

The Creation of Themes

The early years of his life spent living in the Exarchate of Carthage had convinced Heraclius of the necessity of running the outlying provinces on disciplined military lines. He immediately set about creating designated regions called themes, a system so useful it would be expanded by his successors into a complex form of government.

The Roman emperors Septimius Severus at the start of the third century and Diocletian a hundred years later had faced the difficulties associated with running a vast and widespread empire by sub-dividing the little more than 30 Augustan provinces into many smaller, more manageable regions. In time, there were over 200 distinct provincial divisions. Two hundred years on, Heraclius determined to do something similar. The designation was itself significant: *thema* was the Greek word that described a division of troops, so the new emperor's warlike intentions were emphasised from the start.

Heraclius also understood that the typical Byzantine method of raising an army – that of recruiting large numbers of barbarian or other foreign mercenaries, the *foederati* – had to change. For one, it was a hit-and-miss system that failed to guarantee the quality of the troops, for another, the mercenaries all too often betrayed

their paymasters. A professional standing Byzantine army was now required to guard the whole empire. Each theme, therefore, was placed under the command of a *strategos* (military governor), and large numbers of soldiers were stationed in each theme.

In another move that would have been familiar to his ancient Roman predecessors, Heraclius settled the troops on land inalienably granted to them on the condition that they provided hereditary military service. The new arrangement would prove to be of immense value for the defence of the empire in the years to come. It laid the foundations for a disciplined, well-trained native army. Moreover, because of the land grants, the soldiers were defending their own property and so were much more assiduous in carrying out their duties.

Detail from *The Battle of Heraclius Against Chosroes II* by Piero della Francesca. For the first time since the fall of Rome, the Byzantines were possessed of a reliable and professional native army.



A new yeomanry

In short order, Heraclius created a reliable army spread in sufficient numbers throughout the four Anatolian themes. These were the Opsikion in the northwest, the Armeniakon to the northeast, Carabisian, which covered most of the southern coast and its hinterland, and in the centre the Anatolikon. These initial four were soon supplemented (the Carabisian was further divided into Chios, Samos, Thraciesion, and Cibyrrhaeoton), and before his death, he had expanded this number to 13 themes, which grew to 40 by the end of the 11th century. The older provincial administration run under the Praetorian Prefectures of Diocletian soon fell into disuse, although the larger divisions of his Diocese remained – to some extent – enshrined as the religious bishoprics.

Heraclius's success was such that by the end of the seventh century there had grown up, all over Anatolia, a whole new class of soldier-farmers who maintained themselves on their own land and, for a small payment, were expected to turn up for duty, armed and mounted, when summoned. In the essence this structure of vassalage foreshadowed the feudal system of the West, which the Franks adapted from the defensive arrangements they

discovered in those regions of Italy that lay between Byzantine and Lombard lands.

The rights of these new landholders, however, were in stark contrast to the vassalage system the Franks would adopt in which serfs would effectively become slaves, and in beneficial contrast to those of the peasants who had worked on Byzantine senatorial estates previously. So too, they were far more their own men than any had been under the drudgery of Constantine's constitution. As a new political force within the empire, they contributed a degree of stability in opposition to the heated faction politics of the big cities.

Heraclius also intended that the soldier-farmers would be well paid in comparison to the working-class of the civilian population, which in turn would benefit the Byzantine economy through the increased amount of money in circulation. Ultimately, even if Heraclius could ensure greater military security, it would be a hollow victory if the economy, so ruined by the events of recent years, was not to recover and yield the returns necessary for his administrative and military reforms.