



Summary :

The military forces that were stationed in Constantinople consisted mostly of men of the imperial guard (the units of which were called “scholae” during the Early Byzantine period and “tagmata” during the Middle period). Units of regular army that were camped in Thrace and Bithynia were responsible for guarding the city walls in case of siege, while the citizens, and especially the members of guilds and the *demoi*, played important role in Constantinople’s defense.

Date

330-1453

Geographical Location

Constantinople

1. Introduction

Despite the fact Constantinople was the capital of the Empire and regardless of its strategically important location, emperors were hesitant to allow a great number of soldiers to be permanently stationed in Constantinople. The reasons were probably political and economic. The presence of many military units in the city would severely aggravate its supply; moreover the emperors possibly feared that the presence of great military forces in [Constantinople](#) could pose a great threat during revolts. So, Constantinople’s army forces were limited to mostly the men of the imperial guard, while the city’s safety depended mostly on its mighty [walls](#), the existence of a fleet to protect it from sea and the participation of [citizens](#) and neighbor army units to defend it in case of siege.

2. Army units in Constantinople during the Early Byzantine period

During the Early Byzantine period, Constantinople’s imperial guard consisted of the so-called “*scholae*” (*scholae palatinae*). This guard was established circa 312, by [Constantine I](#), who had just disrupted the famous Praetorian Guard of Rome that had supported his rival to the throne, Maxentius. The men of the “schools” were equestrians and at first they were recruited from German warriors, but eventually their combative value decreased and in the 6th century their presence was mostly ceremonial. The initial numbers of the guard of “schools” are unknown, but in the times of [Justinian I](#) (527-565) there were seven “schools”, each of which had 500 men. As it was almost impossible to quarter 3,500 “*scholarioi*” in the palace, it appears that one or two “schools” served as royal guard by turns, while the rest were stationed in cities of the providences of [Bithynia](#) and [Galatia](#).

In order to countervail the decreased military value of the “schools”, emperor Leo I (457-474) introduced a new bodyguard of 300 handpicked men, the “*excubitores*”, who were recruited from his homeland, Isauria. Even though they served as bodyguards to the emperor, “*excubitores*” were often summoned to defend the Theodosian walls.

Other than the men of the imperial guard, responsible for the defense of the walls in case of siege were units of the regular army, more specifically, the men of the two *magistri militum praesentales*, that were stationed in Thrace and Bithynia. They were assisted in their duty by armed citizens, members of the city’s [guilds](#) and the [demoi](#). Ultimately, a unit with paramilitary-police duties, “*pedatoura*” or “*kerketon*” was under the command of *praefectus urbi* (Eparch of the city).

3. Army units on Constantinople during the Middle Byzantine period

It appears that since the beginning of the 7th century, the forces of the two *magistri militum praesentales* incorporated in a united central conflict army under imperial command called Opsikion (from lat. *obsequium* =escort). Opsikion, which at first guarded both Thrace and Bithynia, was later established only in Bithynia, where the homonymous [theme](#) was formed. In the end of the same century, according to the sources, two new units appear in Constantinople, “*noumera*” and “*tiheote*”, assigned to guard the gates and the walls of the [Great Palace](#), which was fortified by emperor Justinian II (685-695, 705-711).



The most important change in the status quo of Constantinople's army forces, a change that characterized the entire Middle Byzantine period, took place around the middle of the 8th century on Constantine V's (741-775) initiative. Having just successfully suppressed the [rebellion of Artabasdos](#), comes of Opsikion, the emperor took measures to avoid similar incidents in the future. First he weakened the theme of Opsikion and then he went on with the reorganization of the "scholae" and the "excubites" (as they were then called).

Constantine recruited new soldiers for the imperial guard, seeing that they were faithful to him and to his [iconoclastic policy](#). The new effective units that resulted from this reorganization were named "tagmata" and their duties were extended: they no longer were exclusively an imperial guard, not even guard of Constantinople, as from that time they would serve as a central conflict army, equivalent to the old Opsikion, and they would participate in the emperor's campaigns. The oldest tagmata were the scholae and the excubitores, each with its own [domestikos](#) in command. Gradually, the term "scholarioi" came to designate the soldiers of the tagmata in general, while the [domestikos ton scholon](#) was second in command under the general of [Anatolikon](#) and later (9th-10th c.) was charged with the command of campaigns in the emperor's absence. As tagmata had by then merely military duties, the so-called "hetairiae" were formed as the emperor's bodyguard.

[Eirene Athenaia](#) (780-8-2) came across the reaction of scholarioi when she attempted to repeal the iconoclastic policies of her predecessors. For this reason, she discharged the old soldiers of tagmata and replaced them with new ones. In the same time, she introduced a third tagma, called "Arithmos" or "Vigla", by men of the [thematic](#) army that were faithful to her. A little later, [Nikephoros I](#) (802-811) established the tagma of "ikanatoi". These four "tagmata" would be the core of Constantinople's guard until the 11th century. It is until the same period that the tagma of Athanatoi, founded by [John I Tzimiskes](#) (969-976) is being mentioned.

4. Army units in Constantinople during the Late Byzantine period

After the 11th century, "tagmata" gradually disappear. During the Late Byzantine period and especially the times of [Palaiologoi](#), Constantinople's military forces consisted of five different units. The most important of them was the [guard of Varangians](#), consisting of [Rus](#) mercenaries with axes, brought to Constantinople by [Basil II](#) (976-1025). Paramonai appear in the sources during the second half of the 13th century and are not mentioned again after 1315. Their soldiers were equestrians, members of the palace guard and native Byzantines, not foreign mercenaries. Mourtatoi were infantry archers and were recruited from the offspring of mixed marriages between Byzantines and Turks. The Tzakones came mostly from Peloponnese; they were established by Michael VII Palaiologos to guard the walls of Constantinople and the palace (armed with clubs, known as "apelatikia") and to serve in the fleet. The fourth was the Vardariotai, probably originating from Hungarians that had settled in the area of Axios River in the 10th century.

With the decline of the Byzantine army, the soldiers of the palace guard would be the only armed forces in the empire in the 15th century. During the last [siege of Constantinople](#), only a few Byzantine soldiers, some thousands of Westerner mercenaries and the armed citizens of Constantinople were defending it.

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Glossary :

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|  | domestikos |
| A term that during Byzantine times denoted a wide array of ecclesiastic, civil and military officials. In church hierarchy the domestikoi were in charge of special groups connected with liturgical rites, such as lectors, sub-deacons but mainly cantors. In the military chain of command during the 6th, 7th and 8th century the domestikoi were the commanders of the <i>tagmata</i> , the regiments under the direct command of the Emperor. | |
|  | domestikos ton scholon |
| Commander of the regiment of <i>scholae</i> . The first officer with this title appears in 767/8. In the 10th C the domesticos became very powerful among the army of the <i>themata</i> ; in mid-10th C the office was divided in two, <i>domestikoi ton scholon</i> of the East and those of the West, commanders in chief of the eastern and the western provinces' army respectively. | |
|  | praefectus urbi (prefect of the city) |
| (later referred to as the <i>eparch</i> of the city) Administrator and virtual governor of Constantinople in the Early/Middle Byzantine Era. He was responsible for the surveillance and the harmonious life of the Capital. One of his responsibilities was to control the commercial and manufacturing activities of Constantinople. After 1204, however, the office began to diminish, while from the 14th century, his responsibilities were assumed by two officers, the so-called <i>kephalatikeuntai of the capital</i> . | |
|  | scholae palatinae |
| Scholae palatinae were created by Diocletian (284-305). They were corps of the imperial guard, and to be more precise they formed the personal army of the emperor. They served under the <i>magistri officiorum</i> and later on under the Domesticos ton Scholon. Seven regiments were stationed in the East and five in the West. Justinian I (527-565) introduced four more short-lived regiments. | |
|  | tagmata (pl.) |
| Military units stationed in Constantinople and its outskirts during the Middle Byzantine period. The most important tagmata were that of the Scholae, the Excubitors (these originated from respective units of the Early Byzantine period and were organized into an imperial guard and a central strike force by Constantine V), the Vigilia (established by Irene the Athenian) and the Hikanatoi (established by Nicephorus I). | |