

THE POLICIES OF NIKEPHOROS II PHOKAS  
IN THE CONTEXT OF THE BYZANTINE ECONOMIC RECOVERY

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Approval of the Graduate School of Social Sciences

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **THE POLICIES OF NIKEPHOROS II PHOKAS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE BYZANTINE ECONOMIC RECOVERY**

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This thesis will analyze the policies and the eastern military campaigns of the Byzantine emperor Nikephoros II Phokas, focusing on their correlation with the gradual recovery of the Byzantine economy that took place from the ninth to the eleventh century. The emperor's conquering campaigns in Cilicia are seen as a response to the social and fiscal effects of said recovery, which caused the Byzantine state to assume a more aggressive stance. The thesis is structured in three parts, the first dealing with the causes and modes of the economic recovery, the second examining the policies of Phokas and the third detailing his campaigns in the east.

The aim of this work is to see how the limited supply of precious metals and the growth of intermediate stages in the circulation process of coinage by the end of the ninth century reduced the relative role of the state in the economy, producing the paradoxical phenomenon of a richer society and a state struggling to get tax revenues.

This situation prompted the new policy-making circles led by Nikephoros Phokas towards the implementation of a more distinctly militaristic policy with the final goal of expanding the fiscal basis of the Byzantine state eastwards, towards those Muslim entities that satisfied the criteria of vulnerability and wealth.

**Keywords:** Byzantine History, Tenth Century, Cilicia, Nikephoros Phokas, gold coinage

## ÖZ

### NİKEPHOROS II PHOKAS'IN BİZANS'IN EKONOMİK İYİLEŞMESİ BAĞLAMINDA POLİTİKALARI

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Bu tez, Nikephoros II Phokas'ın politikaları ve askeri mücadelelerini, Bizans ekononmisinin dokuzuncu yüzyıldan onbirinci yüzyıla kadar olan kademeli iyileşmesine odaklanarak incelemektedir. İmparatorun Kilikya' daki başarılı askeri mücadeleleri,adı geçen ve Bizans İmparatorluğu'nun daha agresif bir duruş amasına neden olan iyileşmenin sosyal ve mali bir etkilenmesi olarak kabul edilir. Tez üç bölümden oluşmaktadır; birinci bölüm ekonomik iyileşmenin nedenlerini ve yöntemlerini; ikinci bölüm Phokas'ın politikalarını; ve üçüncü bölüm imparatorun doğudaki mücadelelerini anlatmaktadır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, sınırlı miktarda tedarik edilen değerli metallerin ve para basmadaki orta evre gelişiminin, dokuzuncu yüzyılda devletin ekonomideki rolünü nasıl azalttığını ve paradoksal olarak bu durumun nasıl daha zengin bir toplum yarattığını ve devletin bu zengin toplumdaki vergi almak için nasıl mücadele ettiğini görmektir. Bu durum Nikephoros Phokas tarafından yeni politika devirlerinin daha açık bir şekilde militarist yönde uygulanmasını, Bizans devletinin doğuda , özellikle de savunmasız ve zengin Müslümanlara karşı,mali yönde gelişmesi nihai amacıyla körüklemiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Bizans, onuncu yüzyıl, Cilicia, Nikephoros Phokas, Altın Para

TO MY PARENTS AND MY SISTERS,  
AS A SMALL PAYMENT OF MY HUGE GRATITUDE DEBT.



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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis will attempt an analysis of the economic policies and the military campaigns of the Byzantine Emperor Nikephoros II Phokas. During his tenure of the *domestikos* office in the east, and more so during his six years on the throne (from 963 to 969), the empire witnessed both an explosive territorial expansion in the east, which resulted in the conquest of Crete, the Cilician plain and the metropolis of Antioch, and the effects of an equally surprising economic recovery, which would finally blossom during the Komnenean age in the eleventh-twelfth centuries.

It has to be clear from the beginning that in this thesis the terms economic expansion, stabilization, consolidation and similar will refer to the collective expansion, stabilization and consolidation of 1) coin circulation, 2) demographic growth, 3) regional and interregional trade. The period under analysis lacked the technological means needed for noticeable economic fluctuations as traditionally intended in reference to modern market economies, and although the quality of production and the prices remained pretty much the same through the centuries, the parameters mentioned above (monetization, population and economic exchange) constitute a series of useful indicators to guess the level of prosperity of a certain period. Studying the diffusion of coinage as a mean of exchange can help us understand which territories were within the reach of state authority and which were not, and offers a generally reliable indicator of the presence of a more complex system of production and exchange, and often signifies some detachment of the economic cycle from the *tempo* imposed by nature to a predominantly agricultural society. Similarly, demographic growth tends to mean on the long run a greater incidence of specialized work and manufacture on society as a whole, and in the particular case of byzantine society, we can presume it meant an intensification in the process of land appropriation and exploitation, with lasting consequences on the regime of land ownership and to the balance of power, both locally and at state level. The

relevance of an increase in commercial exchange, difficult to measure in the period under discussion due to an unfortunate lack of sources, is also an important factor in considering the changes in global prosperity, as a vibrant commercial life is one of the most reliable indicators of widespread security along the main exchange routes (land or sea bound), and of the existence of a strong demand for non essential goods, whatever their natures. In the period under analysis, though, interregional trade was just beginning to become an important economic and political factor, and although we can somehow speak of international trade, due to the existence of documented agreements between the imperial authority and, for example, the 'Rus of Kiev, its relevance would become apparent only in the second half of the eleventh century, with the admittance of merchants and "people of the agora" in the ranks of the senate. Byzantine merchants were of course active and powerful before year 1050 as well, but the relative role of commerce in what we may anachronistically define as the Byzantine GDP was clearly overshadowed by agriculture and local exchanges.

The question of territorial expansion will then be answered by drawing parallels to the contemporary economic expansion, which will assume the double role of main symptom and main cause of the phenomenon. An important role will also be given to the rest of the whole structure surrounding the economic system, as ideology, international developments and internal politics will play a fundamental role. Particular importance will be given to the social structure of the Byzantine periphery, where patronage networks and chains of informal association played a great role in shaping the local economy. The risk of creating a shapeless work will be avoided by assuring the centrality to the economic factors, at the same time acknowledging that such an approach is of course limited and unable to take into account other important developments of society which may have played a relevant part in the Byzantine revival of the tenth century.

Despite the obvious shortcomings of using an economy-centered perspective to explain the evolution of a pre-modern polity with very few extant sources, the Byzantine empire had such a peculiar economic situation— with a unique combination of centralized power, an absolute preponderance of rural areas and a high degree of monetization – that we may legitimately be allowed to speculate about the role of gold, trade and monetization in unleashing the energies of the empire against its regional rivals both east and west. Other explanations of the tenth century expansion have been given which took into

account mostly the weakening of its traditional enemies, or else focusing almost solely on the estate-village community dynamics, without considering the potential implications economic expansion and increased monetization could have had in that context, and why, from 963 onwards, Byzantium gave up its policy of small border adjustments east and west in favor of a more aggressive stance, that by 1025 will lead to the annexation of most western Caucasus, Cilicia, parts of Syria, the Balkans and Bulgaria.

The following thesis will thus try to demonstrate that, assuming a constant and limited supply of gold and silver, economic expansion (as specified above, intended as a very slow demographic, monetary and exchange expansion) led to an extension of the circle of coinage circulation, which spent more times in the hands of more people rather than going directly from the state to its subjects and again to the state. This in time threatened to evolve into a situation of a grave precious metal shortage, as in fact happened in the late eleventh century, as the gold supply could not match the pace of provincial monetization, leading to desperate attempts at saving gold by cutting army budget and dangerously devaluing the *nomisma*. This “expansive devaluation” as it has been called, was nevertheless a devaluation, which greatly diminished the possibility of the Byzantine state to counter the increasing pressures it was facing.

But the Byzantine armies of Nikephoros II did not conquer Cilicia and parts of Syria just to loot the gold required to avert a potential shortage: the state needed land. The birth of large private estates owned by high court officials or else important provincial personalities, who could easily persuade tax exactors to turn a blind eye to their dues, further reduced state income. To counter the growing tax evasion of large landholders, the Byzantine crown tried to increase its own position as landholder profiting directly from the land (rents, sale of agricultural surplus, small manufacturing networks) rather than from taxation, and the best way to acquire new lands to turn into *kouratoria* was through military conquest.

In short, a series of factors, including a more widespread monetization and growing evasion by the owners of large estates reduced the relative role of the state in the economy, while the absolute amount of cash in circulation kept growing dangerously close to the supply limit.

The economic expansion followed a long period of contraction in the eastern Mediterranean, beginning with the so called Justinianean Plague of 542 (which reemerged

periodically until the first half of the eighth century), worsening with the Slavic, Lombard and Persian invasions of the early seventh century and reaching its nadir with the Arabian conquest of most of the Levant and the entirety of north Africa by 646.

Written sources as well as archaeological findings paint the picture of a state barely able to survive against the mounting Arab tides, able at best to maintain a façade of monetized economy in the few surviving cities, which abandoned their former “classical” spaces and shapes to become little more than fortified points of control and exchange.

But the empire survived, thanks to the progressive stabilization on the eastern frontier, itself due also to a surprisingly resistant military system, based on large military provinces called *themes*, ruled by military governors (*strategoi*), and garrisoned for the most part by farmer-soldiers who earned most of their livelihood from farming, and could be mobilized to counter the enemy in case of invasion or raid.

Despite their likely birth out of budget cuts, the *themes* provided strategic depth and a thorough integration of the individual soldiers and the army itself in the state’s productive and fiscal mechanisms.

Nevertheless this system, though it proved somehow effective as a defensive tool, had two major drawbacks: it fostered political instability - since the major part of the imperial armed forces were in the hands of unruly semiautonomous governors, and, due to its peculiarities, was of little use when the empire began to recover and engaged in more ambitious campaigns. Some sort of remedy to the army’s deficiencies was found with the institution of standing regiments (*tagmata*) responsible directly to the emperor, better trained, better armed and stationed around the capital, initially in the traditionally unruly *Opsikion* theme.

The empire gradually began to find some stability and peace around the year 800, and by this time Byzantium was still a fortress state, where monetized exchange was still limited (although steadily growing), barter predominant and the state enjoyed a role of undisputed control over the circulation of bullion, enforcing a stronger supervision over the commercial exchanges held in the metropolis of Constantinople, itself with a much lower population than the preceding centuries.

The first sign of recovery came with the gradual conquest of Greece from the Slavic settlers that began flooding it from the late sixth century, and completed by Nikephoros I, *logothete* of the *Genikon*. Before he was killed in a disastrous battle against the



Bulgarians, he rationalized and reformed the fiscal system, also in virtue of his position as minister, which gave him the right amount of practical knowledge of the state machinery, and the way it could have been improved, helping its adaptation to the new reality of increasing *in specie* exchange.

Later on this trend would continue, and despite disruptive conjunctures like the famous famine of 927-928 or the occasional raid on important coastal cities after the loss of the key strategic Island of Crete, a more monetized economy of exchange was consolidated.

The chronological boundaries of Byzantine economic recovery between the ninth and tenth centuries will be the object of the first part, which will also address the modes and reasons behind it, analyzing the role played by state military expenditures, the monetization of the fiscal system and the international developments that made it possible. The expansion of production and exchange also led to the consolidation and development of a “powerful” class of big landholders, the *dynatoi*. Although extremely heterogeneous in scope and wealth, the “powerful” had one thing in common: they could exert influence on ordinary villagers or on entire village communities, directly or through a more-or-less lengthier chain of associates. Such a chain would sometimes be as long and strong as to reach the Sacred Palace itself, allowing the *dynatoi* to put political pressure on whoever was sitting on the throne. In addition to their undeniable social weight, those who were responsible for estates and monasteries also enjoyed a relative economic freedom, since their properties were not well integrated within the framework of byzantine trade legislation, and were able to act outside the intricacies of the regulations that encumbered trade in Constantinople. For these and other reasons, large estates began being considered a threat by the central government, who devoted much of its energies to the question. The issue of the relationship between the powerful and the village communities was handled less with the introduction of sharp prohibition than with the regulatory institution of *protimesis*, pre-emption, which on paper established a rigid chain of precedence in land acquisition, aimed at excluding the powerful from improving their land availability at the expense of small communities. This kind of legislation proved somehow effective, but could not stop the expansion of large estates on the long run.

Emperor Nikephoros II Phokas followed the footsteps of his predecessors, simply adjusting their legislation regarding the alienation of military properties and enforcing even more severe prohibition on land exchange, and his most famous legislation came as

far as formally forbidding the foundation of new pious monasteries and pious houses, and came along with a formal prohibition of old religious institution from acquiring more land. His whole legislative activity can be understood with the need to ensure a constant inflow of funds for his ambitious campaigning in the east, and the overall well-being of the army and the single soldiers. Economically, his best remembered measures were those introducing the *tetarteron nomisma*, a lightweight golden coin, and his prohibition on the creation of new monasteries, along with other measures aimed at reinforcing the control of the state on the secular church – and its sources of revenue.

The life and the policies of the emperor, seen in the context of the tenth century economic growth, will be the topic of the second part.

Finally, the third part will take off from the conquest of Crete and explore in detail the campaigns fought by Phokas, with a particular focus on the Cilician and Syrian expeditions, from 961 to 969. Cilicia and Antioch were not simply border adjustments, or defensive acquisitions aimed at shielding the Byzantine Anatolian heartland from raids or larger-scale invasions, like Erzurum or Melitene.

After the conquest these lands were resettled by byzantine peasants and soldiers, and were turned into *kouratoria* (crown estates), a transformation which probably displays the need for the state to find new a reliable source of income from the direct exploitation of the land. The successful campaigns in Cilicia were in fact the first expansion of Byzantium outside the traditional borders acquired during the crisis of the seventh century. The territories occupied were rich, but probably not as nearly rich enough as to guarantee their own defense, and physically they were much more exposed, lying as they were outside the Taurus “barrier” and without any physical protection that could help to prevent or minimize enemy incursions in the region. Acquiring territories that were such an easy target denoted a degree of confidence bordering with boldness, and constituted a radical change in the way the Byzantine state intended its (actual) political role in the regional affairs.

## **1.1 THE SOURCES**

One of the main issues in assessing the reality of an economic expansion happening between the eight and the eleventh century is the lack of explicit information in the

written primary sources. This problem is of course mainly due to the nature of the trend, which was probably barely noticeable at the time, and thus escaped being recorded in the contemporary chronicles, which were also, for a variety of reasons, more interested in military events, palace anecdotes and moral judgments, often with heavy religious undertones despite the diverse social backgrounds of the chroniclers.

The range of intervention for the Byzantine government was limited to the imposition or optimization of tax revenue and the manipulation of coinage, which usually came to the detriment of their popularity among their subjects: that is why most instances of recorded interventions are mercilessly framed as *damnatio memoriae*.

This is definitely the case of the chronology of Theophanes the Confessor, who unwantonly preserved for us one of the few detailed records of imperial economic policies, as he wrote down the “Ten Evils” of the Iconoclast Arch-Devil Nikephoros I.

His continuator continues from where he stops, at the death of the aforementioned Nikephoros, and covers a century and a half of history, from the accession of Leo the Armenian to the death of Romanos the younger, and is characterized by a distinct pro-Macedonian attitude, being the product of official court historiography. Interestingly enough, it doesn't contain any negative comment about the Phokades, as it was written during the heyday of their collaboration with the imperial dynasty.

The Phokas family was probably the commissioner of its own series of chronicles, modern historians believe<sup>1</sup>, aimed at exalting the family deeds, and running parallel to another line of sources, probably commissioned by the later Macedonian rulers (possibly Basil II due to his repeated struggles with the Phokades). Both lines now indirectly survive in the works of Leo the Deacon, Zonaras and Skylitzes.

If the history of Leo the Deacon is almost shamelessly pro-Phokades (especially pro-Nikephoros), ultimately blaming all the emperor's perceived mistakes on someone else (the empress, the monks, his lieutenants, the palace eunuchs) or failing to cover his most controversial decisions (like issuing the lightweight *tetareron*), the works of Zonaras and Skylitzes seem to make use of both traditions. This is especially evident in Skylitzes's *synopsis*, in which he harshly criticizes the person of Nikephoros II – calling him without

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<sup>1</sup> A.Talbot, D. F. Sullivan, *The History of Leo the Deacon* p. 11, DOS 51, Washington 2005

hesitation a tyrant<sup>2</sup> and his policies, painting at the same time a picture of the Phokades as almost invincible and terrifying individual fighters, a feature he has in common with the Deacon. The work of Skylitzes is also noteworthy due to its record of the epitaph of Nikephoros Phokas, attributed to John of Melitene. Besides being an interesting work of poetry, the “epitaph” is a useful witness of the existence of a pro-Phokas faction during the reign of John Tzimiskes, and an important indicator of what some aristocrats felt about the emperor’s campaigns against Bulgaria.

Despite their uncanny similarity with the aforementioned *synopsis* (due to the use of similar sources), the history of Zonaras is worth mentioning because of the presence of passages which can be helpful to understand the stance of Nikephoros II regarding soldiers’ property and village communes. It also contains some unique anecdotes on his relationship with his father Bardas<sup>3</sup>. The different attitudes to the Phokas family found in the History of Leo the Deacon and in the works of Zonaras and Skylitzes are clear indication of the declining fortunes of the family after the failed revolts of the eleventh century, as later writers (Skylitzes and Zonaras lived and wrote during the twelfth century) made a more extensive use of the “official” anti-Phokas sources, which probably survived more easily, being sponsored by the winning imperial party. Among the chroniclers who covered this period Yahya of Antioch deserves a special place. He was a Syrian Christian who wrote an Arabic history of the byzantine empire, the city of Antioch and the caliphate in the second half of the eleventh century, and which is by far the most accurate source we have for dates and places. Despite his use of Arabic rather than Greek for toponyms and personal names his importance to understand the development of the tenth century military situation is undeniable, successfully documenting its transformation from a low-intensity conflict with relatively small scale objectives to a fully fledged offensive aimed at subjugating Cilicia and effectively nullifying the importance of the local Muslim potentates like Tarsus and Aleppo.

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<sup>2</sup> J. Wortley, *Skylitzes: a Synopsis of Byzantine History*, p. 264, Cambridge 2010. The term *tyrannis* had different implication during the Byzantine period, and it denoted the morally illegitimate sovereign who acted as God’s punishment.

<sup>3</sup> According to his son *ille pecuniae studet* and *eum tamen mutationem noli putare fore subitam*. He runs after money, and doesn’t want to change. Zonaras, John. *The History*, p.110-111. Latin translation and editing by B.G. Niebuhr. Bonn 1841.

Besides chronicles, other sources useful to understand the realities of the tenth century are the collections of land laws repeatedly issued from 927 to 996 to counter the “alien” infiltration in village communes, and the military treatises.

Military treatises in the Greek-speaking Mediterranean had a long tradition, going back to Onasander. This kind of treatise, here the best example is Vegetius’ *Epitoma rei militaris* (written during the late fourth century in Latin), was more concerned with describing the way the army *should have* worked in ancient times of greater glory, rather than with addressing the right way to make the current army work.

But despite the many inheritors of such a tradition in the late Roman and Byzantine empires, we find a definite change of attitude with Maurice’s *Strategikon*, which conveys a much more realistic picture of the early Byzantine army, setting a model that would be followed and updated during the rebirth of military literature in the following centuries, from Nikephoros Phokas’ own *Praecepta Militaria* to his brother’s *De Velitatione* to Nikephoros Ouranos’ *Taktica*, all written between the tenth and the eleventh centuries by prominent members of the army who wished to address and instruct their peers and successors with a simple and descriptive language stripped of any literary ambition.

The treatise known as *De Velitatione* deserves a special attention. It is a unique book on skirmishing tactics, which was clearly written by someone with great experience on the field, possibly Leo Phokas, brother of the emperor, and also contains a precious passage which can be somehow understood as the political manifesto of the Phokas clan.

Its depiction of the eastern front and its almost ritual exchange of ambushes and raids, detailed with names of places, people and examples from the recent past significantly begins with this sentence: “although it is our intention to set down instructions about skirmishing, we must bear in mind that they might not find much application in the eastern regions at the present time”<sup>4</sup>.

As for the land laws, mostly written during the second half of the tenth century in response to pressing social and fiscal problems, they are a corpus of both official *novellae* and imperial answers to provincial petitions, in which the problem of land ownership and the fiscal integrity of village communities is tackled with the reinforcement of the *protimesis* (pre-emption) institute, trying to enforce a queue for land acquisition, or a list of precedence for land alienation.

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<sup>4</sup> G. T. Dennis, *Three Byzantine military treatises*, p. 147, DOT IX, Washington 1985

Archaeological sources, as reported in a number of essays, also constitute an important tool to understand the evolution of byzantine economy in the period from the seventh to the tenth century. Numismatic findings obviously constitute the first and most reliable archaeological source in assessing the economic history of the region. Excavations held in different locations unearthed similar quantities of coinage for the corresponding chronological frame, thus allowing researchers to determine periodical trends of money distribution – with the caution always associated to archaeological findings, for their nature unpredictable. New archaeological expeditions in sites such as Amorion also helped paint a more detailed picture of the material culture and living condition of the Byzantine semi-periphery in the middle period.

## CHAPTER 2

### FROM CRISIS TO EXPANSION

#### 2.1 ESSENTIAL OUTLINES OF THE SITUATION AFTER THE SEVENTH CENTURY

*Now, two things in particular contribute to the hegemony of the Romans, namely, our system of honours and our wealth, to which we may add a third: the wise control of the other two, and prudence in their distribution.*

*Michael Psellos, Chronographia 5.31*

Despite the understandable lack of explicit mention in the sources, we are still able to positively affirm that between the eighth and eleventh centuries the Byzantine empire experienced a slow economic recovery, which can be understood and read under different perspectives.

For example, Pierre Toubert<sup>5</sup> argues that the reemergence of exchange in the Mediterranean basin and in central Europe was fueled by improvements in land tenure and agricultural production, also due to the introduction of new crops, and a better exploitation of the existing ones through technological advances, such as the improvements of plowing efficiency by feeding the plowing animals with legumes planted to make the fields rest.

These developments (or sometimes the persistence of old technologies, as in the case of the water mill) were slowed but never stopped by the repeated emergence of the plague, which after the devastating epidemic of the sixth century kept surfacing after its last outbreak in the late eight century.

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<sup>5</sup> P. Toubert, Byzantium and the Mediterranean Agrarian Civilization, in Economic History of the Byzantine Empire, edited by A. Laiou, Washington 2002

However, despite its connection with the Mediterranean world, the Byzantine empire presented many characteristics that made it follow a different path of development. First of all, the persistence of a centralized state, with a long established tradition of intervention in matters of tax extraction and an absolute monopoly on minting and coinage over a wide area helped the survival of monetized exchange, which would never be completely replaced with exchange in kind.

The state also maintained a strict control over the armed forces, and never renounced its monopoly on fortification and defense, and as a result the Empire never experienced the forms of *incastellamento* common throughout western Europe, in which the presence of castles and keeps built and garrisoned by local nobility functioned both as a center of opposition to a potential central rule and as a point of local exchange, in short fueling feudalism. There was indeed the retreat of cities into what used to be the ancient acropolis, but this happened along patterns that were totally unlike those of western Europe.

The theoretically absolute control of the army also meant that the government had to find the means to redistribute resources on a large scale, to pay, feed and arm its soldiers. Previous attempts at reducing the army budget by paying the soldiers with state-bought arms and uniforms instead of money only served to upset them, and ultimately led to their repeated mutinies under Maurice.

The problem of outfitting and paying the army was partially solved with the attribution of *stratitika ktemata*, military land plots, which incidentally also helped improve its efficiency as a defensive force. It is perhaps significant that the development of the *stratitika ktemata* happened in a time of deep financial crisis, possibly under the reign of Constans II (641-668), where the only resource abundantly available to the state was a land depopulated after almost sixty years of repeated invasions.

But although the soldiers gained most of their livelihood from farming, they still needed to be armed and supported while campaigning, and while funding these needs probably proved to be a great headache for the byzantine statesmen, it surely helped in putting coinage in circulation.

The means of acquiring the quantities of precious metals required to keep a large army functioning were mostly gained through taxation, and in Byzantium an efficient system of



taxation was adopted using the *chorion* as a base, especially after the demise of the classic city model.

The nature of the *chorion*, the village community, has been a matter of historical debate in the last decades. Many historians, especially of soviet background, believed that the village community worked in principle as a model of what Marx defined as the “Asiatic mode of production”, with no effective private property over fields and pastures, which were owned by the village as a unit. This view had political implications, and painted the picture of a “golden age” of free peasants living off their lands without interference and intrusions from landowners. It has been widely reconsidered, and the recent literature tends to consider the *chorion* more as a fiscal unit than a social unit, which already presented a stratified and diverse social environment from the earlier period, incubating in itself the seeds for the formation of wider estates (*proasteria*), often associated with the ancient *latifundia*, but with many significant differences. From the ninth to the twelfth century, much of the social and economic developments of the byzantine state will revolve around the *choria*\ *proasteria* dialectics: large estates gradually became more and more important, concentrating wealth and social influence in the hands of a smaller number of individuals. Nevertheless, it is important to note here that the *chorion* was the fundamental fiscal unit of the Byzantine state, and that its members were required to pay most of their taxes *in specie*.

As for trade, byzantine trade was heavily regulated by the state, who often capped the percentage of profit each merchant could obtain, restricted some kinds of trade and encouraged others. All in all, this attitude of the state made investment in land much more valuable and safe than investment in trade, and the reduced price of abandoned lands in the period under discussion made it even more so. Another possible source of income was the purchase of court dignities and offices, and although it has been calculated that the pay-off was not convenient, at least in the short run, the acquisition of honors and dignities was much sought off for its immense social significance.

Another characteristic of the Byzantine situation was its geographical collocation. In the center, a relatively rich and productive Aegean core was shielded on the east by the inhospitable Anatolian plateau, itself made less accessible by the Taurus and Armenian mountains. Central Anatolia, despite being probably a little more forested at the time than it is nowadays, is not an environment favorable to agriculture, due to its dry climate

and high elevation. In this region, pastoralism was probably a preferable choice, also given the situation of permanent insecurity, in which flocks could be better protected than fields. The empire also controlled the southern shore of the Black Sea, which increased in importance when the north became a profitable trading partner with the emergence of the Kievan Rus' in the ninth century.

Westwards, the empire in the wake of the eighth century controlled the immediate Thracian hinterland of Constantinople, a few noteworthy towns like Athens and Corinth in eastern Greece, and the city of Thessalonica, with its immediate vicinity. The rest of Greece was lost to the Slavs, and would be gradually retaken.

The emerging Bulgarian state south of the Danube, while sometimes acting as an effective buffer against the recurrent invasions from the northern nomads, constituted a constant threat to the security of Thrace and Greece, and the conversion of khan Boris in the ninth century was of little use for peaceful relations between the two states.

In the Aegean sea, the island of Crete effectively acted as a shield for the smaller islands, allowing some relative safety in trade, until its conquest by the Arabs in 842.

After the death of Constantine II in Syracuse, the Italian territories of the empire were effectively left to defend themselves until the late ninth century.

Meanwhile, the intensity of Arab pressure on the eastern border faded. The Arab siege of Constantinople in 717 would be the last real threat to imperial security (from the east) until the Turkish invasion in the eleventh-twelfth century, and most of the Anatolian land they occupied was ultimately retaken by Leo III, who drove them out of Caesarea in 740. The eastern frontier would gradually settle into a situation of constant low intensity warfare, in which both parties renounced the idea of permanent territorial expansion at the expense of the bordering power. Even when Caliph al-Mutasim led an expedition into the core of Anatolia in 837, raiding Amorion and occupying Ancyra, his campaign did not result in a lasting occupation, and was rather a raid of unprecedented scale.

The eighth-ninth centuries also saw the rise and fall of the iconoclastic movement, which despite being sponsored by relatively successful emperors was vibrantly opposed by many strata of the population, first and foremost by an influential monk lobby. It could almost be said that iconoclasm evolved into a fight between the imperial power and a monastic opposition led by the Studite monks. It is of course a reductive explanation, but it is also true that the iconodule monks were the true winners of the iconoclastic controversy.

Being the main opposition party to a powerful but ultimately defeated religious movement – led, it is useful to remember, by the emperor himself - at the moment of their victory the leading monasteries of the empire, like Stoudion, enjoyed a special status as the saviors of orthodoxy, further increasing the credibility of monasticism as a life choice, as a way of saving one's soul and, most importantly for the ends of this chapter, it paved the way for a more legitimate and widespread accumulation of wealth and land in the hands of many powerful monastic estates, which entered the economic scene as bearers of important privileges allowing them relevant competitive advantage.

After this overview, it is possible to delineate some vague outlines regarding the status of the Byzantine economy at the beginning of the middle period:

- 1) the demise of the city as a center of political and economic life and the sharp population decrease in the preceding decades led to a decrease of monetary exchange and a widespread return to barter;
- 2) an almost total regression to barter was somehow stopped by the survival of a centralized state, which needed the circulation and extraction of precious metal to keep the army and the administration working;
- 3) the fiscal and military system was reshaped to revolve around smaller agricultural districts, in which village communities were the main point of reference for tax and labor extraction;
- 4) the specificities of the situation in the eastern and western frontiers led to a state of constant insecurity in the border areas, which fostered the development of pastoralism rather than agriculture. The increasingly lesser scope of Arab raids in the east also insured a steadily growing level of security in the areas "shielded" by central Anatolia;
- 5) the forms of state intervention in trade made investment in land more convenient, and the acquisition of imperial dignities often paved the way for heavy investment in estates and plots made by more or less important aristocracy members;
- 6) after their moral victory against iconoclasm in the ninth century, many monasteries acquired wealth and authority, along with privileges that made it easier for them to accumulate land;
- 7) monastic and secular estates tended in the long run to concentrate vast amount of wealth and influence in the hands of fewer households.

## 2.2 THE DEMISE OF THE ANCIENT CITY AS A FEASIBLE URBAN MODEL

The dramatic decline in urban life that can be seen throughout the post-Roman world has been attributed to many different factors, for example the plague, the loss of territory, the disruptive effect of the Persian and Arab invasions and the constant insecurity following the Muslim advance in the Levant. It is possible that each of these factors played an important role, beginning with the Justinian's plague, which killed 40% of the citizens of densely populated Constantinople<sup>6</sup> but doubtlessly exacting its toll heavily also on the countryside and the less populated towns. The plague left a poorer empire, unable to properly sustain and outfit its armies for at least forty year up to the reign of Maurice (582-602), a fact which triggered many episodes of mutiny and finally an open rebellion which took a junior officer, Phocas, to the throne. Although he probably did not deserve all the bad publicity the sources favorable to Heraklios gave him, the reign of Phocas did in fact witness the most dangerous Persian campaign in the history of the Roman empire, bringing the state to the verge of catastrophe. The Persians held Syria and Egypt for long years, while their Avar allies regularly raided the Balkans and Thrace. This situation had an absolutely disruptive impact on trade networks and, most importantly, on the grain supply for Constantinople and the other major cities left to the empire, like Thessalonica. Many other cities and towns throughout the empire that were slowly recovering from the plague were raided and in many cases burned to the ground, once during the Persian occupation of Anatolia and then again during the first Arab invasion.

The western provinces on the other hand were not much safer, and most of continental Greece fell into the hands of Slav settlers, effectively slipping out of imperial control for a century or so.

It is about this time (second half of the eighth century), that the trend of urban reduction generalizes, and we find that everywhere in the empire the old cities retreated in old or new fortified places, otherwise disappearing or turning into villages.

A few cities did not shrink as dramatically as others, like in the case of Nicaea, which indeed saw its political importance increase. It became the capital of the *Opsikion* theme, and was intended to act as an advanced defense for Constantinople, guarding the hinterland from which the imperial city acquired its grain supply after the loss of Egypt.

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<sup>6</sup>A. Laiou, *The Human Resources*, EHB, p. 49

Something similar happened to the city of Amorion, which became the main administrative center of the *Anatolikon* theme, hierarchically one of the most important military districts of the empire<sup>7</sup>.

During classical times it was certainly a secondary center, but when the frontier moved from the long established area around upper Mesopotamia to the wide no-man's land across the Taurus mountains, Amorion gained importance as a mustering and administrative strong point, its location in the heart of the Anatolian Plateau a witness to the changing nature of warfare, and the priority given to a strong in-depth defense. Recent findings testify to a continued presence of monetary exchange and lively urban activity, despite the repeated – and sometimes successful – attacks on the city in 644, 668, 716, 796 and finally 838, painting an unusual situation where an old city did not totally retreat in the upper fortified town. Still Amorion did not expand much outside its ancient perimeter, and the third city of the empire<sup>8</sup> was confined within the borders of what would have been in older times a very minor town.

However, Amorion was an exception: other cities were not as lucky.

Indeed, in the different contexts of Epirus, Peloponnesus, Attica, Asia Minor and continental Anatolia we can see similar patterns of contraction, of which one of the most striking examples is the fate of the city of Ancyra. What used to be probably the most important settlement of north-central Anatolia, drastically shrunk to the area surrounding the *kastron*. The haste of the process is evident from the huge quantity of salvaged materials – tombstones, millstones, capitals and column cylinders – still present and visible nowadays in the wall circuit of the modern *kale*, despite the numerous Byzantine, Seljuk and Ottoman interventions.

Many other cities suffered the same fate, and we can name a few examples: Athens slowly regrouped around the acropolis beginning in the III century, Corinth around the Akrokorinthos, Ephesus split into the two nuclei of the upper city and the waterfront<sup>9</sup>,

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<sup>7</sup> The military commander of the *Anatolikon* received a *roga* of 40 pounds of gold, equaled only by the strategos of the equally important and ancient *Thrakesion* theme. W. Treadgold, *Byzantium and its army*, p. 165, Stanford 1995

<sup>8</sup> C. and M. Lightfoot, *Amorium: a Byzantine city in Anatolia*, Homer Kitabevi 2006.

<sup>9</sup> E. Concina, *La città Bizantina*, Laterza 2004

Sardis retreated to the large fortified place built over the old acropolis<sup>10</sup> and finally Pergamon was left deserted for almost three centuries<sup>11</sup>.

In many of the cases mentioned above, the demographic collapse of the cities was due more to a perceived change of function than to actual disruptions and invasions – the surviving centers acted as a fortified refuge point, and could not provide much livelihood or gain from exchanges and specialized manufacture anymore. The overwhelming majority of people already lived in the countryside during antiquity, and most of the population that was lost from the cities in the seventh century did not disappear, but emigrated to the country, which was deemed safer and less attractive to the many potential raiders.

All these cities changed shape almost immediately, in a relatively short lapse of time, and this process was superimposed on the gradual dissolution of the civic elite of the empire, the *decuriones*, which constituted the bulk of the educated class and were tasked with the governance of the provincial cities, effectively providing the kind of services that were out of reach for the central administration. This led to a situation in which the surviving imperial governments loosened their control over the periphery, limiting their scope of activity to the monopoly of defense, the collection of taxes, the issuing of money through *rogai* and the occasional imposition of the orthodox rite on the few remaining heterodox segments of the population. They never had the means – or the will – to directly influence provincial society<sup>12</sup>. Generally speaking, the survival of the central government, coupled with the extinction of civic elites produced an environment in which no institution could effectively challenge the imperial authority<sup>13</sup>, which was strong enough to enforce a monopoly on the abovementioned fields, but was not nearly so powerful as to impose itself in a way similar to modern states.

The rise of the *dynatoi* as a social class can also be read under this perspective, as an attempt to fill a natural reaction to this social void, with relationships of informal dependency between the (relatively) powerful and the (relatively) weak, using a relational

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<sup>10</sup> C. Foss, J. Ayer Scott, Sardis, EHB, p. 617

<sup>11</sup> K. Rheidt, The Urban Economy of Pergamon, EHB, p. 624

<sup>12</sup> L. Neville, Authority in Byzantine Provincial society, 950-1000, Cambridge University Press 2004

<sup>13</sup> With the notable exception of the Church, which had its own field of activity and had a peculiar, at times symbiotic relation with the imperial power.

model that repeated itself more or less in the same way on any level on the hierarchical ladder.

Besides the survival of a few small or medium centers like Amorion and Nicaea, the only two cities left to the empire were Thessalonica and, of course, Constantinople.

Thessalonica had been effectively cut off from the rest of the empire by the seventh century, so much so that emperor Justinian II had to advance in arms through Macedonia to reach it<sup>14</sup>. The city relied by necessity on external sources of support, including grain supply. With the exclusion of its immediate hinterland, the city had no countryside, and already by 619 it had to withstand the Slav siege with the help of grain shipments coming from Egypt or later from the Capital. Grain supply seemed to be in the hands of public figures which may also have acted as merchants<sup>15</sup>. The mention of *naukleroï* (ship captains) and *emporoi* (merchants) in the Life of Saint Demetrios<sup>16</sup> seems to testify for a continuity of urban life in Thessalonica, which nevertheless assumed a more typically medieval and Christian physiognomy. As a significant example, the building and restoration of the important sanctuaries of Saint Demetrios and Saint Sophia in 618-630 coincided with the complete abandonment of the old roman *forum*, while its mint will cease working until the late ninth century<sup>17</sup>.

The capital itself did not survive unchanged from this period of transformation. The city had already begun its transition towards a more medieval and Christian organization of space by the reign of Justinian I, who was happy to rebuild the baths and palaces destroyed in the fires of 532, but probably preferred to apply his well known taste for monumental architecture to sacred buildings<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> H. Turtledove, *The Chronicle of Theophanes*, p. 364, University of Pennsylvania press, 1982. While he was there, Justinian decided to settle the Slavs he took prisoners in the *Opsikion* theme, around Abydos.

<sup>15</sup> A. Laiou, *Exchange and Trade, Seventh-Twelfth centuries*, EHB, p. 701 The examples mentioned are taken from the *Miracles of St. Demetrios*

<sup>16</sup> In A. Laiou, *ibidem*

<sup>17</sup> E. Concina, *ibidem* p. 60

<sup>18</sup> C. Mango, *Le Développement Urbain de Constantinople (IV-VII siècles)*, p. 52, De Boccard 2004

During his reign, the empire suffered greatly from the first emergence of bubonic plague in Europe, which allegedly killed between half and two-thirds of the population<sup>19</sup>, paving the way for a victorious Persian advance in the east, approximately 70 years later.

The war with Persia proved disastrous for the health of the city.

First, the most important source of supply for Constantinople, the Egyptian grain shipped from Alexandria, was cut off from the city when the Persians took it in 618, and further reduction of the supply flow happened when the Avars began raiding Thrace and the same Persians occupied Asia Minor. Such a difficult situation (so difficult in fact that Heraclius seriously thought of moving the capital to Carthage) improved a little by the 630s, when peace in the Balkans and in Anatolia was briefly restored, but by the first Arab campaigns in Anatolia, emperor Constans II reverted to the thought of moving the capital from the Bosphorus, this time to Rome, or even Syracuse, a decision that may have cost him his life<sup>20</sup>.

Whether or not Constans really wanted to move the capital to Italy can only be a subject of speculation, but it is true that by the eight century Constantinople looked nothing like the metropolis of the Justinianic age, and the population declined so drastically that it could probably rely on itself and on its immediate surroundings for its grain supply when it had to withstand the Arab siege of 717, and the most convincing figure for the immediate post-crisis population of the city is around 40.000<sup>21</sup>. The decline in population also meant a ruralization of the vast uninhabited areas contained within the Theodosian walls, which became a place for orchards, gardens and graveyards. The burial of people outside the city was organized by the clergy of Hagia Sophia, which was granted by Justinian the fiscal revenues from 1.100 shops in order to grant an effective service<sup>22</sup>. The fact that the practice of extramural burial managed by the clergy of the Great Church disappeared after the seventh century can either mean that the shops of Constantinople could no longer grant a fiscal surplus that could be redirected to that kind of social service, that the organizational structure behind the service was trampled by the many crises of that time, that the city became so sparsely inhabited that it no longer made

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<sup>19</sup> C. Mango, *ibidem* p. 58

<sup>20</sup> Theophanes, p. 50

<sup>21</sup> C. Mango, *ibidem*, p. 54

<sup>22</sup> G. Dagron, *The Urban Economy (seventh-twelfth centuries)*, EHB p. 424



sense for the people to go outside the walls to bury the dead when they could easily find a place in any of the numerous abandoned places *inside* the walls, or perhaps all of this. Either way, it is a clear symptom of decline in the urban institutions that regulated the life of Constantinople before the seventh century.

Nevertheless, the city retained its role as undisputed capital, and never totally surrendered to the dynamics of ruralization, entrenchment and simplification that were so widespread everywhere across the provinces, and that is probably due also to the role of the imperial court, which together with the surviving magnates and the high church hierarchy covered the functions of urban supervision, organization and embellishment that were proper to the *decuriones* class in the periphery.

The global picture for the beginning of the eighth century is thus one of general entrenchment, militarization and simplification. To tell it with Gilbert Dagron “the city of antiquity gave way to the medieval town”<sup>23</sup>: the urban centers renounced many of their civic and political functions, becoming simple points of gathering and exchange, without a planned structure, a clearly defined geometry and a diversified organization of communal space. Forms of “political” urban life – here “political” should be intended as typical of the old *polis*, and somehow opposed to the new life in the reduced citadels - inherited from classical times, as said, only survived in Constantinople, and only when they had their *raison d’être* in some parts of the imperial ceremonial, as with the hippodrome. Similar structures, which lacked a connection with the imperial ritual, were abandoned or reused. There is also the feeling of a more introverted economy, where many cities barely survived and turned to their immediate hinterland for the essential exchanges, greatly reducing the need for longer scale (sometimes even regional) trade, which in turn drastically reduced the immediate need for exchange in cash. The loss of major trade hubs like Antioch or Alexandria also drastically reduced inter-regional movement of goods and people, including coins, radicalizing a trend towards self-consumption already apparent during the reign of Maurice<sup>24</sup>.

The fact that a surprisingly low number of coins from this period has been found through Anatolia and the Balkans does not necessarily mean that coin circulation dramatically decreased, or stopped altogether. But it may nonetheless point out a lower diffusion of

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<sup>23</sup> G. Dagron, *ibidem*, p. 398

<sup>24</sup> C. Morrisson, *Byzantine Money: its production and circulation*, EHB, p. 956

bullion, as well as lower hoarding possibilities for those who could afford to pay in specie. It is likely that coins of every kind were reserved for the payment of taxes, or for equally relevant tasks, thus increasing their perceived value (against their legal\real values) and becoming themselves an expensive commodity that families, individuals and institutions could not afford to set aside.

Whatever the causes then, the effects of the macroscopic crisis in the sixth-seventh centuries were common through the empire, with a definite decrease in monetary exchange and long distance trade, and the retraction of the urban centers constituted only the most visible symptom of this structural, rather than conjunctural, phenomenon.

### 2.3 THE STATE-POWERED RECOVERY

The state in the Byzantine world was without any doubt the most powerful and influential economic actor of all, for the simple fact that it governed the distribution and minting of coins, both in the central mint in Constantinople and in the provincial ones, in Syracuse (later moved to Reggio), Thessalonica and Kherson, when they were not closed during the seventh-eighth centuries.

The monetary system was reorganized and simplified between Heraclius and Teophilos, and revolved around the reintroduction of silver coinage in the form of the *miliaresion*. The previous form of silver money, the *hexagram*, had practically disappeared from coinage during the seventh century, but was widely used for works of art and precious items during the same period, leading to many different explanations<sup>25</sup>, but was successfully reintroduced, assuming forms similar to those of the muslim *dirham*, with which it was meant to compete. The value of a *miliaresion* was fixed to be 1/12 of the standard golden coin, the *nomisma*, while its ratio to the lower copper coin, the *folles*, was 1:24. The introduction of silver coinage helped the simplification of the coinage model inherited from late roman times, as the silver issue substituted the lighter versions of the *nomisma* (*semmissis* and *tremissis*) which gradually disappeared. The overall result was a net simplification that led to an easy trimetallic standard, in which golden coinage was used for transactions with the state (in form of tax payments and yearly stipends), silver for uncommon ordinary exchanges and finally copper for those everyday transactions that

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<sup>25</sup> C. Morrisson, *Ibidem*, p. 929

were monetized, especially in cities. Gradual increase in the issue of subunits of the *miliaresion* from the eleventh century can thus be an effective proof of the increased use of money as a mean of exchange.

The state was also the “biggest spender”, continuously putting money in circulation directly through the annual payment of *rogai* to soldiers, officials and officers, or indirectly, by paying for the supply of the City, the army and those whose services it needed.

Unfortunately little can be inferred about the precise army size and pay during the transition period, mainly due to the scarcity of documents, which began to be more abundant again somewhere in the ninth century. To define the levels of pay in the army of the eighth century it will be necessary to start at the time of Teophilus’ reform, in the 840s, and from there trying to reconstruct the payroll at the beginning of the iconoclastic age, after the institution of the standing *tagmata* by Constantine V.

In this respect, if we take for good the estimates made by Treadgold, the total number of men in the army payrolls for the ninth century was somewhere around 120.000<sup>26</sup>. Although most of these men lived off their lands (around 96.000 including the soldiers of the Naval Themes like the *kyberrotai*, who were bound to their plots by Nikephoros I in the early ninth century) they still received a yearly pay of 9 golden *nomismata*, and including the pay for the officers, the Strategoi and their service personnel (without of course considering the informal armed or unarmed personnel accompanying them, who were probably paid by the officers themselves), we reach a total of 1.441.404 golden *nomismata*<sup>27</sup>.

The pay for the single soldiers and possibly the junior officers was probably inclusive of campaign rations of 30 modioi of grain and 20 measures of wine (384 kg and 205 liters respectively) per year<sup>28</sup>, amounting to a total of circa 2 *nomismata*<sup>29</sup>, with an extra 2 *nomismata* worth of horse fodder for the cavalry soldiers.

According to Treadgold, the number of soldiers, of both the themes and the *tagmata* was around 80.000 in 773, meaning that in 130 years around 40.000 soldiers were added to

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<sup>26</sup> W. Treadgold, *Byzantium and its army*, p. 94.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 182

<sup>28</sup> C. Morrisson, J. Cheynet, *Prices and Wages in the Byzantine World*, EHB p. 871

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*

the imperial army as a whole, which saw a definite expansion in continental Greece, and gathered the means to support the new *tagma* of the Hikanatoi under Nikephoros I.

Of those, 62.000 were thematic soldiers in 773, while in 842 they were 96.000. It is sometimes assumed that the level of pay for the ordinary troops was increased by Teophilus, so the pay before his reforms may have been slightly lower, and it can be cautiously be stated that the amount paid on average for each soldier was somewhere between around 5 *nomismata* per year.

For the *tagmata*, we see an increase of 6000 men, due to the adjustments of the system after its creation, and the foundation of new regiments, from a total of 18.000 in 773 to 24.000 in 842. Their pays were higher than those of the ordinary soldiers, amounting to 12 *nomismata*, which did not include the equipment and rations issued by the state.

According to Treadgold<sup>30</sup>, the pay for the officers of each theme amounted to 33,7% of the total payroll. He takes off from a passage of the Chronicle of Theophanes<sup>31</sup>, stating that the stolen pay of the *Armeniakon* amounted to 93.600 *nomismata*, to propose that the average pay for the themes officers amounted to 33,7% of the total payroll.

The total number of men available to the empire was thus somewhere around 80.000 in 773, 62.000 of which were paid 5 *nomismata* a year, while 18.000 received 12.

So, without taking into consideration the pay for the newly appointed Strategoi of the themes of Greece, and the subdivisions of the existing ones, like Cappadocia, Paphlagonia, Chaldea and others or the commanders and officers or staff members we can say with extreme caution that the total payroll for the Byzantine army during the first iconoclasm was somewhere around 721.000 golden *nomismata* per year<sup>32</sup>. This is still an admittedly low estimate, since as said, it does not take into account the creation of new districts from the older themes, which would have weighted for circa 1000 *nomismata* per year in the state budget, or the salary paid to the navy's sailors.

Also, before Leo III and his son Constantine V put effort into monetizing tax extraction it is possible that a good part of the pay, if not indeed most, was given in kind in the form of wheat and foodstuff redistribution.

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<sup>30</sup> Treadgold, *ibidem*, p. 190

<sup>31</sup> Theophanes p. 489

<sup>32</sup> Treadgold doesn't seem to count the higher pay of *tagmata* soldiers in his study of the army budget in 811, which according to him amounted to 645.000 *nomismata*. *Ibidem*, p. 191.

Nevertheless, this kind of expense, aimed primarily at keeping the army happy and effective, had a positive effect on the monetization of the empire as a whole, because a relatively significant part of the rural population would receive money directly from the state, and by spending it would allow bullion to circulate more easily throughout the provinces, helped in this by the nature of the military plot system itself, which with its evenly distributed *stratitika ktemata* avoided the concentration of money-receiving soldiery along the borders or near the capital, thus allowing for a more balanced expansion of the use of coinage as a mean of exchange in the countryside, opposed to barter.

The relatively frequent campaigning seasons also provided constant stimuli to the rural economy, as the marching armies, almost always moving through friendly territory by this time, needed all kinds of services. Although these services were often unpaid for by the government<sup>33</sup>, they were counted as a tax payment, and could have allowed coinage some freedom from the “government-services-taxes-government” circle, increasing the possibility of circulation and helping economic exchanges.

Another positive side effect of a standing army to the Byzantine economy was the push it gave to the “defense industry”, as the militarized empire needed a more widespread network of distribution for weaponry, arsenals to keep the navy efficient, fortifications and granaries to resist the frequent enemy invasions, and so on.

The salary of each soldier –which is useful to remember here was supplied by the income of his tax-free farm – could have been invested in more lands, granted to pious institutions or simply hoarded for rainy days.

These side effects were often reduced or nullified by the situation of political instability, with warfare inside almost as often as outside the borders, raiding armies and the inevitable famines and natural disasters which plague agricultural economies, but were nonetheless a significant reason for growth in the long run, especially after the focus of military campaigns moved from within the imperial borders to the frontier areas.

Another important element in the state budget, although definitely less relevant than the army, was the pay for dignities and offices assigned to the court members. The size of the

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<sup>33</sup> And it is telling that the Italian word for “abuse” and “oppression” (“*angheria*”) comes from the medieval Greek *αγγαρια*, which originally indicated the demenial messenger service and, for extension, the *corvées* the arrival of a messenger often implied. In modern Turkish as well, “*Angarya*” means an unpleasant, unwanted mandatory task.

court and the central administration was indeed very variable over time, but the costs sustained to keep the court and the palace running at the level of luxury adequate for a state bent on giving the image of being the universal empire, plus the annual *rogai* given to the various official or dignitaries in gold or in the imperial quasi-coin silk, must have doubtlessly constituted a relevant expense.

Plus, as it was the case of soldiers, the emoluments received by dignitaries were often reinvested in estates or otherwise put into circulation. In particular, acquiring land, especially since its costs were so low in largely depopulated Anatolia or in newly regained Greece, was the best way to secure one's status in the community, and in addition it constituted a relatively secure investment and a safe inheritance to pass to one's descendents.

Finally, in the long run, the Palace itself played a primary role in boosting manufacture and artisanal production of luxury goods in the capital and its immediate surroundings.

The state thus survived, and was still able to impose its authority enough to command the resources needed to this kind of expenses through a network of provincial civil servants that survived all the crises, and although probably less efficient and less educated, was still able to perform its job, enabling a slow but sure return to relative prosperity by the second half of the ninth century.

## 2.4 RURAL DISTRICTS AND TAX EXTRACTION

All those resources came into the hands of the state through taxes, gathered for the most part from agricultural lands, with significant income coming also from trade duties and urban rents.

Rural taxation was imposed calculating the land value, which varied according to the land quality and extension, plus an hearth tax on every family who lived on the land whether or not it was its owner. Land value was assessed by periodical surveys, and there is a debate on whether or not the central government had the means to conduct such surveys, and their frequency. The land value was determined by its usage status, in *nomismata* per unit of area<sup>34</sup>: first class lands (irrigated fields) were worth 1 *nomisma*,

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<sup>34</sup> In Oikonomides, *The role of the Byzantine State in the Economy*, EHB p.974, the unit used to measure land area was the *modios*, given without specifying its value in square meters, while in

while arable fields were considered second class land, and were worth  $\frac{1}{2}$  *nomisma* per unit, while the least valuable land, pasture, was worth  $\frac{1}{3}$  *nomisma*. We know that other kinds of cultivated land, such as vineyards and orchards were worth 3 *nomismata* per area unit<sup>35</sup>.

Once this was assessed, the base tax was  $\frac{1}{24}$  of the calculated land value.

If the land belonged to a village, i.e. was considered part of its fiscal community, each villager had his land registered in the local cadastres. When taxes were due, if a member of the fiscal district was unable to meet his obligations, the village had to cover his payment for him.

Shared tax responsibility for a village community was never taken to its social and fiscal extremes, as shown by the case of detached lands, i.e. lands that lay abandoned by their owners for less than thirty years. During this time they were called *idiostata*, and assessed at a lower value, and if in this period the owner or his heir did not reclaim them, they became *klasmata*, a detached land belonging to the state, and the village was not responsible for its taxes anymore<sup>36</sup>.

The absence of labor and their abandoned state made the market value of klasmatic lands only a fraction of the normal price, and in the tenth century could be as cheap as  $\frac{1}{33}$  *nomisma* (circa 9 *folles*) per modios<sup>37</sup>. It is indeed possible that the low price for klasmatic lands was one of the reasons why the rural citizens of the empire were able to recover abandoned and depopulated territories from the ninth century, and would also help explaining how an aristocracy of landed magnates formed more or less during the same time, as many of them (most notably Phokades, Skleroi, Curcuas and Maniakes<sup>38</sup>) came from the regions of the Anatolian plateau that offered higher rates of abandoned lands (due to war, desertions, movements away from the frontier) at even lower prices, since

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Morrisson and Cheynet, *Prices and Wages*, the unit used is the *Aroura*, equivalent to circa 2.700 square meters. Here, I assume the equivalence of the two units of measurement.

<sup>35</sup> Oikonomides, *The Role of the Byzantine State in the Economy*, EHB

<sup>36</sup> *Fiscal Treatise*, p. 116, cit. in E. McGeer, *The Land Legislation of the Macedonian Emperors*, p. 66, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2000

<sup>37</sup> Morrisson and Cheynet, *Prices and Wages* p. 818

<sup>38</sup> In Skilitzes, for example, the Phokades are repeatedly said to own estates in Cappadocia, while Skleroi and Maniakes had neighboring estates in the Anatolikon theme. The Kurkuas are said to come from the Armeniakon theme.

most of inner Anatolia was probably assessed as pastureland, for both physical and convenience reasons – herds could have been protected much better than fields.

This base land tax was then supplemented by small addenda that began as *una tantum* and then, as often happens, became permanent. The first was the *dikeraton*, a tax of two *keratia* (one *miliaresion*) each *nomisma* paid in taxes, levied by Leo III to fund his renewal of the Theodosian Walls<sup>39</sup>. Another equivalent tax (also called *dikeraton*) was instituted by Nikephoros I in his effort to update the land registers, as a measure to cover the administrative expenses of his new land census<sup>40</sup>. Another was the *hexafollion*, which added six *folles* for each *nomisma*, while the *synethia* and the *elatikon* constituted together an increase of 1,5 *nomismata* for each golden coin paid in taxes, and were taken by the single tax collectors to cover their own expenses and those related to their private armed entourages. Totally, those supplements amounted to 1,7 *nomismata*. Collectively, they constituted an increase of 24% in agricultural taxation<sup>41</sup>.

A hearth tax (*kapnikon*) was paid in addition to the base land tax, and initially amounted to 2 *miliaresia* (later increased to 3, and then 6) for each household residing in the single estate, and was imposed irregardless of the ownership status

The total burden of land taxes paid by a landholder, as calculated by Oikonomides<sup>42</sup> would amount to 39-49% if the land was rented and worked by others, or 18-25% if the land was worked directly by the owner. What may seem like a wide difference in land taxation between leased and owned land, doesn't take into account the value of labor (time and manual effort) involved in cases of direct cultivation, which may well have closed the gap.

At least some of this taxation was monetized by the time of Leo III, who imposed his *dikeraton* on wall restoration, but a leap forward in the monetization of the countryside was probably made possible by his son Constantine V. In all likelihood his was the first thorough attempt at imposing a taxation in golden coinage, and its effectiveness is testified by passages in the chronicles that speak of him as “new Midas”<sup>43</sup> who “heaped

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<sup>39</sup> Theophanes, p. 412

<sup>40</sup> Theophanes, p. 487

<sup>41</sup> These and the other data relating to rural taxation are taken from Oikonomides, *Role of the State*

<sup>42</sup> Oikonomides, *ibidem*, p. 1003

<sup>43</sup> Nikephoros, p. 85



up treasures of gold by stripping the peasants bare”<sup>44</sup>. It is indeed true that the (re)conversion of the fiscal system to a gold standard was mostly felt at the time by the small landholders. Huge numbers of peasants flooded the market, selling their produce at reduced prices<sup>45</sup> in an attempt to obtain the coinage needed to purchase the gold to pay their taxes – and it is very likely that the price of gold coins at change tables rose steeply in a time of such great demand. The equally steep devaluation in grain prices “made the city prosper”<sup>46</sup>, and it is possible that a reduced supply price helped attract people again to a city that was left almost empty by the last serious outbreak of the plague<sup>47</sup>, and further evidence can be found in the aqueduct restoration works started by the same Constantine 20 years later: many of the peasants who found it hard to live by the meager earnings a deflated grain price could provide them probably moved to the city to work as laborers, thus finding themselves on the profiting side of the deflationary crisis, as they could enjoy the artificial abundance of cheap foodstuffs. On the other hand, the vast majority of peasants who could not or did not want to move to the cities suffered from this situation, at least until the economy stabilized and adapted to this “fiscal gold standard”. How long it took for this to happen we cannot know, but it is likely that the deflation lasted for several years, helped by the effects a particularly harsh winter that had frozen the Black Sea waters a few years before<sup>48</sup>. But it is likely that by the end of the century the fiscal system was completely monetized. A monetized taxation allowed for much greater flexibility in accounting, storing and redistributing than could have ever existed with a system of payments in kind. And although the state was the institution that gained the most from it, similar benefits were granted on a smaller scale and with much diversity to society as a whole. An increased availability and circulation of cash made it possible to detach daily or large-scale exchanges from the natural rhythms of production –at least a little - as coinage substituted perishable or cumbersome goods and was easier to carry around.

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<sup>44</sup> Theophanes, p. 443

<sup>45</sup> Patriarch Nikephoros, p. 85, tells us that 60 *modioi* of grain (circa 768kg) could be bought with 1 *nomisma*.

<sup>46</sup> Theophanes, p. 443

<sup>47</sup> Nikephoros, p. 67

<sup>48</sup> Nikephoros, p. 74

Still, it has to be remembered that for the majority of countryside dwellers, gold and silver coinage was a rare and expensive commodity reserved for tax payments or important transactions with the state, while barter maintained its predominance in peer-to-peer peasant exchanges.

Although those of Constantine V can surely be considered as measures that helped spread the use of gold in the peripheral areas of the Empire, the necessary preconditions for their effectiveness were a certain stability and a certain confidence in the Byzantine economy, achieved in the last decades despite all the raids and epidemics.

In less than forty years, the empress Irene was able to lift part of the *commercias* (import and export duties) levied at the important stations of Abydos and Hieron<sup>49</sup>, respectively the southern gate to the Marmara Sea and the northern entrance to the Bosphorus, together with what Theophanes calls “city taxes”<sup>50</sup>. There are many possible interpretations for such a controversial choice, and we cannot be sure whether she did it to increase her popularity among the big traders and the population of Constantinople (who could help her counterbalance the opposition of the army, still loyal to her son Constantine VI) or to stimulate urban trade and repopulation, or maybe hoped to directly reduce the political influence of the army by cutting its budget. Surely enough, an increased and more stable inflow of cash coming from the countryside made these cuts less unbearable for the state budget, at least in the short run.

Whatever the strength of the Byzantine economy at the beginning of the ninth century, this tax relief could not last long, and it provided many court officials with an excuse to oust Irene. Among them was Nikephoros, Logothete of the *Genikon*, that is, charged with running the state finances. He probably did a good job in restoring the budget after he became emperor in 802, since Theophanes in his chronicle repeatedly refers to him as “greedy” and “devourer of everything”<sup>51</sup> and seemed to feel some sort of perverted relief when describing his death by the hands of the Bulgar Khan Krum in 811<sup>52</sup>.

In fact, this “Iconoclast Arch-Devil” did whatever was in his power to restore the state budget after the damages done by Irene, as the years he spent as a leading figure in the

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<sup>49</sup> Theophanes, p. 475

<sup>50</sup> *ibidem*

<sup>51</sup> Theophanes, p. 478-79

<sup>52</sup> Theophanes, p. 491

government machinery gave him the knowledge and skills needed for the task. His posthumous infamy is, after all, a fate shared by many other statesmen who dared increase taxation, and may well derive from the bitterness his policies caused among the newly-taxed monasteries and religious institutions.

His most famous measures are recollected by the same Theophanes in his list of the “Ten Evils”<sup>53</sup>. Besides the enforcement of resettlement policies of Anatolian Christians in the recently reconquered *Sklaviniai* and the grant of military plots to the soldiers of the naval themes, most of the enumerated vexations are in fact adjustments of the taxation system. He introduced shared responsibility for *strateia* payments, meaning that poorer soldiers had to be armed by their villages, collectively responsible for *ad hoc* yearly payments of 18,5 *nomismata* to provide for the necessary equipment and supplies. He also resurveyed the land, adding another *dikeraton* of taxes in clerk’s fees that would become permanent, and requesting payments from those who were found to have more than what they registered. Other “evils” were the imposition of the hearth tax (*kapnikon*) also to the tenants and laborers of the pious houses and monasteries (retroactively), the reintroduction of the taxes lifted by Irene, the taxation of hoards found up to twenty years before (meant to update the tax status of those who had become suddenly richer in the previous generation), an inheritance tax and another tax on the purchase of household slaves outside the duty station of Abydos<sup>54</sup>; finally, the state gained the monopoly in the loans market (or at least a very strong position), loaning to the most prominent traders at 16,6% interest.

Globally, Nikephoros’ “ten evils” must have had a long lasting impact on the fiscal system, creating a new standard for the work of civil servants and bringing the old state registers and cadastres up to date. Although it’s not possible to determine how thoroughly these measures were implemented by the provincial bureaucracy, they served their purpose, and their introduction in 802 marks a turning point in the history of Byzantine economic consolidation. This event can be seen as both a witness and as a stimulus to this process, so much that only half a century later, the treasury left by Teophilus at the time of his death contained, according to Skylitzes, 1900 *kentenaria* of gold and 3000 of silver,

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<sup>53</sup> Theophanes, p. 487

<sup>54</sup> This tax amounted to 2 *nomismata*, thus pointing at the fact that slaves were at the time a pretty expensive commodity.

immediately squandered in trivial pursuits by his son Michael “the Drunkard”<sup>55</sup>. It was indeed an impressive quantity of gold, theoretically able to pay the army salary for a full decade. It comes by itself that the numbers need not to be taken at face value, especially since the source reporting them was written almost three hundred years later, and refers to an emperor whose *damnatio memoriae* as an inept spendthrift was indeed the founding myth of the Macedonian dynasty. Nevertheless, the simple fact that a huge balance surplus was reported – with that particular proportion of gold and silver, is telling. The disproportion of gold and silver was possibly due to the fact that many of the new taxes were paid in *miliaresia* or that the amount of small exchanges (that is, not big enough as to be taxed in gold) substantially increased. Both hypotheses thus point out how the Byzantine economy was showing clear signs of recovery and expansion, at least in the form of a more concrete presence of the state, which came together with a more efficient and pervasive tax extraction system.

## 2.5 STABILIZATION OF THE EASTERN AND WESTERN FRONTIERS

Growth in monetization and stabilization of the economy was greatly helped by the gradual settlement of the imperial frontiers, both east and west.

In the east, the two main fronts were the Caucasus, with its galaxy of Armenian and Georgian principalities, and the Cholonea-Sebastea-Caesarea line adjoining with the Taurus range, up to river Lamos, close to Seleucia.

The way the empire dealt with Armenia did not change much from the times when the main eastern foe was the Sasanian empire, and for much of the period under analysis proxy kingdoms were alternatively backed by one of the two conflicting powers, which offered them their support in the endless internecine struggles between small competing lords, in exchange for their alliance.

For geographical reasons, Armenia has always been as hard to conquer as it was hard to keep, and once the first wave of Muslim warrior enthusiasm declined in the early eighth century, neither the Byzantines nor the Caliphate had for the time any intention to embark in expensive campaigns that were likely to get stuck in risky and time-consuming mountain warfare.

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<sup>55</sup> Skylitzes, p. 96. A *kentenarion* was the equivalent of 100 pounds. 1900 *kentenaria* of gold were the equivalent of 13.680.000 *nomismata*.

In this context, the most effective “Proxy” for Byzantium was the Khazar state right north of the Caucasus, to which the empire relocated the harassment of enemy-held Armenia.

The foothold the Caliphate had in central Anatolia nevertheless reduced the role of gate (or shield) of the imperial eastern territories Armenia played during the struggle with the Sasanians, and allowed the Arab expeditions to reach locations deep in western Asia Minor.

The siege of 717-18 was in this sense a turning point in the history of Byzantine-Caliphal relations, as permanent settlement in the raided territories became increasingly rare, to vanish completely when in 835 Theophilus took back the last occupied center north of the Taurus Range, Tyana, where the Caliph went as far as building a mosque.

The Caliphs often undertook huge scale raids with the purpose of stabilizing their hold on power, legitimizing their right to rule with successful campaigns deep into Christian territory. These expeditions could sometimes arrive as far as the Asian shores of the Bosphorus, like the one led in 782 by Harun-al-Rashid against empress Irene, which resulted in a humiliating peace bought by the Byzantines with a yearly tribute of 160.000 *nomismata*<sup>56</sup>, more or less a tenth of the budget inherited by Michael III sixty years later<sup>57</sup>. But increasingly from the ninth century onwards, with the progressive weakening of the Caliphate, the region became the theater of a low-intensity warfare, with seasonal raids undertaken regularly by the rulers of Muslim border principalities, like Aleppo and Tarsus, which somehow maintained the frontier ethos of early Islam and a certain appeal to wandering warbands, attracting fighters from distant regions of the *Umma* well into the tenth century<sup>58</sup>. This “leasing” of raiding responsibilities from the Caliphate to the border principalities was a result of a growing internal instability, indeed of a gradual retraction of the central government from the periphery: after the last big raid lead by a Caliph in 837-38, which soundly defeated the imperial army and had devastating short-term effects, the smaller expeditions undertaken by smaller states such as Malatya, Tarsus and Aleppo meant less men, less damage and generally less danger.

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<sup>56</sup> Theophane, p. 456

<sup>57</sup> Skylitzes, p. 96, see note 55

<sup>58</sup> Yahya of Antioch, p. 109 talks about 5000 fighters from Khorasan, who reached Antioch in the 960s hoping to loot and raid Byzantine lands.

The frontier thus settled along the Taurus and the region around Melitene\Malatya, and for several generations, territorial acquisitions on both sides were either transitory or minor adjustments, until the taking of Melitene finally paved the way for the Nicephorian conquests of Cilicia and coastal Syria in the 960s.

The lesser scope of Muslim raids from the east allowed for increased security in those regions less exposed to the enemy, and overall it is possible to divide the eastern provinces in three “areas of exposure”. First, we have those areas laying along the frontier, either in the “no-man’s land” or in the immediate whereabouts, which were the most exposed and were naturally less suitable for a prosperous agriculture. Those areas (Cappadocia, Chaldia, Seleucia, Charsianon, eastern Anatolikon) were thus inclined towards the development of an economy based on livestock rather than agriculture, especially pastoralism, and its effect are still visible in certain areas of Anatolia<sup>59</sup>. Here, destruction of property through warfare was a concrete possibility, and this led to the development of a wide network of strong points where people could hide their properties and themselves. Unlike the other regions of Anatolia, which were less exposed to raid and constant military actions, the endless state of war suffered by the Cappadocians, Chaldians etc. contributed to the development – as far as we know, unique within the Byzantine context – of a warrior ethos, evident from heroic epics such as the *Digenis Akritas*, but also clearly visible in ordinary chronicles. The soldierly ethos is evident in Skylitzes’ accounts of the Phokas revolt under Basil II<sup>60</sup>, or in Leo the Deacon, as the writer describes Nikephoros II as a man who could pierce an armor with a single thrust of his spear<sup>61</sup>. Warrior values like these were somehow alien to byzantine culture, at least in its official Constantinople-based manifestations, and their flourishing was symptomatic of the growth of a distinctly military elite in those exact places, as those who were skilled or lucky enough to climb the army ranks were rewarded with huge gold stipends and prestige within their community, and would reinvest both kinds of currency into large

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<sup>59</sup> Although the main blow to the Anatolian landscape was dealt by the Turcoman tribes when they settled in, at the end of the eleventh century.

<sup>60</sup> Skylitzes, p. 337, When the rebel Bardas “Phokas (who was of the opinion that it was better to die gloriously than to live ignobly” desperately charges into Basil II and dies from heart attack. A similar statement occurs just a few pages before, when the same Phokas charges into Skleros trying to kill him personally.

<sup>61</sup> Leo the Deacon, p. 11

estates and possibly client networks, also taking advantage of the reduced land prices. The frontier and its ethos, combined with the higher density of abandoned *klasmata* thus helped foster the mechanism of estate-building that was to play such an important role during the tenth and eleventh centuries.

A second area, roughly comprising the region of the later *Anatolikon* (that is, Amorion, Ikonion, Dorylaion), *Bukellarion* (Ankyra) and Paphlagonia was safer than the first one, but not as far from the frontier as to be completely safe from enemy incursion. Raids as far as Ankyra were not really exceptional between the seventh and tenth centuries, although they gradually became less and less common. These areas were relatively less populated and wealthy than the coastal ones, and developed in a manner similar to the frontier zone, although pastoralism and large estates were probably not as widespread and relevant as in, for example, Cappadocia.

The third area enjoyed a relatively more peaceful demographic and production growth, benefitting from a more fertile soil, the presence of the Aegean seafaring highway and of course the protection allowed by the Anatolian hinterland, which acted as a shield. Smaller property lasted longer, as the price for acquiring higher quality land and the rarer occurrence of *klasmata* made it harder to accumulate vast estates, and the reduced possibilities for military careers in these areas also made it harder to acquire well-paid positions in the army hierarchy.

The state of peace the Aegean coast achieved at the beginning of the ninth century was soon overturned by a new wave of Muslim raiders, this time coming from the west.

Since the time the old Exharchate of Carthage was overrun by the Muslims in the late seventh century, the Byzantines had to entrust the defense of their western flank to the themes of Sicily and southern Italy, until those provinces were themselves besieged by the western Arabs and the Franks at the end of the ninth century.

But the loss of Sicily to the Arabs was less of a problem for the empire than the loss of Crete.

The emirate established by Cordovan expatriates in 828 is sometimes called a “pirates’ nest”, but was probably more than that<sup>62</sup>. Nevertheless, the island of Crete effectively acted as the key to the Aegean Sea, and after its conquest the exchange between the two shores decreased dramatically, as the security level fell and all the coastline up to Abydos

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<sup>62</sup> V. Christides, *The Moslems of Crete in the Aegean Sea*, p. 77, Bruxelles 1981

became threatened. Even though the Cretan Muslims rarely exposed themselves with raids, the island was used as a base by Egyptian and Syrian fleets, as in the case of the 904 sack of Thessalonica by Leo of Tripoli<sup>63</sup>.

Nevertheless, the following events, and the fact that even in Komnenan times the Aegean shores remained the most wealthy and productive areas of the Empire and Thessalonica its most important provincial city, made it clear that the disruption of trade, exchange and material goods during the century and a half of Muslim Thalassocracy in the Aegean did not have heavy long-term effects on the region's course of development.

On the other side of the Aegean, the recovery of the provinces occupied by the Slavs was slow but constant through the eighth century, until the conquest of Peloponnese during the reign of Nikephoros I sealed the return of Byzantine rule in the region. The term *Sklaviniai* designated a fluid, stateless area stretching from western Thrace to the Adriatic sea, which was by its own nature difficult to deal with, being structured around extended family ties which lacked a proper center of political gravity<sup>64</sup>. It took many intensive campaigning seasons to achieve their submission, but in the end these lands were once again integrated in the imperial fiscal system, and were systematically resettled with people coming from Byzantine Anatolia. The presence of magnates in the Peloponnese, like the famous widow Danielis who helped Basil I, may constitute a witness to the resilience of local potentates who secured their position and their lands by offering collaboration with the imperial forces. The Slavs constituted more than a simple nuisance for the empire, as they had already threatened to take Thessalonica and the other Byzantine exclaves in coastal Greece several times, and their submission allowed the towns and the countryside some time to breathe until the new threat posed by the emirate of Crete emerged.

A particularly troublesome front was the Bulgarian one, and not because of the inherent military potential or aggressiveness of the Bulgarian state. The real problem with Bulgaria was its proximity to the core of the empire, and the de facto impossibility of establishing a proper in-depth defense modeled after the eastern provinces. The political system of the Bulgarian *khanate* has been used as an explanation for their constant aggressiveness towards Byzantium: as in many other fragmented nomadic (or semi-nomadic) polities,

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 82

<sup>64</sup> P. Sophoulis, *Byzantium and Bulgaria*, p. 161, Boston 2012.



the legitimacy (and therefore the life) of the ruler depended on his ability to keep his elite content. Two straightforward ways to build a solid network of faithful clients, i.e. to ensure the support of a warmongering elite (in this case, *Boyars*) were to distribute expensive gifts and to show one's prowess in battle. Both choices obviously required waging war against a rich and powerful enemy, and the obvious choice was the Byzantine state just south of the borders. The *Kahanate* probably retained this fluid and charismatic view of the state and its nature well into the tenth century, when the Russians of Svjatoslav were paid by Nikephoros Phokas to invade it from the north.

On the other hand, the Byzantine attempts at securing a deeper hinterland for their capital and their western provinces, by penetrating deeper into mainland Greece, restoring old fortifications and settling soldiers in the Strymon valley, were perceived as threats by the Bulgarian state, which led to an intensification of the military struggle.

Starting with Constantine V, many emperors tried to force Bulgaria into submission, with different results. But after the disastrous campaign that cost emperor Nikephoros I his life – prompting a period of prolonged instability within the empire – the role of Bulgaria as the main threat to the security of the Byzantine Balkans was settled, and from Krum to Simeon, many *Khans* openly dreamed of storming the imperial capital – and both of them came very close to reaching their goal. But the many military defeats could not stop the penetration of Byzantine cultural influence, which became increasingly strong after the Thirty Year peace negotiated by *khan* Omurtag, which besides capitalizing on the Bulgarian victories by pushing the frontier to northern Thrace, relaxed relations between the two states thus paving the way for the growth of Orthodox missionary activity and, of course, trade. The peace favorably impacted on economic activity, and Byzantine merchants probably gained great profit by trading with a people who didn't have a monetized system of exchange.

## **2.6 STATE INTERVENTION IN TRADE**

One of the most salient characteristics of the Byzantine fiscal and productive structures of the middle period was how state regulation of “strategic” markets (like bread and imperial Silk) helped orientating the action of those who had availability of capital –

mostly those who received *rogai* from the emperor – away from investment in production and trade and more definitely towards investment in landed estates.

Of course, this does not mean that the control exercised by the crown on the main trading post of the empire proved to be an overwhelming handicap for an economy that would otherwise have blossomed into that kind of proto-capitalism typical of the merchant states of the Mediterranean a few centuries later, but rather that the limitations imposed on profits and trade prompted the wealthier classes towards more remunerative investments in position revenues (imperial honors and offices) and estates.

The Byzantine society in the tenth century was still a mainly rural society, and although there are examples of urban notables owing their position to trade, the core of the ruling class came from a rural background and owed its position to a relative vicinity to the imperial power, through the army as well as through ecclesiastic, monastic and family connections.

These connections constituted one of the main forms of “social capital” (together with clientelar and patronal networks, friendship and family bonds, fraternity memberships), and there was always a high demand for anything that could help the accumulation of social prestige. Especially effective in this regard was the investment in courtly titles, which allowed the holders to demonstrate their proximity to the locus of supreme power. The return in social capital compensated the money spent in acquiring the honor, as the investors received *rogai* amounting to only 2-3% of the purchase cost for the title. The story told by Constantine Porphyrogenitus in his *De Administrando Imperio* is instructive in this regard: an elderly priest named Ktenas decided to petition the emperor Leo VI for a title as *protospatharios*, one of the highest purchasable titles and the lowest rank needed to enter the senate. Through the intercession of the *patrikios* Samonas, he was able to acquire the title for 60 pounds of gold (40 in cash, plus two precious earrings and a silver table, both worth 10 pounds) , by any standard a huge amount of money. The poor priest died only two years later, recovering only 2 of the 60 pounds of gold he invested in the courtly rank<sup>65</sup>.

We know from the source that Ktenas was of old age when he decided to acquire the title, and could not have possibly expected to live sixty more years. It is clear that the perceived social importance abundantly outweighed the economic benefits.

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<sup>65</sup> *De Administrando Imperio*, ed. G. Moravcsik and R. J. H. Jenkins London, 1967, chap. 50, p. 245

The Justinianic legislation forbidding traders from the acquisition of honors and barring those “lambent with the lights of honor” from trade and commerce<sup>66</sup> was nominally enforced until the eleventh century, when Constantine Monomachus openly admitted the most influential merchants in the Senate. The reasons behind this legislation are explained in the text of the laws themselves, which speak of “lowly standing” and “base trade” but also and more clearly of the need to “facilitate transactions of buying and selling between citizens and merchants”<sup>67</sup>. It is possible to see here, the emergence of what would become a leitmotiv of middle-byzantine fiscal and economic legislation: the tutelage of merchants and commoners from the competition of aristocrats and notables with a huge availability of capital (in cash and social resources), which could easily enter any market and steamroll away any kind of competition, potentially posing a serious threat to the authority of the throne.

A similar *ratio* also lies behind the land legislation of the tenth century, and the principle of competition tutelage is also apparent from the *Book of the Eparch*<sup>68</sup>, an early tenth century handbook containing guidelines and market regulations for all kinds of trade in Constantinople, redacted by the end of the reign of Leo VI.

The regulations described in the *Book of the Eparch* were intended to be applied in Constantinople, and possibly in the other few cities which may have been under the jurisdiction of a prefect (there are some hints that Thessalonica had an Eparch as well), and their stress on fair competition and on the constant level of quality among the guild members was essentially aimed at avoiding the formation of monopolies and oligopolies.

The price fluctuations of essential goods, like bread and cereals, constitute a good example of the state’s attitude towards market regulations. The state did not impose directly a price on wheat, but rather manipulated the market by regulating the inflow of cereals from the provinces and its stockpiling in public granaries, for distribution in times of crisis. Both these forms of intervention were in fact indirect price formation.

Similarly spirited provisions were those limiting the profit margin for a certain set of tradable goods. The retail sale of food, the resale of Bulgarian commodities and the

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<sup>66</sup> E. Papagianni, *Byzantine Legislation on Economic Activity Relative to Social Class*, EHB p. 1083

<sup>67</sup> *ibidem*

<sup>68</sup> The data in the paragraphs regarding the *Book of the Eparch* are taken from A. Laiou and C. Morrisson, *The Byzantine Economy*, Cambridge University Press 2007

distribution of Silk from big merchants to smaller retail traders are specifically mentioned, but we cannot exclude that this measure extended to most kinds of tradable goods. Being limited to a certain profit rate (8.33% on silk<sup>69</sup>), merchants could not increase their income by adopting economies of scale, or by improving their production efficiency by other means. To gain more, traders in Constantinople could only increase their turnover, in other words produce and sell more instances of their products– but always under conditions imposed by the State, and with a market with a substantially stable demand for any kind of good.

It has to be stressed here that the legislation contained in the *Book of the Eparch* was active only for the marketplace of Constantinople, the only one in the empire that fed a trade and supply network so extensive that it needed regulations. Other cities, with the possible exception of Thessalonica, grew outside this normative framework and although it is more than possible that a different set of rules applied to the provincial centers, at this stage we have no proof of its existence.

On the other hand, while entering as a trader in the most lucrative marketplace of the empire was hindered by a jungle of norms conceived to prevent the formation of oligopolies and pressure poles that could contend resources to the government, investing in landed estates was easier and more profitable.

First, there is no surviving evidence detailing elaborate restrictions to the purchase of land plots prior to the “land legislation” of the tenth century, and even after these laws were promulgated, their strict application was surely exceptional and highly dependent on the personal interest of the sovereign or the highest provincial authority. After all if it is true, as reported by Liutprand of Cremona<sup>70</sup>, that merchants from Venice and Amalfi could easily smuggle precious garments made of imperial silk – doubtlessly the most valuable and protected byzantine export – from under the nose of the Eparch, it must have been even easier for local notables to defy laws emanating from a distant center of power, either directly ignoring it, or using their influence on the provincial administration to bypass it. Secondly, according to Oikonomides<sup>71</sup>, the *pakton* (rent) collected by the landowners from their tenants amounted to one tenth of the value of the land rented.

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<sup>69</sup> A. Laiou, *Exchange and trade*, EHB p. 719

<sup>70</sup> Liutprand of Cremona, *De Legatio Constantinopolitana*, tr. Henderson. The declarations of Liutprand are always filled with the utmost bravado, but must nevertheless contain some seed of truth.

<sup>71</sup> N. Oikonomides, *Role of the State*, EHB, p. 1002

One third of this rent (approximately 3,3% of the land value) constituted the income of the landowner after the payment of taxes. This does not consider the profit gained from marketing the estates' surplus or its artisanal production, which could have been substantial in places closer to the profitable urban marketplaces in the provinces. Third, the social influence attached to the ownership of large estates abundantly covered the lack of immediate economic profit. Finally, for the rising class of the countryside *dynatoi*, investment was more a matter of *preserving* wealth, rather than a mean to *acquire* riches, since most of their income came from position rents granted by the imperial palace, by inheritance or by private donations (in case of monasteries). The risks involved in regional or interregional trade, the costs of setting up a profitable manufacturing and logistics structure and the need to abide to the imperial regulations of the capital did not appeal to the wealthier landowner, who preferred the easier and safer source of income granted by rented out land.

This absolute preference of the Byzantine aristocracy for investment in land rather than in trade was critical for the developments of the following centuries. The famous struggle between the big landowners and the central government, whatever the interpretation given to it, is also partly traceable back to the "land hunger" that affected those members of the aristocracy who felt the need to increase and secure their patrimony, but were discouraged, for different reasons, from placing their capital in trade and manufacture.

There is probably a very strong connection between the rising appropriation of land, uncultivated or else, during the tenth century and the territorial expansion in the same period. From an ideological point of view, individuals belonging to the magnate families of the eastern provinces grew with the conviction that the expansion of land under one's ownership was the most tangible evidence of one's power and influence. When the same individuals finally reached the throne with emperors like Nikephoros Phokas or John Tzimiskes, the expansion of the imperial frontiers became a natural manifestation of their mindset.

But most importantly, the individual members of the aristocracy closer to the locus of imperial power – belonging to the same family, or occupying important positions in the bureaucracy – were often the most immediate beneficiaries of territorial expansion, becoming the owners of extended estates carved out of the conquered territories, the most famous example being the case of *paroikomomenos* Basil Lekapenos, who took

possession of large portions of the conquests of Nikephoros II in Cilicia, allegedly together with the Domestic of the *Scholai* and others<sup>72</sup>. There is also mention of seals belonging to a Niketas that acted as supervisor of the properties of Leo the *Kouropalates*, which with all probability came from the state<sup>73</sup>, and were passed to others with the downfall of the Phokas family.

## **2.7 MONASTERIES AND ESTATES, PARALLEL NETWORKS OF PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION.**

One of the most striking aspects of the Iconoclast controversy was the deeply ideological contraposition between the imperial authority and the iconodule party, championed by many influential monastic communities and in particular by the circles revolving around Stoudios. When the secular struggle was finally over with a definite victory of the iconodule front, the monasteries and the individual monks which suffered, died and fought against the imperial power enjoyed a great boost of ideal and political legitimacy. If the legacy of this victory found its ideological expression in the attribution – endorsed by the imperial power itself – of titles such as *blessed* and *confessor* to those who opposed the iconoclast front, it is true that many of the leading monasteries gradually became the focus of a good number of pious donations granted by the many individuals who wished to wash away their “infamy” as supporters of the Iconoclast regime (like the *domestikos* Manuel, who was allegedly converted by a miracle performed by some Studite monks<sup>74</sup>) or others who sincerely believed that donating to a religious institution could help with their salvation. The parable of the monastery of Stoudios, which renounced its traditional role as center of opposition and assumed a tranquil posture of acquiescence and reciprocal assistance towards the imperial power once the Iconoclasm was over, even

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<sup>72</sup> When John I moved to restore state ownership over those lands, the involved officials allegedly reacted by poisoning him. Skylitzes, p. 311-12

<sup>73</sup> Cited in Cheynet, *Official Power and Non-Official Power*, p. 138, in *The Byzantine Aristocracy and its military function*, Aldershot 2006

<sup>74</sup> Skylitzes, p. 81

serving as a place of exile<sup>75</sup>, is indeed representative of the fate of a good part of Byzantine monasticism in the ninth-eleventh centuries.

The result of this boom of donations was a unrestricted burgeoning of pious houses and monasteries, which, far from being “allied with plague and pestilence to empty the realm of the tillers and defenders of the soil”<sup>76</sup>, probably constituted one of the main private engines in the byzantine economy. With their great riches, moral authority and their lasting agreement with the Macedonian emperors, monasteries soon accumulated vast estates, which they rented or cultivated through *paroikoi*, whose agricultural surplus they often marketed in prosperous urban marketplaces like Thessalonica and of course Constantinople.

Some of those monasteries, like Athos, were indeed among the most potent economic actors of their region.

Two things are especially worth noting here: the constitutional “spending impulse” of many monasteries and their stance outside the jungle of laws that regulated the marketplace of Constantinople.

In most of the *typika* that survived from the ninth-eleventh centuries there is an article forbidding the possession and accumulation of gold and treasures<sup>77</sup>. Tangible wealth could not be stored or hoarded, and the administrators of the most important monasteries – who also came from an aristocratic *milieu* – could decide either to break the rules of their “constitutions”, leave and abandon the land they were given or make it fruit and circumvent the articles that forbid riches by continuously putting into circulation their products and putting whatever they couldn’t hoard into church decorations and thus *ad maiorem gloriam Dei*.

Important monasteries like those in Athos certainly did not lack generous donors, often of imperial rank. At its foundation, the monastery of Lavra received 244 *nomismata* from emperor Nikephoros II, and it could also rely on other 244 *nomismata* from the revenues

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<sup>75</sup>J.P. Thomas, A. Constantinides Hero, G. Conestable, *Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents*, Dumbarton Oaks, 2000, p. 69

<sup>76</sup> F.W. Russel, *The Roman Empire, Essays on constitutional history from the accession of Domitian to the retirement of Nicephorus III*, London 1910, p. 292. In his Victorian furor he went as far as describing the iconoclast Leo III as *a Puritan and an Englishman*.

<sup>77</sup> See for example *Stoudios, Athonite Tzimiskes Typikon*, in Thomas, Constantinides, *Monastic Foundations*

of Lemnos and 44 *nomismata* from those of Strymon by John Tzimiskes, 10 talents of silver from Basil II, 216 *nomismata* from Michael VI and finally 100 *nomismata* from Alexius I<sup>78</sup>. For comparison, the wage of a common soldier was 5 *nomismata* per year.

When Athanasios Athonite incorporated the monastery of St. Andrew, he also endowed his newest foundation with 100 completely tax-exempt *paroikoi*. During the following centuries the Lavriote possessions greatly expanded, by whichever means<sup>79</sup>, and Athos survived until today as one of the major centers of Greek Orthodox Christianity .

The monastery kept receiving donations, in land or in cash, which were then reinvested in land and infrastructure: the *typikon* redacted under Constantine X Monomachos openly mentions maritime trade of surplus wine to Constantinople<sup>80</sup>.

The same document equally explicitly states that monks were not allowed to trade with Constantinople, but were instead encouraged to take their produce to Thessalonica and its region. Besides underlining the potential of the marketplace of Thessalonica, this measure is a witness to the fact that the trade network set up by monastic powerhouses like Lavra functioned *outside* the legal framework that regulated commerce in the capital, and could become a serious threat to the traditional traders of Constantinople who were forced to abide those regulations. Maybe it is not a coincidence that this measure was implemented during the reign of Constantine Monomachos, the emperor who first allowed the most powerful merchants in the Senate in the first half of the eleventh century, who could have persuaded him to forbid dangerous Athonite competition from entering Constantinople.

Generally speaking, something similar can be said about every estate belonging to anybody wealthy enough as to set up a manufacture and distribution network, not just monasteries. Secular estates owners could rely on the acquisition of titles and honors to gain moral leverage to buy land or to keep plots they acquired through illicit means. They also had less ethic constraints on using their capital to gain profit, but also less “spending impulse”, due to the lack of formal restriction about hoarding and accumulating gold. Little can be said about the modes of exploitation of secular estates, but if the witness of the will of Eustathios Boilas can be considered reliable and generalizable, the available

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<sup>78</sup> N. Oikonomides, *Fiscalité et Exemption Fiscale à Byzance (IXe-XIe s.)*, Athens 1996, p. 197

<sup>79</sup> *ibidem*

<sup>80</sup> Thomas, Constantinides, *Monastic Foundations*, p. 286



farmland was rented for the most part<sup>81</sup>, and his estate was not structured or administered like an ancient *latifundium*, lazily managed by an absentee landlord who aimed at placing the agricultural produce in an urban market. Instead, the owner gained most of his profit from the rent he gained from his tenants. Still, the context of Boilas' will, a relatively isolated eastern Anatolian environment, probably has a decisive weight in establishing the real degree of general representativeness of this document. It is not to be excluded that estates closer to more profitable urban marketplaces were administered as specialized plantations or even contained a few small manufacturing workshops.

Furthermore, the exemption from the poll tax, *kapnikon* - which applied to every heart registered within a single estate, whatever their property status – enjoyed by the most important monasteries did not apply to secular estates.

But their independence from the strict regulations imposed by the Eparch in Constantinople assured that their development, like that of the monasteries, was free and unimpaired. Nevertheless, the most lucrative market for agricultural produce was still the one bound to the Capital, and the unconstrained growth of provincial production never really set up the road for a de-centralization and de-Constantinopolization of Byzantine trade, but rather accentuated the role of The City as economic consuming and trading center and the role of the provinces as the producing periphery.

## 2.8 ARISTOCRACY, SOCIAL CHAINS AND PRESSURE POINTS

Considered to be *dynatoi* are those who, even if not personally, but through the influence of others with whom it is common knowledge they are connected, are capable of intimidating sellers or satisfying them with a promise of some benefaction<sup>82</sup>

This meaningful definition was used by Romanos Lekapenos to address the question of who was powerful and who was not, who could benefit from the imperial protection and who could easily survive by its own strengths. This definition, based on social power rather than mere wealth came a decade before Constantine VII defined the poors

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<sup>81</sup> Cited in J. Lefort, *The rural economy*, in EHB, p. 242

<sup>82</sup> From a novel of Romanos Lekapenos, in E. McGeer, *The Land Legislation of the Macedonian Emperors*, p. 46

(*penetes*) as people possessing assets for less than 50 *nomismata*<sup>83</sup>, which meant less than a fifth of the minimum amount of assets needed to sustain a cavalry *strateia* (which required lands worth 4 pounds of gold, or 288 *nomismata*).

It was thus quite clear who had power, and what constituted the essence of this power: the ability to obtain consent, by whichever means. On the other hand, defining the opposite side of the spectrum was harder, and required a mathematically precise threshold.

The definition of “powerful” given by Romanos Lekapenos was nevertheless quite vague, and open to a multiplicity of interpretation. Let us consider, for example, the case of an Anatolian soldier who was able to acquire land at a favorable price through the intercession of his commander. Who is the powerful here? The direct beneficiary of the transaction, or the authoritative figure who made the transaction possible?

For this reason, a later novel from the same emperor gave a detailed list of who could have been considered “powerful”: after the obvious mention of those holding the highest imperial honors (members of the senate, *patrikioi* and *magistroi*) and offices (*strategoï* and other military or civil officials), the list mentions the higher ranks of church and monastic hierarchies: metropolitans, archbishops, bishops and higoumenoi, plus the supervisors of private or imperial pious houses<sup>84</sup>. His successor Constantine VII will slightly update the list by adding soldiers of the *scholai* and lesser civil officials. This definition will remain substantially untouched until the inclusion, in a novel by Basil II, of *protokentarchoi*<sup>85</sup>.

In addition to being a possible indicator of gradual enrichment of the lower ranks of civil and military hierarchies in the tenth century, the lists are noticeable for the almost complete absence of “privates” that is, personalities without close bonds with the imperial or church authorities. The only institutions mentioned that did not have a direct connection with the throne are monasteries and pious houses depending on private donations.

This is again a confirmation of the central role of the palace in materially spreading wealth and influence, the only comparable “pole of redistribution” being monasticism. The

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<sup>83</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 64

<sup>84</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 54

<sup>85</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 119

palace on the other hand could not enforce an absolute control over the individuals and clans it favored (and was often forced to favor due to the internal political situation) through a strong and impersonal judiciary structure. The “aristocracy” that emerged in the tenth century was the product of a process of capital accumulation (including “moral” capital) that lasted at least a couple of generations, and proceeded substantially unimpeded by the central authority. Although with the occasional accelerations, this process of accumulation continued smoothly from the first half of the ninth centuries to the end of the eleventh. The turning point was the famous famine of 928, when the state authority finally noticed how risky it would have been for the integrity of its fiscal revenues to leave the powerful unopposed in their expansion within the small village communities. Despite the generally biblical and philanthropic tones of most of the legislation concerning the sale of land and the repeated institution of precedence queues (*protimesis*), these laws were not aimed at saving the poor from the voracity of the rich landowners, but rather to save the state itself from the loss of tax revenue. In the provincial countryside and even more so in the frontier areas, where state authority in fiscal matters was respectfully kept at arm’s length<sup>86</sup>, extracting surplus from a single *dynatos* could be noticeably harder than from ten village communities, and this becomes especially apparent when we consider that the single tax collectors shared the same worldview and values of their society. Belonging themselves to the above mentioned patronage networks, they were inclined to accept bribes from the powerful, and considered risky to alienate their support in favor of a government that was felt absent and distant: the rise of the aristocracy satisfied the need for an intermediary body between the central power in Constantinople and the population in the provinces, a role that was once played by the *decuriones*, before the crisis of the classical urban model radically ruralized society. The powerful were not a parasitic body of great landowners who grew at the expense of the state and the independent farmers, subtracting resources to the central power. They were rather an integrating part of Byzantine society, and besides the few extremely powerful “*Dynatistoi*” like the Phokades and the Maleinoi, they were for the most part small officials, soldiers of the *tagmata* and local bishops which offered patronage, protection and access to the authority, acting as a reference point for local

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<sup>86</sup> With all the exaggerations inherent to its epic medium, the passage of the Digenis Akritas in which Digenis meets the emperor with barely concealed mistrust is a poignant example of this attitude. Digenis Akritas, p. 121 ed. by Paolo Odorico, Firenze 1995

communities in exchange for support and land. The Byzantine word usually mentioned in this regards is *archontes*, and its meaning is as vague as it is poignant. The interplay between the peasants, the local *archontes* and the more prominent personalities directly connected with the throne was the spontaneous response of Byzantine society to the effective retreat of imperial power from the provinces.

Of course, the existence of these kind of clientelar social structures abundantly predated the tenth century, but factors like the demographic growth, an increased prosperity paired with a decreased availability of cheap productive land<sup>87</sup> and the subsequent land-hunger led to a situation in which the existing and the newly emerging *dynatoi* could preserve and expand their power only by dipping into the local village communities, and thus into the state's most important source of fiscal revenues. Another important consequence of this penetration into the village communities was its impact on *strateia* payments, which since the times of Nikephoros I became collective responsibility of each village. By absorbing formerly independent farms into their wider network of estates, powerful landowners reduced the part of fiscal income the state destined to the supply of its soldiery. Several attempts were made by the emperors to reverse or at least stop this trend. First, Romanos Lekapenos accused general John Curcuas of seizing the conquered villages for himself<sup>88</sup>. Later, Constantine VII sent some of his most trusted officials to the core themes of *Opsikion*, *Anatolikon* and *Thrakesion* to grant "a small relief to the paupers"<sup>89</sup>. The common denominator of those operations was their personal rather than institutional character. Romanos I tried to cut off the head of the easternmost patronage network by replacing Curcuas as the head of the eastern army. Constantine VII sent people who were already rich and powerful enough, and could hardly be bribed or pressured. But those were exceptional and conjunctural measures, that did little to halt the hemorrhage of tax revenues on the long run. By the end of the tenth century the emperors had seemingly given up, and the systematic eradication of aristocratic families undertaken by Basil II was really just a political operation aimed at punishing the rebel

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<sup>87</sup> Kismatic land could be acquired cheaply, but required considerable investment to be made productive and useful for something other than pasture.

<sup>88</sup> Theophanes Continuatus, p. 426-428

<sup>89</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 443

families of central Anatolia, who caused the tremendous civil wars that haunted the first part of his reign.

## **2.9 CONCLUSIONS: BYZANTIUM BEFORE NIKEPHOROS II, THE REIGN OF ROMANOS THE YOUNGER**

When the young son of Constantine VII ascended to the throne in 959, the Byzantine state was passing through a rare phase of peace and relative economic prosperity.

The retreat of the central Caliphal authority from the border provinces in Syria and northern Mesopotamia restricted local warfare to a lower intensity campaigning on the eastern front against the emirates of Tarsus and Aleppo, which acted as a gathering center for soldiers coming from all the Muslim world. The army was made a virtual monopoly of the Phokas family. During the time of Constantine VII, the head of the family, Bardas Phokas, was bestowed by the emperor the office of *domestikos* of the *Scholai*, and acted as the supreme commander of the army in the seasonal expeditions along the eastern border. His nomination was probably dictated by political concerns rather than by military merits, as a quick look to the history of his family and to his military records will confirm. During the regency of patriarch Nicholas Mystikos Leo Phokas the elder, brother of Bardas, lost the race for the throne to Romanos Lekapenos, and subsequently became a pole of attraction for the opposition to the usurping *droungarios*, a stance that proved rewarding when Constantine VII was finally allowed to rule by himself. As for Bardas, he was able to improvise a successful resistance in 941, when he was recalled to defend the northern shores from the 'Ros raiders. But every expedition he launched against the emirate of Aleppo, mostly for the control of the eastern Taurus range resulted in a defeat. Ultimately a debilitating wound forced him to leave active service in 954.

The role of *domestikos* was then split, during the reign of Romanos, for the east and the west, and given to the sons of Bardas, Leo and Nikephoros. Unlike their father, they had a distinguished service record and in 950 Leo was able to successfully ambush the Emir of Aleppo, Saif-ad-Dawla, routing his army and forcing him to stop raiding for almost three years, from 951 to 953.

In the west, the Cretan knot was soon to be disentangled by general Nikephoros Phokas, Greece was almost completely re-integrated within the empire and despite the occasional Magyar raid, the Balkan frontier was kept quiet by the tribute paid to the Bulgars.

The campaigns undertaken before Romanos the younger, and during the first part of his reign did not show any kind of offensive ambition, and even the Cretan expedition was consistent with the generally defensive stance of a strategy of border adjustments aimed at covering the Anatolian core with a chain of strong points located at the access of passes or strategic vales. The real change occurred in 962. After Crete was taken and the gateway to the Aegean secured Nikephoros Phokas, as *domestikos* for the east, launched his first Cilician campaign, resulting in the capture of Anazarbos, foothold for future, more ambitious operations.

Peace at the frontiers helped trade regain momentum, at the pace dictated by the growing monetization of tax extraction in the provinces. Circulation of precious metal through taxes and payments by the states injected a definite vitality to the marketplace of Constantinople, prompting a virtuous cycle of growth, plainly visible in the core provinces as well, which would soon become integrated in the economic sphere of the capital. During this phase, the state was still able, although with difficulty, to control the market forces, and to maintain its role as the main actor in the economy, while its relative importance declined due to the longer times of coinage circulation caused by the greater degree of monetization, and the stronger grasps of the powerful over local production and the debilitating effect their influence had on surplus extraction. The Byzantine economy grew steadily, as did its need for precious metal, which in turn became relatively scarcer as the demands of money circulation dangerously approached the supply limit.

The central administration was still far from noticing the potential consequences of the general enrichment and was much more worried by the effect the penetration of powerful landowners was having on its fiscal revenues.

The influence of wealthy merchants was also visibly on the rise, and would lead, within less than a century, to their (not unanimously accepted) inclusion in the senate. Privately owned estates and monasteries emerged as the most powerful engines of provincial economy, and the value of productive land rapidly increased due to demographic pressure and the needs of a rising landed aristocracy to secure its wealth. This didn't lead yet to a "feudal" decentralization of fiscal revenues and military authority, which was still

firmly held by the state, although the wealthiest aristocratic clans, which acquired their riches almost exclusively by serving in the civil or military branches of the state apparatus, were able to plant solid roots in their provincial contexts, enjoying widespread support through a network of patronage which included occasional opposition to state officials, especially regarding fiscal matters.

Still, the oppositional movements that were born from time to time in the core of the empire did not have a centrifugal character, but were rather centripetal, as they didn't seek to establish local autonomies or enforce their right at the expenses of the center, but fought instead to get their hands over the center, whose prerogatives and relationship with the periphery they did not want to change. All the revolts and uprisings recorded for the tenth century are indeed races to the throne, palace plots or attempted coups, and although the legitimacy of the single emperors was occasionally questioned (the case of Constantine VII, son of a barely legitimate marriage, is particularly instructive), there was never any questioning of the role of a single, theoretically absolute, imperial authority. It may be possible to state that the lack of a well defined succession law was at the root of the conceptual stability of Byzantine centralism. As every high-ranking aristocrat or general could legitimately aspire to the throne, no one wanted its powers to be diminished.

The figure of Romanos II as an emperor has been obscured by a series of elements which were hardly under his control during the short time of his reign, and any picture of his rule must consider them, to avoid the risk of mercilessly depicting him as a reckless youth who was at the mercy of his wife and his eunuchs. Indeed, the eunuchs and the bureaucracy he inherited from his father played a very important role. The Paphlagonian eunuch Joseph Bringas was effectively at the head of the state machine, together with the bastard son of Romanos I, Basil the *paroikomomenos*, who was one of the most influential figures within the palace, as well as in the general game of Byzantine politics. The *paroikomomenos'* skills enabled him to keep afloat during the succession crisis of Romanos II – where he played a key role in the coronation of Nikephoros Phokas - and to survive as a kingmaker and grey eminence well into the reign of Basil II.

The second element that often comes to haunt the reign of Romanos II to this day is his wife, Theophano. She was indeed a character worthy of a dramatic play, alternatively depicted by contemporary and modern works as a ruthless *femme fatale*, as a strong

woman who simply wanted what was best for her children, or even as a victim of interests bigger than her. Whatever the interpretation one gives to the figure of Theophano, it is very much possible that the chroniclers, which were either pro or anti Phokades were confused by the actions of a woman who had never taken a precise side. She probably was not as much influent during his first husband's reign, and the prominent role of "palace mistress" attributed to her by later historians is possibly just a reflection of the role she effectively played in creating the following four emperors.

The huge military stature of his successor was also instrumental in making the heir of Constantine VII appear as a secondary figure, and in many chronicles the emperor is dismissed in a few paragraphs, and the coverage of his rule is mostly occupied by an account of the military campaigns led by the Phokades. In the history of Leo the Deacon, who as said made an extensive use of pro-Phokas material, this is particularly apparent.

But despite all those factors, the reign of Romanos II is noteworthy because it marked a turning point in the struggle between Byzantium and the Hamdanid emirate, and possibly in the whole strategic approach towards the east. The interplay of a more resilient economy, weaker enemies pressing at the borders and the development of a provincial aristocracy with a militaristic character and a definite hunger for profitable land was decisive for shaping a new, aggressive stance, emphatically sponsored by the Phokades and by the growing galaxy of major or lesser figures revolving around them. Similarly, the division of the command of the *scholai* enabled more sophisticated operations. Before the second half of the tenth century, the empire did whatever was in its power to concentrate its forces on only one front, trying to use diplomacy, tributes or other peaceful means to deflect the possibility of an attack on multiple fronts. Accepting the possibility of a conflict both in the east and in the west is clearly a symptom of a more confident strategic outlook.

That said, the shortness of his reign notwithstanding, Romanos the Younger did not simply set the stage for Nikephoros Phokas, but his choices were vital in paving the way for what Gustav Schlumberger called "l'épopée Byzantine".



## CHAPTER 3

### NIKEPHOROS II PHOKAS AND HIS POLICIES

#### 3.1 BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

##### 3.1.1 THE EARLY LIFE

*When I saw the emperor Nikephoros riding slowly on horseback through the town, unaffected by such insults, maintaining self-control, and acting as if nothing unusual were occurring, I was astonished at the imperturbable spirit of the man, how fearlessly he maintained the nobility of his spirit in difficult circumstances.*

*Leo the Deacon, p. 65*

*For this and other reasons which we are about to mention, Nikephoros came to be hated and abominated by everybody.*

*Skylitzes, p. 273*

The Phokas lineage appeared in Cappadocia around 872, when the eponymous founder of the family is first mentioned as a tourmarch. His origins were indeed obscure, as he was probably singled out by Basil I for his military skills, but the future fortunes of his family encouraged future writers, both ancient and modern, Byzantine and Arab, to write elaborate genealogies aimed at anchoring the Phokades firmly into Roman, Arab or Armenian history. Even after their parable declined with their virtual annihilation by Basil II, their lasting prestige made association to the dynasty a prized component of aristocratic genealogies, as testified by Attaleiates' attempts at linking the lineage of Nikephoros III Botaneiates to the Phokades, whose origins he traced back to the Fabii of republican Rome. On the other hand, an Arab writer, Ibn-Al-Athir, made the Phokades descendents from a Tarsiot slave woman<sup>90</sup>.

Modern analyses tried to demonstrate potential Armenian or at least mixed origins of the family, mostly adducing the recurrence of the name Bardas, regularly present in every

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<sup>90</sup> ODB, p. 1667

generation as the main proof<sup>91</sup>. Nonetheless, whether the theory of Armenian or mixed origins can be proved or not is hardly relevant, as the Phokades shown a complete and flawless integration in the Byzantine-Anatolian social fabric. Also, clear and defined Armenian origins would have been openly declared (the case of emperor Basil I is instructive) or at least cited in an ennobled manner in later genealogies.

Instead, even Attaleiates' work only mentions the Armenians along the many inhabitants of the region where the ancestors of the Phokades were allegedly settled by Constantine the Great<sup>92</sup>.

It may be somehow significant that the genealogy of the Phokas written by Attaleiates traces the origins of the family back to the Roman *gens* of the Fabii, active during republican times, while emperor Basil II produced a law which extended the time land could be claimed by the state to the time of Caesar Augustus<sup>93</sup>, and the Phokades' attempt at tracing back their lineage to republican times could have been a creative way to respond to this law.

The son of the aforementioned Phokas, Nikephoros the Elder, was able to raise through the army hierarchy, and his striking successes against the Arabs in southern Italy were instrumental in consolidating the family's prestige and its role as one of the main representatives of the Anatolian military aristocracy. He was the father of Bardas and Leo Phokas, both nicknamed "the elder", to distinguish them from their homonymous descendants. Both Leo and Bardas showed little of their father's military skills, and Leo was the direct responsible for the almost total annihilation of the Byzantine army at the battle of Acheloos, the lowest point of a generally disastrous series of campaigns which ultimately excluded the Phokas clan from the race for the throne that followed the regency crisis of the council led by Patriarch Nichola Mysticos and Empress Zoe. Not only did Leo the elder lose the possibility of becoming emperor against Romanos Lekapenos, he also lost his eyes, as his attempt at reversing the situation ended in yet another defeat. From that moment on, the enmity between the Phokades and the Lekapenoi will turn them into a natural gathering point for partisans of the young Constantine VII, excluded from power by the "*basileopator*" and his ambitious sons.

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<sup>91</sup> P. Charanis, *The Armenians in the Byzantine Empire*, Variorum, London 1972, p. 222

<sup>92</sup> Attaleiates, *The History*, translation by A. Kaldellis and D. Krallis, London 2012. p.218

<sup>93</sup> McGeer, *Land Legislation*, p. 126\27

Nikephoros Phokas was born in 912, the son of Bardas Phokas and an unknown female member of the Maleinos family, probably a sister of saint Michael Maleinos<sup>94</sup>.

As shown before, the political stance of the family was instrumental in ensuring their control over the army when Constantine VII was finally allowed to govern on his own, and after Bardas was named *domestikos*, his sons became commander of the three key themes of the eastern frontier: Nikephoros was given the command of the Anatolian theme, Leo of Cappadocia and the youngest, Constantine, the theme of Seleucia<sup>95</sup>.

Little is known of Nikephoros' life prior to 944. The only biographical details mentioned by the sources are his marriage to a nameless member of the Pleuses<sup>96</sup> clan, and that he had a son, Bardas, who died in a training accident when the lance of his maternal cousin, only known as Pleuses as well, stabbed him in his eye. The dynamic of the accident is described quite confusedly by Leo the Deacon<sup>97</sup>:

Bardas had been in the prime of life, with his chin just beginning to glisten with a fiery bright beard, when, while at sport not many years before, he was wounded in the eyelid with a lance by his own cousin, a young man named Pleuses. In his terror at the injury he had caused, Pleuses let the lance slip from his hand; when the butt end hit the ground, the rebound was so great that the point went right through Bardas's head, and he instantly fell from his horse without a sound.

It is highly unlikely that a cavalry lance, normally held in the middle of the shaft, would be so long and so flexible that it bounced so high that it hit a mounted horseman in the eyes. Either the lance (*kontos*) was held very close to the blade – and such an use would have been extremely unpractical, due to the unbalanced weight of the weapon's rear half – or the horses were short ponies – unfit to the status and the age of a warrior “in the prime of his life”. Maybe Leo the Deacon misreported what he heard or read from other sources, or maybe the almost impossible happened. We shall never know.

Unfortunately, nothing else is known about the early and private life of Nikephoros Phokas. Every episode mentioned by the sources is somehow related with the narration

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<sup>94</sup> Skyl. P. 280 and Leo Deac. P. 83 Mention Michael Maleinos as his uncle.

<sup>95</sup> Skyl. P. 239

<sup>96</sup> Sometimes mentioned as Pleustai

<sup>97</sup> Leo Deacon. p. 47

of feats as general or as emperor, outside or within the palace. The only detail which does not show a strong relation with his future role is his relationship with his uncle, Michael Maleinos. Nikephoros probably approached monasticism in his youth, likely through the intercession of his mother's brother. His strong predilection of the most ascetic forms of monasticism would be a constant throughout his life, and in this regard, the only thing sources disagree upon is his degree of sincerity in the adherence to a self-imposed pseudomonastic lifestyle. The chastity and fasting oaths he swore when his wife and son died were to cause political problems when, to secure his position as emperor, he later decided to remarry the widow empress Theophano, especially when he decided (or according to Leo the Deacon, was persuaded by some monks) to renounce his simple vegetarian diet in favor of a more luxurious one, more fit for an emperor<sup>98</sup>.

### 3.1.2 THE PHOKADES UNDER CONSTANTINE VII AND ROMANOS II

As already said, the Phokas clan – meaning not only its members, but also the whole network of kinsmen and associates, like John Tzimiskes, the Maleinoi or the eunuch Peter, future Stratopedarch – was granted virtual control of the army and the eastern provinces during the reign of Constantine VII, for its unrelenting political support during the rule of Romanos Lekapenos. It should also be clear that the family leader and *domestikos* Bardas was, militarily, hardly worthy of his role.

A comparative review of the main Byzantine sources – in this case, John Skylitzes and John Zonaras – can help shed some light on the character of Bardas Phokas, and on the reasons why the same army, against the same opponent, when guided by either himself or his sons would achieve completely different results.

The most frequently mentioned testimony is that of Skylitzes<sup>99</sup>, who tells us that

As Bardas Phokas was appointed Domestic of the Schools, he did nothing worthy of record. Whenever he served under another, he showed himself to be a fine commander; but *once authority over the entire land forces depended on his own judgment, he bought little or no benefit to the Roman realm. He was consumed by greed as if it were an illness which dulled his mind. [...] His sons, Nikephoros and Leo were well above taking any ill-gotten gain. They*

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<sup>98</sup> Leo Deacon, p. 50, Skylitzes p. 260

<sup>99</sup> Skyl. P. 241 italics by the author.

*treated those under their command as favored sons, and greatly benefitted the Roman realm.*

An equally famous passage from Zonaras, in which the newly crowned Romanos II asks Nikephoros Phokas why his realm was in such a dire strait is also telling<sup>100</sup>:

It is said that at the beginning of his reign, angered in his soul by how the Hagarenes were laying waste to all the provinces, emperor Romanos asked Nikephoros Phokas if he knew why the fortunes of the Romans had sunk so low. He replied, speaking freely and without restraint: "the reason is, you are emperor and my father leads the army; your rule is ineffective and *he only looks for profit*<sup>101</sup>. But if you want, the spirit and the situation of the Romans will change. He would not, however, change as suddenly"

From this passages, it is possible to isolate the three elements that undermined Bardas' effectiveness as a military leader: lack of initiative, mistreatment of his own men (possibly with the appropriation of their shares of booty), and a remarkably strong drive towards immediate personal enrichment.

As shown by Nikephoros' own *Praecepta Militaria*, plundering and loot were among the main motives of fighting men in the Arab-Byzantine wars of the tenth century, and a rigid disciplining of the looting phase of combat was needed in order to keep the army effective as a fighting force. Nonetheless, depriving soldiers of their own shares for personal gain would mean completely and irremediably alienating them from their general, and a fair distribution of the booty was probably what Skylitzes meant when he said that Leo and Nikephoros "treated those under their command as favored sons". This point, the low attachment shown by Bardas' troops to their commander, is further expanded by the same Skylitzes when he speaks of the battle of Hadath (953-954)<sup>102</sup>:

It even happened that he once unexpectedly encountered the forces of Chamdan; everybody deserted him, and he would have been taken prisoner if his retinue had not rallied around him and delivered him from captivity.

This leads to another reason why the Byzantine forces commanded by Bardas were unable to achieve significant results in the eastern frontier: in addition to being a

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<sup>100</sup> Zonaras, p. 197. Translation and italics by the author.

<sup>101</sup> The word used by Zonaras is φιλοχρηματων, translated in Latin as "*pecunia studet*"

<sup>102</sup> Skyl. *ibidem*

mediocre leader of men, he also ostensibly lacked strategic resourcefulness and imagination. Through the years, he repeatedly try to capture the fortress of Hadath, and every time the forces of Saif Ad-Dawla took it back, most of the times inflicting severe defeats to the Byzantine field armies<sup>103</sup>. In one of those battles, at Marash, in the eastern half of the Taurus range, the *domestikos* barely escaped with his life, and the resulting *serious and deep wound on the forehead*<sup>104</sup> forced him out of active service, although the testimony of Yahya (who wrote *before* Skylitzes and Zonaras, although he probably relied on Arab rather than Byzantine material) still reports that, in 956-7, “the *domestikos* marched towards Syria, and Saif ad-Dawla met him and repelled him”<sup>105</sup>. The name of Bardas is not explicitly mentioned in the sentence, but a few pages later Yahya reported that the newly crowned emperor Romanos named Leo and Nikephoros *domestikoi* respectively for the east and the west<sup>106</sup>, implying that he would have documented any significant change of the army leadership.

During the same battle of Marash in 954, the Hamdanid emir was able to capture Constantine, youngest of the Phokas brothers, and kill Leo Maleinos, a close associate of the Phokas clan. The following year, Saif ad-Dawla marched to Hadath to meet yet again the army of Bardas, who suffered yet another defeat. His eldest son Nikephoros was barely able to escape his pursuers by hiding in one of the canals near the fortress. This routine was repeated in a similar fashion again in 956, but this time the Byzantines were able to storm Hadath, taking flight before Saif ad-Dawla could bring reinforcements.

His sons on the other hand were faring quite well, and in more than an occasion Leo was able to defeat Hamdanid armies with a clever use of ambushes, and even forced Saif ad-

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<sup>103</sup> Before the Hamdanid power was vanquished in the 960s, the only time a Byzantine force could get hold of the fortress of Hadath for a significant amount of time was between 947-8, when Saif Ad-Dawla was occupied laying siege to the city of Barzhouya. Yahya, p. 69

<sup>104</sup> Skyl. *ibidem*

<sup>105</sup> Yahya, p. 76 “le domesticos se dirigeait vers le Syrie, (Seif-ad-Daoulah) se hata à sa rencontre et le repoussa”

<sup>106</sup> He was only partialy mistaken, and although Byzantine sources (Leo the Deacon and Skylitzes among the others) report that Nikephoros was named *domestikos* for the east, his brother covered for him along the eastern border during the Cretan campaign of 960-1. Yahya, p. 85

Dawla to stop campaigning for three years, after what Yahya called “la campagne du malheur”, the ill-fated campaign<sup>107</sup>.

When the son of Constantine VII took the reins of the state in 959, Leo and Nikephoros were granted the title of *domestikoi* respectively for the east and the west. It is unclear whether the title of *domestikos* passed directly to Bardas’ eldest son when he was forced to retire in 954-55 and was divided only after Constantine VII’s death, or if the position remained somehow vacant for four years. Unlikely as it is, we do not have any other *domestikos* mentioned by name during the last years of the Porphyrogenetos’ reign.

During the short reign of Romanos II, the Byzantine army launched two large-scale offensive operations, which were part of a broader defensive strategy aimed at securing the entrance to the Aegean (by retaking control of Crete) and curbing the power of the Hamdanid emirate in the east, by sacking the lower city of Aleppo and repeatedly thrashing its army, which had already suffered a huge setback when Leo Phokas, leading a “small and weak army”<sup>108</sup>, annihilated it at the battle of Adrassus.

The only detail that can suggest a change in the Byzantine general strategic objective is the campaign of 961, in which the armies of Nikephoros Phokas, returning from Crete, secured a foothold in Cilicia by capturing Anazarbos. But this action was still consistent with the general idea that the empire needed to control key access points to its Anatolian heartland. These strong points were used both as a defensive chain where mobilized troops could gather and fleeing population take refuge, and as advanced bases from which raiding campaigns could be launched into northern Syria.

A definite change in strategic direction only happened when Nikephoros Phokas ascended to the throne, in 963, and the Byzantine armies were able to extend the imperial borders beyond the frontier that had been established in the previous centuries of attrition warfare.

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<sup>107</sup> Yahya, p 74

<sup>108</sup> Leo Deacon, p. 20

### 3.1.3 UPRISING AND ENTHRONEMENT.

When Romanos died in a deer-hunting accident<sup>109</sup> the rule of the empire was entrusted to Theophane, mother of young Basil and Constantine<sup>110</sup>, and a regency council was hastily organized which included Patriarch Polyeuktos and the *paroikomomenos* Joseph Bringas.

The situation had an uncanny resemblance with the succession crisis of Leo VI, but also many significant differences: there was no Bulgarian host encamped outside the capital, and the Byzantine army had been enjoying a unbroken series of victories in the eastern front. The succession crisis of 913-919 was radicalized by a defeated army, with a divided and ineffective leadership, and spawned three usurpation attempts – when in 963 the eastern army was firmly controlled by the Phokades, and they were the only family authoritative and prestigious enough as to produce a believable candidate to the throne.

The fact that Phokas repeatedly went back and forth from Cappadocia to Constantinople to reassure the Senate that his only aspiration was to become a monk and live a life of abstinence and asceticism with the saintly Athanasios the Athonite is a proof that both parties, the general and the palace, were perfectly conscious of the situation.

The events that led to the enthronement of Nikephoros Phokas can be divided in two phases, described in detail in the chronicle of Leo the Deacon.

The first phase opens with an attempt to appease the general, as the Senate awarded him the leadership of the regency council, not before binding him with oaths against moving unexpectedly against the State – in the persons of the two heirs to the throne – and the Senate. Once the senate was reassured that no usurpation attempt was being prepared by the general, Nikephoros left to Caesarea, where he mustered the eastern armies.

In the narration of Leo the Deacon the subsequent escalation of the events will have its first cause in the malice and insecurity of Joseph Bringas, who he goes as far as defining *an artificial woman* through the mouth of John Tzimiskes<sup>111</sup>. The responsibility for the

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<sup>109</sup> Leo Deacon, p. 30-31

<sup>110</sup> The exact date of birth of Basil II is obscure, but recent research has shown that the most likely date is 957-58, when his father, born in 939, was 18-19 years old. J.C. Cheynet, in Skylitzes, note 1 p. 239

<sup>111</sup> Leo Deacon, p. 39



uprising<sup>112</sup> was thus removed from Phokas and placed on the shoulders of a disgraced and intriguing eunuch, who forced a virtuous general to break his oaths in order not to get killed.

The beginning of Phokas' race to the throne, as narrated by Leo the Deacon, is somehow reminiscent of an anecdote reported by Plutarch in his *Parallel Life of Julius Caesar*: in the Deacon's narration, Bringas sent a letter to Tzimiskes offering him command over the eastern army if he had removed Phokas from power, and Tzimiskes read the letter to Phokas, asking him to act quickly and seize power before the eunuch can kill him. Phokas refused three times, adducing as a reason the oath he swore after the death of his son, but ultimately accepts the crown, and his first action is to nominate Tzimiskes Domestikos for the east. Similarly, Plutarch narrates how Marc Anthony (a trusted officer, much like Tzimiskes) offered the royal crown to Caesar, who refused three times. But unlike Caesar, Phokas ended up accepting the *basileia* and marching towards Constantinople. It is not the only time Leo the Deacon – or his source – draws from a repertoire of classical *topoi*, and many other scenes, like the one describing how a soldier was punished for throwing away his shield, have a distinct classical flavor.

John Skylitzes on the other hand, reports a much shorter version of the events in which the general always had an eye on the throne, and his actions were part of a plan agreed from the beginning with empress Theophano, for whom he burned with “passion and desire”<sup>113</sup>. It has to be remembered that he wrote in the eleventh century and had access mostly to anti-Phokas sources.

Phokas' army proceeded from the gathering point at Caesarea to the capital, while two detachments were sent to Abydos and to the Black Sea, to block access to the Sea of Marmara in case things went awry.

Meanwhile, to counter the insurgency Bringas had mustered the western armies under the command of Marianos Argyros, the patrician Paschalios and the two brothers Leo and Nicholas Tornikios. In addition to that, he also took in custody the elderly Bardas Phokas and Leo Phokas, who was nevertheless able to flee to Chalcedon<sup>114</sup>. But the resistance he planned was frustrated by a revolt from the inside, led by Basil Lekapenos and his 3000

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<sup>112</sup> Αποστasia, in Zonaras' text.

<sup>113</sup> Skylitzes, p. 257

<sup>114</sup> Leo Deacon, p. 45

strong *oikos*<sup>115</sup>, in which the garrison commander Argyros was mortally wounded by a flowerpot thrown by a woman who was sitting on a roof top<sup>116</sup>.

In a few hours, order was restored, and Nikephoros Phokas was able to enter in triumph with his troops through the Golden Gate, where he was acclaimed by the crowd and taken to the Great Church, where Patriarch Polyeuktos crowned him.

It was the 16 of august of 963.

### 3.2 LEGISLATION OVERVIEW

During his six years of reign (from August 963 to December 969) Nikephoros Phokas issued a quantity of laws that is frankly surprising for a man who spent most of his time fighting at the borders. Of course, much of his legislation was carried on by the palace bureaucracy in accordance to the tradition established by Constantine VII and his son, but a good part of it has some distinct characteristics that can be traced back to circumstances peculiar to the man and his reign. The first issue to be tackled in this discussion will be that of the land and army legislation, and although they may seem like two separate topics, the legislation disciplining the sale of civil land almost always contained – and was linked to – the preservation of the system of military lands, as both categories (civil and military) were faces of the same fiscal system which saw its *raison d’etre* in the outfitting and sustainment of the army, which itself underwent series of small but substantial structural reforms aimed at increasing its tactic and strategic effectiveness as a fighting force.

A special category of land laws is that concerning the properties of monasteries and pious establishments through the empire, which will be examined together with the laws concerning the state-church relationship, including the debated proposal of granting the martyr status to the soldiers who died in the wars against the Hamdanids and the imposition of crown control over provincial bishoprics. The struggle between the “throne and the altar” also had clear political repercussions in the relationship between the

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<sup>115</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 47

<sup>116</sup> Another parallel with Plutarch and his description of Pyrrhus’ death during the siege of Argos. Leo Deacon, p. 46

persons of the Emperor and the Patriarch, which during the reign of Nikephoros II was all but cloudless.

Finally, the reign of Nikephoros Phokas can be remembered for the substantially failed attempt at saving gold with the introduction of an early kind of fiduciary currency with the issue of the *tetarteron nomisma*, a coin that was materially lighter than the standard *nomisma* but had nominally the same value. The new coin triggered an inflationary reaction which can shed an interesting light over the behavior of the Byzantine economy.

### 3.2.1 THE LAND AND ARMY LEGISLATION

The laws promulgated by Phokas during his reign inscribe themselves within the frame of the tenth century “struggle for the countryside”, which in the common notion pitched the imperial administration against the provincial magnates and their right to expand their estates within the boundaries of village communes.

The legislative measures (novels and rescripts) used by this emperor can be inscribed in the broader tenth century tradition of laws adopting the instruments of pre-emption (*protimesis*) and class divisions to discipline the sale of land from tax-paying communities to estates belonging to (relatively) powerful individuals with an ambiguous fiscal stance and the habit of paying a reduced portion of their due taxes. What worried most the legislators was the effects this encroaching had on the two main pillars of the Byzantine state machinery: fiscal districts and military lands. Without entering in the vast and complex debate regarding the transformations that occurred in the status of formerly free peasants, whether their “paroikoization” was the prelude of a feudalization that irremediably weakened the empire’s social structure or if the consolidation of a landed military class was actually a symptom of its general social strengthening and tighter control of the territory<sup>117</sup>, it is possible to state that there *was* a situation of social turmoil and that the imperial administration *did* in fact struggle to contain a general trend. It was probably never perceived as a social or class *conflict*, and the only revolt that may have

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<sup>117</sup> The first view was championed by G. Orstrogorsky, who helped pioneer the studies of Byzantine land legislation. R.I. Lilie was on the other hand more prone to consider the raise of the Anatolian magnates as a sign of social strengthening.

had social motives was that of the Macedonian Basil <sup>118</sup> who pretended to be Constantine Dukas and went “around troubling and disturbing the cities, inciting them to revolt”<sup>119</sup>, causing a turmoil in the Asian hinterland of Constantinople right after the tremendous famine of 928. Rather, the situation of the common folk was not as influenced by the expansion of private estates as was the state budget and its military capabilities.

The state had been approaching the matter of estate expansion and preservation of villages and military lands even before the famine of 928. Such a destructive event gave the fiscal-agricultural system based on village communes an unavoidable exogenous shock that broke its balance and forced impoverished owners to sell their lands at a reduced price, enabling an explosive expansion of aristocratic estates and a parallel reduction in the number of tax-paying peasants.

It is possible to identify three stages<sup>120</sup> in the history of land legislation, each characterized by the introduction of a different measure to curb the infiltration of the powerful within the village communities. The first phase was characterized by the introduction of *protimesis* as a way to close the villages from external influences. Later, after the turning point of 928, the second phase was opened with the implementation of new measures aimed at retroactively cancelling the land purchases that took place after the famine, while the third stage of the legislation was characterized by the introduction of prescriptive measures that gave the peasants a chance to recover their lost property.

The first recorded legislative act involving pre-emption is its lifting by emperor Leo VI<sup>121</sup>, who wished to “liberalize”<sup>122</sup> the land market by allowing the unrestricted sale of abandoned land. Neighbors are slightly favored in those purchases, to favor the cohesion and fiscal integrity of each district, but external buyers are also encouraged.

The accession of Romanos Lekapenos to the throne changed this trend, and together with the first “relational” definition of the *dynatoi* his earliest land law is also the first attempt

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<sup>118</sup> Not to be mistaken with the almost homonymous emperor

<sup>119</sup> Skylitzes, p. 228

<sup>120</sup> McGeer, Land Legislation p. 11

<sup>121</sup> *ibidem*, p. 36

<sup>122</sup> The term is certainly anachronistic, but nevertheless able to convey the spirit of Leo’s law.

at seriously disciplining the problem of the disruption of village cohesion<sup>123</sup>. Later law will follow in its footsteps, preserving its spirit and expanding on its basic concepts, including the precedence queues described in its text, which were subsequently applied to the new legislative instruments introduced from time to time.

Romanos' following law has been defined "the cornerstone of the land legislation"<sup>124</sup>, and introduces another important measure to the repertoire available to the imperial functionaries, purchase cancellation. Using the fiscal year of 928 as the official turning point, all land transactions that favored a *dynatos* were retroactively cancelled, and the acquisition price was to be reimbursed only in case of good-faith transaction, a loophole that many aristocrats probably used to get their money back when this law was finally enforced in 934. Its most original introduction is the explicit prohibition for those belonging to the *dynatoi* class to acquire property in village communities.

Military lands are first mentioned in a legislative text promulgated by emperor Constantine VII<sup>125</sup>, which set the minimum value of inalienable military land plots to 4 pounds of gold (288 *nomismata*) for the cavalry, which also happened to be the value of two *zeugaria*, i.e. the land a pair of oxen could plough in a season. This is not to say that soldiers were required to own land worth at least 4 pounds of gold, but that military lands below this quantity could not be alienated in any case to individuals or families laying outside the social and administrative boundaries of the village community. This decree is considered the first serious attempt at disciplining the relationship between land and military service, which before that point was only regulated by tradition and custom or, as far as we know, by a legislation that applied to the village communities instead of the single individual owner of military land.

When Phokas was enthroned in 963, the law was distinctly favorable to the *stratiotai* and the smallholders of the village communities, but at the same time the situation did not seem to have improved, at least in central Anatolia, nor the trend towards the formation of larger estates contained. The holders of military lands who were forced to sell them were granted by the law the right to reclaim the property (even if it was *above* the threshold of 4 pounds of gold) they alienated within 40 years from the sale, a right that

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<sup>123</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 40

<sup>124</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 53

<sup>125</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 71

was valid for their heirs as well<sup>126</sup>. A *dynatos* who was known to have registered *stratiotai* in his service had to pay a fine up to six nomismata per soldier per year. Without entering into the detail of each measure, it is possible to say with a certain degree of confidence that the general spirit of the law was to favor the poor against the powerful, to offer imperial patronage to those who could not afford the actual patronage of a powerful neighbor. The novel of Constantine VII imposing a minimum inalienable value on military land was promulgated when the Phokades were raised to the highest echelons of military hierarchy, and the legislative action of Nikephoros Phokas in this field follows the track left by the Porphyrogenetos, but with substantial differences.

Four texts relating to the discipline of land sales have survived with the name of Phokas, two relating to the sale of civil lands, one raising the minimum inalienable value of military land and another one tackling the issue of military land in the newly instituted frontier districts.

The first text is dated between 966 and 967, and is composed by a moralizing prologue, an introduction of the issue at hand, and two articles. Its spirit is as simple as controversial: the powerful should not be allowed to purchase land from the weak, as the weak from the powerful. This gave rise to many different interpretations, and until recently the orthodox view on the matter was that of Orstrogorsky, who saw this law as yet another manifestation of the irreversible trend towards a feudalization of the empire<sup>127</sup>. According to another interpretation, this law was aimed at shrinking the effective range of action of the *dynatoi*, effectively cutting the ground below their feet<sup>128</sup>.

The novel starts with a *proimion* which invokes the role of the emperor as a father who should enforce divine justice and equality for all his sons, and then proceeds stating the perceived fault of the preceding legislation, the unfairly favorable treatment reserved to the poor, that “caused formerly prosperous persons also to live in hardship and penury, as the result of granting the poor the right of pre-emption”<sup>129</sup> and because of this “they

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<sup>126</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 72 holders of dignities and offices were completely barred from this kind of inheritances.

<sup>127</sup> G. Orstrogorsky, *Storia dell'Impero Bizantino*, transl. Piero Leone, Einaudi 1993, p. 251

<sup>128</sup> McGeer, *Land Legislation*, p. 98

<sup>129</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 100

destroyed and annihilated the whole Roman power”<sup>130</sup>. The first article then bars the weak from exercising their right of pre-emption in purchases from the powerful deriving from their residence in the same fiscal district, or from the shared ownership of land parcels. A “person of rank”<sup>131</sup>, defined as “a person who appears to be to the relief and benefit of the poor adjacent to it”<sup>132</sup> will have then to take possession of the land, instead of someone who is “perceived to do harm to the neighbors”<sup>133</sup>.

The first article of the laws ends by stating that “it is our wish that the *dynatoi* purchase from the *dynatoi* only [...] in turn we bar the *dynatoi* from making purchases from the poor or from indigent *stratiotai*, nor are they to cite joint tax obligation or joint ownership in justification, as we are making the legislation fair to all”<sup>134</sup>. The second article is a measure that limits the retroactivity of the right of land reclamation to the year of the famine (927-928).

This law can be understood by referencing it to the broader context of Byzantine military effort in the 960s, and by the precarious position of Phokas as a semi-legitimate ruler who redirected most of the resources of the state to his campaigns in the east, and at the same time had to keep an eye on the state budget which was slowly but regularly shrinking due to the reduction of fiscal income and the longer circulation times of coinage, itself due to the increasing monetization of the economy. The stronger economy created the possibility and almost the need for a series of military expeditions across the Taurus, which could be funded only by forcefully reasserting the role of the state in the extraction of surplus from the provinces, something that could be done only in opposition to the expanding landed aristocracy. At the same time political factors – especially the lack of an actual dynastic legitimacy and the ongoing struggle with the church – reduced the room for maneuver and forced the emperor to come to terms with the landed *dynatoi* that constituted the ruling class of the Byzantine empire, making him unable to enforce stronger measures against their encroachment in village communities. The emperor

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<sup>130</sup> *ibidem*

<sup>131</sup> *ibidem*

<sup>132</sup> *ibidem*

<sup>133</sup> *ibidem*

<sup>134</sup> *ibidem*

enjoyed a widespread support among the army ranks, but was not as popular in Constantinople, where frequent episodes of soldierly indiscipline, the increased tax burden and his monetary policies quickly alienated him the sympathies of the population. He barely escaped a popular riot during the feast of the ascension<sup>135</sup>, and was certainly aware of the political risks involved in his long absences from the seat of power. Despite the appointment of his brother Leo as *kouropalates*, his position as a ruler was always precarious, and the fortification of the Sacred Palace, labeled by Skylitzes as “a tyrant’s dwelling”<sup>136</sup>, is a clear symptom of Phokas awareness of his own vulnerability, especially during his long stays at the frontier, and that other members of the ruling class could have easily exploited the malcontent of the population in case they wanted to stage a *coup* and oust him. True, the situation of Romanos the Elder was somehow similar, yet the Lekapenos was able to promulgate and enforce a much more radical land legislation. But there were many differences between the political situation of Phokas and Lekapenos, as the latter had sons whom he quickly associated to the power, was staying in the capital for much longer times and had already frustrated an uprising attempt by Nikephoros’ uncle, Leo Phokas the elder. He also relieved the city from a devastating Bulgar siege, an event that in the memory of the population of Constantinople was much more tangible than the expansion of a frontier laying thousands of miles away from their immediate world. When the potential element of instability of Constantine VII’s mother Zoe was also taken out of the game, Romanos was able to enjoy a solid support within the palace. Phokas was not as lucky, and probably not as skilled a politician, and the only thing he could do to create a bond of legitimacy with the Macedonian dynasty was marrying empress Theophano, a decision that was to tragically backfire for him.

The legislation of 966-67, by freezing two “class spheres” which were supposed to become separate and parallel, was the result of such a need for compromise between the necessity to keep a reasonably solid political support and the will to divert the state resources to the military effort in the east: it lifted many of the prohibitions barring the powerful from acquiring land and at the same time tried to keep the relative share of land under their control stable and limited, as the rich could only get land from the rich and the poor from the poor. It was a way to leave the known *strateia* rolls and rural fiscal

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<sup>135</sup> Skyl. P. 276

<sup>136</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 275



incomes untouched, while offering a legitimate way to the powerful to appease their land-hunger.

The civil land legislation of Nikephoros II Phokas was a legislation of compromise, and this is evident also from another surviving text, in which the emperor rules that *dynatoi* who were compelled by law to give back land they acquired, and in which they built expensive improvements and mansions, were to refund the sellers with twice the price they paid to acquire the land, or with lands worth twice the value of what they bought, and twice as big<sup>137</sup>. The spirit of this measure is essentially the same as that of the other law, so much that its shortness and its nature has given credit to the hypotheses that it may either be a missing article of the preceding law or a rescript published in response to a petition to the emperor. By forcing the powerful to choose between renouncing to twice the land they bought or to tear apart the “costly mansions of enormous size”<sup>138</sup> this law probably offered some decent degree of relief to the *penetes* while at the same time giving the powerful the chance to keep the most eloquent status symbols within the rural communities, their palaces.

The legislation on military lands, which was promulgated in parallel to the increased military effort of the state, was not nearly as compromising. A legislative text, published in response to a series of petitions regarding the restitution of military lands, ruled that the all the *stratiotai* who wanted back the lands they alienated prior to the emission date of the text, while in possession of immovable assets above the value set by Constantine VII of 4 pounds of gold for cavalry soldiers and 2 pounds of gold for sailors, could reclaim them by preferential right and by paying a fair price. In this context, the worth of a cavalry *strateia* was probably considered a reference value to set that of the other kinds of military services.

The most notable aspect of this law is not the reinforcement of a measure previously introduced by Constantine VII, but rather its triplication of the minimum inalienable value of military lands, from 4 to 12 pounds of gold (from 288 to 864 *nomismata*), which was to be enforced from the publication of the rescript<sup>139</sup>.

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<sup>137</sup> McGeer, Land Legislation, p. 103

<sup>138</sup> *ibidem*

<sup>139</sup> *ibidem*, p. 108

The text explicitly mentions the increased number of heavy cavalrymen in the army (using the words *klibanophoroi* and *epilorikophoroi*<sup>140</sup>), and is a key source to understand the evolution of the Byzantine army in the second half of the tenth century.

The provincial army structure based around part-time soldiers was already becoming a liability as the center of military action moved from the inner Anatolian plateau to the eastern reaches of the Taurus range, and by the second half of the tenth century the meaning of the word *strateia* was shifting from direct military service to cash contribution for the equipment of a more professional force. The transition was not carried at an equal pace through all the provinces, and it is likely that the “core” themes like *Opsikion*, *Anatolikon* and *Thrakesion* were affected by this changes much earlier than the “Armenian themes”, smaller military districts established along the eastern border during the reign of Phokas, and in constant need of military manpower.

It is likely that the assignation of *stratitika ktemata* in exchange for military service began when, during the course of the seventh century, the empire lost the richer Levantine, Egyptian and African provinces that helped sustain the eastern and western armies with their fiscal revenue. Nonetheless, the situation had already reached a critical point before the Arab invasion, and the budget cuts operated first by Maurice and then by Herakleios are witness to a steady shrinking of the military budget. When the state was facing the likely possibility of annihilation in the second half of the seventh century, struggling with an irrecoverable shortage of funds and manpower, the logical reaction of the administration was to reward soldiers with the only good that was abundantly in possession of the state: abandoned and unproductive land.

Unfortunately, the scant amount of sources for the sixth to the eighth centuries makes it impossible to shed light to the institutional and social details of its development. But when the integration of the system of military properties in the state machinery was completed and mature, it may be possible speak of *strateia* as a time-tax imposed to soldiers in lieu of the normal fiscal obligations, and as such the responsibility for its “payment” was moved from the single household to the entire village commune, if a single soldier was not able to properly outfit himself<sup>141</sup>.

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<sup>140</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 107

<sup>141</sup> Theophane, p. 487

At this stage, as the army made of local militias trained to set up an in-depth defense of their provinces began to lose its strategic meaning, the shift in the meaning and practice of *strateia*, from a time-tax imposed on farmers\soldiers to a monetized tax used to outfit and support professional soldiers or mercenaries was a natural evolution.

A passage from Zonaras is often cited to understand this transformation<sup>142</sup>:

But during his reign there was no lack of scribes, inspectors and military officials, and those called protonotari, that were sent to every province, oppressing the subjects in every possible manner and forcing them into absolute poverty, sparing not even the poorest. He inscribed them in the rolls of the post service (δρομικαι στρατειαισ), and those who used to serve there, he moved to the fleet. Sailors fleet were transferred to the infantry, the footmen to cavalrymen and the cavalrymen became heavy cavalrymen.

It would of course be wrong to assume that former cavalrymen were given enough wealth to equip themselves as armored cavalrymen, or that infantry soldiers were granted enough land to enter the cavalry. It is clear that behind the polemical tones and the undeniable bias, this passage records an attempt at reassess the military rolls to maximize the input of military taxation, which is the most recurrent leitmotiv of Phokas' reign.

The resources thus gathered were probably employed for recruitment of the Iberian and Armenian contingents that are mentioned for the campaigns in Crete and in Cilicia<sup>143</sup>, or to finance the expensive deployment of the imperial *tagmata* along the borders.

An anecdote reported by Skylitzes, in which a grey-haired man tries to enlist in the imperial host when the emperor "came into the plain to exercise the army"<sup>144</sup> may also bear witness to the expansion of the ranks of professional full-time soldiers.

The process was of course inhomogeneous, and the soldiers of the themes still constituted the bulk of the Byzantine army, and there is evidence that in many areas of the empire the relationship between land grants and active military service never disappeared<sup>145</sup>. This was particularly evident in the provinces laying along the eastern

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<sup>142</sup> Zonaras, p. 202 Trans. By the author.

<sup>143</sup> Skylitzes p. 268, Leo Deacon,

<sup>144</sup> Skylitzes P. 278

<sup>145</sup> G. T. Dennis, Three Byzantine military treatises. The treaty *On Skirmishing* repeatedly mentions the command structures of a thematic army and the mobilization process of thematic forces.

border, in those small districts called “Armenian Themes” that were the object of another novel of Nikephoros Phokas, explicitly promulgated as a response to a petition.

In this rescript the emperor allows land abandoned by Armenian soldiers for more than three years to be assigned without consequences to other soldiers (thematic or tagmatic) but not to any *dynatos*, and the aforementioned Armenian *stratiotai*, because of “their instability and wandering”, were only entitled *other* lands as a reimbursement, instead of their old *stratiotika ktemata*. If those soldiers were found guilty of murder, their military lands were not to be offered as compensation to the heirs of the victim, but instead remained in ownership of the heirs of the murderer, and if there was no available or willing heir, they were to be given to other families willing to accept the military obligation, as to maintain stable and predictable the total amount of soldiers available at the border<sup>146</sup>.

Besides the vivid description of the socially fluid life at the borders, with the explicit mention of Armenians deserting to the enemy side or wandering for years leaving their land and their duties, this text is notable for its compromising stance, as the deserters are not executed or punished, but they are only removed from service, and they are given lands elsewhere. Despite all their contributions to the imperial army, the Armenians that were called to settle the newly conquered lands in the east were still considered an alien social body, which raised suspicions and was only partially integrated within Byzantine society at large, undermining the effectiveness of the eastern defensive system. The author of the military treatise *On Skirmishing* (allegedly Leo Phokas) was able to express this climate of reciprocal mistrust in one sentence: “these men are not very likely to perform their sentry duty well, for, after all, they are still Armenians”<sup>147</sup>.

The empire still needed those men in active service, and could not risk provoking mass or even local desertions. Only one point is really uncompromising: the passage that mentions that lands granted to the monastery of Lakape (birthplace of the Lekapenoi family), to imperial curatories or to *dynatoi* could be reclaimed at any time without any consequences. Again the main objective of the law is not the application of justice, but the conservation of the most important asset of the state, the military.

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<sup>146</sup> McGeer, *Land Legislation*, p. 87-89

<sup>147</sup> *On Skirmishing*, ch. 2

That the army and its members constituted a priority for the Phokades and the other families that revolved around them and were the leading clan of the Anatolian aristocracy of the tenth century is made very clear by a series of passages in the chronicle of Skylitzes narrating the preferential treatment enjoyed by the soldiers during the reign of Phokas<sup>148</sup>. Even more eloquent is a chapter of the treatise *On Skirmishing*, which can almost be considered a political manifesto of the Phokas clan, and is worth being reported in full<sup>149</sup>:

There is no other possible way, as far as strategy and experience are concerned, for you to prepare for warfare except by first exercising and training the army under your command. You must accustom and train them in the handling of weapons and get them to endure bitter and wearisome tasks and labors. They should not be allowed to become slack or lazy or to give themselves completely to drunkenness, luxury or other kinds of debauchery. *They certainly ought to receive their salaries and money for provisions regularly, as well as gifts and bonuses, more than are customary stipulated.* Not lacking anything, therefore, they will be able to use these to obtain the best horses and the rest of their equipment. With a joyous spirit and a willing and exultant heart they will choose to brave dangers on behalf of our holy emperors and all the Christian people.

*But what is more important than all else and more basic, what arouses their enthusiasms, increases their courage, and incites them to dare what anybody else would dare, is the fact that their own households and those of the soldiers serving them and everyone about them possesses complete freedom.* This has provided them security and protection from the beginning and from antiquity. You will find that this has been legislated by the holy emperors of old and is written down in the tactical books.

In addition to freedom, though, *they should enjoy proper respect and not be despised and dishonored.* For, I am ashamed to say, *men such as these are beaten*, men who do not value their own lives above the service to the holy emperors and for the freedom and vindication of Christianity. *And these things are done by tribute-levying mannequins who contribute absolutely nothing to the common good, but whose sole intent is to wear down and squeeze dry the poor*, and from their injustice and abundant shedding of the blood of the poor they store up many talents of gold.

These men *ought not to be dishonored by the thematic judges either, dragged off as prisoner and whipped, bound in chains* and – oh what a terrible thing – *pilloried.*

Yet these are, after God, the saviors of Christians who, so to speak, die each day on behalf of the holy emperors.

*The law itself stipulates that each officer has authority over his own men and can judge them. Does anyone else have authority over the men who live in the theme beside the general alone, whom the holy emperors have appointed?* For this reason, from the most ancient Romans and from the law, the general possesses authority over his own theme. He judges cases in matters that affect the soldiers and he manages affairs that come up in the

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<sup>148</sup> Skylitzes p. 274, 275, 276,

<sup>149</sup> *On Skirmishing*, ch. 19, italics by the author.

theme. He has a judge to cooperate with him and with whom he too cooperates. He also cooperates with the protonotary and the others assigned to public service. The turmarch, as is clear from the law and imperial decrees, has also had authority to judge in his own turma, according to the regulations in force and their precedents.

If, in conclusion, the army of the holy emperors should attain its ancient condition and can rid itself of *those elements dragging its men into poverty*, they will be full of enthusiasm, happiness and good cheer. They will be better soldiers and more courageous and will appear to the enemy as absolutely invincible. When this comes to pass, our holy emperors will *not only defend their own lands, but will make many other lands of the enemy subject to themselves*.

The general principle here is clear: the fundamental role played by the army in the well-being of the state required a special, preferential treatment for the soldiers. War along the frontier is seen as a duty with religious undertones, and those who chose to risk their lives to protect the Christian realm ought to be granted respect and privileges, economically and legally. How the army always played a primary role in the political life of the Byzantine state is definitely out of question, and an anonymous military treaty dating back to the sixth century<sup>150</sup> tells us that “the financial system<sup>151</sup> was set up to take care of matters of importance that arise on occasion, such as the building of ships and walls. But it is principally concerned with paying the soldier. Each year most of the public revenues are spent for this purpose”. But without going back to the age of Justinian, the prologue of a novel by emperor Constantine VII about the sale of military lands<sup>152</sup> - written at the beginning of the Phokas hegemony of the state machinery - states that “As the head is to the body, so the army is to the state; as their condition varies, so too must the whole undergo a similar change”.

Nevertheless, this chapter of the treatise *On Skirmishing* paints a discouraging picture of the fate of common soldiers in the provinces, reportedly abused by members of the civil administration, when “from the most ancient Romans and from the law” they should only be submitted to the justice of the military courts presided by the *strategos*, himself appointed by the Holy Emperor and therefore a reflection of his divine legitimacy. The violence and humiliation inflicted to these men are attributed to the action of *tribute levying mannequins, who contribute absolutely nothing to the common good*.

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<sup>150</sup> Anonymous treatise on strategy, ch. 2, in Dennis, *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*

<sup>151</sup> χρηματικόν in the Greek text.

<sup>152</sup> McGeer, *Land Legislation*, p. 71

But this chapter is not only a Jeremiad on the fate of soldiers, and as a piece written by a man who was by any chance very close to the innermost circles of the imperial administration (possibly Leo Phokas, if not the emperor himself), it clearly has a programmatic intent, consisting of the description of a concrete problem, a concrete recipe for its solution and the depiction of whatever favorable consequences the enactment of the suggested measures will allow. After all, the book was written as an instruction manual on frontier warfare, and was clearly meant to circulate amongst the highest echelons of military and civil administration, people who could actually influence the policy-making process at the center as well as in the periphery.

The expressed problem is of course the debased treatment of the soldiers by the tax exactors and the civil servants, and its implied consequences are the numerous defeats suffered by the Byzantine army caused by the sorry state of its soldiers. The root of the problem, and thus the solution proposed, is threefold, but essentially coherent in character.

First, the soldiers ought to receive regular stipends as well as gift and bonuses (one may argue the thriftiness of the “φιλοχρηματων” Bardas Phokas may have been the root of his many defeats) *more* than what was customary stipulated, in order to increase their fighting capabilities with better equipment and to give them a concrete motivation, since despite the heroic tones used in the book, the morale of soldiers, from the humblest footman to the wealthiest cavalryman, had often more to do with the possibility of enrichment than with the abstract idea of serving the Christian realm. The fact that among the supposed virtues of a general in the tenth century was the dignified treatment of his troops is exemplified by the account of Phokas’ reign written by Leo the Deacon. In the speech he allegedly pronounced in front of his army right before his march to Constantinople, Nikephoros Phokas says he has shown goodwill towards his soldiers “like a loving father”<sup>153</sup>. Later, returning from a successful campaign in Cilicia, the general hands out “donatives to the host, as was fitting”<sup>154</sup>. Later, in harshly disciplining a soldier who threw away his shield, and the captain that let him go unpunished, he asks the officer

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<sup>153</sup> Leo Deacon, p. 43

<sup>154</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 55

“do you have more concern for the whole army than I do?”<sup>155</sup>. Of course, the anecdotes are almost certainly fictional, as the *topos* of the shield thrown away clearly has classical origins and is already present in Greek archaic poetry, and the Deacon follows the classic tradition, initiated by Thucydides, of explaining his characters’ personality by using long fictional speeches drawn up according to the rules of rhetoric. They are nevertheless worthy indicators of the general’s supposed attitude towards his army, which ought to resemble that of a father, a *topos* also used by Skylitzes in his comparison between Bardas Phokas and his offspring, who are said to have treated soldiers as “favored sons”<sup>156</sup>

Freedom (ελευθερια) was the second point proposed as a way to boost the morale and the effectiveness of the army. The Byzantine concept of freedom had a multiplicity of meanings which differed from the classical conception of “free” as opposed to “slave”, and most of them were shaped by the Christian doctrine of freedom as a complete subordination to the will of God<sup>157</sup>. But in this context freedom concretely meant exemption from taxation. The measure is legitimated, as usual with Byzantine and generally medieval sources, by referring to ancient laws and tradition traced back to the “ancient Romans”, a theme that will also recur at the end of the chapter.

However, the importance given to the soldiers’ freedom from taxation is completely original to the policy started in the age of the Phokades’ dominance of the military establishment. Such a privileged fiscal status for the soldiers hardly has any comparison in the ancient or late antique world, and responded to a simple rationale: the morale of the soldiers offering active service and their fighting efficiency would have been much higher if they were relieved from taxation, and the diminished fiscal income would have been balanced by better soldiers, whether they served directly or through joint contributions, and by the harshening of regular fiscal pressure, probably in the form of *ad hoc* contributions of unspecified nature, and the reduction of imperial largesse to the senate<sup>158</sup>. The aim of the state budget was to finance and supply the army, and any tax collector who wanted to squeeze resources from the soldiers would “contribute

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<sup>155</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 57

<sup>156</sup> Skyl. P. 241

<sup>157</sup> ODB, p. 805, “freedom”

<sup>158</sup> Skylitzes, p. 274



absolutely nothing to the common good”, instead damaging the state finances on the long run.

Fiscal freedom was also important for social reasons, as a free property would stand up inside the context of the village, granting its owners higher dignity and social status within their communities by marking them as “immune” to the plague of tax-collecting, and thus closer to the emperors.

In the context of the tenth-century land legislation, the introduction of measures for the tutelage of military property opened a new phase, and is the symptom of a definite militaristic reorientation of the priorities of the state.

The third point of the chapter, stressing the exclusive jurisdiction of military official (the general, the *turmarch*) over the soldiers of each province, is another measure aimed at ensuring a privileged status to the holders of military property against the alleged abuses committed by members of the civil service, who reserved a humiliating treatment to the “saviors of Christians”. Soldiers could only be judged by military officials of their theme, who took care of cases at the local (the *tourmarchoi* and their staff) or provincial (the *strategoi*) levels. The reference to ancient tradition here is probably not just a rhetoric exaggeration, as the judicial role played by high officers within their regiments is also attested in the *De Administrando Imperio*, in which the Protospatharios of the Basin, who was also the commander of the imperial galleys, “from time immemorial” had judicial power over the oarsmen who served beneath him<sup>159</sup>, and the evolution of obsolete military titles into purely judicial roles is probably the reason why in the twelfth century there were judges with the title of *droungarios*, originally reserved for the commanders of the imperial fleet and for a few officers of the *tagmata*. Moreover, it was common in Byzantine legal practice to have specialized courts deal with cases regarding ecclesiastical, civil, military and financial matters<sup>160</sup>.

In the passages reaffirming the need for purely military courts, rather than proposing ways to improve a certain situation, the author probably attacks the recent diffusion of courts presided by civil officials for causes involving soldiers in the provinces, a practice

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<sup>159</sup> *De Administrando Imperio*, chap. 54, p. 249

<sup>160</sup> R.J. Macrides, *The Competent Court*, in *Law and Society in Byzantium: Ninth-Twelfth centuries*, ed. by A. Laiou and D. Simon, p. 121

which he considered pernicious and contrary to the interest of the state, probably because it dragged down the military men to the same level as commoners.

The three points described in the chapter, regularity of payment and bonuses, fiscal freedom and exclusive jurisdiction of military courts for cases involving soldiers are all coherent with the proposed objective of empowering the individual soldiers, seen as the basic elements of the backbone of the state itself, the army, which would have been able to “attain its ancient condition” only by ridding itself of “those elements dragging its men into poverty”. The last lines finally state the ultimate goal of the proposed measures: to conquer new territories rather than simply defending the Anatolian heartland of the empire. Looking at the history of Phokas’, Tzimiskes’ and Basil II’s reigns, their policies and their legislation on civil and military lands, it seems that these measures were at least partially implemented, with a decent degree of success.

But the effectiveness and indeed the possibility of implementing these policies ultimately rested on the resilience of the state economy: the interaction of demographic growth, widespread monetization and revitalization of trade networks made it possible for the state to sustain larger armies outside the borders, to pay them regularly and supply them on campaign, while renouncing to the tax income deriving from their lands, which was partly integrated by unspecified increases in civil taxation.

What emerges from this quick examination of Phokas’ land policies is thus a clear preference for the military branch of the state, distinctly contrasting with the compromising attitude held in civil legislation, made possible and influenced by many factors, first and foremost a stronger economy that allowed more decided action against weaker and smaller enemies and a precarious position inside the court which pushed for compromise.

### **3.2.2 The POLICIES TOWARDS THE CHURCH AND THE ECCLESIASTICAL PROPERTIES.**

Despite his deeply religious, almost monastic, character, one of the main obstacles that Phokas had to face during his reign was the opposition of the church and the Patriarch, which began in earnest right after his coronation because of a series of polemics regarding his marriage with empress Theophano, a fracture that was radicalized by the

absolutist and stubborn policies of Phokas towards ecclesiastic property, and by the equally strong character of the reigning Patriarch.

The rapid change of attitude of Patriarch Polyeuktos towards Phokas was allegedly caused by the rumor that the emperor stood as baptismal guardian to the young sons of Romanos II, thus invalidating his marriage with Theophano on the grounds of spiritual kinship. The emperor was then barred from the sacraments, unless he renounced to his wife. He did not, and the reasons behind his decision have been a matter of debate for scholars since the inception of Byzantinistics. Charles Dihel for example states that “if Nikephoros Phokas had become ambitious and if, hesitations and scruples notwithstanding, he had finally decided to accept the purple, it is clear that his love for the beautiful empress played a decisive role”<sup>161</sup>. The other great French historian that wrote about Phokas, Gustave Schlumberger stated that, by marrying Theophano after only one month and four days from his coronation, the general “unable to keep the violence of his love hidden, finally shed the mask and fixed for the twentieth of September his marriage with Theophano. This was a great day for the rugged soldier, probably the best of his life”<sup>162</sup>. Both writers lived in France during the *belle époque*, and the sensibility of their time probably helped exaggerating the importance of Theophano’s personal charms and underestimated the political factors at play. This attitude was also clearly visible in the Byzantine chroniclers, and both Skylitzes and Zonaras mention that the emperor was “burning not only with passion, but also with desire for the empress Theophano”<sup>163</sup> and that “he didn’t refrain from Theophano, as he was enflamed with passion”<sup>164</sup>. Leo the Deacon goes further, and in his apology of the emperor keeps comparing the empress to the Homeric Helen, “Laconian woman”<sup>165</sup>, ascribing her influence over the emperor to her malicious, almost witchlike, use of feminine charms<sup>166</sup>. On the other hand, the newly crowned Phokas strongly needed all the support he could

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<sup>161</sup> C. Dihel, *Figures Byzantines* p. 181, translation by the author.

<sup>162</sup> G. Schlumberger, *Un empereur byzantin au dixieme siecle: Nicephore Phocas*, Paris 1890, p. 364, translation by the author.

<sup>163</sup> Skylitzes p. 257

<sup>164</sup> Zonaras, p. 117

<sup>165</sup> Leo Deacon, p. 50

<sup>166</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 85

muster within Constantinople and the palace, and a marriage with the mother of the two *porphyrogennetoi* was probably the best way to achieve a serene reign and avoid takeovers while on campaign. Nevertheless, Phokas had also a debt of gratitude with the Patriarch, who gave him a decisive endorsement in the few months after the death of Romanos II.

When the rumor of his spiritual fatherhood of the young Basil and Constantine reached the Patriarch, the emperor was forced to choose between his wife and the goodwill of the Church, but the matter at stake was not only his marriage with Theophano as much as his personal authoritativeness as the head of the state, not to consider how his exclusion from the sacraments would have affected his prestige in a society in which political legitimacy and social status were inextricably intertwined with religious pity. The affair was settled by dating the canonic law that equated spiritual and physical kinship to the reign of Constantine V, an iconoclast emperor, henceforth invalidating its effectiveness<sup>167</sup>. When the Patriarch was still denying Phokas access to the communion, the responsibility of baptismal sponsorship was transferred to the elderly Bardas Phokas<sup>168</sup> by the same Protopapas Stylianes who spread the rumor in the first place<sup>169</sup>. Polyeuktos was forced to yield and readmit the emperor into communion.

In the account of Leo the Deacon, the “Theophanogate” had no serious repercussions in the relationship between the Emperor and the Patriarch, but the comment of Skylitzes let a certain amount of ecclesiastical bitterness transpire, as “whereupon Polyeuktos, fully aware that Stylianos was perjuring himself, withdrew the charge of marrying the mother of his godchild”<sup>170</sup>.

The emperor barely came out as the winner from this dispute, and in his position as an usurper without any actual link to the ruling dynasty he could not afford to take more decided action against Polyeuktos, who would in fact survive his reign and pose a similar problem to Phokas’ murderer and successor, John Tzimiskes. Polyeuktos, by trying to reaffirm his importance as kingmaker to Nikephoros like Nikolas Mystikos tried to do with Romanos the Elder, was the last Patriarch who actively challenged the imperial authority

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<sup>167</sup> Zonaras, p. 200

<sup>168</sup> Leo Deacon, p. 51

<sup>169</sup> Skylitzes, p. 260

<sup>170</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 260

with some degree of success until the election of Micahel Cerularius seventy years later, and his ability to wrestle for power with two emperors was mostly due to the their status as usurpers<sup>171</sup>.

From this moment on, the relationship between throne and altar became increasingly tense, and were marked by the general tendency of the emperor to centralize the resources and the decisions regarding the church in his person, to cut off much of the Patriarch's power base and enforce a stricter control on the provincial dioceses and their economic activity, a strategy that ran parallel to the general crackdown on monastic wealth. In a law promulgated during his reign, Phokas ruled that no bishop was to be elected or consecrated without his express permission. After the bishop's death, imperial officials were also required to search in the dioceses' accounts and sequester the riches that exceeded past registered expenses.

These measure probably had a multiplicity of reasons, first and foremost the need of funding Phokas' growing military ambitions. Political motives, the necessity to reaffirm his firm hold on power and the supremacy of the imperial figure over the institutional church probably played a role after the dispute that pitted the two powers against each other.

Whatever the causes of this edict we may presume, seeing the tones used in his other law restricting the growth of monasteries, that it was covered by a coating of explicit religious references to Christian poverty. The topic of asceticism was indeed very dear to the person of Phokas, whose almost monastic habits are confirmed by all the sources, although the later and less favorable ones tend to describe them as mere hypocrisy, although the influence over the emperor of his saintly uncle, Michael Maleinos (in whose hairshirt he was reportedly murdered) is well known. It was through Maleinos that Nikephoros Phokas, when he was still *strategos*, was to meet with his future spiritual advisor, St. Athanasios, who at the time was not quite yet Athonite. The ideas of both Maleinos and his disciple Athanasios, together with the monastic tradition still alive in Cappadocia had great repercussions on the way the discourse of Phokas' law on religious property was framed, with a distinct stress on the virtue of poverty and continence.

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<sup>171</sup> In the Byzantine world the status of "usurper" was not entirely clear, possibly because of the lack of a clearly defined succession system and the residual survival of "meritocratic" emperorship. M. Brogini, *A proposito di Tyrannis*, L.R. Cresci, *Caratteri e funzione del Tyrannos nell'ideologia e nella storia dell'impero di Bisanzio*, in *Porphyra*, vol. 15, pp. 3-13., Venezia 2012

This is particularly evident from the legislation on monasteries promulgated in 964, which expresses deep concern for the impious enrichment of religious institutions, guilty of having betrayed the evangelic recommendations of poverty and the venerable teachings of the desert fathers<sup>172</sup>. After a long preamble filled with references to the new testament and the psalms, the body of the law is exposed in four articles. The first requires pious foundations to sell all their holdings (“which should be going to the poor and to soldiers in need”, maliciously adds Skylitzes<sup>173</sup>) in accordance to the biblical precept. The second article forbids the foundation of new institution, and future religious vocations and donations are redirected to old monasteries and pious houses, “in ruins”<sup>174</sup> because of widespread vainglory. The third articles forbids any “benefactor”<sup>175</sup> to sell land to monasteries and pious houses, rather encouraging them to sell to secular buyers. The absolute ban on land sale to religious institutions is lifted in the fourth articles, which allows acquisition of enough holdings to ensure the self sufficiency of a monastic community, although lavriote (semi-solitary) monasticism is explicitly preferred to the cenobite model.

Putting the religious tones aside, it should be remembered that, as already stated in a previous chapter of this work, by the tenth century many monastic foundations had acquired huge properties and had emerged as greatly influential economic and landowning actors, combining ideological legitimacy, organizational strength and exemption from taxes such as the *kapnikon*. The rapid accumulation of capital led to visible inefficiencies and large chunks of land donated to monasteries and charitable houses were left uncultivated and abandoned. The same law clearly states that religious institution were forbidden by the law from selling their lands, so in the eyes of the imperial administration the only way to repair the situation and contribute to a rationalization of the use of land without further unbalancing the political situation by touching the holdings of the secular elites. The ongoing struggle with the Patriarch probably contributed at making this kind of legislation more feasible.

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<sup>172</sup> McGeer, Land Legislation, p. 92-96

<sup>173</sup> Skylitzes, p. 274

<sup>174</sup> McGeer, Land Legislation, p. 95

<sup>175</sup> *ibidem*

Such a drastic decision of restricting and virtually forbidding the growth of non-hermitic monasticism was bound to raise a strong opposition, which could easily focus on the perceived impiety of the law itself. This did not elude the lawmaker, who clearly states in the last paragraph of the novel<sup>176</sup> that

In issuing these recommendations and rules, I know that I seem to be saying things burdensome to many peoples and at variance with their opinion, but this is no concern to me, since, in the words of Paul, I wish to please not men but Christ. To people with sense and faculties, accustomed to seeing things not superficially [...] we will appear to be expressing what is both profitable and beneficial to both those who live according to God and to the entire commonwealth.

The last statement regarding the “commonwealth” radically resizes the spiritual dimension of this novel, and does denote a urgent sense of need, otherwise alien to the text as a whole, conceived as it is like a church homily. It is, much like the previously mentioned law about the consecration of bishops, the strong statement of an emperor who wanted to reaffirm the primacy of his position over the ecclesiastical hierarchies, which are indirectly referred to as impious ignorants of the common good.

It is nevertheless hard to deny the spiritual element of Phokas’ legislation, which emerges in all its strength with the discussed proposal of according the status of martyr to the soldiers who died in the fight against the Muslims, a concept that somehow ironically came to Byzantium through the Muslims themselves, only partially filtered by the frontier Christianity of the eastern borders. The Martyrdom of soldiers was linked with the problem of holy war doctrine in Byzantium, which still owed much to the early Christian tradition, embodied in the works of the Cappadocian fathers.

Byzantine culture never embraced a concept of holy war comparable to that of the Muslim world, and their belief that “he who slays an enemy or slays an enemy enters into paradise” is liquidated as “crazy” and “nonsense” by Constantine VII only a few years prior to Phokas’ accession to the throne<sup>177</sup>. Rather, soldiers who shed enemy blood in combat were punished with a three-years exclusion from communion, in accordance with a

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<sup>176</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 96

<sup>177</sup> *De Administrando Imperio*, p. 92,95

patristic tradition initiated by S. Basil of Caesarea<sup>178</sup>. Practical necessities and an endless state of war made the strict application of this measure nearly impossible, but the idea of holy war, which stood as the basis of the martyrdom of fallen Christian soldiers, was conceived as an abomination by all but a small portion of the frontier elite, presumably spearheaded by the Phokades and their enlarged clan, which included also the writer of the abovementioned chapter of the treatise *On Skirmishing*. According to Canard, for those generals and simple soldiers who embraced the idea of the sanctity of war against the infidel, the conceptual shift from a complete refusal of conflict to its acceptance and encouragement as a sacred duty meant universalizing the dimension of war and granting it a legitimacy beyond the late antique idea of preserving or retaking the old imperial provinces<sup>179</sup>. It is unlikely though that the different conception of war and its sanctification was the main dividing line between the center and the periphery of the empire. The best witness we have for the attitude of the Byzantine frontiersmen is the series of epic songs known as Akritic chants, first composed during the ninth-tenth centuries. The main representative of this literary genre is the epic poem *Digenis Akritas*, which narrates the adventures of a frontier guardsman whose father is a Muslim emir and whose mother is the daughter of a *Strategos* of the Doukas family. The poem survived in several later revisions datable to the eleventh-fourteenth centuries, but its contents and its spirit remained substantially untouched, and speak of a fluid frontier environment in which faith is not an actual discriminating element. The hero himself is the son of a converted Muslim emir, and during the whole poem there is not a single fight started for even vaguely religious motives. The frontiersmen are depicted fighting for prestige, honor and women, and whoever challenged their status, whatever his religious affiliation, was deemed an enemy. The war between the Byzantine empire and the Caliphate seats in the background during the whole poem, and when it sporadically emerges during the first chapters ("the Emir's Chant") it assumes no religious connotation whatsoever: it is almost given for granted, and treated like a daily business alien to the fury and enthusiasm that characterize a thoroughly sanctified vision of war.

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<sup>178</sup> M. Canard, *La guerre sainte dans le monde islamique et dans le monde chrétien*, Revue Africaine, Algier 1936, p.619

<sup>179</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 618



That of granting the status of Martyrs to fallen Christian soldiers was probably more of a personal idea of the Phokades and their affiliates, than a widespread feeling of the border elite, and found its roots in the deep religious feeling of the emperor and his entourage.

This idea encountered a strong opposition and would never gain foot among the majority of educated Byzantines. The proposal advanced by the Phokades, meeting a firm refusal by the ecclesiastical hierarchies, was then a ratification of the prevailing Byzantine attitudes towards war and its sanctity, rather than a potential ideological turning point.

### **3.2.3 DEVALUATION AND STATE PROFITEERING: MONETARY AND ECONOMIC POLICIES OF NIKEPHOROS II**

Among the consequences of the Byzantine economic recovery of the ninth and tenth centuries, the most noticeable was the almost complete monetization of the fiscal system, and the parallel increase of monetary exchanges on every level, as testified by archaeological finds involving large quantities of copper coins used in everyday trade<sup>180</sup>. A more widespread use of coins as a mean of exchange ran parallel to an increase in state expenditures, mostly needed to support an heavier military effort at the frontiers. For several decades, the growth of the Byzantine economic space proceeded relatively unhindered, as the threat of “gold scarcity” was still out of sight at least until the tenth century, and the essentially inelastic nature of metal supply was yet to surface as a problem. The first measures against the hoarding of precious metals, seen as a potential cause of “lack of coins” began to emerge during the reign of Leo VI, and are reported in a novel bearing his name and in a few passages from the Book of the Eparch<sup>181</sup>. A couple of generations later the amount of gold and silver put in circulation by the state began to apparently approach the supply limit. Tied as it was by the scarcity of new sources of precious metal and by its inability to enforce a constant inward flow from outside its territory (through reliable client states, for example) , the imperial administration was compelled to act on coinage itself, manipulating the two physical characteristics that conferred value to the single coins in the eyes of the population: weight and finesse.

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<sup>180</sup> A. Harvey, *Economic Expansion in the Byzantine Empire, 900-1200*, Cambridge 1989, p.85

<sup>181</sup> C. Morriison, *Byzantine Money*, EHB, p.940

Changing in the alloy of coinage was the easiest and safest strategy to ensure a dilution of the available gold into larger quantities of coins, as it allowed the state to save considerable amounts of gold without reducing the apparent face value of single coins. The first documented change in the alloy of a *nomisma* was operated by Constantine VII, who reduced the amount of gold of almost 3%, from 97.3 to 94.4%<sup>182</sup>. Admittedly though, such a limited change in gold composition could be ascribed to technological limitation and to the characteristics of the specific instances found, rather than to a precise monetary strategy, but it is nonetheless consistent with the pace of devaluation of the tenth century and the first half of the eleventh.

Another way to expand the pool of precious metals available to the Byzantine economic space was through military conquests, which enlarged the tributary base of the state and revitalized its finances with the injections of sometimes immense quantities of loot. Larger scale military operations also had the effect of a positive stimulus on provincial economies, as soldiers, officers and the service personnel received their salaries and took their share of the war spoils. The military option, on the other hand, could and did create a vicious circle, in which the immediate gains of a successful campaign were not able to adequately match the direct costs of army mobilization and support, especially in the not-so-infrequent case of failing expeditions, like the one led by Constantine Gongyles to Crete in 949. Although it is certainly an exaggeration to say that military campaigns were seen as long term “investments”, they were clearly expensive undertaking, which were supposed to generate an adequate return in both strategic and financial terms. In 966 Russian king Svjatoslav was paid 15 *kentenaria*<sup>183</sup> by Nikephoros Phokas to invade Bulgaria<sup>184</sup>, and it may be reasonable to assume that leading an expedition in the same region would have cost something like twice the amount of gold offered to the Russian king, offering no immediate or long-term rewards since Bulgaria was notoriously hard to conquer, harder to keep and had not developed a profitable monetary economy. The expansion of the frontier south of the Taurus, on the other hand, was easier and opened the path to the richer regions of the Levant, which acted as the Mediterranean gate to an extensive trade network stretching eastwards to Central Asia and India. Furthermore, the

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<sup>182</sup> *ibidem*, p. 931

<sup>183</sup> equivalent of 108.000 golden *nomismata*

<sup>184</sup> Leo Deacon, p. 63

Cilician plain and the coastal region of northern Syria housed a much more developed and rooted farming economy, which continued to flourish under the Muslim rule.

Nevertheless, during the six years of Phokas' reign, the continuous strain posed to the imperial finances by the uninterrupted series of military expeditions was not balanced by whatever immediate gain the recent acquisitions could offer. This is particularly true if we consider the losses brought by the dramatic failure of the ambitious oversea campaign against the Muslims of Sicily in 964-65<sup>185</sup>, and the abovementioned payments of 15 gold *kentaria* to Svjatoslav in the following year. Moreover, as reported by Yahya of Antioch, the area around Tarsus was suffering from a serious price crisis triggered by a widespread famine<sup>186</sup>, itself probably caused by the state of incessant warfare that plagued the region for several years.

The situation called for a monetary policy that would have enabled the state to collect and distribute larger quantities of gold in a relatively short amount of time, without taking the amount of gold in circulation closer to the supply limit. In other words, the state needed to immediately multiply the nominal value of its limited resources.

The classic combination of increased fiscal pressure and reduced expenses was probably the first path to be explored: according to Skylitzes<sup>187</sup>:

Then when he [the emperor] went off to one of his many expeditions, he maltreated his subjects atrociously, not only by imposing additional taxes, but also by unimaginable plundering. In addition to what has been said, he also suppressed a portion of the customary perquisites of the Senate, allegedly because he was short of money for the wars.

The passage in question does not specify the nature of the new taxes, and it is probably correct to see them as *una tantum* contributions, rather than a permanent increase. As for the "plundering", the range and the frequency of the military expeditions, which were conducted mostly along the poorest regions of southern Anatolia, probably made the forced requisitions of supply more painful to the local peasants than they used to be in the past decades. Whatever their nature, the new taxes were probably heavy and

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<sup>185</sup> *ibidem*, p. 66

<sup>186</sup> Yahya, p. 98

<sup>187</sup> Skylitzes, p. 274

certainly unwelcomed, to the point that even Leo the Deacon, in his normally flattering portrait of Phokas describes them as “merciless” and “oppressive”<sup>188</sup>.

The other possibility was the manipulation of the coinage itself, to artificially create more wealth from the same amount of resources. Due to the urgency perceived by the emperor and its closest affiliates, the option of altering the fineness of the *nomisma* was not deemed feasible. As already said, the quantity of gold in the *nomisma* had already been reduced by 3% by Constantine VII, and further manipulations were probably considered premature and risky for the stability and the prestige of the Byzantine trimetallic standard, still pivoting around the purity of the gold coin. Furthermore, diluting the percentage of gold was a policy that only allowed limited gains on the long run.

The other possibility was the reduction of the weight of the coin, hence the introduction of a new version of the gold coin, the *tetarteron*. The *tetarteron* was a lighter coin weighting only 22 carats, 1/12 less than the normal *nomisma* (from this point on called *histamenos*), from which it was virtually indistinguishable in shape and fineness<sup>189</sup>. The year of its release is not revealed by the extant sources, but it can be deduced with some degree of accuracy by cross-referencing some passages of the Synopsis of Skylitzes. The eleventh century chronicle presents a reference to a famine induced by harsh winds and abnormal inflation between the eleventh and the twelfth years of the indiction (967-68)<sup>190</sup>. A glance to the chronology of Phokas’ expeditions reveals that the conquest of Cilicia was completed during the same year, while no campaign took place in 967. A very ambitious *chevauchée* through Syria (eventually reaching as far as Tripoli) was being organized for 968: the unprecedented scope of this military undertaking clearly required an extraordinary amount of funds, and equally extraordinary means to acquire them. Considering how slowly a high-viscosity medieval economy could adjust to an inflationary shock, it may be reasonable to date the introduction of the *tetarteron* to the end of 966, when coincidentally the emperor was in Constantinople to deal with the Bulgarian situation.

When it was issued, the emperor dictated that tax exactors were compelled to demand only full *histamena*, while imperial payments were made in the new *tetartera*. Since the

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<sup>188</sup> Leo Deacon, p. 64

<sup>189</sup> M. Hendy, *Studies in Byzantine Monetary Economy*, Cambridge 1985 p. 507

<sup>190</sup> Skylitzes, p. 277

two denominations were declared to have the same value<sup>191</sup>, the state expected an immediate and consistent return in gold to the treasury, which would have allowed it to mint one extra *tetarteron* from every eleven *histamena* it collected.

But wealth was still calculated based on the quantity (i.e. the weight) of one's precious substances, and not yet based on the quantity of one's government-validated currency. Somehow predictably, the traders that in exchanging *histamena* for *tetartera* found themselves deprived of a small but consistent portion of their personal possession tried to make up for their losses by inflating the costs of their merchandises. The description of Leo Phokas' profiteering attitude during his tenure as *kouropalates*, and the accuses commonly moved by the sources of rapacious financial behavior in the sale of wheat<sup>192</sup>, may be at least partially attributed to the need to dampen the losses suffered during the passage to the *tetarteron* regime. It is possible that Leo Phokas was directing grain sales in the name of the state, as in Skylitzes, the same criticism is moved to the state-sponsored sale of grain during the famine of 968<sup>193</sup>, and is linked to the anecdote of the old man enlisting in the army because, he discovered himself capable of carrying two gold pieces worth of grain on his shoulders, while in his youth he needed two mules to carry the equivalent of one gold piece. The coincidence of a natural famine and the inflation caused by the market reaction to the *tetarteron* caused an abnormal growth in the prices of essential commodities, which the state did not aim to control as it was still trying to profit from the introduction of the lightweight coin. The admittedly profiteering attitude, as rewarding as it may have been, was politically short sighted, and turned the lukewarm support the emperor could have had in the Capital into open hostility, that erupted in a series of violent manifestation against the person of the emperor during the feast of the Ascension, when a couple of women went as far as to throw rocks to the emperor in his ritual procession to the monastery of Pege<sup>194</sup>.

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<sup>191</sup> *ibidem* p. 275

<sup>192</sup> See for example, Leo Deacon, p. 64 and Skylitzes p. 278

<sup>193</sup> Skylitzes, p.277

<sup>194</sup> Leo Deacon, p. 65 The immediate trigger of the popular malcontent was a clash between the citizens and some Armenian soldiers, but its deeper roots may have been linked to the ongoing price crisis.

The inflationary behavior was common among all the traders, which responded to the new monetary situation by passing out the cost to the buyers. As Laiou pointed out in her works, the emperor probably didn't predict this reaction of the market, but it was completely in accordance with the rules of the economy as we know it<sup>195</sup>. Such an attempt at introducing an early form of fiduciary currency was apparently beyond the possibilities of the Byzantine state and society of the tenth century, as despite its simple and straightforward reasons meant the partial abandonment of the "weight standard" that characterized the economic life of the Byzantine economic space from the early eighth century in favor of a more elaborated and abstract conception of wealth, in which the face value of a coin was less bound to its physical weight and more to its social value as a signifier of riches and a unit of accounting. It is possible to confidently state that Nikephoros II did not think the least about these implications, as the manifest aim of his policies was to find quick sources of cash to finance his military expeditions – themselves made possible and desirable by a series of internal and external factors, not least the relative strength of the empire vis-à-vis its enemies and the slow reduction of fiscal inflow due to the expansion of large estates owned by socially influential individuals. He overestimated the economic authoritativeness of the imperial institution and its ability to influence the internal market with a single non-structural reform. And if we may take a guess about the man's character from the primary sources, he was probably overconfident about his support too, and the people's violent reaction to his policies must have hit him like a cold shower, prompting him to build the infamous wall surrounding the Bukoleon palace.

The *tetarteron* as a sub-unit of the *nomisma* survived until the Komnene monetary reforms of the eleventh century, but its shape was altered during the reign of Basil II, to make it more easily distinguishable from the *histamenon*, of which it became a complement rather than a substitute<sup>196</sup>: it was made thicker and smaller, and as the earlier sub-denominations of the late Roman *solidus* and the copper *follis*, probably found its rationale in the facilitation of transactions.

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<sup>195</sup> A. Laiou, *Exchange and Trade*, EHB, p. 734

<sup>196</sup> M. Hendy, *Studies*, p. 508

### 3.3 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The leitmotiv of Nikephoros Phokas' policies during the years of his reign was undeniably the support of the army. This is evident since the beginning of the Phokas domination of the high echelons of the military that happened when Constantine VII was restored to the throne and the Lekapenoi were ousted from power. A first proof of the militarist reorientation of the state priority can be seen with the introduction of measures aimed to protect the soldiers' properties against alienation, a turning point in Byzantine land legislation that can also be seen as the first attempt to impose a coherent framework on the relationship between military service and land ownership, which before that point was probably regulated by custom rather than by a coherent legislative code. During the reigns of Constantine VII and Romanos II these activity were nevertheless sporadic and in the overall marginal: the reconstruction and the empowering of the army never emerged as their first priority, as proven by the scope of the military activity that took place between 944 and 962, which was limited and followed an essentially defensive line with limited strategic goals. In this phase occasional raids through enemy lands were made for loot or to cause disturbance rather than conquest, when they were not conducted for conjunctural strategic reasons. A good example is the expedition led by Nikephoros Phokas the elder against Adana in response to a Tarsiotie siege of the city of Mistheia<sup>197</sup>: the move is described by the author of the treatise *On Skirmishing* as a perfectly accomplished distracting maneuver to curb the morale of the Muslim army, which promptly interrupted the siege and returned back without having accomplished anything of note. When a member of the Phokades was finally vested of the imperial authority, the state witnessed an aggressive reorientation of its priorities in a militaristic sense.

Chapter 19 of the treatise *On Skirmishing* also offers an example of the "political program" of the Phokas clan, its most noteworthy passages being referred to the freedom (from taxation and oppression) and dignity (against the abuses of the judiciary and the tax collectors) the state should have granted to the single soldiers in the provinces, with the declared objective of expanding the frontiers rather than simply defending the existing territories.

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<sup>197</sup> *On Skirmishing*, ch. 20

The points presented in this “program” were applied with a decent degree of success, and were financed by a whole series of fiscal and monetary actions. Among those, the introduction of the *tetarteron* appeared as a quick way to dilute the value of the existing inelastic supply of gold into a larger quantity of coins to spend in military expeditions that were supposed to generate a substantial, although slower, return.

Nevertheless, the new militarily aggressive outlook of the Byzantine state was not an end itself. True, the Phokades, the Maleinoi the Kurkuas and other important families of the tenth century were all products of the Anatolian frontier, and it may be possible to state that a militarist mindset was written in their social DNA. But seen from a wider perspective, there was a whole series of factors that conjured to reduce the relative role of the state in the economy, which saw its fiscal income slowly decline and its expenses increase. One cause of the decline of tax inflow was the raise of large estates, owned by individuals who could use their social weight to bribe or threat tax collectors into reducing their dues. To counter this phenomenon, the Byzantine state historically operated in a twofold way, issuing laws against the further expansion of large estates within the fiscal districts of village communities on the one hand, and on the other by making itself the largest landowner, thus replacing the loss of fiscal income with new gains coming from the direct exploitations of state-owned estates, preferentially carved out of the newly conquered Muslim lands, which were resettled with Christian *paroikoi* working for the state once the former Muslim inhabitants had been forcefully expelled. The newly conquered lands could have another use as a way to consolidate the grasp of the Phokas clan over the imperial institution, acting as a bargaining tool with the elite, spoils of war to be distributed to prominent officials in exchange for their loyalty. The enlargement of the tax base to new, richer regions was of course another important motive, and on the short run the fiscal gains were supplemented by substantial injections of war spoils.

The emperor’s attitude towards the institutional church and the monasticism was certainly more nuanced, and was heavily influenced by the ongoing political struggle with the Patriarch Polyeuktos, which helped redirecting the imperial policies toward a distinct centralization of the institutional church in the hands of the sovereign. The unpredicted death of the emperor soon questioned the validity his legislative actions, as his murderer and successor John I used them as a bargain tool with the Patriarch, the ecclesiastical support being his sole possible of political legitimacy at the beginning of his reign.



Phokas' well known legislation regarding the properties of monasteries and pious houses, sunken in a deep religious rhetoric, was probably triggered by a deeply felt need to renovate the spiritual character of Byzantine monasticism, but had the welcome side effect of unlocking many vast chunks of arable land that were kept unused by the monasteries – unused and untaxed. Similarly, the motivations behind the proposal of granting the status of Martyr to those soldiers who died in battle against the infidels were certainly linked to the emperor's own stance, and to his own vision of war as a spiritual duty. Nonetheless, the concrete military benefits – in terms of morale and overall fighting efficiency – that sprung from a more confident army which saw its existence as a sacred mission are evident, and are probably the reasons that moved Phokas's attempt at imposing it to the church hierarchies.

As seen from this quick overview, the aim of Nikephoros II Phokas' policies was essentially a militaristic response to the first symptoms of the revenue crisis that would haunt Byzantium until the end of the eleventh century, producing the schizophrenia of a state struggling to keep the pace of an expanding economy within the restrictions imposed by a limited supply of gold. Having empowered the main institution of the state, its armed forces, Phokas tried to reverse the situation by expanding the area subject to imperial domination with an intense series of military campaign in the rich regions of Cilicia and Northern Syria, and by artificially reducing the shortage of gold by authoritatively imposing the use of lighter coins. This partially explains his lack of attention to the western front, which was deemed militarily more risky and certainly less rewarding, the Bulgarians being perceived as a threat unworthy of attention that could be dealt with through the use of the Russian proxy. Phokas clearly underestimated the strategic significance of the Bulgarian front, and when his plan backfired after his death, Constantinople was exposed to the new aggressive Russian neighbor. Nevertheless Nikephoros Phokas was able to reach his target, as he was able to turn the Byzantine army into a better fighting force, capable of extending the borders of the empire and fight back most of its opponent – slowing down the pace of the revenue crisis until it finally exploded in the reign Constantine Monomachos. But by that time, the Byzantine state had filled its *lebensraum*, and it was no longer surrounded by vulnerable border entities that could be liquidated with limited military effort, as the frontier emirates had been slowly absorbed within the boundaries of the Fatimid and Seljuq states. In the radically different

mood of the eleventh century, new solutions had to be elaborated, new constraints faced and new crises overcome.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE EASTERN CAMPAIGNS

#### 4.1 METHOD AND SOURCES

*Although it is our intention to set down instructions about skirmishing, we must bear in mind that they might not find much application in the eastern regions at the present time. [...] Nonetheless, in order that time, which leads us to forget what we once knew, might not completely blot out this knowledge, we think we ought to commit it to writing.*

*Treatise on Skirmishing, p. 1*

This part of my thesis, the last, will attempt to reconstruct the Cilician and Syrian campaigns of Nikephoros Phokas, starting from year 962, date of his first documented successful expedition against the northern cities of the emirate of Tarsus. Of course, the amount of details contained in the sources is scant at best, and in most cases many significant elements of the campaign routes are left to the imagination of the reader. Nevertheless, seeing how different authors have focused on different aspects of the campaigns led by Phokas, first as a *domestikos* and later as the emperor, by cross referencing their texts it is possible to draw a decently believable campaigning history. The most important sources available to the modern reader are the Synopsis of Skylitzes, the History of Leo the Deacon and that of Yahya of Antioch.

The Deacon's work offers a strong emphasis on the army leaders and their exploits on the battlefield concentrating on the most salient episodes of the campaign, in line with its general objective of turning the history of Phokas and Tzimiskes into some kind of Byzantine epic. His account is mostly useful to understand the single highlights of the campaign, particularly those regarding the sieges of the Cilician cities. Nevertheless it needs to be noted that many of the descriptions present in his work are strongly dependent on older histories, and may not reflect the events as they actually

happened<sup>198</sup>. Many fundamental details of the route taken by the fighting armies can be deduced from the chronicle of Yahya, who took care of registering almost every single city or fortress raided and conquered during this period, although his description of the single encounters lacks depth and often repeats itself through the use of almost ritual formulas. His preferred use of the current Arab toponyms contributes in creating a certain confusion, but many of those place names are directly derived from ancient roots, and basing on this assumption they are easily identifiable. The other historical works I examined, the Synopsis of Skylitzes and the History of Zonaras, do not prove useful for a chronologically accurate description of the campaign, as the military operations are reported with no definite chronological order. Occasionally though, the two eleventh centuries writers help shed some light on certain military engagements, and report events that do not appear in the Deacon's History.

General details regarding the way military operations were conducted during the tenth century can be understood from the works generally attributed to Constantine VII, especially his Treatise on Military expeditions, which contains a useful list of *aplekta*, the gathering points of the campaigning imperial army. The other sources more often than not forget to precisely mention these places, as they generally use more vague formulas such as "into roman territory" or "from Cappadocia". This is particularly evident in the otherwise accurate work of Yahya of Antioch, who shows a distinctly stronger degree of confidence when talking about the lands south of the traditional Byzantine border. The other kind of primary source useful to gather indirect details about the conduct of the operations along the eastern frontier is of course the whole corpus of military manuals and treatises that spawned during the so-called Macedonian Renaissance, first and foremost the *Praecepta Militaria* and the invaluable treatise On Skirmishing, both attributed to Nikephoros Phokas himself, but probably a product of his entourage.

The Analysis will proceed with the visual aid of the maps made available by the Pelagios Project<sup>199</sup>, which I edited by adding the possible path followed by the Byzantine armies during their march. Clearly, the routes I sketched are approximated at best: they roughly

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<sup>198</sup> D. Sullivan, Siegecraft, Two tenth century instructional manuals by Heron of Byzantium, Dumbarton Oaks, 2000, p.18

<sup>199</sup> the Atlas of the Ancient World is freely available at <http://pelagios.dme.ait.ac.at/maps/greco-roman/>. All credit is given to the creators of the webpage.

follow the ancient roman roads as visible in the Pelagios map, since as far as I know there has been no coherent and effective study of the medieval military routes in Anatolia.

In this dissertation I chose to leave out the analysis of the expeditions led by Nikephoros Phokas through the Diyar Bakr, the region east of the high course of the Euphrates, since in this time they did not lead to any conclusive result or territorial acquisition by any side, and were only a sporadic sideshow of the war against the Hamdanids, a series of operations conducted within the “usual” framework of armed *chevauchées* with little strategic significance on a wider scope. On the other hand, I deemed the in-depth raid that took the imperial army as far as Tripoli in 968 worth a mention, since its unprecedented scope definitely marked the end of the age of Byzantine military passivity in land operations. The only comparable event before that time was the sack of Damietta of 853, which nevertheless happened within the contest of the struggle for maritime supremacy against the Emirate of Crete and its major ally, the Abbasid Caliphate.

#### **4.2 PRELUDE: MILITARY ACTIVITIES IN THE EAST UNDER CONSTANTINE VII AND ROMANOS II**

As already repeated, the operations along the south-eastern front during the reign of Constantine VII were limited and characterized by overall defensive goals. A possible exception may be the capture of Theodosiopolis in 949, but seeing how the city controlled the route for Trebisond and was in all regards a shield for the inland of Chaldia, the true aim of the Erzurum campaign was indeed that of providing a deeper defensive line for the easternmost provinces bordering with Muslim Armenia. This acquisition followed the annexation of the emirate of Melitene, an event which moved forward the Byzantine frontier and needed to be defensively balanced by the conquest of other neighboring areas capable of supporting the region against the raids coming from the Muslim cities on the northern fringe of the Emirate of Aleppo, and those in the Diyar Bakr.

Another military campaign that could easily be included in this “expansive-defense” framework is the raid in force through the Diyar Bakr, which ultimately led to the capture of Samosata<sup>200</sup>. It is unclear whether the sources referred to Samosata or to its almost homonymous Arsamosata. Both cities lay in the possible route between the Byzantine

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<sup>200</sup> Yahya of Antioch, p. 77, Theophanes Continuatus, p. 238

territories and the “district of Amida, Arzen and Mayafariqin”<sup>201</sup>, alleged objective of the campaign led by Tzimiskes and the *paroikomomenos* Basil in 957-8. Reference to the city of Samosata is more likely, due to the greater importance of this center and especially to its location, laying along the road from Caesarea and at the feet of the passages leading to the core of the Anatolian Plateau. It was also reasonably close to the city of Marash, a strategic junction repeatedly fought over in this phase of the tenth century.

The hostilities between the Hamdanid Emirate and the Byzantine empire were concentrated on the eastern fringes of the Taurus range, around the passes of Marash (where the army led by Bardas Phokas suffered a crushing defeat in 953) and the key strong point of Hadath. This region was apparently of primary importance within the strategic vision upheld by Constantine VII, which was coherently aimed at ensuring the control of the passages that led from northern Syrian plains to the heights of inner Anatolia. With this strategic vision in mind, the Porphyrogenitus was able to advance the Byzantine borders on the east, thickening the shield that protected the core Anatolian provinces.

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<sup>201</sup> Yahya of Antioch, p. 76

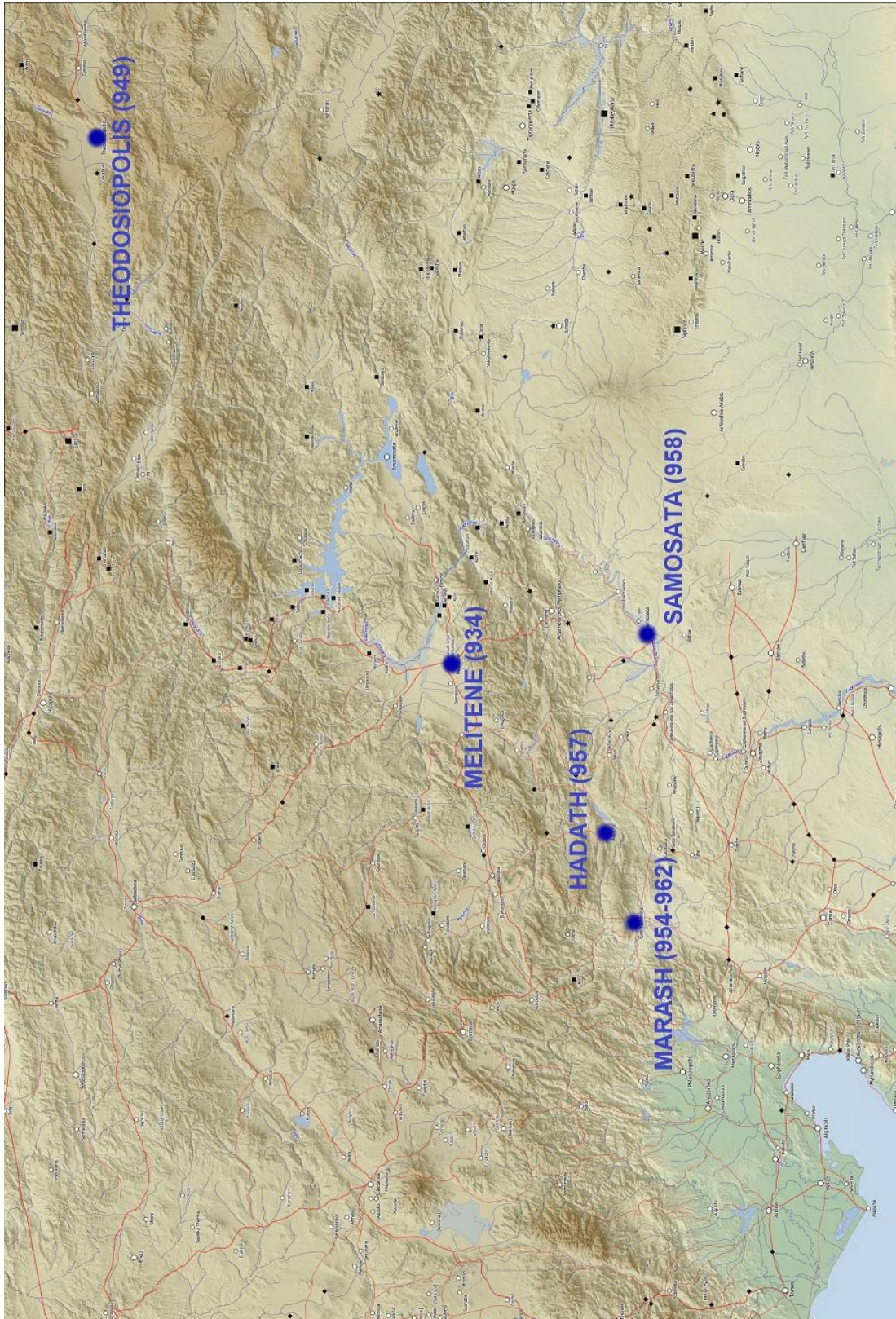


Fig. 1, the eastern acquisitions of the Byzantine empire in the first half of the tenth century.

The other major military undertaking of Constantine VII was the expedition against the emirate of Crete, entrusted in 949 to the eunuch Constantine Gongyles. It was the first serious attempt at retaking the island, which fell into Muslim hands in 824, since the aborted expedition of Michael III and the naval defeat of Hymerios in 911<sup>202</sup>. The peripheral position of Crete made it an easy prey for the army of Andalusian exiles that reached it while the Byzantine fleet was distracted by a major civil war. Once a strong islander government was able to form, the same geographical factors made it hard to conquer without an absolute naval and military superiority, which the Byzantines only occasionally enjoyed in the tenth century.

The Emirate of Crete was founded by Andalusian expatriates backed by Egypt in the first half of the ninth century. Due to its strategic location at the mouth of the Aegean it soon became a key actor in the secular struggle for naval supremacy between the caliphate and the Byzantine empire. The landmark work of Christides<sup>203</sup> demonstrated how the Cretan emirate became a safe haven for the Caliphal ships on their way to raid the cities of Greece and Asia Minor, offering logistic and military support rather than directly leading naval raids with the local navy. Crete became more than the “pirates’ nest” it is usually assumed to be: the Muslim settlers wished to establish a permanent state, and their attacks on the Aegean islands were aimed at creating a belt of defensive control points to serve in case of attacks from the Anatolian or Greek mainland. Once this security chain was established though, the Emirate undeniably supplemented its income with some large scale raiding to the rich Greek cities of Corinth and Monemvasia. The Cretan raiding parties allegedly arrived as far as the Chalcidike, where they sacked the monasteries of Athos. Other Muslim powers, particularly Tarsus and Egypt, made use of the island as a logistic base for their operations, as in the case of Leo of Tripoli’s famous grand raid through against the Aegean, which reached up to the Propontis islands that commanded the way to Constantinople.

The expedition led by Gongyles was a complete disaster, all sources agree. The imperial army disembarked on the island without encountering any resistance, but was routed and utterly destroyed as soon as the Cretans found a way to exploit the general’s carelessness

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<sup>202</sup> R.J.H. Jenkins, *The date of Leo VI’s Cretan expedition*, in *Studies on Byzantine History of the ninth and tenth centuries*, London 1970.

<sup>203</sup> V. Christides, *The Conquest of Crete by the Arabs (ca.824) a turning point in the struggle between Byzantium and Islam*, Akademia Athenon, Athens 1984.



in setting up the encampment. The reasons behind the Byzantine defeat were probably more complex than what it transpires from the sources, who unanimously attribute the humiliating rout to the incompetency of Gongyles, a “coward” and “effeminate fellow from Paphlagonia”<sup>204</sup>. But despite this last burning defeat, the Byzantine state desperately needed to safeguard the southern gate to the Aegean sea, and thus another expedition was organized shortly after the death of Constantine VII by his son Romanos.

The command of this expedition was entrusted to Nikephoros Phokas, at the time *domestikos* for the East, and its success proved to be a fundamental stepping stone to the throne. Indeed, when the news of the capture of Crete reached Constantinople, there was so much rejoicing that the figure of Phokas became the subject of an epic poem written by Theodosius the Deacon, customarily titled *De Creta capta*.

Yahya of Antioch reports that the expedition started the 13 of July 960<sup>205</sup>, when an admittedly large Byzantine fleet, comprising an estimated 250 vessels sailed from the harbor of Phygela<sup>206</sup>. The fight began as soon as the troops began disembarking on Crete, not so far away from the capital, Chandax: according to Leo the Deacon, the imperial soldiers landed “fully armed and mounted” and charged directly at the Cretan troops deployed along the shores, forcing the defenders to take flight inside the town<sup>207</sup>. The testimony of Leo the Deacon is contradicted by other sources, who speak of an unopposed landing<sup>208</sup>. The latter option is much more likely when one takes into account the difficulties inherent in this kind of operations: storming a beach was an extremely risky undertaking, and was almost impossible to carry out effectively and in good order, especially with the limited naval and military technology of the tenth century. It is nevertheless possible that some clashes – probably mere skirmishes, although the possibility of larger scale fights is not to be excluded – took place between the Cretan and the Byzantine armies *immediately after* the Byzantines had disembarked.

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<sup>204</sup> Leo Deacon, p. 7

<sup>205</sup> Yahya, p. 84

<sup>206</sup> Christides, *Crete*, p. 174-77, Attaleiates, p.225

<sup>207</sup> Leo Deacon, p. 8

<sup>208</sup> Christides, *Crete*, p. 177

The next step was to set up a permanent fortified camp, to coordinate the conquest of the island and proceed with the siege of Chandax, its capital. Despite the Muslim opposition and the loss of a strong foraging party led by Nikephoros Pastilas, commander of the *Thrakesion* theme<sup>209</sup>, the siege proceeded well for the Byzantine forces, which were able to impose a blockade and repel every Cretan attempts at dislodging them with sorties and surprise attacks – and it was after one of those battles that Phokas decided to try his way at psychological warfare by throwing the heads of the fallen Cretan soldiers to their comrades defending the city, to undermine their already wavering morale<sup>210</sup>. The assault that immediately followed this macabre move was not as successful as Phokas hoped, and the Byzantine army was forced to retreat within its encampment. Meanwhile, the lack of logistic support was beginning to make the imperial soldiers restless – the problem was solved by the timely arrival of supplies in the winter of 961, sent by *paroikomomenos* Joseph Bringas, allegedly through the intercession of Athanasios the Athonite<sup>211</sup>. Active siege operations were interrupted during the winter, as the army engaged in military trainings and the citizens of Chandax strived with the blockade. They were resumed only at the arrival of the spring, when the Byzantine army attempted another assault, this time successful. Chandax was taken when a breach was open by sappers in the circle of its wall<sup>212</sup>, and the Byzantine soldiers began to swarm inside the city. The exhausted population was graced by the general, who was barely able to restrain his soldiers from wildly plundering the captive city. The rest of Crete promptly followed. We know that not a few notables of the Emirate embraced Christianity and became influent members of the imperial military<sup>213</sup>. Inaugurating what was to become the standard practice for Byzantine annexation of formerly Muslim territories, the state encouraged the local population to convert to Christianity by offering strong fiscal incentives, and by forcefully expelling those who refused to embrace the orthodox faith.

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<sup>209</sup> Leo Deacon, p. 10. Much of the fault of Pastilas' reversal is attributed to the lack of discipline of his mercenary Russian troops, who ignored the high commander's recommendation to be "vigilant and sober".

<sup>210</sup> *ibidem*, p. 16

<sup>211</sup> Christides, p. 82

<sup>212</sup> Leo Deacon, p. 26

<sup>213</sup> Anemas, son of the Emir, accompanied John Tzimiskes in his campaign against the Russians

The island was then repopulated with military settlers<sup>214</sup>, and its administrative center moved to the newly founded fortress of Temenos, in the hills surrounding Chandax. A fleet was providently stationed in the harbor of Chandax, to avoid another hostile takeover. When he finished taking care of the island conquest and resettlement, Phokas loaded the war booty and the captives on his ships and headed back to Constantinople, where he celebrated a triumph – on foot, since the emperor forbade him from entering the city on horse – from the golden gate to the hippodrome, in a ritual strongly reminiscent of Prokopius' account of the triumphs held during the reign of Justinian, four centuries earlier. After he paraded the spoils of his Cretan expedition, Phokas was conferred by the emperor the dignity of *magistros*<sup>215</sup>, and entrusted once again with the command of the eastern armies.

#### 4.3 THE SACK OF ALEPPO, 961-62

The apparent ease with which Nikephoros Phokas was able to conduct his Cilician campaigns in the 960s was made possible by the military exploits of his brother, Leo. The younger son of Bardas Phokas was hastily made commander of the east when Saif Ad-Dawla moved an impressive army, possibly numbering thirty thousand men both sedentary and nomad<sup>216</sup>, through the Cilician Gates in 960. The army of Aleppo was able to enter the Byzantine borders, raiding as far as Asia Minor without encountering any sizeable opposition, until it was successfully ambushed on its way back by the troops of Leo Phokas, stationed along the defiles of an unidentified mountain pass known alternatively as Adrassos<sup>217</sup> or Magrah-al-Kouhl<sup>218</sup>. The troops led by Leo Phokas were mostly soldiers of the theme of Cappadocia, provided by *strategos* Constantine

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<sup>214</sup> Christides, p. 182, referring to measures reported in the *De Cerimoniis*, and Leo Deacon, p. 28.

<sup>215</sup> M. McCormick, *Eternal Victory: Triumphal rulership in late antiquity and the early medieval east*, Cambridge 1987, p. 168

<sup>216</sup> Yahya, p. 83, Leo Deacon, p. 20 speaks of "Hagarenes and Arabs" i.e. Syrian militias and Bedouin nomad cavalry, usually referred to in Byzantine texts as "arabitai".

<sup>217</sup> Skylitzes, p. 250, Theophane Continuatus p. 300

<sup>218</sup> Yahya, p. 83

Maleinos<sup>219</sup>, but the usual remarks about the *domestikos* leading “substandard” troop is probably a mistaken interpretation of a topos used by Leo the Deacon, who almost certainly adopted the classic literary device of exaggerating the weakness of Phokas’ forces in relation to those of the enemy to embellish the heroic feats of the protagonist of his narration<sup>220</sup>, an expedient that can be traced back at least to Caesar, and possibly to the works of the earliest Classic historians. Despite the obvious numerical prevalence of unprofessional thematic soldiers, the fact that Leo Phokas was honored with the office of *domestikos* for the east is a good enough reason to think that he took with him to Cappadocia at least one of the regiments that had not been sent off to Crete. His troops were indeed less numerous than his enemy’s, but their quality was probably higher than what is normally thought. Leo Phokas on the other hand was not new to successful ambushes: his first recorded exploit was also against the forces of Saif Ad-Dawla at the pass of Darb-al-Kenkeroun, in the proximity of Hadath, in November 960<sup>221</sup>. Years later, while guarding the western frontier he was similarly able to stop a Magyar raiding party that had crossed the Danube by attacking their encampment in the dead of the night<sup>222</sup>. In the Byzantine sources, Leo Phokas’ heavy reliance on force multipliers such as ambushes and tricks becomes his declared trademark (as the phrase “vigilant and sober” is repeatedly used as his brother’s mantra), and Leo the Deacon puts in the mouth of the general a speech in which he openly states that “an unbridled act of daring usually thrusts one into danger, whereas reasoned delay can save the lives of those who make use of it”<sup>223</sup>. The success of the ambush against Saif Ad-Dawla was complete: Leo Phokas was granted a triumphal entry in Constantinople, while the Emir himself barely escaped and most of his host was dispersed and annihilated, giving this victory a strategic significance that went beyond the simple protection of the frontier, effectively paving the road for the armies of Nikephoros to invade Cilicia and terminate the role of Aleppo as a regional power.

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<sup>219</sup> Theophane Continuatus, p. 300

<sup>220</sup> Leo Deacon, p. 19

<sup>221</sup> Yahya, p. 70

<sup>222</sup> Leo Deacon, p. 19

<sup>223</sup> *ibidem*, p. 21

Preparations for the next campaign began in earnest as soon as the palace got the news of the capture of Chandax (July 961), and the army assembled in the final months of 961. The astonishing success of Leo's ambush opened for the Byzantine empire a window of time in which the emirate of Aleppo, the main ally of Tarsus and a power of its own right, was virtually defenseless.

The campaign probably took off from Caesarea in Cappadocia, the usual *aplekton* (gathering point), although the Byzantine forces on their way to Tarsus usually gathered at Koloneia. But in this case they probably grouped around Caesarea, which provided better access to the most likely route used to reach the first target of the expedition, Anazarbos. The *aplekton* of Koloneia, used to gather the troops of the *Anatolikon*, *Seleucia* and *Armeniakon* themes laid north-east of this main invasion route and was more suitable for expeditions directed towards the cities of Tarsus or Adana passing through the Cilician Gates, such as the ones that took place in 964 and 956. The Byzantine army crossed the Taurus at the beginning of December 961 and laid siege to Anazarbos, a city that controlled the northern half of the region. During the siege, the Byzantine army encountered and soundly defeated a Tarsiote army in pitched battle<sup>224</sup>. The history of Yahya speaks of five thousands deaths and four thousands captives<sup>225</sup>, and although these numbers are probably an exaggeration, they still constitute an evidence for the fact that a significant battle had been fought in the proximity of the city, a battle in which a good portion of the Tarsiote forces had been routed – as confirmed by the lack of resistance encountered by the Byzantine army along its way to Aleppo. The extant sources did not preserve much detail about the first half of the campaign, and we only know that Anazarbos was taken between December 961 and January 962<sup>226</sup>, its walls destroyed and its inhabitants deported to Tarsus. The Byzantine army then marched towards Marash, Teluch and Raban, plundering and occupying them<sup>227</sup>. The next target was the city of

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<sup>224</sup> *ibidem*, p. 29

<sup>225</sup> Yahya, p. 86

<sup>226</sup> *ibidem*, p. 86

<sup>227</sup> *ibidem*, p. 86. The work of Yahya says that Teluch, Raban and Marach were taken, but does not specify in which order. Marash was more easily reachable from Anazarbus than Raban or Teluch, which laid on the road to Aleppo, so I rearranged their order when I worked on the map. The expression used by the French translator of Yahya (“s’empara de”, “he took possession of”) is used almost ritually and without discrimination to denote simple plundering or lasting occupation. Since

Manbij whose governor, Abu Firas al-harith ibn Sa'id ibn Hamdan was taken captive and sent to Constantinople. The road was now open to Aleppo. The city was allegedly taken by surprise, probably because a direct assault to its fortification was considered an extremely bold move, although it is admittedly unlikely. Saif Ad-Dawla sent a force composed by most of his remaining troops, commanded by his servant Nadja, while he himself waited inside the city. The army of Nadja, by all chances hastily assembled with untrained soldiers, marched toward the town of Azaz, where it encountered a vanguard column led by John Tzimiskes, which was able to stop it and force it to retreat. It was not an uncontrolled rout though, since the same men were able to regroup and march against the forces of Phokas (who was leading the main body of the army) trying to cut their back, only to suffer another crushing defeat. Meanwhile, the same column led by Tzimiskes intercepted the army led by Saif-Ad Dawla, who was fleeing to the fortress of Balis on the Euphrates, slaughtering the core of his army, many nobles and capturing several standards. Many others were trampled in the ensuing rout, trying to enter the city from the gate of Joseph<sup>228</sup>. Again, the fact that all the remnants of the Hamdanid army had been one handedly defeated by the vanguard of the expeditionary force is a testimony to the strategic significance of Leo Phokas' victory in two years earlier. The main body of the Byzantine army reached Aleppo the 18<sup>th</sup> of December 962. It took almost a full year to cover the 450km that separate Anazarbos from Aleppo, but Phokas' relentless advance had paid - the main opponent of the imperial forces in the east was at his mercy – and the slow pace can be at least partially explained by the necessary caution imposed by a march through the eastern Taurus mountains and by the need to provide a large host with an adequate provisioning of food and water. As soon as they settled in the proximity of Aleppo, the soldiers began plundering the mansions and the rich pavilions built by the Hamdanid Emirs outside the city walls for four days, until the city elders decided to meet and negotiate some quarter in exchange for an unspecified sum of money: the Byzantine troops would make a triumphal parade, entering from one door and going out from another, the city and its inhabitants would remain unharmed. The general objected that the citizens would have attacked his men on the street as soon as they lowered their

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these three cities are not mentioned in the later expeditions, it is safe to think that they got occupied.

<sup>228</sup> Yahya, p. 87 He speaks of an army consisting of a hundred thousand men marching to meet Tzimiskes from Aleppo, but it is a clear hyperbole.

guard, but he agreed when the elders specifically stated that very few able-bodied and armed men were left within the city walls. Promising to adjourn the meeting the following day, he dismissed them. At dawn, the Byzantines entered Aleppo – but seeing how few armed men actually remained on guard on the ramparts, they took possession of the city, sacking its lower part to the ground. Only the central keep resisted, guarded by a unit of Daylami foot soldiers who were able to repel the Byzantine assaults<sup>229</sup>. The Byzantine army remained in Aleppo for a week, celebrating Christmas by looting the city and devastating its surrounding, gathering as many loot and captives as they could. They departed the 30<sup>th</sup> of December 962, carrying off a huge train of war spoils, allegedly sufficient to make a rich man out of every soldier<sup>230</sup>.

The campaign of 961-62 completely reached its goal. It was not a conquest expedition, but rather a strong raid in depth, intended to steamroll the Hamdanid state and annihilate every possible source of opposition in the eastern front. Whether or not it was supposed to be a prelude to the conquest of Cilicia is hard to say: the emperor that ordered the expedition of 961-62, Romanos II, died in a hunting accident a few months after the sack of Aleppo, and it is impossible to state how much continuity existed between the policies envisioned by young Romanos and those of his successor, and how much the Phokades and their kinsmen really counted in the complex process of policy-making that took place in the halls of the Great Palace. The strategy of Phokas' army in this first campaign was to aggressively make scorched land wherever they passed, to undermine the enemy's ability to pose a serious threat, and to solve the problem of how to provision the troops<sup>231</sup>.

In his intentions, this would have made the conquest of Cilicia a whole lot easier, provoking an artificial famine that would have frustrated any further attempt to organize an effective resistance. The region did in fact experience a deep price crisis in the following years, but the aggressive scorched land strategy would also prove double-edged, as the lack of food had its serious repercussions in the following campaigns, in one case even forcing the Byzantine army to retreat back to the safety of Cappadocia before it could achieve a complete victory.

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<sup>229</sup> Yahia, p. 88

<sup>230</sup> *ibidem*, Leo Deacon, p. 30

<sup>231</sup> Leo Deacon, p. 29 "So Nikephoros devastated the surrounding regions like a thunderbolt, ravaging the fields and enslaving whole towns with thousands of inhabitants. When he had destroyed everything in his path with fire and the sword, he attacked the fortresses."



Fig. 2: the campaign of 961-62

#### 4.4 “LIKE A BLUNT DART”: THE FIRST CILICIAN EXPEDITION OF 964

While Nikephoros Phokas was on his way back from Syria, in march 963, he received the news that the emperor died during a hunting accident<sup>232</sup> - after six months, in which he gathered support from his troops and within the palace, he was crowned emperor. The first ten months of his reign were used to consolidate his position and try to disentangle the Teophanogate. But as soon as spring arrived, he mustered another host and crossed the Cilician Gates. Its target being Tarsus, the expedition probably set forth from the *aplepton* of Koloneia in the middle of March 964.

The army reached Tarsus and set up a camp, trying to enforce a blockade. At that time Tarsus was a thoroughly militarized city, being the pivotal point of the Abbasid frontier

<sup>232</sup> Leo Deacon, p. 30.



with Byzantium: it was protected by a double circle of stone walls surrounded by a deep moat, that could be filled “to overflow” in less than a hour by deviating the Kydnos river that passed through the town, and provided an endless supply of fresh water for the defenders<sup>233</sup>. It was almost impossible to storm, and after he wasted a considerable amount of time trying to force his way into the city, losing men to desertion and the fortunate sallies of the Tarsiotes, the emperor decided to abandon the siege. There are some discrepancies in the sources as to how the campaign proceeded. According to Skylitzes, the expedition was actually led by John Tzimiskes, while Leo the Deacon and Yahya of Antioch do not mention his name, and speak mostly of Phokas as the sole commander. The presence of an almost contemporary expedition to Sicily, led by the illegitimate son of Leo Phokas the Elder, Manuel Phokas, can help shed some light on this situation. Dolger<sup>234</sup> dates the invasion of Arab Sicily to October 964. Since the Cilician campaign took off at the end of March, it is possible that the emperor launched the two operations at the same time, to keep the Muslims of Africa (Tunisia and Egypt in particular) from sending reinforcements to what he certainly deemed to be the most important front, Syria. The fact that Skylitzes only names Tzimiskes in his account of this campaign can also be traced back to the writer’s notorious bias towards the Phokades. But it may also mean that the single operations he describes in his work were in fact conducted by Tzimiskes, who had been just named *domestikos* for the east, and was certainly following the emperor on campaign. It is as well possible, and fitting, that a whole division of the army was entrusted to his care, and that he was tasked to lead it as a vanguard, like in the case of the Aleppo campaign a few years earlier. This would explain how Tzimiskes encountered the army that moved towards him as the Byzantines moved from Tarsus to Adana. The Muslim army was defeated but not yet routed, and fell back to the top of a hill close to Adana, where the soldiers left – five thousands in number - dismounted and prepared for a desperate defense. Seeing how risky it would have been to charge uphill on horse, Tzimiskes also ordered his men to dismount and surrounded the hill, slaughtering his opponents to a man<sup>235</sup>. The inhabitants of Adana promptly fled to the city of Mopsuestia, followed by the army led by Tzimiskes, who was able to breach the

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<sup>233</sup> *ibidem*, p. 52

<sup>234</sup> Cited in Leo Deacon, p. 66 note 63

<sup>235</sup> Yahya, p. 95, Skylitzes p. 268

city wall but had to retreat because of the lack of provisions, despite the foraging parties sent as far as Antioch<sup>236</sup>. Meanwhile, the part of the army led by Phokas had successfully conquered Anazarbos, which had its fortification restored by Saif Ad-Dawla in the winter of 961<sup>237</sup>. When the operations were over, the army withdrew to Caesarea, where it spent the winter<sup>238</sup>.

Speaking with the voice of his narrative's hero – the emperor himself – Leo the Deacon described this campaign as “a blunt dart”, a disappointing expedition which was not able to reach its target of capturing the city of Tarsus, let alone enforcing a complete occupation of the Cilician plain. Still, unlike the Emirate of Aleppo, the region that laid immediately beyond the Cilician Gates was constantly facing the threat of hostile Byzantine incursions, and was adequately prepared to resist. More importantly, the region was also living a deep price crisis, made worse by the constant state of warfare and the transit of large armies. A passage from Yahya of Antioch clearly exemplifies the harshness of the situation. A company of soldiers from Khorasan arrived in Aleppo, and was convinced by Saif Ad-Dawla to attack the Byzantines while they were busy laying siege to Mopsuestia. The soldiers arrived, but the enemy had already retreated due to scarcity of provisions – they were forced to leave after a short time as well, riding to Baghdad and then all the way back to Khorasan<sup>239</sup>. Campaigns in hostile territory had to be brief and rely on an efficient supply chain, since foraging on enemy lands was apparently out of question. The state of the Byzantine army halfway through the tenth century was that of a defensive force that was slowly learning the know-how needed to wage a conquest war: leading an expedition through a militarized hostile territory during a period of famine was probably beyond its logistic capabilities.

Other factors played an important role, like the deployment of imperial forces on other important fronts, like Italy, or Cyprus. The island, laying in a strategically fundamental position that shielded (or threatened) Antioch, southwestern Anatolia and Palestine, had

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<sup>236</sup> Yahya, p. 98

<sup>237</sup> Yahya, p. 86

<sup>238</sup> Skylitzes, p. 268,

<sup>239</sup> Yahya, p. 96

become through the centuries an odd juridical subject, taxed by both the Caliphate and the Byzantine empire and normally demilitarized<sup>240</sup>. It was annexed in 964-65 by some Niketas Chalkoutzes<sup>241</sup>, and it is reasonable to think that a substantial force was needed to take the island, and provide an effective defense against the possible retaliation, thus subtracting forces to the attack on Cilicia.

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<sup>240</sup> Cyprus Between Byzantium and Islam, AD 688-965, Studies presented to D. M. Robinson, Washington 1953.

<sup>241</sup> Skylitzes, p. 270

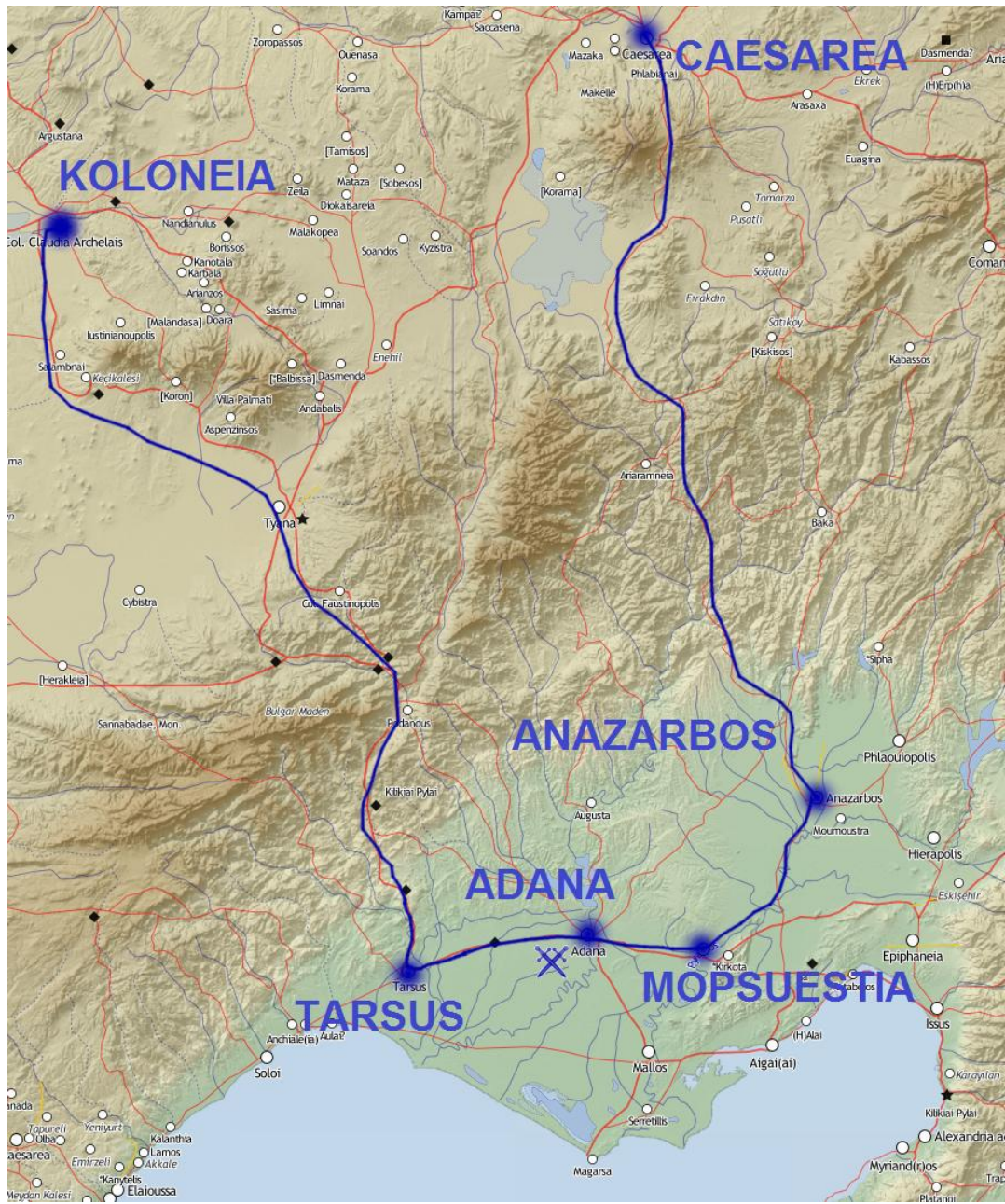


Fig. 3: The campaign of 964

#### 4.5 COUP DE GRACE FOR TARSUS: THE CAMPAIGN OF 965

Since the expedition of 964 did not achieve what it could have, due to the famine and the price crisis, a new operation was promptly set up. Again the army probably gathered at Koloneia, and passed through the Cilician Gates headed to Tarsus, accompanied by vast contingents of Georgian and Armenian mercenaries<sup>242</sup>. There, the emperor set the encampment, ordering to mow down any orchard and bushed area in its vicinity, to avoid surprise attacks on the camp or ambushes to the foragers. According to Leo the Deacon, in the following days the Tarsiote army gathered and marched towards the Byzantine encampment. A pitched battle ensued, in which “one could see the Roman divisions move into action with incredible precision”<sup>243</sup>, led on the right wing by Nikephoros Phokas, on the left by John Tzimiskes, and presumably on the center by Leo Phokas. The Deacon’s heavy reliance on other historical works, combined with his penchant for heroic narrative makes his testimony less reliable than it looks at a first glance, and this clash is not recorded in either Skylitzes or Yahya of Antioch. Moreover, the fact that Tarsus could have been able to muster an army capable of stopping the Byzantine invading force in a field battle is doubtful, especially if we consider how tried its forces must have been, after the loss of so many men to the famine and the repeated invasion attempts, deprived of the possibility of support coming from its former allies, Aleppo and Egypt. It is much more likely that the inhabitants of Tarsus had decided to face the Byzantines by shutting themselves within their city, trusting in their impregnable fortifications as they did in 964. The pitched battle described by Leo Deacon, with its comparison of Tzimiskes to the classical hero Tydeus and its picture of the Byzantine army as a perfectly tuned machine may have been yet another way to ennoble the action of its heroes, by adding an epic reckoning to a somehow dull siege campaign.

The army was divided again in two parts, one led by Leo Phokas was left to continue the blockade of Tarsus, the other was led by the emperor and marched towards Mopsuestia, which was taken by storm the 13<sup>th</sup> of July 965. Its walls were mined by a gallery that made

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<sup>242</sup> Skylitzes, p. 268

<sup>243</sup> Leo Deacon, p. 59

two towers collapse<sup>244</sup>, opening a breach that was promptly exploited by the Byzantine soldiers, led by the emperor himself who allegedly fought in the front ranks.

The inhabitants of Mopsuestia were able to take flight and fall back to Kafarbayya<sup>245</sup>, and during the pursue the defenders staged a last defense on the bridge that connected the two settlements, resulting in another defeat for the Muslim army, and the capture of many fleeing citizens which were paraded in front of Tarsus, still under siege.

If the testimony of Skylitzes is to be believed, one half of the city, divided in two parts by the Kydnos river, had already been occupied by Leo Phokas, and the defenders had regrouped in the other half. A relief fleet from Egypt filled with supplies tried to reach the city, but was prevented from doing it by the sentries posted along the shores. They were forced to turn back. As their last hope of obtaining some much needed supplies faded, the Tarsiotes laid down arms three days after the prisoners from Mopsuestia were paraded in front of the walls<sup>246</sup>. Tarsus was thoroughly looted, but its citizens got a safe-conduct that allowed them to reach Antioch.

The frontier was reorganized, and the new themes of Tarsus, Anazarbos, Hadath, Mopsuestia, Podandos and Hexakomia<sup>247</sup> were added to the defensive belt of Armenian themes, small military districts posted along the eastern frontier, usually repopulated with Armenian settlers where the local Christian population was not sufficiently strong. Most of the lands in these provinces were turned into *kouratoria*, estates exploited by the crown and posed under the direct supervision of a curator named by the emperor<sup>248</sup>.

Before he could deal with these matters, Phokas had to prepare his first triumphal entry in Constantinople since his coronation. He took with him the bronze doors of Mopsuestia and Tarsus. The former, he placed in the Golden Gate, the monumental entrance placed in the southwestern corner of the Theodosian walls; the latter was used for the gate of

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<sup>244</sup> *ibidem*, p. 53 The fall of Mopsuestia is dated to 964 by Leo the Deacon

<sup>245</sup> It was probably a strong point on the eastern bank of the Pyramos river

<sup>246</sup> Skylitzes, p. 270

<sup>247</sup> N. Oikonomides, *Les Listes de Préséance Byzantines des IX et X siècles*, Paris 1972, p. 355-361

<sup>248</sup> In the immediate aftermath of the conquest, many lands were entrusted to Leo Phokas (who was serving as Logothete of the Dromos) and managed by one of his associates. When his family began falling into disgrace after 969, they were administered by Basil Lekapenos, until he too was ousted by emperor Basil II. Cheynet, *Official Power and Non-Official Power*, p. 138, in *Military Function*

the acropolis<sup>249</sup>, i.e. the Great Palace. McCormick<sup>250</sup> states that the doors from Tarsus were placed at the entrance of the new fortifications built around the Bukoleon palace, but it is possible that the “acropolis of the tyrant” had not been erected yet.

The symbolic significance of the victory was materially exemplified in the eyes of the citizens of Constantinople by the recovery of the standards lost almost a century before, when an ill-fated expedition led by Stypeiotes was soundly defeated in the vicinity of Tarsus. The cross-standards were deposited in the Great Church, and the ceremony was accompanied by rounds of spectacles and chariot-races meant to entertain the citizens .

It was a well deserved triumph, the worthy celebration of the end of a political season that lasted two centuries. The reduction of Aleppo to the status of lesser regional power paved the way to the annihilation of the Tarsiote threat and the inclusion of Cilicia and its subdivisions in the imperial system of military districts.

The campaign against Aleppo, and that against Tarsus constitute two interesting case studies: both campaigns were led by the same people, with the same armies involved, in essentially the same political and economic framework. But if the campaign of 961-2 was not meant to expand the frontier – and in fact did not –but only to cripple a threatening enemy, that of 964-65 were explicitly aimed at subjugating the emirate of Tarsus.

The population of Mopsuestia was enslaved and sent to Anatolia, that of Tarsus was spared, but nonetheless expelled and forced to move to Antioch. The difference between the two “states” involved in the aforementioned campaigns is of course mostly geographic: Cilicia was a coastal region, fertile and relatively more accessible to Byzantine armies. The region surrounding Aleppo, although definitely more suitable for agriculture than other parts of Syria, was not such an inviting target for a conquering army.

Another major difference lays in the leadership of the state: the imperial authority was not in the hands of a member of the Macedonian dynasty anymore, but passed to a member of the Anatolian military class, whose mindset and goals had been undeniably shaped by his lifelong service in the army, which as we saw he perceived as a religious duty. Reducing or even denying the influence and the importance of personal leadership in the shaping of military events is something that is usually taken as an axiom by scholars, a relic of nineteenth century historiography that had long yielded to the role of

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<sup>249</sup> Skylitzes, p. 270

<sup>250</sup> McCormick, *Eternal Victory*, p. 170

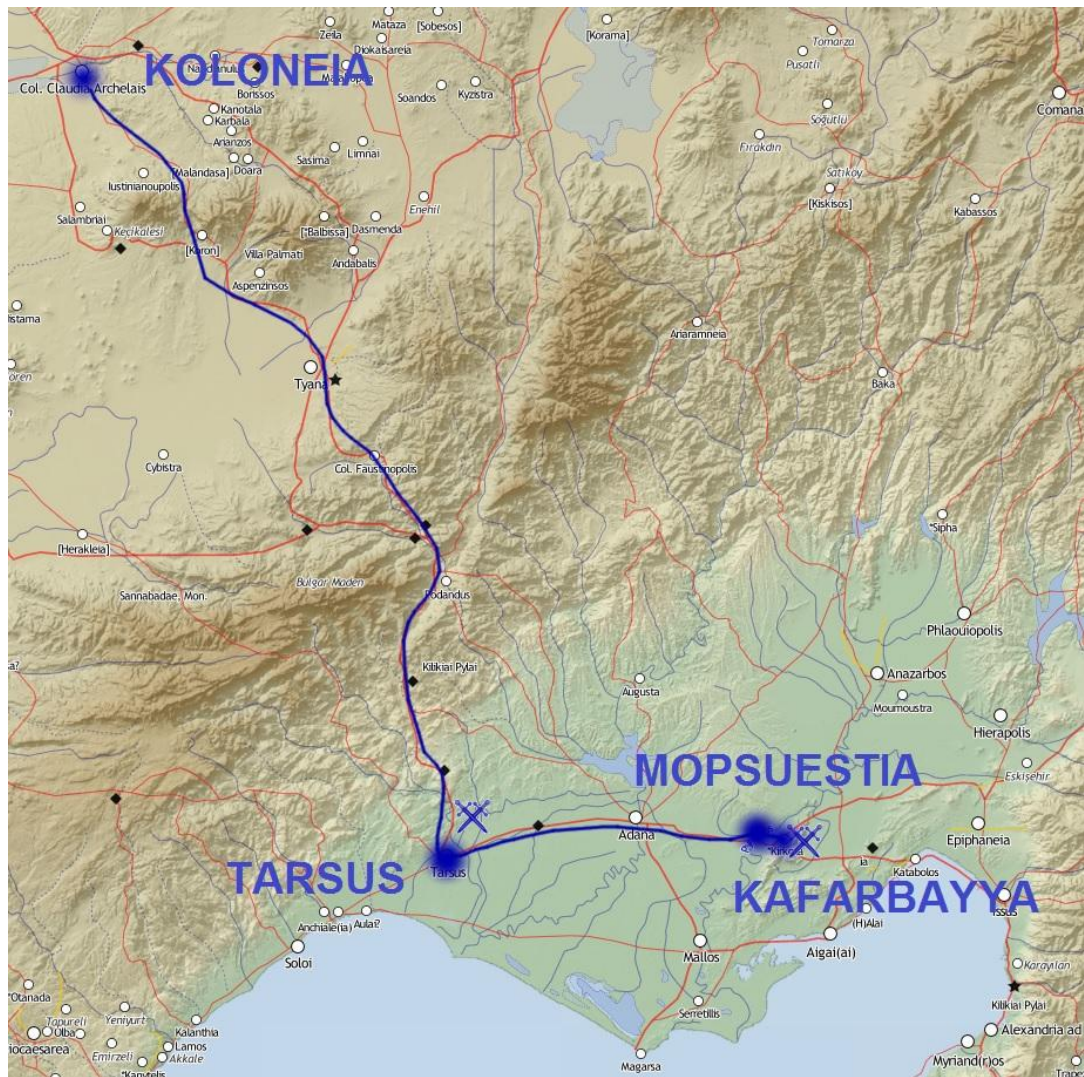


Fig. 4: the campaign of 965

structure, and in the particular case of military history, to the importance of geography and economy. Yet, the successes of the armies led by Nikephoros Phokas and his brother Leo, achieved even in the face of almost the same historical and geographical conditions as their predecessors (and their father) seem to demonstrate again the role of personal agency in the shaping of historical events: led by another general, the Byzantine armies may or may not have been able to conquer Cilicia in two short years, giving time to act to Tarsus and its main supporters. The next step to complete the plan of re-conquest of the northern Muslim Levant was the annexation of Antioch on the Orontes, ancient patriarchal see and major metropolis of northern Syria, at that time still part of the Emirate of Aleppo.



### 3.6 ROAD TO ANTIOCH: FROM 966 TO 969

The encirclement and ultimately the conquest of Antioch required a series of steps, and necessarily passed through another round of punitive expeditions against Aleppo and the other Muslim states of the Levant. June 966 witnessed an exchange of prisoners between Saif Ad-Dawla and the Byzantines, held at Samosata on the Euphrates, instead than along the Lamos river, traditionally elected as the place for these kind of occasions. The Emir was returned many of the nobles and members of his family captured in the last campaigns, and he ransomed the remaining 3000 Muslim prisoners with 240.000 “greek coins”<sup>251</sup>. The Byzantines were returned their imprisoned soldiers, as well as the officers Leo Balanthes, who was to play a fundamental role in the conspiracy to kill Nikephoros Phokas, and another officer<sup>252</sup>, who can be cautiously identified with an ancestor of Philaretos Brachamios, the Byzantine-Armenian commander who held as Duke of Antioch in the decade following the Turkish advance in Anatolia.

In the October of the same year, a Byzantine force was dispatched to the eastern frontier, to make a deep raid against the cities of Amida, Dara and Nisibin, while the emperor marched towards Syria<sup>253</sup>. He devoted his attention to the town of Membij, close to the eastern banks of the Euphrates. The seventh day of October, in exchange for grace, the inhabitants of the city gave up their most valuable relic, a tile that was said to be imprinted with the miraculous image of Christ. The relic was later placed in a case with gold and gems and displayed in the church of the Mother of God, in the imperial palace<sup>254</sup>. During the siege a detachment was sent to the fortress of Balis, where the Emirs of Aleppo usually took refuge in times of crisis, and came back with more than three hundred prisoners. Once the emperor had lift the siege of Membij, he laid siege to and

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<sup>251</sup> Yahya, p. 106 The generic term “dinars grecs” used in the text may refer to either golden or silver coins.

<sup>252</sup> *ibidem*, the translation of the text reports “A...rh.r.m”, its curator was unable to further identify this individual. His identification as an ancestor of Brachamios is of course totally hypothetical.

<sup>253</sup> Yahya, p. 107

<sup>254</sup> Leo Deacon, p. 71

sacked Wadi-Bouthnan<sup>255</sup>, Qinesrin and Tizin<sup>256</sup>, ultimately deviating north to reach and sack Artah, and finally crossing the Amanos range to reach Antioch. The city was encircled and blockaded by a tired Byzantine army, the 23<sup>rd</sup> of October 966<sup>257</sup>. It apparently took only sixteen days to cover the distance between Membij and Antioch, a surprisingly short amount of time, probably due to a certain confusion of the sources. But there is also a possibility that the Byzantine army *did* in fact march through northern Syria at an extremely quick pace, and only carried a limited amount of supplies. This would also explain why the siege of Antioch was carried off for such a short time. Phokas hoped that his name alone would grant him the bloodless surrender of Antioch, and he probably decided to play on this by making his presence more tangible and real, by quickly riding through northern Syria and sacking every fortress that stood between him and his goal. It did not work, and the Syrian digression only gave the Antiochenes time to stock provisions and prepare themselves for a siege. Moreover, the fast pace of his *chevauchée*, required a slim baggage train able to keep up with the rest of the expeditionary corps, but also made it hard to properly set up a blockade, especially if the city involved was one of the major centers of the whole region. The blockade was interrupted by the lack of supplies for the attackers<sup>258</sup>, and only eight days<sup>259</sup> passed before the emperor was forced to abandon the siege and return to Cappadocia.

The walls of Antioch had proven hard to storm, and its citizens had time to prepare themselves for prolonged siege operations. To take the city, it was first necessary to cut

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<sup>255</sup> Location uncertain, and the confusion of the sources is not helpful. The Pelagios Atlas reports a small center laying roughly halfway between Aleppo and Membij, called Batnai. Another option is the almost homonymous Batnae (now Suruç) laying south-west of Edessa. There is also a discrepancy between the Greek sources and the account of Yahya: according to Leo the Deacon, Nikephoros traveled *from* Antioch and then moved eastwards. Yahya on the other hand reports a specular route, in which the imperial army took off from Caesarea and moved south-westwards, raiding until they reached Antioch. Since Yahya is usually more reliable for this kinds of issues, I decided to trust his testimony and assume the Byzantines reached Antioch at the end of the campaign, which will also explain why they laid siege to the city for such a short time.

<sup>256</sup> Tizin is somehow problematic: there is an homonymous village in Syria, but it definitely lays too south in relation to Qinesrin and Arthah, respectively the preceding and following stages of the Byzantine route.

<sup>257</sup> Yahya, p. 108.

<sup>258</sup> Skylitzes, p 271

<sup>259</sup> Yahya, p. 108

away any kind of foreign support it could muster from its neighbors. A deep raid along coastal Syria would have also served as an impressive show of muscle, the demonstration that the Byzantine empire was able to project its military capabilities far beyond its conventional borders. So the preparation began, during the year Phokas spent in Constantinople and along the Balkan frontier dealing with the Bulgarian issue. The starting place of the 968 campaign is obscure: Yahya of Antioch reports that the emperor devoted his attention to Syria right after he conducted an expedition against Arzen and Mayyafariqin<sup>260</sup>, two cities in the Diyar Bakr between Lake Van and the Euphrates, too far east to be part of the same itinerary. The dates given by Yahya's work do not give much help in disentangling the confusion, since he dates the eastern expedition to the final days of year 357 (i.e. November 968), while only a page later he clearly states that the emperor approached Antioch in October 968.

Probably, the two expeditions were independent and the writer mixed them up. Another confirm of this hypothesis may be the mention of ships following the Byzantine army in Leo the Deacon<sup>261</sup>, which points out to the presence of a fleet carrying supply, requiring a strict coordination that was very hard to achieve if the army had in fact crossed the Syrian desert or the southern Anatolian mountains to reach the Mediterranean coast.

Yahya also reports that Abu Al-Mali, successor of Saif Ad-Dawla, fled to Balis – a fortress along the Euphrates that traditionally served as a refuge for the Emirs of Aleppo in times of crisis. His flight may have been caused by Phokas' crossing of the Amanos, rather than by an unlikely march across the Syrian desert.

Since the eastern expedition against Arzen and Mayyafariqin is probably a somehow minor operation with little to do with the western Syrian wars, it may be safe to say that the *chevauchée* began the 6<sup>th</sup> of October 968<sup>262</sup>, when Phokas reached Antioch and tried to laid siege to the city, for thirteen days<sup>263</sup>. Once again the city's formidable defenses

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<sup>260</sup> *ibidem*, p. 117

<sup>261</sup> Leo Deacon, p. 71

<sup>262</sup> If Phokas had actually begun the siege operations the 19<sup>th</sup> of October, and left 13 days later (1<sup>st</sup> of November), and if, as Yahya says (p. 117) he reached Tripoli the 5<sup>th</sup> of November, his army had been able to storm 4 cities and cover a few hundred kilometers in only 4 days, which is highly unlikely. Thus, I decided to assume that the Byzantines reached Antioch on the 6<sup>th</sup> of October, exactly 13 days before the date given by Yahya.

<sup>263</sup> Yahya, p. 117

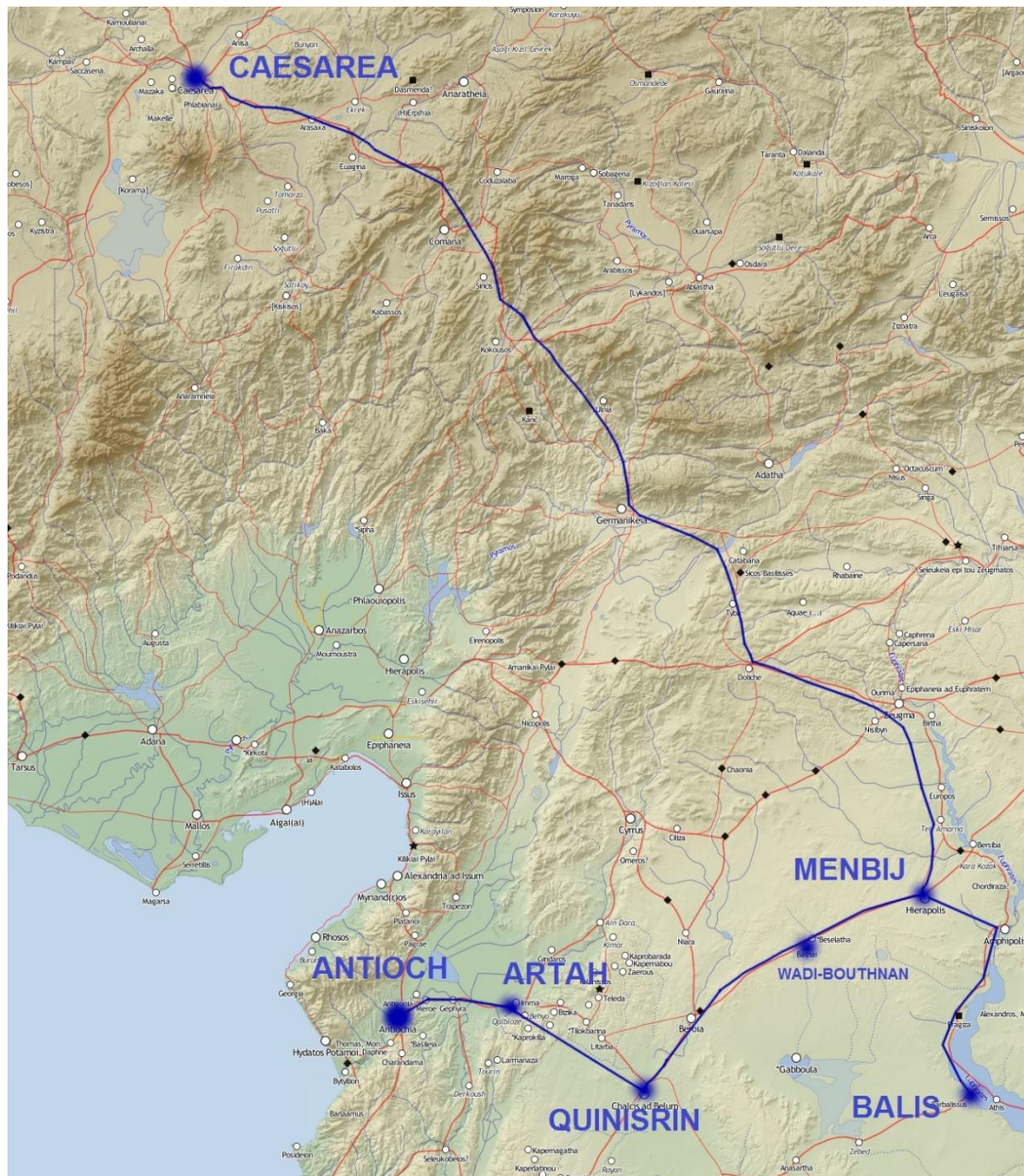


Fig. 5: the campaign of 966

proved impregnable to any attempt at storming it, and its population had been in a constant state of alertness since the last attempt, in 966.

After the unsuccessful blockade of Antioch, the Byzantine army moved south-east towards Maarat Misrin, where the emperor promised the locals “he would make them Greek”, and sent them in Anatolia<sup>264</sup>. This move may be interpreted as a forced transfer of the local Christian population to the newly conquered region of Cilicia, but there is no

<sup>264</sup> *ibidem*

actual element supporting this hypothesis. Phokas then proceeded towards the small town of Maarat Al'Nouman, and then to Hama and finally to Homs (Emesa), where he took possession of the Head of St. John the Baptist.

The city of Tripoli was reached the 5<sup>th</sup> day of November 968, but Phokas decided to simply raid its suburbs, also due to the fact that his supplies were running low, and the relief fleet he expected had been held back by adverse winds<sup>265</sup>.

Tripoli was the southernmost city that a Byzantine army had been able to reach since the loss of the Levant in the seventh century, and was somehow of a trendsetter: only few years later, an expedition led by John Tzimiskes would arrive as far as Damascus.

On his way back, Phokas laid siege to Arqa, a fortified citadel laying on the road from Tripoli to Antioch, blockading it for nine days. The attention devoted to Arqa can be explained by the presence within its wall of the former emir of Tripoli, Abu-al-Hasan-Ahmed-ibn-Nasir-Al-Arghali, who had been ousted from his city only a few weeks earlier, and had moved with all his family and his wealth to Arqa. The citadel was taken by storm and thoroughly sacked<sup>266</sup>.

The army of Phokas returned to the coastal region after its deviation to Arqa, and during its northward march it conquered the small town of Maraqiyah, Jableh and ultimately reached Laodicea, where it extorted an unspecified sum of money in exchange for the city's safety. The raiding continued, and the prisoner train kept expanding – so much that the emperor had to let go over a thousand elderly men and women. As he reached Antioch, he distributed the spoils and the prisoners, and ordered a fortress to be built in the pass connecting Alexandretta and Antioch, in a place named Baghras. Here, he stationed a taxiarchoy of infantry and a squadron of cavalry, totaling 1500 men<sup>267</sup>, under the orders of commander Michael Bourtzes, who was for the occasion elevated to the rank of *patrikios*<sup>268</sup>. His eunuch Peter was given the office of Stratopedarch, and entrusted with the supervision of *tagmata* detachment stationed in the Cilician provinces.

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<sup>265</sup> Leo Deacon, p. 71

<sup>266</sup> Yahya, p. 118, Leo Deacon, p. 71

<sup>267</sup> A taxiarchoy comprised 1000 foot soldiers, while a cavalry *parataxis* had 500 horsemen. The numbers are consistent with the instructions contained in the *Praecepta Militaria*.

<sup>268</sup> Skylitzes, p. 271

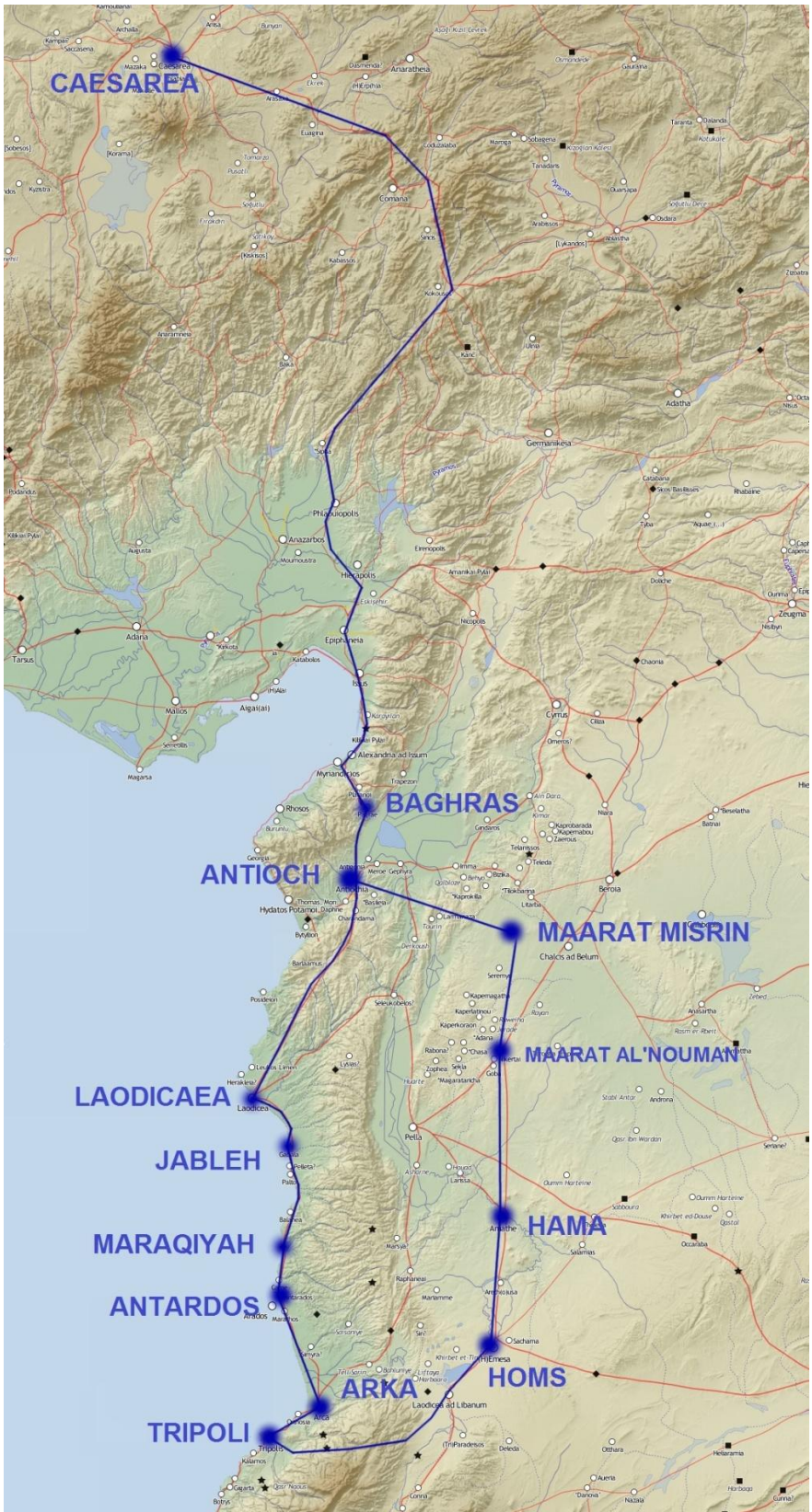


Fig. 6: the campaign of 968

Leo the Deacon reports a brief speech allegedly given by the emperor to his soldiers on the foundation of Baghras, and on the reasons that made him prefer a strategy of attrition rather than a frontal assault. The emperor says that he would call a fool any general who would raid and destroy *his own* country, and that is why he decided to subdue Antioch with “a combination of force and stratagems”<sup>269</sup>. It somehow resembles the old fable of the fox and the grapes: the city is not conquerable by sheer force, but this is not important, since it is one of *my* cities, and therefore I never really wanted to storm it. Skylitzes, on the other hand, reports that Phokas avoided taking the city by force, since he allegedly believed in a rumor telling that the emperor would die at the same time Antioch was taken<sup>270</sup>. More probably, the troops stationed in Baghras were supposed to disturb and harass the countryside of Antioch, intercepting provision trains, razing the fields and scouting for weaknesses. The soldiers in Cilicia supported their operations the best they could until another major army could come and give the city its *coup de grace*. It never happened.

The 29<sup>th</sup> of October 969, Antioch was conquered by the treason of a member of its garrison, some Aulax, who sold the precise size of one of the city’s western towers<sup>271</sup>. Bourtzes immediately gathered three hundred hand-picked men and took possession of that and a neighboring tower, slaughtering the guardsman and holding them against the repeated assaults of the Antiochenes. The final capture of the city rested in the hands of Peter the Stratopedarch, who kept receiving messages asking for help from Bourtzes and his men. After some hesitation, he finally decided to intervene, entering from one of the gates, which stood providentially open thanks to Bourtzes himself and his black bodyguard, Theodoros. Seeing how the city was lost, the Antiochenes set fire to one of the city quarters laying between the entering Byzantine army and the Maritime Gate, from which they left<sup>272</sup>. Those who were not able to escape were taken as prisoners, and although Yahya states that the Christian inhabitants were spared, it is hard to believe that the soldiers were able to make distinctions of such sort as they looted the city.

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<sup>269</sup> Leo Deacon, p. 73

<sup>270</sup> Skylitzes, p. 272

<sup>271</sup> Skylitzes, p. 274, a similar episode –the treason of a garrison member – would deliver Antioch in the hands of the crusaders in the siege of 1098.

<sup>272</sup> Yahya, p. 125

According to Skylitzes, the emperor did not take the news of this disobedience well, and the responsible of the first assault on Antioch, Michael Bourtzes, was relieved of his command and confined to his home. The capture of Antioch was meant to be the crowning achievement of Phokas' military career and reign, and a similar reaction was to be expected. Nevertheless, the discharge and the humiliation of Bourtzes, and those of former *domestikos* Tzimiskes, forced to abandon his office somewhere around 965, proved to be fatal to the emperor only a couple of months later.

After the sack of Antioch, the army led by Peter marched towards Aleppo, camping outside its walls until an agreement was reached.

The cities, castles and villages dependent on Aleppo and Homs had to pay a yearly tribute to the Byzantine emperor, an estimated lump sum of a thousand pounds of gold<sup>273</sup>, three hundred for land rights and seven hundred for land profit. Aleppo also had to pay a *capitatio* of one *nomisma* for every adult male, elderly and infirm excluded. The emperor was then to keep a trusted official in charge of the tribute recollection and the levying a 10% trade duties on merchandises coming from Byzantine territories. A treaty was signed, finalizing the status of Aleppo as a Vassal state, the only tangible differences with an actual province being the absence of an occupying force and of integration in the Byzantine system of peripheral themes. The negotiations lasted for more than a month, and ended in the final days of December 969<sup>274</sup>, two weeks after the emperor's assassination. Aleppo was forced to give up its role as an independent actor on the front scene of international politics for at least sixty years, and would swing back and forth between the Fatimid and Byzantine spheres of influence.

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<sup>273</sup> Yahya, p. 126. The French translator uses the term "quintaux", i.e. "quintal". I assumed that it corresponded with the Byzantine *kentenarion*, i.e. 100 pounds.

<sup>274</sup> Yahya, p. 126. Strangely, the Greek sources do not mention the vassalization of Aleppo.



## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS

*Who once sliced men more sharply than a sword  
is victim of a woman and a sword.  
Who once retained the whole world in his power  
now small, is housed in but a yard of earth.  
Who once it seemed by wild beasts was revered,  
his wife has slain as though he were a sheep.*

John of Melitene, Epitaph of Nikephoros Phokas

What I tried to demonstrate with my thesis was how the economic recovery of the Byzantine state during the second half of the tenth century (in the form of an increased degree of monetization, a generally favorable demographic trend and the stabilization and proliferation of regional and extra-regional exchange networks) made possible, and somehow even necessary, a territorial expansion eastwards. This eastward drive found a meaningful incarnation in the set of laws and edicts issued by Nikephoros II Phokas, who gave to the state and its policies a distinctly militaristic reorientation, ostentatiously favoring the army and its members.

This approach, which was admittedly centered on the socio-economic and political aspects and only marginally touched matters such as the religious and ideological dimension of the issue, has of course many shortcomings. First and foremost, the tyranny of space and time forced me to forego the discussion of important theaters such as Italy and Bulgaria, which are mentioned only in passing. Secondly, my work dealt with the lack of administrative and documentary sources by constantly relying on the testimony of chronicles and histories, which are, especially in the case of Byzantine historiography, heavily laden with references to Classic literary works and rarely present the events in a definite chronological order. The matters of politics, war and economy in these works are

subject to the imperatives of moral character judgment and the conveniences of court life, which discouraged the distribution of numbers or facts that could be used as a political tool against the ruling emperor or his dynasty. For reasons of material availability, I could not make use of other sources like for example hagiographies or precious documents such as the Cadastre of Thebes or the *Palaia Logarike*. But despite all this, it is possible to paint a convincing picture of the Byzantine situation by relying on primary narrative sources and a strong backbone of secondary literature.

To understand how the economic recovery affected the territorial expansion, it is necessary to make some steps backwards, to the time the Byzantine state was facing the threat of complete destruction following the disastrous wars against the Persians and the Arabs in the seventh century. In less than fifty years its territory shrunk to the Anatolian peninsula and a handful of exclaves in Italy and coastal Greece. Despite being forced within more defensible territories, the state was barely capable to muster enough men to provide its capital with adequate defenses, and the incessant state of war inside the Byzantine borders aided by a series of devastating plague epidemics put a serious strain on the state's ability to gather manpower and financial resources from taxation, contributing together with the obsolescence of the Classic Greco-Roman mindsets to the gradual demise of the city as a political actor of its own right. The only *polis* – intended as a place where actual administrative and political processes could take place – left to the empire was Constantinople, and from the seventh century onwards those provincial settlements which did not completely disappear receded to their acropolises, renouncing their political and cultural roles and turning into fortified strong points that. Significantly, a Latin loanword for military encampment, *castrum/kastron* became the standard term for urban settlements. The state had to reorganize its administrative and fiscal structures around rural districts generically defined as *choria*, villages, supporting this change with the implementation of a system of land plots belonging to soldiers and marines. It was a formal abandonment of the strategy of defense at the frontier provided by substandard troops at times supported by professional corps, in favor of a strategic outlook that favored in-depth protection of the inroads to Constantinople, made necessary by the boldness and frequency of Muslim raids. Nevertheless, the Muslim tide began to recede after the turning point of 717-718.

During that year, the failure of the second Arab siege of Constantinople marked the last life-threatening Arab expedition for the Byzantine empire, which regrouped around the figure of its savior, emperor Leo III, and his ideal of religious and moral renewal that pivoted on the iconoclastic doctrine.

Despite the internecine ideological struggle initiated by the iconoclast emperors, there were consistent signs of political and economic recovery, exemplified by the fact that only some seventy years after the siege of Constantinople empress Irene could afford to lift some of the fiscal pressure on her subjects in favor of an immediate political gain. Of course it was only a matter of time before these tax cuts were abrogated by her successor, Nikephoros I, whose action was significantly oriented towards a consistent monetization and rationalization of the state income. Despite being passed onto historiography as a series of “ten evils”, the sanitary measures of Nikephoros I had some degree of success, so much that they made possible the immediate recruitment of a new *tagma* (the *hikanatoi*) and for Theophilos, thirty years later, to raise the pay of the common soldiers.

The growing monetization, itself due to a more widespread use of gold for fiscal reason throughout the empire, brought an increased prosperity and a higher degree of political dynamism, but was also the direct or indirect cause of a series of relevant social issues. First of all, the state soon lost a relative share over its hold on the circulation of precious metal. If in the eighth century there was no social body, except maybe for the institutional church, able to accumulate and mobilize resources on an extensive scale, the situation had drastically changed by the first half of the tenth century. True, there still was no single institution, individual or family able to singlehandedly antagonize or let alone approach the power of the State, but a significant number of private households, monasteries and estates had been able to gather previously unconceivable amounts of gold, subtracting them from the direct fiscal circle.

The raise of private estates and monasteries skyrocketed as the state of war along the eastern frontier settled and the Muslim raids began affecting areas comprised in a noticeably smaller radius, a trend that was already in motion by the early ninth century. The main beneficiaries of this situation were of course the members of the Byzantine “aristocracy”, who were usually also on the receiving hand of the imperial largesse (*rogai*), and normally thought the best use of their money was to reinvest them in lands, to secure

their capital rather than expand it – since as said its main source was the position rent received directly from the crown treasury, and there was a series of laws and regulations that effectively prevented the possibility of profitably investing capital in trade in Constantinople. Chronic land hunger as a form of capital safekeeping was the engine that fostered the expansion of landed aristocracy, propelled by the constant flow of imperial donatives and the low cost of abandoned Anatolian land.

As larger and larger chunks of land were rented out by large landowners, the process of monetary circulation from the state, to the taxpayers and then back to the state acquired new intermediary levels, prolonging the circle. This of course was not only due to the emergence of large holdings in the Anatolian countryside: security in the provinces and the end of religious turmoil, together with the opening of new trading partners north (beyond the Black Sea), in the East (the Caucasian principalities) and in the west (Latin Europe) gave Byzantine trade – regional and local – an injection of dynamism, reproducing on another level the phenomenon of lengthening gold and silver circulation mentioned above.

The presence of non-state agents able to mobilize vaster amount of resources had the obvious side effect of imposing new social actors on the scene of imperial politics, actors formally known in the legislative texts as the *dynatoi*, the powerful. A varied social category, its strength relied on the material wealth of its members as much as it relied on their prestige and social relevance within the rural communities. The first legal definition of *dynatos* – dated to year 934 – was itself based on their ability to muster support and to soothe or threaten those comprise in their sphere of influence, following a process of capital accumulation (including “moral” capital) that lasted for several generations before its social and fiscal effects were finally noticed by the throne. By making use of both their wealth and social prestige to put pressure on the individual tax collectors and small independent landowners, supporting the claims of their own people in provincial court cases or by being themselves supported by other powerful connections that stood higher in the social hierarchy, the *dynatoi* were the spontaneous response of Byzantine society to the partial retreat of the central authority from the provinces, but in doing this threatened the state’s capacity to collect a surplus that was adequate to its rapidly increasing needs.

By the time Nikephoros II was crowned emperor in 963 the Byzantine state was probably blocked between a growing aristocracy able to subtracts land and resources to its direct control, a rigid and limited supply of precious metal and a highly monetized economy that was growing at a fast pace. The easiest way to overcome the risk for a monetary crisis similar to the one that happened a century later the empire was to extend the imperial frontiers in places where the potential outcome, on the long as well in the short run, could repay the campaign costs and unlock the settlement – and the direct control by the crown – of profitable chunks of land.

The Byzantine state tried to reverse or at least counter this trend by acting in a threefold manner: first by issuing a series of laws that restricted the freedom of purchase for the *dynatoi* – to preserve the unity of its tax-paying districts; by manipulating the coinage; and by turning itself into the largest landowner, in order to compensate the reduction of fiscal income with the profits coming from direct land exploitation.

Nikephoros Phokas, once crowned emperor, did not behave differently, and throughout his reign he issued many laws that regulated the sale of civil, religious and military lands. The leitmotiv of his reign was the well-being of the army, and to achieve this goal his legislation on civil lands and village communities had to be admittedly ready to compromise, for reasons of immediate political opportunity, as in the 966-67 legislation that froze two “parallel markets” and forced the rich to buy from the rich and the poor from the poor. On the other hand, he raised the minimum inalienable value of military land from 4 to 12 pounds of gold, to prevent changes in the military payrolls, which were nonetheless updated and reassessed under his reign.

Another way to prevent the expansion of large estates in rural fiscal districts – and help the crown regain some useful land – was the law that instated a prohibition for monasteries and religious institutions to acquire new lands in addition to those needed to ensure the self-sufficiency of the monastic community, effectively unlocking many land plots that previously laid abandoned and unused by the monks. It was promulgated during a time of struggle between the emperor and the patriarch, and this may probably be the reason why its tones could be much harsher than those present in the legislation regarding the sale of civil properties.

In addition to the legislation concerning landed property, a momentary boost to the state income came through the manipulation of the finesse and the weight of golden coinage,

in the shape of the *tetarteron nomisma*, a lighter coin that weighted 1/12 less than the standard golden coin, the *histamenon*. The new issue had at least in theory the same value of the “full” *nomisma*, although tax collectors were legally required to demand *histamena*, while the state began paying in *tetartera*. The emperor probably thought that a change in gold purity would prove risky (something similar had been done by Constantine VII only a few years earlier) and not produce a tangible immediate gain. He wished to profit from the fact that he could mint an additional coin for every eleven *histamena* he collected, and a new golden coin would have meant the pay for a new soldier for a whole year. It was not a little gain, if we consider the volume of Byzantine income from taxation, which could have been around something like 2-3 millions *nomismata* by the tenth century. But the reaction of the market was, as expectable, not favorable to the emperor’s plan: the traders inflated the prices of the goods they sold, since they still perceived the value of the golden coin on the base of its weight, and not of its declared legal tender. Prices peaked, also because of a natural famine that may not have been so seriously had the monetary policy remained stable. The *tetarteron*, middle-Byzantine embryo of a nominal currency, became a simple sub-denomination of the *nomisma*, following its purity fluctuations. It survived in this form until the early twelfth century, when it was displaced by the Komnenean *Hyperpyron*.

The last option available to the Byzantine state was the acquisition of new lands to counter the relative power of larger landowners. As land was at premium in Anatolia and in the Balkans, the only possible ways to acquire it were either through confiscation or through military conquest. Confiscation was out of question, for political reasons. Phokas was by all standards an usurper with a very thin link to the ruling dynasty, a general who based ninety percent of his ruling legitimacy to his ability as a military commanders: he knew very well the risks implicit in an unhappy landed elite, and the frequency with which Byzantine commanders tended to start rebellions. Alienating the highest echelons of the ruling class with arbitrary land confiscations was not an option.

On the other hand, the acquisition of lands outside the borders would have the undeniable advantage of fostering his legitimacy as an *imperator* and did not present any problem of political opportunity.

The only possibility in this regard was of course Cilicia. The lower Caucasus was out of question due to its geographical harshness, and the fact that it functioned as a buffer

against the incursions coming from Baghdad. Moreover, the Caucasian principalities were mostly Christian, and a well played series of diplomatic actions could achieve more than brute force. A gradual advance through the lower Caucasus and western Armenia was in fact what happened during the later part of the tenth century and the beginning of the eleventh, starting with the reign of Nikephoros Phokas himself, who seized the occasion to annex the principality of Taron when its rulers, the brothers Gregorios and Pankratios<sup>275</sup> came to him asking for help in 969. The two brothers were granted the dignity of *patrikios* and some landed estates<sup>276</sup>. Although the Byzantine expansion in this area continued with a steady pace for almost a century, the Armenian and Caucasian fronts would become a strategic priority only with the arrival of the Seljuq Turks in the eleventh century.

On the other side of the Black Sea, the Bulgarian option was not particularly appealing either. The Bulgarian system of exchange was barely monetized, the land less productive than the coastal Balkans and their country too suitable for a guerrilla warfare that would prove exhausting for any attacker. In addition to being dangerously close to Constantinople, Bulgaria's only strategic value lay in its position as a buffer between Thrace and the western steppes. That was probably the reason why no emperor decided to break the truce that had been signed by Romanos Lekapenos, an agreement which consisted in a yearly tribute – allegedly to sustain the lifestyle of princess Maria Lekapena – and probably had a clause that required the Bulgarians to offer some kind of protection to the Byzantine north-western flank, or at least forbidding them from letting the steppe nomads pass their territories unopposed. When Phokas received the Bulgarian ambassadors in 966, he scolded them and famously described their king, Peter, as a “leather-gnawing ruler who is clad with leather jerkin”<sup>277</sup>, refused to pay the tribute and sent them back to Peter. After some short round of negotiations, in which not even the envoy of Peter's sons Boris and Romanos to the imperial court could avoid an escalation, Nikephoros realized that a second front in Bulgaria when his troops were needed east would not lead to any consistent result, and thus resorted to the help of the Russians, who were approached by Kalokyres, *proteuos* (first citizen) of Cherson, and paid the

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<sup>275</sup> Pankratios was probably the Hellenization of the Armenian name Bagrat.

<sup>276</sup> Skylitzes, p. 279

<sup>277</sup> Leo Deacon p. 62

handsome sum of 15 golden *kentenaria* to put pressure on Bulgaria from the north in his stead. The main goal of Phokas seemed to have been the replacement of Peter with his eldest son Boris, together with of course an end to the yearly tribute – a plan that at least during the first phase of its development seemed to work well enough. After they saw what Bulgaria had to offer, the Russians came back in force in October 969, together with a large host of Magyars and Pechenegs, and supported by Kalokyres, who thought he could use the support of the northern peoples to conquer himself the imperial crown. A last-minute proposal of marrying one of the two young sons of Theophano to unspecified local princesses failed to inspire a Bulgarian counter-offensive. Boris, who was supposed to be the puppet ruler of Nikephoros, became instead the puppet ruler of the Russian Svyatoslav. The emperor was killed before he could disentangle the mess of his failed northern policy, a burden that befell on his successors<sup>278</sup>.

The execution and planning of Phokas' Bulgarian policy was admittedly less than perfect, as it overplayed the risky cards of Rus' ambitions in the lower Danube and the doubtful loyalty of Kalokyres, probably chosen only in virtue of his proximity with the steppe world. Nevertheless, as risky and short sighted it may have been, his decision of letting a proxy do the dirty work instead of risking resources, men and credibility against a minor opponent is understandable.

Further west, in Italy, the situation between 963 and 969 was that of an almost complete stalemate against the German emperor Otto I.

During the first half of the tenth century, the Byzantine diplomacy failed to find a stable alliance with any of the numerous rivaling powers of the Peninsula, not so much because of its own shortcomings, but because of the inherent instability of the chaotic Italian political scene before the coronation of Otto I as king of Italy in 951 and his coronation as Roman Emperor in 962. With him, the traditional Byzantine policy concerning Italy – which was based on the assumption that no local power could be allowed to become stronger than the others – could not work. Despite a series of common points of interests, first of all the defense against the Magyar raids, the two empires did not seem to find a common ground to negotiate about Italy. The main point of friction was the division of the south of the peninsula in two spheres of influence – the Byzantines, feeling safer and more confident after their successes in the east and the apparent quiet in the north,

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<sup>278</sup>P. Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier. A Political Study of the Northern Balkans, 900-1204*. P. 50-51. Cambridge 2004.



wanted to extend theirs up to Capua and Benevento. Otto, on the other hand, had similar goals, and feared an extension of the Byzantine action radius so close to the outskirts of Rome. After a series of hostile operations led by Otto himself against the Byzantine cities of Puglia (he laid siege on Bari in 967), the German emperor tried to accomplish something by diplomatic means, asking in 968 that an imperial princess (in this case Anna, daughter of Romanos II) married his son, also named Otto.

But Phokas was not willing to trade in an imperial princess, an act that would have been short of a capitulation and was seen as a concession to an enemy which had not been able to impose its will militarily. He intended to play the support of the heirs of Berengarius of Ivrea, the main opponent of Otto in northern Italy, before he granted any concession to the German emperor.

Phokas' stubbornness in negotiating with Otto led to an unproductive stalemate that could not be resolved by an armed struggle<sup>279</sup>. A solution would have been found only four years later, when in 972 John Tzimiskes finally yielded to Otto's requests for an imperial princess, allowing the Byzantines to concentrate on their struggle against their last Arabian opponent in the east, the Fatimids.

For these reasons, an armed expansion in Italy was out of question.

The only possible direction in which to extend the Byzantine frontier was then the Levant. It offered good farmland, the access to important trade routes and was a well known territory to the emperor, who had spent much of his early life fighting there as *strategos* of the *Anatolikon* and then as *Domestikos*. Its political situation was also favorable to a series of rapid campaigns, and the only other power that could compete with Byzantium for the supremacy in the area was the Hamdanid state of Aleppo, as the Caliphate of Baghdad had been gradually retreating from the frontier and Egypt was being overtaken by the Fatimids of North Africa. As the 962 campaign had shown, the emirate of Aleppo was by itself a small power, easily dealt with and incapable of resisting a determined invasion. Once Aleppo had lost its role as the main supporter of Tarsus, the Byzantine armies could easily take possession of the whole Cilician plain.

If we consider that the campaigning season of 961-62 was only aimed at annihilating Aleppo, the conquest of Cilicia – a region that had been at the forefront of the struggle between Byzantium and the Caliphate for three centuries – only took two years, and was

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<sup>279</sup> R. J. Lilie, *Byzanz. Das zweite Rom*, p. 265-267, Berlin 2003

followed by a series of aggressive actions against the major city of western Syria, Antioch on the Orontes. Antioch was unsuccessfully blockaded twice in 966 and 968.

Its potential allies and supporters were bullied into neutrality one by one, beginning with Aleppo and continuing with those cities on the Levantine coast that could provide supplies and troops: the *chevauchée* of 968, that reached as far as Tripoli, was the most ambitious Byzantine land operation in the east since the seventh century, and a profitable one too. Together with riches gathered from the sack of Tarsus, Mopsuestia, Adana and Anzarbos, the spoils of the Syrian expedition were probably sufficient to not only repay in full the pocket costs of campaigning outside the borders, but also to grant a significant increase in the personal wealth of those many soldiers who were able to get their hands on a share of the loot.

It was only a matter of time, and Antioch finally fell to a Byzantine army in October 969. To avoid the possibility of another hostile takeover by its immediate neighbors (the Hamdanids *in primis*), the conqueror of Antioch (Peter the *stratopedarches*) led his troops to Aleppo, extorting an agreement that ultimately turned the Syrian city into a Byzantine protectorate. The region was reorganized and included within the Byzantine system of *themata*: in this case, it was divided in many small districts, conventionally called Armenian Themes, each ruled by a minor *strategos*, themselves under the jurisdiction of a *Doux* possibly since the late 960s<sup>280</sup>.

The reign of Nikephoros Phokas was drastically ended by a conspiracy against him led by his nephew John Tzimiskes, in December 969. The main motive of the plot was Tzimiskes' bitterness towards Phokas, who forced him to resign, for unknown reasons, in 965. Theophano's anxiety regarding her future and that of her children also played a prominent role in triggering her involvement in the plan, since there was a rumor that Phokas was about to name his brother Leo and his son, Bardas, as sole heirs of the empire after the castration of the current heirs, Basil and Constantine<sup>281</sup>. Several of the other five conspirators had similar motives: Michael Bourtzes had been discharged after his attack on Antioch, and was accompanied by his bodyguard Theodoros (also known as

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<sup>280</sup> C. Holmes, *Basil II and the Governance of the Empire (976-1025)*, p. 301. Oxford, 2005

<sup>281</sup> Zonaras, p. 207. The tenacity with which the Phokades kept making claims to the throne may support this hypothesis.

Atzypotheodoros<sup>282</sup>). The reason behind the involvement of Leo Balantes, ransomed during the 966 prisoners exchange, are unknown, as are those of Leo Pediasimos, allegedly one of Tzimiskes most trusted retainers<sup>283</sup>. They sneaked into the Bukoleon palace during a snowy December night, lifted in a basket pulled up by Theophano's servant maidens. Once they reached the imperial apartments they repeatedly hit him and finally left him dead and went to take possession of the palace.

The description of Phokas' death is remembered by some of the few emotionally touching and pathetic passages of the whole Byzantine literature. They never fail in conveying to the reader the melancholic image of the powerful and undefeated warrior hero reduced only to a shadow of his former self, whispering a desperate *kyrie eleison* while his murderer – and nephew – unleashed his bitter frustration over him, ultimately ordering his fellow conspirators to end the old man's sufferings. The figure of empress Theophano is also an omnipresent *dramatis persona*, although confined to the role of the malicious deceiver. This episode indeed possesses a unique combination of narrative elements – a tragic and noble protagonist smitten by his own hybris, an archetypical female incarnation of vice and an antagonist whose virtues and vices ran parallel to those of his victim – so much that it had been able to inspire a wide range of literary works well into the twentieth century, from Kazantzakis' philosophically "meta-ascetic" play written in 1915<sup>284</sup> to Malerba's (quite mediocre) intrigue novel published in 1990.

Phokas himself easily became an almost legendary figure for the Byzantine chroniclers of the eleventh century. During the troubled times of the Seljuq and Norman invasions, the figure of the victorious commander, with his heroic halo of religious pity and martial bravery, soon became an unforgiving comparison for the many unlucky or incapable leaders of the post-Macedonian period<sup>285</sup>. Alternatively, his charisma and that of his whole family provided a useful legitimacy tool for panegyrists such as Attaleiates, who

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<sup>282</sup> Probably a slave of Nubian or Moorish origins, Yahya repeatedly calls him "the black servant of Bourtzes" and Zonaras says "Atzypotheodoros, better known as the Black Theodoros" (μελαγχροουσ).

<sup>283</sup> Leo Deacon, p. 85

<sup>284</sup> P. Roilos, Byzantium and Heroic Pessimism in Nikos Kazantzakis, *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora*, pp. 227-241, Pella Publishing 2001

<sup>285</sup> Skylitzes, p. 446-447, the Seljuq Sultan was allegedly "frightened off from taking up arms against the Romans merely by the reports of the glorious deeds of three former emperors: Nikephoros, John and Basil."

used it to glorify upstart usurpers such as the short-lived Nikephoros III Botaniates<sup>286</sup>, deposed by Alexios Komnenos in 1081: more than a century had passed since the death of Phokas and the political annihilation of his family.

But once the poetic value of this episode and of its actors is set aside, and the intricate web of political motives and personal rivalries is considered for what it is, an historical accident, it may be possible to say that the plot that killed Phokas, ironically, made him a favor. He was killed before he could witness the advance of the Fatimids and the beginning of another bitter struggle for the Levant, a chapter he thought he had been able to close. His death also left to his heirs the burden of untangling the mess he created in the Balkans and in Italy: the former he left in an evident state of Chaos, only fixed by Tzimiskes tenacious campaign against the Russians; in the negotiations for the latter, his almost mythological lack of tact only deepened the rift that existed between the Byzantine and Ottonian states. Nevertheless, the reign of Nikephoros Phokas definitely marked the beginning of the final phase of what is commonly termed the middle-Byzantine period, for a series of reasons: politically, it pivoted around the axiom of imperial absolutism, particularly against the Patriarch but also against the rising provincial ruling class, which constituted a permanent obstacle to his activities of military empowerment; internationally, around the reaffirmation of the Byzantine role as the central power of the eastern Mediterranean, the Balkans and the Caucasus, fostered by a new aggressive foreign policy; economically, it witnessed the first serious attempt at solving the growing prosperity vs. limited gold reserves dilemma that would ultimately lead to a dramatic devaluation in the following century.

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<sup>286</sup> Attaleiates, ch. 28. Despite his literary skills and ingenuity, Attaleiates soon ran short of generic compliments for Botaniates, so much that he had to fill the chapter that describes his genealogy with an unusual excursus about the weather in the British Isles.

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DOML	Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library
DOP	Dumbarton Oaks Papers
DOS	Dumbarton Oaks Studies
DOT	Dumbarton Oaks Texts
EHB	Economic History of Byzantium
ODB	Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium
BA	The <i>Byzantine Aristocracy and its Military Function</i>

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A: TEZ FOTOKOPİSİ İZİN FORMU

#### ENSTİTÜ

- Fen Bilimleri Enstitüsü
- Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü
- Uygulamalı Matematik Enstitüsü
- Enformatik Enstitüsü
- Deniz Bilimleri Enstitüsü

#### YAZARIN

Soyadı :  
Adı :  
Bölümü :

TEZİN ADI (İngilizce) :

TEZİN TÜRÜ : Yüksek Lisans  Doktora

1. Tezimin tamamından kaynak gösterilmek şartıyla fotokopi alınabilir.
2. Tezimin içindekiler sayfası, özet, indeks sayfalarından ve/veya bir bölümünden kaynak gösterilmek şartıyla fotokopi alınabilir.
3. Tezimden bir bir (1) yıl süreyle fotokopi alınamaz.

TEZİN KÜTÜPHANEYE TESLİM TARİHİ: