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ANDREA CATANZARO, Ordine e sicurezza a Bisanzio. Niceta Coniata narratore (anche) politico? (Storia e politica 36). Pisa: ETS 2025. 268 pp. – ISBN 978-88-467-7331-9

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The attempt to reconstruct the political conceptions underlying Byzantine historiography raises methodological questions of particular significance when the object of inquiry is a work such as Niketas Choniates' Χρονικὴ διήγησις (= *Chron.*), in which reflection on the fortunes of the empire, far from taking the form of a systematic treatise, unfolds through the literary elaboration of events, the portrayal of historical actors, and the investigation of the causes that determine their outcomes. Andrea CATANZARO's volume addresses this set of problems by proposing a reading of Choniates' narrative informed by political science and centred above all on the notions of order and security. The question posed in the subtitle ('Niketas Choniates – A Political Narrator, Too?') aptly signals the perspective adopted: to discern, beyond the account of events, a reflection on the conditions under which power is exercised and on the factors contributing to the progressive weakening of the empire between the reign of John II Komnenos (1118–1143) and the Latin conquest of Constantinople in 1204.

Organised into six chapters, the study opens with a discussion of the relationship between historical writing and authorial intention before examining the forms and limits of Byzantine imperial monarchy, the role of ἦθος in defining the *basileia*, the relationship between imperial authority and the divine sphere, the representation of collective actors and otherness, and, finally, the question of succession to the throne. The argument is held together by the hypothesis that the notion of ἀσφάλεια, closely associated with that of τάξις, provides a particularly fruitful key to understanding Choniates' assessment of the functioning of imperial institutions. From this perspective, 'security' is not confined to protection against external threats: it also encompasses the safeguarding of individuals against the sovereign's arbitrary exercise of power, the stability of social relations, the allocation of prerogatives, and the preservation of political order.

The book's principal merit lies in drawing attention to the political density of a narrative which, while remaining firmly rooted in the conventions of Byzantine historiography, offers numerous occasions for reflection on

the relationships between authority, legitimacy, and responsibility in government. Particularly pertinent, in this respect, are the observations on the vulnerability of a monarchical system to imperial arbitrariness, the importance of trust in relations between rulers and ruled, and the tensions arising from the recruitment of elites and the uncertainty of procedures governing succession. CATANZARO also recognises the multifaceted character of ἀσφάλεια, distinguishing its various manifestations and identifying the disruption of order as one of the recurrent motifs through which Choniates interprets the empire's progressive weakening between 1118 and 1204, with the narrative extending into the years immediately following the Latin conquest of Constantinople.

A question deserving further examination, however, concerns the relationship between these categories and the ways in which they are developed through 'narrative'. In his introductory chapter (pp. 9–23), CATANZARO supplements the methodological tools of the history of political thought – notably QUENTIN SKINNER's reflections on the intentionality of speech acts – with insights from contemporary narrative theory and, above all, the paradigm of *strategic narratives*, developed within political science and international relations by LAWRENCE FREEDMAN and, subsequently, by ALISTER MISKIMMON, BEN O'LOUGHLIN, and LAURA ROSELLE. These references are complemented by scholarship on *master narratives* and on the relationships between narrative, collective representations, and ideology, to which CATANZARO himself has contributed in an earlier study.[1] The author rightly makes clear that he does not intend to suggest either that the Χρονικὴ διήγησις was conceived exclusively as a strategic narrative or that such a purpose was its primary objective (p. 39). Rather, he sees in its pedagogical and prescriptive dimension a further reason to investigate the text from the standpoint of the history of political thought.

This approach is legitimate and potentially fruitful. The issue, therefore, is neither whether political reflection can be discerned in the Χρονικὴ διήγησις

1. Cf. QUENTIN SKINNER, Visions of Politics, I: Regarding Method. Cambridge 2002; H. PORTER ABBOTT, The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative. Cambridge 2002; LAWRENCE FREEDMAN, The Transformation of Strategic Affairs. Abingdon 2006; ALISTER MISKIMMON – BEN O'LOUGHLIN – LAURA ROSELLE, Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order. London 2013; JEFFRY R. HALVERSON – H. L. GOODALL JR. – STEVEN R. CORMAN, Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism. New York 2011; FABRIZIO COTICCHIA – ANDREA CATANZARO, The Fog of Words: Assessing the Problematic Relationship between Strategic Narratives, (Master) Frames and Ideology. Media, War & Conflict 15/4 (2022) pp. 427–449.

nor whether the categories identified by CATANZARO are, in principle, appropriate. It is, rather, the extent to which his examination of the evidence takes account of the specifically *narrative* procedures through which that reflection takes shape. Historical narrative conveys political meanings not only through statements reducible to general principles; it also produces them through the selection and arrangement of events, the attribution of responsibility, the distribution of voices, the characterisation of protagonists, the deployment of literary models, and the construction of causal relationships between episodes separated in time. These procedures are not merely the expressive vehicle of ideas that could otherwise be formulated independently: they help determine the meaning of those ideas. It is, above all here, that the appeal to *strategic narratives* might have found a more systematic application.

A particularly revealing example is provided by the siege of Nicaea by Andronikos I, during which Euphrosyne, the mother of Isaac Angelos, is placed in front of the siege engines in the hope of deterring the city's defenders from attacking them (*Chron.*, X, 3, 2–3, pp. 281–283 VAN DIETEN). CATANZARO reads this account as a particularly eloquent manifestation of the centrality of τάξις, arguing that Choniates condemns an act of such cruelty 'principally, if not exclusively' on account of its subversion of the natural order (pp. 45–46). This interpretation rests on the undoubtedly striking image of an inversion between the human body and the iron intended to protect it: that which ought to provide defence is itself shielded, contrary to the proper order of things, by the defenceless body of a woman.

The formulation concerning τάξις undeniably occupies a significant place in the passage (*Chron.*, X, 3, 3), yet consideration of the narrative sequence as a whole suggests a more complex articulation. The moral condemnation of violence precedes the image of an order turned upside down: in introducing Andronikos' stratagem, Choniates already underscores his inhumanity (X, 3, 2), before observing how anger drives men to every manner of wickedness, without recoiling even from unheard-of acts contrary to human nature. The account, then, describes the skill of the defenders, who succeed in striking the besiegers without injuring Euphrosyne, and culminates in a nocturnal sortie in which the Nicaeans set fire to the siege engines and rescue the woman, thereby frustrating Andronikos' stratagem (X, 3, 3). The initial inversion thus finds a kind of narrative resolution: the ruler's cruelty is thwarted without the defence of the community entailing the sacrifice of an individual.

The episode acquires further complexity through its intertextual elaboration. The precedent supplied by Diodorus Siculus' account of Agathocles' siege of Utica (*Bibliotheca historica*, XX, 54), aptly noted by ANNA PONTANI in her commentary accompanying the Italian translation of Choniates' work, offers a close parallel for the use of prisoners to shield siege engines;[2] the outcome, however, differs, since in Diodorus the defence of the city entails the sacrifice of the hostages. In Choniates' account, by contrast, Euphrosyne's survival assumes decisive importance, while the mythological simile of the Harpies snatching food from Phineus lends the conclusion an ironic tone that serves to diminish the tyrant. The reworking of a narrative motif, recognisable from the ancient tradition, thus renders the historian's particular choices all the more significant.

What emerges is a literary construction in which political judgement arises from the interaction of ethical condemnation, the representation of an inverted order, inherited literary models, and the unfolding of the action. Τάξις is an important element, but not necessarily the exclusive governing principle. The limitation of CATANZARO's reading lies not in identifying a value foreign to the text, but in isolating one conceptual component without fully exploring the implications of the narrative structure through which it acquires its meaning. This question bears directly on an inquiry that seeks to identify a political function in narrative and to examine its possible 'strategic' dimensions.

On a different plane, the relationship between narrative articulation and political interpretation emerges from Choniates' portrayal of relations between the empire and Venice. CATANZARO recalls the commercial privileges granted to the Venetians and the tensions to which they gave rise (p. 69), also mentioning their expulsion from the empire in 1171 in the context of his discussion of Latin otherness (p. 178). Yet the events narrated by Choniates in *Chron.*, VI, 5 (pp. 171–174 VAN DIETEN) reveal an interrelated sequence of economic, administrative, military, and diplomatic developments the significance of which becomes particularly apparent when considered in light of subsequent events. The arrests and confiscations ordered by Manuel I, the appropriation of part of the property by local authorities, Venetian naval reprisals, the ineffectiveness of the Roman naval response, and the formation of an alliance between Venice and the king-

2. Niceta Coniata, Grandezza e catastrofe di Bisanzio (Narrazione cronologica). II: Libri IX-XIV. A cura di ANNA PONTANI. Testo critico di JAN-LOUIS VAN DIETEN. Milan 1999, p. 628, n. 40, with a reference to Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* II, 178–455.

dom of Sicily are not simply episodes in a confrontation between Romans and foreigners. They form part of a process in which an imperial decision intended to reassert control over an economically powerful group produces consequences extending far beyond the original scope of the intervention.

The significance of this sequence becomes especially clear in Book XVI, where Choniates establishes an explicit causal connection between Manuel I's policy towards Venice and the part played by the same in the Fourth Crusade. In *Chron.*, XVI, 21, 3–5 (pp. 537–539 VAN DIETEN), the historian recalls the failure to honour financial obligations incurred by Manuel, subsequent commercial disputes, and the progressive deterioration of relations between Venice and the empire. It is in this context that he introduces Enrico Dandolo, attributing to him a desire for retribution sustained by the memory of injuries inflicted upon the Venetians over several reigns. This recollection proceeds backwards, from the period of the Angeloi to that of Andronikos I and, finally, Manuel I, bringing episodes separated in time into a single chain of responsibility. Choniates thus portrays the doge as an astute political strategist, aware of the risks of an enterprise undertaken by Venice alone and consequently resolved to enlist the support of other enemies of the Romans. Venetian participation in the expedition of 1204 is thereby situated within a *longue durée* perspective, in which the consequences of imperial decisions accumulate and ultimately contribute to the fall of the empire.

Two levels of causal connection can be distinguished here. On the one hand, Choniates retrospectively links the actions of Roman rulers to the progressive deterioration of relations with Venice; on the other, he ascribes to Dandolo himself a selective recollection of past injuries that becomes the basis for political action. The past thus figures not only as an antecedent of subsequent events, but also as the material of a reinterpretation capable of shaping action in the present. A further stage is reached in *Chron.*, XVI, 21, 7 (pp. 539–540), where the presence of the young Alexios, son of Isaac II, provides the expedition's participants with an argument for presenting intervention against Constantinople as the restoration of a legitimate dynastic succession. Choniates, however, exposes the instrumental character of this justification, discerning the political and economic interests that lie behind it. The Χρονικὴ διήγησις thus accounts both for the causes that the historian attributes to the crisis and for the representations through which its protagonists seek to legitimise their own initiatives.

Dandolo acquires a further interpretative function in the account of events following 1204. In XIX, 6, 2–3 (pp. 596–597 VAN DIETEN), Choniates credits him with considerable political judgement in the choice of Baldwin of Flanders as Latin emperor: the preference for a candidate whose lands lay far from Venice, rather than for Boniface of Montferrat, is explained in terms of an anticipation of the risks that a different choice might have posed to Venetian interests. The portrayal turns on the paradox of Dandolo's physical blindness, contrasted with his exceptional powers of political discernment. The historian thus acknowledges foresight and political calculation in a figure whom he subjects to the severest moral condemnation. This characterisation complicates the relationship between ἦθος and the ability to govern: foresight, the calculation of interests, and the capacity to neutralise potential threats may also be possessed by a morally reprehensible figure. It does not follow that Choniates separates political competence from ethical evaluation as a matter of principle; rather, the two cannot be reduced to an automatic correspondence. The narrative stages their coexistence and, at times, the tension between them.

The Venetian case is therefore particularly well suited to testing the application of the *strategic narratives* paradigm. In the textual form in which we read it, events belonging to different reigns are brought together in an explanatory sequence linking imperial decisions, economic interests, collective resentments, and military mobilisation. Above all, the account represents the ways in which historical actors themselves invest the past with meanings that serve their own choices. This does not mean that the causality reconstructed by Choniates can be accepted as an exhaustive historical explanation of the Fourth Crusade. His condemnation of Dandolo markedly shapes the account; moreover, the complex redactional history of the work calls for caution in attributing a single, original compositional intention to all its constituent passages. Nevertheless, in the final post-1204 redaction of the text, the retrospective connection between 1171 and 1204 is explicit and constitutes a historiographical fact in its own right, calling for interpretation. Although CATANZARO refers to some of the relevant passages, particularly in connection with the greed and inadequacies of the Angeloi (pp. 104–105), he does not fully investigate this procedure through which political meaning is constructed.

The need to examine not only the category of 'security' but also the relationships among its constituents is equally evident in the accounts of military campaigns. Manuel I's campaign against the sultanate of Iconium, culminating in the defeat at Myriokephalon, offers an exemplary case (*Chron.*,

VII, 1–2, pp. 175–198 VAN DIETEN). CATANZARO cites the passage in which the emperor's personal safety is attributed to divine protection (VII, 1, 22; pp. 119–120), placing it within his discussion of imperial authority and the intervention of Providence. This interpretation is certainly pertinent, but it addresses only one aspect of a narrative in which Choniates carefully reconstructs the progressive emergence of the conditions that brought about the defeat.

The account of the expedition encompasses Manuel's efforts to strengthen the fortifications along the frontier (*Chron.*, VII, 1, 2 and 5), the difficulties of provisioning and the sultan's attempts to wear down the Roman army and undermine its operational effectiveness (VII, 1, 3–4 and 10), the rejection of peace proposals, and the disregard of advice offered by experienced commanders (VII, 1, 11–12). In the account of the engagement itself, the disposition of the troops, the encumbrance of the siege engines, the configuration of the mountain passes, and environmental conditions all contribute to the explanation of the defeat (VII, 1, 13–17; 23–24). The assessment of the emperor's conduct therefore extends beyond the censure of his moral disposition to encompass the quality of his decisions, his ability to weigh alternatives, and, above all, his capacity to draw appropriate operational conclusions from the information available to him. Particularly significant is the fact that this judgement also takes shape through the explicit identification of alternative courses of action which the narrator presents as possible but which the emperor did not adopt (VII, 1, 11, 13, and 15). The responsibility of command thus emerges not only from the reconstruction of strategic errors, but also from their consequences for the men entrusted to imperial authority.

It is precisely in this connection that particular importance attaches to the interventions attributed to the soldiers, who reproach Manuel for the human and financial cost of his campaigns (VII, 1, 29–30) and challenge his plan to abandon the army in order to save himself (VII, 1, 33). The contrast between the ruler's personal safety and the collective survival of his troops emerges here in terms that cannot be exhausted by the opposition between virtuous government and arbitrariness. Here too, moreover, Choniates introduces a literary framework through an allusion to the biblical figure of David, allowing the reworking of a scriptural model to inform the evaluation both of the soldiers' words and of the emperor's conduct. The conclusion of the episode, with the peace negotiated by the sultan and the obligation to demolish fortresses previously rebuilt by Manuel (VII, 1, 34–42), ultimately lends the narrative a coherent causal structure, in which

territorial initiatives, military decisions, and diplomatic consequences are closely intertwined.

A further illustration of the need to integrate ethical judgement of the ruler with an analysis of the consequences of his decisions is provided by the account of the Vlach-Bulgarian revolt. CATANZARO discusses the greed of the Angeloi and their dissipation of public resources, recognising in these conduct patterns manifestations of an ἦθος incompatible with the proper exercise of imperial authority (pp. 104–105). He does not, however, discuss a particularly instructive episode in which Choniates develops such moral censure into a complex explanation of the empire's political and territorial crisis. In *Chron.*, XII, 6, 1–3 (pp. 368–369 VAN DIETEN), the historian attributes to Isaac II's parsimony the decision to obtain, without payment, the goods required for the celebration of his marriage to the daughter of the king of Hungary, thereby provoking resentment among the inhabitants of the region of Anchialos. The account, however, goes beyond the denunciation of imperial greed: the requisitions and abuses, which Choniates presents as the pretext (πρόφασις) for the revolt, become entangled with the demands of Peter and Asen, the rejection of their requests, and the humiliation inflicted upon the latter. Isaac's subsequent failure to consolidate his military successes by occupying the fortresses also enables the rebels to regroup and secure new allies, transforming an initially localised crisis into an enduring threat to the empire's territorial security (XII, 8, 4–9, 1, pp. 372–374 VAN DIETEN). The sequence thus shows how Choniates constructs the ruler's political responsibility not only through the portrayal of his ἦθος, but also by tracing the causal relationships between economic decisions, social discontent, the handling of local demands, and military consequences. For an interpretation attentive to the political work performed by narrative, the significance of the episode lies in the transformation of an economic and administrative decision into a crisis of political allegiance and territorial control. The judgement of the imperial ἦθος does not provide a self-sufficient explanation here; rather, it acquires substance through the portrayal of the consequences of the ruler's choices.

A further dimension of the problem of security emerges from the representation of relations between imperial authority and the populations subject to its rule. In the chapter devoted to otherness, CATANZARO recognises the complexity of relations between Romans and Muslims and the tensions between the principle of imperial superiority and the demands of diplomatic practice, yet tends to interpret the issue primarily in terms of τάξις, conceived as a hierarchical order in which the Romans occupy a pre-eminent

position (pp. 185–199, especially 196–199). A different perspective, however, is offered by the episode involving Alexios III and Sultan Kaykhusraw (*Chron.*, XV, 15, 1–6, pp. 493–496 VAN DIETEN), in which security assumes a dimension directly bearing upon the living conditions of subjects, and their very sense of political belonging. Following a diplomatic dispute, the emperor orders the arrest of Roman and Turkish merchants arriving from Iconium and the confiscation of their properties, provoking a military response from the sultan (XV, 15, 1–2). Having taken numerous Romans prisoner, the sultan organises their transfer and provides for their subsistence; he subsequently assigns them land to cultivate, promising a temporary exemption from taxation and, in the years thereafter, moderate levies not subject to the arbitrary increases practised among the Romans (XV, 15, 4–5). News of these measures even induces other imperial subjects, who had not been taken captive, to move voluntarily into the sultan's territories.

The narrative construction here is particularly revealing. Without diminishing the foreign ruler's responsibility for the violence of the campaign, Choniates contrasts the Roman emperor's arbitrary conduct with the solicitude subsequently shown by Kaykhusraw towards his prisoners, making the treatment of subjects an implicit criterion for assessing the effectiveness of government. The paradox acquires its full force in the historian's concluding reflection, in which he attributes the willingness of entire Greek communities to leave their homeland and settle in foreign territory to the spread of lawlessness and recurring forms of oppression (XV, 15, 6). The representation of otherness thus assumes a function that transcends the opposition between 'Romans' and 'barbarians': the foreign ruler becomes a point of comparison through which the shortcomings of imperial authority are exposed. This does not necessarily entail a challenge to the political and religious primacy of the Romans; what emerges, rather, is a pronounced tension between the preservation of imperial order and the capacity to provide subjects with conditions of life sufficiently stable and favourable to sustain their allegiance. From this perspective, security appears not merely as the product of adherence to a pre-established hierarchical order, but also as the outcome of the concrete exercise of power, the protection of persons, and a degree of predictability in the obligations imposed upon populations. In *Chron.*, XV, 15, 6, moreover, the Gospel allusion to the cooling of love as lawlessness (ἀνομία) increases (Matthew 24:12) places the denunciation of abuses within an ethical and religious framework: moral criticism is thus not opposed to political explanation, but constitutes one of its components.

It is precisely this dimension, which connects a ruler's ἦθος with his capacity to provide protection and retain the allegiance of the governed, that might have received greater attention in CATANZARO's analysis.

These observations do not, however, justify attributing to CATANZARO any fundamental indifference towards the plurality of causes underlying the empire's crisis during the period in question. He recognises the complexity of the conditions of instability, considers the relationships between the aristocracy and imperial power, and explicitly cites Choniates' denunciation of those members of the Komnenian family who, in aspiring to the throne, sought the support of foreign powers hostile to the Romans (*Chron.*, XVI, 13, 4, p. 529 VAN DIETEN; CATANZARO, pp. 63–64). Here the connection between dynastic competition, external intervention, and the compromising of imperial security is clearly identified. Similarly, the breakdown of bonds of trust under Andronikos I is convincingly interpreted as a process through which violence against individuals could become a destabilising force for the community as a whole.

The difficulty lies, rather, in the tendency to subsume a plurality of processes under a predominantly normative interpretative framework, in which the notions of ἦθος and τάξις sometimes come to serve a more univocal explanatory function than the complexity of the individual narratives would deserve. Yet the very centrality accorded to ἦθος invites us to ask how the narrator constructs its political significance through the effects of decisions, conflicts of interest, and the alternatives available to historical actors. The point, therefore, is not to set an economic, military, or administrative explanation against the moral assessment of government; it is to reconstruct the connections Choniates establishes among the exercise of coercive power, the reliability of institutions, military capability, the availability of resources, diplomatic relations, and the protection of persons and property. This is not to demand from the book a general history of the empire's structures in the twelfth century, but to recognise in the portrayal of their interactions a constitutive dimension of the historian's political reflection.

A distinct, though related, question concerns the philological scrutiny of the categories employed. The occurrence of ἀσφάλεια and its derivatives does not in itself entail identity of meaning across different narrative contexts. The vocabulary of security may refer to personal safety, the defence of a military position, the presumed reliability of a decision, or the condition of a political community. Conversely, some of the most revealing passages for understanding the factors that rendered the empire vulnerable do not em-

ploy this vocabulary at all. A closer examination of contextual usage, considered alongside the vocabulary of danger, fear, salvation, and sedition, would have allowed a more precise assessment of the semantic coherence of the categories underlying the volume's interpretation. The aim is not to confine the inquiry to lexical occurrences alone, but to avoid presupposing a semantic range precisely where that range ought to be demonstrated.

The relationship between conceptual analysis and narrative construction is, ultimately, the most fertile problem raised by the book. The Χρονικὴ διήγησις offers material of exceptional interest for reconstructing Choniates' political conceptions, but this material cannot be separated without consequence from the historiographical form that organises it. The political significance of his judgements resides not only in the principles they seem to articulate; it emerges also through the distribution of voices, the contradictions embodied by the protagonists, the relationships between events distant in time, and the retrospective elaboration of the catastrophe. The history of ideas and literary analysis are therefore not merely complementary approaches in principle, but inseparable aspects of the same exegetical undertaking.

CATANZARO's volume deserves credit for having brought the political dimension of the Χρονικὴ διήγησις back to the centre of discussion, identifying in the notions of τάξις and ἀσφάλεια two categories capable of lending coherence to a reflection that Choniates never presents systematically. His reading is particularly productive in its examination of imperial arbitrariness, the erosion of bonds of trust, and the tensions permeating the structures of power. It is less persuasive where the search for normative principles takes precedence over an investigation of the procedures through which the historian constructs the political meaning of events in *narrative* form. The passages examined show how the assessment of individual responsibility develops through the representation of decisions, alternatives, and consequences, within causal sequences that may extend beyond the limits of a single reign. Similarly, security is not exhausted by the preservation of hierarchical order; it also involves the government's capacity to ensure protection, stability, and conditions conducive to the continuity of the political community. These dimensions are not opposed to judgements concerning ἦθος or to reflection on τάξις; rather, they constitute the concrete terrain on which both are elaborated through narrative. Their interdependence could have provided an especially appropriate and productive field for applying the paradigm of strategic narratives. The significance of CATANZARO's study thus lies also in the interpretative possibilities it opens

up, which a closer engagement with the literary and causal articulation of Choniates' narrative would allow us to develop further.

Keywords

Byzantine historiography; narratology; strategic narrative