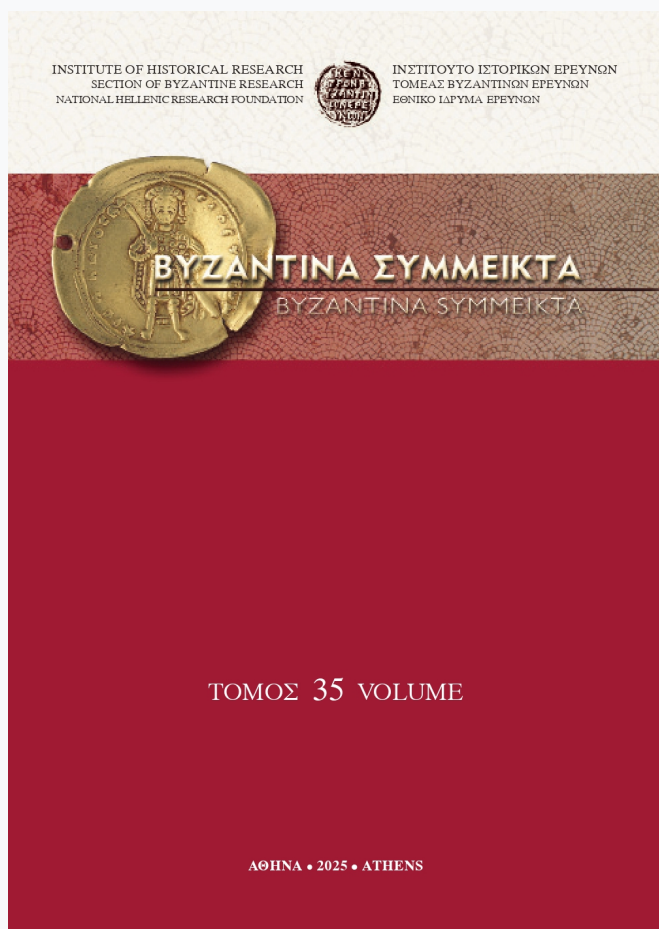


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## Norms of Violence in Byzantine Civil Wars (976 – 1081)

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## NORMS OF VIOLENCE IN BYZANTINE CIVIL WARS (976 – 1081)\*

The civil wars of the medieval east Roman state have attracted much attention from historians, especially in recent years. Important studies have deepened our understanding of the political dynamics of civil wars<sup>1</sup>, as well as the ideological systems that undergirded such conflicts and used to justify them<sup>2</sup>. This study aims to contribute to our knowledge of this topic by focusing on the hitherto neglected question of legitimate conduct during civil war, that is the (necessarily unwritten) norms that governed the actions of belligerents, separate from the legitimacy of their overall cause. To borrow terms from modern international law, this study focuses on *jus in bello*, how war ought to be fought, rather than *jus ad bellum*, the conditions that makes the war itself legal or not<sup>3</sup>. Georgios Chatzelis has noted that Byzantinists have barely addressed questions of *jus in bello* in general, but his own study

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1. See especially J.-C. CHEYNET, *Pouvoir et contestations à Byzance (963-1210)*, Paris 1990; W. TREADGOLD, Byzantium, the Reluctant Warrior, in *Noble Ideals and Bloody Reality: Warfare in the Middle Ages*, ed. N. CHRISTIE – M. YAZIGI, Leiden 2006, 223-228.

2. J.-C. CHEYNET, Se révolter légitimement contre le «basileus»? in *Revolte und Sozialstatus von der Spätantike bis zur Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. P. DEPREUX, München 2008; Y. STOURAITIS, Bürgerkrieg in ideologischer Wahrnehmung durch die Byzantiner (7.-12. Jahrhundert): Die Frage der Legitimierung und Rechtfertigung, *JÖB* 60 (2010); A. KALDELLIS, *The Byzantine Republic: People and Power in New Rome*, Cambridge (Mass.) 2015, 125-138.

3. It is important to note that these are separate: a combatant can commit war crimes (or violate norms) in a war that is legal, while a soldier cannot be prosecuted for fighting in an illegal war.

focuses exclusively on wars against foreign enemies and not civil wars<sup>4</sup>. This paper argues that the norms of conduct in civil wars heavily stigmatized violence against those identified as Romans, especially civilians, and had a tangible effect on the behavior of the belligerent forces. Marked contrasts can be observed with the norms (or their absence) that governed the behavior of Roman armies toward foreign enemies of the empire, thereby establishing the realm of civil war as a distinct category of military behavior. The first part of this paper will explore the norms of violence between Romans, while the second will focus on how those norms were bound in ethnic conceptions of in-group and out-group membership. Even in civil wars, non-Roman participants were not protected by the norms governing violence between Romans, nor were they expected to be bound by them.

In exploring the connection between normative ideals and actual behavior, this paper will make use of what the scholar of the Western Middle-Ages Gerd Althoff termed *Spielregeln*, “rules of the game”. Althoff notes that those ‘rules’ provided both a framework for resolving conflicts and certain limitations on perceived excesses, while also cautioning that *Spielregeln* do not refer to explicit, consistently enforced rules as we might see in a modern sports game, but to informal rules upheld by consensus and liable to be contravened by those willing to pay the price for doing so<sup>5</sup>. In response, Philippe Buc argued that this approach ignores the role of the authors of our sources in crafting narratives of such ritualized encounters and the potential for them to be sites of contention as well as consensus-making<sup>6</sup>. While providing a valuable contribution, Althoff correctly pointed out in reply that even if the sources are not accurately reflecting “reality”, they are nevertheless participating in the same ritual culture as the actors on whom they are reporting<sup>7</sup>. The relative wealth of historiographical sources on the eleventh century allows us to view some events from different, sometimes opposing viewpoints, reflecting the partisan affiliation of the writers. As

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4. G. CHATZELIS, *Stratagems and the Byzantine Culture of War: The Theory of Military Trickery and Ethics in Byzantium (c. 900–1204)*, *BZ* 115/3 (2022), 719–721.

5. G. ALTHOFF, *Spielregeln der Politik im Mittelalter: Kommunikation in Frieden und Fehde*, Darmstadt 2014, *passim* but see especially 282–304 and 361–401 (afterword to second edition); G. ALTHOFF, *Rules and Rituals in Medieval Power Games*, Leiden 2019, 3–8, 42–60.

6. P. BUC, *The Dangers of Ritual*, Princeton 2001, *passim*.

7. G. ALTHOFF, *Rules and Rituals*, 9–15.

this paper will show, the political biases of our sources are not just obstacles to be overcome in the pursuit of ‘actual history’. By arguing for or against a particular candidate to the throne, contemporary historians took part in the ongoing political process of civil war<sup>8</sup>, and their disagreements exemplify the norms of east Roman society regarding conduct in civil war.

In regards to civil war in east Rome, Yannis Stouraitis offers the following definition: “An armed conflict involving the military forces of the imperial regime and one or more organized groups of subjects that used armed force in order to contest the rule of the empire in the person of the emperor or to contest the unity of the imperial realm itself”<sup>9</sup>. However, this definition collapses into the same category two distinct types of event: first, struggles over the throne and, second, revolts aiming to break away from the empire, which were conflicts with fundamentally differing political aims and means. As Stouraitis acknowledges, contemporaries regarded those as two distinct phenomena, the first as a war between Romans, the second as rebellions of the Bulgarians, Vlachs, etc., against the Romans<sup>10</sup>. Therefore this paper will use the term ‘civil war’ only for struggles over the throne and control of the state.

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8. Recent studies emphasize and elucidate the political context and motives of the historiographical sources on the eleventh century. Dimitris Krallis in particular made the case that “history, as practiced by Attaleiates, is politics”; D. KRALLIS, *Michael Attaleiates and the Politics of Imperial Decline in Eleventh-Century Byzantium*, Tempe 2012, 233. See also C. HOLMES, *Basil II and the Governance of the Empire*, Oxford 2005, 202-239, for the late eleventh century political context of Skylitzes and its relevance to the reconstruction of the reign of Basil II, and L. NEVILLE, *Heroes and Romans in Twelfth-Century Byzantium*, Cambridge 2012, on the *Material for History* of Bryennios the Younger.

9. Y. STOURAITIS, Civil War in the Christian Empire, in: *A Companion to the Byzantine Culture of War, ca. 300-1204*, ed. Y. STOURAITIS, Leiden 2018, 94.

10. STOURAITIS, Civil War in the Christian Empire, 99. In her study of revolts in the late twelfth century, Alicia Simpson emphasized that the separatist revolt of the Asenids hinged on a sense of ethnic separateness on the part of the Bulgarians and Vlachs, while the revolts of Isaakios Komnenos in Cyprus and Theodoros Mangaphas in Philadelphia aimed at the throne and cannot be considered ‘separatist’. This supports the distinction between ethnic revolts whose goal was independence and revolts of Roman claimants whose goal was control of the entire state. A. SIMPSON, Provincial Separatism in the Late Twelfth Century: A Case of Power Relations or Disparate Identities?, in: *Identities and Ideologies in the East Roman World*, ed. Y. STOURAITIS, Edinburgh 2022, 250-267.

The focus on the eleventh century is perhaps arbitrary, but appropriate for two reasons. The first is the aforementioned relative wealth of sources from the period. The second is that the period from the accession of Basil II in 976 to that of Alexios Komnenos in 1081 saw a large number of civil wars affecting every part of the empire<sup>11</sup>, making the question of conduct during those conflicts especially important.

### How to correctly pursue the throne

It is curious to note that in the extensive corpus of east Roman military manuals there is no reference to civil wars or rebellions or instructions for ‘best practices’ in such internal military conflicts<sup>12</sup>. While in general historians are wise to avoid trying to explain why something did not happen, the reason for this seems clear enough. Civil war is by definition a suspension or dissolution of the existing “order of things” and therefore inherently resistant to the theoretical elaboration that warfare in general has received for millennia<sup>13</sup>. After all, how does one explain how to fight a war that one should not be fighting?

In the same vein, while denunciations of rebellion can be found everywhere, we are hard pressed to find programmatic statements on how combatants in civil war, on either side, should behave. However, there is one text from the tail end of this period that approximates such an articulation of moral standards. Before becoming Archbishop of Ochrid, Theophylaktos Hephaisotos was the tutor of Konstantinos Doukas, son of Michael VII,

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11. For an overview of internal conflicts at this period, see CHEYNET, *Pouvoir et contestations*, 27-90. For further reading on the eleventh century and the problems facing the Eastern Roman Empire at the time, see the papers collected in: *Η αυτοκρατορία σε κρίση (;): Το Βυζάντιο τον 11ο αι. (1025-1081)*, ed. V. VLYSIDOU, Athens 2003, particularly the first one; S. VRYONIS, JR., *The Eleventh Century: was there a Crisis in the Empire? The Decline of Quality and Quantity in the Byzantine Armed Force*, 17-43, and the second, which responds to Vryonis; J. HALDON, *Approaches to an Alternative Military History of the Period ca. 1025-1071*, 45-74.

12. One could point to Kekaumenos as a counter-example, since he does in fact offer much advice on how to behave during a rebellion, but his work is not simply a military manual but is intended to embrace a much wider range of contemporary social reality.

13. The bibliography that could be cited here is vast, but this argument is guided mostly by G. AGAM BEN, *Stasis: Civil War as a Political Paradigm*, trans. N. HERON, Stanford 2015, *passim*; and for the east Roman context: KALDELLIS, *Byzantine Republic*, 85-88, 159-164.

during his co-emperorship under Alexios I Komnenos (1081-1087)<sup>14</sup>. In this role he wrote and possibly delivered an oration to the shadow court of Konstantinos Doukas and his mother, Maria of Georgia (also known as “Maria of Alania”), that led a short and tense existence under the Komnenoi in the Mangana Palace<sup>15</sup>.

In the oration Theophylaktos nods to the three classical (i.e., Aristotelian) forms of government (monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy), each with its own corrupted form. But admitting that he does not have much to say about the others, he goes on to devote his attention to monarchy and its corruption, tyranny<sup>16</sup>. In comparing the two, Theophylaktos distinguishes between the manner in which a *tyrannos* and a proper *basileus* comes to office:

Πρῶτον μὲν οὖν ὁ τύραννος ἐπὶ τὴν ἀρχὴν ἐκβιάζεται· οὐγὰρ ὑπὸ τῶν πολιτῶν τὰ χαλινὰ τῆς ἀρχῆς ἐκδέχεται, ἀλλ’ αὐτὸς ἀρπάζει ταῦτα σφαγαῖς τε καὶ αἵμασι. Τοιαῦτα μὲν αὐτῷ τὰ προοίμια καὶ οὕτως ἐξ ἀρχῆς τοῖς αἵμασι περιρραίνεται.

In the first place, the tyrant forces his way into office. He does not receive the reins of power from the citizens, so he seizes them through slaughter and bloodshed. Because he starts off in such a way, he is splattered with blood from the outset<sup>17</sup>.

On the other hand:

Καὶ πρῶτον ὄρα τοῦτον εὐθὺς ἐναντία τῷ τυράννῳ ξωγροῦντα τὰ πρόθυρα καὶ οὐ βία τὴν ἀρχὴν κτῶμενον, οὐδὲ τὸν πέπλον αἵματι βάπτοντα, ἀλλ’ εὐνοίᾳ πλήθους καὶ λαοῦ συνδρομῇ καὶ σώφρονι καὶ εὐγνώμονι· ἀρετῆς γὰρ ἄθλον τὴν βασιλείαν ἐκδέχεται καὶ πάντες ὑποχωροῦσι τῶν κρείττονων τῷ κρείττονι.

14. On the background to this composition and its use of the contrast between *basileus* and *tyrannos*, see J.V. DE MEDEIROS PUBLIO DIAS, Performance, Ceremonial and Power in the *Basilikoi Logoi* by Theophylact of Ohrid, *BZ* 115/3 (2022), 803-805, 820-824.

15. Anna Komnene, *Alexiad*, ed. D. Reinsch – A. Kambylis, *Annae Comnenae Alexias* [CFHB 40/1], Berlin – New York 2001, 3.4.7.

16. Theophylaktos, *Λόγος εἰς τὸν πορφυρογέννητον κῆρ Κωνσταντῖνον*, ed. P. GAUTIER, *Theophylacte d’Achrida: Discours, Traités, Poésies*, Thessaloniki 1980, 195; tr. M. KRUSE (publication forthcoming). See also Aristotle, *Politics*, 1289a; ed. W.D. ROSS, *Aristotelis Politica*, Oxford 1957; and Polybius, 6.4; ed. T. BÜTTNER-WOBST, *Polybii Historiae*, vol. 2, Leipzig 1889.

17. Theophylaktos, *Λόγος εἰς Κωνσταντῖνον*, 195-7.

First off, notice that a king enters the palace in a way that is antithetical to that of the tyrant: he does not gain office by force nor bathe his shirt in blood. Instead, he gains his office through the prudent and faithful goodwill of the masses and the assembly of the people. He receives the kingship as a prize for virtue and because all men yield the best things to the best man<sup>18</sup>.

These statements too, find antecedents in ancient political thought. Indeed, Aristotle maintains that being willingly accepted by the people is at the heart of what distinguishes kingship from tyranny.<sup>19</sup> Of course, the theories of Aristotle were meant to describe a very different world from that of the eleventh century, but the employment of ancient models and categories should not lead us to dismiss the argument of Theophylaktos as outdated academic sophistry. His oration addressed issues of very contemporary relevance; it is impossible that anyone attending the oration would have heard Theophylaktos's description of how a tyrant comes to power and not thought of the brutal capture of Constantinople by Alexios Komnenos only a few years earlier, in 1081<sup>20</sup>.

The oration of Theophylaktos is illuminating for our purposes because it employs commonly shared values for the purpose of partisan attacks against the Komnenoi. And we can see that when Anna Komnene rebuffs such attacks, she does so in the framework of the exact same values. While Zonaras speaks of bloodshed and the rape of virgins dedicated to God and of married women during the coup of 1081<sup>21</sup>, she admits that her father's soldiers looted houses and churches in Constantinople during its capture, but explicitly, and quite implausibly, denies that killings occurred<sup>22</sup>.

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18. Theophylaktos, *Λόγος εἰς Κωνσταντῖνον*, 199. Kruse translates βασιλεύς in this oration as 'king', which is kept here due to Theophylaktos's relating of this concept to Aristotelean political theory, in which 'emperor' would not make much sense.

19. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1289a, 1295a; see also D. RIESBECK, *Aristotle on Political Community*, Cambridge 2016, 239-248.

20. João Vicente de Medeiros Publio Dias notes that other comments in this oration of Theophylaktos can also be read as direct criticism of Alexios Komnenos: DE MEDEIROS PUBLIO DIAS, *Performance, Ceremonial and Power*, 821-822.

21. Ioannes Zonaras, *Epitome of Histories*, ed. B. NIEBUHR, *Ioannis Zonarae Epitomae Historiarum, Libri XVIII*, Bonn 1879, vol. 3, 729.

22. Anna Komnene, *Alexiad*, 2.10.4.



By going out of her way to deny such killings, she indicates the political damage caused by the breaking of this taboo. Beyond the personal values of their authors, these texts point to a broader set of norms within the east Roman polity regarding the use of violence in the context of civil war. These norms encompassed the population of Constantinople at large and were not restricted to the elite from which the leaders of either side, and the writers of our sources, were drawn.

Besides denying any killings, Anna takes pains to shift the blame away from Alexios, portraying the violence as the action of out-of-control soldiers. She also asserts that though he was not at fault, he still felt profound guilt for how the capture of Constantinople took place. He assembled the Patriarch Kosmas and high ranking members of the Synod and the monastic order for them to pass appropriate punishment on him. They imposed a harsh penance on him, his family, and those who shared in his rebellion, and they piously (and publicly) carried this out with the appropriate bewailing and lamentation<sup>23</sup>.

In doing so, Alexios followed the traditional model of ‘penitential kingship’ that has been described by Gilbert Dagron, which regarded repentance not simply as mitigating the ruler’s sins, but as a positive “imperial virtue” that was cultivated for its own sake<sup>24</sup>. Yet the role that this penance played in the legitimation of Alexios, and in the later articulation of his imperial persona by his daughter, does not invalidate its immediate role in responding to the crisis caused by his brutal capture of Constantinople. No other person who became emperor by revolt in this period chose or was required to undertake equivalent measures<sup>25</sup>. The jab of Theophylaktos, as a spokesman for the Doukai, at Alexios and his bloody rise to throne touched an exposed nerve that called the very legitimacy of Komnenian rule into question. Indeed, when describing the confrontation with the crusaders outside the walls of Constantinople in Thursday of Holy

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23. Anna Komnene, *Alexiad*, 3.5.2-5. See also P. BUCKLEY, *The Alexiad of Anna Komnene: Artistic Strategy in the Making of a Myth*, Cambridge 2014, 96-98.

24. G. DAGRON, *Emperor and Priest: The Imperial Office in Byzantium*, trans. J. BIRELL, Cambridge 2000, 114-124.

25. The last usurping emperor who was forced to undertake penance before Alexios Komnenos was Ioannes Tzimiskes more than a century before, who gained the throne by murdering his uncle Nikephoros Phokas.



Week (1097), Anna says that the loyalists of Alexios (“εὔνοι περὶ τὸν αὐτοκράτορα”) were afraid that they were to suffer divine vengeance for the Thursday in 1081 in which they themselves captured the city, conveying the enduring significance of this event almost twenty years later and the anxiety it produced in the Komnenian ruling faction<sup>26</sup>. There is no parallel to these feelings of anxiety and guilt, and the public performance of penance attached to them, in the foreign wars of the east Romans, including against foreign Christian peoples. Alexios (like other Roman elites) was not considered accountable for human life in the abstract, but specifically for the life, safety, and property of his Roman compatriots. Romans killing Romans activated a more restrictive and binding set of moral standards than what we find applied to foreign wars.

The rise of Alexios’s uncle, Isaakios Komnenos, to the throne in 1057 was probably even bloodier; his victory at the battle of Nicaea (or Hades), was one of the costliest military encounters in human life for the Roman state in the eleventh century<sup>27</sup>. Attaleiates notes that after his death, the sarcophagus of Isaakios was seen to be “full of moisture”, occasioning debate among the people. The first opinion he cites regarding this is that “it was a sign of his punishment in Hell for the many people who died at Nicaea during the outbreak of civil war (κολάσεως ἔνδειγμα τὸ φανέν διὰ τὸν πολλὸν φόνον ἐκείνον τὸν ἐκ τοῦ κροτηθέντος ἐμφυλίου πολέμου γενόμενον περὶ Νίκαιαν)”<sup>28</sup>. Whether Attaleiates was accurately reporting on the public mood in the 1060s or not, it is clear that this claim reflects a widely-held standard on the conduct of civil wars. It is important to note that while the two cannot be separated, it is the deaths that occurred during the rebellion rather than the rebellion itself that are singled out as the cause of divine opprobrium on Isaakios. Thus, his actions during the rebellion are brought to the fore over the very fact of its existence, highlighting the importance of the norms of conduct in civil war as distinct from the legitimacy of revolts

26. Anna Komnene, *Alexiad*, 10.9.4.

27. G. LEVENIOTIS, “Such carnage in one place had not occurred before in Byzantium”: the Battle of Hades (20 August 1057 CE) and its repercussions, in: *War in Eleventh-Century Byzantium*, ed. G. THEOTOKIS – M. MEŠKO, Abingdon 2021, 54-56.

28. Michael Attaleiates, *History*, ed. E. TSOLAKIS, *Michaelis Attaliatae Historia* [CFHB 50], Athens 2011, 69; tr. A. KALDELLIS – D. KRALLIS, *The History: Michael Attaleiates*, Cambridge (MA) 2012. Citation to the *History* of Attaleiates follow the Bekker pagination.

by themselves. There were immediate political implications and moral consequences for those who made use of violence in civil wars. The more bloodless the course of such a war for both sides, the better. We do not find this standard in the foreign wars of the east Romans.

The reverse image that Theophylaktos presents, of how the legitimate *basileus* comes to power, also cannot be dismissed as mere court rhetoric. In 1047, the rebel Leon Tornikios defeated the forces of Emperor Konstantinos IX Monomachos in a battle outside the gates of Constantinople, causing the defenders on the walls to flee. Psellos and Attaleiates agree that Tornikios could have easily taken the city by storm at this point, but refused to do so. Psellos says that the rebel ordered his soldiers to stop engaging in “familial slaughter (*φόνος συγγενικός*)”<sup>29</sup>. Attaleiates concurs, saying that Tornikios was motivated by “compassion”, since he thought that “his own people (*τὸ ὁμόφυλον*)” would suffer from an assault on the city<sup>30</sup>. Instead, Tornikios expected to be welcomed into the city. Psellos reports:

ἀλλ’ οὗτος τὴν εἴσοδον ἄπαξ ἀποδειλιάσας· ἢ μᾶλλον τεθαρρηκώς, ὥς παρ’ ἡμῶν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν παρακληθεῖν καὶ ὑπὸ προηγουμένῳ φωτὶ καὶ βασιλείῳ πομπῇ ἀναχθεῖν εἰς τὰ βασίλεια, τὴν μὲν εἴσοδον ἐς αὖριον ἀναβάλλεται.

But Tornikios shirked the final entry. Perhaps it would be truer to say that he was confidently awaiting our invitation to make him emperor. He expected to be led up to the palace preceded by torches, in a procession worthy of a sovereign, and so he put off his entry to the morrow<sup>31</sup>.

Again, Attaleiates paints a similar picture:

... ἐπιφαίνεται τοῖς τῆς πόλεως, εὐέλπιδες ὦν ὡς τῇ προτεραία καταπλήξας τοὺς ἐναντίους σὺν εὐλαβείᾳ καὶ φόβῳ παρὰ τούτων ὑποδεχθήσεται, τὰς πύλας αὐτῷ ἀναπεταννύντων καὶ τῆς πρὸς τὰ βασίλεια φερούσης βασιλικῆς προηγουμένων.

... [Tornikios] presented himself to the people of the City in the good hope that his opponents would have been so frightened by what had happened on

29. Michael Psellos, *Chronography*, ed. D. REINSCH, *Michaelis Pselli Chronographia*, Berlin 2014, 6.114.

30. Attaleiates, *History*, 26.

31. Psellos, *Chronography*, 6.114.

the previous day that they would now receive him with reverence and fear, throw open the gates for him, and escort him along the imperial boulevard that leads to the palace<sup>32</sup>.

This is not the idealized scenario of Theophylaktos for the accession of a true *basileus*. As Attaleiates emphasizes, Tornikios expected to be welcomed to the City partly due to the fear of its inhabitants after his victory in battle. But rather than pressing his initial advantage and leading to more deaths, Tornikios waited for the citizens to recognize his victory and invite him to take up the throne. Mindful of public opinion, he attempted to choreograph for himself a reception that fits quite well, in semblance at least, with how Theophylaktos says a good *basileus* gains the throne. As Psellos and Attaleiates recognized, Tornikios allowed himself to be guided by the norms expected of claimants to throne to the extent of forsaking an obvious opportunity to capture Constantinople and gain power.

Ultimately, Tornikios's refusal to push his advantage allowed the emperor's forces to regroup and led to his downfall. But this strategic calculation was not a foregone failure. Psellos recounts that Monomachos told him, upon seeing Tornikios ordering his men to stop the killings, that "when a cruel fellow like this rebel turns to compassion and mercy, it might win him divine approval (τυραννεῖν ὁ δεινὸς ἀνὴρ ἐπιβαλόμενος, φιλανθρώπους ἀφίησι καὶ ἡμέρους φωνάζ. δέδοικα γὰρ, μὴ ἐντεῦθεν τὴν θεῖαν ἑαυτῷ συνεπισπάσῃται δύναμιν)"<sup>33</sup>. Tornikios was not simply acting from naiveté; his decision makes sense (even if it could be considered inexpedient in hindsight) within the "rules of the game" of east Roman civil wars, in which perceived excesses could exact a real price.

The practical consequences of contravening these norms can be seen in an event thirty years later, when another Macedonian rebel, Nikephoros Bryennios the Elder, tried to get the Constantinopolitans to invite him in. He sent his brother, Ioannes, at the head of an army, but rather than besiege the city he was meant to convince the inhabitants to shake off the unpopular regime of Michael VII Doukas and allow Nikephoros to enter peacefully, with a reception fit for an emperor<sup>34</sup>. These hopes were proven false and

32. Attaleiates, *History*, 27.

33. Psellos, *Chronography*, 6.115.

34. Attaleiates, *History*, 250-251; Nikephoros Bryennios, *Material for History*, ed. P. GAUTIER, *Nicéphore Bryennios, Histoire*, Brussels 1975, 3.10.

the inhabitants of the City turned against the Bryennioi after their soldiers looted and burned houses in the suburbs. In essence, the entire episode can be configured in the terms set by Theophylaktos: Nikephoros Bryennios attempted to play the role of legitimate *basileus* who “gains the goodwill of the people” and enters the palace at their invitation, while the actions of his soldiers casted him in the antithetical role of a tyrant who attempts to seize power by bloodshed and destruction.

Our two main sources for the revolt of Nikephoros Bryennios the Elder are his grandson Nikephoros Bryennios the Younger and Michael Attaleiates. They both agree about the main sequence of events, but disagree on about who was at fault for the outbreak of violence. Bryennios claims that the Constantinopolitans were well-disposed to his grandfather, but “the devil (τὸ δαίμόνιον)” destroyed this good will by causing some of Ioannes Bryennios’s soldiers to loot and burn houses on the suburbs of the capital. Ioannes attempted to stop the looters and contain the fire but was not successful, causing the inhabitants of Constantinople to turn against him and his brother<sup>35</sup>. According to Attaleiates, however, this plan was misguided from the start as the inhabitants of the capital awaited the “imperial advent (βασίλειον ἐπιδημίαν)” of Botaneiates “as if it were the advent of God (ὡς ἐπιδημίαν Θεοῦ).” Realizing that he would not be accepted willingly, Ioannes Bryennios was overcome by rage and set fire to the suburbs himself<sup>36</sup>. But Attaleiates does not mention anyone dying in those fires; apparently the property damage was damaging enough by itself to the popularity of the Bryennioi, causing Constantinopolitans to turn against them and Attaleiates to focus on it in his invective. Both accounts are motivated by obvious partisan considerations, Bryennios the Younger for his family and Attaleiates for Botaneiates and against his rivals. Trying to figure out “who is right” and whether Ioannes Bryennios was at fault would be futile. The important point is to note that the disagreement hinges on whether the various parties upheld or failed moral standards that were themselves accepted without question by all sides, and that this moral calculus was used to make the candidates for the throne seem more or less

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35. Bryennios, *Material for History*, 3.11-12. The devil is mentioned several times by Bryennios as a cause for political dissension, especially when disadvantageous to members of the Bryennioi family; NEVILLE, *Heroes and Romans*, 124-125.

36. Attaleiates, *History*, 252.

viable or legitimate. Dimitris Krallis showed how eleventh-century political culture negotiated the relationship between military elites and civilian communities and praised them for civic virtues such as decorum and wit, and for respecting the lives and property of the empire's citizens<sup>37</sup>.

Nor were these norms limited to Constantinople. After Nikephoros Bryennios gathered his supporters in Macedonia, but before openly declaring his rebellion, he encamped before Traianopolis, also in the theme of Macedonia. As the city wished to remain loyal to the Michael VII, it closed its gates to Bryennios. Verbal arguments between Bryennios's soldiers and the inhabitants of the city who stood guard on the wall turned into an exchange of missiles. But when Bryennios the Elder heard that his troops were preparing ladders for an assault on the city, he sent men to stop them lest they "pollute their hands with kindred blood (*ἐμφυλῖω αἵματι τὰς χεῖρας μιανοῦσιν*)"<sup>38</sup>.

Instead, according to Bryennios the Younger, the son of Bryennios the Elder (the Younger's father or uncle) scaled the walls at night with two friends, caught the guards asleep and forced them to acclaim Bryennios. Once the inhabitants of Traianopolis noticed that the walls were taken, they too acclaimed Bryennios as emperor and begged for mercy. The soldiers outside began to climb the wall with ladders, but the son of Nikephoros Bryennios stopped them, presumably worried about what they would do to the inhabitants, and ordered them to acclaim his father from outside the walls<sup>39</sup>.

This narrative might seem far-fetched; the walls of a city being taken by three young noblemen alone resembles an Homeric feat of valor. Attaleiates also mentions that Bryennios was first proclaimed emperor

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37. D. KRALLIS, *Urbane Warriors: Smoothing out Tensions between Soldiers and Civilians in Attaleiates' Encomium to Emperor Nikephoros III Botaneiates* in: *Byzantium in the Eleventh Century: Being in Between* ed. M. LAUXTERMANN – M. WHITTON (eds.), Abingdon 2017, 158-60.

38. Bryennios, *Material for History*, 3.9. For more on military rhetoric and communication between commanders and soldiers, see K. KARAPLİ, *Κατενδωσις στρατού: Η οργάνωση και η ψυχολογική προετοιμασία του βυζαντινού στρατού πριν από τον πόλεμο (610-1081)*, Athens 2010, in particular 221-231.

39. Bryennios, *Material for History*, 3.9. See also NEVILLE, *Heroes and Romans*, 124-125.

in Traianopolis, but does not mention any opposition in the city<sup>40</sup>. It was important for Bryennios the Younger to emphasize that his grandfather and father or uncle ensured that “kindred blood” was not spilt in the course of his rebellion<sup>41</sup>, but he did not hide that the inhabitants of Traianopolis acclaimed Bryennios in fear for their lives. Evidently, he did not consider that to lessen the significance of their acclamation.

In this regard we can see that the distinction between “legitimate” and “illegitimate” paths to power held a tangible impact on the behavior of participants in civil wars, but it was never as clear-cut as presented by Theophylaktos. A proper *basileus* was meant to come to power by the consent of his subjects, but that consent could be extracted through threats to their lives, as Bryennios the Younger willingly admits regarding his grandfather in Traianopolis. Similarly, Attaleiates explained the decision of Tornikios to halt before the Theodosian walls both as an act of “compassion” and as a calculation that his victory has “frightened” them enough to induce them to abandon Konstantinos IX Monomachos and acclaim him<sup>42</sup>. For their own part, civilian communities were able to leverage their political agency and ability to legitimate contenders to the throne by acclamations in order to ensure their safety.

### **Making threats and carrying them out**

The sources frequently record various instances of threats of violence employed against communities in various context. Alongside the aforementioned case of Bryennios in Traianopolis, we can cite the contemporary episode of Alexios Komnenos at Thessaloniki in 1078. After Alexios, then Domestikos of the Scholai of the West for Nikephoros III Botaneiates, defeated the rebel Nikephoros Basilakes in battle, the latter retreated to Thessaloniki. Nikephoros Bryennios the Younger says that Alexios offered Basilakes a guarantee that he will not be harmed “if he surrendered himself and the city.” Once Basilakes refused the Thessalonicans turned against him, and eventually his own men handed Basilakes over to Alexios Komnenos<sup>43</sup>.

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40. Attaleiates, *History*, 246-247.

41. NEVILLE, *Heroes and Romans*, 125.

42. Attaleiates, *History*, 27.

43. Bryennios, *Material for History*, 4.27.

Anna Komnene's version of this event seems to portray her father in a harsher light, though it is based on that of her husband, Bryennios the Younger<sup>44</sup>. She reports that as Basilakes reached Thessaloniki, the inhabitants received him willingly but closed the gates to Alexios. The Domestikos then set up camp and "threatened that he would attack the walls and sack the city (*ἡπείλει τειχομαχίας τῇ πόλει καὶ πόρθησιν ἄντικρυς*)". Though Basilakes refused to surrender, the townspeople allowed Alexios entry out of fear "that the city would be sacked and something horrible would happen to them" (*μὴ ἀλῶναι τὴν πόλιν καὶ δεινὸν τι παθεῖν*)<sup>45</sup>. Compared to the extensive apologism for her father in regards to the sacking of Constantinople, it is notable that Anna has no problem with depicting Alexios threatening to do the same in Thessaloniki. Somewhat paradoxically, the norms against violence on civilians does not seem to have applied to *threatening* such violence.

Contemporary historians tend not to pay attention to internal divisions within communities involved in civil wars, with the "Thessalonicans" or "Traianopolitans" portrayed as acting as a unit. However, several sources indicate that there were often divided loyalties in provincial communities; Attaleiates' account of his own involvement in such a conflict in Raideustos during the Bryennios revolt is well known<sup>46</sup>. In this situation, military pressure from one of the contending sides could help their supporters gain the upper hand within their own communities. In the revolt of Bardas Skleros, Skylitzes tells us that an initial victory of the rebel "disturbed many of those remaining faithful to the emperor and prompted them to desert to Skleros" (*αὕτη ἡ νίκη πολλοὺς τῶν τῷ βασιλεῖ προσκειμένων κατέσεισε καὶ αὐτομολῆσαι πρὸς τὸν Σκληρὸν ἠνάγκασεν*)<sup>47</sup>. Significantly, Skylitzes informs us that "the people of Attaleia put the emperor's *droungarios* in chains, and, with all the fleet, rallied to [Skleros' lieutenant]" (*Ἀτταλεῖς δεσμὰ περιθέντες τῷ ναυάρχῳ τοῦ βασιλέως... προσχωροῦσι μετὰ παντὸς*

44. D.-R. REINSCH, Zur literarischen Leistung der Anna Komnene, in: *ΛΕΙΜΩΝ: Studies Presented to Lennart Rydén*, ed. J. O. ROSENQVIST, Uppsala 1996, 122-125.

45. Anna Komnene, *Alexiad*, 1.9.3.

46. Attaleiates, *History*, 244-246, 249.

47. Skylitzes, *Synopsis of Histories*, ed. H. THURN, *Ioannis Scylitzae Synopsis historiarum* [CFHB 5], Berlin - New York 1973, 319; tr. J. WORTLEY, *John Skylitzes: A Synopsis of Byzantine History: 811-1057*, Cambridge 2010.



τοῦ στόλου)<sup>48</sup>. As Leon the Deacon mentions, taking over Attaleia and the naval forces stationed in it allowed Skleros to control the Marmara and directly threaten Constantinople<sup>49</sup>.

Several incidents suggest that threatening violence against the families of combatants in civil wars was a common tactic. Leon the *protovestiarios*, sent by Basil II against Bardas Skleros, slipped with his forces past Skleros and headed east. According to Skylitzes:

τοῦτο τὸ ἔργον λίαν τοὺς περὶ τὸν Σκληρὸν ἐδειμάτωσε, δεδιότας οὐ περὶ χρημάτων καὶ κτημάτων μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ περὶ τῶν τιμιωτάτων αὐτῶν. πολλοὶ οὖν ἐξομνύμενοι τὴν ἀποστασίαν τῷ πρωτοβεστιαρίῳ προσέερχον...

This manoeuvre sowed fear in the hearts of Skleros' men; they were afraid not only for their money and property, but also for those whom they held most dear. So, many of them renounced the uprising and flocked to the *protovestiarios*<sup>50</sup>.

Similarly, Yahya of Antioch reports that in 1022 many of the soldiers in an expedition with Basil II against the Georgians deserted "to defend their homes and families" once they heard of the revolt of Nikephoros Xiphias and Nikephoros Phokas<sup>51</sup>. The rebels gathered their forces in Cappadocia and cooperated with the Georgians, threatening to envelop the emperor's forces<sup>52</sup>. As Isaakios Komnenos advanced on Nicaea in 1057, the soldiers of the emperor "went home one by one, fearing for their wives and children or for other compelling reasons (οἱ μὲν στρατιῶται οἴκαδε ἕκαστος ἀπιών, οἷα περὶ γυναικὸς καὶ παίδων καὶ τῶν ἄλλων δεδιὼς ἀναγκαιοτάτων)"<sup>53</sup>.

48. Skylitzes, *Synopsis of Histories*, 319-320.

49. Leon the Deacon, ed. C. HASE, *Leonis Diaconi Caloensis Historiae Libri Decem*, Bonn 1828, 10.7; tr. A. TALBOT – D. SULLIVAN, *The History of Leo the Deacon*, Washington, D.C. 2005. There are discrepancies in the chronology of the capture of Attaleia during Skleros' revolt; HOLMES, *Basil II*, 117, 451-452.

50. Skylitzes, *Synopsis of Histories*, 320.

51. Yahya of Antioch, ed. I. KRATCHKOVSKY – A. VASILIEV, *Histoire de Yahya-Ibn-Said d'Antioche*, PO 23 (Paris 1932), 464-465.

52. E. TCHKOIDZE, Η επανάσταση του Νικηφόρου Φωκά και του Νικηφόρου Ξιφία (1021-1022): η τελευταία εσωτερική κρίση στη βασιλεία του Βασιλείου Β' (976-1025), *ByzSym* 24 (2014), 319-321.

53. Skylitzes, *Synopsis of Histories*, 492. See also CHEYNET, *Pouvoir et contestations*, 168-9.

While our sources say that soldiers feared for their homes and families, they do not detail what exactly the threat entailed, nor do we have any record of such a threat being carried out. It is instructive, however, that in the case of the Xiphias and Phokas revolt, we hear of only targeted reprisals against high-profile rebels after it was suppressed: according to Skylitzes, one Pherses was executed for killing several imperial officials, while Aristakes Lastivertsi adds that Pherses' son-in-law, Andronikos, was also beheaded<sup>54</sup>. However, Skylitzes makes it clear that this was the exception, “μόνον δὲ τὸν πατρίκιον Φέρσην ἀπέκτεινε,” while the other rebels were imprisoned and had their property confiscated, but not otherwise harmed<sup>55</sup>. The “Chronicle of Kartli”, part of the “Georgian Royal Annals”, claims that the emperor “beheaded many of [Xiphias] supporters”, but is unclear as to who and how many, since again it only mentions the same Pherses (or Peris) being executed<sup>56</sup>.

The discrepancy between the many instances of violence threatened against Romans and the relatively few cases of it being carried out, setting aside prominent members of the opposing factions and open combat between armed combatants that did not involve civilians, lies at the heart of the matter. The *Spielregeln* of civil wars allowed threats to be used to coerce various participants in the civil war but heavily discouraged carrying them out. Though “Byzantine” emperors are notorious for supposedly employing a heavy hand in punishing disloyalty, it seems that in fact, east Roman political culture was incredibly lenient towards those who took the opposite side in civil wars, especially if they defected before the end of the conflict<sup>57</sup>.

Skylitzes reports that when Leon Tornikios was defeated, emperor Konstantinos Monomachos allowed the rebel army to go home. While “those who remained faithful to the tyrant right to the end had their goods confiscated after being paraded through the Forum and were sent into exile (δημεύονται δὲ καὶ ὅποσοι παρέμειναν ἕως τέλους εὖνοοι τῷ

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54. Skylitzes, *Synopsis of Histories*, 367; Aristakes Lastivertsi, §3; tr. M. CANARD – H. BERBERIAN, *Aristakès de Lastivert: Récit des malheurs de la nation arménienne*, Brussels 1973.

55. Skylitzes, *Synopsis of Histories*, 367.

56. *Chronicle of Kartli*, tr. S. Jones, *Kartlis Tskhovreba: A History of Georgia*, Tbilisi 2014, 152.

57. KALDELLIS, *Byzantine Republic*, 158-159.

τυραννήσαντι, ἀτίμως πρότερον περιχαθέντες διὰ τῆς ἀγορᾶς καὶ ἐξορία παραπεμφέντες)”, only Tornikios and his chief lieutenant Batatzes were blinded<sup>58</sup>. In an oration celebrating the rebels’ defeat, Ioannes Mauropous praises the mercy that the emperor showed to the rebels, demonstrating that clemency towards defeated Roman rebels was seen as a virtue<sup>59</sup>. Basil II is known for his cruel streak, epitomized by the mass blinding of Bulgarian prisoners-of-war, that will be discussed in the next section. But there is no indication that he (or any other Roman in this period) carried out such retaliatory mass mutilation or killing of Romans, captured soldiers or civilians, as distinct from individual leaders such as the impaling (or crucifixion) of Delphinas, a lieutenant of Bardas Phokas<sup>60</sup>.

This light touch at the end of rebellions meant that even if they believed that the emperor would eventually emerge victorious in a civil war (statistically, a safe bet)<sup>61</sup>, civilian communities had little reason to risk immediate danger when facing a rebel army, as they could expect to not be too harshly punished for their disloyalty. By contrast, the rebel army at their gate could inflict immediate violence. Reading the sources, it is clear that there was little or no stigma against provincial communities that switched sides in a civil war, even if it was to the disadvantage of the side that the author of the source supported. Attaleiates reports that he personally castigated the Raidestans “for their betrayal of their salvation and the symbol of our faith (ὡς καταπροδόντων τὴν ἑαυτῶν σωτηρίαν καὶ τὸ τῆς πίστεως σύμβολον),” likely referring to the crosses on which they had sworn loyalty to Emperor Michael Doukas<sup>62</sup>. But even so, he is generally sympathetic to the motives of the people of Raidestos and does not portray them in a negative light, even when they burnt down his own house and estates<sup>63</sup>.

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58. Skylitzes, *Synopsis of Histories*, 442.

59. John Mauropous, *Iohannis Euchaitorum Metropolitae quae in codice Vaticano Graeco 676 supersunt*, ed. P. DE LAGARDE, Göttingen 1882, 194.

60. Skylitzes, *Synopsis of Histories*, 336; Leon the Deacon, 10.9; See also HOLMES, *Basil II*, 267, n. 50.

61. W. TREADGOLD, *Byzantium, the Reluctant Warrior*, in N. CHRISTIE – M. YAZIGI (eds), *Noble Ideals and Bloody Reality: Warfare in the Middle Ages*, Leiden, 2006, pp. 224-225.

62. Attaleiates, *History*, 245; see n. 288 in the Kaldellis and Krallis translation.

63. Attaleiates, *History*, 249.

Thus, we can see that threats were used as a tool in a process of negotiation in which both sides had strong incentives to avoid the outbreak of violence and took pains to avoid it. The political culture in which civil wars operated facilitated such negotiations by assuring communities that their physical safety and property would be safe if they surrender and that they would not face severe recriminations for this after the end of the conflict.

Obviously, the closer one's position was to the current imperial regime, the more one had an incentive to stick with it. A short passage in Attaleiates exemplifies how this could disrupt the process of negotiation between armies and communities. While Ioannes Bryennios was leading a force to Constantinople at the command of his brother, Attaleiates reports that:

... τῇ Περίνθῳ, τῇ νῦν Ἡρακλείᾳ καλουμένη, προσπαραβαλὼν ὁ τοῦ Βρυεννίου αὐτάδελφος, μὴ συγκατανευούσῃ πρὸς τὴν τοῦ Βρυεννίου ἀνάρρησιν διὰ τὸ καὶ στρατιώτας ἔνδον ἔχειν βασιλικούς, κατακράτος εἴλε καὶ πολλοὺς ἀνείλεν αὐτῆς καὶ τὰ ἐκτὸς μετὰ τῶν ἔνδον ἐδήωσεν.

... Bryennios's brother seized Perinthos, which is now called Herakleia and had not accepted Bryennios's accession because it had imperial soldiers in it. He took it by force, killing many of its people and looting both its environs and the city itself<sup>64</sup>.

While this passage is frustratingly short and devoid of detail, the gist of it is clear enough. Attaleiates implies that Herakleia would have acclaimed Bryennios, an act which, like in Traianopolis, would have ensured its safety. Yet this was prevented by "imperial soldiers", who had less ties to the community and more to the regime in power.

Considering this, it is understandable why Constantinople itself saw some of the worst political violence in the eleventh century. Unlike provincial elites, emperors had everything to lose by capitulating to rebels, their status certainly and very likely their lives or limbs. Therefore, they had much stronger incentive to keep up a fight, even when the odds turned against them.

This can be seen in the most famous episode of violence in eleventh century Constantinople, the uprising against Michael V. After the crowds rejected his deposition of Zoe, he had her presented to the crowd to show

64. Attaleiates, *History*, 250.

that she was alive, yet this failed to satisfy them. According to Skylitzes, in a scene recalling the famous discussion in Prokopios between Justinian and Theodora during the Nika Revolt, Michael V thought at this time to give up the throne, but his uncle, the *nobelissimos* Konstantinos, convinced him to fight and either triumph or die an “imperial death” (βασιλικῶς ἀποθανεῖν). Street fighting had been occurring since the beginning, but it is only at this point, when Michael’s efforts to mollify the crowd failed completely and, according to Skylitzes, powerful members of his faction refused to surrender, that the worst violence broke out<sup>65</sup>. Skylitzes and Psellos agree that the imperial forces who carried out the violence were the private retinue (“τὸν ἑαυτοῦ λαὸν ἀπὸ τοῦ ἰδίου οἴκου”, according to Skylitzes) of the *nobelissimos* Konstantinos and the people of the palace, whom the emperor armed; both groups being direct beneficiaries of the regime, with an interest in its survival<sup>66</sup>.

After the defeat of his forces in the Battle of Nicaea, Michael VI Bringas was simultaneously faced with both an uprising in Constantinople and a hostile army outside it. At least according to Attaleiates, however, Bringas still had some soldiers, and the members of his faction urged him to keep fighting. However, unlike Michael V (and perhaps inspired by his fate), Bringas chose at this point to give in and resign the throne. The sources have different opinions on this act, but Attaleiates presents it as saintly: he reports that Michael refused to allow Constantinople to be “polluted with murder (φόνοις μινανθῆναι)” for his sake, and looking at his red imperial boots said “Michael will not forsake his religion for the sake of these (διὰ ταῦτα ὁ Μιχαὴλ οὐ προδίδωσι τὴν εὐσέβειαν)”<sup>67</sup>.

By framing his actions as saintly, Attaleiates indicates the exceptionality of Bringas’s actions. There is a general pattern for rebellions in this period; beginning somewhere in the provinces they make their way to Constantinople, gathering strength for an attempt on the capital<sup>68</sup>. The reason so many rebellions falter at this stage cannot be simply attributed

65. Skylitzes, *Synopsis of Histories*, 418-420.

66. Skylitzes, *Synopsis of Histories*, 419; Psellos, *Chronography*, 5.31.

67. Attaleiates, *History*, 58-59. Skylitzes (499-500), reflecting a source hostile to Michael VI, is less impressed by this act.

68. CHEYNET, *Pouvoir et contestations*, 158-171.

to the strength of the Theodosian walls, but also to the differing incentive structure of provincial elites compared to those of the emperor and those directly connected to his regime.

### ‘Τὸ ὁμόφυλον’ and ‘foreigners’ in civil wars

In a recent paper, Jean-Claude Cheynet pointed out that “The study of provincial revolts, especially in the eleventh century, allows us to better understand what constituted – if not Byzantine identity, at least – the glue that maintained the empire for so many centuries...”<sup>69</sup>. However he maintains that only local revolts are a useful indicator for provincial identity, and not larger scale civil wars aimed at replacing the emperor<sup>70</sup>. This section will show that ethnic identity did actually operate as a relevant and visible factor in wider civil wars, and that such in-group vs. out-group distinctions were fundamental to the use of violence in civil wars.

At a basic level, our sources often discuss ethnicity when reporting on civil war, whether with explicit markers such as ‘Roman’, ‘Bulgarian’, ‘Armenian’, etc., or in terms denoting ethnic similarity or difference such as ‘ἔμφυλος’, ‘ὁμόφυλος’, ‘συγγενής’, ‘ξένος’, ‘βάρβαρος’, etc.. The ethnic composition of different forces in civil wars is often remarked upon, indicating that the ethnicity of the participants was considered relevant information. For example, Attaleiates reports that Nikephoros Basilakes brought for his rebellion in 1078 ‘Franks’ from Italy and gathered in Dyrrachium an army from the various groups in the region, “Romans, Bulgarians, and Albanians (Ἀρβανιτῶν)”, the first certain mention of Albanians in the historical record<sup>71</sup>.

69. J. - C. CHEYNET, Provincial Rebellions as an Indicator of Byzantine ‘Identity’ (Tenth–Twelfth Centuries), in: *Identities and Ideologies in the East Roman World*, ed. Y. STOURAITIS, Edinburgh 2022, 232.

70. CHEYNET, Provincial Rebellions, 233.

71. Attaleiates, *History*, 297. Skylitzes *Continuatus* adds ‘Varangians’ to the list; Skylitzes *Continuatus*, ed. E. T. Tsolakes, *Ἡ συνέχεια τῆς χρονολογίας τοῦ Ἰωάννου Σκυλίτζη*, Thessaloniki 1968, 182. An earlier reference in Attaleiates to Ἄλβανοί occurs in a similar context, the rebellion of Maniakes (1042–1043), but has been subject to long-standing debate over whether it refers to Albanians or Normans; Attaleiates, *History*, 5.1; J. QUANRUD, The *Albanoi* in Michael Attaleiates’ *History*: revisiting the Vranoussi-Ducellier debate, *BMGS* 45/2 (2021).

The killing of Romans by other Romans in the course of civil war is consistently expressed in terms of fratricide, which never happens in battles between Romans and non-Romans. As previously mentioned, Psellos says that the rebel Leon Tornikios, who commanded the armies of Macedonia, ordered his soldiers to stop engaging in “familial slaughter” (*φόνου συγγενικοῦ*)<sup>72</sup>, and Attaleiates adds that he avoided storming the city so as not to harm “his own people” (*τὸ ὁμόφυλον*)<sup>73</sup>. Similarly, Nikephoros Bryennios the Younger reports that his grandfather, Bryennios the Elder, stopped his soldiers from assaulting Traianopolis, a city that refused to support his rebellion in 1077, lest “they pollute their hands with kindred blood” (*ἐμφυλίῳ αἵματι τὰς χεῖρας μιανοῦσιν*)<sup>74</sup>.

The most evocative instance of this idea in this period comes from a poem of Ioannes Geometres, written during the civil war of 987-989, when Basil II fought Bardas Skleros and Bardas Phokas. The poem, “On the Revolt”, is a lament that begins by calling on nature to join the mourning: “Now, heaven, rain showers of blood; air, put on mournful darkness; earth... with an all-black veil, instead of green, cover your face and bewail (*Νῦν, οὐρανέ, στάλαξον ὄμβρους αἱμάτων / ἄήρ, ἐπενδύθητι πένθιμον σκότος, / ἡ γῆ... / ὅλην στολὴν μέλαιναν ἀντὶ τῆς χλόης / τὸ σὸν πρόσωπον ἀμφιέσασα, στένε*)”<sup>75</sup>. The horrors of civil war are expressed in terms of a breakdown of the social bonds that constitute the broader community:

τὸ συγγενὲς μὲν αἷμα πᾶσαν τὴν ἔω | πρῶτον μαιίνει, καὶ μερίζεται ξίφος |  
τὰ συμφυῆ, φεῦ, καὶ γένη τε καὶ μέλη | πατὴρ μὲν ὀργὰ πρὸς σφαγὴν τῶν  
φιλάτων, | καὶ δεξιὰν παῖς πατρικῷ χραίνει φόνῳ | αἶρει δὲ καὶ μάχαιραν,  
ὦ πικροῦ πάθους, | ἀνὴρ ἀδελφὸς εἰς ἀδελφοῦ καρδίαν.

The blood of kin first defiles the entire east, and the sword dismembers, woe, familial bonds and relations; a father rushes to the slaughter of his beloved,

72. Psellos, *Chronography*, 6.114.

73. Attaleiates, *History*, 26.

74. Bryennios, *Material for History*, 3.9.

75. Ioannes Geometres, *Poem 7, On the Revolt*, 1-6; ed. M. TOMADAKI, *Ιωάννης Γεωμέτρης, ιαμβικά ποιήματα: κριτική έκδοση, μετάφραση και σχόλια*, PhD thesis, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, 2014 (my own translation). On the political context of the composition of this poem, see M. LAUXTERMANN, John Geometres – Poet and Soldier, *Byz* 68/2 (1998), 368-371.



and a child stains his hand with patricide; brother even raises a blade, oh bitter suffering, to the heart of his brother<sup>76</sup>.

We can see that Romans of this period felt that such language conveyed the impact of civil war in the use that Attaleiates makes of Geometres's poem when describing the carnage of the battle of Nicaea during the revolt of Isaakios Komnenos (1057):

Τότε τοίνυν πατήρ μὲν καὶ υἱός, τῆς φύσεως ὥσπερ ἐπιλαθόμενοι, πρὸς σφαγὴν ὁργᾶν ἀλλήλων οὐκ εὐλαβοῦντο· καὶ δεξιᾶν παῖς πατρικῶ χραίνει φόνῳ καὶ ἀδελφὸς ἀδελφῶ καιρίαν ἐλαύνει καὶ συγγενείας ἢ συμφύϊας εἶτε τῶν ὁμοφύλων ἔλεος οὐδὲ διάκρισις ἦν.

And then father and son, as if forgetting their natural bonds, did not hesitate in rushing to each-other's slaughter, a child stains his hand with patricide and brother strikes down brother; and there was no pity or distinction made for close relations, family ties or common kinship<sup>77</sup>.

We cannot discount the possibility that close relatives were fighting on opposite sides of the battle. Yet Attaleiates does not focus on these cases as much as he treats such fratricide (and patricide and filicide) as emblematic of civil war in general. He treats as synonymous *συγγένεια* and *συμφυΐα*, terms usually denoting concrete familial relations, and *ὁμόφυλοι*, a term that lacks a simple translation to English but usually refers to wider social groups, such as ethnic or national communities. Similarly, Skylitzes says that before the battle of Nicaea soldiers from both sides who were sent to forage fraternized as "compatriots, relatives and friends" (*ὁμόφυλοι καὶ συγγενεῖς καὶ φίλοι*)<sup>78</sup>.

Returning to the case of Traianopolis, Bryennios and his soldiers were from the theme of Macedonia, to which Traianopolis also belonged, so many in the camp must have had familial and social links with inhabitants, making the term *ἐμφύλιον αἷμα* quite concrete. But the fighting between the Macedonian soldiers of Tornikios and non-Macedonians in Constantinople is described in similar terms. By describing relationships between strangers in

76. Geometres, *Poem 7, On the Revolt*, 7-13.

77. Attaleiates, *History*, 55. The translation of Kaldellis and Krallis is adjusted to better show the correspondence with Geometres.

78. Skylitzes, *Synopsis of Histories*, 395.

terms of kinship, *δμόφυλος* and *ἑμφύλος* point beyond specific kin relations to something like the conception of a ‘nation’<sup>79</sup>. Wars between Romans and non-Roman Christians could, albeit on rare occasions, be described in terms approximating those used for civil wars<sup>80</sup>. Yet even if peace between Christians was hailed as an ideal good, fighting between Romans and non-Romans is never described in the emotionally wrought language used for civil war among Romans, and Christian opponents of the Roman state are usually demonized and dehumanized just as much as its non-Christian opponents. Setting aside what this means to current debates about ethnicity and nationality in east Rome, these terms indicate a crucial element of civil wars that we cannot overlook or regard as formulaic language.

One episode makes it explicit that norms of violence differed between those regarded as Roman, or *δμόφυλοι*, and those regarded as the ethnic other. The aforementioned Leon the *protovestiaros* defeated a force loyal to Skleros, composed both of Romans and Armenians; afterwards “the Romans [under Leon] slew every Armenian they captured without quarter, for they had been the first to join the uprising” (*πάντας γὰρ τοὺς ἄλλόντας Ἀρμενίους ἀπέσφαττον οἱ Ῥωμαῖοι, μὴ λαμβάνοντες οἶκτον διὰ τὸ πρῶτους προσχωρήσαι τῷ ἀποστάτῃ*)<sup>81</sup>. This is the only recorded mass killing of prisoners-of-war in a civil war in this period, an explicit collective punishment on an ethnic basis.

The revolt of Skleros occasioned other instances of ethnic-sectarian violence in the east of the empire. When the Armenians in Antioch and its

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79. B. ANDERSON, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London 2006, 143-145. The argument that “Byzantium” is to be conceived as a nation-state was made in: A. KALDELLIS, *Romanland: Ethnicity and Empire in Byzantium*, Cambridge, Mass. 2019.

80. Stouraitis highlights the *Alexiad*’s use of “*ἐμφύλιον μάχην*” (Anna Komnene, *Alexiad*, 9.10.1) and “*ἐμφύλιον φόνον*” (10.9.5) to describe fighting against the Serbians and the Crusaders respectively, and argues that war against non-Roman Christians could be depicted at times as a civil war, but in general “war against other Christians was not principally viewed and perceived as *emphylios polemos*” (Y. STOURAITIS, Byzantine war against Christians – an “*emphylios polemos*”?, *ByzSym* 20 (2010), 95-96, 102).

81. Skylitzes, *Synopsis of Histories*, 321. For more on Armenians and east Rome in this period, see H. BARTIKIAN, Βυζάντιον και Αρμενία: in H. BARTIKIAN, *Αρμενοβυζαντινά: Σχέσεις του Αρμενικού έθνους με το μεσαιωνικό Ελληνισμό: Ιστορικές συμβουλές*, Thessaloniki, 2007, 40-51, as well as other papers by the same author in this volume.

environs broke out in rebellion in support of Skleros, local supporters of Basil II under the leadership of the Christian-Arab Obeidallah “fought the Armenians and put them to the sword”. According to Yahya of Antioch, the surviving Armenians then fled from the city<sup>82</sup>.

The mass-blinding of Bulgarian captives after the battle of Kleidion has been interpreted as evidence that the Romans, or at least Basil II, regarded the Bulgarians as rebels and not as a foreign enemy, as blinding was the legal penalty for rebellion<sup>83</sup>. As it is outside of the scope of this paper, we will not comment on what this blinding implies on the character of the war in general. But it cannot be overlooked that, as mentioned above, Roman rebels were never subject to such a mass punishment, neither during the reign of Basil II nor later in the eleventh century. Indeed, the blinding at Kleidion was contemporary with other blindings of captured Bulgarians as well as of Georgians and cutting the hands of Bedouin in Northern Syria, indicating that Basil II intentionally reserved this kind of mass mutilation to enemies perceived as foreign<sup>84</sup>.

The differing standards can be clearly seen when it comes to the Pecheneg wars (1047-1053). While Mauropous gave an oration praising Monomachos for clemency towards the Roman rebels who supported Tornikios (mentioned above), an oration praising the same emperor for lenient attitude towards the Pechenegs had to be shelved as this policy proved too controversial, even contributing to the outbreak of Tornikios’s revolt itself<sup>85</sup>. After this attempt to placate the Pechenegs failed and several years of brutal war followed, Monomachos was forced to recognize a Pecheneg autonomy in the Balkans.

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82. Yahya of Antioch, II.378. The rebellion of Bardas Skleros and Bardas Phokas, like other civil wars in this period, involved a variety of local issues that this paper is unable to delve into; for example, see V. Vlysidou, *Αριστοκρατικές οικογένειες και εξουσία, 9ος-10ος αι.: έρευνες πάνω στα διαδοχικά στάδια αντιμετώπισης της αρμενο-παφλαγονικής και της καππαδοκικής αριστοκρατίας*, Thessaloniki 2001, 191-208.

83. “Basil II’s actions in the concluding phase of the war between 1014 and 1018 demonstrate that he treated the Bulgar issue as an internal affair of the Roman imperial realm”; STOURAITIS, *Civil War in the Christian Empire*, 116.

84. C. HOLMES, Basil II the Bulgar-Slayer and the Blinding of 15,000 Bulgarians in 1014: Mutilation and Prisoners of War in the Middle Ages: in: *How Fighting Ends: A History of Surrender*, ed. H. AFFLERBACH – H. STRACHAN, Oxford 2012, 86-7, 93-5.

85. J. LEFORT, *Rhétorique et politique: Trois discours de Jean Mauropous en 1047*, *TM* 6 (1976), 272.

But according to Skylitzes, by the end of the war the emperor was “thinking that life would not be worth living if he could not completely destroy the Pecheneg people” (ἀβίωτον ἡγεῖτο τὸν βίον, εἰ μὴ ἄρδην ἀφανίσει τὸ γένος τῶν Πατζινάκων)<sup>86</sup>. Realistic or not as this wish was, such language on the part of the Roman elite in regard to any Roman community was unthinkable, while there is no indication that such exterminationist rhetoric towards non-Romans was considered to any degree objectionable.

The other side of the coin is that Romans were much more exposed to violence from foreigners than from compatriots. Aside from the aforementioned Pecheneg wars, Skylitzes reports that after Deljan proclaimed his revolt (1041), the Bulgarians made their way to Thessaloniki, “proclaiming and acclaiming him, mercilessly and inhumanely putting to death every Roman they encountered (ἀνακηρύττοντες καὶ ἀνευφημοῦντες τοῦτον, καὶ πάντα τὸν παρευρεθέντα Ῥωμαῖον ἀνηλεῶς καὶ ἀπανθρώπως ἀναιροῦντες)”<sup>87</sup>.

This was also true when non-Romans fought for one of the sides in a Roman civil war. Alongside his aforementioned poem “On the Revolt”, Geometres wrote another poem, “On the Lootings of the Iberians”, where he castigates the western part of the empire, that supported Basil II, for ignoring the devastation caused by their Georgian (‘Iberian’) allies in the east<sup>88</sup>. The support of the Georgian ruler David III Kourpalates was indeed crucial for Basil II against Skleros. The Georgian *Life of Ioane and Ep’time* (John and Euthymios) reports that David sent a substantial force under the command of Tornike which defeated Skleros and then, “according to the emperors’ counsel, captured the Greek nobility <who sided with Skleros> and took away their wealth, a part of which he distributed among the troops and the other big part of the spoil he kept for himself: gold and silver and *stavra* [precious clothes] and other such [goods],” which he used to finance the construction of the Iviron monastery<sup>89</sup>. The text treats this plunder as entirely unproblematic, and there is no equivalent example of a Roman

86. Skylitzes, *Synopsis of Histories*, 476.

87. Skylitzes, *Synopsis of Histories*, 409.

88. Geometres, *Poem* 27.

89. *Life of Ioane and Ep’time*, tr. T. GRDZELIDZE, *Georgian Monks on Mount Athos*, London 2009. The support of David Kourpalates is also mentioned by Skylitzes (*Synopsis of Histories*, 326) and by Aristakes Lastivertsi, §3, §6.

general personally enriching himself on spoils of war taken from other Romans in the civil wars of the eleventh century.

In describing the capture of Constantinople, Anna Komnene says that it was especially shameful that her father's native-born soldiers joined the foreigners in the sacking<sup>90</sup>; such behaviour could be expected from barbarians, but not from Romans. Bryennios the Younger was careful to emphasize that the 'Scythians' (Pechenegs) who joined his grandfather's army were "not foreigners or mercenaries, but had willingly subjected themselves to the Empire of the Romans a long time ago" (οὐ τῶν ξένων καὶ μισθοφόρων, ἀλλὰ τῶν πρὸ πολλοῦ αὐτομολησάντων ὑπὸ τὴν βασιλείαν Ῥωμαίων)<sup>91</sup>. Bryennios does not claim that they are Romans themselves, but implies that since they were not "foreigners or mercenaries" but integrated into the political structure of the Roman state, they were legitimate participants in the civil war. On the other hand, Attaleiates, a source hostile to Bryennios, regards those same Pechenegs as completely foreign barbarians<sup>92</sup>. This disagreement shows that cultural expectations regarding "barbarians", which as we saw were not divorced from reality, created a stigma against the employment of 'foreigners' in civil wars. Though it remained a common practice, it also invited political contention.

## Conclusion

The introduction to this paper referred to Gerd Althoff's concept of *Spielregeln*, which offers a way to understand the norms of political conflict not as formal or consistently enforced rules, but as shared expectations – an implicit 'script' that guides behavior in moments of contestation and helps sustain the long-term stability of a social system to which all sides remain committed, even in the midst of conflict. In this sense, we may say that in the political culture of the eleventh-century Eastern Roman Empire, civil wars and rebellions were not only regular but also regularised. Acts of mass violence towards Romans outside battles were considered outside 'the rules of the game.'

90. Anna Komnene, *Alexiad*, 2.10.4.

91. Bryennios, *Material for History*, 3.11.

92. Attaleiates, *History*, 261-262.

Gerd Althoff notes that western-medieval *Spielregeln* protected fellow aristocrats while the lower classes were exposed to unrestricted violence<sup>93</sup>. While other social groups, most notably the clergy, attempted to tame them, western writers coming from the warrior-elite itself, like the troubadour-knight Bertran de Born, exulted in the opportunity that war gave to inflict violence on civilians<sup>94</sup>. Indeed, Richard Kaeuper showed that far from feeling obligation towards commoners as fellow humans and Christians, “knights and men-at-arms seem to have regarded them almost as another species”<sup>95</sup>. A similar exultation of violence targeting civilians can be found in some Byzantine sources, for example Theodosios the Deacon, who wrote in the tenth century about the Byzantine conquest of Crete<sup>96</sup>. But those are cases of violence towards a religious and/or ethnic other, not a class distinction as in the west<sup>97</sup>. Indeed, the *Spielregeln* of political violence in east Rome made aristocrats particularly vulnerable, as punishment was focused on the ringleaders of failed rebellions or the top figures of deposed regimes, rather than the rank-and-file supporters<sup>98</sup>.

It is incontrovertible that the numerous civil wars and rebellions between 1071-1081 sapped the strength of the empire and contributed to the loss of Anatolia<sup>99</sup>. But taking the long view of the eleventh century, what

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93. G. ALTHOFF, *Rules and Rituals*, 27-29.

94. Bertran de Born, *The Poems of the Troubadour Bertran de Born*, 398-399; tr. W. PADEN JR. – T. SANKOVITCH – P. STÄBLEIN, Berkeley 1986. See also: D. HAY, “Collateral Damage?” *Civilian Casualties in the Early Ideologies of Chivalry and Crusade*, in: *Noble Ideals and Bloody Realities: Warfare in the Middle Ages*, ed. N. CHRISTIE – M. YAZIGI, Leiden 2006, 9-11.

95. R. KAEUPER, *Medieval Chivalry*, Cambridge, 2016, 194, but see also the entire chapter “Chivalry and War”, 161-207.

96. Theodosios the Deacon, *The Capture of Crete*, ed. U. CRUSCULO, *Theodosii Diaconi De Creta Capta*, Leipzig 1979, 1.110-137; 5.86-103.

97. T. SHAWCROSS, *Ethnic and Religious Violence in Byzantium*, in: *The Cambridge World History of Violence: Volume 2, AD 500–AD 1500*, ed. M. GORDON et al., Cambridge 2020.

98. KALDELLIS, *Byzantine Republic*, 158-159.

99. The exact impact of civil wars on this process is unclear; see J. C. CHEYNET, Mantzikert: un désastre militaire?, *Byz 50/2* (1980), 410-438; reprinted in idem, *The Byzantine Aristocracy and its Military Function*, Aldershot 2006, XIII; P. FRANKOPAN, The Fall of Nicaea and the Towns of Western Asia Minor to the Turks in the Later 11th Century: The Curious Case of Nikephoros Melissenos, *Byz 74/2* (2004), 176-180.

is remarkable in fact is how relatively strong and stable east Rome was until Manzikert, despite the prevalence of civil wars. By limiting violence and destruction, the “rules of the game” of civil war were crucial to preserving the state in the face of frequent political conflicts. Civil wars in the eleventh century were a contest for relative advantage between different factions that did not aim at the extermination of their opponents or the utter destruction of their social-economic status. The opposing sides shared an interest in the preservation of the system as a whole and knew that they would have to live together once the conflict was over. A comparative study of Medieval Icelandic political conflicts and the Guinea-Bissau Civil War pointed out that in both cases:

... the front lines are populated by people who know that they will in all likelihood have to re-establish their lives together with the group that they are currently fighting against. Instead of war-scapes that are socially ossified by dehumanization and hatred, we are looking at more flexible divides and alliances that are reciprocally shaped and maintained<sup>100</sup>.

Those words apply to east Roman civil wars as well. As we saw, the sense of a shared community played a crucial role in limiting violence. However, those considered to not be part of the political community were not protected by those conventions, nor did they feel themselves bound to them.

A question we leave to a future study is the applicability of these norms to the micro-level of conflicts within communities as well. There is reason to believe that to a large extent they did. The famous confrontation between Attaleiates and Batatzina at the gates of Raideustos played out quite similarly to larger-scale confrontations, such as the one that took place a little earlier in Traianopolis. Attaleiates managed to leave the town after threatening Batatzina and her children; by allowing him to depart, Batatzina ensured her control of the town without rupturing social bonds that might prove necessary after the revolt ends<sup>101</sup>. Similarly, when advising how to deal with local dissension, Kekaumenos advises to make use of dire threats, but

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100. J. SIGURÐSSON – H. VIGH, Who Is the Enemy? Multipolar Micropolitics: in *Medieval and Modern Civil Wars: A Comparative Perspective*, ed. J. SIGURÐSSON – H. ORNING, Leiden 2021, 40.

101. Attaleiates, *History*, 244-245; see also D. KRALLIS, *Serving Byzantium's Emperors: The Courtly Life and Career of Michael Attaleiates*, Cham 2019, 193-194.



then to act with lenience<sup>102</sup>. This question will help us better understand the extent to which the macro-politics of conflicts over the throne and the micro-politics of local disputes operated within a shared political culture.

### ΚΑΝΟΝΕΣ ΒΙΑΣ ΣΤΟΥΣ ΒΥΖΑΝΤΙΝΟΥΣ ΕΜΦΥΛΙΟΥΣ ΠΟΛΕΜΟΥΣ (976-1081)

Η παρούσα μελέτη επιχειρεί να προσδιορίσει τους κανόνες που διέπουν τη βία, ιδίως κατά του άμαχου πληθυσμού, στους εμφύλιους πολέμους κατά τη διάρκεια του ενδέκατου αιώνα (976-1081). Ενώ οι εμφύλιοι πόλεμοι και οι αιτίες τους έχουν προσελκύσει το ενδιαφέρον των ιστορικών, αυτή είναι η πρώτη μελέτη που εστιάζει στο θέμα της συμπεριφοράς κατά τη διάρκεια εσωτερικών συγκρούσεων. Αξιοποιώντας την έννοια των *Spielregeln* («κανόνες του παιχνιδιού») που διατυπώθηκε από τον ιστορικό του δυτικού Μεσαίωνα Gerd Althoff, υποστηρίζει ότι η αποστροφή της βίας που ασκείται σε «ομόφυλους» Ρωμαίους επηρέασε άμεσα τη συμπεριφορά των αντιμαχόμενων πλευρών στους εμφύλιους πολέμους.

**Keywords:** Civil Wars, Violence, Eleventh Century, Political Culture, Ethnicity

**Λέξεις-κλειδιά:** Εμφύλιοι πόλεμοι, Βία, Ενδέκατος αιώνας, Πολιτικός πολιτισμός, Εθνότητα.

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102. Kekaumenos, *Consilia et Narrationes*; ed. and tr. C. ROUECHÉ, *Sharing Ancient Wisdoms*, London 2013, 57.

