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Sean Strong



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Reconstructing the Narrative: The Usurpation of Nikephoros Bryennios the Elder

Sean Strong

Cardiff University

StrongSS@cardiff.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper traces the usurpation of Nikephoros Bryennios the elder, 1077/8 AD, by examining narratives from three Byzantine historians: Michael Attaleiates, John Skylitzes, and Nikephoros Bryennios the younger. For the most part, modern scholars have focussed on investigating successful usurpation candidates who managed to rise to imperial power. For this period, this included Nikephoros Botaneiates and Alexios Komnenos. Key questions are often asked, such as how usurpers managed to succeed and why did they choose to undertake a course of usurpation, often resulting in a narrative of justification and legitimacy.¹ For this period, albeit from Neville (2012) on Nikephoros Bryennios, appreciation has not been given to usurpers who failed.² This paper will provide a chronology of Nikephoros Bryennios' usurpation, and how these three authors depict the incident, the correlations and differences between them, and lastly, preliminary thoughts why Bryennios' usurpation failed compared to his successful contemporaries.

Keywords: Byzantium, Usurpation, Bryennios, Eleventh-Century, Literature

Introduction: Usurping the Throne in Byzantium

The Byzantine Empire had a long-lasting issue with political instability, and a climax was reached in the mid-late eleventh century. Jean-Claude Cheynet's study testifies to the serious problem and has identified two hundred and twenty-three conspiracies against the throne between AD 963-1210.³ Over one hundred of these conspiracies took place in the eleventh century alone. Opposition was an important aspect of autocratic rule regardless of an individual's aptitude for success. For imperial rule, opposition often took the form of direct usurpation, riots instigated by the racing parties, and military rebellion or mutiny in the provinces.⁴ These types of opposition left the emperor's position untenable and unstable. Depending on the character and attributes of the emperor, different types of insurrection took

¹ These questions are instrumental to answer in the field of usurpation because justification and legitimacy are the quintessential ingredients for understanding how individuals are successful or less fortunate in their coup attempts. The factors of justification and legitimacy intertwine with one another and are important when examining the perception of the usurper and how they were viewed by the public, state, and church during and after their usurpation.

² For a recent, although currently unpublished, thesis that addresses some of the limitations of previous studies on usurpation during this period, see Davidson, *The Glory of Ruling*.

³ Cheynet, *Pouvoir et contestations à Byzance*.

⁴ See Kaegi, *Byzantine Military Unrest* for specific case studies of civil unrest during the early and middle Byzantine period.

place. If a weak or incompetent opponent was in power, usurpation was more likely to occur. On the other hand, the use of usurpation became troublesome in justification when dynasty and lineage came into prominence. To rebel against a centralised and strong emperor, like Emperor Justinian (AD 527-565), an internal insurrection, within the city or its immediate vicinity, was more probable compared to hostile activity originating in the peripheral provinces. For Justinian, the Nika Riot (AD 532) is a key example of how internal threats were more likely to overthrow the emperor than an external enemy.⁵ Nonetheless, to assume all usurpations followed a similar model when analysing the emperor's position would be unfruitful. The position, location and attributes of the usurper also need to be examined and considered when validating certain rebellious actions.

Between AD 1077-1081, five usurpations occurred. Those opposing Emperor Michael VII Doukas were Nikephoros Botaneiates who started his usurpation in the eastern province in July/October 1077 and Nikephoros Bryennios in the western provinces in November 1077. Nikephoros Basilakes in the summer of 1078, Nikephoros Melissenos in Autumn of 1080, and lastly, Alexios Komnenos in early 1081 usurped against Emperor Nikephoros III Botaneiates. This paper will focus on the usurpation of Nikephoros Bryennios and aims to reconstruct the events of the usurpation into a cohesive narrative and identify why the usurpation failed compared to his contemporary, Nikephoros Botaneiates.

Usurpation is largely narrated through literature, nominally as stories of usurpers reaching, or failing to reach, the throne through means of vindication, justification, and legitimacy - a narrative of empire, power, and politics. Certain usurpers and their rise to power can be illustrated through numismatic imagery. In particular, the distinctions between a usurper's image and their predecessors is an interesting topic to examine. However, due to the scope of this paper, and the strength of the literary source material, discussion will be concentrated on the literature.

Davidson has acknowledged that Byzantine literature has allowed scholars to single out three notable types of usurpers.⁶ A usurper might act in self-defence in which they are not acting under their own beliefs or 'wants', instead they are forced to act against an individual or risk being killed. An example is Alexios Komnenos who rebelled against the Emperor Nikephoros Botaneiates in AD 1081 because of growing concerns of his own and his brother,

⁵ Malalas, *Chronographia*. XVIII. 475-477.

⁶ Davidson, *The Glory of Ruling*, 7-60.

Isaac's, lives.⁷ Alternatively, if we are to agree with Nikephoros' depiction of Bryennios, then Bryennios would also fill this category, because it was his belief that fighting against the throne was not the correct measure.⁸ The second type of usurper might launch a usurpation 'for the greater good.' In this circumstance, the emperor or government had threatened the stability or survival of the empire and the last resort, or best option, to prevent collapse was to instigate a usurpation to thwart the ill-doing of the current regime. An example is Nikephoros Botaneiates, who took up arms against the Emperor Michael VII Doukas in AD 1078 in the hope to stabilise the empire's frontiers.⁹ By dethroning Michael, Botaneiates would also remove his unpopular eunuch advisor Nikephoritzes. Lastly, a usurper might act in their own interests, and although this last factor might have played into the other two types of usurpations, rebelling solely on lust for power had no legitimacy. The first two types of usurpers are accepted by Byzantine authors as 'just causes.' However, an individual acting in self-interest was not accepted. Public opinion was often a factor where usurpers found legitimacy and through the contemporary populace condoning certain actions, it ultimately led to several authors conveying the same theme through their literary works. Despite this, successful usurpers often did carry legitimacy, simply by being successful in their coup. Once a usurper attained power and transitioned to emperor, it was up to them to solidify their position. One way a 'usurper emperor' might do this is by commissioning literary works to consolidate their position.¹⁰ Gaining legitimacy has always been easier for those who succeed rather than those who failed. Nonetheless, it is the justification and the factor of legitimacy which have influenced the literary accounts. The various stances and factors that came as a consequence of these literary bias's will be examined later in the paper.

Note: From this moment on, I will use Bryennios to denote the eleventh century usurper, also known as the elder, and for Nikephoros Bryennios the younger, consequently the twelfth century author of the *Material for History*, I will simply use Nikephoros.

⁷ Two notable courtiers known as Borilos and Germanus, who were close with the Emperor Nikephoros Botaneiates, made several life-threatening actions against the Komnenos brothers. Anna Komnena claims this was the main reason for their revolt in 1081. Komnena, *Alexiad*. II.I.

⁸ Bryennios, *Material for History*. III. 5.

⁹ Attaleiates, *History*. XXVII. 213-5; Skylitzes, *Continuatus*. VI. 28.

¹⁰ See Booth, *The Ghost of Maurice* and Frendo, *History and Panegyric in the Age of Heraclius* concerning Heraclius' consolidation of legitimacy through literary frameworks. Neville, *Heroes and Romans*, 123, notes, 'The extended discussions of Bryennios' reluctance to rebel, and all the forces that drove him hesitantly to it, indicate that revolt was a great crime.' Here Nikephoros is using his literary outlet to legitimatise and reconsolidate his families name. An example of how literary works were also used not only to solidify a winner's position but also a usurper who failed.

Prelude to Bryennios' Usurpation

At the turn of the eleventh century, the Byzantine Empire was re-established as a leading power in the Mediterranean.¹¹ Emperor Basil II ruled the empire with surety and, as a result of his dedication and character, he expanded the empire its furthest in territory since Justinian's reconquests in the sixth century. Nevertheless, the empire's fortunes turned again after Basil's death and the empire was plunged into strife. Traditionalist scholars have pointed towards the Battle of Manzikert in AD 1071, which led to a considerable territory in Anatolia being occupied by the Seljuk Turks. The Emperor Romanus IV Diogenes was taken captive and a new emperor was placed upon the throne, Michael VII Doukas.¹²

Emperor Michael VII's reign was troubled and unstable. The empire had pressure from both western and eastern theatres, most notably the Turks in Anatolia and the Serbs and Bulgars in the Balkans. Michael VII did not only face external threats, but also faced four rebellions throughout his reign which signalled the political instability of the period.¹³ In AD 1076, Nestor, an imperial governor of the Danube provinces rebelled against Michael's regime and gained support from the nomadic Pechenegs. The reasoning behind Nestor's rebellion is more important than its outcome because he was not trying to claim lordship over the Balkans, nor exhort money from the government. Instead he wanted Nikephoritzes removed from office.¹⁴ Nestor's rebellion was a clear sign of the dissatisfaction towards the eunuch Nikephoritzes. For too long had Michael's government limited their resources towards the eastern front and as a result, it fell to the Turkish incursions. Nikephoritzes' policies were aimed to recoup the empire's financial reserve; however, he attained this revival through a vigorous economic policy, and it was these policies that sparked Nestor's rebellion. This was not the first time that rebellion came from military dissatisfaction with economic policy.¹⁵

Psellos' *Chronographia*, depicts Michael VII in a moderate light. Michael was an individual who had potential to rule well, however from how events played out, this potential

¹¹ For the Byzantine revival, see Angold, *The Byzantine Empire 1025-1204*, 24-34; Holmes, *Basil II and the Governance of Empire*; Kaldellis, *Streams of Gold, Rivers of Blood*, 81-154 and Whittow, *The Making of Orthodox Byzantium*, 358-390.

¹² For the period following Basil II's revival of the Byzantine Empire and consequent events surrounding Manzikert, see Angold, *The Byzantine Empire 1025-1204*, 35-80 and Kaldellis, *Streams of Gold, Rivers of Blood*, 231-251.

¹³ The four rebellions against Emperor Michael VII were Russel Balliol in 1073, Nestor in 1076, Nikephoros Botaneiates in July/October 1077, and Nikephoros Bryennios in November 1077.

¹⁴ Skylitzes, *Continuatus*. VI. 19. 'Nestor said that he would take no other course unless they got rid of the logothetes Nikephoros as an enemy to all and implacable foe...'

¹⁵ Emperor Maurice (582-602), deployed strict economic policies to cope with the limited treasury he inherited, however, this resulted in extensive dissatisfaction with his reign. Two rebellions were launched during Maurice's reign over military pay [Th. Sim. *History*. III. 1.1 – 3.11; VIII. 6.2- 15.9]. Phokas' rebellion in 602 was initiated due to Maurice's economic policy and the decision to winter his troops beyond the frontier. Maurice and his family were consequently murdered during this rebellion and Phokas ascended to the throne in 602.

was not utilised.¹⁶ However, unsurprisingly, Psellos left this out of his account, choosing to focus solely on the emperor's character and not his policies. The decision to focus on the emperor's character rather than his policies could be a strategic decision due to Psellos' position at court.¹⁷ Psellos was not always in the emperor's favour, and thus writing whilst Michael was still in power meant that Psellos could not afford to portray Michael in a negative way, regardless of whether Michael's true character was unfavourable or not. This places doubts over Psellos' depiction of Michael; however, as Attaleiates demonstrates in the *History*, Psellos' depiction of Michael might hold some truth.¹⁸ A key absence in Psellos' work is Nikephoritzes. Although Psellos' *Chronographia* focussed mainly on the imperial rulers he did include entries on notable individuals during imperial reigns. An example is the *Caesar* John Doukas. So why did Psellos not include Nikephoritzes in his account? It is reasonable to argue, with Nikephoritzes absent, Psellos could focus on depicting a positive portrayal of Michael and with Nikephoritzes not included, there would be no association with the disliked character to his reign. By comparing Psellos' depiction of Michael with Attaleiates' account, it is evident the inclusion of Nikephoritzes alongside Michael VII, instigated an overall negative portrayal of the regime.¹⁹ However, what we are left with is an important distinction and one that was highlighted with Nestor's rebellion in AD 1076.

Attaleiates' account of Michael makes the key distinction between Michael VII and his reign. By distancing Michael from his reign and consequently associating Nikephoritzes with the current regime, Attaleiates provides an anchor point for justifying and legitimising usurpation. Attaleiates does this by attacking the regime but not necessarily the emperor.

*'...whatever the most-evil Nikephoros wished became an imperial decision to order.'*²⁰

And *'...swayed by Nikephoros' evil influence.'*²¹

The emperor is thus depicted as a secondary character in the lead up to the events in AD 1077, however, because he was the current ruler and acting in a dangerous and harmful way to his people he must be deposed. Attaleiates thus challenges the strength of Michael's character, but limits this to mere willpower, and instead attacks Nikephoritzes and his consequent hold over the emperor. Thereupon, Michael's reign is termed tyrannical - not because of Michael himself

¹⁶ Psellos, *Chronographia*. VIII. 2-6.

¹⁷ See Treadgold, *Middle Byzantine Historians*, 271-308.

¹⁸ Attaleiates, *History*. XXIII. 186-7.

¹⁹ Attaleiates, an historian whose account favoured Nikephoros Botaneiates and as a result, would depict Michael VII in a negative light to legitimise Botaneiates' usurpation. On the historiography of Attaleiates, see Krallis, *Politics of Imperial Decline and Serving Byzantium's Emperors*.

²⁰ Attaleiates, *History*. XXII. 182.

²¹ *Ibid.* XXIII. 184.

being ruthless, but because of his incompetence as a ruler, his lack of will-power to stand on his own, and failure to recognise the problem with Nikephoritzes. In essence, Michael was not a tyrant but, by allowing Nikephoritzes near-complete control over policy, his reign was tyrannical.²² Attaleiates goes further and states that Michael acknowledged his wrongdoings but, as a result of his limited willpower, did not rectify his problems and thus left his potential wasted.²³

Skylitzes *Continuatus* gives a direct response why the empire was in such a sorrowful state and directs the blame towards poor policy and, more prominently, the ‘wickedness’ from those with influence, authority and power:

*‘The look of woe was everywhere and the Reigning City was filled with despair. Those in power gave no thought to curbing the daily injustices and the unlawful trials and exactions, but freely carried on with their oppressive and wicked policies just as though there was nothing at all the matter with the Romans, no war with foreign enemies, no divine wrath, no indigence and violence taking their toll on the populace in their daily life.’*²⁴

Given the depictions of Emperor Michael VII by Attaleiates and Psellos, it raises the question whether strength of character could prevail over bad policy. In this instance, it clearly did not, and Michael did not heed such a positive depiction from Skylitzes’ account. It is clear that Michael was unable to atone for his bad decisions and was unable to impose his potential and better judgement against the eunuch advisor Nikephoritzes. From the source passages, Michael VII did not control the empire and was transfixed by his corrupt advisor. Thus, it is undeniable that Michael was a necessary casualty for the ‘good of the empire.’ This allowed contemporary usurpers to justify their usurpations through acting ‘for the greater good.’

Nikephoros portrays Michael VII as a close supporter of Bryennios, and even goes as far as to consider appointing him to the position of *Caesar* in the late AD 1070s, but later retracts this to the title of *doux*.²⁵ Nikephoros assumingly kept Bryennios linked to Michael to confer legitimacy to Bryennios, and as we will see later, it was initially Bryennios’ brother

²² *Ibid.* XXIII. 188. ‘...τὴν τυραννίδα του Μιχαήλ...’ - ‘...hated Michael’s tyranny...’ This passage can be interpreted in many ways. Attaleiates acknowledges Michael’s problem is not his conscious, but his willpower, and consequently Nikephoritzes’ hold over him. It is clear that Attaleiates meant that Michael’s reign is tyrannical, not Michael himself.

²³ *Ibid.* XXIII. 186-7. Michael made an address upon knowledge of Russel Balliol’s actions. ‘“Men of the City and members of the Senate, I have heard dispiriting news such as no one has yet had to endure, and am on the brink of death. I am that Jonah of old, so take me and cast me into the sea, for it is because of my actions that such horrid and dark misfortunes are befalling the Romans.” His words implied a degree of regret for all that he had done wrong, yet his actions failed to confirm that and no change of course was to be seen, for he had surrendered himself to the worst counsel, as if he were rudderless.’

²⁴ Skylitzes, *Continuatus*. VI. 27.

²⁵ Bryennios, *Material for History*. III. 1, 2.

John and another individual named Basilakes who planned to rebel against Michael. Although Nikephoros depicts Bryennios in good relations to Michael, he does not shy away from condemning his character. Noting that Michael was ‘a man who was cowardly in other respects and afraid, as they say, of his own shadow.’²⁶ Despite Nikephoros’ negative portrayal of Michael and Nikephoritzes, he placed a greater justification for the empire’s struggles towards internal disruption such as the use of mercenaries and civil war.²⁷ However, one cannot justify civil war and rebellion were the main reasons for instability. There needed to be a premise for these actions to occur. If the emperor was not acting in accordance and good faith towards the empire, it is unsurprising there was a continuous basis for rebellion and civil unrest.

Reconstructing the Narrative



Figure 1: Constantinople and the Strait. McGeer, E and Nesbitt, J. W, *Byzantium in the Times of Trouble: The Continuation of the Chronicle of John Skylitzes, 1057-1079* (Leiden, 2020), 34.

²⁶ *Ibid.* III. 2. Also see *ibid.* III. 4.

²⁷ See Neville, *Heroes and Romans*, 63-74. Neville fully appreciates Nikephoros was presenting political thoughts on the decline of the empire and that involved the use of mercenaries and initiating rebellions. By doing so, Nikephoros depicts Bryennios as a ‘reluctant usurper’ in order to shield Bryennios’ diminished legitimacy after his rebellion was lost. As a result, Nikephoros covers all bases with Bryennios’ legitimacy by attributing Bryennios to the possible elevation to *Caesar* by Michael Doukas and therefore linking Bryennios with the imperial family. Secondly, by attributing Bryennios the ambience of a ‘reluctant usurper’ and the understanding of the religious and secular consequences of rebelling against God’s chosen representative. Lastly, Bryennios is attributed characteristics of a ‘martial hero’, and consequently the attributes an emperor needed and wanted. This included bravery, martial prowess, and conscience. 121-132.

The narrative of Nikephoros Bryennios (the elder) is often overlooked in scholarly debate due to its unsuccessful nature. However, it is imperative that failed usurpations are also examined because it sheds light on the differences between success and failure. Henceforth, it is imperative to reconstruct the narrative of Bryennios' coup, so that it may be compared and contrasted with, not only Botaneiates, but other usurpation attempts which succeeded and failed.

Before the narrative is reconstructed, three points must be noted. Firstly, Anna Komnena only depicts events concerning Bryennios' coup which involved her father, Alexios Komnenos.²⁸ Anna states that those wishing to learn more about the rebellion should utilise her husband's work, the *Material for History*.²⁹ Thus, it can be debated whether Anna either agreed with Nikephoros' narrative or simply did not want to contradict her husband's work. Nonetheless, Anna did not believe that Nikephoros Bryennios the Elder needed further material written about him. Consequently, Anna clearly did not feel the same way about her father and believed his narrative needed embellishment.³⁰ Thusly, Anna's narrative on the Bryennios coup does instigate a clear bias towards a positive portrayal of her father in those events. At the same time, when one compares the character of Alexios to Bryennios during the Battle of Kalavrye (AD 1078), Anna deploys a valorous account of both generals.³¹ Anna is either demonstrating her loyalty to her husband's depiction of Bryennios or believes that his character was true to what is described.

Secondly, Attaleiates' narrative presents Bryennios as an individual who had the potential characteristics and, due to his resources, capability to achieve success, but ultimately failed because of the mistakes he made throughout the usurpation. More so, in the aftermath of the usurpation period of AD 1077/8, it was crucial to secure justification and legitimacy for key individuals, such as Botaneiates and Alexios. These literary depictions of the major characters influence their actions during the Bryennios and Botaneiates coups. This led to a relatively negative depiction of Bryennios' actions and its effects on the empire. These negative depictions of Bryennios explains why Nikephoros decided he needed to justify and re-legitimise Bryennios' actions in the *Material for History*. Ultimately, Bryennios led a military

²⁸ See Stanković, *Bryennios, Komnene, and Doukas: A Story of Different Perspectives* and Treadgold, *Middle Byzantine Historians*, 343-386 for the relationship between Anna and Nikephoros's narratives.

²⁹ Komnena, *Alexiad*. I. IV.

³⁰ *Ibid.* Preface, 17-21.

³¹ *Ibid.* I. V-VI.

rebellion in the West and Botaneiates led a relative peaceful coup in the East, both against a tyrannical regime. The main difference was Botaneiates focussed on public support and monopolising internal strife to combat his desired non-military inspired insurrection, whereas Bryennios led a relative military focussed assault against Michael and Nikephoritzes. Attaleiates makes no mention of the reasoning behind Bryennios' rebellion, nor any background to his character. This instantly made Bryennios less connectable to Attaleiates' audience compared to Botaneiates. Attaleiates and Skylitzes were the main literary authors of the time, which left little room for a positive review of Bryennios. Nonetheless, this does not mean there were no positive depictions of Bryennios. Certain anecdotes or verbal stories in the western provinces may have been established, but with none remaining or written, we must accept the narratives of Attaleiates and Skylitzes as the main sources for information during the period.³² One important point to highlight is Attaleiates provides no clear prejudice against the character of Bryennios; only the actions of his usurpation, therefore showcasing the clear difference in Botaneiates and Bryennios coups and his ultimate bias towards Botaneiates.³³

Throughout this turbulent time, Alexios Komnenos was constantly involved in the action. Alexios was present and fought against several of the late eleventh century usurpations. Henceforth, Alexios learnt valuable lessons that he then applied to his own usurpation. This was not only achieved in reality, but through literary transmission from the eleventh into the twelfth century. Both, Anna and Nikephoros highlight the importance and significant consequences of certain actions. There are two main themes that are particularly relevant to this paper, however, it is undeniable there are further literary connections. The first literary transmission concerned the problem of using multi-ethnic forces in a show of strength in trying to gain public support. As we will see from Bryennios' usurpation, a show of force combined with the use of foreign forces was not the best way to inspire support.³⁴ Secondly, the reluctant

³² It should be noted Attaleiates and Skylitzes would not have been generally accessible to the wider public, mostly reserved for the aristocracy. So as stated, there might have been verbal stories told about Bryennios' usurpation, but given the precarities of speaking against the emperor, especially once his reign was secure, it is not surprising they were not recorded.

³³ Given the depiction of Bryennios in the *Material for History*, it could be confusing for Attaleiates to know who was really leading the usurpation attempt. What is clear is that Nikephoros Bryennios was the identifiable individual who was seemingly making the commands, but it was the coup's actions which were targeted by Attaleiates, and largely undertaken by John, and therefore not directly assaulting Nikephoros Bryennios' character. Attaleiates, *History*. XXXI. 242-3, 250-2.

³⁴ Komnena, *Alexiad*. II. IX. '*The Komnene however were of the opinion that Constantinople would not easily be captured: their own forces composed of different elements, native and foreign, and where there is any heterogeneous group, there is discordant voices will surely be raised.*' See also Neville, *Heroes and Romans*, 63-74. Although Botaneiates acquired Turkish troops under his banner, he sent a largely Roman detachment of troops to camp outside Constantinople's walls and the public were overjoyed to see Roman troops. '*They all thus lifted their voices and gave thanks to God, as they saw Roman forces and tents having arrived in this place, because a long time had passed since the area as a whole had seen any Romans.*' Attaleiates, *History*. XXXII. 267.

usurper is a literary concept that Neville has attached to Nikephoros' *Material for History*.³⁵ Nikephoros' portrayal of Bryennios encompassed the characteristics of a reluctant usurper in order to legitimise his grandfather's actions in the preceding century. Anna continued this literary construction and used it as a tool for acquiring legitimacy and justification in her narrative for Alexios' coup. Anna adds the image of the reluctant usurper through her narration of Borilos and Germanos, alongside the discussion within the Komnenoi camp concerning who should be the emperor between Alexios and Isaac.³⁶ There may be two explanations for the literary continuation. Nikephoros and Anna either implemented it into their narratives of Bryennios and Alexios to legitimise their own 'reluctant' actions in their alleged usurpation against John Komnenos.³⁷ Alternatively, the decision to use the idea of a reluctant usurper arose when Anna and Nikephoros were exiled and collaborated with one another on their individual works.³⁸ Defining the reason for the construction of the 'reluctant usurper' is not instrumental to the overall point of this paper. However, it is still an important issue to consider when examining the historiographical aspect of Byzantine authors writing on usurpation, and how prior usurpations impacted the method and means of future usurpers.

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Bryennios' rebellion was ignited with the full support of his troops and the western aristocracy in November AD 1077.³⁹ Attaleiates and Skylitzes do not provide reasons concerning the rebellion's initiation, but from Nikephoros' account it seems the main cause was displeasure with Emperor Michael VII's reign.⁴⁰ John Bryennios, Nikephoros Bryennios the Elder's brother, mustered troops from the western provinces which included Macedonian regiments, a number of Varangians, and Frankish troops. Bryennios also gained the support of the *Katepano* of Adrianople, alongside forming an alliance with the Pechenegs, and set a rallying point for Traianoupolis. Michael's response to the Bryennios threat was slow and negligible, and put far greater urgency in dealing with Botaneiates in the East. Michael had the opportunity to manoeuvre Basilakes' troops to engage Bryennios' mustering forces, and it likely would have put an end to the rebellion, however, the emperors' attention laid with Botaneiates.⁴¹ Basilakes

³⁵ Neville, *Heroes and Romans*, 121-138. For a pictorial survey of reluctant usurpers see Davidson, *The Glory of Ruling*, 95 – figure 1. For an overview of reluctant usurpers, outside of Bryennios, see Davidson, *The Glory of Ruling*, 94-142.

³⁶ Komnena, *Alexiad*. II. I [Borilos and Germanos]; I. VII [Komnenoi camp].

³⁷ Choniates, *Annals*, I. 10-11.

³⁸ Jeffreys, *Nikephoros Bryennios Reconsidered*, 201-14.

³⁹ Attaleiates, *History*. XXXI. 242-3; Skylitzes, *Continuatus*. VI. 29.

⁴⁰ Bryennios, *Material for History*. III. 4.

⁴¹ Attaleiates, *History*. XXXI. 243-4; Skylitzes, *Continuatus*. VI. 29, 30. Skylitzes notes that Basilakes did not engage with Bryennios' forces prudently or decisively and attributes some blame towards Basilakes. However, if Basilakes did conduct a secret agreement with John Bryennios then it is unlikely Skylitzes had knowledge of this. Therefore, his actions were plausible.

was eventually moved to engage Bryennios, however, after a small skirmish, Bryennios forces were triumphant and Basilakes was forced to re-affirm his allegiance to the Bryennios insurrection.⁴² Following these events, the Bryennios brothers gathered at Traianoupolis to merge their forces. Bryennios was eventually acclaimed and received the royal insignia at Traianoupolis.⁴³

Attaleiates' and Skylitzes' accounts do not state the justification for Bryennios' decision to spark rebellion, and consequently do not provide information concerning the internal decisions and events within the western provinces. For this reason, Nikephoros is a crucial source. Nikephoros either wanted to rectify the missing information from Attaleiates' and Skylitzes' accounts concerning the internal management of the Bryennios coup or alternatively, because Attaleiates' and Skylitzes' accounts did not detail Bryennios' reasonings, Nikephoros decided it was the perfect opportunity to provide retrospective legitimacy towards Bryennios' rebellion.⁴⁴ It is plausible Nikephoros was doing both because the origins of the usurpation was expanded extensively. Despite Nikephoros' efforts, it did not change the reality that Bryennios, eventually, took the lead in the rebellion. In the *Material for History*, Bryennios did not wish to rebel against the emperor because of his better judgement towards the action's consequences, nor did he receive the royal insignia under his own desires, but instead was coerced into the action by his brother.⁴⁵ From the start of the rebellion, it was Bryennios' brother John who instigated the coup alongside the volatile support of Basilakes and Nikephoros, alluding to John's continued struggle to compel Bryennios to join the cause.⁴⁶ Bryennios only agreed to adorn the imperial insignia and lead the rebellion after an act of trickery at Traianoupolis.⁴⁷ Although Nikephoros' additions concerning events leading up to Traianoupolis might be viewed as rhetoric to justify and legitimise Bryennios' actions, it does

Skylitzes also notes other immediate forces were available to thwart Bryennios, but Michael did not utilise these troops, and thus acted irresponsibly and slowly.

⁴² Bryennios, *Material for History*. III. 8. The original agreement that Basilakes would join the Bryennios coup was made with John and not Nikephoros [III. 4]. Basilakes' thinking is not presented to us at that moment. If Michael had moved Basilakes earlier we must ask, would Basilakes acted the same and tried to quell Bryennios' forces, and if he succeeded (which he did not) would he remain loyal to his prior agreement with John Bryennios? Nonetheless, Basilakes' uneasy loyalty to either Michael or the Bryennios brothers highlights the internal instability of the empire and how individuals were more likely to act in their self-interests than for the good of the state.

⁴³ In Attaleiates' and Skylitzes' accounts, Bryennios openly received these honours and proclaimed himself in open rebellion against Michael. Nonetheless, Nikephoros retains the position that Bryennios was eventually persuaded into condemning his open conscience. Bryennios, *Material for History*. III. 9-10.

⁴⁴ Skylitzes mentions Bryennios was proclaimed before his entry into Adrianople [*Continuatus*. VI. 29] but received the royal insignia at Traianoupolis [*Continuatus*. VI. 30], whereas Attaleiates attributes both these events to Traianoupolis [*History*. XXXI. 246-7].

⁴⁵ Bryennios, *Material for History*. III. 7.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*. III. 4 [for John's decision to initiate rebellion], 7, 9 [for Bryennios' refusal to join John in his venture].

⁴⁷ *Ibid*. III. 9-10.

bring forward an interesting question: which brother believed in and wanted the cause to succeed the most? Neville argues that once Bryennios joined the rebellion, albeit hesitantly, he became fully involved and became a strong figurehead.⁴⁸ Therefore, Bryennios either embraced his decision or Nikephoros again blended truth with uncertainty by depicting Bryennios, no longer as a secondary character to his brother, but as a strong and confident individual. These attributes are needed for successful rulership.

The Bryennios brothers set out to Adrianople with their troops, and on arrival were greeted with happiness. John, alongside other key supporters of the rebellion, were given honours and the populace pulled down the *phoundax* in retaliation to Nikephorizes' economic policies and their recent 'liberation' and pledged support for Bryennios.⁴⁹ Raideostos also pledged their support to Bryennios. Bryennios had built enough support to feel confident enough to try and secure the loyalty and public opinion of Constantinople.⁵⁰ Bryennios sent his brother John, with a reasonably large force, to Constantinople in the hope to either win the city through fear or by the Constantinopolitan populace embracing him, thus igniting an internal struggle against Michael from within the city. However, Bryennios misjudged the situation. John arrived to find the ambience of the capital to be hostile and after a few skirmishes ensued along the city walls (Skylitzes notes these were located along the wall of the Blachernai), he was repulsed.⁵¹ John became frustrated with the situation and consequently ventured over the bridge of St Panteleëmon and torched the local suburbs. This left the city's population furious and John's goal of gaining the capital's public support tarnished.

The *Material for History* offers a different perspective.⁵² John was sent to the capital to persuade the populace to join Bryennios' cause and the populace welcomed seeing John's men. However, some of John's troops, unknowing to him, secretly went to 'find food for their camp,' but in reality, were aiming to secure booty from the city's suburbs. When the soldiers found nothing, they set fire to the local area in a rage. John tried to stop his soldiers' actions, but the destruction got out of control and, to avoid losing face, John decided to besiege the capital. However, after several rebuttals, John decided that he did not want to risk his men's lives for

⁴⁸ Neville, *Heroes and Romans*, 125.

⁴⁹ Attaleiates, *History*. XXXI. 247, 249-50; Skylitzes, *Continuatus*. VI. 30 [Skylitzes does not place this at Adrianople, but at Traianoupolis and does not record both Bryennios brothers making their way to Adrianople – instead John makes his way to Constantinople from Traianoupolis and presumably Skylitzes omits Bryennios' travel to Adrianople despite appearing later in the city when the Pechenegs arrived to besiege it. Skylitzes, *Continuatus*. VI. 33]; Bryennios, *Material for History*. III. 10-11. See Davidson, *The Glory of Ruling*, 49-5, nt. 255.

⁵⁰ Skylitzes, *Continuatus*. VI. 32.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* VI. 32.

⁵² Bryennios, *Material for History*. III. 11-14.

further failure and consequently lifted the siege. John, embarrassed that he had produced no result, needed a pretext for returning to Adrianople, but at the same time needed to obtain something to save himself from humiliation. News had come that a marauding group of Pechenegs had entered over the Haemus Mountains and started to plunder the villages of Chersonese.⁵³ Upon returning back to Adrianople, John defeated the marauding Pechenegs and took many captives. Bryennios used these captives to stop the Pecheneg siege of Adrianople that had pinned his brother within the city, and a new alliance was formed between them.⁵⁴ This narration of events is highly rhetorical and is an example of Nikephoros taking liberties with his position of writing in hindsight. Thus, it is prudent to return to events which had a higher probability of occurring.

In early January AD 1078, John decided to fall back from Constantinople and not risk further angering the capital's populace or fall upon a military retaliation from local imperial forces. John, with two *tagmata*, fell back to Athyra and sent his remaining forces to winter, presumably at Adrianople.⁵⁵ Michael realised John's precarious position and freed Russel Balliol, who he had previously captured during his reign, and sent him alongside the *proedros* Alexios Komnenos with imperial forces to engage in battle. The imperial land forces were accompanied by an allied Rus naval contingent, which were also used to engage with John's forces. Michael's imperial forces were successful and forced John to retreat further back towards Raidestos.⁵⁶ At the same time John retreated to Raidestos, the Pechenegs decided it was an opportune moment to exploit the Macedonian pretender.⁵⁷ The Pechenegs ravaged the neighbouring lands in Macedonia and besieged Bryennios in Adrianople, causing a significant halt to his imperial ventures. Bryennios paid off the Pechenegs over the winter of 1077/8, however, the siege had taken its toll, leaving the western coup crippled with famine, alongside depleted manpower and financial reserves.⁵⁸ Once the Pechenegs had lifted their siege, John, in March 1078, was ordered to raise support and taxes from the promontory of Kyzikos. John was successful, however upon his return, he was set upon by an imperial fleet and defeated,

⁵³ Peter Bell believes Nikephoros is fabricating the events to avoid damaging John's prestige. Nikephoros notes the Pechenegs took advantage of their previous alliance with the Bryennios brothers, and their consequent limited number of troops in the Balkans, in order to plunder the local villages and encircle Adrianople. As Peter Bell believes, it is likely that these events are fabricated to justify John's withdrawal. See, Bryennios, *Material for History*. III. 14. nt. 99.

⁵⁴ Nikephoros associates this event as an establishment of an alliance between the Pechenegs and Bryennios. However, given the narrative of Skylitzes and Attaleiates, it is more likely that this event concluded an uneasy feeling and resulted in hostilities and the subsequent Pecheneg siege of Adrianople which Nikephoros fails to mention, but Attaleiates and Skylitzes provide.

⁵⁵ Attaleiates, *History*. XXXI. 252; Skylitzes, *Continuatus*. VI. 32.

⁵⁶ Attaleiates, *History*. XXXI. 252-255, XXXII. 261; Skylitzes, *Continuatus*. VI. 33.

⁵⁷ Attaleiates, *History*. XXXII. 261-2. 'But the Pechenegs considered that the rebellion of the Macedonians was a boon and benefit for themselves and so in great numbers they approached Adrianople...'; Skylitzes, *Continuatus*. VI. 33.

⁵⁸ Attaleiates, *History*. XXXII. 262-3. Bryennios' decision to pay off the Pechenegs likely occurred in early 1078.

and once again forced to retreat further inland. Concerning Constantinople, upon Botaneiates' imminent arrival from the East, the Constantinopolitan populace occupied the city on his behalf, and Russel caught up with John's remnant forces and once again defeated them.⁵⁹ On the 24th March 1078, Botaneiates was proclaimed within Constantinople, and Michael VII was deposed. A few days later, Botaneiates entered Constantinople victorious.⁶⁰ This left Bryennios in a precarious position.

Botaneiates wanted no further bloodshed and dispatched three different envoys to Bryennios, offering him the rank of *Caesar* and restoration of his previous titles, alongside titles for other notable officials within Bryennios' camp.⁶¹ On all occasions Bryennios refused. Bryennios mustered his forces and marched from Adrianople towards Constantinople. Botaneiates dispatched the newly elevated *nobelissimos* and *megas domestikos* Alexios Komnenos, alongside Russel Balliol, with an imperial force to thwart Bryennios. The imperial forces camped at Kalavrye and it was at this location that the two forces meet each other on the battlefield.⁶² Alexios was victorious and left Bryennios' forces defeated. The Bryennios brothers were captured and taken to Constantinople, where John was executed and Bryennios blinded.⁶³ The Bryennios family's estates in the western provinces remained under their authority, thus leaving them defeated but not crippled. These events concluded the Bryennios rebellion.⁶⁴

Why Did Bryennios Fail?

Bryennios' usurpation had advantageous characteristics, but its demise came from a sequence of poor decisions concerning the operation and consequent actions of the coup. This section of the article aims to give some preliminary thoughts as to why Bryennios failed and allow for further discussion to be taken in the future.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* XXXII. 270; Skylitzes, *Continuatus*. VI. 33.

⁶⁰ Nikephoritzes was arrested, banished, and later died. The location is disputed between Nikephoros [III. 26. – Island of Oxeia] and Skylitzes [VII. 15. – Island of Prote].

⁶¹ *Ibid.* XXXIV. 284-5.; Skylitzes, *Continuatus*. VII. 2. On the use of reconciliation between emperor and usurper see Davidson, *The Glory of Ruling*, 247-71.

⁶² Attaleiates [XXXIV. 289-91], Anna Komnena [I. V-VI], Bryennios [IV. 5-14] and Skylitzes [VII. 3] all provide accounts of the battle.

⁶³ Botaneiates awarded titles to Bryennios despite his decision to blind him. However, once Bryennios was blinded and thus condemned to never sit upon the throne, Botaneiates had no quarrel with, nor deemed any threat from, the usurper. For physical features and the throne, see Laes, 'Power, Infirmary and Disability.' Despite, Bryennios being blinded, the execution of John Bryennios could be interpreted to highlight that he was the main threat to Botaneiates. The decision to execute John also demonstrates there might be some truth in Nikephoros' account depicting John as the main leader and instigator of the rebellion.

⁶⁴ Attaleiates, *History*. XXXIV. 292-4; Bryennios, *Material for History*. IV. 17.

Bryennios mustered good quality troops from the western provinces. These troops comprised Franks, Byzantine regulars from the provinces of Macedonia and Thrace, Varangians, and Pecheneg warriors from the Nomadic Steppe. Bryennios had the manpower and quality of troops to enact a successful coup. Despite initiating his coup in the form of a military rebellion which became a detriment, the quality of manpower demonstrated his martial following. Thus, when comparing Bryennios' military might against his usurper rival Botaneiates, the advantage laid with Bryennios. Although troop numbers were not always the key for success, good quality troops were often significant in firstly, posing yourself as a viable threat; and secondly, to exercise that threat level onto your enemies in a bid to win the throne.⁶⁵ Despite having a positive military backing, it was the execution of these military forces in his bid to win public support that ultimately cost him the imperial throne.

Bryennios' character and personal attributes demonstrated the correct image of a usurper. Both Botaneiates and Bryennios had this positive factor, and both derived benefit. However, Botaneiates utilised it more effectively than Bryennios through consistently generating greater propaganda output into the capital.⁶⁶ Additionally, Bryennios was a member of the western aristocracy and had high-ranking family members and ancestry.⁶⁷ Lineage was important when assessing a usurper's suitability for imperial rule, alongside awarding certain secular ranks and military titles. Kazhdan and Epstein stress being a member of the old military aristocracy and holding a substantial genealogy was a significant factor in determining secular, ecclesiastical, and public opinion on a chosen candidate.⁶⁸ Thus, Kazhdan would argue that because of Botaneiates' greater ancestry, and experience in the maintenance and protection of the empire, he would have had a greater approval from the various classes over Bryennios.⁶⁹ On the other hand, Kaldellis believes lineage does not provide an instrumental impact on suitability, and instead emphasises the significance of the usurper's age and military strength.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Komnena, *Alexiad.* I. V. 'Bryennios, confident in his soldiers, relied on his knowledge and the good discipline of his troops.'

⁶⁶ Attaleiates, *History*, XXVII. 216-20; Kazhdan and Epstein, *Change in Byzantine Culture*, 102-11.

⁶⁷ Komnena, *Alexiad.* I. IV.

⁶⁸ Kazhdan and Epstein, *Change in Byzantine Culture*, 102-11. The emphasis of Kazhdan and Epstein's arguments are founded upon the popular and credible statement that the eleventh century saw the rise of the aristocratic families. These aristocratic families, the Doukai, Komnenoi, Melissenoi, and Palaiologoi were the principle families that intensified the personification of lineage and heritage in the eleventh century. The factors of lineage and legitimacy played a significant role in the perception and legitimacy of a candidate and their respective family name. For further discussion see, Kazhdan and Epstein, *Change in Byzantine Culture* and Krallis, *Politics of Imperial Decline*.

⁶⁹ For Botaneiates' ancestry see Skylitzes, *Continuatus.* VI. 28; Attaleiates, *History.* XXIX, XXXIV. 288 [Botaneiates' outburst after Bryennios' refusal of terms—Botaneiates claims greater ancestry].

⁷⁰ Kaldellis, *Streams of Gold, Rivers of Blood*, 264. Kaldellis argues, despite Botaneiates having several positive attributes, at nearly eighty years old and with diminished military capability in only holding three hundred men at the time of his usurpation

As a result, Kaldellis would favour the younger, but yet still experienced, Bryennios over the older Botaneiates.⁷¹ Although age is a crucial factor, it is only worth applying its impact once the individual is in power. An aged individual might struggle with performing personal heroic deeds on the battlefield, but it would not take away from their military capability for undertaking a reserved leadership role which focussed on strategic elements compared to hand-to-hand combat.⁷² Once an individual was on the throne, the age of the candidate became an issue. If they were too old to produce heirs or had no heirs, their death would create another power vacuum. Furthermore, inciting disruption to the state through a succession crisis.⁷³

Bryennios was also present at the Battle of Manzikert, where he is described as fighting valiantly, much like his later depiction against Alexios at Kalavrye.⁷⁴ By placing Bryennios at the Battle of Manzikert - despite the result - it established his military competency and characteristics of bravery and loyalty.⁷⁵ In accordance to Nikephoros' account, Bryennios did not want to rebel, suggesting that he wanted to seek other measures of bringing down a tyrannical regime - presenting a reserved and virtuous individual. These personal attributes personify the character of Bryennios and produced the perception of a legitimate claimant to the throne. Nonetheless, the public perception of Bryennios did deteriorate.

'When the letter reached him in Dyrrachium, <Bryennios> was full of anxiety; he did know what to do: to enter into revolt he thought dangerous and the cause of the greatest evils, while to deliver himself into manifest danger, while despising all the

initiation (within a couple of months Botaneiates attained support from several Turkish military groups to bolster his military strength), the advantage laid with Bryennios who was younger, had favourable lineage, and a strong military backing. On the use of Turkish mercenaries see Beihammer, *Byzantium and the Emergence of Muslim-Turkish Anatolia*, 198-243.

⁷¹ Kaldellis, 'How to Usurp the Throne in Byzantium', 43-56. Kaldellis presents a more balanced approach to the idea of lineage in relation to public opinion.

⁷² Despite Attaleiates' portrayal of Botaneiates as a competent military general, see Kaldellis, *Streams of Gold, Rivers of Blood*, 266 for Botaneiates not attaining military victories, and discussion in Krallis, *Politics of Imperial Decline*, 144-148. Also see Krallis, *Politics of Imperial Decline*, 148 for an opposing argument from the one given, concerning how military competency, age, and lineage could not be overcome by literary imagery and flattery.

⁷³ Although an emperor might not produce an heir themselves, this did not stop them from adopting sons in lieu of their respective succession. An early example of adoption is Justin II and Tiberius and furthermore, Tiberius adopting Maurice through marriage in the late sixth century. Theoph. Sim. *History*. III. 11. 4; I. 1. 5.

⁷⁴ For the Battle of Manzikert: Attaleiates does not give a detailed portrayal of Bryennios at Manzikert but does note his attendance [*History*. XX. 154-55]. However, this is not unexplainable considering Bryennios' demonstration of martial prowess in other sources and the negative actions of Botaneiates during the Manzikert campaign [see Skylitzes, *Continuatus*. V. 3]. Skylitzes depicts Bryennios in a two-fold manner; Bryennios was clearly a capable fighter and demonstrates his ability during the campaign, however, he also notes that he left Basilakes outmanoeuvred, which resulted in his capture. Although this is not a great depiction of generalship, it is likely the fault came as a result of poor communication [*Continuatus*. V. 8-10]. Nikephoros presents a brighter depiction of the events; nonetheless, Bryennios' martial skill is not disputed in any source. For the Battle of Kalavrye: Attaleiates, *History*. XXXIV. 289-292; Bryennios, *Material for History*. IV. 5-14; Komnena, *Alexiad*. I. V-VI. Skylitzes, *Continuatus*. VII. 3. All accounts depict a fierce and test-worthy battle. For Attaleiates, Bryennios presents himself as a worthy foe for Alexios to conquer and does not take away from the martial prowess of Bryennios. Within all the depictions, Bryennios is shown to be courageous and skilful, and this is evident when he charges into battle at its pinnacle moment [Kalavrye], resulting in him being consequently captured compared to a large number of his men who fled the battle once it had turned for the worst.

⁷⁵ For discussion on Bryennios' good deeds at Manzikert, see Neville, *Heroes and Romans*, 132-3.

consequences, he did not judge to be the act of a good, an intelligent or a noble man. He remained wrestling with these thoughts for a long time...’ (Bryennios, *Material for History*, III. 5, trans. Peter Bell)

Neville’s judgement of Nikephoros’ portrayal towards Bryennios as a ‘reluctant usurper’ is correct, however, it is also rhetorical. Although it was created to justify and provide a relative sense of legitimacy for Bryennios, its use does not condone the Bryennios brother’s consequent actions or John’s troops concerning Constantinople’s suburbs. The term ‘reluctance’ was only used at the start of Nikephoros’ narration of events. This is sensible, but as Neville notes, it is also necessary.⁷⁶ Despite being reluctant to usurp Michael’s throne, Bryennios, once in a position of being “one aspiring to being emperor,” “o *basileion*,” he needed to reconfirm his martial virtues and thusly, be depicted as a worthy and reputable candidate for throne.⁷⁷ Furthermore, Bryennios, although reluctant, needed to be fully in control of his forces and decisive in his decision making. The true embodiment of Bryennios’ character and virtues is depicted during his final battle with Alexios at Kalavrye.⁷⁸

As previously noted, Attaleiates and Skylitzes provide no cogent character passages of Bryennios in their accounts. Skylitzes only offers one vignette into Bryennios’ character, and Attaleiates makes no attempt to offer a depiction of Bryennios until he is pitched against Botaneiates and thusly portrays Bryennios in a horrific manner.⁷⁹ An important point to remember is that neither account portrays Bryennios whilst he was still in a position to challenge for the imperial throne. The depictions we are offered only arrive after the ‘saviour’ Botaneiates had claimed the throne or was confident in its capture. Neither account offers a character passage for Bryennios in which many authors undertake when introducing new individuals to their narrative. The omission of Bryennios’ character in their initial accounts suggests that they either knew very little of Bryennios. Nevertheless, given their status and access to records and other materials it seems unlikely they would not have found some information. Alternatively, they chose to leave his character out of their accounts. It is only when Botaneiates had contact with Bryennios, and consequently when Attaleiates wanted to mirror these two individuals against one another that we are then offered a glimpse into

⁷⁶ Neville, *Heroes and Romans*, 124-5.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 125.

⁷⁸ Bryennios, *Material for History*. IV. 5-14; Komnena, *Alexiad*. I. V-VI. For discussion, see Neville, *Heroes and Romans*, 125-131.

⁷⁹ Skylitzes, *Continuatus*. VII. 2; Attaleiates, *History*. XXXII. 262-3. Attaleiates’ account portrays Bryennios immediately after the Pecheneg siege and the consequent famine which broke out – a time undoubtedly that a leader would not heed to a good portrayal.

Bryennios' character. By doing so, they distanced Bryennios from their audiences, and in particular for Attaleiates, away from the 'legitimate' Botaneiates.⁸⁰ Attaleiates might have been concerned with portraying Bryennios because depictions of Bryennios as brave, martial, and smart would have accredited him with legitimacy in-so-much that he carried the desired characteristics of a ruler. In comparison, it is no surprise that Nikephoros and Anna provide a detailed account of Bryennios' attributes, portraying him as noble and heroic individual in his quest to fight tyranny.⁸¹ A true depiction of Bryennios, outside of his actions, is excluded from the other contemporary sources. This may be a result of various reasons - however, it may be, and is likely, that neither Skylitzes nor Attaleiates wanted to give Bryennios a platform for people to connect with outside of his actions. Furthermore, this implies Anna and Nikephoros' account of Bryennios' character may have solid foundations and hold truth.⁸² The portrayal of Bryennios in the sources is reminiscent of the Emperor Michael VII Doukas. Both individuals had the ability to be a righteous and prosperous ruler, but their actions did not correlate to their potential.

Despite owning these positive factors, Bryennios could not rely upon them alone; it was his actions that would either win or lose him the chance to claim the throne. Unfortunately for Bryennios, he made four major mistakes during his bid for the throne. Although Nikephoros presents a series of justifications for many of Bryennios' decisions, the following mistakes were still carried out and thus, the outcome was unchanged.

Bryennios' first mistake was that he launched an armed rebellion against the emperor. This usurpation attempt had ramifications with image and legitimacy. None of the contemporary sources state Botaneiates' coup caused the East to break into chaos, but they do state that Bryennios' did.⁸³ Even Anna does not shy away from this point.⁸⁴ Consequently, Bryennios' rebellion took relative immediate action compared to Botaneiates' slower and steadier approach. Whilst Botaneiates did call a usurpation, he instead called for a stand against

⁸⁰ Attaleiates only provides a snippet into Bryennios' character once he is pitched against Botaneiates and one last time when he was blinded. The former depiction is provided with a stark contrasting portrayal to Botaneiates' character. For this reason, the depiction of Bryennios is likely personified in a negative light to allow the audience to lean towards favouring Botaneiates, resulting in solidifying Botaneiates' legitimacy through strength of character. Attaleiates, *History*. XXXIV. 286. The later depiction is once again to confirm Botaneiates' legitimacy and character by enacting clemency and wisdom, whilst depicting Bryennios in a contrasting view. Attaleiates, *History*. XXXIV. 292-4.

⁸¹ Bryennios, *Material for History*, III. 3, 5, IV. 15; Komnena, *Alexiad*. I. IV-VI.

⁸² Anna does not shy away from stating Bryennios' actions caused disruption and chaos in the western provinces, and this demonstrates her ability to be somewhat impartial in her depiction of Bryennios [*Alexiad*. I. IV]. Again, we are left with Bryennios' actions are negative, but his character and attributes are positive. Bryennios, in the mind of Anna, was a flawed hero.

⁸³ Attaleiates, *History*. XXXI. 242-3; Skylitzes, *Continuatus*, VI. 29

⁸⁴ Komnena, *Alexiad*. I. IV.

Michael's regime, and still undertook many of his vital duties as *doux* of Anatolikon by protecting the eastern frontier from Turkish raiding forces.⁸⁵ This ushered a sense of defiance towards Michael, but duty and loyalty to the empire, whereas Bryennios' coup was an outright rebellion against Michael and, consequently, the empire. This shows the difference between the usurpation paths taken by the two usurpers. As a result, an initiation of a military rebellion had major repercussions for Bryennios and his chances for success. Through putting the effort and resources into an armed rebellion, it called into question Bryennios' motives and ultimately, how he might have ruled the empire.⁸⁶ If we are to take Attaleiates' and Skylitzes' versions of events, then the actions of John's troops outside Constantinople was a key example of how one should not act in command of a liberation force. Even if we take Nikephoros' account, John was still not able to control his men, and with the empire in a fragile state and loyalties divided - which was also demonstrated on the grand scale at Manzikert - an emperor could not afford such mistakes. When Bryennios' and Botaneiates' usurpations are compared, a subtle and softer approach was needed to claim the throne. When winning over the public, a reserved approach also increased the image of the usurper and established a case for legitimacy. This was a key mistake for Bryennios as it outlined his intentions straight away and placed doubts on his image, legitimacy, and intent.

The second mistake that contributed to Bryennios' failed usurpation was allying with the Pechenegs. The Pechenegs for Bryennios, and for many of their other allies throughout history, were a volatile ally to obtain.⁸⁷ Bryennios' alliance with the Pechenegs cost him time and resources. The Pechenegs were a nomadic group and revered themselves on martial prowess and strength.⁸⁸ Furthermore, when Bryennios lost multiple engagements early on it demonstrated that not only was he unfit to rule, but was a prime target to take advantage of whilst in a vulnerable state. Bryennios became stuck within Adrianople's walls, unable to manoeuvre or intervene in the capital's politics. This allowed Botaneiates to take his time, plan, and calculate his approach to the capital and once again, Bryennios' offensive approach to his usurpation turned against him. The siege of Adrianople which trapped Bryennios within the city, was another key turning point. The Pecheneg siege caused a great famine, and for

⁸⁵ Attaleiates, *History*. XXVII. 215. Skylitzes, *Continuatus*, VI. 35. See Davidson, *The Glory of Ruling*, 140-41 in lieu of primary sources for solidification concerning Botaneiates' perceived 'reluctant' but 'legitimate' usurpation.

⁸⁶ Rapoport, *Political Dimensions of Military Usurpation*, 560-1.

⁸⁷ For Pechenegs in contemporary sources, see Const. Porphyrogenitus, *De Administrando Imperio*; Komnena's *Alexiad*; Leo the Deacon's *History*; Attaleiates' *History*; and Skylitzes *History* and *Continuatus*. For modern works on the Pechenegs, see Pálóczi-Horváth, *Pechenegs, Cumans, Iasians*; Curta, *Southeastern Europe in the Middle Ages*, 178-429; Kozlov, 'More than Enemies' and Meško's two articles from Meško, *Research Methodology in Ancient and Byzantine History*.

⁸⁸ Const. Porphyrogenitus, *De Administrando Imperio*. 1, 6.

Bryennios, it cost him much of his treasury and resources. Once the siege was lifted, Bryennios faced multiple problems. He needed to feed his people, pay his troops, and ultimately had to accept that he could not further his usurpation attempt until he accomplished these things. While John's mission to Kyzikos was promising, the consequent defeat of John by an imperial fleet meant Bryennios was left with perpetual dilemmas and could not alleviate them. The Pechenegs had cost Bryennios support, valuable time, and resources. During the latter part of the coup, Bryennios remained stuck within the western provinces, unable to impose himself until Botaneiates had already achieved his goal.

The third key mistake were the actions of John's forces outside the walls of Constantinople. Bryennios dispatched John to camp outside the walls of Constantinople with the goal of winning public support from within the city and, consequently, a possible liberation operation. Regardless of the source discrepancies on the event, John failed in his goal and instead damaged attitudes towards the Bryennios rebellion. Focussing on Attaleiates' account, the public did not embrace John upon his arrival, and by his association, Bryennios. The public's reaction to John's forces was likely to be a result from two things: first, John's forces were large and had a strong multi-ethnic structure which included a number of mercenaries. The Constantinopolitan populace were tired and wary of seeing 'foreign' forces patrolling the city, and seeing an army compiled with a strong foreign element, surely made them cautious.⁸⁹ Second, the same army, then standing in front of Constantinople, was the same force that had been troublesome in the western provinces.⁹⁰ Thus, the public's perception of distrust towards John was confirmed when the racing parties organised their men to fight alongside the garrison force in the city's defence. When John had failed and consequently burned the suburbs in rage, it led to a complete breakdown of trust between Bryennios' cause and those he was trying to win over. This action left Bryennios isolated and even if he eventually did become emperor, he would have had to deal with the internal issues that arose from these events.⁹¹

Nikephoros' narrative offers a different perspective. The arrival of John's troops outside the walls was positive, however, and it was only after his soldiers burned the city's neighbouring suburbs that the populace became angry. Nikephoros, by attributing the burning

⁸⁹ Attaleiates, *History*. XXXII. 267-8.

⁹⁰ Bryennios, *Material for History*. III. 10. Once again, Nikephoros tried to cover up Bryennios' actions and demonstrates Bryennios' concerns about sending a multi-ethnic force to Constantinople's walls. This also reconfirms the literary transmission of the twelfth century. See ft. 78.

⁹¹ A similar instance occurred during Alexios' coup in AD 1081. Alexios' forces had stormed Constantinople and began pillaging within the city. Alexios, and his family, to atone for his inability to control his men, and on behalf of his men's actions, undertook a forty-day repentance. Komnena, *Alexiad*. III. V-VI.

of the suburbs to John's soldiers and not specifically John, redeemed John's character, and by association, his brother Bryennios.⁹² Despite Nikephoros' attempt to pass the blame, it demonstrated the flaws of John's leadership. John did not have control his men and did not have the ability to limit the ill-feeling caused between the Bryennios coup and the Constantinopolitan populace.

Both narratives seem to have plausible correlations, and suitable reactions for their respective circumstances. Although the justification of the events from both narratives are different, they still arrive at the same conclusion, albeit certain actions are undertaken in reverse. Despite the differences, it would be sensible to place the burning of the suburbs before the initial assault on the city. This would justify the populace's consequent involvement against John's troops given some had lost their land from the destruction. Regardless of whose fault it was, the absence of Bryennios reduced the event's immediate importance, but the suburbs of the city were still burnt, and the populace angered. The actions enraged the capital's populace and caused a hatred not only for John but through his association, Bryennios. Furthermore, John's actions left Bryennios with limited avenues on how to proceed next. In comparison, Botaneiates let the public arm themselves to fight Michael VII and as a result did not incur the same repercussions.⁹³ Public support was a key component towards a successful usurpation and after the events outside Constantinople, and Bryennios had lost it. At that moment, the public lost faith, and any desire for crowning a new emperor, other than Botaneiates.

The fourth and final last blow to Bryennios' usurpation was his dismissal of the imperial envoys sent to him by Botaneiates. Michael VII had stripped Bryennios of his former titles, which left him without rank or position at court and consequently, politically vulnerable.⁹⁴ Bryennios' decision to refuse Botaneiates' offer was illogical and arguably, foolish. The title of *Caesar* would have given Bryennios a place at court and allowed him to increase his followers and rebuild his support network, in addition to making peace with the Constantinopolitan populace. In the *Alexiad*, Anna suggests Bryennios would have excelled at such a position within the court, making his judgment even more shocking.⁹⁵ Three years after

⁹² Neville, *Heroes and Romans*, 125. The fact Bryennios was not present at Constantinople when John had besieged it released some of the bad attribution of the events towards Bryennios in literary form. However, on the ground, the populace knew who and why John was acting upon.

⁹³ Attaleiates, *History*. XXXII. 269-70; Skylitzes, *Continuatus*. VI. 38. In comparison, see Nikephoros' account which paints the actions of the Constantinopolitan populace as rioters and barbaric in nature. Bryennios, *Material for History*. III. 18-19. Also see Krallis, *Urbane Warriors* for Botaneiates and the Constantinopolitan civilians as militia.

⁹⁴ Skylitzes, *Continuatus*. VI. 29.

⁹⁵ Komnena, *Alexiad*. I. IV. 'So persuasive were his arguments and so great his ability to influence all men, even at first sight and the beginning of their acquaintance, that everyone, both soldiers and civilians, united in giving him precedence and judging him worthy of rule over the whole empire, East and West.'

Bryennios coup was defeated, Alexios Komnenos staged a hybrid palace/military coup against Emperor Nikephoros III Botaneiates and succeeded.⁹⁶ Given the western support Bryennios held throughout his coup, and if he had taken Botaneiates' offer and regained his position at court, Bryennios could have solidified his support groups and mobilised against Botaneiates in a second usurpation attempt. Nikephoros' narrative might explain why Bryennios chose not to agree to Botaneiates' terms. Bryennios retained a large proportion of his military force, because in Nikephoros' narrative, he plays down the Pecheneg's siege of Adrianople.⁹⁷ Botaneiates, knowing that Bryennios was still a threat, did not want his forces to march on Constantinople. However, this was already happening because Bryennios left for the capital on the news of Michael's deposition.⁹⁸ The envoys arrived at Bryennios' camp and made Botaneiates' wishes known. Bryennios was to become *Caesar* and adopted by Botaneiates, becoming the legitimate heir to the throne.⁹⁹ However, greedily, or not, Bryennios demanded Botaneiates also give his leading generals and statesmen titles.¹⁰⁰ After the imperial envoys returned to Constantinople to relay the counteroffer, Botaneiates, feeling insecure, sent Alexios with a military force to defeat Bryennios.¹⁰¹ Thus, in Nikephoros' narrative, Bryennios did not decline the offer, but wanted to continue negotiations. Nikephoros portrays Botaneiates acting in haste and insecurity by forcing a military confrontation between Bryennios and his imperial forces. Once again, Nikephoros is legitimising Bryennios by depicting him wanting the rebellion to end in a peaceful way, and thinking of not only himself, but also his men. Nikephoros is also legitimising Alexios in preparation for his future coup.¹⁰² Despite the different justifications in the various narratives, Bryennios did not take the offer, or did not have the opportunity to finalise the negotiations, resulting in conflict, and the consequent Battle of Kalavrye. The last chance for redemption was lost, and that was his final defeat.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* II. I – III. II.

⁹⁷ Bryennios, *Material for History*. IV. 2-6.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* IV. 2.

⁹⁹ On imperial adoption see, Macrides, *Kinship by Arrangement*.

¹⁰⁰ In Attaleiates' and Skylitzes' narratives, these terms were already part of the first envoys message. Attaleiates, *History*. XXXIV. 284-5.; Skylitzes, *Continuatus*. VII. 2.

¹⁰¹ Bryennios, *Material for History*. IV. 4. In Attaleiates account, Botaneiates dispatched a number of embassies trying to stop war from occurring, however, Bryennios denied his offers several times. Only after the third refusal did Botaneiates dispatch Alexios - Attaleiates, *History*. XXXIV. 284-9.

¹⁰² Attaleiates gives a glowing depiction of Alexios throughout his narrative, and towards the end of his *History* starts to emphasise Alexios as the new 'saviour' for the empire. On Botaneiates being the saviour during his usurpation attempt – Attaleiates, *History*. XXVII. 212.

Concluding Thoughts

Bryennios was an individual who had the potential to become emperor of the Byzantine Empire. He had the correct characteristics, such as bravery, martial prowess, and notable lineage, as well as the resources at the start of his coup, to implement a successful usurpation. Nevertheless, throughout the usurpation campaign, Bryennios made a series of mistakes which cost him the opportunity to seize the throne. For this reason, it is evident that Attaleiates' depiction of Bryennios holds some truth, thus it was not the character of Bryennios that failed him, but his poor decision making.

Bryennios' usurpation had positive factors; however, poor choices were taken throughout the insurrection. The decision to start a military rebellion meant that it carried a serious stigma against it from its inception, leaving his advantageous factors overshadowed. Perhaps the most prominent failure was Bryennios' loss of public opinion, and after Bryennios had befallen to this injury, it left him limited chances and avenues for attaining the throne. The consequent backlash from those he was trying to liberate caused them instead to unite against his cause. Lastly, Bryennios' inability to adapt after the success of Botaneiates in March AD 1078, ensured his demise and highlighted an unfortunate ending to what could have been an interesting twist if he had taken up the title of *Caesar*.

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