

# BYZANTINE MILITARY HISTORY

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

**Overview** As we meet it, in history, the Byzantine army is already simply a brother to and child of the imperial Roman army of the West. Though Byzantium was already a Greek city state at the time of ancient Athens, it was not until Constantine moved the Empire eastward to Constantinople, in 323 C.E., that the military history that meets us in these excerpts comes into flowering. What then flowers, in Byzantium, is a powerful army and navy based in every respect--organization, weaponry, strategic command--on the basic forms of the western Roman military. Those basic forms, though seriously altered, will persist in the Byzantine military forces through the millennium that follows Constantine's move.

## An historical glimpse

**The early stage** One can imagine that the military history of a vast Empire, over a millennium, is in a constant state of change. The Byzantine Empire was continually under military pressure from without, as was the western Roman Empire, especially in its last centuries. During the early centuries of 'Byzantium,' through the reign of Justinian (482-565 C.E.), one might generalize that the Byzantines fought like Roman soldiers, in all the familiar accoutrements, arranged by infantry legions, and supported by cavalry.

**The advent of Islam and foreign incursions** The advent of Muslim military forces, in the seventh century and after, meant that a new kind of military administration was required. It was not just a question of military strength, or powerful attack techniques, like the Greek fire mentioned in the entry under 'Byzantine innovations,' but a question of using effectively the resources of the fast growing population of the Byzantine Empire. The major military-administrative move here, top down from the Emperor, was to institute a system of *themes*, military districts, in which there would be win-win recruitment of free peasants, who serve as career military, while in the end receiving land in payment.

**After the Islamic interventions** The government's finances were ruined by the Muslim interventions, but land they had to offer until, at the end of the Empire, the feudal system began to eat away at the land available for recruitment. In the final centuries of the Empire, even after the (to the Byzantines) disastrous defeat at Manzikert (1071 C.E.) and the Crusaders' plundering of their capital (1204 C.E.), the Byzantine army was still able to stage major land grabs in the Balkans, Syria, Armenia, and even Italy. The careful use of mercenaries--who were clamoring for money and war on the borders of the Empire--was for a long time an aid to growth, though first the Seljuk, then the Ottoman Turks were to prove far too much for the shrinking Byzantine army, which folded in 1453.

## Reading

Dennis, George T., *Maurice's Strategikon: Handbook of Military Strategy*, Philadelphia, 1984.

Martussis, Mark, *The Late Byzantine Army: Arms and Society 1204-1453*, Philadelphia, 1997.

## Discussion questions

Did the geo-political location of Byzantium make it vulnerable to eventual destruction? Or were the seeds of invulnerability latent in its social and economic inequalities?

How did Byzantine weaponry and fighting style change after contact with Arabic and Muslim fighting styles? Did the two opponents learn military technique from one another?

What was the *theme-system*, which the Byzantines used so effectively to recruit among the free peasantry, after the Muslim interventions? How did a late burst of Feudalism help to undermine the *theme system*?

