

Cultic Battle Preparation in Christian Late Antiquity

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Abstract: Throughout most of human history, it was common for rituals to be performed immediately before a battle in order to sway the gods in favour of one's side. For Christian Late Antiquity a primacy of mass celebrations carried out by priests is postulated by scholarship. In this paper the surviving sources from Late Antiquity concerning cultic preparation in the Christian period will be examined, and based on the results, an argument against such a primacy, at least till the end of the 6th century, and an alternative modus of preparation will be formulated.

Introduction

This paper will focus on a very specific aspect of the cultic life in the Christian Roman army, namely what information has been preserved from antiquity about cultic battle preparation in the Christian period and re-evaluate the information presented by them. In this paper “cultic battle preparation” is understood as rituals with whom the (Christian) Roman army aims to secure divine aid and whose performance had been officially accepted and maybe regulated in regards to when, how and by whom they are to be performed. Therefore, “cultic battle preparation” is a subcategory of the Christian official cult of the Roman army, which had replaced the official cult of the pagan times.² As such, reports of individual piety or irregular events like dreams (which, furthermore are often literary *topoi*) may be mentioned, but are not part of the research. This also applies to pre-battle speeches, for while they can provide valuable insight into contemporary notions most of them were certainly not held in

¹ This article was completed shortly before the sudden and unexpected passing of Dr. phil. Winfried Kumpitsch MA. We dedicate it to his memory with gratitude for his enduring commitment to scholarship.

² The traditional terminology as “religion of the Roman army” or “Roman army religion” is misleading, since the Roman army had no distinctive religion from the civilian Roman population, but specific cult practices. See Kumpitsch 2024, 15–21.

the way they were written down, and in regard to the topic, they at best remind the soldiers in general terms to be pious, but they do not refer to practices of the army.³ Due to this approach, the relevant sources presented here will be limited to narrative accounts. Though the documentary sources provide clear evidence that Christian clerics accompanied regiments of the Roman army since the 5th century,⁴ none of the so far known five inscriptions and four papyri provides information about the performance of concrete practices. And it was in fact the disregard for the subtle evidence in the so far known seven literary sources and instead the preference for the documentary sources that led to anachronistic analogies being drawn, which had led researchers to the belief that the cultic preparation for the battle was dominated by celebrations of the holy mass.⁵

The cultic battle preparation of the Romans in republican and imperial times laid, similarly to the Greeks,⁶ utmost importance upon securing divine support, but also on inquiring about the will of the Gods through a variety of divinatory practices.⁷ In scholarship some famous examples are the observation of the sacred chicken (*tripudium*) by the *pullarii* and the *haruspicia* of the *haruspices*. But in general, the literary tradition of all these practices in all time periods is to be considered to be incomplete at best, since the respective authors referred to these practices only if they deemed it fitting to do so. Due to this, it is unclear when the sacred chickens stopped accompanying legions, or if the last mention of a *haruspicium* in 439 AD was also the

³ This statement is based on my study of Agathias, Ammianus Marcellinus, Anonymus Valesianus, Aurelius Victor, Claudian, Corippus, Ephraem the Syrian, Eunapius, Eusebius, Eutropius, Evagrius Scholasticus, Faustus the Byzantine, Hydatius, Joannes Zonaras, John Diakrinomenos, John Malalas, John of Antioch, John of Ephesos, Jordanes, Lactantius, Malchus, Marcellinus Comes, Maurice, Menander Protector, Olympiodorus, Orosius, Paul the Deacon, Paul the Silentiary, Philostorgius, Praxagoras of Athens, Priscus, Procopius, Prosper of Aquitaine, (Pseudo-)Joshua the Stylite, (Pseudo-)Sebeos, (Pseudo-)Zacharias Rhetor, Rufinus, Salvian, Socrates Scholasticus, Sozomen, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, Theodorus Lector, Theophylact Simocatta, Vegetius, Victor Vitensis and Zosimus. Even the mention of the soldiers fasting before the battle of Kallinikos by Procop. *Wars*. 1.18.14–16 is of no concern here, since it was done in preparation for Easter, not the battle itself. A 3 days fasting as battle preparation is mentioned in Nikeph. *praec. mil.* 21.4–17 in the 10th century, but not in Antiquity.

⁴ For the discussion of all currently known 16 mentions of clerics accompanying Roman army units in literary, epigraphic and papyrological sources see Kumpitsch 2024, 219–234; Kumpitsch in press.

⁵ For the scholarly positions see footnotes 9–10. That this paper argues against the celebration of masses in preparation for battle in the 4th–6th century Roman army is not to be understood as to argue against the celebration of the mass by the accompanying Christian clergy at a whole. It is simply that the overall duties of the Christian clergy accompanying Roman army units are firstly not within the scope of this paper, and secondly not much is known after all about their concrete duties, see Kumpitsch 2024, 244–250; Kumpitsch in press.

⁶ Jameson 1993.

⁷ Rüpke 1994, 71; Beerden 2020; Serrati 2020.



last time it was performed for real.⁸ In republican times the *consules* and *praetors* possessed *imperium* and thus were the highest military authorities which subsequently gave only to them the authority to decide when and what divination should be performed, what the portents meant and what to tell the troops commanded by them.⁹ This changed with Augustus and the founding of the *Principate*, because now also the commander in the field was subordinated to the *princeps*/emperor, for only he had *imperium*. However, this development in chain of command and *potestas* did neither changed the reality that the Roman armies needed commanders, nor that they required cultic battle preparation. Therefore, the solution was a pragmatic one: the performance and interpretation fell solely to the *haruspices*, but the commanders still remained as the highest cultic functionaries, for they decided what to do with the results.¹⁰ In scholarship the general consensus is, that this mode of cultic preparation for battle was carried out relatively consistently in accordance with the old patterns till the Constantinian turn. However, during Christian late antiquity a primacy of mass celebrations carried out by priests is postulated.¹¹ This assumption is the result of the culmination of several factors: Firstly, the decline of epigraphic evidence for officers performing rituals as representatives of the commanded soldiers in the context of the overall cult of the Roman army. Although there are dedications made from officers for their soldiers in the 5th century,¹² these dedications are rare and, if interpreted in isolation and without the hints in the literary sources, do not allow for the reconstruction of an organized official cult practice like it was in the traditional cult.¹³ Secondly, based on the role of bishops in the narratives of sieges it was assumed that the general responsibilities of the Christian clerics accompanying the Roman army was as prominent as the bishops and furthermore already the same like in later times. Therefore, the conclusion was that the officers had no cultic duties anymore.¹⁴ And

⁸ Prosp. Chron. 1335: *Litorius, qui secunda ab Aetio patricio potestate Chunis auxiliaribus praeerat, dum Aetii gloriam superare appetit dumque haruspicum responsis et daemonum significationibus fidit, pugnam cum Gothis imprudenter conseruit fecitque [...]*

“Weil Litorius, der an zweiter Stelle hinter dem patricius Aëtius stand und die hunnischen Hilfstruppen kommandierte, danach strebte, Aëtius an Ruhm zu übertreffen, und weil er den Orakeln der Opferschauer und den Zeichen der Götter vertraute, begann er unvorsichtigerweise einen Kampf mit den Goten.“, trans. Becker; Kötter 2016; for additional sources see Kumpitsch 2024, 165–167.

⁹ Albrecht 2020, 23; Beerden 2020, 236–240.

¹⁰ Rüpke 1990, 244; Albrecht 2020, 305.

¹¹ E.g. Bachrach 2003, 17: „Nevertheless, no matter how important a role generals and officers played in organizing and leading religious practices, the armies of the Late Empire still required the service of priests to carry out particular religious tasks, particularly on the field, that only those who were ordained as priests could perform.“; Lee 2015, 829; Malone 2022.

¹² For example the floor mosaic from a Flavius Telpullios – Russell 1987, 83 – and the Christian altar from a tribune in Kidyessos MAMA XI 166.

¹³ For the traditional cult see: Herz 1975; 1978; Helgeland 1979; Birley 1979; Herz 2015.

¹⁴ Heisenberg 1916, 216; Whitby 1998; McCormick 2004; Garland 2022.



thirdly there is the expectation that the cultic battle preparation of Late Antiquity in specific must have been similarly organized to medieval times.¹⁵

However, in recent years the argument has been put forward, to understand the sources as rather implying the partition of cultic competence. This implies that, although the religious content and framing had irreversibly changed, the cultic practice of the Roman army still operated at the end of the 6th century on similar principles than in pre-Constantinian times.¹⁶ This perspective, namely that officers still had cultic responsibilities distinct from the ones of the Christian clerics, will therefore be the basis from which the research topic of this paper will be addressed. In the first part the relevant sources will be presented in chronological order, split into a 4th and a 6th century section¹⁷, while in the second part the analysis will be conducted.

I. The sources

I.1. 4th century

The investigation begins naturally with the transformation that took place under Constantine the Great. This is however not to say, that the army cult during his reign is to be considered as Christian. It is rather important for the topic, because Constantine had to make changes to the cultic practices of his army, which the contemporary Christian sources interpreted from a Christian perspective.¹⁸ The reports about battle preparation during the reign of Constantine the Great are mostly focused on his personal prayer.¹⁹ Glimpses of collective practices are only provided with the victorious sign before the Milvian Bridge 312 AD,²⁰ as well as the introduction of the Labarum.²¹ A very small piece of such a practice before the fallout with Licinius is also found in the works of Lactantius, when he reports that before the final battle against Maximinus Daia, Licinius ordered that the prayer he had received in his sleep

¹⁵ Holzem 2009.

¹⁶ Kumpitsch 2022, 468–469; 2024, 200–208; 2025; in press.

¹⁷ Whilst the sources for the 5th century are mentioning military engagements, prayers and other religious events in military context, there are no descriptions of Christian cultic battle preparations performed by the army.

¹⁸ For the interpretation of the new cult practice within the Roman army as a compromise, intended to be performed by Christian and non-Christian soldiers alike see Wienand 2015, 322–324; Kumpitsch 2024, 114–124.

¹⁹ Euseb. *Vit. Const.* 1.28,1; 2.4; 12.1; 14.1; 4.56, 1–4; Soz. *Hist. eccl.* 1.3.

²⁰ Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 9.9.10; Euseb. *Vit. Const.* 1.28; 38–39; mentions Constantine and his army praising the Lord with Hymns after they victory like the Israelites after the crossing of the Red Sea and the demise of Pharaoh, which must only be doubted in regards to the alleged Christian(ising) contents, not regarding the general practice of religious celebrations; Lactant. *De mort. pers.* 44 mentions that the sign was placed on the shields.

²¹ Euseb. *Vit. Const.* 1.28–31; 40; 2.6–9; Sozom. *hist. eccl.* 1.4 both remark that the victorious sign had religious connotations, Sozomenos even going so far as to say it replaced the old venerated standards in order for the veneration of this new symbol to lead the soldiers towards the true faith.



be distributed to the officers.²² The claim of Sozomenos that Constantine I introduced Christian clergy to accompany Roman army units is to be considered as an anachronistic attribution based on the situation of the 5th century.²³ The only other report for a battle in the early 4th century comes from Theodoret of Cyrrhus who claims, that Constantius II convinced his army to receive baptism before the battle at Mursa 351 AD against Magnentius.²⁴

For the rest of the 4th century the literary sources do not mention other instances of battle preparation before the reign of Theodosius I when the battle of Frigidus in 394 AD finds a wide literary reception.²⁵ Sadly, the Christian and non-Christian authors alike are altogether unreliable, since they are all providing highly stylised narratives.²⁶ Common in all of the Christian narratives is the mention of a prayer of Theodosius I, and its effect on the battle, though the position in the narrative varies: the prayer is either reported to be held in the night before,²⁷ or at a critical moment during the battle.²⁸ Depending on the position of these prayer-narratives, they serve either a similar narrative structure as the pre-battle rituals of the Roman consuls, or as the *devotio* narratives of the early Roman Republic, where the *devotio* is reported to be enacted at a critical point in a manner that the army would witness.²⁹

²² Lactant. *De mort. pers.* 46.5–7: *Discussio deinde somno notarum iussit acciri et, sicut audierat, haec verba dictavit: 'Summe deus, te rogamus; sancte deus, te rogamus. Omnem iustitiam tibi commendamus, salutem nostram tibi commendamus, imperium nostrum tibi commendamus. Per te vivimus, per te victores et felices existimus. Summe, sancte deus, preces nostras exaudi; brachia nostra ad te tendimus; exaudi sancte, summe deus.'* Scribuntur haec in libellis pluribus et per praepositos tribunosque mittuntur, ut suos quisque milites doceat. ("Licinius then shook off his sleep, ordered a secretary to be summoned, and dictated the following words just as he had heard them: 'Supreme God, we beseech Thee; holy God, we beseech Thee. We commend all justice to Thee, we commend our safety to Thee, we commend our empire to Thee. Through Thee we live, through Thee we emerge victorious and fortunate. Supreme, holy God, hear our prayers; we stretch our army to Thee; hearken, holy, supreme God.' This was written out in several copies and distributed among the officers and tribunes, so that they could all teach them to their own troops"), trans. Creed 1984.

²³ Sozom. *Hist. eccl.* 1.8.10–11; see Jones 1953, 239–240; Kumpitsch 2022, 458–460; 2024, 212–214 esp. footnote 961 with further literature.

²⁴ Theod. *Hist. eccl.* 3.1; for a discussion of all the sources see Bleckmann 1999.

²⁵ Ambr. *In psalm.* 36.25; Aug. *De Civ. D.* 5.26; Claud. 3 *Cons. Hon.* 7.88–100; Joh. Ant. *fr.* 187; Philostorg. *Hist. eccl.* 11.2; Oros. 7.35.14; Ruf. *Hist. eccl.* 11.33; Socr. *Hist. eccl.* 5.25; Sozom. *Hist. eccl.* 7.24; Theod. *Hist. eccl.* 5.25; Zos. 4.58.3.

²⁶ For an overview of the different literary traditions see Springer 1996, 91–92; for an alternate explanation of this weather phenomenon as a whirlwind instead of the Bora see Kovač 1996.

²⁷ Oros. 7.35.14; Theod. *Hist. eccl.* 5.25 with the addition that the apostels Iohannes and Philippicus proclaim in a dream to the emperor and a common soldier their support in the upcoming battle.

²⁸ The prayer is followed by a miraculous wind, affecting only the soldiers of Eugenius: Soz. *hist. eccl.* 7.24; Joh. Ant. *fr.* 187; The *magister militum* Bacurius, inspired by the prayer, charges the enemies again, then a miraculous wind affects only the soldiers of Eugenius: Ruf. *Hist. eccl.* 11.33; Socr. *Hist. eccl.* 5.25.

²⁹ Cic. *Fin.* 2.61; Livy 8.9–10; Macro. *Sat.* 3.9.



Though in the latter case, it is also possible to see similarities and therefore a possible influence by the story found in the Old Testament about the role of Moses in securing divine support in the battle between the Israelites and the Amalekites.³⁰ Since as long as Moses had his arms outstretched in prayer, the Israelites were dominating, and similarly when Theodosius I prayed, the sources do not describe him procrastinated like in the prayer during night, but rather standing on an exposed position for his soldiers to see, praying with outstretched arms. Since this is the orans posture, this similarity must not be overemphasised, but nevertheless it can not be ruled out, that this was for some authors and contemporaries a welcome similarity.

The last reported battle preparation in the 4th century is found in the account of Orosius about how Mascezel defeated his rebellious brother Gildo in 398 AD. According to Orosius, Mascezel, visited the hermits on the island Caparia for several days, before he set sail to North Africa. Once he had made landfall there, the recently deceased Ambrose of Milan appears to him in a dream and told him the place where he should face Gildo in battle. After Mascezel and Gildo had arrived at Tabraca and were camping opposite of each other, Mascezel spends the night at the Vigil from where he only left when it was time to set up the battle line, only to be faced with the miraculous surrender by the troops of his brother.³¹

This are all instances during the 4th century where cultic battle preparations have been reported in some detail, although, as will be discussed later, the historicity of some is partially up for debate. That two of the otherwise most important sources in regard to 4th century Roman army, Ammianus Marcellinus and Vegetius, are missing in this short list, results from the simple fact that they do not mention situations or actions interpretable as official Christian cultic battle preparation. The only time Vegetius reports on a clearly Christian topic, is his quotation of the new *sacramentum*, but nothing in the text implies that this was also done in the context of battle preparation³² and even then he presents only the content of the *sacramentum* not a description of the performance of the ceremony. Recently the argument has been made, that the *sacramentum* was not only taken by the soldiers at their enlistment, the *nuncupatio votorum* and after the ascension of a new emperor, but also at the beginning of a military campaign as well as before a battle.³³ However the sources presented as supporting this hypothesis are not without problems: When Servius explains three different types of military oaths,³⁴ his examples for these are all

³⁰ Ex. 17.8–12.

³¹ Oros. 7.36.5–10.

³² Veg. *Mil.* 2.5.3–5.

³³ Różycki 2021, 85–87; Różycki 2021, 67–71.

³⁴ Serv, *Commentarii in Vergilii Aeneidos* 2.157; 7.614; 8.1.



antiquarian, the most recent referring to Sallust,³⁵ but the important fact is that these oaths are in relation to how the soldiers are assembled out of the civilian population and “constituted” as a military force by the Roman leadership, nothing in the description of Servius implies use of them during military operations. Theophylact Simocatta, Syrianus Magister and Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (913-959 AD) are mentioning the taking of oaths in preparation for a campaign³⁶ and as necessity for nightly engagements in general.³⁷ But the presentation by the sources remains ambiguous whether this are additional oaths, or a renewal of the *sacramentum*. However, while the taking of oaths is a part of the official army cult, it should not be considered part of cultic battle preparation, even if done before battle. For the goal of oath-taking is not to sway the divine powers into supporting a specific side, but rather to invoke the divine as warrantor that cowardice and disloyalty will be punished.

Ammianus too is very cautious in mentioning anything related to Christianity or its rites. In his work, the mentions of the term *sacramentum* in military context are restricted to discharges,³⁸ the sole exception being the “*sacramenti fide*” between Valentinian I and the Alemannic king Macrianus.³⁹ In his reports of the ascension of the new emperors the word is replaced by *iurare*,⁴⁰ but as his report about the revolt of Procopius and the invocation of Jupiter demonstrates,⁴¹ Ammianus chose deliberately not to mention the oaths taken by the soldiers. Differently to Vegetius, Ammianus makes a few mentions of the performance of religious rites in relation to military operations, though most of them are during the Persian expedition of Julian in 363 AD.⁴² One of the most notable exceptions, which also bears undisputable Christian connotations, is his critical report about the activities of the *magister militum Orientis* Sabinianus in 359 AD at the martyr tombs in Edessa, after Shapur II had begun his assault on Roman territory.⁴³ And whilst this can be classified as preparation for a

³⁵ Serv. *Commentarii in Vergilii Aeneidos* 2.157.

³⁶ Const. Porphyr. (B) 92-100; Theophyl. *Hist.* 1.15.15.

³⁷ Syrianus Magister 39.2-12, for the dating issue of Syrianus see Rance 2007, with further literature; Theotokis / Sidiropoulos 2021, 21 suggesting a dating between 875 and 886 AD.

³⁸ Amm. Marc. 16.7.1 (dishonourable); 24.3.2 (dishonourable); 25.1.9 (dishonourable); 26.5.3 (recalling of a discharged officer with a questionable reputation); 26.7.4 (recalling of two discharged officers with a questionable reputation); 28.2.9 (dishonourable, a civilian official); 28.6.25 (dishonourable, a civilian official); 30.7.3 (recalling of a discharged officer with an unjustly questioned reputation); in 15.7.6; 28.1.29; 30.3.5 used as a normal oath; Wuk, 2023, 180-189 observes, that Ammianus in most of these cases also provides a negative portrayal of their character.

³⁹ Amm. Marc. 30.3.5.

⁴⁰ Amm. Marc. 21.9-10 (Julian); 25.5.4-6 (Jovian); 26.2 (Valentinian); 26.4.3 (Valens); 26.6.13 (Procopius); 27.6.10 (Gratian).

⁴¹ Amm. Marc. 26.7.17

⁴² Amm. Marc. 23.1.5-7; 2.6-8; 3.1-2; 3.6-7; 5.4; 5.7-14; 24.1.1; 1.12; 3.8; 2.21; 6.16; 8.4-5.

⁴³ Amm. Marc. 18.7.6-7; Amm. 19.3.1.



military conflict, it still remains uncertain if this is to be understood as a practice influenced by local specifics but following an empire wide trend, in other words, that Sabinianus turned to the martyrs of Edessa for their aid in the upcoming war, because imperial policy demanded explicit Christian practices. Or if this is rather an example for the freedom which military leaders had in the organization of cultic rites during the phase of religious change in the 4th century, in other words during a time where the official cult was neutral, it was up to the commanders preferences and the troops reception, what additional cultic practices were performed.⁴⁴ The next exception is a short mention that during the siege of Amida in 359 AD, the Gallic legionaries once [...] *orantes caelestis praeside* [...],⁴⁵ before undertaking a breakout. As invocations before a military operation are a long-standing element of military practices, the identity of the invoked gods remains unknown, though a mention of any form of Christian prayer seems unlikely. Therefore, neither Vegetius nor Ammianus are adding anything to our understanding of Christian battle preparation, which in the latter's case is definitely because the time period covered by him was before any such was established in the army.

I.2. 6th century

From the 5th century no elaborate accounts about the cultic preparation for battle have survived.⁴⁶ Mention of such practices only appear again in the 6th century. Chronologically first is Procopius with his account about the battle from Ad Decimum in 533 AD. The lengthy speech of Belisarius is followed by a one sentence remark: „After speaking these words and uttering a prayer after them, Belisarius left his wife and the barricaded camp to the infantry, and himself set forth with all the horsemen.”⁴⁷ The essential part is “ἐπευξάμενος“, from „ἐπεύχομαι“ meaning „pray; to make a vow to a deity; vow, c. fut. inf.; imprecate upon; exult over“⁴⁸. The brevity of this scene stems from the classicizing style of Procopius and his reluctance to

⁴⁴ Kumpitsch 2024, 167–170.

⁴⁵ “[...] praying for the protection of heaven [...]“, Amm. Marc. 19.6.7, trans. Rolfe 1935.

⁴⁶ This statement is based on my study of Agathias, Ammianus Marcellinus, Anonymus Valesianus, Aurelius Victor, Claudian, Corippus, Ephraem the Syrian, Eunapius, Eusebius, Eutropius, Evagrius Scholasticus, Faustus the Byzantine, Hydatius, Joannes Zonaras, John Diakrinomenos, John Malalas, John of Antioch, John of Ephesos, Lactantius, Malchus, Marcellinus Comes, Maurice, Menander Protector, Olympiodorus, Orosius, Paul the Silentary, Philostorgius, Praxagoras of Athens, Priscus, Procopius, Prosper of Aquitaine, (Pseudo-)Joshua the Stylite, (Pseudo-)Sebeos, (Pseudo-)Zacharias Rhetor, Rufinus, Salvian, Socrates Scholasticus, Sozomen, Theodore of Cyrrhus, Theodorus Lector, Theophylact Simocatta, Vegetius, Victor Vitensis and Zosimus.

⁴⁷ Procop. Wars. 3.19.11: „Τοσαῦτα εἰπὼν Βελισάριος καὶ ἐπευξάμενος τὴν τε γυναῖκα καὶ τὸ χάρακωμα τοῖς πεζοῖς ἀπολιπὼν αὐτὸς μετὰ τῶν ἵππῶν ἀπάντων ἐξῆλθεν.“, trans. Dewing 1914.

⁴⁸ Pape 1954, 918; Liddell-Scott-Jones-McKenzie 1940 (last accessed September 24, 2024). [Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, ἐπεύχομαι \(tufts.edu\)](https://www.tufts.edu/linguistics/greek-english-lexicon/epetuchomai).





knees. Then as suppliant, he lifted his hands and eyes, and praying, spoke these words: «To you, Christ, great Father of many men, glory is rightly given with pure heart and tongue. Willingly I give praise and thanks; and no other do I wish to praise. You, Creator of the world, subdue nations and their wars; You crush unholy arms and are accustomed to aid our realm. Look upon the cities set afire by these harsh tribes, Almighty, and see their land. Now, no farmer cultivates his fields. Now, no priest is able to bring his tears to your temples on behalf of the people. Now, in the mountains they all bear harsh bonds, and their hands are bound behind their backs. Behold, holy Father, and let your bolts not linger. Strew the bands of Moors beneath our feet; rescue the captive Africans from these savage tribes, and look, holy Father, upon your dear Romans with your accustomed pity. Graciously turn our grief into joy.» As he spoke these words, he poured tears upon the dry sands; for grief and piety moved him, stirred his benevolent mind, and shook his limbs with frequent sobs. When he had summed up all these things in favorable [sic!] words, he was silent. Rejoicing, he rose and, wiping the streams that flowed from his eyes, the hero looked back with serene countenance, and ordered the armed cohorts to make haste.”⁵⁵

Directly before battle the Moors as well as the Romans send forth pleas for divine support:

“Here the Moorish band called Sinifere and shouted the name of wild Mastiman. Mastiman the echo replied. There they called Gurzil, and Gurzil rebounded from the hollow rocks. On this side, the Roman band, throwing the sky into confusion with their voices, cried out, and the mountains groaned in return with the noise shaken quivers. A venerable voice sang, and Christ was called by name: “May the brave do battle for your arms, Justinian. Preserve, almighty Father, the rule of our Emperor.” At this name the heavens quaked, and, as the earth was struck, the groaning forests quaked along the ridges, and the peaks in their motion appeared to be shaken. The mountains and the lakes

⁵⁵ Coripp. 4.264–291: *signa ferunt ornantque viri gaudentque tuentes prospera discussis ludentia flamina velis. at pater exurgens compuncta mente Iohannes, corde pio, genibus nixis et poplite fexo, suppliciter geminas tendens cum lumine palmas, ore canens haec verba refert: 'tibi gloria, Christe, summe parens, hominum linguis et pectore puro rite datur, laudesque libens gratesque resolvo. non alium laudare volo. tu conditor orbis, tu gentes et bella domas, tu conteris arma impia, tu nostris solitus succurrere rebus. aspice succensas duris a gentibus urbes, omnipotens, agrosque vide. iam nullus arator arva colit: lacrimas nullus per templa sacerdos pro populo iam ferre potest. nam montibus omnes vincula dura ferunt palmis post terga revinctis. aspice, sancte pater, nec iam tua fulmina cessent. sub nostris pedibus Maurorum sterne catervas, eripe captiuos saevis a gentibus Afros, Romanosque tuos solite miseratus alumnos cerne pius, nostrosque favens fac gaudia luctus.' haec menorans lacrimis siccas infundit harenas. quippe dolor pietasque movent mentemque benignam conturbant densisque agitant singultibus artus. ut bene complacitis consummans omnia verbis conticuit, tunc surgit ovans rivosque fuentes luminibus tergens placidis iam vultibus heros respicit armatasque iubet properare cohorts*, trans. Shea 1966



gave forth a loud groan. The earth, its frame loosened, trembled, and the elements did homage to their maker with their tongues.”⁵⁶

The second battle escalates out of some scouting skirmishes and ends with a battle and defeat for the Romans.⁵⁷ Interestingly, over the course of this episode no mention of religious practices is made, despite the right wing and the center still having the time to form a battle line. Therefore, short mentions of divine invocations could have been made, like Corippus did for the previous battle. Even in the rousing speech at the most critical point of the battle Johannes is only referring to God in the sense that HE will decide the victor in this battle and that the soldiers therefore should not die „like women“. ⁵⁸ Therefore one could cautiously suggest that in the epic poem the mention of religious battle preparation could serve as an additional designator informing the attentive audience beforehand about the expected outcome of battle.⁵⁹

After the Romans recovered from this, and put the Moors again under pressure the preparations for the final battle are most elaborately described. The stage is set, when Johannes as well as the Moorish leader Autiliten announce in their respective camps that the battle will be given on the following day, which they both emphasise is a Sunday.⁶⁰ Whilst the Moors are said to perform blood sacrifices throughout the

⁵⁶ Corrip. 5.37–44: *hinc Sinifere vocans acies Maurusia clamat Mastimanque ferum: Mastiman assonat echo. inde ferunt Gurzil: Gurzil cava saxa resultant. hinc Romana manus conturbans vocibus aethram intonat et quassis regemunt montana pharetris. vox veneranda canit. clamatur 'numine Christus, Iustiniane, tuis pugnet fortissimus armis. principis imperium nostri, pater optime, serva.' ad nomen tremuere poli, tremuere gementes, concussa tellure, iugis et vertice silvae commoto paruere quati, montesque lacusque rauca gemunt: orbis tremuit compage solutus, auctoremque suum linguis elementa fatentur*, trans. Shea 1966.

⁵⁷ Corrip. 6.496–512.

⁵⁸ Corrip. 6.625–630.

⁵⁹ To my knowledge there has been no research on this matter so far: Andres 1997, 142–175, analyses as Christian elements only prayers and the two scenes of mass celebration, therefore he finds such designators only in carefully placed comments of the author as well as in the way the prayer is structured and narratively framed (ibid. 156; 172); although exactly for the lost battle he mentions no previous designators but only analyses how the battle is reflected in Johannes post-battle prayer (ibid. 159–164).

⁶⁰ Corrip. 8.220–225: *ast ubi perfectis caelestia munera sacris obtulerit domino venerandus rite sacerdos votaue Romanus persolverit ordine miles ponemus mensas. Ne longe pascite campis quadrupedes, epulis quoniam de more receptis castra movere placet, [...]*. (When the venerable priest has completed the holy rites, and offered the heavenly gifts to the Lord as is fitting, and when the soldiers have properly discharged their obligations, we shall set out the tables. And do not let your horses graze far off on the plains, for I have decided to move our camp, when we have had our customary meal), trans. Shea 1966. Corrip. 8.254–256: *crastina festa dies popula peragenda Latino est' excipit Autiliten. 'Romanus proelia miles nulla pavet solitis sacris.* (“Tomorrow must be observed as a feast day by the Roman people,” Autiliten took up. “The Roman soldiers, occupied with their accustomed rites will fear no battle”), trans. Shea 1966.



night,⁶¹ the magister militum Johannes and his second in command Recinarius spend the night awake in prayer.⁶² Yet the central piece of this day's battle preparation begins when the Roman army gathers at the advent of dawn:

„At the happy break of day, the worshippers of Christ came, in the prescribed order, the people, the young Roman soldiers, and the great-souled captains along with their standards. Among the foremost in the middle of the camp, where he had his tents with their canvas outspread, the leader John came as well. Here the priest had set up and draped a great altar, and, in the usual manner of their fathers, had surrounded it on all sides with holy robes. The ministers had formed a choir and with humble voices sang sweet hymns as they wept. But, when the commander reached the door of the sacred temple and entered, the people burst out with groans of grief, and let tears gush from their eyes. Their voices struck the heavens on all sides, and with their fists they beat their guilty breasts again and again, as if they were their own foes. “Forgive our sins, and the sins of our fathers, we beseech you, Christ.” They moaned, and, with palms extended they looked up to the heaven and asked for the comfort of the Lord. John himself among the foremost, with knees and body bent, was moved by piety to pray for the people. He let tears pour, from his eyes like a river, and, striking his breast with one blow after another, he made his entreaty in these words: “Creator of the world, the only life and salvation of all things, God, almighty author of the land and sea and air, who fill with your power the earth and the sky, the drifting waves of the sea, and whatever is enclosed by the universe, the air and foul Avernus of the pale souls, you alone have command. The greatest power is yours and praise and sovereignty and the might of your great right hand. Now at long last, look down upon the Romans, look down Almighty and holy Father, and bring us aid. Crush, I beseech you, these proud tribes with your power. Let these people recognize you alone as their powerful Lord, while you crush the enemy and preserve your people in war. Now the entire race condemns their carved divinity, and we confess that you, Almighty, are our true God.” While he recited these words, the father made the earth wet with the tears that welled up in his eyes, and moved with piety, he grieved in his mind for the dangers to the realm and the weighty toils of the people. Beside him Recinarius let tears stream from his eyes and moistened his face no less than his master. As a suppliant he begged with saddened countenance for aid for the Latin people. The great-souled captains and the brave tribunes, their breasts moist with tears, lifted their sobs towards heaven, and with them, all the cohorts poured

⁶¹ Corrip. 8.300–317; For a general analysis of the stylized presentation of the moorish religion and the use of anti-pagan topoi in the epos see Shea 1973, 125–128; Andres 1997, 110–140; 165; 173; Riedlberger 2013, 294–310 who also suggested that the Moors where at this time already Christianized (ibid. 311).

⁶² Corrip. 8.294–299.



forth prayers before God with tearful voices. The high priest placed gifts on the altar and offered them on behalf of the Latin people, making the altar wet with his gushing tears. Then praying calmly, he honored and blessed the father, and as is fitting, gave the gifts to Christ and rendered the accustomed praise. The gift was acceptable to the Lord of heaven on high, and at once sanctified and cleansed the entire Latin nation. [missing text of unknown length, the surviving texts continues with the orders for battle set-up.]⁶³

Sadly, only a part of this ceremony is preserved so it is unclear if this was all, or if further rituals were performed. Leaving aside the epic dramatisation in this scene, the following ritual can be reconstructed: a priest and subordinated clerics are present at the altar, singing hymns, upon entrance of the commander some sort of *mea-culpa* ritual is performed and prayers spoken, followed by the sanctification of the offerings.⁶⁴ The problem now is not solely the incomplete narrative, but that this scene is the highlight in contrasting the pious Romans with the pagan Moors. Therefore, the whole event is in danger of being judged as just fiction, oriented towards the expectation of the contemporary civilian audience. Even more, if religious pre-battle preparation is understood as a designator of the expected battle outcome.

From the end of the 6th century comes a military manual, called the *Strategikon of Maurice*, because of the attribution of authorship to Emperor Maurice (582–602).

⁶³ Corrip. 8.321–369: [...] *felici nascente die. iamque ordine certo Christicolae veniunt populi, Romana iuventus magnanimique duces signis comitantibus una. dux ubi distensis habuit tentoria velis una cum primis media inter castra Iohannes, hic magnum statuit velans altare sacerdos et solito sacris circumdedit undique peplis more patrum: instituuntque choros et dulcia psallunt carmina deflentes humili cum voce ministri. ast ubi sacrati tetigit dux limina templi ingrediens, gemitus populi rupere dolentes. lumina confundunt lacrimis: vox undique caelos pulsant et infensis tot conscia pectora pugnis percutiunt. delicta patrum dimitte, rogamus, nostraque, Christe' gemunt et tensis aethera palmis suspiciunt dominique sibi solacia poscunt. ipse inter primos, genibusque et corpore flexo, pro populo exorans motus pietate Iohannes ex oculis lacrimas fundebat fluminis instar, percutiensque suum geminato verbere pectus talia voce rogat: 'mundi sator, unica rerum vita salusque, deus, terrae, maris, aetheris auctor omnipotens, caelum et terram virtutibus implens undivagumque salum vel quidquid gignitur orbe, aeraque et taetrum populi pallentis Avernum, imperium tu solus habes, tibi summa potestas et laus et regnum magnaue potentia dextrae: respice iam tandem Romanos, respice, summe, atque pius succurre, pater, gentesque superbas frange, precor, virtute tua: dominumque potentem te solum agnoscant populi, dum conteris hostes et salvas per bella tuos. nunc sculptile damnat omne genus, verumque deum te, magne, fatemur.' haec memorans terras oculorum fonte rigabat compulsus pietate pater, Libyaeque periculum mente dolens rerumque graves populique labores' nec minus umectans iuxta Ricinarius ora luminibus fundebat aquas supplexque Latinis auxilium populis vultu maerente rogabat. magnanimique duces umecto pectore fletus ad caelum misere suos fortesque tribuni, atque omnes pariter lacrimosa voce cohortes ante deum fudere preces. summusque sacerdos munera pro populis, onerans altare, Latinis obtulit atque aras lacrimarum fonte rigavit. tunc precibus placidis patrem benedixit honorans et solitas reddens Christo dedit ordine laudes. munus erat summi domino acceptabile caeli, sanctificans mundansque simul genus omne Latinum. [...], trans. Shea 1966.*

⁶⁴ A similar division of the scene is made by Andres 1997, 166–168; 172; for a philological analysis of the prayer content see Andres 1997, 161–163; 169–172.



This military manual draws on earlier treaties and is well regarded by scholarship for the historicity of its content,⁶⁵ although, there may have been variations in actual practice in the field. The *Strategikon* summarises what actions should be performed in preparation for battle in the following way: Firstly, the officers of each unit must take care that their banners are blessed not more than two days before a battle.⁶⁶ Secondly on the day of battle, inside the camp, the commander, his officers and the priest must hold a ceremony in which prayers are spoken, and when leaving camp, the *nobiscum deus* is to be sung by each unit. And thirdly the author testifies indirectly that it is common for the Romans to shout *nobiscum* when charging the enemy, when he says that the soldiers should instead remain silent.

„The battle cry, “Nobiscum,” which it was customary to shout when beginning the charge is, in our opinion, extremely dangerous and harmful. Shouting it at that moment may cause the ranks to break up. For because of the shout, the more timid soldiers in approaching really close combat may hesitate before the clash, while the bolder roused to Anger, may rashly push forward and break ranks. The same problem occurs with the horses, for they too differ in temperament. The result is that the battle line is uneven and without cohesion, in fact, its ranks may well be broken even before the charge, which is very dangerous.

Instead of the shout, prayers should be said in camp on the actual day of battle before anyone goes out the gate. All, led by the priests, the general, and the other officers should recite the „Kyrie eleison“ (Lord have mercy) for some time in unison. Then, in hopes of success, each meros should shout the „Nobiscum Deus“ (God is with us) three times as it marches out of camp. As soon as the army leaves the camp to form for battle, absolute silence should prevail, and no unnecessary word should be spoken. For this keeps the army in better order, and the commands of the officers are more readily understood. The full spirit of the charge is conveyed by the very circumstances, the necessary closing of ranks, and the presence of the enemy, and no other sign is needed. But when the army closes with the enemy, it is not a bad idea for the men to shout and cheer, especially the rear ranks, to unnerve the enemy and stir up our own troops.“⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Dennis, 1984, 14–16; Petersen 1992, 70–71; Rance 2017, 217–221; Theotokis 2024, 160–162; Whitby 2024, 156–158.

⁶⁶ Mauric. *Strat.* 7.A.1: Περὶ τοῦ ἀγιάζειν τὰ βάνδα Χρὴ παρασκευάζειν τοὺς μεράρχας τὰ βάνδα ἀγιάζειν πρὸ μιᾶς ἢ δευτέρας ἡμέρας τοῦ πολέμου καὶ οὕτως ἐπιδιδόναι τοῖς βανδοφόροις τῶν ταγμάτων. (“A day or two before hostilities begin, the merarchs should see that the flags are blessed and then present them to the standard bearers of the tagmas, trans. Dennis 1984.

⁶⁷ Mauric. *Strat.* 2.18: Περὶ δὲ τῆς φωνῆς κατὰ συνήθειάν ποτε λεγομένης ἐν τῷ καιρῷ τῆς συμβολῆς, τουτέστιν τὸ νοβισκούμ, πάνυ ἡμῖν ἀσύμφορον καὶ ἐπιβλαβὲς φαίνεται, καὶ πρόφασιν γίνεσθαι διαλύσεως τῇ παρατάξει τὸ κατ’ ἐκείνην τὴν ὥραν ταύτην κάρζεσθαι. Συμβαίνει γὰρ δι’ αὐτῆς τοὺς μὲν



Finally an episode found in the “Historia” of Theophylact Simocatta, written around 630 AD but concerned with the reign of emperor Maurice, reports how in preparation for the battle of Solachon in 586 AD the *magister militum* Philippicus had brought with him the Acheiopoieton,⁶⁸ integrating its worship into the battle preparations, before sending it into the safety of a nearby fortress:

“When the enemy came into view and the dust was thick, Philippicus displayed the image of God Incarnate, which tradition from ancient times even to the present day proclaims was shaped by divine wisdom, not fashioned by a weaver's hands nor embellished by a painter's pigment. It was for this reason that it is celebrated among the Romans even as ‘not made by human hand’, and is thought worthy of divine privileges: for the Romans worship its archetype to an ineffable degree. The general stripped this of its sacred coverings and paraded through the ranks, thereby inspiring the army with a greater and irresistible courage. Next, when he reached the middle of the throng, pouring out an unquenchable flood of tears over the wastage of the conflict, he employed phrases of exhortation to the army.”⁶⁹

II. Analysis

Comparing the presented sources, it is firstly apparent that they mostly focus on the behaviour of the individual commander. Especially the reports about the emperors

δειλοτέρους τῶν στρατιωτῶν εἰς μείζονα ἀγῶνα ἐμπίπτοντας ἐναπομένους προπετεύσθαι καὶ ἐξέρχεσθαι τῆς τάξεως. Ὅμοίως δὲ ἐστὶν κατανοῆσαι καὶ ἐπὶ αὐτῶν τῶν ἵππων· διαφορὰ γὰρ καὶ ἐν αὐτοῖς ἐστὶν. Ἐντεῦθεν οὖν ἄνισον καὶ ἀσύμφωνον, μᾶλλον δὲ καὶ διαλελυμένην εὐρίσκεσθαι συμβαίνει πρὸ τῆς συμβολῆς τὴν παράταξιν, ὅπερ ἐστὶν ἐπικίνδυνον.

Ἀλλὰ δεῖ τὴν μὲν εὐχὴν γίνεσθαι ἐν ἐκείνῃ μάλιστα τῇ τοῦ πολέμου ἡμέρᾳ ἐν τῷ φοσσάτῳ, πρὶν ἢ τινὰ τῆς πόρτας ἐξελθεῖν, διὰ τε τῶν ἱερέων καὶ τοῦ στρατηγοῦ καὶ τῶν λοιπῶν ἀρχόντων τὸ «Κύριε, ἐλέησον» ἐπιμόνως πάντας λέγειν, εἴτα διὰ τὸ αἶσιον καὶ τὸ “νοβισκοῦμ δέυς” τρίτον ἕκαστον μέρος ἐξερχόμενον τοῦ φοσσάτου. Ἄμα δὲ τῷ ἐξελθεῖν τοῦ φοσσάτου τὸν στρατὸν ἐπὶ τὴν μάχην παντοίαν ἡσυχίαν ἄγειν καὶ μὴ ἀκαίρως φθέγγεσθαι. Τοῦτο γὰρ καὶ τὸν στρατὸν πλέον ἀτάραχον φυλάττει καὶ τὰ τῶν ἀρχόντων μανδάτα εὐπαράδεκτα ποιεῖ. Τὸ γὰρ μέτρον τῆς συμβολῆς αὐτὸ τὸ πρᾶγμα δοκιμάζει καὶ ἡ σφίγις ἡ δέουσα καὶ ἡ τῶν ἐχθρῶν παρουσία. Καὶ ἄλλου σημείου <οὐ> χρεία, ὅταν μέντοι εἰς χεῖρας ἔλθῃ ὁ στρατός, τότε ἀλαλάζειν ἢ ὀρυᾶσθαι, καὶ μάλιστα τοὺς ὀπιθεν τασσομένους πρὸς κατάπληξιν τῶν ἐχθρῶν καὶ διανάστασιν τῶν ἰδίων οὐκ ἄτοπὸν ἐστὶν, trans. Dennis 1966.

⁶⁸ Whitby 1968, 46 n. 8 “*This image was probably one of the two famous “divinely created” images of Christ which came to prominence in the second half of the 6th c., either the Camuliana image, which had been transferred to Constantinople from Syria in 574, or the image of Edessa.*”

⁶⁹ Theophyl. Hist. 2.3.4–6: ἐπεὶ δὲ τὸ πολέμιον παρεφαίνετο, καὶ ἦν κόνις πολλή, Φιλιππικὸς τὸ θεανδρικὸν ἐπεφέρειτο εἰκασμα, ὃ λόγος ἕκαθεν καὶ εἰς τὰ νῦν διηγεῖ θεῖαν ἐπιστήμην μορφῶσαι, οὐχ ὑφάντου χεῖρας (5) τεκτῆνασθαι ἢ ζωγράφου μηλιάδα ποικίλαι. διὰ τοι τοῦτο καὶ ἀχειροποίητος παρὰ Ῥωμαίοις καθυμνεῖται καὶ τῶν ἰσοθέων πρεσβειῶν ἡξιώται· ἀρχέτυπον γὰρ ἐκείνου θρησκευοῦσι Ῥωμαῖοι τι ἄρρητον. (6) ταύτην ὁ στρατηγὸς τῶν σεβασμίων περιπέπλων γυμνώσας τὰς τάξεις ὑπέτρεχεν, κρείττονος καὶ ἀνανταγωνίστου θράσους ἐντεῦθεν μεταδιδούς τῷ στρατεύματι. εἴτα παρελθὼν τῆς πληθύος εἰς μέσον, τῇ ἐπιρροίᾳ τῶν δακρύων ὑπὸ τῆς χύσεως τῆς ἀγωνίας βλύζων ἀένναον τοῖς παρακλητικοῖς ῥήμασιν ἐκέχρητο πρὸς τὸ στράτευμα, trans. Whitby 1986.



Constantine I, Licinius I, and Theodosius I, as well as about the generals Mascezel and Johannes are attempting to present them as *exempla* for pious Christian leadership. Even the *Strategikon* stresses the importance of regular prayer for the commander.⁷⁰ Naturally from such individual focused and idealised descriptions and narratives, no reliable information about the practice of the rank-and-file soldiers can be drawn, and like in the case of Orosius and Coripp, they can even reaffirm the assumption of the Christian mass being a central element in cultic battle preparation. Upon closer examination though, it appears that some of the sources contain indeed valuable information about battle preparation in Christian Late Antiquity, which contradict this assumption.

The brief mention by Lactantius of how Licinius distributed the prayer to the officers, is in accordance with the proceedings known for the traditional army cult, in which the officers were tasked with reciting oaths and prayers for the soldiers to repeat them.⁷¹ It can therefore be suggested, that also the army of Constantine and his sons had the officers tasked in similar manners.⁷² An interesting parallel becomes apparent, when comparing the two sources with the most extensive information from the 6th century, the *Strategikon* and the *Iohannis*. The analysis reveals a nearly identical structure of the described practice in these two sources. Because of the missing text, it is uncertain if the scene in the *Iohannis* also included singing upon leaving camp, but otherwise the elements are identical: the soldiery gathers and guided by priests and command staff communal prayers are spoken. The biggest difference between the two sources is the actions of the Christian clerics. The *Iohannis* depicts them celebrating a seemingly proper mass, whilst in the *Strategikon* they are mentioned for the main ceremony only in relation to the prayers and even then, they have the commander and the officers as co-actors. Furthermore, they appear indirectly when the need for the blessing of the banners is mentioned, since that would naturally require someone with special religious competencies. But whether this means that their sole purpose is to bless the banners and be present at the pre-battle prayer ceremonies, or that the *Strategikon* simply is not dealing in detail with their duties (since what religious actions the clerics perform is not part of the responsibilities of a commander), remains open for debate. The important point is: the *Strategikon* and the *Iohannis* testify to the existence of elaborate prayer ceremonies conducted by the Roman army before battle. The performance of some kind of field mass, however, is only attested in the context of the idealised narrative of Corippus. The problem here is

⁷⁰ Maurik. *Strat.* praef. 36–38; 8.2.1; 11.4.

⁷¹ App. *B Civ.* 1.301; 11.43; Frontin. *Strat.* 4.1.4; Gell. 16.4.2; Livy 22.38.1–6; Polyb. 6.21.1–3; 33.1; Plut. *Galb.* 18.9; 22.4; Suet. *Galb.* 16.2; Tac. *Hist.* 1.55.3–56; 2.74.1; Stoll 2001, 82–85; Kumpitsch 2024, 78.

⁷² For the new assessment of the cultic duties of the Roman officers in Late Antiquity see footnote 11.



to decide about the historicity of the mass-related elements in his account. For it could be that such a ceremony was also held before the first battle and that Corippus simply did not mention it there, maybe because he wanted this stark contrast between Romans and Moors to be revealed near the climax of his epic poem. It could also be that this type of ceremony was held because it was a Sunday and therefore battle preparation was combined with the normal Sunday mass. Finally, it could be that Corippus simply invented these elements and added them to the standardised practice in order to appeal to the expectations of the intended audience at the court in Constantinople with regard to Roman identity and Christian religion.⁷³ But aside from this problem, the analysis leads to the impression that the *Iohannis* and the *Strategikon* are reporting on some sort of standardised practice of the Roman army.

Now if the short passage of Procopius is examined with this knowledge gained from the *Iohannis* and the *Strategikon*, the possibility arises that this one sentence bears the potential to be a shortened description of what the *Iohannis* and the *Strategikon* are conveying: Belisarius prayed, and so did his army. Of course, the argument can be made, that Procopius is mentioning a private prayer, in an attempt to strengthen the impression of Belisarius as a pious commander.⁷⁴ For also the *Strategikon* is emphasising several times the importance of regular prayer by the commander in preparation for dangerous situations.⁷⁵ These prayers by the commander are now in the grey area between personal piety and official cult, for while there is undeniably a societal expectation for it, a silent/soft spoken prayer, or a prayer held in the commander's quarters can hardly be addressed as "official" since it lacks an audience. However, if the commander is even praying for himself, but in a way that is visual for the soldiers, then such a prayer can be understood as "official" since it signals to the soldiers, that the commander interacted with God on their behalf.⁷⁶

Furthermore, this idea of a standardized practice can also be applied to the account of Theophylact, because in this account the soldiers are also gathered and the general is reported to both pray and hold a speech. The new element here is the inclusion of the Acheiropoieton. If the context of this scene is therefore indeed similar to the suggested reconstruction of the *Iohannis* and the *Strategikon* as examples of a standardised practice, then this can be interpreted either as an example of the ease with which this standard practice could be customised with situational elements, or as an example for the overall developments in religiosity at the end of the 6th century, in

⁷³ For example the described draping of the altar and the singing *ministri* are references to the liturgy of that time, see Riedlberger 2013, 320–321.

⁷⁴ Kumpitsch 2024, 180.

⁷⁵ Mauric. *Strat. praef.* 36–38; V8.2.1; 11.4.

⁷⁶ Kumpitsch 2024, 204–205.



this case the cult of the icons, having already a great influence on the contemporary practices in the military.⁷⁷

Summarising the information provided by the few reliable sources leads to the conclusion that Christian battle preparation of the Roman army until the end of the 6th century did not rely on the celebration of field-masses but on communal prayers and singing of hymns in order to prepare spiritually for battle. The only time a seemingly proper mass is reported is in the *Iohannis*, though it is combined with the reconstructed standardised practice. Therefore, it can be concluded that at least until the end of the 6th century the Roman army retained its own religious profile regarding the cultic practices, especially in battle preparation, and was no mere mirror of the practices of the civilian sphere.

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⁷⁷ Whitby 1998, 199; Kumpitsch 2024, 189; 324–325.



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