

Durres During The First Norman Attack 1081-1085

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Abstract

Following the Norman conquest of Byzantine Italy and Saracen Sicily, Robert Guiscard took the initiative to conquer the Byzantine Empire in 1081. Robert Guiscard set out from Italy for the island of Corfu, which he soon conquered. After landing, he received military reinforcements from Italy, and attacks began on the city of Durres, the main port on the Adriatic. The city was well protected on a long, narrow peninsula running parallel to the coast but separated by swamps. Guiscard brought his army to the peninsula and set up camp outside the city walls, but the Norman fleet sailing towards Durres was struck by a storm and lost several ships, despite the losses after the Norman siege, he invaded Durres.

Durres turned into the main theater of the Norman-Byzantine war, and the conquest of Durres by the Normans brought fear, not only to the Ottoman Empire, but also to Europe's largest trading power, Venice. By controlling the Strait of Otranto, the Normans would control almost the entire Eastern Mediterranean. The geographical position of Durres and its connection with the old road Egnatia, which leads to Constantinople, make Durres the key to the conquest of the Byzantine Empire.

Keywords: Durres, Norman-Byzantine War, Byzantine Empire, Normans, Arberia.

Introduction

During the Byzantine period, Durres continued to be the most important Byzantine city in the Adriatic Sea. It was the capital of several provinces, including the provinces from the Mat River to the Vjosa River. After the 7th century, this coastal city began to be established as a separate administrative unit due to the risk of Arab attacks and strong trade competition from Venice. In the 9th century, the Theme of Durres was founded, a large administrative and military unit, where the influence of feudalism began to decline and a new civic elite was created.

By the end of the 11th century all the political and economic currents of the Byzantine Empire changed. The difficulty of finding political and economic stability had made it easier for the growing foreign enemies in Western Europe to target the Byzantine territories. Byzantium initially lost southern Italy, and after the conquest of the last city on the Adriatic Sea, Bari by the Norman fraction led by Robert Guiscard, Byzantium was no longer secure in the Balkans either. Thus, the Normans after the invasion of Italy and the political agreements with the Vatican, increased their ambitions for the conquest and capture of Constantinople.

The rule of the Komnenian Dynasty began in this century, where Alexius I Komnenos undertook a large number of political and military, as well as religious reforms, such as the confiscation of the property of churches and monasteries. In this battle between the West and Byzantium, the main place is occupied by the city of Durres, because from 1081 until the Ottoman occupation in 1501, it was the first gateway of attacks of Western armies against Byzantium. Durres during the Norman-Byzantine war was the main battle between the two camps, whereby, with its occupation by the Normans, it was expected that the Norman military invasion is irreversible towards Byzantium, but Alexios Komnenos with some military alliances managed to repel the Norman attacks exactly in Durres.

The First Norman Attack

The first attempts to establish sovereignty over the Arberian lands were made by the great feudal lords of southern Italy originating from Scandinavia, known in history as the Normans. Their first persistence occurred in the year 1030, namely in 11th century, in a territory given by the Duke of Naples (Ducellier 2005: 165). Later, during the Sicilian expeditions, they invaded Southern Italy and formed there a powerful feudal state, which was no longer well received by the Papacy. In exchange for recognition as feudal lords in the territories where they had settled, Humfrond of Apulia and his found brother Robert Guiscard, approached their submission to the Pope. The non-recognition aggravated the relations, thus leading to the military conflict between them.

Meanwhile, the Byzantine Empire after: the wars it had with the Bulgarian Kingdom and the military incursions of other states; the crisis of the theme system accompanied by a series of anti-government uprisings (especially on its western flank); the danger that was emerging in the east from the Seljuk Turks, etc. was gripped by a severe crisis that was at once a favorable factor for the Normans. At the moment, the presence of divergences and fierce political-military rivalry between the then Duke of Durres, Gjergj Maniaku, and the Emperor Komnen were a concern. In order to neutralize the destabilizing attitudes and actions of Maniak, Alexios Komnenos sent Gjergj Paleolog to Durres, who was assigned the task of using "every maneuver to expel there without war" (Bozhor 1975: 165) Maniak and then, to react strongly against the attacks of the Normans. So, the east-west clash between the Normans and the Byzantines, which had begun with the withdrawal of the Byzantines from Southern Italy in 1071 (Anamali 2004: 179), became at the turn of the 70-80s of the 11th century a danger to the Balkan possessions, up to Constantinople. In the war against Byzantium Robert also had the support of the Ragusa and Spalata fleets that were rivals of Venice (Qerimi 2017: 138). Arberian lands for the westerners constituted a strategic area that enabled the undertaking of military attacks towards the

east. The long-awaited opportunity by the Normans to start the war against the Byzantine Empire came. It was the bishop of Deabolis (Devolli) who invited the Normans to support his people in their efforts to get rid of the imperial yoke of Constantinople (Jacques 1995: 182). The Normans were invited as supporters in the anti-Byzantine movement led by Niqifor Basiliaku. As an experienced military strategist, he had organized an army dominated mostly by the Arberian element, but also by Bulgarians and Greeks, which, in 1079 (Ducellier 1972: 182), concentrated in the suburbs before Durres, where considerable Norman forces penetrated by sea. It was the first clash between the Norman-Arberians and the Byzantines, which ended in favor of the Byzantines. After the defeat, the Normans withdrew to their possessions in southern Italy, but did not give up their objectives, which first ended with the capture of Durres, as the most important point of the eastern Adriatic coast.

To the detriment of the Byzantine Empire, another difficulty was added. On 29 June 1080 the Treaty of Ceprano was concluded (Smith 2000: 507) between Pope (Gregory VII) and Robert Guiscard. According to her, the Pope recognized all the territories occupied by the Normans as well status quo securing Guiscard's position in Lower Italy even during his absence. The alliance that ended with the oath of allegiance by Guiscard was regarded as a very important moral factor. But Robert Guiscard did not want to "be in the trailer of the Pope's politics." His plans were headed towards East. The conquest of the Byzantine Empire would crown the work, to which he would devote his entire life (Smith 2000: 526). When Durres was on the verge of the great Byzantine-Norman clash, Alexios Komnenos sought to avoid the conquest of the main Adriatic city, which opened the way to Thessaloniki and Constantinople. He sent his relative Gjergj Paleolog as commander of the city to counteract the Norman attacks (Ducellier 1972: - 182). At the same time, in order to withstand these attacks, the leaders of the coastal cities were instructed "not to remain indifferent, not to neglect, but to be vigilant and careful, to take all measures of protection, and to

observe the arrival of Robert, in order not to conquer the coastal cities and islands, which would later cause trouble to the Byzantine Empire" (Bozhor 1975: 86). Generalized author entitled "The successor of John Skylitzes" (Bozhor 1975: 86) brings data of interest "for the Byzantine rulers in Durres on the eve of the Norman attack, (as well as) for the political situation in the eastern and northeastern provinces of Arberia" (Bozhor 1975: 89). But Komnenos, thinking that the empire did not have the necessary power to confront the Normans, and with the intention of interrupting the communication of Guiscard forces with the coasts of Apulia, entered into an alliance with Venice. According to her, a joint resistance against the Normans was agreed upon (Anamali 2004: 179). Venice made available to the Byzantine emperor its powerful fleet, in exchange for the recognition of trade privileges in the territories of the Byzantine Empire (Anamali 2004: 179). This agreement marked the beginning of the hegemony of Venice in the Byzantine seas and markets.

The Republic of Venice, which had experienced a great political and economic development during the 11th century viewed the Norman efforts to expand to the other side of the Adriatic (Arber coast M.Q.) as a constant threat to it (AIH, A-II-16, Nr. Inv. 233, f. 22). At this time, in the Arberian Durres and the capital of the Eastern Adriatic, at the most strategic position between East and West, as the entrance and master gate of the most important road to Constantinople (Egnatia Line), the interests of the three great powers of the time were crossed (Byzantine Empire, Norman Kingdom of Guiscard and Venice), interests that first passed through Durres (Bozhor 1975: 99). Durres and Arberia, long incorporated into the Byzantine empire, were known as a permanent and successful factor in the western wing of the empire. As such, not only did the Byzantine Empire continue to account for this factor, but Venice and the Normans also sought to secure the support and trust of the local population. Alexios Komnenos (1081-1118) (SerbischesMittelalter, band I, GrazEienKöln, 1962. p. 11). attached great importance to military training. The

vast majority of military forces were deployed to the east of the city of Durres to be mobilized at the right time. The garrison operated in the city under the command of General Gjergj Paleologu (consisting of an Arber unit), a structure with a rich experience in the field of combat. While in the waters of Durres the Venetian fleet operated. All of them had the primary task of protecting the Durres pier, which was well fortified (Pepo AIH: 2008). Three days before the end of the deadline set by the Byzantine-Venetian agreement, in the waters of Durres, the well-armed Venetian fleet appeared, under the command of Domenico Silvio, which was stationed about 18 stades away from the duke's camp (Bozhor 1975: 101). The clash expected in terms of military troops was not equal. The Normans had a military power of about 15,000 soldiers, while the Byzantines a much larger power, which is estimated at about 75,000 - 90,000 soldiers (Nikaj 1917: 180). However, Alexios Komnenos (according to Ana Komnenos) considered the danger posed by the Norman military penetration on the Arber coast to be the most important for the fate of the empire.

Guiscard's army march towards Durres

According to Ana Komnena, Robert Guiscard aimed to become a lord over the entire coast of Arberia, where the beginnings of the inter-Balkan roads were located. The most suitable route for the conquest of Durres was considered to be through the sea on the line Brindisi-Dyrrah. Along the way, Guiscard conquered the very fortified city of Corfu and from there the army divided into two parts headed for the castles on the Arber coastal lands (Bozhor 1975: 103). A part of the army led by Guiscard landed in Butrint, while the rest led by his son, Boemund, landed in Vlora in May 1081. Boemund after conquering Vlora, Kanina and Jerico (Orikum) arrived in Butrint, where they met Guiscard (Nikaj 1917: 181). According to historical sources, the Norman army that landed on the Arber coast consisted of an effective of 30 thousand armed forces and a military fleet of 150 ships (Pepo 1978: 180). Further, Guiscard and Bomeund, after uniting and reorganizing the forces they commanded,

determined the most probable routes to reach Durres. According to the plan, Robert would command the military fleet, approaching Durres and surrounding it by the sea. While Boemund started marching through the land to siege the city from the land part. But the move did not work out as planned. Guiscard's fleet during the march to Durres collided with the Ceraunian rocks on the Cape of Gjuhëza (notorious since antiquity). This was followed by a sea storm that took them by surprise. As a result, most of the fleet that supplied the army with food sank, a significant part of the military fleet, as well as large human losses. After this difficult situation, Guiscard, in order to repair the damaged ships and to provide the troops with the necessary rest "had a stay of 7 days with residence in Glavinica (today's Ballsh) and the bay of Vlora (in, AIH, A- II-16, Nr. Inv. 233, 13). Then, united with the land forces of Boemund, they made a brief stop with an organizing effect near the ruins of the city of the learned, Apollonia (which flourished in antiquity and was the important point of the second branch of the Via Egnatia). Then, Robert, through the Illyrian plain (today's Myzeqeja) led all the troops towards the most important Byzantine fortress in the Adriatic Sea (AIH, A-II-16, Nr. Inv. 233, 13), at the same time the most important center of Illyricum. According to Ana Komnena, Robert Guiscard after arriving on the outskirts of Durres set up his camp in the ruins of abandoned and old houses located north of the Byzantine walls of the city (AIH, A-II-16, Nr. Inv. 233, 13).

The Norman-Byzantine Battles of Durres

After the drafting and approval of the plan, the movement of Norman troops for the siege of the city of Durres by land and sea began. The first counterattack units to try to block the way for the Normans led by Robert Giuscard were the city forces along with the troops the Dalmatian exarch had sent for help (Schramm 2006: 198), which prevented the first Norman attacks from penetrating the narrow land and sea perimeter of the city. At this stage of the arrival of the Normans, 14 June 1081, the first naval clash between the Norman and Venetian fleets (led by Domenico Silvio) stands out. It

was the Norman fleet that through several successive strikes displayed priority over the Venetian fleet and prevented it from entering the harbor. Meanwhile, a Norman-Byzantine clash took place on the ground (for which we have not been able to find proper evidence), which ended with the victory of Guiscard. With these first victories, the forces of Guiscard, on 16 June 1081, had managed to complete the siege of the city on the entire perimeter (land and sea). But the Venetian fleet, known for its naval war, organized a decisive attack a day later. They managed to break the Norman blockade and entered the port of Durres, welcomed with great excitement by the population. The third day was decisive. It was a perfect combination between the Venetian fleet (against the Norman fleet), the Byzantine forces of Gjergj Paleolog through a powerful offensive against the Norman besiegers, and the Byzantine fleet under the command of Manikio (every supply from Apulia was cut off to the Normans). The Normans were forced to retreat. The main role was played by the city garrison (under the efficient command of Gjergj Paleologu), whose most prominent wing was the organized and experienced unit of Arberians led by the Arberian Commiscort, but also other contingents with foreign troops (not Byzantine), especially Vlachs (Claude Faveyrial 1990: 179). The garrison was also supported by a considerable part of the city's population, as well as the merchant stratum. The protection (fortification) values of the castle, as well as the preliminary military and food supply in bulk also contributed to the success (Shuflaj 2002:120). The outbreak of an epidemic inside the Norman camp also affected.

The consequences of the Byzantine-Venetian victory were catastrophic for the Normans. Their military prestige suffered a severe blow. Although in these circumstances, Robert Guiscard with the courage and thought of invincibility that characterized him, continued to reorganize and made maximum use of the energies of his army to take the city of Durres, before the arrival of the Byzantine emperor, Alexios Komnenos (AIH, A -II-16, Nr. Inv. 233, pg. 25). Meanwhile the Byzantine emperor

had gathered an army of about 70,000 troops. Its core consisted of variants from Scandinavia (occupying a special place) (AIH, A-II-16, Nr. Inv. pg. 26.), garrisons of the most famous for their striking force, such as the unit of the excubitors (one of the most famous of the garrison of Constantinople), trained military units of Macedonia and Thessaly, as well as Turkish, French and other mercenary units. Alexios Komnenos at the head of this military force left Constantinople heading to Durres in August 1081. In Thessaloniki, the emperor was informed about the difficult situation of the besieged castle of Durres from the incessant attacks of Robert, as well as about the wounding of Palaeologu. Under these circumstances, he accelerated the march moving towards Via Egnatia. According to the descriptions of Ana Komnena, the place for the development of the battle was chosen very conveniently (AIH, A-II-16, Nr. Inv. pg. 27.). Arriving in the eastern suburbs of Durres, Alexios Komnenos set up camp and summoned the commander of Durres, Gjergj Paleologu, in order to advise him on the situation and further actions. The advice of the experienced war man was that no decisive battle should take place, but that Robert Guiscard should be surrounded more and more closely, that his food supply should be cut off, and that his army should be weakened through small-scale fighting. "Many of the old experienced generals were of this opinion." But the new high Byzantine aristocracy, especially Constantine Porphyrogenitus (son of the former emperor, Constantine Doukas) insisted on frontal battle (AIH, A-II-16, Nr. Inv. pg. 28), among them was also the 12-year-old boy Leon Diogenes, the son of the former emperor Diogenes. Komnenos with an almost fabulous experience in the military field, apparently preferred the alternative of small but successive and furious battles, to pass at the right moment to a frontal battle.

The first blow against the Norman troops was conceived with the engagement of a part of the forces that would attack at one of the opponent's points, in order to measure the pulse and then decide on further development. It is proved that this non-frontal attack

took place on the eastern side of the city, 4 October 1081 and the victory was on the Byzantine side (AIH, A-II-16, Nr. Inv. pg. 26). This victory created the conviction of Komnenos to carry out a frontal attack, on land and at sea, which would lead to the rapid and final defeat of the Norman army. Consequently, the Kingdom of Guiscard would no longer be a threat to the Byzantine Empire. He placed his army ready for battle. The supreme command was in the center, the right wing was commanded by Caesar Nikephoros Melissenos, and the left wing by the great Domurian Pakourianus (Jireček 1916: 160). The vanguard of the attack consisted of Variags that were barely restrained by impatience. Behind them stood lightly armed soldiers, archers and sling-holders. The emperor had ordered the commander of Durres to support him with a simultaneous and energetic attack. At the side of the emperor was the prince of Zeta, Bodin, who had set up camp with his Montenegrin and Arberian units near the battlefield. On the opposite side, Guiscard “with his loyal people went to the church of St. Theodore (located by the sea), made a short prayer there and then took a favorable position in the hills southeast of the city of Durres, near the villages of today of Sallmanaj and Arapaj and arranged the troops on the battle line” (AIH, A-II-16, Nr. Inv. pg. 28). The center of the army was led by Duke, the left wing was commanded by Boemundi, the right wing stretched out to sea was commanded by Count Amiret, who was worthy to carry out this task. The main frontal battle took place on 18 October 1081 in the hilly area southeast of the city, between the river Erzen (Ululeus) and the sea. It was the fiercest battle. The armies entered the battle, at a distance of 300-500 m, on both sides of the present-day stream of St. Michael (AIH, A-II-16, Nr. Inv. 233, pg. 30). The first to attack were the Variags on the left wing of the Normans, who with their double-edged axes, inflicted many casualties. Robert's army for a moment disorganized, but quickly gathered and threw their spears at the enemy (AIH, A-II-16, Nr. Inv. 233, pg. 31). The weak point was taken advantage of. The Variags “had penetrated far ahead and uncovered their wings, in which they were attacked and completely annihilated”. The losses for the Byzantines were colossal.

At least 500-600 warriors fell on the battlefield, among them, many from the upper aristocracy. The whole camp with everything it had, fell into the possession of the Normans. Of the Normans there were about 30 fallen cavalry.

After the defeat in this battle, the upper part of the city of Durres was entrusted to the Venetians, while the rest was entrusted to a high-ranking military man from Arbanon (Ducelier 1975: 9), at the same time the deputy strategist of the Durres theme and the commander of the Arber troops, who according to the chronicler Ana Komnena (daughter of Alexios Komnenos) held the high title of Commiscort. "Apparently the emperor's decision was based on the ethnic situation in the city." In the created circumstances, he "had no one left to defend Durres outside the main and real inhabitants of the city and that cosmopolitan minority of merchants" (Luka 1968: 157). He entered into an agreement with the Arber Commiscort, as well as with the independent princes of Dukla and Dalmatia, to fight together as allies against the Normans (Komnena 1884: 183). It is an indicator of the development of the process of Arberian differentiation, in the military-political aspect, within the empire. Furthermore, following the Egnatia line and, within two days, managed to take refuge in Achrida (Ohrid) (Faveirial 2004: 31). Then he went to Deabolis (Devoll) and from there with a part of the army set out for Thessaloniki (meeting point for the army), waiting to find means and ways to re-establish military power. The main factor that caused the great Byzantine defeat must be sought in the foreground in the dismantling of the system of themes based on the army of the strategists. The Stratioti army was very motivated because in addition to defending the empire which had provided them with land, it also defended its own residential territories. The strength of the strategic army had been the main factor of success during the periods of Byzantine clashes with rivals such as the Bulgarians, the Diocletians, etc. or the main force of uprisings against imperial power. In the event of a clash with the mighty Kingdom of Guiscard, Alexios Komnenos underestimated

the Stratioti Arberian army. It was a quick move. The right time had to be consumed for the organization of this element that was most motivated because it defended its territories and its capital, Durres. The improper functioning of the alliance system also had an impact. One of the allies, Prince Bodin of Dioclea, although engaged in the beginnings of the clash with the Normans, at the last moment (the main battle) refused to include his troops (Anamali 2002: 225). The victory over the Byzantine army, seven times greater, opened prospects for Guiscard. They turned and surrounded the city already left without outside support. But with winter on the doorstep, he retreated with his army to the plain of Myzeqe (the lower reaches of the river Devoll), where he built a small castle which he called Guiscard Castle (Kola 2002: 150). From there, the duke undertook repeated attacks against Durres. A special role in the defense of the city was played by the forces commanded by the Arberian Commisscort². But the lone resistance of the Arberians could not resist the Norman attacks. They were also helped by the merchants of the cities of Amalfi and Venice in Durres with the treacherous opening of the entrance gates to the city. Byzantine sources, albeit truncated, provide interesting data on the Norman-Byzantine clash. Ana Komnena in her work "Alexiada" describes the Norman-Byzantine wars, which took place mainly on Arberian territory, highlighting their crucial role (Bozhori: 71). The Byzantine-Norman war is partly described by the Byzantine chronicler Jan Zonara in his work "Short History". The Normans of Guiscard enter the city in the seventh month of the siege, 21 February 1082, aided by the betrayal of a Venetian named Domenico (entrusted with the guarding of an important tower) as well as a contingent of Venetian inhabitants. Through the mentioned tower, the Normans entered the city with the shout "Guiscard". After three days of resistance by the

² Arberesh general, mentioned by Ana Komneni in the 11th century, as Komishkurti, was known as Komnin Shkurti. In Beoti there are surnames Komini, in the Albanian version Komnini, Era Vranusi opposes this. See: Aristidh Kola, *Arvanitasit dhe prejardhja e Grekëve*, Tiranë 2002, pg. 150, Commiscort, who was charged with the defense of the city of Durres in 1081, was a functionary in the court of the so-called strategist of Durres, who descended from the Arberesh, i.e. he was of Albanian origin, see Koqo Bozhori, *Critic and Critics and Bibliography*, Historical Studies, 3, Tirana 1964, p. 188.

garrison and the population, the city finally fell under Norman rule. Part of the garrison and the Venetians were taken prisoner. The rest of the Venetians reached the harbor and left by ship. The fall of the Arberian capital under a new rule was at the same time a knock on their conscience to find ways and means against the rule (Qerimi 2017: 139). Duke, after taking Durres, intended to start the march in the heart of the Byzantine Empire at the beginning of spring.

The fall of Guiscard and the recapture of Durres by the Byzantines

With the onset of spring, the duke, marching along the Egnatia Line, took the offensive eastward. For a short time he took the territories of Dibra, Polog, Devoll, Berat, of Kostur, of Larissa. For the provinces and castles that surrendered without resistance, Duke Guiscard, in order to provide support in addressing his case, generously dealt with unresponsive military contingents (the case of the 300 Variags defending the castle of Kostur). From Kostur the duke began preparations to attack Thessaloniki. But this did not happen due to a threatening internal uprising of the Norman princes (Jireček 1916: 160). They were also instigated by Alexios I Comnenus through political intrigue and money, as well as by the hatred of the Apulians against Norman rule. The rebel movement was joined by a part of the Norman leadership, which in favor of the lands as a fief entered in connection with King Henry IV. They feared that “a victorious march (from) the king would lead to the loss of everything” (Anamali 2002: 160). Under these circumstances, Robert, in the spring of 1082 convened the council of war, appointed Boemund, and Count Brieme as commanders of the army to continue taking the Byzantine provinces, and himself returned to Italy. After Guiscard's return, normal developments on Byzantine soil began to fade. After Kostur, which was of great strategic importance for penetration into the interior of the empire, Boemund did not go to Thessaloniki (according to his father's plan) but marched towards Ioannina, and after taking it without resistance, turned to Arta and took measures to besiege it. But

Boemund could not hold on for a long time to the earlier conquered provinces, and, under the blows of the revived Byzantine army and the native populations, the Normans began the retreat (Pepo 1980: 2). Meanwhile, part of the remaining Norman army in various Balkan provinces, mainly Arberia, agreed to enter the service of Byzantium. In these circumstances, in 1084, the Byzantines, assisted by the inhabitants of the country, recaptured Durres (Qerimi 2017: 144). The success of Alexios Komnenos was also the result of a care he showed to the peoples of the empire to have them as support in the fight against the Normans. According to him, "it would have been possible to defeat him (Guiscard) more easily because he would have been hit from all sides, even by the so-called Arbanites (Albanians)". Komnenos was also favored by the death of Guiscard (from plague) in his property in Italy. With his death, the last Norman troops withdrew from Arberia in 1085 (Shuflaj: 32).

Conclusions

The first Norman attack caused great human and economic losses to Durrës and the Arber lands. At the same time, it hindered the process of self-governing administrative-military, but also political process that had been presented healthily under Byzantine rule. Despite these effects, the Norman landing brought to Durres a large number of specialists in various fields, some of whom do not seem to have left this territory. They brought with them a new experience, which is best evidenced in the new techniques used in the field of construction during the 12th century.

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