



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **The byzantine army in video games: common misconceptions shaping popular perceptions**

Oguz, C.M.

### **Citation**

Oguz, C. M. (2025). The byzantine army in video games: common misconceptions shaping popular perceptions. *Gamevironments*, 23(2025), 1-37. doi:10.48783/dm884m60

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4286538>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

hel  
global network player authority PewDiePie guilt god Let's Play angel undead wtf authentic me/iatization Skul dungeon contest  
game rule system gameplay avatar WoW blessing nob kills teimor face body fight hope spe income S PVP digital  
religion gamer analysis representation healing lol relig o-scape soul diablo class tradition experience witch rebirth discussion wedding  
simulation ludology The Last of Us death resurrection funeral tunes ritua virtual identity buff priest genesis Stan gamer  
narrative mage Xbox 360 PVE





## The Byzantine Army in Video Games. Common Misconceptions Shaping Popular Perceptions

Cahit Mete Oguz

### Abstract

Scholars of Byzantium cannot afford to ignore the growing medium of video games, which play a key role in shaping the modern perception of Byzantium among a formative audience. In numerous popular strategy games, Byzantium is differentiated from other contemporary civilizations and factions through a series of highly specific historical vectors including the Varangian guard, *kataphraktoi*, and the so-called Greek fire. Given the constraints of the medium, this leads to significant distortions in its reception by players. This problem is further exacerbated by the same emphases and omissions being persistently deployed across disparate video game titles spanning the last three decades. Byzantium is thus molded into something it was not. Reasons for this range from Enlightenment thought to modern political discourse, and from gameplay concerns to marketing demands. Understanding these are essential to course-correcting Byzantium's historical legacy in the modern milieu, particularly since younger demographics often first encounter Byzantium in the medium of video games.

1

**Keywords:** Medieval, Middle Ages, Byzantium, Perception, Legacy, Greek Fire, Varangian Guard, Cataphract, Military, gameenvironments

**To cite this article:** Oguz, C. M., 2025. The Byzantine Army in Video Games. Common Misconceptions Shaping Popular Perceptions. *Gamevironments* 23, 1-37. Available at <https://journals.suub.uni-bremen.de/>.

A Medieval setting – or what has been rightly called “popular medievalism” (Houghton and Alvestad 2021, 1) – has become popular in not just video games but across a broad spectrum of entertainment media. Byzantium itself remains less popular, having no large-budget productions centered on its millennium-spanning

history. The exception to this is the medium of video games, where we find the Byzantine civilization in ample representation. Video games offer one of the most diffuse platforms where the non-expert encounters and experiences Byzantium, often for the first time (McMichael 2007, Steinkuehler 2010). Since the proliferation of personal computers and consoles in the 1990s, games set in historical periods have captivated the minds of younger demographics in particular, offering a formative platform and guiding the trajectory of history’s popular perception. It is therefore incumbent upon scholars of Byzantium to probe this fast-growing medium of exposure in order to understand the guiding currents behind Byzantium’s modern perception. This study identifies the misleading presentation of Byzantium in video games, delves into the reasons behind these remarkably homogenous errors, and offers way to course-correct its modern legacy.

The influence that video games have had on defining modern cultural narratives is well understood, and it has been particularly well-illustrated for certain epochs, such as for World War II (Allison 2010, Ramsay 2015). This medium has recently begun receiving the attention it deserves from Medieval historians too – notable are the works of Juan Jiménez (2009, 2011), Robert Houghton (2022, 2025) and Vicente Valero (2024). Byzantium’s presentation in game media has also received some attention (Christesen and Machado 2010, Betancourt 2017, Fasolio 2021, Fasolio 2023). This has also included a growing number of fruitful panels and presentations.<sup>i</sup> But so far this has largely focused on the broad strokes of its presentation rather than delving into the specifics, which is where an important part of what must be untangled lies. Byzantium’s army, and in fact, a highly specific set of vectors from within this army, have come to highlight the civilization’s footprint in video games and thus in the minds of lay audiences. But as we shall see, both the reasons and

results of this go far beyond just a military angle, affecting and distorting Byzantium’s popular perception in its entirety.

Byzantium remains relatively under-represented in game media in comparison to more popular historical epochs (e.g., Roman antiquity, World War II) as has been highlighted recently by Marco Fasolio (2021, 2023), and the reasons for this are multiform.<sup>ii</sup> The little exposure that Byzantium does get in game media therefore fulfills an oversized role in guiding its legacy. Some of the most popular titles featuring Byzantium are *Age of Empires II* (1999) and *Age of Empires IV* (2021), henceforth *AoE2* and *AoE4*; *Sid Meier’s Civilization V* (2010) and *Sid Meier’s Civilization VI* (2016), henceforth *Civ5* and *Civ6*, *Medieval II: Total War* (2006), henceforth *MTW2*, *Crusader Kings II* (2012) and *Crusader Kings III* (2020), henceforth *CK2* and *CK3*, and *Europa Universalis IV* (2013), henceforth *EU4*.<sup>iii</sup> Games presenting Byzantium skew towards the strategy genre and its various subcategories, RTS (real-time strategy) and 4X (Explore, Expand, Exploit, Exterminate), unlike, for instance, the much higher percentage of FPS (first-person shooter) games for titles set during World War II (Allison 2010, 193). This is arguably due to the ease of implementing a first-person perspective (i.e., seen through a soldier’s eyes) when gameplay consists of aiming and shooting, instead of swinging swords. Other genres do occasionally feature Byzantium, yet they are fewer and often include tangential, fictionalized references, such as in *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (2015), or are set beyond its timeline, as in *Assassin’s Creed Revelations* (2011) depicting the 1510s.

Broadly speaking, Byzantium’s presentation in video games mirrors many of the same tropes and distortions seen in other types of media. These include the stripping away of Byzantium’s Roman continuity, the homogenization of society, an overemphasis on religion and piety, the downplaying of *realpolitik* and political thought, an

exaggeration of *hiding behind walls* as a means of survival, and the continuous decline narrative. While these common distortions are addressed below in more detail, what is more relevant for the scope of this paper are a series of representations and distortions unique to the video game medium. Since games tend to focus more on warfare than say, civil society or literary culture, these errors mostly concern the military sphere (with wide reaching consequences). These tenets have remained largely unaddressed in scholarship, except for Marco Fasolio (2023) who briefly touches upon them during his survey on the broad strokes of Byzantium's representation in *AoE2*, *MTW2*, and *EU4*, including an up-to-date and much needed historical introduction to the subject. But he does not address why a handful of highly specific military entities have represented Byzantium in almost all strategy games of the last thirty years (pretty much since the advent of computer gaming, despite these games being developed by different teams across different decades and places).<sup>iv</sup> The three things that almost unanimously present Byzantium in video games are: Greek fire, Varangian guardsmen, and *kataphraktoi* (cataphracts). Explaining and unraveling the repercussions of this overwhelming focus is the aim of this paper.

Byzantium is notably never the only civilization in the video games that feature it, instead being one of many selectable and playable factions (a video game centered entirely on Byzantium is yet to be developed, which is striking considering its over-a-millennium lifespan). What all of these games have in common are a handful of unique features to distinguish different civilizations from one another, both aesthetically and functionally. These features are intended to be typical and representative of their respective civilizations and end up playing an oversized role in their popular perceptions. For Byzantium these designators in video games almost always include Greek fire, Varangian guardsmen, and *kataphraktoi*, and to a lesser extent *dromon* warships and strong fortifications. It is these particulars *unique* to

Byzantium that come to define it for the player, who may well be engaging with the civilization for the first time in context of said game. Why has this particular, military-inflected intersection – that is riddled with erroneous presentations – come to define Byzantium? What about all that has been omitted (even just in the military sphere)? And lastly and perhaps most importantly, what effect has this highly curated selection had on shaping Byzantium’s popular legacy?

## **Greek Fire**

In 1995, Alex Roland presented a report to the U.S. Army War College’s annual strategy conference in which he underscored the importance of technological superiority in military strategy (Roland 1995). Seeking to highlight the most poignant examples from across history, he presented three case studies: chariot warfare in the second millennium BCE, Greek fire in the first millennium CE, and submarine warfare in the early-nineteenth century. Anyone wondering why Greek fire made it into this millennia spanning list may consider the following scene: the year is 678.

Constantinople has been besieged for four years by the powerful navy of the Umayyad Caliphate. The Byzantine Empire looks set to fall. But just as the noose is tightening, the Byzantines unleash a new, secret invention that would come to shape the future of naval warfare for centuries, turning the tides of history in the process. Small bronze tubes are directed at enemy ships out of which a liquified form of what appears to be fire is launched, engulfing all it hits in flames and even setting the surface of the sea aflame. Panic-stricken Arab sailors struggle to locate gaps in the water surface as they jump off their crumbling ships in terror; many, many vessels and men suffer a horrible, burning demise. Constantinople is rescued, and it would not fall to an external power for over five more centuries (until the Fourth Crusade captured

it in 1204). During this time, the Byzantines relied on liquid fire in many naval victories.

Unlike what those on the receiving end of it in 678 may have thought, this new weapon was in fact not supernatural. Greek fire or, as the Byzantines called it, liquid fire or sea fire, was an incendiary fluid analogous to modern napalm. It was created from what is referred to in sources as *naphtha*, which consisted of crude oil extracted from wells around the Sea of Azov that was mixed with Sulphur and resin, although its precise composition remains debated (Partington 1998, 1-42). Ships that deployed it were commonly fitted with a frontal implement that consisted of a bronze tube used to propel the mixture to enemy ships (it could be ignited during propulsion, or from afar after delivery). Somewhat similar to napalm, it was used to devastate naval engagements since it would set fire to the sea surface, along with the wooden ships of the enemy. The technology behind it, from its composition and assembly to its delivery mechanism, was a closely guarded state secret of utmost value. The only assembly plant was in Constantinople whence ships were fitted and the know-how was tightly compartmentalized so that no one person knew the entire process of its creation. The wells located around the northern Black Sea coast where crude oil was extractable with Medieval techniques represented important strategic targets as the *De Administrando Imperio* commissioned by emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos makes abundantly clear (*DAI*, chapters 52-53 in Moravcsik 1985, 256-286). Control of the northern shores of the Black Sea were a critical foreign policy objective to maintain this technological advantage.

Given all this, it comes as no surprise that Byzantine liquid fire commonly makes it into video games (Moravcsik 1985, 256-257, 285-286, Roland 1992, 658-675). It has been popularized in other types of media too, often without attribution (e.g., HBO's

*Game of Thrones* [2011-2019]).<sup>v</sup> The presentation of liquid fire as a Byzantine feature in video games makes good sense from a design point of view, since it was indeed a highly valuable technological advantage that was put to great use through the centuries and came to adorn imperial policy documents and chronicles alike. But if we investigate how exactly it is presented to players, certain issues become apparent.

In *AoE2*, several civilizations have access to fire ships, with the Byzantines additionally having a slight bonus through a unique technology the game calls Greek fire. All this does is add a bit of extra range to the flame jet that Byzantine fire ships launch. While its depiction and how it works (e.g., being good against other ships) is relatively accurate within the game's constraints, the technological advantage that the Byzantines held is blurred. In reality, so important was the safeguarding of this technology that the Byzantines rarely used liquid fire outside of defending the capital (Roland 1995, xi-xiv). It was too risky to use it in far-flung or smaller naval battles since if the enemy ever got hold of it, Constantinople itself would be vulnerable. *AoE2*'s proliferation of this technology to many other polities would have indeed represented a Byzantine foreign policy nightmare – something that was historically avoided through great effort and diligence.

7

*AoE4*, in turn, moves away from a purely naval application of this technology and grants the Byzantines Greek Fire Projectiles, which increase the power of siege engines and adds a lingering burning effect to their impact area. It thus highlights Byzantium's liquid fire technology in its historically much rarer terrestrial application. This is likely a game design issue, since titles in the *AoE* series skew towards land warfare, as do all the games reviewed here. But adding a burning effect to munitions launched from an artillery piece (such as a trebuchet) did not necessarily require the usage of Byzantium's prized liquid fire technology; burning projectiles were used

since antiquity by simply using a flammable missile or ordinance. Historically, the terrestrial usage of liquid fire was often the opposite of this. It was more commonly used to counter artillery by burning the enemy's siege engines (which were made of wood), which is how the Byzantine general Manuel Erotikos defended Nicaea in the 970s (Thurn 1973, 323). Trebuchets had taken over from older stone projectors (catapults) from the sixth century onwards and could launch very heavy projectiles great distances (Chevedden 2000). Especially the powerful, gravity-assisted counter-weight trebuchet (eleventh century onwards) posed a grave threat. Dismantling the enemy's artillery was therefore a top priority in any defensive engagement, enough so to warrant the usage of Byzantium's prized napalm analogous substance.

The errors that games such as the *AoE* series make with Greek fire have a long history which has become fairly embedded in Western thought. After all, the term Greek fire is an exogenous construct; the Byzantines never referred to their own product with this name, as stated above. Why would they? They did not call themselves Greeks in the first place (for thousands of years they had referred to themselves as Ῥωμαῖοι or Romans). The origin of the label Greek fire can be traced to the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when European Crusading armies popularized it after witnessing it firsthand. Moreover, the Crusaders were reportedly so impressed with what they called Greek fire that they began calling any sort of incendiary weapon they encountered Greek fire too. This dilution of the term's specific meaning now lives on in modern media. For instance, in another popular strategy game, namely *Stronghold: Crusader* (2002), there are infantry who throw fiery grenades consisting of Greek fire according to their in-game description. But neither are they Byzantines nor is their product the famed Byzantine state secret. While the Byzantines did on occasion use their viscous flammable substance in grenade format or to ignite combustible projectiles, this was far from its common usage.

The appropriation of this technology to a wider and broader geography has much to do with Byzantium not having a modern successor state to course-correct its modern representation; neither Greece nor Turkey nor any of the Balkan countries or Russia currently lay full claim to Byzantium's legacy.<sup>vi</sup> Byzantine liquid fire is thus frequently presented in games as a broad set of flaming weaponry, commonly utilized by various so-called Eastern peoples – an ill-defined category. In *MTW2*, for instance, the Byzantines have access to *fire throwers* in addition to several other civilizations including the Egyptians, Mongols, and Turks, the latter of whom field infantry called *Naffatun*, stemming from the Byzantine word *naphtha*, the main ingredient of liquid fire. Several distant civilizations are thus grouped under the umbrella of a generalized incendiary weapon, even though the Byzantines never fielded fire throwers in any substantial way. This grouping serves the purpose of casting this vaguely fiery style of combat (and its practitioners) as exotic and *different* – different from the Western European default that is otherwise presented. This is the definition of *orientalism*, first identified in Western attitudes towards the East by Edward Said. Unfortunately, Byzantium has a long history of being appropriated like this, a phenomenon definitely not confined to just entertainment media (Cormack and Jeffreys 2000, Cameron 2003, 1990, Kaldellis 2019, 3-37, Clark 2021). As we will also observe below with Varangian mercenaries and *kataphraktoi*, it is not surprising to see products of this broader pattern seep into entertainment media (Marciniak 2018).

On a more positive note, *EU4* has arguably the most accurate description of this incendiary technology, granting Byzantines what it correctly calls "liquid fire," a unique feature that increases their ships' military effectiveness. In this way it strips away the erroneous naming conventions while also correctly highlighting the technology's primarily naval usage. The *Crusader Kings* series, in turn, mentions Greek fire, but it does not really affect anything since the game mostly avoids naval combat.

That being said, naval representation is one of the few areas where Byzantium is somewhat well-endowed in game media, particularly through the legacy of its *dromon* warship, a type of bireme galley and an earlier variant of the Middle Byzantine *chelandion*. In *EU4*, the Byzantines have access to unique *dromon* ships, which are surprisingly common in Byzantium's video-game footprint, often interlinked with the technology of liquid fire. *Civ5* also includes the *dromon* as a unique Byzantine unit, mentioning that *dromon* ships came equipped with Greek fire before explaining their naval effectiveness in comparison to other civilizations' ships. *AoE4* follows suit, granting Byzantines the *dromon* as a unique unit which likewise utilizes Greek fire to increase its naval power. The earlier *AoE2* had not explicitly linked Greek fire with the *dromon*, although both increased naval effectiveness in the game. But similarly to what it does for Greek fire, *AoE2* also granted the *dromon* to other civilizations, likely in the name of gameplay balance (e.g., Armenians, Goths, Huns). In general, the industry's focus on the *dromon* is well-founded since it was the main warship of the Byzantine navy from the fifth to the twelfth centuries along with its *chelandion* variant which by the ninth century formed the bulk of the navy, as underlined by Ioannes Skylitzes and the *De Administrando Imperio* (Thurn 1973, 73, Moravcsik 1985, 182-185). But returning to land, more egregious errors await us in the arena of terrestrial combat.

## Varangian Guardsmen

"It is reasonably certain that no other section of the public service of the Byzantine Empire was the cause of so much entertaining fiction as the Varangian guards – nor has any other retained such a consistently glamorous public image for so long," B. S. Benedikz wrote back in 1962, identifying a trend that has only continued to grow. Tales of the Varangians and their heroic deeds circulate in Icelandic sagas, Danish

literature and Byzantine chronicles, beginning already in the Middle Ages during their time of operation. But had Benedikz surveyed the video game milieu in 2024, he would have found that this trajectory has accelerated even further. Varangian guardsmen continue to decorate the popular imagination from video games to films and books. They are presented as a unique Byzantine unit in games including *MTW2*, *CK2*, *CK3*, *EU4*, and *AoE4*.

Varangian guardsmen being one of the few entities that a lay person may know about Byzantium is ironic considering that they were specifically non-Byzantine, instead being a mercenary group composed of Norsemen, Rus', and Anglo-Saxons who served Byzantine emperors from the late-tenth to the fourteenth century. Their origins can be traced back to Basil II's formation of an elite unit of axe-bearers organized out of about 6.000 warriors gifted to him by Vladimir I of Kiev in the 980s – part of a broader agreement that included princess Anna marrying a Kievan prince. This brings us to the biggest misdirection associated with the widespread portrayal of Varangians guardsmen in video games: the idea that Byzantium was unable or unwilling to fend for itself. The popular image of a mercenary-dependent Byzantine military often materializes through an exaggeration of the role of the Varangian guard, particularly from a chronological perspective. Historically specific parts of the later Middle Ages are erroneously applied as a blanket statement across Byzantium's entire history and legacy.

From the eleventh century onwards, Byzantium's provincial military commands (known as *themata*) were dismantled and its army overhauled under the Komnenian emperors, being replaced by a smaller professional army alongside contracted mercenary companies (Rance 2018, 414-421, Haldon 1993, 60-62). This was accompanied by many territorial losses, for a centralized army can only be in one

place for so long, and once withdrawn the area becomes vulnerable again (unlike with the older provincial armies that were rooted in their respective provinces somewhat akin to a defensive militia). Moreover, mercenary companies were prone to rebel or transfer their loyalties elsewhere, as happened time and time again with powerful foreign leaders employed by Byzantium, such as Roussel de Bailleul or Robert Crispin (Beihammer 2017, 211-213, Reinsch and Kambylis 2001, 14-17). But the idea of a mercenary-dependent Byzantium with powerful foreigners defending its heartland – that is inadvertently conveyed through a heavy focus on the Varangians in video games – was not true for most of the civilization’s history. From the inception of the Eastern Roman capital in Constantinople in the 330s all the way to the eleventh century, mercenaries were not substantial in the Byzantine army. So why is it that, as Benedikz noted back in 1962, Varangians have left such an outsized footprint in popular culture?

Varangian guardsmen were loyal (as far as mercenaries go) and notoriously fearsome, functioning as an elite palatine guard in Constantinople, while on occasion also drafted into the field armies, as noted in both Byzantine and Rus’ sources (Blöndal 1978, D’Amato 2010, Reinsch and Kambylis 2001, 78-79, Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor 2012, 93). Their tradition of loyalty was commented on by Anna Komnene in the twelfth century, when she wrote that “[they] regard loyalty to the emperors and the protection of their persons as a family tradition, a kind of sacred trust and inheritance handed down from generation to generation” (Reinsch and Kambylis 2001, 78-79). Images of what the Varangians looked like survive in a twelfth-century copy of Ioannes Skylitzes’ *Synopsis Historion* (Thurn 1973). They were visually distinct, wearing their native clothing and wielding large battleaxes. They looked nothing like the typical Byzantine soldier. In fact, in the late-twelfth century Niketas Choniates referred to them exclusively through their weaponry, calling them “bearers of one-



*exkoubitores* were an imperial guard unit – but not a foreign mercenary unit – active from the fifth to the seventh centuries, serving many of the same functions that the Varangians fulfilled. They later transitioned into a battalion of the *tagmata* (the centralized, standing army), still operating in the eleventh century (Treadgold 1995, Haldon 1999). Similar to this were the *hikanatoi*, elite Byzantine guardsmen of a few thousand based in the capital from the ninth to the eleventh centuries. Of all Byzantine professional soldiers, then, why are the Varangians singled out for representation and presented on a silver platter to lay audiences? Game studios cannot lean on chronological constraints to reason out of this, since the inclusion of *kataphraktoi* beyond their historical timeline was clearly not an issue. The reason is instead part of a broader pattern.

Byzantium has a long history of being misrepresented, its positive attributes muted in place of the negative, a trend that can be traced all the way back to the European Enlightenment.<sup>x</sup> I will not labor this point since ample, high quality literature exists, but one only needs to look up the meaning of the English adjective *Byzantine* to see how Edward Gibbon's venomous, eighteenth-century take on Byzantium in the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* lingers on in the modern milieu (Runciman 1976; Gibbon 1994). Presenting Scandinavian mercenaries as Byzantium's main military prowess while ignoring all the others acting in front of or alongside them only serves to bolster this narrative and is ultimately a product of it. Firstly, this idea is wrong in the temporal sense, which is further exacerbated by the timeline in games such as *MTW2*, *EU4* and the *Crusader Kings* series skewing toward the later Middle Ages when the heydays of the Byzantine military were in the past and a reliance on mercenaries became commonplace. Secondly, it is a gross exaggeration of when the Varangians were in active service. For instance, under Basil II, when the Varangians were first installed as a palatine guard unit in Constantinople, a well-organized and

vast Byzantine army conquered Bulgaria, invaded Khazaria and Georgia, defended against the Fatimids, and quelled many large uprisings. While sources do occasionally mention the Varangians in some of these incidents (particularly in Georgia), they were in no way front-and-center to these campaigns. Countless Byzantine squires, sailors, soldiers and officers perished on meadows and seas, giving up their lives far away from home in the name of the *politeia ton Rhomaion*. They are, unfortunately, not commemorated anywhere. Having no large-scale self-identifying successors (neither groups of people nor polities) makes the popularization of such feats a challenge for Byzantium.

A further reason for the allure of the Varangians is the popular fascination with feudalism, a system exclusive to Western Europe from roughly the tenth to the fifteenth centuries (and notably not applicable for Byzantine society).<sup>xi</sup> Focusing on this era of supposed knightly chivalry, which is popularized in many types of media, is a sensible marketing decision for game developers.<sup>xii</sup> But it has a trickle effect on the legacy of Byzantium. Players immersing themselves in *MTW2*, for instance, may not be aware that a game featuring the word Medieval in its title skips about five centuries of what is commonly considered the Medieval era, instead starting in 1080 and running to the advent of Early Modernity. This results in the game's timeline beginning after the Battle of Manzikert and the infiltration of Turkmen elements across Asia Minor, which historically, along with the accompanying civil strife, had near-completely dismantled Byzantium's military and eroded its provincial armies (Birkenmeier 2002, Kaldellis and Krallis 2012, 48-49, 98-99, 174-175, 188-189). A fascination with the mid-to-late Middle Ages is not surprising for the Western world, since it coincides with an era where a galvanized Europe slowly began its centuries-long process of 'taming' and conquering the East (the Crusades being one of the earliest manifestations of this). The East in this case also included Byzantium, which

by then was weakened and in the process of contracting and splintering (including splitting from the Catholic Church) all the while its military needs were increasingly contracted out to foreign agents. It is not too difficult to extend this line of thought to, for instance, *EU4*, where we find a mercenary-dependent Byzantium (e.g., the missions titled Defense in Depth or Foreign Officers). Perhaps most representative of the persistence of this long-standing notion is the first sentence from *AoE4*'s official introduction of the Byzantines as a playable faction (from their website): "The Byzantines come equipped with three unique aspects: an Aqueduct network, access to mercenaries, and powerful Greek Fire" (Xbox Game Studios 2023). Aside from some aqueducts, then, players' excitement for selecting the Byzantines is channeled into its "access to mercenaries" and "powerful Greek Fire" (ibid.).

A preferential chronological framework therefore elevates the Varangians and furthers the notion of a decrepit Byzantium – a useful justification for the conquest of Constantinople by the Fourth Crusade. But moreover, the Varangians serve a wider role in the cultural narrative: weaving what are popularly seen as Vikings into the streets and palace intrigues of Constantinople (for they were indeed active in internal matters). This offers captivating material for audiences, particularly of a Western pedigree. They also lend themselves well to fictionalized dramatizations. That notable men from Scandinavia and England were attracted by the prospect of serving in the esteemed imperial guard of Constantinople (e.g., Harald Sigurdsson, later king of Norway) offers ample material for widening a narrative. For instance, in the *Crusader Kings* series, individual Varangian guardsmen have familial links and stories connecting them to people and events all the way in Scandinavia, facilitating long-distance immersion for players and helping flesh out geographical connections. This is a narrative opportunity not possible to the same degree with native Byzantines, thus making the over-representation of Varangians partly a game-design choice.

## Kataphraktoi

“A trumpet sounded the call to battle, the standard of the cross was raised, and the cavalry left the camp in proper order. The horsemen advanced with a precise measured gait, a trot, and, above all, in formation. They trotted forward deliberately, the *kataphraktoi* and their horses encased in metal, in tight formation and in total silence... On several occasions the mere sight of the iron-clad, faceless horsemen advancing in an eerie, unnatural silence completely unnerved the enemy, who broke ranks and fled. Friend and foe alike marveled at the incredible precision of the advancing horsemen in their gleaming armor.”  
 (Talbot and Sullivan 2005, 7)

The above passage describes Byzantium’s expansive campaigns in the reigns of Nikephoros Phokas (r. 963-969) and Ioannes Tzimiskes (r. 969-976), a time when the fearsome *kataphraktoi* shined on the battlefield, both literally and figuratively. *Kataphraktoi* (singular: *kataphraktos*) were a type of heavy cavalry that have come to cast a wide net over Byzantium’s military legacy. They are presented as cataphracts – using an anglicized spelling – in a wide array of strategy games including *MTW2*, *AoE2*, *AoE4*, *Civ5*, *CK2*, and *CK3*. In all these titles *kataphraktoi* are unique to the Byzantines and represent one of the most powerful units available. Before deconstructing their (mis)representation, let us turn briefly to the historical evidence. *Kataphraktos* is a compound of the Greek words κατά and φρακτος meaning “completely covered.” As their name suggests, they were fully draped in armor, including their warhorse. By the tenth century, their armor consisted of a *klibanion*, a lamellar cuirass made of small metal plates/scales sewn onto leather, under which a thick surcoat was worn, while the mail-helm left only the eye-sockets uncovered (McGeer 1995, 36-37, 113-115, Dawson 2001). This was heavy attire, adding up to 40 kilograms of additional weight and reducing their agility. According to contemporary Arab observers, *kataphraktoi* were a terrifying sight to behold; completely clad in metal they “seemed to advance on horses with no legs” (Negin and D’Amato 2020,

55). But this also made the wearer prone to overheating, and one common way of dealing with them on the battlefield was to avoid combat and tire them into exhaustion. Riders wielded a variety of weaponry depending on their position in the cavalry formation (McGeer 1995, 37, Dennis 2010, 82-104, Reinsch and Kambylis 2001, 134-135).<sup>xiii</sup> *Kataphraktoi* were thus very costly to field, one of their biggest drawbacks. For instance, at least two squires were required to accompany each cavalryman on campaign for armor-bearing among other duties of upkeep and maintenance. And the full mail armor and high-quality warhorse that they required were far beyond the acquisition capabilities of ordinary people. A strong horse was needed to support all that weight, and the supply of such prized breeds was sharply contested in the Medieval world. All of this made *kataphraktoi* privileged units, correlated with wealth and social prestige.

As can be surmised, they were far too valuable and expensive to send into the thick of battle without meticulous planning and a precise course of action. It is for this reason that Byzantine military manuals feature extensive tactical insights on the positioning, maneuvering, and protection of *kataphraktoi*. The first thing to note is that *kataphraktoi* have a large footprint in strategic manuals dealing with offensive warfare, and their proper utilization needed a large open space. This type of traditional, pitched battle is emulated well in the *Total War* series (2000-2023), including *MTW2*. On the contrary, smaller engagements (such as mountain-pass ambushes) or any type of asymmetric warfare or resistance was not their forte, since a central problem in deploying *kataphraktoi* was that their usefulness was tied to the enemy's willingness to engage them in battle. Evading their charge was often a possibility and offered one of the easiest counters to them (Eadie 1967, 173, McGeer 1995, 39-51). As such, they were a liability in skirmishes or when facing a guerilla-style defense. In fact, manuals indicate that their primary duty was to act as a single,

decisive, battle-ending charging force (McGeer 1995, 45-49).<sup>xiv</sup> They typically engaged the enemy's main army column, charging in a trapezoid shaped formation to break through it. They were not able to re-form at any feasible rate; it was all designed for the first devastating charge to be successful. Byzantine doctrine thus saw *kataphraktoi* as elite shock troops. Even in their heydays they numbered only a few hundred at most, a marginal number in comparison to the foot soldiers or lighter cavalry in an average Byzantine field army (McGeer 1995, 35, 113).<sup>xv</sup>

Their historical role on the battlefield contrasts with their in-game depictions in several critical aspects, particularly in games of the RTS genre. In *AoE2*, for instance, *kataphraktoi* can freely disengage, re-engage, pivot and turn around, and they are quite fast at all this. This makes them adept at small, mobile engagements and skirmishes, and in chasing down fleeing enemy troops, which is an almost complete reversal of the historical reality. As the esteemed Byzantine general Nikephoros Ouranos stated in his *Taktika*, *kataphraktoi* were not meant to pursue fleeing units; that was a duty left to lighter cavalry. It was too dangerous for *kataphraktoi*; the risk of being lured into an ambush was too great for such expensive units, and not really feasible given their lack of agility (McGeer 1995, 105). While some of these in-game errors can be overlooked from the perspective of playability and the limits of the game engine, it is hard to understand why the developers allowed heavily armored and hard-hitting *kataphraktoi* to move at the same speed as lighter, completely unarmored cavalry. Thankfully, some later titles including *AoE4* and *Civ5* address this by making *kataphraktoi* move slower.

An even bigger problem connected to the cultural assimilation of Byzantium concern visual depictions. *Kataphraktoi* in *MTW2* wield lances, which was representative of Western European knights. As stated above, Byzantine *kataphraktoi* usually wielded

either maces or swords, not lances. This game design choice should be seen as part of the cultural subsumption that Byzantium often faces. A similar issue is visible in *CK2*, which likewise presents 'cataphracts' as the Byzantine equivalent to the archetypal, heavy-armored, chivalric knights of Europe, relaying to players a distorted idea of Byzantine society, erroneously Europeanizing its cultural legacy.<sup>xvi</sup> This is more important than it sounds, for we must remember that these seemingly innocuous and highly specific entities – such as *kataphraktoi* – may be the only exposure that many lay people have to the Byzantine civilization. Taking historical concepts and systems – such as knighthood and feudalism – that were highly specific to a certain time and space and applying them where they do not belong presents a major problem. Byzantium's legacy is essentially denied and subsumed by what is currently popular and marketable.

This brings us to problems of chronology. Roman *kataphraktoi* were attested until the sixth century CE, after which they disappear from records during the tumultuous years spanning ca. 640-860 CE, only to re-emerge in the late-ninth and tenth centuries. After achieving their well-deserved limelight in Byzantium's tenth century campaigns, they once again vacate records in the eleventh century. The timeline conveyed in *MTW2* is the exact opposite of this; in the game, cataphracts require lengthy (centuries-long) investments making it impossible to field them before the end of the Middle Ages, precisely when they historically disappeared from usage. Moreover, since *MTW2* is set between the years 1080 and 1530, even if they had been available from the outset, the timeline still would not hold up. Likewise, the timeline of *CK2* also begins in the eleventh century, thus falling into the same error. An exaggerated focus on *kataphraktoi* thus conveys a temporally frozen picture, emulating a battlefield that is most similar to Byzantium's tenth century campaigning,

the apex of the *kataphraktos*. This burst of offensive warfare is inadvertently conveyed as a *longue durée* Byzantine reality to players.

Despite their powerful charge, there were counters to *kataphraktoi* on the Medieval battlefield other than avoidance. According to Byzantine wisdom, heavy infantry called *menavlatoi*, who wielded long spears up to ten feet in length, were the advised way to stop a charge of *kataphraktoi*. Nikephoros Ouranos describes how *menavlatoi* normally sheltering in the backlines were to rapidly assemble at the front when an incoming heavy cavalry charge was spotted (McGeer 1995, 94): "The *menavlatoi* must stand their ground and bravely meet the charge of the *kataphraktoi*."<sup>xvii</sup> Particularly important were the spears of the *menavlatoi*, which had to be carefully made "as thick as the hand can hold" (ibid.) from a single piece of hardwood such as oak or cornel (i.e., not a composite), such was the ferocity of the charge they needed to halt. Weaker ordinary spears would be easily shattered by a charging column of armored horses, regardless of whether or not their rider even used a weapon.

Another major divergence from reality thus begins in the arena of army composition. It is possible (and not at all uncommon) to create an army consisting almost wholly of *kataphraktoi* and decimate decisive engagements in titles including *AoE2*, *AoE4*, and *MTW2*, in addition to *CK2* and *CK3* to an extent, where *kataphraktoi* can be sent to single-handedly quell provincial revolts (something they were specifically bad at). This unanimous presentation of *kataphraktoi* as self-sufficient military machines is clearly misleading, since they were a tiny fraction of any field army and for good reason. Leaving aside the mountain of squires and other logistical aides that were required to deploy a unit of heavy cavalry, this presentation also ignores the myriad other troops that needed to act in harmony with *kataphraktoi* in order for them to achieve anything. As mentioned above, they were a costly liability if not properly strategized

around – something that Byzantine military manuals underlined time and again (e.g., *Praecepta Militaria* [McGeer 1995, sections II-IV]; Nikephoros Ouranos' *Taktika* [Dennis 2010, sections 57, 60-61]). Thus, running around the battlefield with a contingent consisting solely or heavily of *kataphraktoi* – as is often the case in games such as *AoE2* – is not a realistic presentation of history. Neither is the singular dispatchment of *kataphraktoi* to quell a provincial rebellion, which is an even more egregious misrepresentation. In reality, it was the opposite: *Kataphraktoi* would be the worst units to send into a locally embedded resistance. They were engineered around pitched battles and open engagements, making their depiction in the larger battlefields of *MTW2*, for instance, more accurate than the smaller skirmishes common in *AoE2*.

One reason for the popularity of Medieval heavy cavalry is that offensive warfare attracts more excitement than its defensive, localized counterpart. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced for FPS games, for which studies have shown that particularly the erosion of the rules of warfare offers a ripe platform for glorifying expansive and/or offensive campaigns (Renic and Kaempf 2022). Large urban zones are commonly devoid of civilian life (e.g., *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* 2019) and any remaining civilians are often presented as legitimate targets to players, removing one of the most unsavory aspects of real warfare; everyone caught in the fray is shown as a participant in the violence, in a stark contrast with reality. Additionally, the idea of a *virtuous war* is commonly used in the entertainment industry to infuse a do-good attitude into military invasions (Der Derian 2009). The allure of fighting in a space supposedly beyond one's own territory is compounded by the largest market for games (the Western world) having many more cases of extra-territorial warfare than the reverse in its modern history. Defensive resistance ends up taking the back seat in what is marketable. Thus, for instance, the elastic, guerilla defense that successfully

protected Anatolia against one of the most rapid conquest sprees in recorded history is entirely absent in media. Resisting the Caliphate was arguably one of Byzantium's greatest achievements, and the doctrine of this resistance is recorded in the *Peri Paradromis*, a fascinatingly detailed Byzantine manual on skirmishing and guerilla warfare (Dennis 1985, 144-239). A game or other piece of media focusing on this era of total war would be a welcome change. And a tooth-and-nail struggle for survival definitely fits the term *total war* more so than the pitched battles depicted in the game series that features this very term in its title (*Medieval Total War*).<sup>xviii</sup>

## Conclusions

The presentation of Medieval warfare in video games distorts and outright ignores much of what animated history with its myriad strategic, logistical, and economic challenges. This conveys to lay audiences a remarkably uniform and sterilized picture; there is little to separate Byzantium – with its supposed knights galloping around the battlefield – from Arthurian legends, for instance. Neither do we witness the tremendous amount of civilian effort and suffering that accompanied almost all forms of warfare. While the sterilization of history is common in all forms of media, as discussed above in relation to WWII games, the former issue is specific to the modern presentation of the Medieval setting. It is part of marketing the Middle Ages. Mystifying and purposefully obfuscating the untrendy complexities and darker corners of the Medieval era will inevitably lead to better game sales, which is the ultimate guiding principle for commercial products. This leads to a very important problem in the presentation in modern media of not just Byzantium but of the Middle Ages more broadly speaking. The onus is on historians and scholars of Byzantium and the Middle Ages to course-correct this misleading narrative, not only in the name of academic integrity but also to remove the rose-tinted glasses through

which Medieval warfare particularly, but also war more generally, continues to be viewed.

As we have seen, players of popular strategy video games know about cataphracts, Varangian mercenaries and liquid fire, and associate these with Byzantium, but receive little information on the most basic facts associated with this enduring polity, including its language, ethnicity or governance. Nor is the longevity of Byzantium ever explained, which on the contrary is often presented as a paradox; a supposedly stagnating civilization that somehow, miraculously, survived and prospered for over a millennium in a highly competitive geography. Players of video games may wonder how on earth Byzantium managed this after reading the in-game description of the Byzantines in *MTW2*:

“Byzantium is the shadow that remains of the old Roman Empire. It is a mere shadow because despite retaining the civilized ways of the Roman legacy, the Byzantines have done little to further it. In fact, it is their reverence of the old ways that has brought the empire to a point of stagnation, in a world that has gradually kept moving on.”

Byzantium’s entire history is thus presented as one long episode of decline and stagnation. The Byzantines have reportedly done little to further Rome’s legacy in any aspect whatsoever; a thousand years of history is thus brushed aside as inconsequential. The perplexing question of how such a decrepit entity weathered countless adversaries and challenges throughout so many centuries must indeed appear puzzling. The only possible explanation that game studios provide are to highlight Byzantium’s walls and fortifications; the idea that it sheltered and hid its way through the centuries. Needless to say, this is extremely reductionist.<sup>xix</sup> These sorts of highly outdated notions originate in Enlightenment though (e.g., Hieronymus Wolf,

Voltaire, Edward Gibbon) and are buttressed by the artificial separation of the Eastern Roman Empire (i.e., Byzantium) from its Roman origins (Clark 2021, Grafton 2021).

As it currently stands, Byzantium is framed in comparison to the West; its shortcomings are amplified and separated, its strengths subsumed and appropriated. Thus, *kataphraktoi* play catch up to feudal knights while Norse mercenaries defend Byzantium against so-called infidel barbarians pouring towards Europe from further east. Had different video games chosen to emphasize different aspects of Byzantium's legacy, it would have posed much less of an issue for its overarching presentation. The crux of the problem outlined in this paper lies in the persistence of the same emphases and omissions across different titles released by different game studios. The same select handful of historical vectors are deployed time and again, up to and including *AoE4*, which added the Byzantines as a playable civilization just recently. This ignores the mountains of support units, other infantry and lighter cavalry that were needed to prevent *kataphraktoi* or Varangians mercenaries from being decimated on the battlefield. Games also grossly exaggerate the frequency and importance of pitched battles, erroneously conveying the Middle Ages as a time when armies continuously met and engaged in large open spaces. The idea of a clearly delineated battlefield where each person is a participant in violence is of course much easier to present palatably in entertainment media, but players may start wondering: why would the weaker side keep agreeing to these engagements?

A group of foreign mercenaries being one of the most recognizable supposedly Byzantine entities should give us pause for concern. Perhaps it is time to popularize the javelin and bow-wielding *akritoi* manning the frontlines of Anatolia, the light-armed *koursatores* cavalry adept at pursuing and flanking the enemy, or the *prokoursatores* scouts so vital for field intelligence? Many such units remain unknown

to lay audiences. As long as this current pattern continues, the same static and misleading picture will get further entrenched in popular perceptions. Lacking self-identifying successors in today's world should not doom Byzantium's legacy to assimilation and subservience. There is an urgency, incumbent upon scholars of Byzantium, to help disseminate a better-rounded, more nuanced, and most importantly, independent presentation in the growing and highly diffuse medium of video games.

## References

*A Knight's Tale*, 2001. [film] Directed by Brian Helgeland. USA: Sony Pictures Releasing.

*Age of Empires II*, 1999. [video game] (PC) Ensemble Studios, Microsoft.

26

*Age of Empires IV*, 2021. [video game] (PC, Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S) Relic Entertainment, Xbox Game Studios.

Allison, T., 2010. The World War II video game, adaptation, and postmodern history. *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 38(3), 183-193.

*Assassin's Creed Revelations*, 2011. [video game] (PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch) Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft.

Bartusis, M., 2012. *Land and privilege in Byzantium: The institution of Pronoia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bastéa, E., 2000. *The creation of modern Athens: Planning the myth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Beihammer, A., 2017. *Byzantium and the emergence of Muslim-Turkish Anatolia, ca. 1040-1130*. New York: Routledge.

Betancourt, R., 2017. The medium is Byzantine: Popular culture and the Byzantine. In: Bildhauer, B. and Jones, C., eds. *The Middle Ages in the modern world*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 305-338.

Benedikz, B. S., 1962. The evolution of the Varangian regiment in the Byzantine army. *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, 62(1), 20-24.

Blöndal, S., 1978. *The Varangians of Byzantium*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

27

*Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*, 2019. [video game] (PlayStation 4, Microsoft Windows, Xbox One) Infinity Ward, Activision.

Cameron, A., 2003. Byzance dans le débat sur l'orientalisme. In: Auzépy, M. F., ed. *Byzance en Europe*. Paris: Presses universitaires de Vincennes, 235-250.

Cameron, A., 1990. The use and abuse of Byzantium: An essay on reception. *Inaugural Lecture: KCL*, 3-16.

Chevedden, P. E., 2000. The invention of the counterweight trebuchet: A study in cultural diffusion. *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 54, 71-116. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1291833>.

Christesen, P. and Machado, D., 2010. Video games and classical antiquity. *The Classical World*, 104(1), 107-110.

Clark, F., 2021. From the rise of Constantine to the fall of Constantinople: Defining Byzantium and the 'Middle Age' in early modern scholarship. In: Aschenbrenner, N. and Ransohoff, J., eds. *The invention of Byzantium in early modern Europe*. Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 323-348.

Cormack, R. and Jeffreys, E. M., eds., 2000. *Through the looking glass: Byzantium through British eyes: Papers from the twenty-ninth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, London, March 1995*. London: Aldershot.

28

Crichton, M., 1999. *Timeline*. New York: Knopf.

Cross, S. and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, O., eds., trans., 2012. *The Russian Primary Chronicle Laurentian Text*. Cambridge, MA: Mediaeval Academy of America.

*Crusader Kings II*, 2012. [video game] (PC) Paradox, Paradox Interactive.

*Crusader Kings III*, 2020. [video game] (PC, PS5, Xbox Series X/S) Paradox, Paradox Interactive.

D'Amato, R., 2010. *The Varangian Guard 988-1453 (men-at-arms)*. Oxford: Osprey Publishing.

Dawson, T., 2001. Klivanon revisited: An evolutionary typology and catalogue of middle Byzantine lamellar. *Journal of Roman Military Equipment Studies*, 12, 89-95.

Dennis, G., ed. and trans., 2010. *The Taktika of Leo VI*. Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks.

Dennis, G., ed. and trans., 1985. *Three Byzantine military treatises*. Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks.

Der Derian, J., 2009. *Virtuous war: Mapping the military-industrial-media-entertainment network*. New York: Routledge.

29

Durak, K., 2022. The popular perception of Byzantium in contemporary Turkish culture. *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 47(1), 122-139. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/byz.2022.31>.

Durak, K., 2014. The representation of Byzantine history in high school textbooks in Turkey. *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 38(2), 245-264. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1179/0307013114Z.00000000047>.

Eadie, J. W., 1967. The development of Roman mailed cavalry. *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 57(1), 161-173. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/299352>.

*Europa Universalis IV*, 2013. [video game] (PC) Paradox, Paradox Interactive.

Fasolio, M., 2023. Games of Byzantium: The image of the empire in three strategy videogames. In: Kulhánková, M. and Marciniak, P., eds. *Byzantium in the popular imagination: The modern reception of the Byzantine Empire*. New York: I. B. Tauris, 123-145.

Fasolio, M., 2021. Between history, exoticism, and enlightened prejudices: Some aspects of Byzantine presence in video games. In: Alışık, E., ed. *What Byzantinism is this in Istanbul!* Istanbul: Pera Museum Publication, 232-263.

Haldon, J., 1999. *Warfare, state and society in the Byzantine world 565-1204*. New York: Routledge.

Haldon, J., 1993. Military service, military lands and the status of soldiers: Current problems and interpretations. *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 47, 1-67.

30

Hamilakis, Y., 2007. *The nation and its ruins: Antiquity, archaeology, and national imagination in Greece*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Houghton, R., 2025. *Playing the Middle Ages: Pitfalls and potential in modern games*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Houghton, R., ed., 2022. *Teaching the Middle Ages through modern games: Using, modding and creating games for education and impact*. Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg.

Houghton, R. and Alvestad, K. C., 2021. Introduction: Accuracy and authenticity – interactions in contemporary medievalism. In: Alvestad, K. C. and Houghton, R., eds.

*The Middle Ages in modern culture: History and authenticity in contemporary medievalism.* London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1-11.

Gibbon, E., 1994. *The history of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire.* New York: Penguin.

Grafton, A., 2021. Western humanists and Byzantine historians. In: Aschenbrenner, N. and Ransohoff, J., eds. *The invention of Byzantium in early modern Europe.* Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 71-104.

Jiménez, J. F., 2011. The other possible past: Simulation of the Middle Ages in videogames. *Imago Temporis: Medium Aevum*, 5, 299-340.

Jiménez, J. F., 2009. Video games and the Middle Ages. *Imago Temporis: Medium Aevum*, 3, 311-365.

31

Kaldellis, A., 2021. From 'Empire of Greeks' to 'Byzantium': The politics of a modern paradigm shift. In: Aschenbrenner, N. and Ransohoff, J., eds. *The invention of Byzantium in early modern Europe.* Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 349-367.

Kaldellis, A., 2019. *Romanland: Ethnicity and empire in Byzantium.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Kaldellis, A. and Krallis, D., eds., trans., 2012. *Michael Attaleiates, the history.* Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks.

*Kingdom of Heaven*, 2005. [film] Directed by Ridley Scott. USA: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox.

Laiou, A., 2009. The Palaiologoi and the world around them (1261-1400). In: Shepard, J., ed. *The Cambridge history of the Byzantine Empire c. 500-1492*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 803-833.

Marciniak, P., 2018. Oriental like Byzantium. In: Alshanskaya, A., Gietzen, A. and Hadjafxenti, C., eds. *Imagining Byzantium: Perceptions, patterns, problems*. Mainz: Byzanz zwischen Orient und Okzident, 47-55.

McGeer, E., 1995. *Sowing the dragon's teeth: Byzantine warfare in the tenth century*. Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library.

McMichael, A., 2007. PC games and the teaching of history. *The History Teacher*, 40:2, 203-208.

*Medieval II: Total War*, 2006. [video game] (PC) Creative Assembly, Sega.

Meineke, A., ed., 1838. *Ioannis Cinnami Epitome Rerum ab Ioanne et Manuele Comnenis Gestarum*. Bonn: Impensis Ed. Weberi.

Moravcsik, G., ed., 1985. *Constantine Porphyrogenitus De Administrando Imperio*. Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks.

Negin, A and D'Amato, R., 2020. *Roman heavy cavalry AD 500-1450*. Oxford: Osprey Publishing.

Partington, J., 1998. *A history of Greek fire and gunpowder*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Ramsay, D., 2015. Brutal games: Call of Duty and the cultural narrative of World War II. *Cinema Journal*, 54(2), 94-113. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2015.0015>.

Rance, P., 2018. The army in peace time: The social status and function of soldiers. In: Stouraitis, Y., ed. *A companion to the Byzantine culture of war*. Leiden: Brill, 349-439.

Ransohoff, J., and Aschenbrenner N., eds., 2021. *The invention of Byzantium in early modern Europe*. Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks.

Reinsch D. and Kambylis, A., eds., 2001. *Annae Comnenae Alexias*. Berlin: de Gruyter.

Renic, N. and Kaempf, S., 2022. Modern lawfare: Exploring the relationship between military first-person shooter video games and the “war is hell” myth. *Global Studies Quarterly*, 2(1). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksab045>.

*Rise of the Tomb Raider*, 2015. [video game] (PC, PS4, Xbox 360, Xbox One) Crystal Dynamics, Square Enix.

Roland, A., 1992. Secrecy, technology, and war: Greek fire and the defense of Byzantium 678–1204. *Technology and Culture*, 33(4), 658-675. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3106585>.

Roland, A., 1995. *The Technological Fix: Weapons and the Cost of War* (US Army War College Press). <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/236>.

Runciman, S., 1976. Gibbon and Byzantium. *Daedalus*, 105(3), 103-110. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674733695.c6>.

Sansom, C., 2004. *Dark fire*. London: Macmillan.

*Sid Meier's Civilization V*, 2010. [video game] (PC) Firaxis: 2K Games.

*Sid Meier's Civilization VI*, 2016. [video game] (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch)  
Firaxis: 2K Games.

Steinkuehler, C., 2010. Video games and digital literacies. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 54(1), 61-63. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1598/JAAL.54.1.7>.

*Stronghold: Crusader*, 2002. [video game] (PC) Firefly Studios: Take 2 Interactive.

Talbot, A. M. and Sullivan, D. F., 2005. *The history of Leo the Deacon: Introduction, translation, and annotations*. Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks.

34

*The Green Knight*, 2021. [film] Directed by David Lowery. USA: A24.

Thurn, I., ed., 1973. *Ioannis Scylitzae Synopsis Historiarum*. Berlin: W. de Gruyter.

Total War Center, 2024. *Medieval II: Total War*. Available at  
<https://www.twcenter.net/forums/forumdisplay.php?3-Medieval-II-Total-War>,  
accessed 15 March 2024.

Treadgold, W., 1995. *Byzantium and its army, 284-1081*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Valero, V., ed., 2024. *Europa en Juego: Visiones de Europa a través de los videojuegos*. Valencia: Tercera Fase Ediciones.

Van Dieten, I., ed., 1975. *Nicetae Choniatae Historia*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Whittow, M., 1995. Rural fortifications in western Europe and Byzantium, tenth to twelfth century. *Byzantinische Forschungen*, 21, 57-74.

Xbox Game Studios, 2023. *Byzantines – Age of Empires*. Available at <https://www.ageofempires.com/games/age-of-empires-iv/civilizations/byzantines/>, accessed 10 March 2024.

---

<sup>i</sup> E.g., the recent panel conversation titled “East Pixelated: Byzantinism and Orientalism in Video Games” jointly organized by the Istanbul Research Institute, Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, and Özgen Berkol Doğan Science Fiction Library in May 2023 was fruitful for highlighting the tendency of video games to homogenize the religious landscape of Byzantium. Also relevant are the Middle Ages in Modern Games strands hosted each year at the *International Medieval Conference* (IMC) in Leeds, organized by the Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Research of the University of Winchester (where I presented an earlier version of this paper in 2021).

<sup>ii</sup> As Marco Fasolio (2023, 125): “Unlike medieval or medieval-like settings, which are relatively standard for several videogame genres, purely Byzantine or predominantly Byzantine games are almost entirely absent.” Reasons for this are many, but an important one is that despite its millennium-long existence, Byzantium uniquely lacks the ‘heritage protecting’ that other historical polities of comparable length and impact enjoy. It today occupies a shaky middle-ground in the political and cultural atmospheres of modern Greece and Turkey (its territorial successors), not fully embraced by either. That being said,

Greece has been somewhat reconciling with its Byzantine past in recent years, and particularly Byzantium's religious legacy has remained attractive to Greece, Russia and other Orthodox Christian countries. But this has remained insufficient for the purposes of fully embracing and championing the Byzantine past as national heritage, which thus remains somewhat lost in the community of historical polities (Bastéa 2000, Hamilakis 2007, Durak 2014, Kaldellis 2021, 349-367).

<sup>iii</sup> Other iterations of these game series may also be listed (e.g., *Age of Empires III* (2005), *Medieval: Total War* (2002), earlier *Civilization* titles). But since they have similar representations of Byzantium, I have decided to omit these entries, and instead focus on the most popular titles in their respective series. But in other cases (e.g., with *AoE2* and *AoE4*) the difference in Byzantium's representation is substantial enough to warrant separate analysis.

<sup>iv</sup> Fasolio (2023) very shortly touches upon Varangians noting that they became a ceremonial unit from the thirteenth century onwards, he recognizes Greek fire as a unique Byzantine tenet in a sentence, and notes the chronological problem of *kataphraktoi*. But this remains a small part of his chapter, which provides a broad survey, and does not aim to deconstruct the reasoning behind (and repercussions that stem from) these highly specific choices.

<sup>v</sup> It is called wildfire in the TV-show and also in the *A Song of Ice and Fire* book series by George R. R. Martin (1996-2011) upon which it is based. It is also featured in novels such as Sansom 2004, Crichton 1999.

<sup>vi</sup> While Greece and also Russia have championed certain aspects of their Byzantine past and connections to it (for Greece this has revolved a lot around religion), they do not draw on its full historical legacy. For instance, in Greece there is a tendency to downplay or outright exclude Byzantine material in favor of the Classical heritage, perhaps best exemplified in the structuring of modern Athens (Bastéa 2000, Hamilakis 2007). Also, see endnote ii, above.

<sup>vii</sup> Van Dieten 1975, 172 (οἱ τοὺς ἑτεροστόμους πελέκεις ἐπὶ τῶν ὠμῶν ἀνέχουσι), 248-249 (οἱ κατωμαδόν τοὺς ἑτεροστόμους πελέκεις ἀνέχουσιν), 407, 525-527 (τῶν πελεκυφόρων), 545 (τῶν πελεκυφόρων βαρβάρων).

<sup>viii</sup> Fan communities of *MTW2* are populated with so-called Byzantophiles or Byzantiboos who describe the Byzantines as their favorite (or as the most powerful) faction in the game. For instance, see Total War Center 2024.

<sup>ix</sup> The ambiguous timeline presented in *AoE2* and *AoE4* brings together not just different troop types but whole civilizations that never chronologically overlapped in reality.

<sup>x</sup> E.g., Durak 2022, 123-139. For a historical overview, see Ransohoff and Aschenbrenner 2021.

<sup>xi</sup> Feudalism as a social system is generally accepted by scholars as not being applicable to Byzantium owing to the significance differences that it exhibited. While Late-Byzantium or the Palaiologan era most approached certain tendencies that are often grouped under the label feudalism, it was still vastly different in many key aspects, such as those concerning social relations or territorial administration (Whittow 1995, Laiou 2009, Bartusis 2012).

<sup>xii</sup> Popularized in films such as *A Knight's Tale* (2001), *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005), *The Green Knight* (2021), or book series (and their associated TV-shows) set in fictionalized, pseudo-Medieval fantasy worlds that resemble the social organization of feudal Europe, such as *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R. R. Martin, *The Wheel of Time* by Robert Jordan (1990-2013), or *The Witcher* by Andrzej Sapkowski (1986-2024).

<sup>xiii</sup> The first four ranks wielded heavy iron maces, the flanks of the cavalry wedge wielded lances, while the center could have archers. All carried swords too. *Praecepta Militaria* 3.6-7 in: McGeer 1995, 37. Also see Leo VI's *Taktika* in: Dennis 2010, 82-104. For a description of the armor's robustness, see Anna Komnene's comments on her father's experiences in the *Alexiad* 4.6: Reinsch and Kambylis 2001, 134-135.

