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THE FAMILY STRATEGY FOR PURPLE – COMPARING THE METHODS OF ANDRONIKOS I AND ALEXIOS I KOMNENOS OF CONSTRUCTING IMPERIAL POWER*

Through accomplishing the coup d'état in 1081, Alexios Komnenos and his whole family turned out to be victorious, in almost thirty years of controversy over the legacy of the extinct Macedonian dynasty. This event also means the definitive victory of the aristocracy in the struggle for power in the Empire¹. During his long 37-year reign, Alexios I drastically changed the state, carrying out reforms that inseparably connected the Komnenian dynasty with the apparatus of power². His system of hierarchical dignities granted according to the degree of kinship contributed to the ongoing process of aristocratization of the Byzantine society and made it possible to create a faction consisting of many families. This enabled stabilization of the internal situation of the state, until the death of his grandson, Manuel I Komnenos³.

Almost a hundred years later, in 1182, a grandson of Alexios I, Andronikos Komnenos, made an attempt to take over the crown, taking advantage of the period of weakening of the imperial power in the hands of the regents. The juvenile Alexios II, the only legitimate son of Manuel I Komnenos, was under the influence of his mother, empress Mary of Antioch, and her lover, *protosebastos* Alexios Komnenos. Setting off from Oinaion in Paphlagonia, Andronikos carried out the first successful coup since the establishment of the Komnenoi. He was ultimately

* This article is an extended version of a paper presented during the First Colloquia Ceranea International Conference in Łódź in April 2019.

¹ M. ANGOLD, *Introduction*, [in:] *The Byzantine Aristocracy IX to XIII Centuries*, ed. M. ANGOLD, Oxford 1984, p. 4.

² P. BUCKLEY, *The Alexiad of Anna Komnene. Artistic Strategy in the Making of a Myth*, Cambridge 2014, p. 84.

³ On Alexios' reforms cf. P. MAGDALINO, *Innovations in Government*, [in:] *Alexios I Komnenos. Papers of the Second Belfast Byzantine International Colloquium 14–16 April 1989*, ed. M. MULLETT, D. SMYTHE, Belfast 1996 [= BBT, 4.1], p. 146–166.

acclaimed as an autokrator of the Romans. However, unlike his grandfather's, his power turned out to be ephemeral, and the attempt to start a new chapter in the history of the Komnenoi dynasty ended in a complete failure. The defeat suffered in 1185 as a result of the takeover of power by Isaakios Angelos, ended not only with the tragic death of Andronikos I Komnenos, but also removed forever the decimated and discredited male line of descendants of Alexios Komnenos from Constantinople. All of this in just five years after the death of such an authority and undeniable family head as Manuel I Komnenos.

The short and turbulent reign of Andronikos I therefore marks the end of the period that can be called the "Komnenian restoration"⁴. Well aware of that were contemporary historians such as Eustathios of Thessaloniki. He stated that with the death of Manuel Komnenos, *collapsed [...] everything that was firm among the Greeks*⁵. Niketas Choniates as well states that from that moment on the fate of the Romans took a hopeless direction⁶. In fact, the years 1180–1204 comprise a separate period, characterized as the time of the political collapse of the Byzantine Empire, analogous to the second half of the 11th century. However in spite of this, the reign, as well as the figure of Andronikos Komnenos, has not lately received particular research attention⁷. The only full monograph devoted to this extremely

⁴ The term "Komnenian restoration" refers to a theory according to which the period between 1081 and 1180 was a time of a political, cultural and military expansion under the rule of the three emperors from the Komnenian dynasty. This point of view traces back at least to Ferdinand Chalandon's works, cf. F. CHALANDON, *Essai sur le règne d'Alexis Ier Comnène (1081–1118)*, Paris 1900, p. I. Modern historians tend to evaluate Alexios', John's and Manuel's achievements with more reserve, cf. M. ANGOLD, *Belle époque or crisis? (1025–1118)*, [in:] *The Cambridge History of the Byzantine Empire*, ed. J. SHEPARD, Cambridge 2008, p. 624–626; W. TREADGOLD, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society*, Stanford 1997, p. 612–666.

⁵ EUSTATHIOS OF THESSALONIKI, *The Capture of Thessaloniki. A Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, ed. et trans. J.R. MELVILLE JONES, Canberra 1988 [= BAus, 8] (cetera: EUSTATHIOS), p. 18–19. Cited here English edition of Eustathios uses reprinted Greek edition by Stilpon Kyriakides, cf. EUSTAZIO DI TESSALONICA, *La espugnazione di Tessalonica*, ed. S. KYRIAKIDIS, B. LAVAGNINI, trans. V. ROTOLO, Palermo 1961. About Eustathios's works cf. *Reading Eustathios of Thessalonike*, ed. F. PONTANI, V. KATSAROS, V. SARRIS, Berlin 2017.

⁶ *Nicetae Choniatae Historia*, vol. I, rec. I.A. VAN DIETEN, Berolini 1975 [= CFHB, 11] (cetera: CHONIATES), p. 223. On Choniates history work cf. A. SIMPSON, *Niketas Choniates. A Historiographical Study*, Oxford 2013; T. URBAINCZYK, *Writing About Byzantium. The History of Niketas Choniates*, London 2018 [= BBOS].

⁷ Since the publication of Jean-Claude CHEYNET's *Pouvoir et contestations à Byzance (963–1210)* in 1990 (Paris), which offered some reinterpretations on the subject, the reign of Andronikos I has rarely been the main research focus. Yet some contributions from the last 30 years are worth mentioning such as: N. SAVVAS, *Andronikos I Komnenos: Tyrant of Twelfth-century Europe*, MHJ 22, 1, 2019, p. 1–39; IDEM, «*Tyrannus Grecorum*». *The Image and Legend of Andronikos I Komnenos in Latin Historiography*, MG 12, 2012, p. 195–284; H. MAGOULIAS, *Andronikos I Komnenos: a Greek Tragedy*, BΣΥΜ 21, 2011, p. 101–136; N. GAUL, *Andronikos Komnenos, Prinz Belthandros und der Zyklus*, BZ 96, 2003, p. 623–660; E. PAPAGIANNI, *Andronic Ier Comnène et Jean VI Cantacuzène. Deux exemples*

interesting figure is still the work of Oktawiusz Jurewicz from 1962⁸. In numerous works on the history of the 12th century, this five-year episode between the reigns of Manuel I and Isaakios II, is described primarily in terms of two dominant views following the narratives of Choniates and Eustathios⁹. The first of these highlights the reforming activity of the usurper who tried to improve the situation of the population living in the provinces of the Empire, harassed by corrupt tax collectors. However, his actions went much further. Supposedly, he was trying to restrain the influence of aristocracy and completely reorganize the internal affairs of the empire. This issue was particularly emphasized by Alexander Každan who in his work presented Andronikos Komnenos as a reformer trying to return to the bureaucratic style of governance, similar to this of the Macedonian dynasty¹⁰.

The second view is that his reign was a reaction to the Latin influence in the court of Manuel I. According to this theory, Andronikos was playing the role of the leader of an anti-Latin party of unspecified composition. This would explain both his rebellious actions from before 1180 and the massacre of the Latin population in 1182. This point of view, especially outlined by Georg Ostrogorsky¹¹, became the basis for building a narrative about this short reign. Both of these theories met with criticism taken up by Jean-Claude Cheynet, who came to the conclusion that Andronikos' actions did not distinguish him drastically from his predecessors. They fit into the trends of 12th century imperial governance style, characterized by the participation of a group of relatives and allied aristocrats, as well as benefiting from the services of newcomers from Western Europe¹².

However, the coming to power and the rule of Andronikos I Komnenos may also be considered in terms of the changing situation of the Byzantine aristocracy, in particular of the so-called "clan" of the Komnenoi. Following this thought, the changes in the structure of the elites that took place during this period have their consequences in the process of the fall of the imperial authority, characteristic of the twenty years preceding the Fourth Crusade. In order to show the transformations that took place in the century long rule of the Komnenoi dynasty, a reference point is needed. The coup of Andronikos was the first successful takeover of power in the Byzantine Empire since the reign of his grandfather Alexios, whose rule is also a turning point in the internal situation of the Empire. The comparison

d'usurpation de pouvoir ou deux aspects de résistance, [in:] *Antichità e rivoluzioni da Roma a Costantinopoli a Mosca. Rendiconti del XIII Seminario. Campidoglio, 21 aprile 1993*, Roma 1998, p. 225–235; A. EASTMOND, *An Intentional Error? Imperial Art and "Mis"-Interpretation under Andronikos I Komnenos*, *ArtB* 76, 3, 1994, p. 502–510.

⁸ O. JUREWICZ, *Andronik I Komnenos*, Wrocław 1962.

⁹ CHONIATES, p. 325–326; EUSTATHIOS, p. 36–38.

¹⁰ А.П. КАЖДАН, *Социальный состав господствующего класса Византии XI–XII вв.*, Москва 1974, p. 264.

¹¹ G. OSTROGORSKY, *Geschichte des byzantinischen Staates*, München 1963, p. 326–327.

¹² J.-C. CHEYNET, *Pouvoir...*, p. 433–435.

of these two emperors, therefore, seems to be the most obvious method that will characterize the changes which have taken place in the social and aristocratic structure in the Byzantine Empire over the course of one century.

The way of coming to power and constructing the imperial authority characteristic of Alexios I Komnenos is also reflected in his grandson's actions which were very similar in many respects. Both of them waited for the right moment to openly stand up against the ruler. In the case of the brothers Alexios and Isaakios, they chose the moment of weakening of the authority of imperial power during the rule of Nikephoros III Botaniates. This emperor, who was already at an advanced age, gained power as a result of a rebellion which removed from the throne Michael VII Doukas, a representative of one of the dominant aristocratic families at that time¹³. The rule of Botaniates was marked by corruption and squandering of the means of the Empire. On top of that, there was a looming threat of Normans from Italy who were dissatisfied with the removal of the Doukas family from the throne, and of Seljuk Turks who were advancing through Anatolia towards Aegean Sea and Propontis¹⁴. He was also unable to secure a succession after his death because he did not have male descendants. Thus, he appointed Nikephoros Synadenos as his successor, which, of course, did not meet with the approval of the Doukai and gave a spark to start a rebellion¹⁵.

Andronikos chose the moment of disarray after the death of Manuel I. The juvenile Alexios II, under the care of the regency council, became only a bargaining card for ambitious individuals within the extended Komnenos family. The dynasty's discrediting affair between the widow-empress Mary and *protosebastos* Alexios was a signal that initiated Andronikos' action. He was awaiting his opportunity at his seat in Paphlagonian Oinaion, where he was sent by Manuel a few months before his death¹⁶. Similarly to the situation from an earlier century, the crisis of the imperial authority became the basis for the pretender.

Both Alexios and Andronikos, at least officially, played a role of the defender of the rightful heir. The first of them, bound to the family of the former emperors by a marriage with Irene Doukas, decided to protect the interests of the young son of Michael VII – Konstantinos from the Doukas family¹⁷. The latter used to his advantage the oath made to his imperial cousin, according to which he was

¹³ D. POLEMIS, *The Doukai. A Contribution to Byzantine Prosopography*, London 1968, p. 8–10; J.F. HALDON, *Social Élités, Wealth, and Power*, [in:] *The Social History of Byzantium*, ed. J.F. HALDON, Chichester 2009, p. 182.

¹⁴ NICÉPHORE BRYENNIOS, *Histoire*, IV, 1, rec. P. GAUTIER, Bruxelles 1975 [= *CFHB*, 9] (cetera: BRYENNIOS), p. 256–257. On Bryennios' work cf. L.A. NEVILLE, *Heroes and Romans in Twelfth-Century Byzantium. The Material for History of Nikephoros Bryennios*, Cambridge 2012.

¹⁵ *Annae Comnenae Alexias*, II, 2, 1, vol. I, rec. D.R. REINSCH, A. KAMBLYS, Berlin 2001 [= *CFHB*. *SBe*, 40] (cetera: KOMNENE), p. 57–58.

¹⁶ CHONIATES, p. 227.

¹⁷ KOMNENE, III, 4, 6, p. 82.

to remain faithful to his descendants inheriting power¹⁸. He therefore officially protested against the arbitrary *protosebastos* who ruled as if from behind Mary of Antioch. The aim was to protect the young Alexios II and that met with general approval from the aristocratic elite of the empire, headed by the older stepsister of the juvenile emperor – *kaisarissa* Maria Komnene¹⁹.

The key to carrying out a successful coup was also getting the support of the population and the army. Alexios Komnenos, as a famous commander, was the soldiers' favourite²⁰. His actions were also supported by members of the close family, that is his brothers Isaakios, Adrianos and Nikephoros, and many members of prominent aristocratic families such as Palaiologos, Pakourianos and Doukas²¹. The support of the latter was ensured by his and his brother Adrianos' marriage to Doukai brides. The proper preparation of the family for the possibility of returning to power was taken care of by Anna Dalassene, mother of Alexios. She connected her children through the bonds of marriage with powerful families, including the descendants of the Roman emperor Roman IV Diogenes²². With such support, Alexios was able to set off for capital, believing in his victory.

Andronikos may not have been in such a comfortable position as his grandfather, but in 1182 he was also widely supported in Constantinople. He made up for the shortcomings in the network of alliances with his appearance and predispositions that made him "worthy of the Empire"²³. He was awaited by the opponents of *protosebastos* Alexios, who were the highest-ranking members of the Komnenoi family, including his sons, John and Manuel, as well as the city population itself²⁴. In addition, he could count on the support of the mercenary Paphlagonians. They did not constitute a great force, but they turned out to be enough. When the Angeloi and the commander of the imperial fleet, Andronikos Konostephanos, also defected to his side, the victory of Andronikos became certain²⁵.

After winning and taking over the emperor's title, both emperors focused on consolidating their power. This meant the consistent neutralization of potential pretenders. Alexios, crowning himself in 1081, had a difficult task ahead of him. The instability of imperial power that characterized the previous period meant that there were many ambitious individuals (including *porphyrogenets* predestined for the role of the emperor by birth), potentially dangerous to him²⁶. These include:

¹⁸ CHONIATES, p. 227–228.

¹⁹ CHONIATES, p. 230.

²⁰ KOMNENE, II, 7, 7, p. 75.

²¹ A. CAMERON, *The Byzantines*, Oxford 2006, p. 42.

²² BRYENNIOS, I, 6, p. 84–87.

²³ CHONIATES, p. 103.

²⁴ CHONIATES, p. 230–231.

²⁵ CHONIATES, p. 248.

²⁶ P. FRANKOPAN, *The Fall of Nicaea and the Towns of Western Asia Minor to the Turks in the later 11th Century: the Curious Case of Nikephoros Melissenos*, B 76, 2006, p. 165.

the Diogenes brothers, Nikephoros Melissenos, Nikephoros Synadenos, Konstantinos Doukas and another Konstantinos Doukas²⁷. It took almost 20 years to eliminate the threat coming from them²⁸. Particularly problematic was the issue of young Konstantinos Doukas, son of Michael VII, who – as part of an agreement with his family – was appointed successor to the throne and engaged to the first daughter of Alexios – Anna. However, when John was born in 1087, it was only a matter of time before Doukas would be stripped of titles. Soon his protector and mother, the empress-widow Maria of Alania, was forced to join a monastery, and her son was deprived of the title of successor in favour of the emperor's eldest son²⁹. After the unsuccessful assassination attempt of Nikephoros Diogenes circa 1095, Alexios' power and the succession of his son John were properly secured.

Century later Andronikos turned first against Alexios II and his regents. In the long run, however, the threat to his power were numerous "clan", in particular, the relatives of Manuel I Komnenos. However, the actions of the usurper went too far, and open hostility towards the Komnenoi threatening his power had become the reason for alienation in the aristocratic environment. The neutralization of potential claimants as in the case of Alexios was aimed at ensuring succession to Andronikos' son John³⁰.

A very important element in the politics of both discussed emperors was to base their power on the faithful party consisting of relatives. As already mentioned, before he acquired purple, Alexios had the support of other aristocratic families. In the course of his reign, his numerous children, and especially daughters, allowed for the construction of a party based on blood ties and initiated the "clan" family structure that exercised power throughout the 12th century. Andronikos tried to act in the same way, but the extent to which he managed to implement this kind of policy was very limited. There were two reasons for that. Firstly, his closest family consisted of very few members, not allowing for alliances through marriages. Secondly, the enmity of aristocratic elites caused alienation and constricted the ability to establish a faction³¹.

Finally, the role of imperial power propaganda that both Alexios and Andronikos used must not be overlooked. They undertook actions reforming certain

²⁷ Leo and Nikephoros Diogenes were *porphyrogennets* and sons of Romanos IV, the latter plotted against Alexios, cf. KOMNENE, IX, 5, 5, p. 269–270. Nikephoros Melissenos was a brother-in-law of Alexios and his rival before his ascension to the throne, cf. KOMNENE, II, 8, 1, p. 75. Nikephoros Synadenos was designated by Nikephoros III as a successor, see note 13. The two Doukai were sons of emperors Konstantinos X and Michael VII, cf. D. POLEMIS, *The Doukai...*, p. 48–53, 60–63.

²⁸ By ca. 1100, all of the potential pretenders were either dead or irrelevant in the court. The dynastic plans of Alexios were finally confirmed after the unsuccessful plot of Nikephoros Diogenes, cf. J.-C. CHEYNET, *Pouvoir...*, p. 370.

²⁹ KOMNENE, III, 4, 7, p. 97; B. SKOULATOS, *Les personnages byzantins de l'Alexiade. Analyse prosopographique et synthèse*, Louvain 1980, p. 59.

³⁰ EUSTATHIOS, 45, p. 54; CHONIATES, p. 324.

³¹ CHONIATES, p. 269.

aspects of the government in the Empire and built their image as restorers of order (τάξις) in the state. There are many examples from the reign of Alexios I in this area. We see this in the way he treated his opponents, who were punished in firm yet merciful way³². In his activity in the defence of orthodoxy against heresies, in which he personally engaged³³. But above all, the image of a good ruler in the case of Alexios I was built through his very active contribution to defending the Empire from enemies. His relentless diligence in this area was emphasized by his daughter³⁴. Andronikos, for personal and political reasons, was not so active in the field of state defence or theological disputes which he personally despised³⁵. He built his image as a restorer of the state. He directed his propaganda to the simple folk, introducing himself in iconography as an ordinary farmer³⁶. His attempts to curb corruption in the state served to construct a positive image. Not having the support of the aristocracy, he turned to the rest of society in this way. He personally eagerly compared his fate to that of the Biblical David³⁷.

At the root of Andronikos' actions were therefore the same goals that guided his grandfather. He followed the same path perhaps consciously, as he certainly knew the history of his ancestor and founder of the dynasty. Yet, despite the significant similarities and the use of the same *modus operandi*, he failed to achieve an equally spectacular success. Why? Niketas Choniates answers this question in his work, stressing the pernicious effect of the Emperor's unprecedented brutality, writing: *He would not have been the least of the Komnenian emperors had he mitigated the intensity of his cruelty...*³⁸ It is hard to deny that he has a point. However, a modern researcher will not be satisfied with this simple answer. Perhaps Andronikos' failure was not only the result of his brutal methods, as Choniates suggests, but had its ground in the situation in which he found himself.

During the reign of Manuel I Komnenos, the Komnenoi were at the peak of their power and prestige. The emperor ruled the state with the support of his faction, also referred by historians as a "clan". It was a privileged group of aristocrats connected with the Komnenoi through blood ties. Their hierarchy was strictly based on kinship and titles³⁹. The creator of this system was Alexios I Komnenos who, basing his authority on the family, stabilized the internal situation of the state.

³² KOMNENE, IX, 8, 4, p. 276.

³³ M. ANGOLD, *Church and Society in Byzantium under the Comneni, 1081–1261*, Cambridge 1995, p. 69–70.

³⁴ KOMNENE, V, 5, 2, p. 153–154; XII, 3, 1, p. 364.

³⁵ CHONIATES, p. 331.

³⁶ CHONIATES, p. 332. I am interpreting Choniates' description literally but it should be noted that there are different views on that matter, cf. R. STICHEL, *Ein byzantinischer Kaiser als Sensenmann?*, BZ 93, 2000, p. 586–608; A. EASTMOND, *An Intentional...*, p. 503–506.

³⁷ CHONIATES, p. 333.

³⁸ CHONIATES, p. 353.

³⁹ The Komnenian hierarchy of dignities was thoroughly described in: L. STIERNON, *Notes de titulature et de prosopographie byzantines: Sébaste et Gambros*, REB 23, 1965, p. 222–243.

Upholding imperial power on the family or faction was not a new phenomenon in the second half of the 11th century. It is the way it was implemented through direct connection of the family with the power apparatus that distinguished the Komnenian system⁴⁰.

In the mid-12th century, almost 90% of military offices were in the hands of aristocrats related to the Komnenoi⁴¹. Such a strong connection between the family and the state meant that any interference with the authority also became an interference with the internal affairs of the “clan”. That is why a very important task of the Komnenoi emperors was to maintain the unity of their faction. As long as its members remained loyal to the emperor, the internal peace prevailed. To achieve this, it was necessary to develop an indisputable position of the head of the family. It was connected with raising the level of the imperial authority which reached its peak during the reign of Manuel I Komnenos. When he died, however, it became apparent that without a strong figure on the throne it was impossible to control the “clan” which had grown to a large size⁴². It should be noted that from the beginning of the 12th century, the number of aristocrats possessing Alexios I Komnenos among their ancestors increased several times⁴³. Due to the lack of clear rules of inheritance in the Byzantine Empire, each of them could have considered himself as worthy of the purple.

Choniates is right heralding the advent of the period of polyarchy, the mother of anarchy at that time⁴⁴. The powerful aristocratic faction deprived of the head of the family became in truth the sovereign of the state. Alexios II was not a factor here, as he was a mere puppet in the conflict between *protosebastos* Alexios and Maria Komnene. Yet as long as the young heir to the throne lived, the “clan” remained theoretically faithful to him. This fact was also abused by the ambitious Andronikos Komnenos. His first actions were very prudent and thoughtful. He did not immediately set out for the capital, but instead waited for the development of events⁴⁵. The news of his actions came to the family residing in the capital. By declaring himself a defender of the juvenile Alexios II, he gained the support of the opponents of *protosebastos*. If Andronikos in fact would have only limited himself to supporting the rights of the heir to the throne, perhaps he would have been able to maintain his position as a co-emperor. The problem was that his ambitions went much further, and his actions were very hasty. His life ambition was to gain

⁴⁰ P. FRANKOPAN, *Kinship and the Distribution of Power in Komnenian Byzantium*, EHR 122, 2007, p. 2–3.

⁴¹ A. CAMERON, *The Byzantines...*, p. 80.

⁴² P. MAGDALINO, *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos, 1143–1180*, Cambridge 1993, p. 189–190.

⁴³ Κ. ΒΑΡΖΟΣ, *Η γενεαλογία των Κομνηνών*, vol. II, Θεσσαλονίκη 1984, p. 883–887.

⁴⁴ CHONIATES, p. 225.

⁴⁵ The first moves of Andronikos started probably as early as in the beginning of 1181, since it was before his daughter Maria came with news about the situation in the capital (in May 1181). Only after her arrival did he cross the borders of Paphlagonia and march towards Bithynia and then Constantinople, cf. CHONIATES, p. 229, 243–244.

sole imperial power. This claim, as both Choniates and Kinnamos mention, he inherited from his father – *sebastokrator* Isaakios, the younger brother of John II Komnenos⁴⁶. This line of the Komnenoi family always caused trouble for the reigning emperors. And again, the source of the problem lied in an unclear way of the inheritance of power, a problem which has been significantly emphasized with the introduction of family-based governments⁴⁷. Like his son, *sebastokrator* Isaakios was a person with a truly imperial predispositions⁴⁸. Initially, he supported his brother's rule, but in some unspecified circumstances, probably around 1122, a conflict started between them⁴⁹. It happened at about the same time at which John II appointed his son Alexios as successor. However, Isaakios' plotting came to naught when he died shortly after 1152⁵⁰. After the death of his father it was Andronikos who continued to undermine his cousin's rule.

Andronikos' situation was much more complicated than his grandfather's hundred years earlier. Alexios did not have against him a ruler supported by the dominating aristocratic faction in the state. Nor did he have to turn against his family. Nikephoros III Botaniates was reluctantly perceived by the Doukai who were removed from power. The wise decision of the Komnenoi was therefore to make an alliance with that family and to strive together to overthrow the usurper. We can say that the throne of the Empire was just waiting for its saviour, who would lead the state in the right direction.

Meanwhile, in 1182, even despite conflicts that broke out after the death of the last emperor, Alexios II remained the heir to the throne, at least as long as the family supported him. Therefore, if Andronikos wanted to gain power, he had to get rid of Manuel's son. Whether due to his advanced age or innate impulsiveness, he did not hesitate to act immediately. After taking over the capital in September 1182, he was crowned co-emperor, using as a pretext the need to act against the rebels in Bithynia – Theodoros Kantakouzenos, Isaakios and Theodoros Angelos⁵¹. Only a year later, did he finally get rid of Alexios II, not even trying to cover up the case, or find a scapegoat to blame for this deed⁵². This act was absolutely unacceptable and disgusting in the eyes of the Byzantines. Not only was the widely accepted successor to the throne murdered, but also it was a fratricide. This act was considered

⁴⁶ CHONIATES, p. 280; *Ioannis Cinnami Epitome rerum ab Ioanne et Alexio Comnenis gestarum*, rec. A. MEINEKE, Bonn 1836 [= *CSHB*, 23.1] (cetera: KINNAMOS), p. 53–54.

⁴⁷ Although primogeniture was dominant, there was no written rule establishing this. There were many factors influencing the choice of the successor such as: seniority, experience, appearance, popularity among the aristocrats and folk, and others. But the most important was the authority of the current ruler/dynasty.

⁴⁸ THEODOROS PRODROMOS, *Historische Gedichte*, XLII, rec. W. HÖRANDNER, Wien 1974 [= *WBS*, 11], p. 396–398.

⁴⁹ CHONIATES, p. 32.

⁵⁰ Κ. ΒΑΡΖΟΣ, *Η γενεαλογία...*, vol. I, p. 252.

⁵¹ CHONIATES, p. 269–270.

⁵² CHONIATES, p. 273–274.

as a horrible crime and it is worth noting that none of the previous three emperors ever dared to commit it, even as a part of righteous punishment⁵³. This meant an open declaration of war against the entire Komnenoi and all related families.

Andronikos began his actions against family and aristocracy even before he decided to finally get rid of Alexios II. One of his first targets were the daughter of Manuel I – *kaisarissa* Maria Komnene – along with her husband Renier (John) from Montferrat. It is worth noting that as long as Andronikos' position on the throne was not grounded, he tried to act in secret and not reveal his true motivations. Therefore, his first moves, which were to lock in dungeons or condemn to banishment his rivals and opponents, were done secretly⁵⁴. In the case of *kaisarissa* and *kaisar*, he bribed a certain eunuch named Pterygeonites, their servant. He poisoned them both, but slowly to avoid premature suspicion⁵⁵. It seems ironic that the greatest supporters of Andronikos Komnenos became one of his first victims. However, their support was limited only to helping to keep the young Emperor in power. It is hard to imagine that Maria Komnene would support the usurpation of her uncle and allow for her brother's murder. There is also another reason why she was the biggest threat to Andronikos' rule.

The cognatic system of inheritance functioning in Byzantium led to situations in which the first-born daughters of the emperors could aspire to take power in favour of their husbands⁵⁶. Similar circumstances can be observed already in the 11th century when after the extinction of the male descendants of Basil the Macedonian, the daughters of Konstantinos VIII became heirs of imperial power which they only transmitted to their husbands as part of their marriage. In the Komnenoi family, this phenomenon was the source of many problems. Against Alexios I rebelled the husband of his elder sister – *panhypersebastos* Michael Taronites⁵⁷. John II had to deal with the plot of Anna Komnene, the firstborn child of Alexios⁵⁸. Manuel was opposed by John Roger Dalassenos, the husband of the oldest surviving child of John II at that time – Maria Komnene⁵⁹. It was no different with *kaisarissa* Maria and her husband. In the future, they could lead to the overthrow of Alexios II, if he proved to be a weak ruler.

Finally, the matter of the AIMA prophecy circulating among the Komnenoi family cannot be ignored. It proclaimed that the Komnenoi dynasty would reign as long as there is the word AIMA (αἷμα – blood). This referred to the initials

⁵³ Banishment, stripping of dignities and wealth seems to dominate as a form of punishment for imperial relatives at that time, cf. KOMNENE, IX, 8, 3, p. 275–276; CHONIATES, p. 11, 32, 101.

⁵⁴ CHONIATES, p. 258.

⁵⁵ CHONIATES, p. 259–260.

⁵⁶ A. LAIOU, *Family Structure and the Transmission of Property*, [in:] *The Social History...*, p. 51–75.

⁵⁷ KOMNENE, IX, 8, 4, p. 276.

⁵⁸ CHONIATES, p. 10–11.

⁵⁹ KINNAMOS, p. 37–38; J. NESBITT, *Some Observations About the Roger Family*, NRh 1, 2004, p. 211–213.

of the emperors: Alexios, John (Ioannes), Manuel and Alexios⁶⁰. By converting to the Orthodox Church, Maria's husband received the name John, so according to the prophecy he could continue this cycle. Given the subsequent actions of Andronikos regarding the election of his successor to the throne, this prophecy had a big impact on the imagination of the Byzantines, so one should not underestimate its influence on politics⁶¹.

Some aristocrats also became victims of Andronikos, especially those who were directly related to the imperial family. We should mention families such as: Angelos, Branas, Vatatzes, Kontostephanos, Maleinos, Dalassenos, Kladon and Lapardas⁶². They all were dignified and held the highest titles. Two bastard sons of Manuel I Komnenos, both named Alexios, were also eventually persecuted by Andronikos. The first one was banished and fled to the Kingdom of Sicily initiating Norman invasion⁶³. The second one, legalized by Manuel, bearing the title of *sebastokrator*, was initially proposed as a husband for Andronikos' daughter Irene, before he changed his mind and blinded him⁶⁴. Apart from them, Isaakios Komnenos, son of Irene Komnene, daughter of *sebastokrator* Isaakios, Manuel's brother, rebelled in Cyprus⁶⁵. Then Andronikos accused Konstantinos Makrodoukas and Andronikos Doukas of insult to the majesty. They were devoted people of the emperor and tried to discourage their relative for rebelling against the power⁶⁶. This type of irrational behavior only worsened the situation of the usurper. There were many more victims, but unfortunately, the sources do not identify all the aristocrats who suffered punishment at that time. Their number was enormous according to the testimonies of Byzantine historians⁶⁷.

In such a situation, Andronikos could indeed believe that nobody was loyal to him⁶⁸. Nobody wanted to participate in his brutal family purge. Of the "clan" aristocracy, only his own family remained faithful to him, although at the end of his reign, his older son Manuel refused to obey him⁶⁹. David Komnenos, appointed the administrator of Thessalonica, served Andronikos out of fear for the fate of his relatives⁷⁰. Andronikos' family was not large and could not provide

⁶⁰ CHONIATES, p. 169.

⁶¹ CHONIATES, p. 292; C.M. BRAND, *Byzantium Confronts the West 1180–1204*, Cambridge Mass. 1968, p. 67–68. On AIMA prophecy cf. R. SHUKUROV, *AIMA: the Blood of the Grand Komnenoi*, BMGS 19, 1995, p. 161–181.

⁶² EUSTATHIOS, p. 56; J.-C. CHEYNET, *Pouvoir...*, p. 429–430.

⁶³ CHONIATES, p. 334.

⁶⁴ CHONIATES, p. 260, 309.

⁶⁵ CHONIATES, p. 290–291.

⁶⁶ CHONIATES, p. 292.

⁶⁷ CHONIATES, p. 323.

⁶⁸ CHONIATES, p. 315.

⁶⁹ CHONIATES, p. 337.

⁷⁰ EUSTATHIOS, p. 72.

him with adequate support. He only had two sisters: Anna and Maria⁷¹. His only brother escaped to the Sultanate of Rum⁷². He had three children with his first wife – Manuel, John and Maria⁷³ – and two with his lover Theodora – his daughter Irene and the still adolescent Alexios⁷⁴. Several people were unable to oppose the “clan”, already counting more than fifty members.

Taking up the struggle with the “clan” of the Komnenoi, Andronikos deprived himself of the possibility of creating a loyal faction, which was a key element in the process of consolidating power by Alexios I Komnenos. The self-reliant reign using terror was not an option in the Byzantine Empire of the second half of the 12th century. There were too many potential and powerful pretenders who could be chosen at any time as the emperor. In this situation it is hardly surprising that Andronikos spent most of his short reign in the capital. Unlike his grandfather, he was not able to appoint a deputy from the family for the time of his absence⁷⁵. Thus he failed as a defender of the Empire, which was a crucial element in the construction of a positive imperial image⁷⁶. When the Sicilian army was moving along the via Egnatia, Andronikos was at most capable to send his son at the head of the army, but he himself had to stay close to Constantinople, to prevent the raise of a pretender.

Since obtaining the support of the aristocracy was out of the question, Andronikos tried other means of building authority. His reign is definitely characterized by more emphasis on the so-called civil aristocracy, consisting of bureaucrats, public servants and the senate⁷⁷. Many times during his reign he refers to the council's decision⁷⁸. This does not mean that he tried to reverse the aristocratization process and return to the situation from before the Komnenian restoration. Rather, it is only proof of a desperate search for support. The purpose of the usurper was not to remove the aristocracy from power, but to construct it anew based on new families. Niketas Choniates repeatedly states that the purpose of the tyrant was to destroy the Komnenoi family, at another time he mentions the desire for revenge on Manuel's relatives⁷⁹. It did not mean, however, a total disintegration

⁷¹ K. ΒΑΡΖΟΣ, *Η γενεαλογία...*, vol. I, p. 254.

⁷² CHONIATES, p. 36.

⁷³ K. ΒΑΡΖΟΣ, *Η γενεαλογία...*, vol. I, p. 637.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 638.

⁷⁵ Like Alexios I did with Anna Dalassene and his brother Isaakios, cf. KOMNENE, III, 6, 1, p. 100; IV, 4, 1, p. 126.

⁷⁶ CHONIATES, p. 321.

⁷⁷ I am using the term “civil aristocracy” here being aware that there were no firm boundaries between military and bureaucratic factions, cf. W. KAEGI, *The Controversy About Bureaucratic and Military Factions*, BF 19, 1993, p. 26; J.-C. CHEYNET, *Pouvoir...*, p. 191–198; A. HARVEY, *Economic Expansion in the Byzantine Empire 900–1200*, Cambridge 1989, p. 3–4.

⁷⁸ CHONIATES, p. 273.

⁷⁹ CHONIATES, p. 266, 257.

of the family to which after all he himself belonged. The aim was rather to shift the dominant line of the Komnenoi from the descendants of John II to *sebastokrator* Isaac's. In other words, Andronikos' goal was to construct the "clan" again. He wanted to conduct an exchange of old families, associated with the descendants of previous emperors, for new ones, devoted to his authority. This explains why Andronikos among the allies had many members of less significant families like: Tripsychos, Dadibrenos, Kamateros, Chumnos and Hagiochristophorites⁸⁰. In the end this proved to be insufficient, because the degree of consolidation of the old families in the Empire after the rule of three generations of the dynasty was too large to allow a complete exchange of elites.

At the end of their reign, the emperor's actions became increasingly desperate. When the Norman army landed in Dyrrachion and headed towards Constantinople, it captured the second largest city in the empire – Thessalonika. At this point Andronikos' reign lost all the leftovers of legitimacy. With one back to the wall, he took all measures to stop the threat of losing power. Every sign of disloyalty was punished. Responsibility for any insubordination was borne not only by the guilty but also by their families and relatives⁸¹. Finally, Andronikos ordered the execution of all those in prisons, against which his son, the *sebastokrator* Manuel, objected⁸². In this situation it was already certain that the days of Andronikos on the throne were numbered.

During his short reign, Andronikos Komnenos also showed disregard for the residents of Constantinople. According to Choniates, he relished the stupidity of citizens⁸³. The underestimation of the inhabitants of the capital in the 12th century was a serious mistake, the consequences of which he soon felt on his own skin⁸⁴. When the rebellion of Isaakios Angelos took place, it was the people of the city who delivered support for the new emperor. This error was never committed by Alexios I, who always cared for his public image. After looting the city as a result of his coup, he undertook repentance⁸⁵. When he was forced to melt church treasures to raise funds for war with the Normans, he also publicly regretted his deeds⁸⁶. He strived to act as a truly orthodox and compassionate ruler. By funding the Orphanotropheion he took care of education and the fate of orphans⁸⁷. The prudence that characterized his rule was lacking in the case of his grandson.

⁸⁰ CHONIATES, p. 274.

⁸¹ CHONIATES, p. 343.

⁸² CHONIATES, p. 337.

⁸³ CHONIATES, p. 322–323.

⁸⁴ During the 11th and 12th century the capital population represented a significant force, cf. L. GARLAND, *Political Power and the Populace in Byzantium Prior to the Fourth Crusade*, Bsl 53, 1992, p. 18.

⁸⁵ KOMNENE, III, 5, 2–5, p. 129–131.

⁸⁶ KOMNENE, VI, 3, 1–5, p. 171–173.

⁸⁷ KOMNENE, XV, 7, 7, p. 483–484.

A comparative analysis of the actions of Alexios I and Andronikos I Komnenos shows the transformations that took place in the apparatus of power and society of the Byzantine Empire over a hundred years. After the changes that the Byzantine Empire underwent in the 12th century, the aristocracy related to the Komnenoi became the main ruling power of the state. The progressing process of state aristocratization was a natural stage in the development of medieval society, and it was no different in Byzantium⁸⁸. By accepting these changes, consciously or unconsciously, and using them in his favour, Alexios I managed to consolidate his power in the state and pass it on to the next generation of his family. The state situation in the second half of the 11th century favoured his actions. The vacuum left by the extinction of the Macedonian dynasty, the last Byzantine dynasty of non-aristocratic origin, had to be filled by a new family, and the talent and luck of Alexios I made him successful. Andronikos, following similar motivations, was unable to repeat his grandfather's result because the consolidation of the power by the Komnenoi "clan" was a one-off process and was practically irreversible. When he turned against his family, he started a fight with the entire state elite. The Komnenian system had a serious loophole. It was completely dependent on the ruler's authority. This can be described as a constant clash between the emperor trying to maintain absolute power and the faction trying to bend him to its will. The imperial authority collapsed immediately after the death of Manuel Komnenos. An unsuccessful attempt to impose power over the family by Andronikos shows how immense strength this family had after three generations. One can even say that it was not Andronikos who tried to reject the aristocracy, as some scholars saw it, but it was the aristocracy that rejected Andronikos. They found themselves a more compliant candidate for power that was Isaakios Angelos⁸⁹. This almost two-year reign is therefore the time of the disintegration of the Komnenoi family and the transition of power to the external affinal families (Angelos, Laskaris, Palaiologos) which, however, never gained an equally high status as the Komnenoi. From this vantage point, the actions of the last of the reigning Komnenos in Constantinople are an important indicator and catalyst for changes in the structure of the aristocracy and the position of the *basileus* in the Byzantine Empire.

⁸⁸ G. OSTROGORSKY, *Observations on the Aristocracy in Byzantium*, DOP 25, 1971, p. 6–9.

⁸⁹ CHONIATES, p. 355–356. Over the course of his rule Isaakios II tried to impose his authority over the aristocracy, which eventually led to his dethronement with the support of the Branas, Palaiologos, Petralifas, Raoul and Kantakouzenos families, cf. CHONIATES, p. 451.

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Abstract. In this paper I would like to concentrate on strategies and methods that were guiding Alexios I and Andronikos I of the Komnenos dynasty during the process of gaining and consolidating their power in the Byzantine Empire. Between these two emperors, who belonged to the same family, there exist many analogies in the way of carrying out a coup and constructing the authority based on a group of faithful aristocrats. It is crucial to highlight the active family politics which characterized both the emperors, as it was the main strategy aimed at ensuring the durability of the freshly acquired power. Between Andronikos' and his grandfather's coups passed almost exactly one hundred years. The completely different social and political situation of the Byzantine Empire in the late 12th century forced Andronikos to take a different approach. The most striking change was in the way of eliminating potential threats from the circles of Constantinopolitan aristocracy, especially when it comes to his relatives. Such a comparative analysis leads to some important observations concerning the social changes in the late 11th and 12th centuries, as well as mechanisms of seniority and precedence of power in the Komnenos family.

Keywords: Andronikos I Komnenos, Alexios I Komnenos, Byzantine aristocracy, imperial authority, twelfth century.

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