

MARIA LUISA AGATI, *Alla vigilia delle Crociate: Michele VII Ducas (1071–1078) (Hellenica 104)*. Alessandria: Edizioni dell’Orso 2022. xii, 268 pp. – ISBN 978-88-3613-294-2

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‘Psellus’ pitiful puppet, a cloistered bookworm, prematurely worn out intellectually and physically, surrounded by court intriguers and long-winded pedants’: this was Michael VII in OSTROGORSKY’s categorical judgement, which has long cast a dark shadow over the personality and reign of the last Doukas emperor.¹ Deconstructing, or at least reassessing such an unequivocally negative historiographical perception is the aim of AGATI’s book, as is explicitly stated in the Introduction. In her own words, the author wishes to cleanse the image of Michael VII ‘from the partisan or tendentious encrustations of medieval historiography and the interpretative forcing of modern historiography’ (p. 5). To my knowledge, there has been no monograph on Michael VII or on the Doukas dynasty since the general prosopographic study devoted to the Doukas family by POLEMIS: in this respect, AGATI’s book actually addresses a gap in scholarship.

Nevertheless, OSTROGORSKY’s views on Michael VII Doukas, or more generally on the eleventh century and the ‘government by the civil aristocracy’, have been amply nuanced, corrected and updated by subsequent studies over the last forty years. Indeed, there is no lack of recent works on eleventh-century Byzantium – one could think, among others, of the collective volumes edited by LAUXTERMANN and WHITTOW in 2012 (*Byzantium in the Eleventh Century: Being in Between*), FLUSIN and CHEYNET in 2017 (*Autour du Premier humanisme byzantin et des Cinq études sur le XI^e siècle, quarante ans après Paul Lemerle*, Travaux et Mémoires 21.2 – especially the second part edited by CHEYNET) and HOWARD-JOHNSTON in 2020 (*Social Change in Town and Country in Eleventh-Century Byzantium*). One would expect recent research to be taken into account and the state of the art to be clearly assessed and discussed at the outset, in the introduction. Unfortunately, this is not the case, and it is telling that none of

1. GEORGE OSTROGORSKY, *History of the Byzantine State*, transl. JOAN HUSSEY. Oxford 1968, p. 345.

the volumes I cited above are ever mentioned in the book. Indeed, bibliographical lacunae and a lack of engagement with up-to-date scholarship are, in my view, major flaws of AGATI's book, which have an impact on the soundness of her arguments.²

The Introduction offers some general considerations to explain the choice of the subject matter and its interest to both specialist and general readers. AGATI begins by recalling the centrality of the *basileus* and his crucial role in determining the destiny of the empire, which warrants a study of a specific emperor – even if the description of Byzantium as a state characterised 'by a complete centralisation of power' and of its people as 'the plebs, an amorphous mass of peasants, agricultural labourers, and workers of all kinds' (p. 1) may well raise eyebrows.³ Then, following ÉVELYNE PATLAGEAN, AGATI stresses the importance of integrating Byzantium into the European Middle Ages and the history of the medieval Mediterranean. Finally, the author declares her objectives: to re-examine the Byzantine and Latin sources on the reign and the personality of Michael VII, and to determine which provide reliable information and which should be discarded as biased and untrustworthy, in order to reach a more balanced judgement on this ruler.

Chapter 1 (*Michele VII nel suo tempo: elementi di storia e cronologia*) gives a brief, ten-page biographical sketch and a summary of the events of Michael VII's reign, limited to facts established and extrapolated from the sources. The author's intention is to provide readers with a general overview that will be enriched and nuanced in the following chapters through detailed analysis. This 'concise and uncritical account of events' (p. 17) is in fact followed by a long chapter devoted to 'a close reading of the written sources' (Chapter 2, *Le fonti storiche*), which constitutes the bulk of the book (105 out of 195 pages). In this section, AGATI analyses all the

2. The author herself acknowledges in the preface (*Premessa*) that this volume draws substantially on two articles she published in the early 1990s and that, although the work undertaken at that time never reached 'a satisfactory conclusion', its publication seemed justified primarily by the absence of monographic studies on Michael VII.

3. On the possible political agency of the people in Byzantium see especially ANTHONY KALDELLIS, *The Byzantine Republic: People and Power in New Rome*. Cambridge MA 2015. For a revision of the often overstated scope of imperial control and administration see LEONORA NEVILLE, *Authority in Byzantine Provincial Society, 950–1100*. Cambridge 2004; LUISA ANDRIOLLO, *Constantinople et les provinces d'Asie Mineure, IX^e–XI^e siècle. Administration impériale, sociétés locales et rôle de l'aristocratie* (Centre de Recherche d'Histoire et Civilisation de Byzance, Monographies 52). Leuven 2017.

medieval historiography, both Byzantine and Latin, dealing with Michael VII and his reign: from Psellos to the Palaiologan *Kleinchroniken* edited by SCHREINER, from the chronicle of Lupus Protospata (late 11th century) to that of Andrea Dandolo (14th century). For each of them, AGATI adopts a similar methodological approach. She provides some information on the author and the work in question, more or less detailed depending on its availability and interest for her purpose. She then concentrates on those passages in each source which report on the main events of Michael's life and reign, on his personality and government, and on the role and behaviour of those close to him, who shared his power and were able to influence him. Her purpose is to highlight points of contact and discrepancies between the sources considered, in order to identify possible relationships of dependence and derivation. Such *Quellenforschung* is expected to lead to the establishment of a *stemma fontium* that accounts for the existence of different historiographical attitudes towards Michael VII. AGATI notes affinities and variations in factual details: who, among the children of Constantine X, was promoted co-emperor during their father's lifetime; with whom their mother Eudokia shared the regency after Constantine's death; who took the initiative and responsibility for her marriage to Romanos IV Diogenes (herself alone or with the Senate, sharing her plan with Michael and possibly the *kaisar* John Doukas); with whom Diogenes shared the imperial power among the sons of Constantine X and his own; who played a role in the proclamation of Michael VII and the ban of his mother after Mantzikert, and who was to blame for Diogenes' blinding (Michael, the *kaisar* John, other political actors at the court); how Michael's deposition is presented and explained. The author also delves into the portrayal of characters, in order to assess the degree of agency attributed to Michael VII, his relatives and his advisers by each source.

While such an analytical approach may be useful and valid in theory, its application in the present case has significant shortcomings. These relate to three main points: gaps in the bibliography and up-to-date knowledge of historiographical debates; the presentation and use of extracts from sources; the overall aim of the analysis. It would be lengthy and beyond the scope of this review to supplement the bibliography provided and consulted by AGATI: it will suffice to give some indications with regard to the most important Byzantine sources.

With respect to Kekaumenos' *Consilia et Narrationes*, AGATI refers to the

edition by MARIA DORA SPADARO,⁴ without mentioning the more recent one by CHARLOTTE ROUECHÉ, available online with an English translation and detailed commentary.⁵ The use of this online resource would also have helped shed light on the not so obscure family connections, social profile, and cultural background of the author, whom AGATI in several occasion qualifies as ‘little known’ (p. 19) and as a man perhaps belonging to the court milieu or voicing the opinion ‘of any random contemporary’ (p. 141). With regard to Michel Psellos, AGATI does not take into account recent works devoted to this author by PAPAIOANNOU, JENKINS, and BARBER;⁶ her discussion of the generic distinctions within Byzantine historiography and the definition of Byzantine chronicle would have benefited from an engagement with recent theoretical discussions on the subject, such as those found in the works of MARKOPOULOS, or BURGESS and KULIKOWSKI.⁷ AGATI mentions DIMITRIS KRALLIS’s book on *Michael Attaleiates and the Politics of Imperial Decline in the Eleventh Century* (2012); however, she considers Attaleiates a member of the Byzantine military landed aristocracy (pp. 39, 171), an idea that his biography and career as a civil servant and a judge suffice to correct.⁸ On p. 55, John Zonaras is said to have held the functions of ‘first private secretary of the emperor’ (πρωτοασκηρήτης) and δρουγγάριος τῆς βίγλης, ‘one of the highest ranks in the cavalry’: a quick check of the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* would have dispelled any doubt that Zonaras was not a secretary or a knight but a high-ranking judge in the main courts of Constantinople.⁹ It is unclear also

4. Raccomandazioni e consigli di un gentiluomo (*Strategikon*) (Hellenica 2). Alessandria 1998.

5. Kekaumenos, *Consilia et Narrationes* (SAWS edition, 2013).

6. STRATIS PAPAIOANNOU, *Michael Psellos: Rhetoric and Authorship in Byzantium*. Cambridge 2013; DAVID JENKINS – CHARLES BARBER (eds), *Reading Michael Psellos* (The Medieval Mediterranean 16). Leiden 2006.

7. See in particular ATHANASIOS MARKOPOULOS, *From Narrative Historiography to Historical Biography. New Trends in Byzantine Historical Writing in the 10th–11th Centuries*. *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 102 (2010) pp. 697–715; RICHARD W. BURGESS – MICHAEL KULIKOWSKI, *The Mosaics of Time: The Latin Chronicle Traditions from the First Century BC to the Sixth Century AD. Volume I, A Historical Introduction to the Chronicle Genre from its Origins to the High Middle Ages*. Turnhout 2013. See now also RAIMONDO TOCCI (ed.), *A Companion to Byzantine Chronicle* (Brill’s Companions to the Byzantine World 14). Leiden 2024.

8. For a concise overview, see also the introduction in ANTHONY KALDELLIS – DIMITRIS KRALLIS (tr.), *Michael Attaleiates: The History* (Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library 16). Cambridge MA 2012.

9. On Zonaras, see now THEOPHILI KAMPIANAKI, *John Zonaras’ Epitome of Histories: A Compendium of Jewish-Roman History and Its Reception*. Oxford 2022; LUISA

why AGATI did not use the more recent editions of IADEVAIA, LAMPSIDIS, and TOCCI for the works of Joel, Constantine Manasses, and Theodore Skoutariotes respectively, relying instead on 19th-century editions.¹⁰

Besides that, the rationale behind the presentation and use of extracts from primary sources in the book is generally hard to grasp. AGATI juxtaposes long stretches of Greek text, which can extend over several pages, with little or no interruption, mostly without providing any translations and without engaging in detailed textual analysis. Take, for example, the section on the *Chronography* of Psellos: 7 pages out of 17 (pp. 21–38) are occupied by almost uninterrupted Greek excerpts. AGATI's observations usually provide a brief summary or highlight salient points of the content, but most of the reported text is left uncommented and sometimes does not even seem directly relevant to her argument. On some occasions, gaps and omissions in the Greek text are not clearly signalled: e.g. p. 42, between τὸν χάρακα ἔθετο and Ἀλλ' ἦκεν ἡμέραις; or pp. 67–68, where an omission of two pages in the text edition is signalled generically by the [...], with no further indication. Quite surprisingly, on pp. 99–101 Skoutariotes' text is not even typewritten, but one finds a copy-pasted photo of the old SATHAS edition. All this is not only frustrating for the reader – and one imagines that it will be especially so for students or non-Byzantinist colleagues from related disciplines, such as Western medievalists – but it may also suggest an unwillingness to undertake the kind of in-depth and painstaking interpretation that any process of translation entails. Such an effort would have been particularly commendable in the case of sources, such as *Scylitzes Continuatus*, for which we have no translation into a modern language.

Finally, one might question the choice of systematically examining sources from different periods, spanning four centuries, with the same methodological approach. If the aim is to reach a critical assessment of Michael VII's

ANDRIOLLO, When Universal History Reaches the Present: Narrative Time and Authorial Presence in Zonaras' Account of Alexios Komnenos' Reign. *Studi classici e orientali* 69 (2023) pp. 299–324.

10. Gioele. *Cronografia compendiaría: Introduzione, testo critico, traduzione, note e lessico* a cura di FRANCESCA IADEVAIA. Messina 1979; Constantini Manassis *Breviarium Chronicon*, recensuit ODYSSEUS LAMPSIDIS (*Corpus fontium historiae byzantinae* 36). Athens 1996; Theodori Scutariotae *Chronica*, recensuit RAIMONDO TOCCI (*Corpus fontium historiae byzantinae* 46). Berlin 2015. AGATI mentions LAMPSIDIS's edition in the bibliography but does not use it as the reference edition when reporting extracts from Manasses' chronicle. In general, the bibliography on Manasses is outdated: the reader should take into account the studies dedicated to this author by INGELA NILSSON, PAUL MAGDALINO, and ELIZABETH JEFFREYS.

reign, would it not be a more effective strategy to focus on historiographical sources that are relatively close in time, and to compare them with sources of different genres and nature, both literary and non-literary, in order to get as nuanced a picture of the context as possible? What contribution can Pseudo-Kodinos, the Palaiologan *Kleinchroniken* or the chronicle of Andrea Dandolo bring to such a purpose? And, if we widen the scope to the sources of the Palaiologan era, would not this rather be a study of the reception of Michael's image? This is an equally interesting question, but one that requires the adoption of a different methodological framework, as well as greater attention to the reuse and reshaping of historical memory in changing historical contexts.

In accordance with AGATI's goals and methods, Chapter 3 (*Analisi critica delle fonti*, pp. 122–146) consists mainly of a comparison of the main narrative elements already highlighted in each source. Authors and historiographical texts are examined again, one by one, this time in a more cursory way, recalling narrative affinities and discrepancies. In the case of some authors, such as Psellos and Attaleiates, AGATI delves somewhat deeper into their literary works, giving an overview of earlier scholarly interpretations. Otherwise, she essentially carries out *Quellenforschung*, which leads her to identify two main strands and attitudes in the historiographical representation of Michael VII (graphically represented in a *stemma fontium*, p. 142). The first one has its sources in Psellos and Attalates, whose testimonies are reused and occasionally combined by *Scylitzes Continuatus*, Zonaras and Glykas; it provides an image of Michael as weak, unfit for the imperial role, childish, passive and idle, but without accusing him of cruel or downright evil behaviour. The other historiographical attitude is found mainly in later sources which seem to elaborate on some details of Psellos' narrative, such as Manasses, Joel, George Continuatus, Skoutariotes, Pseudo-Kodinos, *Kleinchronik* 15, and to some extent, Anna Komnene and Nikephoros Bryennios. This second 'branch' of the historiographical tradition also portrays Michael VII negatively, but in a very different way, attributing to him forms of more or less autonomous agency, a 'capacity to understand and to want' (*capacità di intendere e di volere*, p. 138), which in some later authors goes so far as to appear as lack of scruples and wickedness (George the Monk, *Kleinchronik* 15). In both attitudes AGATI recognises the influence of Psellos' *Chronography*: Psellian narrative details and psychological characterisations are selected, received, and manipulated differently by later sources; in AGATI's view Psellos' influence is present and perceptible throughout the Byzantine tradition (pp. 140–141).

Only Kekaumenos is considered as a truly independent source, but without reaching a satisfactory explanation for his attitude, while the analysis of the Latin sources seems marginal and of little relevance to AGATI's purpose. This is, as anticipated in the introduction, to rehabilitate Michael VII and his reign, by trying 'to see the facts in their neutrality' (p. 147). AGATI therefore devotes the last chapter of her book to a reassessment of Michael's political action (Chapter 4, *Riesame della politica di Michele VII*, p. 147–195). In particular, she seeks to establish whether he was capable of political initiative and autonomous agency, or whether he was really as idle, easily influenced, and indifferent to the fate of his empire as most sources portray him. To this end, she examines Michael's actions and behaviour in foreign policy (especially military policy), both in the East and in the West, and in domestic policy, in terms of his attitude towards economic matters and court politics. Unfortunately, AGATI's interpretations are often undermined by a quite outdated appraisal of the dynamics and developments of Byzantine social and political life in the 11th century. She begins by expressing her desire to clarify the traditional Ostrogorskian view of a struggle between a civil 'bureaucratic' aristocracy and a military 'feudal' one in the period under consideration. However, she ends up taking for granted questionable (if not outright misleading) concepts such as 'nobility by birth' and 'nobility of the gown' (*nobiltà per nascita* and *nobiltà di toga*, p. 148), the latter allegedly being a product of what ALEXANDER KAZHDAN called 'vertical dynamism' and of a supposed 'etatist educational system' (*istruzione statalizzata*).

AGATI acknowledges that this is a 'very simplistic reading' of the available evidence, that the Byzantine aristocracy evolved over time, and that a tension between individual merit and *eugeneia* is perceptible in many 11th-century sources. However, her attempt to achieve a synthesis between the theses of GEORGE OSTROGORSKY, ALEXANDER KAZHDAN, and ÉVELYNE PATLAGEAN leads her to perplexing conclusions. Thus, the rise of the Komnenian dynasty would have led to a new category of nobility, overlapping with 'the group of people who had a share in the government' (but in what this would be new?); it is also hard to see how this situation would have led simultaneously to the growth of provincial urbanism and to a 'feudal model even stricter than in the West' (p. 149). AGATI's considerations and her assertion that 'there have been no systematic studies of what nobility and ruling class meant for the whole duration of the empire' (p. 148) are all the more puzzling when one considers that the studies of JEAN-CLAUDE CHEYNET and JOHN HALDON (to mention but two prominent

scholars) have contributed decisively to nuance traditional binary oppositions within the Byzantine elite and to shed light on the multiple interest groups involved in political competition in Byzantium.¹¹

On the other hand, AGATI rightly observes that during the reign of Michael VII the extended family of the *basileus* played a significant political role, but that this was not yet institutionalised – a notable difference from the future Komnenian system. It would have been interesting to develop this insight further, by contextualising it within the situation of intense aristocratic competition and dynastic instability of the period. Also the emphasis placed by AGATI on the skillful use of diplomacy in a context of limited financial and military resources is insightful and well justified, even though the author embraces the traditional idea that the recourse to unreliable mercenary forces was a specific 11th-century development and the main cause of Byzantine military weakness – a view that has been thoroughly refuted and is no longer accepted by scholars.¹² It is curious that AGATI places the Danube front and the Balkans in the East (this was certainly not the case from a Byzantine perspective); the reader must also be warned that the list of Balkan revolts on pp. 155–156 contains several factual errors: Constantine Bodin was not the *nipote* (nephew or grandson) of the Serbian ruler Mihailo, but his son; Nestor, who revolted in 1075, was not a praetorian prefect who ‘became the servant of the *basileus*’ but an imperial official who served as duke of Paristrion; Nikephoros Botaneiates was the duke (and not *strategos*) of the Anatolikon theme.

With regard to the West, which in AGATI’s discussion basically coincides with Italy, the focus is on diplomatic negotiations, first with a view to a marriage alliance with Robert Guiscard, then with the papacy. In this context, AGATI comments at length on two epistles addressed by the imperial chancery to an unnamed recipient identified as Robert Guiscard, and on a secret letter sent to Pope Gregory VII, now lost, whose content can only be guessed from the surviving papal reply. It is curious that AGATI does not give the Greek text of the two epistles to Guiscard, the only sources of

11. JEAN-CLAUDE CHEYNET, *Pouvoir et contestations à Byzance, 963–1210* (Publications de la Sorbonne 9). Paris 1996; IDEM, *The Byzantine Aristocracy and Its Military Function*. Aldershot 2006; JOHN HALDON (ed.), *A Social History of Byzantium*. Chichester 2009.

12. A concise mise à point in SAVVAS KYRIAKIDIS, *Army Structure: Roman Continuity and Byzantine Change*. In: YANNIS STOURAITIS (ed.), *A Companion to the Byzantine Culture of War* (Brill’s Companions to the Byzantine World 3). Leiden 2018, pp. 229–258.

which she provides a complete Italian translation (Appendici 6.1 and 6.2, pp. 197–201); the chrysobull of 1074 in favour of Robert Guiscard is neither translated nor reported in the original Greek, but only summarised and briefly commented on. This is unfortunate, since these documents could allow a thorough analysis of the arguments, language, and ideology of imperial diplomacy at a time of crisis. As for the lost secret letter to the Pope, it is methodologically dangerous to base an argument on a source that has not survived; nevertheless, it might have been interesting to report, translate, and comment on the text of the papal reply as a witness to diplomatic communication and cross-cultural ideological negotiation.

On the whole, the discussion of the financial crisis of the 1070s, based on the relatively recent studies of CECILE MORRISON and ANGELIKI LAIOU, is convincing, although AGATI's arguments on the infamous episode of the imperial warehouse in Raideustos and the imperial monopoly of wheat may arouse scepticism. She infers indeed that the state monopoly of grain was the norm in Byzantium, and she sees in the Raideustos episode the outcome of a struggle between 'direct state economy', favoured by the bureaucratic class, and a free economy championed by the Byzantine feudal aristocracy (p. 173).¹³ Finally, AGATI's consideration of Michael's behaviour towards other power brokers at the court leads her to rightly agree with ROSARIO ANASTASI and to emphasise that this emperor coherently defended the dynastic interests of the Doukas family, using considerable effort to control competing factions among his courtiers (p. 179).

In the concluding section (*Conclusioni: Un sovrano pacifico e diplomatico?*, pp. 185–195) AGATI paints the portrait of a ruler whose political failures were due to the nefarious influence of bad advisers, to whom he submitted out of fear and inexperience, but whose skills and agency in the field of diplomacy should be sufficient to rehabilitate his reign. One can be sceptical, at least in part, about the strength of AGATI's arguments, which often seem to venture into the perilous field of historical psychology. And while

13. On this episode and, more generally, on market economy and the circulation of food supplies in Byzantium: NICOLAS OIKONOMIDES, *The Economic Region of Constantinople: From Directed Economy to Free Economy*. In: IDEM, *Social and Economic Life in Byzantium*. Aldershot 2004, no. XIII; PAUL MAGDALINO, *The Grain Supply of Constantinople, Ninth–Twelfth Century*. In: CYRIL MANGO – GILBERT DAGRON (eds), *Constantinople and Its Hinterland: Papers from the Twenty-Seventh Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies*, Oxford, April 1993. Aldershot 1995, pp. 35–47; ANGELIKI LAIOU, *Monopoly and Privileged Free Trade in the Eastern Mediterranean*. In: DAMIEN COULON et al. (eds), *Chemins d'outre mer. Études d'histoire sur la Méditerranée médievale offertes à Michel Balard (Byzantina Sorboniensia 20)*. Paris 2016, pp. 511–526.

her work has the merit of highlighting a gap in scholarship, a balanced reassessment of the reign of Michael the VII and, more generally, of the political action of the Doukas dynasty or of the crisis of the 1070s still remains a desideratum.

Keywords

middle-Byzantine political history