



Summary :

Initially the term "Varangians" denoted Scandinavian and Slav mercenary soldiers arriving at Byzantium through the territories of the Kievan Rus'. From the end of the eleventh century the majority of Varangians were of Anglo-Saxon descent. Varangians participated in numerous campaigns and distinguished themselves as part of the Byzantine emperors' bodyguard. In the sources they are often described as "axe-bearing", because of their armament, and "Tauruscythians" or "Celts", due to their northern European origins. Their presence in Constantinople is evidenced until the fifteenth century.

Date

988 - Fifteenth c.

Geographical Location

Constantinople

Names

Varangians, Varyags; Varangoi, Variagoi (Greek names); Tauruscythians, Celts (in Greek sources)

1. The Varangians and Basil II (976-1025)

Despite the fact that mercenary Rus', a mixture of Scandinavians and Slavs, had taken part in Byzantine military operations since the beginning of the tenth century, the formation of a battalion and unit of the imperial guard of the Varangians in 989 stems from the political and military developments in Byzantium. In 986 the imperial army under the leadership of Basil II suffered a heavy defeat in the Gates of Trajan at the hands of the Bulgarian ruler Samuel. This fact made the suppression of the [rebellion of Bardas Phokas](#), with whom a significant number of [generals](#) in Asia Minor had sided, extremely difficult. In order to face the rebels, Basil II sought help from the Kievan prince Vladimir, who dispatched to Constantinople 6,000 Rus' soldiers to aid the emperor. These soldiers made a decisive contribution in Basil II's victories at the battles of Chrysopolis and [Abydos](#) in 989 that resulted in the crushing of the rebels.¹

Their abilities on the battlefield and, more importantly, a lack of trust towards generals coming from the [great aristocratic families](#) of [Asia Minor](#), to whom he shrunk from awarding high-ranking military offices, led Basil II to form the Rus' into a unit of the Byzantine army and to establish the imperial Varangian Guard, composed solely of Rus'.² Another reason for the recruitment of the Varangians was the shift in the empire's military orientation. From the late ninth/early tenth century Byzantium's military organization gradually lost its defensive orientation. On the contrary, from the middle of the tenth century it clearly took on an expansionist character. Therefore, mercenaries like the Varangians, because they were on constant readiness, as opposed to provincial soldiers, and under the strict control of the Crown, were judged useful in serving this offensive strategy. On the other hand, native soldiers, the bulk of which were stationed in the provinces, lacked experience and resources for long-term operations. Also, they were often under the influence of ambitious aristocrats competing for the throne.³

Although it is possible that they participated in other campaigns of Basil the Bulgar-slayer as well, the presence of the Rus' in the aforementioned emperor's campaigns is confirmed for 999 in Syria, 1009-1010 in Italy, 1016 in Bulgaria and 1021 in Georgia, where there is testimony that they committed atrocities against non-combatants.⁴ Also, shortly before the death of Basil II, Varangians were sent to Sicily against the Arabs.

2. From the death of Basil II to 1081

In their attempt to curb the influence of ambitious members of [higher aristocracy](#) in military, as well as in civilian matters, the successors of Basil II maintained the Varangians and increased the army's reliance in foreign mercenaries. Referring to a unit of Varangians stationed in Asia Minor in 1034, the historian Scylitzes is the first source to use the term "Varangians" instead of "Tauruscythians", "Rhos" or "axe-bearing".⁵ In that same year perhaps the best-known commander of the Varangians, Harald Hardrada, future king of Norway Harold III (1046-1066), came to Byzantium along with 500 soldiers.⁶ His arrival is an indication of the high prestige enjoyed by the Varangian Guard, which could be serve as a sound springboard for north-European soldiers. Whereas a substantial sum of gold had to be payed before one entered the guard, their payment was equally generous. Hardrada and the Varangians took part in operations in Sicily against the Arabs from 1038 to 1040 and against Peter Deljan in Bulgaria. The future king of Norway's career in Byzantium ended in 1042/1043, when for reasons unknown he fell from favor with emperor Constantine IX Monomachos (1042-1055). The Varangians also seem to have played a part in the complex period of continuous struggle between aristocratic families from 1042 to 1081, almost always supporting the Crown.

3. From 1081 to 1204

Although references to their presence are less numerous, it appears that the establishment of the [Komnenian dynasty](#) in 1081 did not alter the Varangians' role, since they continued to escort the emperor in expeditions and perform bodyguard duties at the palace. However, during the reign of Alexios I Komnenos (1081-1118) the Varangians' ethnic composition was transformed. A number of Anglo-Saxons that had abandoned England after the Norman Conquest (1066) reached Byzantium. Some of them joined the Varangians and others settled in the [Crimea](#).⁷ This transformation is mirrored in the sources. The historian-princess Anna Komnene, although noting that the Varangians had been in the emperor's service from old times, writes that they came from Thule, possibly meaning Britain.⁸ When narrating the victory of John II Komnenos (1118-1143) against the [Pechenegs](#) in 1122, the historian Kinnamos refers to the Varangians as British.⁹

4. The Varangians after 1204

Sources do not confirm the presence of Varangians on the field of battle after 1204. This, however, does not necessarily mean that they stopped being a combat outfit. The fragmentary and anecdotal nature of available sources does not allow conclusions to be safely drawn. Nevertheless, there are numerous mentions of the presence of Varangians in late Byzantium. After 1204 they appear as guarding the [Nicaean state's](#) imperial treasury at [Magnesia](#).¹⁰ It is also stated that they kept the keys of any city visited by the emperor.¹¹

The treatise of Pseudo-Kodinos, dealing with imperial ceremonies and the hierarchy of imperial court dignities and dating from the second half of the fourteenth century, presents the Varangians as one of six units in the [imperial guard](#).¹² The anonymous author notes that during imperial ceremonies the Varangians acclaim the emperor in their native tongue, English, while the historian [Georgios Pachymeres](#) mentions an English jailer.¹³ Therefore, it is almost certain that the Varangians of the later period came from England. The presence of the Varangians is witnessed for the last time in two documents dating from the year 1400. The fact that these documents mention the Varangians as "most loyal" is an indication that even in the fifteenth century they had kept their reputation as the emperor's absolutely obedient and loyal personal guard.¹⁴

1. Blöndal S. - Benediktz B., *The Varangians of Byzantium* (Cambridge, 1978), p. 42. Leo the Deacon, *Historiae libri decem*, ed. C.B. Hase (CSHB, Bonn 1828), pp. 171-173. Scylitzes, *Synopsis historiarum*, ed. H. Thurn (CFHB 5, Berlin 1973), p. 336.

2. Whitton M., *The Making of Orthodox Byzantium, 600-1025* (London 1996), p. 374. Cheynet J.-C., *Pouvoir et contestations à Byzance* (963-1210) (Byzantina Sorbonensia 9, Paris 1990), p. 307.



3. Haldon J., *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565-1204* (London 1999), pp. 92-93.
4. Blöndal S. - Benedikz B., *The Varangians of Byzantium* (Cambridge, 1978), pp. 46-52. Holmes C., *Basil II and the Governance of Empire (976-1025)* (Oxford 2005), p. 512.
5. Scylitzes, *Synopsis historiarum*, ed. H. Thurn (CFHB 5, Berlin 1973), p. 394.
6. Sheppard J., "A Note on Harold Hardrada: The Date of his Arrival at Byzantium", *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 22 (1973), pp. 145-150.
7. Blöndal S. - Benedikz B., *The Varangians of Byzantium* (Cambridge 1978), p. 141; B. Benedikz, "The Origin and Development of the Varangian Regiment in the Byzantine Army," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 62 (1969), pp. 23-24; K. Cigaar, "L'émigration anglaise à Byzance après 1066," *Revue des Etudes Byzantines* 32 (1974), p. 305; J. Sheppard, "The English and Byzantium: A Study of Their Role in the Byzantine Army in the Later Eleventh Century," *Traditio* 29 (1973), pp. 53-92.
8. Anna Comnena, *Alexias*, ed. D.R. Reinsch - A. Kambylis (CFHB 41, Berlin, 2001), p. 79.
9. John Kinnamus, *Epitome Rerum ab Ioanne et Alexio Comnenis Gestorum*, ed. A. Meineke (CSHB, Bonn 1836), p. 8.
10. George Pachymeres, *Relations historiques*, ed. A. Failler (CFHB 24/1, Paris 1984) I, p. 101.
11. *Ioannes Cantacuzeni eximperatoris historiarum libri IV*, ed. L. Schopen (CSHB, Bonn 1828) I, p. 389.
12. Pseudo-Kodinos, *Traité des offices*, ed. J. Verpeaux (Paris, 1966), pp. 179-180.
13. George Pachymeres, *Relations historiques*, ed. A. Failler (CFHB 24/1, Paris 1984) I, pp. 485, 615.
14. Bartusis M., *The Late Byzantine Army* (Philadelphia 1992), p. 275.

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Glossary :

strategos ("general")

During the Roman period his duties were mainly political. Office of the Byzantine state's provincial administration. At first the title was given to the military and political administrator of the themes, namely of the big geographic and administrative unities of the Byzantine empire. Gradually the title lost its power and, already in the 11th century, strategoi were turned to simple commanders of military units, responsible for the defence of a region.

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Quotations

Harald Hardrada's arrival to Constantinople:

Iron-shielded vessels

Flaunted colourful rigging.

The great prince saw ahead

The copper roofs of Byzantium;

His swan-breasted ships swept

Towards the tall-towered city.

Snorri Sturluson, *King Harald's Saga*, transl. M. Magnusson-H. Palsson (London 1976), p. 48.

Varangian presence in Constantine IX's campaign against the Pechenegs:

Ὅπως δὲ τῶν Πατζινάκων ἐπικρατέστερα γένηται τὰ Ῥωμαίων ὁ βασιλεὺς φροντίζων, τὸν Κεγένην ἐξάγει τῆς φυλακῆς καὶ ἐς Πατζινάκας ἐκπέμπει, ὑποσχόμενον διασχίσει τούτους καὶ εὖνους θεῖναι τῷ βασιλεῖ. καὶ τὰ συμμαχικὰ πάντα συναθροίσας ὑφ' ἐν, Φράγγους φημὲν καὶ Βαράγγους, μεταπεισάμενος δὲ καὶ ἵπποτοξότας ἀπὸ τοῦ Τελοῦχ, τοῦ Μαύρου ὄρου, καὶ τοῦ Καρκάρου, περὶ τὰς εἰκοσι χιλιάδας, καὶ ἀνδράσιν ἐπισήμοις τῶν γενῶν ἑκαστον ἀναθείς, καὶ ἐπὶ πᾶσιν ἡγεμόνα καταστήσας τὸν πατρικίον Βουέννιον καὶ ἐθνάρχην τοῦτον κατονομάσας, τὰς ἐκδρομὰς ἐκπέμπει κωλύειν καὶ ἐπέχειν τῶν Πατζινάκων.

H. Thurn (ed.), *Ioannes Scylitzae Synopsis historiarum* (CFHB 5, Berlin 1973), p. 471.

John Kinnamos mentions the British origin of the Varangians in the service of John II Komnenos:

Σκύθαι γὰρ ὡσπερ ἐπιτειχίσματα ταῖς ἀμάξαις χρῆσάμενοι μεγάλα Ῥωμαίους ἐλύπουν. ὁ βασιλεὺς ἀνοησάμενος ἤθελε μὲν αὐτὸς τοῦ ἵππου ἀποβάς πεζῇ σὺν τοῖς στρατιώταις τὸν ἀγῶνα διαθλήσῃ. Ῥωμαίων δὲ οὐδαμῇ ἐπαινούτων ἐκέλευε τοῖς ἀμφ' αὐτὸν πελεκυφόροις (ἔθνος δὲ ἐστὶ τοῦτο Βρετανικὸν βασιλευσὶ Ῥωμαίων δουλεῦον ἀνάκαθεν) πελέκεις ἐπιστάντας διακόπτειν αὐτάς. τῶν δὲ αὐτίκα ἔργου ἐχομένων, οὕτω δὴ καὶ αὐτοῦ τοῦ Σκυθῶν στρατοπέδου ἐγκρατὴν βασιλεὺς γίνεται.

A. Meineke (ed.), *Ioannes Cinnami Epitome Rerum ab Ioanne et Alexio Comnenis Gestorum* (CSHB, Bonn 1836), p. 8.

Anna Komnena mentions the origin of the Varangians from Thoule (Britain?):

Ἐπυθάνετο οὖν, τίνες ἂν εἴεν οἱ ἑκασταχοῦ τοὺς πύργους φυλάσσοντες. Ὡς δὲ ἐνταῦθα μὲν ἐφεστάναι τοὺς ἀθανάτους λεγομένους ἐμάνθανε (στράτευμα δὲ τοῦτο τῆς Ῥωμαϊκῆς δυνάμεως ἰδιαιτάτων), ἐκείσε δὲ τοὺς ἐκ Θούλης Βαράγγους (τούτους δὴ λέγω τοὺς πελεκυφόρους βαρβάρους)...

D.R. Reinsch-A. Kambylis (ed.), *Annae Comnenae Alexias* (CFHB 41, Berlin 2001), p. 79.