

# REWRITING THE 1120S: Chronology and Crisis under John II Komnenos

*Original scientific article*

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*The reign of Emperor John II Komnenos (1118–1143) has traditionally been overlooked by scholars due to an apparent lack of source material, particularly in comparison to his father and son, Alexios I and Manuel I. As such, developments from this period tend to be examined in broader bilateral studies examining Byzantine dealings with peoples such as Serbs, Hungarians, Turks and Venetians separately, or only in reference to one region, or another figure, and the same goes for Crusader and Islamic polities later in the reign. This is despite the fact that John's reign, occurring between the First and Second Crusades, occurred at a crucial time in Eurasian history, when Western Europe and the Middle East entered a new phase of contact on account of the Crusades. Byzantium was still, arguably, the most powerful Christian nation, and examining how the formerly unquestioned hegemonic power dealt with the rising powers of the Normans, Turks, Italian maritime republics and others deserved study if these developments are to be understood at all. As such, this paper aims to expose the changes in our analysis that result from the incorporation of non-traditional source material, highlighting how John's reign as a whole should be re-examined with this methodology. Using the years 1123–1126 as a case study, the dividends such a methodology can pay will also be shown through analysis of Byzantine foreign policy in this period, as a previously overlooked crisis occurred for John's regime in 1126.*

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### THE REIGN OF EMPEROR JOHN II KOMNENOS

(1118–1143)<sup>1</sup> has traditionally been overlooked by scholars due to an apparent lack of source material, particularly in comparison to his father and son, Alexios I (1081–1118) and Manuel I (1143–1180).<sup>2</sup> As such, developments from this period tend to be examined in broader bilateral studies examining Byzantine dealings with peoples such as Serbs, Hungarians, Turks and Venetians separately, or only in reference to one region, or another figure, and the same goes for Crusader and Islamic polities later in the reign.<sup>3</sup> This is despite the fact that John's reign, occurring between the First and Second Crusades, occurred at a crucial time in Eurasian history, when Western Europe and the Middle East entered a new phase of contact on account of the Crusades. Byzantium was still, arguably, the most powerful Christian nation, and examining how the formerly unquestioned hegemonic power dealt with the rising powers of the Normans, Turks, Italian maritime republics and others deserved study if these developments are to be understood at all. As such, this paper aims to expose the changes in our analysis that result from the incorporation of source material outside of ostensible history writing, highlighting how John's reign as a whole should be re-examined in depth with this methodology. Using the years 1123–1126 as a case study, the dividends such a methodology can pay will also be shown through analysis of Byzantine foreign policy in this period, as a previously overlooked crisis occurred for John's regime in 1126.

1 Though these dates are conventionally taken to be John's reign years, he was crowned as co-emperor at the age of four in 1091, and in the author's opinion played a major role in Alexios' regime by the 1110s at the latest. Due to the continuity in policy between these years and the 1120s, stating that John's reign began in 1118 is an oversimplification, and the office of co-emperor in the Later and New Roman Empires will be the subject of a future paper.

2 The only monograph is: Chalandon 1912. This lack has been recently supplemented by a volume of essays and a doctoral thesis: Bucossi and Rodriguez Suarez eds., 2016; Papageorgiou 2010. For the Komnenian period as a whole with peripheral references to John, see: Magdalino 1993; Stanković 2006; Birkenmeier 2003; Angold 1984; Angold 1995; Zlatar 2015.

88 | 3 Examples include: Stephenson 2000; Lilie 1993; Harris, 2007.

To begin this task, it is first necessary to break free from the shackles imposed by Niketas Choniates and John Kinnamos, whose self-confessed cursory accounts of John's reign form the basis for previous studies. Recent scholarship has deconstructed this picture: scholars have become more aware that these histories were not neutral accounts, simply chronicling what occurred, rather, they were written to convince their readers of a political agenda (Macrides 2010; Angelou 2010, 289–305; Kaldellis 2016, 293–306). In Choniates' case, it has been demonstrated that one of the purposes of his constructed narrative is to present Byzantine history since 1118 as a steady decline in the rightful order of the world, the *taxis*, culminating in the fall of Constantinople in 1204 (Kaldellis 2009, 75–99). John's reign was designed to show the world as it should be in Choniates' narrative, with barely the first hints of disorder and decay creeping in, and John himself as the near-perfect emperor from which all others would decline.<sup>4</sup> This desire to portray John's reign as ordered and successful results in Choniates, in the vast majority of cases, in only relating instances of reversal in the context of their imminent resolution, with no regard for accurate chronology. Indeed, he glosses over certain events in John's reign in such a way that he is undeniably guilty of lying by omission. Even when Choniates does relate events more verifiably, he often changes the order to suit his narrative goals, or for dramatic effect. Therefore, while it would be contentious to suggest that Choniates' account is useless, his version of events must be reconciled with other narratives.

To a certain extent, Kinnamos' version helps to clear up these issues; where Choniates' portrayal of John is almost without exception flattering, Kinnamos' narrative goal often causes him to view John prejudicially. Kinnamos was writing a biography of Manuel, for which John's reign would form the prelude. He is excessive in his praise of Manuel, likely for the purpose of gaining employment under the new regime, to demonstrate his literary talents and value to the regency government that followed Manuel's death.<sup>5</sup> John's purpose in Kinnamos' narrative is complex: on the one hand Manuel gains some glory from being the worthy son of a worthy father, but on the other Manuel must be seen to surpass his father: a ruler who completes the unfinished tasks of his father and is wholly virtuous where

4 Kaldellis 2009, 79–80; Simpson goes so far as to say John is portrayed “as an *Ioannes imaginaire*.” Simpson 2009, “Introduction,” Eadem, 45.

5 John Kinnamos, *Epitome* 4–5.

his father had faults.<sup>6</sup> Kinnamos uses the fact that he is only giving a summary of events as his “get out” clause on some occasions, but even so the events he chooses to chronicle confirm his rhetorical purpose of convincing his audience of Manuel’s success and saintliness compared to John’s shortfalls.

Treadgold and Magdalino posit that Choniates had read Kinnamos: they argue that Choniates deliberately ignored or actively rejected Kinnamos so that Choniates would be the definitive historian of the era, regarding Kinnamos as a panegyrist of Manuel rather than a historian.<sup>7</sup> Treadgold believes that the reason Choniates’ narrative provides more detail after 1134 is that he consulted with a soldier who had begun campaigning with John about then, while Kinnamos’ more equal treatment of the whole of John’s reign is because he could consult with soldiers who were alive for the whole of it, and Treadgold suggests a few imperial secretaries Kinnamos could have known personally (Treadgold 2013, 412–3). Neither reveals his sources directly, but in addition to likely oral evidence from eyewitnesses, sections such as descriptions of John’s triumph evoke contemporary rhetorical poems, implying they also used texts such as these (see Lau 2014, 195–214). Treadgold also notes that Kinnamos’ title, *Epitome*, and the fact he only devotes a twelfth of his manuscript to John despite his reign taking up two-fifths of the chronological time, may be due to the fact that our surviving text was a summary of what Kinnamos originally wrote, abridged by a scribe (Lau 2014, 410–11, 279–80).

Despite this limitation, Kinnamos’ narrative in conjunction with Choniates’ potentially reveals two sides of John: Choniates portraying the wholly positive aspects, Kinnamos portraying the flawed aspects, with both drawing on some eyewitness sources and documentary evidence. Reconciling these disparate sources has been the conventional strategy for scholars to analyze John’s reign, causing ongoing debates regarding issues such as dating John’s Serbian and Hungarian

6 Magdalino 1993, 413–488; Stephenson 1996, 177–187; Magdalino 2000, 15–43. The latter article highlights how Anna Komnene did similar things in the *Alexiad* by revealing how Alexios was more worthy than Manuel in fields such as his dealings with crusaders, revealing that this method of history writing was common at the time.

7 Treadgold 2013, 237–8; Magdalino 1993 13–4. This could also be considered a standard *modus operandi* of Byzantine history writing, however; for example Skylitzes states in his prooimion that his predecessors were deficient in their history writing, while he has taken appropriate care. John Skylitzes, *Synopsis of Histories*, 1–2; Wortley trans. 2010, 1–3.

campaigns, in which Kinnamos and Choniates cannot be reconciled, as discussed in full below. Equally, this approach has led to the reign of John often being studied in imprecise thematic terms. While this reconciliatory approach has the benefit of being able to fill-in-the-gaps for certain issues, it suffers from imperial priorities, whatever they may have been, almost certainly differed from one year to the next, as circumstances developed and his priorities shifted. What is more, the customary methodology of studying bilateral relationships between Byzantium and another power gives the impression that John dealt with the various challenges facing him sequentially, when in fact, his choices, and the events themselves, can be better understood when it is acknowledged that he had to balance multiple priorities at once, often facing various challenges in the same year. Indeed, I had planned to present the material thematically, as Chalandon and Papageorgiou have done. However, it became clear that the significance of certain events radically shifted when they were placed in conjunction, and so it became a priority to present the material in chronological order.

At first sight, such an approach may appear dated, more in keeping with the work of earlier scholars such as Bury or Runciman. However, the work of Stanković and Papageorgiou has demonstrated that there is deeper understanding to be gained when these less used rhetorical texts are incorporated, and then supplementing them with regional, non-Byzantine texts can take this even further. As old-fashioned as the approach may seem, only with this new picture being constructed can deeper historical analyses begin. Regarding these non-Byzantine texts, on the one hand, they have the virtue of providing us with a non-Constantinopolitan and non-Emperor focused view on events. For this paper, I particularly point to the Priest of Diokleia and Michael the Syrian, whose regional texts allow us to focus on developments in areas Choniates, Kinnamos and the court rhetorical texts gloss over, in favour of what the emperor was doing, or what occurred in the capital.

On the other hand are the sources usually classified as “rhetorical” texts, produced at the time by court rhetors to glorify the emperor and his regime, with the three most productive during John’s reign being Michael Italikos, Nikephoros Basilakes, and particularly Theodore Prodromos.<sup>8</sup> They produced a mixture of formal orations, *ekphrases*, hymns, occasional poems, and some letters, all of these

8 Nikephoros Basilakes, *Orationes et epistolae*; Michael Italikos, *Lettres et discours*; Theodore Prodromos, *Historische Gedichte*.

being in varying forms of Greek and for audiences ranging from the court to the people of the city as part of a public ceremony.<sup>9</sup> The texts may use conventional poetic devices, but scholarship has revealed that these devices had specific meanings under John, referring to recent events.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, though these sources have a political agenda that influences their transmission of events, they are no worse a source than the histories of Choniates and Kinnamos, indeed they could well be based on battlefield reports and thus considerably more reliable.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the fact that they are produced at the time provides us with the message the regime wished to be known in the capital, allowing us to take the political pulse of John's regime, and assess what that regime was attempting to accomplish.

To outline the remainder of this paper, the foreign policy that emerges from this approach is that John's government adopted a strategy to cumulatively acquire client rulers, defined as non-Roman elites who acknowledged the authority of the emperor and contributed soldiers and resources towards his future campaigns. This strategy had started well with the defeat of the nomadic invasion of Pechenegs and Cumans in 1122, an initial Serb expedition in 1123 followed by a similar campaign against the Turks in Anatolia in 1124, all of which involved recruitment to the army and the former two involving population exchanges to reinforce frontiers and imperial authority. In 1125, John was given the opportunity to accelerate these plans with the arrival of three fugitive princes in Constantinople, but in backing them all he overextended himself when he had to simultaneously deal with a Venetian war and the rebellion of Gabras of Trebizond too. This precipitated a crisis of overextension, in which in order to salvage the situation John was forced into a fairly humiliating peace with Venice and to ignore Anatolia in order to focus on

9 C.f. Kazhdan and Epstein 1985, 129; Hörandner 1991, 415–432; Lauxtermann 2002, 139–152; Jeffreys 2003; Bernard 2010; Magdalino 2012; Lau 2014, 195–214. C.f. Chapter Nine.

10 Hörandner considers Prodromos' *Kaiseridee* to be highly traditionalized, using tropes usual to rhetors and emperors in antiquity, but Kazhdan and Franklin have noted that the amount of factual detail is significantly more than is traditional. Hörandner 1991, 94–7; Kazhdan, and Franklin 1984, 106. See also Magdalino 1993; Stankovic 2006; Papageorgiou 2010; Lau 2014.

11 See in particular a letter from the rhetor Michael Italikos to Stephen Meles, Logothete of the Drome, where he notes how a letter from Meles regarding the Emperors campaign was read out, and then he composed a poem and read it out himself. Michael Italikos, *Lettres et discours*, Letter 40, 231–233; Lau 2014, 202–203. C.f. for the reign of Manuel: Stanković 2006, 437–450.

the Serbs and Hungarians. Only through examining these events in their chronological context does this strategy, and an explanation for John's peace with Venice emerge, and why the empire focused on the Balkans at the expense of Anatolia. It has been unappreciated that the empire was dealing with every front concurrently, and indeed it was only with victory on successive fronts as John acquired more clients that he could attempt more ambitious campaigns in future: for example, during the Cilician and Syrian campaign of 1137, the most ambitious of his reign, Turkish, Pecheneg and Serb troops are mentioned in his forces.<sup>12</sup> Though ultimately John managed to get this strategy back on track as that example shows, whether through imperial hubris after victory at the battle of Berrhoia, or merely through not anticipating the actions of other political actors, the whole plan almost came apart in 1126.

Thus, turning to the sources, up until the Autumn of 1124, everything John had touched had turned to gold since he came to power. Laodikeia and Sozopolis had been recaptured and nomadic Turks recruited, a Serb expedition had been successful and a nomadic invasion defeated, along with his sister Anna's *Philopation* plot.<sup>13</sup> However, in October 1124 the Venetian fleet returned from the siege of Tyre and landed on Rhodes to take on provisions, leading to hostilities between the inhabitants and the fleet.<sup>14</sup> Previous examinations of this Venetian war often characterize it as a continuous conflict from John's refusal to renew Venice's trade privileges in 1118, with this event leading directly to a war that finished in a humiliating peace in 1126.<sup>15</sup> However, such a portrayal does not account for the fact that the Venetians continued to trade without privileges for four years until at least 1122 when the Venetian crusader fleet had a similar incident to that on

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12 Serbs: Niketas Choniates, *Historia*, 16. With Manuel supposedly increasing the customary levy of Serb troops from 300 to 500 after a Serb rebellion during his reign: John Kinnamos, *Epitome*, 113, 199, 90, 151. Diokleians in specific are also mentioned as part of the retinue of John's co-emperor, his eldest son Alexios who was a general during the Cilician campaign, according to the coronation oration of Theodore Prodromos, *Historische Gedichte*, Poem I, line 90. Pechenegs: John Kinnamos, *Epitome*, 8; Pecheneg troops are specifically used to capture the town of Nistrion near Shayzar in 1138, Niketas Choniates, *Historia*, 29. Turks: John Kinnamos, *Epitome*, 9. With Turks and Serbs being used in different divisions in Cilicia: Niketas Choniates, *Historia*, 16, 29–30.

13 John Kinnamos, *Epitome*, 5–9; Niketas Choniates, *Historia*, 10–17.

14 Dandolo, *Chronicon Venetum*, 234. and *Historia Ducum Veneticorum*, 74.

15 This section summarises events analysed in full in: Lau, [Forthcoming], 2016.

Rhodes taking on provisions at Corfu when sailing to the Levant.<sup>16</sup> There seems to have been no response to this incident, and no hostilities until 1124, so the idea of this being some form of eight-year war is misleading at best. Whether through opportunism or intention, however, the Venetian fleet had to overwinter in Byzantine territory in 1124, and after the incident at Rhodes they had begun a series of raids against the Byzantine islands of Samos and Methone before overwintering on Chios. As this map shows, these targets suggest either the fleet changed its mind about returning to Venice, or that Fulcher of Chartres as our primary source for this war had incomplete information. In the New Year, the Venetian fleet then raided Lesbos and Andros before finally leaving with the relics of St. Isidore, still in San Marco, on March 29<sup>th</sup> to arrive back in Venice in June.<sup>17</sup>

Portraying themselves as audacious heroes, the Venetian sources make much of these exploits while Fulcher bemoans the suffering of Christians, and Choniates and Kinnamos gloss quickly over the incident, only referring to it much later in a different context altogether. John's response to all this is, therefore, all but invisible in these sources, causing scholars to surmise that John likely had no fleet due to the finance minister John Poutzes centralizing naval taxes, though that act did not, in fact, occur until the 1130s.<sup>18</sup> However, in the court rhetoric of Theodore Prodromos and Nikephoros Basilakes there are some hints that John did respond: in the former case, during a stanza listing the past victories of the emperor during the 1133 Kastamon triumph, he includes a victory at Lemnos, and in particu-

16 Evidence of Venetians trading in Constantinople between 1118 and 1122 are found in: *Documenti del commercio veneziano*. Nos. 41, 42, 45, 46. Regarding the incident on Corfu and the Venetian participation in the siege of Tyre, together with the opening of the Byzantine-Venetian war, see: William of Tyre, *Chronicon*, 12.9–12, 556–562; Fulcher of Chartres, *Historia Hierosolymitana (1095–1127)*, 3.3, 621–623; Tafel and Thomas, *Urkunden* 1, no. xxxviii, 78; Dandolo, *Chronicon Venetum*, 232; *Historia Ducum Veneticorum*, 73; *Translatio Isidori*, 322–3; Riley-Smith, 1986, 339–350; Queller and Katele 1986, 29 and Devaney 2010, 135.

17 Dandolo, *Chronicon Venetum*, 234–235; *Historia Ducum Veneticorum*, 74; *Translatio Isidori*, 323–324; *Annales venetici breves* 71; John Kinnamos, *Epitome*, 281 and Pietro Giustiniani, *Venetiarum historia*, 106–107.

18 Devaney 2010, 139. The date of the centralisation of naval taxation is recorded in *Synopsis Chronikē*, 220–222; Herrin, 2013, 86, n. 144. Sathas and Herrin give 1135 as the most likely date, together with this, Poutzes isn't attested as *Megas Logariastes* until Manuel's reign, and his continued high office in 1157 suggests that the 1130s were the earliest he could have been in a position to shape such a policy, particularly if his lowly origins and assumedly longer path up the career ladder are to be considered. *Πατριμική Βιβλιοθήκη*, 316.



lar a line that John had had “as many [victories] by land as by sea and islands”.<sup>19</sup> Though rhetorical exaggeration of imperial deeds is to be expected, using such a specific example, and the fact that every other victory named on the list is already known, is noteworthy, particularly as John would have been far too young to face off against the Turkish fleet of Tzarchas of Smyrna in the late eleventh century. As such, failing another completely unknown conflict, the only hostilities in the region would have been against Venice; Lemnos also makes sense as a site for an imperial victory, because imperial fleets could have withdrawn north towards Constantinople if they were overpowered or to gather in preparation for a counter strike. Equally, a hostile fleet moving north from Chios to Lesbos and Samos would have made Lemnos the next likely target for the Venetians, and so even if this wasn’t any great victory, the imperial fleet operating here would have been the likely place to convince the Venetians they should quit while they were ahead.



Fig. 1: Venetian Raids

19 “Ὡ νίκη Λαοδικεινή, νίκη Σωζοπολίτις,  
 ἑτέρα νίκη Σκυθικῆ καὶ Δαλματικῆ ἄλλη,  
 ἑτέρα δ’ Ἀμωριανῆ, Λημναϊκῆ δ’ ἑτέρα,  
 ἀπλῶς ὅποσας κατὰ γῆν καὶ θάλασσαν καὶ νήσους,”  
 Theodore Prodromos, *Historische Gedichte*, Poem IV, lines 270–3.

Though this is from but one reference to an unspecified victory at sea, there is specific mention of John's *Megas Domestikos* John Axouch commanding triremes and other ships in a fragmentary encomium by Basilakes, and throughout the works of Prodhromos, there are several mentions of John's dominion over the sea as well as the land. Although these could be considered rhetorical flourishes, they would perhaps be less likely had John not succeeded by sea at all.<sup>20</sup> Together with this possible military response, the later Venetian historian Dandolo tells us that John burned the Venetian quarter in Constantinople in retaliation for these atrocities, which though only mentioned in this source, and perhaps exaggerated, does suggest that the emperor exacted reprisals against the Venetians, though their very presence again tells us that this conflict was seemingly not pre-planned by either the emperor or the doge, or else these Venetians would have already sought to leave the city.<sup>21</sup>

Whether the emperor had had a victory at Lemnos in 1125 or not, or assumed the conflict was considered over now that the Venetians had returned home as Devaney has suggested, the responses of John's regime imply that it still believed it was in control of the situation in 1125.

It was in the wake of these events that the three fugitive princes arrived in Constantinople, causing John's reach to exceed his grasp. These portentous foreigners were Mas'ud of Ikonion, Álmos of Hungary, and Gradinja of Diokleia, whose situations I will outline before addressing John's response.

The first was perhaps the most surprising: Alexios and John's old enemy Mas'ud of Ikonion, who had prevented the treaty of Philomelion from being implemented, and the lands of Ikonion from coming under the imperial aegis. According to Michael the Syrian, just as Mas'ud had killed his brother Malik Shah to seize the throne, so too had their brother Arab, fourth son of Kilij-Arslan, rebelled against him, causing him to take refuge with his former enemy and ask for aid.<sup>22</sup>

The second was Álmos, great uncle to John's Empress Eirene-Piroska, and uncle to the current Hungarian King Stephen II.<sup>23</sup> Álmos' brother, the late King

20 Nikephoros Basilakes, *Orationes et Epistolae*, 117; Theodore Prodhromos, *Historische Gedichte*, Poem V, line 19; XI line 120; XV, lines 67–70; XVI, line 213; XVII, lines 130 and 348; XXV lines 42, 64; All referencing victories at sea, in sea battles, or dominion over the sea and islands.

21 Dandolo, *Chronicon Venetum*, 236.

22 Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, 16.2, 608; French Translation: Chabot trans. 1963, 223.

96 | 23 John Kinnamos, *Epitome*, 9; Niketas Choniates, *Historia*, 17.

Coloman, had crowned Stephen at the age of four in 1105 to secure his succession, and since then Álmos had threatened his brother and nephew's throne. He had gained support from the German emperor and other neighbouring princes to unsuccessfully stake his claim multiple times, such that as Coloman approached his death in 1116 he ordered Álmos and his seven-year-old son Béla blinded, and the latter castrated though this was not carried out.<sup>24</sup> Álmos understandably stayed quiet after this, likely in his monastery at Dömös, until his flight to Constantinople in 1125.<sup>25</sup>

During Álmos' quiet years, Stephen had suffered one setback after another in all of his endeavours. A full account would be another paper, but in less than ten years Stephen had lost Dalmatia to the Venetians, been defeated by the Bohemians at the battle of the river Olšava, attempted to raid Austria but was devastated by a counter raid from Leopold III in alliance with Bořivoj II of Bohemia who began raiding continuously from this point on, and failed invading Kiev while supporting a claimant who then died. He then attempted to recapture Dalmatia while the Venetian fleet was away, but was soundly beaten when they returned in 1125. In fact, the Hungarian chronicle uses several speeches by nobles openly talking about replacing him with even a blind king, particularly as Stephen had no heir, and it is difficult to imagine a less successful king. Whether blind Álmos' still desired the kingship by 1125 and therefore made an active choice to go to Constantinople for support, or whether he went for sanctuary to prevent Stephen finishing the job his father had started, is impossible to tell from the sources, but either way, he

24 *Chronicon Pictum*, 429–30; Makk and Kristó eds. 1996, 151; Kosztołnyik 2006, 101–3; Tuzson 2002, 79–81; Makk 1989, 16–7.

25 Kosztołnyik 2006, 104 for quotation. The exact date of Álmos' flight has also been much debated by scholars, with Moravcsik and Chalandon believing that he fled immediately after being blinded around 1116. Makk establishes uncontroversial *terminus post* and *ante quem-s* however, as he notes that the Hungarian chronicle tells us that Álmos fled “from King Stephen”, that both Kinnamos and Choniates place Álmos' flight in the reign of John II, and that he died in Constantinople in 1127. He narrows this range of 1118–1127 down however by noting that Álmos' sister Adalheid who was married to the Bohemian prince Vladislav I was welcomed at court in 1123, something unlikely if Álmos was *persona non grata*, and that Choniates tells us that the war started directly because of Álmos' flight, and that therefore it would not have been many years in advance of the war starting, meaning Álmos arrived in Constantinople around 1125. Fine also sides with this interpretation, even if he sees the entire Hungarian war as happening earlier, discussed in Chapter Five; Niketas Choniates, *Historia*, 17; *Chronicon Pictum*, 459; Chalandon 1912 57; Moravcsik 1970, 77–8; Fine 1991, 234–6; Makk 1989, 22–3.

had to flee.<sup>26</sup> His presence in Constantinople was then a sword of Damocles above the beleaguered Stephen, although as with Mas'ud the situation provided as much danger as an opportunity for John.

Finally, there was Gradinja, brother to King Grubeša of Diokleia who was the primary imperial client in the Serbian lands, who had come because Uroš I of Raška had invaded Diokleia in support of Juraj's claim as the son of King Constantine Bodin.

The Chronicle of the Priest of Diokleia tells us that since John had campaigned against Vukan, father of Uroš, in order to neutralise Juraj and Raška in 1118 and been forced to leave because Alexios was on his deathbed, Grubeša had reigned in peace for seven years, which if true would put the year of the events the Priest next describes at 1125.<sup>27</sup> He tells us of a successful attack by Juraj and Uroš on Diokleia, leading to Grubeša being killed and Juraj taking the throne.<sup>28</sup> In order to prevent yet another imperial intervention as in 1118, Juraj had invited Grubeša's three brothers to court under oath and gave them lands, but his ploy, well meaning or not, was unsuccessful as two of the three brothers escaped to the *doux* of Dyrrachium while the third was imprisoned. There then followed a dance that was becoming well rehearsed for the family by this point, as the fugitive Diokleian princes once again requested imperial aid against Juraj from the *doux* of Dyrrachium, this being at least the third time in the last twenty years.<sup>29</sup> The Priest then relates that *doux* Pyrrhogeorgios gathered an army, and marched with the brothers into Diokleian lands – and it is here we have our answer as to why this does not appear in our Greek sources, as John himself was not the commander.

Due to the nature of Kinnamos and Choniates' works, they rarely mention events unconnected to the actions of John himself, as these do not fit the goals of their narratives. Equally, it was hardly in John's interest for it to be reported

26 Makk believes he was biding his time throughout, Tuzson that because Álmos was half-Greek, "spoke Greek and had relatives there," naturally he would go there, and Kosztoľnyik portrays Álmos as a "refugee." Makk 1989, 22–4; Tuzson 2002, 140; Kosztoľnyik 2006, 105.

27 Priest of Diokleia, *Chronicle*, 174.

28 Priest of Diokleia, *Chronicle*, 174.; Fine 1991, 233.

29 Fine notes the bias of the Priest once more here, as the account mentions Juraj as a tyrant who planned to treacherously imprison the brother despite his oath, favouring as he does the descendants of Branislav over the descendants of Bodin: Fine 1991, 233; Priest of Diokleia, *Chronicle*, XLV, 176.

that he had lost control of the situation in the Serbian polities, and so it is not so unrealistic that both Mas'ud and Gradinja's arrival go unreported by Kinnamos and Choniates, who assign no event at all to the year 1125, highly suspect for an emperor who was constantly campaigning. The Priest, on the other hand, mentions how both Gradinja and Pyrrhogeorgios came to Constantinople, the latter following the occupation of much Diokleian territory and Juraj blinding both the third brother of Grubeša who did not flee, along with Michael the son of the old Diokleian King Vladimir, who had allegedly been working with the empire and who quite naturally blamed Juraj's mother for poisoning his father earlier.<sup>30</sup> It is not stated as such, but is likely that Pyrrhogeorgios and Gradinja, as one of the two surviving fugitive brothers of the late King Grubeša, travelled to the capital to update the emperor on the situation in 1125, and to seek John's blessing and support for Gradinja's bid for the crown of Diokleia.

Thus John was left with the choice of where to place imperial resources: to focus on defeating the Venetians at sea, or on offering aid to Mas'ud of Ikonion, Álmos of Hungary or Gradinja of Diokleia.

Unfortunately, we have no way of knowing whether the three princes arrived together, and thus whether John even had the option to deal with each one in turn. However, the result was that John prioritized supporting these princes above further offensive operations against Venice, and we have no further information regarding any actions, military or diplomatic, related to them in that year. This decision was possibly made because John believed the conflict had been resolved now that the Venetian fleet had returned west (Devaney 2010, 141). This would be particularly likely if the emperor had won some naval victories against them, and furthermore, it is reasonable to conclude that John chose to support these princes as they were more likely to become loyal client rulers than the Venetians, or indeed because they would be more useful clients to have in future conflicts.

This brief study shall only briefly sketch John's actions in supporting these three princes: for Mas'ud the price for aid was almost certainly the imposition of the treaty of Philomelion whereby the sultanate of Ikonion would become John's client. Michael the Syrian tells us John provided funding and that Mas'ud did indeed defeat his brother Arab, and that at the first siege of Gangra a decade later

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30 Priest of Diokleia, *Chronicle*, XLV, 176.

Mas'ud's troops supported John's before betraying him. Thus for a brief period, Mas'ud of Ikonion was an imperial client.

For Álmos, a more considered approach was taken, as he was welcomed and given lands in Macedonia, but no military support. It appears John had no wish to immediately wage war on Hungary in support of Álmos' claim but was maintaining a hub of Hungarian opposition for his future advantage, as he would in 1129 for Boris Kalamanos.

There was no such ambivalence regarding Gradinja of Diokleia: Pyrrhogeorgios was retained at court, and the Priest of Diokleia mentions a certain "Kirialexius de Condi Stephano" being sent out as the new *doux* of Dyrrachium to support Gradinja's claim to Diokleia. This person can almost certainly be identified as Kyrios Alexios Kontostephanos, the brother of Stephanos Kontostephanos who married John's daughter Anna in 1125, possibly as a move to bind the Kontestephanoi even closer to the imperial family before entrusting an army to them, a tactic that worked as the family became major players in Manuel's administration as well.<sup>31</sup> The Priest then tells us that the people of Diokleia hated Juraj, thus Stephanos had no problem installing Gradinja as a king, though Juraj fled into the mountains and forests of the Serbian principalities to wage a guerrilla war against imperial and Diokleian forces that would continue to be a thorn in John's side until 1129. Fine called this: "the most destructive part of this long civil war".<sup>32</sup>

Therefore, imperial resources were being successfully employed in the acquisition of clients, but as 1126 began the Venetians would upset all of these plans.

31 Stephanos was to be commemorated with Anna in the *Pantokrator Typikon* of 1136, putting him in the inner circle of the Komnenian clan (reinforced by Kinnamos, Choniates and the poems of Prodromos during Manuel's reign, and indeed the number of family members that appear during the reigns of following emperors; most importantly Isaac Kontostephanos was a *protonobelissimos* during the Synod of Blachernae in 1094–5, and then in 1107 was promoted to *mezas doux*), and thus it is unsurprising that his brother was given the important post of *doux* of Dyrrachium and was the commander that won Gradinja his throne. Alexios could be identified with the collaborator of empress Eirene on the Pantokrator Monastery as posited by Loukaki, and discussed further in Chapter 9. Loukaki 2013, 191–201; *Le Typikon du Christ Sauveur Pantocrator*, 45; Magdalino 1993, 501; Stephenson 2004, 184; Choniates, *History*, 77–8; Kinnamos, *Epitome*, 96–7; Prodromos, *Historische Gedichte*, Poem LIV; C.f. translations: Niketas Choniates Magoulias trans. 1984, 433–4; and John Kinnamos: Brand trans. 1976, 268; *Corpus of Byzantine seals from Bulgaria*, seal 361, 235–6; Anna Komnene, *Alexias*, 13.7, 403–4.

32 Regarding the guerilla campaign: "Rex autem cum suis per montana et per silvas huc illuc fugiens latitabat," Priest of Diokleia, Poem XLV, 176–8; Fine 1994, 233.

We do not know how much the doge knew concerning how stretched John's resources were, but according to Dandolo's *History* he was outraged enough at the burning of the Venetian quarter in Constantinople that he demanded all Venetians shave their beards lest they be mistaken for Greeks, and then launched raids on imperial possessions in the Ionian sea, plundering Cephalonia and seizing the relics of St Donatos from Corfu.<sup>33</sup> Whether these targets were chosen for their proximity to Venice and its Adriatic territories, or whether John had begun amalgamating localised fleets into a navy capable of taking on the Venetians in the Aegean is unknown, though from the fragmentary encomium to Axouch, we know that a fleet was constructed in response to other threats on another occasion, and the date of the centralisation of naval revenue would suggest a coordinated response was underway, even as he continued to support the three princes.<sup>34</sup>

Nevertheless, however well such a policy was working, or whatever plans he may have had to take the fight to the Venetians, in 1126 John received a huge shock to his regime in the form of an open rebellion by *Doux* Constantine Gabras of Chaldia, a family that had been traitorous before but in the face of John's guerrilla war against Juraj, Venetian raids and Anatolian and Hungarian intrigues decided to openly rebel. At the same time, Stephen of Hungary could not allow such a hub of opposition under John's protection, and having attempted a campaign against all of his other neighbours and failed he too decided to take advantage of the emperor's troubles and attack imperial territory, successfully sacking the fortress of Braničevo, Belgrade and Serdica (modern Sofia) in 1127.<sup>35</sup>

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33 Dandolo, *Chronicon Veneticum*, 236.

34 Nikephoros Basilakes, *Orationes et Epistolae*, 116–9.

35 These attacks are confirmed in the archaeological record to this period by Popović 1991, 171–5; John Kinnamos, *Epitome*, 10; Niketas Choniates, *Historia*, 17; The *Hungarian Chronicle* merely mentions Stephen “destroying the walls of Greek fortresses” in Bulgaria: *Chronicon Pictum*, 440; tr. Stephenson 2004, 209.



*Fig. 2: Major Political Actors and Locations in 1126*

Thus, the choice in 1125 to support all three clients backfired as in 1126 the empire found itself overcommitted on multiple fronts, which implies that far from the Venetian war being needless or hopeless as it is often characterised, the empire's peace with them was the lesser of many evils as they became imperial allies once more. A humiliating peace was better than losing the Balkans to the Serbs and Hungarians. In Gabras' case, his rebellion was to last another few years before John could deal with it, whilst Mas'ud's later betrayal could have been predicted because John did not have the resources to enforce his clientage. These developments and John's strategy as a whole are only revealed through examining the events chronologically and taking a holistic approach to all possible sources from the period. Though modern historical studies are often dismissive of such an approach, requiring that history only be interpreted through the lens of a more complex ideological intellectual framework, in understudied but still crucial fields such as John's reign the worth of this approach is still apparent. Answering the question of how the Byzantine Empire sought to operate in the changed world of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, as its hegemony came under increasing threat from rising powers, has so far been approached only through Alexios and Manuel's reigns, and this paper has demonstrated the contribution that adding John's reign



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**Rezime:*****Ponovo ispisati 1120-te: hronologija i kriza pod Jovanom II Komninom***

Vladavinu cara Jovana II Komnina (1118–1143) istraživači su obično zanemarivali zbog očitog nedostatka izvornog materijala, naročito u poređenju sa vladavinama njegovog oca i sina, Aleksija I i Manojla I. Iz ovih razloga, događaji iz tog perioda su najčešće posmatrani iz perspektive širih bilateralnih studija koje se bave odnosima Vizantije sa narodima poput Srba, Ugara, Turaka i Venecijanaca posebno, ili samo u odnosu na neku pojedinačnu oblast, ili ličnost; isto se može primeniti i na odnose sa krstaškim i muslimanskim državama kasnije tokom njegove vladavine. Sve ove činjenice stoje uprkos činjenici da se Jovanova vladavina, smeštena između Prvog i Drugog krstaškog rata, odigrala u izuzetno važnom periodu evroazijske istorije, kada su zapadna Evropa i Bliski istok ušli u novu fazu kontakta zahvaljujući krstaškim ratovima. Vizantija je još uvek, u izvesnom smislu, bila najmoćnija hrišćanska država, i ispitivanje načina na koje je ranije neprikosnovena hegemonika sila izlazila na kraj sa rastućom moći Normana, Turaka, italijanskih primorskih republika i drugih zaslužuje studiju, ukoliko želimo da uopšte razumemo ove razvoje. U tom smislu ovaj članak ima za cilj da izloži promene u našoj analizi koje rezultiraju iz uključivanja netradicionalnog izvornog materijala, ističući kako bi čitava Jovanova vladavina trebalo da bude preispitana kroz perspektivu ovakve metodologije. Koristeći godine od 1123. do 1126. kao studiju slučaja, prednosti koje ovakva metodologija može doneti će se takođe pokazati kroz analizu vizantijske spoljne politike u ovom periodu, pošto je 1126. godina donela krizu Jovanovog režima koja ranije nije primećena u nauci.

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***Ključne reči:*** Jovan II Komnin, 1120te, Stefan II Arpad, Masud, Konja, Komninska restauracija, Duklja, Raška, Teodor Prodrom

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