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Başvuru/Submitted: 05.02.2025

Kabul/Accepted: 24.03.2025

Atf: Öztürk, Saffet, “Dimitri Korobeinikov, Bizans ve XIII. Yüzyılda Türkler, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014”, *Ortaçağ Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 8/1 (Haziran 2025): 423-428.

Citation: Öztürk, Saffet, “Dimitri Korobeinikov, Byzantium and the Turks in the Thirteenth Century, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014”, *Ortaçağ Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 8/1 (June 2025): 423-428.

Lisans/License:



Yayın Tarihi	26 Haziran 2025
Hakem Sayısı	Ön İnceleme: Bir İç Hakem (Editör-Yayın Kurulu Üyesi) İçerik İncelemesi: Üç Dış Hakem
Değerlendirme	Çift Taraflı Kör Hakemlik
Benzerlik Taraması	Yapıldı-İntihal.Net
Etik Bildirim	ortacagarastirmalaridergisi@gmail.com
Çıkar Çatışması	Çıkar çatışması beyan edilmemiştir.
Finansman	Herhangi bir fon, hibe veya başka bir destek alınmamıştır.
Telif Hakkı & Lisans	Yazarlar dergide yayınlanan çalışmalarının telif hakkına sahiptirler ve çalışmaları CC BY-NC 4.0 lisansı altında yayımlanır. https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/deed.tr
Date of Publication	26 June 2025
Reviewers	Single Anonymized - An Internal (Editor board member) Double Anonymized - Three External
Review Reports	Double-blind
Plagiarism Checks	Yes – İntihal.Net
Complaints	ortacagarastirmalaridergisi@gmail.com
Conflicts of Interest	The Author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest.
Grant Support	No funds, grants, or other support was received.
Copyright & License	Author(s) publishing with the journal retain(s) the copyright to their work licensed under the CC BY-NC 4.0. https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/deed.tr

BYZANTIUM and the TURKS in the THIRTEENTH CENTURY

Dimitri Korobeinikov's book, "*Byzantium and the Turks in the Thirteenth Century*", consists of an introduction, seven main chapters, and a conclusion. In his book, he thoroughly investigates the complex relationships between the Byzantines and the Turks during the period 1204 and 1304/5 and the political affairs in the triangle of the Byzantine Empire, Anatolian Seljuks, and Mongols in the chaotic atmosphere of the 13th century.

In the Introduction section (pp. 1–6), Korobeinikov discusses the turbulent nature of the 13th century, including the unprecedented and aggressive Mongolian expansion into the continent of Asia, the destruction of states and most pre-existing urban settlements. He also examines the extermination of many human populations by the Mongols, whose massive expansion made cultural exchange possible. Their expansion enabled expeditious diffusion and transfer of cultural exchanges (e.g., ideas, the arts, etc.) and commercial activities in the 1200s, as Marco Polo epitomizes. Afterward, he discusses the historical and political position of the Byzantine Empire throughout the tumultuous conditions of the 13th century. Although there was a noteworthy political body in the Levant, the Byzantine Empire subjugated significant sections of the Balkan and Anatolian Peninsulas. The existing situation altered in the following years. The glorious Empire was replaced by the one constantly vanquished and diminished as its borders expeditiously shrunk. Naturally, it caused the Empire to weaken against various Balkan nations that avariciously set their eyes on its territories. Two devastating historical events shook the Empire's foundations. These included the Crusader annexation of Constantinople in 1204 and the conquest of Byzantine lands by the Anatolian Seljuks in 1304. Notwithstanding the recapture of their capital back in 1261, the Byzantines could not alter their inauspicious trajectory. As for the general studies in this field, he stresses the lack of investigations into the 13th-century Byzantine Empire. Existing studies only treat the Byzantine vanquishments in Anatolia. The difficult nature of the subject (e.g. the need for proficiency in multiple languages) also plays a significant role in investigating the relevant topic. At this point, he emphasizes key conceptual distinctions between terms such as "*Turks–Turkish*", "*Seljuks–Seljuk*", and "*Mongol–Mongolian*", referring to "*nation*" and "*political unit*". The latter denotes a combination of a specific nation and exceptionally diverse ethnic groups. It is slightly different from the former context, which conceptually constitutes the backbone of his research. Hence, he clearly and carefully distinguishes these terms to avoid ambiguity for the reader. Later, he sets certain thematic and temporal limits on the scope of his research subject to probe into it healthily. Finally, he briefly points out the primary sources he utilizes in his inquiry.¹

In Chapter 1 (pp. 7–39), Korobeinikov draws on a wide range of primary sources written in Classical Greek, Persian, Arabic, and Ottoman Turkish. He states that nomadism was an indispensable component of the Turks' lifestyle in the 1200s. Unfortunately, the Turks did not produce a written tradition in Asia Minor during that period. Their initial infiltration, marked by the emergence of Anatolian *beyliks* (i.e., principalities), began towards the end of the 11th century. For this reason, the primary sources regarding the Turkish annexation of Asia Minor in the 1200s were mostly written in Classical Greek, Persian, and Arabic rather than Turkish. He categorizes the sources providing historical information on Byzantine-Turkish relations into two main groups: Byzantine and Oriental. He further discusses their distinct historiographical characteristics. The Byzantine historiography, as the Byzantine models were few, was fundamentally modeled on or emulated the works of two prominent Ancient Greek historians: Herodotus of Halicarnassus (d. c. 425 BC) and Thucydides (d. c. 400 BC). In his parlance, this gave rise to a genre known as "*classicizing history*." In contrast, Oriental historiography, including Persian, Arabic, and Ottoman Turkish sources, emerged in a more recent historical context than its Byzantine counterpart. Indeed, the earliest Arabic and Persian works date back only to the 8th or 9th centuries. As he puts it, Oriental historiography lacked an "*antiquarian*

¹ Dimitri Korobeinikov, *Byzantium and the Turks in the Thirteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1–6.

system of genres and models.” He cites Ibn al-Bībī, Āqsarāyī, Ibn al-Athīr, Al-Nasawī, Yahşı Fakih, and Āşıkpāşāzāde as prominent figures in Oriental historiography, while George Akropolites, George Pachymeres, and Nikephoros Gregoras represent the Byzantine tradition. After outlining the fundamental differences between the two historiographical traditions, Korobeinikov conducts a detailed comparison. Chapter 1 also highlights the author’s credibility and scholarly rigor in evaluating the primary sources, including their problematic aspects.²

In Chapter 2 (pp. 40–80), Korobeinikov discusses the Asia Minor-based Nicaean Empire (1204–1261), founded in the wake of the Fourth Crusade (1202–1204) and the Latin annexation of Constantinople at the outset of the 1200s. According to him, although the Nicaean Empire was a significant power, it was an anomaly, as it represented a contradictory continuation of the Byzantine legacy, especially in light of the existence of the Despotate of Epiros and the Empire of Trebizond. He points out that former Byzantine domains were divided shortly after the disintegration of the Byzantine Empire in 1204. Consequently, new Greek states emerged, such as the Nicaean Empire, the Despotate of Epiros, and the Empire of Trebizond. Each claimed to be the rightful heir to the Byzantine Empire, although their international standing remained weak compared to the pre-1204 Empire. He states that Theodore I Laskaris (r. 1205–1221) received military support from the Anatolian Seljuks, defeated his rivals, gradually became a significant military power, and managed to unify the fragmented Byzantine territories in Asia Minor, despite limited support from his own people. Thus, as the founder of the Nicaean Empire, he reestablished a Byzantine-like political entity after a long and difficult process. Despite several failed attempts (such as Papal rejection), Laskaris sought to gain international recognition for his empire and succeeded in obtaining acknowledgment from the Seljuks. The imperial success of the Laskarid dynasty—of which Theodore I Laskaris was a key figure—was rooted in several factors: **(i)** the support of the Byzantine aristocracy, **(ii)** the integration of prominent noble families into the administration while maintaining a balance with newly emerging elites, and **(iii)** the preservation of the Komnenian governmental structure. These factors collectively contributed to the stability of the Empire. In brief, the “*Nicaean Paradox*” refers to how the Empire asserted its legitimacy, strove for hegemony, and used its resources to restore order in a chaotic political environment. More precisely, it describes a period in which the Nicaean Empire—though reluctantly—had to align with one of its rivals, the Seljuks. At the same time, it sought to reconnect with the remnants of the former Byzantine society and reclaim the grandeur of the pre-1204 Empire.³

In Chapter 3 (pp. 81–110), Korobeinikov analyzes how the Seljuk Sultanate of Rūm existed, its relations with its surrounding political entities, the ethnic variegation it embodied, and how it ideologically defined itself through meticulously crafted titles, including “*sultan*” for legitimacy. In other words, he offers a comprehensive analysis of its complex dynamics within the 13th-century geographical and political landscape. According to his historical overview the Sultanate of Rūm was established shortly after the Seljuks' decisive victory over the Byzantine army at the Battle of Manzikert (1071) and had an opportunity to experience a rapid territorial expansion. Consequently, it expeditiously incorporated small-scaled Turkish *beyliks* and prior Byzantine possessions in Asia Minor into its imperial body. One key factor behind the Sultanate’s rapid territorial expansion was its deliberate policy of cooperating with local rulers and aristocracies to maintain internal stability through mutual benefit. Eventually, the Sultanate of Rūm could control disparate ethnic groups, but he mentions internal struggles in the Sultanate’s post-partition period. These crises intensified as internal instability overlapped with external pressures. He also remarks on the existing military and political situation that directed the Sultanate’s fate. Diplomatic relations, political marriages, and military alliances between the Seljuks and the Nicaeans are also indispensable components of his account.⁴

² Korobeinikov, *Byzantium and the Turks*, 7–39.

³ Korobeinikov, *Byzantium and the Turks*, 40–80.

⁴ Korobeinikov, *Byzantium and the Turks*, 81–110.

In Chapter 4 (pp. 111–169), Korobeinikov probes into the convoluted relations ranging from political and military affairs to diplomatic and cultural ones between the Nicaean Empire and the Seljuk Sultanate of Rūm in the 13th century. Two key events shaped these relations. The first was the Fourth Crusade (1202–1204), which resulted in the Latin conquest of Constantinople in 1204. The second was the Mongol defeat of the Seljuks at the Battle of Köse Dağı in 1243, which marked the beginning of Mongol invasions in the mid-1240s. He begins by outlining the historical background of their relations, dating back to the 1160s. Manuel I Komnenos (r. 1143–1180) was the first Byzantine emperor to establish formal relations with the Seljuks. Korobeinikov provides a comprehensive historical account of how their relations proceeded in the 13th century. Theodore I Laskaris received military support from the Seljuks to consolidate his rule and defeat rival claimants, shortly after the Byzantine Empire fragmented into three Greek successor states, including the Nicaean Empire. Initially, their relations were amicable and based on mutual interests. The Seljuks recognized the Nicaean Empire and its Patriarch both diplomatically and culturally, even signing a peace treaty based on shared interests. In this way, Laskaris barely managed to unify the previous Byzantine possessions in Asia Minor. However, this alliance deteriorated after the Battle of Antioch-on-the-Meander in 1211, where Nicaean forces defeated the Seljuks. Nevertheless, diplomatic ties were soon restored through a new agreement. In the following years, however, the Nicaean Empire launched a military campaign against the Sultanate of Rūm between 1225 and 1231. During this period, the Nicaeans conducted successful military operations and captured key strategic locations, reflecting the shifting nature of their interest-based relationship. The emergence of the Mongol threat in the mid-1240s, which significantly altered the balance of power in Asia Minor, led to a renewed alliance between the two sides. Following their victory over the Seljuks at the Battle of Köse Dağ in 1243, the Mongols established dominance over Asia Minor. The Nicaean Empire maintained its alliance with the Seljuks, seeing the Mongols as a common external threat to its interests. To conclude, the Nicaean Empire adapted to the shifting political climate by tactically maintaining its alliance with the Seljuks and preserving a degree of strategic flexibility. Ultimately, Korobeinikov presents a detailed account of how Nicaean-Seljuk relations evolved throughout the 13th century and how the Nicaean Empire managed its position *vis-à-vis* both the Seljuks and, after 1243, the Mongols in an increasingly unstable political environment.⁵

In Chapter 5 (pp. 170–216), Korobeinikov inquires into the Mongols' invasion of the Seljuk Sultanate of Rūm, their relations with the Seljuks, how they, including the Nicaean Empire, radically altered the political and geopolitical landscape of 13th century Asia Minor and how this historical process caused the ascent of the Ottoman *beylik* in the post-1243 period. He provides a comprehensive account of power structure in Asia Minor and of what transpired between the two powers before the Mongol invasion. Accordingly, the Seljuks realized the potential Mongol threat despite the border conflicts with the Nicaean Empire between 1225 and 1229. In light of this threat, they signed a peace treaty with the Nicaean Empire in 1232. Meanwhile, the Mongols pursued a vigorous expansionist policy under Chinggis Khān's administration. Between 1219 and 1221, they invaded the Khwārazmian Empire, signaling the Mongol occupation of the Islamic world and then Asia Minor. Shortly after the decline of the Khwārazmians, the Seljuks were directly confronted with the Mongol danger. With the Battle of Köse Dağı in 1243, the Seljuks became a vassal state by the Mongol vanquishment. Afterward, they forged a strategic alliance with the Nicaean Empire against the common threat, but the primary sources do not verify whether this alliance turned into a military action. Although the Seljuks attempted to pursue a middle course with the Mongols to assure their Sultanate's (autonomous) political survival, the Mongols' unchanging political stand refused to allow this and worsened the Seljuks' position. Ultimately, it paved the way for various rebellions among the Turkish tribes (*beyliks*), one of which was Osmanoğulları, facilitating the appearance of new power structures in Asia Minor. Meanwhile, the Nicaean Empire adroitly navigated diplomatic ties with the Mongols in a period when the Turks increasingly raided the Byzantine borders.⁶

⁵ Korobeinikov, *Byzantium and the Turks*, 111–169.

⁶ Korobeinikov, *Byzantium and the Turks*, 170–216.

In Chapter 6 (pp. 217–281), Korobeinikov investigates the complicated relations among the Nicaean Empire, the Seljuk Sultanate of Rūm, and the rising Turkish *beyliks* within the turbulent atmosphere of the 13th century. He also examines the challenges the Nicaean Empire faced during the final years of the century. After providing a comprehensive background on Nicaean-Seljuk relations, he then outlines their contemporary interactions. The Seljuks experienced internal problems leading to fragmentation, which benefited the Nicaean Empire. Afterwards, the disintegration of the Seljuks allowed the Turkish tribes to gradually establish political entities. The Nicaean Empire continuously strengthened its fortifications. It placed utmost importance on deploying a formidable military force in Asia Minor, as this was crucial for its stability and survival. Despite taking strategic measures against the Seljuks, the Nicaean Empire began to experience some external problems. Due to intense pressure from the Mongols in the east, the Turkish tribes began raiding the Nicaean Empire excessively, which weakened its defense system. This situation enabled tribes to settle adjacent to this region. Notably, the period between 1292 and 1305 was critical for the Nicaean Empire, as it suffered military defeats by the Turks, enabling them to infiltrate Byzantine territories. On the other hand, newly emerging Turkish *beyliks* also accelerated the disintegration of the Nicaean Empire across its various regions. Despite the defensive and other measures taken, the Nicaean Empire reacted passively rather than proactively. This passive approach caused severe losses in Asia Minor. As a result, the Nicaean Empire continuously lost territory despite some isolated successes. Due to the newly arisen internal problems, such as intra-aristocratic struggles and the rebellions between aristocracy and military figures, combined with these military failures, crises deepened the Nicaean Empire more. Korobeinikov provides an enlightening insight into how internal and external factors shaped the trajectory of the Nicaean Empire in the late 13th century.⁷

In Chapter 7 (pp. 282–288), Korobeinikov examines the challenges (including the Catalan mercenaries, who contributed to the Nicaean decline in Asia Minor) the Nicaean Empire encountered in Asia Minor from 1303 onwards, along with how Asia Minor gradually became a Turkish stronghold. He states that the turning point occurred in 1303, when Andronikos II Palaiologos hired costly Catalan mercenaries to eliminate the Turkish presence in Asia Minor. Meanwhile, the situation deteriorated further as the Turks intensified their incursions into the Byzantines' most significant possessions by 1304. The mercenaries, the emperor's last hope, militarily succeeded against the Turks, but everything reversed when Michael IX Palaeologus assassinated their leaders in 1305. Consequently, the mercenaries intemperately protested this action and started plundering the Byzantine lands under a new leader leading to accelerating Turkish expansion. Despite suffering severe losses to the Turks, the Empire was barely able to retain control over key cities such as Ephesos, Magnesia, and Sardis, particularly along the western coast of Asia Minor. Korobeinikov states that, despite attempts at reforming the remnants of the Byzantine army, the emperors were generally unable to take decisive action due to severe financial constraints. These led to mounting Turkish raids, the instability of the Empire, and the internal conflicts among various factions. Byzantine diplomatic efforts to engage the Mongols against the Turks also proved ineffective due to the Mongols' indifference and their prioritization of regional interests. Meanwhile, the Turkish incursions enabled a sizeable Turkish population to settle in the newly conquered Byzantine domains by simultaneously displacing a large portion of the Greek population, which radically altered the demographic pattern in Asia Minor. To conclude, he offers insight into the internal and external challenges faced by the Nicaean Empire and how the Turks gradually transformed previously Byzantine-held regions into their own homeland.⁸

In the Conclusion section (pp. 289–297), Korobeinikov points out that a pure decline narrative of the Byzantine Empire does not mark the period under investigation. Instead, the 13th century illustrates how the Empire navigated diplomatic relations with other power structures of its time despite being

⁷ Korobeinikov, *Byzantium and the Turks*, 217–281.

⁸ Korobeinikov, *Byzantium and the Turks*, 282–288.

doomed to catastrophic military failures and internal strife. He principally explores the relations between diplomatic affairs and the military failures of the Empire. He argues that the devastating military defeats in the volatile political and geopolitical landscape of 13th-century Asia Minor unfortunately eclipsed the Empire's diplomatic achievements. Consequently, this situation damaged the Empire's absolute sovereignty.⁹

A few key aspects can be highlighted for the critical evaluation of the book. First of all, Korobeinikov stands out as a scholar with a high degree of analytical sensitivity, transparency, and objectivity in his treatment of the primary sources related to the 13th century. He makes extensive use of a wide variety of primary sources and presents their problematic aspects (i.e., limitations, biases, etc.), which also mirrors his methodological approach. He provides a comprehensive and nuanced picture of the events that transpired in the 13th century. Secondly, for his book to be original, **i-**) he treats the convoluted interplays between the Byzantines and Turks, particularly in the 13th-century, since the scholars neglect in their historiography concerning the Byzantine Empire, Anatolian Seljuks, and Mongols; **ii-**) he sifts through primary sources and furnishes readers with an analytical account of what transpired in the 13th century. All of these points indicate that the book is original. Thirdly, he describes the convoluted interplay between the Nicæan Empire and Anatolian Seljuks in the 13th century as “*cooperation and conflict*” to indicate their relations. His significant contribution to the relevant literature is his comprehensive, in-depth analysis of their interactions in many different areas, such as social, political, military, diplomatic, and cultural spheres. He also demonstrates how all these events forged the general landscape of Asia Minor in the same century. Ultimately, Korobeinikov opens new horizons for fledgling historians and offers fresh perspectives on the complexities of 13th-century Asia Minor.

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⁹ Korobeinikov, *Byzantium and the Turks*, 289–297.