

Theses of Doctoral (Phd) Dissertation

**John Kinnamos's and Niketas Choniates's Accounts of
the Reign of John II Komnenos (1118–1143)**

István Kovács

Supervisor: Dr. László Horváth



UNIVERSITY OF DEBRECEN

Doctoral School of History and Ethnography

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1) Research Objectives and Scope of the Dissertation

The historiography of the Komnenian era of the Byzantine Empire—specifically the reign of John II Komnenos (1118–1143)—has received relatively limited attention in Hungarian scholarship. Although the emperor achieved significant military successes (including the recovery of large parts of Asia Minor), his active diplomatic and military endeavors were often overshadowed in modern historiography by those of his father, Alexios I (1081–1118), and his son, Manuel I (1143–1180). The two most important sources covering this period, the historical works of John Kinnamos and Niketas Choniates, are not only essential for reconstructing historical facts but also shed light on the distinctive features of 12th-century Byzantine historiography and textual transmission.

This research emerged from the scarcity of source materials available in Hungarian translation. As a member of the EC Byzantium Centre, I initially approached the topic by translating Book One of Kinnamos's historical work into Hungarian. It soon became clear that the analysis would be more thorough if I included the corresponding section from Niketas Choniates's historical work covering the same period. This expansion made it possible to compare the portrayal of events from two distinct perspectives and, through a philological approach to the sources, to highlight the diversity of 12th-century Byzantine historiography.

A more in-depth investigation of the period covered by both authors revealed that these works are significant beyond the sphere of event history. The writings of Kinnamos and Choniates (especially when considering their rhetorical devices and narrative structures) illustrate the varied ways in which Byzantine historiography adopted and adapted contemporary literary traditions. Examining the two historians' distinctive source handling and linguistic-stylistic approaches provides insights not only into the Byzantine Empire's political structure but also into its intellectual life and historiographical practices.

Consequently, I concluded that these two primary sources on the reign of John II Komnenos should be presented in Hungarian translation with detailed philological commentary. This contribution not only enriches Hungarian academic discourse but also familiarizes readers with the textual traditions of Komnenian Byzantium, its historiographical methods, and a comprehensive understanding of the period's events. Thus, while building on existing reception history, this study aims to deepen our understanding of 12th-century Byzantine history by highlighting the narrative techniques in these two fundamental sources.

Accordingly, the dissertation pursues two main objectives: first, to present new Hungarian translations, accompanied by detailed philological commentary, of the most important historical sources concerning the reign of John II Komnenos—namely the relevant sections from the works of John Kinnamos and Niketas Choniates; and second, by way of a comparative analysis of these texts, to offer insight into the distinctive features of 12th-century Byzantine historiography.

The study adopts an explicitly philological approach to the sources. While presenting the historical context of events is undoubtedly necessary, the dissertation's primary focus lies on linguistic and stylistic analysis, examination of textual traditions, and exploration of narrative techniques. Through comparative philological analysis, the divergent perspectives, objectives, and representational methods of the two authors are brought to the fore.

The first part of the dissertation provides the background needed for proper contextualization of the sources. It begins with a chronological overview of John II's reign, aiming to provide readers with reliable reference points for situating the events discussed in the sources within their historical and historiographical context. This is followed by a detailed examination of John Kinnamos's historical work, including its textual transmission, the author's biographical background, and his historiographical methods. The next chapter devotes similar attention to Niketas Choniates's work: in this section, I examine the historian's work under the same headings. Although he covers the same period, he employs notably different approaches and narrative strategies.

The second major structural unit of the dissertation contains the Hungarian translations of the sources and their detailed commentary. While the work naturally touches upon matters of political history, its primary purpose is philological and cultural-historical analysis. This conscious choice stems from the fact that both political history and philology are such complex fields that their findings could each constitute complete dissertations in themselves; therefore, it seemed more practical to focus on the philological approach. Thus, the dissertation does not attempt to present a new historical narrative of John II's reign but rather focuses on interpreting and elucidating the sources. Accordingly, the explanatory notes concentrate on textual history, linguistic-stylistic features, and possible interpretive angles, while still providing the necessary historical background.

2) Overview of Applied Methodology

The dissertation examines the two main historiographical sources of John II Komnenos's reign (1118–1143), the works of John Kinnamos and Niketas Choniates, primarily from a philological perspective. The methodology combines several closely interrelated approaches, extending from the structural and stylistic analysis of these works to the identification of their rhetorical devices and literary models.

Accurate interpretation of the sources requires that they be viewed in context, with a close examination of the authors' backgrounds and the environment in which these histories were produced. Within this framework, I undertook a thorough review of the manuscript traditions, editions, and translations of both works. Applying critical awareness, I assessed both authors' reliability while taking into account their personal circumstances, political biases, and the sources upon which they drew.

A significant part of the dissertation comprises new, modern Hungarian translations and interpretations of the relevant texts. For the translation, I relied on August Meineke's 1836 Bonn edition for John Kinnamos and Jan Louis van Dieten's 1975 critical edition for Niketas Choniates. I also consulted the critical apparatus in Gyula Moravcsik's 1984 bilingual edition when examining texts related to Hungarian affairs, and that of Anna Pontani's 2017 bilingual edition for passages in Niketas Choniates. In all cases, my aim was to render the Greek text accurately into fluent Hungarian.

Interpretation of the sources involved a multifaceted approach. In examining the textual tradition, I analyzed the relationships among the manuscripts, noted textual variants, and looked for indications of authorial revision. The philological analysis also encompassed linguistic and stylistic characteristics, rhetorical devices, and intertextual connections, always considering the conventions of Byzantine historiographical genres and each author's adaptations of these conventions.

During the philological research, I paid special attention to linguistic-stylistic elements, intertextual connections, and narrative techniques. The investigation of terminological issues, including the analysis of expressions used to describe imperial power (such as βασιλεύς, αὐτοκράτωρ, and other imperial titles), provides insight into the political thinking of the period. Similarly, terminology related to military and administrative offices proved illuminating.

In preparing the commentary, three principal objectives guided me. First, I addressed issues of textual criticism, manuscript tradition, and textual variants. This was followed by the clarification of complex expressions, rhetorical and stylistic devices, and genre-specific characteristics. Finally, I investigated the authors' use of sources, their intertextual references, and how they positioned themselves within the ancient-Byzantine literary tradition.

The commentary also includes explanations of individuals, locations, and material references appearing in the texts, thus aiding readers in comprehending the historical context of events, the backgrounds of the figures involved, and broader cultural or political connections. In preparing the commentary, I relied on relevant scholarly literature but also endeavored to add fresh perspectives and interpretive suggestions.

3) The Achievements of the Dissertation

1. Complete Hungarian Translation of Historical Works Related to John II's Reign

The dissertation makes the relevant sections of two crucial 12th-century Byzantine historical sources—the works of John Kinnamos and Niketas Choniates—available in Hungarian translation for the first time in their entirety. Rather than translating only those passages relevant to Hungarian history, I have included the complete books dealing with John II Komnenos's reign (1118–1143). As a result, Hungarian readers now have access to the two most important contemporary narrative sources for this era as coherent wholes.

The translations are accompanied by detailed, primarily philological commentary. This apparatus, consisting of “close-to-the-text” and “textual-historical” explanations, illuminates Byzantine linguistic-stylistic characteristics, possible textual corruptions, and the complexity of manuscript tradition. The commentary thus aims to reveal not only the content of the texts but also their linguistic and cultural-historical context, contributing to a more complex interpretation of the sources.

2. Systematic Philological Examination of Textual Tradition and Manuscripts

A key objective of the dissertation is to provide a comprehensive and up-to-date overview of the manuscript tradition of John Kinnamos's and Niketas Choniates's historical works. The research explored the groups of surviving manuscripts for both authors, their interrelationships, and the process of textual transmission.

In the case of Kinnamos's work, I conducted a detailed investigation of the codex history and the stemmatic relationships among the manuscripts. Drawing on earlier studies and especially on the new findings proposed by Raimondo Tocci in his 2011 publication, I proposed modifications to the *stemma* established by Gyula Moravcsik in 1967. The philological investigation clearly revealed that August Meineke's 1836 critical edition, which remains the only complete scholarly edition of Kinnamos's work, is now nearly two hundred years old and does not reflect our current understanding of the textual tradition. In light of the newly discovered manuscript relationships and the modified *stemma*, the preparation of a new, modern critical edition appears essential for further research.

Regarding the dating of Kinnamos's historical work, I attempted to refine the chronology of its composition. The *terminus post quem* is clearly 1180, as the author refers to Emperor Manuel as deceased, while the *terminus ante quem* is marked by the *brevior* version of Niketas Choniates's *Historia*, which Niketas likely wrote between 1196 and 1204. Given that Kinnamos was part of Emperor Andronikos I Komnenos's immediate circle but adopts a critical stance toward him, the composition of the text likely took place after Andronikos's death in 1185. While Kinnamos may have begun collecting materials during Manuel's reign, certain passages—especially those criticizing Andronikos—were probably written after 1185. The unfinished nature of Kinnamos's text and inconsistencies suggest that it was assembled from chapters written at different times, later supplemented by insertions, without ever undergoing a final unifying revision.

For Niketas Choniates's *Historia*, I relied on the works of Jan Louis van Dieten and Alicia Simpson in examining the manuscript tradition. I provided a detailed presentation of the text's three main versions (*brevior*, LO, and *auctior*), which reflect different stages in Choniates's lengthy process of revision. This complex textual tradition is significant not only from a philological perspective but also provides valuable insight into the evolution of the author's historical perspective and political views.

3. Linguistic-Stylistic and Rhetorical Analysis of the Sources

A stylistic comparison of Kinnamos and Choniates reveals distinct differences. Kinnamos's narrative features a concise, direct prose style, making his work more accessible to modern readers. In contrast, Choniates writes in a more heavily classicizing manner, employing frequent biblical and ancient literary references that produce a more complex and layered text.

The explanation of rhetorical and stylistic devices used in the text is provided in the commentary. In the translation, I sought to preserve the classicizing tendencies, while the commentary discusses the theoretical and practical aspects of archaic expressions and historical ethnonyms. For instance, the use of terms like “Persians” for Seljuk Turks or “Huns” for Hungarians are not merely stylistic devices but integral parts of the Byzantine historiographical tradition. Following the models of ancient Greek historiography, this practice attempted to interpret contemporary events within the conceptual framework of classical education, simultaneously reflecting Byzantine literary erudition and the Empire’s sense of continuity with the Greco-Roman heritage. The philological analysis also addresses the texts’ lexical characteristics, examining the occurrence and role of rare expressions and *hapax legomena*. The dissertation demonstrates that while Kinnamos strives for general comprehensibility, Choniates frequently employs unusual, archaizing, or innovative words, adding an intellectual layer to his work. The authors’ different approaches reflect their distinct historiographical methods: while Kinnamos presents events in a mostly concise, focused style—though not abstaining from literary references—Choniates more frequently employs detailed descriptions and extensive digressions.

For instance, in describing the single combat between a Greek and an Armenian during the siege of Feke, Choniates incorporates multiple layers of classical literary allusions that demonstrate his deliberate and sophisticated use of intertextual references. The historian creates a direct connection with the *Iliad* by mentioning the Armenian warrior’s “Hectorian shield,” endowing the episode with epic *gravitas* and elevating the hero’s stature. A further textual layer comprises a Herodotean parallel, where Choniates adapts the classical model to his own narrative context. The conscious use of ancient historiographical tradition is exemplified by the adoption of a Procopian phrase that simultaneously evokes two different passages from *De bellis*: the challenging, mocking behavior of the warrior holding his shield, and the heroic dimension of the Gothic king Teias’s final battle, thereby producing a twofold interpretive framework for the passage.

4. Analysis of Imperial Representation and Historiographical Reflection

In presenting both authors and preparing the commentary, I emphasized not only the military and diplomatic events but also addressed the imperial image conveyed by the sources and their rhetorical devices. The commentary reveals the linguistic and visual patterns through

which the two historians construct the portrait of the ideal ruler: biblical parallels, classical literary allusions, and topoi of panegyric speeches.

I argue that Kinnamos's reference to Xenophon in his historical work's introduction is more than a literary flourish: it is a conscious programmatic statement. The historian creates an intertextual connection with Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, where the ideal ruler Cyrus takes center stage, while in Kinnamos's work, this role is fulfilled by Emperor Manuel I Komnenos. The parallel is particularly pronounced in the depiction of Manuel's early exploits at Neocæsarea, which shows numerous similarities with two scenes from Xenophon: Cyrus's first hunt and first battle. In both narratives, the young rulers distinguish themselves through their reckless courage and turn the tide of battle, for which their elder relatives express both concern and pride. This conscious parallel underscores Kinnamos's intention to portray Manuel as a model of an ideal ruler, although the author later sometimes criticizes Manuel's rashness, even if conceding it remains an expression of the emperor's chivalric nature.

In describing the same event, Niketas Choniates draws on the literary tradition of the Second Sophistic. He employs a sophisticated literary reference when evoking a characteristic passage from Lucian's *How to Write History*. The behavior of the imperial army's soldiers, who seek to please John II by protecting his son, consciously echoes Lucian's scene where the historian Aristobulus seeks Alexander the Great's favor through an exaggerated battle description. This intertextual connection simultaneously serves to demonstrate Choniates's historiographical credibility and offers a veiled criticism of his contemporary Kinnamos's excessive, panegyric style of representation.

5. Comparison of the Two Authors' Narratives

The narrative approaches of the two historians, Niketas Choniates and John Kinnamos, differ noticeably in their portrayal of Emperor John II Komnenos. While Choniates draws a comprehensive historical arc in his complete historical work, leading from John II's "golden age" to the fall of Constantinople in 1204, Kinnamos primarily focuses on Manuel I's reign. Choniates depicts John II as an ideal ruler, the embodiment of mercy and forgiveness, as exemplified in his treatment of Anna Komnene and the *sebastokrator* Isaac's cases. In contrast, Kinnamos's narrative reveals a severe monarch willing to administer physical punishment, citing episodes such as the flogging of Kurtikios or the humiliating reprimand of Kritoplos. A marked difference can also be observed in legitimation techniques: while Kinnamos rein-

forces Manuel I's legitimacy with supernatural elements, Choniates refrains from such devices in Manuel's case. The two authors approached the same historical period with different aims and perspectives: Choniates interprets events from a broader historical perspective within the context of the Empire's subsequent decline, while Kinnamos primarily focuses on extolling Manuel I's achievements.

6. Philological Approach Supporting Further Historical Research

The dissertation consciously places philological analysis at the forefront. Because both historical and philological inquiries are individually complex areas of study, I have concentrated on producing reliable Hungarian translations and analyzing them from a philological perspective. In so doing, I aim to provide a reliable foundation for further historical research. The commentary therefore focuses predominantly on textual history, linguistic-stylistic aspects, and possible interpretations of the texts, while still providing the necessary political-historical context.

7. The Birth Date of Manuel I Komnenos

In the commentary, I propose a reconsideration of Emperor Manuel I Komnenos's birth date, demonstrating that the widely accepted date of November 28, 1118, in scholarly literature cannot be supported with complete certainty. At this point, I also sought to draw attention to how Kinnamos sometimes sacrifices historical accuracy in favor of literary *topoi* that cast Manuel in a favorable light. This finding recommends caution when relying on Kinnamos's portrayal of the emperor.

8. Future Research Plans

As a logical extension of this dissertation's translation and philological work, I intend to prepare translations and commentary for the sections of Kinnamos's and Choniates's works covering the reign of Manuel I Komnenos.

However, I am aware that this task presents an even more complex challenge than the previous work. Manuel I's reign is documented in much greater detail, making the sources not only more extensive but also more complex. Exploring the historical background and preparing appropriately detailed commentary will therefore require even more thorough research than before.

In future research, I intend to conduct a meticulous side-by-side comparison of the texts for the entire period of Manuel's reign, pinpointing textual parallels and examining the influence of the Second Sophistic not only on Niketas Choniates—where it has been partially explored—but also in John Kinnamos's writing, where further investigation is warranted.

Finally, I plan to supplement these Byzantine sources with Latin chronicles from the West, such as the works of William of Tyre and Otto of Freising. Incorporating these additional perspectives will facilitate a fuller comparative analysis of differing narrative traditions and further refine our understanding of how both John II and Manuel I Komnenos have been perceived, both in Byzantium and the Latin West.



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List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian book chapters (1)

1. **Kovács, I.**: Egy bizánci iskoláskönyv?

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2. Harrauer, H., **Kovács, I.**: Néhány megjegyzés a karakallion kapcsán.

Belvedere Meridionale. 31 (1), 129-138, 2019. ISSN: 1419-0222.

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3. **Kovács, I.**: When Was Byzantine Emperor Manuel I Komnenos Born?

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Hungarian conference proceedings (1)

4. **Kovács, I.**: II. Ióánnés Komnénos uralkodása.

Ingenia Hungarica. 8, 179-188, 2023. ISSN: 2416-0911.





List of other publications

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5. **Kovács, I.**: Stamatina McGrath: Hadviselés mint irodalmi elbeszélés.
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