

New Light on Byzantine Military Science – A Landmark Edition in Hungarian Byzantine Studies

VI. (Bölcs) Leó: *Taktika* / Leo VI Sapiens: *Tactica*, Translated by: Fehér Bence. Notes by: Fehér Bence and Kákóczki Balázs. Introductory study by: Kákóczki Balázs. Budapest, HUN-REN Research Centre for the Humanities / Pázmány Péter Catholic University. 2025. Series: *Corpus Fontium Antiquitatis Hungaricae*, Vol. 2 pp. ISBN: 978-615-6388-85-8

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With the publication of the second volume of the *Corpus Fontium Antiquitatis Hungaricae* series in 2025, Hungarian academia offers scholars an invaluable tool: the first complete Hungarian translation of Leo VI the Wise's (886–912) *Tactica* (VI. (Bölcs) Leó: *Taktika*), one of the most important sources for understanding Byzantine military art of the 9th–10th centuries and, indirectly, the military practices of the barbarian peoples who threatened the borders of the empire. Translated by Fehér Bence, with an introductory study written by Kákóczki Balázs and notes written by both, this volume represents a significant scholarly achievement as it brings the full Middle Greek text of Leo VI's treatise to Hungarian readers for the first time in its entirety, beyond the well-known excerpt on the Hungarians. The importance of the book is twofold. Firstly, it makes an essential work on Byzantine military science accessible, which shaped military strategy for centuries. Secondly, it provides a source that is fundamental from the perspective of Hungarian prehistory, since Chapter XVIII contains a description of the warfare of the conquering Hungarians.

Published jointly by the HUN-REN Research Centre for the Humanities' Hungarian Prehistory Research Group, the Moravcsik Gyula Institute, and the Department of Archaeology of the Pázmány Péter Catholic University, the book underscores ongoing efforts to illuminate early Hungarian history through Byzantine sources.

For centuries, Leo VI's *Tactica*, composed around 900–910 AD, was an underestimated work, often dismissed as a mere compilation of earlier works, especially Emperor Maurice's *Strategikon*. Kákóczki's introduction, however, emphasizes that this judgment is unfair: it represents far more than a simple medieval military manual, and is not merely a *compendi-*

um, but rather a distinctive self-portrait of an era: that of an empire struggling for survival while striving to preserve traditions, arguing that this view underestimates its value as a “masterpiece” that synthesizes traditions while adapting them to 9th–10th-century realities. Leo’s work is the high point of the genre of military treatises: at once a true encyclopedia of Byzantine military art, an instructional manual, and an ideological program. It was written not for imperial successors, but for provincial commanders – something that itself reveals the peculiarities of the Byzantine military system, namely the decentralized, *theme*-based state structure. As Kákóczki Balázs’s introduction clearly demonstrates, this work is a deliberate systematization of military knowledge. The treatise, structured in 20 “constitutions” (plus Prologue and Epilogue), covers tactics, strategy, ideal generalship, armament, training, punishments, marches, encampments, sieges, surprise attacks, naval warfare, and aphorisms. The edition’s bilingual presentation (Greek original facing Hungarian translation) enhances accessibility, while the interpretation of the text is supplemented by a rich apparatus of notes, terminological explanations, and a study on the military-historical context. Particularly innovative is the integration of the religious dimension into military art. Its religious framing reflects Leo’s theological approach, positioning defensive war as divinely sanctioned. Leo VI is probably the first Byzantine treatise writer to systematically justify war on Christian theological grounds, inserting military conduct within an ethical and religious framework that reflects contemporary mentality.

Kákóczki shows how the work is linked to the political situation of the time – primarily the Arab threat – and how it influenced later authors, including Nicephorus Phocas. The introductory study offers a nuanced overview on the Byzantine military evolution from the 7th century crisis under Heraclius to the Macedonian Renaissance, and provides a precise description of the era’s armament. The Byzantine Empire of the 9th–10th centuries, having overcome the crises of the 6th century (territorial losses, Persian and Avar attacks, the fall of the Balkans, and internal anarchy, then the existential crisis of the 7th century through Heraclius’s reforms and the introduction of the *theme* system), still found itself under constant pressure from Arabs to the East and Northern nomadic peoples to the North. The empire’s survival was ensured by Heraclius’ reforms, who reorganized the army, created a financial basis, and through victories regained the Eastern provinces. Although he could not halt the Arab conquests, his measures laid the foundations of Byzantine stability for three centuries. In this scenario, the need to systematize and update military knowledge became not only opportune, but vital for the empire’s very survival. A key innovation was the introduction of the *theme system* (*themata*), which tied military service to landholding. The hereditary service of the peasant-soldiers (*stratiotes*) – who received hereditary land (*pronoia*) for service – guaranteed military manpower while reducing the state’s financial burden. This decentralized structure, complemented by elite central *tagmata* units (e.g., *scholae*, *excubitors*), composed of professional mercenaries, stabilized the empire against Arab, Avar, and Slavic threats, that is, became the pillars of central power. Armament changes are meticulously traced: heavy cavalry (*kataphraktoi*) adopted the sword and the long *kontarion* lance, as well

as the lamellar cuirass (*klibanon*) – which became the hallmark of Byzantine warfare – maces, and sabers, while infantry gradually specialized, and emphasized pikes (*menaulon*) for anti-cavalry roles. The study highlights tactical shifts, like avoiding pitched battles in favour of ambushes and attrition, rooted in Maurice, but updated for Islamic foes. The dual structure, i.e. the mass armies of the *themes* and the elite tagmata, formed the basis of Byzantine military thought, which the *Tactica* describes and regulates in detail.

One of the most fascinating aspects of this volume is the critical analysis of Leo VI the Wise's figure. The introduction addresses with intellectual honesty the paradox of an emperor who, despite never having personally commanded an army in battle, produced one of the most influential military treatises in medieval history. Kákóczki Balázs presents Leo as an "armchair soldier". This characteristic, far from diminishing the work's value, rather highlights its nature: the *Tactica* is not the outcome of a commander's personal experience; rather it is the result of systematic compilation and synthesis of the best available military sources. Leo VI presents himself as a legislator promulgating military decrees with the same authority with which he issued his numerous civil constitutions, giving the work an almost normative character. Authorship is probed critically: while Leo is named, his lack of battle-field experience suggests court scribes' involvement, with final edits under Constantine VII. One of Leo VI's principal merits lies in having overcome the traditional compilative approach of his predecessors to create an organic and systematic treatise. Unlike Maurice's *Strategikon*, which constituted his main source, the *Tactica* presents a logical and progressive structure that guides the reader from fundamental theoretical notions to the most complex practical applications.

A key section surveys Byzantine military literature, positioning the *Tactica* as a bridge between ancient tacticians and later works like Nicephorus Phocas's *Praecepta Militaria*. Kákóczki paints a broad panorama of the transformations in Byzantine military affairs between the 6th and 10th centuries, as well as the development of Eastern Roman military writing. Byzantine military literature derived from Maurice's *Strategikon*, which became the standard. Authors of the 7th–11th centuries commented on, expanded, and updated it. The *Tactica* represents the culmination of this process: a comprehensive systematization that is both tradition-preserving and innovative.

The introduction addresses with philological rigor one of the most delicate questions: the relationship between the *Tactica* and its sources, particularly Maurice's *Strategikon*. The analysis demonstrates that while some passages are literal transcriptions, others reveal work of adaptation and revision that considers the transformations of Byzantine military art between the 6th and 10th centuries. The section on the Turks (ch. XVIII, 43–58) is particularly problematic as it derives directly from the description of the 6th-century Western Turks contained in the *Strategikon*. This raises concerns about Leo VI's actual knowledge of the Magyars of his time, suggesting that his description might be the result of misidentification rather than direct observation. Kákóczki notes Leo's reliance on sources (80% from Maurice)

yet praises his innovations, such as integrating Christian ethics and contemporary details (e.g., Greek fire in naval tactics).

For scholars of Hungarian history, this volume represents a contribution of exceptional importance, the book's appeal lies in Constitution XVIII, describing "Turks" (including Hungarians) as nomadic horsemen skilled in feigned retreats and ambushes (mentioning them among the "barbarian peoples"). Despite the necessary cautions in interpreting Chapter XVIII, the *Tactica* remains the only contemporary source providing detailed information on the military practices of steppe nomads during the period of great migrations. For a long time, this description circulated as an independent source, but the Introduction stresses that the section partly blends with accounts of 6th-century Turks. Nevertheless, it remains one of the earliest Byzantine testimonies to how the eastern empire perceived the Hungarians advancing toward the Carpathian Basin. This critical analysis allows the distinction between probably authentic elements (combat tactics, nomadic military organization) and possible anachronisms or generalizations. Kákóczki argues that the description largely copies Maurice's 6th-century Turks, blending them with 9th-century observations, thus it is not not purely about the Conquest-era Magyars. He reveals characterizations (such as greed, oath-breaking) to be generic "Scythian" stereotypes, urging cross-verification with archaeology and other sources like Constantine VII's *De Administrando Imperio*. This balanced analysis contributes to interdisciplinary Hungarian prehistory research.

The bibliography (pages 6–11) is exhaustive, it lists manuscripts, editions (from Cheke's 1554 Latin to Dennis's 2010 English), ancient sources (Ammianus to Xenophon), and modern scholarship (Darkó, Haldon, McGeer). The edition is based on Dennis, while incorporating Vári's partial Hungarian edition, Fehér's translation results in a philologically robust text. Strengths include clear chapter divisions aligning with Dennis, avoiding Vári's discrepancies, and *indices* for technical terms. The translation demonstrates careful attention to technical terminology, with Fehér prioritizing accuracy over interpretive approach. Furthermore, the choice to provide the complete translation, alongside the original Greek text, responds to the best practices of scholarly source editions.

Particularly appreciable is the adopted interdisciplinary approach. The apparatus of notes goes beyond clarifying technical terms and historical references, regularly offering comparisons with other sources and critical analyses that considerably enrich understanding of the text. The availability of an accurate Hungarian translation, with a substantial critical apparatus, represents a significant contribution to the field at a time of renewed scholarly interest in Byzantine military institutions and practices. The volume belongs to the broader project of the *Corpus Fontium Antiquitatis Hungaricae*, which proposes to make the principal narrative sources on early medieval Hungarian history accessible in Hungarian translation.

The initiative, resulting from collaboration between the HUN-REN Research Centre for the Humanities and Pázmány Péter Catholic University, represents an example of academic cooperation and commitment to high-level scientific dissemination.

While recognizing the indisputable value of this volume, it is possible to identify some limitations that could be addressed in future editions. While the introduction provides excellent historical contextualization, the influence of the *Tactica* on subsequent Byzantine and Western military tradition could have been explored more deeply. Leo VI's work did not remain confined to the Byzantine sphere, but influenced military treatise writers until the Renaissance, and this aspect perhaps deserved greater attention. Minor critical observations are the followings: the introduction assumes familiarity with Byzantine history, which may challenge undergraduate readers; a richer iconographic apparatus would have been useful, illustrating the military formations and equipment described in the text.

Overall, this edition revitalizes Leo's *Tactica* as an encyclopedia of 6th–10th-century warfare. The quality of the translation, richness of the critical apparatus, and depth of historical analysis make it an indispensable tool for anyone dealing with medieval military history, Byzantine studies, or early medieval Hungarian history. For scholars specialized in Byzantine Studies/History, it offers fresh insights into military adaptation; for Hungarian historians, a critical lens on Conquest sources. At a time when interdisciplinary approaches dominate, this collaborative work exemplifies how ancient texts illuminate national origins without anachronism. Furthermore, the methodological approach adopted here could be profitably applied to the study of other texts dealing with "barbarian" peoples from the Byzantine perspective, contributing to a better understanding of intercultural dynamics in early medieval Europe. The work deserves to find a place not only in specialized libraries, but also among the working tools of all those interested in the complex dynamics that characterized the encounter-confrontation between the Byzantine world and the nomadic peoples of the steppes in the central centuries of the Middle Ages.