

REWRITING ROME'S PAST GLORIES? THE HEROES OF THE RECONQUEST IN THE MIDDLE BYZANTINE PERIOD AND THEIR FORERUNNERS ACCORDING TO HISTORICAL SOURCES AND POPULAR NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT

The idea of the reconquest of former Roman lands is only part of the complex of ideas related to the Byzantine understanding of war, and can hardly be dealt with separately from concepts such as oecumene, religion or legitimacy. Present paper will try to explore an aspect still neglected in the studies produced thus far, such as the popular backing or understanding of the idea of reconquest in Byzantium. I will address here some examples under two different headings, both referring to events in the 10th century in Byzantium. The first will involve two short speeches dealing with the Byzantine reconquest of Crete, and the second will deal with the typology of the heroes who appear in the sources as inspiring models for Byzantine frontier warriors in their fight against Islam. A detailed philological analysis of the texts will allow us to see that arguments legitimating the war were constantly reused and rewritten in the historical sources and that, accordingly, they are to be approached with some caution, tacking into account the literary debts. On the other hand, a series of topical references to the old mythical and historical heroes found in some 10th-century sources suggest that the idea of reconquest was perhaps more prevalent among common soldiers than is usually believed and may have even buoyed the Byzantines' campaigns at the eastern border.

KEYWORDS

Byzantine reconquest, Holy War, Capture of Crete, Theophanes Continuatus, Nikephoros I Phokas.

CAPITALIA VERBA

Restauratio Byzantina, Bellum sacrum, Expugnatio Cretae, Theophanes Continuatus, Nicephorus I Phocas.

1. Preliminary issues

Strategic and military approaches still prevail in current research on war in Byzantium,¹ but there are already a significant number of studies that focus on the concept of war from a theoretical point of view and deal with issues such as the legitimacy of war, Byzantine rights over the former Roman territory (to a great extent identified with the Christian *oecumene*), the defensive or offensive nature of war, or, finally, the religious foundations of the imperial power that were supposed to guarantee orthodox rulers² victory on the battlefield. A special interest has been taken in the concepts of Islamic “Holy War” in Byzantium,³ but much less attention

1. See, for instance Kyriakidis, Savvas. *Warfare in Late Byzantium, 1204-1453 (History of Warfare 67)*. Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2011; Stouraitis, Yannis, ed. *A Companion to the Byzantine Culture of War, ca. 300-1204 (Brill's Companions to the Byzantine World)*. Leiden: Brill, 2018; Theotokis, Georgios; Meško, Marek, eds. *War in Eleventh-Century Byzantium*. London: Routledge, 2021.

2. As Late Antiquity and Early Byzantium, including the Age of Justinian, fall outside the consideration of this paper, and are dealt with in a previous contribution to this issue, I will list here only some contributions dealing with the Byzantine concept of war in the Middle and Late Byzantine period: Laiou, Angeliki E. “On just war in Byzantium”, *Τὸ ἑλληνικόν. Studies in Honor of Speros Vryonis*, John Springer Langdon, ed. New Rochelle: Artstide D. Caratzas, 1993: I, 153-177; Lounghis, Telemachos. “Die byzantinische Ideologie der ‘begrenzten Ökumene’ und die römische Frage im ausgehenden 10. Jahrhundert”. *Byzantinoslavica*, 56 (1995): 117–128; Koder, Johannes. “Die räumlichen Vorstellungen der Byzantiner von der Ökumene (4. bis 12. Jahrhundert)”. *Anzeiger der philosophisch-historischen Klasse*, 137/2 (2002): 15-34; Schmalzbauer, Gudrun. “Überlegungen zur Idee der Oikumene in Byzanz”, *Wiener Byzantinistik und Neogräzistik*, Wolfram Hörandner, Johannes Koder, Maria A. Stassinopoulou, eds. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2004: 409-419; Stouraitis, Ioannis. *Krieg und Frieden: in der politischen und ideologischen Wahrnehmung in Byzanz (7.-11. Jahrhundert) (Byzantinische Geschichtsschreiber, Ergänzungsband 5)*. Wien: Fassbaender, 2009 (it introduces the main study for the categories); Kyriakidis, Savvas. *Warfare...: 13-44* (Chapter: “Warfare and imperial propaganda”); many of the contributions featured in Koder, Johannes; Stouraitis, Ioannis eds. *Byzantine War Ideology Between Roman Imperial Concept and Christian Religion. Akten Des Internationalen Symposiums Wien, 19.-21. Mai 2011*. Wien: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2012.

3. Canard, Marius. “La Guerre Sainte dans le monde islamique et dans le monde chrétien”. *Revue Africaine*, 79 (1936): 605-623; Laurent, Vitalien. “L’idée de guerre sainte et la tradition byzantine”. *Revue historique du Sud-Est européen*, 23 (1946): 72-92; Walker, Paul E. “The Crusade of John Tzimisce in the light of new Arabic evidence”. *Byzantium*, 47 (1977): 301-327; Kolia-Dermitzake, Athena. *Ὁ βυζαντινὸς «ἱερὸς πόλεμος». Ἡ ἔννοια καὶ ἡ προβολὴ τοῦ θρησκευτικοῦ πολέμου στο Βυζάντιο*. Athena: Basilopoulos, 1991; Oikonomides, Nikos. “The Concept of Holy War’ and Two Tenth-Century Byzantine Ivories”. *Peace and War in Byzantium: Essays in Honor of George T. Dennis, S.J.*, Timothy Miller; John Nesbitt, eds. Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1995: 62-86; Dagron, Gilbert. “Byzance entre le djihad et la croisade. Quelques remarques”, *Le Concile de Clermont de 1095 et l’Appel à la Croisade. Actes du Colloque Universitaire International de Clermont-Ferrand (23-25 Juin 1995)*. Roma: École Française de Rome, 1997: 325-337; Dennis, George T. “Defenders of the Christian people: ‘Holy war’ in Byzantium”, *The Crusades from the perspective of Byzantium and the Muslim world*, Angeliki Laiou, Roy Parviz Mottahedeh, eds. Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 2001: 71-82; Krausmüller, Dirk. “Killing at God’s command: Niketas Byzantios’ polemic against Islam and the Christian tradition of divinely sanctioned murder”. *Al-Masaq*, 16 (2004): 163-176; Stouraitis, Ioannis. *Krieg und Frieden...: 327-344*; Kolia-Dermitzake, Athena. “Holy war in Byzantium twenty years later: a question of term definition and interpretation”, *Byzantine War Ideology Between Roman Imperial Concept and Christian Religion, Akten Des Internationalen Symposiums Wien, 19.-21. Mai 2011*, Johannes Koder, Ioannis Stouraitis, eds. Wien: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2012: 121-132; Stouraitis, Ioannis. “‘Just war’ and ‘holy war’ in the Middle Ages. Rethinking theory through the Byzantine Case-Study”. *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik*, 62 (2012): 227-264; White, Monica. *Military saints in Byzantium*



has been paid to the Byzantine response to the Western "Crusade". Regardless of the impact of these "imported" visions of war on the official ideology of the Empire, Byzantium always followed its own way, based on Roman tradition.⁴

The idea of the reconquest of formerly Roman lands is, therefore, only part of the complex of ideas related to the Byzantine understanding of war, and can hardly be dealt with separately from concepts such as *oecumene*, religion or legitimacy. This is, in fact, the approach adopted by researchers on this topic; mainly by Ioannis Stouraitis, who has produced a good number of seminal studies on this subject. It makes no sense to recapitulate here what has been competently said by him, but it is, perhaps, worth exploring an aspect still neglected in the studies produced thus far, such as the popular backing or understanding of the idea of reconquest in Byzantium.

This neglect comes as no surprise, as with regards to Byzantium we are mainly dependant on sources that reflect, for the most part, the position of the ruling elites, or even convey official propaganda. They are, therefore, apparently uninformative about the real feelings and perceptions of the war and its causes among soldiers and common people. However, deeper philological scrutiny of some of the texts available may open up new perspectives of analysis. We should not only consider the content of a given passage - what it says - but also how it is formulated; that is, the language and literary conventions followed by the author, and the sources and models he had in mind when he wrote it. The identification of old and new layers of the text is here of the utmost importance, for it allows us to trace the reception of ancient views, identify changes, and detect new insights emerging under the surface of an apparently neutral official statement.

I will address here some examples under two different headings, both referring to events in the 10th century in Byzantium. The first will involve two short speeches dealing with the Byzantine reconquest of Crete, and the second will deal with the typology of the heroes who appear in the sources as inspiring models for Byzantine frontier warriors in their fight against Islam.

2. The conquest of Crete as the beginning of the Byzantine reconquest

Two speeches are frequently quoted when dealing with the concept of reconquest in Byzantium in the 10th century. They both appear in the what has been called *Theophanes Continuatus (ThCont)*, a historical compilation put together in the imperial palace that continued the chronicle of Theophanes and embraced a heterogeneous

and Rus, 900-1200. Cambridge: University Press, 2013: 32-63 (Chapter: "The formation of the martyr-warrior ideal").

4. See Kolbaba, Tia. "Fighting for Christianity. Holy War in the Byzantine Empire". *Byzantion*, 68/1 (1998): 194-221; Stouraitis, Ioannis. "Jihād and Crusade: Byzantine positions towards the notions of 'holy war' ". *Byzantina Symmeikta*, 21 (2011): 11-63.



series of narratives dealing with the imperial reigns from the iconoclastic emperor Leon V the Armenian (813-820) up to Romanos II (959-963). The texts of the various reigns were written during different periods in the 10th century, and all of them were grouped into six books, in a single manuscript (Vat. gr. 167) that has preserved the work. The two speeches under consideration here appear in the last section of the last book,⁵ and are related to the campaign waged by the Byzantine army during the reign of Romanos II for the reconquest of Crete. The island had been taken in the second decade of the 9th century by Muslim emigrants from al-Andalus, but was effectively recaptured in 961 by the troops led by Nikephoros II Phokas, in what at the time was considered a major success for the Byzantine army. This event was a turning point in Byzantium's military history and marked the path for a series of aggressive wars against the Muslims in the East leading to the recovery of extensive territory in Syria (including the capital, Antioch). A modern French scholar, at the beginning of the 20th century, labelled these victorious campaigns by Byzantine emperors "l'épopée byzantine".⁶ Byzantium had re-established itself as the dominant power in the Middle East, after centuries of defensive war against Islam.

It is against this backdrop that we should consider the two speeches mentioned, written in the section devoted to the reign of Romanos II. The section is written in a low Greek, and we even find in it Arabic loanwords, such as *magarites* (μαγαρίτης) 'apostate', from the Arabic *muhāġir* (Rom. II, §14b), *farion* and *faras* (φάριον, φάρας), 'horse', from the Arabic *faras* (Rom. II §14a-b), and *saka* (σάκα) 'rear', from the Arabic *sāqat* (Rom. II §10). Moreover, the text follows the mode of presentation characteristic of a chronicle, as it contains a series of episodes ordered chronologically, but does not attempt to produce a comprehensive narrative encompassing all the events involved. It is clear that whoever composed this final section of Book VI tried to accentuate the relevance of the military campaign in Crete, depicting it as a central event in the reign of Romanos by means of two speeches delivered by the protagonists. Before any analysis, one must previously be aware that speeches are very infrequent in Book VI of *ThCont*, for they were considered rhetorical tools alien to the straightforward approach of the chronicler, who preferred to record facts and to avoid literary embellishment and comments on the actions of the protagonists, whether to approve or disapprove of them. It is, therefore, with some caution that we must consider these two rhetorical speeches appearing inserted in a low- to middlebrow chronicle.

The first speech (*ThCont* VI §9) is delivered by the chamberlain (*parakoimomenos*) Ioseph Bringas, a eunuch and trusted adviser of the emperor who encourages him not to put off any longer his plans to send an army against Crete under the command of Nikephoros I, the *domestikos* of the Palatine *scholae*. A prophecy (φήμη,

5. Michael Featherstone and I are preparing the edition of this last Book VI, which will soon appear in the *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae*. In the meantime, the edition to be consulted is the old one by Bekker, Immanuel. *Theophanes Continuatus, Ioannes Cameniata, Symeon Magister, Georgius Monachus*. Bonn: E. Weber, 1838: 353-481, to which we will refer here by chapters.

6. Schlumberger, Gustave. *L'épopée byzantine à la fin du dixième siècle*. Paris: Hachette, 1895-1905.



literally 'rumour') augured that whoever captured Crete would reign amongst the Romans (fulfilled when Nikephoros II, after the premature death of Romanos II, was proclaimed emperor by the troops), but the emperor should not pay heed to this. In Bringas's words:

We, Master, all know how many evils have befallen the Romans at the hands of the deniers of Christ; it is right to take into account the murders and the defilement of virgins and the destruction of churches and the taking of captives in coastal themes, and it is meet to fight for our fellow Christians and not to fear the length of the journey or the open seas or the uncertainty of victory or the impossibility pronounced by rumour. We must by all means obey thy God-inspired counsel and command, as this argument comes to you from God—for the heart of the emperor is in the hands of God— especially because it is a faithful and upright servitor, the *domestikos* of the *scholae*, being dispatched by thy God-guided imperial rule⁷.

The speech seems to justify the campaign against Muslim Crete as the Empire's punitive retaliation for the invaders' continuous attacks on the people of its territory. Moreover, there is a clear reference to God (quoted four times) as the guide and inspiration of the emperor, whose plan to reconquer Crete is, thus, doubly justified, both by religion and legitimate defence.⁸ However, it would be mistaken to consider these words an accurate rendering of Bringas's thoughts, or take them as representative of the official stance, for this speech follows closely, in its wording and concept, a similar one preserved in the chronicle of Theophanes, in which Ioannes the Patrician warns Justinian of the risks of engaging in a war against the distant Vandals (matching words are marked in bold):

We, Master, obey your commands and do not strive against them, **but it is right** for you **to take into account the length of the journey or the open seas**— while the journey by land takes 140 days—, **and the uncertainty of victory**, the pain of defeat and the pointlessness of regret.⁹

7. Ἡμεῖς μὲν, δέσποτα, ἴσμεν πάντες ὅσα δεινὰ Ῥωμαίοις συνέβησαν παρὰ τῶν ἀρνητῶν τοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς ἡμᾶς· καὶ δίκαιόν ἐστι λογίσασθαι τὰς σφαγὰς καὶ τὰς τῶν παρθένων φθορὰς καὶ τὰς τῶν ἐκκλησιῶν καταστροφὰς καὶ τὰς τῶν παραλίῳν θεμάτων αἰχμαλωσίας, καὶ πρέπον ἐστὶν ὑπὲρ τῶν Χριστιανῶν καὶ ὁμοφύλων ἀγωνίσασθαι, καὶ μὴ δεδιέναι τῆς ὁδοῦ τὸ μήκος καὶ τὰ τῆς θαλάσσης πελάγη καὶ τῆς νίκης τὸ ἄδηλον καὶ τῆς φήμης τὸ ἄδύνατον. καὶ χρὴ μάλιστα τῇ θεοσυνεργίῳ βουλῇ καὶ προστάξει σου πειθαρχεῖν ἡμᾶς, ὡς ἐκ θεοῦ σοι τοῦτο τὸ ἐνθύμημα—καὶ γὰρ καρδία βασιλέως ἐν χειρὶ θεοῦ— μάλιστα διὰ τὸ πιστὸν καὶ ὀρθὸν δοῦλον στέλλεσθαι τὸν δομέστικον τῶν σχολῶν παρὰ τῆς θεοκυβερνήτου βασιλείας σου: Bekker, Immanuel. *Theophanes Continuatus...*: 475 (with small changes). The translations of all the passages of *ThCont* in this article are by Michael Featherstone and myself for our edition of the text for the *Corpus Fontium*.

8. Stouraitis, Ioannis. *Krieg und Frieden...*: 316-317.

9. ἡμεῖς μὲν, ὃ δέσποτα, τοῖς σοῖς προστάγμασι πειθόμεθα καὶ οὐκ ἀντιτείνομεν ἀλλὰ δίκαιόν ἐστι λογίσασθαι σε τὸ τε τῆς ὁδοῦ μήκος καὶ τὰ τῆς θαλάσσης πελάγη, καὶ τὸ διὰ ξηρᾶς ῥμ' ἡμερῶν ὁδοῦ διάστημα ἔχον, καὶ τῆς νίκης τὸ ἄδηλον, καὶ τῆς ἥττης τὸ ἐπώδυνον, καὶ τῆς μεταμελείας τὸ ἀνόνητον: De Boor, Carl. *Theophanis chronographia*. Leipzig: Teubner, 1883: 188. For an English translation of the work, see: Mango, Cyril; Scott, Roger. *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor. Byzantium and Near Eastern History AD 284-813*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.



It is revealing that the writer of *ThCont* chose this passage on Justinian reconquest an inspiration for Bringas's speech. We do not need to presume that he consulted Theophanes' original work directly, looking for a parallel to the reconquest of Crete in Belisarius' campaign in Africa. As we have seen elsewhere, the authors of Books I-IV of *ThCont* relied on the *Excerpta historica* edited by Konstantinos Porphyrogenetos, where passages of Ancient and Early Byzantine historians were compiled and arranged according to different topics in a kind of thematic anthology.¹⁰ We know that there was a volume collecting speeches from historical works, entitled "On speeches" (Περὶ δημηγοριῶν), to which the anonymous composer of the *ThCont* most probably turned when he looked for models. There are no excerpts from Theophanes in the few preserved volumes of the *Excerpta historica*, but it seems unlikely that he would not have been included in this encyclopaedia, not only because he was the most important chronicler for Late Antiquity, but also because he was related to the emperor's family.¹¹

Be this as it may, to the rather sketchy speech of John the Patrician preserved in Theophanes, the Continuator added some more words, such as a quote from *Proverbs* 21.1 ("the heart of the emperor is in the hands of God") and commonplace references to the destruction of churches, the defilement of virgins, and the taking of captives.¹² Finally a short reference to the "rumour" (the prophecy concerning the imperial destiny of the conqueror of Crete) was added, along with a mention of the *domestikos* and his divine support. The result, without being original, is not a simple pastiche either, for it somehow reflects the author's final stance. Considering its underlying rhetorical structure, it is, obviously, a simplification to take the speech as a precise reflection of Byzantine attitudes towards the war of reconquest in the 10th century.¹³

10. Signes Codoñer, Juan. "The author of Theophanes Continuatus I-IV and the Historical Excerpts of Constantine VII Prophyrogenitus", *Investigatio Fontium II. Griechische und lateinische Quellen mit Erläuterungen (Antiquitas - Byzantium - Renacentia)* 30), László Horváth, Erika Juhász, eds. Budapest: Eötvös-Joszéf Collegium, 2017: 17-42. For the use of the *Excerpta historica* by other historians of the period see the study of: Németh, Ándras. *The Excerpta Constantiniana and the Byzantine appropriation of the past*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, who was able to draw up a list of the titles and content of many of the lost volumes of the project by means of internal cross-references.

11. Signes Codoñer, Juan, "Theophanes at the time of Leo VI". *Travaux et Mémoires*, 19 (2015): 159-176.

12. See, for instance, among other possible enumerations: τὴν αἰχμαλωσίαν, τὴν πυρκαϊάν, τὴν ἀπόλειαν τῶν ἐκκλησιῶν, τὴν διαφθορὰν τῶν παρθένων ("The captivity, fire, destruction of churches, rape of virgins, widowhood, orphanage"): Nicholas I, epistle 28, ln. 10-11, *Nicholas I, Patriarch of Constantinople, Letters (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 6)*, ed. Romilly J.H. Jenkins; Leendert Gerrit Westerink, Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1973, 190-191. For these topical lists of war calamities, see: Aelius Theon in his *progymnasmata*, edited by: Spengel, Leonhard. *Rhetores Graeci*. Leipzig: Teubner, 1854: II, 62-63.

13. Kaldellis, Anthony. "The Byzantine conquest of Crete (961 AD), Prokopios' *Vandal War*, and the Continuator of the *Chronicle of Symeon*". *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 39 (2015): 303-311 compares the campaign of Crete as it appears in the Continuator (including the speech of Bringas) with Prokopios' narrative on Belisarios's campaign in Afrika, but Kaldellis does not notice that the Continuator does not directly imitate Prokopios, but rather Theophanes, whose account was based on Prokopios. Comparison of the three together shows this clearly. As we shall see immediately below, Theophanes' quotation of Heraklios is also recognisable as the source for Nikephoros's speech to the troops in Crete as reported by the Continuator.



The second speech is a harangue supposedly delivered by Nikephoros II Phokas himself before his troops, and it is followed by a soldier's reply on his comrades' behalf:

"O men, my brothers and fellow soldiers, let us keep in our minds the fear of God. Let us fight to avenge outrage against God. Let us stand nobly in Crete against the enemies who have taken up arms impiously. Let us keep hold of faith, the slayer of fears. Let us consider that we are inside the Syrian island. Flight from here entails great danger. Let us avenge the violations of virgins. Beholding these severed noble limbs, let us feel pain in our hearts. Toil is not without reward, nor without danger. Let us stand and persevere in resistance to the deniers of Christ, and the Lord God will work together with us and will destroy our enemies; and the *kastron* of those who mock Christ will be plundered".

And after he had exhorted many other things of them, one man answered on behalf of all: "Thou hast opened our hearts, Magistros. Thy words have steeled and sharpened our faculties and our intentions. Thou hast given wings to our thought, and we shall follow thy counsel and command, and we shall die with you."¹⁴

If we were to summarize Nikephoros' speech, we could say that he appeals to his troops to show resistance and determination in their struggle against the infidels, because they can rely on God's support. There is no mention of their right to reconquer former Roman lands and, despite repeated mentions of the "violation of virgins" and their supposed "severed limbs", neither is any mention made of martyrdom or glory.¹⁵ Both aspects, however, were essential in the campaign.

In fact, the first point, the fact that Crete was now re-conquered because it was unjustly wrested from the Romans by the Arabs, is expressed in a different version of this speech that another contemporary historian, Leon the Deacon, attributed to Nikephoros II Phokas on this same occasion, with the latter stating that "the raids and enslavement that they (the Arabs) have murderously perpetrated against Romans" happened "when they (the Christian inhabitants of Crete) were living on an island that was ruled by them (the Romans), although it had come to the Agarenes through the wickedness of fortune".¹⁶ The expected reference to the right

14. Ἄνδρες ἀδελφοί μου καὶ συστρατιῶται, λάβωμεν εἰς νοῦν τὸν τοῦ θεοῦ φόβον· ἀγωνισώμεθα τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ ὕβριν ἐκδικήσαι· στώμεν γενναίως ἐν τῇ Κρήτῃ κατ' ἐχθρῶν δυσσεβῶς ὀπλισμένων· λάβωμεν πίστιν τῶν φόβων φονεύτριαν· ἀναλογισώμεθα ὅτι ἐνδον ἐσμὲν τῆς Συριακῆς νήσου. μέγαν κίνδυνον ἡ φυγὴ ἀπὸ τῶν ὧδε φέρει. ἐκδικήσωμεν τὰς φθορὰς τῶν παρθένων· τὰ τετιμημένα μέλη βλέποντες τετρωμένα ὀδυνηθῶμεν τὰς καρδίας. οὐκ ἔστιν ἄμισθος καὶ ἀκίνδυνος ὁ κόπος. στώμεν καὶ καρτερήσωμεν εἰς ἀντιπαράταξιν τῶν ἀρνητῶν τοῦ Χριστοῦ, καὶ Κύριος ὁ θεὸς συνεργήσει ἡμῖν, καὶ ὀλέσει τοὺς ἐχθροὺς ἡμῶν, καὶ πορθήσεται τὸ κάστρον τῶν ἀλαζόνων τοῦ Χριστοῦ. καὶ ἄλλα πολλὰ πρὸς αὐτοὺς παραινέσαντος ἀπεκρίθη εἰς ὑπὲρ πάντων Ἦνοιξας ἡμῶν τὰς καρδίας, μάγιστρε. ἐστόμωσαν καὶ ὤξυναν οἱ λόγοι τὰς δυνάμεις καὶ προθέσεις ἡμῶν. ἀνεπτέρωσας τὰς διανοίας ἡμῶν, καὶ ἐπόμθα τῇ σῇ βουλῇ καὶ προστάξει, καὶ σὺν σοὶ ἀποθανοῦμεν: Bekker, Immanuel. *Theophanes Continuatus*...: 478 (changes are from our edition).

15. Stouraitis, Ioannis. *Krieg und Frieden*...: 318-319.

16. Hase, Carl Benedict. *Leonis Diaconi Caloënsis Historia*. Paris: Typographia regia, 1819: 12, in the translation of Talbot, Alice-Mary; Sullivan, Denis F. *The History of Leo the Deacon. Byzantine Military Expansion in the Tenth Century*. Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 2005: 65.



of reconquest made here by Leon the Deacon is, therefore, conspicuously absent from the speech in the version of *ThCont*.

The martyrdom of the soldiers fallen in their fight against the infidels is not mentioned either, although emperor Konstantinos VII Porphyrogenetos, in a harangue written by himself or on his behalf some years before, did strive to lift the soldiers' spirits by saying: "we embrace your bodies wounded by Christ as the limbs of the martyrs".¹⁷ Certainly, this exaltation of martyrdom was not based on a view prevalent amongst the Byzantines, whose concept of war backed by a just God was nothing like the Arabs' notion of jihad, as we stated at the beginning. However, some sources contain references to a law supposedly promulgated by Nikephoros II Phokas —after the campaign in Crete, when he was already emperor— so that the "soldiers who died in the war should enjoy the rewards given to the martyrs" (τοὺς ἐν πολέμοις ἀποθνήσκοντας στρατιώτας μαρτυρικῶν ἀξιούσθαι γερῶν) for the emperor "put the salvation of the soul only in war and in anything else" (ἐν μόνῳ τῷ πολέμῳ τιθέμενος καὶ οὐκ ἐν ἄλλῳ τινὶ τῆς ψυχῆς σωτηρίαν).¹⁸ This law was heavily criticized by the Patriarch and later Byzantine canonists,¹⁹ who cited a canon by Saint Basileios of Kaisareia that even prescribed a period of three years of excommunication for soldiers who had committed murder in war.²⁰ The discussion centred only on the severity of the penalty imposed upon "sinful" soldiers (for it could affect their participation in the war), but never questioned the principle of murder as an act against God, in the line of the Byzantine irenic tradition, which was critical of the concept of jihad ever since the first appearance of Islam.²¹

One of the criticisms against jihad is found in Theophanes' *Chronicle*,²² where we find, again, the passage that served as a model for Nikephoros' speech appearing in *ThCont*. The text informing the latter work is now a speech by emperor Heraklios

17. τὰ διὰ Χριστὸν τραυματισθέντα σώματα ὑμῶν, ὡς μαρτυρικὰ μέλη, κατασπασόμεθα: Vári, Rezső. "Zum historischen Exezerptenwerke des Konstantinos Porphyrogenetos". *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, 17 (1908): 75-85, here 82-83. See also: Stouraites, Ioannis. "Just war and holy war...": 247; and Markopoulos, Athanasios. "The ideology of war in the military harangues of Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos". *Byzantine War Ideology Between Roman Imperial Concept and Christian Religion. Akten Des Internationalen Symposiums Wien, 19.-21. Mai 2011*, Johannes Koder, Ioannis Stouraitis, eds. Wien: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2012: 47-56, here 53.

18. The quotes come from Skylitzes' *Synopsis*, edited by: Thurn, Ioannes. *Ioannis Scyltiae synopsis historiarum*. Berlin-New York: De Gruyter, 1973: 274 (line 60), 275 (line 69) (= Nikephoros II Phokas §18).

19. For a short overview of the texts by the canonists, see: Stouraitis, Ioannis. "Jihād and Crusade...": 52-58.

20. Courtonne, Yves. *Saint Basile. Lettres*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1957-1966: III (Basileios' letter 188 §13 to Amphilochos).

21. See, for instance, the statements against jihad found in the refutation of the Quran by Niketas of Byzantium: Förstel, Karl. *Niketas von Byzanz, Schriften zum Islam I*. Würzburg-Altenberge: Echter-Oros, 2000: 192, 334-345.

22. De Boor, Carl. *Theophanis chronographia...*: 334. The passage is quoted by Konstantinos VII in his *De administrando imperio*, edited by: Moravcsik, Gyula; Jenkins, Romilly J.H. *Constantine Porphyrogenitus, De administrando imperio (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 1)*. Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1967: chapter 17.16-23. See also chapter 14.28-31 for a further criticism of the emperor to the Jihad.



(610-641) to his troops in the wake of an engagement against the Persians in 622. Marked in bold are the parallels with Nikephoros' speech:

O men, my brothers and fellow soldiers, let us keep in our minds the fear of God. Let us fight to avenge outrage against God. Let us stand nobly against the enemies who have inflicted many terrible things on the Christians. Let us respect the sovereign state of the Romans. Let us stand **against the enemies who have taken up arms impiously. Let us keep hold of faith, the slayer of fears. Let us consider that we are inside the Persian land. Flight from here entails great danger. Let us avenge the violations of virgins. Beholding these severed noble limbs of our soldiers, let us feel pain in our hearts. Toil is not without reward, nor without danger**, but it leads to eternal life. **Let us stand bravely and the Lord God will work together with us and will destroy our enemies.**

And after the emperor **exhorted** this and **many other things to the army, one man answered on behalf of all: "Thou hast** expanded our hearts, emperor, by opening thy lips to encourage us. **Thy words have sharpened our** swords and embued them with life. **Thou hast given** us **wings** by thy words. We blush to see thee leading us in battle and we shall follow thy orders.²³

The soldier's speech, as we see, is slightly tweaked by the author of *ThCont*, but we do not see any significance in the changes made, except perhaps for the fact that the writer has tried to diminish the military tone of the reply. Thus the sentence "Thy words have sharpened our swords" is rewritten as "Thy words have steeled and sharpened our faculties and our intentions".

The changes made to Nikephoros' speech are, perhaps, more noteworthy. *ThCont* replaced the original "Persian land" with a reference to the "Syrian island", added specific references to Crete, and, at the end of the passage, to the *kastron* of Chandax, where the Muslims put up fierce resistance to the siege by the Byzantine troops. The first sentence of Heraklios' original speech, referring to the fight against those "who have inflicted many terrible things on the Christians", and the respect due to "the sovereign state of the Romans", is not found in *ThCont*, but probably as a consequence of a *saut du même au même* ("let us stand" appears twice in Theophanes' version).

23. "ἄνδρες ἀδελφοί μου, λάβωμεν εἰς νοῦν τὸν τοῦ θεοῦ φόβον καὶ ἀγωνισώμεθα τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ ὕβριν ἐκδικῆσαι. στώμεν γενναίως κατ' ἐχθρῶν τῶν πολλὰ δεινὰ Χριστιανοῖς ἐργασαμένων. αἰδεσθῶμεν τὸ τῶν Ῥωμαίων αὐτοδέσποτον κράτος, καὶ στώμεν κατ' ἐχθρῶν δυσσεβῶς ὀπλισμένων. λάβωμεν πίστιν τῶν φόνων φονεύτριαν. ἀναλογισώμεθα ὅτι ἔνδον ἐσμὲν τῆς τῶν Περσῶν γῆς καὶ μέγαν κίνδυνον φυγῆ φέρει. ἐκδικήσωμεν τὰς φθοράς τῶν παρθένων, τὰ τετμημένα μέλη τῶν στρατιωτῶν ἡμῶν ὀρῶντες πονήσωμεν τὰς καρδίας. οὐκ ἔστιν ἄμσθος ὁ κίνδυνος, ἀλλ' αἰωνίου ζωῆς πρόξενος. στώμεν ἀνδρείως, καὶ κύριος ὁ θεὸς συνεργήσει ἡμῖν, καὶ ὀλέσει τοὺς ἐχθροὺς ἡμῶν.» ταῦτα δὲ καὶ ἄλλα πολλὰ τοῦ βασιλέως παραινέσαντος τῷ λαῷ, ἀπεκρίθη αὐτῷ εἰς ὑπερ πάντων· «ἤπλωσας ἡμῶν τὰς καρδίας, δέσποτα, τὸ σὸν πλατύνας ἐν παραινέσει στόμα. ὦξυναν οἱ λόγοι σου τὰ ξίφη ἡμῶν, καὶ ἔμψυχα ταῦτα εἰργάσαντο. ἀνεπτέρωσας ἡμᾶς διὰ τῶν ρημάτων σου. ἐρυθριῶμεν σὲ θεωροῦντες προάγοντα ἡμῶν ἐν ταῖς μάχαις, καὶ ἐπόμεθα ἐν πᾶσι τοῖς σοῖς κελεύσμασιν": De Boor, Carl. *Theophanis chronographia*...: 307.



However, what really catches our attention is the elimination of the sentence “it leads to eternal life”, which explained the previous statement “Toil is not without reward, nor without danger”. It is evident that the author of this passage in *ThCont*, who was certainly active at the imperial palace and a clear partisan of Ioseph Bringas, sought to dissociate Nikephoros’ words from any suspicion of defending the holy war. The wording of Heraklios’ speech would take on a new significance in the context of the “holy” war against Islam in the 10th century, and this fact would have not escaped the contemporaneous reader, quite aware of the controversial reform measures Nikephoros supported favouring the sanctification of the fallen soldiers.

It must be said, however, that Heraklios’s speech, reproduced by Theophanes, was, in turn, based on one written in verse form (trimeters) by Georgios Pisides, a contemporary of Heraklios, part of his lost *Herakleid*. The modern editor who sought to reconstruct the original wording of Pisides’s text did not believe that the sentence “Toil is not without reward, nor without danger, but it leads to eternal life” belonged to the original poem.²⁴ If he is right, then this sentence must have been added by Theophanes to the original work and reflect the perspective of a Byzantine of the 8th - 9th century (the age of Theophanes) rather than of one of the 7th (the age of Heraklios). Again, if this supposition is true, it should be pondered whether Theophanes was responsible for the addition, or the Palestinian Georgios the Synkellos, who provided Theophanes with the sources for the writing of the *Chronicle*.²⁵

Whatever the case may be, the elimination of the reference to “eternal life” in *ThCont* must not have been casual, and confirms *a contrario* that the idea of an eternal reward was somehow in the air at the time, not just an extravagant idea of the emperor. Considering emperor Nikephoros’ strong connection with the provincial armies in Anatolia, he was most likely simply echoing feelings common among the soldiers, who sanctified their fellow comrades who fell on the battlefield fighting against Islam.

Proof of this popular sanctification of the warrior is provided by a fresco of two mounted troops found in a rural chapel in Kappadokia, on the eastern frontier of

24. Pertusi, Agostino. *Giorgio di Pisidia. Poemi. I. Panegirici epici (Studia patristica et Byzantina 7)*. Ettal: Buch-Kunstverlag, 1959: 27-29, 276-277 (with the edition of the text as fragment 3), 293-294 (for a short commentary on the passage). The same occurs with a second passage of Theophanes containing a further speech by Heraklios, in which the emperor says to his soldiers: “May we win the crown of martyrdom, so that we may be praised in the future and receive our recompense from God”: De Boor, Carl. *Theophanis chronographia...*: 310-311, for Pertusi does not include the last sentence *καὶ ὁ θεὸς τοὺς μισθοὺς ἀποδώσῃ* in the original passage he attributes to Pisides (Pertusi, Agostino. *Giorgio di Pisidia...*: 279, edited as fragment 6). White, Monica. *Military saints...*: 49-51, does not seem to be aware of the problem. Tesei, Tommaso. “Heraclius’ war propaganda and the Qur’an’s promise of reward for dying in battle”. *Studia Islamica*, 114 (2019): 219-247, especially 222-229, considers Theophanes’ quotes to be original of Pisides, and also finds similar statements in other Greek and Armenian sources contemporary to Heraklios. Tesei even believes that this Byzantine vision of the soldiers as martyrs during the time of Heraklios is connected with the Qur’an.

25. Mango, Cyril. “Who wrote the Chronicle of Theophanes?”. *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta*, 18 (1978): 9-17.



the Empire (see Illustration 1).²⁶ The two soldiers, identified with their names and positions (the *skribon* Leon and the *tourmarches* Michael) are riding facing horses and spearing a demon standing in between them — a figure that can, obviously, be identified as the Muslim foe in these frontier areas of the Empire. Although the two figures are not portrayed with halos, they were painted over a tomb in a rural chapel at the end of the 9th or early 10th century, and constituted an object of veneration for a time. Moreover, the scene's composition resembles that of the military saints Georgios and Theodoros, devotion to whom saw a veritable blossoming in the era of the Macedonian emperors, precisely in this period, probably because of their widespread influence among the population and the army.²⁷

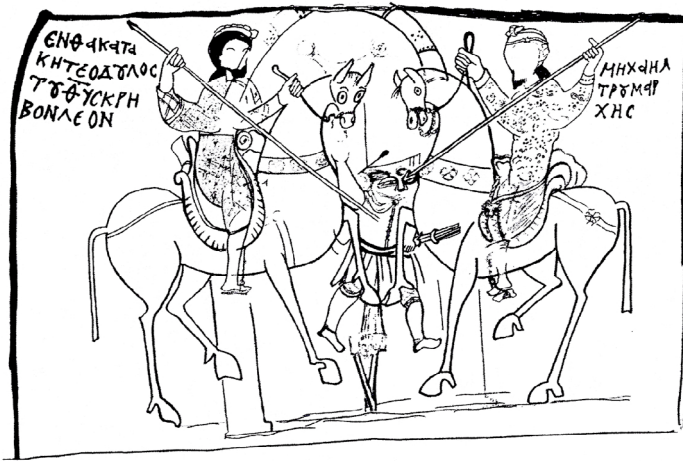


ILLUSTRATION 1. SKRIBON LEO AND TOURMARCHES MICHAEL IN A CAPPADOCIAN FRESCO OF THE 8TH-10TH C. ILLUSTRATION FROM THIERRY, NICOLE. "PORTRAITS FUNÉRAIRES INÉDITES DE DEUX OFFICIERS BYZANTINS MORTS AU COMBAT SUR LES FRONTIÈRES DE LA CAPPADOCE". Δελτίον τῆς χριστιανικῆς ἀρχαιολογικῆς ἐταιρείας, 30 (2009): 169-176 .

3. The hailed heroes of the past as models of the Reconquest

Military saints were not the only model for and inspiration of the Byzantine warrior. There were also heroes of the past, literary or not, who regularly appear in

26. Thierry, Nicole. "Portraits funéraires inédites de deux officiers byzantins morts au combat sur les frontières de la Cappadoce". Δελτίον τῆς χριστιανικῆς ἀρχαιολογικῆς ἐταιρείας, 30 (2009): 169-176, with references to other similar images.

27. White, Monica. *Military saints...*: 64-93 (Chapter: "The collective cult of military saints") stresses the veneration of military saints by the emperor and the Constantinopolitan elites.



the sources and provided encouragement, lifting the troops' morale and furnishing them with examples of victory against the enemy. There are a range of types:

1) Mythological heroes. The Homeric heroes were repeatedly evoked in the sources as a model for contemporary warriors. This, obviously, had to do with the prominent position Homer enjoyed in Byzantine education, such that it is not always easy to determine whether the references to the mythological heroes are a simple product of high learning²⁸ or reflect their broader popularity. The fact that these past Hellenic heroes are referred to in some compositions can be explained in both ways. Thus, for instance, Theodosios the Deacon, who wrote an epic poem on the taking of Crete by Nikephoros II Phokas, blatantly mocked Homer, for, according to him, the exploits of the Hellenic heroes sung in his *Iliad* were but a poetic lie and, in any case, a trifle compared to the heroic deeds of the brave Byzantine soldiers who fought in Crete. The author does not squander the opportunity to deride the old Greek heroes: "Small is to us the army of Greece, small its phalanxes, weak its generals, Ajax, Achilles, Odysseus, Diomedes".²⁹ Byzantine generals are, thus, compared not to their Roman counterparts, but rather to the old Greek heroes. We can surmise that the epic genre of the text inevitably led Theodosios to the mythical world of his model, Homer, but this does not necessarily mean that the heroes alluded to were not also models for the common soldiers in the field. In fact, Achilles appears again and again amongst the Byzantine sources as a kind of eponymous hero of the frontier warriors, and was even the hero in a late Byzantine poem the *Achilleis*. Moreover, Achilles is mentioned along with Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar in another passage of the poem, as if all were historical figures.³⁰ Also, Herakles' labours are compared there to the historical exploits of bygone military commanders.³¹

2) Heroes of the popular tradition. The figures in this group were freely devised on the basis of historical events whose authenticity it is hard for modern researchers to determine. Most of them appear as frontier warriors fending off the invasion of the Arabs and performing incredible feats, or even changing sides and serving the infidels. A paradigmatic case is the legendary epic hero Digenis Akritas, the "Twyborn Border Lord", who became the focus of the most famous Byzantine narrative poem.³² But there were many others, minor figures whose glorious deeds are sometimes lost, but whose names survived; for instance, Philoppapos, Kinnamos and Ioannakes, whose heroic exploits are referred to in the *Digenis* (Song IV, v. 33)

28. Achilles is the most quoted hero in the Treatise of Syntax by Michael the Synkellos, written in Syrian Edessa at the beginning of the 9th century, see: Donnet, Daniel. *Le traité de la construction de la phrase de Michel le Syncelle de Jérusalem. Histoire du texte, édition, traduction et commentaire*. Bruxelles-Rome: Institut historique belge de Rome, 1982.

29. μικρὸς γὰρ ἡμῖν ὁ στρατὸς τῆς Ἑλλάδος, / μικραὶ φάλαγγες, ἀσθενεῖς στρατηγέται, / Αἴας, Ἀχιλλεύς, Ὀδυσσεύς, Διομήδης; Criscuolo, Hugo. *Theodosi Diaconi, De Creta capta*. Leipzig: Teubner, 1979: Akroasis I, vv. 35-37.

30. Criscuolo, Hugo. *Theodosi Diaconi...*: epistle, vv. 4-5 and Akroasis III v. 206.

31. Criscuolo, Hugo. *Theodosi Diaconi...*: Akroasis III, vv. 214-217.

32. Jeffreys, Elizabeth. *Digenis Akritis. The Grottaferrata and Escorial versions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.



and of whom we know nothing else except for this quote. Other popular heroes were, actually, historical figures, but their deeds were distorted in the popular literature. This is, for instance, the case with Manuel the Armenian at the beginning of the 9th century, whose deeds were probably acclaimed in hagiographies or popular songs, in which he is portrayed as a new Achilles, fighting wild beasts in distant Central Asia when he was exiled from Byzantium and serving the caliph.³³ These literary heroes, regardless of their historical basis, became the central characters of popular sagas, or “hagiographies”, a phenomenon shared with the Arabic world, where many novels have been preserved describing the frontier wars between the Byzantines and Arabs, full of personages on both sides performing feats of heroism and courage, but also acts of treachery and villainy.³⁴

3) Historical characters of the distant past. In this group we include major historical figures who were, nevertheless, turned into literary characters, their stories being unfolded in phantastic narratives, as in the case of Alexander the Great, whose adventures were recounted in what was called the *Novel of Alexander*, of which there are many versions; or of Belisarius, Justinian's general, about whom novels and poems were also composed containing, again, only a minimal amount of historical truth.³⁵ After them, a great number of generals and emperors are mentioned in the contemporary sources as symbols of Rome's past glory. The references seem to be the result of learned readings of the author, including main historians of the past, as is the case with those found in Theodosios the Deacon to figures such as Scipio, Sulla, Caesar, Pompey and Carbo, for the poet even names the sources he consulted, mainly Plutarch and Dio Cassius.³⁶

It is against this background that we should consider some references to Roman generals and, particularly, emperors, who are presented in the 10th-century sources as examples of success and victory against the enemies of the Empire. The emphasis on the fact that some of these emperors not only defended, but even significantly extended the limits of the Empire, is of relevance for us here, especially because these allusions appear in the main period of the Byzantine reconquest of the East.

Usually these references are considered the result of antiquarian interest and evidence of a sense of continuity with the glorious age of Rome prevailing among the Byzantine elites. For instance, the emperor Konstantinos VII, in a much-quoted

33. The proof is provided by Genesis III.10, which labels Manuel as “our own Achilles” (τὸν καθ' ἡμᾶς Ἀχιλλέα) see: Lesmüller-Werner, Annie; Thurn, Hans. *Iosephi Genesisii regum libri quattuor (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae. Series Berolinensis 14)*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1978: 44 (line 29). See also: Signes Codoñer, Juan. *The Emperor Theophilos and the East (829-842). Court and Frontier in Byzantium during the last phase of Iconoclasm (Birmingham Byzantine and Ottoman Studies 13)*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2014: 95-99.

34. See, for instance, the pioneering studies by Grégoire, Henri. “The historical element in Western and Eastern epics. Digenis — Sayyid-Battal — Dat-el-Hemma — Antar — Chanson de Roland”. *Byzantion*, 16 (1942-1943): 527-544; or Canard, Marius. “Les principaux personnages du roman de chevalerie arabe Dāt al-Himma wa-l-baṭṭāl”. *Arabica*, 8 (1961): 158-173.

35. Bakker, Willem F.; van Gemert, Arnold F. *Ἱστορία τοῦ Βελισσαρίου (Βυζαντινὴ καὶ Νεοελληνικὴ Βιβλιοθήκη 6)*. Athena: Morphotiko Idryma Ethnikes Trapezes, 2007.

36. Criscuolo, Hugo. *Theodosi Diaconi...: 222-235 (Akroasis I, vv. 3-18), 256-257 (Akroasis III, vv. 206-210)*.



passage, refers to “Julius Caesar, the admirable August, that most famous Trajan, as well as Konstantinos, great among the emperors, and Theodosius and those who after them embraced the Christian piety” as paragons of victory against the foreign nations who were attacking the *oecumene*. Konstantinos VII even contrasts their age, when emperors themselves usually led their armies on campaigns, with the period after Heraklios, when generals headed armies, the consequence of this change being that the size of the Empire was substantially reduced.³⁷

This appears as a learned and elaborated reflection, although the Greek in which it is expressed is not particularly rhetorical, for, like many of the treatises composed by Konstantinos VII, it was conceived for the education of his son and successor Romanos II (who, paradoxically, turned out to be uninterested in education, in contrast to his father). However, this does not mean that the references to past emperors are just a piece of antiquarian lore, and that the emperors quoted were not remembered by the population. Let us consider another passage (*ThCont* VI Romanos I, §41a-42) dealing with the exploits of the Armenian general Ioannes Kourkouas and his brother Theophilos, active on the eastern frontier of the Empire during the reign of Romanos I Lakapenos (920-944):

But faithful and earnest in his relation to the emperor Romanos, John the domestikos of the Schools set the borders of the Romans as far as the Euphrates and Tigris and presented Romania with bounties and gifts, and from thence the emperor gained people and an army and ordained that many taxes should be received yearly, and he carried off much booty and weapons and Hagarene captives. For applying himself to the greatest struggles he sacked the cities of the deniers of Christ. Who could relate by name all of these cities which John Kourkouas, domestikos of the Schools, took and made subject to the Romans? In twenty-two years he subdued some thousand or more cities and offered them to the Romania. It was possible to see the wakeful John Kourkouas on the line of battle employing discourses and persuasive exhortations to the Romans and compare and name him a second Trajan or Belisarios; and if one sets the man beside these latter, he will find the manly virtues and brave deeds of Kourkouas to be greater in number. Anyone who longs and wishes to clearly learn the brave deeds of John Kourkouas will find also the narratives stretched over eight books by Manuel the protospatharios and judge.

It is also fitting to relate the brave deeds and manly virtues of the full brother of John the magistros and domestikos of the Schools, the patrikios and general of Chaldia Theophilos. Having become sole general of Chaldia he did not give himself, as the many do who enjoy them, to food and luxury and pleasure; but devoting himself to toil and harshness, to laying waste the villages and territories of the Hagarenes, so that he also carried captive the Hagarenes living in the courageous and all-wondrous Theodosiopolis and the kastro surrounding it and he made them subject to tribute and obedient to the magistros John. Also in Mesopotamia did he shew himself to be an excellent general, and not only shown, but also proven to be so, and appeared and became known as another Solomon of the time of Justinian. This Theophilos also left to posterity his grandson John, called Tzimisces; and honoured as patrikios and general of various themes by reason of the good nature and bravery and courage of the man, he appeared later also under the emperor Nicephore the conqueror called Phokas as magistros and domestikos of the Schools.

37. Pertusi, Agostino. *Costantino Porfirogenito. De thematibus* (Studi e Testi 160). Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1952: prolog 1.8-25.



There are some points to consider here. Above all, the text is written in a deficient Greek according to the classicizing standards of the age, with broken syntax and an abundance of anacolutha. But not only the language itself, but also the style, full of effusive adjectives and some evident exaggerations (“set the borders of the Romans as far as the Euphrates and Tigris”, “subdued some thousand or more cities”) reveals an author without rhetorical training, one probably closer to the military heroes he is praising than to the learned officers of the Palace. However, he apparently used a written source, for he says that the deeds of John were “exposed in eight books” (ἐν ὀκτῶ βιβλίοις ἐκτεθείσας) by a Manouel protospatharios and judge of whom we have no further notice. The point is that, if he had consulted this source, we could expect more specific details in the narrative and, probably, better prose. Accordingly, it appears that the writer was acquainted with a work dealing with Kourkouas’ exploits, but most probably had not read it and was mostly relying on hearsay and autopsy in his report.

The second point to take into account is the fact that among the heroes of the past mentioned here, emperor Trajan is quoted along with general Belisarios, although they, as we said above, apparently belong to two different categories: Trajan was a famous emperor, but not the object of any popular epic, whereas Belisarios was a legendary general praised in oral compositions. Both are, however, linked by the fact that the two of them expanded the borders of the Empire. Trajan pushed Rome’s boundaries to their greatest extent with the annexation of the Mesopotamia into the Empire as a province in the year 115 AD — an ephemeral occupation, for the province reverted to the Persians barely two years later upon the ascent of Hadrian. But, as is known, modern cartographers always like to represent the Roman Empire at this date on their maps, apparently for the same reasons of prestige that caused Trajan to be mentioned here as a forerunner of Kourkouas, who is said to have “set the borders of the Romans as far as the Euphrates and Tigris”. However, whereas the upper-middle Euphrates was incorporated into Byzantine territory, only Tigris’ stream close to the sources was reached (seizure of Amida in 943), nothing comparable to the occupation of Mesopotamia by Trajan, with whom the writer of the passage, a clear partisan of Kourkouas, was eager to compare his hero. Belisarios’ exploits were instead related to the reconquest of the West, as his Eastern campaigns against the Persians did not alter the Empire’s borders, but he is mentioned here anyway as a prototype of the successful general.

There is, however, a third hero of the past mentioned in the passage, to whom less attention has been paid by modern researchers: Justinian’s general Solomon, known for serving under Belisarios in the West, and his governorship in Africa, after the reconquest of the Vandalic kingdom by Belisarios in 534. The historian Prokopios is our main source for him in Africa but says nothing about his activities in Mesopotamia, the reason why he is mentioned in this text. One might be tempted to dismiss this as an error by the author, but the fact is that we know, thanks to a Syrian chronicle, that Solomon was an astute and cunning man, and that he served



under the dux Mesopotamiae Felicissimus³⁸ before he moved to the West, exactly as occurred with Belisarios, so we must consider the possibility that he was also known in songs for his exploits in the East. This is a serious warning against relying entirely on the official records in the written historiographic sources to assess the heroic models followed by the Byzantine troops fighting on the eastern frontier.

Be that as it may, the references to the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, and the territory of Mesopotamia, indicate that, in the view of the contemporary writer of the passage, the activity of the Byzantine troops in the area was mixed with the well-known exploits of Roman heroes of the past. Apparently, these preceding feats were known and justified the aggressive campaigns of the Byzantine troops in the 10th century, who were setting foot anew on formerly Roman territory.

Some years after Kourkouas, Nikephoros II Phokas, who became emperor in 963 partly due to his conquest of Crete, also considerably expanded the boundaries of the Empire through his successful campaigns in Syria, as he himself declares in a speech that the historian Leon the Deacon attributes to him.³⁹ He earnestly endeavoured to recover most of the control of Syria and Palestine from the Arabs, although we scarcely know what his motivations were beyond taking advantage of the opportunity provided by the military superiority of the Byzantine army.⁴⁰ In any case, as is to be expected, we also find in contemporary sources rhetorical passages referring to the territories conquered by him. This is, for instance, the case with a poem by Ioannes Geometres written after the death of Nikephoros II Phokas in 969, slain at the Palace after a plot by his wife Theophano and his nephew Ioannes Tzimiskes, who supplanted him on the throne. The poet mocks Nikephoros, for, despite his brilliant victories in the field, being fatally defeated by a woman. In his verses Geometres has Nikephoros himself boast about his exploits. Assyrian and Phoenician cities, Tarsos in Kilikia, and islands such as Crete and Cyprus are conquered by him, whereas “East and West shrank before my threats, and so did the bliss-giver Nile and rocky Libya” (ἀντολίη τε δύσις τε ἑμὰς ὑπέτρεσαν ἀπειλάς, / ὀλβοδότης Νεῖλος καὶ κραναῆ Λιβύη).⁴¹ Contrary to the previous passage, we do not find in the poem references to the conquerors of the past, who appeared in the passage of *ThCont* quoted above.

38. Greatrex, Geoffrey; Phenix, Robert P.; Horn, Cornelia B. *The Chronicle of Pseudo-Zachariah Rhetor. Church and war in Late Antiquity (Translated Texts for Historians 55)*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011: 318.

39. A speech by Nikephoros II Phokas, still a general, before the patriarch Polieuktos, as he is afraid of the plotting by Joseph Bringas against his life, an undeserved reward to him, for he was the one who “expanded the borders of Rome with the help of the Almighty” (τὰ Ρωμαϊκά μοι πλατύνοντι ὄρια ταῖς τοῦ κρείττονος εὐδοόσεσιν) and “ravaged so much territory of the Agarenes with fire and the sword, razing so many cities from their foundations” (καὶ τοσαύτην μὲν χώραν τῶν Ἀγαρηνῶν πυρὶ καὶ μαχαίρᾳ δηρῶσαμένῳ, τηλικαύτας δὲ πόλεις ἐκ βῆθρων κατεριπώσαντι): *Leonis Diaconi...: 33 (History 2.11)*.

40. Von Grünebaum, Gustav. “Eine poetische Polemik zwischen Byzanz und Baghdad im 10. Jahrhundert”. *Analecta Orientalia*, 14 (1937): 43–64 edits and studies a letter to the caliph al-Muṭṭi’ li-’llāh (946-974) dated to the year 966 and written in Arabic on behalf of the emperor Nikephoros II Phokas, in which the emperor declared his intention to conquer the caliphate and push the Arabs back to the desert.

41. Poem 61 in the edition by van Opstall, Emilie Marlène. *Jean Géomètre: Poèmes en hexamètres et en distiques élégiaques*. Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2008.



This mixture of geographical references to distant lands and evocations of past heroes appears in Byzantium in the popular poetic tradition, and particularly in an epic song, usually known by the name of its protagonist, Digenis Akritas. Although the text was copied in the 12th century, it is based on an older oral tradition going back to the 9th and 10th centuries. The poem even contains references to the Doukas family, some of whose members lived on both sides of the border, their loyalties alternating between the Caliphate and the Empire. In the poem's prologue we find praise for the protagonist, who is said to "have put to flight all Syria, Babylon, the whole Charziane, Armenia and Kappadokia, Amorion and Ikonion, and even the illustrious big fortress, I mean the powerful and well walled Ankyra, and all Smyrna, subduing the regions".⁴² In a later passage, the poet, significantly, refers to the heroes of the past, whose exploits should not be compared with those of the Digenis. He first commands his rivals "to stop writing about Homer and the myths of Achilles, as well as about those of Hector, for they are false". He then mentions Alexander, who ruled over the whole world (κοσμοκράτωρ), without being a Christian. Finally, he lists a series of unknown frontier warriors, the Philoppapos, Kinnamos and Ioannakes we mentioned above, whose exploits pale compared to those of the hero. After that, he lists again the territories he conquered, among which he includes "parts of the Romania" and the "land of Herakles", along with Charziane and Kappadokia.⁴³ We find here the same pattern visible in the poem by Theodosios the Deacon; the same combination of far-fetched geographical references and allusions to mythical and popular heroes. In this case the source is not a learned epic written for the court, however, but rather a popular song, thus confirming that these kinds of evocations were not just a literary topos, but were probably widespread in popular milieus and, somehow, provided the soldiers on the frontier with ideal images of superhuman warriors.

The same or very similar stance is adopted by a later writer whose cultural background seems to be very close to that of the anonymous writer of the Kourkouas' passage from *ThCont*; namely, the Byzantine general Kekaumenos, who was active in the 11th century and wrote a kind of memoir recording his experiences on the battlefield, in the provinces, and at the court. Kekaumenos had done some reading, and possessed a certain degree of knowledge of the past. His Greek was rather low, but, significantly, his arguments feature some points in common with the passages we commented on above. Thus, Kekaumenos, when giving advice to the emperor regarding his government of the Empire, exhorts him not to remain at the capital, but rather to visit the provinces, as the emperors did who resided in Byzantium, such as Constantine the Great, Constantius, Julian, Jovian and Theodosius. He emphasizes that the countries then enjoyed peace (which is, evidently, not true, for the East was invaded by the Goths after Adrianople in 376, when Theodosius came to the throne), and then lists the territories that "paid tribute to Rome" (ὑπόφοροι ἦσαν Ῥωμαίους), namely "the whole Europe and Libya, the most important part

42. Jeffreys, Elizabeth. *Digenis Akritis...*: Song I, vv. 5-12.

43. Jeffreys, Elizabeth. *Digenis Akritis...*: Song IV, vv. 27-53.



of Asia till the Euphrates region, and the territory of Adiabene, Armenia, Syria, Phoenicia, Palestine, Egypt, and even the legendary and great Babylon (ἡ μεγάλη καὶ θρυλλομένη Βαβυλών)⁴⁴. Among the territories listed, the mythical Babylon stands out and refers us back to the short-lived conquest of Trajan, who is one of the few emperors of the past whose exploits are singled out and described by Kekaumenos; specifically, in connection with the conquest of Dacia.⁴⁵

Kekaumenos refers to other figures from the past who provide models for the generals to follow, leaders such as Pyrrhos of Epirus, Hannibal of Carthage, Scipio and, once more, Belisarios. He mentions that “learned men” (φιλόπονοι) could add other names to the list, thus confirming that his references may have been drawn from written sources.⁴⁶ In fact, he mentions Dio Cassius among his sources, exactly as does Theodosios the Deacon.⁴⁷ But, again, it should not be ruled out that some of these figures may have been popular among the troops, who had knowledge of them by other means. This is precisely what Michael Psellos, one of the most learned intellectuals of the Byzantine age, seemed to state in the 11th century when he mentioned in his *Chronographia* all the famous deeds “of which we know by hearsay that happened among these Trajans and Hadrians and even earlier, among the Caesares Augusti, and before them, among Alexander son of Philipp”.⁴⁸

4. Conclusions

When the Komnenian noble family, closely related to the eastern landowners of Anatolia who defended the Empire against the Muslims, came to the throne towards the end of the 11th century, the provincial epic and its heroes came to the fore. It was a time when some vernacular literature began to be written, like the *Digenis*, thus confirming that references to the heroes of Antiquity and the old frontiers of Rome permeated popular milieus, at least to some extent, perhaps out of nostalgia for an era of bygone glory. Although we should expect in the official records of the 10th and 11th centuries more substantial references to the reconquest of old territories, based on the historical rights of the Empire, the reality is that these are generally absent from our sources, where the stress is generally laid on the right of the Empire to defend its lands. When references to the mythical or heroic warriors of the past appear, they seem to reflect more popular feelings than imperial ideology. Thus, when Anna Komnene wrote that his father Alexios “widened the

44. Litavrin, Gennadij Grigor’evič. *Sovety i Rasskazy Kekavmena, socienie vizantijskogo polosovodca XI veka*. Moskav: Aleteia, 1972: 314 (reedited in Sankt Petersburg: Aleteia, 2003).

45. Litavrin, Gennadij Grigor’evič. *Sovety i Rasskazy Kekavmena...*: 284.

46. Litavrin, Gennadij Grigor’evič. *Sovety i Rasskazy Kekavmena...*: 164.

47. Litavrin, Gennadij Grigor’evič. *Sovety i Rasskazy Kekavmena...*:146.

48. ὅποσα ἀκοῆ ἴσμεν παρὰ τοῖς Τραϊανοῖς ἐκεῖνοις καὶ Ἀδριανοῖς καὶ ἔτι ἄνω παρὰ τοῖς Σεβαστοῖς γενόμενα Καίσαρσι, καὶ πρὸ ἐκείνων παρὰ Ἀλεξάνδρῳ τῷ τοῦ Φιλίππου: Michael Psellos III.8, *Michaelis Pselli Chronographia*, ed. Diether Roderich Reinsch. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014: 35 (lines 17-19).



circle of the Empire" (ἡῤῥονέ τε τὸν κύκλον τῆς βασιλείας) and "put as limits in the sunset the Sea of Adria and in the rising the Euphrates and Tigris", she is paying tribute once more to the legendary borders of the Empire during Trajan's time. She further states that the emperor "would have renewed the former prosperity of the Empire" (καὶ ἂν εἰς τὴν προτέραν εὐδαιμονίαν τὴν βασιλείαν ἀνενώσατο), had it not been for "the continuous warfare, the fatigue and the constant risks contained his offensive" (ἀπέστησαν τοῦ ὀρμήματος).⁴⁹ However, this short reference, by alluding to the *renovatio imperii*, is only echoing popular yearnings and trying to disguise the fact that Alexios fought for the survival of the Empire against powerful enemies, both in the East (the Seljuks) and the West (the Normans).

I have tried in this short overview to offer new perspectives on the Byzantines' perceptions of the offensive wars waged by the Empire on the eastern frontier in the 10th century. Until now scholars have mainly relied on the official sources (written by members of the Constantinopolitan elite), and have taken their statements at face value, contrasting different views and putting them in context, in order to come up with some conclusions. This approach was urgently needed to generate an initial picture of the overall scenario, but, as I have sought to demonstrate, a meticulous philological analysis of the texts is vital to their proper assessment. In fact, many of the passages studied and quoted in scholarly debate should not be approached without adequate contextualization. Rather, they must be considered taking into account their sources and backgrounds in order to grasp the messages they were transmitting to contemporary audiences.

This kind of approach has allowed us to see that arguments legitimating the war were reused and rewritten in the historical sources and that, accordingly, they are of a limited value if we do not consider all the parts of the chain in relation to each other, taking into account both additions and eliminations. In the case of the speeches by Bringas and Nikephoros on the campaign to wrest the island of Crete from the Arabs, as transmitted in *ThCont*, this analysis has proven useful, as we were able to see, in the removal of a reference to the holiness of the fallen soldiers, that this concept was, perhaps, more present than expected in the contemporary debate. The law supposedly promulgated by Nikephoros upholding the fallen soldiers as martyrs was probably an exception in terms of the official conception of the war, but did have some popular support, as is proven by the Kappadokian fresco of the Byzantine soldiers spearing the devil. And there is the possibility that the sanctification of the soldiers may have been calculated to bolster the Byzantines' reconquest efforts.

The existence of a popular perception of the war, one that we can discern lying under the surface of the official sources, has also informed our analysis of a series of topical references to the old mythical and historical heroes found in some 10th-century sources. These heroes are portrayed as conquerors and victors of the enemies of the Empire, pushing its boundaries as far as the Tigris river, such that the

49. *Annae Comnenae Alexias (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae. Series Berolinensis 40)*, eds. Athanasios Kambylis, Diether Roderich Reinsch. Berlin-New York: De Gruyter, 2001: 6 (lines 11-13).



legendary Babylon (close to Baghdad) reverted again to control by Constantinople after Trajan's ephemeral occupation of it between 115-117 AD. Usually these allusions are understood as historic references to the past, written by learned authors, but we have seen that they also appear in popular traditions, so that the possibility arises that, in fact, accounts and a consciousness of past glories were, in fact, more prevalent among common soldiers than is usually believed. This popular feeling of continuity may also have buoyed the Byzantines' reconquest campaigns.

