

Thomas Salmon*

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE BYZANTINE “PARAMERION”¹

Abstract: The nature of the weapon known as the “paramerion” has raised many questions among Byzantine scholars for several decades. Currently even its precise meaning remains difficult to define, though linguistic analysis can help in this regard. Any clear understanding of the word’s meaning can only be found in few 10th century military treatises, such as the “Taktika”, the “Sylloge Taktikon” or the “Præcepta Militaria”, which describe the “paramerion” as a single-edged sword. An important change seems to have occurred in the 10th century when it became a primary weapon of the heavy-armed “kataphraktoi”, alongside the mace. The reasons of this evolution will be examined through archaeological, artistic and literary evidence, related to the nature and specific use of the “paramerion”.

Keywords: “Paramerion”, Byzantine weaponry, “kataphraktoi”, sword, “machaira”.

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Although the nature of the “paramerion” has raised many questions among academics over the last few decades, few answers have been found. As such, there is still scope for additional research. This paper aims at presenting another perspective which will hopefully provide a comprehensive overview of the “paramerion” and particularly its use by the “kataphraktoi” of the Middle Byzantine Period, focusing on the 10th and 11th centuries.

The lack of archaeological evidence for Byzantine weapons remains a serious issue for their identification and study. However, by first undertaking a linguistic analysis of the word, this paper aims at overcoming the lack of in-depth studies on Byzantine military linguistics.

“Paramerion”: a terminological and lexical problem

The term “paramerion” (παραμήριον) is directly derived from the adjective “paramerios”

(παραμήριος), literally meaning “on the thigh” in Greek, which most likely indicates the way the weapon was worn (Sophocles 1914, 847; *The Online Liddell-Scott-Jones*, 1318).² In the 5th/6th centuries AD the grammarian Hesychios of Alexandria described a weapon called a “klonister”: κλονιστήρ· παραμήριος μάχαιρα. παράσιον (Hesychius, 3040). At the time the “klonister” was considered to be a kind of “machaira” worn on the thigh or near it.³ Indeed, it seems that the adjective “paramerios” became a substantive around that time. The “paramerion” is first attested as a weapon in a *novella* of Justinian I (527-565) on the prohibition of private forging and selling of weapons: *καλῶμεν γὰρ τοὺς ἰδιώτας ἐργάζεσθαι καὶ ὠνεῖσθαι τόξα καὶ βέλη σπάθας τε καὶ ξίφη (ἄπερ καλεῖν εἰώθασι παραμήρια) (Corpus Iuris Civilis, 417, l. 26-29), translated into: we prevent private individuals from either selling or making bows, any kind of swords, also swords that are usually called parameria.*⁴

* Department of Orient & the Mediterranean, Sorbonne-Université, Paris, France; ORCID ID: 0000-0001-5180-0540; e-mail: thomase.salmon@gmail.com.

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² The basic meaning has not changed throughout the Byzantine Period from the 1st century AD on.

³ The term “klonis” itself probably originated from the Sanskrit “śronī” meaning “haunch” or “butt” (Huet 2019, 854).

⁴ Here and below translated by the author.



Fig. 1. "The sacrifice of Isaac", Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 9.28, fol. 132v, Florence (Italy), 11th century (after <http://mss.bmlonline.it/s.aspx?Id=AWODj05n11A4r7GxL9fD&c=Topographia%20christiana%20incerti%20auctoris#/book> – access 19.09.2020).

Ryc. 1. „Ofiara Izaaka”, Biblioteka Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 9.28, fol. 132v, Florencja (Włochy), XI w. (wg <http://mss.bmlonline.it/s.aspx?Id=AWODj05n11A4r7GxL9fD&c=Topographia%20christiana%20incerti%20auctoris#/book> – dostęp 19.09.2020).

It also appears around a century later in the Life of St George of Choziba, which remains the only mention in the whole Byzantine hagiography (Houze 1888, 7, 30, l. 21). References in Theophanes the Confessor's "Chronography" bring together the "paramerion" (Theophanes Confessor, 218, l. 13; 381, l. 3) and the "machaira" (ibidem, 215, l. 5; 283, l. 10), both being treated as weapons of choice in assassinations and beheadings. Indeed, the "machaira" has been described as/considered a weapon used in murders, sacrifices and punishments from the beginning of the Christian literature to the Middle Byzantine Period. The "Septuaginta", for example, mentions it several times as being used by Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (Gn, 22, 6; 22, 10) and also by Simeon and Levi, sons of Jacob, to slaughter the male inhabitants of a city (ibidem, Genesis, 34, 25; 34, 26). The known representations of the "machaira" are almost all derived from the same iconographical archetype that can be seen on manuscripts, frescoes or mosaics; that is a single-edged long knife (Fig. 1). Few, like the fresco in the monastery of St Jeremiah in Saqqarah

or the one in the Basilica San Vitale in Ravenna, show a longer type of weapon, that is, a single-edged short sword (Fig. 2).

These two frescoes may indicate either a local or more global iconographical influence derived from real weaponry. Evidence from this chronological framework associating both the "paramerion" with the "machaira" points to the first being a long knife or short sword. The non-military origin of their intertwined meaning in the Early Byzantine Period could explain their (surprising) absence in the "Strategikon", a major military treatise written under the supervision of Emperor Maurice I (582-602) in the late 580s or the 590s. However, the evidence does not necessarily mean that the "machaira" or the "paramerion" were exclusively ceremonial or ritual weapons. In this regard the author shares the opinion of Piotr Grotowski (2010, 360 and n. 206), relying on the mentions of the aforementioned Early Byzantine sources. A few centuries later Emperor Constantine VII mentions it in the list of weapons which needed to be assembled for an emperor when going on



Fig. 2. “The sacrifice of Isaac”, fresco from the St Jeremiah Monastery, Saqqarah (Egypt), 6th-8th centuries (after <http://www.coptic-cairo.com/museum/selection/fresco/fresco/files/page49-1000-full.html> – access 19.09.2020).

Ryc. 2. „Ofiara Izaaka”, fresk z klasztoru św. Jeremiasza, Sakkara (Egipt), VI-VIII w. (wg <http://www.coptic-cairo.com/museum/selection/fresco/fresco/files/page49-1000-full.html> – dostęp 19.09.2020).

a campaign, together with two other swords, one of which being a ceremonial one (Haldon 1990, C, 219). As such this clearly implies that the “paramerion” was not considered a ceremonial weapon at this time.

The “Paramerion” in Middle Byzantine military treatises

The “Paramerion” then reappears in the 10th century “Taktika” of Emperor Leo VI (886-912) (*Taktika*, V, 2, 17; VI, 2, 19; 30, 197) and in most of the military treatises of the 10th and 11th centuries: the anonymous “Sylloge Tacticorum”, the “Praecepta Militaria” of Nikephoros Phokas and the “Taktika” of Nikephoros Ouranos (*Sylloge Tacticorum*, XXX, 2, 5; XXXVIII, 5, 2; 7, 4; 10, 2; XXXIX, 2, 5; 9, 3; *Praecepta Militaria*, III, 7, 58; *Taktika*, LX, 7, 69, 75; LXI, 13, 212). These treatises also link the “paramerion” to the “machaira”, which is not, in the opinion of the author, another Byzantine classicising term but one that finds echo as a real kind of weapon. The “Taktika” states: *παραμήρια, μαχαίρας μεγάλας μονοστόμους* (*Taktika*, V, 2, 9), translated into: *parameria*, [that are] *long single-edged machaira*. Then, the Pseudo-Symeon says: *μάχαιραν μεγάλην, τὸ δὴ λεγόμενον παραμήριον* (Pseudo-Symeon, 697, 9), translated into: *long machaira*, that is called *paramerion*.

More than designating one and the same weapon, it is clear from the written sources that the “paramerion’s” meaning evolved over the centuries. Beginning as a rather short weapon it became a longer one. The “Sylloge Tacticorum”, in describing the armament of the Byzantine cavalry, adds both clarity and confusion to our understanding of the nature of the “paramerion”: *Ἀπεωρείσθω δὲ τῶν αὐτῶν ὤμων καὶ ζίφη δίστομα σπιθαμῶν ὄντα μάλιστα τεσσάρων τῆς κόπης χωρὶς, τὰ δ’ ἐλάχιστα τεσσάρων μετὰ τῆς κόπης· καὶ ἕτερα δὲ μονόστομα ζίφη τοῖς διστόμοις ἰσομήκη παραζωννύσθωσαν οἱ αὐτοί, ἃ δὴ καὶ παραμήρια λέγονται*, translated into *Double-edged swords, which are of approximately four spans excluding the hilt, should be hung from their shoulders. The smallest should be four spans including the hilt. They [the “kataphraktoi”] should be girded with other, single-edged swords, which are of the same size as the double-edged ones, and are in fact called parameria* (*Sylloge Tacticorum*, 39, 2). According to the treatise, the “paramerion” would have measured between 93.5 and 112 cm long including the hilt; this may be considered a rather “long” sword (Kolias 1988, 137; Haldon 2014, 174). The sword is also single-edged: this is an important piece of information, confirming its link to the “machaira”, which was traditionally single-edged. In an earlier paragraph, when discussing infantry



Fig. 3. St George, staitite icon, Vatopedi Monastery (Greece), 11th century (after <https://www.elpenor.org/athos/imgprev/19-1.asp> – access 19.09.2020).

Ryc. 3. Św. Jerzy, ikonka staitytowa, klasztor Vatopedi (Grecja), XI w. (wg <https://www.elpenor.org/athos/imgprev/19-1.asp> – dostęp 19.09.2020).

armament, the treatise specifies: *Ζωννύσθωσαν δὲ καὶ παραμήρια ξίφη δηλαδὴ ἑτερόστομα σπιθαμῶν μετὰ τῆς κόπης ὄντων τεσσάρων*, translated into *They should indeed be girded with parameria, namely single-edged swords, which measure four spans including the hilt (Sylloge Tacticorum, 38, 5).*⁵ “Paramerion” then clearly designated a single-edged sword, or more precisely a category of swords of the Middle Byzantine Period. Indeed, the “paramerion” would have had several variants as the texts emphasize the variation of the lengths of the swords, and therefore of their weights.

The archaeological and iconographical evidence for the Middle Byzantine Period

In the next step we should examine scarce archaeological and iconographical data concerning this problem which are available for the Middle Byzantine Period. The single-edged sword found at Malaïa Pereshchepina (Werner 1984, 26 and Fig. 13)⁶ is considered by some as a “paramerion” (Kolias 1988, 138; Lebedynsky 2008, 25-27; 155), though the weapon’s origin remains doubtful. It is not of course a *sine qua non* condition, but a clear Byzantine context could lead to this assertion. Some proto-sabres and single-edged

⁵ We have corrected a mistake in the translation of “Sylloge Tacticorum” (*Sylloge Tacticorum* /transl./, 38, 5), where “ἑτερόστομα” was translated as “double-edged” whereas it is surely “single-edged”.

⁶ It measures 94 cm long including the hilt.

swords have also been found in modern Bulgaria, however there was no direct evidence for their Byzantine origin (Īotov 2004, 65; 67, Fig. 29-32). Two other single-edged blades: one from Sardis in Lydia (Waldbaum 1983, 30-31, Inv. No. 6) and the other from Kodra e Pecës in present-day Kosovo (Përzhita 2009, 124; 198 and tab. XV:10), both from layers dated to the 6th-7th centuries, have thus far not been examined in relation to the questions posed here, but in the author’s opinion they should.⁷ Coming from a confirmed Byzantine archaeological context these blades would be the best candidates to be “parameria” blades if “parameria” were indeed straight-bladed weapons. Yet contemporary information on the shape of blades remains scarce as the only written source discussing such issues is a short treatise on blades by Al-Kindi (801-873): *The swords of the Greeks and the heretics are simple swords, thin, long, of bent blade* (Hammer-Purgstall 1854, 79). If we trust Al-Kindi, it would imply that the Byzantines used the sabre at least from the mid-9th century onwards and not from the 13th century as Taxiarchis Koliass thought (Koliass 1988, 145). At that time, the sabre was already in use throughout the Carpathian Basin and the northern Balkans, as well as in the Pontic steppes and the northern Caucasus (Kirpichnikov 1966, 62-72; Świątosławski 1999, 48; Gorelik 2002, 129-131; Īotov 2004, 61-69). As the Byzantines frequently employed fighters from these areas, it would not be surprising that they would have known such weapons. Nonetheless it is still not clear whether this type of sword could also be described as being a “paramerion”. Unfortunately, there are no definite Byzantine depictions of such “parameria”. Even if Ada Bruhn Hoffmeyer thought of sabres in some of the “Madrid Skylitzes” miniatures, it is hard to tell whether the curved blades were drawn to represent physical characteristics of the blades or to give the impression of slashing movement (Bruhn Hoffmeyer 1966, 92). The best candidates would rather be what appear to be long single-edged swords carried by at least some of the 40 martyrs on a fresco in the Çavuşin chapel (Grotowski 2010, 360 and Fig. 59) along with, in my view, the sword of Saint George on a steatite icon from Mount Athos (Fig. 3). These depictions date from the 10th and 11th centuries respectively.

The “paramerion” and the “kataphraktoi”

The weapon or type of weapons that this term designates is rather unique in another way as it is considered, together with various types of

maces, as being the primary weapon used exclusively by the “kataphraktoi” (*Præcepta Militaria*, III, 7, l. 53-60). The exact nature of the Middle Byzantine “kataphraktoi” needs to be slightly reconsidered, or at least more clearly defined. The “kataphraktoi” formed the heavy cavalry of the Byzantine Empire, but it is important that the word is a generic term and not a special unit of the Middle Byzantine Period. The term is an old one and continued to be in use with the same meaning until at least the 14th century. However, the deployment of the “kataphraktoi” on the battlefield in a polyvalent wedge formation, together with lancers and archers, can be taken as specific to the 10th and 11th centuries (*ibidem*, III, 7, l. 62-63). The role of this formation is clear; it was designed to weaken the enemy’s centre, which was usually the most crucial part of an army. Archers had first discharged volleys of arrows to disorganise the enemy before other troops charged in and engaged in hand-to-hand combat. Each type of cavalry had then its role to play. The “kataphraktoi”, placed around the archers at the centre of the formation and alternately on flanks with lancers, were designed for melee combat. The maces and the “paramerion” carried by the heavily armoured “kataphraktoi” were ideal close combat weapons (*ibidem*, III, 4; 7). A sword could not easily deliver concussive blows but is not much harder to handle and to strike with than a mace. It is therefore reasonable to think that the “paramerion” would have been used in a similar fashion that is, to deliver a blow from above or from another angle, in a slashing motion. Slashing is much more convenient than thrusting in close combat on horseback as, from a horse, the slashing “coup” is empowered by the weight of the weapon (related to the height from which the blow is delivered), enhanced if the blade is straight. Therefore, there is less chance to fall off the horse, or to lose the weapon pegged in the opponent. At least, it is the most likely configuration for delivering a blow. Therefore, the “paramerion” of the “kataphraktoi” would have been accordingly a long sword, with a single-edged blade, possibly straight.

Conclusions

The approach undertaken in this paper was based both on the relationship between the terms “paramerion” and “machaira” and the effective use of the “paramerion” by the “kataphraktoi”. While being not completely new elements, these two perspectives were considered here as they should

⁷ Its width is approximately 3.5 cm.

be, that is, as starting points. These allowed for some insights on the evolution of both the term and the kind of weapon the “paramerion” surely was throughout the Early and Middle Byzantine Periods. The textual and iconographical evidence suggests that “paramerion” designated single-edged long knives or short swords during the Early Byzantine Era, and then long single-edged swords worn in the same fashion, that, is on the thigh. The term applied not to a particular weapon but to a type of weapons. Yet, as far as

the “paramerion” is concerned, it is worth raising some reservations, especially on the linking of the term itself and archaeological material. Some doubts would also concern the possible curve of the sword blade. The debate will surely not go much further without new evidence and both discovered and published data, which is to be encouraged.

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NOWE SPOJRZENIE NA BIZANTYJSKI "PARAMERION"

Streszczenie

Od wielu dekad uczeni zajmujący się problematyką Bizancjum stawiali więcej pytań aniżeli tez dotyczących „parameriona”. Wśród niewielu pewników wskazać można istnienie związku między tym terminem i innym określeniem, mianowicie „machairą”. Wiadomo także, iż termin ten był używany w traktatach wojskowych z X w., jak „Taktika”, „Sylloge Taktikon” i „Praecepta Militaria”, w odniesieniu do rodzaju broni siecznej używanej przez katafraktów, ciężkozbrojną uderzeniową jazdę bizantyjską. W niniejszym artykule spostrzeżenia te potraktowano jako punkt wyjścia do dalszych dociekań, nie zaś jako wnioski. Świadczenia leksykograficzne sugerują ewolucję omawianego terminu, począwszy od takiego określenia jednosiecznych długich noży lub krótkich mieczy noszonych na udzie (stąd nazwa broni) w okresie wczesnobizantyjskim. W ciągu wieków termin ten ewoluował i w okresie środkowobizantyjskim z pewnością oznaczał on długie jednosieczne miecze, noszone zapewne w ten sam sposób. Istotna zmiana miała miejsce prawdopodobnie w X w., kiedy „paramerion” stał się główną bronią

(obok buław) katafraktów oraz dodatkowym orężem niektórych rodzajów piechoty i jazdy. W tym czasie broń ta osiągnęła znaczne rozmiary, o których wspominają traktaty wojskowe. W omawianym okresie termin ten z pewnością odnosił się do szeregu jednosiecznych długich mieczy, acz nie wiadomo, czy ich główne były zakrzywione czy nie. Można jednak przypuszczać, iż głównie mogły być proste celem większej wygody w walce. Źródła i dane ikonograficzne oraz archeologiczne dotyczące „parameriona” są nieliczne, co zresztą tyczy się w ogóle uzbrojenia bizantyjskiego. Pomimo tego można wskazać pomijane poprzednio źródła, jak fresk z Sakkary przedstawiający „machairę” oraz kilka jednosiecznych głowni pozyskanych z bizantyjskich kontekstów archeologicznych. Potwierdzają one, iż Bizantyjczycy znali i używali jednosiecznych mieczy, zarówno krótkich, jak i długich, który to oręż może zostać połączony z terminem „paramerion”.

Translated by Grzegorz Żabiński