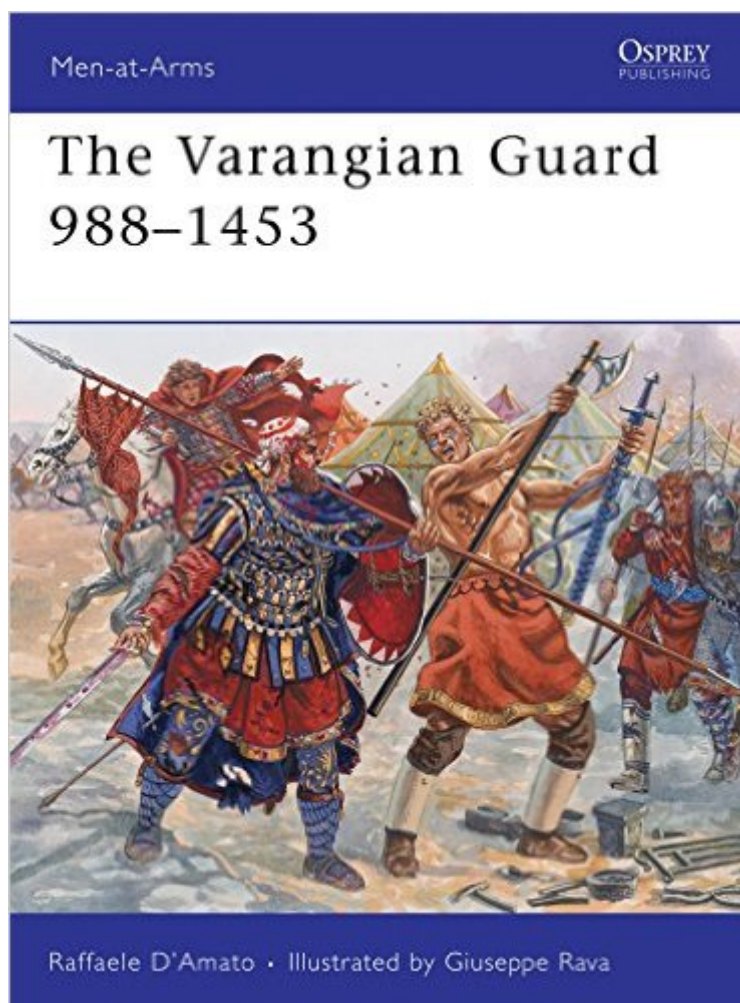


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# The Varangian Guard 988–1453 (Men-at-Arms)



## Synopsis

The Varangian Guards were Viking mercenaries who operated far beyond their native shores as an elite force within the Byzantine Armies. Descendants from a legendary line of warriors, the Varangian Guard was formed after a group of Viking mercenaries made a major contribution to the Byzantine Emperor Basil II's victory over rebel forces in 988 AD. These 5,000 men were then retained as Basil's personal guard and would provide loyal service to many successive occupants of the imperial throne. Commonly referred to as 'foreigners' (Etaireia), they were nonetheless absorbed into a new Palatine regiment under command of an officer termed the Akolouthos, who was either a Norseman or a Rus (Norsemen colonizers of Russia). The Varangians wore mixtures of their native clothing and armor together with a splendid formal Byzantine uniform. But most famously, they always wielded their own traditional battle-axes; this became a sign that the emperor was on the battlefield in person. This is an insightful look of one of the legendary guard units of the medieval world, complete with a dazzling array of artwork plates showing the Varangian Guard in an array of settings from court ceremonies to the battlefield.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is one of Osprey's better offerings in its rather short series of Byzantine-themed volumes. I have had complaints with some previous volumes, and I have some here, but they are sparser and less critical. I am no art critic, but I really have to praise Guiseppe Rava. The plates are loaded in brilliant colour and detail. From another reviewer here, I understand that Rava received some criticism for his earlier work on Dawson's Byzantine Cavalryman C.900-1204, but he has certainly stepped up his game. The illustrations are utterly fantastic, and some of the best that I have yet

seen in an Osprey book. However, there is one small quibble with some of the visuals. The reproduction of manuscripts in Osprey volumes have presented a continuing problem. Too often they are lousy black and white copies of documents that were illustrated in many colours, and as such it is very difficult to see the fine detail. At times they are so badly reproduced as to be utterly useless. None here fall into the useless category - although some of the fresco reproductions sure come close - but still, these representations are a form of source material, and were meant to be viewed in full colour. The actual content of the book is quite good. D'Amato benefits from some modern scholarship that was not available to Blondal when he wrote his *The Varangians of Byzantium*, especially in regards to archaeological discoveries of equipment.

One of the most immediately recognized medieval military unit - the varangian guard! With so many peculiar characteristics and quirks that they would seem more likely in a fantasy novel. Great warriors of huge size and physical prowess, with limitless bravery and weapons frequently inlaid with silver runes; they travel to a far away land beyond mountains and rivers to serve a mighty and noble Emperor. Obviously I'm letting out that they were plunderers, susceptible to alcohol, violent, and the service to the emperor (that frequently wasn't that mighty or noble) implied generous rewards. This small title from Professor D'Amato is the perfect introduction to this remarkable unit that for many centuries was the Roman (Byzantine) Emperor guard. In palace and battlefields they showed almost always a strong sense of loyalty (rare in the lands of Constantinople), bravery and steadfastness. It's almost unbelievable that there are so few books on the Varangian Guard; this book was really needed. Their history and main events are summarized. The ethnic origins are also an interesting subject; there were several different provenances depending on the century and geo-political situations worldwide (for example, the conquest of England by the Normans, sent many English Saxons searching for a post in the Varangian Guard). The organization, daily life, weapons and armour and motivations are also mentioned. D'Amato also gives us several anecdotes mentioned in sources that brings light to those northern warriors ways of thinking and moral (for example the woman that killed a Varangian after he tried to rape her, and the reaction of the other Varangian brothers in arms; the "assault" on the emperors quarter; curious diplomatic blunders, etc.).

This Osprey booklet on the Varangian Guard of Byzantium draws heavily from *Blondal* and *Benedictz* "The Varangians of Byzantium" which has at last been reprinted and remains the major reference on the subject. To this, it adds a few paragraphs inspired by archaeological findings in

Bulgaria, and in particular at Dristra (with the author using the modern Bulgarian name of Drastar) where the emperor Alexios Komnenos suffered one of his worst defeats in 1087 and where Varangians were present. As other reviewers had already commented upon, Rava's plates are rather gorgeous. Some of sections, in particular the one on Guard service and on Equipment, are particularly good summaries. Others, however, are perhaps more questionable. For instance, the discussion on numbers and organization is rather cursory, perhaps because of space limitations. There seems to be no distinction made between Tagmata (professional regiments) of Rus or Varangians, and the Varangian Guard itself. It seems unlikely, for instance, that the Varangian Guard numbered 6000 in 1203. However, mercenary Rus infantry regiments PLUS the Guard could perhaps have made up such a total. In reality, we simply do not know the exact proportions or numbers at all times, neither how they evolved over time. Since the Varangians were not only bodyguards but also very much shock troops, losses tended to be heavy, even when the Varangians won.

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