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**“SOMETHING IS ROTTEN IN THE STATE OF DENMARK” –
DISEASES OF EMPERORS AND PROMINENT PERSONS
IN BYZANTINE HISTORICAL NARRATIVES
AS AN EXPRESSION OF TURMOIL IN THE EMPIRE ¹**

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Abstract. The Byzantine emperors and officials suffered from the diseases. Information about them was employed in Byzantine historical texts as a literary motif in order to express corruption of the ruling class in the Empire and criticism of imperial policy. This motif can be dated to the earliest centuries of Christian literature. At that time it was used to illustrate the just punishment of God inflicted upon the persecutors of the Christians. A commonly held belief was that those who did not adhere to the canons established at the first Church councils were also susceptible to illness. The writers of the early Byzantine period exploited this motif to express the criticism of the imperial policy and to assert that certain emperors were undeserving of the Byzantine throne. This trend persisted throughout the Middle Byzantine period. The iconoclastic emperors, Leo III and Constantine V, succumbed to severe illnesses as a consequence of their transgressions against the Church. The development of Byzantine political thought is especially perceived in the historical work of Michael Psellus. In his *Chronographia* the criticism of the imperial policy reached its zenith. Psellus employed the metaphor of illness to illustrate the pervasive decline of the Empire under the rule of unsuitable emperors in the 11th century. On occasion, the affliction was associated with certain individuals. In this manner, Byzantine historians depicted these figures as antiheroes. Such was the case with John II Comnenus in the *Alexiad*, a historical account written by his sister Anna Comnene. Byzantine intellectual Nicetas Choniates also narrates about emperors and prominent political figures who suffered from certain illnesses. The overall condition of these characters would invariably deteriorate concurrently with the occurrence of significant political developments. The literary motif of “diseases” persisted until the 15th century. In the Late Byzantine period, the same literary device was utilised by the Byzantine historians to censure the rulers and to expose the “heretics” at the time of the hesychast controversy. The illnesses that befell the prominent political figures in the Byzantine Empire were not fictionalised. This assertion can be substantiated by other sources pertaining to the narratives in question. In this manner, Byzantine historians ensured the veracity of their accounts. The literary motif was employed as a convenient means to serve the purpose of the authors. Lastly, the research demonstrated that there are few examples of illnesses being used to express the sufferings of the dethroned emperor Romanus IV Diogenus. In the works of Michael Attaleiates and Scylitzes Continuatus, Romanus IV was perceived as righteous Job. Thus the motif of diseases was also employed in a favourable manner, as a metaphor to illustrate fortitude and perseverance in the face of significant adversity. The article consists of the following sections: Introduction; Methodology; Results; and General Remarks; as well as Early Byzantine Period; Middle Byzantine Period; Late Byzantine Period; The Trial of “righteous” Job; and Conclusion.

Key words: diseases, illnesses, Byzantine historiography, literary motif, Byzantine emperors, imperial officials.

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«ПРОГНИЛО ЧТО-ТО В ДАТСКОМ КОРОЛЕВСТВЕ» – БОЛЕЗНИ ИМПЕРАТОРОВ И ВЫДАЮЩИХСЯ ЛИЦ В ВИЗАНТИЙСКИХ ИСТОРИЧЕСКИХ ТРУДАХ КАК ВЫРАЖЕНИЕ БЕСПОРЯДКА В ИМПЕРИИ ¹

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Аннотация. Византийские императоры и чиновники страдали от болезней. Сведения о них использованы в византийских исторических текстах как литературный лейтмотив с целью показать общую коррумпированность господствующих слоев Империи и выразить критику имперской политики. Этот мотив можно проследить с первых столетий распространения христианской литературы. Уже тогда он использовался, чтобы показать законное наказание Божие, посланное на гонителей христиан. Обычно считалось, что болезни постигали и еретиков, не следовавших канонам, установленным на первых церковных соборах. Кроме того, писатели ранневизантийского периода использовали этот мотив для того, чтобы выразить критику имперской политики и подчеркивать, что некоторые императоры не заслуживали византийского престола. Эта тенденция получила дальнейшее развитие в средневизантийский период. Императоры-иконоборцы Лев III и Константин V в конце своего правления были наказаны тяжелыми болезнями за грехи против Церкви. Развитие византийской политической мысли особенно ярко выражено в историческом труде Михаила Пселла. В его «Хронографии» критика имперской политики достигла своего зенита. Прибегая к метафоре болезни, Пселл стремился показать общий упадок Империи, управляемой негодными императорами в XI веке. Иногда сама болезнь ассоциировалась с определенными людьми. Их византийские историки склонны изображать как антигероев. Так было с Иоанном II Комнином в «Алексиаде», написанной его сестрой Анной Комниной. Византийский интеллектуал Никита Хониат рассказывает об императорах и выдающихся политических деятелях, которые страдали от определенных болезней. Всеобщая обусловленность исторических персонажей становилась заметно хуже всегда в то время, когда они должны были совершать важные политические шаги. Литературный мотив «болезней» продолжал использоваться так или иначе вплоть до XV века. В поздневизантийский период византийские историки использовали тот же литературный инструмент и для критики правителей, и для изобличения «еретиков» во времена исихастских споров. Болезни, постигшие выдающихся политических деятелей Империи, не были выдуманы. Это может быть подтверждено другими источниками, связанными с рассматриваемыми сюжетами. Поэтому византийские историки добивались правдивости своих свидетельств. Они использовали этот литературный мотив, как удобное средство для достижения своих целей. Наконец, исследование показало, что примеров, когда мотив болезней использовался для выражения страданий свергнутого императора Романа IV Диогена, немного. Он воспринимался как праведный Иов в произведениях Михаила Атталиата и Продолжателя Скилицы. Таким образом, мотив болезней эксплуатировался и в положительном ключе, как метафора, чтобы показать проявленную стойкость и настойчивость перед лицом великой смуты. Статья состоит из следующих разделов: Введение; Методология; Результаты и общие замечания; а также Ранневизантийский период; Средневизантийский период; Поздний византийский период; Суд над «праведным» Иовом; и Заключение.

Ключевые слова: болезни, заболевания, византийская историография, литературный мотив, византийские императоры, имперские чиновники.

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Introduction

"Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" is one of the famous lines from the play Hamlet,

by William Shakespeare. It is pronounced by Marcellus, an officer of the palace guard, commenting on the appearance of a ghost who beckons Hamlet to follow him. The ghost is the

spirit of the late king of Denmark, Hamlet's father, who has been poisoned. Political corruption is a major theme in Hamlet, and we are constantly reminded of the pervading atmosphere of decay. Throughout the text we can trace a path of corruption that leads to death through images of diseases in the characters of Polonius, Claudius and Hamlet himself. This phrase has become an English idiom, serving as a general description of corruption.

The literary game Shakespeare played in 16th-century England was already exploited in Byzantium. Byzantine writers employed a plethora of literary devices to enhance the dramatic quality of their historical texts and imbue their characters with greater vitality. This assertion is particularly pertinent to the texts of the 11th and 12th centuries, as evidenced in the sources [42, pp. 197-230; 50; 48]. One, such extensively utilised literary topic is the motif of diseases. This term served to illustrate instances of political corruption within the society or to evoke the turbulence that pervaded the Empire. Furthermore, in certain cases, it was used to denote internal strife in the Church, as well as external and internal threats to the state. The aforementioned examples illustrate the broader usage of the terms such as disease, pestilence, and illness to portray corruption and decay of the Empire in a more generalised manner. Nonetheless, the motif of illnesses was also deployed in a context where an emperor or other prominent political figure was afflicted by the disease. His sufferings were, thus, directly linked to the turbulence within the Empire, and the illness was perceived as a direct consequence of the corrupt politics pursued by an emperor or an official. In this regard, it is crucial to highlight several key points. Some Byzantine historians demonstrated a profound understanding of medicine and a keen interest in this field. Consequently, the facts they chose to record concerning the illnesses were often shaped by their own perspectives and interests. Secondly, it should be noted that not all authors who presented the sufferings of prominent figures caused by illnesses utilised them as a literary motif. It is common knowledge that the metaphor of the diseases goes back to ancient rhetoric. The metaphors are traced in the works of Demosthenes, Cicero, Quintilian and other classical writers. A common feature of Byzantine

historiography was the practice of passing the final judgement on the rule of a certain emperor at the end of his reign. Also, the historians tended to describe the way in which an emperor left his earthly life. Some of these accounts make no reference to the prevailing political circumstances. Nevertheless, the examples that were used deliberately, as will be discussed subsequently in the text, demonstrate that the stories about these ailments were not the product of their authors' imagination. The illustrated symptoms were widely recognised, as was the condition of the patient. It can therefore be concluded that the intention of the historians in question was not to invent these accounts and, thereby, reduce the credibility of their own works. The writers were more inclined to manipulate the extant facts in order to persuade their audience in the truthfulness of their testimonies [92]. However, the disparate interpretation of the facts enabled the authors to provide a multiplicity of ends to the narrative they were constructing and thus to proffer a plethora of alternatives to the "truth." In this regard, some Byzantine authors employed diseases as a literary device to illustrate the justifiable punishment of the wrongdoers. The severity of the crime was reflected in the degree of the punishment and the intensity of the torments. The portrayal of illnesses was used not only to illustrate the justifiable punishment of the principal characters but also to exemplify the pervasive corruption and deterioration within the Empire.

1. Methodology

The author of this article set the task to offer an overview of historical narratives (both chronicles and histories) pertaining to the subject matter, rather than to present a comprehensive enumeration of instances where this literary motif has been employed in the described manner. Furthermore, the author sought to illustrate the persistence of the literary motif under examination while also identifying instances of divergence. The article presents a series of cases, commencing with the earliest centuries of Byzantine historiography and concluding with the 15th-century historians. What is more, in order to show that the Byzantine historians did not fabricate the information regarding the illnesses, a comparison was conducted with other contemporary sources when they referred to the

same events. In this way, the author demonstrates that the Byzantine historians in question made use of the existing data as a convenient method to achieve their own goals, namely, to express criticism of the imperial policy and reveal the incompetency of certain rulers and officials.

2. Results and General Remarks

The research made plain that the motif of illnesses in Byzantine historical narratives can be traced throughout Byzantine history. The motif was deployed in two distinct ways: firstly, to illustrate the justifiable punishment for the actions deemed contrary to the will of God, and secondly, to highlight the shortcomings of emperors and leading officials. This dual application was evident all the way through Byzantine history. In the early Byzantine period, which saw the establishment of Christian faith and the Church, the motif of diseases served as a displaying punishment for the persecution of Christians and for dealing with various heresies. In the middle Byzantine period, this literary motif was further exploited, potentially reaching its apogee in the historical work of Michael Psellus. As Byzantine political thought, philosophy and society developed [65], this motif was primarily employed to convey the perceived corruption and decay of the Empire. However, during the period of iconoclasm, it was also utilised to elucidate how God punished the iconoclastic emperors for their transgressions. The motif of illnesses continued to be present in Byzantine history when referring to the heretical teachings, such as the disputes over hesychasm, along with the criticism of the imperial policy and the overall corruption in the Empire. This ultimately led to the Fall of Constantinople in 1453. It is noteworthy that the motif of illness was not utilised to describe the disputes between those who advocated for the union and those who opposed it, as evidenced by the historical narratives of the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries.

2.1. Early Byzantine Period

In Byzantine literary tradition, accounts of illnesses befalling the sinners were not uncommon. Even in the earliest centuries of Christian literature we encounter strikingly detailed stories about the Roman emperors who were subjected to divine retribution for their treatment of the nascent Christian community.

These descriptions are found in the works of the late antique writers. Perhaps the most prominent example is Lactantius and his work *De mortibus persecutorum*. In recounting the demise of the detested emperor Gaius Galerius (305–311), Lactantius makes the following observation: "A malign ulcer appeared on the lower part of his genitals and spread more widely. Doctors cut and then treated it; a scar formed, but then the wound split open; a vein burst, and the flow of blood imperilled his life". The physicians tried to help, but "a slight movement of his body reopened the wound, and it bled more profusely than before. ...As the marrow was assailed, the infection was forced inwards and got a hold of his internal organs; worms were born inside him. The smell pervaded not just the palace but the whole city, and this was not surprising, since the channels for his urine and his excrement were now confused with each other. He was consumed by worms, and his body dissolved and rotted amid insupportable pain... This had gone on continually for a year, when at last, subdued by his ills, he was compelled to confess God. In the intervals of the pain as it pressed on him afresh, he cried out that he would restore the temple of God and make satisfaction for his crime" [43, pp. 50-53; 14].

This detailed account of Gaius Galerius's suffering was subsequently elaborated upon by the pioneering Byzantine historian, Eusebius of Caesarea [38, pp. 57-66; 90, pp. 23-46]². In his *Vita Constantini*³ Eusebius sets forth the view that Licinius (308–324) was wholly indifferent to the fate that had befallen Galerius. He reiterates the assertion of Lactantius concerning Gaius Galerius: "...God-sent punishment pursued him, beginning with his very flesh and extending to his mind. A general inflammation arose in the middle of his bodily private parts, then a deeply fistulous ulcer; these spread incurably to his intestines, from which an unspeakable number of maggots bred and a stench of death arose... As he wrestled with so many evils, he did indeed ultimately become aware of his crimes against the Church. He then made confession to God and stopped the persecution of Christians..." (*Eusebius. Vita Constantini*. Book I, Ch. 57 [18, pp. 44-45]; for English translation see *Eusebius. Life of Constantine*. Book I [17, pp. 92-93]).

Following the victory of Constantine I (306–337) over Licinius in 324 and the subsequent

acquisition of comprehensive control over the Empire ⁴, Constantine proceeded to issue a missive to the provincials of Palestine. In this passage, Eusebius provides an overview of the detrimental effects of the civil wars, emphasising the importance of respecting the will of God: “When such and so grave a wickedness oppresses humanity, and when the state is in danger of utter destruction from a sort of pestilential disease and needs much life-saving medical care (καὶ τῶν κοινῶν οἶον ὑπὸ νόσου λοιμῶδους τινὸς ἄρδην διαφθαρῆναι κινδυνευόντων καὶ θεραπείας σωτηρίου πολλῆς χρηζόντων), what relief does the Divinity envisage, what escape from horrors?” (*Eusebius. Vita Constantini*. Book II, Ch. 28 [18, p. 60]; for English translation see *Eusebius. Life of Constantine*. Book II [17, p. 105]). It is evident that Eusebius employs the term “disease” as a metaphor to elucidate the internal challenges confronting the Empire. Furthermore, Eusebius utilised this metaphor to explain the conflicts in the Church. In his commentary on the disputes in Egypt, Eusebius observes that while those in Alexandria were engaged in inconsequential disagreements over matters of great significance, those in other regions were still divided over long-standing issues, resulting in a state of schism. The entire region of Libya was afflicted by these issues, which could be likened to a diseased body (τούτοις δ’ ὥσπερ σώματος κεκακωμένου). This spread to the other provinces, which were also affected by the same disease (συνενόσει δὲ καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ μέρη)” (*Eusebius. Vita Constantini*. Book II, Ch. 62 [18, p. 73]; for English translation see *Eusebius. Life of Constantine*. Book II [17, p. 115]).

The description of Constantine I’s illness, baptism and death in Eusebius’s *Vita Constantini* represents the best example of the literary motif under discussion: “First a bodily indisposition came upon him, then illness supervened (Γίνεται δ’ αὐτῷ πρώτητις ἀνωμαλία τοῦ σώματος, εἴτ’ οὖν κάκωσις ἐπὶ {ταύτην. – B. P.} συμβαίνει...), and thereupon he went out to the hot water baths of his city, and from there to the city named after his mother. But when he became aware that his life was ending, he perceived that this was the time to purify himself from the offences which he had at any time committed, trusting that whatever sins it had been his lot as a mortal to commit, he could wash them from his soul by the power of the

secret words and the saving bath” (*Eusebius. Vita Constantini*. Book IV, Ch. 61–62 [18, pp. 145–146]; for English translation see *Eusebius. Life of Constantine*. Book IV [17, p. 177]) ⁵. After the baptism, Constantine I overcame the illness by peacefully leaving this world. The disease he suffered from may well have been sent to him because of his earlier paganism. Nonetheless, having received the tonsure, the emperor was taken up to his God, as Eusebius informs us (*Eusebius. Vita Constantini*. Book IV, Ch. 63–64 [18, pp. 146–147]; for English translation see *Eusebius. Life of Constantine*. Book IV [17, p. 179]). The first “Byzantine historian”, judging by the quoted examples, used the motif of disease to narrate about civil wars within the Empire. What is more, with this particular motif, Eusebius refers to paganism and the internal conflicts in the Church.

Similar accounts of the persecutions endured by those who espoused the Christian faith can be found in other ecclesiastical histories from the first centuries of Byzantine historical literature. Apart from that, heretics were also afflicted by divinely inspired diseases. This fate has also befallen Arius, who perished suddenly and tragically, as documented by Socrates the Scholasticus (Socrates the Scholasticus. *Kirchengeschichte*. Book I, Ch. 38 [87, p. 89]) ⁶.

The literary motif of illnesses being sent as a form of punishment for the sins was not only brought into relation with the persecution of the Christians in the earliest historical writings of Byzantine literature. This literary motif served as a means of expressing the criticism of the imperial policy in a veiled manner. Furthermore, such literary method was applied for articulating disapproval of imperial policy in a more oblique style. One of the most illustrative examples in this regard is that of the 6th-century historian Procopius of Caesarea ⁷.

In the works of Procopius, namely *De bellis* and *Historia arcana*, we find a detailed account of the catastrophic plague that posed a significant threat to the survival of the inhabitants of 6th-century Constantinople. The description of the plague in Procopius’s work *De bellis* is well known and is based on the account of Greek historian Thucydides. What is of particular interest for our topic is that emperor Justinian (527–565) was afflicted by the disease but

survived ([79, pp. 454-473; for English translation see [77, pp. 179-184]). In relation to the surviving patients, Procopius makes the subsequent observation: "As soon as they had recovered from the disease and were safe and thought that they were now secure, since the disease had gone to other men, they abruptly reverted again and changed for the worse; they displayed the strangeness of their habits even more than before, surpassing themselves completely in wickedness and lawlessness. It would not then be a lie to assert that this disease, whether by chance or by foresight, carefully selected the most wicked and spared them, though this became clear only later" ([79, pp. 470-471]; for English translation see [77, p. 183]). There can hardly be any doubt that Procopius conveyed his disapproval of "the wicked" Justinian, who was among the survivors, in a veiled manner. In his *Historia arcana*, however, Procopius is unambiguous in his criticism. He states that: "When the plague, which I described in a previous book, was cutting down the people of Byzantion, it happened that the emperor Justinian fell so grievously ill that it was even said that he had died. This rumor was spread about by hearsay until it reached the camp of the Romans. Some of the officers there began to declare that if the Romans in Byzantion foisted another emperor like that upon them all, they would never allow it. But shortly afterward it happened that the emperor recovered and the officers of the Roman army began to slander each other" ([76, pp. 24-25]; for English translation see [78, p. 18]). This is undoubtedly an overt reproach of emperor Justinian, which is absent from *De bellis* [8, pp. 40-42]. Furthermore, Procopius writes that Justinian was more detrimental than the plague itself, as some individuals survived the pandemic, yet nobody could evade him: "Like some new calamity sent from heaven to fall upon the whole of mankind, it left no one entirely unscathed" ([76, p. 42]; for English translation see [78, p. 31]). In the time of the great plague that devastated the Empire, Justinian, as recounted by Procopius in *Historia arcana*, demonstrated no leniency towards the people. The wars continued unabated, the populace was compelled to provide military personnel, and taxes were not once remitted ([76, pp. 144-145]; for English translation see [78, p. 104]). Accordingly, based on Procopius's account in both *De bellis* and with

greater clarity in his *Historia arcana*, the historian attributed the disaster to Justinian, viewing the plague as a divine retribution. Moreover, by likening the emperor to a calamity, Procopius articulates his critique of the societal structures that were subjected to the rule of Justinian.

There is no doubt that the Empire was faced with an epic disaster. The testimony of Agathias corroborates this fact. The historian also describes the numerous misfortunes that befell the Empire in the course of the epidemic⁸. Similarly, Agathias acknowledges the perspective that divine wrath was the cause of the devastation, a form of retribution for humanity's transgressions that resulted in the annihilation of entire populations. However, Agathias offers a comparatively lenient assessment of the situation in comparison to Procopius. He concludes his account with the admission that it is not up to him to decide on the veracity of one hypothesis over another. Such an undertaking would be beyond the scope of Agathias's comprehension ([1, pp. 175-176]; for English translation see [2, pp. 145-146])⁹.

The illness of emperor Justin II (565–578) was inextricably linked to the political and social unrest in the Empire. The reign of Justin II witnessed the persecution of the monophysites¹⁰ and significant external threats, particularly from the Avars and Persians. In his work, John of Ephesus¹¹, a monophysite and historian being close to the emperor Justin II, states that Justin II displayed periods of psychotic behavior. The historian holds emperor Justin II responsible for the persecution of monophysites, linking his affliction to divine retribution for his misdeeds: "He (God. – B. P.) sent it by means of an evil angel, who suddenly entered into him, and took his form, and domineered over him cruelly and fearfully, making him an example of the terribleness of their malice. For suddenly it destroyed his reason, and his mind was agitated and darkened, and his body given over both to secret and open tortures and cruel agonies, so that he even uttered the cries of various animals, and barked like a dog, and bleated like a goat; and then he would mew like a cat, and then again crow like a cock: and many such things were done by him, contrary to human reason, being the workings of the prince of darkness" [89, p. 167]. John of Ephesus provides a detailed account of the emperor's erratic behaviour, which included running from

place to place, hiding under the bed, and then proceeding to throw himself down at the windows. He assaulted and severely bit one of the guards who were responsible for his safety and security. This led to the circulation of a rumour that the emperor had eaten two of his chamberlains. Those in his vicinity devised a range of diversions, both to occupy his attention and to facilitate his return to a state of rationality. He was transported in a small waggon with a throne for him to sit upon. An organ was installed and played continuously, which proved an effective method of maintaining the emperor's composure for the majority of time [89, pp. 168-169]. In addition, the account of John of Ephesus indicates that the emperor also suffered from a severe urological illness: "...Hopes were long entertained of his recovery, chiefly because of the recurrence of lucid intervals, during which he could be propped up in his chair, and shown to the people, and even taken to the entertainments of the Hippodrome in the morning: but then he would again relapse into his former imbecility, to which were added other trials, especially the painful disease of strangury: so that upon the whole his health constantly declined... And when afterwards the pain of the strangury increased, and he was tortured by stones which obstructed the bladder... a deep incision was then made in both his groins, and the whole operation so barbarously performed, that he was put to extreme torture: nevertheless, in the midst of his cries, he said, with a loud voice, 'Just are thy judgments, O God; for all the sins and wickednesses which I committed with my body are openly requited in Thy anger upon the members whereby I wrought them'" [89, pp. 177-178]. John of Ephesus, whose monophysites were subjected to persecution during the reign of Justin II, was justified in attributing the emperor's afflictions to divine wrath. It is important to note that Justin II's mental illness and erratic behaviour could have been caused by the emperor's urological problems¹².

Historian Evagrius attributes the madness of emperor Justin II to the fall of Dara, the most important city in the frontier region between the Romans and the Persians. He states: "Upon hearing these events, Justin was unable to engage in rational thought or to process the situation in a manner that was consistent with his previous state of mental health. Instead, he succumbed to a state of mental disorder and madness, which rendered

him incapable of comprehending the events that had transpired" [16, p. 270]¹³. Ultimately, Theophylact Simocatta, the last representative of the early Byzantine historians¹⁴, offers insights into the reign of emperor Justin. In his account, Simocatta states: "In this particular year Justin (Justin II. – *B. P.*), the emperor of the Romans, withered away from disease, after encountering great punishments for his violent deeds" [26, p. 133]. Although Simocatta does not explicitly identify the illness of the emperor, it is evident that he was aware of the prevalent discourse surrounding the emperor's health.

2.2. Middle Byzantine period

The literary motif of diseases is first encountered in the *Short History* of the patriarch Nicephorus I (806–815)¹⁵, at a point when he expresses his criticism of the incestuous marriage contracted by emperor Heracleius (610–641) with his niece Martina. In his account, Nicephorus states: "Sometime later he (Heracleius – *B. P.*) fell ill with the dropsy and realized that his disease was difficult to cure, for it grew to such an extent that when he was about to urinate, he would place a board against his abdomen: {otherwise. – *B. P.*} his private parts turned round and discharged the urine in his face. This was in reproof of his transgression (namely, his marriage to his own niece). Because of this marriage he suffered this ultimate punishment (ἐλεγχος δὲ ἦν τοῦτο τῆς παρανομίας τῆς ἑαυτοῦ, ὑπὲρ ἧς ταύτην δίκην ὑστάτην ἐξέτισετο εἰς τὴν ἀνεπιάν τὴν οἰκείαν γάμου...). So he died of this {disease. – *B. P.*} at the age of sixty-six after a reign of thirty years, four months, and six days..." [67, pp. 76-77; 75, pp. 269-270; 45].

In the *Short History* of Nicephorus I, we additionally discern the author's disapproval of the iconoclastic emperors, mainly Constantine V (741–775). Nicephorus informs his readers that the pestilence, which suddenly befell the Empire during the reign of this emperor and his father, Leo III (717–741) was perceived as a punishment for the iconoclastic politics of Leo III and his son Constantine V, Nicephorus states: "{Now a great plague – *B. P.*} fell upon the Imperial City and the surrounding lands, and wherever this destructive disease prevailed, it consumed and entirely annihilated all human beings... The pestilence was particularly intense at Byzantium. Frightful

portents were suddenly to be seen: cruciform markings appeared on men's garments and holy cloths, upon doors and door posts, and these phenomena aroused in everyone great fear and consternation as if they were foreshadowing an instant doom... Those who were able to think aright judged that these (misfortunes – *B. P.*) were inflicted by God's wrath inasmuch as the godless and impious ruler of the day and those who concurred with his lawless purpose dared to lay their hands on the holy images to the disgrace of Christ's Church (ταῦτα ἐκρίνετο τοῖς ὀρθὰ φρονεῖν εἰδόσιν ἐκθείας ἐπισκίπτειν ὀργῆς, ἡνίκα ὁ τότε ἀθέως καὶ δυσσεβῶς κρατῶν, καὶ ὅσοι αὐτῷ συνήνουν τῷ ἀθέσμῳ φρονήματι, τὰς χεῖρας ἐπαρεῖναι κατὰ τῶν ἁγίων ἀπεικονισμάτων εἰς ὕβριν τῆς τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐκκλησίας τετολμήκασιν)" [67, pp. 138-141].

A comparable indictment of the iconoclastic emperors is presented in the *Chronicle* of Theophanes¹⁶. Similarly, he provides a detailed account of illnesses that befell the iconoclastic emperors. The historian uses the motif of disease as a means of expressing divine retribution. Theophanes posits that the emperors were deserving of their fate due to their impiety and the peculiarities that ultimately led to their demise. This is exemplified by the case of emperor Constantine V, whom Theophanes refers to as "the persecutor of laws handed down from the fathers, who became emperor by divine judgment because of the multitude of our sins" ([88, pp. 637-638]; for English translation see [11, p. 105]). The ascension of Constantine V to the imperial throne is perceived as a consequence of the misdeeds committed by the 'Romans' (*Rhomaioi*). In his account concerning the end of the emperor's days, Theophanes states: "In this year (775), the emperor sailed forth against the Bulgars in August. At that time his legs were terribly burnt by a God-sent plague, unknown to his doctors, which caused a severe fever... Pitiably dying in his warship he cried out: 'I have been given to unquenchable fire while still alive...' Thus did the autocrator give up his life; he had ruled 34 years, 2 months and 26 days after his father's death. He was defiled by the blood of many Christians, by invocations of demons and sacrifices to them, by persecution of the holy churches and the true and blameless faith, and by the murder of monks and the parceling out of monasteries. He had

done all sorts of wicked deeds, no less than had Diocletian and the tyrants of old" ([88, pp. 693-694]; for English translation see [11, p. 135]). Therefore, it can be concluded that God punished not only the iconoclastic emperors by sending them incurable diseases but also the Byzantines by sending them the emperors who were undeserving of the throne.

In the historical work, *Chronographia*, Michael Psellus¹⁷ provides a detailed account of the reigns of the emperors, starting with Basil II (976–1025) and concluding abruptly with the events dated to the reign of Michael VII Ducas (1071–1078). Psellus was one of the most prolific writers in the Byzantine Empire, who is regarded as one of its greatest minds. He devoted considerable attention to the physical descriptions of the emperors and the portrayals of their diseases. Psellus was also a distinguished connoisseur of medicine [57; 56; 6]. In addition to demonstrating his expertise on the subject, these accounts served another purpose: to illustrate the pervasive corruption and decline of the Empire following the demise of emperor Basil II [82; 71].

It may be advisable to begin with the metaphor of the Empire's illness, presented by Psellus in his *Chronographia*. The author introduces this metaphor at an unspecified point in the description of Isaac I Comnenus's reign (1057–1059). Psellus likens the Empire to a monstrous body, "a body with a multitude of heads, an ugly bull neck, hands so many that they were beyond counting, and just as many feet" (σῶμα τερατείας πάσης μεστὸν, κεφαλαῖς μὲν διαμεμερισμένον πολλαῖς, δυστράχηλόν τε καὶ πολυτράχηλον, χερσίτε οὐκ εὐαριθμήτοις διαπεπλασμένον, καὶ ποσὶν ἰσαρίθμοις χρώμενον). The historian employs medical terminology to point to the patient in a state of severe illness, namely the Empire of the 'Romans' (*Rhomaioi*). As we learn from his narrative, it was Isaac I Comnenus who attempted to implement the aforementioned remedy (καὶ οὕτως ἐπάγων τὸ φάρμακον). However, the emperor did not select an optimal moment for this course of action. Had he done so, the state apparatus (τὸ πολιτικὸν σῶμα) would not have been brought to complete ruin ([55, pp. 231-232]; for English translation see [12, pp. 154-155]; on Isaac's illness see [32]). Psellus elucidates the manner in which the body of the state became so corrupted and assumed

the shape of a monster. To achieve his purpose, the historian presents an overview of imperial reigns, commencing with Basil II. Psellus notes that Basil II bequeathed a vast and prosperous empire to his successors. The brother of Basil II, Constantine VIII (962–1028), “plunged into a life of pleasure, determined to squander and spend everything... He was the first emperor to corrupt and swell out the body of the state (οὗτος μὲν δὴ πρῶτος τὸ σῶμα τῆς πολιτείας κακοῦντε καὶ ἐξογκοῦν ἤρξατο), partly by fattening some of his subjects with great wealth, partly by raising them to positions of honor and giving them opportunities to live in depravity and vice” ([55, p. 232]; for English translation see [12, p. 155]). Following the demise of Constantine VIII, the throne was bestowed upon his son-in-law, Romanus III Argyrus (1028–1034), who, wanting to secure the throne for the members of his own family, continued distributing the wealth, “adding to a body which was already gross, and aggravating the disease, and filling the corrupted part with superfluous fat” (καὶ προστίθῃσι τῷ περιττεύσαντι σώματι, καὶ αὐξάνει τὴν νόσον, καὶ τὸ διαφθειρόμενον καταπληροῖ ἐκκεχυμένης ποιότητος) ([55, p. 233]; for English translation see [12, p. 155]).

Subsequent to Romanus III, Michael IV (1034–1041) assumed the throne. In his *Chronographia*, Psellus presents Michael IV in a largely positive manner, although even this emperor was not entirely worthy of the throne of Constantine the Great. Psellus acknowledges that Michael IV put a stop to the majority of malevolent activities. At the same time, Psellus criticises Michael IV: “He was not strong enough to deny some small additions of fat to this body, so accustomed to its nourishment of bad juices and unwholesome, fat-making, foods” (οὐ μέντοι γε τοσοῦτον ἐξίσχυσεν ὥστε τολμῆσαι μηδὲ τὸ βραχύτατον ἐκλιπᾶναι τὸ εἰωθὸς σῶμα χυμοῖς ἐκτρέφεσθαι πονηροῖς καὶ διεφθαρμέναις ἐξογκοῦσθαι τροφαῖς) ([55, p. 233]; for English translation see [12, p. 156]).

Psellus proceeds to discuss the rule of Constantine IX Monomachus (1042–1055). The historian writes that the mentioned emperor “first added a host of new limbs and new parts to a body already long-corrupted, injected into its entrails liquids even more unwholesome, and then, having done this, took it out of its

natural state and deprived it of peaceful and civilized existence” (πλεῖστα περιθεῖς μέρη καὶ μέλη τῷ πάλαι διαφθαρέντι σώματι, καὶ χυμοὺς πονηροτέρους τοῖς σπλάγχχνοις εἰσενεγκὼν, τοῦ μὲν κατὰ φύσιν ἀπήνεγκε, καὶ τῆς ἡμέρου καὶ πολιτικῆς ζωῆς ἀπεστέρησεν) ([55, p. 233]; for English translation see [12, p. 156]). Emperor Constantine IX, whom many subjects referred to as “εὐεργέτης”, exacerbated the already bad situation in the Empire even further. According to Psellus, the emperor also had a detrimental impact on the psychological well-being of his subjects. Constantine IX was followed by Theodora (1042–1056). She further aggravated the empire’s position. Theodora was succeeded by “the old man Michael”, as Psellus remarks for Michael VI (1056–1057). Nevertheless, the new emperor swiftly withdrew from the competition, being unable to withstand the movement of the imperial chariot ([55, p. 234]; for English translation see [12, p. 156]).

When Isaac I Comnenus had come to power, the Empire had already been “fattened up to such an extent that it was necessary to administer purgative drugs, and that in considerable doses. A second course of treatment was demanded – I mean, of course, surgical operations, cauterization, and cathartics. The opportunity for healing recurred and Isaac Comnenus, wearing his crown, climbed into the Roman chariot” ([55, p. 234]; for English translation see [12, p. 156]). Not even Isaac was able to effect a resolution at the time he attempted to do so. Psellus presents this emperor as a man who devoted himself to the philosophic life. The emperor abhorred anything that was physically diseased or corrupt (Ἦν δὲ οὗτος βίου μὲν ἐραστὴς φιλοσόφου, καὶ τὸ νοσοῦν ἅπαν καὶ διεφθαρμένον ἀποστρέφόμενος τῆς ζωῆς). Psellus suggests that the prevailing circumstances within the Empire disheartened Isaac. Furthermore, the emperor observed a predominance of disease and festering sores. The historian provides an explanation for the premature actions of Isaac I by employing medical terminology once again. Psellus writes: “...he (Isaac – B. P.) ought to have waited for the appropriate moment before he applied surgical remedies and cautery; it was wrong to operate on the internal organs with the surgeon’s heated iron without reasonable premeditation... But Isaac wanted to see the sick body restored to health immediately” ([55,

pp. 234-235]; for English translation see [12, pp. 156-157]).

As Psellus recounts in *Chronographia*, the successors of Basil II are held responsible for the politics of the Empire. They put it at the brink of ruin. The metaphorical representation of Psellus indicates that Basil's successors precipitated imperial decline. It was exceptionally challenging to reverse the decay of the Empire. The sole emperor who attempted to implement the prescribed remedies was Isaac Comnenus, albeit in a misguided manner and at an inopportune time. Psellus reiterates elsewhere the negative characterisations of the emperors described in a lengthy passage of his *Chronographia*. In this way the author, having indirectly demonstrated the portrayal of these diseases, educated his readers [82, p. 346].

In *Chronographia*, there are three idealised portraits of Byzantine emperors: Basil II, Constantine X Ducas (1059–1067) and Michael VII Ducas [82, p. 337]. Psellus asserts that all of these three emperors died peacefully and happily. In the case of Basil II, the writer emphasises the emperor's longevity and his long reign [55, pp. 1-23], whereas John Skylitzes makes reference to the emperor's illness at the end of his life [30, pp. 368-369]. According to Psellus, Constantine X Ducas lived a more glorious life and died more contented. However, Michael Attaliates also provides information regarding an illness that afflicted this emperor towards the end of his life [36, pp. 166-167]. It seems likely that Psellus omitted any mention of the diseases of the named emperors in order to present these rulers as the ones worthy of the Byzantine throne. They had actually earned such a peaceful death, without suffering from any illness [82, p. 339]. In this light, the descriptions of the diseases that other emperors suffered from during their lifetime assume even greater significance in terms of Psellus's skilful rhetoric and ironic portrayal of the characters in *Chronographia* [83].

Constantine VIII is represented as an antipode of his brother and predecessor, Basil II. Constantine's physical appearance provided an initial insight into the description of gout. The emperor suffered from the illness, caused by laziness and sexual passions ([55, p. 28]; for English translation see [12, p. 23])¹⁸. Of Romanus III, Psellus relates: "An illness of

all unusual and painful character befell Romanos. Actually, the whole of his body became festering and corrupted inside. At any rate, from then onwards, he lost most of his appetite, and sleep, poised on his eyelids, quickly flitted away. All the ill-humors fell upon him together – harshness of character, peevishness of spirit, anger and wrath and shouting, things unknown in him before. All his life, from his earliest years, he had been a friendly sort of man; now, it became not only hard to get into his presence, but hard to get civil reply to one's questions. Laughter deserted him, and his former graciousness and pleasant nature. He trusted nobody at all, nor did he seem to others trustworthy himself. Each party suspected and was suspected by the other. His lack of generosity now became more pronounced. The distributions of money that he made were niggardly in any case, and he was savagely angry at every request for it" ([55, pp. 47-48]; for English translation see [12, p. 34]). It would appear prudent to pay attention to the terminology employed in descriptions of the Romanus's illness. Psellus makes use of compound nouns derived from the term "ἥθος" which refers to an individual's intrinsic character [37, pp. 23-28]. The historian reiterates these nouns even twice in the same sentence, firstly to designate the unusualness of Romanus's disease (νόσημα τῶν ἀήθων) and, secondly, to describe the decay of his body (κακόηθες αὐτῷ ἐγγένοι καὶ ὕπουλον). The term "κακοήθης" is applicable in both medical contexts and the portrayal of diseases. However, it is primarily used to describe a morally corrupt character. Therefore, Psellus's use of wordplay imbues this text with a dual meaning: a straightforward depiction of Romanus's physical condition and a portrayal revealing the character of the emperor in question [82, pp. 340-341]. In addition, it is evident from this account that Romanus III was gradually losing the qualities that are typically associated with an emperor.

In the account of Constantine IX, Psellus presents the illness of the emperor. The historian makes a contrast between the conditions of the emperor's body at the beginning of the reign and its subsequent deterioration. The affected beauty and strength of the emperor's body is associated by the historian with the onset of arthritis. Without doubt, this metaphor provides an explanation for the deterioration of the state in

which the Empire found itself during the reign of Constantine IX. Psellus asserts that Monomachus was a suitable candidate for the imperial throne, yet his subsequent conduct soon demonstrated his inappropriateness. The emperor's indifference concerning the welfare of the Empire and his sexual appetites were met with retribution in the form of gout [82, p. 342].

Psellus offers the following description of character flaws that he perceives in Constantine: "A healthy animal, with a thoroughly strong constitution, is not altered in a moment at the first symptoms of illness. So with the empire in the reign of Constantine: it was by no means moribund and its breathing was still energetic; the neglect from which it was suffering seemed an insignificant item, until, by slow degrees, the malady grew, and reaching a crisis, threw the patient into utter confusion, complete disorder. This later stage, however, had not yet been approached, and the emperor, taking little share in the anxieties of power, but seeking recreation in a multitude of pleasures, was preparing the then healthy body of his empire for a thousand maladies destined to attack it in the future" ([55, p. 126]; for English translation see [12, p. 84]). It is evident that emperor Constantine IX lacked the fortitude and determination (ζῆλος), which could have enabled him to prevail over his ailment, as espoused by Christian doctrine [54, p. 303; 71, pp. 88; 34]. The bouts of illness only served to exacerbate the situation, when enemies from within and without imperilled the very existence of the Empire. The only emperor who was able to maintain control over its condition during a period of significant instability was Michael IV. He suffered from epilepsy [46] ¹⁹. At the time of Petar Deljan's rebellion in 1040, the emperor demonstrated resilience and vitality. He overcame the attacks of his illness and exhibited a timely response in suppressing the uprising. For this reason, Psellus commended Michael IV. Despite the generally favourable portrayal of the emperor in the *Chronographia*, Michael IV's representation served as a basis for his disqualification from the throne [82, p. 343; 53, p. 384].

Michael Psellus developed the motif of diseases even further and brought it into a whole new level. He made use of medical terminology in his *Chronographia*. Psellus presents the inability

of rulers to address the internal and external challenges they face. Also, the portrayal of the emperors in the *Chronographia* illustrates the gradual dissipation of their *joie de vivre*. The rulers of the Empire would undergo a transformation into corrupt and unworthy of their position. Initially depicted as merry characters, the emperors would subsequently become rotten, unmerciful individuals. With time, their personalities would deteriorate, and they would lose the qualities that initially made them worthy of the throne.

Other Byzantine historians similarly utilised this literary motif to illustrate that certain people were unsuitable for the roles they played. In an account of the rebellion of Nicephorus Bryennius ²⁰ in November 1077, Michael Attaleiates ²¹ seeks to present his own involvement in the events surrounding this uprising. At the end, he writes about his attempts to offer counsel to logothetes (logothete) Nicephorus (Nicephoritzes) ²². Michael Attaleiates states: "I... advised... that he (Nicephoritzes – B. P.) should speedily bring calm to Raideustos with a chrysoboullon and secure its loyalty with displays of compassion and understanding and do likewise with the other cities, all the while calling up the army for the same purpose, to stem the flow of so many people toward the rebel... But the logothetes, responding with a smile to all that I had earnestly proposed to him, procrastinated and put off matters that could not be afforded even a short postponement, so that by the time he tried to apply a remedy, the disease was most inflamed (ἕως τοῦ πάθους φλεγμαίνοντος τὴν ἰατρειάν ἐπεχείρησε μὲν). Then he realised the futility of trying to move the immovable, and at that point I again sensed that few of the men among us were able to use good in order to cure evil (τὸ κακὸν ἰᾶσθαι)" [36, p. 449]. As previously remarked, the term "disease" was sometimes used to designate the external and internal adversaries. Nonetheless, Attaleiates employed it not only to indicate the threat posed by Bryennius but primarily to highlight the incompetency of logothetes Nicephoritzes, who was assigned the task to confront the rebel Bryennius.

The arthritis or gout and epilepsy were prevalent ailments throughout the Middle Ages ²³. The gout was frequently associated with a life of indulgence and excess by the Byzantine historians. We know well that emperor Alexius I

Comnenus (1081–1118) suffered from this disease. In the *Alexiad*, Anna Comnene²⁴ suggests a number of reasons to explain the emperor's condition. The princess initially writes about an injury that her father sustained several years earlier, and hereupon his illness was precipitated. Anna Comnene emphatically rejects the notion of any association concerning the disease of Alexius, which would allude to his lifestyle. He is portrayed as an unblemished hero [81, pp. 102–103]. Although it is evident that Anna had a comprehensive understanding of medicine, she introduces the third reason for Alexius's ailments. Anna relates: "The man I am speaking of must be introduced at this point and considered a third reason of the emperor's illness, not merely as the immediate cause, but also the most effective cause (to use the doctors' terms). He did not attack once and for all and then disappear, but remained with him, a constant companion like the most pernicious humors in the veins. Worse than that, if one reflects on the man's character, he was not only a cause of the disease, but he was himself a malady and its most troublesome symptom (οὐ μόνον αἰτία νοσήματος ἦν, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἀντικρὺς νόσημα καὶ βαρύτερον σύμπτωμα). But I must bite my tongue and say no more" [4, p. 442]; for English translation see [3, p. 374]. Although the princess does not explicitly identify the individual in question, it is clear that Anna Comnene is referring to her brother and heir to the throne, John II Comnenus²⁵. As this example demonstrates, the use of the diseases as a metaphor for a person was sometimes employed by the author to discredit the individual in question.

A number of additional examples of diseases are provided by the Byzantine writers in their portrayal of the Middle Byzantine Empire. In his historical work, Nicetas Choniates, a well-known Byzantine historian of the 12th–13th century²⁶, wrote about Theodore Kastamonites. He was the prominent financial expert of the reign of emperor Isaac II Angelus (1185–1195) and the emperor's maternal uncle. Choniates criticised the government of emperor Isaac II for his inability to address the multifarious challenges confronting the Empire²⁷. Consequently, Isaac II transferred the administration of all public affairs to Theodore Kastamonites. Choniates vividly describes: "Nothing was done without his knowledge, and no one in authority was allowed

to sit down with Kastamonites but must stand in his presence in a servile attitude". Furthermore, Choniates discusses the events in question, remarking that the emperor remained entirely undisturbed by these developments. Conversely, Isaac II even permitted Kastamonites to wear the imperial purple garments and wear the purple military cloak. The latter was authorised to affix his signature to public decrees and rescripts in the same color. Nevertheless, Kastamonites was punished with an illness, which Choniates depicts as merciful (νόσος φιλάνθρωπος), because it relieved his countrymen from this man. The gout which afflicted Kastamonites was, therefore, used like a metaphor to illustrate the comprehensive decline of the Empire's political circumstances in the reign of Isaac II. The emperor's uncle is subsequently punished, dying after having suffered a sudden attack of the disease that "spread to other parts of the body, leaving his buttocks covered with sores" ([64, pp. 437–438]; for English translation see [13, p. 241]).

A similar affliction befell emperor Alexius III Angelus (1195–1203). The severity of his arthritis attacks was increased at the time of conflicts with external adversaries of the Empire. One of the descriptions of these attacks is worthy of particular mention. In the account that shed light on the sufferings of Alexius III, Choniates expresses his sorrow for the fate of the Empire. After the emperor's death, there were no male successors to claim the throne ([64, pp. 497–498]; for English translation see [13, pp. 273–274])²⁸.

According to the opinion of Nicetas Choniates, another patient suffering from the same disease was Philokales, the father-in-law of emperor Alexius V Ducas Mourtzouflos (1204). Philokales exploited the illness for his political purposes. Emperor Alexius V dismissed Choniates from his office, the logothetes of the sekreta, and promoted Philokales in this place. It is unsurprising that the historian depicted this individual in a negative light. In his account Choniates states: "This man, wholly unprepared to make himself known and precariously exceeding propriety because of inordinate ambition, ...fooled some by affecting the gout, as if his brain had flowed down into his feet with the disease, and so, with his wits wandering, he neglected his duties" ([64, p. 565]; for English translation see [13, p. 311]). Choniates sought to persuade his audience that Philokales

was driven by a desire for political advancement. Yet, the historian also writes how Philokales used his affliction with gout. The proof in this regard is scarce, thus rendering it impossible to verify the veracity of Choniates's testimony. Hence, this example also proves that the Empire's state of affairs would worsen further with the appointment of unsuitable individuals to positions of authority, as well as the implementation of ineffective governance.

2.3. Late Byzantine period

The following examples of late Byzantine historical narratives will be presented in order to provide a comprehensive account of the utilisation of illnesses as a literary motif that expressed internal strife within the Empire. We commence on the most renowned epileptic among the Byzantine emperors, Theodore II Lascaris (1254–1258) [47]. The sources diverge in the portrayal of this ruler and in the narration about his illness. It is evident that the historians employ the emperor's disease as a means of articulating their attitudes towards the two dynasties (the Lascarids and the Palaeologus), which intertwined following the death of Theodore II.

George Acropolites, the emperor's contemporary and one of his closest collaborators, but later also the emperor's most prominent adversary, offers the explicit commentary on this issue²⁹. Theodore's frequent changes of mood were attributed by Acropolites to his illness, which was believed to be epilepsy. The same disease also afflicted his father, John III Vatatzes (1221–1254)³⁰. The episode concerning the punishment meted out to the great logothetes Acropolites is well-known. The story about him relates to the emperor's illness and his occasional insanity. Still, this episode is only recorded in the work of Acropolites [22, pp. 130–131], whereas neither Theodore Skoutariotes³¹ nor George Pachymeres³² make any mention of it, and therefore neither does Nicephorus Gregoras³³. This fact, though, does not provide sufficient grounds to challenge the veracity of Acropolites's testimony. George Pachymeres writes a candid account of the emperor's illness, noting that Theodore II exhibited a pronounced inclination towards superstition and even attributed his afflictions to the machinations of a malevolent force [21, p. 53]. Nicephorus Gregoras does

not explicitly mention Theodore's disease, but he does report on the emperor's sharp character and unpredictable nature, which some feared. The most significant consequences of the emperor's illness, evidenced in historical works, were detrimental to his own well-being. As a consequence of his illness, the emperor's subjects, predominantly members of the aristocracy with whom the Nicaean emperors often conflicted, were adversely affected [10, pp. 351–352].

The accounts of emperor Theodore's death presented in the works of George Acropolites and Nicephorus Gregoras merit further examination. Theodore II Lascaris, afflicted by a serious illness, ultimately succumbed to it. Despite the efforts of the attending physicians, the emperor ultimately yielded to his illness and passed away. The terminology employed by Gregoras in his story about the emperor's demise is worthy of particular attention. The illness is described as carrying with it the weapons of death (ὅπλα θανάτου). This phrase contains an intriguing choice of words. The disease set various siege devices against the emperor's body (ἡ δὲ καὶ ποικίλας τὰς ἐλεπόλεις κατὰ τοῦ βασιλικοῦ σώματος ἀντηστήσασα) and did not allow itself to be vanquished until it had brought about the death of the emperor himself [61, pp. 61–62].

At the same time, Acropolites, portraying Theodore II, sought to accentuate the shortcomings of the ruler. Thereby the historian paves the way for a more favourable characterisation of Michael VIII Palaeologus (1259–1282). He was arguably the most laudable of all the Palaeologus rulers. In contrast, Pachymeres, who had previously expressed strong criticism of the first Palaeologus, presented the Lascarid emperors in a highly favourable light. Then again, Pachymeres did not conceal the fact that Theodore II was suffering from illness. Nicephorus Gregoras depicted the mildest portrait of the named emperor in the narrative about these events. The historian offers no praise for Theodore II and makes no criticism of him. Gregoras suggests a reconciliation between the contrasting aspects of the emperor's character [73]³⁴.

The Roman History of Nicephorus Gregoras presents Gregory Palamas, the renowned hesychast of his time, as the most negative figure. The historian depicts the disease from which Palamas suffered in a particular manner.

Nicephorus Gregoras asserts that Palamas was punished with a fatal illness for his impiety. This viewpoint of Gregoras aligns with his opposition to the hesychast movement. Gregoras even refers to the followers of Palamas as “παλαμναῖοι”, which can be translated with the word “murderers.” The historian states that Palamas’s demise was marked by bitterness and dishonour (πικρόν τε καὶ αἴσχιστον). His intestines were frequently twisted, resulting in the excretion of matter through his mouth that was intended to emerge from the other end. Palamas exhibited behaviour consistent with that of a madman as a result of an inflammatory condition affecting the brain (καὶ πρὸς γε μανιώδει φρενίτιδι), which ultimately led him to death [63, p. 549]³⁵. Although Gregoras’s description may be considered to be somewhat exaggerated, it should not be dismissed as being entirely inaccurate. It can be ascertained from the *Vita* of Palamas and the *Collection of miracles* written by Philotheus Kokkinos that the saint did, in fact, suffer from severe stomach problems towards the end of his life (νόσῳ βαρεῖα περιπίπτει τῶν σπλάγγων, ἥτις αὐτὸν μετὰ βραχὺ καὶ τῆς ζωῆς ὑπεξάγει) [59, p. 322].

Emperor John VI Cantacuzenus (1347–1354) was also subjected to censure for his support of Palamas and his followers. The Black Death, the epidemic of the plague that devastated the Empire in the mid-14th century, resulted in the passing of his youngest son, Andronicus. The death of the young Andronicus Cantacuzenus is placed in two sections of Gregoras’s *Roman History*. The first instance in which Gregoras makes reference to Andronicus, the historian merely states that Cantacuzenus’s son died of the plague. Subsequently, in the books written post Gregoras’s condemnation at the Council of Constantinople in 1351, when the hesychasts emerged triumphant, Gregoras recalls Andronicus and his demise. This fact should be situated in direct correlation to his father’s transgressions, namely, his endorsement of the hesychasts [62, pp. 797-798, 804-813]³⁶.

The employment of diseases as a metaphor for the decay of the Empire is exemplified in the work of the historian of the Fall, Ducas [28, pp. 490-494; 41, pp. 270-314; 60, pp. 298-301]. In the context of the threat posed by the Ottoman Turks, emperor John V Palaeologus (1341–1391), as documented by Ducas, “...was unable to

retaliate (he {John V Palaeologus – B. P.} was bedridden and suffering from gout in his feet, half-dead, so to speak, from gluttony, excessive drinking, and luxurious living...) After the bitter and nefarious ultimatum had been accomplished, the emperor in the throes of excruciating physical pain, died” ([15, p. 77]; for English translation see [52, p. 82]). In general, Ducas is highly critical of the Byzantine emperors, but he particularly disapproves of John V Palaeologus. This assertion can be supported by different facts. First of all, it is necessary to take into account the observation of Ducas regarding the gout suffered by John VIII Palaeologus (1425–1448). Ducas identifies a number of additional factors that contributed to the development of the emperor’s illness, rather than attributing it solely to the effects of debauchery ([15, p. 279; for English translation see [52, p. 186]). Additionally, the negative portrayal of John V Palaeologus in the historical narrative of Ducas can be ascribed to his sympathies towards John VI Cantacuzenus. It is a well-documented fact that Ducas’s grandfather provided support to Cantacuzenus in his military campaign of 1341–1347 against the regency of dowager empress Ann of Savoy, the patriarch John XIV Calecas (1334–1347), and the megas doux (grand duke) Alexios Apocaucus in Constantinople, who ruled in the name of the minor emperor, John V Palaeologus. The grandfather of Ducas was among the prisoners and participants of the uprising against the megas doux Alexios Apocaucus in 1345. This information is corroborated by the testimony of Nicephorus Gregoras, as well as John Cantacuzenus [62, p. 729; 29, p. 542]³⁷.

The aforementioned examples irrefutably illustrate that the Byzantine authors utilised the motif of diseases as a literary device throughout Byzantine history. The historians have offered their own interpretations of the characters in question. The authors did not fabricate the facts about the illnesses from which a person was suffering. The Byzantine historians did not want to subject the entirety of their testimonies to rigorous scrutiny. The historians made use of the extant facts and interpreted them in a manner that was the most advantageous to their argument. In the case of the diseases, they were employed as a means of illustrating the just recompense meted out to those who had sinned. More explicitly, these facts were used as a metaphor to show the punishment

inflicted for heretical beliefs and to highlight the overall decline and corruption within the Empire. The metaphor of diseases also served as a method to caution against the external and internal threats Byzantium was faced with.

2.4. “The trial of righteous Job”³⁸

The story of righteous Job and his sufferings has long been regarded as an exemplar of the idea that God subjects us to various trials with the intention of testing and strengthening our will and faith. While examples of this literary motif are scarce, it can be observed in this context in two Byzantine historical texts: in the *History* of Michael Attaleiates and the work of Skylitzes's successor [7, pp. 5-13; 60, pp. 155-161]. Both examples make reference to emperor Romanus IV Diogenes (1068–1071), who was defeated in the battle of Manzikert in 1071, despite having fought bravely against the Seldjok Turks and their sultan Alp Arslan. This defeat resulted in the emperor being not only imprisoned by the Turks but also stripped of his throne. The opposing faction in Constantinople exploited the situation to proclaim Michael VII Ducas as emperor and compelled his mother Eudocia, the empress and wife of Romanus IV, to enter a monastery. Following the signing of the agreement with the Turks, Romanus IV was released from captivity. Subsequently, a struggle for the imperial throne ensued, resulting in Romanus's defeat at the hands of the Ducas. In contravention of the agreement with the former emperor, John Ducas, the new emperor's uncle, cruelly blinded Romanus Diogenes in 1072. He succumbed to his injuries, which had become infected due to the lack of medical treatment. Michael Attaleiates provides a particularly detailed and vivid account of these events. He asserts that Romanus was a pitiable and pathetic sight that evoked an uncontrollable emotional response in all who beheld it. The emperor's misfortunes were the consequence of actions undertaken with the intention of benefiting the ‘Romans’ (*Rhomaioi*). The historian provides a detailed account of the former emperor's condition, describing him as a rotting corpse with gouged-out eyes and a swollen head and face. As a result of the infection, maggots were observed to be dropping off his body. Romanus died a few days later in excruciating pain. The surrounding area was permeated by

a foul odour. In his account, Attaleiates makes the following observation: “Romanus left to posterity a record of sufferings exceeding those of Job, but the most amazing and at the same time noble thing for which he is remembered is that throughout all these enormous trials and unparalleled evils he never uttered a blasphemous or petty word but always gave thanks and asked to spend more time in misfortune simply in order, as he put it, to be able to please his Maker by traversing the path of self-denial in an even more challenging way” [36, pp. 324-325]. Romanus IV Diogenes, in opposition to the initial persecutors of the Christians who perished in gruesome circumstances as a consequence of an illness-induced infection, meets his demise in a manner alike righteous Job. The emperor's infected wound served to illustrate the ungratefulness of the Byzantines towards their emperor, who had endeavoured to provide them with protection and security.

Similarly, John Skylitzes or his successor makes reference to the final days of Romanus Diogenes, concluding his portrayal with the following words: “In the course of such great and towering evils, not a single blasphemous or unseemly word did he utter, but he continued to give thanks and readily bear that had befallen him” [7, p. 133].

The concise portrayal of the hardships emperor Romanus IV Diogenes had to endure at the end of his life in the writings of Attaleiates and Skylitzes's successor offers a markedly distinct application of the illnesses motif. Thus it was necessary to differentiate this example from the preceding ones. The illness and subsequent death of Diogenes were employed as a means of apostrophising and underscoring the positive attributes of this emperor in relation to his opponents, particularly the *genos* of the Ducas.

Conclusion

The Byzantine historians made use of a highly sophisticated rhetorical and literary apparatus in their narrative style. They exercised great care while composing their characters, structuring their narratives around the reigns of the emperors, which were always in the focus of their attention. The rulers were subjected to criticism, either overt or covert, through a variety of means. This included disapproval of

the officials they appointed, the use of literary motifs and condemnation of certain imperial acts and moves. In this manner, the motif of diseases was employed to indicate the moral decline and decadence of the society in which they lived. The Byzantine emperors or other prominent political figures were susceptible to illnesses perceived as a divine retribution. Such diseases were regarded as a just punishment for the wrongdoings and the sins of the afflicted individuals. Furthermore, the described conditions were not only perceived as the transgressions of the characters in question but also as collective faults of the 'Romans' (*Rhomaioi*).

This propensity to critique imperial politics through the utilisation of the aforementioned motif can be discerned from the earliest centuries of Byzantine historiography, extending to the 15th century. It is evident that the forms in which this tendency manifested itself varied considerably depending on the authors in question, their personal views, their education and literary skills, as well as their intentions and the audience to which the author was addressing. In order to ensure the veracity of their accounts, the Byzantine historians did not fabricate the ailments of their characters, which can be substantiated by other sources. Furthermore, although only two examples have been identified thus far, the motif of diseases was also exploited to illustrate the afflictions of the virtuous. As a result, it is pertinent to enquire whether there were any characters depicted as entirely healthy whose condition was utilised to suggest the contrary, namely that the Empire was in a state of stability and prosperity. As our research has shown, this answer can only be given in the case of Psellus's *Chronographia* for emperors Basil II, Constantine X Ducas and Michael VII Ducas. However, it would be reasonable to conclude that this issue remains open to further analysis.

NOTES

¹ This paper was presented at the Nikos Oikonomides seminar organised by the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Department for Byzantine Studies and National Hellenic Research Foundation, Institute for Mediaeval Studies, Department of Byzantine Studies, in May 2023. For an overview on the topic, see also [35]. The scientific editing is realised by Yuri Vin.

² Although we are well aware that there is a numerous bibliography for each of the historians that will be presented, we shall refer to those titles that give a general overview of Byzantine historiography.

³ Eusebius's *Vita Constantini* can be considered a historical work written to describe the era of Constantine I [90, pp. 41-46; 17, pp. 27-34].

⁴ For a general overview of Constantine I's reign see [68].

⁵ The illness of Constantine I, followed by his miraculous healing after his baptism by the pope Silvester, is described in detail in the chronicle of John Zonaras (Zonaras. History. Book XIII; for English translation see [27, pp. 150-151]).

⁶ About Socrates see: [38, pp. 114-142; 90, pp. 134-145; 93].

⁷ About Procopius of Caesarea see: [28, pp. 291-299; 38, pp. 369-419; 90, pp. 176-226; 8].

⁸ About Agathias see: [28, pp. 303-308; 38, pp. 432-448; 90, pp. 279-290].

⁹ Evagrius describes the plague as well ([16, pp. 229-232]; about Evagrius see also: [38, pp. 232-249; 90, pp. 299-307; 9]).

¹⁰ About the monophysites see: [19].

¹¹ About John of Ephesus see: [28, S. 312; 38, pp. 472-474; 90, pp. 308-310].

¹² It has been established that the severe urological problems can cause psychiatric disorders, even schizophrenia [58; 23]. However, some authors do not bring the mental illness of Justin II and his urological problems into connection [75, pp. 270-271]. With the aim of establishing the interconnection between the two maladies of emperor Justin II, a more thorough study must be conducted.

¹³ For the Byzantine-Persian wars and the narrative sources describing the developments under the reign of Justin II see: [85, pp. 135-150].

¹⁴ About Theophylact Simocatta see: [28, S. 313-319; 38, pp. 475-510; 90, pp. 329-339; 60, pp. 47-51].

¹⁵ About patriarch Nicephorus I see: [39, pp. 61-88; 91, pp. 26-30; 60, pp. 72-77].

¹⁶ About Theophanes see: [28, S. 334-339; 39, pp. 117-188; 91, pp. 38-77; 60, pp. 61-71].

¹⁷ About Michael Psellus see: [28, pp. 372-382; 40, pp. 59-186; 91, pp. 271-308; 60, pp. 137-146].

¹⁸ For the illness of Constantine VIII see: [74, pp. 407-409].

¹⁹ The epilepsy of Michael IV is also corroborated by the statements of Michael Attaleiates [36, pp. 12-14].

²⁰ About Nicephorus Bryennius see: [69, pp. 330-331].

²¹ About Michael Attaleiates see: [28, pp. 382-389; 40, pp. 187-238; 91, pp. 312-328; 60, pp. 150-154].

²² About logothetes (logothete) Nicephorus (Nicephoritzes) see: [70, p. 1475].

²³ On the diseases in question see: [53; 31; 33; 44; 46; 49; 80].

²⁴ About Anna Comnene and her work see just basic literature [28, pp. 400-409; 40, pp. 397-464; 91, pp. 354-386; 60, pp. 174-185].

²⁵ It is a familiar fact that Anna strived to usurp the throne after her father's death. Having no success in this endeavour, she tried to present her brother and her nephew, emperor Manuel I Comnenus, in a very bad manner in her historical work [51].

²⁶ About Nicetas Choniates see: [28, pp. 429-441; 40, pp. 699-788; 91, pp. 422-456; 86; 60, pp. 219-225].

²⁷ Emperor Isaac II Angelus is consistently portrayed as incompetent, slothful, greedy and vain [86, p. 170].

²⁸ The other attack of illness occurred during the rebellion of Manuel Kamytzes and his son-in-law Chrysos and the rebellion of John Spyridonakes in 1201 ([64, pp. 533-534; for English translation see 13, p. 293]).

²⁹ About George Acropolites see [28, pp. 442-447; 41, pp. 32-59; 60, pp. 226-231].

³⁰ It should not be excluded that the emperors John III Vatatzes and Theodore II Lascaris suffered from a heart disease, which could have caused the epileptic seizures. This is explained in the *History* of George Pachymeres ([21, p. 23]; about him see n. 32; on epilepsy see also [81, pp. 121-123]).

³¹ About Theodore Skoutariotes see: [41, pp. 430-435; 60, p. 232-236].

³² About George Pachymeres see: [28, pp. 447-453; 41, pp. 60-98; 60, pp. 237-242].

³³ About Nicephorus Gregoras and his work see [28, pp. 453-465; 41, pp. 137-186; 60, pp. 243-248].

³⁴ Nicephorus Gregoras presents us with an emotional portrayal of the last hours of Theodore II's life, writing that the emperor died in tears, seeking repentance. On the display of emotions in Byzantine literature see [24; 25].

³⁵ For the chronology of Palamas's death see: [66, p. 161, n. 96; 5, pp. 151-152; 84].

³⁶ For the depiction of Gregory Palamas in the historical work of Gregoras see: [72].

³⁷ On the portrayals of John VI Cantacuzenus and John V Palaeologus in Ducas's history see: [20].

³⁸ I would hereby like to express my warmest gratitude to my colleague, Dr. Jovana Šijaković, for pointing out this aspect of the employment of diseases as a literary motif.

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