THE BATTLE OF DYRRHACHIUM

PYRRHUS LIVES!

In the early 1000s, the Normans were one of the most dynamic groups of people seen in Europe for many decades. Descended from Vikings, they settled initially in Normandy in northern France, but as their population of warlike nobility expanded, they sought new adventures and new lands. In 1015, responding to an opportunity to act as swords for hire, with the payment being in land, a group of these martial mercenaries turned up in Southern Italy. Here they became involved in settling long running feuds between the Lombards, the Papacy and Byzantium – not least by judiciously changing sides whenever it seemed advantageous.

By bringing this new pragmatic form of warfare to Italy, it wasn’t long before they gave up serving others (at least overtly serving others) and now served only their own needs. The family of the day were the Hauteville family and their main representative, Robert Guiscard. Robert was the sixth son of a minor noble in Normandy and was despatched to seek his fame and fortune in Italy.

Arriving in around 1047, Robert initially acted as the leader of a band of Norman brigands (or bandits depending on your view) before teaming up with some of the more settled Normans and with the arrival of his brother Roger he felt they were strong enough to challenge the authority of the Pope. Swiftly defeating the Papal forces in 1054, Robert was subsequently created Duke of Apulia in 1059. He had arrived in Italy – and not in the least bit worried that the bulk of the lands conferred upon him by the Pope were lands beyond the Pope’s authority, he set about consolidating his rule. Within 13 years he had conquered all of Sicily, expelling the Saracen rulers who had governed Sicily for over 250 years. Around the same time, he finished expelling the Byzantines from Italy and by 1073 all of Southern Italy and Sicily lay under his iron grip.

In all this he exhibited one weakness: he forgave Norman rebels. He had to continually deal with a lot of these, many of whom came from more senior families back in Northern France, but equally many came from within the ranks of his own family. Invariably he forgave the rebels, extracted promises not to do so again and let them go – only to see them rebel again at a moment’s notice. Seeking to ensure that these troublemakers would behave once and for all, Robert readily seized on the chance to do so when the Byzantine Emperor, Michael VII Doukas, offered his son and heir Constantine as groom to Robert’s daughter Helena – thereby placing the Hauteville/Guiscard line onto the throne of the Byzantine Empire – upstarts no more. The Emperor had to deal with threats from the East and he could spare little time or effort fighting a western Christian and this alliance would seem to preserve this best of all.

Robert seemed to have overlooked the complex and, frankly, byzantine politics that took place on an hourly basis. His daughter was dispatched to Byzantium in 1074 and within a few years her future position was untenable, Michael VII abdicated following a succession of inept campaigns in the East, forcing him to ac-
cept Seljuk Turk conquests in order to gain their support against rebellious troops. His position weakened, he abdicated in favour of a succession of usurpers, the last of whom would be known as Alexios I Komnenos. The broken betrothal was all Robert needed – he saw a weakened Empire and resolved to strike immediately.

Robert was one of the last few Normans in Southern Europe to have had any practical shipbuilding experience (in fact given their proud nautical tradition the Normans in the Mediterranean were well known for their complete lack of ability when it came to anything naval), and in 1081 he assembled a significant fleet and transported his seasoned army to Avalone (modern day Vlorë in Southern Albania) and after reducing some smaller garrisons he marched and sailed northwards on Dyrrhachium (modern day Durrës (and previously Durazzo) in Albania). This was a significant port and Byzantine trade relied on it to supply their western provinces as well as maintaining lines of communication to military and trading allies in the West.

By the time he arrived at the gates of Dyrrhachium he had approximately 30,000 troops and allies, primarily infantry, supported by 1,800 heavy Norman knights, sporting the latest in technology: stirrups, the couched lance and the high supporting saddle. His intention was to take the port, re-victual his troops and then press on to confront the local forces.

For once Roberts famous luck failed him, as he deployed his troops on the landward side of the city, his fleet was hit by a storm as it arrived, sinking several ships – and some of those carried his specialist siege experts and their equipment. The continuing bad weather prevented the siege being conducted by anyone except the land based forces. Whilst Robert tried to re-order the siege, his fleet was surprised at sunset by a Venetian fleet, and despite fighting well, the general lack of naval skills told and the Norman fleet was sunk or scattered. Venice ruled the seas and all seemed to be going badly for Robert. However, not being one to let the loss of a fleet discourage him, Robert pressed on with the siege, and whilst his opponent in the besieged city, George Palaeologus, was of immense skill, he knew that he could hold out only for so long.

Whilst all this was going on, Alexios was not idle and he busied himself with raising an army to combat this threat to sovereign Byzantine territory. More naval setbacks for the Normans now meant the army was cut off from Italy entirely. As the summer progressed the siege developed slowly with Norman technology gradually giving them the advantage. Alexios finally finished raising his troops, and in late summer 1081 he started to march from Salonika. In the meantime, sickness and casualties had reduced Robert’s army to approximately 20,000 troops and 1,000 knights.

Alexios had raised a similar number, however their mix was exceptionally broad with troops ranging from the elite Varangian Guard down to local conscripts – Alexios had even had to resort to his predecessor’s trick of acknowledging Seljuk conquests in order to gain the use of their troops. All in all, he stripped many of the eastern provinces of troops in order to defeat Robert. On the 15th of October 1081, Alexios pitched camp and met with his council of war. Although they advised caution, especially
as time seemed to be swinging behind the Byzantines, Roberts shrewd actions forced action. Learning about Alexios’ arrival from scouts, on the 17th Robert moved his army across a pontoon bridge from the headland the city sat on to the mainland. This move forced Alexios to redraw his plans, and despite protests from his generals he opted to deploy his forces opposite Robert’s. The stage was set for the battle to take place the next day, 18th October 1071 – St Luke’s day – patron saint of physicians – the irony would not be lost on many.

**RULES TO USE**

This is a big battle, probably best suited to large battle systems such as *Hail Caesar* or *Swordpoint* when it is released. I feel however that *Saga* could be a good system to play this game out by breaking down the battle down into the individual actions (playing the flanks and centre as separate battles, the winning side is the one who wins the most battles). This would allow players to see how the microcosm of each section actually plays out – this battle was unusual in that there seemed to be little attention paid to outcomes on the flanks of Battles until it was too late to change the results. *Lion Rampant* could similarly be used.

I have used 500 as a ‘regimental’ definition as this was a very common sized operational unit for Byzantine units and the Normans are easier to put into this system than the other way around. For *Saga* or *Lion Rampant*, feel free to either combine regiments to make bigger units or adapt your game to allow extra units.

**DEPLOYMENT**

See the map to see the deployment of the ‘battles’. The marsh areas are difficult going. Hills are gentle. Rivers are significant obstacles and can only be crossed at bridges or fords.

Free Deployment/Reserve troops must deploy with at least half of the units in a reserve. The balance of forces may be added to the Battles at the start of the game.

**The Normans**

The Normans used their Knights as their shock of impact troops – and used new tactics that were proven in the West and real game changers the further East they moved. The Norman army had a lot of troops that could have been defined as levy or mercenary, but the situation they were in meant that these troops fought better and were much more reliable that they would normally have been.

**Left Battle**

- Commander: Bohemond ‘the Giant’, Prince of Taranto. Good General
- 3 regiments of Norman Infantry - armed with swords, axes, shields and heavy armour. Training is good and morale is high.
- 2 regiments of Norman Light Infantry - armed with spears, daggers, shields and light armour. Training is average and morale is good.
- 1 regiment of ‘Italian’ Light Cavalry - armed with javelins, swords, shields and light armour. Training is good and morale is average.
- 1 regiment of ‘Lombard’ Infantry - armed with spears, daggers, shields and light armour. Training is average and morale is good.
- 1 regiment of ‘Italian’ Light Infantry - armed with javelins, daggers, shields and light armour. Training is average and morale is average.
- 1 regiment of ‘Sicilian’ Bowmen - armed with shortbows and light armour. Training is good and morale is good.
- 1 regiment of ‘Norman Archers - armed with crossbows and light armour. Training is good and morale is average.

**Main Battle (for details, see Left Battle)**

- 4 regiments of Norman Infantry
- 2 regiments of Norman Light Infantry
• 2 regiments of ‘Lombard’ Infantry
• 2 regiments of ‘Italian’ Light Infantry
• 1 regiment of ‘Sicilian’ Bowmen
• 1 regiment of ‘Italian’ Light Infantry
• 1 regiment of ‘Norman Archers

Right Battle (for details, see Left Battle)
• Commander: Amicetas, Count of Giovinazzo. Good General
• 3 regiments of Norman Infantry
• 2 regiments of Norman Light Infantry
• 1 regiment of ‘Italian’ Light Cavalry
• 1 regiment of ‘Lombard’ Infantry
• 1 regiment of ‘Italian’ Light Infantry
• 1 regiment of ‘Sicilian’ Bowmen
• 1 regiment of ‘Norman Archers

Free Deployment/Reserve (for details, see Left Battle)
• Commander: Robert Guiscard
• Norman Knights (At least 3 of which are in Reserve) - Armed with a couched lance and wearing heavy armour and carrying shield and long sword. Training is elite and morale is high
• 4 regiments of Norman Light Infantry
• 2 regiments of ‘Lombard’ Infantry
• 2 regiments of ‘Italian’ Light Infantry

THE BYZANTINES
Any units noted as Mercenary are not reliable. When a unit attacks them or they attempt to attack an enemy unit in melee, they roll a D6. On a 1 the unit is not motivated sufficiently. They will retire from the threat for one turn or refuse to advance. They test again immediately, on the roll of another 1 the unit withdraws from the battle completely. These units test every time they engage a new enemy unit. For any ‘Serbian’ units, both units test – if one fails then both fail – even if they are deployed separately. Seljuk infantry tests separately, but if the Varangian Guard breaks at any stage they test as per the ‘Serbian’ units i.e. if one fails then they all fail.

Deployment for the Battle of Dyrrhachium.

Left Battle
• Commander: Gregory Pakourianos, Megas Domestikos (Grand Master) of the West. Superior General
• 2 Regiments of Varangian Guard (the Guard had a separate commander who was very impetuous – should the Guard break an enemy they must pursue for at least a turn) This unit is deployed in front of the two Seljuk archer units. The archers may shoot over the Guard. Armed with two handed axes, short swords and shield, heavy armour. Training is good and morale is excellent.
• 2 Regiments of Seljuk Archers armed with shortbow. Training is average and morale is poor. Mercenary.
• 1 regiment ‘Asian’ Tagmata armed with shortbow with light armour. Training is average and morale is poor.
• ‘Heraclea Pontica’ Tagmata armed with spear and shield with light armour. Training is poor and morale is average.

Main Battle
• Commander: Alexios I Komnenos, Pistos en Christoi Basileus Autokrator Rhomaiôn. Good General
• 2 regiments of Frank ‘Swords’ deployed in front of the Main Battle. Armed with single handed axes or swords, shields and heavy armour. Training is average and morale is good. Mercenary
• 1 regiment of Exkoubitoi (the Sentinels) – Alexios’ bodyguard. He may not leave this unit. Armed with spear, sword and shield with heavy armour. Training is good and morale is high
• 1 regiment of Vestiaritai (Fiscal Guard) armed with sword, axe and shield with medium armour. Training is good and morale is good when defending and poor when attacking. (this reflects the nature of this unit as being responsible primarily for defending the royal treasury – they were press ganged into the campaign)
• 2 regiments of Thracian Tagmata armed with spear and shield with light armour. Training is good and morale is average.
• 2 regiments Macedonian Tagmata armed with spear and shield with light armour. Training is average and morale is average.
• 1 regiment of ‘Armenian’ Infantry armed with short bows and daggers. Training was average and morale was average. Mercenary.

Right Battle
• Commander: Nikephoros Melissenos, Caesar of the Balkans. Average General
• 1 regiment of Thessalian Cavalry armed with long spear, shield and medium armour and barded horses. Training was average and morale was good. Mercenary.
• 1 Regiment of Turkish Horse Archers armed with shortbows and daggers. Training is average and morale is average. Mercenary.
2 Regiments of Turkish Infantry armed with spear, shield and medium armour. Training is good and morale is average. Mercenary.

5 Regiments Manichaean Infantry armed with spear and shield. These troops had been raised in the desert regions between modern Syria and Turkey. Training is average and morale is average.

Free Deployment/Reserve
- Commander: Alexios I Komnenos
- 3 regiments of Thracian Tagmata
- 3 regiments of Macedonian Tagmata.
- 2 Regiments ‘Serbian’ (Duklja) Vassals. Armed with short sword and target shield. Training was average and morale was poor. Mercenary.
- 10 regiments of Seljuk Infantry. Armed with spear and shield with light armour. Training is poor and morale is average. Mercenary
- 2 regiments of Seljuk Archers.

THE BATTLE
The battle started with skirmishing along the line, this was escalated when the Norman line tried to force the line at the junction of the advanced Varangian Guard and the Main Battle. As this attack stalled the Byzantine right wing drove off the Norman cavalry and forced the troops back – bending their line to the point of rout. Whilst this was going on the Norman Centre forced the Byzantines to retire – thereby isolating the Varangian Guard who, tiring, fled to the comparative safety of a church – the Church of the Archangel Michael. This proved to be an illusory sanctuary with the Guard being wiped out as the church was set on fire. With this shock Alexios was dealt the blow of both the Serb and Seljuk troops pulling out of the line and watching events as they unfolded. Deprived of these troops, Alexios could only watch as his army collapsed, the success of the right being cancelled by losses elsewhere. With the approach of night the Normans completed their victory by catching the garrison on a sortie and destroying them when they could not regain the city in time.

VICTORY
The battle was fought from early in the day and was decided long before sunset – and so the game has a significant number of turns – I suggest 16 turns with a die roll to allow for a random game end from turn 12 onwards – 1 to end on 12, 1 – 2 on 13 and so on with the game automatically ending at the end of turn 16.

This is a straight stand up fight. Whichever army holds the battlefield is considered the winner. If either side loses their army commander they suffer a strategic defeat regardless of the tactical outcome.

AFTERMA TH
With the collapse of his army Alexios only narrowly escaped. He fled with his bodyguard to Ohrid (in modern Macedonia) where he rebuilt his army – losing this one in turn to another Norman victory.

The battle itself saw truly staggering casualties with both armies losing close to 50% of their forces – admittedly a lot of Byzantine casualties were desertions – but in the shadow of Pyrrhus’ old stomping ground his spirit was very much alive...

Dyrrhachium fell in February 1082 to treachery – something the Normans were only too good at promoting. Eventually internal unrest in Italy forced Robert to return to resolve leaving his son Bohemond to press their claim. Alexios eventually beat the Normans and drove them from the Balkans, but his over reliance on Seljuk support cost him most of his possessions east of Byzantium. In 1095 he appealed to the Pope and his Western cousins for help, triggering the First Crusade and little did he know that this would see his old foe Bohemond elevated to Prince of Antioch as a result. The ensuing Norman Kingdom in the Levant would outlive both Norman England and the Norman Kingdoms in Italy and Sicily... W&S&S