



Summary :

The Empire of Nicaea, established in 1204 after the fall of Constantinople to the Crusaders, tried to fill in the gap for the Byzantine Empire in all fields. Education and sciences were given particular consideration. Eminent scholars of the 13th century were associated to the court of Nicaea, where the subsequent movement of the Palaiologean Renaissance was largely defined.

Date

1204-1261

Geographical Location

Bithynia, Asia Minor

1. State Policy and Views

The ‘[Empire of Nicaea](#)’, [Nicaea](#) of Bithynia being its center, was established by [Theodore I Laskaris](#) (1204 - 1222), who tried to fill in the gap created by the dissolution of the Byzantine Empire after Constantinople fell to the Crusaders of the [Fourth Crusade](#) in 1204. This decision actually denoted that the institutions that had declined after the empire collapsed should be established again, while the new state should become as influential and prestigious as its predecessor. In this framework, the first emperors Theodore I and [John III Vatatzes](#) (1222 - 1254) were particularly interested in cultural development, since they recognised that one of the characteristics the new state should have, if it was to be considered the heir of the Byzantine Empire, was cultural radiation.

In order to recruit its officials, the Empire of Nicaea initially turned to members of the Byzantine administration settled in its territories. They formed the original core of officials responsible for the administration of the new state.¹ However, circa 1220 the need for a renewal within the framework of the state and the church became obvious. This requirement, and mainly the increased interest of Emperors Theodore I and John III Vatatzes in an organised cultural development, led to the formation of a wide circle of scholars, who actively participated in administration and education. It is worth mentioning that one of the ways for selecting the new officials must have been the public examination of the candidates by the official who supervised education.²

2. Higher Education

It should be pointed out that when the new state mechanism was established, the emperor appointed [Theodore II Irenikos](#), the subsequent patriarch, as [hypatos ton philosophon](#) (chief of the philosophers). This office was introduced in the Byzantine Empire in the 11th century and its holder was responsible for supervising higher education. At the same time, admitting the lack of an organised educational system, the emperor sponsored at first a group of teachers to undertake the higher education of a circle of young people, offsprings of illustrious families who lived in the imperial court and were intended to become state officials (‘*archontopouloi kai paidopoula*’ - young masters and youngsters, according to one of them, [Nikephoros Blemmydes](#), who later became a prominent scholar of sciences³). [Demetrios Karykes](#), appointed by John III as the hypatos ton philosophon, was one of those teachers (Blemmydes himself was the apprentice of Karykes in philosophy).⁴

This policy of resorting to private teachers was followed in the domain of education by John Vatatzes as well. Another group, including the historian [George Akropolites](#), was sent to [Theodore Hexapterygos](#), who held a school of rhetoric under imperial auspices.⁵ However, it is worth mentioning that despite state funding, it was at the teachers’ disposal to accept or refuse particular students.

The most important teacher of this period was Nikephoros Blemmydes. After he had completed his studies and entered the ecclesiastical hierarchy, Blemmydes settled at the Monastery of St. Gregory, near [Ephesus](#), where he started to teach science to students sent by the emperor. He was the teacher of [Theodore II](#), successor to the throne, while in 1248 he established a school at the monastery of the Lord Christ-Who-Is in Ematha, where students soon started to flock as a result of the fame the school



achieved.⁶

At the same time, there were attempts at establishing a school of high education supervised by the court. In this framework, Blemmydes was summoned to assume the direction of the school but, when he refused, the gap was filled by [the school of George Babouskomites](#). The exact location of the school is not known, although it seems that it was within some distance from Nicaea, had several teachers and a rich library, which is said to have included, for example, all Aristotle's works.⁷

A school of liberal studies supervised by the state and funded by the state treasury was established in the years of Theodore II Laskaris. The [school](#) was based at the Church of St. Tryphon, near Lake Ascania, and aimed to provide the people with the ability to staff the highest posts of state.

3. Scientific Development

The distinct characteristic of education in the Empire of Nicaea was its secular orientation. This corresponded directly with the interests of the literary and imperial circles.

The interest in secular studies was expressed right from the start, but was particularly developed in the years of John Vatatzes before it reached a peak in the years of Theodore II Laskaris. The Laskaris family thought of their state as the heir of Byzantium and, as a result, of its culture and science, as science had developed in the Byzantine Empire. The aim of raising the standards and achieving fame on a cultural level resulted in the formation of a climate of intellectual pursuit in the imperial court. Thus, there were attempts at collecting books and founding libraries, undertaken mainly by Blemmydes. This meant that the scientific texts and the ancient Greek literature had to be republished, which created the opportunity of interpreting it anew.

At the same time, public discussions with a scientific topic seem to have been taking place in the imperial court, while empress Eirene must have played an active role.⁸ According to sources, these approaches were probably characterised by attempts towards rationalisation and demystification, always according to context of the time.

The accounts and works of scholars that lived in the Empire of Nicaea shed light on the level of the scientific discussion held and the questions posed. The re-publication of texts led to their being read in a new light. Astronomy and the study of the natural world attracted particular interest. New works were written to meet the educational needs.

The most important texts reflecting the level the scientific discussion had reached are those by Nikephoros Blemmydes, that is, *Epitome physica*⁹ and *Synopsis Geographica*¹⁰, which dealt with the description and interpretation of the natural world. The works of the literate Emperor Theodore II, *Declaratio cosmica* and *De communione naturali*,¹¹ deal with cosmology and physics respectively.

A comprehensive review of the above mentioned works could reveal the issues and the level of the scientific discourse at the time. The work *Epitome physica*, written by Blemmydes after 1258, consists of 32 chapters and attempts to interpret the natural phenomena on the strength of natural principles and natural causes. In this framework, it deals with essential principles of physics, such as time, motion, space, perpetuity, the motion of the planets, as well as natural phenomena, such as thunders and earthquakes. The writer must have had an all-embracing knowledge of the ancient Greek production over a wide range of writers and works. Apart from Aristotle and Plato, he also refers to Archimedes, Eratosthenes, [Galen](#), Claudius Ptolemy, John Philoponus, Damascius and [Simplikios](#). Blemmydes interprets the world according to scientific principles and Christian theology. However, it is important that his Christian conception of the world does not inhibit his attempt towards a rational interpretation.¹² This joint interpretation is very important for the legitimisation of the ancient Greek intellectual production and its use in further scientific development.

As regards the works of Theodore Laskaris, they deal with cosmology and biology. The study of his work proves that he had been strongly influenced by Galen and Plato – mainly by Plato's *Timaeus*.



4. Evaluation

The intellectual atmosphere formed in the Empire of Nicaea is characterised by a series of innovations, which largely defined the subsequent movement of the Paleologean Renaissance.

At first, the turn to secular studies, formed under the auspices of the imperial rule, changed the intellectual atmosphere formed already from the late 11th century, which imposed obligations to scholars and promoted theological education against its secular counterpart. In the case of Nicaea, the attempt to recover ancient Greek knowledge provides an opportunity for reconsideration and new approaches, always taking into account the restrictions and obstacles posed to thinking by the intellectual realities of the time. The recovery of knowledge allows, among others, the enrichment of the content of studies, a result of which was the appearance of a series of scholars, who would later play a key-role in the Paleologean Renaissance (such as [George Pachymeres](#)).

Another very important point is that the authorities legitimised research and cultural re-evaluation, a fact expressed also through public discussions held in the imperial court.

As a result, the scholars gained in social and political status, a fact that contributed further to intellectual development.

The short period of the Empire of Nicaea was remarkably fruitful as regards the development of sciences and intellectual activity in general, while it formed to a large extent the basis for the subsequent Paleologean Renaissance.

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1. Niketas Choniates, Nicholas Messarites, Theodore Irenikos and Manuel Karantinos were among them. See Constantinides, C.N., *Higher Education in Byzantium in the Thirteenth and Early Fourteenth Centuries* (Cyprus Research Centre, Nicosia 1982), pp. 5-6.
 2. According to the autobiography of Nikephoros Blemmydes, who was examined by Demetrios Karykes, the consul of philosophers. Heisenberg, A. (ed.), *Nicephori Blemmydae, Curriculum Vitae et Carmina* (Leipzig 1896), p. 55.
 3. Heisenberg, A. (ed.), *Nicephori Blemmydae, Curriculum Vitae et Carmina* (Leipzig 1896), p. 4.
 4. See the autobiography of Blemmydes, Heisenberg, A. (ed.), *Nicephori Blemmydae, Curriculum Vitae et Carmina* (Leipzig 1896), p. XII.
 5. According to Akropolites, Theodore Hexapterygos was a 'άνήρ ου πάνυ μεν επιστήμων εν τοις μαθήμασιν, αγαθός δε φράζειν, οία ρητορικοίς λόγοις κατάκρως ενδιατρίψας και το εξαγγέλλειν ευφυώς μεμελετηκός και πολλού διά τούτο ηξιωμένος ονόματος', Heisenberg, A. (ed.), *Georgii Acropolitae Opera* (Leipzig 1903), p. 49.
 6. For example, George (Gregory II) of Cyprus went to Nicaea from Cyprus in order to continue his studies, although he was not finally admitted by the school of Blemmydes. According to his autobiography, '[...] τας εν Νικαΐας διατριβάς όπου και λόγος εκράτει γενομένω τινί αυτάς εξείναι δοκείν, τα γ' ες σοφόν ανδρών αφθονίαν, τας παλαιάς Αθήνας οράν'. See 'Autobiographie de Grégoire de Chypre', in Lameere, W., *La tradition manuscrite de la correspondance de Grégoire de Chypre, patriarche de Constantinople* (1283-1289) (Bruxelles-Rome 1937), p. 179, col. 26-28.
 7. Constantinides, C.N., *Higher education in Byzantium in the 13th and early 14th centuries (1204-ca.1310)* (Nicosia 1982), pp. 16, 141.
 8. A similar discussion is reported by George Akropolites, who says that during a previous discussion with Eirene Doukaina, circa 1238, about the cause of the solar eclipse, he maintained that the phenomenon occurred because of the interposition of the Moon between the Sun and the Earth, thus demystifying it. Eirene disagreed and fell in with the imperial doctor Nicholas Myrepsos. It is interesting that the empress finally was convinced by Akropolites and described him as 'φιλοσόφους λόγους προφέρων'. See *Χρονική συγγραφή*, chap. λθ', Heisenberg, A. (ed.), *Georgii Acropolitae Opera* (Leipzig 1903).
 9. Νικηφόρος Βλεμμύδης, *Epitome logica, Epitome Physica*, Migne, J.P. (ed.), *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 142 (Paris 1857-1866), 1024-1634.



10. Spohn, S. (ed.), *Nic. Blemidis duo opuscula geographica (Γεωγραφία συνοπτική ή Σύνοψις γεωγραφική και Ιστορία περί της γης εν συνόψει)*, (Leipzig 1818).
11. Migne, J.P. (ed.), *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 140 (Paris 1857-1866), pp. 1267-1396.
12. See Καρτσωνάκης, Μ., 'Φυσική και αστρονομία στο βυζαντινό κράτος του 13ου αιώνα', in *Ορθοδοξία και φυσικές επιστήμες* (Athens 1996), pp. 81-91.

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	Νικολαΐδης Θ. , "Οι επιστήμες στο Βυζάντιο. Η ιστορική παράδοση του νεότερου ελληνισμού", Καράς, Γ. (επιμ.), <i>Ιστορία και φιλοσοφία των επιστημών στον ελληνικό χώρο</i> , Αθήνα 2003, 26-44

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Glossary :

	hypatos ton philosophon
(consul of the philosophers) Byzantine official and scholar responsible for the public schools of philosophy. The first one was Michael Psellos (11th C.), whose successors were John Italos and Theodore of Smyrna etc.	

Sources

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- Νικηφόρος Βλεμμύδης, *Epitome logica, Epitome Physica*, Migne, J.P. (ed.), *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 142 (Paris 1857-1866), pp. 1024-1634.



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Quotations

Foundation of libraries in the Empire of Nicaea by Theodore II Laskaris

‘Καὶ βίβλους δὲ συνηγάγετο, οὐδ’ ὅσας ὁ ἐπὶ τούτῳ μεγαλυνόμενος Πτολεμαῖος, παντοίων τεχνῶν τε καὶ ἐπιστημῶν, καὶ ταύτας ταῖς πόλεσιν ἐναποτιθεῖς, τοῖς βουλομένοις εἰς ἀνάγνωσιν καὶ τῶν ἐν αὐταῖς σπουδασμάτων ἀνάπτυξιν ἐθέσπισε μεταδίδοσθαι, ἐφ’ ᾧ καὶ τὰ τοῦ λόγου εἰς τὸ μηδὲν σχεδὸν καταντήσαντα ἐκ τῆς καταστροφῆς τῆς βασιλίδος τῶν πόλεων, ἐπὶ τούτου αὖξεσθαι ἤρξατο, καὶ ἐπὶ μείζω προέκοψεν, ὡς ἐκασταχὴ τῶν Ῥωμαϊκῶν χωρῶν τε καὶ πόλεων χορείας σοφῶν καθορᾶσθαι καὶ Μουσῶν συνίστασθαι θέατρα, καὶ πάντα σχεδὸν τόπον, ἀγοραῖς πλήθει ἐλλογίμων ἀνδρῶν ἐπιστημονικῶν ζητημάτων παραθέσεις καὶ ἀντιθέσεις ἀσχολουμένων, καὶ πονουμένων ἐπὶ λογικὰς προτάσεις καὶ συμπεράσματα’.

Ψευδο-Σκουταριώτης, Σύνοψις Χρονική, Σάθας, Κ. (ed.), *Μεσαιωνική Βιβλιοθήκη Ζ'* (Venice 1894), pp. 535.26-536.6

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Emperors of Nicaea

Theodore I Laskaris (1204-1222)

John III Vatatzes (1222-1254)

Theodore II Laskaris (1254-1258)

John IV Laskaris (1258-1261)

Michael VIII Palaiologos (1259-1261: Emperor of Nicaea; 1261-1282: Emperor of Constantinople)