NATIONS AND MINORITIES IN PSELLOS’ CHRONOGRAPHIA (976–1078)

Michael Psellos (1018–1081) in his *Chronographia* gives a unique insider’s view into the nations and minorities which the Byzantine Empire needed to know and understand. He wrote mainly about court dynamics and how the empire and its allies and enemies were seen from the Palace in Constantinople. Scholars have undertaken to compare his evidence with that provided by other historians such as Skylitzes, Kekaumenos, Aristakes Lastiverci, Nicephoros Bryennios as well as focusing on peoples and minorities which later became prominent during the Comnenian dynasty (1081–1177). However, the *Chronographia* yields valuable information about Psellos’ attitude formed long before the First Crusade (1095–1099). Psellos’ letter to Machetarios reveals that he altered his writing strategy in 1057 when Isaak I Comnenos (1057–1059) became emperor:

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4 F. Lauritzen, *The Depiction of Character in the Chronographia of Michael Psellos*, Turnhout 2013 [= B.SBHC, 7].
5 Ioannis Scylitzae synopsis historiarum, rec. I. Thurn, Berolini 1973 [= CFHB.SBe] (cetera: Scyl., *Hist.*).
new court dynamics required a new history. Therefore, each book needs to be seen separately when dealing with nations and minorities.

Book 1 [Basil II (10th January 976 – 15th December 1025)] mentions some peoples: Arabs, Assyrians, Babylonians, Iberians, Scythians. This coincides with the concerns of Basil II with the North and the South East of the empire. However, the references are single instances and are not developed into a narrative.

Book 2 [Constantine VIII (15th December 1025 – 11th November 1028)] has no references to foreign nations or minorities (like book 6a, 7c).

Book 3 [Romanos III (15th November 1028 – 11th April 1034)] only refers to Saracens and Syria. That is because of the important narrative of the failed campaign of Edessa in 1031\(^{11}\).

Book 4 [Michael IV (11th April 1034 – 10th December 1041)] for the first time gives wider information. It refers to Babylonians, Bulgarians, Persians, Scythians. Once more the concern is North and South East.

Book 5 [Michael V (10th December 1041 – 20th April 1042)] mentions only peoples to the North: Scythians and Tauroscythians.


Book 7 [Isaak I (1st September 1057 – 22nd November 1059)] mentions Assyrians, Egyptians, Getai, Italians, Moesians, Parthians, Tauroscythians.

Book 7a [Constantine X (24th November 1059 – 22nd May 1067)] mentions Moesians, Persians, Syria, Triballi.

Book 7b [Romanos IV (1st January 1068 – 24th October 1071)] mentions Armenians, Curds, Franks, Persians.

Book 7c [Michael VII (22nd May 1071 – 24th March 1078)] mentions no nations or minorities (like book 2).

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Alans X

Arabs X

Armenians X

Assyrians X

\(^{11}\) Psellus, *Chronographia*, 3, 7–11. The siege is described in Scyl., *Hist*. Romanos, III, 13 (387, 89 Thurn) (within the date range September 1031 – August 1033: 15th Indiction 6540 [Romanos, III, 9 (384, 1–2 Thurn)] – 2nd Indiction 6542 [Romanos, III, 17 (390, 90 Thurn)]).
The data is striking and needs to be highlighted before it is interpreted. Books 2 (1025–1028), 6a (1055–1056) and 7c (1071–1078) do not mention any foreign nations. In the first case it is not striking since Psellos was aged 8 to 10 years old\(^\text{12}\). The second case may be due to the recalling of Psellos to court during a short period.

\(^{12}\) Psellos’ birthdate: Before April 1034, he was not yet 16 (PSELLOS, *Chronographia*, 3, 25, 1–3).
reign\textsuperscript{13}. However the last case is surprising since the only portrait of Psellos which survives, shows him as an advisor to Michael VII\textsuperscript{14}. The evidence of the \textit{Chronographia} would indicate that his advice during 1071–1078 was not about foreign affairs\textsuperscript{13}. Psellos was also too young to be writing book 1 (976–1025) while Basil II was alive\textsuperscript{16}. He indicates that his first main memory was the funeral of Romanos III in 1034\textsuperscript{17}. That would mean that his description of the siege of Aleppo in 1031 (when he was 13 years old) was rather hearsay\textsuperscript{18}. Therefore, the direct and contemporary evidence would seem to cover book 4 to book 7b (1034–1071), reasonable since Psellos was 16 to 53 years old.

Most references to foreign peoples appear in books 6, 7 and 7a (1042–1055; 1057–1067). They amount to 58% of the total (20 out of 37). Of the 18 imperial speeches\textsuperscript{19}, ten are dedicated to Constantine IX Monomachos (1042–1055) and two to Theodora (1056). Thus, twelve speeches were delivered at the same time as the period of most references to foreign nations in the \textit{Chronographia}. Given that these imperial speeches were recited at court, it would imply that during the period 1042–1059 Psellos was active at court, and for this reason he heard direct information about the foreign relations of the empire. The period of 1042–1059 is important since it is the time when Psellos knew the events concerning the empire and the foreign policies and pressures.

In the period 1042–1059 he does not mention Arabs or Saracens, but shows concern for Egypt (Fatimid caliphate) and the Parthians/Persians (Seljuk Turks). He is aware of the Balkans and mostly the Moesians/Scythians and Triballi. In the period 1042–1055 alone he seems aware of the Caucasus (Alans/Armenians/Iberians), while it does not concern him at other times. This is important because the mistress of the emperor Constantine IX Monomachos was from Alania\textsuperscript{20}. Moreover, Grigor Magistros\textsuperscript{21} was representative of Media (Vaspurakan). Thus,

\textsuperscript{13} Psellos, \textit{Chronographia}, 6, 13. Theodora reigned from 11\textsuperscript{th} January 1055 to 31\textsuperscript{st} August 1056.

\textsuperscript{14} Athos, Pantokratoros 234, f. 254 recto.


\textsuperscript{16} Seven years old at the death of Basil II on 15\textsuperscript{th} December 1025. He says he does not remember seeing either Basil II or Constantine VIII (Psellos, \textit{Chronographia}, 3, 1, 12–16).

\textsuperscript{17} Psellos, \textit{Chronographia}, 3, 4.

\textsuperscript{18} Psellos, \textit{Chronographia}, 3, 7–11.


\textsuperscript{20} Psellos, \textit{Chronographia}, 6, 151–155.


the North, East and South were important according to Psellos. The west appears irrelevant to him, all the more striking since the Norman advance was against Byzantine territory in Southern Italy. The period before Psellos was active at court (1018–1042)\(^{22}\) sees him focusing on Arabs and Scythians almost exclusively (Celts and Iberians are briefly mentioned). The subsequent period (1067–1078) Psellos mentions Armenians, Curds, Franks (Normans) and Persians (Seljuk Turks) alone (only 1067–1071).

Psellos’ understanding of foreign nations and minorities can be divided into three phases.

1) Focus on Arabs and Scythians [1018–1042]

2) Wide range of nations [1042–1067]

3) Focus on Armenians, Curds, Franks and Persians [1067–1071]

The evidence of the panegyrics tells us that the second phase represents his more detailed understanding the court’s view of the outside world. In general terms the shift from phase 1 to phase 3 seems to coincide with Byzantine history: the concern for Arabs and Pechenegs, at the beginning of the century, was replaced by the arrival of the Normans and Turks in the second half of the century. The discovery of three phases is interesting, since it reveals Psellos’ understanding of the world he was watching change before his very eyes. The main problem, with the terms he uses, is that it is not immediately clear today to which population he is referring. Thus, one will now propose some solutions to identify the populations he names in the *Chronographia*.

Alans (Ἀλανοὶ, Ἀλανία 6, 145; 6, 151–155) = Ossets [a. 1050–1054]\(^{23}\). They are to be identified with modern day Ossets\(^{24}\) because Tzetzes records a sentence in Alanic\(^{25}\) which can be understood as an older form of Ossetic\(^{26}\). It is not clear


\(^{24}\) An Osset is present on the road between Vladikavkaz and Tibilisi at the beginning of M. Lermontov, *A Hero of our time*, Bela, St Petersburg 1840.


the geographic area of the Alans/Ossets at this time. Important is the inscription of Bolshoi Zelenchuk (Karachay Cherchessia, Russian Federation) which appears to be written in Ossetian but with Greek letters. Moreover the church at Senty (Karachay Cherchessia, Russian Federation) has an inscription in Greek dated to 965 which refers to Alania. Alda of Alania gave the fortress of Anakoufia (Anakopia) to Romanos III. Thus the Alans/Ossetians appear to control a large area north east of the Black Sea.


30 Const. Porph., De Adm., 22, 44.

31 Psellos, Chronographia, 6, 189.


34 Chatatourios 61 PBW 2016.
Babylonians (Βαβυλώνιος 1, 11; 4, 19 [a. 976–1025; a. 1040]) = Caliphate with capital Baghdad. Focus is once more on the capital. See Assyrians. An ancient name for a city close to modern day Baghdad. It would therefore refer to those people living in the capital of the Caliphate.

Bulgarians (Βούλχαροι 4, 40–47 [a. 1040–1041]) = Bulgarians during the revolt headed by Peter Delian and Alusianos. They are mentioned by name and refer to a people rather than a place in the Chronographia. This reflects the conflict over territory between the Byzantines and the Bulgarians which had been partially settled four years before Psellos was born. Psellos grew up with Bulgarians living within the Byzantine Empire.

Celts (Κελτοί 1, 31) = Northern Europeans (which ones?) [a. 976–1025]. Unclear which northern population he is indicating.

Curds (Κούρτοι 7b, 20 [a. 1067–1071]) = Curds. Brief mention, but important given that it indicates that the meaning of the title of Alp Arslan (1063–1072) was ‘ruler of Turks or Curds’35.

Egyptians (Αἰγύπτιοι 6, 159; 6, 190; 7, 50 [a. 1050–1054, 1057–1059]) = Fatimid Egyptians36. Fatimid Caliphate with capital in Cairo. The references concern only the period 1050–1059 and reveal the shared concern of the Caliphate of Cairo to the events in Baghdad, namely the sieges and conquest (1058) by the Turks of Toğrul Bey (1037–1063).

Franks (Φράγγος 7b, 39 [1067–1071]) = Normans after the conquest of most Byzantine territory in Italy.

Getae (Γέται 7, 67 [a. 1057–1059]) = Uzes. The identification is certain since Scylitzes refers to the same episode giving the name as Uzi37.

Iberians (1, 10; 1, 15; 1, 17; 1, 31; 6, 100; 6, 105 [a. 976–1025, a. 1047]) = Georgians.

Indians (Ἰνδοί 6, 159 [a. 1050–1054]) = India, land from where spices come (see also Egyptians).

Italians (Ἰταλοί 6, 78; 7, 24 [a. 1043, a. 1057–1059]) = Italians rather than Normans and before the latter settled properly in Italy.

Macedonians (Μακεδόνες 6, 99; 6, 102; 6, 110 [a. 1047]) = Inhabitants of Adrianople (modern Edirne). Leo Tornikios is defined as someone who was Macedonian. He is described in the Chronographia only in relation to his rebellion dated to 104738.

35 ὁ σουλτάν, ὁ τῶν Περσῶν ἢ Κούρτων βασιλεὺς (Psellos, Chronographia, 7b, 20, 2).
37 Scyl., Hist. Const., IX, 16 (455, 45 Thurn) Getae/Uzi force Moesians/Pechenegs across frozen Danube [a. 1046/7] [ODB Uzes].
38 The rebellion of Tornikios is described in Scyl., Hist. Const., IX, 8, 103 (September 1046 – 13th Indiction [Scyl., Hist. Const., IX, 8, 1 (435, 1 Thurn)] – August 1048: 1st Indiction [Scyl., Hist. Const., IX, 8 (439, 10–11 Thurn)]).
Moesians (Μυσοί 7, 67; 7a, 23 [a. 1057–1067]) = Pechenegs (Πατζινάκαι) crossed frozen Danube. Parthians (Πάρθοι 7, 50; 7, 63 [a. 1057–1059]) = Seljuk Turks. Lead by a Sultan (σουλτάν 7, 50) [Toğrul I]. See Persians.

Persians (Πέρσαι 4, 19; 7a, 11; 7b, 13; 7b, 20; 7b, 41; [a. 1040, a. 1059–1071]) = Seljuk Turks. Sultan is ruler of Persians or Curds (7b, 20). See Parthians.

Russians (σκάφη Ῥωσικὰ 6, 90–6, 95 [a. 1043]) = Rus'.

Saracens (Σαρακηνοί 3, 7 [a. 1031]) = Arabs living in Koile Syria whose capital is Aleppo (Psellos, Chronographia, 3, 7).

Scythians (Σκύθαι 1, 13; 1, 31; 4, 43; 4, 49; 5, 15 [a. 976–1025; a. 1040; 1041]) = Pechenegs or Bulgarians? Scyl., Hist. Const., IX, 16 (455, 45 Thurn) [a. 1046/7]). [Leaders were Turach and Kegenes]. (See Const. Porph., De Adm., 1–8. F. Curta, The Image and Archaeology of the Pechenegs, Ban 23, 2013, p. 143–202 [ODB Pechenegs].

Syria (Συρία 3, 7; 3, 8; 7b, 13 [a. 1031, a. 1059–1067]) = Syria (Emirate of Aleppo). Local language Arabic (Psellos, Chronographia, 3, 8). The emirate became an ally of the Byzantine Empire after 1031 and was the first ally to confront the Turkish armies in the 1050s.

Taurus Scythians (Περὶ τὸν Ταῦρον Σκύθαι 5, 25; 7, 13 [a. 1041, 1057–1059]) = Scyths near Crimea. This population is the only one described by a geographic paraphrase. Taurus refers to Crimea and the Scythians are those living around the Crimea but not in the Crimea. This could refer to the Varangians who were travelling between Kiev and the Black Sea especially during the time of Yaroslav the Wise (1019–1054) whose daughter married Harald Hardrada, and whose wife was also Scandinavian. Defined as ξενικόν (5, 25).

Triballi (Τριβαλλοί 7a, 23 [a. 1059–1067]) = Uzes? or Serbs? It is difficult to identify the population. Psellos may be ambiguous on purpose. He is defining a geographic area. Indeed, the Triballi used to live in the area of Moesia Inferior (the area of modern-day Serbia). These ancient names sometimes represent overlapping populations. It is worth recalling the modern names and how they are referred to:
Adrianople inhabitants = Macedonians (1047)
Aleppo Emirate = Syria (1031; 1059–1067), Saracens (1031)
Arabs = Arabs (976–1025)
Armenians = Armenians (1045, 1067–1071)
Bulgarians = Bulgarians (1040–1041), Scythians (1040–1041)
Caliphate of Baghdad = Babylonians (976–1025; 1040), Assyrians (976–1025; 1057–1059)
Curds = Curds (1067–1071)
Georgians = Iberians (976–1025; 1047)
Indians = Indians (1050–1054)
Italians = Italians (1043; 1057–1059)
Normans = Franks (1067–1071)
Northern Europeans = Celts (976–1025)
Pechenegs = Scythians (976–1025; 1040–1041), Moesians (1057–1059)
Russians = Rus’ (1043)
Turks = Persians (1040), Parthians (1057–1059), Persians (1059–1071)
Uzes = Getae (1057–1059), Triballi (1059–1067)
Varangians = Scythotaurians (1041; 1057–1059)

Psellos refers to nations which border with the Eastern Roman Empire or else with minorities present within the empire. In Costantine Porphyrogennetos’ *De Administrando Imperio* one sees an important difference: each neighbouring nation is defined also by other countries it has on its borders. In other words, Psellos seems more concerned by the internal matters of the empire, even though he has some understanding of the foreign peoples present at the borders. While one sees a much wider understanding of foreign relations between 1042 and 1059, with an understanding of all points of the compass, it is striking that Psellos does not mention those nations which are a concern for states bordering with the Eastern Roman Empire. It is a view from the imperial palace. Psellos’ network is also that of the local governors within the empire. More than half of his surviving letters are addressed to provincial governors (*kritai*).

It would appear that Psellos’ understanding of nations and minorities depends on his friendship with provincial governors until 1042. When Constantine IX Monomachos became emperor, Psellos gained access to information from within the palace about the outside world. After 1059 he seems to have less information about what is going on abroad. These dates correspond to the tenure of Leichoudes.
as *mesazon* (1042–1050, 1057–1059)\(^{47}\). In other words, Psellos had access to information about the empire when his friends were in power\(^{48}\). In particular Leichoudes as *mesazon* but also Leichoudes’ son was governor of Vaspurakan\(^{49}\). It is interesting that though his friend John Xiphilinos was from Trebizond, Psellos does not seem particularly interested in that area. His knowledge about Alania, Iberia and the Rus seems connected with events in Constantinople itself.

Psellos however seems to consider most of these populations as barbarians (βάρβαροι). This generic term is useful for him since it allows him to speak about his main subject (the emperor), but reveals his ‘inner’ view. He is less interested in differentiating foreign populations, than discussing their impact within court politics. The term barbarian seems to be a generic term, which does not reveal particular interest in the populations concerned. The word barbarian is not used in book 5, 6a, 7c confirming that Psellos is not concerned by foreign peoples in 1041–1042, 1055–1056 and 1071–1078. He seems to imply that there is a distinction between barbarian and ‘Greek’ culture\(^{50}\). However, the most important element is that three nations are not defined as barbarian: Armenians, Macedonians, Tauroscythians. The Macedonians are defined as those connected with Leo Tornikios and his rebels. Armenians and Tauroscythians owe their ‘non barbarian’ status to their mercenary role. Indeed, Psellos refers to ξενικαὶ δυνάμεις\(^{51}\). The term ‘foreigner’ is connected with the term alliance (ξενικὴ συμμαχία). Therefore, barbarians are those who do not have a formal agreement with Constantinople and who tend to rebel or fight against the empire. This implies that the Scythians living around the Crimea were actually Varangian settlements. In other words the references to the Scythians around the Crimea in 1041 refer to *xenoi*, allied foreigners (at the service of Michael V), while the Rus’ as a foreign people refer to their enemy status in 1043. Therefore, *barbaros* does not define a foreign nation, but a foreign enemy, instead of a foreign ally. Thus, Byzantine rebels are as local

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48 F. Lauritzen, *Il mecenate Costantino Licudi e la monodia di Michele Psello in memoria di Maria Sclerena (poem 17 Westerink)*, Pare 8, 2018, p. 23–35.
49 ὑποστρέφων δὲ ἀπὸ τῆς τροπῆς καὶ μέλλων διοδεύειν ἀπὸ τῆς Μηδίας ήτοι τοῦ Βαασπρακᾶ (ήρχε δὲ τότε τῆς τοιαύτης χώρας ἐκ βασιλέως πεμφθεὶς Στέφανος πατρίκιος ὁ Κωνσταντῖνοι τοῦ παραδυναστεύοντος τῷ βασιλεῖ τῆς Λειχουδίας υἱός) στέλλει πρεσβευτὰς πρὸς αὐτόν, ἀξιῶν συγχωρηθῆναι διελθεῖν ἀκωλύτως, ύπαιθρούμενος μεθ’ ὅρκων φρικωδεστάτων ἄψαυστον καὶ ἀσινῆ διατηρῆσαι τὴν χώραν. (Scyl., *Hist. Const.*, IX, 10 (446, 79–84 Thurn). [14 Indiction September 1047 – August 1048: Const., IX 9 (439, 10–11 Thurn)].
50 Psellos, *Chronographia*, 6, 37.
51 ξενικήν ἑτέραν ξυλλοχίσαμεν δύναμιν 1, 13, 4; ξενικᾶς τε συγκροτῶν δυνάμεις 3, 7, 10–11; ξενικόν τε καὶ συμμαχίων εἰώθας οἰ βασιλεῖς, λέγω δὲ τοὺς περὶ τὸν Ταύρον Σκύθας 5, 25, 17–18; ἐν ταῖς αἰγίλας ξενικῶν 5, 30, 10; εἰ μή τις ὀλίγη μερίς ξενική, ὅπως τις εἰσυθεὶς ἐφέπεσαν ταῖς βασιλείσις πομπαῖς 6, 105, 8–9; τὰς παρ’ ἡμῖν ξενικὰς δυνάμεις 7, 10, 14–15; ὅπως καὶ στρατοπέδω καὶ ξενικάς ἀρκέσειν ἀν ἐξοκινήσας 7, 22, 5–6; ξενικὴν συμμαχίαν 7b, 12, 4.
as foreign mercenaries. This means that Psellos does not have a problem with foreigners but defines them by their allegiance: barbarians are enemies, foreigners are allies.

The evidence Psellos’ *Chronographia* yields is essential. He is one of the foremost eyewitness accounts of the court’s attitude towards nations and minorities, especially for the period 1042–1059. Before that time, he is unaware of the changes occurring in distant lands, and after that date, his role appears less informed. His understanding of foreign affairs does not imply he was central to such questions, but rather that his circle of friends was aware of such information. It seems that while Constantine Leichoudes was *mesazon*, Psellos has the widest interest in the outside world, otherwise he appears to rely on the network of *kritai* (judges) with whom he has an important exchange of letters. Therefore, Psellos sees nations and minorities from the prism of the court. First from the outer circles of the court, then as an insider thanks to Leichoudes and then once more as an outsider.

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The *Chronographia* of Michael Psellos (1018–1081) reveals a limited interest in nations and minorities within and without the Byzantine Empire. He had access to information about these peoples either indirectly (1018–1042) or more directly (1042–1078). He has a greater understanding of their complexity, especially between 1042–1059 when his friend Constantine Leichoudes was *mesazon*. Psellos refers to nations and minorities in his *Chronographia* through the prism of the imperial court at Constantinople.

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**Keywords:** Michael Psellos, *Chronographia*, nations, minorities, Byzantine Empire.

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