



Summary :

The dynasty of the Komnenoi (1081-1185) was confronted not only with the external threats menacing the empire, but also with internal conflicts, often involving ecclesiastical or religious controversies. The most crucial of these conflicts related either to older heresies (Paulicianism, Messalianism etc.) or contemporary issues that emerged during the Komnenian period (dispute over the sacred vessels, John Italos etc.).

Date

1081-1185

Geographical Location

Constantinople

1. Historical context

The [Komnenian dynasty](#) effectively reversed the state of affairs in the Byzantine Empire both in a political and in an ecclesiastical level. At the time of Alexios I Komnenos' rise to the throne (1081), the [Patriarchate of Constantinople](#) had already long ago began interfering in the political scene of the capital, if not controlling it entirely. Such were the cases of Patriarchs Nikolaos Mystikos and Polyuktos in the 10th century¹ and of Michael Keroularios in mid-11th century, who even demanded the right to use imperial symbols.

Alexios did not rise to the throne with the help of the Church. On the contrary, confrontations between him and the Church began early on in his reign: the Patriarch Cosmas I (1075-1084) demanded from him and his family to pay a monetary fine because of the way Alexios rose to the imperial throne. Alexios complied, but soon afterward he forced the patriarch to resign, appointing Eustratios Garidas (1081-1084) in his place.

2. Ecclesiastical conflicts during the reign of Alexios I (1081-1118)

2.1. Internal strife

The problems in the relations between the emperor and the Church reached their peak in 1081 with the so called "dispute over the sacred vessels". This began after Alexios I converted several sacred vessels into money, when, after a Norman attack, he was not able to provide the funds to cover the Empire's military expenses.

The clergy reacted immediately to this decision, the fiercest critic being Leo, bishop of [Chalkedon](#). In 1082 Alexios I issued a [chrysobull](#), with which he pledged not to repeat the act of confiscating ecclesiastical property and to return what he had already taken, when the situation allowed him to do so.² Leo of Chalkedon, was not appeased by this action and accused the new patriarch, a favourite of the Komnenoi, of being a supporter of [Messalianism](#). In the end, Eustratios Garidas was acquitted by a Council at [Hagia Sophia](#), but chose to resign; he was replaced by Nikolaos III Grammatikos (1084-1111).³ In 1087 Leo was sent in exile, but did not cease the opposition. He finally came to terms with the emperor in 1094, in a [Council](#) at [Panagia of Blachernai](#).⁴

Alexios I first had the opportunity to act as a protector of the faith in the dispute concerning John Italos, a disciple of [Michael Psellos](#). At the beginning of January 1082, Alexios received an anonymous letter, accusing Italos of heretic teaching. Italos was confident that, as before,⁵ he would avoid the charges. However, matters were complicated when the intense popular reaction forced Italos to seek refuge in the church of Hagia Sophia. In 13 March 1082 he was convicted as a heretic and was confined in a monastery. On Alexios I's orders, the patriarch also put on trial Italos' disciples; in the end they were acquitted and allowed to continue teaching.

The monk Neilos, accused of leaning towards [Monophysitism](#),⁶ was probably a disciple of Italos. During the same period appeared



the priest Theodore Blachernites, who had infiltrated the aristocratic circles and taught an interpretation of the scriptures which was deemed heretic. [Anna Komnene](#) mentions that Theodore Blachernites was an **Enthusiast** and that the emperor sent him to trial, where he was convicted.

2.2. Paulicians and Bogomils

In 1081-1082, during the campaign against the Normans, Alexios I also turned against the **Paulicians** of Thrace, many of whom served in his own army. When the military unit of the Paulicians refused to return to Mosynopolis, Alexios I arrested their leaders and confiscated their property. Many Paulicians then converted to Orthodoxy; those who insisted on keeping their faith were sent to exile, while the rest were freed.

The persecutions against the Paulicians were renewed in 1114, during the campaign against the Cumans; mass conversions of Paulicians have been noted during that period. In his struggles against Paulicianism, Alexios I relied on the advice of Eustratios, bishop of [Nicaea](#).

The last doctrinal issue that Alexios I had to face concerned **Bogomilism**, which stemmed from Paulicianism.⁷ Led by Basil, a group of Bogomils was active in Constantinople and had begun influencing both the higher circles and the lower levels of the population in the capital. Alexios I, under the pretence of wanting to join Bogomilism, invited Basil to the palace and arrested him, while his disciples and followers soon met the same fate. Basil was condemned as heretic in a Council and died at the stake.

3. Ecclesiastical conflicts during the reign of John II (1118-1143)

During the reign of John II there was only one divergence within the Church, that of the monk Constantine Chrysomallos, whose teachings were a mixture of Enthusiasm, Bogomilism and Messalianism.⁸ Chrysomallos taught that people who had been baptised as infants were not really Christians; they ought to be rebaptised, even if they led a virtuous life, following the Church Fathers' teachings. He also believed that every Christian had two natures, a Christian one and a demonic one. The demonic nature resided within the person, even if he led his life according to Christian rules.

This theory, which gained many supporters, was condemned as heretic and all relevant books were burnt. Chrysomallos' manuscripts were discovered in monasteries. From the monks in charge of them, George was penitent and pardoned, while the monk Peter was deemed unworthy of leading others spiritually, and was moved to a different monastery, under surveillance and guidance. The punishment of Chrysomallos' followers was somewhat lenient, probably because the theory had not yet spread extensively; a more severe sentence would make them appear as heroes and render the situation even more crucial.

4. Ecclesiastical conflicts during the reign of Manuel I (1143-1180)

4.1. The case of Niphon

During the reign of [Manuel I](#) (1118-1143) there were only three new patriarchs, while in the period 1143-1157 six patriarchal changes were recorded; this is indicative of this emperor's relations with the Church. The problems began from the moment Manuel was proclaimed emperor in [Cilicia](#), since the patriarch had just died and the seat was still vacant. Manuel hastily appointed Michael II Kourkouas Oxeites (July 1143) as patriarch and was crowned by him in November 1143.

Even before this coronation, the Church was facing new doctrinal issues. On 22 February 1144, while already a prisoner since 1 October 1143, the monk Niphon was convicted for his support of two **Cappadocian** bishops, recently condemned as Bogomils. In March 1146, Cosmas Attikos, a friend of Niphon's, became patriarch. Because of this relation, he was called to explain himself in front of the emperor, where he maintained that Niphon was not a heretic; he was dethroned⁹ and replaced by the 80-year-old Nikolaos Mouzalon in December 1147. Mouzalon's appointment caused further problems and the intense reaction of many bishops.¹⁰ Manuel was forced to succumb to the bishops' pressures and appoint Theodotos (1151-1154) to the patriarchal throne



instead of Mouzalon.¹¹

4.2. The final conflicts

When Constantine Chliarenos (1154-1157) was patriarch, the deacon Basil was appointed **didaskalos tou Euangeliou**. Envyng him this position, the scholar Nikephoros Basilakes and Sotirichos Panteugenos accused Basil of supporting **Nestorianism**. The ecclesiastical council acquitted Basil (26 January 1156), but on the insistence of his accusers, Manuel I summoned a Council at **Blachernai**, after his return from a campaign (12 May 1157). Sotirichos Panteugenos was anathematised, while Nikephoros Basilakes was merely reprimanded. On 18 May 1157 Sotirichos Panteugenos was convicted a second time.

Theological disputes continued, this time with the emperor himself as the accused, after an accidental event took place. After his return from the West, a Byzantine ambassador asked the emperor what he believed about the evangelical saying: "My Father is greater than I". Manuel made the mistake of answering that the human nature of Christ was inferior to his Godly paternal one. The ecclesiastical circles of Hagia Sophia reacted to this, despite the efforts of the Patriarch Loukas Chrysoberges (1156-1169) to deflate the situation. Manuel attempted to defend himself, by presiding over a Council (2 March 1166), but was not successful. In order to bring an end to the problem, he was forced to issue a text called *Ekthesis*, which was placed on the narthex of Hagia Sophia. Unable to react differently, his accusers demanded the resignation of the patriarch, but the emperor refused to succumb to the pressure. After Chrysoberges died in 1169, Constantine, bishop of Kerkyra accused him of heresy, but was convicted himself in the end. Shortly afterward an anonymous abbot of a Constantinopolitan monastery was accused and convicted of not complying with the *Ekthesis*.¹² Thus, Manuel succeeded in controlling the clergy and did not face any further problems from the Church.

1. The Patriarch Nikolaos Mystikos had been appointed by Emperor Leo VI (886-912), but turned against him during the revolt of Andronikos Doukas. During the period 913-920, as regent of the underage Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogennitos, he facilitated Romanos I Lakapenos (920-944) in seizing the throne. Polyeuktos came in conflict with the Emperors Constantine VII, who tried to dethrone him without success, and Nikephoros II Phokas (963-969); he also imposed his own terms on the new emperor, John I Tzimiskes (969-976) before the latter's coronation.

2. See Grumel, V., "L'affaire de Léon de Chalcédoine. Le chrysobulle d'Alexis Ier sur les objets sacrés", *Etudes Byzantines* 2 (1944), pp. 126-133.

3. The long term of Nikolaos III Grammatikos (1084-1111) as a patriarch reflected his good relations with the emperor, which he maintained without ever submitting to the emperor. Nikolaos forced Alexios to abide to the terms of the 1082 chrysobull and refused to restore the pope's name in the diptych, for the sake of the emperor's diplomatic schemes.

4. See Gautier, P., "Le synode de Blachernes (fin 1094)", *Revue des Etudes Byzantines* 29 (1971), pp. 213-220. This was the First Council of Blachernai.

5. John Italos had been accused of heresy in 1077, but the intervention of the then emperor Michael VII, who favoured Italos, was enough for his acquittal.

6. Neilos was finally convicted by the Synod, but the time and details of this conviction are not known.

7. According to Angold, M., *Church and society in Byzantium under the Comneni* (Cambridge 1995), pp. 485-487, this heresy was put under control before 1111.

8. The only information on this heresy derives from a 'synodical note of the Patriarch Leo Styppes (May 1140)' in Πάλλης, Γ.Α. – Ποτλής, Μ. (ed.), *Σύνταγμα των θείων και ιερών κανόνων* 5 (Αθήνα 1859), pp. 76-82.

9. Ιωάννης Κίνναμος, *Επιτομή*, Meineke, A. (ed.), *Ioannis Cinnami Epitome rerum ab Ioanne et Manuele Comnenis gestarum* (Bonn 1836), pp. 63.21-65.9.









10. The bishops argued that with his resignation from the seat of Cyprus, Mouzalon had also resigned from his capacity as a priest; therefore, he was not eligible to become patriarch.
11. After his death, a deacon of St Sophia accused the patriarch of heresy on the grounds that, as he was dying, his hand was turning black, as it happened with the Bogomils. This accusation was enough to tarnish the patriarch's name, and for the first time a patriarch was accused of heresy after his death.
12. Ιωάννης Κίνναμος, *Επιτομή*, Meineke, A. (ed.), *Ioannis Cinnami Epitome rerum ab Ioanne et Manuele Comnenis gestarum* (Bonn 1836), pp. 251.7-257.16.

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Glossary :

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|  | Bogomilism |
| The heresy of Bogomilism appeared in the wider region of Thrace, in the mid-10th century. It combined neo-manichean beliefs with the views of Paulician migrants from Asia Minor and of local Slavonic ascetic movements. It proposed a dogmatic interpretation but also suggested an essential reformation of the ecclesiastical practice and of everyday life. The Bogomils survived up until the 15th c., despite the persecutions and repeated condemnation of their beliefs by the Church. | |
|  | chrysobull |
| (gold seal) Imperial document of the Byzantine state which was so named because it bore the gold seal of the emperor. | |
|  | didaskalos tou Euangeliou |
| (mean. «teacher of the Gospels», also known as <i>oikoumenikos didaskalos</i>). One of the three <i>didaskaloi</i> (teachers) of the Holy Scripture, attached to the Patriarchal School of Hagia Sophia, known from the Komnenian period. They were deacons and their duties revolved around exegesis and sermons. | |
|  | Enthusiasm |
| A heretic ascetic movement, close to Messalianism. Enthusiasm emerged in Syria in the 4th c. Its followers believed that only constant prayer made possible the salvation of the soul. | |
|  | Messalianism |
| A heretic ascetic movement that emerged in the eastern Byzantine provinces in the 4th c. Its followers considered Baptism inadequate for the salvation of the soul. | |
|  | monophysitism |
| A Christian heresy which developed in the 5th cent. Contrary to the orthodox dogmas, it argued that Christ did not possess two natures, but only one – a human nature. This heresy became widespread in the eastern provinces of the Byzantine Empire (mainly in Egypt) and in Armenia. | |

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Quotations

The account of the Byzantine historian Niketas Choniates of the dethronement of Patriarch Kosmas Attikos (1147):

Ὁ δὲ Κοσμάς ἦν μὲν τοῖς διακόνοις ἐνάριθμος, εἶχε δὲ πατρίδα τὴν Αἴγιναν, σοφίας δ' ἀπάσης μεταλαχὼν ἐκ τοῦ τῶν ἀρετῶν ὄρμαθου πλέον ἤϋχει τοῦπίσημον. μάλιστα δὲ τῷ πολλῷ τῆς ἐλεημοσύνης ἐκέκαστο, ἥτις ὡς ἐν περιδεοραίῳ κόσμῳ πολυτελεῖ προσπετηγυῖα τῇ ποικιλίᾳ τῶν ἀρετῶν δίκην ἀκτινώδους λίθου ἐπάμφαινε· οὕτω γὰρ τὸν εἰς ἀνθρώπους ἔλεον ἔρρωτο, ὡς καὶ τὸν ἐπενδύτην αὐτὸν καὶ τὸν χιτῶνα ἐνιαχοῦ τοῦ σώματος καὶ τὴν ὀθονοσκεπὴ καλύπτραν τῆς κεφαλῆς διαδιδόναι πένησι καὶ πράγματα παρέχειν τοῖς ἀφ' ἑστίας μὴ διφῶσι μόνον αὐτά, ἀλλὰ καὶ πρὸς εὐπορίαν ἄλλων τυρβαζομένοις. διὰ ταῦτα καὶ παρὰ πᾶσι μὲν ἦν αἰδέσιμος ὁ ἀνὴρ, ὁ δὲ σεβαστοκράτωρ Ἰσαάκιος, ὁ τοῦ βασιλέως Μανουὴλ αὐθάιμος, μόνον οὐκ ἐπέθυεν ὡς θεῷ, ἐκεῖνο θεοφιλὲς καὶ πρακτέον οἰόμενος, ὅπερ ἦν ὁ πατριάρχης ὑποτιθέμενος, κάκεινο αὐθις θεομισὲς καὶ ἀπώμοτον, ὅπερ οὐτοσί ἀπηγόρευεν. ἢ γοῦν φατρία τῶν τότε ἀντιδόξων τῆς ἀρετῆς ἀρχιερέων καὶ τοῦ ἐργάτου ταύτης ἀντίθετος μοῖρα ἐνδιαβάλλουσι τὸν ἄνδρα τῷ βασιλεῖ ὡς τῷ ἀδελφῷ Ἰσαακίῳ τὴν βασιλείαν μνῶμενον, λαθραίας τὰς προόπτους εἰς τὸ ἱερὸν ἀρχεῖον ἀνόδους τοῦ σεβαστοκράτορος ὀνομάζοντες καὶ κρυφιώδεις συσκευὰς τὰ οὐκ ἐν μυχῷ γῆς καὶ παραβύστω ἀλλ' ἐφ' ἡλίῳ συλλαλούμενα μάρτυρι. Ὁ τοίνυν Μανουὴλ νέος ὢν ἐτι καὶ αὐτάρεσκος καὶ ἄλλως ὑποβλέπεσθαι τὸν ἀδελφὸν ὑπὸ τῶν τοῦ πατριάρχου κατηγορῶν ὡς βασιλειῶντα ἐναγόμενος ἀνατρέψαι τοῦτον τοῦ θρόνου ἐζήτηι. κάπειδὴ ἄπτεται Μῶμος καὶ τῶν ἀψαύστων, ὡς οἶδαμεν, καὶ ἅπας, ὡς καὶ τοῦτο ἴσμεν, εἰς τὸ κακὸν τι δρᾶν προσκλινέστερος, καθαιρέσει καθυποβάλλεται ὡς τῷ μοναχῷ δήπουθεν Νίφῳνι συμφρονῶν. ἦν δὲ ὁ Νίφῳν συνήθης μὲν τῷ πατρὶ καὶ πολλάκις ἐκ τῆς αὐτῆς τραπέζης ἐστιαθεὶς καὶ στέγης



ομοίως μετελιχώς, διεβέβλητο δὲ ὡς οὐκ ὀρθὸς εἶη τὰ ἐς πίστιν, διὸ καὶ τὴν σχοινοτενῆ γένυν ἐκέκαρτο καὶ δεσμοτηρίῳ ἐνείρχθη παρὰ τοῦ πατριάρχου Μιχαήλ. ἦν οὖν ὁ Κοσμάς δι' αὐτὸν ὑπ' αἰτίαν ὡς ὁμόφρων τε καὶ ὁμόδοξος καὶ οἱ ἀντίδοξοι τῷ Κοσμᾷ εὐπροσώπου ταύτης ἀφορμῆς λαβόμενοι κατέτρεχον ἤδη καὶ λαμπρῶς ἐπέκειντο, κατὰ κράτος αἰρήσειν καὶ ὄλαις καθελεῖν ψήφοις αὐτὸν ἐπειγόμενοι. κρινόμενος οὖν, ἢ μᾶλλον κατακρινόμενος καὶ ἃ οὐκ ἐγίνωσκεν ἐρωτώμενος καὶ διὰ ταῦτα ἐξοστρακιζόμενος ζήλου πῖμπλαται καὶ τὸ συνέδριον ἐκεῖνο περισκεψάμενος τῇ μὲν μήτρᾳ τῆς βασιλίδος ἐπιτιμᾷ μὴ παῖδα τεκεῖν ἄρρεν, ἀφορίζει δὲ καὶ τῶν περὶ τὸν βασιλέα τινὰς καὶ τὴν τότε συνελθοῦσαν εἰς αὐτοῦ καθαίρεσιν σύνοδον ὡς βασιλείου θύρας ἐκτρίβουσαν καὶ πρόσωπα λαμβάνουσαν κάκ τούτου μὴ κανονικῶς ἀλλ' ἄθεσμως καὶ θρόνου καὶ ποιμνῆς αὐτὸν ἀπελαύνουσαν.

Niketas Choniates, *Chronike Diegesis*, van Dieten, J.A. (ed.), *Nicetae Choniatae Historia* (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 11, Berlin – New York 1975), pp. 79.88-81.31.

Chronological Table

- 1081:** Alexios I Komnenos causes disturbance in the Church by confiscating sacred vessels to melt them in coins
- 1081-1082:** Persecution of the Paulicians in Thrace
- 1082:** Chrysobull of Alexios I, guaranteeing the return of the sacred vessels
- 13 Μαρτίου 1082:** John Italos is convicted
- 11 Απριλίου 1082:** Acquittal of John Italos' disciples
- 1087:** Leo, bishop of Chalkedon is exiled
- 1080s:** Condemnation of the priest Theodore Blachernites (as Enthusiast) and of the monk Neilos (as Monophysite)
- 1094:** Council at Blachernai. Reconciliation of Alexios I Komnenos with Leo, bishop of Chalkedon
- Before 1111:** Persecution of Bogomils and execution of their leader Basil
- 1114:** New measures taken against the Paulicians
- 1140:** Condemnation of the writings of the monk Constantine Chrysomallos
- 22 February 1144:** Condemnation of the monk Nephon
- December 1147:** Dethronement of the Patriarch Kosmas Attikos
- 1156-1157:** Condemnation of Nikephoros Basilakes and Soterichos Panteugenos
- 1166:** Debate over the evangelical saying "My Father is greater than I"