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978-1-107-00945-5 - Heroes and Romans in Twelfth-Century Byzantium: The Material for
History of Nikephoros Bryennios

Leonora Neville

Excerpt

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Introduction

The *Material for History* written by the Caesar Nikephoros Bryennios in the early twelfth century is a story of men and arms. The history is a remarkably sympathetic reading of a devastating decade in Byzantine history, 1070–1080. While Nikephoros maintains a sense of horror at the Empire's disastrous political situation, his history has remarkably few villains and a great many heroes. The laudatory characterization of nearly all the leading politicians is all the more remarkable in that Nikephoros is telling stories about men who fought each other. The most sympathetic and heroic characters in the history are three political enemies: Romanos Diogenes, John Doukas, and Nikephoros Bryennios the Elder. These men fought destructively and at times viciously. John unwillingly became a monk and Romanos and Bryennios were blinded. Romanos's blinding led to his death.

That Roman generals who were engaged in fighting other Romans while the Empire was being conquered by Turks, Pechenegs, and Normans can all emerge as heroes in Nikephoros Bryennios's history indicates that Nikephoros was a masterful rhetorician whose history is far more than a plain description of events. Such a text deserves a systematic reading as a work of literature as well as history. The present study is grounded in the conviction that all Byzantine historical texts need to be studied in their own right as coherent compositions before scholars can begin either constructing stories about the past or developing an accurate view of Byzantine culture and society. Byzantine historical texts are still too often mined for information deemed pertinent for the reconstruction of events rather than treated as coherent and complex texts. We need to understand the role that the history played in twelfth-century culture and politics before we can accept or reject its evidence about eleventh-century battles or society. My initial premise that Nikephoros's history is a well-constructed text and worthy of detailed analysis has not been disappointed. Neither has my suspicion that Nikephoros's narrative choices speak to his

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twelfth-century political and cultural situation in ways that should give pause to modern historians hunting for facts about the eleventh century. Here I have tried to illuminate some of Nikephoros's authorial choices and cultural attitudes, so far as they can be ascertained through the study of his history, to provide some preliminary guidance to this text and, hopefully, to bring readers to a greater appreciation of its literary and historical virtues.

Nikephoros's characterizations frequently call on classical Roman ideals of masculine virtue. A primary conclusion of the current work is that Nikephoros's sense of virtue and honor can be understood as a response to what he perceived as traditional Roman values. While scholars have identified renewed interest in classical Rome as one current in court thought in the twelfth century, Nikephoros's history has not been considered as part of this trend.¹ Nikephoros is here presented as a major proponent of classical Roman virtue and a central character in the growing engagement with Roman history in twelfth-century Constantinople.

When the text is read in light of classical Roman ideas of masculine virtue, new meanings emerge. Most significantly, the work supports a critique of Emperor Alexios Komnenos, the author's father-in-law. Alexios Komnenos is the most complex character in the book. Alexios is never a straightforward hero and some episodes admit of a highly critical reading. Like many Byzantine texts, Nikephoros's history seems designed to speak with double meanings much of the time.²

Nikephoros's history has long been seen as representing a shift in Byzantine culture from a more Christian, quietist ethic to a more military, 'aristocratic,' and valorous sensibility.³ The seemingly more militaristic

¹ Paul Magdalino, "Aspects of Twelfth-Century Byzantine Kaiserkritik," *Speculum* 58, 2 (1983): 343–44; Ruth Macrides and Paul Magdalino, "The Fourth Kingdom and the Rhetoric of Hellenism," in *The Perception of the Past in Twelfth-Century Europe*, ed. Paul Magdalino (London: The Hambledon Press, 1992), 117–56.

² Panagiotis Roilos, *Aphoroglossia: A Poetics of the Twelfth-Century Medieval Greek Novel* (Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2005), 20–24; Anthony Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium: The Transformations of Greek Identity and the Reception of the Classical Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 237. The Byzantines were participating in an ancient tradition of veiled criticism: F. Ahl, "The Art of Safe Criticism in Greece and Rome," *American Journal of Philology* 105, 2 (1984): 174–208.

³ Alexander Kazhdan and Annabel Jane Wharton, *Change in Byzantine Culture in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 106; Kaldellis, *Hellenism*, 242; Antonio Carile, "La Hylis historias del cesare Niceforo Briennio," *Aevum* 43, 1–2 (1969): 56–87. On the 'aristocratization' of Byzantine culture in the twelfth century see: Alexander Kazhdan and Simon Franklin, *Studies on Byzantine Literature of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 59–60; Alexander Kazhdan, "Aristocracy and the Imperial Ideal," in *The Byzantine Aristocracy, IX–XIII Centuries*, ed. Michael Angold (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1984), 43–57; George Ostrogorsky, "Observations on the Aristocracy in Byzantium," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 25 (1971): 1–32; Alexander Kazhdan and Giles Constable, *People and Power in Byzantium*:

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and aristocratic culture of the twelfth century, with its greater emphasis on personal loyalty and martial honor, can give the superficial impression of being more ‘medieval’ than its predecessor. Nikephoros himself has been characterized as “a great seigneur,” which draws an implicit parallel with conceptualizations of western medieval chivalric culture.⁴ In some contexts the twelfth-century cultural change has been seen as a decline from the cultural traditions of the Byzantine Empire. In Ostrogorski’s classic narrative, the influence of the “military aristocracy” was deeply connected with the lamentable “feudalization” of Byzantine society. Ostrogorski decried “feudalization” because he saw it as bringing economic and political decentralization.⁵ While theories of Byzantine “feudalization” have become passé, the shift toward the values of the twelfth-century “military aristocracy” remains part of our understanding of twelfth-century Byzantine culture.

Rather than the implicit westernization of Ostrogorski’s story however, the shift toward military culture is here seen as a response to the development and cultivation of cultural memories of classical Rome. Nikephoros’s emphasis on personal military virtue can be understood as a return to traditional Roman cultural values and ideas of proper masculinity. While the emphasis on military glory bears a surface similarity to western knightly ideals, the details of Nikephoros’s stories show that he was drawing on classical exempla. Nikephoros was not creating a new medieval sense of manly virtue, but recalling what he perceived to be classical Roman attitudes.

Within the field of Byzantine studies the interactions of the medieval Romans with their classical past generally have been discussed in terms of

An Introduction to Modern Byzantine Studies (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1982), 111–13; Paul Magdalino, *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos, 1143–1180* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 413–88; Paul Magdalino, “Byzantine Snobbery,” in *The Byzantine Aristocracy, IX to XIII Centuries*, ed. Michael Angold (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1984), 58–78; Paul Magdalino, “Honour among Romaioi: The Framework of Social Values in the World of Digenes Akrites and Kekaumenos,” *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 13 (1989): 183–218.

⁴ Kazhdan and Wharton, *Change*, 106.

⁵ “The age of the Comneni saw an intensification of the feudalizing process and those very feudal elements in the provinces, against which the tenth-century Emperors had battled with such insistence, were to become the mainstay of the new state. Alexios gave preference to those powerful and social factors which had persisted in spite of the opposition of the middle Byzantine state, and it was on these that he built his political and military organization. Therein lies the secret of his success as well as its limitations.” George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1969), 374; see also Ostrogorsky, *Pour l’histoire de la féodalité byzantine*, trans. Henri Grégoire (Brussels Éditions de l’Institut de philologie et d’histoire orientales et slaves, 1954). Kazhdan maintained the implicit connection between the ‘aristocratization’ of culture and the decline of the state: Kazhdan and Constable, *People and Power*, 15; Alexander Kazhdan, “State, Feudal and Private Economy in Byzantium,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 47 (1993): 83–100.

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“renaissance” or “revival.”⁶ Intentionally or not, the biological metaphor of rebirth implies a period of death or decay. It also reifies culture into a somatic entity capable of birth and death. The logic of the growth, death, and new-birth model of history thus necessarily puts undue emphasis on issues of cultural continuity and disjuncture. Any perception of shifts in Byzantines’ valuations of their past becomes embroiled in debate over continuity of culture and mechanics of change. The biological metaphor also carries an inherent valuation dividing history into “good,” vital times and “bad” dead times.

Concepts of cultural memory provide a more flexible means of discussing the shifting relationships with the past seen throughout Byzantine history. Beyond the three-generation span of personally communicated memory, societies create cultural memory through the interplay of available textual and physical remnants of the past, the cultural memory of their elders and the context of their current society.⁷ Texts, monuments, objects and stories from the past are the materials from which cultural memory evolves in response to the ever-changing environment and challenges each generation faces. The choices one generation makes about what in the past is valuable or dangerous can affect what texts and artifacts are preserved or destroyed for the future and can markedly alter their presentation and contexts. But the particular valuations and meanings one era bestows upon the detritus of history do not necessarily pass normatively into the future.

In this way Byzantine history is not the story of the repeated birth and death of a reified antiquity, but of different generations constructing their cultural memory differently. In perceiving as valuable and selecting for emphasis certain values and traits of the classical past, Nikephoros was participating in the ongoing process of creating cultural memory. The mass of textual and physical antiquities in Constantinople and throughout the Empire presented constant points of reference and demanded interpretation. The resonance that stories of old Romans who fought, struggled, and

⁶ See for example: Steven Runciman, *The Last Byzantine Renaissance* (Cambridge University Press, 1970); Warren T. Treadgold, *Renaissances before the Renaissance: Cultural Revivals of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Stanford University Press, 1984); David Talbot Rice, *The Twelfth Century Renaissance in Byzantine Art* (University of Hull Publications, 1965).

⁷ Jan Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory: Ten Studies*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford University Press, 2006), 1–30; Patrick J. Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton University Press, 1994); Gerd Althoff, Johannes Fried, and Patrick J. Geary, *Medieval Concepts of the Past: Ritual, Memory, Historiography* (Washington, DC: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge University Press, 1989).

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died for the glory of the Empire had for Nikephoros needs to be seen in light of the particular military defeats the Empire suffered in his childhood. In other eras the touchstones for the creation of cultural memory were Christian martyrs, rather than the Horatii. This shift is not a matter of anything dying and being reborn but a change in perceptions of what in the past had true meaning for the present; of what in the past held power for the identity, moral direction, and orientation of the present. The study of Byzantine cultural history is frequently the study of changes in medieval Roman constructions of their cultural memory and varieties within those changes.

The conception of classical Roman history at stake in this book is the one Nikephoros developed from the monuments, texts, landscape and cultural memories that surrounded him. This differs most obviously from contemporary textbook conceptions of Rome in having its textual basis in Greek but not Latin sources and in perceiving Plutarch, Polybius, Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Cassius Dio as all fully Roman rather than as Greeks variously negotiating Roman rule. The process by which Greeks came to adopt Roman identity was sufficiently thorough and distant to have left no trace on medieval Roman perceptions of the past.⁸ More importantly, Greek assimilation to Rome had no meaning for Nikephoros; therefore he was blind to it in the texts he read as it played no role in his memory of Roman history.

Further, while contemporary scholars may consider Polybius and Plutarch to represent different cultural periods within Roman history, it appears that from the perspective of the twelfth century Nikephoros used their texts, among others, to develop a unified memory of old Roman traditional morality. Just as Plutarch made characters from widely different centuries serve as exemplars judged according to one moral system,⁹ Nikephoros appears to have brought his reading of diverse periods in Roman history into a cohesive vision of Roman ancestral traditions. Nikephoros's textual sources did not mention the *mos maiorum* because that term is Latin. The Greek histories of Rome, however, did convey the sense that upholding the customs of the ancestors was a core Roman virtue and presented various visions of what those traditions were. Throughout this text I use terms such as "traditional Roman values" and "classical

⁸ Kaldellis, *Hellenism*, 42–119. Medieval Romans did have a fine sense of historical change; the Greek assimilation to Rome simply appears to have been unimportant for them. Anthony Kaldellis, "Historicism in Byzantine Thought and Literature," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 61 (2007): 1–24.

⁹ Rowland Smith, "The Construction of the Past in the Roman Empire," in *A Companion to the Roman Empire*, ed. David S. Potter (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 431.

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Roman virtues” to refer to Nikephoros’s perception of the *mos maiorum*. Nikephoros shared the experience of creating his own personal conception of what the *mos maiorum* was with every other Roman for whom Roman traditional morality held meaning. Aeneas, Romulus, and Horatio were ancient models for Cato and Seneca as much as for Nikephoros. Romans of widely different eras engaged in the process of learning traditional Roman virtues through their cultivation and education, broadly conceived. Nikephoros may have read Dionysius’s “Roman Antiquities” rather than Livy, but they all were creating a cultural memory of Roman values on the basis of texts, monuments, stories and the memories of their elders.

This book has three parts, the first and last dealing with the twelfth-century period of composition and the middle with the close reading of Nikephoros’s history. The first chapter presents our extant evidence about Nikephoros and largely deconstructs the standard narrative of the ‘attempted coup’ in 1118 of Anna Komnene in Nikephoros’s name that derives from the later histories of John Zonaras and Niketas Choniates. The chapter then presents multiple possible scenarios for Nikephoros’s allegiances and for the context of composition. By destabilizing his standard biography, this chapter frees the literary analysis in Part II from being determined by presuppositions about authorial intentions. The rest of Part I sets up a framework for understanding the functions of early twelfth-century court history, audiences, and the possible sources at Nikephoros’s disposal.

The core literary analysis of Nikephoros’s history in Part II endeavors to illuminate some of its many possible meanings. It opens with a discussion of Nikephoros’s explanation of the causes of Roman decline. Chapter 6 describes his overt case for Alexios’s right to accede to the rule of the Empire. Some of Nikephoros’s views regarding Roman identity are discussed in Chapter 7. Chapter 8 explores the moral patterns behind Nikephoros’s descriptions of the many military encounters in the history. Chapters 9 and 10 deal with Nikephoros’s deployment of familial politics and his sense of religion. The remaining chapters of Part II treat individual characters in the history and endeavor to bring the previous discussions of Nikephoros’s system of values to bear on understanding those portraits.

The deep reading in Part II makes the text far more telling as a source of information about Nikephoros when it is brought to bear on the discussion of Nikephoros’s attitudes and politics in Part III. The first chapter of Part III explores how the reading of Nikephoros’s history presented in

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Part II may modify our understanding of the events surrounding John Komnenos's succession and the possible political contexts for the composition of the text. Nikephoros's relationship with his wife Anna Komnene and the various relationships between their histories form the middle chapter of Part III. The final chapter turns to a discussion of what Nikephoros's appeal to classical Roman exemplars meant for his twelfth-century Constantinopolitan culture.

THE MANUSCRIPT

The only manuscript of Nikephoros's history is no longer extant. The manuscript had been acquired by the French legal scholar Jacques Cujas (d. 1590). He gave it to Pierre du Faur de Saint-Jorri (d. 1600), the first president of the Parliament of Toulouse, who had wanted to edit the *Alexiad*. It is unclear what happened to the manuscript after Saint-Jorri's death. When in the mid seventeenth century the Jesuit scholar Pierre Poussines undertook the editing of the *Alexiad* for the Paris Corpus, he knew that Saint-Jorri's manuscript, which he called "Tolosanus," was of great importance. An acquaintance of Poussines's was able to borrow the manuscript from its owner for a few days. Upon inspecting the manuscript Poussines found that it contained, in addition to the complete text of the fifteen books of the *Alexiad*, another long work of history. From its content, Poussines supposed that it was the history written by Nikephoros Bryennios that Anna described in the *Alexiad*. Poussines interpreted a text at the beginning of Nikephoros's history as a prologue. It has since been understood that it is a separate work, briefly describing the dynastic reasons for the Komnenian coup of 1081.¹⁰

Poussines worked quickly with the help of his colleague Claudius Maltrait to transcribe the text before he needed to return the manuscript. Sometime later the manuscript came into the possession of Guillaume Puget who gave it to Poussines's Jesuit community. Poussines then worked to correct his transcription but before he completed his task Puget asked to borrow the text back temporarily. Puget died while the manuscript was in his possession; his heirs denied that he had intended to give it permanently to the Jesuits and refused to let Poussines study it further.

¹⁰ Johannes Seger, *Nikephoros Bryennios: Eine philologische-historische Untersuchung*, Byzantinische Historiker des zehnten und elften Jahrhunderts 1 (Munich: Verlag der J. Lindauerschen Buchhandlung, 1888), 83–106; Franz Hermann Tinnfeld, *Kategorien der Kaiserkritik in der byzantinischen Historiographie* (Munich: W. Fink, 1971), 151–52.

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In the middle of the eighteenth century the manuscript was mentioned as having been part of the Jesuit library in Toulouse. Most of that collection seems to have been hidden by the Jesuits before the library was taken over by the French government in 1764 and added to the royal library of Toulouse. The manuscript was not among those added to the royal library. All published editions are based on the transcription made by Pierre Poussines and published in the Paris Corpus in 1661.¹¹ Meineke removed many of Poussines's conjectural emendations of the text in the Bonn edition of 1836. Paul Gautier thoroughly studied Nikephoros's use of other historians, primarily John Skylitzes and Michael Psellos, and corrected Nikephoros's text wherever he had a basis for comparison.

Since the publication of Gautier's edition in 1975, a new fragment of book 1 of Nikephoros's history has come to light in a fifteenth-century manuscript containing works by Pachymeres.¹² A section of the manuscript collects various passages from Pachymeres dealing with the origins of the Turks. The heading in the manuscript is "From the first volume (tome) of the history of the Caesar Bryennios, about the Turks." Nikephoros included large portions of John Skylitzes's description of early Turkish history into his text. The fragment is then mostly Skylitzes as utilized by Nikephoros. A comparison of the text of Skylitzes in the Marcianus manuscript with that of Poussines's transcription and other manuscripts of Skylitzes shows that the Marcianus text contains fewer errors. In one of the five chapters included in the fragment, Nikephoros reworked Skylitzes's text more thoroughly, changing the order of sentences and rewriting passages. This segment of Nikephoros's writing allows for a comparison with the text transcribed by Poussines. While the absence of any third standard makes it difficult to determine absolutely which reading is closer to Nikephoros's original, the comparison of the Skylitzes passages indicates that the Marcianus manuscript is far superior.¹³ In addition the discovery of the fragment in the Marcianus manuscript provides significant confirmation that Poussines's transcription was not an invention.

¹¹ Seger, *Bryennios*, 107–09; Paul Gautier, ed. *Nicephore Bryennios Histoire; introduction, texte, traduction et notes* (Brussels: Byzantion, 1975), 33–40; Albert Failler, "Le texte de l'histoire de Nicéphore Bryennios à la lumière d'un nouveau fragment," *Revue des études byzantines* 47 (1989): 239–50.

¹² In Marcianus gr. 509, a manuscript of Bessarion copied in the third quarter of the fifteenth century. The fragment was catalogued in 1740 by A. Zanetti and A. Bongiovani "excerpta quaedam ex historiis jam editis Georgii Pachymerae & Bryennii Caesaris." In the new catalogue of manuscripts in the Marcian library it is attributed to Manuel Bryennios. Failler found it by chance in working on Pachymeres. Failler, "Le texte," 240.

¹³ Failler, "Le texte," 242.

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Despite Poussines's stated desire to look at the manuscript again, it seems likely that his transcription included the whole of the text Nikephoros wrote. Anna describes her husband's history as unfinished. The loss of the manuscript means that matters of punctuation and possible variant readings are simply speculative.

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