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**Paradox, Reversal and the Meaning  
of History**

Those who wish to study Niketas Choniates as both a historian and a sophisticated writer face a formidable challenge. The mountain to be climbed is tall and steep and there are no 'royal highways' to the top. It is possible that no one has been there before. If the view promises to be spectacular, the ascent is sure to be treacherous. Niketas left no directions, despite the fact that he created something new, something that he knew would confound the expectations of even the most seasoned climbers. Any place where we might pause may collapse beneath our feet; there are pits and deep caverns everywhere; or else, his grottos may be so charming that, like Siren songs, they entice us to linger and give up the ascent. Likewise, we cannot afford to be dizzied by the spiraling chasms of irony and paradox. We can take little for granted here. Where is the solid ground in Niketas Choniates' *History*?

I have no answer to that question. My intention here will only be to map some of the pitfalls and switchbacks that face intrepid explorers. For example, the surface of the narrative is not always solid. We have to always push against it and see how far it will yield and what lies hidden within. Also, because of the enormity of the labour and the number of enchanting places along the way, there is a temptation, which has claimed many, to halt in one

curious spot and spend the time clearing it away, forgetting our task to explore the whole. We must, in other words, not lose a sense of the place of the particular, however charming, in the massive overall structure.

The trouble begins, of course, at the very start, as is well known and has been for centuries. In his preface, Niketas promises a narrative unadorned by excessive rhetoric, free of obscurity and difficulty and written in a simple prose that even common folk can read (specifying diggers, smiths, soldiers and even women who weave: v.D. 3). But this cannot be taken at face value by anyone who reads further. Setting aside his demonstrable contempt for precisely such classes, despite his promise of a royal highway through a meadow what Niketas delivers is a winding and dangerous path (yes, dangerous: consider the fate of the English translator). What are we to make of this paradox, this contradiction, which was already noted in the marginal comment of *Vindobonensis hist. gr.* 53?<sup>1</sup> Niketas promises to deliver τὸ σαφὲς and says that he will avoid 'words like steep mountain ridges' (κρημνώδεις λέξεις). According to the scholiast, however, instead of clarity we get βαρυσώδη prose, i.e. full of deep pits. Niketas says he will avoid rhetorical effect and poetic invention, but the *History* is both highly rhetorical and poetic, more so than most or even any other Byzantine history. Niketas, like his brother's teacher Eustathios of Thessalonike (who authored Niketas' main source for the capture of Thessalonike in 1185), 'combines an exceptional richness of vocabulary with an ingenious concatenation of words and sentences'.<sup>2</sup> His practice as a writer, therefore, is κατὰ διάμετρον in contrast to his programmatic declaration on style (to use the words of his own

<sup>1</sup> Cited in van Dieten's edition, XXXII. For Niketas' life and works, see J.-L. van Dieten, *Niketas Choniates: Erläuterungen zu den Reden und Briefen nebst einer Biographie* (Berlin-New York, 1971). For some preliminary reflections on how historiography may be read as literature, see A. Kaldellis, 'Byzantine Historiography: The Literary Dimension', 21<sup>st</sup> *International Byzantine Congress* (London, 2006), online at [www.byzantinecongress.org.uk/en/Theme/Pancl\\_V/P1.html](http://www.byzantinecongress.org.uk/en/Theme/Pancl_V/P1.html)

<sup>2</sup> J. Munitiz, 'Hurdles in Greek', in M. Mullett, ed., *Metaphrastes, or, Gained in Translation: Essays and Translations in Honour of Robert H. Jordan* (Belfast, 2004), 22-27, at 25.

preface against him).

What recourse do we have against authors who do this? Are we simply powerless in the face of such audacity? And how can we make sense of anything later in the text after such a beginning? To invoke 'irony' here seems somehow inadequate, and even the few scholars who have done that have not followed through on irony's hermeneutical demands.<sup>3</sup> The problem is compounded by the redundant, overwrought, rhetorical and poetic, excessive and periodic style of the preface itself. The contradiction, in other words, is not merely between the preface and the narrative, but between what the author says and what he does at the very moment that he is saying it. In one sense, this is highly appropriate for a work that will focus on dissimulation, that is on people who say one thing while intending something else, or holding something else in their minds, to use one of Niketas' favourite verses from the *Iliad* (IX.312-313, though only one incidence of it is noted in van Dieten's *index locorum*). Here Achilles responds to the speech of Odysseus by saying, 'I detest that man who hides one thing in the depths of his heart and speaks forth another' (Lattimore trans.). Well, Achilles too is about to threaten the envoys with his immediate departure, something that he really has no intention of doing. The spiral of dissimulation does not stop at the 'author'.

The style of Niketas' narrative refutes his preface. Does he mean by this to suggest that it is naive to expect that history can be written in a clear style that day-labourers can understand? Clarity simplifies, but the story Niketas had to tell was not simple, neither in its overall trajectory nor, as we will see, in its details. But paradoxical relationships cut both ways. In a different sense, the preface in turn refutes the narrative. Perhaps history *ought* to be such that it can be written in a simple style, if men were who they claimed or aspired to be; the fact that this particular history could

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<sup>3</sup> H. Hunger, *Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur der Byzantiner*, 2 vols. (Munich, 1978), I, 438 n. 586; I. Grigoriadis, *Linguistic and Literary Studies in the Epitome historion of John Zonaras* (Thessalonike, 1998), 45-46, speaks of 'teasing' and 'having us on'. Surely these are involved, but the terms do not take us very far.

not be so written, that it required inordinate complexity, is an indictment of sorts, suggesting that convolution and contradiction lay in the events themselves, or rather in the hearts of its protagonists. We want to be told what happened in a straightforward way, but what happened was so unnatural and horrible that the terms of linguistic clarity failed. After a few readings of the *History*, we may finally come to accept our unease at Niketas' prose and learn to view history as he did, as a tangle of reversals and paradoxes. If hardly anyone in the work speaks his mind, why should Niketas himself? The deeper point is not, however, one of deceit. Niketas and his protagonists found themselves in a historical condition whose true nature could not be captured in clear language; as historical agents they had passed beyond the scope of clarity and even generic distinction: were they acting out tragedies? Comedies? Or something else? The paradox of the preface, in this sense, prepares us for what comes, if anything can.

Consider the opening sequence of the narrative proper, modeled on the opening of Xenophon's *Anabasis*. The children of the dying monarch are listed, with their ranks by birth. Here too, as in Xenophon, the king prefers one child, the queen another. Strife ensues and a plot to overthrow the 'legitimate' heir, which fails. In this case, as in many others in Byzantine literature, the implied classical comparison serves to accentuate *differences* rather than similarities. This one is very well chosen. The contest is between a son and an ambitious daughter, not two sons, and the struggle is fought in the inner chambers of the palace and the private dealings of factions, not on the battlefield (as in the *Anabasis*). Women and family intrigue will, accordingly, be far more prominent in Niketas' *History* than in his classical predecessors. The decline of Byzantium during the twelfth century will revolve more around domestic Komnenian history than anything that happens in battle. But whereas battles can be described in simple prose, as they are by Xenophon, the unnatural complexities of the Komnenian betrayals could not. We will consider a number of incidents closely below, especially those involving Andronikos I. For now let us look closely at the axes of the opening sequence, for its culmination highlights the themes I have identified.

Ioannes II, who will turn out to be the best Byzantine emperor in Niketas' account, is supported by his father Alexios I, who admits to his wife Eirene that he won the throne by violating the norms of kinship and Christian custom (v.D. 5-6; all dynasties are illegitimate at the moment of their inception). Niketas adds that Alexios more than anyone would hide his mind and reveal little about what he intended (v.D. 6). His wife (and we) rightly suspect that his death-bed piety was a sham, a deflection of the succession crisis (v.D. 7). This is not an emperor who would put religion above power. And his wife and daughter will not stop before family, precedent, or legitimacy in their rush to power. What sort of people were they? Niketas praises Anna and her husband Nikephoros Bryennios for their learning and philosophy, but states at the same time that their faction consisted of evil men who would murder Ioannes II (v.D. 10), who, we should add, never shows any signs of being learned. Certainly, Niketas valued learning, but the elements were all misaligned here, as they will be frequently in the *History*. The plot fails because Nikephoros was sluggish and Anna turns out to be vulgar and bitter. Who were these people, really? Nothing about them stands still, taking down with them traditional notions of imperial virtue. Better the cynical but capable Alexios and Ioannes than the learned but bitter Anna and sluggish Nikephoros.

The story climaxes after the plot's failure. Ioannes is gazing at his sister's treasure of gold and silver, which he has collected in one room. What he says at that moment sets the tone, I believe, for the entire *History*: 'how greatly has natural order (*taxis*) been overturned for me! Kin have become my enemies and outsiders my friends!' Accordingly, he bestows his sister's treasure on the closest of those friends, his *megas domestikos* Ioannes Axouch (v.D. 11). Axouch is himself a fascinating case of reversal. A Seljuk boy captured by the Crusaders and given as a present to Alexios, he became one of Ioannes' playmates and later his friend, confidant and high official. Niketas has told us his story, just before his account of Anna's final plot. In other words, the terms of Ioannes' exclamation have been well prepared. Niketas highlighted there the fact that Axouch had more prestige than

many of the emperor's relatives (v.D. 9-10). His dramatic change of fortune gives real substance to the emperor's lament: a man who was once a Seljuk slave-boy was more supportive than the emperor's own sister.<sup>4</sup> And it is he who persuades Ioannes to return the treasure to Anna, reminding him of compassion and family loyalty. Every part of the story, in other words, is just about the opposite of what one would expect if the laws of nature were operating normally. 'Nature' and *taxis* – the word that signified the Byzantine understanding of human and cosmic order – have been overturned, for Ioannes and, on a larger scale, for the author of the *History*. This happens again and again in the work, leading directly to the very destruction of Byzantium.

We know how the Crusaders were diverted to Constantinople and what they found there. The theme of reversal that Niketas announces at the beginning of the *History*, after the failure of Anna's plot and through the mouth of Ioannes, recurs throughout the narrative and thickens at the end. The reign of Alexios III Angelos, who blinded and deposed his brother Isaakios II, begins with a commentary by Niketas on the effects of internecine strife. Some men, he says, fail to perceive the noble gifts of nature (τὰ τῆς φύσεως σεμνὰ δῶρα) and attack each other because of their evil minds and passion for fame. This causes the barbarians to despise the Romans and blame them for their misfortunes (v.D. 453). Here it is 'nature' that is set aside, but it basically stands for the same thing that Ioannes II had perceived in *taxis*. Later in Alexios III's reign, Niketas declares that the fall of empire was the fault of the Komnenoi, many of whom wandered among the barbarians and incited them against the Romans (v.D. 529). The context is significant: he is about to discuss the fateful journey of the emperor's nephew, Alexios (IV) Angelos, to the West in search of aid for his father, the deposed Isaakios II. A few pages later, in discussing Serbian affairs, Niketas comments on the prevalence of fratricide in his age: it spread from Constantinople to other nations, who took up arms against themselves (v.D. 532).

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<sup>4</sup> On the figure of Ioannes Axouch in Choniates' narrative see R. Maisano, 'Memoria letteraria e memoria storica: il personaggio di Giovanni Axouch nell'opera di Niceta Coniata', *Atti dell'Accademia Pontaniana* n.s. 46 (1997), 155-172.

The ultimate paradox, the culmination of this theme, occurs during the winter of 1203-1204, when the emperor of the Romans, Alexios IV Angelos, was consorting, drinking and going on campaign with the Latins against other Romans (v.D. 556-557); when the Latins were taxing the Romans in Constantinople, making them effectively fugitives in their own capital; and when Romans who were resisting the Latins had to beg, in vain, for assistance from their emperor (v.D. 560-561). Everything was turned upside down. Meanwhile, Alexios' blind father, Isaakios II, in his own mind the true emperor, was being plied with strong drink by corrupt monks and made to dream of restoring his sight and attaining universal rule (v.D. 557-558). Such a state of affairs could only be followed by destruction and lament.

What we have discussed so far is only a *historical theme* that is woven into the narrative. It concerns family quarrels, the undermining of natural relations by ambition and greed. Beyond being a theme that the *History* is about, something that it seeks to document, this element of reversal and paradox operates also at the level of the text itself; it is textual as well as historical. The overturning of nature and *taxis* on the level of history elicited from Niketas a complementary overturning of textual *taxis*. The theme, as it were, is a fundamental component of Niketas' rhetoric. The text itself is unstable and liable to be overturned, and this includes declarations by the author himself (as with the preface). One thing is always superseded by another, or even contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction, as did the Byzantine empire.

Let us consider a minor example from the reign of Ioannes, still within the theme of family dissension. The emperor's brother Isaakios the *sebastokrator* was one of his supporters in the succession crisis, but later defected to the barbarians over a trivial grievance (μικρολυπία: v.D. 32), taking his warlike son Ioannes with him. He intended to attack Roman territory and 'become a Satan to his brother' but found no internal support. Eventually he returned and was accepted by Ioannes. Niketas essays an aphorism to explain Ioannes' forgiveness: 'ἰσχυρὸν γάρ τι χρῆμα πόθος συγγενείᾳ διωφαινόμενος, καὶ ἀπορραγεῖν μικρὸν τι τῆς συμφυῖας, ταχέως φιλυπόστροφος γίνεται' (v.D. 32). Isaakios'

actions, of course, were out of proportion to his grievance. The aphorism seems weaker the more we think about it, and will be shredded to pieces by subsequent events. We do not have to read as far as Andronikos murdering his nephew or Alexios III blinding his brother. Within a few pages of the aphorism itself, Isaakios' son, the warlike Ioannes, defects to the Seljuks for a trivial reason, renounces Christianity and undermines the emperor's war effort (v.D. 35-36). This man was the father of Andronikos, who will later cause such mischief, inheriting these tactics. The career of this side of the family will prove Niketas' aphorism wrong. In fact, we probably should not even call it Niketas' aphorism: it is what most normal people think most of the time about family; it reflects the natural state of things. It is precisely this state that will be destroyed by the narrative of the *History*, ripped to shreds by the behaviour of the Komnenoi and bears signs of strain even in connection with Isaakios' defection.<sup>5</sup> Niketas has, in effect, set himself up. His text does this to itself constantly.

Let us consider a few specific cases. Paradox and reversal are heightened in connection with the fate of history's victims, though the victims of *this* history are not necessarily men with whom we must sympathize. Isaakios, eldest surviving son of Ioannes II, was incarcerated temporarily so that Manuel, his younger brother, could seize the throne (v.D. 49). He did not take it well: 'δεινὰ πάσχειν λέγων καὶ πέρα δεινοῦ ξύμπαντος, καὶ ὡς ἐπαινετέα ἡ τάξις, ὑφ' ἧς διακρατεῖται τὸ πᾶν'. Here is a man who takes his stand on *taxis*, in fact a cosmic *taxis*, and like all such in the *History* he will learn his lesson. We may sympathize with his frustration and indignation: the greatest prize in the world is just beyond his reach and he is locked up with a rightful claim to it! Yet consider how Niketas takes his leave of this caged lion: 'ὁ μὲν τοιαῦτα μάτην ἐξετραγῶδει καὶ εἰκαίως ἦν περυγίζων κατὰ

<sup>5</sup> On the very page after narrating Ioannes' defection, Niketas tells us about some former imperial subjects who lived near Attaleia and who preferred the Seljuks over the Roman emperor. This calls for a different aphorism: 'οὕτω χρόνῳ κρατυνθέν ἔθος γένους καὶ θρησκείας ἐστὶν ἰσχυρότερον' (v.D. 37). This is more like it, and again resonates with events at the end of the narrative (cf. especially v.D. 495), but *ethos* too – habit or custom – will be tested along with nature, *taxis* and the like, and found wanting.



σαγηνευθὲν πτηνάριον'. Personal tragedy, inner rage, is mocked with a comic image. Isaakios' frustration is presented first from his own point of view, but from the standpoint of history he is nothing more than a trapped little bird fluttering its wings in vain. One cannot imagine a more dismissive image – or more appropriate. Tragedy turns into comedy in the course of a few lines, and the impression we are left with is both bitter and amusing.<sup>6</sup> (And how cruel are we to mock the losers? Do we not see that *taxis* is being destroyed?).

The tyrant Andronikos was captured trying to flee Constantinople in a ship with his two women. Bound, unarmed and thrown in a boat, this escape-artist and Odyssean man of many wiles (πολύμητις) still tried to get away.<sup>7</sup> He began to sing the tragedy of his own life (ὑποκρίνεται τραγωδίαν: v.D. 348), hoping for sympathy from his captors. (Recall that his cousin Isaakios had also presented his incarceration and loss of the throne as a 'tragedy'). By recounting his deeds, suffering and nobility to his captors, he hoped for sympathy and reprieve. His women joined in the song, improvising a mournful tune to complement his dirge. The description reaches a crescendo: 'καὶ ὁ μὲν ἤρχε τῶν θρηνημάτων, αἱ δὲ ἀντιῆδον αὐτῷ συνυπακούουσαι καὶ συμπάλλουσαι'. Let us step aside from this stunning performance. The scene is impressive, though whether tragic or comic is still unclear: the English word 'pathetic' comes to mind here as bridge between tragedy and comedy. Much will depend on the reaction of the audience; efficacy will do much to determine our final reaction. Well, the whole performance was in vain – μάτην Niketas calls it, like Isaakios' wailing about the *taxis* of the universe. The past evil acts of this 'man of many devices

<sup>6</sup> Cf. P. Magdalino, 'Prophecy and Divination in the *History*' (in this volume).

<sup>7</sup> The comparison between Andronikos and Odysseus was learned by Niketas from Eustathios of Thessalonike; cf. A. Vassilikopoulou, 'Ἀνδρόνικος ὁ Κομνηνὸς καὶ Ὀδυσσεύς', *EEBS* 37 (1969-1970), 251-259; B. A. Sarris, 'Ἡ σάτιρα τῆς ἐξουσίας στή συγγραφή τοῦ ἀρχιεπισκόπου Εὐσταθίου', *Βυζαντινός Δόμος* 8-9 (1995-1997), 15-29; N. Gaul, 'Andronikos Komnenos, Prinz Belthandros und der Zyklus: Zwei Glossen zu Niketas Choniates' *Χρονική διήγησις*', *BZ* 96 (2003), 623-660 (Andronikos as *both* Odysseus and Polyphemos). For this particular episode, see S. Efthymiadis, 'Greek and Biblical *Exempla* in the Service of an Artful Writer' (in this volume).

(πολυτροπώτατος)' blocked up his captor's ears like wax; not one of them listened to the Siren song that he sang like a woman (κατὰ Σειρήνας ἐμελῶδει γυναικωδῶς: v.D. 348-349). Yet another tragedy turns into a comedy, though its effects on Andronikos are soon to be horrific. The image of Odysseus, a manly man who escaped the Sirens and so many other dangers, is reversed: it is now the captors who block their ears to Andronikos' feminine Siren song. The tables are turned and all the allusions and comparisons are reversed. It is not just Andronikos' career that comes to an end but an entire textual order, a narrative *taxis* that Niketas has elaborately constructed with some subtlety.

The effect of these episodes and more in the *History* is to destabilize the polarity between tragedy and comedy, one of the basic building blocks of Greek literature since antiquity. Niketas is engaged in a deconstructive enterprise: by subverting the cardinal difference between tragedy and comedy, he draws the line not *between* them but *through* them, showing how they penetrate each other in violation of our structured (because conditioned) expectations. He is, then, writing in the margins of the tradition, highlighting its instabilities.<sup>8</sup> This was not an incidental or unconscious effect but a strategy that he had considered carefully and which we must explore. The fifth line of his preface declares that histories make a comedy of evil (κακία δὲ παρ' αὐταῖς κωμωδουμένη: v.D. 1 – what exactly does this mean?), while in the midst of his Lament for Constantinople, the culmination of the work (v.D. 577), he notes how the city's captors 'made a comedy of your tragedy (καὶ κωμωδίαν τιθεμένους τὴν σὴν τραγωδίαν)' by singing drunken songs about their deeds. Even an event such as that was not free of the grievous paradoxes of generic inadequacy. Niketas knows that his own account of the fall is infused with elements of the comic. His tragedies have farcical backgrounds (cf. Euripides' *Alkestis*) and his comedies are bitter and hurtful (cf. Aristophanes' *Clouds*).

Let us consider one more victim, Isaakios II Angelos, blinded and

<sup>8</sup> Plato attempted the same, for different purposes: *Symposium* 223d; cf. the light treatment of tragic themes (e.g. incest) and serious treatment of comic themes (e.g. female equality, Sokrates) in the *Republic*, especially in book V.

deposed by his secretly scheming brother. 'He was deprived of sight', we are told, 'by those whom he had imagined had led him by the hand (χειραγώγησιν) as though they were his own eyes. For what is closer and more true than a brother, and a loved one at that?' (v.D. 453). This is a fascinating reversal and its implications spiral almost out of control, causing a mild vertigo. Isaakios imagines his relation to his brother before that fateful April day as that of blind man placing his trust in and being led around by a seeing man. But this metaphor is double-edged and ironic, for it leads us to think of Isaakios as blind before the fact, his 'blindness' being precisely the trust that he placed in his brother. The emperor was not so much blinded by his brother as blind all along. This is *very* well done – to say nothing of the fact that it was a brother who did the deed, eliciting connections with other themes in the *History*. Niketas will not leave this one alone. With less mastery, but more irony, he notes upon Isaakios' restoration to the throne in 1203: 'led by the hand (χειραγωγούμενος), because of the *blinding* that he had suffered, he who was to *oversee* everything (ὁ τὸ πᾶν ταττόμενος ἐφορᾶν) was raised to the throne' (v.D. 550). We note the allusion to the emperor being led by the hand again (the only two places in the *History* where the verb occurs), and appreciate the tight thematic structure of the narrative (these two books, the first devoted to Alexios III and the one on Isaakios II and Alexios IV, begin with a blind emperor being led by the hand). This 'overseer' was to be just as 'blind' after 1203 as he was before 1195. Nor can we miss the bitter comedy of Niketas' account of the man's grief. This is undeniably a form of cruelty: a personal tragedy has been made into a historical comedy, albeit a dark one, but Niketas has more important things to worry about than Isaakios' feelings.

We note, moreover, that the passive participle ταττόμενος comes from the same verb that gives us the word *taxis*: a blind man was now to supervise the *taxis* of 'everything' (τὸ πᾶν). We recall one other time when these two words were used in close conjunction: Manuel's brother Isaakios, imprisoned so that a transfer of power could take place, who praised the *taxis* ὑφ' ἧς διακρατεῖται τὸ πᾶν (v.D. 49). A hopeless appeal in the earlier case, a cruel irony in the second: *taxis* loses either way.

The overturning of *taxis* is, then, not only a historical theme of Niketas' work but a textual strategy. It operates at every level of the *History*, from the most banal case of a surprise reversal described in a few words to the fate of emperors and nations. Its effects range from rapid change in the circumstances of a man or event in the narrative, to irony and paradox, culminating in the destabilization of the reader's experience of reality. We cannot analyse the entire *History* here, and besides too much will escape the critical attention of one reader given the preliminary state of the field, but we may attempt a typology, to show how the prose and narrative simulate the effect of having experienced Niketas Choniates' twelfth century. This effect is more intense in some places than in others, but it is almost always felt. How is it accomplished?

At the most basic level, which is banal for each individual passage but whose cumulative effect should not be underestimated, are sudden or extreme narrative reversals. Niketas has a favourite vocabulary for such events as well as grammatical strategies. The Sicilian Normans who sacked Thessalonike in 1185 were defeated against all expectation on their return to the West. Niketas ascribes this to God (v.D. 361), who is omnipotent and has mercy for all. Roman affairs are said to lie on the scales and God tipped them in our favour (εις πλάστιγγος ἐπαγαγὼν τὰ ἡμέτερα). This suddenly transformed the victims who were being murdered into the killers of their murderers, and the language appropriately reverses the relation: 'τῶν ἀναιρουμένων ἀποκτεινόντων τοὺς φονευτὰς τῷ ἐξαίφνης εἰς ἀποτόμους ὑπὸ θεοῦ μεταβληθῆναι πολεμιστάς'. The effect is created through the alternation of the passive and active voices of participles and verbs. On the next page (v.D. 362), we read that 'the prisoners became prisoners and the conquerors were conquered (γεγένηνται αἰχμάλωτοι οἱ αἰχμαλωτεύσαντες καὶ κατεκυριεύθησαν οἱ κυριεύσαντες)'. 'They flogged us briefly and were flogged more (μαστιγοῦντες ἡμᾶς βραχέα καὶ μαστιγωθησόμενοι πλείονα)'. We may speak here of a 'tidal' sense of history: what flows in an active sense flows out a passive. These turns can be ironic, especially regarding events of

ideological significance.<sup>9</sup>

I chose the metaphor of flow and tide because Niketas uses it. Consider how Theodoros Stypeiotes tripped up Ioannes Hagiotheodorites in the early years of Manuel (v.D. 58): 'εὐρόει δὲ καὶ τῷ Ἀγιοθεοδωρίτῃ Ἰωάννῃ τὰ διαβούλια, πλὴν τούτῳ ἢ ταχύπλους τῶν πραγμάτων φορὰ καὶ ἀγγίστροφος ὑποσκελιστὴν ἐνδέξιον τὸν Στυππειώτην ἐφιστᾷ Θεόδωρον, ὃς συντρέχων ἢ ἀντιτρέχων τῷ Ἰωάννῃ. . .'. Φορὰ is Niketas' favourite word for the course of history. It is impersonal but can function as an agent, like τύχη in the ancient historians.<sup>10</sup> Here it is the subject of the main sentence. Men are affected by it in this way or that; they are its objects, either in the dative or the accusative. It evokes a river. Even in the first sentence, where things are going well for Hagiotheodorites, his counsels are said to 'flow well (εὐρόει)'. We imagine this φορὰ as difficult to resist, and Niketas characterizes it as 'swift-sailing' (ταχύπλους). But then, as though it were a casual afterthought, he calls it καὶ ἀγγίστροφος: 'liable to sudden change'. This is not so easy to imagine: it forces us to reverse the direction of our thinking about the flow of history. The momentum of our thinking is tripped up by this word in the same way that Hagiotheodorites is tripped up by Stypeiotes, who is just then called an ὑποσκελιστής: 'he who trips one up at the heels'. By the end of the clause the flow of events has become fully reversible or rather it has broken down in either direction, as our ὑποσκελιστής Stypeiotes was able to either run *with* or *against* Hagiotheodorites (συντρέχων ἢ ἀντιτρέχων) in the race for power.

In the *History*, Manuel is one of the few who make an effort to deliberately reverse this flow, whether for good or ill. He was not, we are told (v.D. 95), a fearful man who yielded to misfortune nor one to relax when the sailing was smooth (τῷ οὖρῳ τῶν πραγμάτων). When the Norman king in but one moment

<sup>9</sup> When Manuel arrived at the capital in 1143 after his father's death, the patriarchal throne was vacant. To be properly crowned, he appointed Michael Oxeites patriarch, who then τὸν χρίσαντα χρίει (v.D. 52).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. A. Kaldellis, *Procopius of Caesarea: Tyranny, History, and Philosophy at the End of Antiquity* (Philadelphia, 2004), ch. 5.

overturned all that the Romans had achieved in Italy in the 1150s (ἐν ἀκαρεῖ καιροῦ ἀνατρέψας), Manuel ‘contended and worked against τύχη when she disregarded him (πρὸς τὴν τύχην ἀγνωμονοῦσαν ἀντιπράττων διημιλλᾷτο)’. Reversal here is indicated by verbs in ἀνα- and ἀντι-. In 1167 something funny happened in the forum as he was on his way to march against Hungary. Two statues of female figures stood on the western arch, one called the Roman and the other the Hungarian. ‘Time, which changes everything’, says Niketas, caused the Roman one to fall down. When Manuel heard this, he commanded that it be lifted and the other one cast down in the hope that ταῖς τῶν εἰκόνων μετασκευαῖς μεταβαλεῖν καὶ μεθαρμόζειν οἰόμενος καὶ τὰ πράγματα (v.D. 151). We note the density of μετα- words. The *History* is full of them. But Manuel’s struggle against the flow of things was not always for the better. ‘He halted the *outflow* (ἐκρῶαν) of generosity, lest I say that he forced it to flow backward (εἰς τὸ παλλίπον)’ (v.D. 60). It is this tidal imagery and language that sustains Niketas’ unstable view of history.

Manuel is rare in the *History*, if not unique, in seeking to challenge the flow of events, to contend against τύχη. Most reversals that take place in this history are not intended. Some are largely narrative reversals. For example, Niketas offers an overwrought account of Manuel’s jousting tournament in Antioch – banners flutter, horses prance, gold trappings glitter, the wind rushes, riders fall or win and the like. It was like watching Ares couple with Aphrodite, the historian opines (v.D. 108-110). Well, this passage is immediately followed by the destruction of the Roman army on the return. Thinking that they would be traveling through friendly territory, the emperor disbanded them and instructed them to make their own way home. As a result, they were easily picked off by the Seljuks. When Manuel rushed back and calculated the number of the slain, he smote his thigh in anguish, gnashed his teeth and wept (v.D. 110). The illusions and pageantry of Antioch are shattered in a single page of remorseless butchery. As a narrative strategy, this recalls Thucydides’ decision to set Perikles’ idealistic funeral oration immediately before his account of the plague, whose insistence on bodily deformation and extreme social disruption deflates the visionary politician’s

rhetoric.<sup>11</sup>

For all his flaws, Manuel is treated with more sympathy by Niketas than are the lesser men and women who came after him and who did not even try to oppose τύχη or φορά. We have seen Isaakios II blind before he was blinded. In a sense, Manuel too was blind when he allowed his troops to disband, and in fact Niketas reproaches him for his lack of forethought (προμήθεια). On the other hand, we are allowed to empathize with Manuel's anguish at his own failures of judgment, whereas the reverses suffered by later rulers elicit more irony than grief.

Consider the fate of the *protosebastos* Alexios, the lover of Manuel's widow and effective ruler before Andronikos overthrew him. This man was a tangle of reversals, though none to his credit (unlike Andronikos, who made something interesting from his own mixture of opposite qualities). He was a womanly man (γύνανδρος), effeminate (θηλυδρίας) and slept well past dawn. Lest the sun, so beloved by mankind, pry open his eyes with its brightness, he blocked his windows with heavy curtains. The normal *taxis* of day and night is reversed: 'τὰ μὲν νυκτὸς ἔργα τρυφῶν φωτὶ ποιητῶ τὸ νύκτερον διέλυε ζόφωμα, ἡλίου δέ. . . τάπησι καὶ πέπλοις ἀλουργέσι τὸ φῶς ἀντέφραττε' (v.D. 244). The 'deeds of the night in which he delighted' presumably involved Manuel's widow. As Niketas tells the story, Alexios' hold on power deteriorates in a series of reversals that benefit his enemy Andronikos (cf. the ironic use of a Biblical passage in v.D. 245-246). The final irony is that he is removed from the palace and put under guard in the middle of the night (v.D. 249), his favourite time. This elicits an exclamation by Niketas, in familiar language: 'ὦ πραγμάτων παλινστροφῶν φορᾶς καὶ θᾶπτον ἢ λόγος μετακλινομένης ἐνίστε'. He highlights only this about the *protosebastos*' captivity: his guards did not let him sleep! This detail, insignificant for the course of history, culminates the paradoxical human drama that Niketas is recounting. One extreme leads to the other, at least for those who do not resist. The historian's final verdict is this: had the *protosebastos* armed his

<sup>11</sup> Cf. W. Robert Connor, *Thucydides* (Princeton, 1984), 62-75; C. Orwin, *The Humanity of Thucydides* (Princeton, 1994), 174.

hands for the battle-line and trained his fingers for war – we imagine what he was actually doing with his hands and fingers – and had he not spent half the day snoring – in other words, had he been more like Manuel, in whose bed he was snoring and whose widow held his fingers – he could have resisted Andronikos (v.D. 250).

We will shortly consider the reign of Andronikos, which presents special challenges and opportunities. Our typology has so far considered reversals in the narrative, but the reversal of *taxis* affected even language itself, the means by which reality was expressed. This happens especially in the reign of Alexios III Angelos. Consider a minor example, how his liberal grants of titles degraded all that was previously deemed exalted: ‘ὥς εἶναι τὸ πολῦτιμον ἄτιμον καὶ τὸ φιλότιμον ἄχαρι’ (v.D. 454). Again, this reminds one of Thucydides’ famous description of how civil strife changed the meaning of key words (3.82-83). These themes come together in Niketas’ account of the reception of German envoys at Alexios’ court. For Christmas, 1196, he and his court donned bejeweled, dyed and gold-woven attire. If Alexios meant to awe his guests, the sight had the opposite effect (v.D. 477) and inflamed their *eros* to conquer the servile, unwarlike *Graikoi*. The Romans preened themselves, pointing to the paradox of how their emperor, dressed up like a flowery meadow, was offering the delights of spring in the midst of winter. We note that this, after a fashion, violated natural *taxis* (and cf. v.D. 584). Niketas attributes to the Germans a series of mocking statements that overturn the court’s unnatural *taxis*. First, they state that they themselves have no need for jewels, which serve to make painted women desirable to men. This casts the Romans as women and the Germans as men who wish to overpower them. Then they frighten the Romans – *μορμολύττοντες*, a word that now casts the Romans as children – by stating that it is time to put away feminine brooches and put on iron instead of gold. And then, having filled the Romans’ meadows with grim iron, the Germans go one step further and violate the Roman metaphors by turning their adornments into metaphors of their own. If the embassy fails, they say, the Romans will have to battle men of Mars whose wrathful eyes flash like gemstones and whose beads of sweat on their foreheads outshine



any pearls (v.D. 477-478).

It is hard to imagine a more humiliating deconstruction of the pretensions (and the famous *taxis*) of the court. Engrossed in its fantasies, its silken webs and flowery words are brushed aside by German iron. Niketas has outsiders perform the literary service that he normally delivers himself. The reader experiences this as a startling shift in perspective. Metaphor is dispelled by harsh reality and then further subverted by a counter-metaphor. As Roman readers, we do not know whether to cry or laugh at the state of the court and the way in which emperors sought to impress those men of Mars. This confused reaction resonates with the conflation of comedy and tragedy. We saw above how Niketas turned the reality of Isaakios' blindness into a metaphor and used that against his previous reign, with similar tragicomic effect. But there are moments when this historical irony and the confusion between language and reality freezes the reader in his tracks and elicits only tears. The Balkan wars that followed the Fall caused such horror that on Easter day, 1206, the wailing and laments drowned out the festive chant. 'And while the pious sang about the emptying of the tombs and the overthrow of Hades and the rising up from death, all the cities were sinking into the pits of the earth and the dark and horrifying abodes of Hades' (v.D. 637). We notice again the simultaneous reverse movement, the trademark of Niketas' paradox. In the case of Alexios III, however, it was the pretensions of the court that were being targeted and rudely deconstructed by reality; here it is the most sacred hopes of the Christians. This was not a *taxis* that Niketas wanted to see destroyed, but he was not one to spare his readers this shared grief.

The most paradoxical character in the *History* and the one about whom Niketas offers the most contradictory verdict is Andronikos I Komnenos. It is not clear what we are supposed to make of this man and it seems from the narrative that many contemporaries were equally unsure. We have already seen him as one of those nodal points where tragedy turns into comedy, at the end of his career (in the boat). In that episode we also witness his transformation from an Odyssean man of wiles to a woman, a Siren with two female backup singers who fails to seduce her

victim. Gender reversals inform many passages in which he appears.<sup>12</sup> There is no doubt that he is a manly man, a man of action, a seducer of women. But, as we have seen, in his extravagance he often veers closer to the feminine. This comes out very strongly in the account of his seduction of Philippa in Antioch, a feat of Aphrodite and Eros that he performs immediately after his defeat in the works of Ares, Deimos and Phobos – these are the mythological coordinates of Niketas' own narrative (v.D. 138-139). His attempts to seduce Philippa make Andronikos effeminate and he is described in the language that one would a woman, and his manliness is openly questioned.

The language of an even earlier episode is more interesting in this regard. It concerns Andronikos' affair with Manuel's niece Eudokia, which landed him into a great deal of trouble but from which he escaped because of his manliness (ἀνδρεία: v.D. 104). The pair were trapped by her relatives making out in a tent at the camp near Pelagonia and he had but minutes to devise an escape. Eudokia here is described as a manly woman, as δραστήριον τὸ φρονεῖν, οὐμενοῦν κατὰ γυναῖκας τὴν σύνεσιν (v.D. 105). The plan proposed by this manly cousin-lover is, effectively, to make Andronikos into a woman for the purposes of escape. His first reaction to the situation is to gird on his long sword – τὴν ἐπιμήκη διαζωσάμενος μάχαιραν – an action of manly symbolism, but she advises him instead to disguise himself like a woman – ὑπετίθει τῷ ἐρωμένῳ γυναικείαν ὑποδύναι στολὴν – to become like one of her bed-women (τινὶ τῶν προκοίτων καὶ κατευναστριῶν γυναικῶν) – and pretend to carry out her command to leave. So the manly Eudokia is proposing a direct reversal of their 'natural' roles. Andronikos, however, again affirms his manly nature, described by Niketas in tongue-in-cheek language. He rejects her plan and reveals his very masculine sexuality: 'οὐκοῦν τὸ ξίφος γυμνώσας καὶ δοῦς τοῦτο τῇ δεξιᾷ ἐφάλλεται τὴν σκηνὴν ἐγκαρσίως διατέμνων καὶ ἐν ἐνὶ πηδήματι...' he jumps through the slit he has cut with his naked sword.<sup>13</sup> This rapid succession of

<sup>12</sup> See also S. Efthymiadis, 'Greek and Biblical *Exempla* in the Service of an Artful Writer' (in this volume).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Homer, *Odyssey* X 321; for temporary gender reversal, cf. Hektor and Andromache in *Iliad* VI.

contradictory images is the hallmark of Andronikos' textual presence. From Ares to Aphrodite, man to woman, governor to prisoner, courtier to fugitive, this versatile, ambiguous and treacherous character has many pasts that allow him to continually refashion himself.<sup>14</sup>

As regent and then emperor, Andronikos introduces the reign of paradox; he does not merely reverse natural *taxis*, he shreds it apart. For example, Niketas highlights how his own adherents were not treated better than his enemies: all were in fear. On one and the same day, the same man would be exalted and cast down (v.D. 259). Praise from him was recognized as an insult; gifts were a prelude to losing everything; and kind attention presaged destruction. Niketas' vision of the *φορὰ* is here infused with a Thucydidean analysis: 'the *φορὰ* of those times was irresistible and the mutual distrust that prevailed among even the closest friends was an intolerable evil' (v.D. 258). Families were torn apart, brother against brother and father against son, calling for additional participial modulations: 'πολλοὶ δὲ κἀν τῷ ἄρτι κατηγορεῖν κατηγορήντο' (cf. also v.D. 294-295, 314-315). The priests who absolved Andronikos of his oath to Manuel and Alexios II, after his murder of the latter, were first honoured and then despised (v.D. 276-277). There was no Manuel now to resist this *φορὰ*. Only one man stood against it, the patriarch Theodosios Boradiotes, who finally had to abdicate. But he is the only person in the *History* described thusly: he was not intimidated by Andronikos, he was not frightened by the threats, but he remained steady like a jutting rock on which the surging waves break, scattering the sea into froth and spray (v.D. 261). Only one man among the Romans!

The most startling images confront us. The first of Andronikos' reign, following immediately upon the account of his murder of Alexios II with which the previous book closed, is of the old man sleeping with his nephew's eleven-year old bride. Opposites are conjoined: 'ὁ πέπων τὴν ὁμφακίζουσαν, ὁ ὑπέρωρος τὴν ἡλικίαν τὴν ὀρθότιτον νεάνιδα, ὁ ῥικνὸς καὶ χαλαρὸς τὴν ῥοδοδάκτυλον

<sup>14</sup> Cf. v.D. 141: 'κάπὶ τὰς πρώην ἐπαναδραμῶν δραπετεύσεις καὶ πρὸς τὰς παλαιτέρας αὐτοῦ μηχανὰς ἀπιδών'.

καὶ δρόσον ἔρωτος στάζουσιν' (v.D. 275-276). This is the first image of the reign. If it disgusts us, what are we to make of Andronikos' stratagem in the siege of Nikaia, being defended by Isaakios Angelos? The tyrant brought Angelos' mother from the capital and lashed her to a battering ram to deter the besieged from trying to destroy it (v.D. 282). Niketas calls this act foreign to human nature. He highlights the paradox: 'men then saw for the first time soft flesh, in truth that of a woman, being used as a bulwark for iron, changing its natural order (*taxis*) and becoming something it was not. . . iron protected by a human body' – to say nothing of the sexual dimension of the image.

We need not review here all the strange contrasts of Andronikos' reign, which Niketas highlights by setting his general account of the tyrant's reign in the context of the Norman invasion of the Balkans. Sexual escapades and aloof indifference are juxtaposed to the terror of the people of Constantinople, even though the historian is often reaching back into the two years before the attack. Let us cite here only Niketas' general claim that 'these deeds were of a man who fought against the very nature of things' (τῇ φύσει τῶν πραγμάτων: v.D. 321) and who fought too little against the Normans. The problem that we cannot avoid at this point is that the greatest contradiction in the account of the reign is not a function of Andronikos but belongs to Niketas' own evaluation of the man. Suddenly, in the midst of a passage detailing all of his cruelties and horrors, we encounter a panegyric account of his good policies (v.D. 324). This is a sudden, even wrenching turn to his positive contributions, which are substantial. We have just been told that he was irascible, savage and harsh, implacable in punishing, and that he made sport of the misfortunes of others. 'But many good actions can be set down to him'. Specifically, he suppressed the greed of those who had power and restored justice to the financial system. As a result, all the provinces began to flourish and the population began to increase (v.D. 325). This is stunning, to say the least, as nothing comparable is said of any other ruler in the *History*. Andronikos paid his assessors well, so they would not squeeze the provincials, and punished them harshly if they did; he also refused to sell offices. By suppressing corruption, he caused the provinces to

flourish, a development that Niketas describes at length as a golden age of prosperity and justice.

What is going on? The contrast is so striking that it seems as though a panegyric of Andronikos has been interpolated into a text that is otherwise hostile to him. 'In a short time, the majority of the cities revived and regained their former happiness' (v.D. 326). We are speechless. This is one of the most paradoxical reverses in the narrative. And it continues for pages. Andronikos finally and effectively suppressed the provincials' bad habit of plundering shipwrecks (v.D. 326-329). Niketas calls this a change wrought by God (v.D. 329). There follows an account of his buildings; he appointed just *praitores* and paid them well (v.D. 330); he was a fair judge, open and accessible to both poor and rich (v.D. 330); he forbade theological debates but honoured learning (v.D. 331); he restored the church of the Forty Martyrs (v.D. 332). Then this idyll gradually comes to a close. He ordered a portrait of Manuel's widow defaced, changing her youthful beauty into the wrinkles of a hag, so that his crime would elicit less pity (v.D. 332-333). He compared himself to David and made himself out to have been an apostle of Christ among the gentiles in the barbarian lands of his exile (v.D. 333-334). And then his fears are brought back to the fore and he becomes a killing and blinding monster again, imposing collective punishment upon the aristocracy (v.D. 334-336). We are now back to the days of the Norman invasion and the end of the reign. Clearly, all the positive things that we have been told were a summary of policies implemented between 1183 and 1185. The tyrant is about to be lynched. But how can we explain Niketas' temporary reversal?

We should not underestimate the challenge posed by this passage to any reading of the *History*. We cannot, for instance, simply say that as an impartial historian Niketas faithfully recorded both the good and the bad actions of each emperor. He is not that kind of historian. For one thing, he has embellished both the good and the bad with awesome literary artistry. He does not simply depict Andronikos as a bad ruler, he paints the portrait of a depraved, cruel and dirty old man (*gerontion*, he calls him). Moreover, he does not grudgingly admit that this tyrant also did some good

thing. No, he glowingly *exaggerates* the benefits that he conferred on the Roman population. 'In a short amount of time, the cities grew in population, the earth gave back its bounty hundredfold and the cost of living was made easier' (v.D. 330). Like this sentence, the panegyric lacks specificity in terms of names and places and appears to have been elaborated for effect. In other words, he *wanted* to create as great a contrast as possible between the good and the bad; in this effort 'the facts', I believe, were secondary. Niketas is manipulating reversal and paradox to have an effect on his readers, but what effect? By this point, he could not expect us to regard him as a historian who reports the facts with 'no respect for persons'. His *History* is all about persons.

Before coming to grips with the panegyric section, let us consider the account of Andronikos' death, because there is a similar, albeit less perplexing, shift in perspective there too. By this point in the *History*, most readers probably have come to the point of hating Andronikos and feeling that any punishment is too good for him. His death is, to be sure, gruesome and repellent, but if anyone deserved such a thing it was he. Yet note what happens: as Andronikos begins to lose body parts, Niketas suddenly castigates 'the stupid and most ignorant inhabitants of Constantinople' – he scornfully lists their vulgar professions and compares them to flies – for reviling the man and not remembering that he had been emperor of the Romans, that they had sworn oaths to him and praised him while he still ruled (v.D. 349-350). Now, in 'wickedly' abusing him and tearing him apart, they gave way to 'irrational anger and most absurd madness. . . The most shameless among them threw stones at him and called him a rabid dog'. It is of course they who are revealed as the rabid dogs here if we follow the irony that Niketas' reversal suggests. If we allow the language to guide our reactions, we may situate ourselves with a group that is mentioned briefly at the beginning of the dreadful account: those who saw the wreck that Andronikos had become and who spared a tear for him (v.D. 349). For his part, Andronikos endured all 'bravely' (γενναίως) and retained his senses (v.D. 350).

What is going on here? The climax of Andronikos' downfall is

marred by sympathy. Niketas shifts his attention from the expected and perhaps just punishment of a loathsome tyrant to the vulgarity of his executioners, the crowd of Constantinople. And more elevated elements of Roman society were behind Andronikos' death, and they are targeted equally, if only implicitly. The death of Andronikos becomes the mirror of Roman society: less interested in the tyrant, Niketas suddenly holds this mirror up to us, so that we may see who we are. Just when we thought that the narrative would externalize him, that we could gaze as outside observers at his punishment, that defeated and pathetic object becomes a public mirror in which we see ourselves: all other Romans become the observed. The cruel death of a hated tyrant reveals the cruelty in the heart of us all. Niketas has again turned the tables and reversed our expectations.

Two conclusions emerge from this brief reversal, the first political and the second moral. The first has to do with the respect that Niketas believes was owed to the imperial position. It is for this disrespect and inconsistency that he chiefly accuses Andronikos' killers. Whatever the man deserved, by treating him so they were lessening the authority of Roman *archê*, cheapening their own institutions and contributing to the spiral of political decline that led them to 1204, when no one would obey anyone and nothing was held to be sacred, not by the Romans and not by the Latins. In his account of Alexios III, Niketas addresses the Roman *archê* directly, lamenting the rapists who have so often seized and defiled her (v.D. 498-499). There is, then, an element of conservative respect for authority behind Niketas' condemnation of the mob that killed Andronikos. That act was one step in the erosion of Roman power. Taking a long-term view, as Niketas could and had to after 1204, the manner of Andronikos' killing was politically inexpedient and brought out the worst in people.

We will defer the second – moral – conclusion that emerges from Niketas' narrative of Andronikos' death to the end. Let us now return to the panegyric digression in his account of the reign. The contrast is deliberate and rhetorically elaborated. The point of it is not to 'rehabilitate' Andronikos; that is too banal a goal for Niketas' talents and, besides, as an interpretation it is ruled out by

the fact that the overall picture is extremely negative. No, the panegyric cannot be read apart from the rest of the reign. It requires that the best effects of imperial action be set next to the worst. Something so good had to emerge, or could only emerge, from its opposite. This was not a law of history. Niketas certainly knew about happier ages when emperors improved their subjects' welfare without behaving like Andronikos. The striking contrast, the law of opposites, is, then, a function of the age in question. The panegyric is another mirror, reflecting the paradox of the times. Only a monster such as Andronikos could bring about this improvement, which reveals not so much the good in him as the corruption of Roman public life, in the same way that his death brought out the cruelty of the population. By praising his positive policies, Niketas reverses the direction of his criticism onto the prevailing state of affairs. The key to interpreting this passage is that Andronikos succeeded in reform only through the threat of violence. This is highlighted by his edict quoted by Niketas, whose preamble begins with the amazing declaration that there is no wrong that an emperor cannot set right if only he is not squeamish in using the sword (v.D. 327). This indicts not Andronikos himself but all whom he aimed to reform, tax collectors in particular but also the population at large (in the case of shipwrecks). It is they who, by this sudden reversal of perspective, are revealed as corrupt, heartless and immoral. Having cast Andronikos as a violent monster, Niketas expends the capital of this image by turning it against Romania as a whole. In better times, in a less corrupt common-wealth, reform could be effected through persuasion. But only a monster such as he could reform *these* thieves. The one deserved the other. The panegyric is less about Andronikos than about his times and his subjects. 'Our times are not like those of Solon', Niketas notes after the Fall (v.D. 585).

Returning now to Andronikos' death, the second conclusion that emerges from Niketas' narrative is, as I mentioned above, moral. At the end of his account of the reign of Isaakios II, the man who was chiefly responsible for the manner of Andronikos' death, Niketas notes that 'providence, which governs all in the best way, wants avengers to treat even their greatest enemies with



compassion, as they should suspect that power is not permanent; and that both the ungirding of power and the return motion from one state back to that same state occurs often by a throw of the dice (μετακύβευσις) or an oscillation (παλινδρόμησις) (v.D. 452). The randomness and tidal tendencies of power are here acknowledged as a given fact about history. The *History* as a whole proves that Byzantine *taxis* was an illusion, a knowledge that any refugee after 1204 felt deeply. Yet the lesson that Niketas drew was not 'every man for himself'. Rather, he insists on simple compassion as the only sensible response. The paradoxes of history may have no intrinsic meaning and even if they are (somehow) caused by providence, its ways are mysterious and apparently beyond human comprehension. The story that he tells, as we have seen repeatedly, makes no 'sense', but that does not mean that our response to history need also be amoral. The *History* is the testament of a man struggling to reconstitute his humanity in the face of so much senselessness.