

## **THE ARMY OF THE ANCIENT AND BYZANTINE GREEKS**

### Foreword

During the ancient and medieval times, the territorial and maritime space, where the Greeks lived, was incessantly changing in size, due to the repeated invasions by barbaric tribes for many centuries. For instance in the Antiquity, this space spread from Asia Minor (Ionia) to Cyprus, Lower Italy ("Great Greece"<sup>1</sup>), Sicily and from Bosphorus and Macedonia to Crete; while during the early years of the Byzantine Empire, not exaggeratingly the Mediterranean Sea could be characterised as a Byzantine Lake.

Like it happened in those remote times, Greece, situated in the middle of the eastern basin of the Mediterranean Sea, consists even in the modern era the connective link between Europe, Asia and Africa; while its geographic position is extremely important from a strategic point of view.

Because of this important position, our country has been constantly threatened by the aggression of various peoples that aimed at occupying it. This issue is very old and reaches through to our recent past. In such situations, the Army of the Greeks has served as the brave defender of the Greek Nation, incarnating the union of hearts and minds, and the determination of the Greeks to stand up for freedom and honour and for the protection of the territorial integrity of our Homeland.

A brief and, to the extent possible, a consistent review of this long-time action and important role of the Army of the Greeks, covering a period of 25 centuries, is presented in this monograph.

### The Army of the Mycenaean Lords (1600 – 1100 BC)

There are traces of the military might of the Mycenaean Greece, since approximately the 16th century BC, on which important evidence are contained in the Homeric Epic Poems and mainly in Iliad. These information by Homer are verified by very significant archaeological findings (such as weapons, and war scene paintings on vases and wall frescoes), as well as by the remaining relics of the Cyclopean Walls of the Acropolises of Mycenae and Tiryns that prove the multidisciplinary knowledge of the Mycenaeans in the field of Fortification.

Various tablets in Linear B Writing, which are important written sources for that era in the (still primitive) Greek language of that time, provide elements on the military organisation. The chief of the army was "wa-na-ka" (Ψάναξ = lord) and "ra-wa-ke-ta" (λαΨαγέτα - λαγέτας or λαγέτης, that was the leader of the people = army), that is the polemarch<sup>2</sup>. The officers to command the units of a region belonged to the class of "mo-ro-qa" (μοιρόνα), i.e. of the landlords. As regarded the warriors, the

---

<sup>1</sup> In Latin, "Magna Grecia"

<sup>2</sup> General-in-Chief

charioteers were the financially more prosperous, while the foot-soldiers were rather underprivileged. Men were allocated to serve in military stations, each of them with 200 personnel.

The offensive weapons of the Mycenaeans consisted of spears, bows, arrows, long swords and daggers, while foot-soldiers were equipped with protective helmets, cuirasses and shields. The charioteers were literally "cataphracts"<sup>3</sup>, as they were protected by heavy panoplies (armouries), which however restricted their mobility. It should be noted that the previously mentioned charioteers were "e-ge-ta (ἐπέται)", i.e. yeomen of the lord, who furnished them the chariots and the necessary accessories.

Undoubtedly, the army of the Mycenaeans was powerful, optimally organised, sufficiently equipped and obviously well-trained; it played a primordial role during the 10-year overseas campaign against Troy (1194 – 1184 BC). Indeed, during this long war Agamemnon, exercising command over several thousands of Greek warriors and 1.186 ships, has victoriously defeated the Trojans [these forces are detailed by Homer (Iliad, B, 484-759)]. Thucydides (Xygraphe<sup>4</sup>, I, 3) diligently points out that this firm military cooperation between all the Greeks, as well as the active participation of the war fleet in this great operation, had never occurred before the "Trojan events".

From the Decline of the Mycenaean Civilisation  
to the End of the Wars against the Persians (1100 – 470 BC)

It is approximately eight decades after the seizure of Troy, i.e. by 1.104 BC, that started the Descent of the Dorians, sealing the decline of the luminous Mycenaean Civilisation and geopolitically transforming the Greek world. This transition paved the way for the foundation and, effective 800 BC, for the stabilisation of the city-states and the development of the colonialism (from the end of the 8th to the 6th century BC), centred in the Aegean Sea and spread over a greater region, from the shores of the Black Sea up to Gibraltar, then known as the "Gates of Hercules". These events coincide with the raise of the might of the Dorian sects, and their most prominent metropolis, Sparta.

Starting from the 6th century BC, the Persians made their expansionist desires obvious. Oriented versus the West, they seized one-by-one the flourishing Greek cities of Ionia; under the pretext of the presence of a small reinforcement that the Athenians provided in support of the Ions, in order to shake off the yoke of the Persian occupants, the latter declared war against the Greeks of the mainland, ultimately seeking to subjugate them. During the Medean Wars, i.e. between Greeks and Persians, Hellenism united its actions to counter the barbarian aggressor. It was then that great and bloody battles were fought in Marathon (490 BC); the Thermopylae pass, where Leonidas king of Sparta and his few but brave warri-

---

<sup>3</sup> Armoured

<sup>4</sup> History

ors were sacrificed (480 BC); the narrows of Salamis (480 BC); and the area of Plataea (479 BC). These indisputable sacrifices of the union of the Greeks averted the danger, originating from the expansionism of the Persians. To successfully counter the Persian naval forces, the Athenians deployed 127 triremes (out of 271 Greek ships in total) for naval warfare, while Sparta assumed most of the burden of land warfare.

Differentiated tactics developed during the aforementioned wars. Indeed, effective the 7th century BC, chariots were no longer employed in war fighting, while the Cavalry became the decisive arm for victory in the operations.

Significant is the contribution of foot-soldiers during the battle, in particular of elite soldiers forming the "Phalanx of the Hoplites"<sup>5</sup>, first appearing in 650 BC, moving compactly and uniformly in lines (rows), and remaining indivisible. Bravery, determination, efficiency, and esprit-de-corps are the characteristics of these Hoplites, which made the Phalanx an effective arm to crash the enemy. The ideal of these men had always been "fighting and perishing for the city".

Certainly, these Hoplites, when fighting as foot-soldiers, were heavily equipped, but this did not imply that the weight was that much as to impede them fight. Consequently, their panoply should not be compared to the heavy-weight panoply of the Mycenaean charioteers. Moreover, these warriors of the ancient times (approx 700-479 BC) were armed with a smaller round shield, a spear longer than the Mycenaean lance, and a sword rather shorter than the one of the Mycenaeans.

New tactics applied in the "Phalanx of the Hoplites" and the changes conferred to the defensive and offensive armoury, contributed to greater flexibility and mobility of the armies of the Greek city-states, in effectively countering and defeating the Persian invaders, whose numerically superior forces were proven incapable to subjugate Greece.

#### The Army of Ancient Greeks during the Classical and Hellenistic Times (479-146 BC)

The Greeks, thanks to the valuable experience obtained during the aforementioned wars, had managed to more systematically train their armies and more methodically organise them. This is historically evidenced by the land forces of the three bigger city-states (Athens, Sparta and Thebes) and, later, of Macedonia.

The Athenian Army had been under the command, during the early ancient times, of the "Archon Polemarch", i.e. the General-in-Chief, who chaired the war council of the Ten Generals, number equal to the "Phyle"<sup>6</sup>,

---

<sup>5</sup> Order of Battle of Infantry

<sup>6</sup> Union (according to kinship)

the subdivisions of the population of Attica, established by Cleisthenes (508 / 7 BC).

The institution of the Ten Generals was solidified in the times of the wars against the Persians. During the 5th century BC, in the era of Pericles, the Generals were elected every year by the "Ecclesia of Demos"<sup>7</sup>, i.e. by the entire corps of the electors. The 10.000 Hoplites were commanded by those Generals, by 10 "Taxiarchs"<sup>8</sup> and 100 "Lochages"<sup>9</sup>.

The Athenian Cavalry, which in the times of Cleisthenes consisted of only 100 men, gradually increased to 300, 1.200, and up to 1.800 men, during the 5th century BC. Commanders were two "Hipparchs"<sup>10</sup> and 10 "Phylarchs"<sup>11</sup>. Cavalrymen were implicitly the financially more prosperous, as they had to support the heavy expenses for the acquisition and sustenance of their horses.

The Athenians also organised units of archers, who either belonged to the class of "Thete (very poor)", or were mercenaries or slaves. Better performing archers were men from Thrace or Crete. By 446 BC, there were 1.600 warriors with this specialty in the Athenian Army.

In the beginning of the 4th century BC, the Athenian general Iphicrates had organised elite units of "Peltastes" that were lightly armed Infantrymen, carrying and efficiently using a crescent-shaped shield (called "pelta") and an "acontium"<sup>12</sup>; their tactics were to launch skirmishes against the enemy. All those, lightly armed with arches, javelins and slings, were called "psiloi"<sup>13</sup>.

The warships of the Athenians were famous for their endurance and mobility, as well as for the audacity, bravery and great experience of their crews. During the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC), 400 "trierarchs (trireme captains)" had exercised full authority over the maintenance, armament and manning of their ships. The War Fleet of the Athenians had been the solid foundation of the Athenian Symmachy<sup>14</sup> and greatly contributed to its further enlargement.

The military service for the Athenians was two years long and ended at the time of their 20th anniversary. Normally, the newly-recruited soldiers were charged with the expense for the acquisition of their weaponry, while they were obliged to reenlist in case of war, until they reached the age of 60.

---

<sup>7</sup> Assembly of the People

<sup>8</sup> Commander of the Quota of Infantry

<sup>9</sup> Captains

<sup>10</sup> Cavalry Commanders

<sup>11</sup> Union Leaders

<sup>12</sup> Javelin

<sup>13</sup> Underequipped (barehanded)

<sup>14</sup> Alliance

On the contrary, Sparta, a city-state of a strict militaristic character, compelled its citizens to serve in the army for many decades, long after the end of the hard basic training, until they would reach an advanced age. Leaders of the Spartan Army were the two reigning Kings of Sparta. Effective 507 BC, in case of war, only one of the Kings was to assume the leadership of the troops – this aimed at impeding any friction between the two Kings, a fact that would adversely affect the cohesion, morale and combat effectiveness of the campaigning force.

As time went by, the five "Ephors", i.e. the magistrates charged with the supervision of implementing the socio-political order, became more powerful; therefore, the declaration of war and the mobilisation were no longer an exclusive privilege of the King, who was thence required to have two of the "Ephors" as basic members of his War Council. Moreover, senior Officers, known as "Polemarchs", became the staff officers of the King, during any campaign.

The Royal Guard consisted of 300 "Hippius"<sup>15</sup> under the command of three "Hippagretoi"<sup>16</sup>. Nevertheless, this Guard was indeed foot-soldiers and the title "Hippius"<sup>17</sup> was purely honorary.

The permanent garrison troops of Sparta originated from the classes of the "Homoei"<sup>18</sup> and the "Perioeci"<sup>19</sup>, while the "Neodamodes" (newly enfranchised "Helots"<sup>20</sup>) could form an interim task force.

The elementary unit of the Spartan Land Force was the "Lochus"<sup>21</sup> of the heavily-armed soldiers. It is reported that, in 418 BC, there were seven companies of a total strength of (614 X 7 =) 4.298 men. There was also a company of "Scirrhitae"<sup>22</sup> of a total strength of 600 men, to be employed in very dangerous missions. Each company was divided into four "Pentecosts"<sup>23</sup> and each of them into four "Enomoties"<sup>24</sup>, headed by "Lochages", "Penteconters"<sup>25</sup> and "Enomotarchs"<sup>26</sup>.

During the 5th century BC, largest of the units was the "Mora"<sup>27</sup> under the command of a "Polemarch" and consisted of two "Lochi", eight "Pentecosts" and 16 "Enomoties". Starting from 424 BC, to each of the Moras (six in total) was subordinated a Cavalry unit, of a strength of 100

---

<sup>15</sup> Equestrian

<sup>16</sup> Horse Grippers

<sup>17</sup> Cavalrymen

<sup>18</sup> Peers

<sup>19</sup> (with civil liberties, not political rights)

<sup>20</sup> Slaves

<sup>21</sup> Company

<sup>22</sup> Hardened

<sup>23</sup> Group of 50 Men

<sup>24</sup> Squad

<sup>25</sup> Leaders of 50 Men

<sup>26</sup> Squad Leaders

<sup>27</sup> Battalion

men each. The strength of each of the Moras was 916 men (including the respective section of the Royal Guard, the "Scirrhitae" and the Cavalrymen).

The war fleet of Sparta, commanded by the "Navarch"<sup>28</sup> and the "Epistoleus"<sup>29</sup>, was of restricted combat capabilities and experience. Only by the end of the Peloponnesian War, Sparta managed to have a naval order of battle of 140 warships, of which just 25-43 were its own, while the rest of them were belonged to its allies. The ship crews were drafted among the "Perioeci" and mercenaries. The class of "Homoei" provided only the "Navarch", the "Epistoleus" and the trierarchs (ship captains).

As regards the Boeotians, they established a respective League by 447 BC. The command of the army of the Boeotian League was exercised by the Ten "Boeotarchs"<sup>30</sup>, who were probably the supreme commanders, of equal status to the Ten Athenian Generals, and were elected every year. The excelling and capable leaders of the Thebans and of the rest of the Boeotians, such as Epaminondas and Pelopidas, were exclusive commanders of this League, as the other nine "Boeotarchs" willingly resigned from their posts, acknowledging the leading qualifications of their two fellows-in-arms.

Indeed, the city of Thebes owed to these experienced and genius military leaders the apogee of its power, its relatively good progress in matters of organisation and mostly tactics (establishment of the "Loxe"<sup>31</sup> Phalanx"), and the achievement to assume the hegemony of Greece between 371 and 362 BC. The elementary unit of each city-member of the Boeotian League was the "Lochus". The "Ieros Lochus"<sup>32</sup>, consisted of 300 elite Thebans, was the unit that in the period 379-338 BC was renowned for the gallantry in the battlefield, as well as for the heroism and the self-sacrifice of its men, gloriously perished in action at the battle of Chaeronea, against the mighty Macedonian Land Force of King Philippe the 2nd.

Of great importance, capability and audacity was the Cavalry of the Boeotian League that had already shown its bravery and experience during the Battle of Plataea (479 BC). Units of this Cavalry, called "teli" underwent systematic training under the orders of Epaminondas. Commander of the Boeotian Cavalry was the "Hipparch" and its components, called "Heniochs"<sup>33</sup> and "Parabatae"<sup>34</sup>, were drafted among the Boeotian nobility. The "amhippoi" were lightly armed soldiers ("javelin carriers") that had no organic horses, but rode on horseback together with the Cavalrymen, fought as foot-soldiers by the side of the Cavalrymen, could be

---

<sup>28</sup> Admiral

<sup>29</sup> Chief of Staff

<sup>30</sup> Magistrates of the Boeotian League

<sup>31</sup> Oblique

<sup>32</sup> Sacred Company

<sup>33</sup> Charioteers

<sup>34</sup> Indirect Attackers

employed for contingencies as Cavalrymen, and in general were distinguished for their speed and flexibility.

It is obvious that the troops of the Boeotians were optimally trained and always combat effective.

The Macedonians are a very particular case, as regards their organisation, training and operations of their troops.

By the end of the 5th century BC during the reign of King Archelaos, they had generated a significant Cavalry, but had no organised Infantry with the exception of some mercenary sections drafted during the reign of Amyntas III, in the first two decades of the 4th century BC.

Full generation of Infantry troops was conducted by King Philippe II (383-336 BC), who rose to the throne of Macedonia by the year 359 BC. Philippe, during his infantile and juvenile ages, had lived as an internee in the city of Thebes, and had many to be taught about organisation and tactics by Pelopidas and mainly Epaminondas. Thus, when he took over the reins of the Kingdom of Macedonia, he managed to improve the organisation of his troops, and optimally equip and train them; the final outcome was the "Macedonian Phalanx" that was a heavily-equipped Infantry unit, compactly moving and literally smashing any opponent.

The Phalanx consisted of six units, called "Taxes"<sup>35</sup> or "Phalanges", each of which numbered 1.500 warriors from rural communities. Each of the "Taxes" was subdivided into "Lochi" and each of them into "Scenes"<sup>36</sup>, with approximately 10 men.

This very heavy Infantry seeded the panic to the enemy, acting as unbending and incomparable crashing force. The son and successor of Philippe, Alexander III the Great (356-323 BC) had always cared for the improvement and enhancement of the effectiveness of the Macedonian Phalanx; indeed, after the battle of Gaugamela (331 BC), he doubled the number of "Taxes".

The troops of the Phalanx, called "Pezhetaeri"<sup>37</sup> and deployed as the King's entourage in form of close friends and yeomen, were equipped with a defensive helmet, "cnemis"<sup>38</sup> and a 50 cm-diameter round shield. Their offensive weapon was the famous "sarissa" that was a protracted spear, approximately 5,50 m long, held by both hands. In case that it broke, they used a mass sword, but such case was almost impossible as those spears were very resistant and shaped up an impenetrable wall, at the sight of which the opponent turned away.

---

<sup>35</sup> Classes

<sup>36</sup> Squad, Housed Under the Same Tent

<sup>37</sup> Companion / Foot Soldiers

<sup>38</sup> Shinbone protective (s)

Light Infantry consisted of soldiers, called "hypaspists<sup>39</sup>", that wore special robes, named "causia<sup>40</sup>", a broad head-cover (hat), a shield decorated with the beamed star, and a short "Acontium".

Heavy Cavalry was manned by the "Hetairoi<sup>41</sup>", Macedonians of noble decent, optimally trained, brave and experienced soldiers; they were subdivided into eight "Ilas<sup>42</sup>", each of a strength of 300 men. The top elite of this Cavalry was the "Royal Ila", also called the "Agema<sup>43</sup>". These Cavalrymen were equipped with a helmet and a "thorax<sup>44</sup>", a sword, a spear and eventually a small shield.

The lightly armed horsemen, called the "prodrome<sup>45</sup>", as they marched ahead of the troops, spied and provided the friendly forces with on-time information on the movements of the enemy. These also used a long spear and wore breeches, i.e. tight trousers. They were subdivided into four "Ilas".

All the aforementioned foot and mounted troops, at the times of Philippe II and Alexander the Great, were directly linked to the King, to whom they owed unquestioned allegiance and continuous discipline. They trained and fought all together, and had a direct dependence from their Prince.

Most close companions of the King were his seven personal guards that were senior officers of his most personal trust. Descendants of aristocratic houses of Macedonia were employed in the personal service of the King, also called as "paedes basilici<sup>46</sup>", fighting at his side. In general, during the reign of Alexander the Great, the Macedonian troops were very well-organised. The Staff of the King-Supreme Commander functioned promptly; there was a vast information network that collected and evaluated military parameters; the "Epimeletea<sup>47</sup>" provided significant support, in particular during the campaigns, when the fighters were provided on-time with necessary quantities of water, food, various supplies, medical material and besieging machinery (Helepoles<sup>48</sup>, Criophores<sup>49</sup>, Chelonians<sup>50</sup>, etc).

Alexander the Great, a genius and victorious commander, succeeded in uniting the Greeks (with the exception of the Lacedaemonians) and

---

<sup>39</sup> Aides

<sup>40</sup> Heat-proof

<sup>41</sup> Companions

<sup>42</sup> Companies in Dorian Tribes

<sup>43</sup> Detachment

<sup>44</sup> Chest Armoury

<sup>45</sup> Foregoers

<sup>46</sup> Royal Boys

<sup>47</sup> Logistics

<sup>48</sup> Moveable War Tower

<sup>49</sup> Battering Ram

<sup>50</sup> Battering Turtle

complete the tough and lengthy campaign (334-323 BC), by which he extinguished the Persian threat, established an extended Empire, and propagated the Greek civilisation to the depths of Asia.

Regrettably, after the premature death of that charismatic leader, this Empire could not endure, as his descendants entered into endless quarrels, which led to civil wars and the disruption of the unity of Hellenism. Long wars between the descendants, and their successors, seriously hurt the Greeks and weakened their positions, giving the Romans the possibility to intervene in the affairs of the Greeks and finally allowing them to subjugate mainland Greece by the year 146 BC.

### The Armed Forces of the Byzantine Empire (324 – 1453 AC)

In spite of the fact that Rome occupied Greece, the Greek civilisation had kept on flourishing, and the tough Romans gradually took it on in a positive way.

Since October 312, Constantine the Great showed tolerance to Christianity and ordered the termination of the Persecutions against the Christians. When in September 324, he became monarch, he sought a solid support in the East, where the new religion had been broadly propagated in lands of Greek predominance. Moreover, that visionary leader had already realised that in order to preserve his vast Empire, he needed Christianity and the culture, the language and the civilisation of the Greeks. Thus, on 8 November 324, he officially proclaimed a new capital for his state at the strategically important site of Byzantium, an ancient colony of Megara from the 7th century BC; the "Encaenia"<sup>51</sup> of Constantinople were celebrated in great pomp on 11 May 330, and the city got known as "New Rome", "Heptalophos (city)"<sup>52</sup>, "Basileuoussa"<sup>53</sup> and "Basilica Polis"<sup>54</sup>.

During the early Byzantine period (324-610), large part of the Byzantine Army consisted of mercenaries. After the reorganisation by Emperor Diocletian (284-305), which applied up to the times of Constantine the Great, the Army operated in a dual system: of the "limitanei" (borderline guards) and the "exercitus comitanensis" (transferable reserve troops).

Borderline guards were given lands by the state, situated close to the borders, which they cultivated to exploit their products, with the obligation to defend the borderline areas, threatened by barbarian invasions.

At strategically important locations of the interior, reserve units were deployed, prepared for war and capable to rapidly deploy to areas,

---

<sup>51</sup> Inauguration

<sup>52</sup> Seven Hills

<sup>53</sup> See of the King

<sup>54</sup> Reigning over Capitals

under enemy aggression. Fortified cities and "castella" (fortresses) contributed to the defence of the country. Along Danube River, which served as the natural northern borderline of the Empire, the archaeological shovel has brought to light various traces of fortification works, destined to counter any menace or aggression by barbarian tribes, living on the other side of the river.

Furthermore for the protection of the Emperor, there was a "Praetorian Guard" that, however, deviated from the mission and developed political activities. This is why Constantine the Great dissolved the Guard in 312, and founded the "Scholae Palatinae", i.e. new sections of Guards for the Palace. All the units, deployed in various parts of Asia (up to Euphrates River) and Egypt, were subordinated to the "Magister Militum per Orientem" (Marshall of the East). He was the supreme (regional) military commander, whose jurisdiction was restricted at the times of Emperor Justinian I (527-565), as four more "Magistri" were appointed for local commands.

Sections of the Byzantine Army of that primitive era were manned by local rather combat effective populations. Foreign mercenaries were experienced; nevertheless, if discipline in their ranks failed, they could become very dangerous for the Empire.

An interesting case is the one of the Goths "Foederati" (self-governed allies) that, according to the Treaty of 3 October 382, settled in between Danube River and "Haemus"<sup>55</sup> Mountain; the Empire offered them cultivable lands, entailing the obligation to defend the borderline areas, under the command of a Goth general.

During the middle Byzantine period (610-1204), the Empire developed a clearly national army, as this was exclusively manned by local populations. The military organisation of that era is totally different to the one of the primitive Byzantine era.

The army was distinguished into the Army of Battalions and the Army of the "Themes"<sup>56</sup>. It was about two categories absolutely different between them from financial and recruiting points of view.

The Army of "Tagmata"<sup>57</sup> mainly consisted of the three Royal battalions, named "Scolae"<sup>58</sup>, "Excubitores"<sup>59</sup> and "Arithme"<sup>60</sup> or "Vigla"<sup>61</sup>, forming the Palace Guard. They had their headquarters inside Constantinople;

---

<sup>55</sup> Balkan

<sup>56</sup> The Greek word is Θέμα (Thema) = Location

<sup>57</sup> Battalions

<sup>58</sup> Internal

<sup>59</sup> Night Watch

<sup>60</sup> Numbered

<sup>61</sup> Vigil / Watch

sections of them deployed in the Asian towns of Dorylaeum<sup>62</sup> and Cotyaeum<sup>63</sup>. These were very experienced and well-trained units, which participated in various operations.

The "Scolae Battalion" was an important unit of that army; there were in total seven "Scolae" with strength of (500 X 7) 3.500 men, descendants of the noblest families of the Empire. Commander of the unit, effective 767, was the "Domesticus<sup>64</sup> of the Scolae". Of equal importance was the "Icanati<sup>65</sup> Battalion" of noble young fighters, established in 809 by Emperor Nicephorus I to escort his son and heir, Stauracius.

The most distinguished among the military commanders were "Numerus<sup>66</sup>" and "Teichiotes<sup>67</sup>", who were tasked to defend the Holy Palace and run the affairs of the two penitentiaries within the palatial complex.

Those serving in the ranks of the Army of Battalions were professional soldiers. Until the 10th century, the largest part of the troops was the Cavalry, and in order to assemble and train them, there were stud-farms, i.e. specific installations called "Aplecta". The most important of them was in the region of Malagines, close to Sangarius<sup>68</sup> River, at the crossroad to Prusa<sup>69</sup> and Nicaea<sup>70</sup>.

The personnel of the "Army of the Themes" were originating from the peasant's class and were drafted under the auspices and the responsibility of the Strategus<sup>71</sup> of a Theme<sup>72</sup>; this general assumed the civic-military leadership of an area upon decision of the Emperor. Initially, the term "Theme" meant the lists with the names of the soldiers of a geographical "taxis", i.e. the lists with the names of a unit, with headquarters in an area (region); gradually the unit and eventually the region were named as "Theme". In this way, a system was established for the defence of the country. The origins of this system could be traced at the administrative reform by Emperor Justinian I, providing for the civic-military administration of certain areas in the East by "Archons<sup>73</sup>", i.e. generals. Thus, progressively there was no separation between the civic and the military authority, since one and only person was to be vested (the general of the Theme) with both powers.

---

<sup>62</sup> Now, Eski Sehir

<sup>63</sup> Now, Koca

<sup>64</sup> Commander of the Household

<sup>65</sup> Of the Capable

<sup>66</sup> Commander of Arithme

<sup>67</sup> Commander of the Guard of the Walls

<sup>68</sup> Now, Sakarya

<sup>69</sup> Now, Bursa

<sup>70</sup> Now, Iznik

<sup>71</sup> General

<sup>72</sup> Administrative Area

<sup>73</sup> Noblemen

The first Themes were organised in Asia Minor (Theme of Armeniaci in 667, Theme of Anatolici<sup>74</sup> in 669, Theme of Opsikion in 680), followed by the organisation of Themes on European soil (Thracoon<sup>75</sup> in the years 680 and 685 and of Hellas<sup>76</sup> in 695).

From a purely military point of view, the system of the Themes proved to be successful and effective, nevertheless from the political one, it raised concerns, as the Generals of the older and larger Themes had acquired more power; by the end of the 7th and the beginning of the 8th century, they challenged the imperial authority and led many coups d'état. To impede this danger, Emperor Leo III (717-741) divided the Theme of Anatolici into two of smaller size, thus with less powerful generals.

The more prosperous and socially higher peasants, serving as soldiers of a Theme, were enlisted in "Military Houses", while their more underprivileged fellows-in-arms in the "Civic Houses". The previous were landowners, and provided for their own armament and horse (if they were "mounted soldiers") at their own expense. Moreover, during their military service, they should provide for the presence of farmers that would cultivate their lands. On the side of the state, they were granted financial privileges and they were exempted from compulsory unpaid labour and various obligations (with the exception of the property tax).

All these soldiers were entitled to receive donations, part of the spoils and "roga"<sup>77</sup> (= salary). From the early 9th century on, the expense for the equipment of resource-less peasants (poor, needy, of lower income, according to written sources) obliged to enlist, was borne by their "prosperous fellow-citizens", i.e. their well-off neighbours.

The above system of Themes remained functional until the mid-11th century. From that moment on, it started declining because of adverse developments in the agricultural sector, the demining of the military leadership of the Themes, numerous military coups d'état, the enlistment of heretic<sup>78</sup> populations that were not of the confidence of the Emperor, etc.

Soon after that, Emperor Alexius I Comnenus (1081 – 1118), in an effort to reorganise the Troops, established a Battalion of 2.000 of "Archondopoula" that were elite and adequately-trained young men of noble descent, whose fathers had perished in action. He also recruited foreign mercenaries, who on one hand were combat effective soldiers, but on the other had excessive financial demands. Thereafter, the generation of a new local force (in each of the Themes), in particular after the disconnection of the military service from the land ownership ("apargyrismos tis

---

<sup>74</sup> Residents of the East

<sup>75</sup> Thracian

<sup>76</sup> Mainland Greece

<sup>77</sup> Literally = part of the crop

<sup>78</sup> Non-Orthodox Eastern Christians

strateias<sup>79</sup>", as mentioned in the written sources), became extremely difficult in the times of Comnenus dynasty.

The Navy played a primordial role in the defence of the Empire. From the 2nd quarter of the 6th century until 640, the entire Mediterranean Sea was under Byzantine control. Very important Byzantine naval bases were located from the Balearic Islands up to Alexandria and the coasts of Asia Minor, and threats had vanished after the destruction of the war fleet of the Vandals in the times of Emperor Justinian I.

Effective the last years of the reign of Heraclius (610-641), the situation changed because of the emergence and rapid expansion of the Arabs, who disposed numerous warships, thus terrorising and despairing the residents of the coastal and insular regions of the Empire, which experience the same Arab threat against its own capital.

To counter this difficult state of affairs, the Empire expedited the organisation of a voluminous naval command, responsible for both the southern coasts of Asia Minor and the islands of the southern Aegean Sea. Commander of the force was the "General of the Karavi<sup>80</sup> or of the Karavisianni (= shipmates)". Later on, by 732, Emperor Leo III dissolved this naval command and established the "Naval Theme of Kyvirraiotēs", to effectively counter the Arabs. Other naval Themes were the one of Cephalonia by 750, including the islands of the Ionian Sea; the Theme of Crete (961); the Theme of Sicily, established between 654 and 718; the Theme of Cyprus (965); as well as all those established for the coasts of the Black Sea during the 9th century (Paphlagonia<sup>81</sup>, Chaldea<sup>82</sup>, and Kherson).

The capital and its broader area were guarded by the "Basilicon Ploimon<sup>83</sup>" under the command of the "Drugarios Ploimou<sup>84</sup>". His chief staff officers were the "Topoteretes<sup>85</sup> Ploimou" and the "Chartoularios<sup>86</sup> Ploimou". Local naval bases were commanded by the "Komites<sup>87</sup> Ploimou", while the skippers of the warships were called the "Centrarchi". An important arsenal operated in Rhodes, for building and repairing such ships.

Faster and lighter of the warships were the "Galleons", rapid and long ships, the "Dromons" and the "Chelandia", while the "Pamphilo<sup>88</sup>" were renowned for their rapidity during naval battles, thanks to their robust oarsmen. The "karavia kamatera", bulky, heavy and rather slow sail-

---

<sup>79</sup> No financial burden for the Army

<sup>80</sup> Ships

<sup>81</sup> NW Asia Minor

<sup>82</sup> NE Asia Minor

<sup>83</sup> Royal Fleet

<sup>84</sup> Admiral of the Fleet

<sup>85</sup> Locum Tenens (2nd in Command)

<sup>86</sup> Chief of Staff

<sup>87</sup> Earls / Counts

<sup>88</sup> Types of Ships

ships, were used for transport of horses, cereals, and various other supplies.

As regards the strength on each of the ships, it is reported that during the 10th century, each Dromon had 300 sailors, of who 70 were warriors, and 230 were oarsmen, but also fighters if necessary. Each "Pamphilos" had 130 – 160 oarsmen that could also serve as fighters.

By the year 1085 the Fleet of the Themes was dissolved and the Navy was reorganised, but there are few information from written sources and we have inadequate knowledge on the exact extent of this reorganisation or the types of ships that deployed.

It has been verified that the post of "Drugarios Ploimou" was degraded and was replaced by the post of the "Duke of the Fleet", promoted in 1092 to "Grand Duke". It is also known that, when Alexius I Comnenus rose to the throne, the Empire only theoretically had warships; therefore, Alexius was forced to request reinforcement by the Navy of Venice in order to face the Normans. Anyhow, the Comnenus dynasty made good efforts that later on, resulted into the capability to build new ships.

The War Fleet of Byzantium is related to the "hygron pyr"<sup>89</sup>, a fearsome weapon of mass destruction, which was employed for the first time against the fleet of the Arabs, besieging the capital in the years 673 to 678. It was a mixture of inflammable substances, whose composition is not exactly apprehended. Callinicus, an engineer of Greek origin, was most probably the one that perfected the "siphon"<sup>90</sup>, the mechanism for launching this liquid fire. Such mechanisms were placed over the prow of "Dromons" and the "siphonator"<sup>91</sup>, one of the "proreoi elatae"<sup>92</sup> manipulated the mechanism and launched this inflammable mixture against enemy ship, which set them on fire. Later on, tubes of smaller size were used, the so-called "cheirosiphona"<sup>93</sup> that were individual weapons of foot soldiers, as indicated by the scholar Emperor Leo VI the Wise [Tactics, IO (19) 57, line 1008: "... launched by small handheld siphons (...) manipulated by soldiers, called "cheirosiphona", recently fabricated by crown firms".

The beginning of the Late Byzantine Period (1204-1453) coincides with the beginning of the Latin Domination, starting on 13 April 1204, when the soldiers of the 4th Crusade finally captured the "Basilica Polis", i.e. the capital of the Byzantine Empire, Constantinople. It was then that the brave and indefatigable Theodore I Lascaris (1204-1222) founded on the opposite coast on Asia Minor soil, the Empire of Nicaea, while he prolonged the tradition of his predecessors and raised an Army that was sys-

---

<sup>89</sup> Liquid Fire

<sup>90</sup> Tube

<sup>91</sup> Server of the siphon

<sup>92</sup> Prow Oarsmen

<sup>93</sup> Portable siphons

tematically trained, to the end of shaking of the yoke of the Franks. His rectifying project continued in the times of his successors Johannes III Doucas Vatatzis (1222-1254) and Theodore II Lascaris (1254-1258). It is noteworthy that these sovereigns have indeed contributed to the revival of our national conscience and the shaping up of the "Megali Idea"<sup>94</sup> using the correct name of "Hellene"<sup>95</sup>, while their state is mentioned in the written sources as "Hellenis Epicrateia"<sup>96</sup>, "Hellenicon"<sup>97</sup> and "Hellas"<sup>98</sup>.

It was the experienced and efficient General Michael Palaeologus (afterwards Emperor Michael VIII and founder of the homonymous and last dynasty of the Empire), who was privileged by fate to recapture Constantinople and thus succeed in reviving the Byzantine Empire even for a short period. He continued, as did his successors, to in depth organise and enhance the capabilities of the Army. However, the expected results were not satisfactory because of both the lack of the necessary funds and the disputes and quarrels among the members of the dynasty, which enormously harmed the cohesion of the Empire, in particular after the beginning of the 15th century.

In the times of the first two emperors of Nicaea, the Army could be characterised as national, since it composed of warriors from the local population, that were Greeks.

Nevertheless, part of the Army was formed by Latins, i.e. western Europeans (Franks, Venetians, Catalans, Germans, etc) that had come to Byzantine territories at the times of the Crusades. Their number gradually increased and during the last years before the fall of Constantinople in 1453, they constituted the majority of the Byzantine troops.

In the context of the efforts of the Emperors of Nicaea to reorganise their Armed Forces, it is evidenced that the Themes started regaining their military importance. Each unit of a Theme was then commanded by a Duke. These commanders were high-ranking and were called as "Chaussi"<sup>99</sup> that were commanders of units, known as "allagioi". These units were guarding the castles, i.e. the fortified towns. Written sources mention that, by 1250, there were operations by "Kavalarioi", Cavalry units composed of personnel from rural areas.

By the end of the 13th century and, indeed, at the beginning of the 14th, the word "Theme" is no longer in use, while the word "Katepanikia" is mentioned, which were military districts commanded by the "Katepano"<sup>100</sup>, powerful officials that exercised both civilian and military authority, as previously did the "Generals of the Themes".

---

<sup>94</sup> Great Ideal

<sup>95</sup> Greek

<sup>96</sup> Hellenic Territory

<sup>97</sup> Greek Area

<sup>98</sup> Greece

<sup>99</sup> From the Frank word = in high heels = in prominent post

<sup>100</sup> From the Greek word = Superior

After the recapture of Constantinople (1261), Emperor Michael VIII Palaeologus organised four new units that were: the "Thelimatarioi"<sup>101</sup> for the land forces, and the "Gasmuloi", "Tzakones" and "Prosalentoi" (= oarsmen), serving in the Navy.

The presence of foreign mercenaries in the ranks of the Byzantine Troops was very strong in the times of Palaeologus dynasty. Emperor Michael VIII, as his mercenaries of Latin origin have started showing signs of "fatigue" and "decay", decided to gradually replace them by Turkish mercenaries, whom he considered as more apt and performing for the implementation of his military plans of action in the West, aiming at recapturing Byzantine lands, seized by the Latins.

After 1350, small numbers of Latin mercenaries still offered their services to the Byzantine Emperor, while a few weeks only before the "ill-famed day" of 29 May 1453<sup>(102)</sup>, according to the historian Georgios Frantzis, apart from the 4.773 Greeks – defendants of the "Basilica Polis", there were 200 foreign mercenaries; nevertheless other writers raise the number of the foreigners to almost 3.000.

Generally speaking, while during the times of the Emperors of Nicaea efforts made to organise one Army, almost entirely composed by Greeks – evidently because the soldiers of Greek origin were numerous, on the contrary in the times of the Palaeologus dynasty, the foreign mercenaries made up the larger part of the Byzantine Army, just like the early Byzantine period.

Apart from the above units, from the early 14th century, mentioned are units called "Syntrophiae"<sup>103</sup> that were units of both local origin and foreigners. The soldiers of the "Syntrophiae" had predetermined responsibilities and obligations, but also pecuniary privileges, such as allowances, tax reductions and cultivable land donations. The most important of these units was the "Megali Syntrophia ton Katalanon"<sup>104</sup>, manned by brave warriors, who offered their services to Emperor Andronicus B' Palaeologus (1282-1328), the "Varvarinon Syntrophia" in the area of Chalcidica between the years 1327 and 1340, the "Syntrophia tou Kritou tou Stratou"<sup>105</sup> named Sgouros (the year 1377) and the "Klazomenion"<sup>106</sup> Syntrophia" by 1342 that was a section of the garrison of Serrae.

The bad financial situation of Byzantium, seriously deteriorating from 1380 on, allowed the activation of a very limited number of additional "Syntrophiae".

---

<sup>101</sup> Serving under the Orders

<sup>102</sup> Day of conquest of Constantinople by the Ottoman Turks

<sup>103</sup> Literally = Sharing the Same Food (Fellowships / Companies)

<sup>104</sup> Great Fellowship of the Catalans

<sup>105</sup> Fellowship of the Critic (= Supervisor) of the Army

<sup>106</sup> Clazomenae = city in Asia Minor, previously Vurla, now Urla

## Epilogue

In general, during the last phase of the late Byzantine period, all forms of difficult situations, privations, misfortune, lack of supplies, as well as shortage of men, adversely affected the Armed Forces of the shadowy, then, Empire, whose end was both tragic and fatal. However, the remaining few Byzantine fighters, loyal to their brave Emperor Constantine XI Palaeologus, and observing the long and weighing military traditions of the "Basilica Polis<sup>107</sup>", fell to the last in the line of duty, defending its honour and territorial integrity.

Athens, 2 Feb 2009

The Author

Dr Nicolaos Solon Depastas  
Historian – Archaeologist  
Historiographer,  
HAGS / Army History Dte  
Director of 2nd Section

---

<sup>107</sup> Capital of the Empire