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THE MILITARY SKILLS OF GABRIEL RODOMIR: SOURCES AND INTERPRETATION

War and warfare were an integral part of medieval life. The level of military skill and knowledge among the population depended on many factors: from their way of life, to the character of the individual. For most it was a tool for survival, for others a skill through which the resources needed to maintain or strengthen their own position in a given state were acquired, while for some the social status they possessed required of them to be acquainted with the art of warfare. As for members of the high social strata and heirs of medieval states, i.e. the elite, what was expected of them in the Middle Ages was to be educated, and from their early years gradually accustomed, with affairs of the state. This included involvement not only in political, but also in military matters, although from history we know that often there were exceptions in relation to this issue.¹ This medieval social norm also applied to members of the high social strata, or elite, of Balkan States. In that context, focus of this article will be the military skills of one representative of the *Kometopouloi*², and a ruler of Samuel's state: Gabriel Rodomir, Samuel's son.

¹ In this context, it can be noted that some of the dignitaries in Byzantium, but also some of its emperors, showed little interest in military matters.

² The four brothers, David, Moses, Aaron and Samuel, who according to John Skylitzes, *A Synopsis of Byzantine History 811-1057*, trans. John Wortley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 312, rebelled twice, established a State in the Balkans with its capitol first in the region of Lake Prespa, and then in city of Ochrid. They were sons of Nicholas, a *komes*, one of the powerful men in the Bulgarian Empire, thus the name *Kometopouloi* for the rulers of Samuel's State.

Information in the sources regarding Gabriel Rodomir's life are patchy and scarce, about its military skills almost none existing. Only two authors, John Skylitzes and Priest of Duklja, provide some evidence relating to his military knowledge and battlefield activities. Of the two, Skylitzes is much more detailed and reports of several battles where Gabriel was actively participating, while the other author, Priest of Duklja, puts forth his military skills in only one sentence.

As a son of Samuel, his successor and a future ruler, the source material states that Gabriel Rodomir has been actively involved in affairs of the state from an early age, at least when it comes to political matters. According to John Skylitzes, he became involved in the power struggle between Samuel and Aaron, in which his father eventually emerged as the winner. In his *Synopsis of Byzantine History* reports that Gabriel managed to persuade his father Samuel to spare John Vladislav, who was the son of Aaron. Immediately afterwards, as reported by Skylitzes, Aaron, along with the rest of his family was executed.³ According to medieval social norms in the Byzantine cultural sphere, which included the Balkans, in order for a certain person (at least for the members of the elite) to be entrusted with significant social and state affairs, such as active participation in military campaigns, was only after one entered the period of adolescence, which started at the age of fourteen. This seemed to be a period of young population's life where reasoning, beliefs, opinions and attitudes could not only be accepted by the adults, but also influence their decision-making, as well as making decisions which could have serious implications on lives of other people, an age that Gabriel Rodomir probably had during the power struggle between his father and Aaron.⁴

The events in the years that followed indicate that Gabriel took an active role in military affairs of the state. This can be noted because the sources mention him during campaigns that Samuel had taken. Gabriel Rodomir was

³ According to Skylitzes, *Synopsis*, 312, "...Samuel slew his brother Aaron and his family too...the only survivor was his son, Sviatolsav (also known as John [Vladislav]), saved by [Gabriel] Rodomir (also known as Romanos) the son of Samuel."

⁴ Драган Ѓалевски, „За бракот на Самоил и Агата“, in *Самоиловата држава и Византија: Историја, легенда, традиција, наследство, Зборник на трудови од Меѓународниот симпозиум „Денови на Јустинијан I“, Скопје, 17-18 октомври, 2014*, уред. Митко Б. Панов (Скопје: Евро Балкан, 2015), 79-81.

present in all the important battles that his father fought against the Byzantines. He is mentioned as a participant in the battles at river Spercheios⁵ and also at Belasitza Mountain in the vicinity of Kleidion⁶, where Samuel was disastrously defeated. As heir to the throne, Gabriel was probably at his father's side in his other campaigns.

That he had predispositions for a skilled warrior is indicated by John Skylitzes in his *Chronicle*. According to him, Gabriel Rodomir "...surpassed his father in vigour and strength but was sadly inferior to him in wisdom and understanding."⁷ What this statement is pointing out, and the events that followed only confirmed this fact, is that the son of Samuel probably was not as good a politician as he was a warrior.⁸ Similar statement is made by Priest of Duklja. He reports that Gabriel "...was very strong and led a multitude of wars..."⁹ against the Byzantines, that is, he emphasizes his warlike skills.

If we consider Skylitzes narrative of the course of battles that are witnessed in his *Chronicle* in which Gavriilo Rodomir participated as credible, it can be noted that he possessed very good, if not exceptional military skills. At the defeat at Spercheios, although he suffered serious injuries during the battle, Gabriel succeeded together with his father by "...hiding among the dead, lying down as though they were slain..." to "...secretly slipping away into the Ætolian Mountains by night..."¹⁰ saving themselves from captivity or certain death. At the battle of Belasitza, where in the moments when Emperor Basil II managed to destroy the constructed fortifications, Samuel "...was only able to escape from danger, by the cooperation of his own son who stoutly resisted those who attacked...and led him [safely] to the fortress called Prilapon."¹¹ Immediately after the battle of Belasitza Gabriel Rodomir is witnessed in the *Chronicle* of John Skylitzes how, in an unnamed mountain defile in the surroundings of

⁵ Skylitzes, *Synopsis*, 324.

⁶ Ibid, 331.

⁷ Ibid, 332.

⁸ Skylitzes, *Synopsis*, 334. Just one year after Samuel's death, Gabriel Rodomir was killed by the man whom he saved from certain death, his cousin John Vladislav.

⁹ *Љетопис Попа Дукљанина*, уред. Славко Мијушковић (Београд: Просвета, 1988), 127.

¹⁰ Skylitzes, *Synopsis*, 324.

¹¹ Ibid, 331.

Stroumbitza, he ambushed Theophylact Botaneiates, *dux* of Thessalonike, which ended with success.¹²

The above-mentioned evidences in the sources indicate that Gabriel was well-versed in various medieval military tactics and strategies. He was able, when necessary, to devise and use various cunning and deceptions, as well as to use in his favor geographical factors that surrounded him. One such example are the events that followed the disastrous defeat at river Spercheios where Gabriel Rodomir, along with his father, passing through "...the peaks of...[Ætolian] mountains and crossing the Pindos..." succeeded to reach the safety of their country.¹³ At the battle of Belasitza, it can be noted that Gabriel was acquainted with the defensive medieval tactics of retreat from the battlefield. Skylitzes report that Samuel "...was only able to escape from danger, by the cooperation of his own son who stoutly resisted those who attacked..." leads to such a conclusion. The battle against Theophylact Botaneiates, *dux* of Thessalonike, which was fought in an unnamed mountain defile, indicates that he was also familiar with the tactics for setting ambushes at gorges and narrow passes, i.e. with guerilla warfare. It was so successfully set, according to Skylitzes, that "...nobody [from the byzantine army] could do anything to defend himself."¹⁴

Like any other person in the Middle Ages who was an active participant in military activities, Gabriel Rodomir was also skilled in wielding weapons for close combat. The statement given by John Skylitzes that, he "...stoutly resisted those who attacked..." a defensive activity that was probably possible only if it was followed by use of some kind of a weapon, can be perceived in one such context. Michael of Devol, who complemented the *Chronicle* of Skylitzes, is more specific about the level of skills Gabriel possessed regarding the use of such weapons. He even mentions a type of weapon that he used against his enemies

¹² According to Skylitzes, *Synopsis*, 332, Emperor Basil II "...dispatched Theophylact Botaneiates, duke of Thessalonike...with orders to cross the Stroumbitza Mountains and to burn all the defense-works he encountered on the way, clearing the road to Thessalonike for him. As Theophylact departed he was permitted to pass unimpeded by the Bulgars...but when he was about to return to the emperor...he fell into an ambush prepared for this purpose, set up in a long defile."

¹³ Skylitzes, *Synopsis*, 324.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 332-333.

in battle. According to him, Theophylact Botaneiates, *dux* of Thessalonike, was killed personally by Rodomir with "...the spear he bore."¹⁵

There is no source that was written by any of the *Kometopouloi* entourage, or by their subjects, which would present, at least theoretically, the military strategy and tactics they implemented on the field, or would give some sort of a systematic survey of the weapons used by them or the soldiers of their army. Also, there are no archaeological findings in R. Macedonia,¹⁶ the heartland of Samuel's State, of medieval weapons, like spears, swords or axes, which can be accurately dated to this period and could shed some light on this matter. Nevertheless, due to frequent transfer of military techniques and equipment between tribes and states in the Middle Ages, regarding the question what types of weapons Gabriel Rodomir used during battles, the closest we can come to some sort of an answer is by consulting the Byzantine military manuals from the end of the X century.

The reason for consulting these types of Byzantine sources to answer this question lies in the fact that in terms of organization and military equipment, the Byzantine army of this period was one of the most sophisticated medieval armies. Byzantine art of warfare, which was developed almost to a level of science (surviving military manuals are clear evidence of this), actually exceeded the borders of the Empire and significantly influenced military techniques of nations and states that were neighbors of the Byzantines, or came into contact with them.¹⁷ It is not excluded that the Balkans as a part of the Byzantine sphere of interest, besides politically and culturally, was under influence of the sophisticated Byzantine concept of warfare. In that context, there is a probability that the *Kometopouloi* not only accepted and implemented

¹⁵ See note 14 above.

¹⁶ Иван Микулчиќ, *Средновековни градови и тврдини во Македонија*, Книга 5 (Скопје: Македонска цивилизација, 1996), 86-93.

¹⁷ *The Taktika of Leo VI*, XVIII.114, ed. and trans. George T. Dennis (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Press, 2010), reports that the Byzantine Empire strongly influenced the military skill of the Saracens who "...also imitate the Romans in many respects. It is though they have been trained by experience, ...so the very things they suffered from the Romans they are now busily putting into practice against them". See also Charles W. C. Oman, *The Art of War in the Middle Ages A.D.378-1515* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1885), 33.

some aspects of the Byzantine military strategy, but also their military equipment.

Byzantine military manuals, or rather their authors, report that by the end of the X century “primary” weapon of the imperial troops was spear for the infantry and lance for the cavalry.¹⁸ If we take into account the fact that there was a certain exchange of knowledge in that period, i.e. accepting foreign military strategies, tactics and technologies that at the moment seemed more superior and could have a positive outcome on the battlefield,¹⁹ then the report of Skylitzes about the use of a spear by Gabriel Rodomir in battles is plausible. The narration itself suggests that he knew to use this weapon very skillfully. The spear witnessed in the *Chronicle* was most likely identical, or at least similar, as the byzantine heavy spear named in the military manuals from the X century as *menaulion* (μεναύλιον) that was used in battles for thrusting and skirmishing, with an approximate length of around 2.3–3.1m,²⁰ and not the longer *kontarion* (κοντάριον).²¹ The reason for such assumption is not only because of the field of battle, which according to Skylitzes was a very narrow mountain defile ideal for use of weapons like the *menaulion*,²² but also how Theophylact Botaneiates was

¹⁸ Eric McGeer, *Sowing the Dragon's Teeth – Byzantine Warfare in the Tenth Century* (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Press, 2008), 206, 213.

¹⁹ One such an example is the Byzantine acceptance of the skill of a horseman-archer from the Parthians, or the composite bow of the Huns. For the Byzantine use of a horseman-archer in the battles see Oman, *The Art of War*, 11, 14, and McGeer, *Sowing the Dragon's Teeth*, 207, for the composite bow. See also Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 263-264.; Walter E. Kaegi jr., *Some Thoughts on Byzantine Military Strategy* (Brooklyn, Massachusetts: Hellenic College Press, 1983), 7-8.

²⁰ See McGeer, *Sowing the Dragon's Teeth*, 210, and Timothy Dawson, “Fit for the Task’: equipment sizes and the transmission military lore, sixth to tenth centuries”, *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies Vol. 31*, No. 1 (2007): 7-8, 11, for the length and primary function of *menaulion*.

²¹ According to McGeer, *Sowing the Dragon's Teeth*, 206, the length of *kontarion* was 3.7-4.7m, and according to Dawson, “Fit for the Task”, 9-10, the length of *kontarion* varied around 3.9-4.8m, much longer then the *menaulion*.

²² McGeer, *Sowing the Dragon's Teeth*, 211, points out that *menaulion* was used by the Byzantines for fighting in hilly terrain.

killed, from a deadly wound that, by my opinion, could only be made from a thrust by a skirmishing spear that Gabriel hold firmly in his hands.²³

Furthermore, soldiers from the medieval armies in the Balkans were equipped and trained to wield other weapons for close combat, which represented an integral part of their military equipment. These “secondary” weapons, according to Byzantine military manuals, were the sword,²⁴ widely used even by archers in the army, as well as various types of axes or iron maces.²⁵ It is very likely that Gabriel Rodomir, as a military commander, and later the supreme commander of the army, but also a strong and experienced warrior versed in all aspects of warfare, in order to be better protected during battle was also skilled in wielding these “secondary” weapons. He was certainly skillful with the sword, because of the fact that it was used not only by ordinary soldiers, but also by archers. Unfortunately, the sources are silent regarding what type of sword Gabriel used. According to the military manuals, two types of swords were with certainty used in the byzantine army: the double-edged named *spathia* (σπαθία), and the curved single-edged *paramerion* (παράμηριον). Archaeological findings in Northern Bulgaria dated during the Rus-Byzantine War of 970-971, and the fact that military technology and weapons were exchanged among states in the Middle Ages, allows us to speculate that these two types of swords were probably widely used in the army of the *Kometopouloi*.²⁶ In that context, although there is no exact evidence, it can be assumed that Gabriel Rodomir was skilled in using both of these swords. Also, this does not exclude the possibility that, because of his military prowess, he went thru some basic training for other melee weapons, such as iron mace or axe.

From the aforementioned it can be concluded that Gabriel Rodomir, like any other member of the elite and successor to the throne who was interested

²³ Skylitzes, *Synopsis*, 333, reports that Gabriel “...spilled out [the duke’s] entrails with the spear he bore...”, a wound that cannot be connected with a casting of javelin, or with the longer *kontarion*, because it’s not a skirmishing weapon like *menaulion*.

²⁴ McGeer, *Sowing the Dragon’s Teeth*, 206-207, 213, 217.

²⁵ Ibid, 206-207, 213, 217.

²⁶ Валери Йотов, *Въоръжението и снаряжението от българското средновековие (VII–XI в.)* (Варна, 2004), 41-42.

and had an affinity, was introduced in the art of medieval warfare. Although, due to lack of relevant information in the sources, one can only speculate on how and in what way he acquired his skills. However, what can be noticed from these same sources is that Gabriel has been most probably very well addressed in various military strategies and field tactics that were used in the medieval warfare, but also in wielding different types of weapons for close combat.

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ВОЕНИТЕ ВЕШТИНИ НА ГАВРИЛ РАДОМИР: ИЗВОРИ И ИНТЕРПРЕТАЦИЈА

-РЕЗИМЕ-

Војната и војувањето претставувале нераздвоен дел од средновековниот начин на живеење. Колку што поединецот имал повисоко место во општеството, односно бил припадник на високите општествени слоеви или пак престолонаследник, толку повеќе се очекувало од него да биде едуциран и со текот на годините постепено да се запознава со воените работи. Гаврил Радомир, како и секој друг престолонаследник кој бил заинтересиран и поседувал афинитет, бил запознаен со средновековната вештина на војување. Иако поради недостатокот од релевантни информации во изворите може само да се шпекулира како и на кој начин ја стекнал својата вештина, сепак она што со сигурност може да се забележи е дека Гаврил, по сè изгледа, бил мошне добро упатен во разните воени стратегии и борбени тактики што се употребувале во средновековното војување, но и во вештините за ракување со различни видови оружје за блиска борба.