines did not have a copy of *On Skirmishing* by their bedside and were simply executing its directions incorrectly. Instead, it is much likelier that they did not have a full, detailed plan to follow and were. It is important to point out that Theophanes does give other examples of military encounters during this period, this study will restrict the analysis and selections to those that show some resemblance to the concepts put forth in *On Skirmishing*.

The first example Theophanes gives of higher level strategy is of a Byzantine raid of Syria in 699, which went all the way up to Samosata on the upper Euphrates; a sizable distance from the Byzantine homeland. Not only were the Byzantines predominantly on the defensive during this period, but this strategy was also unique in that it was done when the Muslims under Muhammed b. Marwan were busy invading a third party's land.⁵⁹ The idea of invading with great haste when the enemy was certainly not a new one, although it was still covered in *On Skirmishing* as a way to exploit any potential opening.⁶⁰ This was the only offensive military success that Theophanes gives

58 I am taking every piece of evidence Theophanes offers that can at least some level of strategy can be discerned from. As he his focus post-Heraclius is not fully military based and he has much to cover, a short paragraph is the most one can find on any given encounter.

59 Theophanes, 518.

60 *On Skirmishing*, 221. This also partially relates with Heraclius's multiple invasions of Persia itself when the enemy armies were away although in that case it was because the Persians

during the long time period from Heraclius up until the 8th century.

Evidently, the situation of an enemy occupied invading a foreign land was not a frequent one, for it was only briefly addressed in *On Skirmishing* and with its unusual level of success one would think that the Byzantines would wish to emulate it in the future; thus the likely conclusion is that it was simply a rare opportunity well exploited.

Continuing on the trend of brief information, Theophanes gives a vague description of a successful ambush in the early 8th century. Although his lack of detail restricts the analysis of what kind of ambush it was, we can infer that it was performed on the advance of the enemy army and not their retreat:

Furthermore, while Mardasan was raiding with his Arab army from Pylai to Nicaea and Nicomedia, the imperial officers who, like Mardaites, were concealed with their foot soldiers at Libos and Sophon, suddenly attacked them and broke them in pieces and so forced them to withdraw from those parts...⁶¹

While *On Skirmishing* does provide details of how to ambush⁶² and gives the suggestion of ambushing or at least blocking the enemy's advance with infantry stationed in tough terrain,⁶³ the author wisely recommends that the general wait until the enemy retreats to ambush them.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, ambushing on the advance was not spoken of poorly, just as an inferior option to ambushing on the retreat.

Next, Theophanes gives another, more concrete example of a Byzantine force picking off raiding and foraging parties with the defeat of a detachment under one of Harun al-Rashid's generals. Although as usual Theophanes lacks precise statements of what occurred, it is likely that the "small raiding party" stated was either a foraging party or a detachment sent to pillage an adjacent area. Either way, it fits under the treatise. And furthermore, if Theophanes deemed it worthy enough to mention alongside other much larger events, it must have had some significance towards the outcome of the invasion:

were invading Byzantium and not a third party; c.f. Theophanes, pp. 435-479. A more applicable precedent for this type of strategy can be tracked to Belisarius's quick raid into Persia in 541, when Chosroes had invaded Colchis with a large army and was laying siege to Petra. Upon hearing news that Belisarius captured a fortress in the heart of Mesopotamia and sent a raiding party beyond the Tigris river, Chosroes abandoned the invasion and speedily retired back to Persia to deal with the intruder, who had already left for home, his purpose accomplished; cf. Procopius of Caesarea, *"History of the Wars, Books 5-6,"* trans. H.B Dewing, (Project Gutenberg, 27 September 2005), Book 2, xvi-xix, <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/20298> accessed December 20 2008.

61 Theophanes, 546.

62 On *Skirmishing*, 147-179. Specifically pp. 155-7 provides the most detail on ambushing on the enemy advance path. Another area which covers ambushing on the retreat, although not fully applicable here it still goes over some general ambushing strategies, is on pp. 211-3.

63 Ibid, 155-7.

64 Ibid, 157-61

Aaron, [Harun al-Rashid] after invading the Armeniac *thema*, besieged all summer the fort Semalouos and in the month of September he took it by capitulation. He had previously sent Thoumamas to Asia with 50,000 men. A small raiding party of his was met by Michael Lachanodrakon, who gave battle and killed the brother of Thoumamas.⁶⁵

Although this victory was small and produced only limited physical results, it is still notable for a success of defeating an isolated detachment in an otherwise unsuccessful invasion defense. This aspect of limiting food supplies and harassing any detachments is addressed numerous times in *On Skirmishing* and is clearly one of the most important subjects to the author.⁶⁶

Partially parting with brief and inconclusive statements, Theophanes starts to give better descriptions and therefore examples towards the end of his chronicles. One of the more detailed examples comes from a campaign in 770, where part of what would become skirmishing strategy is applied, but not the complete form. When the emperor heard of the invasion of Banakas and the siege of Syke, he sent three *strategoi* who did the following:

These men arrived and occupied the Arabs' exit, which was a very difficult mountain pass. Meanwhile the fleet of the Kibyraiots under their *strategos* the *spatharios* Petronas cast anchor in the harbour of the fort. On seeing this and losing all hope, Banakas encouraged and roused his men. He marched up to the cavalry *themata* and, with a great shout, routed them. He killed many of them and, after devastating all the surrounding country, returned home with much booty.⁶⁷

In this scenario, the *strategoi* had done the correct maneuver of blocking their opponent's retreat as described below:

Still, instead of confronting the enemy as they are on their way to invade Romania, it is in many respects more advantageous and convenient to get them as they are returning from our country to their own. They will be worn out and much the worse for wear after having spent such a long time in the Roman lands...The general, therefore, must never let them return home unscathed.⁶⁸

65 Theophanes, 625.

66 See *On Skirmishing*, 175-9, 229, for further information and the other major references to hampering the enemy food supplying.

67 Theophanes, 615.

68 *On Skirmishing*, 158-60.

However, they didn't attempt to weaken their foe before they retreated home as *On Skirmishing* recommends.⁶⁹ Thus, the enemy was able to overpower the blockade despite the disadvantage in attacking such a strong position, because the *strategoi* had neglected to weaken the invaders before the ambush. Nevertheless, the power of this *manoeuvre sur les derrieres* advised in *On Skirmishing* is clear, for it caused Banakas and his men to lose all hope despite coming back from a successful raid and it was only the strength of his resolve and the good condition of his army. While this may still have been a great defeat for the Byzantines, it shows marked improvement over the earlier disasters of offering direct battle such as that under Justinian II.⁷⁰

Eight years later, there is a campaign which demonstrates the complete opposite of the failure to stop Banakas in 770 by neglecting to put his army in a poor condition in preparation to force and block their retreat. This time, the Emperor himself dictated the overall strategy in response to a great Arab invasion lead by Hasan b. Qahtaba in 778:

The emperor [Leo IV] ordered the *strategoi* not to fight an open war, but to make the forts secure by stationing garrisons of soldiers in them. He appointed high-ranking officers at each fort and instructed them to take each 3,000 chosen men and to follow the Arabs so as to prevent them from spreading out on pillaging raids, while burning in advance the horses' pasture and whatever other supplies were to be found. After the Arabs remained fifteen days at Dorylaion, they ran short of necessities and their horses went hungry and many of them perished. Turning back, they besieged Amorion for one day, but finding it fortified and well-armed, they withdrew without achieving any success.⁷¹

Here, the Byzantines performed the first part of skirmishing correctly. They were able to shadow the enemy detachments and prevent them from foraging or pillaging, and at the same time using a scorched earth policy to force the Arabs to limit their pillaging and destruction and force them to make an inglorious retreat.⁷² However, the final step would be for the Byzantines to maneuver upon the Arab's rear block their exits, ensuring the destruction or dissolution of the entire army. As the treatise describes:

When the enemy are withdrawing and are hastening to reach their own country, our infantry forces should be dispatched

69 Ibid, 165-173.

70 Theophanes, 510-514.

71 Theophanes, 624.

72 *On Skirmishing*, 211. "When some of the enemy ride about three or four miles from their arm, this detachment should attack and harass them there and there in order to prevent them from gathering food. When food becomes scarce, they may be compelled to turn back."

beforehand to the mountain passes to hold the roads along which they will be passing.⁷³

By neglecting to block the enemy's retreat, the *strategoi* were able to achieve a half-victory: the Arabs were forced to abandon their unsuccessful raid, probably suffering from a reasonable amount of casualties from starvation and fatigue. However, their army was not destroyed like it would have been if the Byzantines had blocked the exits. Yet, the Byzantines were learning.⁷⁴ As early as the 770's, Byzantines had executed two major parts of the plan that would be proposed in *On Skirmishing* to a reasonable degree, just not at the same time. As the strength of each part on its own showed, if the Byzantines had used the full strategy in the same campaign, it is all the more likely that in both cases there would have been a complete Byzantine victory.

However, even just a year or so later after the half-successful defense against the great invasion by Hasan, the Byzantines suffered a nasty defeat to a raiding party. Rather than shadow, harass, and deny the enemy supplies and food, there was apparently either a stubborn *strategoi* who refused to adapt, or just as likely, a lack of a unified theory that all *strategoi* were supposed to follow. These poor generals obviously weren't caught up with the times:

In this year [789] an Arab raiding party went forth against the Roman country in the month of September and penetrated into the Anatolic *thema*, to a place called Kopidnadon. The Roman *strategoi* joined forces and gave battle to them. They were defeated and many were killed...⁷⁵

The concept of giving direct battle when at a numerical and/or qualitative disadvantage was frowned upon in *On Skirmishing*; this is of course no surprise when the entire treatise is written of ways to fight more efficiently than through direct battle, but it is worth mentioning that in the beginning the author specifically mentions that while directly offering battle may be the easiest course of action, it is one that is often impractical for Byzantine generals.⁷⁶

Conclusion from Two Centuries of Evolution

⁷³ Ibid, 231.

⁷⁴ As this was a specific campaign at least formally directed by the Emperor Leo IV, it is likely at this point that there is at least some rudimentary understanding. As the 8th century came to a close, the Byzantines were able to show some successes that resulted from higher level strategy and even in their failures they could be seen attempting to rise to the next level of strategy. However, as we shall see below, Byzantine policy was by no means unified or always efficient.

⁷⁵ Theophanes, 637.

⁷⁶ *On Skirmishing*, 147-153.

The early 790's was the last decade of any military significance recorded by Theophanes, and as this study was limited to Theophanes' work, this is the natural place of closure. However, it is not too much of an inappropriate time to halt overall. The the late 8th and earlier part of the 9th century was mostly devoted to non-military affairs, most notably the fanatical religious devotion by the state under Irene and the iconoclast controversy following her. What military attention there was focused on the Balkans, which had been neglected for several centuries. While the Empire still suffered eastern military defeats during this period, it is perhaps more apt to say that these did not matter as much to the state, and it follows that the value of examining this period for the evolution in strategy is likely minimal. It was not until Theophilus and Michael III that attention to eastern military matters improved, and from Michael on the fortunes of the Byzantines rose onto newfound heights of prosperity.

While there were some concepts, such as ambushing, that preceded Heraclius, the majority of the broad concepts that ended up in *On Skirmishing* mirror and can be taken from an analysis of his campaigns. *On Skirmishing* gives an effective solution to every scenario Theophanes records in these two centuries, an almost certain indicator that its solutions were developed from the Byzantine successes in failures in what is commonly called the Byzantine 'Dark Ages.' Politically and culturally that label may or may not be correct, but on military strategy, nothing could be farther from the truth. By accumulation of theory, from sources such as Maurice's *Strategikon* and Leo's *Taktika*, mixed in with battle tested strategy taken from Heraclius and subsequent generations, the Byzantines were able to produce a successful strategy that saved them from the brink of disaster.