

The two faces of Nikephoros Phokas

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“Lying, crafty, merciless, foxy, proud, falsely humble, miserly and greedy”.¹

Liutprand of Cremona’s description of Nikephoros Phokas was probably conditioned more by the wounds to his *amour propre* inflicted by Byzantine court officials than by any disinterested analysis of the emperor’s character, but it is a judgement which has influenced much of the subsequent writing on Nikephoros’ reign. With a thoroughly unpleasant character was, of course, associated a repulsive appearance:

“A monstrosity of a man, a dwarf, fat headed and with tiny mole’s eyes: disfigured by a short, broad, thick beard going grey: disgraced by a neck scarcely an inch long; pig-like by reason of the big bristles on his head; in colour an Ethiopian”.²

In short, “the sort of man you would not wish to meet in the dark”.³

But contrast this assessment with that of another contemporary, the historian Leo Diakonos. Far from being an arch villain, Nikephoros, for him, was:

1. Liutprand of Cremona, *Relegatio de legatione Constantinopolitana*, ed. J. Bekker, *Scriptores rerum Germanicum in usum scholarum*, xl (Hanover 1915). On Liutprand see now J. Koder and T. Weber, *Liutprand von Cremona in Konstantinopel* (Byzantina Vindobonensia 13, Vienna 1980).

2. Liutprand, 138. The short neck was perhaps a family trait, as his great-nephew, also a Nikephoros, was known as “stiff” or “short neck”. See H. Grégoire and N. Adontz, ‘Nicéphore au Col Roide’, *B* 8 (1933) 203-12, repr. in H. Grégoire, *Autour de l’épopée byzantine* (London 1975).

3. Liutprand, *loc.cit.*, quoting Juvenal, *Satires*, V 54.

“a man who, without a doubt, was the leader of the age in virtue and strength. In war, a man of great bravery and skill, persistent in all his labours, uncorrupted and untainted by the lusts of the flesh, liberal and munificent. In public affairs the most just of judges, a firm legislator such that none of those versed in such affairs could be placed above him. He was unbending and adamant in his nocturnal vigils before the altar, keeping his concentration throughout his prayers and never letting it wander into vain thoughts”.⁴

In other words, a paragon of the personal and imperial virtues. Leo Diakonos’ praise was not due merely to the fact that he was a Byzantine, for one of the most curious aspects revealed by an examination of the sources for the life and career of Nikephoros, is that provenance does not dictate attitude. The fundamental difference of opinion revealed in these two passages is also reflected in other Byzantine, Italian and Arab sources. Why was the opinion of Nikephoros so varied? Certainly not because medieval writers were in any sense forced to “take sides”. Recent work on Byzantine *Kaiserkritik* has shown how sophisticated the biographical treatment of emperors had become by this time and how the particular formulation of judgements about them could be extremely revealing of prevailing social and political attitudes.⁵ A study of the literary treatments of Nikephoros Phokas can provide both an example of Byzantine methods of image building or character assassination and the personal characteristics and actions upon which contemporaries based their judgements, as well as a chance to observe the interplay of personal ideals and relationships with more formal concepts of the imperial role. In Nikephoros’ case, too, it is possible to see the career, aspirations and concerns of a representative of a much discussed “class” — the *dynatoi* of the tenth century. This paper, then, has a double aim. Firstly, to isolate those actions and characteristics that were a cause of controversy about Nikephoros in his own day and, secondly, to attempt to explain the existence

4. Leo diaconus, *Historia*, ed. C.B.Hase, (CHSB, Bonn 1828) V, 8, 89. (henceforth Leo diak.)

5. See F. Tinnfeld, *Kategorien der Kaiserkritik in der Byzantinischen Historiographie von Prokop bis Niketas Choniates* (Munich 1971), for a general survey and P. Magdalino, ‘Aspects of Twelfth-Century Byzantine *Kaiserkritik*’, *Speculum* 58 (1983) 326-46, for a shrewd discussion of the particular case of Manuel Komnenos. Both writers are, of course, mainly concerned with criticism of emperors; more work needs to be done on the categories of praise.

of the two contrasting literary traditions, without merely confining the enquiry, as has often previously been the case, to historiography. The reign of Nikephoros is remarkable for the *variety* of sources that we possess about the emperor.⁶ At a time when a major new edition and commentary upon one of the most important works associated with Nikephoros Phokas — the *De velitatione (On Guerilla Warfare)* — has recently been published, it seems an opportune moment to make a further contribution to the long standing debate about this intriguing emperor. Though the biography by Schlumberger, first published in 1890, remains a classic (though a flawed one), there is a need for a more up-to-date study which could take into account the considerable amount of recent research on the late tenth century. The present paper can only present some provisional suggestions.⁷

Difference of opinion in the sources centres around Nikephoros' approach to the two pillars of the Byzantine state — the church and the army — and their treatment of these two areas provides the key to their overall judgement of him. This is clearly revealed in two contrasting Byzantine historiographical traditions: that represented by Leo Diakonos on the one hand, and by Skylitzes, Kedrenos and Zonaras on the other. Leo Diakonos, writing at the end of the tenth century, transmits a tradition which is very favourable to the Phokas family.⁸ As Professor Kazhdan demonstrated twenty years ago, he made use of a family chronicle of the Phokades, which began with the campaigns of Nikephoros Phokas the Elder under Basil I and ended with those of his grandson and namesake, the emperor.⁹ This is not to say

6. For a general survey of the relevant historians, see H. Hunger, *Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur der Byzantiner*, 2 vols. (Munich 1978) I, c.4, espec. section 4, 330-441. cf. 367-71 for Leo diak. and 389-93 for Skylitzes.

7. G. Dagron and H. Michaescu, *Le traité sur le guérilla de l'empereur Nicéphore Phocas* (Paris 1986). See also G. Schlumberger, *Un empereur byzantin au fin du 10e siècle: Nicéphore Phocas*, 2nd. ed. (Paris 1923).

8. *Traité sur le guérilla, Commentaire* 303, n.43. He also presents material similar to that found in the *Treatise*, such as speeches by Phokas generals to their troops. *op.cit.*, 126-7, n.6.

9. See Tinnefeld, *Kaiserkritik*, 108-18 for summary and discussion of Kazhdan's work, particularly A.P. Kazhdan, 'Iz istorii Vizantijskoj chronografii X.v., 2. Istocniki L'va Diakona i Skilicy dlja istorii tvet'ej cetverti X stoletija', *VV* 20 (1960) 106-28, unfortunately linguistically unavailable to me. Kazhdan referred to this source as "Source B".

that he was entirely uncritical of Nikephoros, but in general he tended to take a more moderate view of his activities than did other commentators. Not surprisingly for a *diakonos*, Leo supported the activities of the church authorities and especially the actions of the Patriarch Polyeuktos, when they came into conflict with the policies of the emperor. But he maintained that Nikephoros' intentions towards the church were generally sound and commented at length on the ruler's piety.¹⁰ In some cases, where more hostile sources directly criticised Nikephoros, Leo Diakonos attempted to spread the blame, involving, for instance, the Emperor's brother Leo.¹¹

In contrast, John Skylitzes (writing about 1057), while also making use of the Phokas chronicle, also made considerable reference to an anonymous source of the late tenth century which was extremely hostile to Nikephoros.¹² Kazhdan suggested that its author came from the patriarchal circle, concerned to criticise any emperor who seemed to be encroaching on the rights of the Church.¹³ It is this source which overwhelmingly influenced Skylitzes' treatment of the Emperor and that of the later historians who made use of his account — notably Kedrenos and Zonaras. But even though their views differed, it is important to bear in mind that both Leo Diakonos and Skylitzes were undertaking essentially the same task. They were both concerned to establish how far Nikephoros measured up to prevailing ideals of rulership. The Emperor was, after all, the symbol of imperial power and "the living embodiment of the everlasting Empire of the *Rhōmaioi*". The characteristics that the righteous (and therefore the true) emperor should display — piety, *philanthropia*, generosity, judicious judgement, which would be rewarded by the divine grant of victory — had long been the currency of imperial panegyric. But an analysis of the criteria applied in Nikephoros' case is particularly interesting because he provides an early example of a tendency which was to become much more prevalent in the eleventh century: the judging of an emperor by his military

10. Tinnefeld, *Kaiserkritik* 117.

11. *op.cit.* 116.

12. The source identified by Kazhdan as "Source A".

13. Tinnefeld, *Kaiserkritik* 115.

achievements as well as by older, pacific standards. For Kazhdan, the presentation of Nikephoros' reputation by his admirers was "the first attempt to create the image of the emperor as a noble warrior".¹⁴ One can surely go further than this. It was Nikephoros' military achievement which provided the major area for discussion in approving and hostile sources alike and far from being an "attempt" to portray him as a noble warrior, the evidence would suggest that his military achievements were widely noted and admired both by contemporaries and in later tradition.

The Skylitzes school is, however, the most hostile to Nikephoros, and the enumeration of the Emperor's faults (suspiciously similar to the list of the *kakōseis* of the first Emperor Nikephoros in the Chronicle of Theophanes) given by Skylitzes pin-points the affairs of the Church and the army as the two main areas of concern. "By the third year of his reign [he writes] he had become hated by all men and all longed earnestly for his downfall".¹⁵ A little later he tells us why. The main reason was Nikephoros' toleration of misbehaviour by his soldiers. He seemed to be positively "anti-civilian"; he apparently remarked that it was not surprising that a few out of an army of this size should turn out to be bad lots. He sat on his throne in the Hippodrome, unmoving and apparently unconcerned, when an over-realistic military display got out of hand, resulting in the deaths of panic-stricken spectators. Far worse than this indulgent attitude towards military unruliness was the financial burden laid on the state by his continuous campaigns. All was subordinated to the demands of war finance; the people were ever more heavily taxed. A new lighter-weight *nomisma*, the *tetarteron*, was minted; even the senators lost their *roga*. Zonaras amplified this complaint by reporting that those without financial resources were sent to serve the postal service, and those who already performed military services of some kind were moved to more demanding tasks. At the

14. See A. Kazhdan, 'Certain traits of Imperial Propaganda in the Byzantine Empire from the Eighth to the Fifteenth Centuries', in G. Makdisi, D. Sourdel and J. Sourdel-Thomine, eds., *Prédication et propagande au Moyen-Age* (Penn.-Paris-Dumbarton Oaks Colloquia III, 1980 [Paris 1983]) 13-8, and n.29.

15. Johannes Scylitzes, *Synopsis Historiarum*, ed. J. Thurn, (CFHB, Vienna 1973) 271 (henceforth Skylitzes).

top of the scale, the cavalry men were transformed into cataphracts, with all the extra expense that this entailed for them. The second chief ground for complaint was Nikephoros' treatment of the church. Skylitzes relates in shocked tones how the donations of previous emperors to churches and monasteries were stopped; how a law was promulgated forbidding further grants to churches, monastic houses and other *euageis oikoi*; how certain sycophant bishops were found to agree to the principle of the approval of all appointments to the episcopacy by the emperor and, most appalling of all, how Nikephoros had promised that any soldiers who died in battle should be proclaimed martyrs — a move which was, he maintained, quickly scotched by the Patriarch Polyeuktos.¹⁶

Such, then, were the charges laid against Nikephoros. The conclusion the reader is intended to draw is that Nikephoros was a harsh, pragmatic ruler, insensitive both to the welfare of civilians and to the traditional honour due to the church. The emphasis laid on the threat posed by the army, however, perhaps gives us an indication of Skylitzes' — or, more correctly, his source's — main pre-occupation. He wished to discredit Nikephoros' achievements in the field and to make it clear that no emperor should identify himself too closely with the ambitions of the military.

It is, of course, as a highly successful general that the Emperor first appears in the chronicles of the period. He came from a military family. His grandfather, Nikephoros, had fought against the Paulicians in 872, was then appointed *stratēgos* of the Charsianon theme, led the troops that re-conquered Calabria in 885 and became Domestic of the Schools under Leo VI (probably

16. Skylitzes, 273-5. Polyeuktos quoted the Canon of St. Basil which banned those who shed blood from receiving communion for three years. See V. Grumel, *Les régestes des actes du patriarcat de Constantinople*, I (*Les actes des patriarches*) fasc. ii (Paris 1936) no. 790. For Zonaras' commentary on this canon, see *In epistolam S. Basilii canonicam*, II, 13 (PG 138) col. 640A. Dagron has suggested (*Traité sur le guérilla, Commentaire* 286, n.35) that while the idea of "holy war" (with suitable spiritual rewards) might have been implanted in the eastern frontier since the days of Leo VI *elle fait scandale à Constantinople*. For the increased militarisation of the empire, see Johannes Zonaras, *Epitome Historiarum*, ed. T. Büttner-Wobst, 3 vols. (CSHB 1897) III, xvi, 25, 505-6 (henceforth Zonaras).

in 887). His uncle, Leo, was somewhat less successful, commanding the Byzantine troops at the defeat of the Anchialos in 917, deprived of his post as Domestic of the Schools in 919 and confined to his estates and, finally, blinded for rebelling against Romanos Lekapenos. But his father, Bardas, had a long and glorious career as Domestic of the Schools (944-955) and was still very much in evidence at court in 968 at an advanced age — not of “at least a hundred and fifty” as Liutprand put it, but probably of about ninety.¹⁷ It may then be maintained without exaggeration that the military successes which characterised the tenth century were almost entirely due to members of the Phokas family. It was not merely a question of luck, or of disorder in the ranks of their enemies. The Phokades were thorough professionals and their expertise was cited as an example to the younger generation of generals. In his *Taktikon*, Leo VI cited Grandfather Nikephoros’ activity four times and referred to him as “our” *stratêgos*. His expedition against Adana and Tarsus in 878 was seen as an object lesson in guerilla warfare and his campaign in Calabria as a fine example of the way to deal with a conquered population.¹⁸ The *Treatise on Guerilla Warfare* itself gave Bardas Phokas the credit for reviving the tactical arts and named him as one of the three finest generals of the age. The other two were his brother-in-law, Constantine Maleïnos, for many years the *stratêgos* of Cappadocia and his son, the Emperor Nikephoros, both of whom had learnt their strategy from him.¹⁹ Though the *Treatise* was written or dictated by the future Emperor Nikephoros himself (at some time in the 960’s), and “edited” by a military man in the Phokas circle, its praise is hardly exaggeration when set against the record of their victories.²⁰ Nikephoros’ success in containing and turning back the raids of the Emir of Aleppo, Saif ad-Dauleh, by using the techniques of guerilla warfare

17. See now *Traité sur le guérilla, Appendice, ‘Les Phocas’*, for J.-C. Cheynet’s excellent short survey of the family in their heyday. For Nikephoros the Elder, see 291-6; for Leo and Bardas, 296-9.

18. *op.cit.*, 166 for references to and discussion of the relevant passages from the *Taktikon* of Leo VI.

19. *op.cit.*, 5-8; 34. For Constantine Maleïnos, 309-10.

20. *op.cit.*, 162-8 for a discussion of the production of the *Treatise*.

perfected by his own family, paved the way for a period of military offensive on the eastern frontier which culminated in the fall of Antioch in 968.²¹ He seems to have been a master of the complicated strategy and logistics involved in mounting sea-borne invasions. Crete fell to his forces in 961, the last of the six attempts that had been made since the island had been taken by the arabs in 824; Cyprus fell in 964-5. The only serious military disaster of the reign was that of the failure of the attack on Sicily in 964-7, due to a combination of the inexperienced generalship of his nephew, Manuel Phokas and, probably, the overstretching of resources to fulfill military commitments in Cyprus as well as on the eastern front.²²

Nikephoros' role as a bringer of victories is constantly emphasised in the sources well-disposed towards him and even in those which one might expect to be more hostile, such as the eleventh-century Arab chronicler, Yahya ibn Sa'id of Antioch (c.980-1066). It was long ago suggested that Yahya may have used the same pro-Phokas source as Leo Diakonos, but he was also ready to criticise the Emperor.²³ But even he had to admit that Nikephoros was a formidable opponent:

“His arrival [at Aleppo in 962] was so unexpected [Yahya wrote] that Saif ad-Daulah was unaware of it until he approached”.²⁴

By 968, he added, “no one doubted that the Emperor Nikephoros would conquer the whole of Syria”²⁵ and it was

21. M. Canard, *Histoire de la dynastie des H'amdaniides de Jazîra et de Syrie, (Publications de la Faculté des lettres d'Alger 2, 21 [Paris 1953])* 1 785-838 remains a classic account of these campaigns. See *Traité sur le guérilla, Commentaire* cc.III-IV, 177-214, for the military strategy involved.

22. Leo diak. I, 3-II, 8, 7-28 for the conquest of Crete; for that of Cyprus, Skylitzes 270. The abortive campaign in Southern Italy and the question of Manuel Phokas' degree of relationship with the Emperor Nikephoros is discussed in *Traité sur le guérilla, Commentaire*, 306. See also Leo diak. IV, 7-8, 66-7.

23. J.H. Forsyth, *The Byzantine-Arab Chronicle (938-1034) of Yahya b.Sa'id al-Antaki*, 2 vols. (University Microfilms, Ann Arbor 1977) I, 190 and II, 336, following the earlier work of Siuziumov, suggests that Yahya also had access to a Phokas family chronicle ('Source B', see n.9 above) since members of the family play such an important part in his account of the years 953-69. For the text of the Chronicle: *Histoire de Yahya ibn Sa'id d'Antioche*, edd. and Fr. trans. I. Kratchkovsky and A.A. Vasiliev in *PO* 18 (1924) fasc.5.

24. Yahya 784.

25. *op.cit.* 825.

clear that any army led by him could almost be guaranteed success. In another passage, based on a lost arab source, Yahya described the impotence of the arab armies in tones more hostile to Nikephoros:

“For his soldiers, his invasions were like a promenade because no-one attacked them, nor came out to meet them. [Nikephoros] went where he wished and devastated as he pleased without one of the Muslims or anyone else to turn him back or block his way”.²⁶

The continuing successes of the Phokas family were recognised and marked in Constantinople by a series of ceremonial receptions and triumphs which must have served to enhance its reputation before large audiences in the imperial capital. In the mid-tenth century, the particular achievement of the family was that its members seemed to be able to gain victories even when Byzantine military fortunes in general seemed at a low ebb. Nikephoros and his brother, Leo, captured the cousin of Saif-ad-Dauleh, Abu'l 'Asa'ir at a moment when successes were slow in coming, and thus provided the central figure for a ceremony of formal humiliation which took place in the Forum of Constantine in 956 in which Abu'l 'Asa'ir was ritually trampled by the Emperor Constantine VII.²⁷ In 960, Leo Phokas, after defeating Saif, was received by the emperor and allowed to stage a parade of booty and prisoners in the Hippodrome.²⁸ It is very likely, too, that when Nikephoros himself returned triumphant from Crete in 961, he was granted a triumph by Romanos II, and certain that he celebrated one in 963 after his victories in Syria.²⁹ When, after

26. *op.cit.* 826. Forsyth, *Byzantine-Arab Chronicle*, 334 and 365 n.64, shows that this passage derives from the lost work of Thabat b. Sinan, later also used by the historians Ibn al-Athir (d.1234) and Sibte b.al-Jawzi (d.1257). Its critical tone is therefore not surprising.

27. M. McCormick, *Eternal Victory, Triumphal rulership in Late Antiquity, Byzantium and the Early Medieval West* (Cambridge/Paris 1986) 161-5. The ceremony is described in Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De ceremoniis aulae byzantinae*, ed. J.J. Reiske, 2 vols. (CSHB, Bonn 1829) II, c.19, 607-8, if McCormick is correct in arguing that this passage is based (as are others) on the most recent performance of a given ceremony — which in this case would be in 956. See now J.F. Haldon (ed.), Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *Three Treatises on Imperial Military Expeditions* (CFHB 25, Vienna forthcoming) for the triumphs of Theophilus and Basil I.

28. McCormick, *Eternal Victory* 166.

29. *ibid.* 167 and n.141; 168, for the problem of whether there were two triumphs (961 and 963) or merely one in 963.

his usurpation in 963, he made a formal entry into Constantinople the acclamations of the people reflected, not surprisingly, intense pride in his recent military activity:

“Welcome, Nikephoros, who has routed the enemy’s regiments!
Welcome, Nikephoros, who has sacked the enemy’s cities!
Welcome, most courageous victor, ever august!”³⁰

Even Liutprand showed grudging admiration for these triumphs and recorded how Nikephoros was hailed by the crowds in Constantinople as “the white death of the Saracens”.³¹

Triumph in war and heroic bravery were two qualities which played a major part in the creation of a “good” reputation. They were certainly the qualities which Nikephoros’ apologists emphasised and which were admirably suited to celebration in panegyric. Theodore Diakonos’ poem, *The Fall of Crete* (probably written in the second half of 961,³² and not “published” until 963, though before Nikephoros had become Emperor), and those by John Geometres, Archbishop of Melitene at the end of the tenth century, are classic examples of the use of the panegyric techniques of dramatic narration, vivid but carefully constructed characterisation and shameless hyperbole.³³

The tone of the *Fall of Crete* is one of unalloyed jingoism. The Emperor exhorts his troops before battle: “Let us take up our swords for our children, our wives, our friends and our native land (*patris*)”.³⁴

The poet concludes the work with a positive paen of triumph:

“The whole earth belongs to the Romans — every ocean and city, the mountains, the streams, the stars, the waters of the ever-flowing rivers, the offices

30. *op.cit.* 169 (McCormick’s trans.). See *De cerim.*, I, c.96, 438.

31. Liutprand, x, 141.

32. *Theodosii Diaconi de Creta capta*, ed. H. Criscuolo (Leipzig 1979). For a longer study and edition of the text, N.M. Panagiōtakēs, *Theodosios ho Diakonos kai to poiēma autou ‘Halōsis tēs Krētēs’*. (*Krētike historikē biliothēkē* 2, Heraklion 1960). For the dating, see Panagiōtakēs, 12-7.

33. Joannes Geometres, *Carmina varia*, PG 106, cols. 901-1002. For their author, see Hunger, *Profane Literatur* II, 169 and n.280. The so-called *Phliopatris*, a dialogue in the style of Lucan now dated to the end of the tenth century, also echoed this triumphal tone, with references to recent victories in the east. See *Philopatris dialogus*, ed. C.B. Hase (*CSHB* 1828) 324-42, espec. 341 and Hunger, *op.cit.* II, 149-50.

34. *Expugnatio Cretae, Akroasis* ii, ed. Criscuolo, 16; ed. Panagiōtakēs, 106.

(*tagmata*) of the Church [a somewhat incongruous element, though probably deliberately inserted]. They all praise their master together'.³⁵

The poetry of John Geometres, of a much higher calibre, also emphasises the martial virtues of the emperor. He celebrated the Emperor's victories against the "Scyths" and "Assyrians", and urged him to rise from his tomb to drive his enemies, like wolves, back among their rocks. In a bitter poem on his death, the emperor, speaking in the first person, enumerates his triumphs, but ends with an ironic comment on the circumstances of his death: "I fell in the heart of the Palace, unable to flee the hand of a woman".³⁶

The military achievements of the emperor in life could obviously be made much of by his admirers, but their contribution to the enhancement of his reputation became greater after his death. For even the most villified of emperors could be re-habilitated if there came a time when his kind of military prowess was needed for the survival of the Empire. Exactly this process may be seen in Nikephoros' case. It is most vividly presented in the epitaph for him preserved in one of the interpolations in Skylitzes' Chronicle. It was apparently inscribed on Nikephoros' tomb, which stood in the Mausoleum of Constantine at the Church of the Holy Apostles.³⁷ In this *Epitaphion*, which is attributed to

35. *op.cit.*, *Akroasis*, v, 11.1-4, ed. Criscuolo, 35; ed. Panagiôtakês, 120-1.

36. John Geometres, xli, col.927; xxiv, col.920; xli, col.927.

37. Skylitzes, c.23, 282-3. Leo Diak (90), clearly states that Nikephoros' decapitated body lay for a day in the snow before being buried in the Church of the Holy Apostles. Although the list of those buried in the so-called Mausoleum of Constantine in *De cerim.* II, 642-9, does not, as it stands, seem to contain Nikephoros' name, there are *lacunae* in it and it may well be that it should be restored. Two texts which can be associated with late-eleventh-century recensions of the *Patria* do, however, include Nikephoros among the emperors in the Mausoleum. For texts and Eng. trans. and commentary, see G. Downey, 'The tombs of the Byzantine Emperors at the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople', *JHS* 79 (1959) 27-51, espec. *Anon. List C*, p.37, 1-13 and *Anon. List R*, p.40, 1.14. A Maricq, 'Notes philologiques, 4: Les sarcophages impériaux de Constantinople', *B* 22 (1952) 370-2 made the association with the *Patria*. The later mss. of the Skylitzes' interpolation (*Ms. Reg.gr. 166* and *Ms. Otto.gr.307*), dated by Mercati to the 15th and 16th centuries respectively, are mistaken when they state that Nikephoros' epitaph was found in his tomb in the Monastery of the Theotokos of the Peribleptos, since this building was not constructed until the reign of Romanos III Argyros (1018-1034). But the Emperor Nikephoros III Botaneiates was buried there after he had been de-throned by Alexios Komnenos and become a monk. The later mss. of the interpolations have, it would appear, con-

John Geometres, the Emperor is exhorted to arise from his tomb and lead his people against the barbarians who are surrounding them:

“The Russian forces rise up against us, the Scythian peoples are working themselves up for an orgy of killing. Every barbarian race plunders your City . . . Cast aside the stone that keeps you in thrall and with rocks drive off the wild beasts! . . . Even if you do not wish to venture out of your tomb, let your voice burst forth against the barbarians!”³⁸

The myth of the invincible emperor who will come back to life to save his people is a common enough *topos* and was obviously an emotive subject, but in Nikephoros’ case, it is clear that the association of the emperor’s prowess with the fate of the empire was already being made while he was still alive. Liutprand of Cremona refers, tantalisingly, to the books of prophecy that circulated at the Byzantine court and to one prophecy in particular which concerned Nikephoros: “It was read that, as long as this Nikephoros lived, the Assyrians [Arabs] would not be able to resist the Greeks.”³⁹ This was a reference to a passage in the so-called *Visions of Daniel*, a prophetic work probably compiled during Nikephoros’ reign, which Liutprand was shown during his second visit to Constantinople in 968.⁴⁰ It contained predictions of the length of each emperor’s rule; whether, during his reign, there would be peace with the muslims and whether the infidel would be successful or not. The prognostications of victory for Nikephoros were, of course, borne out, as was the less comforting prophecy that he would “live” (i.e. rule) no longer than seven years.⁴¹ Although it is unusual in this kind of work for the sub-

flated the two men into one and have no knowledge of the earlier (and correct) accounts of Nikephoros’ burial at the Church of the Holy Apostles. See S.G. Mercati, ‘Note d’epigrafia bizantina’, *Bessarione* 25 (1921) 136-62; no.10, 158 for the mss. tradition and R. Janin, *La géographie ecclésiastique de l’empire byzantin*, I, *Le siège de Constantinople et le patriarcat oecuménique*, iii, *Les églises et les monastères*, 2nd ed. (Paris 1969) 218-22 for the Monastery of the Theotokos of the Peribleptos.

38. Skylitzes 283.

39. Liutprand 152.

40. See P.J. Alexander, ed. D. de F. Abrahamse, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 1985) 7; 96-8, for the *Vision of Daniel* and its dating.

41. Liutprand 153.

ject of a prophecy to be named, the powerful and war-like leader of the text, whose name even meant 'bringer of victories' could be none other than Nikephoros Phokas.⁴² But it is significant that Liutprand was also shown contrasting prophetic material. Another "oracle", attributed by him to "Hippolytus, Bishop of Sicily", predicted that a western, rather than a Byzantine ruler would fulfill the apocalyptic role of the Last Emperor and that the Franks, rather than the Greeks, would defeat the Saracens. Liutprand then commented that, inspired by this prophecy, the muslims had defeated the imperial force sent under the *magistros* Manuel Phokas and the eunuch Niketas in the Straits of Messina (964).⁴³ Furthermore, Nikephoros had himself made peace with the Fatimid rulers of North Africa (the main threat to Liutprand's Italian homeland) in order to concentrate on attacking their mutual enemies in Syria.⁴⁴ It has been cogently argued that the second set of prophecies, essentially hostile to Nikephoros, was shown to Liutprand by individuals at court who were opposed to his policy of *entente* with the rulers of North Africa and who might have preferred an alliance with the Ottonians to clear the arabs out of Italy.⁴⁵ Whatever one makes of these contrasting prophecies, however, they have an important common theme. Success or failure was to be assessed militarily. The victories or defeats of the army were already seen as a direct reflection of the ability (and *suitability*) of the Emperor.

It was the identification of Nikephoros with military success that was one of the strongest weapons in the armoury of his admirers. The Skylitzes school was thus faced a daunting task when its adherents attempted to denigrate Nikephoros' achievements, which would have appeared even more remarkable in comparison with the bungling efforts of the emperors of the eleventh cen-

42. Alexander, *Apocalyptic Tradition* 98.

43. Liutprand, *loc.cit.*, Alexander, *Apocalyptic Tradition* 7-8; 99. For Manuel Phokas, see *Traité sur le guérilla, Commentaire* 306.

44. Alexander, *Apocalyptic Tradition* 105.

45. *ibid.* 120. Whether one should describe Liutprand's contacts as the "legitimist opposition" working for the return of the Macedonians is a moot point, but Liutprand himself and his father and father-in-law before him had all enjoyed cordial relations with Nikephoros' predecessors and Liutprand might well have re-activated these contacts in 968.

tury. As we have seen, some attempt had already been made in the tenth century to seize upon military set-backs and to use them as a basis for hostile propaganda, but there were not enough defeats under Nikephoros to make this line of attack a very profitable one. Skylitzes' method was to maintain that the price of victory was too high for the Byzantine state to bear and to imply that the Emperor was too closely devoted to and identified with the interests of the army to rule justly.

There is no doubt, indeed, of Nikephoros' impatience with affairs of state. Liutprand, bemoaning the passing of the gentle and scholarly Constantine Porphyrogenetos, was rudely set to rights by the imperial officials:

“‘Constantine’, they said, ‘was an easy-going man, always staying in the Palace and in this way he made the foreigners his friends. The Emperor Nikephoros is *tachycheir*, dedicated to the arts of war. He hates the Palace like the plague’”.⁴⁶

It is from Nikephoros' known antipathy to the bureaucratic constraints of the Palace that Skylitzes was able to develop his line of argument. His main complaint, of course, was that the financial demands of military campaigning were excessive and that Nikephoros persisted in mounting new attacks even in the face of the growing suffering and protest of the civilian population. Abnormally high taxation and imperial speculation in the corn market⁴⁷ was accompanied by what the hostile chroniclers make out to be a vicious currency fraud — the issue of the *tetarteron*, a lighter gold coin, and the insistence that while imperial taxes and dues should be paid in the 'old', heavier *nomisma*, the imperial debts and payments would be discharged in *tetartera*. Added to this, the only legal tender was to be coin of Nikephoros' own minting, a fundamental break with tradition.⁴⁸

Before examining whether Skylitzes had any real grounds for these accusations, one should only mention the fact that financial exactions were also given as a cause for complaint in the arab sources hostile to Nikephoros Phokas. The arab chronicler Ibn Hauqal, a contemporary, relates that he demanded 10 golden

46. Liutprand 160.

47. *loc.cit.* 198-9 and Skylitzes 274.

48. Skylitzes 275.

dinars from every household of a “notable” (a *dynatos*?) who possessed servants, cows, sheep, arable and pasture lands and from the less wealthy, one man and his (military?) equipment as well as a sum of money — a rather confused reference to Nikephoros’ military edicts. According to Ibn Hauqal, his campaigns were entirely financed from these exactions:

“He never drew on the funds in his own treasury, never made any perceptions on his own fortune and never devoted any of his own revenues to this . . . This method of gathering money was the reason why the Christians hated him, loathed his rule and chafed against his advisors . . . It was their reason for murdering him”.⁴⁹

The interesting point to note here is not so much the fact that Nikephoros is accused of making heavy exactions, though Ibn Hauqal does not actually *say* that there was no legal basis for them, but that again opinion of Nikephoros was being formulated on the basis that he was a grasping miser. The crucial question concerns the source of Ibn Hauqal’s information. We know that he was travelling from Khwarezm in Persia westwards via Mosul and Nisibis in 969, areas which were under strong Byzantine attack at the time and it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that he met captured Byzantines, or even, as a non-combatant, passed peacefully through the lands of those who had been heavily taxed by the Emperor. Those in the furthest of the Eastern themes had, after all, borne the brunt of almost continued campaigning for upwards of fifty years and Nikephoros’ demands may well have seemed like the last straw. But whatever Ibn Hauqal’s source, the use of the imagery of injustice, meanness and lack of *philanthropia* both here and in Skylitzes, was one way in which the attractive qualities of success and military glory could be undermined.

In Skylitzes’ case, another element was added. For he implied that Nikephoros not only wrung as much personal advantage as possible from the financial resources already available to the

49. Ibn Hauqal, *La configuration de la terre*, ed. and trans. J.H. Kramer and G. Wiet, 2 vols. (Paris/Beirut 1964). Dagron, *Traité sur le guérilla, Commentaire* 279-80 points out that although Ibn Hauqal may not have known much about the precise nature of Nikephoros’ military reforms, he noticed their implications of *militarisation à l’outrance*.

emperor, but that he also invented new and reprehensible ones. The myth of the constant and unchanging *nomisma* has long since been exploded, but the trust that the Byzantines placed in the probability of their currency and the dire psychological effects that any alteration to it produced, meant that an adjustment in specie or the issue of new and unfamiliar coins could be relied upon to create popular unrest and alarm. Such was the case with Nikephoros' issue of the *tetarteron* and his regulations on legal tender, described with such disgust by Skylitzes. Zonaras, unusually departing from the pattern set by Skylitzes, gives the reason for these new regulations. It was done "so that the merchants would only demand his *nomismata* [the ones bearing Nikephoros' effigy] and he would get a share of all the money-changing transactions that resulted from this".⁵⁰

The real reasons for the minting of the *tetarteron* have been much discussed. While it is no longer possible to maintain that the issue was a deliberate move to place the *nomisma* on a par with the Fatimid dinar, the move undoubtedly had fiscal aims. But in any case the adjustment in the value of the coin relative to the *nomisma* was small. Michael Hendy has demonstrated that the *tetarteron* was very little lighter than the *nomisma histamenon*, so on the grounds of weight, at least, the alteration was hardly significant. He also exploded the myth that only the *tetarteron* was to be used for imperial expenditure and only the *histamenon* for revenue, for had this been the case, then it might well have led to the eventual complete disappearance of the *histamenon*.⁵¹ It was probably always intended that the two weights should circulate side by side (as they certainly did in the following century) and that imperial revenues should often be paid half in *tetartera* and half in *nomismata*.⁵² Were the chroniclers making a drama

50. Zonaras III, xvi, 26, (507).

51. M.F. Hendy, *Studies in the Byzantine Monetary Economy* (Cambridge 1985) 507; all Nikephoros' successors (up to and including Nikephoros III Botaneiates) struck *tetartera* which circulated with the *histamena nomismata*.

52. See M.F. Hendy, 'Light-weight *solidi*, *tetartera*, and the *Book of the Eparch*', *BZ* 65 (1972) 57-80. As Hendy points out, even if imperial dues were being paid half in each weight, this would still only have implied a tax of some 1/24 on each payment (i.e. the difference in weight), since the *tetarteron* was lighter than the *histamenon* by 1/12, see *Byzantine Monetary Economy*, *loc.cit.*

out of nothing? Perhaps not, since the measures which may have been instituted to *ensure* the circulation of the *tetarteron* might well have caused discontent, especially amongst the merchants. Regardless of the real monetary effects of the change — an “appreciable but not a fundamental increase in revenue” and a “slight inflationary effect” in Hendy’s view — the psychological impact of *any* alteration in the currency, beneficial or not, was enough to fuel the criticism of the emperor.⁵³

So one of the main lines of the attack on Nikephoros was based on his attributes as a miserly tyrant, and, indeed, Zonaras reports that “all prayed to be released from his tyranny”.⁵⁴ The means by which the victories had been achieved could nullify their triumphs. It is here that one may seriously question whether Nikephoros really was as much in sympathy with the aspirations of the class from which he came as used to be maintained. Might not the *dynatoi* have been the group (as the evidence of Ibn Hauqal suggests) most harshly pressed by Nikephoros’ exactions? Many of them were also military men, but the emphasis laid on Nikephoros’ identification with the army *as a whole* can be seen as a reflection of that growing professionalism which was, in the eleventh century, to reduce the role played by the traditional leaders of the thematic troops — the provincial aristocracy — while increasing that of the *tagmata* and the mercenary commanders. The development of a specifically military ethos which emphasised the role of the fighting man (rather than the property and kin-ship systems which produced him) and sought to provide significant temporal *and* spiritual rewards for him, certainly antagonised powerful interests in Constantinople. It must also have had serious implications for social relationships between the thematic *dynatoi* and their erstwhile inferiors who could now find new wealth and self-esteem in Nikephoros’ armies. Professor Dagron, indeed, has cogently argued that Nikephoros and his propagandists (such as the “editor” of the *Treatise on Guerilla War-*

53. Hendy, *Light-weight solidi* 71-2.

54. Zonaras, *loc.cit.* For further examples in other contexts of Zonaras’ somewhat frequent outbursts against “imperial tyranny”, see Magdalino, *Byzantine Kaiserkritik* 329-33. It may have been a matter of greater concern in his own time than in the tenth century and his comments should, therefore, be treated with caution.

fare) were concerned to create a personal link between the Emperor and his “companions in arms”; an exclusively military rather than a civilian-influenced hierarchy.⁵⁵ The events leading up to Nikephoros’ death and the rôle played in them by another *dynatos*, John Tzimiskes, indicate the alarm felt by more traditional members of the provincial aristocracy at the possibility of such radical innovations and the later commentators showed their distaste for actions which seemed to be allowing one of the limbs of the Byzantine body politic to gain control of the head.

Clearly much criticism centred on Nikephoros’ behaviour as military commander. But a second, in many ways associated area — that of his relationship to the Church — was also a topic upon which emotions ran high. But here the conflicting accounts of the rival schools of chroniclers may be corroborated or disproved from a much wider variety of sources. Not only do we possess the text of Nikephoros’ Novel of 964 concerning church property,⁵⁶ but the information contained in various documents concerned with the early years of the Great Lavra on Mount Athos (which found its first and most valuable patron in Nikephoros himself) and with the life of its founder, St. Athanasios, provides us with detailed information about the emperor’s own spirituality, the kind of observance which attracted him and the development of his rather idiosyncratic approach to religion.

The main sources for the life of St. Athanasios are two hagiographies, usually referred to as the *Vita* (A) and the *Vita* (B).⁵⁷ The *Vita* (A) was written by a monk, Athanasios, between c.1000 (1006 at the latest) and 1025. The source of much of the author’s information was his teacher, Antonios, the successor of St. Athanasios as *hêgoumenos* of the Lavra and later *hêgoumenos* of the Monastery of Panagiou in Constantinople. The *Vita* (B) was composed by an anonymous Lavriote at some time after 1028 and, at the latest, by the first half of the twelfth

55. *Traité sur le guérilla, Commentaire* 281-5.

56. *Jus graecoromanum*, edd. J. and P. Zepos, 8 vols. (Athens 1931) I, col.iii, 249-52. For Eng. trans., see P. Charanis, ‘The Monastic Properties and the State in the Byzantine Empire’, *DOP* 4 (1948) 53-118, repr. in *Social, Economic and Political Life in the Byzantine Empire* (London 1973).

57. *Vitae duae antiquae Sancti Athanasii Athonitae*, ed. J. Noret (*Corpus Christianorum*, series graeca, 9, Louvain 1982).

century.⁵⁸ Even more useful is a group of three documents composed by St. Athanasios himself: the *Typikon* for the Lavra (dating from c. 973-5), his *Diatypōsis* (Testament) written at some point between 984 and his death (which occurred between 997 and at the latest, 1006) and the *Hypotypōsis*, or monastic regulations of the Lavra, written between 964 and 985.⁵⁹

These sources are of crucial importance because they chiefly concern someone who had a fundamental influence on Nikephoros Phokas' religious attitudes. The connexion is a complicated but fascinating one. As a young man, Athanasios (then Abraamios) studied in Constantinople and was appointed *didaskalos*, probably by Constantine Porphyrogenetos, but at any rate between 940 and 950.⁶⁰ He evoked the jealousy of his fellow professors and left the City for a time for Lemnos in the company of Theodore Zephinezer, the *stratēgos* of Aigaion Pelagos.⁶¹ It was on his return to Constantinople that he met both the holy man Michael Maleīnos (on two occasions) and Michael's nephew, Nikephoros Phokas. Athanasios followed Michael back to his monastery on Mount Kyminas and lived there from about 952 to, probably, 957. He then fled to Mount Athos and after a period of secluded life under the name of Barnabas, emerged to begin the process of building up his own monastic community.⁶² The vital link in this chain is Michael Maleīnos, the uncle by marriage of Nikephoros and the spiritual advisor of Athanasios. He represents, with St. Paul of Latros, St. Nikephoros of Olympos and St. Athanasios himself, that growing and influential band

58. For a discussion of the dating and provenance of the *Lives of Athanasios*, hitherto the subject of considerable controversy see Noret's *Introduction*, cx; cxvi-cxxvi (*Vita* (A)); cxxvii-cxxviii (*Vita* (B)).

59. P. Meyer, *Die Haupturkunden für die Geschichte der Athos-Klöster* (Leipzig 1894) 102-22 (*Typikon*); 123-30 (*Diatypōsis*) and 130-40 (*Hypotypōsis*). For the dating, see edd. P. Lemerle, A. Guillou, N. Svoronos and D. Papachryssanthou, *Actes de Lavra, I. (Archives de l'Athos V, Paris 1971) 17; 20-1*. The precise date of Athanasios' death is unknown. D. Papachryssanthou, in *Actes du Prôtaton (Archives de l'Athos VII, Paris 1975) 101*, puts it at "about 1000". Noret, *op.cit.*, *Introduction* cx, suggests a *terminus ante quem* of 1006.

60. *Vita Athanasii* (A) c.14, p.9. See P. Lemerle, *Byzantine Humanism (Byzantina Australiensia 6, Canberra 1986) 298-302*, for his intellectual career in Constantinople.

61. *Vita Athanasii* (A), c.18 (10-11).

62. *op.cit.*, cc.19-39 (11-20).

of holy men who, while withdrawing to the seclusion of the mountains and scorning the traditional communal life of the great Byzantine monasteries, exercised considerable influence in affairs of state through their positions as spiritual fathers to the aristocracy.⁶³

A study of the relationship of Nikephoros and Athanasios provides many clues to answering what at first seems to be an insoluble paradox: why, if (as Skylitzes implies) the Emperor was determined to crush the church by stopping grants of land to it, as well as extending his control over episcopal appointments, do we find him such a generous patron to the Lavra on Mount Athos and a frequent visitor to the monastic establishments on Mount Kyminas? Why, in the same year (964) as the Novel concerning Church lands was issued, did he also issue a chrysobull for the Lavra which confirmed two previous ones (also granted by him) which in their turn had legalised the Lavra's possession of the lands in Pallene of the Monastery of St. Andrew of Peristerai, near Thessalonika?⁶⁴ The answer, in simple terms, is that Nikephoros was not "anti-monastic" in the widest sense of the term, but was personally committed to the ascetic practices made fashionable by St. Michael Maleinos and St. Athanasios. Both these men, and Athanasios' influential disciple, John the Iberian, the founder of the Georgian house on Athos, were welcome visitors at Nikephoros' court.⁶⁵

The source of this devotion was his own early intention to become a monk and the fact that he did *not* fulfil this ambition has an important bearing on the events of 964. Nikephoros' intended vocation is stated, though in a context hardly creditable

63. For Michael Maleinos, see *Vie de S. Michel Maleinos*, ed. L. Petit, *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* 7 (1902) 543-83. I deal further with the monastic leaders of the tenth century in 'Monasteries and their patrons in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries', in J. Haldon and J. Kouloumides, eds., *Perspectives in Byzantine History and Culture* (= *BF* 10 [1986] 185-231).

64. *Actes de Lavra*, I, no.2. 1,800 *modioi* of land were involved, of which 1,200 *modioi* were cultivated and 600 *modioi* were *klasmata*.

65. For Athanasios and Michael in Constantinople, see *Vita Athanasii* (A), *passim*. For John the Iberian, see edd. J. Lefort, N. Oikonomides, D. Papachryssanthou and H. Métréveli, *Actes d'Iviron* I (*Archives de l'Athos* XIV, Paris 1985) 19-20 and J. Lefort and D. Papachryssanthou, 'Les premiers Géorgiens à l'Athos dans les documents byzantins', *Bedi Kartlisa* 41 (1983) 27-33.

to the Emperor, by Skylitzes, who reports that after the death of Romanos II, Nikephoros plotted with the eunuch Joseph Bringas, telling the latter that he had nothing to fear since he, Nikephoros, had long intended to enter a monastic house. He showed Bringas the hair shirt that he wore,

“and with oaths he maintained that he had long wished to embrace the monastic way of life, and would have entered upon it, having aside the cares of the world, if he had not been prevented by his duty towards the Emperors Constantine and Romanos”.⁶⁶

This information is corroborated by Athanasios himself. In the *Typikon*, he relates how Nikephoros visited him on Mount Kyminas and revealed his plans for becoming a monk, which, Athanasios added, were overruled by the Emperors Constantine and Romanos.⁶⁷ They were obviously not prepared to give the able young general permission to leave his post. The important question as far as Nikephoros’ spiritual development is concerned is the point at which he gave up this ambition. He seems to have still been firm in his resolve in 961, when Athanasios joined him on Crete and was joyfully received by the Emperor.⁶⁸ Nikephoros then reasserted his determination to renounce the world and offered money to finance the building of a *koinobion*.⁶⁹

The implication of this statement is, of course, that now the reconquest of Crete had been achieved, Nikephoros could be expected to be released from his military duties in order to take up his vocation. We shall never know why he did not. Perhaps some credence may be given to Leo Diakonos’ report that, after Romanos II’s death in 963, Nikephoros was reluctant to accept the acclamations of the army at Caesaria on 2nd July, and that

66. Skylitzes 255.

67. *Typikon* 103; *Vita Athanasii* (A), cc.30-3 (15-16).

68. *Vita Athanasii* (A), cc.68-70 (32-3). The *Vita Athanasii* (B), c.22 (148) describes Athanasios as being already Nikephoros’ spiritual father — a later embellishment, perhaps, but one which does reflect the reality of the relationship in 961.

69. *Vita Athanasii* (A), c.70 (33). The *Vita* (B), c.22 (148), develops this episode so that Nikephoros is also made to request the building of hesychastic *kellia* and the foundation of a church “thus to form it into a *koinobion*” — a reasonably precise description of the development of the Lavriote monastic régime in the late tenth century.

he was only persuaded to accept the imperial power (by, ironically, John Tzimiskes) in order to save it from falling into the hands of “that miserable wretch from Paphlagonia, Joseph Bringas”.⁷⁰ Yahya of Antioch explained (in a view echoed by the Armenian chronicler, Matthew of Edessa) that the Empress, as the mother of two children,

“deemed it necessary for Nikephoros to direct the affairs of the Empire because of his justice, his expertise at administration and his successive victories and this view was generally endorsed.”⁷¹

More probably, we must conclude that Nikephoros had been too long a career soldier to be able to resist the temptation into which so many of his predecessors had fallen.

The news of his protégé’s accession to the height of empire rather than the higher life had a shattering effect on Athanasios. He fled from Athos to Cyprus and may have got as far as Attaleia before being persuaded to return by reports of confusion in the Lavra, and, more importantly, of the Emperor’s remorse. By May of 964, the imperial pangs of conscience were beginning to bear fruit. Nikephoros’ confirmatory chrysobull for the Lavra dates from that month. It is from this document, too, that we learn that Athanasios himself had recently been in Constantinople. For the Emperor despatched with the Chrysobull a gift of three important relics: a fragment of the True Cross, and the heads of St. Basil of Caesareia and St. Alexander of Pydna, which “we worshipped *together* in the royal chapel not long ago”.⁷²

70. Leo Diak. 41.

71. Yahya of Antioch 788. See also, for Matthew of Edessa, A.E. Dostorian, *The Chronicle of Matthew of Edessa: Translated from the Original Armenian with a Commentary and Introduction*, 2 vols. (Ann Arbor 1972), where Matthew comments that Nikephoros “kept the sons of Romanos, Basil and Constantine, near him in the Palace with great honour and splendour”.

72. *Actes de Lavra* I no.5. The document is firmly dated to May, Indiction 7, 6474 (May 964). The fact that there is, today, only one fragment of the True Cross preserved in the Lavra and this is, by tradition, the one given by Nikephoros, has puzzled the editors of the *Actes d’Iviron* (see n.65 above). As they note, the *Lives of SS. John and Euthymios* (ed. and Lat. trans. P. Peeters, ‘Histoires monastiques géorgiennes’, *AB* 36-7 (1917-19) 8-158), includes a fragment of the True Cross in a silver reliquary in a list of gifts given by the *Georgian* monks to the Lavra (*loc.cit.* 25). To explain this, they suggest that John the Iberian was instrumental in 964 in obtaining the relic for the Lavra (*Actes d’Iviron* I, 20, n.6) Apart from the separate problem of the date

We do not, unfortunately, know the month in 964 when the Novel concerning church property was issued. Since Athanasios must have been in Constantinople some time between fleeing from Athos on hearing the news of Nikephoros' acclamation on 2nd July (or, more probably, his coronation on 16th August 963) and, say, April 964 (giving him time to make the round trip Athos-Cyprus-Attaleia?-Athos-Constantinople and be back in Athos where the chrysobull was addressed in May, 964) there are strong reasons for suggesting that the Novel must have been promulgated *after* Athanasios' visit.⁷³ The Novel is, in fact, far easier to interpret if it is seen as another facet of Nikephoros' attempts to placate Athanasios: For while the Emperor castigated the great monastic houses of the empire for their ambitions as landowners rather than as shepherds of souls, and fulminated against the acquisition of "thousands of measures of land, superb buildings, innumerable horses, oxen, camels and other beasts",⁷⁴ and declared that henceforth no new monasteries could be founded and that land could only be granted to those monasteries which had fallen on hard times, he specifically excluded from these strictures the foundations of *kellia* and *lavrae*, for "we find it praiseworthy so long as these *kellia* and *lavrae* do not strive to obtain fields and estates beyond their enclosures."⁷⁵ But what else was St. Athanasios of the Lavra attempting with the acquisition of the lands of St. Andrew at Peristerai?

In other words, the Novel of 964 is not a general onslaught on the monastic houses of the empire, but a selective attack on the houses which still practised the traditional types of

of John the Iberian's arrival at the Lavra to join Athanasios (traditionally put at 965 and certainly before 969), which makes activity on their behalf in 964 questionable, it seems unwise to discard the evidence of *Actes de Lavra* I, no. 5 which clearly associates *Athanasios* with this relic—unless we are here dealing with more than one fragment of the True Cross. A. Frolow, *La relique de la Vraie Croix* (*ArOrCh* 7 [Paris 1961] no. 147 for the 964 fragment and, interestingly, nos. 962 and 1664 for details of others which were later falsely associated with Nikephoros, as if by this their repute would be established.

73. D. Papachryssanthou, *Actes du Prôtaton*, 80-1, suggests that Athanasios returned to Athos from his flight at the end of 963 or beginning of 964. Only the *Vita Athanasii* (B), c. 33 (164), reports the saint at Attaleia.

74. Zepos, *op.cit.* 249.

75. *loc.cit.* 251.

monasticism. Nikephoros spoke highly in his Novel of the spirituality of the early fathers of Palestine and Syria; he obviously considered Athanasios to be the heir to that tradition. We cannot know if Athanasios personally influenced the tone and wording of the Novel of 964, but the strong links between Nikephoros and the Lavra were continued even after the Emperor's death. For it is in Lavriote sources that one finds some of the staunchest approval of Nikephoros' character. He was celebrated as a martyr in a liturgical office used on Athos and probably composed by Theodore the Deacon:

"Like a ladder leading upwards from the earth and creeping things, your slaughter will lead you to the heights of martyrdom and undying glory".⁷⁶

Theodore cited him as the "champion" (*athlêtês*) of his people and as the "strong right arm of the army of Christ". He compared him with St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Further evidence for a cult of Nikephoros in existence by the mid-to late eleventh century is furnished by a passage in the later *Vita* (B) of Athanasios. In a section dealing with miracles performed in the Lavra, the author relates a conversation between a cook, Nicholas, and one of the elders of the monastery on the subject of patience in vigils. Nicholas tells how his concentration flagged one night, and wracking his brains for a suitable person to whom to pray for intercession,

"a thought came to me of the martyr Nikephoros as to whether or not we ought to venerate him as a martyr, for many confidently affirmed that he was such."⁷⁷

The Lavriotes may well, then, have helped to disseminate a cult venerating the murdered emperor in addition to the other numerous expressions of regret about his death which will shortly be discussed.⁷⁸

76. L. Petit, 'Un office inédit en l'honneur de Nicéphore Phocas', *BZ* 13 (1904) 398-420. See espec. 402, 1.48 *et seq.* Could this Office also have been used in certain houses in the capital itself?

77. *Vita Athanasii* (B), c.44 (178-9). The *Vita Athanasii* (A) does not contain this episode. Noret comments that its author was conspicuously unfavourable to miracles and insists on the value of virtue: "For me, it seems that the virtues are all as admirable. They, in fact, are the cause of miracles, not *vice versa*".

78. See 112-3, below.

The question remains, though, of whether the Lavra was a “special case”, an exception to the treatment meted out to other religious houses. But it does not seem to have been alone in enjoying a close relationship with the Emperor. The communities of Kyminas and Olympos, where the semi-eremital style of monasticism flourished during the tenth century, also enjoyed imperial approval. The loss of the archives of Kyminas prevents any estimate of Nikephoros’ bounty to the houses there and makes it impossible to discover whether it equalled his donations to the Lavra. Athanasios, however, tells us in his *Typikon* that Nikephoros’ patronage of Kyminas continued after he became Emperor and, incidentally, that he also employed monks from Kyminas to take messages to Athos and was one of the earliest promoters of the cult of St. Michael Maleinos.⁷⁹ For Skylitzes tells us that, after warnings of impending doom in 969, the Emperor was accustomed to sleep on the floor, wrapped for protection in a bear-skin worn by his uncle Michael Maleinos.⁸⁰ Significantly, another owner of a relic of Michael was his spiritual son, Athanasios, who took with him the *koukoulion* or cowl of his teacher when he left Kyminas and, as the *Vita* (B) reports, “wore it as a protection in life and when dying had it placed in his tomb.”⁸¹

There is evidence, too, of Nikephoros’ popularity among the provincial patrons of the monastic communities of Cappadocia for which there is no documentary evidence, but ample physical remains. The left apse of the so-called “Dove-Cote” Church at Çavuşin is decorated with a group of five figures in imperial robes, one of whom is standing before a throne. An inscription identifies him as Nikephoros. Three of the other figures have been identified as those of the Empress Theophano, Nikephoros’ brother, the *kouropalates* Leo Phokas and their father Bardas.⁸² As recent commentators on the monument have shown, the

79. *Vita Athanasii* (A), c.71 (33). The monk Methodios was sent in 963 with money for the building of the Church of the Theotokos on Athos. He subsequently became a *hēgoumenos* on Mt. Kyminas.

80. Skylitzes, c.22 (280).

81. *Vita Athanasii* (A), c.240 (115); (B), c.12 (139); c.65 (200).

82. See L. Rodley, ‘The Pigeon-House Church, Çavuşin’, *JÖB* 33 (1983) 301-339, for a full description of the monument.

representation of the Phokas family forms part of a triumph scene, completed by a nearby representation of two mounted figures in procession (now identified as John Tzimiskes and the Armenian general, Melias).⁸³ It was commissioned by donors who were probably provincial land-owners of relatively humble rank and it commemorated Nikephoros' triumphs — either his accession to the throne in 963, or, as Nicole Thierry has persuasively argued, the campaigns of 964-5 which culminated in the capture not only of the city of Tarsus, but of important relics of the Cross which had been kept there.⁸⁴ It was not the only church where Nikephoros is known to have been portrayed. He was depicted, as any donor might have been, in the Church of the Theotokos and the Magistros in Crete, re-built or restored by him during the siege of Chandax in 961.⁸⁵ But in the Cappadocian case it is significant that other donors admired the military exploits of the emperor and his entourage so much that they wished to incorporate them in the decorative scheme and that these portrayals existed in a clearly monastic context.⁸⁶

Towards the end of his life, in fact, his religious practices became more austere and all the accounts of his murder are agreed that on the night of his death Nikephoros had spent much time reading religious works and praying (probably in a small room adjoining the Church of the Pharos which he had had built for his private meditations), before finally falling asleep there.⁸⁷ He

83. Rodley, *art. cit.* and N. Thierry, 'Un portrait de Jean Tzimiskès en Cappadoce', *TM* 9 (1985) 477-84.

84. Thierry, *art. cit.* 480-3.

85. Thierry, *art. cit.* 482. See H. Grégoire, 'Etudes sur le neuvième siècle: I, Un grand homme inconnu: Le magistrat et logothète Serge le Nicétiate', *B* 18 (1983) 515-34. Grégoire (530) exploded the myth presented by Attaleiates that Nikephoros had this church *built* in three days!

86. For the monastic communities of Cappadocia, see L. Rodley, *Cave Monasteries of Byzantine Cappadocia* (Cambridge 1985) espec. c.6, 237-54.

87. R. Guillard, 'Le Palais du Boukoléon: l'assassinat de Nicéphore II Phokas', *BS* 13 (1953) 101-36, espec. 128-33. In a formidable piece of detective work, Guillard established that the "scene of the crime" was not, as Schlumberger and others had maintained, a *kastron* "newly built" by Nikephoros near the Boukoleon (there was no such place), but actually within the Great Palace itself. His suggestion that Nikephoros had built on to the Church of the Pharos a small chamber for meditation is an attractive one and fits well with the chronicle accounts of Tzimiskes and his conspirators climbing *up* to the terrace of the Palace and then not being able to

also seems to have lived a celibate life, a matter which later sources, both literary and popular, saw as a major cause of the Empress Theophano's hatred for him.⁸⁸ His devotion to relics is mentioned in a number of sources and it is very possible, as his own name would suggest, that he had a particular veneration for the True Cross and its relics.⁸⁹ As we have seen, he sent at least one fragment to Athos⁹⁰ and almost certainly possessed the True Cross reliquary now in Cortona, on whose ivory case an inscription celebrated his victories:

“Once Christ gave this cross to the powerful Emperor Constantine for his salvation.

Now it is Nikephoros, [ruler] by God's grace, who in possessing it, puts to flight the barbarian tribes”.⁹¹

This enthusiasm may have reflected an aspect of specifically Cappadocian piety. For military circles in Asia Minor in the eighth and ninth centuries, the Cross had particular significance as a symbol of protection against the inroads of muslim attack. By the tenth century, after the restoration of the veneration of icons, the figures of Christ and the saints re-appeared in decorative

find Nikephoros, since, as Guiland suggests, he was not in the imperial bed-chamber but in this private refuge for meditation. The eunuch who showed them where the emperor was would have known of his devotional habits.

88. Leo Diak. (85) declared that Nikephoros remained fond of his wife; Skylitzes (279) that Theophano abandoned him for John Tzimiskes because of the former's austerity and chastity. Zonaras (III, 516), reported that Nikephoros no longer had any sexual dealings with Theophano either “because of satiety” or (much more likely) “through continence”.

89. I am grateful to Jonathan Shepard (who is at present working on this topic) for much illuminating guidance on the subject of imperial relic-collecting in the tenth century.

90. See 104 and n.72 above. The chrysobull of 964 in which it is mentioned begins with a *Hymn to the Holy Cross*, probably written in full knowledge of the emperor's particular devotion. See S. Binon, ‘Un ‘Eloge de la Sainte Croix’ dans un chrysobulle de Nicéphore Phocas’, *Bull. Inst. hist. belge de Rome* 18 (1937) 109-18.

91. A. Frolov, *Relique de la Vraie Croix*, no.146, 239-41 for the reliquary of Cortona (illustrated in *ibid.*, *Les reliquaires de la Vraie Croix* (Arch.Or.Chrét. 8 [Paris 1965] fig.40). André Guillou has suggested that this Cross was carried before the armies in 963-5 before being returned to Haghia Sophia (which would explain the mention of the *skeuophylax* Stephen in one of its inscriptions). See A. Guillou, ‘Deux ivoires constantinopolitains’, in *Byzance et les Slaves: Mélanges I. Dujčev*. (Paris n.d.) 207-11.

schemes, but the image of the Cross remained potent. Nikephoros and Theophano carry crosses in the Çavuşin portraits, a reference to the Tarsus relics, perhaps, but certainly a reflection of the personal devotion of both the subjects and the donors of the fresco.⁹²

Skylitzes' strictures on Nikephoros' treatment of the church and Leo Diakonos' description of a deeply pious man are not, then, incompatible. They are two sides of the same coin. Nikephoros' disliked what might be termed the "official" church and found the asceticism and rigorous spirituality of the holy mountains far more to his taste. Links with his own family — in both the physical and spiritual sense — helped to influence the direction of his patronage. This is, too, a strongly individualistic character evident in all Nikephoros' religious practices. He was, like many of his contemporaries, deeply concerned with his own spiritual welfare and for his own future salvation and he cultivated the company of those whose ways he felt might best achieve these ends. There was, of course, nothing intrinsically wrong in this, but, in the case of the Emperor, matters which might be acceptable (and even praiseworthy) in a private individual, took on a new light. A lack of interest in and even hostility to traditional imperial ecclesiastical concerns — the protection of the rights of the secular church, concern for its financial resources and guardianship of its lands and institutions — was a matter of deep anxiety to the patriarchal authorities, coupled as it was with the patronage and encouragement of monastic institutions which took little heed of the traditional jurisdictional rights of the episcopacy and which seemed to be attracting large numbers of the faithful into their orbit. Nikephoros' own favoured forms of spirituality were applied in the Empire as a whole. The monks and hermits who could bring salvation and victory by the purity of their lives and the concentration of their prayers were just as vital in the fight against the infidel as the soldiers whose sacred duty it was to wage temporal war. Other, less "potent" monastic houses were to be curbed — a move with particularly

92. N. Thierry, 'Le culte de la croix dans l'empire byzantine du VIIe au Xe siècle dans ses rapports avec la guerre contre l'infidèle', *Riv.Studi.Bizant.Slavi* 1 (1981) 205-28.

dangerous implications for the large *koinobia*. The two major concerns of the chroniclers: Nikephoros' spiritual orientation and his relationship with the army were, in many senses, one.

Here, then, are the two faces of Nikephoros Phokas: the hermit *manqué* and the general; the sternly ascetic practitioner of religious observances and the castigator of those whose duty it was to spend their lives in intercession but whose attention had been distracted by worldly wealth. The attitude of those who wrote of him was influenced both by their views on proper religious practice and by their conception of the imperial position. Skylitzes, an apologist for the Macedonian emperors, compared Nikephoros unfavourably with Basil I, who never let his people starve and who always had their welfare at heart. But Basil I did not win many battles, either. He was also concerned to point out the dangers of too great a reliance on the military. Leo Diakonos, himself involved in the religious life of the capital and once an army chaplain, seems to have been one of those who admired the "new puritanism" in religious observance that Nikephoros practised.

What verdict can one give on Nikephoros? Obviously a virtually impossible task, but one way of approaching it is to observe how those responsible for his downfall were viewed by later commentators. One can dismiss the pro-Ottonian comments of Thietmar of Merseburg and Widukind of Corvey⁹³ who attributed Nikephoros' death to the outraged mob of Constantinople who rose against him on hearing of a minor defeat of the Byzantine forces in Italy. A far more astute comment comes from Yahya of Antioch. For him, the tragic events of the night of 10th December, 969, were the results of a family quarrel. The Empress Theophano, mistrustful not, it would appear, of Nikephoros himself, but of his brother Bardas' intentions towards her sons Basil and Constantine, threw in her lot with John Tzimiskes, already her lover, and persuaded him to kill Nikephoros.⁹⁴ It is

93. Thietmar of Merseburg, *Chronicon*, *MGH*, *SS*, 3, 723-871, see 748; Widukind, *Res gestae saxonicae*, *loc.cit.*, 408-67; see c.74, 465. The *Chronicle of Salerno*, however, knew of the affair between Theophano and John Tzimiskes and described Nikephoros as *iustus et iure legis servator* in contrast to his *crudelissima uxor*. See *Chronicon Salernitanum*, *MGH*, *SS*, 3, 467-561; see 556.

94. Yahya of Antioch 827.

a view also stated by Zonaras, who, alone of the Byzantine chroniclers, asserted that Nikephoros wanted to dispose of the young *porphyrogennetoï* Basil and Constantine in order to leave the Empire to his brother, Leo.⁹⁵ Zonaras was, of course, trying to justify the unjustifiable — the involvement of John Tzimiskes in the murder of Nikephoros — but it is interesting that other chroniclers did not wish to press this line too strongly. For them, Nikephoros' misdeeds had to stand as justification for his removal, if not his murder.

The guilt of John Tzimiskes and, in particular, the adulterous Empress Theophano, provided a strong dramatic theme for later popular treatments of Nikephoros' reign and death. Henri Grégoire was of the opinion that the deeds of the Phokas family (especially Nikephoros) were celebrated in epic cycles similar to those referring to the Doukas.⁹⁶ This line of enquiry, which he was again pursuing at the time of his death, has met with some criticism, but there is little doubt that the exploits of the Phokas left a powerful memory in the Byzantine world. This surfaced, for example, in a late medieval slavonic poem and in a sixteenth-century Cretan ms. which contains a popular song recording how the murderous Empress was exiled by her lover and made the subject of a satirical parade in the streets of Constantinople.⁹⁷ In popular tradition, the murder of Nikephoros was seen as a particularly virulent example of female vindictiveness not as a just retribution for years of tyranny. In more literary sources, too, the murder was condemned and Nikephoros was portrayed as a righteous man who had been unjustly killed. The so-called *Letter concerning Heaven and Hell* which only exists in a fifteenth-century manuscript, but which its editor believed was based on

95. As noted by Guillard, *op.cit.* 103-4.

96. See his misleadingly titled short note, 'Les Bylines russes. Miettes d'épopée', *Bull. Acad. roy. de Belgique, Classe des lettres*, 5th ser., 48 (1962) 44-6.

97. See N. Turdeanu, *Le dit de l'empereur Nicéphore II Phocas et de son épouse Théophano* (Association Hélienique des études slaves 1, Thessalonika, 1976) and E.L. Vranoussi, 'Un 'Discours' byzantin en l'honneur du saint empereur Nicéphore Phokas transmis par la littérature slave', *Revue des Etudes Sud-est européennes* 16 (1978), for the debate about the nature of the slavonic tale (which Vranoussi thinks has a monastic provenance). See also G.A. Morgan, 'A Byzantine Satirical Song', *BZ* 47 (1954) 292-7. Further research on the Phokas family in popular literature clearly needs to be done.

an original written very soon after the death of John Tzimiskes, portrays a penitent Tzimiskes in Hell being reproached by Nikephoros for bringing an “unjust death to one who wished peace to all men”.⁹⁸ Its author was most probably a monk and it was particularly in monastic circles that Nikephoros’ reputation as a martyr was preserved and enhanced. It is probably no accident that the most fervent praise of “the blessed Emperor Nikephoros” to be found in later prose sources is that contained in Michael Attaleiates’ extraordinary excursus on the Phokas family, contained in his history of the reign of Nikephoros Botaneiates (whom he wished to demonstrate was descended from them), since Attaleiates was a monastic founder and patron of considerable importance.⁹⁹

The two major participants in the plot to oust Nikephoros thus fared somewhat differently at the hands of later commentators. Perhaps unfairly, Theophano became the object of derision and hatred. John Tzimiskes fared somewhat better, (perhaps because of his undoubted abilities as a general and because he seems to have been endowed with a certain amiability of character) but at a cost.¹⁰⁰ Great efforts were made by the Patriarch Polyuktos to create an aura of respectability around him: it was argued that the anointing of his coronation washed away the taint of the murder, just as baptism nullified previous sin.¹⁰¹ In confirming and increasing the privileges of the Athonites, Tzimiskes attempted to “buy off” the monks of the Holy Mountain and silence the influential voices that might have been raised against him.¹⁰² This policy may have worked more successfully with some of the Athonite houses than with others. While the Lavriotes

98. *Anonymi Byzantini de caelo et infernis epistula*, ed. L. Radermacher (Leipzig 1898) 22-3.

99. Michael Attaleiates, *Historiae*, ed. I. Bekker (CSHB 1853) 217-28 on the Phokas family. Attaleiates wanted to demonstrate that his hero, the Emperor Nikephoros Botaneiates, was descended from this clan “whose deeds, as many as have come down to us are celebrated and often mentioned”. (*loc. cit.*, 223). For Attaleiates’ monastic foundations, see P. Gautier, ‘Le Diataxis de Michel Attaleiate’, *REB* 39 (1981) 5-143.

100. See Tinnefeld, *Kaiserkritik* 118.

101. Grumel, *Régestes*, no. 794.

102. See in particular the so-called *Tragos* of John Tzimiskes in *Actes du Prôtaton*, no. 7, by which the emperor acted to restore peace to the holy mountain and to confirm its privileges. For commentary, see *ibid.*, 95-102.

continued to venerate the “martyred” Emperor, by the mid-eleventh century, the Georgian monks of Iberon were referring to the “Blessed Emperor John”, who was to be remembered on the date of his death, the 11th January.¹⁰³ Tzimiskes may have intervened to protect Nikephoros’ spiritual father, Athanasios, from the attacks of other monastic groups on Athos, but it is significant that he did so *via* the good offices of the Georgian monk, John the Iberian.¹⁰⁴ According to Matthew of Edessa, Tzimiskes was struck with remorse for his part in Nikephoros’ murder and eventually handed over the imperial power to the two *porphyrogennetoi* before retiring into a monastery “to fulfill the Beatitudes and make amends for his crime”.¹⁰⁵ This story is entirely legendary, but its tone is an echo of the epitaph written for Tzimiskes by John Geometres. The Emperor is made to speak in the first person and to bemoan the loss of his reputation:

“I who was once a lion among men, now live the life of a leper . . . I whose victories were once celebrated with the lyre am now, alas! mocked in theatrical displays”.¹⁰⁶

Even Leo Diakonos, faced with the prospect of chronicling the reign of an emperor who, it could have been argued, was morally unfit to rule, resolved this dilemma by describing Tzimiskes’ devotion to the Virgin Mary and his good works in an almost hagiographical portrait.¹⁰⁷

It is in these desperate attempts to confirm John Tzimiskes in his position and to portray his repentance that we can see the

103. See M. Van Esbroeck, ‘L’Empereur Jean Tzimiskès dans le calendrier de Georges l’Athonite’, *Bedi Kartlisa* 41 (1983) 67-72. Van Esbroeck establishes John’s death as the night of the 10th-11th January, 976, thus reconciling the apparently contradictory evidence of the sources. The 11th January could have been seen to begin after nightfall. It is perhaps merely due to coincidence that, since Tzimiskes died exactly a month after the anniversary of Nikephoros’ death, he was commemorated on 11th January, but since he did not appear in the *Greek* commemoration upon which George’s was based, a lingering doubt must remain as to whether Tzimiskes was the *original* subject of this commemoration. Could its original subject and date have been changed?

104. *ibid.* 70.

105. *ibid.* 71.

106. John Geometres, *Carmina Varia*, no.2, col.904.

107. See E. Patlagean, ‘Sainteté et pouvoir’, in *the Byzantine Saint*, ed. S. Hackel (1981) 88-105, see 104-5.

power of Nikephoros' reputation and the esteem in which he was held in many quarters. This is what made the task of the Macedonian apologists so difficult and it helps to explain the sharp divergence of opinion in the chroniclers. The more popular the subject, the more necessary it was for propagandists of a different inclination to employ all the means at their disposal to blacken his reputation and thus the more sharply contrasting those assessments were likely to be. In Nikephoros' case, the views of the eleventh-century historians are those which have gained general credence. It is surely time to re-consider whether they should indeed be given more weight than the variety of evidence testifying to Nikephoros' popularity and lasting reputation.

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