

## Byzantina Symmeikta

Vol 22 (2012)

BYZANTINA SYMMEIKTA 22



**Rus, Varangian and Frankish mercenaries in the service of the Byzantine Emperors (9th-11th c.): Numbers, Organisation and Battle Tactics in the operational theatres of Asia Minor and the Balkans.**

*Georgios THEOTOKIS*

doi: [10.12681/byzsym.1039](https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.1039)

Copyright © 2014, Georgios THEOTOKIS



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

### To cite this article:

THEOTOKIS, G. (2012). Rus, Varangian and Frankish mercenaries in the service of the Byzantine Emperors (9th-11th c.): Numbers, Organisation and Battle Tactics in the operational theatres of Asia Minor and the Balkans. *Byzantina Symmeikta*, 22, 125–156. <https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.1039>

GEORGIOS THEOTOKIS

RUS, VARANGIAN AND FRANKISH MERCENARIES IN THE SERVICE OF THE  
BYZANTINE EMPERORS (9TH-11TH C.)

NUMBERS, ORGANISATION AND BATTLE TACTICS IN THE OPERATIONAL THEATRES  
OF ASIA MINOR AND THE BALKANS

It is common knowledge to everyone who has dealt with the history of the Byzantine Empire that non-Greek mercenaries were employed by the Emperors since the times of the Late Roman period, frequently and in large numbers depending on the occasional needs of the Imperial army for additional high-quality manpower<sup>1</sup>. Narrowing down our analysis to the period of the “Reconquest” (956-1025), a time when the Empire was in desperate need for large quantities of able-bodied and experienced soldiers to conduct its wars in the East and the Balkans, we have ample examples of large bodies of non-Greek troops finding their way to the Imperial pay-rolls, not yet termed as «μισθοφόροι» (the person who receives pay in Greek) but rather as “allies” (σύμμαχοι) or “foreigners” (έθνικολί)<sup>2</sup>. It was roughly

1. On the employment of non-“Roman” mercenaries in the fourth century: J.H. LIEBESCHUETZ, *Barbarians and Bishops: army, church and state in the reign of Arcadius*, Oxford 1990, 7-85.

2. Compare with: Constantinus Porphyrogenitus, *De Administrando Imperio*, Greek text edited by GY. MORAVCSIK; English translation by R. J. H. JENKINS, Washington D.C. 1967, 13. 96, p. 70, 31. 40, p. 148; Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *Three Treatises on Imperial Military Expeditions*, ed. J. F. HALDON, [CFHB, vol. 28], Vienna 1990, pp. 118-9; *The Taktika of Leo VI*, text, translation and commentary by G. T. DENNIS [Dumbarton Oaks Texts 12], Washington DC, 2010, XVI. 54, XVIII. 212, 365, 620, XX. 290, 305, 379, 385, 456, 801; *The Anonymous Book on Tactics*, in: *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*, tr. G. T. DENNIS, Washington 1985/latest edition 2008, 18, p. 292; *Presentation and Composition on Warfare of the Emperor Nicephoros*, in: *Sowing the Dragon’s Teeth: Byzantine Warfare in the Tenth*

during the following period of the *Epigonoι* of the Macedonian dynasty (1025-56) that we begin to observe a slight change in terminology by chroniclers, who are using the term *μισθοφόροι* instead, thus indicating a period of change in the way the Empire was recruiting its mercenaries<sup>3</sup>. But what was the difference between these large units of foreign mercenaries and the westerners that first appeared in the Imperial Court in the second half of the eleventh century?

The troops that had been employed by the Byzantine Empire to cover its needs for large quantities of soldiers were supplied, primarily, by states like Armenia and the neighbouring principalities of the Caucasus, Bulgaria, Hungary and Kiev. These were not only neighbouring countries, but in many cases were either in cordial relations with Constantinople or were depended upon their trading agreements or were simply satellite or vassal states. And in order to raise these sizeable enough units, Constantinople had to have the permission and active cooperation of their respective lords or overlords.

If we examine the case of the Byzantine expedition in Sicily in 1038, when 300 mounted Normans took part in that campaign sent by Gaimar of Salerno, a suzerain of the Normans of Aversa and a vassal of the Empire<sup>4</sup>. The example of the Normans fits in the already established pattern of the Byzantines employing large units of mercenary soldiers to cover their occasional need for troops, thus marking the first case of a “Frankish” unit being employed by a Byzantine expeditionary force. However, these Frankish troops that first arrived in the mid-eleventh century, although they should have been receiving a fixed pay (*ρογα - σιτηρέσιον*), their main difference was that they were employed as individuals – materialistic volunteers who had travelled long-way in search for sufficient pay and the opportunity to pillage and destroy, literally matching the term “soldiers of fortune”. Further, the contingents of troops provided by the aforementioned states were serving

---

*Century*, tr. and ed. by E. McGEER, Washington 1995, I, 52, p. 14; J.-A. DE FOUCAULT, Douze chapitres inédits de la tactique de Nicéphore Ouranos, *TM* 5 (1973) 308-9; Cecaumenus, *Strategicon*, ed. B. WASSILIEWSKY – V. JERNSTEDT, St. Petersburg 1896, 95; Nicephori Bryennii, *Historiarum Libri Quattuor*, ed. P. GAUTIER [CFHB, vol. 9], Brussels, 1975, 91, 259, 265, 27.

3. The use of *μισθοφόρος* as “wage-receivers” is first seen in the work of Skylitzes who uses it along with the older terms *σύμμαχοι* and *έθνικοί*. See the detailed analysis by: J. SHEPARD, The Uses of the Franks in Eleventh-Century Byzantium, *Anglo-Norman Studies* 15 (1993), 280-1.

4. An analysis of this campaign, along with bibliography, can be found in p. 140.

the Emperor for a limited number of campaigns, and maybe even a single campaign, while a large number of Franks served under Imperial generals for many decades, either for or against the Emperor. Thus, the 300 Normans of the 1038 campaign, although they were sent by Gaimar of Salerno who was a vassal of Byzantium, they were not their native subjects and they were serving George Maniaces under their own leaders, namely William and Drogo Hauteville. A significant number of them were still referred to as “Maniakatoi” by Anna Comnena in 1078<sup>5</sup>, serving the rebel *dux* Nicephorus Bryennius at the battle of Kalavryai against the Imperial army.

But even before the first appearance of Franks as individual mercenaries in the service of the Byzantine Emperors in the mid-1040s, troops from Russia had already left their mark in the Byzantine army and society, mostly due to the famous regiment of the Varangians which was in the personal service of the Byzantine Emperors. A number of studies have been published on these two types of mercenaries, the Varangians and the Franks, and I owe to mention two of them which served me as guides through the writing of this paper. Regarding the Varangians in Byzantine service, a great study is Sigfus Blöndal’s *The Varangians of Byzantium*, translated and revised by Benedikt Benedikz, which offers a magnificent insight into the mysterious world of these warriors through the examination of Greek, Latin, Rus, Arabic, Armenian and, most significantly, Scandinavian and Icelandic sagas<sup>6</sup>. For the establishment of Frankish mercenaries in the Byzantine Empire and the career of their officers in the period 1040s-80s, the classic study of “The Uses of the Franks in Eleventh-Century Byzantium” by Jonathan Shepard is of great value to any historian of the period<sup>7</sup>.

However, no study has attempted to examine these significantly different mercenary groups and compare their fighting tactics with those of their enemies on each of the two major operational theatres of the Byzantine

---

5. *Annae Comnenae Alexias*, (2 vols.), ed. D. R. REINSCH – A. KAMBYLIS [CFHB, vol. 40], Berlin 2001, I. v, 21-22.

6. S. BLÖNDAL, *The Varangians of Byzantium*, tr. and ed. by B. BENEDIKZ, Cambridge 1978 (latest edition, 2007); I did not have the chance to go through: WLADYSŁAW DUCZKO, *Viking Rus: Studies on the Presence of Scandinavians in Eastern Europe*, Leiden 2004.

7. SHEPARD, *The Uses of the Franks*, 275-307; see also: J. -C. CHEYNET, “Le Role des Occidentaux dans l’Armée Byzantin avant la Première Croisade”, in: *Byzanz und das Abendland im 10. und 11. Jahrhundert*, ed. E. KONSTANTINOU, Köln 1997, 111-28.

Empire, the Balkans and Asia Minor. Thus, not structuring my analysis on a chronological basis but rather on the different enemies that these mercenaries were facing in different geographical conditions, the main objective of my research is to give answers to a series of questions; what evidence do we have about the organisation of the mercenary units of the Rus, the Varangians and the Franks and in what numbers were they descending at Constantinople? What were the political circumstances that led to their employment by the Emperors throughout our period of study? What was their standing in the Byzantine military establishment? Did they pose any threat to the central government? What evidence do we have about their battle and siege tactics and their overall role in each operational theatre?

The formal date for the introduction of the Varangian Guard to the Byzantine military establishment is widely considered to be the year 988<sup>8</sup>. In that year, the Emperor Basil II was faced with the one of the most challenging tasks of his reign which was the suppression of a rebellion led by two of the most powerful families of Asia Minor, the Phokades and the Skleroi<sup>9</sup>. With the rebel armies marching against him and in a desperate need for troops he turned to Prince Vladimir of Kiev, who agreed to send him 6,000 elite troops in exchange for the hand of a *πορφυρογέννητη* princess, Basil's sister Anna. But even before the arrival of the Varangians, Swedish warriors from Russia had already left their mark in the Empire for more than a century. The earliest surviving records that indicate a Swedish-Russian presence in the Constantinopolitan court dates back to the reign of Theophilus (829-42), when "a Rus ambassador" participated in an embassy sent by the Emperor to Louis the Pious on 18th May 839<sup>10</sup>. It is reasonable to think that these

---

8. G. OSTROGORSKY, *History of the Byzantine State*, Oxford 1989, 304; A. A. VASILIEV, *History of the Byzantine Empire*, (2 vols.), Madison, 1928-29, I, 392; M. ANGOLD, *The Byzantine Empire, 1025-1204*, London 1997, 25.

9. C. HOLMES, *Basil II and the Governance of Empire (976-1025)*, Oxford 2005, 240-99; EADEM, Political Elites in the Reign of Basil II, in: *Byzantium in the Year 1000*, ed. P. MAGDALINO, Leiden 2003, 35-69, especially 44-56; J.-C. CHEYNET, The Byzantine Aristocracy, (8th-13th c.), in: *The Byzantine Aristocracy and its Military Function*, ed. J.-C. CHEYNET, Ashgate-Variorum 2006, 281-322.

10. *Annales Bertiniani* [MGH. Scriptores 5], ed. G. WAITZ, Hannover 1883, vol. 20, 434; for a translation into English: *The Annals of St-Bertin*, tr. J. L. NELSON, Manchester 1991, 44. See also A. V. RIASANOVSKY, The Embassy of 838 revisited: some Comments in connection with a "Normanist" source on Early Russian History, *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 10 (1962), 1-12.

particular emissaries must have been sent by a Swedish-Russian ruler in an attempt to seal a trading deal, but unfortunately the sources are not clear at this point.

What might have brought the Swedish-Rus<sup>11</sup> warriors in close contact with the Byzantines would have been the raids of their chieftains during the previous decade that threatened the *archondate* of Cherson, in the north coasts of the Black Sea, and it is implied that the root cause for the unsettled situation in the north was indeed the Rus from southern Russia<sup>12</sup>. However, it is widely believed that the official date for the establishment of firm relations between Byzantium and the Rus was the year 860 which marks their first siege of Constantinople. In its aftermath, we find treaties being drawn between Michael III and the Russians in the years 866 and 868 where it is clearly noted that troops should be sent to the Emperor's personal service<sup>13</sup>.

For the following decades the relations between the Rus and Byzantium remained mostly cordial, though it is important to mention one of the terms of the Russian - Byzantine treaty of September 911, which followed the Russian siege of Constantinople in 907, that "Whenever you [Byzantines] find it necessary to declare war, or when you are conducting a campaign,

---

11. **The Russians were an amalgamation of Scandinavian – mainly Swedish – settlers and Slavic and Finno-Ugrian nomads.** From now on only the term Rus will be used, mainly as a geographical term that will include Russians of both Slavic and Scandinavian origin, unless specified otherwise. For more on the debate concerning the origin of the ninth and tenth century Rus: G. VERNADSKY, *The Origins of Russia*, Oxford 1959, 198-201; BLÖNDAL, *The Varangians of Byzantium*, 1-14; H. R. E. DAVIDSON, *The Viking Road to Byzantium*, London 1976, 57-67. A. CARILE, Byzantine Political Ideology and the Rus' in the tenth-twelfth centuries, *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, 12/13, Proceedings of the International Congress commemorating the Millenium of Christianity in Rus'- Ukraine (1988/1989), 400-413.

12. *De administrando imperio*, 42. 76-78, p. 186. This issue has been largely debated in: A. A. VASILIEV, *The Goths in the Crimea*, Cambridge Mass. 1936, 108 ff; J. B. BURY, *A History of the Eastern Roman Empire, from the fall of Irene to the accession of Basil I*, London 1912, 417-8; D. OBOLENSKY, *The Byzantine Commonwealth*, London 1971, 175-6; S. FRANKLIN – J. SHEPARD, *The Emergence of Rus*, London 1996, 85.

13. **Anecdota Bruxellensia I**, *Chroniques byzantines du Manuscrit 11376*, ed. F. CUMONT (1894), 33-4. This chronicle was compiled in the eleventh century and we have to be cautious about the information we derive from it. For a much detailed study and an extensive literature: A. A. VASILIEV, *The Russian attack on Constantinople in 860*, Cambridge Mass. 1946.

providing any Rus desirous of honouring your Emperor come at any time and wish to remain in his service, they shall be permitted in this respect to act according to their desire”<sup>14</sup>. This Russian-Byzantine treaty of 911 was further developed to a treaty of friendship and alliance after the Russian siege of Constantinople in 941 and the peace-treaty of 944, signed after Prince Igor’s show of power in the Danube in 943. In that treaty of 944, we read: “And if our [Byzantine] Empire needs military assistance from you against our adversaries, we shall write to you Great Prince [Igor], and he shall send us as many troops as we require. And so other nations shall learn what amity the Greeks and the Rus entertain toward each other”<sup>15</sup>. The importance of these aforementioned treaties, along with the one which ended the 971 campaign by Svyatoslav in the lower Danube and simply confirmed the previous one of 941<sup>16</sup>, and the gradual conversion of the Kievan Russians to Christianity in the same period<sup>17</sup>, were fundamental for the Rus who wished to serve as professional soldiers in the Imperial Army. Especially after 944 they had ample opportunities to do so.

The most important operational theatre of the Empire through the period of the “Reconquest” was, undoubtedly, Cilicia and Syria. In Egypt there were the Ikhshidites, nominal masters of Syria as well, who were ousted by the Fatimids of Ifriqiya in 969. In the meantime, the Hamdanid dynasty had established itself at Mosul and Aleppo, in 944/5, staying in power until

---

14. *Povest Vremennykh Let*, ed. V. P. ADRIANNOVA-PERETTS, Moscow and Leningrad, 1950, cols. 29-36; *The Russian Primary Chronicle, Laurentian Text*, tr. and ed. by S. H. CROSS – O. P. SHERBOWITZ-WETZOR, Cambridge Mass. 1953, 64-68; see also: G. OSTROGORSKY, L’Expedition du Prince Oleg contre Constantinople en 907, *Annales de l’Institut Kondakov* 11 (1939), 47-62; A. A. VASILIEV, The Second Russian Attack on Constantinople, *DOP* 6 (1951), 161-225; for a detailed study of the Russian-Byzantine treaties of 911, 944 and 971, see: S. MIKUCHI, *Etudes sur la diplomatie russe la plus ancienne*, Krakow 1953; J. SHEPARD, Some problems of Russo-byzantine relations c. 860-c. 1050, *The Slavonic and East European Review* 52 (1974), 10-33; J. MALINGOUDI, *Die russisch-byzantinischen Verträge des 10. Jhds. aus diplomatischer Sicht*, Thessaloniki 1994.

15. *Povest Vremennykh Let*, i. 45-54; *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 72-77.

16. *Povest Vremennykh Let*, i. 72-74; *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 89-90

17. The famous visit of Princess Olga to Constantinople, in 957, and her conversion to Christianity. *The Primary Chronicle* talks about an agreement made between Constantine VII and Olga before her departure for Kiev: “You [Olga] promised me that on your return to Rus’ you would send me many presents of slaves, wax, and furs, and despatch soldiery to aid me”. *Povest Vremennykh Let*, i. 62-63; *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 83.

the Byzantine conquest of Antioch in 969, being reduced to a vassal state after that. The Arab armies<sup>18</sup>, consisted primarily of two categories of troops; first, we had the regular troops – the professionals, the conscripts and the volunteers (*ghazis*), with large numbers of Bedouin and Sudanese auxiliary units (*abid*); also, we had the foreign mercenaries – specialists who performed particular roles in battle, primarily infantry units of Iranian Daylami, along with Kurds and steppe Turkish and Khorasanian cavalry of slave-soldiers (*ghulam mamluk*)<sup>19</sup>. The battle tactics and equipment of the Arabs were very similar to those of the Byzantines, revealing the great influence of the Eastern Roman Empire upon them throughout the centuries, meaning they were fighting on horseback at full gallop and in closed formation intending to deliver a heavy blow rather than encircle and harass the enemy<sup>20</sup>. However, we have to note that certain units of the Arab armies were fighting in a similar way with that of the Seljuks, more specifically the Berber auxiliary units armed with a lance, with Nicephoros Phocas devoting much attention to them in his *Praecepta Militaria*<sup>21</sup>.

In this period that began with the abortive expedition against the Umayyad Muslims of Crete in 949, some 629 Rus participated in the

---

18. For the best accounts on the organisation, consistency and battle tactics employed by the Hamdanids and Fatimids: E. McGEER, *Sowing the Dragon's Teeth*, 225-46; C. W. C. OMAN, *A History of the Art of War in the Middle Ages AD 378-1485*, (2 vols.), London 1924 (latest edition: 1991), I, 208-16; B. J. BESHIR, *Fatimid Military Organization*, *Der Islam* 55 (1978), 37-56; W. J. HAMBLIN, *The Fatimid Army during the Early Crusades*, PhD thesis, University of Michigan 1985; Y. LEV, *Infantry in Muslim armies during the Crusades*, in: *Logistics of Warfare in the Age of the Crusades*, ed. J. H. PRYOR, Ashgate 2006, 185-206.

19. **In contrast to the vast numbers of mounted archers that the Seljuks could put in the field**, this element was not as dominant in the Aghlabid, Tulunid, Ikhshidite – and later the Fatimid – and the Hamdanid armies: J. L. BACHARACH, *African Military Slaves in the Medieval Middle East: The Cases of Iraq (869-955) and Egypt (868-1171)*, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* [13. 4 (1981)], 478-80; HAMBLIN, 85-7; Y. LEV, *Regime, Army and Society in Medieval Egypt, 9th-12th Centuries*, in: *War and Society in the Eastern Mediterranean, 7th-15th Centuries*, ed. Y. LEV, Leiden 1997, 120-22, 129.

20. **Leo VI**, *Tactica*, XVIII. 110, 114; see also: T. G. KOLIAS, *The Taktika of Leo VI and the Arabs*, *Graeco-arabica* 3 (1984), 129-35.

21. **They are identified as the Arabitai (Ἀραβίται)** and they were the main reason for the adding of the third line of horsemen in the Byzantine cavalry formations of the tenth century: *Praecepta Militaria*, II. 101-110, p. 28.



campaign which was sent by Constantine VII<sup>22</sup>, while we also know that about 700 Rus had already been employed by Leo VI in his Cretan expedition against the Arabs in 912, being paid 7,200 nomismata<sup>23</sup>. Five years after the second failed expedition against Crete, in 954, Bardas Phocas – the Domestic of the Scholae – is said to have brought a number of Rus with him in northern Mesopotamia in his campaigns against the Emir of Aleppo Saif-ad-Daulah<sup>24</sup>. The campaigns in Upper Mesopotamia can be traced back almost continuously since the early 930s, conducted under the brilliant generalship of John Curcuas, the same general who was summoned to deliver the capital from the danger of the Russian invasion of Bithynia in 941<sup>25</sup>. Did he personally introduce a number of Russians into the units of his army? We cannot say with certainty but it is quite possible. Whatever the case, a number of Rus and Bulgarian soldiers had been active in Mesopotamia and Armenia since the Byzantine campaigns of 947<sup>26</sup>. It would have been very interesting, indeed, if we were able to reconstruct the Rus fighting tactics primarily against the infantry of the Iranian Daylami under the command of the Hamdanids of Aleppo. The latter had very similar equipment with the Rus, meaning large battle-axes and swords, accompanied with two-pronged spears (*zupin* or *mizraq*). Their ethnic background made them excellent

22. Constantinus Porphyrogenitus, *De Cerimoniis Aulae Byzantinae*, [CSHB, 5-6], ed. I. REISKE – E. WEBER, Bonn 1829-30, I, 664ff.; A.A. VASILIEV, *Byzance et les Arabes, 867-959*, (4 vols.), Brussels 1968, II, p. 334. Most likely a part of them would have participated in the Byzantine reinforcements sent to Italy in 934/5. Constantine VII writes about 415 Rus being transported by 11 chelandia. See: *De Cerimoniis*, I, 660; J. GAY, *L' Italie meridionale et l'Empire Byzantine depuis l'avenement de Basile Ier jusqu'a la prise de Bari par les Normands (867-1071)*, (2 vols.), Paris 1904, I, 210; J. H. PRYOR – E. M. JEFFREYS, *The Age of the Δρόμων, the Byzantine Navy ca 500-1204*, Boston 2006, 189.

23. *De Cerimoniis*, I, 654; for the conquest of Crete by the Arabs: V. CHRISTIDES, *The conquest of Crete by the Arabs (ca. 824): a turning point in the struggle between Byzantium and Islam*, Athens 1984, 157ff.; D. TSOUGARAKES, *Byzantine Crete from the 5th century to the Venetian Conquest*, Athens 1988; C. MAKRYPOULIAS, *The Navy in the Works of Constantine Porphyrogenitus*, *Institute for Graeco-Oriental and African Studies* 6 (1995), 1-19.

24. Mutanabbi, *Poem on Hadath*, in: *Byzance et les Arabes, 867-959*, ed. A. A. VASILIEV and trans. M. CANARD, Brussels 1950, vol. 2.II, 331; CANARD, M., *Histoire de la Dynastie des Hamdanides de Jazira et de Syrie*, Alger 1951, 779.

25. *ODB*, (3 vols.), ed. by A. P. KAZHDAN, New York 1991, II, 1156-57; OSTROGORSKY, *History of the Byzantine State*, 277.

26. A. RAMBAUD, *L'Empire grec au Xe siècle: Constantin Porphyrogénète*, Paris 1870, 425.

fighters in mountainous and broken terrain where the cavalry could not operate, with the Taurus Mountains of Cilicia and the broken terrain in Syria being the perfect battle-ground for them, thus we presume they would have met with the Rus in battle at some point<sup>27</sup>.

In the third and final expedition against the Cretan Arabs commanded by Nicephoros Phocas in 960/1, the elite unit that preceded the rest of the invading army and broke through the coastal defences of the Arabs probably consisted of an unknown number of Rus<sup>28</sup>, most likely foot-soldiers judging by the nature of their mission, and it is reasonable to believe that these elite and battle-hardened troops would have been of much use to Nicephorus II against Aleppo in 962. According to Leo the Deacon, during the early years of Nicephorus' reign, a number of Rus is mentioned to have taken part in an expedition launched against the Kalbite Muslims of Sicily, in 964-5, which resulted to a complete failure for the Imperial forces at Rametta<sup>29</sup>. Next year, however, the Imperial fleet managed to capture Cyprus from the Arabs, and although no reference is made by the chroniclers, it is quite likely that Russian troops would have taken part in that expedition as well.

So far, the cardinal distinction between the aforementioned troops and those in the Varangian Guard after the year 988 was that the former were employed as individuals, and although they had even managed to penetrate into the tagmatic unit of the *ἐταιρεία* already since the years of Michael III<sup>30</sup>, they never formed a separate and distinct unit like the Varangians. It seems that these Russian troops were primarily infantry units, basing our conclusions mainly on the nature of their missions and upon considering that in all the cases when they arrived outside the walls of Constantinople

27. For the Daylami: McGeer, *Sowing the Dragon's Teeth*, 233-6; C. E. Bosworth, *Military Organisation under the Buyids of Persia and Iraq*, *Oriens* 18 (1965-66), 149-51.

28. Leonis diaconi, *De Velitatione bellica Nicephori augusti*, ed. C. B. Hase, [CSHB, 4], Bonn 1828, 7-18, 24-8; *The History of Leo the Deacon: Byzantine military expansion in the tenth century*, tr. by A. M. Talbot, Washington D.C. 2005, 60-9, 76-9.

29. Leo the Deacon, 65-8; *The History of Leo the Deacon*, 115-7; Ibn-el-Athir, *Kamil fit-ta ta'rih*, tr. M. Canard, in: *Byzance et les Arabes, 867-959*, ed. A. A. Vasiliev, 160-1; Liutprand of Cremona, *The Works of Liutprand of Cremona, Antapodosis, Liber de Rebus Gestis Ottonis, Relatio de Legatione Constantinopolitana*, trans. with and introduction by F. A. Wright, London 1930, p. 261; see also: G. L. Schlumberger, *Un empereur byzantin au dixième siècle, Nicéphore Phocas*, Paris 1890, 447-9; M. Amari, *Storia dei Musulmani di Sicilia*, (3 vols.), Catania 1935, v. II, 304-15.

30. *De Cerimoniis*, 579, 682; Schlumberger, *Nicéphore Phocas*, 295.

they had been transported by their famous *μονόξυλα* (“single-strakers”), relatively small wooden vessels with low hull that could hardly have had space for the transportation of horses. Leo the Deacon, who describes Svyatoslav’s Danube expedition of 969-71, gives us a description of the Rus warriors’ defensive formations: “They [Rus] quickly seized their weapons and shouldered their shields that reached to their feet<sup>31</sup>, and drew up into a strong close formation and advanced against the Romans. Since the Scythians [Rus] were on foot (for they are not accustomed to fight from horseback, since they are not trained for this), they were not able to withstand the spears of the Romans”<sup>32</sup>. But even when the chroniclers talk about the Rus setting out against “Tsargrad” by horse and boat, it is much more likely that they hired mercenary troops, like they did with the Patzinaks, the Varangians from Sweden and other Turkic nomads in 907, 944 and 971<sup>33</sup>. Finally, an interesting note is written by the Emperor Nicephoros Phocas in his *Praecepta militaria*, where the javeliners who constituted a fifth of a typical 1000-man infantry *drungus* (or taxiarchy) of the period were “either Ros or other foreigners”<sup>34</sup>, while the late tenth century treatise *On Tactics* mentions these troops forming elite units of heavily armed infantry, probably spear men or javeliners<sup>35</sup>, escorting the Emperor and performing special duties during the campaign.

31. *Ποδηγεκίς θυρεούς*: Leo the Deacon, pp. 133, 144; *The History of Leo the Deacon*, pp. 180, 188. Compare the shape of the shield with the Viking and Norman ones of the period: J. K. SIDDORN, *Viking Weapons & Warfare*, Stroud 2003, 39-60; an excellent analysis of the Byzantine shield can be found in: T. G. KOLIAS, *Byzantinische Waffen. Ein Beitrag zur byzantinischen Waffenkunde von den Anfängen bis zur lateinischen Eroberung* [BV 17] Vienna 1988, 88-133.

32. Leo the Deacon, pp. 133-4, 143; *The History of Leo the Deacon*, p. 180, 188.

33. *Povest Vremennykh Let*, i. 22, 29, 44; *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 60, 64, 71-2; Joannes Scylitzes, *Ioannis Scylitzae Synopsis historiarum*, ed. I. THURN, [CFHB, Berlin 1973], I, 288; Leo the Deacon, p. 108. This practice eclipsed by the coming of the eleventh century. See: B. GREKOV, *Kiev Rus*, Moscow 1959, 461-71; G. VERNADSKY, *The Origins of Russia*, 257, 265.

34. *εἰ μὲν εἰσὶν ἀκοντισταί, εἴτε Ρῶς εἴτ’ ἔτεροι ἔθνηκοί*: *Praecepta Militaria*, I. 52, p. 14.

35. The text reads: “Let him [the Emperor] also have some Rus and malartioi.” *Malartioi*, according to Dennis were later (11th century) referred to as *κονταράτοι* (spearmen). Thus the Rus would probably have belonged to the same category or perhaps, javeliners: “On Tactics”, 10. 37-40, p. 280; 19. 35, p. 294.

A new era, however, for the mercenary forces employed by the Byzantines began in the late 980s with the coming of the Scandinavian regiment of the Varangians in Constantinople. We read in Psellus' description of their arrival: "The Emperor Basil was well aware of the disloyalty of the Romans, but not long before this a picked band of Scythians had come to help him from the Taurus. These men, fine fighters, he had trained in separate corps and put them in a division with other foreign troops, and sent them out against the enemy"<sup>36</sup>. The fact that this unit was mixed with other mercenaries, bearing in mind that the Byzantines used to keep the units, both indigenous and foreign, ethnically and geographically coherent, makes us think that this core of 6,000 men would have been increased with existing troops from Russia, of either Slavic or Scandinavian origin<sup>37</sup>, already in service. And by the time the Varangians arrived in the capital and won their first battle against the rebels at Abydos (13th April 989), they immediately replaced the *Excubitai*<sup>38</sup> as the personal guard of the Emperor. In addition, they were divided into the "Varangians of the City" (*οἱ ἐν τῇ πόλει Βάραγγοι*), who guarded the Emperor and escorted him in his tours, either within the

36. Although we have to bear in mind that Psellus cannot be taken as an authority in military matters: *The History of Psellus*, edited with critical notes by C. SATHAS, London 1899, 7-8, from now on: Psellus; M. Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine rulers: the 'Chronographia' of Michael Psellus*, tr. E. R. A. SEWTER, London 1966, I, 13-15, pp. 34-5, from now on: *Chronographia*. For the documentation of the arrival of the Varangian regiment, see also: Skylitzes, II, 444; Ioannis Zonaras, *Annales* [CSHB, 41], 42.1, 42.2, Bonn 1841-97, III, 553; for an edition into modern Greek: *Ιωάννης Ζωναράς, Επιτομή Ιστοριών*, μτφ. Ι. ΓΡΗΓΟΡΙΑΔΗΣ, Αθήνα 1995-99; Asochik, *Histoire Universelle*, tr. E. DULAURIER – F. MACLER, Paris 1883-1917, II, 164-5; Yahya-ibn-Said Antaki, *Histoire de Yahya-ibn-Sa'ïd d'Antioche, continuateur de Sa'ïd-ibn-Bitriq*, ed. and tr. I. KRACHKOVSKII – A. A. VASILIEV, Paris 1932-57, *Patrologia Orientalis*, t. 18, fasc. 5, 425-6.

37. Whether these troops before the 980s were of Slavic or Scandinavian origin is debatable. Even if the newly arrived Scandinavian Varangians were reinforced by existing forces of "Scythians", we must remember that the Byzantine chroniclers used this term to describe all the Rus, both of Slavic and Scandinavian origin. See: *Povest Vremennykh Let*, i. 29; *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 64.

38. Elite unit of Constantinopolitan noblemen who were responsible for the defence of the Imperial Palace. They should not be confused with the men of the *Etaireia* who formed the Emperor's life-guard. See: J. B. BURY, *The Imperial Administrative System in the Ninth Century*, London 1911, 57-60; H. J. KÜHN, *Die byzantinische Armee im 10. und 11. Jahrhundert: Studien zur Organisation der Tagmata*, Wien 1991, 93-104; A. CHRISTOPHILOPOULOU, *Βυζαντινή Ιστορία*, Thessaloniki 2007, II, 335; BLÖNDAL, *The Varangians of Byzantium*, 18-21.

capital or in his campaigns, and the “Varangians outside the City” (*οἱ ἔξω τῆς πόλεως Βάραγγοι*) who were stationed in key posts in the provinces<sup>39</sup>. In fact, it is worth quoting a letter found in the *Primary Chronicle*, allegedly sent from prince Vladimir to Basil II: “Varangians are on their way to your country. Do not keep many of them in your city, or else they will cause you such harm as they have done here. Scatter them therefore in various localities, and do not let a single one return this way”<sup>40</sup>.

This elite regiment of fighters would certainly have accompanied Basil II in his series of campaigns, both in the East and in the Balkans. In the Syrian expedition of 999, when Basil II was called to restore order in the region after the duke of Antioch’s defeat by the Fatimids the year before, the Emperor besieged and captured Raphanea and Emesa. According to the *History* of the Muslim chronicler Yahia-ibn-Said, an unknown number of Varangians was used in the operations, with their presence being made known by their burning of a church where people had taken refuge<sup>41</sup>. The same army that left Cilicia and Syria can be found in Armenia in the following year, when an Armenian chronicler notes the presence of the Varangian regiment, clearly foot soldiers that used horses for transportation, in full-strength in the Armenian palace<sup>42</sup>.

Regarding the Empire’s Balkan struggle against the Bulgarians in Basil II’s reign, although the great Byzantine general Nicephorus Ouranos had inflicted a serious blow to them in 997, it was only after the Emperor’s return to Constantinople in 1001 that the great counter-offensive began<sup>43</sup>. In

39. BLÖNDAL, *The Varangians of Byzantium*, 45.

40. *Povest Vremennykh Let*, i. 79; *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 93; the chronicler erroneously copies this letter under the year 980.

41. Yahya-ibn-Said Antaki, *Histoire de Yahya-ibn-Sa’id d’Antioche, continuateur de Saïd-ibn-Bitriq*, ed. and tr. I. KRACHKOVSKII – A. A. VASILIEV, Paris 1932- 57, *Patrologia Orientalis*, t. 23, fasc. 3, 458; G. SCHLUMBERGER, *L’épopée byzantine à la fin du dixième siècle*, (2 vols.), Paris 1896-1905, II, 152-3; B. S. BENEDIKZ, *The Evolution of the Varangian Regiment in the Byzantine Army*, *BZ* 62 (1969), 24.

42. Asochik, *Histoire Universelle*, 165; Aristakès de Lastivert, *Récit des Malheurs de la Nation Arménienne*, trans. with introduction and commentary by M. CANARD – H. BERBÉRIAN, Brussels 1973, 4.

43. P. M. STRÄSSLE, *Krieg und Kriegführung in Byzanz: Die Kriege Kaiser Basileios II. gegen die Bulgaren (976-1019)*, Köln 2006, 296-301; J.-C. CHEYNET, “La politique militaire byzantine de Basile II à Alexis Comnène”, *ZRVI* 29-30 (1991), 61-74, especially 61-64; P. STEPHENSON, *The legend of Basil the Bulgar-Slayer*, Cambridge 2003, 11-49; IDEM, *Byzantium’s*

an attempt to cut Tsar Samuel off from his traditional Bulgarian territories of the lower Danube, Basil conducted a series of campaigns<sup>44</sup>, sometimes taking place throughout the year, attacking Sardica and advancing towards Pliska (the former Bulgarian capital) and both the Great and Little Preslav. The two major battles he fought and won over Samuel took place in 1004, not far from Skopje, and ten years later he nearly reached his goal of pacifying the Bulgars in the famous battle at the Kleidion Pass (29th July 1014)<sup>45</sup>. Although no detailed mentioning is made by our contemporary sources<sup>46</sup>, it is almost certain that throughout this period Basil would have used his elite Varangians to sweep off any Bulgarian elements from Macedonia, Thessaly and the areas of Great and Little Preslav. It would be fascinating to be able to reconstruct their fighting tactics in the mountainous regions of Macedonia and Bulgaria against the infantry forces that the Bulgarians were able to put to the field and see whether they were used as elite units like in Syria or Crete.

To understand the military tactics employed by the Bulgars from the late eighth until the early eleventh centuries we need to examine two factors; their ethnic background and the geography of the Balkan Peninsula. The Onogur-Bulgars<sup>47</sup> were a Turkish tribe that by the late ninth century it would have been classified to the group of nations which Leo VI identifies

---

*Balkan frontier: a political study of the northern Balkans, 900-1204*, Cambridge 2000, 47-80. Although the author's ground-breaking opinions should be viewed with some caution; J. V. A. FINE, *The Early Medieval Balkans*, Ann Arbor Michigan 2008, 188-200.

44. **This is the old established view of Basil marching against the Bulgars every year.** See: Skylitzes, I, p. 348. STEPHENSON argues that Skylitzes' comments are exaggerated: STEPHENSON, *The Legend of Basil the Bulgar-Slayer*, pp. 21ff; *Byzantium's Balkan frontier*, 66-79.

45. J. HALDON, *The Byzantine Wars*, Stroud 2001, 107-8.

46. Skylitzes, I, 348-51.

47. **On the origins of the Bulgars:** D.M. LANG, *The Bulgarians, From Pagan Times to the Ottoman Conquest*, Southampton 1976, 21-92; ΕΥΑΓΓΕΛΟΣ Κ. ΚΥΡΙΑΚΗΣ, *Βυζάντιο και Βούλγαροι, 7ος-10ος αι.: συμβολή στην εξωτερική πολιτική του Βυζαντίου*, Αθήνα 1993; I. KAFESOGLU, *Origins of Bulgars*, Ankara 1986; G. FEHER, *Culture of Turco bulgars, Magyars and other peoples akin to them: Impact of Turkish culture on Europe*, Ankara 1986; M. WHITTON, *The Making of Orthodox Byzantium*, London 1996, 262-98; the most recent study is: E. N. LUTTWAK, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, London 2009, 171-96; Γ. ΚΑΡΔΑΡΑΣ, *Η Πολεμική Τέχνη των Προϊμίων Σλάβων (Στ'-Ζ'αι.)*, *Βυζαντινά Σύμμεικτα* 18 (2008), 185-205.

as the Scythian tribes – the Magyars, the Patzinaks and the Bulgars<sup>48</sup>. They were largely a nomadic nation of light horsemen armed mainly with spears and bows, with their fighting tactics being very similar to the Turkish ones<sup>49</sup>. The Balkans present a very rugged and fragmented landscape, with few major fertile plains in Thessaly, Thrace and the Danube area and around two thirds of the peninsula are covered with high mountains<sup>50</sup>. Thus, in order to successfully deal with the Byzantine army, and especially the heavy tagmatic cavalry, the Bulgars had to take advantage of the terrain, and in many occasions that was exactly what they did by either trying to lure the Byzantine units deep into hostile territory and trap them by blocking the mountain roads and passes with fell timber<sup>51</sup>, like Pliska (811), Anchialos (917) and Kleidion (1014)<sup>52</sup>, or simply trying to avoid any pitched battle, like Samuel between 997-1014<sup>53</sup>.

In the period following the death of Basil II, a key date concerning the leadership of the Varangian Guard was the year 1034<sup>54</sup>, when the younger half-brother of the Norwegian King Olaf II and future King Harald III

---

48. Leo VI, *Tactica*, XVIII. 42-73.

49. Oman, *The Art of War*, vol. I, p. 206-7.

50. Read about Nicephorus Phocas' brief foray into Bulgaria in 968: Leo the Deacon, pp. 62-3; *The History of Leo the Deacon*, p. 111. For an examination of the geography of the Balkans: ΕΥΣΤΡΑΤΙΑ ΣΥΓΚΕΛΛΟΥ, *Ο Πόλεμος στον Δυτικό Ελλαδικό Χώρο κατά τον Υστερο Μεσαίωνα (13ος-15ος αι.)*, Αθήνα 2008, 43-101; STRÄSSLE, *Krieg und Kriegführung in Byzanz*, 148-214; J. KODER, *Der Lebensraum der Byzantiner*, Wien 1984 (latest edition: 2001), especially 20-42; M. WHITTOW, The Political Geography of the Byzantine World – Geographical Survey, in: *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies*, ed. E. JEFFREYS – J. F. HALDON – R. CORMACK, Oxford 2008, 219-31; HALDON, *Warfare, State and Society*, 46-66.

51. Leo the Deacon, pp. 105, 130-3; *The History of Leo the Deacon*, pp. 154-5, 176-9; Another factor that needs to be considered seriously is the condition of the roads and paths through the mountains and plains: J. HALDON, Roads and communications in the Byzantine Empire: wagons, horses, and supplies, in: *Logistics of Warfare in the Age of the Crusades*, ed. J. H. PRYOR, Ashgate 2006, 131-58, especially 136-44.

52. For the use of fell timber by the Bulgars to block mountainous roads and passes: Άνωνύμου *Βιβλίον Τακτικόν*, in: *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*, ed. G. T. DENNIS, Washington D.C. 1985 (latest edition: 2008), 19. 25-32, p. 294; McGEER, *Sowing the Dragon's Teeth*, pp. 342-43.

53. HALDON, *The Byzantine Wars*, pp. 71-6, 87-8, 105-8.

54. J. SHEPARD, A Note on Harold Hardrada: the Date of his Arrival at Byzantium, *JÖB* 12 (1973), 145-50.

(*Hardrada*, the “Severe”) had made his way from Norway to enter the Varangian Guard. From this year onwards, our main primary sources consist mainly of numismatic and other archaeological evidence along with Scandinavian sagas which entail the life stories of Haraldr Sigurdarson. These, mainly Norwegian and Icelandic, sagas were written some 200 years after the events had taken place, and although the writers would have been aware of the related poems and traditional stories, these can be quite misleading on a number of occasions<sup>55</sup>. According to the sagas, Harald and his mercenaries “served on the galleys with the force that went into the Grecian Sea”<sup>56</sup>. It sounds reasonable for the Empire to have used these experienced mercenaries in policing duties in the Aegean Sea<sup>57</sup>, an area that was ravaged by Arab raids in the past centuries, even more so if we consider the grand naval strategy that had been taking shape as early as the reign of Romanus III (1028-34) and involved the revival of the Imperial Fleet and the expulsion of the Muslims from Sicily<sup>58</sup>. However, whether the Varangians were used as crews of some sort of privateer ships or they actually manned Imperial ships, thus being under the direct command of the *δρογγάριος τοῦ πλωΐμου*, is not made entirely clear by the sources, although the last case seems much more likely. Further, it is important to note that in this early period Harald was still in command of the “Varangians outside of the City”, which probably had its winter quarters in the region of the Thrakesion theme<sup>59</sup>.

---

55. K. CIGGAAR, *Visitors from North-West Europe to Byzantium. Vernacular Sources: Problems and Perspectives*, in: *Byzantines and Crusaders in non-Greek Sources, 1025-1204*, ed. M. WHITBY, Oxford 2007, 123-55.

56. *Heimskringla*, ed. B. ADALBJARNSON, Reykjavik 1941-51; *Chronicle of the Kings of Norway* (Snorri Sturluson), ed. S. LAING, (3 vols.), London 1844. The newest edition that I did not have the chance to go through is: *Heimskringla, History of the Kings of Norway (Snorri Sturluson)*, ed. by LEE M. HOLLANDER, Austin Texas 1964 (4<sup>th</sup> ed.: 2002).

57. “Gyrger [George Maniakes] and Harald went round among all the Greek islands, and fought much against the corsairs”: *Chronicle*, ed. S. LAING, v. III, p. 4. Although, according solely to the *Heimskringla*, the Varangians were active in the coasts of Tunisia as well: *Heimskringla*, III, p. 75; *Chronicle*, ed. S. LAING, v. III, p. 6.

58. H. AHRWEILER, *Byzance et la Mer*, Paris 1966, 123; see also: Salvatore COSENTINO, *La Flotte Byzantine Face a l’Expansion Musulmane. Aspects d’Histoire Institutionnelle et Sociale (VIIe-Xe Siècles)*, *BF* 28 (2004), 3-21.

59. Skylitzes, I, p. 394.



The campaign that made Harald's Varangian Guard famous throughout the Empire, however, was their participation in the 1038 campaign against the Kalbite Muslims of Sicily, under the command of George Maniakes<sup>60</sup>. In this campaign a contingent of them, probably around 500 under the command of Harald, was sent to Italy to take part in the expulsion of the Arabs of Sicily along with units from the Balkan mainland and 300 Normans from Aversa<sup>61</sup>. The *Heimskringla* implies that they were used to man the imperial naval squadron sent to patrol the coastline of eastern Sicily, while it is also highly likely that they were sent to reduce a number of fortified sites in the east and south-east of the island<sup>62</sup>. The fact that they manned imperial ships during this campaign is further supported by their role in Apulia between the years 1066-68, a very similar operational theatre where they patrolled the Apulian coasts and defeated a Norman fleet off Brindisi according to contemporary chroniclers. However, it is very regrettable that the *Heimskringla* is our only source concerning the siege-tactics of the Varangians in Sicily. These were the enforcement of a land-blockade, the digging of tunnels to undermine the city-walls, along with "unchivalric" tricks employed to win over an unidentified castle<sup>63</sup>.

60. A. SAVVIDES, *Γεώργιος Μανιάκης. Κατακτήσεις και υπονόμευση στο Βυζάντιο του 11ου αιώνα, 1030-1043 μ.Χ.*, Athens 2004. For his presence in Vaspurakan as a Catepan for one year (1036-7): G. LEVENIOTES, *Η Πολιτική κατάρρευση του Βυζαντίου στην Ανατολή, το ανατολικό σύνορο και η κεντρική Μικρά Ασία κατά το Β' ήμισυ του 11ου αιώνα*, DPhil Thesis, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki 2007, 189, 493; RODOLPHE GUILLAND, *Titres et Fonctions de l'Empire Byzantin*, London 1976, XIII, 10-12.

61. *Cecaumenus*, 97. Geoffrey Malaterra, *De Rebus Gestis Rogerii Calabriae et Siciliae Comitis et Roberti Guiscardi Ducis Fratris Eius*, [Rerum Italicarum scriptores, vol. 5.i], ed. L. A. MURATORI, Città di Castello, 1900-. I. 7; Amatus, II. 8, in: *L'histoire de li Normant et la Chronique de Robert Viscard par Aime, moine du Mont-Cassin*, ed. By M. CHAMPOLLION-FIGEAC, Paris 1835; *Gesta*, I, 203-6, p. 110; Skylitzes mentions 500 men: Skylitzes, I, 425.

62. The *Heimskringla* tells us about the siege of four unidentified castles: *Chronicle*, ed. S. LAING, v. III, pp. 7-12. Could it be that the two of them were Messina and Syracuse, for which the rest of our sources talk about? See: Malaterra, I. 7; Amatus, II. 8, 9; Skylitzes also mentions the capture of thirteen more cities: Skylitzes, I, p. 408. For the course of the campaign: AMARI, *Storia dei Musulmani di Sicilia*, v. II, pp. 438-55; J. GAY, *L'Italie Meridionale et l'Empire Byzantine*, Paris 1904, 450-54; F. CHALANDON, *Histoire de la domination normande en Italie et en Sicile*, (2 vols.), Paris 1907, I, 88-96; W. FELIX, *Byzanz und die islamische Welt im früheren 11. Jahrhundert: Geschichte der politischen Beziehungen von 1001 bis 1055*, Wien 1981, 207ff.

63. *Chronicle*, ed. S. LAING, v. III, pp. 7-12; see also: H. DAVIDSON, *A Viking Road to Byzantium*, London 1976, 214ff.

After the failure of the Sicilian expedition, the Byzantine forces were called to crush a Lombard rebellion in Apulia (1041). Three battles took place in that year, more specifically in March (Olivento), May (Ofanto) and September (Montepeloso) with the rebel forces consisting of Lombard footsoldiers and a few hundred Norman cavalry emerging victorious from all three of them<sup>64</sup>. At Olivento, it is more possible that the rebel Lombard army would have been confronted by local militias raised hastily by the Catepan of Bari<sup>65</sup>, but after their initial success, the Catepan Doukeianos managed to regroup his scattered forces and offer a second battle at Ofanto, on the 4th May. He probably received all the necessary reinforcements from Sicily<sup>66</sup>, because now we also find troops from the themes of Opsikion and Thrace, along with contingents from the Varangian Guard<sup>67</sup>. For the third and final battle of the year, although Amatus tells us that the new Catepan Boioannes had brought with him Varangians from the capital, and William of Apulia writes about reinforcements called in from Sicily, it is more likely that Boioannes had to rely on the forces that his predecessor had gathered

---

64. There are a number of excellent studies that deal with the Norman expansion in the South, although none of them provide a specifically military analysis: CHALANDON, *Domination normande*, vol. I; H. TAVIANNI-CAROZZI, *La terreur du monde, Robert Guiscard et la conquete Normande en Italie*, Paris 1996; R. BUNEMANN, *Robert Guiscard 1015-1085. Eine Normanner eroberung Südtalien*, Cologne 1997; G. A. LOUD, *The Age of Robert Guiscard: Southern Italy and the Norman Conquest*, London 2000. A detailed analysis of the strategy and military tactics of the Normans in the “early stages” of their expansion in Italy between 1018-1068 can be found in: G. THEOTOKIS, *The Campaigns of the Norman Dukes of southern Italy and Sicily against Byzantium, in the years between 1071 and 1108 AD*, PhD thesis, University of Glasgow 2010, 154ff.

65. Skylitzes does not mention the presence of elite troops at Olivento, while for the next battle at Ofanto a few weeks later he specifically talks about troops from the Balkan mainland and Varangians: Skylitzes, I, p. 426. Amatus of Montecassino notes that Doukeianos’ troops were “as weak as women”, meaning that they did not have sufficient military training, thus they could not have been troops brought from Sicily: Amatus, II, 22. See also: H. HUNGER, *Graeculus Perfidus, Ἰταλὸς ἱταμὸς*, Unione Internazionale degli Istituti di Archeologia, Storia e Storia dell’Arte, Rome 1987.

66. William of Apulia notes that he asked for reinforcements after his second defeat at Ofanto, but he is probably wrong: *Gesta*, I, 310-12, pp. 114-6.

67. Skylitzes, I, p. 426. Amatus, II, 22. For the course of the battle: Amatus, II, 23; *Gesta*, I, 297-308, p. 114; Malaterra, 1.10, although Malaterra confuses Ofanto with Montepeloso; *Chronica monasterii Casinensis*, [MGH SS 34], II, 66, pp. 298-301.

along with newly-recruited Apulian troops as well<sup>68</sup>. Unfortunately, next to nothing is known for the course of this battle and the scarce information we get from the chroniclers do not allow us to reconstruct the Guard's battle-tactics and its general role among the army's units<sup>69</sup>.

For the following period of Constantine IX's reign (1042-55), the Varangians were present in almost every operational theatre in both Asia Minor and the Balkans. And it was in this crucial period that the Franks first appear as individual mercenaries in the service of the Byzantine State in the year 1047, during the revolt of Leo Tornikios. The siege of the capital by the latter in September brought to the forefront of the political life of the capital a man who was very much known to the Normans in Italy. That person was Argyros, son of the former Lombard rebel Melus and Catepan of Longobardia between 1042-5, who was recalled to the capital in that year or early in 1046 to be given a high rank in the Imperial Court<sup>70</sup>. According to the primary sources, there is strong evidence to suggest that his coming to the capital in 1046 would have been combined with a number of Norman mercenaries from Italy, while it is also possible that remnants from Maniakes' army would also have ended up in imperial service by the mid-1040s<sup>71</sup>. Coupling these two aforementioned statements, we can see that Argyros' coming to Constantinople in 1046 is highly likely to have been combined with a number of Normans from Italy who might have thought that Byzantium would have been a more profitable place to offer their services. In addition, it is quite possible that another unknown number of Normans from Italy might have ended up in the Imperial Court after George Maniakes' failed campaign against the Emperor in 1042, when he was escorted by "Romans from Italy and Albanians", meaning of course Greeks from his command in Italy and local soldiers from Illyria.

68. Amatus, II, 24. *Gesta*, I, 328-30, p. 116. Skylitzes is adamant that no reinforcements were sent with Boioannes from the mainland, see: Skylitzes, I, 426-7. It would be more prudent if we believe Skylitzes' account at this point because, as a senior officer of the tagmatic armies of the capital (δορυγάρχιος τῆς βίγλας), he must have been better informed.

69. Amatus, II, 26; *Gesta*, I, 373-95, pp. 118-20; *Chronic. Casin.*, II, 66, pp. 298-301.

70. *ODB*, 165-6. See also: A. Pertusi, "Contributi alla storia dei themi bizantini dell'Italia meridionale", *Atti del 3 congresso internazionale di studi sull' alto medioevo* (1956), Spoleto 1958, 495-517.

71. Skylitzes, I, 439-40; Anonymous Baresens, *Chronicon*, [RIS, v. 151], s.a. 1047. For the remnants of the Maniakes' army Michaelis Attaliatae, *Historia*, [CFHB, vol. 50], ed. E. TSOLAKES, Athens 2011, 15. Psellus, 125; *Chronographia*, VI, 86-7, pp. 197-8;

Indeed, the Norman soldiery would not have gone unnoticed by the Emperor, judging by the sending of Argyros back to Bari to seek for the recruitment of more Normans<sup>72</sup>. We also have to mention the embassy sent to Duke William of Normandy by the Emperor Constantine IX, probably around that period, in an attempt to recruit new Normans “right from the source”<sup>73</sup>.

In the Balkan theatre both the Franks and the Varangians were called to fight off the Patzinak penetration south of the Danube which had taken place in the winter of 1046/7<sup>74</sup>. According to Attaliates who was an eye-witness we do know that a Varangian contingent of unknown numbers took part in the 1049 campaign, while the same chronicler also mentions a number of Frankish troops being recalled from the Armenian border-towns of Mantzikert and Khliat to man a number of fortresses against the Patzinaks during the same year<sup>75</sup>. But the first major campaign to dislodge the Patzinaks took place in the last years of Constantine IX’s reign, in 1052, when Byzantine forces penetrated in eastern Bulgaria (towards Preslav) in an effort to drive them out. Again we have no idea about the size or the consistency of the Byzantine force sent for the task, although it is likely that Constantine might have called for the Varangians and the experienced western tagmata, aware that he was dealing with very experienced mounted soldiers. In fact, Skylitzes rights that Constantine Arianites, Domesticus of the West, along with Macedonian, Bulgarian and thrakesian soldiers were, indeed, mobilised for that campaign<sup>76</sup>.

Another fundamental change seen in the structure of the mercenary Frankish troops employed by the Byzantines after 1049 was that from now on they would have their own leader. Hervé or *Ἐρβεβίος ὁ Φραγγόπυλος*<sup>77</sup>,

72. *Gesta*, II. 55-60, p. 134.

73. *Gesta Guillelmi of William of Poitiers*, ed. and tr. by R. H. C. DAVIS AND M. CHIBNALL, Oxford 1998, 96-7.

74. J. SHEPARD, John Mauropous, Leo Tornicius and an alleged Russian army: The chronology of the Pecheneg crisis of 1048-1049, *JÖB* 24 (1975), 61-89.

75. Attaliates, 26-33; Cecaumenos, 22-3.

76. Skylitzes, I, 458. We have to bear in mind that in Skylitzes’ text the term *τάγματα* means the whole of the troops of a military area.

77. Hervé’s origin has not been established and we may presume that he was either a Norman or Frank. Frankopoulos meant, in Greek, “the son of a Frank.”: *ODB*, vol. I, 922; E.M.C VAN HOUTS, Normandy and Byzantium, *Byz* 55 (1985), 554-5.

a veteran of Maniakes' Sicilian campaign<sup>78</sup>, who commanded the left wing of the Imperial army against the Patzinak invaders in 1049 under the general Catacalon Cecaumenos<sup>79</sup>. The left wing commanded by Hervé is described by Skylitzes as the wing of the "Roman phalanx" consisting of mounted Frankish mercenaries who were Hervé's fellow-countrymen<sup>80</sup>. However, if we accept the probability of Hervé's men being all Franks, their numbers should have been quite substantial if they made up an entire wing of the Imperial army's battle-line. Even though Hervé is mentioned to have fled the field in disgrace, it is quite likely he returned to fight the Patzinaks a couple of years later, although again no specific mentioning of him can be traced in our sources<sup>81</sup>.

During the reign of Constantine X Doukas (1059-68) the Varangians were mainly used in the distant province of Longobardia against the expanding Norman states<sup>82</sup>. In 1066, a contingent of them was sent to Bari to take the initiative against the Normans in Apulia. They succeeded in re-taking Taranto, Brindisi and Castellanetta, with a number of them being posted in Brindisi, where they successfully defended it against a Norman assault and Otranto<sup>83</sup>. During this period and until the siege of Bari (1068-1071) they were employed in one of their usual tasks, meaning the naval patrol of the Apulian coasts<sup>84</sup>.

In the eastern provinces of Asia Minor during the same period, a force of some 3,000 Varangians took part in the annexation of the Armenian Kingdom of Ani (1045), in operations that spread from the Byzantine

---

78. Skylitzes, I, 484.

79. Cecaumenos was a senior army officer, himself a Sicilian veteran in the head of the Armeniac contingent under the command of Maniakes where he, probably, invested Messina. For more on Cecaumenos, see: A. SAVVIDES, *The Byzantine Family of Kekaumenos (Cecaumenos)*, late 10th-early 12th centuries, *Δίπτυχα* 4 (1986-87), 12-27.

80. *ἄρχοντα τῷ τότε τῶν ὁμοεθνῶν*. Skylitzes, I, 467-8.

81. *Ibid.*, I, 467-8.

82. LOUD, Robert Guiscard, 130-137.

83. *Anon. Bar.*, s.a. 1066; CHALANDON, *Domination Normande*, I, 183; GAY, *Italie Meridionale*, 535. For the siege of Otranto: Cecaumenos, 30; for a modern Greek edition, see: Κεκαυμένος, *Στρατηγικόν*, tr. by D. TSUGARAKIS, Athens 1996.

84. *Lupus Protospatharius Annales* [ MGH SS. Vol. 60], s.a 1071; Cecaumenos clearly distinguishes between the infantry units of the Rus (ζωνταράτοι) and the Varangians who were marines (πλώμιοι); Cecaumenos, 30.

Armenia to Georgia and Abkhazia to the north<sup>85</sup>, while in the mid-1050s, a large unit of Varangians and Normans was called to defend the Imperial fortresses – Mantzikert in particular – in Armenia against the Seljuk raids, with much success<sup>86</sup>. We know that Hervé had his household in “Armenian lands” in the early 1050s, being sent to these areas to defend the Empire’s Armenian outposts<sup>87</sup>.

As one of the most elite regiments of the Byzantine Army, the Varangians played a protagonist role in the *coup d’état* of the summer of 1057, the one that cost Michael VI (1056-57) his throne by the Domesticus of the East Isaac Comnenus. Although since the arrival of the Varangian Guard in 988, this elite unit had always remained faithful to its employer the Emperor, this was the first case where the rare phenomenon of Varangians facing each other is reported. The most possible explanation, however, is that the Emperor’s Varangians were the “Varangians of the City”, the personal guard of Michael VI, while Isaac must have won, not the hearts and minds, but rather the pockets of the “Varangians outside of the City”, who were in Armenia fighting the Seljuks just before Isaac’s *coup d’état* broke out.

Skylitzes and Matthew of Edessa mention the presence of Franks, this time specifically put on horseback, sent to Upper Armenia by Michael VI (1056-57) to fight-back a Seljuk raiding party in 1056, again under the command of Hervé<sup>88</sup>. And this Frankish contingent not only managed to push back the Seljuks but successfully pursued the retreating Turks. This was a very risky battle-tactic indeed, if we consider the characteristic battle-tactic of the steppe people – the feigned retreat – the aim of which was to confuse and demoralize the enemy, isolate and break-up the enemy’s formations<sup>89</sup>.

85. Skylitzes, I, 474-5.

86. Matthew of Edessa, *Chronique*, tr. E. DULAURIER, Paris 1858, 99-102; *The Chronicle of Matthew of Edessa*, II, 3, p. 87; Skylitzes, I, 474-5; Aristakès de Lastivert, 79-80.

87. Skylitzes, I, 485; probably in a region called Dagabare: P. MAGDALINO, *The Byzantine Army and the Land: from Stratiotikon Ktema to Military Pronoia*, in: *Byzantium at War (9th-12th Century)*, Εθνικό Ιδρυμα Ερευνών, Athens 1997, 28-9; A. J. SIMPSON, *Three sources of military unrest in Asia Minor: the Norman chieftains Hervé Frankopoulos, Robert Crispin and Roussel de Bailleul*, *Mesogaios/Mediterranée* 9-10 (2000), 185.

88. Skylitzes, I, 485; Matthew of Edessa, *Chronique*, 99-102; *The Chronicle of Matthew of Edessa*, II, 3, p. 87.

89. Some expert works on Seljuk warfare are: Oman, *The Art of War in the Middle Ages*, v. I, pp. 206-19, 273-4; R. C. SMAIL, *Crusading Warfare (1097-1193)*, Cambridge 1956,

Regarding Isaac's rebellion Skylitzes mentions that the general Catacalon Cecaumenus, one of the ring-leaders, was sent to Chaldea and Colonia to gather troops for Comnenus' upcoming rebellion, and he came up with "two Frankish *τάγματα* and one Russian who were spending the winter in these areas"<sup>90</sup>. For these mercenary troops that eventually but very reluctantly followed Isaac Comnenus to his siege of Constantinople, in 1057, we have an eye-witness description of them from Psellus, who was one of the ambassadors sent by Michael VI to negotiate with Isaac: "There were Italians, and Scyths from the Taurus, men of fearful appearance, dressed in fearful garb, both alike glaring fiercely about them. The one [the Franks] made their attacks as their spirit moved them, were impetuous and led by impulse, the other [the Varangians] with a mad fury; the former in their first onslaught were irresistible, but they quickly lost their ardour; the latter, on the other hand, were less impatient, but fought with unsparing devotion and a complete disregard for wounds"<sup>91</sup>. What we see in this description by Psellus is the whole theme that dominated the Byzantine military manuals, from the *Strategikon* to the *Tactica*<sup>92</sup>, where the Franks were characterised by the tremendous impact of their cavalry charge and their limited stamina.

From the late 1040s, but mainly in the 1050s, the Franks would have been permanently established in areas pointed out by the governmental officials to live off the land. They would have been quartered for the winter in the Armeniac thema, where we find their leaders holding large estates in the immediate period that follows, while many of them should have been stationed in the neighbouring themata of Chaldea, Iberia and Colonia along with a number of Varangians<sup>93</sup>. Thus, a very valuable source is the exemption acts (*chrysobulls*), granted to landowners or monastic houses from the obligation of providing shelter and all the necessary supplies to

---

75-83; J. FRANCE, *Victory in the East, A Military History of the First Crusade*, Cambridge 1999, 147-9; see also: N. ZBINDEN, *Abendlaendische Ritter, Griechen und Tuerken im ersten Kreuzzug: zur Problematik ihrer Begegnung*, Athens 1975.

90. Skylitzes, I, 490.

91. Psellus, 199-200; *Chronographia*, VII. 25, 289.

92. *Das Strategikon des Maurikios*, ed. by G. T. DENNIS, 1981; *Maurice's Strategikon: handbook of Byzantine military strategy*, English translation by G. T. DENNIS, Philadelphia 1984 (latest edition: 2010), XI. 3, pp. 119-20; Leo VI, *Tactica*, XVIII. 80-95.

93. Skylitzes, I, 474.

the Imperial troops<sup>94</sup>. This policy might be considered as an attempt not only to settle down these restless warriors, especially in a sensitive frontier area like the north-east Asia Minor, but also to avoid paying by cash in a period when the collapse of the economy was at its first stages and the coin had already been significantly debased by Constantine IX<sup>95</sup>.

The second of the three Frankish commanders to be found in Byzantium in our period of studying was Robert Crispin<sup>96</sup>. He had followed a rather similar career pattern as Hervé, having sailed to Constantinople, as Amatus tells us, “to become a noble (*chevalerie*) at the Emperor’s Court”, probably between 1067-69<sup>97</sup>. Attaleiates tells us that after his arrival Robert was immediately sent east to the Frankish camps to spend the winter of 1068/9, along with the rest of his followers<sup>98</sup>. It is not possible to put down an exact figure for the troops under his command at this early stage, but Matthew of Edessa does mention a strong garrison of 200 Frankish knights at Sewawerat, north of Edessa in northern Mesopotamia, defending the castle against a

---

94. *Actes de Lavra*, ed. G. ROUILLARD – P. COLLOMP, Paris 1937, 1, 28, 80; SATHAS, *Bibliotheca graeca medii aevi*, (6 vols.), Venice-Paris 1872-94, 1, 55. For more on these sources, see: HALDON, *Warfare, State and Society*, 146-48; A. KAZHDAN, B. FONKIC, *Novoe izdanie actor Lavry i ego znachenie dlja vizantinovedenija*, *Viz Vrem* 34 (1973), 49; G. OSTROGORSKY, *Pour l’histoire de l’immunité a Byzance*, *Byzantion* 28 (1958), 165-254; G. LEVENIOTES, *To στασιαστικό κίνημα του Νορμανδού Ουρσελίου (Ursel de Bailleul) στην Μικρά Ασία, 1073-1076*, M. Phil. Thesis, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, 66ff.

95. HENDY, M., *Studies in the Byzantine Monetary Economy c. 300-1450*, Cambridge 1985 (latest edition: 2008); A. LAIOU – C. MORRISSON, *The Byzantine Economy*, Cambridge 2007; A. HARVEY, *Economic expansion in the Byzantine Empire, 900-1200*, Cambridge 1989; P. LEMERLE, *The Agrarian History of Byzantium from the origins to the Twelfth century. The Sources and the Problems*, Galway 1979.

96. **For traces of the Crispin family in Normandy and post-Conquest England, see: M. FAUROUX, *Recueil des Actes des Ducs de Normandie de 911 à 1066*, Caen 1961, 33, 34 (n. 77).**

97. **Amatus, I. 8. Although the exact date is not specified by any source, we presume it would not have been long before his rebellion, in spring 1069, against Romanus IV (1068-71). In 1066 he was still in the service of Richard I of Capua. See: G. A. LOUD, *A calendar of diplomas of Norman princes in Capua*, *Papers of the British School at Rome* 36 (1981), 121-22.**

98. *συνδιαπλευσάντων αὐτῶ καὶ συναφικομένων ὁμογενῶν*. Attaleiates, 96.



Seljuk raid in 1065/66<sup>99</sup>. Could this mean that by the end of the decade Robert would have had a substantial following of several hundred knights?

After several acts of insubordination, in 1069, against imperial authority in the regions neighbouring his Armeniac base at *Μαυροκάστρον*<sup>100</sup> Crispin must have had a substantial number of followers by that time -some four hundred if we believe Attaleiates and Bryennius who relate the army that Roussel of Bailleul took over with that which Robert Crispin commanded before him<sup>101</sup>.

After the defeat at Mantzikert and the deposition of Romanus, the new emperor Michael VII Doukas restored Crispin to his former command and greatly filled his castle with imperial gifts, clearly in an attempt to gain a strong ally against the legitimate Emperor<sup>102</sup>. Skylitzes tells us that in the campaign launched against the latter, in spring 1072, under Andronicus Doucas, where Robert was in command of the army's left wing<sup>103</sup>. This would have raised great resentment and discontent, both against Crispin and the Emperor, from the Byzantine generals which it is duly noted by Cecaumenos in his *Στρατηγικόν*, written between the years 1075-78: "The foreigners, if they do not come from the royal family of their land, do not raise them in great offices nor trust them with significant titles; because if you honour the foreigner with the officium of *πρωμικῆριος* or *στρατηγός*, then what is the point of giving the generalship to a Roman? You will turn him [the Roman] into an enemy"<sup>104</sup>. A precedent of a Frank commanding a large division of the Byzantine army had already been set by Hervé in 1049. However the fundamental distinction, though, between these two cases is that Hervé commanded a division of fellow Franks under the command of a Byzantine general-in-command against foreign invaders (Patzinak invasion of 1049), while Crispin participated in civil conflicts, having the full support of an Emperor that the rest of the Byzantine generals quite possibly would

99. *The Chronicle of Matthew of Edessa*, II, 27, pp. 107-8. Matthew also notes the presence of a Frank in the garrison of Edessa for the same year. *Ibid.*, II, 28, p. 109.

100. Attaleiates, 98.

101. Attaleiates, 145; Bryennius, 147.

102. Attaleiates 97.

103. Bryennius, 135; Psellus underlines the crucial role played by Crispin in his attacking and breaking the enemy centre division with his cavalry unit: Psellus, 257; *Chronographia*, VII. 31-32, pp. 363-4. Attaleiates, 132-34.

104. Cecaumenos, 95.

not have had, and apparently he was the dominant figure in Andronicus' army in 1072, inspiring admiration not only by his men but from Byzantine troops as well<sup>105</sup>. The last mentioning of Robert Crispin comes from Psellus, probably around 1073, and has to do with his death<sup>106</sup>.

The most famous of the Franks to have been employed by Constantinople in the second half of the eleventh century was, undoubtedly, Roussel of Bailleul, Roger Hauteville's principal lieutenant in Sicily, who won the day for the Normans at the battle of Cerami in June 1063<sup>107</sup>. The fact that he is no longer mentioned by the "Italian" chroniclers after Cerami suggests that, around that period of stalemate in Sicily he decided to pursue a more profitable career across the Adriatic. The next mentioning of Roussel comes in 1071 and Romanus IV's fatal third campaign against the Seljuks where, according to Attaliates, Roussel's contingent numbered around five hundred although no exact figures are provided<sup>108</sup>. This is important because it points out the dominant role played by Roussel in the command of the Frankish contingents after the "discharge" of Robert Crispin to Abydos just before the campaign<sup>109</sup>.

The first signs of Roussel's ambitions for the Imperial throne can be seen in his insurrection against the ruling Doukas family (winter of 1073/4)<sup>110</sup>. Challenging Isaac Comnenus' authority during an expedition against the Seljuks, Roussel defeated him in an open battle and in command of just 400 men (1074). Roussel's army during that period must have increased significantly, from 400 men to around 2.700-3.000 men, all cavalry, in just a few months. While at the same time, his estates and thus his power had been growing rapidly, thus turning him into one of the most powerful nobles in north-eastern Asia Minor, "having gathered a considerable force made up partly of his own countrymen and partly of other nationalities"<sup>111</sup>. He had

105. Attaleiates, 134; his role is more clearly seen in Psellus' account: Psellus, 257; *Chronographia*, VII. 39, p. 364.

106. Psellus, 257; *Chronographia*, VII. 39, p. 363; Bryennius, 134.

107. Malaterra, 2. 33. For Geoffrey Ridel, see: P. SKINNER, *Family Power in Southern Italy: the Duchy of Gaeta and its neighbours, 850-1139*, Cambridge 1995, 157.

108. Attaliates, 115; Zonaras, III, 697; Haldon, *Byzantine Wars*, 171.

109. Amatus mentions that Roussel was captured by Alp-Arslan and released afterwards with Romanus, see: Amatus, I. 11.

110. Attaleiates, 143ff.; *Alexiad*, I. i, pp. 11-12.

111. Attaleiates 145-6; Zonaras, III, 709-712. Anna Comnena is our only source that does not talk solely about Franks in Roussel's contingent. It is possible that she might be

managed to take advantage of the desperation of the local inhabitants of the areas of Lykaonia and Galatia, on the Armeniac thema, for protection against the Seljuk raids, by establishing himself in the area and rapidly winning the support of the population<sup>112</sup>.

It would be in the face of Alexius Comnenus that Roussel would find a cunning and much formidable rival. Sent in Amaseia in 1075 the young officer resorted to the plundering of Roussel's estates and besieging the principal cities under his control, thus denying him his source of revenue and avoiding a pitched battle<sup>113</sup>.

Undoubtedly, the period of Alexius' maturing years, meaning the collapsing period of the 1070s when the latter was a young officer in the service of the Doukas family, must have taught him a lot about how to deal with mercenaries, and especially the Westerners. In a significant change of tactics towards them, he may have allowed some of them to have their own commander after becoming an Emperor, but Constantine Humbertopoulos, a nephew of Robert Guiscard, had been living in Byzantium for a long time, and judging from his Orthodox-Greek name he was not a newcomer who had raised his own followers in a distant Imperial province, but rather a trusted Imperial officer who actively assisted Alexius' rise to the throne<sup>114</sup>. Humbertopoulos also took part in the 1081 campaign against Robert Guiscard's siege of Dyrrachium, commanding a "regiment of Franks". But Alexius did not make the mistake of deploying the Frankish regiments in some distant winter camps in eastern Anatolia or in the Balkans, although

confused, since she is writing about seven decades later. See: *Alexiad*, I. i, p. 12. In our contemporary primary sources like Attaleiates, Skylitzes and Bryennius the Franks are mentioned as cavalry, thus I presume that it would have been unlikely for Roussel to have introduced native infantry men in his contingent. Turks would have been employed quite easily but our sources would certainly have mentioned any Turks and Franks fighting side by side.

112. Bryennius, 167,185. Attaleiates 153. SHEPARD, *The Uses of the Franks*, 303, notes that the collection of taxes in the name of Roussel would have been undertaken by the official tax-collectors of the Byzantine State.

113. Bryennius, 185; Simpson, *Three sources of military unrest*, 196; *Alexiad*, I. ii, pp. 13-14. The tactic of avoiding battle unless it is of the utmost need is stressed by Vegetius, Leo VI and Nicephoros Phocas, in their military manuals: *Vegetius: Epitome of Military Science*, tr. by N. P. MILNER, Liverpool 2001, III, 26, 116-9; Leo VI, *Tactica*, XX. 36; *Praecepta Militaria*, IV. 192-208, p. 50.

114. *Alexiad*, II. iv-v, pp. 93-104; SHEPARD, *The Uses of the Franks*, 303-4.

someone might wonder if there were indeed any areas under Byzantine control in Asia Minor in the 1080s where the Franks could have been deployed, but he rather kept them in the capital under his close supervision<sup>115</sup>.

## Conclusions

In this paper I had the chance to examine two types of mercenaries that were employed by the Empire for its wars since the second half of the ninth century. On the one hand we had the Rus of Kiev who were employed in large numbers by the Byzantine government on the grounds of treaties that were signed with the official Kiev authorities since their first siege of Constantinople in 860 and were occasionally renewed in the tenth century. The fundamental difference between these troops and the units of the Varangian Guard that arrived in the capital in 988 was that the former were recruited as individuals or in large groups, but they never formed a distinct unit like the Varangians. The Franks, on the other hand, that are first recorded in service in Constantinople in the mid-eleventh century can be characterised as the typical “soldiers of fortune” – a term which may sound commonplace but it encapsulates the degree of individualism that characterised the relatively small number of western mercenaries that descended in Constantinople and which can be viewed as the source of their fighting techniques. And although they were registered in the Imperial payrolls, thus receiving a regular and fixed pay, they were materialistic individuals that could desert their employers whenever suited them best.

The second half of the tenth century marked a period of expansion for the Byzantine State in its eastern borders, with units of Rus taking part in the expeditions against the Umayyad Arabs of Crete in 902, 949 and again in 960/1 when the island’s capital (Chandax) finally capitulated, while evidence from primary sources allow us to locate them in northern Mesopotamia, Armenia and Syria throughout the middle decades of the tenth century. It is impossible to assess the numbers of the Rus in Byzantine service at any period, but judging from the nature of their campaigns and from whatever pieces of evidence we can collect and put together from the primary sources, we understand that they would have been primarily infantry units that had

---

115. The aforementioned Frankish regiment under Humbertopoulos is clearly seen to have been based at Constantinople before Alexius’ campaign against the Normans in Dyrrachium, in August 1081: *Alexiad*, IV. iv, 199.

very similar equipment to their Scandinavian relatives and were completely unfamiliar to mounted warfare. Unfortunately, the amount of information we have does not allow us to reconstruct in detail their fighting tactics in the plains and mountainous terrains of Syria, Cilicia and Armenia. Probably they would have been elite heavily armed regiments of spearmen that would operate in conjunction with other elite tagmatic units of the Imperial Army, either occupying a place in the centre of the infantry formation before a pitched battle or – as the military treatises of the period suggest – take the role of javeliners in the high mountain passes of the Taurus against the expeditionary forces of the Muslims.

A turning point in the history of mercenary units was the year 988, when the famous 6,000 strong Varangian Guard arrived in the Imperial Court. Chronicler material puts the Varangians at Antioch in 999, restoring order in the vicinity of the Syrian capital, while next year they were to be found in Armenia. But the most significant operational theatre in Basil II's reign was Bulgaria and the struggle against Tsar Samuel (1001-1018). Although no specific mentioning of them can be found in the primary sources of the period, the Varangians – perhaps not the entire regiment but certainly a significant number of them – would have had a leading role in the sweeping operations against the Bulgarian forces in the central Balkan area. Further, a unit of Varangians was transported to Italy in the same period to face a rebellion of Lombards in Apulia, again playing a key role in the operations to suppress a local insurrection. And because the Lombard rebels enjoyed the military assistance of several hundred Norman cavalry men, that operation marked the first contact between Byzantine forces and the newly arrived Normans in Italy, although it would have been extremely interesting if we had any first-hand evidence as to what impression did the Norman fighting tactics made upon the men of the Guard.

The regiment of the Varangians would have consisted of heavy infantry units that were using horses for transportation and would dismount before battle in their typical Viking fashion. Their equipment would have been very similar, if not identical, to their Scandinavian relatives with contemporary or later accounts of the sources – including the illustrations from the Skylitzes manuscript in Madrid<sup>116</sup>, identifying the famous battle-axes, an

116. A. GRABAR – M. MANOUSSACAS, *L'illustration du manuscrit de Skylitzes de la Bibliotheque Nationale de Madrid*, Venice 1979; V. TSAMAKDA, *The Illustrated Chronicle*

ideal weapon for infantry warfare<sup>117</sup>. As an elite and experienced unit they would have been used in special operations like the siege of a city or a castle and in large-scale battles they would have probably been put in the centre of the formation to repel any enemy cavalry attack. And Bulgaria would have been an operational theatre that favoured the use of these Viking warriors in smaller units, since the rough and fragmented terrain and the nature of the operations (i.e. siege of Bulgarian strongholds) did not favour mounted warfare. In addition, the operational role of the Varangian Guard was expanded in 1034 after the arrival of Harald Hardrada in Constantinople. The Scandinavian experience in naval warfare and the change in Imperial politics towards the establishment of a powerful navy during the reign of Romanus III, strongly favoured the assigning of units of the Guard into policing duties in the eastern Mediterranean.

The 1040s was the decade that saw the arrival in large numbers of the first Frankish mercenaries in the Byzantine capital (1047). These were all primarily cavalry units, fighting in their usual Frankish manner of mounting a frontal cavalry charge against the enemy, a battle tactic that had been well known in France for several decades<sup>118</sup>. And we also have evidence that the Byzantines were well aware of the charge of the Frankish chivalry, judging by the writings of Leo VI in the early tenth century<sup>119</sup>. Their main operational role, judging by the evidence provided by our chroniclers, was the manning of key towns and fortresses in strategic border areas in both the Balkans and Asia Minor. A fundamental difference between these troops and the Rus of the previous period is that the former were serving under their own commanders after 1049. Indeed, the presence of Frankish troops in Imperial service after the late 1040s has largely depended on the ambitions of their leaders, and three names are frequently mentioned by the primary sources of this period; Hervé the *Frangopolos* (1049-63), Robert Crispin (1067/9-73) and Roussel of Bailleul (1064-80). All of them seem to have had a remarkably similar career, arriving in Byzantium with an already

*of Ioannes Skylitzes in Madrid*, Leiden 2002; A. B. HOFFMEYER, *Military Equipment in the Byzantine Manuscript of Skylitzes in Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid*, Granada 1966.

117. KOLIAS, *Waffen*, 162-73; K. DEVRIES, *Medieval Military Technology*, Ontario 1992, 16-18.

118. J. FRANCE, "La Guerre dans la France féodale à la fin du IXe et au Xe Siècle", *Revue Belge d'Histoire Militaire* 23(1979), 189ff.

119. Leo VI, *Tactica*, XVIII. 80-98.

established reputation in Sicily (Hervé and Roussel) and Spain (Crispin). Thus, they were immediately transferred to a crucial border area of the Empire, either to the Balkans to face the Patzinaks (Hervé) or the Cumans (Roussel) or to Armenia (Crispin). They all had established their lands in the Armeniac theme and, already since the early years of their careers, they had managed to gather a significant number of knights in their service, varying from 400 to 2,500 men. Although great land-owners, it is very difficult to establish whether the troops in their service were household knights or mercenaries living off the land, or possibly both. We should highlight, however, that Crispin was the only one of the three who had the chance to command Imperial troops in military operations during the civil wars that followed the defeat at Mantzikert, contrary to the others who, although were deployed in combat alongside Imperial forces, they never commanded Imperial troops themselves. Eventually, their ambitions led them to mount rebellions against the Byzantine Emperors and they were involved in this period's civil strifes, taking the side of the highest bidder.

It has frequently appeared throughout this study the reference to the Franks as materialistic volunteers who would desert their paymasters at any time<sup>120</sup>. However, this can be quite misleading and the long-established view of them being the main cause for numerous rebellions throughout the centuries has been challenged by a recent series of studies<sup>121</sup>. And, indeed, the arguments are simple enough; no evidence can support the fact that indigenous troops, either thematic or tagmatic, were more loyal to the central government than the Franks were. In fact, more rebellions were mounted by the armies of the East or West in the second half of the eleventh century than the Franks were even capable of. Second, there is a direct correlation between the timing of these rebellions and their political context; Hervé turned against the weak government of Michael VI in the summer of 1057 which strangely coincided with the rebellion of two of the most senior Byzantine generals; Robert Crispin's insubordination against Romanus IV's government took place in the Armeniac thema (spring 1069), a region with a political power vacuum for at least a decade due to the Turkish infiltration; and it was in the same region that Roussel of Bailleul had established his base when he was involved in the civil wars of the 1070s. In this political

120. Attaleiates, 96,98; *Strategikon*, XI. 3, p. 119; Leo VI, *Tactica*, XVIII. 82-84.

121. SHEPARD, *The Uses of the Franks*; HALDON, *Warfare, State and Society*, 85-93.

context, it was the indigenous troops that played a dominant role in the events rather than the Frankish mercenaries. Finally, as Shepard rightly puts it, it was the colourful risings of rebels that excited the curiosity of the chroniclers, and there may have been many “Frankish” commanders whose service in Byzantium was almost as illustrious as Crispin or Roussel’s, but who never behaved in such a way as to attract attention; that is, they never revolted<sup>122</sup>.

---

122. SHEPARD, *The Uses of the Franks*, 276.



RUS, VARANGIAN AND FRANKISH MERCENARIES IN THE SERVICE OF THE  
BYZANTINE EMPERORS (9TH-11TH C.)  
NUMBERS, ORGANISATION AND BATTLE TACTICS IN THE OPERATIONAL THEATRES  
OF ASIA MINOR AND THE BALKANS

This study examines two significantly different mercenary groups (Varangians and Franks) that played a vital part in the organisation and structure of the Byzantine armies after the ninth century and compare their fighting tactics with those of their enemies on each of the two major operational theatres of the Byzantine Empire: the Balkans and Asia Minor. Structuring my analysis not on a chronological basis but rather on the different enemies that these mercenaries were facing in different geographical conditions, the main objective of this paper is to examine what evidence do we have about the organisation of the mercenary units of the Rus, the Varangians and the Franks and in the numbers in which they were descending at Constantinople, the political circumstances that led to their employment and their standing in the Byzantine military establishment and – most importantly – what do we know about their battle and siege tactics and their overall role in each operational theatre.