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a cura di
MARCO BETTALLI ED ELENA FRANCHI



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Byzantium's amphibious ways of war, 810-961

by MARK CHARLES FISSEL

ABSTRACT. The period 810-961 witnessed amphibious warfare's central role in the resurgence of the Byzantine Empire. Tailored to Byzantium's defensive strategic culture and resilient imperial institutions, the Byzantines relied upon multifarious types of amphibious ways of war: major expeditions, defensive operations, and raiding. Attempts to reconquer Crete from the Andalus-Arab Emirate frequently managed to deploy forces upon Crete but failed to re-establish Byzantine hegemony. This essay proposes that precise synchronization of leadership and logistics finally made possible the reconquest in 960-961. We assess the failed expeditions, Nikephoros Phokas' triumph, and other amphibious actions (defensive as well as offensive). Military leadership stemmed from an aristocratic military elite as well as commanders of genius who understood the management of material capabilities. Another factor in Byzantium's ways of war were successive incarnations of its marine troops. The latter fought not only major campaigns but excelled in limited actions that harnessed long distance force projection serving the Empire's changing strategic position. In the course of our analysis we consider how traditional military history might come to terms with the unique nature of Byzantine primary sources, written and illustrated.

KEYWORDS. CRETE, AMPHIBIOUS OPERATIONS, MARINES, NIKEPHOROS PHOKAS, LOGISTICS, LEADERSHIP, COMMAND, INSTITUTIONS, CHANDAX, THESSALONIKI, CONSTANTINOPLE, EMPIRE, NARRATIVE, GIOVANNI SKYLITZES, GIOVANNI KAMINIATES, DAMIETTA, EMIRATE, ARABS, EXPEDITI

For roughly 137 years, even the formidable and resilient Byzantine Empire found reconquest from the Emirate occupying Crete to be a frustratingly elusive objective. Six, perhaps seven, reasonably well-equipped expeditions against Crete failed.¹ The imperial policy of careful management

¹ One should not be surprised regarding the legend circulated, that he who conquered Crete would be elevated to the purple. Meredith Riedel, "Nikephoros II Phokas and Orthodox Military Martyrs", *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures*, 41, 2, (2015), p. 128. The author is indebted to Georgios Theotokis for counseling a non-specialist in his field. Errors



Fig. 1. John Skylitzes, *Synopsis Historion*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Vitr. 26-2, f.38r. Arab amphibious force enroute to Crete, circa 824-828. Source: Wikimedia Commons. See p. 45 in John Skylitzes, *A Synopsis of Byzantine History 811-1057*, John Wortley, ed., Cambridge, CUP, 2010.

of limited resources (manpower, ready money, victuals, vessels, etc.) was sorely tested in these amphibious operations (which were inherently extraordinarily complex, demanding precise planning and thus easily thrown into disarray). Failed expeditions worsened the strategic position of the Empire by squandering resources needed elsewhere for requisite defensive purposes.²

Nikephoros Phokas' successes upon Crete in 960-961 are a paradigm of how Byzantium's utilization of amphibious operations illumines the Empire's strategy, tactics, logistics, and more. The undertaking in 960 illustrates a principle of amphibious operations, that both quantitative and qualitative requirements must

and misinterpretations are entirely the responsibility of the present author. Profuse thanks, too, to Virgilio Ilari, for translation, an impromptu tutorial and so much else.

2 John Haldon, *Byzantium at War AD 600-1453*, Oxford, Osprey, 2002, pp. 36-41.



Fig. 2. John Skylitzes, *Synopsis Historion*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Vitr. 26-2, f.39. Skylitzes relates that Andalus-Arab Abu Hafs (“Apochaps”) burned his boats after the successful landing on Crete. Source: Wikimedia Commons. See p. 45 in John Skylitzes, *A Synopsis of Byzantine History 811-1057*, John Wortley, ed.

be met or exceeded. Quantitatively, Phokas’s invasion and siege were of greater scale than what had been attempted before. Qualitatively, the campaign proves John Guilmartin’s assertion “that in amphibious operations success is highly - *perhaps uniquely* - dependent on the skill, competence and foresight of senior commanders”³ The campaign that commenced in 960 got everything right: amphibious operations and siegecraft well-executed, timely resupply from Constantinople, all overseen by an exemplary commander. That comparatively rare *decisive* victory prompts military historians to inquire why the enterprises of *circa* 824-826, 843, 866, 911-912, and 949 faltered. Did the ill-fated campaigns founder due to (1) lapses in leadership and/or (2) formidable logistical challenges involving both amphibious landings and a lengthy siege (that of Chandax [Heraklion])? Precise synchronization of command and logistics is essential in amphibious warfare.⁴

3 “The Siege of Malta, 1565”, in D.J.B. Trim and M.C. Fissel (eds), *Amphibious Warfare 1000-1700. Commerce, State Formation and European expansion*, Leiden, Brill, 2007, p. 179, italics mine.

4 D.J.B. Trim and M.C. Fissel, “Conclusion” in D.J.B. Trim and M.C. Fissel, (eds), *Amphibious Warfare*, pp. 432-439; On logistics, Lucas McMahon, “Logistical modelling of a sea-borne expedition in the Mediterranean: the case of the Byzantine invasion of Crete in AD 960”, *Mediterranean Historical Review*, 36, 1, (2021), pp. 63-94.



Fig. 3. John Skylitzes, *Synopsis Historion*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Vitr. 26-2, f.34. Michael II the Stammerer, Emperor from 820-829, was an expert military commander and spent most of his reign at war. Source: Wikimedia Commons. See p. 46 in John Skylitzes, *A Synopsis of Byzantine History 811-1057*, John Wortley, ed.

Failed expeditions

Muslim control of Crete, initiated around 824 and accomplished in stages, empowered additional Arab incursions against imperial territories launched from that island.⁵ [Fig. 1 e 2] From its increasingly well-fortified capital at Chandax, the Anadlusi-founded Emirate lorded over Aegean commerce. Trade routes became vulnerable to predators operating out of Cretan ports. The Emirate was supported materially by Arab communities in Egypt and North Africa, spheres of influence that Byzantium had lost in the seventh century. Furthermore, the Emirate was as economically viable as it was optimally situated. According to Vassilios Christides, “. . . the non-monetary economy of Byzantine Crete was changed to a strong monetary economy, raising highly the standard of living of its inhabitants”⁶. Coupled with its losses of Sicily and Cyprus, Byzantium faced a

5 Chronology remains controversial. See Warren Treadgold, “The Chronological Accuracy of the *Chronicle* of Symeon the Logothete for the years 813-845”, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 33, (1979), p. 167, citing evidence that the process of the conquest of Crete may have occurred 826-828.

6 Vassilios Christides, *The Conquest of Crete by the Arabs (CA. 824). A turning point in the struggle between Byzantium and Islam*, Athens, Cyprus Research Centre, 1984, p. 121.



Fig. 4. John Skylitzes, *Synopsis Historion*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Vitr. 26-2, f. 39ra. The death of Damianos and rout of the Byzantine expeditionary force. Source: Wikimedia Commons. See p. 46 in John Skylitzes, *A Synopsis of Byzantine History 811-1057*, John Wortley, ed.

growing strategic predicament. Crete had to be regained, necessitating a complex and expensive offensive action utilizing amphibious operations in what had become strategically speaking a comparatively distant theater. Muslim expansionism further impacted the *Kibyrrhaeotic* fleet (referenced below), renewing the need to see it “refitted and reorganized”⁷.

Michael II [Fig. 3] dispatched forces to repulse the Arab presence spreading from Crete’s southern coast. The imperial “favorite” Photeinos voyaged to the island and reconnoitered the location and size of Arab forces. He returned to Constantinople, obtained reinforcements under the command of *protospatharios* Damianos, Count of the Imperial Stables. This combined command descended upon Crete. The two men disembarked their forces and risked battle⁸. Damianos was slain in combat and Byzantium’s forces routed.⁹ [Fig. 4] A second attempt followed *circa* 825-6: Krateros, general of the *Kibyrrhaeotae*, the above-men-

7 T. C. Lounghis, *Byzantium in the Eastern Mediterranean: Safeguarding East Roman Identity*, Nicosia, Cyprus Research Centre, 2010, p. 84.

8 Makrypoulias, “Byzantine Expeditions”, pp. 348-351,

9 Dimitris Tsougarakis, *Byzantine Crete. From the 5th Century to the Venetian Conquest*, Athens, Historical Publications St. D Basilopoulos, 1988, p. 34.



Fig. 5. John Skylitzes, *Synopsis Historion*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Vitr. 26-2, f. 40ra. Krateros descends upon Crete, gains initial victory. Source: Wikimedia Commons. See pp 47-48 in John Skylitzes, *A Synopsis of Byzantine History 811-1057*, John Wortley, ed.

tioned naval theme, conveyed by perhaps seventy vessels, executed an amphibious landing, engaged and defeated the defenders. [Fig. 5] However, insufficient post-battle wariness allowed a nocturnal counterattack by the Emirate's rallied forces, scuttling Byzantine victory¹⁰ [Fig. 6]. Scale and operational expertise did not foment the calamity for either Photeinos' and Damianos' expedition, nor for Krateros' invasion. Both "involved considerable naval forces"¹¹. Krateros' demise [Fig. 7] sealed the fate of the *Kibyrrhaeotae*. The first *Kibyrrhaeotic* period (732-825/6) ended in failure.¹²

On 18 March 843, *logothetes* Theoktistos (the foremost member of the regency council, but not a career military man) put to sea as had his predecessors with a substantial flotilla¹³ [Fig. 8]. Theoktistos' operational commander was *magister* Sergios Niketiates, who put troops ashore on Crete and temporarily re-established imperial authority in that vicinity. According to Dimitris Tsougarakis,

10 Skylitzes, John, *A Synopsis of Byzantine History 811-1057*, John Wortley, (ed) Cambridge, CUP, 2010, p. 48.

11 Tsougrakis, *Byzantine Crete*, p. 43.

12 Lounghis, *Byzantium*, pp. 84-85.

13 Makrypoulias, "Byzantine Expeditions", p. 351; Tsougrakis, *Byzantine Crete*, p. 46.



Fig. 6. John Skylitzes, *Synopsis Historion*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Vitr. 26-2, f. 40rb. Cretan Arabs execute a surprise night attack, slaughtering the drowsy Byzantines. Source: Wikimedia Commons. See p 48 in John Skylitzes, *A Synopsis of Byzantine History 811-1057*, John Wortley, ed.

“Theoktistos landed safely on a part of the island not yet subjugated by the Arabs (...)”¹⁴. Theoktistos (again, who was a co-regent) was supposedly deceived into sailing for Constantinople by a tale of intrigue in which Empress Theodora had elevated a new Emperor. The Byzantine garrison would be overcome and massacred. Flawed command figures here: “The army, left behind without a leader, was attacked by the Arabs and annihilated”¹⁵. Imperial politics again confounded a Cretan expedition, in 866, organized by the *de facto* ruler Bardas the Caesar (although led in person by Michael III)¹⁶. The forces sojourned as far as the mouth of the River Meander, at Kepoi. There Bardas was assassinated, witnessed by Michael III, at the hand of the future Basil I and his entourage. [Fig. 9] With the architect of the expedition dead, that operation was stillborn.

Leo VI [Fig. 10] in 911 turned to *logothete* Himerios to mobilize an attack on Crete. The ensuing hostilities lasted inconclusively for eight months. In April-May 912 Himerios withdrew, despairing that he had been unable to achieve a comprehensive occupation of the island. Enroute to Constantinople his fleet was

¹⁴ Tsougarakis, *Byzantine Crete*, p. 47.

¹⁵ Tsougarakis, *Byzantine Crete*, p. 47.

¹⁶ Makrypoulis, “Byzantine Expeditions”, pp. 351-352; Tsougarakis, *Byzantine Crete*, p. 49



Fig. 7. John Skylitzes, *Synopsis Historion*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Vitr. 26-2, f. 41a. Narrowly escaping the carnage, Krateros flees but is hunted down and crucified on Kos. Source: Wikimedia Commons. See p 48 in John Skylitzes, *A Synopsis of Byzantine History 811-1057*, John Wortley, ed.

waylaid and heavily damaged off Chios¹⁷. An operational history could determine causes of failure, but no such evidence survives, apparently.

In 949 Constantine Gongyles commanded more than 100 vessels, crews (including marines) numbering nearly 20,000 men. Although not quite the scale of the 911 expedition, still Gongyles succeeded in landing his troops. However, he committed an error inexcusable in conducting the art of amphibious warfare: he did not adequately secure his army and establish a defensive position, nor conducted reconnaissance. Recognizing the vulnerabilities of the Byzantines, the Arabs fell upon and routed the imperial forces. [Fig. 11] “The sources agree that the responsibility for failure fell upon the commander-in-chief”.¹⁸ The leaders of the failed Cretan expeditions were not, as far as I can understand, members of Byzantium’s military elite.¹⁹ The latter knew tactical fundamentals and would

17 Makrypoulias, “Byzantine Expeditions”, p. 352; Tsougarakis, *Byzantine Crete*, pp. 53-55.

18 Eric McGeer, *Sowing the Dragon’s Teeth: Byzantine Warfare in the Tenth Century*, Washington, DC, Dumbarton Oaks Studies, 2008, p. 359; Alice-Mary Talbot and Denis F. Sullivan, (eds), *The History of Leo the Deacon. Byzantine Military Expansion in the Tenth Century* Washington DC, Dumbarton Oaks, 2005, pp. 58-59; Tsougarakis, *Byzantine Crete*, pp. 54 note 128, 58.

19 For example, John Skylitzes’ observations in *Synopsis* p. 229, including note 18, and pp. 236-237.



Fig. 8. John Skylitzes, *Synopsis Historion*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Vitr. 26-2, f.70. Theoktistos *logothete* advised, as depicted, three consecutive emperors on matters of religion, diplomacy, and strategy. It is argued that he became the most influential personality in the Empire, especially during the minority of Michael III. He would be assassinated by Bardas, who then inherited the problem of taking Crete by amphibious means. Source: Wikimedia Commons.



Fig. 9. John Skylitzes, *Synopsis Historion*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Vitr. 26-2, f. 80a. Setting out on campaign with the Emperor to reconquer Crete, Bardas is slain and mutilated by the chamberlain (the future Basil I) and co-conspirators. Source: Wikimedia Commons. See pp 112-113 in John Skylitzes, *A Synopsis of Byzantine History 811-1057*, John Wortley, ed.

have fared better than court-appointed commanders. Command faltered, hand in glove with logistical weaknesses, stymying vaunted Byzantine institutional strength. Nevertheless, Byzantine efficiency in mounting amphibious campaigns and executing difficult disembarkations remains evident.

The achievement of 960-961

Nikephoros Phokas' campaign of 960-961 was likely double the size of 949's expedition, for which an inventory of the latter survives.²⁰ Reportedly every theme in the Empire contributed. Possibly the Imperial Fleet of Constantinople sailed with 100 dromons, 200 *chelandia*, 308 transport ships, wafting to Crete perhaps 77,000 soldiers (an estimation that seems rather excessive). The expeditionary forces rendezvoused, rallied, and set sail from Phygela (according to Skylitzes) near Ephesus on 13 July 960.²¹ No Muslim navy intercepted the flotilla.

²⁰ Anthony Kaldellis, *Streams of Gold, Rivers of Blood. The Rise and Fall of Byzantium, 955 A.D. to the First Crusade*, Oxford, OUP, 2017, p. 36.

²¹ Tsougarakis, *Byzantine Crete*, pp. 62-63; Skylitzes, *Synopsis*, p. 240, note 4; in the latter



Fig. 10. John Skylitzes, *Synopsis Historion*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Vitr. 26-2, f. 105. Leo VI commissioned Himerios first (apparently) to destroy Arab naval forces wherever they were in the eastern Mediterranean, and second, the reconquest of Crete was a subsequent endeavor, according to research by John Haldon. Source: Wikimedia Commons. See pp. 185-186, especially footnote 128 on p 185 in John Skylitzes, *A Synopsis of Byzantine History 811-1057*, John Wortley, ed. Also, Tsougarakis, *Byzantine Crete*, p 52.

Intelligence-gathering was performed well, a testament to Byzantine adeptness at amphibious expeditions. Cartography had been refined from the experiences of previous assaults on the island. Reconnoitering commenced as soon as men were ashore. The landing went unopposed, according to Theophanes Continuatus and Theodosios the Deacon (both sources being “variants of the continuation of the *Chronicle* of Symeon the Logothete”).²² Leo the Deacon, however,

footnote the editors of Skylitzes, *Synopsis*, suggest “250 vessels” made up the expeditionary force.

²² Anthony Kaldellis, “The Byzantine Conquest of Crete (961 AD), Prokopios’ Vandal War, and the Continuator of the Chronicle of Symeon”, *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 39, 2 (2015), p. 302; see also Alice-Mary Talbot and Denis F. Sullivan, (eds), *The History of Leo the Deacon. Byzantine Military Expansion in the Tenth Century*, Washington DC, Dumbarton Oaks, 2005, p. 61, note 43.



Fig. 11. John Skylitzes, *Synopsis Historion*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Vitr. 26-2, f. 138ra. Cretan Arabs capitalize on the unwary encampment of Byzantine amphibious troops, killing some and driving the remainder back to their ships. Source: Wikimedia Commons. See pp. 236-237 in John Skylitzes, *A Synopsis of Byzantine History 811-1057*, John Wortley, ed.

details an engagement near the littoral.²³ Leo relied upon the above-mentioned sources, particularly Theodosios' poem. That latter source, Anthony Kaldellis has discovered, cribbed from Procopius' account of Belisarius' 533-534 expedition into North Africa.²⁴ Similarly, Leo's recount of the siege of Chandax "is modelled on a siege in Agathias" derived from Procopius, as John Haldon's research revealed.²⁵ Kaldellis also suggests that Leo's tantalizing martial details derive from military manuals. "It is suspicious that he uses more technical terms and information about battle arrays than any other Byzantine historian".²⁶ How are Leo's descriptions of the amphibious landing as well as the besiegement of value to historians?²⁷ According to Kyle Sinclair, "Leo's report of a battle on shore is rather improbable" given that Nikephoros Phokas appears to have succeeded in

23 Leo's work does assume a utilitarian approach that makes tactical detail desirable in history-writing. Leonora Neville, "Why Did the Byzantines Write History?", *Proceedings of the 23 International Congress of Byzantine Studies, Belgrade, 22-27 August 2016*, The Serbian National Committee of AIEB (2016-7), p. 268.

24 Kaldellis, "Byzantine Conquest", pp. 302-311.

25 Kaldellis, "Byzantine Conquest", p. 311, note 24.

26 Kaldellis, "Byzantine Conquest", p. 310.

27 The philological dimension, in terms of historical development and the language that attempts to explain it, is not addressed herein; Wahlgren, Staffan. "Symeon the Logothete: Some Philological Remarks", *Byzantion*, 71, 1 (2001) pp. 251-62, *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44172551>. Accessed 22 Oct. 2023.

arriving offshore undetected.²⁸ Still, a chance sighting of the Byzantine convoy under sail might have alerted the Andalus-Arab defenders sufficiently to muster troops at the likely point of disembarkation.

Whether Byzantine amphibious operations fought against Vandals in 533 or Andalus-Arabs in 960-1, Leo's account conveys the Empire's amphibious ways of war. According to his representation, Nikephoros secured a beachhead, formed up his forces briskly, and was prepared for battle when Muslim forces appeared. If the Byzantine cataphract cavalry charged the enemy, that is particularly impressive, as disembarking



Fig. 12. Nikephoros Phokas, master of combined operations. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

and arraying equine troops was complicated and time-consuming (“For he had brought ramps with him on the transport ships, which he set up on the beach, and thus transferred the army, fully armed and mounted, from the sea on to dry land”).²⁹ The tripartite advance of Byzantine infantry formations (“studded . . . thickly with shields and spears”) cracked the defenders’ configuration, sending the “*barbaroi*” scurrying behind the walls of Chandax.³⁰ John Skylitzes, too, acknowledges a clash at the landing (“[I]mmediately upon disembarkation [Nikephoros Phokas] became embroiled with the Hagarenes who were there and offering him resistance. These he put to flight and safely disembarked both himself and

28 Kyle James Sinclair, *War writing in Middle Byzantine historiography. Sources, influences and trends*, University of Birmingham PhD thesis, 2012, p. 53.

29 *Leo the Deacon*, p 61; see analysis on p. 40.

30 *Leo the Deacon*, p. 61.



Fig. 13. John Skylitzes, *Synopsis Historion*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Vitr. 26-2, f. 140. A tripartite illustration: amphibious craft protected, maintained and at the ready; a secure and orderly siege camp; the improved fortification around Chandax. Source: Wikimedia Commons. See pp. 240-241 in John Skylitzes, *A Synopsis of Byzantine History 811-1057*, John Wortley, ed.

his army”).³¹ Leo reports a set piece battle; Skylitzes credits the defenders with (wisely) attacking when Byzantine “marines” transferred, precariously, from the rolling surf to the unsteady sands of the littoral, when the assault was assailable. Although chronicling different types of operations, both Leo and Skylitzes portray Nikephoros Phokas as a skilled amphibious warrior who observed strictly the protocols of Byzantine amphibious operations [Fig. 12].

The commander understood that the key to defeating the Emirate was to take the capital, no mean feat. Phokas further consolidated his initial position: he “ (...) set up a strong camp which he fortified with a deep trench and wooden palisade” near Almyros beach (located just to the west of his objective).³² Having safeguarded their landing zone, the Byzantines marched straightaway to Chandax, thinking to storm it immediately, whilst driving the rural inhabitants before them. Again, mindful of his army’s exposure, a siege camp was erected “ (...) which [Nikephoros Phokas] securely fortified on all sides with a palisade and

³¹ Skylitzes, *Synopsis*, p. 240.

³² McGeer, *Sowing*, p. 352, quoting Leo the Deacon; Skylitzes, *Synopsis* describes “a strong palisade surrounded by a deep ditch fortified with stakes and staves”, p. 240.



Fig. 14. John Skylitzes, *Synopsis Historion*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Vitr. 26-2, f. 32ra. Detail of sappers wielding pickaxes from operations against Constantinople by Thomas the Slav. See also, Christos G. Makrypoulias, "Siege Warfare: The Art of Re-capture", *A Companion to the Byzantine Culture of War*, ca. 300-1204, edited by Yannis Stouraitis, pp. 356-393.

trench".³³ [Fig. 13] Operations around Chandax, such as Nikephoros Pastilas's fatal reconnoitering in force, are critiqued via an *adlocutio* delivered by Nikephoros Phokas.³⁴ Skylitzes, too, heaps encomia upon Nikephoros: "For seven months in all he employed every kind of siege-engine; he threw down the walls of the

³³ McGeer, *Sowing*, p. 352, quoting Leo the Deacon; see the comments of the editors of *Leo the Deacon* on why and when the camp was established, p. 62, note 47.

³⁴ The differing treatment of Pastilas by Theodosius and by Leo exemplifies the challenges posed by primary sources when used by modern military historians, as in these pages. See Sinclair, *War writing*, pp. 53-54.

cities and occupied the strongholds. On 7 March (...) he ravaged the strongest city of all (...) Chandax (...) and took prisoner the emir of the island”.³⁵ In the end those grimy agents of siegecraft, sappers and catapultists, breached Chandax’s towers and walls, allowing foot soldiers to batter their way through and sack the city.³⁶ [Fig. 14 e 15]

Given near-contemporaneous accounts, how reliable are chronicles of the Cretan campaign?³⁷ As in studying the warfare of ancient Egypt, accounts of the reconquest do not lend themselves to the composition of traditional military history in the Western European model. Confirming factual accuracy and tracing causation through linear narrative are problematic given the nature of the sources.³⁸ That said, Theodosios the Deacon claimed access to manuscripts of the greatest relevance, “frontline dispatches from Nikephoros to the Emperor”.³⁹ However, possession of primary evidence did not keep Theodosios from telling the story in a fashion that resonated Biblical motifs suiting his literary purposes.⁴⁰ While Leo the Deacon’s representations of Nikephoros Phokas’ discourses (and other vignettes) are imaginative, tangible principles of the Byzantine approach to amphibious warfare (and siegecraft) are expressed explicitly throughout (and subtly referenced albeit obliquely to written works from classical antiquity). Despite Leo’s embellishments (consider his estimation that the Muslim force discovered lying in wait to counterattack the Byzantines numbered 40,000!), the martial protocols that Leo credits to Nikephoros Phokas’s prosecution of the siege, such as surveying the landscape in person and clandestinely reconnoitering an enemy

35 Skylitzes, *Synopsis*, p. 240; see also p. 241, note 7.

36 Kaldellis, *Streams*, p. 37; analysis of Leo the Deacon’s description of the besiegement of Chandax is pp. 33-36 in *Leo the Deacon*.

37 See the seven “unwritten rules for historical accuracy” in Warren Treadgold, “The Unwritten Rules for Writing Byzantine History”, *Proceedings of the 23 International Congress of Byzantine Studies, Belgrade, 22-27 August 2016*, The Serbian National Committee of AIEB (2016-7), p. 292

38 On Byzantine narrative, “unhistory”, and more, see Anthony Kaldellis, “The Manufacture of History in the Later Tenth and Eleventh Centuries: Rhetorical Templates and Narrative Ontologies”, *Proceedings of the 23 International Congress of Byzantine Studies, Belgrade, 22-27 August 2016*, The Serbian National Committee of AIEB (2016-7), pp. 294-296, 303-304.

39 Arie Neuhauser, “‘For Such Was the Wailing Lamentation of Crete’: Theodosios the Deacon’s Praise of a Massacre during the Conquest of Crete”, *Diogenes* 12 (2021), p. 40.

40 *Ibid*, p. 46 especially.



Fig. 15. John Skylitzes, *Synopsis Historion*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Vitr. 26-2, f. 72; Rather stylishly dressed Byzantine pickaxe-carrying sappers at the siege of Samosata in 859, the campaign led by Bardas and Michael III.

position, suggest that the author knew the art of war not only from firsthand accounts but also from Byzantium's substantial literature of military science. "The high quality of training of officers . . . was based on a plethora of very important military manuals the contents of which was being continuously, systematically and methodically updated and enriched."⁴¹ Lucas McMahon suggests that by distinguishing the classical Roman models in Byzantine military manuals from more contemporary practices and innovations recorded in the accounts, a more accurate rendering of the art of war emerges.⁴² Indeed, Byzantine military manuals emphasized leadership and the complexity of warfare. The latter themes, dominant in the Byzantine conceptualization of war, address a fundamental challenge for a multiplex type of warfare such as amphibious operations.

An interplay clearly exists between historical narratives on one hand, and util-

41 John Karkazis, "The Byzantine Navy. A synopsis of battles, admirals, and tactics (preprint edition, unpaginated) <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339487745>; also, Salvatore Cosentino, "Writing about War in Byzantium", *Revista de Historia das Ideias*, 30 (2009), pp. 83-99, especially 94-99.

42 McMahon, "Logistical modelling", pp. 65-66.



Fig. 16.
Nikephoros
Phokas, master
of the art of
war. Source:
Wikimedia
Commons.



Fig. 17. John Skylitzes, *Synopsis Historion*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Vitr. 26-2, f. 127a; A twelfth century depiction of tenth-century poliorcetics as an example of Byzantine siegecraft where swordsmen scale assault ladders. General John Kourkouas *circa* 934 lays siege to Melitene in a series of campaigns expanding the Empire. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

itarian military treatises on the other. Of what use is visual evidence, specifically the above-mentioned Madrid Skylitzes illuminated manuscript created at the court of Roger II, a Norman? This essay incorporates drawings from that source, an artistic achievement that “transforms Byzantine history to suit Sicilian needs by subverting imperial ideology . . . and denying Constantinople’s providential favor and political preeminence”.⁴³ Obviously, we cannot categorize as “traditional” military history the iconography and representations of amphibious operations found in the hundreds of drawings in the Madrid Skylitzes MS.⁴⁴ Although parallels exist between Norman amphibious operations and the mid-Byzantine art of amphibious warfare, the illustrations presented in this essay are renderings of the actions of one amphibious Eastern Mediterranean power by a court culture that postured as heir.⁴⁵

43 Elena N. Boeck, *Imagining the Byzantine Past. The Perception of History in the Illustrated Manuscripts of Skylitzes and Manasses*, Cambridge, CUP, 2015, p. 10

44 Skylitzes, John, *Synopsis Historion*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional d’España, Vitr. 26-2. A pdf file from the BN provided via the Library of Congress by hyperlink was used for this essay: <https://www.loc.gov/item/2021667859>.

45 On Norman amphibious actions, Georgios Theotokis, *The campaigns of the Norman dukes*



Fig. 18. John Skylitzes, *Synopsis Historion*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Vitr. 26-2, f.32rab. Archery and Byzantine siege warfare as illustrated in Thomas the Slav's assaults on Constantinople, "a" showing mounted archers providing cover for sappers (see also Illustration 14 above); "b" presenting a siege engine used in tandem with foot archers to protect sappers hammering at the walls of the Blachernae quarter of Constantinople. Source: Wikimedia Commons.



Fig. 19. John Skylitzes, *Synopsis Historion*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Vitr. 26-2, f.151. Detail of Byzantine catapulters bombarding fortifications, possibly the artist's impression of a tenth to eleventh-century equivalent of a trebuchet. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

A host of artists from differing backgrounds and cultures interpreted through respective “social meanings” the vignettes they were commissioned to depict. Variations in artistic style, skill, ethnocentric orientation, and even pigments, make the Madrid Skylitzes MS idiosyncratic. Elena Boeck observes something significant for military historians: “Divergences in representations of Byzantine imperial costumes and Arabs indicate that each artist working in isolation drew

of southern Italy against Byzantium, in the years between 1071 and 1108 AD, <https://theses.gla.ac.uk/1884/>; Georgios Theotokis, *Warfare in the Norman Mediterranean*, Boydell and Brewer, Woodbridge, 2020; Georgios Theotokis, “The Norman invasion of Sicily (1061-1072): Numbers and Military Tactics,” *War in History* 17 (2010), pp. 381-402. And, Matthew Bennett, “Amphibious Operations from the Norman Conquest to the Crusades of Saint Louis, c. 1050-1250”, D.J.B. Trim and M.C. Fissel (eds), *Amphibious Warfare*, pp. 51-68.



Fig. 20. John Skylitzes, *Synopsis Historion*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Vitr. 26-2, f.31ra. Representation of the imperial fleet when commanded by Thomas the Slav. Source: Wikimedia Commons. See p. 36 in John Skylitzes, *A Synopsis of Byzantine History 811-1057*, John Wortley, ed.

upon his training and experience in translating designers' instructions into imagery".⁴⁶ The "freeze-framed" narratives of battle remain, as we would expect, extremely suspect and technical detail (Byzantine or Norman) is unreliable.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the helmets, shields, etc. are not fanciful. Rather they were inspired by iconographic and archaeological sources, such as *sarcophagi*. Ada Hoffmeyer concluded that the Madrid Skylitzes drawings are "a significant connexion with and a continuation of Mediterranean Antiquity combined with strong cultural currents from the various civilizations not even of the Near East but with Central Asia and now and then the Far East".⁴⁸ In other words, the respective artists knew

46 Boeck, *Imagining*, pp. 32-42, quotation from p. 37.

47 Note the observation regarding variations in vessel design in depictions of amphibious warfare in the Skylitzes drawings. Lucas McMahon, "Smoke on the Water: The Emirate of Crete", *Medieval Warfare- Naval warfare and piracy in the Middle Ages*, 5, 5, (November-December 2015), p. 39.

48 Ada Bruhn Hoffmeyer, *Military Equipment in the Byzantine Manuscript of Scylitzes in Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid, Gladius*, 5 (1966), p. 151, published in Granada by the Instituto de Estudios sobre Armas Antiguas of the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas. Hoffmeyer's meticulous cross-referencing of militaria far exceeds what used to be labelled antiquarianism. Her ideas now benefit greatly from the information and interpretation found in Elena Boeck's *Imagining the Byzantine Past* (2018). For example, should the MS even be labelled "Byzantine", despite its textual substance? Furthermore, there are factual errors, such as Nikephoros Phokas conquering Sicily rather than Crete in



Fig. 21. John Skylitzes, *Synopsis Historion*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Vitr. 26-2, f.41b. Although Admiral Niketas Oöryphas is celebrated as a master of “naval” warfare the bulk of his operations were ship-to-shore, coastal, and littoral. In other words, Oöryphas’ campaigns against Muslim forces can be characterized as amphibious warfare. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

of artifacts from their eleventh century perspective and incorporated such details to achieve a satisfactorily near-contemporaneous decoration.

As in the case of Leo the Deacon, a broad Mediterranean-centered interpretation intimates the centrality of amphibious operations for those who would rule. The spectrum of representations of amphibious warfare underscores how ubiquitous was that operational mode: inshore, estuarine, riverine, coastal, etc.⁴⁹ The images impart that the fortunes of empires were dictated by multiplex amphibious warfare; nothing less than survival might be decided by the degree to which a state assimilated this art of war at the interface of land and sea.

Command, logistics, organization, and resources

The coordination necessary to navigate the intrinsic complications of amphib-

961 (p. 24). Still, Hoffmeyer’s 1966 tome deserves greater attention from mainstream military historians.

49 For detailed subsets see Vladimir Shirogorov, “A True Beast of Land and Water: the gunpowder mutation of amphibious warfare”, M.C. Fissel (ed.), *The Military Revolution and Revolutions in Military Affairs*, Berlin, DeGruyter, 2023, pp. 207-311.

ious warfare depended upon firm and visionary command.⁵⁰ Leadership and logistics were the salient dimensions in Byzantium's administration of amphibious warfare. Command frequently determined success or failure, provided that the material requirements of the expedition were met. Amphibious operations are precarious and complicated; command must be virtually flawless. The complexity and fluidity of operational management meant that those overseeing amphibious actions learned from trial and error, painfully through 810 to 961.⁵¹ Given the miscarriages of the previous 136 years and Nikephoros Phokas's disciplined and informed generalship, doubtless he went "by the book" in conducting operations [Fig. 16]. His respect for orthodoxy and love of precision suggests adherence to the conventionalities of Byzantine military arts. Indisputably the Byzantines managed siegecraft admirably [Fig. 17, 18 and 19], even if resupply logistics were strained (or occasionally stalled). Neither side foresaw a circumvallation lasting through winter. Stretched supply lines held because Phokas had the foresight to ally with an administrative advocate in Joseph Bringas (the *parakoimomenos* active in Constantinople throughout the war). Bringas secured politically and institutionally the expeditionary force's sustenance at a critical moment.⁵² The *ad hoc* partnership between Phokas and Bringas (obscured by their later falling out) reifies how battlefield command meshed with political bureaucracy to ensure material support for a successful war effort.⁵³

Experiential training undergirded the ethos of the elite that (traditionally) marshalled armies and navies. Byzantine generalship, such as that practiced by Nikephoros Phokas, fused the military exceptionalism of classical Rome with the spiritual sanction derived from Christian institutionalization (as set in motion by Constantine I at the Milvian Bridge).⁵⁴ Such tradition, grounded in military

50 Salvatore Cosentino, "Writing about War in Byzantium" *Revista de Historia das Ideias*, 30 (2009) pp. 96-97; Trim and Fissel, "Conclusion", pp. 432-439.

51 On amphibious warfare and learning from failure, see John Stapleton, "The Blue Water Dimension of King William's War: Amphibious Operations and Allied Strategy during the Nine Years' War, 1688-1697", in D.J.B. Trim and M.C. Fissel (eds), *Amphibious Warfare*, p. 317.

52 Tsougarakis, *Byzantine Crete*, pp. 61-62; on Bringas, see Skylitzes, *Synopsis*, p. 239, note 2.

53 However, see below, note 71.

54 On classicizing and literary imitation in the context of the conquest of Crete's evidential sources, see Kaldellis, "Manufacture", pp. 297-298.



Fig. 22. John Skylitzes, *Synopsis Historion*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Vit. 26-2, f. 33r. Spectacular (and strategic) instances of defensive amphibious operations occurred in defending Constantinople for seaborne invasion. Here the sea walls that were a critical component of the defensive walled system (Τείχη της Κωνσταντινουπόλεως) blunt Thomas the Slav's assault from the Sea of Marmara. See also Fig. 18. See also pp. 37-39 in John Skylitzes, *A Synopsis of Byzantine History 811-1057*, John Wortley, ed. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

expertise, brought success within a long-standing defensive strategy. Continuity was also fostered by well-conceived bureaucratic regeneration, e.g., in the 700s and after 920. Institutional durability and calculated organizational restructuring undergirded Byzantine logistics on land, sea, and littoral.⁵⁵ The Isaurian emperors bequeathed to their successors a strengthened navy [Fig. 20]. During the reign of Constantine V (741-775) these “new naval units and commands” were integrated within existing institutional structures. For example, the *Kibyrrhaeotae* were fortified by the creation of the *Droungarios* of Dodekanessos (“a subordinate

⁵⁵ According to John Haldon, “It is clear . . . that the basic fiscal mechanisms in the sixth and the ninth centuries were almost identical: the terminology had changed, and the administrative relationships between the different departments responsible for the procedure was slightly different, but in essentials the later system was very obviously derived from the earlier.” “The Organisation and Support of an Expeditionary Force: Manpower and Logistics in the Middle Byzantine Period”, *Byzantium at War* (1997), n.p.: <https://deremilitari.org/2014/05/the-organisation-and-support-of-an-expeditionary-force-manpower-and-logistics-in-the-middle-byzantine-period>.



Fig. 23. John Skylitzes, *Synopsis Historion*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Vitr. 26-2, f.130. In 941, Byzantine amphibious forces repulsed the Rus, in what may be deemed successful defensive amphibious warfare on the Black Sea, near the Bosphorus, and at a rivermouth. *Nota bene* the use of “swimmers” in combat. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

command of the existing naval forces”) around 780-781.⁵⁶ During the 700s the *Kibyrrhaeotae* theme and fleet that fended off Arab incursions proved “sufficient to keep all attempts of the Arab fleet at bay without any new arrangements, adjustments or reforms to the state military and the naval administration . . . This meant that the creation of the theme and fleet of the *Kibyrrhaeotae* had been a success”.⁵⁷ The dominion of an “agrarian and militaristic regime” from the 820s onward further buttressed Byzantine naval power and amphibious operations.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Lounghis, *Byzantium*, p. 81.

⁵⁷ Lounghis, *Byzantium*, p. 79.

⁵⁸ Lounghis, *Byzantium*, p. 84.



Fig. 24. John Skylitzes, *Synopsis Historion*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Vitr. 26-2, f.202r. Georgios Maniakes carried on the tradition of amphibious generalship in Sicily *circa* 1038-1040. See in John Skylitzes, *A Synopsis of Byzantine History 811-1057*, John Wortley, ed., pp. xxvii, 109, 360-361, 365-366, 374-383, 392, 400-406, 410, 414, 436, 452, and 458. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Aquatic warfare in this era was conducted by a professional warrior class. For example, two admirals, Niketas Oöryphas and his successor Nasar, embodied sea-going generalship. They built upon the naval organizational reforms of the 700s. Oöryphas (serving *circa* 842 to *circa* 886 and possibly participating in the sack of Damietta in 853, discussed below), while commanding the imperial fleet defended the Cyclades and other island outposts. Notably he crushed a formidable contingent of Muslim raiders in the Gulf of Corinth in 872.⁵⁹ [Fig. 21]. His celebrated amphibious *stratagem* of the portage of his fleet across the isthmus probably did not occur (again, the chroniclers' attribution of an amphibious feat accomplished during antiquity to the legendary reputation of a prestigious Byzantine general). Nevertheless, the ascription of such heroics underscored reverence for amphibious command as well as equation of the virtues of a contemporary *droungarios* with the cleverness of the ancients.

⁵⁹ Skylitzes, *Synopsis*, p. 48; Tsougarakis, *Byzantine Crete*, p. 50



Fig. 25. John Skylitzes, *Synopsis Historion*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Vitr. 26-2, f.212rb. The Byzantines, supported by mercenaries, engaged frequently in amphibious warfare during the campaign to reconquer Sicily. Depicted here is the siege of Messina in 1038, ironical because if indeed the Madrid Skylitzes MS was a product of Roger II's reign, paleographical and stylistic evidence suggest that the monastery at which much of the illuminated manuscript was crafted was located in the vicinity of Messina. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Nasar achieved notable victories whilst patrolling coastal Dalmatia, and near Cephalonia *circa* 880 by the ruination of the Muslim flotilla operating out of Tunis that preyed upon the Ionian islands. In coordination with the latter expedition, Nasar waged successful ship-to-shore operations against enemy forces in Sicily.⁶⁰ The point is that these above-mentioned operations involved offshore and littoral amphibious operations and succeeded largely due to the direction and management of material resources. Byzantium's amphibious expertise extended to defensive warfare, as should be expected given the Empire's strategic culture, there being diverse situations where Byzantine forces repelled enemies that descended upon the water's edge. Constantinople's seawalls and the Golden Horn were defended successfully more than once against Arab interdiction and assaults, for example in 674 to 678, and 717 to 718. Defensive amphibious measures were taken during the revolt of Thomas the Slav in 822 [Fig. 22]. The "combined" defense of Constantinople is that much more remarkable due to the absence of a large land-based force garrisoned within the Empire's capital.⁶¹ Consider, too,

⁶⁰ Skylitzes, *Synopsis*, pp. 149-150.

⁶¹ John Haldon, "The Blockade of Constantinople in 813", *Byzantion'dan Constantinop-*



Fig. 26. John Skylitzes, *Synopsis Historion*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Vitr. 26-2, f.105 Basil I and Leo VI on horseback. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Byzantine inshore defensive amphibious operations fought against the Rus along the coastline of the Black Sea, near Ierop at the mouth of the Bosphorus in June 941. Dromons under *Patricius* Theophan allowed the Rus boats to encircle the Byzantine flotilla, and once in tightening formation the Rus received a taste of Greek Fire. Inshore fighting became an amalgam of riverine and estuarine warfare when the Rus vessels were pressed into the river mouth of the tributary Riva, Çayağzı. It would appear that the shallower draught Rus ships navigated up river whilst the dromons could not follow. Although that clash was not decisive, in September the Rus flotilla was waylaid by Theophan again and greatly damaged. Byzantine defensive amphibious warfare was successful in keeping the Rus from assailing Constantinople, though riverine settlements suffered depredations at the

olis'e İstanbul Kuşatmaları, Murat Arslan and Turhan Kaçar, (eds), İstanbul, İstanbul Araştırmaları Enstitüsü, 2017, pp. 263-279.



Fig. 27. John Skylitzes, *Synopsis Historion*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Vitr. 26-2, f. 111r. The sack of Thessaloniki in 904 understandably might be regarded as an immense failure of Byzantine defensive amphibious warfare. However, complacency was not an issue. The inhabitants had attempted to build an underwater barrier that might tear up the hulls of invading ships. The sea wall was being reinforced even as Leo of Tripoli's Arab forces appeared on the horizon. During the attack itself the Thessalonians put up a stiff resistance with dropping stones and any weapons they could manage. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

hands of the Rus⁶². [Fig. 23] There are, of course, cases of unsuccessful defensive amphibious warfare, e.g., the Arab landing and attack at Thessaloniki (904), set forth in detail by an eyewitness, at the end of this essay.⁶³

In 920 generalship was further reinforced by the accession of Lekapinos as Emperor, only the second admiral to occupy the throne, in the style of Tiberius III. Lekapinos, predictably, enhanced his fleet through institutional reform and expansion. Despite episodes of political instability amphibious operations were prioritized, especially the maintenance (and improvement) of capabilities enabling military undertakings. Oversight was critical in harnessing resources.

62 Иванов С.А. «Византийский нарратив о войне 941 г.» [в] Иванов С.А. *Византийская культура и агиография*. Москва: ЯСК, 2020, pp. 407-414. Translated into English as S.A. Ivanov "The Byzantine narrations on the war of 941," in Ivanov S.A. *Byzantine culture and hagiography*. Moscow: YaSK, 2020. The author is indebted to Vladimir Shirogorov for this reference and analysis. However, the present writer is entirely responsible for any errors of fact, interpretation and spelling.

63 Lucas McMahon, "Smoke on the Water: The Emirate of Crete", *Medieval Warfare- Naval warfare and piracy in the Middle Ages*, 5, 5, (November-December 2015), pp. 38-43; John Kaminiates, *The Capture of Thessaloniki* (translated by David Frendo and Athanasios Fotiou) Leiden, Brill, 2017.

The survival (indeed, prosperity might be a better term) of an elite military leadership coupled with collective memory and efficiency (e.g., the 911 and 949 inventories, with the caveat that the inventories are also “confusing, inconsistent, and incomplete”) saw a revitalization of Byzantine maritime ascendancy.⁶⁴ The *De Cerimoniis Aulae Byzantinae* inventories shed light upon relative percentages of troop strength, pay arrangements, classifications of armaments, and miscellaneous accoutrements. Even if the expeditions prior to 960 disappointed the imperial court, still they demonstrated the remarkable fortitude of Byzantine amphibious operations, provided that timely and sufficient logistical support undergirded offensives, even in winter.

The steady consistency of Byzantium’s bureaucracy in empowering amphibious operations is remarkable because the state did not prosecute wars upon credit. Liquid capital, coinage of precious metals, had to be proffered up front. An amphibious enterprise of magnitude could swallow up an entire year’s imperial revenues, with potentially “catastrophic” consequences.⁶⁵ Poliorcetics in the ninth and tenth centuries necessitated capital investment in siege trains, skilled artillery crews and sappers, not to mention infantry and cavalry, the latter to patrol surrounding territory.⁶⁶ That expeditions managed to be funded, equipped, launched and landed testifies to Byzantium’s institutional sophistication in waging amphibious warfare. With dependable officers in place, supply arrangements then had to ensure that the besiegers possessed all the equipment, food, and money they needed. In short, serious difficulties in maintaining lengthy sieges, including assembling, transporting, servicing a siege operation, were understandably best managed by “professional” supervision and fully committed supply lines from Constantinople.⁶⁷ Regarding victualling, Lucas McMahon notes that the Byzantine

“intention was for the final expedition against the Emirate of Crete to acquire its own provisions from the island. Some of this would have come at the expense of the local population, although marine protein, a significant aspect of the Byzantine diet, could have provided a large amount of food. The resource assessments carried out for the earlier campaigns indicate that mechanisms were

64 Kaldellis, *Streams*, p. 35.

65 Michael Hendy, *Studies in the Byzantine Monetary Economy c. 300-1450*, Cambridge, CUP, 1985, p. 223.

66 See Figures 15 and 18.

67 Makrypoulias, “Byzantine Expeditions”, p. 361.

in place to distribute military expenses across the empire. That this was not done in 960 suggests a deliberate strategy was in place to set the burden firmly upon the populace of Crete”.⁶⁸

Civilian resources exploited for amphibious warfare were not limited to systematic “foraging”. The obligation was extended to the lifeline of the Empire, namely to the “merchant marine”, when amphibious expeditions requisitioned such vessels into their flotillas.⁶⁹ The relationship between naval campaigns and maritime trade was delicate. The wheels of commerce had to be kept turning, even at the risk of diverting the stowage capabilities of the merchant marine (so to speak) into expensive amphibious expeditions that might yield nothing for that immense investment and strenuous effort (as indeed was the case for the offensives of 911 and 949). Economic realities make the Byzantine logistical achievement more impressive when linking commercial expansion to amphibious warfare and state formation.⁷⁰ Equally impressive is the scale of the 960 campaign, which exceeded in size its predecessors, and thus escalated costs and administrative complexity. Scale is dependent upon executive management of resources; the larger the expedition, the greater the logistical challenge both for support institutions but also for those in command of the enterprise. The more formidable the logistical challenge, the higher the likelihood of administrative breakdown. Byzantium’s economy (and tax base) had to be sufficiently resilient to finance the recapture of an island essential to the macroeconomics of the Empire.

To sum up: excepting the campaign led by Bardas the Caesar in tandem with the Emperor in 866, forces were deployed consistently upon Crete even if victory eluded them due to failures of command and/or the limits of logistical support being exceeded in the exhausting labors of siegecraft. Nikephoros Phokas himself might have failed in 960-961 save for delivery of crucially needed supplies in the bitter cold of the last stages of the besiegement of Chandax (credited to the persuasiveness and elocution of Joseph Bringas as was noted above).⁷¹ The rela-

68 McMahan, “Logistical modelling”, p. 79; on the abundance of Crete, see *Leo the Deacon*, p. 63.

69 McMahan, “Logistical modelling”, pp. 70, 78.

70 D.J.B. Trim and M. C. Fissel, (eds), *Amphibious Warfare 1000-1700. Commerce, State Formation and European Expansion*, Leiden, Brill, 2006, pp 1-6, 13, 38-44, 80-94, 219, 257, 421-426, 452-454.

71 The historical substance of the Bringas speech should be taken with a grain of salt,



Fig. 28. John Skylitzes, *Synopsis Historion*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Vitr. 26-2, f. 111r, detail. See David Frendo and Athanasios Fotiou, eds., *John Kaminiates: The Capture of Thessaloniki*, Leiden, Brill, 2000 for analysis of what appears to be a firsthand account of the sack of Thessaloniki, detailing atrocities. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

tionship between siegecraft and amphibious warfare empowered the Byzantines to shift from a generally defensive strategy to a highly mobile one that delivered quickly and forcefully in a distant theater. In other words, amphibious operations permitted swift transversal followed by a powerful blow, sea to land. This symbiotic art of war resulted, ultimately, in successes in Crete, Sicily and elsewhere [Fig. 24 e 25].

however. See Sinclair, *War writing*, p. 52.

Marines

Byzantium inherited the efficacious amphibious capabilities of Imperial Rome. In the lands adjoining the ancient Mediterranean Sea, marines were as ubiquitous and indispensable as were infantry.⁷² The land-sea power projection of Byzantine navies was well established by 532. Generally, and comparatively speaking, amphibious fighting forces develop as an appendage to a larger command. Marines, more specialized than most auxiliaries by definition, came from various military populations settled in the Empire and were interspersed within various maritime themes. One group is foremost, however, the *Karabisianoï* (*Καραβισιάνοι*), which appear on the scene as a prototypical maritime corps in the 600s, and were quartered in Rhodes, the south coast of Anatolia, and elsewhere in the Aegean.⁷³ The *Karabisianoï* (derived from *karabis* or *κάραβος*, a term for a seagoing vessel, the term sometimes translated as “ship troops”) enjoyed distinction as they served at the beckon call of the Emperor, forming the “core of the middle Byzantine state’s provincial naval power”.⁷⁴ The marines/oarsmen/sailors of the *Karabisianoï*, being a standing organization, can be regarded as more “professional” than their diverse predecessors. Their unique identity might explain at least partially the *Karabisianoï* intrusion into dynasticism, for example their role in attempts to destabilize Leo III *circa* 717–741. Political engagement likely led to their demise.

The *Karabisianoï*’s successor, around the 690s, was the above-mentioned *Kibyrrhaeotae* maritime theme, anchored geographically (named after Kibyrrha in coastal Caria) and utilizing a naval bureaucracy more closely tailored to the imperatives of the ruling dynasty.⁷⁵ As the Empire’s contingencies (and strategic culture) mutated, institutional innovations (often initiated directly from the Emperor) enabled Byzantium to meet new challenges. For example, tactical organizational innovation melded with extant institutions in recruitment, arming, training, and deployment of marines. For example, the *Caravisiiani*, the imperial

72 M.C. Fissel, “The Egyptian Origins of Amphibious Warfare: Out of Africa”, in Kaushik Roy and Michael Charney, (eds), *Routledge Handbook of the Global History of Warfare*, London, Routledge, 2024, pp. 217-241.

73 Warren Treadgold, *Byzantium and its Army, 284-1081*, Stanford, SUP, 1995, p. 23.

74 Quoted in John Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565-1204*, London, Routledge, 1999, p. 74; also Treadgold, *Byzantium*, p. 23.

75 Haldon, *Warfare*, p. 77.

naval presence that had buoyed the Empire into the early 700s, was replaced with the “provincial fleet” of the *Kibyrrhaeotae*. The strategic range of the *Caravisiani* extended widely across the Mediterranean, whereas the *Kibyrrhaeotae* concentrated on the East Roman theater (largely because Arab depredations had eroded Byzantine power in that part of the world).⁷⁶ Basil I and Leo VI, [Fig. 26] reacting to new strategic realities, undertook the “subjugation of all existing units of the fleet to the new priorities of the dynasty”.⁷⁷

The presence of Byzantine marines can be identified by terminology, e.g., *polemistia*. Seventy marines would be carried aboard the average dromon. The 949 inventory includes what appears to be the dromon’s standard habiliments provided to the vessel’s marines. The inventory lists 70 *klibanial* (lamellar corselets) and 70 sewn shields. We might surmise that, given the number, these were exclusively marine accoutrements. An abundance of archery weapons (50 “Roman” bows with double strings, hand-spanned crossbows, and silk strings, and 10,000 arrows) suggest that marines discharged missile weapons, especially if battling enemy vessels, as well as practicing various forms of hand-to-hand combat aboard ship: 80 *corseques* (trident pikes), 20 *longchodrepana* (lance-sickles and rigging cutters), 4 grapnels with chains, etc. Marines appear from this inventory to have worn visorless helmets (80 helmets listed, distinguished from 10 helmets equipped with visors). That is not to say that there was a standard “uniform” or equiptage for marines.

Muslim fleets had around this time (the late seventh century or the commencement of the eighth century) developed “marines” as is documented by an “Arabic papyrus by Yusuf Ragib, from Aphrodito of Southern Egypt (...) dated from 710 A.D.”.⁷⁸ An imperial response to Arab innovations in utilization (arming and tactical use of marines resulted).⁷⁹ Michael II during the 820s mobilized the *Tessarakontarioi*, a special marine unit. According to Georgios Theotokis, *Tessarakontarioi* were recruited by Michael II for “special service”, not necessarily as a

⁷⁶ Lounghis, *Byzantium*, p. 77.

⁷⁷ T.C. Lounghis, “The Byzantine War Navy and the West, Fifth to Twelfth Centuries” in Georgios Theotokis and Aysel Yildiz, (eds), *A Military History of the Mediterranean Sea. Aspects of War, Diplomacy, and Military Elites*, Leiden, Brill, 2018, p. 22.

⁷⁸ Christides, *Conquest of Crete*, p. 54.

⁷⁹ Angus Konstam, *Byzantine Warship versus Arab Warship 7th-11th centuries*, Oxford, Osprey, 2015, p. 23.

long-term institutional change. Theotokis refers to them as “special naval troops” and does use the term “marines”.⁸⁰ Warren Treadgold points out that the Imperial Fleet itself did not possess its own such corps until 870, when 4,000 “professional marines” were attached directly to the Fleet⁸¹ in the midst of the decades-long struggle over Crete. Perhaps the Emperor increased his marine forces at least partially as a response to the persistent failures to take Crete, though that is speculation. In the time of the 911 expedition under Himerios, mentioned above, marine contingents were mobilized from numerous and diverse themes that buttressed the Imperial Fleet. 4,200 marines were deployed from the Imperial fleet itself and then complemented by 5,087 Mardaites drawn from the Peloponnese community where 4,000 “marine” families had been granted lands in 809, as well as from Epiris and Nicopolis. An additional 1,190 from Anatolia, likely from the vessels of the *Kibyrrhaeotae* theme, also served in the 911 expeditionary force to Crete. The *anno* 949 inventory states: “The dromon should have 300 men, of these 230 men of the ship [should be] oarsmen and also marines, and the other seventy men marines from the cavalry *themata* and the barbarians”.⁸² Therefore, the success of the 960-961 campaign benefited from the lengthy and deliberate development of marines that adapted to Byzantium’s mutable strategic objectives.

Amphibious raiding and the Byzantine strategy of defense

Another vehicle of Byzantine amphibious warfare succeeded: raiding. The Empire’s strategic position dictated the type, scale, and frequency of its amphibious operations. The immensity and porousness of the Empire encouraged its defensive strategy. Arguably Byzantium’s most affordable approach (in terms of resources) to counter Muslim expansionism was raiding. The Empire tailored its force projection via selective attacks on ports and coastal “march-lands” *circa* 810-813, particularly during summer 812 against North African outposts, especially Egyptian territories.⁸³ The loss of Crete then precipitated a seismic “turning

80 “Σώκοϛ- An Unusual Byzantine Weapon”, in *A Military History of the Mediterranean Sea*, Georgios Theotokis and Aysel Yildiz (eds), Leiden. Brill, 2018, p. 168.

81 Treadgold, *Byzantium*, pp. 33, 76.

82 John Pryor and Elizabeth Jeffreys, *The Age of the Dromon. The Byzantine Navy ca 500-1204*, Leiden, Brill, 2011, p. 557.

83 Wladyslaw B. Kubiak, “The Byzantine Attack on Damietta in 853 and the Egyptian Navy in the 9th Century”, *Byzantion*, 40 (1970), pp. 145-166. www.jstor.org/

point” and deteriorated substantially imperial security. Driven out of Sicily and Crete, the Byzantines’ defensive strategy could best be implemented via amphibious strikes. Defense of areas close to the center of the Empire was subordinated to aquatic strikes against Arab presences at boundary points, many of which were now peripheral, even distant, from Byzantium’s control. T.C. Lounghis writes, “the neglect of ‘minor’ territorial losses near the central core of the empire in favour of remote expeditions meant no less than an absolute priority for overseas domination and relevant remote boundaries rather than a narrow and step by step defence (...)”.⁸⁴

Seagoing trade routes remained vulnerable to predators operating out of strongholds at Candia. Between 824 to 827, in the wake of the above-mentioned Muslim conquest of *circa* 824, raiders based in the Emirate preyed upon Byzantine territories and shipping, causing commercial disruption at the hand of Islam. A Muslim-controlled Crete was buttressed by Islamic settlements in Egypt and North Africa, spheres of influence that the Empire had lost in the seventh century. From Chandax the Anadlusi-originated Emirate radiated a sphere of influence that disrupted and sometimes hijacked Aegean trade, including the periodic occupation of Aigina, Kos, Karpathos, and Kythera. Merchants trading through Rhodes and Cyprus, too, contended with piracy and plundering. Imperial countermeasures failed repeatedly, for example the reverse suffered off Thassos in 839. Once-relatively secure continental European ports were left exposed.

Against the Egyptian march-lands the Byzantines exercised well-conceived raids, more methodical than random raiding or sporadic harassment of Fatimid territory. In 852-853, an expedition commanded by the eunuch *patrikios* and *para-koimomenos* Damianos disrupted Muslim logistical support for Crete by striking the Egyptian coast at Damietta and later at al-Farama. The forays of 852-853 synchronized three flotillas that assembled between 85 to 300 vessels. The raid on Damietta in 853 saw the Byzantines ashore for three days, during which they plundered: “(...) the Greeks came to Damietta and pillaged it (...) [T]he landing party was made up of 5,000 ‘marines’. They remained there for three days, then they went away to the land of the Greeks with captives, gold and silver”.⁸⁵

[stable/44170285?seq=1](#).

⁸⁴ Lounghis, *Byzantium*, p. 86.

⁸⁵ Christides, *Conquest of Crete*, p. 165; See also Kubiak, “Byzantine Attack”, p. 56.

The comparative slowness of communication in this era made coordination of amphibious operations difficult and risky. Thus, the perfectly timed assault upon Damietta, when its garrison was absent, was impressive. Intelligence gathering additionally contributed to the successful 3-day sack of Damietta, enabling the discovery and destruction of materials destined for the Emirate of Crete. In short, the burning of Damietta demonstrated the range and efficiency of Byzantine amphibious raiding. The element of surprise encouraged the targeting of multiple objectives. For example, in the wake of the assault on Damietta, the fleet(s) threatened the island of Tinnis. Next, a descent upon the formidable defenses of Usutum reduced that outpost's military capabilities, though being merely a raid, besiegement was out of the question.⁸⁶

Follow-up expeditions against Damietta occurred in 854 and 855, apparently. In 859, Farama was similarly preyed upon, and Damietta yet again that same year.⁸⁷ To reiterate, the 853 strike upon Damietta exhibited operational expertise, especially in command and logistics, qualities subsequently apparent in the Phokas expedition of a century later. A greater challenge, of course, was to exceed raiding and achieve an amphibious landing that laid the groundwork for occupation, as would be the situation in Crete in 960 to 961, described above. Byzantine offensive successes were avenged by the devastating plunder by Cretan Arabs of Thessaloniki, arguably the second largest imperial city, at the beginning of the tenth century (again, described below).

The witness of Ioannes Kaminiates

In 904, a formidable Muslim force won a spectacular victory, but experienced difficulty overcoming terrified defenders struggling against even a well-executed raid. Despite enjoying advantages, such as the number and expertise of its "marines", and the vulnerability of Thessaloniki to amphibious assault, the Muslim

⁸⁶ E. W. Brooks, "The relations between the empire and Egypt from a new Arabic source", *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, 22, 1, (1913), pp. 389, 391, https://ia600708.us.archive.org/view_archive.php?archive=/28/items/crossref-pre-1923-scholarly-works/10.1515%252Fbyzs.1912.21.1.268.zip&file=10.1515%252Fbyzs.1913.22.2.381.pdf, <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/byzs.1913.22.2.381/html>; Kubiak, "Byzantine Attack", pp. 57-59; Kubiak reprints a Muslim papyrus account of the Byzantine raid against Damietta, on p. 56

⁸⁷ Kubiak, "Byzantine Attack", p. 59.



Fig. 29. John Skylitzes, *Synopsis Historion*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Vitr. 26-2, f. 110ra. “Once these barbarians were inside, they slew all those whom they found writhing about on the ground in the vicinity of the wall (...)” See John Kaminiates, *The Capture of Thessaloniki* (translation, introduction and notes by David Frendo and Athanasios (eds), Leiden, Brill, 2017, p. 63. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

attacking force met spirited resistance. The city had been bulwarked to withstand land-based sieges, which were to be expected in that theater of the Empire. Ioannes Kaminiates, a priest of Thessaloniki who experienced the raid and later wrote his witness⁸⁸, opined that the architect discounted the possibility of assault from the sea, as the southern barriers facing the Mediterranean were inferior to the rest of the fortifications. Kaminiates concluded that the lowness of the seawalls could be surmounted by archers positioned in the rigging of attacking vessels and thus had a tremendous height advantage over defenders manning Thessaloniki’s Mediterranean ramparts⁸⁹. [Fig. 27, 28, 29 e 30]

The Andalus-Arab invasion force (from Crete, ironically) did not have the advantage of surprise; the Byzantines had been alerted. Feverish efforts were made to improve the walls facing the sea. The inhabitants frantically erected tim-

88 Ioannes Kaminiates, *Eis την άλωσην της Θεσσαλονίκης (Ioannis Cameniatae, clerici ac capellani, de excidio Thessalonicensi narratio)*, in *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae*, B.G. Niebuhr (ed), Bonnae, 182, 8, pp. 487-600; John Kaminiates, *De Expugnatione Thessalonicae*, Gertrud Böhlig (ed), *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae IV*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 1973; John Kaminiates, *The Capture of Thessaloniki* (translation, introduction, and notes by David Frendo and Athanasios Fotiou [eds]), Leiden, Brill, 2017.

89 Kaminiates, *Excidio*, 9, B.G. Niebuhr (ed), p. 500; J. Kaminiates, *The Capture of Thessaloniki*, D. Frendo and A. Fotiou (eds), p. 31.

bered towers at the weaker points of the seawall. Tragically, the newly-arrived supervisor of defenses was thrown from his horse and gravely injured, thus he could not oversee the enhancement of Thessaloniki's fortifications. Assistance was rendered by the *strategos* of the Strymon, more accustomed to facing land-based threats from the direction of Bulgaria. However, he understood the value of missile weapons in defensive amphibious warfare and dispatched archers to stiffen Thessaloniki's preparations. These reinforcements, it was hoped, might stem the tide of the first wave of attack⁹⁰.

The Cretan Arab flotilla, capturing favorable winds, descended upon Thessaloniki at dawn. They struck their sails and paralleled the walls closely. Having identified the most vulnerable sections of the defensive architecture, the ships rowed into their assault, shouting and beating drums in anticipation of unnerving the defenders. Both sides exchanged projectiles. The Muslim assault commenced with shield-bearing swimmers pulling a ladder to the base of the wall as a hail of stones and arrows cascaded upon them. This barrage was more than the attackers could withstand, and assault troops were dashed from the ladder and pierced by Byzantine archers. Withdrawing, the assailant vessels stood off but continued launching arrows at Thessaloniki's battlements. Byzantine catapults kept most of the ships at bay but renewed amphibious assaults combining stone-throwing contraptions and assault ladders were attempted at the various bulwarks. These failed as miserably as the initial foray. Hostilities continued into the night. On the morrow the attack recommenced, and assault teams swarmed against sections of wall wherein gates were sealed. At one location, where according to Kaminiates, seven stone-throwing devices concentrating upon the perceived most vulnerable outer gate. When assault troops made headway in ascending their ladders, a daring counterattack riposted. Byzantines wielding spears leapt down from the ramparts and impaled the invaders. The shock of the repulse compelled the Arabs to abandon their ladder and fall back, assuming a defensive infantry formation⁹¹.

Blunted, the attacking force resolved to burn the outer gates, penetrate the outworks, and have their best archers pick off the defenders atop the battlements

90 Kaminiates, *Excidio*, 19-20, B.G. Niebuhr (ed), pp. 512-515; J. Kaminiates, *The Capture of Thessaloniki*, D. Frenzo and A. Fotiou (eds), pp. 35-37.

91 Kaminiates, *Excidio*, 23-29, B.G. Niebuhr (ed), pp. 519-528; J. Kaminiates, *The Capture of Thessaloniki*, D. Frenzo and A. Fotiou (eds), pp. 43, 45, 47, 49, 51, 53.



Fig. 30. John Skylitzes, *Synopsis Historion*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Vitr. 26-2, f. 110ra. Another detailed rendering of the aftermath of the Muslim raid. Those not put to the sword were whisked off to slave markets. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

that would peer down and return fire. Carts were heaped with flammables (wood, brush, pitch and sulfur). Those combustibles were covered with overturned boats, concealing and protecting the incendiaries. These deadly devices were pushed up against the outer gates, despite withering fire from above, and ignited from beneath their carriages. The sappers, covering themselves with their shields, fell back and sheltered behind the archers. The carts burst into flame, and fire lapped at the wooden gates. The conflagrations intensified, and the iron-plating upon the portals became white hot. The timbers blazed and the gates collapsed. Alarmed, the inhabitants erected makeshift walls behind the threatened inner gates and brought up buckets of water to extinguish further fiery attempts on the gateways⁹².

⁹² Kaminiates, *Excidio*, 30-31, B.G. Niebuhr (ed), pp. 529-531; J. Kaminiates, *The Capture of Thessaloniki*, D. Frenodo and A. Fotiou (eds), pp. 55, 57.

That night the attackers lashed together ships, raising their steering paddles aloft alongside their masts, and assembled platforms. The finest archers again went into action, raining down their shafts on Thessaloniki's defenders. These were seconded with catapults that heaved stones into the inner circuit of the defenses, along with incendiary projectiles fashioned from earthenware and filled with flammables. The defenders likewise had prepared ignitable weapons, including quicklime. When the paired ships, conjoined with cables and chains, moved their towers close to the walls, the combatants on both sides set about heaving stones and burning devices at each other. A pair of vessels bearing an aquatic turret found sufficiently deep water to butt up against the fortifications. The attackers swept the battlements with missile fire and a type of primitive flamethrower (propelled through the air via tubes), clearing a landing spot atop the wall. Sword-bearing Arabs leapt from the ship towers onto Thessaloniki's fortifications. Now the amphibious attackers were safe to disembark and torch the inner gates. Through the breach they surged, putting to the sword the unfortunates fallen from the parapet. The sack of the city commenced⁹³.

Thessaloniki's dogged (but ultimately futile) defensive amphibious measures make an appropriate bookend for the aggressive (and supremely successful) offensive amphibious operations of Nikephoros Phokas, discussed at the outset of this essay. Characteristics of amphibious warfare are evident in the capture of Thessaloniki. Despite significant weaknesses in shoreline security, a stout albeit spontaneous resistance nearly thwarted a well-organized amphibious assault. A testament to the quality of the Arab offensive is evident in terms of the impressive amount of material the attackers brought to bear: a portable coastal siege "train", a staggering number of arrows, incendiary devices, and specialized personnel. The probing of Thessaloniki's defenses, the tactical coordination displayed repeatedly, and the sheer tenacity of the storming of the city suggests that the Andalus-Arabs were as adept at amphibious warfare as were Byzantine marine and naval forces.

93 Kaminiates, *Excidio*, 32-35, B.G. Niebuhr (ed), pp. 532-535; J. Kaminiates, *The Capture of Thessaloniki*, D. Frenzo and A. Fotiou (eds), pp. 57, 59, 61, 63.

Conclusion

Amphibious operations are precarious and complicated. Command must be virtually flawless. Though not the sole cause of the failure of the expeditions prior to 960-961, leadership determined success, with the caveat that the material requirements of the expedition were met. (2) Byzantium's institutional resilience, particularly in relation to logistics, is impressive, particularly factoring frequent civil wars and a primarily agriculturally based economy. The Empire's material capabilities were enhanced by the longevity of the Empire's existence, however, and further strengthened by its fundamentally conservative strategies (which minimized risk to scarce resources). To summarize, Byzantium mastered amphibious operations that suited the defensive strategy of the Empire. Command and supply were the twin pillars sustaining this art of war. The Empire thus produced a unique and paradigmatic amphibious warfare that contrasted with the strategic assumptions of Western Europe whilst simultaneously demonstrating at the very least an operational parity.

Specifically, we further posit these tentative conclusions: (a) amphibious warfare played a rather different kind of role, particularly strategically, in the Empire than was practiced in Western Europe due to strategic culture and geography. (b) Byzantium possessed remarkably more institutional continuity (and probably, expertise) than Western European states (my own field of early modern Britain did not witness the splendid successes on a scale that compares with the Cretan expedition of 960-961).⁹⁴ (c) Byzantine military science dovetailed amphibious operations with siegecraft and created viable strategies for the survival of the Empire. (d) A military aristocracy existed that contributed to, and revised, the aforementioned literature. (e) The longevity and continuity of Byzantine institutions did not greatly inhibit organizational reform, for example reconfiguration of the fleets and the contingents of warriors who sailed upon those vessels. (f) While the orthodox western military history, with its emphasis on empirically verifiable factual narrative, is foreign to Byzantine "war-writing", still a schematic of the Byzantine art of amphibious warfare exists, for example Leo the Deacon's embroidered account of the 960 landing upon Crete, with its detailed set-piece battle. And that art of war was considered universal in that it imitated

⁹⁴ M. Fissel, "English Amphibious Warfare, 1587-1656", in D.J.B. Trim and M.C. Fissel, (eds), *Amphibious Warfare*, pp. 217-261.

the ancients, thus Byzantine historians could incorporate classical narratives and contemporary military manuals. (f) Byzantine (and Norman) perceptions of military history emerge from the extant visual evidence, such as the Madrid Skylitzes manuscript. Admittedly, the latter reveals much more about the court of Roger II of Sicily rather than Byzantine concepts. Still the Normans, expert in amphibious operations, document in the Skylitzes illustration exemplary (positively and negatively) evidence of amphibious arts in Byzantine history from 811 to 1057. Both cultures shared the firm conviction that amphibious warfare was, naturally, essential and integral to Mediterranean strategies. Leo the Deacon sets forth an orthodox model of Byzantine amphibious military science. The Madrid Skylitzes is an illuminated panorama that affirms the centrality of amphibious warfare in the Mediterranean. Johannes Kaminiates provides a rare if imperfect eyewitness case study of defensive amphibious warfare. (g) The development of a corps of marines furthered the development and maintenance of dedicated mobile contingents flexible enough to expedite Byzantine successes in major expeditions and raids. (h) And finally, the refinement and conduct of (affordable) raiding such as that which was performed at Damietta in 853 was adapted successfully when the Empire's strategic position mutated.

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So called Missorium of Kerch, 4th century Found: Bosporan Necropolis, vault on the Gordikov estate. Near Kerch, the Crypt in the North-Eastern Slope of Mount Mithridates, 1891 This silver dish was a diplomatic gift from the Byzantine Emperor to a representative of the Bosporan government. In this fine example of the early Byzantine art traditional Classical themes are combined with a new artistic style. The vessel shows a composition typical of Roman coins: the Emperor on horseback is piercing the enemy with a spear. The rider was usually accompanied by one or several warriors and Nike crowning the winner. In contrast to the Classical composition showing the final scene of a battle, here we see the scene of triumph: Emperor Constantius II sits on a horse, triumphantly raising his spear. To emphasize the Emperor's highest rank and divine power, the artist used special pictorial devices including, for example, the distortion of proportions. The images were produced by a chisel. Part of the ornamentation is nielloed. The outer surface is gilded and a loop is soldered onto it. Hermitage Museum. Saint Petersburg. CC BY-SA 4.0 (Wikimedia Commons).

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