The Franj Arrive

In that year, news began to trickle in about the appearance of Franj troops, coming down from the Sea of Marmara in an innumerable multitude. People took fright. This information was confirmed by King Kilij Arslan, whose territory was closest to these Franj.

The King Kilij Arslan whom Ibn al-Qalānīsī mentions here was not yet seventeen when the invaders arrived. The first Muslim leader to be informed of their approach, this young Turkish sultan with the slightly slanting eyes would be the first to inflict a defeat upon them—but also the first to be routed by the formidable knights.

In July 1096 Kilij Arslan learned that an enormous throng of Franj was en route to Constantinople. He immediately feared the worst. Naturally, he had no idea as to the real aims of these people, but in his view nothing good could come of their arrival in the Orient.

The sultanate under his rule covered much of Asia Minor, a territory the Turks had only recently taken from the Greeks. Kilij Arslan’s father, Suleymān, was the first Turk to secure possession of this land, which many centuries later would come to be called Turkey. In Nicaea, the capital of this young Muslim state, Byzantine churches were still more numerous than Muslim mosques. Although the city’s garrison was made up of Turkish cavalry, the majority of the population was Greek, and Kilij Arslan had few illusions about his subjects’ true sentiments: as far as they were concerned, he would never be other than a barbarian chieftain. The only sovereign they recognized—the man whose name, spoken in a low whisper, was murmured in all their prayers—was the basileus
Alexius Comnenus, ‘Emperor of the Romans’. Alexius was in fact the emperor of the Greeks, who proclaimed themselves the inheritors of the Roman empire. The Arabs, indeed, recognized them as such, for in the eleventh century—as in the twentieth—they designated the Greeks by the term Rûm, or ‘Romans’. The domain conquered from the Greek empire by Kilij Arslan’s father was even called the Sultanate of the Rûm.

Alexius was one of the most prestigious figures of the Orient at the time. Kilij Arslan was genuinely fascinated by this short-statured quinquagenarian, always decked in gold and in rich blue robes, with his carefully tended beard, elegant manners, and eyes sparkling with malice. Alexius reigned in Constantinople, fabled Byzantium, situated less than three days’ march from Nicaea. This proximity aroused conflicting emotions in the mind of the young sultan. Like all nomadic warriors, he dreamed of conquest and pillage, and was not displeased to find the legendary riches of Byzantium so close at hand. At the same time he felt threatened: he knew that Alexius had never abandoned his dream of retaking Nicaea, not only because the city had always been Greek, but also and more importantly because the presence of Turkish warriors such a short distance from Constantinople represented a permanent threat to the security of the empire.

Although the Byzantine army, torn by years of internal crisis, would have been unable to undertake a war of reconquest on its own, it was no secret that Alexius could always seek the aid of foreign auxiliaries. The Byzantines had never hesitated to resort to the services of Western knights. Many Franj, from heavily armoured mercenaries to pilgrims en route to Palestine, had visited the Orient, and by 1096 they were by no means unknown to the Muslims. Some twenty years earlier—Kilij Arslan had not yet been born, but the older emirs in his army had told him the story—one of these fair-haired adventurers, a man named Roussel of Bailleul, had succeeded in founding an autonomous state in Asia Minor and had even marched on Constantinople. The panicky Byzantines had had no choice but to appeal to Kilij Arslan’s father, who could hardly believe his ears when a special envoy from the basileus implored him to rush to their aid. The Turkish cavalry converged on Constantinople and managed to defeat Roussel; Süleyman received handsome compensation in the form of gold, horses, and land.

The Byzantines had been suspicious of the Franj ever since, but the imperial armies, short of experienced soldiers, had no choice but to recruit mercenaries, and not only Franj: many Turkish warriors also fought under the banners of the Christian empire. It was precisely from his congeners enrolled in the Byzantine army that Kilij Arslan learned, in July 1096, that thousands of Franj were approaching Constantinople. He was perplexed by the picture painted by his informants. These Occidentals bore scant resemblance to the mercenaries to whom the Turks were accustomed. Although their number included several hundred knights and a significant number of foot-soldiers, there were also thousands of women, children, and old people in rags. They had the air of some wretched tribe evicted from their lands by an invader. It was also reported that they all wore strips of cloth in the shape of a cross, sewn onto the backs of their garments.

The young sultan, who doubtless found it difficult to assess the danger, asked his agents to be especially vigilant and to keep him informed of the exploits of these new invaders. He had the fortifications of his capital inspected as a precaution. The walls of Nicaea, more than a farsakh (six thousand metres) in length, were topped by 240 turrets. South-west of the city, the placid waters of the Ascanian Lake offered excellent natural protection.

Nevertheless by early August the serious nature of the threat had become clear. Escorted by Byzantine ships, the Franj crossed the Bosporus and, despite a blazing summer sun, advanced along the coast. Wherever they passed, they were heard to proclaim that they had come to exterminate the Muslims, although they were also seen to plunder many a Greek church on their way. Their chief was said to be a hermit by the name of Peter. Informants estimated that there were several tens of thousands of them in all, but no one would hazard a guess as to where they were headed. It seemed that Basileus Alexius had decided to settle them in Civitot, a camp that had earlier been equipped for other mercenaries, less than a day’s march from Nicaea.

The sultan’s palace was awash with agitation. While the Turkish cavalry stood ready to mount their chargers at a moment’s notice, there was a constant flow of spies and scouts, reporting the smallest movements of the Franj. It transpired that every morning hordes several thousand strong left camp to forage the surrounding
countryside: farms were plundered or set alight before the rabble returned to Civitot, where their various clans squabbled over the spoils of their raids. None of this was surprising to the sultan’s soldiers, and their master saw no reason for particular concern. The routine continued for an entire month.

One day, however, toward the middle of September, there was a sudden change in the behaviour of the Franj. Probably because they were unable to squeeze anything more out of the immediate neighbourhood, they had reportedly set out in the direction of Nicæa. They passed through several villages, all of them Christian, and commandeered the harvests, which had just been gathered, mercilessly massacring those peasants who tried to resist. Young children were even said to have been burned alive.

Kiliç Arslan found himself taken unawares. By the time the news of these events reached him, the attackers were already at the walls of his capital, and before sunset the citizens could see the smoke rising from the first fires. The sultan quickly dispatched a cavalry patrol to confront the Franj. Hopelessly outnumbered, the Turks were cut to pieces. A few bloodied survivors limped back into Nicæa. Sensing that his prestige was threatened, Kiliç Arslan would have liked to join the battle immediately, but the emirs of his army dissuaded him. It would soon be night, and the Franj were already hastily falling back to their camp. Revenge would have to wait.

But not for long. Apparently emboldened by their success, the Occidentals decided to try again two weeks later. This time the son of Süleyman was alerted in time, and he followed their advance step by step. A Frankish company, including some knights but consisting mainly of thousands of tattered pillagers, set out apparently for Nicæa. But then, circling around the town, they turned east and took the fortress of Xerigordon by surprise.

The young sultan decided to act. At the head of his men, he rode briskly towards the small stronghold, where the drunken Franj, celebrating their victory, had no way of knowing that their fate was already sealed, for Xerigordon was a trap. As the soldiers of Kiliç Arslan well knew (but the inexperienced foreigners had yet to discover), its water supplies lay outside and rather far from the walls. The Turks quickly sealed off access to the water. Now they had only to take up positions around the fortress and sit and wait. Thirst would do the fighting in their stead.

An atrocious torment began for the besieged Franj. They went so far as to drink the blood of their mounts and their own urine. They were seen looking desperately up into the sky, hoping for a few drops of rain in those early October days. In vain. At the end of the week, the leader of the expedition, a knight named Reynald, agreed to capitulate provided his life would be spared. Kiliç Arslan, who had demanded that the Franj publicly renounce their religion, was somewhat taken aback when Reynald declared his readiness not only to convert to Islam but even to fight at the side of the Turks against his own companions. Several of his friends, who had acceded to the same demands, were sent in captivity to various cities of Syria or central Asia. The rest were put to the sword.

The young sultan was proud of his exploit, but he kept a cool head. After according his men a respite for the traditional sharing out of the spoils, he called them to order the following day. The Franj had admittedly lost nearly six thousand men, but six times that number still remained, and the time to dispose of them was now or never. Kiliç Arslan decided to attempt a ruse. He sent two Greek spies to the Civitot camp to report that Reynald’s men were in an excellent position, and that they had succeeded in taking Nicæa itself, whose riches they had no intention of sharing with their coreligionists. In the meantime, the Turkish army would lay a gigantic ambush.

As expected, the carefully propagated rumours aroused turmoil in the camp at Civitot. A mob gathered, shouting insults against Reynald and his men; it was decided to proceed without delay to share in the pillage of Nicæa. But all at once, no one really knows how, an escapee from the Xerigordon expedition arrived, divulging the truth about his companions’ fate. Kiliç Arslan’s spies thought that they had failed in their mission, for the wisest among the Franj counselled caution. Once the first moment of consternation had passed, however, excitement soared anew. The mob bustled and shouted; they were ready to set out in a trice, no longer to join in pillage, but ‘to avenge the martyrs’. Those who hesitated were dismissed as cowards. The most enraged voices carried the day, and the time of departure was set for the following morning. The sultan’s spies, whose ruse had been exposed but its objective attained, had triumphed after all. They sent word to their master to prepare for battle.
At dawn on 21 October 1096 the Occidentals left their camp. Kilij Arslan, who had spent the night in the hills near Civitat, was not far away. His men were in position, well hidden. From his vantage point, he could see all along the column of Franj, who were raising great clouds of dust. Several hundred knights, most of them without their armour, marched at the head of the procession, followed by a disordered throng of foot-soldiers. They had been marching for less than an hour when the sultan heard their approaching clamour. The sun, rising at his back, shone directly into the eyes of the Franj. Holding his breath, he signalled his emirs to get ready. The fateful moment had arrived. A barely perceptible gesture, a few orders whispered here and there, and the Turkish archers were slowly bending their bows: a thousand arrows suddenly shot forth with a single protracted whistle. Most of the knights fell within the first few minutes. Then the foot-soldiers were decimated in their turn.

By the time the hand-to-hand combat was joined, the Franj were already routed. Those in the rear ran for their camp, where the non-combatants were barely awake. An aged priest was celebrating morning mass, the women were preparing food. The arrival of the fugitives, with the Turks in hot pursuit, struck terror throughout the camp. The Franj fled in all directions. Those who tried to reach the neighbouring woods were soon captured. Others, in an inspired move, barricaded themselves in an unused fortress that had the additional advantage of lying alongside the sea. Unwilling to take futile risks, the sultan decided not to lay a siege. The Byzantine fleet, rapidly alerted, sailed in to pick up the Franj. Two or three thousand men escaped in this manner. Peter the Hermit, who had been in Constantinople for several days, was also saved. But his partisans were not so lucky. The youngest women were kidnapped by the sultan's horsemen and distributed to the emirs or sold in the slave markets. Several young boys suffered a similar fate. The rest of the Franj, probably nearly twenty thousand of them, were exterminated.

Kilij Arslan was jubilant. He had annihilated the Frankish army, in spite of its formidable reputation, while suffering only insignificant losses among his own troops. Gazing upon the immense booty amassed at his feet, he basked in the most sublime triumph of his life.

And yet, rarely in history has a victory proved so costly to those who had won it.

Intoxicated by his success, Kilij Arslan pointedly ignored the information that came through the following winter about the arrival of fresh groups of Franj in Constantinople. As far as he was concerned—and even the wisest of his emirs did not dissent—there was no reason for disquiet. If other mercenaries of Alexius dared to cross the Bosporus, they would be cut to pieces like those who had come before them. The sultan felt that it was time to return to the major preoccupations of the hour—in other words, to the merciless struggle he had long been waging against the other Turkish princes, his neighbours. It was there, and nowhere else, that his fate and that of his realm would be decided. The clashes with the Rûm or with their foreign Franj auxiliaries would never be more than an interlude.

The young sultan was well placed to feel certain about this. Was it not during one of these interminable battles among chiefs that his father, Sûleyman, had laid down his life in 1086? Kilij Arslan was then barely seven years old, and he was to have succeeded his father under the regency of several faithful emirs. But he had been kept from power and taken to Persia under the pretext that his life was in danger. There he was kept: adulated, smothered in respect, waited on by a small army of attentive slaves, but closely watched, and strictly prevented from visiting his realm. His hosts—in other words, his jailers—were none other than the members of his own clan, the Seljuks.

If there was one name known to everyone in the eleventh century, from the borders of China to the distant land of the Franj, it was theirs. Within a few years of their arrival in the Middle East from central Asia, the Seljuk Turks, with their thousands of nomadic horsemen sporting long braided hair, had seized control of the entire region, from Afghanistan to the Mediterranean. Since 1055 the caliph of Baghdad, successor of the Prophet and inheritor of the renowned 'Abbasid empire, had been no more than a docile puppet in their hands. From Isfahan to Damascus, from Nicaea to Jerusalem, it was their emirs who laid down the law. For the first time in three centuries, the entire Muslim East was united under the authority of a single dynasty which proclaimed its determination to
restore the past glory of Islam. The Rûm, who were crushed by the Seljuks in 1071, would never rise again. The largest of their provinces, Asia Minor, had been invaded, and their capital itself was no longer secure. Their emperors, including Alexius himself, dispatched one delegation after another to the pope in Rome, the supreme commander of the West, imploring him to declare holy war against this resurgence of Islam.

Kilij Arslan was more than a little proud to belong to such a prestigious family, but he had no illusions about the apparent unity of the Turkish empire. There was no hint of solidarity among the Seljuk cousins: to survive, you had to kill. Kilij Arslan's father had conquered Asia Minor, the vast area of Anatolia, without any help from his brothers, and when he attempted to move further south, into Syria, he was killed by one of his own cousins. While Kilij Arslan was being held forcibly in Isfahan, the paternal realm had been dismembered. In 1092, when the adolescent chief was released in the wake of a quarrel among his jailers, his authority barely extended beyond the ramparts of Nicaea. He was only thirteen years old.

The advice subsequently given him by the emirs in his army had enabled him to recover a part of his paternal heritage through war, murder, and subterfuge. He could now boast that he had spent more time in the saddle than at his palace. Nevertheless, when the Franj arrived, the game was far from over. His rivals in Asia Minor were still powerful, although fortunately for Kilij Arslan, his Seljuk cousins in Syria and Persia were absorbed in their own internecine quarrels.

To the east, along the desolate highlands of the Anatolian plateau, the ruler during these uncertain days was an elusive personality called Danishmend 'the Wise'. Unlike the other Turkish emirs, most of whom were illiterate, this adventurer of unknown origin was schooled in the most varied branches of learning. He would soon become the hero of a famous epic, appropriately entitled The Exploits of King Danishmend, which recounted the conquest of Malatya, an Armenian city south-east of Ankara. The authors of this tale considered the city's fall as the decisive turning-point in the Islamicization of what would some day become Turkey. The battle of Malatya had already been joined in the early months of 1097, when Kilij Arslan was told that a new Frankish expedition had arrived in Constantinople. Danishmend had laid siege to Malatya, and the young sultan chafed at the idea that this rival of his, who had taken advantage of his father Süleyman's death to occupy north-east Anatolia, was about to score such a prestigious victory. Determined to prevent this, Kilij Arslan set out for Malatya at the head of his cavalry and pitched his camp close enough to Danishmend to intimidate him. Tension mounted, and there were increasingly murderous skirmishes.

By April 1097 Kilij Arslan was preparing for the decisive confrontation, which now seemed inevitable. The greater part of his army had been assembled before the walls of Malatya when an exhausted horseman arrived at the sultan's tent. Breathlessly, he panted out his message: the Franj were back; they had crossed the Bosphorus once again, in greater numbers than the previous year. Kilij Arslan remained calm. There was no reason for such anxiety. He had already shown the Franj that he knew how to deal with them. In the end, it was only to reassure the inhabitants of Nicaea—especially his wife, the young sultana, who was about to give birth—that he sent a few cavalry detachments to reinforce the garrison of his capital. He himself would return as soon as he had finished with Danishmend.

Kilij Arslan had once again thrown himself body and soul into the battle of Malatya when, early in May, another messenger arrived, trembling with fear and fatigue. His words struck terror in the sultan's camp. The Franj were at the gates of Nicaea, and had begun a siege. This time, unlike the previous summer, it was not a few bands of tattered pillagers, but real armies of thousands of heavily equipped knights. And this time they were accompanied by soldiers of the basileus. Kilij Arslan sought to reassure his men, but he himself was tormented by anxiety. Should he abandon Malatya to his rival and return to Nicaea? Was he sure that he could still save his capital? Would he not perhaps lose on both fronts? After long consultations with his most trusted emirs, a solution began to emerge, a sort of compromise: he would go to see Danishmend, who was after all a man of honour, inform him of the attempted conquest undertaken by the Rûm and their mercenaries, which posed a threat to all the Muslims of Asia Minor, and propose a cessation of hostilities. Even before Danishmend had given his answer, the sultan dispatched part of his army to the capital.

After several days of talks, a truce was concluded and Kilij Arslan
set out westwards without delay. But the sight that awaited him as he reached the highlands near Nicaea chilled the blood in his veins. The superb city bequeathed him by his father was surrounded: a multitude of soldiers were camped there, busily erecting mobile towers, catapults, and mangonels to be used in the final assault. The emirs were categorical: there was nothing to be done. The only option was to retreat to the interior of the country before it was too late. But the young sultan could not bring himself to abandon his capital in this way. He insisted on a desperate attempt to breach the siege on the city’s southern rim, where the attackers seemed less solidly entrenched. The battle was joined at dawn on 21 May. Kılıç Arslan threw himself furiously into the fray, and the fighting raged until sunset. Losses were equally heavy on both sides but each maintained its position. The sultan did not persevere. He realized that nothing would enable him to loosen the vice. To persist in throwing all his forces into such an ill-prepared battle might prolong the siege for several weeks, perhaps even several months, but would threaten the very existence of the sultanate. As the scion of an essentially nomadic people, Kılıç Arslan felt that the source of his power lay in the thousands of warriors under his command, and not in the possession of a city, however enchanting it might be. In any event, he would soon choose as his new capital the city of Konya much further east, which his descendants would retain until the beginning of the fourteenth century. Kılıç Arslan was never to see Nicaea again.

Before his departure, he sent a farewell message to the city’s defenders, informing them of his painful decision and urging them to act ‘in the light of their own interests’. The meaning of these words was clear to the Turkish garrison and the Greek population alike: the city must be handed over to Alexius Comnenus and not to his Frankish auxiliaries. Negotiations were opened with the basileus, who had taken up a position to the west of Nicaea, at the head of his troops. The sultan’s men tried to gain time, probably hoping that their master would somehow manage to return with reinforcements. But Alexius hurried them along. The Occidentals, he threatened, were preparing the final assault, and then there would be nothing he could do. Recalling the behaviour of the Franj in the environs of Nicaea the year before, the negotiators were terrified. In their mind’s eye they saw their city pillaged, the men massacred, the women raped. Without further hesitation, they agreed to place their fate in the hands of the basileus, who would himself establish the modalities of the surrender.

On the night of 18–19 June soldiers of the Byzantine army, most of them Turks, entered the city by means of boats that slipped silently across the Ascanian Lake; the garrison capitulated without a fight. By the first glimmerings of dawn, the blue and gold banners of the emperor were already fluttering over the city walls. The Franj called off their assault. Thus did Kılıç Arslan receive some consolation in his misfortune: the dignitaries of the sultanate would be spared, and the young sultana, accompanied by her new-born son, would even be received in Constantinople with royal honours—to the great consternation of the Franj.

Kılıç Arslan’s young wife was the daughter of a man named Chaka, a Turkish emir and adventurer of genius, famous on the eve of the Frankish invasion. Imprisoned by the Rûm after being captured during a raid in Asia Minor, he had impressed his captors with the ease with which he learned Greek, for he spoke it perfectly within a few months. Brilliant and clever, and a magnificent speaker, he had become a regular visitor at the imperial palace, which had gone so far as to bestow a noble title upon him. But this astonishing promotion was not enough for him, for he had set his sights far higher: he aspired to become the emperor of Byzantium!

The emir Chaka had devised a coherent plan in pursuit of this goal. First he left Constantinople to settle in Smyrna, on the Aegean Sea. There, with the aid of a Greek shipbuilder, he constructed a fleet of his own, including light brigantines and galleys, dromonds, biremes, and triremes—nearly a hundred vessels in all. During the initial phase of his campaign, he occupied many islands, in particular Rhodes, Chios, and Samos, and established his authority along the entire Aegean coast. Having thus carved out a maritime empire, he proclaimed himself basileus, organizing his Smyrna palace on the pattern of the imperial court. He then launched his fleet in an assault on Constantinople. Only after enormous effort did Alexius manage to repel the attack and destroy a part of the Turkish vessels.

Far from discouraged, the father of the future sultana set to work to rebuild his warships. By then it was late 1092, just when Kılıç Arslan was returning from exile, and Chaka calculated that the
young son of Süleyman would be an excellent ally against the Rûm. He thus offered him the hand of his daughter. But the calculations of the young sultan were quite different from those of his father-in-law. He saw the conquest of Constantinople as an absurd project; on the other hand, all in his entourage were aware of his intention to eliminate the Turkish emirs who were then seeking to carve out fiefdoms for themselves in Asia Minor, in particular Danismend and the ambitious Chaka. The sultan did not hesitate: a few months after the arrival of the Franj, he invited his father-in-law to a banquet, plied him with drink, and stabbed him to death, with his own hand it appears. Chaka was succeeded by a son who possessed neither his father's intelligence nor his ambition. The sultan's brother was content to administer his maritime emirate until one day in 1097 when the Rûm fleet arrived unexpectedly off the coast of Smyrna with an equally unexpected messenger on board: his own sister.

She was slow to realize the reasons for the Byzantine emperor's solicitude towards her, but as she was being led to Smyrna, the city in which she had spent her childhood, everything suddenly became clear. She was told to explain to her brother that Alexius had taken Nicaea, that Kilij Arslan had been defeated, and that a powerful army of Rûm and Franj would soon attack Smyrna, supported by an enormous fleet. In exchange for his life, Chaka's son was invited to lead his sister to her husband, somewhere in Anatolia.

Once this proposition was accepted, the emirate of Smyrna ceased to exist. With the fall of Nicaea, the entire coast of the Aegean Sea, all the islands, and the whole of western Asia Minor now stood beyond the control of the Turks. And the Rûm, with the aid of their Frankish auxiliaries, seemed determined to press on further.

In his mountain refuge, however, Kilij Arslan did not lay down his arms. Once he had recovered from the surprise of the first few days, the sultan began actively preparing his riposte. 'He set about recruiting troops and enrolling volunteers, and proclaimed jihad', notes Ibn al-Qalânisî.

The Damascene chronicler adds that Kilij Arslan 'asked all Turks to come to his aid, and many of them answered his call.'

In fact, the sultan's prime objective was to cement his alliance with Danismend. A mere truce was no longer enough: it was now imperative that the Turkish forces of Asia Minor unite, as if forming elements of a single army. Kilij Arslan was certain of his rival's response. A fervent Muslim as well as a realistic strategist, Danismend felt threatened by the advance of the Rûm and their Frankish allies. He preferred to confront them on his neighbour's lands rather than on his own, and without further ado he arrived in the sultan's camp, accompanied by thousands of cavalry. There was fraternization and consultation, and plans were drafted. The sight of this multitude of warriors and horses blanketing the hills filled the commanders with fresh courage. They would attack the enemy at the first opportunity.

Kilij Arslan stalked his prey. Informers who had infiltrated the Rûm brought him precious information. The Franj openly proclaimed that they were resolved to press on beyond Nicaea, and that their real destination was Palestine. Even their route was known: they would march in a south-easterly direction towards Konya, the only important city still in the hands of the sultan. During their entire trek through this mountainous zone, the flanks of the Occidental army would be vulnerable to attack. The only problem was to select the proper site for the ambush. The emirs, who knew the region well, had no hesitation. Near the city of Dorylaeum, four days' march from Nicaea, there was a place at which the road narrowed to pass through a shallow valley. If the Turkish warriors gathered behind the hills, all they would have to do was bide their time.

By the last days of June 1097, when Kilij Arslan learned that the Occidentals had left Nicaea, accompanied by a small force of Rûm, the apparatus for the ambush was already in position. At dawn on 1 July the Franj loomed onto the horizon. Knights and foot-soldiers advanced serenely, seemingly with no idea of what was in store for them. The sultan had feared that his stratagem might be discovered by enemy scouts. Apparently, he had nothing to worry about. Another source of satisfaction for the Seljuk monarch was that the Franj seemed less numerous than had been reported. Had some of them perhaps remained behind in Nicaea? He did not know. At first sight, however, he seemed to command numerical superiority. This, combined with the element of surprise, augured well. Kilij Arslan was anxious, but confident. The wise Danismend, with his
twenty more years of experience, felt the same.

The sun had barely risen from behind the hills when the order to attack was given. The tactics of the Turkish warriors were well practised. After all, they had assured their military supremacy in the Orient for half a century. Their army was composed almost exclusively of light cavalry who were also excellent archers. They would draw near, unleash a flood of deadly arrows on their enemy, and then retreat briskly, giving way to a new row of attackers. A few successive waves usually sufficed to bring their prey to their death agony. It was then that the final hand-to-hand combat was joined.

But on the day of the battle of Dorylaeum, the sultan, ensconced with his general staff atop a promontory, noted anxiously that the tried-and-true Turkish methods seemed to lack their usual effectiveness. Granted, the Franj lacked agility and seemed in no hurry to respond to the repeated attacks, but they were perfect masters of the art of defence. Their army’s main strength lay in the heavy armour with which their knights covered their entire bodies, and sometimes those of their mounts as well. Although their advance was slow and clumsy, their men were magnificently protected against arrows. On that day, after several hours of battle, the Turkish archers had inflicted many casualties, especially among the foot-soldiers, but the bulk of the Frankish army remained intact. Should they engage the hand-to-hand combat? That seemed risky: during the many skirmishes around the field of battle, the horsemen of the steppes had come nowhere near holding their own against these virtual human fortresses. Should the phase of harassment be prolonged indefinitely? Now that the element of surprise had worn off, the initiative might well shift to the other side.

Some of the emirs were already counselling retreat when a cloud of dust appeared in the distance. A fresh Frankish army was approaching, as numerous as the first. Those against whom the Turks had been fighting all morning turned out to be only the vanguard. Now the sultan had no choice but to order a retreat. Before he could do so, however, a third Frankish army came into view behind the Turkish lines, on a hill overlooking the tent of the general staff.

This time Kilij Arslan succumbed to fear. He leapt onto his charger and headed for the mountains at full gallop, even abandoning the rich treasure he carried with him to pay his troops. Danish-mend was not far behind, along with most of the emirs. Taking advantage of their one remaining trump card, speed, many horsemen managed to get away without the victors being able to give chase. But most of the soldiers remained where they were, surrounded on all sides. As Ibn al-Qalānisi was later to write: *The Franj cut the Turkish army to pieces. They killed, pillaged, and took many prisoners, who were sold into slavery.*

During his flight, Kilij Arslan met a group of cavalry coming from Syria to fight at his side. They were too late, he told them ruefully. The Franj were too numerous and too powerful, and nothing more could be done to stop them. Joining deed to word, and determined to stand aside and let the storm pass, the defeated sultan disappeared into the immensity of the Anatolian plateau. He was to wait four years to take his revenge.

Nature alone seemed still to resist the invader. The aridity of the soil, the tiny mountain pathways, and the scorching summer heat on the shadowless roads slowed the advance of the Franj. After Dorylaeum, it took them a hundred days to cross Anatolia, whereas in normal times a month should have sufficed. In the meantime, news of the Turkish debacle spread throughout the Middle East. When this event, so shameful for Islam, became known, noted the Damascene chronicler, *there was real panic. Dread and anxiety swelled to enormous proportions.*

Rumours circulated constantly about the imminent arrival of redoubtable knights. At the end of July there was talk that they were approaching the village of al-Balana, in the far north of Syria. Thousands of cavalry gathered to meet them, but it was a false alarm: there was no sign of the Franj on the horizon. The most optimistic souls wondered whether the invaders had perhaps turned back. Ibn al-Qalānisi echoed that hope in one of those astrological parables of which his contemporaries were so enamoured: *That summer a comet appeared in the western sky; it ascended for twenty days, then disappeared without a trace.* But these illusions were soon dispelled. The news became increasingly detailed. From mid-September onwards, the advance of the Franj could be followed from village to village.

On 21 October 1097 shouts rang out from the peak of the citadel of Antioch, then Syria’s largest city: ‘They are here!’ A few layabouts hurried to the ramparts to gawk, but they could see nothing
more than a vague cloud of dust far in the distance, at the end of the broad plain, near Lake Antioch. The Franj were still a day's march away, perhaps more, and there was every indication that they would want to stop to rest for a while after their long journey. Nevertheless, prudence demanded that the five heavy city gates be closed immediately.

In the souks the morning clamour was stilled, as merchants and customers alike stood immobile. Women whispered, and some prayed. The city was in the grip of fear.

When Yaghi-Siyān, the ruler of Antioch, was informed of the approach of the Franj, he feared possible sedition on the part of the Christians of the city. He therefore decided to expel them.

This event was related by the Arab historian Ibn al-Athīr, more than a century after the beginnings of the Frankish invasion, on the basis of testimony left by contemporaries:

On the first day, Yaghi-Siyān ordered the Muslims to go out beyond the walls to clean out the trenches ringing the city. The next day, he sent only Christians on the same task. He had them work until night had fallen, and when they sought to return, he halted them, saying, ‘Antioch is your city, but you must leave it in my hands until I have resolved our problem with the Franj.’ They asked him, ‘Who will protect our women and children?’ The emir answered, ‘I will take care of them for you.’ He did, indeed, protect the families of those expelled, refusing to allow anyone to touch a hair of their heads.

In that October of 1097 the aged Yaghi-Siyān, for forty years an obedient servant of the Seljuk sultan, was haunted by the fear of betrayal. He was convinced that the Frankish armies gathered before Antioch would be able to enter the city only if they found accomplices within the walls. For the city could not be taken by assault, and still less starved out by a blockade. Admittedly, this white-bearded Turkish emir commanded no more than six or seven thousand soldiers, whereas the Franj had nearly thirty thousand
combatants, but Antioch was practically impregnable. Its walls were two *farsakh* long (about twelve thousand metres), and had no less than 360 turrets built on three different levels. The walls themselves, solidly constructed of stone and brick on a frame of masonry, scaled Mount Habib al-Najjar to the east and crowned its peak with an inexpugnable citadel. To the west lay the Orontes, which the Syrians called al-Assi, 'the rebel river', because it sometimes seemed to flow upstream, from the Mediterranean to the interior of the country. The river-bed ran along the walls of Antioch, forming a natural obstacle not easily crossed. In the south, the fortifications overlooked a valley so steep that it seemed an extension of the city walls. It was therefore impossible for attackers to encircle the city, and the defenders would have little trouble communicating with the outside world and bringing in supplies.

The city's food reserves were unusually abundant; the city walls enclosed not only buildings and gardens, but also wide stretches of cultivated land. Before the *Fatih*, or Muslim conquest, Antioch was a Roman metropolis of two hundred thousand inhabitants. By 1097 its population numbered only some forty thousand, and several formerly inhabited quarters had been turned into fields and pastures. Although it had lost its past splendour, it was still an impressive city. All travellers, even those from Baghdad or Constantinople, were dazzled by their first sight of this city extending as far as the eye could see, with its minarets, churches, and arcaded souks, its luxurious villas dug into the wooded slopes rising to the citadel.

Yaghi-Siyân was in no doubt as to the solidity of his fortifications and the security of his supplies. But all his weapons of defence might prove useless if, at some point along the interminable wall, the attackers managed to find an accomplice willing to open a gate to allow them access to a turret, as had already happened in the past. Hence his decision to expel most of his Christian subjects. In Antioch as elsewhere, the Christians of the Middle East—Greeks, Armenians, Maronites, Jacobites—suffered a double oppression with the arrival of the Franj: their Western coreligionists suspected them of sympathy for the Saracens and treated them as subjects of inferior rank, while their Muslim compatriots often saw them as natural allies of the invaders. Indeed, the boundary between religious and national affiliation was practically non-existent. The same term, 'Rûm', was used to refer to both Byzantines and Syrians of the Greek confession, who in any event still saw themselves as subjects of the basileus. The word 'Armenian' referred to a church and a people alike, and when a Muslim spoke of 'the nation', *al-umma*, he was referring to the community of believers. In the mind of Yaghi-Siyân, the expulsion of the Christians was less an act of religious discrimination than a wartime measure against citizens of an enemy power, Constantinople, to which Antioch had long belonged and which had never renounced its intention of recovering the city.

Antioch was the last of the great cities of Arab Asia to have fallen under the domination of the Seljuk Turks: in 1084 it was still a dependency of Constantinople. Thirteen years later, when the Frankish knights laid siege to the town, Yaghi-Siyân was naturally convinced that this was part of an attempt to restore the authority of the Rûm, with the complicity of the local population, the majority of whom were Christians. Faced with this danger, the emir was not troubled by any scruples. He therefore expelled the *nazara*, the adepts of the Nazareth (for this is what Christians were called), and then took personal charge of the rationing of grain, oil, and honey, ordering daily inspections of the fortifications and severely punishing any negligence. Would that suffice? Nothing was certain. But these measures were designed to enable the city to hold out until reinforcements arrived. When would they come? The question was asked insistently by everyone in Antioch, and Yaghi-Siyân was no more able to give an answer than was the man in the street. Back in the summer, when the Franj were still far away, he had dispatched his son to visit the various Muslim leaders of Syria to alert them to the danger stalking his town. Ibn al-Galâniši tells us that in Damascus Yaghi-Siyân's son spoke of holy war. But in Syria in the eleventh century, *jihâd* was no more than a slogan brandished by princes in distress. No emir would rush to another's aid unless he had some personal interest in doing so. Only then would he contemplate the invocation of great principles.

Now, in that autumn of 1097, the only leader who felt directly threatened by the Frankish invasion was Yaghi-Siyân himself. If the emperor's mercenaries wanted to recover Antioch, there was nothing unnatural about that, since the city had always been Byzantine. In any case, it was thought that the Rûm would go no
further. And it was not necessarily bad for his neighbours if Yaghi-
Siyān was in a spot of trouble. For ten years he had toyed with them,
sowing discord, arousing jealousy, overturning alliances. Now he
was asking them to put their quarrels aside and rush to his aid. Why
should he be surprised if they failed to come at the run?

A realistic man, Yaghi-Siyān was well aware that he would be left
to languish and forced to beg for help, that he would now have to
pay for his past cleverness, intrigue, and betrayal. But he never
imagined that his coreligionists would go so far as to hand him over,
bound hand and foot, to the mercenaries of the basileus. After all,
he was merely struggling to survive in a merciless horns’ nest.
Bloody conflict was relentless in the world in which he had grown
up, the world of the Seljuk Turks, and the master of Antioch, like
all the other emirs of the region, had no choice but to take his stand.
If he wound up on the losing side, his fate would be death, or at least
imprisonment and disgrace. If he was lucky enough to pick the
winning side, he would savour his victory for a time, and receive
several lovely female captives as a bonus, before once again finding
himself embroiled in some new conflict in which his life was at stake.
Survival in such a world depended above all on backing the right
horse, and on not insisting on the same horse at all times. Any
mistake was fatal, and rare indeed was the emir who died in bed.

At the time of the arrival of the Franj in Syria, political life was
envisioned by the ‘war of the two brothers’, a conflict between two
bizarre personalities who seemed to have stepped out of the
imagination of some popular story-teller: Ridwān, the king of
Aleppo, and his younger brother Duqāq, king of Damascus. Their
mutual hatred was so obstinate that nothing, not even a common
threat to both of them, could induce them even to contemplate
reconciliation. Ridwān was barely more than twenty in 1097, but his
personality was already shrouded in mystery, and the most terrifying
legends about him were rife. Small, thin, of severe and sometimes
frightening countenance, he is said (by Ibn al-Qalanisi) to
have fallen under the influence of a ‘physician-astrologer’ who
belonged to the order of Assassins, a recently formed sect that was
to play an important part in political life throughout the Frankish
occupation. The king of Aleppo was accused, not without reason, of
making use of these fanatics to eliminate his opponents. By means
of murder, impiety, and witchcraft Ridwān aroused the distrust of
nearly everyone, but it was within his own family that he provoked
the most bitter odium. When he acceded to the throne in 1095 he
had two of his younger brothers strangled, fearing that they might
take one day contest his power. A third brother escaped with his life only
by fleeing the citadel of Aleppo on the very night that the powerful
hands of Ridwān’s slaves were supposed to close upon his throat.
This survivor was Duqāq, who subsequently regarded his elder
sibling with blind hatred. After his flight, he sought refuge in
Damascus, whose garrison proclaimed him king. This impulsive
young man—easily influenced, inclined to fits of anger, and of
fragile health—was obsessed by the idea that his brother still sought
to assassinate him. Caught between these two half-crazy princes,
Yaghi-Siyān had no easy task. His closest neighbour was Ridwān,
whose capital Aleppo, one of the world’s oldest cities, was less than
three days’ march from Antioch. Two years before the arrival of the
Franj, Yaghi-Siyān had given Ridwān his daughter in marriage. But
he soon realized that his son-in-law coveted his kingdom, and he too
began to fear for his life. Like Duqāq, Yaghi-Siyān was obsessed by
fear of the Assassins sect. Since the common danger had naturally
brought the two men closer together, it was to the king of Damascus
that Yaghi-Siyān now turned as the Franj advanced on Antioch.

Duqāq, however, was hesitant. It was not that he was afraid of
the Franj, he assured Yaghi-Siyān, but he had no desire to lead his army
into the environs of Aleppo, thus affording his brother an opportu-
nity to strike from behind. Knowing how difficult it would be to
prod his ally into a decision, Yaghi-Siyān decided to send as
emissary his son Shams-al-Dawla—‘Sun of the State’—a brilliant,
spirited, and impassioned young man who stalked the royal palace
relentlessly, harassing Duqāq and his advisers, resorting by turns to
flattery and threat. But it was not until December 1097, two months
after the start of the battle of Antioch, that the master of Damascus
finally agreed, against his better judgement, to take his army north.
Shams went along, for he knew that the full week the march would
take gave Duqāq plenty of time to change his mind. And indeed, the
young king grew increasingly nervous as he advanced. On 31
December, when the Damascene army had already covered two-
thirds of its trajectory, they encountered a foraging Frankish troop.
Despite his clear numerical advantage and the ease with which he
managed to surround the enemy, Duqāq declined to issue the order
to attack. This allowed the Franj to overcome their initial disorientation, recover their poise, and slip away. At the day's end there was neither victor nor vanquished, but the Damascenes had lost more men than their adversaries. No more was needed to discourage Duqāq, who immediately ordered his men to turn back, despite the desperate entreaties of Shams.

The defection of Duqāq aroused the greatest bitterness in Antioch, but the defenders did not give way. Curiously, in these early days of 1098, it was among the besiegers that disarray prevailed. Many of Yaghi-Siyān's spies had managed to infiltrate the enemy army. Some of these informants were acting out of hatred of the Rūm, but most were local Christians who hoped to win the emir's favour. They had left their families in Antioch and were now seeking to guarantee their security. The information they sent back encouraged the population: although the defenders in the besieged city had abundant supplies, the Franj were vulnerable to starvation. Hundreds had died already, and most of their mounts had been slaughtered for food. The expedition encountered by the Damascene army had been sent out to find some sheep and goats, and to pilfer some granaries. Hunger was compounded by other calamities that were daily undermining the invaders' morale. A relentless rain was falling, justifying the light-hearted nickname the Syrians had bestowed upon Antioch: 'the pissoir'. The besiegers' camp was wired in mud. Finally, there was the earth itself, which trembled constantly. The local people of the countryside were used to it, but the Franj were terrified. The sounds of their prayers reached into the city itself, as they gathered together to plead for divine mercy, believing themselves victims of celestial punishment. It was reported that they had decided to expel all prostitutes from their camp in an effort to placate the wrath of the Almighty; they also closed down the taverns and banned dice games. There were many desertions, even among their chiefs.

News such as this naturally bolstered the combative spirit of the defenders, who organized ever more daring sorties. As Ibn al-Athir was to say, Yaghi-Siyān showed admirable courage, wisdom, and resolution. Carried away by his own enthusiasm, the Arab historian added: Most of the Franj perished. Had they remained as numerous as they had been upon their arrival, they would have occupied all the lands of Islam! A gross exaggeration, but one that renders due homage to the heroism of the Antioch garrison, which had to bear the brunt of the invasion alone for many long months.

For aid continued to be withheld. In January 1098, embittered by Duqāq's inertia, Yaghi-Siyān was forced to turn to Riwān. Once again it was Shams al-Dawla who was charged with the painful mission of presenting the most humble excuses to the king of Aleppo, of listening unflinchingly to all his sarcastic cracks, and of begging him, in the name of Islam and ties of kinship, to deign to dispatch his troops to save Antioch. Shams was well aware that his royal brother-in-law was not susceptible to this type of argument, and that he would sooner lap off his own hand than extend it to Yaghi-Siyān. But events themselves were even more compelling. The Franj, whose food situation was increasingly critical, had just raided the lands of the Seljuk king, pillaging and ravaging in the environs of Aleppo itself, and for the first time Riwān felt his own realm threatened. More to defend himself than to aid Antioch, he decided to send his army against the Franj. Shams was triumphant. He sent his father a message informing him of the date of the Aleppo offensive and asked him to organize a massive sortie to catch the besiegers in a pincer movement.

In Antioch, Riwān's intervention was so unexpected that it seemed heaven-sent. Would it be the turning-point of this battle, which had already been raging for more than a hundred days? But the Franj were not to be denied. In the afternoon of 9 February 1098 look-outs posted in the citadel reported the approach of the Aleppo army. It included several thousand cavalry, whereas the Franj could muster no more than seven or eight hundred, so severely had their mounts been decimated by famine. The besieged, who had been anxiously awaiting the Aleppoans for several days now, wanted the battle to be joined at once. But Riwān's troops had halted and begun to pitch their tents, and battle-orders were postponed to the following day. Preparations continued throughout the night. Every soldier now knew exactly where and when he had to act. Yaghi-Siyān was confident that his own men would carry out their side of the bargain.

What no one knew was that the battle was lost even before it began. Terrified by what he knew about the fighting abilities of the Franj, Riwān dared not take advantage of his numerical superiority. Instead of deploying his troops, he sought only to protect them. To avoid any threat of encirclement, he had confined them all
night to a narrow strip of land wedged between the Orontes River and Lake Antioch. At dawn, when the Franj attacked, the Aleppoans may as well have been paralysed. The narrowness of the land denied them any mobility. Their mounts reared, and those horsemen who fell were trampled underfoot by their comrades before they could rise. Of course, there was no longer any question of applying the traditional tactics, sending successive waves of cavalry-archers against the enemy. Ridwân’s men were forced into hand-to-hand combat in which the heavily armoured knights easily gained an overwhelming advantage. It was carnage. The king and his army, now in indescribable disarray and pursued by the Franj, dreamed only of flight.

The battle unfolded differently under the walls of Antioch itself. At first light, the defenders launched a massive sortie that compelled the attackers to fall back. The fighting was intense, and the soldiers of Yaghî-Siyan were in an excellent position. Slightly before midday, they had begun to penetrate the camp of the Franj when news came in of the Aleppoans’ debacle. Sick at heart, the emir ordered his men to fall back to the city. Scarcely had they completed their retreat when the knights who had crushed Ridwân returned, carrying macabre trophies from the battle. The inhabitants of Antioch soon heard great guffaws of laughter, followed by muffled whistles. Then the fearfully mutilated severed heads of the Aleppoans, hurled by catapults, began to rain down. A deathly silence gripped the city.

Yaghî-Siyan offered words of encouragement to those closest to him, but for the first time he felt the vice tighten around his city. After the debacle of the two enemy brothers, he could expect nothing more from the princes of Syria. Just one recourse remained open to him: the governor of Mosul, the powerful emir Karbûqa, who had the disadvantage of being more than two weeks’ march from Antioch.

Mosul, the native city of the historian Ibn al-Athîr, was the capital of Jazîra, or Mesopotamia, the fertile plain watered by the two great rivers Tigris and Euphrates. It was a political, cultural, and economic centre of prime importance. The Arabs boasted of its succulent fruit: its apples, pears, grapes, and pomegranates. The fine cloth it exported—called ‘muslin’, a word derived from the city’s name—was known throughout the world. At the time of the arrival of the Franj, the people of the emir Karbûqa’s realm were already exploiting another natural resource, which the traveller Ibn Jubayr was to describe with amazement a few dozen years later: deposits of naphtha. This precious dark liquid, which would one day make the fortune of this part of the world, already offered travellers an unforgettable spectacle.

We approach a locality called al-Qayyara [the place of tar], near the Tigris. To the right of the road to Mosul is a depression in the earth, black as if it lay under a cloud. It is there that God causes the sources of pitch, great and small, to spurt forth. Sometimes one of them hurls up pieces, as though it were boiling. Bowls have been constructed in which the pitch is collected. Around these deposits lies a black pool; on its surface floats a light black foam which washes up on the banks and coagulates into bitumen. The product looks like a highly viscous, smooth, shiny mud, giving off a sharp odour. Thus were we able to see with our own eyes a marvel of which we had heard tell, the description of which had seemed quite extraordinary to us. Not far away, on the banks of the Tigris, is another great source; we could see its smoke rising from afar. We were told that when they want to extract the bitumen it is set on fire. The flame consumes the liquid elements. The bitumen is then cut into pieces and transported. It is known throughout these lands as far as Syria, in Acre and in all the coastal regions. Allah creates whatever he wills. Praise be upon him!

The inhabitants of Mosul attributed curative powers to the dark liquid, and immersed themselves in it when they were ill. Bitumen produced from oil was also used in construction, to ‘cement’ bricks together. Because it was impermeable, it was used as a coating for the walls of public baths, where its appearance was similar to polished black marble. But as we shall see, it was in the military domain that oil was most widely employed.

Apart from these promising resources, Mosul was of vital strategic importance at the start of the Frankish invasion; its rulers had acquired the right to inspect Syrian affairs, a right the ambitious Karbûqa intended to exercise. He considered Yaghî-Siyan’s call for
help a perfect opportunity to extend his own influence. He immediately promised to raise a great army. From that moment on, Antioch was on tenterhooks anticipating Karbūqa’s arrival.

This providential figure was a former slave, a condition the Turkish emirs did not consider in any sense degrading. Indeed, the Seljuk princes used to appoint their most faithful and talented slaves to posts of responsibility. Army chiefs of staff and governors of cities were often ex-slaves, or mamluks, and so great was their authority that it was not even necessary to manumit them. Before the Frankish occupation was complete, the entire Muslim Middle East would be ruled by Mamlik sultans. As early as 1098 the most influential men of Damascus, Cairo, and several other major cities were slaves or sons of slaves.

Karbūqa was among the most powerful of these. This authoritarian officer with the greying beard bore the Turkish title of atabeg, literally ‘father of the prince’. Members of the ruling families suffered a staggering mortality rate in the Seljuk empire—through battles, murders, and executions—and rulers often left heirs who had not yet reached their majority. Tutors were assigned to protect the interests of these heirs, and to round out his role as adoptive father, a tutor generally married his pupil’s mother. These atabegs naturally tended to become the real holders of power, which they often subsequently transmitted to their own sons. The legitimate prince then became no more than a puppet in the hands of the atabeg, sometimes even a hostage. Appearances were scrupulously respected, however. Armies were often officially ‘commanded’ by children of three or four years of age who had ‘delegated’ their power to the atabeg.

Just such a strange spectacle was seen in the last days of April 1098, as nearly thirty thousand men gathered to set out from Mosul. The official edict announced that the valiant fighters would be waging the jihād against the infidels under the orders of an obscure Seljuk scion who, presumably from the depths of his swaddling clothes, had entrusted command of the army to the atabeg Karbūqa.

According to the historian Ibn al-Athir, who spent his entire life in the service of the atabegs of Mosul, the Franj were seized with fear when they heard that the army of Karbūqa was on its way to Antioch, for they were vastly weakened and their supplies were slender. The defenders, on the contrary, took heart. Once again they prepared for a sortie to coincide with the approach of the Muslim troops. With the same tenacity as before, Yaghī-Siyān, ably seconded by his son Shams al-Dawla, checked the grain reserves, inspected the fortifications, and encouraged the troops, promising them a rapid end to the siege, ‘with God’s permission’.

But his public self-assurance was a mere façade. The real situation had been worsening for several weeks. The blockade of the city had been tightened, it was more difficult to get supplies, and—this was even more worrying—information from the enemy camp was increasingly scanty. The Franj, who had apparently realized that their every word and deed was being reported to Yaghī-Siyān, had decided on drastic action to deal with the problem. The emir’s agents had occasion to watch them kill a man, roast him on a spit, and eat his flesh, while shouting that any spy who was discovered would suffer a similar fate. The terrified informants fled, and Yaghī-Siyān no longer had detailed information about his besiegers. As a seasoned military man, he considered the situation highly disquieting.

He was reassured only by the knowledge that Karbūqa was on the way. He was expected by the middle of May, with his tens of thousands of fighters. Everyone in Antioch impatiently awaited that moment. Rumours circulated day after day, propagated by citizens who mistook their desires for reality. There would be a spate of whispering and a dash to the ramparts, maternal old women asking questions of callow soldiers. The answer was always the same: no, the rescuing troops were not in sight, but it would not be long now.

The great Muslim army was a dazzling sight as it marched out of Mosul, with countless lances glinting in the sun and black banners (emblem of the ‘Abbasids and the Seljuks) waving in a sea of white-robed cavalry. Despite the heat, the pace was brisk. The army would reach Antioch in less than two weeks if it maintained its rate of advance. But Karbūqa was troubled. Shortly before the army’s departure, he had received some alarming news. A troop of Franj had taken Edessa, known to the Arabs as al-Ruḥā, a large Armenian city situated north of the route leading from Mosul to Antioch. The atabeg could not help wondering whether the Franj of Edessa might not advance behind him as he approached the
besieged city. Was he not running the risk of being caught in a pincer movement? In the early days of May, he assembled his principal emirs to announce that he had decided to take a different route. He would first head north and settle the problem of Edessa in a few days; then he would be able to engage the besiegers of Antioch without risk. Some protested, reminding him of Yaghi-Siyân’s anxious message. But Karbûqa silenced them. Once his decision was made, he was as stubborn as a mule. While his emirs grudgingly obeyed, the army headed for the mountain passes leading to Edessa.

The situation in the Armenian city was indeed worrying. The few Muslims who had been able to leave had brought news of strange events there. In February a Frankish chief by the name of Baldwin had arrived in command of hundreds of knights and more than two thousand foot-soldiers. Thoros, an old Armenian prince and ruler of the city, had appealed to him to strengthen the city garrison against repeated attacks by Turkish warriors. But Baldwin refused to act as a mere mercenary. He demanded to be formally named the legitimate successor of Thoros. The latter, aged and childless, agreed. An official ceremony was held, in accordance with Armenian custom. Thoros dressed in a loose-fitting white robe, and Baldwin, naked to the waist, slipped under his ‘father’s’ frock and pressed their bodies together. Then it was the turn of the ‘mother’, the wife of Thoros, against whom Baldwin now crept, between robe and naked flesh, before the amused regard of the onlookers, who whispered that this rite, conceived for the adoption of children, seemed somewhat inappropriate when the ‘son’ was a great hairy knight.

The soldiers of the Muslim army laughed loud and long as they pictured the scene that had just been described to them. But the sequel of the account chilled them. A few days after the ceremony, ‘father’ and ‘mother’ were lynched by a mob urged on by the ‘son’, who watched impassively as they were put to death and then proceeded to proclaim himself the ‘count’ of Edessa. He then appointed his Frankish companions to all the important posts in the army and the administration.

Hearing his worst fears confirmed, Karbûqa decided to organize a siege of the city. His emirs again sought to dissuade him. The three thousand Frankish soldiers in Edessa would not dare to attack the Muslim army, which numbered tens of thousands of men. On the other hand, they were quite sufficient to defend the city itself, and the siege might well drag on for months. In the meantime Yaghi-Siyân, abandoned to his fate, might give way to the pressure of the invaders. But the atábeg would not listen. Only after a futile three weeks under the walls of Edessa did he acknowledge his mistake and set out once more for Antioch, on a forced march.

Meanwhile, within the besieged city, the high hopes of early May had given way to utter disarray. In the palace and in the streets alike, no one could understand why the troops from Mosul were taking so long. Yaghi-Siyân was in despair.

The tension reached a paroxysm just before sunset on 2 June, when the look-outs reported that the Franj had assembled their forces and were heading north-east. The emirs and soldiers could think of only one explanation: Karbûqa was in the area, and the attackers were setting out to meet him. Within a few minutes, houses and ramparts had been alerted by word of mouth. The town breathed again. By sunrise, the atábeg would try the city loose. The nightmare would finally end. It was a cool and humid evening. Long hours were spent discussing the situation on the doorsteps of darkened homes. Finally Antioch drifted off to sleep, exhausted but confident.

Then at four in the morning, from the southern rim of the city, came a dull sound of rope being dragged against stone. From the peak of a great five-sided tower a man leaned out and gestured. He had not slept all night, and his beard was dishevelled. His name was Firûz, a maker of armour in charge of the defence of the towers, Ibn al-Athir would later report. A Muslim of Armenian origin, Firûz had long been part of Yaghi-Siyân’s entourage, but he had lately been accused of black-market trading, and Yaghi-Siyân had slapped a heavy fine on him. Firûz, seeking revenge, contacted the attackers. He told them that he controlled access to a window overlooking the valley south of the city, and declared that he was prepared to escort them in. Better still, to prove that he was not leading them into a trap, he sent them his own son as hostage. For their part, the attackers promised him gold and land. Thus the plot was hatched: it would be put into action at dawn on the third day of
June. The night before, in order to mislead the garrison into relaxing its vigilance, the attackers would pretend to move away from the city.

When agreement was reached between the Franj and this accursed maker of armour, Ibn al-Athir writes, they climbed to that small window, opened it, and hauled up many men by means of ropes. When more than five hundred of them had ascended, they sounded the dawn trumpet, while the defenders were still exhausted from their long hours of wakefulness. Yagh-

siyân awoke and asked what was happening. He was told that the sound of the trumpets was coming from the citadel, which had surely been taken.

The noise was actually coming from Two Sisters Tower. But Yagh-

siyân did not bother to check. He thought that all was lost. Succumbing to his fear, he ordered that one of the city gates be opened and he fled, accompanied by several guards. He rode for hours, haggard and unable to recover his spirits. After two hundred days of resistance, the ruler of Antioch had finally broken down. While reproaching him for his weakness, Ibn al-Athir evoked his death with emotion.

He burst into tears at having abandoned his family, his sons, and the Muslims, and, in great pain, he fell unconscious from his horse. His companions tried to put him back in the saddle, but he could no longer hold himself upright. He was dying. They left him and rode off. An Armenian woodcutter who happened to be passing by recognized him. He cut off his head and brought it to the Franj in Antioch.

The city itself was a scene of blood and fire. Men, women, and children tried to flee through muddy alleyways, but the knights tracked them down easily and slaughtered them on the spot. The last survivors’ cries of horror were gradually extinguished, soon to be replaced by the off-key singing of drunken Frankish plunderers. Smoke rose from the many burning houses. By midday, a veil of mourning enveloped the city.

Only one man was able to keep his head amidst the bloodthirsty lunacy of 3 June 1098: the indefatigable Shams al-Dawla. The moment the city was invaded, the son of Yagh-

siyân had barricaded himself in the citadel with a small group of fighters. The Franj tried to dislodge them on several occasions, but were repulsed each time, not without suffering heavy losses. The greatest of the Frankish commanders, Bohemond, a gigantic man with long blond hair, was himself wounded in one of these attacks. Having learned something from his misadventure, he sent Shams a message proposing that he abandon the citadel in exchange for a guarantee of safe conduct. But the young emir haughtily refused. Antioch was the fief he had always meant to inherit, and he intended to fight for it to his dying breath. There was no shortage of supplies or sharp arrows. Enthroned majestically at the summit of Mount Habib al-Najjar, the citadel could resist the Franj for months. They would lose thousands of men if they insisted on scaling its walls.

The determination of these last defenders eventually paid off. The knights abandoned their attack on the citadel, and instead established a security zone around it. Then, three days after the fall of Antioch, Shams and his companions saw to their delight that Karbuqa’s army had appeared on the horizon. For Shams and his handful of dchodars, there was something unreal about the appearance of the cavalry of Islam. They rubbed their eyes, wept, prayed and embraced one another. The soldiers’ cries of Allahu akbar, ‘God is great!’, rose to the citadel in a continuous roar. The Franj dug in behind the walls of Antioch. The besiegers had become the besieged.

Shams’s joy was tinged with bitterness, however. When the first emirs from the rescue expedition joined him in his redoubt, he bombarded them with a thousand questions. Why had they come so late? Why had they given the Franj time to occupy Antioch and massacre its inhabitants? To his utter astonishment, the emirs, far from defending their army’s tactics, denounced Karbuqa for all these evils: Karbuqa the arrogant, the pretentious, the inept, the coward.

This was not simply a matter of personal antipathy. It was a genuine conspiracy, and the ringleader was none other than King Duqûq of Damascus, who had joined the Mosul troops as soon as they crossed into Syrian territory. The Muslim army was decidedly not a homogeneous force, but a coalition of princes whose interests
were often contradictory. No one was unaware of the territorial ambitions of the *atabeg*, and Duqaq had little trouble convincing his colleagues that their real enemy was Karbüqa himself. If he emerged victorious from the battle against the infidels, he would set himself up as a saviour, and no Syrian city would escape his rule. On the other hand, if Karbüqa was beaten, the danger to the Syrian cities would be lifted. Compared to that threat, the Frankish peril was a lesser evil. There was nothing alarming about the Rûm’s desire to retake their city of Antioch with the aid of their mercenaries, for it was inconceivable that the Franj would create states of their own in Syria. As Ibn al-Athîr put it, *the atabeg so annoyed the Muslims with his pretensions that they decided to betray him at the battle’s most decisive moment.*

This superb army, then, was a colossus with feet of clay, ready to collapse at the first fillip. Shams, who was willing to forget the decision to abandon Antioch, still sought to overcome all this pettiness. He felt that it was not yet time for accounts to be settled. But his hopes were short-lived. The very day after his arrival, Karbüqa summoned Shams to inform him that he was to be deprived of his command of the citadel. Shams was indignant. Had he not fought bravely? Had he not held out against all the Frankish knights? Was he not the rightful heir of the ruler of Antioch? The *atabeg* refused to discuss the matter. He was in charge, and he demanded obedience.

The son of Yaghi-Siyan was now convinced that the Muslim army could not win the day, in spite of its imposing size. His only consolation was the knowledge that the situation in the enemy camp was scarcely any better. According to Ibn al-Athîr, *after conquering Antioch, the Franj went without food for twelve days. The nobles devoured their mounts, the poor ate carrion and leaves.* The Franj had suffered famine before during past months, but on those occasions they had always been able to gather provisions by raiding the surrounding countryside. Their new status as a besieged army, however, deprived them of this possibility. And Yaghi-Siyan’s food reserves, on which they had counted, were practically exhausted. Desertions were running at an alarming rate.

Providence seemed unable to decide which of these two exhausted and demoralized armies to favour during that June of 1098. But then an extraordinary event brought about a decision. The Occidentals cried miracle, but the account of Ibn al-Athîr contains no hint of the miraculous.

Among the Franj was Bohemond, their commander-in-chief, but there was also an extremely wily monk who assured them that a lance of the Messiah, peace be upon him, was buried in the Kusyan, a great edifice of Antioch. He told them: ‘If you find it, you will be victorious; otherwise, it means certain death.’ He had earlier buried a lance in the soil of the Kusyan and erased all his tracks. He ordered the Franj to fast and to make penance for three days. On the fourth day, he had them enter the building with their valets and workers, who dug everywhere and found the lance. The monk then cried out, ‘Rejoice, for victory is certain!’ On the fifth day, they began exiting from the city gates in small groups of five or six. The Muslims said to Karbüqa, ‘We should slip up to the gate and slaughter all who come out. It would be easy, for they are dispersed.’ But he answered, ‘No. Wait for all of them to leave, and we will kill them all, every last one.’

The calculation of the *atabeg* was less absurd than it may appear. With such indisciplined troops, and with his emirs waiting for the earliest excuse to desert him, he could not afford to prolong the siege. If the Franj were ready to join the battle, he did not want to frighten them with an excessively massive attack, which would threaten to drive them back into the city. What Karbüqa had failed to anticipate, however, was that his decision to temporize would be seized upon by those who sought his downfall. While the Franj continued their deployment, desertions began in the Muslim camp. There were accusations of treason and cowardice. Sensing that he was losing control of his troops and that he had probably underestimated the size of the besieged army as well, Karbüqa asked the Franj for a truce. This merely demolished the last of his prestige in the eyes of his own army and emboldened the enemy. The Franj charged without even responding to his offer, forcing Karbüqa in turn to unleash a wave of cavalry-archers upon them. But Duqaq and most of his emirs were already serenely withdrawing with their troops. Realizing his mounting isolation, the *atabeg* ordered a general retreat, which immediately degenerated into a rout.
Thus did the powerful Muslim army disintegrate 'without a stroke of sword or lance, without the firing of a single arrow'. The Mosul historian was hardly exaggerating. The Franj themselves feared a trick, he wrote, for there had not yet been any battle justifying such a flight. They therefore preferred not to pursue the Muslims. Karbūqa was thus able to return to Mosul safe and sound, with the tatters of his troops. All his great ambitions vanished for ever before the walls of Antioch, and the city he had sworn to save was now firmly in the hands of the Franj. It would remain so for many a year.

Most serious of all was that after this day of shame, there was no longer any force in Syria capable of checking the invaders' advance.

I know not whether my native land be a grazing ground for wild beasts or yet my home!

This cry of grief by an anonymous poet of Ma‘arra was no mere figure of speech. Sadly, we must take his words literally, and ask with him: what monstrous thing came to pass in the Syrian city of Ma‘arra late in that year of 1098?

Until the arrival of the Franj, the people of Ma‘arra lived untroubled lives, shielded by their circular city walls. Their vineyards and their fields of olives and figs afforded them modest prosperity. The city’s affairs were administered by worthy local notables devoid of any great ambition, under the nominal suzerainty of Ridwān of Aleppo. Ma‘arra’s main claim to fame was that it was the home town of one of the great figures of Arab literature, Abu‘l-‘Alā‘ al-Ma‘arri, who had died in 1057. This blind poet, a free-thinker, had dared to attack the mores of his age, flouting its taboos. Indeed, it required a certain audacity to write lines like these:

The inhabitants of the earth are of two sorts:
Those with brains, but no religion,
And those with religion, but no brains.

Forty years after his death, a fanaticism come from afar descended on this city and seemed to prove this son of Ma‘arra right, not only in his irreligion, but also in his legendary pessimism:

Fate smashes us as though we were made of glass,
And never are our shards put together again.