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Anna Komnene

The Alexiad

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The Alexiad of

ANNA KOMNENE

(1083-1153)

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Medieval Library

ANNA KOMNENE

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The Alexiad of Anna Komnene

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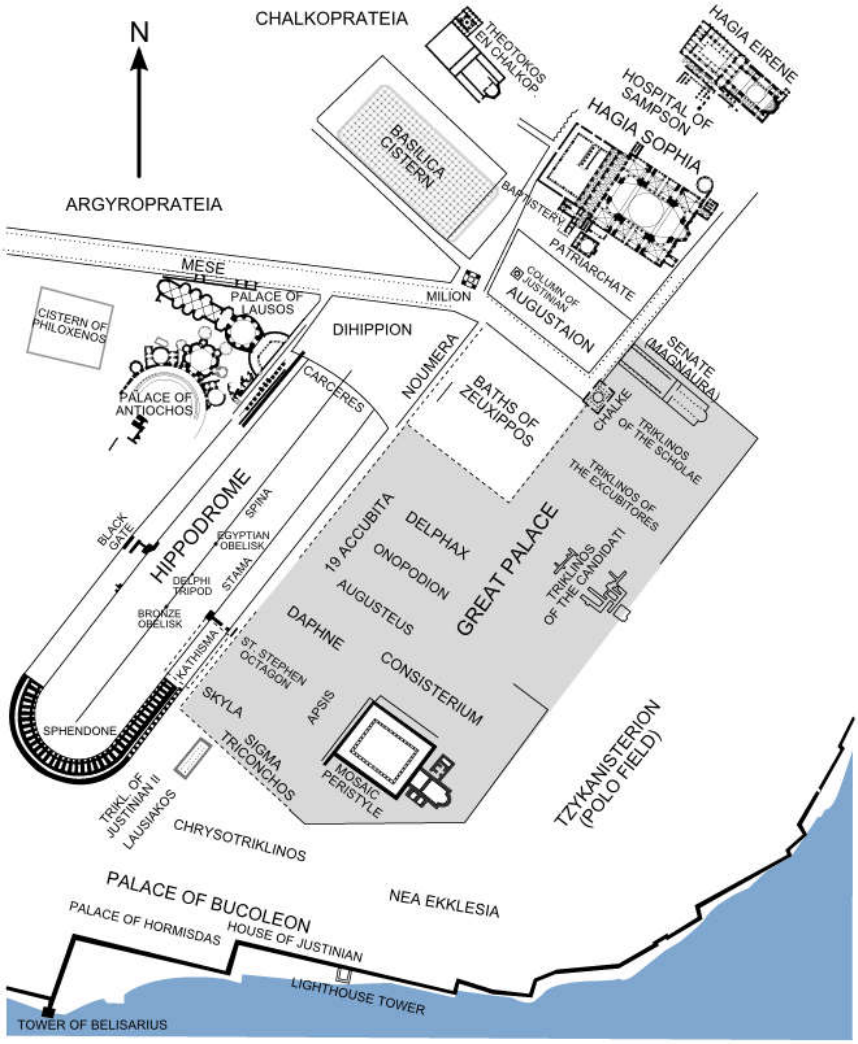
The Translation

Istanbul, formerly Constantinople, Byzantine Empire — Anna Komnene's birthplace

One of the piers from the Great Palace of Constantinople, held in the courtyard of the Istanbul Archaeological Museums. Anna was born in the Great Palace, which served as the main imperial residence of the Eastern Roman emperors until 1081 and was the centre of imperial administration for over 690 years. Only a few remnants of the palace have survived into the present day.

The site of the Great Palace of Constantinople today



Modern map detailing the location of the Great Palace of Constantinople

The Alexiad

Translated by Elizabeth Dawes, 1928

Anna Komnene was a Byzantine Greek princess and historian, whose work of history, *The Alexiad,* gives a detailed account of the reign of her father, Emperor Alexios I Komnenos (1057-1118). Her work constitutes the most important primary source of Byzantine history of the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, as well as of the early Crusades. Although best known today as the author of *The Alexiad*, Anna played an important part in the politics of the time and attempted to depose her brother, John II Komnenos, as emperor in favour of her husband, Nikephoros.

At birth, Anna was betrothed to Constantine Doukas and she grew up in his mother's household. She was well-educated in Greek literature and history, philosophy, theology, mathematics and medicine. Constantine died in 1094 and Anna married the leader of Bryennium, Nikephoros Bryennios, in 1097. They went on to have several children before Nikephoros' death in c. 1136.

With the birth of John II, Anna's brother, in 1087, she and her husband were no longer the assumed heirs to the throne. According to the Byzantine historian Nicetas Choniates (c. 1155-1217), Emperor Alexios favoured John and declared him emperor while the Empress Irene threw her full influence on persuading him to designate Nikephoros Bryennios, Anna's husband, in John's place. Around 1112, Alexios fell sick with rheumatism and could not move. He therefore turned the civil government over to his wife, Irene. She in turn directed the administration to Bryennios. Choniates states that, as Emperor Alexios lay dying in his imperial bedchamber, John arrived and secretly took the emperor's ring from his father during an embrace, as though in mourning. Anna also worked in her husband's favour during her father's illness. In 1118, Alexios I Komnenos died and a cleric acclaimed John emperor in the Hagia Sophia.

According to recent historians, Anna was almost certainly involved in the murder plot against John at Alexios' funeral. Choniates tells us Anna was "stimulated by ambition and revenge" to scheme for the murder of her brother. The plots were discovered and Anna forfeited her estates. After her husband's death, she entered the convent of Kecharitomene, which had been founded by her mother. She remained there until her death. While in confinement, she wrote *The Alexiad*.

Composed in c. 1148, it is written in a form of artificial Attic Greek. It illustrates the political and military history of the Byzantine Empire during the reign of her father, providing a significant account on the Byzantium of the High Middle Ages. Among other topics, *The Alexiad* documents the Byzantine Empire's interaction with the Crusades and highlights the conflicting perceptions of the East and West in the early twelfth century. The work was paraphrased in vernacular Medieval Greek in mid-fourteenth century to increase its readability, attesting to the work's lasting popularity.

The Alexiad is divided into 15 books and a *Prologue*. The first Book addresses Alexios' becoming general and Domestikos ton Scholon — a senior military post of the Byzantine Empire, extant from the eighth century until the early fourteenth century. The Book also discusses the Normans' preparation for their invasion. Book II addresses the Komnenian revolt, while the third Book concerns Alexios' ascension to Emperor in 1081, the internal problems with Doukas family and the Normans'

crossing the Adriatic Sea. Book IV involves the war against the Normans (1081-1082) and Book V charts the war against the Normans in 1082-1083 and their first clash with the "heretics". The sixth Book describes the end of the war against the Normans in 1085 and the death of Robert Guiscard. Books VII and VIII concern the war against the Scythians (1087-1090), while Book IX deals with operations against Tzachas and the Dalmatians (1092-1094) and the conspiracy of Nicephorus Diogenes in 1094. The tenth to thirteenth Books narrate the war against the Cumans and the First Crusade (1094-1097). Book XIV concerns Turks, Franks, Cumans and Manicheans (1108-1115), while the last Book addresses the expeditions of the Bogomils and the death of Alexios (1116-1118).

The principal theme of *The Alexiad* is the First Crusade and the religious conflict it involved. Anna describes in detail her father, Alexios Komnenos and his conquests throughout his rule from 1081 to 1118. Of course, she favours a "Byzantine view" of the Crusades. She regards the crusaders, whom she refers to as Celts, Latins and Normans, as uneducated barbarians. Some historians have also detected the influence of Greek mythology in her work. *The Alexiad* was first edited by Possinus in 1651. In contrast to other medieval historians, Anna refers to herself directly in the text and openly acknowledges her feelings and opinions of some events, going against the typical format of historiography. Her style differs widely from Greek prose historians and because of this the book was initially well received, though it was subjected to criticism later. She was around the age of 55 when she began work on *The Alexiad*. She criticises the crusaders that came to her father's aid in contempt for their actions against the Empire after they looted various conquests and failed to return to the Basileus' demesne many of the lands they promised to return to him. Despite this, Anna claims that she portrayed them in a neutral light. Some historians believe her work to be biased because of her feelings towards the Crusaders and how highly she regarded her father.

The Alexiad provides a rare window into the religious and intellectual activities within the Byzantine Empire. Though the text suffers from a defective chronology and excessive adulation, it is still invaluable for its character sketches of the leaders of the First Crusade, as well as many other dignitaries with whom Anna had direct contact.

Portrait of Alexios I within the 'Panoplia Dogmatica' by Euthymios Zigabenos

Probable representation of Anna's mother, Irene Doukaina, from the 'Pala d'Oro' in St Mark's Basilica in Venice

Byzantine coin depicting emperor Alexios I Komnenos and Irene Doukaina, eleventh century

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Cloisonné engraving of Constantine Doukas from the Holy Crown of Hungary

John II, Anna's brother and Alexios I's successor to the imperial throne

Anna Komnene's 'The Alexiad', twelfth century manuscript, Laurentian Library

INTRODUCTION

THE "ALEXIAD" OF Anna Comnena has long been used as a source of information by historians of the Byzantine Empire and by writers on the First Crusade, and numerous extracts from it have been quoted and translated, yet a complete English translation of it has not been published before.

It was to supply what appeared to me a regrettable omission that I attempted to fill the gap and, as I proceeded with the work, I became more and more interested, for the book gives a picture of wonderful mental and physical energy in the person of its hero, the Emperor Alexius, and helps us to realize the enormous difficulties which confronted a Byzantine Emperor at this period.

Readers of Sir Walter Scott's *Count Robert of Paris* may also be glad to have a full translation of a work to which he so often alludes.

The present translation is not a free adaptation of the original but is as literal as a translation can well be; hence there is much repetition of words and phrases, for I have striven to reproduce Anna's style as far as possible.

The text on which I have based my version is that of Aug. Reifferscheid in the Teubner edition of 1884.

The text on which I have based my version is that of Aug. Reifferscheid in the Teubner edition of 1884.

The proper names (with the exception of those which have acquired a definite English form) I have in most cases trans-iterated exactly and then added in a footnote the spelling of them as found in Bury's edition of Gibbon, e.g. Apelchasem = Abul-kassim.

I have dispensed with an historical introduction in view of the fact that the Oxford University Press is shortly publishing a book by Mrs. Georgina Buckler, Ph.D., entitled *Anna Comnena: a Study*, which deals exhaustively with the chief points of interest raised by the Alexiad.

In conclusion, I wish to acknowledge my deep indebtedness to Professor F. H. Marshall, for he looked over my work in manuscript, and gave me many valuable suggestions and kind help in the elucidation of difficulties. And I must also express my grateful thanks to my sister, Mary C. Dawes, M.A., for her patient help in the revision and in the perusal of the proof-sheets.

ELIZABETH A. S. DAWES.

PROLOGUE

I

TIME IN ITS irresistible and ceaseless flow carries along on its flood all created things, and drowns them in the depths of obscurity, no matter if they be quite unworthy of mention, or most noteworthy and important, and thus, as the tragedian says, "he brings from the darkness all things to the birth, and all things born envelops in the night."

But the tale of history forms a very strong bulwark against the stream of time, and to some extent checks its irresistible flow, and, of all things done in it, as many as history has taken over, it secures and binds together, and does not allow them to slip away into the abyss of oblivion.

Now, I recognized this fact. I, Anna, the daughter of two royal personages, Alexius and Irene, born and bred in the purple. I was not ignorant of letters, for I carried my study of Greek to the highest pitch, and was also not unpractised in rhetoric; I perused the works of Aristotle and the dialogues of Plato carefully, and enriched my mind by the "quaternion" of learning. (I must let this out and it is not bragging to state what nature and my zeal for learning have given me, and the gifts which God apportioned to me at birth and time has contributed).

However, to resume — I intend in this writing of mine to recount the deeds done by my father for they should certainly not be lost in silence, or swept away, as it were, on the current of time into the sea of forgetfulness, and I shall recount not only his achievements as Emperor, but also the services he rendered to various Emperors before he himself received the sceptre.

II

These deeds I am going to relate, not in order to shew off my proficiency in letters, but that matters of such importance should not be left unattested for future generations. For even the greatest of deeds, if not haply preserved in written words and handed down to remembrance, become extinguished in the obscurity of silence.

Now, my father, as the actual facts prove, knew both how to command and how to obey the rulers within reasonable limits. And though I have chosen to narrate his doings, yet I fear that the tongues of suspicion and detraction will whisper that writing my father's history is only self-laudation, and that the historical facts, and any praise I bestow on them, are mere falsehoods and empty panegyric. Again, on the other hand, if he himself were to supply the materials, and facts themselves force me to censure some of his actions, not because of him, but from the very nature of the deed, I dread the scoffers who will cast Noah's son, Ham, in my teeth, for they look at everything askew, and owing to their malice and envy, do not discern clearly what is right, but will "blame the blameless" as Homer says. But he who undertakes the "rôle" of an historian must sink his personal likes and dislikes, and often award the highest praise to his enemies when their actions demand it, and often, too, blame his nearest relations if their errors require it. He must never shirk either blaming his friends or praising his enemies. I should counsel both parties, those attacked by us and our partisans alike, to take comfort from the fact that I have sought the evidence of the

actual deeds themselves, and the testimony of those who have seen the actions, and the men and their actions — the fathers of some of the men now living, and the grandfathers of others were actual eye-witnesses.

III

The reason which finally determined me to write my father's history was the following. My lawful husband was the Cæsar Nicephorus, a scion of the clan of the Bryennii, a man who far outshone his contemporaries by his surpassing beauty, his superior intelligence, and his accurate speech. To look at him, or to listen to him, was a pure delight. But I must not let my tale wander from its path, so for the present let us keep to the main story. My husband, as I said, was most remarkable in every way; he accompanied my brother John, the Emperor, on several other expeditions against the barbarians … as well as on the one against … who held the city of Antioch. As Nicephorus could not abide neglecting his literary work, he wrote several excellent monographs even during times of stress and trouble. But his task of predilection was that enjoyed by the Queen, to wit, a compilation of the history of the reign of Alexius, Emperor of the Romans, and my father, and to set out the doings of his reign in books whenever opportunity granted him a short respite from strife and warfare, and the chance of turning his mind to his history, and literary studies. Moreover, he approached this subject from an earlier period (for in this detail too he obeyed the will of our mistress), and starting from Diogenes, Emperor of the Romans, he worked down to the man about whom he had himself purposed to write.

At the accession of Diogenes my father had just entered upon his brilliant youth, and before this was not even a full-grown boy, and had done nothing worthy of recording, unless, forsooth, the deeds of his childhood were made the theme of a panegyric.

Such then was the Cæsar's intention as his own writing shews; but his hopes were not fulfilled, and he did not complete his history. He brought it down to the Emperor Nicephorus (III) Botaniates, and opportunity forbade his carrying it further, thus causing loss to the events he meant to describe, and depriving his readers of a great pleasure. For this reason, I myself undertook to chronicle my father's doings, that the coming generations should not overlook deeds of such importance.

Now, the harmonious structure and great charm of the Cæsar's writings are well-known to all who have chanced to take a look at his books. However, as I have already mentioned, when he had got as far as my father's reign, and sketched out a draft of it, and brought it back to us half-finished from abroad, he also, alas! brought back with him a fatal disease. This was induced, maybe, by the endless discomfort of a soldier's life, or by his over-many expeditions, or again, from his overwhelming anxiety about us, for worrying was innate in him, and his troubles were incessant. In addition to these causes, the varieties and severities of climate experienced, all contributed to mix the fatal draught for him. For he started hence on an expedition against the Syrians and Cilicians when seriously out of health; from Syria he went on ill to the Cilicians, from them to the Pamphylians, from the Pamphylians to the Lydians, and Lydia sent him on to Bithynia, who finally returned him to us and to the Queen of cities suffering from an internal tumour caused by his incessant sufferings. Yet, ill as he was, he was anxious to tell the tragic story of his adventures, but was unable to do so, partly because of his disease, and partly because we forbade it through fear that the effort of talking might cause the tumour to burst.

IV

Having written so far, dizziness overwhelms my soul, and tears blind my eyes. Oh! what a counsellor the Roman Empire has lost! Oh, for his accurate understanding of affairs, all of which he had gained from experience! And his knowledge of literature, and his varied acquaintance with both native and foreign learning! Think, too, of the grace of his figure and beauty of face, which would have befitted not only a king, as the saying goes, but even a more powerful, nay, a divine person!

To turn to myself — I have been conversant with dangers ever since my birth "in the purple," so to say; and fortune has certainly not been kind to me, unless you were to count it a smile of kind fortune to have given me "emperors" as parents, and allowing me to be born "in the purple room," for all the rest of my life has been one long series of storms and revolutions. Orpheus, indeed, could move stones, trees, and all inanimate nature, by his singing; Timotheus, too, the flute-player, by piping an "orthian" tune to Alexander, incited the Macedonian thereby to snatch up his arms and sword; but the tale of my woes would not cause a movement in place, nor rouse men to arms and war, but they would move the hearer to tears, and compel sympathy from animate, and even inanimate, nature. Verily, my grief for my Cæsar and his unexpected death have touched my inmost soul, and the wound has pierced to the profoundest depths of my being. All previous misfortunes compared with this insatiable calamity I count literally as a single small drop compared with this Atlantic Ocean, this turbulent Adriatic Sea of trouble: they were, methinks, but preludes to this, mere smoke and heat to forewarn me of this fiery furnace and indescribable blaze; the small daily sparks foretold this terrible conflagration. Oh! thou fire which, though unfed, dost reduce my heart to ashes! Thou burnest and art ever kept alight in secret, yet dost not consume. Though thou scorchest my heart thou givest me the outward semblance of being unburnt, though thy fingers of fire have gripped me even to the marrow of my bones, and to the dividing of my soul! However, I see that I have let my feelings carry me away from my subject, but the mention of my Cæsar and my grief for him have instilled devastating sorrow into me.

Now I will wipe away my tears and recover myself from my sorrow and continue my task, and thus in the words of the tragedian: "I shall have double cause for tears, as a woman who in misfortune remembers former misfortune." To have as my object the publication of the life of so great and virtuous a King will be a reminder of his wondrous achievements, and these force me to shed warm tears, and the whole world will weep with me. For to recall him, and make his reign known, will be a subject of lamentation to me, but will also serve to remind others of the loss they have sustained.

Now I must begin my father's history at some definite point, and the best point will be that from which my narrative can be absolutely clear and based on fact.

End of Sample