

Alessandra Bucossi/Alex Rodriguez Suarez (Hrsgg.): *John II Komnenos, Emperor of Byzantium: In the Shadow of Father and Son*. London/New York: Routledge 2016 (Publications of the Centre for Hellenic Studies, King's College 17). XXI, 237 S. £ 110.00. ISBN: 978-1-4724-6024-9.

The publication of this volume of collected essays on the reign of John II Komnenos (1118–1143) is particularly welcome, as it comes to fill a conspicuous historiographical gap, whose causes and extent are recalled by the editors in the book's preface (p. XIII–XV).

Despite the renown John II enjoyed in the later Byzantine tradition, studies devoted to this emperor continue to be remarkably rare. This is, in the first place, due to the paucity of primary sources and the absence of contemporary historiographical works reporting on John's rule, but also to the apparent lack of scholarly interest in a period which did not witness major political or military events. Such a situation stands in sharp contrast to the reigns of John II's father and son, Alexios I and Manuel I: these are better documented and are usually regarded as pivotal periods of Byzantine political and cultural history.¹ After Chalandon's classic history of the Komnenian emperors², John II's reign has been addressed, albeit briefly and incidentally, in the important works on the Komnenian age published in the 1980s and 1990s by Michael Angold³ and Paul Magdalino.⁴ Only in recent

1 In the last twenty-five years they have both been the subjects of important monographic studies. On Alexios I Komnenos: M. Mullett/D. Smythe (eds): *Alexios I Komnenos. Papers of the Second Belfast Byzantine International Colloquium, 14–16 April 1989*. Belfast 1996; E. Malamut: *Alexis I^{er} Comnène*. Paris 2007. On Manuel I Komnenos, see the monography by P. Magdalino: *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos, 1143–1180*. Cambridge 1993.

2 F. Chalandon: *Les Comnènes. Études sur l'empire byzantin aux XI^e et au XII^e siècles. II. Jean II Comnène [1118–1143] et Manuel I Comnène [1143–1180]*. Paris 1912.

3 M. Angold: *The Byzantine Empire, 1025–1204. A political history*. London/New York 1985, 150–160 and Id.: *Church and Society in Byzantium under the Comneni, 1081–1261*. Cambridge 1995, *passim*.

4 P. Magdalino: *Manuel I Komnenos* (as above note 1), 35–41 and *passim*.

years, scholarly events and new publications have started to raise attention for this neglected period of Byzantine history.⁵

A case in point of this renewed scientific interest is the collective volume edited by Bucossi and Rodriguez Suarez. It gathers papers presented during a workshop held at King College's Centre for Hellenic Studies in 2013⁶, and covers a wide range of topics, including Byzantine internal politics and imperial ideology, military and monetary history, diplomatic exchanges, cultural and ecclesiastical relations with the West, as well as Byzantine literature and art. According to the editors' intentions, this book is meant to provide "a more complete picture of this period of Byzantine history, which is usually reduced to a list of military campaigns and the construction of the Pantokrator Monastery" and "to examine the changes and developments that took place in Byzantium" at that time (p. XIV).

Indeed, comparable works published in the last years have focused on specific aspects of John's reign (military history, building activity) and/or on a close analysis of textual sources.⁷ This book adopts a wider and more general historical perspective. Therefore, it will prove particularly useful for students of the Greek and Mediterranean Middle Ages, to whom it will provide an introduction to several historical issues. On the other hand, the book's weakness lies in the somewhat fragmentary nature of the historical reconstruction. As it is often the case in collective volumes, individual contributions display a variety of approaches and (occasionally conflicting)

5 Bucossi and Rodriguez Suarez mention the book on the Pantokrator edited by S. Kotzabassi: *The Pantokrator Monastery in Constantinople*. Boston/Berlin 2013 (*Byzantinisches Archiv* 27), and the conference on "Piroska and the Pantokrator" organized by the Central European University of Budapest in 2015 (p. XV). In his contribution, D. Stathakopoulos also refers to the recent work of J.W. Birkenmeier: *The Development of the Komnenian Army, 1081–1180*. Leiden/Boston/Cologne 2002 (*History of Warfare* 5). Two doctoral thesis on John II Komnenos remain unpublished: J.-F. Mouroux: *L'avènement de Jean II. Querelles de succession et principes de légitimité (X^e–XII^e siècles)*. Diss. Université Paris 4 Sorbonne 2012; A. Papageorgiou: *Ο Ιωάννης Β' Κομνηνός και η εποχή του*. Diss. University of Athens 2007 (see also her contribution in the present book).

6 In the Shadow of the Father and Son. John II Komnenos and his Reign", 12 January 2013, Center for Hellenic Studies, King's College, London.

7 The second part of Kotzabassi's book (p. 109–249) is specifically devoted to the study and edition of texts related to the Pantokrator monastery.

points of view; some of them are more informative, while others leave room for deeper historical interpretations.

The book opens with a historiographical survey by Dionysios Stathakopoulos (*John II Komnenos: a historiographical essay*, pp. 1–10). Expanding on the remarks of the editors' preface, the author examines available primary sources for the reign of John II as well as secondary literature since Chalandon. Stathakopoulos recognizes that, given the limits of source material, "a major, transformative re-evaluation of John II is not likely" (p. 10). However, he points to the potential interest of less studied literary texts (like the anonymous poems of the *Marcianus graecus 524*) and documents (such as the imperial chrysobulls sent to Pope Innocent II, pp. 4–5). His conclusion that "ample room" remains "to produce an image of John and his reign that is much more complete and complex" (p. 10) echoes the editors' preliminary considerations and seems to be well justified.

In the following chapter, Vlada Stanković deals with the problematic transmission of imperial power within the newly-established Komnenian dynasty (*John II Komnenos before the year 1118*, pp. 11–21). The accession of John II in 1118 is reinterpreted in the light of the position he held at court during the reign of his father. By systematically testing Anna Komnena's biased testimony against further literary and documentary evidence, Stanković convincingly demonstrates that since 1092 John Komnenos was recognized as the only possible heir to the Empire, having been officially designed as co-emperor by Alexios I and acting as such in all circumstances.

Although the questions introduced by Stanković – the sharing of power and the establishment of dynastic authority in a situation of "growing internal antagonism" within the Komnenian clan (p. 13) – are not given a specific treatment in this volume, they resurface in other contributions, particularly in those of Robert Ousterhout and Kalliroe Linardou. Therefore, the reader will excuse me if, from this point onwards, I will leave aside the actual order of the book's chapter to present contributions rather according to thematic criteria.

In his contribution, Robert Ousterhout examines the developments which occurred in architectural forms during the reign of John II, with special reference to burial sites reserved for members of the imperial family (*Architecture and patronage in the age of John II*, pp. 135–154). Burials built in monas-

teries benefitting from the Komnenian patronage (the Pantokrator, the Chora and the Kosmosoteira) are considered in their evolution and dialectic relation. The increasing visibility granted to monumental tombs is interpreted as “a new kind of expression of political power and family prestige” (p. 148), one that served also to voice dynastic conflicts among the sons of Alexios I. What is more, the reconstruction of the building process shows that some innovative features in monumental decoration, usually dated to the age of Manuel Komnenos, must be pre-dated to the reign of his father.

The use of visual propaganda as an instrument for political competition is also at centre of Linardou’s intriguing paper (*Imperial impersonations: disguised portraits of a Komnenian prince and his father*, pp. 155–182). The detailed analysis of artworks produced under the patronage of the *sebastokrator* Isaac Komnenos, who repeatedly rebelled against his brother John II, sheds light on the visual and ideological vocabulary he used to support his political ambitions. The portraits of Isaac and his father, Alexios I Komnenos, are scattered in buildings and manuscripts, possibly disguised in the form of biblical characters or saints; they reveal the power attributed to the status of *porphyrogennetos* and to the association with the founder of the dynasty in the fight for imperial legitimacy.

Given the importance of bloodline in the formulation of Komnenian dynastic and imperial ideals it is surprising to note the lack of any reference to family and kinship in the chapter devoted to John II’s political ideology by Angeliki Papageorgiou (*The political ideology of John II Komnenos*, pp. 37–52). Papageorgiou provides a survey of themes and motifs related to the imperial figure during the reign of John II, trying to highlight continuities and evolutions in Byzantine imperial ideology. While the ecumenical vocation of the Empire stands out as a cornerstone of Byzantine political thought, other imperial attributes are presented as characteristic of John Komnenos’ age. Among them Papageorgiou lists Komnenian militarism and the idea of imperial *reconquista*; the heroic presentation of the *basileus* and his association with Christian figures or symbols, such as the Theotokos, some biblical characters and the cross; his possible depiction as a crusader and as the champion of a “Byzantine Holy War”.

Although the military background of the Komnenian lineage could hardly be denied, particularly in the case of the first Komnenian emperors, it would have been interesting to place these ideological features within the context of the imperial tradition inherited from the tenth and the eleventh

century. In this view, several themes of John II's propaganda could be explained in terms of revival or renewal, rather than innovation. A number of studies have explored the political and cultural role played by "military emperors" in the centuries preceding the rise of the Komnenian dynasty; the evolutions that they introduced in the imperial attitude towards war – particularly the war against the Arabs – and piety have also been the object of scholarly inquiries. The essays of John Cotsonis and Jean-Claude Cheynet about the cult of military saints and the evolution of religious iconographies on seals and coins deserve to be mentioned here, for they may help to contextualize the symbolic choices made by John II.⁸ Also, the reference to biblical models of kingship and the dialectic relation between individual merit and hereditary succession are deeply rooted in Byzantine tradition, as shown by Gilbert Dagron in his classic book *Empereur et prêtre*.⁹ The notion of a "Byzantine idea of Holy War" (p. 44), the interpretation of John Komnenos' triumphs (or rather triumphal entries?) as expression of a crusading ideology and the affirmation that John II intended to present himself as a crusader are open to debate.¹⁰ However, Papageorgiou's clarification that the *basileus* did so "not so much for the benefit of his fellow-

- 8 J. Cotsonis: The Contribution of Byzantine Lead Seals to the Study of the Cult of the Saints (Sixth–Twelfth Century). In: *Byzantion* 75, 2005, 383–497; J.-C. Cheynet: *La société byzantine. L'apport des sceaux*, 2 vol. Paris 2008 (Bilans de recherche 3).
- 9 G. Dagron: *Empereur et prêtre. Étude sur le « césaropapisme » byzantin*. Paris 1996, esp. 33–73. See also my own remarks in L. Andriollo: *Constantinople et les provinces d'Asie Mineure, IX^e–XI^e siècle. Administration impériale, sociétés locales et rôle de l'aristocratie*. Leuven, Paris, Bristol/CT 2017 (Monographies du Centre de Recherche d'Histoire et Civilisation de Byzance – Collège de France 52), 403–410.
- 10 See the article of Stouraitis in this book (with bibliographic references); G. Dagron: *Byzance entre le djihad et la croisade. Quelques remarques*. In: *École française de Rome* (ed.): *Le concile de Clermont de 1095 et l'appel à la croisade. Actes du Colloque universitaire international de Clermont-Ferrand (23–25 juin 1995)*. Rome 1997, 325–337; G.T. Dennis: *Defenders of the Christian People. Holy War in Byzantium*. In: A. Laiou/R. P. Mottahedeh (eds): *The Crusades from the Perspective of Byzantium and the Muslim World*. Washington/D.C. 2001, 31–39; B. Caseau/J.-Cl. Cheynet: *La communion du soldat et les rites religieux sur le champ de bataille*. In: B. Caseau/J.-Cl. Cheynet/V. Déroche (eds): *Pèlerinages et lieux saints dans l'Antiquité et le Moyen Âge. Mélanges offerts à Pierre Maraval*. Paris 2006 (Monographies du Centre de Recherche d'Histoire et Civilisation de Byzance – Collège de France 23), 101–120; J.-Cl. Cheynet: *Légitimer la guerre à Byzance*. In: *MUSJ* 62, 2009, 233–251.

Byzantines [...] but vis-à-vis the Latins who populated and dominated the Crusader states” (p. 46) makes the last point more acceptable.

The questions of John II’s military strategy and attitude towards the Crusaders and his recourse to the ceremony of triumph are discussed in detail and from a quite different point of view in the contributions of Ioannis Stouraitis and Paul Magdalino. Both these papers draw attention to social and political tensions within Byzantine society and to the way internal problems affected the international policy of the Empire as well as the imperial self-representation.

In his contribution, Stouraitis exposes the flaws represented by modern prejudices and hindsight in the understanding of the past; at the same time, he provides an acute re-evaluation of John II’s military action (*Narrative of John Komnenos’ wars: comparing Byzantine and modern approach*, pp. 22–36). The fundamental question he raises is “what John’s actual military policy decisions tell us about the socio-ideological background [...] that produced them” (p. 24). An attentive analysis of twelfth-century sources, particularly of Choniates’ account, leads Stouraitis to question the alleged crusading ideology attributed to John II by some modern commentators (pp. 28–29). He also demonstrates that the positive judgement expressed by later Byzantine historians on this emperor depended less on the territorial gains he could achieve than on “his ability to maintain the authority of imperial office” (p. 32) within the Empire. Such a judgement, formulated in the immediate aftermath of John’s reign, was influenced by the experience of provincial dissidence and internal unrest under the later Komnenoi and the Angeloi. Far from reflecting simplistic religious or ethnical divisions, John II’s military action in Syria and Cilicia heralds the increasing divergence between the interests of the Constantinopolitan elite and those of the population of the Empire’s former provinces.

The triumph of 1133 gives Paul Magdalino the opportunity to investigate the forms of Komnenian political propaganda through the mirror of contemporary literature (*The triumph of 1133*, pp. 53–70). Magdalino’s fascinating paper focuses on the testimony of four poems, composed by Theodore Prodromos for this occasion. Three aspects are taken into account: the concrete information concerning the ceremony and its ideological connotation; the form and function of these literary texts, and the role of their author; the historical context surrounding the event and its deeper historical significance. John II’s triumph skilfully blended tradition and innovation in

order to enhance imperial humility, to emphasize the relation between the *basileus* and the imperial city, and to express political reconciliation in the aftermath of Isaac Komnenos' attempted usurpations. Magdalino stresses the significance of John's decision to revive a ceremony long since abandoned, and its connection with the Empire's internal strife, thus shedding new light on this extraordinary event. The uniqueness of Prodromos' poetic dossier – as regards versification, possible performance and declared authorship – is a further proof of the literary evolutions taking place during John's rule. The chapter also includes a new English translation of one of Prodromos' poems.

Magdalino's paper is not the only one devoted to a literary subject. In a chapter specifically dedicated to court literature in the early twelfth century, Elizabeth Jeffreys confirms the existence of a lively literary life in Komnenian Constantinople well before the reign of Manuel I (*Literary trends in the Constantinopolitan courts in the 1120s and 1130s*, pp. 110–120). Through the works and personalities of four prominent *literati* active during the reign of John II (Nikephoros Basilakes, Michel Italikos, Nikephoros Bryennios and, once again, Theodore Prodromos) we have a glimpse of the cultured society that gathered at Constantinopolitan *theatra*. Jeffreys shows that ambitious teachers, churchmen and civil servants, as well as high officers and aristocrats like Nikephoros Bryennios could take an active part in the production and performance of literature. Since the 1120s effective social and cultural networks emerged, which favoured both the careers of talented intellectual and the development of new literary forms. The role played by Komnenian patronage in fostering such cultural experiences, already highlighted in earlier studies,¹¹ is further demonstrated.

Three more papers deal with political and cultural interactions between Byzantium and its neighbours during the reign of John II.

11 M. Mullett: *Aristocracy and Patronage in the Literary Circles of Comnenian Constantinople*. In: M. Angold (ed.): *The Byzantine Aristocracy, IX to XIII Centuries*. Oxford 1984 (BAR International Series 221), 173–201.

Martin Marko Vučetić considers John II's diplomatic activity and his official meetings with foreign rulers (*Emperor John II's encounters with foreign rulers*, pp. 71–90). A case in point is represented by the reception of exiled or captured rulers in Constantinople. This situation seems to have concerned only eastern potentates, and does not present any novelty with respect to Byzantine traditional conduct of international relations. On the contrary, the contact with Western rulers appears to have triggered significant innovations in Byzantine diplomatic practices. Among them were the oath of fealty and the service of *strator* rendered by the crusader lords to the emperor. Vučetić also stresses the exceptionality of John II's border meeting with Stephen II of Hungary. The description of this event (reported only in Latin sources) could either be modelled on Western traditions, or disclose a significant step in long-term developments of Byzantine diplomatic habits.

In his contribution (*From Greek into Latin: Western scholars and translators in Constantinople during the reign of John II*, pp. 91–109), Alex Rodriguez Suarez collects the sparse information concerning the activity of Western intellectuals in Constantinople under the rule of John II Komnenos, with particular regard to their work as translators. Rodriguez Suarez considers the possible presence of bilingual individuals and translators in Constantinople already in the eleventh century and during the times of Alexios I Komnenos. Then, he sketches the portrait of four scholars who were active at court during the reign of John II, or participated in public theological discussions as linguistic facilitators: Cerbano Cerbani, James of Venice, Moses of Bergamo and Burgundio of Pisa. Some of them were in contact with Greek intellectual circles, and they actively participated in the translation and circulation process of ancient Greek authors, such as Aristotle and Galen. By doing so, they prepared the ground for the rediscovery of Greek culture in twelfth-century Western Europe. The origins of these intellectuals also confirm the role played by the Italian peninsula as a “bridge between Byzantium and the West, right from this early period” (p. 107).

The paper of Alessandra Bucossi (*Seeking a way out of the impasse: the Filioque controversy during John's reign*, pp. 121–134) focuses on ecclesiastical and theological life in the period considered. In the first part of this chapter, the author enumerates a series of “attempts, exchanges, pourparler, embassies, discussions” between the Greek and the Latin churches “that did not achieve any result but that still bear witness to the fact that the reunion of

the churches was perceived as a possible result” (p. 125). Then, Bucossi tries to shed light on the production of theological literature under John II. She focuses on a corpus of texts written by Niketas of Thessalonica (c. 1133), the *Dialogues on the Procession of the Holy Spirit*. These works bear witness of a quite open attitude towards the Latins, whose arguments are given due space and treated as authoritative. On this ground, Bucossi suggests that the hardening of Byzantine ecclesiastical positions postdates the reign of John II Komnenos. Niketas’ writings also reveal the growing attention granted to linguistic issues in theological discussions, as well as the development of a specific theological vocabulary referring to the *Filioque* controversy.

Finally, Pagona Papadopoulou’s chapter on the monetary policy of John II Komnenos provides an important contribution to the knowledge of this poorly documented reign (*Coinage, numismatic circulation and monetary policy under John II Komnenos [1118–1143]*). The study of the production and circulation of coins in precious metal reveals that John II “conceived and put into effect an innovative monetary policy regarding the south-eastern parts of the Empire (Asia Minor, Crete, Rhodes, Cyprus)” (p. 199). There, the progressive replacement of gold with electrum coins affected the system for tax collection, and appears to be associated with contemporary administrative reforms, i.e. the restoration of a thematic structure in this area. Although the reasons for this policy remain obscure, numismatic evidence adds details to our knowledge of John II’s personality and political agenda.

As it emerges from this survey, Bucossi and Rodriguez appear to have succeeded in their aim to provide a multifaceted picture of an important transformative period for Byzantium, the Near East and Mediterranean Europe. Their book offers a variety of inputs and ideas, which may prove valuable for readers with different interests and backgrounds. The bibliography (pp. 201–229) and the index (pp. 230–237) provide a starting point for further research. The map and the chronology of John II’s life placed at the beginning of the volume (pp. XVIII–XXI) are equally helpful, particularly for non-specialists.

It must be admitted that a comprehensive study of John II’s reign, one taking into account the composition of Komnenian society, its culture, ideology and complex networks of personal relationships— themes which receive limited attention in this book — still remains a *desideratum*. However, students and scholars wishing to undertake such a task will find in the pa-

pers collected by Bucossi and Suarez Rodriguez a great deal of useful information and thought-provoking insights. As a result, this book represents a real advancement for Byzantine scholarship and a commendable reading.

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Empfohlene Zitierweise

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