How the Byzantines Lost Macedonia?
A New Perspective on Byzantine Macedonia

On the evening of the feast of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary, 15 August 1118, Emperor Alexios I Komnenos was on his deathbed in Constantinople. His thirty-seven-year long reign has profoundly and radically changed the Byzantine aristocratic society and the empire itself, and established a vast and all-dominant imperial family, whose members will hold the power in the Byzantine world in their hands until the end of the empire in the fifteenth century. For twenty six of the thirty seven years of Alexios’ rule, his oldest son John was his undisputed co-ruler, crowned by Alexios as a five-year-old boy, probably in September of 1192. And yet, owing mostly to persuasive narrative of John’s older sister Anna Komnene, later generations of Byzantine scholars, historians and learned men, and a majority of modern scholars, gave credence to the dramatic, movie-like description of Alexios’ deathbed, and his supposedly last important political decision written almost a century later by Niketas Choniates. Presenting a tense atmosphere around Alexios’ deathbed, and desperate attempts by the empress Eirene Doukaina and Anna Komnene to persuade the dying emperor to name Anna’s husband – the Caesar Nikephoros Bryennios as his successor – Choniates ascribes to Alexios the following words: «έπ’ ἐμοὶ δὲ καὶ μάλα καπνὸν γελάσει εἰς τὸ Παντράμαιον, καὶ τῶν φρενῶν κριθείην ἀποπεσών, εἰ τὴν βασιλείαν οὐκ ἐπαινετῶς εἰληφὼς, ἀλλὰ αἰμασὶν ὁμογενῶν καὶ μεθόδους Χριστιανῶν

Niketas Choniates in this fictitious and imaginary passage, peppered with irony and his strong criticism of the way Alexios ascended to the imperial throne, which – through the reign of Choniates’ villain Manuel Komnenos – led directly, in his opinion, to the disastrous consequences for the fate of the empire at the dawn of the thirteenth century, emphasizes the geographical region from which his son-in-law, Nikephoros Bryennios, stems, in order to underline additionally that he is unsuited for the imperial crown. Choniates’ characterization of Bryennios as ‘the Macedonian’ had a peculiar ring to it at the beginning of the thirteenth century, especially in the young Empire of Nicaea whose ruler still struggled to be recognized by all the Romans–Byzantines as their emperor, but it also points to a broader tendency in Byzantine thinking, and understanding of Macedonia in the preceding centuries, with a particular significance of Alexios Komnenos’ reign: the blurring of the Byzantine notion of what Macedonia is, which occurred with the disappearance of the recognizable, formal administrative unit of Macedonia, and the abandonment of the name Macedonia from the use in the official Byzantine administration.

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The wandering nature of the name of Macedonia by the Byzantines’, as Evangelos Chrysos brilliantly put it⁴, is evident in the very

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nature of this region, in the constant changes of its status and nature, stressed already in the 930s in the overview of the Byzantine administration and its development, composed for the emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos. The author of the compilation On the Themes (Περί των θεμάτων) describes the ‘historical journey’ of Macedonia in the following manner: «ὡστε ἀπὸ βασιλείας εἰς ἐπαρχίαν τὸ σχήμα μεταβαλεῖν καὶ νῦν εἰς θέματος τάξιν καὶ στρατηγίδος αὐτὴν καταλήξαι»

This brief commentary on Macedonia underscores its significance in the first half of the tenth century, strengthened by the evidence of the published seals of Byzantine officials of Macedonia from the ninth and the tenth century, and particularly by the high titles of patrikios and protospatharios bestowed to most of the theme’s strategoi already in the ninth century⁶. The name Macedonia featured solely on all the seals of the commanders of the homonymous administrative unit at this time, even if Macedonia was lumped together with Thrace already in the early ninth

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⁶ Catalogue of Byzantine Seals at Dumbarton Oaks and in the Fogg Museum of Art. Volume I: Italy, North of the Balkans, North of the Black Sea, eds. J. Nesbitt–N. Oikonomides, Washington, D.C., 1991, nos. 43.16, 43.19, 43.20–22, 43.24; strategoi: 43.25–26 (Christophoros, patrikios, imperial protospatharios and strategos of Macedonia, ninth century), 43.27 (Gregory, patrikios, imperial protospatharios and strategos of Macedonia, tenth century), 43.28 (Malakenos, imperial protospatharios and strategos of Macedonia, tenth century), 43.29 (Malakenos (same as the previous?), anthypatos, patrikios, and strategos of Macedonia, tenth century), 43.31 (Olbianos, imperial spatharios and strategos of Macedonia, ninth century), 43.31 (Orestios, imperial protospatharios and strategos of Macedonia, tenth century), 43.33 (Proteinos, imperial protospatharios and strategos of Macedonia, ninth/tenth century), 43.34 (Symbatikios, imperial protospatharios and strategos of Macedonia, tenth/eleventh century), 43.35 (Theodore, patrikios, imperial protospatharios and strategos of Macedonia, ninth century)
century seals of the imperial kommerkiarioi. The importance of Macedonia in the second half of the ninth and the first three quarters of the following century, until the destruction of the Bulgarian empire in 971, left its mark on the separate status of the administrative unit called Macedonia and its staff at this time – toward the end of the tenth century the trend of combining once again Macedonia with Thrace became evident, and it only rose in strength in the eleventh century.

But even before the beginning of the eleventh century, and – paradoxically – in the wake of the Byzantine greatest success in the Balkans in centuries, the destruction of the Bulgarian state and return to the old borders of the empire on the Sava and the Danube rivers, the Byzantines begun to abandon the name Macedonia, once it did not have the symbolic value as an empire’s frontier stronghold against the threatening ambitions of its Christian neighbor to the north. Once the Bulgarian state was no more, the conquerer of Bulgaria, the emperor John Tzimiskes, proceeded with the new administrative organization of the vast territories in the empire’s European hinterland. The newly created or rearranged themes, and the entire administrative reorganization that followed the Byzantine triumph in 971, brought great changes to the Balkans, but also to the ways the Byzantines understood the term Macedonia.

Thus, instead of the theme Macedonia, the reforms of Tzimiskes introduced two new themes: the theme Drougoubiteia (Δρουγουβιτείας) and the theme New Strymon (Νέου Στρυμόνος), as well as the theme Beroes (Βερόης), approximately on the territories of the now abandoned provincial administrative unit of Macedonia. The theme Thrace (Θράκης)

7 Catalogue of Byzantine Seals, eds. Nesbitt–Oikonomides, nos. 43.17 (The imperial kommerkiia of Thrace and Macedonia, 820/1), 43.18 (Constantine, imperial kommerkiarios of Thrace and Macedonia, 830/2).
8 Catalogue of Byzantine Seals, eds. Nesbitt–Oikonomides, nos. 43.1, 43.2, 43.4, 43.6, 43.7, 43.8, 43.10, 43.1143.12, 43.13.
9 N. Oikonomidè, Les listes des préséances byzantines des IXe et Xe siècles, Paris 1972, 267, 6 (Δρουγουβιτείας), 267, 34 (Βερόης), 269, 4 (Νέου Στρυμόνος). The so-called Escurial Taktikon which lists the new order of the emperor John Tzimiskes in the Balkans, stems
was enlarged and renamed to theme Thrace and Iannoupoleos (Θράκης και Ιαννουπόλεως), the latter part being the new name given to Bulgarian capital Preslav, in honor of the victorious emperor John Tzimiskes. Consequently, the name Macedonia begun to fade not only from the Byzantine official language and the pertinent documents, but also from the Byzantine political thought and, more generally, worldview. The decision of the emperor John Tzimiskes and his advisors to abandon the name Macedonia, with all its historical significance, and to replace it with politically neutral, more geographically oriented terminology, provoked a radical break in Byzantine attitudes toward Macedonia and signified the waning of the political significance of the name Macedonia. It was a watershed moment in Byzantine history, with vast and long-term consequences on Byzantine and post-Byzantine spatial thinking, and the accompanying ideology – and it went unnoticed by the Byzantines, and uncommented and unstudied by both the Byzantines and the scholars of Byzantium.

Once abandoned, with the reforms of the emperor John Tzimiskes, the name Macedonia will never again feature prominently in Byzantine administration: Macedonia never again regained its significant place in the

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10 Oikonomidès, Listes, 265, 9.

political and church organization of the Byzantine Empire. The emperor Basil II, after the final victory over the rebelled ‘Bulgarians’, and the destruction of the empire of Samuel in 1018, did not reclaim the name Macedonia as an exclusive political, geographical, religious and ideological domain of the Byzantines. Instead, in the place of the empire of Samuel that was in every political sense a Bulgarian empire, but had its center(s) geographically in Macedonia, Basil II created a vast administrative unit, the theme Bulgaria, with the center in Skopje, and the semi-autonomous Arch bishopric of Ohrid and the entire Bulgaria under direct control of the emperor. In that way, the name Macedonia disappeared from the official Byzantine political discourse, only to resurface briefly during the reign of Alexios I Komnenos, especially in its first half, before the end of the eleventh century.

In attempts to strengthen the grip on power, Alexios Komnenos relied exclusively on his closest relatives and the clients of the family of the Komnenoi. The Pakourianoi, of Georgian origin was one of the allied clans Alexios could count upon in the first years, and even decades of his reign, with so many dangers for his rule within and outside of the empire’s significantly shrunken borders. One Symbatios Pakourianos, possibly a relative of much more famous Gregory Pakourianos, the founder of the Petritsoni/Bačkovo monastery of the Dormition of Virgin south of Philippopolis, who had taken monastic vow and the name Sabbas, mentions in 1090 the theme Macedonia, in which his estate, gifted by the holy emperor, was placed: «τό ἑτερον πρόαστειόν μου τό λεγόμενον Σούβάγα καὶ παρὰ τοῦ βασιλέως τοῦ ἁγίου δωρηθέν μοι τό κατά τό θέμα τῆς Μακεδονίας διακείμενον...».


It is the only mention of the theme Macedonia from these times: Symbatios/Sabbas’ widow Kale, renamed Maria as a nun, mentions the same estate in 1098 as being situated in the petition of Macedonia, replacing the older administrative term with a more adequate tax-collection related administrative unit. During the reign of Alexios Komnenos, with the emperor and the central administration in the capital in the constant need of tax income from the European provinces, a short-lived official resurfacing of the name Macedonia was entirely connected exactly with this aspect of Byzantine administration. The imperial tax collectors scourged the population of “Macedonia” at the end of the eleventh and the beginning of the twelfth century, and it was only prudent of Leo Kephalas, one of the most faithful clients of the emperor Alexios, to secure the exclusion of his property from their power by the order of the emperor himself in 1089.  

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By April 1299, when the vast regions of western Macedonia – with the town of Skopje as the center of this region from the time of Basil II’s reorganization of the Balkan provinces at the beginning of the eleventh century – was turned over to the Serbian king Milutin as a dowry of the emperor Andronikos II’s five-year-old daughter Simonis who became Milutin’s bride and the queen of Serbia, the name Macedonia vanished from the political reality of the wider Byzantine world: both from the Byzantine empire, and the empire’s Serbian rivals and allies. The only time Macedonia is mentioned in the documents preserved in the Athonite monasteries after the reign of Alexios I Komnenos is in a list of metropolitans and bishops from the years before the official celebration of the alliance and the union between the emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos

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14 *Iviron II*, no. 47/179, 25–26. The nun Maria leaves her estate, together with some books to her nephew protobestes Leo: “τῶν πρωτοβέστη κυρίω Λέωντι τῶ ἐξαδελφῶ μου, τὸ βιβλίον μου τὸν ἄγιον Ἰωάννην τῆς Κλήμακας καὶ τὸ προαστεόν μου τὴν Σουγάδαν, τὸ ἐν τῷ πετίτῳ τῆς Μακεδονίας τυγχάνον, καθὼς ἐστὶ καὶ μετά πάσης τῆς περιοχῆς καὶ διακρατήσεως καὶ προνομίων αὐτοῦ”.

and Serbian king Milutin\textsuperscript{16}: a Synodal decision of Patriarch Athanasios I from the month July in the years between 1289 and 1293, mentions Andreas, who was \textit{πρόεδρος τῶν ὑπερτίμων καὶ ἐξάρχος πάσης Θράκης καὶ Μακεδονίας}\textsuperscript{17}. Even in the vast collection of epistles and decisions of the Archbishop of Ohrid Demetrios Chomatenos, who was geographically situated in Macedonia, the term Macedonia is never met\textsuperscript{18}.

The definitions, the names, the naming and the characterizations were of utmost importance in Byzantium, a highly literate political society, but even in Serbian medieval sources – and despite Serbian conquest of the entire Macedonia by the mid fourteenth century – the name Macedonia is not to be found in its contemporary geopolitical meaning, with Serbian sources, and learned men, without a doubt following tendencies from the Byzantine empire itself. George Pachymeres, a contemporary of the emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos and king Milutin, and a historian of the Serbian king’s \textit{union} with the emperor, did not mention Macedonia in his detailed historical narrative that spreads over more than 350 pages in the modern edition. On only four instances in his History, Pachymeres mention \textit{the Macedonians}, referring in the first and third instances to the population of Macedonia (and Thrace, in the first instance), and to the contingents from the region of Macedonia, in others\textsuperscript{19}. When Laonikos Chalkokondyles thus wrote that the Serbian king and later emperor Stefan Dušan “pushed into Macedonia, and made Skopje his royal capital”\textsuperscript{20}, he was not only factually wrong, since Skopje has been made ‘royal capital’

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\item On the Byzantine official naming of the alliance as \textit{the union} between the Serbian king and the emperor, see V. Stanković ‘Beloved son-in-law: Charters of Byzantine Emperors to the Hilandar Monastery after the Marriage of King Milutin to Symonis’, in: A. Miltenova – M. Dimitrova (eds.), \textit{Scripta & e-Scripta. The Journal of Interdisciplinary Medieval Studies} 12, Sofia 2013, 57-68.
\item \textit{Actes de Xéropotamou}, eds. J. Bompaire (Archives de l’ Athos III), Paris 1964, no. 11/97, 2–3.
\item \textit{Demetri Chomateni Ponemata Diaphora}, ed. G. Prinzing (CFHB 38), Berlin–New York 2002, 155*. \\
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by Dušan’s grandfather king Milutin half a century earlier, with the imperial sanction of Andronikos II, but was also ahistorical in his description – since he ascribed to Macedonia geopolitical meaning and boundaries it had long since lost in Byzantine official administrational system, and consequently in Byzantine political thought.

Niketas Choniates was, in a way, both a witness of the disappearance of Macedonia as a defined political territory and, equally important, as a political concept, and a harbinger of the later Byzantine attitudes toward this historical region, which remained mainly an antiquarian reminiscence of learned writers, and a purely geographic nomination of a territory whose status and boundaries were fluid, as evident from the histories of both Chalkokondyles and Doukas, but also from so many late Byzantine texts21. With Macedonia’s disappearance from the official Byzantine system, and the accompanying terminology, it ceased to be recognizable contemporary reference point for the Byzantines. The Byzantines lost Macedonia when they relinquished the name Macedonia, at the high point of their power in the Balkans, long before the Serbian or the Ottoman conquest of the territory itself.

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21 Histories, Laonikos Chalkokondyles, vol. I, 52, 72, 84, 160, 162 (in this case, as in the one quoted in the previous note, Chalkokondyles stresses the importance of Skopje, testifying to either his understanding of the central position of this town in the central Balkans, or to his connection with this city and the region, otherwise not confirmed) and passim. Similarly but even more pronouncing is Doukas’s limited, geographical understanding of Macedonia, [Μιχαήλ] Δούκας, Βυζαντινοτουρκική ιστορία, μετάφραση - εισαγωγή - σχόλια Βρ. Καραλής, Αθήνα 1997, 210: Eparchies Thrace and Macedonia, but both connected to the Ottomans, here with Mousa, after Suleyman’s death. Similarly an anonymous description of the siege of Constantinople by the Sultan Bayezid from 1394 to 1402 (possibly written by Demetrios Chrysoloras), mentions Macedonia together with Thrace in a strictly geographical sense, stressing, objectively, the importance of Europe for the survival of the remnants of the Byzantine world, P. Gautier, ‘Un récit inédit du siège de Constantinople par les Turcs (1394–1402), Revue des études byzantines 23 (1965), 100–117, mentions of Macedonia, 104, 114.
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