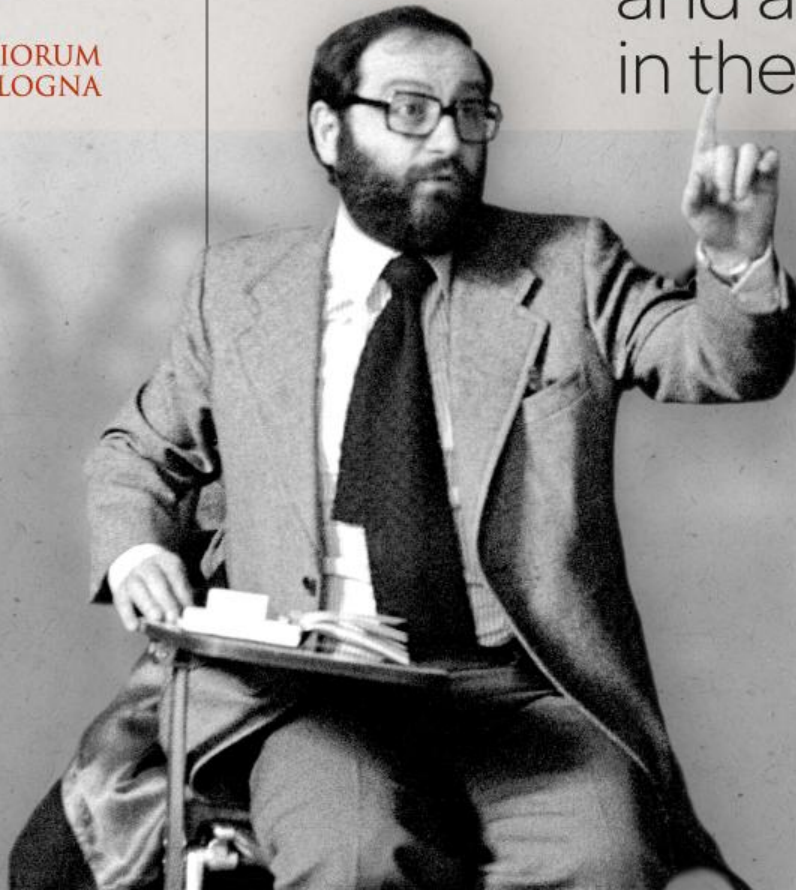


# Inheriting Eco.



ALMA MATER STUDIORUM  
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA

Umberto Eco,  
the University of Bologna  
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27/29

May

2026

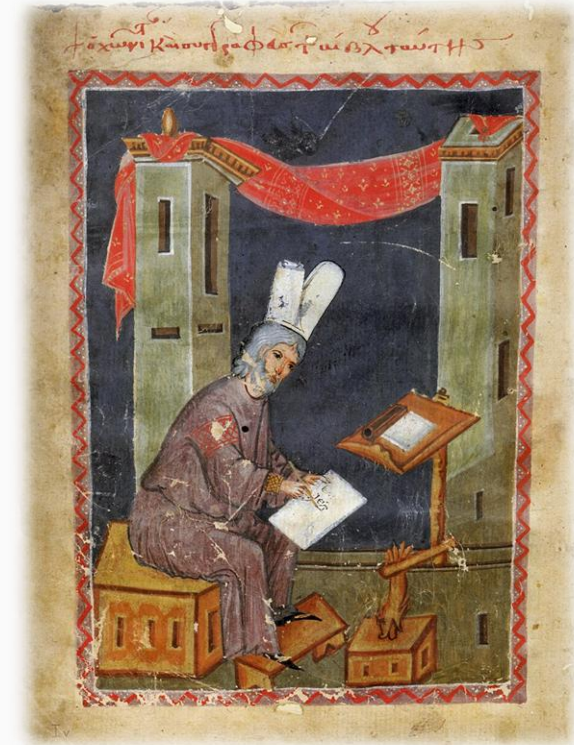
**BOLOGNA**

# Why Niketas?

## *Eco, the Meaning, the History.*

**Lorenzo L. D. Incardona**

PhD in Semiotics – United International Business School



Niketas Choniates, illumination, *Hist. gr.* 53\*, fol. 1v

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# Eco, Niketas

UMBERTO ECO

*the popularizer*

Remembered for the **clarity** of his prose, the ability to **popularize** complex notions and engage readers even on obscure topics.

NIKETAS CHONIATES

*the labyrinth*

Promised to **cherish clarity**; readers from Byzantine scholiasts to Hieronymus Wolf and beyond complained he wrote **in riddles**.

*Ὄχι οἶδα τί φῆς ἐνθάδε Χωνιάτα, σοφὸν τὸ σαφὲς συγγράφων εἶναι λέγεις, εἴτα γριψώδη καὶ βαρυσώδη γράφεις*

*I don't know what you're saying here, Choniates. You say it's wise to write clearly, and then you write in riddles, in pits.*

(A scholiast)

*Prolixa et intricatissima periodus. E quibus salebris me uix quidem, sed expediri tamen, ut arbitror: multum certe laboravi*

*A long-winded and most tangled period. From its rough patches I have, with difficulty indeed, but nonetheless (as I judge) extricated myself: I have certainly labored much.*

(H. Wolf)

...and yet, Eco himself confessed:

***Medievali si nasce.***

*One is born medieval*

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## SIMPSON ON NIKETAS

*Narrative practices such as characterization, description and story-telling, fictitious speeches and conversations, digressions and excursuses, all derive from his **imitation of literary models from the past**. The same is true of his employment of citations and allusions to ancient and biblical authorities as well as his fondness for proverbs and generalizations.*

(...)

*Niketas' insistence on descriptive rather than factual narration also explains his preference for literary rather than documentary evidence as well as the **subtle manipulation of his sources and the subordination of strict factual accuracy to his purpose and style**.*

– Alicia Simpson, *Niketas Choniates: A Historiographical Study* (2013)

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I.

# Why Niketas?

*Obvious reasons.*

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## NIKETAS: UNAVOIDABLE REFERENCE

*...one can hardly imagine the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries without his masterfully sculpted imperial portraits, **his sarcasm and sense of humour, his immediacy and directness, his poetic nobility and dramatic sensibility, his elitist and judgemental tone, his humanity and sensitivity.***

– Efthymiadis and Simpson, *Niketas Choniates: A Historian and a Writer* (2009)

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## ECO ON BAUDOLINO

*Per divertirmi, innanzitutto. Perché eventi come la traslazione dei Magi a Colonia o la canonizzazione di Carlo Magno sembrano invenzioni d'un genio del comico. Invece sono cose veramente accadute. E **trovare su Internet siti interi dedicati all'antica cucina bizantina è una bizzarria che mi mette di buonumore. È così che piano piano la narrazione viene fuori dall'enciclopedia, diventa una sua estensione.***

– Umberto Eco, interviewed by Roberto Barbolini. *Panorama*, 2000 ([archived](#))

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### A tavola con i bizantini

Di Nicola

● AGO 7, 2013 ● #Alessio Cittadini, #Cucina bizantina, #mangiare a Bisanzio



II.

# Where the journey starts

*The XIX book of the Χρονική διήγησις: the sack of Constantinople.*

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## KAMPIANAKI: THE RESCUE OF CHONIATES

*Particularly worthy of note is that the historian's recollections of how he was saved during the destruction of Constantinople provide the basis for Eco's own presentation of how Baudolino managed to rescue the hero Choniates. From the History we learn that Choniates considered seeking refuge in Hagia Sophia, but understood that it would have been in vain as the Crusaders did not hesitate to attack even those who had sought asylum in a holy place. **He was eventually helped by an anonymous Venetian-born friend**, who wore armour and pretended to be a fellow soldier of the Crusaders. Speaking to the Crusaders in their own language, he prevented them from entering and searching the place where the Choniates family were hiding, and later led the family safely to a house belonging to some Venetian acquaintances.*

– Theofili Kampianaki, *Βίβλος Ζώντων or Libro Dei Viventi: The Reception of Niketas Choniates' History in Umberto Eco's Baudolino* (2018)

We actually know the name of this person:  
**Domīnikos (Δομίνικος)**

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## KAMPIANAKI: ECO'S TAMPERING IN REVERSE

*At the end of the novel, Choniates is convinced by a friend to omit Baudolino's incredible stories – and Baudolino himself – from his historical account, and to write only vaguely that he was rescued by certain Venetians. Here, **Eco brilliantly plays with the concept of tampering with the recording of history.** He presents the hero Choniates as purposely concealing Baudolino's role from his audience in his rescue and attributing his actions to somebody else. This is precisely what Eco does in reverse: **in twisting Choniates' account of what he experienced during the sack of the City, the novelist ascribes the anonymous Venetian's attempts to save Choniates to his fictional protagonist, Baudolino.***

– Kampionaki (2018)

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## BOSSINA · PONTANI: PLAYING WITH SOURCES

*Con un'insistenza talvolta inattesa, Niceta produce piuttosto **trame fittissime in cui si annidano incroci di fonti e di citazioni di cui è molto spesso difficile ricostruire la genesi.** Perché la fonte è sovente manipolata, occultata, variata nel testo per forme sinonimiche, o anche nascosta in parafrasi allusive ed enigmatiche: una vera e propria sfida per l'interprete, che si trova nella necessità di scavare sotto una superficie testuale che nasconde spesso una lunga gestazione e un fecondo retroterra di memorie, di figure, di citazioni.*

– Luciano Bossina, *La Bestia e l'Enigma. Tradizione Classica e Cristiana in Niceta Coniata* (2000)

*...quello che in origine era il simulacro di un animale apotropaico (quindi senza i gemelli) sia presentato come quello della Lupa Capitolina, simbolo identitario del popolo romano (...) perché **in questo contesto lo storico è mosso dalla volontà di rappresentare i Latini come empi...***

*È stata avanzata l'ipotesi che **Niceta stia in realtà descrivendo una statua di Afrodite e abbia operato lo scambio per motivi attinenti allo scopo per cui ha redatto il *de statuis*, che non è storico-artistico, ma appassionatamente ideologico...***

– Anna Pontani, commento a Niceta Coniata, *De Statuis* (2014)

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III.

# From encyclopedia *to storytelling.*

## **Inheriting Eco.**

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# Niketas, a paradigm of the Medieval culture

There is a solid connection between Eco's theoretical inquiries into medieval textual reuse, the writing of Baudolino and the choice of Niketas as a main character in that novel.

In 1998, Eco presented at the *Centro Italiano di studi sull'alto Medioevo* a report called *Riflessioni sulle tecniche di citazione nel Medioevo*.

It starts with a long quotation from Liutprandus' *Relatio de legatione constantinopolitana*.

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## BAUDOLINO · CHAPTER III: LIUTPRANDUS' *RELATIO*

*“Più di duecento anni fa,” disse Niceta, “venne a Costantinopoli, come ambasciatore del vostro re Ottone, un vostro vescovo, **Liutprando**, che fu ospite del basileo Niceforo. Non fu un bell’incontro, e sapemmo **dopo che Liutprando aveva steso una relazione del suo viaggio** in cui noi romani eravamo descritti come sordidi, rozzi, incivili, vestiti di vesti consuete.*

– Umberto Eco, *Baudolino*, chapter III

*Non solo il popolo ma anche gli ottimati erano rivestiti di **tuniche bucherellate** per la troppa vetustà.*

(...)

*...mi porrò in questa sede alcune questioni circa il **senso del termine “reimpiego”**, sia che esso sia usato per la cultura materiale sia che lo impieghi (e reimpieghi), non so ancora quanto metaforicamente, per la cultura detta “alta”, e cioè per quell’abito medievale di riutilizzare un tesoro di citazioni e altri materiali classici (tra l’altro, anche la **relazione di Liutprando è un bell’esempio di frenesia citatoria, quasi un collage di luoghi classici**), e di riciclare continuamente idee e parole di auctoritates millenarie o secolari, con una certa disinvoltura, senza troppe preoccupazioni filologiche, poiché l’autorità aveva un naso di cera.*

– Umberto Eco, *Riflessioni sulle tecniche di citazione nel Medioevo* (1998)

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# Distortions and inaccuracies as creative fuel

While drawing from the encyclopedia, even philological distortions and inaccuracies may become pieces of the creative game the author plays with his readers.

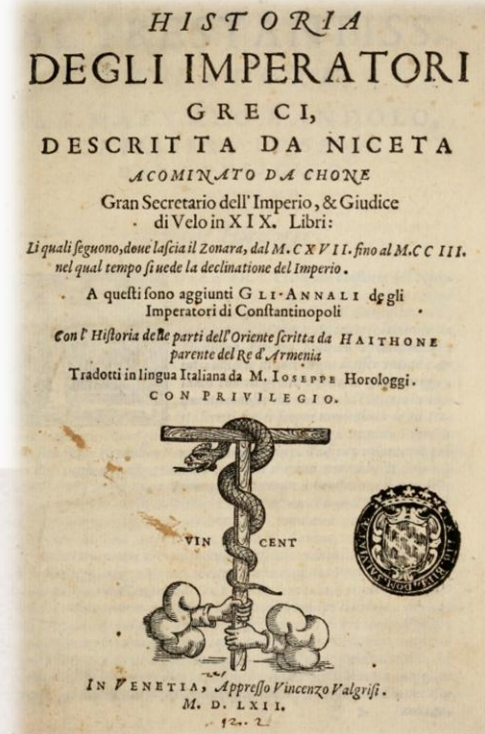
*O Costantinopoli, Costantinopoli, madre delle chiese, principessa della religione, guida delle perfette opinioni...*

- Umberto Eco, *Baudolino*, chapter II

Thanks to Marmo (2022), we know that Eco consulted an Italian translation of Niketas' work by Giuseppe Dondi dell'Orologio, published in 1562.

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## MAISANO ON DONDI'S TRANSLATION

*Nel suo insieme il volume si presenta con una fisionomia eminentemente utilitaria. Il formato, la stampa, la qualità della carta dimostrano **l'intenzione di contenere i costi**, e lo sfruttamento dello spazio, unitamente alla rinuncia a qualsiasi corredo ausiliario, conferma le intenzioni «spartane» che hanno ispirato l'iniziativa. Il fondamentale disinteresse da parte del Dondi nei confronti dell'essenza letteraria dell'opera si manifesta pure nel modo di rendere il testo di Niceta. **Il volgarizzatore non tenta di riprodurre in italiano la ricercatezza formale dell'autore bizantino**, e d'altro canto non sceglie neppure il criterio della chiarezza e dell'accessibilità: rimane indeterminato, nelle parole e nei fatti, lo scopo effettivo dell'impresa, così rimane incerto l'orientamento nella resa letteraria del testo.*

*Infine, una verifica effettuata su più luoghi del testo greco confrontati con la versione latina del Wolf e con l'italiana del Dondi fornisce la prova evidente che **il volgarizzamento fu condotto — con estrema rapidità e una certa destrezza e padronanza del mestiere — non sull'originale, ma sul latino del primo editore.***

– Riccardo Maisano, *L'incontro della cultura occidentale con l'opera storica di Niceta Coniata* (1990)

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## NIKETAS' INACCURACIES

*...did not follow his written sources consistently or faithfully (...) For this reason, it is sometimes difficult to tell how accurate his narrative scenes are. Although, theoretically speaking, the sine qua non of Byzantine historiography was the truth, it is only to be expected that in **this type of narrative, which was often based on hearsay, historians exaggerated, embroidered, and falsified reports.** One of the most characteristic literary features of the History is the **generous use of citations and allusions** to ancient and biblical sources (...) Although this feature is present, to greater or lesser extent, in all classicizing writers of the Byzantine period, **its continual, almost compulsive, use by Niketas has been said to define the literary style of the History.***

(...)

*His citations, numbering around two hundred from Homer and two-hundred from the Psalms, are rarely exact, indicating perhaps that he is quoting from memory, but more significantly, pointing to his inherent desire to surprise and impress his audience, something he achieves through the **formal reworking and 'decontextualising' of his model, and also through the rather skilful mingling of ancient and biblical citations.***

– Alicia Simpson, *Niketas Choniates: A Historiographical Study* (2013)

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## BOSSINA · PONTANI: PLAYING WITH SOURCES

*...il continuo recupero, in forma esplicita o allusiva, di un'amplissima tradizione letteraria, classica e cristiana insieme, non ci apparirà mai soltanto come uno strumento retorico fine a sé stesso. Al contrario vi riconosceremo un ben più profondo risvolto ideologico, tutto orientato ad alimentare l'implicita consapevolezza **dell'inevitabile ciclicità della storia, il segno di una necessaria ripetitività che è figlia dell'immutabile natura dell'uomo, delle sue congenite tentazioni, delle sue incorreggibili debolezze.** Per questa via, per lo storico e retore Niceta, **l'intertestualità sembra porsi come l'esito naturale di una diretta relazione tra storia e parola**, per la quale la ripetitività dell'una impone la ripetizione dell'altra. Non c'è evenienza, qualità o vizio umani che non abbiano già avuto il loro cantore o che non siano già stati rappresentati in un'immagine, solenne o proverbiale che sia, che ne perpetui simbolicamente il ricordo o il monito: per questo riproporre la parola significa testimoniare implicitamente la continuità della storia come continuità dell'uomo.*

– Luciano Bossina, *La Bestia e l'Enigma. Tradizione Classica e Cristiana in Niceta Coniata* (2000)

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# A web of citations: a philosophy of history

Niketas' "compulsive" tendency to lean on encyclopedic knowledge is also a way to cope with a personal and intellectual struggle.

Reconciling the tragic facts he was forced to narrate with the Divine Providence.

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IV.

# The meaning *and the history.*

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## KALDELLIS: A TANGLE OF REVERSALS AND PARADOXES

*Perhaps history ought to be such that it can be written in a simple style, if men were who they claimed or aspired to be; the fact that this particular history could not be so written, that it required inordinate complexity, is an indictment of sorts, suggesting that convolution and contradiction lay in the events themselves, or rather in the hearts of its protagonists. We want to be told what happened in a straightforward way, but what happened was so unnatural and horrible that the terms of linguistic clarity failed. After a few readings of the History, we may finally come to accept our unease at Niketas' prose and learn to view history as he did, as a tangle of reversals and paradoxes.*

– Anthony Kaldellis, *Niketas Choniates: Paradox, Reversal, and the Meaning of History* (2009)

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# Baudolino's view on history

A tangle of reversals and paradoxes is the history as seen from Baudolino's perspective.

It is the paradoxical perspective of a liar admitting his own lies based on an idea of history intended as a complex, chaotic network of words and events obeying only their immanent dynamics.

Baudolino's history continues moving from sign to sign, without listening to the "voice of reason", because reason, like Providence, is something beyond the plane on which history unfolds.

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## NIKETAS TRIES TO STOP BAUDOLINO

*“Ma non ricordi neppure dove è stato ucciso!”*

(...)

*“Ma avete toccato con mano che non c’è!”*

(...)

*“Ma vi eravate resi conto che gli eunuchi mentivano.”*

(...)

*“Ma non sei più giovane come quando hai provato la prima volta!”*

(...)

*“Ma sono passata più di sette anni!”*

(...)

***Non ci fu verso.***

– Umberto Eco, *Baudolino*, chapter XXXIX

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## KAMPIANAKI: BAUDOLINO VS. NIKETAS?

*Overall, making use of material from the History, Eco draws the portraits of Choniates and Baudolino, presenting the two characters as opposite to one another in many respects. Just like the real Choniates, the fictional Choniates is a reliable and careful historian and a distinguished member of the Byzantine nobility, for whom the capital of his state is preeminent in the world. In contrast, Baudolino is the narrator of fantastic accounts and tales and a Westerner of humble origins who explores and appreciates foreign lands.*

(...)

*Choniates' belief in the workings of God's Providence, which is prominent in his historical narrative, is reflected in fictional Choniates' idea of history as a combination of various stories woven together by Divine Providence.*

–Kampianaki (2018)

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# But Niketas is also Baudolino

Kampianaki is right about Eco's characters, but she underestimates the *complexity of the historical Niketas*.

## Niketas' contradictory profile

He was *reliable*, but he did not hesitate in *altering his sources*.

He was a *skeptic, rational* personality, who certainly *believed in Divine Providence*, and who *wrestled to fit the events he had to witness to it*.

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## NIKETAS' COMPLEXITY

...Niketas, like many other Byzantine historians, **struggled with the reconciliation of human agency and divine revelation in history**. His own *History* clearly follows an **anthropocentric approach** to historical causation and **seeks the explanations for events at a human level**, and more specifically in the actions and motives of leading individuals. At the same time, however, the historian endorses the principle that divine providence determines the historical development of events and constantly seeks to infer the will of God from the shape of events on earth.

(...)

However, it is important to recognize that Niketas' explanation for the fall, and more generally **his approach to historical causation, frequently looked beyond the Christian formula of sin and divine retribution**; the hand of God may topple tyrants, but it rarely acts without some intermediary (...). It is principally on these 'intermediary' human agents that Niketas's account is concentrated; human endeavours influence the course of events and the divine will is but the general framework in which they operate. This is precisely the reason why the ideology of providential design (although never denied) was frequently employed in those situations that lacked any alternative explanation, but challenged when human agency was obviously at work or when Niketas wished to emphasize it.

– Alicia Simpson, *Niketas Choniates: A Historiographical Study* (2013)

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## V. CONCLUSIONS

### So, why Niketas?

- Literary, intertextual, and maybe even psychological proximity to Eco.
- A paradigm of medieval textual reuse: the encyclopedia becoming story.
- A complex, multifaceted intellectual figure, in which opposite philosophies of history collapse.

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*...cannot be inherited, and if you want it you  
must obtain it by great labour. – T. S. Eliot*

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