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The image of Theodore I Laskaris in primary sources and historiography: some reconsiderations

Volkoff Angelina A.

Аспирант

Московский государственный университет имени М.В.Ломоносова, Исторический факультет, Кафедра истории средних веков, Москва, Россия

E-mail: angelinavolkoff@gmail.com

Theodore I Laskaris (1206-1221) was the “refounder” of the Byzantine empire at Nicaea. He is basically considered the first Byzantine emperor after the capture of Constantinople in 1204 by the Fourth crusade as it was precisely his empire that eventually took back the ancient capital city. His efforts in the regroupment of the Byzantine state were crucial and although this role could potentially have been taken up by another person, Theodore’s success was praised and his skills exemplified. This paper aims to review how emperor Theodore I was perceived and portrayed by his contemporaries, and how later historians studied and presented him. It becomes clear that the laudatory nature of the primary sources concerning Theodore Laskaris and the particularities of the historiographical treatment of them have all contributed to a rather two-dimensional representation of this historical figure, lacking in depth and dynamism.

While emperor, Theodore Laskaris was compared to Christ the Saviour, Zorobabel, and Alexander the Great. He was asked for patronage and support, undertook difficult military campaign and eventually came to terms with his adversaries on essentially equal grounds. The high esteem towards Theodore had consequently influenced and defined his historical image. Primary sources and modern scholars have put forward an almost exclusively positive perception of Theodore I Laskaris’ role in history. This perception, however, is partly the effect of bias and of the simplification of this figure’s participation in the events of his time. It can be said that Theodore’s efforts have been sidelined by the ultimate results he achieved during his reign which thus overshadow other important aspects of his persona. The current state of Theodore’s presentation in history lacks depth and does not do justice to the complexity of his activities. His patience and application in Byzantine affairs should not be minimised, nor should the originality of his approach to some key issues be overlooked.