



Beyond Medieval Europe

# ELITE BYZANTINE KINSHIP, ca. 950–1204

BLOOD, REPUTATION, AND THE *GENOS*

By  
**NATHAN LEIDHOLM**

Amsterdam  
University  
Press

ARC HUMANITIES PRESS





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KINSHIP, ca. 950–1204**

## **Beyond Medieval Europe**

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*To my family, καὶ ἐξ αἵματος καὶ ἐξ ἀγχιστείας.*

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## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>BMGS</i>	<i>Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies</i>
<i>BZ</i>	<i>Byzantinische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>DOP</i>	<i>Dumbarton Oaks Papers</i>
<i>GRBS</i>	<i>Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies</i>
<i>LBG</i>	Trapp, Erich. <i>Lexikon zur byzantinischen Gräzität, besonders des 9.-12. Jahrhunderts</i> . Vienna: Verlag der österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1996
<i>LSJ</i>	Liddell, H. G., and P. Scott. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> . Ninth Edition with Revised Supplement. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996
<i>ODB</i>	<i>The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium</i> , ed. Alexander Kazhdan. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991
<i>PG</i>	Migne, J. P., ed. <i>Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Graeca</i> . 161 vols. Paris: J. P. Migne, 1857–89
<i>REB</i>	<i>Révue des études byzantines</i>
Rhalles and Potles	Rhalles, G. A., and M. Potles, eds. <i>Σύνταγμα τῶν θείων καὶ ἱέρων κανόνων</i> . 6 vols. Athens: G. Chartophylakos, 1852–56
Zepos and Zepos	Zepos, Ioannes, and Panagiotēs Zepos, eds. <i>Jus graecoromanum</i> , 8 vols. Athens: Phēxēs, 1931



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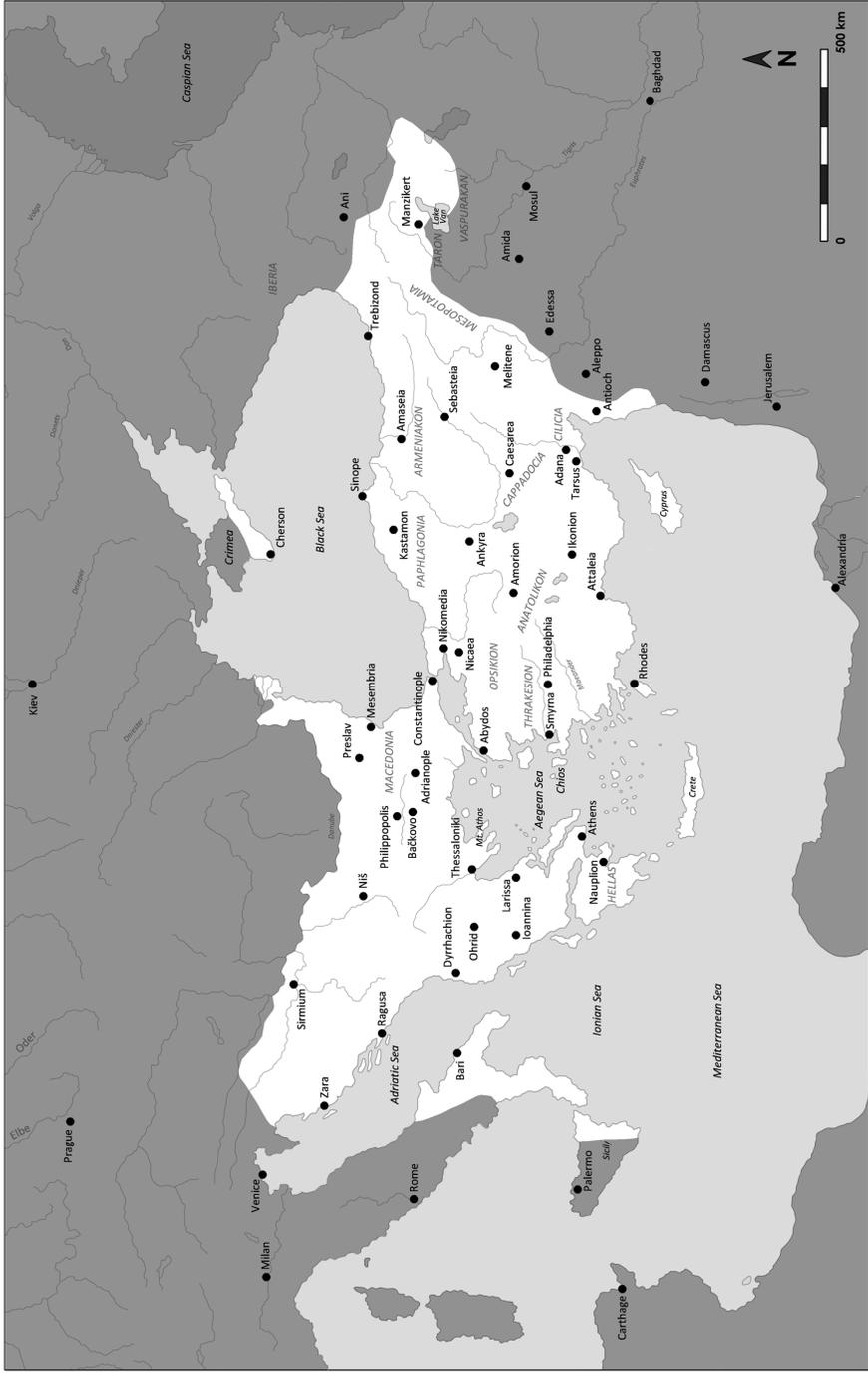
The faculty, staff, and facilities at the University of Chicago proved to be very helpful throughout my graduate career. One could scarcely ask for a better place to complete a PhD, and I will always look back on my time there with great fondness. I would also like to thank all those who have been or are currently involved in the Workshop on Late Antiquity and Byzantium. The workshop is a unique strength in the University of Chicago’s program of study, and I hope that it continues to be recognized as such well into the future.

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Map 1. The Byzantine Empire, ca. 1042.



## INTRODUCTION

“BASIL VATATZES [D. 1194], the scion of an undistinguished family (γένους μὲν ἀσήμου), had been honoured with the office of *Domestic of the East* and girded with the ducal command of the Thrakesion theme because he was married to the emperor’s second cousin on his father’s side.”<sup>1</sup> With these words the Byzantine historian Niketas Choniates describes the beginnings of the meteoric rise of the family of Batatzes (alternately written as Vatatzes). Within a single generation, Basil’s descendants could be counted among the most politically and socially influential people in Byzantium and its successor states after 1204. By the first few decades of the thirteenth century, the name of Batatzes appeared alongside those of Komnenos, Doukas, and others, whose impeccable nobility had been established and celebrated since at least the eleventh century. Basil’s marriage was, according to Choniates, enough to raise his family (*genos*) out of obscurity in a single moment. By joining his family to that of the emperor, however distantly, Batatzes immediately associated himself, his relatives, and his descendants with the most powerful elements of Byzantine society and politics.

Basil’s story is emblematic of the way in which Byzantine politics had become family politics by the late twelfth century. Over the course of the previous few centuries, imperial authority had merged with the system of social hierarchy and cultural values of the Byzantine aristocracy, which had themselves been transformed in that same time. Within this system, the *genos* emerged as the cornerstone of aristocratic identity and factional politics.

The Byzantine aristocratic *genos* (γένος, pl. γένη/*genē*) is alternately treated by modern scholars as a western European-style lineage, some kind of nebulous “clan,” or is simply left untranslated. Most have viewed it as a kind of amorphous, poorly defined Byzantine “extended family,” and have contrasted the *genos* with the *oikos*/household or nuclear family. Despite the fact that it was foundational to the social and political structure of the Byzantine aristocracy from at least the eleventh century, the precise nature of the *genos* as a distinct form of kin group remains relatively unexplored among modern scholarship.

What follows is a study of the *genos* as both a social group and, importantly, a concept. Its purpose is to ascertain the role and function of the Byzantine aristocratic *genos* as a distinct entity, particularly its political and cultural role, as it appears in a variety of sources between the tenth and twelfth centuries. The analysis focuses primarily on the social and political elites of the Byzantine Empire, both because of the nature of the sources and

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<sup>1</sup> Niketas Choniates, *History*, 400, ed. Jan A. van Dieten (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1975): Μετ’ οὐ πολὺ δὲ ὁ Βατάτζης Βασίλειος, γένους μὲν ἀσήμου βλαστῶν, διὰ δὲ τὸ εἰς γυναικὰ οἱ γαμετὴν συναφθῆναι τὴν τοῦ βασιλέως πρὸς πατρός ἐξανεψιῶν δομέστικος τῆς ἀνατολῆς τιμηθεὶς καὶ τὴν δουκικὴν ἀρχὴν τῶν Θρακησίων ἀναζωσάμενος ...; trans. Harry J. Magoulias, *O City of Byzantium: Annals of Niketas Choniates* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984), 220.

because many of the structures and ideals associated with the *genos* as kin group pertained primarily, if not exclusively, to them. Even if some aspects of the *genos* were shared by all people in the empire, a central argument of this book, the average peasant farmer probably had a more restricted view of his lineage and extended kin than a member of the Constantinopolitan court in the eleventh century. As in contemporary Western Europe, for the lower social orders in Byzantium, the household probably reigned supreme.<sup>2</sup>

This study will argue that the *genos* was a strictly consanguineous kin group (or at least imagined as such), whose members were thus linked through bonds of shared descent and whose membership was limited to the seventh degree of consanguinity, at least in issues of legal marriage.<sup>3</sup> It was largely immune to change beyond the reproductive act, and adults maintained their identities as members of their natal *genē*, even after marriage. It came to be marked by a surname (family name), at least among the elite, over the course of the tenth and eleventh centuries, by the end of which the *genos* had become perhaps the single most important marker of collective identity and source of social prestige within the Byzantine aristocracy.

The chronological scope of the book is designed to cover the period in which the *genos* clearly emerged as one of the defining characteristics of the Byzantine aristocracy. It makes no attempt to trace the origins of the *genos* as kin group or of the aristocracy of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, as such a study would inevitably need to extend far earlier in time than the tenth century. Numerous studies in recent decades have demonstrated that the powerful aristocratic families that so dominate the history of the empire from the late tenth century onward were not an entirely new phenomenon to be contrasted with an earlier Byzantine period, which was defined by upward mobility and the possibilities of social advancement within dominant state structures.<sup>4</sup> Instead, the focus is on the tenth through twelfth centuries, during which time the *genos* as a social and cultural phenomenon is clearly visible in the sources, thereby allowing for a more thorough analysis.<sup>5</sup>

## The Byzantine Aristocracy, ca. 900–1204: An Overview

The development of the *genos* as a distinct form of kin group is inextricably linked with broader developments in the nature of social structures and political power in tenth- and eleventh-century Byzantium. The concept of a clearly defined lineage or extended

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Aurell, "Society," in *The Central Middle Ages*, ed. Daniel Power (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 47.

<sup>3</sup> This is following the Roman tradition of calculating degrees of kinship.

<sup>4</sup> Christine Angelidi, "Family Ties, Bonds of Kinship (9th–11th Centuries)," in *Authority in Byzantium*, ed. Pamela Armstrong (Burlington: Ashgate, 2013), 155–66; Claudia Ludwig, "Social Mobility in Byzantium? Family Ties in the Middle Byzantine Period," in *Approaches to the Byzantine Family*, ed. Leslie Brubaker and Shaun Tougher (Burlington: Ashgate, 2013), 233–46; Leslie Brubaker and John Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era (ca. 680–850): A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 573–624.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Claude Cheynet, "L'aristocratie byzantine (VIIIe–XIIIe siècle)," *Journal des Savants* 2 (2000): 284.

kin group (i.e. *genos*), according to the prevailing model, (re-)appeared in Byzantine aristocratic society around the year 1000 and, by at least the mid-twelfth century, the group began to form the basis of political organization. Prior to the year 1000, it is argued, there is “no evidence of the concept of lineage as a community based on kinship and mutual support.”<sup>6</sup> Even then, following this model, the Byzantine *genos* remained a “loose social grouping,” lacking in such things as patrilinear descent and communal property holding, and elaborate genealogies tracing shared descent to more distant founders, real or imagined, remained in an “incipient phase.”<sup>7</sup>

This model, as it currently exists, fails to grasp the full nature of the aristocratic *genos*, which is the subject of the following chapters. In order for this investigation to be successful, however, the aristocratic kin group must be placed in its proper, historical context. Hence, what follows is a brief survey of the major developments within the Byzantine ruling class from the late ninth through the twelfth centuries.

Though the aristocratic *genos*, with all of its defining features, would not appear in its mature form until the mid-eleventh century, recent work has shown that many of the characteristics associated with the kin group and the aristocracy in which it flourished can be traced at least into the ninth century.<sup>8</sup> The eighth and early ninth centuries, dominated by the first and second periods of Iconoclasm (ca. 727–787 and 814–843), typically appear as something of a break in political and, especially, social historical narratives of the Byzantine Empire. The period functions as a convenient *terminus ante* or *post quem* in Byzantine studies, not only because of the significant religious, political, and social upheaval it witnessed, but also because of the relatively small corpus of written sources to survive from the era. By the second half of the ninth century, at which time sources begin to reappear in substantial numbers, Byzantine society predictably looks substantially different than it had previously.<sup>9</sup>

Though the ninth century is sometimes portrayed as a period in which a largely service aristocracy remained fluid and open to new members, emperors from as early as the 820s ruled, at least in part, through the cooperation of key elements within the provincial aristocracy, especially those originating in central and eastern Anatolia.<sup>10</sup> The

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**6** Alexander Kazhdan, ed., *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 1230–31. Hereafter cited as *ODB*.

**7** *ODB*, 1231.

**8** Some scholars have even suggested that the origins of the eleventh-century aristocracy should be sought as early as the eighth century, but such claims are difficult to prove. Brubaker and Haldon offer a good review of this scholarship in their exhaustive study of Byzantium in the Iconoclast era. See Brubaker and Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era*.

**9** The question of possible continuities between the aristocracy of the pre- and post-Iconoclast eras in Byzantium in many ways runs parallel to similar issues surrounding the early and late years of the Carolingian period in Western Europe. For a recent treatment of the issue, see Brubaker and Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era*, esp. 573–624.

**10** For an excellent discussion of the supposed meritocratic nature of the Byzantine elite in this period, and some of the problems with this characterization, see Ludwig, “Social Mobility in Byzantium? Family Ties in the Middle Byzantine Period,” 233–46.

Amorian dynasty (r. 820–867) consistently favoured a group of aristocratic families, mainly of Armenian origin and stemming from Paphlagonia (north-eastern Anatolia). These included the Doukai, Kourkouai, and Skleroi, families whose names would become well known by the early tenth century.<sup>11</sup>

With the appearance of Basil I on the throne in 867, marking the establishment of the long-lived “Macedonian” dynasty, the families of Phokas, Maleinos, and Argyros, all originating in Cappadocia and/or Charsianon, were, in turn, lifted to the heights of power within the aristocracy in an effort to consolidate imperial power and to gain a foothold of support in the east. The pattern was maintained throughout the tenth century, with both factions of the aristocracy alternately benefiting from imperial support. This created a rivalry between these two factions within the aristocracy, which would last well into the eleventh century.

These families rose to power in large part through the support of the imperial government and the titles, offices, and other privileges that such service entailed. In turn, the emperors relied on the influence of these families to secure their rule in the more distant provinces. The relationship was reciprocal, and the extent to which either group could have exercised their authority without the support of the other continues to be debated. Certainly many of the aristocratic families could boast of wealth and power that was completely independent from the imperial government’s influence, and the history of the tenth century is replete with examples of antagonism, including violence, between one or more families and the emperor in Constantinople. Nevertheless, numerous studies have shown that the support of the imperial government, or lack thereof, could and did make or break the fortunes of even the most powerful families.<sup>12</sup>

For much of the tenth century, a small group of powerful families held a near-monopoly on many of the most important military posts in the empire. While several scholars have cautioned against the idea that these families could field private armies of any significant size, members of families like Phokas and Skleros did enjoy widespread support within the military. They were probably aided by the fact that many of the soldiers they commanded (at imperial behest) originated in the same regions as the aristocrats themselves, as well as by the militaristic and pious reputations many of these families had earned. Regional ties were important both in securing the loyalty of troops and in the formation of factions within the aristocracy itself, something that would remain true throughout the eleventh century as well. Most of the time, emperors were able to prevent these divisions from threatening the unity of the empire by incorporating members of the most powerful families within the still robust imperial administration.

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**11** Vasiliki Vlysidou, *Αριστοκρατικές οικογένειες και εξουσία (9ος–10ος αι.): Έρευνες πάνω στα διαδοχικά στάδια αντιμετώπισης της αρμενο-παφλαγονικής και της καππαδοκικής αριστοκρατίας* (Thessaloniki: Ekdoseis Vaniis, 2001).

**12** Catherine Holmes, “Political Elites in the Reign of Basil II,” in *Byzantium in the Year 1000*, ed. Paul Magdalino (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 35–69; Stephen Arnold Kamer, “Emperors and Aristocrats in Byzantium 976–1081,” PhD diss., Harvard University, 1983; Vlysidou, *Αριστοκρατικές οικογένειες και εξουσία*.

By the last quarter of the tenth century, the Anatolian aristocracy had reached new heights of power and influence, even providing the empire with two rulers, Nikephoros II Phokas (r. 963–969) and his nephew, John I Tzimiskes (r. 969–976). Of course, relations between the Anatolian aristocracy and the imperial government were not always cooperative or even peaceful. A flurry of imperial edicts issued between 900 and 996, aimed at curtailing the increasing ascendancy of the so-called “powerful,” suggests that these same families increasingly subjugated the provincial peasantry, to the detriment of the imperial fisc.<sup>13</sup> The independent strength of the Anatolian aristocracy was showcased in the successive revolts of Bardas Skleros and Bardas Phokas between 978 and 989, which nearly brought the imperial government to its knees. The two men were sometimes enemies, sometimes allies during this turbulent decade, exemplifying the complex web of familial politics that so defined the aristocracy of the period. Emperor Basil II was only able to restore order with the help of troops sent by the Kievan Rus’.<sup>14</sup>

Contrary to some older arguments, Basil II did not wage a systematic war against the Anatolian aristocracy as a whole.<sup>15</sup> He did find himself at odds with both the Phokades and the Skleroi, two of the most powerful families of the era, but their loss of power and prestige did not signify the end of the provincial aristocracy writ large. Instead, the work of Catherine Holmes and Stephen Kamer (among others) has shown that his reign is better understood as a kind of changing of the guard within the aristocracy.<sup>16</sup> Those families who were raised to positions of influence during the reign of Basil II, often at the expense of those who had been powerful in the second half of the tenth century, became the serious players of the mid-eleventh century.<sup>17</sup> The long reign of Basil II thus marks a turning point in the fortunes of several families within the Byzantine aristocracy, but his one-time reputation as an autocrat bent on the destruction of non-imperial power in the empire has been proven to be an illusion.

Between the death of Basil II in 1025 and the ascension of Alexios I Komnenos in 1081, the empire was faced with generally ineffective rulers in Constantinople, the loss of territory to outside forces (especially the Seljuq Turks), and internal disruptions within the aristocracy. No fewer than eleven men and two women sat on the imperial throne in just over fifty years. In that same time, there were more than ninety episodes of revolt or internal rebellion, often involving the ascendant aristocracy.<sup>18</sup> Prior to 1056, imperial

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**13** This is the so-called “Macedonian” legislation. See Eric McGeer, *The Land Legislation of the Macedonian Emperors* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2000).

**14** This famously led to the conversion of the Rus’ to Christianity, at least officially, and the birth of the Varangian Guard, a corps that would act as imperial bodyguards for the following centuries.

**15** Jean-Claude Cheynet, “Bureaucracy and Aristocracies,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies*, ed. Elizabeth Jeffreys, John Haldon, and Robin Cormack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 522.

**16** Holmes, “Political Elites in the Reign of Basil II”; Kamer, “Emperors and Aristocrats in Byzantium.”

**17** Cheynet, “Bureaucracy and Aristocracies,” 522.

**18** Jean-Claude Cheynet, *Pouvoir et contestations à Byzance (963–1210)* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1996), 38–90.

legitimacy was earned through marriage or other bonds with Zoe and/or Theodora, the last remaining scions of the Macedonian dynasty after the death of Constantine VIII in 1028. After 1056, reigns were secured through a combination of factionalism within the aristocracy and the courting of good will among the masses. Henceforth, imperial legitimacy ceased to be earned by marriage or adoption into the Macedonian dynasty, and instead rested upon the prestige and “nobility” of the new emperor’s own *genos*. In this atmosphere, the politics of reputation and effective marriage alliances were essential.

By the mid-eleventh century, not only was the Byzantine aristocracy saturated by the values of the Anatolian elite, including the almost universal employment of family names, this aristocracy also began to close itself off through claims of nobility by blood. Although nobility of blood was never enshrined in Byzantine law, and the ranks of the social and political elite remained open to upward mobility, at least to some extent, until the end of the empire, members of the aristocracy of this period display an increasing awareness of illustrious lineage, a trait that would become vital to social standing and celebrated in numerous forms by the end of the century. A quickening economy in the eleventh century, especially in urban centres, led to the rise of a wealthy merchant class who, from the middle of the century, were also eligible for imperial office and titles for the first time. This encouraged the aristocracy to further differentiate itself from the rest of Byzantine society and to reinforce its internal cohesion through carefully orchestrated marriage strategies.<sup>19</sup> In this increasingly interconnected class, solidarities and rivalries were built upon kinship networks, which functioned precisely because of the solidarity and cohesiveness within the *genos*.

The rise of a powerful Anatolian aristocracy and its increasing influence in imperial politics was accompanied by the transformation, more or less gradual, of elite culture that reflected the particular values of this provincial, largely military aristocracy. Scholars have described what they call the “aristocratization” of Byzantine culture in this period.<sup>20</sup> The most prevalent aspects of this aristocratic culture were the celebration of martial virtues and battlefield prowess, a particularly ascetic brand of Christian devotion, and the importance of the family, in particular the extended family (*genos*), which maintained a unique identity over several generations.

It was once common to describe the politics of the eleventh century in terms of a dichotomous rivalry between the provincial, military aristocracy on the one hand and a younger, largely urban class of civil servants and *nouveaux riches* on the other.<sup>21</sup> Even emperors of this period have been ascribed origins and affiliations in either the “military

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**19** Angeliki Laiou, “Family Structure and the Transmission of Property,” in *A Social History of Byzantium*, ed. John Haldon (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 59.

**20** Alexander Kazhdan and Ann Wharton Epstein, *Change in Byzantine Culture in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Alexander Kazhdan and Michael McCormick, “The Social World of the Byzantine Court,” in *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204*, ed. Henry Maguire (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1997), 167–97.

**21** For an excellent summary, see Walter Kaegi, “The Controversy about Bureaucratic and Military Factions,” *Byzantinische Forschungen* 19 (1993): 25–34.

aristocracy" (e.g. Isaac I Komnenos, Romanos IV Diogenes) or the "civil aristocracy" (e.g. Constantine X and Michael VII Doukas). In reality, such a division seems never to have existed. Nearly every prominent family in this period could boast of members who held positions in the military, civil administration, and the church. Certainly many different factions did exist, but these were largely based around geography (e.g. Adrianople) and nearly always built upon ties of kinship and/or marriage alliances.<sup>22</sup> In these circumstances, one's *genos* became a kind of calling card, a declaration of one's loyalties, and a cornerstone of identity, both individual and collective.

The ascension to the throne of Alexios I Komnenos in 1081 has sometimes been viewed as the victory of the (military) aristocracy.<sup>23</sup> Though the existence of a separate military aristocracy at this time is doubtful, Alexios did succeed in attaining power by virtue of the support of a coalition of aristocratic families, many of whom were connected to the Komnenoi through marriage. Alexios instituted a series of reforms in the imperial administration, in which members of the extended family (i.e. the *genos*) played an increasingly vital role. Thanks to a number of strategic marriages and an unusually large family, the Komnenoi altered the very nature of the Byzantine aristocracy. For most of the twelfth century and beyond, the *genos* of the Komnenoi and their affines constituted the highest social stratum of the empire.

While the extent to which the governmental reforms of Alexios and his successors might be considered truly revolutionary and the speed with which they were enacted continues to be debated, there is no question that by the reign of Manuel I Komnenos (1143–1180), the entire system of administration and imperial offices and titles had been remade. Under the Komnenian system, emperors effectively ruled through family connections. To be a member of the extended family of the Komnenoi was to be a participant in both the imperial government and in the highest level of the Byzantine aristocracy. Closeness to the ruling couple, either through genealogical or marriage ties, largely determined the internal hierarchy within this imperial elite. Ruling the empire had become a family affair. At the core of the system's effectiveness and cohesion was the *genos*.<sup>24</sup>

The Byzantine Empire experienced a rapid decline in its fortunes and near total collapse in the final decades of the twelfth century, culminating in the capture of Constantinople by forces of the Fourth Crusade in 1204.<sup>25</sup> Political in-fighting and rivalries within the extended imperial kin network weakened the state long before the arrival of the crusaders. Ties of kinship could not prevent such fracturing or individual ambitions. But those families who would go on to dominate the Byzantine rump-states

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**22** Cheynet, *Pouvoir et contestations*, 267, 476–77.

**23** Paul Magdalino has singled out the role of the *genos* in the Komnenian reforms of imperial politics. See Paul Magdalino, *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos, 1143–1180* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 185.

**24** Magdalino, *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos*, 187.

**25** For a recent analysis of this apparent collapse, see Alicia Simpson, ed., *Byzantium, 1180–1204: "The Sad Quarter of a Century?"* (Athens: National Hellenic Research Foundation, 2015).

in the thirteenth century and, later, the restored empire based in Constantinople had established themselves and their illustrious credentials under the Komnenoi. The loss of the imperial capital in 1204 encouraged and accelerated the rate at which family loyalties and identity based upon one's *genos* moved to the centre of elite culture. Political authority and personal influence were derived largely from one's family for the rest of Byzantium's history.

### Family and Aristocracy in Byzantium: The State of the Field

Alexander Kazhdan once described the family as "the one form of association that flourished in Byzantium."<sup>26</sup> This view, which remained dominant for decades, privileged the nuclear family or household, leading many to the conclusion that Byzantine society was atomized and generally individualistic, at least before the eleventh or twelfth century. Since Kazhdan published these words, there has been an understandable tendency among scholars to move away from kinship as the only important social bond in Byzantium. This move, including claims that the importance of the family in Byzantium was overstated, has been beneficial in many ways, but it should not be taken too far. There were certainly a wide range of other social groups and bonds (notably friendship) that played a vital role within Byzantine society and deserve scholarly attention. Yet, much remains to be discovered and analysed concerning the Byzantine family and kinship, and the fact remains that kinship was among, if not the single, most important and ubiquitous social bond at any period of Byzantine history. One need only look at the language of kinship employed by emperors, monks, and friends to discover the importance Byzantines themselves placed on ties of kinship.<sup>27</sup> Patron-client relationships, teacher-student relationships, and even friendships operated through the constant repetition of kinship terms (most often "father," "son," "brother," or "nephew") precisely because of the strength of such bonds, which the use of these terms evoked.

The study of the family, in all its forms, in Byzantium is still underdeveloped compared with the fields of Ancient Greek, Roman, or Medieval European history, though recent years have seen renewed interest from a multitude of perspectives.<sup>28</sup> Beyond the nuclear family or household, those who have examined Byzantine kinship are typically drawn to the variety of forms that kinship could take in the eastern Roman Empire.<sup>29</sup>

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**26** Alexander Kazhdan and Giles Constable, *People and Power in Byzantium* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1982), 32–33.

**27** Rosemary Morris, *Monks and Laymen in Byzantium, 843–1118* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Alice-Mary Talbot, "The Byzantine Family and the Monastery," *DOP* 44 (1990): 119–29.

**28** Leslie Brubaker, "Preface," in *Approaches to the Byzantine Family*, ed. Leslie Brubaker and Shaun Tougher (Burlington: Ashgate, 2013), xx–xxi.

**29** Évelyne Patlagean, "Families and Kinships in Byzantium," in *A History of the Family*, vol. 1: *Distant Worlds, Ancient Worlds*, ed. André Burguière, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, Martine Segalen, and François Zonabend (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 467–88.

In addition to the more standard bonds of consanguinity and affinity, bonds of kinship could be formed through spiritual means (e.g. baptismal sponsorship) or legal adoption, including the adoption of brothers (*adelphopoiia*).<sup>30</sup> Household archaeology and the analytical categories associated with “household societies” (pioneered by Lévi-Strauss) are relatively recent phenomena in anthropology and archaeology, seeking to bring new perspectives to the much older tradition of kinship studies. The changing nature of the aristocracy and its relations with the central government have long been topics of debate in Byzantine studies, yet the *genos* has received comparatively little attention from scholars of the Byzantine family.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, scholarship on the Byzantine aristocracy and the family has closely paralleled developments in the related field of Medieval Studies. George Ostrogorsky proposed a model in which Byzantine society began to exhibit many features of western European feudalism, including the emergence of a more or less closed noble class, around the eleventh century.<sup>31</sup> This model was taken up by several important scholars, most notably Alexander Kazhdan, who added nuance to Ostrogorsky’s argument and softened the severity of the social and cultural change supposedly taking place around the turn of the second millennium.<sup>32</sup> Even after Kazhdan’s intervention, however, the model closely resembled those for the so-called “feudal revolution” in the West.

Scholars of medieval Europe, especially of medieval France and Germany, have long relied on the conclusions of Georges Duby, who himself drew heavily from the works of Marc Bloch and Karl Schmid, to provide a narrative of social change that includes a seismic shift in dominant family structures among the elite. According to this model, as part and parcel of the widespread political and social shifts occurring in Western Europe around the year 1000, the dominant form of the family among the nobility shifted from a nebulous clan structure (*Sippe*) to a closely defined lineage (*Geschlecht*).<sup>33</sup> These lineages, the argument goes, increasingly favoured male-line, primogeniture inheritance, severely limiting the importance of both younger sons and women in general. At the same time, the European aristocracy gradually closed itself off to the lower social orders

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**30** The adoption of an adult as one’s “brother,” which had its origins in classical Roman law, continued to be practiced throughout the period covered by this study and beyond, even if the practice was frowned upon by many jurists and, especially, clergy.

**31** George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, rev. ed. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1969); George Ostrogorsky, *Pour l’histoire de la féodalité byzantine*, trans. Henri Grégoire (Brussels: Éditions de l’Institut de Philologie de l’Histoire Orientales et Slaves, 1954).

**32** Kazhdan and Constable, *People and Power in Byzantium*; Kazhdan and Epstein, *Change in Byzantine Culture*; Alexander Kazhdan, *L’aristocrazia bizantina: dal principio dell’XI alla fine del XII secolo*, trans. Silvia Ronchey (Palermo: Sellerio editore Palermo, 1997).

**33** Karl Schmid, “Zur Problematik von Familie, Sippe und Geschlecht, Haus und Dynastie beim mittelalterlichen Adel,” *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte des Oberrheins* 105 (1957): 1–62; Georges Duby, *La société aux XIe et XIIe siècles dans la région mâconnaise* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1953); Georges Duby and Jacques LeGoff, eds., *Famille et parenté dans l’Occident médiévale* (Rome: École française de Rome, 1977).

through its emphasis on nobility by blood. By the twelfth century, the nobility defined itself by its unique legal and social privileges and chivalric, distinctly militaristic culture.

Since the 1990s, there has been a general movement away from ideas of the *mutation de l'an mil* (alternately imagined as a transformation, revolution, or something less drastic), or at least a softening of its theses.<sup>34</sup> Rather than a rapid and thorough transformation, scholars have argued that social and cultural change occurred more gradually and unevenly over time and space.<sup>35</sup> Some have even contended that the changes described in Duby's model are little more than a change in the way in which documents were produced and in the nature of their contents.<sup>36</sup>

The historiography covering the Byzantine aristocracy and kinship in the tenth through the twelfth century displays remarkable similarities to its western medieval counterpart. In both fields, the eleventh century looms large as the period in which a supposed transformation of aristocratic family structures, among other things, took place. In Byzantium, as in medieval France and Germany, it is argued, a weak central government allowed for the expansion of the independent power of the aristocracy, who were able to mould the dominant political culture. Militarism came to the fore, as did notions of nobility by blood and the importance of family connections among a continuously shrinking circle of elites. The transition from *Sippe* to *Geschlecht* is ostensibly (and perhaps superficially) mirrored in the development of the Byzantine *genos*. As is the case for Duby's thesis for Western Europe, in Byzantine studies the thesis proposed by Kazhdan and, before him, Ostrogorsky, has been softened and amended, but not replaced.<sup>37</sup> Importantly, these similarities have often led scholars to treat the Byzantine aristocratic *genos* as a western-style lineage without questioning the validity of the comparison. This study approaches the *genos* without any such assumptions.

There are, of course, several important differences between Byzantium and Western Europe, even leaving aside the obvious issues in treating Latin Europe as a monolith. Among the most important, for this study at least, is the nature of the Byzantine government. Byzantium did eventually see some powerful individuals and families collecting revenue that would otherwise have been bound for the state (including, but not necessarily limited to, taxes) in the form of *pronoia* grants, but even these were granted

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**34** See, for example, Jonathan R. Lyon, *Princely Brothers and Sisters: The Sibling Bond in German Politics, 1100–1250* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017), esp. 1–33, 232–38.

**35** The work of Constance Bouchard is an excellent example of the softening of Duby's arguments and a move toward greater stability and more gradual change. See Constance Bouchard, *Those of My Blood: Creating Noble Families in Medieval Francia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

**36** Daniel Power, "Introduction," in *The Central Middle Ages*, ed. Daniel Power (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 24.

**37** The similarities between some parts of Western Europe and Byzantium may have become deeper and more widespread at the very end of the twelfth century and, especially, after 1204. Patlagean has produced an excellent study comparing Byzantine society to its western medieval counterpart. See Évelyne Patlagean, *Un Moyen Âge grec: Byzance IXe–XVe siècle* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2007).

only by the emperor, and if they were sometimes heritable from one generation to the next (though this was not usually the case), they could still be revoked. Members of the Byzantine aristocracy never achieved the kind of legal authority and independence that characterized the nobility in some parts of the West, even in the twelfth century.

To say that the *genos* played a central role in the Byzantine aristocracy of the eleventh century and later is not a controversial statement. The histories, hagiographies, orations, poetry, and lead seals of the late tenth century onward are full of references to “noble lineages” (εὐγενεῖς γένη). Praise is consistently lavished on individuals for their famous and wealthy family members, past and present. Heritable surnames, as markers of one’s *genos*, become ubiquitous by the eleventh century. The political manoeuvring and civil unrest that so dominated Byzantine politics in the late tenth and eleventh centuries consisted of factions largely divided along family lines and built upon family ties. Under the Komnenoi, the *genos* formed the very basis of both the government and of the aristocracy as a whole. All of this has long been recognized by researchers. Still, while the *genos* has played an important role in many studies, the precise nature and role of the *genos* in medieval Byzantine society remains unclear in much of the existing scholarship. The following chapters attempt to address this issue using several different approaches.

