



*John Komnenos, Emperor of  
Byzantium: In the Shadow of  
Father and Son*

**Alessandra Bucossi and Alex  
Rodriguez Suarez (eds.)**

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**Review by: K. S. Parker**



*John II Komnenos, Emperor of Byzantium: In the Shadow of Father and Son*. Edited by Alessandra Bucossi and Alex Rodriguez Suarez. London: Routledge, 2016. ISBN 978-1-4724-6024-0. xxi + 237 pp. £110.

This volume contains a welcome collection of essays dedicated to the oft-neglected second emperor of the Komnenian dynasty, John II (r.1118-43). As the editors rightly note, there has been a dearth of research and scholarship about John II and his reign, with the most thorough study to date published over a century ago by Ferdinand Chalandon in 1913. The current volume owes its origins to an international workshop held in 2013 at Kings College London, where seven of the included chapters were first presented. The reigns of John's father, Alexios I, and his son, Manuel I, both included major political events (for instance, the First Crusade) and likewise featured important and detailed chronicles. In contrast, the reign of John "the Good" included neither of these, and has traditionally been condensed to a number of military campaigns and the foundation of the famous Pantokrator Monastery. It is for this reason, argue the editors, that John has not received the attention that he otherwise should. The aim of this volume, therefore, is to fill a neglected gap in the history of the Byzantine Empire. As the editors assert, its aim is to "reassess not only the figure of John as emperor, but also to examine the changes and developments that took place in Byzantium during the period of his rule. The reign of John II merits its proper place within Byzantine history" (xiv-xv).

In addition to its twelve chapters, the collection also includes a chronology, a map, a substantial bibliography, and numerous illustrations throughout. In the opening chapter, Dionysios Stathakopolous appropriately sets the stage by discussing the historiography dealing with John, including contemporary sources and the modern scholarship that has shaped our understanding of John and his reign. The scarcity of primary sources for John's reign is in marked contrast to the reigns of his father and son, Alexios and Manuel, respectively. Vlada Stanković next sets out to provide a portrait of John's life during the rather obscure thirty-one years prior to his coronation as sole emperor in 1118. This task is particularly difficult given the paucity of sources.

The third chapter, by Ioannis Stouraitis, explores the numerous wars of John, particularly focusing on the difference in approach between contemporaries and modern scholars in seeking to ascertain the underlying goals of his campaigns. Angeliki Papageorgiou's contribution analyses the political ideology of John and seeks to cut through the literary stylization found in primary sources, while also exploring the means John used to present his ideals to both subjects and foreigners. The imperial military triumph of

1133 in Constantinople is the subject of Paul Magdalino's contribution. Not only does he provide context and a discussion of the triumph—a highlight of John's reign—he also provides an analysis and new translation of Theodore Prodromos' commemorative poems. A noted feature of John's reign was his extensive participation on military campaigns and thus his absence from Constantinople.

Martin Marko Vučetić, in the sixth chapter, examines the relationship John had with various foreign rulers, particularly focusing on the introduction of new elements in diplomacy sometimes erroneously attributed to the reign of Manuel. The Latin influence in Constantinople is explored by Alex Rodriguez Suarez in his discussion of Western scholarship and translation during the reign of John II. His case studies of four Italians—including two court officials—demonstrate a Western presence prior to the reign of Manuel. The written word is further expounded by Elizabeth Jeffreys in her contribution on popular court literature during the period under consideration. In particular, she focuses on four authors who exemplify the creative literary energy patronized throughout the Komnenian dynasty.

Alessandra Bucossi next explores in chapter nine an essential point of debate throughout later Byzantine-Latin discussions: the Filioque controversy. During John's reign in the early twelfth century, this contentious issue was less heated than in later centuries, but as the dialogues of Niketas of Thessalonica and others demonstrate, it was a period of growing contact and a fundamental theological obstacle to reunion of the Churches. Ecclesiastical architecture and imperial patronage in the early twelfth century form the subject of Robert Ousterhout's contribution, particularly the function of monasteries as burial sites for their patrons. Kallirroë Linardou next investigates a number of disguised portraits commissioned by the emperor's brother, Isaac, which he used to display his political ambitions. Finally, Pagona Papadopoulou concludes the volume with a discussion of the coinage circulating during John's reign. Based upon this evidence, she is able to demonstrate that a new monetary policy was established in a large portion of Byzantine territory.

*John II Komnenos, Emperor of Byzantium: In the Shadow of Father and Son* is a worthy contribution to the study of the Komnenian dynasty and will help to raise awareness of the often glossed-over reign of the second emperor. John II's reign featured not only the expansion of the Byzantine Empire and the foundation of the ambitious Pantokrator Monastery, but—as demonstrated by this volume—also many of the features attributed to the reign of his son, Manuel. Lacking a substantial chronicle for his reign, scholarship has tended to focus on other periods of the long Komnenian twelfth century. This volume would have benefitted from a proper conclusion to usefully tie all of its varied threads together and perhaps provide suggestions for further

research. Promising in this regard is that a number of the contributors have relevant studies forthcoming, not least Angeliki Papageorgiou's adapted PhD thesis on John II and his reign. One hopes that this volume will be a springboard for new scholarly interest in the Byzantine Empire during the reign of Emperor John II Komnenos and that he will no longer be remembered most as simply the neglected emperor.

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