

Nikephoros III Botaneiates, the Phokades, and the Fabii: embellished genealogies and contested kinship in eleventh-century Byzantium

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This article examines the genealogical claims of Nikephoros III Botaneiates, namely his supposed descent from the Phokades and the ancient Roman Fabii, and aims to situate Botaneiates' case within a broader context of exaggerated and contested claims of kinship in medieval Byzantium. While exploring the uses of fictionalized or exaggerated kinship and their reception in contemporary society, it addresses issues of authenticity, proof, and credibility. It argues that Byzantine authors were widely sceptical of audacious genealogical claims and may have been exposed to false claims of kinship more often than previously acknowledged.

Keywords: Byzantine aristocracy; kinship and genealogy; Nikephoros III Botaneiates; Michael Attaleiates; Michael Psellos

The emperor Nikephoros III Botaneiates, who reigned in Constantinople from June 1078 to April 1081, famously claimed to descend from the family of Phokas, one of the most influential kin groups of the tenth-century Anatolian aristocracy, and, through them, the ancient Roman Fabii. The claim is preserved in the historical narrative written by Michael Attaleiates, who devotes a considerable portion of his *History* to praise of the new emperor, including the assertion of Botaneiates' supposed ancestry and extolling the virtues of his 'ancestors', the Phokades and Fabii.

Among modern historians, some have accepted this connection (some more cautiously than others), some have focused on its likely fictitious nature, while others have simply noted that such claims were made.¹ Few have devoted more than a passing reference to the topic. Yet there are other, contemporary Byzantine sources that preserve at least the rumour of Botaneiates' relation to the Phokades and, in some of them, hints of scepticism at the claim being made. These references have received very little attention

1 K. Amantos, 'Οι Βωτανειάται', *Ελληνικά* 8 (1935) 48; J.-C. Cheynet, *Pouvoir et contestations à Byzance (963-1210)* (Paris 1998) 268; A. P. Kazhdan (ed.), *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, I (Oxford and New York 1991) 314–15; É. Patlagean, *Un Moyen Âge grec: Byzance IXe-XVe siècle* (Paris 2007) 138–9.

by modern scholars, in particular their implications for the near-contemporary reception of Botaneiates' genealogical assertion and others like it.

The purpose of this article is twofold. First, it reviews the available sources related to Nikephoros Botaneiates' genealogical claims and offers several plausible interpretations of the claims' origins and reception. Secondly, it aims to situate Botaneiates' case within a broader context of exaggerated and contested claims of kinship in medieval Byzantium. While exploring the uses of fictionalized or exaggerated kinship and their reception in contemporary society, it begins to address questions regarding the Byzantine concepts of authenticity, proof, and credibility. As will be made clear, there are some indications that, in the eleventh century at least, Byzantine authors were widely sceptical of audacious genealogical claims and may have been exposed to false claims of kinship more often than previously acknowledged.

The account of Botaneiates' ancestry contained in the pages of Attaleiates' history stands out not only for its apparent audacity, but also for its relative prominence in the narrative and the strength with which the author asserts his patron's claims. Attaleiates spends more time and spills more ink in the pages of his *History* covering the careers of Botaneiates' supposed ancestors than he does on the deeds of the emperor's own father and grandfather, who receive comparatively short shrift. Half of chapter 27 and all of 28 are dedicated to the assertion of Botaneiates' descent from the Phokades and Fabii and provide a detailed account of the deeds of famous members from each family.

According to the account,

His family's first rank spring originally from the Phokades, those very Phokades whose fame is great over the entire earth and all the seas, for they had attained power greater than anyone else's in the palace, easily surpassing all others with their military might, political leadership, manly strength of arms, and family distinction.²

Such statements are largely consistent with the reputation still enjoyed by the family of Phokas in the latter half of the eleventh century.³ Attaleiates claims that Botaneiates' pedigree also included a direct link to none other than Constantine the Great.

Now, if one were to go back to the very source and beginning of those ninety-two generations – a total time span of generations that takes us down to the

2 Michael Attaleiates, *Historia*, ed. I. Pérez Martín (Madrid 2002) 216–17 (hereafter Attaleiates): Ἡ μὲν οὖν τοῦ γένους αὐτοῦ ἀνωτάτω καὶ πρώτῃ σειρὰ ἐκ τῶν Φωκάδων ἐκείνων ὄρμηται, Φωκάδων ὧν κλέος εὐρὸν κατὰ πᾶσαν γῆν τε καὶ θάλασσαν. οὗτοι γὰρ ὑπερφυῶς τῶν ἄλλων τὸ κράτος ἐν βασιλείοις ἐκέκτηντο, στρατηγίας τε καὶ δημαγωγίας καὶ ἀνδρείῳ βραχίονι καὶ γένους ἐπισημότητι πάντας ἐπιεικῶς ὑπεραίροντες... Trans. A. Kaldellis and D. Krallis, *The History: Michael Attaleiates* [Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library 16] (Cambridge, MA and London 2012) 394–97.

3 For more on this, see J.-C. Cheynet, 'Les Phocas', in G. Dagron and H. Mihaescu, *Le traité sur la guérilla de l'empereur Nicéphore Phocas* (Paris 1986) 314–15.

reign of the blessed emperor, lord Nikephoros Phokas – one will find that they descend from the thrice-blessed Constantine the Great.⁴

Botaneiates was not the only member of the Byzantine aristocracy to claim descent from Constantine in this period, but Attaleiates does not stop there. ‘Based on all this, as the story goes and as can be surmised from the family ancestry, the Phokades are the descendants of those most famous Fabii, and draw from them their fame and valiant, irresistible courage...’⁵ He then recounts the deeds of several historical figures, including Scipio Africanus, Scipio Asiaticus, and Aemilius Paulus.

The narrative may feel slightly out of place and even awkward in a history, but it is in keeping with the encomiastic nature of Attaleiates’ treatment of his patron. While the first three quarters (roughly) of Attaleiates’ narrative fit more comfortably within the bounds of the genre of history, the last quarter, whose subject is Nikephoros Botaneiates before and during his reign as emperor, is more or less unabashed encomium.⁶ In the latter genre, praise of the subject’s ancestors is a common, even fundamental element.⁷

Many of Attaleiates’ claims in this part of the text, as in others whose purpose was to glorify or flatter his patron, are clearly exaggerated, if not outright fabrications.⁸ Leaving aside his hollow assertion that Botaneiates had outdone both the Fabii and Phokades in the greatness of his deeds, the claim that the Phokades had flourished at the pinnacle of Byzantine politics and society for 92 unbroken generations from the reign of Constantine I would probably have sounded just as fantastical to his eleventh-century audience as it does to modern readers, even if the connection between the Phokas family and Constantine I had already been circulating for more than a century.⁹ The problem would have been exacerbated by Attaleiates’ inability to offer any detail about the

4 Attaleiates 216-17: εἰ δὲ τις ἀναδράμοι πρὸς τὴν τῶν ἐνενήκοντα καὶ δύο γενεῶν ἀρχὴν καὶ ἀκρότητα (μέχρι γὰρ τοῦ τῆς αὐοιδίμου λήξεως βασιλέως κυρίου Νικηφόρου τοῦ Φωκᾶ τὸ ποσὸν τῶν τοιούτων συνεψηφίζετο γενεῶν), εὐρήσει κατηγμένους αὐτοὺς ἀπὸ τοῦ τρισμακάροϋ καὶ μεγάλου Κωνσταντίνου... trans. Kaldellis and Krallis, 396-7.

5 Attaleiates 217-18: ἐκ τούτων οὖν, ὡς ὁ λόγος αἰρεῖ καὶ ἡ τοῦ γένους ἀναφορὰ περιάγει, οἱ Φωκάδες...αὐτοὶ καταγόμενοι τὴν τε περιφάνειαν ἄνωθεν ἔσχον καὶ τὸ τῆς ἀνδρίας ἀλκιμώτατον καὶ ἀνύποιστον, ἐκ τῶν ὀνομαστῶν ἐκείνων Φαβίων..., trans. Kaldellis and Krallis, 398-99.

6 D. Krallis, *Michael Attaleiates and the Politics of Imperial Decline in Eleventh-Century Byzantium* (Tempe, AZ 2012) 146–50.

7 Menander Rhetor, *Basilikos Logos*, ed. and trans. D. A. Russell and N. G. Wilson (Oxford 1981) 78–80.

8 In general, see Krallis, *Michael Attaleiates and the Politics of Imperial Decline*.

9 Though by no means certain, there is some evidence that the tenth-century Phokades were thought to have some link with Constantine I and that they may have worked to further that association. Several sources associate Nikephoros II Phokas with Constantine, as Markopoulos has shown. Additionally, in the so-called Pigeon House Church in Çavuşin (Cappadocia) Nikephoros and his family are depicted in frescoes alongside Constantine and Helena. A. Markopoulos, ‘Constantine the Great in Macedonian historiography: models and approaches’, in P. Magdalino (ed.), *New Constantines* (Aldershot 1994) 164–70; C. Jolivet-Levy, *Les églises byzantines de Cappadoce. Le programme iconographique de l’abside et de ses abords* (Paris 1991) 18–20; N. Thierry, ‘Un portrait de Jean Tzimiskès en Cappadoce’, *Travaux et Mémoires* 9 (1985) 480–83.

specific genealogical connection linking the tenth-century Phokades with the eleventh-century Botaneiates lineage. He does not even tell his reader whether the relation came from Botaneiates' mother's or father's side, a practice that was becoming commonplace among aristocratic claims to 'nobility' in much more mundane circumstances by the last quarter of the eleventh century.¹⁰ Such an oversight suggests that the genealogy rested on shaky foundations.

Despite the gaps in Attaleiates' presentation, it seems that at least some of Botaneiates' contemporaries were convinced of his connection to the Phokades, judging from several late eleventh- and early twelfth-century sources. Some, but not all, of the authors of these sources could have used the *History* as their principal source. Perhaps most notable among those witnesses independent from Attaleiates is the *Chronographia* of Michael Psellos.

The final part of Michael Psellos' *Chronographia* consists of a summary (with some apparently direct quotations) of a letter supposedly sent from emperor Michael VII Doukas to Nikephoros Botaneiates at the time of the latter's revolt in 1077. Admittedly, it is an odd way to close such a work, but Psellos' writing seems to have been interrupted before he could finish his history.¹¹ The letter, as it is preserved in the text, is relatively short, consisting of rather formulaic elements: Michael VII acknowledges the harshness of Botaneiates' exile and laments the former friendship the two men had previously enjoyed before recounting the many benefits he had offered to the man who was now 'rumoured' to be contemplating usurping the throne. The emperor then expresses his hopes that such rumours are unfounded and, finally, reminds the rebel of the ever-watchful eye of God and his judgement. The letter is full of flattery, apparently meant to shame Botaneiates for his treason.

Rather than being 'to Nikephoros Botaneiates', the letter is simply addressed to 'Phokas', and Botaneiates is again called simply 'Phokas' in the short text.¹² The name Botaneiates makes no appearance at all. The *Chronographia* was almost certainly written earlier than Attaleiates' *History*, making it unlikely that Attaleiates himself was the originator of Botaneiates' genealogical claims, even if he was probably their chief perpetrator.¹³ Psellos and Attaleiates may have known each other personally; they were

10 See, for example, M. Grünbart, *Inszenierung und Repräsentation der byzantinischen Aristokratie vom 10. bis zum 13. Jahrhundert* (Münster 2015) 27–51.

11 For a recent discussion, see S. Papaioannou, *Michael Psellos: Rhetoric and Authorship in Byzantium* (Cambridge 2013) 13–15.

12 Michael Psellos, *Chronographia*, ed. and trans. D. R. Reinsch, *Michael Psellos Leben der byzantinischen Kaiser (976-1075)* (Berlin 2015) 794–801. Reinsch, following an earlier argument of Ljubarskij, suggests that the letter(s) summarized at the end of Psellos' work may actually belong to the reign of Basil II and his struggle against the rebel Bardas Phokas. According to Reinsch (862, n.320), the letter belongs to a group of documents which Psellos had intended to use as a source for Basil II's reign, which a redactor then appended to the end of the *Chronographia*. See also J. Ljubarskij, 'Der Brief des Kaisers an Phokas', *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 26 (1977) 103–7.

13 Psellos probably died in 1078. Papaioannou, *Michael Psellos: Rhetoric and Authorship in Byzantium*, 13.

familiar with each other's work at least.¹⁴ Dimitris Krallis and others have shown without a doubt that Attaleiates used parts of the *Chronographia* in the writing of his own history.¹⁵ Yet the relative date of the two works makes it unlikely that Psellos' choice to address Botaneiates as 'Phokas' was inspired directly by Attaleiates' text.

The interpretation of Psellos' 'letter' is further complicated by alternative readings of Attaleiates' ostensibly encomiastic history. Dimitris Krallis has suggested that Attaleiates' profuse praise of the emperor in the pages of his history, including the lengthy genealogy, could contain more than a hint of irony and should be read, in some cases at least, as veiled criticism of his patron.¹⁶ Applying a similar reading to Psellos in this instance adds another layer of complexity to an already complicated set of possibilities.

One cannot know for certain the way in which Michael VII addressed Botaneiates in the letter itself, if indeed it was ever sent or even existed. The fact that no form of address appears in any portion of the text supposed to be directly quoted from the letter should caution against any conclusions regarding the emperor Michael VII's intentions. Psellos, however, unquestionably made the choice to refer to Botaneiates using only the surname Phokas, which could be interpreted in a number of ways.

Firstly, it could indicate that Botaneiates was actively employing the surname Phokas at the time of his revolt. Such fluidity in the use of surnames was not unheard of in this period, even if an individual changing the surname by which he was known would stand out as slightly unusual.¹⁷ Alternatively, Nikephoros may not have been going by the name Phokas, but he may have been disseminating his supposed relation to the family at that time. Psellos' reproduction of the name Phokas could even have been a stylistic choice by Psellos meant to make Botaneiates seem a more serious opponent, thereby reflecting well on Michael VII by giving him a worthy adversary whom the emperor, it may have been expected, would then defeat. The *Chronographia* was dedicated to the emperor Michael VII after all, and the Phokas family's fame and reputation for martial prowess had not diminished by the 1070s.¹⁸

14 D. Krallis, 'Attaleiates as a reader of Psellos', in D. Jenkins and C. Barber (eds.), *Reading Michael Psellos*, (Leiden 2006) 167–8.

15 Krallis, 'Attaleiates as a reader of Psellos', 167.

16 Krallis, *Michael Attaleiates and the Politics of Imperial Decline*, 148–50.

17 Skylitzes, for example, records how in 1056 or 1057 the emperor Michael VI bestowed upon his nephew, also named Michael, both the title of *doux* of Antioch and the surname Ouranos, 'because his *genos* supposedly derived from the ancient Ouranos'. Anna Komnene's two sons were also famously known by two different surnames (Komnenos and Doukas). Neither of them bore the family name of their father, Nikephoros Bryennios. See John Skylitzes, *Synopsis Historiarum*, ed. J. Thurn (Berlin, New York 1973) [Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 5] 483; translation taken from J. Wortley, trans., *John Skylitzes: A Synopsis of Byzantine History, 811–1057* (Cambridge 2010) 451; on the names of Anna Komnene's sons, see Prodomos' poem edited and published in Nikephoros Bryennios, *Historiarum libri quattuor*, ed. P. Gautier (Brussels 1975) 344–47.

18 J. Ljubarskij, 'Nikephoros Phokas in Byzantine historical writings. Trace of the secular biography in Byzantium', *Byzantinoslavica* 54.2 (1993) 245–53.

At the same time, the name of Phokas equally conjured images of rebellion and usurpation in the mid-eleventh century. Psellos begins his chronicle with an account of the failed rebellions of Bardas Phokas and Bardas Skleros against Basil II, and, although the chronicle was never finished, at least in its surviving form, the fact that it begins and ends with an account of a Phokas gives the work a certain cohesion. Anyone reading or listening to Psellos' text could not fail to make the connection between the rebel Phokas from the beginning of the chronicle and the one appearing at its end. Several sources produced in the later eleventh century maintain the memory of the infamous rebellions of Bardas Phokas in the late tenth century. In a panegyric composed for the emperor Constantine IX Monomachos ca. 1044, Psellos associated the entire Phokas family with deceit and rebellion.¹⁹ By the time he composed his *Chronographia*, it is possible that he made the choice to address Botaneiates as 'Phokas' in order to strengthen public mistrust and distaste toward Botaneiates by further linking him with rebellion. As was the case for the contemporary Doukai, a single family name could simultaneously be associated with rebellion and still be remembered fondly for such things as martial prowess or 'nobility'. Authors might choose to highlight one or another aspect of such contradictory reputations, depending on their particular aims.

Regardless of the precise interpretation of the passage in the *Chronographia*, it remains evident that Attaleiates did not invent the connection between Botaneiates and the Phokades. Most likely it was Nikephoros himself who disseminated the idea, whether or not he actively used the name itself at any time. As valuable as Psellos' account may be as a witness for the relationship between Botaneiates and the Phokades, it does not include any mention of the more ancient Fabii, nor does it reveal the extent to which these claims of descent were accepted by Nikephoros' contemporaries. For this, one is forced to look elsewhere. In fact, several other sources from the late eleventh and twelfth centuries repeat the supposed ties between Nikephoros III and the *genos* of Phokas, while simultaneously preserving at least the suggestion of scepticism regarding their veracity.

The Botaneiates-Phokas link is repeated several times by Byzantine historians of the late eleventh and twelfth centuries. In every case, however, authors distance themselves from the assertion through the use of qualifying language. The continuator of John Skylitzes' *Synopsis of Histories* (possibly Skylitzes himself), who extends Skylitzes' chronicle from 1057 to 1079, remarks that

Botaneiates was among the well-born, descending from the entangled *genos* of Phokas, and, what's more, from the famous Fabii (Φλαβίων), the family that came from the illustrious elder Rome, as the tradition that has come down [to us] concerning him (Botaneiates) holds.²⁰

19 Michael Psellos, *Orationes panegyricae*, ed. G. T. Dennis (Stuttgart 1994) 2.101-4.

20 *Ἡ Συνέχεια τῆς Χρονογραφίας τοῦ Ἰωάννου Σκυλίτη*, ed. and trans. E. Th. Tsolakis (Thessalonike 1968) 172.10-14: Ἦν δὲ ὁ Βοτανειάτης τῶν εὐπατριδῶν, ἐκ τοῦ Φωκᾶ τὸ γένος πολυπλόκως μὲν ἀλλ' ὅμως κατὰ γων καὶ τῶν περιωνύμων Φλαβίων, οἳ τὸ γένος ἀπὸ τῆς περιδόξου καὶ πρεσβυτέρας Ῥώμης κατήγον, καθὼς ἡ ἀνέκαθεν παράδοσις κρατεῖ περὶ αὐτοῦ.

The author probably derived his information from Attaleiates, judging from the inclusion of the Fabii, but the words seem to be the author's own. The final clause, stressing that the information reported about Botaneiates' ancestry is 'as the tradition has it', distances the author from the assertion and its veracity. His employment of the adverb *πολυπλόκως* could be an additional jab.

Botaneiates' ties to the Phokades are again mentioned, briefly, in the twelfth-century *Epitome of Histories*, written by John Zonaras, although he does not include the more fanciful link with the ancient Fabii. 'Botaneiates was among the well-born, thought to have drawn his line from the *genos* of Phokas'.²¹ Zonaras' word choice suggests he used *Skylitzes Continuatus* for this passage as for other portions of the text concerning Botaneiates, though he does not quote it directly. Like the continuator of Skylitzes, Zonaras finishes his statement with a qualifier, in this case, *νομιζόμενος*.

Even with the qualifying language, the fact that these late eleventh- and twelfth-century authors chose to include Botaneiates' supposed relation to the Phokades is significant. Both *Skylitzes Continuatus* and Zonaras elide or omit a large amount of material from their sources. Whether or not these authors personally believed the assertion made so forcefully by Attaleiates (or Botaneiates himself), they clearly deemed the connection plausible enough, or at least important enough, to warrant inclusion in their works. It is also noteworthy that neither Nikephoros Bryennios nor Anna Komnene say a word about Botaneiates' supposed links to the Phokas family in their histories. Both authors, writing in the first half of the twelfth century, would have had good reason to dislike Botaneiates. Bryennios' grandfather was vying for the imperial throne in open rebellion at the same time as Botaneiates, while Anna's father, Alexios I Komnenos, ousted the man from power by force. While it should not be taken too far (arguments from silence are inherently weak), the fact that both authors omit any reference to the Phokades in their treatments of Botaneiates could reflect the generally positive attitude toward the family in this period and the potential benefits an association with them might bring.

Botaneiates himself employs his surname in numerous surviving documents and lead seals, both before and after his rise to the throne (unlike his reputed ancestor Nikephoros Phokas).²² In every known instance, it is Botaneiates, not Phokas, which he used. It is not as though the name Botaneiates was without distinction. Nikephoros III's grandfather and father had both served the Byzantine state with high-ranking offices and titles.²³ Even without the addition of Phokas or Fabii ancestry, Botaneiates could still have claimed to be, as contemporary sources often put it, 'from among the nobles'

21 John Zonaras, *Epitome historiarum libri XIII usque ad XVIII*, ed. T. Büttner-Wobst, 3 vols. (Bonn 1897) III, 715.10-11: ἤν δὲ τῶν εὐπατρίδων ὁ Βοτανειάτης, ἐκ τοῦ Φωκᾶ τὴν τοῦ γένους ἔλκων σειρὰν νομιζόμενος.

22 For a review of Botaneiates' career prior to ascending the throne, see O. Karagiorgou, 'On the way to the throne: The career of Nikephoros III Botaneiates before 1078', in C. Stavrakos, A.-K. Wassiliou, and M. K. Krikorian (eds.), *Hypermachos: Studien zu Byzantinistik, Armenologie und Geographik. Festschrift für Werner Seibt zum 65. Geburtstag* (Wiesbaden 2008) 105–32.

23 Attaleiates, 229-30; Patlagean, *Un Moyen Âge grec*, 138.

(τῶν εὐγενῶν/εὐπατρίδων).²⁴ Yet Botaneiates would have had several reasons to advertise, or indeed fabricate his ties to the Phokades.

First and foremost, descent from the *genos* of Phokas would have given Botaneiates an imperial pedigree, greatly increasing his legitimacy as an imperial claimant. After the death of the empress Theodora in 1056, imperial legitimacy could no longer flow through the well-established Macedonian dynasty founded by Basil I in the mid-ninth century. For nearly two centuries, no emperor ruled without some sort of connection (by blood, marriage, adoption, or regency) with Basil's descendants. After 1056, emperors or imperial claimants had to rely on their own connections within the Byzantine aristocracy and their own claims to 'nobility' in order to garner sufficient support to rule, triggering a kind of genealogical arms race regularly attested in surviving sources. While the family of Botaneiates was unquestionably among the elites in the late eleventh century, several other lineages could lay claim to more ancient and illustrious lines, potentially making them more favourable candidates for the throne.

The Phokades' Cappadocian origins also would have served Botaneiates well during the months of his rebellion, since the majority of his support, both in terms of troops on the ground and within aristocratic circles, came from western and central Anatolia (or families with origins in areas of Anatolia now lost to the advancing Turks).²⁵ The regional character of his revolt was further intensified by the fact that his was not the only armed bid for the imperial throne in 1077 and 1078. Nikephoros Bryennios, a representative of an elite family based in and around Adrianople (modern Edirne), himself led an uprising at the same time as Botaneiates. The bulk of Bryennios' support, as one might expect, came from the regions of Thrace and northern Greece. Though not a perfect model, it is generally accurate to imagine two rebellious factions simultaneously aiming to take control of a weakened Constantinople, a western contingent led by Bryennios and an eastern one championed by Botaneiates.²⁶ For those coming from Anatolia, most of whom were facing the immediate threat of the Seljuk Turks or other Turkmen, the martial virtues embodied by the tenth-century Anatolian family of Phokas would have been a popular rallying cry.

The Phokades were long remembered for their origins in Cappadocia (sometimes recalled in this period as 'the East'), and there is every reason to believe that the general populace, especially soldiers, in the Anatolian provinces would have remembered the family fondly in the eleventh century. At least four members of the Phokas family, including an unbroken period between 944 and 963 in which three members held the title in succession, had served as *strategos* of the Anatolikon theme in the tenth century, and the family held a near-monopoly on the position of Domestic of the Schools, the

24 E.g. Attaleiates 212-14, here at 213.

25 Cheynet, *Pouvoir et contestations à Byzance*, 351.

26 Cheynet, *Pouvoir et contestations à Byzance*. 351. A third, less serious contender, Nikephoros Basilakios, drew his support primarily from central and southern Greece.

highest military command in the empire at the time, for most of the same period.²⁷ At the time of his rebellion in October of 1077, Botaneiates had served roughly two years as *doux* (military commander) of the Anatolikon theme in west-central Anatolia.²⁸ Not only was he remembered in surviving sources as coming ‘from the East’, he was also reportedly thrust into the position of imperial claimant by a group of elites again ‘from the East’.²⁹

Although the family had effectively disappeared from the ranks of the Byzantine elite by the 1020s or 1030s, the Phokades seem to have held a special place in the collective memory among the Byzantine aristocracy in the second half of the eleventh century. From the last quarter of the tenth century, the name Phokas itself was synonymous with the aristocratic ideals of wealth, piety, martial prowess, and fame.³⁰ Aside from the more or less ‘official’ records and histories of Nikephoros II’s reign, there is considerable evidence that a number of other writings dedicated to the man or his family were in circulation.³¹ Already by the early eleventh century, just a generation or two removed from the death of Nikephoros II Phokas, the emperor and his lineage had attained something of a legendary status. Michael Psellos devotes an unusually long portion of his *Historia Syntomos* (‘Short History’) to the deeds of Nikephoros II Phokas (chapters 103, 104, and 105), most of which covers the man’s exploits before his reign as emperor.³² Maria of Bulgaria, wife of Andronikos Doukas and mother of Eirene Doukaina (the eventual wife of Alexios I Komnenos), was reportedly descended from several illustrious families, including the Phokades. Nikephoros Bryennios records how Maria ‘on her mother’s side [was descended from] the Kontostephanoi, Aballantes, and the Phokades, who were previously very famous (περιφανεστάτους) and adorned with much wealth’.³³ The fact that the Phokades receive special emphasis in the form of additional descriptors highlights the family’s importance in the construction of Maria’s genealogy.

27 Cheynet, ‘Les Phocas’, 312-13.

28 Karagiorgiou, ‘On the way to the throne’, 120-21.

29 Zonaras, *Epitome historiarum*, III, 715.5-7: Οὕτω δὲ τῶν πραγμάτων ἐχόντων, οἱ τῶν ἐφῶν ἀρχόντων προέχοντες συνελθόντες ἀποστασίαν ὠδίνησαν, καὶ τὸν κουροπαλάτην Νικηφόρον τὸν Βοτανειάτην εἰς βασιλέα προεῖλοντο. By this period, ‘the East’ could mean more or less any area of central or eastern Anatolia.

30 V. N. Vlysidou, *Αριστοκρατικές οικογένειες καὶ ἐξουσία (9ος-10ος αἰ.): Ἐρευνες πάνω στα διαδοχικά στάδια αντιμετώπισης τῆς αρμενο-παφλαγονικῆς καὶ τῆς καππαδοκικῆς αριστοκρατίας* (Thessalonike 2001) 108-42; Cheynet, ‘Les Phocas’, 19; P. Stephenson, ‘A development in nomenclature on the seals of the Byzantine provincial aristocracy in the late tenth century’, *Revue des études byzantines* 52 (1994) 196.

31 Ljubarskij, ‘Nikephoros Phokas in Byzantine historical writings’, 245-53; A.-M. Talbot and D. F. Sullivan (eds. and trans.), *The History of Leo the Deacon: Byzantine Military Expansion in the Tenth Century* (Washington, DC 2005) 14-15; L. Neville, ‘A history of the *caesar* John Doukas in Nikephoros Bryennios’ *Material for History?* *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 32 (2008) 168-88.

32 Ljubarskij, ‘Nikephoros Phokas in Byzantine historical writings’, 245-53.

33 Nikephoros Bryennios, *Historiarum libri quattuor*, 219: ...μητρόθεν δὲ ἐς τοὺς Κοντοστεφάνους καὶ τοὺς Ἀβαλλάντας καὶ τοὺς Φωκάδας τοὺς πάλαι περιφανεστάτους καὶ πλούτῳ πολλῷ κομῶντας.

Assuming the accuracy of Eirene Doukaina's maternal link to the famous *genos*, the children and grandchildren of the emperor Alexios I Komnenos and Eirene Doukaina could also have claimed descent from the Phokades. Yet the Komnenoi rarely, if ever, celebrated this fact. This is not, however, an argument against the importance of the Phokades in the Byzantine collective memory in this period. Alexios I could already lay claim to an imperial lineage, that of Isaac I Komnenos (r. 1057–1059), who was his uncle. His marriage to Eirene Doukaina also tied him to the imperial dynasty of Constantine X and Michael VII. Taken together, Alexios and his descendants had little need to reach further for the legitimation of their right to rule or the illustriousness of their lineage. It may also have been foolish to associate oneself with the same family as that of Alexios I's predecessor, who, it should be remembered, was ousted from his office by force.

Despite their significance, the Phokades represent only one part of Nikephoros III Botaneiates' genealogy. Undoubtedly the more fantastical claim is the supposed descent from the Roman *gens* Fabia.³⁴ In fact, such an assertion does not appear to be particularly unusual in its late eleventh-century context. Exaggerated or invented genealogies were certainly not unheard of in this period, and there is ample evidence to suggest a fairly large number of individuals or families were looking to the more ancient, Roman past both for inspiration and, it seems, the origins of their lines.

Aside from Botaneiates' assertion of descent from the Roman Fabii, for example, the Serblias family is known to have claimed descent from the ancient Roman *gens* Servilia. In a mid-twelfth century letter from the John Tzetzes to a certain Nikephoros Serblias, Tzetzes repeatedly refers to his addressee as 'descendent of Caesars', perhaps as a form of flattery.³⁵ In the case of the Serbliai, the linguistic similarities between their surname and the *gens* Servilia made this claim an obvious choice and would have reinforced their association repeatedly with each use. Elsewhere, a twelfth-century lead seal belonging to one *sebastos* John Mankaphas celebrates his family's origins in old Rome.³⁶

The Doukai were one of the most well known families to claim that one of their ancestors had been a contemporary of Constantine the Great at the time of his foundation of the city that bore his name. It was even said that the founder of the lineage was Constantine's first cousin, and that he was given the title of *doux* by the emperor himself, whence the name of Doukas reportedly survived until the tenth and eleventh centuries. The anonymous preface to the *Material for History* by Nikephoros Bryennios records that 'the first Doukas was a legitimate relative of Constantine the Great, for he

34 It is possible that the Phokades themselves first invented a genealogy that included the Fabii, which Botaneiates and/or Attaleiates simply borrowed. See Cheynet, 'Les Phocas', 290.

35 John Tzetzes, *Epistulae*, ed. P. L. M. Leone (Leipzig 1972) 18.12 (Καισάρων ἀπόγονε); 18.18-19 (ὡς ὁ Σερβιλίων Καισάρων ἀπόγονος); 31.17 (τῶν πρὶν Καισάρων Σερβιλίων ἀπόγονε).

36 The seal bears the catalogue number BZS.1951.31.5.413 (formerly Fogg 413). E. McGeer, J. Nesbitt, and N. Oikonomidès (eds.), *Catalogue of Byzantine Seals at Dumbarton Oaks and in the Fogg Museum of Art, Volume 5: The East (continued), Constantinople and Environs, Unknown Locations, Addenda, Uncertain Readings* (Washington, D.C. 2005) 109.1. Obverse: Bust of the Virgin *orans*; Reverse: Σφρ[α]γίς σεβαστ[οῦ] Μαγκάφους Ἰω(άννου) ρίζαν γένους ἔχοντο[ς] ἐξόχου (?) Ἰώμης.

was his first cousin, and received the title of *doux* from him. Hence are all of those descended from him named Doukas (Doukonymoi).³⁷ An anonymous poem in the well-known manuscript Marcianus graecus 524 dedicated to one *sebastokratorissa* Eirene also celebrates her family as ‘descendants of Aeneas’, an obvious reference to ‘old’ Rome and the ancient Romans.³⁸

At the same time that apparently fictionalized elements were making their way into ostensibly historical genealogical accounts, historical families were also inserted in avowedly fictional literature. The Doukai appear in several surviving versions of *Digenes Akrites*. In the Grottaferrata version, the name Doukas is repeated several times, and Basil Digenes’ grandmother, the Emir’s wife (the hero’s mother), and Basil Digenes’ own wife are all, at times, assigned ancestry that includes the Doukai.³⁹ In the Escorial version, perhaps achieving its written form slightly later than that of the Grottaferrata manuscript, the connection to the Doukai receives less attention, but the hero’s uncles (his mother’s brothers) relate to his father that their own father was ‘of the Doukas faction’ (τῶν Δουκάδων τὴν μερέαν).⁴⁰

The Doukai also appear in the twelfth-century tale *Timarion*, lending their name to the ‘heroic and fortunate’ pedigree of a governor of Thessalonike. The governor’s father, thanks to his wealth, learning, and, above all, battlefield achievements, was able to marry a beautiful woman

who is in her own right greatest of the great, being of royal blood and descended from the famous Doukai family, a family whose fame, as you know, has been spread by the lips of many across the sea from Italy and the race of Aeneas to Constantinople itself.⁴¹

Common to all of these fictional cases is the connection of the Doukai with women (grandmothers, mothers, and wives of the protagonists), a fact that has been seen as reflecting the actual role played by the Doukai in the genealogy of the Komnenoi in the twelfth century.⁴²

37 Nikephoros Bryennios, *Historiarum libri quattuor*, 67-68: ὁ πρῶτος Δούκας ἐκεῖνος...καθ’ αἷμα τῷ μεγάλῳ Κωνσταντίνῳ καὶ γνησιώτατα προσφικέωτο· ἐκεῖνου τε γὰρ ἐξάδελφος ἦν καὶ τὴν τοῦ δουκὸς Κωνσταντινουπόλεως ἀξίαν παρ’ αὐτοῦ ἐγκεχρίστο, κἀντεῦθεν καὶ πάντες ἐξ αὐτοῦ κατονομάσθησαν οἱ Δουκῶνυμοι.

38 Grünbart, *Inszenierung und Repräsentation der byzantinischen Aristokratie*, 44 (Lampros nr. 56.26-33): Ἀλλὰ τολμήσας στρέφω, σεβαστοκρατόρισα, πρὸς σὲ τοὺς λόγους. Γένος μὲν οὖν σὸν εἰς τὸ τῶν Αἰνεϊάδων ὡς εἰς ἀπαρχὴν ἀνάγειν... The addressee is possibly Eirene Doukaina, sister-in-law of Manuel I Komnenos.

39 *Digenes Akritis*, ed. and trans. E. Jeffreys (Cambridge 1998) G 1.267, 4.43, 4.59, 4.325, 6.14, and 6.414.

40 *Digenes Akritis* E 136-37.

41 *Timarion* 8, in B. Baldwin, trans., *Timarion* (Detroit 1984) 47. The passage concludes with the question, ‘What man does not know of her father of all men, distinguished as he is by his high offices of state, tested in the most important military commands, conferring in every way an incomparable nobility upon his daughter?’

42 *Digenes Akrites* viii-lx; R. Beaton, ‘Cappadocians at court: Digenes and Timarion’, in M. Mullett and D. Smythe (eds.), *Alexios I Komnenos: Papers of the Second Belfast Byzantine International Colloquium, 14-16 April 1989*, vol. I: *Papers* [Belfast Byzantine Texts and Translations, 4.1] (Belfast 1996) 329-38.

One might plausibly argue that *Digenes Akrites* was viewed, like the Trojan War, as a quasi-historical account by medieval Byzantine readers, but stories such as the *Timarion* could only have been recognized as fiction. In certain cases, the inclusion of the Doukai in such contexts may have been a deliberate attempt (perhaps funded by Komneno-Doukas patrons) to flatter members of the family, while further associating the family name with illustriousness and nobility. Even if it is unlikely that members of the Doukai would have sought to have their name included in the *Timarion*, the text nonetheless uses the name as shorthand for ‘nobility’ and the aristocracy as a whole, reinforcing the association in an otherwise biting satire.⁴³

Nikephoros Botaneiates was a usurper, and, like any usurper, the necessity of legitimizing his rule was made all the more urgent because of this fact. Botaneiates faced a particularly difficult task because of the man he replaced on the throne, Michael VII Doukas. During the reigns of Constantine X and, especially, Michael VII, the aristocratic credentials of the Doukas family had been firmly established. Botaneiates was perhaps inspired (or pressured) into asserting his own family’s ‘nobility’ by efforts such as that contained in Psellos’ *Chronographia*, which set out to affirm the quality of the Doukas family, thereby strengthening their claim to the throne.⁴⁴ Yet even these claims were not above suspicion or criticism in the heated atmosphere of eleventh-century Byzantine politics.

John Zonaras, the twelfth-century author of a universal history, delivers a curious aside in that work regarding the family and ancestry of the emperor Constantine X Doukas. According to Zonaras, Constantine was ‘not considered a pure Doukas, but as having mixed and adulterated kinship with the Doukai’.⁴⁵ The sentiment is an odd one on its own, but it is made even more so by the reasons Zonaras gives for his critique. He tells us that all the male members of the Doukas family were wiped out following the failed revolt of Andronikos and Constantine Doukas in 913. Constantine X was thus related to the tenth-century family through the female line, which is apparently enough to have polluted his bloodline, or at least to have diluted his legitimate claim to membership in the *genos* of Doukas.

Although Zonaras’ opposition to Alexios I Komnenos, who was married to a member of the Doukas family, is well-documented, and probably helps explain his criticism of Constantine X, the method chosen to discredit him here appears odd in a Byzantine context. Strictly agnatic lines of descent are rarely considered to be a part of Byzantine

43 For an astute analysis of the *Timarion* as a satirical critique of the Byzantine aristocracy, see M. Alexiou, ‘Literary subversion and the aristocracy in twelfth century Byzantium: a stylistic analysis of the *Timarion* (Ch. 6-10)’, *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 8 (1983) 29–45, and D. Krallis, ‘Harmless satire, stinging critique: notes and suggestions for reading the *Timarion*’, in D. Angelov and M. Saxby (eds.), *Power and Subversion in Byzantium. Papers from the Forty-third Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Birmingham, March 2010* (Farnham 2013) 221–46.

44 Patlagean, *Un Moyen Âge grec*, 138–9.

45 John Zonaras, *Epitome Historiarum*, III, 675–76: ἐκ θηλείας οἱ τούτου [Constantine X] κατήγοντο πρόγονοι, ὅθεν οὐδὲ Δοῦκας λελόγιστο καθαρός, ἀλλ’ ἐπίμικτος καὶ κεκιβδηλευμένην ἔχων τὴν πρὸς τοὺς Δοῦκας συγγένειαν.

culture.⁴⁶ The classical Roman *familia*, consisting of a male *paterfamilias* who held absolute authority over all of his living descendants through the male line, had effectively disappeared long before the tenth century in Byzantium. Byzantine law always favoured equitable, partible inheritance practices, for male and female offspring, and family names could be inherited through the female line as often as through the male.⁴⁷ Combined with the lack of any legally defined nobility, this has traditionally been one of the features most frequently cited to differentiate the medieval Byzantine aristocracy from its western counterparts.⁴⁸ Zonaras' comments about the emperor Constantine X seemingly bear witness to a current within Byzantine thought seldom acknowledged by modern scholarship, and one that could have serious implications for how we understand the intergenerational reproduction of families in a Byzantine context. As anomalous as it may appear, the very fact that Zonaras felt he could attack Constantine X on these grounds indicates that at least some of his readers would have agreed with his assessment that descent through the female line was somehow less legitimate than through the male or that it even had a polluting effect.

Zonaras was not alone in his scepticism of outlandish genealogical claims. Michael Italikos, in a twelfth-century letter to Eirene Doukaina, includes a passing remark ostensibly criticizing those members of the Byzantine aristocracy who exaggerated their genealogies, saying that some would even claim descent from Zeus himself.⁴⁹ Comments like these suggest that the practice was far more common than is sometimes assumed. They also caution against any modern assumption of Byzantine gullibility upon hearing or reading such exaggerated lists of ancestors.

Probably the most famous case of a Byzantine emperor claiming a fantastical genealogy belongs to Basil I (r.867-886), who would found one of the longest-lasting dynasties in Byzantine history. He came from rather humble origins in Macedonia but, thanks in large part to the efforts of the patriarch Photios, Basil's son Leo VI, and his grandson Constantine VII, the legitimacy of his dynasty came to rest, in part, upon a

46 A. Laiou, 'Family structure and the transmission of property', in J. Haldon (ed.), *A Social History of Byzantium* (Chichester 2009) 51–75.

47 Laiou, 'Family structure', 72: 'Descent is cognatic, and the family property is transmitted through bilateral inheritance, with a strong preference in law for equal inheritance...'

48 See, for example, G. Duby and J. LeGoff (eds.), *Famille et parenté dans l'Occident médiévale* (Rome 1977) [Collection de l'École française de Rome 30]; K. Schmid, 'Zur Problematik von Familie, Sippe und Geschlecht, Haus und Dynastie beim mittelalterlichen Adel: Vortragen zum Thema "Adel und Herrschaft im Mittelalter"', *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte des Oberrheins* 105 (1957) 1–62.

49 Michael Italikos, *Lettres et discours* [Archives de l'Orient chrétien 14], ed. P. Gautier (Paris 1972) Ep.13.19-24 (to Eirene Doukaina): Οἱ μὲν γὰρ μῦθοι τὰ γένη εἰς Πηλέα τε καὶ Αἰακοὺς τυχὸν ἀναφέροντες, τελευταῖον εἰς τὸν Δία τὴν τοῦ γένους σειρὰν ἀνάπτουσι... ('The stories tracing families to Peleus and Ajax, finally attach the family line to Zeus...').

myth of royal ancestry.⁵⁰ For Basil and his successors, this meant the Armeno-Parthid dynasty of the Arsakids.

Constantine VII's tenth-century *Vita Basilii*, which takes the form of a history (even if it contains elements of encomium and even hagiography), devotes considerable space to Basil I's illustrious lineage.⁵¹ In this text, the sheer amount of detail seems to be the chief strategy employed to convince the reader of the veracity of its audacious claims. The author (perhaps Constantine himself) provides a detailed narrative of how the descendants of Arsakes were forced to settle in Roman territory during the reign of Leo I and their subsequent history up to Basil's birth. He is, of course, careful to mention that, in all the generations separating the first Arsakids to settle in Macedonia and the birth of Basil, the descendants of Arsakes maintained their cohesiveness and unique identity, despite intermarrying with some locals. The repeated mention of the names of emperors, other rulers, and even bishops appears designed to ground the narrative firmly in its historical framework, giving the entire account an air of authenticity. Emperor Leo VI also asserts Basil's Arsakid ancestry, though very briefly, in his funeral oration for his parents. This brevity, he says, is due to the nature of his work: 'panegyric, not history'.⁵² He simply states that anyone who has read his history knows of the Arsakids. In typical Byzantine fashion, he does insert a few lines describing the ancient house of Arsakes and its prestige.

Not every Byzantine author, however, repeated the dynasty's contention. The chronicler Symeon the Logothete, famously opposed to Basil I and his line, says nothing of the emperor's supposed royal ancestors.⁵³ He even goes so far as to claim rather matter-of-factly that Leo VI was the son of the former emperor Michael III, rather than of Basil. Symeon's silence, however, is not the most damning critique of Basil's supposed Arsakid origins. This title surely belongs to the *Life of Patriarch Ignatios* by Niketas David, a hagiography of the patriarch of Constantinople who was a political rival of patriarch Photios.⁵⁴ The text attempts to discredit Photios by claiming that he invented Basil's Arsakid lineage in order to ingratiate himself with the emperor (Photios was in

50 S. Tougher, 'Imperial families: the case of the Macedonians (867-1056),' in L. Brubaker and S. Tougher (eds.), *Approaches to the Byzantine Family* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT 2013) 303-26; P. Gounaridis, 'Constitution d'une généalogie à Byzance', in A. Bresson (ed.), *Parenté et société dans le monde grec de l'Antiquité à l'âge moderne. Colloque international, Volos (Grèce), 19-20-21 juin 2003* (Pessac, Bordeaux 2006) 271-80; Patlagean, *Un Moyen Âge grec*, 108-11.

51 *Chronographiae quae Theophanis Continuati nomine fertur Liber quo Vita Basilii Imperatoris amplectitur*, ed. I. Ševčenko [Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae – Series Berolinensis 42] (Berlin 2011) 212-16.

52 Emperor Leo VI, *Oraison funèbre de Basile I*, in A. Vogt and S. Hausherr (eds.), 'Oraison funèbre de Basile I par son fils Léon VI le sage', *Orientalia Christiana* 26.1, no.77 (1932) 44.27: οὐ γὰρ ἱστορίαν, ἀλλ' εὐφημίαν ἐργάζεται.

53 *Symeonis Magistri et Logothetae, Chronicon*, ed. S. Wahlgren [Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae – Series Berolinensis 44/1] (Berlin 2006) 689-90.

54 Niketas David, *The Life of Patriarch Ignatius*, ed. and trans. A. Smithies [Dumbarton Oaks Texts 13] (Cambridge, MA 2013) 89.

exile at the time). He reportedly wrote a text ‘using ancient lettering’ and made the manuscript appear old, which he then ‘discovered’ in one of the imperial libraries and brought to Basil as proof of the emperor’s royal ancestry.⁵⁵ In one fell swoop, the *vita* undermines not only Photios, but also a cornerstone of Basil I’s and his dynasty’s legitimizing propaganda. The importance of the patriarch’s genealogical aggrandizement to Basil I’s legitimacy is highlighted by the method his opponents chose to attack him.

Taken as a whole, sources from several periods suggest a certain degree of anxiety regarding the veracity of claims of kinship in Byzantine society, especially from the second half of the eleventh century. Part of this surely lies in the benefits that could be accrued by membership in a given family and, conversely, the consequences of accepting someone’s claims at face value. Kekaumenos, for example, includes in his text a story in which a man invites a stranger into his home on the pretext that the traveller was a distant relative of his wife. In the story, the supposed stranger is, in fact, only interested in stealing his gracious host’s wife, which he promptly does.⁵⁶ The tale is meant to remind his sons of the importance of protecting an inherently fragile household, in particular against outsiders posing as kin. Though surviving examples of overt criticism (e.g. Zonaras on Constantine X or the *vita* of Ignatios regarding Basil I) are relatively rare, more subtle clues like the efforts of several authors to distance themselves from Botaneiates’ assertions suggest that scepticism of genealogical claims was much more widespread. Evidence of anxieties over the quality of proof offered by authors themselves further supports this contention.

For Attaleiates, the lack of detail regarding the genealogical connection between his patron and the Phokades seems to have been a thorn in his side and something for which he tries to make up by offering alternative proofs of the link. Attaleiates was a personal relation of the new emperor, yet he claims that his source was not Botaneiates himself, but ‘a certain old book’.⁵⁷ He also argues that, as further proof of the connection, Botaneiates simply looked like a member of the Phokas family. The future emperor Nikephoros Phokas reportedly built a church in Crete dedicated to the Theotokos after he had led Byzantine armies to victory in their conquest of the island in 961. According to Attaleiates, ‘Phokas himself is represented in it ...When I visited the island, I saw the image myself, which in all ways resembles the aforementioned emperor...perfect proof (πίστεως ἀκριβοῦς σύμβουλον) that he is in fact the descendant of that man’.⁵⁸ Such passages suggest that Attaleiates felt the need to support his argument with additional

55 The episode is also recounted in the *Chronicon* of Symeon the Logothete, 689-90.

56 Kekaumenos, *Raccomandazioni e consigli di un galantuomo*, M.D. Spadaro (Alessandria 1998) 102.31-3; Kekaumenos, *Consilia et Narrationes*, ed. and trans. C. Roueché (SAWS edition 2013): at <http://www.ancientwisdoms.ac.uk/library/kekaumenos-consilia-et-narrationes/>.

57 Attaleiates 217-18: ὡς που διὰ βιβλου τινὸς παλαιᾶς ἐχειραγωγῆθην ποτὲ... Attaleiates here refers specifically to the link between the Phokades and the Fabii.

58 Attaleiates 227-29: αὐτὸς ὁ Φωκάς ἀνεστηλωμένος ἐν τούτῳ...Καὶ εἶδον τοῦτον ἐγὼ τῇ νήσῳ ἐπιδημηκῶς καὶ ἔστιν ἐμφορῆς πάντῃ τῷ προμνημονευθέντι βασιλεῖ κῦρ Νικηφόρῳ τῷ Βωτανειάτῃ, πίστεως ἀκριβοῦς σύμβουλον τοῦ εἶναι τοῦτον ἐκείνου ἀπόγονον; trans. Kaldellis and Krallis, *The History*, 416-17.

evidence in order to convince his contemporary readers, who could be suspicious of claims of kinship, especially when they were politically charged.

Genre at least partially dictated the means by which a potentially contested genealogy was presented. In history, this was done largely through a barrage of detail. In rhetoric, no such space could be given, but the relative fame and glory of the ancestors compared with contemporaries was meant to act as proof. In letters and, often, poetry, forms of address appear to be particularly important. In all cases, linguistic similarity or seemingly plausible etymologies served this function, as did similarities in character, personality, or physical appearance. One general strategy seems to have been to associate an individual or family with as many important personages, both mythical and historical, near-contemporary and ancient, as possible. Perhaps the hope was that the future mention of the subject's name would subconsciously conjure up images of such heroic associations among those who had encountered the work. This would have been equally true for the insertion of historical names into fictional tales. The authority of the written word, especially more 'ancient' works, and eyewitness accounts is attested in many sources.

The impetus to exaggerate or fabricate one's ancestry in the late eleventh century was the product of the confluence of several developments in Byzantine society, both social and cultural. Family connections were rapidly becoming a primary means of political success at the same time that a growing interest in classical literature was increasingly influencing the kinds of works produced by Byzantine authors and the ways in which they conveyed their message to their audience.⁵⁹ Eleventh- and twelfth-century authors like Skylitzes and Bryennios actively sought to appease and flatter members of the aristocracy through prodigious praise of their ancestors.⁶⁰ A renewed taste for classical Roman literature in late eleventh- and twelfth-century Byzantium and its reflection in contemporary sources has already been noted by other scholars.⁶¹ This trend extended into the realm of family politics and the ever-increasing competition for prestige among the elite.

On the basis of surviving sources, it is impossible to prove or disprove definitively Nikephoros Botaneiates' genealogical relation to the Phokades of the tenth century. The evidence of Psellos' *Chronographia* strongly suggests Attaleiates did not invent the connection, and the inclusion of the Phokades and, in some cases, the Fabii in later sources attests to the (partial) success of the message, wherever it originated. One might guess that Attaleiates expected his version of Botaneiates' ancestry to be challenged since he repeatedly asserted its veracity, and this approach could be fruitfully applied more

59 L. Neville, *Heroes and Romans in Twelfth-Century Byzantium: The Material for History of Nikephoros Bryennios* (Cambridge 2012) 104–11.

60 C. Holmes, *Basil II and the Governance of Empire, 976-1025* (Oxford 2006) 202–10; L. Neville, "Families, politics, and memories of Rome in the Material for History of Nikephoros Bryennios," in L. Brubaker and S. Tougher (eds.), *Approaches to the Byzantine Family* (Farnham and Burlington, VT 2013) 359–70.

61 For a summary, see Neville, *Heroes and Romans*, 105–11, 194–8.

generally to other sources from this period. Commonly acknowledged familial connections seem to have needed little evidence in the texts themselves, with the focus instead being on praise for the family and their ancestors (which remained the dominant element in more fantastical versions).

The end goal of most genealogies was to demonstrate the superior claim of a family or individual to ‘nobility’ (a rather intangible concept in medieval Byzantium), which could and did translate into real benefits in politics and social interactions more broadly.⁶² In this sense, convincing even a few of a connection to Constantine I or the Arsakid royal bloodline would be a success. Even if the connection was not accepted by most, if enough people were saying your or your family’s name alongside those of impeccable nobility, especially from the more ancient and revered past, it could produce very tangible gains. In this sense, whether or not the claims were believed to be literally true was perhaps not the most pressing question in the minds of many Byzantine authors.

62 For an excellent summary of these benefits, see Patlagean, *Un Moyen Âge grec*, esp. 95-162.