

**Military tactics and strategy of the Middle Byzantine armies against  
Eurasian steppe peoples and Slavs**

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Already from the Early Byzantine Period and during the Middle Period, the Byzantines faced several nomadic peoples of the Eurasian steppes, Altaic and some Northern Iranian. In the European imperial borders they faced the Black Huns, some Late Sarmatian tribes (Proto-Serbians and Proto-Croats who were not Slavic yet, Alanic groups etc.), the Avars, some Late Hunnic tribes (Proto-Bulgarians, Kutrigurs, Outigurs, Saragurs, Onogurs and others), the Pechenegs (*Patzinakes* according to the Byzantines), the Uzes (*Uzoi*), the Cumans (*Qiptchak* in their own Turkic/Turkish language, and *Polovtsy* in the Eastern Slavic language) and others. In the same period, the Byzantines faced in Asia Minor the Seljuks and other Turcoman (Turkmen/Oghuz) tribes. On the other hand, the Byzantine army consisted partly of many mercenaries, mainly horse-archers from almost all the above mentioned peoples with the addition of the Magyars (proto-Hungarians), the Kavars (proto-Hungarians also), the Khazars and the Alans.

The battle tactics of the nomadic peoples were very difficult to treat by the Byzantine or any other imperial army that attempted to confront them. The Romans, Byzantines, Persians, Chinese, Indians, Chorasmians (Central Asian Iranians) and other peoples with mainly agricultural economy, suffered devastating defeats by these demonic horsemen of the steppes. The superiority of the nomad fighting tactics, was due to the use of a combination of very fast horsemen (who were additionally keen archers) and heavily armored

cavalry (sometimes protected by full body armor including their horses) equipped with a long lance (*kontos* in Sarmatian, from which term came the synonymous *kontarion* in Byzantine Greek). The steppe peoples, while generally few in number, were excellent archers and horsemen, frugal and indomitable, with blazing maneuvering and masters of surprise. During the clashes and battles, the nomadic horse-archers were “hammering” the enemy soldiers with a barrage of bowshots, while maintaining a safe distance. They were attacking frontally with a sword (or a mace) only if they ascertained that the opposing army had been disorganized by their arrows. The nomads were masters of the ancient battle tactic of the steppe peoples, called the “feigned retreat” which they usually used when they were facing a superior enemy. When applying the “feigned retreat”, they were pretending that they were defeated and were starting to retreat disorderly, thus dragging the enemy army in a rapid march, which led to the disruption of its ranks. Thereby the disorganized enemy was becoming an “easy prey” for the nomadic horsemen (horse-archers and cataphracts), who were abruptly interrupting their retreat following the relevant orders (sign) of their commander, making “about-face” with their horses and counterattacking, eventually crashing the surprised enemy. The nomad feigned retreat could last for some minutes or continue for several days.

Often the nomad horse-archers, while galloping with their back towards the enemy, were turning suddenly their torso by 180 degrees, and unleashing an “avalanche” of bowshots against their unsuspecting persecutors. This tactic was called the *Parthian arrow* by the Greeks and the Romans, but before the emergence of the Parthians, it was called the *Scythian arrow*, probably

because the Scythians/Sakas were its instigators. The Scythians were probably also the instigators of the tactic of “feigned retreat”.

In the case of Asia Minor which incurred the invasions of the Seljuks and other Turkomans, when the Byzantine army was repelling some of their groups, others were making a surprise attack elsewhere in the peninsula destroying settlements, villages and towns, and capturing people. The Byzantines were unable to achieve an overwhelming victory over the Seljuks, who were following a typical nomadic strategy: when they were facing superior forces, they were galloping away, just to appear a little later on another place of the imperial territories. The historian Robert Irwin makes the following apt remark for the Turkic horsemen, which characterizes almost all the mounted warriors of the steppes: *“(they were acting) like flies: you can send them away, but you can not destroy them.”* the nomadic horse-archers were galloping extremely fast, because they were not bearing any kind of armor, often neither helmet, while their small-stature horses were hardy due to continuing marches and clashes. The basic fighting tactic of the horse-archers was the following: they were galloping in circles around the enemy army, “pounding” him from a safe distance with a barrage of bowshots. This pounding was causing heavy losses to unarmored troops, but did not seriously harm soldiers with armor, like most of the Byzantines. But the arrow-pounding was causing anxiety and stress to the enemy, which either developed into panic, or induced the enemy to a misguided attack. When the nomad horse-archers were threatened, they were retreating galloping and arrow-pounding the enemy, using the tactic of the Parthian/Scythian arrow. But they were soon regrouping and repeating their attack. They were often conducting this

temporary retreat, in a crescent formation with its concave side facing to the enemy forces. Under this tactic, the center of the nomad crescent gave way steadily, and the “horns” of the crescent followed the retreat with the same speed, “hammering” with bowshots the rival army from a distance.

The Byzantine army was facing the nomadic attacks using formations reminiscent of a “moving fortress”. The Byzantine army was attacking the nomadic cavalry using its armored cavalry lancers. The latter had to catch up the nomad riders and strike them down with their spears, a difficult task due to the speed of galloping of the steppe warriors. The Byzantine cavalry should not be involved in a simple exchange of bowshots with the nomads, because this practice would favor the latter who were better archers.

In general, the most important for the Byzantine commanders who were facing nomadic cavalry, was not to fall into the tactic trap of the nomad “feigned retreat”, which usually had disastrous results for the army who was chasing the steppe warriors. This is the reason why the chase of the nomadic cavalry which seemed to have been defeated, should be done with great alert and in particular without disorganizing the ranks of the Byzantine army. Concerning the battle of Mantzikert (1071), the popular view that the Emperor Romanos IV fell into the Seljuk trap of feigned retreat from inexperience, is rather incorrect. Romanos knew very well the nomadic tactics of the Seljuks, confronting them for many years as a commander and a general and then as an Emperor. Political factors and conditions were mainly responsible for the disruption and final destruction of the Byzantine army in the battle of Mantzikert. These factors were not related to both the Emperor himself, or the notorious Andronikos Doukas’ “deliberate delay” (the commander of the

Byzantine rearguard) during the battle, but they were related strongly to the nobility of Constantinople who ‘demanded’ a great victory against the Seljuk Turks. Many Byzantine nobles, if not most of them, were considering Romanos a usurper. The Emperor faced especially the stubborn opposition and challenging of the Doukas faction (being the former Byzantine Dynasty). Romanos would stabilize himself on the throne, if only he would achieve a rapid and overwhelming victory against the Turks. So he was obliged to order a risky pursuit of the Seljuk cavalry on the open field of Mantzikert, despite the great danger of the Seljuk “feigned retreat” (which eventually shattered the Byzantine army). Moreover, Romanos could not maintain for a long time his army because of the large costs. Finally, the strongly multinational character of his army and its growing indiscipline, were constantly threatening its cohesion and did not allow the Emperor to delay the final encounter.

When a Byzantine army was defending the imperial territory against the nomad onslaught, it was better for its commander to cover its rear which could be rapidly overtaken by galloping enemy horse-archers, having in the back of the imperial army an impassable for horses geophysical obstacle (rugged terrain, river, marshes etc.). During the battle, the Byzantine frontline should be consisted of infantry spearmen (a sort of pikemen), who were pointing their spearheads against the enemy horses. Usually the Byzantine infantrymen could confront the steppe warriors more effectively than the imperial cavalrymen, so the Byzantine infantry and cavalry should not in any way, be severed during the battle against them. The steppe horse-archers were usually feared of the Middle Byzantine infantry archers, because their bows had usually a greater range of bowshot than their own nomadic ones. Both of

them (Byzantines and nomads) were using types of composite bows (mostly of Hunnic origins) but the Middle Byzantine bows were more effective. The tactics of the combined military action of the imperial frontline (infantry spearmen) with the archers of the middle lines of the Byzantine order of battle (who were hurling bowshots over the heads of their fellow spearmen), were almost impossible to be encountered by the nomad horse-archers. Generally the nomads could hardly break a defensive formation of this type, even if they were unleashing against it their cataphracts (extra heavy cavalry, which would be immediately confronted by the enemy cataphracts, Byzantine or any other imperial).

From the 6th century and on, the Byzantine Empire had to deal with the Slavic invasion of its territories. The Slavs were led initially by Altaic (mostly Turkic), Sarmatian and other steppe tribes which had been imposed to them as suzerains (sometimes without any Slavic reaction as it seems, due to the military benefits for the Slavs from their cooperation in raids with the powerful nomadic cavalry). This is the reason why the Byzantine tactics against them, are dealt in this essay along with the imperial tactics against the Eurasian nomads.

By dispensation, the Rus Slavs (Russians) were not led by a nomad aristocracy, however their attacks against the Byzantine Empire were mainly seaborne, through the Black Sea. The Altaic Avars and Proto-Bulgars, and the Sarmatian Proto-Serbs (Servli, Sorbs), Chrovates (Proto-Croats) and Alans were leading numerous Slavic populations against the Empire. The Slavs were overwhelmingly more numerous than their nomad dominators, so in the case of the Proto-Bulgarians, Proto-Serbs and Proto-Croats, they Slavicized them

consolidating the modern Slavic nations of the Bulgarians, Serbs and Croats.

On the hand, the Magyars of the Pannonian Steppes managed to assimilate large numbers of Slavs. This is reason why the most typical Slavic anthropological type (the Eastern Baltic type) is very common among modern Hungarians. But in this case, the Finno-Ugrian Magyar language managed to “overthrow” the Slavic language of Eastern Pannonia and thereby modern Hungarians do not speak a Slavic language.

The Slavs of this period (Middle Byzantine) were fighting mainly as light infantry with rudimentary organization. When they were fighting together with the nomads against the Byzantine army in open battle, they were not especially threatening and they were easily repulsed by the imperial cavalry or infantry. The Slavs were becoming really threatening when they were operating in a wooded, hilly and/or mountainous terrain. Then they used to harass the flankguards and the rearguard of the Byzantine troops with arrows, spears and other missiles, and they often set ambushes in mountain defiles. Thus the capture of defiles and passages by the imperial advance guards was necessary when the Byzantines were marching against Slavs. The preferred time for Byzantine action against them was the winter, when the Slavic warriors could not operate effectively or ambush their enemy, because of their imprints in the snow. Additionally, the foliage of shrubs and trees – which they used as a cover – was meager. Also in winter, the imperial forces (especially the cavalry) could cross the marshes which usually protected the settlements of some Slavic tribes. The marshes were frozen during winter, changing to ice and allowing the passage of the horses, while the ice was eliminating the risk of malaria for the Byzantines (a disease caused usually by the marshes). Thus the



Slavs were losing their defensive advantage and could not take cover to the reeds of the marshes. Finally, the Byzantine diplomacy was making very effective use of the rudimentary state organization of the Slavs, and bribery was used to weaken them. The imperial officials used to bribe some Slavic tribesmen, ensuring their neutrality or turning them against other Slavic tribes. It was a standard practice of the Byzantine grand strategy against all enemies of the Empire, a legacy of the Roman Grand strategy.

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