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THE NICAEAN EMPERORS AND THE ARISTOCRACY

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THE NICAEAN EMPERORS AND THE ARISTOCRACY*

The Empire of Nicaea (1205–1261) was one of the main Byzantine polities in exile after the sack of Constantinople in 1204. It was a new political formation but manned entirely by members or offspring of the previous political establishment, whether they came from the provincial elites of Anatolia, or were part of the high Komnenian aristocracy who sought refuge in Nicaea from the European territories and Constantinople. Once a leader emerged and the polity was consolidated, when a court and an administration were established, so did the familiar power dynamics between emperors and the aristocracy, the dialectics between a centralized monarchy and a set of powerful individuals and families who expected a privileged share in power and its trappings¹. In principle, there was nothing

* This text was commissioned several years ago by Pagona Papadopoulou and Alicia Simpson for a volume on the Empire of Nicaea that unfortunately has not been published. I would like to thank them both very much for their initial invitation and add particular thanks to Alicia Simpson for many helpful comments on a previous draft. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to both Ekaterini Mitsiou and Vincent Puech for making their important unpublished PhD dissertations available to me.

1. The key works are M. ANGOLD, *A Byzantine Government in Exile: Government and Society under the Laskarids of Nicaea (1204–1261)*, Oxford 1975; J. S. LANGDON, *John III Ducas Vatatzes' Byzantine Imperium in Anatolian exile 1222–54*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, UCLA 1979; D. KYRITSES, *The Byzantine Aristocracy in the Thirteenth and Early Fourteenth Centuries*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Harvard University 1997; V. PUECH, *L'aristocratie et le pouvoir à Byzance au XIIIe siècle (1204–1310)*, unpublished doctoral thesis, Université de Versailles-Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, 2 vols, 2000; E. MITSIOU, *Untersuchungen zu Wirtschaft und Ideologie im Nizänischen Reich*; unpublished doctoral thesis, Universität Wien, 2006; D. ANGELOV, *Imperial Ideology and Political Thought*

new about this. However, the state of Nicaea can act as a useful case study in the evolution of the struggle between emperors and the aristocracy as well as into how the Byzantine elites adapted to new political and material circumstances for two reasons: because it had a limited lifespan and because the Byzantines returned to Constantinople under a leader from a different ruling family, thus signalling a break in the political organization. In this clearly delineated period, therefore, a set of questions can be explored: Did the watershed events of 1204 change the aristocracy in a significant way – its composition and extent of properties, its relationship to the imperial court and authority, or its access to power? In short, is the most productive way to frame the question one of continuity or break? Does the relationship between emperors and the aristocracy in Nicaea represent a continuation of the social dynamics of the preceding period, or is it characterized by a different set of principles? If there is difference, what caused it and how was it expressed?

The relationship between the aristocracy and imperial authority in Nicaea cannot be separated from the period that preceded 1204 and, to an extent, from the Palaiologan dominance after 1258. Furthermore, as the discussion below will demonstrate, the three emperors who ruled during the Nicaean period until 1258 adopted quite different approaches towards the aristocracy; as such it is misleading to think of a ‘Nicaean’ imperial policy towards its elites. Rather, one should examine how these three emperors adapted the inherited and dominant ideology and practices of dealing with the aristocracy to suit their conceptions of power and authority to the extent that conditions that were often outside their control allowed it. Similarly, neither can one sensibly talk of a unified and coherent aristocratic policy towards these emperors as the aristocracy never formed itself into a group pursuing common political goals². Again, we are looking at individuals and, to a certain degree, families, who pursued their own interests in their desire

in *Byzantium, 1202–1330*, Cambridge 2007; IDEM, *The Byzantine Hellene: The Life of Emperor Theodore Laskaris and Byzantium in the Thirteenth Century*, Cambridge 2019; A. JOVANOVIĆ, *Michael Palaiologos and the Publics of the Byzantine Empire in Exile, c. 1223–1259*, Cham 2022.

2. On the limits of aristocratic power within the Byzantine political system see E. RAGIA, *Social Group Profiles in Byzantium: Some Considerations on Byzantine Perceptions about Social Class Distinctions*, *ByzSym* 26 (2016), 309–372 and especially 349–371.

to retain and augment their privileged position, at times by contracting opportunistic alliances (and often shifting them) with each other and/or the emperors who ruled them.

Defining the Aristocracy

To study the aristocracy, it is obviously important to first define it, but this is more difficult than it may appear. Numerous scholars have tried to produce working definitions of what constituted this group in the absence of a clear and stable statement from the Byzantines themselves. While it is self-evident, for example, that the imperial families (the Komnenoi, Doukai, Angeloi and later the Palaiologoi) belonged to the aristocracy, the proliferation of their progeny since the late eleventh century and the marriages they contracted created a much larger pool. This represented the highest echelon of this social group, depending on the degree of proximity to the reigning imperial dynasty. Increasingly, its members came to be recognized for their noble birth (*eugeneia*)³. As Angeliki Laiou was the first to explicitly point out, the Byzantine aristocracy did not constitute a nobility, ‘a hereditary caste, whose rights and privileges are safeguarded by law’⁴. And yet, as Magdalino has remarked, those descended from the imperial and leading families (see below) formed a (noble) class apart and their exalted status was noted by contemporaries⁵.

It seems that identifying a member of the aristocracy may have been clearer to their contemporaries in Byzantium than it is to us. To overcome this obstacle, Kyritses opted to disregard what he sees as ‘subjective’ information (the way an individual is presented in the sources as, e.g., prominent or noble) and instead focused on official designations (titles, offices and honorific epithets, such as *kyr*)⁶. This definition becomes more valid for the period in question given that offices and titles at court were merged

3. For a survey on this issue see N. LEIDHOLM, *Elite Byzantine Kinship, ca. 950–1204*, Leeds 2019, 12–19, 50.

4. A. LAIOU, The Byzantine Aristocracy in the Palaiologan Period: A Story of Arrested Development, *Viator* 4 (1973), 131–151, here 132.

5. P. MAGDALINO, Court Society and Aristocracy, in: *A Social History of Byzantium*, ed. J. HALDON, Oxford 2009, 229–230.

6. KYRITSES, *Byzantine Aristocracy*, 7–15.

into a single hierarchy during the Nicaean period⁷. While such a working definition will not retrieve all aristocrats from the source material, it has the advantage of offering a solid reference point. Puech adopted a similar approach but included the higher echelons of the ecclesiastical hierarchy in his sample⁸.

What becomes obvious even from this very short outline of the question is that it is difficult to generalize, and that any effort to define and characterize the aristocracy as a whole cannot do justice to the complexities of the system. This is bound to change with the publication of a growing number of prosopographical studies devoted to specific families as well as a general prosopography of the Empire of Nicea that is being prepared⁹, but at present a more cautious approach would be prudent. As such, I have decided to focus chiefly on the highest echelons of the aristocracy: those who were descended from imperial families through blood and marriage and who occupied the highest offices in the civil and military administration. As a group they are highly visible in our source material and their political actions are easier to track. In doing so, I am following the information provided by the sources.

In a much quoted passage, George Pachymeres presents what seems like a snapshot of this exalted group in the Nicaean Empire as they gathered to debate the regency of the young heir John IV in 1258: Tzamantouroi/Laskarides, Tornikioi, Strategopouloi, Raoul, Palaiologoi, Batatzai, Philai, Kavallarioi, Nestongoi, Kamytzai, Aprenoi, Angeloi, Livadarioi, Tarchaneiotai, Philanthropenoi, Kantakouzenoi – those ‘welded together by the golden chain of noble birth’¹⁰. Angold and Magdalino add the Raoul, Branades, Petraliphai and Synadenoi¹¹, and one must, obviously, count the

7. ANGOLD, *A Byzantine Government in Exile*, 63-64, see also 67-68 for a similar, if not quite as explicit, approach to defining the aristocracy.

8. PUECH, *L'aristocratie et le pouvoir*, I 23-24.

9. See <https://www.oeaw.ac.at/imafo/veranstaltungen/detail/bridging-the-gap-the-prosopography-of-a-fragmented-world-13th-cent>.

10. Καὶ ὅσοι ἄλλοι οἷς ἡ μεγαλογενὴς σειρὰ καὶ χρυσὴ συγκεκρότητο, George Pachymeres, *Relations historiques*, I-II, ed. A. FAILLER, tr. by V. LAURENT [CFHB 24/1-2], Paris 1984; III-IV ed. and tr. by A. FAILLER, [CFHB 24/2], Paris 1999), I 21, 93

11. ANGOLD, *A Byzantine Government in Exile*, 69; MAGDALINO, *Court Society and Aristocracy*, 230.

imperial families of the Komnenoi and the Doukai, even if the proliferation of their members requires ad hoc decisions on the inclusion of each individual in the discussion that follows.

The Komnenian Arrangement and Its Legacy

Since the social and political landscape and its key players at Nicaea did not begin *ex nihilo*, it is important to briefly outline the political and social framework in which they operated. At the heart of the nexus of relationships between the emperors and the aristocracy lies what we may call the Komnenian arrangement, initiated by Alexios I Komnenos (1081–1118) and continued by his son John II (1118–1143) and grandson Manuel I (1143–1180)¹². Having secured power through a bloody coup, Alexios followed a policy of alliance with major aristocratic families (the Doukai, the family of his empress being the first and most important). As his brothers and other close relatives were entrusted with high offices, exalted titles and significant landed properties and as his children and other close relatives were married with scions of aristocratic families a network of the highest, imperial aristocracy gradually emerged. As Peter Frankopan, however, has shown Alexios did also appoint to some of the highest positions in the military men who were not imperial kin, but were chosen for their skills and loyalty¹³.

The aim of the system, which proved quite successful until Manuel I's death in 1180, was to make clear to the aristocracy that it was more beneficial for them to join the imperial family than oppose it¹⁴. As Magdalino has clearly shown, the system worked as long as the emperors

12. For an overview see P. MAGDALINO, *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos, 1143–1180*, Cambridge 1993, 180–217; IDEM, Innovations in Government, in: *Alexios I Komnenos*, ed. M MULLETT – D. SMYTHE [Belfast Byzantine Texts and Translations 4/1], Belfast, 1996, 146–166; J.-C. CHEYNET, L'aristocratie byzantine (VIIIe–XIIIe siècle), *Journal des savants* (2000) 281–322; tr. The Byzantine Aristocracy (8th–13th centuries), in: *The Byzantine Aristocracy and Its Military Function*, Aldershot 2006, 1–43, here 41–42). Magdalino and Cheynet show that some of the features of Alexios's approach had already begun to emerge from the late Macedonian period onwards.

13. P. FRANKOPAN, Kinship and the Distribution of Power in Komnenian Byzantium, *English Historical Review* 122 (2007) 1–34.

14. MAGDALINO, *Manuel Komnenos*, 187.

governing the empire could persuasively and actively demonstrate they were also heads of the (by then) extended Komnenian network of power and control the aristocracy with a steady hand¹⁵. The ‘sad quarter of a century’ that followed Manuel’s death, however, showed that the arrangement had reached an impasse. In what followed, and in our case must be seen as the immediate background to the formation of the Nicaean Empire, rulers had to negotiate the legacy of this arrangement, to accept, reject, and adapt to a set of difficult circumstances¹⁶.

The short reign of Andronikos I Komnenos (1183–1185) saw changes at the top, as the emperor removed and killed all those who were closer to the succession than himself (merely a cousin of Manuel I) as well as any potential aristocratic rivals¹⁷. However, he did not break with the spirit of the Komnenian arrangement, as he entrusted major offices to his kin and distributed grants to his allies¹⁸. He was supported by members of the Palaiologoi, the Branades, and the Mavrozomai. He was opposed by other members of the high aristocracy, such as, for example, John Komnenos Batatzes in Philadelphia¹⁹.

When Isaac II Angelos usurped the throne in 1185, he had Andronikos and his sons killed or mutilated, mirroring in a way his predecessor’s policy. Since the direct male line of succession of the Komnenoi had been extinguished by Andronikos, there were now numerous aristocrats with an equally valid pedigree. Isaac II was a great-grandson of Alexios I through a daughter, but others had stronger claims, being descended through the male line. The result was a feeling that the imperial throne could be won by anyone with a strong claim rather than being passed on in clear succession within one branch of the Komnenoi, as had happened until Manuel I’s reign²⁰. Isaac relied on his kin, the Angeloi, and sought the support of families that had opposed the previous regime of Andronikos (such as the Kontostephanoi,

15. MAGDALINO, *Empire of the Komnenoi*, 659.

16. On this period see *Byzantium 1180–1204: The Sad Quarter of a Century?* ed. A. SIMPSON [Institute of Historical Research. International Symposium 22], Athens 2015.

17. The best evaluation in J.-C. CHEYNET, *Pouvoir et contestations à Byzance (963–1210)* [Byzantina Sorbonensia 9], Paris 1996, 429–434.

18. CHEYNET, *Pouvoir et contestations*, 431–432.

19. See LANGDON, *John III Ducas Vatatzes*, 31–33.

20. MAGDALINO, *Empire of the Komnenoi*, 661.

Doukai-Kamateroi, Kantakouzenoi, and Komnenoi-Batatzai) by securing marriage alliances, and, one must also assume, by making substantial grants of land²¹. His reign was nevertheless plagued by rebellions²².

Isaac II was ultimately removed by a coup led by his brother Alexios III and supported by the Palaiologoi, Branades, Kantakouzenoi, Raoul and Petraliphai; to these should be added the Kamateroi (the family of Alexios' wife, Euphrosyne) as well as the Laskarides²³. Some of these (like the Palaiologoi and the Branades) had supported Andronikos, so one could observe here a sense of retribution towards Isaac's regime²⁴. Niketas Choniates writes that Alexios gave lavish grants to his supporters²⁵. The families at the heart of Alexios III's regime had strong links to Thrace and Macedonia and could perhaps stand as representatives of the European (as opposed to the Anatolian) aristocracy²⁶. Since Alexios III did not have any sons there was fierce competition for the hand of his daughters. Two had already been married under Isaac II to Andronikos Kontostephanos and Isaac Komnenos Batatzes respectively but were widowed. In 1199/1200 they were joined in second marriages: Eirene to Alexios Palaiologos (who had to divorce his wife in order to remarry) and Anna to Theodore Laskaris. Before his death in 1203 therefore Alexios Palaiologos, who had been given the very high title of *despot*, was the heir apparent of Alexios III. Theodore Laskaris assumed this position thereafter. Due to the preservation of documentary evidence (a chrysobull to the Venetians dated to 1198 and the *Partitio Romaniae* of 1204²⁷) we are much better informed about the

21. CHEYNET, *Pouvoir et contestations*, 434-436; evidence on the grants dates mostly from the period of Alexios III, but one cannot exclude that some of them were made under Isaac II; see below for further discussion.

22. CHEYNET, *Pouvoir et contestations*, 437-440.

23. CHEYNET, *Pouvoir et contestations*, 440.

24. PUECH, *L'aristocratie et le pouvoir*, I 29.

25. *Nicetae Choniatae Historia*, ed. by J. L. VAN DIETEN, 2 vols [CFHB 11/1-2], Berlin – New York 1975; I 459-460; see P. MAGDALINO, Money and the Aristocracy, 1180-1204, in: *Byzantium, 1180-1204*, 195-204.

26. PUECH, *L'aristocratie et le pouvoir*, I 28.

27. On how this document can be used to gauge property grants, see N. OIKONOMIDÈS, La décomposition de l'empire byzantin à la veille de 1204 et les origines de l'empire de Nicée: à propos de la *Partitio Romaniae*, in: *Actes du XVe Congrès International des Études Byzantines: Rapports*, Athens 1976, 3-28.

substantial grants made by Alexios III to his empress, his daughters and their husbands, and other members of his court²⁸.

What this brief overview makes clear is that even if after 1180 the individuals and the family branches of the Komnenoi at the top changed, the Komnenian arrangement stood firm as a framework to structure the relationship between the emperors and the aristocracy.

THE NICAEAN EMPERORS AND THE ARISTOCRACY

Theodore I Laskaris (1205-1222)

As a product and beneficiary of this system, Theodore I Laskaris was bound to adhere to it. Very little is known about Theodore and his family before 1204²⁹. On an early seal he calls himself Theodore Komnenos Laskaris *protovestiarites* and *sebastos*; a seal of his brother, Constantine Komnenos Laskaris, also survives³⁰. Theodore may have acquired the name Komnenos through his marriage to Alexios III's daughter Anna, but the same cannot have been the case for Constantine. This suggests a matrilineal connection to the imperial clan³¹. Another indication for a Komnenian connection of Theodore independent of his marriage are the names of two of his brothers, Isaac and Alexios, both prominently and frequently used by the Komnenoi³². The seals of the two brothers also include another important hint: they carry an image of St George Diasoreites, which suggest a link to Pyrgion in Lydia and thus indicate a connection to Anatolia³³, to which Theodore would flee in late 1203.

28. M. C. BARTUSIS, *Land and Privilege in Byzantium: The Institution of Pronoia*, Cambridge 2012, 168-169.

29. See the overview in E. GIARENIS, *Η συγκρότηση και η εδραίωση της Αυτοκρατορίας της Νίκαιας: Ο αυτοκράτορας Θεόδωρος Α΄ Κομνηνός Λάσκαρις* [Ινστιτούτο Βυζαντινών Ερευνών. Μονογραφίες 12], Athens 2008, 29-46.

30. A.-K. WASILIOU, 'Ο ἄγιος Γεώργιος ὁ Διασορίτης auf Siegel. Ein Beitrag zur Frühgeschichte der Laskariden, *BZ* 90 (1997), 416-424.

31. CHEYNET, *Pouvoir et contestations*, 444.

32. É. PATLAGEAN, *Un Moyen Âge Grec: Byzance, IX^e-XV^e siècle*, Paris 2007, 297.

33. WASILIOU, Γεώργιος ὁ Διασορίτης, 418-420; PUECH, *L'aristocratie et le pouvoir*, II 310-311 and IDEM, The Aristocracy and the Empire of Nicaea, in: *Identities and Allegiances in the Eastern Mediterranean after 1204*, ed. J. HERRIN and G. SAINT-GUILLAIN, Farnham 2011, 70.

Theodore was arrested after Alexios IV was installed on the throne (August 1203), but managed to escape to Anatolia at some point before January 1204, and initially tried to bring the areas around Nicaea and Prousa under his control³⁴. Since we possess very little information on Theodore's past, we can only make educated guesses regarding his standing and alliances in the region. Since Alexios III had chosen him as a potential, if not likely, successor, we can assume that Theodore would be at the top of the scions of the aristocratic families that constituted that emperor's inner circle. It is therefore not surprising to see that members of these families would gradually congregate to his court in Nicaea and would be granted high office (see below).

In order to assemble his polity in Anatolia Theodore had to work from the start with a delicate balance. His establishment in the area was not unopposed and the historian George Akropolites explains that initially Theodore had attempted to rule in place of his father-in-law Alexios III (who had escaped to Macedonia)³⁵. There were two major groups of aristocrats that Theodore had to deal with. On the one hand, there was a local aristocracy with estates and clients in Anatolia³⁶. In some cases, there had been rebellions against imperial power underway well before the conquest of Constantinople and thus Theodore had to find ways to either put them down or seek accommodation with their leaders. In the region of Philadelphia, Theodore Mangaphas (who had earlier led a rebellion against Isaac II and in the aftermath of the Fourth Crusade re-established his position in the region) most probably ceded control of his power to Theodore in 1205 or 1206, or Theodore defeated him³⁷. The case of Manuel Mavrozomes

34. *Georgii Acropolitae Opera*, v. 1, ed. A. HEISENBERG – P. WIRTH, Leipzig 1978, 10; tr.; R. MACRIDES, *George Akropolites, The History: Introduction, Translation and Commentary*, Oxford 2007, 118; see GIARENIS, *Συγκρότηση*, 46-47.

35. Akropolites, *Opera*, 10; OIKONOMIDÈS, *La décomposition*, 22-28.

36. On such people see CHEYNET, *Pouvoir et contestations*, 457-458.

37. A. G. K. SAVVIDES, *Βυζαντινά στασιαστικά και αυτονομιστικά κινήματα στα Δωδεκάνησα και στη Μικρά Ασία 1189-σ. 1240 μ.Χ.*, Athens 1987, 173-190, esp. 178-179 with n. 36 thinks that Mangaphas, who had fled to the Seljuq court, was handed back to Theodore who imprisoned him with reference to Choniates 401. This episode, however, refers to the period before 1204, see CHEYNET, *Pouvoir et contestations*, 454-455. There is evidence that individuals with the family name Mangaphas owned property in and around

(a grandson of Manuel I through an illegitimate daughter, no less³⁸) in the region of Phrygia was more complicated: he enjoyed Seljuq support as one of his daughters had married the sultan Kay-Khusraw I (1192–1196, 1205–1211); although Theodore I defeated him in battle, he granted him two cities, Laodikeia and Chonai as well as the valley of the Meander in late 1205/early 1206³⁹. Similarly, Sabbas Asidenos, who was based at Priene/Sampson and controlled the Meander valley from 1204 to 1206, reached an agreement with Theodore I in late 1205/early 1206 and recognized his authority – he was later joined in marriage to a member of the Phokas family (which in their turn were related by marriage to Theodore⁴⁰) and was granted the title of *sebastokrator*⁴¹.

On the other hand, as Theodore's power grew and especially after securing the election of a patriarch in Nicaea (Michael Autoreianos, whose family was linked to the Kamateroi, Alexios III's empress' family⁴²), many of the leading aristocratic families from Europe flocked to him⁴³. These prominent refugees had to be accommodated as well. They were socially much superior to the local aristocrats in terms of their blood and marriage networks, and some of them at least will have owned significant

Philadelphia in the 1240s which would mean that Theodore Mangaphas' fall did not spell out the social demise of his kin, see J.-C. CHEYNET, *Philadelphie, un quart de siècle de dissidence, 1182–1206*, in: *Philadelphie et autres études*, ed. H. AHRWEILER [Byzantina Sorbonensia 4], Paris 1984, 45, 50–51.

38. S. MÉTIVIER, *Byzantium in question in 13th-century Seljuk Anatolia*, in: *Liquid & Multiple: Individuals & Identities in the Thirteenth-Century Aegean*, eds. G. SAINT-GUILLAIN – D. STATHAKOPOULOS [Collège de France – CNRS, Centre de Recherche d'Histoire et Civilisation de Byzance. Monographies 35], Paris 2012, 236–237, 255–257.

39. SAVVIDES, *Βυζαντινά στασιαστικά και αυτονομιστικά κινήματα*, 233–245; CHEYNET, *Pouvoir et contestations*, 469; E. RAGIA, *Η κοιλάδα του κάτω Μαιάνδρου ca 600–1300: Γεωγραφία και Ιστορία* [Βυζαντινά Κείμενα και Μελέτες 51], Thessaloniki 2009, 263–265; S. MÉTIVIER, *Les Maurozōmai, Byzance et le sultanat de Rûm. Note sur le sceau de Jean Comnène Maurozômès*, *REB* 67 (2009), 197–207.

40. See RAGIA, *Η κοιλάδα του κάτω Μαιάνδρου*, 143–144.

41. SAVVIDES, *Βυζαντινά στασιαστικά και αυτονομιστικά κινήματα*, 246–251; CHEYNET, *Pouvoir et contestations*, 466–469.

42. PUECH, *L'aristocratie et le pouvoir*, II 314–315.

43. KYRITSSES, *Byzantine Aristocracy*, 287. It should be noted here that several of these aristocrats had stronger claims to the throne in terms of their ancestry than he did.

estates in Anatolia, especially along the coastal areas⁴⁴. Others –possibly the majority of the high Constantinopolitan aristocracy– may have been facing a shortage of funds, since we can assume they did not have (full) control of their European estates as a result of conquests and incursions (by the Crusaders, the Bulgarians or the state of Epiros)⁴⁵. Given the complex situation, Theodore I was successful in establishing himself, first as representative of his father-in-law and later, after Alexios III had been captured by Boniface of Montferrat in late 1204/early 1205, in having himself acclaimed emperor in 1205 or 1206. He was crowned much later, in 1207⁴⁶. He continued in the vein of the Komnenian arrangement by placing his close kin to key positions (for example, three of his brothers are attested with the title of *sebastokrator* while his brother Constantine held the title of *despot*⁴⁷) as well as accommodating himself with the local aristocracy as outlined above⁴⁸. When it comes to marriage alliances, two of Theodore's daughters were married to foreigners: Maria was married to the future Béla IV of Hungary (1254–1258) and Eudokia was eventually married to the prominent Latin baron Anselm of Cahieu, after her father had unsuccessfully attempted to have her wed Robert of Courtenay, the Latin Emperor of Constantinople (1221–1228). Theodore's eldest daughter Eirene was first married to Andronikos Palaiologos, who was made despot and became the heir apparent; when he died, Eirene was married to John [III] Doukas Batatzes⁴⁹.

Theodore's initial preference for the Palaiologoi is easily understandable. A powerful family since at least the twelfth century, one of its members had

44. MAGDALINO, *Manuel Komnenos*, 166; PUECH, *L'aristocratie et le pouvoir*, II 348–350 (on the evidence from John III's reign). The case of the Batatzai, for example, can stand as an example. Although originally from Thrace, they had acquired a base at the Thrakesion theme by the second half of the twelfth century. Cf. LANGDON, *John III Ducas Vatatzes*, 42–43. See the next section on John III for more discussion.

45. KYRITSES, *Byzantine Aristocracy*, 181.

46. CHEYNET, *Pouvoir et contestations*, 470; on the dates of Theodore's acclamation and coronation see P. GOUNARIDIS, 'Η χρονολογία της ἀναγόρευσης καὶ τῆς στέψης τοῦ Θεοδώρου Α΄ τοῦ Λασκάρεως, *Symmeikta* 6 (1985), 59–71.

47. MACRIDES, *George Akropolites*, 167–168 with n. 1; see also ANGELOV, *Byzantine Hellene*, 29–30.

48. ANGOLD, *A Byzantine Government in Exile*, 62–63.

49. GIARENIS, *Συγκρότηση*, 52–53.

already come very close to inheriting the throne through marriage (Alexios Palaiologos, see above). Their power base was in the West and Theodore may have needed their support to ensure loyalties in that area⁵⁰. The choice of John Doukas Batatzes may indicate Theodore's need to secure the support of the Thrakesion theme, over which the family wielded considerable power, given the prominence that this region attained in his reign and that of his successor⁵¹. Overall, however, I must agree with Kyritses who observed that Theodore did not manage (whether by choice or not) to recreate the type of matrimonial network that had been characteristic of Komnenian rule⁵². Nevertheless, Theodore did form under adverse circumstances a network of alliances that was quite close to that of his father-in-law⁵³. He was proclaimed emperor by a council of notables, who, though unnamed, will have comprised of those who were given high office in his reign and who included most families of what Pachymeres later termed the 'golden chain'⁵⁴. Moreover, his adherence to the Komnenian tradition is reflected in the way his rule was portrayed in court rhetoric, which provides a clear image of an imperial ideology of continuity and renewal despite the watershed of the Latin conquest⁵⁵. Theodore I did not experience any major dissent towards his rule; furthermore, his establishment in Anatolia was only possible with the collaboration of the major aristocratic families of the former empire.

John III Doukas Batatzes (1222–1254)

At Theodore I's death power passed to John III. Theodore's sons Nicholas and John had died before their father, while an unnamed son by his second wife Philippa from Cilician Armenia, was never included in the succession – he may have died before his father as well or may have been disinherited⁵⁶. John inherited the throne as the only surviving son-in-law,

50. PUECH, *L'aristocratie et le pouvoir*, II 323.

51. PUECH, *L'aristocratie et le pouvoir*, II 326.

52. KYRITSES, *Byzantine Aristocracy*, 219.

53. KYRITSES, *Byzantine Aristocracy*, 289; PATLAGEAN, *Un Moyen Âge Grec*, 308.

54. See PUECH, *L'aristocratie et le pouvoir*, II 320–321.

55. R. MACRIDES From the Komnenoi to the Palaiologoi: Imperial Models in Decline and Exile, in: *New Constantines: The Rhythm of Imperial Renewal in Byzantium, 4th–13th centuries*, ed. P MAGDALINO, Aldershot 1994, 280; ANGELOV, *Imperial Ideology*, 106.

56. ANGELOV, *Byzantine Hellene*, 32; GIARENIS, *Συνγκρότηση*, 53–57.

but he encountered opposition both at the start and end of his reign. John Doukas Batatzes (who only referred to himself as Doukas) descended from a family whose members had occupied high office since the eleventh century with a particular focus in Thrace (Adrianople and Rhaidestos), where we can assume they owned estates and had their power base⁵⁷. A scion of the family, Theodore Batatzes, married Eudokia, a daughter of John II and was invested with high command under Manuel I⁵⁸. His son, Theodore Komnenos Batatzes was active in Anatolia, in the Thrakesion theme, in the late 1170s; from there he had opposed Andronikos I⁵⁹. It is not exactly clear who John III's father was, but consensus has it that it was Basil Batatzes, who became *doux* of Thrakesion under Isaac II and was married to a niece of the emperor⁶⁰. John III was therefore someone with a strong enough, though not overtly imperial, pedigree.

The first challenge to his rule came in 1222 from the brothers of Theodore I, who allied themselves with the Latins of Constantinople in order to oust him. The two prominent rebels, Alexios and Isaac, were defeated and blinded⁶¹. A little later, in 1224–1225, another conspiracy against John's throne was uncovered, this time led by Andronikos Nestongos, the emperor's cousin; this was thwarted as well, and Andronikos was banished to Magnesia, while his brother Isaac was blinded and had his hand cut off⁶². A generation later, a number of Nestongoi appear with high titles during the reign of Theodore II which corroborates Puech's suggestion that John III must have associated them closely with his government in Anatolia despite the uprising and the punishment of its instigators⁶³. Other aristocrats embroiled in the conspiracy of 1224–1225 included a Synadenos and a Tarchaneiotes. Puech sees the two uprisings as connected and ties them to Theodore I's policy towards the Latin Empire of Constantinople: the emperor had contracted

57. LANGDON, *John III Ducas Vatatzes*, 23–27.

58. LANGDON, *John III Ducas Vatatzes*, 27–28.

59. LANGDON, *John III Ducas Vatatzes*, 31–32.

60. LANGDON, *John III Ducas Vatatzes*, 35–39.

61. PUECH, *L'aristocratie et le pouvoir*, II 340–341.

62. J.-C. CHEYNET, Les Nestongoi, un exemple d'assimilation réussie, in: *La société byzantine. L'apport des sceaux* [Bilans de recherche 3], vol. II, Paris 2008, 606–607.

63. PUECH, *L'aristocratie et le pouvoir*, II 338 and I 155–156 for the genealogy of the family.

his third marriage with Maria, the sister of the future emperor Robert de Courtenay and tried to arrange the marriage of his daughter Eudokia with Robert, suggesting that he was pursuing a *détente* with Constantinople rather than military confrontation. There was dissent in Nicaea about this policy and Langdon sees John III's elevation as the victory of an anti-Latin faction in the aristocracy, which would explain the first uprising by the Laskaris brothers who saw Theodore I's policy abandoned⁶⁴. Macrides on the other hand, saw the uprising of the Laskarides as an explicit challenge to John's accession to the throne, while more recently Giarenis interpreted both conspiracies as attempts to restore the 'true' Laskarid dynasty⁶⁵. Regarding the Nestongos conspiracy, according to Langdon, it was the reaction of Thrakesian aristocrats against John's plans for the expansion of Nicaean power into Europe that would potentially deprive the area of armies to defend it against Turkish incursions⁶⁶. These early rebellions show that less than a generation after the establishment of the Empire of Nicaea, its elites harboured personal ambitions and different notions about its policies, and had clear interests to pursue that often opposed those of the emperor.

John implemented significant changes in the direction of rule: he moved his capital to Nymphaion, in the Thrakesion, and abandoned Theodore's policy of *détente* with the Latin Empire. This was made clear by his successful early campaigns against the Latins following the Laskaris rebellion in which he managed to dislodge the Latins from all but very few parts of Anatolia⁶⁷. Two figures that would play a crucial part in the final days of the Empire a generation later made their appearance at the court of John III in the late 1230s: the future Michael VIII Palaiologos (ruler 1259–1282) writes that he

64. PUECH, *L'aristocratie et le pouvoir*, II 339-341; LANGDON, *John III Ducas Vatatzes*, 60-64

65. MACRIDES, *George Akropolites*, 160, 165-167; E. GIARENIS, Η "δυναστεία των Λασκάρεων": Απόπειρες και ακυρώσεις, *Βυζαντικά* 23 (2003), 220-223. It is important to note here that John III Batatzes had been chosen as emperor over Theodore's underage son (by his second wife Philippa) or his brothers, two of whom, Isaac and Alexios, led the rebellion of 1224–1225 against him, while Manuel and Michael had gone into exile at the time of his succession. Following Komnenian precedent, at least three of Theodore's brothers had been granted the title of *sebastokrator*.

66. LANGDON, *John III Ducas Vatatzes*, 76.

67. LANGDON, *John III Ducas Vatatzes*, 60-66, 72-74.

was raised at the palace until he assumed a military role around 1242/43⁶⁸, while his future victims, George Mouzalon and his brother Andronikos were installed as pages (*paidopouloi*) of John's heir, Theodore II at approximately the same time⁶⁹.

John's reign saw a major expansion of the Nicaean territory especially in Europe. Through a number of campaigns from the mid-1230s until his death in 1254 he secured the largest parts of Macedonia and Thrace (to the detriment of Epiros and the Bulgarian Empire) and managed to surround the Latin Empire on all sides. The most remarkable feature of these campaigns regarding the aristocracy is that John clearly employed aristocrats with ancient links to these areas and placed a number of them as governors of these newly conquered cities and regions. For example, in his early campaign against Adrianople (1225) John sent John Kammytzes, a cousin of Isaac II and Alexios III, who had been a rival of the Branades, the family that had been given the control of the city by the Latins⁷⁰. More clearly, in his campaign against Thessalonike in 1242 John was accompanied by members of the Tornikes, Palaiologoi, Raoul, Tarchaneiotas, Kontostephanoi and Petraliphai⁷¹, while Andronikos Palaiologos and his son Michael were assigned as governors of the cities of Thessalonike and Serres and Melnik respectively⁷². Such measures suggest that John III needed to use the authority that aristocrats with connections to Europe enjoyed in these regions to cement the Nicaean establishment in them, but possibly also, that

68. Typikon Kellibara = H. GRÉGOIRE, *Imperatoris Michaelis Palaeologi de vita sua*, Byz. 29-30 (1959-1960), 451; see Kellibara I: Typikon of Michael VIII Palaiologos for the Monastery of St. Demetrios of the Palaiologoi-Kellibara in Constantinople, tr. G. DENNIS, in *Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents*, 5 vols, ed. J. P. THOMAS – A. CONSTANTINIDES HERO, [Dumbarton Oaks Studies 35], Washington DC 2001, 1243. Michael was actually a Diplopalaigos since both his parents came from the same clan, see PUECH, *L'aristocratie et le pouvoir*, I 234 for the genealogy; it should be noted that his mother Theodora Angelina Palaiologina was the granddaughter of Alexios III.

69. PUECH, *L'aristocratie et le pouvoir*, I 151.

70. PUECH, *L'aristocratie et le pouvoir*, II 351-52.

71. PATLAGEAN, *Un Moyen Âge Grec*, 268, 309 observed that the men in charge of this campaign stemmed from the same families as those that had signed a synodal document under Isaac II in 1191 suggesting continuity.

72. PUECH, *The Aristocracy and the Empire of Nicaea*, 74.

these prominent men may have tried to direct his thrust towards Europe in the first place⁷³.

It soon became clear that some of them may have been pursuing their own agendas, as revealed by the conspiracy of Michael Palaiologos in 1246. According to Pachymeres Michael had been engaged in a secret pact of alliance with Epiros that centred around a marriage between himself and the daughter of Michael II Doukas Angelos. Although this had come to light earlier, it was only in 1253, after a successful campaign against Epiros led by Nikephoros Tarchaneiotes as well as Michael Palaiologos and Alexios Strategopoulos that John III moved against Michael⁷⁴. After spending a considerable time in prison Michael was eventually released after swearing oaths of loyalty in 1254, a short time before John's death. He was married to Theodora, a granddaughter of John's brother Isaac (despite having previously been promised the hand of John's granddaughter Eirene), conferred the title of great constable as well as the governance of Bithynia⁷⁵.

This marriage alliance between the Batatzai and Michael Palaiologos may well have been John's plan for a peaceful resolution of what was by then a clear antagonism that was beginning to get out of hand: Michael was too powerful or popular to dispose of completely, but he was to be removed from any contact with Macedonia, his family's power base⁷⁶. By comparison with the Komnenian emperors we must agree with Kyritses⁷⁷ who thought that John III was not able to build a similar network of alliances, but that was, not least, a result of biology: John only had two brothers and one son. His brother Isaac Doukas was given the title of *sebastokrator*, reflecting Komnenian practice since Alexios I. Isaac's son John Doukas was married

73. PUECH, *L'aristocratie et le pouvoir*, II 372, 544.

74. Pachymeres, *Relations historiques*, I 7. According to Akropolites, *Opera*, vol. 1, eds. HEISENBERG –WIRTH, § 50, 92-100, Michael was compelled to prove his innocence by undergoing ordeal by fire, but he managed to avoid going through with it. R. MACRIDES, On Whose Authority? Trial by Ordeal in Byzantium, in: *Authority in Byzantium*, ed. P. ARMSTRONG, Farnham 2013, 42, shows that this was probably a narrative device by Akropolites to praise Michael, rather than an actual event.

75. PUECH, *L'aristocratie et le pouvoir*, 371.

76. PUECH, *L'aristocratie et le pouvoir*, 377.

77. KYRITSES, *Byzantine Aristocracy*, 220.

to Eudokia Angelina and a daughter married Constantine Strategopoulos⁷⁸. John's daughter Theodora was married to Michael Palaiologos. Another (unnamed) brother of John III had a daughter who married Alexios Raoul⁷⁹. John III's only child and heir, Theodore II, was married to Helena Asen of Bulgaria sealing the alliance between the two states in 1235⁸⁰. John also arranged the marriage of his granddaughter Maria with Nikephoros Angelos of Epiros⁸¹.

The families that John III rewarded with high office included the Tornikes, Palaiologoi, Tarchaneiotai, Raoul and Strategopouloi, some of which were allied to his own family through marriages. But as the case of Michael Palaiologos has shown, this was at times an uneasy alliance. Nevertheless, as Kyritses has observed the high Byzantine aristocracy of the last centuries of Byzantium was formed in John's reign, that is the specific branches of the families that were to dominate Byzantium in its last two hundred years all first came into prominence in this period⁸².

Furthermore, John III made significant grants of land to the high aristocracy, to his family, and to the patriarchate⁸³, although the extant source material does not allow us to chart the fortunes of any of these properties in time⁸⁴. And yet, the possibility of attracting such grants and establishing themselves in areas such as the Thrakesion that were not only fertile, but also relatively safe, would have been a crucial factor in rallying the high aristocracy around John III⁸⁵.

If we assume that John III made the best out of the circumstances that were in his control regarding the construction of aristocratic networks and the positioning of kin in important positions as well as rewarding them with land and privilege, he was nevertheless aware that his efforts appeared to be

78. D. POLEMIS, *The Doukai: A Contribution to Byzantine Prosopography*, London 1968, no. 73, 109.

79. PUECH, *L'aristocratie et le pouvoir*, I 218-219.

80. LANGDON, *John III Ducas Vatatzes*, 181.

81. PUECH, *L'aristocratie et le pouvoir*, II 367-368.

82. KYRITSES, *Byzantine Aristocracy*, 291.

83. MITSIOU, *Wirtschaft und Ideologie*, 89-93.

84. See the general comments on aristocratic fortunes in: KYRITSES, *Byzantine Aristocracy*, 209-210.

85. PUECH, *L'aristocratie et le pouvoir*, II 351.

wanting when compared to the Komnenian paradigm. This would explain the shift of ideological tone expressed in rhetoric at his court which praised not an 'abstract virtue of nobility', but the emperor's lack of preferential treatment of his own family and friends as a token of his justice⁸⁶.

Theodore II Laskaris (1254–1258)

Theodore's short reign represents the most radical break with the Komnenian arrangement. This is made clear not only by his direct actions which will be discussed below, but also by the tumultuous events after his death and the clear reversal to as pure a form of the Komnenian tradition as possible by the new dynasty of the Palaiologoi who succeeded him.

Theodore's ascension to the throne was unopposed since he was John III's only son. From the start he showed his desire to break with some of the key aspects of his father's reign: he used the name Laskaris as his official designation and brought back a focus on Nicaea and Bithynia in his regime, as opposed to John III's emphasis on Nymphaion and the Thrakesion⁸⁷. He also favoured families that were loyal to the dynasty and had ties to this area⁸⁸. Furthermore, in what Angelov interpreted as 'a snub at aristocrats with military tradition running in their families'⁸⁹ he gave high office to trusted men such as Manuel Laskaris (most probably, a brother of his grandfather Theodore I), to Constantine Margarites and the two Mouzalon brothers, Andronikos and George. These new appointees angered the high aristocracy. Akropolites is particularly scathing on Margarites whom he calls an 'a peasant born of peasants, reared on barley and bran and knowing only how to grunt'⁹⁰.

In 1255 Alexios Strategopoulos and Constantine Tornikes were sent as commanders of the Nicaean troops to face a Bulgarian attack in Macedonia. However, they did not engage in any battles and made a disaster of the expedition. Theodore II wrote scathing remarks on his two

86. ANGELOV, *Imperial Ideology*, 106-107.

87. PUECH, *L'aristocratie et le pouvoir*, II 381-382.

88. PUECH, *L'aristocratie et le pouvoir*, II 383.

89. ANGELOV, *Byzantine Hellene*, 152.

90. Ἄνδρα ἀγροίκον καὶ ἐξ ἀγροίκων γεγεννημένον, μάξι καὶ πιτύροις ἀνατεθραμμένον καὶ λαυγγίζειν μόνον εἰδότα, Akropolites, *Opera*, 60.

commanders in a letter to George Mouzalon⁹¹. Towards the end of the same year Theodore made sweeping changes at his court which suggest that the events in Macedonia had not been unconnected: a number of aristocrats were demoted from their office: Alexios Raoul (whose office was given to Andronikos Mouzalon), Constantine Tornikes, Nikephoros Alyates, George Zagarommates; others were imprisoned as well (Alexios Strategopoulos) and some were blinded (Constantine Strategopoulos, Theodore Philes, the governor of Thessalonike who had succeeded Andronikos Palaiologos) – all aristocrats with links to the European provinces of Nicaea⁹². Others, who remain unnamed, were also affected. Manuel Laskaris, Margarites, and the Mouzalon brothers George, Andronikos and Theodore Mouzalon were given higher offices. The Mouzalones are presented by Pachymeres as not being of noble descent (*οὐκ εὐγενείας μὲν μετέχοντας τὸ παράπαν*)⁹³ while Akropolites records that after their murder in 1258 they were declared ‘loathsome little men, worthless specimens of humanity’⁹⁴. Puech has shown that the family had reached the level of just below that of the high aristocracy in the Komnenian period and attributes Pachymeres’ comment on their lack of *eugeneia* as meaning they did not have imperial blood⁹⁵. While such men owed their social ascent entirely to imperial favour, it is wrong to assume that it was unprecedented for such individuals without any direct links to the dynasty, whether by blood or marriage, to be invested with high office. Even in the exalted Komnenian period, the case of John Axouch makes this clear: a young Turkish boy who was captured at Nicaea in 1097, made a page and companion of John (II) Komnenos, and enjoyed a distinguished career under both his childhood companion John as well as under his heir Manuel I (whose securing of the throne he helped achieve)⁹⁶.

91. PUECH, *L'aristocratie et le pouvoir*, II 374.

92. PUECH, *L'aristocratie et le pouvoir*, I 75.

93. Pachymeres, *Relations historiques*, I 8, 41.

94. Ἀνδραγίοις βδελυροῖς καὶ ἀνθρωπίσκοις οὐτιδανοῖς, Akropolites, *Opera*, 75, 156; MACRIDES, *George Akropolites*, 339

95. PUECH, *L'aristocratie et le pouvoir*, I 151-152. JOVANOVIĆ, *Michael Palaiologos*, 123-124, suggests that since they had been chosen as pages for Theodore II in his childhood, they cannot have been lowborn.

96. See Prosopography of the Byzantine World <http://pbw2016.kdl.kcl.ac.uk/person/Ioannes/293/> with sources and literature.

Axouch's case is not dissimilar to the Mouzalones as childhood companions and confidants of Theodore II. It can be assumed that the shakeup of the court was accompanied by extensive confiscations⁹⁷ and perhaps lands were granted to the new favourites.

Michael Palaiologos⁹⁸ was warned that the emperor would soon have him arrested (or worse), and in 1256 he fled from Bithynia, where he had been assigned by John III, to the Seljuqs. Meanwhile his uncle and namesake had also been demoted. After a year as military commander in the service of the sultan, Michael decided to ask Theodore II's pardon and be allowed to return in 1257. This was granted, Michael returned, was given the office of grand constable and sent to Durrachion. A little later, however, Michael was arrested once more. The pretext was the behaviour of his sister, Maria Tarchaneiotissa, who was accused of sorcery in relation to the marriage of her daughter and was physically tortured to extract a confession. Pachymeres records that Theodore II feared that Michael would be moved to sedition when hearing what had happened to his sister⁹⁹. However, Theodore freed Michael and demanded of him as well as everyone at court to swear to protect his son and heir John IV. This occurred shortly before his death and while severely ill, so his condition and the knowledge of his imminent death probably played a part in this decision. According to the terms of his testament he had placed George Mouzalon as regent¹⁰⁰.

A few days after Theodore's death in 1258, the question of succession proved messy, since his heir was a young boy. In these crucial days the aristocrats of the Empire of Nicaea gathered together – this was the instance when Pachymeres mentioned the 'golden chain'. Many held a grudge against the deceased emperor. Some bore on their bodies the signs of Theodore II's punishments against them, but most felt rage about the various humiliations inflicted upon them – the demotions, the physical punishments, the forced

97. ANGELOV, *Imperial Ideology*, 210.

98. It should be pointed out that Michael and Theodore were second cousins as great-grandsons of Alexios III through his two daughters. Cf. LANGDON, *John III Ducas Vatatzes*, 38-39.

99. Pachymeres, *Relations historiques*, I 12, 57. Other (unnamed) individuals were subjected to the ordeal by hot iron to dispel the emperor's accusations of sorcery against him and one assumes that some of them may have been members of the high aristocracy.

100. Akropolites, *Opera*, 75, 154.

marriages and confiscations, and the promotions of men who they saw as commoners, men who lacked *eugeneia*. Although it is difficult to discern the exact circumstances –and especially what had transpired in the background– there was a bloody coup that resulted in the brutal murder of the regent George Mouzalon as well as his brothers. Although Pachymeres and Akropolites diverge in many points in their description of the events, they both stress the aristocracy's anger towards the Mouzalones while Pachymeres insinuates that Michael Palaiologos, as *megas konostavlos* and thus commander of the Latin mercenaries, encouraged, or at least did not hold back the soldiers that killed the Mouzalones¹⁰¹. Following the murders, the assembled aristocrats vied for power in a bid to win the office of regent for the young heir. Michael Palaiologos established himself as the dominant figure of authority in Nicaea. The rest is (Palaiologan) history.

From the discussion above it is clear that Theodore II pursued a policy of breaking with the Komnenian arrangement, adopting a much more confrontational and aggressive attitude towards the aristocracy. Theodore had no brothers to place in important positions. Furthermore, he married his elder daughters to foreign men who included the Bulgarian tsar Constantine Tich and two Latin lords – there were no sons-in-law to be employed at court¹⁰². He also personally arranged for the marriages of some of his closest officials: George Mouzalon was married to Theodora Kantakouzene (a niece of Michael Palaiologos) and his brother Andronikos to a daughter of Alexios Raoul. The marriage between Theodora Tarchaneiotissa, Michael Palaiologos' niece, which had had such a devastating effect on the relations between the two men, had also been contracted by Theodore¹⁰³. The emperor seems to have made a number of such matches, determined to mix the blood pool of the high aristocracy and to disrupt the matrimonial alliances of the Palaiologoi, which by then encompassed more or less all the families

101. Pachymeres, *Relations historiques*, I 18.

102. See Table 3 in MACRIDES, *George Akropolites*, for the genealogy of the Laskarides. The two daughters were married to the Latin lords after their father's death: MACRIDES, *George Akropolites*, 338, n. 12.

103. At first Theodore had her marry a certain Balanidiotes, supposedly of low birth, but a man of the emperor's trust, then he broke off the engagement and had her marry Basil Kaballarios, a man of noble lineage. See PACHYMERES, *Relations historiques*, I 12.

of the high aristocracy¹⁰⁴. Of the people he promoted to high office the Mouzalon brothers had grown up with him as pages in the palace; he also gave members of the Laskaris and the Nestongos families high posts. These were close kin and supporters of his grandfather, Theodore I¹⁰⁵.

Searching for the reasons why Theodore II chose to follow a different policy than his predecessors, various theories have been proposed. Pachymeres suggested that the main reason had been Theodore's aim to appoint the best, most capable and talented men for each task, regardless of their background, but that he also wanted to suppress the pride of those close to him¹⁰⁶. Modern scholars have looked for clues in Theodore's biography: his temperament, soured by chronic illness and the fact that he had grown up apart from the younger aristocrats of his generation (like Michael Palaiologos) who were sent to campaign in the West while he was kept in Anatolia (as the precious only son and heir)¹⁰⁷. The first point has now been completely disproved by Angelov who has shown very clearly that Theodore did not suffer from epilepsy (as is very commonly repeated in modern scholarship), nor was he chronically ill¹⁰⁸. Angold suggested that Theodore's attitude may have been in imitation of Frederick II's policies towards his own elites¹⁰⁹.

A more plausible way to understand Theodore's policies towards the aristocracy comes from his own writings. A prolific author and one of the few emperors to have left a substantial literary record, he provided important indications for his actions in his texts. This was already picked up in earlier scholarship by Angold and Kyritses¹¹⁰, but made very clear in

104. Pachymeres, *Relations historiques*, I 12; see ANGELOV, *Imperial Ideology*, 211. MACRIDES, *From the Komnenoi to the Palaiologoi*, 282 observed that such a mixing would have been unthinkable under, e.g., Manuel I, who prevented any such unions. Cf. MAGDALINO, *Manuel Komnenos*, 210-211.

105. PUECH, *L'aristocratie et le pouvoir*, I 77.

106. Pachymeres, *Relations historiques*, I 8.

107. KYRITSES, *Byzantine Aristocracy*, 294.

108. ANGELOV, *Byzantine Hellene*, 381-389.

109. M. ANGOLD, *After the Fourth Crusade: The Greek Rump States and the Recovery of Byzantium*, in *Cambridge History of the Byzantine Empire, c. 500-1492*, ed. J. SHEPARD, Cambridge 2008, 748. Frederick was the father of Theodore's father's second wife.

110. ANGOLD, *A Byzantine Government in Exile*, 74; KYRITSES, *Byzantine Aristocracy*, 295, 298.

Angelov's masterful studies of his texts¹¹¹. Theodore considered kinship and lineage as categories contrary to the good governance of a state; instead he promoted friendship –if on unequal terms– as the proper tie between ruler and ruled; the latter should place their friendship with their master above all ties of blood, or as Theodore put it: πολλῶν καὶ μεγάλων σαρκικῶν συγγενῶν ἢ τῶν ἀληθινῶν δούλων ἀγάπη ὑπερνικᾷ (The love of true friends surpasses that of many and great blood relatives)!¹¹² Furthermore, he contrasted what he saw as natural nobility (which could characterize even a farmer) with the nobility of blood that was conferred within the small pool of the high aristocracy. Nobility as a moral virtue of the soul was therefore far higher than an aristocratic pedigree, and in his mind someone like George Mouzalon was a true noble. Angelov is right to point out that in expressing this new framework Theodore was breaking new ground in Byzantine political thought¹¹³. Theodore was not moved by a general anti-aristocratic ethos in itself, but his opposition to the enshrined privilege of this group was political¹¹⁴. Instead, Theodore hoped to substitute –or supplement¹¹⁵– the networks of aristocratic kinship with those created by himself as networks of clients (termed friends) who would offer their loyalty, devotion, and services to the emperor in exchange for the many privileges that he could reward them with¹¹⁶.

He did his best to implement these ideas on the ground, but he did so with utter disregard to the sensibilities of the high aristocracy who saw their privileged status, their families, property, and bodies under attack¹¹⁷. This was bound to create a violent backlash and it is remarkable that

111. ANGELOV, *Imperial Ideology*, 215-234; IDEM, *Byzantine Hellene*, 124-127.

112. *To George Mouzalon (Tractatus ad Georgium Muzalonem)*, ed. A. TARTAGLIA, Munich – Leipzig 2000, 137, 435-437 in: ANGELOV, *Byzantine Hellene*, 126. The translation of *doulos* as 'friend' is justified in the context of the specific text, see ANGELOV, *Byzantine Hellene*, 124-127.

113. ANGELOV, *Imperial Ideology*, 234.

114. KYRITSES, *Byzantine Aristocracy*, 298; PUECH, *L'aristocratie et le pouvoir*, II 381.

115. JOVANOVIĆ, *Michael Palaiologos*, 90, 125, suggests that Theodore wished to 'add new links' to the 'golden chain', rather than do away with the existing group.

116. ANGELOV, *Byzantine Hellene*, 125-127.

117. ANGOLD, *A Byzantine Government in Exile*, 76; KYRITSES, *Byzantine Aristocracy*, 298.

Theodore did not seem to anticipate it. And yet it is important to note that the aristocratic response only became serious after Theodore's death. The various conspiracies that both John III and Theodore II himself had faced cannot have been as grave since they managed to deal with them as quickly and efficiently as they did. The aristocrats were either not powerful enough or unwilling to violently topple a reigning emperor – perhaps the painful lessons of the decades after Manuel I's death were still alive in people's minds¹¹⁸. Furthermore, it is also important to stress that the aristocracy never united as a body to demand more specific constitutional powers for themselves as a collective¹¹⁹. Instead what we can see are powerful individuals who are lobbying for themselves or their close kin. Nowhere is this made clearer than in the speeches that Pachymeres puts in the mouths of George Mouzalon and Michael Palaiologos in the troubled days between Theodore's death and Palaiologos' ascent to power. George Mouzalon, the regent, but undoubtedly speaking from a position of weakness, acknowledged Theodore's heavy-handed actions towards the magnates but absolved himself and his brothers of any responsibility in the matter. In this speech he constantly debased himself and exalted the magnates in front of him and repeatedly offered to back down from what in fact were Theodore's wishes regarding the succession. In his response, Michael Palaiologos, the clearest representative of the 'golden chain', pragmatically emphasized that the imperial decision was binding for all (after all, they had taken oaths to uphold his wishes) and that power rests with Mouzalon, as per Theodore's orders and the office he had granted him. He urges Mouzalon: 'Command therefore, take care of the emperor, take care also of the affairs and the government of the Romans, and we will follow you obediently: indeed, we shall not all command and we cannot all give orders, for polyarchy is anarchy'¹²⁰.

118. KYRITSES, *Byzantine Aristocracy*, 298

119. ANGOLD, *A Byzantine Government in Exile*, 74.

120. Ἄρχε τοίνυν, καὶ προνόει μὲν βασιλέως, προνόει δὲ καὶ τῶν τῆς τῶν Ῥωμαίων ἡγεμονίας πραγμάτων, καὶ ἡμεῖς εὐπειθοῦντες ἐψόμεθα· οὐ γὰρ πάντες ἄρξομεν, οὐδὲ πάντες ἐπιτάττειν ἔχομεν· ἀναρχὸν γὰρ τὸ πολύαρχον. Pachymeres, *Relations historiques*, I 16-17, see KYRITSES, *Byzantine Aristocracy*, 300.

The Ascent of Michael Palaiologos (1258–1261)

After the murder of the Mouzalones Michael Palaiologos gradually secured power, first as regent (*epitropos*) and *megas doux*, then as *despot* and finally as (co-)emperor¹²¹. One of the earliest attested instances of his self-designation comes from the inscription on a silk *peplos* that was given as a gift to Genoa in the early 1260s on which Michael is named as ‘the most high emperor of the Greeks Lord Michael Doukas Angelos Komnenos Palaiologos.’¹²² This is a clear statement trumpeting Michael’s *eugeneia*, being the offspring of three imperial lineages. It would be difficult not to compare his pedigree (he was the fourth great-grandson of Alexios I though the female line, namely his daughter Eirene) with the much less exalted one of his three Nicaean predecessors, something that even Pachymeres (although inimical to him) could not fail to record when he mentions his ancient nobility¹²³. Michael quickly took steps to consolidate his power. Here, I will only look at the first few years of his long reign, which is sufficient for the point I am trying to make. The remaining members of Theodore II’s close associates were removed and Michael set about to establish his own circle. Michael’s brother John (PLP 21487) was first made *megas domestikos*, later *sevastokrator* and then *despot*, while another brother, Constantine (PLP 21498) was made *kaisar* and then *sevastokrator*. Furthermore, these two brothers were married to a daughter of Constantine Tornikes, and a daughter of a Branas respectively – both families of the ‘golden chain’. Nikephoros Tarchaneiotēs, the husband of Michael’s sister Martha (PLP 21389) was made *megas domestikos*. Angelos (PLP 179), brother of Michael’s mother-in-law, was made *megas primmikerios*. Aristocrats who had suffered under Theodore II were rehabilitated and promoted. Constantine Tornikes was made *sevastokrator*; Alexios Strategopoulos (PLP 26894) was made *kaisar*; John Komnenos Doukas Angelos Petraliphes Raoul (PLP 24125), son of the demoted *protovestiarios* Alexios (24110) was given his father’s title and was married to the widow of George Mouzalon and Michael Palaiologos’ niece,

121. Pachymeres, *Relations historiques*, *megas doux* (I 23); *despot* (I 27), *basileus* (II 3).

122. C. J. HILSDALE, *Byzantine Art and Diplomacy in an Age of Decline*, Cambridge 2014, 31–65, esp. 43–45, on the dating of the textile and 65–66 on the inscription naming Michael.

123. Pachymeres, *Relations historiques*, I 22.

Theodora; Alexios Philes (PLP 29809), son of the blinded Theodore, was made *megas domestikos* and was married to Maria, sister of Theodora. In another move that would signal Michael's reversal of Theodore II's actions, he had his niece Theodora Tarchaneiotissa (PLP 27510) divorce Basil Kaballarios and marry her originally intended groom Balanidiotes (see above) who was also promoted to *megas stratopedarches*¹²⁴.

The group that Michael placed at the top of government is exceptionally tightly knit and makes very clear that high office was reserved only for the close relatives of the emperor. There was perhaps a new rigidity to the hierarchy as is corroborated by an undated novel of Michael VIII in which the degree of kinship with the emperor seems to have 'high "constitutional" value' and is structured in three groups: the imperial brothers, the emperor's kin by blood or marriage and finally the kin of these relatives¹²⁵. Through his own marriage and those of his siblings Michael was related to the Doukas, Komnenoi, Batatzai, Tornikes, Branas, Tarchaneiotas, Angelos, Kantakouzenos, Raoul and Philes – families that constituted the largest part of the 'golden chain'.

Conclusions

Examining the dynamic relationship between the emperors and the aristocracy in Nicaea it is tempting to look at events in reverse chronology starting with the triumph of the high aristocracy. Events then make sense in a specific, teleological way, but this clouds the much more complex reality. My reading suggests that each of the three emperors followed a more or less coherent policy towards the elites. This was shaped, no doubt, by the particular biography of each emperor, but also by their attempts to manoeuvre the complicated political landscape with the hand that each had been dealt. The Komnenian arrangement was the unspoken yardstick. Theodore I and John III certainly followed its principles. They both tried

124. On Michael's promotions see Pachymeres, *Relations historiques*, I 25, II 13, II 23.

125. L. BURGMANN – P. MAGDALINO, Michael VIII on Maladministration: An Unpublished Novel of the Early Palaiologan Period, *FM* 6 (1984), 377-390, here 380, 388. C. MALATRAS, *Social Stratification in Late Byzantium* [Edinburgh Byzantine Studies], Edinburgh 2023, Table 26, 441-462, clearly shows that Palaiologan office holders, especially those occupying the highest dozen or so of offices, almost all came from the families of the 'golden chain'.

to create a network of matrimonial alliances with important aristocratic families and bolstered their regime, as much as biology allowed them to, with their close kin. The rise of the Palaiologoi – who had been chosen as heirs by being married to elder daughters of emperors in two occasions (under Alexios III and Theodore I) in a way paralleled the emergence and consolidation of Nicaea. It is telling that John III although clearly aware of the danger to his power that Michael Palaiologos posed was unable to do away with him. Theodore II's reign does represent a break, but his new, heavy-handed approach towards the aristocracy was so short lived that it is impossible to know whether it actually had a chance of functioning. In the long-term, it is highly doubtful. Attempting to transform a power dynamic between emperors and the aristocracy that had been in use for over two centuries according to his own political philosophy had little chance of being willingly accepted by the aristocracy. During his reign he was powerful enough to enforce it, but its spectacular dismantling a mere days after his death shows that there was no viable alternative to the old system, or at least none that the high aristocracy was prepared to accept. It is perhaps best to view the ascent of Michael Palaiologos not simply as the failure of Theodore II's innovations, but –perhaps more importantly– as the success of a model that provided a structure to this power dynamic, uneasy and often requiring corrective manoeuvres as it may have been. Michael Palaiologos was able to gather support from the families of the 'golden chain' because he successfully represented being the head of a kinship-network that would lead the aristocracy and provide them with their share in power and privilege that they considered as their birth right.

ΟΙ ΑΥΤΟΚΡΑΤΟΡΕΣ ΤΗΣ ΝΙΚΑΙΑΣ ΚΑΙ Η ΑΡΙΣΤΟΚΡΑΤΙΑ

Το άρθρο αυτό εξετάζει τη στάση και τις ενέργειες των αυτοκρατόρων της Νίκαιας (1204-1258) απέναντι στην αριστοκρατία. Προκειμένου να αξιολογηθεί πώς ο καθένας από τους αυτοκράτορες προσπάθησε να διαχειριστεί τη δυναμική των σχέσεων εξουσίας μεταξύ των ηγεμόνων και των ελίτ τους, στο άρθρο αναλύεται αρχικά το κοινωνικό υπόβαθρο του κάθε αυτοκράτορα, οι επιλογές του στη στελέχωση των κυριότερων αξιωμάτων αλλά και οι σχέσεις που διατηρούσε με αυτούς. Το σχήμα που καθιερώθηκε από τον Αλέξιο Α΄ σύμφωνα με το οποίο η αυτοκρατορική οικογένεια δημιουργήσε συμμαχίες και επιγαμίες με ορισμένους μεγάλους αριστοκρατικούς οίκους σχηματίζοντας μια υπερ-αριστοκρατία στην οποία οι ηγεμόνες παραχωρούσαν υψηλά αξιώματα και τίτλους, μεγάλες εκτάσεις γης και άλλα προνόμια, αποτέλεσε το μέτρο σύγκρισης. Οι αυτοκράτορες της Νίκαιας είτε ακολούθησαν αυτό το σχήμα όσο πιο πιστά τους επέτρεπαν οι περιστάσεις (Θεόδωρος Α΄, Ιωάννης Γ΄) είτε προσπάθησαν να του δώσουν νέα πνοή και περιεχόμενο κατ' εικόνα τους (Θεόδωρος Β΄). Η ανατροπή των καινοτομιών που επέφερε ο τελευταίος λίγο μετά τον θάνατό του έδειξε ότι η αριστοκρατία δεν ήταν διατεθειμένη να δεχτεί αλλαγές που θα μείωναν το κύρος της, όπως δείχνει η άνοδος της πιο εξέχουσας οικογένειας ανάμεσά τους, αυτής των Παλαιολόγων.