

# Reinterpreting the Role and Significance of the Two-Emperor Problem in Frederick I and Isaac II Angelos' Conflict During the Third Crusade.

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# Introduction

In 1188, an agreement was reached at Nuremberg: Frederick Barbarossa (r.1155-1190) would reach the Holy Land by traversing through Byzantine territory. What initially seemed a calm journey through allied lands quickly became a confrontation with the Byzantine emperor, Isaac II Angelos (r.1185-1195), from August 1189 to February 1190. The question of why Isaac chose to impede Barbarossa's progress is a nuanced inquiry often met with oversimplified answers.

Isaac has traditionally borne the blame for obstructing Frederick's sacred aspirations. However, new explanations arise by viewing this from the Problem of Two Emperors' perspective.<sup>1</sup> Frederick's aggressive imperial ambitions and his pursuit of consolidating the Hohenstaufen dynasty's claim to the Roman throne provoked a calculated response from Isaac. Isaac grew fearful as Frederick's forces approached, and reports from the West informed them of his malicious intentions. Upon arrival in Byzantine territory, Frederick asserted his dominance, capturing significant swathes of land. Within three months of his arrival, Frederick entertained plans for the conquest of Constantinople itself. The rapid escalation of tensions raises the question: How did the situation escalate to this extent, and what were the underlying motivations?

From late August until late October, Isaac endeavoured to secure victory on the battlefield. However, faced with the evident military superiority of the German army, Isaac strategically retreated to diplomacy. His correspondence with Frederick aimed to assert Byzantium's Roman claims while dismissing those of the Germans. Frederick's enraged response signalled

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<sup>1</sup> A term coined by Ohnsorge in 1947 to denote the conflict between Frankish and Germanic kings and the Byzantine emperors for the title of 'Roman Emperor'. Hereafter, references to the term will be capitalised (e.g.: "Problem", "Issue")

the Problem of Two Emperors' presence. Within six months, Constantinople faced the threat of invasion, cities were captured while others lay in ruins, and Isaac was compelled to acknowledge Frederick's rights to the Roman throne.

Without considering the framework provided by the Two Emperor Problem, Isaac's actions can be wrongly perceived as illogical, as envisioned by Hampe.<sup>2</sup> A closer examination of the historical context reveals a Byzantine perspective of the events, an aspect overlooked by existing scholarship. Drawing on Choniates' accounts, we glimpse Isaac's apprehension at Frederick's encroachment and the widespread mistrust of Byzantines towards the Crusaders' true intentions. Understanding Isaac's motivations for confronting Frederick without resorting to speculative notions, such as a possible alliance with Saladin, which Harris dismisses, allows for a more nuanced and comprehensive analysis of the confrontation.<sup>3</sup>

The Two Emperor Problem is crucial for contextualising the *intitulatio* conflict. *Intitulatio*, denoting the letter heading and containing imperial titles, were symbols of sovereignty and prestige. These titles were not mere formalities; they reflected the ideologies and ambitions of the rulers.<sup>4</sup> German rulers, particularly as sovereigns of a younger empire with relatively recent claims to Roman heritage, attached significant value to the acknowledgement of their Roman emperors.

This paper argues for incorporating the Two Emperor Issue into discussions surrounding the Third Crusade, advocating for an extension of the current scholarly timeline. By arguing that

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<sup>2</sup> Karl Hampe, *Deutsche Kaisergeschichte in der Zeit der Salier und Staufer* (Leipzig: Quelle & Meyer, 1909), 170.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Harris, *Byzantium and the Crusades* (New York: Hambledon and London, 2003), 134.

<sup>4</sup> Franz Dolger, "Die Kaiserurkunde der Byzantiner als Ausdruck ihrer politischen Ansichten," *Historische Zeitschrift* 159, no. 1 (1939). 234-238.

the Problem persisted with Barbarossa, it contends that Frederick's imperialistic pursuits rendered the conflict with Isaac inevitable. Evidence of the emperor's expansionist ambitions permeates historical accounts such as Otto of Freising's *Deeds*, the *Play about the Anti-Christ*, and Ansbert's narrative of the Third Crusade. By exploring this continuous theme of aggressive ideology, the paper seeks to contextualise and rationalise Isaac's actions.

While integrating the Problem into studies of the Third Crusade is essential, it is equally important to maintain a balanced perspective on its significance. Current scholarship tends to polarise between extremes—some emphasising the Issue's overarching influence, while others dismiss its relevance entirely in foreign politics. This research contends that the Problem holds temporary significance within specific contexts, such as the Third Crusade.

To effectively integrate the Problem of Two Emperors into the conflict analysis, attention must be devoted to Choniates' chronicle. Written during the reign of Alexios III Angelus (r. 1195-1203), the *Historia* offers an eyewitness account of the events unfolding between 1189 and 1190. As the governor of Philippopolis, Choniates was familiar with Isaac's strategies to contend with the impending German threat. However, due to the composition of the *Historia* after Isaac's reign, it assumes a critical stance towards the emperor while sympathising with Frederick. Furthermore, its depiction of the conflict remains somewhat superficial. The value of Choniates' perspectives lies in his portrayal of Byzantine sentiment towards the Crusade, particularly the apprehension and discontent within the imperial circle concerning Frederick.

A comparative analysis will be conducted using accounts from Ansbert's *Historia*, the *Historia Peregrinorum*, and Dietpold's letter to analyse the *intitulatio* conflict. All three sources carried the same purpose: to record the expedition for educated Western readers. They naturally contain rich accounts of the Crusade's events with an undertone of Greek hatred. The *Historia*,

a composite text written before 1195, is an eyewitness narrative representing the most comprehensive account of events from 1189 to 1190. While certain sections are derived from Tageno's *Descriptio*, which lacks an independent surviving copy but has been integrated into Magnus of Reichersberg's chronicle, these segments solely pertain to events post-March 1190. Conversely, the *Historia Peregrinorum*, composed either before the demise of Henry VI or circa 1200, lacks an eyewitness perspective. Its contents primarily derive from Ansbert's *Historia* and material drawn from eyewitnesses, potentially soldiers who participated in the expedition. Nonetheless, the source often confuses events and mistakes their chronology, exemplified in its treatment of the *intitulatio* conflict.<sup>5</sup>

Lastly, a letter from Dietpold, Bishop of Passau, to Leopold, Duke of Austria, as recorded by Tageno and copied by Magnus, offers vivid insights into the challenges encountered by the Crusaders during their stay in Greece. Of particular significance is Dietpold's rendition of Isaac's *intitulatio* in a letter dispatched to Frederick and the ensuing response of the German emperor to the perceived affront. Through a comparative examination of the variation in imperial titles and Frederick's reactions across the three sources, it will be argued that Latin sources likely misconstrued Isaac's intentions and overlooked the complexities of the Greek language.

Two further texts from the Crusade warrant scrutiny. *The Letter About the Death of the Emperor Frederick*, written immediately following the emperor's death, provides a summarised account of the Crusade but omits any mention of the *intitulatio* conflict. Similarly, the *Chronicle of Otto of St. Blasien*, compiled approximately two decades after the events, merely glances over the conflict.

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<sup>5</sup> Graham Loud (Trans.), *The Crusade of Frederick Barbarossa*, (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 1-33.

The Problem of Two Emperors is a relatively recent scholarly development, with attention gradually increasing in recent decades. However, despite this growth, research on this topic remains limited, particularly in its application to conflict. Originally, Ohnsorge intended to use the Problem of Two Emperors to analyse the complex relationship between Germany and Byzantium. However, Ohnsorge's work has faced criticism for its idealistic tendencies, as he attributes almost every interaction between Germany and Byzantium during Manuel's reign to the Two Emperor Issue. The Third Crusade is not explored by historians because of erroneous claims over the veracity of Frederick's intentions.<sup>6</sup>

Since Ohnsorge's initial proposal, research on the Problem of Two Emperors has primarily focused on two specific periods: the reigns of Charlemagne and Manuel Comnenos. For example, Classen advocated for the significance of the Problem during these periods but only briefly acknowledged Isaac's use of *intitulatio* in response to Frederick's claims to Roman authority.<sup>7</sup> However, support for the significance of the Problem of Two Emperors has not been uniform. In 1985, Lilie argued that the Problem only emerged when relations between the two empires were already strained, only having minimal influence on foreign policy decisions.<sup>8</sup> This perspective gave rise to a sceptical tradition within the study of the Problem, which treated the conflict as insignificant.

Following a period of relative dormancy, the Problem of Two Emperors study received renewed attention in 2014 with Athina's contribution. Influenced by Lilie's thesis, Athina

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<sup>6</sup> Werner Ohnsorge, *Das Zweikaiserproblem im früheren Mittelalter: Die Bedeutung des byzantinischen Reiches für die Entwicklung der Staatsidee in Europa* (Hildesheim: August Lax, 1947).

<sup>7</sup> Peter Classen, "Die Komnenen Und Die Kaiserkrone Des Westens." *Journal of medieval history* 3, no. 3 (1977), 219.

<sup>8</sup> Ralph-Johannes Lilie, "Das "Zweikaiserproblem" und sein Einfluß auf die Außenpolitik der Komnenen", *Byzantinische Forschungen*, 9 (1985), 220.

characterised the Problem as merely a "diplomatic weapon," providing a superficial analysis of its role in the Third Crusade.<sup>9</sup> Recently, Hehl's work took a complete sceptic stance, advocating for the rejection of the Issue altogether. Hehl, like Lilie and Athina, argued that the Problem only arose in times of strained relations and served as a diplomatic tool.<sup>10</sup>

Third Crusade historiography has only superficially addressed the *intitulatio* conflict and the Byzantine perspective. While scholars like Zimmert in 1902 and Dolger in 1953 made valuable contributions to understanding the political ideology revealed through *intitulatio*s, their analyses lacked application to justify Isaac's actions.<sup>11</sup> Recently, Hiestand provided an organised guide to understand the conflict through the letters' *intitulatio*.<sup>12</sup> Despite their invaluable contributions, the absence of any reference to the Two Emperor Issue in these works undermines their interpretations of the events. Thus, a dual gap exists in both the Problem of Two Emperors and Third Crusade scholarship. By implementing the Problem, this paper aims to justify Isaac's reaction, the evolution of Frederick's intentions, and the short-lived yet significant nature of the Issue during the conflict. A more detailed assessment of the merits and limitations of the historiography on the Issue and the confrontation are included in sections one of Chapters Two and Three, respectively.

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<sup>9</sup> Athina Kolia-Dermizaki, 'Byzantium and the West – the West and Byzantium (Ninth-Twelfth Centuries) Focusing on Zweikaiserproblem. An Outline of Ideas and Practices' in *Aureos. Volume dedicated to professor Evangelos K. Chrysos*, ed. Taxiarchis Kolias, Konstantinos Pitsakis (Athens: National Hellenic Research Foundation, 2014), 380.

<sup>10</sup> Ernst-Dieter Hehl, 'Zwei Kaiser – (k)ein Problem? Byzanz, das westliche Kaisertum und ein missverständlicher Forschungsbegriff' in *Byzantium and its European neighbors: Political interdependencies and cultural misunderstandings*, ed. Ludger Körntgen, Jan Kusber, Johannes Pahlitzsch, and Filippo Carlà-Uhink, Byzantium Between Orient and Occident 17 (Heidelberg: Propyläeum, 2020), 57, 67, 69.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Zimmert, 'Der deutsch-byzantinische Konflikt vom Juli 1189 bis Februar 1190,' *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, vol.12(1) (Leipzig: Teubner); Franz Dolger, *Byzanz und Die Europäische Staatenwelt: Ausgewählte Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Buch: Kunstverlag Ettal, 1953).

<sup>12</sup> Rudolf Hiestand, 'Barbarossas letztes Schreiben vom Kreuzzug,' in *De litteris, manuscriptis, inscriptionibus ... Festschrift for the 65th birthday of Walter Koch*, ed. Theo Kolzer, Franz Bornschlegel, Christian Friedl (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007).



All sources utilised are digitised and extracted from Google Books, Internet Archive, and the University Library, among other websites. Primary sources are translated into English to facilitate comprehension. While secondary sources are predominantly German, translations have been provided for direct citations or paraphrases to maintain coherence. Critical words in the original language of primary sources have been retained where essential for the argument, enhancing the rigour of the analysis. The translation tools used are Google Translator and UPDF.

This research begins by exploring the context of the Two Emperor Issue to trace its history and prior moments of significance. Through an examination of notable moments from Charlemagne to Manuel Comnenus, this paper elucidates the intricacies that shaped this dilemma. Chapter One discusses the conflict itself. From the Byzantine perspective, this research analyses the accounts of Choniates to unravel Isaac's actions and understand the rationale behind his decisions. Additionally, it scrutinises the *Intitulatio* Conflict, uncovering potential inconsistencies in the accounts of the letters exchanged between Isaac and Frederick and exploring how linguistic challenges may have contributed to misrepresentations.

Chapter two will focus on interpretation by critically analysing the implications of the conflict within the broader framework of the Two Emperor Issue. It evaluates the significance attributed to the Two Emperor Issue through a review of existing historiography, probing its relevance and impact on historical narratives. Furthermore, this research examines how the Two Emperor Issue permeated the conflict, influencing power dynamics and geopolitical strategies by discussing Barbarossa's imperialism and aggressive policies. It contextualises Barbarossa's actions within the broader context of his reign, highlighting the continuity of themes and motifs. Chapter Two also discusses the influence of the Problem in shaping

decisions by distinguishing between times when the Issue governed or was used to represent the leaders' actions.

The last Chapter assesses the opposition to the significance of the Two Emperor Issue and the research's future. This paper will argue that Frederick's personality requires more attention, finding recent scholarship to be dismissive. The Problem lived on with him because being Roman was essential to his idea of emperorship. To conclude, this paper will reassert the significance of the Problem during the conflict, warranting an extension in the research timeline. In balance, it will be acknowledged that this influence was strictly confined to the six months of conflict.

# The Problem of Two Emperors: A Brief Context

In 800, Pope Leo III transferred the Roman crown from the East to the West, challenging Byzantine sovereignty over the *Oἰκουμένη*. Charlemagne's coronation initiated a process that gradually eroded Byzantine territorial and spiritual claims in the West. Charlemagne's change in imperial title in 801 to include Roman Empire epithets (*imperator Romanum*) reflected this shift.<sup>13</sup> Byzantium responded by adding the words *Ῥωμαίων* (Romans) and later *αὐτοκράτωρ* (Emperor) to imperial titles, thus becoming *πιστὸς βασιλεὺς καὶ αὐτοκράτωρ Ῥωμαίων* (Faithful king and emperor of the Romans).<sup>14</sup> The *Pax Nicephori* in 812 temporarily eased tensions, but the Issue remained unresolved.

The usage of references to Rome became a norm in Germanic imperial titles, and the new stage of the Two Emperor Problem began: assimilation with Byzantium. As a new kingdom, the Western Romans were not culturally nor ideologically united with their neighbours. At the same time, as a direct ancestor of the Romans, Byzantium continued the Empire's legacy in the East. The assimilation pursued by the Ottonians with Byzantine imperialism became more pronounced during Otto III's reign. A new *renovatio imperii romani* ideology was formed based on the hegemony of Frankish kingdoms, Italy, with Rome as its capital and the rest of the Christian nations as allies.<sup>15</sup> This was an imitation of Byzantium's model of emperorship as a family. Otto III's imperial title clearly expresses the new Western ambitions: "*Otto tercius Romanus Saxonicus et Italicus, apostolorum servus, dono dei Romani orbis imperator*

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<sup>13</sup> Peter Classen, *Karl der Grosse, das Papsttum und Byzanz: Die Begründung des karolingischen Kaisertums (Beiträge zur Geschichte und Quellenkunde des Mittelalters)* (N.p.: Jan Thorbecke, 1985), 71; Engelbert Mühlbacher (ed.), 'Die Urkunden Pippins, Karlmanns und Karls des Grossen,' in *Die Urkunden der Karolinger*, MGH DD Karol I (Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1906), 263-263.

<sup>14</sup> Dermitzaki, *Byzantium*, 360.

<sup>15</sup> Dermitzaki, *Byzantium*, 371.

*augustus*”<sup>16</sup> From the Western perspective, the first stage of the Two Emperor Problem was marked by an ardent desire to be recognised by Byzantium, and later to emulate it.

By the twelfth century, the balance of power in Europe had changed; East and West were closer than ever because of the Crusades, and the Problem of Two Emperors had become more pronounced. The conflict intensified during the Comnenian-Staufer era, with exchanges of letters and battles over *intitulatio*s. In a correspondence between Conrad III and John II from 1142, the German emperor refers to himself as “*Romanorum imperator augustus*”, while his counterpart is addressed as “*Constantinopolitano imperator*”.<sup>17</sup> In contrast with customs in previous centuries, the Staufers attempted to undermine the Byzantine connection to Rome using *intitulatio*s.

Initially, the Byzantines compromised. The Comnenian accepted the German use of the title βασιλεὺς Ῥώμης (*rex Romae*), but not Ῥωμαίων (*Romanorum*) since the latter was reserved for Byzantine Emperors. In a letter dated 1153, Manuel refers to himself as “*augustus et imperator Romeon*” and Frederick as “*prenobilissimus rex Romae*.”<sup>18</sup> After the 1160s, Manuel attempted to attain recognition from the pope as Roman Emperor since Frederick supported an antipope. At the peak of the conflict, Manuel issued an edict in 1166 asserting himself to be:

“Supreme ruler of the Romans, most devout perpetual Augustus, ..., heir of the crown of great Constantine”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> ‘Die Urkunden Otto des III,’ in *Die Urkunden der deutschen Könige und Kaiser*, MGH DD O II (Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1888), 820.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Die Urkunden Konrads III. und seines Sohnes Heinrich,’ in *Die Urkunden der deutschen Könige und Kaiser*, ed. Friedrich Hausman, MGH DD Ko III (Cologne: Hermann Böhlau Nachf, 1969), 122.

<sup>18</sup> Philipp Jaffé (ed.), *Monumenta Corbeiensia*, *Rerum Germanicarum* I (Berlin: Apud Weidmannos, 1864), 561.

<sup>19</sup> Classen, *Komnenen*, 214-215. “*Romanorum moderator piissimus perpetuus... heres coronae magni Constantini*”

Manuel's specific reference to the "crown of Constantine" reveals his use of *intitulatio* to counter German claims to imperial lands. In his famous work "*de administrando imperio*", Porphyrogenitus warned that any requests by foreigners to the imperial treasures ought to be denied.<sup>20</sup> Since Manuel did not face any internal challenge to the throne, Classen concludes that the emperor's title was a response to German claims.<sup>21</sup> Classen's argument is convincing since the edict was issued during the tumultuous years where Manuel and Frederick were engaged in a proxy war over control of Italy and support of the papacy.

After Manuel's death, the Problem only resurfaced during the Third Crusade. The encounter between Frederick and Isaac marked the first time in 400 years that rulers met on the battlefield because of the Two Emperor Issue, demonstrating the significance attached to the Roman legacy of both empires.

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<sup>20</sup> Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De Administrando Imperio*, ed. Gy. Moravcsik, trans. R. Jenkins, CFHB 1 (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1967), 67-75.

<sup>21</sup> Classen, *Komnenen*, 218-219.

# The Two Facets of the Conflict

## The Byzantine Perspective

Due to the prevalence of Western sources, historians have overlooked the Byzantine perspective on the events of 1189-1190. Despite Isaac's signing of a treaty at Nuremberg guaranteeing the safe passage of German soldiers through Byzantine territory, he rightly harboured scepticism regarding their true intentions. Frederick had previously demonstrated his desire to assail the empire, as recorded by Kinnamos, who documented Frederick's threat to attack Byzantium during King Conrad III's reign.<sup>22</sup> Thus, what assurance did Isaac possess that, with the command of an entire army, Frederick would refrain from realising the unification of the Eastern and Western Roman Empire? The Byzantines widely feared Frederick's march. Evident from the events in the 1160s, Frederick's imperial ambitions posed a significant threat to Byzantium's territorial integrity, causing the Dual Emperor Issue to influence the foreign policies of both nations.

The Byzantine source available to historians is written by Choniates. Due to the delicate political climate in Byzantium, Choniates' narrative lacks consistency in its portrayal of Frederick, Isaac, and the expedition. In a eulogy composed during the crusade's passage through Byzantium, Choniates describes Frederick as a "tyrant... full of many evils, a fountain full of deceit and falsehood."<sup>23</sup> Conversely, the *Historia* scrutinises Isaac's policies and attitudes extensively while praising Frederick's commitment to his holy cause. Mitsiou articulates that the author's conflictive accounts can be attributed to the date and political background in which they were written. As the *Oratio* was written during the crusade, its anti-

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<sup>22</sup> John Kinnamos, *Deeds of John and Manuel Comnenus*, trans. Charles Brand (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 61.

<sup>23</sup> Nicetas Choniates, 'Oratio 9' in *Nicetae Choniatae Orationes et Epistulae*, ed. I. A. van Dieten, CHFB 3 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1972), 89. "Ἰδοὺ καὶ ἕτερος τύραννος, ὁ κατάρχων τῶν Ἀλαμανῶν, γέρων καὶ πολλῶν κακῶν ἰδρύς καὶ ψευδορκίαν"

German leaning is justifiable. The *Historia* was written during the reign of Alexios III, who usurped the throne from Isaac, suggesting a political undertone to Choniates' treatment of Isaac.<sup>24</sup>

Nonetheless, Choniates' accounts remain valuable for elucidating the Byzantine sentiment toward Frederick's expedition. From the moment the Byzantines learned of Frederick's intentions, they perceived it as an invasion.<sup>25</sup> Choniates writes that the Byzantines were "oppressed by a distant evil" once Frederick revealed his plans to march through the Empire.<sup>26</sup> Prior to the arrival of the crusaders, Patriarch Dositheus cautioned the Emperor that the Germans harboured no desire to conquer Palestine; their true ambition lay in seizing the "Queen of Cities," Constantinople.<sup>27</sup> Isaac's apprehension was so profound that he reinforced the gate that the Patriarch prophesised would be breached.

Under Frederick's command, the German forces responded to Greek resistance by seizing significant territory in what is now Eastern Rumelia. Ansbert justifies the Crusaders' occupation by citing Isaac's imprisonment of Frederick's envoys. The author describes how, upon learning of their capture, the army "unceasingly occupied and plundered towns, castles and villages."<sup>28</sup> While it is challenging to discern Isaac's rationale behind the imprisonment of the envoys, the Germanic occupation of Byzantine territory reinforced the widespread fear of invasion throughout the empire. Even after Isaac released the hostages, Frederick occupied and conquered cities unabated. Frederick's imperial ambitions were well-known in Byzantium. The

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<sup>24</sup> Ekaterini Mitsiou, 'Vier byzantinische rhetorische Texte auf westliche Herrscher' in *Emperor Sigismund and the Orthodox World*, ed. Ekaterini Mitsiou et al., Veröffentlichungen zur Byzanzforschung 24 (Vienna: Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2010), 29.

<sup>25</sup> Zimmert, *Konflikt*, 42.

<sup>26</sup> Nicetas Choniates, 'Historia' in *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae*, ed. Emmanuel Bakker (Bonne: impensis E. Weberi, 1835), 525. "*etiam longinquo malo sumus oppress.*"

<sup>27</sup> Choniates, *Historia*, 528.

<sup>28</sup> Ansbert, 'The History of the Expedition of the Emperor Frederick,' in Loud, *Crusade*, 71.

restoration of the great Roman Empire formed part of his ideology, and Byzantine lands, or at least territories claimed by Byzantium, were integral to Frederick's vision.

The two-emperor dilemma contributed to the anxiety within the Byzantine court. Frederick, perceived as a usurper of the Roman throne rightfully belonging to Byzantium, instilled fear and paranoia through his imperialistic policies directed against Byzantium. Choniates' depiction of apprehension regarding a German invasion stems from these sentiments. Memories of the 1160s remained vivid during Isaac's reign. The conflicts over Italy and Roman emperorship that witnessed the cessation of Byzantine hopes to reacquire Italian territories and the resulting relegation of Byzantium as a significant power within the West marked Byzantines.

The Byzantine fears were not unfounded. A letter dispatched by Frederick to his son, Henry VI, in November 1189 contains directives for an assault on Constantinople. Frederick counsels his son as follows:

"Since, therefore, our crossing... will be impossible until we obtain hostages from the Emperor of Constantinople ... and we make the whole of Romania subject to our empire, we urgently request your prudent and noble royal person to send suitable envoys from your serene majesty to Genoa, Venice, Ancona, Pisa and other places to obtain a squadron of galleys and other vessels, to meet us at Constantinople around the middle of March, so that they may attack the city by sea while we do so by land."<sup>29</sup>

The letter was dispatched only three months after Frederick entered into Byzantium and nearly a month after the release of his envoys. At this juncture, the Crusader army grappled with

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<sup>29</sup> Ansbert, *History*, 71-72.



minor skirmishes against Byzantine forces, and the contentious issue of *intitulatio* was unresolved. The gravity of Frederick's proposed solution to the crisis is noteworthy. Instead of pursuing peaceful resolutions, Frederick advocates for the capitulation of an entire empire. Brand attributes Barbarossa's decision to a faction within the Crusader army that advocated for "unlimited hostilities" against the Byzantines.<sup>30</sup> While Ohnsorge claims that the confrontation between Isaac and Frederick only happened for crusading purposes.<sup>31</sup> Although it is true, as Schobesberger proposes, that the capture of Constantinople was not initially part of Frederick's agenda, it indeed became a priority by November.<sup>32</sup> Latin sources have readily exculpated Frederick from accusations of a planned attack on Constantinople and historians have accepted them. It did not take long, however, for Frederick to resort to the capture of Constantinople. The plan devised by the emperor was also meticulously crafted. In March 1190, Henry VI would launch a maritime assault on Constantinople with the assistance of the Italians, while Frederick led the land assault. The brevity of the time taken by Frederick to conceive the plan and its complexity suggest that it was a concept the ruler had contemplated.

Within the letter, Frederick also instructs Henry VI to relay the report on Isaac's behaviour to the Pope. Papal opinion held immense significance in crusading matters, given his role as the expedition's leader.<sup>33</sup> As Frederick contemplated an invasion of Constantinople, justifying his actions to the pope was crucial for preserving his political standing and spiritual integrity. It is crucial to emphasise that Frederick was not asking Henry to alert the Pope about plans to attack Constantinople; instead, the letter aimed to ensure that the Pope was informed of Isaac's transgressions.

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<sup>30</sup> Charles Brand, *Byzantium Confronts the West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 181.

<sup>31</sup> Ohnsorge, *Zweikaiserproblem*, 115.

<sup>32</sup> Nikolaus Schobesberger, *Die Staufer und Byzanz: Die staufische Byzanzpolitik von Konrad III. bis Philipp von Schwaben*. Magister der Philosophie thesis (N.p.: n.p., 2008), 138.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Phillip Hughes, *A History of the Church* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1948), 370-2: It was intrinsic to Crusades to contain papal approval and dispensation of sins, constituting an important crusading aspect.

A similar request is found in Frederick's letter to Leopold of Austria, dispatched in November 1189, alongside the missive addressed to Henry. The second letter sent by Barbarossa contains no mention of an assault on Constantinople, indicating a desire to seize Byzantium discreetly. Duke Leopold is informed of how Isaac "has from the very first violated all the oaths which are known to have been sworn by his chancellor at Nuremberg", and how Frederick sought "peace and to arrange for our peaceful march."<sup>34</sup> The secrecy behind the plan to attack Constantinople is notorious. Frederick establishes his own narrative of the events to Westerners: one of Germanic messianic fervour confronted by Greek deception. Frederick's intentions are unmistakable: to covertly usurp the Byzantine throne and exploit Isaac's actions as justification.

### The *Intitulatio* Conflict

Another aspect of the confrontation between Isaac and Frederick was the dispute over imperial titles. From August 1189 to early 1190, Isaac sent three letters to Frederick. In the first letter, dated August 1189, Isaac possibly intended to provoke or assert his superiority over the German ruler by using Roman *intitulatio*. Describing the August letter, Ansbert remarks that "a letter arrived from Isaac, the Greek emperor, full of pride and arrogance."<sup>35</sup> Ansbert's chronicle, typically the most informative, omits any mention of imperial titles or what made the letter sound so "arrogant." The account from the *Historia Peregrinorum* concurs with the element of arrogance in Isaac's correspondence while also recording the *intitulatio* used:

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<sup>34</sup> Dana Munro (ed.), *Letters of the Crusaders* (Philadelphia: Department of History of the University of Pennsylvania, 1902), 20-21.

<sup>35</sup> Ansbert, *History*, 69.

“Isaac Angelos, appointed by God, the most sacred, excellent, powerful, and exalted emperor, ruler of the Romans, heir of the whole world and the crown of the great Constantine.”<sup>36</sup>

The *intitulatio* that the *Peregrinorum* chronicle attributes to August was not used by Isaac until after November, according to Ansbert’s account. Additionally, it is inconceivable that Isaac would refer to Frederick as prince (*principi*), given its unprecedented use and the danger related to the German army’s presence in Byzantium. The author’s alteration of Frederick’s title was possibly purposeful to contrast Isaac’s exorbitant claims of being “heir to the entire world” and Barbarossa’s princehood. Another possibility is that the mistake was genuine, which cannot be ruled out given the source’s provenance and non-eyewitness status. The chronicle’s errors shed light on a broader trend in German accounts of the Third Crusade: the exaggerated vilification of the Greeks. It is acknowledged that German sources cannot be expected to depict the Greeks impartially. However, since Frederick died in the Crusade soon after leaving Byzantium, chroniclers only had Isaac to blame for the misfortunes.<sup>37</sup> Frederick’s crusade never reached its objective— It was preoccupied with fighting the Greek emperor for most of its duration. Chronicles composed years after the events, such as the *Historia Peregrinorum*, found it easier to reserve hatred and further antagonise the Greek emperor by misrepresenting the facts.

The animosity towards the Greeks beyond the crusading events is evident from Bishop Dietpold’s letter. In describing the first letter sent by Isaac, the Bishop complains about the Greek Emperor’s surname. The Latin version of Isaac’s surname would be “Ángelos”, which

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<sup>36</sup> Anonymous, ‘Historia Peregrinorum’ in *Quellen zur Geschichte des Kreuzzuges Kaiser Friedrichs I*, ed. Anton Chroust, Monumenta Germaniae Historica 5 (Berlin: APVD Weidmannos, 1928), 140. “Ysachius a deo constitutus imperator sacratissimus excellentissimus potentissimus sublimis Romanorum moderator Angelus tocius orbis heres corone magni Constantini.”

<sup>37</sup> Brand, *Byzantium*, 188.

resembles the word for angel in Latin "*angelum*". Claiming to be an angel was not the only issue Dietpold had with Isaac, as the Greek "*regis*" also claimed to be *Romanorum Imperatorem*.<sup>38</sup> The title's only recorded use during Isaac's reign, comes from the Third Crusade. As Kresten notes, throughout Isaac's reign his *intitulatio* remained, "Isaac Angelos, faithful emperor in Christ to God, divinely crowned, sublime, powerful, exalted, ever august and moderator of the Romans (*moderator Romanorum*)" irrespective of the recipient.<sup>39</sup> One possibility is that Isaac altered his title upon Frederick's presence to reassert his rights over the Roman throne. Another possibility is that Latin chronicles distorted Isaac's title to depict more incredible disrespect towards Frederick, allowing the justification of the crusaders' actions in Byzantium. In both cases, the Two Emperor Issue is being used to represent the conflict as they both presuppose that Isaac's use of Roman titles was a disrespect to Barbarossa's claims.

The second letter, which arrived in the German camp on October 29, 1189, unequivocally illustrates the influence of the dual-emperor problem in the conflict between Isaac and Barbarossa. According to Ansbert, "the little Greek mendaciously called himself the emperor of the Romans, while he referred to our most serene and august lord not as Emperor of the Romans but only as 'king of the Germans'."<sup>40</sup> The aspect that infuriated Frederick was his status compared to Isaac's, as not only was he called "King of Germany" but his counterpart referred to himself as Roman Emperor.

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<sup>38</sup> Magnus, *Chronicon Magni Presbiteri*, MGH SS XVII (Hannover: Impensis Bibliopolii Avlici Hahniani, 1861), 510.

<sup>39</sup> Otto Kresten, 'Zur Rekonstruktion der Protokolle kaiserlich-byzantinischer Auslandssehreihen des 12. Jahrhunderts aus lateinischen Quellen' in *Polypleuros nous: Miscellanea Für Peter Schreiner Zu Seinem 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Cordula Scholz and Herbert Hunger, Byzantisches Archiv 19 (Leipzig: K. G. SauMünchen, 2000), 150.

<sup>40</sup> Ansbert, *History*, 78.

Despite the prevailing perception that Isaac was attempting to provoke Frederick, historians have largely overlooked the intricacies of the Greek language. Byzantine emperors referred to Western rulers in two alternative ways depending on their rank vis-à-vis the Byzantines. The most common word for “king” used was *Ῥῆξ*, which translates to “*rex*” in Latin. Another word for “king” that was reserved for the Byzantine emperor and only a few monarchs was *Βασιλεύς*, which in Latin also carried the same translation: “*rex*”. Basileus carried significantly more prestige than *Ῥῆξ*, yet there was no distinction in Latin. Kresten raises the issue that the Greek chancery had difficulties in translating Greek titles into Latin, which allowed German rulers to exploit it by referring to Greek emperors with the lower-ranking title of “*rex*” instead of “*imperator*” at times.<sup>41</sup>

Contemporary chronicles readily antagonised Isaac for referring to Frederick as “*regem*” and omitting any reference to the Roman Empire. At this juncture of the conflict, the Problem of Two Emperors was accentuated by Frederick’s reaction to the second letter sent by Isaac. In Ansbert’s version of the events, Barbarossa could not tolerate “the arrogance of the foolish king and the usurped title of the false emperor of the Romans.”<sup>42</sup> What follows is the German ruler’s assertion of power and entitlement over the legacy of Rome:

“There is only one roman emperor, the sole ruler...I have held the sceptre of the roman empire in peace for more than thirty years, with no contradiction from any king or prince...while my predecessors who have ruled as roman emperors for more than four hundred years have gloriously transmitted their rule to me...This rule has been translated from the city of Constantinople back to Rome...because of the tardy and ineffective assistance offered to the Church by the Emperor of Constantinople against

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<sup>41</sup> Kresten, *Rekonstruktion*, 135.

<sup>42</sup> Ansbert, *Historia*, 49. “*fastum stulti regis et usurpativum vocabulumfalsi imperatoris Romeón.*”

tyrants...I am, therefore, amazed that my brother, your Emperor of Constantinople, usurps for himself an inappropriate and unwarranted title and glories in an honour that does not belong to him and is utterly foolish, when he should clearly know that I, Frederick, am... Emperor of the romans and always Augustus... Unless...he greets me in his letters with proper respect and the name of roman emperor...he should in no way dare to send envoys or letters to us again."<sup>43</sup>

Dissecting the discourse in Ansbert's account elucidates the reality and significance of the Two Emperor Issue in the conflict. According to Frederick, there is only one Roman Emperor and the "Emperor of Constantinople" ought to show him proper reverence by referring to Frederick as "Roman Emperor" in letters. Imperial titles were a demonstration of power and sovereignty for monarchs; hence, Isaac's use of titles claimed by Frederick constituted a direct challenge to the ruler's power. In response to Isaac's attempt to trace his Roman descent to Constantine, Frederick invokes the concept of the *translatio imperii* under Charlemagne. All accounts of Frederick's reaction contain the phrase where he traces his rights to Charlemagne's coronation in 800.

In Dietpold's letter, Frederick Barbarossa's discourse includes an addition, while the rest remains similar to Ansbert's version. According to Dietpold, Frederick said that "His predecessor, Manuel of pious memory, was careful to use our name in his letters, even when we were enemies one to another, nor did he make any attempt to impair the dignity of our majesty. I behaved in the same manner to him."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ansbert, *History*, 78.

<sup>44</sup> Magnus of Reicherberg, *The Chronicle of Magnus of Reicherberg*, in Loud, *Crusade*, 152.

However, in the last preserved correspondence between the two monarchs from the end of 1176 or the beginning of 1177, Manuel refers to Frederick as “*gloriosissimo regi Alamanniae et imperatori*.” In the same correspondence, Manuel addresses himself as “*Manuel in Christo Deo fidelis imperator, porphirogenitus, divinitus coronatus, regnator, potens, excelsus, semper augustus et Romanorum moderator*.”<sup>45</sup> The similarity between Isaac and Manuel’s *intitulatio* is conspicuous, so how can Frederick’s anger be explained? The answer lies in the *Historia Peregrinorum*. Frederick is recorded to have said, “Thus, he should have called himself not the ruler of the Romans, but rather the moderator of the *Romaniorum*”<sup>46</sup>. The term ‘*imperatorem Romanorum*’, as explained by Frederick during his expression of outrage in Ansbert’s account, could only refer to a singular ruler within the Roman custom. Contrastingly, ‘*moderatores*’ was a title that could be shared by more than one individual, resembling the modern word “ruler”. This custom was understood by Isaac, as evidenced by the emperor’s resumption of his old title, “*Romanorum moderator Angelus*”, in the last letter sent to Frederick.

Barbarossa’s reaction to Isaac’s use of Roman imperial titles exacerbated hostilities between the Latins and Greeks. The relationship between the rulers reached a nadir in November 1189 when Frederick sent a letter to Henry VI. Recognising that he could not expel the Crusaders from his lands without risking the capital’s safety, Isaac altered the imperial titles in his letters. According to Ansbert, in the first letter, Frederick was referred to as “*regem tantum Alemannię*”, then in the second “*generosissimum imperatorem Alemannię*”, and finally in subsequent letters as “*nobilissimum imperatorem antiquę Romę*”.<sup>47</sup> The reference to “old Rome” for Frederick and “heir to Constantine’s Crown” in Isaac’s *intitulatio* indicates the use of the *κληρονόμος* formula. Referring again to Manuel’s edict from 1166, Isaac’s *intitulatio* is a last

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<sup>45</sup> Otto Kresten, ‘Der "Anrede Streit" zwischen Manuel I. Komnenos und Friedrich I. Barbarossa nach der Schlacht von Myriokephalon,’ *Römische Historische Mitteilungen*, vol. 34/35 (1992/93), 91-93.

<sup>46</sup> Anonymous, *Peregrinorum*, 143. “*Non ergo Romanorum, sed potius Romaniorum moderatores se dicere debuisset.*”

<sup>47</sup> Ansbert, *Historia*, 51.

resort attempt to establish superiority over the Germans.<sup>48</sup> By mentioning Constantine, Isaac refers to the change of Roman capitals performed by Constantine in 330 from Rome to Constantinople. Despite the conflict ending here, the Problem of Two Emperors was left unresolved, and the Crusaders continued their march to the Holy Land.

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<sup>48</sup> Classen, *Komnenen*, 214-219.



# Interpreting the Conflict

## The Modern Revival of German Imperialism?

In 2020, Ernst Hehl attributed German scholars' interest in the problem of two emperors to Germany's imperial longing.<sup>49</sup> While Hehl's statement lacks explanation or justification for such attribution, it contains some truth. Research on the problem of two emperors has predominantly originated from Germany and focused on the German perspective of empire building. Ohnsorge's revolutionary work was the first to introduce the problem of two emperors as a significant variable in explaining Germany and Byzantium's actions and foreign policy during the twelfth century. This introduction is particularly significant during the period, as Staufer's ideas about *sacrum imperium* interfered with Byzantine territorial claims, heightening tensions between the two empires.<sup>50</sup> Before Ohnsorge's seminal contribution, the intricate dynamics between Isaac and Frederick garnered considerable attention from scholars such as Zimmert and Dolger. However, while comprehensive, their analyses exhibit a notable gap in addressing the pivotal Two Emperor Issue dilemma.

Ohnsorge's new perspective on the events between 800 and 1204 opened a fresh way of visualising the dealings between Byzantium and Germany. By arguing that *intitulatio*s oscillated to conform to the *status quo*, Ohnsorge connected the use of Roman imperial titles with conflicts over territories and political influence.<sup>51</sup> However, identifying the Issue was still challenging because of its "private" nature. Even Otto v. Freising, the half-brother of Conrad III and chronicler who narrates the correspondence between the two empires, does not mention a single word about the Two Emperor Issue.<sup>52</sup> For Ohnsorge, the element of

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<sup>49</sup> Hehl, *Zwei Kaiser*, 41.

<sup>50</sup> Dermitzaki, *Byzantium*, 377.

<sup>51</sup> Ohnsorge, *Zweikaiserproblem*, 8.

<sup>52</sup> Paolo Brezzi, 'Ottone di Frisinga' in *Bullettino dell'Istituto Storico Italiano per il medio Evo e Archivio Muratoriano*, vol. 54 (Roma: Istituto storico italiano per il Medioevo 1939), 129 ff.

confidentiality is essential to understanding that the relationship between the two empires was impactful in politics.<sup>53</sup> The development of a new perspective through which German and Byzantine relations could be analysed was historically revolutionary, but did its “creator” take it too far?

Ohnsorge’s work shines in its analysis of the Problem of Two Emperor during Manuel’s reign, but it overstates the importance of the Issue in foreign politics. The Problem is referred to as “world-shaking” and it is even considered to be one of Frederick’s main concerns at the beginning of his reign.<sup>54</sup> The Problem of Two Emperors was not a continuous Issue, as Ohnsorge perceives. During the twelfth century, the problem manifested sporadically. Firstly in the 1160s, when Manuel’s coronation was a real possibility, and again during 1189-1190, when Frederick and Isaac engaged in diplomatic exchanges and battles, were the only times where the problem was significant enough to affect politics. The second limitation of Ohnsorge’s work is his neglect of the Two Emperor Issue’s role in the Third Crusade. The Two Emperor Issue did not just turn into “deceitful tactics”, nor did it “disappear” after Manuel’s passing.<sup>55</sup> On the contrary, during the Third Crusade, the problem was more alive than ever before. Amidst the looming threat to Constantinople, the vocal expressions of discontent regarding *intitulatio*s, and the tumultuous battles raging, the encounter between the two empires serves as a pivotal illustration of the reciprocal sensitivity inherent within the Roman question.

In contribution to Ohnsorge’s work, Peter Classen’s study advocated for the existence of an ‘imperial title’ conflict during the twelfth century. Classen asserted that both instances where

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<sup>53</sup> Werner Ohnsorge, *Abendland und Byzanz: gesammelte Aufsätze zur Geschichte der byzantisch-abendländischen Beziehungen und des Kaisertums* (Darmstadt: H. Gentner, 1958), 436 ff.

<sup>54</sup> Ohnsorge, *Abendland*, 455; Ohnsorge, *Zweikaiserproblem*, 99.

<sup>55</sup> Ohnsorge, *Abendland*, 455-456.

emperors referred to the Crown of Constantine in *intitulatio*s could be construed as a counterclaim to Western sovereignty over Rome.<sup>56</sup> Notably, this marked the inaugural recognition of the possibility that the two-emperor conflict existed during the Third Crusade. However, the study has limitations, particularly its peripheral examination of the significance of such counterclaim within the framework of the Two Emperor Issue. Nevertheless, the acknowledgement of the Issue (as articulated by Ohnsorge) and the proposition that *intitulatio*s could serve as evidence of its existence (as posited by Ohnsorge and Classen) represent substantial strides towards a better understanding of the two-emperor problem.

Despite the progress made by nineteenth and twentieth-century scholars, the understanding of the Two Emperor Issue about the Third Crusade has not been fully appreciated. The encounter in 1189-1190 was a time of many "firsts": the first time Constantinople was threatened by a German ruler, the first time a Byzantine Emperor expressed fear— rather than preoccupation— over a German invasion, and the first time the two empires met on the battlefield on opposing sides. Given Isaac's fears and Frederick's actions, the timeline of the Issue should be extended.

In addition to advocating for an extended timeline, a more nuanced assessment of the significance attributed to the Issue is warranted. Ohnsorge's perspective appears to diverge from historical facts. The Problem of Two Emperors did not persist as a continuous dilemma, as evidenced by periods of peace and alliance between the two empires. The mere persistence of rulers in using Roman titles cannot be deemed a "problem" in its entirety. A crucial factor for evaluating the Issue's significance lies in the "reaction" of the other ruler. Expressions of disdain, explicit counterclaims, and threats serve as indicators of the presence of the Two Emperor Issue and can facilitate deductions regarding its importance.

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<sup>56</sup> Classen, *Komnenen*, 181-182.

The conflict in the Third Crusade contains all indicators that hint to the involvement and significance of the Two Emperor Issue. Despite the short longevity and limited short-term political impact, the encounter between East and West was a turning point in the conflict over Rome. Evolving from established diplomatic norms to an uncharted realm of warfare, the interaction between the two emperors is the most explicit evidence that a problem existed during the late twelfth century. While Latin sources maintain that Frederick's sole intent was to reach the Holy Land, this is only true until October 1189. Scholars have thus far neglected to discern the multifaceted stages of the conflict and the nuanced shifts in attitudes and ambitions from both the Byzantines and Germans. The dealings were not simple crusading activities or a random chain of events.<sup>57</sup> Isaac's defensive stance, driven by apprehensions of invasion stemming from Frederick's imperial ambitions, elicited a pragmatic response from the latter. This strategic manoeuvring was compounded by Frederick's grievance over Isaac's perceived insolence and self-identification as Roman. Hence, the significance of the Two Emperor Issue within the broader framework of the German-Byzantine encounter during the Third Crusade warrants comprehensive reassessment, with this research representing the foundational step towards this scholarly endeavour.

### An Application of the Two-Emperor Issue to Explain the Conflict

The Two Emperor Issue profoundly influenced the encounter between the Western and Eastern Roman Empires during the Third Crusade. From the Byzantine perspective, fear and suspicion regarding German ambitions prompted Isaac to employ desperate tactics to expel the Crusaders from his kingdom. The mistrust felt amongst Byzantines reached German ears, as Dietpold writes, "The report of the kings of France and England and the Duke of Brindisi was that our lord the emperor had entered Greece with the intention of extinguishing and

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<sup>57</sup> Ohnsorge, *Zweikaiserproblem*, 115.

eradicating the Greeks, and he wanted to transfer that kingdom into the power of his son, the Duke of Swabia.”<sup>58</sup> Isaac lent credence to reports from the English and French kings regarding Frederick’s purported plans to usurp the Byzantine throne. Even more remarkable is the widespread awareness in Western Europe of Barbarossa’s ambition to seize Byzantium. If Dietpold’s letter is to be believed, the Problem of Two Emperors was common knowledge within medieval foreign politics.

From an alternative perspective, the conflict that embroiled the Two Emperor Issue was initiated by Isaac not out of fear but rather from a desire to assert his sovereignty. Unlike in the West, where usurpation was uncommon, it was a prevalent practice in the East. However, attaining recognition posed an inherent challenge. Since Manuel’s time, Byzantium had lacked a "legitimate" ruler, prompting Isaac, as the first member of his dynasty, to seek legitimacy by aligning himself with Byzantine customs. Being Roman was an intrinsic aspect of emperorship in the East and, as elucidated by Ohnsorge, both sides clearly understood the Two Emperor Issue at this juncture in the century.<sup>59</sup> Isaac thus seized a unique opportunity to confront Barbarossa directly, aiming to reassert that Roman customs belonged to the East and discredit his Western counterpart in the process.

This perspective aligns with the unfolding of events. Initially, Isaac employed attacks and scorched earth tactics within his empire, hoping to surround, tire, and defeat Frederick. As it became evident that Frederick was steadfast in his Crusade aspirations and willing to conquer more Byzantine territory to realise his objectives, Isaac de-escalated. The de-escalation did not entail an immediate correction of Frederick’s imperial titles in letters. It was only when the

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<sup>58</sup> Magnus, *Chronicon*, 510. “*Relatione regum Franciae et Angliae ei ducis Brundusii se percepisse, domnum imperatorem ea intentione Greciam intrasse, quod extinctis et extirpatis Grecis regnum illud in potestatem filii sui ducis Sueviae vellet transfundere.*”

<sup>59</sup> Werner Ohnsorge, *Ost-Rom und der Westen: gesammelte Aufsätze zur Geschichte der byzantinisch-abendländischen Beziehungen und des Kaisertums* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1983), 25.

capital, Constantinople, came under threat and war was declared that Isaac “ideologically retreated”.

The Third Crusade marked a pivotal juncture in the 400-year conflict during which Byzantium was confronted by a threat from the Germans over the Two Emperor Issue. Despite the palpable sense of desperation conveyed in Choniates’ chronicle, the author conspicuously omits any direct mention of the Two Emperor Problem. Nevertheless, Choniates consistently refers to the Byzantine emperors as “Roman Emperors” and the populace of the empire as “Roman”, juxtaposed with Frederick being consistently labelled as the “German emperor/king”.<sup>60</sup> Although contemporary Byzantine sources remain silent on the Two Emperor Issue, insights gleaned from Kinnamos reveal that the contest was well-known in Byzantium. In his writings, Kinnamos criticises the papacy for conferring a false title upon the German ruler and denounces the German ruler for appropriating imperial honours devoid of legitimacy. Recalling Constantine’s role in integrating the papal office and the concept of imperial sovereignty into the empire, Kinnamos accuses the pope of selectively embracing only parts of the decree that are advantageous to himself.<sup>61</sup> The absence of the Two Emperor Issue in Byzantine sources can then be attributed to Byzantium’s longstanding identity as the new Rome.<sup>62</sup> Despite the inconvenience and annoyance caused by the Germans’ usurpation of titles, they were predominantly perceived as devoid of genuine meaning.

Byzantium’s self-perception as Roman rendered references to Rome somewhat futile. While imperial titles were subject to change, coins served as consistent indicators of imperial political ideology.<sup>63</sup> Illustrated by Byzantine coins from Isaac’s reign (fig. 1), references to Rome or

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<sup>60</sup> Nicetas Choniates, *O City of Byzantium, Annals of Niketas Choniates*, trans. Harry Magoulias (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984), 197-248.

<sup>61</sup> Kinnamos, *Deeds*, 164-166.

<sup>62</sup> Lilie, “*Zweikaiserproblem*”, 242-243.

<sup>63</sup> Dolger, *Byzanz*, 299.

imperial titles were notably absent from the empire's currency. Instead, religious iconography predominated, featuring the emperor on one side with holy figures to reaffirm the origins and legitimacy of his role. In contrast, coinage from Barbarossa's reign (fig. 2) often bore the inscription "ROMA CAPVT MVNDI" on its reverse, alongside imagery of a tower with a gate enclosure. The acknowledgement of being the Roman successor held greater importance for Frederick than for Isaac. As a relatively new empire, Germany had only occupied the Roman seat for 400 years. Insecurity characterized the German perception of Byzantium. During the Third Crusade, mere titles and minor conflicts were sufficient to prompt Barbarossa's strategic shift from simply traversing Byzantine territory to contemplating conquest. The discourse documented in German sources reveals the volatility of Frederick's character when his claim to Roman emperorship was challenged. This fragility on the part of the German Emperor was only assuaged when Isaac recognised the German imperial titles. Therefore, the conflict over Roman inheritance receives considerably more coverage in accounts by Ansbert, Dietpold, and the author of *Historia Peregrinorum* compared to Byzantine sources.

Challenges to Frederick's status as the "Roman Emperor" were not confined to the East. In the West, debates ensued to determine the true Roman Emperor. Addressing this question, Bernardus, a Spanish canonist, affirmed that "the Constantinopolitan, he is the procurator and defender of the Roman Church [...] and to this Roman church, he grants the sword and crown."<sup>64</sup> Bernardus expressed doubts about Charlemagne's coronation and whether it constituted a *translatio imperii*, ultimately concluding that the Byzantine emperor was the true Roman emperor. Although Bernardus articulated this perspective after Frederick's reign, it is plausible that similar debates occurred throughout the twelfth century. Doubts over the identity of the "real" Roman emperor possibly existed in the 1160s. When Frederick withdrew his

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<sup>64</sup> Alphons Stickler, 'Der Kaiserbegriff des Bernardus Compotellanus Antiquus.' In *Post Scripta Essays on Medieval Law and the Emergence of the European State in Honor of Gaines Post*, Ed. Joseph Strayer and Donald Queller, *Studia Gratiana* 15 (Rome: Libreria Ateneo Salesiano, 1972), 106n5. "*Dicitur. quod constantinopolitanus, iste alius procurator est sive defensor romane ecclesie [...] et huic romana ecclesia concedit gladium et coronam.*"

support for the papacy to support an antipope, Manuel temporarily became the pope's protector and was nearly crowned in Rome. The division of support in Italy would have undoubtedly led to varied responses to the question "Who is the real Roman emperor?" from different city-states.<sup>65</sup> As the newer empire and a younger Roman entity, Frederick was particularly protective of his title and engaged in efforts to solidify the legitimacy of the Holy Roman Empire against challenges from the East.

### "Governing" or "Representing" the Conflict?

During different stages of the conflict, the problem of the two emperors either governed or was used to symbolise the struggle. To assert that the Two Emperor Issue "governed" aspects of the encounter between Isaac and Frederick is to acknowledge its role in shaping the attitudes of one party towards the other. Conversely, the Two Emperor Issue "represented" the conflict during periods where other factors contributed to the decision-making of the rulers, and the Issue was employed to justify their actions.

The Two Emperor Issue can be said to have governed the conflict through Isaac's actions before and during the initial months of the arrival of the Crusader army. Isaac bore responsibility for breaching the Nuremberg agreements of safe passage, imprisoning Frederick's envoys, and launching attacks on the Crusader army.<sup>66</sup> Drawing from the accounts of Choniates, Dietpold, and Ansbert, the precise influence of the Two Emperor Problem on Isaac's actions becomes evident. According to the Byzantine chronicler, the advancement of the Germans was perceived as an invasion. Dietpold corroborates that the emperor received reports from France and England regarding Frederick's true ambitions.<sup>67</sup> Isaac's insecurities

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<sup>65</sup> Paul Magdalino, 'The Byzantine Empire, 1118–1204,' in *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, ed. David Luscombe and Jonathan Riley-Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 621–22; Zachary Brooke, *A History of Europe* (London: Mathuen, 1938), 482–483.

<sup>66</sup> Choniates, *City*, 219–227.

<sup>67</sup> Choniates, *City*, 220; Magnus, *Chronicon*, 510.



were further compounded by the actions of the Crusaders within Byzantine territory, as they engaged in plunder and conquests to establish bases.<sup>68</sup> Within Byzantium, the anti-German sentiment was spearheaded by Patriarch Dositheos. Choniates records Dositheos' prophecy foreseeing the Germans entering Constantinople through the Xylokerkos postern.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, upon the return of the German legates, Frederick was informed of Dositheos' speeches urging the Greeks to kill Germans without fear of reprisal.<sup>70</sup> Influenced by the anti-German sentiment and afraid of losing his kingdom, Isaac actively sought to end the Crusade by defeating Frederick. At this stage, the Problem was governing Isaac's actions.

It was not until October 1189, when it was clear that the Byzantine army was inferior to the crusaders' that Isaac altered his tactics. From this stage, the Problem of Two Emperor assumed symbolic significance for the Byzantines and receded into the realm of *intitulatio*. Isaac's *intitulatio* remained unchanged during his reign, with the sole exception of his letters to Frederick. However, the conflict became symbolic because of Isaac's silent acceptance of military defeat. Had the Byzantine army found success against the Crusaders, it is unlikely that Isaac would have retreated to the pen and paper.

Conversely, the Problem of Two Emperor influenced Frederick's actions differently. Initially, the Two Emperor Issue played a peripheral role in Frederick's actions. However, as Isaac's resistance intensified, particularly regarding Frederick's Roman titles, the Issue began to significantly influence the actions of the German Emperor vis-à-vis the Byzantines. In a letter from Frederick to Isaac dated after the German occupation of Philippopolis (24-26 August), the German emperor reasserts his intentions to march to the Holy Land without threatening

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<sup>68</sup> Ansbert, *History*, 71-72.

<sup>69</sup> Choniates, *City*, 222.

<sup>70</sup> Ansbert, *History*, 77.

Byzantium. In the letter, Frederick confirms that “neither did he plot now, nor had he in the past, anything detrimental or disagreeable against the Romans”.<sup>71</sup>

However, as Brand claims, the circumstances of Choniates’ account suggest that Frederick’s letter preceded Isaac’s first defiance (received on 25 August).<sup>72</sup> The sources corroborate Brand’s hypothesis, as Isaac answers Frederick’s reconciliatory letter by dispatching the “arrogant” letter to the German emperor and another to the *protostrator* Manuel Kamyzes. The letter to Manuel contained instructions to attack the crusader army, which led to the near Philippopolis on 29 August.<sup>73</sup> Although Choniates’ mistake does not alter the impact of the Two Emperor Problem in Frederick’s action, it raises the question as to whether the author manipulated the dates to vindicate the German Emperor. The chronicler expresses deep admiration for the German emperor, claiming upon his death that “He was a man who deserved to enjoy a blessed and perpetual memory... because his burning passion for Christ was greater than that of any other Christian monarch of his time.”<sup>74</sup>

While it is compelling that Frederick initially harboured no intentions or plans to harm Byzantium, his demeanour undoubtedly shifted following Isaac’s initial defiance. Therefore, Choniates’ error holds significance as it misrepresents the ruler’s sentiments toward Isaac. Upon receiving Isaac’s second letter of defiance on 29 October, Frederick’s rhetoric reflected a noticeable change in attitude toward Byzantium. This marks the point where the Two Emperor Issue began to govern the German Emperor’s actions. If Choniates’ account is to be believed, Frederick’s change of attitude appears too sudden, even when considering Isaac’s other disrespectful actions, such as imprisoning diplomats and skirmishes. All manifestations

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<sup>71</sup> Choniates, *City*, 222.

<sup>72</sup> Brand, *Byzantium*, 359.

<sup>73</sup> Franz Dolger (ed.), *Regesten Der Kaiserurkunden Des Oströmischen Reiches Von 565-1453*, Teil 2 (Berlin: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 1925) doc. 1596, 96.

<sup>74</sup> Choniates, *City*, 228-229.

of Isaac's conduct, guided by the Two Emperor Issue, compelled Frederick to revise his sentiments and aspirations toward Byzantium. The Issue governed Frederick's decision-making from the moment Frederick expressed distaste for Isaac's handling of the Roman question until December.

Despite the inverse relationship between Frederick's and Isaac's use of the Two Emperor Issue, the elements of "governing" and "representing" are not mutually exclusive. For instance, Isaac's actions from August to October can be interpreted as being governed by the Two Emperor Issue but also represented by it. The emperors' active attempt to thwart the expedition's progress were governed by his fears of a German invasion, while the letters' *intitulatio* were a representation of the Problem to undermine Frederick's claim to the Roman throne.

# Scepticism and the Future of Research

## ‘The (Not a) Problem of Two-Emperors’ (Hehl)

Soon after Ohnsorge and Classen advanced the understanding of a two-emperor conflict active between 800 and 1204, scepticism spread. Lilie, in the 1980s, acknowledged the existence of the conflict but made reservations over its political relevance. Claiming that the Issue only arose when relations were already strained, Lilie concluded that it posed no significance to foreign policy decisions.<sup>75</sup> As previously argued, the Problem of Two Emperors was not continuous. It only arose in particular instances (the 1160s and 1189-90). However, the limitation imposed on its political significance belittles the potential historical significance of the Issue. As an added barrier between Latin, especially Germany and their allies, and Greek relations, the potential ramifications of the fight over Roman imperial titles are endless.

In the twenty-first century, debates surrounding the significance of the Two Emperor Issue persist. Athina's study on *intitulatio*s concluded that they were merely used as a “diplomatic weapon.”<sup>76</sup> A few years later, Hehl called into question the Issue's entire significance, going as far as to claim there was no Problem of Two Emperors.<sup>77</sup> Since the 1980s works on the Two Emperor Issue have focused on trivialising or at least challenging its existence and significance. No historian has dedicated efforts to applying the perspective of the Two Emperor Issue to the events of the Third crusade. It is tempting to view the Issue through a narrow lens, imagining the exchange of letters and likening the conflict to that of Manuel's reign. During Manuel's reign, the Two Emperor Issue was only active when the emperor sought to be

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<sup>75</sup> Lilie, “*Zweikaiserproblem*”, 219, 241.

<sup>76</sup> Dermitzaki, *Byzantium*, 380.

<sup>77</sup> Hehl, *Zwei Kaiser*, 41-46, 67-69.

coronated. Still, it is unlikely that the pope had genuine intentions to perform the ceremony.<sup>78</sup> However, the context of Isaac's reign presents a different scenario. With the threat looming and reports from Europe detailing Frederick's true intentions, Isaac, unlike Manuel, was not striving to assert his claim as the emperor of Rome. Instead, the emperor was grappling to maintain his position as the Eastern Roman emperor in the face of such formidable threats.

Lilie's perspective on the Two Emperor Issue presents a more nuanced understanding among sceptic scholarship. While it acknowledges the historical existence and occasional significance, it erroneously contends its influence on foreign politics. Limiting the Issue's significance hinders a complete understanding of events. Nevertheless, how do other primary sources corroborate the understanding of sceptical historians?

The '*Letter About the Death of the Emperor Frederick*', composed after the emperor's demise but before the army's arrival in Antioch, notably does not mention the Two Emperor Issue. In detailing the conflict, Bishop Gottfried of Würzburg attributes the capture of Greek cities to the "Emperor of Constantinople" without reference to any broader imperial dispute.<sup>79</sup> Although the *Letter* provides intricate descriptions of battles, letters exchanged, and negotiations, the absence of any allusion to the Two Emperor Problem may suggest its perceived insignificance at the time. Indeed, this omission resonates with the final peace treaty of Adrianople between Germany and Byzantium, which similarly lacks any explicit mention of the Issue.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> George Waitz (ed.), *Chronica regia Coloniensis cum continuationibus in monasterio S. Pantaleonis scriptis atque historiae Coloniensis monumentis*. MGH SS rer. Germ. 18 (Hanover: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 1880), 121.

<sup>79</sup> Otto of St. Blasien, 'The Chronicle of Otto of St. Blasien,' in Loud, *Crusade*, 169.

<sup>80</sup> Ansbert, *History*, 91-92

Similarly, Otto of St. Blasien's *chronicle*, written around two decades after the crusade, omits any mention of the Two Emperor Issue. The author describes how the crusaders overcame the "Emperor of Constantinople" through "Roman power and German Resolution," attributing their actions to Greek treachery.<sup>81</sup> Both the Letter and Otto's Chronicle reveal that the Two Emperor Conflict held little importance in the narrative of the Third Crusade's events, both during and even twenty years after the conflict. After the Greeks acquiesced to Frederick's demands for hostages, Problem of Two Emperors appears to have vanished from historical records.

The conflict between Isaac and Frederick was undoubtedly significant, so its absence from contemporary sources demands an alternative explanation. The purpose and circumstances under which both sources were written may justify the omission of Isaac's conflict with Frederick. Despite offering a brief account of the crusade, The *Letter*, aimed primarily to inform the pope or a German bishop about the emperor's death.<sup>82</sup> Therefore, a detailed and intricate narration of the emperor's interactions with the Greeks would have been deemed counterintuitive and unnecessary. As for Otto's chronicle, its chronology is notoriously dubious, diminishing its value for studying the Third Crusade. Instead, the significance of Otto's *chronicle* lies in its invaluable perspective of the events two decades after their occurrence.

The recently studied extracts from the *Chronica Fuldensis* offer a nuanced perspective on the *intitulatio* conflict between Frederick and Isaac. This source significantly highlights the existence of disagreements that were swiftly resolved through Isaac's compliance with Frederick's peace terms. The German emperor refers to his Byzantine counterpart throughout the conflict as "*rex Constantinop(olitani)*". A notable shift in tone occurs in a subsequent

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<sup>81</sup> Blasien, *Chronicle*, 177-178.

<sup>82</sup> Chroust (ed.), *Quellen*, xcvi.

letter dated February 1190, where Frederick addresses Isaac as “*imperatorem Romanie*”. In the last preserved report from the crusade written by Barbarossa to Henry VI, the emperor writes about the resolution achieved with the Greeks and names Isaac again “*imperatoris Romanie*”.<sup>83</sup> During the conflict, Frederick adamantly refuses to recognise Isaac’s claim to Roman titles. However, as the conflict subsided, the German emperor reverted to acknowledging Isaac as a fellow Roman. The significance of the Two Emperor Problem was pronounced during times of conflict, as it influenced foreign policy and diplomatic engagements. However, this importance was fleeting, strictly confined to periods of heightened tension where the question of Roman sovereignty was paramount.

The significance of the *intitulatio*s in folios 13b, 14a, and 14b of the *Chronica Fuldensis* fragments has not been adequately explored within the context of the Two Emperor Issue. In 2007, Hiestand elucidated that Frederick’s alteration in protocol was a direct response to the change in Isaac’s letter to Barbarossa after October 1189. Drawing upon Dietpold’s assertions, the historian posits that when Isaac resumed adherence to Frederick’s Roman protocols, the German emperor reciprocated, similarly to the dynamics observed between Manuel and Barbarossa.<sup>84</sup> As noted before, Manuel’s address to Barbarossa does not corroborate Dietpold’s suggestion. Aside from the 1178 letter previously analysed, another exchange dated to 1180, towards the end of Manuel’s reign, confirms that Byzantines did not grant Roman imperial protocol to the Germans. Despite the absence of active conflicts with Barbarossa, Manuel addresses the German emperor as “*gloriosissimo regi Alemannie at imperatori*”, while reserving the title “*augustus et Romanorum moderator*” for himself.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Walter Heinemeyer (ed.), *Chronica Fuldensis: Die Darmstädter Fragmente der Fuldaer Chronik* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1976), 93-100.

<sup>84</sup> Hiestand, *Barbarossas*, 510.

<sup>85</sup> Albert of Stade, *Annales Stadenses auctore Alberto*, ed. Johann Lappenberg, MGH Ss XVI (Hannover: Impensis Bibliopolii Avlici Haviani, 1859), 349.

The *Chronica Fuldensis* is the only Latin source from the Third Crusade that attributes Roman protocol to Isaac. The acknowledgement of Isaac's Roman emperorship contrasts with Frederick's discourse in October. After vehemently asserting that there could only be one head of Rome, why would Frederick address Isaac as the "Roman Emperor"? Given that Frederick had already secured what he desired from the Greeks—respect, security, and provisions—Why extend such deference to Isaac, especially in a letter inaccessible to the emperor?

The *Chronica* appears to have been aware enough of the *intitulatio* conflict to modify Isaac's protocol after peace was secured. The letter from folio 14b contains information that must have originated from an individual with access to imperial documents. However, due to the unknown origin and authorship of the source, assessing its authenticity is challenging. If authentic, it would lend support to Lilie's view of the Two Emperor Issue as having isolated significance. Yet, one would expect Ansbert's account to include at least one reference to Isaac as a 'Roman emperor' in such a case. No Latin chronicle from the period accords Isaac the status of being referred to in the same line as Rome. Instead, Latin sources consistently denote Isaac as the "King of Constantinople", "Emperor of Constantinople", "King of the Greeks", and "Emperor of the Greeks". Unfortunately, the *Chronica* is incomplete and heavily damaged, surviving in only one copy. This makes it difficult to ascertain its provenance and true significance. Further research efforts should be dedicated to exploring the value of the *Chronica Fuldensis'* Darmstädter fragments.

### A Solution: The Future of the Two-Emperor Dispute and the Third Crusade

Historians have largely overlooked the significance of the Two Emperor Problem during the Third Crusade. Scholarship has primarily concentrated on Manuel's era as a focal point for analysing this Issue. While the selection of this timeframe is understandable given Manuel's lengthy reign, which was marked by extensive interactions with the West, the events of the



Third Crusade provide deeper insights into the gravity of the matter. Historians must understand that the Two Emperor Problem did not perish with Manuel in 1180. During the twelfth century, Frederick's assertive imperialism brought the Two Emperor Problem to the forefront, shaping interactions between Germany and Byzantium.

During the 1160s, Frederick's ambitions were not confined to Italian territories; they extended to all regions previously under the dominion of the Roman Empire. Another source missing from discussions concerning the Two Emperor Issue is the *Ludus de Antichristo*. The play, written in 1160, is connected to the rivalry between Pope Alexander III and Frederick. According to Thomas, the propagandistic discourse depicts Barbarossa as the "only ordained instrument of divine agency."<sup>86</sup> Aspiring to become the head of the Church, the emperor seeks hegemony and acceptance from the Christian leaders. Those who resist, like the Franks, face defeat on the battlefield.<sup>87</sup> In the *Rex Graecorum's* case, the emperor's message is clear: "Because, with all discretion, we know you to be wise, you should now acknowledge our jurisdiction."<sup>88</sup> The Greek acknowledgement of Frederick's status as the head of the Church inherently entails acceptance of his Roman rights.

Frederick's boundless ambitions are vividly portrayed in the play, as he not only seeks to ascend as the head of the Church but also to claim the title of emperor over the Christian world. The imperial mechanism envisioned by the Germans closely mirrors the Roman-inspired Byzantine model: the emperor as the Church's spiritual leader and the Christian vassal states paying tribute to the Emperor in Constantinople. The creation of the *Ludus* also prompts questions regarding the extent to which Frederick's ambitions were known among his

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<sup>86</sup> Kyle Thomas (ed.) and Carol Symes (trans.), *The Play about the Antichrist (Ludus de Antichristo)* (Boston: Medieval Institute Publications, 2023), 36.

<sup>87</sup> Thomas, *Play*, 85-89.

<sup>88</sup> Thomas, *Play*, 92-93.

contemporaries. If the author was aware, especially during the 1160s when the emperor's Roman claims peaked, then it is reasonable to infer that knowledge of such ambitions permeated throughout Christendom. It certainly did not seem farfetched to Isaac when the French and English kings reported Frederick's desire to conquer the Greeks and place his son on the throne.<sup>89</sup> The perpetuation, if not of Frederick's actual ambition, but of the belief within Christendom regarding what Frederick was capable of, ensured the continuation of tensions between Byzantium and Germany during the Third Crusade. Even if Frederick's ambitions were not malicious, the emperor had instilled widespread apprehension because of his aggressive imperialistic politics.

The imperialistic sentiments aimed at Byzantium are reflected in Otto of Freising's *chronicle*. The author initially delineates the boundaries of the German empire, asserting that the "barbarians or Greeks who dwell outside its bounds... are overawed by the weight of its authority and tremble."<sup>90</sup> Not only are the Greeks not a Roman empire, but they are also depicted as enemies. Later in the chronicle, in the section attributed to Rahewin, victory is claimed over Manuel, "who voluntarily sought friendship and alliance... to term himself emperor not of Rome, but of New Rome."<sup>91</sup> Portraying the Byzantine compromise as a submission was intended to depict Frederick as triumphant over the Greeks in their dispute over the Roman crown. The German fixation on Byzantine recognition resurfaced during the Third Crusade after Isaac's second letter of defiance.

Otto's *Deeds*, the *Ludus*, and the sources from the Third Crusade depict a consistent manifestation of imperialism directed towards Byzantium throughout Frederick's reign. While

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<sup>89</sup> Magnus, *Chronicon*, 510.

<sup>90</sup> Otto of Freising, *The Deeds of Frederick Barbarossa*, trans. Charles Mierow (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 25.

<sup>91</sup> Freising, *Deeds*, 334.

the *Ludus*, being a play, cannot be directly construed as Frederick's personal ambitions, its thematic aspirations and portrayal of the ruler align with the overarching ethos of his reign. Otto's chronicle provides a more reliable account of Frederick's ambitions during the early years of his rule. Notably, the chronicle places significant emphasis on the Greeks at certain junctures, lending credence to Isaac's apprehensions.

With Frederick's imperial ambitions in mind, the Two Emperor Problem research cannot end at Manuel's death. Isaac's defensive actions ought to be vindicated by the apprehension of an imminent attack—a sentiment he deemed entirely rational. Immediately preceding the Third Crusade, the West's quest for universal imperial supremacy gained renewed vigour through events such as Henry VI's marriage to Constance in 1186 and the amalgamation of Sicily with the Western Empire between 1189 and 1194.<sup>92</sup> Therefore, the chronology of the Two Emperor Issue needs to be extended to encapsulate 1189 and 1190 as points of consideration. The significance of the Third Crusade in elucidating the dynamics between the Holy Roman Empire and the Eastern Roman Empire lies in the Byzantine apprehension and German sense of entitlement.

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<sup>92</sup> Hans Hubert Anton, 'Zweikaiserproblem,' in *Lexicon des Mittelalters*, vol. 9 (Munich: LexMA, 1998), 721-722.

# Conclusion

The encounter between Frederick and Isaac in the Third Crusade can only be comprehensively and accurately understood with considering the Two Emperor Issue. The absence of this factor in the scholarly analysis of the 1189-1190 confrontation has led to oversimplified explanations of Isaac's motives and Frederick's intentions. Isaac, often painted as the instigator, is unfairly criticised for engaging in what appears to be a senseless conflict against Frederick, who is erroneously portrayed as maintaining peaceful intentions. However, a closer examination through the lens of the Two Emperor Issue reveals a more nuanced perspective, particularly the Byzantine viewpoint on the unfolding events. Frederick's consistently aggressive imperialism, documented in contemporary sources, understandably alarmed Isaac, especially given Frederick's command over a formidable army. Isaac's apprehension appears justified with reports from the English and French kings and the actions of the Crusaders upon their arrival in Byzantium.

Another misconception that requires correction is the portrayal of Frederick as a peaceful figure. While there may have been genuine intentions of peace at first, evidence suggests that Frederick's stance evolved once Isaac's insubordination touched the sensitive issue of Roman emperorship. Frederick's intentions were converted, and he now sought the downfall of Constantinople. This transformation in Frederick's intentions became evident when he considered conquering Constantinople. Within three months of entering Byzantium, Frederick orchestrated the conquest of towns for strategic purposes, permitted his army to pillage and plunder the surrounding areas, and dispatched a letter to Henry VI requesting assistance in attacking Constantinople. This swift and dramatic shift in strategy occurred following Isaac's challenge to Frederick's Roman claims. Researchers must recognise that Frederick's envoys had been released from captivity by this stage, and Isaac had ceased engaging in physical confrontations. This situation raises questions about whether Frederick's unreasonable

demands for peace were merely a guise to achieve Isaac's submission and humiliation, thereby solidifying his Roman claims. This aspect presents a promising avenue for further exploration in future research.

A comprehensive examination of primary sources is essential to fully integrate the Problem of Two Emperors into the 1189-1190 conflict. Instead of automatically relying on Ansbert's account, which has its limitations, greater attention should be given to Choniates' works. Despite its shortcomings, Choniates' writings provide valuable insights into the perceptions of Byzantine inhabitants regarding Frederick's expedition. Additionally, the recently transcribed *Chronica Fuldensis* offers another crucial perspective overlooked in discussions of the Problem of Two Emperors and warrants further exploration.

The Problem of Two Emperors both governed the 1189-1190 conflict and served as a representation of it. Throughout this period, the Problem significantly influenced foreign policy decisions, challenging the simplistic views of denialists who dismiss it as a mere gimmick. However, this paper's thesis rejects Ohnsorge's unqualified endorsement of the Issue's influence, particularly regarding the Third Crusade. Instead, it argues that the Problem of Two Emperors was only relevant for the duration of the conflict. As evidenced by the *Chronica*, Frederick promptly acknowledged Isaac's connection to Rome in subsequent *intitulatio*s after the correction of his imperial titles. Therefore, the Problem of Two Emperors had temporary significance during the 1189-1190 conflict.

## Appendix



Figure 1) Hyperpyron of Isaac II Angelos (1185-1195), Gold, 4.60g, 29mm, Dubarton Oaks. Obverse: the Virgin enthroned facing, nimbate, wearing tunic and maphorion, holding the head of the infant Christ facing on breast; across fields: MHP ΘV. Reverse: ICAAKIOC ΔCC; Isaac standing facing on the left, wearing stemma, divitision and jeweled loros, holding cruciform sceptre, and the Archangel St. Michael standing facing on the right, wearing military tunic, breastplate and Saigon, holding sword-in-sheath between them; above: Manus Dei and O, in right field: XM. <https://www.doaks.org/resources/online-exhibits/byzantine-emperors-on-coins/the-komnenoi-and-angeloi-1081-1204/hyperpyron-of-isaac-ii-1185-1195> [accessed 15 March 2024]



Figure 2) AR Pfennig struck in Aachen of Frederick Barbarossa (1155-1190), 18mm, 1.5g, Cointalk. Obverse: Emperor holding sword and globus cruciger. Reverse: ROMA CAPVT MVNDI, Tower behind enclosure wall with gate, Manadier 27. Credit: <https://www.cointalk.com/threads/frederick-barbarossa.305228/> [accessed 15 March 2024]

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