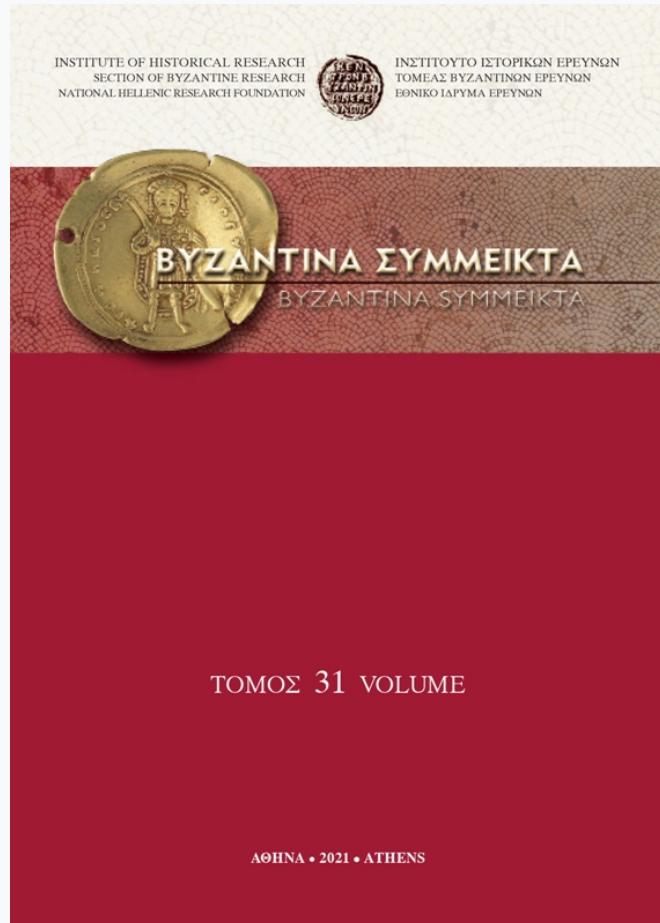


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A. G. C. SAVVIDES, “*No rest for the wicked*” [Isaiah 48:22 & 57:21]. *On Isaac Ducas Comnenus’ Cypriot “separatist” state (A.D.1184/5-1191): The last of the Cypriot revolts against Byzantium* (Papazissis Publishers: Athens, 2019). Pp. 166. ISBN 978-960-0203539-5

What do we really know about Isaac Ducas Comnenus, the man who ruled the island of Cyprus for about seven years before it fell under the control of the crusaders? The short answer is ‘not a lot’, and the reason is simple: everyone who wrote about him was against him. In the Byzantine capital he was seen as rebel, while the Anglo-Norman authors who recorded the crusading exploits of Richard the Lionheart had to justify the seizure of a Christian-ruled island. So the picture emerges of a usurper and a tyrant who cruelly oppressed the people of the island with his financial exactions, appointed his own patriarch, impeded the crusaders and illtreated those westerners who fell into his clutches. But is it true? The calumny, much of which is quite possibly the product of rumour and hearsay and the malicious invention of the historians or their informants, leaves an impenetrable smokescreen. Even those writers who were perhaps closest to the events, Neophytus and Michael the Syrian (Michael Rabo), join in the denigration.

Alexios Savvides adopts an essentially historiographical approach, describing what modern scholars have had to say about Isaac. He reminds us that Isaac was the fourth rebel to take control of Cyprus in defiance of the authorities in Constantinople since the 1040s and also that his assumption of power coincided with a number of separatist movements in other parts of the empire in the context of the political upheavals that followed the death of Manuel Comnenus in 1180. Savvides pays particular attention to the date at which Isaac took control but is unable to be more precise than ‘1184/85’. However, he duly notes that the most recent scholar to address this issue, Stavros Georgiou, opts for the second half of 1184. If Isaac was a usurper, so too, it could be argued, was the emperor in Constantinople at the

time he came to power, Andronicus Comnenus. Isaac's coins show him with the title *despotes*, and both Neophytus and Michael the Syrian seem to have been under the impression that he aspired to be the *basileus* and take power in Constantinople. Even so, as Savvides points out, some scholars, notably Anthoulles Demosthenous dispute this assumption and claim that Isaac's ambitions were limited to controlling Cyprus.

With so many contemporaries or near contemporaries keen to blacken Isaac's memory, it comes as no surprise that many modern writers have followed in their footsteps. The calumnies are repeated, and Isaac is condemned for precipitating centuries of western rule in Cyprus or for prefiguring the events of 1204. Historians copy what others have written. In recent years a more critical approach has been adopted by, for example, Stavros Georgiou, but the source materials defy the sort of analysis that would allow us to come closer to divining what really happened. We can only conclude that, even if the individual accusations are open to question, the sources were probably right: Isaac was a vicious ruler, the effect of whose rule was to weaken the cohesion of the upper echelons of Greek society in Cyprus –people whose loyalty in many instances remained focused on Constantinople– and so make the Frankish take-over so much easier.

One person, however, did take a stance that sided with Isaac, albeit belatedly. This was Duke Leopold V of Austria, Isaac's relative by marriage, who in 1192 took Richard the Lionheart captive and went on to use Richard's treatment of Isaac and his family as one of his excuses for holding him to ransom. Leopold is thus a lone voice protesting at Isaac's treatment. It is a voice that is not considered in this study.

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