

TRISTAN SCHMIDT, *Armeeführung und Militäreliten in Byzanz, 1081–1203: Selektion, Hierarchie, Repräsentation* (Byzantioç. Studies in Byzantine History and Civilization 24). Turnhout: Brepols 2025. 562 pp. – ISBN 978-2-503-61450-2

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Following his earlier study *Politische Tierbildlichkeit in Byzanz: Spätes 11. bis frühes 13. Jahrhundert*, TRISTAN SCHMIDT now presents his second monograph, *Armeeführung und Militäreliten in Byzanz, 1081–1203: Selektion, Hierarchie, Repräsentation*. Completed between 2017–2024, the book is the product of research fellowships held at academic institutions in Germany, Turkey, and Poland. It constitutes a valuable contribution to the study of the Byzantine army under the Komnenoi and the Angeloi, with particular focus on military personnel selection, decision-making, and modes of representation, themes that have not always received the attention they merit. At the same time, it engages with aspects of prosopography, dynastic legitimation, and the complex dynamics between imperial authority and the military aristocracy. Drawing on a wide range of sources (including historical narratives, poetry, letters, orations, seals, documents, and treaties), SCHMIDT frequently offers more nuanced perspectives than earlier contributions in the field, complementing them nicely.¹

The book is structured into four main chapters, preceded by a substantial introduction that outlines the theoretical and methodological framework, defines categorisation, clarifies the purpose of the study, and situates it within current scholarship. The first three main chapters are arranged chronologically, while the fourth groups the findings of the author thematically, serving in effect as a conclusion. The book is rounded out with a rich bibliography, as well as helpful prosopographical lists and indexes.

1. See, for example, ARMIN HOHLWEG, *Beiträge zur Verwaltungsgeschichte des Oströmischen Reiches unter den Komnenen* (Miscellanea Byzantina Monacensia 1). Munich 1965; JEAN-CLAUDE CHEYNET, *Pouvoir et contestations à Byzance (936–1210)* (Byzantina Sorbonensia 9). Paris 1990; PAUL MAGDALINO, *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos 1143–1180*. Cambridge 1993; JOHN W. BIRKENMEIER, *The Development of the Komnenian Army, 1081–1180* (History of Warfare 5). Leiden 2002 and 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.

The first chapter, *Militärische Personalentscheidungen während der Regierungszeit Kaiser Alexios' I. Komnēnos*, revisits the prevailing view that Alexios I relied primarily on family members for staffing positions of military leadership. SCHMIDT demonstrates that, in the aftermath of the coup of 1081, military appointments were shaped less by kinship than by coalition politics, with key offices distributed among political allies. Alexios I sought to appoint both western and eastern aristocratic families into military positions, thereby creating shared interests in the stability of his regime. Military failures were usually not punished severely, yet suspicions of political disloyalty could lead to serious sanctions, though often tempered by the emperor's limited resources and need for consensus. Gradually, Alexios I consolidated his role as supreme commander, increasingly relying on kin and binding leading generals to the imperial family through marriage alliances. Even so, the presence of numerous field commanders unrelated to the emperor demonstrates that kinship was neither a perquisite nor a guarantee of promotion to top military positions, unlike in the reign of Manuel I. The author correlates Alexios I's frequent presence in the field with the periods that key formal military command positions, such as the *megas domestikos*, remained vacant. By contrast, the office of *megas dux* was consistently filled, presumably because its primarily naval operational responsibilities posed little threat to imperial prestige, and its duties of administration of maritime provinces could not be left unattended. Despite the significant ceremonial visibility of the Komnenoi, family members were not systematically privileged over unrelated officers in leadership and decision-making. Alexios I controlled the appointment and rotation of key military officers and governors, but regional networks also played their part. For instance, the emperor integrated the aristocracy of Adrianople into his familial network and its members were well represented into appointments of military leadership. In certain frontier regions, Alexios I tolerated the autonomy of potentates such as the Gabrades in Chaldia and Trebizond, attempting at the same time to force their integration in court and a recognition of imperial overlordship. He also valued specialised skills, particularly among foreigners whose cultural competence facilitated the mediation between the empire and foreign troops. The most successful in career advancement were often second-generation foreigners, already relatively well integrated into the Byzantine elite. Former palace guards and retainers could also rise to field command through personal proximity to the emperor. SCHMIDT notes that court titles and informal negotiations substituted for a rigid military hierarchy, producing a system where official permanent military offices (such

as the *megas domestikos* and the *stratopedarches*), temporary commissions (such as the *strategos autokrator*) and individuals who irregularly carried responsibilities of military command (*protostrator*) overlapped in practice. This system multiplied the channels of ceremonial representation and the delegation of military authority. Ultimately, SCHMIDT argues that in the reign of Alexios I, military power rested on a complex interplay of factors, with kinship and personal ties, court connections, integration into the sociopolitical and economic networks of the capital, special skills, military training and performance, all playing their part.

The second chapter turns to the reigns of John II and Manuel I, both of whom inherited a relatively stable system and a dense web of connections between the Komnenoi and leading military aristocratic families. John II largely continued his father's policies, reinforcing the familial character of military authority, while Manuel I sought to assert himself as the supreme military authority, establishing an uneasy relationship with the experienced *megas domestikos* John Axuch. After the triumph of 1149 and Axouch's death in the early 1150s, the emperor fully emerged as the uncontested military authority. He personally led campaigns well into the 1170s and left the office of *megas domestikos* vacant. The office of the *megas domestikos* for the East was only reactivated in the later years of Manuel's reign when his operational capacity was limited. Court ceremony, encomia, and iconography reinforced his image as general-emperor, yet the aristocracy continued to promote its own martial virtues in literature, though mostly acknowledging the military skill and authority of the emperor. Loyal and successful generals, such as Andronikos Kontostephanos, could even share in triumphal celebrations alongside the emperor. SCHMIDT argues that under Manuel I, the so-called 'Komnenian style' of family-based governance fully matured: a small circle of families monopolised high command, with integration into the imperial family and the bestowal of the title of *sebastos* becoming prerequisites for field commands. Performance still mattered, since individuals were expected to prove themselves first in lower command positions before promotion into higher ones. Despite the dynasty's self-promotion as a family of warriors, the emperor's male siblings had their military careers curtailed and were often denied significant military commands, reflecting potential rivalries. As in the reign of Alexios I, high-ranking commanders were normally punished only when their operational failures were lined to political insubordination, and even then, penalties were softened to preserve internal familial peace, as illustrated in the case of Andronikos Komnenos. Although high command became the preserve

of kin, some rare opportunities for outsiders still existed. The newcomers were either integrated into the family due to their important regional ties (e.g. the Maurozomai in Peloponnese and the Angeloi in Thrakesion) or solely on the grounds of military performance. Those holding the dignity of *sebastos* or a higher one were compelled to negotiate hierarchies and responsibilities during joint campaigns. As in the reign of Alexios I, Manuel consistently appointed holders to the office of *megas dux* and delegated military authority not only through permanent and temporal formal military offices, but also through court officials who did not strictly practice duties of military command, such as the *protostrator* and the *chartularios tou staulou*.

The third chapter, *Die militärische Führung in der Zeit von 1180 bis 1203*, explores the instability of the late Komnenian and Angeloi periods. Andronikos I favoured the military aristocracy who held offices in the regime of Manuel I, but was not close enough to him to have been particularly privileged. This demonstrates that Andronikos I was not collectively against the military elite, he only sought to eliminate individuals that had supported the *protosebastos* Alexios and Alexios II. Isaakios II retained some of the most prominent commanders of Andronikos I, not only due to the ongoing Norman invasion, but also as a long-term strategy. At the same time, he reestablished old and handicapped commanders disfavoured in the old regime, in an attempt to promote himself as the restorer of peace and unity. While kinship with the Angeloi was not a definitive criterion for access to positions of high military command, both the Angeloi and the military aristocracy actively sought to be integrated into the imperial familial network. Like the Komnenoi, the Angeloi appointed relatives to military posts, but their weaker family cohesion and consensus, led to frequent rebellions and dismissals. SCHIMDT notes the shrewdness of Alexios III, who contrary to previous scholarly assessments as weak and irresolute, defended the stability of the regime through the appointment of non-related commanders in key military commands (e.g. the *megas domestikos* Basileios Batatzes dealt with the rebellion of Isaakios' cousin), and the promotion of sons-in-law to high command, thus legitimizing them as potential successors. In addition, once securely established in the capital, Alexios III campaigned frequently to embody the general-emperor ideal, so crucial for imperial legitimation. The author contrasts Alexios III's conduct with that of the *protosebastos* Alexios, Andronikos I and Isaakios II who, owing to their precarious position in Constantinople, either avoided campaigning in person, or lead expeditions without notable success. Although emperors of

this period still controlled personnel decisions and regional appointments, the aristocracy of Adrianople retained privileged access to military commands. The provinces enjoyed greater secessions and autonomy when the centre was weakened by internal political conflicts. Under these circumstances and amid deteriorating financial and military conditions, foreign potentates and adventurers such as Ivanko in the Balkans and Giovanni Stirione in the Aegean were entrusted with military authority, their service relying partly on their own regional connections and financial and military means. SCHMIDT notes that this period laid the groundwork for later developments in military offices and duties that became standard in the 13th century, including the abolition the *megas dux*'s operational command role and the growing tendency for the *protostrator* to assume the functions of a general. At the same time, the office the *megas domestikos* was revived, both in the East and the West. The effort to consolidate and strengthen the Eastern frontier through the establishment of independent regional command is seen as one of the main drives behind the revival of the *megas domestikos* of the East.

The final chapter focuses on the fundamental conditions of military leadership in the period under investigation, tracing personnel selection strategies within their social, political and military contexts. The discussion proceeds along three axes: a) the criteria for rendering individuals viable candidates, b) the mechanisms of appointment, promotion and dismissal, and c) the semantics of legitimation and promotional representation of military authority. As regards the first axis, connections were crucial, be them regional, courtly, military, or ties of kinship to the emperor. Apart from the above, political circumstances and instabilities also shaped appointments. Special skills, such as cultural competences, as well as the possession of loyal troops, private or foreign, also emerge as potential assets for aspiring commanders. Turning to the second axis, SCHMIDT argues that appointments to field commands required the balancing of three key factors, military performance, consensus and loyalty, which were not always mutually compatible. Methods for assessing military personnel varied. Senior commanders were seldom dismissed solely for military failures, unless their poor performance was compounded by political disloyalty. Conversely, lower-ranking officers could face severe punishments for operational setbacks or poor discipline. Promotion and precedence within the command structure depended on a combination of factors, such as informal negotiations, recommendations from advisors, court hierarchy, ranks, age and experience. SCHMIDT notes that offices such as the *megas domestikos*, *megas dux* and

protostrator, though differing in function, duties and evolution, were associated with responsibilities of high command. As far as the third axis is concerned, SCHMIDT notes that historical narratives, poems and orations typically justified the possession of military office on the basis of merit. Effective military performance was often associated with bravery, noble birth and, in some instances, knowledge of military manuals. In the case of foreign commanders, these criteria were supplemented with references to their successful integration into Byzantine society, with particular stress on proper Byzantine education and upbringing.

SCHMIDT's arguments and analysis are, on the whole, convincing. His use of a wide range of primary sources, combined with his solid command of the relevant bibliography, have resulted in a credible and nuanced study of strategies of military personnel selection, the structuring of military hierarchies, the representation of the military aristocracy, and the factors that shaped them. That said, the book has some inevitable omissions and weaknesses. In some respects, its scope is ambitious in that it is extremely difficult to address thoroughly all aspects of the three central themes in a single monograph. For instance, representation alone could easily warrant a monograph of its own. Consequently, certain aspects of the book invite further reflection which will be considered here grouped under the three central themes of the book: selection, representation and hierarchy.

To begin with selection, SCHMIDT demonstrates well the value that emperors placed on foreigners whose cultural background and competence enabled them to mediate effectively between the empire and foreign troops or leaders. To the foreign commanders discussed in the book one might add the case of Guy, Bohemond's half-brother. To secure his defection from Robert Guiscard, Alexios I offered Guy a high title, a payment of a substantial sum of money, and integration into the extended imperial family through marriage. After the death of Robert Guiscard, Guy entered Byzantine service and, according to Latin sources, enjoyed a good standing at Alexios I's court. He acted as seneschal of the emperor, and helped to mitigate the mutual distrust between Alexios I and the Crusaders. Guy even participated in a private imperial council with the purpose of discussing Alexios I's response to the dire situation in Antioch during the First Crusade.²

2. Anna Komnene, 6.5.2 (ed. DIETHER R. REINSCH – ATHANASIOS KAMBYLIS, *Annae Comnenae Alexias* [Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 40]. Berlin 2001); *Gesta Francorum*, pp. 63–64 (ed. and trans. ROSALIND HILL, *The Deeds of the Franks and the Other Pilgrims to Jerusalem* [Oxford Medieval Texts]. Oxford 1972); Ralph of Caen, p. 96

Another dimension that could have been explored further is the role of literacy and literary culture in facilitating access to, or promotion within, military offices. SCHIMDT does note the significance of military manuals and their place in the education of aristocrats, yet engagement with the works of CATHERINE HOLMES and GEORGIOS CHATZELIS could have enriched the analysis by taking into consideration the function of literary knowledge as a pillar of *Romanitas* and a mode of legitimating authority. These studies also shed light into the ways in which literary education intersected with military education and impacted career advancement.³

Schimdt rightly demonstrates that noble birth had long been regarded as an advantage for military appointments and correctly traces this ideal back to Onasander's *Strategikos*.⁴ Noble birth usually signified a virtuous upbringing, and the author effectively explores the high value that aristocratic families placed on the military education of their young male members. As SCHIMDT cogently argues, young aristocrats were typically instructed and mentored by their father or by tutors, often drawn from within the family. It is worth noting that, military education, along with moral edification (most

(trans. BERNARD S. BACHRACH – DAVID S. BACHRACH, *The Gesta Tancredi of Ralph of Caen: A History of the Normans of the First Crusade* [Crusade Texts in Translation]. Aldershot 2005); William of Tyre p. 277 (trans. EMILY A. BABCOCK – AUGUST C. KREY, *A History of Deeds Done Beyond the Sea* by William Archbishop of Tyre, vol. 1. New York 1943); *Chanson d'Antioche* 38–45, 286 (trans. SUSAN B. EDINGTON – CAROL SWEETHENHAM, *The Chanson d'Antioche: An Old French Account of the First Crusade* [Crusade Texts in Translation]. Abingdon 2016).

3. CATHERINE HOLMES, *Political Literacy*. In: PAUL STEPHENSON (ed.), *The Byzantine World* (Routledge Worlds). London 2010, pp. 141–157; CATHERINE HOLMES, *Byzantine Political Culture and Compilation Literature in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries: Some Preliminary Inquiries*. *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 64 (2010) pp. 55–80; GEORGIOS CHATZELIS, *Imperial Office and Education: The ideal of the Educated Emperor and its Reception in Middle-Byzantine Historiography and Iconography*. *Βυζαντιακά* 36 (2020–2021) pp. 191–230; GEORGIOS CHATZELIS, *Wars and Cultural Wars: Military, Ideological and Cultural Factors Behind the Emergence of Byzantine Military Treatises (c. 800–1100)*. In: CONOR WHATELY (ed.), *Military Literature in the Medieval Roman World and Beyond* (Reading Medieval Sources 8). Brill 2024, pp. 255–299; GEORGIOS CHATZELIS, *Byzantine Education and Military Manuals: Military, Intellectual and Moral Edification in Byzantium*. In: FRANCESCO FIORUCCI (ed.), *Das antike Militärwesen: Autoren, Werke und ihr Nachleben* (Paradeigmata 77). Baden-Baden 2024, pp. 111–153.

4. Though to demonstrate more fully the impact of Onasander's *Strategikos* on Byzantine military manuals, the author could have consulted PHILLIP RANCE, *The Ideal of the Roman General in Byzantium: The Reception of Onasander's Strategikos in Byzantine Military Literature*. In: RICHARD EVANS – SHAUN TOUGHER (eds), *Generalship in Ancient Greece, Rome and Byzantium*. Edinburgh 2022, pp. 242–263.

probably gained from the study of various literary genres), was considered a vital part of a proper upbringing for young aristocrats. This explains why emperors often sponsored the military education of their close relatives and newly allied kin from prominent aristocratic houses. For instance, as soon as Gregory Gabras, the son of the separatist Theodore Gabras, joined the imperial family, he was assigned a tutor from the empress's retinue, the eunuch Michael. According to Anna Komnene, he was given a good moral instruction and thorough knowledge of every aspect of military science.⁵ Manuel I likewise was celebrated for sponsoring the moral and military education of his nephew John the *protosebastos* and *protobestiarios*. The significance of this education to the aristocracy is highlighted by John's gratitude to the emperor: a fresco in John's residence depicted him standing alongside the emperor, accompanied by a written testimony in which he praised Manuel for acting as a guardian and second father, providing him with a noble upbringing, that comprised the cultivation of virtue, and instruction to the art of weapons and generalship.⁶

Turning to the theme of representation, SCHMIDT provides a critical lens for understanding how ideals of military leadership were not only enacted in practice but also shaped, reinforced, and negotiated through cultural discourse. In this respect, his dismantling of the cliché of historical narratives that aristocrats advanced through merit from soldiers and officers of elite guards to field command is particularly valuable. SCHMIDT argues that this was rarely the case, applying only to a handful of individuals already closely tied to the emperor and his family, highlighting the gap between reality and literary representation. Situating this observation within the broader framework of Byzantine perceptions of childhood and adolescence, can illuminate further how normal practice and cultural ideals fed into each other. The Byzantines viewed youth as a formative stage that prefigured adult life, believing that the qualities, habits and virtues cultivated in young age would by default endure into maturity. This notion underpinned the ideal of the *puer senex*, the child who displayed adult wisdom and virtues, and thus embodied the qualities of a successful leader from an early age.⁷ It is no coincidence, therefore, that the ninth- or tenth-century

5. Anna Komnene 8.9.6 (REINSCH – KAMBYLIS). SCHMIDT discusses in passing the case of the military education of Gregory Gabras in his monograph.

6. PAUL MAGDALINO – ROBERT NELSON, *The Emperor in Byzantine Art of the Twelfth Century*. *Byzantinische Forschungen* 8 (1982) pp. 135–137.

7. DIMITER G. ANGELOV, *Emperors and Patriarchs as Ideal Children and Adolescents: Literary Conventions and Cultural Expectations*. In: ARIETTA PAPACONSTANTI-

Patmos *Vita of Constantine I* features the protagonist as a young military prodigy, entrusted by his father with the post of *komes* at the age of ten, or that the future Patriarch Ignatios is recorded as having been appointed *domestikos* of the *hikanatoi* at the same age.⁸

Moreover, if SCHMIDT had considered the views of LEONORA NEVILLE and CATHERINE HOLMES, this would have enhanced his already detailed and multifaceted discussion of the representation of the military aristocracy.⁹ NEVILLE has demonstrated how the classical ideals of bravery and warrior culture reemerged in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, often clashing with the more cautious and pragmatic style of warfare pursued by Alexios I. She has also highlighted the contrasting agendas of the histories of Nikephoros Bryennios and Anna Komnene, and their differing literary strategies that shaped the representation of military virtues and leadership. Similarly, HOLMES has argued that the compilation of John Skylitzes' *Synopsis Historion* during Alexios I's reign impacted the portrayal of the military past of certain aristocratic families that were on good grounds with the regime of Alexios I, casting their military conduct in distinctly positive light.

On the theme of military hierarchy, SCHMIDT's discussion of the flexible and overlapping structures of command, including formal, informal, temporal and permanent delegations of military authority is particularly illuminating. SCHMIDT's observations can be further appreciated, and perhaps developed, when read in conjunction with the unpublished doctoral dissertation of STAVROS GEORGIU.¹⁰ For instance, GEORGIU likewise notes the difficulties in establishing clear hierarchies in the period under investigation, given that mostly there was no neat correspondence between military offices and court titles. He also demonstrates that even when men shared the same title, e.g. that of *sebastos*, protocols existed

NOU – ALICE-MARY TALBOT (eds), *Becoming Byzantine: Children and Childhood in Byzantium*. Washington DC 2009, pp. 85–125.

8. See Niketas David, 3 (ed. A. SMITHIES, *Nicetas David, The Life of Patriarch Ignatius* [Dumbarton Oaks Texts 13]. Washington DC 2013).

9. CATHERINE HOLMES, *Basil II and the Governance of Empire* (Oxford Studies in Byzantium). Oxford 2005; LEONORA NEVILLE, *Heroes and Romans in Twelfth-Century Byzantium: The Material History of Nikephoros Bryennios*. Cambridge 2012. For the dating of John Skylitzes cf. EIRINI-SOPHIA KIPIDOU, *Η Σύνοψη Ιστοριών του Ιωάννη Σκυλίτζη και οι πηγές της (811–1057): Συμβολή στη βυζαντινή ιστοριογραφία κατά τον ΙΑ΄ αιώνα* (Μελέτες Βυζαντινής Γραμματείας 9). Athens 2010.

10. STAVROS G. GEORGIU, *Οι τιμητικοί τίτλοι επί Κομνηνών (1081–1185)*, PhD Thesis, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. Thessaloniki 2005.

to determine seniority and precedence. This was especially relevant in the reign of Manuel I, when the number of *sebastoi* increased significantly. By examining the order of signatures on official documents, GEORGIU has argued that factors, such as proximity of kin to the emperor, stratified men of equal title. Exploring whether such protocols extended to military hierarchies and translated to the assumption of higher commands or more critical duties could have added an intriguing layer to SCHMIDT's analysis. Despite the above, *Armeeführung und Militäreliten in Byzanz, 1081–1203* constitutes a particularly welcome and valuable contribution to the study of Byzantine military, social and administrative history. SCHMIDT's nuanced analysis of military personnel selection, hierarchy, and representation cogently demonstrates the complex interplay of merit, imperial authority, networks, and cultural ideals in shaping the military command of the Komnenoi and Angeloi. The breadth of sources, the methodological clarity, and the careful contextualization of findings ensure that this monograph will serve as an indispensable reference for scholars of Byzantine history and stimulate further research into the intersections of politics, administration, culture, and warfare.

Keywords

middle Byzantine military history