

ALEKSANDAR JOVANOVIĆ, *Michael Palaiologos and the Publics of the Byzantine Empire in Exile, c.1223–1259 (New Approaches to Byzantine History and Culture)*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan 2022. xiii, 255 pp. – ISBN 978-3-031-09277-0

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A reader drawn to this book by its title and the famous portrait of the Byzantine emperor on the cover, as it appears in the magnificent *Pachymeres Monac. gr. 442* (f. 174r), might initially expect a conventional biography of Michael VIII Palaiologos (r. 1259–1282), one that chronologically traces his political, economic, and cultural endeavours. Such readers, however, may find themselves somewhat surprised – at least at first. Upon closer examination, it becomes evident that the work, through both its methodological approach and the breadth of data it presents, provides scholars with valuable insights into the man behind the imperial purple and his place within the political landscape of the Byzantine Empire. In the end, the monograph that ALEKSANDAR JOVANOVIĆ has developed from his doctoral research at Simon Fraser University surpasses all traditional expectations.

Deep analysis is facilitated not merely by the book's core content but also by its structuring. JOVANOVIĆ is particularly attentive to the diverse socio-political groups that shaped Michael Palaiologos's public life and with which this Byzantine 'self-made' ruler had to engage. In order to foreground the significance of these behind-the-scenes strategies – without being overshadowed by the broader and well-documented historical developments of his reign – the author deliberately limits his focus to the years preceding Michael's ascent to the throne. More generally, he introduces this case study for exploring the interaction of individual agency and public discourse.

By concentrating on this formative period, set against the turbulent backdrop of the post-Fourth Crusade era, the study moves beyond certain established yet sometimes rigid interpretations of Michael VIII. It anticipates the conventional portrayals of him as a 'New Constantine' and shifts attention away from the urban redevelopment of Constantinople or his efforts to resolve the ecclesiastical schism. At the same time, it undertakes

broad exploration of Byzantium's evolving identity as reflected in the literary and ideological constructions of an empire undergoing fragmentation, exile, and restoration. In doing so, JOVANOVIĆ's research not only illuminates the complex interplay between personal ambition, public discourse, and socio-political restructuring but also demonstrates how these forces collectively shaped both Michael's pursuit of imperial power and the revitalization of the Byzantine Empire itself.

The short reigns of Michael VIII's predecessors Theodore II (r. 1254–1258) and John IV Laskaris (r. 1258–1261) serve as a poignant case study in this regard. Their difficulties exemplify the extent to which political survival in Byzantium was contingent not merely on hereditary legitimacy or military acumen but also on the strategic deployment of rhetoric and self-representation. As JOVANOVIĆ demonstrates, Byzantine society placed an extraordinary premium on rhetorical skill and education, both of which functioned as essential tools for social mobility. Mastery of rhetorical discourse allowed individuals to construct compelling narratives of their own competence, thereby positioning themselves as viable contenders within the *cursus honorum* and reducing the hierarchical distance between themselves and imperial power.

In particular, the book aims to provide a comprehensive examination of the socio-political strategies employed by Michael VIII Palaiologos during the Nicaean period, with a particular emphasis on recontextualizing the agency of Byzantine elites within the broader framework of contemporary power struggles. By adopting CLIFFORD ANDO's approach to *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalties*, this analysis highlights the central role played by what ANDO terms 'institutions of communicative practice' in shaping political legitimacy and elite interactions (pp. 12–13). In doing so, the study brings together a common methodological thread that, while pursued from different perspectives and with distinct objectives, is evident in the recent scholarship of ANTHONY KALDELLIS, JEAN-CLAUDE CHEYNET, LEONORA NEVILLE, and DIMITRIS KRALLIS. Ultimately, it seeks to link traditional Byzantine historiography with modern theories of public engagement and political communication, thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between individual agency and structural forces within the public sphere as a critical site of imperial power negotiation.

Through meticulous engagement with primary sources and historiographical debates, JOVANOVIĆ forges a fresh interpretative lens for assessing the

complexities of Byzantine statecraft and identity formation during a period marked by political exile and territorial fragmentation. Furthermore, he engages extensively with recent historiography, integrating interdisciplinary approaches such as sociological and anthropological theories. Therefore, close reading of the *Histories* by George Akropolites and George Pachymeres – two authors who, respectively, advocate for opposing factions within the political arena of their time – permits comparative analysis of competing narratives. By cross-referencing these literary accounts with the historical self-representation articulated by Michael VIII himself in his ‘testament’, preserved in the *typikon* of the Monastery of St. Demetrius in Constantinople, the study illuminates the mechanisms through which public support and consensus were orchestrated. The book uses also neglected ‘minor’ texts, putting them in dialogue with their ‘major’ counterparts as well as presenting them in clear translation to the reader (this is the case, just to quote an example, of the four commemorative pieces on/for Andronikos Palaiologos’ death, whose most recent study to date was that by SILVIO GIUSEPPE MERCATI). By weaving together diverse strands of analysis, JOVANOVIĆ invites further reconsideration of the ways in which public discourse and performative legitimacy shaped the fate of emperors and political aspirants alike within the intricate landscape of Byzantine politics.

As anticipated, the author’s central argument hinges on Michael Palaiologos’ ability to navigate the fragmented political landscape by employing a combination of personal charisma, strategic alliances, and symbolic actions.

Following a succinct yet comprehensive introductory chapter, ‘Meeting the Roman Public’ (pp. 1–30), which establishes the book’s framework and underscores the centrality of communication in maintaining public consensus within the Byzantine Empire – particularly in the exceptional context of the Nicene exile – the volume is divided into six chapters. These progress chronologically, tracing Michael’s life and examining the various facets of his political ascent, each illustrating the different strategies he employed to adapt to the shifting circumstances of his career. A recurring theme throughout the study, addressed in a broader context within the introduction, is the evolving concept of ‘Roman’ identity among the empire’s inhabitants. In the dynamic political and social landscape of the first half of the 13th century, identity became a contested space – both at the individual and societal levels – as displaced rulers and intellectuals sought to redefine their connection to a fragmented yet enduring imperial legacy.

Chapter Two, ‘Making Officials in Exile: The Case of the Palaiologoi’ (pp. 31–84), explores the genealogical and social background of the Palaiologos family, tracing its prominence back to Michael’s father, Andronikos, who was an integral part of the governing elite and held the distinguished title of μέγας δομέστικός under John Vatatzes. Within Vatatzes’ itinerant court – predominantly based in Nicaea but frequently relocating to the Lydian region, including Manisa and the palace of Nymphaion – young Michael received the traditional education befitting his social class. His studies culminated in mastery of rhetoric, a discipline that not only facilitated entry into public office but also endowed him with the rhetorical dexterity necessary for shaping his public persona. Moreover, during this period, Michael observed high-ranking officials, bureaucrats, and clergymen in action, gaining insight into governance and administration. The chapter concludes with his appointment as governor of Serres and Melenikon in Macedonia, albeit under his father’s supervision. Andronikos, through astute political manoeuvring, constructed an extensive and functional support network centred in Thessaloniki, the empire’s most significant city after Constantinople. It was this network that shielded the young and inexperienced Michael upon his father’s death, aiding his calculated ascent to political prominence. His rise was further bolstered by a carefully crafted eulogy honouring the late μέγας δομέστικός, reinforcing his legitimacy and consolidating his position.

Michael’s first true test came with the necessity of navigating the Byzantine administrative hierarchy and proving his capacity to manage both peripheral and central affairs. Chapter Three, ‘Linking the Golden Chain: The Social Network of Michael Palaiologos’ (pp. 85–128), examines the complex dynamics between provincial governance and the imperial court. It delves into the rhetorical strategies employed by both factions to safeguard their respective spheres of influence, often circumventing direct appeals to the emperor. Beyond traditional diplomacy, Michael skilfully wielded symbolic authority through public ceremonies, the adoption of prestigious titles, and meticulously staged displays of power, all of which bolstered his legitimacy. The chapter further analyses the intricate web of alliances and rivalries that defined Michael’s political trajectory. Unlike his father, he faced mounting opposition, culminating in accusations of treason orchestrated by the influential merchant Nikolaos Manglavites, who directly petitioned the emperor. In the ensuing trial, Michael deftly leveraged his connections and military backing, not only securing his acquittal but also obtaining a promotion and securing a marital alliance with Vatatzes’ niece

– arrangements that JOVANOVIĆ metaphorically describes as forging a crucial ‘golden chain’. These carefully crafted strategies were soon put to the test with the accession of Theodore II, whose reforms sought to recalibrate the distribution of power within the imperial hierarchy.

The following chapter introduces a temporary shift in JOVANOVIĆ’s narrative focus, which, while providing a rich analysis of Byzantine interactions with external powers, slightly disrupts the book’s chronological flow. Titled “‘*Je veux être calife à la place du calife*’: Michael Palaiologos in the Seljuq Sultanate of Rum’ (pp. 129–178), this section explores Michael’s self-imposed exile and his direct engagement with the Romans residing under Seljuq rule – many of whom played active roles in governance and administration. By examining both literary and material evidence, JOVANOVIĆ highlights the significant presence of Byzantine exiles within the Seljuq polity and underscores Michael’s ability to adapt his communicative strategies to an entirely different political and cultural sphere. The chapter provides a compelling study of the interplay between diplomacy and faith, demonstrating Michael’s resilience and strategic acumen in navigating this unfamiliar environment.

Chapter Five, “‘The Return of the King’: Michael Palaiologos Claims Imperial Dignity’ (pp. 179–223), charts Michael’s return to Byzantine affairs as he neared the pinnacle of his political ascent. The extensive relationships he had cultivated with aristocrats, bureaucrats, and military figures proved instrumental in his calculated dismantling of the Mouzalon brothers, who had been entrusted with the guardianship of the young emperor John IV. Through a combination of strategic manoeuvring and public performances of authority, Michael successfully positioned himself as the saviour of the Byzantine Empire. His consolidation of power, bolstered by widespread support and effective communication, ultimately paved the way for the triumphant restoration of imperial rule in the capital. With this resounding success, Michael’s life entered a new phase in which persuasion and consensus-building gave way to celebration and eulogistic narratives. Now the undisputed ruler, he assumed control over the writing of history itself, shaping his legacy as the architect of Byzantium’s history.

While concise, perhaps excessively so in comparison to the well-balanced structure of the main chapters, the book’s conclusion (pp. 225–230) revisits its key themes in an erotematic – and very Byzantine – format, reinforcing JOVANOVIĆ’s central arguments: ‘– How did Michael Palaiologos and his associates come up with an effective plan for communicative ac-

tion? [...] The answer rests with the elite's training and education, which more than evidence of sclerotic classicism represented a veritable panoply of politically useful and frequently deployed rhetorical techniques [...] – Why would Michael care to forge an image of a divinely sanctioned New Constantine during his reign? [...] Michael Palaiologos needed to find a common thread for his public persona that he could use to promote the image of a good ruler throughout the empire [...] – Why was Michael elected emperor? [...] Simply put, because he developed a public persona that was appealing to a wide majority of the people and publics in the Roman Empire' (pp. 229–230).

Beyond its aforementioned merits, JOVANOVIĆ's work effectively integrates existing research on Michael Palaiologos, whose primary focus was on political strategy and propaganda following his ascension to the throne of Constantinople. I have already mentioned studies concerning his urbanistic program in the capital and his self-representation as a 'New Constantine'. Furthermore, in a recent paper I highlighted Michael's deliberate self-construction: initially seeking recognition as the 'son' of Vatatzes, he later chose to symbolically sever ties with his Nicene past and its intellectual elite, instead aligning himself with the prestigious Komnenian legacy – an approach that seems to anticipate the themes explored in *The Brothers Karamazov*. JOVANOVIĆ's work represents a significant advancement in our understanding not only of Michael Palaiologos' rise to power but also of 13th-century Byzantine culture and society. It establishes a crucial link between Michael's post-1261 political strategy and the formative experiences of his youth, connecting the historical narratives crafted within the imperial court on the Bosphorus to the lessons he absorbed while on the periphery of the Empire.

Deeper understanding of Michael's ideological framework also allows for a more nuanced interpretation of certain phenomena occurring between the late 13th and early 14th centuries, such as the emergence of the cults of Laskaris saints – particularly John IV and, above all, John III. In my view, these cults functioned as a direct response to the Palaiologan approach to power consolidation; as representatives of opposition voices, they sought to reinterpret the past, offer a new perspective on the present, and advocate their own vision for Byzantium's restoration. A comparable strategy – though without leading to canonization – was employed by Michael himself in crafting an exalted image of his father Andronikos. He commissioned Iakobos, Archbishop of Bulgaria, to compose a funeral oration as well as three poetic works extolling Andronikos' achievements in Thessalonica's

administration (moreover, these texts were written in different genres to resonate with diverse social strata; pp. 72–84). Notably, the same Iakobos also composed a funeral oration for Vatatzes. Thanks to JOVANOVIĆ's study, it becomes evident that Laskarids supporters ultimately adopted the very same rhetorical strategies once employed by their political adversaries. While not without its limitations, primarily due to the complexity of the topic and the novelty of the approach, *Michael Palaiologos and the Publics of the Byzantine Empire in Exile* succeeds in illuminating the intricacies of Michael's policy and their enduring impact on Byzantine statecraft, serving as the foundation for further research on governance strategies, power networks, and transclass actions, conceived as societal phenomena. Undoubtedly, it is a significant contribution to Byzantine studies.

Furthermore, this book heralds a form of Copernican revolution in many respects. By emphasizing the necessity of meticulously preparing political action, weaving complex power networks, and constructing a carefully curated public image, JOVANOVIĆ's analysis directs our attention to the critical importance of investigating the years preceding an emperor's ascension to the throne – shifting the focus from the *regnum* to the *ante-regnum*. This approach encourages complementary research on rulers who have left sufficient traces of their preparatory strategies, ultimately moving historiography away from a purely evenemential perspective toward a more comprehensive anthropological framework. Thus, by examining Michael VIII through the sources that portray his persona and actions and by observing the evolution of the Byzantine Empire in the 13th century from his perspective, we are drawn into a dynamic interplay between the individual and the state, between the tangible and the theoretical. At times spectators, at times behind the scenes, and at other moments immersed in the private thoughts, emotions, and ambitions of the key historical actors, we become participants in a grand performance.

This paradigm shift is particularly relevant – and, in some cases, essential – for a deeper understanding of the final period of the Byzantine Empire. During this era, more than ever before, the delicate balance of power was maintained through sophisticated rhetorical constructions and the concealed networks of influence that Michael VIII Palaiologos meticulously cultivated in his gradual yet inexorable pursuit of the imperial purple.

Keywords

late Byzantine Empire; Michael VIII Palaiologos; politics; prosopography