

Examining Operational Art in Byzantine Campaigns

A Monograph

by

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Abstract

Examining Operational Art in Byzantine Campaigns By MAJ White, Jeremy S. US Army, 38 Pages.

This monograph analyzes historical campaigns through the lens of modern American military doctrine. Using the elements of operational art – particularly the concepts of operational reach, center of gravity, and risk – it compares the campaigns of Basil II against the Bulgars and Romanus IV against the Seljuk Turks. The study argues Romanus IV failed in his campaign against the Seljuk Turks by imprudently accepting unmitigated operational risk. This gamble led to his capture, the defeat of his army, and the subsequent collapse of the Byzantine Empire from invasion and civil war. In contrast, his predecessor Basil II cultivated his strategic, operational, and tactical capacities in Bulgaria which mitigated the risk of failure. By assuming mitigated risk to create an opportunity, Basil II defeated the Bulgarian field army while preserving his options to continue the campaign. These outcomes should prompt modern operational artists to deeply consider the risk inherent in Large-Scale Combat Operations in a world of reemerging great power competition.

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Acronyms

ADP	Army Doctrine Publication
ADRP	Army Doctrine Reference Publication
JP	Joint Publication
FM	Field Manual
LSCO	Large-Scale Combat Operations
LOC	Line of Communication
COG	Center of Gravity

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Section 1 – Introduction

In an increasingly competitive world, the US Army doctrine is developing from a counter-insurgency model towards Large-Scale Combat Operations (LSCO). *Field Manual (FM) 3-0, Operations* focuses the US Army on setting conditions and winning in decisive battles. These battles are some of most chaotic, complex, and dangerous endeavors the leaders of this country will ask the US Army to undertake.¹ LSCO against near-peer competitors will likely involve commanders assuming operational risk with the lives of soldiers numbering in the tens of thousands. With the US Army focused on LSCO, there is a danger our leaders are rushing to decisive battle. Gambling with operational risk and failing to assume risk prudently when the opportunity for decisive battle arises can lead to strategic catastrophe. Romanus IV chanced his forces in such a way at the Battle of Manzikert on 26 August 1071. His defeat and capture there played a major part in the collapse of the Byzantine Empire. This monograph examines the Byzantine Empire's campaigns, its leaders, and their assumption of operational risk during a transitory period as its military shifted toward conventional operations and decisive battle.

The Byzantine Empire lasted for nearly 1000 years after the fall of Rome.² It went through periods of ascendancy and dramatic decline over its long history. Its successes and failures tell the tale of its leaders as they struggled to contend with the challenges of their time. Two leaders stand in contrast between one's triumphant victory against another's tragic defeat. The Emperor Basil II developed a careful campaign to annex the troublesome Bulgarians that led to the massive expansion of the Empire and its resources. Romanus IV, however, led an ultimately disastrous campaign against the Seljuk Turks resulting in the loss of some of the most important regions in the Empire. These two leaders attempted to leverage their strategic, operational, and tactical capacities while leading their armies against rival empires. Their

¹ US Department of the Army, *Field Manual (FM) 3-0, Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2017), 1-1.

² Warren Treadgold, *A Concise History of Byzantium* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2001), 1.

decisions in the assumption of operational risk highlights the success of Basil II's campaign against the failure of Romanus IV.

Both leaders faced enemies in stark and rugged terrain and had to balance their campaigns with the constant tether of operational reach. Basil cut through the Bulgarian heartland and secured basing that helped maintain the endurance, momentum, and security of his efforts against the Bulgars. Romanus campaigned against the Seljuk Turks to seize vital bases to pressure the Seljuk Turks into a favorable battle, but faced a highly mobile enemy frustrating his attempts at every turn. While Basil could afford to take a patient approach to maintain his operation, the context of Romanus' time pushed him to assume larger risks for greater rewards. While the two Emperors faced different terrain at different times, they both recognized the importance of operational reach to their campaigns.

Basil and Romanus faced determined enemies with elusive field armies menacing their operations. Basil faced the irregular warfare of the Bulgarian army trying to take any advantage to overcome the Byzantine advantage of open battle. Only by attacking the Bulgarian army's ability to maneuver freely could Basil bring his enemy to battle on favorable terms. Romanus attempted to pursue a similar operation by threatening the Seljuk Turk heartlands to lure his mounted enemy to face his far larger army in open battle. His hope for a set-piece battle was realized, but the risks he assumed to precipitate there would be his undoing.

The purpose of this monograph is to examine the planning and execution of campaigns by these Byzantine leaders, and particularly their relative success when applying the elements of operational art. The comparative analysis of this paper will specifically consider the elements of operational reach, center of gravity, and risk when examining the two campaigns, as defined in US Joint and Army doctrine. This monograph will show the crucial moment of both Emperors' campaigns came when they assumed operational risk by splitting their forces to achieve an opportunity for decisive results. Romanus failed in his campaign against the Seljuk Turks by imprudently accepting unmitigated operational risk. This gamble led to his capture, the defeat of

his army, and the subsequent collapse of the Byzantine Empire from invasion and civil war. In contrast, Basil cultivated his strategic, operational, and tactical capacities in Bulgaria which mitigated the risk of failure. Assuming mitigated risk created an opportunity for Basil to defeat the Bulgarian field army, while preserving his options to continue the campaign. Romanus gambled on the probabilities inherent in warfare and lost everything, while his predecessor established mitigating factors to ensure his operations could continue.

Elements of Doctrine

In modern US doctrine, planners use intellectual tools such as the elements of operational art when creating an approach to solve complex problems. These elements represent critical factors planners incorporate into their efforts to have a higher chance of success in their campaign. They allow operational artists to better describe and visualize the arrangement of their capabilities in an operational approach, enabling them to construct a distinctive methodology for analyzing the operational environment and preparing operations. Though the elements of operational art are important, not all may be critical for every operation.³ This monograph will consider the elements of operational reach, center of gravity, and risk.

Operational reach is “the distance and duration across which a joint force can successfully employ military capabilities.”⁴ Military planners must balance the natural tensions of endurance, momentum, and protection to sustain their reach and avoid culminating before their objective.⁵ The operating environment’s geography and weather conditions can limit operational reach. Enemy action can also limit a military’s operational reach by denying key resources, terrain, or threatening a force’s lines of communication (LOCs). Forward basing of resources can

³ US Department of the Army, *Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 3-0, Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2016), 2-4.

⁴ US Department of Defense, Joint Staff, *Joint Publication (JP) 5-0, Joint Planning* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2017), IV-35.

⁵ US Army, *ADRP 3-0*, 2-8.

conversely increase operational reach for a military force. Operational reach provides a military force the ability to leverage combat power against the enemy across time and space.

The center of gravity (COG) is “a source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act.”⁶ In other words, the COG is the part of the system doing the action to achieve the objective.⁷ COGs exist on friendly and enemy sides of the battlefield. Both sides seek to protect their COG while assailing their adversary’s COG directly or indirectly. The COG theoretically represents the balancing point of the operational system. It possesses critical capabilities with which it performs actions and relies on critical requirements from which it draws its strength. Some of these requirements are vulnerable to attack which could weaken the COG without opposing it directly. By identifying the vulnerabilities of the enemy, the operational planner can take an indirect approach to defeating the enemy’s center of gravity. Whether a military planner strikes the enemy’s COG directly or indirectly, defeating the enemy COG should cause a collapse of the entire system.⁸

Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0, Operations places the risk at the heart of operational art itself. Operational art is how commanders balance risk and opportunity to create and maintain the conditions necessary to seize, retain, and exploit the initiative and gain a position of relative advantage while linking tactical actions to reach a strategic objective.⁹ As Carl Von Clausewitz points out, all warfare involves probability and uncertainty.¹⁰ The ambiguous

⁶ US Joint Staff, *JP 5-0, Joint Planning* 2017, IV-23.

⁷ Joe Strange and Richard Iron, “Understanding Center of Gravity and Critical Vulnerabilities Part II,” United States Airforce Air War College, accessed April 1, 2019, <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/usmc/cog2.pdf>, 7.

⁸ US Joint Staff, *JP 5-0, Joint Planning* 2017, IV-25.

⁹ US Department of the Army, *Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0, Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2011), 10.

¹⁰ Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 85-88.

nature of combat brings with it risk of failure but also opportunity. Prudent risk is when the potential damage to the operation is worth the cost to achieve some opportunity.¹¹ Prudent risk-taking is necessary to take advantage in combat, but it is not truly gambling. By deliberately assuming risk and mitigating it to maintain options should the operation fail, the operational artist can eschew gambling and avoid staking the success of the action to a single event.

This monograph will use these three elements of operational art to compare the efforts of Basil and Romanus. These past campaigns can be powerful lessons for the future. Through this analysis, operational artists can leverage the experiences of the Byzantine Emperors and improve their ability to plan campaigns involving decisive battle and operational risk. The future of US combat operations lean toward LSCO as our doctrinal focus continues to develop. Operational planners can learn an indirect approach to combat enabling decisive battle with mitigated operational risk from the Byzantines.

Literature review

One of the major sources of Byzantine historiography is John Skylitzes' *Synopsis Historion*. This important work is a comprehensive look at Byzantine history from 811, at the death of Nikephoros I, to 1057 when Michael VI abdicated. Born sometime before 1050, and writing during the reign of Alexios Komnenos between 1081 and 1118, Skylitzes likely did not have firsthand knowledge of most of the period he covers. The author states clearly that his intent is to combine, harmonize, and abridge the works existing at his time.¹² Given the time period and the focus on the Macedonian imperial dynasty, the long reign of Basil receives much attention. For this reason, John Skylitzes' *Synopsis Historion* remains a key source for study of Basil and his campaigns against the Bulgars.

¹¹ US Army, *ADP 3-0* (2011), 14.

¹² John Skylitzes, *John Skylitzes: A Synopsis of Byzantine History, 811–1057*, trans. John Wortley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), ix.

Another important primary source relevant to this monograph is *The History* by Michael Attaleiates. A Byzantine bureaucrat born sometime around 1025, Attaleiates served in the Imperial Senate as a legal advisor and later as the “Judge of the Army” during the reign of Romanus.¹³ Attaleiates was present through every campaign of Romanus from his ascension to the throne to his downfall at Manzikert. His work describes the time period from 1034 until roughly 1079. As a survivor of the dreadful battle and important dignitary of the Byzantine Empire at the time, Attaleiates’ accounts of the campaigns of Romanus and the aftermath of the Battle of Manzikert are comprise a large portion of the book.

A third prominent primary source describing the period relevant to this monograph is Matthew of Edessa’s *Chronicle*. Matthew was a monk living in Edessa at the beginning of the twelfth century. His *Chronicle* covers events from 952 to 1051 through sources at the time, events from 1051-1101 through eyewitnesses living in Matthew’s time, and 1101 to 1136 through the author’s own experiences.¹⁴ Despite his lack of personal experience with the timeline of this study, Matthew of Edessa’s contributions are important to consider due to the relative lack of other primary sources with significant depth during this period.

For understanding of the Byzantine way of war, this monograph will consider four Byzantine works which served as doctrine of sorts for Byzantine leaders. Maurice’s *Strategikon*, Leo VI’s *Taktika*, and Nikephoros II’s *Praecepta militaria* all served as handbooks for Byzantine military leaders through time.¹⁵ These books provide a body of evidence describing Byzantine military thought. Through these works, historians can discern a continuous military tradition

¹³ Michael Attaleiates, *The History*, trans. Anthony Kaldellis and Dimitris Krallis (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), viii.

¹⁴ Matthew of Edessa, *Armenia and the Crusades: Tenth to Twelfth Centuries: The Chronicle of Matthew of Edessa*, trans. Ara Edmond Dostourian, (Belmont, MA: Armenian Heritage Press, 2013), 1.

¹⁵ Leo VI, *The Taktika of Leo VI*, trans. George T. Dennis (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 2014), ix-xiv; Maurice, *Maurice’s Strategikon*, trans. George T. Dennis (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), vii-xxi; Eric McGeer, *Sewing the Dragon’s Teeth: Byzantine Warfare in the Tenth Century* (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1995), 3-61.

scarcely present anywhere else in Europe at the time. By considering the vocabulary of the sources and decisions made by Basil and Romanus, modern historians are confident both Emperors were at least familiar with the precepts of Byzantine doctrine and made their decisions in light of them.¹⁶

For secondary sources, the works of Warren Treadgold are some of the most well-respected sources on the Byzantine Empire. His book *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* provides historians a general survey of the Byzantine Empire from its inception to its collapse in 1453 and beyond.¹⁷ *A Concise History of Byzantium* provides a more condensed survey of the Empire within the same period.¹⁸ Another one of his works, *Byzantium and Its Armies 284-1081*, considers specifically the Byzantine army and provides a general survey of its workings until its collapse following the Battle of Manzikert.¹⁹ This monograph considers both of these works as general surveys of the Byzantine Empire and its military.

Other modern sources on Byzantine history come from the historian John Haldon. His book *Byzantium at War* provides a short survey of the Empire from its inception to its fall in 1453.²⁰ *The Byzantine Wars* provide a more in-depth survey of Byzantine military conflicts, exploring each major period from the strategic to the tactical levels of war.²¹ Another important work of Haldon's is *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World 565-1204* in which the

¹⁶ John Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World 565-1204* (London: University College London, 1999), 200-201; McGeer, *Sowing the Dragon's Teeth*, 252-292; Brian Todd Carey, Joshua B. Allfree, and John Cairns, *Road to Manzikert: Byzantine and Islamic Warfare, 527-1071* (Barnsley, UK: Pen & Sword, 2012), 99.

¹⁷ Warren Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 3-10.

¹⁸ Treadgold, *A Concise History of Byzantium*, 1-6.

¹⁹ Warren Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 1-7.

²⁰ John Haldon, *Byzantium at War* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2003), 1-4.

²¹ John Haldon, *The Byzantine Wars* (Charleston, SC: Tempus Publishing, 2001), 7-11.

author delves into the cultural impact of warfare.²² He also provides vital knowledge of the Byzantine logistical system.²³

Paul Stephenson provides a critical look into the campaigns of Basil in *The Legend of Basil the Bulgar-Slayer*.²⁴ Primarily concerned with the accuracy of Basil's posthumous reputation as "the Bulgar-Slayer," Stephenson provides in-depth analysis of Basil's efforts in Bulgaria. Stephenson's work largely concerns the way the Greeks built Basil's reputation as a conquering hero generations after his death. However, the book delves deeply into the Byzantine Emperor's campaigns and motivations when fighting the Bulgars.

Brian Todd Carey, Joshua B. Allfree, and John Cairns' book *Road to Manzikert: Byzantine and Islamic Warfare 527-1071* offers an in depth look at Romanus' campaign against the Seljuk Turks.²⁵ The authors consider the primary sources of the time with modern scholarship to depict the campaign and defeat at Manzikert. *Road to Manzikert* makes the argument that Romanus' defeat was not so much a military disaster, but rather a political one originating with the succession crisis present at the time between Romanus and the Doukas clan.

The Byzantine Empire

The Byzantine Empire, as modern people often refer to it, suffers from a naming problem. Often derided in the West as "the Empire of the Greeks," Byzantium lost its proper connection to classic antiquity. The Byzantine Empire is in fact the Roman Empire continued. From the fall of the western half of the Roman Empire to the final fall of Constantinople in 1453, the Eastern Roman Empire survived for nearly 1,000 more years. In its time, Byzantium's neighbors referred to it as "Rome" and its people as "the Romans." In the mid-nineteenth century,

²² Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World 565-1204*, 1-12.

²³ *Ibid.*, 143-148.

²⁴ Paul Stephenson, *The Legend of Basil the Bulgar-Slayer* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1.

²⁵ Carey, Allfree, and Cairns, *Road to Manzikert: Byzantine and Islamic Warfare, 527-1071*, 6-7.

the term “Byzantine Empire” came into regular use to distinguish the Eastern Roman Empire, dominated by Greek language and culture, from the western half where Latin was prevalent.²⁶

While this distinction may strip away some of the grandeur of the connection to Rome, it is an important and useful way to characterize the Eastern Roman Empire. It became a separate entity within the larger Roman Empire in the third century, when the Emperor Diocletian appointed Maximian a co-Emperor in charge of administering the western half of the Empire.²⁷ While this system waxed and waned in formality over the centuries, its distinction grew when Emperor Constantine established a “New Rome” over the site of an older city named Byzantium. Constantine named this city Constantinople in honor of himself, which became the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire for a millennium to come.²⁸

The separation from the Latin Roman tradition grew when in the fifth century, the Western half of the Empire collapsed. The remaining eastern half continued to regard the lands lost as theirs. Emperor Justinian made substantial efforts to regain the Empire’s holdings in the west in the sixth century.²⁹ His successes may have restored much of the territory, but the Eastern Roman Empire strained to hold its far-flung conquests. Though stretched thin and weakened by the first known appearance of the bubonic plague in Europe, the Roman Empire continued, albeit centered exclusively on Constantinople.³⁰

A new great power emerging from the Arab peninsula largely dashed any hope of reclamation of the larger Roman Empire in the seventh century. While also embroiled in a long-running war with Persia, the Emperor Heraclitus faced war with the rampaging Muslim

²⁶ Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society*, 3-10.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁹ Haldon, *Byzantium at War*, 12-13.

³⁰ Treadgold, *A Concise History of Byzantium*, 62-73. This the first recorded occurrence of the disease in Europe.

Caliphate. The Arab armies attacked from every direction, pushing back the Byzantine Empire and overwhelming the Persians completely.³¹ From 636 to 685, the Empire's borders shrank drastically. The Arabs conquered most of the Empire's middle-eastern and African provinces, while Slavic tribes took advantage of the fighting to conquer large swaths of the Byzantine's Balkan territory.³² Having lost most of their peripheral territories, the Byzantine Empire settled into a period of strategic defense centered on their Anatolian provinces.

Now at the crossroads of Bulgarian and Khazarian tribes to the west, and with the Muslim Caliphate threatening their east, the Byzantine Empire reorganized their traditional, Roman way of war into a distinctly Byzantine approach. Instead of maintaining massive field armies that could hardly hold the thinly stretched borders of the Empire against threats from all sides, the Byzantines settled on a strategy of defense in depth. They organized their Anatolian provinces into *themes*, where each one would maintain its own regional forces spread out in small forts, or in large fortress-cities.³³ Invading forces would have to either besiege each fort as they moved into Anatolia, or bypass them; the defenders of bypassed forts would then threaten the invader's lines of communication and shadow the force to provide intelligence. Eventually the invading army would have to either abandon their attack due to the risk of culmination, or delay their advance thereby providing the Byzantine army a chance to consolidate and attack.³⁴

This defensive strategy served the Byzantines well for the turbulent seventh and eighth centuries. As the Empire began to prosper in their much smaller, but more defensible position, they saw the opportunity for expansion. The Arabs, having divided their Caliphate after a period of civil wars, were considerably weaker than they were when they conquered most of the

³¹ Treadgold, *A Concise History of Byzantium*, 91-99.

³² Haldon, *Byzantium at War*, 14.

³³ John Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World 565-1204* (London: University College London, 1999), 77-79.

³⁴ Michael J. Decker, *The Byzantine Art of War* (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2013), 138-139.

Byzantine Empire in the seventh century. The Bulgars, a nomadic tribe that owned much of the former Byzantine lands to the West of Constantinople, were also entering a period of internal strife and weakness.³⁵ With the ascension of Nicephoros II Phokas, the Byzantine Empire saw a period of military successes unmatched since the reclamation wars of Emperor Justinian in the 5th century. He and his heirs adopted an offensive strategy bent on reclaiming some of the Empire's historic territory.

The change in strategy generated direct competition with the great powers on Byzantium's borders. No longer focused on deterring raids and minor invasions, its Emperors all but abandoned the *theme* system in favor of standing armies called *tagmata*.³⁶ The Empire now refused to suffer the periodic incursions of other states. Instead, the Byzantines concentrated their substantial resources into a mighty field army and hardened their borders. With its powerful army, the Byzantine Emperors of the tenth century would wrest back control of long-lost territory. With this hardness and strength, however, came inflexibility and brittleness. The Byzantine leaders had forgotten an important lesson from their past defeats: large-scale combat involves a great deal of chance. The Byzantine success would continue for a short time, but it eventually faltered against another great empire.

Section 2 – The Campaigns of Basil II

Strategic Context

Basil II inherited an Empire on an ascendant trajectory. The Macedonian dynasty had overseen decades of military reform and expansionist policies. While Basil II's father, Romanus II, died while he was only six years old, the boy Emperor stood as co-Emperor behind two victorious military generals who revitalized the long-withering Byzantine Empire. With their successes came a drastic change in Byzantine grand strategy. While the Empire had been

³⁵ Haldon, *Byzantium at War*, 15.

³⁶ Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World 565-1204*, 92-93.

surviving since the mid-seventh century relying on *thematic* armies to dissuade and defeat invaders on the frontiers, a more aggressive stance emerged in the tenth century that entailed an increased quality of standing armies and utilization of defensive hard-points along the frontier.

The aggressive reconquest of territory began in earnest with the accession of Basil's first co-Emperor, Nicephorus II Phokas in 963.³⁷ Under his leadership Crete, Cyprus, and much of Armenia reintegrated into the Empire. When the Bulgars attacked the Empire, Nicephorus invited the Kievan Rus to attack the Bulgars, allowing the Emperor to focus against the Arabs.³⁸ After Nicephorus's death in 969, John I Tzimisce, another gifted general, ascended next to the throne and resumed the offensive strategy of his predecessor. The newly crowned co-Emperor seized the ancient city of Antioch from the Arabs and defeated the Kievan Rus when they threatened the Byzantine Empire to the west, annexing most of the Bulgar lands in the process.³⁹ Turning east again, John I campaigned even deeper into Arab lands, winning more territory and promising to take back Jerusalem.

The Byzantine Emperors were steadily transforming the Empire's strategy from a defense-in-depth with local forces working independently to overcome invaders, to a more professional force with standing armies. A major issue was the Emperor needed to muster large field forces and respond to threats centrally from Constantinople.⁴⁰ This structure worked well when the Emperor focused his power toward one enemy, but was vulnerable when faced with threats on two fronts. The Bulgars would learn this lesson and try to reassert themselves once an eastern distraction could capture Byzantine attention.

³⁷ John Julius Norwich, *Byzantium: The Apogee* (London, UK: Penguin Books, 1993), 183.

³⁸ Haldon, *The Byzantine Wars*, 96-97. The Kievan Rus were a mixture of Scandinavian settlers and indigenous Slavic peoples of central and western Russia. Their power grew greatly during this period and their longships often reached the Black Sea.

³⁹ Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army*, 36.

⁴⁰ Haldon, *The Byzantine Wars*, 109.

When John I died suddenly from illness in 976, Basil became sole Emperor at the age of eighteen, facing significant internal and external problems that challenged the flexibility of the Byzantine strategy.⁴¹ The eastern army commander Bardas Sclerus sparked a civil war, commanding most of his *thematic* armies. With internal strife pulling resources to the east, the Bulgars rebelled against the Byzantines under the leadership of Tsar Samuel. After extinguishing the civil war in its infancy and turning his army west, Basil faced the Bulgars for the first time. The latter successfully defeated the young Emperor's forces in 986.⁴² This loss sparked another civil war in the east. Basil then abandoned his western provinces to the Bulgars, and with the aid of Rus mercenaries, defeated his last domestic rival by 990.⁴³ The repeated shuffling of the Byzantine army to and from its opposite boundaries displayed the weakness inherent in the Empire's strategy. Without the resources to fight on both fronts simultaneously, Basil had to assume risk in one theater to pursue any effort on another.

His powerbase finally secured, Basil could now focus his attention on the Bulgarian Khanate. The Bulgars had grown powerful while internal threats distracted the Byzantines. Tsar Samuel commanded a kingdom stretching from modern day Macedonia into Thrace and up to the Danube river as shown in Figure 1. Basil, however, had one of the largest and most disciplined armies in all of Europe or the Middle-East at the end of the tenth century. The most limiting factor in Byzantine strategy was the potential for simultaneous attacks from the east and the west. For Basil, however, infighting in the Muslim world during his reign weakened the threat of attack from the east.⁴⁴ With the circumstances providing alleviating danger in his eastern theater, Basil assumed mitigated strategic risk and focused his efforts in the west.

⁴¹ Haldon, *The Byzantine Wars*, 105.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 106.

⁴³ Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army*, 37.

⁴⁴ Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society*, 521.

Operational Context

The operational advantages of the Byzantine Empire lessened the impact of their strategic challenges. While moving its army back and forth across the length of the Empire posed challenges, Basil possessed several operational advantages in his campaigns against the Bulgars. Operational reach, joint capabilities, and a steady tempo of operations gave the Byzantines an advantage in designing their operational approach.

The greatest Byzantine advantage was their operational reach on their western border. Basil could pursue lengthy campaigns against the Bulgars within the logistical reach of his seat of power in Constantinople. Arms, armament, and personnel flowed primarily through the Imperial capital by the tenth century. Road networks, built by the Roman Empire, still survived through the region, aiding logistical supply. Four major arteries flowed out of Constantinople and through Bulgaria, Macedonia, and into Greece.⁴⁵ Major river routes also aided supply. The principle waterway – which also served as the demarcation the Northern Bulgarian border – was the Danube. Basil well understood the value of rivers for supply and troop transport, as previous emperors had used this capability against the Bulgars to shorten supply routes during their campaigns.⁴⁶

The Mediterranean Sea and major rivers surrounding and penetrating Bulgarian territory allowed the Byzantines to leverage their naval power against the inherently terrestrial Bulgars. The Danube had long served as a route for the Byzantine navy. John I Tzimisces had previously used the river as a staging point for amphibious landings and supply against the Bulgars and the Rus.⁴⁷ In 971, the Bulgars had witnessed the Byzantine navy using the Danube to pin the Rus in

⁴⁵ Haldon, *Warfare, State, and Society in the Byzantine World 565-1204*, 54.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 182.

at Dristra allowing Tzimisces forces to lay siege.⁴⁸ Any operations against the Bulgars would have the advantage of amphibious transport troops while denying them use of waterways.

Basil also controlled the timing of operations in Bulgaria. Early in his campaigns against the Bulgars, his forces seized fortifications in the northeastern areas of the region.⁴⁹ These defensive strongpoints, established in the most cultivated portions of Bulgaria, and which helped secure naval control of the Danube River, greatly limited the Bulgarian Tsar's capability to launch offensive campaigns. This fact ceded the initiative to the Byzantine Emperor, which Basil took full advantage of by launching annual campaigns against the Bulgarians from 1004 to 1014.⁵⁰ Dictating the timing and arrangements of operations, the Bulgarians could only react.

With the initiative fully in hand, joint army-navy capabilities far superior to that of the Bulgarians, and operational reach to bring the fight into the heart of Bulgaria, Basil possessed a great number of operational advantages. The Emperor could thus afford to take his time, exploit opportunities, and when assume risk when necessary knowing a full collapse of these advantages was highly unlikely in any defeat. Moreover, tactical advantages further enhanced these operational capabilities.

Tactical Context

The Byzantine armies had been cavalry-heavy organizations for centuries. Since the time of Heraclitus, the Empire had been on the strategic defensive. The delaying strategy adopted after the Arab invasion required highly mobile units of cavalry to follow, harass, and break the invading army's line of communication. The typical invaders of the time were Arab and Steppe clans who usually fought from horseback in highly mobile formations. The *Strategikon* details tactics used against such foes, and expresses the need for a high ratio of cavalry to infantry in the

⁴⁸ Haldon, *The Byzantine Wars*, 103.

⁴⁹ Stephenson, *The Legend of Basil the Bulgar-Slayer*, 20.

⁵⁰ Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society*, 525.

army.⁵¹ By the reign of Nicephorus, however, the Byzantine army utilized much more infantry, which mirrored strategic changes.⁵² As taking and holding territory was the goal for Emperors of this time, the need for infantry grew.

The Byzantine army in the late tenth century was a highly trained fighting force capable of defeating enemies in open combat. Emperors Nicephorus II and John I dedicated much of their effort as Emperor to training the Byzantine army for war. In 965, Nicephorus II had written the *Praecepta*, a tactical manual to stress the importance of training and unit cohesion in battle. Basil reinforced the rigor of training when taking the throne.⁵³ All three of these militant Emperors also enhanced the use of competent foreign mercenaries and standing, professional *tagmata* units.⁵⁴ This move away from the *theme* system would degrade the frontier power to repel invasions and harassment of irregular attackers, but would strengthen the discipline and reliability of the Byzantine standing army. With a well-trained, disciplined, and experienced fighting force fresh off decades of combat, Basil possessed impressive tactical advantages when facing the Bulgars on campaign.

Infantry-focused tactics were an advantage against Bulgars in the tenth century. They had little success against the Byzantine armies in set-piece battles. The Bulgarians did possess an advantage in irregular warfare, however. Most of their victories came from either ambush in mountainous and forested terrain unsuitable for horse combat, pre-dawn attacks on undisciplined Byzantine forces, or protracted sieges with degrading attacks on Byzantine lines of communication. The difficult terrain of their homeland, combined with the freedom of maneuver

⁵¹ Maurice, *Maurice's Strategikon*, 143-145; Leo VI, *The Taktika of Leo VI*, 105-133. The *Strategikon* and the later *Taktika* are exceptionally cavalry heavy in focus, dedicating most of the books' length to the topic. They specifically talk about fighting horse-archer type units with a mix of infantry to shield the cavalry until they can get close enough to the horse-archers.

⁵² Haldon, *The Byzantine Wars*, 95.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁵⁴ Michael Decker, *The Byzantine Art of War*, 79.

provided by independent units operating within their own borders, allowed the Bulgarian forces to achieve surprise and leverage their irregular advantage. While a competent Byzantine commander leading a well-trained force had a high probability in defeating a Bulgar enemy on open ground, the Imperial army had to counter the Bulgarian ability to maneuver in order to force a regular fight.⁵⁵

Basil II's Bulgar Campaigns

Basil II possessed several operational advantages when he began his campaign to subjugate the Bulgars. The Byzantine navy and logistical system provided operational reach with which the Emperor could strike deep into Bulgar territory at a moment's notice. The relative political and strategic calm on his frontiers throughout his reign allowed Basil to focus his resources against the Bulgar menace's center of gravity in a steady manner to degrade its capacity. With these advantages, the Byzantine ruler had the ability to assume risk when the time came to deliver a decisive blow against the Bulgars.

By then Basil had learned that an ill-conceived campaign into Bulgaria could doom even his impressive army. The Emperor's first campaign against the Bulgars in 986, when he was inexperienced and had yet to cement his power base, had been a disaster. During the campaign, Basil marched directly to Sardika (modern day Sofia) in the heart of Bulgaria.⁵⁶ Besieging Sardika, Basil found the city defiant and unwilling the surrender. With his logistics overstretched in an unexpectedly long campaign, Basil retreated through the narrow passes leading back to Constantinople. Using their freedom of maneuver, the Bulgarians emplaced their forces and ambushed the Byzantine army at the Trajan Gates, throwing it into disarray and routing it.⁵⁷ The humiliating defeat cost Basil legitimacy at court, sparking a second challenge to his throne.

⁵⁵ Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society*, 211.

⁵⁶ Stephenson, *The Legend of Basil the Bulgar-Slayer*, 14.

⁵⁷ Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society*, 517.

Basil failed in his first effort against the Bulgarians by assuming too much operational risk to achieve a decisive victory without mitigating the danger to his forces with secure lines of communication. Attacking into the heart of Bulgaria would have dealt a significant blow to the Bulgarian state and could have led to an early victory for the Byzantine Empire. The Bulgarians had a strong defense with mobile, irregular forces operating with freedom of maneuver. By seeking decisive victory without first setting conditions for the attack, the Byzantine Emperor assumed unmitigated operational risk. This gamble nearly destroyed the Imperial army and cost Basil his life. Failure to set conditions during the campaign taught the Byzantine leader a valuable lesson in mitigating operational risk.

Returning in 1001 after defeating his last internal rival and securing his strategic powerbase, Basil began a campaign focused on achieving secure operational reach, weakening the Bulgarian army through indirect attacks, and mitigating the risk of a direct assault on their forces. First, the Byzantine forces moved northeast to secure cities and old fortresses in the Preslav and Pliska regions. The following year, 1002, Basil drove his army into northwestern Bulgaria to capture Vidin, a fortress-city along the Danube. After an eight-month siege, the fortress fell.⁵⁸ This siege was likely more successful than the previous one in 986 due to better forward basing and the Byzantines' ability to leverage the Danube River for their logistics. Basil then began to return to Constantinople, "ravaging and destroying every Bulgar stronghold he came across." At this point, Basil encountered Tsar Samuel's forces near the city of Skopje. He quickly maneuvered his forces and surprised Samuel, but the Bulgar leader fled, abandoning Skopje to the Byzantines.⁵⁹ This victory provided Basil with a wedge of ground between Samuel's Macedonian territory and the Bulgarian heartlands around the Danube.

⁵⁸ Stephenson, *The Legend of Basil the Bulgar-Slayer*, 18-21.

⁵⁹ Skylitzes, *A Synopsis of Byzantine History 811-1057*, 328.

By 1004, Samuel has lost the ability to mount successful attacks, ceding the initiative to Basil for the remainder of the conflict. Moreover, it provided operational reach for future Byzantine operations. With adequate operational reach, the Byzantine army could balance their momentum, endurance, and protection over a long campaign. Launching annual raids into Bulgaria over the next ten years, their new operational reach gave the Byzantines more freedom of maneuver, enabling them to maintain the momentum of their previous conquests by keeping the pressure constant against their Bulgarian foes, and protect their lines of communication to and from Constantinople. This advantage allowed Basil's forces to negate their enemy's irregular warfare advantage, and the Emperor to focus on whittling down the Bulgarian field army prior to trapping it in a conventional battle.

For ten years, these annual raids weakened Samuel's political position, attrited his forces, and ultimately destroyed the Bulgarian ability to wage war. Samuel responded with defensive operations focused on fortifying key choke points into Bulgaria. According to John Skylitzes, after 1004:

The emperor continued to invade Bulgaria every year without interruption, laying waste everything that came to hand. Samuel could do nothing in open country nor could he oppose the emperor in formal battle. He was shattered on all fronts and his own forces were declining, so he decided to close the way into Bulgaria with ditches and fences.⁶⁰

With strong lines of communication, strategic freedom to focus on Bulgaria, and a relative combat advantage secured against a withering adversary, Basil looked to risk open battle with the main Bulgarian army. His decisive move came in 1014. The Byzantine forces encountered Samuel's forces at Kleidion, a narrow pass in the Belasitsa mountains. Basil attempted to have his troops storm the wooden palisades erected by the Bulgarians, but the defenders repulsed the attack.

⁶⁰ Skylitzes, *A Synopsis of Byzantine History 811-1057*, 330.

With decisive battle against Samuel's operational center of gravity at hand, Basil decided to go against his prudent nature and assumed operational risk by splitting his forces. His army's main body would continue to launch diversionary attacks while a small force would seek to envelope the defensive position.⁶¹ Basil could assume this risk due to the strategic, operational, and tactical advantages he had cultivated over the preceding ten years. His political seat and eastern frontier were secure; he possessed adequate basing and operational reach to maintain his position; and after years of campaigning his forces were of high quality, rarely meeting defeat against a Bulgarian force outside of cleverly established ambushes. Even if the envelopment of Kleidion failed, the Bulgarians were on the defensive and Basil could reliably disengage and return to fight another day.

But the operation succeeded. On July 29, 1014, the enveloping force emerged behind Samuel's defensive position and attacked. Basil's main body then stormed the palisades with a determined attack against the disoriented defenders. The Byzantine forces pursued Samuel's army to complete destruction, capturing 15,000 defeated soldiers. Samuel escaped the battle and fled deeper into Bulgaria. Basil cemented his legacy as the "Bulgar-Slayer" this day by blinding all the captured, save for one of every 100 men who had one eye spared. The one-eyed soldiers led the thousands of blinded to Bulgaria to report to Samuel.⁶² The Bulgarian Tsar succumbed to age and illness shortly after this battle. Having defeated the last significant Bulgarian force, Basil completed the annexation of all Bulgarian territory over the next four years. In 1018, the then 65-year-old Emperor celebrated his conquest by parading through Bulgaria.⁶³ At his death in 1025, Basil had reclaimed a vast swath of territory (as shown in Figure 1), developed one of the greatest armies in the East, and bolstered the Byzantine economy.

⁶¹ Norwich, *Byzantium: The Apogee*, 261.

⁶² Haldon, *The Byzantine Wars*, 108.

⁶³ Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society*, 528.

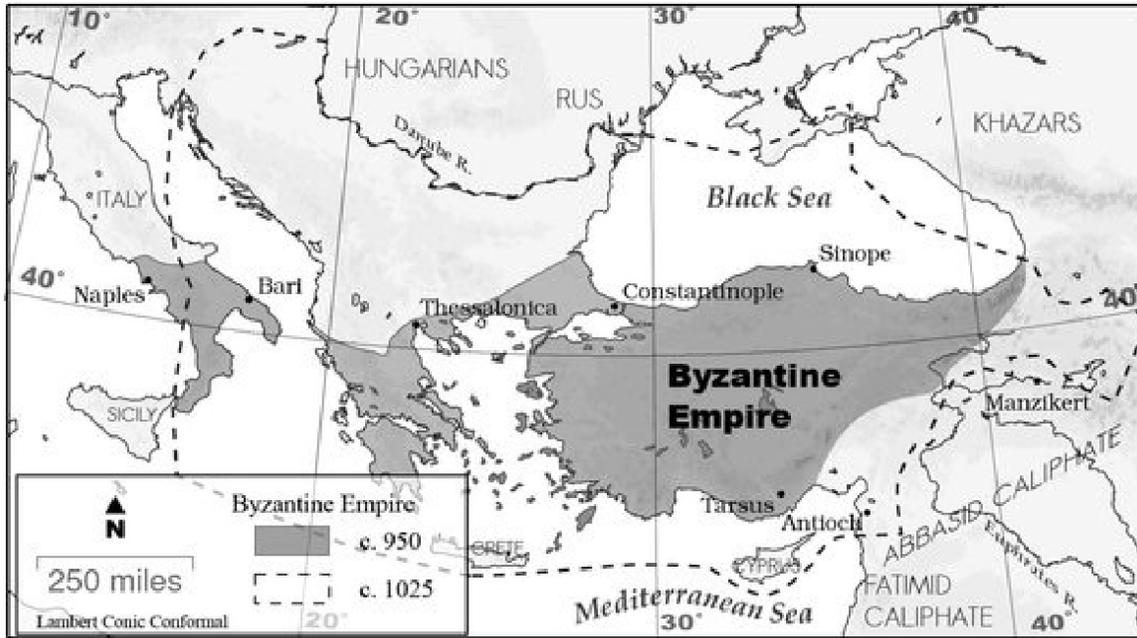


Figure 1. The Byzantine Empire circa 950 to the death of Basil II in 1025. Carey, Allfree, and Cairns, *Road to Manzikert: Byzantine and Islamic Warfare, 527-1071*, 115.

Basil assumed operational risk to achieve a decisive victory against the Bulgarians. The Emperor assumed this risk prudently, cultivated his operational reach, and indirectly prepared the Bulgar center of gravity over a long, patient campaign. When the time came to act boldly, however, Basil did not gamble. At Kleidion he did not risk his entire operation on a single decision, but retained options by using a small, picked force to make the envelopment while ensuring the survival of his main force. Basil finished his campaign against Tsar Samuel with advantages at every level of war, acquired through patience and prudently building his capacities. When the decisive battle to crush Bulgaria presented itself, Basil assumed risk without gambling his entire campaign.

Section 3 – The Campaigns of Romanus IV

Strategic Context

The Byzantine Empire steadily declined between Basil II’s rule and the ascension of Romanus IV. A long period of succession crises and internal political issues, as opposed to external threats, degraded the Byzantine ability to win wars. Three key strategic aspects

facilitated Byzantine decline. One was the ramifications of Basil and his forbearers' strategic decisions. While a competent leader such as Basil could juggle the challenges of the future well, his inept heirs struggled to maintain his buffer state system and large, expensive army.⁶⁴ Another feature of the post-Basil Empire was the emergence of new threats to the east and the west. Normans savaged the remaining Byzantine cities on the Italian peninsula, while powerful steppe nomads called the Seljuk Turks had gained prominence in the Muslim world.⁶⁵ The final aspect of decline stemmed directly from the ascension of Romanus IV Diogenes. The internal strife between the ruling Phokas clan and the new co-Emperor created a political squabble destined to tear the Empire apart.⁶⁶

Basil spent most of his reign attempting to suppress and control his western border. With Bulgars absorbing most of his attention, the Byzantine Emperor established a series of buffer states in eastern Anatolia designed to deflect and delay any invasion from the east. The logic behind the vassal states was they would provide the Empire levies and resources in times of war, and thus free the treasury for civil pursuits.⁶⁷ So long as armed invasions remained rare, the Imperial army could focus on one threat at a time; with the Empire internally united, the threatening force of the Byzantine *tagmata* could maintain this diplomatic approach to frontier maintenance. This system began to break down, however, in the mid-eleventh century. Belligerent forces massed in all the border regions, Turkomen raiders penetrated deep into the frontiers, and internal strife kept degrading Byzantine military power. While perhaps cheaper to maintain, the system was far less flexible compared to the *theme* system of old.⁶⁸ Instead of

⁶⁴ Treadgold, *A Concise History of Byzantium*, 165-170.

⁶⁵ Carey, Allfree, and Cairns, *Road to Manzikert: Byzantine and Islamic Warfare, 527-1071*, 164.

⁶⁶ Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society*, 601-604.

⁶⁷ Haldon, *The Byzantine Wars*, 110.

⁶⁸ Haldon, *Warfare, State, and Society in the Byzantine World 595-1204*, 65.

relying on local forces, the large and cumbersome Byzantine standing army would have to respond to every threat.

The Byzantine army at the beginning of the eleventh century was likely unmatched in the Western world in terms of quality and discipline. Quality comes at a price, however. The burden of the large standing Byzantine army fell mostly on the *thematic* forces maintaining the frontier. Unhappy with frequent challenges and civil wars from frontier military families, Emperors from Basil on consolidated their army into a professional force centrally located and loyal to the throne.⁶⁹ The financial cost of this centralization was devastating for the Byzantine economy and the *thematic* forces in general. In 1050, the Emperor Constantine IX debased the gold in his treasury, which led to inflation throughout the Empire. Soldiers, desperately low on supplies and pay, were in an even tougher position. In 1053, Constantine IX relieved over fifty thousand *thematic* soldiers in Armenia to save money.⁷⁰ These soldiers were some of the best trained and experienced soldiers in the Empire. With fewer native Greeks in the forces, mercenaries including Franks and Penchegs, as well as the famous Varangian Guard, filled out the forces to a much greater degree.⁷¹ Overall this force remained powerful, but inflexible and unwieldy in the wrong hands.

Keeping the Empire together was more difficult than ever in the eleventh century, with new threats arising in both the west and the east. The Normans were becoming a direct threat at the end of Basil's reign, but he died before launching a campaign against them.⁷² Subsequent

⁶⁹ Haldon, *Warfare, State, and Society in the Byzantine World 595-1204*, 92-93.

⁷⁰ Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society*, 595.

⁷¹ Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army*, 37; Haldon, *The Byzantine Wars*, 105. The Varangian Guard was a mercenary band of Scandinavian Rus soldiers provided to Basil II for assistance during the Byzantine Emperor's second civil war. The Rus leader, Vladimir provided the troops based on an alliance forged by the marriage of Vladimir and Basil II's sister, Anna. The Varangian Guard would continue to serve Byzantine Emperors for centuries as shock troops and guards loyal only to the Emperor and generally free from political scheming.

⁷² Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society*, 265.

years saw little effort from the Byzantine throne to curb the Norman threat. Emperor Constantine IX, already having overseen the debasement of the treasury and gutting of the army, hoped for assistance from the Pope. In 1054, however, the alliance with the Papacy ended after the Pope laid a writ of excommunication on the leader of the Eastern Orthodox Church.⁷³ This act, and the mutual excommunication that followed, led to the Great Schism of the Christian Church and the loss of any Western allies against the Norman threat.

While the Normans pecked at the far periphery, a still greater threat imperiled the eastern frontier of Byzantine Anatolia. The Seljuk Turks, a tribe of steppe nomads, emerged and dominated the Muslim world in the early eleventh century. Turkish forces raided, plundered, and captured the entire region with rare defensive success from the withering Byzantine forces.⁷⁴ Most notably, they seized the fortress-cities of Ani (ancient capital of Armenia) and Kars in 1064 under their Sultan Alp Arslan. He followed this victory with continuous attacks against the mountain-kingdom of Georgia, stealing it from the Byzantine orbit.⁷⁵ The entire eastern theater of the Empire lay bare at the feet of the Seljuk Sultan with little to stop him from invading the interior of Anatolia.

With the Empire in crisis, Romanus came to power as co-Emperor alongside Michael VII Doukas, son of the previous Emperor Constantine X Doukas. Michael was too young to be Emperor and so his mother, Eudokia Makrembolitissa had reigned as regent. Eudokia swore an oath to Constantine X she would never remarry following his death. But with Seljuk Turks and their Turkomen allies capturing cities in Anatolia and Armenia, Eudokia saw that the Empire needed a strong leader. The regent-widow recalled from exile Romanus, previously banished for planning a rebellion during the reign of her late husband.⁷⁶ Romanus and Eudokia married in

⁷³ Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society*, 319.

⁷⁴ Attaleiates, *The History*, 143.

⁷⁵ Carey, Allfree, and Cairns, *Road to Manzikert: Byzantine and Islamic Warfare, 527-1071*, 131.

1067. This action, however, supplanted the Doukas family from power, who were waiting for Michael to come of age. Despite the political turmoil, the Empire had its first Emperor focused on developing the Byzantine army since Basil II, Romanus IV Diogenes.

Operational Context

Romanus dedicated his reign to combating the most immediate threat to the Empire's heartlands, the Seljuk Turks. The task would not be easy on an operational level. The Seljuks were formidable opponents, possessing a large empire stretching from Persia to Syria. With key bases already inside the Byzantine perimeter, the Seljuks had operational reach and flexibility to threaten the Empire's interior. Byzantine forces would have to campaign in the harsh terrain of Eastern Anatolia. Raiders had stripped the already mountainous area of resources over decades of attacks by this point. With the operational advantage on the side of the Seljuks, Romanus would need to dedicate his early campaigns to seizing the initiative.

Beyond incursions into Anatolia, the Seljuk Turks had conquered much of Armenia and Georgia by 1064, and thus possessed key basing to operate on the Empire's periphery.⁷⁷ Moreover, the Seljuks had an operational flexibility the Byzantines did not possess, as their soldiers were almost exclusively horse-mounted: On several occasions, cavalry had penetrated deep into the frontier and enveloped the Imperial field army, and attempts to bring these forces to battle were generally unsuccessful.⁷⁸ In this way, the Seljuks could indirectly harass and foil the Byzantine operational center of gravity – its field army – while protecting their own. This highly

⁷⁶ Attaleiates, *The History*, 177.

⁷⁷ Carey, Allfree, and Cairns, *Road to Manzikert: Byzantine and Islamic Warfare, 527-1071*, 128-130.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 163-167. In 1069, for example, Romanus campaigned to attack Khilat in the Lake Van area. He left a rearguard to protect his LOC with Constantinople, but a Seljuk force maneuvered around him and defeated it. The Seljuks avoided Romanus' attempt to pursue and continued to sack cities in western Anatolia. Ultimately, Romanus returned to Constantinople after months of chasing the Seljuks.

mobile force, possessing forward basing on the Byzantine periphery, provided a complex problem the declining Empire needed to solve.

The Byzantines also faced operational challenges other than the Seljuks on their eastern frontier. Constantinople was the hub for nearly all logistics for the Imperial army.⁷⁹ The eastern frontier was far away from the walls of the capital, and campaigns required excellent logistics. The loss of many of their eastern fortress-cities constrained Byzantine operational reach, as did the terrain of eastern Anatolia. The highlands of Armenia were arid lands devoid of many resources necessary to sustain a large field army. Years of raiding by the Seljuks and their Turkomen tribal allies had nearly completely stripped what few resources the area possessed. The terrain was also mountainous, with narrow passes slowing movement and no major waterways by which the Byzantine's could utilize their naval capacity. Overall, the terrain of eastern Anatolia was suitable for a deep defense or cavalry raids.⁸⁰ Maneuvering his largely infantry forces through Anatolia proved a difficult challenge for Romanus in mounting sustained campaigns against his eastern enemies.

Tactical Context

The Byzantine force under Basil II had fought against the largely infantry-based Bulgar forces who relied mostly on reinforced defensive positions and ambushes to defeat their foes. Romanus would contend with a completely different problem in the Seljuk Turks. Their brand of horse-archer tactics was not new but was still a deadly threat to the infantry- and lancer-heavy Byzantine army. Complicating this challenge was the lack of experienced Greek soldiers, a deteriorating *theme* system, and a growing reliance on foreign mercenaries with different tactics and languages. While the Byzantine army of Romanus had little experience against the Seljuk tactics, they did have the historical military manuals to help guide them to victory.

⁷⁹ Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World 565-1204*, 140-141.

⁸⁰ Haldon, *The Byzantine Wars*, 114-115.

The Seljuk Turks were steppe nomads before setting their sights on Persia and the Arab world.⁸¹ They used horse-archer tactics to encircle and harass their enemies, which was often enough to erode the will of a defending force causing them to break, or charge, Seljuk troops. If the latter, horse-archers would move to avoid the charge while maintaining a continuous barrage of arrows.⁸² A technique they often employed was the feigned retreat. Pretending to flee, the Seljuks would draw out enemy cavalry forces from the protective infantry; they would then retreat to an awaiting ambush that would destroy the pursuers, leaving the enemy infantry without a striking arm. The Seljuks would rarely charge into an enemy force unless they saw some decisive advantage.⁸³ Their unceasing withering attacks required iron discipline and good armor and weather and overcome.

In contrast, Romanus' forces were in a poor state of readiness. By the time of his coronation, the ruination of the *theme* systems, insufficient training, and poor quality of arms had severely degraded the combat effectiveness of the Byzantine army from the high-water mark under Basil II.⁸⁴ Moreover, in the interim Byzantine Emperors had sought to rely less on their locally conscripted militia forces and more on centrally controlled professional forces supplemented by foreign mercenaries. The latter often used unfamiliar tactics and were not fluent in Greek, which posed a command and control nightmare Byzantine commander would have to cope within the thick of battle.⁸⁵

Yet the Byzantines were not completely unprepared to face the Seljuks. They had a legacy of discipline and training to fall back on, despite their years of mismanagement. The

⁸¹ Carey, Allfree, and Cairns, *Road to Manzikert: Byzantine and Islamic Warfare, 527-1071*, 140-143.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 140-148.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 148-149.

⁸⁴ Attaleiates, *The History*, 189.

⁸⁵ Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World 565-1204*, 224.

Taktika gave Byzantine leaders important advice on how to contend with horse-archer armies and how to instill discipline into forces. The *Taktika* makes it clear commanders should not commit to battle with horse-archer armies without sufficient archers of their own. In such situations, archers could hold back the charges of horse-archer units. The manuals also stress the importance of training and fortification while on the march.⁸⁶ Romanus had an Imperial lineage of military doctrine with which to prosecute his campaigns against the Seljuks.

Romanus IV's Seljuk Campaign

Romanus began his campaign against the Seljuk Turks in 1068, just days after his coronation as co-Emperor. To succeed, the Byzantine Emperor had to improve his operational position in Anatolia. The Seljuks initially controlled the tempo of operations in Anatolia, and Romanus had to first seize the initiative from his enemy by opposing him in the field. The Byzantine Emperor could rarely bring the Seljuk field army to battle due to its elusive nature, and so adopted an indirect approach to threaten the interior of the Caliphate. To strike the interior of the Caliphate, Romanus had to secure adequate basing that could provide him operational reach into the Euphrates River valley. This operation would bring Romanus into direct contact with Aps Arslan's field army, and offer the chance to defeat the Seljuks in open battle. But doing so too early, without first setting proper conditions, would be the gamble that led to Romanus' failure and ultimate demise.

The Byzantine Emperor campaigned to the east in 1068, 1069, and 1070 to wrest the initiative from his Muslim enemies.⁸⁷ To save time and supplies on the march, the Byzantine Emperor collected *theme* armies en route to the frontier as his main field force crossed through Anatolia. These armies were in a poor state of supply and their equipment was in disrepair as they

⁸⁶ Leo VI, *The Taktika of Leo VI*, 445-447.

⁸⁷ Carey, Allfree, and Cairns, *Road to Manzikert: Byzantine and Islamic Warfare, 527-1071*, 133-134.

fell in line with the primary Byzantine force.⁸⁸ Romanus supplemented this ragged force with his better maintained *tagmata* forces, Frankish mercenaries, and the Varangian Guard.

Romanus' operations between 1068 and 1070 succeeded in capturing Hierapolis in the northern Levant, securing the Empire's southern flank, and relieving Antioch, but failed to bring the Seljuks to direct battle. Each year, the Byzantine operations achieved some success, but the Seljuk Turks ultimately thwarted the Imperial army by threatening its line of communications to Constantinople. Without adequate protected basing to keep the army in the field and pursue the Seljuks, Romanus retreated to Constantinople at the end of each operation.⁸⁹ If the Byzantine army could not bring the Seljuks to decisive battle directly, Romanus would have to attack the Seljuk force indirectly by threatening the Seljuk state's interior. With the resources available, however, such a campaign was infeasible without basing to provide the necessary operational reach.

The Lake Van area in eastern Armenia offered the basing Romanus required to attack into the interior of Seljuk territory. Aps Arslan had previously seized the local cities of Manzikert and Khliat in 1066.⁹⁰ Later, with the Seljuk Sultan believing the Byzantines were requesting a truce, his army had moved away from Armenia and were besieging the Fatimid controlled city of Aleppo.⁹¹ Romanus took this opportunity to advance on the Lake Van area in February of 1071 and begin his Manzikert Campaign (as shown in Figure 2).⁹² The Byzantine army was a combined force of *tagmata*, *thematic*, and mercenary forces at a strength of 40,000 troops. Moving a force of this size through the resource-stripped land of Anatolia was slow and difficult.

⁸⁸ Attaleiates, *The Histories*, 189.

⁸⁹ Carey, Allfree, and Cairns, *Road to Manzikert: Byzantine and Islamic Warfare, 527-1071*, 164-167.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁹¹ Haldon, *The Byzantine Wars*, 112-117.

⁹² Carey, Allfree, and Cairns, *Road to Manzikert: Byzantine and Islamic Warfare, 527-1071*, 168.

By June, however, they had reached Theodosiopolis and prepared to march the last leg to Manzikert. At this final base, Romanus ordered his troops carry two months of supply for the coming campaign.⁹³ Doing so required an immense baggage train, and attested to the logistical severity of the eastern Anatolia.

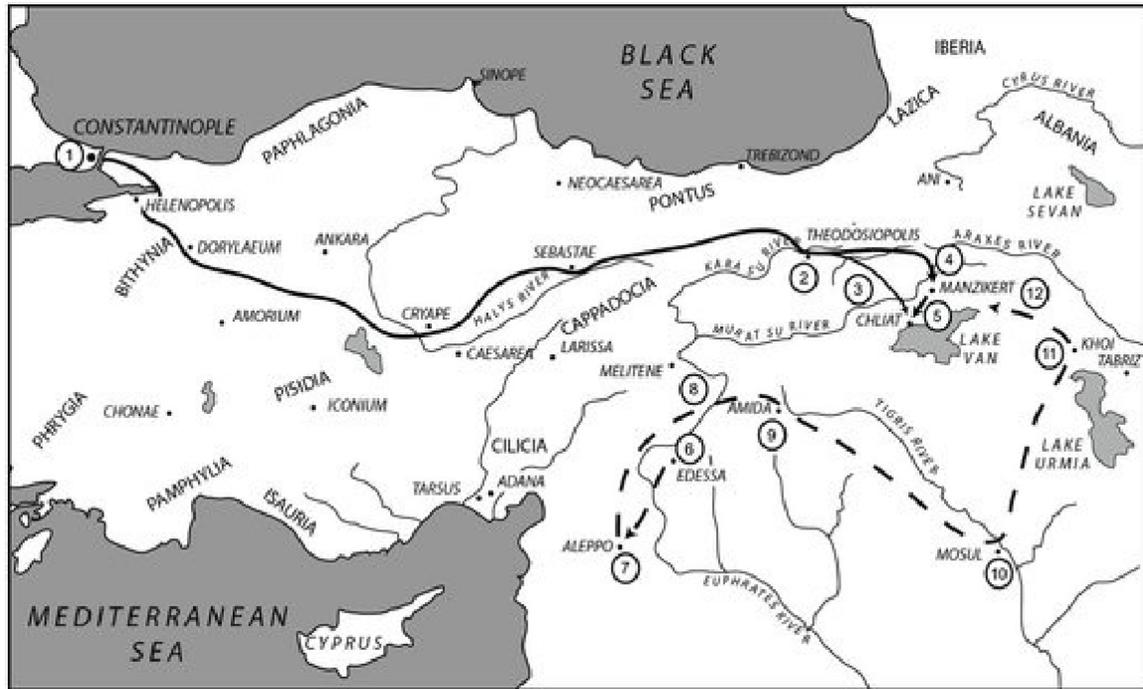


Figure 2. Romanus IV's 1071 Manzikert campaign. 1) Romanus marches from Constantinople with his field army, 2) Byzantine forces supply at Theodosiopolis, 3) Some forces move toward Khilat, 4) Byzantine army crosses the Araxes River, 5) Byzantine forces split to attack Khilat and Manzikert simultaneously, 6) Aps Arslan sieging Edessa, 7) Arslan moves to siege Aleppo, 8) Arslan's army is scattered trying to cross through the Euphrates, 9) Seljuk army moves through Amida, 10) Seljuks move through Mosul, 11) Seljuks arrive at Khoi, 12) Seljuk army marches on Manzikert to face Romanus IV. Carey, Allfree, and Cairns, *Road to Manzikert: Byzantine and Islamic Warfare, 527-1071*, 168-169.

As the Byzantine army trekked the final 150 miles to the Lake Van region, Aps Arslan discovered the Byzantine ruse and abandoned his operations against Aleppo. Moving with extreme haste, the Seljuk force reportedly disintegrated while attempting the forced march across the extreme terrain of Syria. Upon receiving this intelligence, Romanus made the decision to split his forces. The Byzantine Emperor sent one half of his army, around 25,000 men, to seize the city

⁹³ Carey, Allfree, and Cairns, *Road to Manzikert: Byzantine and Islamic Warfare, 527-1071*, 138.

of Khilat, which included some of his most experienced *tagmata* and foot-archers. Romanus led the remainder toward Manzikert – which would be at a significant disadvantage if it faced a horse-archer army.⁹⁴ Instead of taking these fortresses in sequence, as originally planned, the Byzantine Emperor assumed a dreadful operational risk in effort to seize both cities simultaneously. Romanus arrived at Manzikert on 23 August 1071 and took the city with little effort.⁹⁵ But Aps Arslan was not licking his wounds somewhere in Iraq, as the Byzantine Emperor had assumed. The Seljuk leader was within a day's march with a force to match the latter's own.

Aps Arslan had advanced nearly 30,000 soldiers to contest Romanus' offensive. The Seljuk leader had collected forces from his allies and vassals from the areas of Azerbaijan and northern Iraq en route to Armenia. The Seljuk scouts provided intelligence to Arslan as his forces gathered and reported Romanus' movements.⁹⁶ When his forces were prepared, the Seljuk commander first moved toward the Khilat taskforce. The commander of the Byzantine forces, upon discovering the presence of a large Seljuk army, elected to retire to the west instead of doing battle or regrouping with Romanus. Arslan then concentrated his forces against Romanus, harassing the Emperor as the Byzantines established camp outside of Manzikert.⁹⁷ Arslan, however, did not intend to face a Byzantine field army in a set-piece battle despite his apparent advantage. Such a battle could prove dangerous to his rule and the capacity of his army to conduct future operations against his Muslim enemies. On 25 August 1071, Arslan sent envoys to Romanus offering to negotiate instead of fight.⁹⁸ With his horse-archer army poised to defend Seljuk territory, the Sultan waited for Romanus' reply.

⁹⁴ Carey, Allfree, and Cairns, *Road to Manzikert: Byzantine and Islamic Warfare, 527-1071*, 169-170.

⁹⁵ Haldon, *The Byzantine Wars*, 117.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 118-119.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

Romanus had the opportunity for decisive battle before him, but his tactical and operational situation was not to his advantage. The Emperor commanded just around 20,000 soldiers at Manzikert with the remainder – as far as Romanus knew – en route from Khilat. Romanus attempted to delay battle with the Seljuks until he could recall those troops and concentrate his separate forces. However, by the time Aps Arslan's envoys came propose peace talks, the Emperor knew the forces previously dispatched to Khilat were not coming.⁹⁹ The Byzantine Emperor could have chosen to accept the offer of diplomacy from his Seljuk rival, but his political enemies at home would likely use a retreat against him if he returned home empty handed. Additionally, the opportunity for a direct battle against the Seljuk field army and the hope for a decisive victory stood before him. Despite the risk, Romanus sought battle with Arslan's forces on 26 August 1071.¹⁰⁰

Romanus assumed an imprudent amount of risk by engaging in his battle with the Seljuk Turks. Not only had the Byzantine Emperor split his original force of 40,000 soldiers before the battle; the troops he sent to Khilat were some of his best, including most of his archers. He desperately needed them at Manzikert to attrit harassing Seljuk horse archers and repel their charges.¹⁰¹ Moreover, engaging without superior total numbers, or greater numbers of archers, deviated drastically from the teachings of the Byzantine military manuals. Another complicating factor was that the son of Romanus' political rival led his reserve cavalry, which could prevent an envelopment and avert disaster should the Byzantine attack fail.¹⁰² Romanus also put the Empire's strategic center of gravity at risk in this battle as he, the Emperor himself, would lead

⁹⁸ Attaleiates, *The History*, 289-291.

⁹⁹ Haldon, *The Byzantine Wars*, 118-120.

¹⁰⁰ Carey, Allfree, and Cairns, *Road to Manzikert: Byzantine and Islamic Warfare, 527-1071*, 147.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 144.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 166-167. Romanus IV elected to bring Andronikos Doukas, the son of his chief political rival John Doukas, with him as his reserve cavalry commander. This was likely a ploy to have a hostage in case John Doukas attempted a coup in Constantinople while the Emperor was on campaign.

the attack in the center. A disaster here would throw the Empire into chaos. With his least experienced troops at hand, without the support of archers, and relying on a political rival to potentially save the day, Romanus left himself a marginal chance at victory and few options if the attack failed. By assuming too much risk with little to mitigate the danger, Romanus gambled the entire Empire on the outcome of Manzikert.

The attack did fail, and the Byzantine Empire would crumble as a result. Romanus initiated movement in the morning, moving slowly away from his supply base, with his cavalry at the center of a large infantry square. The Seljuks spread out in a crescent shaped formation and pelted the Byzantines with withering fire as they advanced. The Byzantines weathered the storm, but Romanus' forces could not respond in kind without significant numbers of archers. The Byzantine Emperor could only hope to maneuver the Seljuk horse-archers closer to his forces and then have his cavalry strike a decisive blow, but failed to do so over the course of the battle.¹⁰³ Realizing he was too far from his base of supply with the sun beginning to set, Romanus ordered a counter-march back to his starting point. The Byzantine forces, inexperienced with the complex maneuver and speaking a plethora of languages, botched it.¹⁰⁴ The Seljuks, seeing large gaps that appeared in the Byzantine lines as a result, charged into the disorganized Imperial army. The Seljuks quickly surrounded Romanus and his central units as his flank forces dispersed. The reserve cavalry had already left the battle, as its commander convinced them the signal for counter-march was a call for full retreat. Arslan's forces captured Romanus at the conclusion of battle.¹⁰⁵ His capture and subsequent release sparked a civil war that left the gates to Anatolia open. The Seljuk Turks then flooded into Asia Minor and, within twenty years, controlled nearly

¹⁰³ Carey, Allfree, and Cairns, *Road to Manzikert: Byzantine and Islamic Warfare, 527-1071*, 174-176.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 177.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 181-183.

all of Anatolia nearly up to the Byzantine capital.¹⁰⁶ Romanus' tactical defeat came about due to an unadvised assumption of operational risk, leading to strategic collapse for Byzantium.

Section 4 – Conclusion

The Byzantine Empire rose to a zenith unreached since the fourth century under Basil, and collapsed beyond a point from which they could recover due to the failure of Romanus. The campaigns of Basil subjugated the Bulgarians after centuries of conflict, absorbed a large swath of territory into the Empire's western region, cultivated a system of tributary states to guard his eastern border, and built an army unmatched in Europe and the Middle-East. He secured his greatest achievement with an uncharacteristic assumption of operational risk which led to a glorious victory. Basil's inability to secure his succession, however, withered those achievements to the wretched state of which the Seljuk Turks took advantage following the Battle of Manzikert. Romanus tried to use a weakened Byzantine capacity for war to challenge the downward spiral of the Empire, and failed. While Basil cultivated the system in Bulgaria over a period of many years to mitigate the risk of his final blow, Romanus would instead gamble his fate, and the fate of his Empire, in a decisive battle.

Basil was a prudent risk taker who measured his capabilities against his opponent. He built his operational reach in Bulgaria over years to steal the initiative from the Bulgars, maintain an attritional tempo, and protect his lines of communications in the region. Constant raiding attrited the Bulgarian field army and denied it the freedom of maneuver it required to leverage its advantage in irregular warfare. When the time came to deal the decisive blow against the Bulgarian army, Basil had mitigated the risk of failure through careful maneuvering. Splitting his force to envelop the Bulgarian force, the Byzantine Emperor did not gamble the loss of most of his force nor his lines of communication with the maneuver. Basil achieved a decisive victory by

¹⁰⁶ Carey, Allfree, and Cairns, *Road to Manzikert: Byzantine and Islamic Warfare, 527-1071*, 147.

assuming operational risk at an appropriate moment to seize an opportunity while mitigating the cost of failure.

Romanus, by contrast, gambled his force in a decisive battle with little effort paid to mitigating failure. The later Emperor initiated steps to improve Byzantine operational capacities in eastern Anatolia in the first years of his campaign against the Seljuk Turks, seizing basing in the Levant and challenging the Seljuk movements in Armenia. But Romanus had not achieved the necessary basing to extend his operational reach into the Seljuk heartland, nor had he secured his lines of communication to Constantinople, when he went to battle with Aps Arslan. His insecure political position, and a perceived opportunity to accelerate his timeline to secure the Lake Van area, led him to divide his forces before reaching Manzikert. As a result, his force ratio and composition in 1071 was insufficient to successfully engage in combat with the Seljuk field army. Far from his base of supply, and with only half of his mostly inexperienced army, Romanus gambled in a direct battle against the Seljuks. Lured by opportunity for a decisive victory, the Byzantine Emperor neglected to consider the cost of failure that could result from his unmitigated risk taking. This failure led to the defeat of Romanus' confused army and his capture at the hands of Aps Arslan.

Both Basil and Romanus were capable military leaders who assumed risk in the final efforts of their campaigns. Both leaders planned their operations against their enemies and personally led their forces into battle. They each had to contend with strong and defiant foes with the capability to win in certain situations. Both Emperors chose an indirect approach to bring their opponent's field army within striking reach. When the opportunity to deliver a decisive blow arrived, however, Basil assumed a prudent risk mitigated by previous successful operations, while Romanus gambled his army and his Empire away on the field of battle.

As the US Army today focuses upon LSCO, military planners must use the lens of history to gain experience at assuming risk in decisive operations. The Byzantine Empire was a perennial state threatened from all sides during its entire existence. Its leaders also hedged toward LSCO as

it built its standing army in the tenth century and eschewed the irregular tactics with which had previously survived. While the leaders at the forefront of this change found success applying the Byzantine might against their rivals, subsequent generations stumbled in their responsibility to this system and gambled away their brittle might. Operational artists today can consider these campaigns to discern how to cultivate their military capacities, deny the enemy the strength on which they rely, and assume prudent risk when opportunity arises. As the US Army transitions from concerning itself primarily on irregular conflicts to LSCOs and great power competition, military planners can look to medieval leaders like Basil II and Romanus IV to educate themselves in the risk inherent to seeking decisive battle.

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