

MICHAEL GRÜNBART, *Die Komnenen: Eine byzantinische Herrscherfamilie* (Urban-Taschenbücher). Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2026. 259 pp. – ISBN 978-3-17-039447-6

• KONSTANTINOS TAKIRTAKOGLU, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (ktakirta@hist.auth.gr)

MICHAEL GRÜNBART describes his work as a short history of the Komnenian dynasty. It combines an overview of the political and military developments of the period with an examination of the exercise and projection of imperial power.

In the introduction (ch. 1, pp. 11–13), the author offers a brief discussion of the significance of the Komnenian period, the history of the dynasty, its origins, and a concise account of its rise to the imperial throne. The international setting at the time when the Komnenoi came to power is also examined. The chapter concludes with two sections devoted to the sources (1.1) and to the modern bibliography (1.2), which presents the main themes that have occupied modern scholarship on the Komnenian period.

The second chapter (*Das Herrscherhaus der Komnenen*, pp. 18–101) examines the history of the Komnenian dynasty. In the first subsection (2.1, pp. 19–24), the author traces the gradual rise of the Komnenos family, beginning with its progenitor Manuel Erotikos. In connection with his role during the reign of Basil II, the author also discusses key characteristics of the Byzantine aristocracy, including its division into a civil and a military branch. He then explores how growing dissatisfaction with Michael VI among the military eventually led to the proclamation of Isaac Komnenos as emperor. The following subsection (2.2, p. 24–30) discusses the reign of Isaac I Komnenos. Among other things, it analyzes how the need for a stricter fiscal policy led Isaac Komnenos into conflict with Patriarch Michael Keroularios. GRÜNBART highlights (pp. 27–28) the causes of the ensuing conflict between the two men and offers several observations that help explain the deterioration of their relationship.

In section 2.3 (p. 30–40), the author examines the period from Isaac’s abdication to the accession of the second Komnenian emperor Alexios I. This section offers a useful analysis of the activities of Anna Dalassene, described by GRÜNBART as a ‘*meisterliche Netzwerkerin*’. The discussion

supports his argument that, ultimately (p. 38), *‘der Clou des Coups der Komnenen bestand darin, dass sie sorgfältig durch ›Networking‹ vorbauten, indem sie etwaige Konkurrenten an sich banden und damit neutralisierten’*.

Next, in section (2.4, pp. 41–50), the author focuses on the reign of Alexios I. The balance of power between the Komnenoi and their aristocratic allies is examined alongside the emperor’s foreign policy. Particular attention is given to the First Crusade and the relationship between the Latins and the Byzantine emperor. GRÜNBART observes (p. 46) that the difficulty in Alexios’ policy ultimately lay in reconciling two conflicting expectations: on the one hand, supporting the Crusaders’ operations and, on the other, avoiding alienating the Seljuks, given that they remained a powerful enemy even after the Crusaders’ passage had been completed.

The section on John II Komnenos (2.5, pp. 51–59) examines both his domestic policy and his dealings with the various enemies he confronted during his reign. With regard to the emperor’s second campaign, GRÜNBART suggests, based on Choniates (p. 59), that the emperor’s objective was to conquer Antioch and subsequently proceed towards Jerusalem.

The next section (2.6, pp. 60–93), devoted to Manuel I, is the longest in the chapter. Its length reflects the fact that the surviving sources deal primarily with his reign. The author discusses Manuel’s relations with the Church, showing that there were limits to the emperor’s omnipotence: *‘hatte sich also mit der orthodoxen Kirche auseinanderzusetzen, denn nur so blieb seine Herrschaft in Verbindung mit dem Patriarchat stabil’* (p. 62). He then focuses on Manuel’s dynastic policy, as well as on his dealings with the allies and enemies with whom he came into contact in both East and West. On this point, GRÜNBART (p. 75) offers a useful explanation for Manuel’s expansion into southern Italy. In addition to the frequently cited desire for the *renovatio* of Roman rule, GRÜNBART identifies the need to protect western Greece from attacks coming from the Adriatic.

The chapter concludes with an examination (2.7, pp. 93–101) of the period from Manuel’s death to the end of the Komnenian dynasty, focusing on the intra-dynastic conflicts that brought Andronikos I Komnenos to the throne and the turbulent period of his reign.

The third chapter (*Das komnenische Kaisertum*, pp. 102–122) examines imperial power during the Komnenian period. Its subsections address the spatial organization of imperial power, imperial birth, imperial marriages, accession to power and the coronation, the death of the emperors, and their

physical appearance. The author's observations concerning the functioning of tents and the mobile court during military campaigns are worth noting.

The following chapter (4. *Kaiserliche Aufgaben*, pp. 123–149) shifts from the holder of imperial power to various aspects of its exercise. This is a significant section of the work and draws in part on the research project *Kulturen des Entscheidens*, of which GRÜNBART was the principal investigator (2015–2019). The chapter begins with the emperors' advisors. The author demonstrates that the emperor was expected to benefit in various ways from the advice of experts, while also emphasizing that he retained ultimate authority: '*sicherte er seine Autorität durch sein letztes Wort und bekräftigte seinen kontrollierenden Machtanspruch*' (p. 124). Examining Anna Dalassene's role under Alexios Komnenos, GRÜNBART suggests (p. 125) that the emphasis Anna places on this issue may conceal a complaint about the more limited influence of women in her own time. His argument (p. 130) that Byzantine rulers' recourse to divine intervention in decision-making did not necessarily reflect a particular affinity for supernatural inspiration, but rather a search for possible solutions in times of crisis, seems convincing.

In the next subsection, the author turns to the monetary policy of the Komnenian emperors and the use of money as a weapon in their dealings with the empire's enemies. Subsection 4.3 turns to military confrontation with these enemies and to the role of the Komnenoi as warriors and generals. The author's argument (p. 133) that, in the case of the Komnenoi, we cannot speak of an expansionist policy, since their conflicts with their enemies were responses to hostile attacks, is interesting, although it may invite some reservations.

Taking as his starting point Anna Komnene's reference to Aelian's tactical manual, GRÜNBART then turns to the imperial cultivation of knowledge, considering the education of the emperors alongside broader questions of learning and cultural production during the Komnenian period. The chapter concludes with an extensive section devoted to the ecclesiastical and religious policy of the Komnenoi. Their role as protectors of Orthodoxy is emphasized, particularly through their persecution of heretics. The analysis could also have addressed the ecclesiastical contacts of the Byzantine Church during the Komnenian period, both with the Western and with the Eastern Churches – contacts that also had clearly defined political motives.¹

1. See e.g. ISABELLE AUGÉ, *Byzantins, Arméniens & Francs au temps de la Croisade. Politique religieuse et reconquête en Orient sous la dynastie des Comnènes, 1081–1185*.

Chapter 5 (*Imperiale Imagepflege*, pp. 150–180) explores the various ways in which the emperor's image was projected during the Komnenian period. It begins with the iconographic representation of the emperors on coins and lead seals and concludes with the rare surviving examples of monumental paintings and manuscript miniatures, such as Vaticanus Urbinatus gr. 2 (Diktyon 66469). The next subsection considers the projection of imperial power in public spectacles, triumphs, processions, and other staged contexts. The section also considers meetings between the *basileus* and foreign rulers, in which impressing the visiting ruler formed one of the principal aims of Byzantine diplomacy. The subsection concludes with the image projected by the emperors themselves as hunters. This is followed by a discussion of the imperial virtues they sought to project: mercy, charity (*philanthropia*), and repentance. Section 5.4 also considers the Komnenoi's efforts to found institutions that would ensure the commemoration of their names. The final two subsections address Imperial Leisure (5.5) and criticism of the emperors (5.6). The discussion of how dissatisfaction with an emperor was expressed is particularly useful in a political system in which criticism of the emperor, naturally, '*durfte selten offen geäußert werden*' (p. 177).

The book concludes with a short chapter entitled *Was bleibt* (pp. 181–184), which sets out the legacy of the Komnenian dynasty. The final pages contain the footnotes (pp. 185–216), the bibliography (pp. 217–243), a glossary of terms (pp. 245–246), and a useful index (pp. 247–257). The map at the beginning of the volume (p. 9) was prepared by MIHAILO POPOVIĆ.²

There are a few minor typographical errors in the text and the footnotes.³ The bibliography is rich, although the broad scope of the work inevitably means that some relevant studies are not included. For example, in relation to John II Komnenos, one might also mention PAPAGEORGIOU's mono-

Paris 2007.

2. A minor typographical error should be noted: the labels for Tarsus and Adana should have been switched.

3. For example, on p. 34, the reference should be to Isaac, Alexios' brother and Isaac I's nephew, rather than to Isaac I. On p. 36, the reference should be to Alexios I Komnenos rather than to '*Annas Vater Alexios*'. On some occasions (e.g. p. 96), the rulers of the Rurikid dynasty are incorrectly referred to as kings. There are very few typographical errors in the footnotes, and these mainly concern minor errors in bibliographical references. For example, note 70 (p. 187) cites Rickelt 2019 rather than 2020, while note 162 (p. 190) should cite Belke 2020 rather than 2000.

graph; for relations with the Crusaders, the classic study by HARRIS; and for the empire's relations with Nur al-Din, the work of ELISSÉEFF.⁴

These observations do not detract from the value of the present work. It is, in essence, an accessible handbook of the Komnenian period, covering the political and military history of the dynasty alongside important aspects of imperial power. The book will prove useful to Byzantinists working on this period, as well as to historians whose research touches more broadly upon the history of the Roman Empire during the Komnenian period, including scholars working on the Crusader states and on Armenian history. It provides a concise overview of the principal events of the period while also offering a framework for understanding the exercise of imperial power: how the emperor governed, how he made decisions, how he sought to be perceived by friends and enemies, and how he sought to be remembered. I hope that the work will soon be translated into other languages as well.

Keywords

Comnenian dynasty; middle-Byzantine history

4. ANGELIKI PAPAGEORGIOU, *Ο Ιωάννης Β' Κομνηνός και η εποχή του* (1118–1143). Athens 2017; JONATHAN HARRIS, *Byzantium and the Crusades*, 2nd ed. London 2014; NIKITA ELISSÉEFF, *Nūr ad-Dīn. Un grand prince musulman de Syrie au temps des Croisades* (511–569 H./1118–1174), 3 vols. Damascus 1967.