

MAXIMILIAN LAU, *John II Komnenos: Rebuilding New Rome 1118–1143*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2023. xviii, 382 pp. – ISBN 978-01-9888-867-3

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MAXIMILIAN LAU’s monograph reconstructs the political and military history of the reign of Eastern Roman Emperor John II Komnenos (1118–1143). A student of PAUL MAGDALINO, LAU is an internationally renowned specialist in twelfth-century Byzantine history. His book is a reworking of his doctoral dissertation defended at the University of Oxford in 2016. Although he completed the manuscript years earlier, the pandemic and consequent logistical problems delayed its publication. This review first summarizes the chapters and then offers remarks on the book’s overall argument.

The Introduction surveys the existing literature and clearly situates the author’s contribution as a long-awaited monograph on John II Komnenos, addressing a lacuna noted in the introduction to a recent edited volume on the emperor.¹ LAU’s reference to FERDINAND CHALANDON is commendable, as few Komnenos scholars use his *opus magnum* these days (p. 2). The author recommends reading Niketas Choniates’s *Historia* as historical fiction rather than pure historiography (p. 11), and praises John Kinnamos’s more critical approach to John II (p. 12). Rhetoric and panegyrics are shown to be ways out of the ‘shackles’ of grand narratives.

The book consists of eleven chapters. Chapter 1 is dedicated to the network of intellectuals who created, spread and amplified imperial propaganda both in Constantinople and in the provinces, especially Theodore Prodromos, Nikephoros Basilakes, John Italikos and the *Muses* (pp. 16–20); as well as other sources, such as law and theological commentary, seals and coins. Non-Byzantine sources include Syriac, Arabic, and Latin texts, some used in translation. Archaeological sources also receive attention, particularly the similarities between towers of different fortifications of Lopadion. The section is complemented with maps: a commendable choice, which helps the reader familiarize with the landscape prior to delving into John’s expeditions (pp. 37–38).

1. ALESSANDRA BUCCOSI – ALEX RODRIGUEZ SUAREZ (eds.), *John II Komnenos, Emperor of Byzantium: In the Shadow of Father and Son*. London 2016.

The second chapter describes John's childhood and adolescence, highlighting the significance of the formative, and certainly traumatic, years of the First Crusade in the life of the young prince (pp. 45–47). Noting the connection between Theotokos, the future emperor, and his wife Eirene-Piroska (p. 45), LAU takes the middle ground in the long-standing debate about Anna Komnene's role in the power struggle after the death of Alexios I. Instead, he focuses on the complex relations between John II and his mother Anna Dalassene (pp. 50–51, 63). The prosopographical study of John's supporters in the wake of Alexios's death demonstrates the importance of the general and clerics in the Komnenian succession (pp. 51–58). The author's proposition regarding the possibility of joint reign or a triumvirate of John, Nikephoros Bryennios, and Anna Komnene certainly merits further consideration (p. 60).

LAU begins the third chapter with the description of the Byzantine space around 1119, which owes much to previous works by OBOLENSKY and MAGDALINO (pp. 79–89). The discussion of the political and geographical consequences of John's marriage contains a great deal of new information, while the description of John II's first mobilisation against the Turks in the East is a convenient summary of narrative sources (pp. 90–95), with a special focus on the Byzantine re-capture of Korakesion/Kalanoros/Alanya. The fourth chapter presents a detailed account of the Pecheneg campaign of 1122. While the consideration of the Byzantine landscape is wanted in this section, the welcome inclusion of Norse sources (p. 107) does allow LAU to complement the accounts of Choniates and Kinnamos with valuable information. Further, the subsequent comprehensive reconstruction of the anti-Cuman alliance (pp. 110–115) is an excellent example of writing the global history of the twelfth century.

In the same vein, Chapter 5 gives a detailed account of the year when the 'Three Fugitive Princes' arrived in Constantinople in rapid succession and John II had to attend to their needs (pp. 120–130). The narrative intensifies in Chapter 6, dedicated to Dalmatia and Serbia. Subtitles like "Fire and Sword" on the Danube' evoke the tone of historical novels, while the stratigraphy of Belgrade and other cities place the situation on the ground against the dramatic backdrop of the Byzantine-Hungarian conflict (pp. 143–145). John II's peace settlement is examined in detail to reveal the cornerstones of Manuel I's politics in the Balkans (pp. 155–156). LAU's reconstruction of the Byzantine network of fortresses in southern Serbia is an important contribution to our understanding of the Komnenoi's deployment of the landscape (pp. 160–165). His suggestion that John II's propa-

ganda emerged as a device to keep the population of Constantinople loyal to the emperor is well founded (p. 175). In this vein, deciphering Prodrinos's Gangra poem allows the author to dwell upon the figure of the Seljuk princess who surrendered the city to John II (pp. 190–195).

Chapter 8 focuses on the expedition to Syria, and begins with the detailed analysis of diplomatic alliances that John II created to support his military campaigns (pp. 194–197). The field material presented inserts the well-documented sieges into the landscape of Cilicia, which complements the sources in various languages on this particular campaign (pp. 210–215). The discussion of John's religious politics in the newly-conquered lands provides a generous insight into the complexity of the views that the authors of sources in Greek, Latin, Syriac, and Armenian held regarding the matter (pp. 216–220). Further, the chapter includes a description of the 'autumn war' and the peace settlement between John II and Raimund of Antioch (pp. 222–230), as well as the most documented event in the long reign of John II: the 1138 siege of Shaizar. The latter is reconstructed through keen attention to detail and a firm grasp of the siege as a theme in contemporary Byzantine rhetoric (pp. 235–240).

Dedicated to John II's last campaigns, Chapter 9 clearly demonstrates how the highly personalized Komnenian regime rendered the emperor's presence indispensable for mounting an effective response to the increasing number of threats (pp. 246–250). The term 'stabilization' is particularly apt in the context of Anatolia, since it more accurately captures the actions of the emperor than the conventionally employed concept of 'reconquest' (p. 248). LAU's analysis of the failed campaign in Neokaisareia benefits considerably from the material gathered on site (pp. 252–256). The connection drawn between John II's last major campaign at Lake Pousgousa and the possible plans for the capture of Ikonion is compelling, especially in light of the considerable support identified in the sources (p. 260). The description of John II's death and its role in the origins of the Second Crusade is particularly important, as general histories tend to overlook the contribution of Komnenian emperors to the balance of power in the Eastern Mediterranean (p. 270). The next chapter's discussion of the Komnenian fortifications in Asia and the Balkans (pp. 270–290) stands out as one of the strongest parts of the book, offering observations that have been largely absent in the field since the publications of CLIVE FOSS and DAVID WINFIELD some fifty years ago. The 'network of fortifications' concept (p. 285) helps integrate the analysis and frame it on a global scale. The discussion of the Komnenian army as one in which individual troops were deployable in multiple

ways, stands in contrast to earlier interpretations of MARK C. BARTUSIS and JOHN W. BIRKENMEYER (pp. 299–305).

In Chapter 11, LAU concludes his analysis with the assessment of the data regarding John II's church politics (p. 331). The observations on the emperor's participation in the pan-Christian movement for the 'recodification' of canon law are particularly interesting and insightful (p. 314), and the dialogue between Eastern Orthodox and Latin intellectuals points to the possibility of compromise between the churches in the period between the First and the Second Crusades (pp. 319–320). A brief detour into the possible, albeit limited, Byzantine influence on Benedictine monasticism (p. 326) contributes to the book's conclusion, which culminates in a discussion of the potential 'symphony' between church and state under John II (pp. 328–329) and closes with the powerful image of John as an emperor of the Christian *oikoumene* (p. 331).

The work has many strong points. It is indeed 'the first English-language study of John and his era' and the first in-depth examination of the complexity of John II's reign. The author demonstrates that John II cannot be reduced to a merely military ruler, and argues that his operations in Anatolia and further east can be properly understood 'only once his campaigning has been presented in its entirety' (p. 170). LAU's deep familiarity with poems and panegyrics enables him to reconstruct the sophisticated (and carefully crafted) literary universe centred on John II Komnenos, and shows convincingly that Manuel I Komnenos's empire did not emerge *ex nihilo* but was grounded in the actions of his father both in the field and at court. Focusing on John Zonaras as the principal source for the twelfth century adroitly sidesteps the tendency to cast Anna Komnene as either 'good' or 'bad', a pattern that has been particularly prominent in recent scholarship.² The analysis of some episodes in the *Deeds of John and Manuel Komnenos* convincingly demonstrates the critical stance that Kinnamos adopts towards John II (pp. 150–151). The discussion of the treatment of past events by Choniates and Kinnamos is of particular importance for a broader understanding of Komnenian historiography. To fill the gaps in the biased Byzantine narratives, the author draws on an unusually wide range of sources in other languages, including Norse sagas, Hungarian chronicles and Syriac grand narratives, using them to illuminate moments in Byzantine history

2. LEONORA NEVILLE, *Anna Komnene: Life and Work of a Mediaeval Historian*. Oxford 2016, pp. 150–174; SAMUEL P. MÜLLER, *Latins in Roman (Byzantine) Histories: Ambivalent Representations in the Long Twelfth Century*. London 2021, pp. 46–49.

at which both Kinnamos and Choniates fall silent. At a time when Byzantine Studies are increasingly confined to Greek material, this represents a notable methodological strength.

LAU uncovers an important connection between the emperor's ideology and his actions in various landscapes across the Eastern Mediterranean. The chapter on the Byzantine landscape under John II's reign is likely to become standard reading in graduate courses. The maps and photographs, integrated within the text rather than placed at the end, contribute to a clearer understanding of the complexity of Byzantine spatial strategy. LAU's extensive familiarity with the terrain, acquired during years of field trips, helps to insert a vivid image of the emperor into the physical landscape. Parts of this seminal monograph, especially Chapter 6, effectively function as a professional guide to Byzantine landscapes in the Balkans, especially Southern Serbia and Novi Pazar. Discussing rivers and waterways as a means of communication and propaganda (p. 154) places LAU's work alongside recent scholarship by FINGAROVA and KÜLZER.³ In sum, this unique and much-needed book is a rare achievement, in which the author succeeds in crafting a truly global and interconnected account of Byzantine history.

At the same time, the monograph is not without its omissions and shortcomings. The most notable omission is John II's wife. Eirene-Piroska is no mere footnote and would clearly warrant sustained discussion in a monograph devoted to her husband; yet, despite John II regarding her as a full partner in his rule, her name is not included in the index (pp. 378–380). The same holds true for John II's many family relations which are scattered throughout the text. As the Komnenian family proper effectively constituted the backbone of the empire, these relations could usefully be brought together in a dedicated chapter to lend greater balance to the book. The repeated claim that Kinnamos presents John 'as a poor predecessor to Manuel' (p. 145) would benefit from a more robust argument, perhaps in a separate article. Kinnamos does depict John as a predecessor to Manuel, but whether he evaluates his actions in wholly negative terms remains an open question. It is not immediately clear why LAU regards the *Muses* as the manifesto of John's reign. This problem is not confined to this anonymous and partially preserved text, but extends to some others too; for example, Skylitzes's chronicle was probably written with Alexios I Komnenos in mind,

3. GALINA FINGAROVA – ANDREAS KÜLZER (eds.), *Territories and Boundaries: Crossing River in Byzantium and Beyond*. Turnhout 2026.

but whether it was written for or commissioned by Alexios is hard to tell. Similarly, the *Muses*, an anonymous poem on Byzantine politics written after the death of Alexios Komnenos is clearly connected to the Komnenoi, but its incompleteness calls for caution (p. 46), while the surviving version of the *Danishmendnameh* is a product of later periods, notably the Seljuk Sultanate of Rum and the Ottoman era. While LAU does handle the sources with care, an explicit note of caution would benefit the reader. There are other minor sources missing from the bibliography: an alphabetical poem written by Stephen Physopalamites almost certainly addresses Alexios Porphyrogennetos, one of the prominent characters in this monograph. Sources in other languages could be exploited more fully, particularly the Arabic narratives: while some, especially Ibn al-Athir, are used, their potential is not fully realized.

Certain details are lacking in the maps. The Map 2 in Chapter 3, for example, could be improved by including Sinop in Paphlagonia, Khersonesos and Kerch' in Crimea (both well attested in the twelfth-century), as well as Nicomedia and Neokaisariea in Asia Minor. The romantic, if not openly colonial, concept of 'nomadic tribes' could be replaced with terms such as 'kin-groups' or 'house societies', both of which more accurately reflect key aspects of Steppe identity than 'tribe'.⁴ In the same vein, using the term 'horde' (p. 105) for the Pechenegs and the Cumans is problematic. While the word *ordu* did exist in eleventh-century Turkic, the dictionary of Mahmud al-Kashgari, for example, implies the presence of some central command, as is preserved in the modern Turkish word *ordu*, 'army'.⁵ Since the term now carries both later historical connotations such as the Golden Horde, and modern associations, primarily with the orcs from the Warcraft universe, it creates a misleading impression of a united nomadic superpower attacking Byzantium from the West. As LAU argues, no unified agency was at work here; rather, Byzantine sources portray the invaders as a multi-headed hydra (p. 104). Viewing Paristrion as a 'reservation for nomads' projects a modern, even colonial, hierarchy of peoples onto the

4. For the discussion of the possibility of using terms 'tribe' and 'kin' see DAVID SNEATH, *The Headless State: Aristocratic Orders, Kinship Society, and Misrepresentations of Nomadic Inner Asia*. New York 2007. For a critical appraisal of the modern assumptions underpinning SNEATH's approach, see PETER B. GOLDEN, *Review of David Sneath, The Headless State*. *Journal of Asian Studies* 68 (2009) pp. 293–296. I am grateful to NICHOLAS MATHEOU for drawing my attention to this discussion.

5. Mahmud Kasghari, *Dīwān Lughāt al-Turk* [Compendium of the Turkish language], trans. ROBERT DANKOFF – JAMES KELLY. Cambridge MA 1982, p. 148.

twelfth-century Mediterranean, where such a framework did not exist (p. 114). In 1123, John II Komnenos did not push for the re-absorption of the sultanate of Ikonion: the 1122 campaign, which resulted in the capture of several important forts and fortlets, was significant in the early part of his reign, but it can hardly be seen as aimed at bringing the sultanate under his control (p. 116). LAU's estimate of the size of John's garrisons would benefit from a broader range of comparanda than the chronicle of John Kantakouzenos (fl. 1292–1321) which, in this context, seems insufficient (p. 293). Lastly, the book would benefit from consulting Turkish historiography: the works of Turkish historians, in both English and Turkish, are largely absent from the footnotes and bibliography.⁶

Minor errors are attributable to the sheer scale of the work. The capture of Ras could hardly lure prince Juraj (Đorđe) 'out of the woods and the mountains in the open', because the small chain of valleys that was home to the city of Ras is, in fact, surrounded by mountains and forests on all sides (p. 152). The city of Viminacium is not situated 'in the midst of modern farmland' but forms a part of the post-industrial landscape of the Danube valley (p. 159). The 'sultanate' of Mohammed, son of Amir Ghazi, is something of a misnomer, because the Danishmendids were *amirs*, not sultans (p. 225), and Mohammed himself was referred to as *malik*. Place-names would be easier to deal with if accompanied by their present-day Turkish/Serbian/Greek forms, as this would allow for easier navigation on maps. The inclusion of modern place-names is inconsistent, which can be disorienting even within a single page.

6. Relevant works are too many to list; one obvious example is SONGÜL MECIT, *The Rum Seljuqs: Evolution of a Dynasty*. New York 2013.

John II Komnenos: Rebuilding New Rome is a major contribution to the history of the twelfth-century Mediterranean. It is a monograph that lays a foundation for future research on the reign of John II and deepens our understanding of politics and culture of the Eastern Roman Empire in the period between Alexios I Komnenos and Manuel I Komnenos. It offers a solid research foundation that can support a wide range of fields, from numismatics to discourse analysis, and from ethnography to regional scholarship, spanning the vast expanse from the Balkans and Asia Minor. Scholarship rarely displays such breadth and versatility, and I am confident that MAXIMILIAN LAU's landmark monograph will become the basis for many further studies and receive the lasting attention it deserves.

Keywords

middle Byzantine history; Comnenian dynasty; Byzantine-Turk relations