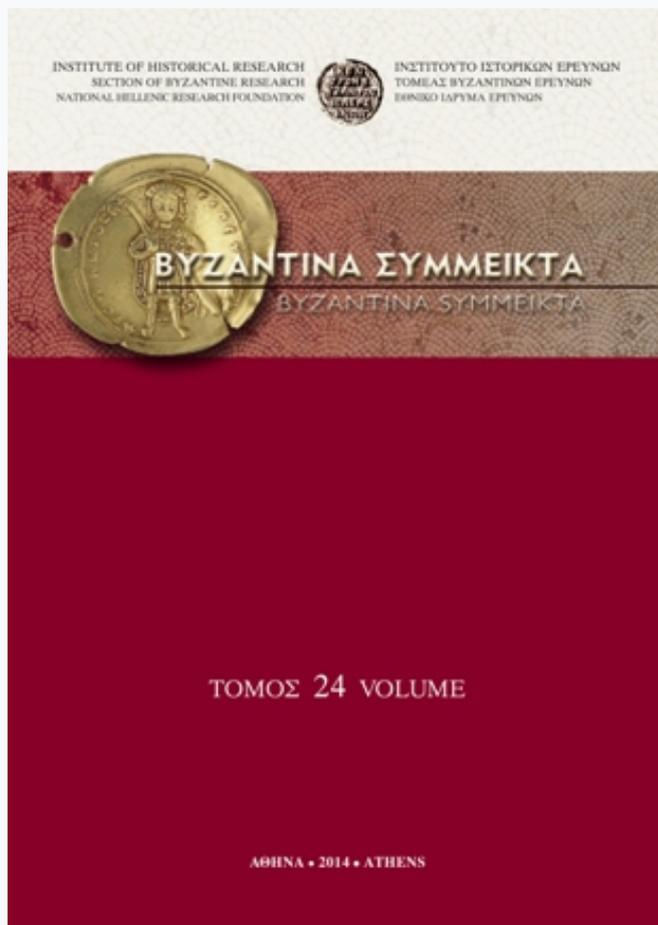


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### Book Review: A. SIMPSON, Niketas Choniates: A Historiographical Study. Oxford Studies in Byzantium

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A. SIMPSON, *Niketas Choniates: A Historiographical Study* [Oxford Studies in Byzantium], Oxford 2013, pp. 400, 2 in-text maps. ISBN 978-0-19-967071-0

*Baudolino*, Umberto Eco's 2002 novel, takes readers to the dramatic scenery of Constantinople's sack by the warriors of the fourth crusade in 1204. In this apocalyptic environment of destruction and cruelty the modern novelist and critic unspools a narrative yarn made of the finest Byzantine silk. In the opening pages and throughout the book the voice of the narrator is that of Niketas Choniates, an erudite storyteller easily relatable to the modern audience. Eco's book is a useful entry point to discussions about Niketas Choniates' life and work. *Baudolino*'s storyline opens with the drama of 1204, immortalized by the Byzantine author's work, and is authorized by his erudition. Choniates, however, soon fades into the background as the barely coherent Baudolino, the novel's homonymous hero, and his quasi-Freudian ramblings take centre stage. A. S. Byatt in her 2002 review of the novel for the *Guardian* does not even attempt to offer a short biography of the book's Byzantine narrator. Choniates is taken for granted, not analyzed. The man who becomes the reader's gateway into our story remains unknown.

In a way it is much the same with the modern era reception of Niketas' work in both scholarship and popular consciousness. As noted by Alicia Simpson in her 2013 *Niketas Choniates: A Historiographical Study* (henceforth AS and *NCHS*) Choniates is the basic ingredient in much of what is written about the empire's life and near death experience in the 12th and early 13th centuries (*NCHS*, p. 297 quoting Brand, Angold, and Treadgold). And yet, as with A. S. Byatt's review, in most modern work Choniates is acknowledged, only for the analysis to then turn to the serious business of imperial decline. Unlike earlier efforts, AS' book places Choniates at its very core and attempts the first comprehensive analysis of this essential author and his body of work. In that she offers an essential corrective to what is a curious scholarly neglect (*NCHS*, p. 298 on the need for such focus).

*NCHS* is organized around four large chapters (1. The Author: His Life and Works, 2. The Composition and Transmission of the *History*, 3. Historical Narrative and Imperial Biography, 4. Sources, Models, and Concepts) and is complemented by an introduction and a concluding chapter. There are also three appendices (1. The Manuscripts of the *History*, 2. Summary of the *History*, 3. Niketas, the Latins, the Turks, and the Vlach-Bulgarians), two convenient genealogical charts, and two maps.

*NCHS* does not appear in a vacuum. After years of scholarly work that mined the oeuvre of Byzantine historians for the purposes of piecemeal historical and philological analysis the last two decades have seen the proliferation of dedicated book-length author studies in English. Anthony Kaldellis' work on Prokopios, Psellos, and now Chalkokondyles, Leonora Neville's close reading of Nikephoros Bryennios' *Materials for History*, Penelope Buckley's stylistic and philological study of the *Alexiad* and my own work on Attaleiates have sought to place the author at the centre of conversations about literature, history, and philosophy, authorial strategies, social and peer circles as well as the broader context of Byzantine history<sup>1</sup>. Each one striking a different balance between history, historiography, and philology, such authors have shed new light on the men and the one woman who crafted much of the narrative on which modern reconstructions of Byzantium and its history rest. AS comes into this scholarly circle to offer her take on Choniates by striking her own balance between philology and the historical context.

AS's work strikes the reader as more philological and literary in nature when read next to Kaldellis, Krallis, and Neville. While part of this may be the result of training and scholarly formation, it is also the unavoidable effect of what AS describes as Choniates' literariness (p.7). Central to AS's analysis is the assertion that with Choniates we face a Byzantine literary master, who also happens to write the history of his times and shape out views of the Byzantine world. This decision on the nature and direction of AS's investigation is by no means infelicitous. Detailed engagement with the texts produced by Choniates in the course of his life takes the form of extended

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1. A. KALDELLIS, *The Argument of Psellos' Chronographia* (Studien und Texte zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters 68), Leiden and Boston 1999; *Procopius of Caesarea: Tyranny, History, and Philosophy at the End of Antiquity*, Philadelphia 2004; *A New Herodotos: Laonikos Chalkokondyles on the Ottoman Empire, the Fall of Byzantium, and the Emergence of the West* (Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Humanities), Cambridge MA 2014.- L. NEVILLE, *Heroes and Romans in Twelfth-Century Byzantium: The Material for History of Nikephoros Bryennios*, Cambridge 2012.- P. BUCKLEY, *The Alexiad of Anna Komnene: Artistic Strategy in the Making of a Myth*, Cambridge 2014.- D. KRALLIS, *Michael Attaleiates and the Politics of Imperial Decline in Eleventh-century Byzantium*, Tempe AZ 2012.

examination of the *History's* multiple manuscripts (pp. 77-103 and all around). Parallel citation of excerpts from the two main manuscript fonds, the a- and b- (*auctior* and *brevior*) allows AS to unspool a fascinating narrative thread of writing and re-writing on which she weaves a story of Choniates' evolving career, professional steps, personal and imperial triumphs, as well as Byzantine imperial decline. The rather technical chapter 2 therefore represents the beating heart of the book, taking what biographical information has been gleaned from a discussion of sources and texts in the book's first chapter and deploying it in a meticulous analysis of Choniates' engagement with the empire's history and palpable decline (*NCHS* p. 295).

AS lucidly charts processes of writing and re-writing of the *History's* text, poring over reams of specialized philological scholarship that she critically deploys in her analysis. The picture she paints of the *History* is that of a complex work that never quite reaches a final form. It is replicated, recopied, and received even as Choniates still works on some version of it. It also authorizes numerous derivative narratives that stem from its different branches (see pp. 106-124 on Ephraem, Skoutariotes, Akropolites, and the *Metaphrase*). In AS's fascinating account the manuscript evolves along with its author's and the empire's declining fortunes, while at the same time becoming in its different iterations an *Ur-text* for the construction of post-catastrophe readings of Byzantine history (*NCHS* p. 9).

AS' approach to the task at hand works effectively. Her specific examples of modulations in the *History's* narrative from b- to a- versions of the text range from short sentence-long examples with evidence of minimal, if in fact decisive, interventions (p. 85, 87, 95) that often include the focusing of the narrative of the a-text on culprits unmentioned in b-text, to more elaborate shifts in tone, content, and length of text that represent a more comprehensive re-writing of the basic account. This is the case of the coup against Isaakios II (pp. 95-96), which is more elaborately presented in the *auctior* version of the *History*. The work in chapter 2 is therefore a fascinating gateway into the thought processes and work-habits of a Byzantine author and should be read carefully by both scholars and students of Byzantium and the middle ages who seek a better understanding of medieval authorship.

The structure of AS's work, however, also poses some challenges. The focus on the text, its contents, and evolution as a means by which to address authorial practices, biographical information, and broadly historical questions leads to a certain degree of replication across chapters. Alexios III's coup against Isaakios is a case in point. In chapter 1 AS refers to the relationship between the *History* and Niketas' oration to Alexios, revealing in passim the differences between a- and

b- versions on the details of the narrative (p. 59). The same incident is discussed with direct textual reference to the two main versions of the *History* in chapter 2 (pp. 95-96), and also in the part of chapter 3 dedicated to the *History's* treatment of individual emperors (pp. 182ff for Alexios III). The same can be said of the segments on Niketas' eyewitness testimony in both chapters 1.1 and 4.3.

A side effect of AS's focus on the text and its literariness is a discussion of genre and literary technique that to the opinion of this reviewer undercuts AS' own argument for the literary significance of the *History*. Is Choniates' authorial genius the product of Byzantine literary training? Did he really need to follow treatises of rhetoric regarding vividness and clarity in order to produce his work (pp. 256-60)? Does intertextuality – as nicely presented in AS's discussion of the mirrored interactions between Alexios and Manuel Komnenos with Bohemond and Kilij Arslan respectively in the works of Anna Komnene and Niketas (p. 260) – really obey the rules of genre? It appears at times that in seeking to address the concerns of scholarship for neat categorization of Byzantine literary output AS overplays the significance of genre. The exercise therefore appears superfluous, especially since AS's biographical sketch of Choniates and her close reading of his text produce a compelling image of a historically bound agent able to bend genre and its rules to the whims of his evolving narrative.

In writing a comprehensive study of Choniates' work, AS offers nuggets of analysis of great value to the student of the twelfth century. Chapter 3 is a study of Historical Narrative and Imperial Biography, but also a fundamental introduction to the source material and core questions involved in the study of twelfth century emperors. Insights on the reigns and character of emperors Isaakios II (pp. 170-82) and Alexios III (pp. 182-97) are by no means the central focus of *NCHS* but point towards opportunities for further research on understudied reigns. The discussion of Manuel Komnenos is a useful account of the evolution of Byzantine *Kaiserkritik*, to be read alongside Magdalino's essential contributions on the same issue<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, the discussion of the *History's* sources in chapter 4 may stand alone as a primer on historiographical connections as well as social and peer groups in the Komnenian court.

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2. My perhaps uninformed historian's critique of the importance of genre will surely find disagreement among philologists as seen in F. BERNARD and K. DAMOEN, "Giving a Small Taste", in: F. BERNARD and K. DAMOEN (eds.), *Poetry and its Contexts in Eleventh-century Byzantium*, Farnham 2014, 9.

3. P. MAGDALINO, Aspects of Twelfth-Century Kaiserkritik, *Speculum* 58 (1983), 326-46; ID., *The Empire of Manuel Komnenos 1143-1180*, Cambridge 1993.

A reader inspired by the rich pickings of *NCHS*'s analysis might seek more on issues of historical causation, the role of the divine, and the utility itself of history. Such subjects assumed pride of place in work cited above by Kaldellis and Krallis and must remain at the core of attempts to better understand the thought world of the Byzantines. AS anticipated such an interest and dedicated a few of the book's closing pages (pp. 279-94) to what she terms Historical Concepts. Here, however, *NCHS* displays undue caution and even misreads historiographical parallels with the work of Attaleiates (p. 288, my work on Attaleiates' *History* cited in note 286 does not support her reading, pointing rather towards the opposite direction). Her analysis takes the reader to the core issue that marks the latter versions of Choniates' *History*, the demise of the empire in the course of his lifetime and the collapse of his own promising and successful career. AS's pages on divine providence thus open with lip service to the idea of an orthodox and properly pious Choniates (*NCHS* pp. 284-88). Here the book's analysis, reinforced by AS' discussion of the *Dogmatike Panoplia* in chapter 1 (pp. 36-50), recognizes the central role of God as a punisher of sin. And yet, divine providence notwithstanding, in short succession AS presents evidence that also substantiates an anthropocentric analysis of history (*NCHS* p. 288ff). In the drama of the empire's demise, the sins ostensibly punished by God (p. 287) are measurable political actions that require no divine punishment to unleash their catastrophic effects on the polity. Thus a few pages later, AS turns to the real culprits, the Komnenoi themselves and their political arrangements (pp. 290-94). By now the *History* is once again the great human drama that Choniates' pen had followed from the first page of his work.

*NCHS* opens Choniates' world to the modern reader, offering a compelling portrait of a statesman and writer, whose work has shaped modern views of the Komnenian era. In AS's book philology turns into history as the reader follows an agent whose historical work can be shown to have been conditioned by and adapted to an ever changing reality. AS's philological, historiographical, and historical insights turn literature, its production, reception and refashioning into historical narrative that can be followed and in turn illuminate wider historical questions. In that, *NCHS* proves singularly successful, this reviewer's critiques notwithstanding.

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