

DIONYSIOS A. MAMAGKAKIS, *Ατενίζοντας τα έσχατα. Εσχατολογία και αυτοκρατορική ιδεολογία στο Βυζάντιο του Αλεξίου Α' Κομνηνού (1081–1118)*. Athens: Εκδόσεις Σιάτρα 2024. 448 pp. – ISBN 978-618-5818-07-4 (€24.00)

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The monograph “Staring at the end of time: Eschatology and imperial ideology in Alexius I Comnenus’s Byzantium (1081–1118)”, as the title translates in the English summary, marks the culmination of the author’s engagement with the study of the reign of the Comnenian dynasty’s founder, which began in the frame of his unpublished dissertation.¹

The book begins with a foreword (ΠΡΟΛΟΓΟΣ, pp. 11–16) written by PAUL MAGDALINO, himself one of the pioneers of scholarship on the “end of times” thematic, who makes the point that modern scholars have for various reasons avoided to deal with a question posed since a generation; namely whether and to what extent eschatology influenced the decision-making of the medieval Roman state’s ruling class, an issue that has been in the meantime studied only for the period of Late Antiquity up to the rule of Heraclius (610–641). MAMAGKAKIS’ monograph serves to address this gap.

In his short introduction (ΕΙΣΑΓΩΓΗ, pp. 17–26) the author refers to the continuous strength of Christian eschatology up to our days by shortly discussing prophecy of such nature in the beginning of the 21st century as emanated by sometimes controversial yet influential Greek monastic figures, triggered by contemporary events and crises and often recycled online despite the fact that many predictions have been proven wrong. Yet, MAMAGKAKIS declares that his aim is to highlight the interconnection of the medieval Greek apocalyptic tradition with the ideology of the central authority in the time of the second Comnenian emperor.

1. DIONYSIOS MAMAGKAKIS, *Ο αυτοκράτορας, ο λαός και η Ορθοδοξία. Αλέξιος Α' Κομνηνός (1081–1118): κατασκευάζοντας την δημόσια αυτοκρατορική εικόνα* [The emperor, his people and Orthodoxy. Alexios I Komnenos (1081–1118): constructing a public imperial image], National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, 2014: <https://www.didaktorika.gr/eadd/handle/10442/35374?locale=en>

The book is divided in eight chapters, each with up to five subchapters marked by Greek numerals. The first three chapters are essentially an extensive introduction to the history of the interconnection of eschatology and imperial ideology from the beginning of the Christian empire up to the 11th century; it shows MAMAGKAKIS' understanding of earlier studies related to the long period before Alexius Comnenus' reign. In the first (ΚΕΦΑΛΑΙΟ 1. Από την παλαιοχριστιανική στη βυζαντινή εσχατολογία, pp. 27–46) MAMAGKAKIS briefly discusses the two factors that eventually came together in what is known as imperial eschatology, being the imperial office, which within Christianity assumed priestly qualities in the old pagan tradition already by the time of Constantine the Great (A, pp. 27–33), and eschatology as “the mother of all Christian theology” (B, pp. 33–38); moreover, the author traces the development of the expectations about the end of times as well as the modes of its continuous calculation (millenarianism) (Γ, pp. 38–46).

In the second chapter (ΚΕΦΑΛΑΙΟ 2. Ηράκλειος και Ψευδο-Μεθόδιος: Από την ιστορία στον εσχατολογικό θρύλο, pp. 47–98) MAMAGKAKIS discusses the eschatological surge during the 7th century, a period unrelated to millenarian expectations but full of political upheavals (Persian war, Arab conquests) that spurred apocalyptic speculation. The author suggests that Heraclius' triumph over the Persians and his restitution of the True Cross in Jerusalem constituted an eschatological model (A, pp. 47–51). It was taken up by the originally Syriac Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius, which introduces for the first time the prophecy of the “Last Roman emperor”, who would emulate Heraclius' deeds before the end of times. The Pseudo-Methodian prophecy is generally assumed to have been written in the beginning of the 690s as a Christian reaction to the Muslim domination of Syropalestine (B, pp. 51–60) and matched the ambitions of reconquest of Heraclius' descendant, Justinian II (685–695 / 705–711), during his first reign (Γ, pp. 61–67). It is also a testimony of the Syrian Christians' partial change of attitude towards the Chalcedonian emperors of Constantinople after two centuries of religious dissent in the region (Δ, pp. 67–74). Concluding the chapter MAMAGKAKIS explores the Pseudo-Methodian typology and symbolism, which not only predicts the fulfilment of Old Testament types in the figure of the messianic emperor but also draws inspiration from well-established historical or legendary models, most notably Alexander the Great (E, pp. 74–98).

In the third and last chapter of his extensive introduction to the eschatological background of Alexius' reign (ΚΕΦΑΛΑΙΟ 3. Από την εσχατολογία

του 7ου αιώνα στην εσχατολογία του 11ου: Ο εξωτερικός παράγων, pp. 99–149) the author turns to the developments of the 11th century. He argues about a revival of the Heraclian past in the time before Alexius' rise to the throne, fostered by the Turkish advances in the eastern provinces which called for an imperial figure of comparable stature to reverse the military setbacks (A, pp. 100–110). The eschatological resurgence, however, was mostly influenced by the Norman factor, when the ruler of Southern Italy and Sicily, duke Robert Guiscard (1059–1085), invaded the empire; he presented himself as the messianic emperor who would ultimately conquer Jerusalem after being crowned in Constantinople, in line with prophecies circulating in the Latin West (B, pp. 110–129). To further prove the eschatological competition as well as interconnection between East and West, MAMAGKAKIS concludes the chapter by pointing out the resemblance of Alexius' claim of a semi-divine universal Christ-like emperorship with that of the German emperor Otto III (996–1002) around the millennium (Γ, pp. 129–149).

Passing to Alexius' reign itself in the fourth chapter (ΚΕΦΑΛΑΙΟ 4. Οι εσωτερικοί παράγοντες διαμόρφωσης της εσχατολογικής ιδεολογίας του Αλεξίου Α' Κομνηνού, pp. 151–181), the author discusses the domestic factors that influenced the emperor's eschatological ideology. Alexius' usurpation of power with his troops looting Constantinople and the subsequent deeply unpopular appropriation of ecclesiastical treasures for financing the war effort stigmatized the new regime, which took recourse to the Pseudo-Methodian eschatology for counterbalancing the negative climate (A, pp. 152–157). This was facilitated by the emperor's connection, particularly through his pious and influential mother Anna Dalassena, to monastic circles, always receptive as well as source of political prophecy and invaluable in terms of propaganda (B, pp. 157–174). The eschatologization of ideology was further fueled by the empire's continuous dire straits of "apocalyptic" dimensions in the face of relentless enemy invasions (Γ, pp. 175–181).

In the fifth chapter (ΚΕΦΑΛΑΙΟ 5. Η αυτοκρατορική εσχατολογία κατά τις πρώτες δύο δεκαετίες της βασιλείας του Αλεξίου Α', pp. 183–241) MAMAGKAKIS examines Alexius' imperial eschatology up to the eve of the First Crusade (1095/1096–1099). He initially discusses the first decade of his reign (1081–1091), in the beginning of which the condemnation of the philosopher John Italus took place, whose teachings did not largely align with the traditional views of the church and imperial eschatology. The latter was linked to the emperor's "renovatio imperii" as propagated through

reforms in the state, reminiscent of similar developments in western Europe. To further support his narrative though, Alexius needed a personal military victory, especially after the gloomy winter of 1090–1091 which favored the circulation of pessimistic apocalyptic scenarios; it was at that time that the emperor attempted to involve the westerners in the eastern empire's struggle against the menacing onslaughts of both Pechenegs and Turks, whom he sought to present as eschatological enemies of Christianity (A, pp. 183–208). The much-desired imperial military victory occurred in the spring of 1091, when the Pechenegs were utterly defeated at the battle of Leburnium, a fact that enabled Alexius to proceed with renewed confidence in his “*renovatio imperii*”. This is further evidenced by the redating to the year 1092 of the so called “edict of 1107” concerning the Orthodox clergy (B, pp. 208–219). Finally, MAMAGKAKIS discusses the depiction of the Final Judgement in the throne room of the palace of Blachernae, described by an epigram of Nicholas Callicles, probably created on the occasion of the church synod of 1095 held there, as well as its meaning for Alexius' imperial eschatological propaganda (Γ, pp. 219–241).

In the sixth chapter (ΚΕΦΑΛΑΙΟ 6. Ἀ' Σταυροφορία καὶ μνημειακὴ τέχνη, pp. 243–273) the author takes up the issue of the First Crusade's influence on the emperor's eschatological narrative. The passage of the crusaders through imperial territories boosted the eschatological expectations in the region (A, pp. 243–247) and MAMAGKAKIS associates this with Alexius' battling of heresy, which allowed him to demonstrate his role as defender of the common Christian faith by burning at the stake Basil, the leader of the Bogomils, whose teachings challenged traditional Orthodox beliefs about the Second Coming and the Final Judgement. Thus, the author seems to be implicitly pushing the incident's dating earlier than it has been hitherto assumed (B, pp. 247–252). A crusader influence can be also discerned through the iconography of religious foundations indirectly related to the emperor, such as that of the Virgin Mauriotissa monastery at Castoria, where the Final Judgement is depicted in the narthex; its dating might be disputed, yet common features are shared with the church of Virgin Phorbiotissa or Asinu on Cyprus, whose securely dated iconography in the very beginning of the 12th century addresses the same theme (Γ, pp. 252–273).

In the seventh chapter (ΚΕΦΑΛΑΙΟ 7. Εσχατολογία καὶ μνημειακὴ τέχνη: Μονὴ Δαφνίου, pp. 275–316) MAMAGKAKIS goes on to examine the connotations of the famous Daphnium monastery in Attica, another foundation of the same period dedicated to the Virgin. Its eschatological message is

particularly present in the mosaics of the dome (A, pp. 275–280), a fact that, together with the example of the two religious foundation from Castoria and Cyprus, leads to the conclusion that such iconographic choices emanated from the imperial court and its propaganda (B, pp. 281–288). The strong association of the new Alexian regime with the cult of the Virgin – also underscored by the emphasis placed on the relevant iconography within the monument – is not coincidental (Γ, pp. 288–294), more so given the significant place enjoyed by the pious imperial mother Anna Dalassena, whose symbolic identification with the mother of God corresponded to that of Alexius with Christ (Δ, pp. 294–316).

In the eighth and last chapter (ΚΕΦΑΛΑΙΟ 8. Στοιχεία διαχείρισης της προφητικής παραγωγής, pp. 317–351) the author discusses how Alexius’ regime attempted to exert control over prophecy. While imperial censorship should be considered a given (A, pp. 317–319), the court utilized monastic eschatology as well as astrology for its political ends (B, pp. 319–324), despite the latter’s controversial nature as evidenced by Anna Comnena’s “Alexias” (Γ, pp. 325–334); the emperor was after all associated with well-known experts of astrology (Δ, pp. 335–346). Finally, MAMAGKAKIS provides an example of a prediction made under the regime’s auspices by the Athenian astrologer Catanances (Κατανάγκης) regarding the time of death of Alexius himself, who must have thus sought to forward his propaganda of being the Pseudo-Methodian messianic emperor (E, pp. 346–351).

The monograph concludes with an epilogue (ΕΠΙΛΟΓΟΣ, pp. 353–366), which integrates the author’s main arguments into a coherent narrative; it also argues that Alexius instigated the First Crusade with his own eschatological narrative firmly in mind. It is followed by a short English SUMMARY (pp. 367–368) and an extensive bibliography (pp. 369–443). The book has been properly edited, save very few typographical errors, although in one instance a portion of a footnote has gone lost where a figure is inserted (pp. 133–135).

MAMAGKAKIS’ study adds a fresh perspective to the scholarship about Alexius’ reign, but also beyond that. He proves that eschatology, namely expectations related to the core of the Christian religion, should be taken seriously into consideration when examining imperial politics, both domestic and foreign. Admittedly, this is a difficult task, given that the sources rarely speak explicitly of such controversial matters, except when doing so derisively after certain prophecies had been proven wrong. Such is the only

direct evidence about Alexius' claim to be the prophesied messianic emperor, recounted on the occasion of his death by the chronicler John Zonaras (pp. 162–163). Yet MAMAGKAKIS succeeds in navigating through the sea of indirect references by not only employing literary but also artistic evidence, supported by the necessary figures, nine in total. Even if some of the evidence presented remains open to interpretation, the author has made sure to offer enough so that the overall argument cannot be easily refuted. Ultimately, MAMAGKAKIS' monograph reminds us that in a society such as Rhomania, where mainstream cosmological views were shaped by the Christian faith, history is not open-ended but limited by a teleology. Hence, eschatology should be considered as one of the factors that influenced those in power in their decision-making. One could argue that this is especially the case when the incumbent of the imperial office was a usurper in need of legitimization; perhaps this is why a fair number of prophecies about messianic emperors refer to figures who emerge from obscurity into the global spotlight.²

Keywords

imperial eschatology; Pseudo-Methodius; Last Roman Emperor; Alexius Comnenus; First Crusade

2. Cf. ANDRÁS KRAFT, *The Last Roman Emperor *Topos* in the Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*. *Byzantion* 82 (2012) pp. 245–246, 248 (list: “Mode of appearance”).