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The political problem of internal "ασφάλεια" in Niketas Choniates' Chronikè Diégthesis: a contributing factor to the Constantinople's fall in 1204

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THE POLITICAL PROBLEM OF INTERNAL «ΑΣΦΑΛΕΙΑ» IN NIKETAS
CHONIATES' CHRONIKÈ DIÉGHESIS:
A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR TO THE CONSTANTINOPLE'S FALL IN 1204*

Although we cannot consider the Byzantine historian Niketas Choniates a political thinker in the strict sense of the word¹, it is possible to find

^(*)This article is an enhanced version of *Il problema della "sicurezza" nella Chronikè Diéghesis di Niceta Coniata: per una lettura della caduta di Costantinopoli*, that I published in *Il Pensiero Politico* XLIV (2011), 149-170.

1. A. PERTUSI, Il pensiero politico e sociale bizantino dalla fine del secolo VI al secolo XIII, in: *Storia delle idee Politiche Economiche e Sociali*, ed. L. FIRPO, Torino 1982, 778 and 791 ss.; passages of *Chronikè Diéghesis* that I quoted in this article are showed according to the critical edition edited by J.-L. VAN DIETEN in *Nicetae Choniatae Historia*, Berolini et Novi Eboraci 1975; the English translations of the *Chronikè Diéghesis'* passages that I quoted both in the text and in the footnotes come from H. J. MAGOULIAS, *O city of Byzantium, Annals of Niketas Choniates*, Detroit 1984 (from this point forward [H.M.]); about Niketas Choniates cfr. A. SIMPSON, Niketas Choniates: the Historian, in: *Niketas Choniates. A Historian and a Writer*, eds. A. SIMPSON and S. EFTHYMIADIS, Geneva 2009, 14; S. EFTHYMIADIS, Niketas Choniates: The Writer, in: *Niketas Choniates. A Historian and a Writer*, 35-58; A. KAZHDAN - R. MAISANO - A. PONTANI (eds), *Niceta Coniata. Grandezza e catastrofe di Bisanzio*, vol. I, Milano 1994, XIV-XV; A. PONTANI - J.-L. VAN DIETEN (eds.), *Niceta Coniata. Grandezza e catastrofe di Bisanzio*, vol. II, Milano 1999; J.-L. VAN DIETEN, Two unpublished fragments of Niketas Choniates' historical works, *BZ* 49 (1956), 311-317; IDEM, Noch einmal über Niketas Choniates, *BZ* 57 (1964), 302-328; IDEM, *Zur Überlieferung und Veröffentlichung der Panoplia Dogmatike des Niketas Choniates*, Amsterdam 1970; IDEM, *Niketas Choniates: Erläuterungen zu den Reden and Briefen nebst einer Biographie*, Berlin-New York 1971; IDEM, Bemerkungen zur Sprache der sog. vulgärgriechischen Niketasparaphrase, *BF* VI (1979), 37-78; IDEM, Corrigenda et non-corrigenda in «meinem» Niketas, *Byz.* 53 (1983), 359-369; A. KAZHDAN - A. WHARTON EPSTEIN, *Change in Byzantine Culture in the Eleventh*

in his *Chronikè Diéghesis* some significant elements of political thought concerning the situation in the Byzantine Empire in the XIIth century. One of the most important among them is the theme of *ἀσφάλεια* which represents, in my opinion, a peculiar characteristic of Niketas' political thought.

His conception of *ἀσφάλεια* is a complex idea, placed at the confluence of numerous ideas of safety that are linked to different fields related to politics: foreign affairs, social peace, confidence in institutions, relations between the emperor and the church or between the emperor and the members of aristocracy.

My aim is to analyze three of these aspects that I consider related, more or less closely, to the cultural background of the "second class" aristocracy as defined by P. Magdalino in his *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos (1143-1180)*².

The "second class" aristocracy is a wide section of the Byzantine aristocracy which was largely penalized by the political choices of the Emperor Alexios I Komnenos. After his taking power, in order to enhance the strong position of his family, he started to increasingly favor the members of his clan and those who were related to the Komnenoi through blood ties. The aristocrats that were not in some way related suffered exclusion from the most important positions of power³.

The first aspect that I would like to analyze concerns the link between the overturn of the traditional *τάξις* in the empire and the progressive decrease of its internal *ἀσφάλεια*. The second one is focused on the lack of safety deriving from the choice of keeping a part of the aristocracy out of the most relevant positions in power. The last one concerns the problem of *ἀσφάλεια* in the event of rebellion and usurpation. I intend to analyze these

and Twelfth Centuries, Berkeley 1985; A. KAZHDAN, *La produzione intellettuale a Bisanzio. Libri e scrittori in una società colta*, Napoli 1983, 91-94 (first edition Moscow, Naukla, 1973); M. ANGOLD, *L'Impero bizantino (1025-1204). Una storia politica*, Napoli 1992, 139-428 (first edition 1984); H. J. MAGOULIAS, *Byzantine Christianity: Emperor, Church and the West*, Chicago 1970, 1-16.

2. P. MAGDALINO, *The empire of Manuel I Komnenos. 1143-1180*, Cambridge 1993, 188-190; IDEM, Aspects of Twelfth-Century Byzantine Kaiserkritik, *Speculum* 58 (1983), 326-346.

3. About the radical changes in the aristocratic *corpus* under Alexios I, cfr. C. M. BRAND, *Byzantium confronts the West. 1180-1204*, Cambridge 1968, 9.

from the perspective of a member of the Byzantine administrative apparatus and an historian whose cultural background was deeply influenced by the political ideas of the “second class” aristocracy.

In order to clarify the idea of *ἀσφάλεια* in the *Chronikè Diéghesis*, I need to make some preliminary remarks about Niketas’ historical work.

The fall of Constantinople in 1204 represents a significant milestone in the life of the Byzantine historian both as a citizen deeply involved in the empire’s political life and as a writer⁴. Although he began writing his historical work in 1185, he revised the text after the fall⁵. Obviously that event influenced both his work and his political analysis about the period 1118-1206 which is covered by his *Chronikè Diéghesis*⁶. The fall is considered as an unavoidable consequence and a just punishment from God for the sins of the empire⁷. According to Niketas the subversion of traditional imperial *τάξις* imposed by Alexios I Komnenos’s politics and then perpetuated, more or less strongly, by his successors is one of the worst among these sins. Niketas’ conception of *τάξις* is a first significant milestone in order to analyze his idea of *ἀσφάλεια*: as a matter of fact he thinks that *τάξις* represents the antithesis of lack of *ἀσφάλεια*, which the Byzantine historian considers one of the most dangerous political problems⁸.

Life without *ἀσφάλεια* – as was, in Niketas’ analysis, the life in the Byzantine Empire under the Komnenoi and the Angeloi – created a sort of lack of relations in society: men started not to trust institutions, not

4. SIMPSON – EFTHYMIADIS (eds.), *Niketas Choniates: a Historian and a Writer*, passim; KAZHDAN – MAISANO – PONTANI (eds.), *Niceta Coniata. Grandezza e catastrofe di Bisanzio*, IX-XVI.

5. KAZHDAN, *La produzione intellettuale a Bisanzio. Libri e scrittori in una società colta*, 94-95.

6. SIMPSON, *Niketas Choniates: the Historian*, 14; A. J. SIMPSON, *The Versions of Niketas Choniates’ «Historia»*, *DOP* 60 (2006), 189-190; M. GALLINA, *Potere e società a Bisanzio. Dalla fondazione di Costantinopoli al 1204*, Torino 1995, 279; KAZHDAN – WHARTON EPSTEIN, *Change in Byzantine Culture in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*, 225.

7. Cfr. *Chronikè Diéghesis*, 581; cfr. MAGDALINO, *The empire of Manuel I Komnenos. 1143-1180*, 14; S. RONCHEY, *Lo stato bizantino*, Torino 2002, 123-124; KAZHDAN, *La produzione intellettuale a Bisanzio. Libri e scrittori in una società colta*, 98-100 and 116; SIMPSON, *Niketas Choniates: the Historian*, 22.

8. About the *τάξις* and its overturn in the *Chronikè Diéghesis*, see A. KALDELLIS, *Paradox, Reversal and the Meaning of History*, in: *Niketas Choniates. A Historian and a Writer*, 75-99.

to trust themselves, not to trust their relatives too. So, when the crusaders attacked the capital city, the Byzantine system, also for these reasons, was so internally damaged that they could easily conquer it⁹. In Niketas' thought the idea of *τάξις* comes first from a parallel between the pecking order in the Kingdom of Heaven and the hierarchical order in the earthly empire. Secondly *τάξις* appears as the respect people should have for their social standing and in their reciprocal relations according to a sort of natural order¹⁰.

In the *Chronikè Diégghesis* this second feature of *τάξις* seems to me principally linked to three different areas. The first one is associated with the institutional field: when John II explained the reasons for the designation of Manuel as his successor, for example, he said that nature (*ἡ μὲν φύσις*) usually follows a *τάξις* based on birthright, but in these circumstances it was not respected¹¹. The second one is related to the conspiracies against the emperors carried out by members of their families: Niketas wrote that through this behavior they compete to subvert the natural *τάξις* of the empire¹². The last one is linked to the respect people should have for their position in society: the power acquired by Alexios III's wife became more powerful than the power of previous empresses and even more powerful than her husband's power too. The result was the creation of a sort of diarchy in

9. Cfr. *Chronikè Diégghesis*, 549-550, 552, 561-562, 564.

10. MAGDALINO, *The empire of Manuel I Komnenos. 1143-1180*, 236-237; KALDELLIS, *Paradox, Reversal and the Meaning of History*, 80.

11. Cfr. *Chronikè Diégghesis*, 44: "Perceiving in my own case that the proper order of succession was observed, and that you are eager that the same should hold true for offspring of my loins, and that you long to be ruled by one of my surviving sons (these are Isaakios and Manuel); and that you do not want to make the selection yourselves but entrust the election for me, I must admit it has been the custom [*ἡ μὲν φύσις*], by the very nature of things, to award the highest office to the firstborn son; however, in the matter of highest promotions it does not always please God that should be the case", [H.M.], 25; in *Chronikè Diégghesis*, 49. Isaakios, Manuel's elder brother, complains about not being appointed emperor that had been "extolled the order [*τάξις*] by which the whole universe is sustained", [H.M.], 29; cfr. KALDELLIS, *Paradox, Reversal and the Meaning of History*, 79.

12. Emperor John II after his sister's plot against him says: "How the natural order of things [*τάξις*] has been inverted [*ἀντέστραπται*] for me! Kinsmen have become the enemy, and strangers friends"(Cfr. *Chronikè Diégghesis*, 11; [H.M.], 8); cfr. KALDELLIS, *Paradox, Reversal and the Meaning of History*, 79.

the empire and, in Niketas' strongly monarchical view, a subversion of the natural *τάξις*¹³.

When *τάξις* turns into *ἀταξία*, power cannot be oriented towards the common good and the empire grows weaker. A relevant example is in a passage of the *Chronikè Diégghesis* which describes the situation in the empire after the death of the Emperor Manuel I:

For just as confusion [*ἀταξία*] reigns everywhere with the overthrow of a noble-minded and earnest leader, as when a column is removed from its firm and steadfast base the whole structure leans in the opposite direction, so did each pursue his own end, and all conspired against one another¹⁴.

This idea of *τάξις* probably derives from Niketas' education; his family sent him to Constantinople in order to enter the bureaucratic apparatus of the empire¹⁵. He studied “grammar, rhetoric, poetry, mathematics, astronomy, law and politics”¹⁶ and the *Holy Scriptures*. These studies – particularly the legal studies¹⁷ – influenced him and his political thought: he was persuaded

13. Cfr. *Chronikè Diégghesis*, 460: “Because the empress had overstepped the bounds and held in contempt the conventions of former Roman empresses, the empire was divided into two dominions. It was not the emperor alone who issued commands as he chose; she gave orders with equal authority and often nullified the emperor's decrees, altering them to her liking”, [H.M.], 252; about Eufrosyne cfr. EFTHYMIADIS, Niketas Choniates: The Writer, 51-53; J.-C. CHEYNET, L'imperatore e il Palazzo, in: *Il mondo bizantino. L'impero bizantino (641-1204)*, ed. J.-C. CHEYNET, Torino 2008, 202-203; in another passage of *Chronikè Diégghesis* Niketas describes an analogous situation of subversion of natural order writing about some events related to the life of Theodore Kastamonitēs (cfr. *Chronikè Diégghesis*, 438); cfr. MAGOULIAS, *O city of Byzantium, Annals of Niketas Choniates*, XIX; BRAND, *Byzantium confronts the West. 1180-1204*, 119.

14. Cfr. *Chronikè Diégghesis*, 224; [H.M.], 127.

15. A. KAZHDAN, Some Observations on the Byzantine Concept of Law: Three Authors of the Ninth through the Twelfth Centuries, in: *Law and Society in Byzantium, Ninth-Twelfth Centuries*, ed. A. E. LAIOU – D. SIMON, Washington D.C. 1994, 213; KAZHDAN, *La produzione intellettuale a Bisanzio. Libri e scrittori in una società colta*, 91-128; KAZHDAN – MAISANO – PONTANI, *Niceta Coniata. Grandezza e catastrofe di Bisanzio*, XII-XIII; MAGOULIAS, *O City of Byzantium, Annals of Niketas Choniates*, IX-XXXVIII.

16. MAGOULIAS, *O City of Byzantium, Annals of Niketas Choniates*, XII.

17. Cfr. MAGDALINO, *The empire of Manuel I Komnenos 1143-1180*, 357-360; IDEM, Aspects of Twelfth-Century Byzantine Kaiserkritik, 334-335: “Educated Byzantine may not

that the imperial monarchy was the best form of government, but not the monarchy of the Komnenoi and – at least partially – of the Angeloi¹⁸. Starting from the reign of Alexios I the political system changed¹⁹ and the events of 1204 are deeply linked to those changes: the politics of Alexios I contributed to the decrease of internal *ἀσφάλεια* in the empire and competed to create the conditions of the fall.

Niketas' idea of *ἀσφάλεια* is strongly related to a second significant element that immediately appears in the *Proem* of the *Chronikè Diéghesis*: the concept of *ἀρετή*. In the *Proem* the Byzantine historian lays out the educational function of history which is considered a powerful instrument to show people – to quote his words the “*τῶν ἀνθρώπων μεγαλογνώμονες*”²⁰ – which actions and behaviors are right and wrong. Particularly he wrote:

Furthermore, even when History is composed with solemnity and reverence, she passionately desires to be the reward of diggers and of smiths covered with soot; she is also familiar with the armed company of Ares and is not captious with women who cultivate her²¹.

I cannot escape the need to contextualize this passage: it is difficult to believe that Niketas really wanted to address his work to all the people in the Byzantine Empire. If we overlook which categories of individuals would be interested in the work and which would be really able to read it, in the passages of the *Chronikè Diéghesis* in which Niketas speaks about men belonging to the “crowd” he harshly criticizes them²² – both as individual

have been unreceptive to the ancient idea that democratic element was a necessary component of the ideal constitution, the «mixed polity», which would combine the rule of one, the rule of the best, and the rule of the many. Kinnamos' contemporary Eustathios of Thessalonica describes the Christian order as a «Trinity» of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy”.

18. Cfr. *Chronikè Diéghesis*, 529 and 537; cfr. MAGDALINO, Aspects of Twelfth-Century Byzantine Kaiserkritik, 333; about a summary of Niketas' judgment about Angelos family cfr. J.-C. CHEYNET, Le rôle de la «bourgeoisie» constantinopolitaine (XI^e-XII^e Siècle), *ZRVI* 46 (2009), 92.

19. MAGDALINO, *The empire of Manuel I Komnenos. 1143-1180*, 226-227.

20. Cfr. *Chronikè Diéghesis*, 1.

21. Cfr. *Chronikè Diéghesis*, 3; [H.M.], 4.

22. Cfr. L. GARLAND, Political Power and the Populace in Byzantium Prior to the Fourth Crusade, *BSI* 53 (1992), 46-47; A. KAZHDAN, Byzantine Town and Trades as Seen by Niketas Choniates, *BSI* 56 (1995), 218.

men and collectively as a group – and only on rare occasions does he show his appreciation for them²³.

The citizens of Constantinople are accused of not being able to decide for themselves autonomously and not being able to gladly obey their governors²⁴. They are considered – due to their unstable nature (*ἀστασία ἥθους*)²⁵ – inclined to rebellion, while the variety of their crafts (*τῆ τῶν τεχνῶν ποικιλία*)²⁶ makes them difficult to govern. That is why they are called *ἀβέλτεροι*²⁷ by Niketas.

Perhaps it is more appropriate to think that the *τῶν ἀνθρώπων μεγαλογνώμονες* – those men who are naturally inclined to do good and who receive from history numerous, clear and educational examples of right and wrong – could be, in Niketas' thought, the members of aristocracy and, particularly, the members of that “second class” aristocracy marginalized by the Komnenoi. Probably he considered them the only class able to rebuild and govern the empire effectively after its fall.

Considering the loathing against the crowd and the members of the aristocracy linked to the Komnenian family by blood ties (and for this reason holders, of the most important government positions, although often unskilled), at least regarding the political message of Niketas Choniates, I deduce that the Byzantine historian wanted to address his work principally to the members of the “second class” aristocracy. During the entire XIIIth century this class could merely look upon the crumbling of the empire and helplessly witness its fall. However, after this event, it had to respond to

23. Cfr. *Chronikè Diéghesis*, 560-561.

24. Cfr. *Chronikè Diéghesis*, 552.

25. Cfr. *Chronikè Diéghesis*, 234.

26. Cfr. *ivi*.

27. Cfr. *Chronikè Diéghesis*, 270; a list very similar to the traditional trades of the popular class can be found in a passage (*Chronikè Diéghesis*, 349-350) dedicated to the composition of the mass that insults the deposed emperor Andronikos; despite the indubitable differences related to the context, the analogy remains: “But the stupid and ignorant inhabitants of Constantinople, and of these more so the sausage sellers and tanners, as well as those who pass the day in the taverns and eke out a niggardly existence from cobbling and with difficulty earn their bread from sewing, even as tribes of flies are gathered together and swarm around milk pails in the springtime and drink deep from the ivy-wood cups filled to overflowing, gave no thought to the fact that but a few short days earlier this man had been emperor”, [H.M.], 193; cfr. KAZHDAN – MAISANO – PONTANI, *Niceta Coniata. Grandezza e catastrofe di Bisanzio*, 567-568 and 687.

it. For Niketas the *Chronikè Diégghesis* should be a precious tool to show the “second class” aristocracy the right way; so history teaches its readers *ἀρετή*.

In Niketas’ work the conception of *ἀρετή* comes from two different cultural traditions. The first one is the Greek and Roman tradition; the second comes from Christian thought. The result is a manifold and quite original idea of *ἀρετή* and consequently of *ἥθος* which is, at the same time, both a condition and a tool in order to realize the *ἀσφάλεια* which Niketas considers one of the most important aims of politics. His idea of *ἀσφάλεια* represents the link between the conception of *ἀρετή* which runs the risk of remaining on a merely idealistic plan and the contingencies of real and pragmatic politics²⁸.

In order to avoid this risk, Niketas is careful not to completely idealize or totally stigmatize the lives and behaviors of the protagonists of his narrative: none of them are presented entirely good or bad. Although he is inclined, for example, to idealize John II and, on the contrary, to stigmatize Andronikos I, he tries, even if not so frequently, not to carry his judgment to extreme and unrealistic positions²⁹.

One of the most significant tools or units of measurement that Niketas uses to show if and how emperors, high officials and men belonging to the ruling class are virtuous in their public offices and what the impact of their actions and behavior is on the society is his conception of *ἀσφάλεια*. This idea, due to the insistence of the Byzantine historian who does not miss any opportunity to point it out, represents one of the original and peculiar elements of Niketas’ political thought and is one of the most relevant features in his complex analysis about the fall of the Byzantine Empire.

Although in the *Chronikè Diégghesis* *ἀσφάλεια* appears in several different contexts, I will focus on three aspects that I consider close to the ideals of the “second class” aristocracy as explained by a member of this class. The first one is concerned with a worry that is deeply related to the idea of *τάξις* that we have just seen to be an essential basis of the political thought of the “second class” aristocracy. The balance between emperor and

28. The amount of *ἀσφάλεια* in the empire can be considered the litmus paper of the moral virtue of its rulers.

29. Cfr. *Chronikè Diégghesis*, 47 and 353; cfr. KAZHDAN, *La produzione intellettuale a Bisanzio. Libri e scrittori in una società colta*, 103-104.

members of aristocracy³⁰ is an essential value for this class that considers itself heavily damaged by the political choices of an imperial government almost totally devoted to benefiting members of the imperial family.

In Choniates' idea *ἀσφάλεια* is mainly safety from imperial power and, consequently, from other political and administrative powers deriving from it. This question is inserted in a wider debate concerning the differences between the good emperor and a tyrant and is strictly related to the discussion about the limits of imperial power that, in Komnenian Byzantium, was heated³¹.

Although Niketas deals with this, he appears more worried about the abuses of lawful power than the abuses of tyrants, usurpers and not clearly virtuous politicians. He fears the aspect of *ἰσχὺς* that is an essential element both of the positive and of the negative political power; for this reason he pays great attention to the theme of arbitrary punishments imposed by emperors on their subjects. This is for Niketas a significant criterion to distinguish a good ruler from a bad one³². Due to this he appreciates John II³³ and – although partially – Alexios III³⁴ for their temperance in passing sentences on their subjects but he criticizes Isaakios II³⁵ – even though under his reign Niketas became an high official of the empire³⁶ – and Andronikos I³⁷ for the opposite reason.

30. BRAND, *Byzantium confronts the West. 1180-1204*, 1.

31. MAGDALINO, *The empire of Manuel I Komnenos 1143-1180*, 249-250; IDEM, *Aspects of Twelfth-Century Byzantine Kaiserkritik*, 327.

32. This aspect appears clear, although it seems to be left in the background, in the discourse of John II about the choice of Manuel as his successor; cfr. *Chronikè Diégghesis*, 45: “Isaakios has often appeared to me as being irascible; provoked by some cause he flies into a towering rage, a fault which ruins the wise and because of which the majority of man act thoughtlessly. Manuel, on the other hand, together with the cluster of virtues shared by Isaakios, is not a stranger to meekness, readily yielding to what is useful and willing to listen to reason”, [H.M.] 26.

33. Cfr. *Chronikè Diégghesis*, 11 and 47.

34. Cfr. *Chronikè Diégghesis*, 548.

35. Cfr. *Chronikè Diégghesis*, 367.

36. Cfr. KAZHDAN – MAISANO – PONTANI, *Niceta Coniata. Grandezza e catastrofe di Bisanzio*, XIII; MAGOULIAS, *O City of Byzantium, Annals of Niketas Choniates*, XII-XVI; RONCHEY, *Lo Stato bizantino*, 123.

37. Cfr. *Chronikè Diégghesis*, 223-354.

However, I think it is both reductive and misleading to restrict this analysis of Choniates only to the debate concerning the limits of imperial power. In fact his thought focuses on this topic but he attempts to bypass the merely technical aspects of it and to analyze its consequences and effects on society. Life in a precarious system in which personal safety is potentially denied to everyone –the passage “if the brother is not safe, then what man is?”³⁸ devoted to the dethronement and the blindness of Isaakios II by his brother Alexios in 1195 is emblematic – creates a progressive lack of trust in institutions and undermines the solidity of social relations. In Choniates’ thought when abuse ousts ἀρετή, τάξις coming from relations based on trust between the rulers and the people deteriorates and the societies can fall into anarchy, which he considers the worst form of government.

The account of the episode of Styppeiotēs, as recounted by Niketas³⁹, is a good example. In the final lines, Choniates writes “Styppeiotēs’ pupils were forthwith destroyed, and he was unjustly [ἀδίκως] blinded, never again to see the sun”⁴⁰. The use of the adverb ἀδίκως clearly shows the position of the historian: he considers the reaction of Manuel I against his subject an unjustifiable abuse of power; furthermore, in Niketas’ account, this action is based on an unfounded accusation. The arbitrary punishment of Styppeiotēs poses a threat to the personal ἀσφάλεια of each imperial citizen and appears very similar to the above mentioned passage concerning the dethronement of Isaakios II by his brother Alexios: if a member of an upper class as Styppeiotēs cannot escape from the emperor’s misuse of power, how can a simple man be safe? The *protostrator* Alexios too meets a fate similar to that Styppeiotēs’, but the situation is worsened by the indefensible attempt to justify this arbitrary act by some slanderers who wanted to gain the favour of Manuel I⁴¹.

Niketas does not correlate the problem of abuse of power only to the emperors: ἀσφάλεια depends on the ἀρετή of all the men who are in power, so the safety of the empire as a whole is related to their virtue. A

38. Cfr. *Chronikè Diégheis*, 454, [H.M.] p. 249.

39. Cfr. *Chronikè Diégheis*, 110-113; about this episode see MAGDALINO, *Aspects of Twelfth-Century Byzantine Kaiserkritik*, 334-335; IDEM, *The empire of Manuel I Komnenos 1143-1180*, 198-199.

40. *Chronikè Diégheis*, 113, [H.M.], 64.

41. Cfr. *Chronikè Diégheis*, 143-144.

wrong and guilty use of power or a lack of *ἀρετῆ* by the administrators – as clearly appears, for example, in the episode of John of Poutzē⁴² – can lead to dangerous consequences for the society. People cease to trust men who represent the emperor, the ties between the ruler and his subjects are loosened and the cohesion of the empire is broken. This situation creates social instability and fertile soil for demagogues, usurpers and seditious acts. In Niketas' analysis this aspect of abuse of power comes principally from the lust of the rulers both for wealth and power; it nourishes their fear towards emerging men who appear or are considered dangerous rivals owing to, among other things, their skills in public affairs or in leading armies⁴³.

According to the Byzantine historian, this occurs without distinction to emperors, high officials and those who hold political, military or administrative offices. So if Niketas criticizes Manuel for this misbehavior⁴⁴, he shows his appreciation for Alexios III because he did not commit such

42. Cfr. *Chronikè Diéghesis*, 54-55.

43. *Chronikè Diéghesis*, 143: “Every man who holds power is fearful and suspicious; each rejoices in executing the works of Thanatos and Chaos an Erebus, felling the nobility, overturning and casting forth as excrement the influential and capable counselor, and cutting down the courageous and ingenious general. The mighty of the earth can be likened to lofty and tapering pine trees; just as these rustle when the sharp wind shake the needles of their branches, so do these rulers mistrust the man of wealth and cower before him who surpasses most in manly spirit. And should there exist someone endowed with the beauty of a statue and the lyrical eloquence of a nightingale in song, gifted, moreover, with ready wit, then the wearer of the crown can neither sleep nor rest, but his sleep is interrupted, his voluptuousness suppressed, his appetite for pleasure lost, and he is filled with grave apprehensions; with wicked tongue he curses the creator nature for fashioning others suitable to rule and for not making him the first and last fashioning others suitable to rule and for not making him the first and last and the fairest of men”, [H.M.], 81; cfr. MAGDALINO, *Aspects of Twelfth-Century Byzantine Kaiserkritik*, 326. A similar idea appears also in a passage devoted to explain the reasons of ostracism of emperor Manuel against Andronikos (*Chronikè Diéghesis*, 103): “The reasons of his incarceration has been cited above, but no less a cause was his constant outspokenness and the fact that he excelled most men in bodily strength; his perfect physique was worthy of empire, and his pride was not to be humbled. All these things generate suspicion and provocation deep in the hearts of rulers because of the fear that surrounds the throne. For these attributes, as well for his cleverness in battle and the nobility of his birth [...], Andronikos was viewed with a jaundiced eye and was greatly distrusted”, [H.M.], 59.

44. *Chronikè Diéghesis*, 143.

unjust actions⁴⁵. In the closing lines of the account concerning the life of this emperor he writes:

If it be exceedingly difficult for emperors not to cut down the ears of corn which overtop the rest, and not to leap brutally upon those who have offended them, one could see that Alexios was rich in such virtue⁴⁶.

In the Byzantine Empire, on the contrary, during the XIIth century it often happens that rulers use their power not for the public good, but against people, particularly those belonging to the aristocracy, and those who are considered a threat to their positions. A systematic application of this principle gradually deprives the empire of its best men, makes it unstable and undermines its *ἀσφάλεια*⁴⁷. As we shall see, the second aspect of *ἀσφάλεια* in Choniates' *Chronikè Diéghesis* that I want to analyze will highlight, though for different reasons, the same political problem.

Furthermore when political or bureaucratic powers are not virtuously exercised, people start to fear for their safety and tend to place their personal *ἀσφάλεια* before the collective one; this can seriously damage the stability of the empire. Niketas says that, during the reign of Alexios II, the power of the *protosebastos* Alexios Komnenos became so great that those belonging to the highest rank of Byzantine society were so terrified that they placed their personal safety before the safety of other citizens (*τὸ καθ' αὐτοὺς ἀσφαλῆς τοῦ πέλας προτυτίθεσαν*)⁴⁸.

Niketas' analysis about the social consequences coming from the regime of terror created by Andronikos Komnenos picks up another serious question linked to the reduction of internal solidity coming from the emperors' abuse of power: during Andronikos's reign this decrease of *ἀσφάλεια* was even able to destroy relationships naturally and traditionally very strong such as the relationships between parents and sons or between brothers⁴⁹. Even though we consider the lapse of time between 1183 and

45. See footnote 34.

46. *Chronikè Diéghesis*, 548, [H.M.] pp. 299-300.

47. See footnote 43.

48. Cfr. *Chronikè Diéghesis*, 225.

49. *Chronikè Diéghesis*, 258: "The flux of those times was irresistible and the mutual distrust, even among the most genuine friends, an intolerable evil. Not only did brother ignore brother and father neglect son, if such was to Andronikos's liking, but they also

1185 a sort of exception, a period – as Niketas calls it – of “Polyarchy [πολυαρχίας], the mother of Anarchy [ἀναρχίας]”⁵⁰, we can observe that, in the entire *Chronikè Diégthesis*, Choniates usually shows how things can become dangerous and critical when subjects are not protected against the power of the emperor or his high officials⁵¹.

The Byzantine historian illustrates this situation, but he does not seem eager or able to suggest a political solution: he explains the events and says that ἀρετή should be a sort of natural limit for individual behaviors, but he does not enter into the matter deeper. He commits his answer to his historical work which, as he wrote in the *Proem*, should be not only a narration of the events of XIIth century but also an educational tool devoted to τῶν ἀνθρώπων μεγαλογνώμονες. It seems as if Niketas wants to give his readers a precious instrument with which to analyze the fall of the empire so as to rebuild it on firmer foundations in the future. It is hard not to think that Niketas considered the “second class” aristocracy the real protagonist of this desired renaissance of the Byzantine Empire and this element could compete to reinforce the hypothesis that the political message in *Chronikè Diégthesis* was really principally devoted to this social class.

The second meaning of ἀσφάλεια in Niketas’ thought I will focus on is more peculiarly linked to the “second class” aristocracy than the previous. The analysis of the *Chronikè Diégthesis* allows us to pick out two of Niketas’ worries concerning the problem of lack of ἀσφάλεια in the empire deriving from the marginalization of members of the “second class” aristocracy. Firstly, he is persuaded that men who held the highest positions were unable to govern or manage the empire effectively. According to Niketas this actually happened during the XIIth century. Secondly, the discontent arising

cooperated with the informers in bringing about the utter ruin of their families. There were those who personally informed against their relatives for scoffing at Andronikos’s actions or for being devoted to Emperor Alexios’s hereditary rule, thus shaking themselves free from Andronikos’s grip. In the very act of making accusations, many were themselves accused, and while exposing others or workers of evil against Andronikos, they themselves were denounced by the accused or by others who were present; both accusers and accused were led away to the same prison”, [H.M.], 144; cfr. PONTANI – VAN DIETEN, *Niceta Coniata. Grandezza e catastrofe di Bisanzio*, 596; cfr. BRAND, *Byzantium confronts the West. 1180-1204*, 55.

50. Cfr. *Chronikè Diégthesis*, 225, [H.M.], 128; PONTANI – VAN DIETEN, *Niceta Coniata. Grandezza e catastrofe di Bisanzio*, 551.

51. Cfr. *Chronikè Diégthesis*, 56, 224, 367, 454.

in men systematically excluded from power could foster – and this actually happened – internal instability, rebellions and seditions that occurred many times, during the XIIth century.

The choice by Alexios I and their successors to marginalize a large section of the aristocracy from the highest positions of the empire's administration, in order to place political and bureaucratic power principally in the hands of aristocratic members linked to the imperial family by blood ties, turned the members of the "second class" aristocracy against the Komnenoi and their relatives and created a deep cleavage in the noble class.

Until the reign of Alexios I, the vertical mobility inside the civil aristocracy was quite good and numerous aristocratic families invested in their sons education in order to improve their social standing⁵². The Choniates family did it both with Niketas and his elder brother Michael who became the metropolitan of Athens in 1182⁵³. Alexios I's politics required a sharp reversal of this traditional custom: he reformed imperial dignities and reduced increasingly the opportunities for aristocrats who were not bound to his family⁵⁴. The "second class" aristocracy came out severely damaged by this policy although it was not totally a new policy but the aggravation of a bad policy implemented by previous emperors⁵⁵. Some empirical data appear more significant in contextualizing and showing the effects of this aspect of Alexios I's politics: during his reign, the Komnenian family represented 60% of the Byzantine *élite*; they increased their power to 89% in the following period⁵⁶; moreover in the same years, the number of

52. A. KAZHDAN – S. RONCHEY, *L'aristocrazia bizantina dal principio dell'XI alla fine del XII secolo*, Palermo 1997, 140-141; MAGOULIAS, *O City of Byzantium, Annals of Niketas Choniates*, X; G. OSTROGORSKY, Observations on the aristocracy in Byzantium, *DOP* 25 (1971), 1-32.

53. About Micheal Choniates cfr. M. ANGOLD, *Church and Society in Byzantium under the Comneni. 1081-1261*, Cambridge 1995, 197-212; K. M. SETTON, A Note on Michael Choniates, Archbishop of Athens (1182-1204), *Speculum* 21 (1946), 234-236.

54. Cfr. G. OSTROGORSKY, *Storia dell'impero bizantino*, Torino 1968, 335-337 (first edition 1963); CHEYNET, *L'imperatore e il palazzo*, 90-93; MAGDALINO, *The empire of Manuel I Komnenos. 1143-1180*, 181.

55. Cfr. MAGDALINO, *The empire of Manuel I Komnenos. 1143-1180*, 188-190.

56. KAZHDAN – RONCHEY, *L'aristocrazia bizantina dal principio dell'XI alla fine del XII secolo*, 146; J-C. CHEYNET, Le classi dirigenti dell'impero, in: *Il mondo bizantino. L'impero bizantino (641-1204)*, 197-198; MAGDALINO, Aspects of Twelfth-Century Byzantine Kaiserkritik, 336.

foreigners employed in the political, administrative or military fields rose⁵⁷. Obviously members of the Byzantine “second class” aristocracy were heavily penalized by these political choices and criticized them⁵⁸; due to this it seems clear why Niketas considered this peculiar aspect of lack of *ασφάλεια* one of the conditions that contributed to the fall of the empire.

Evidently we cannot claim that this situation was not subject to modifications by the successors of Alexios I, but some lines of continuity with his political choices were maintained by them⁵⁹. In spite of all, Niketas Choniates represents proof that some career opportunities, albeit small, could still exist. As a matter of fact he, although coming from a family not linked to the Komnenoi, was able to hold the highest offices of the empire with mixed success. Even so the Byzantine historian was a member of the “second class” aristocracy and his political ideas were deeply influenced by this membership⁶⁰.

As we have seen, Niketas accuses the emperors and those who hold political offices of keeping away, as dangerous competitors, men considered very skilled in political, administrative or military activities⁶¹. For this reason, rulers try continuously to keep these rivals out of politics. The exclusion of the “second class” aristocracy reflects a similar purpose, but the question is quite different because it does not concern individual subjects, but a sizeable section of a social class. It seems clear that a reading concerning the lack of *ασφάλεια* focused only on the fear of men who are in power towards skilled members of the aristocracy is only a superficial analysis of a many-sided question that, on the contrary, Niketas considered a deliberate political project of the Komnenian emperors.

We can find his accurate analysis, even if often craftily left in the background, within the narrative: while he was carefully describing the events of the empire in XIIth century, he unraveled, through the description of actions, origin, education and, above all, blood ties between imperial family and various protagonists, the complex network of relations interwoven

57. KAZHDAN – RONCHEY, *L'aristocrazia bizantina dal principio dell'XI alla fine del XII secolo*, 148; cfr. *Chronikè Diégthesis*, 205 and *Chronikè Diégthesis*, 209.

58. Cfr. MAGDALINO, *The empire of Manuel I Komnenos. 1143-1180*, 190.

59. Cfr. MAGDALINO, *The empire of Manuel I Komnenos. 1143-1180*, 191 and 226; IDEM, *Aspects of Twelfth-Century Byzantine Kaiserkritik*, 336.

60. MAGDALINO, *Aspects of Twelfth-Century Byzantine Kaiserkritik*, 337.

61. See footnote 43.

by the Komnenoi in the political and bureaucratic imperial apparatus. Obviously he did not miss the opportunity to fiercely criticize the actions and behavior of these administrators and surely who, in those years, could read the *Chronikè Diéghesis* – we know that this work or partial sections of it were circulating in Byzantine Empire while Niketas was still writing it⁶² – and could clearly understand and contextualize each references. So while he was writing about political careers, abrupt removals, resounding military victories or bitter defeats, wise or disastrous economical and fiscal politics implemented by emperors or by their officials, Niketas was setting the scene of his time and showing both his disappointment and his concern about the decline of *ἀσφάλεια* in the empire.

Kinship (*συγγένεια*), blood-relation (*καθ' αἷμα*) and affiliation to the imperial family group (*γένος*) progressively became the main criterion for the selection of the ruling classes. The abuse of these criteria in selecting high officials broke the internal *τάξις* and created a very dangerous situation. *Συγγένεια* in itself is not considered in a negative way by Niketas, but a precious resource to strengthen social ties and consequently *ἀσφάλεια*⁶³. Problems for the empire occur when someone, particularly an emperor abuses this valuable tool. Politicians and administrators, even if very skilled in their peculiar fields, were denied the highest positions in the imperial system. The senate was increasingly marginalized and robbed of its traditional authority; due to this we can easily understand the reasons of Niketas' grudge against the Komnenian emperors⁶⁴. A passage of the *Chronikè Diéghesis* focused on the period following the death of the Emperor Manuel, although referring to the short reign of his young son Alexios II and its specific context, helps to explain this situation:

And as equality of privilege was no longer esteemed [*τῆς δὲ ἰσοτιμίας ἀτιμασθείσης*] by the great and powerful and by the emperor's kinsmen [*κατὰ γένος*], concern over the affairs of the state

62. SIMPSON, Niketas Choniates: the Historian, 16-17; EADEM, The Versions of Niketas Choniates' «Historia», 205-221; EFTHYMIADIS, Niketas Choniates: The Writer, 44.

63. Cfr. *Chronikè Diéghesis*, 32.

64. Cfr. MAGDALINO, *The empire of Manuel I Komnenos. 1143-1180*, 188 ss.; IDEM, Aspects of Twelfth-Century Byzantine Kaiserkritik, 335-336.

dissipated [*αἶ τε ὑπέρ τῶν κοινῶν φροντίδες*] and assemblies and councils disappeared⁶⁵.

In these lines three essential elements are summarized. Niketas seems to consider them the three fundamental factors that compete to undermine this second side of the idea of *ἀσφάλεια: ἰσοτιμία* – the equality of opportunities and honors – was dishonored (Niketas uses the verb *ἀτιμῶ* whose root is the same, although opposite, to the noun *ἰσοτιμία*) by men who boasted of blood-relations (*κατὰ γένος*) with the Komnenoi. In this transition from a situation of *ἰσοτιμία* to the *ἀτιμία* created by the Komnenoi, the traditional *τάξις* of the empire deriving from *ἀρετή* remained only a vacuous pretence. In this situation the ruling class stops pursuing the common good (*τῶν κοινῶν*) and pursues only individual interests.

In a passage concerning the reign of Alexios III Angelos Niketas clearly mentions the problem of the decrease of dignity and authority linked to the arbitrary assignment of honors and high positions in the political and administrative Byzantine apparatus:

He did not raise up someone held in high repute because of his learning or did he elevate a dignitary to the next successive grade, but he raised up and promoted everyone, both him who had received some dignity but briefly and him who had never been considered worthy even of the lowest rank, to the highest and supreme dignity. Thus the highest honor became dishonorable and the love of honor a thankless pursuit. Many equated promotion with demotion when later they were justly and deservedly promoted to those dignities which others received undeservedly, awarded the same honor and esteem as those who deserved the dignity but who were overlooked and reckoned as ignoble⁶⁶.

A few paragraphs later, while he is criticizing the same emperor for his deplorable habit in assigning political offices even to Cumans and Syrians, comparing the empire to a ship and Alexios to a captain, Niketas says that, owing to this bad practice, citizens stigmatize all the men who are in power,

65. *Chronikè Diéghesis*, 224; [H.M.], 127; cfr. BRAND, *Byzantium confronts the West. 1180-1204*, 10 and 31-34.

66. Cfr. *Chronikè Diéghesis*, 454; [H.M.], 249-250.

cease to trust them, and consequently the political navigation become unsafe⁶⁷.

As already pointed out, in Choniates' view trust in imperial institutions and the empire's *ἀσφάλεια* are linked to each other: if the subjects become aware of the fact that public offices are not assigned on the basis of merit, the solidity of the state is fatally compromised.

Paradoxically the only Komnenian emperor who utilized a system based on merit in order to allocate public offices was Andronikos Komnenos generally defined by Niketas in the *Chronikè Diéghesis* as a wild and bloody tyrant. However, even if he strongly criticized Andronikos and his beastly politics, he judged him positively for the implementation of this system⁶⁸.

On the contrary during the reign of Emperor John II, for example, Gregory of Kamateros, although a learned man (*λόγιος*), was only able to become *logothete* of the *sekreta* after his marriage to a relative of the emperor: he was not considered worthy being promoted until the creation of a blood tie with the Komnenoi⁶⁹. Similarly, in the years of Isaakios II's reign, Basil Vatatzēs⁷⁰, who belonged to an unremarkable family, became domestic of the East through a marriage to "the emperor's second cousin on his father's side"⁷¹. Niketas tells us that he himself was arbitrarily removed

67. Cfr. *Chronikè Diéghesis*, 484: "the pilot of the ship of state, therefore, was ill-spoken of by all, and the officers he stationed in command at the bow and the crew were subjected to the most abominable curses", [H.M.], 265; about Alexios Angelos as a steersman, see also *Chronikè Diéghesis*, 460.

68. Cfr. *Chronikè Diéghesis*, 325-326: "But he refused to sell these public offices to those who wanted them, to hand them out to the baseborn for a sum; instead, he carefully selected them and appointed them to office without receiving payment in return [...]; and as Ezekiel's vision wishes it to be, bones were drawn to bones and joints to joints. Within a short time the greater number of cities revived and recovered their former prosperity", [H.M.], 179; cfr. *Chronikè Diéghesis*, 330; KAZHDAN – MAISANO – PONTANI, *Niceta Coniata. Grandezza e catastrofe di Bisanzio*, 663; KALDELLIS, *Paradox, Reversal and the Meaning of History*, 94.

69. Cfr. *Chronikè Diéghesis*, 9; cfr. KAZHDAN – MAISANO – PONTANI, *Niceta Coniata. Grandezza e catastrofe di Bisanzio*, 518; KAZHDAN, *La produzione intellettuale a Bisanzio. Libri e scrittori in una società colta*, 106.

70. PONTANI – VAN DIETEN, *Niceta Coniata. Grandezza e catastrofe di Bisanzio*, 731-732.

71. Cfr. *Chronikè Diéghesis*, 400; [H.M.], 220.

from an important political office by the Emperor Alexios V Doukas who wanted to promote a relative⁷².

The Byzantine historian is however more worried about the second consequence deriving from this critical situation so much that I am inclined to consider it as a third peculiar and independent aspect of *ἀσφάλεια* in his thought. The decrease of career opportunities for members of the “second class” aristocracy might support rebellions and usurpation attempts. These were very frequent during the later XIIth century and were promoted by different actors: in some of them only the members of the imperial family were involved; other rebellions were instigated by the aristocracy; others, finally, were concerned with an entire social *corpus*⁷³.

Indubitably all these circumstances are related to the theme of *ἀσφάλεια*. However, even if we think that this worry is related to Niketas’ link to the “second class” aristocracy, it seems to be a concern of a member of the generic aristocracy. In fact if we can refer to his cultural membership the idea that those violent social perturbations represent the opposite of *τάξις*, he does not seem focused on this, but, above all, on the risk involvement of the masses (*στῖφος*) in seditious actions.

In his view there is no worse damage for *τάξις* than the wild insurrections of the mob. The consequences of these actions are more dangerous than the events themselves: no-one can imagine and foreshadow what the people’s rage will be in these situations. The mob is determined to pursue its aims and, while it is acting, it often loses sight of them and inclines to become subservient to individual interests; due to its poorly solid nature it can also be easily led by demagogues⁷⁴. So for political power it can be very hard to

72. Cfr. *Chronikè Diéghesis*, 565: “Following him about as his assistant was the feeble shadow of his father-in-law Philokalēs, and in order to place him at the head of the senate, he dismissed me as logothete of the *sekreta*, without even the benefit of a specious excuse, and promoted him in my place”, [H.M.], 311; cfr. KAZHDAN – MAISANO – PONTANI, *Niceta Coniata. Grandezza e catastrofe di Bisanzio*, 518; KAZHDAN, *La produzione intellettuale a Bisanzio. Libri e scrittori in una società colta*, 106; MAGOULIAS, *O City of Byzantium, Annals of Niketas Choniates*, XIV.

73. Cfr. *Chronikè Diéghesis*, 10, 231 ss., 266, 376 ss., 392, 399 ss., 420 ss., 450 ss.; cfr. CHEYNET, *Le classi dirigenti dell'impero*, 210-212; GARLAND, *Political Power and the Populace in Byzantium Prior to the Fourth Crusade*, 51-52.

74. Consider, for example, the accession to the throne and the sudden fall of Nicholas Kannavos initially supported by the people and immediately abandoned by them (cfr.

restore internal *τάξις* and consequently the condition of *ασφάλεια* for all citizens. Niketas' thought about this topic can be read from two different perspectives: as a member of the "second class" aristocracy he appears very worried about the subversion of imperial *τάξις* and then for the *ασφάλεια* of the empire, but as a member of aristocracy at large, he seems to fear for his personal *ασφάλεια* too. He recalls in the *Chronikè Diéghesis* the fall of *protosebastos* Alexios during the reign of the young Alexios II and the plundering of houses and properties by aristocratic members linked to him and his tyrannical politics⁷⁵. Niketas criticizes the *protosebastos* Alexios⁷⁶, but he is afraid of the mob's wild reaction, which he considers a serious problem in the rebuilt empire.

In order not to compromise the social *τάξις*, non aristocratic people must trust power and obey it: they can neither decide nor act autonomously. In Niketas' thought the obedience by the mob is one of the conditions which allows the empire to survive and to be solid: he considers that it is right by nature because it reflects the pecking order in the Kingdom of Heaven that represents the ideal reference pattern for all political systems on earth.

The elements of Niketas' political conception found in his *Chronikè Diéghesis* are indubitably linked to, and deeply influenced by, his membership to the aristocratic class: his strongly monarchical view, his contempt for the mob, his rigid hierarchical vision of society appear strongly related to the cultural background of this social group. Furthermore his anti-absolutism and his fierce opposition to the Komnenian emperors derive from his link to the "second class" aristocracy that was producing in these years a political thought strictly bound up with these political ideas.

However it seems that Niketas, by his enlarging the aspects related to the trinomial *τάξις*, *ἀρετή* and *ασφάλεια*, deeply examines this political problem trying to understand if and how it influenced the fall of the empire. It neither makes Niketas a political thinker nor renders his *Chronikè Diéghesis* a political text, but the political analysis in this work is a very

Chronikè Diéghesis, 564): "Not long afterwards, he was overpowered by Doukas's armed troops and thrown into prison, receiving no assistance from his subjects, all of whom had dispersed immediately following Doukas's proclamation", [H.M.], 309.

75. Cfr. *Chronikè Diéghesis*, 234-235; cfr. GARLAND, *Political Power and the Populace in Byzantium Prior to the Fourth Crusade*, 35.

76. Cfr. *Chronikè Diéghesis*, 250.

significant resource to try to read as widely as possible the events of 1204. From this perspective the most innovative contribution is in my opinion the complex idea of *ἀσφάλεια* and the subsequent analysis of the spread of insecurity inside the social *corpus*. As I have said in the opening lines it is not merely confined to the three cases that I have focused on, but involves several political and social fields that competed to create the preconditions of the fall.

THE POLITICAL PROBLEM OF INTERNAL «ΑΣΦΑΛΕΙΑ» IN NIKETAS
CHONIATES' CHRONIKÈ DIÉGHESIS:
A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR TO THE CONSTANTINOPLE'S FALL IN 1204

In this essay I analyze the idea of internal *ἀσφάλεια* (safety) in the political thought of the Byzantine historian Niketas Choniates (1150-55/1217 ca.), as it appears in his *Chronikè Diégghesis*. This historical work covers the period 1118-1206 and is a very significant source about the history of Byzantine Empire in the XIIth century and about its fall in 1204. Particularly I focus on three aspects of the idea of *ἀσφάλεια* in the “second class aristocracy”, as Paul Magdalino defined it in his works. According to Niketas' thought, the lack of safety in the empire creates in the XIIth century certain preconditions of Constantinople's fall in 1204.