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### **Military power in the Christian Roman Empire, ca. 300–1204**

**Citation for published version:**

Stouraitis, I 2018, Military power in the Christian Roman Empire, ca. 300–1204. in Y Stouraitis (ed.), *A Companion to the Byzantine Culture of War, ca. 300-1204*. Brill's Companions to the Byzantine World, vol. 3, Brill, Leiden, pp. 1-20.

<[https://brill.com/abstract/book/edcoll/9789004363731/B9789004363731\\_002.xml](https://brill.com/abstract/book/edcoll/9789004363731/B9789004363731_002.xml)>

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

A Companion to the Byzantine Culture of War, ca. 300-1204

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# MILITARY POWER IN THE CHRISTIAN ROMAN EMPIRE, *ca.* 300-1204

## AN INTRODUCTION

Yannis Stouraitis

‘Don’t allow your army to be broken up or to become poor, or you will become poor yourself, and consider yourself very wretched. The army is the glory of the Emperor, and the power of the palace. For, if there is no army, the *state* (Treasury) cannot stand firm, but anyone who wants to will by all means oppose you. Endeavour, at all times, (to see) that the fleet grows, and that you have it at full strength; for the fleet is the glory of the Roman realm.’<sup>1</sup>

These lines from the late-11<sup>th</sup> century so-called *Strategikon* of Kekaumenos, a treatise written by a Byzantine magnate of Asia Minor, provide probably the best point of departure for an introduction to the topic of this volume. To begin with, the author’s reference to the current realm of Constantinople as *Romania* makes it clear that the reference to a Byzantine culture of war in the title of the current book has little to do with an effort to take sides in a latent modern historiographical debate as to where Rome ends and Byzantium begins<sup>2</sup>.

Kekaumenos’ solid belief in the continuity of the Roman imperial order in the 11<sup>th</sup> century demonstrates that ‘Byzantium’ as a terminus technicus is – as any other periodicizing concept – *de facto* arbitrary and, therefore, has very little historical value irrespective of its analytical purpose<sup>3</sup>.

As a result, the here suggested conceptualization of eastern Roman military affairs from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries as *Byzantine* is intended to serve concrete analytical goals in the context of our topic. First, it aims to clarify that the focus of this book will be on the East, that is, on those parts of the Christian Roman Empire that were under the centralized authority of the imperial-city state of Constantinople, alias New Rome. Second, it is intended to suggest a different perspective regarding periodization that puts the continuity of a politically united and centralized social order at the epicentre. In other words, it will focus on the role of military power and warfare in the endurance of the centralized imperial rule of Constantinople

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<sup>1</sup> Kekaumenos, *Consilia et Narrationes*, ed. and transl. Charlotte Roueché, ([Sharing Ancient Wisdoms / SAWS](#), 2013), p. 101.

<sup>2</sup> In the present, the term Byzantine Empire is employed either to designate the Roman Empire from Constantine I onwards or, more often the Eastern Empire from the sixth century onwards. On two different takes on this issue, see indicatively Stathakopoulos, *A short history of the Byzantine empire*, pp. 2-3; Whittow, *The Making of Orthodox Byzantium*, pp. 96-98.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Každan/Epstein, *Change in Byzantine culture*, p. 1.

over a fluctuating realm from the foundation of the city by Constantine I in 330 until the irreversible political disintegration of the eastern Roman world in the wake of the Fourth Crusade (1204).

So –to return to the initially cited text-passage– Kekaumenos’ utterances are useful because they spotlight the crucial role of military power in the longevity of the Roman imperial system in the East. In an insightful manner, the Byzantine general presents the existence of the high-medieval East Roman state, i.e. the fluctuating borders of the imperial power’s enforceable authority<sup>4</sup>, as relying on the emperor’s ability to maintain firm control over a strong army that secured his advantage against anyone willing to resist his power. That this statement was equally meant to refer to the army’s role in defending the frontiers of the empire as well as in circumscribing the relationship between the imperial center and the provinces in the interior is made evident by two things:

- Kekaumenos employs the word *demosios* to allude to the *state*. This term literally translates as fiscal authority, i.e. the Treasury, in Byzantine terminology, and its use here pinpoints the interdependence between the imperial office’s concentrated military power and centralized control over tax revenues.
- In another part of the text, the provincial magnate demonstrates his awareness that a rebellion against the emperor was difficult to succeed due to the evident military superiority of the imperial office<sup>5</sup>. This awareness fully corresponds with the fact that the majority of ‘civil wars’ in the imperial realm in the period between the 4<sup>th</sup> and the late-11<sup>th</sup> century was predominately caused by rebels aiming at the usurpation of the imperial office, and had ended with the reigning emperor as the winner of the conflict.

In this respect, Kekaumenos’ approach to the role of organized military power in his own society provides a straightforward answer to the socio-historical question as to whether the eastern Roman social order could have endured as a politically united social order without standing imperial armies, paid and controlled by the center of imperial power. If the Roman Empire had come into being due to the capacity of its legions to re-organize socio-political structures in newly occupied territories, the longevity of the imperial system was grounded on two basic features that had crystalized during the time of the Principate. The first was the integration of provincial élites into the Roman political order, i.e. the process of full-scale

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<sup>4</sup> Haldon, *The state and the tributary mode of production*, pp. 32–34; cf. Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 56–62, esp. p. 57. On the distinction of the state as an ideal type between modern infrastructural and pre-modern despotic, see Mann, “The Autonomous Power of the State” 113-116.

<sup>5</sup> Kekaumenos, *Consilia et Narrationes*, ed. Roueché, pp. 64-76.

Romanization of leading elements of the subjugated populations. The second was the imperial office's monopoly of control over military power. This was crucial not only for the defence of its frontiers against foreign threats, but also for preventing provincial secession from centralized rule. These basic features of the Roman system of territorial empire, i.e. of a vast Roman imperial state, from the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. onwards continued to underline its function in the medieval eastern Roman Empire after the 5<sup>th</sup>-century collapse of centralized rule in the Western parts where the process of migration of Germanic peoples led to the gradual emergence of a post-Roman world of ethnic regna<sup>6</sup>.

The extensive territorial contraction of the east Roman realm in the period between roughly the late-6<sup>th</sup> and the late-7<sup>th</sup> century transformed it into a mini-empire compared to the Roman realm under the autocratic rule of Constantine I or to Justinian I's restored empire of the mid-sixth century. Even in its outmost territorial expansion during the early-11<sup>th</sup> century, the medieval realm of Constantinople would never come any close to past glories regarding its territorial size. Moreover, the medieval Roman élite underwent a transformation into mainly an élite of service highly dependent upon the imperial office for titles and revenues<sup>7</sup>. Even though the basic structure of a hierarchical and centripetal imperial community was maintained, one could plausibly argue that, if the Late Roman Empire had mainly been an agglomeration of self-governed cities, in the wake of the radical transformation of the late-antique urban landscape the imperial realm of Constantinople was transformed into an agglomeration of large territorialized military commands by the early-8<sup>th</sup> century. In the initial phase, these were large areas of assignment (*strategiai*) of the military forces of a *strategos* (general) in Anatolia along with some smaller commands in the few remaining Western outposts. From roughly the early-9<sup>th</sup> century onwards, these developed into *themata*, smaller administrative and military units under a military commander<sup>8</sup>. From the late-tenth century on, the latter were subordinated to larger commands named *doukata* or *katepanata*<sup>9</sup>. These underwent significant changes after the radical territorial contraction in the East in the late-11<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>6</sup> Goffart, *Barbarian Tides*; Heather, *The fall of the Roman Empire*; Halsall, *Barbarian migrations and the Roman West*.

<sup>7</sup> Haldon, "Social Élites, Wealth, and Power", pp. 179f.

<sup>8</sup> On these developments, see Zuckerman, "Learning from the enemy and more" 125f.; Cheynet, "La mise en place de thèmes" 1-14; Brubaker/Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era*, pp. 723-755, esp. 744f.

<sup>9</sup> Kühn, *Die byzantinische Armee*, pp. 123-69

The transition to an apparently more militarized model of society has plausibly been associated with the urgent need to confront the swift expansion of Islam in the course of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. For roughly one century (640s to 740), the Muslim armies threatened the very existence of Constantinople's realm, whereas the Caliphate continued to represent the empire's major rival until the late-10<sup>th</sup> century, thus playing an important role in the configuration of its medieval image. Nonetheless, the socio-political traits of the process of militarization in the interior need to be revisited in the light of the latest research findings regarding the so-called *themata*-system. The revisionist approaches to the older theories about a mid-7<sup>th</sup> century imperial reform, according to which the *themata* were introduced as new military and administrative units, demonstrate that one also needs to revisit those older historiographical schemes which promoted, implicitly or explicitly, a romantic interpretation of the fundamental role of the thematic forces, as quasi-national armies of peasant-militia, in the empire's survival.<sup>10</sup>

Current wisdom emphasizes the continuation of the late Roman military and administrative structures during the period of the Muslim expansion, and points to a process of gradual change of eastern Roman military structures. This process was triggered by the shock of defeat and the territorial contraction in the East in the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century. Nonetheless, it was informed by the principles of Roman statecraft, i.e. of centralized imperial authority, when it took the form of well-directed reform measures by the emperors from roughly the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century onwards. These measures reveal the imperial power's concern to maintain control over standing field armies of full-time (professional) recruits. This means that, if the 7<sup>th</sup> century process of militarization refers primarily to the revived role of the army and high-ranking military officers, the *strategoi* – as the main bearers of imperial authority in the provinces – in political affairs,<sup>11</sup> it cannot be simply explained as the outcome of an emergency reaction to Islamic expansionism. It also needs to be analyzed in the broader context of the function of military power as a central organizational means in the system of empire.

If one looks at the development of the 7<sup>th</sup>-century crisis from the late-630s onwards, the localization of defence as well as the localization of recruitment in the areas of assignment of the *magistri militum* with their armies in Asia Minor were processes that went along with an evident regression of Byzantine efficiency on the battlefield. The radical regression of state-revenues due to the loss of Egypt and the eastern provinces seems to have had a negative

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<sup>10</sup> Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, p. 106; Ahrweiler, *L'ideologie politique*, pp. 29-36.

<sup>11</sup> Haldon, *The Empire that would not die*, pp. 147f.

impact on the quality of equipment and the efficiency of a significant part of the provincial forces in the period from the late-7<sup>th</sup> to the late-8<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>12</sup> More importantly, though, these processes begot a tendency of decentralization of power within the imperial system in the context of regionally focused defence. They *de facto* provided the generals that commanded the regional armies with much more space for autonomy in regard to both control over their forces as well as over the revenues of the latter's regions of assignment, and in part also of their warring activity.

If these developments point to a loosening of those structural conditions that enabled the imperial office to maintain firm control over concentrated military power, one needs to ask why this did not cause the collapse of the imperial system in the face of tremendous external pressure from the Muslim foe roughly between the mid-7<sup>th</sup> and the mid-8<sup>th</sup> centuries. The first answer to come to mind is, of course, the complete ideological adherence of the Romanized provincial élites of Asia Minor to the vision of empire, which had been decisively underpinned by the homogenizing religious discourse of Christian monotheism since the late-4<sup>th</sup> century. Despite the evident decentralization of military power between the mid-7<sup>th</sup> and the mid-8<sup>th</sup> centuries, the loyalty of the Anatolian military élite to the imperial office of Constantinople led the generals to make use of their soldiers' loyalty to their person only to reproduce the system of empire by rebelling as usurpers against the reigning emperor – not to seek the system's disintegration through secession.

However, an overemphasis on the role of an operative ideology or, for that matter, common identity, religious or political (or both), as the main factor that determined the survival of the imperial system would only provide a reductionist – and therefore incomplete – explanation.<sup>13</sup> The role of a religious proto-ideology that underpinned the role of the institutional charisma of the Roman imperial office of Constantinople in keeping the empire together should, of course, not be underestimated. What seems to have played an equally – if not even more – important role, though, is the very nature of the enemy that threatened the existence of the imperial system from without. The character of the Muslim offensive, which was informed by an apocalyptic religious ideology of 'holy war'<sup>14</sup> and which is usually regarded as one of the principal reasons that should have caused the empire to collapse, should rather be seen as one of the main reasons that forced military élites in Anatolia to stick

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<sup>12</sup> A good overview of these processes in Haldon, "Military Service", 11-41.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. the latest comprehensive analysis in Haldon, *The Empire That Would Not Die*, pp. 79-158.

<sup>14</sup> Cook, *Understanding Jihad*, pp. 19-25; Blankiship, *The End of the Jihâd State*, pp. 11-23.

together and maintain their loyalty to the centralized rule of the imperial city-state of Constantinople.

Both the crisis of the 5<sup>th</sup> century in the western part of the Roman Empire as well as that of the long 12<sup>th</sup> century in the core territory of the Byzantine Empire in Anatolia, represent useful examples of the opposite case that can help us make the aforementioned point clear. A macro-structural approach to both aforementioned cases indicates that the foreign enemy did not appear in the shape of an emerging centralized imperial culture that pursued a frontal clash with the Roman order in order to knock it down and replace it with a new one. The infiltration of migrating peoples in the fifth-century West and Turkish groups in eleventh-century Anatolia respectively – albeit their evident differences – equally refer to phenomena of penetration and destabilization, both in military-territorial as well as politico-cultural terms,<sup>15</sup> of two imperial orders that were witnessing internal structural tensions. Thus, the collapse of centralized imperial rule was brought about rather as a process of transformation which – as violent as it may have been – it occurred as the combined result of the imperial office’s diminishing military power as well as of the enemy’s ability to permeate the established order and create conditions of coexistence and/or fusion with existing power structures at a regional level. This process left space for local bearers of power to be partly accommodated either within the emerging new power structures or beside them in a new power-political context.

Conversely, the Muslim offensive of the 7<sup>th</sup> century – especially in its form after the establishment of the Umayyad dynasty from 661 onwards– referred to a rising imperial power’s endeavour to eliminate the Christian-Roman order in order to replace it. The vision of imposing the Koran’s uncompromising monotheism under the centralized rule of the successor of the Prophet, the Caliph, dictated a process of subjugation and substitution, instead of penetration and transformation, of existing orders as the swift conquest and disintegration of the Sassanid Empire had made evident. Even though the early ‘Community of the Believers’ had a tolerant attitude towards other monotheistic populations, thus facilitating the swift accommodation of the eastern – largely Monophysite – Christian

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<sup>15</sup> On the process of so-called ‘barbarization’ of the Roman army in the Empire, see Liebeschuetz, *Barbarians and bishops*, pp. 7-85. On the political and cultural coexistence of Turks and Romans in Asia Minor from the late-eleventh century onwards, see Cahen, *Pre-Ottoman Turkey*, pp. 202-15; Ducellier, *Chrétiens d’Orient et islam*, pp. 260-75; Balivet, *Romanie byzantine et pays de Rûm turc*, pp. 30-39, 47-53; Balivet, “Entre Byzance et Konya”, pp. 47-79; Necipoğlu, “The Coexistence of Turks and Greeks in Medieval Anatolia” 58-76; Beihammer, “Defection across the Border of Islam and Christianity” 597-651; idem, *Byzantium and the Emergence of Muslim-Turkish Anatolia*.

monotheists under the rule of the first three so-called orthodox Caliphs,<sup>16</sup> its territorial expansion was a process of violent military conquest aiming at the elimination of neighbouring political orders.<sup>17</sup> Integration into the early Muslim political order meant that the members of the local élites in the conquered provinces should either abandon their places or stay and – as a rule – accept accommodation in the new religious-political system with a marginal or subordinate social and political position.<sup>18</sup>

If the latter process was facilitated in the eastern provinces by the recent experience of Persian rule, which had contributed to the regression of the local élites' belief in the inevitability of Roman rule and had caused a renegotiation of their bonds with the political centre of Constantinople,<sup>19</sup> the case was not the same with the élites of Asia Minor. These had longstanding vested interests in the centralized Roman imperial system and were predominately Trinitarian Christians, that is, bearers of a monotheistic identity that was even less compatible than that of Monophysites or Jews with uncompromising Muslim monotheism.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the conditions of the military clash after the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century between two centralizing systems of rule with superior military power made any attempt of provincial secession from Constantinopolitan authority on the Anatolian periphery doomed to fail. This reality left the members of provincial élites – especially the military élite – in the empire's Anatolian territorial core with little alternative choice but to remain loyal and seek to defend their status by defending the empire.

Therefore, for the Byzantine success in stopping the Muslim advance in Asia Minor, besides other factors – such as issues of changing military tactics on the Byzantine side as well as political dissension within the Caliphate roughly from the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century onwards – one needs to consider the role of the nature of the Muslim threat in eliciting a higher level of socio-political cohesion and loyalty in the course of the conflict, thus contributing to the preservation of Constantinopolitan control over Asia Minor.<sup>21</sup> It follows that the nature of the Muslim offensive should be seen as both a cause for the emerging decentralization of military power within the imperial system between the mid-7<sup>th</sup> and the mid-8<sup>th</sup> centuries, and a crucial factor that counterbalanced this intrasystemic tension. In this period, provincial élites – in

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<sup>16</sup> Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, pp. 106-118.

<sup>17</sup> Hoyland, *In God's Path*, pp. 63-64, 135-6.

<sup>18</sup> Hoyland, *In God's Path*, pp. 158-61.

<sup>19</sup> Whittow, "The late Roman/early Byzantine Near East", pp. 94-95.

<sup>20</sup> On resistance to the Islamic expansion, see Haldon, *The Empire That Would Not Die*, pp. 159-214.

<sup>21</sup> The same can be said, to a certain extent, for Kusrō II's war of annihilation against the empire in the reign of Heraclius (610-641). On this war see the detailed account in Kaegi, *Heraclius*, pp. 58-191.



particular the generals of the settled provincial armies – may have found themselves in an advantageous position compared to the power élite in Constantinople in terms of political and military power within the system of empire, but the Muslim threat led them to use this advantage almost exclusively towards the defence and reproduction of this system.

By comparison, the process of regression of centralized control over the largest part of Anatolia in the late-11<sup>th</sup> century was the combined result of two things: On the one hand, internal political-military dissension and tendencies of decentralization impaired the imperial power's potential to properly reorganize its military forces and maintain centralized hold on the territory and its revenues – in particular after 1071. On the other, it needs to be related to the nature of the Turkish penetration, the primary phase of which had begun already since the 1140s on the eastern frontier. The Turkish settlement was not the result of a frontal offensive by a rival centralized imperial order that aimed to knock down the empire of Constantinople.<sup>22</sup> The various Turkish groups – even though under the nominal overlordship of the Seljuk sultan – penetrated Anatolia individually, partly also as allies of Byzantine magnates in the latter's conflicts over the throne, and took advantage of the central power's military weakness in order to establish a number of autonomous principalities there.<sup>23</sup>

As a result, the Seljuk settlement became one of the main factors that contributed to the escalation of the phenomenon of provincialism and separatism in the course of the long 12<sup>th</sup> century. The role of this process in depriving the imperial office of important revenues and human resources – as the main means for maintaining strong field armies – pinpoints the interrelation between centralized control over superior military power and the maintenance of provincial loyalty to the imperial office of Constantinople, i.e. to the system of empire. In this period, the incremental tendency of Byzantine provincial magnates to defy the rule of Constantinople and create semi-autonomous or autonomous regimes in their regions was facilitated by the mediocre military strength of both the imperial office as well as the Turkish principalities, its main enemy in Anatolia.

The here attempted comparison of the Arab-Muslim and the Seljuk invasions on a macro-structural level – even though it hardly does justice to the complexity of these diverse and multifaceted historical phenomena – is intended to spotlight the dialectic relationship between military power, intrasystemic contradictions and external pressures in a medieval social order circumscribed by the political discourse of empire. It is in this context that one

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<sup>22</sup> On the process of Turkish interpenetration of Byzantine territories and socio-political structures, see Beihammer, *Byzantium and the Emergence of Muslim-Turkish Anatolia*, pp. 169-304.

<sup>23</sup> Cahen, "La première pénétration turque en Asie Mineure" 5-67; Beihammer, *Byzantium and the Emergence of Muslim-Turkish Anatolia*, pp. 198-243.

should seek to approach the development of medieval Roman military structures from roughly the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The first well-directed military reform of this period, the reorganization of the imperial regiments (*basilika tagmata*) under Constantine V (741-775) sometime around the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>24</sup> was principally associated with internal affairs and had little to do with the war against the Muslims. The emperor's initiative to reinstitute an élite force of two regiments (*scholae, excubitores*) under his direct command and to divide the *opsikion*, the military command in Constantinople's Asiatic hinterland, into three minor commands was the first response of the imperial office to the aforementioned process of decentralization of military power since the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century. This process had nearly cost Constantine V his throne due to the revolt of the military commander of the Opsikion Artabasdos shortly after he had succeeded his father Leo III.

The existence of an élite force directly attached to the imperial office had many implications. Given that this was initially an arithmetically rather small corps and, therefore, could not campaign individually against the enemies of the empire, its primary purpose was to circumscribe the loyalty of the provincial armies. By creating an armed force under the direct control of the imperial office, the emperor ensured that, if one of his generals decided to attempt a rebellion or usurpation, he would not be exclusively dependent on the interests and loyalty of the other generals and their armies in order to defend Constantinople and his regime. Nevertheless, if this reform originally stemmed from Constantine V's need to readjust the internal political scene in terms of dynastic stability (i.e. to discourage movements of usurpation against him), in the long-run it was meant to have a major impact on the endurance of the eastern Roman imperial system.

The timing of the reform coincided with the end of the so-called 'jihad-state' in the Caliphate through the transition of power from the Umayyad to the Abbasid dynasty and the transfer of the capital from Damascus to Bagdad.<sup>25</sup> By sealing the end of the period of Muslim onslaughts against Constantinople – a conducive development for the transition of the clash between the Empire and the Caliphate from a war of annihilation to a frontier conflict of attrition – the fall of the Umayyads triggered a process that gradually led to the decentralization of power within the vast Caliphate. It follows that Constantine V set in motion a policy that aimed to restore the imperial office's centralized control over superior military power in the interior, when the intensity of the Muslim offensive began to wane and a

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<sup>24</sup> The first mention of the *tagmata* in the sources refers to the year 765; On this reform see Haldon, *Byzantine Praetorians*, pp. 228f.

<sup>25</sup> Blankinship, *The End of the Jihād State*, p. 3.

process of destabilization of centralized rule in the Caliphate was about to set in. From that time onwards, the gradual regression of Muslim superiority on the battlefield would go along with military measures that aimed at reinstating the military supremacy of the imperial office within the imperial system.

The imperial *tagmata*, apart from their leading role in the implementation of imperial policies in the interior, acquired incrementally the role of an élite force on the battlefield. The rising importance of these units is reflected in the effort of the emperors that succeeded Constantine V to maintain firm control over them by adding new units to the initial two. In this context, it is of particular importance that emperor Nikephoros I (802-811) who introduced a fourth unit (*Hikanatoi*), thus giving the imperial regiments their final shape, was the emperor that founded the so-called thematic system.<sup>26</sup> A better understanding of the qualitative traits of the military reform that this emperor instigated needs to take into account that he was keen on relying his power on élite units of full-time recruits. This is further demonstrated by the relocation of the regiment of the *foederatoi* from the command of the *Anatolikon* to the capital during his reign.

Nikephoros I – an experienced court official before his rise to the throne – introduced a fiscal measure that made the community of the village, as a fiscal unit, collectively responsible for supporting its recruited members that could not bear the cost of military equipment. This reform was obviously intended to deal with the problem of providing the army with well-equipped recruits – a persistent problem since the 7<sup>th</sup>-century crisis that had influenced the efficiency of the provincial armies on the battlefield. It follows that the emergence of the so-called theme-system in the course of the 9<sup>th</sup> century was the product of a well-directed fiscal reform concerning the system of centrally controlled recruitment. The principal motive behind this reform was not to create an army model of part-time peasant-militia bound to the defence of their region. It was rather to ensure the financial viability of well-equipped recruits in the provincial armies. This is made evident by the instructions concerning recruitment to the thematic forces provided in the *Tactica* of Leo VI. This military treatise was written in the beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> century when the thematic system had taken its full shape after a series of consequent actions in this direction by successive emperors in the course of the 9<sup>th</sup> century. According to the author of the text, the general of the *thema* should recruit his men only from those households registered for military service that were

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<sup>26</sup> Haldon, “A context for two “evil deeds”, pp. 245-266.

well-off, because these men would be capable of devoting themselves full-time to soldiering!<sup>27</sup>

The consistent reorganization of imperial territories into *themata* by the emperors of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, which multiplied the number of generals and commands in Asia Minor in comparison to the older system of the *strategiai*,<sup>28</sup> points to another important power-political aspect of this reform. The upgrading of the administrative role of the general in the region under his military jurisdiction concluded the process of the imperial administration's militarization. At the same time, however, it decisively reduced the individual military power of the commanders of the provincial armies. Constantine V's initiative against the tendency of decentralization of military power in the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century was taken a step further by the emperors of the 9<sup>th</sup> century and was completed through the fragmentation of all large military commands (*strategiai*) into smaller *themata*. These were now administrative units in which the general disposed political authority as well.

In light of this, one could plausibly argue that the 9<sup>th</sup>-century thematic reform was the climax of a reforming process that had started in the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century. The main political rationale behind this process was to increase the imperial army's efficiency on the battlefield as well as to restore the imperial office's strong hold on superior military power within the system of empire, as the main organizational means that circumscribed its coherence. By shrinking the individual military power of provincial generals in the course of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the imperial power consolidated the leading role of the imperial *tagmata* and other emerging élite units under the direct control of the power élite in Constantinople. This meant that the charismatic power of the imperial office was once again guaranteed from within the system of empire in a period when the process of disintegration of centralized Muslim rule in the vast Caliphate was reaching its climax. At the same time, a class of landowning magnates was taking its full shape out of the Byzantine élite of service in the provinces.<sup>29</sup>

As a result of these developments, the empire was stable and militarily strong enough again from the late-9<sup>th</sup> century onwards to antagonize and gradually to supersede its Muslim rival as the dominant military power in the Eastern Mediterranean. In the interior, the leaders of the imperial *tagmata* – usually the *domestikoi* of the *scholai* who often headed the whole imperial field army on behalf of the emperor – became main bearers of political power

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<sup>27</sup> Leonis VI *Tactica*, IV 1, ed. G.T. Dennis, *The Taktika of Leo VI: text, translation, and commentary*, Washington, D.C. 2010, p. 46, 5-11.

<sup>28</sup> On the division of the empire in numerous thematic units by the late-9th century cf. the table in Haldon, *Warfare*, p. 86.

<sup>29</sup> See Haldon, "The army and the economy", 136-38.

alongside the leading officers of the imperial fleet. These high-ranking officers were mostly members of the provincial landowning families that claimed a share in the hegemonic Roman power discourse through their leading positions in the army.

The fact that access to military power was mainly a matter of proximity to the emperor and the court in Constantinople circumscribed the relationship between the imperial office and the landowning provincial élite. This is made evident if one takes a look at the large-scale civil wars caused by members of the landowning military aristocracy during the 10<sup>th</sup> century. These were mainly aimed at the usurpation of imperial rule, not at secession from the imperial state. The rebels were able to materialize their plans only due to their offices that provided them with access to the imperial system's military resources, the standing field armies; not as independent warlords relying on their own economic power and human resources.

Within this framework, 10<sup>th</sup>-century imperial legislation for the protection of small landowners – in particular those with a hereditary obligation of military service – pinpoints the emergence of a new intrasystemic threat to the system's balance. The concentration of landed property in the hands of provincial magnates, many of whom were members of the élite of service, did not provide them with individual means – in particular personal military retinues – that could counterbalance the military resources of the imperial system. Nonetheless, it threatened to potentially undermine the fiscal foundations of centralized recruitment. The so-called powerful (*dynatoi*)<sup>30</sup> that usually enjoyed a privileged status of tax exemptions were in position to buy off the land of small independent peasants. Moreover, such impoverished peasants often sought for the protection of a landlord in order to avoid the heavy burdens of centralized taxation.<sup>31</sup> In the long-term, this threatened to reduce the economic resources through which the imperial power was able to finance standing imperial armies of full-time recruits and foreign mercenaries.

The normative aspect of the legislation for the protection of small landholders reflects, therefore, a developing stand-off between the landowning élite of service and the imperial office, which threatened the preservation of centralized control over the extraction of surplus. The recurrent promulgation of relevant laws in the course of the 10<sup>th</sup> century indicates that the imperial power was hardly in position to effectively implement such legislation. It follows that it was not legislative measures but rather expansionary warfare that provided a temporary solution to this emerging intrasystemic tension. The revenues of reconquered areas in the East and the Balkans widened the central government's base of tax-resources. The case of the

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<sup>30</sup> Morris, "The powerful and the poor"; Neville, *Authority*, 68-9, 79f.

<sup>31</sup> Kaplan, "The Producing Population", p. 152.

*kouratores* in the eastern provinces points to the imperial power's concern to secure direct control over the revenues of newly acquired regions.<sup>32</sup>

The imperial office's thriving economic resources continued to guaranty the loyalty of standing armies of full-time indigenous and foreign recruits and, as a result, to circumscribe the imperial throne's charismatic appeal to the powerful members of the military élite. The large-scale civil war between the leading army officer Bardas Phokas and emperor Basil II (987-989) is indicative. The rebel was clearly in command of the largest and stronger part of the indigenous field army units and controlled a large part of Anatolia, when he set out to occupy Constantinople and the imperial throne. The emperor was in position, however, to use the resources of the imperial treasury to hire a strong mercenary force of Varangians. This action proved crucial for the final outcome of the civil war in his favour. Thereafter, the Varangian guard became the imperial office's main élite force – an imperial guard of foreign mercenaries loyal to their employer, the emperor of Constantinople.

It is in this light that the slow process of disintegration of the imperial system that set in from roughly the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century onwards should be examined<sup>33</sup>. The older mainstream thesis attributed the loss of Anatolia to the Turks to the deterioration of the thematic armies of part-time peasant militia and their replacement by standing field armies of mercenaries (mainly foreign, but also indigenous). This approach overlooked the fact that mercenaries, i.e. full-time recruits, were in principle more efficient than peasant-militia on the battlefield.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, it hardly appreciated the evidence showing that it was the re-organization of standing armies of full-time recruits that had made the empire militarily powerful again in the previous centuries, thus facilitating the large-scale expansion of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. All this indicates that the loss of Anatolia in the aftermath of Mantzikert (1071) to various Turkish groups cannot be attributed to the decline of the army-model of peasant-soldiers. Just like the conspicuous failure of the Arab armies to accomplish the same task four centuries earlier had nothing to do with a centrally-directed reform that created such an army model.

In this regard, the role of the so-called thematic system as the alleged backbone of the empire's survival and revival in the Middle Ages needs to be soberly reevaluated. In the 7<sup>th</sup>-

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<sup>32</sup> On the debate as to whether the *kouratoria* referred to a system that turned land in the reconquered regions into crown estates or whether they referred to a new administrative position that guarantied the collection of tribute for the imperial office in these regions, see Oikonomidès, "L'évolution de l'organisation administrative" 137; Kaplan, *Les hommes et la terre*, 316f.; Howard-Johnston, "Crown Lands" 75-100; Holmes, "How the East was won", p. 47.

<sup>33</sup> Haldon, *Warfare* 90-93.

<sup>34</sup> Haldon, "Approaches to an alternative military history", pp. 69-70.

century, the well-directed withdrawal and dispersal of the imperial armies in Anatolia by the emperors of the Heraclian dynasty created a solid military network of in-depth defence, which in combination with other factors eventually stopped the Muslim advance. The establishment of the *themata* in the course of the 9<sup>th</sup> century maintained and strengthened the in-depth aspect of the military organization by institutionalizing the system of regional/local recruitment. It was out of this reform that the standing field units of the provincial *tagmata* emerged from the early-10<sup>th</sup> century onwards. By the end of this century, the new military-administrative units of *doukata* or *katepanata* relied on joined field armies from the imperial and the provincial *tagmata*. This system adopted an outward (offensive) focus by removing the bulk of the empire's military forces to a broad frontier zone.<sup>35</sup> The result of these developments was a growing military marginalisation of the thematic units in the empire's inland that led to the negligence of the structures of local recruitment there. Moreover, the new system relied more on the individual ability of the head of the army and his subordinates for the successful defence of large-invading armies.<sup>36</sup>

In this context, the civil war over the throne that followed the battle of Mantzikert (1071) was conducive for Constantinople's failure to reorganize its standing forces and concentrate them on regional defence in the aftermath of a defeat that had by no means disintegrated the imperial army.<sup>37</sup> As a result, the imperial office gradually lost control over a large part of the Anatolian core territory, its revenues and human resources. This gave birth to a vicious circle in the years to come, since the reduced military power of Constantinople did not allow for a rash restoration of imperial control over the lost core areas. This determined the moderate military potential of the imperial city-state of Constantinople throughout the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The main bulk of the Komnenian imperial armies were élite units of foreign mercenaries. The latter were incrementally complemented by some indigenous units from the late reign of Alexios I Komnenos onwards as well as by the retinues of the imperial family's relatives and clients. The imperial office's need to retrieve the necessary military power in order to face the Turkish danger triggered the emergence of the crusading movement in western Europe.<sup>38</sup> Alexios I's diplomatic quest for contingents of foreign knights that would help him repulse the increasing Turkish pressure and restore control over Asia Minor unleashed an expansionary vision of 'holy war' in the West, which proved a major threat to the Byzantine imperial system in the long-term.

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<sup>35</sup> Oikonomidès, "L'organisation de la frontière orientale", pp. 73-90.

<sup>36</sup> Haldon, "Approaches to an alternative military history", pp. 62-65.

<sup>37</sup> Cheynet, "Manzikert" 412-34.

<sup>38</sup> Shepard, "Cross-purposes", pp. 107-29; cf. Frankopan, *The First Crusade*, pp. 87-100.

The inherent contradiction of priorities between the Byzantine political vision of restoring imperial authority in Asia Minor and the Crusader vision of re-conquering Christianity's Holy Land determined the course of the First Crusade and the emergence of the so-called Crusader States in the East. Even though the empire took advantage of Crusader advancement in Anatolia in order to recover its authority over parts of western and southern Asia Minor, the re-stabilization of the imperial system took place in a new geopolitical context, in which the mini-empire of Constantinople was constantly under pressure from both the Turks in the East and the Normans in the West. The recurrent Crusades to the Holy Land posed a threat to the empire's security while the Crusader States undermined the Byzantine emperor's position as supreme Christian ruler in the East.

Within this framework, the consolidation of the so-called Komnenian system enabled the Constantinopolitan power élite to remain faithful to the Roman imperial tradition that determined the priorities of its internal and foreign policies.<sup>39</sup> The creation of a new ruling élite consisting of the relatives and the clients of the Komnenoi family counterbalanced the fact that, contrary to the previous period, imperial *rogai* stopped being the main means that bound the members of the ruling élite to the imperial office. The extended Komnenian network of kinship alongside the imperial office's control over standing forces of foreign mercenaries secured temporarily the relative cohesion of the imperial system insofar as a competent warrior-emperor held the throne. The first three Komnenian emperors managed to keep movements of provincial secession under control due to their ability to personally lead the army with success on the battlefield. Moreover, they conducted small-scale expansionary warfare in East and West, which was equally directed against Christian and non-Christian enemies. It was reasons of imperial ideology and power politics that second-ranked the goal of re-conquering the whole of Anatolia from the infidel Turks.

The short power vacuum after Manuel I's death (1180) and the consequent turmoil caused by Andronikos I Komnenos short reign were conducive for the further weakening of the imperial office's diminishing military power and charismatic appeal. This triggered the culmination of the phenomenon of provincial secession in the last quarter of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The Angeloi emperors did not manage to keep the centrifugal forces under control in the face of increasing pressures from both the Turks in Asia Minor as well as the Normans and the Crusaders from the West. The sack of Constantinople by the armies of the Fourth Crusade in 1204 was the climax of a long and multi-faceted process that determined the imperial system's irreversible disintegration. It may rightfully be asserted that this event marked the

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<sup>39</sup> Magdalino, *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos*, pp. 228-266.



end of imperial Romanness as an operative ideology that had circumscribed the political unity of large parts of the Eastern Mediterranean under the centralized rule of the Roman imperial office since the time of Augustus.

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