

## The Changing Role of the Cataphract in the Byzantine Army

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### Crynodeb

Trwy eu cysylltiad â'r Sasanidiau yn ogystal â'r llwythau nomadig megis yr Hyniaid, dysgodd y Bysantiaid am bwysigrwydd marchoglu, ac wrth fabwysiadu'r tactegau hyn, aethant ati i gynnwys y catafract yn eu lluoedd. Nod y gwaith hwn yw asesu arwyddocâd catafractau a'r modd y newidiodd hyn dros bron 500 mlynedd. Trafodaf sut y defnyddiwyd yr unedau hyn wrth frwydro, a oeddent yn ddinistriol o safbwynt ffisegol neu seicolegol i'r gelyn a sut oedd y cyd-destun hanesyddol yn caniatáu iddynt gael eu defnyddio neu'n eu hatal rhag eu defnyddio. Mae ysgolheigion megis Haldon a Decker yn cytuno y peidiwyd â defnyddio catafractau yn ystod y 6ed ganrif, a hynny o blaid marchogion ysgafnach a ddefnyddiai'r bwa yn brif arf, ac nad yw Catafractau yn ailymddangos yn ychwanegiad ond yn ystod ailoresgyniad y dwyrain yn y 10fed ganrif. Fy nod i yw dadlau, er iddynt gael eu disodli'n raddol gan farchoglu mwy symudol, y'u defnyddid o hyd yn bennaf yn foderati gan mai hon fu'r duedd gyffredin er y Notitia Dignitatum. Y gwir amdani oedd nad oedd modd eu cynnal yn dilyn colli'r taleithiau dwyreiniol cyfoethog yn sgil goresgyniadau Arabaidd y 7fed ganrif.

**Geiriau allweddol:** Byddin Bysantiwm, catafract, 6fed–10fed ganrif

### Abstract

Contact with the Sassanids as well as nomad tribes such as the Huns taught the Byzantines the importance of cavalry, and in adopting these kinds of tactics they implemented the cataphract into their forces. The aim of this work is to assess the significance of cataphracts and how this changed over nearly 500 years. I shall discuss how these units were employed in battle, whether they were physically or psychologically devastating to the enemy and how the historical context allowed or prevented them to be used. Scholars such as Haldon and Decker agree that cataphracts went out of use during the 6th century in favour of lighter horsemen whose main armament was the bow, and that Cataphracts only re-appear as an addition during the re-conquering of the east in the 10th century. My aim is to argue that while they were gradually displaced in favour of more mobile cavalry, they still were used mostly as *foderati* as this had been a common trend since the *Notitia Dignitatum*. They were simply unsustainable followed the loss of most of the rich eastern provinces following the Arab conquests in 7th century.

**Key words:** Byzantine army, cataphract, 6th–10th centuries

## Introduction

“Late antiquity has traditionally been characterised rather simplistically as the dawning of a new ‘medieval’ warfare in which the armoured horseman came to dominate the battlefields of Europe and the Near East”.<sup>1</sup> This quotation summarizes a modern myth that has existed regarding the transitional movement during what we know today as the shift from late antiquity, into the period called the ‘Middle Ages’.<sup>2</sup> The cavalry type that stands out to many in this period is the cataphract, a heavily armed cavalryman covered from head to toe in chainmail and lamellar armour, often pointed to as an influence for the later the medieval knights as they were both employed as heavy shock cavalry.<sup>3</sup> Historians such as Coulston have discussed cataphracts as primarily being used by the empires of the Near East such as the Parthians, whose cataphracts famously helped them to crush the Romans at the battle of Carrhae, and the Sassanid Persians.<sup>4</sup> The success of this cavalry type is often assumed to have led to its adoption by the Byzantine Empire.<sup>5</sup> Popular media and scholarship has tended to assume their importance within the Byzantine military.<sup>6</sup> For example, Dahmus, discussing the battle of Yarmuk in 636, describes how the “the principal strength of the Byzantine army lay within their heavy cavalry, the cataphracts, who carried a lance, broadsword, bow, quiver, and dagger”.<sup>7</sup> However, in contemporary sources there is limited evidence of cataphracts being employed, compared to what might be expected.<sup>8</sup>

This article argues that the Byzantine cavalry was influenced by the cataphracts of earlier periods. This counters modern scholarship that tends to dismiss their usage after the fifth century, rather than examining ways in which elements of the cataphract continued to be used by the cavalry that evolved from them, or addressing why they were revived in the middle of the tenth century and then almost vanished by the beginning of the eleventh.<sup>9</sup> It is vital to clarify the meaning of the terms cataphract and *clibanarii*. They are sometimes understood as the same thing, appearing to refer to a class of horseman or armoured horsemen in general.<sup>10</sup> To grasp the significance of cataphracts, one must investigate their origins and their roles leading up to the sixth century for a comparison to be made (Section 1). Over this period there were significant changes made to the Byzantine military, including changes in cavalry roles from the fifth to the sixth centuries epitomised by the adoption of the composite bow, the Islamic conquests and the subsequent retreat into Anatolia, and the adoption of the theme system and imperial *Tagmata*.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the tenth century heralds the arrival of a new class of heavy cavalry under Nikephoros Phokas, which looks back to the cataphracts of old in their armament and function. A section shall be dedicated to each era to analyse how the cavalrymen evolved through incorporating elements of the ancient cataphracts (Sections 2–4).

### 1. Cataphract Origins

For a complete analysis of Byzantine cataphracts it is important to understand their origins. By examining Greco-Roman ancient sources one may analyse the usage of the term cataphract and discuss the inconsistencies concerning its meaning. The word cataphract comes from the Greek word *Κατάφρακτος*, meaning to cover or enclose with mail.<sup>12</sup> The term is compared to the Roman word *clibanarii*, which refers to a covered pot in which bread would be baked – this appears to be related to the conditions of fighting in heavy armour in hot conditions.<sup>13</sup> The first record of *clibanarii* is from Alexander Severus 56.5 in which he gives a speech referring to Persian cavalry which many scholars have interpreted as the Roman name for a Persian cavalryman armed

like a cataphract.<sup>14</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus describes them as looking like “statues polished by the hand of Praxiteles...” whose breastplates “fitted to the curves of their bodies...” so that whichever way they turned the armour allowed for their movement.<sup>15</sup>

In contrast, the first description of cataphracts in Heliodorus’ *Aethiopica*, describes the impressive force of mailed Persian cavalry covered from head to toe in mail made from brass and iron, with holes for him to see through, and his horse being armoured in the same manner.<sup>16</sup> These descriptions have several similarities. Both are fully armoured, in scale armour. Although it is not described in Ammianus, the horse of the *clibanarus* was also heavily armoured. We know this due to the discovery of a depiction of a Persian *clibanarus* in graffiti at the Roman frontier town of Dura-Europos in Syria.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, it is difficult to distinguish the two terms, as Ammianus alternates between them. The *Notitia Dignitatum* follows Ammianus in the same vein, a document listing seven units of *cataphractarii*, and seven units of *clibanarii*, stationed within the eastern half of the Roman Empire, clearly differentiating between the two types. It would suggest that in the 5th century Roman army the *cataphractarii* and the *clibanarii* were two separate units performing different roles on the battlefield; yet this does not necessarily mean that they were used or equipped in the manner described by either Ammianus or Heliodorus.<sup>18</sup>

Speidel, who bases his argument on the *Notitia* and tombstone at Claudiopolis in Bithynia,<sup>19</sup> argues that ‘cataphract’ applies to all heavily armoured cavalry, but the term *Clibanarii*, applies to Persian and Parthian heavily armoured cavalry.<sup>20</sup> Coulston argues conversely that the distinction lies in the equipment, i.e. that *cataphractarii* were less armoured than the *clibanarii* and that they were equipped with a lance and shield (not a lance and bow).<sup>21</sup> Despite what Speidel and Coulston say, it is Eadie’s theory that appears to be more credible. This cites reliefs on the column of Marcus Aurelius, suggesting that the *cataphractarii* were heavily armed *contarii*, who were light cavalry armed with a *kontos* (a two handed lance). They would therefore provide a more flexible alternative to the super heavy *clibanarii* who lacked manoeuvrability and the *contarii* who lacked the shock power of the *clibanarii*.<sup>22</sup> From historical sources it appears that the cataphract’s function on the battlefield was psychological intimidation of the enemy, rather than to physically smash through enemy infantry as horses refuse to charge things they perceive as solid, however their gleaming armour and weapons caused the “shock” according to Onasander.<sup>23</sup> At the battle of Carrhae the cataphracts were used by the Parthians to rout the Roman infantry so that they were easier targets for the horse archers. In descriptions emphasis is always placed on their appearance rather than prowess in melee.<sup>24</sup>

The lack of clarity among ancient authors when defining the term cataphract, and what it actually represented are directly relevant to the three periods of Byzantine history discussed in the next three sections. Like all forms of warfare, cavalry evolved due to the circumstances and enemies encountered by a nation, often simultaneously. This is certainly true of the Byzantine cavalry, which borrowed from these older models through trial, error and experience on the battlefield. To avoid confusion on this matter I will use the term cataphract when referring to armoured cavalry in a general manner.

## 2. ‘The Avar Type’: Armoured cavalry of the 6th and early 7th centuries

The source material for the period between the *Notitia Dignitatum* and the work of Procopius, who is our primary source for the wars of Justinian, is very scarce. By the

time we have reached Procopius the contemporary cavalryman had changed drastically in function and in armament compared to those previously mentioned. Below I will analyse the 6th-century cavalrymen of both Procopius and the *Strategikon*, to show that the Byzantine military was one that adapted to the influx of new nomadic neighbours which helped to mould a new type of cavalryman but also adopt tactics from them.

In the opening chapter of *The Wars of Justinian*, Procopius illustrates the ideal cavalryman of his era as wearing corselets and being able to fire arrows while riding on horseback.<sup>25</sup> This description bears little resemblance to the *clibanarii* described in Ammianus Marcellinus or the Persian cataphracts described in the *Aethopica*. The rider's torso is protected by his corselet made from mail, however he appears to have no helmet and relies on his shield to protect his face.<sup>26</sup> His main armament is the compound bow, which according to Procopius could pierce through shield and corselet alike.<sup>27</sup> The compound bow had been adopted by the Byzantines along with the stirrups through contact with the Huns in the fifth century and then the Avars in the sixth.<sup>28</sup>

The heavy shock tactics of the cataphracts and *clibanarii* of the earlier centuries were ineffective against these nomadic peoples who favoured light, fast moving horse archers as exemplified in the defeat of the Sassanian Shah Peroz by the Hephthalites who feigned retreat, leading the much heavier Sassanian cavalry into an ambush.<sup>29</sup> The effectiveness of the *clibanarii* depended on a mass charge to break the enemy formation. The lack of the manoeuvrability of the *clibanarii* meant that even if the mounted archers could not repel the charge they could retreat to a safe distance and wear them down without the fear of being caught as well as ambushing them in the flanks, etc.<sup>30</sup> This is probably why Procopius refers to this story during his narrative, in order to explain to the civilian readership why such tactics were employed by the Byzantines, most notably in the *Wars of Justinian* and in the *Strategikon* of Maurice.<sup>31</sup> In the *Strategikon* there are many examples of this tactical evolution as the author makes frequent references to both the equipment of the Byzantine cavalryman and the tactics used by them as “in the Avar manner...” or the “Scythian ambush” which is cited as a staple of Byzantine cavalry tactics up until at least the 10th century.<sup>32</sup> A prime example of the Scythian ambush (luring the opponent into an ambush and the fleeing unit of cavalry turning around to envelope the pursuer) can be seen at the battle of Dara in 530 against the Persians.<sup>33</sup>

Although pitched battles were generally avoided in this period, probably due to the defensive position that the empire usually found itself in (maintaining its borders from incursions of various enemies), Dara does illuminate the effectiveness of the new look cavalry.<sup>34</sup> The battle at Dara takes place over two days. Both engagements begin with a skirmish between archers (mounted and on foot) in which the Byzantines on both occasions are more successful. This is in part due to the Byzantine archer being more powerful and accurate, because of the better armament that the composite bow offered.<sup>35</sup> Belisarius is able to defeat the Persian army at Dara by feigning retreat on his left flank, which lures the Persian cavalry past the ditch and into an ambush by a contingent of Byzantine horsemen hidden behind a nearby hill. The Byzantine cavalry fleeing then reengage with the Persians, causing them to break, which allows them to surround the Persians on the other flank, before routing the rest of the Persian army.<sup>36</sup> Pitched battles were a rarity for the time period, for example in the campaigns of re-conquest in North Africa and Italy; there were comparatively more small skirmishes, which involved the sallying out from besieged cities by cavalry, and

this was a tactic used frequently by Belisarius. Although both campaigns were heavily influenced by pitched battles such as Tricamarum and Taginae respectively, both were characterised by this skirmishing and the siege battles accompanying it, which fast moving cavalry excelled at.<sup>37</sup>

While the bow from Procopius' account and from the *Strategikon* itself seems to be the most important weapon for 6th–7th century Byzantine cavalrymen<sup>38</sup> (it is most likely that the final copy of the *Strategikon* was composed by Heraclius or one of his generals<sup>39</sup>), they are more than capable of being used as the “composite cavalry” of the *Strategikon* onwards, which functioned as both archers and lancers.<sup>40</sup> During the battle of Tricamarum the Byzantine cavalry led three attacks on the Vandal lines, first wearing them down with bow and then engaging them in a melee, causing a mass rout and showing that they were certainly a capable shock cavalry.<sup>41</sup>

In the description of the ideal cavalryman in the *Strategikon*, the author describes how the rider “should have hooded coats of mail reaching to their ankles, which can be caught up by thongs and rings, along with carrying cases, helmets with small plumes on top...”<sup>42</sup> before mentioning that:

“The horses, especially those of the officers and the other special troops, in particular those in the front ranks of the battle line, should have protective pieces of iron armour about their heads and breast plates of iron or felt...”<sup>43</sup>

When referring to “the special” troops, the author is probably referring to the *bucellarii* who originally were soldiers employed by private individuals but which came to form a part of the Byzantine army.<sup>44</sup> In Theophanes' account of the battle of Nineveh, Heraclius' horse is protected from spear thrusts and sword blows by its ‘*cataphract*’ and some understandably may assume that this is evidence for cataphracts in the Byzantine army.<sup>45</sup> However, ‘*cataphract*’ is probably a reference to the armour just as the *Taktika* of Leo refers to body armour of cavalrymen as ‘*Klibania*’. It is insufficient as evidence for regular use of cataphracts.<sup>46</sup>

Rance questions the idealisation of the Byzantine mounted warrior of Procopius, suggesting that only the *bucellarii* were capable of fighting in the manner that Procopius describes, as they were elite professional troops maintained at the expense of the emperor.<sup>47</sup> It is also recorded in the *Notitia Dignitatum* that the *bucellarii* under the *Magister Militum* in the east contains both *cataphractarii* and *clibanarii*.<sup>48</sup> It can therefore be theorised that these special *bucellarii* troops were probably the heavily armoured cavalry, protected by coats of mail and horse armour. Therefore, rather than being categorised as either the *cataphractarii* or *clibanarii* of earlier generations, it could be argued that they inherited useful features from both, being able to engage with bow and lance. Not being enclosed in armour made them more flexible when adapting to different enemies who employed different styles of war.

### 3. Byzantium on the Defence: Armoured cavalry in the 7th–9th centuries

The Islamic conquests of the seventh century marked a turning point in the fortunes of the Byzantine military. The Muslims had conquered the eastern provinces. Western territory was gradually lost to Lombard and Slavic invasions respectively and Iconoclasm would split the clergy and cause internal tensions.<sup>49</sup> Imperial forces were pushed back into Anatolia, which became the base of operation as it was forced to deal with annual Arab and Bulgar raids into imperial territory. The equipment and



tactics of the Byzantine cavalry in the seventh to ninth centuries match those of the sixth. However the structure of the army was tailored to deal with these incursions.

The seventh to ninth centuries contain little original detail concerning the Byzantine military.<sup>50</sup> Limited contemporary historical accounts remain, which may reflect the crisis the empire was in.<sup>51</sup> When Theophanes the Confessor was writing (sometime after AD 812/3), the Byzantine army had been wiped out by the Bulgars and the Emperor Nikephoros I had been killed. The writers of this period considered it a turbulent and tumultuous period.<sup>52</sup>

The introduction of the theme system and the imperial *tagmata* illustrates the defensive stance the empire found itself in externally and internally. The exact date that the themes were created is unknown, but it is first mentioned in Theophanes at the beginning of the reign of Heraclius.<sup>53</sup> Heraclius supposedly organised the Byzantine territory into four themes following the Persian invasion. Each theme was governed by a *strategos* who held complete civilian and military authority.<sup>54</sup> The purpose of the themes was to quickly assemble highly mobile forces which could harass and ambush an enemy invading force.<sup>55</sup> The army became something of a militia, responsible for providing their own equipment. The “composite cavalry” would have been recruited from those who could afford the equipment.<sup>56</sup>

The most credible source for the Byzantine deployment of heavy cavalry is in the *Taktika*, attributed to Emperor Leo VI (886–912), although his sole authorship is contested.<sup>57</sup> It is difficult to assess how reliable the *Taktika* is in relation to the warfare of this period as it is a compilation of works, with many passages taken from the *Strategikon*, Onasander and Aelian, as opposed to its being a written military manual in the sense that the *Strategikon* is, so it is unclear whether some things recorded in it are relevant to the time period.<sup>58</sup> An example of this is the mention of what appears to be the *clibanarii*: “They armed the heavy-armed cavalryman and his horse completely... with lamellar armour or mail or some other material”.<sup>59</sup> There is no detail about how they should be used, only that some engaged in combat and others threw missiles as support for them.<sup>60</sup> There is no evidence in historical accounts that these kinds of troops were employed, probably because warfare in this period revolved around the ability to quickly assemble a force that could harass a hostile incursion and potentially destroy it using surprise attacks.<sup>61</sup> The author of the *Taktika* even states that everything has been gathered so that a general can take from it what he considers beneficial. Therefore it is probably adapted from a previous military treatise.<sup>62</sup>

In terms of how the heavy cavalry is armed the *Taktika* is almost identical to the *Strategikon* with the addition of each cavalryman being armed with a double-sided axe with a spiked blade on the opposite side.<sup>63</sup> The axe signifies the increased role of the composite cavalryman as a shock trooper; axes are more efficient at punching through armour and would probably have been employed in a similar way to the *kataphraktoi* of the mid tenth century.<sup>64</sup> It is probable that the composite cavalrymen from the period of Maurice were represented by the personal retainer of the *stratego* and the imperial *tagmata*, a military institution which was installed by Constantine V following successive rebellions by the ever more politicised themes.<sup>65</sup> The purpose of the imperial *tagmata* was to curb the power of the themes and to provide the emperor with an elite body of soldiers that would remain loyal to him. It is therefore no surprise that they mainly consisted of old bodyguard units.<sup>66</sup>

Tactics and many of the manoeuvres in the engagements described in the histories support the theory that they were carried over from the *Strategikon* and that many of the military theories described therein were still relevant for the annual border

raiding between the Byzantines and the Arabs and Bulgars. During his campaign against the Bulgars, Constantine V defeats a Bulgarian host by surprising them at Lithosoria in 772.<sup>67</sup> During his war with the Paulicians Basil I is able to pillage the enemy countryside and then ambush and destroy the Paulician counter raid with a much smaller force, killing their leader Karbeas in the process.<sup>68</sup>

While the *Taktika* suggests that the Byzantines were experimenting with the idea of adopting cataphracts, the fact that the emperor Theophilus was triumphant<sup>69</sup> in this period following raids into Arab territory and seizing a few cities shows that warfare in this period was too small-scale for the deployment of the cataphract, who relied on flat terrain which did not break up its formation unlike the topography of Anatolia and Bulgaria.

#### 4. 'The white death of the Saracens': Age of Reconquest and 10th century armoured cavalry

From the mid-tenth century onwards we begin to see military reverses in favour of the Byzantines, particularly the destruction of the Hamdanid emirate in Aleppo and the retaking of Crete under the reign of Nikephoros Phokas. We also see the incorporation of *kataphraktoi* into the Byzantine army. By examining the *praecepta militaria* along with contemporary historian Leo the Deacon who discusses in detail the Cilician and later campaigns of John Tzimiskes, It shall thus be discussed how these changes coincide with each other and how the *kataphraktoi* gave the Byzantines a new offensive unit, demonstrating that they complemented military units and tactics that were already established rather than replacing them.<sup>70</sup>

As with the reasoning for their absence in the previous centuries, the best reason for their revival can be found in the geography that the conflicts were taking place in. The majority of the recorded use of the *kataphraktoi* is in the wars fought against Hamdanid Emirate based in Aleppo and their allies based in Tarsos which had been a constant base of operations for any Arab army wishing to penetrate Anatolia. The area surrounding both Tarsos and Aleppo is considerably flat in comparison to the largely rugged and mountainous terrain in Anatolia, and therefore far better for employing *kataphraktoi*.<sup>71</sup> For instance, Leo the Deacon observes how before the battle outside of Tarsos, Nikephoros employs his men in cutting down the reeds and destroying any wooded terrain.<sup>72</sup> The reason Leo gives is to prevent any Tarsan forces from launching an ambush, although it was possibly also a strategy on Nikephoros' part to create space and flat terrain for his *Katapraktoi* to operate, which consequently are used to break the Tarsan forces when they sally out.<sup>73</sup> The *Praecepta* discusses a formation similar to that employed by Nikephoros at Tarsos with the *kataphraktoi* deployed in the vanguard supported by two flanks of composite cavalry providing supporting fire for the *kataphraktoi* and attacking any enemy units that attempt to disrupt the *kataphraktoi* assault.<sup>74</sup>

According to the *Praecepta*, the *kataphraktoi* were employed as the main shock arm of the tenth century army. Employed in a wedge formation of 504 or 384 men (Phokas estimates Byzantine forces for this period at around 25,000 men).<sup>75</sup> The *kataphraktoi* were reserved for the purpose of punching through the enemy's elite unit or attacking the location of the enemy general before retreating behind the Byzantine infantry for shelter.<sup>76</sup> Mcgeer cites Agathias' passage in connection with the rise of the *kataphraktoi* in the tenth century, suggesting that its purpose was to break the highly disciplined Daylami mercenary infantry, who served as the palace guards for emirs

and were notoriously difficult to rout.<sup>77</sup> Agathias' passage dates to the sixth century, so it is more likely that the change of terrain in which the fighting took place was the reason for the revival of cataphracts.<sup>78</sup>

Phokas also discusses counter measures should the enemy infantry close the distance on the Byzantines before the *kataphraktoi* can be deployed.<sup>79</sup> He advises that the *kataphraktoi* strikeforce should move through gaps in the corners of the infantry square formation and assail the enemy flanks.<sup>80</sup> This tactic was employed by the emperor John Tzimiskes in the first stage of the battle of Dorostolon, where he divided the *kataphraktoi* into two divisions which were successful in caving the Rus' flanks in on themselves.<sup>81</sup> It is evident that the *kataphraktoi* were still employed to cause fear, as Nikephoros deploys them during the siege of Tarsos to intimidate the inhabitants of the town, and a passage from the *Strategikon* advises generals to employ their most physically intimidating troops in front of a city under siege.<sup>82</sup>

The presence of the accompanying cavalry units suggests that the *kataphraktoi* of the tenth century were still vulnerable to being disrupted by enemy counter attacks or attempts to stall the charge, as due to the heavy armoured nature of the *kataphraktoi* they relied on momentum. They are armed very similarly in terms of armour to the Persian *clibanarii* described above, but differ slightly in their weapons and the construction of their armour. Instead of uniformly being armed with the *kontos* only the *kataphraktoi* close to the rear and on the flanks of the wedge are armed in such a manner, whereas the horsemen located at the front are armed with maces and sabres which were used as shock weapons rather than lances (mainly used for thrusting).<sup>83</sup>

The armour was composed of supplementary pieces: the corselet which stretched down to their elbows and waist, arm guards, helmet and leg guards.<sup>84</sup> The reasoning for the additional pieces was that in the hot climate of the area of interest the *kataphraktos* could keep cool and add the extra armour during the march or allow them to be deployed as lighter cavalry giving them greater flexibility.<sup>85</sup> Both of these changes to the way that the new Byzantine class of cavalry operated meant that they did not necessarily have to deal with issues that had caused previous users of *clibanarii* problems. In *Heliodorus* for example, the manner in which the Persian *clibanarii* were defeated was that their charge was stalled by a detachment of infantry sent out to intercept the *clibanarii* and break up their formation, a problem that could now be avoided by the presence of the escort units.<sup>86</sup> The other issue which the *Praecepta* attempts to eliminate is the conditioning of such a heavily armoured unit which would suffer from heat and exhaustion, which caused the Roman *clibanarii* to be defeated in the battle of Strasbourg.<sup>87</sup>

Even with the addition of the *kataphraktoi* the Byzantines heavily relied on surprise attacks and raiding. Arguably the decisive engagement of the Byzantine-Hamdanid war was an ambush by Leo Phokas on the Hamdanid forces as they were returning through the mountain passes at Andrassos, resulting in most of the Hamdanid field army being destroyed.<sup>88</sup> A lot of the successes of Nikephoros' campaigns result from raids conducted by the *prokoursatores* who were sent ahead of the main army to burn and raise land between Tarsos and Aleppo, effectively isolating the latter.<sup>89</sup> Ideally a Nikephorian expeditionary force was built around the *kataphraktoi*, the composite cavalry was used to protect it from enemy attempts to stall its attack and the infantry who formed a solid square was used as a safe haven for retreat and to clear the intended battle field so that they could be deployed. However Andrassos shows that these successes were only possible through surprise attack and raiding, giving the *kataphraktoi* the environment they needed to function properly.



## Conclusion

The evidence for this period being dominated by the armoured horseman has been deconstructed in this essay. The ease which the evidence often presented as reason as reason to believe on the reliance of armoured horsemen can be deconstructed is so significant that the argument cannot stand against its historical context. The Byzantine army was highly reliant on the deployment of flexible cavalry, used for scouting, raiding, ambushing and in pitched battles such as Lithosoria and Dorostolon. While they did inherit many features, such as select arms and armour, from the earlier models of cataphracts, they operated in a way that made them far more useful. Cautious attitudes to war are definitely epitomised in the *Strategikon* which describes the general who commits his whole force in one attack as inviting a host of evils.<sup>90</sup> This reveals that the Byzantines were more concerned about preserving their forces to defend multiple borders than with expansion.<sup>91</sup> Even with the re-introduction of the *kataphraktoi* in the tenth century and a seemingly more aggressive stance, they could only be effective on flat terrain which made them particularly situational. It is therefore no surprise that they gradually disappeared as they were replaced by foreign mercenary contingents such as Normans and Pechenegs in the eleventh century.<sup>92</sup>

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### **Television and Radio Programs**

Time Commanders. Episode 5, Series 2, "Battle of Dara" BBC 2. 13th February 2005: 45 minutes.

### **Notes**

- 1 Rance 2005: 427.
- 2 Rance 2005: 427.
- 3 Ayton 1999: 187.
- 4 Plut. 27.1.2; Wheeler 2011: 258–259.
- 5 Wheeler 2011: 258–259.
- 6 Haldon 2001: 26; Time Com: 5.34–7.07.
- 7 Dahmus 1983: 68 & 77.
- 8 Greatrex 1998: 39; Theop. 318.
- 9 Treadgold 1995: 116.

- 10 Southern & Dixon 1992: 76.
- 11 The themes were mobile armies that were now located in specific districts of the Byzantine empire, led by a *strategos*. They however tended to be more loyal to their generals than to the emperor and so the *tagmata* was introduced by Constantine V as an elite force located at Constantinople as a counter-balance. For more see Treadgold 1995: 21–32.
- 12 Eadie 1967: 162.
- 13 Eadie 1967: 169–170 for discussion of terminology.
- 14 Eadie 1967: 170.
- 15 Amm. 16.10.8.
- 16 Heliod. 9.273.
- 17 McGeer 2008: 215.
- 18 Notitia. ERE, 5–8, 31, 39.
- 19 For detailed discussion see Speidel 1984: 151–156.
- 20 Southern & Dixon 1992: 76; Speidel 1984: 151–156.
- 21 Southern & Dixon 1992: 76; Coulston 1986: 63.
- 22 Eadie 1967: 168; BNP “*Contarii*”.
- 23 Thorne 2011: 223; Onas. 28–29.
- 24 Plut. 27.1–2; Amm. 16.10.8.
- 25 Proc. 1.15.5.
- 26 Proc. 1.15.5.
- 27 Proc. 1.15.5.
- 28 Bihvar 1972: 285.
- 29 Proc. 1.3.2–19.
- 30 Bihvar 1972: 287.
- 31 Proc. 1.1.9–15.
- 32 Maur. 1.2 & 4.2.
- 33 Maur. 4.2.
- 34 Maur. 2.2.
- 35 Proc. 1.13.29–36.
- 36 Proc. 1.14. 44–52.
- 37 Proc. 4.2.6–12 & 6.1.
- 38 Maur. 1.1–2.
- 39 Bihvar 1972: 287–288.
- 40 Decker 2013: 156.
- 41 Proc. 4.3.10–26.
- 42 Maur. 1.2.
- 43 Maur. 1.2.
- 44 Dennis 1987:12.
- 45 Theop. 318.
- 46 *Taktika*. 6.27.
- 47 Rance 2005: 428; Liebeschuetz 2011: 483.
- 48 Notitia. ERE, 5–8, 31,39.
- 49 Norwich 1990: 287.
- 50 Treadgold 2013: 38
- 51 Treadgold 2013: 1.
- 52 Treadgold 2013: 38. Theop. 498–500.
- 53 Theop. 303.
- 54 Norwich 1990: 287.
- 55 Haldon 1999: 213.
- 56 Those who could not afford the equipment would use equipment such as two layers of quilted material, *Taktika*. 5.3.
- 57 Dennis 2014: 11.
- 58 Dennis 2014: 11.
- 59 *Taktika*. 6.26.
- 60 *Taktika*. 6.27.
- 61 Treadgold 1995: 201.
- 62 *Taktika*. 6.35.
- 63 *Taktika*. 6.11.
- 64 Mcgeer 2008: 213.

- 65 Treadgold 1995: 28.
- 66 Treadgold 1995: 28.
- 67 Theop. 468.
- 68 Skylit. 6.18–19.
- 69 Porphy (text C). 833–861.
- 70 Praec. 3.1.
- 71 *Garrod* 2008: 128.
- 72 *Leo*. 4.3.
- 73 *Leo*. 4.3.
- 74 *Leo*. 4.3; *Praec.* 3.9.
- 75 *Praec.* 46–53; McGeer 2008: 217.
- 76 *Praec.* 2.11.
- 77 McGeer 2008: 233–236.
- 78 For dating of Agathias see Treadgold 2007: 279.
- 79 *Praec.* 2.13.
- 80 *Praec.* 2.13.
- 81 *Leo*. 8.9.
- 82 *Leo*. 5.2; *Maur.* 10.1.
- 83 *Praec.* 3.7.
- 84 *Praec.* 3.7.
- 85 *Praec.* 3.4; Mcgeer 2008: 216.
- 86 *Helio*. 9.274.
- 87 *Amm.* 16.12.38.
- 88 *Leo*. 2.5.
- 89 *Garrod* 2008: 133.
- 90 *Maur.* 2.1.
- 91 *Haldon* 1999: 67.
- 92 Treadgold 1995: 116.