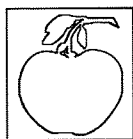


Alicia Simpson
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Niketas Choniates
A Historian and a Writer

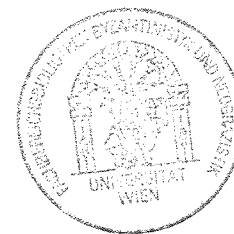


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Abbreviations

BF	<i>Byzantinische Forschungen</i>
BMGS	<i>Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies</i>
BSI	<i>Byzantinoslavica</i>
Byz	<i>Byzantion</i>
BZ	<i>Byzantinische Zeitschrift</i>
CFHB	<i>Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae</i>
CSHB	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae</i>
DOP	<i>Dumbarton Oaks Papers</i>
EEBΣ	<i>Ἐπετηρὶς Ἑταιρείας Βυζαντινῶν Σπουδῶν</i>
JÖB	<i>Jahrbuch der österreichischen Byzantinistik</i>
JÖBG	<i>Jahrbuch der österreichischen byzantinischen Gesellschaft</i>
Kazhdan <i>et al.</i> , <i>Narrazione cronologica</i>	<i>Grandezza e catastrofe di Bizanzio (Narrazione cronologica)</i> , eds., A.P. Kazhdan, J.-L. van Dieten, R. Maisano and A. Pontani, I-II (Milan, 1994-1999)
OBD	<i>Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium</i>
PG	<i>Patrologia Cursus Completus. Series Graeca</i>
REB	<i>Revue des études byzantines</i>
SC	<i>Sources Chrétiennes</i>
TM	<i>Travaux et Mémoires</i>
v.D.	<i>Nicetae Choniatae historia</i> , ed., J.-L. van Dieten, 2 vols (Berlin and New York, 1975)
VV	<i>Vizantijskij Vremennik</i>
ZRVI	<i>Zbornik Radova Vizantološkog Instituta</i>

Introduction

Alicia Simpson

NIKETAS CHONIATES: THE HISTORIAN

In the opening pages of Umberto Eco's *Baudolino* a historian explains that 'there are no stories without meaning [...] you have to consider the events, arrange them in order, and find the connections, even the least visible ones'.¹ The year is 1204 and the historian is Niketas Choniates. The subsequent story is largely framed as a dialogue between the fictional hero Baudolino and the historical character Niketas Choniates. The two men meet unexpectedly amidst the horror and destruction unleashed by the Crusaders during the sack of Constantinople. Whilst hiding from the invaders and organizing their escape, Baudolino proceeds to recount to Niketas his life's story. Like Baudolino's playful and adventurous tale, the story narrated by Niketas in his history is complex and multifaceted. It largely consists of stories within stories, revolving in a periphery around the protagonists, some adventurous, erotic or heroic, others comedic, pathetic and abhorrent. Unlike the happy ending of Baudolino's miraculous tale, Niketas' story ends in unspeakable tragedy as the edifice of

¹ Umberto Eco, *Baudolino*, trans. W. Weaver (New York, 2002), 12.

the Byzantine empire collapses before his very eyes. Yet the historian, much like his character in *Baudolino*, considers these events, arranges them in order, finds the connections and provides them with meaning.

As a historian Niketas is a major figure, embittered and disillusioned by the tragedy of his times, he wrote a lengthy and sophisticated narrative that is the single most important source for Byzantine history in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. It is also the principal Greek eyewitness account of the capture of Constantinople by the armies of the Fourth Crusade in 1204. Because of this, the *History* has long been used as the main source for the period in question and has been intensively studied by scholars of Byzantine history and literature. The monumental critical edition of the text published by Jan-Louis van Dieten in the series *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae* (1975) was preceded by a detailed discussion of the complex manuscript tradition and transmission of the *History*.² As a result of van Dieten's careful analysis, the sequence of composition and revision of the *History* as well as the distinctive features of its different versions can now be examined and properly utilized. This formidable scholar also produced a critical edition of Niketas' orations as well as his correspondence, a biography of the author, along with a study of his orations and letters, and finally, a separate study on the textual tradition of Niketas' theological treatise, *Dogmatike Panoplia*.³ More recently, the first two volumes of an ambitious new publication of the *History* (*Narrazione cronologica*) accompanied by an Italian translation and a comprehensive commentary have appeared.⁴ The first volume (bks. I-VIII) contains the introduction by Alexander Kazhdan, the critical text and commentary by Riccardo Maisano and the translation by Anna Pontani. J.-L. van Dieten revised and

² *Nicetae Choniatae Historia* (Berlin-New York, 1975), VII-CV.

³ *Nicetae Choniatae, orationes et epistulae*, ed., J.-L. van Dieten (Berlin-New York, 1972); J.-L. van Dieten, *Niketas Choniates. Erläuterungen zu den Reden und Briefen nebst einer Biographie* (Berlin-New York, 1971); idem, *Zur Überlieferung und Veröffentlichung der Panoplia Dogmatike des Niketas Choniates* (Amsterdam, 1970).

⁴ *Grandezza e catastrofe di Bizanzio (Narrazione cronologica)*, eds., A. P. Kazhdan, J.-L. van Dieten, R. Maisano and A. Pontani, I-II (Milan, 1994-1999).

corrected his classic edition for the second volume (bks. IX-XIV) jointly with Anna Pontani who also undertook the translation and commentary.

Several translations of the text into modern languages have also been published, most notably the older German translation by Franz Grabler and the English translation by Harry Magoulias.⁵ However, Grabler's translation was based on the earlier edition of the text by Immanuel Bekker in the Bonn Corpus (1835) and the shortcomings of Magoulias' translation mean that it always needs to be checked against the original. In addition to publications, translations and commentaries, the *History* has been the subject of meticulous study by Alexander Kazhdan. Indeed, much of our understanding of Niketas as a writer and intellectual stems from the works of this scholar. Especially significant are his massive *Concordance to Nicetas Choniates' History* and the posthumous publication of his earlier studies in *Nikita Honiat i ego vremja* (*Niketas Choniates and his time*).⁶ In particular, Kazhdan has drawn attention to the political, social and religious views of the author, and demonstrated the mastery of his literary technique.⁷ In a series of important articles Riccardo Maisano has also examined the literary aspects of Niketas' work as well as various problems of the textual tradition of the *History*.⁸ Recent years have

⁵ The German translation in three volumes: I. *Die Krone der Komnenen (1118-1180)*- II. *Abenteurer auf dem Kaiserthron (1180-1195)*- III. *Die Kreuzfahrer erobern Konstantinopel (1195-1206)* (Graz-Vienna-Cologne, 1958); Eng. trans. *O City of Byzantium, Annals of Niketas Choniates* (Detroit, 1984). For a complete list of editions and translations of the *History* see van Dieten's introduction, CV-CXIII and Kazhdan et al., *Narrazione cronologica*, I, LXVI-LXVII; II, XVII-XX; also R. Maisano, 'L'incontro della cultura occidentale con l'opera storica di Niceta Choniata', in *Medioevo romanzo e orientale. Testi e prospettive storiografiche* (Soveria Mannelli, 1992), 19-39.

⁶ *Concordance to Nicetas Choniates's History*, 16 vols. (unpublished notes housed in the Dumbarton Oaks Library); *Nikita Honiat i ego vremja* (St. Petersburg, 2005).

⁷ For this see also A. Kazhdan (with S. Franklin), *Studies on Byzantine Literature of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*, (Cambridge, 1984), ch. VII.

⁸ 'Letteratura e storiografia nell'opera di Niceta Choniata', *Messana* 16 (1993), 41-57; 'Varianti d'autore in Niceta Choniata?', in R. Romano ed., *Problemi di ecdotica e esegesi di testi bizantini e grecomedievali* (Naples, 1994), 63-80; 'Tipologia delle fonti di Niceta Choniata (libri I-VIII)', in F. Montanari and S. Pittaluga, eds., *Storia poesia e pensiero nel mondo antico. Studi in onore di*

witnessed an increased interest in the literary analysis of Byzantine historical texts and this has been reflected in the latest studies on the *History*.⁹ However, as the application of *Quellenforschung* is gradually subsiding, a variety of approaches that take into account genre and ideological perspective, narrative structure and technique, as well as modes of literary presentation are needed.¹⁰

Whether studying the *History* or using it as a source of events one must first cope with the fact that it is not a unitary composition, but a work written and circulated in three main phases: an older, shorter version, *b(revior)*, written under Alexios III Angelos in late twelfth and early thirteenth century; supplements written after 1204 to present an account of the Fourth Crusade and its aftermath; and a longer, thoroughly revised version, *a(uctior)*, written over a decade later in Nikaia.¹¹ There are substantial differences in style, content and purpose between the first and the final versions. Version *b*, though critical of individual emperors, is basically supportive of the dynastic regime; the narrative centres on military affairs, civil wars and conspiracies, often suppressing and/or distorting a host of information that could reflect badly on

Marcello Gigante (Naples, 1994), 391-405; 'I poemi Omerici nell'opera storica di Niceta Coniata', in *Posthomeric II-Tradizioni omeriche dall'Antichità al Rinascimento* (Genova, 2000), 41-53.

⁹ For example, A. Pontani, 'Niceta Coniata e Licofroni', *BZ* 94 (2000), 157-161; eadem, 'Nebenterminologie, Topoi, Loci Similes und Quellen in einigen Stellen der Chronike diegesis von Niketas Choniates', in C. Sode and S. Takács eds., *Novum Millennium. Studies on Byzantine History and Culture dedicated to Paul Speck* (Aldershot, 2001), 271-278; A. Rhoby, 'Beobachtungen zu einigen Textstellen im Geschichtswerk des Niketas Choniates', *BZ* 95 (2002), 84-90; L. Bossina, 'La bestia e l'enigma: Tradizione classica e cristiana in Niceta Coniata', *Medioevo Greco* 0 (2000), 35-68; N. Gaul, 'Andronikos Komnenos, Prinz Belthandros und der Zyklus: Zwei Glossen zu Niketas Choniates' Chronike diegesis', *BZ* 96 (2003), 623-660.

¹⁰ On the issue see J.N. Ljubarskij et al., 'Quellenforschung and/or Literary Criticism: Narrative Structures in Byzantine Historical Writings', *Symbolae Osloenses* 73 (1998), 5-73; however, Choniates is absent from the overall discussion!

¹¹ The versions are studied by A. Simpson, *Studies on the Composition of Niketas Choniates' Historia* (PhD diss., King's College London, 2004); see also eadem, 'Before and After 1204: The Versions of Niketas Choniates' Historia', *DOP* 60 (2006), 189-221.

the imperial dynasty and its supporters. Version *a*, besides being more detailed and comprehensive, is largely critical in tone and moralistic in outlook. Niketas sharpens his historical lens, showing greater interest in characterization, the various happenings at the imperial court and the ordinary anecdotal life of the empire. There is also a perceptible tendency for authorial intervention either in the form of negative commentaries (often personal outbursts and lengthy lamentations) on the historical action or critical judgements on rulers and their subjects. Revising his *History* with the benefit of hindsight and under the difficult circumstances of exile, the older Niketas is no doubt resentful and cynical, but also emotional and profound. In this sense, his *History* is transformed from 'imperial biography' to a mirror reflective of the historian's attitude to the age in which he lived.

The implication of these findings for modern reconstructions and interpretations of the period are self-evident and significant. Take for example Niketas' famous *Kaiserkritik*, which has been much discussed in the case of Manuel I Komnenos.¹² It has gone unnoticed, however, that many of the negative evaluations of Manuel are found in version *a* where Niketas famously criticizes the emperor for his absolutist style of government, his fiscal oppression and excessive expenditures, his belief in astrology and his sexual promiscuity. This does not mean that Niketas presents an encomiastic portrait of Manuel in version *b*, but rather that his criticism of the emperor is strengthened and expanded in version *a*. For instance, the long addition (v.D. 203⁷⁵-206⁴⁷, om. *b*) focusing on Manuel's fiscal mismanagement begins with a criticism of the emperor's burdensome and inefficient taxation of the provinces and then moves on to his excessive endowments to monasteries and churches, the Latin states, his kinsmen and friends, his mistress Theodora and their illegitimate children. Niketas then criticizes the emperor's foolish reliance upon eunuchs of the bedchamber and foreigners. He claims that Manuel appointed the latter to judicial posts and entrusted them with the raising and assessing of taxes, often preferring them to the native

¹² See P. Magdalino, *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos, 1143-1180* (Cambridge, 1993), 3-26 and *passim*; M. Angold, *The Byzantine Empire, 1025-1204* (London, 1997), 173-180.

Romans because he found them more loyal and dependable. Although fiscal oppression, excessive munificence and preferential treatment of barbarians were conventional themes of Byzantine *Kaiserkritik*, it is interesting that Niketas expresses these types of criticism openly only in version *a*. This is significant because the addition was made after the Latin conquest of Constantinople in 1204, and thus helps us to explain Niketas' disapproving stance, which should always be viewed within the wider context of a tendency towards criticism of the political establishment in version *a*.

In a similar manner, Niketas criticizes Isaakios II Angelos, an emperor whom he served in variety of administrative and judicial posts: 'he [Isaakios] adulterated the silver and issued debased coinage. His collection of monies was not without reproach as he increased the public taxes and squandered the monies on profligate living. He put the public offices up for sale in the same way that vendors sell fruit (v.D. 443³⁻⁷, om. *b*). Later in the narrative, and just at the point where Niketas begins his discussion on the Fourth Crusade, he adds that both Angeloi emperors (that is, Isaakios II and his brother and successor Alexios III) were especially obsessed with the love of money; they were not satisfied with enriching themselves from legitimate sources and did not set aside collected revenues, but wasted them on needless care and opulent ornamentation of the body while also enriching courtesans and relatives who were utterly useless to the public (v.D. 537⁵⁰⁻⁵⁵ *a*). The Angeloi brothers as it seems fared no better in military affairs. That much is evident in the comments Niketas attributes to the Vlach-Bulgar rebels leaders, Peter and Asen, in version *a*: 'they prayed that the Angeloi and their stock would manage the affairs of the Romans for many years to come, and entreated the divinity that they should never see death, if possible, or be removed from the throne. These accursed predicted the future, adding that their reason was that as long as the Angeloi reigned, the successes of the Vlachs would increase and magnify and that they would acquire foreign lands and cities, and rulers would come forth from their loins. I do not know from where and how they arrived at these hasty conclusions (v.D. 436⁸⁹-437⁸, om. *b*). It is clear that the historian penned this passage with the benefit of hindsight; his

sarcastic concluding remarks certainly allude to the founding of the 'Second Bulgarian Empire'.

Perhaps more important than fiscal oppression, excessive munificence or even failure in military affairs, is the criticism and derision of character flaws that is so typical of Niketas in the revised passages of the *History*.¹³ Manuel's obsession with astrology and his sexual promiscuity, for instance, are openly criticized and ridiculed only in version *a*. Consider the birth scene of Manuel's heir, Alexios II, vividly re-enacted so as to illustrate the folly of the emperor's belief in astrology since the child was to be murdered just three years after his father's death: 'the emperor, who was present, was anxious for his wife and eased her pains with his looks, but even more, he bestowed his gaze on the one who was scrutinizing the stars and gazing at the heavens with his mouth open. A child issued forth from the womb; it was male and the stars foretold that he would be happy and fortunate and that he would become the heir to his father's throne' (v.D. 169⁸²⁻⁸⁷, om. *b*). A similar scene is presented when Manuel arrests his recalcitrant cousin Andronikos on the charge that he had conspired against him and was conducting an incestuous affair with his niece Eudokia. The witty Andronikos is said to have responded to these accusations by citing the proverb 'the subject is wont to conform to his ruler' and accusing Manuel of engaging in the same illicit behaviour (v.D. 104²⁹⁻³⁶, om. *b*).¹⁴ Once on throne, the now old and decrepit Andronikos is subjected to even worse criticism than Manuel. A characteristic example is this emperor's coronation ceremony, where Niketas tells us the newly crowned Andronikos, upon leaving the holy temple, did not ride slowly through the streets, as was customary, but proceeded at a fast pace. In version *a*, he cannot help but add that many people speculated as to why he did this, some saying that he feared the crowd and others that the strain and fatigue from the day's festivities had caused him to

¹³ For derision in Niketas and other writers of the period see L. Garland, "'And his head shone like a full moon...': An Appreciation of the Byzantine Sense of Humour as Recorded in the Historical Sources of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries", *Parergon* n.s. 8 (1990), 1-31; P. Magdalino, 'Tournier en dérision à Byzance', in E. Crouzet-Pavan and J. Verger eds., *La dérision au Moyen Âge. De la pratique sociale au rituel politique* (Paris, 2007), 55-72.

¹⁴ For the proverb see Kazhdan *et al.*, *Narrazione cronologica*, II, 590, n.18.

defecate himself (v.D. 273⁸⁵⁻⁸⁹, om. *b*).

Isaakios II is consistently vilified and ridiculed while his successes are either downplayed or passed over in silence. Version *a*, if anything, strengthens this evaluation but with persistent emphasis on the character flaws of the emperor. At one point in the narrative, we find Isaakios suffering from delusions of grandeur, imagining that one day he would be sole ruler of the world. In version *a* Niketas informs us that Patriarch Dositheos was responsible for leading the gullible emperor astray with such fantastic predictions. He then paints a picture of Dositheos soothing Isaakios' anxieties 'in the manner that wet-nurses recline babies in order to relax them' and assuring him that like Timothy, Fortune would hand over conquered cities to him while he lay asleep (v.D. 432⁷⁸-433⁸⁸, om. *b*).¹⁵ A little later, Niketas notes how Isaakios' carefree character was harmful to the affairs of state: 'because [Isaakios] took pleasure in ribaldries and was captivated by the gentleness of the Muse's song and mingled with laughter-stirring dwarfs, he did not close the palace to knaves, mimes, parasites and minstrels. But along with these comes drunken revel followed by licentious acts and all those things that corrupt the functional and healthy state of the empire' (v.D. 441¹⁸⁻²³, om. *b*). Alexios III, whom Niketas served in the high-ranking post of *logothetes ton sekreton*, is neither praised nor criticized in the rather bare and concise narrative of his reign offered in version *b*. In contrast, the historian is merciless in his criticism of this emperor in the much longer narrative presented in version *a*. Rather characteristically he claims that Alexios III withdrew from the administration of public affairs and spent his time wearing gold and granting every petition of those who had raised him to power (v.D. 459⁶⁸⁻⁷¹, om. *b*). Much later, he neglected the reports of the movement of the fleet of the Fourth Crusade, occupying himself with building bathhouses, planting vineyards and filling in ravines (v.D. 540³³⁻³⁶, om. *b*). It is significant to note that for the first time the historian acknowledges his inclination towards *psogos* in the account of this emperor's reign (εἰς ψόγον τὴν ἱστορίαν διατιθέμενος; v.D. 483⁴⁶, om. *b*).

¹⁵ The allusion is to Aelian, *Varia Historia*, 13.43.

The inclination towards *psogos* is also evident in Niketas' unflattering portrayal of several high-ranking officials, whose personal dealings with the historian seem to have coloured his attitude towards them.¹⁶ Ioannes Kamateros and Konstantinos Mesopotamites offer good examples. In version *b*, Kamateros is the anonymous *logothetes tou dromou* who deviously orchestrated the downfall of his colleague, Theodoros Styppeiotes, because of professional rivalry (1159). Niketas discloses the logothete's name in version *a* and adds a detailed and damaging characterization of the man, who is described as a licentious dancer, an insolent drunk and a glutton, who had a particular passion for green beans (v.D. 114²⁹-115⁴⁰, om. *b*). Similarly, in version *b*, Mesopotamites remains the anonymous youth who assumed the administration of affairs under Isaakios II. In version *a* Niketas resorts to mythological imagery for the purposes of mock characterization of the young man and does not neglect to add that he was crafty and gluttonous (v.D. 440⁸⁰-441⁹, om. *b*). He returns to the subject in his narration of the reign of Alexios III but only in version *a*: this time he relates the wretched fate of his colleague, who was made an example by divine providence. Having assumed such great power that 'he held the church in his left hand and grasped the palace with his right', Mesopotamites was finally ousted from the palace through conspiracy (v.D. 489⁴⁷-492⁴⁸, om. *b*). What is important to note in these characterizations (as in those of the emperors noted above) is Niketas' insistence on psychological and moral attributes. Indeed, most of the critical comments he voices in the revised version of his text are of a personal rather than a political nature.

Consider Niketas' criticism of Andronikos' failure to repel the Norman attack on Thessalonike in 1185. Instead of accusing the emperor of not making adequate preparations in anticipation of the Norman onslaught, the historian tells us that Andronikos felt satisfied with the preparations he had taken and thereafter relaxed his efforts. He then adds the following information in version *a* (v.D. 320⁷⁷-322⁵⁵, om. *b*). When the news that Thessalonike had

¹⁶ Cf. Simpson, 'Before and After 1204', 202-203, 210-211, 219-220 on Niketas' relations with the powerful Kamateros family and with his colleague Konstantinos Mesopotamites.

been captured arrived in Constantinople, Andronikos addressed the citizens, playing down the seriousness of the event and boasting of a future triumph. All the while, he lusted after power and gave himself over to inhuman habits, surpassing all the tyrants who ever lived. Niketas then shifts his criticism to Andronikos' promiscuity, providing the reader with a particularly abusive description. The emperor, he claims, indulged in various amusements and voluptuous entertainments in the manner of the infamous debauchee Sardanapalos. He was lecherous by nature and applied exotic ointments to himself and ate strange foods in order to enhance his sexual performance. He and his troupe of courtesans would set out from the city often, resembling a 'rooster with hens' and would always be escorted by a barbarian bodyguard, a group of men who did not speak Greek and delighted in their ignorance! It is obvious that the object of Niketas' criticism is not the emperor's failed defensive strategy but rather his character. Sexual promiscuity and barbarian escorts were not, of course, chosen at random; they were the characteristic marks of the tyrant-emperor that Niketas depicts in version *a*.¹⁷

Equally important, and not at all unrelated, is Niketas' criticism of Byzantine society which has been perceived to echo Crusader complaints of Byzantium ever since Edward Gibbon pronounced that the treachery of the Greeks was confirmed 'by the honest confession of a Greek historian, who dared to prefer truth to his country'.¹⁸ This is because the historian sought to understand the tragedy of Byzantium primarily in terms of the excesses and corruption of Byzantine society and its rulers, and viewed the conquest of Constantinople as an act of divine retribution.¹⁹ It is precisely for this reason, however, that such criticism is mainly found in version *a* where Niketas brilliantly exploits the stock negative comparison between the wealthy and effeminate Greeks and the authentic strength of the uncorrupted barbarians.²⁰ In this

¹⁷ Cf. Theophylaktos of Ochrid, *Opera I: Discours, traités, poésies*, ed. P. Gautier (Thessalonike, 1980), 193, 197.

¹⁸ *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, VII (London, 1855), 242.

¹⁹ As argued by Magdalino, *Manuel Komnenos*, 3-26 and Kazhdan *et al.*, *Narrazione cronologica*, I, XXIV-XXV, XXXI-XXXII.

²⁰ For this ancient theme repeated over and over again in Byzantine literature see

scheme, positive images of the Latins are not genuine expressions of the author's attitude; they are literary *topoi* in a familiar story of decline. A well-known example is the reception of the bellicose German envoys of Henry VI by the sluggish Alexios III (25 December, 1196) (v.D. 477⁷²⁻⁸⁷, om. *b*). According to Niketas' story, the emperor donned his magnificent imperial robe adorned with precious stones and commanded his retinue to put on purple garments interwoven with gold. So astonished were the Germans by this display of wealth and flamboyance that they immediately observed: 'the Germans have no need of such spectacles, and they do not wish to stand in reverence of garments and brooches suited to women whose special concern it is to please men with their make-up, veils and shiny earrings'. To frighten the bewildered Greeks, they further added: 'the time has now come to change out of women's garments and put on iron instead of gold'. Niketas is not being unusually perceptive or truthful here but merely repeating the familiar idea that his readers would instantly recognize.²¹

The historian also negatively compares the unjust and strife-ridden society of Byzantium with the generosity displayed by the Turkish conquerors, again in version *a*. When the Seljuk sultan Kay-Khusraw raided Byzantine territory (1198/99), he carried off with him a multitude of Roman captives. These were then settled in villages and apportioned fertile lands for cultivation around the area of Philomilion. The sultan's treatment was so humane, claims Niketas, that it did not permit any of the captives to remember their homeland and attracted to Philomilion even those Romans who had not been captured! Niketas explains this on the grounds of the lawlessness rampant in Byzantine lands; the frequent tyrannies made people abandon a prudent lifestyle, the majority were stripped bare by robberies and seizures and therefore saw no reason to behave with moderation towards their own countrymen. As a result, they gladly quit their homelands and preferred to settle

K. Lechner, *Hellenen und Barbaren im Weltbild der Byzantiner* (Munich, 1955), 115ff.

²¹ Cf. Theophylaktos of Ochrid, *Opera I*, 193 who warned that golden vestments could not deter blood-thirsty barbarians and that the ruler who dressed in such attire would be ridiculed as being soft and effeminate.

among the barbarians (v.D. 495³²-496⁵³, om. *b*). If Niketas thus utilized the conventional image of the 'good' barbarian versus the 'bad' Greek in order to criticize Byzantine society and its rulers in the aftermath of the Latin conquest, this does not mean that he was unaware or indifferent to western or eastern perceptions of Byzantium. The fleet of the Fourth Crusade sailed to Constantinople because 'the Latins had long known that the Roman emperors occupied themselves with nothing else but debauchery and drunkenness and made Byzantis another Sybaris, celebrated for its voluptuousness' (v.D. 541). And 'justly have all nations heard that our men of arms are matricidal vipers, a generation that has lost counsel, blemished children and lawless sons' (v.D. 642). The biblical imagery and vocabulary here was not employed at random, but served to reinforce Niketas' belief in sin and divine retribution.

This brings us back to the comments of the fictional Niketas in *Baudolino* regarding the task of the historian: to consider the events, arrange them in order, find the connections and provide them with meaning. But which events are important to the historian? How are they arranged, presented and connected? And what precisely is their meaning? It is unfortunate that so little has been written on historical methodology and outlook or philosophy of history in Byzantine historiography.²² An obvious starting point is the ancient tradition, but scholarly discussions on the phenomenon of imitation (μίμησις) of antiquity in Byzantine literature have focused mainly on literary *mimesis* and evaluated the influence of the ancient tradition mainly in terms of the quantity and quality of imitation evident in linguistic traits and textual parallels.²³ For Niketas, one can begin with the perceptive

²² Notable exceptions are the studies by C. Turner, 'Pages from Late Byzantine Philosophy of History', *BZ* 57 (1964), 346-373 and J.N. Ljubarskij, 'Homme, destinée, providence: Les avatars des notions antiques dans la philosophie byzantine de l'histoire', in A. Garzya ed., *La philosophie grecque et sa portée culturelle et historique* (Moscow, 1985), 229-268.

²³ For Niketas see in chronological order, O. Musso, 'Zu Nicet. Chon. Hist. 539,6 van Dieten', *JÖB* 27 (1978), 105; G. Fatouros, 'Die Autoren der zweiten Sophistik im Geschichtswerk des Niketas Choniates', *JÖB* 29 (1980), 165-186; A. Kazhdan, 'Looking Back to Antiquity: Three Notes', *GRBS* 24 (1983), 375-376; also D.A. Chrestides, 'Αναμνήσεις από αρχαία κείμενα στο έργο του

comments of Franz Grabler: 'Niketas muß in allem als ein antiker Schriftsteller beurteilt werden'.²⁴ This means that, in studying the ancient profile of the Byzantine historian, we should not confine ourselves to the rhetorical *mimesis* evident primarily in his vocabulary selections and references to classical and post-classical literature, but also examine the descriptive narrative format, the often dramatic and epic tone, the lack of documentation and the use of extensive digressions and fictitious speeches that characterize his narrative. If these already indicate Niketas' dependence on the ancient tradition, it is important to understand the historian's techniques and purposes in employing that tradition. For example, his persistent use of rhetorical rather than documentary material was both an ideological and literary choice. Ancient authors did not employ documentary sources since these were alien to the structure, pacing and literary presentation of history. The same is true of Niketas' *History* which, however, fittingly adapts encomiastic language and motifs into epic battle pieces, dramatic re-enactments of events and fictitious speeches. For instance, the historian used encomiastic sources in his favourable reporting of Manuel's epic courage and perseverance throughout the eastern campaigns in 1175-1179.²⁵ Similarly, echoes of encomiastic literature can be detected in the dramatic rhetorical language of his excessive praise of the administrative reforms carried out by Andronikos I.²⁶

The descriptive narrative format, suitable for a history whose central focus is on individuals and on circumstances, forms the basis of Niketas' method of presenting past events. His recreation of historical episodes, whether set on the battlefield, in the palace or the *agora*, often give us the illusion that the story is in fact unfolding before our very eyes. Ancient critics referred to this

Νικήτα Χωνιάτη «Χρονική Διήγησις», *Επιστημονική Έπετηρίς Φιλοσοφικής Σχολής Θεσσαλονίκης* 22 (1984), 687-709; 'Ο «Κῶφος ποιητής» τοῦ Νικήτα Χωνιάτη', *Ελληνικά* 35 (1984), 70-73 and 'Ο «Κῶφος ποιητής»: παλινωδία', *Ελληνικά* 46 (1996), 307-316.

²⁴ Grabler, *Die Krone der Komnenen*, 21.

²⁵ Magdalino, *Manuel Komnenos*, 457-458.

²⁶ A. Kazhdan, 'Certain Traits of Imperial Propaganda in the Byzantine Empire from the Eighth to the Fifteenth Centuries', in G. Makdisi et al., eds., *Prédication et propagande au Moyen Age, Islam, Byzance, Occident* (Paris, 1983), 23-24.

rhetoical technique as vividness (ἐνάργεια) and defined it as the ability of language to set forth the actions and emotions of historical figures 'before the readers' eyes'. Lucian's treatise on the *Writing of History* views the vivid presentation of events as a primary task of the historian and Thucydides was praised for this quality by critics in antiquity, most notably Plutarch.²⁷ As readers of the *History* we are present during the compelling murder scene of the imperial agent Stephanos Hagiochristophorites by the future emperor Isaakios II Angelos (v.D. 341-343); we follow the imperial troops under Alexios III Angelos on the ill-fated siege of the fortress of Prosakos (v.D. 502-508); and partake in the narrator's sorrow and despair in the days immediately following the capture of Constantinople (v.D. 587-595). We also laugh at his comic digressions – the niggardly Ioannes of Poutza picking up a heated horseshoe off the street or the arrogant Theodoros Kastamonites suffering an attack of epilepsy in the *agora* – aimed to highlight the personality of the subject (most often a government official) and entertain the reader. And we are especially attentive to his carefully constructed speeches, knowing full well that it is often the historian himself who speaks as, for instance, in the sophisticated exposition on Byzantine political philosophy by the dying emperor Ioannes II or the audacious tirade of Andronikos I against the traditional custom of looting shipwrecks (v.D. 43-44 and 327-329).

Yet Niketas' employment of the ancient tradition does not end with the vivid presentation of history or such tried and tested techniques of historical writing. More important in terms of his outlook or philosophy of history are the ideological perspectives passed on to Byzantium from ancient historians and especially those of the post-classical period.²⁸ Niketas subscribes to a utilitarian view of history common both in the ancient world and in Byzantium. The moral and didactic purpose of his *History* is not only evident in the programmatic statement issued in his preface

²⁷ In his treatise *De gloria Atheniensium* 347A-C; see A. Walker, 'Enargeia and the Spectator in Greek Historiography', *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 123 (1993), 353-377.

²⁸ As noted long ago by R. Jenkins, 'The Hellenistic Origins of Byzantine Literature', *DOP* 17 (1963), 37-52.

(largely adapted from Diodoros of Sicily),²⁹ but also in the ideas repeatedly expressed throughout his long work. The praise and censure of leading individuals, the dominant role assigned to divine providence, the instability of fortune and the sudden reversals in the lives of men, the examples of virtue and vice cited for ethical instruction and the continual moralising of the historian, all point the ancient principles of public utility, moral instruction and didactic function of historical narratives. It is precisely these principles that define Niketas' historical outlook and give meaning to the events narrated in his *History*. This meaning is revealed in the skilful introduction to the final book where Niketas looks to the wisdom of Solon (as cited by Plutarch) in order to castigate his compatriots and emphasize the intrinsic value of the ancient idea of learning through suffering: 'and memory, like a fan that rekindles the remaining embers of the good fire buried into the soul into a still living flame, arouses concern against making the same mistake in the future' (v.D. 585). Modern historians might provide a different meaning to these events, but Niketas' compelling vision of the decline and fall of Byzantium has assumed a certain transhistorical quality. Indeed, as Michael Angold has recently noted, Niketas' account contains an impressive analysis of internal disintegration that fits well with modern preconceptions on the fall of empires.³⁰ It is important to recognize, however, that Niketas' analysis was formulated on principles very different from our own.

No less important to the study of the *History* is an examination of the sources from which Niketas compiled his account. This allows us to discern the historian's conceptual and functional approach to his material and better evaluate his testimony in comparison to related pieces of evidence. Although Niketas seems to have received a considerable amount of information from oral communications derived from his various informants and

²⁹ It seems that Niketas not only knew the work of Diodoros first-hand but had studied him carefully. Cf. C.M. Mazzucchi, 'Leggere i classici durante la catastrofe (Constantinopoli, Maggio-Augusto 1203): Le note marginali al Diodoro Siculo Vaticano gr. 130', *Aevum* 68 (1994), 165-218; and *Aevum* 69 (1995), 200-258.

³⁰ M. Angold, *The Fourth Crusade. Event and Context* (Harlow, 2003), 8.

important acquaintances at the imperial court, he also made extensive use of written sources. It has long been noted that one of Niketas' main sources for the reigns of Ioannes II and Manuel I Komnenos was the historical work of Ioannes Kinnamos.³¹ While a comprehensive analysis is still lacking, it was already demonstrated by Vasile Grecu that Niketas' account is almost complementary to that of Kinnamos in the sense that the episodes that Kinnamos describes at length are treated quite briefly in Niketas, and where Kinnamos' narrative is concise, Niketas tends to elaborate.³² More recently, the testimony of the two authors has been juxtaposed in greater detail with very interesting results. Riccardo Maisano has noted that on several occasions where Niketas follows Kinnamos closely, he modifies passages in a way that displays greater literary skill. For instance, in the speech attributed to the dying emperor, Ioannes II, that is related by both historians, Kinnamos turns immediately to the problem of the succession while Niketas, perhaps in an effort to bring out the agony of the dying emperor, begins with a emotional recollection of the military accomplishments of this emperor before moving on to the problem of the succession, all the while enriching his prose with scriptural terminology.³³

Perhaps more importantly, it has been shown that Niketas has the tendency to freely adapt historical material from his source in a

³¹ First by V. Grecu, 'Nicetas Choniates a-t-il connu l'histoire de Jean Kinnamos?', *REB* 7 (1949), 194-204; and later on by Maisano, 'Fonti di Niceta Coniata', 399-402; idem, 'Il rinnovamento della tradizione storiografica bizantina nel XII secolo', in idem, ed., *Storia e tradizione culturale a Bizanzio fra XI e XII secolo* (Naples, 1993), 122-126; J.N. Ljubarskij, 'Manuil I glazami Kinnama I Honiata', *VV* 64 (89) (2005), 99-109; idem, 'I vnov' o Honiate i Kinname', *Antičnaja Drevnost' i Srednie Veka* 33 (2002), 123-127. This view has not been unanimously accepted. See the objections of F. Chalandon, *Les Comnène, II. Jean II Comnène (1118-1143) et Manuel I Comnène (1143-1180)* (Paris, 1912; repr. 1962), XXVI; and A. Kazhdan, 'Ešče raz o Kinname i Nikita Honiate', *BSI* 24 (1963), 4-31 (= *Nikita Honiat i ego vremja*, 327-356) who noted parallels only in the reign of Ioannes II Komnenos.

³² Grecu, 'Nicetas Choniates', 201-202.

³³ That Niketas used Kinnamos as a source on this occasion is confirmed by the following common traits: they both refer to the irascible character of Manuel's elder brother, Isaakios, the premonition of Manuel's accession to the throne as well as the virtues of the future emperor. Cf. Maisano, 'Fonti di Niceta Coniata', 400-401.

way that subordinates factual accuracy to his purpose and style. This is evident, for example, in his description of the illicit relationship between Andronikos Komnenos and Philippa, which is conspicuously similar to Kinnamos' account of the relationship between the same individual and Theodora.³⁴ Similarly, in his narration of the poisoning of Stephen IV of Hungary (1165), not only did Niketas expand the dry report of Kinnamos but he probably adapted the figure of the sinister murderer from an entirely different context in the latter's *Epitome*.³⁵ Much the same can be observed with Eustathios of Thessalonike, whom Niketas used extensively, and not only for the events that transpired in Thessalonike, but also for those in Constantinople.³⁶ For example, Eustathios tells a story where Andronikos Komnenos, firmly established within the imperial palace, reproaches the patriarch Theodosios Boradiotes for not visiting the young sovereign, Alexios II, often enough. Theodosios replies with a caustic jibe: 'I gave up bothering about the emperor when I discovered that you had taken up residence here'. The cunning Andronikos immediately recognizes the double meaning of the phrase uttered by the 'crafty Armenian'. Niketas recounts a similar story, where the patriarch, angered by Andronikos' feigning flattery to his person and his theatrical antics, makes a deliberately vague remark concerning Andronikos' insidious ways. Quoting from the Psalms of David (*Ps.* 47.9), the patriarch utters 'as we have heard, so we have also seen'. Once again, Andronikos does not fail to recognize the meaning of the phrase of the 'crafty Armenian' (v.D. 252-253).³⁷ Niketas not only alters the words exchanged between the participants, but also the circumstances and location of the entire episode, which is placed earlier, when a delegation from the clergy was ferried from Constantinople across the straits to meet Andronikos Komnenos in Chalkedon.

³⁴ Kazhdan *et al.*, *Narrazione cronologica*, I, 609, n. 54.

³⁵ S. Efthymiadis, 'Niketas Choniates and Ioannes Kinnamos: The Poisoning of Stephen IV of Hungary (13 April, 1165)', *BZ* 101 (2008), 21-28.

³⁶ As first noted by G.L.F. Tafel, *Kommenen und Normannen. Beiträge zur Erforschung ihrer Geschichte in verdeutschten und erläuterten Urkunden des zwölften und dreizehnten Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart, 1870), 232-244.

³⁷ Cf. Eustathios of Thessaloniki, *The Capture of Thessaloniki*, trans. J. Melville-Jones (Canberra, 1988), 38-40 and commentary, 181-182.

The historian follows the same approach in his generous use of encomiastic literature. Paul Magdalino has demonstrated that Niketas' account frequently echoes the language and motifs of rhetorical works composed at the imperial court and betrays close dependence on them. In fact, the author diverges from encomiastic sources only in those passages where he is critical of imperial policy, and even on such occasions, his language evokes rhetorical motifs found in encomiastic sources.³⁸ One such source was the writings of his elder brother, Michael, the metropolitan of Athens.³⁹ Contextual and linguistic similarities have shown that Niketas made extensive use of Michael's works and more specifically his panegyric speech to Isaakios II Angelos.⁴⁰ This is even obvious in those cases where the historian attempts to contradict Michael's favourable testimony. For example, during the siege of the rebellious city of Nikaia by Andronikos (1184), Michael presents the future emperor Isaakios II as the valiant defender of city. Niketas, on the other hand, casts him in the role of an idle and frightened spectator (v.D. 284-288).⁴¹ He then attempts to discredit Isaakios completely by deliberately manipulating Michael's testimony: whereas the metropolitan likens the harsh words with which Isaakios addressed Andronikos from within the walls of Nikaia to 'arrows', Niketas speaks of Andronikos praising Isaakios after the capitulation of the city for not making use of his words as 'arrows' (v.D. 286). While Michael claims that Isaakios forced Andronikos to be merciful to the residents of the captured city, Niketas testifies that Andronikos fell upon the citizens of Nikaia like a ravenous lion (v.D. 288-289).⁴² Such examples of free adaptation and even manipulation of sources on the part of the historian allow us to understand his

³⁸ Magdalino, *Manuel Komnenos*, 443 and 457-458.

³⁹ See G. Stadtmüller, *Michael Choniates: Metropolit von Athen* (ca. 1138-ca.1222) (Rome, 1934), 224-234; van Dieten, *Biographie*, 35-36; F. Kolovou, *Μιχαήλ Χωνιάτης: Συμβολή στη μελέτη του βίου και του έργου του: Το Corpus των επιστολών* (Athens, 1999), 172ff.

⁴⁰ Michael Choniates, *Μιχαήλ Ακομινάτου τοῦ Χωνιάτου τὰ σωζόμενα*, ed. S. Lampros, I-II (Athens, 1879; repr. 1968), I, 208-258.

⁴¹ Cf. Michael Choniates, I, 219-224. Some of these ideas were presented by A. Simpson, 'The Historian and his Sources: The Use of Contemporary Accounts in the *History* of Niketas Choniates', *Proceedings of the 21st International Congress of Byzantine Studies*, vol. II: Abstracts of Panel Papers (London, 2006), 158-159.

⁴² For both cf. Michael Choniates, I, 221.

approach to his material. Perhaps more importantly, they reveal the conceptual framework of the narrative and the purpose of the author. For Niketas, it seems that strict factual accuracy was less important than narrative effectiveness (in the case of the meeting between Andronikos and the patriarch) or persuasive defamation (in the case of Isaakios' stance at Nikaia).

This does not mean that Niketas was a 'bad' historian, and by extension, a 'good' liar. It means that he conceived history in a very different way than we do, and as modern readers, we should always be aware of the vast gulf that separates our own sense of preserving the past from that of the Byzantine historian. Niketas is not an objective recorder of past events, he does not discuss military, religious or political institutions, and he does not analyse social conditions and cultural achievements in the manner of modern historians. But he is a conscientious and critical observer of his own times, a writer with unique literary talents and a historian who attempted to explain the decline and fall of Byzantium. As several contributions to this volume illustrate, one of the most remarkable features of the *History* is the sheer scope and breadth of its subject matter. Though structured in the format of 'imperial biographies', the work is neither restricted to courtly or military affairs nor to the imperial incumbents, and this is especially true of the amplified version *a*. In fact, Niketas regularly takes us into the marketplace and streets of Constantinople, recording various incidents from the civic life of the Byzantine capital that range from imperial triumphs and games at the Hippodrome, to rebellions and various incidents of urban unrest.⁴³ He is particularly sensitive to his urban environment as evident from the topographical details and descriptive features that often accompany his reporting of various events as well as the lamentations and *ekphraseis* that dominate his account of the conquest of Constantinople.⁴⁴ At the same time, he does not ignore the provinces, but offers significant information regarding the difficult conditions prevailing in western Asia Minor in times of

⁴³ Cf. A. Simpson, 'Narrative Images of Medieval Constantinople' (in this volume).

⁴⁴ Cf. T. Papamastorakis, 'Interpreting the *De Signis* of Niketas Choniates' (in this volume).

war and especially in the cities along the Maiandros River where his home town Chonai was located. He also pays close attention to the Balkan frontier where he campaigned with the imperial army against the Vlach-Bulgar rebels (1187) and later served as governor in the district of Philippoupolis (1189).⁴⁵ This region would also come to occupy a prominent place in Niketas' narrative of the events that followed the capture of Constantinople.

In addition to the happenings at the imperial court and the developments on the battlefield, Niketas shows great interest in religious affairs and in particular the doctrinal controversies that plagued the Byzantine world in the twelfth century, in some of which he himself became intimately involved.⁴⁶ Of course, this is only to be expected of a man who would go on to write a detailed and comprehensive theological compilation concerned with a general refutation of heresy.⁴⁷ The occult sciences were also very much a part of the historian's cultural milieu. He methodically records celestial phenomena and the prophecies of holy men, continually disparages astrological predictions and fiercely rejects rituals of sorcery and divination. Yet his careful and systematic recording of such incidents testify to their great influence in Byzantine politics and society.⁴⁸ A civil servant himself, Niketas allots a considerable amount of space to the corruption and intrigue inherent in Byzantine officialdom. His vivid accounts of the professional rivalries at the imperial court involving slander and conspiracy are justly famous.⁴⁹ Equally famous is his generic criticism of the fraudulent tax collector, the wealthy monk, the

⁴⁵ See Kazhdan *et al.*, *Narrazione cronologica*, I, XVII.

⁴⁶ See H. Magoulas, 'Doctrinal Disputes in the History of Niketas Choniates', *Patristic and Byzantine Review* 6 (1987), 199-226. These are related in greater detail in the last five books of Niketas' *Dogmatike Panoplia*, PG 139, 1101-1444.

⁴⁷ Cf. L. Bossina, 'Niketas Choniates as a Theologian' (in this volume).

⁴⁸ See P. Magdalino, 'Occult Science and Imperial Power in Byzantine History and Historiography (9th-12th Centuries)', in P. Magdalino and M. Mavroudi eds., *The Occult Sciences in Byzantium* (Geneva, 2006), 119-162; and *idem*, 'Prophecy and Divination in the History' (in this volume).

⁴⁹ See for example, O. Kresten, 'Zum Sturz des Theodoros Styppeiotes', *JÖB* 27 (1978), 49-103, esp. 77ff.; Magdalino, *Manuel Komnenos*, 197-200 and 255-256; M. Hinterberger, 'Ο φθόνος. Ανθρώπινη αδυναμία και κινητήρια δύναμη', in C. Angelidi ed., *Byzantium Matures. Choices, Sensitivities and Modes of Expression (Eleventh to Fifteenth Centuries)* (Athens, 2004), 300-303.

charlatan astrologer, the incompetent general, the cowardly soldier and the fickle and drunken mob.⁵⁰ Such images, however, repeated over and over again, tend to create negative stereotypes of certain segments of Byzantine society. What is more, they reinforce Niketas' picture of a generally corrupt and decadent Byzantium. Consider only the following scenes: when the empire was being hard pressed by the Vlach-Bulgars, Niketas reproaches the monks for their inactivity in the face of such obvious chastisement from God. They did not preach the need to placate the deity and did not speak openly before the Roman emperor on the means of deliverance (v.D. 472³⁴-473⁴⁴, om. *b*). When the Crusaders were encamped outside Constantinople, these same monks were chasing after imperial banquets and stuffing themselves with rich dishes (v.D. 558). There could be no greater contrast than these supposed men of God entertaining themselves while the final collapse was looming overhead.

This is not meant to discredit Niketas' precious images of twelfth-century Byzantium, but merely to draw attention to the fact that such images form an integral part of his vision of the decline and fall of the empire, hence the reason for their accumulation in version *a*. They are no less important, however, because they reflect contemporary social and cultural values just as Niketas' picture of internal disintegration reflects contemporary reasoning for the Latin conquest of Constantinople in 1204. What has been repeatedly stressed throughout this part of the introduction can perhaps be summarized as follows. The *History* reflects the Byzantine past through Niketas' own interests, values and gifts as a narrator. As such, it should be seen more as Niketas Choniates on the twelfth century and less as a history of the twelfth century written by Niketas Choniates. This makes the historian all the more important: he writes and rewrites his history, subtly manipulating his sources, subordinating factual accuracy to his purpose and style, educating and entertaining his readers and presenting the past with epic, tragic and comic hues. The resulting image of Niketas' Byzantium is sophisticated, vivacious and still very persuasive. Indeed, one can hardly imagine the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries without his masterfully sculpted imperial

⁵⁰ Kazhdan *et al.*, *Narrazione cronologica*, I, XXVII-XXIX.

portraits, his sarcasm and sense of humour, his immediacy and directness, his poetic nobility and dramatic sensibility, his elitist and judgemental tone, his humanity and sensitivity.

Stephanos Efthymiadis

NIKETAS CHONIATES: THE WRITER

The image of Choniates as a historian with both a 'classicizing' perception of historical writing and a vivid inclination towards recording the interests and values of contemporary society should neither overshadow his literary identity and skills as such, nor confine him to the spirit of his age and the norms of the literary genre he had to comply with throughout his *History*. Choniates, the rather old man whom we see on the well-known miniature of *Vindobonensis hist. gr.* 53, f. 1^v, holding rather loosely a sharp pen in his right hand and wearing a strange hat on his head, is the only Byzantine secular author whose portrait has survived and whose pen was one of the finest in Byzantium.⁵¹ Although he wrote a comprehensive account of eighty years of Byzantine history in his own unique fashion, his was not an easy pen at all; he must have passed his thirties, i.e. he had already reached a quite mature age, when he first committed himself to historical writing and, judging from the extant versions of his text, he was keen on re-writing and revision.⁵² He was not a pen pusher either; the episode which he records in the *History* and is also recounted by his brother Michael suffices to show that he was both a courageous man and one

⁵¹ The miniature portrait of a secular author *par excellence*, Michael Psellos, as in the manuscript of the Athonite monastery of Pantokrator 234, f. 254, depicts him wearing a monastic garment.

⁵² Cf. A. Simpson, 'Before and After 1204'.