

= John Kourkouas =

John Kourkouas ( Greek : ??????? ????????? , fl. circa 915 ? 946 ) , also transliterated as Kurkuas or Curcuas , was one of the most important generals of the Byzantine Empire . His success in battles against the Muslim states in the East definitively reversed the course of the centuries @-@ long Byzantine ? Arab Wars and began Byzantium 's 10th century " Age of Conquest " .

Kourkouas belonged to a family of Armenian descent that produced several notable Byzantine generals . As commander of an imperial bodyguard regiment , Kourkouas was among the chief supporters of Emperor Romanos I Lekapenos ( reigned 920 ? 944 ) and facilitated the latter 's rise to the throne . In 923 , Kourkouas was appointed commander @-@ in @-@ chief of the Byzantine armies along the eastern frontier , facing the Abbasid Caliphate and the semi @-@ autonomous Muslim border emirates . He kept this post for more than twenty years , overseeing decisive Byzantine military successes that altered the strategic balance in the region .

During the 9th century , Byzantium had gradually recovered its strength and internal stability while the Caliphate had become increasingly impotent and fractured . Under Kourkouas 's leadership , the Byzantine armies advanced deep into Muslim territory for the first time in almost 200 years , expanding the imperial border . The emirates of Melitene and Qaliqala were conquered , extending Byzantine control to the upper Euphrates and over western Armenia . The remaining Iberian and Armenian princes became Byzantine vassals . Kourkouas also played a role in the defeat of a major Rus ' raid in 941 and recovered the Mandylion of Edessa , an important and holy relic believed to depict the face of Jesus Christ . He was dismissed in 944 as a result of the machinations of Romanos Lekapenos 's sons but restored to favour by Emperor Constantine VII ( r . 913 ? 959 ) , serving as imperial ambassador in 946 . His subsequent fate is unknown .

= = Biography = =

= = = Early life and career = = =

John was a scion of the Armenian Kourkouas family ? a Hellenized form of their original surname , Gurgen ( Armenian : ??????? ) ? which had risen to prominence in Byzantine service in the 9th century and established itself as one of the great families of the Anatolian land @-@ holding military aristocracy ( the so @-@ called " dynatoi " ) . John 's namesake grandfather had been a commander of the elite Hikanatoi regiment ( tagma ) under Emperor Basil I ( reigned 867 ? 886 ) ; John 's brother Theophilos became a senior general , as did John 's own son , Romanos , and his great @-@ nephew , John Tzimiskes .

Little is known about John 's early life . His father was a wealthy official in the imperial palace . John himself was born at Dokeia ( now Tokat ) , in the region of Darbidos in the Armeniac Theme , and was educated by one of his relatives , the bishop of Gangra Christopher . In the late regency of Empress Zoe Karbonopsina ( 914 ? 919 ) for her infant son Constantine VII ( r . 913 ? 959 ) , Kourkouas was appointed as the commander of the Vigla palace guard regiment , probably through the machinations of the fellow Armenian , admiral Romanos Lekapenos , as part of his drive for the throne . In this capacity , he arrested several high officials who opposed Lekapenos 's rise to power , opening the road to the appointment of Lekapenos as regent in place of Zoe in 919 . Lekapenos gradually assumed more powers until he was crowned senior emperor in December 920 . As a reward for his support , in ca . 923 , Romanos Lekapenos promoted Kourkouas to the post of Domestic of the Schools , in effect commander @-@ in @-@ chief of all the imperial armies in Anatolia . According to the chronicle of Theophanes Continuatus , Kourkouas held this post for an unparalleled continuous term of 22 years and seven months .

At this time , and following the disastrous Battle of Acheloos in 917 , the Byzantines were mostly occupied in the Balkans against Bulgaria . Hence , Kourkouas 's first task as Domestic of the East was the suppression of the revolt of Bardas Boilas , the governor ( strategos ) of Chaldia , a strategically important area on the Empire 's northeastern Anatolian frontier . This was quickly

achieved and his brother , Theophilos Kourkouas , replaced Boilas as governor of Chaldia . As commander of this northernmost sector of the eastern frontier , Theophilos proved a competent soldier and gave valuable assistance to his brother 's campaigns .

= = = First submission of Melitene , campaigns into Armenia = = =

Following the Muslim conquests of the 7th century , the Arab ? Byzantine conflict had featured constant raids and counter @-@ raids along a relatively static border roughly defined by the line of the Taurus and Anti @-@ Taurus Mountains . Until the 860s , superior Muslim armies had placed the Byzantines on the defensive . Only after 863 , with the victory in the Battle of Lalakaon , did the Byzantines gradually regain some lost ground against the Muslims , launching ever @-@ deeper raids into Syria and Upper Mesopotamia and annexing the Paulician state around Tephrike ( now Divri?i ) . Furthermore , according to historian Mark Whittow , " by 912 the Arabs had been pinned back behind the Taurus and Anti @-@ Taurus " , encouraging the Armenians to switch their allegiance from the Abbasid Caliphate to the Empire , in whose service they entered in increasing numbers . The revival of Byzantine power was further facilitated by the progressive decline of the Abbasid Caliphate itself , particularly under al @-@ Muqtadir ( r . 908 ? 932 ) , when the central government faced several revolts . In the periphery of the Caliphate , the weakening of central control allowed the emergence of semi @-@ autonomous local dynasties . In addition , after the death of the Bulgarian Tsar Simeon in 927 , a peace treaty with the Bulgarians allowed the Empire to shift attention and resources to the East .

By 925 , Romanos Lekapenos felt himself strong enough to demand the payment of tribute from the Muslim cities on the western side of the Euphrates . When they refused , in 926 , Kourkouas led the army across the border . Aided by his brother Theophilos and an Armenian contingent under the strategos of Lykandos , Mleh ( Melias in Greek sources ) , Kourkouas targeted Melitene ( modern Malatya ) , the center of an emirate which had long been a thorn in Byzantium 's side . The Byzantine army successfully stormed the lower city , and although the citadel held out , Kourkouas concluded a treaty by which the emir accepted tributary status .

In 927 ? 928 , Kourkouas launched a large raid into Arab @-@ controlled Armenia . After taking Samosata ( modern Samsat ) , an important stronghold on the Euphrates , the Byzantines advanced as far as the Armenian capital of Dvin . An Arab counter @-@ offensive forced them out of Samosata after only a few days , and Dvin , which was defended by the Sajid general Nasr al @-@ Subuki , successfully withstood the Byzantine siege , until the mounting losses forced the Byzantines to abandon it . At the same time , Thamal , the emir of Tarsus , conducted successful raids into southern Anatolia and neutralized Ibn al @-@ Dahhak , a local Kurdish leader who supported the Byzantines . The Byzantines then turned toward the Kaysite emirate in the region of Lake Van in southern Armenia . Kourkouas 's troops and plundered the region and took the towns of Khliat and Bitlis , where they are said to have replaced the mosque 's minbar with a cross . The local Arabs appealed to the Caliph for aid in vain , prompting an exodus of Muslims from the region . This incursion , more than 500 kilometres ( 310 mi ) from the nearest imperial territory , was a far cry from the defensive @-@ minded strategy Byzantium had followed during the previous centuries and highlighted the new capabilities of the imperial army . Nevertheless , famine in Anatolia and the exigencies of parallel campaigns in southern Italy weakened Kourkouas 's forces . His army was defeated and driven back by Muflih , a former Sajid ghulam and governor of Adharbayjan .

In 930 , Melias 's attack on Samosata was heavily defeated ; among other prominent officers , one of his sons was captured and sent to Baghdad . Later in the same year , John and his brother Theophilos besieged Theodosiopolis ( modern Erzurum ) , the capital of the emirate of Qaliqala . The campaign was complicated by the machinations of their ostensible allies , the Iberian rulers of Tao @-@ Klarjeti . Resenting the extension of direct Byzantine control adjacent to their own borders , the Iberians had already provided supplies to the besieged city . Once the city was invested , they vociferously demanded that the Byzantines hand over several captured towns , but when one of them , the fort of Mastaton , was surrendered , the Iberians promptly returned it to the Arabs . As Kourkouas needed to keep the Iberians placated and was aware that his conduct was being

carefully observed by the Armenian princes , he did not react to this affront . After seven months of siege , Theodosiopolis fell in spring 931 and was transformed into a tributary vassal , while , according to Constantine VII 's *De Administrando Imperio* , all territory north of the river Araxes was given to the Iberian king David II . As in Melitene , the maintenance of Byzantine control over Theodosiopolis proved difficult and the population remained restive . In 939 , it revolted and drove out the Byzantines , and Theophilos Kourkouas could not finally subdue the city until 949 . It was then fully incorporated into the Empire and its Muslim population was expelled and replaced by Greek and Armenian settlers .

= = = Final capture of Melitene = = =

Following the death of Emir Abu Hafs , Melitene renounced its Byzantine allegiance . After attempts to take the city by storm or subterfuge failed , the Byzantines established a ring of fortresses on the hills around the plain of Melitene , and methodically ravaged the area . By early 931 , the inhabitants of Melitene were forced to come to terms : they agreed to tributary status and even undertook to provide a military contingent to campaign alongside the Byzantines .

The other Muslim states were not idle , however : in March , the Byzantines were hit by three successive raids in Anatolia , organized by the Abbasid commander Mu 'nis al @-@ Muzaffar , while in August , a large raid led by Thamal of Tarsus penetrated as far as Ancyra and Amorium and returned with prisoners worth 136 @,@ 000 gold dinars . During this time , the Byzantines were engaged in southern Armenia , aiding the ruler of Vaspurakan , Gagik I , who had rallied the local Armenian princes and allied himself with the Byzantines against the emir of Adharbayjan . There they raided the Kaysite emirate and razed Khliat and Berkri to the ground , before marching into Mesopotamia and capturing Samosata again . Gagik was unable to take advantage of this and capture Kaysite territory , however , as Muflih immediately raided his domains in retaliation . At this point , the Melitenians called upon the Hamdanid rulers of Mosul for help . In response , the Hamdanid prince Sa 'id ibn Hamdan attacked the Byzantines and drove them back : Samosata was abandoned , and in November 931 , the Byzantine garrison withdrew from Melitene as well . Sa 'id was , however , unable to remain in the area or to leave a sufficient garrison ; once he left for Mosul , the Byzantines returned and resumed both the blockade of Melitene and their scorched @-@ earth tactics .

The sources record no major Byzantine external campaigns for 932 , as the Empire was preoccupied with two revolts in the Opsician Theme . In 933 , Kourkouas renewed the attack against Melitene . Mu 'nis al @-@ Muzaffar sent forces to assist the beleaguered city , but in the resulting skirmishes , the Byzantines prevailed and took many prisoners and the Arab army returned home without relieving the city . In early 934 , at the head of 50 @,@ 000 men , Kourkouas again crossed the frontier and marched toward Melitene . The other Muslim states offered no help , preoccupied as they were with the turmoil following Caliph al @-@ Qahir 's deposition . Kourkouas again took Samosata and besieged Melitene . Many of the city 's inhabitants had abandoned it at the news of Kourkouas 's approach and hunger eventually compelled the rest to surrender on 19 May 934 . Wary of the city 's previous rebellions , Kourkouas only allowed those inhabitants to remain who were Christians or agreed to convert to Christianity . Most did so , and he ordered the remainder expelled . Melitene was fully incorporated into the empire , and most of its fertile land was transformed into an imperial estate ( *kouratoreia* ) . This was an unusual move , implemented by Romanos I to prevent the powerful Anatolian landed aristocracy from taking control of the province . It also served to increase direct imperial presence and control on the crucial new borderlands .

= = = Rise of the Hamdanids = = =

The fall of Melitene profoundly shocked the Muslim world : for the first time , a major Muslim city had fallen and been incorporated into the Byzantine Empire . Kourkouas followed this success by subduing parts of the district of Samosata in 936 and razing the city to the ground . Until 938 , the East remained relatively calm . Historians suggest that the Byzantines were likely preoccupied with

the full pacification of Melitene , and the Arab emirates , deprived of any potential support from the Caliphate , were reluctant to provoke them .

With the decline of the Caliphate and its obvious inability to defend its border provinces , a new local dynasty , the Hamdanids , emerged as the principal antagonists of Byzantium in northern Mesopotamia and Syria . They were led by al @-@ Hasan , called Nasir al @-@ Dawla ( " Defender of the State " ) , and by his younger brother Ali , best known by his epithet , Sayf al @-@ Dawla ( " Sword of the State " ) . In ca . 935 , the Arab tribe of Banu Habib , defeated by the rising Hamdanids , defected in its entirety to the Byzantines , converted to Christianity , and placed its 12 @,@ 000 horsemen at the disposal of the Empire . They were settled along the western bank of the Euphrates and assigned to guard five new themes created there : Melitene , Charpezikion , Asmosaton ( Arsamosata ) , Derzene , and Chozanon .

The first Byzantine encounter with Sayf al @-@ Dawla took place in 936 , when he tried to relieve Samosata , but a revolt at home forced him to turn back . In another invasion in 938 , however , he captured the fort of Charpete and defeated Kourkouas 's advance guard , seizing a great amount of booty and forcing Kourkouas to withdraw . In the same year , a peace agreement was signed between Constantinople and the Caliphate . The negotiations were facilitated by the rising power of the Hamdanids , which caused anxiety to both sides . Despite the official peace with the Caliphate , ad hoc warfare continued between the Byzantines and the local Muslim rulers , now aided by the Hamdanids . The Byzantines attempted to besiege Theodosiopolis in 939 , but the siege was abandoned at the news of the approach of Sayf al @-@ Dawla 's relief army .

By that time , the Byzantines had captured Arsamosata and additional strategically important locations in the mountains of southwest Armenia , posing a direct threat to the Muslim emirates around Lake Van . To reverse the situation , in 940 Sayf al @-@ Dawla initiated a remarkable campaign : starting from Mayyafiriqin ( Byzantine Martyropolis ) , he crossed the Bitlis pass into Armenia , where he seized several fortresses and accepted the submission of the local lords , both Muslim and Christian . He ravaged the Byzantine holdings around Theodosiopolis and raided as far as Koloneia , which he besieged until Kourkouas arrived with a relief army and forced him to withdraw . Sayf al @-@ Dawla was not able to follow up on this effort : until 945 , the Hamdanids were preoccupied with internal developments in the Caliphate and with fighting against their rivals in southern Iraq and the Ikhshidids in Syria .

= = = Rus ' raid of 941 = = =

The distraction by the Hamdanids proved fortunate for Byzantium . In early summer 941 , as Kourkouas prepared to resume campaigning in the East , his attention was diverted by an unexpected event : the appearance of a Rus ' fleet that raided the area around Constantinople itself . The Byzantine army and navy were absent from the capital , and the appearance of the Rus ' fleet caused panic among the populace of Constantinople . While the navy and Kourkouas 's army were recalled , a hastily assembled squadron of old ships armed with Greek Fire and placed under the protovestiaros Theophanes defeated the Rus ' fleet on June 11 , forcing it to abandon its course toward the city . The surviving Rus ' landed on the shores of Bithynia and ravaged the defenseless countryside . The patrikios Bardas Phokas hastened to the area with whatever troops he could gather , contained the raiders , and awaited the arrival of Kourkouas 's army . Finally , Kourkouas and his army appeared and fell upon the Rus ' , who had dispersed to plunder the countryside , killing many of them . The survivors retreated to their ships and tried to cross to Thrace under the cover of night . During the crossing , the entire Byzantine navy attacked and annihilated the Rus ' .

= = = Campaigns in Mesopotamia and recovery of the Mandyion = = =

Following this distraction , in January 942 Kourkouas launched a new campaign in the East , which lasted for three years . The first assault fell on the territory of Aleppo , which was thoroughly plundered : at the fall of the town of Hamus , near Aleppo , even Arab sources record the capture of 10 ? 15 @,@ 000 prisoners by the Byzantines . Despite a minor counter @-@ raid by Thamal or

one of his retainers ( ghilman ) from Tarsus in the summer , in autumn Kourkouas launched another major invasion . At the head of an exceptionally large army , some 80 @,@ 000 men according to Arab sources , he crossed from allied Taron into northern Mesopotamia . Mayyafiriqin , Amida , Nisibis , Dara ? places where no Byzantine army had trod since the days of Heraclius 300 years earlier ? were stormed and ravaged . The real aim of these campaigns , however , was Edessa , the repository of the " Holy Mandylion " . This was a cloth believed to have been used by Christ to wipe his face , leaving an imprint of his features , and subsequently given to King Abgar V of Edessa . To the Byzantines , especially after the end of the Iconoclasm period and the restoration of image veneration , it was a relic of profound religious significance . As a result , its capture would provide the Lekapenos regime with an enormous boost in popularity and legitimacy .

Kourkouas assailed Edessa every year from 942 onward and devastated its countryside , as he had done at Melitene . Finally , its emir agreed to a peace , swearing not to raise arms against Byzantium and to hand over the Mandylion in exchange for the return of 200 prisoners . The Mandylion was conveyed to Constantinople , where it arrived on August 15 , 944 , on the feast of the Dormition of the Theotokos . A triumphal entry was staged for the venerated relic , which was then deposited in the Theotokos of the Pharos church , the palatine chapel of the Great Palace . As for Kourkouas , he concluded his campaign by sacking Bithra ( modern Birecik ) and Germanikeia ( modern Kahramanmara? ) .

= = Dismissal and rehabilitation = =

Despite this triumph , the downfall of Kourkouas , as well as of his friend and protector , Emperor Romanos I Lekapenos , was imminent . The two eldest surviving sons of Romanos I , co @-@ emperors Stephen and Constantine , were jealous of Kourkouas and had in the past tried to undermine him , albeit without success . Following the success of Kourkouas in the East , Romanos I considered marrying his trusted general into the imperial family . Kourkouas 's daughter Euphrosyne was to be wedded with the emperor 's grandson , the future Romanos II ( r . 959 ? 963 ) , the son of his son @-@ in @-@ law and junior emperor Constantine VII . Although such a union would effectively cement the loyalty of the army , it would also strengthen the position of the legitimate Macedonian line , represented by Constantine VII , over the imperial claims of Romanos 's own sons . Predictably , Stephen and Constantine opposed this decision and prevailed upon their father , who was by this time old and ill , to dismiss Kourkouas in the autumn of 944 .

Kourkouas was replaced by a certain Pantherios , who was almost immediately defeated by Sayf al @-@ Dawla in December while raiding near Aleppo . On 16 December , Romanos I himself was deposed by Stephen and Constantine and banished to a monastery on the island of Prote . A few weeks later , on 26 January , another coup removed the two young Lekapenoi from power and restored the sole imperial authority to Constantine VII . Kourkouas himself appears to have soon returned to imperial favour : Constantine provided the money for the repair of Kourkouas 's palace after it was damaged by an earthquake , and in early 946 , he is recorded as having been sent with the magistros Kosmas to negotiate a prisoner exchange with the Arabs of Tarsus . Nothing further is known about him .

The fall of the Lekapenoi signalled the end of an era in terms of personalities , but Kourkouas 's expansionist policy continued : he was succeeded as Domestic of the Schools by Bardas Phokas the Elder , followed by Nikephoros Phokas , who reigned as emperor in 963 ? 969 , and finally , by Kourkouas 's own great @-@ nephew , John Tzimiskes , who reigned as emperor in 969 ? 976 . All of them expanded the Byzantine frontier in the East , recovering Cilicia and northern Syria with Antioch , and converting the Hamdanid emirate of Aleppo into a Byzantine protectorate .

= = Assessment = =

Kourkouas ranks among the greatest military leaders Byzantium produced , a fact recognized by the Byzantines themselves : later Byzantine chroniclers hailed him as the general who restored the imperial frontier to the Euphrates , and in a contemporary eight @-@ book history , written by a

protospatharios Michael and now lost save for a short summary in Theophanes Continuatus , he is acclaimed as " a second Trajan or Belisarius " .

The ground work for his successes had certainly been laid by others : Michael III , who broke the power of Melitene at Lalakaon ; Basil I , who destroyed the Paulicians ; Leo VI the Wise , who founded the vital theme of Mesopotamia ; and Empress Zoe , who extended Byzantine influence again into Armenia and founded the theme of Lykandos . It was Kourkouas and his campaigns , however , that incontrovertibly changed the balance of power in the northern Middle East , securing the frontier provinces against Arab raids and turning Byzantium into an expansionist power . In the words of historian Steven Runciman , " a lesser general might [ ... ] have cleared the Empire of the Saracens and successfully defended its borders ; but [ Kourkouas ] did more . He infused a new spirit into the imperial armies , and led them victoriously deep into the country of the infidels . The actual area of his conquests was not so very large ; but they sufficed to reverse the age @-@ old roles of Byzantium and the Arabs . Byzantium now was the aggressor ... [ John Kourkouas ] was the first of a line of great conquerors and as the first is worthy of high praise . "