

THE SWORD AND SHIELD OF GOD: BYZANTINE
STRATEGY AND TACTICS UNDER HERACLIUS
DURING THE LAST PERSIAN WAR AND
FIRST ARAB WAR

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

After the fall of the Roman Empire, its successor, the Byzantine Empire or Eastern Roman Empire had to contend with the ancient enemy of Sassanid Persia and the new threat of Islam that came like a firestorm out of Arabia. By A.D. 610 the Persians were on the verge of shattering the Byzantine Empire. Then a general and emperor had arrived who would use blitzkrieg tactics and strategy to smash the Persians; the use of the word blitzkrieg, while seemingly anachronistic, serves to illustrate the tactics and strategy used by the Emperor Heraclius. He would invade his enemy's homeland while they pursued him across the Fertile Crescent. Striking into the weakened areas like the blitzkriegs of 1939 and 1940, Heraclius used mobility and speed to throw off his enemies and he possessed the army capable of it. He used the three forces of his army for combined arms tactics that enabled him to gain all the advantages possible in any given battlefield situation. He would employ his cavalry like the panzers of the twentieth century to sweep around enemy flanks or smash centers of fierce resistance; the infantry of Heraclius would be like the infantry of any period, only used to great effect and speed with the élan and courage rarely found amongst the corps, and his archers would be used to soften and weaken the enemy both offensively and defensively as suited Heraclius. Only Heraclius could have wielded these forces effectively against his foes to achieve victory; with any other Byzantine commander these revolutionary tactics would have

been monumentally difficult if not unworkable. Unfortunately the tactics and strategy of the Byzantines under Heraclius was not used to its fullest potential against the nascent and wild Arabs who succeeded in conquering forever huge portions of the Byzantine Empire, for without the presence of Heraclius and his use of lightning tactics and strategy victory was impossible. Heraclius was the reason that victory against the Persians became a reality and his absence was the reason for the catastrophic defeats suffered against the Muslims.

Though many excellent monographs and other works have been done on the subjects of the Emperor Heraclius, the Byzantine Army, The Sassanid Army, the Arab forces, and the battles of Nineveh and the Yarmouk, this work approaches the subject from a multifaceted stance that few other writers have tried before. The noted Byzantinist Walter Kaegi, has written many fine works on the Byzantine Empire and the Muslim Arabs; However, he has never approached the subject from point of view that deals entirely with the strategy and tactics of the Arab Conquests. Kaegi's work, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*, does have immense value for those who wish to get a macrocosm of the Byzantine Empire on the verge, during, and post Arab conquests. In addition he has also written a biography on the Emperor Heraclius, *Heraclius, Emperor of Byzantium*, this too evaluates the skill of Heraclius but ultimately he does not designate Heraclius as the only man who could have saved the Byzantine Empire at the Yarmouk as he did at Nineveh. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Warren Treadgold has written several works on the composition, logistics, size and command structure of the Byzantine Army, particularly of the centuries previous to the Byzantine defeat at Manzikert in 1071. *Byzantium and Its Army, 284-1081*, Treadgold's work, does not often examine any one

battle in particular. In this case he does examine the Persian Wars and the Arab Conquests using his methods concerning composition, command structure, and so forth. Treadgold does not scrutinize the Yarmouk and Nineveh in nature of tactical and strategic points of view. The Battle of Nineveh was largely recorded by Theophanes as he lived less than a century after the titanic clash. His *Chronographia* has been both criticized and praised as a work that is inaccurate of the early centuries of the empire and confusing with dates, but becomes far more accurate and useful as he approaches the time of Justinian. His work on Heraclius is a great use as much of this history would have been lost. Even the noted Gibbons, who despised most Byzantine institutions, recognized the immense value of Theophanes' work. For Nineveh, his work is admittedly biased for the Byzantine favor. However, this should not discount the movements of the battle. The tactics and outcome are well described in various sources, both primary and secondary. Persian sources are impossible to come by as most sources that covered Nineveh were destroyed during the Arab conquests and subsequent centuries. It is Theophanes who serves as the best historian of the event, despite his biases both ecclesiastical and secular.

As with Nineveh, Theophanes is the prime source for the Byzantine movements and actions surrounding the campaign. As with Nineveh he possesses his biases. In the case of the Byzantine victory at Nineveh, the more poetic prose of a noble defeat is necessary. However, even Theophanes realizes the flaws in Byzantine tactics that ultimately cost victory for the Byzantines.¹ Fortunately, unlike the regrettable loss of Persian sources on Nineveh, several Muslim sources survive that record the battle. The work considered most accurate by historians is the work by Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari. The Muslim Persian scholar lived over two centuries after the battle. His *History*

¹ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883)156.

of the Prophets and Kings, is a largely religious work that covers the history of the Muslim world with smaller sections on the history of the world before the coming of Muhammad. However, his work on the Battle of the Yarmouk River is invaluable in that it paints a clear picture of Muslim forces on the eve of battle and their losses afterward. The description of the battle is slight and has little of the tactical flow that Theophanes possesses but he does relate several incidents that occurred during the battle that Theophanes does not include, if he even knew of them. Al-Tabari's biases too are obvious. He paints a religious imagery that is typical of Islamic historians but he does address the Muslim conquests well and with relative accuracy.²

In addition to a historiography it may be necessary to define the concepts of strategy and tactics. Neither word is interchangeable and possesses as much difference of definition as macroeconomics does to microeconomics. Tactics is warfare on the smaller scale with only a handful of units. Strategy, on the other hand is, in this case, warfare on a far larger scale. For example, the taking of an individual city such as Constantinople would require tactics to overcome its walls, defenders, and dealing with its Greek Fire. The overall concept of capturing Constantinople in battle, requires a strategy that needs to consider the tactics in taking the city, ensuring that no other Byzantine force will reach the beleaguered city to relieve it, how to supply the forces that are in the overall campaign. That is strategy on the small scale. However, to enlarge this, strategy can also be waged on a scale that changes the face of the war as a whole. The Muslims would do this latter to ensure that they used their strengths to the maximum effect while playing off Byzantine weaknesses. General Douglas MacArthur would use overall strategy thirteen centuries later when he waged an island hopping campaign to bypass Japanese

² Kaegi, Walter. *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*. (New York, Cambridge Press. 1992.)105.

strongholds in the Pacific and seize islands that were less defended with just as much strategic importance. To reiterate, strategy affects conflict on the overall war being waged or in the slightly lesser theatre of the campaign. Tactics are to be found in the individual battles.

In addition the question of the size of forces must be considered. Numbers for any battle of this period or even those up until the twentieth century have been difficult to ascertain. The most reliable source for numbers is the quartermaster's figures. The numbers of foodstuffs, weaponry, sundry supplies is a fair indicator of size of forces. Unfortunately, these are not always true to form. Corrupt generals, inefficient quartermasters, and scheming troops of any century result in numbers that can be deceptive. In addition the strategy of an army may also change numbers. For example, William Tecumseh Sherman in his March through Georgia effectively cut his supplies. Sherman took only enough supplies in food and ammunition to feed only half of his army. The army would need to live off the land or starve, and Sherman was not the only practitioner of this. In summation, while numbers can be guessed and speculated to roundabout sizes, the true size of forces will probably never be fully determined.

When the Roman Empire of the West began its death throes towards the end of the fourth century, a greater star rose in the East on the banks of the Bosphorous. The city of Constantinople was to become the heart of an empire that was descendant to Rome but in many ways was different from the old Rome on the Tiber. Constantinople was a more modern city built on the ancient Greek polis of Byzantium. The city and its people were more Hellenized, had far more of a Christian presence than Rome, and possessed the trade and wealth of the East to assist its growth and prosperity. When the Rome of old,

ravaged and ransacked by the Germanic tribes, fell, the city of Constantine would hold back the tide and save the known world from entering entirely into a dark age.³

In the following centuries the Byzantine Empire, struggled to survive the onslaughts from all directions. In the fifth century Germanic barbarians came and stole away provinces of the Byzantine Empire on the North African coast, the Vandals, and much of the Italian Peninsula, the Goths.⁴ The fierce and terrible Huns, who had ravaged Rome itself in previous centuries, turned their attention on the weakened Eastern Roman Empire by attacking the Balkans and raiding deep into Thrace.⁵ But the worst news came from the East where the Sassanid Persians renewed their wars against the Empire. The Sassanids were in many ways the equals to any westernized nation and army, though they had originally come out of the east as wild horsemen. They were a cosmopolitan empire with great cities like their capital at Ctesiphon and possessed a crack army that had forced Rome into stalemate wars along the Tigris-Euphrates.⁶ For all those advantages, the Sassanids possessed one more that made defeating them almost an impossibility: their empire was large and non-centralized and could withstand invaders seizing large sections of that empire.⁷

The reuniting of the old Roman Empire was an idea pursued to some extent or another by the successors of Constantine. Of all those who tried, the greatest attempt was made by Justinian and his genius general, Belisarius in the early sixth century. Justinian's

³ Romilly Jenkins, *Byzantium: The Imperial Centuries, A.D. 610-1071*. (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1966), 2.

⁴ George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, translated. Joan Hussey (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1969), 34.

⁵ Theophylact Simocatta, *Historiae*, ed. C. De Boor. rev. P. Wirth (Stuttgart, 1972), 41.

⁶ George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, translated. Joan Hussey (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1969), 70.

⁷ Romilly Jenkins, *Byzantium: The Imperial Centuries, A.D. 610-1071*. (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1966), 11.

gains of Italy, North Africa, and Southern Spain were remarkable achievements but regrettably short-lived. In the east, along the Tigris-Euphrates and the Levant, Belisarius was superb in his ability to force the Sassanids to a standstill and bloody attrition.⁸

Belisarius, using far fewer men and fewer resources, was able to defeat the Persians at the Battle of Dara in 530 A.D. Belisarius was able to stem the tide of the Persian advance and hold a defensive frontier which would serve as a buffer for a century against the Persians.⁹

The rulers of Byzantium, after the death of Justinian, attempted to stave off their ever shrinking borders from the threat of Sassanid Persia. In many cases, these defeats were a result of poor leadership and bad luck on the part of the Byzantine commanders, none of whom were up to par with Belisarius. It was not until the crowning of Emperor Heraclius that a leader came forth who could challenge the might of Persia and restore Byzantium to its former glory. It was Heraclius who would use his strategic guile and tactical cunning to attack the Persians and end the war that had so long devastated the Empire.

⁸ George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, translated. Joan Hussey (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1969), 70.

⁹ Theophylact Simocatta, *Historiae*, ed. C. De Boor. rev. P. Wirth (Stuttgart, 1972), 53.

CHAPTER II

HERACLIUS' STRATEGY AND THE COMPOSITION OF BYZANTINE AND SASSANID ARMIES

Heraclius, the greatest of Byzantium's warrior emperors, with the aid of his father, the elder Heraclius, deposed the usurper Emperor Phocas and began his reign in 610 A.D.¹⁰ The reign of Phocas possessed all the usual signs of poor administration and flagrant debauchery associated with the old Roman emperors, Nero and Commodus.¹¹ Phocas had taken the crown from the previous Emperor Maurice in a combination of palace intrigue and assassination in 602. Heraclius the Elder, the *exarch* (governor) of the Byzantine province of Africa, was no friend of Phocas but also realized that any chance for deposing Phocas would take years of successful maneuvering, both covertly and overtly.¹²

In the East, the Sassanids returned to wage war against Phocas as a way to both punish the usurper and enlarge their empire, though mostly the latter. Chosroes II, king of the Sassanids, began a war to avenge the death of Emperor Maurice, whom Chosroes II

¹⁰ Andreas Stratos, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century*. vol. 1, 602-634, trans. Marc Ogilvie-Grant (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1968), 126.

¹¹ Theophylact Simocatta, *Historiae*, ed. C. De Boor. rev. P. Wirth (Stuttgart, 1972), 78.

¹² Theophylact Simocatta, *Historiae*, ed. C. De Boor. rev. P. Wirth (Stuttgart, 1972). 82.

considered his friend and mentor.¹³ Phocas' sacking and execution of Maurice's competent and able generals proved to be the downfall of the Byzantines.¹⁴ The Byzantine armies, as a result, were no match for the well led and efficiently organized Persians. Ironically, two of Maurice's commanders, Heraclius and his son in Africa were fortunately far enough away for Phocas to remove him from his post.¹⁵ In a series of campaigns Chosroes II stripped away the Armenian, Mesopotamian, Cappadocian, and Turkish provinces from Phocas.¹⁶ It was a low point for the empire which seemed to be on the brink of being shattered.

At this point, Heraclius the Younger overthrew the inept Phocas with the support of the people and senate of Constantinople. It was a relatively bloodless campaign for Heraclius, and the greatest casualty being Phocas himself executed by Heraclius' troops.¹⁷ Heraclius galvanized his army and people for what would become the last, great war of the classical world. Heraclius would soon prove that his skill at bearing the crown of Constantine would surpass almost all his predecessors.

The years between Heraclius' coronation, 610, and the Battle of Nineveh, 627, the battle which effectively ended the Sassanid Empire as a threat to Byzantium, were not uneventful ones as he effectively stemmed the tide of Persian, Slavic, Avarian hordes. While able to keep those armies from taking Constantinople, Heraclius could not stop them from taking the great cities of Antioch, Jerusalem, Damascus, and Alexandria.¹⁸

¹³ C. Cornuelle, *An Overview of the Sassanian Persian Military*, (London: Slingshot, 1997), 132.

¹⁴ Theophylact Simocatta, *Historiae*, ed. C. De Boor. rev. P. Wirth (Stuttgart, 1972), 82.

¹⁵ Andreas Stratos, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century*. vol. 1, 602-634, trans. Marc Ogilvie-Grant (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1968), 57.

¹⁶ C. Cornuelle, *An Overview of the Sassanian Persian Military*, (London: Slingshot, 1997), 165.

¹⁷ Andreas Stratos, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century*. vol. 1, 602-634, trans. Marc Ogilvie-Grant (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1968), 78.

¹⁸ Warren Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army: 284-1081*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 63.

Though disastrous it was highly unlikely that Heraclius could have prevented the capture of these cities as his army was exhausted and demoralized and his treasury drained. The condition of the Byzantine armies was in such a state that Heraclius set immediately to rebuilding the morale of the troops and high command structure.¹⁹ At this time the Byzantine Army was not yet ready to stop the onslaught of the Persian armies. With the remnants of a still exhausted army from Phocas' reign, Heraclius set out to fight a war that enabled him to use every advantage he possessed and negate every advantage that the Sassanids had. His first move was a lightning strike into what is now northwest Iraq and other soft spots of the Sassanid Empire. Here the largely Nestorian and Syrian Christian population welcomed Heraclius to save them from the Persian Zoroastrian worshippers of Ahura Mazda, embodied by eternal flames dotting holy sites across the empire.²⁰ While the Nestorian and Syrian Christian sects were a sizeable minority in the Sassanid Empire, they had found themselves frequently persecuted at the hands of the Sassanid Zoroastrians. In the years of Chosroes II the persecutions had increased dramatically. Heraclius' rapid movements into Transcaucasia drew away the Persian armies further afield from the recently captured Byzantine cities. The strategy of Heraclius served several purposes. Firstly he drew the Persian armies away from Constantinople and prevented them from garrisoning the cities they had recently captured. Secondly, Heraclius was able to keep his losses at a minimum and was able to increase the experience and skill of his troops through constant skirmishes and minor battles. Lastly, Heraclius could pick officers and sergeants, using the terms loosely, that would

¹⁹ Romilly Jenkins, *Byzantium: The Imperial Centuries, A.D. 610-1071*. (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1966), 20.

²⁰ Nicephorus, *Short History*, ed. Cyril Mango (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1990), 167.

effectively obey and carry out with his orders with skill and initiative. This would be necessary when he began using his combined arms strategy.

By 622, Heraclius and his improved army had the confidence and skill to take on the elite units of the Persian army under the battle-tested generals Shahrvaraz and Rahzahn.²¹ The battle was a minor one but defeat of the Persians was total. Using feigned retreats and skillful maneuvering, Heraclius spread out the larger Persian army in a pursuit and dealt death and destruction to every unit including the elite *cataphractii* of the Sassanid Empire. The *cataphractii* were units of elite horsemen who were a highly effective force of super-heavy cavalry. Using a force that probably numbered less than 10,000, Heraclius was able to inflict numerous defeats in the Persian heartland.²² This served a twofold purpose: firstly, his victories honed his army to a fighting edge that made them unrivalled in the entire East. Secondly, he was able to pin down tens of thousand of Persian troops and keep them from laying siege to his capital of Constantinople.

The latter was to pay dividends when a massive force of Avars and other Slavic allies laid siege to the city of Constantinople. Heraclius before he set out to wage war in the Persian heartland had considered a siege of the city was likely but realized that victory in Mesopotamia would decide the fate of his empire as much as a siege of his capital city. The city was not under the command of Heraclius as he was still in the field. Instead the cities defenses were left in the hands of his capable General Bonus and Patriarch Sergius.²³ During the siege the Persians, under command of Sharvaraz, were

²¹ C. Cornuelle, *An Overview of the Sassanian Persian Military*, (London: Slingshot, 1997), 166.

²² Warren Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army: 284-1081*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 36.

²³ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883), 110.

unable to bring substantial reinforcements to their Avar allies for fear of the Byzantine ravaging their homeland.²⁴ Even without the Persians, the siege was desperate. It was the first siege the great city had ever undergone.

Fortunately, Heraclius' faith in his subordinates was well placed. Bonus had taken huge steps in ensuring the preparedness of his defenses on both the land and sea walls. Even with the defenses at their peak, the men defending them would be hard pressed to stop the Avar troops, numbering at least 80,000.²⁵ The siege continued for weeks with Avar assaults on the land and sea walls. They were in succession beaten off successfully. After a short parley between the Byzantine and the Avar-Persian envoys, the Avar khan, in frustration from an unsuccessful diplomatic solution in which he was smarted, launched a full scale assault by sea and land. The sea battle on the Bosphorous was a disaster for the Avar-Persians as the Byzantine ships destroyed the Avar boats in multitude. The assault on the walls fared no better and the siege was lifted. The Avars were broken from by catastrophic defeat and never again challenged the Byzantines. However, one of the great benefits of the siege was a new technology that would revolutionize the Byzantine armies and then the rest of the world: stirrups.²⁶ Though of immense importance, this invention was incorporated into the Byzantine cavalry shortly before Nineveh, though to only *cataphract* units, and by the Yarmouk most Greek Byzantine cavalry units would possess this powerful tool. Fortunately, the enemies of

²⁴ Nicephorus, *Short History*, ed. Cyril Mango (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1990), 97.

²⁵ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883), 112.

²⁶ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883), 171.

Byzantium did not have this mighty weapon as well and at Nineveh this would be telling.²⁷

By then the war had entered its twenty-fourth year and Heraclius sought a battle that would end the destructive conflict and reclaim the lands which had been lost by Phocas and by himself earlier in his reign. In Constantinople during the winter of 626/27, Heraclius planned a new campaign, enlarged his army, and sought the most unlikely of allies. Heraclius, in a show of great diplomacy, sought the aid of the Turks and Khazars as allies with whom he could smash the Sassanids in the field. Heraclius was ready to begin the last campaign, for if he failed there would be no retreat.²⁸

Towards the end of the fall Heraclius struck into the northern Persian territory and achieved great successes. Heraclius' use of Turkish troops eventually fell by the wayside in the end as the vast majority of Turks and Khazars left with Heraclius' blessing after the crucial victory in Caucasus Albania, not Balkan Albania.²⁹ Heraclius would carry on the campaign with his native Byzantine troops and other longtime allies, such as Armenians and Huns. After the departure of the Turks, the Persians and many on Heraclius staff assumed the Emperor would settle down into his winter quarters for the season. This was traditional for most armies and continued even into the nineteenth century. Heraclius, unpredictable as usual, chose to attack when his foes assumed he would remain encamped.³⁰ It was a genius offensive that could achieve victory incomparable or a disaster immeasurable. Chosroes, realizing that the war had carried into his heartland,

²⁷ Warren Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army: 284-1081*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 76.

²⁸ Geoffrey Regan, *First Crusader: Byzantium's Holy Wars*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2001), 78.

²⁹ Andreas Stratos, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century*. vol. 1, 602-634, trans. Marc Ogilvie-Grant (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1968), 152.

³⁰ C. Cornuelle, *An Overview of the Sassanian Persian Military*, (London: Slingshot, 1997), 178.

dispatched Shahrvaraz and Rahzadh to counter the Byzantines with a force most likely two to one in the Persians' favor.³¹ The Battle of Nineveh would be forced upon Heraclius by the Persians to prevent Heraclius from driving further down into the Sassanid Empire and Heraclius would require all his brilliance and abilities to win.

Shortly before Heraclius reached Nineveh, Rahzadh sent out a reconnaissance force to reconnoiter the army of Heraclius. Unfortunately for the Persians, this group was ambushed, its captain's head spitted upon a pike, and a key prisoner taken. The prisoner was most likely the captain's squire who, through bravado or fear, informed Heraclius of the Persian army's positions and of a further three thousand heavy cavalry who would soon reinforce the Sassanids. Recognizing the value of the information he possessed, Heraclius sought to exploit the situation.³²

Drawing up his forces in his traditional three line divisions, Heraclius found a spot that was most favorable to him. Unfortunately, Heraclius could no longer rely on the mobile retreat-regroup tactics that enabled most of his earlier victories.³³ Victory was not certain and Heraclius recognized Sassanid tactics even before the battle began. Rahzadh and Shahrvaraz would need to wage a battle of attrition against the battle-hardened but numerically inferior Byzantines. Wave after wave of Persian troops would need to wear out the Byzantines and destroy them. Heraclius and the Persian commanders realized that the cost of victory would be high but each recognized that their empires were at risk.³⁴

³¹ Warren Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army: 284-1081*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 103.

³² Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883), 175.

³³ Warren Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army: 284-1081*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 102.

³⁴ C. Cornuelle, *An Overview of the Sassanian Persian Military*, (London: Slingshot, 1997), 185.

The situation might not have been the key for a Byzantine victory but Heraclius could not retreat from so deep in Sassanid territory.

On 12 December 627 the last great battle of antiquity commenced near the ancient city of Nineveh. On one side were the battle-tested Byzantines who lacked the numbers in both infantry and heavy cavalry but possessed the edge in quality of troops. The Byzantine numbered roughly in the range of 20,000 troops. The majority of these were the reliable infantry, with perhaps 3-4,000 troops being the precious cavalry that Heraclius would rely on for final victory.³⁵ The Sassanids' heavy cavalry now had the chance to engage in a full charge against the Byzantines. However, their infantry was a mix of highly trained and experienced warriors, some fairly good garrison troops, and throngs of inexperienced light infantry equipped with probably no more than a spear and a wicker shield. The number of Persian troops is a more contested number but most likely numbered 30-35,000 men. It is likely that a high portion of these troops were the heavy *cataphracts*.³⁶

The Persian cavalry possessed a preponderance of heavy *cataphract* (Greek for covered over) types along with some light units. The term *cataphract* was the overall term for the types of cavalry, though the types of *cataphract* were specialized: the elite *cataphractii* and *clibinarii*. Both types of soldiers wore armor from head to foot that was similar to fish scales on their leather surcoats.³⁷ Similarly armored were the horses. These horses came from the legendary Nesaeen studs prized for almost a thousand years as the royal horses of the Persian rulers. Bred for size and speed the horses came from the

³⁵ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883), 172.

³⁶ C. Cornuelle, *An Overview of the Sassanian Persian Military*, (London: Slingshot, 1997), 187.

³⁷ C.W.C. Oman, *The Art of War in the Middle Ages: A.D. 378-1515*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1885. Reprint, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1953), 32.

Persian province of Media.³⁸ There were also units of *cataphract* camel cavalry. The advantage of the camels was not a negligible one as horses fear the stench of camels and would be more likely to run from the foul smelling beasts, but camels were also more likely to panic in comparison to horses if a prolonged melee ensued.³⁹

Each type of *cataphract* cavalry had a specific purpose. The *cataphractii* were intended for one great sweeping armored charge that would shatter any formation. The only drawback to the Sassanid *cataphractii* was their lack of stirrups, something the Byzantines used in their cavalry formations.⁴⁰ If the cavalryman ever slowed down or stopped and had to engage in drawn out hand-to-hand combat then he was at the disadvantage. His sheer weight entailed clumsiness and ease for unsaddling in battle.⁴¹ His primary weapon was a lance and would be worthless in a melee. On the other hand, the *clibinarii* intentionally sought close combat and prolonged melees. These horsemen were equipped with heavy maces suitable for crushing an opponent's armor or skull. A charge was not necessary and the rider and his horse would serve rather as a way to hammer through the enemy than sweep them. His bulk was still a disadvantage but the armor also served to protect him and his horse in the close combat. Unfortunately, all that armor could also bake the horseman in the summer sun.

The light cavalry consisted of horse archers with little or no armor and lightweight pursuit riders on light and fast horses. The horse archers were able to sting at will and weaken formations of the enemy with volleys of arrow fire.⁴² The pursuit

³⁸ Robert O'Connell, *Soul of the Sword: An Illustrated History of Weaponry and Warfare from Prehistory to the Present*, (New York: The Free Press, 2002), 62.

³⁹ C.W.C. Oman, *The Art of War in the Middle Ages: A.D. 378-1515*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1885. Reprint, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1953), 36.

⁴⁰ *ibid.* 31.

⁴¹ C. Cornuelle, *An Overview of the Sassanian Persian Military*, (London: Slingshot, 1997), 112.

⁴² C. Cornuelle, *An Overview of the Sassanian Persian Military*, (London: Slingshot, 1997), 114.

horsemen's primary purpose was to ride down enemy skirmishers and keep pressure on retreating troops.⁴³ Neither group could engage medium and heavy infantry or likewise armed cavalry. To have done so would have been suicidal and wasteful.

The Sassanid infantry was, in most cases, a rag-tag collection of poorly armed men. The troops were a polyglot force of men from Kurdistan, Media, and other desert locales who would retreat if placed in a desperate situation in battle. These men served under a compulsive levy and were chained together at the beginning of battle.⁴⁴ The exceptions to these were the Sughdian infantry. Well armed and well disciplined, metallic armor covered them in only the vital places and hardened linen armor in the remainder of their outfit. The Sughdians trained and lived in the capital at Ctesiphon. Despite the Spartan discipline enforced upon them, the Sughdians lived well and received pay commensurate to that of the nobility. The Sughdians would hopefully be the key to breaking the Byzantine infantry line and securing victory.⁴⁵ In addition the Sassanids possessed a large number of infantry archers who would soften up the Byzantine infantry before the charge.⁴⁶

The Byzantine cavalry was far more flexible in its employment. The Byzantines also possessed *cataphract* cavalry, but in far lesser numbers as these could hinder deployment in the mountainous regions. The Byzantine *cataphractii* would eventually prove invaluable in the battle.⁴⁷ The vast majority of their cavalry were the fast moving *byzantinoi*. Well-armored with chain mail, instead of the plate type, the *byzantinoi* could

⁴³ *ibid.*, 110.

⁴⁴ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883), 176.

⁴⁵ C. Cornuelle, *An Overview of the Sassanian Persian Military*, (London: Slingshot, 1997), 201

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 203.

⁴⁷ Maurice, *Maurice's Strategikon; Handbook of Byzantine Military Strategy*, trans. George T. Dennis (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 38.

engage medium cavalry with ease but possessed the speed to catch light units if needed. The *byzantinoi* were equipped with sword and compound bow of the eastern variety and enjoyed the ability to fight and break off effectively. The *byzantinoi* were often troops who possessed an affinity for the saddle already and large numbers of Huns, Slavs, Heruli, and Goths served in the *byzantinoi*.⁴⁸ The other units, which the Byzantine could use quite effectively, were the similarly equipped lancers. The lancers, armored like the *byzantinoi* but able to engage heavy cavalry and then break off quickly, could outrace their foes and return for an attack.⁴⁹ This ability was the result of the lancers possessing a lance capable of killing their heavily armored foes. If, for example, they engaged with a Sassanid *cataphract* unit the lancers would charge, kill as many *cataphracts* before the lancers were swamped by the heavier *cataphracts* and fall back with speed enough to outrace their lumbering opponents. The cavalry of Byzantium would serve as the mobile spear tip of any Byzantine Army.

If the Byzantine cavalry was the sword of the army, the infantry served as the shield with which an enemy would dull its capabilities and ensure that the enemy remained tied down in battle, unable to ever have a full advantage on the field of battle. The standard, basic infantry of the Byzantine army were the heirs to Roman tradition of disciplined, well-led, fighting maniples that would hold steadfast to a line of battle.⁵⁰ Maniples were groups of infantry that were shaped in rectangular or square formations that would move as one solid body instead of a mob. In a maniple there was mobility for the attack and defense. However, they were not terribly loosened like their opponents

⁴⁸ibid., 49.

⁴⁹ C.W.C. Oman, *The Art of War in the Middle Ages: A.D. 378-1515*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1885. Reprint, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1953), 38.

⁵⁰ Geoffrey Regan, *First Crusader: Byzantium's Holy Wars*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2001), 109.

who mostly fought in large slack groups. There were differences, however, between the units of the Roman world and its successor. The sword was no longer a Spanish model short *gladius*. Instead it was a thicker and longer blade very similar to the swords that would be used by the Franks of Western Europe. The sword could effectively stab and slash at opponents as necessary. The shield was also smaller and more compact, with a metallic boss covering the wielders hand. Nor did the infantry carry throwing spears or *pila*.⁵¹ The armor of the troops was no longer the *lorica segmenta* of Trajan and Hadrian's day. Chain mail had replaced that thicker, more constricting armor.⁵² These men were reliable and would not break easily before any force thanks to their training, tactics, and the leadership of their officers and sergeants. The only weakness possessed by the infantry was their vulnerability to heavy cavalry. This was particularly so in a full fledged charge, where the heavy cavalry would crush upon the hapless troops on the ground.

⁵¹ Robert O'Connell, *Soul of the Sword: An Illustrated History of Weaponry and Warfare from Prehistory to the Present*, (New York: The Free Press, 2002), 63.

⁵² *ibid.*, 71.

CHAPTER III

THE LAST BATTLE OF THE ANCIENT WORLD

Heraclius knew his troops and he knew the troops of the enemy as well. It would take a great general to withstand the combined forces of the Persians. The Sassanids' greatest weakness, though, lay in the scornful attitude they possessed for their line infantry. Even the crack Sughdians had little regard given to them by the cavalry of the Sassanid nobility.⁵³ It was to prove the downfall of the Sassanid battle plan. Most importantly, Heraclius knew this weakness well.

The Byzantine front line was composed of three lines which would give Heraclius the depth and mobility he required to fight this battle of attrition. The first line was his infantry corp. The infantry would serve as the anvil on which the Persian hammer would break. The second line had infantry in the center with *Byzantinoi* on the wings and lancers spaced between. Their purpose was to plug gaps that would appear if the Persians succeeded in breaking through.⁵⁴ The last line was the remaining cavalry of the Byzantines which would serve as the shock troops in case the Persian cavalry broke the first two lines and were on the verge of separating the splitting Byzantine army. This line had the contingent of Byzantine *cataphractii* which also served as Heraclius' bodyguard.⁵⁵

The Persian nobles, who possessed such martial vanity, would spell the ruin of their army, drew up their troops in lines several units deep. The contempt of the Persians

⁵³ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883), 183.

⁵⁴ Maurice, *Maurice's Strategikon; Handbook of Byzantine Military Strategy*, trans. George T. Dennis (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 61.

⁵⁵ Romilly Jenkins, *Byzantium: The Imperial Centuries, A.D. 610-1071*. (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1966), 23.

for their infantry played out in that their first line was their heavy cavalry. The *cataphract* units would serve to break the Byzantine lines on the first charge. This was not the designs of either Shahrvaraz or Rahzadh; instead the Sassanid nobles possessed the leeway granted by Chosroes to assert their baronial and lordly claims over the generals who outranked them in the military hierarchy but not in the social hierarchy. This practice was not uncommon, even in later centuries feudal lords would assert their inexperienced and rash command abilities over their most experienced generals⁵⁶ This folly on the part of the nobles and the battle formations drawn up by them would serve to negate whatever plans the Persian generals, Shahrvaraz or Rahzadh, had for a victory that would not be an utter bloodbath. The infantry of the Sassanids were drawn up behind in ranks several files deep. The crack Sughdians would be near the middle to act as the troops which would hopefully attack at the right moment and serve as the breaking point for the Byzantines.⁵⁷

The morning of the twelfth of December was an unusually foggy and wet one in the mountainous region of northern modern day Iraq.⁵⁸ The weather became an ally of the Byzantines that day. The normally dry desert air would have kept the Sassanid bows intact but the rains had weakened the binding of those compound bows. The bows of the Sassanids were composed of numerous layers of wood and bone and glue that were incredibly effective at piercing armor. However, one moistened the glue had a tendency of coming undone and thusly the bow as well.⁵⁹ For the Byzantines, their Hunnic and native Romano-Greeks compound bows did not suffer terribly from the rain and would

⁵⁶ Geoffrey Regan, *First Crusader: Byzantium's Holy Wars*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2001), 112.

⁵⁷ C. Cornuelle, *An Overview of the Sassanian Persian Military*, (London: Slingshot, 1997), 201.

⁵⁸ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883), 183.

⁵⁹ C.W.C. Oman, *The Art of War in the Middle Ages: A.D. 378-1515*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1885. Reprint, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1953), 45.

prove decisive. The bows of the Byzantine in contrast were built often from one piece of wood such as ash. While not as effective at armor piercing as the Sassanid bows these bows would not suffer if wet.⁶⁰ The ground also was soft enough to slow the progress of the Persian heavy cavalry.⁶¹

In the misty morning fog the Persian heavy cavalry made its charge into the Byzantine lines. The thunderous approach of the Sassanid cavalry was unmistakable in the dawn and Heraclius and his bodyguard rode to the frontlines of the infantry to galvanize their courage.⁶² His proximity to the front ranks would be one of the most fortuitous events of the battle, as he would serve as a living banner for the courage of his men. When the Sassanid *cataphractii* were within two hundred yards of the lines, the Byzantine archers and *byzantinoi* opened fire. Normally these distances would have been a quick ride by the *cataphract*. Fortunately, the softened ground slowed the horses pace. At least six volleys of arrows, by most estimates to be 12,000, flew into the iron-plated horsemen and weakened their ranks.⁶³ But the crush of the Persian heavy cavalry was severe. At least one hundred Byzantine infantrymen were smashed in the initial onrush.⁶⁴

The battle had commenced and Heraclius responded quickly to the Sassanid *cataphracts*. Swinging his lancers to both flanks of the Persian cavalry, Heraclius and his *cataphractii* bodyguards entered the fray. The lancers, in only a few minutes, had left their positions in the second line and dashed hard around to begin slaughtering the

⁶⁰ Robert O'Connell, *Soul of the Sword: An Illustrated History of Weaponry and Warfare from Prehistory to the Present*, (New York: The Free Press, 2002), 70.

⁶¹ C. Cornuelle, *An Overview of the Sassanian Persian Military*, (London: Slingshot, 1997), 210.

⁶² Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883), 185.

⁶³ Geoffrey Regan, *First Crusader: Byzantium's Holy Wars*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2001), 118.

⁶⁴ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883), 185.

Persian cavalry.⁶⁵ The infantry, with renewed morale as their emperor was with them, began tearing the Persians, lacking stirrups, out of their saddles. The Byzantines, seeking revenge on the Persians, took no prisoners among the *cataphractii* and *clibinarii*. The *cataphractii* with their momentum spent were easy prey. The *clibinarii* were a more difficult task. For this the lancers needed to slay the *clibinarii* with their long lances. Yet a problem remained with the camel *cataphracts* which were largely *clibinarii*. It was up to the infantry to destroy this force and likewise suffered heavy losses.⁶⁶ The camels could not be attacked by the horse mounted troops of Heraclius, due to their fear of camels, and the infantry would have to get in close to kill the rider. A task the infantryman would have to accomplish amidst the crush of battle while dodging the heavy mace of the *clibinarii*. In essence, the task of destroying a modern tank with a satchel full of grenades would have been easier. For the better part of twenty minutes the cavalry-infantry duel continued with acts of Byzantine heroism that were worthy of medals in any century. Heraclius himself slew three Persian noblemen in the fray. It is noteworthy that these noblemen, all young men, were slain by Heraclius who was considered elderly at fifty-one.⁶⁷

The Persian generals watched as their cavalry charge proved a disaster and recognized that a bloody day lay ahead. Both, however, recognized that that most of the heady and vain Persian nobles were slain and now without hindrance they could send their troops in for the kill. Shahrvaraz and Rahzadh committed their infantry and archers

⁶⁵ C.W.C. Oman, *The Art of War in the Middle Ages: A.D. 378-1515*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1885. Reprint, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1953), 43.

⁶⁶ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883), 186.

⁶⁷ Geoffrey Regan, *First Crusader: Byzantium's Holy Wars*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2001), 120.

to the battle that raged a half-mile away.⁶⁸ While the Persian infantry marched forward the remaining *cataphract* troops retreated to their original positions. Leaderless and demoralized, but thirsting for revenge, the remaining *cataphract* were saved for a possible *coup-de-grace*.⁶⁹

The Persian infantry was to fare better due to their courage and fear of their masters' whips. When the Persians came within range of the Byzantine archers and *byzantinoi*, they suffered terrific losses, yet they pressed forward. It was not until the Persian archers reached one hundred yards that they could open fire. Even then, the strain that the Persians placed on their bows to fire often found their weapons snapping in half.⁷⁰ Still the infantry continued forward. The Byzantines, exhausted by the cavalry battle, prepared for the lines of infantry that would surge forward unto them. When the clash came it was similar to water smashing on rock. But the Byzantines fell back. The Kurds, fighting in their homeland, put up a tough assault against the Byzantines. The Kurds, fierce fighters skilled with a heavy spear, began to make headways.⁷¹ At this point the first third of the Persian infantry had engaged the Byzantine line. Heraclius though hesitated to throw in his precious cavalry until all the Persian infantry was in line.

The elite Sughdians now entered the fray and the battle reached its climax. The Emperor recognized the threat these Sughdians possessed and committed the rest of his infantry to the fight.⁷² The Sughdians and Kurds began to find the breaking points in the Byzantine infantry and surged forward. At this point, Heraclius committed, not his

⁶⁸ C. Cornuelle, *An Overview of the Sassanian Persian Military*, (London: Slingshot, 1997), 216.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, 217.

⁷⁰ C.W.C. Oman, *The Art of War in the Middle Ages: A.D. 378-1515*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1885. Reprint, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1953), 39.

⁷¹ C. Cornuelle, *An Overview of the Sassanian Persian Military*, (London: Slingshot, 1997), 216.

⁷² Geoffrey Regan, *First Crusader: Byzantium's Holy Wars*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2001), 121.

cavalry, but his armored archers from the province of Trebizond. The blows of swords, axes, spears, and shield bosses rang across the battlefield in thunderous roars. For hours this continued, well into the afternoon. The Byzantine infantry, in a near crescent formation, was almost stretched to the breaking point, yet still held on long enough.⁷³

Heraclius at last threw in his *byzantinoi*, lancers and *cataphractii* into the flanks of the Persian infantry and the battle played out into its last and deadliest phase. The Persian generals, Shahrvaraz and Rahzadh, recognized the threat and committed themselves, their bodyguards, and the rallied Persian heavy cavalry to the battle.⁷⁴ The battle had reached its height and both sides recognized that all was at stake. For the Byzantines, defeat would mean death and slavery in a land far from home. For the Persians defeat would mean the end of their empire, or at least its permanent crippling.⁷⁵

Finally the Persian cavalry retreated after Heraclius slew Rahzadh in the heat of battle. The Sughdians had reached their breaking point and began surrendering in what was now a futile battle. Heraclius, realizing that the elite Persian infantry was shattered, called for the surrender of the rest of the Persian army.⁷⁶ The Persians began surrendering in droves. The battle of Nineveh, desperate by any standards, was finally over.

It was already nightfall when the battle ended and both sides hoped to save their wounded and count and bury their dead. Losses were nearly impossible to quantify but deaths among senior commanders, especially amongst the Persians, was catastrophic.⁷⁷ The Persians had slain several senior Byzantine officers. Heraclius, had taken several wounds, but none was severe. Byzantine casualties numbered most likely one fifth of

⁷³ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883), 187.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, 188.

⁷⁵ Geoffrey Regan, *First Crusader: Byzantium's Holy Wars*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2001), 119.

⁷⁶ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883), 190.

⁷⁷ C. Cornuelle, *An Overview of the Sassanian Persian Military*, (London: Slingshot, 1997), 221.

their army, with the infantry taking the majority of the losses. The Byzantines had slaughtered most of the Persian nobility, but enough remained to lead an organized retreat and set up an honor guard on the edge of the battlefield to honor the dead.⁷⁸ Persian losses were monumentally high. At least six thousand Persians were taken prisoner and most likely another eight thousand to ten thousand lay dead on the field.⁷⁹ For the Persians, their wounded were to have no respite as many died during the night of wounds that were probably superficial if immediate treatment had been given to the wounded and the cold killed many more.⁸⁰

Historians will find many comparisons between this battle and one fought eight centuries later in northern France on a field called Agincourt. In point of fact, Nineveh could be easily considered the “Byzantine Agincourt.” One army, massively outnumbered, characterized both battles. At Agincourt, even by the most conservative estimates, Henry V was outnumbered at least three to one. The vaunted Persian and French cavalry insisted on leading a vain charge into a defensive line on a wet day. Both cavalry charges produced losses that were soaring. The English and Byzantine armies were both far from home and led by a warrior king. Byzantine and English archers proved to be a decisive factor in battle. Losses amongst the French and Persian armies were disastrously high. And those losses included vast amounts of nobility. Above all though, Agincourt and Nineveh were tremendous victories that at the time seemed decisive but proved to be short lived.⁸¹ For the English this was due to the premature

⁷⁸ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883), 190.

⁷⁹ Geoffrey Regan, *First Crusader: Byzantium's Holy Wars*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2001), 125.

⁸⁰ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883), 191.

⁸¹ C.W.C. Oman, *The Art of War in the Middle Ages: A.D. 378-1515*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1885. Reprint, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1953), 42.

death of Henry V and the gradual reconquest of French territories by a revived French army. For the Byzantines the reversal would be the whirlwind of Islam.

CHAPTER IV

AFTER NINEVEH AND THE RISE OF ISLAM

After the battle Heraclius prayed to God and the Virgin for the great victory they bestowed upon him and his army. He then chose not to execute his prisoners in the hope of drawing Persian support to him. Not only was the victory great in scope but the booty seized was immense. Theophanes recorded hundreds of gold swords, bracelets, belts, breastplates, and shields seized. The shield of Rahzadh himself was solid gold and possessed at least 120 different laminae, beautifully carved gems placed in a decorative pattern, upon it.⁸²

Heraclius was now free to press southward to the capital at Ctesiphon. However, while the ferocity of Persian resistance grew slightly, no major force blocked Heraclius as no Sassanid leadership was forthcoming. Chosroes II upon hearing of the defeat at Nineveh lost his last vestiges of sanity and the nation was temporarily leaderless.⁸³ In the path of conquest to Ctesiphon, Heraclius took numerous palaces of the Sassanid court. At the River Diyala, Heraclius captured the palace known as the “Paradise of Beklal.” Here the Byzantine troops discovered thousands of deer, zebras, and ostriches. The feast that ensued was the first time the troops ate well in many months.⁸⁴

⁸² Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883), 193.

⁸³ Romilly Jenkins, *Byzantium: The Imperial Centuries, A.D. 610-1071*. (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1966), 28.

⁸⁴ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883), 197.

Along the same river, Heraclius captured the fortified palatial city of Dastagerd. Dastagerd had been the home of the Sassanid royal palace for over a century and its capture proved to be one of the greatest prizes in the history of warfare. Here remained the vast Sassanid treasury only some of which Chosroes had been able to take with him, only weeks before.⁸⁵ Thousands of Christian slaves were liberated from the surrounding area from the Persians and their incursions from the past decades. The freed Christians called him a new Moses.⁸⁶ But in retrospect history proved that this was to be the final episode of the thousand year struggle between the Greco-Romans and the Persians and the prizes taken from Dastagerd would be indicative of this. In the palace the Byzantines found the Roman standards from the battle of Carrhae six centuries previous. They also discovered the standards from the Roman defeat at Edessa in 260 A.D. And like Alexander did eight centuries previously at Persepolis, Heraclius torched the great palace in revenge and for God.⁸⁷

Heraclius pressed on to Ctesiphon hoping to achieve a triumph that would rival Caesar, Constantine, or Alexander. Instead events inside the palace at Ctesiphon would ensure that a full conquest would not be necessary. Kavad, Chosroes' eldest son, overthrew him in a palace coup. Chosroes, imprisoned, had to beg for his food from his jailers. His former generals and governors came to insult him to his face. Finally, Kavad forced Chosroes to watch the murder of his many sons by his many concubines. Kavad

⁸⁵ Geoffrey Regan, *First Crusader: Byzantium's Holy Wars*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2001), 126.

⁸⁶ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883), 198.

⁸⁷ Romilly Jenkins, *Byzantium: The Imperial Centuries, A.D. 610-1071*.(London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1966), 28.

then ordered Chosroes shot to death slowly with numerous arrows, while Kavad watched.⁸⁸

Heraclius made overtures for a Persian surrender and Kavad welcomed them, for his empire lay in ruin. The war was pointless to continue. The terms of the Persian surrender were generous. Heraclius demanded the release of all Byzantine prisoners, the return of all Byzantine territory conquered by the Sassanids in the war, and the return of the True Cross.⁸⁹ When the Persian ambassadors went to Heraclius who was camped north of Ctesiphon at Ganzak, they saw the ruin that Heraclius had inflicted upon the Sassanid states. Along the road between Ctesiphon and Ganzak lay the bodies of at least three thousand Persian troops. The great palaces were in ruins. If Heraclius was a harsh conqueror it was a small thing compared to the ruination the Persians had inflicted upon the Romans and Byzantines.

History records that Heraclius fought with the tactical skill of Hannibal and the strategic foresight of Caesar. He rebuilt a shattered army and made it the best in the entire world. Later on, men such as Napoleon, Sherman, Guderian, Rommel, and Schwarzkopf would repeat his strategy of wearing out the enemy by eating into the rear areas. His ability to lead his army on a brutal war of retreat, attack, and counterattack is unquestionable. Nineveh, the exception to this strategy, ironically remains his greatest victory. His army did not know defeat, only setbacks. And he ended victoriously the last war of the Classical World for an empire that stood as the bastion of Christianity.

Peace had finally come and the Byzantine army withdrew from Persian territory to restore the lands retaken from the Sassanids. Heraclius retired to Constantinople to

⁸⁸ Geoffrey Regan, *First Crusader: Byzantium's Holy Wars*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2001), 127.

⁸⁹ Nicephorus, *Short History*, ed. Cyril Mango (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1990), 163.

rebuild his shattered empire. The destiny of the Byzantine Empire seemed now secure for all time, and Heraclius to be the greatest emperor Christianity had ever possessed.

Regrettably, none of it was to be. The hero of Nineveh, a front line soldier, a man whom his people would adore, did not die at the age of fifty-five in the throes of victory. Instead he would live to see the empire he saved shattered by a force no man could have envisioned.

Like a fire from Arabia, Islam sprang forth onto the world stage and changed the face of history. The story of Islam is one that has been written countless times and needs to be recalled here only briefly. Muhammad of Mecca, a merchant who could expect a life of prosperity and comfort, began receiving divine revelations from Allah at the age of forty in 610 A.D. After a period of fear and doubt Muhammad began preaching, what he insisted was not a new religion but one that purified the way of the old Judeo-Christian monotheism. He was soon to face a persecution common to those who challenge the old ways. In 622 A.D. Muhammad and his followers fled to Medina, north of Mecca, to escape said persecution. This migration is known as the *Hijra* and it also marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar. During his time in Medina Muhammad consolidated his base of power and began his raids on Meccan caravans.⁹⁰ In Arabic these attacks are called the *ghazawat*, and ultimately they resulted in the return of Muhammad to Mecca and the triumph of Islam in Arabia. After several battles with the Meccans, which included the miraculous victory at Badr, Muhammad was finally able to take the city of Mecca without a fight in 630. By the time of Muhammad's death in 632, the entire

⁹⁰ Kaegi, Walter. *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*. (New York, Cambridge Press. 1992), 32.

Arabian Peninsula was under the sway of Islam, though Jews and Christians were still allowed to live and worship relatively freely in those places.⁹¹

After the death of Muhammad the caliphs who followed him, known as the *Rashidun* or Rightly Guided, began to encroach ever further into Palestine and Mesopotamia with their highly mobile mounted forces and lightly armored desert infantry. Initially these movements were probing actions designed to test the weaknesses of the Sassanid and Byzantine Empire. However, discovering that these areas were deprived of defenders the armies Islam went on a rampage of conquest. More importantly many Byzantine cities began welcoming the Muslims as liberators from the theocratic tyranny of the Byzantines upon their Coptic and Syriac subjects.

⁹¹ Hitti, Philip. *History of the Arabs*. (London, Macmillan & Co. 1937), 29.

CHAPTER V

COMPOSITION OF BYZANTINE AND MUSLIM ARMIES

The army of the Arab Muslims was very much the polar opposite of the Byzantine forces against whom they would fight. It possessed the light infantry that was characteristic of eastern troops. However, this infantry, unlike that of the Sassanids, was not a demoralized and conscripted force of polyglot infantry. The Sassanid infantry, with the exception of the Sughdians, were farmers and farriers who were expected to fight and die. In another age they would have been considered perfect cannon fodder. The Arab Muslims were not that, though farmers and merchants they may have been.

The clan style of warfare in the Arabian Peninsula invariably bred men who had tasted combat or at least were familiar with weaponry. Much like the Scottish clans, the Arabs often possessed blood ties to those who fought alongside them and thus their courage was bolstered to near fearlessness.⁹² In addition to this already fearsome skill and determination was the strength of Islam itself. As for the Arab soldiers themselves, the Muslim troops were well suited to desert and other harsh terrains. Their armor and weaponry was not however, of as high a quality as the Byzantines'. In a one-to-one fight

⁹² Sicker, Martin. *The Islamic World in Ascendancy: From the Arab Conquests to the Siege of Vienna*. (Westport, CT. Praeger Publishers, 2000.), 45

like Nineveh this would be telling.⁹³ However, the Battle of the Yarmouk River was not destined to be this type of battle, and because the Byzantines would be lacking their emperor it would be a fight that they would ultimately lose.⁹⁴

Arab cavalry was in many essences the ultimate in light cavalry, though they did not possess the composite bow that was used among the cavalry of the east or the compound bow favored by the barbarians that laid low the Western Roman Empire. Lacking in bows however, they did enjoy the indomitable will that their brethren on the ground likewise possessed and would ensure that they could charge into hurricane of arrows before they broke. In addition the Arabs had some of the finest horses in the world. A treatise could be written on these magnificent animals. Even today, Arabian horse bloodlines are traced back to the days of the Prophet Muhammad. The horse itself is not the massive battle steed favored by the medieval knights of Europe such as the horses bred in Normandy and Flanders. Nor is it like the speedy draft Nesaean studs favored by the Sassanids.⁹⁵ Instead it is a “hot-blooded horse” that is perfect for speed and stamina. In addition the Arabian is a highly intelligent and sensitive animal that is responsive to its rider and makes a superb light and medium cavalry horse. The Arabs would use their speed and mounted discipline to full effect against the larger and more experienced Byzantine cavalry.⁹⁶

When it came to tactics the Muslims were inexperienced but not necessarily at a disadvantage thereby. The Muslims were used to open battles that would allow for the destruction of a large portion of the enemy army when victory was achieved. The usual

⁹³ Kaegi, Walter. *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*. (New York, Cambridge Press. 1992.), 67.

⁹⁴ Kaegi, Walter. *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*. (New York, Cambridge Press. 1992.), 71.

⁹⁵ Robert O’Connell, *Soul of the Sword: An Illustrated History of Weaponry and Warfare from Prehistory to the Present*, (New York: The Free Press, 2002), 154.

⁹⁶ *ibid.* 154.

tactics would be the simple lines drawn en masse across a battlefield. This would be followed with numerous champions fighting individual duels that would serve to bolster the victor and weaken the morale of the defeated. After this was normally a coordinated charge against the enemy lines, and the victory usually going to the attacker, as they possessed the momentum from the charge. The tactics in this case dictated the strategy that open battles were to be sought against foes in preference to lengthy sieges. In battles such as Ajnadayn and the Yarmouk, which will be addressed, this strategy favored the Muslims.⁹⁷

As a polar opposite were the Byzantines whose tactics were dictated by their strategy. The Byzantines tactics were the result of Heraclius' victories against the Sassanids and the work by Maurice as expounded in his *Strategikon*. However, these were problematic. Heraclius' victories were the result of years of conditioning and familiarization with Persian tactics in the face of victory and defeat. The *Strategikon* was an excellent work that included numerous ethnographic studies of Byzantium's known enemies such as the Turks, Sassanids, Avars, Bulgars, etc.⁹⁸ It did not include the wild Muslims driven by faith and with a speed that was nearly unmatchable. However, it did possess one factor that was easily seen in Heraclius' campaigns against the Sassanids: combined-arms strategy. The united use of cavalry, infantry, and skirmishers proved to be of monumental importance to the victories achieved against a numerically and sometimes qualitatively superior enemy. However, this was a difficult task to accomplish and only the most experienced, bold, somewhat rash, and cagiest of generals of any army throughout history could use it effectively. Heraclius was one of those men.

⁹⁷ Kaegi, Walter. *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*. (New York, Cambridge Press. 1992.) 37.

⁹⁸ Geoffrey Regan, *First Crusader: Byzantium's Holy Wars*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2001.) 54.

Unfortunately there weren't any other generals in that part of the world, Muslim or Byzantine, who could have succeeded in such complex maneuvers.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Geoffrey Regan, *First Crusader: Byzantium's Holy Wars*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2001.) 58.

CHAPTER VI

CLASH AT THE YARMOUK RIVER

After several deep incursions by the Arabs into Palestine and Syria, Heraclius decided once and for all to raise a force that would check a major invasion and send the Muslims reeling. Conversely, the Muslims would seek to take Damascus as a launching point for future conquests of Byzantine lands. For both sides Damascus was a strategic point for ensuring the safety of their empires. The strategic importance of Damascus would result in the first serious clash of arms in Syria. The Battle of Ajnadayn, occurring in July of 634, was not the opening move of the Arab-Byzantine Wars but it set in motion the course of events that would eventually led to the great Muslim conquests that would devour the Levant, North Africa, and the rest of the Middle East.¹⁰⁰

Though the battle is sketchy and drawn largely from Muslim sources enough can be pieced together to determine its course and result. At Ajnadayn, at which Heraclius was not present as he felt the Muslims were a force that could be reckoned with easily, the Muslims under Khalid ibn al-Walid marched to meet the Byzantines in the open field.¹⁰¹ It was a wise choice as the cities that had already fallen to the Arabs were not strategically important. In this case an open battle was far preferable to the mobile Muslims, who knew that in the case of a siege with which they were evenly opposed the

¹⁰⁰ Kaegi, Walter. *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*. (New York, Cambridge Press. 1992.) 81

¹⁰¹ *The History of al-Tabari*. Translated and annotated by Yohanan Friedmann. Vol. 12, *The Battle of al-Qadisiyyah and the Conquest of Syria and Palestine*. (Albany: State University of New York, 1992.) 184

Muslims would ultimately fail. It was this strategy, that of seeking open battle rather than siege, that ensured the Muslims' final victory.¹⁰²

The Muslim advance on Ajnadayn was indeed the correct move as a large Byzantine army was marshalling there and was preparing to drive the Muslims out city by city. However, to concentrate their forces took the Muslims two weeks; the Byzantines, without Heraclius's leadership, took almost a month. Once the armies had maneuvered to a point where conflict was inevitable, the Byzantines drew first blood in their opening foray. Initially the Byzantines sent forth their skirmishing slingers and archers. This would serve to not only kill large numbers of the enemy Muslims but also lower their morale. Despite the voluminous fire and heavy casualties the Muslims held firm and did not return volleys as their archers were incapable of the range and volume of archer fire. It was here that the Byzantines threw away their best chance of victory and failed to launch an all-out assault on the Muslims.¹⁰³ After the initial skirmishing phase, which left huge gaps in the Muslim lines, Khalid ibn al-Walid altered his strategy.¹⁰⁴

In this battle it was the Byzantine commanders who had the greater tactical and strategic expertise; thusly al-Walid chose to weaken the Byzantines using their own vanity as a weapon. The Muslims' individual champions would march out to the fore and challenge the Byzantine officers to single combat. Unfortunately for the Byzantines, this ploy worked. Scores of experienced Byzantine officers were killed by the more martial and battle-tested Muslim officers. One of the more notable occurrences was the story of

¹⁰² Sicker, Martin. *The Islamic World in Ascendancy: From the Arab Conquests to the Siege of Vienna*. (Westport, CT. Praeger Publishers, 2000.) 87.

¹⁰³ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883)134.

¹⁰⁴ *The History of al-Tabari*. Translated and annotated by Yohanan Friedmann. Vol. 12, *The Battle of al-Qadisiyyah and the Conquest of Syria and Palestine*. (Albany: State University of New York, 1992.) 186

Zarrar Ibn al-Azwar. Zarrar's common *nom de guerre* was "the half naked warrior" because he often fought with out his shirt and armor, however during the lull for the champions he advanced forward in full armor and an elephant hide shield taken from a dead Byzantine. His challenge to the Byzantine champions for a duel was his famed battle cry, "I am the death of the Pale Faces, I am the killer of Romans, I am the scourge sent upon you, I am Zarrar Ibn al Azwar."¹⁰⁵ Immediately after this he shed his robes and dropped his shield. Numerous Byzantine officers came out to slay the fierce captain but instead they found themselves dead upon the Muslims sword. Followed by these disgraces the Byzantines sent forth several more champions to duel their opposite numbers amongst the Muslims. By the end of the duels al-Walid realized he had achieved the advantage by slaying a high proportion of Byzantine officers for minimal officer losses on his side.¹⁰⁶

At this point the effectiveness of the Byzantine army was thoroughly depleted and al-Walid launched an all-out assault. Al-Walid discovered though, that the Byzantines would be a tougher opponent than he expected as they held their ground despite the losses amongst their officer corps. By the end of the day no one had achieved a clear advantage. On the second day the Byzantine commander, Theodorus, laid an ambush for al-Walid which could have effectively ended the battle. However, the ambush backfired as Theodorus was slain while trying to kill al-Walid himself. The Byzantines, realizing their commander was dead, lost heart but nonetheless maintained the field.¹⁰⁷ Al-Walid sensed the shift in morale and sent out his last assault against the Byzantine positions.

¹⁰⁵ *The History of al-Tabari*. Translated and annotated by Yohanan Friedmann. Vol. 12, *The Battle of al-Qadisiyyah and the Conquest of Syria and Palestine*. (Albany: State University of New York, 1992.) 186

¹⁰⁶ *The History of al-Tabari*. Translated and annotated by Yohanan Friedmann. Vol. 12, *The Battle of al-Qadisiyyah and the Conquest of Syria and Palestine*. (Albany: State University of New York, 1992.) 187

¹⁰⁷ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883). 134.

The Muslim troops charged forth and brutal and merciless combat ensued. Even without leadership however, the Byzantine troops held firm against Muslim attacks. However Khalid now committed his final reserves into the fray, desperate to end the long hours of bloodshed of this prolonged battle.¹⁰⁸ It was with this attack that the Byzantines broke, but they retreated in relatively good order.¹⁰⁹

This could have been a pyrrhic victory for the Muslims as many of their senior officers were killed in the final assaults. It was exceedingly bloody for both sides and even to this day the ground is littered with markers for the dead. Even with the Byzantines retreating in three different directions the battle was not completely over as the remaining Muslim cavalry pursued the largest of the three Byzantine forces that retreated in the direction of Jerusalem. The Byzantine losses were worse here than on the battlefield and it proved to have grievous effects for the cities that were to soon suffer sieges by the Muslims. Shortly thereafter the Muslims went on to laying sieges against numerous cities in Palestine and Syria. While siege works were not the forte of the Muslims, their forces proved to be far too numerous for the Byzantines to counterattack or for those defending to withstand any particularly long or bloody sieges.¹¹⁰

It was to be another two years before the Byzantines or Muslim Arabs chose to engage in open battle against each other. During those years numerous cities fell to the Muslims. Some were the result of the Muslim siege works. Others, however, simply opened their gates to the Muslims as liberators from the rule of Byzantium. These cities fell largely as a result of the Monophysite-Orthodox Schism that had occurred in the

¹⁰⁸ *The History of al-Tabari*. Translated and annotated by Yohanan Friedmann. Vol. 12, *The Battle of al-Qadisiyyah and the Conquest of Syria and Palestine*. (Albany: State University of New York, 1992.) 189

¹⁰⁹ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883) 135.

¹¹⁰ Kaegi, Walter. *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*. (New York, Cambridge Press. 1992.) 54

previous century. It was a sad state of affairs for the Byzantine Empire and glorious conquest for the Muslims. However, by 636 Heraclius had organized a large enough force at Antioch with which he believed he could drive the Muslims out of Syrian and the Levant permanently.¹¹¹ All that was required was a battle that would ensure a finality for the both the victor and the vanquished. Heraclius knew that this was the weapon with which he would crush Islam and regain his lost territories.¹¹²

Upon learning that a large host was arrayed against them, the Muslim forces under al-Walid and numerous other commanders decided to withdraw from the cities, leaving only token defenses in place. For the first time the Muslims chose not engage immediately and decided that a tactical withdrawal would be the wisest move. This served several purposes as it extended the Byzantine supply lines and made their army all the more vulnerable as they moved deeper into Syria; it also ensured that unless the Byzantines moved around the Muslim army, the Muslims would be able to fight on grounds of their choosing. Lastly, if they suffered a defeat that was not a complete catastrophe the Muslims could retreat into the deserts of Arabia. For several weeks this parrying of foes continued until Heraclius realized that peaceful negotiations were an impossibility. Heraclius, by now ill and at Antioch, gave orders for the Byzantine forces to close in and destroy the Muslim army.¹¹³

The Byzantine force that was arrayed against the Muslims was a sizeable one that some historians consider the largest to ever be assembled in the Levant up to that point. Historians of that era, particularly Muslims, estimate the size of Heraclius' army to be

¹¹¹ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883), 139.

¹¹² Kaegi, Walter. *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*. (New York, Cambridge Press. 1992.)

¹¹³ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883), 140.

around 150,000 men under arms.¹¹⁴ Most historians in the past few decades, however, have estimated the Byzantine Army to be less than fifty thousand with the number more realistically being thirty thousand. The reason for this discrepancy is an obvious one as it would serve Muslim propaganda well for the victors of the Battle of the Yarmouk River to have triumphed against a foe that could have outnumbered them as much as five to one. The Muslim forces at the battle were most likely in the range of 15-20,000. If this is so then the forces arrayed against each other at the Yarmouk were comparable in size.¹¹⁵ In such a case it would be tactics that would win the day.

A preliminary action occurred in mid-July of 636 when the Ghassanid Arabs engaged the screening forces for the Muslims.¹¹⁶ Not a battle in any real sense, it nonetheless confirmed that the battle would be soon. On the morning of August 20, 636, the two armies faced off against each other along the Yarmouk River, northeast of the Sea of Galilee. Between the two opposing armies stretched the battlefield which consisted of the Plain of the Yarmouk.¹¹⁷ This is enclosed on its western and southern sides by deep ravines, known as Wadi-ur-Raqqad with the banks about 1,000 feet deep, this ravine joins Yarmouk River on its southern side. Of the entire battlefield only one position has any great strategic importance and it is the hill known as the Jamu'a or Gathering. This hill allows a view of almost the entire field from an elevated position.¹¹⁸

Beyond size the composition of the armies should be examined so that the quality of the forces can be compared. The Byzantine army consisted of five corps of infantry

¹¹⁴ *The History of al-Tabari*. Translated and annotated by Yohanan Friedmann. Vol. 12, *The Battle of al-Qadisiyyah and the Conquest of Syria and Palestine*. (Albany: State University of New York, 1992.) 189

¹¹⁵ Kaegi, Walter. *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*. (New York, Cambridge Press. 1992.) 91.

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883), 158.

¹¹⁸ Kaegi, Walter. *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*. (New York, Cambridge Press. 1992.) 106.

and cavalry that varied in quality and ethnicity. Not only in this army were the citizens of the Byzantine Empire but numerous other factions from afar, including men from the Italian Peninsula. These were the most reliable and battle-experienced of the units as many of these men had fought under Heraclius during the Persian Wars, culminating in the victory at Nineveh. These men would constitute the bulk of the heavy infantry and cavalry that were of superior quality to anything the Muslims could throw at them.¹¹⁹ This also included a large group of other Europeans that included Franks and Spaniards. These forces constituted two corps under the command of Byzantine generals Gregory and Dairjan.¹²⁰ Another corps of the army were the Russians from the area which would in later centuries incorporate Novgorod. Most of these were not Russians in the traditional sense, instead most were Scandinavian settlers of the area and had filtered into the Byzantine army to serve as tough mercenaries. They were equipped largely with axes or spears and simple wooden shields similar to their brethren in the far north.¹²¹

While these men were a relatively trustworthy force, the addition of Avar and Bulgar Slavs to this corps would serve only to cause dissension and distrust in the army. These peoples, who had recently only waged terrible wars against the Byzantines, were by far the most unreliable and of the lowest quality. They went into battle usually armed only with the most basic and crudest of weaponry and also wore little if any armor. These men would serve as suitable troops for wearing out the better force, buying time with their lives.¹²² These men were under the command of the Russian prince Qanateer. Under

¹¹⁹ Geoffrey Regan, *First Crusader: Byzantium's Holy Wars*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2001), 134.

¹²⁰ Treadgold, Warren. *Byzantium and Its Army: 284-1081*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995. 207.

¹²¹ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883), 154.

¹²² *The History of al-Tabari*. Translated and annotated by Yohanan Friedmann. Vol. 12, *The Battle of al-Qadisiyyah and the Conquest of Syria and Palestine*. (Albany: State University of New York, 1992.) 189

the command of their king Mahan, a massive corps of Armenians and Georgians from the Caucasus would serve as the reserve if the battle went awry. These men were largely untested conscripts peppered with a handful of veterans from the Persian Wars. While not as well armed as the Greek troops, these men had better equipment than the Slavs and were of more value than simply cannon fodder.¹²³ Lastly the Christianized Ghassanid Arabs, under the command of their king Jabla bin al-Eiham, would serve as the light cavalry which would counter the Muslim cavalry similarly equipped.¹²⁴ It was formidable force that would take great skill and a good deal of luck to defeat.

The Muslim army was under the overall command of al-Walid, as he was the most experienced of all the officers in the Muslim camp. In addition his victory over the Byzantine force at Ajnadayn added to his battlefield prowess. The force that al-Walid commanded was a polyglot of infantry and cavalry that had made the strategic withdrawal from Palestine and Syria. Al-Walid after taking command reorganized the army in to thirty-six infantry and four cavalry regiments, with cavalry making up a quarter of the army. One large cavalry regiment would serve as the reserve corps.¹²⁵ The army was lined out over a front of eleven miles, with its left on the Yarmouk River a mile before the ravine began and right on Jabiya road. The center of the army was under the command of Abu Ubaidah ibn al-Jarrah to the left center and Shurhabeel bin Hassana to the right center. The left wing was under the command of Yazeed and the right wing was

¹²³ Treadgold, Warren. *Byzantium and Its Army: 284-1081*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995. 159.

¹²⁴ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883) 159.

¹²⁵ *The History of al-Tabari*. Translated and annotated by Yohanan Friedmann. Vol. 12, *The Battle of al-Qadisiyyah and the Conquest of Syria and Palestine*. (Albany: State University of New York, 1992.) 190

under Amr ibn al-A's' command. Behind them stood the cavalry regiments which would serve as fire brigades.¹²⁶

The battle began with the similar calling out of champions, only in this case it took a turn for the worse as a Byzantine general named George desired to speak to al-Walid. According to sources on both sides, George converted to Islam after hearing al-Walid's moving speech on the virtues of Islam. George was destined to die later in the day on the Muslims' side.¹²⁷ After this inauspicious start the true dueling of champions began. By midday no one side had gained a clear advantage in the dueling, and Mahan chose to engage the Muslims with a half-hearted assault to probe the Muslim line for weaknesses. It was the first of many decisions that would come to doom the Byzantine forces. The infantry that seemed on the verge of breaking through was not reinforced and the fighting simply petered out by early evening with both sides taking mild losses. Casualties were higher amongst the Byzantine forces, composed largely of the non-European troops who were not seasoned veterans, unlike most of the Muslim infantry.¹²⁸

That evening Mahan chose to launch a major assault at dawn against the Muslim lines, using surprise as his key element. His orders entailed that the main thrusts would come from the wings of his army with the center holding the Muslims before them in place so that reinforcements could not strengthen the flanks. To observe the course of the battle Mahan set up a large pavilion surrounded by Armenian guards who were most likely needed for the fighting.¹²⁹ Though the attack at dawn achieved success, it was not a

¹²⁶ *The History of al-Tabari*. Translated and annotated by Yohanan Friedmann. Vol. 12, *The Battle of al-Qadisiyyah and the Conquest of Syria and Palestine*. (Albany: State University of New York, 1992.) 191

¹²⁷ *The History of al-Tabari*. Translated and annotated by Yohanan Friedmann. Vol. 12, *The Battle of al-Qadisiyyah and the Conquest of Syria and Palestine*. (Albany: State University of New York, 1992.) 191

¹²⁸ Kaegi, Walter. *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*. (New York, Cambridge Press. 1992.)107.

¹²⁹ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883) 162.

total surprise, as several outward posts had been set up by al-Walid for detecting just such a movement. However, the speed with which the Byzantines attacked served to negate most of this. At the center, the Byzantine did not force a major action as this was meant to be a limited attack to hold the Muslim center in position. On the right wing of the Byzantine a force commanded by Qanateer and was composed largely of Slavs attacked and forced the Muslims to retreat due to sheer numbers. The Muslim infantry was driven back and al-A'as ordered his cavalry to counterattack but they too were pushed back and were driven towards their camp.¹³⁰ After this humiliating retreat the Muslims reorganized and rushed towards the battle-field to reorganize for the counter-attack.¹³¹

On the left the situation was almost as grim for the Muslims. Yazeed's corps was driven back and nearly broke due to the Greco-European troops, who not only were mainly veterans but had also linked themselves at the ankles with chains. This was taken as a blood oath before the battle so none could retreat, and the chains also served to break up Muslim cavalry attacks.¹³² As both wings of the Muslim army seemed on the verge of collapse, Mahan did not press his advantage as wisely as he should have and failed to notice al-Walid bringing up his cavalry reserve. He first turned to the right wing and with his fire brigade and one cavalry regiment struck at the flank of the army of Qanateer at the same time as al-A'as counter-attacked again from the front. The forces under Qanateer began a withdrawal toward their original positions, and thus the Muslim right was stabilized.¹³³

¹³⁰ *The History of al-Tabari*. Translated and annotated by Yohanan Friedmann. Vol. 12, *The Battle of al-Qadisiyyah and the Conquest of Syria and Palestine*. (Albany: State University of New York, 1992.) 191

¹³¹ *The History of al-Tabari*. Translated and annotated by Yohanan Friedmann. Vol. 12, *The Battle of al-Qadisiyyah and the Conquest of Syria and Palestine*. (Albany: State University of New York, 1992.) 192

¹³² Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883) 163.

¹³³ *The History of al-Tabari*. Translated and annotated by Yohanan Friedmann. Vol. 12, *The Battle of al-Qadisiyyah and the Conquest of Syria and Palestine*. (Albany: State University of New York, 1992.) 192

Al-Walid then withdrew his cavalry for a strike on the left where Yazeed's corps was about to make a counterattack. Al-Walid was cautious enough also to dispatch a small cavalry force to ensure that the Byzantine center did not come to the aid of their right flank. Slowly and surely the Muslim left was secured though at a far higher cost than what it took to secure the right. During the fighting in the Byzantine center general Dairjan was slain by the cavalry assault. It was serious blow to morale and his loss was the highest of the day when the lines had returned to their original positions of that morning.¹³⁴

The third day began with a Byzantine attack on the corps of Amr ibn al-A'as and Sharhabeel bin Hasana, selecting the Muslim right again as the point for the main assault. Initially the Muslim line held against the Slavs and Rus troops but the sheer weight of the Byzantine forces proved telling and the Muslims were driven back further and further. This time, though, the Muslim retreat did not continue all the way to their camp. All the while the entire Byzantine center and right demonstrated to keep the main body of the Muslim forces busy so as not to allow any reserves being committed. Al-Walid then decided to concentrate his reserve cavalry on a flank attack to the Byzantine left.¹³⁵ Like the previous day, the Byzantine infantry was not capable of fending off attacks from all three sides. Again the Slavic and Rus corps retreated but in good order and inflicting heavy losses on the Muslims. But by nightfall the lines had returned again to their original positions.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ *The History of al-Tabari*. Translated and annotated by Yohanan Friedmann. Vol. 12, *The Battle of al-Qadisiyyah and the Conquest of Syria and Palestine*. (Albany: State University of New York, 1992.) 194

¹³⁵ *The History of al-Tabari*. Translated and annotated by Yohanan Friedmann. Vol. 12, *The Battle of al-Qadisiyyah and the Conquest of Syria and Palestine*. (Albany: State University of New York, 1992.) 195

¹³⁶ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883) 167.

The fourth day proved to be the last chance the Byzantines had for a total victory and a day in which casualties were enormous on both sides. Mahan's plan was that the two armies of Qanateer, the right wing and right half of the central corps- the Armenians and Slavs and Rus- were to assault the corps of Amr and Sharhabeel. Amr was pushed back again, but not as far as on the previous day for fear of facing the ire of the women in the Muslim camp. The women, who normally served as field wives and etc, were angered the previous day by the dishonorable retreat of their men and began to throw rocks and curses at the Muslims to galvanize their courage through shame.¹³⁷ The corps of Amr, a good distance from their original positions, held the right wing against the Slavs and Rus which led to intense fighting. However, the Armenians almost achieved a breakthrough and pushed the Muslims back towards their camp. The Armenians, strongly supported by the Ghassanid Christian Arabs, seemed on the verge of shattering the Muslim section of the line. Knowing that he could not withdraw his reserve cavalry as the Byzantines had not yet attacked his center and left, al-Walid ordered his troops to attack the Byzantine lines to occupy the Byzantine right and center. With his cavalry now free, al-Walid struck hard at the Armenian right followed by a counterstroke of Muslim cavalry to the Armenian left. It proved to be too much for the Armenians and they withdrew in good order.¹³⁸

With the dangerous Armenian near-breakthrough contained, al-Walid ordered his cavalry and infantry to drive the Rus and Slavs back. Here too they succeeded in sending Qanateer's corps to its original position. However, a dangerous situation had developed

¹³⁷ *The History of al-Tabari*. Translated and annotated by Yohanan Friedmann. Vol. 12, *The Battle of al-Qadisiyyah and the Conquest of Syria and Palestine*. (Albany: State University of New York, 1992.) 195

¹³⁸ *The History of al-Tabari*. Translated and annotated by Yohanan Friedmann. Vol. 12, *The Battle of al-Qadisiyyah and the Conquest of Syria and Palestine*. (Albany: State University of New York, 1992.) 196

on the Muslim left and center. In the midst of the assault on the Byzantine lines to keep them occupied, the troops making the assault suffered horrific losses as a result of Byzantine archery.¹³⁹ In order for the Muslims to withdraw in good order from their attack, a special corps of 400 volunteers took a death oath to hold the Byzantines back for long enough. The suicidal act of Ikrimah's regiment provided a cover for the retreated corps. Of the 400 dedicated men who had taken the oath of death, everyone was either killed or seriously wounded, but they accounted for many times their number of Byzantines. Ikrimah and his son, Amr, were mortally wounded. By the end of the day, their lines still had not moved and losses had reached a terrible culmination.¹⁴⁰

By the fifth day both sides were exhausted; however, the Byzantines had suffered more and were ready to enter negotiations.¹⁴¹ An emissary from Mahan arrived in the Muslim camp and offered a temporary truce. Al-Walid, sensing that the Byzantines were nearly at the breaking point, did not parley with the Byzantine emissary and said, "We are in a hurry to finish this business!" It was a definitive reply that ensured that it would be a fight to the finish. Later in the day al-Walid organized his remaining cavalry force of four thousand men into one massive attacking force. This force was positioned on the far right of Muslim lines.¹⁴²

A sandstorm arose on the sixth day and thus the Byzantine commanders did not reckon on an attack from the Muslims. It was a mistake that would cost them everything. However, shortly before the sandstorm, the Byzantine general Gregory rode out to

¹³⁹ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883) 167.

¹⁴⁰ *The History of al-Tabari*. Translated and annotated by Yohanan Friedmann. Vol. 12, *The Battle of al-Qadisiyyah and the Conquest of Syria and Palestine*. (Albany: State University of New York, 1992.) 196

¹⁴¹ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883) 168.

¹⁴² *The History of al-Tabari*. Translated and annotated by Yohanan Friedmann. Vol. 12, *The Battle of al-Qadisiyyah and the Conquest of Syria and Palestine*. (Albany: State University of New York, 1992.) 197

challenge al-Walid to single combat. Al-Walid did not decline, instead he sent his second, Ubaidah, to face the Greek and after long struggle killed the last Byzantine general on the field. Immediately thereafter arose the sandstorm that seemingly came as blessing from Allah and the Muslims launched a full assault.¹⁴³ The entire Muslim-Byzantine line was engaged with an incredibly fierce attack on the Byzantine left which included Qanateer's Rus and Slavs. During the storm the cavalry of al-Walid rode round the Byzantine lines and took Qanateer's corps from the rear, also engaging the Byzantine cavalry which was blinded and not yet committed. The Slavs and Rus resisted fiercely but were no match for the attack.¹⁴⁴

Realizing that his left flank might be rolled up, Mahan committed his cavalry reserve piecemeal which were likewise destroyed piecemeal against the larger Muslim cavalry force. In this situation the light Muslim cavalry held the advantage over the heavier Byzantine cavalry. The Byzantine cavalry that did survive retreated northwards and left the infantry to its fate. Slowly and irreversibly the Byzantine infantry, Greco-Europeans, Armenians, Russians, were caught in the inexorable steam roller. Though defeat stared them in the face, the Byzantine infantry retreated in good order towards the ravine.¹⁴⁵ It was however, too late and the Byzantine infantry found themselves in a pocket from which there was no escape. They were pushed together so much that they were unable to use their weapons freely and soon they retreated, attempting to find a way through the ravine, unsuccessfully. Some of the Byzantines fell into the ravine whilst the others fell fighting or were captured, effectively ending the battle.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883) 169.

¹⁴⁵ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883) 170.

¹⁴⁶ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883) 170.

Losses amongst the Byzantine troops were horrific. It is difficult to gauge the exact numbers but it is estimated that two-thirds of the Byzantine troops who fought at the Yarmouk died during the battle or the ensuing fight along the ravine.¹⁴⁷ Muslim losses too have never been made clear but even the most conservative estimates give at least one-third losses for the Muslims. In the aftermath of the battle Mahan retreated northwards towards Damascus with his remaining cavalry. He was however, later killed outside the city. The Muslim troops reentered Damascus and effectively Syria and Palestine were under permanent Muslim control.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ Kaegi, Walter. *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*. (New York, Cambridge Press. 1992.) 112.

¹⁴⁸ Kaegi, Walter. *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*. (New York, Cambridge Press. 1992.) 113.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

While there are numerous reasons to explain victories against the Persians and the defeats suffered at the hands of the Muslims, one stands out as undisputed: Heraclius. With the emperor leading his troops into battle, victory was assured. Without Heraclius victory against a wild and skilled foe was almost impossible even with numerical superiority. The victories against the Persians were the result of a relatively untested, but genius general and emperor using tactics and strategy that were simply revolutionary. The combined arms tactics outlined in the *Strategikon* were used to the utmost effect by Heraclius in Mesopotamia. This, combined with unexpected strikes to relatively weak areas, similar to the German Blitzkriegs of 1939 and 1940, served to provide the Byzantines with a victory that effectively ended the last battle of antiquity.¹⁴⁹ Heraclius possessed the genius to use the combined arms tactics to their fullest effect and beat the Persians in the field. However, the Arab invasions were quite the opposite and could be defined as the first wars of the Middle Ages. The strategy of the Arabs was so unlike that of the Persians that the Byzantine commanders who faced them were unable to cope with their implications and the novel strategy used by the Muslims. Even with the lack of familiarity with Muslim tactics, Heraclius would have recognized the need for aggressive action against the Muslims. It is probable that Heraclius could have defeated the Muslims

¹⁴⁹ Geoffrey Regan, *First Crusader: Byzantium's Holy Wars*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2001), 156.

at the Yarmouk and send them back into Arabia. Even if he was unable to achieve victory is it highly unlikely that the Emperor would have allowed his forces to be defeated in detail and finally slaughtered along the ravines.

The Byzantines, who would have preferred to have bled the Arabs in lengthy sieges, could not afford this luxury as many of their great cities were willing to welcome the Muslims as liberators.¹⁵⁰ Instead the Byzantines were forced to fight battles on the Muslim's strategy: an open battlefield that favored Muslim mobility over Byzantine strength. Instead Mahan, though a fine commander in the traditional sense, was not prepared to use every tool he possessed to his advantage. But perhaps worst of all and most unforeseeable of all was the unfortunate timing of the sandstorm that blinded the Byzantines and turned what could have ended as a stalemate into a catastrophe whose implications are felt to this day. Ultimately, Heraclius' illness during the most crucial battle of his reign resulted in defeat and the Emperor was not there to force the Arabs into facing an army that effectively used its infantry, cavalry, and archers. Heraclius was not there to repeat his triumph. Instead his absence resulted in a catastrophic defeat for the Byzantine Empire. After hearing of the defeat at the Yarmouk River, Heraclius said his eloquent farewell, fully knowing that there would never again be a chance as good as the Battle of the Yarmouk River for containing Islam. His goodbye was succinct and sorrowful, "Farewell Syria, my fair province. Thou art an enemy's now and forever."¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Kaegi, Walter. *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*. (New York, Cambridge Press. 1992.) 135.

¹⁵¹ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig, 1883) 162.

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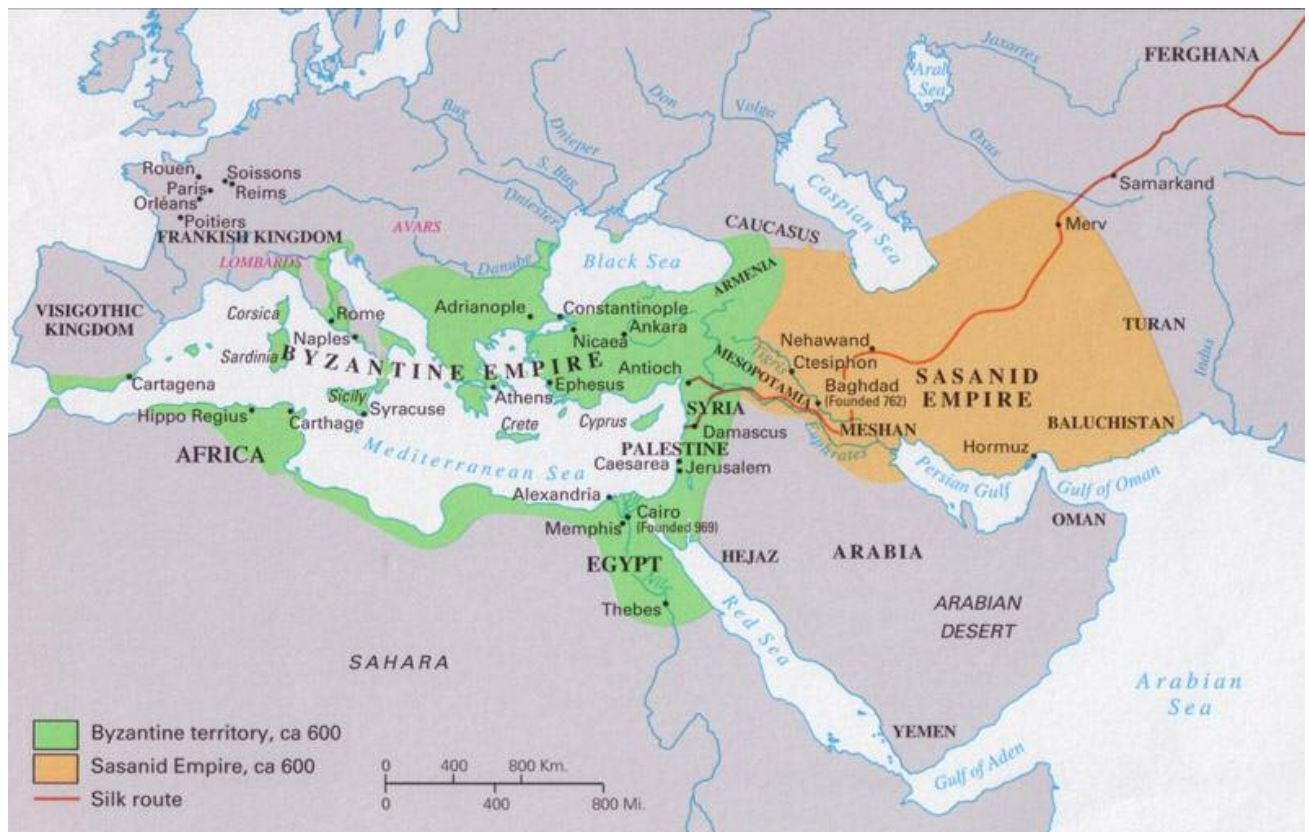
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APPENDIX A

MAP OF BYZANTINE AND SASSANID EMPIRE



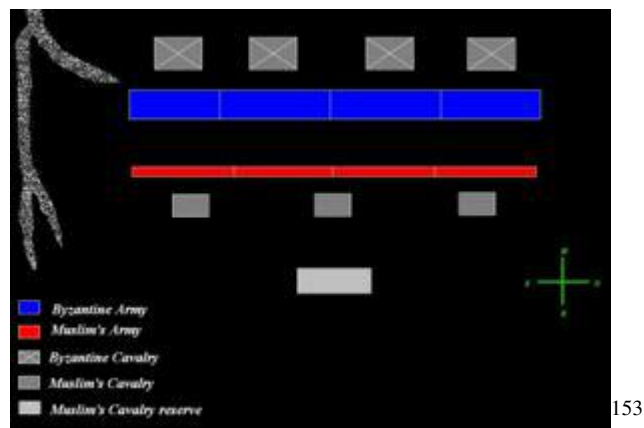
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¹⁵²Survey of World Civilization I Telecourse. "Map of the Byzantine Empire."
<http://faculty.southwest.tn.edu/mpratt/1110Tele/Map2ByzantineEmpire.htm>

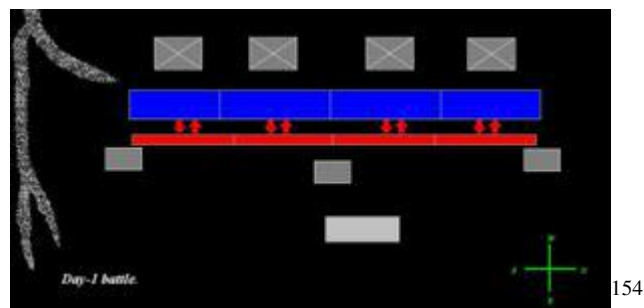
APPENDIX B

MUSLIM AND BYZANTINE MOVEMENTS AT THE BATTLE OF YARMOUK

INITIAL TROOP DEPLOYMENTS



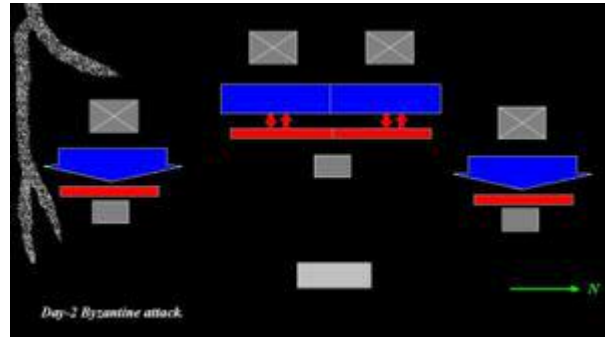
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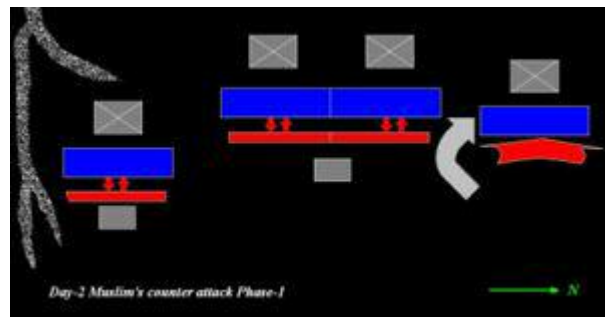
¹⁵³ Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. "The Battle of Yarmouk."
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Yarmouk

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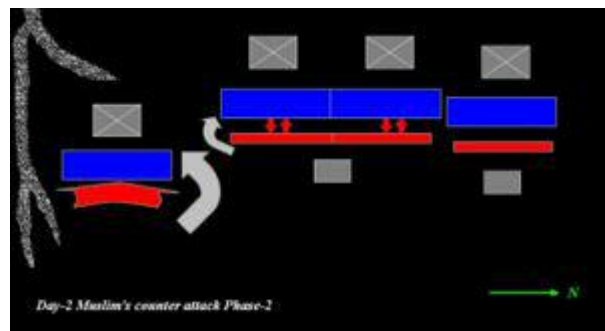
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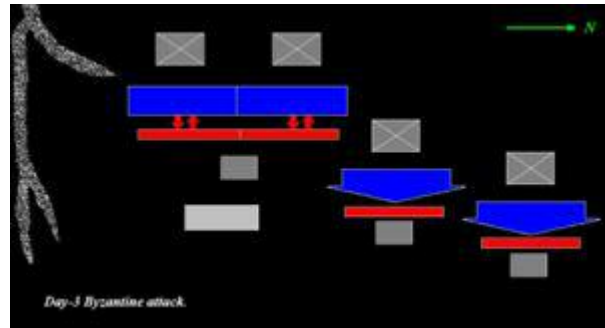
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¹⁵⁵ Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. "The Battle of Yarmouk."
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Yarmouk

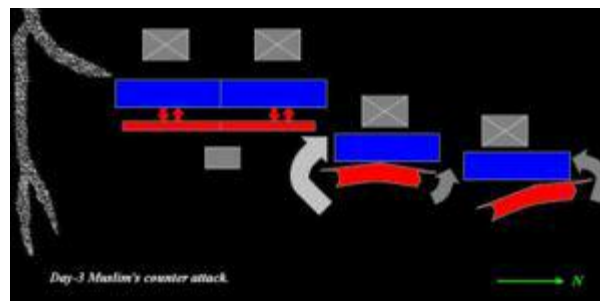
¹⁵⁶ Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. "The Battle of Yarmouk."
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Yarmouk

¹⁵⁷ Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. "The Battle of Yarmouk."
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Yarmouk

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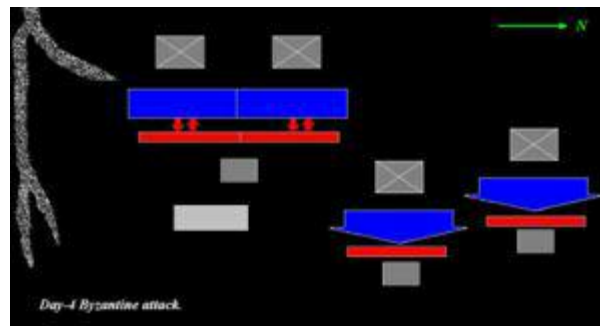


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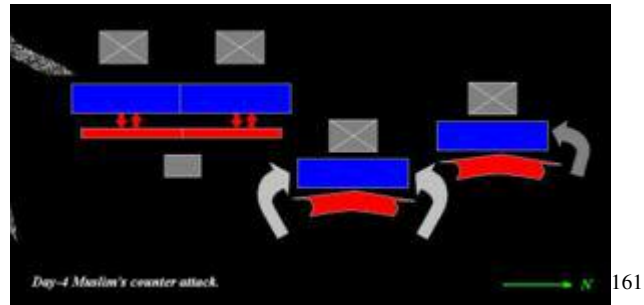


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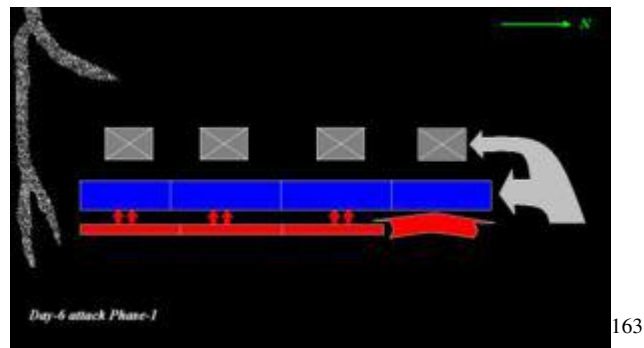
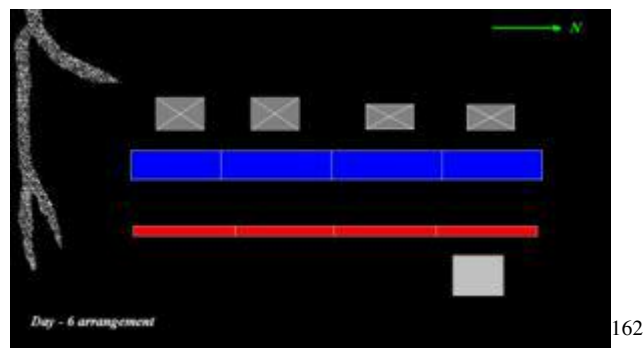
¹⁵⁸ Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. "The Battle of Yarmouk."
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Yarmouk

¹⁵⁹ Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. "The Battle of Yarmouk."
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Yarmouk

¹⁶⁰ Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. "The Battle of Yarmouk."
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Yarmouk



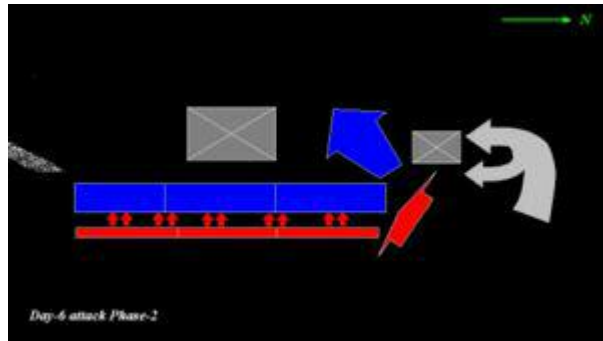
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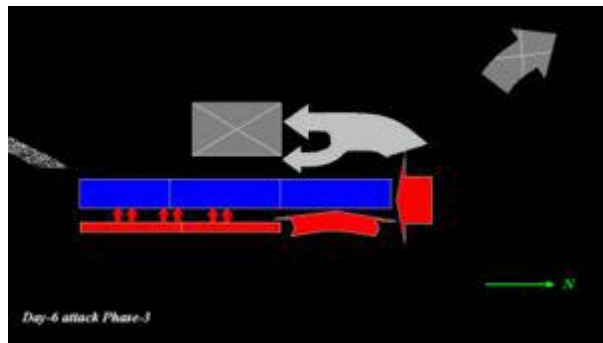
¹⁶¹ Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. "The Battle of Yarmouk."
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Yarmouk

¹⁶² Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. "The Battle of Yarmouk."
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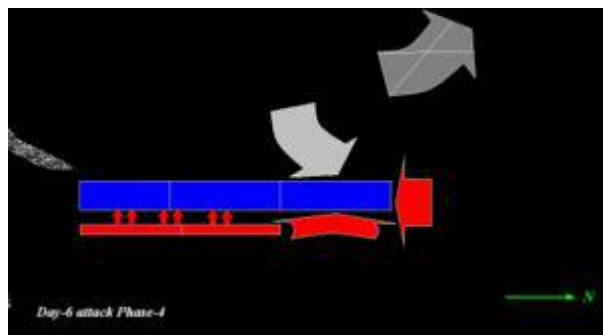
¹⁶³ Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. "The Battle of Yarmouk."
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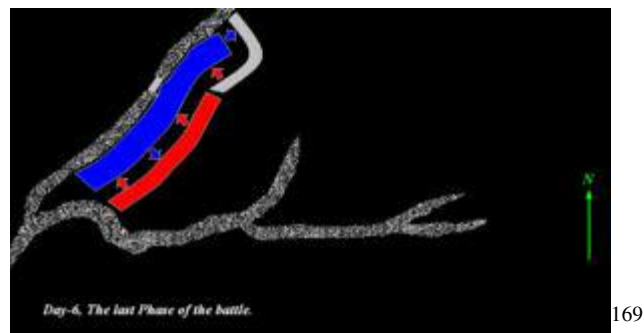
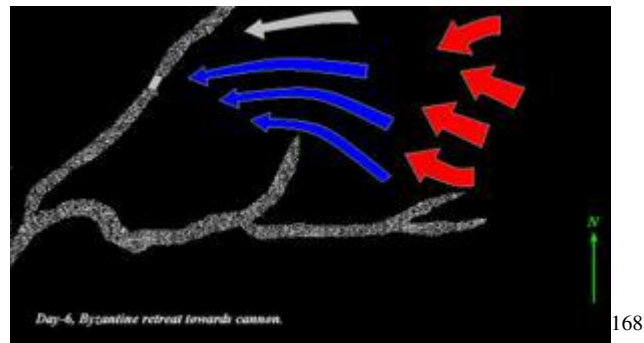
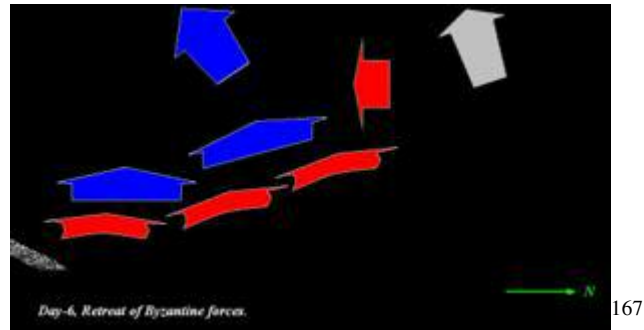


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¹⁶⁴ Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. "The Battle of Yarmouk."
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Yarmouk

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VITA

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WAR AND FIRST ARAB WAR

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Abstract:

The Byzantine Empire in the early Seventh Century suffered a series of disastrous setbacks at the hands of the Sassanid Persians. Under the Emperor Heraclius the Byzantine Army reorganized its tactics and strategy to inflict a series of crushing defeats on the Sassanids that culminated at Nineveh in 629. However, the nascent and fierce Muslims Arabs began their invasions of Syria and Palestine only a few years later. The Byzantines, fighting an unfamiliar foe and lacking the leadership of Heraclius, were decisively crushed at the Yarmouk River in 636. This defeat signaled the loss of considerable Byzantine territory in the Middle East and North Africa, and ultimately set the Byzantine Empire on a course of decline from which it would never recover.

ADVISER'S APPROVAL: Dr. James L. Huston
