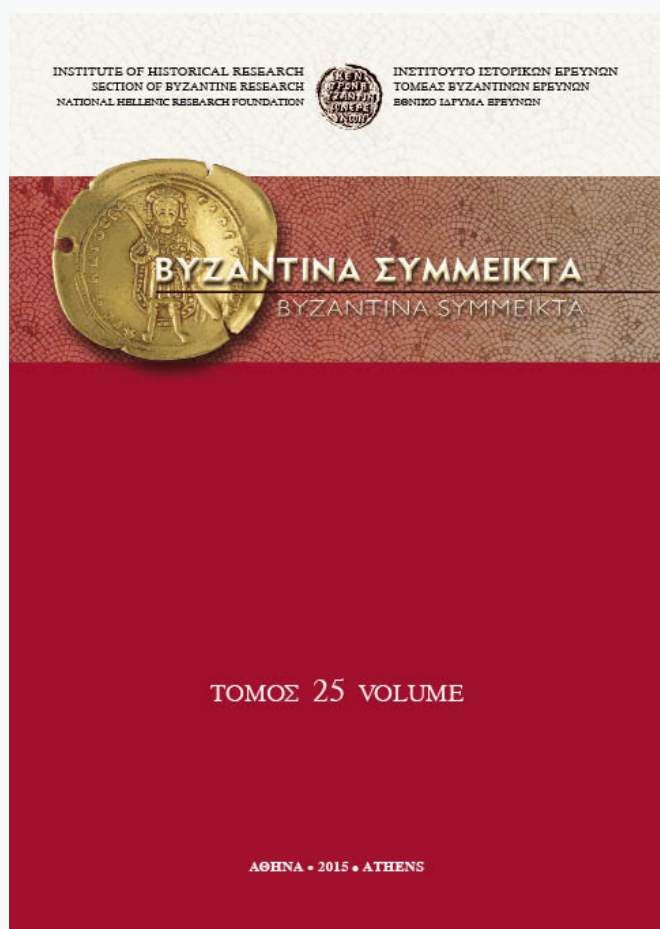


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Book Review: G. THEOTOKIS. The Norman Campaigns in the Balkans, 1081-1108. Warfare in History. Woodbridge: Boydell, 2014, pp.262. ISBN: 9781843839217

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The subject of this book is the Norman campaigns waged in the Balkans against the Byzantine Empire by Robert Guiscard, the Duke of Apulia and his son Bohemond. The book aims to provide a comparative study of the warfare between Byzantium and the Normans in the years 1081–1108 and very much focuses on issues of military organization, strategy and tactics. It begins with a discussion of the principal narrative sources, pointing out their strengths and weaknesses (ch.1) and continues with a series of discussions on Norman military institutions in southern Italy (ch.2) and the Byzantine army and navy in the tenth and eleventh centuries (chs. 3 and 4). This is followed by the establishment of the Normans in southern Italy (ch.5). The campaigns themselves are discussed in chs. 6–9, beginning with Robert Guiscard's invasion of Illyria in 1081 and ending with the signing of the Treaty of Devol in 1108.

I am not competent to comment on Norman military institutions in southern Italy or for that matter elsewhere but several sections of this chapter (e.g. the reasons for the Norman descent upon Italy, castles in Normandy, England and southern Italy) do not seem pertinent to the Norman campaigns in the Balkans. The discussion on the evolution of the Byzantine army and navy in the tenth–eleventh centuries is very helpful for what follows (though it too contains somewhat superfluous sections such as the establishment and development of the *themata*). Theotokis makes good use the Byzantine military manuals in his analysis and allows the reader to understand the structure, organization and battle tactics of the military forces commanded by Alexios I Komnenos during the Norman wars. Next the author discusses the establishment of the Normans in southern Italy and Sicily, including of course the conquest of Byzantine territories in the region, and this sets the scene for the Norman invasion of the Balkans.

The relevant chapters begin with a discussion of Guiscard's motives for the invasion of Byzantium, although I think more could have been said on the nature and terms of the alliance between Guiscard and Michael VII Doukas, which was severed when the latter was deposed by Nikephoros Botaneiates in 1078. Having received papal sanction, Guiscard ostensibly set out to restore the deposed Michael VII, but by the time his expedition sailed from Otranto in May 1081, Botaneiates had been overthrown and replaced by the young general Alexios I Komnenos. Theotokis describes in detail the advance of the Norman forces and Alexios' diplomatic and military preparations. The Normans laid siege to Dyrrachion, the principal city on the eastern shore of the Adriatic Sea, in June 1081. While the Venetian naval forces (reinforced by Byzantine squadrons) attacked the enemy by sea, Alexios and his army set out to relieve the city by land. The battle of Dyrrachion (18 October 1081), which proved victorious for the Normans and disastrous for the Byzantines, is discussed at length by Theotokis, who carefully analyzes the tactics used by Robert Guiscard and Alexios Komnenos stage by stage and convincingly explains the causes of Byzantine failure.

The author then follows the succeeding events from the capitulation of Dyrrachion to the Norman advance towards Larissa in 1082-3. He explains that Guiscard could not take advantage of his victory at Dyrrachion due to the harsh winter ahead. With the coming of spring the Norman leader turned south instead of marching along the Via Egnatia towards Thessalonike probably because he wished to cover his flanks from enemy attacks. In April 1082 Guiscard was informed of a revolt that had broken out in the region of Apulia, which in all likelihood was stirred by Byzantine agents. His decision to return to Italy, leaving his son Bohemond in charge of the campaign, was crucial for the outcome. Theotokis rationalizes Bohemond's decision to secure the areas of Illyria, coastal Epiros and western Macedonia before proceeding to his primary target: Thessalonike. Two further attempts by the Byzantine army to stop the advance of the Normans failed. Bohemond decided to make his winter camp in the Thessaly where he instigated the siege of the capital Larissa. Alexios, having retreated to Constantinople and made his preparations throughout the winter, left the city in early spring 1083 to raise the siege of Larissa. The emperor, having learnt much from his previous encounters with the Normans, decided not to risk another pitched battle. Instead he devised an ambush based on feigned retreat and was finally able to emerge victorious. He followed up his success by spreading discord and disaffection amongst the Norman officers and in the end Bohemond was forced to withdraw though several outposts remained in Norman hands.

Theotokis argues that Guiscard's second expeditionary force to the Balkans (1084–5) was much smaller than that mobilized three years earlier. He explains that this is the reason why having defeated the joint Venetian-Byzantine fleet that awaited his arrival and having established himself at Corfu, Aulon and Vonitsa, the Norman leader turned south towards the island of Kephallonia, which commanded the entrance to the Gulf of Patras. He postulates that Guiscard planned an attack on the poorly defended themes of Hellas and Peloponnesos. However, famine and disease weakened his army and Guiscard himself succumbed to illness and died on 17 July 1085. His death brought the expedition to an abrupt end, and the Normans who still occupied the citadel of Dyrrachion were easily persuaded to surrender it to Alexios' officers.

Theotokis next discusses the leading role of Guiscard's son Bohemond in the First Crusade. This constitutes the background to Bohemond's subsequent campaign in the Balkans. But Theotokis does not discuss Bohemond's relations with Alexios, which up to a certain point were particularly close, and instead dwells on the Norman leader's military qualities and exploits in the course of the crusade. This is a curious omission since Bohemond's establishment at Antioch meant the end of his agreement with Alexios and signaled renewed conflict, this time both in Syria and the Balkans. Theotokis subsequently notes that when Bohemond's newly-acquired territories in Syria came under serious pressure from imperial forces, the Norman leader returned to the west in order to organize an expedition in the guise of a crusade against the Byzantine emperor. The Norman campaign in the Balkans 1107–8, patterned on that of Robert Guiscard twenty-six years earlier, ended in failure. Theotokis demonstrates how Alexios' careful planning and strategy (which involved a rigorous land-blockade of the Norman forces) eventually forced Bohemond to lift the siege of Dyrrachion and surrender. In the end, Bohemond was forced to accept the treaty of Devol (September 1108) through which he became a vassal of the Byzantine emperor. Theotokis' brief discussion of the treaty does not do justice to its significance for the future status of Antioch and more generally for Byzantine relations with the crusader states.

Overall, this book fulfills its stated aim of providing a comparative study of the Byzantine-Norman wars in the Balkans in 1081–1108. Theotokis demonstrates his firm grasp of the subject under investigation and explains very well how and why the Norman campaigns in the Balkans were ultimately unsuccessful. However, many readers would have benefited from a more in-depth discussion of the political context of the military campaigns even if the book quite clearly focuses on military history.

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