

NUMA BUCHS, *Le Règne de Constantin IX Monomaque : gouverner et défendre l'empire byzantin au milieu du XI^e siècle* (Dossiers byzantins 22). Paris : Centre d'études byzantines, néo-helléniques et sud-est européennes 2024. 349 pp. – ISBN 1094824085 (erroné)

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There is something satisfying in the Psellian narrative of the eleventh century. For centuries it remained popular with readers, being both lively and humane. Because the *Chronographia* is endlessly playful, bringing to life historical agents, who are given three-dimensional portraits, it has attracted historians seeking a sneak peek to a complicated era. And yet, Psellos' richly textured narrative flattens time, compresses the arc of history, and distills complex historical questions into personalized answers. The richness of his portraits, his ability to ascribe psychological motivations to his cooking, dice-playing, and womanizing historical agents, appeals to the modern reader of the psychoanalytical age and traps them in a world of primal instincts, base concerns, and human weakness, where complex mechanics of power, age-old social and cultural networks, symbolic systems, and discursive spaces recede before the personal. By placing emphasis on the reign of Konstantinos Monomachos and not on the emperor himself, NUMA BUCHS embarks on a critical rebalancing of our eleventh-century narrative. His reading of the period's source material and of Psellos in particular (ch. 1, pp. 27–51; ch. 2 more broadly, and all over) is therefore an act of unfolding. It is an intertextual exercise where setting one source next to the other, offering timelines, working on prosopography and situating agents and action in space and place, while tackling modern historiographical bugbears, frees the reader from the thrall of Psellos to reveal purposeful action and complex social, political, and cultural dynamics.

Over the past twenty years the reign of Konstantinos IX Monomachos has drawn the attention of scholars who built on earlier attempts at revaluation¹ to offer more or less positive takes on the emperor and his governance in

1. PAUL LEMERLE, *Cinq études sur le XI^e siècle byzantin*. Paris 1977; MICHAEL ANGOLD, *The Byzantine Empire, 1025–1204: A Political History*. New York 1984.

both monograph format² and in shorter, if influential treatments.³ NUMA BUCHS' monograph, published in 2024 (before he was apparently able to engage with KALDELLIS' summary account of Monomachos' time in *The New Roman Empire*), represents a milestone in the study of this emperor, the state apparatus he led and shaped, and the society he sought to protect. It is also a milestone in the study of the Roman polity in the eleventh century and establishes a new standard for sensitive, meticulous, and multifaceted historiographical work. I want to linger for a moment on the 'multifaceted' nature of the work. The eleventh century poses significant challenges to Byzantinists. While historical works, oratory, poetry, letter-writing, hagiography, sigillography, numismatics, and archaeology must all be part of any comprehensive treatment of the time, entire regions from the Caucasus and Mesopotamia to the Balkans and Italy, which for distinct reasons nurture quasi-independent fields of enquiry on the outer edges of Byzantine Studies, also become in the eleventh century integral parts of any attempt at producing a meaningful narrative of the time. BUCHS successfully tackles this challenge to produce an effective and concise synthesis and yet, while all this is true, his book is also tough to review if only because it does so much. As a result, this review, will necessarily remain but a partial exercise. BUCHS' study is built around nine chapters – a nod, perhaps, to Konstantinos IX's place among imperial Konstantinoi, an introduction and conclusion. The author moves sequentially from questions of sources, in the introduction, to the problem of Monomachos' vilification in the available written materials, what he terms the 'legende noir' (ch. 1). He then proceeds to a critical analysis of that very source material, placing each critique in context and assessing its validity (ch. 2). What follows is a blended thematic and chronological progression that tackles in serial fashion the question of an emperor's rise to the throne in the eleventh century (ch. 3), the symbolic elements of power (ch. 4), the Petcheneg wars (ch. 5), Monomachos' rapport with the Latins (ch. 6), familial politics and imperial servants (ch. 7), the pillars of power, specifically the worlds of the military aristocracy and the Constantinopolitan officialdom (ch. 8), and the question of the opening of the senate in the ninth chapter.

Within this framework, detailed source analysis work is paired to construc-

2. ST. CHONDRIDOU, *Ο Κωνσταντίνος Θ' Μονομάχος και η εποχή του: 11^{ος} αιώνας μ.Χ.* Athens 2002.

3. ANTHONY KALDELLIS, *Streams of Gold, Rivers of Blood: The Rise and Fall of Byzantium, 955 A.D. to the First Crusade*. New York 2017; IDEM, *The New Roman Empire: A History of Byzantium*. New York 2023, pp. 588–617.

tive engagement with fundamental questions in the historiography of the eleventh century. Here BUCHS recognizes that Monomachos is nodal in conversations about all manner of disciplinary concerns, ranging from finances, civil vs military relations and governance, to gender, aristocratization, the place of mercenaries and foreigners in society, and the rising influence of urban and specifically Constantinopolitan mercantile strata. In seeking to weave source analysis and critique, BUCHS resorts to a certain degree of repetition, as the same questions reemerge from chapter to chapter. Thus, to use but one example, BUCHS' source critique on the question of Monomachos' Petcheneg wars and the question of fiscal policy as it pertained to the funding of armies, emerges in ch. 2 (pp. 67–70), where he emphasizes Konstantinos' committed support of the army during those wars and his recruitment of new armies, on the occasion of military reversals. It then reemerges in ch. 5, where a dedicated analysis lends heft to the more summary claims in ch. 2. While such repetition might appear redundant at first glance, this is nevertheless no failure in structure and writing. BUCHS' progression through evidence, time, and themes cumulatively reinforces his casting of Monomachos' reign as both historiographical and historical conundrum. This is effective overall. It does not, however, avoid a degree of chronological whiplash. This is evident in ch. 3, on the rise of an emperor in the eleventh century, which follows a detailed discussion of questions relating to Monomachos' role as a leader of soldiers and reformer of the empire's defenses, a subject clearly posterior to the emperor's rise to the throne.

In his *consilia et narrationes* Kekaumenos paints a portrait of the Roman emperor isolated in the palace and fed information about the provinces from eunuchs, courtiers, and bureaucrats. An ideal organic relationship between emperor on the one hand and provincial society, both civilian and military, on the other, is implicit in this reading of imperial power. Such casting of the imperial figure as distant and isolated, an update to Luidprand's distant Leon VI, who subjects only knew through processions,⁴ casts Constantinopolitan officials as barriers separating emperor from his people. Kekaumenos' take, however, occludes much productive work that such officials offered the leader of the Romans by translating the reality of the provinces into actionable information. By carefully walking the reader through the prosopography of Monomachos' officialdom, but also by tracing the ac-

4. PAOLO SQUATRITI (tr.), *The Complete Works of Liudprand of Cremona*. Washington DC 2007, p. 51.

tual politics and results on the ground, BUCHS restores imperial agency, while carefully taking stock of the interests and influence of officialdom. Doing so, he posits imperial power, as embodied in Monomachos, as active, purposeful, and motivated by far more than a desire to sit on a throne and hold the reins. The image that emerges from his account is of an individual who is fully engaged in all dimensions of politics, seeking to balance the conflicting interests of different classes of officials (military, civilian, clerical) and major social players (provincial and Constantinopolitan notables, merchants, the people of the city and the provincial populations), in order to, on the one hand, ensure his hold on to power and, on the other, deliver for the *populus romanus*.

Far from the detached aesthete of the accounts by the historians of the time, a man focused on women, large-scale gardening projects, and exotic animals, Monomachos emerges in BUCHS' account as an adept handler of people and factions; an individual balancing personal interest and the public good, in fiercely competitive political and radically shifting global scenes (pp. 83–84 on what BUCHS describes as a brutal geostrategic shift, as challenging as anything the Roman polity had faced since Herakleios). Here Psellos' most lurid accusation, notably, Monomachos' lust, pleasure seeking, and his distraction from governance, is set into proper context, through careful analysis of the biographies and backgrounds of the purported causes of such distraction. Maria Skleraina and the Alan princess emerge as willful agents on the eleventh-century social and international chessboard. In courting them and by remaining profoundly loyal for the duration of his relationships with them, Monomachos weds politics to the imperial bedchamber, securing in the process the allegiance of an important aristocratic clan and a core Roman ally in the Caucasus (p. 61 on gifts to the Alan princess as diplomacy; pp. 72–81 on a critical account of Monomachos' love affairs).

In ch. 5, BUCHS offers a detailed account of the Petcheneg wars of the late 1040s and early 1050s, a set of events that brought the Roman polity face to face with large scale population movements that impacted both its territories in the Balkans and state finances. His analysis is built on carefully assembled evidence from different accounts by Roman historians and other writers of the time. His presentation is lucid and outlines both challenges faced by the Roman administrations and questions emerging from the sources, while tackling all manner of ancillary topics, ranging from the status of the Paristrion, the operation of Byzantine forces, the cost itself of the wars, and Monomachos' knack for adaptation and reform of the appa-

ratus at his disposal. In this otherwise strong chapter, one might say that an opportunity is missed by not providing a set of maps, which would help the reader more easily follow the events described. A similar omission may be noted in ch. 4 where the rich and detailed analysis of Monomachos' communicative policies, as instantiated in both material culture (numismatics, seals, art) and text, would have truly benefited from plates with images of the objects and spaces discussed.

In discussing Byzantium's eastern front, BUCHS notes that while Monomachos' reign is one when the Roman polity still expands, such expansion usually aims to better adjust the polity's defensive position rather than simply court martial glory (p. 88 on buffer states; p. 106 on defensive border adjustments). This peculiar status of Monomachos' reign as both last hurrah of Roman imperialism and perceived beginning of the polity's decline is doubly interesting. ANTHONY KALDELLIS has outlined a significant development that may be followed in the history of the ninth, tenth, and early eleventh centuries.⁵ In the course of roughly 150 years, Byzantium expanded dramatically, subjecting to its rule territories containing significant populations of foreign peoples. The implications of this reality had not been adequately engaged with by scholarship before the recent turn towards a reading of Byzantium as a Roman proto-nation-state.⁶ KALDELLIS delves in it, as he rightly sees here a transformation driven by the imperial turn of the Middle Byzantine polity. BUCHS' note of Psellos' hostility towards Kagenes, the Petcheneg leader who had successfully entered the Roman court, gaining titles and offices in Monomachos' administration, must be read in this context (p. 54 on Kekaumenos and foreigners; p. 301 on Psellos and the barbarians). The same may be said about the xenophobic writings of Kekaumenos on the matter of office and rank granted to foreigners (pp. 54–55). In his discussion of these reactions to outsiders, BUCHS charts an existing reality in mid-eleventh-century court dynamics, as title and office become instruments of integration in a polity that was increasingly ethnically diverse. That BUCHS chose not to connect the matter with the wider questions raised by KALDELLIS' analysis is a rare missed opportunity in an otherwise excellent work.

In ch. 7, dedicated to the palace eunuchs, their place in the armies, and to the imperial persons (*anthropoi*), BUCHS opens a conversation whose core

5. KALDELLIS, *Streams of Gold, Rivers of Blood*, pp. 196–232 on the question of empire; pp. 233–268 for the apogee of empire.

6. ANTHONY KALDELLIS, *Romanland: Ethnicity and Empire in Byzantium*. Cambridge MA – London 2019.

conclusions will not be clear until the end of the book, after the aristocracy and the opening of the senate are discussed in chapters 7 and 9. This is ultimately a discussion on Byzantine politics and on social dynamics in the eleventh century. As revealed in the titles of the chapters in question, this takes the form of distinct historiographical questions, yet ultimately they all lead to the central concern: how was the Roman world ruled? What was the nature of politics, and what does Monomachos' reign reveal about it all? BUCHS embarks on a convincing analysis of the relationship of Monomachos with the palace eunuchs. In doing so he reveals the entrenched nature of the power of Zoe's eunuchs, but also, importantly, escapes the stereotypical association of those individuals with the *gynaikonites* to trace their importance in imperial reigns going back to Basil II and even Nikephoros Phokas. Palace eunuchs in BUCHS' analysis emerge as more than an exotic element of Byzantine governance. They represent continuity and, along with the entrenched bearded officialdom, which Monomachos was called to manage, constituted the institutional backbone of the Macedonian state apparatus. This institutional backbone, described elsewhere as 'impersonal and infrastructural... state power'⁷ was a force to reckon with as much as they were tools in Konstantinos' disposal. BUCHS' analysis of the power and place of eunuchs relies on case-by-case prosopographic analysis, which set against the chronology of events reveals unnoticed rhythms of power that punctuated politics. His observations on the generational nature of eunuch power – e.g., individuals who entered service in Zoe and Theodora's youth were circling out of power after the early years of Monomachos' reign – enrich our understanding of politics.

At the same time, the institutional limits to imperial power, revealed by BUCHS' discussion of eunuchs, officialdom, and the senate, explain why Monomachos chose to rely on alliances with aristocratic houses, in order to establish his own power (p. 239). Here, however, and in BUCHS' discussion of aristocratic networks in ch. 8, the reign of Monomachos is revealed, perhaps to the surprise of those in the field who, charmed by Psellos, placed him among the so-called civilian emperors of the *politikon genos*, as an agent of aristocratization. Monomachos' reign ushers the rise of those important military notables who will compete for and assume power in the years after his reign. BUCHS' analysis therefore suggests that all those members of the *genos stratiotikon*, who appear frustrated by their peers in the *genos politikon* and rebel against it to assume power and, with the

7. KALDELLIS, *New Roman Empire*, p. 588.

Komnenoi, save the polity, are products of Monomachos' efforts to establish his outsider's position through alliances with select families in both the army and the bureaucracy. In a manner of speaking, the blending of the *genos politikon* and *stratitikon* revealed by JEAN-CLAUDE CHEYNET in his seminal study of over thirty years ago, is fully played out in BUCHS' account of Monomachos' reign.⁸

What is more, BUCHS' treatment of the relations between Monomachos and his circle, on the one hand, and the martial, provincial notables, on the other, build on CHEYNET's seminal contributions but also add texture to the crucial insights of KALDELLIS on the bonds that tied Romans of all stripes and provenance. More to the point, ch. 8 on aristocratic networks and the focus on the links between Monomachos, his sister Euprepia, and Tornikios in the period before the latter's rebellion in 1047 (pp. 250–252), asks the reader to consider the social, cultural, political, and physical spaces where influential men and women of different backgrounds would come together to build alliances and plot their course on the Roman political scene. BUCHS sets the simple fact of the interaction between a Constantinopolitan notable and a military commander from Adrianople before the reader, who must then imagine the Venn diagram that made that relationship possible. The question itself expands on what CHEYNET offered years ago when he challenged the distinction between *genos politikon* and *stratitikon* in his work, in view of KALDELLIS' reconceptualization of the Byzantine Republic as a quasi-national political community of Romans. BUCHS in effect invites us to think of the venues – institutional, regional, social, and other – where figures like Monomachos and Tornikios (but also Vatatzes, Strabomytes, and Branas, from the wider Tornikios circle) would build their rapport.

As ch. 8 spills into the final, ninth chapter, BUCHS situates Monomachos' expansion of the senate rolls in the wider context of a steady expansion of the ranks of government officials dated to the tenth century. Here BUCHS notes that the institutional significance of the senate in the eleventh century brings it closer to its Late Antique counterpart, which like the Middle-Byzantine body provided a venue for the expression of the officialdom's interests, aspirations, and privilege. In a period of accelerated economic activity, as new mercantile interests rise, fiscal as well as legal expertise, and the privileges associated with both, attract new dynamic economic and

8. JEAN-CLAUDE CHEYNET, *Pouvoir et contestations à Byzance (963–1210)*. Paris 1990.

social agents to the senate. With this context in place, BUCHS takes the sting out of Psellos scathing critiques of the recruitment in the senate of marketplace magnates and, secondarily, foreigners. The echo of early imperial critiques of the opening of the senate in Rome to Gauls and other new allies of the early Caesars is unmissable and helps situate Monomachos' policy in the realities engendered by the imperial turn in Byzantine politics. BUCHS then turns to the people of the agora and considers their role as interfaces between the emperor and the Constantinopolitan populace, which had rioted both against Michael V and Monomachos himself. Here, however, what appears as a novelty – namely the opening of the senate ranks – loses its uniqueness, as BUCHS places this development next to Leon VI's recruitment of members of the capital's professional associations into imperial ceremonial, as representatives of the people. In fact, BUCHS' reference to sixth- and tenth-century parallels to Monomachos' policies in this and other parts of the book, situates his reign in longer arcs of memory and institutional development, burnishes this emperor's reformist credentials, and undermines historiographical critiques built on Psellos' focus on Konstantinos' submission to love, lust, and leisure (p. 11 on DIEHL and GIBBON re: lust and pleasure). Rather, for BUCHS, Konstantinos' actions are calculated Roman responses to a changing social, political, and even cultural reality.

The reign of Monomachos has been cast by historians both medieval and modern as an era to which many of the ills afflicting the Roman body politic in the eleventh and later centuries may be traced. It is often either implicitly or explicitly treated as a period precipitating the crisis of the 1060s and 1070s and eventually the emergence of the world of the Crusades and the Komnenian regime. KALDELLIS' recent work has emphatically pushed against this narrative. BUCHS builds on this, and in his pages Monomachos finds his place among conscientious, capable, and impactful rulers of the Roman polity. Moreover, BUCHS convincingly proposes that the critiques of both reign and man must be seen as efforts by Monomachos' epigones (both officials and emperors) to distance themselves from the monarch to whom they owed their rise to power, while setting on his dead feet their own failings. It appears, in fact, as if many of the critiques levelled against Monomachos would better suit the reigns of latter-day emperors, notably Michael VII (pp. 56, 64, 105 on foreigners in state service, on failures before the Turks, and on general military policy respectively). This suggests that there is a degree of Doukas-induced re-writing of history, which endures under the Komnenoi (p. 65 on Doukas efforts to reshape the past)

when Anna Komnene casts Monomachos' court as a den of licentiousness to mirror on it the realities of Manuel's reign (p. 82).

In a recent discussion of politics in the first half of the eleventh century, a colleague noted that the power of the officialdom in Constantinople at the time was amplified by the absence of heirs to the emperor.⁹ Since Basil II's death, the Roman polity faced an interesting situation. The prestige of the Macedonian dynasty turned Zoe, Basil's niece, into a quasi-permanent feature of the political system. In the process, her age ensured that the men she placed on the throne would not have heirs, making the officials at court and the eunuchs in the palace arbiters of politics. In the past, under Psellos' spell, lay and scholarly audiences have both tended to treat this as a problematic development, a break from the martial ethos of the reign of Basil II. And yet, ironically, Zoe's reign perpetuated trends already in play during Basil's 49-year reign. Both the man buried at the Hebdomon and his niece created conditions for the reinforcement of Constantinopolitan power and state power. Monomachos might have entered the palace without an obvious heir and with no prospect to acquire one but was also offered the opportunity to use that powerful nexus of official expertise and influence. BUCHS' book sets before his readers the myriad ways in which this capable politician and willful emperor navigated state power and harnessed it to an active agenda, setting in place the sociopolitical scene which in the context of rapidly changing global conditions would come to rule the Roman world for the coming century. In a way then, BUCHS' deep dive into Monomachos' reign offers a solid new history of the eleventh century while also problematizing the Komnenian revolution by tracing its roots back to Konstantinos.

Keywords

middle-Byzantine history

9. KALDELLIS, *New Roman Empire*, p. 589.