

USURPER NARRATIVES AND POWER: PRETEXTS, LEGACIES, AND
ASPECTS OF LEGITIMATION IN BYZANTIUM (963-1204)

By

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A dissertation submitted to the University of Birmingham in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of MASTER OF RESEARCH in Byzantine Studies

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University of Birmingham
September 2013

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INTRODUCTION

The history of the Byzantine imperial office may be viewed as that of the struggle to establish and maintain a dynasty in the face of repeated internal opposition.¹ The office was forever coveted by individuals who sought to claim it for themselves; as a result, it is not a difficult task to name emperors from any period who faced serious challenges to their rule, or were removed from authority as a result of the machinations of others. The case of Ioannes Tzimiskes and the Emperor Nikephoros II Phokas is one such example: in December 969, a group of discontented military officials led by Tzimiskes entered the imperial palace and proceeded to murder Phokas in cold blood. Tzimiskes was promptly proclaimed emperor and ruled until his death in 976. An even more notorious succession took place over two-hundred years later, in 1183, when the fourteen year old Emperor Alexios II Komnenos was assassinated at the behest of his relative Andronikos I - the latter having already manoeuvred himself into position as Alexios' successor and murdered the boy's immediate family. Andronikos' ensuing reign was brutal but short lived - spanning only two years before he too was deposed and killed. The bloody details of his rise and fall were common knowledge across the medieval world with his misdeeds acting as a cautionary tale to those in power.²

Modern observers would not be alone in questioning the stability of such a system, nor how and why individuals like Tzimiskes and Andronikos could have been allowed to rule given the decidedly abhorrent means by which they gained power. Indeed, these questions were of concern to contemporary historians too.³ That the social, political and moral

¹ For a brief outline of some of the difficulties dynasties faced in maintaining power see Dagron 2003: 14-15.

² On the legacy of Andronikos' misrule in medieval (and especially Western) historiography see Neocleous 2012.

³ These were not new questions either: the account of a seventh/eighth-century Chinese visitor to Byzantium noted that, 'Their kings are not men who last. They choose the most capable and put him on the throne; but if a misfortune or something out of the ordinary happens in the Empire, or if the wind or the rain arrive at the

consequences of the murder perpetrated by Tzimiskes' were subject to debate is evident in the work of the two most important Byzantine sources on the event - Leo the Deacon and Ioannes Skylitzes; and a consistent theme of the thirteenth-century *History* of Niketas Choniates is that of the damage caused to Byzantine *ἀσφάλεια* and *τάξις* by political infighting and intrigues. Writing after the fall of Constantinople to the crusaders, and feeling that God had abandoned the empire, Choniates decried the immorality of such power struggles, viewing them as being partially to blame for the disaster of 1204.⁴

That usurpation was considered a valid route to leadership has been seen as a product of the empire's very identity. Ostrogorsky's famous tripartite formula of that identity – that it consisted of 'Roman political concepts, Greek culture and the Christian faith' – serves to highlight something of the problem: it was, broadly speaking and to varying degrees, an amalgamation of these three often contradictory elements.⁵ Whilst there are a handful of extant texts from the empire's long history that may generally be deemed 'constitutional' in content; and which sought to 'impose some order on this contradictory heritage', they did not comprise an organised (or even generally accepted) legal theory which codified the rules of imperial succession. Instead, we are left with works which may be deemed close in genre to advice literature and collections of maxims which, rather than providing a theory of rule, proffer moral guidance to aid an 'ideal' emperor.⁶ As a result, Dagron has shown that although the language of constitutional or divine choice could be employed by the Byzantines

wrong season, then they all at once depose the emperor and put another in his place.' *Xin T'ang shu* quoted in Hirth 1985: 55; see also Dagron 2003: 13.

⁴ For a general overview of scholarship regarding Choniates' explanation for 1204 see Harris 2000; on Choniates' views regarding the role of the emperors in precipitating the disaster of 1204 see Catanzaro 2012; Kaldellis 2009.

⁵ Ostrogorsky 1969: 27.

⁶ See for example, Agapetos, *Advice to the Emperor Justinian*; Photios, *Eisagoge*; Photios, *The letter of Patriarch Photios*; Blemmydes, *Imperial Statue*; see also Dagron 2003: 17; Barker 1957.

during the transfer of power from emperor to son,⁷ this was merely an affectation which provided the facade of constitutional legitimacy with no genuine legal basis. Taking power by force, which found a ready precedent in the empire's Roman heritage (that upon which the political system was principally based), was therefore a perfectly viable and relatively commonplace route to the throne.⁸

Theodore Mommsen described this system as 'an autocracy tempered by the permanent legal right of revolution.'⁹ Paul Lemerle emphasised the subtleties and parallelism of emperor-usurper relationship arguing that usurpation was less an illegal act than it was the first step in the process of legitimation for a new ruler. In Lemerle's analysis, the parallelism between emperor and usurper arose from the existence of two different, yet mutually reinforcing, notions of legitimacy: one dynastic, one in essence 'republican' and derived from Roman ideals. When a usurper failed to take power the first notion was reinforced and the dynasty strengthened; when he succeeded, he could either integrate himself into the ruling family or choose to found a new dynasty and acquire legitimacy independently.¹⁰ All dynasties are, of necessity, born out of an act of usurpation.

The present study aims to explore the portrayal of usurpers in contemporary narrative histories and some of the means by which their newfound positions were presented as

⁷ Dagron 2003: 14-15; n.4: cites the general formulation 'It is not I who have chosen you, it is God; and it is the people, the senate and the army who have elected you...' which was also used when crowning individuals from outside the ruling family (for example, Justin II crowning his adopted son Tiberius).

⁸ Cheynet 1990: 184; Lemerle cited in Karlin-Hayter 1991: 85; for a general overview of usurpation in Roman history, and especially in the context of the fourth century (a pivotal time in the "Byzantines'" conception of their history) see Wardman 1984: 220-237.

⁹ Mommsen quoted in Bury 1910: 9.

¹⁰ 'L'usurpation... a un sens et presque une fonction politique. Elle est moins un acte illegal que le premier acte d'un processus de légitimation, dont le schema théorique est constant. Entre le basileus et l'usurpateur, il y a parallélisme plutôt qu'opposition. D'où l'existence de deux notions différentes de la légitimité, l'une 'dynastique', l'autre qu'on pourrait dire (au sens romain) 'républicaine', qui ne sont pas vraiment en conflit, mais plutôt se renforcent l'une l'autre: la seconde, quand l'usurpateur échoue, renforce de ce fait la première, et quand il réussit, la recrée, soit que l'usurpateur se rattache à la dynastie, soit qu'il fonde une dynastie.' Lemerle quoted in Karlin-Hayter 1991: 85.

legitimate. It will examine aspects of this ‘first step’ taken by usurpers and some of their subsequent actions/policies/propaganda during the period 963-1204. The study will be split into two principal chapters. The first will examine the narratives of usurpation using a series of short case studies, outlining the ways in which usurpers and their quests to become the *basileus* were described. Where possible it will seek to explore the pretexts contemporary historians ascribed to usurpers, addressing whether their actions in gaining the throne could be deemed justified. Ultimately, this will allow us to draw some general conclusions about how the image of the usurper was constructed, and the processes of usurpation viewed. The second chapter will investigate certain facets of the consolidation of power and the ways in which legitimacy was sought. The visual and symbolic transformation from rebel to usurper along with some of the propaganda utilised to legitimise their actions and subsequent rules will be explored.

Historical background

The period 963 – 1204 covers the history of the empire from the accession of Nikephoros II to the death of Alexios V. Following the expansion of the empire by the soldier emperors Nikephoros II (963-969), Ioannes I (969-973), and Basil II (973-1025) Byzantium is traditionally viewed to have undergone a military decline.¹¹ By contrast, its cultural sphere enjoyed a renaissance: a revitalisation for which the groundwork was laid during the ninth and tenth centuries with the gathering and transcription of Ancient Greek literary and philosophical works.¹² It found expression in the willingness to engage with this literature and

¹¹ Italy along with most of Bulgaria was lost, much of Asia Minor fell to the Seljuks, and in 1204 Constantinople was captured by the crusaders. Kazhdan 1985: 24.

¹² Kazhdan & Epstein 1985: 136.

the exploration of new ideas in the literary products of the eleventh and twelfth centuries – perhaps the greatest exponent being the polymath Michael Psellos.¹³ Meanwhile, the political realm saw numerous fractures: the end of the longest serving dynasty, the Macedonian; protracted periods of political instability caused by civil war and frequent plots against the throne; and the fragmentation of the empire in 1204. Jean-Claude Cheynet has detailed two-hundred and twenty-three separate conspiracies in the period 963-1210, with over a hundred in the eleventh century alone.¹⁴ Moreover, the twenty years prior to 1204 witnessed a dramatic surge in the number of uprisings that now characterise this period of political history: with more than double the number that had taken place in the previous eighty years combined.¹⁵

Introduction to Sources

This period is documented by a great variety of primary source materials; as this study chiefly relies upon the accounts of the narrative historians, some introductory remarks about the authors and the major works should be made at the outset.

The *History* of Leo the Deacon is among the principal sources for the events of 959-976 with occasional excursions on events taking place during the rule of Basil II.¹⁶ Born ca. 950 in western Anatolia, Leo was educated in Constantinople before his ordination as a Deacon

¹³ On the many cultural changes taking place during this period see Kazhdan & Epstein 1985; on some of the literary developments see, for example, Agapetos 2011; Kazhdan & Franklin 1984; on Psellos' relationship with, and exploration of, Greek literature and philosophy see Kaldellis 1999.

¹⁴ Cheynet 1990: 20-156.

¹⁵ Cheynet 1990: 100-145: lists more than fifty rebellions in the final two decades versus twenty rebellions in the first eight.

¹⁶ These excursions include for example, his references to the 'shooting star' seen prior to the death of Basil the Nothos (ca. 985), and the 986 campaign of Basil II against the Bulgars. Leo the Deacon. X.8.

around 970.¹⁷ He appears to have joined the palace clergy during the reign of Basil II and composed the *History* no later than 995.¹⁸ The *History*'s greater focus on imperial biography¹⁹ affords valuable insight into contemporary thought regarding imperial policies and actions. Though Leo makes no reference to his sources, use of a no longer extant pro-Phokas²⁰ work has been posited, alongside sources favourable to Tzimiskes, leading to some inconsistencies in the narrative.²¹ That he had access to 'official documents and panegyrics',²² or/as well as firsthand information from members of the Phokas family has also been suggested.²³

To Leo may be added Ioannes Skylitzes' *Synopsis Historion* covering the years 811-1057. Skylitzes is mentioned in legal documents from 1090 and 1092 as being a senior magistrate in the judicial tribunal of Constantinople.²⁴ Composed near the end of the century, the *Synopsis* formed a synthesis of historical works including many that are no longer extant.²⁵ Skylitzes' accounts of the reigns of Phokas and Tzimiskes are essentially in accordance with those of Leo and appear to have appropriated the same pro-Phokas source as Leo alongside a number of anti-Phokas sources.²⁶ The work of Theodore of Sebasteia may have been utilised for much of the reign of Basil II, an account of Katakalon Kekaumenos for

¹⁷ On Leo's education see Leo the Deacon. IV.11; on the potential dates of his ordination see Panagiotakes 1965: 7-9.

¹⁸ On the dating of Leo's *History* see Holmes 2003a: 38.

¹⁹ The reason for which, Kazhdan has argued, is an attempt by Leo to foster 'the image of the emperor as a noble warrior'. Kazhdan 1983: 27; on the idea of the emperor Nikephoros II as a 'noble warrior' see Morris 1998: 87; on the trend from the tenth century onwards for histories to have a biographical flair instead of the traditional documentation of a chronological continuum see Scott 1981: 64; Markopoulos 2003: 186.

²⁰ This source has been 'identified' as a chronicle stressing the virtuous deeds of the Phokades. Ljubarskij 1993: 252-253; Morris 1988: 85-86.

²¹ Morris 1994: 212.

²² Morris 1994: 209.

²³ On the supposed information from the Phokas family see Cheynet 1986: 303.

²⁴ Wortley 2010: ix-x.

²⁵ Skylitzes' prooimion lists fourteen sources for his narrative, though he likely made use of additional unnamed works. Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 1-3.

²⁶ Kazhdan argued that Skylitzes' anti-Phokas sources might include a text ('Source A') linked with the patriarchate and critical of perceived encroachment into church affairs. Kazhdan cited in Morris 1988: 86.

the reign of Michael IV,²⁷ and potential oral witnesses for the later portion of his work.²⁸ Of particular note is Skylitzes' close focus on the emperors (almost everything in the narrative is used as a way of judging their rule) and his special interest in documenting coups, rebellions and attempted assassinations.²⁹ Skylitzes' narrative was later expanded to cover events up to 1079 – possibly by Skylitzes himself³⁰ - and was subsequently reworked by Ioannes Zonaras,³¹ crucially, with a section on the rule of Alexios I Komnenos recording many of the criticisms of that emperor.

The works of contemporaries Psellos and Attaleiates complete the principal political accounts of the eleventh century. The *Historia Syntomos*, a work ascribed to Psellos,³² covers the period from the foundation of Rome to the reign of Basil II. His *Chronographia* opens with the reign of Basil II and terminates, unfinished, during the rule of Michael VII Doukas. The period from 1035-1060 is particularly detailed and coincides with Psellos' time as a civil administrator in the high government.³³ The reliability of Psellos' narrative may be questioned, however, as his central involvement in, and professed influence over, a number of the events he recorded have been shown to be factually inaccurate – possibly a result of the way in which he chose to write.³⁴ A multifaceted work that incorporates an apologia for his

²⁷ Holmes 2005: 91.

²⁸ Wortley 2010: xxi-xxii; on Skylitzes' sources and methods of composition see Holmes 2003b: 187-199.

²⁹ Skylitzes shows such an interest in these attempts that the reign of Michael VI is almost wholly taken up by an account of Isaakios I Komnenos' rise to power.

³⁰ On the authorship of Skylitzes Continuatus see Kipidou 2006.

³¹ Zonaras also appears to have followed a similar judicial career trajectory to Skylitzes, and was an eyewitness to many of the events of court during his day. Angold 1997: 2.

³² Regarding the authorship of the work see Markopoulos 2006:290-291; Duffy & Papaioannou 2003: 219-229; Aerts 1990: xi-xiii.

³³ Angold 1997: 2; Kaldellis 1999: 8-9.

³⁴ Jeffreys has examined some of the factual inaccuracies surrounding Psellos' central role in the events he narrates. For example: his embassy to Isaakios I Komnenos, which in the *Chronographia* is presented as a resounding success, is reported as a failure in Psellos' speech at the prosecution of Keroularios and in Skylitzes' *Synopsis*; his letters to Isaakios Komnenos also reveal some distance from the political affairs of state, something which the *Chronographia* glosses over – instead keeping Psellos centre stage. These misrepresentations may be a result of the way in which Psellos decided to write: his position as an excessively

involvement in the affairs of state alongside explorations of philosophy and rhetoric,³⁵ the *Chronographia* may be described as a ‘personal history’ relaying Psellos’ explanation for the crises facing Byzantium in the eleventh century; particularly stressing financial mismanagement and a lack of respect for the rules/rights of succession.

Attaleiates’ *History* forms an account of the years 1034-1079/80. As a contemporary (or eyewitness) to many of the events described, the majority of his narrative is devoted to the 1060s and 1070s.³⁶ Attaleiates’ career apparently flourished at this time: becoming a landowner; being promoted to the position of *krites tou stratopedou* in 1068; and awarded the rank of *patrikios* the following year.³⁷ Despite his involvement in Romanos IV’s disastrous eastern campaign (for which the *History* offers an apologia) Attaleiates’ became a *magistros* under the Doukai. The close proximity to events in the capital and at court means that Attaleiates provides a detailed account of the political turmoil of this period. His political allegiances being the opposite of Psellos’, his narrower focus on military affairs and the major deeds of emperors, allow him to be read as a ‘corrective’ to Psellos.³⁸

In addition to the section in Ioannes Zonaras’ chronicle, the rise of Alexios I is covered by two historians from within the regime: Nikephoros Bryennios and Anna

central figure may be a literary device originating in his account of Monomachos (when Psellos genuinely was close to the emperor) and extended in order to provide an entertaining narrative which maintains a high level of contact with the events taking place. A strictly factual historical account is, in this reading, secondary to the author’s literary concerns. On these points see Jeffreys 2010: 80-89; on literary techniques employed in medieval historical narratives see Otter 2005: 111; on the significance of Psellos’ authorial presence see Macrides 1996.

³⁵ Kaldellis 1999: examines ‘the complex interrelationship between philosophy, rhetoric, politics and religion’ presented in the pages of the *Chronographia*.

³⁶ Though amounting to less than a quarter of the period spanned by the *History* these decades consume approximately two-thirds of the text.

³⁷ For a biography of Attaleiates life see Krallis 2012: 1-42; on Attaleiates’ career see Gautier 1981: 15; for the previously unattested position of the *krites tou stratopedou* (a military advisor to the emperor) see Haldon & Morrisson 2002.

³⁸ Krallis 2012: 79-81: has drawn attention to Attaleiates’ familiarity with the *Chronographia* evidenced by Attaleiates’ critique of Psellos’ political assessment of the empire. On the relationship of Attaleiates and Psellos within court and intellectual circles, see Kazhdan 1984: 85-86; for a reassessment in light of new scholarship see Krallis 2012: 71-79.

Komnene. Bryennios was the grandson of Nikephoros Bryennios the Elder, whose revolt against Botaneiates Alexios Komnenos put down.³⁹ Made a *kaisar* by Alexios' government the Younger Bryennios married the *porphyrogenita* Anna Komnene. His *Materials for a History*, commissioned by the Empress Eirene, charts the critical period of 1057-1081, stressing the dire straits in which the empire found itself and detailing Komnenos' rise to power. Anna Komnene's *Alexiad* forms a tribute to her father's rule. Completed during the reign of Manuel I, it provides a Komnenian perspective to Alexios' accession and his subsequent governance.⁴⁰ Anna appears to have utilised the historical materials left by Bryennios, who died before he could complete his history of Alexios' reign.⁴¹

The *History* of Niketas Choniates completes the list of principal Byzantine sources for this period. Choniates was a contemporary to most of the events he narrates and, as he moved into positions of power - eventually rising to the post of *logothetes ton sekreton* under the Angeloi - increasingly became an eye witness to, and direct participant in, imperial policy making.⁴² Covering the years 1118-1206, the *History* was reworked and extended to include the events of 1204 during the period of 'exile' in Nicaea.⁴³ Alongside Kinnamos, whose work he may have used in writing,⁴⁴ Choniates serves as the main Byzantine source for the reigns of Ioannes and Manuel Komnenos, and is the only significant Byzantine source for the period 1180-1206. The embittered Choniates penned a moralising narrative that sought to explain the reasons for the cataclysm of 1204, finding fault in the excess of the rulers and the sinful

³⁹ On the relationship between the two Nikephoros' see Wittek-De Jongh 1953: 463-468; Neville 2012: 16.

⁴⁰ Magdalino 2000: 15-44; see also Smythe 2006: 125-126.

⁴¹ Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* Prologue, 3.

⁴² Kazhdan et al 1991: 428; Magdalino has convincingly demonstrated the use of official encomiastic sources in Choniates' account. Magdalino 1993: 21, 443, 457-458.

⁴³ On Choniates' reworking of the manuscript post-1204 and an analysis of the evidence for multiple editions of the *History* together with their likely dates of composition see Simpson 2006; Simpson 2009: 16-17.

⁴⁴ Choniates' account noticeably complements that of Kinnamos: where Kinnamos provides a detailed account, Choniates is concise; when Kinnamos is lacking, Choniates is more forthcoming. Moreover, the speech of the dying emperor Ioannes Komnenos recorded in Choniates' manuscript appears to be a reworked version of that provided by Kinnamos - enhanced with biblical allusions. Simpson 2009: 27-28.

behaviour of the populace.⁴⁵ To this end, Choniates was not above distorting the facts about the individuals in his *History*.⁴⁶

All of these sources were crafted by individuals involved in the high circles of state. They had, and often made use of sources that had, personal agendas which influenced their writings. The sources are not merely a series of factual accounts tempered by individual perspective, but products of a literary culture undergoing a revolution at the time of composition. The influence of the literary milieu on these works must therefore be taken into account. How might this culture have affected an author's presentation of the individuals and events described? Such considerations are vital if the historical perception and literary presentation of the individual usurper is to be examined.

⁴⁵ For a general overview of Choniates' aims in this regard see Harris 2000: 20-31.

⁴⁶ Simpson notes that Andronikos, for example, is subject to factual distortions that deliberately portray him in a negative light. Choniates' description of Andronikos' illicit relationship with Philippa, was seemingly a reworking of Kinnamos' account of Andronikos' relationship with Theodora. Eustathios of Thessalonike's account of Patriarch Theodosios' reproach by Andronikos was reworked by Choniates to undermine Andronikos' image. Simpson 2009: 28-31; Choniates, *History* 252-253; Eustathios of Thessaloniki, *The Capture of Thessaloniki* 38-40.

USURPER NARRATIVES: PRETEXTS AND LEGACIES

Basileia in Byzantium implied a duality: legitimacy and tyranny, concepts closely related in Byzantine political formulations.⁴⁷ These formulas provided guidance on how an emperor should comport himself: directing him to become an image of God in order that his subjects might have a model to look toward. Despite the emperor's status as the 'living law', and therefore (in theory) his being subject only to God, they advised voluntary conformation to, and defence of, the laws of the state. As Dagron has shown, this could provide a way of converting the 'brute strength' of imperial power into 'legitimate power,' through respect for law and tradition: a moral conversion that allowed legal rule to ensue and implied the legitimacy of an emperor acting in manner pleasing to God.⁴⁸

Tyranny arose in two primary ways: first, in the rebel who challenged a reigning emperor (ended only by death, or success and the conversion of brute strength to legitimate power); second, in the emperor who lost legitimacy and slipped into tyrannical rule.⁴⁹ As Cheynet outlined, the question of tyranny was at the heart of any debate about imperial legitimacy. An emperor might be revealed as a tyrant and a usurper legitimate, and it was only through observation of behaviour that such determinations could be made. The concept of the imperial ideal was of assistance in these debates: philanthropy, clemency, justice, and care for the common good were the qualities of a true emperor – a tyrant abandoned these to the detriment of his subjects. How a usurper attained power gave a clear indication of whether he possessed these qualities, whether he was legitimate.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ The relationship was often alluded to in 'constitutional' literature for the emperor. For example, Blemmydes, *Imperial Statue* §1,8-10, 34-35.

⁴⁸ Dagron 1994: 27-52; Dagron 2003: 19-35

⁴⁹ Cheynet 1990: 177-184.

⁵⁰ Cheynet 1990: 184.

This chapter will examine the descriptions of usurpers in the sources. Through a series of short case studies, it will attempt to outline some of the ways in which historical accounts presented usurpers and their actions: the pretexts for rebellion; the mode of usurpation; the character of some of the individuals involved; and the affect of usurpation on an emperor's public image. It will attempt to draw some general conclusions about the image of usurpers as presented in the accounts and suggest some provisional interpretations of Byzantine views on usurpation as a valid route to power.

Nikephoros II Phokas

To say that Nikephoros' reign was controversial would be an understatement. Liudprand of Cremona's *Relatio* portrays the emperor in an almost universally bad light, and Byzantine sources are deeply divided.⁵¹ The circumstances of his coup can be quickly summarised. In March 963 the Emperor Romanos II died. His sons Basil and Constantine had been named co-emperors: however, given their youth, the Empress Theophano ruled as regent. Joseph Bringas, the *parakoimomenos*, held the real power at court. According to Leo the Deacon, Bringas was 'ill disposed' towards Phokas; troubled by his reputation and influence with the army, Bringas attempted to remove Phokas as a potential threat.⁵² Phokas was persuaded to seize the throne by his nephew, Ioannes Tzimiskes; and with the approval of the Empress Theophano and Patriarch Polyeuktos he assumed the imperial mantle alongside Romanos' sons in July 963.⁵³

⁵¹ Morris 1988: 83-115.

⁵² Leo the Deacon, *History* II.10: III.1.

⁵³ Leo the Deacon, *History* III.4; Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 247-249; Yahya of Antioch, partial translation in Morris 1988: 104.

The *History* of Leo the Deacon attributes the outbreak of the insurrection to the misrule of Bringas. Leo suggests that Phokas was not at all convinced by the explanation of Romanos' death from natural causes.⁵⁴ Instead we learn that 'he was extremely agitated... for the untrustworthiness of events and the reversals and mutability of fortune gave the man no rest, especially as he was suspicious of the power of Joseph.'⁵⁵ It was at this point, according to Leo, that Phokas wanted to rebel. We see him trying to act for the benefit of the empire: if Romanos had been murdered, and Nikephoros suspected that Joseph Bringas (a eunuch⁵⁶ running the empire) was the culprit, then he certainly had a duty to intervene in order to remove the man. Yet despite Nikephoros' reservations, he could not rebel.⁵⁷ It was only when Bringas' plots against Phokas and his family were revealed to him that he was finally spurred into action:

'it is wrong, nay intolerable, for Roman generals to be led and be dragged by the nose... by a wretched eunuch... who has insinuated himself into political power. So follow me quickly unless you want to... suffer the ultimate fate...' When John exhorted him in this manner, Nikephoros was aroused to action...⁵⁸

The natural order had been overturned: a eunuch had weaselled his way to power and was giving instructions to Roman generals. Nikephoros *must* rebel in order to save his life and restore order: Bringas was acting tyrannically and was now unjustly moving against Phokas. Phokas' motivation at the outset is shown to be pure and considered.

⁵⁴ 'luxury... licentious pleasures ... and an appetite for unusual passions.' Leo the Deacon, *History* II.10.

⁵⁵ Leo the Deacon, *History* II.10.

⁵⁶ Ringrose comments on the paradoxical relationship between eunuchs and power: '... eunuchs were clearly not supposed to be individuals of great political or military power. On the other hand, they were supposed to act as surrogates or perfect servants for their masters, and such service might easily include exercising political or military leadership. The way in which an author depicted these eunuchs reflected his own reaction to what he considered a transgression of the eunuchs' gender limitations.' Ringrose 2003: 141; both Leo and Skylitzes present Joseph as an interloper; though he is used as a tool by Skylitzes with which to attack Phokas' character the tone of Ioannes' narrative is clear – the eunuch's accrued power was improper.

⁵⁷ Leo the Deacon, *History* II.11.

⁵⁸ Leo the Deacon, *History* III.3-4.

With this validation in place Leo makes Phokas' pure intentions more explicit by noting how he had no desire to become the *basileus*. During his acclamation by the army, Leo reports that Phokas had initially refused the position and had permitted Ioannes 'Tzimiskes to assume this honour and claim the sceptre instead. But no one in the army would stand for these words.' When Phokas finally did accept the honour, his speech to the troops began by saying that he 'did not assume this imperial regalia through any desire for rebellion against the state, but was driven to it by the compulsion of you, the army.'⁵⁹ Phokas was not rebelling out of a desire for power; he never wanted the office but ultimately pursued it (at the request of others) in order to protect his family, his troops and the greater good from the scheming of Bringas: he acted in defence of Byzantine *ἀσφάλεια*. He deliberated over what was to be done and sincerely believed that this was the only course of action; it was not on a whim or for petty reasons that he revolted.

Leo's only criticism of Phokas' coup - though it is not insubstantial - is that he broke his oath to the patriarch and the state. When Bringas had first challenged Phokas, the Patriarch Polyeuktos stepped in to calm the situation: allowing Phokas to retain his position but 'binding him with oaths' of loyalty ensuring that he would respect the state and the senate and not act against them.⁶⁰ With the outset of his insurrection, Leo says of Phokas, 'he placed previous events second to his own safety, ascribing little importance to his oaths.'⁶¹ In reneging on them Phokas thus dishonoured himself and while it would seem that Leo believed Phokas to have had legitimate grievances for rebellion, the breaking of oaths made to the

⁵⁹ Leo the Deacon, *History* III.1; III.4-5.

⁶⁰ 'I advise you, after binding him with oaths that he will not plan anything undesirable against the state and the senate, to proclaim him as commander-in-chief [αὐτοκράτωρ στρατηγός], and entrust him with the troops of Asia.' Leo the Deacon, *History* II.12.

⁶¹ Leo the Deacon, *History* III.4.

patriarch was something that the Deacon could not condone. For Leo, the rebellion was justified, but Phokas wrong: he ignored sacred bonds.

Skylitzes' narrative, though largely agreeing on the particulars of Phokas' coup, disagrees on the motives of the emperor. Skylitzes provides two possible reasons for Phokas' acclamation: first, that Tzimiskes and the other conspirators had threatened to kill him if he did not allow them to proclaim him emperor;⁶² second, the version that Skylitzes says he believes: that 'Phokas had long been labouring under the impression that he ought to be emperor... [and he] burned with desire for the Empress Theophano.'⁶³ The pair were then supposed to have 'contrived' to have Polyeuktos crown Phokas emperor;⁶⁴ and very soon after Nikephoros was in power, we are told that he dropped 'all pretence and play-acting by taking Theophano to be his lawful wife.'⁶⁵ Skylitzes' presentation of two possibilities is somewhat farcical: who would believe that the conspirators - who we have already been told were 'very loyal' to Phokas - were really going to kill him if he refused to be proclaimed emperor?⁶⁶ Yet if the reader does choose to accept that version of events, Skylitzes presents Phokas as little more than a weak leader; a man at the mercy of others who delays and procrastinates; who is not acting for the long-term good of the empire but merely in order to save his own skin in the short-term. Where Leo presented the noble and deliberated concern of a reluctant emperor chosen by the troops, Skylitzes presents pure reactionary panic. The first story is not included in order to help provide an objective view of the matter, but rather to attack Phokas. The reader *knows* the real version of events was that favoured by Skylitzes. In

⁶² '[they] besought him to act in no uncertain way or to devise some noble and audacious stratagem. They threatened to kill him with their own hands when he delayed and procrastinated. Since he feared that his own life was in danger, he permitted them to proclaim him on 2 July.' Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 247.

⁶³ Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 247-249.

⁶⁴ Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 248.

⁶⁵ Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 250.

⁶⁶ Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 247.

this case, Phokas is again not acting for any noble or legitimate reason, but is motivated purely by lust and self interest: the desire for power and the desire for Theophano. Neither option portrays him in a flattering light. Evidently, the purity of the motive for rebellion was perceived as being vital to the construction of a usurper's image.

The explanation for the starkly different accounts of Leo and Ioannes concerns the source materials being utilised by the historians. Skylitzes' narrative of this period is largely dependent upon a number of anti-Phokas sources.⁶⁷ Kazhdan posited that these shared a common source text: a prototype which may have originated within the patriarchal sphere (given its criticism of perceived encroachments by the emperor into the affairs of the church).⁶⁸ Considering that Phokas' religious policies were rather inflammatory and formed part of the later *damnatio* of the emperor, greater criticism of him is therefore to be expected.⁶⁹ The narrative treatments of Phokas' rise to power fit into the agenda of each historian. Leo, for whom Phokas was the ideal emperor,⁷⁰ ascribes noble reasons to his actions but still condemns him for breaking his vows; by contrast, Skylitzes, whose account is highly critical of Phokas' reign and dependant on these sources, uses the seizure of power as another way to criticise him. The ways in which the historians chose to present Phokas' motives for taking the throne were integral to the overall presentation of both his reign and legacy in their works.

⁶⁷ This is not to say that he did not make use of pro-Phokas sources as well, merely that the work relied on the anti-Phokas sources more often. Holmes 2003b: 187-199.

⁶⁸ Kazhdan cited in Morris 1988: 86.

⁶⁹ On Nikephoros' divisive policies with regard to the church see Charanis 1948:53-118; Morris 1988: 100-103; Laiou 1994: 163-164.

⁷⁰ Leo's treatment of Phokas' reign is highly flattering to the emperor. Morris has noted that Phokas is presented as 'a paragon of personal and imperial virtues'. He is in fact the only emperor not to receive a balanced assessment by Leo: instead, presented as pious, the ultimate warrior, physically strong and always brave. This is not to say that Leo does not criticise the emperor on occasion: only that the overall view is positive. Kazhdan 2006: 284; Morris 1988: 84.

Ioannes Tzimiskes & Theophano

On 10/11 December 969, Tzimiskes entered the imperial palace alongside five discontented military officials⁷¹ and with the help of the Empress Theophano gained access to the emperor's quarters. After some initial panic, finding Phokas absent, they located the emperor and proceeded to beat him to death before Tzimiskes secured the palace and proclaimed himself emperor.⁷²

Leo the Deacon ascribed Tzimiskes' actions to his being betrayed by Nikephoros. In the midst of the description of Phokas' beating, Tzimiskes rages at the emperor and some attempt at a justification is made:

‘Tell me, you most ungrateful and malicious tyrant, was it not through me that you attained the Roman rule...? Why then did you disregard such a good turn, and, driven by envy and evil frenzy, not hesitate to remove me, your benefactor, from command...? Instead you dismissed me to waste my time in the countryside with peasants, like some alien without any rights, even though I am more brave and vigorous than you...’⁷³

We are reminded of the assistance Tzimiskes provided Phokas in gaining power, something which concurrently recalls how *Ioannes* was very nearly acclaimed.⁷⁴ Phokas' dismissal of Tzimiskes is portrayed as not only being unfair, but the act of a ‘most ungrateful and malicious tyrant’; clearly not that of a just emperor. Phokas had instead forgotten his debts, treating Tzimiskes prejudicially ‘like some alien without any rights.’ His being ‘driven by envy and evil frenzy’ was a sign of imperial mismanagement and poor judgement.⁷⁵ Finally, we learn that Tzimiskes was the superior candidate for the throne by virtue of his bravery and

⁷¹Michael Bourtzēs, Isaakios Brachamios, Leo Balantes, Leo Pēdiasimos, and Atzupotheodoros. On these men and their likely motives see Cheynet 1990: 227-328; McGrath 1996: 89-90; Morris 1994: 212.

⁷²Leo the Deacon, *History* V.6-9; Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 268-270.

⁷³Leo the Deacon, *History* V.7.

⁷⁴Phokas repeatedly rejected the throne; it was only the loyalty of the army to Phokas that prevented Tzimiskes being named.

⁷⁵Maguire 1994: 220-223.

vigour; elsewhere he is compared with Homeric figure Tydeus.⁷⁶ As Morris has noted, these charges must clearly be viewed as part of the attempt to undermine the reputation of Nikephoros in order to bolster Tzimiskes' image; it seems certain that this section of the text made use of the pro-Tzimiskes sources at Leo's disposal.⁷⁷

Skylitzes avoided going into too much detail about Ioannes' motives, but agreed with Leo on the essentials.⁷⁸ His largely pro-Tzimiskes account reveals how deeply the stain of Phokas' murder affected his image. He records that the patriarch refused Tzimiskes entry to Hagia Sophia because 'his hands were dripping with the steaming blood of a newly-slain kinsman...' and that he was 'unworthy to enter a church of God.'⁷⁹ Tzimiskes was forced to repent for his misdeeds, and name those responsible for the murder (he did not name himself). Skylitzes continues to work subtle references to the bloodguilt accrued by Tzimiskes into the text: the patriarch of Alexandria comments that Tzimiskes should be patient in his quest to become the *basileus* 'lest by foolishly rushing to possess the throne he destroys his own soul' (tacit acceptance that this is what happened); and later, during Tzimiskes' campaigns, that 'the Romans... knew they had God on their side, He who has no wish to come to the aid of princes with unclean hands, but always helps the victims of injustice' (another reference to Phokas' murder).⁸⁰

The widespread disapproval of Tzimiskes' actions is confirmed by Leo, who notes that Ioannes 'had accomplished... [an] unholy and abominable deed, loathsome to God.'⁸¹ His

⁷⁶ Tydeus was an exceptionally strong and capable soldier of short stature in Greek lore. Leo the Deacon, *History* IV.3.

⁷⁷ Morris 1994: 208-209.

⁷⁸ He notes that Tzimiskes had been dismissed and was confined to his estates, after which the plot was hatched. Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 268.

⁷⁹ Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 272.

⁸⁰ See Sinclair 2009: 108.

⁸¹ Leo the Deacon, *History* V.9.

first comments about Tzimiskes' rule stated that: 'After the emperor Nikephoros was murdered... Ioannes, whose sobriquet was Tzimiskes, took in his hands the reins of empire.'⁸² Despite his admiration for Tzimiskes' military record,⁸³ Leo maintained that the murder of Phokas was a 'wicked crime', and his shock at the desecration of Nikephoros' body was somewhat evident.⁸⁴ He also notes that justice eventually fell upon those involved.⁸⁵ That the coup affected Tzimiskes' legacy in the *History* is certain: the murder was repeatedly alluded to, even during Tzimiskes deathbed confession - the scene which provides the lasting impression of him.⁸⁶ The historian's attitude is clear: he considered the murder an affront to God and Tzimiskes undoubtedly guilty. The fact that the deed was performed by a man who became emperor did not excuse it. It is interesting that Leo chose to comment on how easily Phokas' brother⁸⁷ could have won the throne had he acted 'to take vengeance on the usurpers' before they had secured the government.⁸⁸ The comment reveals the importance of action to the attainment of power, but more importantly highlights the fact that Leo did not believe Ioannes to be legitimate at this point: Phokas' brother was the legitimate claimant. Murdering the emperor and declaring oneself his successor did not make this so.

⁸² Leo the Deacon, *History* VI.1.

⁸³ On Leo's admiration of military prowess see Morris 1988: 83-115.

⁸⁴ 'But John ordered that Nikephoros's head be brought in and shown to his bodyguards through a window. A man named Atzypotheodoros came and cut off the head and showed it to the turbulent group of men. When they saw the *monstrous and unbelievable sight*, they let their swords fall from their hands...' He also comments that the body of the emperor was left outside for the entire day before being hastily bundled into a wooden coffin and laid to rest in the *heroon* of the Holy Apostles. (Leo the Deacon, *History* V.9.) Leo is very careful here to name those involved in the desecration – clearly he wanted people to know precisely who was responsible.

⁸⁵ This is a questionable sentiment. Leo the Deacon, *History* V.6.

⁸⁶ Leo the Deacon, *History* X.10: 'And he summoned Nicholas... and confessed to him his sins of omission in the course of his life.' The 'sins of omission' certainly pertain to the murder of Phokas, which Tzimiskes had never admitted to. Sinclair 2009: 122: argues that the lack of a direct mention of the murder is indicative of the use of a pro-Tzimiskes source.

⁸⁷ Leo, the *kouropalates*.

⁸⁸ Leo the Deacon, *History* VI.2.

The coup had ramifications on the policies pursued by Tzimiskes and the reputations of those involved in the murder.⁸⁹ Skylitzes and Leo's histories show signs of the attempt to repair Tzimiskes' damaged name; and Morris has shown that the emperor's propagandists attacked Phokas' military record in order to undermine his lasting popularity and alleviate some of the criticism of Tzimiskes.⁹⁰ This restorative effort also included the endorsement of Tzimiskes' martial qualities, seen in the narratives' promotion of his military prowess and heroic physique (attributes that were admired by the aristocracy of this period),⁹¹ alongside his piety and philanthropy.⁹² It also invoked Theophano's role in the murder.

The motives provided for the Empress' involvement vary.⁹³ Some sources present her as a concerned mother and call her participation a reaction to Nikephoros' supposed plans to have Basil and Constantine castrated. This allows Phokas to be presented as illegitimate (as he rejected the authority of her children, from whom his power derived and was thus like a tyrant).⁹⁴ Others, Skylitzes prominent among them, suggest that she was discontent with her husband's celibate lifestyle and thus manoeuvred Tzimiskes, whom she loved, into power.⁹⁵ In this version, Theophano is motivated by desire: with her adultery signifying her political disloyalty and serving to increase the condemnation of her. Such charges were also levelled against the empress Zoe in order to revive the reputation of Michael IV.⁹⁶

Theophano too, then, emerges with a tarnished reputation with criticism of her extending into her past. Skylitzes reports that she began life as an innkeeper's daughter:

⁸⁹ See page 41 below.

⁹⁰ Morris 1988: 87-88.

⁹¹ Kazhdan & Epstein 1985: 99-119.

⁹² See below, pages 41-43.

⁹³ On Theophano see Garland 1999: 133-135.

⁹⁴ Psellos, *Historia Syntomos* 100-101; Zonaras, *Epitome* III, 516-517; Cheynet 1990:181.

⁹⁵ Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 268; Psellos, *Historia Syntomos* 100-103. *Historia Syntomos* earlier mentions that Theophano had wanted Tzimiskes to be Romanos' successor rather than Phokas; and that she had intended to marry Ioannes but that he urged Nikephoros to rule in his stead.

⁹⁶ Psellos, *Chronographia* III.26, IV.6; Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 368-371; Strugnell 2006: 131.

evoking associations with prostitution which his later references to her adulterous behaviour can evidently exploit.⁹⁷ He also alleges that she aided Romanos II in his attempt to poison his father and urged the emperor to expel his mother so that she might secure her own status.⁹⁸ Skylitzes makes it clear that she was involved in the death of Romanos II's uncle, the exiled former co-emperor to Constantine VII, Stephen Lekapenos, despite a sizable distance between the pair;⁹⁹ and Leo the Deacon implies that she may have had a hand in the death of Romanos II.¹⁰⁰ Such accusations promote the image of Theophano as an 'Eve' type figure, corrupting the men around her.¹⁰¹ These accusations and the associated 'Eve' imagery provide further evidence of the propaganda campaign aimed at smearing her image; which no doubt intended to lessen Tzimiskes' own guilt.¹⁰² Though most sources avoid directly accusing her of murder¹⁰³ perhaps the ultimate sign of the success of the campaign against her is that she is the cause of Phokas' death in the Epitaph recorded by Skylitzes.¹⁰⁴

The narratives are unanimous in one aspect of their assessment of Tzimiskes: he was guilty of murder. Attempts were made to revive his reputation by attacking Nikephoros'

⁹⁷ Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 237; Cheynet 2006: 17: posits the likelihood of her in fact being a member of the (noble) Krateros family.

⁹⁸ Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 237, 243; Strugnell 2006: 126.

⁹⁹ Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 246: '... the emperor Stephen, still in the land of the living, exiled to Methymne... [he] suddenly and unexpectedly died, for no apparent reason. Yet even though she was living far away, it was Theophano who procured his death.'

¹⁰⁰ 'Most people suspected he [Romanos] drank some hemlock poison that came from the women's apartments.' Leo the Deacon, *History* II.10; Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 244: also mentions that Romanos may have been poisoned, though it does not say by whom.

¹⁰¹ Strugnell 2006: 126-127.

¹⁰² Strugnell 2006: 127 n.48: notes that Skylitzes avoids mentioning the rumour that Phokas was going to have Basil and Constantine castrated, as this would have provoked sympathy for her actions. This certainly appears to be further evidence of Skylitzes' attempts to deflect blame onto Theophano.

¹⁰³ She is never explicitly called a murderer; the blame she receives is just heavily implied.

¹⁰⁴ 'Who once sliced men more sharply than the sword
Is victim of a woman and a glaive [...]
Whom once it seems by wild beasts was revered
His wife has slain as though he were a sheep [...]
Nikephoros, who vanquished all but Eve.'

(Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 270.) The lines, attributed to Ioannes of Melitene, are found only in the ACE manuscript and may be a later interpolation. Even so, this would suggest the success of the campaign against Theophano.

military record and promoting Tzimiskes' 'superior' leadership qualities. Moreover, despite the criticism that would have been levelled at her anyway, it appears that Theophano was used to draw criticism away from the emperor. Regardless, Tzimiskes' becoming the emperor evidently did not justify the murder of Phokas: a misdeed that haunted his legacy.

Isaakios I Komnenos

Isaakios Komnenos' successful usurpation must be viewed in light of Michael VI's reign as presented in the narratives. All of the sources agree that Michael was manoeuvred into power by factions at court and that he was a poor choice of leader. Attaleiates and Psellos were especially critical of the emperor: essentially describing him as being a weak, simple and naive puppet, who was subject to the whims of his political masters.¹⁰⁵ At the outset of their accounts therefore, Psellos and Attaleiates provided a potential justification for Isaakios' usurpation of the throne: imperial mismanagement.¹⁰⁶

The motives and essential details of the revolt are something that the sources largely agree upon. Komnenos, alongside the Eastern military commanders, was deliberately overlooked for recognition and promotion by Michael VI upon the latter's accession to power.¹⁰⁷ The histories report that only those closest to the emperor were benefitting from his munificence: clearly something considered intolerable for those notables who were excluded, and not conduct associated with a responsible and just ruler.¹⁰⁸ To make matters worse, Michael is purported to have unfairly accused Isaakios and the other generals of very nearly

¹⁰⁵ Attaleiates, *History* XI.1; Psellos, *Chronographia* VII.1-3.

¹⁰⁶ Given that all of the principal sources are in accordance about Michael's poor leadership qualities it seems probable that this was a view shared by the majority.

¹⁰⁷ Attaleiates, *History* XI.2; Psellos, *Chronographia* VII.1-5; Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 451-455.

¹⁰⁸ Attaleiates, *History* XI.2; on the need for a ruler to be fair with regards to his largesse see Blemmydes, *Imperial Statue* §35.

losing Antioch.¹⁰⁹ Psellos uses this berating as an opportunity to stress Isaakios' good character: in his version of events Michael is specifically addressing Isaakios, whom the other generals defend.¹¹⁰ The image of Michael is that of incompetence, and tyranny over those excluded from power.

The accounts agree that the conspirators were justified in regard to their grievances with the emperor. Furthermore, both Skylitzes and Psellos attest to the pure intentions of the conspirators. Having earlier approached the emperor for recognition and been cruelly denied, they afforded him a second chance by approaching one of his subordinates, Leo Strabospondylos. After asking him to petition the emperor on their behalf, Strabospondylos is said to have turned them away in an 'arrogant fashion, in no small way making light of each of the men.'¹¹¹ Once more they were slighted, and we are induced to feel aggrieved on their behalf.¹¹² Skylitzes noted that it was only then that they started to talk of resisting, 'in order to obtain a just redress.'¹¹³ Psellos used this as another opportunity to emphasise Isaakios' qualities: accenting his moral fibre in revealing that he restrained the others from laying 'violent hands' upon Michael there and then.¹¹⁴

Given that Isaakios was one of Psellos' favourite emperors, perhaps we should not be surprised by this ascription.¹¹⁵ What is surprising is Psellos' account of his embassy to Isaakios in which he states that the conspirators' anger was reasonable but could not justify revolution. A closer reading of the text, however, reveals that Psellos' intent in the scene was to regale the reader with an account of skilful rhetoric in service of the emperor, rather than

¹⁰⁹ Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 451-455.

¹¹⁰ Psellos, *Chronographia* VII.3.

¹¹¹ Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 454.

¹¹² Psellos, *Chronographia* VII.4; Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 454.

¹¹³ Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 454.

¹¹⁴ Psellos, *Chronographia* VII.4.

¹¹⁵ Kaldellis 1999: 167-178.

providing *his own* objective assessment of events.¹¹⁶ Psellos' recanting of this argument would indicate that it did not reflect his true opinion of the matter but was rather the 'official' view.¹¹⁷ It would appear, therefore, that the histories believed the conspirators to be just and honourable: they were not seeking power for the sake of holding power, but rather to ensure fair recognition and the removal of an unjust emperor, the 'archetype of incompetence', who was disinclined to acquiesce.¹¹⁸

While Attaleiates is rather brief concerning Isaakios as the choice of leader - outlining only that he was a prominent figure and 'well regarded in the east' - Psellos and Skylitzes are more forthcoming.¹¹⁹ In the *Chronographia*, Isaakios, having restrained the others from acting impulsively against the emperor, argued for 'wiser council'.¹²⁰ We are told that he repeatedly refused the honour of the acclamation: asserting that any among the group was capable of ruling. Yet, the conspirators unanimously decided upon naming Isaakios emperor because 'he was in fact pre-eminent, not only by birth but in his kingly appearance; his nobility of mind and firmness of character... One look at the man was enough to inspire respect.'¹²¹ His wisdom and intellect were directly responsible for the success of the revolt: 'they saw him personally taking decisions necessary to its success... [Isaakios'] conduct of the revolt

¹¹⁶ Psellos provides us with a blow by blow account of the arguments put forth by Isaakios and his supporters, frequently commenting on how skilfully he managed to counter them and convince Isaakios of his way of thinking. The account therefore appears to be more of an opportunity for Psellos to boast than for him to provide a critical assessment of the situation. I am inclined to agree with Kaldellis' conclusion that Psellos had very little objection to the fall of Michael and that his comments were an exercise in self-serving rhetoric. Psellos, *Chronographia* VII.30-31; Kaldellis 1999: 167-168.

¹¹⁷ Psellos later talks of 'the reckless speeches' he made as envoy; that he 'was obeying an emperor's command' and 'served him well. So [that] it was not through any ill-will towards you [Isaakios], but in loyalty to Michael that I argued as I did.' Psellos, *Chronographia* VII.41.

¹¹⁸ Cheynet 1990: 186.

¹¹⁹ 'Hence one of the notables, well known and highly regarded in the east, Isaakios by name, whose surname was Komnenos, offended at this slight and insulted when he was shoved aside, was furious and shared his grievance with some of the military men. They too were already inflamed by the irregularity of the situation and full of indignation, and they incited him to rebel.' Attaleiates, *History* XI.2. '...and they chose as their commander-in-chief the leader of the revolt, Isaakios Komnenos.' Attaleiates, *History* XI.4.

¹²⁰ Psellos, *Chronographia* VII.4.

¹²¹ Psellos, *Chronographia* VII.5.

showed more wisdom than boldness.’¹²² Psellos outlines the rebel’s imperial potential: he was a wise leader; well-born; possessing the right way of thinking; looked the part, and was humble. Isaakios’ interest in Psellos’ own Hellenic learning and philosophical insight is later praised by the historian: another sign of Isaakios’ ‘wisdom’.¹²³ Evidently these qualities denoted an excellent potential claimant for the throne.

Skylitzes’ account differs slightly: we are told that the conspirators bound themselves with oaths made in Hagia Sophia and then turned their attention to the choice of emperor.¹²⁴ Skylitzes relied upon a biography favourable to Katakalon Kekaumenos and it is therefore unsurprising that the general was initially chosen to be emperor in his version of events.¹²⁵ His ‘age, bravery and experience’ marked him as a good choice, but he declined the honour immediately declaring Isaakios the emperor.¹²⁶ Kekaumenos’ implied martial qualities were clearly traits valuable to the leader of a conspiracy; and once again we see that when the historian favours a usurper he is described as being unwilling to accept power or start a civil war. Clearly, hastening to war and lusting for power were evidence of a usurper’s unsuitability to rule.¹²⁷

The influence of Komnenos’ coup upon his legacy is intimately linked with the civil war. Attaleiates, whose account to this point largely refrained from passing judgement, had strong views about the war. In his description of the battle between the opposing forces of

¹²² Psellos, *Chronographia* VII.6-7.

¹²³ Psellos, *Chronographia* VII.38, VII.41; on Psellos’ thought regarding the relationship of the ‘philosopher’ and the *basileus* with particular focus on Isaakios I Komnenos see Kaldellis 1999: 169-185.

¹²⁴ ‘Subsequently they congregated in the Great Church, making and receiving oaths neither to be silent nor to abandon the cause but to see those who had offended them punished; and they sealed their conspiracy ‘with links of iron’, as they say...’ Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 454.

¹²⁵ On Skylitzes’ pro-Kekaumenos source see Shepard 1992: 171-182; Wortley 2010: xxi-xxii.

¹²⁶ Sklyitzes, *Synopsis* 454.

¹²⁷ Weiler 2000: 13.

Michael and Isaakios in August 1057 near Nikaia, he notes the reversal of *τάξις* that it prompted:

And then father and son, as if forgetting their natural bonds, showed no compunction in eagerly slaughtering each other... they understood the extent of the tragedy and raised their laments to the heavens. Nevertheless, Komnenos was shown to be the winner... acclaimed as emperor by everyone, and in this conspicuous way revived the hopes of all that they would not fail in their purpose.¹²⁸

Natural order was overturned, families set against one another and hands stained by blood.

The influence of the war on Attaleiates' *History* is evident in his treatment of Michael's abdication: the patriarch convinced him to step down only to avoid further bloodshed;¹²⁹ and his tonsure (to prevent civil war ravaging the capital) is *the only* point at which Michael is praised.¹³⁰ Moreover, the ascription of Emperor Botaneiates' 'bloodless coup' as being 'a definitive and fitting sign of his faith in God and his appointment by him,' would suggest that Attaleiates believed power attained through bloodshed was less legitimate in the eyes of God.¹³¹ We see that Isaakios' reputation clearly suffered because of the 'conspicuous' nature of his rebellion.

In taking the throne as he did, Isaakios created for himself the image of a warrior. Attaleiates noted that he had 'acquired a reputation for manliness and heroism of the highest order... he prevailed over the former ruler in battle and managed to win for himself such a great authority by sword.'¹³² Isaakios' coinage exploited this and broke with the conventional imagery adopting, in place of a pious statement, a militaristic image of the emperor with his

¹²⁸ Attaleiates, *History* XI.5.

¹²⁹ Attaleiates records the possibility that the patriarch was integrally involved in the coup but does not wish to comment further; this accusation is confirmed in both the *Synopsis* and *Chronographia* with the latter noting that the patriarch was involved in the conspiracy through connections of his niece's husband. Attaleiates, *History* XI.7-9; Psellos, *Chronographia* VII.36-37; Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 464.

¹³⁰ Attaleiates, *History* XI.7-9.

¹³¹ Attaleiates, *History* XXXII.16.

¹³² Attaleiates, *History* XII.1.

sword drawn.¹³³ His seals bear a similar image of him with his sword upon his shoulder and were the first examples in which such imagery was used.¹³⁴ This may have been inspired by an icon of St. Michael dating from this period, or from standard formulations of Byzantine military saints.¹³⁵ In any case, the iconography was criticised by his contemporaries because it seemed to imply that Isaakios' legitimacy, at least in part, derived from the sword with which he had won it, rather than from God's beneficence.¹³⁶ The image of the warrior emperor may have been intended as a veiled threat, or a statement of strength which evoked memories of past glory as a symbol of his rule.¹³⁷

Isaakios' accession through 'conquest' lent his image a certain amount of prestige, yet the civil war overshadowed this and determined his enduring image. Attaleiates' final remarks about the emperor supposedly record popular rumour and reveal that upon his death Isaakios' sarcophagus was 'observed to be full of moisture,' which many took to be a sign 'of his punishment in Hell for the many people who died at Nikaia.'¹³⁸ Still others believed it to be evidence of the emperor's sanctity and God's forgiveness for Nikaia.¹³⁹ Plainly, even if the emperor was forgiven by God, the people had not forgotten how Isaakios came to throne and this was something which weighed heavily on the emperor's public image. His conquest may have been noteworthy but it came at too high a price: the deaths of countrymen and fellow Christians.

¹³³ Attaleiates, *History* XII.1.

¹³⁴ On this type of seal see BZS.1955.1.4319 in the Dumbarton Oaks collection. Dumbarton Oaks, *God's regents on Earth: A Thousand Years of Byzantine Imperial Seals, Isaak I Komnenos (1057-1059)*.

¹³⁵ Cheynet & Morrison 1995: 17-18; White 2013: 171.

¹³⁶ Grierson 1982: 200; Kaldellis 1999: 174.

¹³⁷ Angold 2008: 603.

¹³⁸ Attaleiates provides two general interpretations that were touted at the time before then explaining that he believed both to have some merit. Ultimately, he decides that the emperor's sins were forgiven. On the basis of this final remark (his own) about the two general interpretations I am inclined to believe that he genuinely did record popular opinion on the matter rather than merely inventing them. Attaleiates, *History* XII.16.

¹³⁹ Attaleiates records that it was proof that 'there is no sin that can overcome divine benevolence, if one but breaks away from evil and chooses good.' Attaleiates, *History* XII.16.

Isaakios' conspiracy was presented as originating from legitimate grievances and he was considered to have the qualities necessary both to lead a rebellion and govern the empire. The criticism that arose of his usurpation was linked with the civil war. The end result of his rebellion did not justify the means by which power was attained and the bloodguilt that was accrued tainted Isaakios' image. For Attaleiates, it proved to be a stain on Byzantine history which appears to have affected the public's perception of Isaakios: forever associating him with this misdeed.

Alexios I Komnenos

Anna Komnene's account of her father's rise to power affords us a unique insight into how the ruling dynasty wished to present their revolution. She initially presents her father's coup as being a consequence of distrust and factionalism within Botaneiates' court.¹⁴⁰ The Komnenoi feared that they would be attacked by the 'barbarians'¹⁴¹ who were slandering them to the emperor and were compelled to rebel not because of any disloyalty on their part, but because they feared they would be blinded.¹⁴² They were unfairly targeted and, like Phokas, were forced to act in order to defend themselves.

She also attempted to exonerate the Komnenoi from any accusation of desiring power by emphasising their loyalty: Anna Delassene sent a message to the emperor stating that *his* kindness had put the Komnenoi in danger, that the barbarians were acting against them out of jealousy and that *he* should protect the Komnenoi because they were loyal to him.¹⁴³ By having her grandmother entreat Botaneiates on their behalf Anna ensured that it was *his*

¹⁴⁰ Cheynet 1990:182-183.

¹⁴¹ Identified as Borilos and Germanos. Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* II.1.3.

¹⁴² Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* II.1.3, II.4.

¹⁴³ Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* II.5.

failure to defend them (his failure as an emperor) that prompted their uprising against him; and the ‘barbarians’ he failed to destroy supposedly intended to eliminate him in any case.¹⁴⁴ The emperor’s blindness was dangerous; the revolt justified. This image of a failing emperor was made explicit after Alexios’ acclamation by the army. Anna comments that, ‘Botaneiates’ spirit had been chilled by old age,’ that, ‘he only breathed freely now as long as the walls protected him...’, and ‘was thinking seriously about abdicating... Everything pointed to a total collapse.’¹⁴⁵ These charges were mirrored by Bryennios and earlier used by Psellos to justify the removal of Romanos III.¹⁴⁶ Evidently, Alexios was a superior choice of ruler who came along just as Botaneiates was going to abdicate (or be killed) anyway: most propitious timing.

The involvement of Maria of Alania on the side of the Komnenoi served to further reinforce Alexios image as a fitting ruler.¹⁴⁷ Komnene tells us that Maria’s involvement stemmed from her fear that Botaneiates intended to ignore the rights of succession and crown one of his relatives.¹⁴⁸ Her consequent adoption of Alexios was undertaken to ensure that these rights would be respected. It was suggested by Alexios as a temporary expedient in order for them to meet without suspicion being aroused and implied a close relationship with the dynasty.¹⁴⁹ Anna presented the revolt as being an attempt to save the lives of the Komnenoi and safeguard the rights of the legitimate future emperors. Alexios is presented as acting as a noble saviour.

¹⁴⁴ Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* II.4.

¹⁴⁵ Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* II.9.1.

¹⁴⁶ Bryennios writes of Botaneiates that: ‘Formerly an intelligent man and courageous, he had become decrepit with old age and had lost the ambition of his former excellence; he shortly lost all energy and was not fit for the imperial dignity.’ Bryennios, *History prooimion* 4; Kaldellis argues that Psellos used a similar charge against the frail Romanos III in order to justify Michael IV’s involvement in his murder: he was blind to what was taking place at court, and the weight of empire became too much for him to handle (implied through his sagging under the weight of the imperial robes). Kaldellis 1999: 30; Psellos, *Chronographia* III.21-24.

¹⁴⁷ Originally the wife of Michael VII Doukas, she subsequently married Botaneiates. Komnene reports that Maria provided Alexios and Isaakios with information about Botaneiates and aided them in their revolt. Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* II.3.4, II.4.5; on Maria’s life see Garland 1999: 180-186; Garland & Rapp 2006: 91-124.

¹⁴⁸ Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* II.2.

¹⁴⁹ Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* II.2.4; Macrides 1990: 117.

It is in keeping with this image that he was depicted as a reluctant emperor. Anna records that he repeatedly refused the imperial insignia when offered them. His brother Isaakios had to tell him that it was the will of God that he should be crowned, and then literally force the red boots onto Alexios' unwilling feet.¹⁵⁰ He was supposedly selected over his brother because of the 'burning zeal of the army' (reaffirming that his revolt was for the good of others) and 'his exceptional courage and wisdom... [his] hands unusually ready to dispense gifts...' (martial prowess, intellect and philanthropia).¹⁵¹ Alexios' martial qualities also found expression in Anna's description of his bearing and physical presence: though not particularly tall he is described as possessing 'broad shoulders, muscular arms and a deep chest, all on a heroic scale.'¹⁵² Furthermore, his intellect is alluded to a number of times: he is said to have possessed a 'fiery eloquence'; to have 'won universal attention and captivated every heart' by virtue of argument; and invented titles worthy of the 'science' of ruling.¹⁵³ That these qualities were generally considered necessary for the success of a rebellion appears evident from Anna's description of Basilakios who is described as possessing an impressive physique, great strength, majestic presence and irresistible eloquence.¹⁵⁴

Once again it was through civil war that the emperor gained power. Zonaras was especially critical of the actions of Alexios' soldiers upon their entrance into Constantinople. He noted that they treated the city as if it had been conquered; looting it and dishonouring any member of the senate they came across.¹⁵⁵ Anna too censured their actions.¹⁵⁶ Alexios was

¹⁵⁰ Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* II.7.3-7: on Alexios as a reluctant emperor see also Weiler 2000: 7.

¹⁵¹ Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* II.4.7.

¹⁵² Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* III.3.2; Buckley 2006: 94: notes that Anna also embeds the image of Alexios as the Pantokrator in this description of him. Not only was he a heroic figure, he was also an imitation of Christ.

¹⁵³ Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* III.3.2; III.4.3.

¹⁵⁴ Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* I.7.2; see also Anna's justification for Anna Dalassene being granted powers in Alexios' absence (on account of her skilful rhetoric and learning - further evidence of how prized these qualities were in a ruler). Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* III.7.2.

¹⁵⁵ 'Dragging them from their mules, and even stripping some of them of their clothing, they left them in the street half-naked and on foot.' Zonaras, *Epitome* III, 729.

punished at the time, by the patriarch, for the bloodshed and looting involved in his seizure of power.¹⁵⁷ However, a sign that this criticism lingered during his reign emerges from Anna's attempts to rehabilitate him by attacking Botaneiates. According to Anna, Botaneiates, 'who had given up all hope, *pretended* that he wished to avoid civil war,' and was counselled by the patriarch to abdicate rather than to engage in such fighting and 'transgress the will of God.'¹⁵⁸ This subtle attack on Botaneiates was evidently intended to subvert his image as the emperor with the moral high ground. If he had truly been able to do what he had planned there *would* have been a bloody battle.

In assessing the impact of the coup upon Alexios' legacy, an excursion into the events of his final days and the accession of Ioannes as his successor proves insightful. Choniates' account of the succession is striking due to the candour of its *Kaiserkritik* and the clarity of its political thought.¹⁵⁹ Assigning Alexios' death special prominence as the first 'scene' in the *History*, Choniates uses it to set the tone for much of what is to follow in the narrative.¹⁶⁰ We learn from Choniates (whose account somewhat corroborates that of Zonaras)¹⁶¹ that Alexios and Eirene were divided over who should be the next emperor: Alexios had already crowned Ioannes; Eirene, dissatisfied with the choice, spared no opportunity to denigrate Ioannes and endorse Nikephoros Bryennios. Bryennios is lauded as 'the most eloquent and no less capable of getting things done.'¹⁶² His excellent character and imperial qualities were enhanced by his being 'learned in the liberal arts which develop moral character and greatly assist those who

¹⁵⁶ Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* II.10.4.

¹⁵⁷ Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* III.5.1-5.

¹⁵⁸ Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* II.11.7; II.12.5.

¹⁵⁹ On some of the originality of Choniates' *Kaiserkritik* see Magdalino 1983: 326-329, 335; on the historian's political thought see Catanzaro 2012; Harris 2000.

¹⁶⁰ Considerable competition and squabbling over the throne. On Choniates' thoughts about the political infighting see Catanzaro 2012.

¹⁶¹ Zonaras, *Epitome* III, 754-766.

¹⁶² Choniates, *History* 6.

are about to assume the reins of government in preserving the empire intact.’¹⁶³ Certainly then, Bryennios was considered a more than sufficient candidate for the throne.

Alexios’ reaction proves instructive for our purposes. Though more often he chose to simply feign deafness, Alexios comments that Eirene, in petitioning him, is ‘attempting thereby to dissolve praiseworthy harmony and good order as though... stricken by some God-sent madness...’¹⁶⁴ The order of succession had already been decided; any interference would consequently result in *ἀραζία*. After establishing the tradition of hereditary succession¹⁶⁵ Alexios comments that even if power had been transferred to a son-in-law previously ‘we still ought not to recognize rare precedent as binding law.’ The ‘official’ course of succession is clearly established and aids Choniates’ critique of the emperor’s coup. Alexios’ very next line is an admission of guilt and therefore tacit acceptance of the discord his actions caused throughout the empire:

All the Romans would laugh aloud at me and conclude that I had lost my senses should I, *who gained the throne in an unpraiseworthy manner by denying the rights of consanguinity and the principles of Christian laws*, when it came time to leave a succession, replace the child of my loins with the Macedonian...¹⁶⁶

Evidently, Alexios’ usurpation was considered an unpraiseworthy route to the throne – a view that Choniates implies was shared by many. The repercussions of Alexios’ actions had not been forgotten nor (at least in Choniates’ case) forgiven.

Niketas’ critique of Alexios continues to draw upon his coup. After confirming that Ioannes will be his successor Alexios returns to diverting Eirene. Choniates says of this that

¹⁶³ Choniates, *History* 6.

¹⁶⁴ Choniates, *History* 6.

¹⁶⁵ ‘Or rather come, let us take counsel together and see which of the former Roman emperors who had a son suited to take over the reins of government set him aside and chose instead his son-in-law?’ Choniates, *History* 5.

¹⁶⁶ Choniates, *History* 6. Emphasis added.

‘He was, beyond all others, a dissembler, deeming secretiveness a clever thing and never saying much about what he intended to do.’¹⁶⁷ That Choniates has been judging Alexios on the basis of his coup is already evident and is reaffirmed in his assessment of Alexios’ character. With the emperor near death and attempting to atone ‘before God for whatever sins he may have committed,’ Eirene says that in life he ‘excelled in all kinds of deceits,’ gilding his tongue ‘with contradictory meaning’ and even now remained unchanged.¹⁶⁸ A damning indictment indeed; while these remarks could be intended as a critique of Alexios’ false piety,¹⁶⁹ such an interpretation misses something of Choniates’ intentions. Niketas is employing them in the greater context of Eirene’s coup against Ioannes; against this background, and given Alexios’ previous admission of guilt, a parallelism of events¹⁷⁰ is invoked and the circumstances of his own coup are induced in the mind of the reader. Choniates’ analysis of his character traits were therefore to be read with history in mind: making the link more explicit. These comments may be read as a subtle attack on Alexios’ plotting against Botaneiates and the pretexts that we see promoted by Anna.

¹⁶⁷ Choniates, *History* 6.

¹⁶⁸ Choniates, *History* 7.

¹⁶⁹ Kaldellis 2009: 79.

¹⁷⁰ It has been noted that the *History* makes much use of the idea of causation: thus, Andronikos destroys himself through his actions in gaining and securing the throne. Kaldellis 2009: 83-84; Magdalino 2009: 62-63. I would add that the *History* often seems to frame events in a way that would suggest that a form of ‘Cyclical Time’ is at work. In this way, successions are used to divide the narrative (admittedly, a standard structural device); Alexios’ coup very nearly repeats itself upon his death - and *again* with the aid of the reigning empress – with the circumstances of this (failed) coup providing a major theme for the narrative; usurpers should expect themselves to be usurped; and the just are *repeatedly* unjustly judged. Accompanying the *ataxia* which Choniates believes to have undermined the empire, therefore, is the repetition of certain events (getting progressively worse) until natural order is restored.

Andronikos I Komnenos

The full account of Andronikos' rise to power is found only in the *History* of Niketas Choniates. His motives were linked with his relationship with his cousin, Manuel I. Kinnamos provides information about Andronikos' life under Manuel; informing us that they were close as children, but Andronikos' being passed over for the positions of *protovestiarios* and *protosebastos* by Manuel 'greatly wounded Andronikos' soul' causing him to nurse 'a grievance from then on.'¹⁷¹ This grievance prompted two failed coups against Manuel.¹⁷² Andronikos was imprisoned and exiled,¹⁷³ and these earlier intrigues presented by Kinnamos as being the result of mere spite and jealousy on Andronikos' part: he was not being unjustly overlooked.¹⁷⁴

Choniates' account is more complete in its development of Andronikos' motives, which are made to serve Choniates' intentions in writing. In contrast to Kinnamos, he tells us that Andronikos was imprisoned partly as a result of his plotting with the King of Hungary, but also because his lineage made him an excellent potential claimant for the throne: something his 'cleverness in battle' would undoubtedly have helped him with.¹⁷⁵ Alongside his nobility and martial prowess (qualities characteristic of the aristocratic ideal) Andronikos' physical appearance is described in accordance with Homeric ideals:¹⁷⁶ he 'excelled most men

¹⁷¹ Kinnamos, *Deeds of John and Manuel Comnenus* 61-63

¹⁷² The first whilst Andronikos was *doux* of Cilicia; and the second when he conspired to have the King of Hungary aid him in his attempt. Kinnamos, *Deeds of John and Manuel Comnenus* 61-63; 127-130.

¹⁷³ Magdalino 1993: 199: also posits that the 1159 Styppeiotes' affair may have been a result of an attempt to aid Andronikos to the throne.

¹⁷⁴ Magdalino 1993: 197: provides more details on Andronikos' background as outlined by Kinnamos.

¹⁷⁵ 'The reason for 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... for these attributes, as well as for his cleverness in battle and the nobility of his birth... Andronikos was viewed with a jaundiced eye and was greatly distrusted.' Choniates, *History* 101, 103-104.

¹⁷⁶ The eleventh and twelfth centuries saw a greater importance placed upon lineage and birth than had previously been the case: note for example, Botaneiates' invented genealogy presented in the *History* of

in bodily strength' and 'his perfect physique was worthy of empire.'¹⁷⁷ At a young age therefore, Andronikos was a perfect specimen for leadership.

It was Andronikos' incestuous affair with Eudokia, the widowed sister of the *protosebastos* Ioannes, which finally turned the emperor against him - and only after numerous members of the court slandered him to the emperor.¹⁷⁸ In Choniates' account, Andronikos, despite his immorality, was viewed as being a victim of the jealousy and paranoia of others and was ultimately failed by the *basileus* who yielded to popular rumour by imprisoning him.¹⁷⁹ From that point onwards Andronikos viewed Manuel with the utmost contempt and hatred, becoming tyrannical in his actions. His return to Constantinople in 1180¹⁸⁰ afforded Choniates the opportunity to further develop this image. We learn that his penchant for theatrics was part of his now cunning and deceptive nature: the chain he wore around his neck was merely a prop with which to deceive and supplicate Manuel; his repentance false.¹⁸¹

It is against this background that the coup is described. Upon hearing of his cousin's death Andronikos 'revived his passion for tyranny.'¹⁸² We are told that, he 'searched very meticulously to find an opportune and plausible excuse for seizing the throne... after

Attaleiates, or Ioannes Tzetzes' verse commentary including a discussion of his own lineage. Attaleiates, *History* XXVII; Tzetzes partial translation in Beaton 2007: 90-91; these developing views and the increased importance of martial prowess in the aristocratic ideal are discussed in Kazhdan & Epstein 1985: 99-119; on the relationship between Andronikos' image and the deployment of Homeric imagery (and direct allusions) by Choniates see Saxey 2009:121-144.

¹⁷⁷ Choniates, *History* 103-104.

¹⁷⁸ 'When Manuel heard of these events, he was distressed. The accusations were like never-ending drops that carved a channel into the emperor's soul to hold the outpourings against the slandered man...' Choniates, *History* 105-106. Choniates also reports that the affair with Eudokia resulted in a number of plots against Andronikos by the scandalised members of the Komnenian court, all of which he avoided through his 'manliness' and 'mother-wit.' Choniates, *History* 104-105.

¹⁷⁹ Choniates, *History* 106.

¹⁸⁰ Prompted by the capture of his wife and children by forces loyal to Manuel. Choniates, *History* 225-227.

¹⁸¹ 'Andronikos, being most cunning and excelling in diverse wiles, hung around his neck a heavy iron chain...' Choniates, *History* 226-227.

¹⁸² Choniates, *History* 225.

contriving every possible scheme; he finally came upon the written oath he had sworn to Manuel and his son Alexios.¹⁸³ He then brooded ‘on these words like a fly on an open wound,’ finding them ‘extremely useful for achieving the despotic rule for which he had so long been labouring...’¹⁸⁴ The image of Andronikos at the inception of his coup is in stark contrast to Andronikos in his youthful glory. It also lacks the noble intent, the initial rejection of power, and agonized acceptance that usurpation must occur for the good of the empire that we have seen in cases favourable to a usurper. Evidently, Andronikos would do anything to gain the throne and his motives certainly could not be described as pure.

With his mind made up, he came out of exile¹⁸⁵ where he had accrued enough influence to pose as an impartial outsider interested in protecting the young Alexios.¹⁸⁶ He managed to gain position as the boy’s guardian, before becoming co-emperor; killing Alexios and his family, and assuming the throne.¹⁸⁷ Choniates’ leaves us in no doubt as to his feelings; he explains that Andronikos accrued power by ‘seducing and winning over all those he met,’ and that the patriarch recognised this of him.¹⁸⁸ It is interesting that Choniates comments on Andronikos’ intellect at this point in the narrative, telling us of his admirable rhetorical skills which derived from his familiarity with the Epistles of Paul,¹⁸⁹ and of his ability to persuade

¹⁸³ Choniates, *History* 228.

¹⁸⁴ Choniates, *History* 228.

¹⁸⁵ Following his pardon by Manuel, Andronikos was banished again - ostensibly because Manuel had realised the danger of having Andronikos too close at hand. Kinnamos, *Deeds of John and Manuel Comnenus* 250-251; Choniates, *History* 227.

¹⁸⁶ Choniates tells us that the regency council was widely believed to have been overrun by ‘tyranny’, and that Alexios II’s wellbeing had been neglected. Choniates, *History* 223-224; see also Magdalino 2008: 660.

¹⁸⁷ Choniates, *History* 230-276.

¹⁸⁸ ‘The patriarch... perceived his vicious glare... his self-serving and affected manner... his stature... of slightly less than ten feet, his strutting and his supercilious leer... [and] saw that Andronikos was a calculating man ever-wrapped in thought...’ Choniates, *History* 243-244, 252-253.

¹⁸⁹ Works held in high esteem and with which Choniates was intimately acquainted with through his theological writings.

people of his way of thinking.¹⁹⁰ These skills supposedly aided him in gaining power and it should be noted that once again it was the intelligent man that took the throne.

Andronikos' use of poison (delivered by a eunuch) to dispose of the *kaisarissa* Maria exploits a recurring motif in Byzantine historiography, simultaneously evoking negative associations with witchcraft and sorcery, traditionally the domain of women and eunuchs.¹⁹¹ Andronikos' reputation was undermined by his resorting to devious (feminine) intrigues. Choniates also took unusual care to name those involved in Alexios' murder¹⁹² and the subsequent desecration of the body: recording how Andronikos kicked it aside 'deriding the father as a perjurer... wantonly insulting his weak mother as a well-known harlot,' before noting that 'one of the corpses ears was pierced with a nail, and a wax impression of Andronikos' signet ring was hung from it...'¹⁹³ We are induced to despise this figure whose intentions for taking the throne and murdering Alexios are revealed once again: pure spite and hatred of Manuel. Andronikos' marking the body to proudly take ownership of the murder and the insults aimed at Manuel and Xene reveal the acts of a malicious monster. Choniates recognised the murder for what it was in his opening comments on Andronikos' rule: calling it a 'loathsome deed' and later he just calls Andronikos 'the murderer'.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁰ 'Expressing and writing these things with great conviction and charm (for he was, if anything, *well versed in letter writing*, ever quoting from the epistles of Paul, the orator par excellence of the holy spirit), *he won everyone to his views...*' Choniates, *History* 228-229. Emphasis added.

¹⁹¹ In addition to Pterygeonites (the eunuch involved in Maria's poisoning), there are for example, the earlier cases of Basil Lekapenos' attempt to poison Tzimiskes, and the attempt on Basil II which resulted in the eunuch being thrown into a den of lions; Choniates, *History* 259-260. Poisonings in Byzantine narratives were frequently associated with individuals involved in 'witchcraft'. For an overview of the relationship between women, eunuchs, poisoning and witchcraft in Byzantine historiography see Galatariotou 1984: 55-94; Ringrose 2003: 130. See also the narratives concerning the empress Zoe: she is portrayed as trying on several occasions to poison individuals at court, and succeeded in poisoning her husband Romanos III. Psellos, *Chronographia* IV.6; Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 379; Zonaras, *Epitome* III, 609.

¹⁹² Stephanos Hagiochristophorites, Constantine Tripsychos, and Theodore Dadibrenos. 'Unusual' because although Choniates is generally very good about naming people in the course of the narrative, he has a tendency to ignore those who worked for Andronikos – as though not deeming them to be worth naming.

¹⁹³ Choniates, *History* 274.

¹⁹⁴ Choniates, *History* 275, 337.

Andronikos' name was omitted from the lists of the Orthodox Synodikon: a clear sign of his tainted image.¹⁹⁵ This image also finds expression in Choniates' narrative through his (mis)interpretation of Andronikos' imperial art. Choniates describes a panel intended for public viewing which depicted the emperor as a labourer.¹⁹⁶ He does not wear the colours associated with rule, and holds a sickle in his hand about to strike the head of a 'lad'.¹⁹⁷ The victim is identified as the young Alexios. The emperor supposedly put this image up so that he might make explicit to the public 'the lawless deeds he had perpetrated in putting to death the heir and wooing and winning for himself both his throne and his wife.'¹⁹⁸ We may question the reliability of Choniates' interpretation but the intent is clear: he wanted the reader to believe that public perception of the image was dependent upon Andronikos' usurpation of the throne and the murder of Alexios. Moreover, that the emperor in this image was not an emperor at all: the lack of imperial colours revealed his fickle nature and the missing imperial attire proved his illegitimacy.¹⁹⁹

The transformation from the youthful Andronikos into a murderous and illegitimate tyrant was complete. Rather than being a noble hero come to save the empire (undoubtedly the image he had tried to portray in acting in Alexios' best interests), Choniates depicts him as being motivated only by anger, vengeance and self-interest. The *porphyrogenite* Maria, who supported Andronikos and entreated him to act,²⁰⁰ suffered the ire of the historian for similar reasons.²⁰¹ Her involvement with Andronikos was due to her jealousy and short-sighted self-

¹⁹⁵ Cheynet 1990: 179.

¹⁹⁶ This image is discussed below on page 74.

¹⁹⁷ Choniates, *History* 332.

¹⁹⁸ Choniates, *History* 332.

¹⁹⁹ Eastmond 1994: 502-505; on the iconographic importance of the imperial costume see Parani 2003: 11-49.

²⁰⁰ These supporters included many of the people of Constantinople. The number supposedly swelled following the massacre of the Latin inhabitants of the city in 1181 when Andronikos exploited popular discontent at their presence as a way of uniting the people behind him. Choniates, *History* 229-230.

²⁰¹ '[She was] reckless and masculine in her resolution, by nature exceedingly jealous of her stepmother... [and] delighted in the evil joy of her own making... bringing on her own ruin.' Choniates, *History* 231.

interest; her death at Andronikos' hand was the work of providence. Choniates' critique of the pettiness of those in power shines through, but more importantly, his account of Andronikos reaffirms that the motives of those involved in seizing power, and the means by which they achieved this, were a crucial consideration in determining a usurper's worthiness to rule. Andronikos was tyrannical even *before* he became the emperor because his motives were never pure. His misdeeds were not forgotten once he had assumed the throne, and Choniates had *never* believed him legitimate.

Justifications and the 'Image' of the Usurper

Though the specific justifications for revolution varied, they fall into three general categories: 'self-defence', whereby the usurper was unfairly targeted and compelled to act against tyranny; 'for the greater good', where *ataxia* threatened the wellbeing of the empire and revolution would restore order;²⁰² and 'self-interest', where the usurper was motivated purely by a desire for power.

Byzantine authors appear to have accepted that the first two were warranted and could understand why a rebel might turn against an emperor in such cases. Thus, Leo the Deacon presented Nikephoros II's revolt as an act of self-defence and the removal of the despotic Joseph Bringas as being for the greater good, but condemned Phokas for breaking his oaths; Tzimiskes' propagandists provided him justifications to lessen his guilt by turning Phokas into a tyrannical figure; and Anna Komnene furnished her father with multiple justifications for revolution which portrayed him as acting both in self-defence and for the greater good.

²⁰² Cheynet 1990: 189: notes that in these cases the revolution itself was proof that a lack of order threatened the empire, when the emperor was replaced order would be restored.

These justifications were evidently viewed as acceptable reasons for rebellion and were employed by propagandists to substantiate claims to power.²⁰³ In such cases, the propagandist's intent was to reveal how the usurper had acted not for reasons of self-interest but to prevent tyranny and *ataxia* from harming the empire, and that in acting had restored good/harmonious governance, pleasing to God.²⁰⁴ The removal of a reigning emperor is presented as an unfortunate but necessary consequence (a last resort) in order to enable this return to good governance.

By contrast, the 'self-interested' usurper had no basis for revolution. His actions were undertaken solely for his own benefit and contributed to the breakdown of order by ignoring the established traditions of imperial succession for petty reasons. This type of usurper did not first try to guide an ineffectual or tyrannical emperor towards effectual rule through respect for the law and his subjects, or even allow him a chance to reform.²⁰⁵ Instead of acting to end disorder by removing a tyrant, usurpation in the name of self-interest created one. The usurper's relationship with God, and his wider reputation were immediately undermined by these misdeeds; and the legitimacy of such an individual, one who had wilfully flouted the established laws without just cause, was at best highly doubtful.

In cases where murder or civil war was involved, the rebel accrued bloodguilt which inevitably affected his legacy and presentation in the sources. Thus Tzimiskes was roundly criticised for his role in the murder of Phokas; and Isaakios Komnenos was attacked for the blood spilled during the civil war, his legacy forever linked with that misdeed through the stories about his coffin. Alexios I and Leo Tornikios too were criticised for the civil wars in

²⁰³ Weiler 2000: 11.

²⁰⁴ Cheynet 1990: 189.

²⁰⁵ Unlike the Komnenoi, for example, who supposedly informed Botaneiates about the plots against them, giving the emperor a chance to intervene and prove himself worthy of rule. Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* II.5.

which they engaged,²⁰⁶ with Anna Komnene attempting to mitigate some of her fathers' culpability by attacking Botaneiates' image. Andronikos' actions led Choniates to roundly denounce him, presenting him as being illegitimate from the outset. Bloodshed did not preclude a usurper from becoming emperor, but it certainly affected his legacy and made true legitimacy harder to attain: murder and civil war incurred a heavy price.²⁰⁷

Dagron has demonstrated that the Byzantines drew upon Davidic ideology to provide a precedent for dealing with these emperors: the notion of the 'repentant emperor'. Accordingly, David, who slew Saul and took his throne, was punished by God with the death of his son but through repentance was able to save his other child Solomon. It is unsurprising therefore, that usurpers often felt compelled to atone for their sins in becoming *basileus* by courting favour with God. The idea of the repentant emperor was familiar to all in tenth-to twelfth-century Byzantium. A visual reminder of an emperor prostrating himself before Christ was prominent amongst the mosaics of Hagia Sophia's main narthex.²⁰⁸

In the case of Tzimiskes, this repentance took many forms. Firstly, the patriarch Polyeuktos condemned the murder and exacted penance from Tzimiskes. He prohibited Ioannes' entry into Hagia Sophia until he had named those responsible for the crime, banished Theophano and repealed Phokas' religious reforms.²⁰⁹ The emperor's deference revealed him to be subject to the church and to the laws of God, and won him legitimacy through the patriarch's favour. It also revealed the legitimist policy of the church through the willingness to accept a change of regime.²¹⁰ Tzimiskes further courted patriarchal favour in

²⁰⁶ For criticism of Tornikios see Psellos, *Chronographia* VI.115.

²⁰⁷ Cheynet 1990: 181.

²⁰⁸ The narthex mosaic likely depicts Leo VI who was forced to perform public *proskynesis* before the patriarch in atonement for his tetragamy. On the idea of the repentant emperor see Dagron 2003: 114-124; Magdalino 1984: 229.

²⁰⁹ Leo the Deacon, *History* VI.4; Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 272.

²¹⁰ Cheynet 1990: 313-315; Sinclair 2009: 21-22.

acknowledging the division of state power between the two earthly authorities ('priesthood and imperial rule') in his speech to Skamandrenos,²¹¹ and permitted the return of bishops exiled by Nikephoros: permitting the election and consecration of bishops without imperial approval.²¹² In response, the Patriarch tried his hardest to create an aura of respectability for Tzimiskes and to eradicate the bloodguilt.²¹³ This aura was defended by Tzimiskes' buying off the monks of the holy mountain in order to silence their voices against him.²¹⁴ A cynical examination reveals the obvious purpose behind Tzimiskes' efforts to conciliate the church and revive his image, but certainly he would have hoped to have gained some favour with God too.

In addition to demonstrating piety and devotion to the Theotokos,²¹⁵ Tzimiskes promoted philanthropy in his attempts to appease God. The emperor drew lavishly on the imperial treasuries and distributed funds to the poor and the sick. He even disseminated his private property amongst them. One of his final acts, in an attempt to ensure his salvation, was to 'make distributions to the poor, especially those who were maimed.'²¹⁶ Of particular note was the assistance he provided to the treatment of leprosy.²¹⁷ He founded the leprosarium of St. Zotikos; ensured that the existing leper hospital was significantly expanded; and would regularly visit patients in person, treating their symptoms himself.²¹⁸

²¹¹ 'I recognize One Authority, the highest and foremost...But I know that in this life and in the earthly sphere here below there are two [authorities], priesthood and imperial rule; to the former the Creator granted responsibility for our souls, to the latter the guidance of our bodies.' Leo the Deacon, *History* VI.7; this division is also mentioned in the advice provided by Photios in the *Eisagoge*.

²¹² This was something that Phokas had prevented. Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 272; see also the discussion in Dagron 2003: 309-310.

²¹³ Morris 1988: 113.

²¹⁴ Morris 1988: 113.

²¹⁵ See page 81 below.

²¹⁶ Leo the Deacon, *History* X.11.

²¹⁷ A common cause championed by emperors. Kazhdan 1991: 1218.

²¹⁸ Leo the Deacon, *History* VI.5.

Michael IV too believed himself to be suffering God's retribution (for the murder of Romanos III) and attempted to make amends. He treated lepers with kindness as a way of gaining 'forgiveness for his sins';²¹⁹ expanded the church of the healing saints Cosmas and Damian;²²⁰ and utilised the public treasury to fund almsgiving and the construction of new monasteries - drawing Skylitzes' criticism in the process.²²¹ His spending sought to win assistance from the clergy in atoning for his sin.²²² Finally, he accepted the monastic life and through devoted prayer 'conciliated the Almighty and won His favour.'²²³ Likewise, Isaakios Angelos atoned for the murder of Hagiochristophrites through donatives to the indigent and intense prayer.²²⁴ Through deference to the patriarch and policies designed to aid the poor and the needy, a usurper might atone for the sins he had committed to become the *basileus* and redeem himself in the eyes of God.

The Byzantines may have believed that God ultimately conferred rule to the emperor,²²⁵ but this evidently did not excuse the way in which the throne was taken. Attaleiates' ascription of Botaneiates' 'bloodless coup' as being 'a definitive and fitting sign of his faith in God and his appointment by him,' would suggest a belief that power attained through bloodshed was considered less legitimate in the eyes of God.²²⁶ He also criticised Nikephoros Bryennios for continuing to spill Christian blood even after he had been offered

²¹⁹ Psellos, *Chronographia* IV.34-36.

²²⁰ Psellos, *Chronographia* IV.31.

²²¹ As he wanted to purchase absolution 'with the money of others'. Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 375.

²²² Psellos, *Chronographia* IV.34-36.

²²³ Psellos, *Chronographia* IV.52; see also Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 389.

²²⁴ 'As emperor, he anointed his head with an abundant measure of compassion for the indigent, and behind his closet door he held converse with God the Father who sees in secret.' Choniates, *History* 355.

²²⁵ This is stated in 'political' formulations and expressed very clearly in Byzantine Imperial art: for example, the crowning of Basil II depicted in the frontispiece of his Psalter (Cod. Marc. gr. 17. Fol. 3r). On this see Grabar 1971: 86; Mathews 1998: 36-38; Stephenson 2001: 48.

²²⁶ Attaleiates, *History* XXXII.16.

the title of *kaisar*.²²⁷ Psellos commented that Constantine Doukas' appointment was the result of divine intervention as it avoided revolution,²²⁸ implying that the latter was seen as less legitimate. Anna Komnene's staunch defence and repeated justification of her father's rebellion is further proof that coups were an ignominious route to power. Indeed, significant effort went into establishing the purity of motive and whether or not the justifications were fair: considerations which crafted an author's account of a usurper's actions, reign and legitimacy. Usurpation was possible in Byzantium, it happened, but dynastic succession was viewed as the natural order of things and its interruption was not something that should occur without just cause.

When the revolt was viewed as justified *basileia* was typically something that a usurper was reluctant to accept. Often it had to be forced upon them after repeated rejections of the offer. Implicit within the accounts is the idea that aspiration for imperial power (unless a *porphyrogennitos* or high in the order of succession) was something improper. Accusations of such desire to rule were evidently something that could harm a usurper's reputation.

The reluctant acceptance of power was a common topos in medieval European narratives.²²⁹ It revealed that a usurper understood the weight of the responsibility being handed to him and depicted him as acting in accordance with the will of the people/army. His noble intent was made clear and suitability for rule reinforced - he was chosen. Weiler has shown that those who started their reigns reluctantly and under protest proved themselves to be good rulers. Humility was their prime virtue and an imperial ideal, and power accepted for

²²⁷ 'He wanted to settle the dispute through the spilling of Christian blood. For he preferred to make for himself imperial regalia of human flesh and to shake the whole of creation to its foundations...' Attaleiates, *History* XXXIV.1.

²²⁸ Which he described as a 'circuitous route to power.' Psellos, *Chronographia* VII.88.

²²⁹ On the idea of the reluctant emperor in European historical narratives see Weiler 2000.

the greater good.²³⁰ Tyrants, with illegitimate claims, succumbed to hubris and arrogance; they sought power at all costs in order to satiate their pride and ambition.²³¹ Skylitzes' treatment of Nikephoros II typifies this: Phokas drew contempt because he was presented as having long desired power; likewise with Psellos' portrayal of Tornikios,²³² and Choniates' account of Andronikos, who is considered a tyrant even before his rule because his motives were impure.²³³ The image of the reluctant emperor provided a justification for a usurper's interference in the succession (they were qualified and implored to act by others); imparted some legitimacy by presenting an idealised image of the new ruler; and helped to deflect criticism of the coup.

Implicit within this notion is the acknowledgement that the emperor's role was in fact a *τέχνη* and that the exercise of power required talent.²³⁴ The contrasting images of Michael VI and Isaakios I clearly highlighted this fact. Where Michael was little more than the plaything of his faction and universally criticised, Isaakios took charge of events and captured the throne against all odds.²³⁵ The narratives consistently highlight qualities that were deemed necessary to the choice of leader and the success of a revolt.

²³⁰ Weiler 2000: 13-18.

²³¹ Weiler 2000: 18.

²³² Psellos, *Chronographia* VI.99-115.

²³³ To this we may add the example of Michael IV who desired power and was depicted in contemporary sources as having acted for ignoble reasons, suffering God's wrath as a consequence. (Psellos and Skylitzes though acknowledging the wrongdoing attempted to revive Michael's image during his reign. Psellos in particular attempted to negate the blood-stain and shift much of the blame onto Ioannes the Orphanotrophos. Skylitzes, using the same tactic he employed against Theodora, shifted most of the blame for the murder onto Zoe. Psellos, *Chronographia* IV.2, IV.6-11; Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 370-372.) See also the account of the rebel Branas whom Choniates says 'was obsessed by a burning desire for the throne; he held Emperor Isaakios in contempt or, rather, [was] unable to bear seeing him reign...' Choniates, *History* 376-377.

²³⁴ Cheynet 1990: 186.

²³⁵ 'Not even in their wildest dreams had they expected Isaac to entertain ambitions for sovereignty, because of the difficulties of such an enterprise.' Psellos, *Chronographia* VII.6.

Lineage was prominent amongst these qualities. Bardas Skleros had ‘the prestige of royal blood’,²³⁶ and both Nikephoros Diogenes and Constantine Doukas (who attempted a coup under Alexios I) were *porphyrogenetoi*.²³⁷ Imperial descent conferred nobility and implied a right to rule on the basis of heredity. Therefore, these individuals were persons who could make strong claims to legitimacy by virtue of blood/relation. The elder Bryennios was praised by Anna for his ‘noble lineage’ which made him ‘an outstanding candidate’,²³⁸ and Andronikos’ Komnenian lineage proved a boon, whereas Michael IV was criticised for his ignoble birth and history as a money-changer.²³⁹ Descent from noble families implied leadership potential: these families had played a role in the governance of the empire at the highest levels and could therefore draw upon this experience when fielding a potential imperial claimant; those from lesser backgrounds were admonished for the perceived lack of experience and suitability to rule. Affinal links to other important families were heavily promoted by the Komnenoi in order to garner military and financial support for their coup/regime and to increase the status of the imperial house through connections to other great families.²⁴⁰ Nobility afforded a chance to claim the throne, and the importance of impeccable lineage became increasingly pronounced as competition for power increased.²⁴¹

Martial prowess, perfect physique and heroic comparisons are other commonplace descriptors. Phokas was compared with Hercules, Tzimiskes to Tydeus.²⁴² Komnene’s description of Bryennios was obviously influenced by Homeric conceptions of the ‘hero’; and

²³⁶ Psellos, *Chronographia* I.5.

²³⁷ Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* IX.5-9; Frankopan 2007: 25-26; Cheynet 1990: 369.

²³⁸ Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* I.4.

²³⁹ Sklavos 2006: 115; Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 208.

²⁴⁰ Cheynet notes that the Komnenoi attempted to forge marriage alliances with each of the families that comprised the Doukai clan. Cheynet 1990: 369-377. Part of the reason for Alexios being chosen over his brother was the support that Eirene’s family could supply him. Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* III.2.7.

²⁴¹ Kazhdan & Epstein 1985: 99-104.

²⁴² Leo the Deacon, *History* III.8.

both Katakalon Kekaumenos and Isaakios Komnenos were touted as excellent choices thanks to their military experience. Even the villainous Andronikos was described in accordance with Homeric ideals and his military prowess praised. Naturally, a revolt necessitated a skilled general's leadership and many during this period were initiated by persons from within, or with close links to, the military aristocracy.²⁴³ However, literary accounts of usurpers are also often clearly influenced by a stereotyped image of the 'ideal usurper' which apparently derived from/was influenced by the changing precepts of the imperial ideal. Accordingly, following the tenth-century expansionism, emperors were judged on their abilities as soldiers and warriors in addition to their military accomplishments and the traditional imperial virtues.²⁴⁴ In comparing usurpers with this ideal their suitability to rule could be assessed; the literary narrative might be enhanced with worthy opponents in the guise of noble and ignoble heroic figures engaging in a Homeric struggle for power;²⁴⁵ and an acknowledgement made that these individuals were serious threats as well as contenders for the throne.

The physical appearance of a usurper further aided the assessment of his suitability to rule. Psellos states of Georgios Maniakes that 'nature had bestowed upon him all the attributes of a man destined to command,' and then provides a physical description.²⁴⁶ Anna Komnene's sketch of the conspirator Nikephoros Diogenes drew attention to his good looks which were said to have won him support and stayed Alexios' hand.²⁴⁷ Her description of Basilakios made explicit the link between physical excellence and worthiness to rule. Having described his 'impressive physique, great strength and majestic presence,' Anna comments

²⁴³ Angold 2008: 589, 600; Cheynet 1990: 157-198; Stephenson 2004: 209.

²⁴⁴ Kazhdan 1984: 45-51; Munitiz 1995: 57-61; Stephenson 2003: 86-90; Morris 1988: 86-87.

²⁴⁵ On the emergence of the notion of the 'noble general' in Byzantine historical narrative see Kazhdan & Epstein 1985: 77.

²⁴⁶ Psellos, *Chronographia* VI.77.

²⁴⁷ He is described as being 'exceptionally handsome and strong, on the threshold of manhood, tall and finely proportioned,' with blond hair and a broad chest. It was his beauty that allowed him political advancement under Alexios and stayed the emperor's hand. Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* IX.6.5; see also Hatzaki 2009: 51.

that ‘the country folk and military class’ ignored his true nature, instead standing in awe only of his physical appearance; judging this ‘to be worthy of the purple robe and crown,’²⁴⁸ while, Choniates stated that, ‘the wearer of the crown can neither sleep nor rest... with wicked tongue he curses the creator nature for fashioning others suitable to rule and for not making him... the fairest of men.’²⁴⁹ Evidently, physical appearance was deemed an integral part of worthiness to rule and could be used, as in Choniates’ description of Spyridonakis,²⁵⁰ by propagandists and chroniclers either to promote or undermine a usurper’s public image/legacy. This was also one of the reasons for the use of mutilation in removing opponents from the political arena.²⁵¹

The roles of ‘indecision, rashness and inaction’ versus ‘forethought and energy’ emerge as crucial considerations in the accounts of usurpation; they explain why a usurper may have succeeded to the throne, and certainly reveal aspects of his character. Leo the *kouropalates* failed to take the throne from Tzimiskes and avenge Phokas because he did not act in a timely fashion; had he done so, power could easily have been his.²⁵² Despite the intellect and prowess that Choniates ascribed to Bryennios the Younger he failed to become emperor due to his ‘customary sluggishness and languor,’ whereas, Ioannes Komnenos acted swiftly to secure the succession.²⁵³ Leo Tornikios, whose foresight and prowess had won him so many victories, came undone at the last because of a moment’s hesitation.²⁵⁴ When opportunity presented itself, the individual had to be ready to seize it. Bardas Skleros won

²⁴⁸ Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* I.7.2.

²⁴⁹ Choniates, *History* 143.

²⁵⁰ Choniates undermined the usurper Ioannes Spyridonakis by calling him a ‘worthless scoundrel... plain in appearance and of average height, squint-eyed... a pigmy-like homunculus.’ As Hatzaki notes, Choniates’ description aligns Spyridonakis’ ugliness with his other shortcomings (villainy, low birth and immorality) and presents him as an illegitimate contender for the throne. Hatzaki 2009:38; Choniates, *History* 534.

²⁵¹ Herrin 2000: 56-59.

²⁵² See above, page 19.

²⁵³ Choniates, *History* 10.

²⁵⁴ Attaleiates, *History* V.9; Psellos, *Chronographia* VI.115; Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 415.

much support by virtue of his ‘dynamism and vigour,’ also entrusting key roles to those who were imbued with these very qualities.²⁵⁵ Decisive action and an energetic character were clearly considered the qualities of a natural leader and essential in securing power.²⁵⁶ However, overeagerness led to folly: Maniakes’ thoughtless headlong charge into battle, despite his invincible aura, cost him his life;²⁵⁷ and Alexios I was selected instead of his brother because he was not nearly as reckless in battle. Those who succeeded found a balance.

Intellect is another quality that the narratives increasingly emphasise in relation to the choice of candidate. Attaleiates’ praise of the rebel Maniakes noted not only his martial prowess, but his being ‘exceptionally clever’: an assessment agreed upon by Psellos whose commendation of Isaakios Komnenos had much to do with the emperor’s interest in Psellos’ rhetorical skills and philosophical learning.²⁵⁸ Anna Komnene applauded Nikephoros Bryennios’ ‘thoughtfulness’ and persuasive arguments and praised Alexios for his learning and innovations.²⁵⁹ Similarly, Choniates extolled Bryennios the Younger’s eloquence, and admired Andronikos’ knowledge of ‘divine philosophy,’ skilled rhetoric, and his patronage of those learned in these disciplines.²⁶⁰ Evidently, competent usurpers were presented as intelligent individuals who actively sought and promoted learning. If they were going to compete against the emperor and take the throne for themselves such intellect was a necessary requirement and signalled a worthy candidate for the throne. In espousing the significance of these qualities to a usurper’s campaign, the writers validated the importance, and inflated the status, of their own works and educational pursuits. The impact of Psellos’ learning on

²⁵⁵ For example, he entrusted Anthes Alyates to retrieve his son from Constantinople, on account of his being the ‘most dynamic of his subordinates.’ Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 300.

²⁵⁶ Cheynet 1990: 186.

²⁵⁷ Attaleiates, *History* V.1; Psellos, *Chronographia* VI.84; Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 403.

²⁵⁸ Attaleiates, *History* V.1; Psellos, *Chronographia* VI.77, VII.38-41.

²⁵⁹ Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* I.4.

²⁶⁰ Choniates, *History* 331.

Isaakios, for example, was certainly presented in the *Chronographia* in a way that promoted the importance of rhetoric, philosophy and learned individuals like Psellos himself.²⁶¹ But this is also a clear example of the role played by historians in creating an image of the ‘ideal’ emperor, and proffering guidance to them/the reader. It reveals something of the way in which narrative histories could act akin to advice literature: future emperors and officials are being urged to take heed and imitate the learning of these rebels and emperors, and those they patronised.

Chapter Summary

We have examined some of the pretexts used to justify revolt and seen that these could form part of highly politicised propaganda pieces in the historical narratives. The motives behind a rebellion and the deposition of a ruling emperor could be reworked and used to shape the lasting image of a usurper emperor. Acting against a tyrant, or removing an unsuitable emperor, could be viewed as justified but still incurred a price as it interfered with the rules of dynastic succession. Acting without just cause, for reasons of self-interest, was indefensible and though it did not preclude somebody from becoming *basileus*, it did raise serious questions about their right to rule. Those who came to power reluctantly were perceived to have purer motives than others.

The qualities deemed necessary for success in rebellion apparently mirrored the changing imperial and aristocratic ideals, and allowed for the creation of a literary image of the ‘ideal’ usurper. In creating this image the historians might enhance their narratives, and

²⁶¹ On Psellos’ intent to promote the importance of philosophy and learning, and the construction of his narrative on Isaakios to fit in with these aims, see Kaldellis 1999.

were also afforded an opportunity to proffer advice to future emperors and readers, and to bolster the status of their profession and intellectual pursuits.

TRANSFORMATION AND LEGITIMATION: FROM PRETENDER TO
BASILEUS

We have seen the pretexts that were used to justify revolt, and that these revolutions could have a significant impact on both the image of the individual during his lifetime and his legacy in the historical narratives. We have also seen some of the qualities that were deemed necessary in order to be chosen as the leader of a revolt, and that were believed to make a successful usurper. This chapter will explore some of the means by which revolutionaries sought to accrue legitimacy for their rule. It will examine some of the legitimising concerns of usurpers at the outset of their rebellions and during the implementation of their rule. As such, this chapter addresses various facets of the symbolic and visual transformation from rebel to *basileus*, including the initial proclamation, symbols of imperium, and propaganda promoted by usurpers in an attempt to advance their claims to power.

Proclamation & Coronation

The declaration of imperial rule by the army or the people was only the first step in the path to *legal* rule. Isaakios I's acclamation by the military announced his intent but did not automatically make him the emperor. Cheynet notes that Komnenos is not called *basileus* or *autokrator* at any stage during his rebellion. The standard terminology is 'tyrant' and even when Komnenos had defeated Michael's forces at Nikaia, was crowned by his troops and had victory in sight, Psellos refers to him as '*anti-basileus*' because he was still considered only a rebel.²⁶² Michael remained in office and therefore Isaakios could not be called emperor no

²⁶² Cheynet 1990: 178-179. '...his current position does not have a respectable name (for I feared calling rebellion by name).' Psellos, *Chronographia* VII.29.

matter how powerful he was. A usurper's pretensions for the throne required more than just the support of the army in order to make this a reality.

On occasion, the approval of the populace could prove decisive in determining who was to be emperor. In the eleventh century, the people turned against Michael V when he exiled the *porphyrogennite* Zoe and usurped the throne that she had granted him.²⁶³ He was eventually blinded for his insolence and misrule. Zoe's sister Theodora was proclaimed empress by the crowd in order that she might lead them against him.²⁶⁴ In the twelfth century, Isaakios Angelos slew his would-be murderer and sought asylum in Hagia Sophia²⁶⁵ before being proclaimed emperor by the populace, crowned, and escorted to the Great Palace so that the tyrannical Andronikos could be deposed.²⁶⁶ Though there are only a handful of such instances of public intervention, the people evidently exerted a powerful force.

The 'constitutional' clash of Isaakios I and Patriarch Keroularios prompted introspection of the Byzantine political system and the role of the army and public in the appointment of an emperor. Psellos turned to the Augustan constitutional settlement for aid.²⁶⁷ Accordingly, imperial power derived from election/acclamation by three groups: the people, the senate and the army.²⁶⁸ Their approval conferred legitimacy upon an emperor by presenting him as being 'chosen': providing the semblance of the democracy of ancient

²⁶³ See below, page 61.

²⁶⁴ Psellos, *Chronographia* V.17-51.

²⁶⁵ On the role of Hagia Sophia in providing sanctuary for murders, and the flight of Isaakios see Macrides 1988: esp. p.514.

²⁶⁶ Choniates, *History* 341-352.

²⁶⁷ On the ideology and practical impact of the Augustan settlement see Loewenstein 1973: 237-308; on Psellos' use of the settlement see Angold 2008: 603-605; Dagron 2003: 235-238.

²⁶⁸ Psellos objected to Michael VI's reign as he had only acquired the support of the senate and the people; Isaakios accrued all three. He charged the patriarch of trying to use the evils of democracy to subvert the succession. Psellos, *Orationes forenses* p.61. Dennis (ed.) cited in Angold 2008: 603-604; for a comparison of Psellos and Attaleiates' treatment of Keroularios pretensions in the *Chronographia* and *History* see Krallis 2012: 101-105.

Rome.²⁶⁹ Keroularios had already revealed their importance in calling the military and civil officials to acclaim Isaakios during the conspiracy.²⁷⁰

The coronation, the point at which Psellos notes that Isaakios took the ‘government on his own shoulders,’²⁷¹ reaffirmed his right to rule: a right he had already won for himself through rebellion. The public ceremonial intended to show, in theatrical style, the process by which real power acquired legitimacy: through the proclamations of the people, army, and senate at significant ritual sites.²⁷² The emperor’s crowning by the patriarch was the final act of this display. Where Charanis has seen this as evidence for the patriarch’s role in creating an emperor by conferring the imperial title via the crowning, this somewhat overstates the significance of the patriarch’s role.²⁷³ As Dölger remarked, the patriarch’s function did become increasingly important: guaranteeing imperial orthodoxy,²⁷⁴ and becoming part of hallowed custom. However, imperial power was not conferred by his approval: something attested by the oath of orthodoxy sworn before the patriarch and which *already* referred to the emperor as ‘*basileus* and *autokrator* of the Romans’.²⁷⁵ The presence of the patriarch did not, therefore, ‘mark an institutional recognition of the church.’²⁷⁶ The crowning itself was the symbolic handing over, by the patriarch, of insignia which the emperor’s new dignity authorised him to put on.²⁷⁷

²⁶⁹ Note for example Attaleiates’ use of the phrase ‘and by a common vote, everyone in the City proclaimed Botaneiates emperor and master of the Romans’. Attaleiates, *History* XXXII.15.

²⁷⁰ Attaleiates, *History* XI.8-9.

²⁷¹ Psellos, *Chronographia* VII.60.

²⁷² For example, the Hebdomon, Tribunal of the Nineteen Couches, Hippodrome, St Sophia or palace church. Dagron 2003: 78-79.

²⁷³ Charanis 1940/41: esp. pp. 60, 64-65.

²⁷⁴ At least at the time of the oath swearing that sought to guarantee it: an emperor might later renege on this (*i.e.* Leo III and the implementation of iconoclast policies).

²⁷⁵ Dölger 1950: 146-147.

²⁷⁶ Dagron 2003: 67.

²⁷⁷ Dagron 2003: 68.

Visual Authority

A significant element of the transformation from a rebel to an emperor was associated with the visual symbolism of the imperial costume. In Byzantium, specific attire was associated with specific social rank.²⁷⁸ The *chlamys*-costume²⁷⁹ and the *loros*-costume were the ceremonial garments associated with the Byzantine imperial office. They are described in ceremonial handbooks, and were the two types of costume ‘employed by official art to propagate the image of imperial power.’²⁸⁰ The crown was the symbol of this power, associated with the coronation of an emperor, and was often shown in artworks as being presented to him by Christ, the Virgin, or an angel: symbols of the divine origin of imperial authority. Alongside the crown, the red shoes of the emperor were considered to be the most distinctive symbols of imperial power; they were purported to have been worn by him at all times: during ceremonials and even on campaign. Other vestments devoid of any specifically imperial connotations were rarely depicted.²⁸¹

We are told that Ioannes Komnenos’ accession included a failed attempt to gain entry to the palace using his father’s ring as a sign of authority and authenticity. This story provides evidence that objects associated with imperial rule were believed to confer status.²⁸² The reverse was also true: in cases where the reigning monarch rejected, or was divested of, the imperial garments/symbols, the accounts reveal an accompanying loss of authority. Michael V’s choice to deprive Zoe of her imperial insignia is paralleled, in Attaleiates account, by the opulence and grandeur of the emperor’s procession. In stark contrast to the ‘luxurious and

²⁷⁸ Macrides 2011: 222.

²⁷⁹ Parani 2003: 13: notes that the latest reference to the *chlamys*-costume as part of imperial attire refers to the reign of Manuel I.

²⁸⁰ Parani 2003: 11.

²⁸¹ On the importance of these elements to the imperial costume, and in imperial art see Parani 2003: 11-34; Gioles 2002: 68; see also the portrait of Basil II in military attire complete with red buskins, in his Psalter’s frontispiece (*Marc. gr. Z. 17, f.IIIr*).

²⁸² The ring would likely have borne Alexios’ seal. Choniates, *History* 6.

expensive fabrics’, ‘gold and silver ornaments’ that lined the route and comprised the emperor’s attire, Zoe ‘was made to dress in black’ and ‘shorn of her hair.’²⁸³ Her exile and tonsure were evidence of Michael’s usurpation of her position and the loss of garments also served to provide visual/symbolic reinforcement to this idea.²⁸⁴ Anna Komnene very nearly suffered a similar fate when her supposed coup against Ioannes I failed: her imperial garments were gathered by the emperor and were to be given away as a sign of her demotion.²⁸⁵ Further, as Andronikos is divested of power by Isaakios Angelos’ revolt he throws aside his imperial garments and dons barbarian clothing symbolising his utter loss of status.²⁸⁶ The political transition found visual expression in the attire of those involved.

The donning of this clothing and other regalia associated with rulership is something that is consistently reported in the historical accounts on usurpation; and was always amongst the first actions a usurper would take upon declaring himself. Leo the Deacon records that Nikephoros II ‘accepted the imperial rule, and put on the scarlet boots, which are the most prominent emblem of the emperor.’²⁸⁷ Skylitzes’ noted that ‘Bardas [Skleros] had openly declared what his intentions were... donned the diadem and the rest of the imperial insignia and was proclaimed emperor by the entire Roman army.’²⁸⁸ The Constantinopolitan crowd forced a ‘magnificent robe’ upon Theodora;²⁸⁹ and Alexios I had the red shoes forced upon

²⁸³ Attaleiates, *History* IV.4.

²⁸⁴ See also Cheynet 1990: 180.

²⁸⁵ Ioannes was only persuaded not to give away her garments by the wise council of Alexios Axouchos who argued that only she, as a member of the imperial family, was truly worthy of them and that to treat her in such a manner was unbecoming of an emperor. Choniates, *History* 11.

²⁸⁶ Andronikos throws off the ‘ancient amulet and cross’ that were symbols of imperial rule and dons a ‘barbarian cap’ as he flees. A parallelism is invoked in which just as Isaakios is proclaimed emperor and clothed in the imperial garb by the people, Andronikos is throwing it off and being deposed by those same people. Choniates, *History* 346.

²⁸⁷ Leo the Deacon, *History* III.4.

²⁸⁸ Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 300.

²⁸⁹ Psellos, *Chronographia* VI.36-37.

him before being proclaimed.²⁹⁰ The diadem and the red shoes are the items most often singled out in the histories as being symbolic of imperium. In dressing as an emperor a usurper appeared to have taken another step towards becoming the *basileus* and visually announced his pretensions for the throne.²⁹¹ It contributed to the sense of majesty and awe that these individuals were now invested with.²⁹²

The usurper was now committed to, and looked, the part they were trying to play; and was imbued with an extra measure of authority and respect as a result. Thus Leo the Deacon detailed how Nikephoros II was acclaimed, donned the purple, and *then* honoured Tzimiskes with the dignity of *magistros* proclaiming him *domestikos* of the east: acting like an emperor.²⁹³ However, it is clear that Byzantine historians did not believe the acclamation and assumption of imperial attire alone to ever have truly conferred imperial status. Psellos comments that Tornikios ‘once he was garbed in an emperor’s apparel... forgot he was merely an actor.’²⁹⁴ Anna Komnene levels a similar charge against Nikephoros Bryennios;²⁹⁵ and Skylitzes says that Skleros was well aware that in donning the imperial attire and proclaiming himself he had engaged in a game of chance.²⁹⁶ Imperial symbols proclaimed a usurper’s intentions to the world and gave them authority in the eyes of their supporters. They were clear symbols of imperium denoting possession of power, but did not alone confer it.

²⁹⁰ Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* II.7.3-7.

²⁹¹ According to Skylitzes, when offered a deal in exchange for the termination of his rebellion, Bardas Skleros is purported to have said ‘it is impossible, sir, for a man who has once publicly worn that boot voluntarily to take it off again.’ Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 301. Evidently, the usurper would either succeed or fail, capitulation was not an option.

²⁹² An excellent example of this would be the sense of awe and wonderment that is conveyed by Psellos’ meeting with Isaakios I which draws attention to his physical appearance upon a throne complete with his imperial regalia. Psellos, *Chronographia* VII.23-24.

²⁹³ Leo the Deacon, *History* III.6.

²⁹⁴ Psellos, *Chronographia* VI.104.

²⁹⁵ Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* I.4.

²⁹⁶ Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 300.

The Palace

Zonaras' famous critique of Alexios I included the claim that 'he thought of the palace as his own house and called it that.' At first glance this charge may seem somewhat inconsequential,²⁹⁷ however, the Great Palace was a site of historical memory; a major symbol of imperial rule with vitally important bureaucratic functions. It housed the imperial mint; played a central role in diplomacy; and, together with Hagia Sophia, acted as a locus for many of the ceremonial processions involving the emperor.²⁹⁸ It was a prominent symbol of imperial rule, but also a reminder that the emperor had responsibilities to the state: something Alexios had forgotten.

The Blachernai too was as an important palace during this period: Isaakios I returned there to recover from an accident while hunting, with his eventual return to the Great Palace (in order to secure the succession) presented as an aberration from the norm.²⁹⁹ Further, Michael VII was known to have held court at the Blachernai as well as the Great Palace,³⁰⁰ and Botaneiates ordered that it be secured along with the Great Palace, clearly speaking to its increasing importance as a symbol of imperial power by the mid-eleventh century.³⁰¹

²⁹⁷ Especially when compared with the charges that accompany it: 'He did not treat the state as common or public property, and he considered himself to be not its steward but its owner, and he thought of the palace as his own house and called it that.' Zonaras, *Epitome* III, 766; partial trans. Magdalino 1993: 186.

²⁹⁸ Magdalino 1978: 111; on the role of the palace in Byzantine ceremonial see Constantine Porphyrogenetos, *The Book of Ceremonies* (2 vols.); Featherstone 2006: 47-61; on the role of the palace and ceremonial in later Byzantium see Macrides 2011: 217-236.

²⁹⁹ Psellos' account seemingly implies that the emperor was at the Blachernai for more than just its access to hunting grounds, or the benefit of expedience after his accident. Psellos, *Chronographia* VII.76,

³⁰⁰ Attaleiates, *History* XXXII.2; Macrides 2013: 289. Alexios I also held court there. 'Alexios announced that a most important meeting would be held at the palace of Blakhernai...' Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* VI.3.2.

³⁰¹ Attaleiates, *History* XXXII.17; Bryennios, *History* 249.13-14. Possibly, Botaneiates believed that even if he held the Great Palace, Doukas could still have been able to administer the empire from the Blachernai causing him problems in the short-term and detracting from his image of legitimacy: safer to secure both imperial palaces.

Macrides has shown that movement between the Blachernai and the Great Palace was somewhat commonplace and was indicative that both functioned as seats of government.³⁰²

Until at least the end of the twelfth century, however, it was the Great Palace that conferred imperium upon an emperor. Possession of it was the principal aim of most usurpers once they had declared themselves and taken to wearing the imperial garb. Nikephoros II dispatched troops to secure it at the earliest possible opportunity; Tzimiskes' first actions after the murder of Phokas were to 'put the scarlet boots on his feet... [and sit] on the imperial throne'; and Alexios Komnenos quickly made his way there accompanied by the sounds of his acclamation.³⁰³ It was more than just a symbolic building: holding it conferred legitimacy; indeed, according to Skylitzes, Bardas Skleros believed that all he had to do in order to attain rule was to occupy it.³⁰⁴

In each case of usurpation, it was this palace that was secured and occupied at the outset of a reign in order to present the image of legitimacy. Psellos' account of the circumstances surrounding Isaakios Komnenos' abdication and Doukas' accession, prove informative as to why this may have been. Isaakios' family, believing that he was not long for the world and that his brother Ioannes would succeed him, 'exhorted him to go at once to the Great Palace... they were anxious, too, lest the family should fall on evil times at his death... so Isaakios made ready to leave.'³⁰⁵ The implication is that in order to ensure the smooth transfer of power, the Great Palace had to be securely in the hands of those who were to be raised to the imperial status. Even if the emperor were to have selected a successor previously,

³⁰² Macrides 2013: esp. p. 289-291: on the evidence for this bi-location. See also Magdalino 1978: 109-113; Macrides 2011: 226.

³⁰³ Leo the Deacon, *History* III.7, V.9; Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* II.11.3.

³⁰⁴ Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 301.

³⁰⁵ Psellos, *Chronographia* VII.79.

or appointed him elsewhere, the succession could have faced a serious³⁰⁶ challenge if a usurper had taken the palace and declared himself. This idea arose again, in the following century,³⁰⁷ when Ioannes II rushed to the Great Palace presenting signs of his status as Alexios' successor and forced entry to the throne room in order to secure it against his mother, sister and brother-in-law.³⁰⁸ Ioannes did not even attend his father's funeral because 'he had not had sufficient time to secure the throne. He feared his rival's inordinate passion to seize power. Like an octopus clinging to the rocks, John [sic] hugged the palace.'³⁰⁹ Possession of the Great Palace was so important that Michael VII deployed troops to defend it even as he fled to the Blachernai.³¹⁰ It would appear that possession was nine-tenths of the law. Holding the palace was perceived to make or break a claim to imperial authority and allowed the possessor to secure power by promoting supporters and removing enemies.³¹¹ The Great Palace may not have been the sole seat of government but it served as the site at which all new emperors secured their power in the centuries before the Latin conquest.³¹²

Legitimacy appears to have been conferred by the transfer of the palace from one dynasty/emperor to another. Isaakios Angelos was proclaimed by the Constantinopolitan crowd inside Hagia Sophia and then again at the Great Palace once Andronikos had fled.³¹³ His legitimacy to rule was reaffirmed by his controlling the palace. In a similar fashion, Maria

³⁰⁶ Psellos' statement implies that the legitimacy of a usurper's claim would also have been a problem for Isaakios' family had such a challenger taken the palace.

³⁰⁷ 15 August 1118.

³⁰⁸ Choniates, *History* 7.

³⁰⁹ Choniates, *History* 7.

³¹⁰ Attaleiates, *History* XXXII.15.

³¹¹ This is implied in Choniates comments about Ioannes II not having time to adequately secure the throne, and is also mentioned by Leo the Deacon in regard to Tzimiskes removal of political opponents, and his making of appointments, from the moment he took possession of the palace (and prior to the coronation). Leo the Deacon, *History* VI.1-3.

³¹² Magdalino 1978: 111; Macrides 2013: 281.

³¹³ 'Andronikos was driven from the throne of the Roman Empire. Isaakios arrived at the palace, where he was acclaimed forthwith emperor and *autokrator* of the Romans by the assembled throng...' Choniates, *History* 347.

of Alania's continued presence in the palace after Alexios' coup was said to have provoked some confusion over who was truly in control of the empire.³¹⁴

Marriage, Adoption & Association

The role of imperial women in the effort to solidify accession cannot be underestimated.³¹⁵ In the eleventh century, Zoe's position as heir of the Macedonian dynasty allowed her to promote three emperors: two through marriage and one through adoption. Michael IV was brought to her attention by Ioannes the Orphanotrophos who recognised her as the route to power.³¹⁶ When Michael V attempted to usurp the throne by exiling her, the populace rose up to depose him and reinstate her to her rightful position. The empress was the legitimate heir and it was through her beneficence that power was gifted. This idea found visual expression in an illumination in the Madrid Skylitzes, in which the visual authority of the image alludes to Zoe's role as the conduit of power (linking her with Michael by the wrist under an arch) and later in *histamenon* and an ivory conferring Eudokia Makrembolitissa equal status with Romanos IV.³¹⁷

³¹⁴ Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* III.1.

³¹⁵ The period 1028-1081 alone saw four of the twelve emperors gain power by virtue of marriage (Romanos III, Michael IV, Constantine IX, and Romanos IV) and numerous attempts by usurpers to associate themselves with imperial women (Michael IV, Michael V, Nikephoros III, Alexios I, etc).

³¹⁶ Psellos, *Chronographia* III.19; Hill, James & Smythe 1994: 217.

³¹⁷ The Madrid Skylitzes illumination of Zoe depicts Michael dressed in the imperial garb with Zoe wearing a simple dress rather than the imperial purple. The visual authority of the image does further suggest her power however: Michael holds her wrist and the figures are visually linked under an arch. Strugnell 2006: 132; Hill, James & Smythe 1994: 218. Eudokia Makrembolitissa also exemplifies this 'conduit' approach to the transfer of power: see the *histamenon* of Romanos IV and Eudokia depicting the emperor *and* empress on the reverse (indicating her transfer of authority to him), and her sons on the obverse in place of Christ (clearly denoting the order of succession). In addition see the 'Romanos ivory' depicting Romanos IV and Eudokia Makrembolitissa in which the visual hierarchy affords the empress equal status with the emperor - as it was from her that power was transferred. I am inclined to agree with the ascription of the ivory to Romanos IV rather than Romanos II on the basis of this hierarchy, the letter forms used in the engraving, and the use of the term '*Basilis Romaion*'

As Morris has noted, both Nikephoros II and Ioannes I intended to take advantage of this idea through the *'basileopator'* route to power. They sought to become fathers to the *basileis* and thereby become their legitimate regents which could only occur through marriage to Theophano.³¹⁸ *Basileia* had fallen to her because her sons were not yet old enough to rule and she therefore became the guardian of imperial legitimacy.³¹⁹ Phokas' marriage went ahead allowing him to pose as regent and legal guardian to the young emperors, but Tzimiskes' abandoned his plans to wed Theophano.³²⁰ Sinclair argues that Tzimiskes' subsequent marriage to Theodora (sister to the *basileis*) deliberately sought to align him with the ruling dynasty at precisely the time that Bardas Phokas' revolt raised questions about his authority.³²¹ The marriage was intended to provoke a favourable public reaction³²² and should therefore be seen as a deliberate attempt to promote Tzimiskes' legitimacy and dynastic continuity. Andronikos' marriage to Alexios II's fiancé Agnes/Anna was almost certainly another example of a marriage intended to promote continuity and to legitimise a usurper by association and integration into the previous dynasty.³²³

That Nikephoros Botaneiates actively sought to marry an empress as a way of securing his accession is confirmed by the fact that he was split between Eudokia Makrembolitissa and

which was greatly associated with Makrembolitissa and not Bertha-Eudokia. On the *histamenon* and the ivory see Kalavrezou-Maxeiner 1977: esp. p.314.

³¹⁸ Morris 1994: 203. Within a few hours of Phokas' murder, Tzimiskes had dispatched groups of soldiers to move about the city proclaiming him emperor *together* with the sons of Romanos, something which further testifies to his desire to associate himself with the legitimate heirs. Leo the Deacon, *History* VI.1.

³¹⁹ Morris 1994: 205.

³²⁰ This was probably the consequence of a combination of patriarchal pressure and a reluctance to accrue additional criticism by engaging in a second marriage which would have been her third. Morris 1994: 208-209; see also Laiou 1992 on the issues surrounding trigamy in Byzantium.

³²¹ Sinclair 2009: 51: notes that the timing of the marriage is surely indicative of this.

³²² Leo the Deacon's description of the marriage largely records the public's reaction and drew upon Tzimiskes' positive characteristics suggesting its intent was to promote his image. On this see Sinclair 2009: 51-52: who also argues that this section utilised a pro-Tzimiskes source.

³²³ Andronikos was over fifty years older than the thirteen year old Agnes, he already had sons and he brought his mistress to the palace with him – it seems the marriage was politically motivated. Choniates, *History* 275-276; Herrin 2013: 232.

Maria of Alania. We are told that he was persuaded to favour Maria thanks to the intrigues of the *kaisar* Ioannes Doukas who spoke of her nobility and exceptional beauty in order to sway the argument.³²⁴ No less important was her foreign birth, which meant she had no close relatives nearby who might ask for favours,³²⁵ her role as Empress of the newly deposed Michael VII, and as mother to the legitimate heirs.³²⁶ Alexios too was rumoured to have contemplated marrying Maria for the legitimacy that she could confer upon him. Indeed, despite Anna's protest that this was never going to happen, she was kept close by in the Great Palace.³²⁷ Her presence acted as sign of the dynastic continuity that Alexios intended to promote, and he may only have rejected an arrangement because he foresaw potential issues surrounding trigamy.³²⁸ In any case, Alexios' marriage to Eirene Doukaina linked him with the Doukas family as a whole and a close relationship with Maria and Constantine was promoted.³²⁹ Following his marriage to Eirene, Maria was housed near the monastery of the Mangana, and any confusion settled.³³⁰

To further aid legitimacy, or when no blood relationship could be promoted, the image of close association with the reigning dynasty was sought. Adoption served as one such form of association and in the case of Alexios and Maria presented a close relationship between the pair and had allowed information to be passed without suspicion being aroused at court.³³¹

Adoption also allowed the transfer of inheritance and was open to abuse: Zoe was persuaded

³²⁴ The eventual marriage was criticised in some quarters because the traditional period of mourning before remarrying was not observed by Maria. On this see Laiou 1992: 165-173: who also notes that Attaleiates makes no mention of the marriage, a possible indication that it reflected badly on Botanieates'.

³²⁵ This is implicit within Anna's statement that Maria 'was of foreign birth and had no crowd of relatives to embarrass the emperor.' Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* III.2.3.

³²⁶ Zonaras, *Epitome* III, 722; Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* III.2: both also mention the possibility of a scandal involving Eudokia which may have affected his final choice.

³²⁷ Prompting the aforementioned confusion about who was running the empire.

³²⁸ Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* III.1.4; Smythe 1997: 147.

³²⁹ Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* III.2.7.

³³⁰ Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* III.4.7; on Maria's later life see also Mullett 1984: 202-211.

³³¹ Macrides 1990: 117; Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* II.2.4.

to adopt Michael IV who turned against her once in power.³³² Michael VI's proposed adoption of Isaakios Komnenos and Botaneiates' proposed adoption of Nikephoros Bryennios were mooted at times of crisis, when the reigning emperor had no heir, and were to be accompanied by promotion to the rank of *kaisar*.³³³ These adoptions were a temporary expedient intended to serve as a substitute for a blood relationship and to thus allow integration with the ruling dynasty (promoting the image of legitimacy and continuity).³³⁴

Alexios Komnenos' propagandists emphasised his relationship with the heirs of Michael VII in order to bolster his rule.³³⁵ Nikephoros Bryennios achieved this for him by exclusively mentioning Michael's brother Konstantios, whose sole purpose in the *History* was to serve as a close companion and intimate friend of Alexios.³³⁶ Stanković has shown that Bryennios thus presented Konstantios as the *only* heir to his brother and ignored Michael's son, Constantine, entirely.³³⁷ Alexios was revealed as the closest companion to the only legitimate heir and garnered legitimacy vicariously through that connection.

Anna Komnene presented completely the opposite picture. In her account Konstantios is mentioned only *after* Alexios had become the emperor in order that she could hide his claim to power.³³⁸ Instead, she emphasised the pivotal role that Maria played in the overthrow of Botaneiates (providing endorsement for Alexios' rule), the fact that Maria's sons were the legitimate heirs, that Alexios respected their rights, and implied continuity with the reign of the Doukai. Upon his accession Komnenos clearly associated himself with the former dynasty

³³² Macrides 1990: 117.

³³³ Macrides 1990: 117.

³³⁴ Macrides 1990: 117.

³³⁵ It should be noted that his family were already related to Maria of Alania through the marriage of Isaakios to Maria's cousin, and through Alexios' adoption by the Empress. Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* II.1.4-6, II.3.2-4; Bryennios, *History* IV.2.

³³⁶ Bryennios, *History* XXI.247-249.

³³⁷ Stanković 2007: 170-171.

³³⁸ Stanković 2007: 171.

by appointing Constantine co-emperor,³³⁹ and ensured that power would stay within the family by arranging Anna's marriage to him.³⁴⁰ Anna thus presented her fiancé as the legitimate heir and stressed her father's claim to power over Konstantios' through his relationship with Constantine and Maria.³⁴¹ In these ways, a usurper could subtly and effectively subvert the succession whilst securing popular support by appearing to respect the rights of the legitimate heirs and to enjoy their full support.

The importance of this can be seen again, later in Alexios' rule, when his position was endangered by Diogenes' coup. Given Constantine's complete disappearance from the historical record after this coup, it seems likely that he was involved. Nevertheless, Alexios still used Constantine and Maria's authorising influence by presenting Constantine as having informed him about it (which Anna says was a lie promoted by her father), and by concealing Maria's knowledge of it.³⁴² In having them appear to support him, his right to power was reaffirmed by those who had held it and from whom it derived. Public knowledge of their involvement in an uprising would have damaged his legitimacy.

The Patriarch

After the emperor, the patriarch was the most powerful authority in Byzantium. He crowned the emperors, confirming their legitimacy by conferring his own upon them. This act

³³⁹ This changed as soon as his son Ioannes was born, providing Alexios with an heir.

³⁴⁰ Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* III.1.4.

³⁴¹ Stanković 2007: 172-174: Who also notes that in doing this Anna promoted her own claims to power over those of her brother through her connection to Constantine.

³⁴² Constantine's disappearance was explained away as his being left behind by Alexios for the sake of his 'constitution' and certainly seems suggestive of his involvement in the plot. Suppression of information potentially damaging to the unity of Alexios' rule (and that of the Komnenoi more generally) appears to have been commonplace. Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* IX.8.2; Frankopan 2007: 25-26; see also Cheynet 1990: 369: who does not connect Constantine's fall from favour with Diogenes' plot.

afforded him considerable political leverage. Furthermore, as the head of the church he exercised authority over the provincial hierarchy: promoting the image of central authority derived from the imperial city. The canons of the church ordered the deposition of any priest who might challenge the emperor's right to rule, and its legitimist attitude was codified in novels declaring anathema any who sought to rebel against the emperor.³⁴³ The patriarch's status, as head of the Orthodox Church, also allowed him (on occasion) to interfere in an emperor's affairs in the guise of a moral arbiter. Both Leo VI and Ioannes I were forced to perform public penances before being allowed entry to Hagia Sophia, whilst Isaakios Komnenos' clash with Michael Keroularios raised constitutional questions about the roles of the emperor and patriarch, and about the succession itself.³⁴⁴ That said, as Cheynet observes, the power of the patriarch had limits: both in 1067 and 1180 patriarchs failed to protect the legitimate heirs' rights of succession (which they had guaranteed) from usurpers and could be removed from power by particularly strong emperors.³⁴⁵ It seems that while in Byzantine constitutional theory the patriarch and the emperor were seen as governing two separate (though occasionally overlapping) spheres, their influence to act as a check on one another had much more to do with individual personalities, force of will, and factional support than theoretical legalistic compilations.³⁴⁶

Nevertheless, merely the semblance of patriarchal approval was something that a usurper sought. Isaakios Angelos exited Hagia Sophia 'accompanied by Patriarch Basil Kamateros, whom the multitude had induced against his will to participate in and approve of

³⁴³ Cheynet 1990: 313-315.

³⁴⁴ Dagron 2003: 54-83, 235-238; Angold 2008: 603-605.

³⁴⁵ Cheynet 1990: 315.

³⁴⁶ Alexios Komnenos, for example, was forced to perform public penance for the actions of his soldiers upon entry to Constantinople, yet when he had secured his powerbase he simply dismissed Patriarch Kosmas, replacing him with Garidas (a monk of his own choosing), and later exiled bishop Leo of Chalcedon when he mooted criticisms. Angold 2008: 613.

their actions.³⁴⁷ Evidently, Kamateros' presence amongst the rebels was intended to lend legitimacy to their cause; even if it may have been against his will. Isaakios' brother Alexios did not even achieve this but instead bought off a number of the sacristans in Hagia Sophia in order that they might proclaim his name in the church (without the patriarch's authorisation).³⁴⁸ In doing so, he too promoted the idea of patriarchal/church authority as being on his side.

The support of the church and the patriarch could prove integral to a usurper's successful accession and in providing legitimacy for their subsequent rule. The influence of the Patriarch Polyeuktos proved instrumental to Nikephoros Phokas' revolt. He helped him to secure a position as commander of the eastern armies when Bringas had attempted to remove him: Polyeuktos interceded by summoning the senate and then bound Phokas to respect the rights of the state and of Romanos' children, providing him with patriarchal approval in return and thus promoted his good character in the eyes of the people.³⁴⁹ Moreover, he joined Theophano in allowing Phokas to accede to supreme power.³⁵⁰ Michael Keroularios too provided a legitimising aura to Isaakios Komnenos' revolt, as it was through the patriarch's intervention that Michael VI was persuaded to abandon his planned defence of Constantinople and accept the tonsure in order that Isaakios become emperor. Keroularios summoned both the military and civil officials and allowed his clergy to 'strengthen the acclamation of Komnenos' by lending their voices to it.³⁵¹ The Patriarch was intimately involved in the conspiracy through his relative Konstantios Doukas (a friend of Komnenos), and proved

³⁴⁷ Choniates, *History* 346.

³⁴⁸ Choniates, *History* 456.

³⁴⁹ Leo the Deacon, *History* II.12.

³⁵⁰ Leo the Deacon, *History* III.6-8.

³⁵¹ Attaleiates, *History* XI.8; Psellos, *Chronographia* VII.35-36.

decisive in manoeuvring Isaakios into power.³⁵² He was subsequently rewarded for his actions in support of Isaakios by being granted permission to appoint the two most senior offices within the patriarchal administration, the *oikonomos* and *skeuophylax*, which had previously been the emperor's prerogative.³⁵³ Further, Attaleiates reports that the Patriarch Kosmas led the other bishops in suggesting Botaneiates as a successor to Michael VII, providing legitimacy to Botaneiates' coup. The patriarch was a holy figure and therefore somewhat above reproach, if he provided support to a usurper, this was a sign that he was considered worthy to rule. Patriarchal authorisation could prove a vital tool in presenting a usurper's actions/claim as legitimate and in actually gaining the throne. Continuing to court patriarchal favour once in power could go some way towards reducing any sins accrued during the rebellion and provided the new emperor with an aura of legitimacy.

Omens, Portents & Other Signs

Though authors like Psellos, Komnene and Choniates criticize the belief in astrology and the occult sciences, they still record instances of such pursuits.³⁵⁴ Portents and omens were commonplace in hagiography and historical narratives: earthquakes, droughts and eclipses were considered signs of divine displeasure, and visions considered revealing of future events.³⁵⁵ Their importance to issues surrounding succession and imperial legitimacy is made clear in the account of Andronikos' burning of Mamalos and his books because they 'dealt with the reigns of future emperors' and were supposedly being used to incite

³⁵² Attaleiates, *History* XI.8.

³⁵³ Angold 2008: 603.

³⁵⁴ On the detailing of astrological practices and other 'occult sciences' by Psellos and Anna see Magdalino 2006: 139-146.

³⁵⁵ Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 371-372, 381, 384; Morris 1995: 113.

sedition.³⁵⁶ These signs were evidently taken seriously by a significant portion of Byzantine society.³⁵⁷

Favourable portents and prophecies were some of the weapons in a usurper's legitimising arsenal. Usually these portents sought to confirm that a usurper would be successful in their campaign and were derived from unimpeachable sources that testified to the support and divine favour that they enjoyed.³⁵⁸ Alexios I Komnenos' proclamation is legitimised in Anna's account via a prophecy which had long before confirmed it to be the will of God. According to Anna, a 'superior being' (in the guise of a priest) appeared before Alexios and Isaakios as they made their way home from the palace one day. 'He grasped Alexios... and whispered in his ear this verse from the Psalms of David: "be earnest and prosper and govern with an eye to truth and mercy and justice." Then he added, "Emperor Alexios."' The oracle is reported to have vanished with Alexios' attempts to find him proving fruitless.³⁵⁹ It is this prophecy in the *Alexiad* that spurred Isaakios to force the imperial insignia upon Alexios; its invocation served to emphasise that there could be little doubt that Alexios was *the* emperor – chosen by God.

Choniates too indicated the importance of portents to popular support and the perception of legitimacy. He recorded the popular belief that Isaakios II Angelos was fated to become emperor and invoked the AIMA prophecy as proof. Andronikos, fearful of rebellion and suspecting abandonment by God, consulted with practitioners of the demonic arts in order to identify his successor. The oracle's response was a cryptic *iota* and *sigma* which

³⁵⁶ 'Andronikos inflicted the punishment [consignment to flames in the hippodrome] – not without cause but as the result of an earlier crime – and with Mamalos he burned certain books that apparently dealt with the reigns of future emperors which Mamalos had read in secret to Alexios in an attempt to convince him that they spoke of him ascending the throne.' Choniates, *History* 312.

³⁵⁷ Magdalino 1993: 200: notes that consultation of portents, and other signs of Divine influence, was particularly prominent under the Komnenian emperors.

³⁵⁸ Cheynet 1990: 161.

³⁵⁹ Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* II.7.5.

Andronikos took to mean Isaakios Komnenos (the usurper controlling Cyprus) dismissing the true successor Isaakios Angelos out of hand; and eventually dismissing the entire response as nonsense.³⁶⁰ Choniates' account of this episode ends by noting that 'the Divinity was wiser than he.'³⁶¹ Once again a prophecy proved divine favour and a usurper's legitimacy to rule. Andronikos himself was supposed to have enjoyed favourable support and imbibed legitimacy from the AIMA prophecy.³⁶² Magdalino has argued that this was part of the reason for Andronikos' disfavour at Manuel's court and suggests that the prophecy may also have influenced the fall of Alexios Axouchos: as both stood to gain from the association and both were involved in sedition.³⁶³ This would again suggest that a favourable prophecy was a great commodity to the would-be usurper: so valuable that those in a position to exploit them had to be censured.

As Cheynet notes, such was the power of a positive prediction that they were actively sought by usurpers.³⁶⁴ The *Life of Lazaros Galesiotes* contains an example of such a search: Constantine Barys, a usurper under Monomachos, dispatched a messenger to approach the saint - who had previously foreseen the fall of Michael V (proving his prophetic credentials) – with a request asking him to confirm whether Barys would attain the throne. Lazaros not only denied the request, but rejected the coin purse and gold-embroidered robes that were offered as payment. The story accents the willingness to buy a favourable prophecy, but reveals

³⁶⁰ Choniates tells us that the oracular response was dismissed when he learnt that he was to be deposed (he believed) by Isaakios Komnenos on 14th September. Andronikos could not believe that Komnenos could get from Cyprus to Constantinople in time and so rejected the prophecy little knowing that it referred to Angelos. Choniates, *History* 338-341.

³⁶¹ Choniates, *History* 341.

³⁶² 'Those who nurtured a desire to overthrow the government were eager to believe the ancient prophecy that Andronikos would some day reign as emperor; they swarmed about him excitedly like jackdaws around a soaring eagle with crooked talons.' Choniates, *History* 229.

³⁶³ Magdalino 1993: 200, 224; Magdalino 2009: 74.

³⁶⁴ Cheynet 1990: 162.

Barys' spiritual unworthiness to approach the saint and his illegitimacy to rule.³⁶⁵ Evidently the belief that these signs were testimony to the legitimacy of a usurper and a manifest sign of God's approval prompted rebels to seek out and promote such portents by whatever means they could.

As seen with Andronikos' (mis)reading of the AIMA prophecy, however, portents could also indicate the illegitimacy of an emperor/rebel. Skylitzes, for example, reports that in 976 a 'virtuous monk' approached Bardas Skleros to report a vision in which Skleros was presented with the 'imperial scourge' by a woman of 'superhuman appearance'. This was interpreted as proof that Skleros would succeed to the throne, but was instead evidence of God's displeasure.³⁶⁶ The unimpeachable nature of the prophetic monk was established through his virtue and the vision served as proof of Skleros' illegitimacy in the eyes of God. Michael IV also suffered God's wrath - as punishment for his involvement in the murder of Romanos III. The first day of his rule was marked by a hailstorm which brought down houses and churches; the emperor was possessed by a demon; swarms and plagues overran Asia Minor and the Hellespont; his epilepsy significantly worsened and further disasters presaged his demise.³⁶⁷ Michael V's Easter ceremonial 'took place earlier than was customary' and was thus regarded as an ill omen.³⁶⁸ These signs implied heavenly intervention and were vital to the assessment of rule and the perceived legitimacy of candidates for the throne. Portents of divine displeasure clearly revealed an illegitimate candidate.

³⁶⁵ Gregory the Cellarer, *Life of Lazaros Galesiotes* §105; Cheynet 1990: 162; Morris 1995: 139.

³⁶⁶ Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 301.

³⁶⁷ Skylitzes says that these things came about because of Michael's transgression of God's commandments and the desecration of the emperor Romanos which has taken place and the violation of his marriage bed.' Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 371-372, 381, 384.

³⁶⁸ Attaleiates, *History* IV.4; see also Choniates' criticism of Andronikos who rushed to complete his coronation and thus broke with established tradition. Choniates, *History* 272-273.

Imperial Art: Propaganda & Continuity

Works of imperial art, displayed in public, provided an excellent opportunity for a usurper to promote his image and were in keeping with the tradition of imperial display.³⁶⁹ Though most of these works are no longer extant, the literary record provides clues as to how they were intended to bolster the image and legitimacy of rule. The reigns of Andronikos Komnenos and Isaakios Angelos provide examples.

Soon after assuming the throne, Andronikos undertook the destruction and manipulation of images portraying his predecessors. Choniates reports that Andronikos had paintings of the Empress Xene reworked in order to depict her ‘as a shrivelled up old woman because he was suspicious of the pity elicited by these radiant and very beautiful portrayals...’³⁷⁰ Though stopping short of *damnatio memoriae* – which might have provoked greater criticism - Andronikos nevertheless sought to remove images perceived as detrimental to his regime. In reworking them Andronikos sought to quell support for the old regime by corrupting the memory of it. He no doubt believed that his legitimacy and popularity would no longer be overshadowed by (beautiful) visual reminders of his predecessors.³⁷¹ He attempted, instead, to subtly turn the public against their memory. Ugliness connoted ignobility, immorality and other character flaws.³⁷² Art was used as a weapon. Choniates consequently underscored the importance of images to the legacy and legitimacy of an

³⁶⁹ On the apparent commonality of depictions of the emperor in artwork in public spaces throughout the empire see Magdalino & Nelson 1982: 132-133; Eastmond 2003: 73: notes that the function of such art was to ‘display the majesty of the Byzantine emperor and thereby magnify his power and that of the empire everywhere an image was placed.’

³⁷⁰ Choniates, *History* 332-333.

³⁷¹ We may question why Andronikos would have felt the need to tarnish his predecessors’ memory in this manner. It would appear that he enjoyed substantial support at the outset of his reign, with Alexios’ family viewed unfavourably by many of the court and the public. It therefore seems possible that his manipulation of images fits in with Choniates’ general depiction of Andronikos as always acting for capricious reasons: the tarnishing of Xene’s memory is, like his disrespect for Manuel’s memory and the desecration of Alexios’ body, another sign of his villainy and pettiness.

³⁷² Hatzaki 2009:38.

imperial claimant.³⁷³ The populace's subjection of Andronikos' own images to *damnatio memoriae* emphasises this point.³⁷⁴

The emperor decorated many of his Constantinopolitan constructions with depictions of himself. However, 'he could not ornament the buildings with paintings... depicting his recent deeds, having accomplished none, [so instead] he resorted to showing his deeds before he became the emperor.'³⁷⁵ Implicit within this statement is the idea that it was necessary for anyone claiming imperial authority to commission artworks of their valiant deeds – not to do so would seem peculiar. Merely appropriating this tradition was therefore itself seen as a statement of intent and conferred a semblance of legitimacy.

Isaakios Angelos' overthrow of Andronikos was followed by a mass propaganda campaign in which portrayals of the emperor played a major part. The principal sources for these works are the accounts of western travellers to Constantinople. The *Chronique d'Ernoul* records that 'there was not a monastery in Constantinople that did not have his image painted above the entrance';³⁷⁶ and Robert de Clari adds that these depicted 'how Isaakios had miraculously become emperor, and how Our Lord on one side of him and Our Lady on the other put the crown on his head, and how an angel cut the string of the bow with which Andronikos wanted to shoot him...'³⁷⁷ Angelos' images adhered to the precepts of imperial rule and art. The crowning by God and the Virgin publicly testified to his having received the throne by virtue of divine right and was proof of his legitimacy to rule. Choniates confirms that Isaakios believed himself to have been chosen by God and to have been under His

³⁷³ As Eastmond notes, Choniates provides unusually detailed records of the creation, alteration, mutilation and destruction of imperial images and artwork more generally. He also shows significant interest in 'the ways in which it was perceived, interpreted, and used by its Constantinopolitan audience.' Eastmond 1994: 502.

³⁷⁴ Choniates, *History* 352.

³⁷⁵ Choniates, *History* 333.

³⁷⁶ *Chronique d'Ernoul* as quoted in Neocleous 2012: 260.

³⁷⁷ Robert de Clari, *Conquête* as quoted in Neocleous 2012: 260.

protection: an idea he promoted at court.³⁷⁸ The myth that Andronikos tried to shoot Isaakios but his bowstring broke seems to have been circulated widely and served as a valuable aid to this propaganda effort.³⁷⁹ It found expression in public art in the form of the cutting of the string by an angel and evidently aided the ideology that Isaakios was promoting of his divine favour by simultaneously alluding to his family name ‘Angelos’.³⁸⁰ His artwork, like his official rhetoric, presented the Emperor as having been saved from death by divine intervention: with his miraculous elevation to the throne serving as proof of his celestial favour.

Somewhat in contrast is the portrait that Andronikos had erected outside the church of the Forty Martyrs at the heart of Constantinople.³⁸¹ It depicted him,

not arrayed as an emperor or wearing the imperial golden ornaments, but dressed in the garb of a labourer, of blue-green color and slit all around and reaching down to the buttocks; his legs were covered up to the knees in white boots, and he held a huge curved sickle in his hand ... that caught in its curved shape and snared as in a net a lad, handsome as a statue, with only neck and shoulders showing forth.³⁸²

Such a portrayal ignores the standard formulas of Byzantine imperial art seen in Angelos’ portrait: his divine authority is not alluded to, nor his pseudo-angelic nature, his supreme rule on Earth, or his role as the empire’s defender.³⁸³ According to Choniates the image was placed there in order to instruct the public about ‘the lawless deeds he had perpetrated in

³⁷⁸ ‘Isaakios was absolutely convinced that he had received the throne from God, who alone watched over him.’ Choniates, *History* 423.

³⁷⁹ Choniates, *History* 346.

³⁸⁰ Neocleous 2012: 261. This connection with his last name may also have been played upon in his coinage: a number of issues depict him standing alongside the archangel Michael holding a sword. The flatness and frontality of the emperor is similar to the formulaic depiction of archangels during this period (depictions complete with the *loros*, *chlamys* and *divitision* associated with imperial rule). Maguire has suggested that depictions like this in other artwork are indicative of an emperor’s religiosity and pseudo-angelic nature. Maguire 1989: 223; this coin type is discussed further in Magdalino & Nelson 1982: 159.

³⁸¹ For the history of the Church of the Forty Martyrs see Janin 1953: 499-500.

³⁸² Choniates, *History* 332.

³⁸³ On centrality of ideas to imperial art see Parani 2003: 1-49; Grabar 1971.

putting to death their heir and winning for himself both his throne and his wife': it evoked his usurpation.³⁸⁴ The emphasis on colour spoke to his fickle nature and immorality; he dressed as a peasant and the 'lad' was identified as Alexios II.³⁸⁵

It seems highly improbable that this was Andronikos' original intent; Choniates' emphasis here indicates that the portrait was deliberately chosen and its meaning manipulated by the author.³⁸⁶ Angold argues that the image attempted to garner support from the peasantry by reminding them of Andronikos' pro-peasant reforms.³⁸⁷ This view, however, fails to account for 'Alexios' and breaks with traditional conceptions of ideology in displaying the emperor *as* a peasant rather than raising him above his subjects.³⁸⁸ Karlin-Hayter suggests, based on the portraits' location at the emperor's mausoleum, that it intended to depict the young Andronikos in the clutches of Death (in the guise of the 'Reaper') and that Komnenos became associated with the figure of Death after he was killed. In this interpretation the image may have invoked ideas of Divine approval: God intervened to save the youthful Andronikos from Death several times.³⁸⁹ Alternatively, Brand has argued that Andronikos was in fact holding a sword and the intent was to reveal him *protecting* Alexios II. This interpretation would seemingly be in accordance with the image that Andronikos promoted of himself as

³⁸⁴ Choniates, *History* 332.

³⁸⁵ Kazhdan & Franklin 1984: 257-260.

³⁸⁶ Eastmond 1994: 502: notes that it is, in fact, the only detailed description of an imperial portrait in the whole of the *History* proper. Certainly this would suggest that something out of the ordinary is taking place in Choniates' analysis.

³⁸⁷ Kazhdan and Epstein 1985: 54: note 'leaflets' praising Andronikos' protection of the peasantry were in circulation, so certainly propaganda like this was utilised.

³⁸⁸ Angold 1997: 297-299; Eastmond 1994: 504.

³⁸⁹ Karlin-Hayter 1987: 103-116; Eastmond 1994: 503 n.11: argues that this is an unlikely identification of the figures in the image as Death had no precedent on Byzantine church facades and had not yet been associated with the figure of the reaper.

acting in the boy's best interests, but fails to address the 'peasant attire' and relies on Choniates misreporting the image.³⁹⁰

As the original work is lost to us, the intent (and the reliability of Choniates' description) can never truly be known and any interpretation (of either) is subject to conjecture. However, something of Choniates' intentions may be revealed in his invocation of Davidic ideology in relation to Andronikos' other artworks: Choniates first outlines Andronikos' construction projects, and then provides details of the artwork that he decorated these buildings with, including the portrait in question. At the end of this section he introduces the comparison of Andronikos with David by first mentioning iconography depicting Andronikos' travels during his periods of exile – making the link between the story and artwork clear.³⁹¹ We learn that the emperor often compared his fate to that of David, that he 'had been forced to escape the traps of envy and often to migrate to the enemy's country... [and] living meanly and poorly, secretly stole away the necessities of life.'³⁹² This propaganda was also espoused at court, and describes David's banishment by Saul and his protection of shepherds and farmers: evoking Andronikos' own pro-peasant policies, his banishment by Manuel, and possibly explaining his depiction in peasant attire associated with wandering and subsistence living. The story of David's aborted attempt on Nabal's life is also mooted; apparently in contrast to an image of Andronikos as a pious apostolic figure. Nevertheless, the

³⁹⁰ Brand 1968: 329 n.51. An argument could perhaps be made that Andronikos wears such an outfit in order to indicate his fall from grace under Manuel and that he was considered little more than a peasant when he returned to safeguard Alexios.

³⁹¹ Choniates, *History* 331-334.

³⁹² 'Andronikos compared his fate to that of David and contended that he, too, had been forced to escape the traps of envy and often migrate to the enemy's country. He recounted how David, living meanly and poorly, secretly stole away the necessities of life and smote the Amalekites with the sword as he kept watch over the borders of Palestine from a short distance away at Sikelas, and how he would have killed Nabal for refusing to bring him food in answer to his petition, while he, Andronikos, passing through nearly all the Gentile nations, bearing the name of Christ before all and preaching as though he were an apostle, received the highest honors wherever he went and an escort of honor when he departed. These things he expounded with compelling persuasion; indeed, he spoke thus to men of eloquence and learning so long as the affairs of state were calm and tranquil.' Choniates, *History* 334.

reference to Nabal³⁹³ suggests some similarities with Andronikos' own life that implies its inclusion was part of Choniates' *Kaiserkritik* and a deliberate manipulation of Andronikos' portraiture. Like David, Andronikos believed himself ill treated by Manuel and the other Komnenoi when he was overlooked for positions despite his noble lineage;³⁹⁴ he also took as his own, the wife of a dead leader: Abigail/Agnes. Unlike David, however, Andronikos slew Alexios (Nabal) and therefore incurred God's wrath; his reign was short as a result.³⁹⁵ I propose that Choniates deliberately chose this story to highlight the contrast between Andronikos and David. Instead of relating how David slew Saul, which would have provided Andronikos with a precedent for his actions (and was likely promoted by him anyway),³⁹⁶ he cited the story of Nabal showing that Andronikos was *not* another David figure despite what he may have thought of himself.³⁹⁷

Coins and seals represented further opportunities for a usurper to accrue and promote his legitimacy. The minting of currency had always been associated with imperial rule and therefore connoted legitimacy in and of itself: the Great Palace housed the Constantinopolitan mint; the emperor was depicted on the coins; his role in the distribution of salaries acquired a

³⁹³ The biblical Nabal was a rich Calebite who had wronged David by bringing into question his noble lineage. David raised his army against him but aborted his plans to kill him when Nabal's wife Abigail interceded. Nabal died soon after in an act of divine punishment for his contemptuous behaviour towards David (a heart attack), and David subsequently took Abigail as his wife. 1 Samuel 25.

³⁹⁴ Kinnamos, *Deeds of John and Manuel Comnenus* 61-63, Choniates, *History* 104-106.

³⁹⁵ According to the biblical account, Abigail convinced David to stay his hand because God would reward him, providing a long lasting dynasty and divine protection – clearly the same could not be said of Andronikos. 1 Samuel 25:20-29.

³⁹⁶ Choniates has told us already that Andronikos had a penchant for Davidic comparisons, and the idea of the repentant emperor was well known.

³⁹⁷ It is also possible that Nabal was chosen as a way of alluding to Andronikos' policies against the rich/elite.

court ceremonial directly involving coinage, and historians often noted a usurper's production of coin, as well as any changes to the iconography of these products.³⁹⁸

That its manufacture could play an important part in a usurper's attempt to accrue legitimacy is confirmed by the examples of rebels who produced coinage at the earliest possible opportunity. Basilakes provides one such example: his revolt lasted only around six months but centred on Thessaloniki which at this time (1078/79) likely possessed a mint.³⁹⁹ Hendy has shown that during the brief period of his rebellion Basilakes issued a small run of copper *folleis* bearing his initials and a bust of the nimbate Christ.⁴⁰⁰ Theodore Mankaphas, who proclaimed himself *basileus* in Philadelphia (1188), reportedly struck a number of silver *electrum* and *billon trachea* in his own name before Isaakios II quelled his uprising.⁴⁰¹ Nikephoros Melissenos (1080/81) minted coinage in Asia Minor;⁴⁰² and Isaakios Komnenos of Cyprus produced thirteen distinct types during his six year insurrection.⁴⁰³ When the opportunity arose to mint coins therefore, it was taken as soon as possible. They were associated with the *basileus* and served to persuade people who the true emperor was (the hand that feeds you).

³⁹⁸ On the imperial mint of Constantinople see Bellinger & Grierson 1999, vol. 4.1: 128; on the court ceremony for the distribution of salaries see the firsthand account provided by Liudprand of Cremona, *Antapodosis* VI.10 (Magdalino 1993: 239: notes that the ceremony was dispensed with as of the reign of Alexios I); the emperor's role as the distributor of largesse is directly mentioned in 'mirrors for princes' works – on this see Blemmydes, *Imperial Statue* §2; for examples of Byzantine historians noting usurper production of coinage and changes to the iconography of coinage see Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 155; Choniates, *History* 522.

³⁹⁹ Hendy 1969: 79: argues that there certainly was a mint producing coinage that was distinctively of Thessaloniki origin during Alexios Komnenos' reign. Due to certain similarities between Basilakes' coinage and these products, Hendy argues that this mint must have been active prior to Basilakes' revolt and certainly before Alexios came to power. Grierson 1982: 224: is not convinced by Hendy's argument but concedes that a provincial mint was a possibility.

⁴⁰⁰ Hendy 1969: 79, pl.74.5.

⁴⁰¹ Choniates, *History* 522; Hendy 1969: 149; Grierson 1982: 235-236.

⁴⁰² Hendy 1969: 79.

⁴⁰³ Bellinger & Grierson 1999, vol. 4: 354-364.

Aside from the legitimising effect that simply producing coinage provided it could be used as a vehicle to promote ideas about the emperor himself. Nikephoros II certainly grasped this opportunity. Initially Phokas appeared as regent on his issues: Christ was placed on the obverse, with the reverse showing Basil II and Nikephoros both holding the imperial sceptre.⁴⁰⁴ Basil being present served to bolster Nikephoros' legitimacy through association to the reigning dynasty, the heir of which would take over upon Phokas' death: his reign was here depicted as an authorised and temporary interlude. Alexios I also sought to accrue legitimacy by promoting links to the previous dynasty. The compositions of his seals are noted to have mimicked those of his predecessors Michael VII and Nikephoros III, with special focus on those of the Doukai: the obverse of a seal in the Dumbarton Oaks collection displays a motif of Christ enthroned which was first utilised by Constantine X, and then Michael VII Doukas; with the imperial regalia of Botaneiates' seals retained in the depiction of Alexios.⁴⁰⁵ Alexios' imitation of these forms was evidently an attempt to promote continuity of rule (aided by his having married into the Doukas family) and indicated his right to the imperial office. Likewise, Alexios III Angelos sought to evoke imperial legitimacy by promoting continuity with the Komnenian dynasty and with the founder of 'New Rome'. His earlier coins bore Saint Constantine's name evoking continuity with the ancient past and presenting him as another Constantine figure; his later coinage and seals distanced him from his brother and utilised his grandmother's Komnenian heritage to link him to the former

⁴⁰⁴ Pentcheva 2006: 34.

⁴⁰⁵ For an example of this type see BZS.1958.106.611 in the Dumbarton Oaks collection. Dumbarton Oaks, *God's Regents on Earth: A Thousand Years of Byzantine Imperial Seals, Alexios I Komnenos (1081-1118)*.

dynasty. He sought to imbibe honour and legitimacy through association with the name ‘Komnenos’.⁴⁰⁶

Links to previous dynasties or famous emperors from Roman history spoke to the impeccable heritage and ‘dynastic pedigree’ of a potential emperor, allowing them to secure their position. In this way, Attaleiates traced the emperor Botaneiates’ lineage to Nikephoros Phokas, and ultimately to the Fabii and Scipiones of Ancient Rome.⁴⁰⁷ Botaneiates was presented as following in the footsteps of these great figures and his rule was enhanced by the association. Centuries of dynastic succession meant that the unwritten rule of hereditary succession was a firmly established principle.⁴⁰⁸ Psellos noted that Bardas Phokas ‘would never be content to occupy a subordinate position,’ as he was descended from the Emperor Nikephoros, and that this was the reason he was chosen to lead the rebellion;⁴⁰⁹ Alexios Komnenos recalled that his uncle Isaakios had led the empire and that he was following in his footsteps as a legitimate heir;⁴¹⁰ and both Nikephoros Diogenes and Constantine Doukas, who attempted to usurp Alexios, were *porphyrogenetoi*.⁴¹¹ Such heritage afforded the usurper a degree of legitimacy: they were related to previous rulers and, consequently, they too had a right to rule. It is unsurprising, therefore, to find dynastic links promoted on coins and seals.

Nikephoros Phokas’ legitimising efforts eventually changed in nature and the image of dynastic continuity was broken when Basil was replaced on his gold coinage by an image of the Theotokos holding the sceptre alongside Phokas.⁴¹² Pentcheva notes that this iconography

⁴⁰⁶ Grierson 1982: 236; Oikonomides 1986: 118; Choniates, *History* 459: notes that he repudiated the name Angelos either because he held the former in low esteem compared with that of Komnenos or intended his brother’s name to disappear with him.

⁴⁰⁷ Attaleiates, *History* XXVII.1-13.

⁴⁰⁸ Cheynet 1990: 184; Dagron 2003: 39-43.

⁴⁰⁹ Psellos, *Chronographia* I.5-6.

⁴¹⁰ Cheynet 1990: 184.

⁴¹¹ Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* IX.5-9.

⁴¹² Pentcheva 2006: 34.

drew attention to Mary's role as Victoria, evoking ancient associations that served to strengthen the imperial sceptre and Phokas' legitimacy: his triumphal acclamation in Constantinople had drawn on his battlefield successes which were now being alluded to through Mary/Victoria.⁴¹³ The presence of the Theotokos also gave visual form to the broader ideology that Phokas had been promoting in order to associate himself with her divine protection. McCormick postulates that Nikephoros deliberately delayed his coronation in order to coincide with the feast of the Virgin's victory over the Arab besiegers of Constantinople in 718;⁴¹⁴ it also coincided with the entrance of the *Mandyllion* in 944: both invited legitimacy for his rule; divine sanction for his coup.⁴¹⁵ Phokas prayed at the church of the Theotokos on the day of his coronation,⁴¹⁶ had an icon of her beside him as he slept,⁴¹⁷ and supposedly invoked her aid as he was slain.⁴¹⁸ His coinage obviously sought to promote this image of a pious emperor who enjoyed the protection and legitimising power of the Theotokos.

Gold *nomismata* depicting Ioannes Tzimiskes crowned by the Virgin and blessed by the *manus Dei* (a coin type introduced by Phokas) attested to his sanctity.⁴¹⁹ They linked him with the protection of the Theotokos, were imitated on seals bearing his name in a further attempt to indicate that he was *the* emperor chosen by God, and serve as evidence for the 'official image' he presented.⁴²⁰ Skylitzes records that Tzimiskes also did 'something which had not happened before' in placing an image of Christ on all issues of his gold and copper

⁴¹³ Pentcheva 2006: 34.

⁴¹⁴ McCormick 1986: 169.

⁴¹⁵ Talbot & Sullivan 2005: 98 n.68.

⁴¹⁶ Pentcheva 2006: 34.

⁴¹⁷ Leo the Deacon, *History* V.7: the icons he had with him as he slept in fact formed a Deesis scene: a 'Theandric image of Christ and of the Mother of God and of the holy Forerunner and Herald.'

⁴¹⁸ Leo the Deacon, *History* V.7-8; Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 269.

⁴¹⁹ Grierson 1999: 37-38.

⁴²⁰ Bellinger & Grierson 1993, vol. 2: 174-175, 589; Nesbit 2009: 104-105.

coinage; accompanied by the inscription ‘Jesus Christ, King of Kings’.⁴²¹ This was purportedly out of gratitude to Christ for Tzimiskes’ many victories on the field of battle, and therefore provided tacit acceptance that he was favoured by God.⁴²² Skylitzes appears to have been inaccurate in regard to Tzimiskes gold issues as no examples of the anonymous series exist and the *nomisma* had always shown Christ.⁴²³ The copper *folles* does however reveal Tzimiskes’ changes: both his name and bust are absent. Grierson has noted that this may have been an act of contrition for the murder of Phokas with Tzimiskes’ utter subservience to Christ on the more widely distributed *folles* being a general expression of atonement for all to see.⁴²⁴ His coinage therefore served not only to promote his divine legitimacy, but to help him publicise his humility and his atonement for the sins he had committed in gaining power.

⁴²¹ Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 294-295.

⁴²² Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 294.

⁴²³ Bellinger & Grierson 1993, vol. 2: 634-635; Henny 1985: 511-512.

⁴²⁴ Bellinger & Grierson 1993, vol. 2: 635.

CONCLUSIONS

Usurpation clearly had a lasting effect on a usurper's reign. The declaration of rebellion, confirmed in the field by the acclamation of the army, or in Constantinople by the support of the populace, set in motion a process of legitimation for the would-be usurper. It was a case of do, or do not: in rebellion there was no 'try'; the consequences of failure almost certainly included mutilation or death. The coronation represented just one milestone on the path to legitimacy. It was a ceremony that provided a public declaration of the quasi-legal acknowledgment of a usurper's right to wield power which he had already won through rebellion or transference via a member of the imperial family. This transfer of power to, or from, an individual could be implied by the attire he wore/was divested of. The donning of imperial garments in the early phase of a rebellion gave visual demonstration to a usurper's intentions and was calculated to provide additional legitimacy to their claims through its close association with *basileia*. In the eyes of their supporters it symbolised their right to rule; conferred authority upon them, and committed them to revolt.

The justifications for engaging in such behaviour were of great importance to the presentation of a usurper's actions (and rule) by later historians and propagandists. The memory of an emperor could be undermined if his usurpation was presented as being motivated by self-interest. Skylitzes used this charge to attack the image of Nikephoros II, whilst for Choniates it entirely invalidated Andronikos' claims to legitimacy. Acting in self-defence or for the good of the empire were, on occasion, acceptable reasons for revolt as they revealed the tyranny and mismanagement of the reigning emperor. These two justifications were supplied by Anna Komnene to defend her father from the charge of self-interest, and she obviously believed that these would go some way to defending his image. But even so, when

promises were broken (as in the case of Nikephoros II's oath to the patriarch and the state) condemnation could be expected.

While some might argue that the end justifies the means by which a person became the *basileus*, this was clearly not the case for the Byzantines themselves. In cases where blood had been spilled the usurper accrued bloodguilt which invariably affected his legacy. The concept of 'the repentant emperor' provided a precedent by which he might atone for his sins. As with Tzimiskes and Michael IV this had some impact on the policies and actions of their reigns: to which the distribution of alms, concessions to the patriarch and increasing piety may testify. Efforts were also made to rehabilitate such emperors by shifting the blame for bloodshed onto others: in this way Theophano was used as a target by Tzimiskes' propagandists.

The broader image of the usurper employed the motif of the reluctant emperor to portray those worthy of rule as humble and noble heroes, forced to accept power by the magnitude of the situation in which they found themselves. They were almost always individuals of exceptional lineage, and presented in the literature as heroic figures with perfect physiques and excelling in martial ability. These qualities were no doubt influenced by the changing nature of the imperial and aristocratic ideals of this period, and by the practical realities of revolution. But they also allowed usurpers to be portrayed in the literature as engaging in a Homeric struggle for power. Furthermore, the ever increasing importance placed upon their intellect may reflect something of the authors' own interests/concerns in writing. Success came as a result of calculated and decisive action; failure, a result of sluggishness, indecision or recklessness unbecoming of a potential emperor.

Often the action was focused upon securing the Great Palace which was a prominent symbol of imperial rule. It served as the site for the transfer of power, and this legitimating association meant that every usurper of the period desired to acquire it. The legitimising efforts extended beyond the securing of the palace and the coronation. Attempts to court patriarchal favour were commonplace, and several patriarchs were intimately involved in conspiracies that led to the removal of emperors. Favourable omens and portents were actively sought in order to provide the semblance of legitimacy in a society that placed stock in such things. They could reveal the authority of a usurper and the illegitimacy of the reigning emperor and were taken very seriously by those in power. Imperial art was associated with legitimacy as such works were expected of the emperor and provided an opportunity for public displays of propaganda. Isaakios Angelos utilised it to promote the idea of divine favour and protection for his rule, whereas Andronikos damaged the memory of the previous regime in order to kill off any lingering loyalty and to lessen any criticism of his coup. His art also afforded Choniates the opportunity to further his critique by manipulating the emperor's appeals to Davidic ideology in order to undermine his image.

The minting of coinage was another act associated with imperium and was undertaken by usurpers whenever possible. It gave expression to ideas about the emperor himself and usurpers used this to promote their ideological messages. Nikephoros II revealed his close relationship with the Theotokos, with whom he had repeatedly associated his rule. Tzimiskes promoted his piety and subservience to God in order to publicise his atonement for the murder of Phokas. Continuity of rule was also alluded to in the retention of coin and seal designs of previous emperors/dynasties. This continuity aided the perceived legitimacy of a usurper and was also promoted by association with the previous dynasty through professed friendship, the politicised rewriting of history, and through marriage or adoption into the previous dynasty.

Alexios I did all of these things. Descent from famous historical figures of the ancient past and from previous emperors enhanced a claim to legitimacy by providing the necessary 'pedigree'. For the usurper, gaining power was, in a sense, easy. Convincing people that he legitimately belonged there was the more difficult and long-lasting challenge.

List of Emperors during the period 963-1204

959-963	Romanos II Porphyrogennitos
963-969	Nikephoros II Phokas
969-976	Ioannes Tzimiskes
976-1025	Basil II “the Bulgar-Slayer”
1025-1028	Constantine VIII Porphyrogennitos
1028-1050	Zoe Porphyrogenite
1028-1034	Romanos III Argyros
1034-1041	Michael IV Paphlagonian
1041-1042	Michael V “the Caulker”
1042-1056	Theodora
1042-1055	Constantine IX Monomachos
1056-1057	Michael VI Bringas “the Old”
1057-1059	Isaakios I Komnenos
1059-1067	Constantine X Doukas
1067-1078	Michael VII Doukas
1068-1071	Romanos IV Diogenes
1078-1081	Nikephoros III Botaneiates
1081-1118	Alexios I Komnenos
1118-1143	Ioannes II Komnenos
1143-1180	Manuel I Komnenos
1180-1183	Alexios II Komnenos
1183-1185	Andronikos I Komnenos
1185-1195	Isaakios II Angelos
1195-1203	Alexios III Angelos
1203-1204	Isaakios II Angelos
1203-1204	Alexios IV Angelos
1204	Alexios V Doukas

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