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Introduction

One year before he passed away at the age of thirty-six, the subject of this biography sent a polemical letter to his teacher and spiritual father. The letter ended on a note of hope that his arguments "would be judged by future generations."[1] The author called for the judgment of history because he was conscious of criticism of him as a public personality. Throughout his life, he had observed with rising concern the vilification of rulers before and after their deaths. The inevitable lot of the individual vested with royal authority, he reasoned, was "to be the target of reproach."[2] He had a good reason to fear that he would suffer the same fate, for his policies had upset many among the ruling elite and had troubled his former teacher, the addressee of the letter. He wished his lone voice to be heard through the ages and intended his writings to become a lasting monument. "I know," he wrote over a decade earlier, "that in this way I will gain an icon of remembrance before the eyes of the future generations and a clearing of my name."[3]

The author of these poignant words was the Byzantine ruler and philosopher Theodore Laskaris (1221/22–58). He is known as Theodore II Laskaris and his full official name is Theodore Doukas Laskaris, but we will be referring to him in the following pages with the shorter version of his name that was already circulating while he was alive.[4] Theodore Laskaris ruled over the "empire of Nicaea" (1204–61), a polity established in exile in Asia Minor after the dramatic fall of Constantinople, the imperial capital of the Byzantine (Eastern Roman) Empire, to the Latin armies of the Fourth Crusade in April 1204. *Nicaea,* like *Byzantium,* is a Western calque and a misnomer for a state that always named itself "the empire of the Romans." Attested already in a contemporary thirteenth-century Latin text, the designation originates from the main city of the Byzantine successor state: Nicaea, today's Iznik, in northwestern Asia Minor.[5] This biography takes up the challenging task that Theodore Laskaris prepared for us seven and a half centuries ago through his own writings. It tells the story of a single person that is also the story of the transformation of his native culture, Byzantium.

Why should we, as moderns, respond to a cry for attention by an individual who lived long ago and had experiences different not only from

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our own but also from those of the common people in his time? The first and simplest reason is the extraordinary opportunity it provides for empathy with a real human being from the distant past. Thanks to his vivid and self-revealing prose, Theodore Laskaris emerges before our eyes as a man of flesh and blood – with attachments to family and friends, with emotions and mood changes, with anxieties about the direction of his life, and with an interest in the principles of the universe and God's role in it. His impulsive self-confidence and his curiosity that bordered on naïvité are easily recognizable and timeless features of youth. "Let me say something most unusual," he loved to exclaim.[6] He readily invoked his young age and commented, not always with due reverence and respect, on the seniority of people around him.[7] His writings reveal details of his daily life and create a fully human portrait.

All this is hardly insignificant. Medieval history suffers from a shortage of private lives due to the inadequacy of our sources.[8] Biographies of men and women of the Middle Ages tend to present us with their deeds and actions rather than their thoughts, ideas, and emotions. Only rarely do utterances of medieval people, including royalty, survive in sufficient quantity to enable the reconstruction of their evolving thoughts and characters in a coherent biography. One historian concluded with unconcealed frustration his meticulous study of the reign of the seventh-century Byzantine emperor Heraclius: "We can never know what was inside Heraclius' head."[9] Theodore Laskaris belongs to a very small number of premodern individuals who have left an autobiographical record of their life, such as Augustine of Hippo in late antiquity or the fifteenth-century merchant of Prato, Francesco Datini. His literary confessions reveal the unique personal voice of an emperor in Byzantium, a voice whose scope and depth is unmatched until a century and a half later when we encounter the scholar-emperor Manuel II Palaiologos (1350–1425). We see Theodore torn between politics, philosophy, and artistic angst. We see him feeling anguish on account of a demanding life and grappling to reconcile old theories with lived experience and practices.

The gripping historical setting, of which Theodore Laskaris was a part, is another attractive aspect of the life of this little-known figure of the past. The Fourth Crusade was a turning point in Mediterranean and world history, when the relations between the medieval East and West entered a new phase. Latins settled on the territory of a wounded Byzantine Empire by right of conquest. Their arrival brought about the emergence of new polities, colonial as well as irredentist, and a territorial fragmentation that would terminate only under Mehmed the Conqueror in the fifteenth century. Byzantium

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ended its traditional political and economic dominance in the Christian northern Mediterranean. The personal story of a key contemporary opens up a vista on these phenomena. Tracing the events of his life means retelling some of the well-known episodes of the political history of the eastern Mediterranean, Asia Minor, and the Balkans from the unique vantage point of a contemporary leader and eyewitness. Theodore Laskaris held distinctive opinions on many aspects of this political transformation. Indeed, it is the eloquent and engaged voice of the historical character that makes this biography so special. His writings cover a variety of genres and consist of epistles, orations, essays, polemics, theological works, discourses addressed to saints and holy figures, hymns, philosophical tracts, political treatises, and a newsletter – a written output of more than 960 pages of printed editions and, if these are still lacking, manuscript folios. These works form a rich and substantial body of evidence. They are the basis for reconstructing his life and penetrating his thought world. They enrich our knowledge of the historical setting. They reveal new forms of identity construction, which cannot be adequately understood without a focus on the individual himself.

The oeuvre of Theodore Laskaris generates methodological insights into the opportunities and challenges of basing a historical biography on letters and other texts written in the living tradition of Byzantine rhetoric and literature. Starting most prominently in the eleventh century, with Michael Psellos being the foremost example, Byzantine authors embedded their own personae and I-voice in letters, orations, histories, and other kinds of works. Much attention has recently been paid to the construction of the self in these texts. This productive discussion, which has understandably been driven and dominated by literary scholars, has advanced our knowledge of the themes, models, and ploys of authorial self-fashioning.[10] We are approaching a better understanding of the Byzantine author, yet we still lack coherent portraits of the individuals behind the words. Two questions naturally arise. What are the main methods of extracting biographical information from the letters, orations, and hymns written by a learned Byzantine author? Can the themes and devices of self-presentation contribute to our understanding of the historical self?

Theodore Laskaris did not write a narrative autobiography, yet many of his works are markedly self-referential and autobiographic, in the sense that he wrote, in the first person, about his experiences, feelings, and thoughts – that is, about himself.[11] The most important type of self-descriptive texts, as well as the largest single body of his writings, are his more than 200 letters. His letters do not form a continuous narrative. They represent capsules of information in a developing story and pieces of a puzzle that need to be

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assembled to tell the story. Considered in their totality, the letters form a rich and variegated canvas. They vary widely in theme and content: narrative, confession, polemic, satire, consolation, and ordinance. They allow us to learn about his studies, travels, daily routine, diet, friendships, campaigns, and the reception he granted to distinguished foreign visitors.[12] Some of the letters are long and informative. For example, a series of letters to his childhood friend, confidant, and chief minister George Mouzalon dating from a campaign in the Balkans (1255) relate the movements of the army. Other letters are shorter and deal with trifles, such as "keep in touch" and "missing you" notes accompanied by philosophical musings. Theodore's twenty-seven correspondents represent the political and intellectual elite of the empire of Nicaea: officials, secretaries, teachers, and churchmen, including the patriarch and leading bishops, as well as a Roman pope and his cardinals. Letters give us insights into affairs of church and state and into Theodore's duties and activities as a coemperor and a ruling emperor.[13]

The letters enable us to trace Theodore's relationship with three individuals in particular. Mouzalon tops the list of his correspondents with sixty-five letters. He was also the dedicatee of a treatise on friendship and politics, and the philosophical treatise *Explanation of the World*. He is followed by Theodore's teachers Nikephoros Blemmydes (1197–c. 1271), the addressee of the polemical epistle quoted at the outset, with about forty-eight letters and George Akropolites (1217–82) with about forty-two letters.[14] The reading audience of Theodore's literary and philosophical works intersected with the circle of his correspondents. The author often announced by letter that he was sending a composition to Mouzalon, Blemmydes, Akropolites, a metropolitan bishop, and secretaries.[15] He himself received and read works written by his correspondents. An urban official from Philadelphia, thus, shared with Theodore a church hymn and an abbot dispatched a prayer of blessing for the food on his table. Blemmydes sent Theodore Laskaris his mirror of princes (instructive book on kingship), *The Imperial Statue*, and addressed to him theological treatises.[16] The correspondents formed an active, critical, and interconnected group of readers and writers.

The letters are marked by the features of the genre of the epistle in Byzantium.[17] One of these features is the phenomenon of the edited collection. Authors in Byzantium kept copies of their letters and valued them as literary products. At a certain stage of their lives, they made a selection of letters with the aim of preserving the texts, advertising their relations with specific individuals, and presenting an authorial self-portrait. The creation of a collection is the equivalent of publication today.

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Theodore Laskaris followed this practice. His main epistolary collection was prepared in early 1254 when he was thirty-two years of age.[18] It has come down to us in a single fourteenth-century manuscript in the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana in Florence (Cod. Laur. plut. 59, 35). The "Laurentian collection," as it is called hereafter, arranges the 133 letters in batches by correspondent. One of Theodore's agendas was to display his closeness with and intellectual lineage from his two main teachers, because the collection opens with his letters to them. Epistles addressed to the same correspondent form thematic clusters – clusters in which they usually follow chronological sequence and form a quasi-narrative. As was the common practice, his edited letters lack any indication of the time of their composition.

The process of editing the letters into a collection meant the introduction of revisions that we, as historical detectives, must attempt to identify and interpret.[19] One sign of editorial intervention was the removal of unnecessary factual detail, a phenomenon known as "de-concretization." Thus, the name of a Latin individual was replaced in a letter to the pope with the phrase "so-and-so" in order to conceal his identity.[20] Another sign of revision was the removal of diplomatic components from letters that originally served an official purpose. Two of his letters are orders issued by him as a coemperor (he refers to himself as "my imperial majesty") to metropolitan bishops, but they still bear the hallmarks of his writing style. He was clearly the author rather than secretaries in the imperial chancery. One is a letter of command addressed to the metropolitan of Ephesos and refers to itself as "an order" (*prostagma*), a specific kind of imperial charter. This epistolary ordinance is unusual from a diplomatic point of view because it lacks the standard closure (eschatocol) that includes the date of issue.[21] The ordinance must have featured this ending, but at the time of the production of the epistolary collection the author – with the help of his editor – removed the eschatocol.[22] Interestingly, two letters dating to the period of his sole rule (and incorporated into a collection produced after the Laurentian one) retain signs of their diplomatic origins. The first letter has his signature at the end.[23] The second one, addressed to the pope, contains a standard diplomatic component at the beginning: the name and title of the recipient, the sender's name and title, and a salutation.[24] The presence of these features in only two surviving letters confirms the impression that Theodore made an effort to fashion his edited letters as pieces of personal correspondence in accordance with the Byzantine literary tradition, even though some letters had served earlier as "official" communications. In this regard, his letters differ greatly from the charters and epistles of the

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contemporary Western emperor Frederick II Hohenstaufen (1194–1250), with whom Theodore Laskaris has been compared.[25]

The letters of Theodore Laskaris are not easy texts to read and understand. Couched in a learned language with many rare words and composed in an idiosyncratic style, they abound in quotations, circumlocutions, allegories, learned allusions, and philosophical digressions. The text of the letter was only one part of the message in the interpersonal interaction based on epistolary exchange. The letter-bearer delivered an oral report, which could be the gist of the communication. The messenger will "tell you precisely all matters pertaining to me," Theodore wrote on one occasion, and on another urged his correspondent to "accept as if from me what the (letter bearer's) mouth says to you."[26] The letter-bearer served as an explicator of opaque letters.[27] The epistolary communication was accompanied by the dispatch of gifts – hunting trophies, cheese, butter, and sour milk, for example – and the exchange of manuscripts and works composed by Theodore Laskaris and his addressees.[28] Frustratingly, the author often resorted to using code names. He chose wittily, using nicknames from among ancient heroes such as Nestor or Guneas the Arab. Animal species stood for specific people and human types.[29] The anonymity of ridiculed individuals was justified through the authority of Hermogenes (second century AD), the chief theoretician of rhetoric for the Byzantines.[30] Comic neologisms served as code names for specific individuals – "a scion of goats" (*tragophylon*) and "a ram-bearer" (*kriophoros*), for example. Today it is regrettably impossible to identify the people Theodore had in mind, except for cases when he made puns on personal and family names. The "scion of goats" was a playful reference to the surname of Theodore Komnenos Philes, the governor of Thessalonica. The "ram-bearer" appears to have been his attendant and companion Christopher, a play both on his name and the individual's physical characteristics.[31]

These features of the Byzantine epistle explain why historians have traditionally refrained from using them as sources for biography. We have been warned that "the mist of rhetoric is the besetting sin of Byzantine epistolography."[32] This book takes a different view. The rhetorical features of the letters, if approached with due consideration of genre and authorship, are an opportunity rather than obstacle for historical biography. Theodore Laskaris skillfully manipulated the conventions of self-fashioning. In Byzantium, the epistle was understood as an "image" (*eikon*) of one's soul – hence, letters focused on feelings and impressions rather than recordkeeping.[33] The same is true of Theodore's letters, which tend to convey emotional reactions to events and situations. He aestheticized the literary expression of youthful

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feelings – love and hatred, attraction and repulsion. He poured out his feelings without inhibition. He writes in grief, for example: "My hand is numbed, the flesh shivers and my soul is overcome by great commotion."[34]

Friendship is a common trope in Byzantine letter writing.[35] A brief guide to epistolography dating to the last two decades of the twelfth or the first half of the thirteenth century defines the letter as "a report and communication from a friend to a friend."[36] Accordingly, Theodore portrayed many of his correspondents as his friends and called them his equals, alter egos, and soul mates.[37] But he also became deeply interested in the sociology and psychology of friendship. Another characteristic of the Byzantine letter is the ample use of quotations from admired ancient Greek and Christian texts. The guide to epistolography recommends the inclusion of "maxims of wise men, the so-called apothegms, proverbial sayings," as well as verses from Homer and other poets. Theodore judiciously selected the quotations and textual allusions so as to convey his thoughts and emotions. When he begged for pardon after being unjustly accused, he wrote in contrition: "I was given a thorn in my flesh (2 Corinthians 12:7), so that Satan can torment me in an abusive way and I cannot rise toward the first fruits of the intellect. Heaven, lament for me! Earth, cry! Sun, weep!"[38] Grief drove him to elaborate on a phrase from the Book of Proverbs (14:30): "A sensitive heart is a moth in the bones."[39]

As in his letters, so in many of his other writings Theodore adopted an autobiographical approach and brought a personal touch to old themes and traditional rhetorical strategies. Genres and generic expectations supplied loose templates for recounting past experiences. He wrote and structured his *Satire of the Tutor* as an invective (*psogos*), a reversed encomium, in accordance with the recommendations of Aphthonios (fourth century AD), another influential late Roman theoretician of Greek rhetoric.[40] He drew themes from the religious poetry of compunction (*katanyxis*) in order to channel feelings and thoughts of the moment. There is no doubt that the self in his eminently literary works, such as orations and many of his epistles, reflected his individuality. Outspokenness and a sense of immediacy are two hallmarks of his writing. As an heir to the throne and emperor, he felt no need to dissimulate and boasted of "the imperial character of my free spirit."[41] The only limit was his own sense of literariness and the boundaries of literary convention.

The impression of immediacy emerges not only from Theodore's vivid language and developed sense of the dramatic, but also from the free and seemingly improvised flow of his prose. Theodore Laskaris had a rare authorial gift. The historian George Pachymeres, born in Nicaea in 1242,

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tells us that he had "a writing talent by nature rather than education, so that he could compose a lot with great fluency should he start."[42] While the cantors were singing the introductory psalms before matins, he improvised church hymns suitable for the feast day. He was able to compose the poetic works so speedily that the cantors, joined by his chamberlains and bodyguards, performed the new piece during the same service. The manner in which Theodore wrote "with great fluency" corresponds to a characteristic stream-of-consciousness style that he cultivated and cherished. Its features are loose syntax, floating rhythmical clauses, figurative language, wordplay, idiosyncratic expression, and a marked fondness for neologisms that seem to have been coined during the creative process of composition. A work replete with new usages is his theological treatise *On the Divine Names* (the sixth book of his *Christian Theology*), which consists of more than 700 designations for God. Words derived from the spoken register served a literary function and occasionally contributed to a comic effect.[43] One critic has judged this style to be clumsy due to the disregard for the rules of classical grammar and syntax, but this view is unduly harsh.[44]

The massive textual production of Theodore Laskaris is explainable also in light of other aspects of the writing process. He often devoted himself to creative work at night, in spite of the warning of court physicians, because public responsibilities occupied him already in his twenties.[45] He had no qualms in admitting that he practiced composition by dictation. Both as a coemperor and a sole emperor, he was surrounded by secretaries and scribes. His trusted companion Hagiotheodorites served as his recording secretary. Theodore describes him as "the expert connoisseur of my tongue, of my heart and of the thoughts of my mind, and an admirable secretary."[46] His teacher Akropolites helped him to prepare for publication his main epistolary collection (the Laurentian collection) and wrote a versified preface introducing the author. The particularly loose structure of some of Theodore's works, especially the treatise *Representation of the World, or Life*, can be explained as the result of dictation. Nonetheless, he kept tight authorial control and oversight, as is seen in a brief essay on the difficult and unhealthy life of rulers. The piece concludes with a comment suggesting composition by dictation: "He (the author) presented the maxim after having examined these things with a far-seeing eye."[47] The phrase "with a far-seeing eye" is a quotation from Aristophanes' *Clouds* featured in the influential mirror of princes by Blemmydes and could have come only from the pen or mouth of Theodore Laskaris. The remarkable consistency in style and vocabulary of his works precludes the possibility that he used the professional ghostwriters who assisted emperors between

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the eleventh and the early thirteenth century in the composition of speeches and newsletters.[48]

Theodore Laskaris cared deeply about his written word reaching future generations. Five known editions of collected works were produced under his auspices. Characteristic manuscript headings point to the approximate chronology of composition of individual works included in the collections. Narrower timeframes of composition can be suggested in a number of cases.[49] The Laurentian epistolary collection and another collection of nine religious and theosophical *Sacred Orations* were prepared in early 1254. His letters to Mouzalon are conspicuously missing from the Laurentian collection, which suggests that Theodore was somewhat apprehensive at the time about advertising the close relations with his confidant. A collection of ten secular works dates to the later months of the same year, 1254, but before his accession as sole emperor in November. Another collection, titled *Christian Theology*, consists of eight religious works that were mostly composed during the period of his sole rule (1254–58). To the year of his death (1258) belongs another collection that includes letters, the philosophical treatise *Explanation of the World*, essays, and other works.[50] The deluxe manuscript of the philosophical treatise *Natural Communion* – BnF, Parisinus Suppl. gr. 460 (Fig. 26), with its gilded headings, initials, and elaborate drawings executed also in gold – was part of the same editorial project.[51] None of the original codices of the five collections has come down to us, with the possible exception of BnF, Parisinus Suppl. Gr. 472, an expensive and carefully made parchment codex of his ten secular works. There are good reasons to suspect, however, that there were other costly productions prepared in scriptoria close to the court.[52] No working copies are attested, in contrast to the manuscripts of the works of Manuel II Palaiologos, the other famous late Byzantine scholar-emperor.[53] The absence of revisions and additions is partly a reflection of Theodore's confidence as an author, but is also due to his early death, which deprived him of the opportunity to revisit the composed texts.

Writing a biography of Theodore Laskaris would have been impossible without other sources that fill in gaps and complement – while often challenging – his own voice. First and foremost, they include narrative accounts written by his teachers Blemmydes and Akropolites. Blemmydes' autobiography borders on self-hagiography and consists of two accounts completed in 1264 and 1265.[54] Akropolites was the author of the main historical work on the period of the empire in exile.[55] The two authors tend to have different opinions about events and characters from those held by their royal tutee, immersing us directly in the controversies of his reign.

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Blemmydes and Akropolites had frictions with Theodore and, for reasons that will become clear at the end, they painted a negative portrait of him. The exact opposite – highly positive – view of Theodore is found in *Synopsis chronike,* a world chronicle that relies faithfully on Akropolites for the period after 1204, but occasionally makes precious additions. The anonymous author, a clergyman in Theodore's entourage who followed him on military campaigns, removed all of Akropolites' criticisms. He has traditionally been identified as Theodore Skoutariotes, metropolitan bishop of Kyzikos during the second half of the thirteenth century, but this remains uncertain.[56]

George Pachymeres wrote a history of the period from 1258 to 1309, with flashbacks into the empire in exile. Pachymeres grew up in Nicaea and derived some of his information from people who knew Theodore personally, such as Gregory, the archbishop of Mytilene, who administered the last rites and received the confession of the dying emperor.[57] The masterfully written work of Pachymeres has to be treated with caution. The historian idealized the emperors in exile as a foil to their less competent successors, whom he blamed for weakening the defenses of western Asia Minor in the later thirteenth century and facilitating its conquest by the Turks. A similar critical agenda informs the account by the fourteenth-century historian Nikephoros Gregoras, who provides details missing from other sources. [58] Relevant information on prosopography, land-ownership, and social relations can be derived from documentary evidence preserved in the cartularies of the monasteries of Lembos near Smyrna, St. Paul on Mount Latros, and Hiera-Xerochoraphion on Mount Mykale, and in a collection of forty formularies for notarial documents used in the empire of Nicaea.[59] Few charters of Theodore Laskaris have survived in the monastic archives – acts issued by his chancery rather than "epistolary ordinances" and foreign correspondence included in his letter collections. Two ordinances (*prostagmata*) of 1256 have been copied in the cartulary of the Lembos monastery.[60] Latin, Seljuk, Armenian, Bulgarian, and Mamluk sources add valuable details of the historical context of Theodore's life from the dynamic world of international affairs in Europe, Asia Minor, and the Mediterranean.

The intriguing personality and writings of Theodore Laskaris have long made scholars aware of the potential for a biography. In 1897, Karl Krumbacher, the founder of Byzantine studies as an academic discipline, recommended in the second expanded edition of his *History of Byzantine Literature* the "highly enticing task of producing an overall literary and psychological portrait in finest detail."[61] August Heisenberg, his professorial successor at the University of Munich, remarked three years later that

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