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978-0-521-13089-9 - The Despotate of Epiros 1267-1479: A Contribution to the History of Greece in the Middle Ages

Donald M. Nicol

Excerpt

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## Introduction

The history of Epiros as an independent Byzantine province in the north-west of Greece began with the Fourth Crusade. In April 1204 the crusaders and their Venetian accomplices captured Constantinople and appointed an emperor and a patriarch of their own. They then turned to the conquest of the provinces of the Byzantine Empire in Europe and in Asia Minor. Thessalonica passed to Boniface of Montferrat, the leader of the crusade; and from there he planned and directed the Latin invasion of Greece. A number of Greeks joined him. Among them was Michael Komnenos Doukas a bastard son of the *sebastokrator* John Doukas and a cousin of the Emperors Isaac II and Alexios III Angelos. Michael did not stay long in the service of the Latins. He deserted Boniface and crossed over the mountains to join his relative, the Byzantine governor of Arta. There he settled, married the governor's daughter and became the accepted leader and protector of the Greek inhabitants of Epiros.

Epiros means 'the mainland'. Surrounded by sea on the west and south and by high mountains on the north and east, its geography promotes a spirit of independence. At the beginning of the thirteenth century its independence became a fact. The rest of the Greek world was to be subjected to the Latins, to the French and Italian crusaders and their descendants. But Epiros was for a long time to remain free from their control and influence. Michael Doukas was not without experience as a provincial governor. In Epiros he took over the Byzantine administration which had been centred on the city of Arta, capital of the theme of Nikopolis. Included in his domain were the districts of Aitolia and Akarnania, Thesprotia and Ioannina, the province known as Old Epiros, whose inhabitants were mainly Greek-speaking. New Epiros lay further to the north and comprised the theme of Dyrrachion (Durazzo) and the western section of the Via Egnatia, the trunk road which had for centuries linked the ports on the Adriatic Sea with Thessalonica and Constantinople. Many of the inhabitants of New Epiros were Albanians who, by the thirteenth century, were beginning to form identifiable tribal units or clans. The offshore islands of Cephalonia, Ithaka and Zakynthos

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(or Zante) were under foreign rule even before 1204, having been appropriated by an Italian adventurer called Maio Orsini; while the island of Corfu was to be conquered by Venice in 1207.

Michael Doukas appointed himself as leader and defender of the mainland of Epiros against the Latins. It used to be supposed that he held the official and imperial title of Despot and was thus the founder of what later came to be called the Despotate of Epiros. This is a fallacy. None of the contemporary sources suggests that Michael held any such title. The Venetians seem to have thought that his family name of Doukas was equivalent to the Latin title of *dux*, but they never addressed him as Despot.<sup>1</sup> The leader of the other Greek resistance movement which arose in the ruins of the Byzantine Empire after 1204, at Nicaea in Asia Minor, soon adopted the title of emperor. By so doing he staked his claim to the throne at Constantinople in anticipation of the day when the Latins would be expelled. Nicaea came to be regarded, at least by the eastern Greeks, as the political and ecclesiastical centre of the empire in exile, the seat of the emperor and the patriarch. But it was difficult for the emperors at Nicaea to enforce their authority over the distant and isolated province of Epiros. There the spirit of independence flourished unchecked if not unchallenged for many years.

The origins of the 'Despotate' of Epiros cannot therefore be referred back to Michael Doukas. Michael was no more than a local dynast, somewhat like Leo Sgouros, lord of Argos and Corinth, or his relative Manuel Kamytzes, who had carved out his own estate in Macedonia and Thessaly before 1204. The emperor-historian John Cantacuzene, writing many years later, believed that the Greek rulers of Epiros after the Fourth Crusade held a mandate from the Byzantine emperors in Nicaea who entrusted them with an 'annual command' of the province.<sup>2</sup> It is certain that when Michael's brother Theodore Komnenos Doukas left Asia Minor for Epiros about 1207 he was made to swear an oath of loyalty to the emperor at Nicaea.<sup>3</sup> It is no less certain that that emperor and his

<sup>1</sup> L. Stiernon, 'Les origines du Despotat d'Epire. A propos d'un livre récent', *REB*, xvii (1959), 90–126; B. Ferjančič, *Despoti u Vizantii i južnoslovenskim zemljama* (Belgrade, 1960), pp. 49–58. Account was taken of these and other corrections in my chapter on 'The Fourth Crusade and the Greek and Latin Empires, 1204–61', in the *Cambridge Medieval History*, iv: *The Byzantine Empire*, 1 (Cambridge, 1966), pp. 275–330. See also D. M. Nicol, Πρόσφατες έρευνες για τις άρχες του Δεσποτάτου της Ήπειρου, *Ep. Chron.*, xxii (1980), 39–48. The most recent discussion of these problems is that by G. Prinzing, 'Studien zur Provinz- und Zentralverwaltung im Machtbereich der epirotischen Herrscher Michael I. und Theodoros Dukas', *Ep. Chron.*, xxiv (1982), 73–120; xxv (1983), 37–112.

<sup>2</sup> *Ioannis Cantacuzeni eximperatoris Historiarum libri IV*, ed. L. Schopen (*CShB*, 1828–32), ii. 36: 1, p. 520, ll. 15–20 [cited hereafter as Cantac.].

<sup>3</sup> *Georgii Acropolitae Opera*, ed. A. Heisenberg, 1 (Leipzig, 1903), p. 24, l. 23–p. 25, l. 2. George Bardanes, Metropolitan of Corfu, later tried to pretend that this had not

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successors consistently regarded the rulers of Epiros as rebels with no constitutional rights of their own. In later years those rulers, whether Greek or foreign, coveted the title of Despot. But it was never hereditary and it could be conferred only by a Byzantine emperor. None of the Despots of Epiros, even in the fifteenth century, thought otherwise or presumed to take the title to themselves. Nor did it imply any imperial recognition either of a constitutional or of a hereditary right to an appanage or 'Despotate' in Epiros. The word *despotaton* was in fact Latin and not Greek in its formation, having a geographical and not a political significance; and though it passed into later Greek usage in the Chronicle of the Morea, it was a word never employed by Byzantine writers of the thirteenth century to describe the separatist or 'rebel' state of Epiros.

Other commonly held assumptions about Michael I Doukas and his career have also now been questioned. That he was never a Despot of Epiros is clear enough. It is clear too that he never used the family name of Angelos ascribed to him by modern historians. He called himself Michael Doukas or Komnenos Doukas. His contemporaries sometimes identified him merely as 'the son of John Doukas the *sebastokrator*'. The Latins knew him as 'Michalis', 'Michalitius', or 'Michael Comnianus'. Only the later Greek historians, who were hostile to him and to his successors, designated him as Michael Angelos. Neither he nor his brother Theodore liked to be known by that name. They preferred to emphasise their affinity with the more respectable imperial dynasties by styling themselves Michael or Theodore Komnenos Doukas or Komnenodoukas.<sup>4</sup>

By diplomacy as well as by warfare Michael I succeeded in securing the territory that he had acquired in Epiros and in enlarging its extent. In the division of the spoils among the Latins after 1204, Epiros had been allotted to the Venetians. Its coastline was familiar to their merchants and they could make good use of its northern harbours and offshore islands. In 1205 they occupied Durazzo and in 1207 Corfu. But they were never keen to press their claim by conquering the interior of the country; and in

been the case. R.-J. Loenertz, 'Lettre de Georges Bardanès, métropolitaine de Corcyre, au patriarche oecuménique Germain II (1226-1227 c.)', *EEBS*, xxxii (1964), 87-118 (= Loenertz, *BFG*, i [Rome, 1970], pp. 467-501), 116 (499), ll. 427-9; cf. *ibid.*, 101-2 (482). See also J. M. Hoeck and R.-J. Loenertz, *Nikolaos-Nektarios von Otranto Abt von Casole. Beiträge zur Geschichte der ost-westlichen Beziehungen unter Innozenz III. und Friedrich II.* (Ettal, 1965), pp. 148-235.

<sup>4</sup>D. I. Polemis, *The Doukai. A Contribution to Byzantine Prosopography* (London, 1968), pp. 87-94; R.-J. Loenertz, 'Aux origines du Despotat d'Epire et de la Principauté d'Achaïe', *B*, xliii (1973), 360-94, especially 362-3. Loenertz here proposed some other reinterpretations of the early career of Michael Doukas and his brother Theodore, to the effect that the 'Michael' who fought and lost a battle against the Franks in Messenia in 1205 was not Michael of Epiros; and that the 'Theodore' mentioned as 'lord of Corinth and Argos' about 1210 cannot be the brother of Michael. But see M. S. Kordoses, Σχέσεις τοῦ Μιχαήλ Ἀγγέλου Δούκα μετὰ τὴν Πελοπόννησο, *Ep. Chron.*, xxii (1980), 49-57.

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1210 Michael Doukas persuaded them that he could save them the trouble by consenting to govern Epiros as their agent and in their interests. He became, or pretended to become, the vassal of Venice. He made similar agreements with the crusaders who had occupied Thessaly. Not without reason did the Latins come to regard Michael Doukas as their most perfidious enemy. Within a few years he had broken all his agreements. His army invaded Thessaly, recapturing Larissa and other places. He then attacked Durazzo and Corfu, both of which he had recovered from the Venetians by 1214. When he died, probably early in 1215, it was a fact that he was master of all the land from Naupaktos in the south to Durazzo in the north. But he also controlled a large part of Thessaly; and, while Arta remained his capital, he had transformed the city of Ioannina into a second centre of administration and defence in Epiros.

Michael was succeeded by his half-brother Theodore Komnenos Doukas. Theodore was not content to be governor of a Byzantine province owing a nominal allegiance to an emperor in faraway Nicaea. His ambition was to make Epiros a base for the reconquest from the Latins first of Thessalonica and then of Constantinople itself. In 1217 he made his name more widely known by ambushing and capturing the newly appointed Latin emperor of Constantinople, Peter of Courtenay, who had rashly attempted to reach his capital by the overland route from the west. Then, in a brilliant series of military campaigns, Theodore drove the remaining Latins out of Thessaly and beat back the Bulgarians who had occupied western Macedonia. His armies encircled and laid siege to Thessalonica. Under Theodore the state of Epiros became a serious rival to the Empire of Nicaea. He proclaimed its independence in ecclesiastical as well as political affairs; and he was strongly supported by the officials of church and state whom he appointed without reference to the emperor and the patriarch in Nicaea.<sup>5</sup> The climax of his achievements came in December 1224 when his troops entered Thessalonica. Soon afterwards, perhaps in 1227, he was crowned emperor of the Romans by the autocephalous archbishop of Ochrida, Demetrios Chomatianos. A second Byzantine Empire in exile had been created.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The problem of ecclesiastical relations between Epiros and Nicaea was reconsidered by A. D. Karpozilos, *The Ecclesiastical Controversy between the Kingdom of Nicaea and the Principality of Epiros (1217–1233)* (Thessaloniki, 1973). See also the previously unpublished letters of John Apokaukos edited by Eleni Bees-Sepherles, 'Aus dem Nachlass von N. A. Bees' (Ἐκ τῶν καταλοίπων τοῦ Ν. Α. Βέη): Unedierte Schriftstücke aus der Kanzlei des Johannes Apokaukos des Metropolitens von Naupaktos (in Aetolien)', *BNJ*, xxi (1971–6), Supplement, 1–243.

<sup>6</sup> Various alternative dates have now been proposed for Theodore's coronation in Thessalonica. L. Stiernon, 'Les origines du Despotat d'Épire (suite). La date du couronnement de Théodore Doukas', *Actes du XII<sup>e</sup> Congrès International des Etudes*

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It was a short-lived creation, but while it lasted the Empire of Thessalonica extended from Durazzo to Adrianople, from Ochrida to the Gulf of Corinth. In March 1230, when he was within striking distance of Constantinople, Theodore unwisely turned aside to invade Bulgaria. At Klokotnica on the Marica river he was defeated and taken prisoner by the Bulgarian tsar John Asen, who followed up his victory by pouring troops into Macedonia and New Epiros. Thessalonica was allowed to remain Greek under the rule of Theodore's brother Manuel, who continued to call himself emperor. But the empire which he governed was much reduced in size and dependent for its survival on the goodwill of the Bulgarian tsar.<sup>7</sup>

The abrupt collapse of Theodore's empire demonstrated how fragile a structure it was. But the fact that it had been created and the hope that it could be revived fired the imagination of the Greeks of Epiros for many years to come. Theodore contrived to return to Thessalonica in 1237, though not as emperor. He had been blinded during his captivity in Bulgaria. He ejected his brother Manuel and declared his own son John to be emperor in his place. Theodore's humiliation came in the end not from Bulgaria, where John Asen died in 1241, but from Nicaea. In 1242 the emperor of Nicaea, John Vatatzes, marched on Thessalonica and forced John to renounce his imperial title and to accept the lesser dignity of Despot. Four years later Vatatzes took John's brother and reluctant successor Demetrios into captivity. Thessalonica and its surroundings were now annexed to the empire ruled from Nicaea under the command of a military governor appointed from there. There was no longer a rival emperor on European soil.

The rivalry between the Greeks of Nicaea and the Greeks of Epiros had not, however, been extinguished. After Theodore's defeat in 1230 his nephew Michael II, son of the first Michael Doukas, had come back to Arta to claim his heritage. He had been exiled when his father died; and he had married Theodora of the family of Petraliphas, who was later to be revered as Saint Theodora of Arta. The *Life of St Theodora*, written in the thirteenth century, tells most of what is known about the early career of her husband.<sup>8</sup> Michael Komnenos Angelos Doukas has more claim

*Byzantines*, II (Belgrade, 1964), 197–202 (between June 1227 and April 1228); A. Karpozilos, 'The date of coronation of Theodore Doukas Angelos', *Byzantina*, VI (1974), 251–61 (end of 1224 or early 1225); Eleni Bees-Sepherles, 'Ο χρόνος στέψσεως τοῦ Θεοδώρου Δούκα ὡς προσδιορίζεται ἐξ ἀνεκδότων γραμμάτων Ἰωάννου τοῦ Ἀποκαυκού', *BNJ*, XXI (1971–6), 272–9 (between April and August 1227).

<sup>7</sup> B. Ferjančić, 'Solunski Car Manojlo Angeo (1230–1237). (The Thessalonican Emperor Manuel Angelus (1230–1237))', *Zbornik filozofskog fakulteta*, XIV (1979), 93–101.

<sup>8</sup> L. I. Vranousis, *Χρονικά τῆς μεσαιωνικῆς καὶ τουρκοκρατουμένης Ἠπείρου* (Ioannina, 1962), pp. 49–54, demonstrates that the *Life of St Theodora of Arta* was written by Job Meles or Melias Iasites towards the end of the thirteenth century and not, as I had wrongly

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than either his father or his uncle to be called the founder of what came to be known as the Despotate of Epiros. By 1246, when Thessalonica was finally incorporated into the Empire of Nicaea, the people of Epiros and of much of Thessaly had come to acknowledge him as their ruler. He began to see himself as heir to the imperial title in Europe. His ambition was encouraged by his uncle Theodore, who had retired to his castle at Vodena in western Macedonia, where lay the frontier between the territories of Epiros and those of the Empire of Nicaea. In 1251 Michael II tried and failed to cross that frontier. He was obliged to make peace with the Emperor John Vatatzes, who now removed the elderly Theodore from the scene of his earlier triumphs and took him away to end his days as a prisoner in Asia Minor.

The peace between the rival Greek states was to be confirmed by the marriage of the emperor's granddaughter Maria to Michael's son Nikephoros. At the same time both father and son were honoured with the title of Despot graciously bestowed on them by the emperor. The act was calculated to define their state of subservience to his authority.<sup>9</sup> The marriage of Nikephoros to the princess Maria of Nicaea was delayed until 1256, two years after the death of John Vatatzes and the accession of Theodore II Laskaris. It brought not peace but war. For Laskaris imposed certain conditions on the settlement which the Despot Michael thought to be dishonourable and unacceptable. In revenge he took to arms, inciting the Albanians to help him drive out the imperial garrisons from the towns of Macedonia. His initial success inspired him to hope that he too might add Thessalonica to his dominions and restore the rival empire.

The history of Epiros was, however, to be permanently affected by an event that occurred in 1257. In that year Manfred of Hohenstaufen, son of the Emperor Frederick II of Sicily, sent an armada across the sea from Italy and occupied a large stretch of the coast of Albania and New Epiros.<sup>10</sup> Durazzo fell to him as well as the ports of Valona and Kanina and the inland fortress of Berat. Before long he had seized the island of Corfu. These had been prize possessions of the rulers of Epiros. The Despot Michael had been taken by surprise. But he found a way to offset

stated, in the seventeenth century. It is therefore a more reliable authority than had been supposed.

<sup>9</sup> That the title of Despot was conferred on Michael II and his son Nikephoros at the same time was proposed by Ferjančić, *Despota*, pp. 64–8. Michael may, however, have first been given the title by his uncle, the Emperor Manuel of Thessalonica.

<sup>10</sup> On the relations of Frederick II and Manfred with Nicaea and Epiros, see now E. Merendino, 'Federico II e Giovanni III Vatatzes', *Byzantino-Sicula*, II (1974), 1–15; idem, 'Quattro lettere greche di Federico II', *Atti dell' Accademia di Scienze Lettere e Arti di Palermo*, ser. iv., xxxiv (1974–5), part ii, 291–344; idem, 'Manfredi fra Epiro e Nicea', *Actes du XV<sup>e</sup> Congrès International d'Etudes Byzantines*, iv. *Histoire* (Athens, 1980), 245–52.



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his losses while at the same time winning a powerful ally in his conflict with the Empire of Nicaea. He offered his daughter Helena in marriage to King Manfred. Since her dowry was to consist of most of the places in Epiros which he had already occupied, Manfred was pleased to accept the offer. This unexpected development established a link between Epiros and the south of Italy which was never thereafter to be broken until the Turkish conquest in the fifteenth century. Michael won the support of another foreign ally in the person of William of Villehardouin, the French prince of Achaia, to whom he gave his second daughter Anna in marriage. With the help of Manfred of Sicily and William of Achaia, Michael felt confident to go to war with the emperor of Nicaea for the possession of Thessalonica and then perhaps of Constantinople. The long rivalry between the Greeks of Epiros and the Greeks of Nicaea was now to be fought out on the field of battle.

Theodore II Laskaris, emperor at Nicaea, died in August 1258 leaving an infant son, John IV. He was succeeded first as regent and then as emperor by Michael Palaiologos, known as Michael VIII. It was he who assembled the army, under the command of his brother John Palaiologos, that was to go to the defence of Thessalonica against the Despot Michael of Epiros and his foreign allies. The battle that was to determine the future of Epiros, of Nicaea and ultimately of Constantinople and the Byzantine Empire was fought at Pelagonia in Macedonia in the summer of 1259. The grand alliance on which Michael II had pinned his hopes broke up even before the fighting began. Michael and his son Nikephoros decamped by night. His illegitimate son John Doukas deserted to the enemy; and William of Villehardouin and the cavalry that Manfred had sent were cut off and captured. The army of Nicaea then invaded Epiros and Thessaly. The Despot Michael was chased from Arta to Vonitsa and took refuge on the island of Cephalonia with the Orsini family, to whom he was related. Arta, Ioannina and other towns in Epiros as far north as Durazzo were occupied by garrisons of troops from Nicaea. It looked as if the days of Epirote independence were over.

The battle of Pelagonia was the prelude to the reconquest of Constantinople from the Latins. In July 1261 a small force from Nicaea, led by Alexios Strategopoulos who had fought at that battle, entered the city almost by chance. The Latin emperor and his Venetian friends fled; and in August Michael Palaiologos took up residence in Constantinople as emperor of the restored Byzantine Empire. By then, however, Michael of Epiros had rallied. He had sailed back from his island refuge to Vonitsa and from there fought his way into his capital at Arta. His son John had repented and rejoined him with an army of Vlachs from Thessaly. His eldest son Nikephoros had been to Italy and returned with reinforcements supplied by Manfred. The soldiers of Michael VIII who

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had occupied Epiros were few in number and quickly dispersed. The inhabitants of Arta and Ioannina welcomed the return of their Despot. They made it abundantly clear that they would rather be governed by their native rulers than be incorporated as provincials into the revived Byzantine Empire.

After the recovery of Constantinople in 1261, Michael of Epiros obstinately refused to admit defeat or to recognise the new emperor's jurisdiction over his territory. He rose to the attack again before the year was out. He had the loyalty of his people and he had the support of Manfred of Sicily, who had lost his overseas possessions of Durazzo and Berat. Alexios Strategopoulos, sent out from Constantinople with an army, was defeated, taken prisoner and shipped as a hostage to Italy. Michael's pious wife Theodora tried to restrain her husband. She went on a mission of peace to the emperor and handed him her young son John as a security. But Michael repeatedly thwarted her efforts. In 1262 and again in 1263 the emperor's brother, John Palaiologos, the victor at Pelagonia, came west to enforce the submission of the unruly Despot. But when John was recalled to take command in Asia Minor, Michael II at once broke the peace that had been forced upon him.<sup>11</sup>

The emperor then resolved to deal with the matter in person and marched to Thessalonica at the head of a large army. In the summer of 1264 Michael II was chastened into accepting and signing a more formal and solemn treaty. His son Nikephoros, whose first wife had died, was to marry the emperor's niece, Anna Palaiologina. An uneasy peace was thus established between Epiros and Byzantium. Early in 1265 the emperor sent his niece with an escort to Epiros, where her marriage to Nikephoros took place in the same year. Nikephoros was invited to Constantinople and there the emperor confirmed his right to the title and rank of Despot before sending him home laden with gifts.<sup>12</sup> His father Michael II, the first Despot in Epiros, died some two years later, and he died at peace with the new regime in Byzantium against which he had fought so bitterly. His new daughter-in-law, Anna Palaiologina, hoped that the peace would not be disturbed. As *basilissa* of Epiros, wife of the Despot Nikephoros, Anna was to play a dominant role in its affairs for nearly half a century. She took her cue from her saintly mother-in-law Theodora of Arta, by tempering the aggressive instincts of the male members of the family into which she had married.

<sup>11</sup> The chronology of these events has been rectified by A. Failler, 'Chronologie et composition dans l'Histoire de Georges Pachymère', *REB*, xxxviii (1980), 77–103.

<sup>12</sup> George Pachymeres, *De Michaelae Palaeologo*, ed. I. Bekker (*CSHB*, 1835), iii. 26: 1, pp. 242–3 [cited hereafter as *Pach.*, *De Mich. Pal.*]; Nikephoros Gregoras, *Byzantina Historia*, ed. L. Schopen (*CSHB*, 1829–55), iv. 9: 1, pp. 109–10 [cited hereafter as *Greg.*].



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## I

## The restored Despotate – 1267–85

The Despot Michael II, the first of the rulers of Epiros to be so designated, died late in 1267 or early in 1268.<sup>1</sup> He left three legitimate sons, Nikephoros, John and Demetrios. John was in Constantinople, where he had been taken as a hostage in 1261. He had married a daughter of the *sebastokrator* Constantine Tornikios and took no further part in the affairs of Epiros. Demetrios was still a boy.<sup>2</sup> Michael's principal heir was his eldest son Nikephoros, who had already been created a Despot. But he had also to think of his illegitimate son John Doukas, who had more than expiated his treachery at Pelagonia before returning to his castle at Neopatras in southern Thessaly. The bastard John would not have taken kindly to being ignored in the apportionment of his father's estate.

In his will therefore Michael II, whom Gregoras describes as 'ruler of Epiros and Thessaly', divided his dominions between his two sons, Nikephoros and John. The division recognised the fact that Epiros and Thessaly were in many ways separate geographical entities cut off from each other by the Pindos mountains. Gregoras gives the fullest account of the matter, even though he expresses himself in pedantically archaic Greek terms. John Doukas inherited that part of northern and central Greece which comprised the country of the Pelasgians and Phthiotians,

<sup>1</sup> The exact date of his death cannot be determined, but it seems to have occurred between May 1267 and August 1268. See A. Nikarouses, Χρονολογικαὶ ἐρευναι Β – Πότε ἀπέθανε Μιχαὴλ Β΄ Ἀγγελος ὁ δεσπότης τῆς Ἠπείρου, *DIEE*, n.s., 1 (1928), 136–41; B. Ferjančić, 'Kada je umro Despot Michailo II Angeo? (Quand mourut le Despote Michel II Ange?)', *ZRVI*, ix (1966), 29–32; A. Failler, 'Chronologie et composition dans l'Histoire de Georges Pachymère', *REB*, xxxix (1981), 183–4.

<sup>2</sup> Pach., *De Mich. Pal.*, iii. 27: 1, p. 243; iv. 26: 1, pp. 307–8 (*CSHB*). Greg. iv. 9: 1, pp. 109–10 (*CSHB*). Gregoras errs in saying that John was still in Epiros at the time of his father's death. Cf. D. I. Polemis, *The Doukai. A Contribution to Byzantine Prosopography* (London, 1968), no. 50, p. 95 and n. 8; J. L. van Dieten, *Nikephoros Gregoras, Rhomäische Geschichte, Historia Rhomaike*, 1 (Stuttgart, 1973), p. 252 n. 202 [cited hereafter as Greg. (van Dieten)]. John was later to be imprisoned and blinded for making too much of a hero of himself in warfare against the Turks at Nicaea. Pach., *De Mich. Pal.*, vi. 24–5: 1, pp. 485–93. *Prosopographisches Lexikon der Palaiologenzeit*, ed. E. Trapp and others, 1, no. 205 [cited hereafter as *PLP*].

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the Thessalians and Ozolian Lokrians, a district bounded on the north by Mount Olympos and on the south by Mount Parnassos. Nikephoros received that part of north-western Greece known as Old Epiros. It included the lands of the Thesprotians, Akarnanians and Dolopes, as well as the islands of Kerkyra (Corfu), Kephallenia (Cephalonia) and Ithaka. It was bounded on the west by the Adriatic and Ionian seas, on the north by the mountains known as Pydnos and Akrokeraunion, on the east by the river Acheloos, and on the south by Corfu and Cephalonia.<sup>3</sup>

Gregoras is careful to define the new Despot's territory as Old Epiros, the district covering the former Theme of Nikopolis, extending from Ioannina in the north to Naupaktos in the south, with its capital at Arta. New Epiros, the country to the north of the Akrokeraunian promontory and the bay of Valona (Avlona) included in the former Theme of Dyrrachion, was no longer within the Despotate. It had been occupied by the Byzantine army after the battle of Pelagonia. The Emperor Michael VIII in his so-called Autobiography claimed that his troops had overrun Epiros, 'both the one and the other', as well as part of Illyria, and had advanced as far as Durazzo.<sup>4</sup> Michael II had succeeded in expelling them from Old Epiros. But when he died they were still in control at least of Durazzo.

Nikephoros therefore inherited a dominion which could hardly be compared in size or prestige with that once ruled by his great-uncle Theodore. But it was of manageable proportions and Nikephoros, if left to his own devices, might have been content, as Pachymeres says he was, to live at peace with his neighbours.<sup>5</sup> He was connected with most of them by marriage. One of his sisters had married the French prince of Achaia, William of Villehardouin, whose principality lay across the water from Naupaktos. Another sister, Helena, had become the wife and was by 1267 the widow of Manfred of Sicily. His own wife, the *basilissa* Anna whom he had married in 1265, was a niece of the Emperor Michael VIII who had confirmed his right to the title of Despot.<sup>6</sup> Nikephoros had the blessing of Byzantium and the support of his friends in Italy whose colonial possessions on the coast of New Epiros, acquired through the marriage of Helena to Manfred, he had the good sense not to contest. His half-brother John Doukas on the other hand was far from content with the little realm in Thessaly which he had inherited. The emperor was able to pacify him for a while by bringing him into the imperial family. John's

<sup>3</sup> Greg. iv. 9: 1, p. 110. Cf. Greg (van Dieten), I, p. 251 n. 201.

<sup>4</sup> 'Imperatoris Michaelis Palaeologi De Vita Sua', ed. H. Grégoire, *B*, xxix-xxx (1959-60), p. 455, c. vii.

<sup>5</sup> Pach., *De Mich. Pal.*, iv. 26: 1, pp. 307-8.

<sup>6</sup> D. M. Nicol, *The Despotate of Epiros* (Oxford, 1957), pp. 171-3. On the marriage of Anna to Nikephoros see Pach., *De Mich. Pal.*, iii. 27: 1, p. 243.