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A GREAT INTRODUCTION INTO THE SUBJECT OF BYZANTINE ARISTOCRATIC FAMILY (NATHAN LEIDHOLM, *ELITE BYZANTINE KINSHIP*, *CA. 950–1204: BLOOD*, *REPUTATION AND THE* GENOS, LEEDS: ARC HUMANITIES PRESS 2019, 186 S.)

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The issue of Byzantine aristocratic families has been attracting the attention of researchers for years. Since the studies published by Alexander Kazhdan, it has become clear that attempts to directly juxtapose the Western European society and Byzantium can lead to wrong conclusions. The differences between them are too far-reaching for such approach to be reliable. These two cultural circles, despite sharing many common elements, have developed in completely different circumstances. The differences in many aspects touch upon the basic elements that characterize medieval societies. Feudalism never truly developed in the east, nor did the firm social hierarchy.² Understanding these differences meant that Byzantinology had to follow its own individual path and develop own principles and terminology defining the inhabitants of the Empire. One of the processes highlighted by the aforementioned researcher, characterizing the transition from the middle- to late-Byzantine period, is the progressing "aristocratization" of culture, society and politics from the 11th century onward.³ The Byzantine aristocracy that originated in the times of iconoclasm grew to become the primary social group in Byzantium, exercising power during the last centuries of the state. It was almost exclusively in this group that all power disputes took place during this period (hence the title and subject matter of the work of Jean-Claude Cheynet)⁴ and the reviewed work of Nathan Leidholm is devoted to this group.

The Author undertook the task of investigating the issue of kinship among the Byzantine aristocracy, which should arouse the interest of researchers focused on the social and political history of Byzantium. This is because no work has been written so far that would deal with this topic comprehensively. The problem is interesting and definitely requires undertaking such an examination. Due to its aforementioned separation from the Western society, the Byzantine Empire developed its own norms and terminology defining family relations. So far, however, there has been some cloudiness in this area, which is evident in the terminology.

¹ Kazhdan, Constable 1982, 23.

² Kazhdan, Constable 1982, 25.

³ Kazhdan, Epstein 1985, 99–119.

⁴ Cheynet 1990.

The arbitrary and inconsequential use of certain terms that had remained unclear became quite a common occurrence. The terms "family" and "clan" often functioned interchangeably. Some scholars used this word as a synonym for extended family, those who form a group of people of common descent. However, there was a clear lack of consistency in this regard. The problem derives from an attempt to translate Greek terminology into modern languages, which, of course, leads to distortion of the true meaning in many cases. Of the many Greek words covering family topics, the word genos, which has been widespread especially since the 10th century, has become a source of many problems in an attempt to fully understand its context in the Byzantine culture. It is genos - the word meaning both family and race - that Leidholm's publication is focused on.⁵

The Author begins (Introduction) by outlining the subject and framework of the discussed problem and introduces the reader to the history of the Byzantine aristocracy in the years 950– 1204. The reason for such a chronological scope of the work is described as being: "designed to cover the period in which the *genos* clearly emerged as one of the defining characteristics of the Byzantine aristocracy". 6 The last part of the Introduction addresses the aforementioned controversies related to the subject of family and kinship in Byzantium. A brief outline of the history of research in this field is presented. It is suggested that since the 1980s, when Alexander Kazhdan published his studies on family, interest in this issue has weakened. Yet there is still a lot to say in this regard, and the role of kinship remains very important, as indicated by the rich terminology used by the inhabitants of the Empire. Attention is paid to the tendency of comparing the Western European society with Byzantium, especially regarding the transition from Sippe (which the Author summarizes as "a nebulous clan structure") to Geschlecht ("closely defined lineage"). The Author, being aware of the problems associated with such a transfer of social processes into another cultural circle, points out that his work addresses the subject of family without such prejudices.⁸

The first chapter (Defining "the Family" in Byzantine Sources and Modern Historiography) covers the topic of defining the concept of Byzantine family in sources and historiography. At the beginning, the reader is introduced to the terminology used in the Empire. Genos functioned alongside words such as syggeneia and oikos. So far, most of the scholars' attention has been paid to the study of the latter, which defined a small, nuclear

⁵ Leidholm 2019, 1–2.

⁶ Leidholm 2019, 2.

⁷ Leidholm 2019, 8.

⁸ Leidholm 2019, 9–10.

⁹ Leidholm 2019, 13–35.

family or a single household. 10 Genos, on the other hand, although it was never the main subject of any work, has appeared in many academic publications. The Author, therefore, outlines the history of this word in Byzantine studies while simultaneously demonstrating a very good knowledge of the literature on the subject. He refers to attempts to define this term in the works of such historians as Michael Grunbart, Paul Magdalino, Evelyne Patlagean and Jean-Claude Cheynet. He does not overlook publications by Anthony Kaldellis and Gill Page that are focused more on ethnic identity than aristocracy. ¹¹ The main part of the chapter is devoted to sources in which the Author seeks hints that would help understand the scope of genos. It is pointed out that legal and philosophical sources prove to be the most useful, while narrative texts do not provide much specific information.¹² There is a lot of truth in this, although the latter ones, when properly analyzed, can also provide a lot of indirect, yet very useful data that can be helpful in seeking the definition of genos. The cognatic character of it is already underlined at the beginning, a fact that will be important later on. 13 The reader is presented with the analysis of source texts that include i.a. Nikephoros Blemmydes, Demetrios Chomatenos and Eustathios Romaios. The last part of the chapter discusses the boundaries of the term genos.¹⁴ From a vertical, or time, perspective, it means reaching the farthest common ancestor, and, from a horizontal perspective, it would include the furthest relatives who are considered members of the same family. The Author, while analyzing fragments of Michael Attaleiates, Basilics of Leo VI and ecclesiastical writings of Basil the Great, draws attention to the fact that there were many attempts to find the answer to the question of where one genos ends and the next begins. These debates directly affected the lives of Byzantines through marriage law. To conclude the chapter, the Author presents the definition of genos as a group of relatives consisting of both living persons and ancestors that go far beyond a single household. A relevant element was the awareness of this structure as something natural, and its external manifestation were the surnames and reputation associated with them. However, according to the Author, neither surnames, nor legal sources that perceive the seventh level of kinship to be the border of a single family, are key to defining family boundaries. Genos could reach even further. 15

¹⁰ Leidholm 2019, 13–14.

¹¹ Leidholm 2019, 15–19.

¹² Leidholm 2019, 19.

¹³ Leidholm 2019, 20.

¹⁴ Leidholm 2019, 28–33.

¹⁵ Leidholm 2019, 33–35.

The second chapter (The Language of Kinship) is devoted to issues related to the specific terminology of kinship. 16 In this part of the work, the Author presents an overview of the vocabulary used by the Byzantines in regards to relatives. He notices the gradual transformation that is taking place in this area, along with the development of family identity and the need to precisely determine the position of a given person. Some examples of it include new terms, such as *sympentheros*, *syggambros* or *trigenia*. They show that marriages and interfamilial alliances had become a matter of great importance. ¹⁷ Synonyms and other family-related terms are also discussed. Syggeneia, as a word focusing on kinship, rather than on the family as a group, is rejected by the Author as a synonym for the *genos*. The situation is similar with familia – a term borrowed from Latin that describes a small family. Genea functions as an alternative version of the word genos. The last discussed synonym is phylon. 18 The Author also undertakes the analysis of the frequency of appearance of *genos* in narrative sources and does so with the help of an online database of the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*. When presented in the form of a graph, it gives a perspective on the increasing use of this terminology together with the importance of families in the history of Byzantium.¹⁹ The reader also gets information on how this terminology became a part of the Byzantine vocabulary. The matter of understanding it not only as a family, but also more widely as a race, is not omitted. There is also an interesting take on how it functioned among the monastic congregations.²⁰ This indicates that although genos could have been used in a variety of circumstances, both for large and small groups, in reference to consanguineous or ethnic groups, it possessed some inherent and unchanging characteristics. Unfortunately, the chapter entitled "The Language of Kinship" does not contain other terms and they are only introduced much later. For example, it would be the words that were used to distinguish the maternal and paternal origin. 21 Also, despite the frequent use of the English equivalent by the Author, the Greek noun for the connection by marriage or affinity does not appear anywhere $(k\bar{e}dos)$.²²

The next chapter (Marriage Impediments and the Concept of Family) draws attention to the marriage impediments that are directly related to the understanding of *genos* in the Byzantine

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¹⁶ Leidholm 2019, 37–62.

¹⁷ Leidholm 2019, 42.

¹⁸ Leidholm 2019, 42–45.

¹⁹ Leidholm 2019, 45–48.

²⁰ Leidholm 2019, 48–60.

²¹ It appears later on in the chapter 4: Leidholm 2019, 104.

²² There are many examples of this word appearing in this context, for example: *Nicéphore Bryennio Histoire*, rec. Gautier P., Bruxelles 1975, IV 31, 301; *Annae Comnenae Alexias*, rec. D. Reinsch, A. Kambylis, Berlin 2001, II 1.4, 56.

culture. It is mostly the chronologically presented history of disputes regarding the degree of kinship that would prohibit a marriage.²³ This problem is all the more important as it allows to see where bonds of kinship and family ended in the eyes of the Empire's inhabitants, and thus how widely genos was perceived. This matter underwent far-reaching evolution with the development of ancestral consciousness and the increasingly frequent alliances through marriages that connected multiple genē together. Unsurprisingly, the Author starts with the legislation of Leo VI (886–912).²⁴ He juxtaposes church and state law which, to some extent, operated in parallel. A lot of room was dedicated to the so-called *Tome of Sissinios*, written by the patriarch of Constantinople at the turn of the 10th and 11th centuries. ²⁵ Sissinios was the first of the series of patriarchs that had an interest in marriage law. His successors, Alexios Studite and Michael Keroularios, are also mentioned.²⁶ Additionally, the critique of *Tome of* Sissinios, known as Logos Antirrhetikos by Nikolaos Skribas (wrongly named Michael in Leidholm's book), is taken into account. The Author uses his commentary to point out that the affine relationship and consanguinity were clearly distinguished.²⁷ A large part of the discussion focuses on the issue of seventh degree relationships. The Author points out that, although marriages between people who are related like this were officially banned only in the days of Manuel I Komnenos, in reality the clergy already forbade such relationships in the 11th century. ²⁸ Commentaries on marriages by the 13th-century metropolitan of Ohrid, Demetrios Chomatenos, are also referenced, even though they exceed the chronological framework of the book. Indeed, they constitute vital material for studies on the functioning and understanding of family in the Byzantine society.²⁹

The fourth chapter (Interrogating Consanguinity in a Byzantine Context) begins with a quote from the histories by Ioannes Zonaras, in which the chronicler indicates that the noble origin of Konstantinos X was adulterated, as he descended from the Doukas family only through his maternal side.³⁰ This fragment is a rare example showing that the matrilineal kinship was considered as somehow impaired to patrilineal. It is especially unusual because inheritance laws in Byzantium were cognatic as it was pointed out. In search for an answer to

²³ Leidholm 2019, 63–86.

²⁴ Leidholm 2019, 64–65.

²⁵ Leidholm 2019, 66–67.

²⁶ Leidholm 2019, 70–71.

²⁷ Leidholm 2019, 73.

²⁸ Leidholm 2019, 76–82.

²⁹ Leidholm 2019, 82–84.

³⁰ Leidholm 2019, 87. Ioannes Zonaras fragment cited in the text is: Ioannes Zonaras, *Epitomae Historiarum*, III, rec. T. Büttner-Wobts, Bonn 1897, XVIII 8.12–14, 675–676.

the matter raised by the curious fragment of Zonaras, the Author proposes an analysis of source material, interpreting the issue of human reproduction and conception. This approach is justified with the help of Marshall Sahlins' work who remarks that the act of procreation was not only a physiological phenomenon but also had a meaningful social context.³¹ The extraordinary value of shared blood in Byzantine culture is outlined in the following part of the chapter.³² The Byzantines believed that certain qualities and predispositions, as well as nobility, were transmitted with blood. While describing the problem, the Author quotes a fragment of Niketas Choniates, referring to family disputes around the succession after Alexios I.³³ The issue of the symbolic meaning of blood begs for a reference to the AIMA prophecy, especially since it appears in the cited work by Choniates. ³⁴ Yet there is no mention of it in the book. It is quite a substantial omission, given the impact of this superstition on the family relations and politics in the second half of the 12th century. 35 The reader can also learn about the medical perspective on kinship, mainly in the context of works by Galen that were known to the Byzantines. Allusions to his texts can be found in Michael Psellos, Theodoros Balsamon, the already mentioned Eustathios Romaios and others.³⁶ This is important because ancient scholars recognized the role of male semen and female seed in passing certain characteristic to the offspring, while also assessing that women are less perfect than men. This is indeed a very interesting observation and it could have a significant impact on the perception of gender and kinship in Byzantium. Continuing his narrative, the Author also describes physical predispositions, which are underlined in the sources as hereditary. However, he points out that it is difficult to specifically point out any distinction in that matter between features that can only be inherited from women or men.³⁷ The rest of the chapter deals with the issue of the purity of origin.³⁸ Common occurrences in Byzantine sources are references to pure or mixed origin. They show that there was a need to clarify the relationships of individuals with their ancestors. The Author notes that such descriptions were often accompanied by a clear distinction between paternal and maternal lines.³⁹ There is no doubt that the Byzantines were well aware of this, as evidenced by numerous examples from

³¹ Leidholm 2019, 88.

³² Leidholm 2019, 88–93.

³³ Leidholm 2019, 89.

³⁴ Nicetae Choniatae Historia, rec. I. A. van Dieten, Berlin 1975, 169.

³⁵ Nicetae Choniatae Historia, 292; Shukurov 1995, 161–162; Brand 1968, 68, 97.

³⁶ Leidholm 2019, 93–97.

³⁷ Leidholm 2019, 100–103.

³⁸ Leidholm 2019, 103–106.

³⁹ Leidholm 2019, 104.

source texts. 40 As for the blood mixing, it is noted that the term functioned as a way to describe incestuous relationships and mixed origins.⁴¹ The Author does not devote much space to this issue, which is somewhat disappointing, because the problem of mixing families requires further research. Mixed family lines are particularly interesting here as they referred to the heritage of several common genē. Such combined multi-surname lineages appeared frequently since the 12th century. 42 The female line of origin, as noted in the chapter, is often mentioned next to the male and praised in a similar way. Still, there are hints that are clearly emphasizing the priority of the male lineage.⁴³ The Author refers to a *praktikon* from 1073, documenting the allocation of land by the emperor Michael VII to Andronikos Doukas. Gennadi Litavrin, as it is noted, made an observation that in this document male heads of the family are always favoured.⁴⁴ Further in the chapter, while analyzing the perception of genealogy by women in the Empire, the Author notes that they more often emphasized their maternal lineage, as evidenced by the typikon of the monastery of the Theotokos Kecharitomenē, founded by Eirene Doukaina. 45 In conclusion, the Author points out that, although many scholars now accept a certain superiority of agnatic origin in Byzantium, there is a lot of evidence contradicting this view. 46 While it is certainly true, the issue requires further research, as it is clearly visible that the answer is not conclusive. One of the cases that would need additional research are the matrilineal lines of imperial dynasties and how they were perceived in comparison with the male line of the dynasty. These are very important issues related to the dynastic policy of the Komnenoi.⁴⁷

A separate chapter of the work (Family Names and the Politics of Reputation) is devoted to the issue of surnames and the reputation associated with them. ⁴⁸ Undoubtedly, surnames would still benefit from further research, especially in the context of their value as elements shaping the family identity. One of the basic assumptions in the reviewed work is that they were an external manifestation of the *genos*. As such, they were also related to the reputation of a given family, which largely shaped the position and image of people who belonged to

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⁴⁰ One of the most clear examples of such distinction can be found in Nikephoros Bryennios work: *Nicéphore Bryennio Historie*, III 6, 219.

⁴¹ Leidholm 2019, 103–106.

⁴² On the problem of multiple surnames among the Byzantine aristocracy see especially: Nicol 1984.

⁴³ Leidholm 2019, 106–108.

⁴⁴ Leidholm 2019, 106–107.

⁴⁵ Leidholm 2019, 108.

⁴⁶ Leidholm 2019, 109.

⁴⁷ A good example is the identification of Isaakios II and Alexios III of the Angelos family. The first preferred to use Angelos surname, while the latter adopted the surname of his grandmother – Komnenos: *Nicetae Choniatae Historia*, 459.

⁴⁸ Leidholm 2019, 111–135.

such a group.⁴⁹ The Author draws attention to the extensive and recurring vocabulary of adjectives related to the reputation of families.⁵⁰ In fact, fame was an extremely important element, because it was one of the conditions of belonging to the aristocracy.⁵¹ The Author cites several passages from Michael Attaleiates, Michael Psellos and Katakalon Kekaumenos that offer some insight into the problem. He also notes that the reputation of the nobles in the Byzantine culture emphasized military virtues.⁵² This corresponds to the birth in the 12th century of a new social ideal - a noble and brave "knight", visible both in the political ideology of the Komnenian emperors and in culture in the form of the popular stories of the heroic akritēs, Basileios Digenes.⁵³ In terms of surnames, the Author emphasizes their role in conveying the noble values and glory of their predecessors. He refers to the laudations in honour of the children of Nikephoros Bryennios and Anna Komnene, who were the heirs of the glory of the Komnenoi and the Doukai (through their grandmother).⁵⁴ An observation is made about the lack of strict rules regarding the inheritance of surnames in the Byzantine society.⁵⁵ As it has already been pointed out earlier, here too it should be noted that the Author does not make any further observations on the matter of surname inheritance and their role in shaping one's identity. Some problems related to the specificity of surnames in Byzantium would require further analysis. Even the aforementioned example of the children of Anna Komnene raises some questions. Since her children preferred to take her names as more prestigious, does this mean the end of the illustrious Bryennios line? Such and similar issues still require further analysis. As the Author notes, the phenomenon of describing individuals using only surnames is very common in the sources. In this way a person becomes the personification of the whole genos. The Author also confirms Cheynet's observations about the equal value of titles and surnames.⁵⁶ The honour of being the descendant of the imperial dynasty had such a high value that the official title was unnecessary. A separate discussion is also devoted to lead seals that allow to look at the personal perception of the family identity.⁵⁷ Such seals, as the Author remarks, sacrificed iconographic representations in order to include a precise description of the owner's origin. Theses texts were often written in poetic language and contained detailed information about the paternal and maternal genē.

⁴⁹ Leidholm 2019, 111–112.

⁵⁰ Leidholm 2019, 112–113.

⁵¹ Ragia 2016, 353.

⁵² Leidholm 2019, 114–115.

⁵³ Kazhdan 1984, 50.

⁵⁴ Leidholm 2019, 119–120.

⁵⁵ Leidholm 2019, 120, 123.

⁵⁶ Leidholm 2019, 124.

⁵⁷ Leidholm 2019, 128–132.

People closely related to one of the emperors, of course, invoked a specific degree of kinship with the ruler. The pride of belonging to a famous *genos* played a central role in such seals.

The last chapter (Kinship and Political Developments of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries) serves as a review and summary of imperial policy in its relations with the Byzantine aristocracy between ca. 900 and 1204. 58 The Author briefly presents the situation prevailing among the aristocratic elites during the Macedonian dynasty, their struggle for power in the 11th century and the triumph of the Komnenoi along with their specific dynastic policy. It is rather a synthetic representation of history, based on available literature. The Author often remains neutral with the discussed issues. Moving on to the history of the reign of Alexios I Komnenos, he merely points out that there is a dispute regarding the reception of his rule and reforms.⁵⁹ Between references to contemporary literature examining the internal policy of the emperors, however, one can find few original points. Attention is drawn to the issue of family identity that was raised during the description of the usurpation of Alexios III Angelos, which was supported by other aristocratic families. The Author notes that the merging of these families with the Komnenos genos did not eliminate their individual identity. 60 Again, this is not entirely convincing and requires further investigation. It is true that many families retained their independence, clearly visible in their surnames. Yet, some of the families apparently dropped their paternal surnames and adopted the more prestigious ones. In the subsequent generations of such lines, it seems that their original genos was replaced by the new one. This happened with the Bryennioi that were mentioned before and to some extent with the Angelos family by the end of the 12th century. 61

The factual side of Leidholm's work remains mostly impeccable. The only minor mistake, that appears on the first page of the introduction, is the claim that Vatatzes' family career started with the appointment of Basileios Vatatzes as a Domestic of the East. As the Author himself notes elsewhere, this family, in the first half of the 12th century, already belonged to the most famous and prominent in Byzantium. This is evidenced by the marriage of Theodoros Vatatzes with a daughter of Ioannes II Komnenos. Basileios Vatatzes was described by Niketas Choniates as coming from an undistinguished family, because he probably belonged to another branch of the same *genos*, only distantly related to the emperor's son-in-law. But the surname Vatatzes was well known by the Byzantines in the 12th

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⁵⁸ Leidholm 2019, 137–161.

⁵⁹ Leidholm 2019, 152–153.

⁶⁰ Leidholm 2019, 159.

⁶¹ See note 47.

⁶² Leidholm 2019, 1.

⁶³ Leidholm 2019, 156.

century.⁶⁴ Another small mistake is the mistranslated word *kecharitomenē*, which has been translated as "of good hope", where it should be "full of grace".⁶⁵ These oversights, however, do not negatively affect the text as an entirety. The Author uses a wide and multilingual spectrum of secondary literature. He is familiar with the discourses present in modern Byzantine studies. The source base is extensive although in some cases somewhat lacking. For example, there are no Wolfram Hörander's edition of Theodoros Prodromos's poems, which could prove useful for the study of a *genos* reputation.⁶⁶ The Author refers to that Byzantine poet only through some of his works that were published in the appendix to the *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae* edition of Nikephoros Bryennios's chronicle.⁶⁷ The language and composition of the work is very good. The subsequent issues are presented and explained in a clear and consistent manner. Chapters have a clear structure and consist of subsections that help the reader in orientating the narrative.

The book *Elite Byzantine Kinship ca. 950–1204: Blood, Reputation and the Genos* by Leidholm is an important contribution to the Byzantine social history. On slightly over 160 pages, the Author managed to address many important issues and offered an interesting and quite insightful overview of the subject matter that should catch the attention of every researcher familiar with the Byzantine aristocracy. It's a reliable study that successfully sorts out issues related to the understanding of *genos* and kinship. One should express hope that it will become a foundation for further in-depth discussion on individual aspects and specifics of the Byzantine aristocratic family.

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⁶⁶ Theodoros Prodromos, *Historische Gedichte*, rec. W. Hörander, Wien 1974.

⁶⁴ Kazhdan 1991, 2154–2155.

⁶⁵ Leidholm 2019, 58–59.

⁶⁷ Leidholm 2019, 120, 122, 129.

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