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BEAUTIFUL AND ‘FIERY IN SPIRIT’? THE COMPLEXITY OF THE IMAGE OF EMPEROR ISAAC II ANGELOS IN THE *HISTORY* BY NIKETAS CHONIATES

Abstract. The depiction of Isaac II Angelos in the *History* of Niketas Choniates, rounded off with the full description of the emperor in the final paragraph of the account on his first reign (1185–1195), is by far the most complex of all imperial portrayals penned by the respectable historian. The outdated, typically negative image of Isaac II in modern historiography is based only on the surface level of Choniates’ intricate historical narrative, which has been analyzed in greater depth only in the more recent studies. As this paper shall hopefully demonstrate, despite of all literary distortion of his personality, Isaac II remains the most realistically represented character in the *History*, and the most tangible one, embodying the author’s philosophical-anthropological thought on human nature. The aforementioned description represents a set of authentic body features that meet the criteria of the Byzantine (male) beauty ideal, but it possibly connotes additional meaning, thus making the overall portrayal of Isaac II in the *History* uniquely complete.

Keywords: Isaac II Angelos, Niketas Choniates, Byzantine literature, imperial image, Byzantine beauty ideal

Ἦρξε δὲ Ῥωμαίων Ἰσαάκιος ἐνιαυτοῦς ἐννέα σὺν μηνὶν ἑπτὰ, φλογερός ὢν τὴν ὄψιν, τὴν τρίχα πυρρός, τὴν ἡλικίαν μέσος, τὴν ἰσχὺν εὖρωστος, οὕτω τεσσαράκοντα ἔτη γεγενημένος, ὀπηνίκα καθήρητο τῆς ἀρχῆς¹.

The ending lines of the third and the last book on the reign of Isaac II Angelos (1185–1195) represent the only complete and, in all likelihood, an authentic contemporary imperial portrait in the *History* of Niketas Choniates. Isaac reigned

¹ *Nicetae Choniatae Historia*, ed. J.-L. VAN DIETEN, Berlin–New York 1975 (cetera: CHONIATES), p. 452.



for nine years and seven months, he had a ruddy complexion, red/blonde hair, was of average height, strongly built, healthy and vigorous, and not even forty years old when dethroned, Choniates writes. There are not many character descriptions in the *History* that could be compared to that of Isaac. Unlike Michael Psellos and Anna Komnene, his literary predecessors and, to an extent, role models within the historical genre, Niketas did not pay so much attention to his protagonists' physical appearance, concerned more with their personality than with their looks. He does not avoid describing people altogether, but even physiognomies of some emperors are left to our imagination.

In terms of its content and detail, the said portrait of Isaac II resembles Choniates' description of the young Manuel I Komnenos upon the latter's ascension to the throne, whereby the newly proclaimed emperor is represented as a youth of a pleasant countenance, of dark complexion, tall and slightly stooped². However, this visualization of the twenty-four year old Manuel is secondary, since the historian was not even born at the time the event took place (1143). Viewed from the point of contemporaneity, the description of Isaac could be compared only to the impressive but not as comprehensive or definite image of his predecessor Andronikos I Komnenos, whose old age received quite an ambiguous, if not outward contradictory treatment from Choniates. Conversely, the description of Isaac is neat, straightforward and neutral in tone, regardless of the predominately reproachful attitude in the *History* when it comes to his character traits. Furthermore, the list of body features attributed to Isaac in the historical account matches the encomiums addressed to this emperor, including those authored by Niketas himself. Somewhat surprisingly, the description of Isaac II is not comparable to that of his own brother and usurper of his throne, Alexios Angelos, whose reign was next recounted in the *History*. Reaching the highest point of his career under Alexios III, Choniates was undoubtedly familiar with both the emperor's appearance and personality – for reasons not quite certain, Alexios had not been attributed a single physical characteristic.

In narrative sources, as well as in literature in general, physical descriptions aim to bring important characters to life, thus making the story more tangible and its lead actors closer to the reader. Bearing in mind the scarcity of physical descriptions in the *History*, we must assume that those provided were considered important by the author himself. Uninterested into presenting full body images of his protagonists, Choniates does not describe side characters into much detail either, as, for instance, Ana Komnene does; her descriptions of Robert Guiscard, the young Constantine Doukas, or Bohemond of Taranto are fine examples of such elaborate portraits³. However, isolated body parts and physical characteristics

² CHONIATES, p. 50–51.

³ *Annae Comnenae Alexias*, ed. D.R. REINSCH, A. KAMBLYS, Berlin–New York 2001 [= *CFHB*, 40] (cetera: ANNA COMNENA), p. 35, 88, 412.

of the minor figures in the *History* are often highlighted in relation to an imperial protagonist, in order better to evoke a certain situation and/or the emperor's personality, rather than to represent those characters alone. Thus, for example, the tall stature and beauty of *caesar* Alexios Komnenos, along with his noble nature, points to the injustice brought upon him by Andronikos I and Isaac II⁴. The conjoined eyebrows of Constantine Mesopotamites certainly deepen the notion of his clever and resourceful nature, but only in an inextricable connection with Isaac II, whose favorite he was⁵. In the account of the agitation in Hagia Sophia on 12th September 1185, which resulted in Isaac Angelos being proclaimed the Emperor of the Romans, the future sovereign embodies the antithesis of the 'crazy old man with a forked beard', Andronikos I, as well as of his bald (i.e. *aged*) uncle John, who offered himself in place of his hesitant nephew. Still relatively young at the time, Isaac was obviously seen as a suitable candidate for the throne, juxtaposed to two much older men, even though Choniates does not specifically emphasize his age or appearance in this episode, and is very reluctant to represent him as a true champion⁶.

A cursory look into the given description does not reveal what kind of impression about Isaac II the historian wanted to convey to the reader. It appears informative and *positively* neutral, even though the entire narrative revolves around the emperor's flawed persona. The failure of emperors to live up to the imperial ideal emerges as one of the main themes of the pessimistic narrative of the *History*, with Isaac being only one in the line, albeit the most relentlessly criticized. Similar in form and narration style to accounts on Manuel I and Andronikos I, the imperial biography of Isaac II Angelos is by far the most personalized and at the same time the most distorted one in the *History*, as aptly put by Alicia Simpson⁷. The contemporary account of the *History* in true sense begins with the ascension of Isaac Angelos to the throne, whom Choniates then served occupying various important offices, steadily climbing up the ladder of the imperial administration. Therefore, the account on Isaac's reign is characterized by the strong authorial presence, adding to the uniquely vivid portrayal of the emperor, and it proves to be anything but objective. Compelling and seductive, *Choniates' truth* about Isaac is deceptive; it represents a tangled tissue of facts and speculations, latent and manifest functions of the content, the writer's personal impressions and the real traits of his master. His judgment cannot be accepted *de facto*, while at the same time the historian must be trusted – it is the transparency of his personal experience of the emperor that makes the narration on Isaac II so exceptional. Out of all

⁴ CHONIATES, p. 425–427. This Alexios Komnenos was an illegitimate son of Emperor Manuel I, formerly a *sebastokrator*.

⁵ CHONIATES, p. 440–441.

⁶ CHONIATES, p. 345.

⁷ A. SIMPSON, *Niketas Choniates. A Historiographical Study*, Oxford 2013 [= OSB], p. 143–144, 182.

emperors discussed in the *History*, Isaac II is by far the most vividly portrayed one; apart from the full body description, Niketas particularly graphically describes his emotionally charged physical reactions: blushing and a forced smile in a tense conversation with Conrad of Monferrat, a grim face because of an inappropriate joke told at the table, a frown because of the troubles on the battlefield⁸. Moreover, he is the liveliest and the most tangible character in the whole narrative of the *History*.

In addition, the story of Isaac Angelos goes well beyond the three books covering his pivotal reign and its tone is overall ambiguous, with variations in intensity of the criticism towards him depending on the version of the text⁹. Isaac was introduced into the *History* as a tyrant-slayer and one of the six Angeloi brothers opposing the cruel reign of Andronikos I, “all young in heart and brave in deed”¹⁰, but as the narrative unfolds and we get to know him into greater detail, he does not strike an impressive figure. By the end of his reign, Choniates would seek to deprive him of all his virtues, either by diminishing his good qualities through the exposure of the downsides that came along or by ascribing them to higher powers – God and human nature. However, it must be noted that the historian nevertheless saved some words of genuine praise for Isaac.

The answer to the question of *why* Choniates wrote about Isaac II the way he did, including the final passage, lies within the multiple (negative) motivations behind the narrative on this emperor. To understand this, we first ought to take a look into the complicated process of the composition of the *History*. The text was penned through five stages from which the two main versions emerged, one written before the Latin conquest of Constantinople in 1204, and the other in years after the catastrophe; the variants were designated *b(revior)* and *a(uctior)* by van Dieten, respectively¹¹. The original version was written only after Alexios III donned the purple, as convincingly argued by Simpson, following van Dieten’s exhaustive study of the manuscript transmission¹². Therefore, none of the versions could have been in favor of Isaac Angelos. The positive depiction of the deposed emperor would certainly not have benefited the propaganda of his successor, the ‘fratricidal’ Alexios III, whose sinful act against Isaac was at great pains justified in the original version¹³. Later redactions were influenced by the events of 1204, with the writer blaming both Angeloi brothers, as well as their predecessors, for the city’s downfall. Second, unique authorial intrusions reveal genuine frustration

⁸ CHONIATES, p. 384, 442, 431.

⁹ For a general overview of Choniates’ account on the reign of Isaac II see A. SIMPSON, *Niketas Choniates...*, p. 170–182.

¹⁰ CHONIATES, p. 227, 245.

¹¹ A. SIMPSON, *Before and After 1204: The Versions of Niketas Choniates’ “Historia”*, DOP 60, 2006, p. 194.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 196–205.

¹³ EADEM, *Niketas Choniates...*, p. 96.

concerning some of the emperor's actions, mostly those that affected Niketas personally. For example, the historian does not refrain from showing his discontent towards contradictory instructions regarding the fortifications around Philippopolis at the time of the Third crusade, that is, the passage of Frederick Barbarossa's army over the imperial lands. Since the province was under authority of Choniates at that time, all the burden of carrying out the inconsistent imperial orders fell on him. In addition, he informs us about a private heated argument he had with the emperor about the troublesome policy towards Barbarossa and the bad treatment of German envoys in Constantinople. In the historian's own words, he omitted what was said between the emperor and himself, because it was "deserving more of condemnation than of praise", which also testifies to the level of freedom Choniates had before his sovereign¹⁴. On the note of his proximity to the emperor, not only that Niketas performed a series of important functions under Isaac II, but he also belonged to the generation of Angeloi brothers, if he was not even the same age as Isaac, which might have played a part in their relationship¹⁵. It is impossible to deduce how close they were beyond official roles, for Niketas' *Kaiserkritik* can be misleading to that matter. But if we were to delve into his feelings towards Isaac at the time he served him, we may look into the historian's derogatory literary treatment of his friend and colleague Constantine Mesopotamites. The ambitious Mesopotamites, with whom the historian otherwise kept an active correspondence, likely earned his bad reputation in the *History* by not helping out Choniates and his family during their hardships after the catastrophe of 1204¹⁶. By way of analogy, the complaints against Isaac do not necessarily mean that Niketas disliked him as much as he made us think. Nevertheless, his close experience of the emperor is evident in the *History* and it undoubtedly influenced his *Kaiserkritik*, apart from the 'formal' motivations.

The neutral tone of the description of Isaac II avoids proper evaluation of his body image, although the quality of one's physical appearance is almost always in close connection with the status of the character within the work of Byzantine literature, as also seen in the *History*. For example, Choniates is careful not to offend the memory of Manuel I by avoiding an open statement about his dark complexion, a feature considered undesirable at the time; he obviously wanted to represent him as a good-looking, favorable character, even though he would later criticize some of his actions. The historian does not hold back his admiration for the manly physique of Andronikos I, despite of occasional and deliberate emphasis

¹⁴ CHONIATES, p. 402, 410.

¹⁵ Niketas was born between 1150 and 1160, with a later date being more likely (see A. SIMPSON, *Niketas Choniates...*, p. 12–13). Based on the quoted paragraph from the *History*, Isaac Angelos was born in 1156 (see K. ΒΑΡΖΟΣ, *Η γενεαλογία των Κομνηνών*, vol. II, Θεσσαλονίκη 1984, p. 807).

¹⁶ For an insight into Choniates' connection with Mesopotamites, see A. SIMPSON, *Niketas Choniates...*, p. 33–36.

on the latter's advanced age, meant to tarnish his overall imposing figure¹⁷. Choniates mentions nothing about the appearance of Alexios III, possibly due to a shift in the narrative focus in the books covering his reign, leading to the emperor no longer being the central figure¹⁸. Keeping in mind that the historian knew both Angeloi brothers very well, the somber tone of the narration on Alexios III, along with the depiction of the emperor as a man of feeble nature, give an impression of a personality that did not fascinate Choniates as much as Isaac did, for better or for worse. The omission of the physical description of Alexios III, especially when compared to the lively portrait of Isaac II, did not catch the attention of modern historians, even though it might be of great value for understanding individual depictions of the Angeloi brothers in the *History*, as well as the contemporary perception of their reigns. Preoccupation with events rather than with the title character was certainly induced by the magnitude of effects caused by the Fourth crusade, but the shift in focus could also be seen as one aspect of portraying Alexios III. The narration is passive, without distinct authorial presence, in contrast to the dynamic imperial biography of Isaac II, with whom Niketas is personally involved. The complete absence of his interaction with Alexios III, which certainly cannot be ruled out in reality, may speak of the weak impression that the emperor 'with the cotton bat' (Βαμβακοράβδης) has left on the historian¹⁹. Subtle variations in the narration style reflect the contrasting personalities of the Angeloi brothers, as well as their different status within the *History*, even though embittered historian identifies one with the other on several occasions, delivering them a joint guilty verdict for the calamities that befell the Empire with the arrival of the Venetian-crusader troops in 1203²⁰.

Choniates' motives aside, viewed from the perspective of the Byzantine ideal of (male) beauty, all of the listed body features in the description of Isaac Angelos meet its basic criteria. A light complexion prone to blushing, blond or red hair, a strong, healthy body, all these have been replicated throughout Byzantine literature as a set of the most appealing physical traits²¹. Narrative sources and eulogies from the Komnenoi and Angeloi era illustrate the importance of a desirable physical appearance very well. The *History* is not an exception, regardless of the scarcity of body images. Choniates is not indifferent to the beautiful people he

¹⁷ CHONIATES, p. 273, 345, 351. For the specific literary treatment of Andronikos I in the *History*, see R. SAXEY, *The Homeric Metamorphoses of Andronikos I Komnenos*, [in:] *Niketas Choniates. A Historian and a Writer*, ed. A. SIMPSON, S. EFTHYMIADIS, Geneva 2009, p. 124–143.

¹⁸ Cf. A. SIMPSON, *Niketas Choniates...*, p. 143–145.

¹⁹ In several manuscripts of the *History*, the nickname was included in the titles of the chapters on Alexios III.

²⁰ The best examples of this identification are Choniates' reversal of the Dioscuri myth and a fictional speech delivered by the Bulgarian leader Asen. See CHONIATES, p. 452, 466–467.

²¹ On the ideals of (male) beauty in Byzantium, with the focus on the Komnenoi era literature and related texts, see M. HATZAKI, *Beauty and Male Body in Byzantium. Perceptions and Representations in Art and Text*, New York 2009, p. 7–32, 60.

saw or knew of. The entourage of Andronikos I, made up of selected young men of tall stature and fair hair, the attractive, blonde Renier of Montferrat, the 'false Alexios' of Cilicia with his long, blond-red hair, all of them are perfect examples of Niketas' understanding of the dominant perception of masculine beauty²². The portrait of Isaac II fulfills all the requirements for a beautiful description; Myrto Hatzaki rightly singles him out as one of the examples of conventionally good-looking characters in the *History*²³. For reasons known to him only, Choniates wrote it down precisely the way he did, and left it untarnished. He did not have any grounds to deprive Isaac of his appropriate looks, as he did with his personality, although there is room to assume he would have done so if there was anything 'wrong' with the emperor's physiognomy. Niketas may not have left us many detailed descriptions, but he readily points to physical flaws in other men, including emperors, as examples of falling short of the ideal form. To name a few more besides Manuel I and Andronikos I, Choniates praises the excellence of military commanders Andronikos Lapardas and Alexios Branas, but he does not fail to mention that they were short in stature²⁴. Another good example is John Komnenos the Fat, the noble who rebelled against Alexios III, whose "body shaped like a barrel" earned him the unenviable nickname²⁵.

Orations to Isaac II unanimously praise the emperor's desirable physical traits, which is neither surprising nor necessarily indicative of authenticity. Nevertheless, the physical description of Isaac in the *History* closely aligns with the idealized representation of the emperor in the orations, despite the discrepancy between the rhetorical genre and historical account regarding his character. The metropolitan of Athens and brother of Niketas, Michael Choniates, glorifies the appearance of Isaac, comparing him to David, the future king of Israel, whom the Old Testament portrays as a handsome ruddy young man, that is, with reddish hair²⁶. George Tornikes expresses his desire for the emperor to have a long life, painting the motif of the latter's flaming hair turning into white as a symbol of the welcome old age²⁷. In his orations to Isaac, Niketas Choniates also likens him to David, referring specifically to the physical similarities between his emperor and the son

²² CHONIATES, p. 139, 171, 462.

²³ M. HATZAKI, *Beauty and Male Body in Byzantium...*, p. 141, note 21.

²⁴ CHONIATES, p. 263, 376.

²⁵ CHONIATES, p. 526.

²⁶ *Beatissimi Athenarum metropolitae, domini Michaelis Choniatae, panegyricus imperatori domino Isaacio Angelo dictus*, [in:] *Panegyricus Isaacio Angelo post Andronicum Comnenum regno pulsum*, ed. T.L.F. TAFEL, Tübingen 1846 (cetera: MICHAEL CHONIATES), p. 24; *ibidem*, note 43, emphasizes the change of terms in different manuscript versions of Choniates' description of Isaac, whereby *πυρρός*, used for the emperor's hair color, was replaced with *ξανθός*, another word designating reddish-blondish hair, pointing out the similarities between Choniates brothers' depiction of the same emperor.

²⁷ *Fontes rerum Byzantarum. Rhetorum saeculi XII orationes politicae*, vol. I.1–2, ed. V.E. REGEL, N.I. NOVOSADSKIJ, Leipzig 1982, p. 280.

of Jesse²⁸. Finally, in his long letter of praise, Michael Choniates draws the most logical conclusion – if the emperor looks like David, he then must be like David in every aspect²⁹.

The comparison between King David and Isaac II Angelos is not an innovative occurrence; orations to Isaac are largely an imitation of the panegyrics to Manuel I, whom his orators also ascribed ‘Davidian’ qualities³⁰. Theodore Prodromos explains Manuel’s right to the throne by pointing out that he was chosen by God for his virtue and not seniority, just like King David was³¹. Like David, Manuel was the youngest son and the ‘chosen one’ – his father, emperor John II Komnenos, designated Manuel as his heir, thus bypassing the rightful candidate for the throne, his older son Isaac. The encomiastic parallel between the biblical David and Isaac II Angelos may have been introduced on the same basis, since Isaac was likely the youngest of the six Angeloi brothers³². Either way, the distinguishing characteristic of the King David/Emperor Isaac parallel is the emphasis on their mutual physical resemblance. It must be noted that Choniates uses the same biblical formula of David’s red hair and delightful visage in his orations to Alexios III³³. However, in the *History* and related sources, there is not even a hint about the actual physical appearance of Alexios. Curiously enough, his portrait in *Mutinesis graecus 122* stands out from all the others in the manuscript and seems to be very different or even opposite from that of his brother Isaac, represented next to him. Unlike visibly red-haired Isaac, Alexios was portrayed with distinctively coal-black hair and beard³⁴. Nevertheless, there is enough argument to assume that Isaac II Angelos was indeed characterized by the set of conventionally appealing physical features, even though (or precisely because?) Choniates lists them in a neutral tone. For comparison, the authenticity of Ana Komnene’s splendid description of her father Alexios I is debatable. As argued in scholarship, it is probable that the princess modified the imperial portrait to fit the Byzantine beauty standard³⁵. Evoking the appearance of Alexios on the battlefield, she adorns the scene with a fine detail of her father’s *πυρσὴν καὶ ἠλιώσαν κόμην*, “red and sun-like hair”, falling into his

²⁸ *Nicetae Choniatae orationes et epistulae*, ed. J.-L. VAN DIETEN, Berlin–New York 1972 [= *CFHB*, 3] (cetera: *Nicetae Choniatae orationes et epistulae*), p. 32, 37, 98.

²⁹ MICHAEL CHONIATES, p. 24; H. MAGUIRE, *The Art of Comparing in Byzantium*, *ArtB* 70.1, 1988, p. 91.

³⁰ V. STANKOVIĆ, *Komnini u Carigradu (1057–1185). Evolucija jedne vladarske porodice*, Belgrade 2006, p. 254.

³¹ P. MAGDALINO, *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos, 1143–1181*, Cambridge 1993, p. 447.

³² G. Ostrogorski suggests that Isaac was the fifth son of Andronikos Angelos, with Theodore Angelos being the youngest (see G. OSTROGORSKI, *Iz vizantijske istoriografije i prosopografije*, Belgrade 1970, p. 335, note 47). However, Constantine Varzos proposes a different order, with Isaac Angelos being the sixth son (see K. ΒΑΡΖΟΣ, *Η γενεαλογία...*, vol. II, p. 716, note 5; p. 803).

³³ *Nicetae Choniatae orationes et epistulae*, p. 58.

³⁴ *Cronaca di Zonara e altri brevi testi di storia bizantina*, XIV–XV sec., Fondo Estense, Estense Library, Modena, <https://n2t.net/ark:/65666/v1/10903> [6 II 2025].

³⁵ M. HATZAKI, *Beauty and Male Body in Byzantium...*, p. 15–16.

eyes³⁶. Her earlier and more elaborate depiction of Alexios says nothing about the emperor's hair color, but does put an emphasis on his dark eyebrows. In addition, known visual sources represent Alexios with very dark hair. But there could be more to Choniates' description of Isaac than the accuracy regarding his assumedly fitting body image. The quoted passage may contain additional information, as the following discussion shall hopefully demonstrate.

The changes of certain terms in different versions and manuscripts of the *History* make Choniates' description of Isaac II even more interesting, possibly betraying either a different connotation or the duality of its meaning. In *Vaticanus graecus 1623*, designated A by van Dieten and belonging to the *a* version manuscript group, the term ὄψιν was replaced with ψυχὴν, thus alternating the meaning of the phrase φλογερὸς ὢν τὴν ὄψιν, which has typically been translated as 'of ruddy/red face', or literally, 'flaming face'³⁷. The term φλογερός, in relation to one's face, is in itself perplexing. In the book of the joint reign of Isaac II and Alexios IV, Choniates uses the whole phrase once again and in a rather peculiar way, bringing to life an almost infernal vision of the two Angeloi, the father and the son, "those firebrands of the country", οἱ τὴν ὄψιν φλογεροί, indifferent to the sufferings of their compatriots, as Constantinople suffocates in the flames set by their saviours-enemies from the West, in the eve of the catastrophe of 1204³⁸. The image of the *angelonymoi* father and son, "flaming in visage, thus personifying the incendiary angel of evil" is a masterful reversal of the 'angelic' propaganda of Isaac II, who from the ἀγγελουειδῆς emperor in Choniates' oration turns into no less than a fallen angel³⁹. But that is not all. Faces 'brilliant like fire', along with golden hair and fair, rosy skin are associated with the imagery of angels in the Byzantine literature, thus evoking the familiar set of the Byzantine beauty ideal characteristics, as pointed out by Hatzaki in a reference to the angels/eunuchs literary parallel⁴⁰. Given his excellent education, knowledge of written tradition and his own lavish style of narration, Choniates must have been well aware of the aforementioned angelic imagery. Unlike in his orations to Isaac II, the angelic image was reversed and used most ironically in this passage of the *History*. Concerning the term φλογεροί, it obviously does not denote Isaac's and Alexios' *color*, but their *role* in the unfortunate course of events. There is nothing unusual about that, for Byzantine color words, especially those used for describing people, often designate both the hue and the quality, and carry symbolic meanings. For example, the commonly used word for blond hair, ξανθός, has multiple connotations; it may signify light, color yellow, fire and good, and is associated with gold, thus symbolizing something of great value⁴¹.

³⁶ ANNA COMNENA, p. 135.

³⁷ See critical apparatus for CHONIATES, 452.17.

³⁸ CHONIATES, p. 556.

³⁹ *Nicetae Choniatae orationes et epistulae*, p. 28.

⁴⁰ Cf. M. HATZAKI, *Beauty and the Male Body in Byzantium...*, p. 94–95.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

The motif of a blazing, radiant face and/or eyes shining like fire is not exclusively associated with angels. It is a reoccurring phrasing in the Byzantine literature, typically reserved for favorable or awe-inspiring characters, described in terms of the Byzantine beauty standards – with white skin, blond/reddish hair, rosy cheeks, brilliant eyes. As a rule, ruddiness is associated with qualities of luminosity and healthy radiance. Throughout the Byzantine literature, there is a whole gallery of portraits characterized by the appealing, ruddy faces like Isaac in the *History*, in case that ‘a ruddy complexion’ was indeed the meaning of the phrase. Some of the excellent examples include good-looking individuals described by Michale Psellos, Michael Attelates and Anna Komnene. However, none of these authors uses *φλογερός* to denote either a ruddy face, brilliant eyes or an overall radiant appearance. Furthermore, the term does not occur in the Byzantine color words glossary in Liz James’ study on the perception of color in the Byzantine art. The lexicon is not exhaustive, as the author points out, but it introduces us to the most common sets of color words used in the description of people throughout the Byzantine literature⁴². On the one hand, the word choice of Choniates may reflect his desire for originality, while on the other it possibly betrays a specific connotation of the phrase. It is not unlikely that the distinguished historian chose the term precisely because of its multiple meanings. Indeed, *φλογερός* does designate the color red, that is, ‘fiery-red’, but it also points to the property of fire, a body that emits flames and illuminates the other object, thus painting it fiery-red, as in the above mentioned description of Isaac and his son. In *Monacensis graecus 450*, the earliest manuscript of the metaphrase of the *History*, designated B by Imanuel Bekker, *φλογερός* was replaced by *πυροειδής*, whereby the latter denotes rather the quality and not the color (of fire)⁴³. In Classical Greek, *φλογερός* is also used as a metaphor of passion, designating the ‘fiery’ nature of love, similarly to the use of the term in modern Greek.

In the revised phrase, the emperor’s ‘ruddy face’ becomes a character trait, since *ψυχή* by no means denotes a person’s appearance, but one’s spirit, soul, temperament. Francesco Cognasso may have been on the right track when he paraphrased Niketas’ description of Isaac, despite of his outdated interpretation of the *History*. To the list of the emperor’s characteristics already offered by Choniates, Cognasso added one more. He describes Isaac as “di mezza statura, robusto di corpo, acceso in viso, di capigliatura rossa, era un temperamento sanguigno”⁴⁴. Whether he wanted to imply that the emperor was a specific temperament type or simply wanted to say that his demeanor was generally sanguine, is not of the greatest importance for the purposes of this paper. Either way, the personality of Isaac II Angelos, as represented in the *History*, conspicuously falls under the sanguine type, in keeping with

⁴² L. JAMES, *Light and Colour in Byzantine Art*, Oxford 1996, p. 72–74.

⁴³ See critical apparatus for *Niketas Choniates Historia*, 596.3, ed. I. BEKKER, Bonn 1863.

⁴⁴ F. COGNASSO, *Un imperatore bizantino della decadenza: Isaaco II Angelo*, Rome 1915, p. 11 (my emphasis).

the old four temperaments theory. The concept of four temperaments rests upon Hippocrates' medicinal application of humorism; the famous Greek physician suggested that the human body contains four vital bodily fluids (humors) and that the optimal health is being achieved through their balance; the theory was adopted by the Byzantines and very much in spirit of Niketas' time⁴⁵. According to the four temperaments theory, sanguine people are characterized by the dominance of blood, resulting in a number of physical and psychological traits: they have light/reddish hair, gentle skin and fair complexion that is prone to blushing, they are cheerful in nature, their demeanor is typically free and open, but they also tend to be sensitive, easily irritated, impulsive, careless and frivolous, etc.⁴⁶ Isaac II has been ascribed *all* of these characteristics in the *History*; his *sanguine* traits make up a significant subject of the narrative, that is, of Choniates' *Kaiserkritik*. In fact, his whole personality and temperament are at the core of the account on his first reign.

The historian portrays Isaac with a wide range of predominately negative traits, which overshadow rare but precious positive remarks about this emperor. He is the most vigorously criticized title character in the *History*, including even Andronikos I, whose monstrosity is deliberately contrasted with his undeniable virtues, with no small amount of exaggeration of both⁴⁷. In addition, Andronikos' presence is almost mythical, characterized, among other things, by the trickster archetype attributes, while Isaac Angelos ultimately remains just a flawed human figure; in fact, an embodiment of the imperfect human nature⁴⁸. Moreover, Isaac is not a paradoxical character like his predecessor; there is no juxtaposition of his good and bad deeds, as in the case of Andronikos – if they were inappropriate, they are presented as a consequence of the emperor's imperfect persona; if decent and respectable, they are devalued by the same imperfections. Thus, for example, Isaac's love for his brother is shown as foolishness, his optimism as naivety, his piety as theatrical, his generosity as extravagance, etc. It must also be noted that unlike two other real contemporaries of Choniates, the aforementioned Andronikos and Alexios III, Isaac is not offered any redemption from the wrongdoings attributed to him in the narrative. Alexios was commended for his overall mild demeanor, while Andronikos earned the historian's respect for his heartfelt piety and dignity in his final hours. Conversely, most of previously admitted virtues of Isaac are rendered meaningless by the end of his reign.

⁴⁵ Cf. R. RADIĆ, *Drugo lice Vizantije*, Belgrade 2014, p. 74.

⁴⁶ *The Encyclopaedia Britannica. A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences and General Literature*, vol. XVII, ed. M. NAPIER, Edinburgh 1842, p. 696.

⁴⁷ Cf. A. KALDELLIS, *Paradox, Reversal and the Meaning of History*, [in:] *Niketas Choniates. A Historian...*, p. 95–96.

⁴⁸ For more on Choniates' portrayal of Andronikos Komnenos as a trickster figure, see T. LABUK, *Andronikos I Komnenos in Choniates' History: a Trickster Narrative?*, [in:] *Storytelling in Byzantium. Narratological Approaches to Byzantine Texts and Images*, ed. Ch. MESSIS, M. MULLETT, I. NILSSON, Uppsala 2018, p. 263–285.

In the assessment of the emperor's behaviors and deeds in the final book of the imperial biography, Choniates represents Isaac as a man quick to anger, but of a sympathetic nature. Thanks to the latter, his impulsive temperament was easily soothed and he would act out of kindness. He was compassionate, sensitive to misfortunes of others, eager to ease their sufferings⁴⁹. Although he acknowledges the emperor's virtue of empathy, the historian blames Isaac for his unfair judgment, haste in making decisions and generally acting on a whim. For example, Niketas criticizes him for forcefully tonsuring the unfortunate *caesar* Alexios Komnenos, wrongfully accused of plotting against the emperor. As the *History* tells us, Isaac soon regretted his rash decision, "proving once again that he acted out of caprice" and summoned Alexios back to the palace, although his act of repentance was shown with a great deal of irony and cynicism⁵⁰. Another illustrative example is his treatment of the fugitive hostages whom he was supposed to send to Frederick Barbarossa, according to their renewed oaths from February 1190. The selected individuals were afraid of the Germans, so they hid from the emperor. Furious, Isaac confiscated their property, deprived them of their offices and named new hostages. However, he soon discerned that the fugitives' actions were not motivated by disobedience, but by justified fear, so he revoked all the sanctions⁵¹. In other words, it appears that he sympathized with these men, even if there were practical reasons for sparing them.

Choniates frequently complains about the frivolity of the emperor's character, paired with inconsistency in his actions. According to the *History* and contrary to the traditional image of Isaac II in modern historiography, the emperor did not lack statesmanship skills, but persistence in his endeavors. Choniates compares him to a competitor on the stadium who would succumb to fatigue too early in the race. As he easily grew tired of running the empire, his good intentions faded, and he eventually passed the reins of administration into the hands of his uncle Theodore Kastamonites and then to young Constantine Mesopotamites. At a certain point of his reign, Isaac went so far in his negligence of the role he was supposed to carry that he allowed his uncle to use purple horse trappings and military cloak, and sign documents with the ink of same color – all those being prerogatives of the Emperor of the Romans⁵². Niketas is openly displeased with the amount of influence Kastamonites and Mesopotamites exerted on Isaac, as well as with that of the latter's lifelong companion, the monk Dositheos, whom the stubborn emperor elevated to the patriarchal seat at all cost⁵³. The defamation of these characters, especially Dositheos and prophecies of universal rule with which he flattered the emperor, serves to present Isaac as passive and pliable. However, despite of their

⁴⁹ CHONIATES, p. 446.

⁵⁰ CHONIATES, p. 425–427.

⁵¹ CHONIATES, p. 411.

⁵² CHONIATES, p. 437–439.

⁵³ CHONIATES, p. 407.

obvious influence, all three men are secondary figures to the protagonist Isaac, whose portrait is only deepened thanks to their characterization. The *active* status of Isaac II in the *History* comes to the fore when compared to that of Alexios III. Empress Euphrosyne Kamatera, who plays an outstanding role in Alexios' imperial biography, and the aforementioned Mesopotamites, whose engagement is far greater than in the narrative on Isaac II, seem equal with the title character; both are harshly criticized and represented as being too powerful. In other words, Isaac is the *real* protagonist, he owns his decisions and actions, including those concerning other characters, while Alexios appears to be one of the several prominent actors, helpless, docile and literarily distant.

The imperial biography of Isaac II leaves an impression of a reign that was characterized by spontaneous bursts of energy and zeal rather than by consistent effort. This dynamic is especially reflected in Choniates' view on his military activity. As inconsistent, inattentive and frivolous, the historian criticizes the emperor's initial approach to the war against Peter and Asen and later complains about his too short stay in the province, blamed on Isaac's impatience to return to the joys of the capital and delights of Propontis⁵⁴. It should be noted, however, that the detailed account of the campaign of 1187, in which Niketas participated in the capacity of imperial undersecretary, is commendable of Isaac, especially when it comes to the latter's personal engagement with war tactics and leadership in combat⁵⁵. The historian does not fail to mention that the reason for launching this particular expedition were previous failures in the war against the 'Second Bulgarian Empire', but he readily welcomes Isaac's decision to once again head the imperial troops and speaks rather approvingly of his actions. This acknowledgment carries special weight precisely because of Choniates' first-hand involvement, regardless of the dissatisfying outcome of the expedition. At this point in the *History*, even the much-criticized Isaac II, whose war prowess was celebrated by Niketas-the- orator, will briefly fit the dominant Komnenian warrior-emperor ideal⁵⁶. In fact, this image of Isaac as a pleasure-loving but fighting sovereign is irresistibly reminiscent of Choniates' portrait of Manuel I, known both for his hedonistic lifestyle and martial bravery, although it is much less captivating⁵⁷. In addition, the last campaign that Isaac led against the Bulgarians in 1195 was organized with great

⁵⁴ CHONIATES, p. 373, 399.

⁵⁵ CHONIATES, p. 394.

⁵⁶ On the Komnenian ideal of the emperor-warrior, see V. STANKOVIĆ, *Komnini u Carigradu...*, p. 209–218.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 254, indicates that the orations to Isaac II were modeled after the panegyrics dedicated to Manuel I. Therefore, Choniates' encomiastic portrayal of Isaac as a warrior-emperor can easily be explained by the influence of orations to Manuel. However, the similarity between the description of Isaac II and Manuel I in the *History* could be understood with a reverse logic, that is, as an influence of *Isaac's* portrait on that of Manuel, bearing in mind that Niketas had immediate experience exclusively of Isaac II.

care, dedication and zeal on the emperor's part, although Choniates stubbornly refuses openly to praise Isaac, depriving him of his innate virtues by presenting them as a Lord's gift to a man whose downfall is imminent⁵⁸.

Ever optimistic, Isaac took emperorship lightheartedly, convinced that his throne was safe, regardless of many attempts of usurpation; such a careless attitude towards running the state was one of his greatest 'sins' in the *History*. Choniates portrays him as a man susceptible to 'novel tales', especially those uttered by Dositheos, who even foretold his ascension to the throne and thus earned a secure place by the emperor's side. Even though certain level of credulity is likely, especially if we accept that the coup of 1185 was accidental, it is not at all inconceivable that the cunning Isaac consciously manipulated Dositheos' divine insights, such as the latter's ingenious conclusion about God granting him six out of the nine years originally intended for Andronikos I, who was deservingly deprived of the throne after only three. Since the 'transferred' years bore the 'bad quality' of Andronikos, the new emperor had the perfect excuse for the hardships during the first six years of his reign. Unconvinced, Niketas points out that after the end of the 'haunted' period nothing changed at all; in other words, the cause of the troubled times was Isaac himself, *as he was*, while Dositheos was nothing more than a sycophant⁵⁹. However, such a disclosure contradicts the characterization of Isaac as foolish and gullible.

On the other hand, Niketas does not belittle Vasilaki, the odd man who was some sort of a local attraction in Thrace, believed to have prophetic abilities. Isaac visited him during the 1195 campaign only to witness an offensive performance in which Vasilaki predicted his fall from power. Isaac declared the man a fool, but Choniates does not interpret it as a sign of the emperor's common sense; he sees it as another of his bad judgments. Of course, the historian writes with the benefit of hindsight, but open recognition of Vasilaki's clairvoyance appears unusual, especially given Choniates' contempt for divination, magic, astrology, etc. Moreover, the *accurate* prediction of Isaac's rise to power is not mentioned for the sake of proving that Dositheos possessed divine abilities or that the emperor had the right to call upon it, but to highlight Dositheos' influence on Isaac⁶⁰. Encouraged by his favorite, the emperor envisioned universal rule and his own messianic role as the liberator of Palestine, writes Choniates, deliberately concealing the origin of these ideas in the known textual tradition, so to portray Isaac as swayed by Dositheos' nonsensical deliberations⁶¹. In reality, the aforementioned themes were a part of the official imperial propaganda, exploited by Choniates himself in

⁵⁸ CHONIATES, p. 446–447.

⁵⁹ CHONIATES, p. 433; P. MAGDALINO, *Prophecy and Divination in the History*, [in:] *Niketas Choniates. A Historian...*, p. 67.

⁶⁰ CHONIATES, p. 405.

⁶¹ P. MAGDALINO, *Prophecy and Divination in the History...*, p. 70.

his orations to Isaac. One must not forget that credulity is a common theme in the *History* and does not apply to Isaac II alone, but to other emperors as well. Moreover, preoccupation with prophecies as the cause and/or manifestation of Isaac's complete departure from reality occurs only in the gloomy narrative of his second reign (1203–1204). The sad and extremely degrading depiction of the weak, blind emperor, surrounded by self-serving, devious foretellers greatly differs from the image of the confident, albeit stubborn and capricious Isaac from the imperial biography, whose good qualities such as compassion, likeability and even courage survived Choniates' cynicism.

Unfortunately for Isaac, his inclination towards seeing the better side of things left him blindfolded to dangers in his immediate surroundings. Referring to the *History* as the primary source regarding the personality of this emperor, Constantine Varzos noted that Isaac II was more inclined towards acting on emotion, rather than reason, which perfectly corresponds with his φλογερός nature⁶². Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of his total disregard for warnings against his beloved brother Alexios – a tragic oversight that ultimately cost him his eyes, his crown, and his freedom⁶³. However, Choniates treats Isaac's unconditional love for Alexios with a lot of ambivalence, if not irony alone, as interpreted by Anthony Kaldellis⁶⁴. The emperor's *philadelphia* is not represented as a virtue, even though by all means it must be considered a noble trait. It is justified by a philosophical thought on human frailty; the Nature must have implanted within us the passion for our closest kin and friends, turning us blind to all their evils, writes Niketas⁶⁵. The mistake of Isaac trusting his brother is somewhat mitigated by the sentimental approach to Alexios' betrayal, which the historian clearly disapproves. However, Choniates laments over the coup of 1195 because of the catastrophic consequences of the fratricidal habits of his compatriots, the weakening of the Empire and its reputation, rather than out of sympathy for the unfortunate Isaac. Ultimately, "the love that was indelibly branded into the depths of his [Isaac's] soul" is seen as a fault, another proof of the character's recklessness. But if we were to dig deeper into the layers of Choniates' sentiment, we might catch a trace of understanding and even compassion. "For what could be closer and more trustful than a brother, and he beloved?", asks the historian, whose *στοργή* towards his own older brother is well documented; Michael Choniates was not only the closest sibling of Niketas, but also a fatherly figure, his guardian, pedagogue and tutor, the one whom he certainly trusted with his own life⁶⁶.

⁶² K. ΒΑΡΖΟΣ, *Η γενεαλογία...*, vol. II, p. 837.

⁶³ CHONIATES, p. 448.

⁶⁴ A. KALDELLIS, *Paradox, Reversal and the Meaning of History...*, p. 85.

⁶⁵ CHONIATES, p. 447–448.

⁶⁶ A. SIMPSON, *Niketas Choniates...*, p. 14.

When analyzing the portrayal of Isaac II in the *History*, one should always be careful not to overlook Choniates' intentional omission of the motives behind some of the emperor's actions, the exaggeration of his flaws, or deliberate diminishing of his virtues, because it can lead to the assumption that Isaac II was immoral, gullible and unreasonable to the point of absurdity. In pursue of historical accuracy, yet bound by circumstances in which he had been writing and rewriting his work, Niketas Choniates consciously included and avoided certain elements of the past, especially when it comes to character portrayals. He does not lie about any of them, but caricatures their traits for the purpose of proving his point – the decline of the Empire due to the decadence of its leaders, those who were supposed to represent *virī optimi* amongst the Romans. Contextual, *close reading* of the *History* shows that Isaac II was not just a vain, self-indulgent ruler, as he was perceived by the majority of modern historians, due to an insufficiently critical approach to Choniates' account⁶⁷.

It is of great importance to note what Choniates *does not* say about Isaac. For that matter, the historian is very articulate about Isaac's ostentatiousness and the sybaritic banquets he frequented, enjoying the 'low' company of entertainers and concubines, but apart from the latter's penchant for 'lewd songs', nowhere in the entire *History* is there even a hint the about the emperor's licentious behavior, which cannot be said of the lustful (and incestuous!) Manuel I and Andronikos I, for instance. Bearing in mind Choniates' persistence in tarnishing the image of Isaac II, it is inconceivable that he would have left out information of that sort, if he had any, just as he could not wreak any damage to his physical description. When it comes to concealing the emperor's meaningful intentions, the case point might be the account on the restoration of the *katholikon* in the monastery of Saint Michael the Archangel in Anaplous/Sosthenion⁶⁸. Niketas represents it as just another of Isaac's 'mad passions', purposefully ignoring the motivation behind such an undertaking. Fully in keeping with the imperial tradition of his predecessors, the *angelonymos* Isaac sought a fitting religious object to turn into a personal shrine, a monument to his reign, and the place of eternal rest, as Kaliroi Linadro surmises⁶⁹. Instead, Choniates portrays him as a prodigal, a vain megalomaniac, obsessed with an illusion of his own greatness.

⁶⁷ Hereby it implies a deeply interpretative approach to narrative sources, the understanding of the text that is not limited to its manifest layer. Close reading can be understood as analogous to the term of *thick description* used by the anthropologist Clifford Gertz for ethnography, only in reverse order. For a basic insight into Gertz's approach see A. BOŠKOVIĆ, *Kratak uvod u antropologiju*, Belgrade 2010, p. 101. Cf. A. SIMPSON, *Niketas Choniates...*, p. 182.

⁶⁸ CHONIATES, p. 442–443. In recent literature, it was suggested that the two locations of the monastery dedicated to Saint Michael the Archangel mentioned in Byzantine sources actually refer to the same place. See K. LINARDOU, *A Resting Place for the First of the Angels': The Michaelion at Sosthenion*, [in:] *Byzantium, 1180–1204. 'The Sad Quarter of a Century?'*, ed. A. SIMPSON, Athens 2015, p. 248.

⁶⁹ K. LINARDOU, *A Resting Place for the First of the Angels'...*, p. 259.

As a sovereign, Isaac II was apparently likeable and charismatic enough to remain “beloved by many even after his deposition from the throne” – an observation that the *History* states as a fact⁷⁰. Prone to impulsive reactions and acting out of strong emotions, fueled by intermittent bursts of energy and inspiration, he surely was successful in using his assets to gather popular support and create a fairly attractive imperial image⁷¹. It must be noted that, at the very beginning of Isaac’s imperial biography, Niketas writes about the popularity of the new emperor, while the episode of the rebellion in Nicaea against Andronikos I (1184) clearly suggests that he enjoyed a certain degree of prestige even before ascending the throne⁷². Furthermore, it appears that Isaac II was cherished by his subjects, especially in Constantinople, whose inhabitants remained faithful to him throughout his reign, unyielding before usurpers who challenged his imperial right⁷³. If we silence Niketas’ judgmental tone and embrace the complexity of the characterization of this emperor, we would be able to see a realistic portrait of a charismatic, yet temperamental figure, endowed with noble qualities besides innate human flaws, and a ruler who was well aware of his circumstances, consciously investing into the foundation of a compelling imperial image.

In conclusion, the ending passage of the account on the first reign of Isaac II Angelos with which we opened our discussion contains more details than it first appears. Seemingly an unbiased, plain physical description, a set of body features characteristic of one particular individual, it is both a summary and a completion of the entire portrayal of the emperor as represented in the *History*, in all its ambiguity. Apart from the standard information on the duration of Isaac’s reign, Choniates lists the most distinctive outer and inner characteristics of his protagonist – the latter’s appearance and (almost precise) age, of which we know nothing certain until the very end of the imperial biography, and his temperament, which permeates the greater part of the narrative and is, in fact, at the core of the portrayal. It appears that both the emperor’s disposition and complexion were φλογεροί; Isaac was, after all, πυρσός/ξανθός, while Choniates surely put a lot of effort into illustrating his passionate nature.

The listed physical traits place Isaac amongst conventionally attractive characters in the Byzantine literature, although the *History* does not portray him as a man of exceptional beauty. Furthermore, if observed in isolation from the rest of the text, it does not betray the status of the character within the narrative. Given its neutral tone, the description is almost certainly authentic. Choniates neither had reason to embellish Isaac’s image in order to make him more favorable nor

⁷⁰ CHONIATES, p. 446.

⁷¹ Cf. A. SIMPSON, *Perceptions and Interpretations of the Late Twelfth Century in Modern Historiography*, [in:] *Byzantium, 1180–1204...*, p. 29–30.

⁷² CHONIATES, p. 356, 284. Cf. C. BRAND, *Byzantium Confronts the West, 1180–1204*, Cambridge MA 1968, p. 79.

⁷³ Cf. A. SIMPSON, *Perceptions and Interpretations...*, p. 29–30.

did he hid the latter's actual (desirable) features, aiming for historical accuracy and representation of his most developed character into even more tangible details. As mentioned, the description of Isaac in the *History* matches the encomiastic tradition, proving there is some truthfulness behind the rhetorical glorification of the emperor's appearance.

Isaac II Angelos is the most realistic of all emperors in the *History*, the closest to the reader and the most relatable one, despite of all literary distortion; he is the embodiment of Choniates' philosophical-anthropological thought on human nature. His character possesses sophisticated complexity not so easily discernible at the surface of the text, which projects an oversimplified, caricatured image of an arrogant, (self)deluded sovereign. The outdated, typically negative image of Isaac II in modern historiography is built on the manifest level of Choniates' multi-layered historical narrative, defined by a complicated composition process, which in itself is the key to understanding the historian's approach and writing motivation. More recent studies focused on the last quarter of the Byzantine twelfth century initiated much needed process of revising the traditional view of the so-called *imperatore della decadenza*, as Isaac was labeled by Cognasso more than a century ago. What we wanted to draw attention to is the importance of looking at the image of Isaac II in the *History* in its entirety, taking into account somewhat neglected aspects of the portrayal, such as his uniquely delivered physical description, the positive comments about the emperor, comparison to related title characters (with an emphasis on Alexios III), and especially the historian's firsthand impression of his personality.

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