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## Tsar Samuel Against Emperor Basil II: Why Did Bulgaria Loose the Battle with the Byzantine Empire at the Beginning of the 11th Century

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Ivelin Ivanov (Veliko Tŕrnovo)

## TSAR SAMUEL AGAINST EMPEROR BASIL II WHY DID BULGARIA LOOSE THE BATTLE WITH THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 11<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

This question has been troubling generations of historians since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> c., as the power of the Byzantine empire and Basil II's (976–1025) personal qualities have been considered the main reason for the fall of the First Bulgarian Tsardom in 1018<sup>1</sup>. He was one of the most powerful and victorious Byzantine emperors and there is no doubt that the political and military stability of Byzantium at the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> c. influenced greatly the outcome of the Bulgarian–Byzantine clash<sup>2</sup>, but we can also look for the answer in the dramatic events in Bulgaria after 969.

The Bulgarian military strategy and tactics up to the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> c. are considerably well described in the written sources. The Bulgarians traditionally attacked

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<sup>1</sup> В.Н. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История на Българската държава през средните векове*, vol. I, pars 2, *От славянизацията на държавата до падането на Първото царство (852–1018)*, София 1927; Г. БАЛАСЧЕВ, *Българите през последните десетгодишници на десетия век*, vol. II, София 1929; В. КЕЦКАРОВ, *Войни на българите в Тракия 689–972 г.*, София 1940; И. ВЕНЕДИКОВ, *Военното и административното устройство на България през IX и X век*, София 1979; И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Анонимът на Хазе. България и Византия на долни Дунав в края на X век*, София 1987; В. БЕШЕВЛИЕВ, *Прабългарските надписи*, София 1987; Д. АНГЕЛОВ, Б. ЧОЛПАНОВ, *Българска военна история през Средновековието (X–XV в.)*, София 1994; P. STEPHENSON, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier. A Political Study of the Northern Balkans, 900–1204*, Cambridge 2000. According to P. STEPHENSON (*op. cit.*, p. 63):

*Recent scholarship has drawn attention to the inadequacy of the traditional accounts of Basil's reign, which have conflated the meager testimony of Scylitzes and Yahia of Antioch, and been misled by the pointed biography by Psellus [...]. In this revision vein, it is possible to demonstrate that Basil's Balkan campaigns were far shorter and his intentions far more limited than has generally been supposed. Moreover, although he did wage successful campaigns against Samuel, it is clear that Basil also regularly employed familiar diplomatic devices in pursuit of stability in the northern Balkans and beyond.*

<sup>2</sup> For further information about Basil II's reign and his war against Bulgaria see the newest monographs by C. HOLMES, *Basil II and the governance of Empire (976–1025)*, Oxford 2005 [= OSB]; P.M. STRÄSSLE, *Krieg und Kriegführung in Byzanz. Die Kriege Kaiser Basileos' II. gegen die Bulgaren (976–1019)*, Köln–Weimar–Wien 2006.

cunningly and from ambushes, sometimes undertaking big night fights, but their basic striking force was the cavalry, part of which was heavily armed for defense and attack. Beside body armour and helmets, some protective covers for horses (made of leather, chains or metal plates) are described in the surviving inscriptions about arms from the 9<sup>th</sup> c. Unfortunately we do not possess reliable information about the number of the Bulgarian heavy cavalry, with the exception of an written source telling us that in the winter of 811–812 Bulgarian khan Krum (796/803–814) acted in Thrace with 30000 cavalry, all *clad in steel*, i.e. heavily armed<sup>3</sup>. Anyway, while analyzing the arms inscriptions found in the so called *inner territories*, we could be able to estimate the number of heavily equipped riders at 1713<sup>4</sup>. If we assume that the surviving inscriptions of that kind are about 10% of all existing in those times, then we'll have the number of 17130 riders in the so-called inner part of the state. Comparing that to the inscription about khan Krum's 30000 warriors (no doubt clearly exaggerated), we could suppose that at the beginning of 9<sup>th</sup> c. the number of the Bulgarian army varied somewhere between 17000 and 20000<sup>5</sup>. The smaller number of the Bulgar's army when compared to the Byzantine contingents was compensated by its great mobility and by its missile weapons. Nevertheless, only a few decades after the great military success of tsar Symeon, in the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> c. and the beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> c. a collapse appeared in the Bulgarian military power. What were the main reasons for such a turn of the tide?

Tsar Symeon (893–927) waged long and victorious wars against Byzantium and took Bulgaria to a leading position in the European Southeast but soon after his death the signs of a political and social crisis began to show up. During the reign of his successor tsar Peter (927–969) the Bulgarian territory was subject to devastating Hungarian invasions. As Emperor Leo VI the Philosopher (886–912) writes in his *Tactics*, the Bulgarian and Hungarian fighting techniques were similar, but despite that the Bulgarians couldn't stop the devastating attacks<sup>6</sup>. Anyway, this should not be necessarily interpreted as a military crisis, for in Western Europe there was not any effective resistance against the Magyars until 955 when king Otto I (936–973, after 962 an Emperor) defeated them heavily in the Battle of Lechfeld. The next strike was the invasion of the Varangians of knyaz Sviatoslav (945–972) in 969, which aimed at the most highly organized and militarily efficient part of the country – the so-called inner territories. According to the sources Sviatoslav conquered about 80 fortresses

<sup>3</sup> *Symeonis Magistri annales*, ed. I. BEKKER, Bonnae 1838, p. 616, 11–13. The following is mentioned in the source: [...] *Meanwhile, when there came favorable days in the winter, and there wasn't much water in the rivers, the Bulgarians came out with an army of 30 000 strong, all clad in steel* [...].

<sup>4</sup> И. ВЕНЕДИКОВ, *op. cit.*, p. 53–54.

<sup>5</sup> On the basis of the arguments adduced so far, and the assertion that the maximum militarization capability of the proto-Bulgarians was about 20%, we can assume that at the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> century the total number of proto-Bulgarians was about 100000.

<sup>6</sup> *The Tactics of Leo VI*, XVIII, 40–43, ed. et trans. G. DENNIS, Washington 2010, p. 452, 210 – 454, 236 [= CFHB, 49].

on the Danube river, i.e. the Bulgarians did not count on open battles anymore, but on the network of fortresses and their garrisons<sup>7</sup>. We can also estimate the number of the fortresses judging by the fact that in 971 ambassadors from many Bulgarian fortresses came to emperor John I Tzimiskes (969–976) in search for an alliance aiming at the banishing of Sviatoslav<sup>8</sup>. The alliance was initially successful and, after an exhausting siege at the crucial Durostorum fortress on the river Danube, Sviatoslav asked for peace and retreated, but emperor John I himself occupied Northern Bulgaria in the same year. Byzantine garrisons were deployed in the fortresses and the Bulgarian tsar Boris II (969–971) was taken prisoner, led to Constantinople and deprived of the crown in an official ceremony<sup>9</sup>. These events marked the beginning of a deep crisis which led to a considerable change in the Bulgarian military power.

The events connected with the Byzantine occupation of North-Eastern Bulgaria in 971 brought to the foreground four notable aristocrats: David, Moses, Aaron and Samuel, who ruled over the western and south-western Bulgarian territories as a joint regency. After the death of the last representative of the legitimate dynasty – tsar Roman in 997, Samuel (997–1014) was declared tsar and his reign marked a period of fierce Bulgaro-Byzantine wars. The analysis of those wars leads to important conclusions about the changes in the military system of the Bulgarian Tsardom.

First we shall discuss the actions Samuel undertook against the most important fortresses. The siege of Larissa, which controlled the whole of Greek province Thessaly, went on from 977 to 983, i.e. for five long years – a fact which illustrates the limited capability of tsar Samuel concerning sieges and the conquering of big strongholds. In fact Larissa surrendered because of prolonged starvation<sup>10</sup>. Another example is the siege of Servia in Northern Greece. The Bulgarians used military cunning through which captured the commander of the fortress and thus the city surrendered in 989<sup>11</sup>. Besides, in its Adriatic campaign in 998, the Bulgarian army could capture only the town of Kotor<sup>12</sup>. One of the strategically most important fortresses – Dyrrachium, was also taken not by siege but because of the fact that the duke of the city – John Chrysilios – was Samuel's father-in-law<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> *Повесть временных лет*, vol. I, *Текст и перевод*, ed. Д.С. Лихачев, trans. ИДЕМ et Б.А. Романов, Москва–Ленинград 1950, p. 47.

<sup>8</sup> *Ioannis Scylitzae Synopsis historiarum*, 12, rec. I. THURN, Berolini–Novi Eboraci 1973 (cetera: SCYLITZES), p. 301, 96–6 [= CFHB, 5].

<sup>9</sup> И. БОЖИЛОВ, *op. cit.*, p. 122. According to the author, Byzantine rule of the lower Danube was overthrown in the summer of 990 at the latest, and the Bulgarian rule there had already been re-introduced by the time of Basil II's march which took place in the year 1000.

<sup>10</sup> КЕКАВМЕН, *Советы и рассказы. Поучение византийского полководца XI века*, IV, 73, ed. et trans. Г.Г. Литаврин, Санкт–Петербург 2003 (cetera: СЕСАУМЕНУС), p. 266, 30 – 268, 12 [= ВБ.И].

<sup>11</sup> СЕСАУМЕНУС, II, 31, p. 190, 18 – 192, 9.

<sup>12</sup> *Annales anonymi presbyteri de Dioclea*, ed. S. LIŠEV, [in:] FLHB, vol. III, ed. I. DUJČEV et al., Serdicae 1965, p. 174.

<sup>13</sup> В.Н. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *op. cit.*, p. 680.

It is obvious that tsar Samuel did not possess heavy siege engines and, accordingly, the Bulgarian army developed and applied to perfection the tactics of surprise attacks, ambush, full siege and starvation when trying to take control over important fortresses. The sources show that Samuel attacked suddenly, luring the enemy away from the walls of the fortress and towards an already prepared ambush. The chronicler John Scylitzes describes the actions against Thessalonica of 996 in the following way:

[...] Samuel was campaigning against Thessalonike. He divided the majority of his forces to man ambushes and snares but he sent a small expedition to advance right up to Thessalonike itself.<sup>14</sup>

Naturally, the ambush was characteristic of the traditional Bulgarian tactics of the period between the 7<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> c. too, but it was only after 971 that it turned into the most efficient means of fighting against the Byzantine army. One of the most successful battles against emperor Basil II was fought in the Ihtiman pass in 986. After an unsuccessful siege of Serdica the emperor started back to Constantinople, but fell into an ambush in the mountain pass and was defeated. These examples lead to the logical conclusion that Samuel's actions differed considerably from the ones of the previous period and were a partial return to the fighting tactics of the early Bulgarian state (7<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> c.).

Throughout the period between 971 and the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> c. the chroniclers describe sudden raids of the Bulgarian army in Thessaly, towards Thessalonica and into Greece proper. In one of the campaigns – the one in Thessaly in 978 – Samuel marched with cavalry and foot-soldiers, the cavalry being supposedly lightly armed<sup>15</sup>. As I already mentioned, in pursuit of the retreating Basil II in 986, the Bulgarian troops managed to move very quickly and to lie in wait for the Byzantine army but the Armenian guard of the emperor, no doubt heavily armed and well-trained, was able to fight its way through and lead him out of the battle<sup>16</sup>. This leads to the conclusion that the Bulgarian army comprised mainly of light cavalry and lightly equipped and armed foot-soldiers. Naturally, there also were some heavy armed cavalry and foot contingents but they were a very small part of the whole army. According to a source, in a battle of 1017 the Byzantines captured 200 heavy cavalry, which means that such were indeed used by Bulgarians, but they were definitely few in number<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> SCYLITZES, 23, p. 341, 13–15 (Eng. transl. – JOHN SKYLITZES, *A Synopsis of Byzantine History, 811–1057*, trans. J. WORTLEY, Cambridge 2010 [cetera: JOHN SKYLITZES], p. 323). See also SCYLITZES, 36, p. 350, 59 – 351, 81; 38, p. 354, 73–79.

<sup>15</sup> В.Н. Златарски, *op. cit.*, p. 660.

<sup>16</sup> *Leonis Diaconi Caloënsis historiae libri decem*, ed. C.B. HASE, Bonnæ 1828, p. 171, 19–173, 11 [= CSHB]; Из „Всеобща история” на Степан Таронски Асохиџ (XI в.), [in:] *Българска военна история в три тома. Подбрани извори и документи*, vol. I, ed. Д. Ангелов, София 1977, p. 159; Г. БАЛАСЧЕВ, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

<sup>17</sup> SCYLITZES, 40, p. 356, 38–50.



In 997 – the year following his coronation – Samuel penetrated deep into Greek territory but suffered a bitter defeat in a night battle near the Spercheios river. In the same year Samuel was not strong enough to join an open fight with the troops of Nicephorus Uranus, and shut himself in his strongholds<sup>18</sup>. A possible reason for that could have been the defeat at the river Spercheios, but the historians do not think that the latter was fatal to the fighting capability of the Bulgarians. Samuel's campaign in the following 998 proved that he still possessed enough warriors, but they were almost helpless against the big Byzantine fortresses. That is why the defensive actions of 997 can be interpreted as inability to face an experienced Byzantine army in an open battle. Samuel realized that and was quick to secure his rear.

The second period of the wars between Samuel and Basil II – from 999 to 1014 – clearly shows the deep political and military crisis of the Western Bulgarian Tsardom. Emperor Basil II had realized that the Bulgarians could not be conquered by a single overall campaign, but only through systematic and constant pressure, and by taking control over crucial fortresses. The first step in that direction was the reconquering of Northern Bulgaria and the strategic strongholds of Sofia, Vidin and Skopje between 1001 and 1004. Samuel counted on stubborn defense of the fortresses and on surprising raids deep into Byzantine territory. Describing the events of 1003, the chronicler John Scylitzes writes:

[...] While the emperor [Basil II – I.I.] was engaged in this siege [of Vidin – I.I.], Samuel mounted a lightning attack on Adrianople with a light and rapid force [...]. He suddenly fell on the fair which is customarily held at public expense (on that day), took a great deal of booty and went back to his own land.<sup>19</sup>

The effect of such raids was poor, and the unfavorable turn of the military action soon brought about a change of the strategy. The key Bulgarian fortresses, albeit well fortified, could not endure lengthy sieges, and Samuel was not able to render direct assistance to the besieged. The number and the poor military equipment of his warriors could have been the reasons for that and, moreover, the Byzantine Emperor did not make the mistake of 986 again. On top of this, in 1003 Samuel had to face war on two fronts because the Magyars attacked from the north-west. In 1005 Samuel also lost the important Dyrrachium fortress in today's Albania, through which Basil II could easily transfer troops from southern Italy to the rear of the Bulgarians.

However, according to some contemporary researchers, Basil was satisfied with the recovery of Dyrrachium, the reopening of the Via Egnatia, and the consolidation of control north of Thessalonica. Therefore, he was content to leave Samuel

<sup>18</sup> SCYLITZES, 23, p. 341, 22 – 342, 51; YAHYĀ AL-ANTĀKĪ, *Cronache dell'Egitto Fātimide e dell'Impero Bizantino 937–1033*, 11, 27–28, trans. B. PIRONE, Milano 1998, p. 213.

<sup>19</sup> SCYLITZES, 30, p. 346, 49–53 (Eng. transl. – JOHN SKYLITZES, p. 328).

with a realm based around Prespa and Ochrid, from where he could dominate the southern Slavs in Duclja and southern Dalmatia, but was denied access to the lands north and east of Sardica. Also, according to Paul Stephenson, Samuel must have kept his imperial title too, i.e. there had been some negotiations concluding with a truce with the Empire in 1005<sup>20</sup>.

Quite obviously, Samuel was not satisfied with the political and military situation after 1005. The Byzantine army having encircled his domain from the south-east, east and north-east, the Bulgarian tsar decided to move out his defenses and, as the Byzantine chroniclers claim, he began blocking key spots and mountain passes. According to them,

[...] Samuel could do nothing in open country nor could he oppose the emperor in formal battle [...] so [...] He constructed a very wide fortification, stationed an adequate guard there and waited for the emperor [...].<sup>21</sup>

In fact these were defensive devices consisting of deep moats, fieldworks and wooden fortifications, typical for the early Middle Ages. They were preferred by the Bulgarians because their construction required less time and money and fewer workers, but brought them only temporary success. In 1014 a large Bulgarian army suffered a complete defeat at the foot of the Belasitsa mountain while defending a similar fortification. The Bulgarians found themselves in the situation of Leonidas' Spartans in the Thermopylae pass, for they were encircled by a Byzantine contingent surprising them from a by-path. However, unlike the Spartans, the surrounded troops surrendered; the Emperor had the captured 14000 to 15000 Bulgarians blinded. Although clearly exaggerated, these numbers show that the defeat was quick and the surrender – on large scales, which means that those troops were not experienced enough or were poorly armed. Most probably the bigger part of them was just free peasants called to arms or common folk. According to the sources tsar Samuel died of heart attack at the sight of his returning blinded soldiers on Oct. 6<sup>th</sup> 1014. His death marked the beginning of Basil II's triumph.

From military point of view, the main reason for Byzantium's triumph lies in the fact that after 971, and especially after 1001, Samuel could no longer use considerable number of heavy cavalry, recruited primarily from North-Eastern Bulgaria. The examples mentioned above show that the arms and the fighting style of Samuel's

<sup>20</sup> P. STEPHENSON, *op. cit.*, p. 69:

[...] *We have no information of any campaigns between the recovery of Dyrrachium and the fateful campaign of 1014. Whittow has recently noted that Scylitzes may have exaggerated when he claimed that warfare was continuous, and he draws attention to the statement by Yahya of Anthioch that after four years of fighting Basil had won a 'complete victory'. This corresponds exactly with the notion that the campaigns which in 1001 were brought to an end by the events of 1005.*

<sup>21</sup> SCYLITZES, 35, p. 348, 10–18 (Eng. transl. – JOHN SKYLITZES, p. 330–331).

troops were south-Slavonic, i.e. the lightly armed foot-soldiers predominated, and the cavalry was not heavily armed. Besides, the precious experience in the building and usage of heavy siege engines, of which we read in the sources from the 9<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 10<sup>th</sup> cc., was partially lost. Throughout that period the Bulgarians besieged and conquered large strongholds, having even besieged Constantinople and Adrianople several times, while Samuel's options in this respect were very few.

The strategy and military tactics applied by the next tsar, Gabriel Radomir (1014–1015), were similar to Samuel's and were based primarily on guerrilla war and the defense of key strongholds. During his short reign Samuel's son was not able to reverse the course of military decline and was forced to resort to urgent moves aiming at strengthening of the defense. The next ruler, John Vladislav (1015–1018), was obviously an active and warlike person but anyway Basil II continued his successful offensive policy. John Vladislav attempted to introduce a major strategic change by trying to win over the Pechenegs, thus forcing the Byzantines to fight on two fronts again; he also tried to fill in the dangerous breach in the rear, opened by Samuel's brother-in-law Ashot who had surrendered the Drach fortress to the Byzantines. The tsar perished in the siege of that town and his death brought about the beginning of the ultimate military and political end of the First Bulgarian Tsardom.

All this logically gives rise to the question about the main reasons for the change in the military strategy and tactics after the year 971. According to some scholars the main reason for the Byzantine success lies in the fact that the Bulgarian rulers did not manage to reintroduce the attacking cavalry unit applied by the proto-Bulgarian khans and, later on, by tsar Symeon. According to them the Bulgarians had lost their heavy cavalry and infantry during Sviatoslav's marches and, what is more important, as a result of the loss of 300 boyars slaughtered in Durostorum by the Varangians of Sviatoslav who had control over the military organization of the Bulgarian state at the time. In my opinion these authors are only partially right – it was not the slaughter of the 300 boyars or the loss of human lives in the marches but the occupation of East Bulgaria by emperor John Tzimiskes, and the shift of the political centre to the west of the country that were the reasons which led to radical changes in the Bulgarian military tactics. From that moment on the contingent out of which the members of the heavy cavalry were recruited, and the depots of the heavy defense weaponry, were lost as a military potential – they had remained outside the independent Bulgarian territory. Judging by certain archeological and written sources, we can assume that the major heavily-armed forces of the Bulgarian army were recruited from among the population of the internal area, or North-Eastern Bulgaria, where the heavy defense weaponry depots were also concentrated, and their loss played a crucial role in the conflict with Byzantium.

There is no doubt that tsar Samuel's defeat in his wars against emperor Basil II was a consequence of the occupation of Eastern Bulgaria and the removal of the political centre westwards after 971. The territories in which the political and military



elite lived, and where the heavily armed and the best trained contingents used to be recruited, were in a state of occupation between 971 and 976, and their re-conquering by Basil II in 1001 predetermined the outcome of the military collision. Those processes and events possibly coincided with the decline of the traditional military organization of the Bulgarians.

In conclusion I would like to mention that the wars described can be compared with the Anglo-Scottish wars of the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> c. Both Scotsmen and Bulgarians fought fiercely but were finally defeated by a more powerful adversary. What is more, in both cases the military action was extremely cruel because of the refusal of the victor to treat the enemy as a legitimate state. From the English king's point of view the Scottish were subjects of the crown and their actions were treated as those of rebels, who were punished by being hung, drawn and quartered. Similarly, emperor Basil II did not recognize Samuel as a legitimate ruler, and treated the Bulgarian warriors as rebels. An example for this are the great number of Bulgarian captives who were blinded in 1014 – a traditional Byzantine punishment for rebellion and attempts at usurpation. Thus in 1018 the emperor finished in triumph the long wars against the Bulgarians who lost their independence for the next century and a half.

**Abstract.** At the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, after decades of almost incessant wars with the Byzantine Empire, the Bulgarian state lost its political independence. In many research works on the period in question there is emphasis put on the stabilization of the Empire at the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century as a major factor or a reason for the loss of our political independence for a century and a half. Naturally, the internal political state of affairs in the Bulgarian Tsardom and the decline of its military power resulting from the loss of independence also made it easier for Emperor Basil II to put pressure on the Balkans.

This article deals with the issue of the reasons for the decline in the Bulgarian military power at the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the changes in the military stratagems observed in the wars of tsar Samuel and his successors to the throne. Why did Samuel avoid pitched battles? Why do the sources speak mostly about lightly-equipped Bulgarian armies? Why did the Bulgarians of the time take over fortresses after prolonged sieges and mainly through starvation and military stratagems?

The present article attempts to give an answer to these questions, based on the written sources of the period and the works of historians.

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