

Debacle at Manzikert, 1071: Prelude to the Crusades



In the eleventh century, the Byzantine Empire faced an extraordinary crisis on its eastern frontiers with the emergence of a new and dangerous convert to Islam, the Seljuk Turks

Left: Seljuk horsemen represented on a twelfth century jug. L.A. Museum of Art. Photograph courtesy and copyright Steven Baker (www.geocities.com/qilich/)

Below: Rômania before and after the Battle of Manzikert

The Seljuks, like other Central Asian nomads before them, relied on light cavalry horse archers as their primary means of attack. These Turks proved irresistible on the battlefield, conquering the Muslim states in present day Syria, northern Mesopotamia, and Armenia and continuing their traditions of raids into and warfare with the Eastern Roman Empire. This conflict between the Byzantine army and Seljuk invaders would culminate in one of the most important battles in western civilization, the battle of Manzikert in 1071, the results of which would forever weaken a great empire and become a *casus belli* for the crusades against the Islamic residents of the Holy Land.

The Byzantine army which took the field against the Seljuk Turks in the eleventh century was a fighting force much different than that which had won Justinian an empire in

the sixth century. Emperor Justinian's reign (r.527-565) was the high-water mark for the Eastern Roman Empire. The emperor's talented generals Belisarius and Narses had restored North Africa and Italy to Byzantine hegemony, and the Eastern Romans were again the masters of the Mediterranean.

The composition of the Justinian's army differed from that of its Roman predecessor in that cavalry, rather than infantry, would take a dominant position. This switch in emphasis probably arose due to prolonged martial contacts with the Near East. The most formidable threat to the eastern part of the Byzantine Empire came from the successors of the Parthians, the Sassanid Persians, who fought like their forerunners, almost exclusively with light and heavy cavalry. For this reason, some Byzantine heavy cavalry, called *klibanarioi* or *kataphraktoi*, carried bows.

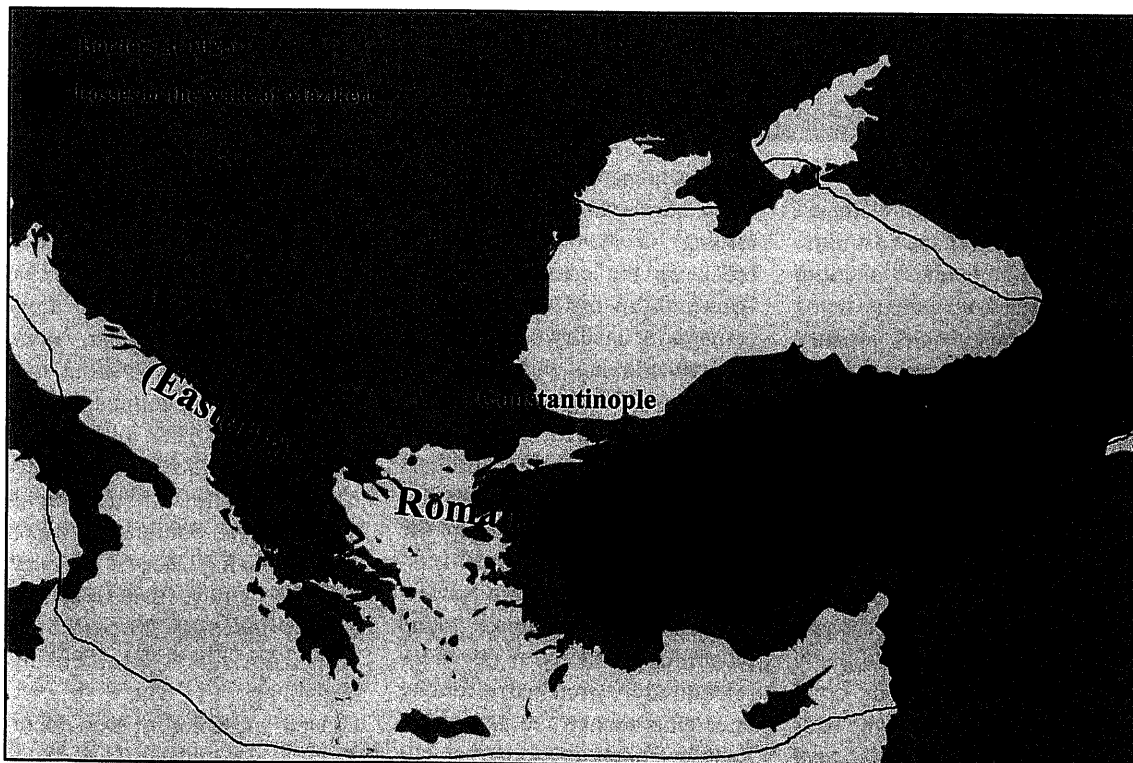
Introduced in the second century by the Roman Emperor Trajan (r.98-117) and widely used in the East in the last years of the Roman Empire, the *kataphraktos* functioned as a heavily armoured lancer or as a mounted archer, fusing heavy and light cavalry into one very capable fighting man. With the adoption of the stirrup sometime in the late sixth century, the *kataphraktos* became for the first time a true lancer because he could now use the synergy of the horse and rider and aim through his target, instead of jabbing down or loosening his spear with every pass as classical heavy cavalry had done for centuries.

Second to cavalry in importance in Byzantine warfare was light infantry. Eastern Roman light infantry wore very little body armour and carried a composite bow with a quiver of forty arrows, a small shield, and an axe for close combat.



Rome's Second Millennium

Although the Western Roman Empire officially ended with the deposition of Romulus Augustulus in 476, the Eastern portion of the empire, nowadays called the 'Byzantine Empire' lasted a millennium longer. (337-1453) The 'Byzantines', who called themselves *Rhomaioi* (Greek for Romans), continued to associate with the achievements of the Roman Empire, even though their capital was Constantinople and their court language was Greek. During this millennium, the Eastern Roman Empire faced numerous challenges from barbarian invasion and Islamic expansion, yet the empire was almost always ready to fight, and often for its very existence. The long Byzantine survival was due in part to the remarkable performance of a balanced combined-arms army.

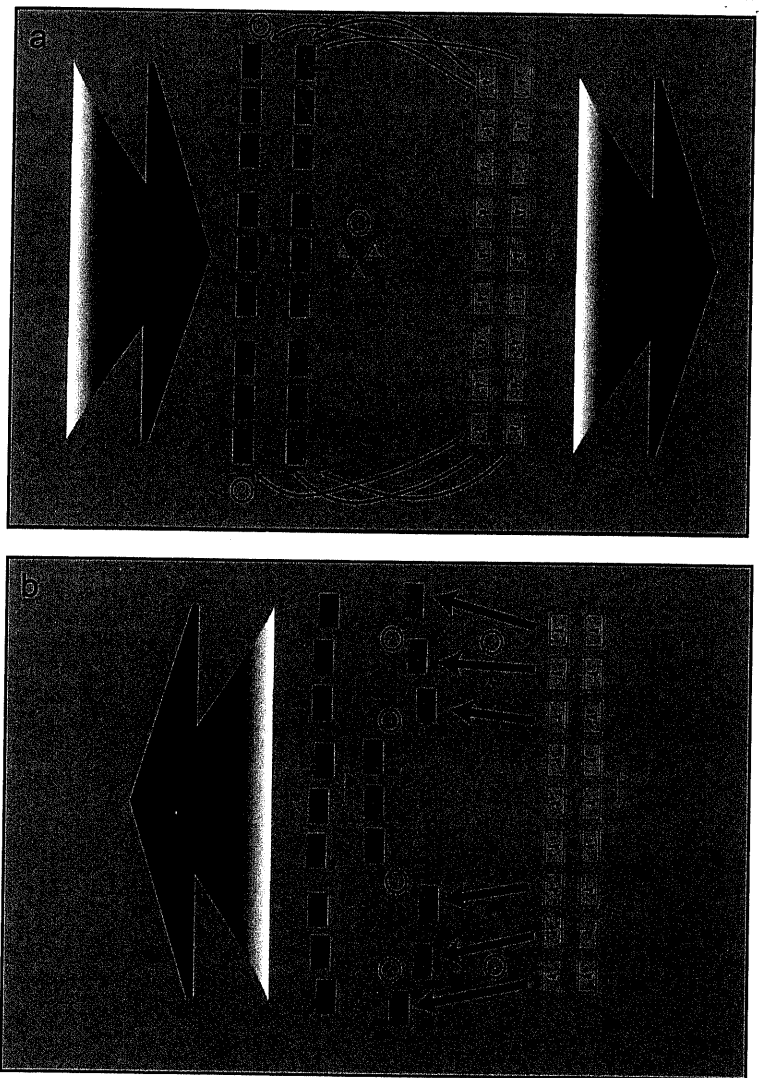




Justinian's thirty-eight year reign was marked by some substantial achievements. He ordered the compilation of *Corpus Juris Civilis* commonly called 'Justinian's Code', a systematic and comprehensive body of Roman law which greatly influenced later European legal systems. He also embarked on an ambitious building program in Constantinople. The construction of Hagia Sophia, the largest domed church in late Antiquity, proved to be his masterpiece. Justinian wanted to recreate the Roman Empire and spent a great deal of imperial resources campaigning all over the Mediterranean. In the end his gains were short-lived and he left an empty treasury for his successors

Below: a) Battle of Manzikert, Phase one : Romanos forms his army into two lines, the first under his personal control (purple) and the second under Andronikos Doukas (red). He orders his heavy cavalry forward against the Seljuk horse archers to his front (blue). The Roman troops pursue the Turks for several hours, sweeping through and beyond the abandoned Seljuk camp (1). Arslan's lighter mounted archers easily stay out of reach of the Roman cavalry whilst constantly harassing the Roman flanks (2)

b) Battle of Manzikert, phase two : His army tiring and nightfall approaching, Romanos orders his troops to break off the pursuit and return to camp. His order is late, however, in reaching the flanks, which continue to advance, separating them from the rest of the army (1). When they finally receive the order and begin to pull back, their formations are loose and gaps are apparent in their lines (2). The Turks quickly seize the opportunity and intensify their attacks (3)



The Byzantine army reorganized: *thema and tagmata*

Unable to sustain a professional standing army, Emperor Constant II (r.641-648) settled his mobile armies in specific districts called *themai* (plural, from which the tactical unit, *thema* (singular), gets its name), despite defeats that deprived it of all its African and Asian possessions except Asia Minor, the Byzantine Empire maintained itself for centuries as a formidable Eastern Mediterranean power. Beginning in the mid-seventh century, soldiers of the *themai* supported themselves from land grants within their districts because the state's only remaining means of supporting its soldiers seems to have been giving them land, mostly probably from imperial estates. For the most part, the *themai* acted as a defensive force, but later emperors would take an interest in regaining lost territory. Emperor Constantine V (r.741-775) created several elite cavalry units called *tagmata*, first as a reaction to a rebellious theme in northwest Anatolia, then for offensive campaigns against the Arabs and Bulgars.

Infantry not skilled with the bow carried javelins. Warfare against mounted archers in the east illustrated the effectiveness of these foot bowmen over enemy horse archers because light infantry fired bows with a greater range from a more stable platform, the ground. Light infantry were supported in the field by heavy infantry modeled after classical infantry. Heavy infantry wore mail or lamellar armour, helmets and carried a large round shield. Equipped with a long spear and sword, heavy infantry normally massed in phalanxes four, eight or sixteen ranks deep on the battlefield. Eastern Roman heavy

infantry generally formed up as a second line behind the cavalry, relying on the *kataphraktoi* to break up the enemy formation before following up, or in the center with cavalry on the wings. After Justinian's death in 565, the Eastern Roman Empire faced crisis after crisis. Constantly besieged by the Slavs and Bulgars in southern Europe, Persians in Mesopotamia, and from the mid-seventh century onward, Islam from Africa and the Levant, the Byzantine Empire found its military and fiscal resources relentlessly stretched, forcing later emperors to reorganize the Eastern Roman army.

The basic administrative and tactical unit of the Byzantine army from the seventh century was the *bandon* (singular, *banda* plural), consisting of about four hundred soldiers commanded by a tribune, and later, by a count. The *banda* were about equally divided into infantry and cavalry, with the dominant weapon system being heavy cavalry. Scholars believe that Byzantine cavalry made up 20 percent to 40 percent of a Byzantine army, depending on where it was created and where it was opera-

Below: c) Battle of Manzikert, phase three : Recognizing the precarious position of his wings, Romanos orders his army to face about and attack. The units under his immediate command obey (1), but the emperor is betrayed by Andronikos, who spreads a rumour that Romanos had been killed. The traitor leads the second line back to camp (2), abandoning his erstwhile companions to their fate

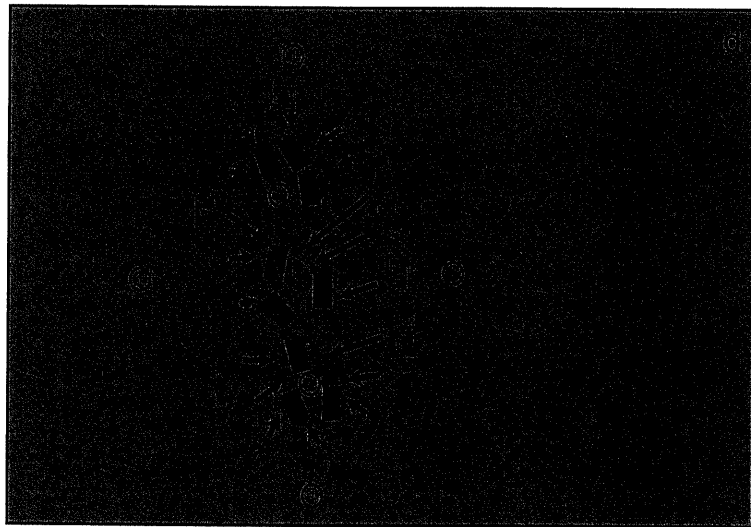
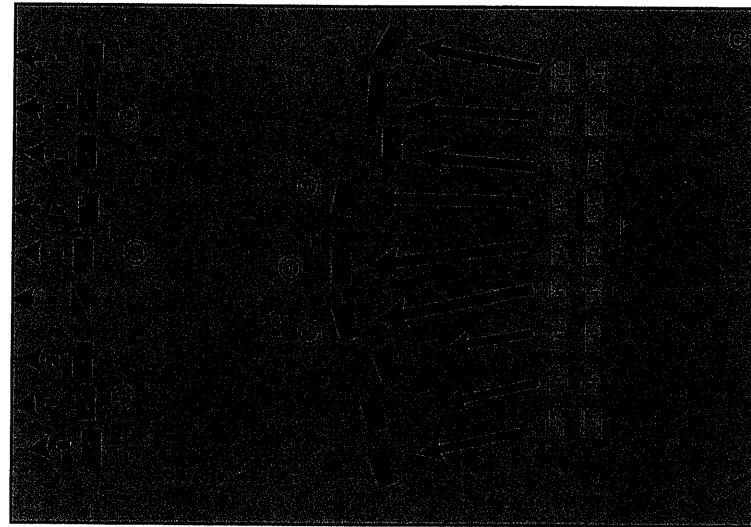
d) Battle of Manzikert, phase four : Alp Arslan takes advantage of the departure of half of his opponent's forced and the approach of nightfall to surround the Romans (1). The right wing falls first, attempting to face two sides at once (2). The left wing, separated from Romanos and the units in the Roman center, fights courageously, but finally breaks under the hail of arrows (3). The Turks press ever closer, encircling the remnants of the Roman center. Romanos, surrounded by the Varangians, is overpowered and captured

ting. Light infantry archers and javelineers usually accompanied the heavy infantry, acting as skirmishers and missile support. Five to eight *banda* (2,000-3,200 cavalry and infantry) formed a *turma*, two or three *turma* (4,000-9,600 soldiers) constituted a *thema*, and three or four *thema* together became a Byzantine field army, usually numbering 25,000 to 30,000 men. The entire Byzantine army was not very large, probably never exceeding 150,000 men total. For all practical purposes, the *thema* replaced the legion as the premier strategic unit of maneuver in Byzantine warfare.

The Byzantine army differed from its Roman predecessor in one significant way--the level of professionalism in its military. Although the soldiers of the *thema* became increasingly a defensive militia force, the core of the Byzantine army were professional soldiers organized in homogenized cavalry or infantry units called *tagmata*, equal to the size of the *thema*. These soldiers were the best-trained troops in the empire, serving as Constantinople's garrison and as the chief expeditionary force for the emperor. When the emperor went on campaign, the *tagmata* and local *thema* combined to create a field army.

The rise of mercenaries

For the next three hundred years, Byzantine field armies enforced a conservative, careful strategy of limited military aims, seizing land in the Balkans from the Bulgars, and territories in Anatolia, Syria and Armenia from the Muslims. But by the turn of the millennium, the overall professionalism of the Byzantine army dropped precipitously, forcing



emperors to rely increasingly on foreign mercenaries, especially Russo-Swedish soldiers called the Varangian Guard. The Byzantines were hiring small bodies of these mercenaries for expeditions as early as 911, with the Varangian Guard itself instituted by Emperor Basil II in 988. The Varangians lacked military lands and proved very loyal to Byzantine emperors who paid them well. By the beginning of the eleventh century, emperors added Normans, Germans and Turks to their payrolls, serving under their own officers in units with their own organization. As the themes declined in combat

efficiency, these mercenaries began to replace the Byzantine army rather than merely compliment it. This trend away from an indigenous professional army would have dire consequences when the Seljuk Turks arrived in southwest Asia.

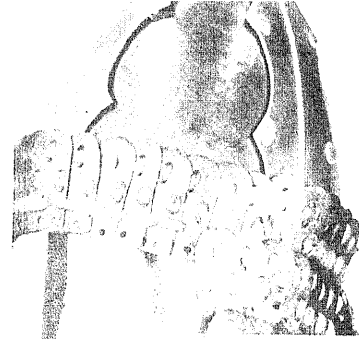
Seljuk warriors invade Anatolia

From the late 1050s, Seljuk nomadic parties were making raids deep into Byzantine Armenia. The Seljuk Turks, who took their name from a successful chieftain (Seljuk, sometimes Saljuk), separated from a larger Turkish tribe known as the Oghuz in



The Parthians were an Central Asian steppe people who created a very large empire centered in what is now modern Iran. At its peak in the first century BC, the Parthian Empire stretched from the Euphrates River in the west to the Indus River in the east. The Parthians proved to be skilled warriors on horseback and a constant threat to the eastern frontiers of the Roman Republic and Empire. The death of the triumvir Crassus at the battle of Carrhae in 53 BC dramatically demonstrated the prowess of the Parthian horse archer and the inadequacy of Roman infantry in dealing with steppe cavalry on open terrain. Over the next few centuries, the Roman Imperial army would adapt to this mounted threat and the heavily armoured Roman heavy cavalryman was born.

Debacle at Manzikert



The Viking migrations of the ninth and tenth centuries produced some important new civilizations in Europe. Swedish penetrations into eastern Europe resulted in the subjugation of Slavic populations and emergence of two powerful Russo-Swedish city-states, Novgorod and Kiev. In 988, the Kievan Prince Vladimir the Great (956-1015) converted to Orthodox Christianity and married the Byzantine Emperor Basil II's sister Anna. As a wedding present, Vladimir gave Basil thousands of Russo-Swedish warriors or Varangians to use as his own personal bodyguard. In the tenth and early eleventh centuries, the Varangian Guard became one of the fiercest and most loyal elements of the Byzantine army. Like Anglo-Saxon *Huscarles*, the Varangians were renowned for the deadly swing of their long battleaxes, although they were equally adept as swordsmen or archers. They were the only element of the Eastern Roman army to successfully defend part of Constantinople during the Fourth Crusade, although the Guard was apparently disbanded after the city's capture in 1204. By this time, the term Varangian referred to any mercenary from northern Europe, and the Guard was probably composed more of English and Scottish mercenaries than Russians or Scandinavians.

the region of what is modern Kazakhstan and stuck southwestward into eastern Persia in the 1040s. By 1055, the Seljuks had taken the Abbasid capital at Baghdad, forcing the Muslim caliph to bestow upon the Seljuk sultan, Tughril-bey, the title of 'king of the East and the West.'⁵ Converting to Sunni Islam, the Seljuks now controlled Transoxiana and all of Persia, but continued to press westward where their presence alarmed both the Byzantine Empire, with interests in Armenia, and the powerful Muslim Fatimid dynasty (909-1171) centered in Egypt. The Fatimids, who practiced the rival Shia form of Islam, possessed land in the Levant stretching from the Nile Delta to Syria. To complicate things for the invading Turks, the Fatimids and Byzantines maintained an uneasy truce, allowing the Eastern Romans to deal with threats in Italy and the Balkans while the Egyptians became rich controlling the lucrative trade coming into the eastern Mediterranean. This balance of power would change with the arrival of the Turks.

Steppe warrior tactics: masters of hit and run

By the late 1060s the Seljuks were migrating in Anatolia proper. As they moved into Byzantine territory, they forced their sultan, Alp Arslan (Turkish for 'Lion') to intervene in the region. This provoked a Byzantine military response. In early 1071, Alp Arslan (r.1063-1072) set out to consolidate his frontier, attacking several Byzantine towns and capturing the fortresses of Manzikert and Argis along the way. The sultan was very familiar with Byzantine tactics, having suffered defeat at the hands of the Eastern

Romans three times, and was well aware of their capabilities.

The Byzantines were likewise very familiar with the tactics of steppe light cavalry. Wearing very little if any body armour and carrying only a slightly curved saber and sometimes a javelin, the Seljuk Turkish warrior relied on his short composite bow, a quiver of thirty to fifty arrows, and the mobility provided by his horse. His short powerful bow was recurved in shape and constructed in three parts: a thin central stave of wood (often maple, cornus or mulberry) laminated with sinew on the back and horn on the belly. This composite construction gave the Turkish bow a powerful draw weight, while the short recurve construction allowed the steppe warrior to shoot the arrow quickly, in any direction, and at great distance. Furthermore, his archery skill was assisted by his novel equipment and riding position. Central Asian warriors used a short stirrup or 'forward seat', putting the rider's weight over the horse's shoulder instead of square on its back. This riding stance was very comfortable over rough terrain and facilitated archery from horseback.

Seljuk warriors rode a hardy breed of steppe ponies known today as Przewalsky horses, thick and strong beasts with broad foreheads, short powerful legs and a reputation throughout the steppes for their courage and stamina. The ponies themselves were also very highly trained, with Turkish warriors preferring mares over stallions as warhorses. Broken and ridden hard for their first two years, these horses were then put out to pasture for the next three years to develop a herd mentality. Afterwards, they were trained for warfare.

Like the Parthians before them and the Mongols after, the Seljuks relied on hit-and-run attacks from horseback, striking from a distance with their powerful bows, and seldom mixing with the enemy in hand-to-hand combat. The Turkish horse archers were adept at the tactic of hovering just within bowshot of their enemy, then taking flight when their enemy offered battle, twisting their torsos and firing arrows backward at their pursuers in what is now called the 'Parthian shot'. If the pursuers seemed vulnerable in any way, the fleeing Turks would suddenly counterattack, swarming their enemy and killing both men and horses. They were like flies that could be beaten off, but not driven away.

One Byzantine commentator and chronicler of the First Crusade (1097-1099), Princess Anna Komnena (the daughter of Byzantine emperor Alexius I Komnenos) described her father's respect for Seljuk tactics:

He [Alexius Komnenos] knew from long experience that the Turkish battle-line differs from that of other peoples...but their right and left wings and their center formed separate groups with the ranks cut off, as it were, from one another; whenever an attack was made on right or left, the center leapt into action and all the rest of the army behind, in a whirlwind onslaught that threw into confusion the accepted tradition of battle. As for weapons they use in war, unlike the Kelts [Franks] they do not fight with lances, but completely surround the enemy and shoot him with arrows; they also defend themselves with arrows from a distance. In hot pursuit the Turk makes

Below: Reproductions of arrowheads found in Anatolian archaeological sites. The diamond section blades, 1 and 5, and the smooth conical pile, 4, were those most commonly used in warfare. (Photograph © Timothy Dawson. www.levantia.com.au)

prisoners by using his bow; in flight he overwhelms his pursuer with the same weapon and when he shoots, the arrow in its course strikes either rider or horse, fired with such a tremendous force that it passes clean through the body. So skilled are the Turkish archers.

The Turks excelled in the feigned retreat. Sometimes, their retreats lasted many days, designed both to wear down their enemies and draw them away from their bases and towards a larger body of steppe warriors.⁸ Once their enemy tired, the Turks would wheel and strike or spring the trap. To cope with the mobility and firepower of steppe horse archers, Byzantine doctrine prescribed always keeping light infantry bowmen near the cavalry, never fighting with uncovered flanks or rear, and never permitting an army to disperse. The Eastern Romans long understood the importance of effective combined-arms cooperation when dealing with enemy light cavalry, and the growing Seljuk menace in Anatolia would provide the Eastern Romans with their greatest test.

The new Byzantine

emperor, Romanos IV Diogenes (r.1068-1071), inherited a difficult strategic position. In the west, the Normans threatened Byzantine possessions in Italy and the Balkans, while in the east Turkish raiding into Byzantine Armenia and eastern Anatolia forced the emperor to organize punitive expeditions against the marauders. Both in 1068 and 1069, Romanos campaigned against the Turks, surprising them at Sebastea (modern Sivas) and clearing them out of the western province of Cappadocia, before being forced to retreat after a defeat near Khilat, close to Lake Van. In 1070, Romanos was forced to deal with Norman incursions in the west, leaving his nephew, Manuel Komnenos, in charge of his forces in the east. But Manuel was taken prisoner by Alp Arslan's own brother-in-law, Arisiaghi, who began to hatch a plot with his captive concerning overthrowing the sultan. Manuel convinced Arisiaghi to go to Constantinople, where the duplicitous Turk agreed to an alliance. When Alp Arslan asked for the traitor's extradition and was refused, the sultan prepared

for war.

The Byzantine emperor welcomed the prospect of war. Believing the Turkish sultan to be in Persia in the summer of 1071, Romanos, an able general who had already tasted victory against the Turks earlier in his reign (twice against Arslan), assembled a army of perhaps 30,000 men at Erzerum, some eighty miles from Manzikert in Armenia, with the intention of retaking the city and neighboring Khilat to be used as bases of operation for a campaign against Alp Arslan in Persia. Muslim authorities mention a Byzantine army of 200,000, 300,000 and 400,000 men, all obvious exaggerations. Romanos used his infantry to reduce captured cities in the borderlands, while employing his cavalry to search for the sultan's forces. Arslan learned of the Byzantine emperor's advance on Armenia as the Turkish army encamped at Aleppo in northern Syria. The sultan immediately turned his army around and headed for the Armenian frontier.

In mid-August 1071, an advance portion of the Seljuk Turkish army met the main



The Strategicon and Tactica: Two Byzantine Field Manuals

The Eastern Romans faced many enemies in the first five-hundred years of their civilization.

In order to better meet these threats, two emperors and professors of tactics, Maurice (r. 582-602) and Leo VI 'the Wise' (r. 886-912) composed field manuals to instruct Byzantine commanders in how best to defeat their enemies.

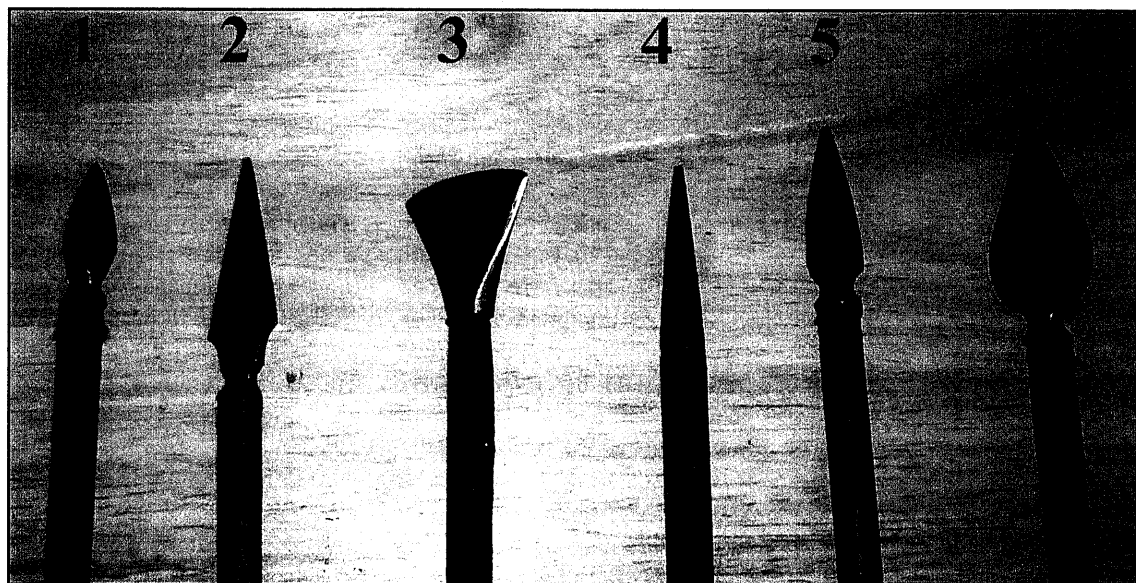
Although written centuries apart, Maurice's *Tactica* and Leo's *Strategicon* both offer specific advice when dealing with mounted steppe warriors: 1) Cavalry should utilize strong flanking positions not only to gain advantage against Turkish units, but also to counter any attempts at encirclement or outflanking maneuvers.

2) Cavalry units should engage in melee as soon as possible in order to avoid mass bow fire.

3) Infantry should remain dense and ordered and should specifically make use of the 'convex' battle formation. 4) Pursuits should be controlled and cautious in order to avoid the feigned retreat tactic.

Byzantine armies that forgot these axioms when facing mounted steppe warriors did so at great

peril



Below: Lamellar armour of the type worn by heavy cavalrymen of Central Asia. (Photograph © Board of Trustees of the Royal Armouries)



Byzantine army and skirmished near Lake Van. The Byzantine emperor retook Manzikert from the Turks, and hearing that the advance guard of Arslan's army was in the area, dispatched an army of allied Cuman or Russian heavy cavalry to meet them. The Turkish commander, seeing that

bers were now on the side of the Byzantines, withdrew. Whether this withdrawal was a feigned flight will never be known for certain, but the pursuing Byzantines were caught in the signature horse nomad ambush, a sudden counterattack by light cavalry horse archers that captured the Byzantine commander and forced the remaining Byzantine army to retreat in disarray.

By the time Romanos' main army arrived on the 18th August, the Turkish advance army, in true Seljuk fashion, was nowhere to be found. The main Byzantine army then returned to camp, where, during the night the Seljuks, joined now by Alp Arslan's main army, returned in force, setting up their own camp three miles away. Seeing that Romanos possessed the larger army, the following morning the sultan offered a peace embassy to the emperor, who bluntly rejected it. Romanos wanted to settle the Turkish problem with a decisive military victory, understanding that raising another army to meet the Seljuk threat would be both difficult and expensive.

'That terrible day': the battle of Manzikert

After the failed parley between the two rulers, Romanos advanced against the Seljuk Turks at midday on 19th of August with his armoured and mounted army ar-

rayed in a single line on a broad front, backed by a strong rear guard (Map 6.6.1). The front line consisted of heavy cavalry from the various themes, with Romanos himself commanding from the center. The second line consisted of foreign mercenary

cavalry from Germany, Normans from Italy, and troops from eastern frontiers. The second line was commanded by Andronikos Doukas, a relation of Romanos' predecessor, Constantine X Doukas (r.1059-1067). The Byzantine army was without any significant light infantry because Romanos committed this arm to a siege elsewhere. The absence of archers to support his cavalry units violated the central canon of warfare against steppe light cavalry.

In the face of the Byzantine heavy cavalry advance, the Turkish center retreated, easily keeping their distance on their lightly burdened mounts. On the wings, the Turks attacked the Byzantine flanks, showering the Eastern Roman cavalry with arrows. Although Turkish missiles probably did not kill many of the armoured riders, the horses did suffer and many riders lost their mounts. Moreover, the Byzantine *kataphraktoi*, no longer possessed the skill of mounted archery present in earlier centuries, and proved no match for the more experienced Turkish light cavalry horse archers.

The Byzantine advance went on for several hours, overrunning the abandoned Seljuk camp (Map 1). But as evening approached, Romanos commanded his tired army to turn around and return to camp. The Byzantine center obeyed, but the wings did not receive the order in time, and when they did, failed to keep a tight formation. With breaks appearing in the line, the Turkish horse archers pressed their attack (Map 2). Romanos countered by ordering the first line to turn around again and threaten the harassing bowmen. But the second line, commanded by Doukas, refused to stop and

num-

face the enemy as ordered. After spreading a rumor that Romanos had been killed, Doukas led the second line back to camp, abandoning the emperor and half the Byzantine army to its fate (Map 3).

As darkness fell on the battlefield, the Seljuk Turks took full advantage of the reserve's disappearance to surround those who remained. Enveloped by the Seljuk horse archers, Romanos' right wing tried to face both ways, but disintegrated under a hail of arrows. The left wing, now isolated from the center, fought bravely, but finally broke. The Turks then concentrated on the center. Here, Romanos, surrounded by his Varangian Guard, was finally overpowered and captured (Map 5). The remaining Byzantine units fled the battlefield, followed by a close and bloody pursuit that continued throughout the night. By dawn, the Turks had destroyed the flower of the Byzantine professional army.

Although the Byzantine defeat can be attributed in large part to the political infighting of the Byzantine nobility, one major factor was Romanos' frantic attempt at engaging the Turks in a pitched battle. The Turks continued to retreat and pull back in the face of the numerically superior Byzantines until they became spread out and unorganized. This thinning of the Byzantine formations allowed the Turks to successfully envelop Romanos' army. The battle of Manzikert demonstrated what the Byzantines had long known, that heavy cavalry could not cope with light cavalry without light infantry support. Although light cavalry did not have a great margin of superiority in mobility, its modest advantage enabled it to refuse

battle while still employing its bows against the slower heavy cavalry. When Romanos offered battle against the Turks without light infantry support, he was ignoring five hundred years of Byzantine doctrine, and sending his army to its destruction. The defeat at Manzikert marked the end of the traditional Byzantine army, an army already in serious decline. With the destruction of Romanos' first line came the destruction of the tagmata regiments and Eastern themai, forcing later emperors to rely even more on mercenaries to supplement their manpower needs.

Causus Belli for Crusade

The sultan would later release Romanos for a healthy ransom to be paid over fifty years and a treaty ceding the border region from Antioch in Syria to Manzikert in Armenia. But the emperor's enemies seized power in Constantinople in his absence. Romanos was captured and blinded in the ensuing civil war, his wounds mortal. The new Byzantine emperor, Constantine X's son Michael VII, proved unable to stem the massive migration of Seljuk Turks into Anatolia — the traditional conscription lands for the Byzantine army. Anatolia would be lost forever to the Christians. The Eastern Roman Empire, now practically defenseless, feared for its very existence. Desperate times called for desperate measures, and in 1095, Emperor Alexius I Komnenos (r.1081-1118) appealed to Pope Urban II for Western assistance. This appeal led directly to the formation of the First Crusade in 1095. In the wake of losing nearly half the Byzantine army at Manzikert, the Seljuk Turks seized much of Anatolia and

the Levant, including the cities of Antioch, Damascus, and Jerusalem. Alp Arslan was killed in 1072 while campaigning in Transoxiana. He was succeeded by his seventeen-year old son Malikshah, a capable leader who ruled for twenty years. Malikshah finished what his father had begun, pressing deeper into Anatolia, destroying cities and ethnically cleansing or enslaving hundreds of thousands of Byzantine citizens. Despite these advances, the Seljuk Empire was already in decline. After Malikshah's death in 1092, Seljuk nobles fought among themselves. It was this fragmentation that allowed the Roman Catholic crusaders to establish themselves in the Levant.

The Byzantine army, deprived of the territory from which it drew much of its manpower and horses for its cavalry, continued its decline. Though Byzantine appeals in the late eleventh century to the West for military assistance helped initiate the crusades, even these allies turned against the Eastern Roman Empire's long-term interests. In 1204, the Venetians, backed by a crusader army, conquered Constantinople, installing their own candidate on the throne. The result of the Fourth Crusade was the Latin Kingdom of Constantinople that stretched from Greece to Asia Minor. Even when Byzantine rule was reestablished in 1261, the empire remained weak for another two centuries until another Turkish tribe, the Ottomans, finally captured Constantinople in 1453, ending a thousand years of Eastern Roman civilization.

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