INSTITUTE OF HISTORICAL RESEARCH
SECTION OF BYZANTINE RESEARCH
NATIONAL HELLENIC RESEARCH FOUNDATION

ΙΝΣΤΙΤΟΥΤΟ ΙΣΤΟΡΙΚΩΝ ΕΡΕΥΝΩΝ
ΤΟΜΕΑΣ ΒΥΖΑΝΤΙΝΩΝ ΕΡΕΥΝΩΝ
ΕΘΝΙΚΟ ΙΔΡΥΜΑ ΕΡΕΥΝΩΝ

Τομος 31 Volume

Christos G. Makrypoulias – Taxiarchis G. Kolias –
Georgios Kardaras

An Overview of Armed Conflicts in Late Byzantium: Theoretical Framework and Current Research

ΑΘΗΝΑ • 2021 • ATHENS

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Military history, although viewed by most outsiders as a unified field of scholarship, usually takes two forms, not necessarily mutually exclusive, but often quite distinct from each other. On the one hand, there are those who view military history from the point of organisation and institutions; to pose it differently, they are interested in establishing what an army *is*. Others focus on warfare itself: battles, tactics, and military strategy; in other words, they study what an army *does*. Historians of the latter persuasion are viewed by proponents of the so-called "new military history" as nothing more than devotees to an obsolescent *histoire événementielle*[1]. However, one can hardly question the pivotal role played by warfare in human history and, since military engagements are the *tesserae* which form this mosaic in all its gory detail, the necessity to study armed conflict and its effects on human society is self-evident.

* The project entitled "ANAVATHMIS. Historical research and digital applications" (MIS 5002357) is implemented under the "Action for the Strategic Development on the Research and Technological Sector", funded by the Operational Programme "Competitiveness, Entrepreneurship and Innovation" (NSRF 2014–2020) and co-financed by Greece and the European Union (European Regional Development Fund).

Η Πράξη με τίτλο: «ΑΝΑΒΑΘΜΙΣ. Ανάπτυξη της ιστορικής έρευνας: μελέτες και ψηφιακές εφαρμογές» και κωδικό MIS 5002357 εντάσσεται στη «Δράση Στρατηγικής Ανάπτυξης Ερευνητικών και Τεχνολογικών Φορέων» και χρηματοδοτείται από το Επιχειρησιακό Πρόγραμμα «Ανταγωνιστικότητα, Επιχειρηματικότητα και Καινοτομία» στο πλαίσιο του ΕΣΠΑ 2014–2020, με τη συγχρηματοδότηση της Ελλάδας και της Ευρωπαϊκής Ένωσης (Ευρωπαϊκό Ταμείο Περιφερειακής Ανάπτυξης).

1. For a brief introduction to the methodological (and occasionally ideological) aspects of these academic issues, see J. Bourke, New military history, in: *Palgrave Advances in Modern Military History*, ed. M. Hughes – W. J. Philpott, London 2006, 258-280.

The Late Byzantine era is a characteristic example of a historical period marked by war as an endemic phenomenon, impacting on both everyday life and the political history of the lands around the Eastern Mediterranean. Whether as active agents of this reality or as hapless victims at the receiving end of it, the Byzantines never ceased to be engaged in military conflicts in the period between the Latin sacks of Constantinople in 1203–1204 and the ultimate fall of the last remnants of the Eastern Roman Empire in the years after the middle of the fifteenth century. And yet it was only in recent decades that historians have began to systematically study the military history of Late Byzantium, when the first monographs on the subject appeared[2]. The first such study was that of Mark Bartusis, whose work set the tone for later researchers[3]. His book, however, is a study of the army within the framework of Late Byzantine society and, although the first part does contain a brief military history of the period, the bulk of it deals with the army as an institution. It was probably in an attempt to fill the gaps left by Bartusis' study that Savvas Kyriakidis added chapters on military leadership, siege warfare and tactics to his own book; it remains,

2. Until then, students of Late Byzantium had usually treated armies in brief chapters attached to more general works of political or administrative history: e.g. L.-P. Raybaud, *Le gouvernement et l'administration centrale de l'empire byzantin sous les premiers Paléologues (1258–1354),* Paris 1968, 237-251; D. A. Zakythinos, *Le Despotat grec de Morée II. Vie et institutions*, London 1975², 132-145; M. Angold, *A Byzantine Government in Exile. Government and Society Under the Laskarids of Nicaea (1204–1261)*, Oxford 1975, 182-201. There were also specialized studies dealing with particular aspects of Late Byzantine military organization: e.g. N. Oikonomidès, Contribution à l'étude de la *pronoia* au XIIIe siècle. Une formule d'attribution de parèques à un pronoiare, *REB* 22 (1964), 158-175; Idem, À propos des armées des premiers Paléologues et des compagnies de soldats, *TM* 8 (1981), 353-371; M. C. Bartusis, The Megala Allagia and the Tzaousios: Aspects of Provincial Military Organization in Late Byzantium, *REB* 47 (1989), 183-207; Idem, On the Problem of Smallholding Soldiers in Late Byzantium, *DOP* 44 (1990), 1-26; B. Hendrickx, Allagion, tzaousios et prôtallagatôr dans le contexte moréote: quelques remarques, *REB* 50 (1992), 207-217. One should not disregard the earlier work of N. Kalomenopoulos, *Ἡ στρατιωτικὴ ὀργάνωσις τῆς ἑλληνικῆς αὐτοκρατορίας τοῦ Βυζαντίου*, Athens 1937; even a cursory glance at this book, however, will convince the reader that the retired general's scholarship was not of the highest caliber. For a modern look on the strategic situation of Byzantium, see E. N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, Cambridge, Mass. – London 2009.

3. M. C. Bartusis, *The Late Byzantine Army. Arms and Society, 1204–1453*, Philadelphia 1992.

however, an institutional history of the Late Byzantine army[4]. The same can be said of Kosmas Panagiotidis' doctoral thesis: an analysis of the organization and command structure of Late Byzantine armies[5]. On the other hand, the monograph of Efstratia Synkellou deals with a multitude of military operations and their various aspects, though the geographical focus (Western Greece) of the book is limited[6].

At first glance, the doctoral dissertation of Nikolaos Kanellopoulos, written almost two decades after Bartusis' book and one year before Kyriakidis' work was published, appears to conform to the precepts of "old school" military history[7]. Kanellopoulos collected information on major military engagements that took place in the Byzantine lands around the Aegean during the period 1204–1461 and then went on to analyze that data to produce a concise picture of the organization of the Late Byzantine army. This methodology –examining important actions and campaigns, followed by general comments on the tactics employed by the opponents– was a well-established one. The first nineteenth-century specialists in ancient and medieval military history (historians with little or no military experience, or officers applying to the study of history the analytical methods used by contemporary army staffs) had penned works that focused heavily, if not exclusively, on battle tactics[8]. This stemmed from the *idée fixe* that pitched battles are the only decisive factor in warfare.

The idea was not a nineteenth-century one; as early as the sixteenth century, philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli had stated that "a day that brings

4. S. Kyriakidis, *Warfare in Late Byzantium, 1204–1453* [History of Warfare 67], Leiden – Boston 2011.

5. K. S. Panagiotidis, *Η οργάνωση του στρατού κατά την ύστερη βυζαντινή περίοδο (1204–1453)*, Thessaloniki 2004 (accessible in https://www.didaktorika.gr/eadd/handle/10442/17953).

6. E. Synkellou, *Ο πόλεμος στον δυτικό ελλαδικό χώρο κατά τον ύστερο Μεσαίωνα (13ος–15ος αι.)* [IBR/NHRF Monographs 8], Athens 2008.

7. N. S. Kanellopoulos, *Η οργάνωση και η τακτική του βυζαντινού στρατού στην ύστερη περίοδο (1204–1461)*, Volos 2010 (accessible in https://www.didaktorika.gr/eadd/handle/10442/29081).

8. For a brief overview of this trend in the study of the military history of the Middle Ages in general and the Crusades in particular, see R. C. Smail, *Crusading Warfare 1097–1193*, Cambridge 1956, 3-17.

you victory cancels every other bad action you have taken"[9]. The perception that campaigns could be won without battle, or at least without field engagements being the decisive factor, had prevailed during the *Ancien Régime*[10]; this belief, however, along with the political and social system that had fostered it, came crushing down during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792–1815). Based on the lessons learned from the latter, the great military thinker Carl von Clausewitz propounded the theory that the "decisive battle" is of cardinal significance in military strategy; as he poses it, "trial by combat is to military operations what cash payment is to financial transactions"[11].

Clausewitzian theories influenced not only the strategic thinking of the military and political leadership of almost every Western nation, but also the views of modern historians. This was largely due to the work of Hans Delbrück, Europe's preeminent military historian in the first decades of the twentieth century[12]. In his *magnum opus*, the first to study the art of war within the framework of political history[13], Delbrück applied Clausewitz's strategic precepts to the study of military history, coining the terms *Niederwerfungsstrategie* ("strategy of overthrow", less accurately translated as "annihilation strategy"), *Ermattungsstrategie* ("strategy of

9. Both quotes (the latter in the original) may be found in Smail, *Warfare*, 14.

10. See Ch. Duffy, *The Military Experience in the Age of Reason*, London 1987, 189-190, and J. A. Lynn, *Battle. A History of Combat and Culture*, Boulder 2003, 111-114. For a general military history of the periods in question, see R. F. Weigley, *The Age of Battles, The Quest for Decisive Warfare from Breitenfeld to Waterloo*, Bloomington – Indianapolis 1991.

11. Quoted (with some variations in the translation) in J. Keegan, *The Face of Battle. A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo and the Somme*, London 1976, 29-30. See also the Greek edition of C. von Clausewitz, *Περί του Πολέμου*, trans. N. Xepoulia, Thessaloniki 1989, 70 (also with some slight differences in the translation). For a detailed analysis of the influence of Clausewitzian theory on Marxist thinking, see P. Kondylis, *Theorie des Krieges: Clausewitz – Marx – Engels – Lenin*, Stuttgart 1988.

12. A. Bucholz, *Hans Delbrück and the German Military Establishment: War Images in Conflict*, Iowa City 1985. See also J. Luvaas, The Great Military Historians and Philosophers, in: *A Guide to the Study and Use of Military History*, ed. J. E. Jessup, Jr. – R. W. Coakley, Washington, D.C. 1979, 77-80.

13. H. Delbrueck, *Geschichte der Kriegskunst im Rahmen der politischen Geschichte*, vol. I-IV, Berlin 1900–1920[3].

attrition") and *Manöverstrategie* ("manoeuvre strategy"[14]). Both Delbrück and contemporary strategists believed that pitched battles were the only war-winning tool in a commander's arsenal[15]. Meanwhile, the Anglo-Saxon world was already moving independently towards similar conclusions, thanks largely to the work of Sir Edward Creasy. The English historian and jurist had published a descriptive list of battles, from Marathon to Waterloo, that had decisively influenced the history of the West[16]. The success of Creasy's book spawned a slew of similar publications and it enjoyed immense popularity in Britain, due mainly to the Victorian ethics permeating the book, allowing battles to be viewed not as indiscriminate carnage, but as milestones along the West's historical road to progress[17].

The combined effect of Delbrück and Creasy was evident in Sir Charles Oman, whose work dominated the field of medieval military history during the first half of the twentieth century[18]. Even the post-WWII generations of scholars did not stray far from the "decisive battle" paradigm, devoting most of their research to the study of field tactics and military organization. That is not to say, of course, that they were not open to fresh ideas and new interpretations. The French medievalist Ferdinand Lot believed that siegecraft was of particular importance in the study of medieval warfare; yet his book is a description of the art of war through the study of battle tactics[19]. Jan Verbruggen was better qualified as a military historian, having served as an officer in the Belgian Army before studying history; he made a number of important contributions, but his methods did not differ from those of earlier historians[20]. Finally, Philippe Contamine also limited the

14. See in general G. A. Craig, Delbrück: The Military Historian, in: *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. P. Paret, Princeton 1986, 326-353.

15. For Delbrück's place in medieval military historiography, see J. F. Verbruggen, *The Art of Warfare in Western Europe during the Middle Ages*, Woodbridge – Rochester 1997², 3-10, and Smail, *Warfare*, 8-10.

16. E. S. Creasy, *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World*, London 1851.

17. Keegan, *Battle*, 57-62.

18. C. W. C. Oman, *A History of the Art of War in the Middle Ages*, London 1924 (a revised and enlarged version of the earlier 1898 edition).

19. F. Lot, *L'art militaire et les armées au moyen âge en Europe et dans le Proche-Orient*, Paris 1946.

20. J. F. Verbruggen, *De Krijgskunst in West-Europa in de Middeleeuwen, IXe tot begin XIVe eeuw*, Brussels 1954. His work became more accessible to academic circles when it was

scope of his study to military organization and tactics, though he did include a brief description of siege engines[21].

By the time Kanellopoulos began working on his thesis, modern researchers had already shifted their perspectives. Since the 1990s it became clear that sieges and raids, not battles, were the most common types of military conflict in the Middle Ages. Scholars finally came to realize that siege warfare was the key component of medieval military strategy[22], along with raids aimed specifically at devastating the lands of the opponents and disrupting the lives of non-combatants[23]. Thus, although a significant portion of his research interests, both then and later, revolved around battle analysis and field tactics[24], Kanellopoulos widened the focus of his research to include Late Byzantine sieges and raids, thus showing that strategies of attrition and manoeuvre were just as important as annihilation and the quest for the decisive battle.

When the research project "A Gazetteer of Late Byzantine Military Conflicts" of the Institute of Historical Research/National Hellenic Research Foundation was in its planning stage (2016–2018), one of the original aims of the project team was to follow in the footsteps of earlier scholars and collect evidence from battles in an effort to create an online reference tool for Byzantine field tactics. After work on the project had began, however, it

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translated into English, with an added chapter on the eighth century, but with the footnotes left out (J. F. Verbruggen, *The Art of Warfare in Western Europe during the Middle Ages, from the Eighth Century to 1340*, Amsterdam – New York 1977). The second edition of the translation (see above, n. 15) includes both the original footnotes and bibliographical updates.

21. Ph. Contamine, *La guerre au moyen âge*, Paris 1980.

22. On the predominance of siege warfare in the Middle Ages, see B. S. Bachrach, Medieval Siege Warfare: A Reconnaissance, *Journal of Military History* 58 (1994), 119-133, esp. 119-122 (on the treatment of siege warfare by earlier medievalists, including Lot, Verbruggen and Contamine).

23. The most characteristic example are the great cavalry raids (*chevauchées*) conducted by English armies against French-held territories during the Hundred Years' War (1339–1453): see in general B. S. Bachrach – D. S. Bachrach, *Warfare in Medieval Europe c. 400 – c. 1453*, London – New York 2017, 366-368.

24. For examples of his work on battle analysis, see N. S. Kanellopoulos – I. K. Lekea, Η βυζαντινή πολεμική τακτική εναντίον των Φράγκων κατά τον 13ο αιώνα και η μάχη του Tagliacozzo, *ByzSym* 19 (2009), 63-81; Eidem, Prelude to Kephissos (1311): An Analysis of the Battle of Apros (1305), *Journal of Medieval Military History* 12 (2014), 119-137.

became clear that most conflicts found in the historical record were either sieges or "raids" – the latter term used to include all campaigns that did not involve a pitched battle with the enemy's regular troops and ultimately affected the non-combatant population, either by plan or by happenstance. This seemed to run contrary to Kanellopoulos' Tables 6.1 and 6.2, containing military events from the thirteenth and fourteenth-fifteenth centuries, respectively, many of them battles rather than raids and sieges[25]. One key methodological aspect of our research that might explain this difference is the fact that our project was ultimately mapped out to collect as many military conflicts as possible, regardless of how detailed (or not) their description is in the sources. Although the total number of conflicts recorded thus far has yet to be tabulated, a "macroscopic" analysis of early records shows that battles (including minor engagements that might more properly qualify as skirmishes or ambushes[26]) were never more than 20% of the total number of conflicts, and sometimes the percentage was much smaller.

Let us outline our thesis with an example from a single campaigning season, one that is well-documented and also quite long by medieval

25. Kanellopoulos, *Οργάνωση*, 335-336.

26. For instance, both Tracheiai (1207) and Arbanon (1217) have been classified as "battles". However, the former was actually nothing more than a small-scale engagement between an unknown number of Nicaean troops under general Andronikos Gidos and a mounted force of approximately 300 knights and *sergents d'armes*, essentially the Latin garrison of nearby Nicomedia raiding the countryside for provisions: see Niketas Choniates, *Χρονικὴ Διήγησις*, ed. J. van Dieten, *Nicetae Choniatae Historia* [CFHB 11/1], Berlin – New York 1975, 641; Idem, *Λόγοι καὶ ἐπιστολαί*, ed. J. van Dieten, *Nicetae Choniatae Orationes et Epistulae* [CFHB 3], Berlin – New York 1972, 145-146; Geoffrey Villehardouin, *La conquête de Constantinople*, ed.-trans. E. Faral, Paris 1939, ch. 480-486; Kanellopoulos, *Οργάνωση*, 48-51; I. Giarenis, *Η συγκρότηση και η εδραίωση της αυτοκρατορίας της Νίκαιας. Ο αυτοκράτορας Θεόδωρος Α΄ Κομνηνός Λάσκαρις* [IBR/NHRF Monographs 12], Athens 2008, 98, 173. As for the latter, researchers have yet to agree on whether the forces of Latin emperor Pierre de Courtenay and cardinal Giovanni Colonna were ambushed in the mountain passes of Albania by the forces of Theodore I of Epirus or the latter simply pretended to lead them to safety, only to betray them and force them to surrender without a fight: see in general N. G. Chrissis, *Crusading in Frankish Greece: A Study of Byzantine-Western Relations and Attitudes, 1204–1282* [Medieval Church Studies 2], Turnhout 2012, 61-68.

standards: that of the year 1255[27]. After the death of Emperor John III Vatatzes (early November 1254), Tsar Michael Asen took advantage of the vacuum of power to reclaim a number of fortified towns along the border of the Thracian possessions of Nicaea with Bulgaria. John's successor, Theodore II Laskaris, did not waste any time. It was still winter (probably early February 1255) when he left Asia Minor with as many troops as he could raise in a hurry and crossed over to Thrace, picking up reinforcements along the way. He reached Adrianople (mod. Edirne), where he spent one day, and then moved on again, seeking a decisive confrontation with the main force of the Bulgarian army. His scouts managed to locate the Bulgarian advance guard, but the main force under Michael Asen declined to give battle and beat a hasty nocturnal retreat. Theodore II led his army in a raid all the way to Beroe (mod. Stara Zagora), 120 km. NW of Adrianople, where he captured booty, prisoners and flocks before the harsh winter conditions forced him to return to his base[28]. When he reached Adrianople, the Byzantine emperor split his forces: one part of the army was ordered to recapture the fortified towns of the region of Achridos[29]; Theodore II took personal command of the other part and led it against the fortified towns north of the Rhodope Mountains still held by Michael Asen. While the emperor laid siege to (and eventually captured) the Bulgarian strongholds of Stenimachos (mod. Asenovgrad, 20 km. SE of Plovdiv), Perist(r)itza (mod. Peruštica, 20 km. SW of Plovdiv) and neighboring Krytzimos (mod. Kričim, 26 km. SW of

27. For the military events of 1255 and the political developments that led to Theodore II's expedition, see in general N. S. Kanellopoulos – J. K. Lekea, The Struggle between the Nicaean Empire and the Bulgarian State (1254–1256): Towards a Revival of Byzantine Military Tactics under Theodore II Laskaris, *Journal of Medieval Military History* 7 (2009), 56-69; A. Madgearu, *The Asanids. The Political and Military History of the Second Bulgarian Empire (1185–1280)*, Leiden – Boston 2017, 240-242; D. Angelov, *The Byzantine Hellene. The Life of Emperor Theodore Laskaris and Byzantium in the Thirteenth Century*, Cambridge 2019, 151-159.

28. George Akropolites, *Χρονικὴ Συγγραφή*, ed. A. Heisenberg, *Georgii Acropolitae Opera* I, Leipzig 1903 (repr. P. Wirth, Stuttgart 1978), 111-113; Theodore Skoutariotes, *Σύνοψις Χρονική*, ed. K. Sathas, *Μεσαιωνική Βιβλιοθήκη Ζ΄*, Paris – Venice 1894, 514-515.

29. On the location and historical geography of the region, see C. Asdracha, *La région des Rhodopes aux XIIIe et XIVe siècles: étude de géographie historique* [Texte und Forschungen zur byzantinisch-neugriechischen Philologie 49], Athens 1976, 10-11, 244-245.

Plovdiv)[30], his generals captured Ephraim (probably mod. Efrem, 53 km. NW of Adrianople), Kryvous (exact location unknown, probably between Ephraim and Perperakion), Perperakion (eight km. NW of mod. Perperek), and Oustra (one km. NW of mod. Ustren)[31].

After the capture of Stenimachos, Perist(r)itza and Krytzimos, Theodore II Laskaris led his troops further west, planning to invest and reduce Tzepaina (mod. Čepina). By then it was probably early spring, but the weather was still inclement and the fort, situated high on a steep, thickly wooded mountain[32], seemed impregnable; so the Byzantine emperor decided to abandon the siege and retire, possibly to Philippoupolis (mod. Plovdiv)[33]. When spring had finally set in, Theodore sent another expedition against the Bulgarian fort; however, his two generals, Constantine Tornikes and Alexios Strategopoulos, made a mess of the campaign and the Byzantine troops were forced to retreat to Serres, losing a great number of horses in the process[34].

News of this failure of the Byzantine army before the walls of Tzepaina emboldened Dragotas, a Bulgarian soldier who had gone over to the Byzantines in 1246 and had been rewarded with the command of the Byzantine troops stationed around Melenikon (mod. Melnik). In the spring or early summer of 1255 Dragotas led a mutiny of his troops and besieged the Byzantine garrison in Melenikon; its commanders, however, managed to hold on to the fort. When Theodore II Laskaris, who had retired with the main part of his army after failing to capture Tzepaina, received word of the uprising (probably in early summer), he marched to Serres and from there headed towards Melenikon. Dragotas attempted to block the Byzantine army's advance along the Strymon River valley by withdrawing his troops from around Melenikon and constructing field fortifications across the

30. Akropolites, *Χρονικὴ Συγγραφή*, 113; Skoutariotes, *Σύνοψις Χρονική*, 515.

31. Akropolites, *Χρονικὴ Συγγραφή*, 108, 113, 119; Theodore II Laskaris, *Ἐπιστολαί*, ed. N. Festa, *Theodori Ducae Lascaris Epistulae CCXVII*, Firenze 1898, 247-248; Skoutariotes, *Σύνοψις Χρονική*, 514-515.

32. On the strong position of its fort, see D. Couchev, La forteresse TZEΠAINA–Čepina, *BSl* 20 (1959), 285-304.

33. Akropolites, *Χρονικὴ Συγγραφή*, 113-114; Skoutariotes, *Σύνοψις Χρονική*, 515.

34. Akropolites, *Χρονικὴ Συγγραφή*, 114; Theodore Laskaris, *Ἐπιστολαί*, 251-255; Skoutariotes, *Σύνοψις Χρονική*, 515-516.

Rupel Pass; Theodore II's troops, however, put the enemy to flight (mortally wounding Dragotas in the process), then marched on to relieve Melenikon and its beleaguered garrison. From there the Byzantine army proceeded to Thessaloniki[35].

In the autumn of 1255 Theodore II, once again at the head of his army, left Thessaloniki and camped near Vodena (mod. Edessa), waiting for a bout of dysentery that was ravaging both himself and his troops to subside. He then went to Prilapos (mod. Prilep) for supplies and siege engines, and from there marched against Velesos (mod. Veles, formerly Titov Veles), a fortified town that had passed from Epiros to the possession of Nicaea in 1252, only to be captured by Michael Asen two years later. The Bulgarian garrison did not even wait for the Byzantine siege engines to be unloaded from the wagons and assembled; the emperor accepted their capitulation and allowed them to leave with their weapons. The Byzantine army then marched through the region of Neustapolis (mod. Ovče Pole) and finally returned to Serres by way of Stroummitza (mod. Strumiča) and Melenikon[36].

Although it was rather late in the campaigning season, Theodore II planned yet another attack on Tzepaina, since he was loathe to leave the place in Bulgarian hands. So, after he had moved most of his troops to the vicinity of Adrianople and Didymoteichon (he had received alarming news from his trusted official George Mouzalon regarding the situation in the East)[37], he ordered the men to prepare for an advance on Tzepaina, even though winter had almost set in. The decision proved unwise and the expedition to besiege the Bulgarian stronghold quickly devolved into a *chevauchée* –if such a term can be used for an expedition that included so many foot-soldiers– before the emperor ordered the expeditionary force to return to Adrianople and thence to Didymoteichon. By then, 1255 was almost over, so Theodore II

35. Akropolites, *Χρονικὴ Συγγραφή*, 114-117; Theodore Laskaris, *Ἐπιστολαί*, 254-255; Skoutariotes, *Σύνοψις Χρονική*, 516-517. See also Th. N. Vlachos, *Die Geschichte der byzantinischen Stadt Melenikon,* Thessaloniki 1969, 46-47.

36. Akropolites, *Χρονικὴ Συγγραφή*, 117-118; Skoutariotes, *Σύνοψις Χρονική*, 518.

37. Byzantinists tend to disregard the turmoil caused by the Mongol invasions and the ripple effect these had on the strategic situation in the Eastern Mediterranean: for a brief overview, see J. Giebfried, The Mongol invasions and the Aegean world (1241–61), *Mediterranean Historical Review* 28 (2013), 129-139.

left behind a strong force under two of his generals and proceeded to cross over to Asia Minor, where he arrived in time to celebrate Christmas[38].

It is clear that earlier historians who might have liked to view Late Byzantine military history through the prism of *Niederwerfungsstrategie* would have been disappointed. Although at the beginning of the campaign Theodore II was anxious to fight the Bulgarian army, Michael Asen avoided a pitched battle. There followed a series of no less than 13 sieges –though some of them abortive– and only one battle; even the latter was nothing more than an assault upon field fortifications. The Byzantines as well as the Bulgarians appear to have been ready to use attrition and manoeuvre as key elements in their respective strategies, and before the emperor of Nicaea returned to Asia Minor he instructed the commanders of the force he left behind not to engage in open battle against the Bulgarians' Cuman auxiliaries; the fact that, when they disobeyed them, they lost their army and one of them was taken prisoner, explains why Theodore II wanted to avoid such unnecessary risks[39].

Although counterfactual history –i.e. attempts by historians (usually in response to "what if" questions) to imagine how things might have gone differently– is not held in high esteem by academia, we actually have an historical example of what might have taken place had Michael Asen offered battle at the very beginning of Theodore II's Bulgarian campaign. In 1230 the Nicaean emperor's namesake, the ruler of Epiros, mounted an expedition into Bulgaria similar to that of Theodore II Lascaris. However, Theodore Komnenos Doukas' aim was not to annex lands – it was to seek out and destroy the Bulgarian army, in order to eliminate any threat to his rear before attacking Latin-held Constantinople[40]. Unlike what happened 25 years later, the Bulgarian tsar was happy to oblige: Ivan Asen II led his troops and Cuman allies against the invading Byzantines and their Latin

38. Akropolites, *Χρονικὴ Συγγραφή*, 118-124; Skoutariotes, *Σύνοψις Χρονική*, 518-522.

39. On the military presence of steppe peoples in the Balkans during the period in question, see I. Vásáry, *Cumans and Tatars. Oriental Military in the Pre-Ottoman Balkans, 1185–1365*, Cambridge 2005.

40. Akropolites, *Χρονικὴ Συγγραφή*, 41-43; Skoutariotes, *Σύνοψις Χρονική*, 474-475; Nikephoros Gregoras, *Ῥωμαϊκὴ Ἱστορία*, ed. L. Schopen, *Nicephori Gregorae Byzantina Historia* I [CSHB], Bonn 1829, 28.

mercenary knights. In a pitched battle fought near the village of Klokotnitsa, Theodore Komnenos Doukas lost both the fight and his kingdom[41].

The danger of staking everything on the uncertain outcome of a "decisive battle" was not lost on contemporary Byzantines. In June 1211 Theodore I Lascaris decided to face the invading forces of the Seljuk sultan Ghiyāth ad-Dīn Kaykhusraw I in battle. Fifty years later, the historian George Akropolites called the emperor's decision "a roll of the dice"[42]. However, it was the strategic importance of the Maeander valley in general –and of the fortified town of Antioch (possibly near mod. Aliağaçiftliği) in particular– that forced the Byzantine ruler's hand; in fact, it was Kaykhusraw who rolled the dice, and his arrogant decision to accept battle ultimately cost him his life[43].

The case of Antioch was hardly an isolated one. The "Gazetteer of Late Byzantine Military Conflicts" contains a number of battles that were connected to a siege. As early as 1205, the encounter outside the walls of Arkadiopolis (mod. Lüleburgaz) –classified as a battle in the "Gazetteer"– was actually a sortie by the town's Latin garrison against the Byzantine rebels besieging it. A few weeks later, the battle of Adrianople (which, it should be noted, did not meet the criteria that would allow it to be included in the "Gazetteer"[44]) was brought about by the intervention of Tsar Kaloyan, whose troops and Cuman auxiliaries marched to relieve the Byzantine defenders of the Thracian city when it was besieged by an army of Franks and Venetians[45]. The battle near Pharsala (c. 1277) was a

41. Brief accounts of the Klokotnitsa campaign may be found in J. V. A. Fine, *The Late Medieval Balkans: A Critical Survey from the Late Twelfth Century to the Ottoman Conquest*, Ann Arbor 1987, 124-126; F. Bredenkamp, *The Byzantine Empire of Thessaloniki (1224–1242)*, Thessaloniki 1996, 150-153; Madgearu, *Asanids*, 201-204.

42. Akropolites, *Χρονικὴ Συγγραφή*, 15-16: *καὶ οἷον ἐπὶ κύβου τὸν πόλεμον θείς.*

43. For a general overview of the military and diplomatic maneuvers of 1211, see Giarenis, *Συγκρότηση*, 70-82.

44. It was not eligible since neither of the opponents were Byzantines. This criterion has also precluded the inclusion of such large-scale decisive battles as Köse Dağ (1243), Halmyros (1311), Kossovo (1389), Nicopolis (1396), Ankara (1402), and Varna (1444).

45. Geoffrey Villehardouin, *La conquête de Constantinople*, ch. 347-366; Choniates, *Χρονικὴ Διήγησις*, 615-617. See also A. Krantonelli, *Ἡ κατὰ τῶν Λατίνων Ἑλληνο-Βουλγαρικὴ σύμπραξις ἐν Θράκῃ 1204–1206*, Athens 1964, 72-73; Madgearu, *Asanids*, 144-150.

meeting engagement between a force led by John I Doukas of Thessaly and an army sent by Michael VIII Palaiologos to supply the local garrison[46], while that of Bellegrada (outside mod. Berat) in 1281 was fought by Byzantine reinforcements skirmishing with an Angevin army that was besieging the city[47]. Another engagement that has been classified as a battle in the "Gazetteer" is Bizye (1307), an example of overconfidence on the part of Byzantine civilians, who managed to convince the city's garrison commander, the *megas tzaousios* Oumbertopoulos, to lead them in a sortie against the besieging Catalans[48].

The aforementioned armed conflict forms part of a larger war between the Byzantine Empire and the Grand Catalan Company which, despite the notions of earlier patriotic Spanish historians, who wished to view it as a glorious expedition similar to that of the later Conquistadors, was nothing more than a short interlude in the military history of the Byzantine Empire[49]. Consisting of a single pitched battle, that of Apros (1305), and a large number of raids and sieges of Byzantine cities in Thrace and Macedonia, many of them unsuccessful, the conflict between the Catalan mercenaries and their former employers clearly showed that, even after the Byzantine defeat at Apros, it was their ability to defend their cities –especially major urban centers, like Adrianople in 1306 and Thessaloniki in 1308– that

46. George Pachymeres, *Συγγραφικαὶ ἱστορίαι*, ed. A. Failler, *Georges Pachymérès, Relations historiques* II [CFHB 24/2], Paris 1984, 527. See also Kanellopoulos, *Οργάνωση*, 109, and D. J. Geanakoplos, *Emperor Michael Palaeologus and the West, 1258–1282. A Study in Byzantine-Latin Relations*, Cambridge, Mass. 1959, 297.

47. Kanellopoulos, *Οργάνωση*, 112-118.

48. Pachymeres, *Συγγραφικαὶ ἱστορίαι*, ed. Failler, *Georges Pachymérès, Relations historiques* IV [CFHB 24/4], Paris 1999, 693. See also A. Laiou, *Constantinople and the Latins. The Foreign Policy of Andronicus II 1282–1328*, Cambridge, Mass. 1972, 169-170; Bartusis, *Late Byzantine Army*, 293; Kyriakidis, *Warfare*, 168-170.

49. A brief account of the Catalan episode may be found in Laiou, *Constantinople*, 158-226; for more recent treatments of the subject, see D. Jacoby, The Catalan Company in the East: The Evolution of an Itinerant Army (1303–1311), in: *The Medieval Way of War: Studies in Medieval Military History in Honor of Bernard S. Bachrach*, ed. G. I. Halfond, Farnham - Burlington 2015, 153-182; V. Puech, Quelques aspects des relations des mercenaires catalans avec le pouvoir impérial byzantin au début du XIVe siècle, in: *Figures de l'autorité médiévale. Mélanges offerts à Michel Zimmermann*, ed. P. Chastang – P. Henriet – C. Soussen, Paris 2016, 221-233.

ultimately proved decisive. One may juxtapose this with the outcome of the war against the Duchy of Athens in 1311. When the Catalans turned against their Frankish masters for non-payment of the salaries they were owed, Gautier V de Brienne believed that he could easily defeat them in a pitched battle. The result was a resounding victory for the Catalans: they killed the Frankish duke and most of his lords, and ruled over Boeotia and Attica until 1388[50].

Let us conclude by reiterating the axiom that battle avoidance was neither new nor uncommon in the lands around the Eastern Mediterranean. Despite what some proponents of the notion of a "Western way of war" would have us believe, both the Byzantines and their opponents would frequently apply *Ermattungsstrategie* and *Manöverstrategie* if it suited their purposes (and for much of the Late Byzantine period their purpose was simply to survive)[51]. It would take the creation of powerful polities like the Ottoman Empire and the Kingdom of Hungary for the Balkans and the lands north of the Danube to once again become a field upon which large-scale decisive battles would be fought[52]. Indeed, some might say that the rule of the Ottomans over Southeastern Europe was consolidated only when they crushed the Hungarian army at Mohács (1526). But it was the war of attrition against the Greeks of Asia Minor, the sack of Thessaloniki in 1430, Constantinople in 1453 and Trebizond in 1461, along with the destructive raids against the Despotate of the Morea, that had created the Ottoman Empire in the first place.

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50. On the battle, see G. T. Kolias, Ἡ μεταξὺ Καταλανῶν καὶ μεγάλου δουκὸς τῶν Ἀθηνῶν μάχη (1311), *EEBΣ* 26 (1956), 358-379; K. DeVries, *Infantry Warfare in the Early Fourteenth Century*, Woodbridge – Rochester 1996, 58-65.

51. For an interesting study of sieges in fifteenth-century Western Greece and the use of "indirect approach" tactics (often by those same Franks who attributed such "dishonest" practices to the Byzantines) in siege warfare, see E. Synkellou, Εναλλακτικές μορφές πολέμου κατά τον όψιμο Μεσαίωνα: η «κλεψία», *Βυζαντιακά* 30 (2012–2013), 345-363.

52. See T. Pálosfalvi, *From Nicopolis to Mohács. A History of Ottoman-Hungarian Warfare, 1389–1526* [The Ottoman Empire and Its Heritage 63], Leiden – Boston 2018. Manpower and finances played a cardinal role in a state's ability to field large armies. This explains why the opponents in one of the largest battles of the Byzantine civil wars, that of Didymoteichon (also known as the battle of Demotika), were Byzantine in name only: the army of John V Palaiologos consisted of Serbs and Bulgarians, while that of John VI Kantakouzenos was fully Ottoman; see Fine, *The Late Medieval Balkans*, 325-326.

Μια Επισκοπηση των Πολεμικων Συγκρουσεων στο Υστερο Byzantio: Θεωρητικο Πλαισιο και Συγχρονη Ερευνα

Η μελέτη αποτελεί μία πρώιμη σύνοψη των συμπερασμάτων που προκύπτουν από το υλικό που συγκεντρώθηκε στο πλαίσιο του ερευνητικού προγράμματος «Ευρετήριο Πολεμικών Συγκρούσεων της Ύστερης Βυζαντινής Περιόδου». Οι παλαιότεροι μελετητές της στρατιωτικής ιστορίας είχαν υιοθετήσει ένα θεωρητικό υπόβαθρο το οποίο βασιζόταν στην έννοια της «αποφασιστικής μάχης», όπως την είχαν διατυπώσει οι θεωρητικοί του πολέμου τον 19ο αι. Μετά από μία σύντομη αναδρομή στην ιστορία της έρευνας, ιδίως των τελευταίων δεκαετιών, αναλύονται ορισμένα χαρακτηριστικά παραδείγματα εκστρατειών που χρονολογούνται στην υστεροβυζαντινή περίοδο. Το συμπέρασμα το οποίο συνάγεται από την ανάλυση αυτή είναι ότι οι εκ παρατάξεως μάχες ήταν κατά πολύ σπανιότερες σε σχέση με άλλου τύπου συγκρούσεις (κυρίως πολιορκίες και επιδρομές) που στόχο είχαν να φθείρουν τον αντίπαλο και όχι να καταστρέψουν τον στρατό του.