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THE ROLE OF THE BYZANTINE NAVY IN THE ACTIONS OF EMPEROR LOUIS II OF ITALY AGAINST BARI IN 866–871. LOUIS II'S LETTER OF 871 TO EMPEROR BASIL I (867–886) – AS A SOURCE FOR MARINE MILITARY STUDIES?

Abstract. The rivalry between the Carolingians and the Byzantines in Italy during the second half of the 9th century faced a new threat – the rise of Islam. Despite the need to unite against the common enemy, mutual suspicion between these two centres of imperial power persisted. This is evident in their joint efforts to confront the Muslim outpost in Apulia, the Emirate of Bari. This article aims to examine the role of the Byzantine fleet in the actions of Emperor Louis II (825–875) during the campaign to eliminate the Emirate of Bari – a task in which the Carolingian ruler was successful. The primary source for this investigation is Louis II's letter of 871 to Emperor Basil I (867–886).

In the letter, the author identifies the links between the activities of Muslims in the Adriatic and Tyrrhenian Seas and their strongholds in Sicily and Africa. Consequently, the author outlines a logical plan to expel the Saracens from Italy, particularly from Campania (Naples) and Calabria, with a crucial role assigned to the Byzantine fleet. The Franks intended to coordinate land operations with the Byzantines in Sicily, aiming to reclaim Palermo – a city, according to the letter, closely linked to the Muslim piracy. However, this plan was based on wishful thinking, as it failed to consider the dispersion of the Byzantine navy, which was simultaneously engaged in conflicts against the forces of the Abbasids, the emirate of Crete, and the Slavic pirates in the Adriatic Sea. These factors, coupled with a growing aversion between the Franks and the Byzantines, ultimately led to the collapse of the alliance and their plans. Despite later successes, the Byzantine fleet was unable to provide timely aid to Sicily and actively counter the advance of Islam on the island.

Keywords: Basil I, Louis II of Italy, the Emirate of Bari, Sicily, Southern Italy, Adriatic Sea

The rivalry between the Carolingians and the Byzantines in Italy in the second half of the 9th century was interrupted by the emergence of a new threat, in the form of the Islamic world. Even then, establishing a common front and uniting against an enemy posed a challenge due to the mutual suspicion between these two centres of imperial power. This became especially evident when the time came to move against the Muslim outpost in Apulia, the Emirate of Bari. Therefore, this

article aims to explore the role of the Byzantine fleet in Emperor Louis II's (825–875) activities during the campaign to eliminate the Emirate of Bari, in which task the Carolingian Emperor succeeded. To do this, I will use one of the medieval sources relating to the actions of both sides during this conflict: the letter of Louis II of 871 to Emperor Basil I (867–886). Furthermore, this article will attempt to determine the value of this source material for maritime military studies.

Introduction

The letter of Emperor Louis II, written probably by Anastasius Bibliothecarius in the spring or early summer of 871, has for many years been a subject of discussion and research into its credibility¹. It was prepared in response to an earlier letter from Basil I, which unfortunately has not survived². We are also not certain whether the letter of Louis II was even sent to Constantinople at all. It may be only a draft version, which was later incorporated into the *Chronicon Salernitanum*, written in the 10th century, where it survived in a 14th-century manuscript³. The first part of this letter is of particular importance. Within, Louis II defends his rights to the imperial title, undermined by Constantinople⁴. The source represents

¹ R. POUPARDIN, *La lettre de Louis II à Basile le Macédonien. À propos d'un livre récent*, MA 16, 1903, p. 185–202; A. KLEINCLAUSZ, *La lettre de Louis II à Basile le Macédonien*, MA 17, 1904, p. 45–53; W. HENZE, *Über den Brief Kaiser Ludwigs II. an den Kaiser Basilius I.*, NAGÄDG 35, 1910, p. 663–676; G. SORANZO, *La concezione dell'autorità imperiale nella lettera di Lodovico II a Basilio I (a. 871)*, [in:] *Atti del II Congresso Nazionale di Studi Romani*, vol. II, Roma 1931, p. 115–124; S. FANNING, *Imperial Diplomacy between Francia and Byzantium: The Letter of Louis II to Basil I in 871*, Cit 34, 1994, p. 3–17; S. KOLDITZ, *Gesandtschaften, Briefe und Konzilien in den Beziehungen Ludwigs II. von Italien zu Byzanz*, [in:] *Von der Ostsee zum Mittelmeer. Forschungen zur mittelalterlichen Geschichte für Wolfgang Huschner*, ed. S. ROEBERT, Leipzig 2019, p. 289–310; C. GANTNER, *Kaiser Ludwig II. von Italien und Byzanz*, [in:] *Menschen, Bilder, Sprache, Dinge, Wege der Kommunikation zwischen Byzanz und dem Westen*, vol. II, *Menschen und Worte*, ed. F. DAIM, C. GASTGEBER, D. HERHER, C. RAPP, Mainz 2018 [= BOO, 9.2], p. 103–112; IDEM, *Ad utriusque imperii unitatem? Anastasius Bibliothecarius as a Broker between Two Cultures and Three Courts in the Ninth Century*, MeW 13, 2021, p. 36–53; J. GAY, *L'Italie méridionale et l'empire Byzantin depuis l'avènement de Basile I^{er} jusqu'à la prise de Bari par les Normands (867–1071)*, Paris 1904, p. 84–88; B. KREUTZ, *Before the Normans. Southern Italy in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries*, [s.l.] 1996, p. 42–45; G. ARNALDI, *Impero d'occidente e impero d'oriente nella lettera di Ludovico II a Basilio I*, C.RFLS 1, 1963, p. 404–424; T. GRANIER, *La captivité de l'empereur Louis II à Bénévent (13 août – 17 septembre 871) dans les sources des IX^e–X^e siècles: l'écriture de l'histoire, de la fausse nouvelle au récit exemplaire*, [in:] *Faire l'événement au Moyen Âge*, [s.l.] 2007, p. 13–39.

² *Regesten der Kaiserurkunden des oströmischen Reiches. Von 565–1453*, vol. I.2, *Regesten von 867–1025*, ed. F. DÖLGER, A.E. MÜLLER, München 2003, p. 5, n. 480 and p. 7, n. 487.

³ For this chronicle and manuscripts, Cf. *Chronicon Salernitanum*, ed. U. WESTERBERGH, Stockholm 1956 (cetera: *Chronicon Salernitanum*), p. XII–XXX.

⁴ *Chronicon Salernitanum*, p. 108–115; *Ludovici II. imperatoris epistola*, ed. W. HENZE, Berolini 1928 [= MGH.EK V, 7.2] (cetera: *Ludovici II. imperatoris epistola*), p. 385–392.

the point of view of the court of Louis II, especially on relations with Byzantium, as well as on the maritime activities directed against the South Italian Muslim state, the Emirate of Bari.

The town of Bari was one of the many ports in southern Italy, therefore its possession was of strategic importance for all concerned⁵. The history of the creation of this Emirate, which existed in Italy for several decades, is closely related to the processes that took place in North Africa and Sicily during this period. The Muslims took advantage of the turmoil in Byzantium, stemming from the internal conflicts in the first half of the 9th century. They directed their ships towards the islands of Crete and Sicily and their armed forces penetrated into the waters of the Adriatic⁶. The most important problem for Byzantium was the gradual loss of control over most of Sicily since 827, which increasingly became a point for further northward expansion of the Muslims. The fall of the Byzantine outposts on this island, including the important fortress of Enna in 859 – which was captured by treason – and the defeat of the Byzantine fleet in Sicily in the spring of 868, were facts that Constantinople was unable to conceal from the rest of Italy⁷. Sicily was key to the safety of Calabria and Apulia. Byzantine weakness on this island allowed the development of Muslim outposts on the Adriatic coast, first in Bari and later in Ragusa⁸.

Muslim forces linked to the North African Muslim dynasty, the Aghlabids, did not immediately establish their emirate in Bari after their first raids on the Italian soil. In the beginning, they occupied that town in 840–841⁹. But a few years

⁵ N. LAVERMICOCCA, *Bari bizantina Origine, declino, eredità di una capitale mediterranea*, Bari 2017, p. 12–20.

⁶ N. TOBIAS, *Basil I (867–886), the Founder of the Macedonian Dynasty: a Study of the Political and Military History of the Byzantine Empire in the Ninth Century* (Ph.D. Thesis, Rutgers. The State University of New Jersey–New Brunswick 1969), p. 276–277; K.M. SETTON, *On the Raids of the Moslems in the Aegean in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries and their Alleged Occupation of Athens*, AJA 58.4, 1954, p. 311–312; T.C. LOUNGHIS, *The Byzantine War Navy and the West, Fifth to Twelfth Centuries*, [in:] *A Military History of the Mediterranean Sea. Aspects of War, Diplomacy, and Military Elites*, ed. G. THEOTOKIS, A. YILDIZ, Leiden–Boston 2018, p. 30–31; *The Little History of the Lombards of Benevento by Erchempert. A Critical Edition and Translation of ‘Ystoriola Longobardorum Beneventum degentium*, 11, ed. L.A. BERTO, Routledge 2021 (cetera: ERCHEMPERT), p. 137.

⁷ A.A. VASILIEV, *Byzance et les Arabes*, vol. I, *La dynastie d’Amorium (820–867)*, ed. H. GRÉGOIRE, M. CANARD, Brussels 1935 [= CBHB], p. 220–222; IDEM, *Byzance et les Arabes*, vol. II, *Les relations politiques de Byzance et des Arabes à l’époque de la dynastie macédonienne (les empereurs Basile I, Léon le Sage et Constantin VII Porphyrogénète) 867–959 (253–348). Première partie: Les relations politiques de Byzance et des Arabes à l’époque de la dynastie macédonienne. Première période, de 867 à 959*, ed. H. GRÉGOIRE, M. CANARD, Brussels 1968 [= CBHB], p. 22; A. METCALFE, *The Muslims of Medieval Italy*, Edinburgh 2009 [= NEIS], p. 14; T. WOLIŃSKA, *Próby stworzenia sojuszu antysaraceńskiego na południu Italii (IX – początek X wieku)*, PH 97.2, 2006, p. 145–146; N. TOBIAS, *Basil I...*, p. 279.

⁸ T. WOLIŃSKA, *Próby...*, p. 146; N. TOBIAS, *Basil I...*, p. 281.

⁹ G. MUSCA, *L’emirato di Bari, 847–871*, Bari 1964, p. 18–20.

later, in 847, Bari was conquered by Khalfun and became a point for the further expansion of Islam in this part of the Apennine Peninsula¹⁰. In recent years scholars have argued that the conquest of Bari by the Muslims took place before 847, and the occupation of 840 was the actual time when Khalfun took over the city¹¹. Khalfun was in Italy at the time, working as a mercenary for the Duke of Benevento, Radelchis, and was one of the many Muslims from North Africa and Andalusia whose services were employed in conflicts between the Lombards¹². This later changed as a result of political and military activities of the Carolingians, in particular of the future ruler of Italy, Louis II, who brought to an end the civil war between the Lombards and subsequently massacred their Muslim mercenaries¹³. Deprived of mercenary employment, the Muslims in Bari turned to looting and acquiring slaves to be sold in the markets of Naples¹⁴. These factors, along with the rejection of the Aghlabids' suzerainty, led to the creation of an independent state, with Bari as its capital. The emirate had only three rulers in its history, the most important being the last of them, Sawdan (850–871), a native of North Africa¹⁵. This emir was a significant adversary of the Franks and Lombards, thereby posing a threat to Byzantium's plans for southern Italy. He also aimed his military actions at the Balkans. According to the account of Constantine Porphyrogenitus, the fleet from Africa, under the command of Soldan (another version of the name for Sawdan), Saba, and Kalphus, arrived in Dalmatia with a force of 36 ships. They captured the cities of Butova, Rossa, and Decatera, while also laying siege to Ragusa for fifteen months¹⁶. The new independent emirate, living off the slave trade, was therefore a real threat to the interests of the Carolingians and Basil I.

Study

The main goal of the plan of cooperation between the Franks and Byzantines was to bring mutual benefits to both sides. Basil I seized power in 867, following the murder of Michael III. The new Basileus wanted to form alliances as part of his plan to recapture the lands in southern Italy and to expand Byzantium to the West. To achieve this, he planned to marry his son Constantine to Louis'

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 31–33; L.M. BONDIOLI, *Islamic Bari between the Aghlabids and the Two Empires*, [in:] *The Aghlabids and their Neighbors. Art and Material Culture in Ninth-Century North Africa*, ed. G.D. ANDERSON, C. FENWICK, M. ROSSER-OWEN, S. LAMINE, Leiden–Boston 2018 [= HOS. NME, 122], p. 471–476.

¹¹ L.M. BONDIOLI, *Islamic...*, p. 474.

¹² ERCHENPERT, 16–17, p. 139–140; L.M. BONDIOLI, *Islamic...*, p. 476–477.

¹³ L.M. BONDIOLI, *Islamic...*, p. 479–480.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 483.

¹⁵ ERCHENPERT, 29, p. 146; A. METCALFE, *The Muslims...*, p. 21; G. MUSCA, *L'emirato...*, p. 59–61.

¹⁶ CONSTANTINE PORPHYROGENITUS, *De Administrando Imperio*, 29, ed. G. MORAVCSIK, trans. R.J.H. JENKINS, ³Washington 1993 [= *CFHB*, 1] (cetera: CONSTANTINE PORPHYROGENITUS), p. 126–127; N. TOBIAS, *Basil I...*, p. 281–282.

daughter, Ermengard¹⁷. In return, the Italian branch of Carolingians would receive the support of the Byzantine fleet to counter the Muslim presence in the region. The Byzantine fleet appeared to be the force most capable of expelling the Muslims from Bari and the Italian coast¹⁸. This was to be tested in 869 and 870 when the fleet arrived near the capital of Apulia. As it turned out, not everything had gone according to plan. The Frankish emperor refuted the accusations made in our primary source by Basil I, who claimed that his Greek soldiers had to attack the largest city of Apulia on their own. The Constantinopolitan emperor alleged that this was happening while the Franks had been celebrating and drinking; they watched the actions of the Greeks without coming to their aid. Responding to these accusations Emperor Louis II compared the actions of Basil I's troops at Bari to the attack of locusts (*locustae*). He probably referred to the battles on land, emphasising the cowardice and weakness of those Byzantine formations which escaped from the besieged city, also suggesting that they took with them as prisoners only Christians¹⁹. Other events are also mentioned in Louis' letter, where he again refutes Basil's remarks, suggesting the following:

Cum enim, diu demorante stolo fraternitatis tue, illius iam minime prestolaremur adventum, et in anno ipso de obsidione Baris nichil omnino fieri putaremus, omnes ad sua redire permiseramus, his solummodo retentis quos ad prohibitionem recipiendorum alimentorum sufficere credebamus; et hoc est, quod stolus insperatus apparens non nisi paucos nostros invenerit. Verum tamen isti ipsi pauci et adhuc pauciores quibusdam horum diverso langore gravatis effecti, antequam Varis caperetur, tres ammiradas, qui totam Calabriam depopulabantur, [et] numerosam multitudinem Saracenorum prostverunt et magnam ve-stratibus salutem divino brachio contulerunt; qua re non solum Calabritanorum Hismahelitum ingens extunc facta est diminucio, set et Barensium potentatus omnimodo dissolutio, hac per id ad capiendum facilis adinvenzione.²⁰

Louis II (or should we say Anastasius) explains the reason for the absence of his soldiers at Bari when the Byzantine fleet arrived at this city. He explained that the arrival of the Byzantines was unexpected. As a result, some of his soldiers had been sent home, possibly for the winter. Additionally, a disease struck the Frankish army, spreading among the soldiers. However, Louis II emphasises that despite the weakness of his forces, they bravely resisted the Muslims, managing to destroy three of their units that were plundering Calabria. This contributed to the subsequent conquest of Bari, making it easier.

¹⁷ V.N. VLYSSIDOU, *Contribution à l'étude de la politique étrangère de Basile I^{er} au cours de la décennie 867–877*, ΒΣΥΜ 4, 1981, p. 304–306; N. TOBIAS, *Basil I...*, p. 296, 300.

¹⁸ Especially since the Muslims were led by enterprising and dangerous emirs from Bari, who saw Apulia as the direction for their conquest. C. HEATH, *Third/Ninth-Century Violence: 'Saracens' and Sawdān in Erchempert's Historia*, *ALM* 27.1, 2015, p. 24–40; T. WOLIŃSKA, *Próby...*, p. 154–155.

¹⁹ *Chronicon Salernitanum*, p. 115–116; *Ludovici II. imperatoris epistola*, p. 391.

²⁰ *Chronicon Salernitanum*, p. 116; *Ludovici II. imperatoris epistola*, p. 391.

Later in that letter other accusations were made, directly and personally aimed at the commander of the Byzantine fleet. The post was held by the patrician and *droungarios* of the *basilikon ploimon* Niketas Ooryphas²¹, who had offended Louis II by addressing him as a king, not as an emperor. The reasons behind the behaviour of the Byzantine commander are not explicitly stated, but it is likely that he assumed Louis II would support his forces with a large army, which did not materialise. Additionally, Niketas was perhaps also meant to escort the daughter of the ruler of the West to Constantinople, which was supposed to take place after the allies conquered Bari²². However, when it became evident that the Carolingian emperor did not fulfil his promise, and after Niketas failed to capture the city, the Byzantine admiral simply sailed away. This may be the reason behind the words of Louis II, who asked Basil I that the Byzantine emperor should not hold Niketas responsible for his act. He further focuses the attention on matters relating to this Byzantine commander and his actions at sea:

Et Niceta quidem patricius, Hadriano loci servatore cum classibus destinato, accepta quasi pro huiusmodi re occasione, multas predas ab ipsis Sclavenis abstulit, et quibusdam castris dirructis, eorum homines captivos adduxit²³.

Louis II and his court presented in this passage an excellent discernment of the activities of the Byzantine fleet. He had known that Niketas Ooryphas was sent with a fleet to defend the Adriatic Sea, which he accomplished by attacking the Slavs, whose castles he destroyed and plundered, additionally taking the defeated into slavery. It also shows that a part of the Byzantine fleet remained in Italy ...*Hadriano loci servatore cum classibus destinato*...²⁴. The topic of Slavs also appears later in that source, where the author provides the following information:

Sane spiritalem tuam nolumus ignorare fraternitatem super castra nostra dirructa et tot populis Sclavenie nostre in captivitate sine qualibet paritate subtractis, supra quam dici possit animum nostrum commotum. Non enim congrue gestum est, ut eisdem Sclavenis nostris cum navibus suis apud Barim in procinctu communis utilitatis consistentibus et nichil adversi sibi aliunde imminere putantibus, tam impie domi sua queque diriperentur, sibique contingerent, que si praenoscerent, nequaquam prorsus incurrerent. Qua de re desiderabilem dileccionem tuam hortamur et ammonemus, quod mox id corrigere iubet et ipsos captivos ad propria cum suis reduci precipiat, si caritatis vinculum nunquam inter nos fore cupiat dissolvendum. Nullus enim mortalium hactenus imperium nostrum talia commisisse recolit; ac per hoc nisi correctio iussione tua preveniat, iuste severitatis nostre

²¹ PMZ, vol. III, p. 441–442; V.N. VLYSSIDOU, *Réactions à la politique occidentale de Basile I^{er} et formation d'un nouveau haut commandement de l'armée*, ΒΣυμ 5, 1983, p. 131.

²² N. TOBIAS, *Basil I...*, p. 302–303.

²³ *Chronicon Salernitanum*, p. 117; *Ludovici II. imperatoris epistola*, p. 392.

²⁴ N. TOBIAS, *Basil I...*, p. 305.

proxima ulcio procul dubio subsequetur; nec poterit remanere penitus imputium, quod in contemptum nostrum tanta temeritate constant fuisse patratum.²⁵

Thus, there is a piece of information that the Byzantine fleet, under the command of the mentioned above Niketas Ooryphas, arrived in the Adriatic Sea, and its actions brought harm to the Slavs under Louis II. The Frankish emperor even put himself in the role of the defender of the Slavs and tried to force the Byzantines to release the captives with all their property. From the time of the Treaty of Aachen, both empires claimed sovereignty over Dalmatia, where Byzantium, under Basil I, gained the upper hand²⁶. Other historical sources add much more information. The main tasks of Niketas Ooryphas in the Adriatic Sea were to repel the Saracen forces from Ragusa (Dubrovnik), and to drive them out of this basin, as well as to curb the independence of the local Slavs²⁷. This Byzantine commander included the Slavic inhabitants of southern Dalmatia in his operations against Muslims, and later tried to use their potential to regain Byzantine power in Apulia²⁸. However, during the actions against Bari in 870–871, the Croats under the command of Domagoy (864–876) acted as allies of the Carolingians, providing them with their boats, and contributed significantly to the capture of the city²⁹. Louis II does

²⁵ *Chronicon Salernitanum*, p. 117–118; *Ludovici II. imperatoris epistola*, p. 392.

²⁶ N. TOBIAS, *Basil I...*, p. 301–302, 305–307.

²⁷ CONSTANTINE PORPHYROGENITUS, 29, p. 126–128; *Chronographiae Quae Theophanis Continuati Nomine Fertur Liber Quo Vita Basilii Imperatoris Amplectitur*, 53, ed. I. ŠEVČENKO, Berlin 2011 [= CFHB, 42] (cetera: *Vita Basilii*), p. 190–194; IOANNES ZONARAS, *Epitome historiarum libri XIII–XVIII*, ed. T. BUTTNER-WOBST, Leipzig 1897 [= CSHB, 49], p. 425; IOANNIS SKYLITZAE, *Synopsis Historiarum*, 26, ed. I. THURN, Berlin–New York 1973 [= CFHB, 5], p. 146–147; Đ. JANKOVIĆ, *Crpnsko pomorje od 7. do 10. stoljeća*, Beograd 2007, p. 61; D. DŽINO, *From Justinian to Branimir. The Making of the Middle Ages in Dalmatia*, London–New York 2021 [= SMHC], p. 222; J. PRYOR, E. JEFFREYS, *The Age of the Δρομων. The Byzantine Navy, ca 500–1204*, Brill 2006 [= MMe, 62], p. 49; R. HARRIS, *Dubrovnik. A History*, London 2006, p. 33; I.D. STEVOVIĆ, *Byzantium, Byzantine Italy and Cities on the Eastern Coast of the Adriatic: The Case of Kotor and Dubrovnik*, 3PBI 39, 2001, p. 165; T. WOLIŃSKA, *Próby...*, p. 156; V.N. VLYSSIDOU, *Contribution à...*, p. 303; N. TOBIAS, *Basil I...*, p. 286–287.

²⁸ CONSTANTINE PORPHYROGENITUS, 29, p. 126–128; *Vita Basilii*, 55, p. 198–200; D. DŽINO, *From Justinian...*, p. 222; J. FINE, *The Early Medieval Balkans. A Critical Survey from Sixth to the Late Twelfth Century*, Michigan 2000, p. 257; F. CURTA, *A Note on Trade and Trade Centers in the Eastern and Northern Adriatic Region Between the Eighth and the Ninth Century*, HAM 16, 2010, p. 267; T. WOLIŃSKA, *Próby...*, p. 156; N. TOBIAS, *Basil I...*, p. 301.

²⁹ CONSTANTINE PORPHYROGENITUS, 29, p. 128; IOHANNES DIACONUS, *Chronicon Venetum et Gradense usque ad a. 1008*, ed. G.H. PERTZ, Stuttgart 1846 [= MGH.SS, 7], p. 19; *Ludovici II. imperatoris epistola*, p. 392; *Vita Basilii*, 55, p. 200; G. MUSCA, *L'emirato...*, p. 73, 96; E. KISLINGER, *Ers-ter und zweiter Sieger. Zum Byzantinisch-Karolingischen bündnis bezüglich Bari 870–871*, 3PBI 50, 2013, p. 254; D. DŽINO, *From Justynian...*, p. 220; J. PRYOR, E. JEFFREYS, *The Age of...*, p. 49; M. BRKOVIĆ, *Diplomatička analiza papinskih pisama druge polovice IX. stoljeća destinatarima u Hrvatskoj*, RZav 43, 2001, p. 31; T. ŽIVKOVIĆ, *On the Baptism of the Serbs and Croats in the Time of Basil I (867–886)*, SSBP 1, 2013, p. 33–53; B. KREUTZ, *Before...*, p. 45.

not mention this in his letter. He does not even describe who led these Slavic warriors or how numerous their fleet was. Furthermore, he did not regard the Slavic fleet as a replacement for the Byzantine naval forces.

In the subsequent fragment of this source the author of the letter again demonstrates an excellent understanding of the maritime affairs related to southern Italy. Moreover, he proposes a strategy to expel Muslims from the Apennine Peninsula, in which the Byzantine fleet should play the central role:

De cetero, frater karissime, noveris cum virtute summi Opificis [nostri] exercitum nostrum, ordine prenotato Bari triumphis nostris summissa, Saracenos Tarenti pariter et Calabrie mox mirabiliter humiliasse simul et comminuisse, hos celerius duce Deo penitus contriturum, si a mari prohibiti fuerint escarum ammictere copias vel etiam classium a Panoramio vel Africa suscipere multitudines. Quapropter specialis frateritas tua, quia per siccam nostrorum cunei populorum in utrisque locis vix aut nunquam deerunt, studeat necesse est sufficientem stolum destinere, qui et illos a recipiendis alimentis a mare coerceat, et si plurimas contingerit, sicuti sepe nunciatur, pessime gentis advenire catervas, facilius illis resistere, divino munito brachio valeat. Nam iste stratigus Georgius, licet sollerter invigilet et strenue pro suo posse decertare, non tamen sufficiet obviare, si plures inimicorum naves ex parte qualibet apparuerint, non videlicet nisi pauca prorsus chelandia possidens.³⁰

The author had found a solution to the problem of the activities of Muslim forces in Italy. He suggested cutting them off from the sea, from the supplies and the military reinforcements that they were receiving from Palermo and Africa. Here, according to the source, the role of the Byzantine fleet was to be crucial. Basil I should send a sufficiently large fleet to Italy because only a significant force could prevent the Muslims from raiding. The Carolingian and his court also draw attention to the fact that the Byzantine patrician and *strategios* Georgios³¹, who was cooperating with the Franks, despite his good intentions had too few warships under his command to have full control over the coast. The topic of war against the pirates is continued in the next fragment:

Et quia nonnulli Sarracenorum Panormi latrunculi cum sagenis solacio et refugio iam memoratorum Neapolitanorum freti, per Tirrenum mare debachantur, oportet ut et hos capiendos tue fraternitatis stolum sine dilacione mictatur. Isti sunt qui et Calabritanis Saracenis indefesse stipendia prebent, et hiis qui Panormi sunt, auxilia cotidiana ministrant; unde si capiantur, sagenae maxima ex parte Sarracenorum tam Panormi quam Calabrie constringuntur. Nos enim Calabria Deo auctore purgata, Siciliam pristinae disponimus secundum commune placitum restituere libertati; quod tanto erit utrumque facilius, quanto illi, divina dextera captis navibus et latrunculis, fuerint amplius et celerius infirmati. Nulla ergo tarditas, frater karissime, nulla mora in mictendo stolo proveniant, ne vel per escarum

³⁰ *Chronicon Salernitanum*, p. 119–120; *Ludovici II. imperatoris epistola*, p. 393–394.

³¹ *Georgios: Georgius. Prosopographie der mittelbyzantinischen Zeit Online [online]*, ed. R.J. LILIE, C. LUDWIG, B. ZIELKE, T. PRATSCH, Berlin–Boston 2013, <https://www.degruyter.com/database/PMBZ/entry/PMBZ24246/html> [31 VII 2023].

a mari receptarum habundanciam vel per adventanicum Agarenorum classium numerositatem horum vires nin infirmentur, set roberentu,r et sic roberentur, ut postea difficilius infirmentur. Set et frustra nostri per siccam indefesse certamen arripiunt, etsi sic ipsi per equora fuerint aliqua stipendia vel copiosam fortitudinem consecuti.³²

The author of our letter saw the collaboration with the Neapolitans as fundamental to the successes of the Saracens of Palermo on the Tyrrhenian Sea, as the former provided the Saracens with shelter and support. The Byzantine fleet, in his words, should therefore catch and destroy the ships of the Muslims and their supporters because with their help the Saracens deliver supplies to their forces in Calabria and Sicily. The task of depriving the Muslims of the means of transport, which could be done by Basil I's men, would subsequently result in regaining by the Christian side full control over Calabria and Palermo. The Carolingian further announced that once the enemies have been removed from mainland Italy, he would take similar actions in Sicily. The Byzantines, according to Louis, should not delay, but as soon as possible crush the forces of the sons of Hagar at sea, and prevent them from coming to the aid of their brethren fighting on the mainland, as well as to block their supply lines. The vision of regaining control over Sicily and Calabria, as proposed by Louis II, was in conflict with Byzantium's rights to these lands, because from the Byzantine perspective only Constantinople could legitimately claim dominion over Calabria and Sicily, and thus had the power to decide the fate of these provinces. It just so happened that at the time of sending this letter Byzantium was fighting on many fronts against the armies of Islam, which stretched the empire's forces too sparsely and made it impossible for Constantinople to regain control of Sicily on its own, or even to expel the Muslims from their bases in Calabria. Louis II was fully aware of this, which is evident in the tone of his letter. He needed, above all, the support of the Byzantine naval forces in his military operations against Tarentum³³. After the death of Louis II Bari itself had come under the Byzantine rule, when its inhabitants invited George, the Byzantine commander from Otranto, to protect them from the Saracens³⁴.

If we look at the entire operation to take Bari only from the perspective of this letter, one could get the wrong impression that the Byzantines behaved extremely passively and that the whole burden of fighting the Muslims fell on the shoulders of the Carolingians. Louis II in his account gives a lot of significant information subjectively. He does not lie, but he presents certain facts in such a way as to present his actions in the most favourable light. Other Latin sources are silent about the activities of the Byzantine fleet at Bari, while Byzantine sources are only somewhat reliable due to the time separating them from the events (mid-10th century). The account of the latter confirms that the fleet of Byzantium and Slavs operated in

³² *Chronicon Salernitanum*, p. 120; *Ludovici II. imperatoris epistola*, p. 394.

³³ ERCHEMPERT, 38, p. 152; N. TOBIAS, *Basil I...*, p. 311–312.

³⁴ ERCHEMPERT, 38, p. 152.

the Adriatic, and was able to prevail there over the Muslims. Unfortunately, we can tell much more about the fleet's operations in Dalmatia rather than near Bari. Byzantine rule over this province was therefore of a greater priority for Basil I. That is why it is necessary to look at these events and the participation of the Byzantine naval forces in Apulia, precisely through the prism of the great game which was then taking place in the Adriatic³⁵.

Conclusions

The letter of Louis II to Basil I provides us with valuable information relating to both the Byzantine and the Saracen maritime affairs. Concerning the Byzantine fleet, the Carolingian and his court referred to it as *stolus* or *classis*. The latter term is also used to describe the Hagarene forces at sea. In the case of ships used by the sides of the conflict mentioned in the text, the author uses the term *chelandia* for the Byzantine units, while the vessels belonging to the Slavs are described as *naves*³⁶. That name is also used to describe Muslim ships and boats, where the author is adding yet another term – *sagenae* (which may be the same as *naves*). This is clear evidence that the author of the letter delimited the boundaries between the professional Byzantine fleet with real warships, such as *chelandia* galleys, and the irregular, pirate naval forces of enemies, the Slavs, and the Saracens³⁷. The enemies of Byzantines as we know, used various types of vessels, because apart from ships, an important element of their equipment were boats, maybe hidden under the term *sagenae*³⁸. Lightships and boats of the Arabs and Slavs from the Adriatic, used primarily for piratical activities, did not take require crews as large as those of the classic Byzantine *dromons*. The ships that were part of the Byzantine naval forces in the 9th–10th centuries had crews numbering in the order of: *pamphilia* between 110 and 120 people, *chelandion* – 160, and *dromon* up to 300³⁹.

³⁵ N. TOBIAS, *Basil I...*, p. 310.

³⁶ On this type of ship: B. KREUTZ, *Ships, Shipping, and the Implications of Change in the Early Medieval Mediterranean*, V 7, 1976, p. 95; Ch. MAKRYPOULIAS, *The Navy in the Works of Constantine Porphyrogenitus*, GA 6, 1995, p. 162; V. CHRISTIDES, *Military Intelligence in Arabo-Byzantine Naval Warfare*, [in:] *Byzantium at War (9th–12th)*, ed. K. TSIKNAKIS, Athens 1997, p. 276; D. MOUTSOS, *Greek Χελανδιον and Latin Celundria*, B 62, 1992, p. 412–413; E. EICKHOFF, *Seekrieg und Seepolitik zwischen Islam und Abendland. Das Mittelmeer unter byzantinischer und arabischer Hegemonie (650–1040)*, Berlin 1966, p. 136–137.

³⁷ B. KREUTZ, *Ships...*, p. 101.

³⁸ The term *sagenae* can also be used for both boats and ships. E.A. SOPHOCLES, *Greek Lexicon of the Roman and Byzantine Periods*, Hildesheim–New York 1975, p. 975; B. KREUTZ, *Ships...*, p. 101–103; R. JURIC, *Ranohrvatski brodovi iz Nina*, RZav 37, 1995, p. 77–91; R. JURIC, S. SUTLOVIC, B. VILHAR, *The Early Croatian Boats from Nin*, Diad 18–19, 1997, p. 379–386; Vessels hiding under this name were also used by the inhabitants of Amalfi. *Vita Athanasii episcopi Neapolitani*, ed. G. WAITZ, Hannoverae 1878 [= MGH.SRLI], p. 446: *...venit cum viginti sagenis et tulit inde sanctum virum...*

³⁹ J. PRYOR, E. JEFFREYS, *The Age of...*, p. 254–262; J. PRYOR, *Types of Ships and their Performance Capabilities*, [in:] *Travel in Byzantine World*, ed. R. MACRIDES, Birmingham 2000, p. 39–41.

Crews of Arab or Slavic vessels however could count from 10 to 120 people, and those vessels were usually smaller than those of the Byzantines⁴⁰. Paradoxically, size was one of their strengths. Smaller ships could move in places inaccessible to the larger ones, where the latter would be in danger of getting stuck. Therefore, they could be used on navigable rivers, shallow bays, or coastal swamps and backwaters. The second element ensuring their effectiveness was their number. Several units could be used for boarding combat in a similar way as the Vikings, Rus, or the Cossacks did contemporaneously. Slow and large enemy galleys made for a particularly easy prey. The final element was the great use of the knowledge of the waters on which the operations were carried out. That was especially important in preparing ambushes or delivering supplies when the enemy loosened the blockade (see Bari, the siege of which lasted for several years, because it was receiving help by sea).

The text also mentions three commanders of the Byzantine fleet, *drungarios* Niketas Ooryphas, and the *strategos* Georgios, and Hadrianos, who must have been known to Emperor Louis II and his courtiers. The shows that they may have met, since Ooryphas managed to offend Louis, and Georgios complained about the weakness of his naval forces and the insufficient number of the *chelandia* warships. Niketas Ooryphas caused a stir during his meeting with the Western emperor, but his competence as *drungarios* of the fleet allowed him to represent the majesty of imperial power, both in diplomacy and in war. Although this commander was not Basil I's favourite at first, he was nonetheless entrusted with missions in the Adriatic as well as, later on, with transporting his future daughter-in-law to Constantinople from Italy. Ooryphas managed to chase away the followers of Islam from Ragusa, thus restoring the credibility of the Byzantine naval forces. It can also be assumed that it was probably on his orders that both Georgios and Hadrianos took part in the blockade of Bari, where they were accompanied by Slavs from Dalmatia, including Croats led by Domagoy.

The examined letter is an interesting source from the point of view of research of the naval history of the Byzantine fleet in the 9th century. Its author, regardless of whether we recognize here the authorship of Anastasius Bibliothecarius or Louis II, was well-versed in the ills of Byzantium in Italy, especially those related to the naval forces. The author of the words addressed to Basil had realised that the activities of Muslims in the Adriatic and Tyrrhenian Seas were linked to their havens in Sicily and Africa. He therefore outlined a logical plan to expel the Saracens from Southern Italy, particularly from Campania (Naples) and Calabria, in which the Byzantine fleet was to play a crucial role. The operation was envisaged by Louis (or Anastasius) to enable the transition to the subsequent joint land operations of the Franks and Greeks in Sicily and the re-capture of Palermo. In this

⁴⁰ CONSTANTINE PORPHYROGENITUS, 31, p. 150; J. PRYOR, E. JEFFREYS, *The Age of...*, p. 254–262; J. PRYOR, *Types...*, p. 39–41.

context the letter mentions that town as a place strongly associated with Muslim pirates. However, the plan was wishful, and its author did not take into account the dispersal of the Byzantine navy, which at that time had fought against the forces of the Abbasids, the Aghlabids, the emirate of Crete, and finally the Slavic pirates in the Adriatic Sea. These factors, despite the later successes, effectively prevented the fleet from aiding in the re-conquest of Sicily and halting the progress of Islam on the island. In addition, there was a growing aversion between the Franks and Byzantines, which resulted in the collapse of plans for the alliance. Ultimately, the extinction of the Carolingian Italian line with Louis II, who during his lifetime did not manage to completely remove the Muslims from Italy, put an end to the straightforward plan. Finally, it is worth noting that Louis II was not mistaken about the support at sea from the Byzantine side during the siege of Bari, which was provided to him, albeit not directly. The Byzantines confronted both the Muslim and the Slavic pirates in the Adriatic, employing their considerable naval forces for this purpose. This in turn drew these people away from helping the Emirate of Bari, which ultimately ensured the success of the Western emperor.

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