

Szymon Wierzbiński, *U boku bazyleusa. Frankowie i Waregowie w cesarstwie bizantyńskim w XI w. [By the Side of the Basileus. The Franks and the Varangians in the Byzantine Empire in the 11th century]*, Byzantina Lodziensia XXXVII, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2019, pp. 434

The reviewed book is an effect of expanding on a doctoral dissertation written under the supervision of Professor Teresa Wolińska, which was defended in 2013 at the University of Łódź<sup>1</sup>. Szymon Wierzbiński is one of the younger alumni of the Łódź school of Byzantinology, currently affiliated with the Institute of Social Sciences and Management of Technologies of the Łódź Technical University. It is worth adding that the book is a result of the author's personal interests in the Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon issues, which he has been developing for more than ten years<sup>2</sup>.

The work was divided into seven chapters. In the first part, the author took up the subject of the functioning of the Byzantine army in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, during the period of great victories of such emperors as Nikephoros II Phokas or John Tzimiskes, with regard to both its organisational structure and personnel count. Obviously, the Byzantinologist's scope of interest also included the question of ethnical composition of the army in this period. The author devoted a lot of space to Armenians, Khazars, Slavonic peoples, as well as the process of introducing the Rus' people into imperial service (pp. 55-70). The second chapter includes basic information about the circumstances of the formation of the Varangian Guard during the reign of Basil II, as well as an attempt at clarifying the situation in which the empire was in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, particularly

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<sup>1</sup> Effects of this research include the article: S. Wierzbiński, *Normans and other Franks in 11th century Byzantium: The careers of the adventurers before the rule of Alexios I Comnenos*, "Studia Ceranea" 2014, 4, pp. 277-288.

<sup>2</sup> *Idem*, *Diuk, król i papież. kilka uwag na temat sporu o legalność objęcia tronu Anglii przez Williama Bastarda w 1066. Cz. I*, "Studia Prawno-Ekonomiczne" 2014, vol. 91, pp. 203-216; *idem*, T. Tulejski, *Diuk, król i papież. Kilka uwag na temat sporu o legalność objęcia tronu Anglii przez Williama Bastarda w 1066 r. Cz. II*, "Studia Prawno-Ekonomiczne" 2014, vol. 91, pp. 217-227.

within the context of the Seljuq threat (pp. 76-86). The third chapter is aimed at discussing the political situation in the motherlands of new imperial mercenaries – Rus', the Scandinavian kingdoms, Normandy and the British Isles (pp. 87-126).

The main topic of the dissertation was dealt with in the subsequent chapters – four and five. The first of them concerns the history of the operation of the Varangian Guard – since its establishing, through the arrival of Harald Hardrada, to the appearance of a greater number of Anglo-Saxon mercenaries in the emperor's personal troops. Here, the author also discussed the behaviour of the Guard during the reign of Nikephoros Botaneiates and the attitude of the troops towards the usurpation of Alexios Komnenos. Reforms applied to the structures of the Guard by the latter conclude the deliberations in chapter four. In the first paragraphs of the next one, Szymon Wierzbiński described the main directions of the Norman expeditions in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century, paying attention to the alternative to Southern Italy, namely the Iberian Peninsula (pp. 211-220). Then, he discussed the facts related to the enlistment of Normans for George Maniakes's expedition to Sicily in the years 1038-1041 and the circumstances of their resignation from the service to the Byzantine commander (pp. 220-226). The representative of the Łódź school of Byzantinology presented the most eminent careers of the Norman mercenaries in the imperial court, developed by such commonly known commanders as Hervé Frankopulos, Robert Crispin or Roussel de Bailleul. However, he focused primarily not on the activity of the Norman commanders, but rather on the emperors' policy towards them, concluding with changes introduced by Alexios Komnenos, who made some Norman knights his close associates, by promoting them and introducing to Byzantine families (such Normans as Roger, the son of Dagobert, founder of the family of Rogerios, Rudolf Peel de Lan and others – pp. 260-269).

The last two chapters were devoted to internal issues, related to the presence of Varangian and Norman warriors in Byzantium. In chapter six, the author presented the collapse of the empire's monetary system after Basil II's death, especially during the rule of Constantine IX Monomachos, and the related economic crisis and the question of remunerating the army – both the one made up of theme soldiers and *tagmata*, and mercenaries (pp. 271-293). Further on, he dealt with the complicated official structure of the imperial court, with special emphasis on the advancing inflation of the importance of former ranks and honours, which ended with the reforms of Alexios Komnenos. At the same time, he presented the results of his own research into the development of ca-

reers of the Russian, Scandinavian, Anglo-Saxon and Norman mercenaries in the imperial court, concluding that the latter definitely managed it in the best way, by reaching considerably higher ranks than the others (pp. 306-320). Certainly, the pages devoted to the mutual relations between Normans and Varangians, where the author proved an interesting phenomenon of a particular mutual indifference and lack of a sense of solidarity towards each other (pp. 321-333), should be regarded as some of the most interesting pages in the reviewed book. The subsequent part of chapter seven concerns the image of the Varangian Guard and the Norman knighthood in Byzantine sources<sup>3</sup>.

At some points, the author's decisions as to the development and deeper explanation of individual issues may be puzzling, in particular those concerning the choice of issues to be discussed in more detail. I believe that the author simply had in mind the principal audience of his work, oriented – owing to the represented environment – principally to Byzantinologists. This may be the reason why he tried to explain the matters concerning the history of Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon peoples at greater length (virtually the entire chapter three: *Drogi do Bizancjum. Nowe obszary zaciagu* [*The Paths to Byzantium. New Territories of Enlistment*] – pp. 87-126), whereas he does not elaborate on the nuances of such events from the history of the empire as the circumstances of the fall of Michael V (pp. 145-148). The author also did not manage to avoid certain mental shortcuts, which sometimes makes it difficult to understand the goal of a given argument. For example – the thesis that the Byzantines were not able to properly assess the threat from the Seljuq, since they were preoccupied with uniting the Armenian principalities within the empire (p. 86), does not seem overly convincing. It might as well be concluded that the unification process was the response to the Seljuq threat.

To finish with, I would like to mention some minor technicalities. While selecting the model of transliteration instead of transcription in Russian names is of course accepted, it does not seem understandable to treat geographical

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<sup>3</sup> However, the reference to the conclusions recently formulated by Vitalij V. Prudnikov, who suggested an interesting interpretative possibility of the Byzantine outrage with the Normans' failure to keep their agreements present in sources, is missing – according to him, it resulted from higher standards expected from Normans in comparison with those the Byzantines represented towards other "barbarians". From "Franks", representatives of the Western Christian knighthood, they simply expected more than from nomads: *Normanny v Maloj Aziji v XI-XII vv.*, dissertacija kandidata istoricheskikh nauk, Moskva 2016, pp. 106-142. In a way, this would harmonise with the court careers that Normans were able to achieve, as those culturally-closer to the Byzantines than Varangians.

names of historically known regions in the same manner – the form *Nakhichevan* (p. 85) cannot be accepted as correct, since the name *Nachiczewan* is commonly used in the Polish language. Secondly, the undoubtedly valuable and multi-layered deliberations of the author are so detailed and scrupulous that it would be necessary to include summaries of the main conclusions at the end of individual chapters. Such a recapitulation would have allowed, in the light of the truly overwhelming amount of information collected by the author, the most important conclusions and hypotheses of the Byzantinologist to be highlighted. Although I realise that the author attempted at collecting all the conclusions in the final chapter (pp. 347-363), he seems to be inconsistent in this decision – since he presents a recapitulation of some of his findings earlier, e.g. by presenting the structure of the Varangian Guard during the reign of Alexios Komnenos (p. 206), or the position of Normans in the social structure of the Byzantine Empire (pp. 268-269).

In conclusion, the monograph by Szymon Wierzbiński must be regarded as an important contribution not only to the knowledge of the history and development of the imperial mercenary troops, but also to the history of Byzantium of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, especially in the military and economic context of the functioning of the state.

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