

# THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF PSELLOS IN THE CHRONOGRAPHIA: the Wise Advisor, the Clever General, and the City\*

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*This paper deals with political theory that Michael Psellos expresses in his programmatic work, the Chronographia, exploring it on its own merits and separating it from his alleged social and political “biases”. Psellos’ history is analyzed from several perspectives and on several narrative layers. The paper dwells on his views on the imperial ideal, as well as his opinions on participants in the political life of the empire (mainly imperial advisors and generals), from both horizontal (Constantinople-provinces; center-periphery) and vertical (the masses and the aristocracy) perspective, reflecting upon his stance on what constitutes aristocracy. Finally, it reexamines Psellos’ “Constantinopolitan bias” by distinguishing his attitudes from his perspective, identities and alliances, and exploring in which ways exactly his metropolitan upbringing and education shaped his narrative.*

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**Key words:** Michael Psellos, Chronographia, Constantinople, provinces, army, Senate, mobs, political man, politeia, political theory, center-periphery.

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IN MORE THAN 1000 WORKS OF LITERATURE, IN virtually all genres available to a Byzantine (Moore 2005), Michael Psellos left us a web of different, often contradictory, sometimes incomprehensible statements, and almost as many different *selves* (see Ljubarskij 1978, 138; Papaioannou 2013, 3–4, 115 *passim*). Therefore his “attitudes” (which must have changed over the course of 40 years) are elusive, and even more so are his political allegiances in the age of change and political instability that was the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Due to his Constantinopolitan upbringing and court career, Psellos has generally been regarded in modern Byzantine studies as the spokesman of the interests of Constantinopolitan aristocracy, even after views of the sharp division between the civil and military parties were abandoned.<sup>1</sup> His political activity was often perceived as opportunistic and in some cases even disastrous for the Empire: he was condemned for lack of morality and was often the one to blame for the “decline” of Byzantium in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. One of my students, after reading Ostrogorsky’s account on the 11<sup>th</sup> century, cried: “Everything would have been better (for Byzantium) had there not been for this Psellos person!”. Moral censure by modern-day historians writing from their ivory tower – an intellectual ideal of their own – of both Psellos’ distortive and biased history-writing and his vacillating political career is as misleading as it is unnecessary. The basis of Psellos’ political and personal philosophy, perhaps the one common thread in that complex web that is his voluminous literary legacy, is an intellectual ideal, even the duty of an intellectual, to act as a *politikos anēr*, a political man. To survive in such turbulent political waters, that man has to be adjustable, *protean* as a rhetor, but he must also have a clear comprehension of the matters of governance, of what is best for the common good and the means to achieve it, namely, he must have clarity of vision of a philosopher (Kaldellis 1999, 127–131; 154–166).

The *Chronographia*, Psellos’ most famous work, is also the most comprehensive expression of his political philosophy. Through portraits of emperors from Basil II (976–1025) to his own time (his history had at least two redactions, one

1 See Ostrogorsky 1968, 316–350. on now largely abandoned notion about “civilian” and “military” aristocracies, as well as on Psellos’ “most unfortunate political activities and his abysmal moral depravity” (327). Lemerle 1977, 296. rejects Ostrogorsky’s view of the period, but maintains the judgment of Psellos’ character (“Psellos est conduit par un insurpassable vanité”). Cheynet 1990 did the most to lay the sharp civilian-military aristocracy division to rest.

ending with the reign of Isaac I Komnenos (1057–1059), the other with that of Michael VII Doukas (1071–1078)), he reflects on what caused the downfall of Roman *politeia*, as he saw it. Historiography as the genre of truth served to give his narrative credibility<sup>2</sup>, but that is not all there is to it. He chose history to express his own truth. Paradoxically, one of the most convoluted and distortive of Psellos' narratives is also one of the most honest ones. His truth does not necessarily lie in factual accuracy. Historians are right to mistrust his account of 11<sup>th</sup>-century history. People Psellos accused of empire's misfortunes are more often than not his personal enemies, and in fact, the entire narrative of *Chronographia* seems to be shaped around the defamation of the emperor who made him wear the monastic habit, Constantine Monomachos (Repajić 2015). Psellos' truth runs deeper and is to be found in his broader political philosophy.<sup>3</sup>

In trying to attribute interests and views of certain social and political groups to individual writers, historians tend to neglect the individual and independent attitudes they could have had. Therefore, we have very few studies on the political thought of individual Byzantine intellectuals, including Psellos.<sup>4</sup> Their views are perceived either as reiterating ancient and patristic ideas without deeper understanding or as representing views of a certain social (or political) group.<sup>5</sup> To speak of Psellos' political philosophy as "Constantinopolitan" is equivalent to describing Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy as "Parisian". Living, learning and being politically active in the intellectual centers of the world of their times certainly influenced thought and perception of both philosophers, but they were hardly mere representatives of social groups they belonged to. It is important not to confuse Psellos' identities, or his alliances, with his political philosophy. Those are interconnected, but by no means identical.

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2 See Stanković 2011, 59. for using truthfulness of history in promoting historian's agenda in Nicephoros Bryennios and Anna Komnene.

3 For a thorough discussion of Psellos' subversive philosophical views in *Chronographia* see Kaldellis 1999. For histories subjected to wider philosophical programs in late antiquity see Kaldellis 2006b. See also Lauritzen 2013, 122. for the notion that exposition of material in *Chronographia* is subordinated to the wider intention (ἔννοια), description of character. History and philosophy as "truthful genres" figure in western literature from ancient times to this day, see Frow 2005, 87–123.

4 Notable exceptions are Kaldellis 1999 about Psellos and Krallis 2006 about Attaleiates.

5 The social perspective was particularly popular among Soviet scholars (see for example Kazhdan 1984 on social views of Michael Attaleiates)

The main goal of this paper is to explore Psellos' political theory on its own merits and to detach it from his (alleged) political and social affiliations, and in the end to scrutinize to which extent and in which ways the *Polis* shaped his narrative in the *Chronographia*. The examination must be multilayered for several reasons. First of all, Psellos is almost never straightforward in his expression. His narrative is highly ironic and intentionally deceptive, a carefully crafted whole, so none of his individual statements can be taken at face value on their own. Secondly, even less straightforward are the Constantinople-provinces/civilian-military polarities, which operate on several ideological, as well as narrative levels.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Imperial Ideal***

The closest thing to an "imperial ideal" in *Chronographia* can be found in the portrait of Basil II.<sup>7</sup> His 50-year long rule and the autocratic image he created (Holmes 2002, 69) quickly became the golden age for later generations that witnessed frequent changes on the throne and the political instability that ensued. Psellos was the first to draw from that source and to create the image of that golden age in his historical narrative. Biographies of Basil II and his younger brother and antipode Constantine VIII served as a canvass to express his ideas more openly than he could have done regarding the reigns of his contemporaries, and to create sort of a template, or rather a key, for reading the rest of his history (Kaldellis 1999, 51; Repajić 2016, 61). In Basil's image in the *Chronographia* we find a harsh, autocratic, frugal and militarist ruler, not ready to compromise and unsympathetic to his subjects. He does not manifest almost any of the traditional imperial virtues, such as clemency, philanthropy, or generosity. Ethics gave way to efficiency in Psellos' political philosophy (Kaldellis 1999, 44; 80). One aspect of emperor's

6 The subject is quite understudied in Byzantine studies. For some interesting and important pointers for research see Holmes 2010; for the provincial perspective see dated, but very important paper of Shevchenko 1979–1980. See also Stanković 2016. for reconsideration of the center-periphery paradigm in favor of a more nuanced, regional approach, particularly when it comes to studying Balkans and in the aftermath of 1204.

7 "Ideal" should be taken relatively, since *Chronographia* is not a princely mirror and there is not one recommended and exclusive way of governance to follow. Every person has their own unique innate nature and has to act according to circumstances (see Ljubarskij 1978, 228–229; Kaldellis 1999, 23–24; 51; Laurizen 2013, 90; 202–204). Overcoming difficult circumstances, and even failures is a very important and commendable character trait (see Repajić 2016, 120), so Psellos' "ideal" characters are quite human and prone to mistakes.

autocracy, however, baffles researchers, since it contradicts the author's insistence on following the advice of wise people as one of the most important traits of good emperors. Basil is said to have been unwilling to take advice from wise people and to have entrusted confidential state business to men of humble origins who were in no way prominent (Michael Psellos, *Chronographia*, I.30).<sup>8</sup> This fact, which Psellos explicitly states, should not, however, be taken at face value, since it applies only to the last part of his reign after Basil matured enough to be able to govern on his own. The paradox of Basil's autocracy and the importance of wise counsel is resolved through two other prominent figures that we find in Book 1 of *Chronographia*: Basil Nothos and Bardas Skleros.

Both Basil Nothos (*parakoimomenos*) and Bardas Skleros serve as the ruler's advisors in the first part of his reign. Through their actions and words, which the emperor was wise enough to follow after he defeated them both, we are shown how Basil II governed. We are told that the *parakoimomenos* was the emperor's tutor and that young Basil looked up to him right before we are given the description of the tutor's way of governing:

“To him (Basil the *parakoimomenos*) the citizens (τὸ πολιτικόν) looked, and the military (τὸ στρατιωτικόν) turned, and he was the first, and actually the only one responsible for public finances and maintaining government.” (I.3)<sup>9</sup>

We see that tight control over the empire, especially the finances, and maintaining power over all the subjects, both the civilians and the army, was the first and most important goal of an emperor. Moreover, the alleged dialogue that took place between Basil II and Bardas Skleros shows how that control is to be exerted. Basil asked his former enemy and a new ally, “as a man of military command”, for advice in preserving his authority from dissension. Skleros' answer was:

“not a military advice, but a cunning counsel: cut out governors who were too powerful, do not let any of the generals have abundance of resources and exhaust them with unjust exactions,<sup>10</sup> in order to keep them busy at homes; do not

8 References to *Chronographia* will henceforth be only by book and chapter (e.g. I.30).

9 Translations of *Chronographia* are from Sewter 1966, with my own emendations when his translations are not precise enough or miss the scope of what is said.

10 This does not indicate Psellos' affiliation with the “civil” party nor his “strong resistance to landowning families” (Lauritzen 2013, 14–167), it is simply a sane ex post facto argument from the times when imperial power was often challenged by powerful provincial military leaders. Immediately afterwards Skleros advises emperor against putting trust in his immediate – i. e. civilian, palace – surrounding.

let women enter the palace and do not be accessible to anyone or share intimate plans with many.” (I.28)

Once emperor Basil II was relieved from the dangers undermining the Empire from within, and after he “conquered” (ἐχειρώσατο) his own subjects, he could turn to yet another duty he had as a sovereign – protecting the state from barbarians (I.23). If this was to be achieved, he needed to maintain control over military power and he focused most of his efforts in that direction. Psellos’ ideal emperor spends months on the battlefield, coming back home only when he accomplishes his goal. But war is not a goal in itself. Both Romanos III Argyros (1028–1034) and Romanos IV Diogenes (1068–1071) are criticized for waging wars in order to appear great (Repajić 2016, 149–152; 381–385), wars that lead to disastrous consequences – losing a great amount of public money in the first case, and endangering the very state when the emperor is captured in the second (III.7; VIIb.1). On the other hand, Psellos states the two most important benefits of Basil’s campaigning: replenishing state treasuries and striking terror into enemies. The Rus attacked Constantinople in 1043 precisely because they no longer feared the Roman emperor – Constantine Monomachos, the anti-hero of *Chronographia* – like they used to in the good old times of Basil II (VI.90); The only worthy successor of Basil II, Isaac I Komnenos, however, managed just that, and foreign rulers feared him even after he abdicated (VII.63).

Obtaining and distributing wealth is a particularly important aspect of imperial policy in the *Chronographia*, and almost always related to the military.<sup>11</sup> Constantine Doukas, not wanting to disturb his own way of life or spend money on the army, bought peace with gifts, which led to enemies gaining more power (VIIa.17), and subsequently to the military disaster which culminated after the battle of Manzikert. Larisa Vilimonović has shown that Anna Komnene’s cries in the *Alexiad* are for those who could have procured her way to power (her husband, her father, and her ex-fiancé, Vilimonović 2014, 124–139). Psellos’ laments in the *Chronographia* are almost exclusively dedicated to the wasted money of the Romans. He almost weeps looking at the ships taking Roman treasures to Alania, the homeland of Monomachos’ latest mistress (VI.153). He is quite clear when it comes to where the money should be going. Criticizing the empresses Zoe and Theodora, Basil’s nieces, he states that revenues devoted to soldiers’ salaries and

<sup>11</sup> Kaldellis 1999, 61. notes that Psellos “defines prosperity in purely military and economic terms”.

military expenditure were diverted to court sycophants: “as if it was for them that emperor Basil had filled the treasuries with riches.” (VI.8)

Isaac Komnenos, the only emperor who partially lived up to Psellos’ image of Basil II, shared both his famous predecessor’s military talent – that is, his strategic talent, not heroism, for we are still far away from the Komnenian ideal<sup>12</sup> –, and his frugal nature (see Kaldellis 1999, 167–178). In fact, the combination of the two seems to be the main feature that distinguishes good from bad rulers. Otherwise ambivalent portrait of Michael IV Paphlagonian turns into proper praise when it comes to his Bulgarian campaigns, for which he managed to overcome two of his greatest weaknesses: illness and regret (see Repajić 2016, 177–181). It is due to that fact, coupled with the prudent fiscal policy of his brother John Orphanotrophos (whose description bears striking similarities to that of the parakoimomenos Basil in this regard), that in Psellos’ view the good in Michael’s governance outweighed the bad (IV.55)

This led Anthony Kaldellis to the conclusion that Psellos is “heavily biased in favor of the military” (Kaldellis 1999, 182), a view that Antonios Vratimos tried to challenge by proving that Psellos’ “concern for the army was not entirely disinterested” (Vratimos 2012). While questionable in particulars, Vratimos’ view is valid in its wider scope: each and every military episode is a part of Psellos’ particular agenda. But so is each and every episode in *Chronographia*, military or not. That agenda mostly revolves around the lack or presence of a wise advisor by the emperor’s side, as Vratimos accurately states (Vratimos 2012, 147). Psellos’ narrative follows a succession of emperors, but his metanarrative also builds up the succession of their right hands, the true heroes of *Chronographia*, from Basil Nothos, via John Orphanotrophos and Constantine Leichoudes, to Psellos himself (Repajić 2016, 120–127; 229–231; 290–292). However, Psellos’ meta-agenda does not indicate that what he had to say about the military was pretense, or that his political views were “civilian” (whatever that is supposed to mean). On the contrary, it essentially shows what a wise counselor (i.e., Psellos himself) would recommend, namely that strong military rule and frugality is supposed to maintain what he calls “the nerve of Roman power” (IV.19), the army.

12 For the Komnenian ideal of the warrior-emperor see Stanković 2006, 209–218. For the change in the aristocratic ideal and militarization that took place in late 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries: Kazhdan and Epstein 1985, 104–119, The trend is particularly strong from Manuel I’s reign (Magdalino 1993, 434–454, Stanković 2008, 235–240)

## ***“Constantinopolitans” and “provincials” in the Chronographia***

We have already encountered two prominent and praiseworthy men by Basil II's side: the emperor's chamberlain and tutor Basil, the illegitimate son of emperor Romanos I Lacapenos, a eunuch and the most influential palace official (Brokaar 1978); and a rebellious military leader from the eastern provinces, Bardas Skleros. Regardless of their background, eunuchs were part of the Constantinopolitan, and more precisely, the palace elite *par excellence* (Oikonomides 1976, 128–129, Ringrose 2003, 163–183). On the other hand, Bardas Skleros was a scion of the military families of the east (Seibt 1976, 29–58; Cheynet 1990, 215). Let us see how Psellos characterizes the two and which qualities provided them such rare benevolence on his part.

“This man (the *parakoimomenos* Basil) became the greatest honour to the Roman empire at that time, through outstanding prudence, great bodily stature, and regal appearance. He was born of the same father as the father of the emperors Basil and Constantine, but of a different mother.”

Even though he suffered castration as the son of a concubine, he was loyal to the emperor and the family (I.3). The author continues with the aforementioned remark on the eunuch's tight grip on state affairs, which Basil looked upon and followed in his sole reign. Similar terms and qualities are used in describing another of Basil's associates and a eunuch, although at a different point of narration – John the Paphlagonian, called Orphanotrophos (Books 3–5). He was not a man of illustrious or imperial descent but came from an unremarkable Paphlagonian family of money-changers recently settled in Constantinople.<sup>13</sup> He obtained high position thanks to his abilities, beginning his career under Basil II. Just like *parakoimomenos*, he was devoted to his family and served it loyally, equally to be ungratefully deposed (Repajić 2016, 215–231). He was, according to Psellos, “a man of dreadful and loathsome fortune, but endowed with an active and brilliant mind” (III.18), and emperor Basil introduced him to the palace and shared his secrets with him. He was meticulous and industrious with his duties, acquainted with all branches of government, but especially with the administration of public finance

13 Bibliography on John Orphanotrophos is scarce. For basic information on his life see: Janin 1931 (quite outdated account retelling the accounts of 11<sup>th</sup> century historians). For the family see Stanković 2003.

(IV.19). He did have some abominable features, namely a deceptive nature (which Psellos generally does not seem to despise) and proneness to drink, but even in those situations, “he did not lapse into forgetfulness of the care for the empire.” (IV.13).<sup>14</sup>

Bardas Skleros had a different set of qualities:

“The first (to rebel) was Skleros, man both competent in planning and very dexterous in action, owner of vast wealth, enough to aspire to the throne (=to attempt tyranny, ἀρκοῦντα τυράννω), having noble descent and success in great wars, as well as all the military behind him, ready to support his enterprise. A worthy opponent to Skleros was found in Bardas Phocas, a noble man from an extraordinary family (ἐὐγενέστατον ἄνδρα καὶ γενναιότατον), a nephew of emperor Nicephoros.” (I.5).<sup>15</sup>

Connected to Basil II thus we have four men of different origins – one was from imperial stock, although an illegal child and therefore a eunuch, a member of the palace elite, Constantinopolitan in very essence of the word; two were prominent generals from the east, both members of outstanding noble families; and the last was a man of modest provincial origins, but effectively a palace dignitary. What they all have in common is care for the wellbeing of the *politeia* and the capability to maintain it.

But was this only a literary commonplace about the good old times when everything functioned properly? What did Psellos have to say about his own time? Aside from emperors, Psellos’ history has two types of male protagonists, reflected in the aforementioned characters from Book 1: imperial advisors and military men who rebelled and tried to obtain the throne. Both serve his personal political agenda well, primarily in denigrating Constantine Monomachos and stressing author’s own worth for the *politeia*.

After Basil Nothos and John the Orphanotrophos, who prefigure the author himself as wise imperial advisors, we find no positive palace or Constantinopolitan protagonists other than Psellos himself. There are other praiseworthy palace officials, but they are all mere extras to the Psellos-story, and none of them are mentioned by name. Constantine Liechoudes is presented as Monomachos’ first min-

14 On the techniques Psellos uses to turn Orphanotrophos’ drunkenness into praise see Repajić 2016, 225–226.

15 On Phokas see Cheynet 1986, 489–490; Đurić 1976: 272–279; For the revolts of Skleros and Phokas: Cheynet 1990, 331–334; Holmes 2005, 240–298.

ister and “lion-tamer” who kept the emperor’s extravagancies checked, but we do not see him as the instigator of action. He only appears when he is to be deposed, and we get a brief overview of his relationship with the emperor (VI.179–181). He is present again, alongside Psellos and Theodore Aloppos, in the episode of the embassy to the rebel Isaac Komnenos, but Psellos is the only one of the three who plays an active role in that story (VII.18–39). In a similar manner the author’s two unnamed friends – John Mauropous and John Xiphilinos – appear in the story of his tonsure (VI.192–200). All of them serve mainly to corroborate Psellos’ own story and the correctness of his political actions, and all (except Aloppos) suffered disgrace under Monomachos. More importantly, they all shared the same set of qualities: intellect, brilliant education, and high culture, and they were all *androi politikoi*,<sup>16</sup> men of noble mind and spirit who used their skills for the good of the *politeia*.

These four are the only commendable Constantinopolitans in the latter, autobiographical part of *Chronographia* (though not all were originally from the capital)<sup>17</sup>. We find another advisor-protagonist at the end of Book 6, but his role is a negative one. The person in question is Leo Paraspondylos, Psellos’ personal enemy, an embodiment of qualities opposed to his own and those of his fellows.<sup>18</sup> He was “a man with no long-standing qualifications in education or speech, but

16 A similar characterization of Leichoudes can be found in the funeral oration Psellos dedicated to him (Michael Psellos, *Funeral Oration for the Most Holy Patriarch Kyr Konstantinos Leichoudes*). For a brilliant analysis of Leichoudes as the epitome of a political man in both *Chronographia* and the funeral oration: Criscuolo 1983, 57–72.

17 Xiphilinos originated from Trebizond (Michael Psellos, *Funeral Oration for the Most Blessed Patriarch Kyr Ioannes Xiphilinos*, 3, p. 118), and Mauropous’ fatherland was Paphlagonia (John Mauropous, *Letters*, 9; 11, pp. 62–66). See Magdalino 2000 (=Magdalino 2007) on what it meant to be Constantinopolitan and the exclusivity of living in the capital, and in particular 152–153. on how one could become Constantinopolitan.

18 For Psellos and Paraspondylos see De Vries – van der Velden 1999; Ljubarskij 1978, 90–97. Psellos gives similar characterization of Paraspondylos in a speech dedicated to him (Michael Psellos, *Speech Characterizing the Virtue of the Protosynkellos*), although in a less derogatory manner. Kaldellis 1999, 155 observes that his true target in criticizing Paraspondylos is the religious aspect of Byzantine politics, as well as that the contemporaries whom Psellos chiefly had in mind when discussing “the three kinds of soul” were the patriarchs Michael Keroularios and Constantine Leichoudes (Ibid, 161–162). For personal political implications of this dichotomy, and Keroularios as the silent antagonist of the *Chronographia* see Repajić 2016, 355–367. In a funeral oration dedicated to his anti-hero, Psellos praises his Constantinopolitan origins (Michael Psellos, *Funeral Oration for the Most Blessed Patriarch Kyr Michael Keroullarios*, 2, p. 2).

able to keep his mouth shut and look at the ground, without manners or any other characteristics of a political man.” (VIa.6) His lack of apprehension of the political life led to serious problems for the state: the election of the incompetent Michael VI as Theodora’s successor and the rebellion of eastern generals under Isaac Komnenos (VIa.20; VII.3–4). Other palace dignitaries, whether they appear collectively as courtiers, or individually as civil officials or military commanders, are accused of not having a proper understanding of politics, working only in their own particular interests, wilfully or not, against the common good. They are directly responsible for the misfortunes that befell the empire, and that fact is mirrored in their choice of emperors. People who surrounded the empresses Zoe and Theodora during their brief sole reign in 1042, the ones towards whom the imperial treasures flew, as Psellos grudgingly stressed, wanted to maintain the state of anarchy which enabled them to pursue their own ambitions and lust for riches and the luxurious life (VI.10). That required an ignorant and careless ruler, and the election of Constantine Monomachos was the result. The similar ambitions of Paraspondylos and his associates would bring Michael VI to the throne fourteen years later.

Rebels against central power, *tyrannoi*, are another group of protagonists in the *Chronographia*, from Phokas and Skleros, to Maniakes and Tornikes, to the only successful rebellion of Isaac Komnenos.<sup>19</sup> They are all essentially provincial and prominent military leaders. While Phokas and Skleros figure as precursors of the *tyrannoi* of Monomachos’ time, all the others are presented as a better alternative to the “political”, that is civilian regimes of Constantine Monomachos and Michael VI. A recurring theme connected to military uprisings is the need for a *strategos autokrator* and the end of “political [in that context civilian, Constantinopolitan] succession” (*πολιτικὴν ... διαδοχὴν*), finally achieved when Komnenos gained power (VI.104; VII.6). A similar need is expressed in the second part of the *Chronographia*, after the death of Constantine Doukas (the narrative successor of Monomachos, VIIb.4). Psellos does not deny the fact that the empire needed a soldier-emperor, thus expressing some kind of military bias, he simply criticizes the choice of Romanos Diogenes, and his criticism of Diogenes is not anti-military. On the contrary, the emperor is censured precisely for his lack of strategic skills (whether or not that is true holds no relevance for the subject, and neither does

19 For the revolts of George Maniakes and Leo Tornikes, with the analysis of origins and connections of their protagonists and participants, see Krsmanović 2001, 89–140. Detailed account of the revolt of eastern strategoi in 1057: Eadem, 145–238.

the fact that Psellos' account is highly personal), and for being overly confident (VIIb.12–14). Excessive confidence is also a trait of Leo Tornikes, the only (partially) negative military provincial character in the first part of history (VI.99). He was still more worthy of the throne than Monomachos, though.

Other provincials in the *Chronographia* – the rebels' closest associates, or potential heirs to the throne – are used as counterparts to the effeminate emperors and their surroundings. They have steadfast characters, comprehension of strategy and military affairs as well as of the needs and problems of the empire; and they usually (though not exclusively) have noble lineage, honor, and loyalty. Paradoxically, this shows that Psellos' perspective, unlike his attitudes, was thoroughly Constantinopolitan. He was less personally acquainted with provincials, so they had less chance to disappoint him. Moreover, and due to that fact, his view of the provincials was romanticized. They represented the idea of uncorrupted provincial life that still knows honor and loyalty. However, Psellos' romanticism did not go far before it was outweighed by his political pragmatism. His rebellious heroes fall into two categories that we shall call "heroic warriors" and "political generals".

In Bardas Phokas and George Maniakes, we find proper heroes of old. Their intentions are pure, they rebelled because they were dishonored. The setting and imagery of their rebellions are derived from poetry, both epic and tragic, leading to their tragic ends. This indicates one important message of Psellos' narrative: his own age is not one of the heroes (Repajić 2016, 116; 317–318). Their characters and actions are commendable, but essentially fruitless and doomed to failure. Their heroism is precisely what gets them killed because they are unfit to face the morally relative world of politics. The poetic language used in their descriptions sets them in the realm of myth. Psellos' military ideal is not Hellenic, it is thoroughly Roman. By contrast, the "political generals" of the *Chronographia* – Bardas Skleros, Basil II after adopting his advice, Leo Tornikes to a certain extent, and Isaac Komnenos – are aware that war-waging requires an entirely different set of qualities. They prefer strategy over heroism – actually, we do not see them perform great heroic gestures at all. They can be conniving – *poikilia* seems to be their quality – and they act as statesmen in war. Psellos stresses several times that Isaac acted "more wisely than boldly (*συνετώτερον ἢ τολμηρότερον*)" in his rebellion against the emperor (VII.7). A common soldier might allow himself to be foolishly brave, but a military leader could not. Much less could the (potential)

66 emperor. Moreover, Psellos' political generals are not devoid of ambition, nor do

they act merely defensively. They want to rule and they are prepared to do anything to achieve their goals. Psellos' ideal emperor possibly poisoned his opponent, Bardas Phokas, and was prone to deception (Kaldellis 1999, 62–66). Lack of political ambition is almost as bad and as damaging as pure ambition with no regard for the common good. Constantine Monomachos obtained and maintained power through other people's actions, or pure luck; he is almost a Forrest Gump-like character. But Isaac Komnenos entered Constantinople triumphantly, with Psellos by his side (VII.39–42).

The period after the death of Basil II was perceived in modern Byzantine studies as the age of dominance by a “civilian aristocracy” and a struggle of the opposed “military” faction to gain power, with a strong moral note: the former were corrupt and devoid of the sense of common good, while the latter's cause was righteous and justified (Ostrogorsky 1968, 316–350).<sup>20</sup> The reigns of Constantine Monomachos and Constantine Doukas were deemed the most “civilian” and damaging ones. Ironically, the fiction of two conflicting aristocracies, as well as of those who were to blame for the “decline” of the empire, was served up on a silver platter by Psellos. His (modern) association with the civilians was based on three facts. The first is a misreading of his irony in the portrayal of Monomachos and the Doukai. Second is the role that he (might have) played in depositions of “military

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<sup>20</sup> Ostrogorsky's views have long since been abandoned, although the appropriate model for defining Byzantine elite(s) is still difficult to find. Kazhdan and Epstein were the first to note some of the major changes in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, but insist on the alleged “feudalization” of Byzantine society (Kazhdan and Epstein 1985, 24–73), a concept that can in hardly any of its definitions fit Byzantine society (as shown by Sarris 2010, 40–42), but survives among older scholars from former socialist countries, educated on Marxist historiography and theory of society, even if they themselves were dissidents from that system (as Kazhdan was). Peter Frankopan (Frankopan 2009, 126) states that, however important land might have been, before the 14<sup>th</sup> century power did not come from independently wealthy individuals or landowning families. The problem is aggravated by the elusiveness of the notion of aristocracy in Byzantium, both in legal and literary texts, since there was never (at least in theory) sharp social division in Byzantine society, meritocratic in its essence. Kazhdan's overview of the social structure of the ruling class of Byzantium in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries remains the most extensive to this day (Kazhdan 1974). Dated, but still relevant are studies by Ahrweiler (1976) on new solidarities and new hierarchies in Byzantine 11<sup>th</sup> century society, particularly the Constantinopolisation of provincial families, and Oikonomides 1976 on the evolution of administration. An excellent study of social elites in Byzantium is Haldon 2009, with references to older scholarship. See also Cheynet 2006, a collection of his studies on the subject of Byzantine aristocracy and army, and a collection of papers on Byzantine aristocracy (Angold ed. 1984).

emperors”, Isaac Komnenos and Romanos Diogenes – the politically complex situations of clan-clashes rather than ideological differences, in which he did best to save his own place, if not his very life.<sup>21</sup> Finally, he is perceived as the spokesman of “civilian” views due to his Constantinopolitan perspective and identity, which are not to be confused with his political attitudes.

### *The chosen vs. the many*

We find one more protagonist in Psellos’ *Chronographia*, one that seems to both fascinate and frighten him: the people, or rather, the mob (τὸ πλῆθος). His description of the popular revolt against Michael V in 1042 (V.25–50), as Andrew Dyck noted, “can compare ... with work done in this [20<sup>th</sup>] century on the psychology of mobs” (Dyck 1994, 278). In this dramatic episode that takes place in the streets of Constantinople, we find two conflicting groups: the masses and the moderate (οἱ ἐπιεικεῖς).<sup>22</sup> Although they agreed upon the final goal – the deposition of Michael V – they represent two different, even opposed modes of thinking and acting. The mob acts irrationally, violently, destructively and mercilessly, while the moderate, including Psellos himself, are rational and humane, even towards the despicable Michael V.<sup>23</sup> It is not just the Constantinopolitan mob that Psellos fears and despises. The multitude of Isaac’s soldiers (στρατιωτικὸν πλῆθος), present in his camp during the negotiations with Michael VI’s embassy (in 1057), provoked fear in the author and his fellow ambassadors, to the extent that they were afraid to address the general. The soldiers prevented Isaac from making the right decision and following Psellos’ advice on gradual rise to the throne. None of them noticed that there was subtlety and wisdom in the philosopher’s plain speech, even when

21 Not unlike Michael Attaleiates, who conformed to circumstances after the misfortunes of Diogenes (Krallis 2006, 77–78).

22 The term occurs seven times in several consecutive passages (from V.40–48). Dyck 1994, 283, n. 66. stresses that the quality of ἐπιεικεία was “often associated with a willingness to pardon offenses” in classical literature, comparing it to Latin *clementia*. In the given context this is an important, but not the exclusive aspect of ἐπιεικεία. In Psellos’ narration it designates someone (or something, an action) who is fitting, suitable for the situation, and moderate, distinguished, in a similar sense as Plato uses it in his *Republic*. Psellos position of a spectator who laments the fate of the emperor is interesting when compared to Plato’s qualification of lament as unfitting for ἐπιεικεῖς (Plato, *Republic*, 387d).

23 Dyck 1994, 277. relates this fact to the *topos* from Socratic dialogues where the ignorance of the many is contrasted with the insight of the one.

simplified for them to understand (VII.22–31). They appear as a force again upon entering Constantinople, causing fear and terror, and both Psellos and Isaac were eager to get rid of them and send them to their homes, worried that they might harm the people of the city (πολιτικὸν πλῆθος, VII.45). The populace of Constantinople, for their part, fuelled the fire by undermining the agreement between the emperor and the rebel on which Psellos had worked so hard (VII.37). The new emperor's entrance into the City is described in a rather derogatory and sarcastic tone – he was welcomed “as some kind of appearance from above” and the citizens appeared to be in frenzy (VII.40).

Psellos' Isaac was well aware of the volatility of popular support. (VII.41) The irony of Michael V's tragic demise at the hands of the mob is highlighted by the fact that he consciously decided to rely upon the people of Constantinople, putting his faith “in the many, rather than the few”. The very same people who called for his head on a plate in the revolt had shown him great honors only days earlier (V.15–16). Relying upon the many instead of the chosen few is also the most common mistake of emperors who knew nothing about strategy: Romanos III Argyros in his Syrian war (III.7), and Constantine Monomachos during the revolt of George Maniakes (VI.83). The success of Michael the Paphlagonian's Bulgarian war was due precisely to the fact that the emperor relied on the counsel of people well versed in strategic and military matters (IV.43). Depending on the many, both in political and military affairs, could lead to disastrous consequences for emperors themselves, and even more so for the public good.

Psellos' attitudes reflect the increasing role of the people, particularly the inhabitants of Constantinople, in the political life. The imperial authority was based on the people, the Senate and the army throughout Roman history (see Kaldellis 2015), but popular support wasn't always as important. Instability of imperial power in the 11<sup>th</sup> century made the populace of Constantinople a powerful tool in the struggle among different power groups. The increase in their role in the political life of the capital led to their greater self-awareness as well as the emperors' awareness of their worth.<sup>24</sup> The rise of the “people of the market” to prominent positions in the Senate is, even more than reliance on the masses, the backbone

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<sup>24</sup> Naturally, this question is more complex, but that is not the subject of this paper. For the role of the people of Constantinople in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries see Cheynet 2009.

of Psellos' criticism of contemporary politics.<sup>25</sup> He devotes several digressions on political theory in Book 6 of his *Chronographia* to this very topic.

"Two things in particular preserve the hegemony of the Romans: I mean the system of honors and wealth; and to them I add the third, the wise control of the two and prudence in their distribution ... [Constantine Monomachos] completely neglected the *cursus honorum* (τάξις τῆς τιμῆς) and abolished all rules of advancement, and almost made all of the simple people of the market and the vagabonds (ἀγοραῖον καὶ ἀγύρτην δῆμον) members of the Senate." (VI.29)

Court protagonists in Monomachos' biography, two conspirators against the emperor, whom Psellos' did not see fit to name, exemplify this remark. Both of them are characterized as "trash" (κάθαρμα): the first one (a certain unknown barbarian) was "barbarian trash", while the second (Romanos Boilas) was a "half-mute trash" (VI.135; 139). They entered the palace from the "crossroads", i.e., from the street, having no prior experience in political affairs, and they were immediately granted the highest positions in the court hierarchy. Both made attempts on emperor's life, being greedy and having an exaggerated sense of self-worth because of the positions that they were granted and their proximity to the emperor. Order and rank seem to be the utmost features of Roman power, in both military and political affairs. One of Psellos' military heroes, George Maniakes, is praised for his gradual ascent up the hierarchy alongside (and due to) his strategic skills and martial prowess (VI.76). Psellos needed to stress this fact since Maniakes was the only military hero of his history who could not pride himself in illustrious descent.

Noble lineage holds great significance in Psellos' view of his contemporaries and their role in the political life of the empire. However, it was not strictly speaking necessary, nor, on the other hand, was it enough to have glorious antecedents. Many people of illustrious origins, such as Romanos Argyros, Constantine Monomachos, Constantine Doukas, and Romanos Diogenes, were unworthy because they lacked personal qualities. Psellos expresses surprise at the longevity of the Macedonian dynasty despite the bloody way in which Basil I obtained the throne, but his astonishment is not genuine, it is a rather sarcastic remark on the relativ-

25 Psellos' view that Constantinopolitan birth does not guarantee nobility of any kind is more similar to the remarks of patriarch Germanos II in 13<sup>th</sup> century ("Are these persons, who resemble mules in their racial mixture, well born and respectable, and will the soil of Constantinople ennoble them?": *Works of patriarch Germanos II*, 282–283; trans. Magdalino 2000, 152 = Magdalino 2007), than to that of patriarch's Constantinopolitan detractors.

ity of nobility (VI.1). Basil's last successors, empresses Zoe and Theodora, were incompetent and spoiled precisely because of their life in the effeminate palace surroundings (VI.17). The nobility of birth was a fine prerequisite, but the obstacle of not having one could be surpassed through virtue and merit and, as George Maniakes' case shows, only gradually. The core of the family tragedy of the Paphlagonians that Psellos weaves in books 4 and 5 was taking on too much too soon, grasping beyond their reach (Repajić 2016, 234–236). Psellos' views on nobility are very Byzantine in essence: they reflect a society of gradual and meritocratic vertical mobility (Kazhdan and Epstein 1985, 105–107; Haldon 2010, 179–185). They also, paradoxically, echo a slow but steady collapse of both graduality of ascent and meritocracy.

The revolt of Isaac Komnenos in 1057, and even more so his deposition in favor of the Doukai two years later, showed just how important family ties were becoming (see Cheynet 1999, 261–286; Krsmanović 2001, 151–176; Stanković 2006, 7–16). In the following decades, belonging to one of the powerful *oikoi* would little by little become the only way to enter the elite and gain a position of power. This trend will reach its culmination in the family rule of the Komnenoi after 1081, but it can be traced back to mid-11<sup>th</sup> century (Stanković 2006, 17–65). The history of Michael Attaleiates, written two decades after the first part of the *Chronographia*, and only years after the second, reflects the growing significance of family ties (Kazhdan 1984, 38; Kazhdan and Epstein 1985, 105).<sup>26</sup> Psellos' subtle criticism of this tendency is expressed in the biography of Michael VII (written after 1075), half of which is dedicated to short descriptions of various family members of the Doukai clan (VIIc.12–17). Psellos' influence in the 1060s and early 1070s was immense, but it was built on different premises than the impact he had in previous two decades. He no longer acted as an intellectual who rose to power due to his skills and played a significant role in the Senate,<sup>27</sup> he was basically a client of a

<sup>26</sup> This does not reflect his affiliation with “military aristocracy”, opposed to Psellos' “civilian views”, as Krallis rightly argues (Krallis 2006, 202–203, *passim*).

<sup>27</sup> Papaioannou 2013, 23, rightly states that “Psellos aggressively explored the social potential of rhetoric”, and that he created an image of a professional intellectual (29). He also stresses the importance of the new elite as one of the main incentives for the dominance of rhetoric in the 11<sup>th</sup> century (Ibid, 45–46). For the role of friendship (φιλία) as a substitute of official connections in the functioning of Byzantine state-machinery in the 11<sup>th</sup> century see Ljubarskij 1978, 117–124.

powerful (imperial) family, much like the literati of the Komnenian times.<sup>28</sup> Psellos adjusted to the changed circumstances, but that adjustment was not entirely voluntary. The second part of his *Chronographia* is a grim account by an aged and disappointed *politikos anēr*.

The privatization of political power and the family rule of the Komnenoi would be the central point of *Kaiserkritik* in the writings of Psellos' spiritual successors, the intellectual elite of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, particularly John Zonaras, as Paul Magdalino has shown (Magdalino 1983). Nicholas Matheou recently examined the historical importance of Constantinople in Zonaras' *Epitome of Histories* from a Roman constitutionalist point of view, concluding that constitutionalism and the insistence on republican and senatorial traditions was "a literary epistemology, within which highly educated bureaucrats of modest background negotiated a place for themselves, enabling them to discursively define their role in the state as 'senators'" (Matheou 2016, 63). His assessment is quite astute, though his subtext that this "literary epistemology" was a construct derived from the distant past rather than contemporary political order is somewhat problematic.<sup>29</sup> It is precisely the dissolution of that order that created the need for them to negotiate and stress their place, and Psellos can be seen as the instigator of that struggle, expressed at a different period and therefore in different terms.<sup>30</sup>

28 On the social position and the role of Komnenian literati see Stanković 2006, 223–269.

29 I owe much to Matheou's excellent paper in terms of inspiration and direction in moments of bafflement with defining and conveying the complex and elusive subject of how Constantinople figures in Psellos' *Chronographia* on different narrative levels. Our disagreement lies in different understanding of the background against which the texts were composed, i.e., the republican basis of Byzantine society. Idealistic part of Psellos' political views lies not in Roman, but in Hellenistic ideals he convokes, as argued below.

30 Psellos' *Historia Syntomos* complements *Chronographia* in this regard and it is, to my knowledge, the first Byzantine history to start with Romulus, and to stress distinctly Roman, almost (although due to its didactic purpose not entirely) Christian-less historical path. Moreover, Constantine the Great, conspicuously, does not figure as a turning point in Roman history, neither through his quality of the first Christian emperor (which is not mentioned at all, although there is a brief remark on the First Oecumenical Synod in Nicea), nor as the founder of the New Rome, the fact which is briefly glossed over, in contrast to Zonaras (John Zonaras, *Epitome of Histories*, I, 14–15; III, 14–18); Michael Psellos, *Historia Syntomos*, 55; for Constantine the Great in Psellos' historiographical works see Repajić 2013). Nearly contemporary is Attaleiates' *Ponēma Nomikon*, stressing ancient Roman roots of law (Michael Attaleiates, *Ponēma*

The inflation of titles and the openness of the Senate to the wider population was, paradoxically, a prelude to the concentration of power in the hands of a few distinguished families. Buying and providing popular support could have opened the gates of Constantinople, as the brief alliance of Isaac Komnenos and Michael Keroularios showed. The Senate, that influential group of palace officials surrounding the emperor, was diluted and lost any real impact on political affairs. Psellos would say that people who had positions and dignities were not political men. It is in that sense that we can understand his complaint that:

“In the well-governed cities, there are catalogues of the best people and the well-born (τῶν ἀρίστων καὶ τῶν εὐγενῶν), as well as of those of obscure origin (ἀγεννῶν), both of political and military orders. That is how the Athenians and those cities that emanated from their democracy governed (ἐπολιτεύσαντο). We have, however, disdained and abandoned this excellent practice and nobility counts for nothing.” (VI.134)

Reinsch’s new edition of the *Chronographia* (Reinsch 2014, 167) reads ἐγγενῶν (in-born) instead of εὐγενῶν in this place. Not having seen the manuscript I cannot make an informed decision, and both fit Psellos’ political thought as expressed in the *Chronographia*. Euthymia Pietsch (Pietsch 2005, 88, n.146) states that reading ἐγγενῶν makes more sense since Psellos himself was not of noble origin. However, εὐγενεία in his discourse does not necessarily denote noble lineage. The term is ambiguous in Byzantine discourse in general, and could, in fact, be interchangeable with ἐλευθερία, as the equivalent of Latin *ingenuus*, and thus denote simply a free-born man (Magdalino 1984, 63–65), so the two readings could designate the same thing. The text that follows, a rant about previously bought slaves who now hold offices would support this view, rather than Psellos’ xenophobia (moreover, only one of the characters whom this elaborate digression introduces was a stranger; the other was Romanos Boilas). Strangers, even those born in strange, barbaric lands, can indeed be praiseworthy in the *Chronographia*, even perceived as legitimate members of the society, if they adapted to the Roman way of life – Bulgarian Alousianos, for example, possesses distinctly Roman, urban characteristics: charm (χάρις) and sweetness of character (ἡθος ἡδύς, IV.45).<sup>31</sup>

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*Nomikon*, 411; for the differences in concepts and similarities in essence between the two and Zonaras’ account see Matheou 2016, 52–53).

31 For Roman way of life as the cornerstone of identity and belonging to Romania, Kaldellis 2006b, 91–95; for the role and depiction of Alousianos and his fellow Bulgarians in *Chronographia*: Repajić 2016, 205–213.

This highly aestheticized character is also Psellos' discursive persona in his rhetorical texts. The prerequisites for such a personality are natural capability and Hellenic *paideia*, and it is closely connected to political affairs (Papaioannou 2013, 140–149). Psellos sought to reconcile rhetoric and politics with philosophy, and he had to publicly defend this dichotomy in his own nature in a speech *To the Slanderer Who Dropped a Defaming Leaflet* (pp. 27–28 passim; for a brilliant analysis see Papaioannou 2013, 140–143). In the *Chronographia* the symbiosis of philosophy and rhetoric within the political life form the central teaching of his narrative (Kaldellis 1999, 129–130), and the three are inextricably connected in the formation of the political man. The learning that he values so much is not abstract or secluded, like in the ideal of λάθε βιώσας that his friend and teacher John Mauropous used to create his own authorial persona (Mauropous *Letters*, 5; Bernard 2014, 57–59). Psellos presents instead the ideal of Plato's *Statesman* (Πολιτικός) in his *Chronographia*. *Paideia* is for him aimed at *political knowledge* (πολιτική ἐπιστήμη). Masses cannot obtain such knowledge, we are told in the dialogue by Young Socrates' Stranger–interlocutor in the *Statesman* (Plato, *Statesman*, 292e). It is reserved for a chosen few (293a). However, the educated statesman is not necessarily an emperor: Psellos' Basil II is devoid of education (I.36). He does not advocate the rule of the philosopher-king (Kaldellis 1999, 178–185); that misconception was mostly based on the misreading of his highly ironic account of Michael VII Doukas. Psellos shows little of the idealism of Plato's *Republic* (Kaldellis 1999, 169). The *Statesman* gives him his own privileged and outstanding place within a monarchy:

“Stranger: Well then, if a man who is himself in private station is wise enough to advise him who is king of a country, shall we not say that he has the science which the ruler himself ought to possess?” (Plato *Statesman*, 259a, trans. Fowler 1925)

The *politikos anēr* of Psellos' *Chronographia*, embodied in the author himself, is precisely the wise advisor. Not coincidentally, Plato's dialogue on the *Statesman* is situated between the *Sophist* and the announced, but never finished *Philosopher*. The entire meta-narrative of Psellos' history is focused on the importance of philosophical advice to the imperial rule (Repajić 2016, 290–292). The authorial persona he adopts in the *Chronographia* is consequently a Socratic one, as is his own role in the *politeia*. The tonsure that he suffered under Monomachos is his

Psellos' political ideal is not Roman, it merely conformed to Roman conditions. He explicitly states that the good customs of the Athenians never took on the Roman ground and that the corruption of the Senate is the result of ancestral heritage, starting with Romulus. His rhetorical persona is, moreover, Hellenic (Papaioannou 2013, 131), and so are his political views. He advocated aristocratic rule over the empire, but aristocratic in the most basic sense of the word: the government of the best.<sup>32</sup> He called for a new nobility, or rather an old one, found in the idealized rule of Basil II, and even further, in great traditions of old Rome and Athens – nobility of both birth and spirit, meaning intellect, accompanied by military skills. His ideal was really a *polis*, but a *polis* that stretched its borders to encompass the whole of *Romania* and was a terror and a role-model to the surrounding barbarians. It was an ideal of an intellectual snob.<sup>33</sup>

### *Psellos the Constantinopolitan: Perspective and Identity*

“Phaedrus: You don’t go away from the city out over the border, and it seems to me you don’t go outside the walls at all.

Socrates: Forgive me, my dear friend. You see, I am fond of learning. Now the country places and the trees won’t teach me anything, and the people in the city do.”

Plato, *Phaedrus*, 230d (trans. Fowler 1925, 422–423)

“At the time of those events, I was residing in the fields that lie before the city, having traveled a short distance in the company of a man who was highly experienced in rhetoric and who had been entrusted with the supervision of the judicial affairs of no small part of the western lands. That was the first time I had ever left the city and seen its surrounding wall, not to mention the open countryside. I was sixteen years old and tall for my age.”

Michael Psellos, *Encomium for His Mother*, 28 (trans. Kaldellis 2006c, 75)

32 In *Historia Syntomos* (Michael Psellos, *Historia Syntomos*, 11) Psellos explicitly states that “aristocratic consulship (ἀριστοκρατική ὑπατεία) proved itself to the Romans to be stronger than the monarchy (βασιλεία)” (trans. Aerts, with slight alterations), a statement that could allude both to the kingship that preceded the Republic, and, subversively, to the subsequent empire and contemporary state of affairs. For the subversive character of Psellos’ views on republican Rome see Dželebdžić 2005.

33 See Magdalino 1984 for a brilliant account on Byzantine snobbery.

Seeing the countryside for the very first time at the age of sixteen could probably have happened only in Constantinople in all of Christendom, as Anthony Kaldellis observed (Kaldellis 2006c, 4). Constantinople, New Rome, was the city, the center of the empire. In the far away Iceland, Constantinople, where the Roman emperor resided, was perceived as the very center of the world even in the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Jakobsson 2009, 921–922). The name that the Byzantines used for themselves, *Rhomaioi*, and the name of their *politeia*, *Romania*, derived from the great capital, their common fatherland (κοινή πατρίς, Magdalino 2000, 151). That common identity spanning from the city to the entire state created a curious case of a unified territorial city-state, resembling a modern nation-state in its homogeneity (Kaldellis 2006b, 80).<sup>34</sup> As Paul Magdalino noted, in “Byzantium there obtained a relationship between a capital and country comparable to that of a centralized modern nation state”. (Magdalino 2010, 43).

Moreover, whether fictional or true, the claim that he left the city for the first time at the age of sixteen is hardly imaginable for anyone but the most Constantinopolitan of all the Byzantines, the man who prided himself on his metropolitan origins and upbringing, Michael Psellos. The episode of him leaving the city for the first time holds significant (and I would argue, intentional) parallels to Socrates venturing into the fields outside Athens in *Phaedrus*. *Phaedrus* is a dialogue about rhetoric,<sup>35</sup> and the philosopher’s interlocutor whose name the dialogue bears is well-versed in the art of speech, much like Psellos’ unnamed fellow-traveler. Psellos says nothing about his reasons for leaving town (in all probability to join the staff of a provincial judge, as hinted by the office of the man he mentioned), yet because of the death of his elder sister we are promptly returned to Constantinople, with no change of scenery, so that we have only a vague idea whether the author shortly afterward lived somewhere in the provinces. The autobiographical narrative that Psellos weaves in the *Encomium for His Mother* is centered on his learning, for which, we are said, she was personally responsible. Just like Socrates,

34 For a contesting view on Byzantine Roman identity and loyalty to the center, see Stouraitis 2014, who understates Romanness as an identity of wider population and ascribes it to imperial normative discourse, subtextually maintaining that it was mainly coercion, rather than identity, that maintained power in the provinces, based on several examples of wavering loyalties in the provinces.

35 See Nichols 1998, 17–18 for rhetoric as the unifying subject of *Phaedrus*, and Ibid. 20–21, for a more personal tone of the dialogue, concentrated on love and pleasure (much like Psellos’ *Encomium*). For analysis of the *Encomium* see Kaldellis 2006c, 29–50.

he was fond of learning, and “the country places and the trees”<sup>36</sup> wouldn’t teach him anything. A *polis*, whether Socrates’ Athens or Psellos’ Constantinople, was the place where a philosopher could learn.

We do not see Psellos leaving the capital in his other works very often either. Moreover, he shows little interest in anything happening outside Constantinople. We have seen that his political attitudes emerging from the pages of the *Chronographia* were not all that Constantinopolitan. Nevertheless, his metropolitan upbringing and career penetrate all levels of the narration. They emerge in the choice of episodes and events described, geographical (im)precision and personal attitudes stated in passing. We must go beyond authorial intentions to understand the centre-periphery relations in the *Chronographia* as a whole, as Psellos’ selection of events reveals both a conscious and inherent Constantinopolitan “meta-agenda”, so to say.

Readers of the *Chronographia* could easily be misled into thinking that the 11<sup>th</sup> century was devoid of war almost in entirety, much more than it was really the case.<sup>37</sup> Psellos describes several wars: the Syrian war of Romanos Argyros (III.7–11); the upheaval of Peter Deljan (IV.39–50); the Russian attack on Constantinople (VI.90–96); a short remark about the annexation of Armenian kingdom of Ani (VI.189); Isaac Komnenos’ expedition against the Petchenegs (VII.68–70); and the eastern wars of Romanos Diogenes (VIIb.13;15–22): 30 pages in sum. When we add around 30 more pages dedicated to various rebellions and civil wars in the provinces (the revolts of Phokas and Skleros, I.5–17; 23–28); Maniakes and Tornikios (VI.75–87; VI.99–123, not including the siege of Constantinople (VI.107–120)); Isaac Komnenos (VII.4–43 not including Psellos’ long account of the embassy to the rebel that he led (VII.14–43)); the civil war after the battle of Mantzikert (VIIb.33–41)), we are still left with roughly five-sixths (almost 85%) of the book devoted to Constantinople. Compared to all other contemporary historians who devoted, if not most, then a significant part of their attention to the military affairs, less than 60 out of almost 350 pages (of a modern edition) are quite a remarkable indicator of Psellos’ priorities in writing history.<sup>38</sup>

36 For the role of landscape in *Phaedrus* see Ferrari 1987.

37 See Cheynet 1991 for a different perspective on military policy of 11<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine emperors.

38 Contemporary (or nearly contemporary) historians writing about the same period: John Skylitzes, *Synopsis of Histories* dedicates around three quarters (75%) of his

Furthermore, even in the passages that focus on the provinces, geographical references are scarce and vague. For instance, in the extensive descriptions of the rebellions of Skleros and Phocas, we are given only three: “Assyria”, where Skleros fled after his first uprising was suppressed (I.9), Phocas’ arrival in “Anatolia” and afterward to “Propontis” (I.12). The only geographical reference in the account of Isaac’s rebellion is “the East”, and throughout the *Chronographia* we find no names of battle sites.<sup>39</sup> It is highly unlikely that Psellos was that unaware of the basic geography of the empire. After all, he was a member of the imperial administration. Rather, precise geography simply had no relevance to the story he was telling.

In contrast, Psellos often provides vivid pictures of Constantinopolitan topography. I will take another rebellion as an example: his masterful and theatrical description of the popular uprising against Michael V (V.25–51). Psellos says that he was standing “in front of the palace entrance” when the mutiny started. Emperor Michael was compelled to bring Zoe Porphyrogeneta back from exile into the palace, and in order to appease the people, he showed her to them “from the balcony of the Great Theatre”. This aggravated them even more, since the empress was wearing nun’s clothes, so they sent for her sister Theodora. When Michael heard this, he “embarked on one of the imperial ships and landed with his uncle at the holy Stoudite monastery”, where the mob found him. The newly appointed officials came to drag them out of the church, “intending to drive them through the center of the city, but they did not go far when they were encountered by a man

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account on reigns from Basil II to Michael VI (pp. 314–500) to military matters (wars and rebellions), taking place outside Constantinople; Skylitzes Continuatus, covering emperors from Isaac Komnenos to Michael VII Doukas, is even more *provincial* in his narration: four fifths (80%) of his narrative is war-waging; in Michael Attaleiates’ *History* (pp. 7–195, not counting the account on Nikephoros Botaneiates) provincial events (wars and rebellions) take up 70% of the narrative, although half of the military exploits he describes are those of Romanos Diogenes. Interestingly, in both Skylitzes’ and Attaleiates’ histories, more than 80% of Monomachos’ reign is covered in military affairs, being by far the most military in Skylitzes’ account and quite close to that of Diogenes in Attaleiates. In Psellos’ account of that emperor, out-of-palace matters take up merely 25% of the narrative, and even in those instances focus is occasionally turned back to the court. Naturally, each and every one of these authors had their own reasons for depicting different events, but it is indicative enough of how Constantinople- and palace-centered Psellos’ history was.

39 The only exception in this regard is the civil war that took place after the battle of Manzikert between the deposed emperor Romanos IV Diogenes and the troops of Michael VII led by sons of caesar John Doukas (VIIb.23–32), but that entire episode is strongly personal and apologetic.

who had been commanded to blind the two”. After the blinding, people hurried back to Theodora, and the Senate had to choose between two empresses, one of whom “was in the palace, and the other in the great church of Saint Sophia”.<sup>40</sup> This indicative episode is, alongside Isaac’s rebellion and that of Leo Tornikes, by far the longest report of such enterprises. There are several reasons for this: first, the upheavals against Michael V and Michael VI led to their downfalls and a change of government and therefore had more importance; second, Psellos was an eyewitness to all three events, so he could provide a more exhaustive account; and last, but by no means least, and related to the first two reasons, they all took place in or near the capital. Similarly, the account of the Russian attack on Constantinople is the longest and the most detailed report of military affairs.

No other contemporary narrative paints a picture that Constantinopolitan. Psellos’ capacity as an eyewitness, which he stresses several times, can give a partial explanation for this phenomenon.<sup>41</sup> He is well aware of the omissions he makes, and defends himself against potential accusations by saying that his goal is not to tell a precise history of events but to recount what is most important, as he remembered it (VI.73).<sup>42</sup> He did not lie, he selected the most important events that he could recollect. Still, that selection speaks loudly about his viewpoint and his memory. He could not have said it more clearly – his ideal *politeia* might have been a *polis*, but his *patris* was *the Polis*.

It is not just Psellos’ perspective that is Constantinopolitan, his identity was closely associated with New Rome as well. That identity is revealed in remarks he makes in passing. After the emperor Basil II removed the *parakoimomenos* Basil from the palace, he further degraded the authority of his younger brother Con-

40 Likewise, after Isaac fell ill while hunting “in a place just outside the city” (VII.73), he was “taken by a boat to Blachernae”, and after a while his family urged him to go to “the Great Palace” in order to make necessary decisions should he not survive (VII.76).

41 In comparison, when Attaleiates participates in events in his own *History*, “they are mostly staged against a provincial background” (Krallis 2006, 43), despite his Constantinopolitan career. That fact, as Krallis notes, reinforces the notion of him as a provincial. Krallis gives an excellent account on different perspectives of the two writers stating that: “If Psellos’ accounts guide the reader through the corridors of power in the palace, Attaleiates narrative crisscrosses the empire’s lands.” (Ibid, 44)

42 See Stanković 2011. for an excellent analysis of the narrative usage of remembrance in histories of Nicephoros Bryennios and Anne Komnene for promoting their own agendas. He also explores the complex tension between remembrance as subjective in essence, but valid as a proof of an eyewitness, and objectivity that historiography entails.

stantine, “letting him enjoy the beauties of the country (ἀγρῶν χάρισι, I.22)”. Similarly, after his second rebellion had been quelled, Skleros “retreated to a country estate” and died soon afterwards (I.29) – i.e., he no longer participated in political life. Withdrawing to agricultural estates is used to denote political exile. But it were not just agricultural activities that indicated exile, it was the very place that mattered. Constantine IX looked unfavorably upon Leo Tornikes even before his rebellion because of the relationship he had with emperor’s unruly sister Euprepia, but since there was no fair pretext for harming him and in order to separate the two, “he sent him away from the City... to govern in Iberia, practically to an honorable exile” (VI.100). In a letter to John Mauropous (Psellos, *Scripta Minora* II, 34), Psellos compares alienation from the City and the palace to Adam’s exclusion from Paradise. As Paul Magdalino pointedly stated about Constantinople: “Outsiders wanted to be there, and insiders never wanted to be anywhere else” (Magdalino 2010, 44). We often hear the cries of those “banished” to hold offices in the provinces.<sup>43</sup>

However, not all the outsiders wanted in, as the case of Kekaumenos shows, weary as he was of Constantinople and its well-read and conniving inhabitants (Kekaumenos, *Concilia and Narrationes*, 138–142; 314–320, passim); nor was exile reserved exclusively for banishment from the capital, as revealed in a lament of

43 The most striking examples of the period are certainly John Mauropous, Psellos’ teacher, and Teophylact of Ochrid, his student, sent away to hold episcopal sees in Euchaita and Ochrid respectively, though their posts seem to have really been “honorable exiles” and results of political circumstances (John Mauropous *Letters* 64ff; Theophylact of Ochrid, *Letters* 13; 34, passim; see also Livanos 2008 (Mauropous), Mullett 1997, 274–277 (Theophylact)). For the topos of exile in Byzantine letter-writing see: Mullett 1996. See Shils 1961, 126. for a strikingly similar analysis of the alienation from the center in contemporary centralized societies: “Among the most intensely sensitive or the more alertly intelligent, their distance from the centre accompanied by their greater concern with the centre, has led to an acute sense of being on ‘the outside’, to a painful feeling of being excluded from the vital zone which surrounds ‘the centre’ of society (which is the vehicle of ‘the centre of the universe’). Alternatively these more sensitive and more intelligent persons have, as a result of their distinctiveness, often gained access to some layer of the centre by becoming school-teachers, priests, administrators. Thus they have entered into a more intimate and more affirmative relationship with the ‘centre’. They have not in such instances, however, always overcome the grievance of exclusion from the most central zones of the central institutional and value systems. They have often continued to perceive themselves as ‘outsiders’, while continuing to be intensely attracted and influenced by the outlook and style of life of the centre.”

Eustathios Boilas for his native Cappadocia.<sup>44</sup> They all had different worlds and different “paradises,” but we hear Constantinopolitan voices most often. Psellos’ voice was the loudest, and his paradise was quite different from Kekaumenos’ idea of a cautious and undisturbed country life that permeates his *Concilia*. The two did not differ that much in political theory (if Kekaumenos’ collection of advice can be defined as a systematic political stance). Psellos would find Kekaumenos’ plea to the emperor to leave the capital and check on the provinces or wage wars quite sane (Kekaumenos, *Concilia and Narrationes*, 312). Their difference was that of identity and personal ideal. Kekaumenos wanted to do his duty, stay loyal to the emperor and remain safe from the complexities of high politics that brought nothing but trouble (Kekaumenos, *Concilia and Narrationes*, 140–146; 264; 284). Psellos’ heaven was the paradise of a *politikos anēr*, the place where intellectual and political life, closely interconnected, happened. That brings us back to the passage from *Phaedrus* quoted at the beginning of this part of the paper: “country places and trees won’t teach” Socrates anything. And learning is for Psellos a political activity; political in the widest sense of the word: pertaining both to the *polis* and to politics. Therefore the Socrates of the *Chronographia* never leaves his *Polis*.

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<sup>44</sup> “Ἐὶ τάχα δὲ καὶ ἄποικος ἐγενάμην τοῦ εὐσεβοῦς θεματός μου Καππαδοκίας καὶ πατρίδος.” (*The Testament of Eustathios Boilas*, 27)

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## Rezime

### *Politička misao Psela u "Hronografiji": mudri savetnik, lukavi general i Grad*

Ovaj rad bavi se političkom teorijom koju je Mihailo Psel izrazio u svom programskom delu, *Hronografiji*, i istražuje njegovu političku misao nezavisno od njegovih navodnih društvenih i političkih „pristrasnosti“. Pselova istorija je analizirana iz nekoliko perspektiva i na više narativnih nivoa. U radu je posebna pažnja posvećena Pselovom carskom idealu, kao i njegovim pogledima na učesnike u političkom životu Carstva (prevashodno carske savetnike i generale), kako iz horizontalne (Carigrad-provincije; centar-periferija), tako i iz vertikalne (mase-aristokratija) perspektive. Konačno, preispituje se Pselova „carigradska pristrasnost“, kroz razlučivanje njegovih stavova, od njegove perspektive, identiteta i političkih savezništava, i kroz ispitivanje načina na koje su njegovo prestoničko vaspitanje i obrazovanje oblikovali narativ *Hronografije*.

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**Ključne reči:** Mihailo Psel, Hronografija, Carigrad, provincije, vojska, Senat, mase, politički čovek, politija, politička teorija, centar-periferija.

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