

αὐτῷ· ἐξείσι πάλιν βασιλῶσ μετὰ τῶν δυνάμεων· καὶ κατὰ τὸ χάρισμα
μυλά κείσ· τρέπεται τοῦτου·

τρίτη ἰστορία
τρίτη ἰστορία



ὅτι καὶ μαρτύροιο κατασχών· αἰχμῶν ἑκοσὶ πέντε χιλιάδων· καὶ μετὰ νίκῃ
πρὸς τὴν βασιλεύουσαν· ἔλαβεν τὴν αἰχμῶν τοσέκτω μῆθρον
μεγαλῶσ· καὶ χερῶν ἐν φιλῶ μομαγῶσ· ὅσ καὶ γνοσὶ κήρυξ τῶν σχολῶν
ἐμαρτυρεῖτο περὶ αὐτοῦ· οὗ σείη τε 263 / ὅσ περὶ τῆς ἰστορίας· καὶ οὗ σείη τε

Essential Histories

Byzantium at War

AD 600–1453

2b
John Haldon

βασιλῆος· οὐδέ γὰρ ἄλλοι, ἀλλὰ τὸν θεοφοβὸν αὐτῶν ἐβούλετο κίβητον
πῶ· ἐξείσι πάλιν ἡ βασιλῆος μετὰ τῶν δυνάμεων· καὶ κατὰ τὸ χάρι
καλακείσ· τρέπεται τοῦτοισ·

Τ. Τ.
τρεπόμενοι



ταὶ αἰχμαλωτοὶ κατασχῶν· αἰχμῶν μείκροσιν ἐπέχλασθον· καὶ μετὰ
πρὸς τὴν βασιλεύουσαν· ἔλθοιεν αἰχμαλωτοὶ ἐκ τῶν

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Byzantium at War

AD 600–1453

John Haldon



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Contents

Introduction	7
Chronology	19
Background to war	
The political world of Byzantium	23
Warring sides	
Neighbours and enemies	29
Outbreak	
Why and how did Byzantium fight wars?	36
The fighting	
Organising for war	47
Portrait of a soldier	
Recruitment, discipline, and life on campaign	61
The world around war	
War and peace	72
Portrait of a civilian	
Metrios – a farmer	80
How the wars ended	
Death of an empire	86
Conclusion and consequences	
War, peace, and survival	90
Further reading	92
Byzantine rulers AD 527–1453	93
Index	94

Introduction

The Byzantine empire was not called by that name in its own time, and indeed the term 'Byzantine' was used only to describe inhabitants of Constantinople, ancient Byzantium on the Bosphorus. The subjects of the emperor at Constantinople referred to themselves as *Rhomaioi*, Romans, because as far as they were concerned Constantinople, the city of Constantine I, the first Christian ruler of the Roman empire, had become the capital of the Roman empire once Rome had lost its own pre-eminent position, and it was the Christian Roman empire that carried on the traditions of Roman civilisation. In turn, the latter was identified with civilised society as such, and Orthodox Christianity was both the guiding religious and spiritual force which defended and protected that world, but was also the guarantor of God's continuing support. Orthodoxy means, literally, correct belief, and this was what the Byzantines believed was essential to their own survival. Thus, from the modern historian's perspective, 'Byzantine' might be paraphrased by the more long-winded 'medieval eastern Roman' empire, for that is, in historical terms, what 'Byzantium' really meant.

In its long history, from the later 5th century, when the last vestiges of the western half of the Roman empire were absorbed into barbarian successor kingdoms, until the fall in battle of the last eastern Roman emperor, Constantine XI (1448–53), the empire was almost constantly at war. Its strategic situation in the southern Balkans and Asia Minor made this inevitable. It was constantly challenged by its more or its less powerful neighbours – at first, the Persian empire in the east, later the various Islamic powers that arose in that region – and by its northern neighbours, the Slavs, the Avars (a Turkic people) in the 6th and 7th centuries, the Bulgars from the end of the 7th to early

11th centuries and, in the later 11th and 12th centuries, the Hungarians, later the Serbs and finally, after their conquests in Greece and the southern Balkans, the Ottoman Turks. Relations with the western powers which arose from what remained of the western Roman empire during the 5th century were complicated and tense, not least because of the political competition between the papacy and the Constantinopolitan patriarchate, the two major sees – Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem were far less powerful after the 7th century Islamic conquests – in the Christian world. Byzantium survived so long partly because internally it was well-organised, with an efficient fiscal and military system; and partly because these advantages, rooted in its late Roman past, lasted well into the 11th century. But as its western and northern neighbours grew in resources and political stability they were able



Gold *nomisma* of Constantine VI (780–797). Reverse: Leo III (717–741), Constantine V (741–775) and Leo IV (775–780), seated. (Courtesy of Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham)

to challenge the empire for pre-eminence, reducing it by the early 13th century to a second- or even third-rate rump of its former self, subordinated to the politics of the west and the commercial interests of Venice, Pisa and Genoa, among others, the greatest of the Italian merchant republics. In this book, we will look at some of the ways in which the medieval east Roman empire secured its long existence.

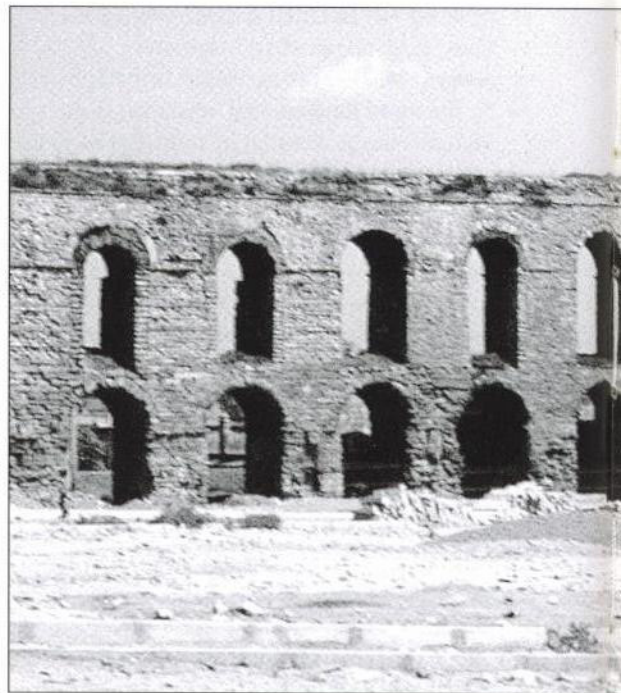
The Byzantine lands

The Byzantine, or medieval eastern Roman, empire was restricted for most of its existence to the southern Balkans and Asia Minor – very roughly modern Greece and modern Turkey. In the middle of the 6th century, after the success of the emperor Justinian's reconquests in the west, the empire had been much more extensive, including all of the north African coastal regions from the Atlantic to Egypt, along with south-eastern Spain, Italy and the Balkans up to the Danube. But by the later 6th century the Italian lands were already contested by the Lombards, while the Visigoths of Spain soon expelled the imperial administration from their lands. The near eastern provinces in Syria, Iraq and the Transjordan region along with Egypt were all lost to Islam by the early 640s, and north Africa followed suit by the 690s. In a half century of warfare, therefore, the empire lost some of its wealthiest regions and much of the revenue to support the government, the ruling elite and vital needs such as the army.

Much of the territory that remained to the empire was mountainous or arid, so that the exploitable zones were really quite limited in extent. Nevertheless, an efficient (for medieval times) fiscal administration and tax regime extracted the maximum in manpower and agricultural resources, while a heavy reliance on well-planned diplomacy, an extensive network of ambassadors, emissaries and spies, a willingness to play off neighbours and enemies against one another, and to spend substantial sums on 'subsidies'

to ward off attack, all contributed to the longevity of the state. And these measures were essential to its survival, for although Constantinople was itself well defended and strategically well placed to resist attack, the empire was surrounded on all sides by enemies, real or potential, and was generally at war on two, if not three, fronts at once throughout much of its long history. The 10th-century Italian diplomat Liutprand of Cremona expressed this situation well when he described the empire as being surrounded by the fiercest of barbarians – Hungarians, Pechenegs, Khazars, Rus' and so forth.

Asia Minor was the focus of much of the empire's military activity from the 7th until the 13th century. There are three separate climatic and geographical zones, consisting of the coastal plains, the central plateau regions, and the mountains which separate them. While hot, dry summers and extreme cold in winter characterise the central plateau, and where, except for some sheltered river valleys, the economy was mainly pastoral – sheep, cattle and horses – the coastlands, where most productive agricultural activity and the highest density of settlement was located,



offered a friendlier, 'Mediterranean' type climate, and were also the most important source of revenues for the government. The pattern of settlement was similarly strongly differentiated – most towns and cities were concentrated in the coastal regions, while the mountains and plateaux were much more sparsely settled. Similar considerations applied to the Balkans, too, and in both cases this geography affected road systems and communications. The empire needed to take these factors into account in strategic planning and campaign organisation, of course, for logistical considerations – the sources of manpower, food and shelter, livestock and weapons, how to move these around, and how they were consumed – played a key role in the empire's ability to survive in the difficult strategic situation in which it found itself.

Armies, whether large or small, and whether Byzantine or hostile forces, faced many problems when campaigning in or across Asia Minor, in particular the long stretches of road through relatively waterless and exposed country, and the rough mountainous terrain separating coastal

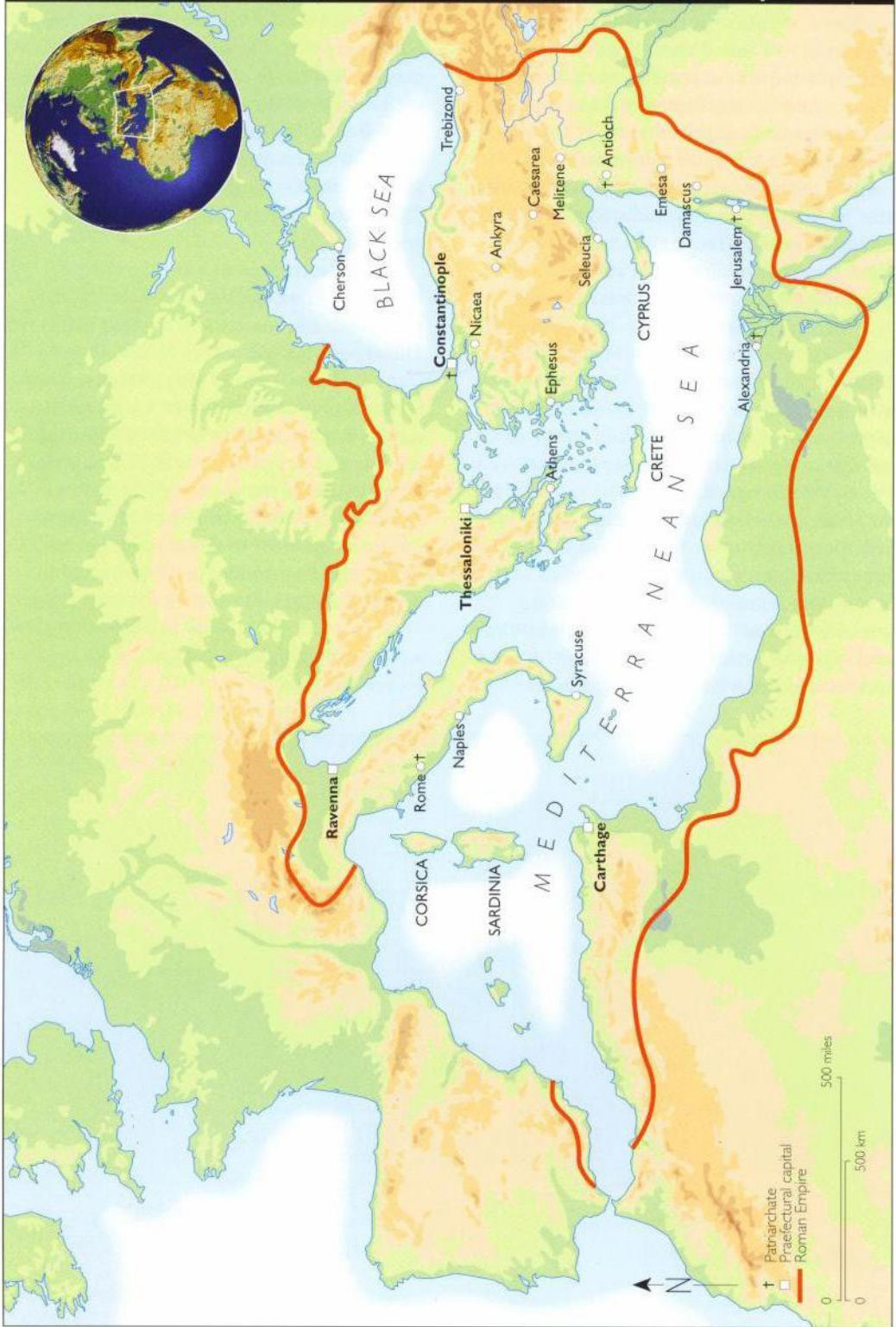
regions from central plateaux. The complex Roman and Hellenistic road system was partly retained during the Byzantine period, but the empire after the 6th century developed a range of military routes together with a series of fortified posts and military bases – for these same routes also served as means of access and egress for Arab forces. Strategic needs changed, of course, and so did the road system, with routes falling in and out of use.

The Balkans present a rugged and fragmented landscape falling broadly into two zones: the coastal and riverine plains (of Thrace, of Thessaly and of the south Danubian area), which are productive and fairly densely occupied; and the mountain ranges that dominate the whole region and represent about two-thirds of its area – the Dinaric Alps in the west, stretching from north-east to south-west; the southerly Pindus range with which they merge, and which together dominate western and central Greece; and the Balkan chain itself,

Aqueduct of Valens in Constantinople (4th century).
(Author's collection)



The east Roman empire in the middle of the 6th century



The conquests of the emperor Justinian re-established the eastern Roman empire as the dominant power in the Mediterranean.

stretching from the Morava river as far as the Black Sea coast, with the Rhodope range forming an arc to the south, through Macedonia towards the plain of Thrace. The fragmented terrain has given rise to a series of distinct geopolitical units separated by ridges of highlands, fanning out along river valleys towards the coastal areas.

A number of major routes served from ancient times to give access to the interior of the Balkan region or to pass through it from north to south or west to east. The Balkans are characterised by relatively narrow and often quite high, easily controlled passes, and this terrain was ideally suited to guerrilla strategy – tough campaigning conditions, and difficult access to some regions during the winter. The structure of communications and the effectiveness of Byzantine political authority demonstrate this, for there were no obvious focal points in the ancient and medieval period in the south Balkan region apart from Thessaloniki and Constantinople, both on the edge of the peninsula and its fragmented landscape.

Geography affected land use in the Balkans as it did in Asia Minor. The uplands and mountains, dominated by forest and woodland, and the lower foothills by woodland, scrub and rough pasturage, were suited to pastoral activity only. Agriculture was limited to the plains, river valleys and coastlands of Thessaly, Macedonia and the Danube. The sea played an important role, since it surrounds the Balkan peninsula apart from along the northern boundary, and acted, as it still does today, as an efficient means of communication along the heavily indented coastline and with more distant regions. The disadvantage of relatively easy seaborne access, however, was that it opened up the southern Balkan peninsula to invasion.

One of the factors that made the Roman army so successful and efficient was the military road system, established for the most part between the end of the 2nd century BC

and the middle of the 2nd century AD. The network also facilitated commerce, civilian traffic and the movement of information. But in the later 4th and 5th centuries the roads went into decline – a reflection of economic and social changes across the empire and the consequences of these for local governors and town councils. One result was a decline in the use of wheeled vehicles, which could not use roads that were not properly maintained, and a corresponding increase in dependence on beasts of burden.

After the 6th century a limited number of key routes was kept up by means of compulsory burdens imposed on local communities. The fast post, consisting of pack-animals, relay horses and light carts, and the slow post, which provided ox-carts and heavy vehicles, were amalgamated into a single system in the 6th or 7th century, and continued to operate until the last years of the empire. The imperial road systems in both the Balkans and Anatolia were less extensive than hitherto, but remained nevertheless effective. But the costs of maintenance and the problem of supervising upkeep meant that many routes were hardly more than tracks or paths usable only by pack-animals, with paved or hard surfaces only near towns and fortresses. Travel and transport by water was usually faster and much cheaper. This was especially so in the case of the long-distance movement of bulk goods, such as grain, for example. The expense of feeding draught-oxen, drovers and carters, paying tolls, together with the slow rate of movement of ox-carts, added very considerably to the price of the goods being transported, generally well beyond the price of ordinary subjects of the emperors. It was really only the government and the army, and to a certain extent the Church and a few wealthy individuals, who could pay for this. In contrast, shipping was much more cost effective, since large quantities of goods could be transported in a single vessel, handled by a small crew, relatively inexpensively, once the capital investment in vessel and cargo had been made.



Byzantine fortress town of Koloneia (mod. Sebinkarahisar) in eastern Anatolia. (Author's collection)

This was the physical world of the later Roman and medieval eastern Roman, or Byzantine, empire, and this was the context within which the politics, diplomacy, warfare and social evolution of Byzantine culture are to be understood. Geography and physical context were not the only factors: cultural assumptions – the ‘thought world’ of Byzantium, also partly determined the complex network of causes and effects, the results of which we call ‘history’. But means of communication, speed of movement of people and information were key aspects on which the effectiveness of armies or the availability of resources to support a campaign might depend. Geography affected how the government worked, the amount of agricultural wealth that it could make available for specific purposes, the distribution and well-being of the population, rates of production and consumption, the availability of livestock,

and so forth. And geographical factors were, of course, fundamental to warfare and the strategic organisation of the empire.

A brief survey of Byzantine history

By the later 5th century the western part of the Roman empire had been transformed into a patchwork of barbarian successor states. Emperors at Constantinople continued to view all the lost territories as part of their realm, however, and in some cases to treat the kings of the successor kingdoms as their legitimate representatives, governing Roman affairs in the provinces in question until Constantinople could re-establish a full administrative and military presence. This is most obviously the case with the Ostrogothic leader Theoderic who, although he ruled nominally in the name of the emperor, established a powerful state in Italy. The leader of the Salian Franks in northern Gaul, Clovis, had quite deliberately

adopted Orthodox Christianity in the last years of the 5th century in order to gain papal and imperial recognition and support for his rule, where he also claimed, at least nominally, to represent Roman rule. Roman emperors considered the west not as 'lost', but rather as temporarily outside direct imperial authority.

The emperor Justinian (527–65) used this as the justification for a series of remarkable reconquests, aimed at restoring Rome's power as it had been at its height – north Africa from the Vandals by 534, Italy from the Ostrogoths by 552. But the plan was too ambitious to have had any chance of permanent success. And while the emperor nevertheless came very close to achieving a major part of his original aims, the problems that arose after his death illustrated the problems his policies brought with them. Warfare with the Persian empire in the east meant that resources were always stretched to the limit and there were never enough soldiers for all fronts. Upon his death in 565 Justinian left a vastly expanded but perilously overstretched empire, in both financial and military terms. His successors were faced with the reality of dealing with new enemies, a lack of ready cash, and internal discontent over high taxation and constant demands for soldiers and the necessities to support them. The Persian war was renewed, while in 568 the Germanic Lombards crossed from their homeland along the western Danube and Drava region into Italy, in their efforts to flee the approaching Avars, a Turkic nomadic power which was establishing a vast steppe empire. The Lombards soon overran Roman defensive positions in the north of the peninsula, founding a number of independent chiefdoms in the centre and south, while the Avars established themselves as a major challenge to imperial power in the northern Balkan region. Between the mid-570s and the end of the reign of the emperor Maurice (582–602), the empire was able to re-establish a precarious balance in the east and along the Danube.

Maurice was deposed in 602 following a mutiny of the Danube forces, and the

centurion Phokas was raised to the throne. Phokas (602–10), popularly regarded in later Byzantine sources as a tyrant, ruled until he was overthrown in 610, when he was in turn replaced by Heraclius, the son of the military governor of Africa. Heraclius was crowned emperor and ruled until 641.

But the empire was unable to maintain its defences against external pressure. Within a few years the Avars and Slavs had overrun much of the Balkans, while the Persians occupied and set up their own provincial governments in Syria and Egypt between 614 and 618, and continued to push into Asia Minor. Italy was left to its own devices and became increasingly autonomous. In spite of a great siege of Constantinople by a Persian and an Avaro-Slav army in 626, Heraclius proved an able strategist and by 628 had utterly destroyed the Persian armies in the east, restoring the situation at the end of Maurice's reign. The regional dominance of the Roman empire seemed assured. But while the Danube remained nominally the frontier, much of the Balkan region was no longer under imperial authority, except when an army appeared. The financial situation of the empire, whose resources were quite exhausted by the long wars, was desperate.

The origins of Islam lie in the northern Arabian peninsula, where different forms of Christianity, Judaism and indigenous beliefs coexisted, in particular in the much-travelled trading and caravan communities of Mecca and Medina. Mohammed was himself a respected and established merchant who had several times accompanied the trade caravans north to Roman Syria. Syria and Palestine already had substantial populations of Arabs, both farmers and herdsmen, as well as mercenary soldiers serving the empire as a buffer against the Persians. Although Mohammed's preaching – a synthesis of his own beliefs with Judaic and Christian ideas – met initially with stiff resistance from his own clan, by 628–29 he had established his authority over much of the peninsula and begun to consider the future direction of the new Islamic community. On his death (traditionally placed in 632) there followed a

brief period of warfare during which his immediate successors had to fight hard to reassert Islamic authority. The raids mounted against both Roman and Persian territories were in part a response to the political demands generated by this internal conflict. A combination of incompetence and apathy, disaffected soldiers and inadequate defensive arrangements resulted in a series of disastrous Roman defeats and the loss of Syria, Palestine, Mesopotamia and Egypt within the short span of 10 years, so that by 642 the empire was reduced to a rump of its former self. The Persian empire was completely overrun and destroyed by the 650s. The Arab Islamic empire was born.

The defeats and territorial contraction which resulted from the expansion of Islam from the 640s in the east, on the one hand, and the arrival of the Bulgars and establishment of a permanent Bulgar Khanate in the Balkans from the 680s, on the other, radically altered the political conditions of existence of the east Roman state. The Balkans up to the Danube were claimed by the empire, and when imperial armies appeared, the local, predominantly Slav, chieftains and leaders acknowledged Roman authority. But this lasted only as long as the army was present. The Bulgars were a new element whose nomadic military organisation and technology enabled them quickly to establish a political hegemony over the region south of the Danube delta, from which their Khans rapidly expanded their power, so that by the end of the 7th century they were a substantial threat to imperial claims in the region.

The resulting transformation of state administrative structures produced an army that was based almost entirely on defensive principles, for which offensive warfare became a rarity until the middle of the 8th century, and which was encouraged by the imperial government to avoid pitched battles and open confrontation with enemy forces wherever possible. The field armies of the late Roman state were transformed in effect into provincial militias, although a central core of full-time 'professional'

soldiers seems always to have been maintained by each regional military commander. A strategy of guerrilla warfare evolved in which enemy forces were allowed to penetrate the borderlands before being cut off from their bases and harried and worried until they broke up or were forced to return to their own lands. Byzantine officers conducted a 'scorched earth' policy in many regions, and local populations in endangered regions were encouraged to keep lookouts posted, so that they could gather their livestock and other movable possessions and take refuge in mountain fortresses, thereby depriving enemy units of forage and booty. Although individual emperors did launch offensive expeditions in the period c.660–730, these were generally designed to forestall a major enemy attack into Roman territory in Asia Minor, or had a punitive nature, designed more as ideologically motivated revenge attacks on important enemy targets, and with no lasting strategic value (although they did have implications for military morale). Although a few notable successes were recorded, many of them failed and resulted in substantial defeats and loss of men and materials. The differentiation between different arms at the tactical level – between light and heavy cavalry or infantry, archers, lancers or spearmen – appears to have lessened, surviving only in a few contexts, associated with imperially maintained elite units. Byzantine armies and Arab armies looked very much the same.

Only from the 730s on, during the reign of Leo III (717–41), an emperor from a military background who seized the throne in 717, and more particularly that of his son and successor Constantine V (741–75), a campaigning emperor who introduced a number of administrative reforms in the army and established an elite field army at Constantinople in the 760s, does this situation begin to change. Political stability internally, the beginnings of economic recovery in the later 8th century and dissension among their enemies, enabled the Byzantines to re-establish a certain equilibrium by the year 800. In spite of

occasional major defeats (for example, the annihilation of a Byzantine force following a Bulgar surprise attack in 811, and the death in battle of the emperor Nikephoros I) and an often unfavourable international political situation, the Byzantines were able to begin a more offensive policy with regard to the Islamic power to the east and the Bulgars in the north – in the latter case, combining diplomacy and missionary activity with military threats. By the early 10th century, and as the Caliphate was weakened by internal strife, the Byzantines were beginning to establish a certain advantage; and in spite of the fierce and sometimes successful opposition of local Muslim

warlords (such as the emirs of Aleppo in the 940s and 950s), there followed a series of brilliant reconquests of huge swathes of territory in north Syria and Iraq, the annihilation of the second Bulgarian empire, and the beginnings of the reconquest of Sicily and southern Italy. By the death in 1025 of the soldier-emperor Basil II ‘the Bulgar-slayer’ (976–1025) the empire was once again the paramount political and military power in the eastern Mediterranean basin, rivalled only by the Fatimid Caliphate in Egypt and Syria.

The walls of Constantinople (5th century).
(Author's collection)



But the offensive warfare that developed from the middle of the 9th century had important effects upon the organisation of the armies. The provincial militias became less suited to the requirements of such campaigning, tied as they had become to their localities and to the seasonal campaigning dictated by Arab or Bulgar raiders. Instead, regular field armies with a more complex tactical structure and more offensive *élan* developed, partly under the auspices of a new social elite of military commanders who were also great landowners, partly encouraged and financed by the state. Mercenary troops played an increasingly important role as the state began to commute military service in the provincial armies for cash with which to pay them. By the middle of the 11th century, a large portion of the imperial armies was made up of indigenously recruited mercenary units together with Norman, Russian, Turkic and Frankish mercenaries. The successes achieved between c.900 and 1030 were thus based on effective organisation and better resources than in the preceding period. Morale and ideology also played a key role, while the increase in the tactical complexity of Byzantine field armies played a significant part, with the various different types of arms familiar from the late Roman period, which had all but vanished in the period of crisis of the 7th and 8th centuries, reappearing once more. Arab commentators remark on the effectiveness of the Byzantine heavy cavalry 'wedge', employed with, literally, crushing effect in the Byzantine wars with both Muslims and northern foes such as the Bulgars and the Rus' of Kiev.

This expansionism had its negative results, however. Increasing state demands clashed with greater aristocratic resistance to tax-paying; political factionalism at court led to policy failures, the overestimation of imperial military strength, and neglect of defensive structures. When Seljuk Turkish raiding parties were able to defeat piecemeal a major imperial force in 1071 and capture the emperor Romanos IV, the empire could

offer no organised counter-attack, with the result that central Asia Minor was lost permanently to the empire. Major military and fiscal reforms under the emperors of the Komnenos dynasty (a military aristocratic clan) from 1081 re-established stability and, to a degree, the international position of the empire. While foreign mercenary units continued to play a prominent role, the recruitment of indigenous Byzantine units specialising in a variety of arms restored the ability of the imperial armies to fight external enemies on their own terms. This was partly based on a reformed fiscal administration, on the one hand, and the raising and maintenance of troops on the basis of grants of revenue to certain individuals in return for the provision of trained soldiers, both infantry and cavalry. Increasing western influence, in the form of the introduction of weapons such as the crossbow and the adoption of western heavy cavalry tactics, differentiate this period from the preceding century. But the successes of the new dynasty were relatively short-lived: overexpansion, the loss of Bulgaria and much of the Balkans to what might be called 'nationalist' rebellions, and the collapse of the empire into renewed factional strife in the 1180s and 1190s, laid it open to external threat. This materialised in the form of the fourth crusade. The capture and sack of Constantinople in 1204 and the subsequent partition of the empire among the Venetian and western victors ended the empire's role as a major political and military power, although it survived after the recovery of Constantinople in 1261 and re-establishment of an imperial regime, on an ever smaller territorial scale, until only Constantinople and a few Aegean islands remained. And in 1453 the Ottoman Sultan Mehmet II extinguished even this remnant.

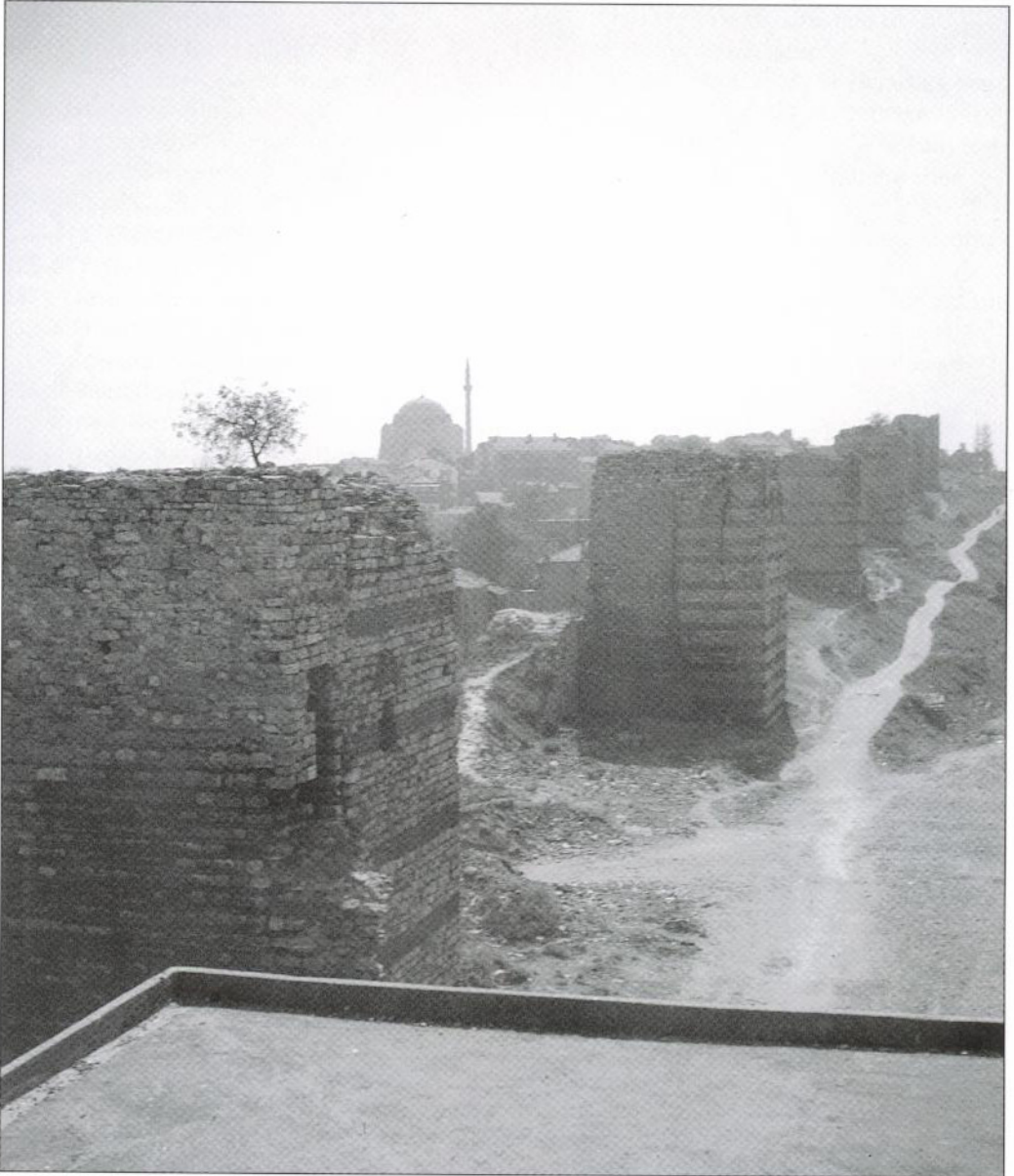
There are, very roughly, five phases of military development in the history of the Byzantine empire: reconquest and expansion under Justinian in the 6th century; contraction, localisation and a primarily defensive character in the 7th and 8th centuries; consolidation, recovery and

a more offensive approach in the period from the 9th to the early 11th century; the breakdown and reform of the structures inherited from the late ancient period during the 11th and 12th centuries, with a brief expansion back into Asia Minor under the emperors Alexios I, John II and Manuel until the 1170s; and a final, slow decline as the empire shrank under the effects of, first, the partition which followed the fourth

crusade; second, the growth of the power of Serbia in the 14th century; and third, of that of the Ottomans in the 14th and 15th centuries.

BELOW The walls of Constantinople (5th century). (Author's collection)

FOLLOWING PAGE Although many routes followed Roman roads, Byzantine armies often used older tracks and paths which predated the Romans.



Major Byzantium routes in Asia Minor



Chronology

- 474–475 Zeno emperor in east
475–476 Basiliscus usurps power in east
476 Last western Roman emperor, Romulus Augustulus, dies
476–491 Zeno (restored)
491–518 Anastasios I emperor in east
493–526 Theoderic rules Ostrogothic kingdom of Italy
c.503 Anastasios recognises authority, as representative of the Romans, of Clovis, king of the Franks
507–711 Kingdom of Visigoths in Spain
518–527 Justin I
527 Justinian I becomes emperor
533–534 Belisarius reconquers Africa (pacification completed in 540s)
534 Belisarius begins reconquest of Italy (war lasts until 553)
537 Dedication of the new Church of the Holy Wisdom (Hagia Sophia) in Constantinople
540 Persian king Chosroes I takes Antioch in Syria
542+ Plague in the Byzantine world
550+ Avars establish rule over Slavs north of Black Sea and Danube
552 Narses defeats Totila and last Ostrogothic resistance in Italy
553+ Reconquest of south-east Spain from Visigoths
558 Treaty with Avars and agreement to pay ‘subsidies’
562 ‘Fifty-year peace’ signed with Persia
564–591 Wars with Persia
566+ Slavs begin to infiltrate across Danube frontier; pressure on frontier fortresses from Avars
568+ Lombards driven westward from Danube, invade Italy.
572 Lombards besiege Ravenna
577 Major invasion of Balkans led by Avars
584, 586 Avaro–Slav attacks on Thessaloniki
591–602 Gradual success in pushing Avars back across Danube
602 Maurice overthrown, Phokas proclaimed emperor
603 War with Persia; situation in Balkans deteriorates
610 Phokas overthrown by Heraclius, son of exarch of Africa at Carthage
611–620s Central and northern Balkans lost
614–619 Persians occupy Syria, Palestine and Egypt
622 Mohammed leaves Mecca for Medina (the ‘Hijra’)
622–627 Heraclius campaigns in east against Persians
626 Combined Avaro–Slav and Persian siege of Constantinople fails
626–628 Heraclius defeats Persian forces in east
629 Peace with Persia
634+ Arabs begin raids into Palestine
634–646 Arab conquest and occupation of Syria, Palestine, Mesopotamia, Egypt (636 – battle of Gabitha/Yarmuk)
644+ Beginning of long-term raids and plundering expeditions against Byzantine Asia Minor
655 Sea battle of Phoenix, Byzantines defeated by Muslim fleet
662 Constans II leads expedition through Balkans into Italy, takes up residence in Sicily
668 Constans assassinated; Mizizios proclaimed emperor in Sicily, but defeated by forces loyal to Constantine IV
674–678 Arab blockade and yearly sieges of Constantinople. First recorded use of ‘liquid fire’ (Greek fire), to destroy Arab fleet
679–680 Arrival of Bulgars on Danube; defeat of Byzantine forces under Constantine IV

- 680–681 Third council of Constantinople (sixth ecumenical council)
- 685–692 Truce between caliphate and Byzantium (Arab civil war)
- 691–692 Quinisext or Trullan council at Constantinople
- 693 Byzantine defeat at Sebastoupolis
- 698 Carthage falls to Arabs; final loss of Africa
- 717–718 Siege of Constantinople; Leo, general of Anatolikon, seizes power and crowned as Leo III
- 726–730 Leo condones iconoclastic views of some bishops. Beginnings of iconoclast controversy
- 739–740 Leo and Constantine defeat Arab column at Akroinon
- 739 Earthquake hits Constantinople
- 741 Artabasdos, Leo's son-in-law, rebels against Constantine V and seizes Constantinople
- 743–744 Artabasdos defeated
- 746+ Plague in Constantinople
- 750 Abbasid revolution, removal of Umayyads from power, capital of Caliphate moved to Baghdad
- 750s–770s Constantine launches major expeditions against Bulgars and Arabs
- 792 Byzantines under Constantine VI defeated by Bulgars at Markellai
- 797 Constantine VI deposed by mother Irene; blinded and dies
- 800 Coronation of Charlemagne by pope in St Peters, Rome
- 802 Irene deposed by chief finance minister Nikephoros (Nikephoros I)
- 811 Nikephoros defeated and killed by forces under Khan Krum after initially successful campaign in Bulgaria
- 813 Bulgar victories over Byzantine forces
- 815 Leo V convenes synod at Constantinople; iconoclasm reintroduced as official policy
- 821–823 Rebellion of Thomas 'the Slav'
- 824+ Beginning of Arab conquest of Sicily and of Crete
- 838 Arab invasion of Asia Minor; siege and sack of Amorion
- 843 Council held in Constantinople to reaffirm acts of seventh ecumenical council; empress regent Theodora and chief courtiers restore images; end of official iconoclasm
- 850s Missionary activity in Bulgaria
- 860 Rus' (Viking) attack on Constantinople; mission to Chazars of St Cyril
- 863 Major Byzantine victory over Arabs at Poson in Anatolia
- 864 Conversion of Bulgar Khan and leaders. Council convoked by Basil I at Constantinople to settle Photian schism: Photios deposed, Ignatios, his predecessor, reinstated. Bulgaria placed under Constantinopolitan ecclesiastical jurisdiction (contrary to papal demands)
- 900+ Final loss of Sicily; Bulgar expansionism under Tsar Symeon; war with Byzantines
- 917 Bulgar victory at river Achelo
- 922 Peace with Bulgars
- 923–944 Byzantine conquests and eastward expansion led by general John Kourkouas
- 960–961 Recovery of Crete under general Nikephoros Phokas
- 963+ Major Byzantine offensives in east, creation of new frontier regions
- 965 Nikephoros II captures Tarsus and Cyprus
- 969 Nikephoros II captures Aleppo and Antioch
- 969–976 Reign of John I Tzimiskes. Continuation of eastern expansion; defeat of Bulgars with help of Rus' allies under Svyatoslav; defeat of Rus' at Silistra (971)
- 975 John I invades Palestine, takes several towns and fortresses, but withdraws
- 985+ Bulgar resistance in western Balkans leads to growth of Bulgarian empire under Tsar Samuel
- 989 Conversion of Vladimir of Kiev to Christianity
- 990–1019 Basil II crushes Bulgar resistance; Bulgaria reincorporated into empire, Danube new frontier in north
- 1022 Armenian territories annexed to empire
- 1034–1041 Michael IV takes first steps in debasement of gold currency

- 1054 Schism with papacy
- 1055 Seljuks take Baghdad; Norman power in southern Italy expanding
- 1071 Romanos IV defeated and captured at Mantzikert by Seljuks; beginning of Turk occupation of central Anatolia; Normans take Bari
- 1070+ Major Petcheneg advances into Balkans; civil war within empire
- 1081 Alexios Komnenos rebels and defeats Nikephoros III and is crowned emperor
- 1082–1084 Norman invasion of western Balkan provinces
- 1091 Seljuk–Petcheneg siege of Constantinople; defeat of Petchenegs
- 1097+ First crusade; Seljuks defeated
- 1098–1099 Jerusalem captured; Latin principalities and Kingdom of Jerusalem established in Palestine and Syria
- 1108 Alexios defeats Normans under Bohemund
- 1111 Commercial privileges granted to Pisa
- 1130s Alliance with German empire against Normans of southern Italy
- 1138–1142 Byzantine confrontation with Crusader principality of Antioch
- 1143–1180 Manuel I Komnenos: pro-western politics become major factor in Byzantine foreign policy
- 1146–1148 Second crusade
- 1153 Treaty of Constanz between Frederick I (Barbarossa) and papacy against Byzantium
- 1155–1157 Successful imperial campaign in Italy; commercial and political negotiations with Genoa
- 1158–1159 Imperial forces march against Antioch
- 1160+ Successful imperial political involvement in Italy against German imperial interests; Manuel defeats Hungarians and Serbs in Balkans and reaffirms imperial pre-eminence
- 1169–1170 Commercial treaties with Pisa and Genoa
- 1171+ Byzantine–Venetian hostilities increase
- 1175–1176 Manuel plans crusade in east
- 1176 Defeat of imperial forces under Manuel by Seljuk Sultan Kilidj Aslan at Myriokephalon
- 1180 Manuel dies; strong anti-western sentiments in Constantinople
- 1182 Massacre of westerners, especially Italian merchants and their dependents, in Constantinople
- 1185 Normans sack Thessaloniki; Andronikos Komnenos deposed
- 1186+ Rebellion in Bulgaria, defeat of local Byzantine troops, establishment of second Bulgarian empire
- 1187 Defeat of third crusade at battle of Horns of Hattin; Jerusalem retaken by Saladin
- 1192 Treaties with Genoa and Pisa
- 1203–1204 Fourth crusade, with Venetian financial and naval support, marches against Constantinople; after the capture and sack of the city in 1204, the Latin empire is established, along with several principalities and other territories under Latin or Venetian rule
- 1204–1205 Successor states in Nicaea, Epirus and Trebizond established
- 1205 Latin emperor Baldwin I defeated by Bulgars
- 1259 Michael VIII succeeds to throne in empire of Nicaea; Nicaean army defeats combined Latin and Epirot army at battle of Pelagonia; fortress town of Mistra handed over to Byzantines (Nicaea)
- 1261 During absence of main Latin army Nicaean forces enter and seize Constantinople
- 1265 Pope invites Charles of Anjou, brother of Louis IX of France, to support him militarily against Manfred of Sicily and the Hohenstaufen power in Italy
- 1266 Manfred of Sicily defeated at battle of Benevento by Charles of Anjou; Angevin plans, supported by papacy, evolve to invade and conquer the Byzantine empire
- 1274 Gregory X summons second council of Lyons; representatives of Byzantine Church present; union of the Churches agreed, under threat of papally-approved invasion led by

- Charles of Anjou; union not accepted in the Byzantine empire
- 1280–1337 Ottomans take nearly all remaining Byzantine possessions in Asia Minor (Ephesus 1328, Brusa 1326)
- 1282 ‘Sicilian vespers’; death of Charles of Anjou and end of his plans to invade Byzantium
- 1285 Council of Constantinople (‘second synod of Blachernae’): discussed and rejected pro-western interpretation of the Trinity as enunciated by the patriarch John XI Bekkos. Also rejected decisions of Council of Lyons (1274)
- 1303 Andronikos II hires Catalan company as mercenary troop
- 1321–1328 Civil war between Andronikos II and Andronikos III
- 1329 Turks take Nicaea
- 1331–1355 Stefan Dushan Kral (King) of Serbia
- 1337 Turks take Nicomedia
- 1340+ Serbian empire under Stefan Dushan at height of power
- 1341–1347 Civil war between John V (supported by Serbs) and John VI Kantakouzenos (with Turkish help)
- 1346 Stefan Dushan crowned emperor of the Serbs and Greeks
- 1347 Black death reaches Constantinople
- 1354–1355 Civil war between John VI and John V (backed by Genoa); Ottomans employed as allies establish themselves in Gallipoli and Thrace
- 1355 John VI abdicates and enters a monastery; John V proposes union of Churches to Pope
- 1365 Ottomans take Adrianople, which becomes their capital
- 1366 John V visits Hungary seeking support against Ottoman threat
- 1371 Ottomans defeat Serbs in battle
- 1373 John V forced to submit to Ottoman Sultan Murat I; John’s son Andronikos IV rebels, but is defeated
- 1376–1379 Civil war in Byzantium: Andronikos IV rebels against John V, who is supported by his younger son Manuel
- 1379 John V restored with Turkish and Venetian support
- 1388 Bulgarians defeated by Ottomans
- 1389 Battle of Kosovo: Serbs forced to withdraw by Ottomans, Serb empire ends; accession of Bayezit I
- 1393 Turks capture Thessaly; battle of Trnovo, Bulgarian empire destroyed
- 1396 Sigismund of Hungary organises crusade against Ottoman threat, but is utterly defeated at Nicopolis
- 1397–1402 Bayezit I besieges Constantinople, but army withdrawn when Turks defeated by Timur at battle of Ankara (1402)
- 1399–1402 Manuel II tours Europe to elicit military and financial support; in December 1400 he stayed as a guest of Henry IV in London
- 1422 Murat II lays siege to Constantinople
- 1423 Governor of Thessaloniki (a brother of John VIII) hands the city over to the Venetians
- 1430 Thessaloniki retaken by Ottomans; populace and Venetian garrison massacred
- 1439 Council of Ferrara moves to Florence; union of Churches formally agreed by emperor John VIII, present at council
- 1444 Hungarians and western crusaders, led by Vladislav of Hungary and Poland, defeated at battle of Varna; Vladislav killed in battle
- 1448 John VIII dies; his brother Constantine, Despot of the Morea, succeeds as Constantine XI, with coronation at Mistra in 1449
- 1451 Mehmet II becomes Sultan
- 1452 Union of Churches proclaimed at Constantinople
- 1453 Mehmet II lays siege to Constantinople; 29 May, Janissaries break through defences and permit main Ottoman army to enter city; Constantine XI, the last emperor, died in the fighting, and his body was never identified.
- 1460 Mistra falls to the Turks
- 1461 Trebizond falls to the Turks

The political world of Byzantium

The Christian Roman state was structured as a hierarchy of administrative levels: at the top was the emperor, understood to be God's representative, surrounded by a palace and household apparatus, the centre of imperial government and administration. Civil and fiscal government was delegated from the emperor to the praetorian prefects, whose prefectures were the largest territorial circumscriptions in the state; each prefecture was further divided into *dioecesaes* or dioceses, which had a predominantly fiscal aspect; and each diocese was divided into *provinciae* or provinces, territorial units of fiscal and judicial administration. These were further divided into self-governing *poleis* or *civitates*, the cities, each with its *territorium* or

The Byzantine fortress of Charpete (Harput), rebuilt in later medieval times. (Author's collection)

hinterland (which might be more or less extensive, according to geographical, demographic and other factors).

Rural production dominated the economy, but the cities were the homes of a literate élite of landowners. Social status was largely determined by one's relationship to the system of imperial titles and precedence, whether one had held an active post in the imperial bureaucracy, and at what level, and so forth, although regional variations were marked. The Church and the theological system it represented (from the late 4th century the official religion of the Roman state) played a central role in the economy of the Roman world – it was a major landowner – as well as in imperial politics, in influencing the moral and ethical system of the Roman world, and in directing imperial religious policy. The prevailing view was that



the emperor was chosen by God, that he had to be Orthodox, and that his role was to defend the interests of Orthodoxy and the Roman i.e. Christian *oikoumenê* (the inhabited, civilised – Roman – world). The political implications were such that heresy was construed as treason, and opposition to the (Orthodox) emperor could effectively be treated as heresy. The late Roman state was thus a complex bureaucracy, rooted in and imposed upon a series of overlapping social formations structured by local variations on essentially the same social relations of production across the whole central and east Mediterranean and Balkan world. Social and political tensions were exacerbated by religious divisions, local economic conditions, imperial politics, and the burden placed upon the tax-paying population as a result of the state's needs in respect of its administrative apparatus and, in particular, its armies.

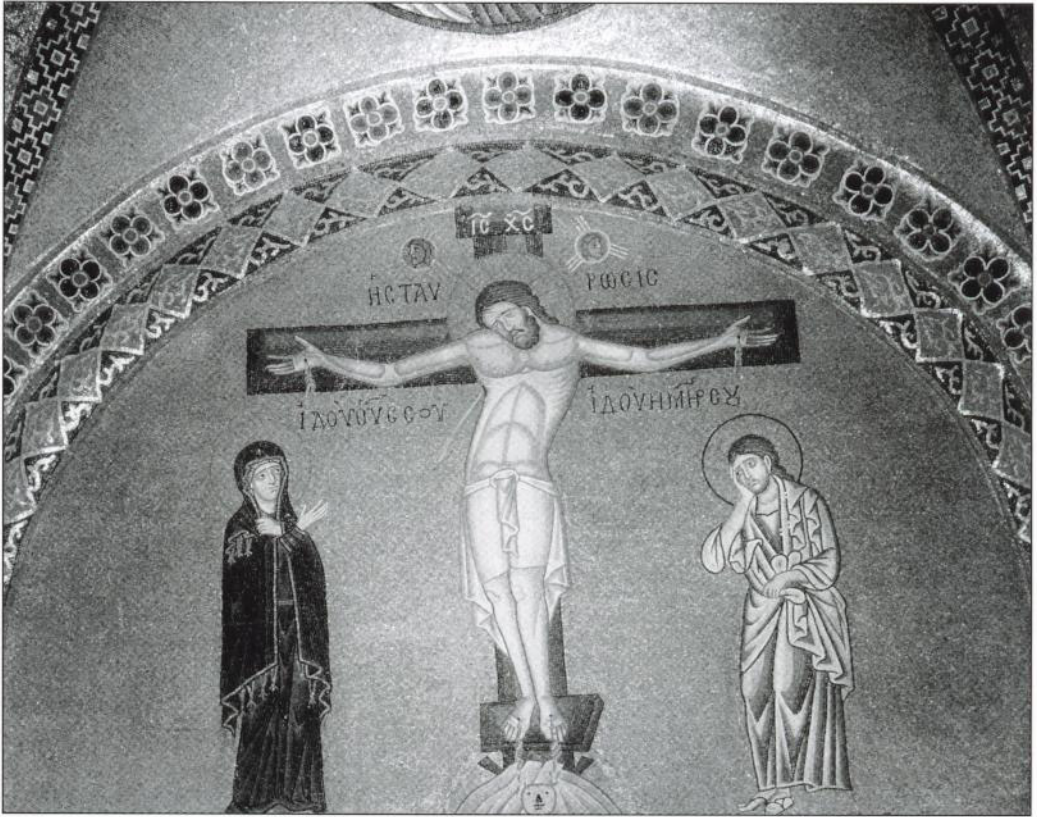
These structures were radically transformed between the later 6th and early 9th centuries, and as the result of a number of factors, the single most important being the Islamic conquests. By 642 all of Egypt and the middle-eastern provinces had been lost, Arab forces had penetrated deep into Asia Minor and Libya, and imperial forces had been withdrawn into Asia Minor, to be settled across the provinces of the region as the only available means of supporting them. Within a period of some 12 years, therefore, the empire lost something over half its area and three-quarters of its resources – a drastic loss for an imperial state which still had to maintain and equip a considerable army and an effective administrative bureaucracy if it was to survive at all. While many of the developments which led to this transformation were in train long before the 7th-century crisis, it was this conjuncture that served to bring things to a head and promote the structural responses that followed.

The changes that accompanied the developments of the 7th century affected all areas of social, cultural and economic life.

There occurred a 'ruralisation' of society, a result of the devastation, abandonment, shrinkage or displacement of many cities in Asia Minor as a result of invasions and raids. The defensive properties of 'urban' sites, their direct relevance to military, administrative or ecclesiastical needs, and so on, played the key role in whether a city survived or not. Constantinople became the pre-eminent city of the empire.

The social elite was transformed as 'new men' selected by the emperors on a more obviously meritocratic basis increased in number, and who were initially heavily dependent on the emperor and on imperially sponsored positions. Yet as a result of its increasing grip on state positions and the lands it accrued through the rewards attached to such service, this elite soon turned into an aristocracy, during the 8th and 9th centuries still very dependent on the state, during the 10th and especially the 11th increasingly independent. The state had to compete directly with a social group whose enormous landed wealth and entrenched position in the apparatuses of the state meant that it posed a real threat to central control of fiscal resources.

The events of the 7th century also produced a reassertion of central state power over late Roman tendencies to decentralisation. The state was both limited, and in its turn partly defined, by the nature of key economic relationships. This is exemplified in the issue and circulation of coin, the basic mechanism through which the state converted agricultural produce into transferable fiscal resources. Coin was issued chiefly to oil the wheels of the state machinery, and wealth was appropriated and consumed through a redistributive fiscal mechanism: the state issued gold in the form of salaries and largesse to its bureaucracy and armies, who exchanged a substantial portion thereof for goods and services in maintaining themselves. The state could thus collect much of the coin it put into circulation through tax, the more so since fiscal policy generally demanded tax in gold and offered change in bronze.



Church of the monastery at Daphni, Greece
(11th century). The crucifixion. (AKG, Berlin)

There were periods when this system was constrained by circumstances, resulting in the *ad hoc* arrangements for supplying soldiers and raising tax in kind, for example (as in the 7th century), and it also varied by region. But in a society in which social status and advancement (including the self-identity of the aristocracy) were connected with the state, these arrangements considerably hindered economic activity not directly connected with the state's activities. For the continued power and attraction of the imperial establishment at Constantinople, with its court and hierarchical system of precedence, as well as the highly centralised fiscal administrative structure, consumed the whole attention of the Byzantine elite, hindering the evolution of a more localised aristocracy which might otherwise have invested in the economy and society of its own localities and towns, rather than in the imperial system.

The growth in the power of the elite was stimulated by two developments. In the first place, there took place an increasing subordination of the peasantry to both private landlords and to holders of grants of state revenue. In the second place the state conceded from the later 11th century the right to receive the revenues from certain public (i.e. fiscal, or taxed) districts or of certain imperial estates with their tenants, encouraging a process of very gradual alienation of the state's fiscal and juridical rights. By exploiting the award by the emperors of fiscal exemptions of varying sorts, landlords – both secular and monastic – were able to keep a larger proportion of the revenues extracted from their peasant producers for themselves, as rent, while the government's hold on the remaining fiscal land of the empire was constantly

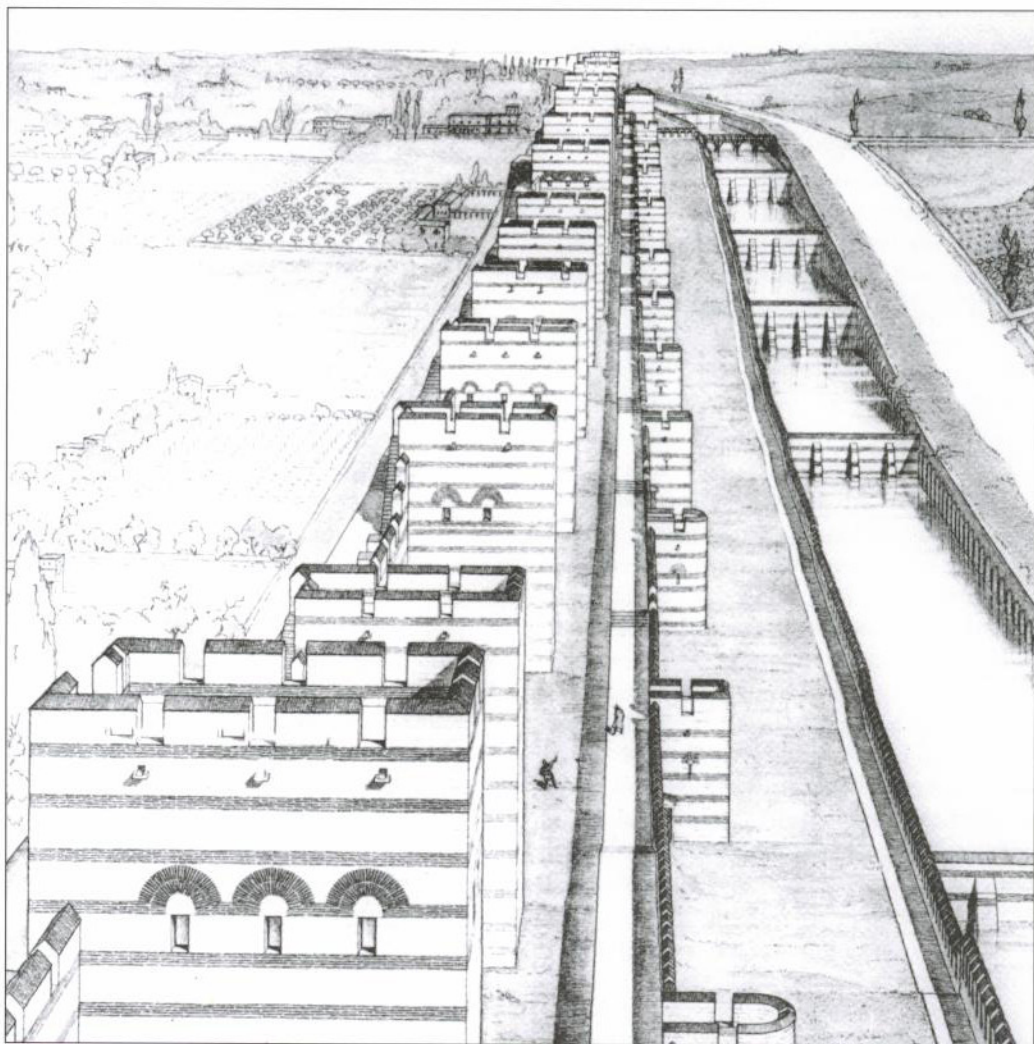


Illuminated manuscript of the *History of John Skylitzes* (11th century), fol. 10v. Proclamation of Emperor Leo V in 813. (Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid)

challenged by the provincial elite. This had important consequences, for it meant that the overall burden placed on the peasant producers grew considerably. Tenants of landlords with access to imperial patronage attempted to free themselves from many of these impositions through obtaining grants of exemption of one sort or another, although the needs and demands of the local military meant that privileges were often entirely ignored. The amount of resources lost to the state through grants of exemption from additional taxes cannot have been negligible, while the burden of landlords' demands on peasant tenants is hinted at by an 11th-century writer who notes that cancelling fiscal privileges freed the rural

communities from the burdens which they owed in rents and services.

The split between the interests of the landed and office-holding elite on the one hand and the government which is evident during the later 10th and 11th centuries was papered over from the time of Alexios I and until the end of the 12th century by virtue of the transformation of the empire under the Komnenos dynasty into what was, in effect, a gigantic family estate, ruled through a network of magnates, relatives and patronage that expanded rapidly during the 12th century and that, in uniting the vested interests of the dominant social-economic elite with those of a ruling family, reunited also the interests of the former with those of a centralised empire. The factional politics that resulted from these developments, in particular over who would control Constantinople and sit on

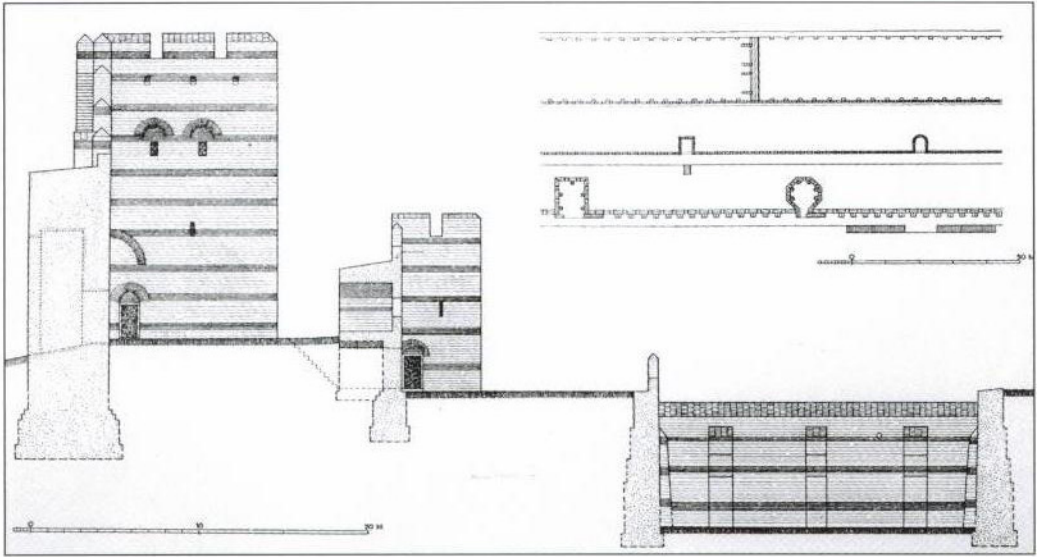


ABOVE The walls of Constantinople (5th century).
(Author's collection)

RIGHT Gold *nomisma* of Theophilus (829–842).
Reverse: busts of Michael II (820–829) and Constantine,
Theophilus' son. (Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University
of Birmingham)

the throne, become apparent in the squabbles and civil wars which followed the defeat of Romanos IV by the Seljuks in 1071, a situation resolved only by the seizure of power by Alexios I in 1081. By the end of the 12th century, if not already a century earlier, the vast majority of peasant producers in the empire had become tenants, in one form or another,





The walls of Constantinople (5th century).
(Author's collection)

of a landlord. The elite had meanwhile crystallised into a multifunctional aristocracy, led by a few very powerful families, with a number of dependent subordinate and collateral clans. Under the Komnenoi, the imperial family and its immediate associates

monopolised military and higher civil offices, while the older families who had been its former rivals dominated the bureaucratic machinery of the state. In the provinces local elites tended to dominate. It was these social relations that facilitated the internecine strife and factionalism that marks the 14th and 15th centuries in particular.

Neighbours and enemies

We have already referred to the strategically very awkward situation of the Byzantine state, with enemies or potential enemies on virtually every front and with a constant need to fight wars on more than one front at a time. In the north and west the situation was especially complex as a result of the variety of neighbouring states and political powers. From its establishment in the 680s, the Bulgar Khanate rapidly grew in power, and until its extinction at the hands of the emperor Basil II, known as the 'Bulgar-slayer' (976–1025), represented a constant threat to the security of imperial territory in the Balkans. Throughout the 8th and 9th centuries and into the early 10th century, Bulgar power and influence grew, in spite of successful counter-attacks under the emperor Constantine V in the 760s and 770s. The nadir of Byzantine fortunes was probably the year 811, when the Khan Krum defeated and destroyed an imperial army, killing the emperor Nikephoros I. Conversion to Christianity of elements of the ruling elite in the 860s was intended to stabilise the situation in favour of Byzantium; but the gradual Byzantinisation of this elite only contributed to the growth of an imperialistic Bulgar politics which hoped to bring the two states together under a Bulgar dynasty. But Bulgar successes under the Christian Tsar Symeon in the first 15 years of the 10th century were as dangerous; while the reassertion of Bulgar imperial ideology under Tsar Samuel inaugurated a conflict – after a relatively peaceful period in the middle of the 10th century – and led finally to the eradication of Bulgar independence and the recovery of much of the Balkans up to the Danube in the early 11th century. In spite of occasional rebellions, the region remained firmly in Byzantine hands until just before

the fourth crusade in 1203–1204. The Latin division of the empire after 1204 resulted in the rapid growth of local Balkan cultural independence and the evolution of new states – the Serbian empire of Stefan Dushan being perhaps the most remarkable. Only the arrival of the Ottomans in the 14th century put an end to this development.

Relations with Italy and the west were similarly complicated. As we have noted already, Italy, north Africa and the south-eastern corner of the Iberian peninsula had been reconquered under Justinian, at enormous cost, from the Ostrogoths, Vandals and Visigoths respectively. But the appearance of the Lombards in Italy (pursued by the Avars, at Byzantine request) soon resulted in the fragmentation of imperial possessions into a number of distinct regions under military commanders or *duces*. Imperial territory in the north-east and central regions was represented by the exarch, an officer with military and civil authority. But distance from Constantinople, local cultural differentiation and political conditions, together with the spiritual and political power of the Popes in Rome soon led to the gradual but inevitable diminution of imperial power. The extinction of the exarchate with the capture of Ravenna, its capital, at the hands of the Lombards in 751; increased papal dependence on the Franks for support against the Lombards, and increasingly autonomous and mutually competing local polities in the Italian peninsula had led to the reduction of imperial power to the regions of Calabria, Bruttium and Sicily by the early 9th century. Other political centres such as Naples remained technically Byzantine, but were in practice quite independent. Venice, which grew in importance from the early 9th century, likewise remained nominally an imperial territory.



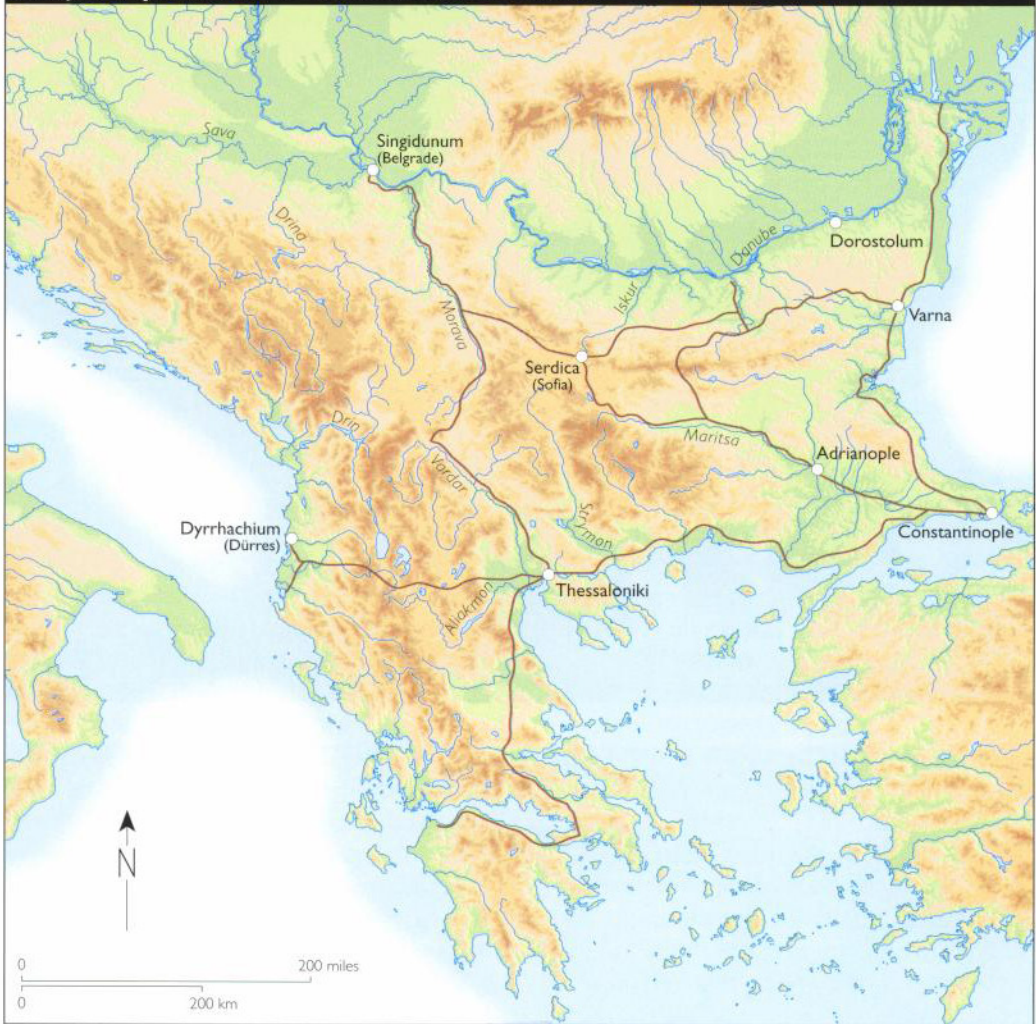
Monastery of Hosios Loukas, Greece (11th century).
Christ Pantokrator. (AKG, Berlin)

The coronation by the pope of Charles the Great – Charlemagne – as (western) Roman emperor in Rome in 800 set the seal on the political and cultural separation of east Rome and the west. Cultural differences, expressed in particular through ecclesiastical politics and the struggle between Franks, Byzantines and the papacy for dominance in the central and western Balkans, became increasingly apparent, complicated by rivalry within the eastern Church. Despite various attempts at marriage alliances between the Byzantine and various western courts, the growing political, cultural and military strength of the western world precluded any serious reassertion of east Roman imperial power in the central Mediterranean basin.

Byzantine influence was struck a further blow by the loss of Sicily to Islamic forces

during the 9th century. The weakening of the empire in the civil wars of the middle and later 11th century and the growth of the Crusading movement further complicated matters: caricatures of western arrogance and ignorance on one side were matched by equally inaccurate caricatures of Byzantine treachery and effete-ness on the other. Although the imperial revival under the Komnenos dynasty during the late 11th and 12th centuries made a rapprochement possible, including the development of a strong pro-western faction at Constantinople (promoted by the emperor Manuel I (1143–80)), the conflict between imperial interests in controlling trade and commerce and Italian merchant expansionism, coupled with cultural suspicion and Venetian political intrigue and opportunism, resulted in the launching of the fourth crusade, the sack of Constantinople, and the partition of the eastern empire into a number of Latin kingdoms and principalities.

Major Byzantine routes in the Balkans



The Byzantines faced particular difficulties in penetrating into the Balkans with their many narrow, easily-blocked passes and defiles.

A somewhat different tone existed in relations between Byzantium and the Rus', Norse settlers from the central Russian river belt who entered the Black Sea to trade and raid for booty, but who had soon become close trading partners with the empire (by the 920s certainly), and provided mercenary household troops for the emperors – from the 980s, the famous Varangian guard. Acceptance of Christianity under Vladimir in the 980s and a marriage alliance between the

latter and Basil II inaugurated a long period of Byzantine cultural and spiritual influence on the Rus', fundamentally inflecting the evolution of Russian culture, the Church and tsarist ideology. The enduring influence of Byzantine methods of cultural penetration in the Balkans was expressed most clearly in the structure, organisation and ideology of the Orthodox Church of the region.

The empire's main neighbours in the north and west until the 10th century were thus the Bulgars – with the various Serb and other Slav chiefdoms and principalities in the western Balkans supporting or being directly controlled by now one side, now the



The monastery church at Daphni, Greece (11th century). (Author's collection)

other; the Rus' beyond them, along with the various steppe peoples – Chazars from the 8th century, then during the 9th the Magyars (who go on to establish the Christianised kingdom of Hungary), the Pechenegs in the 10th and 11th centuries, and thereafter the Cumans, relations of the Seljuks in the east. In Italy and western and central Europe foreign relations were dominated by the papacy and the neighbouring Lombard Kingdom and duchies in the former region until the later 8th century, and thereafter by the Frankish empire in its various forms. In particular the 'German' empire of the Ottonian dynasty dominated central Europe and Italy from the 10th century, and its rulers had a keen interest in eastern Europe and the Balkans. During the 11th century the rising power of the young kingdom of Hungary introduced a new element into this equation. Eastern Roman relations with the kingdom of

Hungary were particularly strained during the 1150s and 1160s, for Hungary played an important role on the international political stage, in particular in relation to Byzantine policy with regard to the German empire. Hungarian interest in the north-western Balkans was perceived by Constantinople as a destabilising element and a threat to imperial interests. The emperor Manuel tried to address the issue by both military and diplomatic pressure, sending frequent expeditions to threaten dissident rulers in the region to follow the imperial line, and interfering in the dynastic politics of the Hungarian court. The rise of the Italian maritime cities, especially Venice, Pisa and Genoa with their powerful fleets and mercantile interests, was to play a key role in both the political and economic life of the empire from this time onward.

Perhaps the most dangerous foe the Byzantines had to face in the west were the Normans of southern Italy, who had served originally as mercenaries in the Byzantine armies, but who by the last decades of the

century had established an independent state of their own, and who invaded the Balkans from Italy during the reign of Alexios I in the 1090s and early 12th century. Eventually defeated on this front, they nevertheless went on to establish one of the most powerful states in the central Mediterranean, the Norman kingdom of Sicily, and presented a major threat to Byzantine interests throughout the century. Yet it was not the Normans who played the key role in diverting the fourth crusade in 1203–1204 from its original targets in the Muslim east to Byzantium, but rather the republic of Venice, and it was Venetian interests that dictated the form taken by the political fragmentation of the empire in the period immediately thereafter.

Until the extinction of the Sassanid empire by the Islamic armies in the 630s and early 640s, the Persian state had been the main opponent of the Roman empire in the east. Thereafter, the Umayyad (661–750) and then Abbasid (751–1258) Caliphates posed a

constant threat to the empire. But this complex history falls into several phases: 650s–720s, when Arab–Islamic invasions were a regular phenomenon aimed at the destruction of the east Roman state; 720s–750s, when a *modus vivendi* had been established, but in which Muslim attacks remained a constant source of economic and political dislocation; and thereafter until the middle of the 11th century, when the collapse and fragmentation of Abbasid authority made it possible for the empire to re-establish a military and political pre-eminence in the region. The increasingly important role of Turkic slave and mercenary soldiers in the Caliphate from the 840s, and the eventual arrival of the Seljuk Turks in the 1050s, was to alter this picture drastically. A combination of internal political dissension and a relatively minor military defeat at the hands of the Seljuk Sultan Alp Aslan in

General view of the monastery at Daphni, Greece (11th century). (Author's collection)





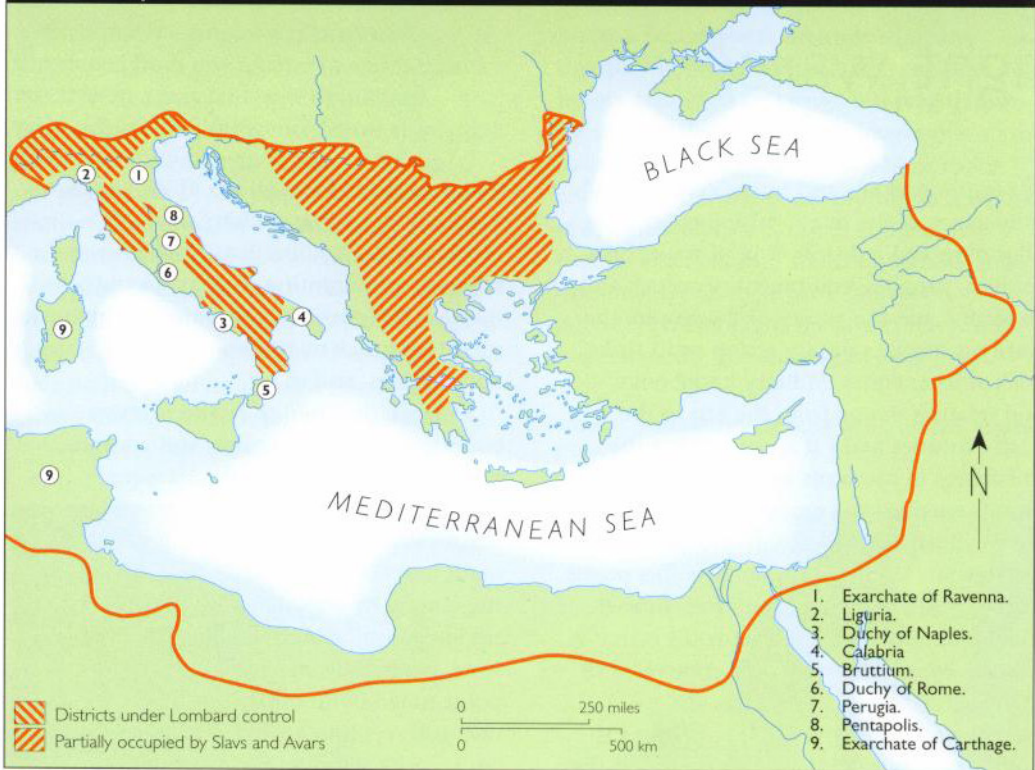
Psalter of Basil II (10th century). The emperor victorious. (Biblioteca Marciana, Venice)

eastern Anatolia in 1071 (battle of Mantzikert, mod. Malazgirt) resulted in the imperial loss of central Asia Minor, which henceforth became dominated by groups of Turkic nomadic pastoralists (known as Türkmén) who presented a constant threat to all forms of sedentary occupation. The

growth of a series of Turkic emirates in the region thereafter made recovery of the region impossible; and the rise of the dynasty of Osman – the Ottomans – from the later 13th century was eventually to prove fatal to the east Roman empire.

The political world of Byzantium was thus complex and multifaceted. The government at Constantinople needed to run an efficient, intelligent and above all watchful diplomatic

The empire c. AD 600



ABOVE The Lombard invasion of Italy in 568 and the Slav immigration into the Balkans dramatically reduced Roman power in the west.

RIGHT Gold *histamenon nomisma* of Constantine VIII (1025–1028). Reverse: bust of the emperor. (Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham)

system, for it was on diplomacy, alliances, gifts and the careful use of intelligence that the empire depended. But when these failed, as they often did, it needed an army, and it is the imperial armies, the way they were maintained and how they fought, that is the main theme of this volume.



Why and how did Byzantium fight wars?

Byzantine generals and rulers were generally fully aware of the relationship between the allocation and redistribution of resources – soldiers, supplies, equipment, livestock and so forth – and the ability of the empire to ward off hostile military action or to strike back at its enemies. Military handbooks and treatises dating from the 6th to the 11th centuries make it apparent that the imbalance in resources between Byzantium and its enemies was recognised. Generals were exhorted not to give battle in unfavourable conditions, because this might lead to waste of life and resources; indeed the dominant motif in these works is that it was the Byzantines who were compelled to manoeuvre, to use delaying tactics, to employ ambushes and other stratagems to even the odds stacked against them; but that it was quite clearly a main war aim to win without having to fight a decisive battle. Victory could be achieved through a combination of delaying tactics, intelligent exploitation of enemy weaknesses, the landscape, seasonal factors, and diplomacy. Wars were costly, and for a state whose basic income derived from agricultural production, and which remained relatively stable as well as being vulnerable to both natural and man-made disasters, they were to be avoided if at all possible.

Another, closely related, factor in imperial strategic thinking was manpower: from a Byzantine perspective, they were always outnumbered, and strategy as well as diplomacy needed to take this factor into account in dealing with enemies. One way of evening the balance was to reduce enemy numbers: delay the enemy forces until they could no longer stay in the field, destroying or removing any possible sources of provisions and supplies, for example, misleading them with false information

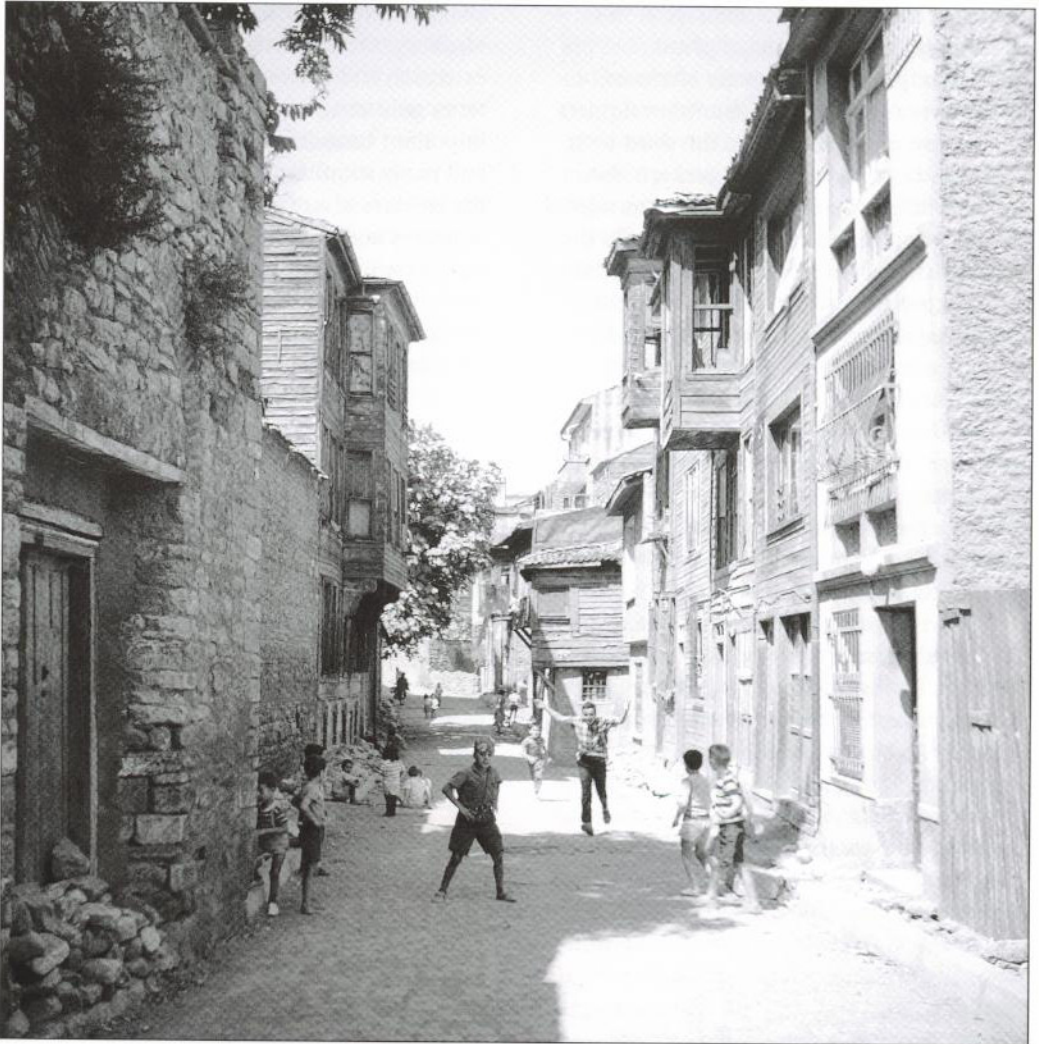
about Byzantine intentions, these are all methods which the military treatises recommend. Avoiding battle, which was a keystone of Byzantine strategy, would also increase the possibility that the enemy host might be struck by illness, run out of water and supplies, and so on.

Defence thus had to be the primary concern of Byzantine rulers and generals. Byzantine military dispositions were administered upon a consistent and logistically well-considered basis, and their main purpose was to secure the survival of the empire by deploying the limited resources available to the best effect. They were, necessarily, defensive in orientation, a point noted quite clearly by the mid-10th-century visitor from Italy, the ambassador Liutprand of Cremona, with regard to the precautions taken to secure Constantinople at night, in case of an unexpected enemy attack. The emphasis placed by Byzantine writers and governments on effective and intelligent diplomacy is not just a question of cultural preference informed by a Christian distaste for the shedding of blood: to the contrary, the continued existence of the state depended upon the deployment of a sophisticated diplomatic arsenal. The whole history of Byzantine foreign relations and both the theory and practice of Byzantine diplomacy reflect this. Diplomacy had its military edge, of course: good relations with the various peoples of the steppe were essential to Byzantine interests in the Balkans and Caucasus, because a weapon might thereby be created that could be turned on the enemies of the empire. Such contacts were also an essential source of information, of course, and much effort was expended in gathering information that might be relevant to the empire's defence.

Going to war was thus rarely the result of a planned choice made by emperors or their advisers, for the empire was perpetually threatened from one quarter or another, and was thus in a constant state of military preparedness. The difference between war and peace in the frontier areas became a matter, not of the state of the empire as a whole in relation to a particular neighbouring power, but rather of the part of the empire in which one found oneself. While recovery of former territories was permanently on the ideological agenda, efforts to implement it reflected an *ad hoc* reaction to an unforeseen advantage gained through victories in battle and the exploitation of favourable circumstances. In

real terms, the potential for the reconquest and restoration of lost territories was severely limited. Strategy was determined by the interplay between resources and political beliefs, tempered by ideological pragmatism: most Byzantine warfare was fought not on the basis of delivering a knock-out blow to the enemy, but on that of attempting to reach or maintain a state of parity or equilibrium, though attrition, raid and counter-raid, and destruction of the enemy's short-term potential. Members of the government and imperial court may have shared common

Street in Istanbul/Constantinople with traditional houses.
(Author's collection)



ideals in respect of their relations with the outside world; but the strategic dispositions of the armies of the later Roman and Byzantine empire were not necessarily arranged with these concerns as a priority.

Resources were a key element in strategic thinking, for obvious reasons – armies cannot fight without adequate supplies, equipment, training and shelter. But warfare was not necessarily conducted with a purely material advantage in mind, since ideological superiority played an important role in Byzantine notions of their own identity and role in the order of things; nor was it conducted with any longer-term strategic objective in mind. Any damage to the enemy was a good thing, but some ways of hitting the enemy also carried an ideological value – strategically wasteful attacks against symbolically important enemy fortresses or towns were carried out by all medieval rulers at one time or another, since the short-term propaganda value, associated perhaps also with a raising of morale, was often considered as valuable as any real material gains. By the same token, some theatres were ideologically more important than others. Fighting the barbarians in the Balkans and north of the Danube was regarded as much less prestigious and glorious than combating the religious foe, the Muslims in the east: an 11th-century writer remarks: ‘There seemed nothing grand (in fighting) the barbarians in the West ..., but were he (the emperor Romanos III) to turn to those living in the east, he thought that he could perform nobly ...!’

There is little evidence that warfare was conducted to gain resources that could then be deployed in a coherent way to further a given strategy, except in the sense that more territory and the wealth that usually accompanied it were desirable in themselves. Warfare was conducted on the basis of inflicting maximum damage to the enemy’s economy and material infrastructure – enslavement or killing of populations, destruction of fortifications and

urban installations, devastation of the countryside. Equally, measures to protect one’s own side had to be taken, and by the middle of the 10th century the Byzantines had developed both aspects of such warfare to a fine art. Both in the war against the Arabs in the east from the 7th to 10th centuries, and against Slavs and Bulgars in the west, Byzantine warfare was conducted effectively on the basis of a struggle of attrition. This is not to suggest that there was never a longer-term strategic aim or ulterior motive at issue – in the case of the accelerated eastward expansion in the 10th century and in the slightly later, but closely related, conquest of Bulgaria under Basil II, it is possible to suggest that this was the case, for example. In the first case, through an aggressive imperialism towards the minor Muslim powers in Syria and Jazīra, the extension and consolidation of the empire’s territorial strength in the area was clearly an important consideration; in the second case, and partly stimulated by the first development, the creation of a new resource-base for the emperors and Constantinopolitan government, independent of the power and influence of the eastern magnates, was a significant consideration; but it was also in the context of an equally practical decision to eradicate the threat from an independent Bulgaria and reassert imperial dominance throughout the Balkan regions. Both facets of these processes mirror very particular structural tensions



Gold *hyperpyron* of Michael VIII (1258–1282).
Obverse: the Virgin Mary within the walls of the city.
(Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham)

within Byzantine state and society, and at the same time they also demonstrate particularly clearly the extent to which the foreign policies and military strategy of a state can reflect power relations within the society as a whole.

Warfare for ideological reasons alone was very rare. Clearly, all defensive warfare could be justified on a range of such grounds – the threat to the empire's territory and population, the challenge to Orthodox rule and God's appointed ruler, the emperor at Constantinople, challenges to Roman sovereignty, and so forth. Offensive or aggressive warfare was, in the Christian Roman empire, a little more difficult to justify, but it was readily accomplished. But there is no doubt that the dominant element in Byzantine military thinking throughout the long history of the empire was defensive, and necessarily so in view of its strategic situation. Byzantium survived as long as it did because it was able to defend itself, intelligently exploit natural frontiers or boundaries in the crisis years of the 7th and 8th centuries, and diplomatic and political relationships thereafter. And whatever the specific details of the process of its political-historical withering away after 1204, the gradual demise of the Byzantine empire went hand-in-hand with its declining ability to muster the resources necessary to defend itself. Strategy was, in practical terms, a matter of pragmatic reaction to events in the world around the empire, only loosely informed by the political-ideological imperatives of the Christian Roman empire. In this respect, the political and strategic conditions of existence of the east Roman or Byzantine state rendered a grand strategy in the narrower sense irrelevant – the strategy of the empire was based on maintaining the conditions appropriate to political, cultural and ideological survival.

Defensive warfare

Wars can, crudely speaking, thus be divided into two broad categories, defensive and offensive, although it must be said at the

outset that pre-emptive attacks could count as both, and were frequently so justified. Defensive fighting took several forms: guerrilla tactics against enemy invaders; major confrontations between field armies, often following a protracted period of manoeuvring in which each side tried to outwit the other; or a combination of the two. The defensive campaigns fought against the first Islamic armies took this form, with the imperial forces struggling to match the mobility and speed of the Arab raiders, who were able to deprive the Roman commanders of the initiative not simply by virtue of their fast-moving, hard-hitting tactics, but also because the type of warfare they practised made any notion of a regular front untenable.

The Arab Islamic conquests radically altered the strategic and political geography of the whole east Mediterranean region. The complete failure of attempts to meet and drive back the invaders in open battle induced a major shift in strategy whereby open confrontations with the Muslim armies were avoided. The field armies were withdrawn first to north Syria and Mesopotamia, and shortly thereafter back to the line of the Taurus and Anti-Taurus ranges. By the mid-640s the armies which had operated in Syria, Palestine and Mesopotamia had been withdrawn into Anatolia. The regions across which they were based were determined by the ability of these districts to provide for the soldiers in terms of supplies and other requirements. The field forces thus came to be quartered across Asia Minor and Thrace, where they were now referred to by the Greek term for these districts, *themata* or 'themes'.

This distribution was intended both to meet logistical demands by providing each army with an adequate hinterland from which it could be supported and to meet the strategic needs of defence. But it was a very defensive strategy, and it meant that the economic hinterland of the frontier incurred substantial damage, subject as it was to regular devastation. There resulted the appearance by the 700s of a 'no-man's land' between the settled and economically safer



The ancient and medieval fortress at Acrocorinth, Greece, controlling entry to the Peloponnese. (Author's collection)

regions on both sides. The new arrangements did prevent the establishment by the Arabs of permanent bases in Asia Minor itself.

The *themata* or themes were at first merely groupings of provinces across which different armies were based. By 730 or thereabouts they had acquired a clear geographical identity; and by the later 8th century some elements of fiscal as well as military administration were set up on a thematic basis, although the late Roman provinces continued to subsist. The number of *themata* expanded as the empire's economic and political situation improved, partly through the original large military divisions being split up into different 'provincial' armies, and partly through the recovery in the last years of the 8th century and the reimposition of imperial authority over lands once held in the southern Balkans.

The localisation of recruitment and military identities which resulted from these arrangements led to a distinction between the regular elements – full-time soldiers – and the less competent or well-supplied

militia-like elements in each theme region. In the 760s a small elite force, known as the *tagmata* ('the regiments') was established under Constantine V (741–75), which quickly evolved into the elite field division for campaign purposes. It had better pay and discipline than both the regular and the part-time provincial units, and this was the first step in a tendency to recruit mercenary forces, both foreign and indigenous, to form special units and to serve for the duration of a particular campaign or group of campaigns. As imperial power recovered in the 9th and 10th centuries, the empire reasserted its military strength in the east, and the role and the proportion of such full-time units became ever more important.

Defensive strategy was determined by several elements. To begin with, raiding forces were to be held and turned back at the Taurus and Anti-Taurus passes, wherever possible. Where this policy of meeting and repulsing hostile attacks at the frontier did not work, local forces would harass the invaders, keeping track of every movement and the location of each party or group. Numerous small forts and fortresses along the major routes, located at crossroads or locations where supplies might be stored as

well as by the frontier passes through which enemy forces had to pass, reinforced the local troops. Although exposed to enemy action, these posts were a constant threat to any invading force. In addition, a series of frontier districts was set up in the 8th and 9th centuries as independent commands along the frontier, complementing the armies of the themes. Known as *kleisourarchiai* (*kleisourarchiai*), they emphasised the highly localised pattern of defence.

The empire suffered many defeats, especially in the earlier period, but it also witnessed some major successes, particularly where the invaders could be shadowed and the imperial armies brought together at the right time and place. These encounters showed that the strategy operated by the imperial forces could succeed, when the armies were well led and adequate intelligence of enemy movements was available. But the war in the east was largely a struggle between two equal powers, with the imperial side having the advantage of geography and communications to offset the superior numbers on the side of the Caliphate. Only in the 10th century, when the empire went over fully to the offensive, does this picture change. These defensive arrangements were progressively allowed to fall into disuse as the empire went onto the offensive after the middle of the 10th century. And when the empire's situation changed for the worse, as a result of the appearance from the 1040s and afterwards of a host of new enemies, the lack of an effective, deep defensive structure permitted the Seljuk Turks to conquer and permanently occupy central Asia Minor after the battle of Mantzikert in 1071 with virtually no opposition. The empire was never again able to re-establish its power in the region.

Pre-emptive attacks

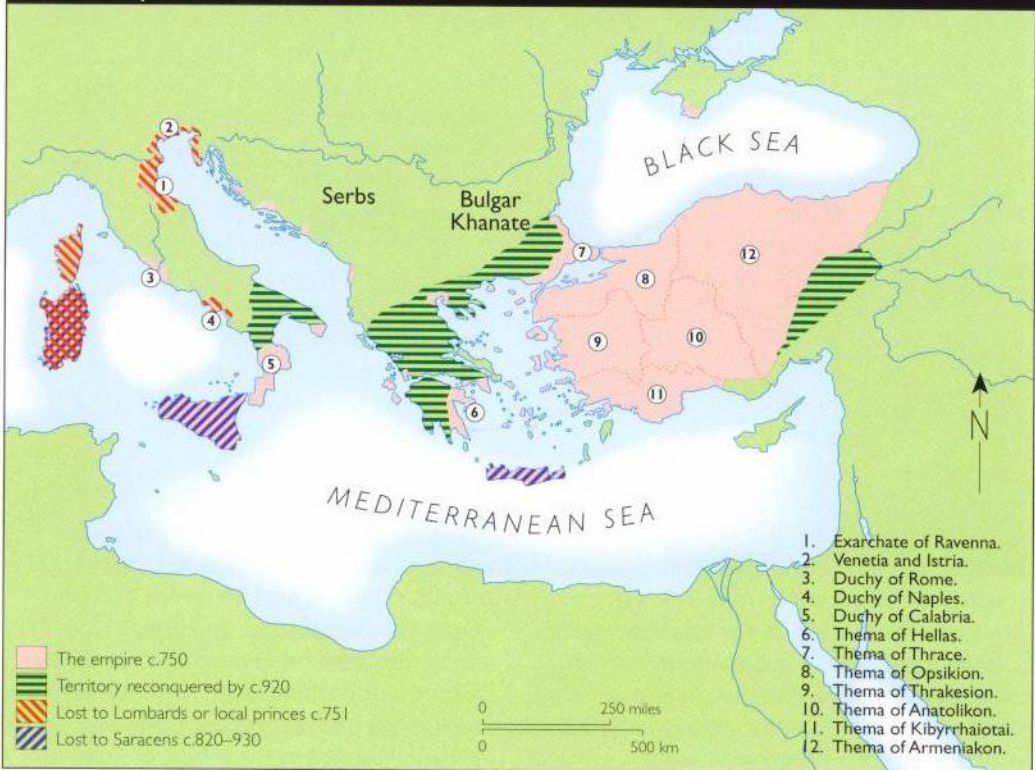
Part of the imperial defensive strategy entailed launching pre-emptive strikes against the enemy, partly aimed at

containment, partly at the reassertion of Roman ideological power. Some of these attacks were successful, some less so. Among the bleakest episodes in the history of the empire is the attack launched against the Bulgars by the emperor Nikephoros I in 811, which ended in both the death of the emperor and a crushing defeat. Nikephoros, who had been the chief finance officer of the empress Eirene, came to the throne in 802 and appears to have wished to defeat the Bulgars so comprehensively that the Bulgar khanate could be recovered for the empire. An expedition in 809 had reached the Bulgar capital at Pliska in north-east Bulgaria, and sacked it. The expedition of 811 was intended to establish a more permanent Roman presence in the region. Nikephoros ordered the assembly of a large force made up from contingents from the Asia Minor armies supplemented by troops from the European *themata* and the imperial guards units, the *tagmata*. There was a ceremonial aspect to the whole affair, since the emperor took victory for granted after the easy win in 809, and as well as the soldiers a large number of courtiers and palace officials also accompanied the expedition. But the imperial troops were eventually drawn into an ambush, where during a night attack they were utterly routed. The defeat was one of the blackest days of imperial history, no less of a catastrophe than the battle of Adrianople in 378 at which the emperor Valens had died fighting the Goths. The Bulgar khan became the most dangerous enemy the empire had to face for the next few years, and was able to lay siege to Constantinople itself in 813.

Offensive warfare

Given the empire's strategic problems noted already, most fighting could be justified in some way or other as 'defensive', even where it was clearly aggressively motivated. Such were the wars waged in the later 10th and early 11th centuries against the Bulgars and the Rus', for example, when the justification

The empire c. AD 700–950



After the initial shock of the Arab conquests and the huge losses incurred in the middle of the 7th century, the empire slowly recovered, establishing a new administrative infrastructure based around the imperial field armies, or *themata*.

for war was both the rejection of previously agreed arrangements which were seen by the emperor as dishonourable, the threat which ensued from the Bulgars to the imperial territories in Thrace, and the involvement of the Rus'. In the autumn of 965, and following the conquest by Byzantine armies of the islands of Crete and Cyprus, as well as of Cilicia in southern Asia Minor and its incorporation into the empire, Bulgarian envoys arrived at the court of the emperor. Their purpose was to request the payment of the 'tribute' paid by Constantinople to the Bulgar tsar as part of the guarantee for the long-lasting peace which had been established after the death of the Tsar Symeon in 927. But the empire was in a very

different position since the time at which the original agreement had been made. The emperor Nikephoros II Phokas (963–69), reflecting the outrage represented by the presumptive demand of the Bulgarians, had the envoys sent home in disgrace. Instead of paying, he despatched a small force to demolish a number of Bulgarian frontier posts, and then called in his allies to the north, the Kiev Rus', to attack the Bulgars in the rear.

The steppe region stretching from the plain of Hungary eastwards through south Russia and north of the Caspian was very important in imperial diplomacy. The home of many nomadic peoples, mostly of Turkic stock, it was always important to keep these peoples well disposed towards the empire. Constantinople had been able to establish good relations with the Chazars from the 630s, whose khans remained faithful allies of most Byzantine emperors. Their strategic significance was great: they

The empire c. AD1000–1180



The great reconquests of the later 10th and 11th centuries dramatically altered the balance of power in the middle east. The arrival of the Normans in the west and the Pechenegs in the north soon transformed the situation, while the appearance of the Seljuk Turks in Asia Minor soon reduced the empire to the coastal regions alone in the east.

were frequently invited to attack the Bulgars from the north, for example, and exerted crucial pressure on the latter at key moments. They also kept the empire informed of developments to the east, in central Asia. But the Chazar empire contracted during the later 9th century, as various peoples to the east were set in motion by the expansion of the Turkic Pechenegs, who established themselves in the steppe region between the Danube and Don. The empire continued to follow the same policy, of course, now with the Pechenegs, whose value as a check on both the Rus' and the Magyars was obvious. Yet they were a dangerous ally.

The Rus' were an amalgamation of Scandinavian settlers and warriors with indigenous Slavic peoples along the rivers of central and western Russia. During the 9th century they had grown to be an important political power, and by the 850s and 860s their longships were regularly entering the Black Sea. In the early 10th century, and following some hostilities, trading agreements were concluded with the empire. This developed into an alliance from the middle of the 10th century, so that when Nikephoros II asked for their support in 966, their ambitious and warlike prince Svyatoslav was only too willing to agree. In 968 he arrived on the Danube and easily defeated the Bulgarian forces sent against him. In 969 he had to return to Kiev to repulse an attack from the Pechenegs, but returned later in the year and, rapidly occupying northern and eastern Bulgaria, he deposed the tsar, Boris II, and incorporated Bulgaria into his own domain.



View from Acrocorinth. (Author's collection)

This was not a part of the emperor's original plan. In vain he attempted to establish an alliance with the defeated Bulgars, but towards the end of 969 the emperor was assassinated, and his successor, John I Tzimiskes, had to confront the difficult task of removing this potentially far more dangerous foe. Some of the Bulgar nobility saw a chance to recover their independence of the Byzantine state and its culture by working with the Rus'. Svyatoslav sent the new emperor an ultimatum to evacuate all the European provinces and confine the empire to Asia alone, who realised that immediate action was essential. In the spring of 970 a large Rus' force invaded Thrace, sacking the fortress of Philippoupolis (mod. Plovdiv) and moving on down the road to Constantinople.

The war that followed involved the assembling of a major imperial army, delaying tactics to distract and divert enemy

resources and, eventually, the complete defeat of the Rus' force and the return of Svyatoslav to his own territories (although he was killed by Pecheneg raiders on the way home). It was a war fought initially as a result of a rejection of what the empire's rulers saw as an outdated and humiliating agreement with an inferior neighbour, but which quickly turned into a major offensive. The result was, on the one hand, the reincorporation of substantial parts of eastern Bulgaria up to the Danube into imperial territory. On the other, the Byzantine victory encouraged the development of a new independence movement and the rise, during the 970s and 980s, of a new Bulgarian empire which, under its tsar Samuel, was to be the major foreign threat to imperial power until the beginning of the 11th century. Only as a result of the tireless campaigning of the emperor Basil II, culminating in a final victory in 1014 and the total recovery of all the territory once held by the empire in the



Bronze plaque of St Theodore (11th century). (Trustees of the British Museum)

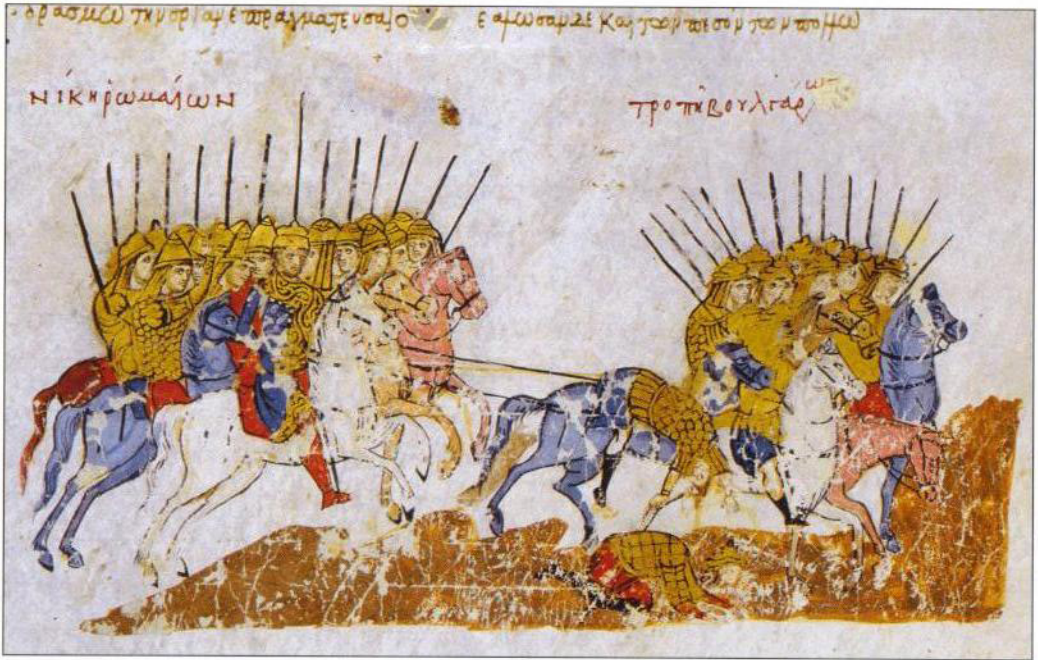
Balkans up to the Danube, was peace re-established, and the Balkans became once more an entirely Roman – from the point of view of political and military control – territory.

A major shift in strategy followed these successes as well as successes against Islamic powers in the east. The establishment of a system of alliances or buffer states made the maintenance of expensive standing forces, which constituted a great drain on the treasury, less necessary. Economic and cultural influence could be employed in addition to the threat of military action to maintain peace along the Danube, and similar policies were applied in the east. The emperors pursued a foreign policy which



Bronze plaque of Sts George and Demetrius (11th century). (Trustees of the British Museum)

placed greater reliance on vassals and neighbouring powers supplying troops, thus limiting the demand on the empire's own resources. But in the 1040s and afterwards this strategy broke down, largely because the balance between diplomacy and military strength was damaged by civil war and provincial rebellion, in turn a reflection of important shifts in the social and political structure of the empire. The provincial or thematic militias had been neglected in favour of full-time, regionally recruited *tagmata*, better suited to the sort of offensive warfare the empire had been waging since the 950s; while reductions in the military budget encouraged a greater dependence on foreign mercenary troops, especially of western knights – Franks, Germans and Normans. In 1071 such an army of mixed Byzantine and foreign troops under the emperor Romanos IV suffered a defeat at the hands of the invading Seljuk Turks near the



ABOVE Illuminated manuscript of the *History of John Skylitzes* (11th century), fol. 19. Defeat of the Bulgars by Leo V. (Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid)



LEFT Gold *histamenon nomisma* of Isaac I Komnenos (1057–1059). Reverse: the emperor; standing with a sheathed sword. (Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham)

fortress of Mantzikert in eastern Asia Minor – not a great disaster from a purely military perspective. Yet the civil war and internal disruption that followed gave the invading Turks a free hand in central Asia Minor, which was never again fully recovered. Emperors from Alexios I onward spent the period from the 1080s until the 1180s attempting to recover the situation but, in the end, without success. The wars of the period were fought increasingly using western tactics and panoply, but with

elements of a still clearly Byzantine or east Roman tactical organisation – contemporaries continue to remark on the order, cohesion and discipline with which the multi-ethnic and colourful Byzantine armies still fought.

Byzantium went to war for many reasons in practical terms – perceived military threats to the frontier, responses to actual invasion and raiding from hostile neighbours, as well as ideologically motivated wars in which justification depended on notions of what territories used to be Roman and could be legitimately recovered, and on ideas about ideological challenges to the Christian Roman world view. The wars of reconquest in the later 10th century were in part motivated and justified on the latter grounds, for example, even though in Byzantium no notion of ‘holy war’ as such ever really evolved.

Organising for war

The evolution of tactical administration

There were important changes in tactical structures over the period from the 6th to the 11th century, and again from the later 11th to the 12th centuries and beyond. Units of the middle of the 6th century varied considerably in their regimental organisation. The older legions and auxiliary forces continued to exist through the 3rd and 4th centuries, divided into *alae* of cavalry and *cohortes* of infantry, nominally of 500 and 1,000 men respectively; although under Constantine I (324–37), new infantry units called *auxilia* often replaced these *cohortes*. Newer legions, numbering 1,000–1,500, had also been created during the 2nd and 3rd centuries, and this number seems also to have applied to the original legions by the 4th century. Apart from these were units called *vexillationes*, originally detachments from various units formed for a

particular reason during the period c. 150–250, which had been turned into permanent units in their own right. This term, *vexillation*, was applied in the 4th century to most of the new cavalry units recruited at that time. Although some of these technical differences survived into the 6th century, the general term for most units was by then the word *numerus* or its Greek equivalent, *arithmos* or *tagma*, which simply meant ‘unit’ or ‘number’ (of soldiers).

Byzantine tactics and strategy had to adapt quickly to the situation following the Arab conquests in the middle of the 7th century. Armies along the frontiers are often referred to as *kaballarika themata* – ‘cavalry armies’ – showing that light cavalry had come to dominate the warfare of the

Illuminated manuscript of the *History of John Skylitzes* (11th century), fol. 30v. The army of the rebel Thomas the Slav massacres the inhabitants of a captured town. (Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid)



period, much of which involved skirmishing and hit-and-run raids. But while infantry continued to be needed, and played an important part in many campaigns, their value appears slowly to have declined, to some extent reflecting social factors, since they were drawn mostly from the poorest of the provincial soldiery. The development of infantry tactics after the period of the first Islamic conquests, along with the higher profile of mounted warfare, therefore, reflected the strategic situation in which the empire found itself. During the period from the later 7th to the 9th or early 10th centuries, the differences which once existed between the different types of infantry and cavalry were subject to a general levelling out of the different arms, into light cavalry and infantry. Only the *tagmata* at Constantinople seem to have provided a heavy cavalry force. It seems to have been the responsibility of local officers in the provinces to establish field units and to arm them as each specific occasion required. The sizes of units on the battlefield varied according to tactical need: there seems to have been no fixed number for the different formations, with figures recommended for the smallest infantry units, the *banda*, for example, ranging from as few as 150 to as

many as 400. Several *tourmai* could appear on campaign as a single large division, for example, or vice versa. Most themes had two or three divisions or *tourmai*, but this does not mean that they were the same size or could muster the same number of soldiers.

The provincial armies were organised into what we would refer to as divisions, brigades and regiments – *tourmai*, *drouggoi* and *banda*. The first and last were also districts of their *thema*, or military region. Each *tourma* had a headquarters or base in a fortified town or fortress. Each *bandon* was identified with a particular locality from which its soldiers were recruited. Each *tourmarchês*, or commander of a *tourma*, was an important figure in the military administration of his theme, responsible for the fortresses and strongpoints in his district, as well as for the safety of the local population and their goods and chattels. His most important responsibility before the middle of the 10th century, however, was dealing with raids into his territory and informing his superiors of enemy movements.

Illuminated manuscript of the *History of John Skylitzes* (11th century), fol. 34. The emperor Michael II receives information from scouts and spies about the forces of Thomas the Slav. (Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid)

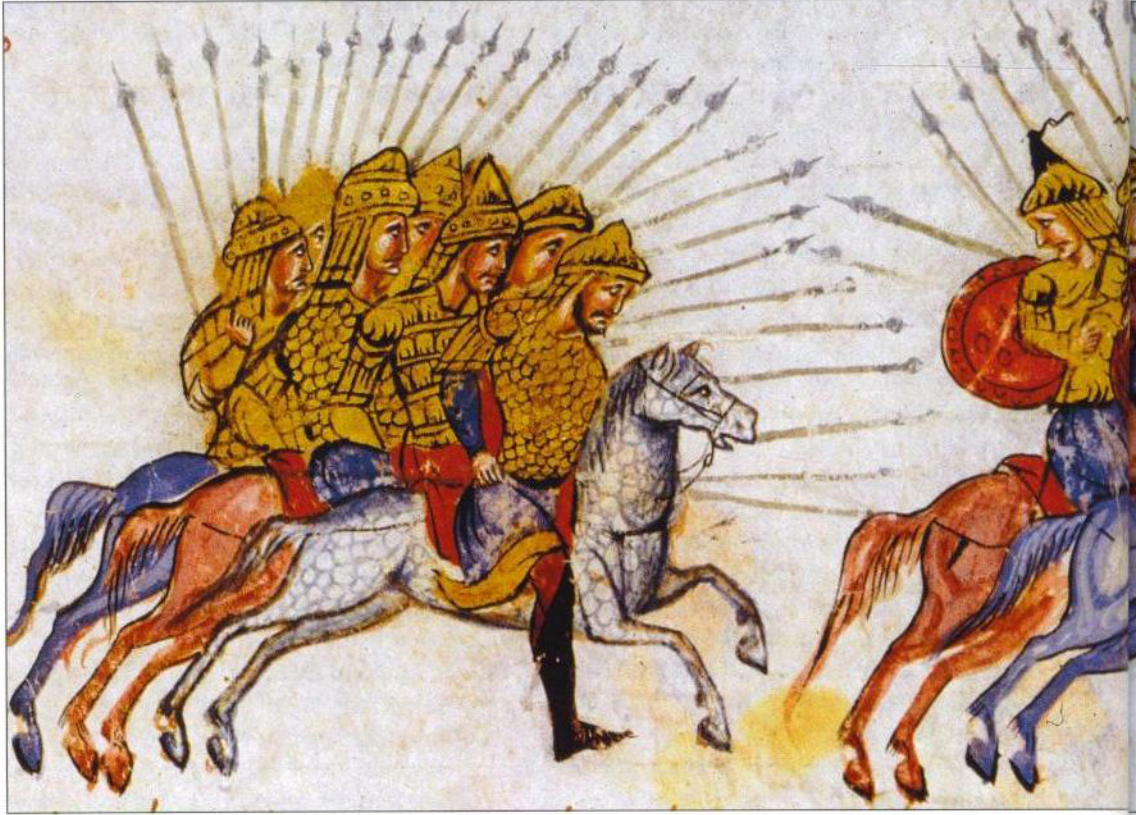


During the course of the 10th century the army evolved a much more offensive tactical structure, the main causes being the need to recruit more professional soldiers, and the need to operate effectively on campaigns which demanded more than the seasonally available theme armies. The main changes were the introduction of a corps of heavy cavalry armed with lances and maces, which could operate effectively alongside infantry, and which substantially enhanced the aggressive power of the Byzantine cavalry, together with the revival of a corps of disciplined, effective heavy infantry, able to stand firm in the line of battle, confront enemy infantry and cavalry, march long distances and function as garrison troops away from their home territory on a permanent basis. At the same time, the army leadership developed new battlefield tactics, so that commanders had a flexible yet hard-hitting force at their disposal that could respond appropriately to a range of different situations.

The remarkable successes achieved by Byzantine armies in the second half of the 10th century in particular, under a series of very able commanders, and described in the historical accounts of the period, corroborate the evidence of the tactical treatises. In one tract a new formation of infantry soldiers is described, consisting of troops wielding thick-stocked, long-necked javelins or pikes, whose task it was to face and turn back enemy heavy cavalry attacks. Twenty years later the tactic had evolved further, so that there were in each major infantry unit of 1,000 men 100 soldiers so equipped, integrated with 400 ordinary spearmen, 300 archers and 200 light infantry (with slings and javelins). This important change in the role of infantry was reflected in the changed political and military situation of the 10th century. In the late 6th century cavalry began to achieve a certain pre-eminence in military organisation and tactics, whereas the 10th-century texts give infantry formations equal or even preferential treatment. Infantry became once more a key element in

the army, both in terms of numbers as well as tactics, a clear contrast to the situation in the preceding centuries. The new tactics were embodied in a new formation, in which infantry and cavalry worked together, essentially a hollow square or rectangle, depending on the terrain, designed to cope with encircling movements from hostile cavalry, as a refuge for Byzantine mounted units when forced to retreat, and as a means of strengthening infantry cohesiveness and morale. Infantry were no longer drawn up in a deep line with a largely defensive role, but actively integrated into the offensive heavy cavalry tactics of the period. And a very important aspect of the change was a focus on the recruitment of good infantry from war-like peoples within the empire, especially Armenians. The demand for uniformity in tactical function and therefore equipment and weaponry meant that the Byzantine infantry of this period were more like their classical Roman predecessors than anything in the intervening period.

New formations of cavalry appear, heavily armoured troops armed from head to foot in lamellar, mail and quilting, whose horses were likewise protected. Face, neck, flanks and forequarters were all to be covered with armour to prevent enemy missiles and blows from injuring the cavalryman's mount. Known as *kataphraktoi* or *klibanophoroi*, they were relatively few in number due to the expense of maintaining them, and were the elite strike force in each field army, drawn up in a broad-nosed wedge with their only function to smash through the enemy heavy cavalry or infantry line, disrupt his formation, and open it up to permit supporting horse- and foot-soldiers to exploit the situation. Contemporary writers, both Byzantine and Arab, comment on the effects of this formation on their foes. The imperial armies achieved a powerful reputation, to the extent that by the 1030s the mere threat of an imperial army marching into northern Syria was enough to keep the local Muslim emirs in check. Yet while these successes were the result of a combination of good organisation and logistics, intelligent tactics,



TOP Illuminated manuscript of the *History of John Skylitzes* (11th century), fol. 54v. Byzantine cavalry pursue defeated Arab troops. (Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid)

ABOVE Illuminated manuscript of the *History of John Skylitzes* (11th century), fol. 36v. The defeated army of the rebel Thomas the Slav flees to Adrianople in Thrace. (Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid)



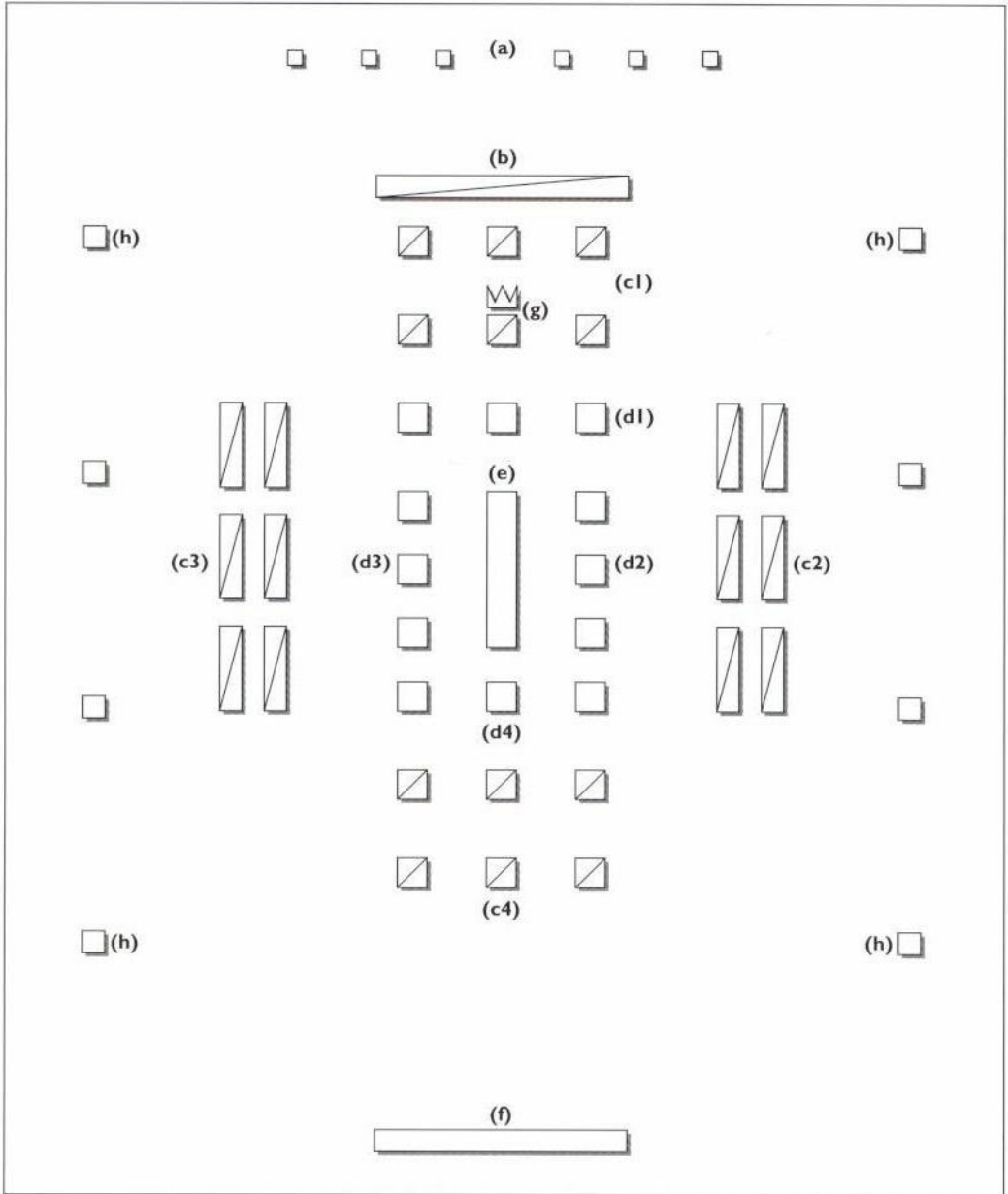
well-armed, trained and disciplined soldiers, and good morale, the key always remained the competence and effectiveness of the general in command. An army is only as good as its leadership, however, and although tactical order and training certainly gave Byzantine armies through much of the empire's history an obvious advantage, incompetent officers were the bane of the system: dependence on the charisma and intelligence of its leaders was one of the most significant in-built weaknesses of the imperial military system at the tactical level. During the middle of the 11th century, and in a context of short-sighted strategic planning and internal political conflict, this produced serious problems and led to the erosion of the effectiveness of both the field armies and the provincial defences.

As the demands of offensive warfare required the employment of ever greater numbers of professional, mercenary soldiers,

both indigenous and foreign, so many of the provincial, thematic units of the imperial armies were neglected, especially in the period after the death of Basil II in 1025. Michael Attaleiates, a contemporary of the Mantikert campaign who travelled with the imperial entourage, paints a sad picture of the state of the thematic levy raised for the campaign of 1071, remarking that the provincial troops were entirely unfitted for warfare – they had been neither mustered nor paid or supplied with their traditional provisions for many years. Yet his account of the campaigns of the dynamic emperor Romanos IV in the years 1068–71 shows that the imperial armies still possessed an order, discipline and cohesion when properly led.

Byzantine armies in the middle and later 11th century were a mixture of regular mercenary units from the different parts of the empire, the older thematic soldiers, and foreign units. The growing political and cultural influence of the world around Byzantium, which had been held at bay for so long, meant that the empire was becoming more and more integrated into the tactical world of the lands around it. Byzantine order and discipline remained a significant element in the empire's armies, but the latter were a polyglot and multi-ethnic mixture of Seljuk, Pecheneg or Cuman horse archers, Norman, German and Frankish knights, Bulgarian and Anatolian light infantry, Georgians and Alans from the Caucasus, imperial guards recruited from outside the empire (Varangians, for example, from the 1070s chiefly made up of Anglo-Saxons who had left recently conquered Norman England). The Byzantine army was no longer, strictly speaking, Byzantine.

One of the tactical innovations of the period with which Byzantine soldiers and generals had to contend was the massed heavy cavalry charge favoured by the Normans. Although they were quite familiar with Norman tactics (Norman mercenaries had served in the imperial armies in Italy and Sicily in the 1030s and 1040s), the Byzantines



had only rarely needed to confront it themselves. Most of the warfare they had been involved in since the 1060s had been against light-armed, highly mobile enemies such as Turks and Pechenegs. And whereas the Byzantine heavy cavalry of the later 10th century had been armed with lances and maces, they had advanced at a trot, not at the charge, with the aim of simply rolling over the enemy force facing them.

In spite of efforts under the emperors of the Komnenos dynasty, many indigenous units were re-equipped and trained in western style, so that the result was an army no different from any other multi-ethnic, polyglot mercenary army in its tactics and formations. The difference lay in the superior order and tactical dispositions of the imperial troops, when these were properly exploited by an able

LEFT Marching order for field army in enemy territory, late 10th century. (Author's collection)

KEY:

- (a) advance scouts
- (b) vanguard
- (c1) cavalry centre division
- (c2) cavalry right wing
- (c3) cavalry left wing
- (c4) cavalry centre/second line
- (d1) infantry centre
- (d2) infantry right wing
- (d3) infantry left wing
- (d4) infantry rearguard
- (e) baggage/siege train
- (f) rearguard
- (g) emperor & household troops
- (h) outriders/flank scouts

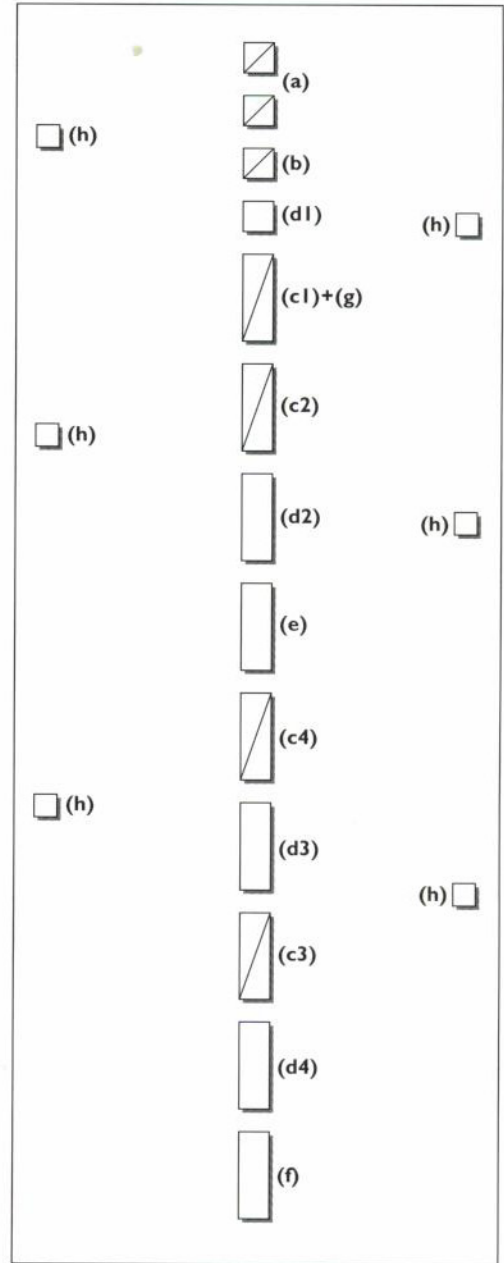
RIGHT Marching order for defiles and Roman territory, late 10th century. (Author's collection)

KEY:

- (a) advance scouts
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- (d4) infantry rearguard
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- (f) rearguard
- (g) emperor & household troops
- (h) outriders/flank scouts

Sources: Leo, *Tactica*, ix, (10th century), Nikephoros Ouranos, *Tactica*, 64 (late 10th/early 11th century), Anonymous, *Campaign organisation*, 10 (970s)

commanding officer, and this is still evident on occasion in the later years of the 12th century. By the middle of the 13th century, and following the fall of Constantinople to the armies of the fourth crusade, while Byzantine technical terms, titles, and names for types of unit continued to be employed in the shrinking territories of the empire, tactics, armour and weaponry were no different from those of the surrounding cultures and states with whom the Byzantines were alternately at peace and war.



Strategy

Strategic dispositions evolved to meet the needs of the moment. In the 6th century and up to the period of the Arab invasions the units established in garrisons along and behind the frontier were called *limitanei*, frontier soldiers, usually comprised of the

The empire c.1204–1250



LEFT The fourth crusade destroyed the unity of the empire, and although Constantinople was retaken in 1261, the empire never recovered its former strength and prestige.

older legions and auxiliary regiments, while the field armies were largely formed of more recently established units, and located across the provinces, often well behind the frontier, in strategic bases from which they could meet any incursions into Roman territory. One result of the loss of the eastern and Danubian provinces during the 7th century was the disappearance of the former and the withdrawal into Asia Minor of the latter, where they settled down to form the themes to which we have already referred to in the 'Outbreak' chapter. In the later 10th century new and much smaller territories under *doukes*, 'dukes' grew up along both the eastern and northern frontiers, serving both as a zone of defence and as a springboard for further advances. At the same time, the old themes became increasingly demilitarised with the growth in the use of mercenaries, as we have also

seen. The collapse of the later 11th century brought with it a need to reorganise, and although the changes wrought by the Komnenoi produced a series of new *themata* and new frontiers in Asia Minor, the basic principles of 11th-century strategy – an in-depth defence based in fortresses and similar strongpoints supported by a single imperial field force based in and around Constantinople – were maintained. The last two centuries of the empire, from the 1250s until 1453, saw no substantial change, although numbers were very much reduced as the empire's resources shrank.

Logistics

There can be little doubt that one reason for the empire's survival from the 7th century on was its effective logistical administration. The road system, although both greatly reduced in scope and degraded in quality when compared with that of the Roman period, remained an important asset. In addition, the carefully managed fiscal system was closely tied into the needs of the army, and although the exact administrative and organisational structures evolved over the period in question, the arrangements for supplying the soldiers in either peacetime or war were effective. Resources were collected in either money or in kind, depending upon a number of variables: whether the areas in question supported enough market activity; whether the agricultural or other resources needed by the army were available and could be stored; what the particular needs of the army at that point in fact were; and how many soldiers and animals needed to be fed and housed over what length of time. The effects of an army on the land and its population were well understood, and there are in the written sources of the period both recommendations to commanders not

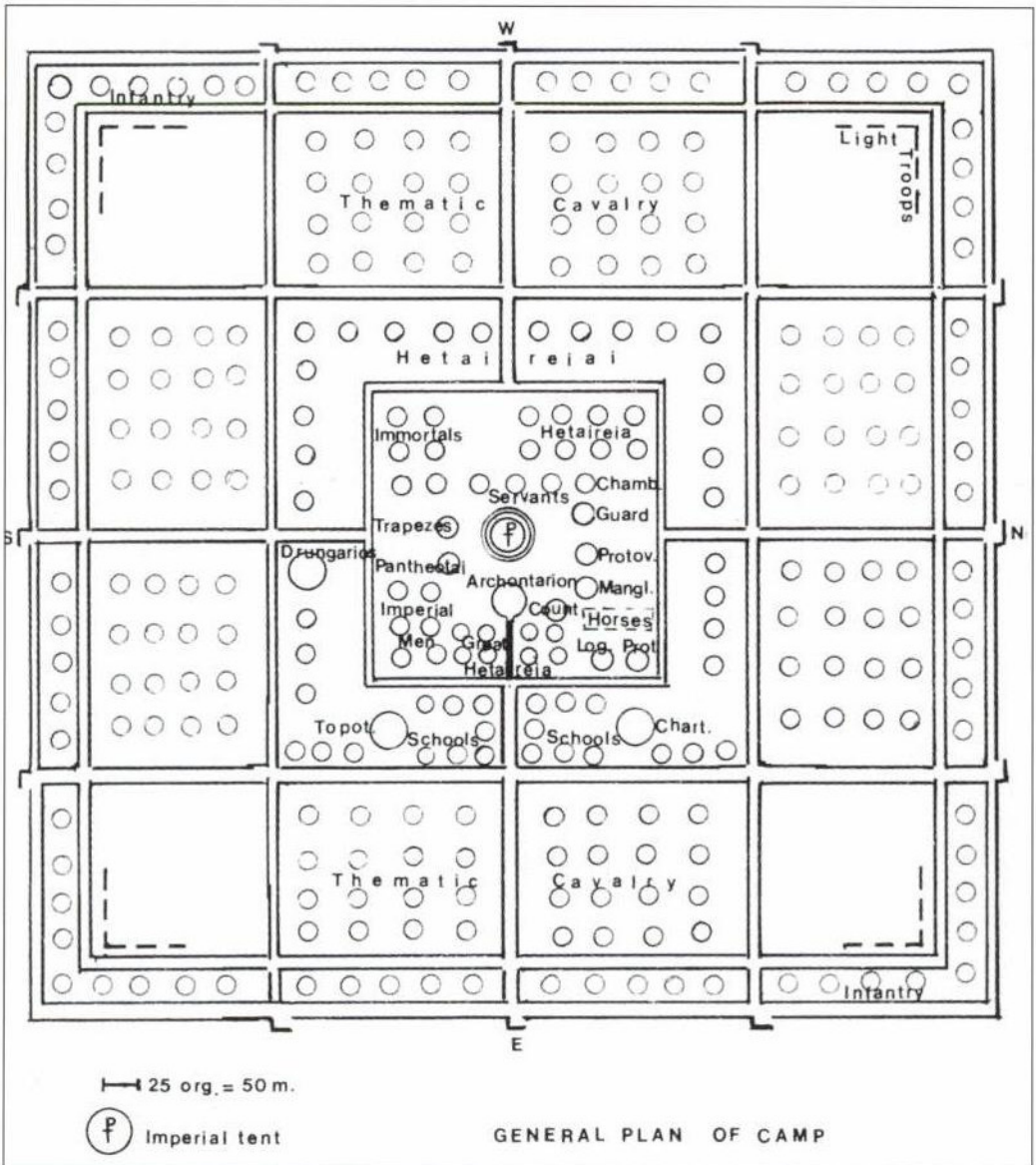


Illuminated manuscript of the *History of John Skylitzes* (11th century), fol. 213. Byzantine troops defeat an Arab army in Sicily in the 1030s. Note the trumpet used for signals. (Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid)

to keep concentrations of troops for too long on Byzantine territory and descriptions of what happened when this advice was not followed.

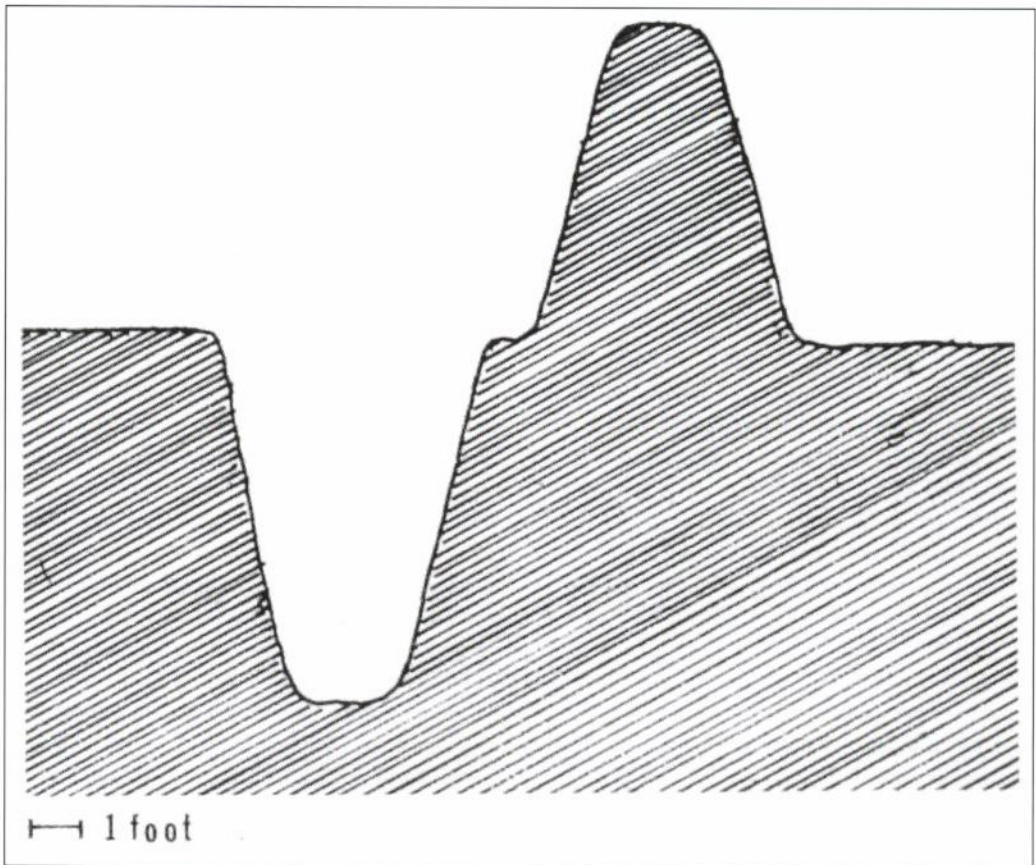
When a campaign was planned, local fiscal officials liaised with the central authorities and the military records department at Constantinople, so that the right amount and type of supplies were provided for the numbers involved. The outlay was often very heavy, and accounts from the 10th century show just how heavy the burden could be,

especially when the emperor and his household were on the expedition. Each of the regions through which the army passed had to put aside adequate supplies of grain, meat (usually on the hoof) and oil or wine for the required numbers of troops. Large expeditionary armies – which would generally be divided into several smaller columns, each taking a separate route and heading for a pre-arranged rendezvous on the frontier – numbered as many as 20,000 or more, and very occasionally as many as



30,000; but the average theme force might be no more than 3,000–4,000, often far fewer, confronting armies of the same size, or shadowing larger forces until they could be ambushed or taken on in a full-scale battle. Providing resources for such armies involved a considerable organisational effort. In addition to food, horses and pack-animals had to be provided, weapons and other items of military equipment replaced and, for expeditions intended to take enemy strongholds, wagons or carts carrying siege machinery and artillery. While food and supplies were generally provided by the districts through which the army passed, weapons and other equipment, as well as cavalry mounts and pack-animals, might come from more distant provinces. In a

10th-century account, for example, detailing some of the preparations for an expedition by sea, some provinces were commissioned to produce a certain number of weapons: the region of Thessaloniki was ordered to deliver 200,000 arrows, 3,000 heavy infantry spears and 'as many shields as possible'; the region of Hellas was asked to produce 1,000 heavy infantry spears; while the governor of Eurippos in Greece, and the commanders of the themes of Nikopolis and of the Peloponnese all undertook to provide 200,000 arrows and 3,000 heavy infantry spears. The same document specifies also that other governors or officers were commissioned to levy thousands of nails and similar items from their provinces for ship construction.



LEFT Plan of field army marching camp, late 10th century, as described in 10th-century military handbook. (From G. Dennis, *Three Byzantine Military Treaties*, p. 335, fig 10B)

ABOVE Section of ditch and embankment, as described in 10th-century military handbook. (From G. Dennis, *Three Byzantine Military Treaties*, p. 335, fig 10F)

Military manuals stressed that excess personal baggage and servants should not be taken by the officers or wealthier men, since it caused problems in respect of food and transport; and while many commanders clearly enforced such regulations, there is evidence that many did not and that discipline in this area was slack – with all the consequences that brought with it. The imperial household, on the other hand, necessitated a vast amount of ‘excess baggage’, since the luxuries to which the emperors were accustomed were rarely left behind. The imperial baggage train in the later 9th and 10th centuries was supposed to have almost 600 pack-animals of one sort or another, to carry the household tents, carpets and other furniture – including a portable commode with gilded seat for the imperial person(!), folding tables, cushions, tableware, a private portable chapel, a portable ‘Turkish’ bath, with supplies, high-quality wines, meat and fowl, spices and herbs, as well as medicines and various other items for personal use. Large numbers of gifts in the form of both cash – gold and silver coin – and richly-decorated luxury cloths and items of clothing were also taken, in part intended as rewards to the provincial officers, in part as gifts and bribes for foreign guests of distinction or even deserters from the other side. The attitude of the generals, who were generally members of the social elite and wealthy in their own right, varied. Some led a fairly ascetic life while on campaign, winning the respect of their men and other observers by sharing the soldiers’ lifestyle; others insisted on taking as many home comforts along with them as they could, in part in order to stress their own status. Yet in general, the system of campaign organisation and logistics was efficient and effective, and kept Byzantine armies in the field in even the most difficult circumstances. Sometimes, of course, in particular in the context of the guerrilla warfare of the frontier regions, this logistical apparatus was irrelevant: soldiers had to live off the land and move in unpredictable directions in order to keep



track of and to harass enemy columns. But even here the provincial fiscal apparatus made it possible to claim back through the following year’s tax assessment what could be demonstrated to have been consumed by the army, although this, like all such systems, tended to be cumbersome, inefficient, slow and unfair.

Where Byzantine armies failed it was generally due to poor leadership, or to a combination of poor morale and lack of discipline, themselves often a direct result of the quality and abilities of the commanding officers. They defended their territory, with varying success, for some 600 years, from the 6th and 7th centuries well into the 12th century, if we include



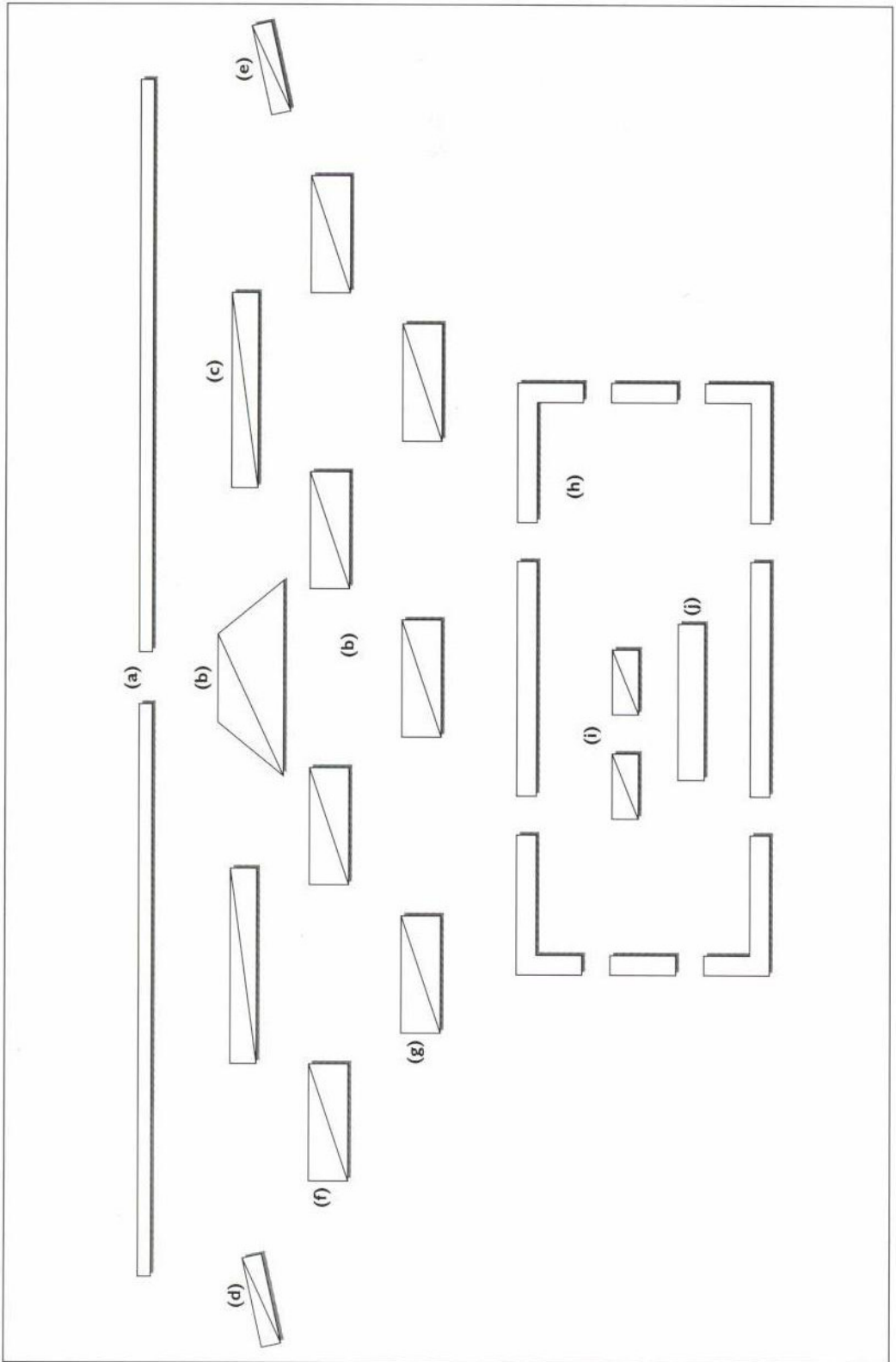
the counter-offensives in Asia Minor under the emperors Alexios I, John II and Manuel I Komnenos in the period from the 1080s to the 1170s. For in spite of some often very heavy defeats, they nevertheless maintained the territorial integrity of the eastern Roman state and were even able, on several occasions, to go over to the offensive. The logistical arrangements maintained by the empire were a major, if not *the* major, contributory factor to this. Only when the political and economic environment in which the empire had to survive had changed sufficiently for it no longer to be able to maintain this logistical basis did the medieval east Roman state ultimately fail.

ABOVE Illuminated manuscript of the *History of John Skylitzes* (11th century), fol. 151 b. Byzantine forces lay siege to the Muslim fortress town of Mopsouestia in Cilicia. Note the traction trebuchet. (Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid)

FOLLOWING PAGE Late 10th-century battle order, as described in a contemporary military handbook. (Author's collection)

KEY:

- (a) light-infantry screen
- (b) cataphract wedge
- (c) first line heavy cavalry (2 units)
- (d) flank guard
- (e) outflankers
- (f) second line heavy cavalry (4 units)
- (g) third line, or rearguard (*saka*)
- (h) heavy-infantry square
- (i) remounts
- (j) baggage



Recruitment, discipline, and life on campaign

Soldiers

There is no doubt that the majority of ordinary soldiers in the army throughout the history of the empire were of fairly humble status. The 'better-off' ordinary soldiers among the thematic armies in the 9th and 10th centuries appear to have held a relatively high position in their communities, however, partly because of their special fiscal and legal status: they were exempt from extra taxation and a range of state impositions in terms of labour service or providing housing and supplies for other soldiers, officers or imperial officials, to which the ordinary population was always subject; and they could bestow their property without having to adhere strictly to Roman inheritance law about the division of property among heirs. This gave soldiers of all types, even when they were not especially well paid, an enhanced social prestige, set them apart somewhat from the ordinary population, and gave them a sense of group identity and solidarity.

The sources for recruitment and length of service for the period after the middle to the end of the 6th century are not very informative. Before that time, it seems that the traditional Roman regulations probably applied, with a minimum recruitment age of 18 years and a minimum height requirement of about five feet six inches. There is reason to believe that the minimum age for recruitment in the 9th and 10th centuries was still 18 and the maximum 40. Service beyond the age of 40 was not unusual, however, and several examples of soldiers who served beyond that age are known. Some sources suggest that many officers stayed on long after their useful career was over, as a result, adversely affecting the military effectiveness of their unit.

There were important differences between the requirements applied to recruits to 'professional' units, such as the *tagmata*, and the provincial or thematic armies, with many of the regulations governing admission to the first group being retained from the late Roman legislation, whereas thematic soldiers were required merely to appear at the regular muster parade appropriately equipped – with mount, provisions for a certain number of days, shield and spear. Some restrictions on recruitment also existed, prohibitions on the enlistment of heretics were applied, at least in theory. Priests and monks were forbidden to join the army, while those convicted of adultery or similar crimes, those who had already been dishonourably discharged, and so forth, were technically disqualified from enlisting. But it is impossible to know to what extent such regulations were observed. It is most likely that in the situation that developed from the middle of the 7th century most of the formal regulations of the Roman period had become irrelevant. The application of such regulations was in any event not possible for foreign units, especially Muslims, Franks and others outside the sphere of Byzantine religious-political authority, nor to others, such as Armenians, who may have belonged to non-Orthodox communities. The further away from Constantinople, the more likely such regulations are to have been ignored. By the 10th century the greater diversity in origins, military value and contexts in which soldiers for different types of unit were recruited must have led to an equal diversity in their conditions of enlistment and service, not just between simple thematic soldiers and soldiers of the imperial *tagmata* but between foreign units and the mercenary soldiers recruited for specific campaigns.

All soldiers paid by the government, whether *tagmata* or *themata*, were listed in military registers, copies of which were maintained in their province and in the government department responsible at Constantinople. Foreign units employed as mercenaries under their own officers could be treated in the same way or paid through their leaders, who would receive a lump sum at regular intervals to be distributed to the men. Leave was granted on a rotational basis, and for periods of between 30 days and three months, depending on the situation of the unit in question – whether on active service, for example, or in winter quarters. The number of men who could be absent at any given time was restricted, and officers who permitted more men to be away could be punished. But it is not clear whether these rules were observed or to which types of unit they were applied.

Soldiers received no state benefits when they retired, other than their protected fiscal status and special legal privileges, although there was a great deal of official rhetoric about how the emperor and the state should look after those who fought for the faith and for God's empire on earth. Until the end of the 6th or middle of the 7th centuries there was a system of state pensions or annuities, but the conditions of the 7th century probably made such arrangements financially impossible for the hard-pressed government. For the ordinary soldiers of the field armies in the provinces this was reflected in the state's acceptance and probable encouragement of their being supported directly from their own households, which by the later 8th century, if not long before, resulted in the majority of thematic soldiers holding landed property from which their duties could be supported. They had to supply provisions for a limited period, equipment and weaponry, and mounts when they were called up for the yearly campaigning season. When such provincial soldiers were too old to serve actively, they will simply have returned to their farms or traditional occupations. Soldiers could thus be divided into several



Gold hyperpyron of Alexios I (1081–1118). Obverse: Enthroned figure of Christ. (Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham)

categories according to the conditions under which they were recruited: self-supporting thematic militia, full-time theme soldiers supported by state salaries and other emoluments; professionals recruited for particular regiments or for particular campaigns. All shared the same legal rights, however, until the introduction of ever larger numbers of foreign mercenaries in the 11th and 12th centuries rendered this picture much more complex.

Many men who had completed their service in the army (as well as many who were trying to avoid conscription or who had deserted) entered a monastery. Most of the evidence concerns senior officers, but there is nevertheless some information on ordinary soldiers opting for this mode of retirement, in particular those who had no family cares. Official regulations forbidding serving soldiers to join a monastery were repeated from the late Roman legislation. Adopting the monastic life catered both for the spiritual well-being of the individuals concerned as well as providing a degree of economic security. It offered at the same time a way through which the soldier could atone for the sins he had committed in terms of killing the enemies of the empire

and of his faith while serving the emperor. The numbers entering monasteries among the officers of the provinces was substantial enough for an Arab historian to remark on the fact, and to note that those who pursued this life forfeited the continuation of their cash salary, to which they were otherwise entitled as bearers of an imperial title.

Officers

There was no 'officer corps' in the Byzantine army, although it is clear that the majority of men who commanded units beyond the level of a squad or troop came from the wealthier elements in society, whether in the provinces or in Constantinople, and that service at court in one of the palace units functioned as a sort of training school. The sources tell us quite a lot about the middle and upper levels of officers, and until the 12th century it is clear that there was always a substantial meritocratic element in advancement. Social background and education played a role, but it was perfectly possible for an able and competent soldier or lower-ranking officer to rise to high position. In all aspects of Byzantine society social connections and kinship always played an important role too, and training and ability were generally mediated through personal ties; for example, an officer might advance his career through service initially in the retinue of an important officer, from where he might receive a junior appointment in a local regiment, rising through the various grades, or being transferred to a senior position elsewhere. Some careers developed within families serving in the same unit – there are several examples of officers' sons entering their father's unit as simple troopers or soldiers before being promoted to junior and then more senior officer grade; in other cases, we hear of privileged young provincial men sent to Constantinople where, with the

help of an influential relative or patron, they were appointed to a junior post in the guards before further promotion. In one case, which was probably not untypical, a young man was appointed first to a small corps of elite guards in the palace, before receiving a junior command at the capital, then a middling provincial post, before being promoted to a senior position, all in the course of some 10 years or so.

By the middle of the 11th century the growth of a powerful provincial aristocracy had brought some changes to this structure. The provincial elite itself provided a major source of recruits to the middle and senior officers' posts in the empire, and during the later 9th and 10th centuries came to monopolise most key provincial military commands. The increasing use of mercenaries reduced at the same time the importance and status of the provincial, thematic soldiery, who blended back into the mass of the peasantry from which they were drawn, thereby losing their distinctive social position.

Discipline and training

The Byzantine army, at least as represented in the narrative histories and in the military treatises, prided itself on its order and discipline. Life in the army involved a very different sort of daily routine from life in



Gold hyperpyron of Alexios I (1081–1118). Reverse: standing figure of the emperor. (Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham)

civilian contexts or from that in less disciplined and organised neighbouring armies. A 6th-century military handbook makes this abundantly clear: 'Nature produces but few brave men, whereas care and training make efficient soldiers,' notes the author. Levels of discipline varied and were a major cause of concern to commanders and to the authors of all the military treatises. There are plenty of cases of mutiny and unrest among the provincial armies and the examples of troops panicking when the commander was thought to have been killed or injured is evidence of the variable psychological condition of the troops. The extent to which proper discipline was actually enforced is not very clear in the limited sources. Usually it was the most able commanders who were most likely to apply military discipline effectively, partly a reflection of their personal character and ability to inspire confidence among the soldiers – a point also recognised in the military treatises. Financial generosity, either on the part of individual commanders or officers, or the government, was a crucial ingredient in encouraging soldiers to follow orders and accept the discipline necessary for effective fighting.

Discipline also varied according to the categories of troops. A strict code certainly prevailed in elite units such as the imperial *tagmata* and in units which had a particular loyalty to their commanding officer. One story recounts the tale of an officer who was upbraided by the emperor himself for his unkempt appearance while at his post in the palace. Discipline was probably least effective in the militia-like thematic forces, but under competent officers it seems to have been effectively maintained. There existed an official code of military discipline which is frequently included in the military handbooks, and effective leaders seem on the whole to have applied it. Nikephoros II is reported to have awarded punishment to a soldier for dropping his shield because he was too tired to continue carrying it. When his officer ignored the order, he too was punished severely, on the grounds that the first had endangered his comrades as well as himself,

while the latter had compounded the crime and further endangered the well-being of the whole force. Constantine V in the 8th century, Nikephoros II, John I Tzimiskes, Basil II in the late 10th century and Romanos IV in the later 1060s were all regarded with approval as strict disciplinarians, as was Alexios I in the late 11th century. Yet discipline often broke down.

There are some hints in the sources about the exercises carried out by the soldiers, descriptions corroborated by accounts of similar exercises in the tactical manuals and handbooks. Nikephoros Phokas put on a series of military games and mock battles in the hippodrome at Constantinople in the 960s – they were so realistic and frightening that a panic occurred which claimed many lives. But whatever the textbooks said about the value of such exercises, sensible commanders appear generally to have been aware of the limitations of the different sorts of troops under their command. The treatises on warfare often include quite simple, easily managed tactical manoeuvres for the great bulk of the thematic infantry, who were on the whole not well equipped and potentially unreliable. In contrast the well-trained and well-equipped heavy cavalry and elite units were expected to implement quite complex manoeuvres, frequently under enemy attack, on the battlefield. Skills and training, discipline and morale went hand in hand.

The sort of exercise in particular skills which cavalry troopers had to carry out is illustrated in a late 6th-century manual:

[The trooper] should shoot rapidly, mounted on his horse and at a canter, to the front, to the rear, to right and to left; he should practise leaping onto his horse. When mounted and at a canter he should shoot one or two arrows rapidly and put the strung bow in its case ... and then take the lance which he carries on his back. With the strung bow in its case he should hold the lance in his hand, then quickly replace it on his back and take the bow.

As well as these individual skills with bow, lance or sword, the troops were drilled in

formation, so that, in larger or smaller bodies, they could be wheeled, moved from column into line and back again, form a square against heavy cavalry attack, form into a wedge to break through an enemy formation, and so forth. Success on the battlefield often depended on the effectiveness with which such manoeuvres might be carried out, although it was also admitted that things should be kept as simple as possible to avoid confusion or being caught unprepared mid-way through a manoeuvre – there are examples of battles in which one of the reasons for the collapse of the imperial forces appears to be due to such errors.

Life on campaign

As we have seen, life as a soldier in the Byzantine army must have varied enormously from century to century as the empire's fortunes changed, and depending on the commanding officers, the type of unit, and so forth. We have very little evidence about individual soldiers, but there is a good deal of information that can be gleaned from the wide range of written sources about what the life of an ordinary soldier must have been like. In what follows, therefore, I will illustrate some of the issues by inventing a 'typical' soldier. Although there is no text concerning our hypothetical soldier, we can build up a picture of some events in his life from several sources, so that in the account below, all the things that happened to him, the actions ascribed to him or to others, the duties he carried out and the fighting in which he was involved, can be found in medieval sources of the period from the 7th to the 12th centuries, and are all perfectly compatible with the actual historical context in which I will situate him.

In this section we will follow the daily routine of a typical cavalry trooper on campaign under the general Bardas Skleros in the Balkans in 971. The soldier's name was Theodore, a fairly common and popular name, and one shared by one of the most famous

soldier saints of the eastern Christian world, St Theodore the recruit, one of the four patron saints of soldiers along with saints Demetrios, Merkourios and George.

Theodore came from the village of Krithokomi near the fortress town of Tzouroullon in Thrace. Theodore was the son of a soldier himself, and the family's land was subject to the *strateia*, the military service due from those enrolled on the thematic military service register. His family was not well off, but their neighbours, who were also liable to military service, were permitted to contribute jointly to arming and equipping a single cavalry soldier. Theodore's skills had brought him into a unit of lancers, medium cavalry armed also with bows and maces, where he held the rank of *dekarchos*, commander of a troop of 10 men, in a *bandon* or squadron of 50 soldiers. He served effectively on a full-time rather than a seasonal basis and a campaign offered him the chance of a promotion, perhaps to second-in-command of his squadron.

In the spring of 970 the empire faced an invasion from a large Rus' force deep into imperial territory in Thrace, where they took the local garrisons by surprise and were able to sack the fortress of Philippoupolis (mod. Plovdiv), before advancing along the road to Constantinople. Since the emperor John had most of his effective field units in the east, where they were campaigning near Antioch, he appointed Bardas Skleros, together with the *patrikios* Peter, both experienced commanders, to take a medium-sized force – numbering some 10,000 – and scout the enemy dispositions in the occupied territories. As a secondary objective they were to exercise the troops and prevent enemy raiders committing further depredations. At the same time, spies – disguised in Bulgarian and Rus' costume – were sent into enemy-held territory to learn as much as they could about the Rus' commander Svyatoslav's movements. Svyatoslav soon learned of the advancing imperial column, and in response despatched a force of both Rus' and Bulgar troops, with a supporting detachment of Petchenegs with whom he was temporarily allied, to drive the Romans off.



Illuminated manuscript of the *History of John Skylitzes* (11th century), fol. 55v a. Combat staged in the hippodrome at Constantinople between a Saracen prisoner and the emperor's champion. (Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid)

The march north followed the established pattern. Bardas needed to move quickly, and so forced the pace somewhat. Within imperial territory he could rely on the co-operation of local officials to supply his troops; once in enemy territory his soldiers and their animals had to live off the land. But regardless of where they were, the army always entrenched for the night. The scouts and surveyors sent ahead to locate an appropriate site had to ensure both an adequate water supply as well as good defensive properties, and preferably in relatively open country to avoid the possibility of surprise attack. On this campaign the latter was difficult since the army passed through hilly and wooded scrubland for much of its route. Byzantine camps followed a standard pattern. The commander's standard was set up in the centre and each of the subordinate officers –

Bardas had divided his force into three divisions of about 3,500 men – were assigned to share the four quarters into which the camp was divided. The various units pitched their tents around the perimeter, as nearly as possible in battle order so that, in the event of a surprise attack or the need to sally out quickly, they would be ready for action. The camp itself consisted of a simple ditch dug by the soldiers themselves, with the earth thrown inside, stamped down and surmounted by the spears and shields of the troops. The spears might be set up as *triskelia*, made by roping three together with the point outermost, acting as a particularly effective barrier behind the trench. Most camps had either two or four transverse roads with the troops' tents placed in the intervals, and where the force was of mixed infantry and cavalry the latter were placed within the former for protection. Where circumstances and manpower permitted, the camp should be at least two and a half bowshots across so that the animals could be quartered safely in the middle sections. The largest camps, which could contain a major field army of over 20,000 men and animals

with their baggage, were more than a mile along the side, with a v-shaped trench some six to eight feet in depth.

Theodore's unit, like all units, had to set up its own rotating watch within the camp; but the commanding officer also needed to set up a watch for the camp as a whole. Each unit along the perimeter provided soldiers for this patrol, called the *kerketon*, and through the use of a regularly changed password had complete authority over access to and egress from the camp. Other units had to be sent out to forage for supplies and fodder for the horses, and they were in turn accompanied by supporting troops for protection – it was important to pitch camp and secure the immediate area before sunset so that supplies could be got in as quickly as possible. Leaving camp after sunset was usually prohibited, except for the outer line of pickets, groups of four men sent out to cover the major approaches to the camp when it was clear that no enemy was yet in the immediate vicinity.

The men were organised in tent-groups of eight, called *kontubernia*, sharing a hand-mill and basic cooking utensils as well as a small troop of pack-animals. Soldiers were issued with two main varieties of bread: simple baked loaves, and double-baked 'hard tack', referred to in late Roman times as *bucellatum* and by the Byzantines as *paximadion* or *paximation*. In campaign conditions, it was normally the soldiers themselves who milled and baked this. The hard tack was more easily preserved over a longer period, was easy to produce, and demanded fairly simple milling and baking skills. Hard tack could be baked in field ovens – *klibanoi* – or simply laid in the ashes of camp fires, an advantage when speed was essential, and this was the case during this expedition – although the soldiers much preferred the best such bread, baked in thin oval loaves cooked in a field-oven, and then dried in the sun. The ration per diem included two to three pounds of bread and either dried meat or cheese; wine was also issued, but it is not clear how often or in what circumstances. The amount of meat

relative to the rest of the diet was often minimal or absent altogether, but would still provide a reasonable amount of nutrition, since ancient strains of wheat and barley had considerably higher protein content than modern strains, and it has been shown that the bread ration of ancient and medieval soldiers provided adequate nutrition for the duration of a campaign season even without much meat.

The camp routine was marked by the trumpet signals for the evening meal, lights out and reveille; trumpet signals were also employed to issue commands to the various units and divisions to strike camp, assemble in marching order and begin the march. Leaving camp was always a dangerous time, for as the troops defiled through the main entrances they were for a while exposed to archers or even a rapid hit-and-run charge from enemy horsemen. A particular order for exiting camps was laid down and followed, and once the army was out of the entrenched area it would be drawn up for a while in a defensive formation until the troops fell into the marching order for the day.

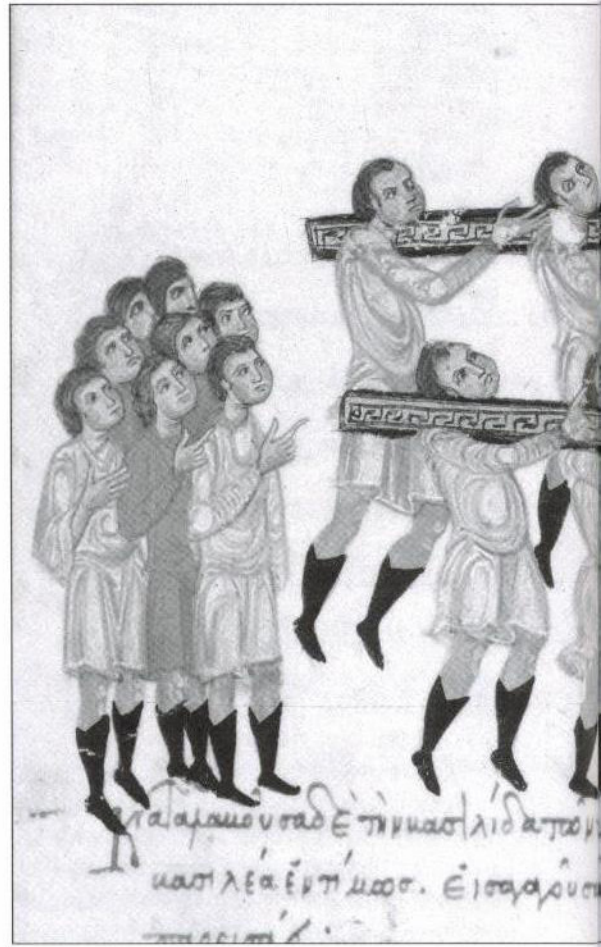
The speed at which armies moved varied according to terrain, weather and the number and types of troops. Unaccompanied mounted troops could cover distances of up to 40 or 50 miles per day, provided the horses were regularly rested and well nourished and watered. Small units generally moved more rapidly than large divisions, even up to 30 miles per day for infantry in some contexts. Average marching speeds were much slower: three miles per hour for infantry on even terrain, two and a half on broken/hilly ground. Mixed forces moved at the speed of the slowest element; but speed also depended on the conditions of the roads or tracks followed, the breadth of the column, and its length. The longer the column, the longer it took for the rearmost files to start moving off, which would thus arrive at the next camp later than the foremost groups, the delay between first and last units being proportional to the length and breadth of the column. Thus a division of 5,000 infantry, which is what Bardas

Illuminated manuscript of the *History of John Skylitzes* (11th century), fol. 102 a. The widow Danelis, a wealthy landowner from the Peloponnese, being carried in her litter by servants. (Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid)

probably had at his disposal, marching at the standard infantry rate of about three miles per hour over good ground, ordered five abreast and with each row occupying a (minimal) two metres would stretch over a two-kilometre distance. There would be a gap of at the very least about 20 minutes, if not more, between the front and rear elements. Theodore's column marched three abreast along the narrow, often wooded tracks followed by the imperial troops on this campaign, and his division of 1,000 cavalry would have extended back nearly six miles, and the whole army some 14 miles. The rearmost units would be well over one hour behind the van.

Having left the camp Theodore's unit was placed in the van division, behind a screen of scouts deployed well ahead of the column, and ahead of the main contingent of cavalry and infantry. The baggage train, to which a group of units was assigned on a rotational basis for protection, was placed in the centre, and other units patrolled at some distance, where the terrain allowed, on either flank. On open terrain in enemy country the army would march over a broader front in a formation that could be rapidly deployed into battle order; and for passing through narrow passes or across rivers another formation was employed.

As the march progressed some of the scouts returned to inform the general that the enemy was not far away, near the fortress town of Arkadioupolis (mod. Luleburgaz). The three divisions were given separate tasks: two were concealed in the rough scrub and wooded terrain through which the track led in the direction of the enemy, while he took command of the third section of the army himself. Leaving the two divisions in ambush with clear instructions, he himself led a fierce and unsuspected charge against the foremost enemy units, made up of Pecheneg mounted archers. In spite of the



greater numbers in the enemy force, he managed to lure the enemy out of their encampment and withdraw in good order, encouraging more and more of the enemy to pursue but, on the assumption that the Byzantine troops were indeed losing, without any clear plan of attack or order. It must have seemed as though the outnumbered Byzantine force, which managed with difficulty to avoid being completely surrounded, was doomed. Yet discipline, training and leadership told, and Skleros finally ordered the prearranged signal to be given for the whole force to fall back. Meanwhile Theodore's unit, one of the two corps that lay in ambush, prepared itself: the order was given to remain absolutely silent, to place all supernumerary baggage animals with their attendants well to the rear, to



check their weapons, and to deploy into a battle order appropriate to the terrain. One of the priests who accompanied the force offered up a quick prayer – a standard practice before battle. As the van division approached, drew level with and then withdrew beyond them, a single trumpet-call ordered them to break cover and charge into the flank of the unsuspecting enemy. Caught in the open in close combat, the Pechenegs, a war-like Turkic people from the Eurasian steppe, had no chance to deploy at a distance suitable for the use of their archery and, after being brought to a halt – at which point the van division about-faced and counter-attacked in its turn – they turned and fled. The Rus' and Bulgar troops, meanwhile, who had been hurrying to catch them up, on the assumption that the

Romans had been routed, suddenly found themselves caught up in the panic. As the rout became general and the Roman forces pushed home their advantage, heavy casualties were inflicted on the fleeing enemy troops. A contemporary source remarks that the Romans lost some 550 men and many wounded, as well as a large number of horses, a direct result of the fearsome archery of the Pechenegs. The combined enemy force, however, lost several thousand. The short encounter won an important breathing space for the emperor John, furnishing him also with vital information about the composition, fighting abilities and morale of the enemy.

After any encounter with the enemy the commanding officers held a muster to establish casualties. Specially detailed soldiers

were deputed to check the fallen, to carry or help the wounded back to the temporary Roman camp, where the divisional medical attendants and surgeons tried to deal with those wounds that were not likely to be fatal. Far more men died of wounds than in battle itself, of course. In a contemporary treatise instructions are given that the wounded were to be taken back towards imperial territory with a section of the rearguard, transported on the pack-animals no longer required for the army's supplies. Occasional references in the chronicles of the period bear this out. There survives a medical treatise, certain sections of which deal with the problems of extracting arrowheads, with fractured or broken bones, and related injuries. Chronicles dating from the 6th to 12th centuries give accounts of the treatment of various wounds: the removal of an arrowhead from the face (the victim survived), of a javelin from the skull





ABOVE Illuminated manuscript of the *History of John Skylitzes* (11th century), fol. 97 a. A Saracen emir interrogates a captive in his tent, while his troops besiege the Byzantine fortress of Beneventum in Southern Italy. (Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid)

LEFT Gold hyperpyron of Manuel I (1143–1180). Reverse: the emperor, standing. (Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham)

(survived the extraction, but died as a result of the infection which followed), and the treatment of deep slashes in the back and thigh (the victim died from blood loss).

Theodore was lucky – not only was he not injured, but his officer had noted how he had dashed in to rescue a comrade from the spear of an attacking Pecheneg, and he was cited for his bravery. He was given a golden arm-ring (taken from one of the dead enemy horsemen), and promoted to *drakonarios* – bearer of the unit banner, a considerable

honour, and bringing with it some extra privileges in camp and a small rise in his *roga* – his pay.

The defeat of the enemy force gave the emperor time to organise a major offensive, an offensive which was, in the event, far more successful than was originally planned. Theodore's unit was involved too, and fought on the left wing at the second battle of Dorostolon in July 971. Theodore eventually retired to his family holding in Thrace where, with his savings from his salary and his promotions – he eventually reached the rank of *drouggarios*, roughly equivalent to brigadier – he invested in an imperial title, that of *kandidatos*, which brought with it a decent annuity, and expanded his property. He ended his days as an important local notable – and his grandchildren enjoyed his tales of bravery and fierce barbarians!

War and peace

The medieval eastern Roman world was a society in which the virtues of peace were extolled and war was condemned. Fighting was to be avoided at all costs. Yet the Byzantine empire nevertheless inherited the military administrative structures and, in many ways, the militaristic ideology of the non-Christian Roman empire at its height. The tensions which these traditions generated were resolved by a political-religious ideology or world view which melded Christian ideals on the one hand, with the justification of war as a necessary evil on the other, waged primarily in defence of the Roman world and Orthodoxy – literally, correct belief. From the 4th and 5th centuries on in the eastern Mediterranean and Balkan regions this blending of ideas generated a unique culture, that could adhere unreservedly to a pacifistic ideal, yet on the same grounds could legitimate and justify the maintenance of an efficient and effective military apparatus.

This attitude is neatly summed up in the introduction to a legal codification promulgated by the emperors Leo III and Constantine V in the year 741:

Since God has put in our hands the imperial authority ... we believe that there is nothing higher or greater that we can do than to govern in judgement and justice ... and that thus we may be crowned by His almighty hand with victory over our enemies (which is a thing more precious and honourable than the diadem which we wear) and thus there may be peace ...

Byzantine emperors could justify their wars on the basis that they were fighting to preserve peace, to extend the territory of the Christian world, and to defend God's Chosen People – for in Christian Roman terms, the mantle of the Chosen People had been

transferred to the Christians with the coming of Christ. There was always a tension between the pacifism of early Christianity, however, and the imperial Roman, but Christian, need to fight to defend the empire's territorial integrity, or to recover 'lost' Christian lands and peoples. Christianity never evolved an ideological obligation to wage war against 'infidels' presented in the terms of Christian theology, even if, at times, and on an *ad hoc* basis, individuals have spoken and acted as though such a justification could be made. The 13th canon of St Basil specifically states that those who took life in warfare should abstain from communion for a period.

As Christianity spread across the empire during the 2nd and 3rd centuries, pragmatism often won the day, and it seems that considerable numbers of Christians served in the imperial armies at this time. This could not banish particular conflicts of interest, however – military service required acceptance of the emperor cult, that is, the emperor as a God – and a whole range of pagan traditions and rituals. The result is that the history of the first three centuries of Christianity, and the 3rd century in particular, is full of tales of persecution and martyrdom, as individual recruits refused to conform to the ceremonial and ritual observances associated with life in the army. As a compromise solution, the 3rd-century Christian thinker Origen argued that Christians formed a special type of army that did not fight wars for the emperor physically, but instead prayed for the success of the state, which made possible their continued existence and the expansion of their community. This compromise was developed as a response to the criticisms made by pagan commentators about Christian communities and their pacifism. In the end,

it was the argument about the continued existence of the Roman state being the necessary condition for the survival and expansion of Christianity which won the day, and led to the more pragmatic compromise noted already.

The favour shown to Christianity by the emperor Constantine I, and his deathbed baptism, however, led during the course of the 4th century to a substantive reformulation of imperial political ideology, and this changed the situation dramatically. The Christianisation of the emperor cult solved one of the most difficult issues at a blow – an earthly emperor selected by God to lead the Christians, now consonant with the Roman people – was clearly acceptable, whereas an emperor who was supposed to be a divinity was not. Two perspectives evolved from this situation. The first was the officially

sanctioned view which encouraged support for the state, as personified by the orthodox emperor, and all its undertakings. Leading churchmen, while expressing their hope that violent conflict could be avoided and that bloodshed would not be necessary, went on to state clearly that it was praiseworthy for a Christian to take up arms against the enemies of the state. The Christianisation of society developed rapidly thereafter, and as the government became dominated by Christians, so by the end of the 4th century it became impossible to obtain a government post without being a Christian.

The association between warfare and Christianity, the struggle for survival of the 'chosen people', led by the emperor chosen

Traditional threshing in eastern Asia Minor.
(Author's collection)





The walls of Constantinople (5th century).
(Author's collection)

by God, at the head of his armies became quite explicit. All warfare was thus about defending Christianity and the Christian empire. At the same time a desire for peace, and a regret that war should be necessary, were constant motifs in imperial and Church ideology. There were constant reminders of the heavenly support which Byzantine armies received. Successful warfare without God's help was impossible. A late 6th-century text notes that:

... we urge upon the general that his most important concern be the love of God and justice; building on these, he should strive to win the favour of God, without which it is impossible to carry out any plan, however well devised it may seem, or to overcome any enemy, however weak he may be thought.

The idea is repeated throughout the Byzantine period. Roman defeats were seen as the result of God's anger with the Romans, the chosen people, who were being punished for their sins. Only when the Romans returned to the path of righteousness and corrected their sins would success once again attend Roman arms, and this idea underlies much of the thinking in the actions of individuals and groups in Byzantine political history and political theory.

There was thus no notion of Holy War as something special, to be waged under

specific circumstances against particular enemies. The Byzantine self-image was one of a beleaguered Christian state fighting the forces of darkness, with foes against whom it had constantly to be on its guard and to evolve a whole panoply of defensive techniques, among which warfare was only one element, and by no means necessarily the most useful. In this sense, one might argue that all war was 'holy war', since all enemy action threatened the lands and beliefs of the Romans.

There were occasions when the notion that soldiers who fell in battle might be rewarded in heaven, a notion reinforced after the development of Islamic notions of Jihad, of which the Byzantines were quite aware. Thus in the 10th century, for example, the soldier-emperor Nikephoros II – known by the somewhat chilling epithet as 'the white death of the Saracens', suggested that this might be an appropriate way to encourage soldiers to fight. But the idea was rejected by the Church and was never really revived. It may have been an element of folk belief, of course, but it was certainly never given any official recognition. A prayer to be said before the soldiers marched into combat is recorded in two 10th-century texts, and it gives a good idea of this combination of Christian with warlike motifs:

Lord Jesus Christ, our God, have mercy on us. Come to the aid of us Christians and make us worthy to fight to the death for our faith and our brothers, strengthen our souls and our hearts and



our whole body, the mighty Lord of battles, through the intercession of the immaculate Mother of God, Thy Mother, and of all the saints. Amen.

There is a mass of evidence, therefore, dating from the 4th century up to the very last years of the empire, for the public and official acceptance by both Church and court, as well as by the ordinary population, of the need to wage war; for the fact of divine support for such warfare; and for the need to maintain and rely on heavenly aid in waging war. Although the notion of 'holy war' in the sense understood by the Crusaders, or by non-Muslims as typical of Islam, flickered briefly into life in the Byzantine world, especially in the context of the aggressive fighting of the 10th century, it never developed beyond this. The ways in which warfare on behalf of the Christian Roman state were understood did go through a certain evolution, for it is apparent that the Byzantines were always conscious of the need

Cornfields in eastern Asia Minor. (Author's collection)

to legitimate their wars, a need which generally became more pressing in a time of political and military expansionism such as the 10th century. While warfare could be justified, therefore, loss of life on the Roman side was in particular to be avoided or minimised, if at all possible. The emperor Constantine V characterised as 'noble' his campaign into Bulgaria in 772–73 because no Roman soldiers died; while by the time he compiled his military handbook or *tactica* c.900, the emperor Leo VI clearly expresses the idea that war has to be justified in accordance with Orthodoxy and the continued existence of the Roman state. As long as Roman interests, however defined, were at stake, then warfare was acceptable and just. War with other Orthodox Christians was, of course, to be avoided. But even this could be justified if the one true empire, that of the Romans, was at risk or subject to attack by the misguided rulers of such lands.

Warfare and east Roman society

Warfare was for much of the Byzantine world, throughout much of its history, the normal state of affairs. Its effects were manifested in a number of ways. To begin with, the ordinary population of the empire was directly affected by hostile activity in those areas most exposed to enemy attack, they suffered the destruction of their crops and dwellings, the theft or slaughter of their livestock, and if they were themselves caught, possible death or enslavement. There survive some short but evocative inscriptions from the frontier regions of Asia Minor, dating to the middle Byzantine period, which commemorate individuals who died of their wounds following a battle or raid; other accounts tell of relatives carried off into captivity or lost in the confusion of an enemy attack and never seen again. And the literate elite was just as aware of these aspects: warfare imposed itself upon many facets of Byzantine literary culture, in saints' lives, in speeches in praise of emperors, in funeral orations, in sermons and homilies to church congregations, in private letters addressed to individuals. Themes such as death, loss of property and so forth occur frequently, and in some cases the terror inspired by a sudden enemy raid is graphically portrayed. Letters often bewail the effects of warfare, with references to the tears of orphaned children and widowed mothers, the destruction of crops, homes, monastic communities, the enslavement or death of populations, driving off of livestock and so forth.

The presence of Byzantine troops was no less onerous, however. The very existence of an army brought with it the need to supply and provision it, to supply materials and livestock for it when it was on campaign, to provide lodgings and billets for officers and soldiers, and so on. There were extensive and burdensome logistical demands wherever an army was present, not just a question of demands made by the army on local populations, but also the fact that government intervention into the local

economy often affected the economic equilibrium of the affected districts. This could either take the form of fixing artificially low prices for the sale of produce to the army, thus harming the producers, or of by sudden heavy demand for certain produce, thus driving up prices for those in the private sector. The civilian population might also be compelled to bake bread and biscuits for the troops as well as providing other supplies and, in addition, they were subjected to the plundering and pillaging of the less well-disciplined elements of the army. Quite apart from this was the potential for conflict between soldiers and civilians, for the outcome was seldom favourable to the latter.

Additional levies in grain were particularly onerous, and there are frequent complaints in the written documentation concerning this and related burdens, usually a result of either special requirements for particular campaigns or the normal operational demands made by the troops in a particular region. In addition to these demands, provincial populations had to provide resources and manpower for the maintenance of the public post, the *dromos*, with its system of posting stations and stables, stud farms and breeding ranches, mule-trains and associated requirements. The postal system served the needs of both the military and the fiscal administration of the state. It helped with the movement of military supplies, was responsible for the rapid transit of couriers and imperial officials of all kinds, as well as important foreigners – diplomatic officials or prisoners of war, for example. The households that were obligated to carry out certain duties for the post were, like households that had to support a soldier, released from the extraordinary state impositions, and this was an important aspect of the smooth running of the provincial postal system.

The nature of the burden which the provincial population bore in support of the army can be seen particularly clearly in a series of documents of the later 10th and especially the 11th century. It consisted of imperial grants of exemption from the

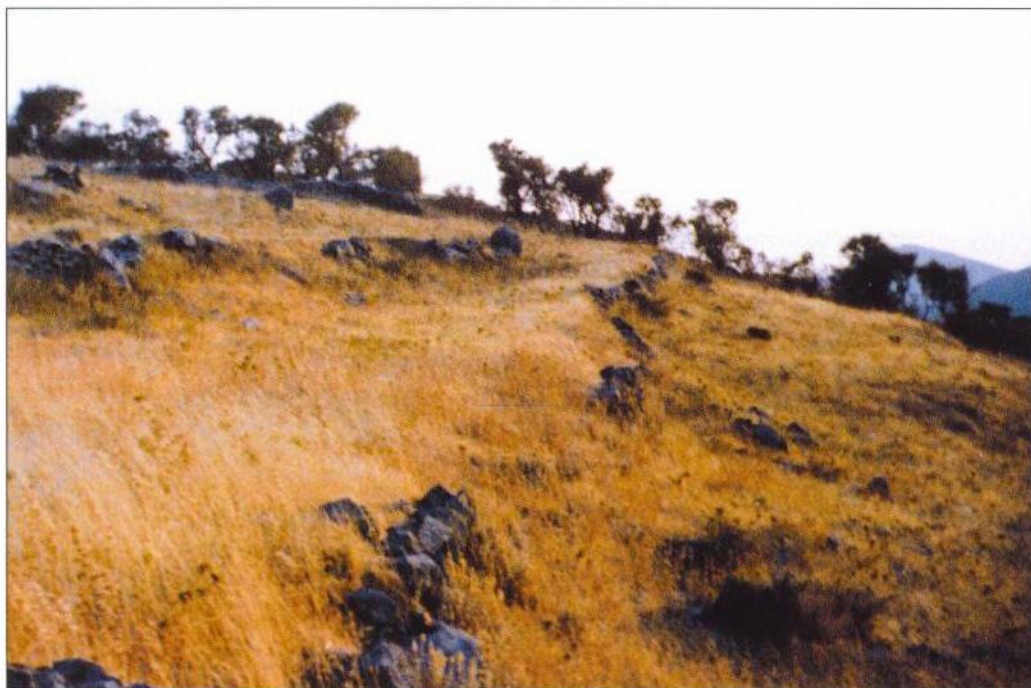
billeting of soldiers, the provision of supplies for various categories of troops in transit, the provision of horses, mules and wagons for the army, and the delivery of charcoal and timber for military purposes. Some accounts in chronicles detail the sort of requirements needed to mount major military expeditions – large numbers of draught-animals, wagons and foodstuffs, for example, and increases in demands for supplies of all kinds; all were provided by requisitions from the local

peasantry who suffered considerably from this form of indirect taxation.

Economic and demographic disruption affected not just the people who lived in the provinces or towns that suffered during periods of fighting. It also directly threatened the government's control over its resources and the ability of the Church to maintain its

A 5th-century mosaic from Argos, showing agricultural labour in September and October. (Author's collection)





Abandoned terraced vineyards on the Aegean island of Limnos. (Author's collection)

spiritual authority and to supervise the communities most affected. Some worries about supposed 'pagan' practices and folk beliefs appear in texts and letters of the time, for example. Archaeological and written information about populations fleeing from the path of invaders or the movement of settlements to more secure sites testifies to the effects of warfare in certain areas. And it took a long time for the worst affected areas to recover. Again, the evidence suggests as long as three centuries before economic and demographic decline was halted. And the effects of warfare were also visible on a day-to-day basis, in the structure of defended settlements, the shrinking and abandonment of towns, the ubiquitous forts and fortresses guarding key strategic points, crossroads, passes, valleys, bridges. And according to several reports the more gruesome effects of warfare could be seen on the battlefields themselves: in one text the author describes how the bones of the soldiers slain at a conflict a few years beforehand could still be

seen littering the ground over which the battle was fought. Yet, while warfare disrupted social and cultural life, it also influenced the patterns of daily existence. Different cultural traditions evolved in regions regularly affected by fighting and enemy action, especially in the east. The seasonal nature of the fighting had quite a lot to do with this, for in many areas distinctive cultures and societies developed on both sides of the frontier, engendering values and ways of life very different from those of the interior or the metropolitan districts around Constantinople, for example, also encouraging intercultural contacts, influences and traditions very different from the mainstream. We should bear in mind that soldiers and their families were no more exempt from these effects than the rest of the population. But while the parents of young men called up for military service wept and lamented as they said goodbye to their sons, the more privileged were able to deploy powerful contacts to have them released from serving in the army: on grounds of economic hardship, for example!



Traditional ox-cart in eastern Asia Minor.
(Author's collection)

The negative aspect was to some extent balanced by an alternative set of views, however. Popular approval and enthusiasm for war could be encouraged, and the emperors exploited court ceremonial at Constantinople specifically to this end. Triumphal processions, accompanied by displays of booty and prisoners, hymns of thanksgiving, the acclamations reminding the emperors (and the crowd who were in earshot) of their Christian duty to defend Orthodoxy and the empire, all were directed to achieve a particular consensus about warfare and the emperor's duty to defend orthodoxy. Poets were commissioned to write and declaim verse accounts of the emperor's courage, strategic skill and military achievements: the poet George of Pisidia thus composed a series of laudatory poems in the 620s and 630s about the victories of the emperor Heraclius over Avars and Persians, while in the 10th century Theodosios the Deacon similarly praised the victories of the

emperor Nikephoros II Phokas. Other members of the cultural and political elite composed letters in praise of the emperor's deeds in war, so that the glorification of military deeds and of individual leaders or emperors was part of the staple production of composers in verse and prose. As an unfortunate but necessary means of achieving a divinely approved end, warfare could thus be given a very positive gloss. Such views were not necessarily shared by the many thousands of peasants and townspeople who suffered over the centuries.

The degree to which warfare was fundamental to the fabric of late Roman and Byzantine society and historical development is evident in our sources. The physical appearance of the Byzantine countryside, social values, cultural attitudes, government fiscal and administrative organisation, themes in literature and art; all these different aspects of cultural and material life were directly influenced by the beleaguered situation of the medieval east Roman state and its need to fight wars.

Metrios – a farmer

The effects of warfare and fighting on individuals and on local communities at different times and the evidence for the non-military perception and perspective on war have already been alluded to in earlier chapters. One of the problems of Byzantine history is the fact that the written evidence, upon which historians have to rely for knowledge of people's opinions and attitudes, was nearly always produced by members of relatively privileged social strata. We thus have very little real idea of what ordinary people – peasants, merchants, craftsmen, simple soldiers – actually thought about their world. Of course, we can try to establish through the writings of the educated something of the views and beliefs of the non-literate, or at least non-writing part of society, and we can also work out through the actions taken by certain groups at certain times something of what they thought and why. For example, while writing for a limited and very elite readership, the Princess Anna Comnena, writing early in the 12th century, presents a graphic description of the effects of warfare on the provinces in the years before her father, the emperor Alexios I, had (in her view) rescued the empire from its troubles:

Cities were wiped out, lands ravaged, all the territories of Rome were stained with blood. Some died miserably, pierced by arrow or lance; others were driven from their homes or carried off as prisoners of war ... Dread seized on all as they hurried to seek refuge from impending disaster in caves, forests, mountains and hills. There they loudly bewailed the fate of their friends ... mourned the loss of sons or grieved for their daughters ... In those days no walk of life was spared its tears and lamentation.

It is because they tended to act in large groups and in specific circumstances about

which we often possess quite a lot of information, soldiers are a very good group to study in this respect. Unfortunately, less can be said through direct evidence about civilians, and so we will necessarily rely on a certain amount of hypothesis in this chapter.

As we saw in the previous chapter, it is clear that the presence of soldiers was rarely, if ever, welcome, except perhaps when a community or the local population at large was suffering directly from enemy attacks. Whether the army was engaged in fighting the enemy or not, whole communities or individuals might still suffer at the hands of unruly or poorly disciplined soldiers. In the 10th century, members of a small monastic community on the island of Gymnopelagesion in the Aegean were forced to abandon their homes because of the frequent seizure ('requisitioning') of their animals and crops by passing vessels of the imperial fleet. There are plenty of other examples: Armenian soldiers, for instance, notorious (at least in the view of the Greek sources) for their lack of discipline and poor behaviour, were especially feared by the ordinary populace of the countryside; and an 11th-century source recounts the tale of a local girl who had been robbed by a unit of Armenian troops passing through. Byzantine writers themselves often remarked on the fact that Roman troops could be poorly disciplined and even ravage imperial territory for their supplies when these were not forthcoming or thought to be inadequate. One commentator sums up the general attitude to soldiers when he makes reference to 'the troublesome presence of soldiers'.

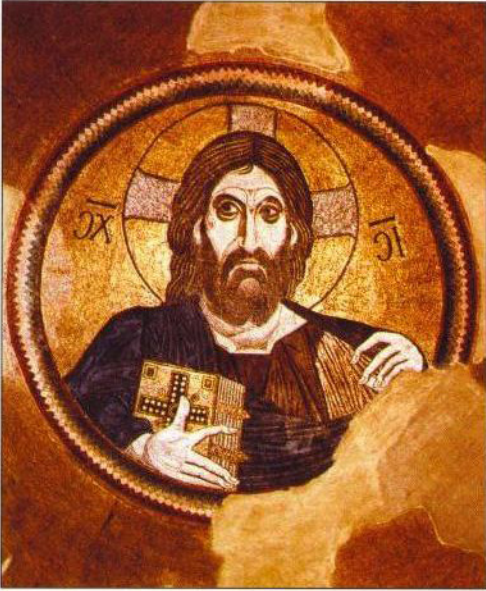
In the late 11th century the Archbishop Theophylact of Ohrid in the Byzantine provinces of Bulgaria complained in the strongest terms about the oppressive weight of the state demands on Church tenants. He

was especially concerned with the labour demanded for the repair, maintenance or construction of fortifications, but he was equally vehement about special conscriptions for the army, which took men away from an already weakened local population. The oppressive demands of the imperial fiscal officials was often such that Theophylact remarks on the flight of considerable numbers of villagers to the forests, in order to escape such oppression. While the situation seems to have worsened in the later 11th century and afterwards, these requisitions and demands and the hardship they caused remained a major burden on the rural population of the Byzantine empire until its last years.

As in the earlier chapter which portrayed the life of a 'typical' soldier, therefore, I will look at the daily life of an ordinary Byzantine through the eyes and experiences of an invented individual, based on a composite derived from a range of sources combined together to generate an impressionistic account: all the events described in what follows can be found in medieval sources of the period from the 7th to the 12th centuries. In this case, our subject is called Metrios – there is a short 10th-century account of a peasant farmer of this name from Paphlagonia. We will assume that he was a farmer of some means in his community, the village of Katoryaka in Paphlagonia, and the time is the middle of the 9th century. Although his village is situated only three days' travel from the large coastal fortress town of Amastris, the villagers rarely undertake this journey, partly because the roads are not particularly safe – there were always small bands of refugees moving northwards from the most exposed frontier zones and, while many of them settled down in and around the smaller towns and fortresses of the region, there were always a few who fell into a life of banditry and brigandage. There was also the fact that Metrios could provide little from his land that villages much nearer the town could not produce, and so his markets would have tended to be located much closer to his

home village. In spite of the distance from the nearest active front, Katoryaka was regularly affected by the war, lying on one of the major routes east from Dorylaion and Constantinople, a route frequently used by the army. This meant that the villagers would regularly have had to provide accommodation and board for officers and imperial officials – fiscal, military and others – who would frequently pass through while carrying out their duties. Although the disadvantages of having to put up such people was the cause of frequent grumbling, it also meant that the village was never short of news, since inevitably the attendants of the officials in question would be willing to pass on gossip to those with whom they came into contact in the course of their duties.

We encounter Metrios at the beginning of an important week. In the first place, it is the feast of the patron saint of the village, St Mokios, and the villagers traditionally have a fair, with a market and a great deal of feasting, culminating in a liturgical celebration in the village church conducted by the local bishop, who has travelled down specially for the occasion. The fair attracts a good number of villagers from the neighbouring communities who come both to join in the festivities and to help any relatives they may have – many of the village girls marry young men from neighbouring settlements – as well as a sizeable number of traders and merchants who come, often considerable distances, with their trains of pack-mules to sell their wares or buy goods that cannot be found elsewhere. It is a good time for the villagers. They can buy goods from the traders whom they only rarely see in their village, in spite of its location on a major route; they can exchange gossip and news; there is the chance for the youngsters to expand their social horizons, and for the young men and women to eye one another up! By far the most interesting visitors to the fair for most villagers are the traders, especially those from far away, distant provinces within the empire bringing the luxury products of those regions – Pontic cloths from the region around Trebizond far



Monastery church of Daphni, Greece (11th century). The Pantokrator. (Author's collection)

to the east, leather goods from Cappadocia in the south, spices and exotic medicines from Syria and the lands further to the east that few of the villagers had even heard of, still less visited themselves. Knowledge of such places came from merchants alone and the occasional slave or former prisoner of the Arabs who had obtained his release by some means or other.

Metrios himself faces two problems this week. In the first place, he has to take his two mules to the neighbouring village of Palaiokastro to collect his injured nephew, a soldier hurt in an accident, and whom he has undertaken to look after, and at the same time purchase some products he cannot get in his own village – his own village produces olives and olive oil in abundance, but good-quality wine, a well-known product of Palaiokastro, is difficult to come by and Metrios wishes to stock up in this respect (the fact that Metrios possesses two mules, incidentally, is a sign of his relative wealth – a good mule could cost as much as 12 or even 15 gold *nomismata*, the basic gold coin and unit of account of the Byzantine world). In addition, he has been informed by a

passing government official that he will be required to put up an officer of a unit passing through the area during the week of the fair. This is his second problem, for he must provide food and a bed for this visitor and his servant as well as fodder for their animals, and if he wishes to avoid having problems he must ensure that his hospitality is appreciated by the officer in question.

Leaving his home shortly after dawn, his journey to Palaiokastro takes nearly six hours. Once there he visits the garrison where his nephew is recovering from his accident, leaves his mules with some of the soldiers, whom he pays to water them and look after them, before walking down the hill to the village, where he stops for a drink of wine with some acquaintances in the village guest-house and tavern. There he rests until the midday heat has abated, playing a couple of games of *tavli* (backgammon) and eating a light meal, before walking back up to the fortress to collect his mules and nephew. By late afternoon he has loaded the broad basketwork panniers on one of the two mules with large leathern bags filled with the wine he has purchased, and set off homewards. Having left it fairly late in the day, the second half of the trip is in the dark, of course, and the fear of bandits on the road gives Metrios and his nephew some cause for concern, although the latter has his sword and spear with him. But they are on a fairly well-used road, and at this particular time of the year there are still a number of other travellers to be seen, mostly on their way to his own village for the fair which begins in two days' time.

Metrios has a day to prepare for the arrival of his unbidden military guest, but he finds a good deal of commotion on returning to the village. It appears that during his absence another train of imperial fiscal officials had arrived and, presenting a series of documents to the village headman, informed the villagers that, in view of the military expedition being planned for the summer that year, they would have to produce an extra supply of grain and olive oil for the army. The village had already paid

its regular tax demands for the year, so this imposition, coming as it did at the time of the fair, was especially unwelcome. Katoryaka was not a poor community, unlike those higher up in the mountains to the south, so the burden could at least be managed without substantial suffering.

Unfortunately, the tax officer in charge of this extra assessment was a particularly unpleasant sort, and made a lot of extra demands in terms of hospitality and 'gifts' from the village. With his own military escort and the additional presence of a unit of regular troops passing through the village, the inhabitants had little option to paying up and getting rid of the official in question as quickly as possible. Inevitably, he decided to prolong his stay to include the fair.

The arrival of the officer took place the evening of the day before the fair. Metrios and his wife and daughter – his son had married some years earlier and had only recently moved into his own house on the other side of the village – greeted the officer politely and after offering him the usual gift of wine and bread showed him to his quarters. The two servants were billeted in the outhouse which served as a storehouse and occasional shelter for the mules. Fortunately, the officer seemed a pleasant sort of man who demanded only what was his due, greatly to the relief of Metrios and his family – particularly the daughter: the reputation of soldiers, and officers in

Church of St Eirene, Constantinople/Istanbul.
(Author's collection)



particular, was only too well known. That evening the family went to the village church for a mass preparatory to the fair and to mark the inauguration of the feast of the village's patron saint, and the officer accompanied them. The village priest, a relatively learned man for such a humble position, chose as the text for his homily a passage from the writings of Anastasios of Sinai, a famous holy man of a couple of centuries ago, on the dangers to the soul posed by lack of attention and piety during the holy liturgy: men staring at the women in the gallery (or at the back of the church in the case of Metrios' village); chattering and discussing matters of business or village gossip while ignoring the priest; and rushing out at the end of the service as though chased by dogs. The congregation listened attentively and soberly – but the attractions of preparing for the fair were too much, and the rush to leave the church at the end of the service was just what father Efthymios did not want to see.

The fair opened the next day – the whole central square of the village was filled with stalls offering all sorts of delights and goods, things seen at most once or twice a year in the village. Metrios' injured nephew, whose military service had taken him farther afield than most, lost no time in letting the village know that he had seen all this before, of course, while his unit was in Constantinople, or Thrace, or down in Attaleia on the south coast. In spite of the presence of the soldiers, the event passed off with no trouble, apart from the irritating presence of the somewhat arrogant fiscal official. But he and his retinue left after three days, as they had to move on to make similar arrangements for supplying the army in the neighbouring villages and were keen to return to their own homes in the regional capital at Amastris. The highlight was the mass held on the Thursday to honour the memory of St Mokios, after which a great feast was held in the village square, accompanied by much merry-making, dancing and music.

Metrios used the opportunities offered by the fair to sell some of his own produce to

the soldiers and officials as well as some of the traders, mostly sales of olive oil of different qualities, some six to seven gallons in all, from which he took in nearly four *nomismata* in silver and gold, a very handsome profit indeed and sufficient to cover part of his next year's tax, assuming it was demanded in money (the government's demands varied according to need, sometimes requiring payment in produce, sometimes in cash). The average income of a labourer, for example, varied from nine to 12 gold *nomismata* per year; a soldier would receive, in addition to his supplies and other things provided by the government, about 12 *nomismata* per annum, although this did not include private sources of income – many soldiers who possessed land earned a good deal more than this, while officers received more again. For a single sale of produce, Metrios had done quite well. Assuming no other extra government demands were made on his household, in the following year he would be able to buy up a piece of waste land next to one of his own plots, and expand his production, perhaps by hiring one of the poorer villagers as a day labourer during the ploughing, sowing and harvest seasons.

Metrios is probably fairly typical of most of the slightly 'better-off' Byzantine peasants during this period, but the majority had less land than he had. Unlike Metrios, who owned his own property, which he had inherited from his father and his paternal uncle whose children had not survived him (one son killed in the course of military service, another who had died of 'fever' aged nine years and a daughter who had died in childbirth), many were tenants of local landlords who extracted relatively high rents, technically to cover the taxation on the estate's lands, but frequently including a fairly high private rent for the landowner. As the wealthier officials and their families bought land and office and increased their hold on the key posts in government and the provinces, so the general situation of the rural population began to worsen as landlords increased rents and the government demanded more in taxes to



Gold *hyperpyron* of Isaac II (1185–1195). Reverse: the emperor with the Archangel Michael. (Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham)

maintain its own machinery and the army. But in Metrios's time that was still a century or so in the future.

There were many other trades and occupations, of course – the merchants and traders we have already noted, the village craftsmen such as the smith, the potter and the leatherworkers, the townspeople of the larger cities who had trades ranging from gold- and silversmithing to butcher, baker, clothiers, fullers and dyers, cobblers, silk importers and exporters, dairy traders, and every other provider of foodstuffs, finished goods and services we might expect to find in a large town. Until the economic boom of the later 10th and 11th centuries, however, such urban activity was limited on the whole to a few major cities such as Constantinople, Thessaloniki, Trebizond on the south-east coast of the Black Sea, or Attaleia on the

southern coast of the Asia Minor peninsula. Yet all these developments were affected in fundamental ways by the fact that war was a normal state of affairs for inhabitants of much of the Byzantine world, and for much of the time. The presence of soldiers as fighters, as peacekeepers, as oppressors and as liberators was a part of this, and the demands made by the army and the government for its soldiers were, as we have seen, the central pillar of the state's financial system. Everything was based on the need to recruit, supply, equip and organise soldiers, and both the economy of the state – the issue of gold coin, for example – and the local economies which comprised the empire were directly affected by this fundamental fact. The invented example of Metrios the farmer gives some idea of the day-to-day existence of the rural population of the empire and the ways in which war or aspects of the need to organise for war had become an integral part of daily existence in Byzantium.

Death of an empire

The Byzantine empire survived for some 500 years from about 600 in a form which grew increasingly away from its late Roman roots. Yet although there were many substantial changes in its geographical extent, institutional arrangements and social structure, it remained until the early 13th century the recognisable descendant of the eastern Roman empire of Justinian. By the middle of the 11th century, however, the international political and economic context of the 12th century – in which it had, after all, to survive – was beginning to change in ways that set up substantial challenges to the empire and, more importantly, to the ways in which it worked and was able to respond.

Deep cultural differences and an increasing divergence between the Greek eastern Mediterranean and south Balkan world, on the one hand, and the Latin-dominated lands of central and western Europe had become increasingly marked across the 8th, 9th and 10th centuries. The situation worsened as western economic strength and political and military aggression began to be a serious problem for the medieval east Roman state in the later 11th century, with the Normans on the one hand and the German emperors on the other presenting serious threats to Byzantine political authority, control and prestige in the Balkans, and with the growing challenge to Byzantine maritime power from Italian commercial centres such as Venice and Genoa. The crusading movement, western prejudices about Greek perfidy and effiteness, and the expansion of the Seljuk emirates in Asia Minor, transformed alienation and suspicion into open conflict.

The real threat now came no longer from the Islamic world to the east, but from the Christian west, and the first conclusive indication of the changed balance of power came in the form of the fourth crusade.

Intending to attack Egypt, the crusading forces had found themselves heavily indebted to the Venetians, who had hired them the ships and provided some of the finance needed for the expedition. The Venetians had been looking for an opportunity to intervene in the confused situation at Constantinople in order to consolidate their trading privileges and their hold over the commerce of the eastern Mediterranean. The presence at Venice of Alexios IV Angelos, a pretender to the imperial throne, rendered the task of the Venetians in requesting a diversion to Constantinople fairly easy. In 1203, the crusader army arrived before the walls of the Byzantine capital and within a short time had succeeded in installing Alexios IV as co-emperor, with his blind father, Isaac II, whom his uncle Alexios III had deposed, and who had been brought out of prison after the latter fled the city. Once installed, Alexios IV found it impossible to pay the promised rewards and, as the situation worsened, he found himself increasingly isolated. Early in 1204 he was deposed and murdered by Alexios Doukas (Alexios V); but this only exacerbated the problem. Although the new emperor strengthened the defences and was able to resist an initial crusader attack, the city fell on 12 April. The booty taken was immense – an eyewitness asserts that so much booty from a single city had not been seen since the creation of the world. The city, full of precious objects, statues, liturgical and ceremonial vestments and objects, which had never before fallen to violent assault, was mercilessly sacked and pillaged for three days. Much destruction occurred, with innumerable artefacts destroyed and precious metal objects melted down or stolen – some of the most spectacular objects can still be seen in Venice today. The capture of Constantinople in 1204 and the establishment of a Latin empire finalised the split between east and west, for the Latin



The empire was rent by civil wars and constantly threatened from east and west, and by 1453 had shrunk to the southern Peloponnese, a handful of Aegean islands and the city of Constantinople.

patriarchate was not recognised by the Orthodox populations of the Byzantine or formerly-Byzantine regions. The patriarch Michael Autoreianos, elected in Nicaea in 1208, was recognised as the true patriarch of the Constantinopolitan Church.

After the capture and execution of the fleeing Alexios V, a Latin emperor was elected in the person of Baldwin of Flanders, the empire's lands were divided among the victors, and Venice was awarded the coveted provinces and maritime districts. Greece was divided among several rulers and the principality of Achaia (in the Peloponnese) and the duchy of the Archipelago, the kingdom of Thessaloniki and the duchies of Athens and Thebes were established.

In spite of this catastrophe, the empire survived and several counter-claimants to the

imperial throne asserted their position. A branch of the Angelos family established an independent principality, the Despotate of Epiros, in the western Balkans, which lasted until the end of the 14th century. The family of the Komnenoi governed a more or less autonomous region in central and eastern Pontus, where the 'empire' of Trebizond now appeared; and at Nicaea, where the noble Constantine Laskaris continued to exercise effective control over much of Byzantine western Asia Minor, the empire of Nicaea evolved, its first emperor being Constantine's brother Theodore, the son-in-law of Alexios III, and thus possessed of a certain legitimacy. Apart from these territories, the Bulgarian Tsar Kalojan was in the process of establishing an independent Bulgaria, and was even able to capture the Latin emperor in 1205 after decisively crushing his army. By the 1230s the Bulgars were threatening to reduce the Byzantines of Epiros to vassal status.

The Latin empire based at Constantinople had a bleak future. The rulers of Epiros tried

with help from the German emperor Frederick II, and later with King Manfred of Sicily, to establish a balance in the Balkans, with the intention of recovering Constantinople. But the emperors of Nicaea were in a better position strategically and politically and succeeded in making an alliance with Genoa. They thereby achieved a balance of power with Venice at sea. During the 1240s and 1250s they extended their territories in the southern Balkans, recovering a substantial area from its Frankish rulers. In Asia Minor a stabilisation of the frontier with the Seljuks was achieved for a while, and in 1261, taking advantage of the absence of most of the Latin garrison of Constantinople on an expedition, a small Nicaean force was able to gain entry to the City and reclaim it for the empire. Constantinople was the capital of the east Roman empire once more. By the end of the 13th century, parts of central Greece were once again in Byzantine hands, while they also controlled much of central and south-eastern Peloponnese.

Nevertheless, the last two centuries of Byzantine rule in Asia Minor and the southern Balkans saw the loss of Asia Minor, and the reduction of the empire to a dependency of the growing Ottoman Sultanate. The empire simply did not have the resources to fight on several fronts, and even to fight on one for more than a short period proved an impossible burden. But the empire's strategic position made warfare unavoidable, while the imperial political ideology meant that emperors continued to look for ways of recovering former territory and lost glory. For a while in the second half of the 13th century, and under the able emperor Michael VIII (1259–82), the empire marked up several successes. It was able to expand into the Peloponnese and to force the submission of the Frankish principalities in the region. Alliances with Genoa and the kingdom of Aragon and, briefly, with the Papacy, enabled the empire once more to influence the international scene and to resist the powers which worked for its destruction and partition. But the international environment soon became much less

favourable. For with the transfer of imperial attention back to Constantinople the Asian provinces were neglected at the very moment that the Mongols arrived in eastern Asia Minor, where they weakened Seljuq dominion over the nomadic Türkmen tribes, allowing them unrestricted access to the ill-defended Byzantine districts. By the 1270s most of the south-western and central coastal regions were lost, independent Turkish principalities or emirates, including the fledgling power of the Ottomans, posed a growing threat to the remaining districts, and by the mid-1330s, the remaining Aegean regions had been lost. The Mercenary Catalan Grand Company, hired by the emperor Andronikos II in 1303 to help fight the Turks and other enemies, turned against the empire when its demands for pay were not met and, after defeating the Burgundian duke of Athens in 1311, seized control of the region, which it held until 1388. Other mercenary companies behaved similarly. The empire no longer had the resources to meet any but the smallest hostile attack, and could soon hardly even afford to hire the mercenaries upon which it relied to defend itself.

In 1390 the last fortress in Asia Minor fell to the Ottomans. Part of the empire's failure can be ascribed to the vicious civil wars that were fought between factions of the ruling dynasty: war began in 1321, lasted until 1325, flared up again in 1327, and broke out again in 1341. The Serbian ruler Stefan Urosh IV Dushan (1331–55) soon became involved on one side, while the other hired Turkish mercenaries to help in the fight. The struggle, which exhausted the small treasury, alienated the rural and urban populations who had to pay for it and failed to heal any of the rifts in the elite, ended with the victory of the emperor John VI Kantakouzenos in 1346. John had been supported by a faction of the clergy which had adopted a strongly anti-western view, a view that had important consequences for the last century of Byzantine culture and politics. But politically and economically the empire was in a desperate situation. The Serbs had absorbed Albania, eastern Macedonia and Thessaly, and all that was left of the empire

was Thrace around Constantinople, a small district around Thessaloniki (surrounded by Serbian territory), and its lands in the Peloponnese and the northern Aegean isles. Each region functioned as a more or less autonomous province, so that Byzantium was an empire in name and by tradition alone. The civil wars had wrecked the economy of these districts, which could barely afford the minimal taxes the emperors demanded.

Galata, the Genoese trading centre on the other side of the Golden Horn from Constantinople, had an annual revenue seven times as great as that of the imperial city itself!

During the civil wars, and as a result of their fighting for Kantakouzenos, the Ottomans began permanently to establish themselves in Europe. By the beginning of the 15th century, and with the exception of some limited areas in the Peloponnese and a few Aegean islands, there remained no imperial possessions in Greece. The advance of the Ottomans in Europe led to the ultimate extinction of Byzantium. Having defeated and subjugated both Serbs and Bulgars by the end of the 14th century, the Ottoman advance caused considerable anxiety in the west. A crusade was organised under the leadership of the Hungarian king, Sigismund, but in 1396 at the battle of Nicopolis his army was decisively defeated. The Byzantines attempted to play the different elements off against one another, supporting first the western powers and then the Ottomans. Some Byzantines espoused a possible solution by arguing for a union of the eastern and western Churches, which would bring with it the subordination of Constantinople to Rome. But the monasteries and the rural population were bitterly hostile to such a compromise. It was even argued by some that subjection to the Turks was preferable to union with the hated Latins. Neither party was able to assert itself effectively within the empire, with the result that the western powers remained on the whole apathetic to the plight of 'the Greeks'.

In 1401 the Ottoman Sultan Bayezid began preparations for the siege of Constantinople, but the empire was saved at the last minute by the appearance of Mongol forces under

Timur (Timur Lenk, known in English as 'Tamburlane'), who invaded Asia Minor and crushed the Ottoman forces at the battle of Ankara in 1402. The Byzantines used the opportunity to strengthen their control in the Peloponnese, but the respite was of short duration. Timur died soon after his victory over Bayezid, his empire broke up in internecine conflict, and Ottoman power revived. The Sultans consolidated their control in Anatolia, and set about expanding their control of the Balkans. The Byzantine emperor John VIII travelled widely in Europe in a vain attempt to gather support against the Islamic threat. He even accepted the union with the western Church at the council of Florence in 1439; and a last effort on the part of the emperor led to the crusade which ended in disaster at the battle of Varna in Bulgaria in 1444. In 1453 Mehmet II set about the siege of Constantinople.

The defences of the city, although suffering from lack of maintenance, remained both impressive and powerful, and it took several weeks of siege before the Ottoman forces, equipped with heavy artillery, including cannon, were able to effect some serious breaches and challenge the small garrison. In spite of a valiant effort on the part of the imperial troops and their western allies, who were massively outnumbered, the walls were finally breached by the elite Janissary units on 29 May 1453. The last emperor, Constantine XI, died fighting on the ramparts while leading a counter-attack. His body was never found. Later, Greek legend had it that, like King Arthur of British legend, he had not died, and would one day return to lead his people to victory.

Constantinople, under its Turkicised name Istanbul (from the Greek *eis tin polin* – in the city) became the new Ottoman capital. The Aegean islands that remained to the empire were soon absorbed under Ottoman rule. The Byzantine principality in the southern Peloponnese, the despotate of Morea, fell in 1460, and Trebizond, seat of the Grand Komnenoi, fell to a Turkish army in 1461. The east Roman empire – Byzantium – was no more.

War, peace, and survival

The Byzantine state survived as an important force in the Balkan and east Mediterranean region until the later 12th century because it maintained an effective fiscal apparatus that could support an efficient and well-organised army. It was as much the changes and shifts in the international situation as it was the internal evolution of Byzantine social and economic relations that led to its decline in the 13th century and its collapse and disappearance in the 14th and 15th centuries. One of the most important reasons for its longevity and its success in defending a territory surrounded on all sides by hostile forces was the system of logistical support that it maintained almost to the end. It was this system which permitted the state to allocate resources from the land to its armies as they needed them, to plan in advance the requirements for offensive operations, to hinder hostile appropriation of the same resources, and thus to make the conditions for enemy forces on Byzantine soil as difficult as possible. The taxation system ensured the raising of supplies in kind at the right time and in the right place, as well as of cash in order to purchase other requirements as well as mercenary soldiers, livestock, and so forth. Naturally, in reality this system was by no means as effective at all times as a simple description might suggest, and it often worked less to the advantage of the army than to that of the social elite, who could exploit it for their own ends. The whole apparatus worked often to the disadvantage of the producing population, who could be very oppressed by the incessant demands of this bureaucratic state.

Other factors also played a role. Tactical order and discipline were regarded by the Byzantines themselves as key elements in their success over the long term, and they were only too aware of what could happen when these

were not respected or maintained. It is also the case that the Byzantine military were by no means unique in this respect. The Islamic armies were also well organised and operated under a strict discipline, while the crusaders in the late 11th century soon learned the value of particular formations and tight tactical discipline in dealing with the fast-moving and hard-hitting Seljuk horse archers. Yet it is clear that Byzantium had an edge over most of its enemies in this respect until the 11th century, even if tactical discipline did not always deliver the results expected because individual officers or commanders lacked the leadership and authority to impose and maintain it. On the other hand, Byzantium was not Rome, and it is important to bear this in mind – the medieval east Roman empire was indeed a medieval empire, and it exhibited similar developmental traits in terms of social organisation, political structures and economic evolution as many of its neighbours.

Another important aspect was leadership, the other side of the disciplinary coin, as it were. When Byzantine armies were well led, it usually meant that they were well-disciplined, fought in coherent units and obeyed the basic tactical rules of engagement appropriate to their equipment and weaponry. It also meant that they were, more often than not, victorious, because Byzantine leaders were supposed to observe the fundamental principle of east Roman warfare, namely that of ensuring that they fought only when they were fairly sure they could win, and at the same time that of minimising the loss of life on their side. This was not mere philanthropy, although that was certainly an important ideological element. It was common sense in such a beleaguered state, in which manpower was at a premium and demographic change could lead to serious problems for the armies. But there were plenty of foolish commanders,

men whose vanity, arrogance or ignorance led them to throw the lives of their soldiers away in futile attacks or ill-considered actions. And it seems often to have been the case that these were the leaders who paid least attention to the fundamental principles of managing soldiers, discipline, tactical cohesion and *esprit de corps*. For with good leadership usually came good morale and self-confidence – crucial ingredients for successful fighting, especially in offensive warfare.

Even with well-equipped, disciplined and well-trained troops, the result of a battle in the medieval period, as well as at other times, was, in the end, unpredictable. The ultimate arbiter was a combination of the soldiers' morale and fighting skills, the quality of the leadership, and good luck. But as the emperor Leo VI points out in his military handbook, or *tactica*, in the early 10th century, the difference between the good general and the bad general was that the good general understood this, acted in a manner appropriate to the circumstances, and made sure that his dispositions could cope with sudden surprises or changes in the conditions of battle. Another writer, this time the son of a famous Byzantine general, noted at the end of the 11th century that he had never known a diligent and alert man who had not been able to make his own good fortune on the battlefield. And while it would be incorrect to suggest that Byzantine defeats were due only to the incompetence or arrogance of commanding officers, this did nevertheless play an important role.

The Byzantine world has attracted western popular and scholarly attention, not only

because it stood at the crossroads of east and west, bridging very diverse cultures, but because it evoked a romantic lost medieval Christian world which was both eastern in its forms yet western in its cultural significance. For some, it had been a bastion of Christianity against Islam; for others, especially in the 16th and 17th centuries, it was a source of politically relevant information about the Ottomans who threatened Europe at that time. And it was to Byzantine authors and texts that later generations directed their attention in the context of increasing national self-awareness as interest grew in the pre-Renaissance and early medieval antecedents of the formerly Byzantine lands. And while both medieval Islam and the Byzantine world served to transmit the heritage of classical and Roman civilisation to the Renaissance and beyond, it was in particular through collections of Byzantine manuscripts and books that many texts were preserved, influencing in this way the evolution and content of modern classical scholarship.

Byzantium was, in a sense, always at war, for as we have seen, it always had an enemy or a potential enemy on one front or another. This situation necessarily inflected the whole history of the empire and determined in part at least its social structure and the way in which the state as well as the political system could evolve. Byzantium made war against its enemies over a period of some 700 years, from the 7th to the 14th and 15th centuries. In this sense, we might also assert that war made Byzantium what it was.

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Byzantine rulers

AD 527–1453

Justinian I	527–65	Theodora (again)	1055–56
Justinian II	565–578	Michael VI Stratiotikos	1056–57
Tiberius II Constantine	578–82	Isaac I Komnenos	1057–59
Maurice	582–602	Constantine X Doukas	1059–67
Phokas	602–10	Eudokia	1067
Heraclius	610–41	Romanos IV Diogenes	1068–71
Constantine III and Heraclonas	641	Eudokia (again)	1071
Constans II	641–68	Michael VII Doukas	1071–78
Constantine IV	668–85	Nikephoros III Botaneiates	1078–81
Justinian II	685–95	Alexios I Komnenos	1081–1118
Leontios	695–98	John II Komnenos	1118–43
Tiberios III	698–705	Manuel I Komnenos	1143–80
Justinian II (restored)	705–11	Alexios II Komnenos	1180–83
Philippikos Bardanes	711–13	Andronikos I Komnenos	1183–85
Anastasios II	713–15	Isaac II Angelos	1185–95
Theodosios III	715–17	Alexios III Angelos	1195–1203
Leo III	717–41	Isaac II (restored) and Alexios IV Angelos	1203–1204
Constantine V	741–75	Alexios V Mourtzouphlos	1204
Artabasdos	741–42	Constantine (XI) Laskaris	1204 (Nicaea)
Leo IV	775–80	Theodore I Laskaris	1204–22 (Nicaea)
Constantine VI	780–97	John III Doukas Vatatzes	1222–54 (Nicaea)
Eirene	797–802	Theodore II Laskaris	1254–58 (Nicaea)
Nikephoros I	802–11	John IV Laskaris	1258–61 (Nicaea)
Staurakios	811	Michael VIII Palaiologos	1259–82
Michael I	811–13	Andronikos II Palaiologos	1282–28
Leo V	813–20	Michael IX Palaiologos	1294–1320
Michael II	820–29	Andronikos III Palaiologos	1328–41
Theophilos	829–42	John V Palaiologos	1341–91
Michael III	842–67	John VI Kantakouzenos	1341–54
Basil I	867–86	Andronikos IV Palaiologos	1376–79
Leo VI	886–912	John VII Palaiologos	1390
Alexander	912–13	Manuel II Palaiologos	1391–1425
Constantine VII	913–59	John VIII Palaiologos	1425–48
Romanos II	959–63	Constantine XI (XII) Palaiologos	1448–53
Nikephoros II Phokas	963–69		
John I Tzimiskes	969–76		
Basil II	976–1025		
Constantine VIII	1025–28		
Romanos III Argyros	1028–34		
Michael IV the Paphlagonian	1034–41		
Michael V Kalaphates	1041–42		
Zoe and Theodora	1042		
Constantine IX Monomachos	1042–55		

The Grand Komnenoi of Trebizond (1203–1461) or the semi-autonomous rulers of the Despotate of Epiros (1205–1318) are not included.

Index

Figures in **bold** refer to illustrations

- Abbasid Caliphate 33
 Acrocorinth **40, 44**
 agriculture 73, 75, 77, 78, 79
 Alexios I, Byzantine emperor 17, 27, 33, 46, **63**, 64, 80
 Alexios III, Byzantine emperor 86
 Alexios IV Angelos, Byzantine emperor 86
 Alexios V, Byzantine emperor 86, 87
 Alp Aslan, Seljuk sultan 33
 Andronikos II, Byzantine emperor 88
 Ankara, battle of (1402) 89
 Anna Comnena, Byzantine princess 80
 Arab Islamic armies
 campaigns against 14, 15, 39-41
 conquests 24, 30, 33
 Aragon, kingdom of 88
 aristocracy *see* elite
 Armenians 80
 armies, Byzantine
 battle order 59, **60**
 campaign life 65-71
 casualties, treatment of 69-71
 cavalry 47-8, 49, 51-2
 discipline 63-4, 90
 history 14-16
 infantry 48, 49
 leave 62
 logistics 55-9, 76-7, 82-5, 90
 marches and marching order 52, **53**, 67-8
 marching camps 56, **57**, 66-7
 officers and commanders 51, 58, **63**, 64, 90-1
 organisation and distribution 39-40, 47-55
 rations 67
 recruitment 61, 78, 81
 retirement 62-3
 soldier-civilian relations 80-1, 83-4
 soldiers 61-3
 strategy 36-9, 45, 53-5
 tactics 47-8, 49, 51-3
 training 64-5
 weapons 16, 49, 57
 Asia Minor
 campaigns in 39-41, 76
 characteristics 8-9
 history 13-16, 24, 34, 45-6, 88
 Avars 13, 29
 Baldwin I of Flanders, Latin emperor 87
 Balkans 31
 campaigns in 65-71
 characteristics 9-11, 31
 history 13, 14, 16, 29, 31-2, 43-4, 88, 89
banda 48
 Bardas Skleros 65, 66, 68
 Basil II, Byzantine emperor 15, 29, 31, **34**, 38, 44, 64
 Bayezid, Ottoman sultan 89
 Beneventum **70-1**
 Bulgars and Bulgaria 14, 15, 29, 38, 41, 41-5, 65, 87
 Byzantine empire
 chronology 19-22
 extent 7-8, **10**, **35**, **42**, **43**, **54**, **87**
 geography 8-12
 government 23-8, 40, 48
 history 12-17, 86-9
 Charlemagne 30
 Charpete 23
 Chazars 32, 42-3
 Christianity
 Church politics and influence 23-4, 30, 31, 61
 east-west conflict 30, 86-7, 89
 papacy 29, 30, 88
 spread 29, 72-3
 and warfare 38-9, 46, 72-5, 77-8
 Clovis 12-13
 coins 7, 24, 27, **35**, **38**, **46**, **62**, **63**, **70**, **85**
 Constantine I, Roman emperor 73
 Constantine V, Byzantine emperor 7, 14, 29, 40, 64, 72, 75
 Constantine VIII, Byzantine emperor 35
 Constantine XI, Byzantine emperor 89
 Constantine, son of Theophilos 27
 Constantine Laskaris, Nicaean emperor 87
 Constantinople 24, **37**, **66**, **83**
 capture by Ottomans (1453) 89
 capture in fourth crusade (1204) 16, 30, 86, 88
 walls 15, 17, 27, 28, 74
 crusades, fourth 16, 30, 33, 86
 Cumans 32
 Daphni monastery 25, 32, 33, 82
 Demetrios, St 45, 65
 diplomacy 8, 36
drouggoi 48
 economy 23-8
 Egypt 24
 elite 24, 25-6, 27-8, 63
 emperors
 campaign baggage 58
 list of 93
 power 26-8
 worship of 72-3
 Epiros, Despotate of 87, 87-8
 fiscal system 24-5, 25-6, 55-8, 61, 76-7, 82-5, 90
 Florence, council of (1439) 89
 Franks 29, 30, 32, 88
 Frederick II, German emperor 88
 Galata 89
 Genoa 8, 32, 86, 88, 89
 George, St 45, 65
 George of Psidia 79
 German empire 32
 government 23-8, 40, 48
 see also fiscal system
 Greece 57, 87, 88, 89
 Gymnopelagesion 80
 Harput *see* Charpete

- Heraclius, Byzantine emperor 13, 79
History of John Skylitzes 26, 46, 47, 48, 50-1, 54-5, 58-9, 66, 68-9, 70-1
 Hosios Loukas monastery 30
 Hungary 32
- ideology, and warfare 38-9, 46, 72-5
 inheritance law 61
 Isaac I Komnenos, Byzantine emperor 46
 Isaac II, Byzantine emperor 85, 86
 Islam
 Byzantine view of Muslims 38
 origins and history 13-14
 see also Abbasid Caliphate; Arab Islamic armies; Turks
 Istanbul *see* Constantinople
 Italy 13, 29-30, 32
- John I Tzimiskes, Byzantine emperor 44, 64, 65, 69
 John II, Byzantine emperor 17, 43
 John VI Kantakouzenos, Byzantine emperor 88
 John VIII, Byzantine emperor 89
 Justinian, Byzantine emperor 13, 16, 29
- Kalojan, Bulgarian tsar 87
kataphraktoi 49
 kleisourarchies 41
klibanophoroi 49
 Koloneia 12
 Komnenos dynasty 26-8, 30, 87
 Krum, Bulgar khan 29
- land ownership 24, 25-6, 27-8, 62
 Latin empire 86-8
 Leo III, Byzantine emperor 7, 14, 72
 Leo IV, Byzantine emperor 7
 Leo V, Byzantine emperor 26, 46
 Leo VI, Byzantine emperor 53, 75, 91
 Limnos 78
 literature 76, 79
 Liutprand of Cremona 8, 36
 Lombards 13, 29
- Magyars 32
 Manfred, king of Sicily 88
 manpower 36
 Mantzikert, battle of (1071) 34, 41, 45-6
 Manuel I, Byzantine emperor 17, 30, 32, 43, 70
 Maurice, Byzantine emperor 13
 medicine, battlefield 69-71
 Mehmet II, Ottoman sultan 16, 89
 mercenaries 16, 31, 40, 45, 51, 55, 62, 63
 Mercenary Catalan Grand Company 88
 Michael II, Byzantine emperor 27, 48
 Michael VIII, Byzantine emperor 88
 Michael Attaleiates 51
 Michael Autoreianos 87
 Mohammed, founder of Islam 13-14
 monasteries 62-3
 Mongols 88, 89
 Mopsouestia 58-9
- Nicaea, empire of 87, 88
 Nicopolis, battle of (1396) 89
 Nikephoros I, Byzantine emperor 15, 29, 41
 Nikephoros II Phokas, Byzantine emperor 42, 44, 64, 74, 79
 Normans 32-3, 43, 51-2
- occupations 85
 Origen 72
- Ottomans *see* Turks, Ottoman
- pacifism 72-3
 papacy 29, 30, 88
 Pechenegs 32, 43, 44, 65, 68, 69
 Persians 13, 33
 Philippoupolis 44, 65
 Phokas, Byzantine emperor 13
 Plovdiv *see* Philippoupolis
 postal system 76
- Ravenna 29
 religion
 emperor cult 72-3
 see also Christianity; Islam
 roads and routes 9, 11, 18, 31
 Roman empire, eastern *see* Byzantine empire
 Roman empire, western 29-30
 Romanos IV, Byzantine emperor 16, 27, 45, 51, 64
 rural life 81-5
 'ruralisation' 24
 Rus' 31, 41-4, 65, 68-9
- Samuel, Bulgar tsar 29, 44
 Sebinkarahisar *see* Koloneia
 Seljuks *see* Turks, Seljuk
 Serbs 29, 88
 Sicily 15, 30, 32-3, 55
 Sigismund, king of Hungary 89
 Stefan Urosh IV Dushan, Serbian ruler 88
 Svyatoslav, Rus' prince 43, 44, 65
 Symeon, Bulgar tsar 29
- tagmata* 40, 41, 45, 61
 Tamburlane 89
 taxation *see* fiscal system
themata
 characteristics and establishment 39, 40, 42, 48, 61, 62, 64
 neglect and decline 45, 51, 55
 Theoderic 12
 Theodore I, Nicaean emperor 87
 Theodore, St 45, 65
 Theodosius the Deacon 79
 Theophylact, archbishop of Ohrid 80-1
 Thomas the Slav 47, 48, 50
 Thrace 39, 42, 44, 88
 Timur Lenk 89
tourmai 48
 trade 81-2
 transport 11
 Trebizond, empire of 87, 89
 trebuchets 58-9
 trumpets 55
 Turks
 Ottoman 16, 17, 34, 88, 89
 Seljuk 16, 33-4, 41, 43, 45, 88
- Valens, Aqueduct of 8-9
 Varangian guard 31, 51
 Varna, battle of (1444) 89
 Venice 8, 29, 30, 32, 33, 86, 87, 88
vexillationes 47
- warfare
 defensive 39-41
 effects on society 76
 offensive 41-6
 pre-emptive strikes 41
 propaganda 79
 reasons and justifications 36-9, 72-5



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