

THE CAMPAIGN AND BATTLE OF MANZIKERT, 1071

by
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To little Nikolas:
pick your battles wisely

Κι ο τρίτος ο απαράβατος, ο λάκριβος της Φήμης,
ο ατρόμητος κυβερνητής, ο μέγας Καππαδόκης,
του Χαλεπιού ο πολέμαρχος, των Άδωνων ο κύρης.
115 Του καταρράχτη του Τογρούλ τού στήθηκε χαράκι,
και κράτησε τον Αρπασλάν, των Τούρκων το σουλτάνο
που καβαλάρης άνεμος απ' τα βουνά του Πόντου
κι από τ' αρμένικα στενά χυνόταν ώς τους κάμπους
της Αντιόχειας· κι ύστερα νά! σκλάβος του σουλτάνου,
120 κι ύστερα πιο λυπητερός ραγιάς, πανάθλιος δούλος
μέσα στη χώρα που όριζε· κι έφαε την καταφρόνια,
του μουλαριού το λάχτισμα, το φτύσιμο του Εβραίου.
Κωστή Παλαμά, *Η Φλογέρα του Βασιλιά, Λόγος Δεύτερος*

Tarihte şanlar, şöhretler kazanmış pek çok insanlar millî noktadan fazilete sahip değildir. Meselâ hakikaten askerî kudret sahibi olan, Moskova'ya kadar giden, yangınlar harabeler üstünden Fransız ordusunu sürükleyip eriten Napolyon'u düşünürüz. Onun hareketleri Fransız milletinin hakiki ve millî menfaatlerine değil, kendi cihangirane emellerini tatmin içindi. Bunu tatmin için Fransa'nın milyonlarca seçkin evlâdini eritti ve nihayet hepinizin bildiğiniz âkibete uğradi. Bizim Osmanlı tarihindeki en büyük ve şanlı görülen hareketleri de aynı noktadan tetkik, aynı mahiyette mukayese etmek mümkündür. (1923)

Atatürk'ün S. II, S. 161-162

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INTRODUCTION

IT HAS BEEN described as a dreadful day, a most shattering and shameful defeat, a debacle, an unmitigated catastrophe, the breaking of Byzantium, the beginning of the end of medieval Hellenism, and the day that opened the gates of Anatolia to the Turks, while being pondered over whether or not it was “un désastre militaire” for the Byzantine army of the late 1060s. Whatever the case, the battle that was fought on August 26, 1071, between the forces of the Byzantine emperor Romanos IV Diogenes and the Seljuk sultan Alp Arslan is—rightly so—regarded as one of the most significant turning points in medieval history. In recent years, an increasing number of scholars specializing in the period have lent their voices in support of the view that the Battle of Manzikert was not the real military disaster as it was once portrayed, framing the upcoming collapse of the Byzantine rule in Anatolia that followed as the direct outcome of two factors: Byzantine aristocratic infighting and civil war, and the increased involvement of the Seljuks in these civil wars that “eased” their penetration into Anatolia.

Indeed, it is also my firm conviction that Romanos Diogenes’s “Manzikert campaign” of 1071 may have been a strategic failure for the emperor, but it was not a tactical disaster. It should have only confirmed Turkish domination of the Armenian highlands in eastern Asia Minor, rather than almost all of Anatolia, which itself was overrun by the Turks within eight years. Therefore, even though no great military figure is said to have died in the battle, and it seems clear that the actual losses incurred were limited to the emperor’s immediate retinue, the *decisive* outcome of the Battle of Manzikert ushered in an element of chaos in the geopolitical history of the Byzantine Empire in the 1070s: the civil wars of the early 1070s that followed the battle marked the political and military collapse of the empire in Anatolia, the Balkans, and Italy as well as central and eastern Asia Minor.

In the introductory part of this book found in the first three chapters, I examine the Christian and Muslim narrative sources for the battle strictly from a military perspective, and I reach several conclusions regarding the value of these sources for the history of warfare in Anatolia and the Eastern Mediterranean in the eleventh century. In Chapter 1, I focus my analysis on the chroniclers’ social, religious, and educational backgrounds, the dates and places of the compilation of their works, their own sources and the information they got from them, and their biases and sympathies, which all shed light on their level of impartiality as historians. This chapter will be followed by a comparative analysis of the sources strictly from a military perspective, reaching significant conclusions regarding their value as “military historians.”

The major questions raised in Chapter 2 are: how accurate and detailed are their descriptions of pitched battles and clashes between enemy units during the Byzantine campaigns of 1068 to 1071 in the East? How far do contemporary narratives permit an accurate reconstruction of the chain of events, especially regarding the battlefield manoeuvres of armies in action? The reader of this section will also find an adequate

analysis of the “battle-piece,” along with the reasons and challenges involved in writing about warfare in ancient and medieval historiography, including a thorough examination of the “requirements” Byzantine classicizing historians had to meet for their works to be regarded as authoritative, and which ensured their survival.

Other questions asked in Chapter 3 are: to what extent are the figures our sources provide for army sizes reliable, both in absolute numbers and in the ratios given between cavalry and infantry? What is our chroniclers’ knowledge of the local geography where the military operations took place, and to what extent—if at all—were they familiar with the terrain of the battles or sieges, or the campaign routes of armies which they describe? How far do their narratives permit the accurate reconstruction of a chain of events, especially about the battlefield manoeuvres of the armies in action?

Chapter 4 describes the geopolitical background of the Turkish infiltration of eastern Anatolia and Upper Mesopotamia, demonstrating that the Turkish campaigns that penetrated the region between the mid-1030s and the mid-1050s did not culminate in any major conquests for the Seljuks, nor did they undermine the imperial defences in Vaspourakan or any neighbouring areas. Rather, they undermined the Byzantine “buffer zone” of the Muslim vassal principalities in Upper Mesopotamia and northern Syria and, second, helped to propel the Seljuk state towards a supra-regional centralizing power and become a serious challenger to both Byzantium and the Fatimids of Egypt. I explain the strategic importance of the fortress-cities along the northern shore of Lake Van, and how the defensive system of the region of Vaspourakan that was based on the strategic assumption of a threat “from the south” was compromised by Turkish penetrations “from the east.” Finally, I outline the many reasons that have been adduced for the Byzantine failure to stem the tide of invasions in different operational theatres after the death of Emperor Basil II in 1025, putting particular emphasis on the constant civil wars between emperors and pretenders concerning the imperial throne that led to critical recalls of eastern forces to suppress seditious movements. Such circumstances greatly weakened imperial defences in the eastern operational theatre, especially Vaspourakan, which eventually became the epicentre of the Seljuk invasion into central Anatolia.

In Chapter 5, I show how the emperor failed in both his campaigns in 1068 and in 1069 to inflict a decisive defeat on a Seljuk army, while the “central” border region between Theodosiopolis and Melitene remained wide open to Turkish raiding parties. Romanos fell short of winning control over the strategic invasion routes of the Arsarnias River valley and the Upper Euphrates region around Melitene, thus allowing for an increased number of enemies to roam free between Vaasparakania, Taron, and the Diyar Bakr province. Furthermore, I connect what was happening in Vaasparakania and Upper Mesopotamia with Alp Arslan’s focus in Syria because it was apparent to the Byzantine side by the summer of 1069 that the entire region of the emirate of Aleppo faced various threats from the Seljuk armies. I highlight that Alp Arslan’s campaign in Syria in the winter of 1070/71 should be considered a strategic success because it significantly boosted his influence over the regions of northern Syria and the Upper Euphrates while putting further pressure on the remaining imperial outposts of Edessa and Antioch. The final section of this chapter deals with the strategic target for Diogenes’s 1071 campaign, an estimate of the numbers and composition of his armies, the course of his army from

Constantinople to Theodosiopolis and Manzikert, and the critical aspect of strategic intelligence that eventually failed him.

The sixth chapter of this book deals explicitly with the tactical aspects of the Battle of Manzikert. I explain Diogenes's strategic miscalculations that are attributed to the strategic intelligence failure I explain in Chapter 5. These miscalculations resulted in the division of his army and the dispatch of a large section to Khliat while the emperor was under the impression that Alp Arslan had adopted a defensive strategy and, thus, would not march against him in Vaspourakan. From here, I disentangle the confusing events of first contact between the two armies, from the siege of Khliat by Trachaneiotēs's detachments to Bryennios's and Basilakes's melees with well-disciplined and battle-hardened Seljuk mounted troops. The following sections deal with the events of Wednesday (August 24) and Thursday (August 25) before the main battle—the terrifying night spent in the imperial camp while under a blockade by the Seljuk army, followed by failed negotiations for a truce, and the emperor's desperate attempt to recall his troops from Khliat that never reached them or went unheeded (we will never know!). The final part of chapter 6 is a stage-by-stage analysis of the Battle of Manzikert that includes a presentation of the potential locations for the battlefield, the advantages and disadvantages of these locations depending on whether an army was attacking or on the defensive, and—critically—the challenges that would have posed for heavily armed units struggling to keep their discipline and maintain an unbroken line through their advance against an elusive enemy.

Chapter 7 introduces the aftermath of the Battle of Manzikert, with a description of the chaos that ensued in the imperial camp following the breaking of the lines of the imperial army and the pell-mell retreat of the units back to the camp, as described by our most important eye-witness, Michael Attaleiates. Then, I describe the reception of the story of the captivity of Emperor Diogenes by Alp Arslan in Muslim historiography of the following centuries, emphasizing specific episodes in their encounters with each other and the ideological significance for Byzantine–Turkish relations of the period. Finally, I look at the political challenges for the imperial government after the Battle of Manzikert, particularly the civil war of 1071–1072, the three-year war with Roussel of Bailleuil (1073–1076), and the multiple civil wars of 1077–1081.

The Secondary Bibliography

One of the most useful studies for this historical period that encompasses the Battle of Manzikert is a recent book by one of the most well-known scholars in the field. Alexander Daniel Beihammer's *Byzantium and the Emergence of Muslim-Turkish Anatolia, ca. 1040–1130* (London: Routledge, 2017) is a meticulous, lucid, and well-structured book that tackles one of the most complicated topics in the political history of the medieval Near East: the political evolution of Anatolia and Northern Syria during the time of the Turkish conquests. Beihammer's study is of particular importance for the period leading up to the Battle of Manzikert, as he scrupulously untangles the complex politics of this era—a challenge in its own right—and seeks to recreate the political development of the Anatolian/Northern Syrian world during the years