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Soldier Biographies and Family Chronicles: Uncovering Lost Sources of the Middle Byzantine Period

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Soldier Biographies and Family Chronicles

As my research project concerns the depiction of warfare in Middle Byzantine literature, a detailed study of the historiographical works composed during this era (c.850-c.1200) is essential. In the Thucydidean tradition of Greek historiography, warfare is the dominant subject in these narratives, and modern Byzantine military historians have gleaned much from their detailed accounts of campaigns and battles. On occasions where the trustworthiness and accuracy of a particular account is called into question, scholars have typically satisfied doubts by cross-referencing with Byzantine military manuals, instructional handbooks listing authentic equipment, tactics and general army doctrine of the period. This comparative technique is useful in establishing the theory and practice of Byzantine warfare, but it actually tells us little about the working methods of historians, and how they went about describing warfare. Perhaps most important in this respect is the question of what sources historians employed for their accounts of military events. The majority of historians of the Middle Byzantine period were not soldiers, and only observed a fraction of the engagements they discuss, if any at all. Therefore, while their works may in principal display a sound military knowledge, we have to ask how these historians gathered information about campaigns which may have taken place some sixty years before they penned their works. This is a difficult task, however, with Byzantine historians notoriously reticent in naming original sources for specific events. A number allege to report events based on the accounts of eyewitnesses, presumably combat veterans. This might merely be claimed in order to strengthen the historian's claim to veracity; in any case,

given that we are dealing with oral sources, this discussion cannot really be sustained. We are on firmer ground with written sources, and it is likely that these were the preferred means of information for many Byzantine historians. Several modern historians have pointed to the role of 'official' campaign reports; and though convincing arguments have been made for their existence, I believe that attempts to identify the use of such documents in existing campaign narratives has hitherto been not wholly successful. In the absence of the autopsy of the author, we may surmise that eyewitness reports (of varying intimacy to the original source), together with 'official' campaign documents, ranked among the basic tools of Greco-Roman historians for centuries. The Middle Byzantine period, however, saw the introduction of a new literary source for historians writing military history – soldier biographies and family chronicles.

Soldier biographies and family chronicles can be seen as the product of two important developments of the tenth century. The first was socio-political: the rise of the Byzantine military aristocracy, which began to play a commanding role in the Empire from the early tenth century, and confirmed their triumph with the accession of the general Nikephoros II Phokas in 963. The second development was literary: the emergence of 'secular biography' during the reign of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitos (r.944-959).¹ Whereas Byzantine historiography previously favoured a chronological ordering of events, here the individual becomes the focal point of the text, with less concern shown for a coherent narrative. The allure of this literary model to soldierly aristocrats is all too evident. By documenting the heroic deeds of current bearers of the family name, as well as past incumbents, competing factions hoped to draw attention to their noble lineage, and show themselves to be worthy of acclaim and favour – even of the throne itself.

Though biographical works associated with the military aristocracy are no longer extant, their existence is indisputable. *Theophanes Continuatus*, a chronicle of the mid-tenth century, refers to a now-lost book recounting the deeds of John Kourkouas, a successful near-contemporary military

¹ Alexander 1940.

commander. With the assurance that such ‘soldier-biographies’ did exist, modern historians have made convincing cases for similar works devoted to other famous generals and military families of the day, tracing the use of such documents in the composition of surviving sources. Alexander Kazhdan first argued that a work detailing the military feats of the famous Phokas family was employed by tenth-century historian Leo the Deacon;² his initial proposals have since been expounded by Athanasios Markopoulos and Jakov Ljubarskij, who have drawn attention to a number of lost panegyric sources celebrating Nikephoros II Phokas.³ Almost forty years ago, Hans-Georg Beck mooted the existence of another family chronicle, dedicated to the Doukas family, and recently Leonora Neville has offered support to such a notion with her convincing hypothesis that the historian and soldier Nikephoros Bryennios made use of a lost biography of the *caesar* John Doukas.⁴ Undoubtedly, the most fruitful source is the late eleventh-century *Synopsis Historian* of Skylitzes, who has been shown to have made use of a number of now-lost soldier biographies. Jonathan Shepard laid the foundations in a number of articles, arguing for Skylitzes’ use of eulogistic biographies of the renowned soldiers Katakalon Kekaumenos and George Maniakes.⁵ Catherine Holmes, building upon the preliminary thoughts of Shepard as well as those of Stephen Kamer and Charlotte Roueché, proposed that Skylitzes made significant use of biographies of the generals Bardas Skleros and Eustathios Daphnomeles.⁶ Clearly, the subject of Byzantine soldier biographies and family chronicles is an ongoing and effervescent debate.

My project contributes to this body of research in several ways. Firstly, I have identified instances in Skylitzes’ chronicle which suggest the use of further lost soldier biographies, using the investigative techniques outlined by the aforementioned scholars. Such content typically details the military accomplishments of a particular individual, and will often distort the narrative to reflect more favourably on him. Yet identifying the potential existence of other aristocratic biographies lurking within Skylitzes is but a minor aim.

² Kazhdan 2006: 273-274.

³ Ljubarskij 1993; Markopoulos 1988, 2003, 2009.

⁴ Beck 1971: 48-97; Neville 2008.

⁵ Shepard 1975-1976, 1977-1979, 1992.

⁶ Holmes 2005: 228-233, 255-297; Roueché 1988.

Rather, I am more concerned with developing a greater understanding of soldier biographies and family chronicles, examining their objectives, audience, composition, and content.

Attempting to reconstruct lost sources is a complicated and potentially hazardous endeavour, but hypotheses may be offered through the guidance of extant sources and interdisciplinary methods. The histories of Leo the Deacon, Nikephoros Bryennios, and Anna Komnena, formed largely of detailed military episodes highlighting the skill and valour of favoured individuals, provide an insight into the composition and also the purpose of Byzantine aristocratic biographies; it is no coincidence that a number of these surviving works appear to have derived such content from lost personal military histories. A less conventional methodology involves the application of Yuval Noah Harari's pioneering findings on late-medieval and Renaissance military memoirs to a Byzantine setting.⁷ Whether or not Byzantine soldier-biographies were self-penned is largely irrelevant; more important is the remarkable number of parallels in content and ideals evident in Renaissance military memoirs and the alleged extracts of Byzantine soldier-biographies, reflective of an institution – the military aristocracy – which possessed fundamental ideas about warfare that transgressed time and culture. While this comparative approach requires a measure of caution, observing the broader tradition of aristocratic military writings may prove critical to our understanding of Byzantine soldier biographies.

Having gained an insight into our lost sources, it is conducive to examine them as a collective body, rather than individually as others have done. By examining the purported soldier biographies and family chronicles together, we witness some consistent traits that seem to define this overlooked branch of Byzantine literature. The fragmentary evidence suggests that military biographies comprised highly descriptive accounts of campaigns and battles, with emphasis drawn to the subject(s). Comparison to contemporary military manuals reveals them to be highly accurate in respect of the strategies and tactics employed. And just as the manuals promote original thinking, we

⁷ Harari 2004.

similarly witness moments of ingenuity and innovation, with the Byzantine predilection for the stratagem consistently evident. They were written with a mind to educate, entertain and impress their aristocratic audience.

Such then was the aristocratic military biography in Byzantium, a source which many Middle Byzantine historians utilized when writing about warfare. Returning to the overall focus of my research, the question of how these conclusions affect our reading of military affairs in Byzantine historiography looms large. Certainly, the relevant fragments suggest that military biographies and family chronicles may have offered the most comprehensive and insightful accounts of warfare in all Middle Byzantine literature, written as they were by sources close to the protagonists involved (if not the subject himself). Yet while they may reflect the experience of warfare among the Byzantine aristocracy, these works cannot be considered honest and impartial. Frequently, events are omitted or distorted to present individuals in a more favourable light, while a heavy focus can lead to imbalanced coverage of conflict. But to speculate about the level of truth in soldier biographies and family chronicles is to misunderstand them; objectivity was not the mandate of the author. Far greater insight can be gained by reconstructing – where possible – the composition of soldier biographies, and examining their general traits as a body of literature. In doing so, I hope to not only improve our understanding of Byzantine war-writing, and how it relates to the wider subject of descriptions of warfare in Greco-Roman and Medieval literature, but also make a valuable contribution to the study of Middle Byzantine historiography.

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