

Byzantine Imperial Guardsmen 925–1025

The *Tághmata* and Imperial Guard



RAFFAELE D'AMATO

ILLUSTRATED BY GIUSEPPE RAVA

Elite • 187

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Series editor Martin Windrow

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BYZANTINE IMPERIAL GUARDSMEN 913–1025

THE *TÁGHMATA* AND IMPERIAL GUARD

INTRODUCTION

Between the 9th and 11th centuries the East Roman Empire, at that time dominating most of south-eastern Europe from its capital in Constantinople, enjoyed a period of unprecedented splendour and renewed vigour under the rule of the Macedonian emperors of the Porphyrogenitus dynasty. (The

modern Anglophone convention of referring to this polity as the Byzantine Empire is necessarily followed in this text for the sake of clarity, but it should be remembered that the inhabitants of the Eastern empire called themselves '*Rhomaioi*' or Romans. The Byzantine state derived directly and without interruption from the Eastern capital, administration and provinces of the Late Roman state, which had survived the barbarian invasions of the 4th and 5th centuries AD that destroyed the Western Empire.)

The Macedonian dynasty, originating in north-western Thrace, acceded to the throne of Byzantium due to the energy and intelligence of its founder, Basil I (r.867–886). It based its strength on the twin foundations of a reasoned policy of fiscal and bureaucratic centralization, which allowed the emperors to contain the centrifugal tendencies of the powerful Anatolian aristocracy, and – above all – on military power. Despite the distractions of struggles over the Imperial succession, during this period the army was consistently well organized, well trained and well paid. The proof of its efficiency is the success of the 9th–11th century Byzantine emperors in overcoming the serious crisis caused by Simeon I of Bulgaria's invasion of the Western provinces; in repelling attacks against Constantinople itself by the Russo-Scandinavians of Igor and Svyátoslav of Kiev; and in resisting pressure in the East from powerful Islamic enemies – both the Hamdanid Emirate of Aleppo and Mosul (the guardian and rival of the



now-decadent Abbasid Caliphate of Baghdad), and the Fatimids, who from 969 dominated Egypt and threatened Byzantine Syria. The elite element of the armies that achieved this success were the regiments forming the Imperial *Tághmata*, stationed around the capital, and the Guards forming the military elements of the Imperial household.

Nikêphóros II Phokás (r.963–969), Iohannes Dzimiskés (r.969–976) and Basil II Porphyrogenitus (r.976–1025) were the protagonists of the great military victories that characterized the ‘age of Byzantine reconquests’ spanning the late 10th and early 11th centuries. These triumphs were due not only to the military genius of these rulers, but to the technical and organizational legacy of Imperial Rome. At the time of Basil II’s death in 1025 the empire extended from the river Danube to the Euphrates, and from the Adriatic Sea to the mountains of Armenia.



Byzantine sword guard of the 10th or 11th century from Pliska, Bulgaria, with ‘sleeve’ extension down blade. (Photo courtesy Prof Valeri Yotov)

CHRONOLOGY

(Byzantine victories against external enemies are printed in *italic type*.)

June 913 Costantine VII Porphyrogenitus, seven-year-old son of the *Vasiléfs* (Emperor) Leo VI the Wise, succeeds his uncle Alexander on the Byzantine throne, under the regency of the Patriarch Nicholas the Mystic.

August 913 First siege of Constantinople by the Bulgarian Czar Simeon.

September 914 Simeon conquers Hadrianopolis.

Summer 915 *Forces of a coalition of the Emperor of Byzantium, the dukes of Naples and Gaeta, the Lombard princes of Salerno, Capua and Benevento, and the Pope, destroy the Muslim stronghold at the mouths of the River Garigliano near Capua, Italy.*

August 917 Expedition against the Bulgarians led by Leo Phokás, *Dhoméstikos* of the *Skhólai*, fails with the defeat at Acheloo and new setbacks for the Empire near Catasyrtæ; Simeon is left the master of the Balkan peninsula.

September 920 The *Vasiléopator* Rhomanós Lecapênós becomes co-regent of the young Constantine VII and the dominant figure of the Byzantine state.

921 or 922 Battle of Phegai against the Bulgarians; weighed down by his armour and equipment, the *Dhroungários* of the Imperial fleet, Alexis Moselés, is drowned.

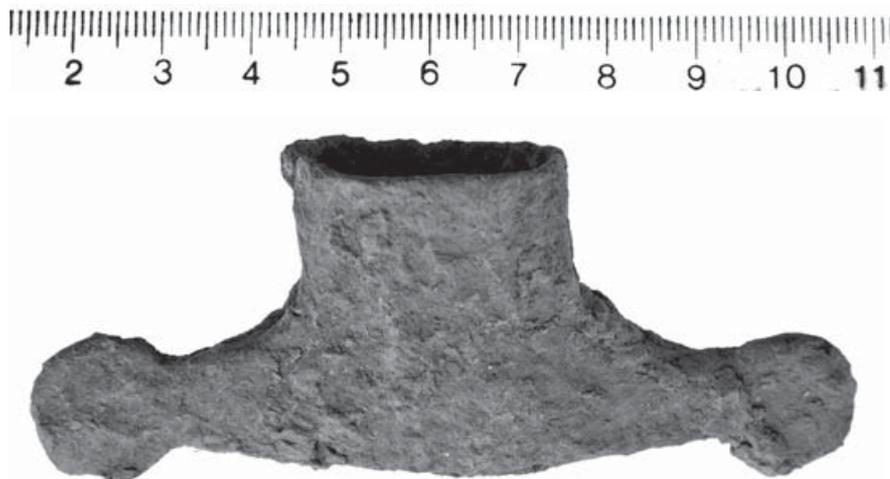
924 Second Bulgarian siege of Constantinople. Simeon overthrows the Byzantine-allied Serbian *Zupan* Zacharias; Rhomanós I names his sons to the succession; *victory of the Imperial fleet over the Arabs of Leo of Tripoli near Lemnus.*

May 927 Death of Czar Simeon of Bulgaria; Byzantine influence strengthens throughout the Balkans.

OPPOSITE PAGE

An Imperial Guardsman of c. AD 1000. The *klivanion* corselet is gilded. The skirt of the *roukhon* tunic is grey embroidered with gold crosses, and the gold-patterned border shows flower motifs; the narrow sleeves are light blue with gold dots. The *chlamys* cloak is red, the trousers (*anaxyrída*) are in light blue and light yellow, and the sash is in silver. The spearshaft is gold and black; the small *cheiroskoutarion* shield is scarlet with white ornaments, a silver rim and a gold boss. For a reconstruction, see Plate H2. (*Menologion* of Basil II, folio 215, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Rome; facsimile by Pio Franchi de Cavalieri, author’s collection)

Iron 11th-century Byzantine or Bulgarian sword guard for a single-edged sabre, from Bulgaria. The empire's multi-cultural armies included *Pharganoi* Turkish troops, and Khazars. (Photo courtesy Prof Valeri Yotov)



- 928 *Erzerum falls into Byzantine hands; raids against the Fatimid Arabs.*
- 931–934 *Victorious campaigns of Iohannes Kourkoúas, Dhoméstikos of the Skholaí, in Armenia and northern Mesopotamia; conquest of Melitene; Magyar raids are successfully contained.*
- September 938** Saif ad-Dawla, the Hamdanid Emir of Mosul and Aleppo, defeats Iohannes Kourkoúas in the Euphrates Valley, compelling the Armenian and Iberian principates to recognize his sovereignty.
- June 941** Rus attack on Constantinople; *the Varangian fleet of Prince Igor is destroyed by the Greek Fire of the Imperial warships led by the Parakoimómenos Theophanes.*
- 942–943 *Successful Mesopotamian campaign of Iohannes Kourkoúas against the Hamdanids: reconquest of Martyropolis, Amidas, Daras and Nisibis; siege and successful storming of Edessa. New Magyar raid into the Balkans is repelled.*
- September 944** Rhomanós I is deposed by his sons Stephan and Constantine, and exiled for life to a monastery on the island of Prote.
- January 945** Arrest and banishment of Rhomanós Lecapênós' sons, leaving Constantine VII as the sole *Avtokrator* (an alternative title to *Vasiléfs* for the emperor).
- 949 Constantine Gongilas leads unsuccessful expedition against Arab pirate bases on Crete; *conquest of Germanicea along the Euphrates border.*
- 950 Saif ad-Dawla's 30,000-strong army ravages the regions of Tzamandos and Charsianon, overcoming the *Dhoméstikos Várdhas Phokás.*
- 26 October 950** *On his way home, Saif ad-Dawla is ambushed and defeated by the Stratêgós Leo Phokás in the passes of Darb al Gawzat and Aqabat on the Germanicea front.*
- 951–952 Seeking to strike a decisive blow against the Emir of Sicily, Constantine VII sends to Calabria (southern Italy) an army commanded by Malakinos and a fleet led by Makroiannes, but on 7 May 952 the army is defeated near Gerace. *Imperial victories in the East against the Hamdanids.*
- 953 New Arab conquest of Germanicea; Saif ad-Dawla defeats and captures Constantine Phokás, son of the *Dhoméstikos Várdhas Phokás.*
- 956 *At the head of Thracian and Macedonian troops and contingents of the Imperial fleet, Marianos Argyros, Patrikios and Stratêgós of Calabria and Lombardy, restores Byzantine authority over Naples and crushes southern*

Italian rebels. Leo Phokás defeats Abu 'Asa'ir, cousin of Saif ad-Dawla, near Duluk.

June 957 *Nikêphóros Phokás, son of Várdhas, captures the Syrian city of Hadath.*

958 *Conquest of Samosata by Iohannes Dzimiskés. The Stratêgós Marianos Argyros is defeated by Arab armies in Calabria.*

November 959 *Death of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus; his son Rhomanós II succeeds him as sole Emperor of Byzantium.*

959–961 *Successes against the Magyars. The Dhoméstikos of the East, Leo Phokás, wins a remarkable victory over Saif ad-Dawla on 9 November 960. Nikêphóros Phokás, the 'White Death of the Saracens', subjugates Crete.*

961–962 *Nikêphóros Phokás leads a victorious campaign against Saif ad-Dawla; after a last successful Muslim raid in Cappadocia, Anazarba, Germanicea, Raban and Doliches are reconquered, and the Hamdanid capital Aleppo is sacked.*

963 *Hungarian invasion of the Balkans; Marianos Argyros, recalled from Italy and elected Dhoméstikos of the Western Skhólai, defeats the invaders.*

15 March 963 *Premature death of Rhomanós II Porphyrogenitus; his widow Theophanó rules as regent in the name of the two young princes, Basil and Constantine.*

August 963 *With the complicity of Theophanó, Nikêphóros Phokás takes Imperial power.*

Autumn 963 *Iohannes Dzimiskés wins a victory over the Cylvician Saracens at the 'Bloody Hill'.*

965 *The strongholds of Tharsus and Mopsuestia are overcome; the Imperial fleet regains control of Cyprus; new military operations in Calabria and Sicily, near Rometta and Demenna; defeat of the Imperial fleet in the Strait of Messina.*

966–968 *Emperor Nikêphóros Phokás leads a successful expedition into Syria.*

28 October 969 *The Stratêgoi Phokás and Burtzes regain possession of Antioch in Syria; capitulation of Aleppo, and establishment of the Byzantine Théma of Syria.*

December 969 *Conspiracy of Iohannes Dzimiskés and Theophanó; Nikêphóros Phokás is murdered in his bed, and Dzimiskés is crowned Vasiléfs in the church of St Sophia.*

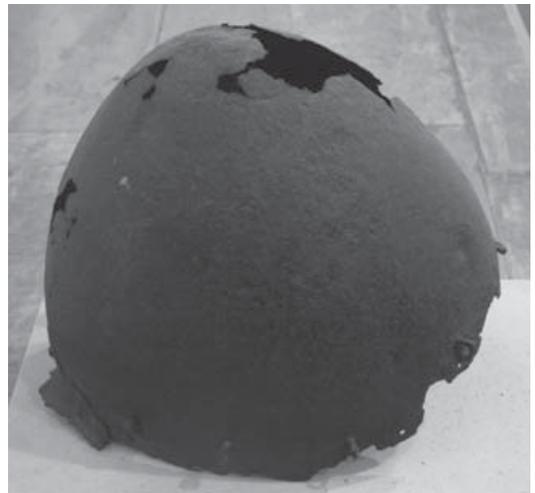
970–971 *Russian-Bulgarian alliance against the Empire, led by Prince Svyátoslav of Kiev; the Magistrós Várdhas Phokás, nephew of Nikêphóros, moves against Dzimiskés.*

April–July 971 *Iohannes Dzimiskés takes Preslav, the Bulgarian capital; siege of Silistra; Prince Svyátoslav capitulates; Czar Boris of Bulgaria is captured and taken to Constantinople. The Egyptian Fatimids threaten Antioch.*

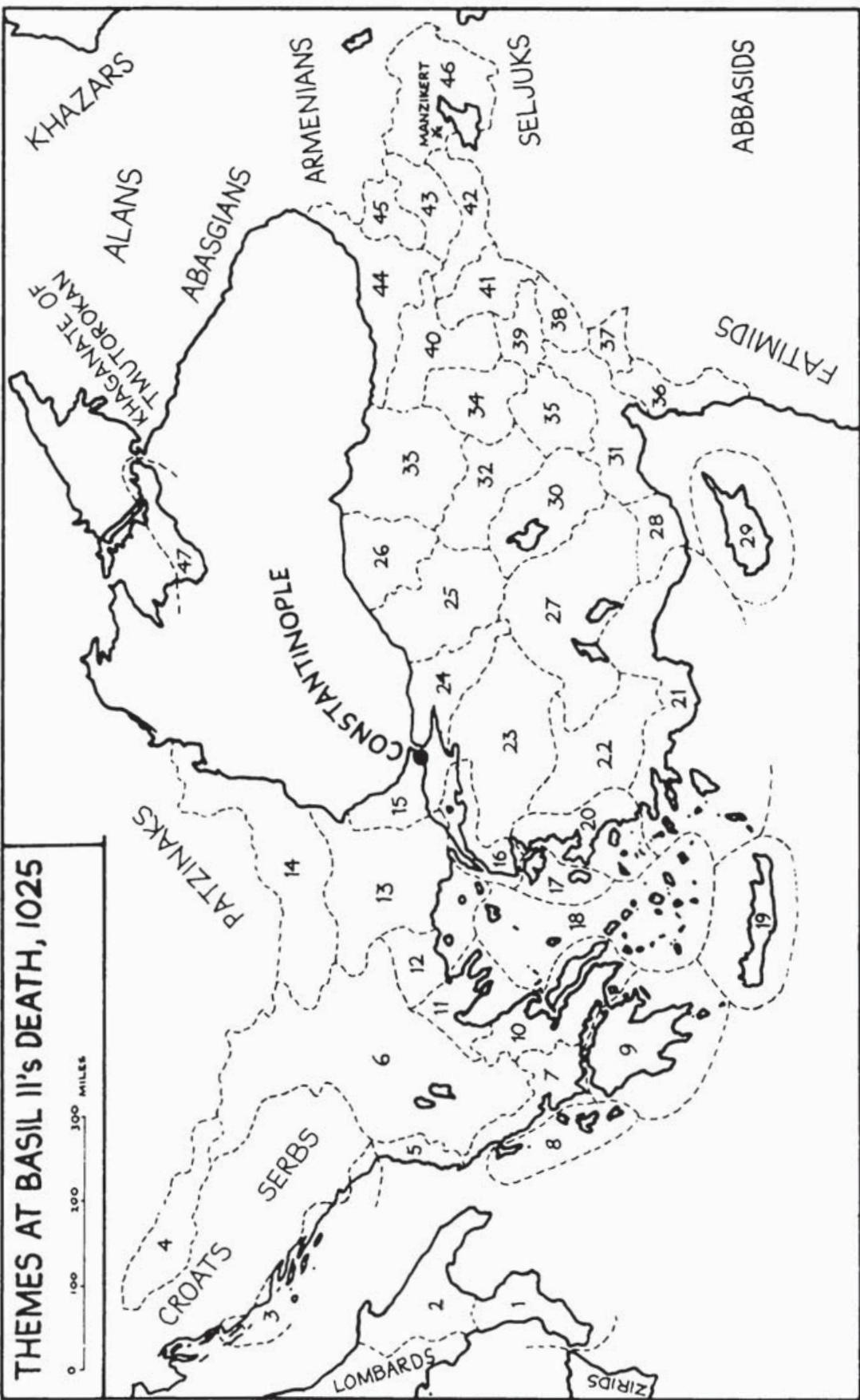
972 *Iohannes Dzimiskés advances in Mesopotamia.*

974–975 *Byzantine offensive in Syria and Palestine: conquest of Baalbek, Damascus, Tiberias, Nazareth and Acre, and assault and capture of Caesarea; Emperor Iohannes Dzimiskés gets within 18 miles (30km) of Jerusalem. New insurrection against the central power by the Magistrós Várdhas Phokás is subdued by the young Co-Emperor Basil.*

Helmet from Ozana. The dating is debatable; some scholars believe it is a modified 14th-century bascinet, but the traces of a particular kind of nasal protection, and comparison with 11th-century miniatures, could support an earlier Byzantine origin. (Kazanlik Regional Museum; author's photo)



THEMES AT BASIL II'S DEATH, 1025



June 976 Death of Emperor Iohannes Dzimiskés from typhus (or poison). The sons of Rhomanós II Porphyrogenitus, Constantine and Basil, jointly succeed to the throne of Byzantium, but only the latter exercises actual power.

Summer 976 Várdhas Sklêrós, brother-in-law of Iohannes Dzimiskés and *Dhoméstikos* of the East, is proclaimed emperor by his troops, and defeats generals loyal to the legitimate co-emperors.

978 Várdhas Sklêrós conquers Nicaea and completes the occupation of Anatolia, approaching Constantinople.

24 May Várdhas Phokás, nephew of former Emperor Nikêphóros, defeats the usurper near Amorium, and compels him to seek refuge with the Caliph of Baghdad.

986 First Bulgarian campaign of Emperor Basil II against Comitopules, whose youngest son, Samuel, restores the late Czar Simeon's Bulgarian empire; Larissas is conquered by the Bulgarians; Basil attempts to attack Serdica by passing through the so-called 'Trajan's Door' pass, but the Imperial army is repelled.

15 August 987 Várdhas Phokás leads a revolt in Anatolia, and agrees to partition the empire with the pretender Várdhas Sklêrós.

OPPOSITE PAGE

Key to map: 1 Calabria; 2 Langobardia; 3 Dalmatia; 4 Sirmium; 5 Dyrrachium; 6 Bulgaria; 7 Nikopolis; 8 Kephalaria; 9 Peloponnesos; 10 Hellas; 11 Thessalonika; 12 Strymon; 13 Macedonia; 14 Paristrion; 15 Thrace; 16 Abydos; 17 Chios; 18 Aegean Peleghos; 19 Krete; 20 Samos; 21 Kibyrrhaiots; 22 Thrakesion; 23 Opsikion; 24 Optimaton; 25 Bukellarion; 26 Paphlagonia; 27 Anatolikon; 28 Seleukeia; 29 Kypros; 30 Kappadocia; 31 Kilikia; 32 Charsianon; 33 Armeniakon; 34 Sebasteia; 35 Lykandos; 36 Antiocheia; 37 Teluch; 38 Poleis Parephratidai (Euphrates Cities); 39 Melitene; 40 Koloneia; 41 Mesopotamia; 42 Taron; 43 Iberia; 44 Chaldia; 45 Theodosiopolis (Taik); 46 Vaspurakan; 47 Cherson (Gothia). In addition the Serbs and Croats, assorted Armenian and Iberian principalities, the Lombard principalities of Salerno, Capua and Benevento, and the Amirate of Aleppo all paid tribute, while Venice, Naples, Amalfi and Gaeta were still nominally Byzantine towns. (Map by Ian Heath)

LEFT

The Martyrdom of St Euphrasia – detail from an image of c. AD 1000. The man's light red garment, bearing a rhomboidal pattern in brown, is a clear example of 'soft armour' – the padded *nevrikon*. Centred in each rhomboid is a light blue dot (rivet?), silvered in the middle. The sleeves are of the removable sort, here attached with buttons at the shoulders; the cuffs are embroidered in black and gold. The sash is green, the cloak light yellow with a light blue border. The light blue trousers are chequered and embroidered with yellow flowers, and are tucked into boots which are shown as gold. The scabbard is black with yellow fittings, and the baldric is black. (*Menologion* of Basil II, folio 333 detail, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Rome; facsimile by Pio Franchi de Cavalieri, author's collection)



Spring 988 At Emperor Basil II's request, a *druzhina* of 6,000 Rus-Varangian troops are sent by Prince Vladimir of Kiev to put themselves at his disposal; they win their first victory for him near Chrysopolis.

13 April 989 Battle of Abydus; Basil's army, mostly formed from the Rus-Varangian *druzhina*, decisively defeats the usurper Várdhas Phokás, who dies of heart failure on the battlefield; end of the civil war.

Spring 991 Second Balkan campaign of Basil II.

994 Renewed invasion of Syria by the Fatimids; the Eastern Byzantine army is beaten on the Orontes river, and Aleppo is besieged.

995 *Basil surprises the enemy under the walls of Aleppo, and wins repeated victories; Raphanea and Emesa are occupied.*

997 Samuel of Bulgaria, taking advantage of the emperor's absence, enters Greece and advances as far as the Peloponnese, *but is beaten and seriously wounded by the army of the Stratêgós Nikêphóros Ouranós.*

998 The Imperial Fleet suffers a setback outside the harbour of Tyre.

999 Truce concluded between Basil II and the Fatimids.

1001–1004 *Third Balkan campaign of Basil II; Serdica, Pliska and Preslav are occupied; Imperial authority is firmly re-established in northern Greece; Byzantine armies defeat the Bulgarians on the Vardar river and conquer Vodena, Vidin and Skoplj.*

1005 *Dyrrachium recaptured.*

July–September 1014 *The Bulgarian army, trapped at Kleidon's Gorge, is surrounded and destroyed; 14,000 prisoners are blinded, and sent back to Czar Samuel in groups of 100 each led by a man blind in only one eye; two days after being confronted by this spectacle, the Bulgarian czar dies.*

1017 A strong army is sent to Italy under the *Katépano* Basil Boiannes, in response to a revolt organized by Melos of Bari.

February 1018 *Basil II enters Ochrida, Bulgaria, in triumph; end of the first Bulgarian Empire. After four centuries of Slav-Bulgarian domination, the whole Balkans are once again under Eastern Roman rule.*

1020 *Basil Boioannes, supported by Norman mercenaries, inflicts a heavy defeat on the Lombard rebels at Cannae. Civil war in Armenia leads to Imperial intervention, and annexation of the whole country to Byzantine territory.*

1025 *Basil sends a strong army with a fleet to pacify Italy and to regain Sicily; the Islamic Zirid fleet is destroyed by a storm before having the chance to confront the Byzantines.*

15 December 1025 Death of Emperor Basil II Porphyrogenitus; he is succeeded by Constantine VIII.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM PICTURE

Joshua and the Angel, in a miniature from an illuminated manuscript of c. AD 1000 that clearly shows the appearance of superior commanders of the Imperial Tághmata. Joshua (left) has a gilded ringmail *lōrikion*, well fitted to the body by means of a brown leather harness, worn over a gilded *zoupa*; his scabbard is scarlet with a gold chape. His shining helmet, of pointed outline, is shown in silver and light blue, and is fitted with a leather *peritrachelion* neck-guard. He wears a light blue tunic with white embroidery, and green *anaxyrides* with a silver netted pattern. The kneeling general wears a purple-violet *chiton* with gold dots, and gold-embroidered red trousers; his boots are painted in silver. St Michael (right) has a gilded *klivanion*; his purple-violet tunic and light blue cloak are both gold-embroidered; his green *anaxyrides* are embroidered with silver thread, and his red boots are decorated in silver. Note the light blue ribbon (*vitta*) around his head, bearing a central red stone. The scabbard and baldric are scarlet with gold fittings. (*Menologion* of Basil II, folio 3, Turin National Library; facsimile by Pio Franchi de Cavalieri, author's collection)

THE REGIMENTS – FORMATION & ORGANIZATION

THE THÉMATA

The Byzantine army of this period was the result of a development that had started in the 7th century. The then Emperor Heraclius (r.610–641) had begun to divide the Imperial territories in Anatolia into military provinces or *Thémata*, which corresponded with the provincial army corps from which the Thémata took their names: e.g., *Anatolikón*, *Opsikion*, *Optímaton*, etc.



The Massacre of the Innocents, in an image of c. AD 1,000. The most interesting figure in this New Testament scene is the young royal guard (centre). His tunic is light green, embroidered with small circlets and squared spaces, and with heavy embroidery in gold around the neck and wrists and on the shoulders. The surface of the shield is light blue with red decorations and gold fittings. The model for this guardsman might have been an Imperial *Eskoubitor* of the *Tághmata*, since that regiment was linked to the 'Greens' faction of the Circus (Hippodrome) in Constantinople. (*Menologion* of Basil II, folio 281, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Rome; facsimile by Pio Franchi de Cavalieri, author's collection)

With the passage of time the system was extended, since it allowed an easier defence of the Eastern Byzantine borders from the repeated Muslim incursions. This system of standing provincial army corps also spread to the empire's Western fronts, and by the end of the 9th century this kind of subdivision appears to have been widely consolidated. By the death of Basil II in 1025 the whole Imperial territory apart from the region surrounding Constantinople itself was divided into 47 *Thémata*. Each *Théma* was subject to a military governor or *stratêgós*, who was also the military commander of the provincial army (*stratós*) that was stationed there. In some widespread border regions the military command was given separately to a *dhoux*, who led the army corps stationed in those places. In some *Thémata* a civil officer, the *protonotarios* – assisted by a *praitor* (also called a *dikasthes* or *krites*), and by a *sakellários* or *kartoularios* – supervised the juridical and financial administration.

The provincial army corps were composed partly of professional soldiers (*stratiotes*), and





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partly of local farmer-soldiers, who in exchange for periodic military service to the state were granted small land holdings. Both the land and the military obligation passed by inheritance to their sons, continued title to the former depending upon continued fulfillment of the latter. (Both professional and part-time soldiers were paid, however.) These Thematic armies constituted the military frontier forces of the Byzantine Empire, and were the true advocates of the 'age of reconquest'. For much of this period the Eastern Thémata were predominant, and the elite *Théma Anatólikon* excelled above all. The soldiers of the Imperial *Tághmata* were often recruited among the Thematics.



Set of Eastern Roman *lamellae* found near Strumica, Macedonia. This exceptional find is probably what is left of the armour of a heavy archer *kataphraktos*. The long *lamellae* are each punched with two holes at the top corners and two centred on each side, for fastening. (Photo courtesy Prof Vane Sekulov, Strumica Museum)

THE TÁGHMATA

The territory of Constantinople and its surrounding regions was not organized as a Théma. The defence of the capital was guaranteed by the presence there, or within a practical distance, of a central field army. (This was stationed in the Thracian district called Tafla or Talaya in Islamic sources, in Macedonia in the west, and in Bithynia in the east.) These regiments formed the elite Imperial *Tághmata*; the cavalry joined the emperor on his military expeditions or manoeuvred to protect the capital when it came under threat, together with the infantry which normally formed the garrison of the city. These were the regiments that, at the moment of the appointment of a new *Autokrator* or *Vasiléfs* (emperor), expressed the consensus of the whole army by raising the newly elected emperor on their shields. Collectively, this army was the spearhead during the Byzantine counter-offensives against the Arabs and Bulgarians in the 9th–10th centuries.

A OFFICERS AND SOLDIERS PREPARING FOR THE BULGARIAN SIEGE, AUGUST 913

1: Katépanos of Vasilikoi Anthropoi

This senior officer of the 'Imperials' of the Guard is wearing a gilded *thorax folidotos* (scale corselet), covered by a crimson *sagion* (military cloak). Note the high pinkish-red boots (*kamptouvia*). The colours here are restored from the original pigments of a Joshua plaque now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

2: Primikérios Kandidatos of VIII Skhóla

The *kandidatos*, reconstructed from folio 215v of the *Commentaries of St Gregorius Nazianzenus* now in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, wears the costly representative parade uniform (*allaxima*) of his unit. The white *kandidatikion* is furnished with a richly decorated collar (*maniakion*), and decorated with gold *klavoi* and *orbiculi*. The gold *epikarpia* on his wrists are copied from the Thessaloniki specimen. He is armed with a spear of Frankish type, with a 'winged' head (obscured here). The colours of his richly decorated *skoutarion* could be the *semeion* of either V or VIII *Skhóla*.

3: Kavallarios Kataphraktos of III Skhóla

This heavy cavalryman is reconstructed according to a description of the *kataphraktoi* in Leo VI's *Tactiká* and *Sylloge Tacticorum*. His neck armour is an old-style *peritrachelion*. Note his two swords (the baldric indicates the second, slung from his right shoulder) and mace. Leo's *Tactiká* (VI, 31) mentions the horse armour: 'They armoured the horses with side and front pieces, i.e. the horses' flanks, heads and necks, with plates or iron mail, or... with other material'. According to the *Sylloge*, the heads were protected by *prometopidiai* (brow-pieces) and the necks and breasts by small iron scales or plates.

4: Skoutatos of Noúmeroi

A typical heavy infantryman of the period, serving in one of the two regiments of the Constantinople garrison. The colours have been reconstructed from the Metropolitan Museum plaque. His coloured *epanoklivanian/epilorikion*, worn over his *klivanion*, as well as his padded *nevrikon*, were probably in the distinctive colours of his company (*vándon*).

Background: In front of the walls of Constantinople, light cavalrymen of the *Víghla* are executing heretic Bogomils.