

= Nikephoros Phokas the Elder =

Nikephoros Phokas ( Greek : ?????????? ?????? , Nik?phoros Ph?kas ; died 895 / 6 or ca . 900 ) , usually surnamed the Elder to distinguish him from his grandson , Emperor Nikephoros II Phokas , was one of the most prominent Byzantine generals of the late 9th century , and the first important member of the Phokas family . As a youth he was taken into the personal retinue of Emperor Basil I the Macedonian , rising quickly to the posts of protostrator and then governor of Charsianon , whence he fought with success against the Arabs . In ca . 886 he led a major expedition in southern Italy , where his victories laid the foundation for the Byzantine resurgence in the peninsula . After his return , he was raised to the post of Domestic of the Schools , in effect commander @-@ in @-@ chief of the army , which he led with success against the Arabs in the east and the Bulgarians of Tsar Simeon in the Balkans . He died either in 895 / 6 or , less likely , sometime ca . 900 . Contemporaries and later historians lauded him for his military ability and character . Both of his sons later succeeded him as Domestics of the Schools . His grandsons Nikephoros and Leo were likewise distinguished generals , while the former became emperor in 963 ? 969 , spearheading the recovery of several lost provinces from the Arabs .

= = Life = =

= = = Early life and career = = =

Nikephoros was the son of the founder of the Phokas family , a man called Phokas , a native of Cappadocia . During one of the campaigns of Emperor Basil I the Macedonian ( reigned 867 ? 886 ) sometime in the 870s ( probably ca . 872 ) , Nikephoros ' father caught the emperor 's attention and was raised to the rank of tourmarches . At the same time Nikephoros , still in his youth , was taken into the imperial retinue , and was soon appointed to the guard corps of the manglabitai . He possibly participated in Basil 's 873 campaign against Samosata .

Shortly after , at any rate before 878 , Nikephoros was promoted to the rank of protostrator and received from the emperor his own palace in the vicinity of the Church of St. Thecla . Eventually he rose to the post of military governor ( strategos ) of the theme of Charsianon , a post from which , according to the continuators of Georgios Monachos , he scored numerous successes against the Arabs .

= = = Command in southern Italy = = =

Nikephoros remained in command of Charsianon until his appointment as the commander @-@ in @-@ chief ( monostrategos , " single @-@ general " ) against the Arabs in southern Italy in replacement of Stephen Maxentios , who had been defeated by the Arabs . This took place in 885 , according to traditional dating . It is likely , however , that Nikephoros was originally sent to Italy already before that , at the head of a picked detachment of troops from Charsianon , which Theophanes Continuatus records as part of Maxentios ' expeditionary force . His command involved the forces of several western themes ( Thrace , Macedonia , Cephallenia , Longobardia and Calabria ) , but Theophanes Continuatus also reports that Nikephoros received further reinforcements from the themes of Asia Minor , including a Paulician detachment . Nikephoros ' command in Italy lasted until his recall to Constantinople following the accession of Leo VI the Wise , in late 886 . Shaun Tougher however posits that Nikephoros was sent to Italy only after the accession of Leo VI , as Leo in his writings takes credit for his dispatch there , and that his recall was not until ca . 887 .

Byzantium had been absent from the affairs of southern Italy for almost a century , but the accession of Basil the Macedonian changed this : from 868 on , the imperial fleet and diplomacy were employed in an effort to secure the Adriatic Sea from Saracen raids , re @-@ establish Byzantine dominance over Dalmatia , and extend Byzantine control once more over parts of Italy .

Otranto was taken from the Saracens in 873 , and Bari in 876 . According to the Byzantine sources , during his tenure in Italy Nikephoros recovered numerous towns taken by the Arabs in the previous years , including Taranto , Bari , Santa Severina , Rhegion and Taormina , Tropai and especially Amantia , which Maxentios had previously attacked without success . According to the continuators of Georgios Monachos , he was besieging Amantia when news came of Emperor Basil 's death and his own recall by Leo VI ; Nikephoros kept the news a secret until he had persuaded the Arab garrison to surrender on guarantee of safe passage . During his time in Italy he also took steps to strengthen the Byzantine position by settling many Armenians in the region , as well as 1 @, @ 000 manumitted slaves donated by Emperor Basil 's old benefactor , the widow Danielis . The 11th @-@ century historian John Skylitzes furthermore reports that Nikephoros brought an end to abuse against the local population , by ending the practice of returning Byzantine soldiers carrying off local Italians to be sold off in the East as slaves . According to Skylitzes , the grateful Italians dedicated a church in his honour . By the time of his departure , he had extended Byzantine control over most of Apulia and Calabria . These victories were followed up by his successors and laid the foundation of a resurgence of Byzantine power in southern Italy , culminating in the establishment of the theme of Longobardia in ca . 892 . The regions of Apulia , Calabria and Basilicata would remain firmly under Byzantine control until the 11th century .

= = = Domestic of the Schools and the war with Bulgaria = = =

His successes in Italy secured Nikephoros a friendly welcome and honours on his return to Constantinople , but he is not mentioned again for several years , until the outbreak of war with Bulgaria in 894 . In the meantime , he was raised to the rank of patrikios and named to the post of Domestic of the Schools , in effect commander @-@ in @-@ chief of the Byzantine army , after the death of his predecessor , Andrew the Scythian .

In 895 , he was sent against the Bulgarians at the head of a large army . It is unclear whether Nikephoros engaged the Bulgarians in battle , for a Byzantine @-@ instigated invasion by the Magyars from the north , and the activities of the Byzantine navy in the Danube , forced the Bulgarian ruler Simeon to ask for a truce , and the Byzantines withdrew .

This is the last campaign associated with Nikephoros Phokas , and Symeon Logothetes reports that he died in 895 / 6 . His death reportedly encouraged Tsar Simeon to reopen hostilities , with devastating success against Nikephoros ' successor as Domestic , Leo Katakalon . The later chronicle of Theophanes Continuatus , however , reports a different story , according to which Nikephoros was disgraced and dismissed from his post after refusing proposals for a marriage alliance with Leo 's powerful chief minister , Stylianos Zaoutzes . After a period out of office , Nikephoros was then appointed strategos either of Charsianon or of the Thracesian Theme , spending his remaining years , until his death around 900 , fighting against the Arabs . Leo VI 's *Tactica* and the later *De velitatione* further mention a successful raid into the Arab lands of Cilicia led by Nikephoros , in retaliation of an Arab attack on the fortress of Mistheia in the Anatolic Theme . While directing the strategoi of the Anatolics and of the Opsician Theme to deal with the Arab invasion , Nikephoros led his forces to raid the vicinity of Adana , making many prisoners , and confounded the Arabs by following a different course on his return , thereby avoiding the Arab army sent to block his retreat . This undated raid probably took place either in the years before or directly after the Bulgarian war .

No definite conclusion as to the date of Nikephoros ' death can be reached today , but most modern scholars , such as Jean @-@ Claude Cheynet , are doubtful of the version of Theophanes Continuatus . It would have been very unusual for a former Domestic to be appointed to the subordinate position of a thematic strategos , and there is reason to doubt the authenticity of the tale of Zaoutzes ' seeing in Nikephoros a potential future emperor and offering the hand of an ? otherwise unknown ? daughter in marriage .

= = = Assessment and family = = =

By all accounts , Nikephoros Phokas was a capable soldier . Leo VI lauds his military talents in his *Tactica* , and he is credited with the invention of a weapon to counter cavalry during his campaign against the Bulgarians , consisting of a sharpened stake driven into the ground . Skylitzes assesses him as a " brave and prudent man , pious towards God and just towards men " .

Nikephoros was the father of Bardas Phokas the Elder and Leo Phokas the Elder , both of whom became Domestics of the Schools . So did his grandsons through Bardas , Nikephoros and Leo Phokas the Younger , with the first becoming emperor as Nikephoros II in 963 ? 969 . Both Leo and Nikephoros II scored major successes against the Arabs , with Nikephoros in particular leading the recovery of Crete , Cyprus , Cilicia and Antioch .