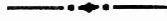


143887718

16.195

THE BYZANTINE WORLD



Edited by

Paul Stephenson



 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

CHAPTER TWO

THE RISE OF THE MIDDLE BYZANTINE ARISTOCRACY AND THE DECLINE OF THE IMPERIAL STATE*

—♦—
Paul Stephenson

THE ELEVENTH CENTURY: c. 950–1081

It is now clear, contrary to interpretations that prevailed through most of the twentieth century, that the economy of the Byzantine empire expanded rapidly between 950 and 1200.¹ It is also clear that in this same period an aristocracy emerged which was integral to the state system, but whose power did not rest exclusively on access to offices of state. While public office remained prestigious and potentially lucrative throughout the period under consideration, to paraphrase Michael Psellos, the great polymath of the eleventh century, many preferred to “belch forth their family’s great name.”² These belchers included the Phokades, Doukai and Komnenoi, each in turn an imperial family, but whose members were committed in the first instance to the promotion of the family and its interests at the expense of the state. The emergence of a self-aware aristocracy can be traced in histories, chronicles and saints’ lives, where, by 1200, 80 per cent of individuals bear a second name, in contrast to 20 per cent in c. 800.³ The emergence of aristocratic self-consciousness is even more marked on the lead seals which were used to secure and guarantee official correspondence. There has survived from before 900 not a single seal which bears a family name, but dozens from the last quarter of the tenth century and hundreds (perhaps thousands) from the eleventh century bear surnames. The typical seal bears a forename followed by the title and rank held by the individual in the state hierarchy, and ends with the surname.⁴ These individuals, representatives both of the state and of their families, may have felt conflicted loyalties, but a wealth of evidence suggests that few felt any compunction to place the interests of the state above those of kin.

The best researched body of evidence for this conflict between the state and the aristocrats is the land legislation issued by emperors of the tenth century, principally Romanos I (920–44), Constantine VII (913/944–59) and Basil II (963/976–1025). Each of these emperors issued laws, known as “novels” (*nearai*), directed against the so-called “powerful” (*dynatoi*), seeking to curtail encroachments upon lands pertaining to the “poor” (*penetes, ptochoi*). The rhetoric of “powerful” and “poor” masked an underlying reality which had little to do with the wellbeing of the humble subject

or peasant farmer: the state was losing taxable land to wealthy families who were better placed to offer protection or assert patronage, and to resist taxation.⁵ Land acquisition might follow crop failure, famine or drought, as the earliest legislation suggests. However, the “powerful” were increasingly able to assert dominance in good years, thanks to population growth and a fairly vigorous land market. Having acquired land, by fair means or foul, the “powerful” could resist demands for taxes more easily than the “poor,” whether by barring access to tax collectors and their armed retinues, by seeking exemptions from the emperor, or indeed by gaining responsibility for the fiscal administration of a particular district.⁶ Consequently, emperors began to demonstrate a keen desire to ensure the fiscal integrity of the village (*chorion*), which also happened to be the corporate entity responsible for the payment of land taxes. The fact that, in 996, Basil II issued stronger legislation to enforce this policy suggests, of course, that it was not working. But by now, emperors had devised alternative methods to compete with the aristocrats: to act in the same manner as the “powerful” but to back this with the coercive force of the state.⁷

Romanos I, author of the first novels against the “powerful” (*dynatoi*), was also the first emperor to incorporate newly conquered lands into the imperial domain as an estate (*kouratoria*). However, it remained the case that abandoned land (*klasma*), for example that abandoned in the face of threat, invasion or crop failure, was to remain within the *chorion*. Basil II reversed this policy, acquiring *klasma* for the state, and adding to it further conquered territories, upon which were settled dependent peasant farmers (*paroikoi*) who paid rents. Basil II evidently inspired fear in his “powerful” subjects sufficient to enforce his legislation, even obliging the wealthy to pay tax arrears owed by the “poor.” That is, he shifted the corporate responsibility for taxes (*allelengyon*) owed by peasants who had defaulted or disappeared from the village (*chorion*) to the powerful (*dynatoi*).⁸

Basil also instituted a new government department, the *Sekreton ton oikeiakon*, which was responsible for the control of state land, including the collection of rents from dependents. By the turn of the twelfth century this department had become the principal body responsible for taxation in the provinces. This change in policy had a significant social impact, especially when placed alongside the continuing growth in landed interests of the “powerful.” Nicolás Oikonomides summarized it thus:

There was undoubtedly an increase in the assets of the state, [and consequently] the composition of society in rural areas changed substantially as the number of dependent villagers (*paroikoi*) rose. In other words, there was a tendency for the economic benefits of the state to be maximized to the detriment of the social structure of the provinces, as the state turned to implementation of the same policy as that which the *dynatoi* . . . were also applying.⁹

One might temper this negative characterization with the information, provided by Psellos, that emperors sought also to improve productivity through land reclamation and innovations in estate management and farming techniques:

The acumen [of Constantine IX] was proved by the profits he made; by the clever ways in which he saved labour; the successful yet economical basis on which he ran his estates . . . by the way he forestalled the seasons in the development of

crops; by the ingenious inventions which enabled him to dispense with farm-workers; by the miracles of improvisation, so wonderful that most people could not believe their own eyes when they saw a field today where yesterday they had seen a flat plain and two days ago a hill.¹⁰

Monasteries were also active in cultivating new land and improving estate management. The founder of the Great Lavra on Mt Athos, St Athanasios, is said to have reclaimed land and provided irrigation to a barren rocky headland.¹¹ Athanasios benefited from a large donation by the future emperor Nikephoros Phokas which financed the initial construction. Thereafter, the Lavra was as acquisitive and competitive as any of the “powerful,” at the forefront of those whose ability to coerce and patronize created a class of *paroikoi* from previously free peasant farmers. Indeed, it is redundant to distinguish between the activities of secular aristocrats and monasteries, for in a society which knew no religious orders – despite the model provided from c. 800 by the Studites – members of the secular aristocracy were able and anxious to establish private religious foundations, for the salvation of their souls and those of family members. To ensure the continuity of such foundations, exemptions (*exkousseia*) were secured from additional land taxes and corvées.¹² Every emperor but Michael V (who died within a year of taking office in 1041) is known to have granted extensive privileges to leading monasteries, particularly those on Athos. As the monasteries acquired greater wealth, increasingly they were not obliged to send gold back to Constantinople.

Public expenditure in the tenth and eleventh centuries was primarily annual payments in gold (*rogai*) to state functionaries, military, ecclesiastical and civilian, Constantinopolitan and (partially) provincial. One distribution ceremony was observed, famously, by Liudprand of Cremona on Palm Sunday, 24 March 950.¹³ This gold was then expected to trickle down to lower levels, through payments by the elites to their subordinates, by commercial exchanges or via professional moneychangers, for all were obliged in September to pay their taxes in gold if the amount owed was valued at over $\frac{2}{3}$ *nomisma*. Change (*antistrophe*) would be given in copper coins.¹⁴ Only some provincial functionaries were entitled, indeed obliged, to draw their salaries as levies or “donations” (*synetheiai*) from their localities.¹⁵ One can imagine that this blurring of the distinction between the exercise of public authority and private power would lead to greater tension in the periphery, and also would exacerbate the principal phenomenon here described, namely the growth of private aristocratic wealth and power at the expense of the state. It is important in this context to note that the principal functionaries who drew no state *roga* and were obliged to draw all resources from the lands where they were based included all the military governors (*strategoi*) of lands west of the river Strymon, being the Balkan lands conquered by Basil II.

Hoarding money had always been popular, and thus the practice (*thesaurizein*) was legislated against by a state anxious to keep gold in circulation.¹⁶ In the 1030s massive private fortunes were amassed, only a few of which the state was empowered to confiscate. For example, two senior clerics, Patriarch Alexios Stoudios (d. 1043) and Theophanes, metropolitan of Thessalonika (d. 1038), were deprived of gold stores of, respectively, 2,500 and 3,300 talents (a total of 417,600 *nomismata*).¹⁷ This amount of gold held by just two of the “powerful” was the equivalent of

perhaps 10 per cent of the annual state budget, which has been estimated at 4–5 million *nomismata*; and is probably more than the number of new *nomismata* minted in any given year (c. 250,000–350,000).¹⁸

In the 1040s, John the *Orphanotrophos*, minister of state, introduced tax farming on a grand scale throughout Byzantine lands, presumably as a device to extract large sums of gold quickly from the wealthy as supplies in state coffers dried up. This policy continued throughout the eleventh century, with serious social consequences. In the first instance, selling taxation rights to the “powerful” was at the expense of the “poor” – these tenth-century legal categories persisted through the eleventh century. The “poor” were immediately subject to a massive increase in extraordinary levies and corvées, and if they could not pay were obliged to sell up and enter the service of the “powerful.”¹⁹ Ultimately, therefore, the policy was at the expense of the state, which experienced greater social unrest, and enjoyed a diminished capacity to control its own agents. Moreover, since the “powerful” had no inclination to levy taxes on their own lands, less taxation revenue reached the imperial treasury even as more of the excess wealth was siphoned off into private hands.

The demand for gold also led to a rise in interest rates in Constantinople. According to the *Peira*, a legal compilation produced before 1045, there was a corresponding reduction in the yield of annual stipends on honorific titles in the Byzantine administration.²⁰ Offices of state were, for the most part, purchased for a non-refundable cash payment. This represented an investment in and over a bureaucratic career, since the annual *roga* payment represented a return of 2.5–3.5 per cent on junior titles, and 5.5–8.3 per cent for more senior (e.g. senatorial) titles.²¹ By 1045, most *roga* payments, which were fixed, represented a poor investment when compared with lending money at interest on the open market. However, offices of state carried great prestige, and as such proved extremely attractive to the *nouveaux riches*. Psellos wrote disparagingly of Constantine IX for having “thrown open the doors of the senate” to different social groups, principally administrative employees formerly ineligible for such promotion.²² Constantine did so not to diversify the social basis of the elite – even if this was one of the consequences – nor indeed to promote the interests of the “civilian” over the “military” aristocracy, as Ostrogorsky once argued.²³ The most obvious reason to offer offices of state more widely was the desire to receive large payments in gold from those with social aspirations.²⁴ Even more obvious, therefore, was the determination by Constantine X Doukas (1059–67) to make merchants and manufacturers in the capital eligible for membership of the senate. According to Michael Attaleiates, Constantine X “desired above all else the increase of public finance and the hearing of private lawsuits” to raise money through fines.²⁵ A complementary policy was the sale of senatorial status, to the extent of devaluing the prestige attached to it.²⁶ If the tenth-century price of the rank of *protospatharios* – the entry-level rank for a senator – remained the same, each new senator provided a lump-sum payment in gold of 60 talents (4,320 *nomismata*) to the treasury, redirecting money from the booming markets of Constantinople back into the state economy.

The most obvious way for an emperor, or indeed empress, to retain gold was to scorn traditional distribution ceremonies. We know that upon her accession to sole rule, following the death of her husband Constantine IX in 1055, Theodora refused to make the distributions to state functionaries expected of any new monarch. She

did so by claiming that this was not her first accession, having ruled with her sister Zoe before her marriage to Constantine in 1042. Isaac I Komnenos (1057–9) had no such excuse, but went further still, rescinding donations made by his ephemeral predecessor Michael VI (1056–7). He earned the wrath of the Church by “cutting off the greater part of the monies set aside for their sacred buildings and, having transferred these funds to the public funds, estimated the bare necessities for the clergy.”²⁷ Without Basil II’s iron-grip on power, Isaac’s actions brought his ouster.

Still these measures were not sufficient to prevent the debasement of the coinage, gradually to the end of the 1060s, and rapidly as the state went bankrupt in the 1070s. Emperors from Michael IV (1034–41) to Romanos IV (1068–71) reduced the gold content of the full-weight *nomisma* from twenty-two to eighteen carats. In the 1070s this slumped to sixteen, then to ten and then to eight carats. There was a correspondingly rapid debasement of the silver coinage, since much of the limited silver supply was being added to the gold coinage.²⁸ According to Morrisson, the gradual debasement of the period c. 1040–70 was deliberate for the purposes of development, given that the volume of trade had increased much more rapidly than the quantity of gold available to service its demands. Although the entire gold coinage was not melted down and restruck by each emperor, if it had been the number of gold coins in circulation would have increased by 5 per cent each year. A more realistic figure, Morrisson suggests, is 1 per cent per year, or an increase of one-third in the number of gold coins circulating over the period 1040–70. Still, this was not enough to meet ever increasing demands, triggering the crisis debasements of the 1070s, and the collapse of the entire fiscal and tax systems.²⁹

What sparked the crisis debasement, and thus served as a catalyst for the collapse of the state economy? In 1071 the empire suffered assaults by the Seljuk Turks and Turkoman nomads, and by a range of peoples in the Balkans and beyond the Balkan frontier. It has long been argued that the battle of Manzikert, which the Byzantines lost to the Seljuks on 26 August 1071, was not a major military reversal for the empire. However, it was symptomatic of factionalism within the capital between competing aristocratic families: the emperor Romanos IV Diogenes lost the support of the Doukas family, who betrayed him on the battlefield and afterwards.³⁰ Nor did the extended aftermath of the battle, when bands of Turkoman nomads gradually settled the interior plateau of Anatolia, deprive the empire of essential, productive lands. The region was occupied primarily by huge ranches owned by a few aristocratic families, and the loss of these was of far less consequence than the preservation of control over the fertile coastal lands of Asia Minor. It has even been suggested that the loss of the central plateau, if not to the benefit of the state in geopolitical terms, was to the benefit of the new imperial dynasty, the Komnenoi, who demonstrated no urgent desire to drive the Turks and Turkmen out. Ultimately the empire paid a high price, but it was not primarily economic.³¹

The Balkan and Italian lands of the empire were no more stable at this time than Anatolia. In 1071 again, Bari, the last Byzantine stronghold in southern Italy, fell to the Normans. In the same year, the Danube frontier came under attack from the Hungarians, at Belgrade, and the Pechenegs who crossed the lower Danube and plundered throughout Thrace and Macedonia. Consequently “the Slavic people threw off the Roman yoke and laid waste Bulgaria taking plunder and leaving scorched earth. Skopje and Nish were sacked, and all the towns along the river Sava

and beside the Danube between Sirmium and Vidin suffered greatly. Furthermore, the Croats and Dukljans throughout the whole of Dalmatia rose in rebellion.³² A decade of rule by the Doukas family failed to effect a recovery, and it fell to Alexios I Komnenos and his aristocratic family, first to restore order, which took until 1091, and then to devise structures and institutions that reflected, developed and exploited new realities in the twelfth century.

THE TWELFTH CENTURY: 1081–1183

The coup which brought Alexios I to the throne in 1081 was a family affair, and the regime that he established placed family – his own relatives by blood or marriage – at the centre of government. For this reason the rise of the house of Komnenos has been considered proof of the triumph of the military aristocracy. We might better consider it the culmination of a number of tendencies which, coming to the fore over the previous century, had seen power and wealth decentralized and central government starved of gold. It was the great achievement of the Komnenoi that they brought the state back from bankruptcy even as they restored the geographical integrity of the empire, driving waves of invaders back and reaching accommodations with new settlers. However, the methods by which this recovery was achieved saw the empire of earlier centuries transformed.

Alexios, like his imperial uncle Isaac I, made an early enemy of the institutional Church through his attempts to finance recovery. Soon after his accession he seized holy vessels from churches and monasteries and melted them down to strike coin, much of which he used to pay his troops. Anna Komnene's *apologia* for her father's behaviour suggests that criticism was fierce, although this was certainly not the first time such an action had been taken.³³ While Alexios was engaged in warfare against Normans, Pechenegs and Turks, he placed his mother in charge of domestic administration, with an official known as the *logothetes* of the *sekreta* to act on her behalf as head of the civil service.³⁴ At the same time, the traditional system of honours was radically altered: honorary ranks and titles were not abolished, but they were left to wither on the vine with the removal of associated stipends (*rogai*). Initially left unpaid as a response to the bankruptcy of the state, Alexios determined simply not to restore the *rogai*.³⁵ Moreover, rather than pack the existing hierarchy with his appointees, Alexios instituted an entirely new tier of court titles over and above those which existed, based on the rank of *sebastos*. The term – an imperial epithet deriving from the Greek translation of Augustus – was reserved for members of the emperor's extended family, by blood or marriage (and some high foreign dignitaries).³⁶

The historian John Zonaras criticized Alexios for acting not as an emperor, but as the head of an aristocratic house, running the government for the benefit of his family. Indeed, "he thought of and called the imperial palace his own house."³⁷ Alexios did not pay his relatives in gold, but rather in privileges relating to land, and more specifically to the taxation of land. Examples are numerous, of which a couple may be cited. In 1084 the emperor's cousin, the *protosebastos* Adrian Komnenos, was granted the right to collect and keep all taxes for the Kassandra peninsula. He was not granted the land, just its tax revenues.³⁸ Similarly, but more extensively, in 1094, the *sebastokrator* Isaac received the revenues of lands of Thessalonika, at the time the empire's second city.³⁹ Besides his family, Alexios rewarded his

commanders. Gregory Pakourianos, commander-in-chief of the army, controlled extensive lands in and around Bachkovo (in present-day Bulgaria), where he founded the Petritzos monastery for his own retirement, and those of his loyal retinue of Armenians and Georgians. Pakourianos died before he could be tonsured, riding his horse headlong into a tree while fighting the Pechenegs, but his monastic foundation document (*typikon*) reveals that his estates were all granted to him by the emperor; that these had previously been state lands; and that he was to collect all state revenue connected with these lands as his own.⁴⁰ On a smaller scale, the general Leo Kephala received, in 1084, a public estate (*proasteion*) which had previously been granted to other military men. There is no indication that this was a grant of taxation revenue, and it must be imagined therefore that Leo received the land in order to extract the profits from the dependent peasantry, while still paying taxes, and with the obligation to return the land to the state upon request or at his death. By contrast, in 1086, after his heroic defence of the city of Larissa in Thessaly, Leo received the village (*chorion*) of Chostiani, with exemption from all taxes and the right to bequeath the property. Ultimately, these lands came into the possession of the Great Lavra monastery on Athos.⁴¹

Clearly, relatives of the emperor or his loyal commanders received income directly from taxpayers, who became their dependents (*paroikoi*). This obviated the need for the state to collect revenue itself, and thus circumvented, to some extent, the need to recoup gold and mint ever more coins to service the state economy.⁴² Still, money continued to change hands, and did so with ever increasing currency. It was a further achievement of this emperor to introduce an entirely new coinage in or shortly after 1092, based on the *hyperpyron nomisma*, a cupped or “scyphate” gold coin of twenty-one carats.⁴³ The reformed currency also allowed for, indeed required, a radical revision of the taxation system, which achieved its final form in 1109.⁴⁴ Details of the transition from the old to the new system are contained in two remarkable documents known as the *Palai Logarike* and *Nea Logarike*, “the old and new accounting.”⁴⁵ Here we may discern recognition of the shift which had taken place from a system predicated on the existence of a largely free peasantry, organized into fiscal units known as villages (*choria*), to one where large estates predominated, and efficiency demanded assessment of disparate, non-contiguous holdings pertaining to “powerful” families or institutions. “The archaic term *epibol[e]* was used to refer to the new fiscal practice that amounted to the first step toward the simplified taxation on land for centuries to come and that was easier to apply to large holdings of agricultural land.”⁴⁶ Unlike the old system, it took no account of the quality of land to be taxed, so while a simplification, it cannot be regarded as an improvement. In parallel with the *epibole*, the compilation of *praktika* came to replace the onerous system of maintaining land registers recording the fluctuating holdings of each village throughout the empire. Instead, taxpayers who owned land in more than one tax unit (*chorion*) could request that all their obligations be grouped in one document, the *praktikon*, which could more easily be updated as an individual or institution gained more land or secured greater privileges. Naturally, this was accompanied by a thorough fiscal survey of, at least, the empire’s core European provinces.

Such a drastic overhaul of the fiscal and taxation systems required a similar restructuring of the fiscal administration. The *Sekretion ton oikeiakon*, which was initially responsible for the control of state land, became the principal bureau in all

matters relating to provincial taxation, preparing the way for an institution we shall examine shortly: *pronoia*.⁴⁷ Furthermore, Alexios swept away many obsolete departments in creating two new accounting bureaux (*logariastika sekreta*), each presided over by a *logariastes*: the *megas logariastes ton sekretou*, “grand accountant of the departments,” who audited all fiscal services; and the very similarly named *megas logariastes ton euagon sekretou*, who was concerned with “charitable departments,” but primarily audited imperial property.⁴⁸ The title “grand accountant of charitable departments” reflects the fact that the emperor placed philanthropy at the centre of his financial reforms. As a pious autocrat, he did so in a manner intended to glorify his own reputation and family name, and to patronize the urban poor: he founded, or more correctly refounded, a massive charitable enterprise known as the *Orphanotropheion*, or “Orphanage.”⁴⁹

Dwarfing all previous aristocratic foundations, the “Orphanage” complex on the acropolis point in Constantinople expanded over several acres. All activities were sustained from lands which the emperor granted, often at the expense of earlier imperial foundations. Thousands of disabled, elderly or indigent adults joined the children, with at least one member of staff to each inmate. There was a church and four monasteries, one for men and three for women (deaconesses, virgins and Georgian nuns), who prayed for the physical and spiritual recovery of the sick. A school instructed both orphans, who lived in the complex, and children of poor parents, who perhaps did not, in music, Greek grammar and Christian doctrine. The *Orphanotropheion* served as a monumental example of the emperor’s power and patronage, past which imperial processions were rerouted and where he received splendid sung acclamations, and as a centre for instilling beliefs which his regime cherished, to the detriment of innovative instruction which had flourished in eleventh-century schools. In this last regard it held true to the original purpose of the orphanage, to promote a particular set of beliefs among the young.

Alexios I’s reign was punctuated by measures aimed at refining and reforming aspects of the eleventh-century situation he had inherited. Early measures smacked of crisis management, cobbled together as they were in the face of state bankruptcy, foreign invasion and a cumbersome bureaucracy. Later measures exploited the political capital won by averting the total collapse of the state to construct a system which suited and benefited a small, intermarried, aristocratic elite. As a consequence of Alexios’ reforms, gold was released from the state economy to circulate in the market economy by the massive expansion in grants of land-based tax privileges. These grants may even have bolstered local market economies, where the new masters of lands “encouraged” dependent peasants (*paroikoi*) to expand production. Whereas the state collected taxes in cash, those granted the right to taxation revenues most likely collected taxes and rent in kind, and sold the surplus to pay off obligations to the state (if they were not granted complete exemption). While such grants of land and tax privileges had a long history, and had grown significantly in the eleventh century, particularly in the realm of grants to monastic foundations, Alexios Komnenos was the first to use them systematically to reward his family and military. Thereafter, “in the twelfth century, the special donation ceased to be a mere fiscal instrument and became a fully developed system for the financing of state officials and officers. It was based on a change that made little practical difference to the beneficiary but was of colossal significance to the state: the donation was for life only

and could not be inherited.”⁵⁰ In this way, state land was not permanently alienated, and could be regranted. This system came to be known by well-established terms for imperial “dispensation” or “foresight”: *oikonomia* or *pronoia*.

There are a few references to state land being granted to soldiers, and subsequently regranted to other soldiers during Alexios’ reign, for example in Macedonia.⁵¹ However, examples become numerous during the reign of his grandson, Manuel I (1143–80), and the historian Niketas Choniates provides a clear explanation of the practice. Soldiers, some of whom were “barbarians,” Choniates notes, collected from the peasants what they would otherwise have paid to the state, and the emperor ceased to pay the soldiers from the treasury. This was no longer restricted to soldiers of exceptional merit – for example Gregory Pakourianos or Leo Kephalas – but was applied writ large.⁵² The decentralization and demonetization of the Byzantine taxation system had significant social consequences. Many peasant farmers now enjoyed the regular presence of a military “lord” who will have treated them as his dependents, although technically they remained state *paroikoi*. This may also, of course, have entailed benefits: an interested overseer willing to provide capital investment and protection for his benefice. But any such “patronage” was a significant departure from the days of peasant corporate responsibility through the village (*chorion*).⁵³

COLLAPSE: 1183–1204

Two key features of the mature Komnenian system, therefore, were an increased reliance on land and taxation privileges; and the consolidation of the power and influence of a group of aristocrats related to the Komnenoi by blood or marriage. Both proved problematic in the last decades of the twelfth century; in combination they proved cataclysmic for the empire, provoking a series of invasions and rebellions. Niketas Choniates offers the following explanation for the rapid decline in imperial fortunes:

It was the Komnenos family that was the major cause of the destruction of the empire. Because of their ambitions and their rebellions, she suffered the subjugation of provinces and cities and finally fell to her knees. These Komnenoi, who sojourned among barbarian peoples hostile to the Byzantines, were the utter ruin of their empire, and whenever they attempted to seize and hold sway over public affairs, they were the most inept, unfit and stupid of men.⁵⁴

Here Choniates highlights the major problem with the Komnenian system: reliance on kinship ties led, over time, to internecine competition between powerful rivals with equally acceptable claims to rule. Very early in his reign, Manuel I had survived at least three challenges to his authority by *sebastoi*.⁵⁵ The most notorious threats to have been reported were that of his confidant Alexios Axouch in 1167, and those of his cousin Andronikos in the 1150s and 1160s. Andronikos finally succeeded, in 1182–3, in removing Manuel’s young son Alexios II. Andronikos had a power base within the upper echelons of the aristocracy, favouring alternative members of Manuel’s, and therefore his own extended kin group. Ultimately, his regime, which commenced with the massacre of Latins, proved too cruel to secure widespread support, and too brief to implement substantial reforms. Just two years after his

accession, Andronikos was deposed by one of the many cousins in his extended kin group, Isaac Angelos, the great-grandson of Alexios I. But Isaac, who had represented the interests of a group of aristocratic families opposed to Andronikos, fell victim to factionalism himself. He endured numerous coups during his ten-year reign before, in 1195, he was overthrown by his own brother, Alexios III Angelos, who also suffered a series of coups. An attempt which nearly succeeded was engineered in 1200 by a certain John Komnenos “the Fat,” who was the grandson of John II by his daughter Maria. His father was the seditious confidant of Manuel I, the *sebastos* Alexios Axouch.

As the *sebastoi* competed for control of the centre, the periphery of the empire slipped from their grasp. According to Angold, “there were now important local interests to protect. Their defence was increasingly in the hands of local ascendancies, often referred to as *archontes*. There was always a tendency at times of weak government or political crisis for each town to come under the control of a dynast or city boss, who was normally a representative of local interests.”⁵⁶ Now *archontes* were in receipt of local taxation revenues, and increasingly reluctant to recognize ineffectual and ephemeral rulers in Constantinople. Several, in regions with no history of independent rule, claimed autonomy from Constantinople. Notable examples are Theodore Mangaphas in Philadelphia (near Sardis in Asia Minor) and Isaac Komnenos on Cyprus.⁵⁷

Others, with dormant traditions of independent rule, began to look elsewhere for patrons or symbols of power and prestige. Thus in 1189 the rulers of Serbia and Bulgaria sought an alliance with the German emperor Frederick Barbarossa. They intended not merely to defend their own interests, as had several pretenders to the Hungarian throne during Manuel’s reign, but to launch an attack on Constantinople itself. And in 1203–4, Kalojan (Ioannitsa), the ruler of the Bulgarian realm, rejected an offer by the Byzantine emperor, Alexios III, to recognize his imperial title and grant Bulgaria a patriarch. He preferred to negotiate with Pope Innocent III, and to receive the insignia of regnal and archiepiscopal – not imperial and patriarchal – offices from Rome.⁵⁸

In the same year, 1203–4, the Venetian fleet that ferried the forces of the Fourth Crusade to Constantinople carried the blinded Isaac II and his son Alexios. We know from western sources that Alexios offered the Venetians full payment of the sum specified in their contract with the leaders of the Fourth Crusade. Therefore, instead of ferrying the Latins directly to the Holy Land, the fleet sailed via Zadar to Constantinople in order to install Alexios on the imperial throne. Alexios IV was the archetypal Komnenian princeling so loathed by Choniates: nurtured among barbarians, an inept and stupid man who brought utter ruin to the empire. With the sack of the city the imperial system collapsed, never fully to be reconstituted.

NOTES

- * An earlier and somewhat different version of this essay appeared as Stephenson 2004. I am grateful to the editors, J. Arnason and B. Wittrock, for permission to reproduce my thoughts here.
- 1 Hendy 1970: 31–52, whose interpretation swiftly received almost universal acceptance. The new orthodoxy has been enshrined in Laiou 2002b, which corrects the dominant interpretation of Ostrogorsky 1968. See now Laiou and Morrisson 2007, and Morrisson in this volume.

- Sathas 1874: IV, 430–1, quoted in fuller translation by Angold 1997: 67. There have been, in recent years, extensive studies of the aristocracy and its ethos. To start with, see the papers collected in Angold 1984.
- 3 Patlagean 1984; Kazhdan 1997.
 - 4 Stephenson 1994; with corrections offered by Seibt 2002; Seibt 2003.
 - 5 The division of society into the powerful and the poor had been articulated in late antiquity, and no new vocabulary had been introduced to better describe the medieval situation. See Patlagean 1977.
 - 6 Oikonomides 2002: 1005: “the difficulty of preventing encroachment on state land was largely the result of the inherent weaknesses of an administrative mechanism staffed by aristocrats [who] were called upon to take action against aristocrats.”
 - 7 The texts of all relevant novels are collected with commentary in Svoronos (1994).
 - 8 For a careful explanation see Lemerle 1979a: 78–80. On the fear Basil inspired, see now Stephenson 2003; Holmes 2005.
 - 9 Oikonomides 2002: 1006.
 - 10 Psellos, *Chronographia*, VI, 175.
 - 11 *Life of Athanasios of Athos*, Vita B, 24; (ed.) Noret 1982: 150–1.
 - 12 See in general Morris 1995.
 - 13 Liudprand, *Antapodosis*, VI, 10; Wright 1930: 211–12.
 - 14 Oikonomides 2002: 995–6.
 - 15 See Oikonomides 1997: 199–215; Oikonomides 2002: 999, 1009–11.
 - 16 Morrisson 2002: 939, 950, estimates that at any given time one-third of all gold coins would be hoarded, and thus out of circulation. Angold 1997: 85, translates a short poem of the mid-eleventh century, by Christopher of Mytilene: “Having gazed on money, much as a polecat does on fat / You accumulate gold just to bury it in a vat / What good does it do you underground / When that is where you are bound?” See Kurtz 1903: no. 134.
 - 17 Angold 1997: 85; Oikonomides 2002: 1018.
 - 18 Morrisson 2002: 937, 941.
 - 19 The total tax burden, the *arithmion*, usually amounted to 23–30 per cent of income on farmed land. Exemptions from payments of additional levies could be granted, most often to monasteries and the “powerful.” At the other end of the spectrum, additional *corvées* could be imposed upon the “poor” by unscrupulous tax farmers (i.e. agents of the “powerful”), significantly increasing their total tax burden. See Oikonomides 2002: 995–6.
 - 20 Oikonomides 2002: 1020.
 - 21 Oikonomides 2002: 1009.
 - 22 Psellos, *Chronographia*, VI, 29. It is likely that all those promoted were not “rascally vagabonds of the market.”
 - 23 Ostrogorsky 1968: 342. On this generally see Angold 1997: 16–17: “The old notion . . . that the eleventh century crisis received political expression in the shape of a struggle between the civil and military aristocracy . . . has been quietly shelved.”
 - 24 This runs contrary to Psellos’ assertion, that “Constantine’s idea was to exhaust the treasury of its money.” Elsewhere Psellos attributes the poor state of public finances to the building projects of various emperors (generally imperial church or monastic foundations) and to the extravagance of the empresses Zoe and Theodora, who “confused the trifles of the harem (*gynaikonitis*) with important matters of state.” See Psellos, *Chronographia*, VI, 5. Angold 1997: 83, follows this line of reasoning.
 - 25 Attaleiates 1853: 76; quoted in fuller translation by Magdalino 1994: 94.
 - 26 Psellos, *Chronographia*, VI, 30: “Gradually the error of the policy became apparent when privileges, much coveted in the old days, were now distributed with a generous abandon that knew no limits, with the consequence that the recipients lost distinction.” See also Zonaras, ed. Pinder and Büttner-Wobst 1897: III, 676, for further information on the sale of offices.
 - 27 Psellos, *Chronographia*, VII, 60.
 - 28 See, in the first instance, Morrisson in this volume. Also, Morrisson 2002: 930–2; Morrisson 1976.
 - 29 Oikonomides 2002: 1020.
 - 30 Angold 1997: 44–8.
 - 31 Hendy 1989: III, 3–9, esp. 9: “there can be little doubt that it was the disruption and/or loss of its main (i.e. Anatolian) territorial base that provided one of the main factors sealing the fate of the old

military aristocracy and permitting the formation – indeed the deliberate construction – of a new one involving the virtually complete Comnenian dynastic appropriation of the pre-existing state apparatus.”

- 32 Bryennios 1975: 211. See also Tsolakes 1968: 162–3; Stephenson 2000: 141–4.
- 33 Indeed, Oikonomides 2002: 1017, suggests we might view this as standard procedure: excess wealth was hoarded in this form, a symbol of imperial generosity in good times, to be cashed in in periods of crisis. See *Alexiad*, V, 1–2. However, see also Pentcheva in this volume.
- 34 On this official, see Magdalino 1996b: 153–5; Magdalino 1994: 110–11.
- 35 Oikonomides 2002: 1021.
- 36 Magdalino 1993: 181. See also Magdalino 1996b: 147–8, for fuller references to research on “the family regime.”
- 37 Zonaras, ed. Pinder and Büttner-Wobst 1897: III, 766.
- 38 Oikonomides 2002: 1040; Lemerle *et al.* 1970: no. 46.
- 39 Oikonomides 2002: 1041; Lemerle *et al.* 1970: no. 151.
- 40 Gautier 1984: 5–146.
- 41 Oikonomides 2002: 1041; Lemerle *et al.* 1970: nos. 44, 45, 48, 49, 60.
- 42 Oikonomides 2002: 995.
- 43 See Morrisson in this volume and Morrisson 2002: 924, 932–3. The identification of the reformed coinage was the achievement of Hendy 1969.
- 44 Harvey 1989: 80–119.
- 45 Oikonomides 2002: 976, 1030.
- 46 Oikonomides 2002: 1031.
- 47 Oikonomides 1976: 136–7.
- 48 Oikonomides 1976: 140–1; Oikonomides 2002: 994–5.
- 49 Miller 2003.
- 50 Oikonomides 2002: 1042.
- 51 Lemerle *et al.* 1970: nos. 56, 64; Oikonomides 2002: 1043.
- 52 Van Dieten 1975: 208–9; Lemerle 1979a: 230–6.
- 53 Magdalino 1993: 172, 175–7: “Manuel made a significant, positive and conscious contribution to the development of local, ‘grass roots’ feudalism.”
- 54 Van Dieten 1975: 529.
- 55 Magdalino 1993: 217–20, suggests that we have probably underestimated the prevalence of factionalism among the *sebastoi* during Manuel’s reign. For documentation and analysis see Cheynet 1990: 106–10, 413–25.
- 56 Angold 1997: 177.
- 57 Angold 1997: 307–10.
- 58 Stephenson 2000: 279–81, 305–12.