

**Byzantium, 1180-1204: 'The Sad Quarter of a Century'?** ed. by Alicia Simpson.  
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It is easy to conceive of the quarter century following Manuel's death as a miserably unsuccessful time for the Byzantine state. Cicilia, Antioch, and Serbia ceased to pay allegiance to the Emperor. The Bulgarian Empire was resurrected. Time and again provincial magnates raised the banner of rebellion. The emperors sometimes had to resort to desperate means to neutralize them. The traditional consensus is that these failures were chiefly attributable to the incompetence of central authority. However, in the past three decades the conventional interpretation has been called into question by scholars such as Savvas Neocleous, Michael Hendy, and Michael Angold. They consider that the central government performed better than we give it credit it for. The current book is the second one to make a serious effort to 'rehabilitate' the government (the first one was C. Brand's *Byzantium Confronts the West, 1180-1204*). It also asks whether the misfortunes of the period 1180-1204 were as serious as we have made them out to be.

The editor has sensibly arranged the contributions into several thematic groups. Broadly speaking, Section 1 focuses on foreign policy, Section 2 on internal policy, Section 3 on economic questions – how well the Angeloi handled their financial resources and private investment in trade – and Section 4 on some of the Constantinopolitan religious architecture that existed during the period 1180-1204.

Chapter 1 falls outside the above arrangement, as its purpose is to summarize the historiography. It competently covers four major historiographical topics: Byzantium's alliances with East and West, the Byzantine retreat from the northern Balkans, the breakdown of the Komnenian system of government, and pronoia grants (notably its link to the failures of the army between 1180 and 1204). Unfortunately, it also suffers from several egregious problems. Simpson ignores the theatres of war outside the northern Balkans and Brand's book and leaves out two historiographical topics that feature in the book's other contributions. On the other hand, the topic of pronoia grants is not featured in any other contribution. The German-Byzantine relationship is addressed in Chapter 4, but regrettably not the one with Saladin.

The main body's first contribution evaluates the legacy of the Angeloi in the north-eastern Balkans. Stankovic argues the Angeloi strengthened Byzantine influence in Serbia and Bulgaria by shrewdly applying the Hungarian model of including the most prominent members of the local ruling families into the imperial household. By doing so, they won the loyalty of the locals and the ruling families to the Byzantine emperor. Thus they actually surpassed the achievements of Manuel I. I give the chapter credit for its boldness. However, it is painfully unconvincing. For one thing, Stankovic all but ignores Bulgaria.<sup>1</sup> For another, I do not see how the Serbian ruling families

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'Bulgaria' is mentioned three times in the entire contribution.

showed more loyalty to the Angeloi than they had to the Komnenoi. Early in Androniko's reign the two main Serbian polities (Serbia and Diokleia) emancipated themselves from Byzantine overlordship. They never reverted to the previous state of affairs, though Isaac Angelos did succeed in creating a lasting peace between himself Stefan Nemanja in 1190 by marrying his daughter to Nemanja's son. And what should we make of the fact that when the grand Serbian *zupan* sought a royal crown, in 1198, he turned to Rome rather than Constantinople? This hardly strikes me as evidence of loyalty or authority. Stankovic would have done better to anchor his defence of the Angeloi (at least in part) on the premise that they inherited an unstable situation, as Fine does in *The Early Medieval Balkans: A Critical Survey from the Late Twelfth century to the Ottoman conquest*.

From Europe, we move to Asia. In Chapter 2, Korobeinikov argues Byzantium did not suffer substantial territorial losses in Anatolia, and the Byzantine-Turkish border remained stable. He uses the history of the strategic centre of Laodikeia (between 1174 and 1204) as his chief case study. Korobeinikov's command of the literary source is excellent. He taps into documents and perspectives from all the relevant contemporary ethnic groups, be they Latin, Turkish, Greek, or Arabic, and abundantly cross-checks them. This makes the author's narrative of Laodikeia's existence a pleasure to read. That being said, Korobeinikov's main propositions do not hold much weight. For one thing, Choniates mentions that the Seljuks had annexed Lykaonia, Pamphylia, and Kotyaeion by 1195. For another, the plundering of Lydia in 1188-1189, the ravaging of Laodikeia's environs and Chonai in 1191, and the ravaging of the Maeander valley in 1195 and 1200 are not indicative of a stable border. Equally problematic is Chapter 4. Lounginis asserts that the German-Byzantine alliance remained alive and well until the end of Isaac II's reign. There was certainly – at the very least – a workable relationship between the Byzantines and Germans in the 1180s. However, Lounginis passes over the reign of Alexios III (during which Henry VI threatened to invade the Empire if he was not paid 5,000 pounds of gold). Also, Lounginis does not criticize Isaac for endangering the 'alliance' through his incompetent double-dealing or his failure to profit from the Germans' passage through the Sultanate of Rum.

A recurring theme in Chapters 2-4 is the post-1180 emperors' crippling lack credibility with their subjects. For example, Isaac could not dissuade Alexios Branas (whom he had tasked with suppressing the Bulgarian rebellion) or Mangaphas from rebelling, and Alexios failed to obtain the consent of his subjects' representatives to collect the aforementioned 5,000 pounds of gold. According to the author of Chapter 5 (Kyritses), this problem was the reason why Manuel's successors did not continue his tradition of making decisions via consultation. The rulers could not convince the councils (of aristocrats, senators, and churchmen) they summoned to support their plans, so they had no choice but to rule by decree.<sup>2</sup>

I will pass over Chapter 6 for the time being and move to Chapter 7. Anagnostakis argues that the centrifugal behaviour of the Peloponnese and Hellas in the decade before 1204 was not due solely to the weakening of central authority, but also to the disruptive influence of the rebellion of Chrysos and Kammytzes (which were themselves made possible by the rise of the Vlach-Bulgarian Empire). It is a cogent argument, given the narrow separation in time between the aforementioned rebellion and that of Leo Sgouros. But Anagnostakis lets the central government off too lightly: he does not ask whether the latter institution was largely to blame for the seditious acts of the Vlach-Bulgarians and Chrysos and Kammytzes.

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<sup>2</sup> The only exception was Andronikos, under whose reign all state decisions were apparently taken by councils.

This brings us to the economic section. Chapter's 8 overall point seems to be ordinary subjects suffered to an unprecedented extent from the financial policies of the Angeloi and their entourages. Not only did the Angeloi tax as oppressively and inefficiently as the Komnenoi, but they fell victim to love of luxury and corruption. And yet, though this behaviour contributed powerfully to the proliferation of revolts under the Angeloi, they in no way brought the Empire near collapse. For the tax mechanism never failed, except in the provinces which attempted to break away. There was never a major financial crisis, though the *stamenon* and *trikephalon* were heavily debased.

Chapters 9 and 10 are extensions of Smyrlis' contribution. Papadopoulou elaborates on the theme of monetary decline. He demonstrates that the production output of precious metals decreased after Manuel's death. Not only did the mint in Thessaloniki cease to operate for both gold and silver, but the number of *officinae* in the Constantinopolitan mint shrank from 2 to 1 during the reign of Alexios Angelos. Concurrently, the silver and base metal currencies experienced severe debasement. Indeed, the ratio of the *hyperpyron* to the electrum *aspron trachy* and *stamenon*, which was 1:3:60 in 1167, changed to 1:4:120 by 1190 and 1/4/176/184 by 1199. With regard to numismatic circulation, regional studies from Athens, Corinth, and Epirus (for the period 1081-1204) are provided. Papadopoulou's commentaries on the various evolutions of the trends – notably the almost complete absence of finds from Corinth for the reign of Alexios Angelos – are thoughtful but appropriately cautious. What is missing is other regional case studies. Papadopoulou compares circulation levels in Athens and Corinth to the "average for the empire", but does not explain how he obtained that average. Nevertheless, Papadopoulou is right to conclude that the peripheral economy was shrinking at the end of the twelfth century. And this would potentially have had dramatic consequences. Consider: if a family had been earning just enough to survive, how would it have coped with the debasement of the *stamenon* by 53 per cent (relative to the *hyperpyron*) between 1190 and 1199? While we have reason to think that the economy was overwhelmingly based on barter in the provinces, the reverse was true in Constantinople.

Magdalino investigates whether the aristocracy gained its wealth solely through corrupt practices or through more legitimate means. While conceding that they engaged in shady activities – diverting tax revenues, he notes that court officials sold the title of *sebastos* to money-changers and silk merchants (during the reign of Alexios III) and may have invested in naval commerce. Magdalino's interpretation on the aristocracy's commercial investments strikes me as somewhat inaccurate. He draws upon an incident in 1192 which Venetian vessels carrying cargo from Egypt to Constantinople were attacked by Genoese and Pisan raiders. The total value of the lost goods was huge, indicating that they were intended for redistribution. But this does not necessarily mean that aristocrats had invested in the ship owners' transactions. They could have been importing luxury commodities from Egypt. The emphasis on commerce is a fitting prelude to Chapters 11 and 12, in which Gerolymatou and Merianos makes the case that the socio-economic influence of merchants in Constantinople grew stronger after 1180. To their credit, I was left in little doubt that the Constantinopolitan merchants had considerable influence with the emperor, given that in the affair of the Genoese-Pisan attack the merchants were able to compel Isaac II to take measures to compensate the victims.<sup>3</sup> But Gerolymatou and Merianos are less successful in proving that merchants were becoming more influential. Their evidence is confined to twelve references to the term *megalemporos* (great merchant) in twelfth century Byzantine sources, only three of which are posterior to 1180.

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<sup>3</sup> Working in tandem with the people.

There are some remarkable pieces of scholarship in this book. Particularly worth mentioning is Chapter 8, which confirms the moral decay and oppressiveness of the Angeloi's fiscal policy while asserting that ordinary subjects were not hugely better off under the Komnenoi. In fact, Section 3 is the one that accomplishes the most. For its part, Section 1 fails to adequately address the ideas that contradict its arguments, and Sections 2 and 4 too often stray away from the book's main question. For instance, what purpose does Chapter 6 ('The anatomy of a failed coup : the abortive uprising of John the Fat') serve? Likewise, what does Chapter 14 ('A gem of Artistic Ekphrasis: Nicholas Mesarites' Description of the Mosaics in the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople') have to do with the sad events of the period 1180-1204? Nevertheless, overall *Byzantium, 1180-1204* brings us closer to giving the period 1180-1204 – and the regimes who held power during those years – a fair appraisal. It suggests that despite the long list of military defeats which the Empire's many enemies inflicted, the economy did not suffer hugely, merchants in Constantinople had considerable leverage with the emperor, and the Byzantine state and its German counterpart had a working relationship until 1195. I believe objectives for further research should include assessing the connection between the Angeloi's fiscal policies and their revolts, how stable the Western Anatolian border was (outside the Theme of Laodikeia), non-monetary benchmarks of economic prosperity (such as pottery), and visiting in much more detail the emperors' diplomatic competences.