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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 Constantinopolim, copiarum cumulis inhiantes amplissimis, formas quadratorum agminium insidiarum metu servantes, ire ocus festinabant, multa in exitium urbis incidebat moliri. Quos inferentes sese immodice, obicesque portarum paene pulantes, hoc casu caeleste reppulit numen. Saracenorum cuneus (super quorum origine moribusque diversis in locis retulimus plura), ad furi amagis expeditiones rum, quam ad concussatorias habilis pugnas, recens illuc accesit, congressurus barbarorum globo repente specto, a civitate fidenter erupit, diuque extento certamine pertinaci, aequis partes dicerere momentis. Sed orientalis turma novo neque ante viso superavit eventu. Ex ea enim crinitus quidam, nudus omnium praesentium labore, subvaicum et lugubre strepens, educet pusione, agmini se medio Gothorum inseritis et interfici hostis lugulo labra admovit, effusumque cruentum exsuxit. Quo monstruo miraculo barbari remissi, postea non ferocientes ex mor, cum in tendum appetebat aliquid, sed ambiguis gressibus incedebant.1

1 From there [Perinthus] they [the Goths] hastened in rapid march to Constantinople, greedy for its vast heaps of treasure, marshaling 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 horde 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 out
That Saracen troops played a key rôle in the defense of Constantinople in 379 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 (4.22.1 ff Paschoud):

"... and thus the blood that poured out..."

... tempted him by offering the spoils of Constantinople. The most notable of these was a large quantity of gold and silver, together with many other valuable objects. The Saracens were thus able to capture the city and to plunder it extensively."

Zosimus very closely follows his late fourth-century source, Eunapius (fr. 4 Blockley), and sets the Saracens' defense of Constantinople before the battle of Adrianopolis. This contradicts Ammianus, who sees their defense of Constantinople after this battle. So when did it occur? It is generally accepted that Ammianus and Zosimus describe the same engagement, but that one of them has misplaced it within his narrative, and Ammianus' account is usually preferred to that of Zosimus.3 Shahid has argued, however, that they really describe two different engagements, i.e., two Saracen defenses of Constantinople, one before the battle of Adrianopolis, the second after, but his arguments are unconvincing and occur in a work otherwise marred by a determination to discover references to Saracens where none in fact exist.4 His interpretation of the evidence is disconcerting not least because it requires that Ammianus and Zosimus are both mistaken, that each has omitted one of the two alleged defenses of Constantinople, rather than that one alone errs. Further, no ancient source actually supports his thesis of two Saracen defenses. Consequently, a brief response to his argu-

- 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 T. S. Burns, Barbarians within the Gates of Rome: A Study of Roman Military Policy and the Barbarians (1994) 286, 34, seem also to accept two Saracen defenses of Constantinople, although they do not explain their arguments. If I seem to single out Shahid for disapproval, this is because his is by far the most comprehensive account of the relevant issues, and he always makes his assumptions or arguments explicit in a refreshingly honest and open way.

2 "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, andimpaling the strangling 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 counterattack the Saracens by ambushing, 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 around the 498-500. 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 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 360 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 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 Adrianople, 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 scolae palatinae and the vexillations palatinae, not to mention those mobile units ranking as comitatenses 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 See J. Matthews, The Roman Empire of Ammianus (London 1989) 8-17.

9 For a list of Zosimus’ geographical errors, see Ridley (supra n.5) 296f.
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, confirmsthat 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):

The barbarians retired to a great distance from the city" (tr. A. C. Zeno, in Socrates, Sozomenus, Church Histories [= Nicetus-Nicetas] Str. 2 2 [New York 1890]) 1176; Greek text: R. Husey [Oxford 1853] 567ff.

13 The Emperor Valens arrived at Constantinople on the 20th of May, in the sixth year of his own consulate, and the second of Valentinian the Younger, and found the people in a very deserted state of mind: for the barbarians, who had already devoured Thrace, were now laying waste the very suburbs of Constantinople, there being no adequate force at hand to resist them. But when they understood 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 unhappy disaster, and then industriously 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 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 outward 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 seditious 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 it ruins, he advanced against the barbarians, whom he pursued with great slaughter, and pursued as far as Adrianopolis, a city of Thrace, situated on the frontiers of Macedonia" (cf. Zosim).

14 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 praetorian prefect 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 G. Woolf, eds., Literacy and Power in the Ancient World (Cambridge 1994) 161-76.

15 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. 4.266).

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. So they perceived the Roman forces, not the Goths, as an immediate threat to their physical and financial well-being; their reasons to do the fighting if necessary to be 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. Following the death of her husband, Mavia had led the Saracen army in revolt against the Empire, and had even forced the magister equitum et peditus 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 Syria 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 foederarii, 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 foederarii, an extremely vague term, indicates neither the status nor the organization of Rome's new Saracen allies. 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. Thus he often avoids precise 'modern' terms in his description of military units in favor of vague classical terms like cuneus and turma here. Although cuneus could be a technical term for a particular type of Late Roman unit, the word has a long history and Ammianus uses it in an entirely non-
technical sense—best seen in its use for barbarian forces, i.e., forces hostile to Rome and unaffected by Roman organization or discipline: Frankish raiders 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 (16.1.16; 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 Malchii 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.4 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, 6.8ff), 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 duas Phoenixes 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 composed 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

23 Shahid (e.g. 177, 179, 253 n.48, 535) places undue emphasis on Ammianus’ terms, which he interprets as if they were technical military terms, i.e., as if cuneus could only be used to refer to a particular wedge-shaped formation unique to the Romans and turma only to refer to a subdivision of an ala or other cavalry unit.

24 See A. K. Goldsworthy, The Roman Army at War 100 BC–AD 200 (Oxford 1996) 271–75, for an account of headhunting 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 headhunting 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 1625). 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:

21 Amm. 20.4.10, 16, 8.8. Note also the large number of desertions from units that the comes domesticorum Richomeres 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 Saracen 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 annona 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 scholarios from this early date. Many scholarios 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 scholarios, or that scholarios 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.

22 (11.8).
tinople on 28 September 365 when he had won over two pala­
line legions, the Divienses Juniores and the Tungricani Juni­
ores, which had happened to be in the capital for two days
during their journey from Asia to the Danube frontier (Amm.
suggests the absence of a permanent unit of scholarii 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 unrea­
sonable 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 Constan­
tinople describes the separate participation of scholarii, an obvi­
ous 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. Per­
haps modern commentators have shied away from this identi­
fication—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 evi­
dence for recruitment into the scholae in particular should not
be anachronistically applied, such as the facile assumption that
the ethnic or cultural mix in the scholae 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 contin­
uous conflict with his Gothic neighbors from his accession in 364
until the treaty of 369, which then had weakened Gothic obliga­
tions towards their Roman neighbor. So Valens was increas­
ingly 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 predo­
ninated in the armed forces to such an extent that it was later
claimed (Procop. Anecd. 24.15ff) that the scholae palatinae
had consisted entirely of Armenians by the reign of Zeno (474-491).
In this instance, Valens' recruitment of Saracens to the scholae
palatinae should be compared to his recruitment of Iberians to
the same branch of service. The tribute of the schola séculoy­
orum sagittariorum at Adrianopolis was an Iberian prince Ba­
curius (Amm. 31.12.16). Later evidence suggests a special associ­
ation between the ruling dynasty of Iberia and this unit, prob­
bly 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 sur­
render of certain nobles, among others, for service in the scholae palatinae, hostages in fact.

I argue, therefore, that the Saracens who defended Constan­
tinople 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 tally
forth as 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
illus 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, Theodosian Empresses (Berkeley 1982) 25f; see also Jul. Ep. ad Ath.
285b; Soc. HE 5.11; Thed. HE 5.13.
23 E.g. R. I. 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 uninitiated men"—widely repeated view (e.g. R. Machmuller, Corruption
and the Decline of Rome [New Haven 1988] 201), although challenged
recently by Elton (Arora 379). 121.
24 The writings of Synesius of Cyr�除有 proven very influential, especialy
De regno 2; in general see P. Heather, "The Anti-Scythian Tide of Synesius'
25 See D. Woods, "Subarmachius, Bacurius, and the Schola Scutori­
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 reinforcements, 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’ 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 matters in the East before returning to deal with the Goths.

Sahid 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

Sahid (181 n.152) emphasizes Ammianus’ recent 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 recent for two cavalry units summoned from Illyricum to Mesopotamia ca 359 (18.8: 359; ad subodium Mesopotamiae recent ex Illyrico missi)—a journey of several weeks at best. So he does not use recent in as limited a manner as Sahid requires.


37 Sahid (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?

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

39 The segesser Dominici (Not. Dig. Or. 6.56) seem to have been named after Dominica, so one assumes that it was formed of the volunteers raised for the defense of Constantinople. This is the only occurrence of Dominici 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 empress was unusual, so were the circumstances: there was no obvious alternative (or objection) during the interregnum between Valens’ death and Theodotius’ accession on 19 January 379.
belong to one, at least, of the schola scutariarum prima or secunda, the schola armaturarum inuniors, and the schola gentilium inuitori. Unfortunately, this is as far as present evidence on the movements and activities of the eastern scholae at this period permit us to go.\(^a\)

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 of this 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

\(^a\) 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 Scholarii Palatinorum," CQ 47 (1997) 269-91 at 287.

\(^b\) Recently, M. P. Speidel, "Sebastian's Strike Force at Adrianopolis," Klio 78 (1996) 434-37, has argued that shortly before the battle of Adrianopolis 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 misconception, not least of which is that Eusebius' detaits for Sebastianus' men (fr. 44.8 Blockley) is a translation of scripta (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.

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."