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The Saracen Defenders of Constantinople in 378

David Woods

Writing ca 391, the historian Ammianus Marcellinus has left us a vivid description of the Roman defense of Constantinople against the Goths shortly after their crushing defeat by these Goths at Adrianopolis on 9 August 378 (31.16.4ff):

Unde Constantinopolinm, copiarum cumulis inhiantes amplissimis, formas quadratarum agminum insidiarum metu servantes, ire ocus fileinabant, multa in exitium urbis incideae molii. Quos inferentes sese immodice, obicesque portuum pene pulsantes, hoc casu caeleste repulsus numen. Saracenorum cuneus (super quorum origine moribusque diversis in locis retulimus plura), ad furt magis expeditionalium rerum, quam ad concursatorias habiliis pugnas, recent illuc accersitus, congressurus barbarorum globo repente specto, a civitate fdenter erupit, diuque extento certamine pertinaci, equis partes discessere momentis. Sed orientalis turma novo neque ante viso superavit eventu. Ex ea enim crimini quidam, nudus omnin praeter pubem, subvacoem et lugubre strepens, educato pugione, agmini se medio Gothorum insersit, et interfici hostis lugulo labra admovit, effusamque cruorem exsuxit. Quo monstruo miraculo barbarorum territ, postea non serientes ex more, cum agendum appetent aliquid, sed ambiguis gestibus incedebant.1

1 From there [Perinthus] they [the Goths] hastened in rapid march to Constantinople, greedy for its vast heaps of treasure, marching in square formations for fear of ambushes, and intending to make mighty efforts to destroy the famous city. But while they were madly rushing on and almost knocking at the barriers of the gates, the celestial power checked them by the following event. A troop of Saracens (of whose origin and customs I have spoken at length in various places), who are more adapted to stealthy raiding expeditions than to pitched battles, and had recently been summoned to the city, desiring to attack the hordes of barbarians of which they had suddenly caught sight, rushed forth boldly from the city to attack them. The contest was long and obstinate, and both sides separated on equal terms. But the Oriental troop had the advantage from a strange event, never witnessed before. For one
That Saracen troops played a key rôle in the defense of Constantinople in 378 is amply attested. Writing at the beginning of the sixth century, Zosimus also described their success against the Goths, or Scythians, as he called them (4.22.1ff Paschoud):

"ο δὲ βασιλεὺς Οὐσίλως λησθομένων ἦν τὴν θρήνην πάσην τοῖς Σκυθέσις θεομένος. έγνω τοὺς ἐκ τῆς ἱρίας σει ναυτί αραγογένινυς και μάχεσθαι μὲ τὴν μεταφέρουσαν τῇ τῶν Σκυθῶν ὑπὲρ πρότερον ἐπέηιμα. Λαβώντες σαν οὗτοι πορη τοῦ βασιλέως τὸ σύνθημα καὶ ἐλθόντος εκ τῶν τῆς Κωνσταντινουπόλεως κυλῶν ἐπεξέσαν, καὶ τῶν ἐκλειπόντων Σκυθῶν τοῖς κοινῶς περιοδόντες πολλὰν ἡμέραν ἐκατὼς ἐφέρον κεφάλης. ἐκεῖ δὲ τὴν ὑπὸν τοπίαν καὶ τὴν κοινῶς ἐπιφέραν δύσμαχον ἦν τοῖς Σκυθίως ἐδόθη, καταπατήθησαν τὸ Σκαρακενικὸν διενοχήθες φιλίαν ἐνέθρεβαν τοῖς κυλῶν ἐνακορύφωσεν τόπῳ προς ἑνὶ Σκύθῳ ἐπέλυσεν συνειδὸν Σαρακηνή. Καὶ τοις δὲ διαμαρτυρών τῆς πείρας τῶν Σκαρακενίων διὰ τὸ τῶν σπερέων ὑπὸν τούτῳ καὶ ἑδύγησιν καὶ ἐξοναίον ἐπεραφόντοις, ἡνίκα δὲ ἐν πλήθος ἑπόμενοι ἐπέκρυσαν ἐπεραφόντοις δὲ συγλατίας καὶ τοῖς κοινῶς ἐνακορύφωσεν, τοιοῦτος ἐγένετο καίηθαν φόνος δέκτει ἐπιπραγμάτευσαν αὐτοῖς ἑκλήθησαν περιποιηθῆναι τὸν Ἰστότον καὶ θάλατα έκδονται τοῖς. Οὕνεκα μελλόν ἡ ὑπὸ Σκαρακενίων καναλείδρῳ διευθυνθηθῆναι καταλατύκτων δὲ αὐτῶν τὸν Κωνσταντινὸν τὴν κύλων τόπος καὶ πορηθῆρᾳ προελθόντων, γέγονεν εὐρύχωρα τῷ βασιλεῖ παραγωγίνι εἰς τῷ πρόσῳ τὸ στράτευμα."

of their number, a man with long hair and naked except for a loin-cloth, uttering hoarse and dismal cries, with drawn dagger rushed into the thick of the Gothic army, and after killing a man applied his lips to the throat and sucked the blood that poured out. The barbarians, terrified by this strange and monstrous sight, after that did not show their usual self-confidence when they attempted any action, but advanced with hesitating steps* (text and tr.: Rolfe, LCL).

1 The emperor Valens, seeing the Scythians plundering all Thrace, decided to send against the Scythian cavalry first the Saracens he had brought with him from the East, who were expert cavalry men. At the emperor's order, they left the gates of Constantinople in small groups, and impaling the straggling Scythians on their lances, brought back the heads of many each day. Since the speed of their horses and the impact of their lances were difficult for the Scythians to withstand, they decided to counteract the Scythians by suddenly, and set up an ambush in some hollows, outnumbering the Saracens three to one. This plan was thwarted, however, because the Saracens, owing to the speed and manageability of their horses, escaped whenever they saw a group of Scythians approaching, but whenever the Saracens caught the Scythians un-
ments is not out of place. Why should we believe Zosimus that a Saracen defense of Constantinople took place before the battle of Adrianopolis?

Shahid claims first that "he [Zosimus] wrote in Constantinople not long after these events had taken place, and thus he was in a privileged position to ascertain such details as affected the deliverance of the city in which he lived." Although it is probably true that Zosimus did write in Constantinople, he did so ca. 498-520. Some confusion is evident here between Zosimus and his main source Eunapius. The exact date of Eunapius' History, and whether it was published in stages rather than as one complete work, is a matter of some controversy, but what is not controversial is that Ammianus and Eunapius were contemporaries, and that neither's work can be preferred to the other's simply on the basis of date. To what extent, if any, Eunapius travelled outside his home city of Sardis in Lydia after his return there in 369 remains unknown. Relatively little is also known about Ammianus' travels after his retirement from the army at his home city of Antioch in 363, although he did reach Rome by ca. 383. So neither author had particularly strong ties with Constantinople, although both may have visited the city. In brief, neither Zosimus nor, more properly, his source Eunapius merit a "privileged position" over Ammianus.

Shahid's second argument completely misses the point. He claims that "Zosimus' account contains topographical and chronological indications that leave no doubt that he knowingly assigned it [the Saracen defense of Constantinople] to the first phase of the Gothic War," i.e., before the battle of Adrianopolis. Yet the real question is not whether Zosimus "knowingly" did this, but whether he was correct. Indeed, as Zosimus for the most part merely abbreviated Eunapius' work, there is little question of his deliberately, or "knowingly," assigning anything anywhere. He simply followed the order of his one main source at this particular point in his narrative. Again, in his fourth argument Shahid claims that "a close examination of the accounts of the two engagements reveals that in spite of super-

ficial similarities involving Gothic and Saracen horsemen fighting not far from Constantinople, they are quite distinct from each other." Here he emphasizes the difference between Zosimus, who claims that the Goths wanted to retreat across the Danube in the face of the Saracen attack, and Ammianus, who claims that the Goths were eventually driven back across the Balkans to the foothills of the Julian Alps (31.16.7). Yet Zosimus' claim—a rhetorical statement to emphasize Gothic fear of the Saracens—is not to be taken literally, and if Zosimus does not understand this himself, then he has misinterpreted Eunapius. The Goths were never driven beyond the Danube. Indeed, it is important to note that Zosimus states not that the Goths actually retreated across the Danube, but that they merely wanted to do this, so that his account is perfectly reconcilable with Ammianus' in this detail at least.

I have left Shahid's third argument until last because it represents a clear rejection of the interpretation that I shall advocate in this paper. He rejects as "the most improbable of courses" any suggestion that "instead of hurling the Arab against the Gothic horse, he [Valens] locked up the Arab foederati, horsemen adapted to mobile warfare, within the walls of Constantinople, where they remained inactive, to be exhibited only after the campaign was over, in the aftermath of the battle of Adrianopolis, and fight in an engagement such as the one Ammianus describes." But such an interpretation remains improbable only if one assumes that the Saracens were Valens' only, or most highly reputed, cavalry when he returned to Constantinople in the spring of 378, and that they were the natural choice to repulse any Gothic raiders in the vicinity of the city. Yet Valens must have been accompanied by the bulk of his palatine forces at least, including two types of cavalry units, the scholae palatinae and the vexillationes palatinae, not to mention those mobile units ranking as comitatensis rather than palatina. So he did not necessarily need to use his Saracen cavalry in the manner assumed, as they were not his only horsemen "adapted to mobile warfare." Nor can we easily assume that large numbers of Goths really threatened Constantinople before the arrival of Valens, as Zosimus would have us believe—a subject to which I shall return shortly.

The truth is that neither Ammianus' nor Zosimus' accounts of the events leading up to, and after, the battle of Adrianopolis are

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8 For a list of Zosimus' geographical errors, see Ridley (supra n.5) 296ff.
entirely satisfactory. Fortunately, we do not have to rely on their testimony alone. Although the so-called Consularia Constantinopolitana does not mention the Saracens, this important source for events 356-384, written at Constantinople from a Constantinopolitan point of view,10 confirms that the Goths did reach the gates of Constantinople only after the battle of Adrianopolis. So full is its account of the momentous events of 378—Valens' arrival at Constantinople from the East on 30 May, his departure on 11 June, a great battle between the Goths and Romans on 9 August at the twelfth milestone from Adrianopolis—that it is difficult to believe that its compiler omitted a Goth-Saracen engagement of the size that Eunapius and Zosimus describe. So the earlier and most trustworthy source tends to support the testimony of Ammianus rather than that of Eunapius and Zosimus: the Goths reached Constantinople only once and after the battle of Adrianopolis.

The mid-fifth-century ecclesiastical historians Socrates (HE 5.1) and Sozomen (HE 7.1) also provide important information. Both describe how Saracens contributed to the defense of Constantinople, although Socrates' is the original account that Sozomen merely paraphrases (Soc. HE 5.1):

> Τοῦ δὲ βασιλέως Οὐλάντος ὁδηγὸν ἐσχήκτεσθαι τὴν τελευτήν, οἱ βαρβαροὶ πάλιν ἔστω τοῖς τείχοις τῆς Κωνσταντινουπόλεως ἐλθόντες τὰ περὶ αὐτὸν ἐκροίνουσα προσάγει. Εἰς τὸς δὲ ἄδηστον ἀγανακτήν ἡ ἑαυτῶν τοῖς βαρβάροις ἀντικείμενης, ἐκεῖος τοῦ παραπενήναι ὧν οἱ διὰ λαμψοντες. Ἔδειξε δὲ τοὺς ἐξολοθρεύτης τὰς τῆς βασιλείας τῆς λαυρίας μασίν ἐκ τοῦ βασιλείου παλαιοῦ, καθὰ καὶ τῶν παρακάτων ἐνεκώπετο. Ἐκεῖθεν δὲ αὐτῶν ἀλήθειαν ὑποδοθείς, πάντων τῆς καὶ ἀνωτέρω ἐνθουσιώσαν. Τἀυτὸν δὲ τὸν τρόπον τηθῆναι τοῦ ἀδίψυ ώς ἀναγεννημένου, πόρω τῆς πόλεως ἐπικεφάλης οἱ βαρβαροὶ.11

Socrates supports Ammianus' description of events: only one Saracen defense of Constantinople after the battle of Adrianopolis. He is all the more trustworthy not only because he wrote at Constantinople,12 but also because he clearly had access to a detailed Constantinopolitan account of events in and about the city at that time. Earlier he had provided an exact date for the arrival of Valens in Constantinople, 30 May, an exact date for his departure, 11 June, and much else besides (HE 4.38):

> οἱ δὲ βασιλεῖς ὁδηγοὶ περὶ τὴν πρώτην τοῦ Μωλον μήνα, ἐν τῇ διοδοὶ ὑποκειμένοι καὶ Οὐλάντινου τοῦ νότου τοῦ διαφέρον, ἔδειξαν τὸν τοῦ Κωνσταντινουπόλισιν ἐξαγγέλτα τοῦ δήμου ἐν ὑποτελεῖα μικράται πολλή. Οἱ μὲ βαρβάρους κατεξειρέθησαν τὴν θρήσκευσιν καὶ τὰ προσάγατα ἐπεράθησαν τὴν Κωνσταντινουπόλεως, μὴ πάντως οὕτως ἀβούλως τηρηθήσεται διάλεξα.

After the Emperor Valens had thus lost his life, in a manner which has never been satisfactorily ascertained, the barbarians again approached the very walls of Constantinople, and laid waste the suburbs on every side of it. Whereat the people becoming indignant armed themselves with whatever weapons they could severally lay their hands on, and sallied forth of their own accord against the enemy. The empress Domitilla caused the same pay to be distributed out of the imperial treasury as to be gathered up to go out on this service, as was usually allowed to soldiers. A few Saracens also assisted the citizens, being confederates, who had been sent by Mavia their queen, the latter we have already mentioned. In this way the people having fought at this time, the barbarians retired to a great distance from the city" (tr. A. C. Zeno, in Socrates, Sozomenus Church Histories [=Nicost-NicF Sec. 2 2 (New York 1989)] 1175; Greek text: R. Hunsley [Oxford 1853] 567ff).


11 "After the Emperor Valens had thus lost his life, in a manner which has never been satisfactorily ascertained, the barbarians again approached the very walls of Constantinople, and laid waste the suburbs on every side of it. Whereat the people becoming indignant armed themselves with whatever weapons they could severally lay their hands on, and sallied forth of their own accord against the enemy. The empress Domitilla caused the same pay to be distributed out of the imperial treasury as to be gathered up to go out on this service, as was usually allowed to soldiers. A few Saracens also assisted the citizens, being confederates, who had been sent by Mavia their queen, the latter we have already mentioned. In this way the people having fought at this time, the barbarians retired to a great distance from the city."


13 "The Emperor Valens arrived at Constantinople on the 30th of May, in the sixth year of his own consulate, and the second of Valentinian the Younger, and found the people in a very dejected state of mind: for the barbarians, who had already desolated Thrace, were now laying waste the very suburbs of Constantinople, there being no adequate force at hand to resist them. But when they undertook to make near approaches, even to the walls of the city, the people became exceedingly troubled, and began to murmur against the emperor; accusing him of having brought on the enemy thither, and then indolently prolonging the struggle there, instead of at once marching..."
The precise nature of the chronological information quoted—the consuls of the year, the dates of Valens' arrival in and departure from Constantinople—suffice to prove that Socrates had access to an authoritative source like the Consularia Constantinopolitana. The real question is whether he combined this with another source, i.e., whether his information concerning the public disturbance in the Hippodrome, for example, came from the same authoritative source as this chronological detail. Next, how did he use his source or sources? His account of the disturbance in the Hippodrome is probably trustworthy in that it seems to be the same incident that Ammianus described as a minor outbreak of popular discontent (31.11.1). His testimony fleshes out this incident in more detail—important because this detail may help explain why Eunapius, followed by Zosimus, wrongly dated the Saracen defense of Constantinople before the battle of Adrianopolis. In fact, there were two popular disturbances at Constantinople, the first during Valens' stay there when he ignored the inhabitants' pleas to arm them, the second after Valens' death when the empress Dominica acceded to their fresh pleas for arms, even paying them as regular soldiers. So one explanation for Eunapius' mistake about the Saracen defense is that he has dated it by one of the popular disturbances there, but wrongly attributed it to the occasion of the first disturbance. This interpretation, however, has Socrates describe

out against the barbarians. Moreover at the exhibition of the sports of the Hippodrome, all with one voice clamored against the emperor's negligence of the public affairs, crying out with great earnestness, 'Give us arms and we ourselves will fight.' The emperor, provoked at these sedulous clamors, marched out of the city on the 11th of June; threatening that if he returned, he would punish the citizens not only for their insolent reproaches, but for having previously favored the pretensions of the usurper Procopius; declaring also that he would utterly demolish their city, and cause the plough to pass over its ruins, he advanced against the barbarians, whom he routed with great slaughter, and pursued as far as Adrianopolis, a city of Thrace, situated on the frontiers of Macedonia (z. Zenos).

Socrates provides direct quotations relevant to events in the Hippodrome on two other occasions (HE 7.22, 23). As similar material does not occur in the Consularia Constantinopolitana, one suspects that he may have had another source specifically for events in the Hippodrome. It may not be irrelevant to his knowledge of, and interest in, the history of the Hippodrome that the judicial records of the eastern provinces had been stored there since the reign of Valens see, in general, C. M. Kelly, "Later Roman Bureaucracy: Going through the Files," in A. K. Bowman and C. Woolf, eds., Literacy and Power in the Ancient World (Cambridge 1994) 161-76.

the disturbance in the Hippodrome as a reaction to the Goths' success in reaching the walls of Constantinople, and would seem to lend some weight to the claim of Eunapius and Zosimus that the Saracens had had to clear Gothic raiders from the environs of Constantinople even before the battle of Adrianopolis. So what do we make of Socrates' evidence in this matter? What was the real cause of the first public disturbance, if not the unexpected appearance of Gothic raiders at the gates of Constantinople?

One could argue that one or two raiders may have slipped past the Roman pickets on the main approach roads at this time, reached the suburbs and panicked the population almost exactly as alleged, and that Socrates, or rather his source, has exaggerated their number. On an alternative argument, there may have been no Gothic raiders at all. Even an empty rumor of such would have sufficed to panic the urban mob. Perhaps some individual Goths still serving in Roman forces at an outpost near the city misled passers-by into thinking that they had witnessed hostile Goths, scouts or some larger force. A more radical reinterpretation of the evidence, however, may be required.

Why accept that the Goths, or the rumor of such, had anything at all to do with the disturbance in the Hippodrome? Clearly Socrates' account is not without errors. His claim that Valens, while leaving, threatened to demolish Constantinople is completely ridiculous—an absurd piece of propaganda that probably originated in a group opposed to the emperor's Arian policies. Nevertheless, Socrates appears to have accepted it at face value. His judgement may have failed him in other details also. In particular, there is a strong possibility that he has inferred the cause of the disturbance in the Hippodrome from the alleged words of the crowd and general political circumstances, rather than that his source specifically reported that Gothic raiders were the cause of it all. A recent work has rightly drawn attention to the ironic nature of the population's protest, "Give us arms and we ourselves will fight." There was hardly a need to arm the people, for the emperor was present with his palatine and other forces. The people were simply protesting

14 The magister Julius had probably not yet carried out his purge of Goths from the remaining eastern forces, but the very fact of this purge suffices to indicate the anti-Gothic panic that seized the East following the disaster at Adrianopolis (Amm. 31.16.8; Zos. 4.26).

15 See A. Cameron, J. Long, and L. Sherry, Barbarians and Politics at the Court of Arcadius (Berkeley 1993: hereafter 'Cameron et al') 209 n.55.
the emperor’s lack of action, and not necessarily because they felt under any immediate threat from the Goths. One suspects rather that they were annoyed at the continued demands of the soldiers who were billeted upon them, and at the shortages in and about Constantinople.19 So they perceived the Roman forces, not the Goths, as an immediate threat to their physical and financial well-being; their raunts to do the fighting if necessary aimed to embarrass the emperor into removing his forces—and their demands—as far from their city and as soon as possible. Little did they know that they would have a real reason to demand arms just over a month later. Socrates, however, wrote with the benefit of hindsight and in the knowledge that Goths really did threaten the city after Adrianopolis; this led him to interpret an ironic demand for arms literally and to infer Gothic raiders.

Although the importance of Socrates’ testimony lies primarily in discerning the date of the Saracen defense of Constantinople, it is also significant because he specifically identifies the origin of these Saracens: they had been sent to Constantinople by their queen, Mavia. Sozomen provides the best account of Mavia’s dealings with the Roman Empire, to be supplemented by other ecclesiastical historians.20 Following the death of her husband, Mavia had led the Saracens in a revolt against the Empire, and had even forced the magister equitum et peditum per Orientem, one Julius apparently, to retreat from a battle that might have ended in a complete rout for the Romans, had not the dux Phoenixes disobeyed orders and used his archers to cover his superior’s retreat. It is difficult to date this war, but it seems likely that it ended not long before Valens set out from Syrian Antioch for Constantinople, i.e., in 377 probably. The war was finally settled by negotiation. The terms of the final settlement do not survive, but Mavia and her followers seem to have done quite well, as the Arian Valens was forced to accept the ordination of the orthodox monk Moses as the bishop for Mavia and her followers, and the magister equitum in praesenti Victor accepted a daughter of Mavia as his wife.

This brings us to the Saracen defenders of Constantinople, usually described as foederati, and there seems no reason to doubt that they served Rome as a result of the final settlement or treaty (foedus) between Valens and Mavia. But foederati, an extremely vague term, indicates neither the status nor the organization of Rome’s new Saracen allies.21 How many Saracen recruits were there? Were they dispersed throughout different units or concentrated in one only? Were these units newly created for this purpose or had they existed earlier? What was the status of these units? Or did these recruits form a group of irregulars, not expected to conform to standard Roman organization or discipline, not part of the army proper, but merely a temporary support rather than a permanent force?

An obvious starting point for any investigation of this matter must be Ammianus’ description of these Saracens in the defense of Constantinople. He refers to them as both a Saracenorum cuneus and an Orientalis turma. Although Ammianus was a former soldier and his work is an important source for military historians, he wrote within a classicizing tradition that discouraged the use of technical vocabulary, military or otherwise.22 Thus he often avoids precise ‘modern’ terms in his description of military units in favor of vaguer classical terms like cuneus and turma here. Although cuneus could be a technical term for a particular type of Late Roman unit,23 the word has a long history24 and Ammianus uses it in an entirely non-

19 H. Elton, Warfare in Roman Europe AD 310-425 (Oxford 1996) 91ff.; rightly emphasizes the difficulty in interpreting any particular use of the term foederati. Nevertheless, he proceeds (93) to include these Saracens in his table of the “foederati regiments in the Roman army,” as if one could easily assume that all, or even most, foederati were constituted into separate units distinct from regular Roman forces. Alternatively, these Saracens are sometimes referred to as auxiliaries: see e.g. N. Lasski, “The Gothic Civil War and the Dace of the Gothic Conversion,” GRBS 36 (1995) 51-87 at 65 n.36. This is no less frustrating a description of these troops than foederati, because it often remains unclear whether it is being used technically to denote membership of an auxilium palatinum, as a synonym for foederati, or in a mistaken belief that their position was similar to that of the auxiliary forces of the principate.


21 E.g. Not. Dig. Or. 39.12-18, 40.11-17, 41.12-19, 42.13-21; Or. 32.22-27, 33.24-28, 34.14f.

22 See R. Grosse, Römische Militärgeschichte (Berlin 1920) 51ff.
technical sense—best seen in its use for barbarian forces, i.e., forces hostile to Rome and unaffected by Roman organization or discipline. Frankish raids in Gaul (17.2.1), for example, or Sarmatians and Quadi along the Danube (17.12.1), Isaurian brigands (19.13.1), Persian troops in the East (24.5.1), as well as Roman forces (17.12.9; 20.11.6). Likewise turma, which Ammianus does not hesitate to apply to both Persian forces (24.6.8; 29.1.3) and Roman (16.1.6; 18.8.2). Hence it is entirely wrong to assume that these terms in reference to Saracens prove anything concerning their organization or status, except that turma confirms that they are cavalry rather than infantry.23

One reason modern commentators are so unwilling to admit that the Saracens were recruited into the Roman army proper, i.e., within existing Roman units alongside recruits of other ethnic or cultural backgrounds, Roman and non-Roman alike, must be Ammianus’ horror story of the Saracen who drank a fallen Goth’s blood. Not only was this a bizarre deed, but Ammianus’ description of the Saracen as naked except for a loincloth does not match expectations of a soldier’s dress, whatever his background, in any regular Roman unit. But Ammianus’ account of the event is inaccurate and biased. His description of the Saracen is merely an ethnic stereotype, also seen in Jerome’s similar description of Saracen raiders who captured a certain Malchus and his party on the road from Beroea to Edessa (Vita Malchi 4). Indeed, Ammianus’ whole account of the Saracen defense of Constantinople has been distorted by his strong prejudice against Saracens (Shahid 239-68)—best revealed by contrasting his account of the Saracen defense of Constantinople with that by Zosimus: Ammianus emphasizes that the Goths and Saracens were evenly matched in battle until that strange deed when a Saracen drank the blood of a Goth; Zosimus depicts the Saracens as clear superiors to the Goths from their first encounter, which forced the Goths to change their tactics in the false hope that this might turn the tide of battle in their favor. So Ammianus credits the Saracen victory to the fact that they were more barbarian even than the barbarian Goths; Zosimus credits their victory to their speed and maneuverability, i.e., their skill in battle. Ammianus’ horror story may even have a basis in fact, but he has put the worst possible interpretation on the evidence. Zosimus specifically records that the Saracens beheaded their victims, so that Ammianus’ account of the Saracen drinking blood from his victim’s throat may be no more than a distortion of a Saracen’s attempt to behead his victim.44 Whatever the case, Ammianus’ dislike of Saracens also appears much earlier when he describes them as desirable neither as friends nor enemies, and summarizes their customs in an inaccurate, unflattering manner (14.4.1-7). Whether Ammianus’ attitude towards Saracens resulted from his experiences during Julian’s Persian expedition in 363, when many Saracens had aligned themselves with the Persians (25.1.3, 6.8f), or from his general military experience in the East, he was undoubtedly prejudiced against them.25 So when we seek to investigate the status of the Saracen defenders of Constantinople in 378, we must be wary of any prejudice concerning their military worth unwittingly absorbed through reading Ammianus.

It is important at this point to inquire about the history of Saracen involvement in the Roman army during the fourth century in the hope that this might shed some light upon the nature of their contribution to the Empire’s defense, in 378 in particular. The Notitia Dignitatum attests a number of Saracen units among the eastern limitanei ca 394. The comes limitis Aegypti had a unit of equites Saraceni Thamudeni at his disposal (Or. 28.17), while the dux Phoenici had two units of equites Saraceni (Or. 32.27f). A Saracen contribution, however, to the mobile forces under the immediate command of a magister militum, i.e., among the palatini or comitatenses, is not attested.

Given the Saracen defense of Constantinople after Adrianopolis, one might expect inclusion of their unit, like others formed in this period, in the Notitia Dignitatum Orientis compiled ca 394. The Tervingi and Visi, for example, auxilia palatina of the two eastern magistri militum praesentales in the Notitia, derived from Gothic groups who participated in Theodosius I’s

24 See A. K. Goldsworthy, The Roman Army at War 100 BC—AD 200 (Oxford 1996) 271-75, for an account of head-hunting by Roman forces during an earlier period, although with too much emphasis on the Celtic origin and nature of this practice. As Caesar, Julian seems to have encouraged head-hunting against German raiders ca 356 (Zos. 3.7.1-5).

25 Given Ammianus’ origin at or near Antioch, some of his friends or relatives may have suffered at the hands of the Saracens, particularly during Mavia’s raids ca 377. See D. Woods, “Maurus, Mavia, and Ammianus,” Mnemosyne, forthcoming.
382 settlement with the Goths (Not. Dig. Or. 5.61, 6.61; Heather 162). Indeed, many units whose positions in the Notitia reveal their formation about the time of the Gothic war 376–382 retained their ethnic titles. So if Valens had raised a unit of Saracens for his mobile forces during his Gothic war, then the Notitia might attest such a unit. But its absence provides good reason to doubt that the defenders of Constantinople had formed a completely new unit rather than being assigned to one or more pre-existing units.

The alternative suggestion, of course, is that the defenders of Constantinople were limitanei, temporarily assigned to the mobile forces for the duration of the Gothic emergency, who returned to their relevant station in the East after the settlement of 382. This remains possible, although Saracens had never been called upon in this way earlier (so far as known), not even during Constantius II’s campaigns against western rivals. One suspects that the Saracens were recognized as specialist desert warriors whose expertise would have been wasted in the very different terrain of continental Europe, and that they were the last troops upon whom any emperor would have called as reinforcements for a western theater of operations, given that some troops had always to be left in the East because of the continued Persian threat. This is not to ignore that eastern peoples and units had been regularly transferred throughout the empire during earlier centuries, but the new distinction between comitatenses and limitanei meant that those in a position to do so would inevitably try to negotiate service in one branch rather than the other. Given their position on the borderlands between the Roman and Persian empires, the wastelands where neither empire exercised complete control, no people were in a better position to do this than the Saracens. The reluctance to leave their native lands for prolonged service overseas, which played so large a part in encouraging his Gallic troops to hail Julian as Augustus in early 360, was hardly unique to these troops. Of particular relevance is Julian’s objection to Constantius II’s demand to send more of his troops eastwards:

\[\text{Not. Dig. Or. 5.58f}^{28} (\text{Raetian, Anglevani, Aileri}), 6.58f^{29} (\text{Bacincobari, Falcondari, Thraceni}).\]

\[\text{E.g. cohorts I milliaria Hemeserorum at Intericia in Pannonia, cohorts I Hamiorum sagittariorum at Carvona in Britain.}\]

\[\text{Amm. 20.4.10, 16, 8.8. Note also the large number of desertions from units that the comes domesticorum Richomeris transferred from Gaul to Thrace in 377 (Amm. 31.7.4).}\]

many of them were trans-Rhenane volunteers who had been promised that they would never be transferred beyond the Alps (Amm. 20.4.4). There seems no reason why many Saracens should not have been able to extract similar promises. So it is no surprise that the only known Saracen contribution to a mobile Roman force was during Julian’s Persian expedition in 363, when Julian passed through the very territories they ruled and Roman limitanei also were called upon for support. Finally, one should not forget that Socrates specifically states that the Saracens defenders of Constantinople were few in number, so few that they had to be reinforced by arming some civilians. This is all very vague, but it does provide grounds for believing that the Saracens may have formed only part of a cavalry unit rather than a full unit.

From another perspective, which troops would Valens most likely have left to garrison his capital, in part at least, after he set out against the Goths with the main body of his troops? The scholae palatinae, the units of the imperial bodyguard, spring to mind immediately. They had a long association with the eastern capital. At least two units had been entitled to receive antonina civica at Constantinople since the time of Constantine I, and Constantine’s extended presence there during his last years suggests that barracks should have been arranged to accommodate some scholarii from this early date. Many scholarii must have been accommodated within the city-walls, for the scholae palatinae certainly played a key role in defending their capital (and their emperor) from the rebel Goth Gainas in 400 (Cameron et al. 207–17). The evidence is scanty, and there can be no absolute proof that Constantinople had a permanent garrison of scholarii, or that scholarii remained there in the absence of the emperor. But Valens had already had his fingers burned earlier: the usurper Procopius had been declared emperor in Constantinople in 30 The Notitia of ca. 394 lists seven scholae under the command of the dux magister officiorum (Or. 11.4–10), but their number varied between five ca. 364 and eight ca. 425; see my “The Scholae Palatinae and the Notitia Dignitatum,” JRomMilitEqUpSt 7 (1996) forthcoming.

21 Cod. Theod. 14.17.9 (26 July 389): Antoninas civicas in urbe Constantinopolitanae, schola scutariorum et scutariorum elenchariorum divi Constantini ad aevaria liberalitatis meritis, possibly referring to three scholae with this privilege: schola scutariorum prima et secunda (Not. Dig. Or. 11.40), as well as schola scutariorum elenchariorum (11.8).
tinople on 28 September 365 when he had won over two palatine legions, the Divitenses Juniores and the Tungricii Juniores, which had happened to be in the capital for two days during their journey from Asia to the Danube frontier (Amm. 26.6.12-18). Procopius’ success—he met no armed resistance—suggests the absence of a permanent unit of scholarii i in the city at that time. But his success may also have convinced Valens of the need for such a garrison in the future. Whatever the case, it is somewhat misleading to focus on the person of the emperor in this instance, to the neglect of others of the imperial family. Socrates’ testimony reveals that the empress Dominica, Valens’ wife, was present during the Saracen defense of Constantinople. Presumably her husband had left her there for her own safety when he had finally set out against the Goths. It is not an unreasonable assumption that her escort included scholarii for both her personal protection and that of her entourage. And as none of the varied sources for the Saracen defense of Constantinople describes the separate participation of scholarii, an obvious inference is that these Saracens were scholarii and members of Dominica’s escort.

So why not identify the Saracen defenders of Constantinople as scholarii? After all, they were, like the scholarii, cavalry. Perhaps modern commentators have shied away from this identification—apart from Ammianus’ prejudiced description of the Saracens—because Germanic or Gothic influences on the late Roman army have received too much emphasis. Yet the evidence for recruitment into the schoolae in particular should not be anachronistically applied, such as the facile assumption that the ethnic or cultural mix in the schoolae remained constant throughout the fourth century, or was the same in both halves of the Empire. Much of the most colorful and often-quoted evidence in this matter pertains to the period 382-402, after the Gothic settlement of 382 until shortly after Gainas’ revolt in 400, when Gothic or German influence in the East peaked. Yet the situation that had confronted Valens throughout most of his reign had been very different. Since the division of the Empire between himself and his brother Valentinian in 364, he had been cut off from the manpower resources of the Rhine and upper Danube regions. On the lower Danube he had been in continuous conflict with his Gothic neighbors from his accession in 364 until the treaty of 369, which then had weakened Gothic obligations towards their Roman neighbor. So Valens was increasingly forced to turn towards his eastern borderlands for fresh troops for all branches of service. His situation foreshadowed that of the fifth century, when Armenians and Isaurians predominated in the armed forces to such an extent that it was later claimed (Procop. Anecd. 24.15 ff.) that the schoolae palatinae had consisted entirely of Armenians by the reign of Zeno (474-491). In this instance, Valens’ recruitment of Saracens to the schoolae palatinae should be compared to his recruitment of Iberians to the same branch of service. The tribute of the schoola scutatoriorum sagittarius at Adrianopolis was an Iberian prince Bacurius (Amm. 31.12.15). Later evidence suggests a special association between the ruling dynasty of Iberia and this unit, probably created as recently as ca 370 to provide honorable service for the hostages Valens had detained following his settlement of the Iberian crisis in that year. Valens’ treaty with Mavia and her Saracens may have stipulated similar conditions such as the surrender of certain nobles, among others, for service in the schoolae palatinae, hostages in fact.

I argue, therefore, that the Saracens who defended Constantinople in 378 were scholarii, probably members of the empress Dominica’s escort. They had remained in Constantinople from 30 May, the date of Valens’ arrival with his wife. This is not to claim that Dominica’s escort consisted solely of Saracens, merely that they were the part of her escort designated to rally forth against the Gothic raiders who approached the city. In describing the defense of Constantinople, Ammianus states that the Saracens had only recently been summoned there (recens illuc accersitus)—an extremely vague statement, which does not relate who had summoned them, nor whence and when they

22 That empresses retained military escorts is generally agreed: e.g. K. G. Holm, Theodotian Empresses (Berkeley 1982) 25 ff; see also Jull. Ep. ad Ath. 285b; Soc. HE 5.11; Theod. HE 5.14.
23 E.g. B. T. Frank, Scholae Palatinae: The Palace Guards of the Later Roman Empire (=PAAR 23 [Rome 1989]) 59, claims that “During the fourth century most of the scholarii were Germans, and this was especially true of the enlisted men”—a widely repeated view (e.g. R. MacMullen, Corruption and the Decline of Rome [New Haven 1988] 201), although challenged recently by Elton (Journal of Roman Studies 79 [1989] 111 ff.)

24 The writings of Synesius of Cyrene have proven very influential, especially De regno 12, in general see P. Heather, “The Anti-Scythian Trade of Synesius De Regno,” Phoenix 42 (1988) 152-72.
had been summoned. Most importantly, however, Ammianus does not claim that they were the only forces summoned. Hence I believe that Ammianus refers here, in a rather casual fashion, to the fact that the Saracens were members of Valens’s train when he arrived in Constantinople on 30 May, after he was himself summoned to his capital not only by his senior officials, military and civilian alike, but also by the very urgency of the situation. No other interpretation fits the political circumstances and the relevant time scale. The Goths reached Constantinople only days after the battle of Adrianopolis, so the authorities had insufficient time to send for reinforcements and for refor-
crements, unless at scattered outposts within the immediate vicinity, to reach the city. But why would Valens have left such forces to his rear when he marched against enemies whose great strength lay in their sheer numbers? Nor does it convince that Mavia had originally sent her Saracens to join the main body of Roman forces under Valens, but that they had arrived too late for the battle. This suggests Valens’s lack of organization or a measure of freedom on Mavia’s part, neither of which seems plausible given the length of time that Valens had carried at Antioch and his determination there to settle affairs in the East before returning to deal with the Goths.

Shahid prefers another interpretation: the Saracens defenders of Constantinople were survivors from the battle of Adrianopolis. Yet it is difficult to understand why other survivors should not have made it back to Constantinople, not just the Saracens. Where were these other survivors? Not only might one expect Ammianus to mention survivors from Adrianopolis contributing to the defense of Constantinople, but Domitica’s need to arm civilians for the city’s defense raises further suspicions concerning this interpretation. After all, even a fraction of the third of the Roman army alleged to have survived Adrianopolis should have sufficed to defend Constantinople without recourse to so desperate a measure. But the survivors of Adrianopolis made for the nearest walled strong points, like the town of Adrianopolis, and were then left in the rear of the main Gothic forces who, unable to storm walls and unwilling to mount long sieges, decided to maintain their March towards Constantinople. The Goths no doubt hoped not only for rich pickings along the way, but also to surprise a poorly garrisoned city long unaccustomed to defending herself. The Roman forces left in their wake then used the opportunity provided by the Goths’ advance to retreat westwards, in hope of linking up with Gratian’s forces, whose imminent arrival had been promised even before the battle of Adrianopolis (Amm. 31.16.2; Zos. 4.24.3.).

A final point concerns the identity of the schola of these Saracens. If we assume six scholae palatinae in the East ca 378, then Zosimus’ evidence on the speed and maneuverability of the Saracens’ horses rules out the schola scutarium clibanarium, and his view that they fought with lances combines with Ammianus on Bacurius’ command of the schola scutarium sagittarium at Adrianopolis to eliminate their membership in this unit. Indeed, the probability that the volunteers whom Domi-
ica raised were archers reinforces this point. So the Saracens

36 Shahid (181 n.152) emphasizes Ammianus’ recens to describe the arrival of the Saracens at Constantinople, as if it were best suited for an event during a preceding period of days only—thus supporting his theory that the Saracens had returned to Constantinople in the few days between the battle of Adrianopolis and the Gothic attack on Constantinople. Ammianus, however, also uses recens for two cavalry units summoned from Illyricum to Mesopotamia ca 359 (18.8.2; ad subiendum Mesopotamiae recens ex Illyricum missus)—a journey of several weeks at best. So he does not use recens in as limited a manner as Shahid requires.


38 Shahid 181ff, who even claims (182 n.155) that the participation of the magister Victor in the battle “could also argue for the participation of the Saracens, now his in-laws,” and that Victor “is not likely to have left them [the Saracens] behind to perform garrison duty in Constantinople; rather he would have taken them along with him to engage in field operations and active combat.” But if there was such a close association between Victor and the Saracens, why did Victor flee towards Macedonia and the West (Zos. 4.24.3) while the Saracens ended up in Constantinople?

39 Amm. 31.13.18. The estimates of survivors vary: Heather (147) and Burns (supra n. 31ff) say 5,000–8,000.

40 Although the Notitia lists seven eastern scholae ca 394 (Or. 11.4–10), I follow D. Hoffmann, Das spätromische Bevölkungsbild und die Notitia Dignitatum (Düsseldorf 1969) 294, in interpreting the schola gentilium seniorum (Or. 11.6) as a late transfer from West to East.

41 The segestarii Dominiti (Not. Dig. Or. 6.56) seem to have been named after Dominita, so one assumes that it was formed of the volunteers raised for the defense of Constantinople. This is the only occurrence of Dominita in the Notitia—an argument against its interpretation as an adjective ("of the Lord"), as occasionally in inscriptions: see e.g. M. P. Speidel, "Maxentius’ Praetorians," MEFRA 100 (1988) 183–86. Although naming a unit after an emperor was unusual, so were the circumstances: there was no obvious alternative (or objection) during the interregnum between Valens’ death and Theodosius I’s accession on 19 January 379.
belong to one, at least, of the schola scutariorum prima or secunda, the schola armaturarum inuniors, and the schola gentilium inuniors. Unfortunately, this is as far as present evidence on the movements and activities of the eastern scholae at this period permit us to go.

In conclusion, the Saracen defenders of Constantinople in 378 chanced to be there simply because they belonged to the empress Dominica's escort. They were not bloodthirsty savages only recently assembled as a temporary, anonymous unit of foederati to fight the Goths, but members of the elite scholae palatinae. The absence of a Saracen known to have risen through the ranks to magister militum or another senior post during the subsequent period proves not so much that the Saracens had not been privileged with membership of this elite, but that the changing tides of political fortune had turned against them. Their lack of advancement up the military hierarchy was surely due, in part at least, to the increased competition for rank and privilege from the Gothic nobles who poured into the system after the Gothic settlement of 382. Nor can the breakdown ca 383 of the treaty, which had seen their acceptance within the scholae only a few years earlier, have contributed much to their further promotion or continued presence within this elite, although to what extent the increased Gothic competition for

42 Note that Nevitta, tribune of the schola armaturarum, probably commanded the escort of Eusebia, Julian's wife, during her trip to her husband's court in early 360: see D. Woods, "Ammianus and Some Tribuni Scholae Palatinarum," CQ 47 (1997) 269-91 at 287.

43 Recently, M. P. Speidel, "Sebastian's Strike Force at Adrianople," Klio 78 (1996) 434-37, has argued that shortly before the battle of Adrianople the scholae were each divided between Valens and his general Sebastianus so that the latter received a little over half of their total number. Unfortunately, this argument rests on a number of misconceptions, not least of which is that Europius' duxes for Sebastianus' men (fr. 44.8 Blockley) is a translation of scutarii (436 n.5). Again, although the precedents quoted (436 n.7) do prove that senior military commanders did sometimes lead scholae in the field, there is no evidence that these were detachments of scholae rather than complete units. In other words, the detachments composing Sebastianus' force cannot have been fragments of scholae. Most importantly, it is arguable that Ammianus and Zosimus, or a common source perhaps, have each misunderstood a description of Sebastianus' career, which began with his promotion by Valens at Constantinople in early June 378, but proceeded then to describe the achievements that led to his promotion, so that they have misdated Sebastianus' victories over the Goths to the period after his arrival at Valens' court rather than before. In brief, it is arguable that Sebastianus received his strike-force from Gratian, not Valens: see D. Woods, "The Role of Sebastianus against the Goths in 378," forthcoming.

44 The breakdown of the treaty is attested only by Pan. Lat. 2 (12) 223. I tend to agree with Shahid (203-21), who explains this event in terms of the rivalry between Goths and Saracens, although he exaggerates the significance of the religious differences between "Arian Goths" and "good orthodox Saracens."