

# The Use of the Charge in Battles in the Latin East, 1192-1291

THE REDUCTION OF the Latin Kingdom during the period c.1260-91 was achieved through a series of successful siege campaigns undertaken by the Mamluk sultan Baybars and his successors. During this period and indeed throughout the thirteenth century, the occupants of the Latin Kingdom did not attempt either to arrest their decline or increase the size of their territories by confronting their Muslim opponents in open battle, since without support from the West they had insufficient troops available to create a field army and at the same time protect their strongpoints.<sup>1</sup> However, when a crusade army arrived in the East it tended to operate, with support from the native Latins, as a field army and this meant that battles were not infrequent. A number of these engagements, moreover, had important consequences. In 1239, Theobald of Champagne's crusade suffered a decisive setback when a large Christian force was defeated at Beit-Hanun. The heavy losses of St. Louis's army at Mansurah in 1250 diminished the effectiveness of his force and probably caused its eventual capitulation to the Muslims.

There were obviously several factors, not always apparent in every battle in the Latin East during this period, which explained the success or failure of opposing armies. However, one of the most important was that on the Latin side, the composition of the army (consisting as it did largely of crusaders used to warfare in the west) meant that battles were fought by Christian troops who showed little understanding of how best to combat the tactics of their Muslim opponents. Muslim tactics against Christian armies relied heavily on the mobility of their troops and particularly their mounted archers. Examples abound throughout the thirteenth century of the effect on a Christian army of a Muslim hail of arrows, 'que pluie ne gresil ne peust pas faire greigneur obsculté'. The Muslims' lightly-armed troops contrasted with the heavy chargers, armour and other equipment which Christian knights used in the West and which they took with them to the East.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It could be argued that an exception to this statement is the Latin army's involvement in the battle of Gaza in 1244. This, however, was a conflict which had more to do with inter-Muslim rivalry in Egypt and Syria than the Latins' efforts to defend, or expand, their territories; and the Latin army was only one contingent in a force consisting largely of Muslim troops from Damascus, Homs and Kerak (see H. A. R. Gibb, 'The Aiyubids', *A History of the Crusades*, ed. K. M. Setton and others, ii (Madison, 1969), pp. 705-9; R. Irwin, *The Middle East in the Middle Ages: the early Mamluk Sultanate, 1250-1382* (1986), pp. 18-19; see also below).

<sup>2</sup> The Muslim hail of arrows is referred to in 'Continuation de Guillaume de Tyr de 1229 à 1261, dite du manuscrit de Rothelin', *Recueil des Historiens des Croisades* (16 vols., Paris, 1841-1906), *Historiens occidentaux* (hereafter *R.H.C. Oc.*), ii, 544. For more detailed information (and references) on the limited manpower

The weight which the knights had to carry round with them did have some advantages. When under attack they were well protected so that amongst the Military Orders, for example, a greater degree of bravery was expected from the brother knights than from the sergeants, although if the latter were fully armed then they should perform as effectively as the knights.<sup>3</sup> When they were the attackers in a conflict, the collective impact of the knights' charge was the most potent weapon available to a medieval army. In western Europe the charge in close formation, followed by the breakthrough into the enemy's units, was central to Christian battle tactics.<sup>4</sup> Since battles in the East were normally fought by Christian armies which were largely composed of crusaders from western Europe, the charge, or a modified form of it, therefore remained an essential element in Christian battle plans. It was unfortunate, from the Christian point of view, that the Muslim approach to engagements with Christian armies during this period could render the charge at best ineffectual and at worst dangerous to the Christians themselves.

In Europe, knights were accustomed to lining up in their *batailles*, prior to an ordered charge against a solid target. This could not be done in the East because the Muslim troops did not normally present such a target. Moreover, the charge, rather than being a pre-emptive act, was a reaction to continual Muslim harassment. It therefore lacked the cohesion which some scholars have perceived in it in the West. From the examples available it is also clear that Muslim commanders had developed tactics to deal with the possible threat of the charge in a way which enabled them to use the manœuvre's energy to their own advantage. That these methods were not just employed coincidentally is confirmed by the Franciscan Fidenzio of Padua. He had detailed first-hand knowledge of the Muslim armies (having been present with them at the siege of Antioch in 1268, for example) and he described their tactics, when faced by a Christian charge, thus:

Sarraceni cedunt et ad invicem dividuntur et vadunt, alii huc, alii vero illuc; postmodum vero ad sonum buccine, . . . congregantur et insultum faciunt in Christianos, et percuciant viros et equos ipsorum multis sagittis et occidunt eos.

The lighter Muslim horses were easily able to outdistance the Christian horses if they were chased: the difficulty for the Christians was that 'nesciunt se recolligere'.<sup>5</sup> But this had been an unsolved problem throughout the thirteenth century. In Egypt during the Fifth Crusade, when the crusaders retreated from Fariskur in August 1219, some of the rearguard who were protecting the rest of the army decided to charge because of the damage which was being caused by Muslim archers. The

---

normally available to the Latin armies in the East; the military impact of the crusades on the region; Muslim tactics against Christian opponents; the Mamluk campaigns against the Latin Kingdom; and Christian arms and armour in the Latin East, see C. J. Marshall, 'Warfare in the Latin East, 1192-1291' (unpublished University of London Ph.D. thesis, 1987), pp. 36-50, 58-9, 113-19 *et passim*.

<sup>3</sup> *La Règle du Temple*, ed. H. de Curzon (Paris, 1886), nos. 172, 419.

<sup>4</sup> J. F. Verbruggen, *The Art of Warfare in western Europe during the Middle Ages* (Amsterdam, 1977), pp. 94-301 *et passim*.

<sup>5</sup> Fidenzio of Padua, 'Liber recuperationis Terre Sancte', ed. P. G. Golubovich, *Biblioteca bio-bibliografica della Terra Santa e dell'Oriente Franciscano* (5 vols., Quaracchi, 1906-23), ii. 29-30.

Muslims opened their ranks and allowed the Christians to pass through, then closed up again. The Muslims took advantage of the crusaders' subsequent confusion and attacked them using cudgels, swords, javelins and Greek fire.<sup>6</sup> During a battle outside Acre in 1269 Robert of Crésèques, who had recently arrived in the East, attempted to charge the Muslim army. Once again the Muslims opened their ranks, allowing the crusaders to pass through, before attacking them from the rear and eventually defeating them.<sup>7</sup>

It would seem, therefore, that Christian armies which found themselves facing a Muslim force were in something of a quandary. They could not use the charge, as they would in the West, as the first move in a conflict because they had nothing to charge against. They were therefore obliged to wait and suffer the attentions of the Muslim mounted archers. It is possible that when the Muslim archers were directing a hail of arrows against a Christian force, they momentarily presented a solid target against which a charge could be directed. However, the Muslims' mobility would have enabled them to scatter and avoid the crusaders' charge. The Muslims could then regroup and resume their attack against a Christian army which was almost certainly in a state of disarray. Was there anything that the Christians could do to counter the Muslim threat?

The solution, though in most instances it proved to be only a partial one, lay in the effective use of archers and crossbowmen. Fidenzio of Padua considered the functions of the bow and crossbow in a Christian force and he argued that it was possible, with these weapons, to repel the Muslims' mounted archers. Archers and crossbowmen would keep the Muslims at a distance and more significantly would inflict heavy casualties on their horses. Fidenzio stressed this point because he believed that Muslim troops were ineffective on foot. Without archers, however, a Christian force consisting only of infantry was liable to be destroyed by the Muslims. For similar reasons large numbers of archers and crossbowmen should be incorporated into a force which included horsemen.<sup>8</sup>

The battle of Beit-Hanun in November 1239 illustrates both the importance of Christian archers and crossbowmen in conflicts against Muslim armies, and the Muslims' tactics against a Christian charge. The Christian force was a substantial part of Theobald of Champagne's crusade; it numbered nearly 700 knights with crossbowmen and both mounted and foot sergeants. It was camped in a valley, a position which the infantry of the opposing Muslim army were able to dominate from the heights of the surrounding sand dunes and hills. The Muslim cavalry were placed to block a narrow entrance to the area where the Christians were camped. The battle started with the Muslim infantry bombarding the Christians with stones and great quantities of arrows. This caused confusion amongst the Christian ranks: many of their number were wounded and a large number of horses were killed. The standard response in this situation was to attempt to drive the Muslims off with

<sup>6</sup> James of Vitry, *Lettres*, ed. R. B. C. Huygens (Leyden, 1960), pp. 121, 129; 'Fragmentum de captione Damiatinae', *Quinti Belli Sacri Scriptores Minores*, ed. R. Röhrich (Geneva, 1879), pp. 188-9.

<sup>7</sup> *Les Gestes des Chiprois*, ed. G. Raynaud (Geneva, 1887), pp. 183-4.

<sup>8</sup> Fidenzio of Padua, pp. 29-30.

archers and crossbowmen—and indeed, this tactic was adopted. For a time it kept both the Muslim infantry and cavalry at a safe distance but this could not be maintained because of a shortage of arrows. Once again the Muslims were able to move closer, so the Christian knights resorted to a charge. This is another good example of a charge being used as a reactionary manoeuvre but on this occasion, the first stage of the charge was a great success. The Muslim cavalry blocking the narrow entrance to the Christian camp presented a solid target and a close conflict began in which the Christians gradually gained the advantage, helped by the fact that the Muslim footsoldiers could no longer strike at them from above. In order to draw the Christians from this protected position, the Muslims therefore employed a feigned retreat. The success which the Christians had enjoyed was completely thrown away as they chased wildly after the apparently fleeing Muslims. When the latter turned again, the Christians realized their mistake: they faced the Muslim cavalry in one direction and, in the other, the Muslim foot who had come down from their previous positions on the hills and sand dunes. The depleted Christian force was trapped. They tried to regroup in their *batailles* but it made little difference. The Muslims used their arrows to wear down the Christians before moving closer with swords and maces: few of the Christians were able to escape the slaughter.<sup>9</sup>

At the battle of Mansurah in 1250, Muslim pressure and a lack of Christian firepower again led to a charge by a crusade army. The Muslims were able to surround St. Louis's forces, and began firing great quantities of arrows at them. At this point in the battle, the crusaders did not have any crossbowmen with them to return the fire, so they were obliged to charge in order to come to grips with the Muslims. It appears that the size of the Muslim army prevented this from being a particularly effective attack.<sup>10</sup> John of Joinville reported that it was the arrival of the king's foot crossbowmen that eventually caused the Muslims to flee: the latter retreated as the former were preparing for action, when 'nous virent mettre pié en l'estrier des arbelestes'.<sup>11</sup>

There were occasions when a Christian charge did enjoy some success. In July 1219 during the Fifth Crusade, the Muslim army mounted a series of assaults against the crusader camp. The Muslims eventually broke through into the camp, thereby threatening the entire crusade army. The Templars, led by their marshal who carried their standard, the *bausan*, were given permission to charge. With the support of the Teutonic Knights and other soldiers, they forced the Muslim army to withdraw. On this occasion, the Muslims had presented the Templars with a solid target to charge against; this undoubtedly contributed to the success of the manoeuvre.<sup>12</sup> In 1239 a crusader army under the command of Peter of Brittany

<sup>9</sup> 'Rothelin', pp. 538-46; Matthew Paris, *Chronica Majora*, ed. H. R. Luard (7 vols., Rolls Ser., 1872-83), iv. 144-5.

<sup>10</sup> 'Rothelin', p. 606.

<sup>11</sup> John of Joinville, *Histoire de Saint Louis*, ed. N. de Wailly (Paris, 1874), p. 134.

<sup>12</sup> Oliver of Paderborn, 'Historia Damiatina', ed. H. Hoogeweg, *Bibliothek des Litterarischen Vereins in Stuttgart*, ccii (1894), 209-11; 'Fragmentum de captione Damiatæ', pp. 180-1; 'Gesta Obsidionis Damiate', *Quinti Belli Sacri Scriptores Minores*, pp. 99-100.

attacked a Muslim caravan. The Muslim soldiers advanced towards the crusaders firing rapidly, but when the latter charged they forced the archers back on to the rest of the Muslims who were following behind. As the Muslims were now unable to use their bows, a close *mêlée* developed, a conflict which was eventually resolved by the decisive intervention of a crusader reserve force.<sup>13</sup>

The Muslims, unlike the Christians, were able to modify their tactics to deal with the opponents they were facing. Muslim troops were prepared, against certain opponents, to offer a solid target to a charge. In 1244 the Latin Kingdom's army supported the Damascenes against the Egyptians in the battle of Gaza. The Latin contingent lined up as the right wing of the Muslim and Christian alliance; the troops commanded by Da'ud, the ruler of Kerak, were on the left whilst al-Mansur Ibrahim of Homs commanded the centre. Both the left and centre were broken by their Egyptian opponents; the Latins were surrounded and annihilated by the Khwarizmians, the Egyptians' allies. It is interesting to note that according to the author of the 'Eracles' account, the Christians' problems were exacerbated by their inability to mount a charge, because the squires and foot sergeants had become confused with the ranks of knights.<sup>14</sup>

The Muslims were also prepared to offer a solid target to a Mongol charge. It is difficult to establish the precise course of the battle of 'Ain Jalut in 1260, but one eye-witness stated that the future sultan Baybars, with an advance guard, 'repulsed the vigour of their [the Mongols'] first charge'. As a result of this, the other Muslims were able to advance and gain the victory.<sup>15</sup> The account of al-Makrizi also suggested a conflict determined by the charge, as one wing of the Muslim force was broken in disorder, but the situation was saved by the Mamluk sultan Kutuz who charged in amongst the Mongols.<sup>16</sup> At Homs in 1281, the Mongol and Muslim forces again lined up for a pitched battle, each side deployed with a left, right and centre. The Mongol charge broke the Muslim left and the left of the Muslim centre, but the Muslim right held and this eventually decided the battle.<sup>17</sup> Homs, like 'Ain Jalut, was a conflict in which the outcome was determined by the success or failure of the charge, and its immediate penetration. This is very different from Muslim battles against Christians.

The Christians in the Latin East did have some opportunities to use a pre-emptive charge during this period, but only against Christian opponents. The Lombard-Ibelin conflict was significantly influenced by two battles, at Nicosia in 1229 and Agridi in 1232. In the first of these, few details survive of the battle but it

<sup>13</sup> 'Rothelin', p. 335.

<sup>14</sup> Al-Makrizi, *Histoire d'Égypte*, tr. E. Blochet (Paris, 1908), p. 489; Ibn al-Furat, *Ayyubids, Mamlukes and Crusaders*, ed. U. and M. C. Lyons and J. S. C. Riley-Smith (2 vols., Cambridge, 1971), ii, 4-5; *L'Estoire de Eracles empereur et la conqueste de la Terre d'Outremer*, *R.H.C. Oc.*, ii, 428-30; 'Rothelin', p. 364.

<sup>15</sup> Ibn 'Abd al-Zahir, 'A critical edition of an unknown Arabic source for the life of al-Malik al-Zahir Baybars', ed. A. A. al-Khowayter (unpublished University of London Ph.D. thesis, 1900), p. 339.

<sup>16</sup> Al-Makrizi, *Histoire des Sultans Mamlouks de l'Égypte*, trans. M. E. Quatremère (2 vols., Paris, 1845), t. i, 104-5; see also P. Thorau, 'The battle of 'Ayn Jalut: a re-examination', in *Crusade and Settlement*, ed. P. W. Edbury (Cardiff, 1985), pp. 237-9.

<sup>17</sup> Al-Makrizi, *Histoire des Sultans*, t. i, 35-8; *Cartulaire général de l'ordre des Hospitaliers de St.-Jean de Jérusalem (1100-1310)*, ed. J. Delaville Le Roulx (4 vols., Paris, 1894-1900), no. 3782.

seems that the two sides simply lined up in their *batailles* and charged. Philip of Novara added that once the efforts of the clergy to mediate had failed, each knight directed his energies against the enemy he hated the most.<sup>18</sup> At the battle of Agridi, the charge of the first Lombard *bataille* led by Walter of Manepau was carried out so badly that it took him past the Ibelin rearguard. After trying to attack the fourth Ibelin *bataille*, Walter fled. This demonstrated the problems encountered in trying to correct a misdirected charge by a body of knights. The charge of the second Lombard *bataille* was more effective, but help from the third Ibelin *bataille* assisted the first, which had taken the full brunt of the assault. The battle subsequently developed as a series of confused individual combats, in which some great feats of arms were performed.<sup>19</sup> The charge, though begun in a position of complete order, had merely been the prelude to an untidy *mêlée*.

The charge, when used by Christian armies against Muslim opponents, was a powerful but unwieldy tactic which was generally a reaction to Muslim pressure rather than, as in the West, a first move in a conflict. The use of the charge in battles in the Latin East during this period also reflects a paradox which was noted earlier: the Latin armies could generally fight only when they were reinforced by troops from the West, yet these troops did not understand the kind of conflict in which they were likely to become involved. They tried to respond, particularly through the charge, with techniques which they knew from the battlefields of Europe. The more mobile Muslim cavalry could use a Christian charge to their own advantage, but this did not prevent Christian troops from consistently trying to use a tactic which was recognized by contemporaries such as Fidenzio of Padua as anachronistic to the requirements of warfare in the East.<sup>20</sup>

CHRISTOPHER J. MARSHALL

<sup>18</sup> *Gestes des Chiprois*, p. 58.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 103-4.

<sup>20</sup> I am grateful to Professor Jonathan Riley-Smith for his comments and criticisms on this article.