



**HAL**  
open science

# Literary Representations of Descent and Social Mobility: the Case of the Lakapenoi

Nikolaos Kostourakis

► **To cite this version:**

Nikolaos Kostourakis. Literary Representations of Descent and Social Mobility: the Case of the Lakapenoi. *Byzantina Symmeikta*, 2021, 31, pp.29-50. 10.12681/byzsym.23210 . hal-03823170

**HAL Id: hal-03823170**

**<https://hal.sorbonne-universite.fr/hal-03823170>**

Submitted on 25 Oct 2022

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

INSTITUTE OF HISTORICAL RESEARCH  
SECTION OF BYZANTINE RESEARCH  
NATIONAL HELLENIC RESEARCH FOUNDATION



ΙΝΣΤΙΤΟΥΤΟ ΙΣΤΟΡΙΚΩΝ ΕΡΕΥΝΩΝ  
ΤΟΜΕΑΣ ΒΥΖΑΝΤΙΝΩΝ ΕΡΕΥΝΩΝ  
ΕΘΝΙΚΟ ΙΔΡΥΜΑ ΕΡΕΥΝΩΝ



# BYZANTINA ΣΥΜΜΕΙΚΤΑ

BYZANTINA SYMMEIKTA

ΤΟΜΟΣ 31 VOLUME

NIKOLAOS L. KOSTOURAKIS

LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF DESCENT  
AND SOCIAL MOBILITY: THE CASE OF THE LAKAPENOI

ΑΘΗΝΑ • 2021 • ATHENS

NIKOLAOS L. KOSTOURAKIS

LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF DESCENT AND SOCIAL MOBILITY:  
THE CASE OF THE LAKAPENOI\*

The tenth century witnessed drastic developments in Byzantine history writing, as narrative historiography was gradually overshadowed by the new genre of historical biography. Its main novelty lies in ordering the material not in a linear timeline but around a certain individual, the history's protagonist, whose deeds are exalted<sup>1</sup>. Though far from certain, historical biography might have originated in the court milieu as *Genesisios* and *Theophanes Continuatus* seem to have taken the earliest steps towards that direction<sup>2</sup>. This did not prevent the Asia Minor military aristocracy, which emerged as a dominant political group in the tenth century, from taking advantage of the same tool in order to consolidate and expand its influence<sup>3</sup>.

---

\* This article originates from a chapter of my M.A. thesis, *Οικογενειακές στρατηγικές και πολιτική στο Βυζάντιο τον 9<sup>ο</sup> αιώνα (802-913)*, written at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens under the supervision of Associate Professor Katerina Nikolaou. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of the journal for their useful comments and suggestions.

1. A. MARKOPOULOS, Byzantine history writing at the end of the first millennium, in: *Byzantium in the year 1000* [The Medieval Mediterranean, 45], ed. P. MAGDALINO, Leiden – Boston 2003, 183-197, esp. 184-186 and. n. 10 for further bibliography. See also A. NÉMETH, *The Excerpta Constantiniana and the Byzantine Appropriation of the Past*, Cambridge 2018, 145-151.

2. A. MARKOPOULOS, From narrative historiography to historical biography. New trends in Byzantine historical writing in the 10th-11th centuries, *BZ* 102 (2009), 697-715, here 699-703.

3. L. ANDRIOLLO, Aristocracy and Literary Production in the 10th Century, in: *The Author in Middle Byzantine Literature* [Byzantinisches Archiv, 28], ed. A. PIZZONE, Boston – Berlin 2014, 119-138, here 130-131.

Conforming to Pseudo-Menander's advice, extolling the hero's noble descent became an integral part of his encomium<sup>4</sup>. Basil the Macedonian (867-886), whose humble birth was elaborately embellished by his son and grandson, offers the most thoroughly studied case of such a literary process<sup>5</sup> and, at the same time, a salient example of social mobility in Byzantium. Recent research has reasonably doubted traditional beliefs about the extent of social climbing since the rarity of family names and the relative silence of the sources on the prosopographical details of this period tend to give a misleading impression regarding the continuity of social élites<sup>6</sup>.

Further evidence on these two intrinsically related issues, textual representation of descent and social mobility as a factual reality, can be found apparently by taking a closer look at the rise of the Lakapenos family. Romanos I (920-944) is usually considered to be of humble origin, the son of a soldier peasant<sup>7</sup>. However, some scholars have questioned this well-established view based on two facts: a) Theophylaktos Abastaktos, Romanos' father, received a *τόπος βασιλικὸς*<sup>8</sup> from Basil I in 871; b) there was an in-law relation with the future Domestic of the Schools Adralestos,

---

4. MARKOPOULOS, History writing, 187.

5. See Gy. MORAVCSIK, Sagen und Legenden über Kaiser Basileios I., *DOP* 15 (1961), 59-126 (repr. in: IDEM, *Studia Byzantina*, Amsterdam 1967, 147-220), whose study remains classic. See also Ch. SETTIPANI, *Continuité des élites à Byzance durant les siècles obscurs: les princes caucasiens et l'empire du VIe au IXe siècle*, Paris 2006, 246-254.

6. Cl. LUDWIG, Social Mobility in Byzantium? Family Ties in the Middle Byzantine Period, in: *Approaches to the Byzantine Family* [Birmingham Byzantine and Ottoman Studies, 14], ed. L. BRUBAKER – Sh. TOUGHER, Farnham 2013, 233-245, esp. 238; J. HALDON, Social Élites, Wealth and Power, in: *The Social History of Byzantium*, ed. J. F. HALDON, Oxford 2009, 168-211, esp. 179.

7. A. KALDELLIS, *Romanland. Ethnicity and Empire in Byzantium*, Cambridge – Massachusetts – London 2019, 174; R. J. H. JENKINS, *Byzantium: The Imperial Centuries AD 610-1071*, London 1966, 234; P. CHARANIS, The Armenians in the Byzantine Empire, *BSI* 22 (1961), 196-240, here 219 (repr. in: IDEM, *Studies on the Demography of the Byzantine Empire*, London 1972, n. V); S. RUNCIMAN, *The Emperor Romanus Lecapenus and His Reign: A Study of Tenth-Century Byzantium*, Cambridge 1929, 63; N. G. GARSOÏAN, The problem of Armenian Integration into the Byzantine Empire, in: *Studies on the internal diaspora of the Byzantine Empire*, ed. H. AHRWEILER – A. E. LAIOU, Washington 1998, 53-124, here 66; *ODB*, vol. 3, lemma Romanos I Lekapenos (A. KAZHDAN).

8. On the term's disputed interpretation see below pp. 31-32.

contracted probably close to that date. According to this interpretation, the Lakapenoi either belonged to the Asia Minor élite before the imperial reward or rose to prominence because of it<sup>9</sup>. At the same time, the primary sources referring explicitly to the family's social background provide seemingly contradictory accounts. Two texts, Liutprand's *Antapodosis* and Constantine VII Porphyrogenitos' *De Administrando Imperio* [hereafter *DAI*], agree on the family's obscure background, the former presenting it in a rather positive way and the latter being the fiercest *ψόγος* against the Lakapenoi. The fourteenth-century *Life of Saint Euphrosyne the Younger* suggests an aristocratic origin, while Symeon Magister's narrative includes only the story introducing Theophylaktos Abastaktos without any specific remarks on the family's social status. Before examining the varying origin and intentions of these testimonies, we should like to address the actual status of the family until its rise to power in 919. Even though the evidence available is occasionally fragmentary or vague, an attempt to define the social origins of the Lakapenoi should take into account the careers of every known family member up to 919 and the in-law bond with Adralestos.

In 871 Theophylaktos Abastaktos saved Basil I from almost certain capture during a battle against the Paulicians. The emperor wished to reward the man who rescued him but could not find him at first. After many soldiers approached the emperor claiming to be his saviour, Basil finally met Theophylaktos, to whom he wanted to bestow a *τιμή*. However, Abastaktos refused the *τιμή* and asked for a *τόπος βασιλικός*<sup>10</sup>. The emperor fulfilled

9. *Reallexikon der Byzantinistik*, ed. P. WIRTH, Amsterdam 1969, Vol. 1, 1-2; N. LEIDHOLM, *Elite Byzantine Kinship, ca. 950-1204. Blood, Reputation and the Genos*, Leeds 2019, 139-140; É. PATLAGEAN, *Un Moyen Âge grec. Byzance IXe-XVe siècle*, Paris 2007, 114. See below n. 15, 16 and 33.

10. *Symeonis Magistri et Logothetae Chronicon* [CFHB, 44/1], ed. St. WAHLGREN, Berlin – New York 2006 [hereafter Symeon Magister, *Chronicon*], 262<sup>42</sup>-263<sup>50</sup>: *ἐν δὲ τῇ τοιαύτῃ φυγῇ τοῦ βασιλέως Θεοφύλακτος ὁ Ἀβάστακτος, ὁ πατὴρ Ῥωμανοῦ τοῦ μετὰ ταῦτα βασιλεύσαντος, διέσωσε τὸν βασιλέα παρὰ μικρὸν ὑπὸ τῶν Ἀγαρηνῶν κρατούμενον ὃν ἐπιζητήσας ὁ βασιλεὺς μετὰ ταῦτα καὶ εὐρῶν καὶ γνωρίσας (πολλοὶ γὰρ ἔλεγον τῷ βασιλεῖ, ὅτι ἐγὼ εἶμι), ὁ δὲ τὴν τιμὴν ἀφείξ τῶπον βασιλικὸν ἠτήσατο, οὗ καὶ τετύχηκεν.* Cf. *Georgius Monachus Continuatus, Knigy vremen'nyja i obraznyja Geórgija mniha. Khronika Georgiya Amartola v drewnem slavyanorusskom perevode Tekst, issledovaniye i slovar*, ed. V. M. ISTRIN, St. Petersburg 1922 [hereafter *Georgius Monachus Continuatus*], 19<sup>1-9</sup>.

his request and modern research appears to be divided regarding the nature of the reward. While it has been argued that it consisted of a place in the imperial guard or, more generally, imperial service<sup>11</sup>, it is almost certain that Theophylaktos rejected the prospect of serving the emperor and preferred settling in an estate donated by him<sup>12</sup>. The fact that *τιμὴ* indicates titles or offices and *τόπος* is a word used to describe land in imperial documents<sup>13</sup> excludes the possibility of an alternative interpretation<sup>14</sup>.

The next question to be raised involves defining the social status of Theophylaktos Abastaktos, before and after the incident of 871. The father of Romanos has been described as a noble patrician<sup>15</sup>, while identification with a namesake general of the Armeniacs, active in 866–867, has been proposed<sup>16</sup>. Nonetheless, a detail included in the story mentioned above might imply that Abastaktos was not a distinguished officer before 871; the man who saved Basil was neither known to him nor prominent enough to be recognised easily, as his identity remained elusive for a certain period of time. One could also extract an *argumentum ex silentio*, as Symeon Magister would not have failed to mention his title or office if he had any. This narration, found in the

11. RUNCIMAN, *Romanus*, 63; *PmbZ*, n. 28180.

12. KALDELLIS, *Romanland*, 175; H. GRÉGOIRE, *Le Lieu de naissance de Romain Lécapène et de Digenis Acritas, Byz.* 8 (1933), 572-574; *ODB*, vol. 2, lemma Lekapenos (A. KAZHDAN).

13. N. SVORONOS, *Les nouvelles des empereurs Macédoniens concernant la terre et les stratiotes*, Athens 1994, 176<sup>1-2</sup>; N. OIKONOMIDÈS, *Les listes de préséance byzantines des IXe et Xe siècles. Introduction, texte et commentaire* [CNRS], Paris 1972, 281.

14. It is quite plausible that the land ceded was situated in Lakape. See GRÉGOIRE, *Le Lieu*, 572-574; F. HILD – M. RESTLE, *TIB 2, Kappadokien (Kappadokia, Charsianon, Sebasteia und Lykandos)* [Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften], Vienna 1981, 85; V. VLYSSIDOU et al., *Η Μικρά Ασία των θεμάτων. Έρευνες πάνω στην γεωγραφική φυσιογνωμία και προσωπογραφία των βυζαντινών θεμάτων της Μικράς Ασίας (7ος-11ος αι.)* [IBE/EIE, Έρευνητική βιβλιοθήκη], Athens 1998, 127, 273. See also n. 29.

15. SETTIPANI, *Continuité des élites*, 210, 285.

16. M. W. HERLONG, *Kinship and Social Mobility in Byzantium, 717-959*, Washington 1986 (Unpublished PhD thesis), 146, suggests at the same time an identification with the homonymous *πατρίκιος* mentioned in the *Miracles of the Pege Monastery*, who seems to have lived in the tenth century. See St. ΕΦΘΥΜΙΑΔΙΣ, *Le monastère de la Source à Constantinople et ses deux recueils de miracles. Entre hagiographie et patriographie, REB 64-65 (2006-2007)*, 283-309, here 293 and n. 35; *PmbZ*, n. 28204. See below n. 26.

pro-Lakapenid cycle of the Logothete, associates the father of the usurper Romanos with the founder of the Macedonian Dynasty, whom he served faithfully<sup>17</sup>. Nonetheless, the incident's obvious political connotations do not constitute sufficient grounds for doubt regarding its historical validity<sup>18</sup>. It seems that in a time when mere soldiers such as Phokas managed to rise to prominence thanks to imperial intervention<sup>19</sup>, Abastaktos opted not to seize the opportunity. On the contrary, the acquisition of land estates, perhaps considerable, coupled with Basil's favour, might have conferred the family some local influence in Eastern Asia Minor, where Theophylaktos could have continued to serve as an officer. This episode, if not considered fictitious, probably indicates that his family neither joined the court élite, nor can be considered undistinguished henceforth, while its relation to the Asia Minor aristocracy is not illuminated.

According to epigraphic evidence, one more person bore the family name Abastaktos during this period<sup>20</sup>. Stephanos, *δρογγάριος* in the Cibyrrhaeot theme, is known to have rebuilt the walls of Attaleia in 909/910. The inscription's acrostic reads ΑΥΑΣΤΑΚΤ and reveals his belonging to the family, which apparently had a significant presence in the Byzantine

---

17. On the political views of the Logothete see A. KAZHDAN, *A History of Byzantine Literature (850-1000)* [Research Series, 4], ed. Ch. ANGELIDI, Athens 2006, 162-167. St. WAHLGREN (*The Chronicle of the Logothete. Translated with introduction, commentary and indices* [Translated Texts for Byzantinists, 7], Liverpool 2019, 197, n. 2), observes that this story falls into the broader pro-Lakapenid propaganda to be found in this part of Symeon's text.

18. According to a similar narration, Constantine the Armenian took care to prevent Basil's injury during a fight with a Bulgarian wrestler. See *Iosephi Genesisii regum libri quattuor* [CFHB, 14], ed. A. LESMÜLLER-WERNER – I. THURN, Berlin – New York 1978, 78<sup>19-23</sup>; *Chronographiae quae Theophanis Continuati nomine fertur Liber quo Vita Basilii Imperatoris amplectitur* [CFHB, 42], ed. I. ŠEVČENKO, Berlin 2011 [hereafter *Life of Basil*], 48<sup>24</sup>-50<sup>30</sup>.

19. J.-Cl. CHEYNET, Les Phocas, Appendice in: G. DAGRON – H. MIHAESCU, *Le traité sur la guérilla de l'empereur Nicéphore Phocas*, Paris 1986, 319-361, here 320-322 (repr. in: IDEM, *La société byzantine. L'apport des sceaux* [Bilans de recherche, 3], Paris 2008, n. 17).

20. An epigraph found in Crete referring to a certain Ioannes Abastaktos should be dated in the seventh or eighth century, meaning that any connection to the ninth-century family would be highly unlikely. See *PmbZ*, n. 2800; A. C. BANDY, *The Greek Christian Inscriptions of Crete* [Χριστιανικά Ἐπιγραφαὶ τῆς Ἑλλάδος, 10], Athens 1970, n. 58, pp. 85-86.

administration by that time<sup>21</sup>. The future emperor's career in the navy is well-documented, since he appears in Greek sources as *στρατηγὸς Σάμου* in 910 and becomes *δρογγάριος* of the imperial fleet under Alexander (912-913)<sup>22</sup>. However, the earliest mention of Romanos' *cursus honorum* comes from Liutprand of Cremona, according to whom he used to be a *πρωτοκάραβος* (i.e. commander of a vessel). Nevertheless, the remark on his family's naval tradition as *he [Romanos] came from one of those lowly families that took pay from the emperor for naval battles* seem to be more interesting<sup>23</sup>. It appears that this detail, which does not refer exclusively to Romanos, has not been related to Stephanos' career and illustrates Liutprand's sufficient knowledge regarding the family's activities.

A question that arises naturally after examining the careers of these three officers concerns the use of the names Abastaktos and Lakapenos in primary sources<sup>24</sup>. Alexander Kazhdan addressed the issue briefly and precisely by observing that the family name Lakapenos is ascribed to Romanos and his offspring for the first time in the late eleventh century by Skylitzes and that most texts describe him as Romanos *the Elder*. This evidence seems sufficient to support his argument that the name was given to the lineage *a posteriori*<sup>25</sup>. While his father, Theophylaktos, the *δρογγάριος*

---

21. A. RHOPY, *Byzantinische Epigramme auf Stein nebst Addenda zu den Bänden 1 und 2 (Byzantinische Epigramme in inschriftlicher Überlieferung, hrsgg. von Wolfram Hörandner, Andreas Rhoby und Anneliese Paul, Band 3, Teil 1 und 2)* [Veröffentlichungen zur Byzanzforschung, 35], Vienna 2014, n. TR 24, pp. 556-559. See also L. ANDRIOLLO, *Constantinople et les provinces d'Asie Mineure, IXe-XIe siècle. Administration impériale, sociétés locales et rôle de l'aristocratie* [CNRS, Monographies 52], Louvain - Paris - Bristol 2016, 294; *PmbZ*, n. 27242.

22. JENKINS, *Imperial Centuries*, 234; *PmbZ*, n. 26833.

23. *Liudprandi Cremonensis Opera Omnia* [Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis, 156], ed. P. CHIESA, Turnhout 1998 [hereafter Liutprandus Cremonensis, *Antapodosis*], 77<sup>384-387</sup>: *Erat autem ex mediocribus ipsis qui navali pugna stipendia ab imperatore acceperant*. We follow the translation by P. SQUATRINI (transl.), *The Complete Works of Liudprand of Cremona* [Medieval Texts in Translation], Washington D.C. 2007, 120.

24. For a recent and comprehensive research on family names during the middle byzantine era see ANDRIOLLO, *Constantinople et les provinces*, 355-371.

25. A. KAZHDAN, *The Formation of Byzantine Family Names in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries*, *BSI* 58 (1997), 90-109, here 90.



Stephanos, and another Theophylaktos, probably a contemporary of his<sup>26</sup>, bore the name Abastaktos, Romanos is generally considered not to have used it<sup>27</sup>, so the sources calling him Abastaktos simply attribute his father's name to him, as was customary. The earliest text describing him as Romanos Abastaktos is the rendition of the Logothete's chronicle, perhaps written in 963–969 and known as Redaction B<sup>28</sup>. Psellos' testimony, who also calls him Abastaktos in the middle of the eleventh century, might be of more interest. The *Short History* is the first text to associate the family with the village of Lakape<sup>29</sup> and, at the same time, notes that *the man* [Theophylaktos Abastaktos] *was, unquestionably, very strong of body, but disturbed of mind and dangerous when angry*<sup>30</sup>. This commentary, found in what seems to be a history textbook<sup>31</sup>, could be considered a moralistic interpretation of the sobriquet Abastaktos (i.e. the Unbearable), providing a good reason to Romanos to dissociate himself from an adversely perceived family name. The suggestion that the name Lakapenos was used by the imperial branch of the family and became dynastic is based on the observation that only members of that line bear it<sup>32</sup>. Yet, textual analysis evinces that the

26. The πατριίκιος Theophylaktos, who is mentioned as Abastaktos in the *Miracles of the Pege Monastery* (*PmbZ*, n. 28204), could be identical to the μάγιστρος whose daughter married an Armenian prince (*PmbZ*, n. 28196) or the πατριίκιος who participated in the arrestment of Theodoros, Constantine VII's tutor (*PmbZ*, n. 28194). See *De sacris aedibus deque miraculis Deipare ad Fontem*, in: *AASS Novembris* III, 1910, 878-889, here 887.

27. É. PATLAGEAN, Les débuts d'une aristocratie byzantine et le témoignage de l'historiographie: système des noms et liens de parenté aux IXe-Xe siècles, in: *The Byzantine Aristocracy, IX to XIII Centuries*, ed. M. ANGOLD, Oxford 1984, 23-43, here 30.

28. *Georgius Monachus Continuatus*, 48. St. WAHLGREN, Symeon the Logothete and Theophanes Continuatus, *JÖB* 69 (2019), 323-333; A. MARKOPOULOS, Le témoignage du Vaticanus gr. 163 pour la période entre 945-963, *Σύμμεικτα* 3 (1979), 83-119, here 88-89.

29. *Michaelis Pselli Historia Syntomos* [CFHB, 30], ed. and transl. W. J. AERTS, Berlin 1990 [hereafter Michael Psellos, *Short History*], 92<sup>65-66</sup>. On the imperial monastery founded by Romanos in Lakape and attested in a novel of Nikephoros Phokas see J.-Cl. CHEYNET, Le monastère impérial de Lekapè, in: *Όλοκότινον. Studies in Byzantine Numismatics and Sigillography in Memory of Petros Protonotarios*, Athens 2013, 173-178, here 177-178.

30. Michael Psellos, *Short History*, 88<sup>75-79</sup>. We follow the editor's translation.

31. K. SNIPES, A Newly Discovered History of the Roman Emperors by Michael Psellos, *JÖB* 32/3 (1982), 52-61, here 55-56.

32. J.-Cl. CHEYNET, L'aristocratie byzantine (VIIIe - XIIIe siècle), *Journal des Savants*, no. 2 (2000), 281-322, here 287 (= repr. and English transl. in: IDEM, *The Byzantine Aristocracy*

name was not created at the time of Romanos, since it appears only in later sources, which might have used it in order to distinguish the imperial family from lesser branches. In fact, the first reference to Lakape as the family's birthplace dates back to the eleventh century, some decades before the surname Lakapenos emerges.

As mentioned earlier, an in-law relation to the general Adralestos has been put forth as a crucial argument for the family's aristocratic status<sup>33</sup>. Our goal is to ascertain what this bond can reveal about the social origins of the Lakapenoi by displaying all the data available. Adralestos is introduced in historiographic sources as the first general to be appointed Domestic of the Schools by Romanos I. Apparently, he had died by 921, when Pothos Argyros assumed the post<sup>34</sup>. A hagiographic text, the *Life of St. Michael Maleinos*<sup>35</sup>, reports in a detailed genealogy of the Saint's family that Adralestos the στρατηλάτης Ἀνατολῆς ἀπάσης was his maternal grandfather and that one of his grandmothers was a blood relative of Romanos<sup>36</sup>. The identification of this woman with the wife of Adralestos and not that of Eustathios, his paternal grandfather, is generally accepted<sup>37</sup>. Even though

---

and its Military Function, Aldershot 2006, n. I); ANDRIOLLO, *Constantinople et les provinces*, 358, n. 134.

33. *PmbZ*, n. 20343.

34. Symeon Magister, *Chronicon*, 315<sup>109-113</sup>; *Theophanes Continuatus*, *Ioannes Cameniata*, *Symeon Magister*, *Georgius Monachus* [CSHB], ed. I. BEKKER, Bonn 1838 [hereafter *Theophanes Continuatus*], 400<sup>1-6</sup>.

35. S. MÉTIVIER [Michel Maléinos, un saint des Phocas?, *TM* 21/1 (2017) (= *Mélanges offerts à Jean-Claude Cheynet*), 451-458, esp. 455-457], suggests that the *Life of Michael Maleinos* did not serve the interests of the Phokades, as it is widely believed, but those of the Maleinoi. Their close ties to the Phokades apparently did not deter them from aligning to their in-law relative, Romanos Lakapenos, during his reign.

36. L. PETIT (ed.) *Vie et office de saint Michel Maléinos, suivis d'un traité ascétique de Basile Maléinos* [hereafter *Life of Michael Maleinos*], *ROC* 7 (1902), 543-603, here 550<sup>27</sup>-551<sup>1</sup>: τὸν πρὸς πατρὸς μὲν αὐτῷ πάππον, Εὐστάθιον ἐκείνον, τὸν ἐν πατρικίοις μέγα κτησάμενον ὄνομα καὶ ἐν στρατηγίαις περιφανῶς διαπρέψαντα, πρὸς δὲ μητρὸς αὐθις Ἀδράλεστον, τὸν τῇ αὐτῇ μὲν τῶν πατρικίων ἀξία τετιμημένον, στρατηλάτην δὲ τῆς Ἀνατολῆς ἀπάσης διὰ τὸ τῆς ἀνδρείας καὶ φρονήσεως ὑπερβάλλον γενόμενον\*; ἢ τίς ἠγνόησε τὴν ἐκ βασιλικοῦ αἵματος γεγεννημένην μάμμην αὐτῷ; τῷ μεγίστῳ γὰρ βασιλεῖ Ῥωμανῷ διέφερε πρὸς συγγένειαν. On the term μάμμη, which in a different context could denote mother, see *PmbZ*, n. 20343, as well as *LSJ*<sup>3</sup> and *LBG*, s.v.

37. *PmbZ*, n. 20343; V. N. VLYSSIDOU, *Αριστοκρατικές οικογένειες και εξουσία* (9ος-

Adralestos' long career, who appears to be active from the 870s up to 921, has led to the estimation that the Saint's grandfather and the Domestic of the Schools are not the same person<sup>38</sup>, the identity is plausible<sup>39</sup>. In fact, the appointment of Adralestos as Domestic of the Schools by Romanos early in his reign strengthens the possibility that the two men were related, as the emperor conferred this post to his most trusted relatives<sup>40</sup>. Thus, it can be deduced that Theophylaktos Abastaktos married a close relative of his to Adralestos and Anastaso, the Saint's mother, was the couple's daughter. Adralestos is the first known member of an aristocratic family that would be close to the Phokas faction a century later<sup>41</sup>. Whether he was himself a scion of the rising Asia Minor aristocracy, which already comprised families such as the Doukai or the Argyroi, or a *homo novus* is impossible to tell as there is no evidence pertaining to it<sup>42</sup>.

The marriage under question is suggested to denote that the Lakapenoï belonged to the Eastern Asia Minor local élite before 871, based on the following reasoning. According to his *Life*, Michael-Manuel was born in 894, after a long period of infertility for his parents<sup>43</sup>. If the Saint was born approximately 10 years after the union, and his mother, Anastaso<sup>44</sup>,

---

10ος αι.): *έρευνες πάνω στα διαδοχικά στάδια αντιμετώπισης της αρμενο-παφλαγονικής και της καλπαδοκικής αριστοκρατίας*, Thessaloniki 2001, 87 and n. 175; PATLAGEAN, *Moyen Âge*, 115.

38. *PmbZ*, n. 20115.

39. MÉTIVIER, Michel Maléinos, 455-456 and n. 32.

40. J.-Cl. CHEYNET, Les Maleïnoï, in: J.-Cl. CHEYNET, *La société byzantine*, 511-524, here 512. VLYSSIDOU, *Οικογένειες*, 87-88, sees the appeasement of the Phokades as a possible incentive behind the appointment, as the general was related to them as well.

41. J.-Cl. CHEYNET, *Pouvoir et contestations à Byzance (963-1210)* [Byzantina Sorbonensia, 9], Paris 1990, 227-228.

42. The first mentioned member of a family is not necessarily the first to belong to the élite. See F. WINKELMANN, *Quellenstudien zur herrschenden Klasse von Byzanz im 8. und 9. Jahrhundert*, Berlin 1987, 166; CHEYNET, *Aristocratie*, 287.

43. See L. PETIT, *Vie et office de saint Michel Maléinos* (as in n. 36), 543-603, here 587.

44. J.-Cl. CHEYNET [La patricienne à ceinture: une femme de qualité, in: *Au cloître et dans le monde: femmes, hommes et sociétés (IXe-XVe siècle). Mélanges en l'honneur de Paulette L'Hermitte-Leclercq*, ed. P. HENRIET - A.-M. LEGRAS, Paris 2000, 179-187 (repr. in: IDEM, *La société byzantine*, 163-173, here 165-166)] identifies Anastaso with the namesake *ζωστή πατρικία* mentioned in the *Life* of Basil the Younger. See *The Life of Saint Basil the*

got married at the age of 18 (ca. 884)<sup>45</sup>, that would entail she was born ca. 866 and establish a dating for her parents' marriage in the early 860s<sup>46</sup>. Moreover, if Adralestos is considered a prominent officer during that time, it can be argued that his wife, Theophylaktos' relative, could not but belong to the same social milieu<sup>47</sup>. Yet, both the chronology of the marriage and Adralestos' social status appear to be tenuous. The birth of Saints after the prolonged infertility of their pious parents, who are usually redeemed by a miraculous intervention, is undoubtedly a hagiographic *τόπος*<sup>48</sup>. Furthermore, Eudokimos and Anastaso had at least two more children after the birth of Michael, something that can hardly imply any fertility issues<sup>49</sup>. Therefore, the calculation of a considerable gap between the marriage of Michael's parents and his birth, a necessary argument for a chronology before 871, should be abandoned. If Anastaso gave birth to her first child before the age of 22, a case that seems realistic, her parents could have been married slightly after 871. Nonetheless, this assumption by no means erases the possibility of an earlier marriage.

The re-examination of the question highlighted certain flaws in the suggestion that the family belonged to the Asia Minor aristocracy already in the 860s *because of the marriage*. Nonetheless, even if we consider that the Lakapenoi were undistinguished before 871, as argued above, the union's uncertain dating leaves two different interpretations open. On the one hand,

---

*Younger. Critical Edition and Annotated Translation of the Moscow Version*. D. F. SULLIVAN, A.-M. TALBOT, S. McGRATH [Dumbarton Oaks Studies, 45], Washington 2014, 120<sup>1-3</sup>.

45. On the legal age of marriage in Byzantium, which was 12 for women and 14 for men, see Ph. KOUKOULES, *Βυζαντινὸν Βίος καὶ πολιτισμὸς*, v. 4, Athens 1951, 76-78; K. NIKOLAOU, *Η γυναίκα στη μέση βυζαντινή εποχή. Κοινωνικά πρότυπα και καθημερινός βίος στα αγιολογικά κείμενα* [IBE/EIE, Μονογραφίες 6], Athens 2016, 85-86. See also HERLONG, *Kinship*, 14-15.

46. These calculations made by A. E. LAIOU (The General and the Saint: Michael Maleinos and Nikephoros Phokas, in: *EYΨΥΧΙΑ. Mélanges offerts à Hélène Ahrweiler* [Byzantina Sorbonensia, 16], ed. M. BALARD et al., Paris 1998, 399-412, here 403 and n. 23), refer to Eudokimos, but they seem to have been applied to Anastaso as well. See above n. 33. See also HERLONG, *Kinship*, 163.

47. *PmbZ*, n. 20343.

48. Th. PRATSCH, *Der hagiographische Topos. Griechische Heiligenviten in mittelbyzantinischer Zeit* [Millennium Studien, 6], Berlin - New York 2005, 72-75.

49. *Life of Michael Maleinos*, 551<sup>23</sup>-552<sup>3</sup>.

Adralestos might have been a common soldier who married a relative of his equally obscure comrade before 871, in an act that had no socio-political incentives or impact at that time. On the other hand, Adralestos could be either a rising officer or a member of the Asia Minor élite, who decided to forge a bond with a relatively wealthy officer, bestowed with imperial favour. Both cases are possible, but the latter seems to fit quite well with the particular social conditions of the third quarter of the ninth century. The proposal that the Domestic of the Schools Christophoros, who succeeded in capturing Tephriki in 872<sup>50</sup>, was Romanos' father-in-law, thus proving the family's social distinction in the last third of the ninth century<sup>51</sup>, shall not be discussed in detail as its doubtful nature has already been demonstrated<sup>52</sup>.

The strategies employed by literary sources in representing social descent should primarily be correlated to the political loyalties and goals of the milieu they expressed<sup>53</sup>, still in some cases they might betray what the actual origins of the people in question were. The *communis opinio* that Romanos was the son of an Armenian peasant is largely based on the testimonies of Constantine VII (945-959) and Liutprand of Cremona, as the Lombard Bishop refers to his humble birth on three different occasions in his *Antapodosis*<sup>54</sup>. There is good reason to believe that he composed this work during the reign of Constantine, based on both oral tradition

---

50. On the military operations against the Paulicians and their chronology see P. LEMERLE, *L'histoire des Pauliciens d'Asie Mineure d'après les sources grecques*, *TM* 5 (1973), 1-144, here 96-103.

51. O. KRESTEN – A. MÜLLER, *Legitimationsprinzip und kaiserlicher Urkundentitel in Byzanz in der ersten Hälfte des 10. Jahrhunderts* [Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften], Vienna 1995, 49, n. 149 and pp. 84-85. See also SETTIPANI, *Continuité des élites*, 280 and n. 1, who argues that Christophoros was at the same time son-in-law of Basil I and father-in-law to Romanos, thus proposing that the future emperor owed much to his tie with a granddaughter of Basil.

52. *PmbZ*, n. 21258.

53. Rhetorical manipulation could be used freely in order to sketch inaccurate social profiles since there were no legally defined classes in medieval Byzantium. See E. RAGIA, *Social Group Profiles in Byzantium: Some Considerations on Byzantine Perceptions about Social Class Distinctions*, *ByzSym* 26 (2016), 309-372, esp. 365-367.

54. Liutprandus Cremonensis, *Antapodosis*, 77<sup>382-384</sup>: *Imperante Leone, Constantini huius genitore, Πομπανος imperator iste, quamquam προχος, ab omnibus tamen χρησιμος habebatur*, 79<sup>438-440</sup>, 85<sup>591-593</sup>.

and written sources, which have not been preserved<sup>55</sup>. The *Antapodosis* depicts Romanos Lakapenos in a rather good light as his naval prowess is extolled, while a legend concerning his victorious confrontation with a lion is also detailed<sup>56</sup>. Seemingly, Romanos' only fault was his intention to disinherit the lawful heir, Constantine VII<sup>57</sup>. Under these conditions, it can be argued that Liutprand had a glorifying biography of Romanos at his disposal, perhaps commissioned by the eunuch Basil Nothos. The natural son of Romanos wished to defend his family's interests while respecting the dynastic legitimacy and hence decided to promote a narration favourable both to his father and the reigning emperor<sup>58</sup>.

The *Life of St. Euphrosyne the Younger*, written in the fourteenth century by Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos<sup>59</sup>, is the only source referring to an aristocratic birth of Romanos, as he is said to be *τό τε γένος οὐκ ἄσημος*<sup>60</sup>.

55. A. M. SMALL, Constantinopolitan connections: Liudprand of Cremona and Byzantium, in: *From Constantinople to the frontier* [The Medieval Mediterranean, 106], ed. N. S. M. MATHEOU et al., Leiden – Boston 2016, 84-97, esp. 85-87. On the credibility of Liutprand's testimony see KRESTEN – MÜLLER, *Legitimationsprinzip*, 7-8 and n. 13.

56. Liutprandus Cremonensis, *Antapodosis*, 77<sup>387</sup>–79<sup>425</sup>, 81<sup>474-482</sup>. G. PRINZING (Historiography, Epic and Textual Transmission of Imperial Values: Liudprand's *Antapodosis* and *Digenes Akrites*, in: *Reading in the Byzantine Empire and Beyond*, ed. T. SHAWCROSS – I. TOTH, Cambridge 2018, 336-350, here 346-348), makes an interesting connection between this narration and the epic of *Digenes Akrites*.

57. Liutprandus Cremonensis, *Antapodosis*, 86<sup>599-605</sup>.

58. SMALL, *Liudprand of Cremona*, 94; PRINZING, *Liudprand's Antapodosis*, 345-346. See also *ODB*, vol. 2, lemma *Liutprand of Cremona* (M. McCORMICK). On Basil's interest in history writing see J. M. FEATHERSTONE, *Basileios Nothos as Compiler: the De Cerimoniis and Theophanes Continuatus*, in: *Textual Transmission in Byzantium: between Textual Criticism and Quellenforschung*, ed. J. SIGNES CODOÑER – I. PÉREZ MARTÍN, Turnhout 2014, 353-372.

59. The work of Nikephoros, who composed seven more Lives, constitutes an example of the Palaeologan trend to rewrite Lives of Saints who lived in the past centuries. See St. EFTHYMIADIS, *The Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography. Volume 1: Periods and Places*, Farnham 2011, 176-179.

60. Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos, *Vita Euphrosynae Iunioris* (BHG 627), in: *AASS Novembris III*, 1910, 861-877 [hereafter *Life of Euphrosyne the Younger*], here 873: *Λέων δὲ ὁ σοφώτατος μετ' οὐ πολὺ, τῶν τῆς ζωῆς ἐτῶν διαμετρηθέντων, τό τε κράτος καὶ τὴν ζωὴν ἀπειπὼν ἐξ ἀνθρώπων γίνεται καὶ ὁ ἀδελφὸς αὐτοῦ Ἀλέξανδρος ἐπιβαίνει τῶν σκήπτρων ἀλλὰ καὶ οὗτος ἐπὶ μισὶ δέκα πρὸς τοῖς τρισὶ τὴν βασιλείαν διωκηκῶς ἐν τρυφαίῃ καὶ ἀβρότῃ, τοῦ βίου ἐξίσταται. Τοῦ δὲ παιδὸς τοῦ Λέοντος Κωνσταντίνου*

In all probability, Nikephoros composed this *Life* based on an unpreserved work of the tenth century. The existence of such a prototype seems likely, even though Euphrosyne herself might have been a fictive person, as a series of historical details, which could not have been invented by the author, are mentioned<sup>61</sup>. Among those, two are more intriguing as Romanos is said to a) become *δρουγγάριος* of the fleet under Leo VI (886-912), while it is generally accepted that this happened during Alexander's reign; b) rise to the throne directly after Alexander's death<sup>62</sup>. These obvious errors appear to have no historical importance, but crosschecking the evidence provided by Liutprand might prove otherwise.

---

κομιδῇ νέου ἀπολειφθέντος, ἐπειδὴ ἄνδρα παρῆναι τῇ ἀρχῇ ἔδει ἰκανὸν τὰς ἡγίας τῆς Ῥωμαίων ἡγεμονίας διαχειρίσοντα, πολλῶν τῇ βουλῇ πρὸς τοῦτο δὴ κρινομένων, ἐξ ἀπάντων δὴ Ῥωμανὸς τὰ πρωτεῖα λαμβάνει, τό τε γένος οὐκ ἄσημος ὢν, ὥσπερ ἔφημεν, τῷ τε μακρῷ γῆρα πολλὴν εἰληφὼς ἐμπειρίαν καὶ ταῖς συχναῖς στρατηγίαις δι' αἰδοῦς τῇ βουλῇ Ῥωμαίων καθεστηκώς. The phrase οὐκ ἄσημος/ἀγενής literally means “not undistinguished”, yet parallels suggest that this litotes generally indicates aristocratic birth. See *Life of Athanasios Athonites*, Sancti Athanasii Athonitae vita prima auctore Athanasio Monacho (BHG 187), in: *Vitae duae antiquae Sancti Athanasii Athonitae* [CCSG, 9], ed. J. NORET, Leuven 1982, 1-124, here 5<sup>5-6</sup>; *Life of Macarios*, S. Macarii monasterii Pelecetes hegumeni acta graeca (BHG 1003), *AnBoll* 16 (1897), 140-163, here 143<sup>16-25</sup>.

61. I. ROCHOW, *Die Vita der Euphrosyne der Jüngerer, das späteste Beispiel des Motivs der weiblichen Transvestitentums (Monachoparthenia) in der byzantinischen Hagiographie*, in: *Mir Aleksandra Kazhdana, K 80-letiju co dnja roždenija*, ed. A. A. CHEKALOVA, St. Petersburg 2003, 259-271, esp. 270-271. J. O. ROSENOVIST, *Die byzantinische Literatur. Vom 6. Jahrhundert bis zum Fall Konstantinopels 1453*, Berlin - New York 2007, 165, doubts the historicity of the *Vita*. See also P. ODORICO, *Les miroirs des princes à Byzance. Une lecture horizontale*, in: “*L'éducation au gouvernement et à la vie*”. *La tradition des “Règles de vie” de l'Antiquité au Moyen-Âge*, ed. P. ODORICO, Paris 2009, 223-246, here 241-245, esp. n. 40.

62. Romanos is introduced as *δρουγγάριος* during the extensive coverage of Leo's contacts with the Saint, in a part of the *Life* that has been considered a *speculum principis*. See K. BOURDARA, *Le modèle du bon souverain à l'époque de Léon VI le Sage et la vie de Sainte Euphrosynè*, in: *ΕΥΨΥΧΙΑ. Mélanges offerts à Hélène Ahrweiler*, 109-117. *Life of Euphrosyne the Younger*, 873: Ἦν δέ τις κατ' ἐκεῖνο καιροῦ [under the reign of Leo VI] τῶν ἐν ἀξιώμασι διαπρεπόντων περιφανῆς ἀνὴρ, δρουγγάριος τὸ ἀξίωμα, τοῦ πλοῖμου στόλου παντὸς ἐξηγούμενος, -μέγα δὲ τοῦτο παρὰ Ῥωμαίους βούλεται εἶναι εἰς περηφάνειαν- Ῥωμανὸς ὄνομα τῷ ἀνδρὶ. See above n. 22.

In fact, these two exact mistakes can be found in the *Antapodosis*<sup>63</sup>, and this circumstance should not be considered coincidental. On the contrary, this observation might reveal an until now unnoticed relation between the two texts; both *Antapodosis* and the lost Life of St. Euphrosyne the Younger draw from a common pro-Lakapenid tradition, which had already taken shape in the middle of the tenth century. Despite that, the two traditions are not identical, as they do not agree on the social descent of the Lakapenoi. This is the only evidence available to support the argument, since there seems to be no further common ground between the two texts. Nonetheless, the question remains even if our assumption is incorrect: Why did two sources with convergent views choose to represent their hero's origins in contradictory ways? Starting with Liutprand's testimony, one should take notice of the fact that his source, or sources, is/are referring consistently to his humble birth, which is revealed emphatically on three separate occasions<sup>64</sup>. To understand the insistence – which has to be purposeful – in making of Romanos a peasant (*πτωχός*) who managed to claim the throne exclusively thanks to his virtues (*χρησίμιος*), we should look at the ways pro-Macedonian literature legitimised Basil's rise to power. The first reference to his fictitious descentance from the Arsacids is made in Basil's funeral oration, delivered by Leo VI in 888<sup>65</sup>. About ten years earlier, a different strategy was chosen to serve the same cause in a laudatory poem written perhaps by Photios: Basil's undistinguished birth is celebrated as he is paralleled to David, the shepherd who was anointed King<sup>66</sup>. It has been suggested convincingly that during Basil's lifetime accepting and legitimizing his humble origins by invoking

---

63. Liutprandus Cremonensis, *Antapodosis*, 79<sup>425-429</sup>. *Unde factum est ut, tam pro caeteris quamque pro praeclaro praesenti hoc facinore, non multo post a Leone imperatore tanto donaretur honore, οπως παντα τὰ πλοια in manibus suis essent eiusque iussionibus oboedirent*, 53<sup>725-728</sup>. Leone atque Alexandro imperatoribus augustis hominem exeuntibus, Romanos, ut latius dicturi sumus, cum Constantino, qui nunc usque superest, Leonis imperatoris filio, Constantinopolitanum regebat imperium, 80<sup>445-81</sup><sup>473</sup>. KRESTEN – MÜLLER, *Legitimationsprinzip*, 52-53, have illustrated that some of Liutprand's chronologies follow a coronation of Romanos in 913, and not 920.

64. See above n. 54.

65. A. VOGT – I. HAUSHERR (eds.), *Oraison funèbre de Basile I par son fils Léon VI le Sage*, [*Orientalia Christiana*, 77], Rome 1932), 5-79, here 44<sup>23-30</sup>.

66. A. MARKOPOULOS (ed.), An Anonymous Laudatory Poem in Honor of Basil I, *DOP* 46 (1992), 225-232, here 230<sup>70-88</sup>.



the Bible was preferred to forging a legendary lineage because the truth was widely known<sup>67</sup>. Half a century later, his ancestry was further embellished by adding Constantine I and Alexander the Macedonian as his forebears<sup>68</sup>.

Is this evidence enough to consider Basil's case as a model for the sources used by Liutprand and referring to Romanos? One of the three passages mentioning his undistinguished background notes that even though *never did he dream ... that he would hold the royal scepter*, he eventually became emperor because [The Lord] *lifts up the poor from the dunghill, so that he may sit with the princes and hold the throne of glory*<sup>69</sup>. The use of Hannah's Prayer to explain and justify Romanos' ascendance might be the only surviving fragment indicating that the emperor's milieu integrated elements from the pro-Macedonian Davidic tradition<sup>70</sup> into its pro-Lakapenid propaganda<sup>71</sup>. The two other references to Romanos' background complete the picture of a capable and benevolent ruler as he is characterised *χρησιμος* in the former and *kind-hearted* in the latter<sup>72</sup>. Nonetheless, concluding that the rise of the Lakapenoi was due exclusively to Romanos' political prowess, as Liutprand's sources would wish their readers to believe, would be unperceptive. Given that the family had a noticeable and growing influence after 871, one could argue that the emperor's supporters at court found it awkward to exalt his lineage, as it was inferior to established aristocratic families, especially the Phokades<sup>73</sup>. Unfortunately, Liutprand's testimony is indirect and fragmentary as he preserves certain sources and traditions that are now lost, meaning that there can be no definite conclusions regarding their nature,

---

67. MARKOPOULOS, *History writing*, 187.

68. *Life of Basil*, 18<sup>25-27</sup>.

69. Liutprandus Cremonensis, *Antapodosis*, 85<sup>591-597</sup>; 1 Sm 2: 7-8. See SQUATRINI, *Liutprand of Cremona*, 128.

70. See P. MAGDALINO, *Observations on the Nea Ekklesia of Basil I*, *JÖB* 37 (1987), 51-64, here 58 (repr. in: IDEM, *Studies on the History and Topography of Byzantine Constantinople*, Aldershot 2006, n. V).

71. Attributing the citing of Hannah's Prayer to Liutprand's own plume does not seem plausible, since the other two references to Romanos' humble origins are also accompanied by positive remarks.

72. Liutprandus Cremonensis, *Antapodosis*, 77<sup>382-384</sup>, 79<sup>438-440</sup>.

73. On the rivalry between Romanos and the Domestic Leo Phokas, which ended with the latter's blinding, see CHEYNET, *Les Phocas*, 296-297.

purposes, and literary strategies<sup>74</sup>. In spite of that, the assumptions made above try to deal with the evident contradiction that in a society where noble birth was openly praised<sup>75</sup> an unwavering pro-Lakapenid tradition, which included other fictive elements in its narration, opted to downplay rather than embellish Romanos' origins.

The *Life of St. Euphrosyne the Younger* appears to derive from a different milieu and to serve other goals as it represents the emperor's descent in a divergent manner. Rochow's suggestion that the original *Life* had been commissioned by the aristocratic family of Agelastos is plausible since the Saint was a member of it herself, her paternal uncle being described as an Agelastos<sup>76</sup>. The historical context seems to reinforce this possibility as Leo Agelastos, a *πρωτοσπαθάριος* active in the Peloponnese, was expelled by Bardas Platypodis, the *στρατηγός* of the theme. This event, related to the unrest in the region about 923-925<sup>77</sup>, has been understood as a struggle between the pro-Lakapenid Bardas Platypodis and the pro-Macedonian Leo Agelastos<sup>78</sup>. Consequently, the family might have sought to strengthen its delicate position by commissioning a hagiographic text favourable to the reigning emperor<sup>79</sup>. This chronology cannot be certain since we are dealing with a text whose existence has been questioned. However, the arguments already made and the fact that the depiction of Romanos is overtly positive indicate that such a text actually existed and that it should be dated under his reign.

At this point, we should turn to some details that might provide further insight into the *Life* under discussion. Saint Euphrosyne prophesized and thus legitimised Romanos' rise to the throne during the reign of Leo VI, yet she warned him not to *think of something else* [i.e. conspire against Leo],

74. On this point see PRINZING, Liudprand's Antapodosis, 336-337.

75. See CHEYNET, Aristocratie, 292-298.

76. ROCHOW, Euphrosyne, 270-271. See *Life of Euphrosyne the Younger*, 863.

77. See I. ANAGNOSTAKIS, 'From Tempe to Sparta': Power and Contestation prior to the Latin Conquest of 1204, in: *Byzantium, 1180-1204: 'The Sad Quarter of a Century'?* [IBE/EIE, Διεθνής Συμπόσια, 22], ed. A. SIMPSON, Athens 2015, 135-157, here 138-141.

78. *Constantine Porphyrogenitus, De administrando imperio* [CFHB, 1], ed. and transl. Gy. MORAVCSIK - R. J. H. JENKINS, Washington 1967<sup>2</sup> [hereafter *DAI*], 234<sup>53-60</sup>. See *PmbZ*, n. 24413.

79. ROCHOW, Euphrosyne, 270.

*because you will regret it afterwards*<sup>80</sup>. The same Saint contributed decisively to the birth of Constantine VII, Leo's longed-for son, while Romanos' conflict with his mother, Zoe Karbonopsina, is artfully concealed by placing his ascent right after Alexander's death<sup>81</sup>. These remarks show that the Agelastoi continued to respect the dynastic legitimacy while flattering the Lakapenids. In fact, Leo Agelastos reappears in literary sources as *στρατηγός* of the Armeniacs in 945/946, under Constantine VII<sup>82</sup>. Returning to the representation of the family's origins, one observes that the *Life's* writer pays particular attention to the importance of social distinction. The wealth of the Agelastoi is consistently exalted<sup>83</sup>, while they are said to be of imperial stock (*βασιλείον γένος*)<sup>84</sup>, thus being presented as one of the most influential families in the empire. This approach to the issue of social prominence leaves no alternative than to praise the Lakapenoi. The fact that in the text of Nikephoros Xanthopoulos the phrase *ὥσπερ ἔφημεν*<sup>85</sup> is used when referring to Romanos' birth, without any prior mention, may evince that the lost *Life* contained a more complete record of his ancestry.

The third source referring specifically to the background of Romanos is, unlike the two already examined, staunchly anti-Lakapenid. In *DAI*, a work that regardless of its authorship manifests Constantine VII's political views<sup>86</sup>, the Porphyrogenitos unleashes a philippic against his father-in-law, who is described as *a common, illiterate fellow... nor was he of*

80. *Life of Euphrosyne the Younger*, 873.

81. *Life of Euphrosyne the Younger*, 870. See ROCHOW, *Euphrosyne*, 262-263.

82. *Theophanes Continuatus*, 443<sup>18-21</sup>.

83. *Life of Euphrosyne the Younger*, 862: *πατέρες δὲ αὐτῆ ἀγαθοὶ καὶ ἐξ ἀγαθῶν, πλοῦτον μὲν πρῶτον ἄφθονον καὶ ἀκένωτον ἐπιεικῶς πλουτήσαντες, τὴν εὐσέβειαν, οὐκ ἔλαττον δὲ τινος ἐνεγκάμενοι τῶν ἐν τῇ πατρίδι κὰν τῷ δευτέρῳ τούτῳ, ὅσος ἐν χρυσῷ καὶ ἀργύρῳ καὶ τοῖς διαχρύσοις ἐσθήμασιν*, 863: *Ἀμέλει καὶ ὡς γε προσήκον ἦν ταύτην ἐνσκευασάμενοι χρυσῷ τε πολλῷ καὶ ἀργύρῳ ταύτην ἐφοδιάσαντες διαπόντιον τῇ Κωνσταντίνου ἐγκαθιστῶσι καὶ τῇ τῶν Ἀγελάστων οἰκίᾳ φέροντες ἐκδιδάσσι.*

84. *Life of Euphrosyne the Younger*, 866: *πατὴρ δὲ καὶ μήτηρ αὐτῆς καὶ ἡ κατὰ γένος ἅπανα περιφάνεια – εἰς βασιλείον γὰρ γένος τὴν τοῦ γένους βλάστην ἦν ἀναφέρουσα.*

85. See above n. 60.

86. Pr. KOMATINA, *Constantine Porphyrogenitus, De Administrando Imperio and the Byzantine Historiography of the mid-10th Century*, *ZRVI* 56 (2019), 39-68; I. ANAGNOSTAKIS, *Οὐκ εἶσιν ἐμὰ τὰ γράμματα. Ιστορία και ιστορίες στον Πορφυρογέννητο, Σύμμεικτα* 13 (1999), 97-140; NÉMETH, *Excerpta*, 34-35.

*imperial and noble stock*<sup>87</sup>. Apparently, Constantine offers insight into the alternative perception of humble origins during the tenth century by laying his emphasis on the negative aspects of social obscurity such as illiteracy or *arrogant and despotic* actions. The *ψόγος* of Romanos should be understood more in a dynastic and political context rather than as a personal grudge. Constantine launched a campaign to “restore” the Macedonian dynasty after the Lakapenid usurpation<sup>88</sup> and, at the same time, expressed an alternative approach on matters of external policy<sup>89</sup>. This testimony seems to be the least illuminating of the three, as its polemic character dictates strictly the textual means to be used when referring to the background of the Lakapenoi<sup>90</sup>.

One is, at first, surprised by the fact that the *source par excellence* on Romanos’ reign, the chronicle of Symeon Magister, makes no allusion to his social status<sup>91</sup>. A possible way to interpret its silence is by relating it to the characteristics of traditional annalistic chronography, as the particular interest in noble birth is among the literary novelties of the tenth century<sup>92</sup>. In fact, one of the most considerable differences between the chronicle and the sixth book of *Theophanes Continuatus*, which is largely based on it, is

---

87. DAI, 72<sup>149-152</sup>: Ὁ κύρις Ῥωμανός, ὁ βασιλεύς, ἰδιώτης καὶ ἀγράμματος ἄνθρωπος ἦν καὶ οὔτε τῶν ἄνωθεν ἐν βασιλείοις τεθραμμένος, οὔτε τῶν παρηκολουθηκότων ἐξ ἀρχῆς τοὺς Ῥωμαίκοὺς ἐθισμοὺς, οὔτε ἀπὸ γένους βασιλείου καὶ εὐγενοῦς. We follow JENKINS’ translation.

88. P. MAGDALINO, Knowledge in Authority and Authorised History: the Imperial Intellectual Programme of Leo VI and Constantine VII, in: *Authority in Byzantium* [Centre for Hellenic Studies, Publications 14], ed. P. ARMSTRONG, London – New York 2013, 187-209. See also Pr. PRASAD, Splendour, Vigour and Legitimacy. The prefaces of the *Book of Cerimonies* (*De Cerimoniis*) and Byzantine imperial theory, in: *The Emperor in the Byzantine World: Papers from the Forty-Seventh Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies*, ed. Sh. TOUGHER, London – New York 2019, 235-247.

89. T. K. LOUNGHIS, *Κωνσταντίνου Ζ΄ Πορφυρογέννητου, De administrando imperio* (*Πρὸς τὸν ἴδιον υἱὸν Ῥωμανόν*). Μία μέθοδος ἀνάγνωσης, Athens 2018<sup>2</sup>, 45-49.

90. See HERLONG, *Kinship*, 147.

91. I. CHRESTOU, *Αυτοκρατορική εξουσία και πολιτική πρακτική. Ο ρόλος του παραδυναστεύοντος στη βυζαντινή διοίκηση (τέλη 8ου-αρχές 11ου αιώνα)*, Athens 2008, 209-210, observes that the pro-Lakapenid Symeon makes no attempt to embellish his hero’s origins. See also SETTIPANI, *Continuité des élites*, 280-281.

92. See MARKOPOULOS, History writing, 187-190.

the addition in the latter of a series of genealogical details, praising families such as the Kourkouai or the Argyroi<sup>93</sup>. Before proceeding to the conclusions, we should like to make a short note on the family's ethnic background, as Anthony Kaldellis in his recent *Romanland* succeeded in dispelling the long-standing myth of its certain Armenian origin<sup>94</sup>. One could add to his argumentation the fact that not a single member of the family bears an Armenian name, such as Bardas<sup>95</sup>.

The analysis made above suggests that the rise of the Lakapenoï to power should be understood as a gradual process rather than as a *parvenu's* personal achievement. The only evidence pertaining to the family's social status before 871 derives from the incident involving Theophylaktos Abastaktos and Basil I since the lack of further information about the in-law bond with Adralestos renders it unusable in this respect. Romanos' father is introduced as a soldier who saved Basil during a battle, in a story that creates a bond between the Macedonians and the Lakapenoï. However, the pro-Lakapenid Symeon Magister does not refer to any title or office held by Theophylaktos and adds that he actually refused to receive one (*τὴν τιμὴν ἀφείλετο*). On the contrary, he was granted imperial lands by the emperor, who was indebted to him. Therefore, this incident seems to have conferred to an until then undistinguished family both economic influence and imperial favour. No other family members are recorded in the sources for the next forty years as two senior naval officers, Romanos and Stephanos Abastaktos, appear around 910. The prolonged silence of the sources does not allow us to monitor the family's socio-political activities during this period, yet assuming that it did not have any would be unsubstantial. What can be said is that the family had established its presence in the navy by the beginning of the tenth century, and thus belonged to the empire's bureaucratic élite.

The direct references of three sources to the origins of the Lakapenoï contribute to sketching their social profile before 919; however, what appears to be more interesting is understanding the textual reconstructions of descent in political context. At first, one notices two contradictions: a)

---

93. KAZHDAN, *A History of Byzantine Literature*, 166-167.

94. KALDELLIS, *Romanland*, 174-176.

95. KALDELLIS, *Romanland*, 181-183, uses this argument for the Emperors Maurice and Herakleios but not in the case of Romanos.

the sources favourable to the family, Liutprand of Cremona and the *Life of Euphrosyne the Younger*, do not agree on Romanos' background as the former calls him *πτωχὸς* and the latter *οὐκ ἄσημιος*; b) Liutprand agrees with the openly hostile Constantine VII on his humble birth. Contextualising the two pro-Lakapenid texts is a rather demanding challenge, as neither constitutes a "direct" source, Liutprand reproducing lost Greek sources and traditions and the *Life of Euphrosyne* being a fourteenth-century work, perhaps abbreviating a tenth-century initial text. These two sources seem to derive from different political environments and to serve divergent agendas, even though they might share a common tradition based on the fact that they repeat two historical errors. The *Life of Euphrosyne* predominantly serves the interests of the Agelastoi, its possible commissioners, as they are shown to belong to the upper echelons of the aristocracy. At the same time, the pro-Macedonian family pronounces its respect to dynastic legitimacy and tries to reconcile with Romanos Lakapenos, the reigning emperor, by flattering him. In a text where the importance of social prominence is evident, Romanos' birth is described as aristocratic, thus reflecting the family's social ascendance after 871. Liutprand of Cremona, and his relatives before him, were active at court, and therefore, it is plausible to assume that the material reproduced in the *Antapodosis* was circulated in this particular milieu. Apparently, these traditions, which included even a confrontation of Romanos with a lion – a strong sign of their propagandistic character – preferred to depict their hero as a *homo novus*, who owed everything to his resourcefulness rather than as a scion of the élite. The odd thing is that, instead of magnifying, such an approach conceals the family's relative distinction after 871. To provide an explanation, we suggested looking towards two directions: a) pro-Macedonian literature had recently deployed a similar strategy in order to legitimise the ascension of the undistinguished Basil I, who is represented as the New David. Seemingly, the partisans of Romanos found a tested model, incorporating elements of the Davidic tradition into their narration as a passage of the *Antapodosis* implies; b) the rivalry with the most prominent aristocratic family, the Phokades, rendered the investment in noble descent unproductive as this was their area of advantage. In the third text, Constantine VII's *DAI*, a more "snobbish" approach towards undistinguished birth is put forth out of political calculation.

So, what can the case of the Lakapenoi tell about the reality and the perception of social mobility in ninth- and tenth-century Byzantium? An obscure family managed to gradually integrate into the Empire's ruling class, giving the chance to a potent naval officer to claim the throne half a century later. Thus, social climbing was possible, yet members of established families appear to be better equipped in the political arena than their *parvenus* forebears<sup>96</sup>. There seems to be no single or fixed attitude towards the phenomenon, as humble birth could be either accepted and praised or slandered, depending on the political conditions. Nonetheless, the very fact that low origins had "to be accepted"<sup>97</sup> brings to the surface a social reality where being born into the ruling class was most auspicious.

---

96. As CHEYNET, *Les Phocas*, 290-291, notes the actual rise of the Phokades was due to Nikephoros Phokas the Elder and not his father.

97. See *Life of Basil*, 19<sup>43-50</sup>.

ΛΟΓΟΤΕΧΝΙΚΕΣ ΑΝΑΠΑΡΑΣΤΑΣΕΙΣ ΤΗΣ ΚΑΤΑΓΩΓΗΣ ΚΑΙ  
ΚΟΙΝΩΝΙΚΗ ΚΙΝΗΤΙΚΟΤΗΤΑ. Η ΠΕΡΙΠΤΩΣΗ ΤΩΝ ΛΑΚΑΠΗΝΩΝ

Ο Ρωμανός Α΄ Λακαπηνός παραδοσιακά θεωρείται ταπεινής καταγωγής. Ωστόσο, η δωρεά ενός τόπου βασιλικού από τον Βασίλειο Α΄ στον πατέρα του, Θεοφύλακτο Αβάστακτο, και η εξ αγχιστείας συγγένεια με τον στρατηγό Αδράλεστο έχει οδηγήσει σε αναθεώρηση της επικρατούσας άποψης σχετικά με την κοινωνική καταγωγή των Λακαπηνών. Ταυτόχρονα, οι πηγές που αναφέρονται ρητά στο ζήτημα παραδίδουν αποκλίνουσες εκδοχές. Στο παρόν άρθρο εξετάζεται, αφενός, η κοινωνική θέση της οικογένειας μέσα από την δράση των μελών της και, αφετέρου, επιχειρείται ερμηνεία των στρατηγικών με τις οποίες οι πηγές αναπαριστούν την καταγωγή των Λακαπηνών, με ιδιαίτερη έμφαση στα πολιτικά κίνητρά τους και την πρόσληψη του φαινομένου της κοινωνικής κινητικότητας. Προτείνεται ότι η οικογένεια ήταν άσημη και πως η σταδιακή άνοδος της επέτρεψε στον Ρωμανό να σφετεριστεί τον θρόνο, καθώς και ότι δύο φιλολακαπηνικές πηγές, μολονότι ενδέχεται να αναπαράγουν κοινές παραδόσεις, διαφωνούν ως προς την καταγωγή του Ρωμανού λόγω της διαφορετικής προέλευσης και στόχευσής τους.