

= Battle of Dyrrhachium ( 1081 ) =

The Battle of Dyrrhachium ( near present @-@ day Durrës in Albania ) took place on October 18 , 1081 between the Byzantine Empire , led by the Emperor Alexios I Komnenos ( r . 1081 ? 1118 ) , and the Normans of southern Italy under Robert Guiscard , Duke of Apulia and Calabria . The battle was fought outside the city of Dyrrhachium ( also known as Durazzo ) , the Byzantine capital of Illyria , and ended in a Norman victory .

Following the Norman conquest of Byzantine Italy and Saracen Sicily , the Byzantine emperor , Michael VII Doukas ( r . 1071 ? 1078 ) , betrothed his son to Robert Guiscard 's daughter . When Michael was deposed , Robert took this as an excuse to invade the Byzantine Empire in 1081 . His army laid siege to Dyrrhachium , but his fleet was defeated by the Venetians . On October 18 , the Normans engaged a Byzantine army under Alexios I Komnenos outside Dyrrhachium . The battle began with the Byzantine right wing routing the Norman left wing , which broke and fled . Varangian mercenaries joined in the pursuit of the fleeing Normans , but became separated from the main force and were massacred . Norman knights in the centre attacked the Byzantine centre and routed it , causing the bulk of the Byzantine army to rout .

After this victory , the Normans took Dyrrhachium in February 1082 and advanced inland , capturing most of Macedonia and Thessaly . Robert was then forced to leave Greece to deal with an attack on his ally , the Pope , by the Holy Roman Emperor , Henry IV ( r . 1084 ? 1105 ) . Robert left his son Bohemond in charge of the army in Greece . Bohemond was initially successful , defeating Alexios in several battles , but was defeated by Alexios outside Larissa . Forced to retreat to Italy , Bohemond lost all the territory gained by the Normans in the campaign . The Byzantine recovery began the Komnenian restoration .

= = Background = =

The Normans first arrived in Southern Italy in 1015 from northern France and served local Lombard lords as mercenaries against the Byzantine Empire . As they were paid with lands , soon they were powerful enough to challenge Papal authority ; in 1054 , they defeated the Pope at the Battle of Civitate , forcing him to acknowledge their authority . In 1059 , the Pope made Robert Guiscard , of the Hauteville family , Duke of Apulia , Calabria , and Sicily . However , most of Apulia and Calabria were in Byzantine hands , and Sicily was in Saracen hands .

By 1071 , Robert , together with his brother Roger , had taken over the last Byzantine stronghold in Italy , Bari . By the next year , they conquered all of Sicily , ending the Islamic Emirate of Sicily . In 1073 , the Byzantine Emperor Michael VII sent an envoy to Robert offering the hand of his son Constantine to Robert 's daughter Helena . Guiscard accepted the offer and sent his daughter to Constantinople . However , in 1078 , Michael was overthrown by Nicephorus Botaneiates , an event that destroyed any chances Helena had for the throne . This gave Robert a motive to invade the empire claiming his daughter had been mistreated ; however , his intervention was delayed by a revolt in Italy .

Robert conscripted all men of a fighting age into the army , which he refitted . Meanwhile , he sent an ambassador to the Byzantine court with orders to demand proper treatment for Helena and to win over the Domestic of the Schools , Alexios . The results of these attempts remain unknown , but the ambassador fell under Alexios 's charm and as he was returning to Italy , he heard of Alexios 's successful coup against Botaneiates , by which he became Alexios I Komnenos .

When the ambassador returned , he urged Robert to make peace , claiming that Alexios wanted nothing but friendship with the Normans . Robert had no intention of peace ; he sent his son Bohemond with an advance force towards Greece and Bohemond landed at Aulon , with Robert following shortly after .

= = Prelude = =

The Norman fleet of 150 ships including 60 horse transports set off towards the Byzantine Empire

at the end of May 1081 . The army numbered 30 000 men , backed up by 1 300 Norman knights . The fleet sailed to Avalona in Byzantine territory ; they were joined by several ships from Ragusa , a republic in the Balkans who were enemies of the Byzantines .

Robert soon left Avalona and sailed to the island of Corfu , which surrendered because of a small garrison . Having won a bridgehead and a clear path for reinforcements from Italy , he advanced on the city of Dyrrhachium , the capital and chief port of Illyria . The city was well defended on a long , narrow peninsula running parallel to the coast , but separated by marshlands . Guiscard brought his army onto the peninsula and pitched camp outside the city walls . However , as Robert 's fleet sailed to Dyrrhachium , it was hit by a storm and lost several ships .

Meanwhile , when Alexios heard that the Normans were preparing to invade Byzantine territory , he sent an ambassador to the Doge of Venice , Domenico Selvo , requesting aid and offering trading rights in return . The Doge , alarmed by Norman control of the Strait of Otranto , took command of the Venetian fleet and sailed at once , surprising the Norman fleet under the command of Bohemond as night was falling . The Normans counter-attacked tenaciously , but their inexperience in naval combat betrayed them . The experienced Venetian navy attacked in a close formation known as " sea harbour " and together with their use of Greek fire " bombs " , the Norman line scattered , and the Venetian fleet sailed into Dyrrhachium 's harbour .

= = Siege of Dyrrhachium = =

Robert was not discouraged by this naval defeat , and began his siege of Dyrrhachium . In command of the garrison at Dyrrhachium was the experienced general George Palaeologus , sent by Alexios with orders to hold out at all costs while Alexios himself mustered an army to relieve the city .

Meanwhile , a Byzantine fleet arrived and ? after joining with the Venetian fleet ? attacked the Norman fleet , which was again routed . The garrison at Dyrrhachium managed to hold out all summer , despite Robert 's catapults , ballistae and siege tower . The garrison made continuous sallies from the city ; on one occasion , Palaeologus fought all day with an arrowhead in his skull . Another sally succeeded in destroying Robert 's siege tower .

Robert 's camp was struck by disease ; according to contemporary historian Anna Comnena up to 10 000 men died , including 500 knights . Even so , the situation of the Dyrrhachium garrison grew desperate because of the effects of Norman siege weapons . Alexios learned of this while he was in Salonica with his army so he advanced in full force against the Normans . According to Comnena , Alexios had about 20 000 men ; historian John Haldon puts the army 's size between 18 000 and 20 000 men , while John Birkenmeier estimates it between 20 000 ? 25 000 men . It consisted of Thracian and Macedonian tagmata , which numbered about 5 000 men ; the elite excubitors and vestiaritai units , which numbered around 1 000 men ; a force of Manichaeans which comprised 2 800 men , Thessalian cavalry , Balkan conscripts , Armenian infantry and other light troops . As well as the native troops , the Byzantines were joined by 2 000 Turkish and 1 000 Frankish mercenaries , about 1 000 Varangians and 7 000 Turkish auxiliaries sent by the Seljuk Sultanate of Rûm . Alexios also withdrew the tagmas from Heraclea Pontica and the remaining Byzantine holdings in Asia Minor and by doing so , he effectively left them to be overrun by the Turks .

= = Battle = =

= = Initial moves = =

Alexios advanced from Salonica and pitched camp on the river Charzanes near Dyrrhachium on October 15 . He held a war council there and sought advice from his senior officers ; among them was George Palaiologos , who had managed to sneak out of the city . A majority of the senior officers , including Palaiologos , urged caution , noting that time was with the Emperor . Alexios ,

however , favoured an immediate assault , hoping to catch Guiscard 's army from the rear , while they were still besieging the city . Alexios moved his army to the hills opposite the city , planning to attack the Normans the next day .

Guiscard , however , had been informed of Alexios ' arrival by his scouts and on the night of October 17 , he moved his army from the peninsula to the mainland . Upon learning of Guiscard 's move , Alexios revised his battle plan . He split his army into three divisions , with the left wing under the command of Gregory Pakourianos , the right wing under the command of Nikephoros Melissenos , and himself in command of the centre . Guiscard formed his battle line opposite Alexios 's , with the right wing under the command of the Count of Giovinazzo , the left under Bohemond and Guiscard facing Alexios in the centre .

The Varangians had been ordered to march just in front of the main line with a strong division of archers a little behind them . The archers had been commanded to move in front of the Varangians and fire a volley before retreating behind them . The archers continued this tactic until the army neared contact .

As the opposing armies closed in , Guiscard sent a detachment of cavalry positioned in the centre to feint an attack on the Byzantine positions . Guiscard hoped the feint would draw up the Varangians ; however , this plan failed when the cavalry was forced back by the archers . The Norman right wing suddenly charged forward to the point where the Byzantine left and centre met , directing its attack against the Varangian left flank . The Varangians stood their ground while the Byzantine left , including some of Alexios ' elite troops , attacked the Normans . The Norman formation disintegrated and the routed Normans fled towards the beach . There , according to Comnena , they were rallied by Guiscard 's wife , Sikelgaita , described as " like another Pallas , if not a second Athena " .

= = = Byzantine collapse = = =

In the meantime , the Byzantine right and centre had been engaging in skirmishes with the Normans opposite them . However , with the collapse of the Norman right , the knights were in danger of being outflanked . At this point , the Varangians ( mainly Anglo @-@ Saxons who had left England after the Norman Conquest ) joined in the pursuit of the Norman right . With their massive battle axes , the Varangians attacked the Norman knights , who were driven away after their horses panicked . The Varangians soon became separated from the main force and exhausted so they were in no position to resist an assault . Guiscard sent a strong force of spearmen and crossbowmen against the Varangian flank and inflicted heavy casualties on them . The few remaining Varangians fled into the church of the Archangel Michael . The Normans immediately set the church on fire , and all Varangians perished in the blaze .

Meanwhile , George Palaiologos sortied out of Dyrrhachium , but failed to save the situation . Alexios 's ally , Serbian King Constantine Bodin stayed aside with his army , intending to await the outcome of the battle . When the Byzantines were defeated and started to flee , Bodin retreated with his army . The Turks who had been lent to him by the Seljuk Sultan Suleyman I followed Constantine 's example .

Deprived of his left wing ( still in pursuit of the Norman right ) , Alexios was exposed in the centre . Guiscard sent his heavy cavalry against the Byzantine centre . They first routed the Byzantine skirmishers before breaking into small detachments and smashing into various points of the Byzantine line . This charge broke the Byzantine lines and caused them to rout . The imperial camp , which had been left unguarded , fell to the Normans .

Alexios and his guards resisted as long as they could before retreating . As they retreated , Alexios was separated from his guard and was attacked by Norman soldiers . While escaping , he was wounded in his forehead and lost a lot of blood , but eventually made it back to Ohrid , where he regrouped his army .

= = Aftermath = =

The battle was a heavy defeat for Alexios . Historian Jonathan Harris states that the defeat was " every bit as severe as that at Manzikert . " He lost about 50,000 of his men , including most of the Varangians . Norman losses are unknown , but John Haldon claims they are substantial as both wings broke and fled . Historian Robert Holmes states : " The new knightly tactic of charging with the lance couched ? tucked firmly under the arm to unite the impact of man and horse ? proved a battle winner . "

George Palaiologos had not been able to re-enter the city after the battle and left with the main force . The defense of the citadel was left to the Venetians , while the city itself was left to the Count of the Tent ( or Byzantine provincial administrators ) mobilizing from Arbanon ( i.e. , the term *Arbanon* is short for *Arbanon* meaning " Count of the Tent " ) .

In February 1082 , Dyrrhachium fell after a Venetian or Amalfian citizen opened the gates to the Normans . The Norman army proceeded to take most of northern Greece without facing much resistance . While Guiscard was in Kastoria , messengers arrived from Italy , bearing news that Apulia , Calabria , and Campania were in revolt . He also learned that the Holy Roman Emperor , Henry IV , was at the gates of Rome and besieging Pope Gregory VII , a Norman ally . Alexios had negotiated with Henry and given him 360,000 gold pieces in return for an alliance . Henry responded by invading Italy and attacking the Pope . Guiscard rushed to Italy , leaving Bohemond in command of the army in Greece .

Alexios , desperate for money , ordered the confiscation of all the church 's treasure . With this money , Alexios mustered an army near Thessalonica and went to fight Bohemond . However , Bohemond defeated Alexios in two battles : one near Arta and the other near Ioannina . This left Bohemond in control of Macedonia and nearly all of Thessaly . Bohemond advanced with his army against the city of Larissa . Meanwhile , Alexios had mustered a new army and with 70,000 Seljuk Turks sent by the Sultan , he advanced on the Normans at Larissa and defeated them . The demoralised and unpaid Norman army returned to the coast and sailed back to Italy . Meanwhile , Alexios granted the Venetians a commercial colony in Constantinople , as well as exemption from trading duties in return for their renewed aid . They responded by recapturing Dyrrhachium and Corfu and returning them to the Byzantine Empire . These victories returned the Empire to its previous status quo and marked the beginning of the Komnenian restoration .

=== Primary ===

Anna Comnena ( translated by E. R. A. Sewter ) . The Alexiad . London : Penguin Books , 1996 , ISBN 0 14 044215 4 .

=== Secondary ===