

Twelfth-century politics and the House of Komnenos

Nikephoros's early twelfth-century history looks back on a period of intense civil war and political calamity in the 1070s. The Seljuk Turks entered practically unimpeded into Roman imperial territory following their defeat and capture of Emperor Romanos Diogenes at the famous battle of Manzikert in 1071. The disaster at Manzikert often overshadows the Norman capture of Bari, also in 1071, ending centuries of Byzantine rule in southern Italy.¹ Pechenegs raided as far south as Thrace and the Slavic provinces in the Balkans revolted.² Troubles with wild currency devaluation and a decrepit taxation system impeded imperial financing.³ Not since the Arab conquests of the seventh century had so many things gone wrong for the Empire. But while the seventh century had the highly capable Heraclius, the eleventh-century Empire was ruled by Michael VII who was so incompetent that no one – from his most trusted relatives to his bitter enemies – thought he could govern without someone at his side doing the real work. During this chaotic period the ruling elite was consumed by a series of civil wars for control of the Empire that hindered any coherent opposition to the Seljuk or Norman advances. Fueled at least partially by Michael's incompetence, there were ten civil wars fought between 1070 and 1081.⁴

¹ The political fallout from Romanos's capture was more disabling for the Byzantines than the actual battle: Jean-Claude Cheynet, "Manzikert, un désastre militaire?," *Byzantion* 50, 2 (1980): 412–38; Catherine Holmes, "Political-historical Survey: C 800–1204," in *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies*, ed. Elizabeth Jeffreys, John Haldon, and Robin Cormack (Oxford University Press, 2008), 273; Carole Hillenbrand, *Turkish Myth and Muslim Symbol: The Battle of Manzikert* (Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

² Paul Stephenson, "Byzantine Policy Towards Paristrion in the Mid-Eleventh Century: Another Interpretation," *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 23 (1999): 43–63; Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier: A Political Study of the Northern Balkans, 900–1204* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 98–100, 41–44.

³ Angeliki Laiou and Cécile Morrisson, *The Byzantine Economy* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 90–165; Cécile Morrisson, "Byzantine Money: Its Production and Circulation," in *The Economic History of Byzantium from the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Angeliki Laiou (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2002), 909–66. On the taxation system see Leonora Neville, *Authority in Byzantine Provincial Society, 950–1100* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 47–65.

⁴ Using Treadgold's definition of a civil war as "an armed conflict in which a significant number of Byzantine soldiers fought on both sides with a significant number of casualties." Warren Treadgold,

The era of civil war was put to an end when Alexios Komnenos seized the throne in a violent coup in 1081. Alexios managed to stay in control for thirty-seven years and passed on stable rule to his son, John. Nikephoros uses the story of Alexios Komnenos's rise to power as a narrative core for his history of the civil wars of the 1070s. The political situation of the Empire during Nikephoros's mature years in the early twelfth century was markedly different from that of the chaotic period his history describes. In the early twelfth century the Empire was ruled by two energetic, reforming, warrior emperors: Alexios Komnenos and his son John. There were revolts against Alexios and John, but far fewer than had been the norm in the later eleventh century, and only one of these may be considered a full-scale civil war.⁵ The reigns of Alexios and John were characterized by significant gains in the recovery of Byzantine power in the east and strengthening Byzantine control in the west, as well as by internal political stability. Alexios's and John's reigns were times of political steadiness, expansion, and strong rule.

Alexios presented himself as a reformer. He demonstrated a willingness to act radically in the face of old problems, a tendency he showed by instituting a monetary reform through issuing new coinage; extensively reforming the taxation systems of the Empire and pressing great monasteries to make appropriate fiscal contributions, cashiering age-old systems of government service, imperial titulature and salaries; as well as in bullying intellectuals and burning heretics.⁶ No doubt some were riled by his vigorous pursuit of reform.⁷

Alexios came to power with the help of an extraordinary alliance of aristocratic households. Once firmly in power Alexios systematically reduced the authority of the families that helped bring him to office. Most of his

"Byzantium, the Reluctant Warrior," in *Noble Ideals and Bloody Realities: Warfare in the Middle Ages*, ed. Niall Christie and Maya Yazigi (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 224–32; Jean-Claude Cheynet, "La politique militaire byzantine de Basile II à Alexis Comnène," *Zbornik Radova Vizantolosko Instituta* 30 (1991): 61–73.

⁵ Treadgold considers Michael of Amastris's revolt as fitting his definition. Treadgold, "Byzantium, the Reluctant Warrior," 232. Cheynet regards this as a more limited event: Cheynet, *Pouvoir et contestations à Byzance (963–1210)* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1990), 102.

⁶ Margaret Mullett and Dion Smythe, eds., *Alexios I Komnenos* (Belfast Byzantine Enterprises, 1996). Reform: Paul Magdalino, "Justice and Finance in the Byzantine State, Ninth to Twelfth Centuries," in *Law and Society in Byzantium, Ninth–Twelfth Centuries*, ed. Angeliki Laiou and Dieter Simon (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1994), 93–116; Paul Magdalino, "Innovations in Government," in *Alexios I Komnenos*, ed. Mullett and Smythe, 146–66. Taxation: Neville, *Authority*, 63–65. Heretics: Kaldellis, *Hellenism*, 228–33; Dion Smythe, "Alexios I and the Heretics: the Account of Anna Komnene's *Alexiad*," in *Alexios I Komnenos*, ed. Mullett and Smyth, 232–59. Alexios' reign saw further development in the urban landscape of Constantinople: Paul Magdalino, "Medieval Constantinople," in *Studies on the History and Topography of Byzantine Constantinople* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 76–95.

⁷ Magdalino, "Aspects of Twelfth-Century Byzantine Kaiserkritik," 335–39.

military energy was spent on vigorous campaigns in the Balkan frontier. Alexios's re-conquests in Asia were limited largely to coastal areas, leaving the highlands of Anatolia in the hands of the Turks. Alexios's ability to grant his chosen followers estates in newly conquered territory in the Balkans to replace those lost in the east gave him an unprecedented power over the aristocracy. While the imperial elite undoubtedly benefited in some ways from the cessation of civil war and the stability which Alexios's reign brought, those whose wealth had come from eastern estates were permanently displaced and increasingly dependent on the largesse of the ruling Komnenos family to maintain their elite status.⁸ This spike in the power of the emperor vis-à-vis the aristocracy created a new social situation for the aristocracy than had existed in the previous several centuries.

NIKEPHOROS THE AUTHOR

In the mid eleventh century the Bryennios family rose to be among the greatest aristocratic houses in the Empire. They had been known as an influential military family since the ninth century, based primarily in Thrace and particularly in Adrianople. Nikephoros Bryennios the Elder was *magistros* and *dux* of the West under Romanos Diogenes and commanded the left flank in the battle of Manzikert. He was appointed *dux* of Dyrrachion by Michael VII.⁹

Bryennios was proclaimed emperor by his troops in Traianopoulos in November of 1077. The following spring Nikephoros Botaneiates, who had rebelled in eastern Anatolia, was welcomed into Constantinople and crowned emperor. Immediately upon his accession, Botaneiates sent Alexios Komnenos to fight Bryennios's insurrection. Alexios was victorious in the conflict, capturing Bryennios who was then blinded. The elimination of Bryennios's rebellion was a key step in paving the way for Alexios's own successful bid for the throne in 1081. Although their rebellion had failed, the Bryennios family was not destroyed, either by Botaneiates or Alexios. Their property was restored and the blinded Bryennios the Elder lived until at least 1095.¹⁰

⁸ Cheynet, *Pouvoir*, 359–77, 413–16; Peter Frankopan, "Kinship and the Distribution of Power in Komnenian Byzantium," *English Historical Review* 122, 495 (2007): 1–34; Frankopan, "Challenges to Imperial Authority in Byzantium: Revolts on Crete and Cyprus at the End of the 11th century," *Byzantion* 74, 2 (2004): 382–402.

⁹ Diether Roderich Reinsch, "O Nikephoros Vryennios – Enas Makedonas Syngrapheas," in 2. *Diethnes Symposio Vyzantinē Makedonia, dikaio, theologia, philologia* (Thessaloniki: Hetaireia Makedonikōn Spoudōn, 2003), 169–78; Cheynet, *Pouvoir*, 66, 68, 83, 220; Antonio Carile, "Il cesare Niceforo Briennio," *Aevum* 42 (1968): 429–54.

¹⁰ Cheynet, *Pouvoir*, 99; Carile, "Niceforo Briennio," 432–36.

When Alexios's daughter Anna Komnene was born in 1083, Alexios betrothed her to Constantine Doukas, the son of Michael VII, strengthening the Komnenos claim to power by making Alexios the protector of the previous ruling dynasty. After young Constantine's death in 1094, Alexios moved to consolidate his authority by marrying Anna to the grandson of his former enemy, Nikephoros Bryennios the Younger. While some scholars have argued that the younger Nikephoros Bryennios was the son of the usurper, the preponderance of evidence indicates that Nikephoros was his grandson.¹¹ Nikephoros was given the title Caesar and married Anna in around 1097. In 1108 Nikephoros received one of the new Komnenian court titles, *panhupersebastos*. According to the *Alexiad*, Alexios gave Nikephoros command in a fight with the troops of Godfrey of Bouillon outside the walls of Constantinople in 1097.¹² He continued to serve Alexios and campaigned with John. Nikephoros died in 1136/7.¹³

The key political event of Nikephoros's life to have entered the historical record was the dispute regarding the succession to imperial power of John Komnenos, Nikephoros's brother-in-law. Discontent with Alexios's mode of autocratic government, and especially his subordination of the other grand aristocratic families of the eleventh century, has been interpreted as fueling an attempt to have Nikephoros succeed Alexios rather than his son John. The standard story is that Alexios's wife Irene Doukaina and her daughter Anna plotted to have Anna and Nikephoros succeed to the throne instead of John. Nikephoros became the natural focal-point of the attempted rebellion because of the imperial ambitions of his family, but he allowed the plot to fail through his refusal to participate.¹⁴ The event is commonly seen as the last gasp of the leading aristocratic families of the

¹¹ Reinsch resolved the question of whether Nikephoros was the son or grandson of Nikephoros Bryennios the rebel by making use of additional information in George Tornikes' funeral oration for Anna; Diether Roderich Reinsch, "Der Historiker Nikephoros Bryennios, Enkel und nicht Sohn des Usurpators," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 83 (1990); Antonio Carile, "Il problema della identificazione del cesare Niceforo Briennio," *Aevum* 38 (1964): 74–83.

¹² Anna Komnene, *Annae Comnenae Alexias*, edited by Diether R. Reinsch and Athanasios Kambylis, (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2001): 10.9.6; Jonathan Harris, *Byzantium and the Crusades* (London: Hambledon and London, 2003), 56.

¹³ Carile, "Niceforo Briennio," 442–45; Elizabeth Jeffreys, "Nikephoros Bryennios Reconsidered," in *The Empire in Crisis (?) Byzantium in the Eleventh Century, Diethmē symposia, II* (Athens: Institutouto Vyzantinon Ereunon, 2003), 201–14; Reinsch, "Der Historiker Nikephoros Bryennios," 423–24.

¹⁴ Carile, "Niceforo Briennio," 445–54; Élisabeth Malamut, *Alexis Ier Comnène* (Paris: Ellipses, 2007), 445–482; Paul Magdalino, "The Pen of the Aunt: Echoes of the Mid-Twelfth Century in the *Alexiad*," in *Anna Komnene and her Times*, ed. Thalia Gouma-Peterson (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 17–18; Barbara Hill, "Actions Speak Louder than Words: Anna Komnene's Attempted Usurpation," in *Anna Komnene and Her Times*, ed. Thalia Gouma-Peterson (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 47–49; Lynda Garland, *Byzantine Empresses: Women and Power in Byzantium AD 527–1204* (London: Routledge, 1999), 197–98.

eleventh century, the Doukai and the Bryennioi, who had been pushed aside as Alexios gained power.

While this interpretation is entirely plausible, it is worth pausing to remember how much of this story is a matter of modern analysis. Scholars have identified possible causes of discontent and associated them with information about the revolt. Our medieval sources describe the revolt in terms of the personalities and personal relationships of various members of the imperial family, rather than the more general social or political problems that are the usual subject of modern explanations. Because the revolt is a central act in the modern reconstruction of Nikephoros's biography, it is worth reviewing what we actually know about the events. The only sources that speak about the succession dispute explicitly are the histories of John Zonaras, written in the middle of the twelfth century, and that of Niketas Choniates, written in the early thirteenth century. A brief notice of the dispute occurs in an anonymous Syriac chronicle written in Edessa around 1240.¹⁵ Zonaras's chronicle covers history from the Creation to the death of Alexios in 1118 and is largely hostile to Alexios.¹⁶ Choniates's history begins with the stories of strife surrounding the death of Alexios and ends in the early thirteenth century after the Latin conquest of Constantinople. The *Alexiad*, a biography of Alexios written by Anna Komnene in the middle of the twelfth century, makes no mention of an attempted usurpation against her brother, although her portrait of John is not flattering. A funeral oration for Anna by George Tornikes alludes vaguely to tensions surrounding the death of Alexios but argues strongly for Anna's proper conduct.¹⁷

In both Zonaras and Choniates the actions of the women in the imperial family serve, at least in part, to create a gendered critique of the imperial men.¹⁸ The narratives of Zonaras and Choniates either question or entirely undermine the masculinity of Alexios, John, and Nikephoros. Medieval Roman authors seem to share in the classical Roman cultural logic that

¹⁵ *Anonymi Auctoris Chronicon ad A.C. 1234 Pertinens*, ed. Albert Abouna (Louvain: Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1974), vii, 63.

¹⁶ Magdalino, "Aspects of Twelfth-Century Byzantine Kaiserkritik," 328–34.

¹⁷ *George et Demetrios Tornikes. Lettres et discours*, ed. Jean Darrouzes (Paris: Editions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1970), 267–69.

¹⁸ On the study of gender as a means of revealing some of the functions of women in Greek texts see: David M. Halperin, "Why is Diotima a Woman?," in *One hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love* (London: Routledge, 1990), 113–51; Elizabeth Clark, "Ideology, History, and the Construction of 'Woman' in Late Ancient Christianity," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2 (1994): 155–84; Elizabeth Clark, "The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the 'Linguistic Turn'," *Church History* 67 (1998): 1–31; Kate Cooper, "Insinuations of Womanly Influence: an Aspect of the Christianisation of the Roman Aristocracy," *Journal of Roman Studies* 82 (1992): 150–64. Similar methodologies may be fruitfully applied to medieval Greek texts.

equated virtue with maleness so that an attack on one impugned the other.¹⁹ The criticism implicit in both histories becomes clearer when we pay attention to how the actions of the imperial family invert the Roman ideals of proper familial relations between men and women. The function of Irene and Anna in these critical narratives should inform our reading of the evidence for their participation in the revolt.

Zonaras's story casts Irene and her son John as the major antagonists. Zonaras introduces the topic of Irene's excessive influence at court with a discussion of the marital relations between Alexios and Irene. As a young man Alexios was not particularly devoted to her and only had sex with her out of a sense of duty until "the passing of time blunted the fire-throwing arrows of *Eros*."²⁰ He then became inordinately fond of Irene and she shared in the administration. As Alexios's health declined the empress became increasingly powerful and held power over her son John. This situation was intolerable for John, who was not only a full-grown man, but already had been a husband for some time and was a father of children.²¹ John came to fear for his life as well as his succession and went around secretly asking friends and relatives to renew the oaths they had already taken that they would accept no other ruler after Alexios's death.²² The men were eager to reassert their loyalty to John.²³ Irene had John followed by spies and tried to cut off access to him, but he continued to draw supporters anyway.²⁴

Here Zonaras's story implicitly criticizes Alexios first for having affairs as a young man and then for over-indulgence of his wife as an old man.

¹⁹ On Roman masculinity see Mathew Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Roman Ideology in Late Antiquity* (University of Chicago Press, 2001), 19–31; Myles Anthony McDonnell, *Roman Manliness: Virtus and the Roman Republic* (Cambridge University Press, 2006). On Byzantine conceptions of gender see Charles Barber, "Homo Byzantinus?," in *Women, Men and Eunuchs: Gender in Byzantium*, ed. Liz James (London: Routledge, 1997), 185–99; Kathryn M. Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium* (University of Chicago Press, 2003); Martha Vinson, "Gender and Politics in the Post-Iconoclastic Period: The Lives of Antony the Younger, The Empress Theodora, and the Patriarch Ignatios," *Byzantion* 68 (1998): 469–515; Dion Smythe, "Gender," in *Palgrave Advances in Byzantine History*, ed. Jonathan Harris (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 157–65.

²⁰ Zonaras, *Ioannis Zonarae epitomae historiarum libri xviii*, edited by M. Pinder and T. Büttner-Wobst, 3 vols. (Bonn: Weber, 1841–97): 747.2–9. πρὸς δὲ τὴν κοινωνὸν τοῦ βίου ὁ βασιλεὺς οὗτος οὐτ' ἀποστρόφως εἶχε τὸ πρότερον οὔτε λίαν ἐκείνη προσέκειτο, ἀφροδισίων δ' ἠττώμενος οὐ πάνυ τὰ ἐς εὐνήν ἐτύγχανε δίκαιος, ὅθεν καὶ βέλεσιν ἢ Αὐγούστα ζηλοτυπίας ἐβέβλητο. ἐπεὶ δ' ὁ χρόνος προήκων τῷ αὐτοκράτορι τὰ πυρφόρα βέλη τοῦ ἔρωτος ἤμβλυσε, τότε πρὸς τὴν Αὐγούσταν τρέψας τὸν ἔρωτα ὅλος ἦν τῆς πρὸς ἐκείνην στοργῆς καὶ ἤθελεν εἶναι σχεδὸν αὐτῆς ἀδιάσπαστος.

²¹ Zonaras 747.9–748.3 τῷ δὲ τὸ σκέμμα οὐκ ἀνεκτὸν ἐς ἄνδρας ἤδη τελούντι καὶ γυναικί πρὸ πολλοῦ συναφθέντι . . . καὶ παιδῶν γεγονότι πατρί.

²² Zonaras 748.4–10. ²³ Zonaras 748.11–12. ²⁴ Zonaras 748.12–17.

The incontinent young Alexios fails to exhibit the virtue of self-control, *sophrosyne*, considered particularly vital for an emperor.²⁵ The overly affectionate elderly Alexios exhibits a different form of weakness in allowing himself to be ruled by his wife. In not striving to nurture and support her son, Irene is portrayed as derelict in the most basic duties of a mother. By denying John's status as an adult man and actively fighting against him, Irene inverts the natural order of an ideal family.²⁶

Zonaras further relates that as the emperor's health continued to decline "the empress was extremely powerful and much authority belonged to her son-in-law Caesar Bryennios."²⁷ Nikephoros was entrusted with making proclamations and giving justice. Zonaras describes Nikephoros as a man "inclined to knowledge" whose wife:

held her ground in intellectual pursuits, speaking accurate Attic and having a keen mind for complex concepts. She added to her natural intelligence through study. She was engrossed by books and profound conversations with learned men.²⁸

Everything was going well for the Caesar, who was universally praised. This situation cast John, "the emperor's son and emperor," into despondency and anguish, which he bore with endurance.²⁹

Zonaras admits doubts about what actually happened when Alexios died. He presents several versions of Alexios's deathbed scene, inviting his audience to choose between competing stories. All of these, however, describe the succession struggles as exclusively between Irene and John. Nikephoros's prominence in palace administration prior to Alexios's death is presented as a corollary to Irene's control of the government. Neither Anna nor Nikephoros figured at all in the drama surrounding Alexios's death, although Anna and her sisters were all present at Alexios's death. Zonaras says that after he was firmly in control of the Great Palace, John

²⁵ Helen North, *Sophrosyne: Self-Knowledge and Restraint in Classical Antiquity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966); Barbara Hill, "The Ideal Komnenian Woman," *Byzantinische Forschungen* 23 (1996): 14; Kazhdan, "Aristocracy and the Imperial Ideal," 42–57; Kuefler, *Manly Eunuch*, 77–96.

²⁶ Roman mothers were expected to support their son's careers without being overly ambitious: Suzanne Dixon, *The Roman Mother* (London: Croom Helm, 1988), 175–6, 202–03; Susan Treggiari, "Women in the Time of Augustus," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Augustus*, ed. Karl Galinsky (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 143–47. On care for family as a chief virtue of women in twelfth-century panegyrics see: Hill, "The Ideal Komnenian Woman," 8.

²⁷ Zonaras 754.

²⁸ Zonaras 754.10–755.16 ἦν γὰρ καὶ λόγοις προσκείμενος ὁ ἀνὴρ, καὶ ἡ σύνοικος δέ οἱ οὐδὲν ἦττον, εἰ μὴ καὶ μᾶλλον ἐκείνου, τῆς ἐν λόγοις παιδείας ἀντείχετο καὶ τὴν γλῶτταν εἶχεν ἀκριβῶς ἀττικίζουσαν καὶ τὸν νοῦν πρὸς ὕψος θεωρημάτων ὀξύτατον. ταῦτα δ' αὐτῇ προσεγένετο φύσεως ὀξύτητι καὶ σπουδῇ· προσετέθη γὰρ ταῖς βίβλοις καὶ λόγοις ἀνδράσι καὶ οὐ παρέργως ὠμίλει αὐτοῖς.

²⁹ Zonaras 754.16–755.2.

considered what he should do about his mother and sisters and Nikephoros because he suspected them of wanting to plot against him.³⁰ Zonaras does not specify what John decided to do and turns instead to further description of Alexios's end and an assessment of his reign.

Choniates, although writing over half a century after Zonaras, presents himself as having more information about the attempted coup. Zonaras's competing versions of Alexios's death are replaced by one seamless narrative. The characters are more fully drawn, but they are drawn as stock types. Choniates uses the story of the succession dispute to create an image of an unharmonious and unnatural imperial family in which all the familial and gender roles are inverted. Setting the beginning of his history in the context of Alexios's dysfunctional household contributes to Choniates's larger agenda of explaining the fall of Constantinople in 1204 in terms of Komnenian failings.³¹ The opening of Choniates's history invites a comparison with the opening of Xenophon's *Anabasis*, in which a king and queen fight over which of their two *sons* ought to succeed.³² In Choniates's telling, the Komnenos dynasty was perverse and unsound from its foundation.

Choniates opens with a shrewish Irene badgering Alexios about his son John's faults. Choniates's exquisite use of *double-entendre* allows him to have Irene complain simultaneously about John's moral weaknesses of rashness, luxuriousness, and lack of virtue and his bodily weaknesses of diarrhea, feebleness from recurring twisting of his bowels, and general ill-health.³³ In response to Irene's nagging, Alexios manages to maintain his composure some of the time, which crucially means that he lost his temper some of the time.³⁴ Choniates recreates one of Alexios's tirades in which he points out not only the logical reasons for John's succession but also the bloody nature of his acquisition of power:

³⁰ Zonaras 764.1–5.

³¹ On the larger agenda see Alicia Simpson, "Before and After 1204: The Versions of Niketas Choniates' *Historia*," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 60 (2006): 189–221; Alicia Simpson, "Studies on the Composition of Niketas Choniates' *Historia*" (Ph.D., King's College London, 2004), 178–200.

³² Anthony Kaldellis, "Paradox, Reversal and the Meaning of History," in *Niketas Choniates: A Historian and a Writer*, ed. Alicia Simpson and Stephanos Efthymiadis (Geneva: La Pomme d'Or, 2009), 78–79.

³³ Choniates, *Nicetae Choniatae Historia*, ed. Jan Louis van Dieten (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1975): Choniates, *John* 5.7–9 . . . προπετή τοῦτον ἀποκαλοῦσα καὶ ὑγρὸν τὸν βίον παλίνστροφόν τε τῶνθεος καὶ μηδαμῆ μηδὲν ὑγιές . . . Ὁν στρόφος used in contexts of incipient defecation see Jeffrey Henderson, *The Maculate Muse: Obscene Language in Attic Comedy* (Oxford University Press, 1991), 197.

³⁴ Choniates, *John* 4.24–6.11.

Oh woman, sharer of my bed and Empire, will you not stop admonishing me on behalf of your daughter, undertaking to destroy praiseworthy harmony and order as if you had been struck mad? Put it down to good fortune. Or rather let's now study and observe together who of all of those taking up the scepters of Rome until now who had a son appropriate for rule overlooked him and selected instead his son-in-law? Even if this did happen at some point, oh woman, we should not follow the rarity as law. The whole of Rome would laugh out loud at me and conclude that I had lost my senses if I, who seized the Empire, not in a praiseworthy manner, but with the blood of compatriots and ways departing from Christian laws, when I need to find an heir for it, would banish the one from my loins and welcome in the one from Macedonia.³⁵

Here Alexios condemns himself for usurpation and his wife for insanity. Irene's lack of support for her own son again is an unnatural action that disrupts the proper harmony and order of the household. When Irene ignored Alexios's arguments and persisted in pestering him, he would pretend to think about it "since he was a dissembling man beyond all others."³⁶ Within the cultural logic of Choniates's text, the idea of disputing the succession of the reigning emperor's healthy adult male heir is absurd and irrational. In addition to criticizing Irene for persisting with a bad idea, Choniates disparages both Irene and Alexios for their inversion of proper marital roles. Alexios lacked the authority to get his wife to stop arguing with him while Irene did not respect her husband's judgment. Alexios appears weak and conniving while Irene appears shrewish.

Choniates provides a single continuous narrative of Alexios's death. John's struggle to secure power is the narrative center. Choniates provides a story about a second moment of contention within the first year of John's reign. John's relatives formed a plot in favor of Nikephoros. The plan was to strike against the emperor murderously in the night when John was encamped outside the city. The guards had been bribed and the conspirators would have struck "had not the customary dullness and

³⁵ Choniates, *John* 5–6. ὦ γυναῖκα, κοινωῆ μοι λέχους καὶ βασιλείας, οὐ τὰ πρὸς χάριν παύσῃ τῆς σῆς ὑποτιθεμένη μοι θυγατρός, ἁρμονίαν τε καὶ τάξιν ἐπιχειροῦσα λύειν ἐπαινετήν, ὡς εἶπερ θεοβλαβείας μετέσχικας; βάλ' ἐς τύχην ἀγαθὴν ἢ μᾶλλον δεῦρο κοινῆ συνδιασκεψόμεθα καὶ γνωσόμεθα, τίς ἐξ ἀπάντων τῶν πρώην τὰ Ῥωμαίων σκῆπτρα παρειληφότεων, υἱὸν ἔχων ἀρμόδιον εἰς ἀρχήν, τοῦτον μὲν παρεβλέψατο, γαμβρὸν δὲ ἀνθειλετο. εἰ δέ ποτε καὶ τοῖόνδε τι ξυμβέβηκεν, οὐ νόμον, ὦ γυναῖκα, τὸ σπάνιον ἠγησόμεθα. ἐπ' ἔμοι δὲ καὶ μάλα καπυρὸν γελάσειε τὸ Πανρῶμαιον, καὶ τῶν φρενῶν κριθεῖην ἀποπεσῶν, εἰ τὴν βασιλείαν οὐκ ἐπαινετῶς εἰληφώς, ἀλλ' αἵμασιν ὁμογενῶν καὶ μεθόδοις Χριστιανῶν ἀφισταμέναις θεσμῶν, δεῖσαν ταύτης ἀφεικῆναι διάδοχον, τὸν μὲν ἐξ ὄσφυος ἀποπεμψάμην, τὸν δὲ Μακεδόνα εἰσοικισάμην. All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

³⁶ Choniates, *John* 6.10.

languidness stopped [Nikephoros] Bryennios from taking in hand the attempt on the Empire and compelled him to remain in place, forgetting his agreements, and extinguishing the hot desire of the conspirators.”³⁷ Choniates relates that the conspirators were only temporarily deprived of their property and that Anna and John were reconciled.³⁸ Choniates includes a gratuitously sexual appraisal of Anna’s disappointment:

It is said that the Kaisarina Anna was so disgusted with her husband’s frivolity that she considered herself as suffering something terrible and blamed nature most of all. Nature was placed under a grave indictment on the grounds that Anna’s genitals were spread wide and hollowed whereas Bryennios had the long member and was balled.³⁹

The term translated as “frivolity” also refers to passive anal penetration while “nature” is a euphemism for female genitals.⁴⁰ With Choniates’s pornographic depiction of Anna’s frustration with her womanhood, his use of gender inversion to disparage the Komnenoi becomes patent. Nikephoros becomes a weakling in this narrative through his marriage to an ambitious woman as much as through his failure to attack John. The analytic goal of Choniates’s history was to explain what went wrong with the Roman Empire that led to the Latin conquest. By portraying Alexios’s court as a locus of gender inversion and unnatural power relations, Choniates undermined the good standing and reputation of those who founded the dynasty. In Choniates’s narrative, the story of John’s accession is sordid and full of perverse characters: men who let women rule them, women who want to rule, women who egg their husbands on to murder. The whole

³⁷ Choniates, *John* 10.16–22: τάχα δ’ ἂν καὶ νυκτὸς ἐπέθεντο μεθ’ ὄπλων τῶν φονουργῶν αὐλιζομένῳ τῷ βασιλεῖ κατὰ τὸ μικρὸν ἄποθεν τῶν χερσαίων πυλῶν ἱππῆλατον Φιλοπάτιον, δῶροις προδιαφθείραντες ἄδροις τὸν ἐπὶ τῶν εισόδων τῆς πόλεως, εἰ μὴ τὸ εἰωθὸς ὑπόνωθρον καὶ χαλαρὸν πρὸς βασιλείας ἐπίθεσιν τῆς ἐγχειρήσεως ἔπαυσε τὸν Βρυέννιον, αὐτόν τε μένειν κατὰ χώραν παραβιάσαν τῶν ξυνηκῶν λαθόμενον, καὶ κατασβέσαν τὸ θερμὸν τῶν συνελθόντων φρόνημα.

³⁸ Choniates, *John* 11.27–28.

³⁹ Choniates, *John* 10.22–25: ὅτε καὶ λέγεται τὴν καיסάρισσαν Ἄνναν πρὸς τὸ χαῦνον τοῦ ταύτης ἀνδρὸς δυσχεραίνουσαν ὡς πάσχουσαν δεινὰ διαπρίεσθαι καὶ τῆ φύσει τὰ πολλὰ ἐπιμέμφεσθαι, ὑπ’ αἰτίαν τιθεῖσαν οὐχὶ μικρὰν ὡς αὐτῇ μὲν διασχούσαν τὸ ἄρθρον καὶ ἐγκοιλίαν, τῷ δὲ Βρυεννίῳ τὸ μῦριον ἀποτείναν καὶ σφαιρώσαν.

I thank Anthony Kaldellis for calling my attention to the error in Magoulias’s translation. Magoulias’s mistranslation has entered the literature: Malamut, *Alexis Ier Comnène*, 446; Dion Smythe, “Middle Byzantine Family Values and Anna Komnene’s *Alexiad*,” in *Byzantine Women: Varieties of Experience 800–1200*, ed. Lynda Garland (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 127. Quandahl and Jarratt discuss the text of Magoulias’s translation while acknowledging that it does not reflect Choniates’s meaning: Ellen Quandahl and Susan C. Jarratt, “To Recall Him . . . Will be a Subject of Lamentation: Anna Comnena as Rhetorical Historiographer,” *Rhetorica* 26, 3 (2008): 308.

⁴⁰ χαῦνον: Henderson, *Maculate Muse*, 211, φύσις: John J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 217–20.

story is rife with sexualized vocabulary. It makes for a gripping and fitting opening chapter for his story of the Empire's decline. Because the story fits his thirteenth-century purposes so well, however, we must be cautious in accepting it as evidence for the events of 1118.

The account of the anonymous Edessan chronicler is more violent and spare than either Zonaras or Choniates. The anonymous casts Irene as supporting her son-in-law over John, leading to enmity between the two men. The main event of the story is John's assault on the walls of the palace and subsequent violent plunder of the imperial treasure. The anonymous says that once in power John exiled his brother-in-law and sent his mother to a monastery.⁴¹ Anna is not mentioned.

Anna Komnene's *Alexiad* does not mention any attempted coup but makes a strong case for Anna and her mother and sisters behaving appropriately at the time of her father's death and casts John's actions to secure the succession as power-hungry and lacking in filial sentiment. The *Alexiad* systematically builds in emotional intensity throughout Book XV moving toward Alexios's death.⁴² In Anna's history Alexios is surrounded by his wife and three daughters who minister to him with increasing grief. Anna's account shows Anna and Irene acting in their proper gender roles and has John improperly concerned with politics at the hour of his father's death. Nikephoros plays no role whatsoever in Anna's version of the succession story. Anna employed the same standard ideas of proper gender roles as Choniates, but used them to opposite effect.

Overall, modern historians have preferred to synthesize Zonaras and Choniates while ignoring Anna – her eye-witness notwithstanding. Standard modern accounts of the event hold that Irene and Anna together were the active impetus for the coup which failed because of Nikephoros's loss of nerve. The women were then forced into monastic retirement. Choniates's story is heavily represented in this synthesis. Choniates is the only source that implicates Anna in the coup, when he describes her frustration as a means of disparaging Nikephoros. Nikephoros similarly appears as failing to pursue power only in Choniates's story. In the others he does not figure. Zonaras has Irene as the instigator and Anna, who is never named, only figures as the wife of Nikephoros.

The standard view combines those elements from Zonaras's and Choniates's histories that appeal to modern sensibilities. Modern historians

⁴¹ *Anonymi Auctoris Chronicon ad A.C. 1234 Pertinens*, 63.

⁴² Margaret Mullett, "Alexios I Komnenos and Imperial Renewal," in *New Constantines: The Rhythm of Imperial Renewal in Byzantium, 4th–13th Centuries*, ed. Paul Magdalino (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1994), 264.

conceive of this as ‘Anna’s coup’ because they are interested in women’s authority and attracted to Anna’s mystique as a great medieval woman writer. In valorizing the perceived efforts of Anna and Irene to take power, modern historians have given the texts a meaning that runs opposite to what appears to have been the authors’ intent. Cultural changes in ideals of womanhood have complicated our reading of these histories. On the other hand, cultural continuities regarding negative associations with passive men persist into the modern era with sufficient force that Nikephoros is now generally regarded as a wimpy intellectual because he chose not to murder his brother-in-law.

It is likely that there was some internal palatial dissension at the time of Alexios’s death. Tornikes’s funeral oration indicates that some people regarded Anna and John as rivals but strongly insists upon her proper behavior. There is no reason to think the stories in Zonaras and Choniates had no basis in at least rumor and gossip. The attempts against John cannot have been particularly threatening, however, because they apparently had no significant consequences for the participants. Zonaras does not say what John decided to do about Irene, Anna, and Nikephoros once he had become emperor. Choniates says that property was temporarily seized but that Anna and John were soon reconciled. Irene retired to the convent she founded sometime after her husband’s death, but we do not have reason to associate her retirement with John’s displeasure. Anna may have joined her mother in monastic retirement only after Nikephoros’s death.⁴³ Anna was tonsured shortly before she died.⁴⁴ Nikephoros remained at court and ended his life while in military service.

Whether Nikephoros wrote his history before or after John’s accession must remain a subject of speculation. We do not know how much of it he left unfinished or even how much of what he did write we have. The narrative breaks off unfinished in 1080. Since it seems that Nikephoros was born sometime in the late 1070s or early 1080s, it is unlikely that he began to write much before around 1100. Jeffreys plausibly speculates that a period of “enforced leisure” after Anna and Irene’s unsuccessful coup in Nikephoros’s name could have provided the opportunity for Nikephoros to engage in serious literary activity and possibly write his history.⁴⁵ We

⁴³ The idea of Anna’s immediate retirement comes from her description of her internal exile in the *Alexiad* at 14.7.6. Anna’s self-proclaimed isolation is contradicted to some extent by her ongoing lively intellectual work. Robert Browning, “An Unpublished Funeral Oration on Anna Comnena,” *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 8 (1962): 4–12.

⁴⁴ Demetrios I. Polemis, *The Doukai: a Contribution to Byzantine Prosopography* (London: Athlone, 1968), 70–74, Basile Skoulatos, *Les personnages byzantins de l’Alexiade: analyse prosopographique et synthèse* (Louvain: Bureau du recueil Collège Erasme, 1980), 119–24.

⁴⁵ Jeffreys, “Nikephoros Bryennios Reconsidered,” 211–13.

have however no call to think he was so deeply busy with other work that he could not have written this history at other times as well. The history as we have it is hardly monumental. I have known too many good historians to leave half-finished books on their desks for decades at a time to think that the unfinished nature of the text means that Nikephoros had pen in hand in the last months of his life.

Nikephoros's historical writing was described by his wife, Anna Komnene, in the prologue to her history of her father's reign, the *Alexiad*.⁴⁶ She wrote that her mother, Irene, had commissioned Nikephoros to compose a history of Alexios's reign and that Nikephoros was able to complete the first part of the work, from the reign of Romanos Diogenes through that of Nikephoros Botaneiates. In the preface to the *Material for History* Nikephoros addresses a wise woman who had commissioned a history of Alexios, presumably Irene Doukaina.⁴⁷ While there is no conclusive proof that the text we know as the *Material for History* is the history said to have been written by Nikephoros Bryennios, it matches Anna's description well enough to proceed on that assumption.

To gain any traction on the dating of the text, we need to reflect on the political messages in the history and speculate about possible contexts of composition. Since working out the meanings of the text is the subject of the core of the present book, the discussion of possible political contexts in Part III is more satisfying. Here the task is to lay out the various possible scenarios for the political context. One key result of the close reading of the text with immediate significance for the political context of composition is the understanding that Nikephoros's history contains veiled criticism of Alexios and marked valorization of Bryennios the Elder. While the argument for the negative reading of Alexios will unfold over the core section of the present book, in thinking about possible political contexts of composition we need to address its fundamental plausibility.⁴⁸

Alexios Komnenos was the logical person to blame for the blinding of Nikephoros's grandfather, Bryennios the Elder, a fact unlikely to have been forgotten by Bryennios's descendants. There is very little reason to doubt that if Alexios had failed to defeat Bryennios's rebellion, Nikephoros would have become emperor. In addition to dealing the Bryennios family one dramatic and devastating blow in 1080, Alexios effectively reduced

⁴⁶ Komnene, P.3.

⁴⁷ P.II.1–3, On Irene's literary patronage see Margaret Mullett, "Aristocracy and Patronage in the Literary Circles of Comnenian Constantinople," in *The Byzantine Aristocracy: IX–XIII Centuries*, ed. Michael Angold (Oxford: British Archeological Reports, 1984), 175–76.

⁴⁸ Reinsch outlines evidence for Nikephoros's loyalty to his grandfather: Reinsch, "O Nikephoros Vryennios," 173–76.

the power and influence of the other aristocratic families throughout his reign. Nikephoros would have had more than one possible reason to dislike Alexios. Although he was a fairly high-ranking courtier and the husband of the princess, Nikephoros very reasonably can be supposed to have been politically disappointed.

Anna Komnene's highly laudatory depiction of her father in the *Alexiad* may give rise to a natural presupposition that her husband liked Alexios too. Anna wrote about her great affection for her husband in moving terms. She may well have been entirely sincere. Affection of a wife for her husband was a mark of good character however and it is equally possible that Anna said she loved her husband because that was the emotional relationship most flattering for a good woman. That it is at least possible for loving couples to disagree significantly on matters of politics is proven by common experience. There is no reason *a priori* to assume that Anna and Nikephoros had the same evaluation of Alexios's character and success. As will be shown in subsequent chapters, the *Alexiad* and the *Material for History* can be seen as engaging in a critical dialogue regarding Alexios's character.

The evidence for an abortive coup after the death of Alexios, such as it is, indicates resistance to John. Given the solid material reasons for growing resentment among the old aristocracy at the increasing centralization of power and authority in the hands of the Komnenos family over the course of Alexios's reign, it is reasonable to expect some courtiers would have disliked Alexios. Several conspiracies were revealed during Alexios's reign, the most dangerous of which aimed to replace Alexios with a descendant of the eleventh-century aristocracy.⁴⁹ That a negative portrait of Alexios could have circulated in Constantinople should not be surprising.

Interpretations of possible contexts for the composition of a critical portrait of an emperor depend in turn on judgments of how dangerous such criticism was, for either the author or the emperor. The criticism of Alexios in Nikephoros's history is veiled, but thinly. The criticism is never overt, but hardly so esoteric or deeply subtle to be truly hidden. I doubt anyone would have expected that John could have listened to the history and been too naïve to catch the negative underlay. More likely keeping the criticism veiled allowed it to be more polite, or at least not so insulting as to require a response.

Much, but not all, of the negativity depends on hearing the story told with a conception of classical Roman ideals of masculinity and honor

⁴⁹ The most politically threatening revolts were probably those of Gregory Gabras, Nikephoros Diogenes, and Michael Anemas. Cheynet, *Pouvoir*, 90–103.

in mind. Therefore various audience members may have perceived it as more or less critical depending on the degree of their engagement with classical culture. Assessment of the degree of openness and intensity of the criticism then depends to some extent on a judgment regarding the depth of education at court. In the later twelfth-century court, where references to Plutarch and other classical authors in court rhetorical performances were routine, the value system that codes Alexios as dishonorable and un-Roman would have been widely known. If Nikephoros's criticism was fairly esoteric in 1110, it might have seemed quite obvious by 1200. Even in the early twelfth century enough people at court had heard enough Roman history to be sure that Nikephoros's history would not have passed as purely laudatory. Some strands of criticism, such as that which aligns Alexios's behavior with that of the Turks, required no classical education.

Several possible basic scenarios for the context of composition then present themselves. One possibility is that the history was written when Alexios was alive and that it formed part of Nikephoros's bid for power in Alexios's last months. In this case the criticism of Alexios would work with the lionization of Bryennios the Elder to make a case for Nikephoros's superior qualifications for rule. This scenario would present Nikephoros as more active in the pursuit of power than he appears in the standard narrative.

The second half of Nikephoros's history is more biting in its criticism than the first half, which contains more cloying overt praise of Alexios. This observation led Seger to suggest that the first half was written when Alexios was alive and the second after his death.⁵⁰ A third possibility is that the first half was written shortly after John's accession, perhaps as an effort to reassure John that Nikephoros would support the Komnenos regime, but that as time went on and both John and Nikephoros became more secure in their relationship, Nikephoros felt free to be more critical. This case would have Nikephoros writing slowly, or in fits and starts, over a long period of time.

A fourth possibility is that it was written well after John's accession at a time when any attempted coup could be considered safely in the past. The criticism of Alexios and the valorization of the Bryennios family at such a point may have been emotionally satisfying but would have carried little political bite. It is possible that Nikephoros wrote more critically in later chapters because John's response to early chapters indicated that there would be no recriminations to doing so. In this scenario John did not

⁵⁰ Seger, *Bryennios*, 32–33.

need to worry about criticism of his father because such talk was of no political importance. It is of course possible that John did not mind, or even enjoyed, hearing his father criticized.

There are certainly other plausible scenarios as well, but they all likely fall somewhere in the range from an early highly politically significant context near the end of Alexios's reign to an almost purely academic context in the middle of John's reign. This range of options is offered to the reader as an aid in contextualizing the analysis which follows and will be revisited in Part III.