CHAPTER SEVEN

COMNENIAN IMPERIAL SUCCESSION AND THE RITUAL WORLD OF
NIKETAS CHONIATITES’ CHRONIKE DIEGESIS

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Just as every cop is a criminal
And all the sinners saints
As heads is tails
Just call me Lucifer
Cause I’m in need of some restraint
So if you meet me
Have some courtesy
Have some sympathy, and some taste
(M. Jagger/K. Richards, Sympathy for the Devil)

1. Introduction

Byzantine succession procedures, i.e., the election, proclamation, and coronation of emperors, have quite appropriately been characterized as “the cornerstone of the Byzantine state edifice.” Based on methods and theories of traditional constitutional history and studies in Roman public law, scholars from the late nineteenth century onwards have made numerous efforts to define the rules and principles governing the accession to the imperial throne from the age of the Diocletian reforms up to the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople. General textbooks on Byzantine


history usually offer readily accessible summaries of these investigations.\textsuperscript{3} Due to the survival of notions originating from the Roman Republic, the Byzantines drew a clear distinction between the \textit{basileia}, i.e., the state, on the one hand, and any of the incumbents of the imperial office, on the other, engendering thus an incessant antagonism between a rather weakly developed dynastic principle and a constant readiness for usurpation. Success, measureable on the basis of a candidate’s recognition by the so-called three constitutional factors or political bodies, the army, the senate, and the citizens of Constantinople, was the crucial criterion for becoming a ruler who expressed the people’s will and therefore was chosen by God, irrespectively of whether he derived his claims from an ancestry born in the purple or a violent rebellion.\textsuperscript{4}

This system of organized instability manifested itself in a lack of standardized practices regulating the process of enthronement. A collection of mainly fourth- and fifth-century protocols transmitted in Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos’ treatise \textit{De Cerimoniis} contains more or less loosely connected descriptions of acclamations, processions, and rituals of investiture,\textsuperscript{5} offering thus a broad spectrum of freely interchangeable variants to later generations. As he explicitly states in his prologue, the author intended to compose an easily accessible summary of paternal customs and contemporary usages of imperial order,\textsuperscript{6} not to issue prescriptive norms. Certainly, there is a clearly discernable development in the early


\textsuperscript{4} For a detailed discussion, see Dagron, \textit{Emperor and Priest}, pp. 13–48.


\textsuperscript{6} \textit{De cerimoniis}, ed. Reiske, p. 4: “ταύτα φιλοπόνῳ μελετή ἐκ πολλῶν ἑρανίσασθαι καὶ πρὸς εὐσύνοπτον καταλήψιν τῷ παρόντι ἐκθέσθαι φιλοτεχνήματι, καὶ πατρίων ἐθῶν παραδομένων παράδοσιν τοῖς μεθ’ ἡμᾶς ἐνσημήνασθαι.”