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### The Chronology of the Reign of Alexios III Komnenos for the years 1198-1202 AD and its Implications

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ΙΝΣΤΙΤΟΥΤΟ ΙΣΤΟΡΙΚΩΝ ΕΡΕΥΝΩΝ  
ΤΟΜΕΑΣ ΒΥΖΑΝΤΙΝΩΝ ΕΡΕΥΝΩΝ  
ΕΘΝΙΚΟ ΙΔΡΥΜΑ ΕΡΕΥΝΩΝ



# BYZANTINA ΣΥΜΜΕΙΚΤΑ

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ANTHONY KALDELLIS

THE CHRONOLOGY OF THE REIGN OF ALEXIOS III KOMNENOS  
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ANTHONY KALDELLIS

THE CHRONOLOGY OF THE REIGN OF ALEXIOS III KOMNENOS  
FOR THE YEARS 1198–1202 AD AND ITS IMPLICATIONS<sup>1</sup>

Alexios III Komnenos (né Angelos) was the last emperor to govern the Roman polity before the arrival of the Fourth Crusade in 1203, which would conquer Constantinople and dismember the territories of its state. Yet Alexios' reign (1195-1203) has not been systematically studied since the days of Charles Brand and Jan-Louis van Dieten in the late 1960s and early 1970s. They were the last who tried to work out its basic outline and they made major advances. But neither of them took into consideration the evidence provided by all the texts at our disposal or tried to pull it together in a systematic way, and so they also left behind many gaps, errors, conflicting conclusions, and uncertainties. Later historians focused on individual texts and events, but in dating and interpreting them they too did not try to assemble all the relevant data and scholarship in order to see the full picture that emerges. Thus, for the years 1198-1202 in particular, historians still cite discrepant dates. Lacking a coherent chronology, the reign continues to be evaluated on the basis of Niketas Choniates' hostile account rather than the precise sequence and interrelation of the events themselves. Recent scholarship by Alicia Simpson on the history of Choniates and the generation before the fall of the City has proven the need for a revision of traditional interpretations, but the sequence of events under Alexios III still remains chaotic<sup>2</sup>. This article will draw the evidence together in the hope of bringing order to the reign.

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1. I thank Michael Angold for generously taking the time to discuss the arguments made below in a constructive back-and-forth exchange.

2. A. SIMPSON, *Niketas Choniates: A Historiographical Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); EADEM (ed.), *Byzantium, 1180–1204: 'The Sad Quarter of a Century'?* (Athens: National Hellenic Research Foundation, 2015).

The effort will be repaid with consequential and revisionist conclusions, indeed with a new interpretation and partial rehabilitation of this much maligned ruler. Alexios III is one of the few remaining emperors whom it is acceptable for modern scholars to revile or just ignore as a non-entity. He did, after all, flee from the urban battlefield on 17 July, 1203, after the crusaders had scored only a preliminary victory over his forces near the Blachernai district, and so he bears significant responsibility for the ensuing catastrophe. Yet the dominant negative image stems not primarily from that retreat but from the hostile image of Alexios crafted by Choniates, the chief of Alexios' civilian administration (*logothetes* of the *sekreta*)<sup>3</sup>. Choniates harps on Alexios' alleged incompetence, indifference to military affairs, laziness, addiction to a life of pleasure, and subservience to his wife, to say nothing of the fact that he came to power by deposing and blinding his brother Isaakios II Angelos (1185–1195)<sup>4</sup>. Choniates' defamation of Alexios seems to have drawn on damning templates from ancient literature<sup>5</sup>. It is also clear that the historian dwells on the defeats and disasters of the reign while paying minimal attention to Alexios' frequently successful resolution of them. Choniates' account is a masterpiece of insinuation, distortion, and, as we will see, unreliable reporting.

Yet Choniates' account in his history is countered by the testimony about the actions of Alexios in the orations that both he and others wrote to praise that emperor during his reign. The argument of the present discussion is *not* going to try to strike a middle ground between the blame found in Choniates' history and the praise found in the orations, as if the truth could be found "somewhere in the middle." Not at all: the present argument will *not* assume that panegyric praise is true. However, those orations do contain invaluable information about Alexios' movements and campaigns, information that is strategically left out of Choniates' history in order to make the emperor seem lazier and more irresponsible than he really was.

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3. SIMPSON, *Niketas Choniates*, 20.

4. For some characteristic statements, see Niketas Choniates, *History* 454, 459-460, 477, 484, 487, 496, 529-530, 536-537, 546-547, ed. I. A. VAN DIETEN, *Nicetae Choniatae historia* (CFHB XI/1-2, Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1975); for his negative image, see SIMPSON, *Niketas Choniates*, 182-197.

5. S. KUTTNER-HOMS, Thersite en son palais, ou la désastreuse épopée d'Alexis III Ange dans l'histoire de Nicétas Chôniatès, *Παρεκβολαί* 8 (2018), 37-53.

Choniates' own orations can thus be used to refute the picture that he drew up in his history. But in order to properly rehabilitate Alexios, we must first place his actions and reactions in their proper sequence, and for this we must draw on the testimony of all sources from his reign. When we do that, Alexios emerges as an emperor of unusual energy, responsiveness, and solicitude for the empire's security, who, more often than not, succeeded in his goals. He did not have "less energy and ability than his younger brother" Isaakios<sup>6</sup>, quite the opposite, in fact.

The present article will focus on the years 1198-1202 because of the great chronological tangles that they present. The first three years of the reign are left out because they would require a completely different (and longer) analysis, one that focuses more on the narrative structure of Choniates' *History*, in particular of its digressions. After 1198 those problems are not so prevalent in the text. I will also not discuss the chronology of diplomatic communications, including Alexios' correspondence with pope Innocent III, which has already been studied<sup>7</sup>.

In the later part of Alexios' reign, there are two clusters of events that we can date in more or less absolute terms (rather than just relative to each other). The first is the resolution by Alexios and the Holy Synod of a long-standing debate over the incorruptibility of the elements of the Eucharist. This took place in the spring of 1200 and was linked chronologically to Alexios' campaign against the Vlach rebel Ivanko-Alexios at Philippopolis. We know the year-date because the Synodal memorandum specifies that it was the third indiction, corresponding to September 1199-August 1200, though the extant document preserves no other part of the date. We need not place the Synod meeting specifically in March, as Grumel does<sup>8</sup>. In his

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6. W. TREADGOLD, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 659.

7. J. M. POWELL, Innocent III and Alexios III: A Crusade Plan that Failed, in M. BULL and N. HOUSLEY (eds.), *The Experience of Crusading*, v. 1: *Western Approaches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 96-102; and G. PRINZING, Das Papsttum und der orthodox geprägte Südosten Europas 1180-1216, in E.-D. HEHL et al. (eds.), *Das Papsttum in der Welt des 12. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart: Thorbecke, 2002), 137-184.

8. V. GRUMEL, ed. by J. DARROUZÈS, *Les registres des actes du patriarcat de Constantinople*, v. 1: *Les actes des patriarches*, fasc. 2-3: *Les registres de 715 à 1206* (Paris: Institut français

*History*, Choniates says that Alexios marched out against Ivanko “at the end of spring” and specifically *after* the Synod, whereas in *Oration Z*, delivered at the time, he discusses the campaign *before* the Synod<sup>9</sup>, though this may be a rhetorical arrangement rather than a strictly chronological one (Choniates does not explicitly say in the oration that the campaign took place before the Synod, while he does say in the *History* that it took place after it).

*Oration Z* also discusses an otherwise unattested campaign in Asia Minor to bring discontent soldiers into line and to fight some Turks. This campaign followed immediately upon the emperor’s return to the capital from the campaign against Ivanko (allegedly with no time in between to even say hello or goodbye)<sup>10</sup>, proving that the Synod really did occur before the Ivanko campaign, as recounted in the *History*, and therefore by extension also before the Asia Minor campaign, and not between the two campaigns (which is the order in which they are discussed in the oration). *Oration Z* ends by praising Euphrosyne for suppressing a rebellion that took place in the capital in Alexios’ absence, which we know from the *History* involved a certain Kontostephanos. The oration does not say during which of the emperor’s two absences the rebellion took place, while the *History* places it during the Balkan campaign (though perhaps this is by default, seeing as the *History* does not mention the Asia Minor campaign at all)<sup>11</sup>. Thus,

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d’études byzantines, 1989), 606-607 = no. 1195; for the controversy itself, see V. KATSAROS, *Ιωάννης Κασταμονίτης: Συμβολή στη μελέτη του βίου, του έργου και της εποχής του* (Thessalonike: Center for Byzantine Research, 1988), 98-115; M. ANGOLD, *Church and Society in Byzantium under the Comneni, 1081-1261* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 127-131.

9. Niketas Choniates, *History* 514 (ἔαρος ὑπολήγοντος) and 518. C. M. BRAND, *Byzantium Confronts the West, 1180-1204* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 351 n. 43 postulates another outbreak of the controversy between the war against Ivanko and the eastern expedition, in order to make both texts right in their chronology, but this is unnecessary.

10. ... Μὴ καθαρῶς τὰ φίλτατα προσειπὼν ... Niketas Choniates, *Oration Z*, p. 65. 9-12, ed. I. A. VAN DIETEN, *Nicetae Choniatae orationes et epistulae* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1973). The Asia Minor campaign took place after the Balkan one: see *ibid.* pp. 53.23, 53.28, 54.2, 63.13, and 65.9-10. Specifically, praise of the Balkan campaign against Ivanko is found at 60.8-63.12; allusion to the Church controversy: 63.13-64.9; praise of the Asia Minor campaign: 64.10-67.2.

11. Niketas Choniates, *Oration Z*, pp. 67.3-68.11, for praise of the empress Euphrosyne

*Oration Z* cannot date from March 1200, which is where Darrouzès placed it<sup>12</sup>, because it was delivered after both campaigns and the first campaign began at the end of spring. It must then date from the summer of 1200 at the earliest, as van Dieten realized. Brand places *Oration Z* in early 1201, but this is far too late.<sup>13</sup>

Thus in the spring and summer of 1200 we have the Synod; the campaign against Ivanko; a campaign in Asia Minor; the plot by Kontostephanos; and Choniates' *Oration Z*.

The second absolute date is the flight of the young Alexios Angelos (the son of Isaakios II Angelos) to the west, where he eventually became a pawn of the leaders of the Fourth Crusade. Niketas links his flight to the beginning of Alexios III's campaign against the *protostrator* Kamytzes who had rebelled in Greece, and we know from the timeline of the events leading up to the Fourth Crusade, which is amply documented in western sources, that this was in the fall of 1201, no later than September<sup>14</sup>. This campaign by Alexios III targeted Kamytzes in Thessaly and also the latter's ally, the Vlach rebel Dobromir-Chrysos, who was based at Prosek in what is modern North Macedonia, both of whom the emperor defeated. Meanwhile, the emperor's son-in-law Alexios Palaiologos defeated yet another rebel, Ioannes Spyridonakis, at Smolena in Macedonia. In his *History*, Choniates gives a vague and inadequate account of these campaigns, with no chronological indicators beyond the order in which they appear in the work<sup>15</sup>.

However, the court orator Nikephoros Chrysoberges praised Alexios III for these same wars in a speech that bears the following information in the

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(συνέριθον ἔχων καὶ τῶν πόνων δεξιὸν συλλήπτορα τὴν ἀνδρείαν ὄντως ἐν γυναιξί, τὴν κυρίαν ἡμῶν καὶ βασίλισσαν ...). Kontostephanos: *History* 519 (τὰ παρὰ τινος Κοντοστεφάνου ἐξυφανθέντα σοστρέμματα).

12. J. DARROUZÈS, Les discours d'Euthyme Tornikès (1200-1205), *REB* 26 (1968), 49-121, here 51.

13. J.-L. VAN DIETEN, *Niketas Choniates: Erläuterungen zu den Reden und Briefen nebst einer Biographie* (Berlin and London: de Gruyter, 1971), 102; BRAND, *Byzantium Confronts the West*, 347 n. 13.

14. Niketas Choniates, *History* 536-537; BRAND, *Byzantium Confronts the West*, 275-276; D. E. QUELLER and T. F. MADDEN, *The Fourth Crusade: The Conquest of Constantinople*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 34-35.

15. Niketas Choniates, *History* 533-535.

title: “read at the palace of Scutari, not a short while after (*μετὰ παραδρομὴν οὐκ ὀλίγην*) the Feast of Lights [i.e., Epiphany = 6 January]; in the year 6710, the fifth day [i.e., Thursday], in the fifth indiction”<sup>16</sup>. This date and indiction correspond to the year from September 1201 to August 1202. The information in the title suggests that the campaigns must have been wrapped up by late 1201 on the grounds that this speech was delivered in the first days of 1202; indeed, Darrouzès and (following him) Angold have concluded just that<sup>17</sup>. However, scholars had already pointed out that the title itself claims that the oration was in fact delivered *long after* 6 January, and moreover the title may be textually corrupt (the month is missing). Epiphany was a conventional date for imperial orations, making it likely that Chrysoberges wrote this one for the emperor but postponed its delivery until his return in the spring. We know that the emperor returned in the spring because, as van Dieten pointed out, Chrysoberges himself alludes to that in the oration (and he also supplies the information that the emperor had set out in the late summer of the previous year, i.e., 1201)<sup>18</sup>. The next occasion for imperial speeches was the feast of St. Lazaros, which in 1202 fell on 6 April. As it happens we have another speech by Chrysoberges for that occasion in that year (“the fifth indiction of the year 6710”), in which he says that he cannot address it to the emperor, who is still on campaign, and so he will praise the patriarch (Ioannes X Kamateros) instead<sup>19</sup>. This means that Alexios III was still on campaign on 6 April, 1202. Thus the war against Kamytzes and Dobromir-Chrysos kept him away from Constantinople between September 1201 and at least until April 1202 and possibly beyond.

Choniates also wrote a speech praising Alexios III for these campaigns and for making peace with Kalojan of Bulgaria – it is *Oration IA* – though it contains no valuable chronological indicators. At the time of its composition

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16. M. TREU, *Nicephori Chrysobergae ad Angelos orationes tres* (Breslau: Gutschmann, 1892), 13.

17. DARROUZÈS, *Les discours d'Euthyme Tornikès*, 51, 66 n. 15; M. ANGOLD, *The Anatomy of a Failed Coup: The Abortive Uprising of John the Fat (31 July 1200)*, in SIMPSON (ed.), *Byzantium, 1180-1204*, 113-134, here 115.

18. VAN DIETEN, *Niketas Choniates: Erläuterungen*, 133-135; see also BRAND, *Byzantium Confronts the West*, 275, with references to past scholarship.

19. R. BROWNING, *An Unpublished Address of Nicephorus Chrysoberges to Patriarch John X Kamateros of 1202*, *Byzantine Studies / Études byzantines* 5 (1978), 37-68, here 39-40.



or delivery, Spyridonakis was still at large, but was presumably about to be defeated by Alexios Palaiologos (as we know from the *History*). Choniates' speech does, however, enable us to date the truce with Kalojan to the spring of 1202<sup>20</sup>.

We now have a window to fill in between the summer of 1200 (Alexios' return from his Asia Minor campaign) and the late summer of 1201 (Alexios' departure for the campaign against Kamytzes and Dobromir-Chrysos). Within that window, Choniates' *History* includes the following major items:

1. The arrival in Constantinople of the deposed sultan Kay Khusrow (520-522) "not long after" (οὐ πολὺς δ' ὁ ἐν μέσῳ καιρός) the defeat of Ivanko (and its associated events).
2. "The following year" (τῷ δ' ἐφεξῆς ἔτει) an invasion by Cumans, called off when the Rus' attacked their homeland from behind (522-523).
3. The arrest and release (due to popular pressure) of the money-changer Kalomodios (523-524), followed "not many days later" (οὐ πολλαῖς δ' ἡμέραις ὕστερον) by a popular uprising and attempt to proclaim a new emperor in Hagia Sophia (524-526).
4. Soon after that, we have the rebellion of Ioannes Komnenos Axouch "the Fat" (526-528). Alexios was in Constantinople, at the Blachernai palace, during this disturbance.
5. Tensions with the sultan Rukn al-Din resulting in a peace treaty, which is then broken (528-529).
6. The rebellion of Michael Komnenos Doukas at Mylassa in Asia Minor; he is defeated and flees to Rukn al-Din, who gives him soldiers with which to raid the Maeander valley (529). (Michael Komnenos Doukas was the later founder of the separatist Roman state at Epeiros in the aftermath of 1204.)
7. In response to Michael's rebellion, Alexios III marches against him in the fall (probably November: περὶ μῆνα τὸν φυλλοχόον) (529).

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20. Niketas Choniates, *Oration* IA, pp. 106-112; see SIMPSON, *Niketas Choniates*, 62-63; truce with Kalojan: A. MADGEARU, *The Asanids: The Political and Military History of the Second Bulgarian Empire (1185-1280)* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017), 117-118.

- Choniates says nothing about the course of this campaign, looking only at the emperor's return.
8. Alexios spends the ensuing winter in the Great Palace, allegedly for astrological reasons, then moves to Blachernai after the first week of Lent (530).
  9. Stefan II Nemanje of Raskia repudiates his wife Eudokia, Alexios' daughter (531-532)<sup>21</sup>.
  10. Kalojan of Bulgaria conquers Konstantia and Varna around the time of Easter (532-533).

As Alexios III spent the entire winter of 1201–1202 on campaign against Kamytzes and Dobromir-Chrysos, the winter that he spent in the Great Palace (item # 8) must be the winter of 1200–1201. As this winter is linked directly to the aftermath of the campaign against Michael Komnenos Doukas in “the months when the leaves fall” (# 6-7), that campaign must have taken place in the fall of 1200 (though historians often place it in 1201). In other words, in 1200 Alexios III went on at least two campaigns in Asia Minor (and I will argue below that in fact Alexios went to Asia Minor *three* times during that year).

Choniates has mangled his account of the rebellion of Michael Komnenos Doukas, probably in order to hide another one of Alexios' successes. He tells us first that Michael was defeated (*πολέμῳ ἡττηθείς*), but not by whom, and sought refuge with Rukn al-Din; he then digresses on how traitorous the Komnenoi were for allying with barbarians; and finally he mentions Alexios III's campaign against Michael, but tells us nothing about what happened during it, only that the emperor visited some baths upon his return. Brand takes this to mean that Alexios “went no further than the baths at Pythia”, but this is not what Choniates says. What he says is that Alexios visited the baths “upon his return from there” (*ὑποστρέφων δ' ἐκεῖθεν*), implying that Alexios did go to Asia. The likeliest explanation is that it was Alexios who defeated Michael<sup>22</sup>, but Choniates has obscured this from view by chopping

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21. This event is possibly out of sequence, occurring between June 1198 and July 1199: K. BARZOS, *Ἡ γενεαλογία τῶν Κομνηνῶν* (Thessalonike: Center for Byzantine Research, 1984), v. 2, 746 n. 83. I will not discuss it as it did not involve any action by Alexios III.

22. As assumed, albeit without argumentation or narrative analysis, by BARZOS, *Ἡ γενεαλογία*, v. 2, 671 (but placed in the wrong year, 1201); and by van DIETEN, *Niketas*

the narrative into a section on Michael (“defeated” in the passive voice) and (after a rant against the Komnenoi) a brief mention of Alexios’ campaign against Michael, about which he gives no particulars, possibly because he does not want to give Alexios credit for his (many) military successes. This has again lured modern historians into recording Michael’s rebellion as another case of the empire spiraling out of control, but not taking into account its immediate suppression by Alexios<sup>23</sup>. But Michael does not appear again until much later (he was Alexios III’s cousin and the founder of the independent state of the Romans in Epeiros), and so he must have been suppressed effectively by Alexios III during this campaign<sup>24</sup>.

Thus we can now confidently date Alexios’ move from the Great Palace to Blachernai to 17 February, 1201, as Choniates specifies that this move took place on the sixth day of the first week of Lent (*History* 530.55-56) – and we can also date Kalojan’s attack on Varna (# 10) to 23 March, 1201 (Choniates specifies that this was on the sixth day of Christ’s Passions: *History* 532.26). Moreover, between 1198 and 1202 Kalojan conquered the region between Braničevo and Belgrade, while the Serbs took Niš and its territory. Unfortunately, we cannot date these losses more precisely, and they do not appear to have involved any activity on Alexios’ part<sup>25</sup>. As we will see, he was busy on a full-time basis throughout those years.

The event whose date has been most debated is the rebellion of Ioannes Komnenos Axouch (# 4), which lasted for a single day and night and of which we have many accounts. The calendar date, but not the year is given by one of them, Nikolaos Mesarites: 31 July<sup>26</sup>. The defeat of Axouch’s rebellion was celebrated by a speech given by Chrysoberges on 14 September and a

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*Choniates: Erläuterungen*, 127. A. SAVVIDES, *Βυζαντινὰ στασιαστικά καὶ αὐτονομιστικά κινήματα στὰ Δωδεκάνησα καὶ στὴ Μικρὰ Ἀσία, 1189-c.1240 μ.Χ.* (Athens: Domos, 1987), 210 n. 42 also places the suppression of Michael in 1201 rather than 1200.

23. E.g., TREADGOLD, *History*, 662.

24. For Michael Komnenos Doukas, see BARZOS, *Ἡ γενεαλογία τῶν Κομνηνῶν*, v. 2, 669-689; and R. MACRIDES, *George Akropolites: The History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 127.

25. MADGEARU, *Asanids*, 116-123.

26. Nikolaos Mesarites, *Narration of the Rebellion 2*, ed. A. HEISENBERG, *Nikolaos Mesarites: Die Palastrevolution des Johannes Komnenos* (Würzburg: Königliche Universitätsdruckerei von H. Stürzt, 1907), 19-49, here 20.

speech given by Euthymios Tornikes on 6 January, but we do not know the years of those speeches, which would tell us the year of the revolt. Both 1200 and 1201 have been proposed for Axouch's rebellion. Angold has recently advocated for 1200, but neither of his reasons is conclusive. The first relies on Darrouzès' wrong dating of the other speech by Chrysoberges' to early January 1202, which we discussed above, while the second conjecturally links the plot of Kontostephanos in 1200 to the popular disturbances (# 3) that occurred right before Axouch's coup; I think this is right but by itself it is not conclusive as a basis for dating<sup>27</sup>. Alexios was probably in the capital on 31 July in both 1200 and 1201, so either date could work. Each option raises a different set of problems.

If we place Axouch in 1200, we face the following two problems. First, between "the end of spring" and 31 July, Alexios III has to complete a campaign in the Balkans against Ivanko and then a campaign to restore military discipline and fight the Turks in Asia Minor. It is a narrow window, but not impossible. It does, however, require us to interpret "the end of spring" liberally, and not place it in June, because then the timeline could not possibly accommodate Axouch in 1200. An early understanding of spring is allowed by some Byzantine usage, for there were rituals in Constantinople that celebrated the onset of spring as early as mid-February<sup>28</sup>. The second problem is that Choniates says that the Cuman raid (# 2) and so also (presumably) the disturbances in the capital regarding Kalomodios and Axouch occurred "in the following year" (τῷ δ' ἐφεξῆς ἔτει), that is the year after Ivanko and the Synod on the Eucharist, which took place in the first half of 1200. Presumably this means the next indiction year (i.e., September 1200 to August 1201). Van Dieten considered whether Choniates might mean Alexios III's regnal year, which began in early April, but then *all* those events would fall in the same regnal year (April 1200 to April 1201), unless Choniates was jumping far ahead, to the summer of 1201<sup>29</sup>.

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27. ANGOLD, *The Anatomy of a Failed Coup*, 115; IDEM, *Nicholas Mesarites: His Life and Works (in Translation)* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017), 31-32. By contrast, J.-C. CHEYNET, *Pouvoir et contestations à Byzance (963-1210)* (Paris: Sorbonne, 1990), 136-137, opts for 1201.

28. F. GRAF, *Roman Festivals in the Greek East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 176 (the *Lupercalia* in the tenth-century hippodrome races).

29. VAN DIETEN, *Niketas Choniates: Erläuterungen*, 125-126.

If we place Axouch in 1201, we face a different problem, which is probably more severe. It would preserve “the following year” for the Cumans and Axouch, but we must then accept that Choniates mistakenly recounted those events (which on this hypothesis would have taken place in the summer of 1201) right after the events of the spring of 1200 (Ivanko; the Synod) and right *before* the events of the winter of 1200–1201 (Michael Komnenos Doukas; wintering in the Great Palace; the invasion of Kalojan). It is unlikely that he made a mistake of this magnitude for events that he not only lived through but about which he was writing at the time. This would be a huge disruption of the relative chronological order of these events, for no purpose that I can discern. It is more likely, therefore, that the phrase “in the following year” is mistaken or that it refers narrowly to the Cuman invasion, which is the first event that it more specifically introduces. Perhaps the Cuman invasion is the only event out of order here. As it happens, precisely this passage regarding “the following year” was added by Choniates in the revisions that he made to the *History* later, at Nikaia, which increases the odds that we are dealing with a localized error<sup>30</sup>.

According to Choniates, the Cuman raid was called off because Roman II Mstislavich, the ruler of Halych, attacked their homeland from behind. This is not the place to examine ties during this period between Constantinople and Rus’<sup>31</sup>. Suffice it to say that Rus’ sources confirm that Roman attacked the Cuman lands at around this time. Historians combine those sources with Choniates’ reference to “the next year” and place Roman’s attack in either 1200-1201 or 1201-1202<sup>32</sup>. This range can accommodate a date in late 1200

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30. See the apparatus of the van DIETEN edition, p. 522, which gives the *b* (*brevior*) earlier version.

31. A. V. MAIOROV, The Alliance between Byzantium and Rus’ before the Conquest of Constantinople by the Crusaders in 1204, *Russian History* 42 (2015), 272-303.

32. MADGEARU, *Asanids*, 116 (“sometime in 1201”); I. VÁSÁRY, *Cumans and Tatars: Oriental Military in the Pre-Ottoman Balkans, 1185-1365* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 48-49 (Roman II’s campaigns in 1201–1202 and 1203–1204); V. SPINEL, *The Romanians and the Turkic Nomads North of the Danube Delta from the Tenth to the Mid-Thirteenth Century* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), 141-142 (1201-1202); and M. HRUSHEVSKY, *History of Ukraine-Rus’, v. 2: The Eleventh to Thirteenth Centuries*, tr. I. PRESS, ed. C. RAFFENSPERGER and F. E. SYSYN, with assistance by T. PLAWUSZCZAK-STECH (Edmonton and Toronto: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 2020), ch. 3 (gives 1200–1201). I thank Christian Raffensperger for that last reference.

(Alexios' busiest year). It is also possible that the Cumans set out against Romanía in 1200 and turned back "in the following year," in early 1201, when Roman attacked their lands. Choniates then goes back to discuss the events in the capital in the summer of 1200, including the revolt of Axouch.

It is safer, therefore, to assume that the rebellion of Axouch took place on 31 July, 1200, even if it does impose a tight timeline on Alexios' campaigns during that spring and summer. It does require that "the end of spring" (when Alexios set out against Ivanko) be in April or early May, not June. In fact, there is another argument that conclusively places Axouch in 1200. In the *History*, immediately after his account of Axouch's rebellion (528-529) Choniates recounts the treaty that Alexios made (and then broke) with the sultan Rukn al-Din, and he places the treaty right before the rebellion of Michael Komnenos Doukas, which we now know took place in late 1200. Certainly, the sequence might be wrong. Yet one of the four texts that we have for Axouch's rebellion is Choniates own *Oration I*, which he delivered soon after the event itself; we know this because he refers to the severed head of the rebel that was still on display, as a perch for crows<sup>33</sup>. Now, this oration actually has two subjects, as stated even in its extant title: (a) the treaty made with the sultan, which entailed a journey by the emperor to Asia Minor (also not mentioned in the *History*), and (b) Axouch's rebellion. In other words, these happened in close chronological proximity, exactly as laid out in the *History*. We must therefore keep them in the same summer, meaning that Axouch is locked in for 1200.

However, in the *History* Choniates places the treaty after Axouch, whereas in the oration he discusses them in the reverse order. Simpson believes that it is the oration that gets the sequence right, and that Choniates reversed it in the *History* because he was arranging events thematically<sup>34</sup>. This is possible but not certain. It is just as possible that Alexios popped over to Asia Minor to make the treaty after Axouch's rebellion and returned a few days or weeks later before Axouch's head was taken down. In fact, in the oration Choniates says that the emperor has "just" returned from the east (ἄρτι τῶν κοινῶν καμάτων ἐπανιόντος), and the transition to

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33. Niketas Choniates, *Oration I*, p. 105.27-28 (καὶ κορῶναι δὲ οὐχ ἦττον λακέρουσαι παρ' αὐτὴν ἐφιπτάμεναι κρώζουσιν).

34. SIMPSON, *Niketas Choniates*, 61.

Axouch's rebellion later in the text does not disclose the chronological relation between the two events. I am inclined to believe that Choniates discusses the treaty first not because it happened first but because he wants to play up the theme of the emperor's glorious return<sup>35</sup>.

There is another reason to accept the sequence in the *History*. Choniates' *Oration I* makes it clear that Alexios went to Asia Minor in order to agree on the treaty, making this his *third* journey to Asia Minor in 1200 and the second one that is not mentioned in the *History* (the others being the campaign after Ivanko in the late spring or summer –which is also not mentioned in the *History*– and the campaign against Michael Komnenos Doukas in the fall). There is no way that the treaty expedition is a duplicate of either of the other two, as they are nothing alike. In *Oration I*, Choniates is explicit that Alexios crossed the Hellespont to make the treaty and that the whole affair was “bloodless,” i.e., there was no fighting: the sultan yielded to the power of Alexios' persuasion<sup>36</sup>. This, then, was not a military campaign at all but a diplomatic summit, which could have been wrapped up quickly if diplomats on either side had worked out the particulars in advance. Alexios need not have been absent from the capital for more than a few weeks, while the head of Axouch rotted in public view. If, on the other hand, we were to place this journey before the rebellion of Axouch on 31 July, we would then have yet *another* trip to Asia Minor to fit into the spring-summer of 1200 after the defeat of Ivanko. That strains an already tight timeline for the first half of that year.

Now that we have worked out the period between the “end of spring” of 1200 and the spring of 1202, which is the period that poses the thorniest problems, we can work backwards to establish the chronology of the earlier part of his reign. We began this analysis with Alexios' war against Ivanko, the Vlach who in ca. 1196 had murdered Asan, the ruler of the Bulgarian empire at Tarnovo, and who then fought for the Romans until he rebelled. Alexios III had given him the important command of Philippopolis and a

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35. Niketas Choniates, *Oration I*, pp. 101.20, 104.11. D. KOROBENIKOV, *Byzantium and the Turks in the Thirteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 125, also follows the order in the *History* rather than the *Oration*.

36. Niketas Choniates, *Oration I*, pp. 102.26-27, 103.9, 104.6-7.

niece in marriage<sup>37</sup>. News of Ivanko's rebellion was reported to the court during the double wedding of Alexios III's daughters to Alexios Palaiologos and Theodoros Laskaris, specifically right before the days of ἀπόκριεω (which was itself right before Lent)<sup>38</sup>. Alexios III immediately sent out the *protostrator* Kamytzes and his newly made sons-in-law Palaiologos and Laskaris to suppress Ivanko. But in which year?

Most historians place these events (the dynastic wedding and the first expedition against Ivanko) at the start of 1199<sup>39</sup>. But that dilates the timeline too much, placing well over a year between the first expedition (led by Kamytzes, Palaiologos, and Laskaris) and Alexios' own campaign at the end of the spring of 1200, which finally defeated Ivanko. There is no signal in the *History* that so much time passed between the two expeditions. Moreover, by taking an inventory of the events in the *History* after the end of Alexios' third regnal year (which is explicitly signaled at *History* 493), van Dieten concluded that the double wedding and first expedition took place in early 1200 (the *apokreos* would, then, have been in early February of 1200)<sup>40</sup>.

We arrive at the same conclusion via another route: the events of the first expedition against Ivanko can easily fit within a few months. That expedition seems to have quickly regained Philippopolis itself. Choniates does not say this explicitly but it is logically required by the narrative at *History* 513.16-17. By failing to state plainly what happened, Choniates has lured modern historians into thinking that "the Byzantine army refused to fight Ivanko"<sup>41</sup>. In fact, they recovered the city and drove Ivanko into the mountains, where he ambushed and captured Kamytzes<sup>42</sup>. That is all that happened during this campaign, led by the emperor's sons-in-law. Alexios

37. Niketas Choniates, *History*, 469-473.

38. Niketas Choniates, *History*, 508 (ἦν δ' ὁ καιρός, καθ' ὃν αὐται γηγόνασιν αἱ συνάφειαι, ἐγγίζων ταῖς ἀπόκριεω ...).

39. E.g., BRAND, *Byzantium Confronts the West*, 130; MADGEARU, *Asanids*, 114-115 (who even puts Ivanko's rebellion in 1198); MACRIDES, *George Akropolites*, 137; CHEYNET, *Pouvoir*, 133; TREADGOLD, *History*, 661. By contrast, SIMPSON, *Niketas Choniates*, 98, 189, 213 dates Ivanko's rebellion to 1200 (correctly, as I will argue), even though she cites Brand and Cheynet (who put it in 1199).

40. VAN DIETEN, *Niketas Choniates: Erläuterungen*, 101.

41. TREADGOLD, *History*, 661.

42. Niketas Choniates, *History*, 511-514.



then marched out (as we have seen) “at the end of spring.” All this could easily have taken place between February and (say) April or May of the same year (namely 1200). We should also note that Choniates has occluded the success of the first expedition led by Palaiologos and Laskaris in order to focus on Kamytzes’ defeat, probably in order to associate Alexios’ reign generally with more defeats. He likewise discusses Ivanko’s atrocities at length while noting his defeat by Alexios almost in passing, not disclosing that the whole episode lasted for only a few months, was dealt with swiftly, and was limited to the mountains around Philippopolis.

The year 1200 has shaped out to have been one of the busiest in all Roman history. Let us not add more to it here, and look next to the years before it.

Choniates’ account of the first five years of Alexios III’s reign (1195–1200) unfortunately contains few reliable chronological indicators, so we must fall back on the sequence of events relative to each other, while correcting for Choniates’ digressions, which sometimes squeeze the events of many years into a passage that breaks out of the main sequence of the narrative. Fortunately, he does provide a chronological firewall at *History* 493.62-64, where he signals the end of the first three years of Alexios’ reign (i.e., 1195–1196, 1196–1197, and 1197–1198). As van Dieten realized, what follows must belong to the years 1198–1199 and 1199–1200 (bringing us down to *History* 508 and the double dynastic wedding in February 1200)<sup>43</sup>. The events of those two years are easy to trace and date in the *History*. We have a war with Kay Khusrow in Asia Minor (containing a reference to a winter, which must be that of 1198–1199), which was followed, probably in the spring of 1199, by the campaign of Andronikos Doukas against the Turks<sup>44</sup>. Not mentioned by Choniates is the treaty with Venice that was drafted in September 1198 and then finalized in November<sup>45</sup>.

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43. VAN DIETEN, *Niketas Choniates: Erläuterungen*, 98-101.

44. Niketas Choniates, *History*, 493-496.

45. D. M. NICOL, *Byzantium and Venice: A Study in Diplomatic and Cultural Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 121; for a legal study, see D. PENNA, *The Byzantine Imperial Acts to Venice, Pisa and Genoa, 10th-12th Centuries* (PhD dissertation, University of Groningen, 2012), ch. 2.7.

Moving into 1199, we have a Cuman-Vlach invasion of Thrace that took place around the feast of St. George (i.e., 23 April, 1999) and was defeated by the Roman defense forces of Bizye<sup>46</sup>.

Around the same time as the Cuman invasion, “at the beginning of spring” (*ἀνατείλαντος δ’ ἔαρος*), i.e., of 1199, Alexios mustered his forces at Kypsella and marched, via Thessalonike, against the Vlach rebel Dobromir-Chrysos, who was based at Prosek (in modern North Macedonia). Choniates curiously introduces this campaign three times in the *History*, interrupting it first to give an account of the emperor’s severe illness (gout?) and deliberations on the dynastic marriages that he was planning; second, to recount the Cuman invasion; and then, for the third time, he restarts his account of Alexios’ campaign at the beginning of a new book of the *History*. That book recounts the failed siege of Prosak, which occurred presumably during the spring and summer of 1199. Alexios returns to the capital and we reach, after another Cuman raid, the dynastic weddings of February 1200<sup>47</sup>. It should be noted, however, that Brand’s dating is far off here: he places the Cuman invasion and siege of Prosek in 1197 and the dynastic weddings in early 1199. It should be clear by now that these dates are impossible<sup>48</sup>.

We now have a reliable timetable for the imperial actions of the years 1198-1202. We have one more text that refers to a campaign by Alexios III within that period, Nikolaos Mesarites’ *Description of the Church of the Holy Apostles*. Near the start of the text, Mesarites refers to his ability to see, from the grounds of the church, the external Philopation, a park and mustering grounds outside the city, facing the Blachernai palace, and he specifically says that he can see the emperor gathering his army there<sup>49</sup>.

46. Niketas Choniates, *History*, 499-501.

47. Niketas Choniates, *History*, 496.66, 499.55, 501.10-11; raid: 508; MADGEARU, *Asanids*, 116.

48. BRAND, *Byzantium Confronts the West*, 127-130.

49. Nikolaos Mesarites, *Description of the Church of the Holy Apostles* 5, ed. A. HEISENBERG, *Grabeskirche und Apostelkirche: Zwei Basiliken Konstantins* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1908), v. 2, 10-96; tr. G. DOWNEY, Nikolaos Mesarites: *Description of the Church of the Holy Apostles at Constantinople*, *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* n.s. 47 (1957), 897-918; and ANGOLD, *Nicholas Mesarites*, 83-133; for readings of this text, see B. DASKAS, Nikolaos Mesarites, *Description of the Church of the Holy Apostles at Constantinople: New Critical Perspectives*, *Παρεκβολαὶ* 6 (2016), 79-102; and many of the

This may be a generic, rhetorical description of what one *might* be able to see from there, but it is likely to be factual. Angold argues that it refers to 29 June, 1200, specifically to the campaign that Alexios was about to lead against Ivanko “at the end of spring” of that year; the calendar date of 29 June is that of the festival honoring the Apostles Peter and Paul, with which the text is closely associated<sup>50</sup>.

However, Angold does not account for the Asia Minor campaign that Alexios (as we know from Choniates’ *Oration Z*) conducted immediately after the Ivanko campaign but before 31 July, 1200 (Axouch’s rebellion). There is no way, then, that he could have been setting out against Ivanko on 29 June. It is possible that he was mustering forces for the Asia Minor campaign, assuming that those campaigns mustered at the Philopation and not somewhere in Asia Minor itself, which is more likely. The *Description* praises the patriarch Ioannes X Kamateros, and so it could be linked to the festivals of 1199, 1200, and 1201 (Kamateros took office on 5 August, 1198, which rules out festival of that year). The year is unlikely to be 1199 (because Alexios marched out against Dobromir-Chrysos at the start of spring); it is unlikely to be 1201, because Alexios set out against Kamytzes and the rest in the late summer-early fall of that year; and it is unlikely to be 1202, as no campaign is recorded for that year. The Asia Minor campaign of 1200 is therefore still our best bet for the date of Mesarites’ text, assuming the reference in it to the muster of soldiers is historical-specific and not generic.

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Alexios III Komnenos has never been anyone’s favorite emperor. Even after the partial rehabilitation offered here, he is unlikely to be regarded even as a successful emperor. He made bad choices in trusting subordinates such as Kamytzes, who betrayed him, and in giving regional power (and even imperial brides) to Balkan warlords such as Ivanko and Dobromir-Chrysos, who also betrayed him. Alexios faced many rebellions by provincial

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papers in M. MULLETT and R. G. OUSTERHOUT (eds.), *The Holy Apostles: A Lost Monument, a Forgotten Project, and the Presentness of the Past* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 2020); the view of the Philopation is confirmed by H. MAGUIRE, *Inside and Outside the Holy Apostles with Nikolaos Mesarites*, in *ibid.* 193-207, here 201-202.

50. ANGOLD, *Nicholas Mesarites*, 77-78.

governors (such as Michael Komnenos Doukas and Spyridonakis) as well as popular protests and attempted coups in the capital, especially that of Axouch. And yet, through tireless and decisive campaigning, he managed to defeat or suppress all those enemies. He sometimes spent winters too on campaign, and he made three trips to Asia Minor during the course of 1200 alone. We can immediately dismiss Choniates' accusations of indolence, indifference, and incompetence. In its place, we find an emperor who responded instantly to every challenge, and usually successfully. He also appointed trusted subordinates who were loyal to him, such as the most capable Alexios Palaiologos.

A ruler who pulled off what Alexios III did in those frantic years cannot have been "light in the head, unsuited to the management of public affairs... and as ignorant of what was going on around him as the Roman empire is distant from Ultima Thoule"<sup>51</sup>. A different picture, indeed the opposite one, emerges from the historian's concern to dispel the belief, which apparently many held, that Alexios was both skilled in warfare and warlike<sup>52</sup>. The charges of sybaritic luxury and indifference simply do not hold up when we behold Alexios taking the field and rising to the occasion year after year, month after month, even while he was suffering from gout.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, even Choniates admits that Alexios was gentle, accessible, did not lend an ear to informers, terrorize his subjects, or habitually resort to punishments such as blinding and amputation, his brother excepted<sup>54</sup>. If we combine this portrait of a civil prince with the military leader who emerges from the proper sequencing of events, we behold an emperor who was at the very least above average.

Moreover, it is possible that the years before 1200 saw more actions than Choniates reports in his *History*. We have seen that, in his account of 1200, he omits two of Alexios' journeys to Asia Minor whose existence is incontrovertibly known from his own orations at the time; and he mangles the third expedition (against Michael Komnenos Doukas) in order to hide

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51. Niketas Choniates, *History*, 484 (... ἡ τῶν βασιλικῶν φρενῶν ἐλαφρόα καὶ τὸ πρὸς διοίκησιν τῶν πραγμάτων ἀπροσφνές .... τοσοῦτον δ' ἀπείχε τοῦ εἰδέναι τὰ δρώμενα, ἐς ὅσον καὶ Ῥωμαίων ἀποσχοινίζονται οἱ τῆς Θούλης οἰκοῦντες ...).

52. Niketas Choniates, *History*, 465, 483.

53. Niketas Choniates, *History*, 496-497, 534.

54. Niketas Choniates, *History*, 547-548.

the fact that it was a success. As we lack similar orations for the years before 1200, whether from Choniates or the other orators, there is no telling how many of Alexios' actions in those years have been lost to us. It is suspicious, for example, that no actions by Alexios are recorded for the year 1198. The timetable given in the Appendix is, therefore, only partial: Choniates may be keeping much more from us. It is curious that the historian places his accusations of indolence and indifference not in the years for which he reports no significant activity but precisely in conjunction with Alexios' actual campaigns.

Choniates' bias against Alexios III also affects how we read the aftermath of the Fourth Crusade. Alexios was in fact the source from which most opposition to the Latin occupation sprang, in both Asia Minor and Greece, though this fact is obscured in the scholarly literature. Let us start with the obvious: the imperial dynasties of the Laskarids and Palaiologoi both sprang from the dynastic marriages arranged by Alexios for his daughters, after careful deliberation over the choice of grooms, in early 1200. Choniates comments on the importance of the fact that the two grooms were Roman and not foreign<sup>55</sup>. Alexios bestowed the title of *despotes* upon his sons-in-law in succession (first to Palaiologos, then to Laskaris), thereby designating them as his intended heirs<sup>56</sup>. When Laskaris sought to establish himself at Nikaia after the fall of Constantinople, he derived most of his authority from his link to Alexios III and his title of *despotes*. He used it on his seals along with the designation "husband of the emperor's daughter Anna," as if that too were a title. Until he claimed the imperial title for himself, Laskaris was essentially acting in the name of Alexios<sup>57</sup>. His task was made easier by the fact that he was at peace with the Seljuk sultan Kai Khusrow, who

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55. Niketas Choniates, *History*, 508 (... ὁ ψὲ δὲ τῶν τοιούτων σκεμμιάτων μεθαρροσθεῖς ῥωμαίοις αὐτὰς ἐκδέδωκε).

56. BARZOS, *Ἡ γενεαλογία*, v. 2, 746-747.

57. Niketas Choniates, *History*, 626; Georgios Akropolites, *History*, 6-7, ed. A. HEISENBERG and P. WIRTH, *Georgii Acropolitae opera* (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1978), with commentary by MACRIDES, *George Akropolites*, 82-83; seal: G. ZACOS and A. VEGLERY, *Byzantine Lead Seals*, v. 1.3 (Basel: Augustin, 1972), 1570-1571. For the evolution of the title despotes during these years, see A. STAVRIDOU-ZAFRAKA, *Βυζάντιο 13ος αιώνας: Από την κατάρρευση στην ανασυγκρότηση* (Thessalonike: Baniias, 2016), V.

had been spiritually adopted by Alexios III in Constantinople, and this link passed now to his “brother” Laskaris<sup>58</sup>.

Meanwhile, Alexios III himself was no less active than before, although he was based in Thrace. In 1203–1204, he may have personally visited his ally Roman Mstislavich, the Rus’ prince of Galicia and Volhynia, in search of aid<sup>59</sup>. He caused such trouble for the Latins in Thrace, that they had to march out in order to expel him. After a stop at Thessalonike, Alexios went south to Thessaly, where he gave another daughter in marriage to the warlord Leon Sgouros, possibly along with the title of *despotes*. Sgouros is usually depicted as a loose canon, a Roman adventurer from Nauplion who was carving out his own domain. But this connection indicates a different, more legitimist interpretation: Sgouros allowed himself to be coopted into Alexios’ growing regime-in-exile<sup>60</sup>. Alexios then went to Epeiros, where he planned to join, and probably again coopt, the independence movement being led by his cousin Michael Komnenos Doukas; this was the same man whom Alexios had defeated in Asia Minor 1200. Yet along the way Alexios was arrested by Boniface, the marquis of Montferrat and one of the leaders of the crusade. Alexios was stripped of his imperial insignia and sent to Montferrat as a captive<sup>61</sup>. But Michael, the founder of the state of Epeiros, still felt that he needed Alexios, so a few years later he ransomed him from Italian captivity and kept him in honor at Arta<sup>62</sup>. In 1210, he sent him with an escort to Kai Khusrow, the Seljuk sultan of Konya, Alexios’ spiritual

58. KOROBENIKOV, *Byzantium and the Turks*, 120-136.

59. A. MAIOROV, Angelos in Halych: Did Alexios III Visit Roman Mstislavich, *GRBS* 56 (2016), 343-376.

60. Niketas Choniates, *History*, 556, 608-609; Georgios Akropolites, *History*, 5, 8; *despotes*: Theodoros Skoutariotes (?), *Chronicle*, ed. K. SATHAS, *Μεσαιωνική Βιβλιοθήκη*, v. 7 (Paris: Phoinix, 1894), 453; see P. MAGDALINO, A Neglected Authority for the History of the Peloponnese in the Early Thirteenth Century: A Demetrios Chomatianos, Archbishop of Bulgaria, *BZ* 70 (1977), 316-323.

61. Geoffroi de Villehardouin, *Conquest of Constantinople*, 306-308, ed. E. FARAL, *Geoffroi de Villehardouin: La conquête de Constantinople*, 2 vols. (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1938-1939).

62. Iob the Monk, *Life of the Empress Theodora*, in *PG* 127: 904C; Georgios Akropolites, *History*, 8. For the origin of the Roman state of Epeiros and the career of Michael, see the detailed study by N. LAPPAS, *Πολιτική ιστορία του κράτους της Ηπείρου κατά τον 13ο αι.* (PhD dissertation, University of Thessalonike 2007).

son, possibly in order to help the sultan destabilize the rival Roman regime of Laskaris. In 1211, Kai Khusrow was defeated and killed by Laskaris at the battle of Antioch on the Maeander. Alexios, who had accompanied the sultan, was captured, possibly blinded, and confined to a monastery by Laskaris. This was the end of his career in politics and war<sup>63</sup>.

In sum, Alexios remained just as active in the years immediately following the fall of Constantinople as he had been before that event, and he was regarded widely – from Greece and Epeiros to Thrace and Asia Minor – as the focal point of Roman unity and the legitimating agent behind most resistance to the Latins. Yet historians have largely missed this aspect of those years, treating Laskaris, Michael of Epeiros, and Sgouros as completely disconnected players. Choniates has taught us to underestimate Alexios as a ruler before 1203, and so we do the same for his activities after 1203. Nor is that all. Choniates is explicit that Alexios changed his family name to Komnenos when he gained the throne in 1195, and official and contemporary documents from his reign bear out the fact that he ruled under that name<sup>64</sup>. Yet we insist on calling him “Angelos,” which is a term that stuck to him in the later thirteenth century and was meant to delegitimize his dynasty in relation to the more prestigious Komnenoι. We now know that Roman aristocratic names of this period were not fixed by lineage, but chosen on an individual basis among the many genealogical options that each person had<sup>65</sup>. So we should start calling him Komnenos, rather than Angelos.

Moreover, as Alexios III Komnenos was the last ruler of the Roman state before the arrival of the Fourth Crusade, the way that we represent him and his reign bears directly on the way that we cast the story of the Crusade itself. The traditional image, crafted by Choniates, depicts the empire as falling apart under the incompetent and lazy rule of Alexios – indeed, his

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63. The main sources are Georgios Akropolites, *History*, 8-10, with the commentary by MACRIDES, *George Akropolites*, 123-132; Theodoros Skoutariotes (?), *Chronicle* (ed. SATHAS), 454-457; and Niketas Choniates, *Oration IC* (ed. VAN DIETEN); see also the reconstruction by KOROBENIKOV, *Byzantium and the Turks*, 148-150.

64. Niketas Choniates, *History*, 459 (ὁ δὲ βασιλεὺς τὴν ἀγγελωνιμίαν παρωσάμενος Κομνηνὸς ἐπελέγετο ...).

65. D. KYRITSES, *The Byzantine Aristocracy in the Thirteenth and Early Fourteenth Centuries* (PhD dissertation: Harvard University, 1997), esp. ch. 4.

“womanly” personality (*γύννις ἀνήρ*)<sup>66</sup>. This enables some to even depict the Crusade as a breath of fresh air, as an injection of masculine virility into the corrupt and effeminate condition of Constantinople<sup>67</sup>. Choniates’ account of Alexios’ personality is taken at face in scholarship on the Fourth Crusade as a way of insinuating that the empire was on its last legs<sup>68</sup>. It is unfortunate that Choniates’ narrative gives comfort to these colonialist readings.

Choniates’ narrative, however, is the product of literary polemic. If we look at the actual events in their proper sequence, Alexios emerges as a significantly more competent ruler than his brother. To be sure, the empire continued to decline during his reign: regional warlords and governors were rebelling left and right; the Vlachs, Bulgarians, and Serbs made gains in the north; and the provinces were still being squeezed by heavy taxation. But these were systemic problems that Alexios inherited. For their causes we must look deeper and earlier than his reign<sup>69</sup>. In fact, an argument has been made that the critical phase of imperial dissolution set in with the events of 1203–1204 and was caused by the Crusade, not under Alexios<sup>70</sup>. At least the trajectory of decline did not accelerate under him. For all his errors in judgement, Alexios III made every effort to salvage the situation. He did not deserve Choniates’ polemics and we should not be perpetuating them.

## APPENDIX: Timeline of the years 1198-1202

1198, summer and winter: attacks by Kay Khusrow on Roman Asia Minor  
 1198, September–November: treaty between Alexios III and Venice  
 1199, spring: campaign of Andronikos Doukas in Asia Minor

66. Niketas Choniates, *History*, 549.

67. This appears to be the subtext of F. Van TRICHT, *The Latin Renovatio of Byzantium: The Empire of Constantinople (1204–1228)* (Leiden: Brill, 2011) and of other (equally apologetic) scholarship on the Fourth Crusade. For the role of gender, see C. MESSIS, *Lectures sexuées d’altérité: Les Latins et identité romaine menacée les derniers siècles de Byzance*, *JöB* 61 (2011), 151–170.

68. E.g., QUELLER and MADDEN, *Fourth Crusade*, 105.

69. Older and more recent studies include J. HERRIN, *Realities of Byzantine Provincial Government: Hellas and Peloponnesos, 1180–1205*, *DOP* 29 (1975), 253–288; R.-J. LILIE, *Des Kaisers Macht und Ohnmacht: Zum Zerfall der Zentralgewalt in Byzanz vor dem vierten Kreuzzug*, *Ποικίλα Βυζαντινά* 4 (1984), 9–120; and the papers in SIMPSON, (ed.), *Byzantium, 1180–1204*.

70. CHEYNET, *Pouvoir et contestations*, 446–458.



- 1999, April: Vlach and Cuman raid, defeated by Roman soldiers of Bizye
- 1999, spring and summer: Alexios campaigns against Dobromir-Chrysos, besieges Prosek, but fails
- 1200, before Lent: dynastic weddings to Alexios Palaiologos and Theodoros Laskaris
- 1200, before Lent: Ivanko rebels at Philippopolis
- 1200, spring: Palaiologos and Laskaris take Philippopolis, Ivanko captures Kamytzes
- 1200, spring: Synod meeting on the Eucharist
- 1200, end of spring-summer: Alexios captures and executes Ivanko
- 1200 (?), 29 June: Nikolaos Mesarites, *Description of the Church of the Holy Apostles*
- 1200, early summer: Alexios campaigns in Asia Minor
- 1200, early summer: Euphrosyne suppresses plot by Kontostephanos
- 1200, early summer: Choniates, *Oration Z* (ed. van Dieten)
- 1200, early summer: Kay Khusrow visits Constantinople (second visit)
- 1200, summer: popular uprisings in the capital
- 1200, 31 July: rebellion of Ioannes Komnenos Axouch “the Fat”
- 1200, August: Alexios goes to Asia Minor for treaty with Rukn al-Din
- 1200, August: Choniates, *Oration I* (ed. van Dieten)
- 1200, 14 September: Chrysoberges, *Oration 1* (on Axouch’s rebellion, ed. Treu)
- 1200, fall (or early 1201?): Cumans invade, turn back
- 1200, fall: Alexios defeats Michael Komnenos Doukas (Mylassa, Asia Minor)
- 1200-1201, winter: Alexios winters in Great Palace
- 1201, 6 January: Euthymios Tornikes, *Oration in Praise of Alexios III Komnenos* (ed. Darrouzès)
- 1201, March: Kalojan conquers Konstantia and Varna
- 1201, late summer or fall: Alexios Angelos escapes to the west
- 1201, late summer or fall, to spring 1202 (after 6 April): Alexios campaigns against Manuel Kamytzes and Dobromir-Chrysos, defeats both
- 1202, spring: treaty with Kalojan
- 1202, 6 April: Chrysoberges, *Oration in Praise of the Patriarch Ioannes X Kamateros* (ed. Browning)
- 1202, spring: Choniates, *Oration IA* (ed. van Dieten)
- 1202, spring: Alexios Palaiologos defeats Spyridonakis
- 1202, late spring: Chrysoberges, *Oration 2* (ed. Treu)

Η ΧΡΟΝΟΛΟΓΙΑ ΤΩΝ ΓΕΓΟΝΟΤΩΝ ΤΗΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΙΑΣ ΤΟΥ ΑΛΕΞΙΟΥ Γ΄  
ΓΙΑ ΤΑ ΕΤΗ 1198-1202 ΚΑΙ ΟΙ ΕΠΙΠΤΩΣΕΙΣ ΤΗΣ

Η χρονολογία των γεγονότων της βασιλείας του Αλεξίου Γ΄ απασχόλησε την έρευνα για τελευταία φορά προ πενήκονταετίας, χωρίς όμως να αξιοποιηθούν όλα τα διαθέσιμα στοιχεία. Στην μελέτη επανεξετάζεται το θέμα και ανασκευάζεται η εικόνα του συγκεκριμένου αυτοκράτορα, που παρουσιάζεται από τον Νικήτα Χωνιάτη ως οκνηρός, αδιάφορος και συβαρίτης.