THE LITERARY, CULTURAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT FOR THE TWELFTH-CENTURY COMMENTARY ON THE *NICOMACHEAN ETHICS*

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One of the great challenges posed by study of the age of the Komnenian Emperors is that of trying to work out what kind of Empire Byzantium was in the late eleventh and the twelfth centuries. Was this an Empire that was introverted or one which looked to the outside for inspiration? Was it an Empire which was buoyant or one struggling to stave off imminent destruction by the forces which surrounded it? Was it an Empire which was becoming more and more liberal or one which was increasingly repressive and dogmatic? The answer, of course, is that it was both and it was neither. Under the Komnenoi, Byzantium was highly stratified, and yet individuals of low and obscure origin could and did rise to the summit; it was closed in some ways, and yet open to outsiders in others; it was deeply conservative, and yet it was also open to new ideas. One of the reasons for this ambivalence is that there are competing images at play for the period which started with the usurpation of Alexios I in 1081. The evidence for the century or so which followed is abundant and often colorful, and as such allows for a wide range of perspectives. The skill, then, is to set out conclusions which are both suitably nuanced, but which do not simply park contradictory or difficult source material on one side in order to drive home expansive arguments which raise as many problems as they solve.

A case in point is that of assessing the interest in, value and importance of philosophy in Byzantium in the twelfth century, a topic that is not as straightforward as might first seem. The aim of this paper is to try to provide a context for the commissioning of Eustratios of Nicaea’s commentaries on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, or, to be more precise, his commentaries on a part of that work. It will seek to provide a literary, cultural and political context for the observations on Aristotle’s work, which proved enormously influential not least in Western Europe and to Western European political thought.

Eustratios makes it clear that his commentary on the *Ethics* was not his own idea. Rather, as he tells us at the start of his observations on
Book I, he was prompted to write by a person of high status in contemporary Constantinople. Refusal was out of the question, according to Eustratios, since this individual had been his benefactor in the past, including through some very difficult times. The author gives little else away as to the identity of his patron, saying nothing more about who this individual was, or what their motivation was for seeking a guide to the Ethic. At the start of his commentary on Book VI, however, he returns to the subject of his patron, whom he describes this time as a high-ranking member of the imperial family, addressing her as ἡ ἐμπρόσθιμη, ἡ ἐμπρόσθος, τοίχων διπλῶν καὶ περίκλεις.2

Although Eustratios does not provide the name of the ‘empress’ in question, there is little doubt that he must be talking about Anna Komnene, the eldest daughter of Alexios I Komnenos, sister of John II and aunt of Manuel I.3 Anna was the author of one of the most famous all medieval texts and one of the most celebrated Byzantine histories, the Alexiad, which covers the reign of Alexios I from his seizure of the throne in 1081 to his death in 1118. This cavernous text provides ample opportunity to pick out areas and themes of specific interest to the author. These certainly include philosophy in general and perhaps Aristotle specifically, who is quoted directly or indirectly on a handful of occasions in the Alexiad.4

Coupled with Anna’s own composition is the reputation that she acquired during and shortly after her lifetime from other intellectuals in Byzantium. Theodore Prodromos called her “wise Anna, absolute intellect, home of the Graces”, and referred to her as the fourth Grace and as the tenth Muse, stating that she loved both truth and philosophy.5 We learn of her love of literature, her unquenchable thirst for truth, and, again, her keen interest in philosophy from an oration

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1 τινός τῶν μᾶλλον ἀμείως ἡμᾶς πρὸς τούτον ἀνερευσάντος καί τινα ἐκθέσεια σαρφύσαν τοῖς πρῶτοι τῶν Ἀριστοτέλεως Ἕβης ἁυμοφειχέων ἐπιτάττεν, διὰ τὸ ἐν πολλοῖς αὐτόν ἀναγγέλλων εὑρείν ἡμᾶς εὐ ἐργασάμενον ἅθετειν δὲ τόν οὔτω πρὸς ἡμᾶς διακείμενον καὶ παραιτεῖσα τί τῶν δυνατῶν ἐπιτάττεντα ἀγνωμόν ἃμα καὶ ἀμφύλοφον. In EN 1.13–18. On this passage, see also Mercken (1973) 10* f.

2 In EN 256.3f. For the full dedicatory passage, see 256.3–257.12.

3 Browning (1962) 1–12, esp. 6–7.

4 Alex. Prologue, I.2.13, p. 5; II.1.26ff., p. 6; II.4.184f., 89f., p. 64; III.6.45ff., p. 101; V.8.89ff., p. 163; V.9.1, p. 165; V.9.82ff., p. 166; X.11.63ff., p. 318; XII.5.28ff., p. 371; XII.5.33ff., p. 372; XIII.1.53f., p. 394; XIV.7.iii.16f., p. 450.

5 Kurtz (1907), 88.43f.; Epithalamium col. 1401.