

# Review of: "Shrewdness, coup d'œil, and genius: the cognitive attributes of the consummate general (Greek antiquity, Byzantine era, modern times)"

Tristan Schmidt<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Silesia

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

Shrewdness, coup d'oeil, and genius: the cognitive attributes of the consummate general – Ami-Jacques Rapin; Rev. by Tristan Schmidt

The article presents an intriguing study of terms and concepts describing the “consummate military leader” in two distinct periods of literature on warfare: the Ancient Greek/Byzantine time up to the 10th century, and the 18th and 19th-century German and French tradition. The study focuses on the concept of “tactical and strategical intuition” of military leaders, an ability to grasp the situation in the field, quickly reach a solution, and act effectively. This ability is conceptualized as a combination of insights gained by experience and calculation with a unique personal cognitive disposition or “genius” (C. v. Clausewitz).

The study presents a well-informed survey of terminology used to describe the mentioned abilities in several ancient Greek and Byzantine military treatises and other military oriented literature (the central term here is ἀγχινοία, occasionally connected to εὐστοχία). This is followed by a (considerably longer) discussion of the development of similar concepts (coup d'oeil, genius) in French and German military writing during the 18th and 19th centuries. A strong point of the argument is the connection between the terms used in the military related texts with concepts known from other contemporary literature on the human mind. In the case of the Greek texts, considerable space is dedicated to Aristotle's use of ἀγχινοία outside the thematic area of military strategy. Very interesting is the diverse use of ἀγχινοία in Byzantine military treatises; they combine an understanding that seemingly follows Aristotle's ideas, which are reflected in a definition of the 10th-c Suda lexicon, with several instances of a much more generic use.

The paper rejects the view that these Greek concepts can be directly translated into the idea of “coup d'oeil” in French and later German military writing (18th/19th) c. The main argument here focuses on the fact that the French pioneer of the concept, Folard, evidently knew Polybius (who used ἀγχινοία), but read his work only in translation. This makes a direct reception of the concept hard to trace and, as the author correctly states, forbids drawing a direct line. At this point of the article, which represents the transition from the Ancient Greek notion of ἀγχινοία/ εὐστοχία to similar concepts of 18th c. military writing, I propose to further elaborate on the reception of Ancient military writers and the Aristotelian concept of ἀγχινοία in 17th/18th century western Europe. Even though Polybius might not have directly influenced Folard, the interest in Ancient Greek literature might have caused familiarity with the diverse concepts of military shrewdness presented in the ancient and medieval manuals and related texts. The manual attributed to the Byzantine emperor Nikephoros Phokas, for instance, was edited already in 1819 in Paris and reprinted in Bonn in 1828; the edition was based on 16th c.

manuscripts, one of them bought by the Bibliothèque Royale de France in the 1730s/40s. A further investigation would make the connection of the two parts of the paper (Ancient/Byzantine & Modern) more explicit and might even strengthen the argument in favor of a tradition of thought from Ancient concepts of tactical/strategical intuition up to the 18th century. I add some minor remarks on the text that might help improve the wording, but do not affect the overall argument:

- General: given the different time periods covered in the paper, I would suggest to add the authors' lifetimes (centuries/decades).
- P 3, first §: Here, it is not (yet) entirely clear whether Polybius even uses the term ἀρχινοία – only later this becomes evident.
- P 8: On Skirmishing is not necessarily written by Emperor Nikephoros Phokas. The introduction rather suggests that the work was commissioned and then attributed to Nikephoros
- P 19: Here I would harmonize the cases in the German expressions to the rest of the sentence:
  - "...over that of militärischer Blick"
  - "...Geist des neuern Kriegssystem[s]"
  - "...and the strategic key (strategischer Schlüssel)"
- P 20: "Faffungskraft" → "Fassungskraft"