



April 2009

A Defensive Offense: Infantry Tactics of the Early Byzantine Army

Grant Harward

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studiaantiqua>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Harward, Grant. "A Defensive Offense: Infantry Tactics of the Early Byzantine Army." *Studia Antiqua* 7, no. 1 (2009).
<http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studiaantiqua/vol7/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studia Antiqua* by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu.

A DEFENSIVE OFFENSE: INFANTRY TACTICS OF THE EARLY BYZANTINE ARMY

GRANT HARWARD

After the disaster inflicted upon the Romans at Adrianople in August 378 ce by the Goths, the Roman leaders in the Eastern Empire had to reorganize their army and expand their cavalry arm to meet this new threat. The increasing importance and even dominance of Byzantine cavalry in their military system could easily eclipse the role of Byzantine infantry. However, heavily armored, well-trained, and organized infantry remained the mainstay of the Byzantine army, without which the improvements in Byzantine cavalry would have been useless. These infantry formations were capable of effectively defeating mounted nomadic charges but normally unable to annihilate them. However, if properly supported by cavalry, they could shatter enemy cavalry formations, which would then be enveloped and crushed between the combined weight of Byzantine cavalry and infantry.

The early Byzantine army is rooted in the Roman military disaster at Adrianople on 9 August 378 ce. This battle highlights the two major flaws of the Roman army. Upon seeing the larger Visigothic wagon, “the emperor, with wanton impetuosity, resolved on attacking them instantly.”¹ Herein lies the root cause of most of the Roman army’s greatest defeats: reckless commanders who impudently committed their forces too early, hoping to overwhelm the enemy with the sheer weight of infantry. The disaster at Cannae against Hannibal in 216 b.ce, the debacle in the Teutoburg forest in 9 ce, the ignoble defeat at Carrhae in 53 b.ce, and the fresh defeat at Adrianople were all led by glory-seeking commanders, rushing headlong into battle, in unfamiliar terrain, with little reliable information on the tactics, dispositions, or capabilities of the enemy. After the infantry had been fully committed and order had disintegrated into chaos “the cavalry of the Goths had returned with Alatheus and Saphrax, and with them a battalion of Alans; these descending from the mountains like a thunderbolt, spread confusion and slaughter among all whom in their

1. Ammianus Marcellinus, *The Roman History of Ammianus Marcellinus* (trans. C. D. Yonge; London: G. Bell & Sons, 1911), 609–11.

rapid charge they came across.”² The surprised and disorganized Romans were encircled and completely destroyed because the brash Valens failed to hold back a reserve to meet any unexpected Visigothic attack.

The previous passage illustrates the other traditional weakness of the Roman army which was had plagued it from its very beginnings: its weak cavalry arm. Its defeats by Hannibal and the Parthians were dependent largely on skillful usage of mounted lanciers against the slower Roman formations. Only when effective *auxilia* of Numidian cavalry were employed by the Romans did they finally defeat Hannibal. When cavalry enveloped infantry they would usually panic, huddle together seeking protection, and then be slaughtered where they stood. As Ammianus Marcellinus described in his account of the battle of Adrianople:

Our left wing had advanced actually up to the wagons, with the intent to push on still further *if they were properly supported*; but they were deserted by the rest of the cavalry, and so pressed upon by the superior numbers of the enemy, that they were overwhelmed and beaten down, like the ruin of a vast rampart.³

The heavy, disciplined, and organized infantry of the Roman army was effective against the forest nomads of Gaul, Germania, and Briton, in part, because they faced armies which were made up primarily of infantry with limited cavalry contingents. The Roman army’s history is filled with victories against these infantry based armies where their strategic ineptness, impudent boldness, and weak cavalry could be overcome by the tactical organization and discipline of the Roman infantry soldier. However, the old style Roman army could not effectively match the mobility and strength of mounted armies. Roman infantry left unsupported could retain their cohesion for a time, but after being surrounded, under constant attack from all sides, and without any hope that of own cavalry rescuing them, they would be cut down by the enemy. The Byzantines had to reorganize their military to be able to keep the enemy at a distance and prevent any catastrophic flanking.

The Justinian age, from 527–565 ce, marked a resurgence of Byzantine military power and its success can be attributed to the reforms enacted within the Byzantine army.⁴ The *Strategikon*, attributed to the emperor Maurice who began his rule only 17 years after the death of Justinian in 582, describes a completely revitalized army which had risen to the challenge of defeating Vandals, Goths, Avars, and even Persians. The military organization advocated by Maurice and other Byzantine military authors is one that stresses the importance of cavalry and defensive tactics to guard against enemy attacks but is clearly dependent on traditional heavy infantry and combined arms.

2. Marcellinus, *The Roman History of Ammianus Marcellinus*, 611.

3. Marcellinus, *The Roman History of Ammianus Marcellinus*, 612–13; emphasis added.

4. John Haldon, *State, Army and Society in Byzantium: Approaches to Military, Social and Administrative History, 6th–12th Centuries* (Great Britain: Variorum, 1995), 5–6.

“The Romans conquered all nations chiefly through military training.”⁵ So begins Vegetius’ treatise on Roman military matters in late antiquity. Thorough training allowed the Byzantines to effectively control their armies and execute complicated maneuvers on the battlefield. Without this training the Byzantine army could not have hoped to defeat its enemies. “For in the contest of battle a few trained men are more ready for victory, whereas an untried and unskilled multitude is always subject to slaughter.”⁶ The most important result of this training in the Byzantine army was the tactical options given to the Byzantine phalanx.

“A phalanx is a formation of armed men designed to hold off the enemy. It may assume a variety of shapes: the circle, the lozenge, the rhomboid, the wedge, the hollow wedge, and many others which we shall not bother to discuss in this work.”⁷ The phalanx was subdivided and organized almost ad nauseam. This diversity is an indicator that the Byzantine phalanx was not at all the bulky, unwieldy phalanx used by in the Greek world by Alexander’s successors. Rather the Byzantine phalanxes were a continuation of the maniple tradition of the Old Roman army, able to subdivided their units quickly, change positions, reform lines, create new tactical formations, exploit holes in the enemy’s line, maintain proper intervals, and react quickly to enemy threats. This flexibility is what made the Byzantine infantry so dangerous on the battlefield.⁸

The phalanx was the first and last line defense for the Byzantine army. This was because the heavy infantry,⁹ the *protostate*,¹⁰ played two important roles in battle. The most obvious was to repel enemy charges by presenting an impregnable wall of spears and shields to the advancing foe. In this aspect the Byzantine phalanx was similar to the Old Greek phalanx, but the spears used by the Byzantines were only two meters long,¹¹ a third of the length of the Old Greek *sarissa*, and the depth of the phalanx was no more than 16 men deep because the Byzantine commanders had decided that if the phalanx was any deeper it was a less effective use of manpower.¹² The heavy infantry were armored with helmet, mail jacket, greaves, and a *spatha* as their secondary weapon. The second role of the heavy infantry was as missile troops. Each man had a bow and quiver with 30 to 40 arrows and as the enemy began his attack he was to lodge his spear in the ground and begin raining missiles into

5. Flavius Vegetius Rhenanus, *Epitoma Rei Militaris*, trans. Leo F. Stelten (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1990), 11.

6. Rhenanus, *Epitoma Rei Militaris*, 11.

7. Anonymous, “Strategy: *Anonymi Peri strategias*, The Anonymous Byzantine Treatise on Strategy,” in *Three Byzantine Military Treatises* (ed. and trans. G. T. Dennis; Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1985), 46.

8. John F. Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World* (London: Routledge, 1999), 192.

9. Maurice, *Strategikon*, trans. George T. Dennis (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 139.

10. Anonymous, “Strategy: *Anonymi Peri strategias*,” 49.

11. I. P. Stephenson, *Romano-Byzantine Infantry Equipment* (Stroud, Engl.: Tempus, 2006), 83.

12. Maurice, *Strategikon*, 142.

the enemy.¹³ Only after “the enemy’s horses have been shot at for a while and they begin to slow down their forward progress, then the infantry should pick up their spears from the ground, hold them tightly, and with increased energy and courage they should advance against the enemy.”¹⁴ This was an improvement on the old *gladius* and *pilium* combination used by the Old Roman legion. The longer thrusting spears allowed the infantry to engage the enemy at a distance and hold them off with a wall of bristling spear points. Procopius records the incredible ability of even a few heavy spearmen, on good ground, to withstand repeated cavalry charges and wreak havoc among the charging horsemen.

The horsemen accordingly charged upon them with great hubbub and shouting, intending to capture them at the first cry, but the Romans drew up together into a small space and, making a barrier with their shields and thrusting forward their spears, held their ground. Then the Goths came on, charging in haste and thus getting themselves into disorder, while the fifty, pushing with their shields and thrusting very rapidly with their spears, which were nowhere allowed to interfere one with the other, defended themselves most vigorously against their assailants; they purposely made a din with their shields, terrifying the horse, on the one hand, by this means, and the men, on the other, with the points of their spears.¹⁵

This passage also illustrates another important result of training: the maintenance of proper intervals. There were three basic intervals: normal intervals for marching, tight intervals to repel cavalry charges, and loose intervals to allow light infantry to filter through the phalanx if necessary. It is clear that that these intervals could have only been maintained by well-disciplined troops. Precise interval keeping also allowed the infantry to fully employ their multitude of missile weapons.¹⁶ This evolution in dual role heavy infantry was an important development which allowed the Byzantine army to meet the mounted armies threatening the empire in the sixth century ce

However, heavy infantry only formed the outer shell of the Byzantine line. Only first four ranks, the last rank, and the flank files were made up of these spear wielding infantry. The center of the phalanx was made up of regular infantry, for “what use will a set of long spears in the middle of the phalanx be to the *protostate* who are engaged in hand-to-hand fighting with the enemy?”¹⁷ These men did not wear greaves, nor the heavy mail coat, but wore lighter leather armor, which allowed for greater movement. These soldiers filled the gap between the long-range arrows and close-range spears. They carried an assortment of missile weapons: javelins, throwing axes, slings, and, most interestingly,

13. Procopius, *History of the Wars*, trans. H.B. Dewing (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1919), 5.358.

14. Anonymous, “Strategy: *Anonymi Peri strategias*,” 111.

15. Procopius, *History of the Wars*, 5.357–58 (emphasis added).

16. Stephenson, *Romano-Byzantine Infantry Equipment*, 149.

17. Anonymous, “Strategy: *Anonymi Peri strategias*,” 55.

lead weighted darts. The *spiculum* and the *gaesum* were lighter versions of the classic *pilum* but with greater range.¹⁸ Some men were armed with *francisci*, which were throwing axes that could shatter shields at 4 meters and were still lethal at 8 and 12 meters.¹⁹ Slingers were also often used. These fist-sized rocks could be hurled the impressive distance of 150 to 400 meters and were often valued more than archers because of their ability to deliver an incredible amount of blunt trauma to the enemy at long distances. The *plumbatae* were short arrows, or darts, weighted with lead and thrown underhand to create an ancient mortarlike weapon that would plunge down vertically behind the enemies shields and hit them in their unprotected heads and shoulders.²⁰ This weapon had a range up to 60 meters.²¹ These darts were held, like the javelins, in the left hand which held the round, medium shield of the regular infantry. Lastly, light infantry armed with small shields, daggers, and bows would support the main phalanx body.²² With so many different types of weapons it is clear why the soldiers in the phalanx had to be properly trained to keep intervals. Men standing shoulder to shoulder could not employ these types of weapons. The slingers, ax-throwers, *plumbatae* troops, and archers needed space around them to employ their weapons. The ranks and files would have kept proper distance from each other in order to allow the missile armed infantry to work their deadly arts. Maurice states that the proper proportion of archers to infantry should be one light infantryman for every four heavy infantryman, “so that if the heavy infantry ranks are reduced to four deep in a file, there will be one archer behind it.”²³ It is obvious that the importance of missile weapons had been recognized by the Byzantines. These missile armed soldiers could inflict immense physical and psychological damage even against the most determined enemy cavalry charge.²⁴

It is interesting to note that the protostate were a throwback to the *triarii* of the old “Polybian” legions that existed at the time of the Punic Wars. The *triarii* were the older veterans who had occupied the last line in the three line Roman army of the Republic. Unlike the forward lines the *triarii* were armed with long, thrusting spears and larger shields, just like the heavily armed *protostate*. However, the roles which they filled were completely different. The *triarii* had been the last line of defense. If the first assaults had been halted and routed by the enemy the shattered line was to filter through and take refuge behind the great wall of shields and spears created by the *triarii*. The Byzantines had taken this old defensive support unit and had put it in the front ranks of their phalanx and given it the responsibility to halt the enemy. It is plain to see why these units were favored over the old legionaries: they could use their spears to halt a charge, while

18. Stephenson, *Romano-Byzantine Infantry Equipment*, 111.

19. Stephenson, *Romano-Byzantine Infantry Equipment*, 120.

20. Renatus, *Epitoma Rei Militaris*, 37.

21. Stephenson, *Romano-Byzantine Infantry Equipment*, 117–19.

22. Maurice, *Strategikon*, 139.

23. Maurice, *Strategikon*, 143.

24. Procopius, *History of the Wars*, 5.378.

legionaries armed with the pilium and the short gladius had to engage the enemy at a much closer range and without the same defensible power of that imposing wall of bristling spears. Soldiers assaulted on all sides by cavalry could become “so huddled together that a soldier could hardly draw his sword, or withdraw his hand after he had once stretched it out,”²⁵ because they could not distance themselves from the enemy. With tactical mobility and training negated, they became an easy target for the enemy. The regular infantry, which had been the main offensive arm of the Roman army during both the Republic and Imperial ages, was now relegated to supporting the *protostate*. The old, lighter-armed soldiers just could not stand up as effectively to the charges of Visigothic charges. This is a clear move to a more defensive formation to meet the needs of the changing battlefield.

Now, it easy to visualize the effect a well-trained phalanx could have on a cavalry charge. The charging cavalry would come under fire by long-range arrows, bouncing off their armor, hitting unprotected limbs, striking their horses, inflicting wounds, and causing panic. Soon, large stones hurled by slingers would ricochet off shields, dent helmets, knock men off balance, and crush bones. The cavalry would begin to become confused and the cohesion of their lines would falter. As the enemy grew closer, unseen darts would suddenly bombard them, penetrating mail and weak points in the armor, injuring horses and men alike. As this hail of missiles distracted the riders and panicked the horses; the air would be rent with the high-pitched screams of wounded horses, groans of dying men, and war cries of the attacking Goths. However, other than the sound of barked orders and the exertions of the missile troops, the Byzantine line would remain completely silent. At close range a spattering of spinning axes would knock men off their horses, crack shields, and stun the riders. Suddenly the enemy line would let loose a cry, “O God!” and contort, contract, and transform into a solid wall of bristling spears.²⁶ The horses would shy away, riders would be speared off their horses, unable to break the Byzantine line, and would be forced to retreat or reform. To pass through this maelstrom intact and carry the day would have been nearly impossible.

Clearly no intelligent Avar leader or Persian general would send their cavalry against a formed line of Byzantine infantry, properly trained, armed, and in good spirits. Instead the classic tactics of a mounted army was to envelope the enemy, avoiding a frontal charge, attacking the flanks and rear, causing panic and routing the enemy. The Byzantines recognized the need for effective cavalry to help augment the infantry and allow a decisive blow to be dealt to the enemy. Infantry were just too slow to envelop mobile cavalry armies. They could defeat them but not destroy them. The Byzantines introduced extensive reforms that greatly strengthened their cavalry, which began playing a very important role in the Byzantine military system. However, it is clear

25. Rhenatus, *Epitoma Rei Militaris*, 617.

26. Maurice, *Strategikon*, 146.

from the sources that cavalry had not supplanted infantry, but remained the backbone of the Byzantine army well into the seventh century ce.²⁷ The early Byzantine army sought to find an effective combination of cavalry and infantry.

“To form the whole army simply in one line facing the enemy for a general cavalry battle and to hold nothing in reserve for various eventualities in case of a reverse is the mark of an inexperienced and absolutely reckless man.”²⁸ The multiple-line system of the Old Roman army was modified by the Byzantines to create an effective defensive formation with the option of a powerful offensive punch. “To draw up the whole army in one battle line, especially if it is composed of lancers, is, in our opinion, to invite a host of evils.”²⁹ These evils were the reasons for the multiple-line system. It kept the line shorter so it was easier to command and control. It also allowed the army to retain tactical cohesion. Equally as important, this created a surplus of soldiers which could be used to create a second or even a third line to support the front line. The width of the front line was to match that of the enemy unless it thinned the ranks to the point when they were dangerously thin. The second line would be placed a bow shot behind the first line in order to be close enough to support the first line but remain out of range of enemy missiles. If the first line broke it could retreat through the second line and use it to take shelter and reform within the confines of an unbroken and unbloodied line.³⁰ This support line could also be turned around and guard against any cavalry assaults on the rear of the Byzantine army. The general’s position would have been at the center of the second line where he could best see and control the battle, yet remain protected.³¹ The last line was not really a line in the strictest sense. It was a small cadre of cavalry and “a few soldiers, both heavy and light infantry with their own officers, not really needed in the battle line,”³² placed far to the rear of the first two lines, which acted as a kind of tactical reserve or a quick reaction force to any crisis on the battlefield. It could plug gaps in the line, check any envelopments around the flanks, or frustrate any hidden ambushes against the Byzantine rear. This system is a clear evolution of the original three line system of the Old Roman army, but is much more defensively oriented and tactically effective against sweeping envelopments and ambushes, which were the bread and butter of the mounted armies.

Most importantly this system was effective in keeping the Byzantine commander from committing his troops too early. Over and over in the *Strategikon*, the emphasis is placed on an orderly attack only after the enemy had been harassed and misinformed. Even if the enemy broke before the

27. Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World*, 193, 196.

28. Maurice, *Strategikon*, 23.

29. Maurice, *Strategikon*, 23–24.

30. Maurice, *Strategikon*, 24, 51.

31. Maurice, *Strategikon*, 33.

32. Maurice, *Strategikon*, 141.

onslaught of the the Byzantine infantry, the commander was to keep his soldiers from pursuing recklessly, breaking ranks, and becoming a disorganized mob. Rather the cavalry was to run down the enemy while the two lines of infantry were to remain a cohesive unit in case the enemy flight was only a ruse and would turn back and try to break the line again. The second line was only to be committed if the first line had completely disintegrated and had to be relieved. The need to remain uncommitted in Byzantine tactics is illustrated that even after a defeat the second line was still supposed to be relatively unscathed and able to replace the shattered first line and conduct offensive operations if viable.³³

This defensive orientation dominated Byzantine tactical thinking, protecting it from surprise envelopments, ambushes, and feigned retreats, but an offensive spirit was cultivated by Byzantine leaders and the army itself remained offensively potent. "If our army seems to be in better condition, we should move toward battle, *but without underestimating the enemy.*"³⁴ This statement works well as a maxim for the model Byzantine commander. The army should always move to battle and make the enemy react to it rather than be caught in the enemies own surprises. However, not every Byzantine commander was a Belisarius or Narses, who masterfully balanced their offensive power with the necessary protective defensive tactics. With so much emphasis on defense and the movements of the enemy, many commanders could easily lose sight of the offensive capabilities of the army and not exploit the weaknesses of the enemy to the fullest. Maurice openly berates passive commanders who, after routing the enemy, do not pursue their utter destruction. For,

By not seizing the opportunity, these people only cause themselves more trouble and place the ultimate results in doubt. One should not slacken after driving them back just a short distance, nor, after so much hard work and the dangers of war, should one jeopardize the success of the whole campaign because of lack of persistence. *In war, as in hunting, a near miss is still a complete miss.*³⁵

Many commanders probably feared the risks involved with pursuing the enemy. This was compounded if the commander did not have a grasp on how to properly employ his cavalry and only used it in short envelopments of the enemy line and not in the destructive pursuit of broken enemy infantry and cavalry. The *Strategikon* attempts to educate commanders on how to properly employ their cavalry units in concert with the infantry.³⁶ Even if the Byzantines could muster only a force large enough to harrass the enemy columns and their lines of logistics in hit and run ambushes; the emperor Nikephoros says that "the general, therefore, must never let them return home unscathed."³⁷ Therefore,

33. Maurice, *Strategikon*, 73.

34. Anonymous, "Strategy: *Anonymi Peri strategias*," 103; emphasis added.

35. Maurice. *Strategikon*, 74; emphasis added.

36. Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World*, 196.

37. Emperor Lord Nikephoros, "Skirmishing," in *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*,

while much of the Byzantine tactical formations, training, and doctrine were more defensively oriented, they still considered their field armies “the means by which one retaliates against his opponents.”³⁸

The Battle of Taginae is an example of the destructive capabilities of the Byzantine army when under the command of a gifted commander who could effectively use his combined arms to halt the enemy and then completely destroy it. Narses faced the Gothic king Totila. Narses was able to obtain a good defensive position and formed his line with his Lombard allies dismounted in the center and formed into a dense phalanx.³⁹ This was designed to keep them from riding away from any enemy charge. Regular Byzantine infantry were placed on either side in their phalanxes with archers on the both wings of the line. A thousand were placed on the left wing with 500 acting as the tactical reserve.⁴⁰ The opening movements of the battle were over a hill which dominated the Byzantine left. Narses hurriedly rushed 50 heavy infantry to take the hill and deny it to the enemy. Totila ordered repeated cavalry charges on the hill, but the infantry showered the enemy with missiles and then held them off with their long spears. Wave after wave of Gothic cavalry broke against the infantry, unable to turn the Byzantine flank.⁴¹ Totila delayed battle until he received further reinforcements. Narses had no reason to break from his position and waited out his enemy, making his men eat in formation to keep them from being surprised by an unexpected enemy charge, and knowing full well that he could not be defeated where he was. Totila was finally forced to attack en masse. He concentrated his attack on a mass cavalry charge against the Byzantine center. He probably hoped to close as quickly as possible against the Lombards in the center who were not normally foot soldiers, untrained in Byzantine phalanx tactics, and were the most likely to break against a determined charge. The Lombards may have been placed there as a trap laid by Narses to lure the Goths to attack the center, and he used the same formation again later at the Battle of Casilinum. The Gothic cavalry charge came under immediate attack by the Byzantine archers and the other missile troops in the phalanx, which produced a terrible crossfire as the Byzantine line bent into a crescent and enveloped the Gothic cavalry. The Gothic charge was halted immediately and decimated.⁴² A general advance by the whole Byzantine line shattered the dispirited Gothic army and resulted in a general slaughter in which Totila was killed.

The Early Byzantine army was less a shadow of the Old Roman army and more an army in its prime, the equivalent and possibly the superior of the Old Roman army. It had reinvented itself in some ways and developed a much stronger cavalry arm but still relied on the traditional training, subdivision, dual

(ed. and trans. G. T. Dennis; Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1985) pg. 159

38. Anonymous, “Strategy: *Anonymi Peri Strategias*,” 21.

39. Procopius, *History of the Wars*, 5.370.

40. Procopius, *History of the Wars*, 5.370.

41. Procopius, *History of the Wars*, 5.357–58.

42. Procopius, *History of the Wars*, 5.378.

armed soldiers, basic tactical formations, and offensive drive that had made Rome a world superpower. This new army now protected the perpetuity of the Byzantine Empire long into the Middle Ages.