

GEORGIOS THEOTOKIS, *The Campaign and Battle of Manzikert, 1071*.
Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2024. xx+201 pp.
ISBN 978-1-64189-435-7

• MAXIMILIAN C. G. LAU, Worcester College, University of Oxford
(max.lau@worc.ox.ac.uk)

Debate over the causes and effects of the Battle of Manzikert (1071) has long preoccupied many academics, university students, and people generally interested in Byzantium. GEORGIOS THEOTOKIS opens his book by presenting that debate's central question: why exactly did a single battle lead to the quick loss of Anatolia, so that Asia Minor, a Roman province since classical antiquity, became the Turkish homeland? He states his answer from the outset: the battle proved geopolitically decisive because it introduced an element of chaos into Byzantine history, especially due to the capture of Romanos IV Diogenes. This conclusion is emphasised through a comparison with Alexios I Komnenos' defeat by the Normans at Dyrrachium (1081): a debacle similar to the Manzikert one ended, thanks to Alexios' escape, with the enemy being pushed out of the Balkans within a few years' time. THEOTOKIS mentions the death of Harold in the Battle of Hastings and the capture of Emperor Napoleon III during the Franco-Prussian War in order to stress that loss of leadership usually has fatal consequences. By contrast, much recent historiography has emphasised the long-term warning signs of Byzantine collapse in the east after the death of Basil II (1025), as well as the socio-economic causes for the loss of Anatolia – rather than the impact of Manzikert itself.

In itself, THEOTOKIS's analysis forms a welcome addition to perspectives on the battle in current historiography. Even a reader who disagrees with him will find much that is good in his central chapters. The author engages both primary and secondary sources to cover events, with foci such as the battle of Petroe/Hades (1057) used to emphasise the weakening state of the imperial army in the pre-Manzikert decades. Deployment of troops in Sicily, southern Italy, and the Balkans steadily lowered the empire's supply of manpower – and of trained soldiers in particular. A fiscal crisis led to the so-called 'tagmatization of the themata' (p. 106), whereby men were now paid in cash, rather than holding tax-free lands in return for military service. But this in itself did not diminish the Byzantine army's capacity to win battles; it was a combination of determined enemies in multiple

operational theatres, poor morale, payment arrears, and sometimes incompetent leadership that led to Byzantine military weakness (pp. 109–110). THEOTOKIS picks out these points in the following chapters, in connection with various developments that occurred during the Manzikert campaign. Chapters Five and Six deftly interweave sources so as to build a narrative that flits with ease between Islamic, Byzantine, and other eastern Christian accounts. THEOTOKIS's focus on the Syrian campaign of Alp Arslan and its strategic success pays dividends for readers truly interested in what went on in the wider region (p. 118). Good use is made of pictures and maps, together with the latest Turkish archaeological surveys, to illustrate the battlefield terrain (pp. 151–154). The author convincingly argues that it is highly unlikely for Trachaneiotēs and Roussel to have deliberately committed treason by not relieving Romanos: the times and distances involved were significant, and the fortress of Khliat, which the two were besieging, was an important one (pp. 147, 138, 163). Modern analyses of historical warfare, from CLAUSEWITZ's seminal *Vom Krieg* to JOHN KEEGAN's *Knowledge of the Enemy*, are interwoven with Byzantine military manuals, Constantine Porphyrogenitus's *De Administrando Imperio*, and Nizam al-Mulk's *Siyāsatnāmeḥ*, which all discuss the importance of intelligence and the use of outriders and scouts. That Romanos failed in not learning of Alp Arslan's advance sooner, is a point very well made (pp. 128–129, 141).

Some readers might dislike the author's frequent references to earlier periods in history: Romanos camped at Satala, which had been used as the base of Legio XV Apollinaris since the time Emperor Trajan (p. 127), the arrow killing zones were familiar to the Persian Shahanshah Darius I (p. 159), and so on. Others, however, will find such comparisons illuminating – and I certainly see myself in the latter camp. THEOTOKIS often uses language that is much more expressive and opinionated than usual for books of this kind. 'Romanos would not have heeded such advice' from military manuals (p. 156) rings modest compared to 'Romanos was in for a shock!' (p. 134) or 'Vratimos argues that "the focus on Diogenes's anxious expectation for news from Khliat means that his orders had reached Trachaneiotēs safely." No it does not!' (p. 147). While an academic audience will certainly deem such style unusual, I am eager to recommend the book to general readers or to younger students as a breath of fresh air, compared to what is often on their reading lists. THEOTOKIS's analysis of post-Mazikert events in Chapter Seven is also to be praised for clear statements backed up with evidence – for instance, writing about the battle at

the Zombos Bridge (1074) when the Normans beat the imperial army and the Turkish leader Artuk was hired to defeat the Norman Rousset: ‘Henceforth, the Byzantines would hire Franks to fight Turks and Turks to fight Franks’ (p. 174).

This brings us to the remaining chapters, where there is still much to appreciate. The opening one (pp. 1–21) gives a solid introduction to the key sources, and its use of Islamic texts in particular is to be recommended in comparison to many works out there – though nothing will be unfamiliar to a scholar in the field. In Chapter Two, the author could have commented more of the Islamic traditions of history writing: he puts Byzantine texts in context as far back to Polybius and traces their style back to Homer, so similar contextualising in this case would have been helpful for a non-specialist. Some of THEOTOKIS’s analysis could perhaps have gone deeper. For example, the section on rhetorical education and battle pieces (pp. 46–51), where he discusses the Homeric air of combat descriptions and points that many of them were derived from military manuals or from classical antecedents, could have offered reflection about the extent to which life imitates art, i.e. rather than this necessarily being a question as to how much eleventh-century authors derived their accounts from older templates, to what extent were the commanders acting in ways that follow their own military education, which was itself based on those older texts? In the brief section on supernatural assistance, exaggeration, and the importance of God’s favour (pp. 52–54), THEOTOKIS notes the importance of knowing the ‘socioeconomic and religious background, life and career, and the specific cultural context in which the authors wrote their narratives’ – an analysis of the impact of religious faith and of belief in omens on the actions of commanders and their soldiers would have been welcome here. Chapter Three discusses the numerical strength of the armies involved, calling this the ‘million dollar question’ (p. 63). THEOTOKIS scrapes together what references there are from sources across previous centuries (less pertinent ones could have been excluded or simply referenced in a single long footnote, while some later material could have been useful). Curiously, by the end of the chapter no actual answer is ventured. We are left to wait for an aside on p. 122, where the author cites figures used by HALDON et al. in their paper on the Manzikert campaign.¹ That THEOTOKIS mentions this

1. JOHN HALDON – VINCE GAFFNEY – GEORGIOS THEODOROPOULOS – PHIL MURGATROYD, *Marching across Anatolia. Medieval Logistics and Modeling the Mantzikert Campaign*. *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 65/66 (2011–2012) pp. 209–235.

paper just once is a real shame (considering his otherwise quite full use of the existing bibliography) and exposes a missing piece in his analysis. He writes that ‘the main aim... is to examine the primary sources for the Battle of Manzikert strictly from a military perspective and attempt to reach some conclusions regarding their value for the history of eleventh-century warfare in the region of Asia Minor’ (p. 23). He also states that his work ‘does not go into detail concerning the institutional framework of the armies in the region of the eastern Mediterranean, nor does it break new ground in the logistics of the wars of the period’ (p. xv). In this THEOTOKIS follows CLAUSEWITZ, whom he is fond of citing and who did not overvalue logistics either. But even CLAUSEWITZ deemed logistics vital to understanding warfare and its conduct:

The Art of War is the art of making use of the given means in combat; there is no better term for it than the conduct of war. To be sure in its wider sense the art of war includes all activities that exist for the sake of war, such as the creation of the fighting forces, their raising, armament, equipment, and training.²

Although the volume does an expert job of explaining the geopolitical situation and what occurred on the battlefield, together with the importance or morale and leadership, the exclusion of logistics just leaves readers to seek information on this aspect of the campaign elsewhere. THEOTOKIS readily recognises the importance of a common soldier’s experience, even if he places ‘the face of battle’, as JOHN KEEGAN famously termed it, beyond the scope of his analysis (p. xvi). Some similar comment about the impact of logistics on this campaign would have been useful. The author’s argument for the general importance of battles, on the other hand, is an excellent one (pp. xvi–xx).

In general, much of the book’s extra material appears unconnected and somewhat superfluous to the fantastic Chapters Five, Six, and Seven. I already mentioned that an entire chapter appears to get us (especially with no treatment of logistics) but a little closer to knowing how many men there were at Manzikert. Likewise, the final section on modern Greek and Turkish historiography comes across as tangential at best. Its first, Greek part (pp. 182–187) runs from the 19th century till the 1950s, and although the Turkish section goes up to recent speeches of the country’s president and the construction of a commemorative mosque, this is not connected to the

2. CARL VON CLAUSEWITZ, *On War*, ed. and trans. MICHAEL E. HOWARD – PETER PARET. Princeton, NJ 1984, p. 127.

core chapters – beyond the fact that Manzikert still resonates today, as it did in the recent past. The relevant parts here could have been integrated into the earlier historiography sections in order to keep the book more precisely ‘on focus’, whilst Chapter Three could certainly have been cut dramatically and its material replaced with more pertinent sections on logistics, or indeed armament, equipment and training – which, CLAUSEWITZ advises, is important for military study and so should form part of any traditional military history of the kind THEOTOKIS tells us he is carrying out here.

In sum, this is a highly valuable work – and it could have been even better with some superfluous material excised, leaving space for discussion that would complement the author’s otherwise excellent core chapters. I will certainly be adding it to reading lists in the future, and I encourage other historians to use it as a starting point for further investigation. THEOTOKIS shows that there is much value in analysing sources from a military perspective and in writing what some would consider old-fashioned military history.

Keywords

battle of Manzikert; history of warfare