CHAPTER SIX
THE NORMAN THREAT: 1185

THE LATIN MASSACRE OF 1182 BROUGHT RETRIBUTION FROM AN expected quarter: Norman Sicily. William II's subjects had not suffered in the massacre, for their trade with Constantinople was negligible and they had neither commercial privileges nor a special quarter there. Strong and ancient grievances against the Byzantines, however, impelled them to renew their former attacks; and the difficulties of Andronicus I tempted them. Their hopes were almost fulfilled when their invasion surpassed all previous successes: they took and sacked Thessalonica, the empire's second city, and came within range of the capital; only fortune and a brilliant Byzantine general turned them back.[1]

Behind the invasion of 1185 stretched a century of warfare between the two states. In 1071 Robert Guiscard took Bari, the last Byzantine outpost in Apulia, and then struck in the Balkans. From 1081 to 1085 Norman armies fought with Alexius Comnenus in Epirus and Macedonia, and in 1108 Robert's son Bohemund renewed the war under the guise of a crusade against Byzantium. During 1147–1148 King Roger II took advantage of the confusion caused by the Second Crusade to seize Corfu and sack Thebes and Corinth. In 1157 in an inconclusive struggle with Manuel Comnenus William I's fleet ravaged the Aegean coasts. During these conflicts the Byzantines labored to stir up the Norman barons and the German emperor to attack the enemy in the rear. When in 1155 Manuel invaded Apulia, the Normans expelled his troops with difficulty.

William II had a personal insult to avenge. In 1172 Manuel had promised him his daughter Maria Porphyrogenita, but at a shift of the political wind the emperor abruptly broke off the engagement. Manuel's act left the king literally waiting at the dockside, and the affront rankled. William II began to meditate an attack on the Eastern empire; to shield his flank during his planned invasion he allowed his aunt to marry the German emperor's heir, the future Henry VI, in 1184.[2]

After the death of Manuel Comnenus, additional inducements lured the king of Sicily eastward: Andronicus' persecution of Byzantine magnates drove many of them to seek refuge abroad, especially at Palermo.[3] The first notable arrival was a member of the imperial family, Alexius Comnenus, whom Manuel had named imperial cupbearer; he was probably a nephew of Alexius the Protosebastos, Marie-Xena's lover, who from 1180 to 1182 had been the real ruler of the empire. Alexius the Cupbearer fled to Russia and then to Sicily, where he and his henchman Maleïnos of Philippopolis set about wooing the king, "... almost stroking the soles of his feet and licking them with their tongues like dogs," as Nicetas says.[4] Having expatiated on the wealth of the Byzantine provinces, he urged William to install him on the throne of that empire; his plea was supported by a group of Latins at Palermo, formerly mercenaries or holders of other positions in Constantinople whom the tyrant Andronicus had expelled. At length William assured Alexius the Cupbearer of military support.[5]

Soon thereafter a competing pretender appeared claiming to be Alexius II, the first of many such to plague the empire. Eustathius reports that he was a peasant boy from Vagenetia (Vonizza in Illyricum), whom a soldier-turned-monk by the name of Alexius Sikuntenos of Philadelphia had trained for the role. Before crossing to Italy the two traveled along the Adriatic coast, winning immense popularity. At Palermo the youth's "identity" was initially concealed, then allowed to leak out. When he was brought before the king, Alexius the Cupbearer laughed at him, but a group of Genoese merchants who had been in Constantinople vouched for his authenticity. King William, whatever his private doubts, accorded him imperial honors and provided a strong guard against Andronicus' assassins. The boy took no part in the ensuing campaign, but both Alexius Comnenus the Cupbearer and the soldier-monk Sikuntenos accompanied the Norman army.[6]

Which of the two pretenders the expedition supported was never made clear, for William's real intention, as every contemporary understood, was to seat himself on the Byzantine throne; Eustathius even claims that he planned to turn Sicily over to someone else. William's decision not to participate in person may have given a show of validity to his pretended disinterest. His scheme was not without precedent: in 1081 Robert Guiscard had supported a similar pretender, a pseudo-Michael VII, with no nobler intention than William II's. Opposition to William's plan is said to have come from the archbishops of Palermo and Messina,

but in answer to cautious doubts the king could point out that the moment was perfect: Alexius the Cupbearer had assured him that at his approach an immense revolt of the magnates against the cruel Andronicus would break forth, aiding himself and the king.[7]

William II's preparations occupied the early part of 1185. He seized merchant vessels to use as transports, while embargoing all voyages to the East to prevent word's reaching Constantinople. Rumor speculated on the great armament's intended goal: Majorca, Alexandria, or the former Norman possessions in North Africa; but the king's inquiries about events in Constantinople left little doubt as to his intentions.[8] The army was very large; Eustathius learned from friendly Latins that it numbered eighty thousand men, including five thousand knights, but like most chroniclers' estimates these figures cannot be taken literally. Ibn Jubair says three or four hundred ships set out, Eustathius declares that two hundred were at the siege of Thessalonica, and Nicetas reports that the same number later approached Constantinople.[9]

Because of the method of recruitment the quality of the Norman army was not the best. Along with hired mercenaries, William enrolled adventurers of many nationalities who served without pay in hope of booty. The fleet, likewise, included pirate ships associated on the same basis. The presence of such elements led to repeated crimes during the occupation of Thessalonica and later proved fatal to discipline. The conduct of the Western forces evidenced their extreme rusticity: they were contemptuous of Byzantine arts and luxuries and repeatedly jeered at Orthodox religious services. Their fighting qualities, however, were excellent.[10]

The generals were Count Baldwin and Count Richard of Acerra; the latter later revolted against Henry VI and met his death at that emperor's hands. Count Baldwin, who is not otherwise known, was the principal commander of the Sicilian army. Nicetas portrays him as a braggart: "... [He was] not sprung from a noble or distinguished family, but esteemed by the king for his skill in war and invested with the dignity of generalship over all, and, inflated by his earlier victories over the Romans [Byzantines], he compared himself to the famous Alexander of Macedon ... and boasted that he had done greater deeds than the latter in a brief period and without bloodshed."[11] Eustathius praises his generosity and his efforts to preserve discipline during the occupation of Thessalonica. The admiral of the fleet was Count Tancred of Lecce, who later succeeded William on the Sicilian throne.[12]

On 13 June 1185 the Sicilian fleet set out across the Adriatic, and on the 24th Durazzo, the terminus of the land route to Constantinople, fell to the invaders. Andronicus, getting wind of the coming attack, had recently dispatched to Durazzo a new military governor, John Branas; but he had lacked time to prepare a defense. The citizens, disaffected by past oppressions of the tyrant's ministers, offered little effective resistance; Nicetas says "... the Italians descended on Epidamnos [Durazzo] like birds of the air, and scarcely bestriding a horse easily overleapt the crown of the walls. . . ."[13] Since the road to Thessalonica now lay open and undefended, the Sicilians hastened along it while the navy sailed around the Peloponnesus. The two met at Thessalonica, which hurriedly prepared to withstand a siege.[14]

The Byzantine emperor's strategy was not without merit; it had been used by the Comneni against previous Norman invaders and was later attempted by Isaac Angelus against Frederick Barbarossa: the enemy was to be drawn into the interior of the Balkans and there worn down by lengthy sieges of fortified places. Repeated attacks by Byzantine troops on the invading army's scouts, stragglers, and foragers would exhaust its strength and then hunger, winter, and disaffection would break it completely. Two essential mistakes were made by Andronicus, however; he allowed the Normans to pass through Macedonia to Thessalonica, where they effected a junction with their fleet, and he entrusted Thessalonica to an incompetent defender.[15]

This man, David Comnenus, feared Andronicus far more than he did the Normans and even preferred to fall into their hands rather than return to the tyrant's clutches. Cowardice, effeminacy, and willful refusal to pay attention to the welfare of the city characterized his actions throughout the siege.[16] Eustathius accuses him of deliberately betraying the city and substantiates this charge with specific instances of misconduct. David, he declares, purposely deceived the emperor about the condition of the city's defenses by assuring him that Thessalonica was strong, well-supplied, and well-manned, while he magnified any petty Norman reverse into a great Byzantine victory. Until events had proceeded too far Andronicus had no way to confirm or deny these reports. David also sent many able-bodied defenders as guards for citizens who could pay for their escape. He refused to repair the military-engines on the walls or prepare supplies of food and water; indeed, he negligently allowed the water to escape from the acropolis cistern so that no hope of final defense in that fortress remained.

Until too late he refused to attack the enemy engineers who were undermining the wall.[17]

Eustathius also charges David Comnenus with treason. When Andronicus at length realized the true state of affairs in the city he sent Nicephorus the Parakoimomenos with orders to execute David. Nicephorus reached Thessalonica but David realized his mission; to save himself, he betrayed the city to the Normans on the next day. (This accusation cannot be proven, for the city would have fallen that morning regardless of David's wishes: on the previous night the undermined wall had collapsed.) Although the fortifications of Thessalonica were ruinous, the defenders few, and food and munitions short, the weakest element in the city's defense was the general's character.[18]

The Norman land army reached Thessalonica on 6 August 1185 and began to besiege its western side. The fleet arrived on 15 August and debarked troops who attacked the east wall with greater vigor than those on the west, and it was on the east that operations ultimately proved successful. The Normans bombarded the city with arrows and stones from their great catapults while their engineers undermined the east wall; they were assisted by Armenian peasants who lived near the city.[19]

The defending garrison strove as best it could to withstand these assaults. The Alan and Georgian mercenaries particularly distinguished themselves and the natives of Thessalonica, especially the women, also fought well. Sharpshooters from the walls poured arrows on the catapult operators. The construction of an additional wall behind the area being undermined was begun, but the Normans learned of this plan and concentrated their missile fire to prevent further building. Although many of the garrison were eager to make sorties David Comnenus refused to allow them to do so; he argued that Andronicus had only ordered him to hold the fortress, and that his troops would desert to the enemy. When some individuals made sallies and carried off cattle David expressly ordered them to stop.[20]

In the meantime Andronicus had sent several armies to the neighborhood of Thessalonica. He gave his son John command of one at Philippopolis, but the prince spent his time in hunting and idleness. Because Andronicus feared his other generals, who were nearly all members of the magnate class, he rejected unified leadership of the relief army. Instead, the command was divided among Alexius Gidos the Great Domestic of the East, Andronicus Palaeologus, Manuel Kamytzes, Theodore Chumnos the Chartularios, Alexius Branas, and

Nicephorus the Parakoimomenos. Believing Thessalonica to be adequately defended, Andronicus ordered these commanders to abstain from pitched battle but instead to injure the enemy as much as possible.[21] Of all these generals Chumnos alone had the courage to advance against the Normans, but only the troops native to Thessalonica would face the enemy. At this crucial point David Comnenus at last consented to release a sortie from within the city, although he closed the gates behind its back. The Latins admitted later that this attack seriously endangered their dockyard and arsenal but, fighting hard on two fronts, they beat off Chumnos' forces and compelled the sortie to retire within the city as best it might. One last attempt to save Thessalonica was made when John Maurozomes the Sebastos arrived with an army from the Peloponnesus, as much to gain credit with Andronicus as to rescue the city; he entered it and offered sound advice which David Comnenus refused to heed.[22]

The Normans were not lacking in assistance from within the city. From a wall-tower near the foreign quarter two Illyrian brothers signaled information and encouragement to the enemy; they later joined the Normans in sacking the city. Shortly before the fall Theophanos Probates, a Greek who had served as a guide for the Norman army between Durazzo and Thessalonica, was seen in the city, where he probably made contact with disaffected elements. The German mercenaries in the garrison threatened treason: a deputation of their leaders openly talked with the enemy at the west gate. In the dawn before the city's capture, a Greek fisherman came upon five Germans in close colloquy who immediately attempted to slay him, presumably because their talk had compromised them. The knowledge that treason was afoot spread within the city, so that on the night preceding the final attack the exhausted garrison lost heart and mounted no guard on the east wall.[23]

During the night of 23 August the undermining was completed. When the miners fled, setting fire to the props behind them, a thunderous roar signaled the collapse of a section of the wall already injured by stones from catapults. Dawn of the 24th showed the Normans the extent of the breach they had achieved. The first man to mount the rubble-heap was a member of the pirate Siphantos' crew, who triumphantly waved his spear. The few Byzantines who made an effort at defense were overwhelmed. Although David Comnenus had once boasted that he could hold such a breach for forty days with a wall of weapons, he fled at

first sight of the foe and in his panic left open the east gate, through which still more Normans entered. In his rush through the streets towards the acropolis David attracted numerous Byzantines who followed him in hope of refuge, but as soon as he entered he ordered the portcullis dropped behind him, crushing several wretches; hundreds more perished of suffocation as the terrified mob attempted to squeeze into the narrow entrance. David saw the futility of resistance and surrendered himself, Maurozomes, and the acropolis to the Normans.[24]

The Norman army had full opportunity to display its brutality and barbarism in the sack of the city, which began immediately. The horrors of the first day, recorded by Metropolitan Eustathius, are scarcely to be told; if some of his stories were exaggerated the truth was certainly not much less terrible. Rushing into the city the soldiers slew all the men they could find, pausing only to strip them of their valuables. The streets were so thickly covered with bodies that it was hard not to tread on them. Wives, girls, and nuns were slain or raped; children were killed before their parents' eyes; pregnant women were slashed open. In the churches, where many had sought asylum, hundreds suffocated to death in the crush and many more were wantonly slain by the Latins, who showed no respect for religious sanctuary. Fires broke out, covering the whole city with smoke for days.[25]

Most of the Normans were more interested in plundering than in slaughter; corpses and churches were equally their prey. They violated the tomb of the city's patron, St. Demetrius, and took the saint's crown and one of his feet until a Sicilian officer stopped them. Siphantos was well-accustomed to such scenes and assembled his booty and captives in the hippodrome, where he surveyed them from horseback. Among his most valuable prisoners were Maurozomes and the metropolitan Eustathius. The Norman soldiers sought chiefly precious metals and jewelry, and then iron rings, nails, daggers, and arrowheads. They sold such Byzantine luxuries as books, precious textiles, perfumes, medicines, and dyes to peddlers at a fraction of their value. But even the camp followers could not absorb the quantities of goods which the sack made available, and the streets were piled with unconsidered treasures.[26]

By late afternoon the Norman commanders Count Baldwin and Count Richard of Acerra had restored a degree of order, and until the end of the Norman occupation in November their troops maintained discipline by day. Count Baldwin now took charge of the city. In dealing with the conquered populace he negotiated with Eustathius, who had

been held prisoner for a time on Siphantos' ship and then released. The metropolitan at once assumed leadership of the Thessalonians and with his subordinates arranged for relief of his flock's miseries. Eustathius says he shrank from no flattery, however base, to win Count Baldwin to his side, and he achieved a substantial measure of success: ". . . we stood up to the man and standing unshaken we got him to swear there would no longer be any fear of murder or any other evil hanging over the defeated. And from then on we were left alone, as much as might be. But it was not entirely possible among such Greek-hating Latins."[27] Count Baldwin practiced capricious generosity, repairing the damages inflicted on St. Demetrius' shrine and sending to Eustathius books, silver candleholders, icons, and other religious articles, most of which were of no value to him. A few other Latins also made donations for relief work among the wretched citizens.[28]

Eustathius was opposed by a group of Norman knights, extremists who wanted a harsh policy against the Byzantines. They cursed themselves for not having slain all the city's inhabitants on the day of the sack and said, among other things, "'Why should heads rest on such bodies?' and that 'Their blood cannot blend with ours,' and that 'We should ask the king's permission, and then all these shall fall, and Latins will be settled here by themselves instead, and so everything will be wonderful.'"[29] That Eustathius even partially overcame these firebrands is astonishing.

During the occupation the Normans settled in the houses of the city, the commanders in the principal mansions, and each unit of the army in a house by itself. The surviving Byzantines were compelled to seek refuge in whatever hole or hovel they could find. The Norman soldiery allowed none of them to have adequate garments: anything more than the merest rags made the wearer subject to seizure by any Latin he met on suspicion of possessing concealed wealth. The victors, in quest of treasure, dug up floors and robbed graves. They also compelled the natives to trim their hair and beards in the Latin fashion and to wear hats. The conquered suffered not only from cold but from hunger, for Byzantines living elsewhere refused to contribute food, while the neighboring Armenians and Jews would sell only at high prices. The population was saved by an exceptionally good wine harvest, which they sold to the invaders in exchange for clothing and supplies.[30]

The inhabitants endured by day the violent temperament and cruel sportiveness of the Norman troops. No Byzantine could go about the

city without suffering indignity: the Normans delighted in taunting, kicking, and spitting upon the defeated, while Western knights rode down any unfortunate wretches they could find. Any former householder caught by the present occupants of his dwelling would be tortured to reveal his hidden treasures. The conquered were compelled to rejoice at their "liberation," but not allowed to laugh at the Latins: anyone who either groaned or smiled in their presence was immediately beaten.[31]

From the beginning the crude Latins took the Orthodox religion as a special subject for jest and sport. Lest they be used to signal a revolt, the sounding-boards which called the Orthodox to worship were prohibited on pain of death. When Byzantines took refuge in churches Latins would rush in and break up the liturgy by disturbances or profane imitation of the priest's intonation. On Eustathius' protest Count Baldwin forbade such desecration and disciplined those who were guilty of it, thereby suppressing some of the violent spirits among the occupying troops.[32]

Worse than daytime incidents was the criminal violence which raged unchecked at night. No native house dared show a light lest roving bands of ruffians fall upon it in quest of women and hidden treasure. Even during the day Latins would secretly observe places which were inhabited, especially by desirable women, in order to raid them at night; to prevent complaints they frequently killed their victims. During the initial sack of the city, many Byzantines had committed suicide to avoid such horrors; others now became traitors to their fellows for self-preservation, spying on refugees, revealing treasures, and delivering quarry to the hunters. Wives sold themselves and fathers their daughters to protect the rest of their families. No entreaties from priests could prevent such deeds.[33]

Eustathius reports the official Norman and Byzantine counts of Thessalonians killed in the siege and early days of the sack. The Normans enumerated only the corpses visible in the streets and arrived at the figure of five thousand; Byzantine officials, who sought out also the bodies of those smothered in churches or slain in houses and included members of the former garrison, found seven thousand dead. At first the Norman authorities refused to allow the removal and burning of these corpses, declaring that they were accustomed to and even enjoyed such sights and smells. Only when disease broke out did they permit the cremation of the remains.[34]

An epidemic appeared in the occupation troops which Eustathius attributes to the exhalations from dead bodies and to the Latins' addiction to sweet new wine and their consumption of tainted meat. This outbreak destroyed about three thousand Sicilians, a number equal to those slain by Byzantine archers during the siege. In the same period the Normans lost others who were killed in foraging and skirmishes or by starvation; so, for the siege, sack, and occupation of Thessalonica from 6 August to the middle of November 1185, Byzantine and Norman losses were approximately equal.[35]

The fall of Thessalonica caused no change in Andronicus' plans. He reassured the fearful people of Constantinople, saying that "he would pursue the hated enemy and destroy them utterly in the fashion hunters do solitary boars. For when these beasts are abroad from the covert where they lived and are eager for dead meat, then the trap and the snare are sprung upon them, and thus they encounter the spear and receive a deep wound in the vitals; in a like manner the Italians, deeming heedlessly that no one opposed them, always advancing forward and beguiled by the desire of more booty, were destined to fall into utter and unforeseen ruin, and their unrighteousness would descend upon their own head."[36]

While full of confidence publicly, Andronicus began to look to his defenses. Even before the news of the Thessalonian disaster the emperor made a personal tour of the fortifications of the capital, ordering necessary repairs and the demolition of houses abutting on the walls. He also put a fleet in the Golden Horn which was ready to sail at a moment's notice to any city attacked by the Sicilian navy (whose appearance in the Marmara was considered imminent). Reports of the Norman victory and further advance caused him to imprison the relatives of David Comnenus; he then withdrew to a villa outside the city as a sign of confidence in his armies and to be free from the mob's pressure. From this resort he ordered a fresh proscription of all those he suspected of disaffection to his regime; included was Isaac Angelus, who with the valor of despair slew his executioner and on 12 September was acclaimed emperor for the deed.[37]

One of the first acts of the new ruler was to write a letter to the Norman generals in which he vigorously set forth accusations of every sort and demanded that they forthwith quit the soil of the God-guarded empire. Vaunting his own bravery and excellence, Isaac threatened the Normans with destruction. In reply, Count Baldwin ridiculed Isaac's

foolish posturing, his unmilitary education, his sword bloodied only in civil strife. Laughing at Isaac as one who feared nothing but the whistle of the schoolmaster's rod, he urged the emperor to abdicate and await the mercy of the conquering king of Sicily, for otherwise his life was forfeit. A few months later the count was to have second thoughts about the advisability of this letter.[38]

Isaac was not idle. To reinforce Andronicus' original field army, which still existed intact, he recruited additional troops, including some veterans, from the peasants who flocked in to see their new emperor. Abandoning the former system of divided command he entrusted the entire army to a single general, Alexius Branas. This unified force moved to meet the Normans, who were cautiously advancing into Thrace.[39]

The Norman offensive was spurred on by the pretender Alexius Comnenus the Cupbearer, who argued that popular affection for him was as great as it had been for Manuel I. The name of Angelus, he said, would pale before the glorious one of Comnenus. Prior to Andronicus' fall the greater part of the Norman army had moved out of Thessaonica and divided into halves, one of which occupied Serres on the Strymon, to check the Byzantine army at Philippopolis. The other half advanced along the coast and seized Mosynopolis (almost mid-way between Thessalonica and Constantinople) while the Byzantines, still hampered by their divided command, occupied the mountains along the Norman route. Until the arrival of Branas, their units were afraid to descend and meet the enemy in battle.[40]

The undisciplined character of the Norman army, largely composed of unpaid adventurers, was revealed at Mosynopolis when instead of advancing on the lightly defended capital they broke up into small bands and wandered about the countryside plundering and foraging, unchecked by their commanders. Alexius Branas, with his fresh army, used this situation to season and encourage his men through victories cheaply gained over roving enemy gangs. The Normans withdrew to Mosynopolis in alarm, pursued by Branas. He burned the city's gates and stormed in with great slaughter, causing the remnants of the Sicilian force to retreat hastily; they joined some of their compatriots on the Strymon, but Branas maintained his psychological advantage by following them closely. The two armies met at the field of Demetritzes (modern Demetiza or Demechissar), where the Normans apparently had the Strymon at their backs.[41]

The Sicilian generals, alarmed at these Byzantine successes, decided to temporize by suggesting a truce, which Branas accepted. The two armies settled down to face one another, but after some time Branas perceived that the Normans did not plan to fulfill their initial offers. Believing that the delay was to allow the Norman units around Serres to reach Demetritzes, the Byzantine general determined to fall upon the enemy by surprise. On the afternoon of 7 November 1185 the imperial army, without herald or trumpet-blast, attacked the Sicilian forces; though the latter were carelessly drawn up they fought bravely, until at length their irregular and undisciplined nature overcame their courage. They fled in such haste and disorder that the survivors, says Nicetas, were known thereafter as the "Birds." During their flight to Thessalonica, many were killed or taken and many more drowned. Among the captives were the two Norman generals Count Baldwin and Count Richard of Acerra, and the pretender to the Byzantine throne Alexius Comnenus the Cupbearer. Because his captors regarded Alexius as the principal cause of the invasion he was blinded and presumably incarcerated in a monastery.[42]

Deprived of their leaders, the remnants of the Norman forces including those stationed at Serres fled to Thessalonica. They communicated their fear to the city garrison, which despaired of holding the breached wall against the Byzantines, and all who could boarded ships in the harbor; others hastened westward to Durazzo, where they joined the Sicilian force occupying that city. Even those who had found room on shipboard were not safe, for the sea and winds took their toll of the vessels bound for Sicily. Not all the Normans in Thessalonica escaped, however, for the Byzantines and their Alan mercenaries caught and slaughtered many of their late oppressors, the Alans being particularly cruel in avenging their fellows killed during and after the siege. Thus, the Latins' crimes were fiercely revenged.[43]

In the meantime the Norman navy had been active. After the sack of Thessalonica, Tancred of Lecce led two hundred ships through the Dardanelles to the Isles of Princes, where he awaited the coming of the army in preparation for an attack on the capital. At length, learning of the disaster at Demetritzes, Tancred determined to take vengeance before leaving Byzantine waters and so invaded the Astakenos Gulf leading from the Sea of Marmara to Nicomedia. Although Isaac Angelus refused to commit to battle his hundred reserve ships, the people dwelling around the gulf and the soldiers stationed there proved

able to master the situation. Wherever the Norman fleet attempted a landing it was greeted by a shower of arrows and compelled to withdraw. The Byzantines assembled a naval force of over one hundred vessels, including fishing boats manned by armed civilians, which met and fought the enemy. After devasting the island of Kalonymos (Kalolimnos) and the coasts of the Dardanelles, Tancred returned to Sicily troubled by storms and shortages of provisions. The threat from the sea had been repelled.[44]

William II had been beaten in one battle—a defeat which his unreliable troops had converted into total disaster—but he did not intend to give up the war, for his initial experiences had suggested it could easily be won. He sent naval forces under a new admiral, the ex-pirate Margaritone, to the Aegean islands and coast; he also allied himself with the rebel Emperor Isaac Comnenus of Cyprus. When in about the spring of 1187 Isaac Angelus dispatched a fleet from Constantinople to recover Cyprus, Margaritone was at hand to combat it. Isaac had entrusted his expedition to a pair of commanders, John Kontostephanos and Alexius Comnenus Vatatzes (the emperor's cousin, blinded by Andronicus I); Isaac Comnenus defeated and captured both of them on land, and their fleet lost a battle at sea. The Byzantine generals were handed over to the admiral for dispatch to Palermo. The independence of Cyprus was assured for the time being, and Sicilian supremacy in the waters of the eastern Mediterranean was established in a fashion which not even Saladin could challenge.[45]

Branas' counterattack had not destroyed the Norman beachhead at Durazzo, which was strengthened by fugitives from Thessalonica: in an expedition during 1186 Isaac personally besieged and took the town. But the Byzantine Empire did suffer a permanent territorial loss from the Norman invasion, for the islands of Cephalonia, Zante, Ithaca, and the rocks called the Strophades became possessions of the Sicilian Admiral Margaritone. After Henry VI blinded him, the islands were ruled by his son-in-law Count Maio Orsini, who, following the Fourth Crusade, placed them under Venetian protection. The Angeli, beset near home by the Vlach-Bulgarian revival and local revolts, were too preoccupied to recover possessions distant from the capital and exposed to Italian raids.[46]

According to Nicetas' account, during the war the Sicilian army lost ten thousand men slain on land and sea while another four thousand were captured by the Byzantines. Isaac Angelus carelessly mistreated

his prisoners, lodging them in public prisons with no provision for their maintenance, so that they were dependent on the charity of pious persons. When William II heard of their plight, he appealed directly to the emperor: "... he rebuked the emperor by letter because he inhumanely allowed the ranks of so many men to be decimated by hunger and nakedness, men who had openly taken up weapons against the Romans by the law of war, but who were likewise Christians and yielded to his hands by God. He said the victor must either condemn the prisoners immediately to destruction, thus by a great miscalculation changing to a beast's nature and scorning human law; or not approving this, having taken and imprisoned them, he must at least break a small loaf of bread for them, if he was a niggard about a sufficient diet, but he must not take vengeance other than by the sword or directly by fate, allowing them to starve and their spirit to be broken by frost and cold, contriving the cause of murder even if he did not pierce their breasts with the spear or display the arrow ripped from their vitals and deep-dyed, since there was no difference between killing and affording the occasion of death."[47] Isaac refused to heed the king's words; numbers of prisoners were daily committed to mass graves. For more than a year this treatment continued until, needing troops in 1187, Isaac released the survivors and enrolled them as infantry in a force under Alexius Branas to be sent against the Vlachs. Branas chose this occasion to revolt and led his army against Constantinople, where his Normans easily repelled the first Byzantine force sent against them but were defeated by Conrad of Montferrat's hasty levies. Their subsequent fate is not recorded.[48]

In addition to these lesser Sicilian captives, the Norman generals Count Baldwin and Count Richard of Acerra were in Isaac's hands. The emperor remembered the letter which Count Baldwin had written before the Battle of Demetritzes in which he had ridiculed Isaac and advised his abdication; at a formal audience the new ruler taxed the count with discourtesy and threatened him with death. Baldwin, the possessor of a tongue skilled in flattery, praised the sharpness of the emperor's sword, and declared Isaac's words to be not merely truth but divinely inspired. Furthermore, he said, there was no need for Isaac himself to campaign or lead his army when he could send men whose capacity his enemies and the whole world attested. The emperor, allowing his anger to be mollified, ended by granting a general amnesty from torture and death to all who had formerly opposed him by force or

who would in the future do so. Thus Isaac relieved the Normans of their fears; he had probably never intended to do more than impress them with his majesty.[49]

The date and nature of the peace treaty between William and Isaac are unknown. The treaty did not antedate Margaritone's victory at Cyprus in the spring of 1187, but it probably followed Saladin's conquest of Jerusalem in October of the same year. William II, greatly moved by the latter event, immediately bent all his resources on sending aid to the Holy Land; he therefore wished his hands freed from a troublesome and stalemated war. By this treaty Isaac presumably released his remaining prisoners: in 1189 Richard of Acerra was back in Italy.[50]

Of the two pretenders, the peasant youth calling himself Alexius II made his way to France where he was greatly admired for his ability to speak Greek, Latin, and French. He claimed Philip II as his relative by marriage and for a time was honored by the court, until his imposture collapsed and he himself vanished. Nothing is known of the fate of Maleïnos and Alexius Sikuntenos, but it is likely that they perished during or after the battle.[51]

Following the campaign of 1185 the Norman army's hatred of the Byzantines found a response in Europe. Latin chroniclers kept alive the memory of the treachery of Alexius Branas at the Battle of Demetritzes. A monk of 1200 wrote: "At length the Emperor Isaac's army, to the command of which was appointed a certain prince called Granatus [Branas], meeting his [William's] men with peaceful words, saying that they could not advance further, yet if they wished to return to their own land, he promised them security and granted a firm peace; the King of Sicily's counts accepted this guarantee, and, promising peace in turn, were deceived by the Greeks on the Feast of St. Leonard [15 October] [sic], and were cunningly carried off to Constantinople in captivity."[52] William of Tyre's continuator, writing about 1229, even declared that certain Greeks who pretended opposition to the regime in Constantinople guided William II's troops into a trap.[53] The charge of treachery was brought up in 1195 by Henry VI to excuse his demand for the restoration of William II's conquests.[54] The Latins' injured innocence can scarcely stand up in the face of their own disregard of the "laws of civilized warfare," and the Byzantine Nicetas makes no secret of his pleasure in Branas' astute tactics, although he attempts to find a pretext for this ill-faith.[55]

The crimes of the Normans in Thessalonica made a great impression upon the Byzantines. Nicetas, in a work of larger scope than Eustathius' monograph, devotes many pages to them, arguing that God had permitted such things because of the Byzantines' offense in tolerating Andronicus' tyranny but that the invading army, cruelly exceeding God's commands, had been justly defeated by Isaac Angelus. The sack of Thessalonica also seemed a prelude to the Fourth Crusade's sack of Constantinople, and Nicetas, who wrote or revised his work after that event, spares no effort in rhetorically embellishing the most horrifying incidents he found in Eustathius.[56]

For the moment Isaac Angelus' empire had withstood one of the greatest attacks the West had ever launched, but William's invasion brought to a fever pitch the Byzantines' obsessive fear of Western aggression. When Frederick Barbarossa, who desired only to rescue Jerusalem from the Saracens, requested permission to pass through the Eastern empire, Isaac prepared a hostile reception. In the meantime the Byzantines could rejoice in their momentary deliverance: "The war on land received such a happy end as had never occurred to any of our hearts. God who cares for all because He is master of all, and with great mercy manages human affairs and has compassion on all, because He is mighty over all, He who lays our affairs on the scale's balance and repays every well-founded hope, chastizing us in a few respects, punished our enemies in many. . . ."[57]