

Byzantine: The Battle of Manzikert

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The battle of Manzikert was such a shattering defeat that the Byzantines were never able to speak of it as other than "that terrible day". It was on that terrible day in 1071 that "Anatolia, heartland of Byzantium... was lost forever to Christendom" (Streater p 257). In one catastrophic day the eastern Roman Empire had lost its major recruiting region, its major grain producing region, and its vital trade route between Constantinople and the riches of the East.

The Emperor Romanus IV Diogenes was crowned on January 1st, 1068. According to Norwich, he was an arrogant man with a strong sense of his own importance but he was also a brave soldier. Romanus understood the threat the Seljuks posed to his empire. At home in Constantinople, Romanus had to deal with Michael Psellus and the Ducas family who, according to Norwich, loathed him and his rise to power and were resolved to bring about his destruction. The strength of this ill-feeling towards him made it virtually impossible for Romanus to leave Constantinople on campaigns, because every time he left there was the possibility of one of his enemies attempting a coup. This, however, played to his advantage because he was able to devote his energies to improving the army, obtaining new equipment, implementing new training programs and recruiting new forces. The truce that had recently been made with the Turkish leader Alp Arslan was continually being broken by the marauding Turkomans and was generally considered by Romanus as a failure. Romanus was already planning a campaign for 1071, with an army of some seventy thousand men.

According to Runciman, the army assembled by Romanus in 1071 was:

no longer the magnificent force it had been fifty years before..... The cavalry regiments, sixty thousand strong, that had patrolled the Syrian frontier... were now disbanded. The imperial guards, hand-picked and highly trained Anatolians, were far below their old strength. The bulk of the army consisted now of foreign mercenaries, the Norsemen of the Varangian Guard, Normans and Franks from western Europe, Slavs from the north, and Turks from the steppes of southern Russia, Petcheneg, cuman and Ghuzz. Out of these elements Romanus collected a force of nearly a hundred thousand men, of which perhaps half were Byzantine born.... (Runciman p 62)

This expedition crossed the Bosphorus in the second week of March 1071, and then headed eastward. The historian Michael Attaleiates was present; it is his version of events of that summer that remains the most detailed and trustworthy account of the Battle at Manzikert. Two-hundred miles into the journey, Romanus' demeanour is said to have changed dramatically. Attaleiates suggests that Romanus had been disturbed by various bad omens, among them being the sudden breakage of his tent pole, the unexplained fire in his tent that damaged most of his personal possessions and the loss of many of his best horses and mules. The Emperor's determination remained firm, realising that if he were to return to Constantinople without having engaged the Seljuks on the battle field, he would have little chance of maintaining his role as Emperor.

According to Norwich, Romanus sent the greater part of the Roman army towards Lake Van, under the command of the experienced general Joseph Tarchaniotes, while he himself and his senior commander Nicephorus Bryennius continued with the remainder of the army towards

the little fortress town of Manzikert. Tarchaniotes and his force met with misfortune of some sort, but it is not certain what happened. Later Moslem historians claimed that he had been overwhelmed in a great battle, but there is no contemporary evidence for this. Norwich believes that Tarchaniotes may have deliberately abandoned the emperor and was really a traitor, a tool of the Ducas family.

On the other hand, Runciman tells us that Joseph Tarchaniotes was Turkish born, and commanded the largest contingent of mercenaries, the Turkish Cumans. He believes that 'the Cumans, remembering that they were Turks and in arrears with their pay, had gone over in a body on the previous night to join the enemy' Whatever happened to Tarchaniotes, Romanus was now left to fight the Turks with less than half his army. His corps d'elite, the Norman and Frankish heavy cavalry, decided to take no part in the battle. (Runciman p 63)

There is no certainty about the actual date and location of the battle; the actual date varies from 5th August to 26th of August. Moslem historians are unanimous that it took place on a Friday in August; Michael Attaleiates says that it was a moonless night, and, according to Norwich, this means that it must have been the 26th. The most likely location is a fairly level steppe with rougher and hillier country close by, beyond which is a line of foothills cut through with ravines and gullies - ideal ambush territory - about a mile or two from the fortress of Manzikert.

There are no contemporary eye-witness accounts of the events of that day, other than Michael Attaleiates. According to Jasper Streater "Arab historians for two centuries wrote of it in great detail, and sometimes in rhyme, and no two agreed on the size of the armies engaged." (Streater, p 258) Anna Comnena refers to the battle very briefly towards the end of her history when she is narrating her father's dealings with the Turkish sultan Saisan:

(Alexius) made a speech, explaining his decision in full.'If you are willing' he said, 'to yield to the authority of Rome and to put an end to your raids on the Christians, you will enjoy favours and honour, living in freedom for the rest of your lives on lands set aside for you. I refer to the lands where you used to dwell before Romanus Diogenes became emperor and before he met the sultan in battle - an unfortunate and notorious clash which ended in the Roman's defeat and capture..' (Anna Comnena, 15,vi)

Anna's husband, Nicephorus Byrennius, whose grandfather took part in the battle, also wrote an account of the action. According to this, fighting began on the day before the actual battle, when Romanus sent out a detachment of troops to drive off what he believed to be a small band of turkish marauders, then later a larger detachment led by Byrennius himself. Byrennius found himself 'confronted with what must have been a considerable proportion of the entire Seljuk army' (Norwich p 349) By nightfall, it must have been clear that the Byzantine army would have to fight when the day came.

The expected battle did not take place on the next day. Instead, a Turkish delegation came with an offer of peace. Romanus dismissed the idea of a division of the Armenian territory proposed to him by the embassy. According to Streater, this was an inexplicable error on his part, a failure to exploit the growing rift between two branches of Islam, the Shi'ites and the Sunni. Alp Arslan had been intent on marching against the Fatimid dynasty in Egypt and only turned north reluctantly to deal with the Byzantine threat. Romanus could have exploited the Moslem quarrel to his own advantage. His refusal made the battle certain.

It seems likely that Romanus now organised his men on the battle field in the style of the traditional army manuals, that is, a long line several ranks deep, with the cavalry on the ends. Romanus himself took the centre, with Bryennius on his left and a general named Alyattes on his right. The rearguard was composed of the private armies of the great landowners, under the command of Andronicus Ducas, the nephew of the late Emperor. Andronicus should never have been allowed to participate in the battle, let alone to lead the rearguard, as he made no secret of his contempt and loathing for Romanus. However, Romanus no doubt thought it better to have Andronicus under his watchful eye, rather than at home in Constantinople where he was likely to stir up more trouble, or so Romanus thought.

The imperial army advanced across the steppe towards the Seljuks, who steadily withdrew into a crescent, allowing their archers to shower the Byzantine's flanks with arrows. The cavalry, probably angered by the Seljuks' archery, followed the Seljuk horsemen towards the foothills and fell straight into prepared ambushes. The Emperor remained on the battlefield, frustrated by the lack of enemy. Realising that there was nothing further to gain from pursuit, especially as the sun was setting and he had left his camp practically undefended, Romanus ordered the imperial standards to be reversed, the signal to withdraw. Alp Arslan had been waiting for this signal from his observation point in the hills above and ordered his men to attack. As Arslan's men poured down onto the steppe, the Romans broke in confusion. Many of the mercenary units retreated, assuming that the Emperor had been killed or captured, and this allowed the Seljuks to infiltrate the front line and separate it from the rearguard. Had the rearguard acted correctly by moving forward they would have prevented the Seljuks' escape. Instead, Andronicus spread the word that the emperor had been killed and the battle lost, and subsequently fled. This act caused more confusion among the remaining troops and more and more of them fled the battlefield. Only the Emperor remained with his personal guards around him. Romanus fought valiantly until the end:

The emperor was completely isolated and deprived of reinforcement. Then he charged, his sword bare, killed more than one Turk and forced others to flee. But finally, surrounded by a mass of enemies, he was wounded in the hand. Recognized by the enemy, hemmed in on all sides, he was captured when an arrow wounded his horse, which slipped and lost its footing, felling its rider at the same time (Hallam p 42)

Romanus was treated by Alp Arslan with the respect that his position entailed. For the next week, Romanus remained as a guest in the Turkish camp and ate at Alp Arslan's table. The peace terms were more than moderate and merciful. The Sultan only demanded the surrender of Manzikert, Antioch, Edessa and Hieropolis as well as one of Romanus' daughters as a wife for one of Arslan's sons. The ransom for Romanus was even reduced from ten million to half a million, with a further three-hundred and sixty thousand in annual tribute. Romanus was then allowed to return to Constantinople, because of the very real danger of a threat to his throne. Romanus had hoped to return to Constantinople as Emperor, but these feelings were not shared by the inhabitants of Constantinople. The news of the defeat had come as the second cracking blow in one year, as 1071 had also seen the fall of Byzantine Italy to the Normans led by Robert Guiscard. This is how the arrival of the news was described by Nicephorus Bryennius:

A very few days passed before one of the fugitives arrived at Constantinople as bearer of evil tidings, and then there was another, then a third and a fourth, having nothing precise to announce except the catastrophe itself..... The matter was discussed in council by Empress Eudocia, Romanus' wife, who was asking what she had to do. Everyone agreed that it was

necessary provisionally to abandon Romanus to his fate, whether he was prisoner or dead, and that the empress must secure the power for herself and her sons. Everyone was still in suspense when it was decided that the empress-mother and Michael Ducas, the eldest of her sons, should share the empire under the following conditions: Eudocia should have the honours due to the mother of the emperor, but she should share with her son the reality of supreme power... (Hallam p 42)

Romanus was able to gather together what was left of his army with the intention of marching into Constantinople and reclaiming the throne from his step-son, Michael VII Ducas. There were two battles before Romanus reached Constantinople, both against John Ducas and in both Romanus was defeated. After the second battle he gave himself up to Andronicus, agreeing to renounce all claims to the throne and to retire to a monastery. In return he was given assurance that no harm would come to him on his return to Constantinople. However, Andronicus put Romanus on a mule for the five-hundred mile journey back to Constantinople and allowed him to be attacked by onlookers, one of whom poked out his eyes. Romanus died in the summer of 1072.

The Battle of Manzikert can be seen as the most disastrous battle in the history of Byzantine civilization. Romanus was a brave and gallant leader, but it was his naivety in trusting Andronicus with leadership of the rearguard and his lack of information of the enemy's movements which caused the East Roman army's worst defeat ever.

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