

The oath of the Byzantine army in AD 917 and the relic of the True Cross: some remarks on the meaning of the episode

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Abstract: In AD 917, the regiments of the Eastern Roman Empire concentrated in Thrace, preparing a military response against the incursions of Symeon of Bulgaria. Then, according to the *Chronicle of the Logothete* and other sources, palace officials brought with them a relic of the True Cross, and the troops venerated it and swore an oath on it before the beginning of the campaign. This paper raises some questions regarding this oath and offers an explanation regarding the meaning of the episode. Accordingly, the paper argues that the practice described by the chroniclers can be explained, on the one hand, by the different ways in which the Byzantine imperial elite used Christian relics in military contexts, and, on the other, by the particular situation of the throne during the regency of Zoe, the mother of Constantine VII.

Keywords: Christian relics – military oaths – Constantine VII – Zoe Karbonopsina – *Chronicle of the Logothete* – Byzantine army.

**EL JURAMENTO DEL EJÉRCITO BIZANTINO EN 917 D. C.
Y LA RELIQUIA DE LA SANTA CRUZ:
OBSERVACIONES SOBRE EL SIGNIFICADO DEL EPISODIO**

Resumen: En el año 917 d. C., los regimientos del Imperio Romano de Oriente se concentraron en Tracia, preparando una respuesta militar contra las incursiones de Simeón de Bulgaria. En ese momento, según la *Crónica del Logoteta* y otras fuentes, los oficiales de palacio trajeron consigo una reliquia de la Santa Cruz, y las tropas la veneraron y juraron sobre ella antes del comienzo de la campaña. Este artículo plantea algunas preguntas sobre este juramento y ofrece una explicación sobre el significado del episodio. El artículo argumenta que la práctica descrita por los cronistas puede explicarse, por un lado, por las diferentes formas en que la élite imperial bizantina utilizaba las reliquias cristianas en contextos militares y, por otro, por la particular situación del trono durante la regencia de Zoe, madre de Constantino VII.

Palabras clave: Reliquias cristianas – Juramentos militares – Constantino VII – Zoe Karbonopsina – *Crónica del Logoteta* – Ejército bizantino.

Introduction

In the year 917, the armies of the Eastern Roman Empire gathered, preparing a military response against the incursions of Symeon I of Bulgaria. Ever since their semi-nomadic tribes settled around the Danube, in the seventh century, the Bulgars had maintained a complicated relationship with the Empire, with sporadic alliances, recurrent raids, numerous wars, and treaties.¹ In AD 912, emperor Alexander I refused to pay the annual tribute to Symeon the Great established in a previous treaty signed by his predecessor and brother Leo VI.² Following this, Symeon started a series

¹ Runciman (1979); Ševčenko (1984), pp. 289–303; Fine (1991), pp. 25–157; Shepard (2000), pp. 567–585; Hupchick and Cox (2001); Sophoulis (2012), pp. 311–319.

² Symeon the Great was the son of Boris I, the first Christian ruler of Bulgaria, and before his accession to power he spent several years of his youth studying in Constantinople: Runciman (1979), pp. 133–183; Fine (1991), pp. 132–134; Shepard (2000), pp. 567–581; Nikolov (2012), pp. 101–108.

of offensives as retaliation against the Byzantines.³ Alexander died in June of AD 913, leaving a regency council in power, as the heir, his nephew Constantine VII, was only eight years old. The death of Alexander was followed by great political instability. The regency council, led by patriarch Nicholas Mystikos, was generally perceived as weak, and after a failed palace coup, Symeon the Great invaded the Empire and besieged Constantinople in August of 913. The council negotiated with Symeon, who retreated after receiving tribute, recognition as emperor of Bulgaria, and the promise of marrying one of his daughters to the young Constantine VII.⁴ Nonetheless, the following year, Constantine's mother, Zoe "Karbonopsina" took power as regent and *augusta*, rejecting the imperial recognition of Symeon, the promise of marriage and the tribute, which provoked new Bulgarian offensives and raids. After signing a peace treaty with the Arabs, the regent ordered to prepare a large expedition against Symeon, transferring troops from Anatolia to Thrace. The Byzantines had consolidated their position in Armenia and Italy in the previous years, and the recurrent Bulgarian raids probably led them to think that it was better to eliminate the danger that a powerful Bulgaria represented for the Eastern Roman Empire.⁵

Consequently, in the summer of AD 917, the *tagmata* and thematic regiments assembled in Thrace — in the plain of *Diabasis*, according to the *Chronicle of Skylitzes* — under the military command of Leo Phokas,

³ The main sources for these events are the chronicles of Symeon Logothete and of John Skylitzes. For a general historical reconstruction of the main events of these years: Runciman (1979), pp. 133–164; Jenkins (1993), pp. 227–233; Treadgold (1997), pp. 472–475; Shepard (2000), pp. 567–581; Kaldellis (2024), pp. 540–543.

⁴ Loud (1978), pp. 109–120; Shepard (2011), pp. 545–561; Nikolov (2012), pp. 101–108; Mladjov (2015), pp. 171–183.

⁵ Treadgold (1997a), pp. 472–474; Kaldellis (2024), pp. 542–543.

the Domestic of the Schools.⁶ The sources describe a curious episode that took place there, before the army departed for the campaign. According to the tenth-century *Chronicle of the Logothete*:

Constantine the *protopapas* in the palace, called Kephalas, and Constantine of Malelia brought the life-giving and venerable wood out to Thrace, and everyone venerated it and swore on it that they would die for each other; and so they went in full force against the Bulgarians.⁷

⁶ *Chronicle of the Logothete* 135, 18 (p. 223); Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 202 (9, 8, p. 197); Vasiliev (1950), pp. 229–311; Treadgold (1997), pp. 472–474; Shepard (2000), pp. 574–575; Kaldellis (2024), pp. 542–543. The first ones, the *tagmata*, were elite units, comprised mainly of heavy cavalry and garrisoned close to Constantinople. They acted as imperial guards, but they were also usually the core of expeditionary forces. The sources mentions the *Exkoubitoi* and the *Hikanatoi* among the *tagmata* that participated in this Bulgarian campaign: *Chronicle of the Logothete* 135, 18 (p. 223); Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 202 (9, 8, p. 197). The second ones, the *themata* or thematic regiments were the provincial troops, more numerous than the *tagmata* and with a more diverse composition. They were recruited and stationed in the provinces, which they protected, but they could be mobilised for foreign campaigns as this one. The sources do not mention any specific thematic units for this expedition, only some “Armenians”, but it is likely that most of the troops came from Anatolia. The sources mentioned that troops were transferred following the treaty with the Arabs, since, at least, the late-seventh century, Anatolia had the largest number of themes and thematic troops: *Chronicle of the Logothete* 135, 18 (p. 223); Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 202 (9, 8, p. 197); Haldon (1999), pp. 112–123. Regarding these Armenians: Dédéyan (1983), pp. 31–54; 1993, pp. 67–85. Regarding the *themata* and *tagmata* regiments, and the general organisation and composition of the Byzantine army: Haldon (1979); (1984), pp. 82–95, 142–337; (1999), pp. 107–233; Treadgold (1995), pp. 98–117. According to John Wortley, the plain of Diabasis, mentioned by Skylitzes, was situated around 50 km from Constantinople: Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 202 (9, 8, p. 197); Wortley (2010), p. 41.

⁷ *Chronicle of the Logothete*, 135; 19: “ἐξαγαγόντων δὲ τὰ ζωοποιὰ καὶ σεβάσιμα ξύλα Κωνσταντίνου πρωτοπαπᾶ τοῦ παλατίου, τοῦ Κεφαλᾶ λεγομένου, καὶ Κωνσταντίνου τοῦ Μαλελίας ἐν τῇ Θράκῃ ἅπαντες προσκυνήσαντες καὶ ἐπομοσάμενοι συναποθνήσκειν ἀλλήλοις πανστρατὶ κατὰ Βουλγάρων ἐξώρμησαν.” English translation of Staffan Wahlgren (2019), p. 225. The sixth book of the continuation of Theophanes follows closely the text of the Logothete in this passage. *Theoph. cont.* VI, p. 388,23 – 389,4. Moreover, the *Chronicle of Skylitzes* includes a very similar narrative, probably a summary of the previous text or variation from the same historical tradition: Skylitzes, *Synopsis*, 9; 8; 14–16: “ἀποσταλεῖς ὁ πρωτοπαπᾶς τοῦ παλατίου



Fig. 1.- The oath of the army before the campaign (AD 917): Madrid Skylitzes, Vit/26/2, BNE, fol. 121r.
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The episode is depicted with considerable detail in a miniature of the famous *Madrid Skylitzes* (Fig. 1).⁸ The swearing of solemn oaths on holy relics was a common Christian practice, attested since at least the seventh century across various regions.⁹ Yet, the oath of AD 917 was significantly different: First, in most other descriptions of oaths on relics, it is one high-profile individual — emperor, patriarch or aristocrat — who vows something specific. Additionally, in Byzantium this usually took place at a church, palace or some other public building of the Imperial city.¹⁰ In the episode of AD 917, instead, the relic was taken from the Great Palace of

μετὰ τῶν τιμίων ξύλων παρεσκεύασε προσκυνήσαντας πάντας ἐπομόσασθαι συναποθνήσκειν ἀλλήλοις· καὶ τοῦ ὄρκου τελεσθέντος πανστρατὶ κατὰ Βουλγάρων ἐξώρμησαν.” Regarding these sources: Treadgold (1995), pp. 188–226, 329–339.

⁸ *Madrid Skylitzes*, Vit/26/2, BNE, fol. 121r (see Fig. 1 above).

⁹ Mergiali-Sahas (2001), pp. 53–54; Klein (2004a), pp. 55–56. The general Lekapenos, who had been previously accused of conspiring, gave assurances to the court and swore oath on a fragment of the True Cross: *Chronicle of the Logothete*, 135; 30, p. 220; Skylitzes, *Synopsis*, 9; 11, p. 202.

¹⁰ Mergiali-Sahas (2001), pp. 53–54; Klein (2004a), pp. 55–56.

Constantinople to some location outside the city for a general oath of the army, which was being gathered for a military expedition. The sources mention two high-ranking officials carrying the relic. Thus, it is likely that the regent Zoe sent the item with a ceremonial guard in the name of Constantine VII. The episode is rather unique in the sense that there are no other references to a general oath of the army with a Christian relic before a campaign. Since the times of the Principate, the oath of allegiance of the Roman army — *sacramentum militiae* — was taken in front of the emperor, or, in his absence, in front of his image. This practice was later Christianised and continued in the Eastern Roman Empire.¹¹ Nevertheless, there is no other description of Byzantine troops using a Christian relic for an oath before a military expedition. Accordingly, the episode raises a significant question: What was the function of this particular oath ceremony and of the relic involved in it? In the next pages of this paper, I will argue that the meaning and function of this oath were related, on the one hand, to the different uses of Christian relics by the Byzantine imperial elite and, on the other hand, to the specific political context and the situation of the throne around AD 917.

The relic of the True Cross, an emblem of imperial authority

Between the years 914 and 917, after deposing the regency council, Zoe Karbonopsina ruled as sole regent and *augusta*, while Constantine VII was still too young. Following the Roman tradition, the Byzantines considered the ruler as the commander-in-chief, the supreme leader of the Empire's armed forces, which was the original meaning of the Latin title *imperator*, usually translated into Greek as *autokrator*. However, according

¹¹ Töpfer (2011), pp. 179-198; Clauss (2013), pp. 15-467; Hebblewhite (2016), pp. 120-142; Stephenson (2018), pp. 34-35.

to this tradition, neither a woman nor a child could personally command the army in the field.¹² For this reason, the Bulgarian expedition of AD 917 was in charge of the Domestic of the Schools, Leo Phokas, and other military officials.¹³ Accordingly, sending the relic to the army was probably a conscious decision from Zoe and her circle, which served various different purposes.

First, the sign of the cross was a well-known traditional symbol of Christian imperial victory. Between the late fourth and the seventh century, the sign of the cross and the idea of imperial victory became associated, as well, with the relics of the True Cross.¹⁴ In various apocalyptic texts, the True Cross is described as the main protective talisman of the Roman Empire, the guarantee of its continuity and strength.¹⁵ Moreover, Andrew of Crete, in a homily of the early eighth century, wrote that: “the cross is the victory of pious kings, generals, and armies (...) It gave itself to the [Roman] emperor as an unbreakable weapon, a ready standard, a steadfast sceptre (...) as an irresistible strength, which subjected for him the whole earth”.¹⁶

¹² Stephenson (2018), pp. 23–55; Pazdernik (2021); Viernmann (2021a); (2021b), pp. 379–402; Malone (2022), pp. 59–80.

¹³ *Chronicle of the Logothete*, 135, 12–29; Skylitzes, *Synopsis*, 9; 8; 14–16, p. 197; Treadgold (1997), pp. 473–475; Garland (1999), pp. 4, 114–125. The Domestic of the Schools was the senior commander of the *tagmata* regiments, and usually acted as commander of the whole army.

¹⁴ The bibliography on this topic is incredible vast and thus an exhaustive summary would be excessive for this paper. Yet, these are a few examples of classic and recent studies on the subject: Gagé (1933), pp. 370–400; Cecchelli (1954); Frolow (1961); Bruun (1997), pp. 41–59; Walter (1997); (2007); Klein (2004a), pp. 31–59; Garipzanov (2018), pp. 81–105.

¹⁵ Pseudo-Methodius, *Apocalypse*, Chapter IX, 8–9; *Edessen Apocalypse*, ff. 98v–99r. The apocalyptic tradition is extremely intricate, regarding this topic: Martinez (1985); Emmerson and McGinn (1992); Reinink (2002), pp. 81–94; Ubierna (2008); Garstad (2012); Kraft (2012); Palmer (2014); Bonura (2016), pp. 47–100; DiTommaso (2021), pp. 205–250.

¹⁶ Andrew of Crete, *Homilia de exaltatione s. crucis*, 5, 385–470: Καὶ μὴν καὶ νίκη βασιλέων καὶ στρατηγῶν εὐσεβῶν καὶ στρατευμάτων σταυρός, ἥττα τῶν οὐ τοιούτων, ὄπλον ἀληθείας,

Additionally, since the early sixth century, a processional reliquary cross with a fragment of the True Cross, which was attributed to Constantine the Great, accompanied the emperor in religious and civic ceremonies. The same object — or a very similar one — was displayed in processions during sieges, triumph ceremonies and military parades.¹⁷ The item can probably be identified as the “precious cross of Saint Constantine” described in the tenth-century *Book of Ceremonies*.¹⁸ Furthermore, Constantine’s VII treatise on imperial expeditions mentions that this cross and another relic of the True Cross were carried when the ruler was leading the troops.¹⁹ Therefore, when the emperor was commanding the army, in person, he was always accompanied by the symbol and the relics of the True Cross, powerful talismans of divine protection and assistance in war.

Following the Christianised Roman ideology of imperial triumph — what Paul Stephenson called the “Imperial theology of victory” —, God was always the ultimate source of military success, and the emperor, as a pious ruler appointed by God and the keeper of the most precious relics, was the one who commanded the army and received victories from

κυκλοῦν εὐσεβῇ κατὰ τὸν μέγαν Δαυίδ—Χριστὸς μὲν γὰρ ἡ ἀλήθεια, σταυρὸς δὲ ὄπλον Χριστοῦ—, πίστις βεβαία καὶ ἔμπεδος [...] ὄπλον αὐτὸν ἀρραγὲς καὶ σύνθημα δεξιὸν καὶ σκῆπτρον ἀκλινὲς τῷ βασιλεῖ δεδωκώς, καὶ ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν δύναμιν ἀνανταγώνιστον, ἥτις αὐτῷ πᾶσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην ὑπήγαγε καὶ τὴν ἀρχὴν τὴν Κύρου καὶ Ξέρξου καὶ Ἀλεξάνδρου ἐν προσθήκῃς μέρει πεποίηκεν. English translation of Marc De Groote (2007), pp. 472-479.

¹⁷ The earliest source to mention this is of Theodore Anagnostes’ compilation of ecclesiastical histories written around AD 518: Anagnostes, *HT* (ed. Hansen) p. 13: τὸ δὲ ἐν διαλίθῳ σταυρῷ κατακλείσας ταῖς περιόδους ἑαυτοῦ ἡγούμενον ἐμπροσθεν ἔταξε. τοῦτο δὲ καὶ εἰσέτι νῦν ἐν τῷ παλατίῳ φρουρούμενον ἐν ταῖς ἐορταστικαῖς τῶν βασιλέων προόδοις ἐξάγεται. Regarding this object: Cotsonis (1994), pp. 8–22; Klein (2004a), pp. 35–37; (2004b), pp. 32–57; (2006), pp. 81–96; Krause (2010), pp. 171–193; Serrano del Pozo (2021), pp. 1–17.

¹⁸ Constantine VII, *De Ceremoniis*, Book I, chap. 1, pp. 10-15 (64-108), Book II, chap. 6, pp. 44-49 (36-52), chap. 40, pp. 230-231 (62-65).

¹⁹ Constantine VII, *Imperial expeditions* (C), pp. 124-125 (485-489); pp. 144-145 (785-787). Regarding this text: Haldon (1990); Sullivan (2010), pp. 155–156

God.²⁰ Accordingly, the relic sent by Zoe to the army acted as an emblem of her son, the young emperor Constantine VII, the commander-in-chief, who was not leading this expedition in person, but shared this holy item to remind the officials and troops of his sacred imperial authority and his spiritual presence.

The miniature of the *Madrid Skylitzes* (Fig. 1) that accompanies the narration of the event depicts the officials of the army taking the oath with their hands over a rectangular object, and an inscription over the miniature says “The *protopapas* of the palace providing the venerable wood for the swearing of the army”.²¹ It is interesting that the *staurotheke* depicted here is not cross-shaped or a processional reliquary-cross, it looks more like a chest; or maybe a chest containing a rectangular reliquary, as the Fieschi Morgan *staurotheke*, or Limburg *staurotheke*, which have been dated to the ninth and tenth centuries respectively.²² The previously quoted passage of the treatise about imperial expeditions describes a *koubikoularios* — a palace eunuch — carrying a relic of the True Cross around his neck in front of the emperor.²³ Nancy Sevcenko argued that the Limburg *staurotheke* was made to carry relics into military campaigns in the manner described by Constantine’s VII treatise.²⁴

²⁰ McCormick (1999); Stouraitis (2012), pp. 227–264; Stephenson (2018), pp. 23–58.

²¹ *Madrid Skylitzes*, Vit/26/2, BNE. Fol. 121r; Tsamakda (2002), pp. 152–157.

²² The *Fieschi Morgan Staurotheke*, ninth century, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY. 17.190.715a; *Limburg Staurotheke*, Limburg Diözesanmuseum. Regarding these objects and other Byzantine reliquaries: Klein (2004c), pp. 283–314; Pitarakis (2006); (2010); Hostettler (2011); (2012), pp. 7–13; Sevcenko (2013), pp. 1–13.

²³ Constantine VII, *Imperial expeditions* (C), pp. 124–125 (485–489): “ἔμπροσθεν δὲ τοῦ βασιλέως περιπατοῦσιν οἱ πραιπόσιτοι καὶ τὸ κουβούκλειον, καὶ μέσον τῶν πραιποσίτων περιπατεῖ κουβικουλᾶριος βαστάζων τὰ τίμια καὶ ζωοποιὰ ξύλα μετὰ τῆς θήκης ἐπὶ τοῦ τραχήλου· ἔμπροσθεν δὲ τοῦ κουβουκλείου περιπατοῦσιν οἱ βασιλικοὶ, καὶ μέσον τούτων περιπατεῖ σιγνοφόρος βαστάζων σταυρὸν χρυσοῦν διάλιθον.”

²⁴ Sevcenko (2013), pp. 8–10.

Considering this, it is likely that, while the Byzantines used the cross of Saint Constantine only in processions or military expeditions when the emperor was physically present, the palace kept other “secondary” relics of the True Cross, which rulers could send to their military officials and troops as an emblem of imperial power or use for other purposes.²⁵ The *Limburg staurotheke*, the reliquary carried by the *koubikoularios* according to the treatise, and the one used in the oath of AD 917, regardless of whether they were the same object or not, surely belonged to the same category of highly precious and venerable relics kept in the sanctuaries of the palace and used as sacred emblems of the imperial office. Moreover, a military speech composed by an adult Constantine VII, and addressed to the generals of Anatolia, shows a similar use of relics around AD 950. In this case, the emperor sent his troops sanctified oil to act as a supernatural protection in battle, but also as a reminder of his imperial authority and as compensation for his absence.²⁶

Therefore, it is likely that there was a complex hierarchy of holy items used in different military contexts. First, the cross of Saint Constantine, the main imperial war-talisman, which was used exclusively when the emperor was present. Second, other famous venerable relics — enclosed in precious reliquaries — which the emperor could grant temporarily for specific ceremonies. Finally, precious processional crosses, “minor relics”, and holy oil, which the ruler could give to generals or send to the field armies for prolonged use in military campaigns that he was not commanding in person.²⁷

²⁵ The literary sources always mention the precious cross of Constantine in the presence of an emperor. John Haldon expressed a similar idea: Haldon (1990), pp. 245–247.

²⁶ Constantine VII, *Speech to the Strategoi of the East*, 8, 20–36L; McGeer (2003), pp. 111–135.

²⁷ John Haldon argued something similar: Haldon (1990), pp. 245–247.

The ceremony and words of the oath

Consequently, the reliquary sent by Zoe in AD 917 was, first and foremost, a reminder of Constantine VII's imperial authority and a material expression of its sacred nature. However, it was not just that. Following the traditional Roman ideology of triumph, the glory of a military victory always belonged to the *imperator*, the commander-in-chief. In his famous study, Michael McCormick showed how the idea of victory gradually became an intrinsic attribute of the ruler, and how the triumph ceremony became an imperial prerogative. McCormick also demonstrated that when emperors were not physically present on the battlefield, they used ceremonies, symbols and propaganda to maintain the metaphor — or fiction — of imperial victory. For instance, triumphal processions in which field generals presented captive kings and spoils of war at the feet of the ruler.²⁸ Therefore, it is also possible that Zoe — or her close circle of advisers — planned the oath ceremony as a way of starting to appropriate the victory, should the expedition be successful.

Unfortunately, the sources are extremely succinct in their description of the ceremony and of the words of the oath. The narratives say that everyone in the army venerated the relic and swore on it that they would die for each other: “ἅπαντες προσκυνήσαντες καὶ ἐπομοσάμενοι συναποθνήσκειν”.²⁹ The miniature of the *Madrid Skylitzes* shows a long line of people waiting to swear on the relic.³⁰ It seems highly unlikely that every single soldier in the army touched the reliquary. More probably, the item was touched by military officials above a certain rank, and then the rest of the troops uttered the oath in front of the relic and their officials. In

²⁸ McCormick (1999), pp. 4–5, 20–24, 120–130.

²⁹ *Chronicle of the Logothete*, 135; 19.

³⁰ *Madrid Skylitzes*, Vittr/26/2, BNE, fol. 121r.

addition, it is unknown if the oath was accompanied by other rituals, but it is easy to imagine that other traditional practices of the army, such as liturgies, the blessing of the regimental banners, and the oath of loyalty in front of the image of the emperor, took place at the same time.³¹

The sources do not specify the exact words of the oath. Possibly the chroniclers did not know the complete oath and were just trying to convey the general idea of the rite or what they assumed was its purpose. According to the military treatise of Vegetius, who wrote around the late fourth or early fifth century, in the traditional oath of allegiance, the Roman soldiers: “swear by God, Christ and the Holy Spirit, and by the Majesty of the Emperor (...) that they will strenuously do all that the Emperor may command, will never desert the service, nor refuse to die for the Roman State”.³² While there is no concrete evidence about the continuity of this oath in later centuries, it is possible to imagine some Greek version of this formula still being used in the tenth century, with a variation of this traditional oath being employed in AD 917.³³

³¹ Regarding religious rites of the Eastern Roman army: Dennis (1993), pp. 107–117; Haldon (1999), pp. 13–33; Dennis (2001), pp. 31–39; McCormick (2004), pp. 45–67; McGeer (2005); Shean (2010); Haldon (2014), pp. 33–38, 264, 271.

³² Vegetius, *Epitoma rei militaris*, II, 5: “*Nam uicturis in cute punctis milites scripti, cum matriculis inseruntur, iurare solent; et ideo militiae sacramenta dicuntur. Iurant autem per Deum et Christum et sanctum Spiritum et per maiestatem imperatoris, quae secundum Deum generi humano diligenda est et colenda. Nam imperator cum Augusti nomen accepit, tamquam praesenti et corporali Deo fidelis est praestanda deuotio, inpendendus peruigil famulatus. Deo enim uel priuatus uel militans seruit, cum fideliter cum diligit qui Deo regnat auctore. Iurant autem milites omnia se strenue facturos, quae praeceperit imperator; numquam deserturos militiam nec mortem recusaturos pro Romana republica*”. English trans. of Milner (1993), pp. 34–35.

³³ It is possible that the later Byzantine chroniclers, unfamiliar with military traditions, misinterpreted the promise of dying for the Republic — dying for Roman State or for the common good — contained in the oath as the soldiers dying for each other.

The words that immediately follow the oath in the *Chronicle of the Logothete*, “ἀλλήλοις πανστρατὶ κατὰ Βουλγάρων ἐξώρμησαν” may contain a clue. It is likely that the original oath included a commitment to move with full force against the Bulgarians. If so, this oath could be interpreted as a protective clause, a pledge, in which this large concentration of troops promised not to remain in the region or pose a threat to Constantinople, but to devote themselves entirely to eliminating the foreign threat of the Bulgarians. Such an oath was unusual but may have been prompted by recent circumstances and events.³⁴ The subsequent withdrawal of the fleet commanded by Lekapenos, which provoked rumours of a coup among the army, suggests there were suspicions of this nature.³⁵ Moreover, if the Bulgarian campaign began with a ceremony planned by the palace and involving an imperial relic, people would be more inclined to attribute the victory to the emperor, and then the war could finish with a triumph ceremony, also planned by the palace, that would consolidate the idea.³⁶ None of this happened, because the campaign ended up as a military disaster for the Byzantines, a disaster that eventually led to the deposition of Zoe and the usurpation of Lekapenos.³⁷

Other motives and schemes behind the oath

Nevertheless, there were also other reasons behind the oath of AD 917. The ceremony was probably a way of encouraging and safeguarding

³⁴ The attempt of coup of Constantine Doukas in AD 914, see below and note 46.

³⁵ *Chronicle of the Logothete*, 135, 21-30; Skylitzes, *Synopsis*, 9; 9-11; 204-208; Runciman (1929), pp. 45-62; Treadgold (1997), pp. 472-475; Kaldellis (2024), pp. 542-545. See below and notes 45&46.

³⁶ For examples of Byzantine triumph ceremonies: McCormick (1999), pp. 120-259.

³⁷ For these events: Runciman (1929), pp. 45-62; Treadgold (1997), pp. 472-475; Kaldellis (2024), pp. 542-545.

the loyalty of the expeditionary army and its generals towards the throne. Usually, relics were required in the oath of individuals when there was some distrust in their promises, as a way of reinforcing the binding force of the oath and making its infringement a sacrilege. For instance, one of the early Byzantine cases of swearing on relics is a reference, in Nikephoros' *Short History*, of Herakleios II swearing on a fragment of the True Cross that he would not harm the children of his deceased brother Constantine III (AD 641).³⁸

Moreover, there are several reasons to think that the regent Zoe had reasonable concerns regarding the loyalty of some military officers involved in the expedition. First, Romanos Lekapenos — who acted during the war as commander of the fleet — was investigated later by his actions in this campaign. The sources suggest that, already during this war, there were rumours circulating about his intentions to take the throne, and, a couple of years later, in AD 919, Lekapenos directed a coup that deposed Zoe.³⁹ Second, there were recent precedents of military coups, as only three years before, in AD 914, the previous Domestic of the Schools, Constantine Doukas, attempted to take power in a palace coup that ended in a bloodbath.⁴⁰ Finally, the commander in charge of the expedition, Leo Phokas was likely appointed because Zoe and her advisors trusted him to some degree — at least more than other high-ranking military officers, but there were other generals that could depose Leo Phokas, and even Leo Phokas was replaced two years later because Constantine VII feared that he might rebel against him.⁴¹

³⁸ Nikephoros, *Short History*, 30 (Mango, pp. 80-81: 20-23). See also: Frolow (1961), p. 193; Klein (2004b), pp. 49–50; (2006), p. 94.

³⁹ *Chronicle of the Logothete*, 135, 21-30; Skylitzes, *Synopsis*, 9; 9-11; 204-208; Runciman (1929), pp. 45–62; Treadgold (1997), pp. 472–475; Kaldellis (2024), pp. 542–545.

⁴⁰ *Chronicle of the Logothete*, 135; 3-10; Kaldellis (2024), pp. 540–541.

⁴¹ *Chronicle of the Logothete*, 135, 27; Skylitzes, *Synopsis*, 9; 11; 208.

Even if there was no concrete reason for suspicion in AD 917, the fragility of female power in Byzantium was enough reason for caution over a large military force, assembled near the capital. As the usurpations of Romanos Lekapenos, Nikephoros Phokas and John Tzimiskes, years later, would prove, a strong man with command over troops, prestige, and military experience would always be a threat to the ruler, especially to a female regent and a twelve-year-old emperor.⁴² The Bulgarian campaign was particularly risky for Zoe, because victory, if it had occurred, could have enhanced the prestige of military men who might want to seize power, while defeat would sow discontent among the population and the troops, as it did in the end. Furthermore, considering that the expeditionary army included at least two *tagmata* regiments, numerous thematic regiments from Anatolia, and a significant part of the imperial fleet, there was probably not many more forces left to oppose them if they decided to march against Constantinople.⁴³

There is another interesting fact that supports this argument: Constantine of Malelia, one of the two individuals sent with the relic according to the *Chronicle of the Logothete*, was one of the closest collaborators and advisors of Zoe. He held the rank of *protospatharios* and the office of *protoasekretis*.⁴⁴ The *protoasekretis* was the senior officer of the imperial notaries and the head of the imperial chancery, one of the most powerful and influential positions in the civil bureaucracy.⁴⁵ After the deposition of Zoe, the same Constantine of Malelia, rebelled against the usurper Romanos

⁴² Garland (1999), pp. 118–123; Herrin (2013), pp. 161–186; 2021, pp. 240–257.

⁴³ Probably one or two other *tagmata* regiments, the small garrison of Constantinople and the Palace Guard. This was one of the constant dangers of concentrating troops close the Imperial City: Haldon (1984), pp. 191–353; Treadgold (1995), pp. 28–32

⁴⁴ *Chronicle of the Logothete*, 136, 4; Pseudo-Symeon, *Chronicle*, 728,2-6; “Konstantinos Malelias”, *PMBZ Online* (2013), 25972 (16/08/24).

⁴⁵ Kazhdan 1991, “Protasekretis”, *ODB*, p. 1742; Haldon (2005), pp. 132–135

Lekapenos on behalf of young Constantine VII.⁴⁶ The other person mentioned as accompanying the relic, Constantine Kephalas, was the *protopapas* of the palace. This position was held by a senior priest elected by the ruler, who oversaw the chapels and religious ceremonies of the imperial palace, so it is reasonable to speculate that Kephalas was also someone highly trusted by Zoe.⁴⁷

Therefore, it is likely that the delegation sent with the relic was also a stratagem to introduce people from the inner circle of Zoe, who were not part of the military, into the army camp to examine and supervise the preparations of the expedition, to assess the reactions of the different generals and officials towards the oath, to observe the movements of the expeditionary force and to spy on the commanders. These loyal advisors of Zoe would have needed an official excuse to visit the military camp — especially if they were palace clerics and civil bureaucrats — to avoid insulting the commanders with their presence. Carrying a venerable relic from the palace, as a ceremonial guard, offered a perfectly acceptable justification for their presence. It is likely that some military officials might have suspected their real purposes, but they could not accuse them of anything without appearing both rebellious and impious.

Conclusions

Therefore, the curious episode of the oath of the Byzantine army in AD 917 can be explained, on the one hand, by the different ways in which the imperial elite used Christian relics in military contexts and, on the other, by

⁴⁶ *Chronicle of the Logothete*, 136, 4; Skylitzes, *Synopsis*, 9, 13: 209; Treadgold (1997), pp. 473–475; Garland (1999), pp. 4, 114–125.

⁴⁷ *Chronicle of the Logothete*, 135; 19; Klein (2006), pp. 90–91; Kraus (2007), pp. 105–106; “Konstantinos Kephalas”, *PMBZ Online* (2013), 25944 (16/08/24).

the particular situation of the throne during the early years of Constantine VII and the regency of his mother Zoe. In the Eastern Roman Empire, the ruler was considered the commander-in-chief, the supreme leader of all the armed forces, but neither a woman nor a child could command the troops in person. Hence, the Bulgarian expedition was in charge of Leo Phokas, Romanos Lekapenos, and various other generals, not all of whom were trusted by the regent. The recent precedent of a failed military coup, and the general fragility of female power in Byzantium were sufficient reason for caution.

Accordingly, the oath of the army and the relic of the True Cross involved in the ceremony served several purposes. First, as a powerful talisman of war, and a traditional emblem of Christian imperial victory, the relic acted as a reminder of the sacred authority of Constantine VII. It was part of an intricate hierarchy of relics and holy items used by emperors in military contexts. The role of the ruler as guardian and distributor of venerable relics strengthened the sacred aura of his figure, and reinforced the idea of God as the ultimate source of imperial authority and military victory. Additionally, while there are numerous aspects of the ceremony and the oath that we do not know, it is likely that the rite was oriented both to reinforce the loyalty of the troops, ensuring that they would direct their force against the Bulgarians, and to begin a process of appropriation of the victory, in case of success. Thus, it is possible to imagine that, had the expedition been successful, the process of appropriation of the victory, initiated with the oath, might have culminated with a grand triumph ceremony in Constantinople, where God would have been presented as the ultimate source of the victory, and the emperor as God's appointed ruler, the recipient of the triumph and its glory.

Furthermore, considering the evidence, there were other purposes and schemes behind the oath and the relic. Based on the precedent of the failed military coup of AD 913, in the events surrounding the usurpation of Lekapenos, and in the people mentioned by the chroniclers as part of the

delegation with the relic, it seems highly likely that the ceremony also worked as a stratagem to bring people from the inner circle of the regent Zoe into the military camp. Therefore, it was also a reasonable excuse to introduce trusted civil advisors who could observe the gathering and movement of the troops, assess the reactions of the different commanders to the oath ceremony, spy on them, and report back to the regent.

Finally, the episode of AD 917 is an excellent example of the different ways in which the Byzantine imperial elite could use relics in political and military contexts. Scholars have frequently framed the military use of relics as a manifestation of an idea of “holy war”.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the episode of AD 917, as many others, suggest that the Byzantine military use of relics was often oriented internally, had little to do with the religious identity of the enemy, and was usually related with questions of contested imperial authority.⁴⁹ There are several examples of Byzantine rulers using relics in military contexts with similar purposes, before and after AD 917.⁵⁰ Constantine’s VII speech to the generals of Anatolia, and his involvement in the reception of the Mandylion, show that the ruler learned, from previous experiences, the relevance of relics as instruments to reinforce imperial authority with an aura of sacred power.⁵¹ Byzantine rulers continued using relics in various different ways until the last days of the empire, when, in the midst of a desperate situation, they offered renowned relics to the

⁴⁸ Erdmann (1935), pp. 30–50; Frolow (1953), p. 79; Thierry (1981), pp. 205–228; Kolia-Dermizaki (1991), pp. 401–402; Mergiali-Sahas (2001), p. 50; Bronisch (2006); Kolia-Dermizaki (2012), pp. 122–131.

⁴⁹ Although considered barbarians by the Byzantines, the Bulgarians were at least nominally Christian in AD 917: Runciman (1979); Shepard (2000).

⁵⁰ For instance, emperor Maurice in the late-sixth century, or Michael II during the siege of Thomas the Slav: Klein (2004b), pp. 54–55; Stouraitis (2012), pp. 236–237; Serrano del Pozo (2021), pp. 1–17.

⁵¹ Runciman (1931), pp. 238–252; Cameron (1983), pp. 80–94; McGeer (2003), pp. 111–135; Gudrun Engberg (2004), pp. 123–142; Guscini (2008), pp. 7–69, 154–184.

Western rulers in exchange for financial or military assistance.⁵² Nevertheless, by then, the myth of the Empire's invincibility had been shattered by the force of facts.



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⁵² Mergiali-Sahas (2001), pp. 55–60; Klein (2004c), pp. 283–314; (2004b), pp. 58–68, 234–276; Shepard (2012), pp. 61–92.

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