

# THE BATTLE OF BABAYN 1167

The battle of Babayn, 18 March 1167, provides us with a wonderful opportunity to field many different troop types - the Fatimid Arab and Armenian cavalry, fighting alongside the Frankish knights and Turcoples, facing off against Turkic steppe horsemen. Even the setting makes for a striking and unusual game - an Egyptian rural town on the edge of the wargames table, with a suburb gradually blending from small holdings into the harsh sand of the encroaching desert.

The allies had been chasing Shirkuh and his army south down (or technically 'up') the Nile, and he had eventually turned to face his pursuers. But it was on ground of his own choosing, and he had chosen well. Battle was joined at 'a place called Babayn'. The Franks had 374 knights with them (a substantial force by their standards), but were accompanied by larger numbers of Turcoples and Egyptians. Both of the latter were described as being 'for the most part, useless' or, showing the effortless blend of racism and homophobia with which medieval commentators were so accomplished, 'worthless and effeminate'.

Regardless of prejudice, however, the performance of the Egyptian contingent was poor, in the best traditions of the Fatimid military. They were barely mentioned by either side, despite probably forming the majority of the allied army, and even Muslim accounts speak of the encounter as a battle between Turks and Franks. Whatever the exact numbers, and despite the views they held of their allies, the Franks also thought that they were severely outnumbered, both by Shirkuh's Turks and by a large Bedouin contingent.

The ensuing battle was confused and disjointed. Swirling masses of cavalry, manoeuvring in a desert, inevitably conjured up vast, enveloping dust clouds. The topography hindered visibility still further, as the ground was 'uneven, broken by sand dunes and depressions, so that those coming or going could not be seen from a distance'. Crucially, the nature of the battlefield, carefully chosen by Shirkuh so that it was 'on the borderland between the fertile country

and the desert', made it unsuitable for the crusader knights to launch a battle-winning charge.

Accounts of the fighting are as partial and as contradictory as one would expect under those circumstances, reflecting the poor visibility and appalling conditions. The outcome is often described as 'indecisive', but that is to flatter the Franco- Egyptian army considerably.

The Turkic army was deployed in the traditional three divisions. A central division, on flat ground and with the baggage train behind it, was led by Shirkuh. The two wings had been positioned 'with energetic foresight' on small hills on the flanks, with Saladin and his men on the right and a Kurdish force on the left. Hugh of Caesarea later led the attack on the hill occupied by Saladin's men and complained to William of Tyre that the 'rising ground and the soft sand made it difficult for our men to charge this position'.

The Franco-Egyptian army mirrored this deployment and advanced towards the Turkic enemy that they had pursued so tenaciously for the past few weeks. King Amalric personally led the central division into combat against Shirkuh and his men.

Hollywood, or a day at the races, creates the image of a cavalry charge as an unstoppable rush, an elemental torrent of horseflesh breaking upon the enemy ranks at appalling speed. But this was different: dehydrated horses, desert sand everywhere, heavily armoured riders.

And, of course, Amalric's huge weight - the king famously had 'man boobs' that gyrated uncontrollably on the rare occasions when he laughed. Everything was calculated to slow down their advance and dissipate the energy of their impact, just as Shirkuh had planned. The crusader charge was probably delivered at little more than a trot.

In the centre, on the relatively flat ground between the hills, even this was enough, however. Amalric and his men routed their opponents and set off in pursuit, hoping to inflict as many casualties as possible and prevent any chance of a rally.

It was a different story on the flanks. Moving uphill on sand dunes, the Frankish and Egyptian cavalry were struggling to get above a walking pace. Turkic countercharges reduced both wings of the battle to a churning chaos in which the Christian knights were at a significant disadvantage. Disordered and scattered, the Franks fled in small groups. Saladin's troops followed close behind, killing and capturing the disorientated cavalry and pillaging their baggage train.

This was a catastrophe for King Amalric. He was separated from most of his men and his surviving knights had no infantry to rally behind. There was no supply train to help rebuild his shattered forces. And the remnants of both his flanking divisions were thrown across a confusing plain of dust and death. The chase after Shirkuh had ended in an almost complete disaster.

