НИШ И БИЗАНТИЈА
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The last quarter of the tenth and the first decades of the eleventh century were marked by the long — and at times rather vicious — struggle between the Byzantine Empire under Basil II and the Bulgarians of Tsar Samuel and his successors. Unlike previous wars between the First Bulgarian Empire and the Byzantines, the military operations that took place between 976 and 1018 were characterized by an absence of pitched battles (possible due to the reduced military capabilities of Samuel’s army, especially when compared to the combat effectiveness of the armies of Khan Krum or Tsar Symeon) and an abundance of raids, ambushes and sieges. It is to the latter that we propose to focus our attention. The aim of this paper is to analyze the way in which the urban centers of Byzantium’s Balkan provinces (particularly those to the west and south of Thessaloniki) fitted into the strategic plans of both Basil II and Samuel, as well as to examine the role of the inhabitants of those cities, both as participants to the war and as victims of it.

Our main narrative source for the period in question is John Skylitzes’ Σύνοψις ἱστοριῶν, composed at the end of the eleventh century; included in it are a number of interpolations added to the text by Michael, bishop of Devol, in 1118. The so-called Στρατηγικὸν of Kekaumenos, written two or three decades before the Synopsis Historion, is particularly valuable to military historians, since the author’s...
grandfathers and other family members had served in the Byzantine-Bulgarian war — in fact, they had fought for both sides. Finally, a piece of military literature that includes instructions on withstanding enemy assaults against a city, known by the Latin title its first editors gave it: *De obsidione toleranda*. It is usually attributed to the literary circle of Constantine Porphyrogenitus; however, as I have endeavored to show elsewhere, internal evidence overlooked by most researchers point to a later date of composition, sometime during the last quarter of the tenth century. Therefore, references to Bulgarian enemies contained in the text are possibly based on personal observation, either by the author himself or by his informants.

There is sufficient evidence in the sources to indicate that blockade was the main siege technique employed by Samuel’s armies against the Byzantine cities of the Balkans. This is not to say that Bulgarian siegecraft at the end of the tenth century was technologically backward or that the Bulgarians were either unable or unwilling to assault enemy fortifications. Moses, Samuel’s brother, was killed during the siege of Serres (probably in 976) by a stone thrown from the wall according to Skylitzes’ main text or, as Michael of Devol would have it, during a skirmish with the Byzantine commander’s troops; either version is compatible with a Bulgarian attack that had reached the city walls. In 1018, Ivan Vladislav (Samuel’s nephew) lost his life in a similar skirmish under the walls of Dyrrhachion (modern Durrës).

As for the use of complex siege engines by the Bulgarians, the narrative sources are silent on the matter, although both Skylitzes and Kekaumenos relate incidents which show that Samuel’s troops were at least able to employ defensive countermeasures against Byzantine machines. Furthermore, a passage in the *De obsidione toleranda*...
one toleranda referring to the inability of Byzantium’s contemporary enemies to field little more than a handful of artillery pieces and one or two rams possibly had the late-tenth/early-eleventh century Bulgarian army in mind, an army that seemed to be technologically up to date, but apparently suffered from a lack of resources.\textsuperscript{11} It was precisely for those reasons that starving a city into submission through a lengthy blockade became the Bulgarians’ preferred siege technique.

As a matter of fact, in the tenth century the Byzantine army used similar tactics against the Muslim cities on the eastern frontier, the best-known instance of such a long-range siege being that of Antioch (968-969).\textsuperscript{12} Unlike the Byzantines, however, the Bulgarians did not find it necessary to use another town or castle from which to harass the enemy city’s supply lines. As they already controlled the mountainous regions of Western Macedonia, the armies of Tsar Samuel could easily use the latter as a base of operations, especially since most of their targets were situated nearby, at the edge of the plains of Thessaly and Thessaloniki. Taking advantage of the upheaval caused by the rebellions of Bardas Skleros and Bardas Phokas, Samuel and his local warlords were able to pick off the Greek cities of the region one by one. A typical example of how this tactic worked — and, thanks to Kekaumenos, one of the best-documented — is the blockade of Larissa: the Bulgarians allowed the citizens to go out and plant crops, but not to harvest them when the time came; as a result, after three or four years the citizens capitulated and were forced to relocate to the Prespel region.\textsuperscript{13}

Another characteristic of this method was that the besiegers could take advantage of the weakened state of a city’s defenders to attempt what modern strategists would call an “indirect approach”, in other words a commando-style operation — in fact, that was exactly how the Byzantines captured Antioch in 969. Kekaumenos refers to the capture of Servia by his maternal grandfather: having unsuccessfully blockaded the city for a whole year, the Bulgarian general finally forced the garrison to surrender when he captured the Byzantine general and his infantry commanders while they were bathing outside the city walls.\textsuperscript{14} The anonymous compiler of the \textit{De obsidione toleranda} reports another instance, that of the capture of Kitros: when the besiegers observed a local inhabitant going in and out of the fortified settlement by skirting the \textit{brachiolion},\textsuperscript{15} they simply swam their way into the city and took it.\textsuperscript{16} The ers of the Bulgarian castle of Moreia manage to undermine Basil II’s siege mount by setting fire to its timber supports).

\textsuperscript{11} \textit{De obsidione toleranda}, 98, 8-13: ἐπειδὴ δὲ ὡς ἄρθυμον, κατὰ πολὺ τὸ καθ’ ἱματιῶν ἐπιτύχω, ὁπλίτων πλέοντα πύρῳ, ὑπὲρ τῶν ἑπέφυσεν πόλεων καὶ τῶν ἑρμίων πόλεων καταχωρίσεως, ἐκεῖνο τῆς ἔφημος παρασκευής, ήταν καὶ πρὸς τὸ πλῆθος καὶ ἐντολάς παρακολούθησα, ἐκεῖνο τὴν πρὸς τὰ ξύλινα μεγαλοκαλά πρὸς τὸ πλῆθος ἐκάστη, καρποὺς δὲ δώδεκα ἔξι, καὶ τυχὲν ἑνα [. . .].


\textsuperscript{13} Kekaumenos, 266, 11-268, 16; cf. Skylitzes, 330, 2-9.

\textsuperscript{14} Kekaumenos, 190, 18-192, 7.

\textsuperscript{15} Also known as \textit{brachiolion}, a stretch of masonry projecting into the sea at the point where land and maritime walls meet: Sullivan, “Instructional Manual”, 163, n. 64.

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{De obsidione toleranda}, 52, 8-11. The capture of Kitros cannot be dated with any kind of precision and ultimately depends on the chronology of the text. Hence, most scholars
A feature of this strategy of attrition that should never be underestimated (especially when we are dealing with siege warfare, which is the type of military operations that has the most noticeable impact on civilians) is that it might lead to many cities being taken not by force, but with the help of a fifth column. Watching their families die of starvation (in Larissa there were even cases of people resorting to cannibalism) might convince local citizens to assist the besiegers in taking the city, thus sparing the inhabitants from further suffering. Ethnic or religious minorities could be counted upon to render assistance to the enemy. This trait was particularly pronounced in border areas, such as those in the Byzantine-Arab frontier.17

One might argue that the region to the west of Thessaloniki could also be considered a border area during the Byzantine-Bulgarian war of 976-1018; however, although there is some evidence to indicate that inhabitants of local urban centers were often willing to reach some sort of understanding with the Bulgarians,18 the ethnic composition of the cities in question was not the key factor. Apart from ordinary citizens trying to survive, another reason was the apparent hostility of ruling elites towards Basil II, probably due to the measures he took against the “powerful”, the landed aristocracy from which both Bardas Phokas and Bardas Skleros had originated. Nikolitzas and his family in Larissa, who went from Byzantine officials to Bulgarian warlords almost overnight, and the Chryselioi of Dyrrachion, local dignitaries who not only negotiated with Samuel on equal terms, but also formed a marriage alliance with him, are two characteristic examples.19

who believe that it was written by someone working for Constantine Porphyrogenitus prefer to attribute the city’s capture to the forces of Tsar Symeon during the period 913-924: see Sullivan, “Instructional Manual”, 140, 165; cf. H. Hunger, Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur der Byzantiner, II, Munich 1978, 335, and Strässle, Krieg, 42. However, if my view of the De obсидione toleranda as a teaching manual composed for the benefit of Basil II is correct, it seems more plausible to date the capture of Kitros to the last quarter of the tenth century, perhaps after the fall of Larissa (986 at the latest) or during Samuel’s 996 campaign. Kitros was still in Byzantine hands after neighboring Kolindros had fallen to the Bulgarians, if we are to believe the tale told in the Life of St Phantinos the Younger (ed. Enrica Follieri, La Vita di San Fantino il Giovane [Subsidia Hagiographica 77], Brussels 1993, 61) of a young slave who was captured by the Bulgarians and taken to Kolindros, then managed to escape on foot to Kitros and from there by boat to Thessaloniki; P. A. Yannopoulos, “La Grèce dans la Vie de S. Fantin”, Byzantion 65 (1995) 475-494, here 489, 492-493, dates this episode to 989-991.

18  According to Kekaumenos, 266, 14-31, his namesake grandfather who was the local military commander at Larissa pretended to come to terms with Samuel so that the inhabitants could sow their fields, reap the grain and bring the harvest inside the city. He wrote to Basil II to explain his actions and the emperor seemed to sanction them, although three years later he transferred Kekaumenos to another command and the city fell to the Bulgarians after a long blockade that perhaps lasted into the early 980s. At about the same time (perhaps as early as 976, according to Privvatrić, Самуилова држава, 82-83) the city of Dyrrachion, Byzantium’s most important outpost on the Adriatic, was drawn into Samuel’s sphere of influence after the latter married the daughter of John Chryselios, the city’s unofficial ruler (Stephenson, Balkan Frontier, 61).
19  On the Chryselios family of Dyrrachion during and after the war of 976-1018 see
We have very little information regarding the early measures taken by the Byzantine government in order to counter the military successes of Samuel. A passage in the *De obsidione toleranda* referring to the distinct possibility that “no chiliarchiai are present to garrison the city”\(^{20}\) might be an indication that during the first 15 years of the war, when Basil II was busy trying to retain his throne (not to mention his head), the cities of Byzantine Greece were left to their own devices or to what little assistance local troops (probably including citizens drafted into service)\(^{21}\) could provide.

After Basil II managed to weather the rebellions of Bardas Phokas and Bardas Skleros, he turned his attention to the Balkans, campaigning in person there; when he returned to Constantinople in 994, he left behind in Thessaloniki his associate Gregory Taronites with a number of reinforcements from Asia Minor.\(^{22}\) Thessaloniki was not only the base of the forces of the local *doux*, but also the main target of the Bulgarian offensive strategy. A look at a map of the region will show that the cities captured by Samuel’s warlords during the last decades of the tenth century (Larissa, Veroia, Servia, Kitros, Kolindros, Vodenia), along with those the Bulgarians either raided or attacked but failed to take (Serres, Hierissos), form a cordon around the outer edge of the plain of Thessaloniki.\(^{23}\) Apparently Samuel’s strategic goal was to isolate Thessaloniki or at least to neutralize the forces of its *doux*, so that he could have a free hand in the region. Although the troops under the command of Gregory Taronites were probably too strong for the Bulgarians to face in open battle, Samuel managed to decapitate them by using his favorite method, that of “indirect approach”. In 994 or 995 he ambushed and killed Gregory Taronites, taking his son Ashot prisoner; he then went on to capture Taronites’ successor.


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\(^{20}\) *De obsidione toleranda*, 56, 67-69: καὶ ἡ ἄρχηγος ἡμών τοῦ μεγαλύτερον ἐπαρ εἰς ἑαυτήν ἐξ χωρωτοῦ τοῦ κάστρου χιλιαρχίαι […].

\(^{21}\) It should be borne in mind, however, that the Eastern Roman Empire’s stance towards armed citizens was nothing if not ambivalent: see Ch. G. Makrypoulias, “Civilians as Combatants in Byzantium: Ideological versus Practical Considerations”, in J. Koder – I. Stouraitis (eds.), *Byzantine War Ideology between Roman Imperial Concept and Christian Religion* (Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-historische Klasse, Denkschriften 452), Vienna 2012, 109-120.

\(^{22}\) On the significance of the military command of Thessaloniki during the war against Samuel and his successors see Bojana Kršmanović, *The Byzantine Province in Change (On the Threshold Between the 10th and the 11th Century)*, Belgrade – Athens 2008, 148-156; cf. Holmes, *Basil II*, 403-409.

\(^{23}\) See the map in Stephenson, *Balkan Frontier*, 68; cf. Holmes, *Basil II*, 398, commenting on the strategic significance of the fortified sites of Vodenia and Veroia. For the capture of Larissa, Servia, Kolindros (cf. Skylitzes, 344, 95-3) and Kitros, as well as the failed attempt against Serres, see above, nn. 8, 13-14, 16. For repeated Bulgarian raids in the vicinity of Hierissos see Stephenson, *Balkan Frontier*, 60. Veroia fell in 989 (Leo the Deacon, 175, 6-11), while Vodenia remained in Bulgarian hands until recaptured by Basil II in 1001 (Skylitzes, 345, 20-26).
cessor, John Chaldos, sometime between 995 and 996. Only when Basil II sent Nikephoros Ouranos, newly-promoted to the position of domestic of the Schools of the West, to Thessaloniki did the tide begin to turn in favor of the Byzantines.

In addition to gathering a central strike force in Thessaloniki, the Byzantine high command also dispatched numerous infantry brigades as garrisons to the various cities under threat. We have already mentioned the fate of the commanders of two such units that had been stationed at Servia. These taxiarchiai (or chiliarchiai), each comprising 500 light troops (archers, slingers and javelin throwers) and an equal number of heavy infantry, were originally used as field troops in support of cavalry during offensive operations. A comparison between the so-called Praecepta Militaria, a military manual attributed to Nikephoros Phokas, and the Περὶ καταστάσεως ἀπλήκτου, a text dating from the last years of the tenth century that contains information on military operations against the Bulgarians, may hint at the gradual transformation of the taxiarchiai into garrison troops during the Byzantine-Bulgarian war. Whereas the earlier text states that the line infantry in each taxiarchia should consist of 400 hoplitai or skoutatoi (shield-bearing foot soldiers carrying spears) and 100 menavlatoi (armed with the menavlion, a heavy pike they were trained to employ against enemy armored cavalry), the Περὶ καταστάσεως ἀπλήκτου suggests that similar tactics were employed by the Bulgarians against Byzantine cities.

24 Skylitzes, 341, 13-22; 347, 81-82. Chaldos spent 22 years in captivity until released in 1018: Skylitzes, 357, 72-75; cf. Holmes, Basil II, 404. It has never been adequately explained how Samuel managed to ambush two successive doukes of Thessaloniki so close to their seat of power, on flat terrain that was ideally suitable for Byzantine heavy cavalry and lacked any feature (such as woods or mountains) which the Bulgarians could use to their advantage. A passage in Kekaumenos might provide the answer to that question: in it (286, 27-288, 2) the author advises the Byzantine commander to be on his guard against ambushes that make use of pits in the ground large enough to conceal 300-500 enemy horsemen; those pits, Kekaumenos explains, were dug by “the ancients” so that the earth could be used to erect a mound. Interestingly enough, the compiler of the De obsidione toleranda, 62, 13-17, also warns against similar practices on the part of those besieging a Byzantine city, noting that it is “something the Bulgarians customarily do” (Sullivan, “Instructional Manual”, 185). Given all that, and the fact that prehistoric mounds abound in the plain of Thessaloniki (cf. A. J. B. Wace, “The Mounds of Macedonia”, Annual of the British School at Athens 20 [1914] 123-132), one is led to the conclusion that both Kekaumenos and the author of the De obsidione toleranda had Samuel’s tactics in mind, and that the Bulgarian ruler made skilful use of the terrain around Thessaloniki to strike directly at the head of the Byzantine high command in Thessaloniki.

25 Skylitzes 341, 22-24. The question of whether Nikephoros Ouranos simultaneously held the position of doux of Thessaloniki is discussed in Kršmanović, Byzantine Province, 52-55; see also Holmes, Basil II, 409-410.


27 Edited with English translation and commentary in McGeer, Byzantine Warfare, 1-78.


taseos aplektou describes all 500 heavy infantrymen as hoplitai, while eleventh-and twelfth-century sources use the term kontaratoi ("spearmen") to collectively denote soldiers in the line infantry serving as garrison troops. Apparently, by the end of the tenth century the use of specialized troops in mobile field operations had taken second place to the need for static garrisons in the beleaguered cities of the Balkan Peninsula.

What is of interest to us here is that many of these infantry units were composed of Armenians — in fact, one of the reasons we assume that thousands of infantrymen were sent as garrison troops in Byzantine Greece is that in 1018 Basil II found numerous prisoners-of-war that had been settled on Bulgarian territory and many of them were Armenian. Clashes between Armenian soldiers and local Greek-speakers — either civilians or other servicemen, such as sailors — are documented in contemporary sources; it is only natural to assume that such clashes would have taken place in the Byzantine cities of the Balkans as well. One such indication is the comment of Michael of Devol in an interpolation that refers to the recapture of Voden (modern Edessa) by Basil II in 1015: he writes that the emperor deported the city’s population and Bulgarian garrison, replacing them with “the so-called Kontaratoi, beastly murderous people, a group of merciless highwaymen.” This less-than-favorable attitude towards the region’s imperial defenders could not have been an isolated event.


30 Peri katastaseos aplektou, ch. 1, 11-12.


33 Skylitzes, 275, 88-91 (Easter 967: a clash takes place in Constantinople between Armenians and sailors of the imperial fleet, during which many people die and Sissinios, the City prefect, is almost killed); Leo the Deacon, 64, 22-65, 1 (late spring 967, forty days after the previous incident: in the course of a religious procession, a fight erupts between Armenian soldiers and Constantinopolitan soldiers, resulting in the death of many civilians); Skylitzes, 321, 58-61 (977: after doing battle against a division of Bardas Skleros’ rebel army, the victorious imperial troops execute all the Armenian prisoners); Life of St Lazaros of Mt Galesion, ed. H. Delehaye, Acta Sanctorum Novembris, 3, Brussels 1910, 513-514 (early 990s: a band of Armenian soldiers passing through the region of Antioch abduct a peasant girl and it is only when the saint threatens to denounce them to the Byzantine commander that they are persuaded to release her). The Byzantines’ poor opinion of the Armenians serving as guards on the eastern frontier zone is attested to in Ἴπειρος ποροθορεσίας πολέμου, a military treatise dating from the first years of Basil II’s reign (ed. under the title “Skirmishing” in Dennis, Military Treatises, 137-249, here ch. 2, 11-21). On the widespread tensions between Byzantines and Armenians during this period see S. Vryonis, Jr, “Byzantium: The Social Basis of Decline in the Eleventh Century”, Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies 2 (1959) 159-175, here 169-175.

34 Skylitzes, 352, 17-19: ἐξ ἀρόδου ἔλθων παρελάβετο τὰ Βοδηνά καὶ τῶν οἰκίστωρος
One final piece of information that might point to tensions between local civilians and Byzantine troops brought from other parts of the empire also relates to the recapture of Vodena in 1015. It would seem that the new garrison was not quartered inside the city walls, where it might be overrun yet again by a rebellious mob; instead, Basil II built two castles in the mountain passes around Vodena, one called Kardia, the other Hagios Elias. Interestingly enough, when the emperor finally captured Ohrid, the heart of Samuel’s realm, in 1018, and pulled down its fortifications, he took the additional measure of building two castles, called Vasilis and Konstantios, in the vicinity. They were clearly meant as tokens of Byzantine rule, and they were taken as such: as soon as Peter Deljan assumed sole leadership of the Bulgarian uprising of 1040, his first act was to order the walls of Vasilis to be demolished. The castle was a symbol of imperial dominion and, in a way, so were the cities of the entire region and their citizens: the power that held them, both the walls and the hearts and minds of those who dwelt within them, ruled the Balkans.
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