

Nicephorus Phocas and the Scythians

LÁSZLÓ BALOGH



Hungarians conquered the Carpathian Basin in the late ninth century. From there they conducted numerous campaigns to both the East and West in the course of the tenth century. However, while the western campaigns are well known in the Latin sources,¹ the attacks against the Byzantine Empire, are mentioned in few sources. In the present paper, I would like to discuss a short source detail which have not yet been connected by historians to the Hungarians of the tenth century.

Byzantine sources of the Hungarian history in the ninth-tenth centuries – thanks to the meticulous and all encompassing work of the renowned Hungarian Byzantinologist, Gyula Moravcsik² – have hardly increased in number during the past decades. Recently, Ferenc Makk has collected the new sources concerning Hungarian history in the ninth-tenth centuries.³ He mentioned only one sentence in the work of Joannes Skylitzes that Moravcsik did not know of, which refers to tenth-century Hungarians.⁴ In 2009, István Baán drew the scholars' attention to a

¹ Cf. G. Fasoli, *Le incursioni ungare in Europa nel secolo X*. Firenze 1945; Sz. de Vajay, *Der Eintritt des ungarischen Stammebundes in die europäische Geschichte (862–933)*. Mainz 1968; Gy. Kristó, *Levedi törzsszövetségétől Szent István államáig*. [From the tribal confederation of Levedi to the state of Saint Stephen] Budapest 1980; M. G. Kellner, *Die Ungarneinfälle im Bild der Quellen bis 1150*. Studia Hungarica. Schriften des Ungarischen Instituts München. Bd. 46. München 1997.

² Cf. Gy. Moravcsik, *A magyar történet bizánci forrásai*. [Byzantine sources of the Hungarian History] A Magyar Történettudomány Kézikönyve I. Vol. 6/b. Budapest 1934; Gy. Moravcsik, *Byzantinoturcica*. I–II. Zweite durchgearbeitete Auflage. Berlin 1958; Gy. Moravcsik, *Byzantium and the Magyars*. Budapest 1970; Gy. Moravcsik, *Az Árpád-kori magyar történet bizánci forrásai*. [The Byzantine sources related to Árpadian Hungarian History] Budapest 1988².

³ F. Makk, "Külföldi források és a korai magyar történelem (X–XII. század)." [Foreign Sources and the Early Hungarian History (10–12th centuries)] in F. Makk, *A turulmárártól a kettőskeresztig*, Szeged 1998, 95–96, 104–107, 112–114.

⁴ Ioannis Scylitzae *Synopsis historiarum*. Recensuit I. Thurn. Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 5. Berolini–Novi Eboraci 1973, 305^{21–23}; Jean Skylitzès *Empereurs de Constantinople*. Texte traduit par B. Flusin et annoté par J.-Cl. Cheynet. Réalités Byzantines 8. Paris 2003, 255. cf. F. Makk, "Új forrásadatok a X. század végi magyar–bizánci kapcsolatok értékeléséhez." [New sources on the Hungarian–Byzantine relationship in the tenth century] *A Nyíregyházi Jósza András Múzeum Évkönyve* 43 (2001), 271–274; F. Makk, "A bizánci fenyegetés árnyékában. Géza fejedelem politikai-vallási választása," [In the

Byzantine diploma which mentioned the destruction of Hungarian troops in the Byzantine Empire during the tenth century.⁵ The number of new details is very limited.⁶ Thus any information – even if it is very brief – serves as a valuable addition to our knowledge of Hungarians in tenth-century history.

The Byzantine army of Asia Minor proclaimed Nicephorus Phocas as emperor in 963. He told them that they should expect a serious civil war. Previously they fought bravely against Cretans, *Scythians* and Arabs, but they now had to fight against their countrymen.⁷ The three examples of related events were certainly known to the soldiers.

Nicephorus Phocas' army invaded the island of Crete in the summer of 960. The besiegers conquered the capital city, Kandia, in 961. As a result of the victory, after one and a half centuries of Muslim rule, the island again fell under the control of the Byzantine Empire.⁸ Almost simultaneously, Nicephorus Phocas's brother, Leon Phocas took a part of the Byzantine troops from the Balkans to Asia Minor. Exploiting the fact that most of the Byzantine army was on the island of Crete, Sayf al-Dawla, the prince of Hamdanids carried out more attacks against the border of the Byzantine Empire in Asia Minor. When Emperor Romanus II found out about this, he sent Leon Phocas, who previously had successfully defended the Balkans' border of the Empire, to Asia Minor fighting against the Muslims. Leon Phocas's troops defeated Sayf al-Dawla's army when they returned home with booty and numerous Byzantine prisoners on 8 November 960. In the course of the attack the prince barely escaped due to his ingenuity. Subsequently Leon Phocas went to Constantinople, which held a triumph in his honor.⁹

shadow of the Byzantine threat. The politico-religious choice of prince Géza] *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* 114 (2001), 130–138. cf. Хр. Димитров, *Българо-унгарски отношения през средновековието*. София 1998, 80, 358.

- ⁵ I. Baán, "Újabb lehetséges adalék a magyarok balkáni kalandozásaihoz." [Another possible datum to the campaigns of the Hungarians in the Balkan] in *Fons, skepsis, lex. Ünnepi tanulmányok a 70 esztendő Makk Ferenc tiszteletére*. ed. T. Almási-É. Révész-Gy. Szabados, Szeged 2010, 21–25.
- ⁶ L. Balogh, "A New Source on the Hungarian Raids against Byzantium in the Middle of the Tenth Century." *Chronica* 7–8 (2007–2008), 16–25; L. Balogh, "The Turks in the *Vita Sancti Athanasii Athonitae*. Vardariota-Turks or Hungarians?" *Chronica* 9–10 (2009–2010), 15–25.
- ⁷ *Leonis Diaconi Caloënsis Historiae*. ed. C. B. Hasii, Bonnae 1828, 42₂₁–43₁; *The History of Leo the Deacon. Byzantine Military Expansion in the Tenth Century*. Introduction, translation, and annotations by A.-M. Talbot and D. Sullivan with the assistance of G. T. Dennis and St. McGrath, Washington 2005, 93.
- ⁸ *Leonis Diaconi Historiae* 7₉–16₂₃, 17₁₋₂, 24₉–29₂; *The History of Leo the Deacon* 60–70, 76–81; Ioannis Scylitzae *Synopsis historiarum* 249₂₄–250₄₇; Jean Skylitzes *Empereurs de Constantinople* 210. vö. L. Bréhier, *Vie et mort de Byzance*. Paris 1969, 178–179; G. Ostrogorsky, *Geschichte der byzantinischen Staates*. München 1963, 237; G. Schlumberger, *Un empereur byzantin au dixième siècle Nicéphore Phocas*. Paris 1890, 46–98; E. Ekkehard, *See-krieg und Seepolitik zwischen Islam und Abendland*. Berlin 1966, 341–342.
- ⁹ *Leon Diaconi Historiae* 17–24₈; *The History of Leo the Deacon* 70–76; Ioannis Scylitzae *Synopsis historiarum* 250₄₇₋₆₁; Jean Skylitzes *Empereurs de Constantinople* 211; Schlum-

Following the successful campaign against Crete, Nicephorus Phocas continued the war against the Hamdanids. As a result, the capital of Sayf al-Dawla, Aleppo fell into the hands of the Byzantines in 962 with the exception of its citadel.¹⁰ It appears that the fighting against Cretans and Arabs which is mentioned in Nicephorus Phocas' speech refers to these two victorious wars. It is obvious that Nicephorus Phocas (or Leon Diaconus, who attributes the speech to him) wanted to refer to well-known, recent events in the case of the war against the *Scythians*.

Leon Diaconus used the *Scythian* name to indicate a number of peoples who lived then or at once in *Scythia*, north of the Danube area and the Black Sea. It was him who called the Bulgarians,¹¹ the Hungarians¹² and the Russians,¹³ and in general the peoples living in *Scythia* (which in some cases perhaps also included the Pechenegs) all *Scythians*.¹⁴ The question is raised, however, which of these peoples were defeated by the Byzantine soldiers?

Bulgarians cannot be identified with these *Scythians*. There was peace between the Byzantine Empire and Bulgaria around this time, which only ended after the Nicephorus Phocas occupied the throne.¹⁵ Thus it is not surprising, that the collection containing the Byzantine sources of Bulgarian history does not mention the emperor's speech.¹⁶ Similarly, we know of no Russian or Pecheneg attacks in the 950s reaching the Byzantine Empire.¹⁷

berger, *Un empereur byzantine*, 131-146; G. W. Freytag, "Geschichte der Dynastien der Hamdaniden in Mosul und Aleppo." *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 11 (1857), 195-197; E. Honigmann, *Die Ostgrenze des byzantinischen Reiches*. Bruxelles 1935, 85-86.

¹⁰ *Leon Diaconi Historiae* 29₃-30₈; *The History of Leon the Deacon* 81-82; Schlumberger, *Un empereur byzantine*, 155-250; Bréhier, *Vie et mort de Byzance*, 179-180; Ostrogorsky, *Geschichte der byzantinischen Staates*, 243; Freytag, *Geschichte der Dynastien der Hamdaniden*, 197-203.

¹¹ *Leon Diaconi Historiae* 61₁₉₋₂₀, 123₁₀, 173₃. cf. Moravcsik, *Byzantinoturcica*, 2: 280.

¹² *Leon Diaconi Historiae* 18₂₂, 19₅, 10; Moravcsik, *Az Árpád-kori magyar történet*, 72. cf. Moravcsik, *Byzantinoturcica*, 2: 280.

¹³ *Leon Diaconi Historiae* 143₁₀, 143₁₂, 143₁₅, 144₁₂, 145₄, 148₅, 148₁₁, 149₃, 149₁₁, 149₁₃, 152₁₇, 152₂₃, 153₄, 153₁₂, 153₁₄, 153₁₉, 153₂₄, 154₁₆, 155₂, 155₁₀, 156₁₈₋₁₉, 157₁₂. etc.

¹⁴ *Leon Diaconi Historiae* 77₇₋₉, 108₁₁₋₁₆, 109₇₋₁₁₁₇. cf. Moravcsik, *Byzantinoturcica*, 2: 280.

¹⁵ *Leon Diaconi Historiae* 61₁₂₋₆₂₁₂; *The History of Leo the Deacon*, 109-110; S. Runciman, *A History of the First Bulgarian Empire*. London 1930, 198-200, 303-305; J. V. A. Jr. Fine, *The Early Medieval Balkans. A Critical Survey from the Sixth to the Late Twelfth Century*. Ann Arbor 1989⁵, 181; Ostrogorsky, *Geschichte der byzantinischen Staates*, 242; Bréhier, *Vie et mort de Byzance*, 193-194.

¹⁶ *Лъв Дякон, История. Увод, превод и бележки от Г. Цанкова-Петкова. in Гръцки извори за Българската история. VI. ed. И. Дуйчев et al. Fontes Historiae Bulgaricae* 10. София 1965, 246-247.

¹⁷ Relations of the between the Byzantines and the Pechenegs in the tenth century: F. E. Wozniak, "Byzantium, the Pechenegs and the Rus': the Limitations of a Great Power's Influence on its Clients in the 10th Century Eurasian Steppe." *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi* 4 (1984), 299-316; E. Malamut, "L'image byzantine des pechenégues." *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 88 (1995), 105-117; И. О. Князький, *Византия и кочевники южнорус-*

Therefore it is most likely that by a struggle against the *Scythians* we are to understand *Scythian* invasion which was successfully beaten back by Nicephorus Phocas brother's Leon Phocas, according the Leon Diaconus' work. According the unanimous opinion of historians, the same event was reported in one part of the *Vita Athanasii*.¹⁸ Leon Diaconus mentions that when a *Scythian* army crossed the Danube, Leon Phocas did not immediately enter into a battle with them because he had only a very small army, instead, he was waiting for the appropriate moment and he attacked the opposing camp at night. The Byzantine troops killed many of the *Scythians*, while many others were forced to flee.¹⁹ The *Vita Athanasii* mentions that Leon Phocas, who was the "commander of the West(ern affairs)" brought a serious defeat onto the *Scythians*.²⁰ The identification of the enemy is very clear in this case. The Byzantine sources reported an ill-fated attack by a Hungarian army.²¹

This campaign could be identical with the Hungarian campaign which had reached the Byzantine Empire in 961.²² According to Theophanes Continuatus, Hungarian troops invaded the Byzantine Empire at the Easter of 961 (on 7 April, 961). Emperor Romanus II sent *Marianos Argyros*, who was the "commander of the West", to stop the attackers. The Byzantine general defeated the Hungarians, and forced them to return home.²³

However, this view is hardly tenable. Scholars probably dated the Hungarian attack to be in the year 961 because this date was written on the margin of the text in the collection of sources.²⁴ However, it is not the date of the fight against the *Scythians*: it only indicates that Leon Diaconus's second book discusses the events of 961.²⁵ The Byzantine author only makes a brief mention of Leon Phocas's pre-

cxux cmeneū, Санкт-Петербург 2003, 11–36. Relations of the between the Byzantines and the Russians in the tenth century: S. Franklin-J. Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus (750–1200)*. London–New York 1996.

¹⁸ P. Lenerle, *La Vie ancienne de saint Athanase l'Athonite composée au début de XIe siècle par Athanase de Lavra*. in *Le millénaire du Mont Athos (963–1963)*. I. Chevetogne 1963, 74. Note 47.; Moravcsik *Az Árpád-kori magyar történet*, 74. Note 1.

¹⁹ *Leon Diaconi Historiae* 18₁₉–19₁₂; *The History of Leon the Deacon*, 71–72; Moravcsik, *Az Árpád-kori magyar történet*, 72.

²⁰ *Vitae duae antiquae Sancti Athanasii Athonitae*. Editae a J. Noret. Corpus Christianorum. Series Graeca 9. Brepols–Turnhout 1982, A 55₃₋₉, B 20₃₋₉; *La Vie de Saint Athanase l'Athonite*, Chevetogne 1963, 37; Moravcsik, *Az Árpád-kori magyar történet*, 74, 76.

²¹ Moravcsik, *A magyar történet bizánci forrásai*, 141; Moravcsik, *Az Árpád-kori magyar történet*, 74. Note 1.

²² K. Szabó, *A magyar vezérek kora. Árpádtól Szent Istvánig*. [The Age of the Hungarian Prince from Árpád to St. Stephen] Pest 1869, 318–319; Moravcsik, *Az Árpád-kori magyar történet*, 69. cf. Kristó, *Levedi törzsszövetségétől*, 294–295; Gy. Kristó, *Az Árpád-kor háborúi*. [The Wars of the Arpad's Age] Budapest 1986, 44; P. T. Antonopoulos, "Byzantium, the Magyar Raids and their Consequences." *Byzantinoslavica* 54 (1993), 262.

²³ *Theophanes Continuatus, Ioannes Cameniata, Symeon Magister, Georgius Monachus*. Ex recognitione I. Bekkeri. Bonnae 1838, 480₁₃₋₁₇.

²⁴ *Leon Diaconi Historiae* 19. cf. Szabó, *A magyar vezérek kora*, 318–319.

²⁵ Cf. *Leon Diaconi Historiae*, 18–28.

vious victory as the one that reveals his courage.²⁶ However, Leon Phocas left the Balkans in 960. Romanus II sent Leon Phocas to Asia Minor, because the commander fought successfully against the *Scythians*. Thus, he could not be fighting the *Scythians* in 961 or later.

The *Vita Athanasii* mentions that Leon Phocas visited Athanasios after having brought defeat onto the *Scythians*.²⁷ The source explains that first Athanasios met Leon Phocas, then he was tempted by the Devil for one year, afterwards he visited Nicephorus Phocas in Crete in 961.²⁸ This also suggests that the campaign against the *Scythians* took place in or before 960 but not in 961. According to the *Vita Athanasii*, Leon Phocas fought against the *Scythians* as commander of the West. But in 961 it was Marianos Argyros and not Leon Phocas who occupied this position.

Thus, it is obvious that Leon Phocas cannot have been fighting against the *Scythians* in 961. When did, then, Leon Phocas fight against the *Scythians*? And who were these *Scythians*?

Two Byzantine authors, Theophanes Continuatus and Pseudo-Symeon mention that the Hungarians (*Turks*) attacked the Byzantine Empire in 959. The emperor, Constantinus Porphyrogenitus, sent Pothos Argyros, the commander of a guardian army with general of Bukellarioi, Opsikion and Thrakesion, against them. The Byzantine troops attacked the Hungarians in the night and defeated them – just like Leon Phocas's troops in the story by Leon Diaconus. The Hungarian army was forced to return home.²⁹ The details of the campaign: a night attack, the year 959, the enemies (*Turks*, *Scythians* namely the Hungarians) it creates an impression that Leon Diaconus, Theophanes Continuatus and Pseudo-Symeon reported about the same war.³⁰

Some problems, however, remain. Theophanes Continuatus only mentions Pothos Argyros but not Leon Phocas in relation with the war to the spring of 959. According to *Vita Athanasii*, Leon Phocas was the „commander of the West(ern affairs)“, but he was appointed to this rank by Romanus II, at the end of 959.³¹ Assumptions are necessary to interpret of the sources. It is presumable that since Leon Phocas fought at the eastern and western borders of the Empire in 959–960, the *Vita Athanasii* did not exactly follow the rapid changes of his titles, sometimes identifying him as commander of the West already during the spring of 959. In such a mistake, a bibliography of a saint would not be unusual to some extent. It is also possible that the Byzantine chronicles only accidentally fail to mention Leon Phocas in relation with the fight of 959 (perhaps he would be the unnamed general of Bukellarioi, Opsikion and Thrakesion). The other possibility is that the sources do not speak of the same campaign. If we accept that Leon Phocas was

²⁶ Cf. *Leon Diaconi Historiae* 107₁₉–108₉; *The History of Leo the Deacon*, 158.

²⁷ Noret 1982, A 55₁₋₁₇, B 20₁₋₂₃; *La Vie de Saint Athanase l'Athonite*, 37–38.

²⁸ Noret 1982, A 56₁₋₆₀₂₈, B 21₁₋₂₂₅₀; *La Vie de Saint Athanase l'Athonite*, 38–40.

²⁹ *Theophanes Continuatus*, 462₁₉–463₇, 746₁₋₅.

³⁰ L. Petit, „La Vie de Saint Athanase l'Athonite,“ *Annalecta Bollandiana* 25 (1906), 29. Note 1.

³¹ *Theophanes Continuatus*, 472₅₋₇.

the commander of the West when he fought against the Hungarians (his brother, Nicephorus Phocas was the general of Anatolia at this time),³² then a Hungarian army again attempted to attack the Byzantine Empire in the beginning/early summer of 960. So Pothos Argyros and Leon Phocas defeated two different Hungarian armies using the same tactics³³ on two occasions.

After Leon Phocas gained victory over the Hungarian troops (959 or 960), Emperor Romanus II sent the successful general to the eastern border of the Empire. But the Hungarian attacks did not end. Again a Hungarian army invaded the Empire in 961. Although these raids were beaten back by the Byzantine army, but Byzantine soldiers were able to experience how dangerous their enemy was. In 963 Nicephorus Phocas mentions three dangerous enemies: the Arab warriors on the island of Crete, the army of Hamdanids in Asia Minor, and the *Scythians*, that is the Hungarians in the Balkans. He tells the truth; Hungarian troops regularly attacked the Byzantine Empire at this time.³⁴ Thus the short datum in speech of Nicephorus Phocas provides a piece of the colorful mosaic of the tenth-century history of the Hungarians.

³² Noret 1982, A 22₁₋₅, 28₁₋₃, B 16₁₋₃, 19₅₋₆; *La Vie de Saint Athanase l'Athonite*, 33, 36. cf. Ioannis Scylitzae, *Synopsis historiarum*, 249₂₄-249₃₀; Jean Skylitzes *Empereurs de Constantinople* 210. *Theophanes Continuatus*, 462₅₋₁₁. cf. N. Oikonomidès, *Les listes des préséances byzantines des IXe et Xe siècles*. Paris 1972, 329.

³³ *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*. Text, Translation, and Notes by G. T. Dennis. *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae* 25. Washington 1985, 139-140, 164-167, 190-197.

³⁴ Cf. Ioannis Scylitzae, *Synopsis historiarum*, 276₂₃-277₃₁; Jean Skylitzes *Empereurs de Constantinople*, 232-233.; Moravcsik, *Az Árpád-kori magyar történet*, 69-71, 85-86.