

# The Mongols' Approach to Anatolia and the Last Campaign of Emperor John III Vatatzes

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**G**EORGIOS AKROPOLITES (ca. 1217/20–1282) in his *History* describes in detail the diplomacy of the emperor of an exiled Byzantine government, John III Vatatzes (r. 1221–1254). The narrative gives the impression that the emperor's reign was full of campaigns to the West—the Bulgarians, Epiros, and Constantinople under the Latins. Recent studies indicate that the empire had close relationships with the East, in particular with the Rum Seljuk.<sup>1</sup> In a broader perspective, the emperor's strategy, during the latter half of his reign, may be situated in the context of the Mongols, as discussed in depth by John S. Langdon.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of the present article is to reexamine the generally accepted date of an imperial expedition described by Akropolites, and to place the expedition in the broader context that surrounded the 'Nicaean' empire. The expedition was led

<sup>1</sup> D. A. Korobeinikov, *Byzantium and the Turks in the Thirteenth Century* (Oxford 2014); the articles in A. Peacock and S. N. Yıldız (eds.), *The Seljuks of Anatolia: Court and Society in the Medieval Middle East* (London/New York 2013), esp. D. Korobeinikov, "The King of the East and the West': The Seljuk Dynastic Concept and Titles in the Muslim and Christian Sources," 68–90, and R. Shukurov, "Harem Christianity: The Byzantine Identity of Seljuk Princes," 115–150. An extensive bibliography is provided by D. Thomas and A. Mallett (eds.), *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History IV (1200–1350)* (Leiden/Boston 2012).

<sup>2</sup> J. S. Langdon, "Byzantium's Initial Encounter with the Chinggisids: An Introduction to the Byzantino-Mongolica," *Viator* 29 (1998) 95–140.

by John III Vatatzes against Epiros and was his last one. It is mentioned by Akropolites, *Χρονική συγγραφή* ch. 49–52,<sup>3</sup> and this source was quoted or paraphrased by later Byzantine authors, for the expedition constitutes a decisive step toward integration of the two exiled Byzantine governments into the Lascarids and later the Palaiologoi. Furthermore, the historian describes a trial that the emperor conducted at Philippi during this expedition, against Michael Palaiologos for treason. Michael would become the emperor of the restored government in Constantinople and was presumably the governor of the Thracian towns of Melnik and Serres at that time. Historians have traditionally dated the expedition to 1252–1253 on the basis of the narrative structure of Akropolites' *History*. Our examination aims to propose a more plausible chronology and to recontextualize those events in the contemporary Eurasian world.

1. *Interpretations of the date of events in Akropolites ch. 49–52*

As the first step in our analysis, we summarize the events described in Akropolites ch. 49–52. First, a peace agreement between John III Vatatzes and Michael II Doukas of Epiros is presented, in which they arranged a marriage between a granddaughter of John III, Maria, and a son of Michael II, Nikephoros. John went to meet Nikephoros at Pegai and the marriage was performed there. But later, on account of rebellion by Michael, John started his (last) expedition against him, crossing the Hellespont from Anatolia to the Balkans, and

<sup>3</sup> A. Heisenberg and P. Wirth, *Georgii Akropolitae opera* I (Stuttgart 1978). Translations: (German) W. Blum, *Georgios Akropolites (1217–1282). Die Chronik* (Stuttgart 1989); (Turkish) B. Umar, *Georgios Akropolites. Vekayinâme* (Istanbul 2000); (Modern Greek) Α. Παναγιώτου, *Γεώργιος Ακροπολίτης, Χρονική συγγραφή* (Athens 2003); Σ. Σπυρόπουλος, *Γεώργιος Ακροπολίτης, Χρονική συγγραφή. Η Βυζαντινή ιστορία της λατινοκρατίας (1204–1261)* (Thessaloniki 2004); (Russian) П. И. Жаворонков, *Георгии Акрополит. История* (St. Petersburg 2005); (English) R. Macrides, *George Acropolites, The History* (Oxford 2007); (French) J. Dayantis, *Georges Acropolites, Chronique du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle. L'empire grec de Nicée* (Paris 2012).

quickly made Michael surrender. In contrast to all his previous expeditions, he stayed in the Balkans and did not go back to Anatolia that winter. After spending the winter in Vodena (now Edessa), the emperor set out in the spring and visited newly-acquired cities such as Ochrid, Deapolis, and Kastoria. Then, in the autumn, he began a return to the east. On his way home, however, an important event occupied him: the trial of Michael Palaiologos,<sup>4</sup> the future founder of the Palaiologan dynasty, who was accused of treason in conspiring with the Bulgarians.<sup>5</sup> Chapters 50–51 describe in detail this curious trial presided over by John, which was held at Philippi; in the end, Michael was found innocent after swearing an oath of loyalty to the emperor. Akropolites, then, tells us about the return of John to his home, Anatolia, and his death from disease in November 1254.

This last expedition of John III is unique for its long duration: two years. Historians, however, do not agree on the exact date of the series of events because of Akropolites' vague description. The dispute partly concerns the dating of the famous trial of Michael Palaiologos, which began during the campaign. Edouard de Muralt, to the best of my knowledge, was the first to date the campaign to 1251–1252, citing Akropolites' and Nicephoros Gregoras' narratives, though without any concrete proof.<sup>6</sup> De Muralt's dating has been adopted by relatively few scholars.<sup>7</sup> Instead, probably following a note in Heisenberg's

<sup>4</sup> *Χρονική συγγραφή* ch. 46. For his career in that period see D. J. Geanakoplos, *Emperor Michael Palaeologus and the West 1258–1282* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1959) 16–26.

<sup>5</sup> Macrides, *George Akropolites* 265, proves that in fact Michael Palaiologos had conspired with Michael II Doukas of Epiros.

<sup>6</sup> E. de Muralt, *Essai de chronographie byzantine, 1057–1453* (St. Petersburg 1871) 375–378.

<sup>7</sup> A. Μηλιαράκης, *Ιστορία του βασιλείου της Νικαίας και του Δεσποτάτου της Ηπείρου (1204–1261)* (Athens 1898) 392–396; A. Gardner, *The Lascarids of Nicaea: The Story of an Empire in Exile* (London 1912) 188; G. Czebe, "Studien zum Hochverratsprozesse des Michael Paläologos im Jahre 1252," *BNJbb* 8 (1929/30) 59–98; J. S. Langdon, *John III Ducas Vatatzes'*

1903 edition,<sup>8</sup> most historians have dated the expedition to 1252–1253.<sup>9</sup> This discrepancy arises from the fact that John III's acquisition of Rhodes (late 1249 or 1250)<sup>10</sup> is the last event mentioned by Akropolites prior to the campaign. The majority view dating the expedition to 1252–1253 was stressed anew by Ruth Macrides, whose argument serves as the starting point of our examination.

The key of her discussion is the interpretation of the beginning of *Χρονική συγγραφή* ch. 52:<sup>11</sup>

When the emperor [John III] arrived in the eastern parts [i.e. Anatolia] and that year had passed, he came again to Nicaea, the capital city of Bithynia. It was towards the end of the winter; February was coming to an end.

ὁ δὲ βασιλεὺς τὰ τῆς ἔω μέρη κατειληφῶς καὶ τοῦ ἐνιαυτοῦ ἐκείνου παρῳχηκός αὐθις περὶ τὴν προκαθημένην τῶν Βιθυνῶν πόλιν ἀφίκετο Νίκαιαν. καιρὸς ἦν περὶ τὰ τοῦ χειμῶνος τέλη, καὶ φθίνων ἐτύγχανε Φεβρουάριος.

There is no doubt that John's return to Anatolia was in February 1254, in view of the sequel ch. 52, which records his death in November of the same year and the accession of his son Theodore Lascaris to the throne of the Empire of Nicaea. Now let us consider Macrides' interpretation of the sentence

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*Byzantine Imperium in Anatolian Exile, 1222–1254: The Legacy of his Diplomatic, Military and Internal Program for the Restitutio Orbis* (diss. UCLA 1978) 254; Blum, *Georgios Akropolites* 229 n.117.

<sup>8</sup> Akropolites, *Χρονική συγγραφή* p.89.13 H.

<sup>9</sup> For example, Geanakoplos, *Emperor Michael Palaeologus* 21; D. J. Geanakoplos, *Interaction of the "Sibling" Byzantine and Western Cultures in the Middle Ages and Italian Renaissance* (New Haven/London 1976) 146–155; M. Angold, *A Byzantine Government in Exile: Government and Society Under the Lascarids of Nicaea* (Oxford 1975); A. Failler, "Chronologie et composition dans l'Histoire de Georges Pachymère," *REB* 38 (1980) 5–103, here 9–16; Langdon, *Viator* 29 (1998) 124–129; Macrides, *George Akropolites* 251. Cf. *Reg.* nos. 1806–1810.

<sup>10</sup> *Χρονική συγγραφή* ch. 48 (88.9–14 H.); Macrides, *George Akropolites* 249.

<sup>11</sup> *Χρονική συγγραφή* ch. 52 (101.19–23 H.); transl. Macrides, *George Akropolites* 270.

“When the emperor arrived in the eastern parts and that year had passed.” It is certain that John arrived in “the eastern parts” (τὰ τῆς ἕως μέρη), Asia Minor or Nymphaion, where his palace existed, in “that year” (τοῦ ἐνιαυτοῦ ἐκείνου), that is, the year preceding February 1254. Macrides believes that John’s move to Anatolia refers to the return from his expedition to the Balkans in the autumn, which Akropolites reports in ch. 49–51. She thinks that the emperor came to Nymphaion at the end of the same year as the autumn in which he began his return: 1253. To summarize, in Macrides’ opinion, John III started his expedition sometime during 1252, spent the winter at Vodena, then headed back to the eastern parts in autumn 1253, organizing the trial of Michael Palaiologos at Philippi in the course of his return, came to Nymphaion at the end of 1253, and went to Nicaea in February 1254.<sup>12</sup>

Although Macrides’ argument seems persuasive, we must pay attention to an often disregarded fact. In the phrase “When the emperor arrived in the eastern parts and that year had passed,” the period of “that year” presupposes a calendar that differed from the *Annus Dei*. Macrides carefully provides a section on “Dating and Chronology,” in which she examines expressions of time used by Akropolites and also addresses the calendar employed in the *History*.<sup>13</sup> According to her, Akropolites uses the calendar of *Annus mundi* with the year of indiction three times in his work. Her analysis, however, does not touch on another word he uses, ἐνιαυτός.

To the best of my knowledge, Akropolites uses the word ἐνιαυτός eleven times in the *History*. In ten cases it is used vaguely, such as “for many years,” so that in those cases the word does not play any crucial role in determining the exact dates of events.<sup>14</sup> At the beginning of ch. 52, however, the

<sup>12</sup> Macrides, *George Akropolites* 271.

<sup>13</sup> Macrides, *George Akropolites* 42–43.

<sup>14</sup> *Χρονική συγγραφή* pp.11.5, 20.23, 31.3, 32.18, 34.20, 45.16, 153.21, 154.12 (used in the plural); and 175.18, 177.4 (singular). The latter two examples are in the singular without a definite article, designating a period

author uses the singular ὁ ἐνιαυτός to designate a particular year. Considering that Akropolites uses exclusively *Anni mundi* in other cases, we can suppose that “the year” is also premised on this calendar, whose year begins on September 1.<sup>15</sup> The fact is worth considering in interpreting Akropolites’ statement. According to him, again, John III arrived at Nicaea in February 1254, a period that must be within the year following “that year” (τοῦ ἐνιαυτοῦ ἐκείνου), i.e. A.M. 6762 = 1 September 1253 to 31 August 1254. Thus the year of the emperor’s return to Anatolia was A.M. 6761, 1 September 1252 to 31 August 1253. In other words, one cannot calculate that John returned at the end of 1253,<sup>16</sup> for in that case one has to set the period of his arrival to Nicaea in February of A.M. 6763, i.e. in February 1255—after his death. To avoid contradiction with the account of Akropolites, we must, against Macrides’ view, push the launch of the emperor’s last expedition back one year.

Our reconstruction of the chronology is as follows: to repress the revolt of Michael II of Epiros, John III began to march into the Balkans sometime in 1251. After staying in Vodena during the winter of 1251/2, he visited the cities in the Balkans under Lascarid control starting in the spring of 1252, then left for the east. During this return trip, the emperor brought Michael Palaiologos before his court at Philippi. The emperor returned home to Nymphaion in Asia Minor sometime in AM 6761, between 1 September 1252 and 31 August 1253, and presumably before winter 1252/3.<sup>17</sup> In summary, the period of the

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of one year (εἰς ἐνιαυτόν, εἰς ὅλον σχεδὸν ἐνιαυτόν). Cf. examples in the abbreviated version of the *History*: pp.202.20, 212.8, 220.2–3, 221.17, 230.23, 265.10, 272.18.

<sup>15</sup> B. Croke and A. Kazhdan, “Byzantine Era” and “Chronology,” *ODB* I 342–343, 448–449.

<sup>16</sup> It is an unacceptable hypothesis that the emperor launched his campaign to the Balkans sometime in 1252 and returned to Anatolia before 31 August 1253. This is because Akropolites states that John only began his road to the east “in the autumn season” (p.92.22–23, τῆ τῆς ὀπώρας ὥρα).

<sup>17</sup> Nine other campaigns of John III to the Balkans or Constantinople are

emperor's last expedition, as presented in the *History* of Akropolites, is between 1251 and 1252.

2. *Verifications of the proposed date: deepening our understanding of ch. 52*

We have deduced this chronology only from the internal structure of the *History* of Akropolites. To test its probability, it should be verified with other sources on the period. One is the cartulary of the Lembiotissa monastery near Smyrna, which contains over 200 documents ranging from the twelfth to the early fourteenth century.<sup>18</sup> In this codex is an imperial ordinance (*horismos*) issued in August 1253 accepting the petition of the monastery and mandating that Agaron Kopidis, dux of the Thrakesion theme, assure the protection of a monastic property in the village of Vari from infringements by its neighbors.<sup>19</sup> This conflict, however, did not end with the imperial decision, and the same emperor issued another *horismos* on this matter in November 1253.<sup>20</sup> These two acts, whose author is certainly John III,<sup>21</sup> pose a problem that cannot be ignored. If the last expedition of John occurred in 1252–1253, as is commonly accepted, the emperor would have issued these acts while on his journey in the Balkans, upon receiving the petition of monks of the Lembiotissa monastery. Yet it does not seem likely that the monks of the monastery journeyed to the west. It

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attested (1235, 1236, 1238, 1240, 1241, 1242, 1244, 1246, 1247), all of which started in spring and ended before winter of the same year, not counting the campaign in 1244, the end season of which is unknown to us: *Χρονική συγγραφή* ch. 33, 36, 40–41, 43–47.

<sup>18</sup> The fundamental study is still H. Ahrweiler, "L'histoire et la géographie de la région de Smyrne entre les deux occupations turques (1081–1317)," *TravMém* 1 (1965) 1–204.

<sup>19</sup> MM IV 206–207, no. 120 (*Reg.* no. 1813).

<sup>20</sup> MM IV 210–211, no. 123 (*Reg.* no. 1815).

<sup>21</sup> The author of MM IV 206.11–13 states that an earlier order from John III is from him: ἐπεὶ δὲ ἐδέησε καὶ περίορον γενέσθαι ἐπ' αὐτοῖς, ὤρισεν ἡ βασιλεία μου τῷ τότε στρατοπεδάρχῃ ὄντι τοῦ θέματος τῶν Θρακησίων ἐκεῖνον. This earlier order is identified with *Reg.* no. 1742 (December 1234).

may be noted that in the second *horismos* (November 1253), both imperial orders (August and November) were proclaimed by hearing cases “at the *aule* of my majesty,” ἐν τῇ αὐλῇ τῆς βασιλείας μου.<sup>22</sup> αὐλή here apparently signifies the physical courtyard of the palace of the Nicaean emperors in Nymphaion;<sup>23</sup> in other words, the emperor was in Anatolia in the latter half of 1253. In addition, we do not know of any case in which the emperor issued acts to laymen and ecclesiastics living in Asia Minor during his expeditions to the Balkans.<sup>24</sup> Nor do we know any definite case in which other persons issued imperial documents in the emperor’s place in the Lascarid period.<sup>25</sup> These known documentary practices cast doubt on

<sup>22</sup> MM IV 210.31–211.4: ἐπιστηρίζον αὐτὸν καὶ ἐτηρήθη ἡ τοιαύτη ὑπόθεσις [on the struggle between the monks of Lembiotissa and the party of Pothos Apelmenos] ἐν τῇ αὐλῇ τῆς βασιλείας μου, παρόντων καὶ ἀμφοτέρων τῶν μερῶν, καὶ ἀνεφάνησαν οἱ μοναχοὶ δικαιούμενοι ἐπὶ τῇ τοιαύτῃ γῆ, καὶ ἐγεγόνει αὐτοῖς καὶ ὀρισμὸς τῆς βασιλείας μου περὶ τούτου [*horismos* of August 1253]. οἱ δὲ δηλωθέντες ἀπεπέμφθησαν, ὡς μὴ δίκαιον ἔχοντες. ἐπεὶ δὲ καὶ πάλιν ὄχλουν τοὺς μοναχοὺς οἱ ἀνωτέρω δηλωθέντες χάριν τῆς τοιαύτης γῆς, καὶ ἐνεφάνισαν οὗτοι [the monks] ἐν τῇ αὐλῇ τῆς βασιλείας μου καὶ ἔγγραφον, ἄφ’ οὗπερ μᾶλλον ἐδηλώθη, ὡς ...

<sup>23</sup> Cf. S. Çağaptay, “How Western Is It? The Palace at Nymphaion and its Architectural Setting,” in A. Ödekan et al. (eds.), *1. Uluslararası Sevgi Gönül Bizans Araştırmaları Sempozyumu / First International Sevgi Gönül Byzantine Studies Symposium* (Istanbul 2010) 357–362; R. Macrides, J. A. Munitiz, and D. Angelov, *Pseudo-Kodinos and the Constantinopolitan Court: Offices and Ceremonies* (Farnham 2013) 367–378.

<sup>24</sup> Compare the chronology offered by Langdon in *John III Ducas*, in “The Forgotten Byzantino-Bulgarian Assault and Siege of Constantinople, 1235–1236, and the Breakup of the *Entente Cordiale* between John III Ducas Vatatzes and John Asen II as Background to the Genesis of the Hohenstaufen-Vatatzes Alliance of 1242,” *Byzantina kai Metabyzantina* 4 (1985) 105–135, and in *Viator* 29 (1998) 95–140 and by Macrides, *George Akropolites*, to the entries in *Reg.* nos. 1712, 1712a, 1713, 1714, 1715, 1716, 1717, 1718, 1724, 1725, 1727, 1728, 1729, 1729a, 1731, 1733, 1734, 1736, 1737, 1738, 1739, 1741, 1742, 1748, 1749, 1750, 1751, 1752, 1759, 1763, 1764, 1767, 1768, 1769, 1756, 1770, 1772, 1783, 1784, 1785, 1793, 1797, 1799a, 1802.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *Reg.* no. 1823 (*prostagma*?) of the co-emperor Theodoros II Lascaris). I am preparing a paper on the acts of the co-emperors of the



the chronology that dates John's last expedition to 1252–1253.<sup>26</sup>

Another piece of evidence is the sequence of events in the trial of Michael Palaiologos, which Akropolites describes in detail.<sup>27</sup> According to him, although the accused Michael could not establish his innocence, John III did not punish him severely because of the family relationship they shared and Michael's connection with other influential men in and outside of the empire. Thus John asked the patriarch Manuel II (1243–1254) to receive Michael and bind him with oaths that he would maintain his obedience to the emperor. The patriarch carried out the request and, as a confirmation of the oath, Michael Palaiologos married Theodora, the niece of John III.<sup>28</sup>

George Pachymeres (1242–ca. 1310), on the other hand, also describes the trial in his *Historical Relations*, and from another aspect.<sup>29</sup> According to him, Michael Palaiologos not only could not establish his innocence in the trial at Philippi but was also imprisoned for a time.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, Pachymeres writes that the patriarch Manuel II begged John for mercy for Michael, “residing together with the emperor [John] in Lydia [probably Nymphaion] for many months.”<sup>31</sup> Manuel's efforts got Michael

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Lascarids and the early Palaiologoi.

<sup>26</sup> On an act of John III now dated in November 1237 or November 1252 (MM IV 251, no. 158i [*Reg.* no. 1759]), if one considers the period of the expedition to be 1251/2, as we argue, the date November 1252 should be eliminated.

<sup>27</sup> On the characteristics of this trial see R. Macrides, “Trial by Ordeal in Byzantium: On Whose Authority?” in P. Armstrong (ed.), *Authority in Byzantium* (Farnham 2013) 31–46.

<sup>28</sup> *Χρονική συγγραφή* ch. 51. On Theodora see A.-M. Talbot, “Empress Theodora Palaiologina, Wife of Michael VIII,” *DOP* 46 (1992) 295–303.

<sup>29</sup> A. Failler (ed.), V. Laurent (transl.), *Georges Pachymères, Relations historiques* I (Paris 1984) 37.1–41.3.

<sup>30</sup> *Συγγραφικαὶ Ἱστορίαι* I 39.2–3: ἀλλ' ἐφ' ἱκανὸν χρόνον τῆ φυλακῆ κατείχετο δέσμιος, καὶ ἡ ὑποψία προσῆν.

<sup>31</sup> I 39.5: (Manuel) ἐπὶ μῆσὶ πλείστοις συνδιάγων κατὰ Λυδίαν τῶ βασιλεῖ.

set free, and Michael swore the oath of loyalty to the emperor.

The difference between the two authors has occasionally been examined by scholars. Macrides, in her insightful analysis, points out that, though Akropolites was an eyewitness of the trial, it is not guaranteed that his report is completely reliable.<sup>32</sup> Because he was on Michael's side, he often constructs a heroic image of Michael.<sup>33</sup> Rather, at least concerning the imprisonment of Michael and the intervention of Manuel II, we can put our confidence in Pachymeres, who paid particular attention to the affairs of the Church and seemed to gather his sources from the ecclesiastical circles, as Albert Failler rightly insists.<sup>34</sup>

Both Akropolites and Pachymeres agree that the trial itself did not settle the case of Michael Palaiologos and that it ended rather with Michael's oath to John III. When, then, was the oath sworn? Failler proposes a possible solution: as John's last expedition was carried out in 1252–1253, he holds that John arrived in Nicaea in February 1254, then returned to Nymphaion in April of the same year, where he stayed almost until his death on 3 November 1254.<sup>35</sup> Accordingly, Failler points out that Pachymeres mentions that the patriarch Manuel II stayed with the emperor in Nymphaion “for many months” (ἐπὶ μῆσὶ πλείστοις): hence the conclusion that the liberation of Michael and his oath to the emperor should be dated many months after April 1254, that is, after the time of Manuel's departure from Nymphaion and before the emperor's death,

<sup>32</sup> Macrides, *George Akropolites* 71–75, esp. 73–74.

<sup>33</sup> In the twilight of his life, Michael Palaiologos gave his own portrait in the typikon for the monastery of St. Demetrios of the Palaiologoi-Kellibara in Constantinople (in 1282), in which he omitted the topic of his imprisonment. See H. Grégoire, “Imperatoris Michaelis Palaeologi de vita sua,” *Byzantion* 29/30 (1959/60) 447–476; J. Thomas and A. C. Hero (eds.), *Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents* (Washington 2000) III 1237–1253.

<sup>34</sup> Failler, *REB* 38 (1980) 9–16, esp. 10–12.

<sup>35</sup> *Χρονική συγγραφή* ch. 52. Starting in April 1254 John III visited Periklystra in a suburb of Smyrna, which was one of his summer resorts. See Macrides, *Georgios Akropolites* 212 and 274.

November 1254—"summer or perhaps early autumn."<sup>36</sup>

Failler's theory is persuasive in taking both Akropolites and Pachymeres into account. Certainly, the period in which the emperor and the patriarch could have spent time together was only spring to summer of 1254, if one dates the emperor's last expedition to 1252–1253. Nevertheless, Failler also admits that, according to Pachymeres, after promising Emperor John during his stay at Nymphaion that Michael would be freed, Manuel II departed with a number of bishops, and on his way, near Achyraous (now in the province of Balıkesir), he dispatched an envoy to the ruler to take custody of Michael. Pachymeres also says that after Michael was freed, he swore an oath before the synod organized by the patriarch (in the summer or early autumn of 1254, according to Failler).<sup>37</sup> Here, Pachymeres does not say the exact place where the synod was held. Vitalien Laurent supposes that it was Achyraous, based on Pachymeres' account,<sup>38</sup> but what the historian says is only that "When he approached near Achyraous, along with a number of bishops, the priest sent to the ruler [...] one of his household who had taken holy orders."<sup>39</sup> In the reign of the Lascarids, most synods were held at Nicaea, and so I think it is reasonable that, after sending his envoy to the emperor near Achyraous, Manuel II continued on to Nicaea in order to pre-

<sup>36</sup> Failler, *REB* 38 (1980) 12. Macrides, *George Akropolites* 269, introducing Failler's theory, proposes winter 1253/4 for the date of the oath, during which time, she supposes, the emperor was in Nymphaion. However, this date does not accord with Pachymeres' description that, after the trial, Michael was imprisoned for a time, or, moreover, with a period of "many months" in which the patriarch Manuel was begging for mercy for him, as Pachymeres says.

<sup>37</sup> *Συγγραφικαὶ Ἱστορίαι* p.39.18–25.

<sup>38</sup> *Reg. Patr.* no. 1320, cf. no. 1814.

<sup>39</sup> I 39.18–21: καὶ δὴ περὶ που τὴν Ἀχυράουσι ὁ ἱερεὺς γεγονώς, συνάμα καὶ πλείστοις ἀρχιερεῦσι, στέλλει πρὸς τὸν κρατοῦντα, [...] τινὰ τῶν αὐτοῦ οἰκείων καὶ ἱερωσύνῃ κοσμούμενον.

pare the synod.<sup>40</sup> One can also assume that both parties to the oath would be there, that is, that John III was at Nicaea at the time of the synod for the ritual of the oath, although Pachymeres does not specifically say that the emperor was present.<sup>41</sup>

In these circumstances, it is improbable to suggest that Michael swore an oath of loyalty to John at Nicaea, in the presence of both parties, in the summer or early autumn of 1254. This is because John's physical condition had already taken a turn for the worse in the spring of 1254. Therefore, as Failler himself points out, he could not journey much further before his death in November.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, if one supposes that the beginning of John's last expedition was in 1251, as we propose, the chronology is as follows: John III conducted the trial of Michael Palaiologos in autumn 1252. The emperor put Michael into prison after their return. Many months afterward, John freed Michael and obliged him to take an oath, probably in 1253, when John was still in good health.

This theory can arrange known events logically, contributing to a better understanding of Akropolites' *History* ch. 52. To repeat: "When the emperor [John III] arrived in the eastern parts [Anatolia] and that year had passed, he came *again* to

<sup>40</sup> Cf. the entries in *Reg. Patr.*, where there is no other case of a synod held at Achyraous. On Achyraous see J. Preiser-Kapeller, *Der Episkopat im späten Byzanz. Ein Verzeichnis der Metropolitzen und Bischöfe des Patriarchats von Konstantinopel in der Zeit von 1204 bis 1453* (Saarbrücken 2008) 2–3.

<sup>41</sup> On oaths of loyalty to Byzantine emperors, N. Svoronos, "Le serment de fidélité à l'empereur byzantin et sa signification constitutionnelle," *REB* 9 (1951) 106–142, collects a number of examples. I must note that Pachymeres also says that, after swearing his oath of loyalty to John, Michael Palaiologos "returned to the ruler" (πρὸς τὸν κρατοῦντα αὐθις ἐπανιών) and received a very hearty welcome by him (I 39.26–27). This passage seemingly signifies that John did not participate in the synod, but one cannot be certain whether the verb "return" (ἐπᾶνεμι) implies the physical proximity or the mental distance between them.

<sup>42</sup> Note that the patriarch Manuel II already died before John III, in October 1254: V. Laurent, "La chronologie des patriarches de Constantinople au XIII<sup>e</sup> s.," *REB* 27 (1969) 129–150, here 138–139.

Nicaea, the capital city of Bithynia.” His arrival in Nicaea was at the end of February 1254. In the preceding chapters there is no mention of John’s stay in Nicaea corresponding to the word “again” (ἀϋθίς).<sup>43</sup> The historian describes the progress of the expedition in question (ch. 49), the details of the trial of Michael Palaiologos (50), and the actions after the trial (51), although Akropolites portrayed the judgement differently. In any case, in my opinion, after his return to Nymphaion (probably at the end of 1252), the emperor was *once more* in Nicaea, before August 1253, participating in Michael’s oath-taking ritual. In this context, it is probable that this visit by John corresponds with Akropolites’ use of ἀϋθίς.

It is thus his inadequate expression in this section of the *History* that caused the problem of chronology regarding the first set of dates of the 1250s. One might say that this problem arises from Akropolites’ intention to avoid the displeasure and disfavor of Michael Palaiologos.<sup>44</sup>

### 3. *Re-contextualization of the events re-dated*

Let us examine how we might place the expedition of John III in the contemporary geopolitical context. The Mongols’ westward expansion is one of the key elements. Beginning in the 1230s, their growth became a significant concern to John, and the battle of Köse dağ in June 1243, which ended in an overwhelming victory of the Mongol army under Baiju’s command, fundamentally changed the geopolitical situation in Anatolia: Mongols subjected Seljuk Anatolia, Armenian Cili-

<sup>43</sup> Both Theodore Skoutariotes and Ephraim, who used Akropolites’ *History* as a main source, describe John’s move to Nicaea in February 1254 without the word ἀϋθίς, which they might have regarded as strange: *Theodori Scutariotae Additamenta ad Georgii Acropolitae Historiam* no. 31, in *Χρονική συγγραφή* p.284.10–14 (quoted below n.58; on the authorship of this chronicle see K. Zafeiris, “The Issue of the Authorship of the *Synopsis Chronike* and Theodore Skoutariotes,” *REB* 69 [2011] 253–264); O. Lampsides, *Ephraem Aenii Historia chronica* (Athens 1990) 314, line 8898.

<sup>44</sup> The *History* was written after 1261, under the reign of the first Palaiologos: Macrides, *George Akropolites* 31.

cia, and the empire of Trebizond as tributaries, and John reinforced the Byzantine-Seljuk alliance and accelerated the fortification along Byzantium's eastern frontier.<sup>45</sup> Concerning John's policy towards the Mongols in his later years, there are few clues in the Greek sources.<sup>46</sup> However, the friar William of Rubruck, who was dispatched to the court of Möngke Qa'an in Karakorum by the French king Louis IX,<sup>47</sup> offers hints in his report, the *Itinerarium*. The missionary describes the situation when he was at Karakorum at the end of December 1253:<sup>48</sup>

At this time, unbeknownst to us, our neighbors were ambassadors from Vastacius [i.e. John III]. At daybreak men from court made us rise with all haste, and I accompanied them barefoot a short distance to the dwelling of these envoys, whom they asked whether they knew us. Thereupon a Greek knight recognized our Order and also my colleague, whom he had seen at the court of Vastacius along with Friar Thomas, our Minister; and he and all his companions spoke highly in our favor.

*erant tunc ibi iuxta nos nuncii Vastacii, quod ignorabamus. et diluculo fecerunt nos homines de curia surgere cum festinatione. ego autem iui cum eis nudis pedibus modica uia ad domum dictorum nunciorum, et quiesuerunt ab illis si nos cognoscerent. tunc miles ille Grecus, recognoscens Ordinem et etiam socium meum, quia uiderat eum in curia Vastacii cum fratre Thoma ministro nostro, cum uniuersis sociis suis exhibuit magnum testimonium de nobis.*

Only from this account do we learn that John III dispatched an

<sup>45</sup> Langdon, *Viator* 29 (1998) 116–119.

<sup>46</sup> J. Richard, "Byzance et les Mongols," *ByzF* 25 (1999) 83–100, here 86–87. On the Mongols as figured in Byzantine sources see G. Moravcsik, *Byzantinoturcica*<sup>3</sup> II (Leiden 1983) 55 (Ἀγαρηνοί), 160 (Κιμμέριοι), 183 (Μασσαγάται), 193 (Μουγούλιοι), 254 (Πέρσαι), 282 (Σκύθαι), 301 (Τάταροι), 329 (Τόχαροι).

<sup>47</sup> On the date see P. Jackson and D. Morgan, *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck* (London 1990) xii, 170–175. Cf. *Reg.* no. 1816.

<sup>48</sup> Ch. 28.10: P. Chiesa, *Guglielmo di Rubruck. Viaggio in Mongolia* (Milan 2011) 150; transl. Jackson, *The Mission* 175.

envoy to the Mongol court. Rubruck explains their mission:<sup>49</sup>

The [Möngke's] man who was addressing me was a Saracen who had been ambassador to Vastacius. Dazzled by presents, he had advised Vastacius to send envoys to Mangu Chan [i.e. Möngke] and to play for time, as Vastacius was under the impression that his country was due for an imminent invasion. So he sent [envoys], but since he has come to know them [i.e. the Mongols] he has paid them little heed. He has not made peace with them, nor have they as yet invaded his territory. (And they will not be in a position to do so as long as he has the courage to defend himself. They have never conquered any country by force, only by subterfuge: it is when people make peace with them that under cover of this peace they bring about their ruin.)

*Ille autem qui loquebatur mecum erat sarracenus et fuerat nuntius apud Vastacium, et consuluerat Vastacio, excecatus muneribus, ut mitteret ad Mangu chan nuncios, et interim transiret tempus, quia Vastacius credebat quod statim deberet ingredi terram suam. et ipse misit, et postquam cognouit eos parum curauit de eis: nec ipse fecit pacem cum eis, nec adhuc ingressi sunt terram suam. nec potuerunt, dummodo audeat se deffendere: nec unquam aliquam terram ceperunt ui nisi dolo; et quia homines faciunt pacem cum eis, sub illa pace destruunt eos.*

The friar heard of the arrival of one of Möngke's envoys, a *sarracenus*, and of the Saracen's urging John III to send his ambassadors to Möngke's court. These ambassadors are presumably the same ones whom the friar met in Karakorum at the end of 1253.<sup>50</sup> William of Rubruck's account is credible at least on the existence of the Lascarids' envoy to the Mongols, given that this work was written as an official report to the French king.<sup>51</sup>

Although the date of the meeting of this *sarracenus* with John III is uncertain, the beginning of the reign of his dispatcher

<sup>49</sup> Ch. 33.3 (*Guglielmo* 240; *The Mission* 227).

<sup>50</sup> Langdon, *Viator* 29 (1998) 127–129 nn.181 and 194, considers that John's two ambassadors were not the same; but see n.56 below.

<sup>51</sup> On the characteristics of the *Itinerarium* see Jackson and Morgan, *The Mission* 47–51.

Möngke gives a *terminus post quem* of July 1251.<sup>52</sup> A *terminus ante quem* is provided by Rubruck's description of his meeting at the end of December 1253 with John's ambassador, who was probably dispatched after the arrival of the Saracen. The interval of travel from (exiled) Byzantium to Karakorum could give a further clue. A useful reference is Rubruck's itinerary: the friar departed Constantinople in April 1254 and arrived in Karakorum in December. Thus the duration is about eight months.<sup>53</sup> If we apply this duration to the itinerary of John's envoy, who was in Karakorum at least by the end of 1253, it gives us another *terminus ante quem* of the first trimester of 1253 for the meeting of John and Möngke's envoy. According to this time span, the meeting took place during John's expedition to the Balkans or after his return to Anatolia.<sup>54</sup>

The arrival of Möngke's envoy became a potential turning point for John III's strategy against the Mongols. After the battle of Köse dağ in 1243, following an interval caused by the death of Ögedei (December 1241), the Mongols targeted the Abbasid Caliphate. Moreover, the death of Güyük in 1248 and subsequent power struggles that lasted until the decisive election of Möngke in 1251 temporarily paralyzed the Mongols' chain of command. This situation enabled Vatatzes to concentrate his forces on matters in the Balkans.<sup>55</sup> However,

<sup>52</sup> On Möngke Qa'an (r. July 1251–August 1259) see D. O. Morgan, *EI*<sup>2</sup> VII (1991) 230. After the death of Güyük in April 1248 there was an interregnum for three years because of internal dissensions.

<sup>53</sup> Still, on his journey the friar spent a month at the headquarters of Batu and his son Sartaq up on the steppe. See the chronology provided by Jackson and Morgan, *The Mission* xi–xv.

<sup>54</sup> It may be possible to narrow the *terminus post quem* of July 1251 by adding the itinerary from Karakorum to Byzantium of Möngke's envoy, who would utilize the postal relay-system of the Mongol Empire (Jam/Yam). This itinerary, however, cannot be reckoned accurately. Cf. D. Morgan, *The Mongols*<sup>2</sup> (Malden 2007) 91–93.

<sup>55</sup> See a detailed description by Langdon, *Viator* 29 (1998) 119–125. On the other hand, in his *Chronica maiora*, Matthew of Paris writes that the messengers from the Mongols to the Pope in 1248 told of a plan of a Mon-



Rubruck's report on John's conciliatory measure regarding the *sarracenus* makes clear that the arrival of this envoy, who surely reported Möngke's enthronement, would have produced a sense of impending crisis in the mind of the Lascarid emperor, for he might have needed to change his strategy against the Mongols, depending on the yet unknown intentions of the new Qa'an.<sup>56</sup>

John Vatatzes, who immediately dispatched his envoys to Möngke, thus following the Saracen's advice, seemed to

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gol attack on Vatatzes: H. R. Luard, *Matthaei Parisiensis, monachi Sancti Albani, Chronica majora* V (London 1880) 37–38. But against its authenticity see Richard, *ByzF* 25 (1999) 86. On the character of Matthew's chronicles see B. Weiler, "Matthew Paris on the Writing of History," *Journal of Medieval History* 35 (2009) 254–278.

<sup>56</sup> Here we encounter another problem with the theory that puts John's last expedition in 1252–1253: if that is so, we should suppose that the arrival of the Saracen before John (from July 1251 through the first trimester of 1253) occurred before the emperor's departure to the Balkans or during his expedition. In other words, after the meeting at latest in the first trimester of 1253, John was staying in the Balkans in a leisurely manner until the end of 1253, even though the revolt of Michael II Doukas of Epiros already ended in the spring of the same year. Could it be that the pressure of Mongols was behind this activity? In order to solve this question on the basis of the 1252–1253 theory, Langdon, *Viator* 29 (1998) 127 n.181, gives another chronology for the exchange of the Byzantino-Mongol ambassadors, according to which "(a) the Saracen Mongol ambassador was dispatched from Mongolia by Möngke in ca. 7/1251 on a fact-finding mission to the Byzantine court; (b) the Saracen arrived at Vatatzes's Anatolian court in ca. 12/1251; (c) Vatatzes's own ambassadors were promptly dispatched from Anatolian Byzantium in ca. 12/1251; (d) Vatatzes's ambassadors arrived at Möngke's court in ca. 6/1252; (e) Vatatzes's ambassadors sent correspondence by the Mongol post which reached Vatatzes or his regent Theodore by ca. 8/1252; or (f) they themselves returned to the Byzantine court in ca. 12/1252." Certainly, according to Langdon's reckoning (and if Möngke's response was favorable to the Byzantium), Vatatzes could be freed of his worry about the eastern frontier before his departure to the Balkans in '1252'. Nevertheless, it seems to me that Langdon's chronology is too tight to execute. After all, on a matter of such great consequence to the state, did a correspondence of his ambassadors really reassure John III?

strengthen the defense of the eastern frontier.<sup>57</sup> Only the Chronicle attributed to Theodore Skoutariotes tells us John's policy against the Mongols in this period. The author explains that the emperor arrived at Nicaea in late February 1254 to make arrangements for security and protection against the Mongols (τῶν Ἀτάρων).<sup>58</sup> Meanwhile, the emperor would not have known about the intentions of the new ruler Möngke, for John's envoy who was at Karakorum two months earlier, at the end of 1253, could not be in Anatolia. Having heard of the enthronement of the new Qu'an, the emperor had to prepare defenses in case the Mongols' strategy changed for the worse for the Lascarids. Even assuming that what Rubruck says is true—that John came to pay little attention to the Mongols—the emperor could do so only after the return of the Greek envoy who received a favorable response from Möngke.<sup>59</sup> It is certain that John could not move a major military force to the west before his envoy returned. Therefore we propose a hypothesis as follows: the fact that John III's expedition to the Balkans in 1251–1252 turned out to be the last one resulted, at least in part, from Möngke's election as Qu'an and the Mongols' latent threat.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>57</sup> After 1243 the emperor pushed forward the fortification of the eastern frontier and the settlement of so-called *akritai* on them. See Pachymeres *Συγγραφικαὶ Ἱστορίαι* I 27.18–31.20.

<sup>58</sup> *Theodori Scutariotae Additamenta* no. 31 (284.10–14): καὶ φθίνων ἐτύγγανε Φεβρουάριος] περίπου τὸν Φεβρουάριον μῆνα. καὶ ἡμέρας διέτριψεν ἐν αὐτῇ, τὴν ἀπὸ τῶν Ἀτάρων ἔχων ποίαν καὶ ὅσα εἰς φυλακὴν αὐτῆς καὶ ἀσφάλειαν παντοίως διαπραττόμενος. Nicaea seemed to be on a potential major route of Mongol invasion to the capital of the Lascarids, Nymphaion. Cf. I. Booth, "Ghazis, Roads and Trade in North-West Anatolia 1179–1291," *BMGs* 31 (2007) 127–145.

<sup>59</sup> It should be noted that Möngke dispatched Hülegü, the future founder of the Ilkhanate (Hülegü Ulus), with a massive Mongol army to south-western Asia in 1253; this information might have reached Byzantium. On this campaign see R. Amitai-Preiss, *Mongols and Mamluks: The Mamluk-Ilkhanid War, 1260–1281* (Cambridge 1995) 11–25.

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Table: proposed chronology

|                                    |  |
|------------------------------------|--|
| 1251 (sometime during this period) | Beginning of John III's campaign to the Balkans                        |
| Winter 1251/1252                   | John's stay at Vodena  |
| From spring 1252                   | John's inspection of cities in the Balkans                             |
| Autumn 1252                        | John sets out from the Balkans for Anatolia                            |
| Autumn 1252                        | Trial of Michael Palaiologos at Philippi                               |
| Before winter 1252/3               | John's return to Nymphaion   |
| Sometime in 1253 (before August)   | Synod for the ritual of the oath sworn to John by Michael at Nicaea(?) |

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