

NICEPHOROS II PHOCAS

- A GREAT SOLDIER, A MINOR RULER ? -

by Doros Alastos.

A thousand years ago, on 10 December 969, the Emperor of Byzantium, Nicephoros Phocas was murdered ^{in his bed} by a group of high ranking officers. He was fifty-seven years old.

Those who plotted and carried out the murder were famous men and all were close to the Emperor. Chief among them was John Tzimiskes. He was nephew of Nicephoros. He succeeded him on the throne and proved himself eminently successful both as statesman and administrator. The other was Bourtsis, a distinguished military commander who achieved fame fighting under Nicephoros. The Empress Theophano, ex-tavern girl (she would now be dignified with the professional appellation of actress) and reputedly very beautiful, was privy to the conspiracy.

Theophano had already lost one husband ^{in 963} - Lecapenos II, son of Constantine Porphyrogennetos, a fun-loving, spendthrift, impressive-looking young man, yet a very able ruler, in his middle twenties. Rumour had it that she poisoned her young Emperor-husband because of her love for the veteran soldier Nicephoros. Undoubtedly, the second murder gave credibility to the rumours about the first. However, even a cursory look at the evidence is sufficient to dispel them for two very simple reasons:- (a) Lecapenos II, died when Theophano was in bed with a two-day old child; (b) it was by no means certain that Nicephoros would have made the throne for Theophano to have both her cake and eat it. In fact the strongest candidate for the throne in the absence of grown-up heirs was Lecapenos's Chief Minister, Joseph Bringas. It was known that young Lecapenos was very fond of the old and successful commander of his armies. But Bringas held power and, furthermore, he happened to be on the spot. He was efficient, purposeful and unscrupulous.

Nicephoros was popular. This Bringas feared. He ^{sought to} ~~set about~~ destroying both the man and his fame. He accused Nicephoros of plotting the usurp the throne. It is probable that, at the same time, he began to circulate rumours about the alleged

poisoning of Lecapenos with Theophano and Nicephoros singled out as the culprits. His policy must have met with some success for he proceeded to make arrangements to have Nicephoros arrested and blinded. It was standard Byzantine practice for rendering a man harmless.

Nicephoros who was then campaigning on the frontiers, got wind of what was afoot and asked the Patriarch of Constantinople and other dignitaries for their protection. Such was his reputation as a man of integrity that the people he approached sided with him and rejected the accusations. Bringas's "legalistic" murder-plan miscarried. Thwarted, Bringas did not give up. He resorted to conspiracy. He approached Tzimiskes, the ablest general on Nicephoros's staff and offered him the supreme command of the army - the very army Nicephoros had fashioned into a powerful offensive instrument - provided he arrested his chief and sent him in chains to Constantinople.

The choice of Tzimiskes for the task is interesting. Unfortunately, we know very little as to why. Did Bringas simply gamble, or did he have a clear understanding of what the rising general was capable of in order to achieve the object of his ambitions? The future showed that Bringas knew well or perceived clearly, the character of his would-be accomplice. But he was premature!

Tzimiskes, somehow, flinched from becoming a hired assassin. He harboured, perhaps, greater ambitions and larger designs. He wouldn't destroy a relative, even for state reasons, simply to smooth someone else's path to supreme power who had no legitimate right to it. Not only he did not do what the Prime Minister wanted but took the letter to Nicephoros and asked him there and then to assume the title of Emperor. Nicephoros refused. He was a soldier, not a courtier. And who knows, he might have had other dreams! Two years earlier his friend and confessor St. Athanasius the Athonite, established the first monastic foundation on a coenobitic basis on the Athos peninsula which became known as the Great Lavra. He drew up rules of the monastery and reserved a cell for Nicephoros.

Monasticism was then an "in" phenomenon. It satisfied a spiritual need, it provided for some people a dignified opting out from the responsibilities and stresses of social and of public life and for others a quiet and uncomplicated

retirement. Nicephoros was a religious man. Did he look forward after the toils of a hundred campaigns, to a few years of peace in a monastery? It is highly probable. In any case his refusal to accept the crown appears to have been genuine. It flows logically from what we know of the man.

Nicephoros must have persisted in his refusal. At last, it is said, John Tzimiskes and Romanos Kourkouas, son of a famous general and himself famous, entered Nicephoros's tent, drew their swords and threatened to kill him on the spot if he persisted in his refusal. It was pointed out to him with the convincing force of two swords aimed at his throat that the only way to protect himself, his friends and the army from Bringas and the other imperial hangers-on, was by making himself Emperor.

Nicephoros yielded. Still, the imperial crown was a long way off. Ultimately, all depended on the mood of the capital and there Bringas was in complete control. Speed was essential. Nicephoros marched at once from Caesaria in the interior of Asia Minor to Chrysopolis, modern Scutari, opposite Constantinople where he encamped. The presence of a victorious army so near the capital proved decisive. People and palace guards rose up in favour of the army. All opposition collapsed and Nicephoros was invited to enter the capital. He was crowned in Agia Sophia on 16 August 963.

It is grimly ironic that the sword of Tzimiskes which propelled Nicephoros^{on} to the imperial throne was the one which was to strike him down six years and four months later.

x x x x

Along with the imperial crown, though not coincidentally, came Theophano, young, beautiful and aberrant. Nicephoros was now Emperor, husband of the Empress and step-father to the legitimate future rulers of Byzantium. He was already a legend. His soldiers were devoted to him; they fought and died for the love of him the chroniclers inform us. Now he was supreme ruler with hardly any political experience to back him up, living in a palace surrounded by smooth courtiers, eunuchs and bigots whom he had to instruct and get to know how to handle, and married to a young and doubtlessly demanding wife. He became, all of a sudden,

very vulnerable. The sharp transition from camp to court with so many problems, political, military, economic and administrative crowding in created many difficulties for a man getting on in years and set in his ways. In addition, Nicephoros encountered strong opposition from a totally unexpected quarter - the Church. Why that was is difficult to know though, as is to be shown later, easy to understand.

The light of history beats down hard on Nicephoros Phocas. It reveals little. We see, occasionally, a clear outline, some sharp features and areas of decisive action. The essential man escapes us. Even G. Schlumberger's courageous study, Un Empereur Byzantin au Xe Siècle: Nicéphore Phocas (Paris 1890) does not fully succeed in unwrapping the various layers of denigration and of patronising obloquy with which he has been covered like a mummy.

For one thing, Nicephoros had never had what can be described as "a good press". He did not prove a hit with the intellectuals! The chroniclers did not like him. Nothing monstrous or downright evil can be attributed to him and made to stick in view of what is known about him, yet there is disparagement and accusations though unauthenticated. He has been called mean, pompous, cruel, impious and, in modern social terms, he has been labelled reactionary.

Liutprand, Bishop of Cremona, is often quoted by historians. The Bishop is invariably accused of spite, falsehood and gullibility. But quoted he is, evidently on the principle that there can never be smoke without fire. He may be a liar but what he says cannot be entirely without some foundation in fact! A valid enough argument. But what follows? The "textual" accusation, even if thought invalid is maintained, it is quoted and its implications linger on.

Liutprand was the envoy of the West Roman Emperor, Otto the Great. He visited Constantinople to arrange for the marriage of Otto to Nicephoros's step- and Theophane's daughter. He failed in his mission. Because of this nothing pleased him in Constantinople. He possessed the determination to decry; it was the barbarian's envious rejection of civilisation. He found Nicephoros avaricious and brutally ungenerous towards his prospective son-in-law. He would

not give Otto the Southern parts of Italy as a dowry which, in any case, were not strictly his to give. He found him boastful. Nicephoros ~~claimed~~ that the Greeks were the sole possessors of a worthwhile navy; he called his fleet

the glory of Romania - i.e. Greece. It was, however, a statement significantly true, at the time. *He was, he wrote of "unusual analysis" "as an Ethiopian" and "terrifying to any one who might chance meeting him in the dark".* Further, Liutprand says that the ministers of Nicephoros

Phocas taunted him by saying that with their wealth in gold they could lead the people of the whole world against King Otto and break him like "an earthenware jug which, once broken can never be mended again". An unsubtle threat inelegantly expressed! Hardly in keeping with what we know of the suave sophistication of Byzantine diplomats unless, of course, they had been in this case, unendurably provoked by the "bull in a china shop" envoy. Liutprand appears to have had no tact and little understanding. He ^{had} visited Constantinople twenty years earlier and reported that he saw the "singing tree", the "metal lions that roared" and that he had met Bardas, the father of Nicephoros, whom he estimated to be a hundred and fifty years old. He had learnt nothing in between except that being the trusted emissary of a strong, aggressively-minded potentate and secure in his docility to his master, he could throw his weight about and behave in the same predictable way the representatives and emissaries of twentieth-century dictatorships behave at conferences and at international gatherings, i.e. with coarse rudeness and a repertory of invective.

Bishop Liutprand was an outsider and by definition a critic, ~~he~~ *may be* not ~~unintentionally~~ an enemy. He had made his point in history - an enduring one.

But the Byzantine chroniclers ^{Zonaras} Zonaras, ^{Cerdrenas} Cerdrenas and ^{Leo Diacones} Leo Diacones, *wrote within the reality of their times.* Yet none appears to be overfond of Nicephoros. All however recognise his military ability.

No systematic attempt will be made in this short article to re-sketch the "historical" ^{portrait} ~~profile~~ of Nicephoros or to reassess his personality. For this to be ~~done~~ ^{attempted at all effectively} considerably more space, time and research ^{work would be} ~~are~~ needed. *than can be spared at the moment.* ~~than can be spared at the moment.~~ Consequently the question mark on the subtitle will have to remain. The conclusions which we may arrive at the end cannot but be provisional.

However justly or unjustly history has dealt with Nicephoros Phocas the incontestable fact is that the period during which he was the military commander and then the supreme ruler of the Empire saw a decisive change in its fortunes. It ushered in one hundred years of glory [L'ÉPOQUE BYZANTINE], when the civilisation and the civilising mission of Byzantium have reached their apogée.

For three hundred years the Byzantine world was buffeted by continuous and savage wars. Ever since the rise of Islam in the second quarter of the 7th century, the Christian Greeks of Byzantium had been at war with it. The Arab Moslems, first as fanatical raiding hordes, soon to grow into various powerful and on the whole civilised states (the Arabs did not disdain to learn from the Greeks, both from classical antiquity and from byzantine educationists and savants; ^{and did not fail to} put into good use what they have learned; it is generally accepted by scholars that the Greek classics came to the awakening West after the dark ages, through Arab translations and as a result of Arab cultural enterprise) made great inroads ^{also} into the territories of Byzantium. Being new to the game of conquest, they used new tactics. They realised the value of cavalry in desert warfare and spear-headed their attacks with it. They grasped instantly the significance of sea-power which is both elusive and potent. The Byzantines, like the Romans before them, had neglected the naval arm. Actium must have demonstrated to the Romans and the lesson was not lost on the Byzantines, that Empires relying on the arm of the sea can be lost in a day. Hence, strong armies securely based on adequate ^{could secure both} hinterlands ~~and thus serving~~ ports and sea lanes, ~~while~~ ^{This} the navy became a subordinate arm. The Arabs destroyed the conservative comfort of this orthodox strategy. They would raid with cavalry far ahead of their armies, ^{This} create consternation and confusion and enabled the armies to advance; They built ships and began raiding by sea from the Syrian coast before, they had consolidated their hold of the hinterland. Within three quarters of a century after they had appeared on the Sinai peninsula ready to plunge into Byzantine Egypt, their armadas were besieging Constantinople in the East and their armies were advancing towards the Loire and Paris in the West. The Greek liquid fire saved Constantinople and Martel the Hammer reversed the direction of the Moorish advance in France. The two points

of the vast Arab pincer movement against Europe were blunted irreparably and from then on began the long, slow and discontinuous agony of the Arab decline. But decline only in the sense that Arab power could get no further. It still had a lot of energy left to keep hammering the Greek provinces in Asia Minor, to establish itself permanently on the North African areas from Suez to the Atlantic and turn the Mediterranean into an Arab lake.

Cyprus was conquered, though not completely and not permanently. Crete became a bastion of Arab power. Sicily was invaded and areas of the Côte d'Azur became Arab colonies and naval bases. But the central area of the Moslem expansionist pressure remained the heartland of the Byzantine Empire, Asia Minor. There the war went on remorselessly and losses were grievous. Frontiers constantly changed. Treaties lasted only as long as it suited the aggressors. In addition, the Byzantines themselves underwent the debilitating ordeal of the iconoclastic controversy which reached civil war dimensions and engulfed several generations.

By the time the Byzantine Empire overcame its internal difficulties and the direct of external dangers from the east in the second half of the 9th century it was no longer the same old state. It had rediscovered the Greekness of which it was acutely conscious during the first period of the victory of Christianity before it became overlaid by growing theocracy. People began to remember their Hellenic heritage. True, their ancient forefathers were pagans, knew nothing of salvation, bore their unshedable share of the original sin but could not all be uniformly bad or totally sinful! The university of Constantinople and Photius's Myriobiblos, the famous compilation of abstracts from his wide reading of ancient writers, stimulated interest in classical learning. Socially, there was a growing tendency towards land-ownership and the enlargement of great estates. The frontier wars continued, with varying intensity. But within those wars other little wars were developing which provide history with the first large-scale case-study of guerrilla warfare - a warfare which lasted for the best part of a century and which spread over wide areas from the Pontus and the Caucasian regions to Cyprus. Guerrilla war gave rise to a new type of song, the heroic ballad of

the Akritic Cycle which became the foundation of the great artistic creation of tenth century Byzantium, the epic of Digenis Akritas. These Akritic poems constitute the beginning of Modern Greek literature.

^{In a way} ~~Thus~~ the Greeks ^{had} discovered themselves and began ^{at the same time} to create their new national literature. Up to then, Byzantine literature was.....a-national.

With the coming of the tenth century, however, ~~pressures~~ against Byzantium mounted from many directions. In the East, the Caliphate and the various autonomous emirates though enfeebled, could pack a powerful punch. In the north and west, the Bulgarians, the Serbs and later the Hungarians and the Russians carried on relentless war against Byzantium. The Balkan Danubian areas, Thrace, Macedonia even Central Greece, were repeatedly invaded. The invaders lived off the land, looted, killed, destroyed and moved on or were pushed back by the imperial army. Destruction was on a prodigious scale. It was recurring with every invasion. There were so many of these that it is impossible to have them catalogued here. The student looking closely at these developments cannot but find it remarkable that people have survived at all or, that having survived, the fabric of their civilisation was not irreparably destroyed. Hellenic tradition and church organisation were stubborn agents which helped to preserve civilisation.

Crete was for almost a century a Moslem stronghold. For the second time in its history, nearly two and a half thousand years after the Minoan Sea-Empire, Crete was again a Thalassocracy. Its rulers with interlocking alliances with the North African states represented a considerable power. They had at their disposal excellent fighting material - islamised Cretan peasants - and a strong navy. They dominated the Aegean, looted and raided ~~and~~ at will. In the early part of the tenth century they occupied and sacked Demetrias and the great city of Thessaloniki. The islands were at their mercy. Constantinople was compelled to act. But the strong force sent under Himerios against Crete in 911 was annihilated by the Arabs off Samos. Every other effort to contain them proved ineffectual and usually disastrous. The Cretan Arab fleet remained master of the area.

It was during these cataclysmic times of defeats, invasions and disasters on occasions becalmed by the capacity of a resilient Empire to strike back

successfully,
~~effectively~~, that Nicephoros Phocas was growing to manhood. He imbibed war with his mother's milk. He belonged to a family which produced generals in numbers. Soldiering was to be his job in life. Despite ^{its} ~~the~~ external difficulties, for the most part of his adult life the State had been ably ruled a) by Romanos Lecapenos and b) Constantine Porphyrogenetos the gentle and studious author of "The Imperial Administration", "Court Ceremonies in Byzantium" etc. There was an absence of destructive internal upheavals. Therefore the concentration of interest of any young, ambitious man could not be easily deflected towards intrigues and conspiracies; the frontiers and national security were of greater attraction and of impelling necessity.

Nicephoros became a campaigner. He saw war at close quarters. He studied the science of war. He must have realised immediately the value of guerrilla war and the need for a general to act independently though within the framework of his instructions. Already, the Byzantine commanders had proved themselves adept in all kinds of military tactics. The manuals from the eighth century to the so-called Strategicon of Cecaumenos in the 11th, which have survived, are proof of this. Nic^ophoros's contribution to military thinking was the introduction of a new theoretical dimension to the act of strategy - guerrilla war. The Greek frontiersman, half brigand, half-soldier and totally lawless except for ultimate obedience to the church, was dignified with a new role - that of being the pathfinder, the long-range eyes, ears and lance-point of the army.

Out of his experience on the frontiers, Nicephoros produced the booklet Peri Paradromis Polemou (On the Accompaniment of War) which demonstrated the military value of guerrilla war and ascribed importance to the guerrilleros - an importance up to then denied them by history, though generously accorded them by the people in the songs and lays of Akritic poetry. Not all the authorities accept Phocas as the author of Peri Paradromis Polemou. Some suggest that it was written by an officer of his entourage. If is of no material importance who actually penned the instructions, ~~the~~ the name of Nicephoros Phocas is associated with.

Perhaps as a result of his tutorial on the frontiers Nicephoros saw the

significance of the relationship of a fighting commander with his troupes. A soldier will fight if he is well-trained, well-~~led~~^{shod}, well-armed, well-fed, sufficiently disciplined and sternly led. He will fight better if he believes in what he is fighting for. He will fight magnificently if he is inspired by, loved by and has confidence in his commander. Alexander the Great was united by an unbroken bond of fraternity with his companions and with something like a community of will with his troops - it was as if both soldiers and commander were strung out as impulses on the same wave-length. Caesar possessed the austerity of awe; men served him and followed him dutifully, dominated by him as if by an implacable power. Belissarius inculcated the élan of faith. Nicephoros set out to win the devotion of his troops. Having learned as much as he could learn of war through study and practice, and having added to its storehouse of knowledge, inescapably he must have come up against the problem of human relationships in the stresses of conflict; a problem which cannot be solved by reading textbooks and one which, even when moderately mastered, makes all the difference between a good or successful commander and a great one. Napoleon in defeat was greater than his opponents and Themistocles would have been great even if his critical gambler's throw at Salamis did not come off.

How Nicephoros tackled it we do not know. He did tackle it, however, and must have brought it within grasp for we have adequate evidence of the intense devotion which his soldiers had for him; "they fought and died for love of their Marshal" say the historians.

Out of this relationship, Nicephoros ~~fashioned~~^{shaped} a strong, dependable army and catapulted himself to the first rank of military leaders. The enemy began to feel the edge of his power. He displayed later on great qualities as a strategist. He could handle and coordinate the activities of armies over difficult terrain, plan meticulously the combinations of separate units to be achieved during battle action, proved himself capable of ruses and feigned attacks and above all master of surprise and of audacious fighting action.

IN SUPREME COMMAND.

Sometime during the last years of the reign of Constantine Porphyrogenetos (944 - 959) the decision was taken to build a strong navy. To strike at the enemy hard, the Empire needed at least the command of its "front garden" sea, the Aegean. Thus, ^{to} the Akrites there were now to be added the guerrillas of the sea, the fighting sailors. Both were to be appendages to the army. Doubtlessly, the counsel of Nicephoros to this end must have been invaluable.

The Navy was built. At last the Byzantines were ready to take the war to the enemy camp. They chose to reduce first the bastion of Crete to allow for freedom of movement. In 961 the expedition was ready. Lecapenos II, entrusted the supreme command to Nicephoros Phocas. It proved a wise decision and perhaps the only one that rescued the young Emperor from anonymity, save for his place in the list of the occupiers of the throne.

So many had been the reverses which were met by the Byzantine forces in their encounters with the Cretan Arabs, that it was impossible for Nicephoros not to ^{have} been apprehensive. However he reached his destination without loss. The Arabs tried but failed to impede his progress. Once in Crete he made straight for the capital, the strongly fortified town of Chandax and invested it by land and sea. He cut it off ^{from} ~~it~~ all communication with the outside and began the long task of reducing its defences.

He sent detachments to occupy the island. These met with strong opposition. Reinforcements, meanwhile, reached the Arabs. One of the Byzantine units was cut off and strong Arab forces were massed for an all out attempt to relieve the besieged capital. Nicephoros, leaving enough troops behind to continue the blockade, took the field in person, surprised the Arabs in their camp and defeated them with fearful ~~and~~ slaughter. George Finlay, fighter for Greece and a historian of Greece, writes as follows: "The Byzantine general, in order to intimidate the defenders of Chandax, ordered the heads of those slain in the country to be brought to the camp, stimulating the activities of his soldiers in this barbarous service by paying a piece of silver for every head. They were then ranged on spears along the whole line of the circumvallation towards the fortifications of the city; and the number of slain was so great that many more were cast into

the place by means of catapults, in order to let the besieged see the full extent of the loss of their countrymen."

This single but decisive victory of Nicephoros so ruthlessly "advertised" broke the Arabs' heart. Their moral was sapped and in the following May the city was stormed. Arab rule and Arab presence were irrevocably removed from the island.

Undoubtedly, the methods used towards this end can arouse strong feelings in many of our contemporaries. Finlay, not given to philistinism or patronising, uses the word "barbarous". One ~~can~~ ^{may even} use the word "genocide". From the superior dunghill of our twentieth century ethics we can, of course, say this - we can, that is, if we choose to forget Maidanek, Buchenwald, Katyn, Vorkuta, Hiroshima, Vietnam, Dresden, Madagascar, Algeria and so many other horrors flowing from the cult and quest of power or brought about by *corrosive* ideologies and international conflict which have disfigured our century. Who are we to condemn? At best we should try to understand.

Nicephoros acted within the ethos of his world. He was not waging a war of conquest but of liberation. His co-religionists ~~have~~ suffered grievously at the hands of his enemy. Only recently the Cretan Arabs had carried out mass slaughter against the Greeks; they were unrepentant aggressors. On the moral plane Nicephoros has to be condemned for waging total war. All "total" wars are condemnable and none of the others, save those for liberty, can be but brutal, brutalising and unjust. Nicephoros, however, was impelled by historical necessity, by the demands of faith and of country. The weight of right was on his side. Further, if his Cretan action were to be judged from the standpoint of cost-effectiveness, he must be praised not only as a liberator but, potentially, as a great pacifier.

The Arabs suffered a numbing defeat in Crete. They never recovered from it. It was the beginning of the end of their would-be world dominion. Gradually their power was rolled back from the Byzantine frontiers in Asia Minor. No

longer did they molest the Empire and never since, has Arab fought Greek or coveted Greek territory.

It is no exaggeration to say that the prolonged wars between the two peoples and the final destruction of the Arab will for aggression, brought about a healthy respect of Greek for Arab and Arab for Greek. Gradually a Modus vivendi was reached, contacts and trade increased between them which might have ripened to co-operation and friendship had the West not interfered with Middle-Eastern development. The appearance of the Crusaders on the scene gave a new impetus to Moslem vigour and the story was later taken up by the Ottoman Turks who brought a new dimension of fanaticism to their task of conquest and imposed tyrannic government on the territories of the Byzantine Empire they brought under heel/^{which i.e} was practically ^{on} the entire Byzantine world. Unlike the Arabs, the Turks were not affected by the emollient influences of the civilisation of the Greeks, or of the Arabs, with which they came into contact. They remained stubbornly rooted to their primitive urges for loot and rapine, tyrannised over by their absolutist system of state authority, ^{they erected} and themselves tyrants, until Kemal Ataturk strove manfully to bring them within the European orbit.

Nicephoros's action in Crete was loaded with beneficial potential. Historically, it was justified, though not necessarily in the totality of its details.

THE EMPEROR.

From Crete Nicephoros Phocas, after a short visit to Constantinople, took himself and the bulk of his army to Asia Minor. There, he set upon the task of ^{pushing} ~~driving~~ the Arabs back. It was at the start of this campaign that he found himself in the thick of political intrigue and compelled to mount the throne. Clearly the Palace could not contain him for long. Whatever time was spared to him during the campaigning season he would be with his army. In 964 he crossed the Taurus range to the South. He liberated Cilicia and Cyprus in succession, ^{Cyprus in 965} and in the ^{same} following year he invested Tarsus, the ^{capture} ~~fall~~ of which

would open the way towards Alexandretta and on to Syria. Other of his forces crossed the Euphrates. Everywhere the Arabs were hard pressed. The fall of Tarsus was a major blow. But Nicephoros did not hurry unduly. He wanted to consolidate what he won and leave no fifth-column to rise up in his rear.

Events in Europe compelled him to mark time in the East for a while but in 968 he again assumed command of the army and resumed the offensive. He marched into Syria, occupied Tripoli, Damascus, Aleppo and laid siege to the great city of Antioch, the old hellenistic cultural centre, before returning to Constantinople for the winter. Next year Antioch fell and became Greek after 330 years in Arab hands. The armies marched south and entered Palestine. At this point in time Nicephoros, back in his capital, met a violent end.

As a general, he died undefeated. The only reversal suffered by his army while he was in supreme command was in Sicily where a force, consisting mostly of cavalry led by Nicetas, the liberator of Cyprus, was defeated by the Arabs. Nicetas was taken prisoner. Nicephoros managed to have him freed by sending to his captors the sword of Mahomet which had fallen into his hands in Syria.

~~His luck as a soldier~~^{luck} did not smile on his ~~career~~^{career} as Emperor. He started out with great advantages. He possessed exceptional abilities, had fame, was popular. But he was also a complex personality:- religious mystic, ruthless conqueror, tender husband and father, ^{and} wounded beyond consolation by the loss of his family, spartan warrior, spendthrift on occasions, morose and taciturn but capable of deep feeling. All these were cloaked by unemotional pragmatism.

He was dogged during his imperial career by two disadvantages: by the inability to master the art of saying harsh things gently, i.e. the art of diplomacy, a prerequisite to sycophancy by subordinates which smooths the path of power, and by lack of good "public relations". Other Emperors managed to find the latter in some efficient Ministers or in the Church. Here, Nicephoros failed abysmally. He knew what was needed to be done but did not know how to go about doing it with political expertise. The first major and ultimately ruinous step was his marriage to Theophano. He was 52, she 22. Tongues began

to wag. Many envied Nicephoros both the Basileia and the Basilissa. His confessor, a hermit on Athos, was aghast. He visited Constantinople to remonstrate. Instead of Nicephoros taking monastic vows he became Emperor and got himself a young wife. It was insupportable! Then, there were rumours about incest. A very damaging accusation. Nicephoros, it was alleged, stood god-father to one of Theophano's children and according to canon law, by marrying his god-child's mother he had committed incest. The accusation was widespread and had to be investigated ecclesiastically. It was proved unfounded.

For some not clearly expressed reason the Patriarch who performed the marriage ceremony had second thoughts about it, for soon afterwards he denied the Emperor entrance to the inner sanctum of Agia Sophia - penance for his second marriage. A wave of opposition, the obvious and tut-tutting type, was rising against Nicephoros generated by the clergy. This, to a deeply religious man was doubly wounding.

He retorted by enacting a law to the effect that the consecration of bishops required imperial authority. Whether this was motivated by pique or avarice (to make the bishops pay for their sees, some of which were very wealthy) or by a genuine desire to curb the independence of the Church and combat nepotism in its higher reaches, it is unprofitable to speculate. Perhaps all the factors counted. But here Nicephoros erred. He erred tactically because he antagonised the Church, the second pillar of Byzantine authority and he erred politically because his move was potentially dangerous. It represented the thin edge of the wedge towards absolute monarchy.

Essentially, the Byzantine civilisation was dualistic. There was the State, possessing all legislative and executive power headed by the Emperor; there was the Church which represented and expressed the spiritual life of the people and was the ultimate arbiter in all aspects of human behaviour, headed by the Patriarch. The Church could not formulate policy but could influence it if it chose to do so. All the public actions of the Emperor were ultimately subject to the sanctions of the Church - the sacraments were the Church's and were inalienable. On the other hand, the Emperor could not define dogma but

could, if he chose, offer advice and guidance. He could not interfere with the Church structure and authority without subordinating it to the State.

Any upsetting of this delicate balance of seemingly unequal but in reality harmonising and counter-pointing power would result on the one side in unbridled Caesarism, on the other, in Papism. It is no accident that in its eleven centuries of existence the Byzantine system proved itself proof against the rise of a Hitler or a Stalin. There was no lack of fanatics, cruel persons and pathological degenerates in high places, even the highest, but none could have a free field to violate the common standards of human conduct wholesale, as so many modern dictators have done and are doing. The two legs could not become a monolith without a fundamental and catastrophic restructuring of the State. Consequently, the action of Nicephoros, however well meant, or necessary at a given time, was fraught with incalculable dangers.

Further, Nicephoros tried to restrict the growth of Monasticism and forbade, in general, new foundations and endowments of the monasteries with land. At a period when the Empire - and it must be remembered that it was the only state that represented civilisation in Europe at the time - was facing so many dangers to have so many men withdrawing themselves from production and citizen responsibility could hardly be condoned. Nicephoros did not ^{oppose} ~~deny~~ the monastic idea of prayer and saintliness. He praised the poverty of the Egyptian fore-runners of the monastic orders. Looking around he was incensed by the wealth and luxury of the monasteries of his day. He attacked them harshly. This, unfortunately, only served to increase his enemies even among poor people who saw every criticism of the Church as a sacrilege. We find this hostility bitinglly expressed in Philopatris, an anonymously written satirical dialogue patterned on Lucian, directed against Nicephoros.

Another attempt by Nicephoros to get the Church to declare every person who perished in war fighting infidels a martyr failed - to the credit, of course, of the Church. Killing and sanctification would have become synonymous and as all the enemies of the state would be, or could be called infidels, the Church would

could, if he chose, offer advice and guidance. He could not interfere with the Church structure and authority without subordinating it to the State.

Any upsetting of this delicate balance of seemingly unequal but in reality harmonising and counter-pointing power would result on the one side in unbridled Caesarism, on the other, in Papism. It is no accident that in its eleven centuries of existence the Byzantine system proved itself proof against the rise of a Hitler or a Stalin. There was no lack of fanatics, cruel persons and pathological degenerates in high places, even the highest, but none could have a free field to violate the common standards of human conduct wholesale, as so many modern dictators have done and are doing. The two legs could not become a monolith without a fundamental and catastrophic restructuring of the State. Consequently, the action of Nicephoros, however well meant, or necessary at a given time, was fraught with incalculable dangers.

Further, Nicephoros tried to restrict the growth of Monasticism and forbade, in general, new foundations and endowments of the monasteries with land. At a period when the Empire - and it must be remembered that it was the only state that represented civilisation in Europe at the time - was facing so many dangers to have so many men withdrawing themselves from production and citizen responsibility could hardly be condoned. Nicephoros did not ^{oppose} ~~deny~~ the monastic idea of prayer and saintliness. He praised the poverty of the Egyptian fore-runners of the monastic orders. Looking around he was incensed by the wealth and luxury of the monasteries of his day. He attacked them harshly. This, unfortunately, only served to increase his enemies even among poor people who saw every criticism of the Church as a sacrilege. We find this hostility bitinglly expressed in Philopatris, an anonymously written satirical dialogue patterned on Lucian, directed against Nicephoros.

Another attempt by Nicephoros to get the Church to declare every person who perished in war fighting infidels a martyr failed - to the credit, of course, of the Church. Killing and sanctification would have become synonymous and as all the enemies of the state would be, or could be called infidels, the Church would

have ranged itself automatically behind every war. It would have become an instrument of policy.

At every turn, Nicephoros met with Church opposition, sometimes unquestionably justifiable. His successor repealed his so-called anti-ecclesiastical measures to the satisfaction of the Patriarch. ^{Tzimiskes was not a} ~~He was a man~~ _{to stand against the storm; he} who knew how to bend and even humble himself to win through. Nicephoros's stiff-neckedness was, for him, an example to be avoided!

Unfortunately, Nicephoros did not fare much better in his political enactments. All of them were measures conceived to do justice, alleviate distress and where possible, promote prosperity. Either through bad timing or because of incapacity on the part of those entrusted with their broadcast and application, they did not succeed in having their full effect at the time and in consequence, the requisite historical impact.

Like his predecessors, Nicephoros sought to stabilise the military holdings, stratiotica ktimata. The holders of these lands were obliged to provide a heavily armed horseman for the army. It was of paramount importance for these holdings to be maintained and not to be sold out to magnates or to be fragmented. With their diminution or alienation the obligation they entailed ceased. Recruitment was the inevitable sufferer. Romanos Lecapenos and his successor Constantine VII, forbade the selling of these properties. Nicephoros reactivated this measure and lightened the burden on the poorer section of the farmer-soldiers by raising by a factor of three (from four to twelve gold pounds) the value of property which carried the obligation of military duty.

"It is the people, the large number of humble men who supply the State's needs, pay taxes, meet military charges. Everything breaks down as soon as they fail to keep up these obligations". So, stated Romanos Lecapenos in his Novella of 934 by which he decreed cessation of the alienation of peasant land to the rich. This law came after several years of hardship following the famine of 927. Peasants got into debt and great

numbers of them had to sell their land. Lecapenos tried to right the wrongs already done to so many poor producers by making his law retroactive to the year 927. A courageous act, also necessary. Nicephoros strengthened the law of Lecapenos by making the acquisition of land from the humiliores by the potentiores illegal. No magnate could buy from the peasant either through pressure or by means of straightforward agreement. It was a measure calculated to ensure the continuing economic viability of the peasantry as the backbone of the nation and lift from their horizon the dread of being forcibly sold out. This law rigorously applied at first gradually fell into desuetude.

Simultaneously, but without intending a paradox, Nicephoros decreed that as the rich should not buy out the poor neither should the peasants, i.e. the humiliores, buy out the i.e. the potentiores. This has been generally interpreted by historians as capitulation to the rich, Nicephoros, a landowner himself, had become a magnates' man. Is that so? Usually the fact is glossed over that the forces which ranged themselves in opposition to the Emperor were not the peasants, the monks and the soldiers, that is to say the poor and the virtuous but the church leadership, the rich Church establishments, the rising class of the feudatories, the big merchants and the political establishment. Why this? Perhaps the restriction on the buying and selling of land between classes along with the decisions of Nicephoros to debase the currency and provide cheap money, to curtail the pensions of the courtiers and cut back on largesses to the Court (i.e. the administrative machinery) can provide part, if not the whole of the answer.

How easy it is to ridicule a law forbidding the rich to sell land to the poor or vice versa, preventing the poor from acquiring the land of the rich! It sounds, to say the least, ludicrous. But in the context of the times not only it made sense, it was imperative. Rich landowners, preproperty owners or big money makers in contemporary Great Britain turn themselves into public companies or trusts to escape some of the burdens of taxation and on demise, reduce the amount of death duties. They can issue shares to friends, relatives, employees, keep control of the company if they desire in their own

hands and so preserve their property intact, provide themselves with additional remuneration through expenditure (expense accounts) and pay less in tax, living and dead. This is perfectly legal. But were a British government to forbid the turning of estates into trusts and companies by which the exchequer, that is the tax-paying public loses money and make it illegal for any man, rich or poor, to buy shares in such a company would that be an anti-social and "reactionary" move ?

Large estates during the time of Nicephoros had certain public rights attached to them such as tax gathering, payment of tribute, maintenance of fortresses, supply of troops, upkeep of communications etc. If they fell below a certain level ^{the} ~~of~~ obligations ceased. By making his property over to a monastery under some agreement or other, one could still have it and be rid of all obligations accruing from its possession. Similarly, if one divided his property among a number of tenants under some instalment system which nominally turned the cultivator into freeholder but in fact tied him to the landlord in perpetuity through repayment in the form of mortgage, the result would be the same. One need not assume that the Byzantine magnates and business tycoons of a thousand years ago were less adept in preserving by various "legal" means their wealth and property and of enhancing it than are their modern counterparts.

Nicephoros, to my mind, tried to stop a "legal" loophole which enabled people to "disengage" from their obligations to the state. Power without responsibility, wealth without taxation, ^{weaken significant areas of the state,} Many would have us believe that this was a measure calculated to uphold the social power of the class upon which imperial administration depended. But there is no evidence that the wealthy welcomed the "freezing" of their property and obligations in the interest of the state. Even more violent reaction was produced by the issuing of a new coin, the tetarteron. This was a deliberate policy to create cheap money; to devalue the currency. Devaluation, when judiciously controlled, can stimulate economic activity. Modern states ^{find} ~~found~~ it so. To the Byzantine historians, this well-intentioned economic measure - it would have been ^dcon~~demn~~able if all it aimed at was the amassing of wealth for the court to squander - appeared odious.

~~It was~~ ^{applied to them to be} a violation of public faith, an act tantamount to sacrilege. The honour of the Empire was at stake! What the merchant-adventurers of Constantinople thought of it can well be imagined.

And so the chorus of criticism and obloquy rose to a crescendo. Enemies multiplied. Unfortunately, Nicephoros was not allowed to live long enough to see the effects of what he had decreed. A few more years of power might have demonstrated their validity and made them acceptable. Even so, his short-lived but very activist rule based on rigid pragmatism unencumbered by strict adherence to precedence and dogma, plus his military victories opened up a great period in Byzantine history. He became the founder of the épopée.

It is, I believe, wrong to attribute his downfall to the intrigue of his wife, Theophano, (then nearly 29) ^{with} ~~or by~~ his kinsman Tzimiskes (then 45). Crime passionelle, chercher la femme etc. make good, novelletish reading. But the reasons for the assassinations go deeper. Tzimiskes was a general and a big land owner. Bourtzis, a general, was also immensely wealthy. Both were estranged from the Emperor, but ~~were~~ still very powerful. Discontent found a focal point. Practically the whole of the institutional world of Byzantium ^{had} turned against Nicephoros. The soldiers and the people who supported him could only be of help in the event of a showdown.

This, the conspirators could not contemplate with any hope of success. They aimed not at revolution which must be backed by causes but at assassination. Tzimiskes became the agent of the conspiracy and put himself at its head. Far from Theophano ensnaring him, he made use of her love for him - he may even have set about deliberately to seduce her with that aim in view; his subsequent treatment of her adds colour to this view - to get his men and himself into the palace through the women's quarters. The rest was easy.

Nicephoros died with his imperial work only half-done. A man of remarkable ability, a great captain, he still awaits recognition as a great and, on the whole, humane ruler.

DOROS ALASTOS.