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John Wortley

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JOHN SKYLITZES:

A synopsis of Byzantine history, 811–1057

John Skylitzes' extraordinary Middle Byzantine chronicle covers the reigns of the Byzantine emperors from the death of Nicephorus I in 811 to the deposition of Michael VI in 1057, and provides the only surviving continuous narrative of the late tenth and early eleventh centuries. A high official living in the late eleventh century, Skylitzes used a number of existing Greek histories (some of them no longer extant) to create a digest of the previous three centuries. It is without question the major historical source for the period, cited constantly in modern scholarship, and has never before been available in English. This edition features introductions by Jean-Claude Cheynet and Bernard Flusin, along with extensive notes by Cheynet. It will be an essential and exciting addition to the libraries of all historians of the Byzantine age.

JOHN WORTLEY is Professor of History Emeritus at the University of Manitoba. He has published widely on the Byzantine era, and completed several translations to date, including *Les Récits édifiants de Paul, évêque de Monembasie, et d'autres auteurs* (1987), *The 'Spiritual Meadow' of John Moschos, including the additional tales edited by Nissen and Mioni* (1992), *The spiritually beneficial tales of Paul, Bishop of Monembasia and of other authors* (1996) and *John Skylitzes: A Synopsis of Histories (AD 811–1057)*, a provisional translation published in 2000.

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JOHN SKYLITZES

A Synopsis of Byzantine History, 811–1057

INTRODUCTION, TEXT AND NOTES

TRANSLATED BY

JOHN WORTLEY



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The English translator's Preface

It would be unfortunate if the extraordinary process by which this translation came into being were not noted. A critical edition of Skylitzes' text appeared in 1973, a German translation of the first half of the text shortly after (the second half seems never to have seen the light of day), both the work of Hans Thurn. Thus, since not everybody can read German and even fewer the rather convoluted kind of Greek found in the *Synopsis*, Skylitzes' has literally remained a closed book for many readers. This is unfortunate for, although it is far from being an original work (in fact it consists almost entirely of other men's words), it not only preserves extracts from some sources which have survived in no other form; it also constitutes the unique source for some periods of the Byzantine experience. It was therefore particularly regrettable that this text remained virtually inaccessible to many readers. When therefore the present writer learnt that his Parisian colleagues Bernard Flusin and Jean-Claude Cheynet were proposing to make the work available in French, he suggested to them (and they agreed) that it should be published in English too. A cooperative plan was evolved: it was proposed that Wortley and Flusin should each translate into his own language, then exchange versions, chapter by chapter, so that each could use the other's work to control his own. Meanwhile Cheynet was to produce footnotes for the French edition which would in due course be translated by Wortley for the English publication. Nineteen years after the original agreement was made, all this has finally been accomplished. Since the French translation appeared (in 2003) other works have been published; these have been duly noted by M. Cheynet in the revised footnotes and bibliography that accompany this volume.

The English translator wishes gratefully to acknowledge the unfailing courtesy and kindness of Bernard Flusin and Jean-Claude Cheynet, without whose splendid efforts and patience this work could never have been

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realised. He also wishes to acknowledge and thank others who from time to time have generously offered helping hands, most especially: Margaret Mullett, Catherine McColgan and Robert Jordan in Belfast, Catherine Holmes in Oxford, Rory Egan in Manitoba.

One pondered long and carefully about what to call this book. John Skylitzes described his work simply as ‘a synopsis of histories’. By this he meant a digest of a number of historical writings he had to hand (see his *Proimion*, page 1 below) but it seemed that ‘a synopsis of histories’ would be very puzzling to many a modern reader. Therefore, after much deliberation, *A Synopsis of Byzantine History, 811–1057* was finally selected as an adequate title. It was chosen because it has the triple advantage of being totally comprehensible to the modern reader and of accurately describing the contents of the book, while retaining at least an echo of the original title by retaining the word *synopsis*.

The numbers in square brackets in the text indicate the pages in Thurn’s Greek text.

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Introduction: John Skylitzes, the author and his family

Jean-Claude Cheynet

What little information exists concerning the author of the *Synopsis historion* is all found either in the manuscripts of that work itself or in a few archival documents.¹ He was known by two names: Skylitzes and Thrakesios. There is no doubt that these refer to the same person because the twelfth-century historian John Zonaras, narrating the abdication of Isaac Komnenos (AD 1059) in his *Epitome historion*, makes reference to a passage in which John Thrakesios describes the awesome vision which persuaded that emperor to step down.² His near contemporary George Kedrenos also makes reference to the earlier synopsist in his own *Synopsis* (in which he slavishly follows Skylitzes' account), calling him the protovestiarios John Thrakesios. This name is clearly a reference to the place from which he (or his parents) came: the Thrakesion theme in western Asia Minor.³

John Skylitzes is mentioned in certain legal documents dated 1090 and 1092 as droungarios of the watch (*tes biglas*), a title which at that time designated the principal magistrate of the main judicial tribunal of Constantinople. In 1091⁴ Skylitzes petitioned Alexios Komnenos for elucidation of the *novel* (new law) concerning betrothals, to which he received a reply from the emperor in the following year.⁵ In addition to his appointment as grand droungarios, John also held the post of eparch of Constantinople with the title of proedros. Werner Seibt thinks this was too lowly a title for

¹ There is a short study of this person by W. Seibt, 'Ioannes Skylitzes. Zur Person des Chronisten', *JÖB*, 25 (1976), 81–5.

² John Zonaras III, *Ioannis Zonarae epitomae historiarum*, ed. M. Pinder (CSHB, Bonn, 1897), 18.6.5, 673:4–18.

³ His contemporary, Michael Attaleiates, also bore the name of his place of origin: the city of Attaleia, now Antalya. Had either of them hailed from Thrace (rather than the Thrakesion theme) the appropriate epithet would have been *Thrax* (Thracian), not Thrakesios.

⁴ The date of this act has been commented on at length. It was finally established by P. Wirth: *Regesten der Kaiserurkunden des oströmischen Reiches*, 11, *Regesten von 1025–1204*, ed. F. Dölger and P. Wirth (Munich, 1995), 1162a.

⁵ A. E. Laiou, *Marriage, amour et parenté à Byzance aux XIe–XIIIe siècles* (Paris, 1992), 36.

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such a senior officer at that time. Assuming that a scribe had mistakenly omitted a syllable,⁶ he proposes to amend it to read *protoproedros*, and in fact two years later we find John addressed as *kouropalates* when he received from Alexios Komnenos the solution [*lysis*] to a problem he had raised some months earlier concerning the impediments to marriage.⁷ As Seibt has convincingly demonstrated, Skylitzes could not have exercised the office of *protovestiaros*; this is probably a misreading of an abbreviated form indicating the rank of *protovestis*, even of *protovestarches*.⁸

Briefly: it appears that John Skylitzes (born before 1050) followed a career in the judiciary which led to the highest positions under Alexios Komnenos. He may have survived into the first decade of the twelfth century, or even a little later. It is possible that he was also the author of the work known as *Skylitzes Continuatus* of John Skylitzes.⁹ Nothing is known of his social background; he appears to be the first person bearing that surname to have risen so high in the civil service. As in the case of Michael Psellos and Michael Attaleiates before him, a good education was probably what brought about his social advancement, which it was certainly capable of doing in the eleventh century. John's contemporary, Basil Skylitzes, attained the by no means insignificant dignity of *proedros*. But it was in the following century that the Skylitzes family fortunes achieved their apogee. That was when members of the clan acquired numerous civil and ecclesiastical appointments in the way that was usual at that time for men of learning. We can reconstruct the career of Stephen Skylitzes, metropolitan of Trebizond (who reorganised the church there in the time of John II) from a lament by Prodromos.¹⁰ Stephen's brother was the director of St Paul's school. George Skylitzes, who was the next generation after Stephen, first served under Manuel Komnenos, participating in the synod of 1166 as *protokouropalates* and *grammatikos* (secretary) to the emperor.¹¹ Subsequently, under Andronikos Komnenos, he became *protoasekretes*,¹²

⁶ Seibt, 'Ioannes Skylitzes', 82. The scribe would have simplified the already abbreviated form of the title by reducing (*proto*)(*pro*)*edros* to (*pro*)*edros*.

⁷ Dölger and Wirth, *Regesten*, 1167; see the comments of Laiou, *Mariage*, 30.

⁸ Seibt, 'Ioannes Skylitzes', 83–4.

⁹ *He synecheia tes chronographias tou Ioannou Skylitze*, ed. E. T. Tzolakes (Thessalonike, 1968), 76–99. Tzolakes believes this to be the work of Skylitzes, others disagree.

¹⁰ R. Browning, 'The Patriarchal School at Constantinople in the twelfth century', *B*, 32 (1962), 175–6, repr. R. Browning, *Studies in Byzantine history, literature and education* (London, 1977), x.

¹¹ *PG*, 140, 253.

¹² J. A. van Dieten, *Nicetae Choniatae Orationes et Epistulae* (CFHB, 3, Berlin and New York, 1972), 335. Many of his seals of have survived, one of which has the rare distinction of portraying St George on horseback: Fogg Art 5 Museum no. 573. Another seal reveals that George became *sebastos*: SBS, 3 207.

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head of chancellery. A man of great learning, George was the author of poems, theological works, canons and of a *Life of John of Rila*, the Bulgar saint.¹³ His wife, Anna Eugeniotissa, also pertained to the highest ranks of the civil service.¹⁴ The Skylitzai did not disappear after the turmoil of 1204, for a Theodore Skylitzes was an officer of the treasury at Mourmounta (the region of Miletos) in 1263, in the service of the panhypersebastos George Zagarommates.¹⁵ The last members of the family known in the time of the Palaiologoi did not play any role of great importance.¹⁶

¹³ *ODB* II, 913–14.

¹⁴ S. Lampros, 'Ho Markianos kodix 524', *Neon Hellenomnemon*, 8 (1911), 249.

¹⁵ *PLP*, ed. E. Trapp and H.-V. Beyer (Vienna, 1976–96), no. 26234

¹⁶ *PLP*, ed. Trapp and Beyer, nos 26232–26236

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Re-writing history: John Skylitzes' *Synopsis historion*

Bernard Flusin

John Skylitzes' *Synopsis historion* was written during the reign of Alexios Komnenos (1081–1118), almost certainly towards the end of the eleventh century.¹ It purports to cover the years 811 to 1057: from the death of Nikephoros I to the abdication of Michael VI. From the mid-tenth century onwards it provides a source of major importance for some periods of Byzantine history, an outstanding example being the long reign of Basil II.² It also constitutes an important element in the historiography of Byzantium. Its title reveals the nature of the work: *Synopsis of histories*, meaning a comprehensive digest of historical works already in existence. The author makes no claim to be dealing for the first time with hitherto neglected material, nor does he endeavour to rework in his own way the research which others have already conducted. His task is rather to rewrite the works of his predecessors, combining, harmonising and abridging them. The *Synopsis* is a second-hand work, the work of an author who views history as a literary genre, and of a historian who creates a text on the basis of other histories. The prooimion to the *Synopsis* contains valuable

¹ The first edition of the *Synopsis historion* appeared in 1973: *Ioannis Scylitzae Synopsis historion*, editio princeps, ed. I. Thurn (CFHB, 5, Berlin and New York, 1973). See the comments of G. Fatouros, 'Textkritische Beobachtungen zu Ioannes Skylitzes', *JÖB*, 24 (1975), 91–4. Prior to 1973 Skylitzes' text could be read in the George Kedrenos, *Compendium historiarum*, ed. I. Bekker, 2 vols. (CSHB, Bonn, 1838), of which it forms an integral part. On the continuation of Skylitzes covering the years 1057–79 (almost certainly the work of Skylitzes himself) see below, p. 23. For a general study of the author and his work: G. Moravcsik, *Byzantinoturcica*, 1, *Die byzantinischen Quellen der Geschichte der Türkvolker* (Berlin, 1958), 335–40; H. Hunger, *Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur der Byzantiner* (Munich, 1978), 1, 389–93 (Greek tr. Athens, 1992), 210–16. Contrary to the opinion of this author, we do not think Skylitzes addressed himself to a wide audience: 'Skylitzes could only partially fulfil the promises made in his prologue. This can be excused if we bear in mind that, in common with the other chroniclers, he was writing for a wide public, hence he could not escape the general trend in less serious literature', Hunger, *Literatur der Byzantiner*, 212 in the Greek translation. Neither the continuators of Theophanes nor Skylitzes are in the business of writing popular literature and their work is not to be included under the heading of 'less serious literature'. It is intended for court circles and the upper echelons of the administration, the circles in which those authors lived and moved.

² See C. Holmes, *Basil II and the Governance of Empire (976–1025)* (Oxford, 2005).

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indications of how we are to understand the nature of this undertaking; these must be investigated wherever it is possible to check them by studying the ways in which Skylitzes handled his sources.

THE PROLOGUE (PROOIMION)

The prooimion of the *Synopsis historion*³ is a statement of capital importance in Byzantine historical literature; it has frequently been discussed because it contains the names of certain historians whose works have not survived.⁴ Its importance for us here lies in the fact that in this statement Skylitzes defines the project he is undertaking. First he defines it in a very positive fashion by placing it under the patronage of two authors whose sanctity and excellence he reveres: George the synkellos and Theophanes. Then he defines it in a somewhat negative way by identifying certain historical works of which he is critical. Hence the genre in which Skylitzes intends to operate is not history in the strict sense of the word, but historical digest (*epitome historias*), the genre of George and Theophanes (themselves following in the steps of some older writers of whom our author says nothing, but whom he must not pass over in silence). The works of his two model writers are extant.⁵ They represent, to quote Cyril Mango, 'the most ambitious effort ever made by Byzantine historiography to provide a systematic account of what has befallen humanity'.⁶ As Skylitzes says, one of them covers the period from the creation of the world to the accession of Diocletian; the other from then to the coronation of Leo V (not merely 'until the death of Nikephoros the former genikos'). Thus both the *Synopsis* and Theophanes' narrative (of which the former is the continuation) record the reign of Michael I Rangabe.⁷ The affinity between the

³ Skylitzes, *Synopsis historion*, ed. Thurn, 3–4.

⁴ See (esp.) Théodore Daphnopatès. *Correspondence*, ed. J. Darrouzès and L. G. Westerink (Paris, 1978), 6–7; I Grigoriadis, 'A study of the prooimion of Zonaras' chronicle in relation to the other twelfth-century prooimia', *BZ*, 91 (1998), 327–44, at 338–9; A. Markopoulos, 'Byzantine history writing at the end of the first millennium', *Byzantium in the year 1000*, ed. P. Magdalino (The Medieval Mediterranean, 45, Leiden and Boston, 2003), 192–3.

⁵ Georgii Syncelli *Ecloga Chronographica*, ed. A. A. Mosshammer (Leipzig, 1984), tr. W. Adler and P. Tuffin, *The Chronography of George Synkellos: a Byzantine chronicle of universal history from the creation* (Oxford, 2002); Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. de Boor, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1883–5), tr. C. Mango and R. Scott, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor, Byzantine and Near Eastern History ad 284–813* (Oxford, 1997).

⁶ *Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, ed. Mango and Scott, lii.

⁷ The discrepancy between the true ending of Theophanes' *Chronographia* and the ending alleged by Skylitzes may simply mean that the latter was speaking in general terms. Another possibility is that, because Theophanes wrote before Leo V openly declared himself in favour of iconoclasm, he portrayed that emperor in more favourable colours than Skylitzes was prepared to endorse.

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Chronographia of Theophanes Confessor and the *Ekloge chronographias* of George the synkellos is very close because, when he was dying in 810, George requested Theophanes to continue the work that he was leaving unfinished, bequeathing the material he had collected to his friend.⁸ Although Theophanes' *Chronographia* (completed before 814)⁹ was the sequel to George's work, there are clearly discernible differences between the two. While chronology occupies an important position in both of them, the computation of George the synkellos (derived from a tradition which goes back to Eusebius of Caesarea) is the more scholarly. Yet throughout his *Chronographia* Theophanes, for his part, regularly sets down the year of creation (*anno mundi*), the year of the incarnation (*anno domini*), the indiction, the regnal years of the emperor and of the Sassanid ruler (of the caliph later on), to which he adds the pontifical year of the patriarchs. There is, however, little trace of this chronological aspect of the work of his predecessors in Skylitzes. Sometimes he states the indiction or the year of creation, but there is nothing systematic about the way he does it. This is an important difference, but it is not an innovation on Skylitzes' part. Already in the ninth century Byzantine historiography had left behind the chronological apparatus found in some late antique writers. Indeed from this point of view George the synkellos was already a man of the past.¹⁰ There are, however, other indications that Skylitzes stood in succession to Theophanes, above all the way in which he worked, rifling the available historical texts with the intention of providing a digest of them. Theophanes declares that, in addition to the material bequeathed to him by George the synkellos, he has worked through the history books and made a selection of what they had to offer.¹¹ In the past, when George the synkellos claimed that he had made an abridgement of his sources, he also employed the same term (*synopsis*)¹² that Skylitzes was to use to

Genesios likewise began his *History of the Reigns* with the second year of Michael I: *Iosephi Genesii Regnum libri quattuor*, ed. A. Lesmüller-Werner and J. Thurn (CFHB, 14, Berlin and New York, 1978), 3.

⁸ *Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, ed. Mango and Scott, lv.

⁹ *Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, ed. Mango and Scott, lvii.

¹⁰ *Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, ed. Mango and Scott, lii. Neither Joseph Genesios nor the continuators of Theophanes in the tenth century made any effort to establish a systematic chronology.

¹¹ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. de Boor, 1:4; tr. *Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, ed. Mango and Scott, 2.

¹² 'I have noted this in brief [ἐν συντόμῳ] in the so-called *Life of Adam* ... on the basis of other *Origins*, of the Scriptures inspired by God and of the best known historical records which succeeded them. It is from those sources that I have gleaned most of the events described (with the exception of a few events that have taken place in our own times), events of which I will attempt to make a *synopsis*', George Synkellos, ed. Mosshammer, 5–6.

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describe his own work. There is the matter of style too: 'simple, unaffected language, touching exclusively on the substance of the events which had taken place', meaning narrative written so that it might be clearly understood. On this point 'chronography' is to be distinguished from sophisticated history, whose rhetorical pretensions march off in a different direction. Of course Skylitzes is not content merely to follow the examples of George and Theophanes. While he continues their work, it is clear that in his own eyes the *Synopsis* he is compiling is no more than a section of a chronography which others had begun; a chronography that started with the creation of the world and that others in turn will carry forward.

The idea of continuing the work of Theophanes was not a new one in the eleventh century nor was it the exclusive property of Skylitzes. He was well aware that during the period covering almost three centuries between the reign of Leo V and his own time there were those who had preceded him. He knew of them, but considered them unsatisfactory. We can follow in his footsteps by dividing these predecessors into two groups, the first of which would include 'Sikeleiotēs grammatikos' (meaning Theognostos),¹³ Psellos and 'some others', who remain anonymous. Now the two names just mentioned are not names one would have expected. Theognostos' work, dating probably from 820–30, is lost to us. We only know of it because the so-called 'continuators of Theophanes'¹⁴ made use of it to report an event which occurred in Sicily (the passage is found in Skylitzes too).¹⁵ It is even more surprising to find Michael Psellos in this context. The *Chronographia*, so brilliant and personal, which we owe to this author, has none of the dryness for which he is reproved.¹⁶ The solution could be that it is to another work of Psellos that reference is made here, his *Historia syntomos* (Short History), which better fits the description

¹³ For Markopoulos, 'Byzantine history writing', 193, 'Sikeliotēs *didaskalos* is surely a phantom', yet it appears that he can now be definitively identified. On Theognostos, author of a treaty on orthography and also of a history (now lost) that was a source used by the continuators of Theophanes: Hunger, *Literatur der Byzantiner*, I, 340, Greek tr., II, 144.

¹⁴ *Scriptores post Theophanem*, ed. I Bekker (CSHB, Bonn, 1838), 1–1481. See Hunger, *Literatur der Byzantiner*, I, 339–43, Greek tr., II, 143–8.

¹⁵ The event is the attempted usurpation of Euphemios in Sicily in the reign of Michael II: *Theophanes Continuatus*, ed. I. Bekker (CSHB, Bonn, 1838), 81–3 (Theognostos is identified as the source of this information, 82, lines 17–20); Skylitzes, *Synopsis historion*, ed. Thurn, Michael II, ch. 20, 45–6. On this episode, its date and the account of Theognostos, see M. Níchanian, V. Prigent, 'Les stratèges de Sicile. De la naissance du thème au règne de Léon V', *REB* 61 (2003) 97–141, especially 129–30 and note 229.

¹⁶ Michel Psellos, *Chronographie ou histoire d'un siècle de Byzance (976–1077)*, ed. tr. E. Renauld, 2 vols. (Paris, 1920); *Fourteen Byzantine rulers: the Chronographia of Michael Psellus*, tr. E. R. A. Sewter (London and Newhaven, CT, 1953); Michele Psello. *Imperatori di Bisanzio (Cronografia)*, ed. S. Impellizzeri, U. Criscuolo, tr. S. Ronchey, 2 vols., (Fondazione Valla, 1984)

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given of it in Skylitzes' prologue.¹⁷ So far as Skylitzes is concerned, these bumbling continuators of Theophanes have done little more than set out lists of emperors, either omitting the most important events or distorting those they include. Brutal criticism! Nor is the second group of authors – ten in all – spared, though we are in no position to appreciate the validity of the charges made by Skylitzes against them as six of the ten are scarcely more than names for us today.¹⁸ The works of two of those writers are still extant. *Reigns* (*Peri basileion*), composed by Joseph Genesios at the command of Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos,¹⁹ can indeed be considered as a continuation of Theophanes as far as it goes, for it commences where Theophanes left off. The *History* (*Historia*) of Leo the Deacon (or Leo of Asia, as Skylitzes calls him) was written at the end of the tenth century. It covers the reigns of Nikephoros Phokas and John Tzimiskes.²⁰ The two remaining names are problematic. Theodore Daphnopates is a known writer of the reign of Constantine VII, but we possess no historical writing under his name. It is possible that a part of the sixth book of *Theophanes Continuatus* is to be attributed to him: this matter is still under discussion.²¹ A similar problem arises in the case of Niketas the Paphlagonian,

¹⁷ The specialists, however, are still discussing this point. J. N. Ljubarskij, *Mihail Psell. Lichnosti i tvortchestvo* (Moscow, 1978), 177, sees the then unedited *Historia syntomos* of Psellos as the work of that author which Skylitzes criticises, and his opinion is shared by K. Snipes, 'A newly discovered history of the Roman emperors by Michael Psellos', *XVI. Internat. Byzantinistenkongress. Akten* II/3, = *JÖB*, 32/33 (1982), 53–61, esp. 55. The first editor of the work in question, W. J. Aerts, challenges this opinion. For him the criticisms of Skylitzes are inappropriate to Psellos and in any case it is by no means certain that Psellos is the author of the *Historia syntomos*; Aerts even tries to attribute it to the other writer mentioned by Skylitzes in this passage of the prooimion, the 'schoolmaster of Sicily': *Michaelis Pselli Historia Syntomos. Editio princeps*, ed. tr. and commentary W. J. Aerts (CFHB, 30, Berlin and New York, 1990), X–XIII. While Aerts' arguments are less than convincing, he has nevertheless cast serious doubts on the attribution of the *Historia syntomos* to Psellos.

¹⁸ These are: Manuel of Byzantium, the author of a work dealing with John Kourkouas; a Phrygian known as Nikephoros the Deacon; three bishops, Theodore of Side, Theodore of Sebastaea and Demetrios of Kyzikos, and the monk John the Lydian, not to be confused with the sixth-century writer of that name. See below on Theodore of Sabastaea.

¹⁹ In his prologue, Genesios, ed. Lesmüller-Werner and Thurn, 3, Genesios claims to have written at the command of Constantine VII: 'It was from the emperor Constantine who by nature and by choice loves that which is good, the most learned of emperors who ever existed, son of the most wise Leo, that sovereign of eternal memory, that I received the command to secure in writing the events that had taken place in and since the reign of Leo [V] the Amalekite (whose godlessness sated his soul), and that had not yet been collected into a history book.'

²⁰ Leo the Deacon, *Leonis Diaconi Caloënsis historiae libri decem*, ed. C. B. Hase (CSHB, Bonn, 1828)

²¹ Hunger, *Literatur der Byzantiner*, I, 343, Greek tr., II, 147, endorses the opinion of A. Kazhdan, *Iz istorii vizantijskoj bronografii*, Xv, 19, (1961), 91–6, who thinks that the attribution of a portion of Book VI of *Theophanes Continuatus* to Daphnopates is not without foundation. The opposite opinion is expressed by A. Markopoulos, 'Théodore Daphnopates et la continuation de Théophane',

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a somewhat verbose writer of the end of the ninth and the beginning of the tenth centuries: none of the writings by him which have survived is of a historical nature.²² Some scholars have proposed to recognise as the work of Niketas mentioned in Skylitzes' prologue a *Life of the patriarch Ignatios* written at the end of the ninth century.²³ This (they say) is what he is referring to when he mentions 'a pamphlet directed against a patriarch' [*psogos patriarchou*], for it contains some violent attacks on the patriarch Photios.²⁴ It seems more likely though that the Prologue refers to some historical work by Niketas of which there is some evidence, and which A. Markopoulos has even suggested might be an anonymous ecclesiastical history mentioned in Codex Baroccianus graec. 142.²⁵

Skylitzes levels a variety of charges against these authors, all of which boil down to their having moved too far from the spirit of George the synkellos and of Theophanes. They have concerned themselves with their own times or with the recent past (he alleges). Rather than producing the kind of 'historical digest' beloved of Skylitzes, they have played the historian and, allowing their prejudices to sway their judgement, written what from a classical point of view should be carefully differentiated: commendation [*epainos*], eulogy [*enkomion*] and censure [*psogos*]. The reader is thus plunged into confusion; not only are these historical discourses too heavy but also, given the prejudices of the writers, the facts are unreliable.

Judging by the works which have survived, Skylitzes' allegations are sometimes valid. Genesis' *Reigns* is not particularly at fault (or scarcely more so than the *Synopsis*), but the first part of the *Historia* of Leo the Deacon is frankly a eulogy for the emperor Nikephoros Phokas. This is precisely what Skylitzes wants to avoid. He wants to get back to the digest, the *synopsis*, pure and simple, along the lines laid down by George the synkellos and Theophanes the Confessor, in the true spirit of Byzantium;

JÖB, 35 (1985), 171–82. The matter is fully aired in *Théodore Daphnopatès. Correspondence*, ed. J. Darrouzès and L. G. Westerink (Paris, 1978), 6–10, where the attribution of all or part of *Theophanes Continuatus* to Daphnopates is rejected.

²² S. A. Paschalides, *Νικέτας Δαβίδ Παφλάγων, τὸ πρόσωπο καὶ τὸ ἔργο του* (Thessalonike, 1999).

²³ BHG 817, PG 105:488–574

²⁴ This is the opinion of R. J. H. Jenkins, 'A note on Nicetas David Paphlago and the *Vita Ignatii*', *DOP*, 19 (1965), 241–7. The text of the *Vita Ignatii* (BHG 817) is in PG, 105, 488–574. An unpublished dissertation by A. Smithies, 'Nicetas David Paphlago's Life of Ignatius, a critical edition and translation' (Washington, DC, 1987), proved inaccessible.

²⁵ A. Markopoulos, 'He chronographia tou Pseudosymeon kai hoi peges tes' (dissertation) University of Joannina, 1978, 132 and n. 48. See the contrary opinion of F. Winkelmann, 'Hat Niketas David Paphlagon ein umfassendes Geschichtswerk verfasst?', *JÖB*, 37 (1987), 137–52. The matter is all laid out in Paschalides, *Niketas David Paphlagon*, 253–8.

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the kind of work to which (for example) the name of Constantine Porphyrogenetos is attached²⁶ and of which the reader can easily grasp the meaning. But he also wants to handle his sources critically, in order to present a clearer picture of the facts; that is, by discarding anything which might have been generated by the writer's emotions and everything that smacks of the miraculous.

The modest claims made for his work by Skylitzes need not, however, be taken too seriously. For if the history is a simple digest, a mere manual to prepare the reader for more serious works, an aide-mémoire, it is also a remedy for all the pernicious elements in historiography. Skylitzes does not merely make use of the work of his predecessors: he claims to correct it.

THE SOURCES

Skylitzes names fourteen sources in his prologue; this, however, does not necessarily mean that he used all of them or that he used *only* those sources. No systematic investigation has yet been conducted into the sources of the *Synopsis*; the matter is complicated by the fact that many of the texts which were available at the end of the eleventh century have since been lost.²⁷ Here is a summary of what is generally admitted, with some personal remarks interspersed.

At the beginning of the *Synopsis*, for the reigns of Michael I Rangabe and Leo V the Armenian, Skylitzes used an unidentified source²⁸ at first (for Michael I), then he made free use of the work Joseph Genesios wrote at the command of the emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos (944–59), *Reigns (Peri Basileion)*, each of the five chapters of which is devoted to a separate emperor: Leo V, Michael II, Theophilos, Michael III and Basil I. Skylitzes was still using this source when he described the beginning of the reign of Michael III.²⁹

Very soon, however, in fact from the reign of Leo V, he makes use of another source, the so-called *Theophanes Continuatus*, which rapidly gains

²⁶ In the preface to each chapter of the Constantinian *Excerpta* the compilers (who were following the instructions of Constantine VII) complain of the excessive bulk of the historical works, a defect which it was their function to correct. There is a French translation of this prologue in P. Lemerle, *Le premier humanisme byzantin* (Paris, 1971), 281–2. The editors of the *Excerpta* dealt with the overwhelming mass of their sources by extracting passages from it and arranging them in a systematic order.

²⁷ The remarks of F. Hirsch, *Byzantinische Studien* (Leipzig, 1876), 356–75, are basic to this question; see also Holmes, *Basil II*.

²⁸ See Hirsch, *Byzantinische Studien*, 362–4.

²⁹ On Genesios see notes and above. For Skylitzes, *Synopsis historion*, ed. Thurn, Michael III, ch. 1, 81 (107 below), the source is not the equivalent passage in *Theophanes Continuatus*, but the one

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precedence to the extent that the *Synopsis* often looks like an abridgement of it. *Theophanes Continuatus* is another work composed at the instigation of Constantine VII by his collaborators, and in the case of Book V (the *Life of Basil I/Vita Basilii*) by that emperor himself using material that he had assembled.³⁰ *Theophanes Continuatus* consists of six books, five of which deal each with a single emperor (as in the case of *Genesios*), from Leo V to Basil I, while Book VI (a later composition) deals with several reigns: Leo VI, Alexander, Constantine VII with Romanos I Lekapenos, followed by the personal reigns of Constantine VII and Romanos II until 961.

The fifth book of *Theophanes Continuatus* is of particular importance, for it is a *Life of Basil* [I] written by (or – as its title suggests – composed from material assembled by) Constantine VII. Its object is to bring the character of the founder of the Macedonian dynasty, Constantine's own grandfather, to the notice of the public. Skylitzes makes massive use of *Theophanes Continuatus* right down to the end of the first part of Book VI, to the conclusion of the reign of Romanos Lekapenos. It is truly surprising that he apparently failed to mention this source, to which he owes so much, in his prologue; a source that the *Synopsis* he is writing (it too a continuation of *Theophanes*) so closely resembles. It is this failure that leads one to think that Theodore Daphnopates – whom Skylitzes *does* mention – could have been the author of a portion of *Theophanes Continuatus*.³¹ Yet even in the part of his work under consideration it is noticeable that Skylitzes has drawn on sources other than his principal one. As noted above, the influence of *Genesios* can still be detected at the beginning of the reign of Michael III; after the siege of Amorion in the

in *Genesios*, which has been somewhat rewritten. Skylitzes, *Synopsis historion*, Michael III, ch. 2, 81–4, contains at least one piece of information mentioned only by him (John the Grammarian marking his backside with lead to give the impression that he had suffered a beating). In *Theophanes Continuatus* he cuts the veins of his belly; nothing resembling this is to be found in *Genesios*. For ch. 3, Skylitzes, *Synopsis historion*, ed. Thurn, 84–6, the same thing applies as for ch. 1. For ch. 4, Skylitzes, *Synopsis historion*, ed. Thurn, 86–8, the *Synopsis* is far removed from the text of *Theophanes Continuatus*; less remote from *Genesios* perhaps, but certainly re-written. It is only from ch. 5 that Skylitzes seems to rely exclusively on the continuators of *Theophanes*, and there are still points at which questions arise, e.g. the end of ch. 9, Skylitzes, *Synopsis historion*, ed. Thurn, 96, or in ch. 16, Skylitzes, *Synopsis historion*, ed. Thurn, 105, giving the list of professors appointed to the Magnaura by Caesar Bardas.

³⁰ *Theophanes Continuatus*, ed. I. Bekker (CSHB, Bonn, 1838). On the question of the authorship of the *Vita Basilii* and the doubts sometimes expressed: I. Ševčenko, 'Storia Letteraria', *La Civiltà Bizantina dal IX all'XI secolo. Aspetti e problemi* (Corsi di Studi 11, 1977, Bari, 1978), 99–101.

³¹ This matter is not yet decided (cf. n. 37): see P. Frei, 'Das Geschichtswerk des Theodoros Daphnopates als Quelle der *Synopsis Historiarum* des Johannes Skylitzes' in E. Ploickinger (ed.), *Lebendige Altertumswissenschaft: Festgabe zur Vollendung des 70. Lebensjahres von Herman Vettiers*, Vienna 1985, 348–53, who tries to show that the historical work of Daphnopates used by Skylitzes is not *Theophanes Continuatus*, vi.

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reign of Theophilos, he seems to be using some text independent both of *Theophanes Continuatus* and of Genesios, unless (as F. Hirsch suggests) he has thoroughly re-worked those sources.³² Then there are several events described in the reign of Romanos Lekapenos which have no parallel in the work of the other continuators (such as the stratagem by which the patriarch Tryphon was obliged to abdicate).³³ It is events such as these that made Hirsch think that Skylitzes was using some source(s) in addition to *Theophanes Continuatus*.³⁴

For the personal reigns of Constantine VII and Romanos II, Skylitzes abandons the continuators of Theophanes, possibly because their work smacked too much of encomium for his liking.³⁵ He turns now to another source, one that is very difficult to identify. This source is critical of Constantine VII and is possibly the ‘source A’ which we are about to discuss. For the great warrior emperors Nikephoros Phokas and John Tzimiskes, the narrative runs more or less parallel (certainly for the reign of Phokas) to the ten books of the *Historia* which Leo the Deacon wrote before 992, covering the period from the death of Constantine VII in 959 to the death of Tzimiskes in 976. Since Skylitzes mentions Leo the Deacon (calling him ‘Leo of Asia’) in his prologue and since several pages of the *Synopsis* run parallel to Leo’s *Historia*, the temptation is to conclude that one used the other. The work of Sjużjumov, taken up and completed by Alexander Kazhdan, shows, however, that the situation is much more complicated than that.³⁶ An analysis of the *Synopsis* reveals that the author has used two different sources here, the first of which [A] is a text which is hostile to the Phokas family. Its presence can already be detected in the reign of Constantine VII, who is presented in a very inauspicious light. He is severely censured for failing to appoint adequate persons to senior posts in the government. There are criticisms of Nikephoros Phokas too, but John Tzimiskes gets off more lightly. The person whom the author of source A most favours is not an emperor at all; it is the patriarch Polyeuktos. Kazhdan thinks that this source was composed shortly before AD 1000 by somebody who had lived through the events he narrates,

³² Hirsch, *Byzantinische Studien*, 369.

³³ Reign of Romanos Lakapenos, c. 26. Skylitzes, *Synopsis historion*, ed. Thurn, 226–7.

³⁴ Hirsch, *Byzantinische Studien*, 372–3.

³⁵ It is possible that Skylitzes simply did not know the second part of *Theophanes Continuatus*, v1, which was written later than the first part.

³⁶ A. P. Sjużjumov, ‘Ob istochnikah L’va Djakona i Skilicy’, *Visantijskoe obozrenie*, 2 (1916), 106–66; A. P. Kazhdan, ‘Iz istorii visantijskoj hronografii X. v. Istochniki l’va Diakona i Skilicy dlja istorii tret’ej chestverti X stoletija’, *VV*, 20 (1961), 106–28. C. Zuckerman is warmly thanked for translating this article into French.

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sometimes recording his own memories, sometimes what others were saying. The second source [B] is a very different matter. It is favourable not only to the emperor Nikephoros II, but to the entire Phokas family, from which the detailed information on Italo-Byzantine relations must have come. Source B was used by Leo the Deacon too, which explains the parallels that can be found between his work and Skylitzes'. These come to an end with the death of Nikephoros Phokas, for Skylitzes abandons source B and uses source A for the reign of John Tzimiskes. Szuzjumov (who first drew attention to the existence of source B) thought that this would have been written during the reign of Basil II, subsequent to the fall of Basil Lekapenos, the parakoimomenos; but Kazhdan thinks it should be dated prior to the assassination of Phokas in 969 since Tzimiskes, who was one of the murderers, is presented in a favourable light. J. Shepard has suggested that he also used a war journal³⁷ for the reign of Tzimiskes, but it is difficult to know whether this was a direct or an indirect source.

The question of the sources of the *Synopsis historion* takes on a different aspect with the beginning of the personal reign of Basil II.³⁸ Sometimes Skylitzes' text is unique (which gives it a special value); sometimes it runs parallel to pre-existing texts such as the *Chronographia* of Michael Psellos. But if Skylitzes knew these works, he did not make use of them and his sources are lost. Indeed, his reign of Basil II (for which he is a witness of prime importance) seems to have been inspired by a work of the Theodore of Sebasteia mentioned in the prologue, now lost.³⁹ As for what comes after, Jonathan Shepard has emphasised the quality of the information which Skylitzes has at his disposal on the person of Katakalon Kekaumenos, beginning in the reign of Michael IV the Paphlagonian.⁴⁰ This could indicate that he was using some work, maybe autobiographical, maybe not, which was centred on that great man. Skylitzes was able to use it right to the end of the *Synopsis*, until his narrative of the revolt of the military chiefs that terminated the reign of Michael VI the elder. As for the concluding passages of his work, the possibility should not be excluded of Skylitzes having had recourse to oral witnesses, as he says in his prologue.

³⁷ Holmes, *Basil II*, 95 and note 63. ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 120–70.

³⁹ See Hunger, *Literatur der Byzantiner*, I, 391, Greek tr., 11, 213, referring to B. Prokić, *Die Zusätze in der Handschrift des Johannes Skylitzes codex Vindobensis hist. Gr. LXXIV. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des sog. Wesbulgarischen Reiches* (Munich, 1906), 23. In a 12th-cent. *Traité des transferts* there is a reference to Theodore of Sabastaea 'who composed the *chronikon biblion* of Sire Basil Porphyrogenitos': J. Darrouzès, 'Le traité des transferts', *REB* 42 (1984) 181.

⁴⁰ J. Shepard, 'A suspected source of Skylitzes' *Synopsis Historion*: the great Catakalon Cekaumenos', *BGMS*, 16 (1992), 171–81; J. Shepard, 'Skylitzes on Armenia in the 1040s, and the Role of Catakalon Cekaumenos', *REArm.*, n.s. 11 (1975–6), 269–311.

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In its entirety, Skylitzes' *Synopsis* is thus dependent upon the very small number of written works which he had to hand. For the most part (insofar as it is possible to tell) he uses a main source, sometimes only a single source, such as the *Vita Basilii* or one of the other books of *Theophanes Continuatus*, so that the source text runs parallel with his and sometimes the rewriting is very slight indeed.⁴¹ His is no 'metaphrastic version', whose author has felt obliged systematically to revise the vocabulary of the original text. Entire phrases are reproduced with some slight change in the order of words, which earned him the rather severe condemnation of Hans Thurn:

For a long time we have made the mistake of over-estimating Skylitzes. There are long sections in which he does nothing more than paraphrase a single source; and, when he does offer some supplementary information, there is good reason to be cautious because it is by no means certain that he is making use of other sources in such places. Often all he offers is embellishment (e.g. in the description of battles) or even imagination. In this respect I totally agree with the conclusions of D. I. Polemis.⁴²

This judgment is not inaccurate so far as the first part of the *Synopsis* is concerned – that is, the part which depends on the continuators of Theophanes – but it should not be applied to the complete work too hastily. There are passages in which the editing process is thorough enough to make one hesitate and ask: did Skylitzes not have some other sources at his disposal? As we have seen, at the beginning of the *Synopsis* and then, more especially, in the reign of Nikephoros Phokas, when he is using 'source A' and 'source B', he is not (or at least not always) content to base his narrative on a single source. He is not able to make simultaneous use of two sources tending in opposite directions without a certain lack of coordination. Kazhdan has succeeded in noting a number of doublets, contradictions, and even some references that appear to go nowhere.

⁴¹ On the literary aspects of Skylitzes' work, see C. Holmes, 'The rhetorical structures of John Skylitzes' *Synopsis Historion*', *Rhetoric in Byzantium*, ed. E. Jeffreys (SPBS, 11, Aldershot, 2003), 187–99.

⁴² H. Thurn, p. xxxiii, referring to D. I. Polemis, 'Some cases of erroneous identification in the chronicle of Skylitzes', *BS*, 26 (1965), 74–81, that examines an interesting phenomenon: in the earlier part of the *Synopsis*, down to 948, where Skylitzes is using the sources that have survived (*Theophanes Continuatus*, *Genesios* and 'a recension of Symeon the Logothete') there are places where he provides additional information (such as Christian names) that is not found in the texts he is using. Polemis' hypothesis is that Skylitzes is not dependent on other sources for this information, but that he has gone in search of it himself (and sometimes has got it wrong). Without examining the soundness of this hypothesis, one can say that the idea of Skylitzes having made a personal effort to complete his sources is attractive. C. Holmes (*Basil II*) tends to assign him 'an active authorial role' (p.130) but for the sections where Skylitzes' sources are lost it is always difficult to know whether one is reading a source or his own composition.

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It is very difficult to tell whether Skylitzes' modifications follow a set pattern. At times there seems to be some system or a definite direction in the selections he makes from the source he is using. Thus, in the reign of Romanos Lekapenos, he has omitted the erudite digressions found in Book VI of *Theophanes Continuatus*: passages that certainly had no place in the kind of abridged history that he had in mind.⁴³ He has also avoided the eulogistic element that is so often to the fore in his source for this reign. Many details favourable to Kourkouas, to Theophanes the parakoimomenos and even to Romanos I himself are passed over in silence. In the reign of Basil I (where he follows the *Vita Basilii* very closely, abridging it as he goes along) there are certain omissions that also seem to be according to some plan. A number of advances made under Constantine VII are omitted, presumably because they smacked too much of eulogy.⁴⁴ So too are some other passages, possibly because they were considered too implausible, for instance the effects of the emperor's vows on the war against the Manichees.⁴⁵ Thus Skylitzes seems to have remained faithful to the principles set out in his prologue⁴⁶ and certainly not to have used his sources uncritically.

THE HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

It is not only the content of his narrative that Skylitzes borrows from his predecessors; he found a connecting thread in them (or, at least in some of them) by which the *Synopsis* is held together: it is not difficult to spot what it is. The title that Joseph Genesios set at the head of his work exactly describes what Skylitzes also wrote: a *History of the Reigns*. It begins (as the title and the opening words claim) immediately after the death of one emperor (Nikephoros I) and ends with the deposition of another one (Michael VI). At least in outward appearance it is divided into reigns of different lengths, ranging from a few pages (e.g. Michael I, Romanos II or Michael V, not to mention one of the only two empresses who ruled in their

⁴³ For an analysis of Skylitzes' treatment of the reign of Romanos I: Holmes, *Basil II*, 125–52.

⁴⁴ e.g. Basil I, chs. 29 and 38, Skylitzes, *Synopsis historion*, ed. Thurn, 151–2 and 160, *Vita Basilii*, chs. 59 and 72, where passages in praise of Basil have been omitted. On the other hand, in Basil I, ch. 26, Skylitzes, *Synopsis historion*, ed. Thurn, 145–7, Skylitzes has omitted the insulting epithets applied to Michael III in *Vita Basilii*, ch. 55.

⁴⁵ The story in the *Vita Basilii*, chs. 41–3 (CSHB), 271–6, portrays the emperor's vows as an essential cause of the imperial victory over the Manichees. It ends with the striking figure of Basil letting fly three arrows at the detached head of Chrysocheir which has been sent to him; there is nothing of this in Skylitzes: Basil I, chs. 18–19, Skylitzes, *Synopsis historion*, ed. Thurn, 135–40.

⁴⁶ For a contrary opinion, see Hirsch, *Byzantinische Studien*, 374.

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own right, Theodora) to as much as forty pages: Basil II Bulgaroktonos and Constantine IX Monomachos. In this way the reigns of the emperors provide an outer framework for the *Synopsis* that actually becomes less rigid at times, for example, when a prince ‘born in the purple’ but too young to rule is supplanted by a successful usurper. Thus Constantine VII, who held the title of *autokrator* on the death of his father, Leo VI, was kept in the background for many years by Romanos I Lekapenos until he seized control of the government and then exercised his personal authority for some years, 944–59. The same is true of the brothers Basil II and Constantine VIII, both emperor in name, but abandoning the supreme position in the empire first to Nikephoros Phokas, then to John Tzimiskes, before reigning (theoretically) together until Constantine VIII became sole emperor on the death of his brother in 1025. The division into reigns does not interrupt the narrative; it comes as no surprise (for instance) to find the portrait of Romanos II at the beginning of the reign of Basil and Constantine.⁴⁷

There is yet another reason for seeing the *Synopsis* as a ‘history of the reigns’: as the narrative proceeds, everything is organised around the ruling emperor, the *autokrator*. There is nothing, or at least hardly anything, said here about the many events which took place in detachment from the sovereign. Even natural occurrences such as comets, earthquakes, famines, the appearance of conjoined twins and so forth are interpreted as signs of divine approval or censure of this or that emperor. And because his work is organised around the emperor, Skylitzes limits himself to those parts where the emperor’s writ ran. For him time is defined by the reigns, space by the extent of the empire.

Because it is divided into reigns and focused on the emperor, in common with several other Byzantine historical works, Skylitzes’ *Synopsis* bears some resemblance to another literary genre well defined in rhetoric, the *basilikos logos*, ‘in praise of the sovereign’. This is especially true of the *Vita Basilii* which Skylitzes did little more than abridge. But while it is appropriate to observe this resemblance to the rhetorical eulogy, it must be pointed out that at the time when Skylitzes was writing, the genres of the ‘history of reigns’ and of the *chronographia* were already defined; those to whom the *Synopsis* was addressed knew what to expect. It is well known that, when commanded to do so by Constantine VII, the compilers who were working at court rifled the extant corpus of historical writing to obtain selections which they then organised under fifty-two heads according

⁴⁷ Reign of Basil and Constantine, ch. 2, Skylitzes, *Synopsis historion*, ed. Thurn, 254.

to topic (*hypothesis*).⁴⁸ The titles of those heads are partially known; they are of interest, given the extent to which they show what categories the Romans of the tenth century devised for the various matters which they expected historians to write about. The Constantinian *Excerpta* started out with a section devoted to the proclamation of emperors, and this is indeed the first event narrated by a whole series of Byzantine historians whose attention is focused on the imperial power. Skylitzes is no exception; the beginning of the *Synopsis* is devoted to the process which brought Leo V to power rather than to the reign of Michael I; Leo's is the first reign he really deals with, from accession to death, the latter accompanied by a final assessment. And, just like the death of Michael I, the death of Leo V is at once an end and a new beginning; his assassin, Michael II, mounts his throne. Such are the events which confer on the *Synopsis* its measured pace and provide its cyclic procession: accession, first measures taken, reign, death (or, more rarely, deposition), length of the reign.

Skylitzes pays special attention to a discrete category of events to which the editors of the Constantinian *Excerpta* had also devoted a chapter (now lost) called *epiboulai*,⁴⁹ meaning attempts on the emperor's life, attempted *coups d'état* and usurpations, both abortive and successful. Thus more than half the reign of Michael II is taken up with the revolt of Thomas the Slav while the attempted usurpation of Euphemios is mentioned more than once. The entire reign of Michael VI Stratiotikos is concerned with the revolt of the eastern commanders and the rise to power of Isaac Komnenos.

After the accession comes the exercise of power. The events which Skylitzes chooses to mention fall into two categories: internal matters and foreign affairs, which in effect means Constantinople in the one case, war in the other. On the home front the question is whether an emperor was devout, just, benevolent. As the ancient opposition between church history and secular history no longer applied in the middle Byzantine period, religious affairs are included too, more frequently in the case of the iconoclastic emperors or of Michael III, but in a rather conventional way once orthodoxy was re-established. Apart from the appointment of patriarchs, foundations and bequests to the church, not much is reported. Pride of place is given to the justice, the good (or bad) administration and the

⁴⁸ See Lemerle, *Premier humanisme*, 283–4; B. Flusin, 'Les *Excerpta* constantiniens: logique d'une anti-histoire', *Fragments d'historiens grecs. Autour de Denys d'Halicarnasse*, ed. S. Pittia (Collection de l'Ecole française de Rome, 298, Rome, 2002), 553–8.

⁴⁹ *Peri epiboulon kata basileon gegonuion*, 'About the attempts on emperors' lives which have taken place', see Flusin, 'Les *Excerpta* constantiniens', 555.

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personal behaviour of a sovereign (especially up to the reign of Romanos II); and these contribute to both the equilibrium and the interest of the *Synopsis*. In certain cases Skylitzes follows his sources in noting the buildings of an emperor, but the only emperor for whom this traditional chapter of the imperial eulogy is filled out in detail is Basil I.⁵⁰ A special place is reserved for cultural history; the author is pleased to report how a major figure such as Caesar Bardas or a sovereign like Constantine VII was able to revive learning.⁵¹

For Skylitzes (as for his sources) the beginnings of a reign and the appointments that went with it are an object of especial attention, indicating that this was something of great interest for Byzantine historians and their public. The end of a reign will often provide our author with the opportunity of devoting rather more attention to internal events. Yet in many of the reigns it is war (civil or foreign) that occupies centre stage.⁵² Of the long reign of Basil II (for instance), the first half is taken up with the revolts of Bardas Skleros and Bardas Phokas, the second by the Bulgar campaigns. Other events are distributed between these subjects and dealt with briefly as though they were incidental. This is true whether they are struggles for power (e.g. the disgrace of the parakoimomenos Basil Lekapenos), other revolts, church affairs (the death of the patriarch Anthony and the accession of Nicholas Chrysoberges), internal matters (the introduction of the *allelengyon*), natural phenomena, rare diplomatic developments (Basil and Venice) or other campaigns (e.g. the submission of Khazaria). In the case of John Tzimiskes even more weight is given to his campaigns against the Russians and the Bulgars. The theatre of operations shifts around the total extent of the empire, from Italy in the west to the eastern frontiers, and sometimes the chronology of the narrative is slightly dislocated. The kinds of events described often remain the same: sieges, battles, defeats and victories or (the Constantinian *Excerpta* has a special chapter on this topic)⁵³ recoveries in the state of affairs. Sometimes there is simply a list of places conquered, including naval successes; sometimes, but less often, an ethnographic digression to introduce a new enemy.⁵⁴ It is noticeable

⁵⁰ Skylitzes, *Synopsis historion*, ed. Thurn, 161–4. The passages in *Theophanes Continuatus* (139–48) describing the building activity of Theophilos are not reproduced in the *Synopsis*.

⁵¹ Skylitzes, *Synopsis historion*, ed. Thurn, 101, 237–8.

⁵² This is also how Skylitzes' methods of abbreviation can lead to some unfortunate distortions: Holmes, *Basil II* 99–109.

⁵³ In the *Excerpta* there are separate heads for battles, leading armies, victories, defeats and defeats turned into victories, see Flusin, 'Les *Excerpta* constantiniens', 555.

⁵⁴ e.g. Reign of Constantine IX, ch. 9, Skylitzes, *Synopsis historion*, ed. Thurn, 442–5 and ch. 16, Skylitzes, *Synopsis historion*, ed. Thurn, 455–7, on the Turks and the Patzinaks.

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that the exploits of a given person can hold an important place in the war stories; this advances to centre stage a character who has an important part to play (a Kekaumenos or a Maniakes), and who is often an eminent member of the Byzantine aristocracy too. This is very different from anything one might find in Theophanes, and it very probably says something about new ways of fighting. It is also symptomatic of the great interest of Skylitzes and his readers in the great families and their members.⁵⁵

The *Synopsis historion* is not merely a linear succession of reigns; a wider, more general plan can be detected. Here too Skylitzes borrowed (for the period down to the mid-tenth century) from some of his sources: Genesios and especially *Theophanes Continuatus*. That was where he found the prophecy of the monk of Philomilion,⁵⁶ which provides the structure for the beginning of the *Synopsis* by throwing three key characters together in a dramatic encounter and proclaiming their fate: the two emperors Leo V and Michael II together with the usurper Thomas the Slav. After that, the revived iconoclasm of Leo V provides another linking element until the re-establishment of orthodoxy under Michael III, thus offering a unifying factor for several reigns. But it is above all from *Theophanes Continuatus* and the ideology which it reflects that Skylitzes borrows a huge project, the sole object of which is to enhance the dynasty of the 'Macedonian' emperors while denigrating the Amorians. There is a striking similarity between these dynasties: the one founded by Michael II and occupying the imperial throne until the death of Michael III, the other the dynasty of Basil I and his successors. Both were instituted by an assassination: Michael II killed Leo V and thus rose to power; Basil I did the same to Michael III. This similarity, however, is carefully concealed; under the orders of Constantine VII (who was only following his family's tradition), *Theophanes Continuatus* presents a totally different aspect. In a powerful narrative⁵⁷ the murder of Leo V is projected (with a wealth of attendant detail) in such a way as to emphasise the sacrilege involved ('They have slain the Lord's anointed within the sanctuary!'). The justice of Theophilos (partly hypocritical)⁵⁸ cannot wash away the indelible stain on the succession of Michael of Amorion. It is a different matter at the death of Michael III, where Basil is carefully absolved.⁵⁹ This murder is

⁵⁵ Sometimes Skylitzes gives new information (compared with his sources) on the names and titles of the people of whom he speaks, but caution is called for: Holmes, *Basil II*, 131ff.

⁵⁶ Skylitzes, *Synopsis historion*, ed. Thurn, 27–8.

⁵⁷ Skylitzes, *Synopsis historion*, ed. Thurn, 19–23, *Theophanes Continuatus*, ed. Bekker, 33–40.

⁵⁸ Skylitzes, *Synopsis historion*, ed. Thurn, 49–50.

⁵⁹ *Theophanes Continuatus*, ed. Bekker, 254. After a long and violent indictment of Michael III, Constantine lays the murder of that prince at the door of the principal dignitaries of the Senate.

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made to look like a simple blow for public safety and an act of legitimate defence. In a wider sense the entire reign of Michael III ‘the drunkard’ is contrived to show that emperor as a godless and unworthy prince, while the *Vita Basilii* creates an image of the ideal sovereign. Those things, moreover, which in the case of Michael II are presented as lamentable defects (the lowliness of his origins, aggravated by heresy, his rudeness and illiteracy) in Basil’s case become matters for praise. Thus his modest birth is a sure indication that he will be benevolent to his people; nevertheless it is compensated for by a fictitious genealogy and by a wealth of portents indicating that he is the emperor chosen by God. Even if he soft-pedals certain details, Skylitzes faithfully reproduces his sources on all these points.⁶⁰

After the end of the reign of Basil I the plan of the *Synopsis* is perhaps less clear, but a favourable attitude towards the Macedonians (some of whom are censured) is still perceptible even if it is only in the fact that the author seems to have intended his narrative to conclude with the end of that dynasty, Michael VI being the last emperor raised up by a Macedonian princess. More qualified approval is accorded the great warrior-emperors Nikephoros Phokas (especially) and John Tzimiskes, but the pride which Skylitzes feels in the Byzantine achievement probably reaches its apogee in the reign of Basil II, who was both the legitimate heir to the throne and sovereign warrior. Once that high point is past we have to wait until the reign of Constantine IX Monomachos to find an overall assessment of the period under review. It is alleged, possibly on the authority of a lost source, that it was with that ruler that decadence set in:

there is one thing which has to be mentioned and I will say it: that it was from the time of this emperor and on account of his prodigality and pretentiousness, that the fortunes of the Roman empire began to waste away. From that time until now it has regressed into an all-encompassing debility.⁶¹

The general organisation and unity of the *Synopsis* derive from this overall plan and from its unwavering commitment to the centrality of the emperor. But it is at a less elevated level that the true literary value of the work is to be found and where it really succeeds. I am referring to the many stories that are included in each reign, discrete stories of one or more episodes

Skylitzes says that Basil murdered Michael, but he accompanies the murder with all kinds of extenuating circumstances; Skylitzes, *Synopsis historion*, ed. Thurn, 113–14 and 131.

⁶⁰ There are some portents announcing the reign of Basil that he leaves aside, but others he retains. As for the murder of Michael, see the previous note.

⁶¹ Reign of Constantine IX, ch. 29, Skylitzes, *Synopsis historion*, ed. Thurn, 476.

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which render the work of Skylitzes so immediately appealing.⁶² There is (for instance) the tragi-comic story of the assassination of Leo V on Christmas Eve, prepared for well ahead of time by the apparently irrelevant comment on his inferior musicianship.⁶³ Then too, interrupting the monotonous catalogue of the campaigns of Basil II, there is the tale of the confrontation of Daphnomeles and Ibatzes the Bulgar.⁶⁴ Skylitzes, however, wins very little credit as a storyteller for he does little more than reproduce what he found in those who had written before him. This probably accounts for variations in style that hardly seem to have troubled our author.⁶⁵ In the earlier reigns, down to Theophilos, the style is somewhat archaic; ecclesiastical affairs loom large and are treated in some detail. With the reign of Basil I we enter the domain of imperial legend.

After that it is not so much the style in the strict sense of the word as the nature of the stories that varies, depending on the sources which Skylitzes has at his disposal: more military in character for Tzimiskes or Basil II, more balanced in the case of Romanos III or Constantine IX. In this last reign, when he describes the campaigns against the Patzinaks and especially in the fine digression on the Turks, Skylitzes' horizons suddenly open out way beyond the limits of the Roman empire. It is possible that the vigour of the earlier stories has been somewhat attenuated by their abbreviation. On the last night of the life of Leo V (for instance), one cannot understand why the emperor – visiting the quarters of the *papias* – was recognised by his red buskins. But Genesios and *Theophanes Continuatus* inform us that the servant who noticed the footwear was lying flat on his stomach under the bed of the future Michael II, hence all he could see of him was the feet.⁶⁶ Nevertheless Skylitzes has on the whole managed to retain the attraction and the interest of the originals. And even though the terms he found in his sources sometimes show through in the text he has written, Skylitzes has performed his task of compiler in such a way as to produce a unity of style and voice, presenting his readers with refined and objective narratives of the events he reports, be they heroic or tragic, horrible or amusing.

⁶² See Holmes, *Basil II*, 110, where Skylitzes' penchant for discreet episodes is noted (following J. Shepard).

⁶³ Leo the Armenian, chs. 6 and 11, Skylitzes, *Synopsis historion*, ed. Thurn, 18 and 22. It is the *troparion* that Leo sings (badly) that is the signal for the assassins to strike him down.

⁶⁴ Basil II, ch. 42, Skylitzes, *Synopsis historion*, ed. Thurn, 360–3.

⁶⁵ Zonaras seems to have been very sensitive to differences in the style of the sources he used; he apologises (and congratulates himself) for having respected them: Zonaras, *Praef.*, ch. 2, 8–9.

⁶⁶ Leo the Armenian, ch. 11, Skylitzes, *Synopsis historion*, ed. Thurn, 22; Genesios, ed. Lesmüller-Werner and Thurn, 17; *Theophanes Continuatus*, ed. Bekker, 38.

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THE TEXT AND ITS HISTORY

Simple though it may be, Skylitzes' work enjoyed great success at Constantinople; this is clear from the transmission of the text and from other Byzantine writers who made use of it. In order to make his edition, Hans Thurn had access to nine manuscripts of the entire text of the *Synopsis* dating from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries. In addition to other manuscripts containing only extracts from the work, there is the *Chronographia* of George Kedrenos which includes the entire text of the *Synopsis* of Skylitzes almost unchanged. Considering how many Byzantine historical works are only known in a single medieval copy (*Theophanes Continuatus* is a case in point), the *Synopsis*, without being among those works which are best attested, nevertheless occupies an honourable place in comparison with them.

Among the extant manuscripts of this work, the 'Madrid Skylitzes' must be mentioned, Codex Matrit. Bibl.nat.Vitr.26.2. Thurn dates this codex to the thirteenth or fourteenth century, but N. G. Wilson has now shown that it dates from the end of the twelfth century.⁶⁷ With its 574 miniatures the *Matritensis* is one of the most remarkable monuments of Byzantine art.⁶⁸ It is also the only surviving example of an illustrated chronicle from the Greek milieu.

For a work of which there are many witnesses, the text of Skylitzes is distinguished by having been interpolated at an early date. Thurn was of the opinion that there stood between the original and all the other surviving medieval manuscripts of the work a manuscript (now lost) which had already been enriched with marginal notes by an attentive reader who was quite familiar with the history and topography of Bulgaria; notes that were subsequently incorporated into the text of several manuscripts.⁶⁹ Other interpolations would have other origins. Special mention must, however, be made of the many interpolations which are found in the fourteenth-century manuscript U in the edition of Thurn, Codex Vind. Nationalbibl., hist.gr.74. These are particularly rich and interesting for the history of Bulgaria and are the work of a known person: Michael of Diabolis.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ N. G. Wilson, 'The Madrid Skylitzes', *Scrittura e civiltà* 2 (Turin, 1978), 209–19.

⁶⁸ *L'Illustration du manuscrit de Skylites de la Bibliothèque nationale de Madrid*, ed. A. Grabar and M. Manoussacas (Venice, 1979); most recently, V. Tsamakda, *The illustrated chronicle of Ioannes Skylitzes in Madrid* (Leiden, 2002).

⁶⁹ On the question of the interpolations, see Skylitzes, *Synopsis historion*, Thurn's preface, xxix–xxxiv (and the stemma on xxxv) on what he calls 'Skylitzes interpolatus'.

⁷⁰ This person was identified by B. Prokić, *Die Zusätze ...*; see J. Ferluga, 'John Skylitzes and Michael of Devol', *ZRVI*, 10 (1967), 163–70.