1. Biography

An overview of the author’s personal life will help us gather his personality and place him among the historical and cultural context of the twelfth century.¹ Nikephoros Basilakes was born around 1115 in Constantinople to a prominent family of military traditions on the father’s side,² while involved in the civil career on the mother’s side.³ The only certain identification is that of his brother Constantine Basilakes, who took part and died presumably around 1155 in the expedition of Manuel Komnenos (r. 1143-1180) to the Norman reign of Sicily. Contrary to his family’s traditions, he decided to dedicate himself to literature, even if we are aware that he also served in the court administration as βασιλικὸς νοτάριος.⁴ He probably started out as a teacher in private schools.⁵ Afterwards, he entered the so-called Patriarchal School of Constantinople, at first in the position

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² Nikephoros Basilakes himself mentions in Nikephoros Basilakes, Monodia 1.190-194, ed. A. Pignani, Niceforo Basilace. Progimnasmi e monodie (Byzantina et Neo-Hellenica Neapolitana, 10). Napoli 1983, 244, and Oratio 3.38, ed. A. Garzya, Nicephori Basilicae orationes et epistolae. Leipzig 1984, 74.1-2. It has also been suggested that he could have been related to Nikephoros Basilakios, dux of Dyrrachium under the emperor Nicephore Botaniates. See Garzya, Un lettré (cited n. 1), 612.


of “professor of rhetoric” (μαίστωρ τῶν ρητόρων) and then as διδάσκαλος τοῦ ἀποστόλου. It does not come as a surprise that the greater part of his literary production consists of the *Progymnasmata*, a collection of preliminary rhetorical exercises for students to learn the art of prose composition and of declamation, but also a virtuous literary work in its own right.

During his teaching period, as per request, he put effort into the court rhetoric. Between 1136 and 1138, during John II Komnenos’ campaigning in Cilicia and Syria, Nikephoros Basilakes, together with Michael Italikos, recited several speeches to honour the Emperor and his entourage.

Around 1140, Nikephoros Basilakes reached the peak of his career. His lessons on the Apostle Paul were such a success, that they attracted the envy of the other professors and caused a conflict with the patriarch, who ordered him to confine his exegesis to the doctrines expounded in a standard commentary on the Pauline epistles. Moreover, due to a theological controversy that burst under the patriarchy of Constantine IV and continued under Luke Chryssoberges, in a short time his career decline became apparent. In the centre of the controversy was a passage from the liturgy of Iohannes Chrysostomus, interpreted as if the sacrifice of the cross had been offered only to the Father and the Holy Spirit, rather than to all the persons of the Trinity. The synod affirmed that Christ was both suitor and recipient, as hypostasis of the incarnate Logos and according to his divinity, respectively.

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6 Garzya, Un lettré (cited n. 1), 613.
9 Nik. Basil. Praef. 6.25–7.4, ed. Garzya (cited n. 2), 4-5. On the debated interpretation of such passage (mainly due to the different paleographic readings), cf. I. Polemis, A note on the Praefatio of Nikephoros Basilakes. BZ 94 (2001) 605-607. He proposed that the author of this commentary could have been Theophylact of Ochrid.
10 The major figure of this controversy was Soterichos Panteugenos, a deacon of Hagia Sophia and then patriarch-elect of Antiochia for whom cf. ODB III, 1574, s.v. “Panteugenos, Soterichos” (A. Kazhdan), but also Eustathius, metropolitan of Dyrrachium and Michael of Thessalonica were involved.
11 Namely σὺ εἶ ὁ προσφέρων καὶ προσφερόμενος καὶ προσδεχόμενος, a prayer that addressed Christ as “you are the one who offers, the one who is offered and the one who receives”.
12 On the controversy see J.M. Hussey, The Orthodox Church in the Byzantine Empire.
The religious debate immediately had political repercussions. The synod of the twenty sixth January of 1156,\(^\text{13}\) which occurred at the presence of the emperor Manuel I Komnenos, led to the deposition of Nikephoros Basilakes from the post of *didaskalos tou apostolou* (1156) and to his exile to Philippopolis.\(^\text{14}\) We do not know how long the exile was, but for sure Nikephoros was never reinstated to public posts. He probably returned to Constantinople, where perhaps he could have been compelled to resume private teaching, since his last work is a scholastic product, a judicial declamation, to be precise.\(^\text{15}\) He died after 1182.\(^\text{16}\)

2. Some Notes on the First, the Second and the Fourth Letters

Related to the events of the exile, the four letters ascribed to Nikephoros Basilakes are a great sample of Byzantine epistolography, even if they have been almost completely neglected by scholars until today. Indeed, no bibliography concerning them seems to be available, after they were published by Antonio Garzya in 1963,\(^\text{17}\) and then later included in his teubnerian edition of *Orationes et epistolae* in 1984.\(^\text{18}\) Contrary to what one might think, they could be extremely useful, in order to examine the hot topic of “self-representation”: what kind of “self” did authors promote when writing letters, how it was displayed within the text and in what way rhetoric takes part in such a communicative discourse.

In these letters the filter of rhetoric is particularly strong, consistently with the style of this highly-educated writer. At the same time, it is this very feature that allows us to run into the subjectivity of the author, observing his interaction with the demands of a codified and markedly learned register of language. Nevertheless, the risk of failure still remains. We have to bear in mind that these are first of all literary works and we cannot expect to obtain a clear and definitive personal depiction. Rather, we will probably find only some traces that need to be compared to and integrated with the information – where provided – stemmed from other sources. Therefore, in this paper I would like to, firstly, draw the atten-

\(^{13}\) A second synod took place on the twelfth May 1157.

\(^{14}\) For an accurate revision of the sources about the process which involved Nikephoros Basilakes see A. GARZYA, Precisazioni sul processo di Niceforo Basilese. *Byz* 40 (1970) 309-316.


\(^{17}\) A. GARZYA, Quattro epistole di Niceforo Basilese. *BZ* 56 (1963) 228-233.

tion to these texts and, secondly, to reflect on how rhetoric could not only hinder self-portraying, but also actively contribute to it. And this feature acquires even more importance in relation to the designed public of these letters: it is clear that, beyond the specific addressee of each letter, there is an implied reader(ship), at whom Nikephoros winks.

Today, we only know four letters written by Nikephoros Basilakes, but it is very likely that these are just a part of a broader epistolary œuvre, to be understood as a complete epistolographic work of one author. Indeed, in a brief note published in 1971, Garzya stated that he had been able to consult de visu a miscellaneous manuscript written on oriental paper and datable back to the 13th c., where, after an ethopoeia of our author, the inscriptio τοῦ αὐτοῦ ἐπιστολαί followed. Furthermore, he also managed to read the addressee of the alleged first letter of the collection, τῷ ἁγιωτάτῳ μητροπολίτῃ άθηνών κυρῷ μιχαὴλ τῷ χονιάτη, while the text of that letter was completely lost. The latter element is the most relevant evidence we have in order to set Nikephoros Basilakes’ death surely after 1182, the year when Michael Choniates was appointed as metropolitan of Athens. More broadly, this finding leads us to speculate about an epistolary production greater than what has been transmitted to us. All of the four letters we are dealing with are contained in the well-known miscellaneous codex of rhetorical content preserved in the monastery of Escorial, namely Scor. gr. Y.II.10, ff. 199v-200v (13th c.). Additionally, only the first letter, that is the one addressed to two friends, is contained also in a manuscript from Naples datable between the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth century.

Since the topic is going to be developed mainly based upon the third letter, a brief introduction of the other letters is required, in order to gather both their similarities and peculiarities. All the letters recall the period of the exile, more or less covertly, and are marked by a mournful style and resort to several quotations, taken both from the Classics and the Holy Scriptures.

The first letter is addressed to two friends (δύο τοὺς ἐμοὶ φιλτάτους), one of the most recurring kind of epistolary relationship.

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19 Garzya, Fin quando (cited n. 16), 302.
Basilakes devotes a few lines to describe the profound bond of friendship that unites him with them. A slight variation on the theme is the duality of the addressee and, consequently, of the sentiment. Indeed, the friends are two, but at the same time the author stresses their inseparability. In order to give the impression of this unit, he employs a sort of metaphorical characterization: the ascription of the typifying traits relies on the explicit alignment with several comparantes, by means of an intertextual movement. The rhetorical question “πῶς δ’ ἂν καὶ διαιροῖμεν Ἀχιλλέως Πάτροκλον ἢ Διομήδους Σθένελον ἢ Κύρον Χρυσάνταν ἢ Ξέρξου Αρτάβανον;” opens up to the collective imagination of the deepest literary friendship created by the sixteenth book of the Iliad.

Nikephoros directly links the emotional bond with the reading experience. Because they have a strong friendship in common, they should share the letter (ἵν’ ὡς τὴν φιλίαν ἔχετε καὶ τὸ γράμμα κοινόν). In this way, the letter that he is sending to them becomes a communal and performative event since the very first reading and the reception of its message provokes participant understanding and emotional reaction. Simultaneously the communal reading of the letter strengthens the bond of friendship. A strong self-centeredness clearly emerges as a seminal feature of letter-writing, as the recipient(s) is/are defined by his/their relationship with the sender. In our specific case, even if from afar, it is the figure of Nikephoros that works as the trigger for implementing the relationship between the two friends, through his letter.

Then, the letter continues basically as a complaint of the current conditions Nikephoros is forced to live in. He makes insistent remarks on the roughness and the bellicosity of both the land and the inhabitants (Ἀρεϊκὰ πάντα, ἀθέμιτα πάντα, ὡς ἐν βαρβάροις φόνια· Δίκη δὲ καὶ Νέμεσις ἐκποδῶν). By reading between the lines, we may detect also some veiled references to the background of his condemnation. For instance, the expression ἔσωθεν ἐπιβουλαὶ ἔξωθεν ἀπειλὰi is extremely evocative and we could ask ourselves if it carries an additional hidden meaning. Indeed, we know that the antonymous couple ἔσωθεν – ἔξωθεν was used to distinguish the teachers of theological studies and those who taught rhetoric and other subordinate subjects within the so-called Patriarchal School, where Basilakes himself worked. In this sense, he could be referring to the hostility that his colleagues would have harboured towards him. In fact, such information

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seems to be validated by external sources too. In his *Praefatio*, he talks about the envies attracted upon himself after the successful lessons on the Apostle Paul,\(^\text{26}\) while John Kinnamos mentions a certain Βασιλάκιος, διδάσκαλος τοῦ ἐυαγγελίου, among the detractors of Nikephoros and Michael Thessalonicensis.\(^\text{27}\)

The closing seems to mirror a man who, even if discouraged by the events (ἀμφίκρημνα πάντα μοι), does not give up easily (ὅμως μέντοι ἀνέχομαι), availing himself especially of his education (Ἀλλ' ἐγγὺς ὁ Μωυσῆς, κἂν ὑμεῖς ἐθέλητε καταγλυκανεῖ μοι πάντα τῷ τῆς παιδεύσεως ξύλῳ, τῇ σωφρονιστικῇ βακτερίᾳ). For this reason, I am inclined to place this letter rather early in his period of exile.

The second letter is addressed to his pupils (Τοῖς ἐμοῖς ποτὲ ῥήτορσιν) and it represents a sort of manifesto of Nikephoros Basilakes as a public figure. Indeed, here he lays claim to his major role in the intellectual life of Constantinople of the late 12th c.

Nevertheless, after reiterating the alleged betrayal of people who were close to him (ἤκονησα τὸ ξίφος κατ' ἐμαυτοῦ τοῖς ποτὲ φίλοις καὶ ξυμμάχοις ἀγνωμοσύνην ἐπεγκαλῶν), he seems to feel the need to explain himself, to the point where he declares himself responsible for his tragedy (ὡς Αἴας ἐμάνην ὡς Ὀρέστης ἠτύχησα. ὁμολογῶ τὴν παραπληξίαν, οὐκ ἀρνοῦμαι τὴν ἀτυχίαν, κάκιστος εὑρέθην Μενέλαος), resorting to a quotation from the *Orestes* by Euripides (φεύγεις ἀποστραφείς με, τὰ δ' Ἀγαμέμνονος φροῦδα; ἄφιλος ἄρ' ἦσθ' , ὦ πάτερ, πράττων κακῶς), where Orestes pontificates on his father’s misfortune.

Then, Nikephoros ends the letter with a glimpse of pride, affirming that he himself chose the exile (διὰ ταῦτα τὴν ἀποδημίαν ἐβουλευσάμην καὶ φυγὴν ἐμαυτοῦ κατεψηφισάμην μακράν). We do not know how much it corresponds to the historical truth but, taking into account the general context of the epistle, it is more likely that this was the message he wanted to convey to readers, which was not necessarily true. Differently from the previous ones, in this case the (collective) addressee plays merely a part in the epistolary communication. By addressing his students, Nikephoros gets the chance to speak to the literary and cultured audience par excellence, as well as to Constantinople’s elite. The content of his letter is not modelled on his declared addressee nor aimed at making contact specifically with his addressee.

From an emotional point of view, his attitude appears to have already changed. By then, his literary engagement is long gone, and instead a feeling of resignation has taken over (καὶ νῦν συναναχρόννυμαι τὴν βάρβαρον γλῶτταν γλώτταν εἰς ἀμουσίαν

\(^{26}\) Nik. Basil., Praef. 10-11, ed. GARZYA (cited n. 2), 6-7.

\(^{27}\) A. MEINEKE, Ioannis Cinnami epitome rerum ab Ioanne et Alexio Comnenis gestarum. Bonn 1836, 176.19.
ἐξέπεσον, οὐκέτι πρεσβεύω τοὺς λόγους οὐκέτι θύω ταῖς Μούσαις). I do not rule out the possibility that this letter is subsequent to that addressed to the two friends.

The fourth letter is again addressed to Nikephoros Basilakes’ students and basically it is built upon the unflattering description of the local products, such as yearling piglets (χοίρων [...] τὰ τῶν Φιλιππουπολιτῶν ώραία), damsons (τὰ δαμασκηνά), melons (οἱ πέπονες), pears (οἱ ἄπιες), bunch of blackberries (αἱ σταφυλαὶ βάτων), wine, sometimes sour and sometimes mellow (ὁ οἶνος πῆ μὲν ὀξίνης πῆ δὲ σαπρίας), but never drinkable, and pine resin (ῥητίνης γέμει).

Besides this sort of ethnographic insight, this letter does not provide any relevant information about the author himself and his story, except for the opening sentence. Indeed, he starts off his letter with: Μή με ἀγραφίας γράψησθε. The term ἀγραφία seems not to be so common. It appears just in seventeen instances during the course of quite a short time span (from the late eight to the fourteenth century), and it recurs only in epistolographic sources. Intuitively, this is due to its semantic field, even if its meaning can slightly vary. According to the chronological order of our sources, at first it conveyed the idea of “not being representable” – to be placed within Theodore Studites’ commitment to battle iconoclasm –, then its meaning evolved, losing the ideological undertone and including either the idea of “not having written” or that of “impossibility of writing”.

Even if the latter semantic evolution can be easily explained by connecting it with the rituals and codes of epistolary communication, one is particularly struck by the gathering of instances in the twelfth century. This lead us to wonder if the word ἀγραφία, which is mainly connected to the modalities of epistolary communication, could hide a second level of (quarrelsome) meaning, referring to “censoring” circumstances. Undoubtedly, in the specific case of Nikephoros

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29 P.A.M. Leone, Ioannis Tzetzae epistulae. Leipzig 1972, 106.9 (ep. 73) and 126.22 (ep. 85), and P. Gautier, Théophylacte d’Achrída. Lettres (CFHB, 16/2). Thessalonica 1986, 277 (ep. 44.6) and 559 (ep. 121.6).
31 Mich. Chon., ed. Kolovou, Michaelis (cited n. 21), 52 (ep. 38.12) and 282 (ep. 176.13); Mich. Ital., ed. Gautier, Michel (cited n. 4), 182.12 (ep. 27); Theophyl., ed. Gautier, Théophylacte (cited n. 29), ep. 44.6 and 121.6; Greg. Ant. Laud. seb., ed. Sideras, Gregorios Antiocphos (cited n. 30), 304.68; Tzet., ed. Leone, Ioannis (cited n. 29), 106.9 (ep. 73); 126.22 (ep. 85).
Basilakes, the usage of this word could indeed refer to a temporary interruption of the correspondence with his addressee, but surely it alludes also to a more general condition of unproductiveness that the author is experiencing at that time in relation to his condemnation. Moving on to the very next sentence, we seem to find evidence of this interpretation. It is obvious that πεδεῖ γάρ μου τὴν χεῖρα καὶ τὴν γλῶσσαν ἡ παλαμναία νόσος could be also read in figurative terms, even if the rarity of the combined expression παλαμναία νόσος does not help and seems to be used mostly with a neutral meaning.\(^{32}\)

3. The Third Letter (Fratri): a Case Study

Shown below, firstly, my own English translation, based on the Greek text edited by Garzya, and secondly a commentary of the said letter.

3.1 Text and translation

**Fratri**

Philippopoli Constantinopolim, post a. 1157

Ἐξεθήλυνέ με τὸ σπλάγχνον καὶ τὰ τῆς Ἀντιγόνης ἐπεύχομαι· ἑπότε λάβοις ὑπὲρ ἐπομένης ὅπως ἑπομένως πληροφορίαν ἔχεις, ἵνα τὸν ἀμών ὑπομονετικόν ἰδομι. ἀλλ' ἀκριβῶς τοῦ ἔπους οὐ μέμνημαι· ἀπολέλοιπε γάρ με καὶ ἡ ποίησις. ἀλλὰ φιλάνθρωπος ὁ Δαυὶδ καὶ μοι τῶν ἀσμάτων ἀποχαρίζεται. 'τίς δώσει πτέρυγάς μοι ὡσεὶ περιστερᾶς καὶ πετασθήσομαι καὶ καταπαύσω' πρὸς σέ, τὸν ἐμοὶ περιψύχιον· ἀπολώλαμεν, ἀπολώλαμεν οὐκ ὡς διοίκημαν, ἀλλ’ ὅτι θεοῦ μακρὰν ἀπερρίφημεν. τί γάρ μοι καὶ ὅπλων, τί γάρ μοι καὶ δασμολογίας; διὰ τῆς Σκυθῶν βαδίζομεν, οὐδὲν ἡμῖν εἰρηναῖον καὶ ἄμαχον· μέσον παγίδων διαβαίνων πολλῶν, 'ἐπ' ἀλλοτρίησι συμφορήσεις λύπας' καπτούμεθα, μόνα κερδαίνομεν δάκρυα. εἰ δὲ μοί ποτε καὶ γελάν ἐπὶ, γελῶ τὴν Τύχην γελῶ τὴν Φιλίαν, ὅπως ἡμᾶς ἠμείψατο, κατὰ τοὺς Ταυροσκύθας ἡμᾶς ἐξένισεν. γεγόναμεν κατὰ τὴν ποίησιν 'Ἀψινθίων ἄγχουροι'. ἡ γὰρ μοι αὐλαία ὑπερφυῶς ἀψινθοφορεῖ, τοιαύτην ἀρωματοφόρον οἰκοῦμεν. ἡ γῆ μὲν οὕτω κάρπιμος, οἱ δ' ἄνδρες οὐκ ἀγανόφρονες οὐδὲ γλυκύθυμοι, ἀλλ' ὅτι τὸν γνώμην ἀψινθιάζουσι, οὕτω πικρόχυμός τις ἡ γῆ καὶ πικρὰ πάντα φύει καὶ ἄνθη καὶ ἄνδρας. 'Γενοίμην ὑπὸ πλάκα' Ῥηγίου, τὴν ἱερὰν χρησίμως προς τὴν Κωνσταντινούπολιν.\(^{33}\)

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32 It is likely that Nikephoros had in mind especially Constantine Manasses’ usage in his Chronicle (ed. O. LAMPSIDES, Constantini Manassis Breviarium Chronicum [CFHB, 36], Athens 1996), v. 2072 about the death of emperor Titus, and v. 6226 about the death of emperor Constantine Monomachos.

To the brother
From Philippopolis to Constantinople, after 1157
my spirit has become limp and I pray as though Antigone: “I wish I could run like a cloud pushed by the wind in order to meet my brother”. But I don’t remember exactly the verse: indeed even poetry has abandoned me, but the philanthropist David has offered me the poetic song, “Who will give me wings so that as though a dove I spread them and land” to you, my dear? We are ruined, we are ruined, not because we have seen God, but because we have been expelled faraway from God. Indeed what do I have to do with the arms, indeed what do I have to do with the tribute exaction? We march through Scythia, neither peace nor truce to us. Through many ambushes we enjoy grief “for others’ luck”, we obtain just tears. Then if I happened to laugh, I would be laughing at Fate, I would be laughing at Love, because it rewarded us, it has hosted us in the way of Tauroscythians. As the poem says, we have become “neighbours of Ap-synthians”. Indeed the yard exceedingly produces wormwood for me, we inhabit a species producing-alike land. Such a fertile land, but the men neither polite nor affable, but they really have a bitter mentality like wormwood, so that the land, like a bitter flavour, produces everything bitter, both flowers and humans. “I wish I could be at the base of” Reggio, in order to send my best regards to the holy Constantinople.]

3.2 Commentary
As it is known, the importance of rhetoric in the composition of letters affects their structure. This letter consists of three main sections that are characterized in turn by a set of standard elements.

3.2.1 Introduction: Prescript and Prologue (lines 2-9)
As in a normal rhetorical text, the introduction prepares the reader for what follows. At the beginning of a letter we usually find the prescript and a brief prologue.

The prescript contains the addressee, that in our case is his brother. It is not surprising that his proper name is missing. Because of the “re-functionalization”, concrete information such as first names were removed. Therefore, the choice of avoiding addressing their correspondents by name and preferring undefined forms of address must chiefly be connected to the fact that letters were preserved in new communicative contexts as compared to the pragmatic purposes that they originally served.34 At the same time, the employed epistolary codes are

34 On the re-functionalization of letters see A. RIEHLE, Epistolography as Autobiography.
functional also for the success of the current correspondence. Defining the addressee on the basis of the relationship immediately activates a shared emotional environment between the sender and the recipient: in other words, the intimacy existing between Nikephoros and his brother Constantine, to whom shortly after he would also dedicate a monody.\(^35\)

The two following lines can be considered as the prologue, from which we can deduce the main theme of the letter but also its literary value, taking into account not only what Nikephoros writes, but also how he does it. In this sense, the absence of the brother as part of a general sentiment of nostalgia and solitude clearly emerges as the main topic of the letter. After all, the expression of the writer’s sorrow due to the deprivation of his correspondent’s physical presence is the most recurring *topos* in epistolary prologues, since the epistolary communication comes exactly from the concrete need to cope with separation. Nevertheless, in the case of Nikephoros Basilakes this theme becomes of greater note, because it is directly linked with his long-lasting enforced departure.

As is often the case, the prologue includes a scriptural phrase or a classical quotation pertinent to the subject to be discussed.\(^36\) We know that the use of quotations from other authors reflects both each writer’s knowledge and the trend of the time, but, even more, it allows the writer to position himself within a complex social network. By displaying his literary knowledge, at the same time Nikephoros is shaping the persona of the writer and recalling the prominent role he used to play among the social hierarchy.

Byzantine epistolographers have their own way of referencing earlier writers: for instance, they often omit the name of the writer they are alluding to. So does also Nikephoros while quoting from the *Phoenissae* by Euripides ἀνεμώκεος εἴθε δρόμον νεφέλας ποσίν ἐξανύσαιμι διʿ αἰθέρος,\(^37\) about the impossible desire expressed by Antigone towards her brother. The epistolographic *topos* of the unquenchable desire to visit the addressee and to reduce the distances is often expressed by mythological motifs. Among them, the winged sandals of Perseus became particularly popular.\(^38\) Instead, Nikephoros Basilakes chooses the myth

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37 Euripides, Phoenissae 163.
38 Liban., Ep. 44.2, ed. R. FOERSTER, Libanii opera, X. Leipzig 1921, 42.3; Procop. Gaz., Ep. 58.6-8, ed. A. GARZYA – R.-J. LOENERTZ, Procopii Gazaei epistolae et declamationes. *(Studia Patristica et Byzantina, 9)*. Ettal 1963, 33; Mich. Psell., Ep. 245.8-9, ed. S. PAPA-
of Antigone and, contrary to the more frequent preference of Byzantine authors for imitation rather than direct quotations, here he does not adapt the passage to the context of his letter, but rather he applies it faithfully.

In order to correctly understand and evaluate the employed quotation, first of all I need to expand a bit on the presence of Antigone in Byzantine texts. In fact, as far as I am concerned, there are no reliable studies on Antigone’s fortune in Byzantine texts. Looking at the available sources and excluding the scholastic production, we can basically work on nine significative instances. I consider worthwhile to distinguish three groups of sources:

1) the chronographical
   Georgius Cedrenus, Compendium historiarum 1, 46, 1-11 (ed. I. Bekker, Georgius Cedrenus Joannis Scylitzae opera, vols. 1-2. Bonn 1838-1839);

2) the religious

3) a more heterogeneous group
   our passage of Nikephoros;

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39 The reasons of such an attitude could be either the habit of quoting by memory or conscious and deliberate modifications in relation to style and variation. Cf. Kotzabassi, Epistolography (cited n. 36), 190.
For the purpose of the present paper, Michael Psellus and Maximus Planudes’ sources are of scarce relevance, except for certifying the vitality of the myth and even more its wide diffusion in the cultural elite. The other sources, instead, are extremely interesting and provide us significant food for thought.

The group of the chronographical sources are all interrelated: clearly Joannes Malalas is the model which the other two depend from, so it will be enough to focus on the passage from Malalas’ Chronographia. We can notice that Malalas is reviewing the myth of the Labdacides. He insists on and emphasizes Jocasta’s intentions more than the classical tradition did. He writes καὶ λοιπὸν ἡ Ἰοκάστῃ, μὴ θέλουσα ἐκβληθῆναι τῆς βασιλείας. Looking at the narrative from the point of view of a Byzantine, he is attributing to Jocasta the greatness of the Byzantine empresses. The second passage from Malalas’ Chronographia can be ascribed to the genre of the “tyche sacrifices”.

Moving on to the religious sources, we immediately recognise the typical attitude of the Christian humanism, which enabled the preservation of the classical literature considering it as a practice for the theological one. Cyrillus Alexandrinus reused Soph. Antigone, vv. 262-267, but missed the right interpretation of Sophocles’ passage. Indeed, he interpreted the scene of the messenger like a solemn vow and “mixed” it with Genesis 15:9, where is described the oath of the fire that passes through the animals, symbol of the high loyalty of the Christian God. Euthymius Protasecretis in the Encomium in Mariam Aegyptiacam develops the story of Maria from Egypt, the prostitute who became a saint. This life was considered highly symbolic of the essence of hagiography itself, inasmuch psuchopheles: in this passage Antigone is part of a long list of virtuous women.

The comparison of the sources brings me to a final consideration. If the profane literature more clearly looks at Euripides, the religious one seems to prefer Sophocles’ portrait of Antigone. The different preferences can be easily

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41 Indeed, the link of Cyrillus Alexandrinus to the first episode of the tragedy is almost explicit, while we may have doubts about Euthymius’ Encomium. Here apparently there isn’t any sign in favor of Sophocles or Euripides, but we can make a hypothesis evaluating the opening sentence of the passage: Πάντα μὲν οὖν τὰ θεία δημιουργήματα καλὰ τε λίαν καὶ τοῦ λίαν θαυμαζόμεθαι ἄξια, ἀλλ’ ὅσι ἂν τι φανεύῃ τῆς θομούμενης θαυμασιώτερον traces the famous words of the Chorus in the first stasim by Sophocles, πολλὰ τὰ δεινὰ κονδὲν ἀνθρώπου δεινότερον πέλει. Both phrases are constructed on an opposition
explained. The tragedy of *Phoenissae* was part of the so-called “Byzantine triad” (*Hecuba, Orestes, Phoenissae*) that was taught in the educational program in Byzantium,\(^{42}\) so it was a *must* in classical literature. At the same time, Sophocles provided a narrative that was more compatible with a christianized reading of the myth: first among everything filial piety, but then also virginity, secret burial and martyrdom were values relevant to Christian thought. In any case, either with Sophocles or with Euripides, the character of Antigone had been assimilated and resignified by Byzantium.

Now, we have to ask ourselves what Nikephoros meant when resorting specifically to this quote. Undoubtedly, in this way he highlighted his cultural and literary esteem. But, since this choice appears to be unusual, it is licit to wonder about both the reasons and the effect of such a conscious and deliberate choice. If we look at the other works of the author, we will certify the following status quo. In his *Progymnasmata* and *Orations*, the author employs only two explicit quotations from Sophocles, while around thirty are indirect ones.\(^{43}\) In proportion, quotations from Greek tragedies are more present in the monody dedicated to his brother, where he resorts to four Aeschylean, three Euripidean and two Sophoclean quotes.\(^{44}\) Among other things, all these quotations are characterized by an extremely faithfulness to the original literary context,\(^{45}\) showing an aware reuse of the classical material. The theatrical work seems to be the favoured literary language employed when writing about the brother. As a consequence, resorting to quotations from classical tragedies characterized by highly poetic language metaphorically contributes to the depiction of brotherhood on the one hand while also marking different discourses about his brother, so as to become a sort of common thread linking these pieces within the whole Basilakes’ literary work.

In addition to this, we cannot deny that the quotation from *Phoenissae* leads to compare himself to a feminine character, and not just anyone. Antigone’s reception inevitably entails the idea of opposition to the legitimate power and specifically to its ruling: does it allow for a comparison with Basilakes’ situation? Besides the elegance and the evocative dimension of the quotation, the author could have intended to add a hint of objection to the court decision inflicted upon


\(^{43}\) Pignani (cited n. 2), 38-39.


\(^{45}\) See Battaglino, Sofocle (cited n. 44), 166-169 for a specific case study.
him. It will remain an open question, because, even if we suppose that Basilakes meant to add this veiled message, he found a safe way of expressing it, without being explicit and concealing himself behind a polished classical quotation.

The same concept of separation conveyed by the classical quotation is again expressed by a biblical quote from *Ps.* 54:7. But the biblical contexts where the winged animal recurs may suggest an even greater similarity with the words of Antigone. The dove does not only convey the idea of speed of movement. In the Old Testament it is a symbol of peace, especially in *Gen.* 8, and a bearer of divine message, but it can also be found in the *Canticum Canticorum*, where its use seems very near to Nikephoros’: indeed, the dove is a tender epithet and a metaphor of love. Even stronger is the significance of the dove in the Gospels, where it symbolizes the divine love for God, since the Holy Spirit descends from heaven in the shape of a dove during the baptism of Jesus. In relation to these models, the quote from the *Psalms* appears to be an exact duplicate of the passage from Euripides, giving the idea of fast transfer and of deep and devoted bond. In this way, Nikephoros is able to immediately evoke both biblical and classic images, displaying a strong fraternal love inspired by no less than the relation God–Jesus.

Another recurring element for the construction of the self in Byzantine letters is the self-positioning as an authoritative figure, that Papaioannou considers as an attitude derived from the model theological letters. The literary device consists of presenting himself, and consequently also the content of the letter, as divinely inspired. For this purpose, Nikephoros ascribes to David his poetic inspiration. The reference to the *ποίησις* and to the motif of the poetic investiture belongs to the folkloric category of the “religious legend”. The origin of this motif is classical, suffice it to think about Archilochus and Hesiod. But here the author brings the perspective back to the Christian model: not the Muses anymore, but David donates to him the poetic capacities. After all, David has been very early perceived as the successor of those mythological figures such as the Muses or Orpheus. The paving mosaic of the Gaza’s synagogue in 6th century already showed a David crowned and playing the harp surrounded by wild animals, not to mention that

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47 *Cant.* 5:2 and 6:9.
48 *Cant.* 1:15 and 4:1.
his chant was considered able to expel demons. At the same time, this motif is an effective tool for promoting a self-centeredness discourse. Nikephoros temporarily distances himself from the theme of brotherhood, and starts lamenting again his lost role of prolific rhetorician and successful διδάσκαλος.

3.2.2 Body (lines 9-16)

After this introductory part, a cursory historical reference follows. The sentence ἀπολώλαμεν […] ὅτι θεοῦ μακρὰν ἀπερρίφημεν may hide the events related to the result of the two synods in which Nikephoros Basilakes was involved. Moving away from God means having moved away from the orthodox doctrine. In the subsequent lines, Nikephoros gives some information about his “new life”, highlighting a general sense of discomfort as regards to the place and the people he is living with. The style is the same that was used in the first part of the letter: the desire to describe his personal and real experience is mixed with an almost irrepressible deployment of his literary expertise.

The geographical context is the region of Scythia, where Philippopolis – today Plovdiv (Bulgaria) – is. The pair ὅπλων and δασμολογίας makes clear the difficulties that the author is experiencing while also describing him as a man of culture who is forced to deal with arms and taxation. The term δασμολογία is worth discussing because of its scarce occurrence (around ten times) in Greek texts, at least in those we know. They consist of three lexicographic sources, three from the early Byzantine period (5th-6th century) and three (including Nikephoros) datable between the 12th and the 14th century. The only classic source within this group is Plutarchus. It is interesting that in this passage the

triumvirate needs to collect tribute and raise money in order to fulfil the promise to pay every one of the soldiers five hundred drachmas. There is therefore an interesting association between δασμολογία and στρατιά that can be compared with the pair ὀπλῶν and δασμολογίας in Nikephoros’ letter. Moreover, the popularity of the Parallel Lives during the Komnenian period has been demonstrated also concerning Nikephoros Basilakes’ activity, so it is plausible that here he had memory of Plutarchus’ passage, too.

The hard life he is living in Scythia is not the punishment for his fault anymore, but it is skilfully presented like a sort of martyrdom. The rare expression combining the verb καρπόω and the noun λύπη sounds like an oxymoron and describe the necessity of his pain for a generic – and universal in its indefiniteness – ἀλλότριοι. The dictionaries define the particular use of καρπόω associated to the idea of pain a “negative use”, but personally I think that both Hippocrates and Nikephoros’ passages help us to understand exactly the aim of this enterprising combination: enhancing the positive effect of the painful. In fact, also in Hippocrates’ passage the action of undergoing pain is referred to a more authoritative figure (the doctor) and is directed to the benefit of another (the sick patient).

The mention of the tears in the closing part of the sentence is directly connected with the subsequent phrase, which takes on a tone of bitter irony. Nikephoros cannot consider himself lucky neither in Fate nor Love, and resorts to an erudite mythological reference to express it: the notorious inhospitality of...

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60 This association is attested in Hp. Flat. 1.6.

61 The combination γελῶ-Τύχη does not seem very recurring. Actually, according to the sources, we are tempted to confer Nikephoros the fortune of this kind of expression, that we find in the subsequent century in Manuel Philes, Carmina, Flor. 26.12 (ed. E. Miller, Manuelis Philae Carmina, I. Paris 1855, 205) and in Demetrius Cydones, Ep. 108.17 (ed. R.-J. Loenertz, Démétrius Cydonès, Correspondance I [StT, 186]. Città del Vaticano 1956, 145), Especially Demetrius Cydones’ intellectual backgound could include an accurate reading of Nikephoros’ works, because also the other combination γελῶ-Φιλία recurs in Demetrius’ Epistula 298.6 (ed. R.-J. Loenertz, Démétrius Cydonès, Correspondance II [StT, 208]. Città del Vaticano 1960, 216). Surely, it would be necessary a more extensive research, but cannot be ruled out that Demetrius Cydones used Nikephoros’ letters as a model for his own corpus: this kind of survey could be extremely useful both for increasing our knowledge about the Byzantine background of Demetrius (the newest study on this topic is J.R. Ryder, The Career and Writings of Demetrius Kydones: A Study of Fourteenth-Century Byzantine Politics, Religion and Society [The Medieval Mediterranean, 85]. Leiden–Boston 2010, that does not mention Nikephoros Basilakes within the possible sources of Cydones) and maybe for working on Nikephoros’ epistolary lost materials.
the Taurians that finds its best depiction in the *Iphigenia in Tauris* by Euripides. Nikephoros continues the sequence of refined allusions with a quote from Lycophron, where the population of Apsynthians from Thrace is mentioned. His account is in line with the traditional and stereotyped image of Apsynthians as savage and rough, which also appears in two passages by Herodotus. The first passage seems to oppose the civilized and more Hellenized population of Doloncyes to the bellicose and barbaric Thracian Apsynthians. The second one reports that Apsynthians offered the Persian Oiobazon to the local god Pleistor. But there is another significant aspect that makes Lycophron’s passage particularly similar to Nikephoros’ one: the quoted verse 418 from *Alexandra* is within the wider part devoted to the foretelling of the nostoi. The allusive operation is completed very meticulously by Nikephoros, who does not restrict himself to only recalling the geographical reference, but he also evokes the dramatic condition of being distant from the homeland.

3.2.3 Conclusion (lines 16-21)

The last lines represent the conclusion of a climax-evolution of the writing. In fact, they are detached from a realistic depiction of the land where Nikephoros is living and extend to a wider metaphor of his personal intellectual condition, playing on the notorious bitter flavour of wormwood. Firstly (l. 16-17), he describes a barren and poor land employing the verb ἀψινθοφορέω, which is an hapax in Greek Literature. Let us also reflect on the term ἄψινθος/ ἀψίνθιον. As one might imagine, the majority of sources is composed by medical ones, which go from Hippocrates to the 2nd century AD and to later sources datable between the 6th and the 13th centuries (i.e. Aetius Amidenus, *Iatricorum libri*; Paulus Aegineta, *Epitomae medicae libri septem*; Paulus Nicaeensis, *Liber Medicus*; Nicolas Myrepsus, *Dynameron*). From these sources it is evident that the plant of wormwood was used mainly as an emetic medicine. However, there is a considerable group of literary sources, both pro-

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62 In particular the capture of Orestes and his friend Pylades by the inhabitants of Tauris in order to sacrifice them to Artemis.
65 Hdt., Hist. 6, 34.4-6.
66 Hdt., Hist. 9, 119.1-4.
67 Among the other sources about the bitterness of the plant, we mention Flavius Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii* 1.21 (ed. C.L. KAYSER, Flavii Philostrati opera, I. Leipzig 1870, 23.15-16), because it is one of the few sources prior to the Byzantine era.
68 Various works by Discorides Pedianus, Rufus, Soranus, Galenus and Aelius Promotus.
fane and religious, that could disclose all the implications of the employment of this particular semantic area connected with wormwood, which dominates the ending of the letter. Indeed, the privileged section of the letter should convince us to validate the choice of the author.

From a numeric point of view, the Byzantine sources are outnumbered. It is quite curious that the almost unique classic literary source is a passage from Menander’s *Samia*, where wormwood is associated with the city of Byzantium. One cannot help but wonder if it can be considered as a confirmation of the particular interest of Byzantines for wormwood because of its habitual preparation and application? Looking at the religious sources, we can go back to *Apocalypsis Joannis*. In the sequence of the angels playing the trumpets, the third trumpet marks a further approach of God to men’s history in the Earth System. Wormwood is the incandescent star that falls over water and makes it poisonous and lethal for men. In this passage the toxic quality conveyed by wormwood, which symbolizes the negative judgement by God about the Earth System, damages water, essential for life. The presence of wormwood in Nikephoros’ letter works in a similar way. It is a toxic element for the γνώμη, a distinctive feature of humans.

The annotations of Arethas of Caesarea give us more interpretative tools in order to make assumptions on the additional meaning of penitence followed by redemption. Arethas, starting from the medical uses of the plant – that is the administration to children for a ὀξυωπία (good sight) – says that through the bitterness (διὰ τῆς πικρίας) of wormwood God wants to strengthen (ῥώννυμι) men’s eye (τὸ ὀπτικὸν) or, in other words, make them able to discern (ὡς ἂν οἱ δυνάμενοι διαβλέψαι). Analogously, Nikephoros has been punished for his fault, but the punishment (symbolized by wormwood) has made him better. This kind of double value of wormwood in Christian culture seems to be confirmed by other sources. Marcus Eremita, for example, considers similarly healthy the action of wormwood on a person without appetite and the adversities on the malicious. In the end, the significant concentration of the occurrences in the age of Nikephoros Basilakes is absolutely noteworthy. For instance, in one letter

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69 Men., Sam. 100.
70 *Apoc. Joan.* 8:10-11.
71 Wormwood has got a bitter flavour, but it is not toxic; however it is interpreted in this way in the Old Testament, especially in Ger. 9:14 and 23:15 where it is matches in parallel with poisonous water.
73 Arethas, Commentarius in Apocalypsin, *PG* 106, 617C 10 ss.
by Euthymius Malaces (1115 – before 1204), who was closely connected to the intellectual circles of the so-called Patriarchal School of Constantinople, we find the expression “τῆς ὀργῆς τοῦ Ὀθωνὶ τὸ ἀψίνθιον” and a passage by Eustathius of Thessalonica in his tenth oration that says Ὡς γὰρ ὁ μελετῶν ὑγιαίνειν ἐς σῶμα, τιμήσεταί ποτε καὶ πρὸς αὐτοῦ μέλιτος τὸ πικρὸν ἀψίνθιον. Both these sources are coherent with the above-mentioned Christian vision of this special plant. It must be recalled that the ἀψίνθιον is attested in the Progymnasmata collection of the same Nikephoros Basilakes. There, the image of “honey mixed for wormwood” describes the turmoil of the Theotokos, when her son is being prepared for burial. The bitterness of wormwood has a dual effect: it represents the sacrifice of Christ for the redemption of mankind.

While complaining about the difficulties he is facing, at the same time he ends the letter with an implicit praise of Constantinople. The description of the land basically evaluates the architecture and the agricultural economy: Nikephoros talks about the αὐλαία and the ἀρωματοφόρον production, respectively. These two standards of judgement are the same employed by Strabon in his description of Homeric Arabia, which is defined as not rich at all, but rather a poor land, where cities are just masses of tents, except for a small part where herbs and spices are produced. The fact that the attribute is normally referred to Arabia’s region is a good reason to think that here Nikephoros is using well-known categories of descriptive narrative in order to depict a believable image of a foreign land.

Secondly (l. 17-18), Nikephoros establishes a direct link between the features of the space with the features of the inhabitants, who are rough and uneducated, according to a typical Greek mindset of that time. Moreover, here the author chooses marked terms: οὐ […] γλυκύθυμος […] οὐδὲ ἀγανόφρων is Achilles when he kills without mercy Troo, Halastor’s son. It is interesting that the description by litotes helps making clear what is implicit: if the local inhabitants are οὐκ ἀγανόφρονες οὐδὲ γλυκύθυμοι, on the contrary the Byzantines are ἀγανόφρονες and γλυκύθυμοι and, among Byzantines, Nikephoros himself is
inconsistent with the arm, but γλυκύθυμος and ἀγανόφρων, like he has already said on line 10 of this letter. Line 19 works as the final necessary result of his metaphor-reasoning.

The concluding phrase of the letter ends with another quote, which expresses an impossible desire, in the same way the letter opens. In this case, Nikephoros makes his own the words that the chorus pronounces in the third stasimon of the Ajax,81 where the strong distress concerning the present circumstances leads the chorus to express a wish to escape.82 In this case the quote from Sophocles should have appeared particularly suitable to Nikephoros, because on the one hand it perfectly expresses his mood and sounds like a last cry of despair based on a polished reference, on the other hand the semantic evolution of ἱερός in a Christian sense is the perfect ending for a man who is addressing not only his brother, but also the Christian elite of Constantinople.

4. Concluding remarks: How Quotations Individualize Self-Portrayal within Exile Discourse in Nikephoros Basilakes

As clearly pointed out by Herbert Hunger in his exemplary – and almost unsurpassed – essay on literary imitation in Byzantium, “imitation of antiquity […] belonged to the essential features of Byzantine literary works in the high language”.83 And, from this point of view, Nikephoros Basilakes’ Letters do not make an exception. Because of the cultural continuity experienced by the Eastern Empire, a great number of Byzantine works are characterized by the imitation of the ancients, rather than their mere reproduction. Nevertheless, the modalities of such process were varied, and mostly different from our modern understanding of literary imitation,84 so the popular opinion is that Byzantine Middle Ages cared very little for “original genius”. But what did actually mean “to imitate” for Byzantine authors and in what way did such bulky rhetorical equipment affect self-expression? I think that the case of Nikephoros Basilakes’ Letters is extremely meaningful for this subject.

81 Soph., Ajax 1217-1222.
83 HUNGER, On the Imitation (cited n. 39), 38.
4.1 The Comnene Exile Letter-Writing

Exile has a very long-term tradition, and it is surely one of the most common themes in Greek literature of all periods. Consequently, at first glance, the exile discourse could be easily regarded as stereotypical and hackneyed. Therefore, it would seem to be totally counter-productive to look for individualisation (and Byzantine “originality”) in this kind of discourse, and even more in the (exile) letter-writing, that – as is well known – often takes on functions of verse, as a vehicle for emotions.\(^8\) Quite the opposite, the Byzantine exile discourse appears to be “highly complex and very individual”:\(^6\) the (ostensible) static employment of quotations is, in truth, extremely responsive to personal reality. In our specific case, Nikephoros Basilakes’ Letters prove to belong to the distinctive exile discourse of the 12th century – with which they share a common framework of themes and vocabulary – while also distinguishing themselves among this already peculiar corpus of the period between the 1090s and the 1230s.

Comnene literature seems to be first and foremost characterized by the theme of exile, which has been developed by several writers of the period as a consequence of politico-legal exiles, non-episcopal official exiles, refugee bishops’ exiles, monastic exiles, so that in many ways the exile discourse of the 12th century forms a homogeneous body of texts.\(^7\) Indeed, in telling how the authors are coping with the exile, they all express mainly a sense of contrast and of loss, rather than focusing on physical conditions and questions of guilt and innocence, which can be found more in the 10th century letters.\(^8\) In this sense, Nikephoros, after opening up his lament with the usual prefacing phrase τὰ ἡμέτερα,\(^9\) immediately turns to the spatial dimension, enhancing the contrast existing between his exile-home and the lost Constantinople. It is recurring that the exile-homes are identified as Tartaros or Hades (οὐδ’ εἰν Ἀἰδαο at the beginning of the first letter of Basilakes),\(^9\) but the mythological imagery is often integrated with concrete references about the climate and the (scarce) availability or quality of produce, for instance. The complaints of Basilakes about the (in his opinion terrible) fruits of Philippopolis in the fourth letter recall what Gregory Antiochos

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87 Ibid., 41.
88 Ibid., 42-43, 49.
90 Mullett, Originality (cited n. 86), 43.
and Basil Pediadites wrote about Bulgaria and Corfu, respectively.  

Nevertheless, the typical feature of the twelfth-century exile letter-writing seems to be the concept of *barbarismos*, inaugurated by Theophylact of Ochrid.  

Besides the Greek sense of the treatment of the stranger in the hosting community – which is sometimes present, such as in Basilakes’ third letter (κατὰ τοὺς Ταυροσκύθας ἡμᾶς ἐξένισεν) – it has to be intended as the danger of losing knowledge due to the barbarian people who the author is in close contact with. Nikephoros says καὶ νῦν συναναχρώννυμαι τὴν βάρβαρον γλῶτταν εἰς ἀμουσίαν ἔξεπεσον to explain why he has not got the sophistic skills of Hermogenes and Lucian anymore.  

This continuously repeated opposition between civilised world and land of barbarians outside is the very kind of deprivation felt by the twelfth-century exiles. The reasons of such an attitude need to be found within the historical and cultural context of the Comnenian period, where social mobility and professional hierarchy depended on and were possible thanks to the imperial environment. Being in (and in agreement with) the imperial environment could easily lead to promotion, but likewise easy was moving downwards. It is precisely as a result of this increasing attachment to the City – as social authorizing space – that banishment was the easiest solution in order to penalise who was troublesome and not in agreement. This was true both for the literary society – taking into account the importance of the *theatra* as space where self-promotion could materialize – and for the government of the church.

Within this peculiar epistolographic production, there are some features which specifically characterize Nikephoros Basilakes’ *Letters* in the way he depicts himself as a victim of a sentence of exile, and it is precisely what is regarded as “imitation” that results in this individualization. From the second letter Nikephoros expresses a certain dignity and moral force in introducing the sentence he has been involved in, as conveyed in the words διὰ ταῦτα τὴν ἀποδημίαν ἐβουλευσάμην καὶ φυγὴν ἐμαυτοῦ κατεψηφισάμην μακράν. But beyond that, he seems to be motivated to oppose the legal decision, even if he displays a sentiment of repentance through the very original image of wormwood, that has already been discussed above. On the one hand, the faithful quotation from Euripides’ *Phoenissae* and the self-comparison with Antigone, and the redeeming property of wormwood serve as a metaphor for his banishment, on the other

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91 Ibid., 42.  
92 Ibid., 45.  
94 Mullett, Originality (cited n. 86), 48.  
95 Ibid., 50.  
hand, they depict Nikephoros personal experience. Nevertheless, if we read his words carefully, we will notice that his repentance is not due to having changed his mind, but rather to the desire of reaffirming his elitist social role. He is still firmly certain about his intellectual role, and he tries to regain it, aware of the lack of independence he needs to deal with.

4.2 Quotations and Self-Portrayal

Since from the centuries of Late Antiquity and of the Byzantine Age we lack theoretical remarks on the subject of imitation, we still miss a theory of literary imitation in Byzantium, which would enable us to fully understand Byzantine mannerism. As is so frequently found in Byzantine literature, in Basilakes’ Letters the mythological example is often followed by a Christian one from the Holy Scriptures. For instance, in the third letter, that we have analysed thoroughly, the quote from Euripides’ Phoenissae is followed by a quote from the Psalms. Beyond recognising the intellectual attitude promoted by Christian humanism, I believe that this specific pattern allows the writer to choose the interpretation of the classical quote in question. It is perhaps due to this feature of consistent overlapping of classical and biblical images, which can be found pretty consistently in Basilakes’ style, that the classical quotation is apparently emptied out of its additional content because the biblical quotation drives the interpretation, giving the reader a secure direction.

A productive starting point could be to regard the concept of “imitation” as intrinsically connected to reception and social interaction, rather than as a purely author-oriented practice. Among the scholars of narratology it is an established fact that character interpretation involves specific structures and inferential mechanisms. Albeit with some variations, cognitive approaches can also be applied to Byzantine epistolography.

First of all, the epistolographic self results in an integrative process throughout the whole corpus of letters. Therefore, the information given earlier (cognitive effect of primacy) will be continuously loaded with the accumulation of new information, even if the (first) mental model of the imagined character will be always activated as a long-term memorised knowledge structure. This very dynamic nature of the creation of a mental model tends to be limited among epistolograph-

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97 As pointed out in: BENEKER – GIBSON, The Rhetorical Exercises (cited n. 1), xvi-xvii.
98 NILSSON, The Same Story (cited n. 83), 200.
100 DE TEMMERMAN – VAN EMDE BOAS, Character (cited n. 99), 18.
phers, who try to offer a self-portrayal as coherent as possible, whereas the narrative texts more often aspire to “round” characters. It is therefore evident that the investigation of self-representation in Byzantine epistolography deals with reconstructing the schemas (both social and literary) available to the authors and the readers as common recognisable heritage, rather than wondering about the degree of truth related to the discourse subjectivity.

Byzantine literary imitation can be understood exactly as part of these schemas, that is to say “meaningful memory structures”, which are both socially-based and literature-based. Since characters are representations in the minds of readers, rather than in the texts, it becomes fundamental to identify the metaphorical techniques, as complementary to metonymical ones. They function at the level of literary construction, activating intertextual resonances, in addition to intratextual associations.

In this sense, imitation of antiquity becomes a tool for expressing the self, rather than a constraint that limits its display. Nikephoros Basilakes’ language of emotion benefits from the learned συγκρίσεις of which he fills up the texts. His deep fraternal love is expanded thanks to the reference to the mythological devotion of Antigone to her brother. The function of quotations as proof of high rhetorical skill is just one facet of their employment, because simultaneously they make multiple expressions of emotions possible. This shows how “the constraint of authority encouraged […] authorial subjectivity” for the Byzantines.

If we adopt such a perspective, we will also be able to evaluate differently how Byzantine authors handled these materials, as something potentially dangerous, especially in certain historical periods. A quotation is a polyphonic piece of information and when the authors create their self within a text they need to be aware of that and take into account which possible interpretations readers would give. Concerning this aspect, Nikephoros Basilakes seems to be particularly careful. He consciously resorts to quotations that can provide additional meanings of opposition to and contrast with the official version of the events that involved him and the official public image of him as a (sentenced) heretical. At the same time, however, they remained veiled and apparently distant from the mainstream tone of the letters, thanks to several literary devices, first among all the overlapping proximity of quotations from the Classics and from the Holy Scriptures.

101 Ibid., 17.
102 Ibid., 17.
103 On this see ibid., 20.
In conclusion, Nikephoros Basilakes is perfectly aware of the modalities of creation and reception of identity, therefore he does not hazard a rebellious self-portrayal, even if we can notice snippets of it. Rather, he prefers an autobiographical narrative in name of his once high literary esteem, repentance and praise. In this sense, the classicising and formalistic spirit of the education of the 12th century promoted by the centralised system of higher education must not be deemed only as a tool for authorities to stifle philosophical (and potentially subversive) speculation. It is also what enabled authors to express their intellectual subjectivity during the Komnenian period, when the absorption of the schools under the control of the emperor and the patriarch gave the authorities a hold not only on the teaching profession, but also on writers and intellectuals. And even if one perceives the despair of a man who felt at loss because he was an outsider to the imperial environment, his praise never becomes flattery, consistently with what he wrote about himself in his *Praefatio*:

σχολαστικὸν ἄγουσιν ήθος καὶ εἰς τὰς τῶν δυναμένων οἰκίας οὐ θαμίζειν οὐδὲ θυραυλεῖν ἀνεχομένοις

[since I was of a scholarly nature and unable to put up with frequenting the houses of the powerful and waiting at their doors]

We know that autobiography had not been able to establish itself in Byzantium as a distinct genre, even if the autobiographical impulse itself was quite ubiquitous. As much as he was entangled with erudition and mannerism, Nikephoros Basilakes appears to be one of the strongest promoters of autobiographical narrative. If the preface to his edition of collected works represents the first (surviving) example of how the humanist ideal joined the autobiographical form, his *Letters* are undoubtedly more appropriate to study embedded self-portrayal.

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109 Translation and brief discussion of the passage in Magdalino, The Empire (cited n. 8), 336.
Abstract

Nikephoros Basilakes was a Byzantine rhetorician of the second half of the twelfth century, whose works have all in all recently drawn scholars’ attention. In this paper, I will focus on one of his minor works, namely the Letters. We have four surviving letters written during the exile of the author, in which nostalgia, solitude, and discomfort are a predominant part of his self-expression. After a brief introduction on the main themes of the four letters, I will analyse the complex literary pattern that characterizes the third one (offering also the first-ever translation into a modern language), in which the sophisticated combination of “reused” materials taken from the Classics and the Holy Scriptures, the resignification of traditional images and the overlapping of several meanings can be found as typical elements of Basilakes’ writing.