

## **The Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantium) and the Western Way of War The Komnenian Armies**

Byzantium. The word invokes to the modern imagination images of icons, palaces and peaceful Christianity rather than the militarism associated with its European counterparts during the age of the Byzantine Empire. Despite modern interpretations of the Empire, it was not without military dynamism throughout its 800-year hold on the East. During the “Second Golden Age” of Byzantium, this dominion experienced a level of strength and discipline in its army that was rarely countered before or after. This was largely due to the interest of the Komnenian emperors in creating a military culture and integrating foreign ideas into the Eastern Roman Empire.

The Byzantine Empire faced unique challenges not only because of the era in which they were a major world power but also for the geography of Byzantium. Like the Rome of earlier eras, the territory encompassed by Byzantium was broad in scope and encompassed a variety of peoples under one banner. There were two basic areas held by the empire – the Haemus and Anatolia, with outposts in Crete, the Crimea and southern Italy and Sicily (Willmott 4). By the time of the Komnenos dynasty, most of Anatolia had been lost in the battle of Manzikert.

Manuel I would attempt to remedy that loss, considered significant to the control of the empire.

Of this territory, the majority was arid or mountainous, creating difficulties for what was primarily an agricultural economy. This reliance on land-based products helped to bolster the reluctance for war in the eastern Roman Empire. The dramatic economic impact that crop loss or military service could have on the ability to sustain the agrarian culture influenced military

thought away from direct confrontation on the battlefield and towards a system of “subsidizing” those nations with whom they might otherwise come into conflict.

These nations were not few but many. Bordered on all sides by hostile countries, the observation made by Liutprand of Cremona, a 10<sup>th</sup> century Italian diplomat, that the empire was surrounded by the “fiercest of barbarians” sums the situation up well (Haldon 8). Battles with countries like Turkey and Hungary would reoccur throughout their history while attempts to maintain a hold in Italy and Sicily also resulted in conflict. Byzantium was frequently beset by revolts and insurgencies throughout the entirety of its hold on the East.

Warfare was not a rare occurrence in this region but rather, a way of life. The Empire was in a constant state of war and it was this that resulted in a series of strategies and an evolution of what could be characterized as a distinctly eastern version of warfare. The field armies of Rome translated themselves during the fall of the empire to locally based militias. While regional commanders held larger standing armies, offensive warfare was virtually never undertaken until the 8<sup>th</sup> century (Haldon 14).

War and the military took on a different flavor than they possessed in Western Europe – rather than battling to acquire land, the Byzantines were in a position where acquisition was a lesser concern than retaining the land that they already held. The modern vernacular has adopted “byzantine” as an adjective to mean “of, relating to, or characterized by a devious and usually surreptitious manner of operation” (Merriam-Webster). This is a direct reference to a “subsidy” system developed by Byzantine emperors where they paid bordering nations a fee to remain at peace with them. This might better be termed bribery, a word with more relevance to the political and social blackmail that often accompanied such payments. Generals and rulers preferred bribery and blackmail to the possibility of confrontation where war was unavoidable,

utilizing tactics such as providing misleading information, harassing the enemy and forcing an overextension of communication lines and resources (Haldon 36-7).

These methods of waging warfare have resulted in a lack of interest in the study of Byzantine warfare, particularly by western military historians. Much of what remains to the public as readily available interpretation of this period and region focuses on art and architecture, with occasional mention of politics and law, particularly where they intersect with the West. For a culture that ruled for nearly millennia, there is little consideration of their military structure or how that system affected society. Much of what exists has sunk into obscurity with an occasional spotlight on Byzantium during its golden ages and the passage of the Second Crusade through eastern territories.

The other major world powers during the Middle Ages, the period during which the Komnenian line controlled Byzantium, have been examined in much greater detail. Western Europe was experiencing a shift in military power, moving towards a feudal structure and empowering armies with a religiously linked ideology as they swept across the East, through Byzantium and into the Arab world, on a series of crusades.

Likewise, Arabic powers were also responding with the development of new technology and forceful engagements to halt the spread of Western expansionism. Western armies appear more dynamic than the slowly declining East at the beginning of the medieval era. The Komnenian emperors, particularly Manuel I, would recognize this and respond, embracing aspects of the Western Way of War as they sought to maintain what was a crumbling empire in the wake of a decisive defeat at Manzikert.

But who were the Komnenos? To fully examine the impact of the Komnenian emperors and to understand the impetus in developing a military culture, one must look slightly before the first of that dynasty towards the Battle of Manzikert.

In August of 1071, Byzantine forces led by emperor Romanus IV Diogenes clashed with the army of the Turkish sultan, Alp Arslan near Manzikert, Armenia. Byzantium lost for a number of factors, among them the desertion of troops and military inconsistency. In the process, the emperor was captured. The Battle of Manzikert is described by historian John Norwich as “the greatest disaster suffered by the Empire in its seven and a half centuries of existence” (Norwich 242).

This disaster was not due to the actual losses sustained in battle. Imperial losses appear to have been minimal, the chief one of note being Romanus’ abduction (Willmott 5). The biggest effects of Manzikert were the resultant civil war within the Byzantine Empire and the eventual loss of Anatolia and surrounding territory as a critical source of military manpower and state revenue (Der Nersessian 22-3). After years of struggle between Doukas and Komnenos families, it was Alexios I Komnenos who took the empire in 1081. Alexios would be the first of three successive emperors to attempt military reform in an effort to restore and preserve imperial superiority, changing the way in which Byzantine armies waged war.

In the Alexiad, Anna Komnene, daughter of Alexios I, states of her father at the beginning of his reign:

“Alexius [Alexios] saw that the Empire was nearly at its last gasp, for in the East the Turks were grievously harassing the frontiers whilst in the West things were very bad... Consequently the young and brave Emperor was desperate, and did not know which way to turn first, as each of his enemies seemed to be trying to begin war before the other, and

thus he grew sorely vexed and disturbed. For the Roman Empire possessed only a very insufficient army (not more than the 300 soldiers from Coma cowardly and inexperienced in war, besides just a few barbarian troops, accustomed to carry their swords on their right shoulder). And further there was no large reserve of money in the imperial treasury with which to hire allied troops from foreign countries. The preceding Emperors had been very inefficient in all military and warlike matters and had thus driven the State of Rome into very dire straits. I myself have heard soldiers and other older men say that never within the memory of man had any State been reduced to such depths of misery.”

Alexios would not return to Anatolia, more concerned with defending the western frontiers of Byzantium. To recapture Anatolia would have required both the enlargement of the army and giving land to magnates dispossessed in the Civil War, thus strengthening rivals to the Komnenos (Threadgold 672).

His reluctance was also due to constant threat from Doukas claimants to the throne and conflicts with Normans at Dyrrhachium, Corfu, and Thessaly. The Byzantine army was not equipped to adequately fight battles of this scale and it was only through the early death of Norman leader, Robert Guiscard that Alexios managed to disengage his army from that conflicts.

It may have been this early encounter in Alexios' reign that encouraged the emperor to restructure his army in the face of attacks from countries with superior and dynamic tactics. It may also have been desperation – not long after the problems with the Normans came a threat to the capital from barbarian raiders. The constant state of warfare within Byzantium had not abated but rather exacerbated with the civil wars - enemies now challenged the empire from within and without.

The solution that the emperor would utilize would be to look to the west for support. Calling on Pope Urban II, Alexios received help in the form of the First Crusade. The help that he requested was not what he had expected – the Crusaders expected much and gave little, the first wave slaughtered by the Turks that they had been called to destroy (Gallant 17). Yet, despite these difficulties, they opened the door for Komnenian policies that increasingly favored the integration of western ideas in the eastern sphere.

Alexios is thus notable in this regard for two things – the plea to the western pope being only one of them. The other was the introduction of a conscription system, a concept hitherto unknown to the Eastern Roman Empire.<sup>1</sup> The economy was not strong enough to afford the maintenance of an army comprised of mercenaries in the wake of Manzikert – likewise, with the defeat, it could no longer easily obtain troops from Anatolia. This signaled the beginning of a military structure that his successors, John II and Manuel I, would build upon.

John II Komnenos took the throne, continuing in the military tradition that his father had begun without the burden of having been the instigator of both conscription and western alliance (though John and his successors would pay for Alexios' actions later as Crusaders passed through Byzantium). He began a system of slow and steady campaigning, choosing to battle in sustained annual campaigns rather than to extend his forces beyond their capacity. For the majority of his reign, however, John was to remain defensive, centering much of his efforts around the Turks' encroachment on Asia Minor rather than adopting a more Western pattern of aggression.

It was one of these wars against the Seljuk Turks that would lead to Manuel I's distinction and later acclimation as emperor by the Byzantine army (Gibbon 72). Manuel was

not the intended successor to John's throne- that role was planned for his elder brother, Isaac. It was his military service that elevated him as heir through both paternal and public choice. Like both father and grandfather before him, Manuel designated the military as one of his highest priorities as emperor.

With this continuation of a growing military tradition came a realization of the Western traditions and what they could offer the Byzantine Empire. While Manuel raised awareness of foreign culture to distinct heights, this was the culmination of both his predecessors' interest in foreign affairs and the changing Byzantine perception of Western Europe.

Prior to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, writers of the Eastern Roman Empire had described the west in terms delineating the region as being comprised of a series of distinctly different peoples, cultures and territories (Spaniards, Italians, etc.). By the time that Manuel began to reach the heights of Imperial power, eastern intellectuals had begun to describe Europe as a unified people, bringing the concept of "The West" to the East (Kahzdan 86).

But what was "West" in the 12<sup>th</sup> century? To characterize briefly what Manuel I would have perceived and his fellow Byzantines, Western Europe was consumed by the fervor of the Crusades during the 1100s. The Crusades were an attempt in part by the Church to maintain a hold on Western Christendom and prevent the rapidly increasing centralization of power in the hands of government, rather than in those of the church. The structure of government and society was shifting rapidly during this period in Western history and while Manuel occasionally tried to take advantage of these changes, he could not have failed to note the dynamism and superior armies of Europe, particularly when they were riding through Imperial lands.

With the Western Way of War came an aggressiveness that Byzantium warfare did not characteristically possess. Another signal aspect in which West outclassed East was in the

discipline of forces. Where combat effectiveness had been a major point of study for centuries in Europe, the focus in the Byzantine Empire had been on diplomacy and avoiding war, rather than acting as the aggressor of it. Before the Komnenian line, most of the emperors had chosen against putting resources into a consistent military force, choosing instead to rely on the tested method of subsidies.

The Komnenoi were aware of the culture of Western Europe from the reign of Alexios onwards. During his rule, a few Westerners even held high positions in the army and at court (Kahzdan 95). Manuel went further in his attempts to integrate the Byzantine Empire with the world around him, though much of his efforts focused on the military rather than the political. Not since Theophilos had there been another Byzantine emperor who attracted comment for his love of foreign culture, gaining a reputation as an admirer of the West (Magdalino 2) In particular, he was fascinated by the practice of chivalry. Of an 1159 joust with Latin knights in Antioch, chronicler Niketas Choniates wrote:

“He carried his lance uprights and wore a mantle fastened elegantly over his right shoulder which left the arm free on the side of the brooch. He was borne by a war-horse with a magnificent mane and trappings of gold which raised its neck and reared up on its hind legs as though eager to run a race, rivaling its rider in splendor.” (Choniates 62)

The prestige of arms in the Western world had come to influence the Byzantine emperor. While the Imperial state was centralized in function, Manuel began to add prestige to aristocratic officers in the army through the system of *pronoia*. Where Alexios I had used *pronoia* to safeguard his empire through land grants to his own family, Manuel used it to



reward the army. In some respects, the system bore similarity to western feudalism; however, unlike serfs, the *pronoiai* owed no service to the upper strata of the system, the *pronoiar*, because the emperor still maintained central control as the owner of the land. This same system enabled the emperor to request military service of those who held the grant, much as had been done under the earlier guise of conscription (Threadgold 679-682).

The Latin West exerted influence on more than military culture – in his campaigns throughout the latter half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century; Manuel used siege warfare and fortification to alter the way in which he was fighting. Because of the foundation built for him by Alexios and John, Manuel had an army more disciplined and able to adapt to using European tactics in the Byzantine setting. Soldiers were drawn both from native populations, particularly in Asia Minor, and from those that the army defeated. Foreigners comprised approximately 1/3 of all troops, a significantly lowered figure from previous, mainly mercenary, armies (Gallant 19).

The influence exerted was not always of a positive nature. During this period, the empire turned from defender to aggressor. Manuel fought a series of wars while he was emperor, many of them with Christian rulers. He successfully battled Hungary, wrung nominal submission from the Normans in Sicily and brought the king of Jerusalem under his influence, forcing him to seek help from Byzantium in keeping his throne against outside forces.

Aggression was not only limited to warfare but also found outlets in diplomatic intrigues. The latter half of the Komnenian dynasty saw increased agitation as Manuel and his subordinates instigated the rise of malcontent cities and rulers against the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa (Davis 84).

The strengthening of the Komnenian army was based on the emperors who held it. Much like ancient Rome, the Byzantine Empire was controlled by a “cult of the emperor” - power was

centralized and placed in the hands of a singular individual. Had Manuel had the resources and effective economic structures to maintain the series of campaigns on which he embarked, the strength of the army might have been inherited by his successors. The majority of his tenure as emperor was spent in battle – he did little to restore the empire’s degenerating economy.

From a long-term military perspective, his army was ultimately unsuccessful as well. Despite attempts to regain Anatolia, no conclusion was reached with the Seljuk Turks and the long history of warfare between them and the Byzantines.

The Komnenian military tradition would not outlive the third of the line despite the groundwork laid by three successive emperors. Upon his death, his 11 year-old son, Alexios II, followed Manuel. Alexios II reigned for only two short years, strangled to death by a bowstring at the age of thirteen by a cousin, Andronikos Komnenos, who then took control of the empire.

Andronikos was the last Komnenian emperor to rule Constantinople, though his heirs took the empire after him. After this point, Byzantium conclusively returned to traditional defensive tactics and bribery of nearby enemies. With the fall of Constantinople in 1453 came the official end of the Empire. Though it was more than three hundred years later, by then, the military gains of the Komnenoi had long since been eclipsed.

The collapse of the military tradition cannot be laid solely at the feet of a successor in his minority due to the brief time in which Alexios II ruled. There were several factors in the disappearance of Komnenian reform, among them a lack in Byzantium of the very qualities that promoted success in the Western Way of War.

One of the key tenets of a Western Way of War is the ability of western forces to innovate and adapt to situations. Byzantium was never fully able to embrace this quality,

assuming the trappings of western civilization while they continued to utilize a consistent series of interactions with other powers.

Despite the growth of his army, in the end, when it came to confrontation with Frederick I Barbarossa, Manuel I used subterfuge rather than open conflict to try and assume control over the Holy Roman Empire. He did not take the opportunity to utilize his military strength or examine other ways of achieving the same goals, falling back on established Byzantine routines to solve potential dilemmas presented to him by Barbarossa's power. This was a function of the size of the army but given Manuel's willingness to engage other Christian powers, it is interesting to note that when pressed with a difficult situation, he chose to return to eastern diplomacy rather than embrace western aggression.

A characteristic of the warfare of Western Europe during this period, although it is not necessarily inherent to the thesis of western warfare, was the religiosity of the military motivation for battle. It is heavily cited when discussing conflicts of the Middle Ages and of particular interest when engaging in the Crusades yet the same consideration is rarely given the Eastern Roman Empire.

Like the West, the Byzantine Empire also shared religious fervor among motivators for warfare. Iconography, particularly of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, reveals a series of warrior saints who are shown to do battle for Christ. As with European Christians, the symbol of the cross was carried into battle and used in imperial propaganda (Haldon 17). Despite similarities in religiosity, Byzantium did not possess the same degree of religious fervor that its counterparts would experience in Europe.

A third quality that differentiated some western armies from the east was civic involvement with the military. Although the concept of citizen soldiers would not fully blossom

until later centuries, power in the western world was not always held exclusively in the hands of a centralized monarch but distributed through nobles, religious leaders and monarchs with variance depending on the state in which the aforementioned resided.

Centralization of power was the basis of Byzantine government, reflected not only in the rapid destabilization of military systems as leaders left it but also in the rising and waning of the agricultural economy based on those who held the Imperial power. Those emperors who placed value on the military, as Manuel did, and elected to drain resources from the land in order to power their armies also created a situation in which the economy diminished significantly.

Financial depression provoked a cycle of strife - without a functioning economy, a stable military could not be maintained. Without a stable military or a functioning economy, the pressures of neighboring enemy states intensified. The warfare that Manuel believed would strengthen and expand the Eastern Roman Empire may have hastened its demise.

On the surface, it appears that the Komnenoi embraced the West in respect to warfare but in practice, the reality is far more complex. While certain trappings of European civilization and militarism were in place, they were adhered to in a uniquely Eastern manner. Even within militaries, forces were disjointed and the armies created more of a reinterpretation of those Western ideals they sought to emulate rather than synergy with the innovation and energy of the Western Way of Warfare.

As stated earlier, history has said little of the Byzantine world in regards to warfare. It frequently merits little to no notice in contemporary textbooks and contemporary studies of world warfare. John Keegan's *A History of Warfare*, one recent text that can be said to be generous in comparison with its Byzantine references, mentions the Empire on only fifteen of its 432 pages.

This is not an appropriate treatment of the subject, given the relevance of the centralized military state to our own times. Like the emperors of Byzantium, modern military diplomacy often revolves around the necessity of subsidizing client states. Likewise, puppet governments like those of the Komnenos who focus on a centralized leader still exist and are likely to continue in their existence. The “cult of the emperor” can be found in dictatorships across history – while it may not be vocalized in the same manner, the precepts are the same. A single figure holding the reins of government can control it so firmly that it begins to destabilize with that leader’s death or removal from office.

Byzantium reached some of its strongest moments when it came into contact with Western Europe. Had Manuel been able to maintain a stabilized economy, the future of the Empire would have been significantly different. During the reign of the Komnenoi, the door was opened to new ideas of what an army was and how it could function, no longer relying solely on defense but rather, looking towards the west, to examine offense and innovation. Change does not come easily, however, and without charismatic individuals shepherding this process, the idea was condemned before it could come to full fruition. The western tradition never took root in the East.

The strength of the empire was never ultimately in the consistency of its troops but rather in the utilization of political and economic resources. A system of discipline and internal cooperation that had comprised the structure of the Komnenian Army disappeared. What had shown promise of an adaptation towards western European methods of warfare regressed after the Komnenian reign and the internal structure for effective warmaking was broken, the legacy of the Komnenoi forgotten.

This is both testament and memorial to an attempt to integrate the Western Way of War

into an eastern context – testament that such attempts elevated the Byzantine armies for a time and memorial to the limited lifespan of such an effort.

## WORKS CITED

- Choniates, Niketas. *O City of Byzantium*. Tr. Harry J. Magoulias. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984.
- Comena (Komnene), Anna. *The Alexiad*. tr. Elizabeth A. Dawes. 1928. as referenced from the Medieval Internet Sourcebook. 2001. <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/annacomnena-alexiad00.html#BOOK%20III>. (accessed 02-20-08.)
- Davis, William Sterns. *A Short History of the Near East: From the Founding of Constantinople*. New York: Macmillan Company, 1923.
- Der Nersessian, Sirarpie. *Armenia and the Byzantine Empire. A Brief Study of Armenian Art and Civilization*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1945.
- Gallant, Tom, Hellenic Heritage Foundation Chair and Professor of Modern Greek History, Department of History, York University. "Byzantine Empire: A Short Overview." Toronto: York University, 2006.  
<<http://www.arts.yorku.ca/hist/tgallant/documents/ByzantineEmpireoverview.pdf>>
- Gibbon, Edward. *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (Volume III)*. New York: Penguin Classics, 1984.
- Haldon, John. *Byzantium at War: AD 600 - 1453*. Westminister, MD: Osprey Publishing, 2002.
- Haldon, John. *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565-1204*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Kahzdan, Alexander. "Latins and Franks in Byzantium: Perception and Reality from the Eleventh to the Twelfth Centuries." *The Crusades from the Perspective of Byzantium and the Muslim World*. ed. Angeliki E. Laiou and Roy Parviz Mottahedeh. Washington, D.C.: Dunbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2001.
- Magdalino, Paul. *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos: 1143-1180*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Norwich, John Julius. *A Short History of Byzantium*. New York: Vintage Books, 1997.

Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, "Byzantine - Definition." 2007-2008. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/byzantine> (accessed 02-21-08).

Threadgold, Warren T. *A History of the Byzantine State and Society*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.

Willmott, Ned. "East Meets West: The Eastern Empire and the Western Way of War". *Seminar II, Lecture 4*. Northfield, VT: Norwich University, 2008.

**Gwen Perkins**, B.A. (Hum), M.A. (Mil. Hist.)  
Norwich University in Northfield, Vermont, U.S.A.  
5416 S. I Street  
Tacoma, WA 98408  
[graeae@gmail.com](mailto:graeae@gmail.com)