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II.
The Good Life of Anna Comnena:
First Female Historian and Byzantine Princess

By Meghan Kelley '11



When the Roman Empire split into two separate kingdoms, Western (Rome) and Eastern (Byzantium), not only was the land divided, but the Romans and Byzantines became divided in nearly every aspect of their civilizations. Linguistically, Latin prevailed among the Romans while Greek was spoken among the Byzantines. Religiously, the Romans created Western Christianity and the Byzantines followed Orthodox Christendom. Politically, both societies were imperialistic. However, the Westerners developed the concept of the Holy Roman Emperor, combining the state with religion; while the Byzantines strived to keep religion subordinate to the state. The Crusades were the culmination of this cultural conflict between the East and the West, and it was during the First Crusade that Anna Comnena wrote her work the *Alexiad*. Anna Comnena made a crucial contribution to Western History not only because she was the first female historian, but also because the *Alexiad* is the only account of the First Crusade written in Greek. In addition, the Comnenus dynasty, her family, was the force that kept the Byzantine Empire from its ultimate destruction for over one hundred years.¹ Along with her role in history as a princess, her role as a historian allowed her to have a good life according to the standards of the Byzantine Empire during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Evidence that Anna Comnena led a good existence is found in her life as a woman of nobility, her emphasis on family, and her writing.

One of the most important characteristics of Comnena's life was that she was born into the Comnenus dynasty. Her status as a princess of the Byzantine Empire certainly gave her many advantages and privileges.² In comparison to other Byzantine women, Comnena did not have to adhere strictly to the customs of seclusion before marriage. She was able to move about the city and had an active role in political life.³ This participation in politics was a result of her nobility and additionally of being highly educated for a woman. She had received education in the areas of rhetoric, history,

¹ Georgina Buckler, *Anna Comnena: A Study* (London: Oxford University Press, 1929), 4.

² George J. Marcopoulos and Lynda N. Schaffer, "Muraski and Comnena: Two Women and Two Themes in World History," *The History Teacher* 4, no. 19 (Aug., 1986): 489.

³ *Ibid.*, 488.

science, and medicine. She had a great admiration for Aristotle and even was a patroness of an Aristotelian circle of thinkers.⁴

The view of women in Byzantine society was on the whole positive. However, women did undergo a cycle of suppression, freedom, and suppression again throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Women were suppressed during much of the eleventh century, liberated during the twelfth and moved about the city with more freedom, but then were confined again just before the fall of Constantinople.⁵ The fluctuation in the social climate of these various time periods accounts for the changes in the role of women. Alexius I—Anna's father who ruled as emperor from 1081 to 1118—and the rest of the Comnenus dynasty seemed to have established a rule that was generally kind towards women. Alexius I's reign could be the cause of the freedom women experienced during the twelfth century in Byzantium. However during the periods in which women were secluded, there are no historical records of abuse towards women that is sometimes present in militaristic societies.⁶ Any injustice towards women from a modern point of view seems to have been strictly exclusion from political and social aspects of society.

Although the view of Byzantine women in Byzantium was generally positive, Byzantine women were often viewed negatively in the neighboring Muslim world. The Arabs often characterized Byzantine women as beautiful, but thought that all unmarried Byzantine women were adulteresses.⁷ The distaste that Muslims harbored towards Byzantine women could be reflective of their distaste for the Byzantine Empire in general. Nevertheless, the expectations the Arabs had of Byzantine women were in accordance with the regulations imposed upon them by the Byzantine Empire. Byzantine women were expected to have little contact with men, wear a veil outdoors, and be "retiring, shy, modest, and devoted to their families and religious duties."⁸ As a woman, Comnena did strive to be devoted to her family and religion; however she had a different opinion about what the ideal woman should be.

Comnena's view of women in Byzantium was for the most part negative. She seems to have wanted to distinguish both herself and the other women in her family from the stereotypical Byzantine woman. Although she was a noble and not secluded, she asserted in her writing that "it was not my lot to be kept home and brought up in the shade and in luxury."⁹ Her desire and ability to be active in the political life of Byzantium differentiated her from the other women of that time. In Comnena's opinion, her grandmother and mother were the ultimate models of ideal women and other Byzantine women faltered in comparison. She referred to her grandmother Anna Dalassena as courageous and intelligent, because her father entrusted many of the Empire's

⁴ Robert Browning, "Enlightenment and Repression in Byzantium in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries," *Past and Present*, No. 69 (Nov., 1975):17.

⁵ Alexander P. Kazhdan, "Women at Home," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 52. (1998): 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁷ Nadia M. El-Cheikh, "Describing the Other to Get at the Self: Byzantine Women in Arabic Sources (8th-11th Centuries)," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 40, No. 2. (1997): 239-241.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁹ Anna Comnena, *The Alexiad of the Princess Anna Comnena*, trans. Elizabeth Dawes, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1967), 381.

administration duties to her. She additionally described her mother Irene Ducas as an ideal woman because she was devout to both her family and religion.¹⁰

Although this affection for these women was probably a result of her great love for her family, she does make negative comments about women in general. She writes that "Women are leaky vessels and cannot even keep their husbands' secrets."¹¹ This quote demonstrates that perhaps she viewed women negatively because she thought they were not as devoted to family as her grandmother and mother were. Whatever the case, as a noblewoman, Comnena was able to become a historian, and it is in this writing that her love for her family—grandmother, mother, and father included—is shown.

The theme of Comnena's adoration for her family, especially for her father Alexius, pervades the *Alexiad*. Perhaps the reason why she had such a great regard for her father was because she was often compared to him. She describes this comparison as being made from the moment she was born. "And at dawn on a Sunday a female child was born to them who was exactly like her father, they said; that child was I."¹² Comnena's entire purpose in writing the *Alexiad* was to defend and preserve in writing Alexius' actions during his reign. She asserted that upon his rise to power in 1081, he ended the "Time of Troubles," a period of illiteracy and disorder from 1025-1081.¹³ However, not every member of her family was thought of so highly by her.

Anna scorned her brother, John II, who became the successor of the Byzantine Empire in 1118 after Alexius' death. In her study of Anna Comnena, Georgina Buckler writes that Anna "hated John and everything to do with him."¹⁴ Anna's hate for John was rooted in her opinion that the position as ruler of Byzantium was rightfully hers. Anna was taught from a young age that one day she would be Empress. She was betrothed to Constantine Ducas, but he died before their marriage could take place. Shortly afterwards, John II was born.¹⁵ John was then appointed heir to the throne. When Comnena married Nicephorus Bryennius, Comnena attempted to usurp the throne from John as Alexius was dying in 1118. However, her plans failed and Comnena was left bitter, feeling that John was incompetent and that she was the rightful queen.¹⁶ Although this view of her brother was negative, the majority of her work is a positive description of her father's reign.

Comnena's contempt for her brother has only a minor role in the *Alexiad*; the majority of her work reinforces her love for her family. Comnena admits that this theme is present in her writing. "Even in the womb I felt affection for my parents which was manifested so conspicuously in the future. For afterwards as I grew up. . . I became sincerely devoted to my mother and also equally to my father."¹⁷ She feared that her father's reign would be forgotten by posterity and that the challenges he faced would be overlooked. She argued that the difficulties faced by Alexius during his reign were much more complex and prolific than those faced by previous Byzantine emperors. She

¹⁰ Buckler, *Anna Comnena*, 116-118.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹² *Anna Comnena, Alexiad*, 151.

¹³ Marcopoulos and Schaffer, "Murasaki and Comnena," 489.

¹⁴ Buckler, *Anna Comnena*, 8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 27-31.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 250.

¹⁷ *Anna Comnena, Alexiad*, 151.

classified the problems that were prevalent earlier in the Empire's history as "very slight and tolerable" as opposed to the problem of invading Franks, Scythians, and Ishmaelites during the First Crusade.¹⁸ The overall message from Comnena about the concept of family in the *Alexiad* is that it is a positive attribute to society. This positive view is definitely in accordance with the Byzantine values of her time.

Devotion to family was one of the most important characteristics of the ideal Byzantine woman and the concept of the family unit was highly respected in Byzantium. "It has been emphasized many times that the nuclear family was the center of Byzantine society and that women unquestionably played an important part in family life."¹⁹ Mothers were often highly revered in Byzantine literature. Another Byzantine historian during the eleventh century, Michael Psellus, wrote a famous eulogy to his mother. Comnena, who was thought to have admired Psellus, additionally praises her mother and grandmother as mentioned earlier. However, a eulogy for a father has never been recovered from Byzantium. Even Comnena seems to have thought of her father as more of a statesman than a family man.²⁰ Therefore, the role of family was crucial to Byzantine society; however, it seems the most important member of the family was the mother.

Although Comnena's devotion to family was an important characteristic of the good life during the Byzantine Empire, her writing ultimately defined her ability to have a good life. Before his death, her husband had written a series of historical accounts of Byzantine emperors preceding Alexius I. Comnena decided to follow his passion for writing in order to create an account of her father's reign and to assert some of her own opinions on matters such as philosophy, religion, and history. One view of religion that she made clear in the *Alexiad* is her distaste for heresies such as Manichaeism. She asserted that "I know everyone considers the Manichean heresy an absurdity..."²¹ In addition, she wrote that Plato's Doctrine of "Unity" or "the One" created "many other principles dependent, both mundane and hyper-mundane."²² These opinions are strong ones, especially for a woman in Byzantine society. However, Comnena was able to use writing as a platform to share her ideas, an opportunity many Byzantine women did not have.

Comnena's reason for choosing to write a historical account while she spent time in a monastery is made clear in the opening lines of the *Alexiad*. These lines are additionally some of the most famous words from her work, "Time in its irresistible and ceaseless flow carries along on its flood all created things, and drowns them in the depths of obscurity . . . But the tale of history forms a very strong bulwark against the stream of time, and to some extent checks its irresistible flow . . . and does not allow [events] to slip away into the abyss of oblivion."²³ The events she referred to as having the potential to be forgotten are obviously the events of her father's reign. It is in these opening lines that Comnena expressed her major purpose in writing her work and elaborated on these lines by explaining that her father's value as a ruler. However, it is additionally in these opening lines that some historical critics argue that she foreshadowed a major source of

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 380.

¹⁹ Nadia M. El-Cheikh, "Women at Home," 10.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

²¹ Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, 384.

²² *Ibid.*, 384-85.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1.

bias in this work. Although she has a tendency to defend her father in every situation, most historians agree that her writing is nevertheless critical to understanding Byzantine history.

Comnena's writing was considered pertinent to Western History by her contemporaries and is still considered relevant today. She was considered to be an "eminent historian"²⁴ even while she was alive. As the first woman historian and the only historian to write an account of the Crusades in Greek, she provides a unique perspective on the Crusades, the church, and politics. However, despite this unique perspective, today's historians recognize that her work contains some bias and historical omissions in addition to her accurate accounts.

Several instances occur in the *Alexiad* that lead historians to believe that Comnena skewed events. These skewed events are often related to her father's battle strategies and reforms. Any instances during which Alexius decided to retreat are regarded as courageous and tactical. "She defends her father against the charge of cowardice, claiming for him courage (he 'loved danger if ever any one did') no less than wisdom and resourcefulness."²⁵ In addition to her argument that Alexius had good battle strategies, she credited her father for bringing about reform to the Byzantine Empire once he came to power. She wrote that the empire was in a state of disarray and that the people lacked education in 1081. When her father came to power this same year, she argued that he encouraged people to revert to reading Aristotle and the Bible.²⁶ Comnena's argument for this period of enlightenment on the part of her father often troubles historians. She almost seems to have overlooked here the turmoil that occurred during her father's reign. The First Crusade would begin in 1095. Although Comnena's tendency to forgive her father and bolster his reforms is present throughout the *Alexiad*, it is at least a consistent attitude throughout the work.

Georgina Buckler suggests in her study that despite her bitterness towards her father for appointing her brother John as heir, she seemed to forgive her father by the end of his life. Some historians argue that she was attempting to soften her father to hand over the crown to her. However, Buckler argues that had Comnena still been bitter, she would have described his death with "the venom that would have relieved her feelings and thrilled her readers"²⁷ as opposed to the "eulogistic lines"²⁸ that she chose to use.

Other questionable elements in Comnena's work are unrelated to her familial bias. There are several locations in the text in which Comnena entirely omitted names of people or a particular place. Historians can only speculate about her reasons for leaving out certain words; it is impossible to know whether these blanks in the manuscript were intentional. Buckler suspects that a likely reason was that she did not have the resources to look up the appropriate name while she was in seclusion in the monastery where she wrote. She additionally does not rule out the possibility that this was simply an oversight by Comnena. Perhaps she left the word out and forgot to look it up.²⁹ In either case,

²⁴ Marcopoulos and Schaffer, "Murasaki and Comnena," 489.

²⁵ Buckler, *Anna Comnena*, 245-46.

²⁶ J.M. Hussey. "The Byzantine Empire in the Eleventh Century: Some Different Interpretations." *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 4th Ser., Vol. 32. (1950): 80-81.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 247.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 247.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 251.

although these omissions are a minor fault in her work, they do somewhat detract from its overall accuracy.

Additional sources of uncertainties and inconsistencies are present in the *Alexiad* as well. Comnena made some inaccurate statements in her account in reference to a city, writing that “the new city was laid out in a certain number of stades”³⁰ (someone may remember how many).³¹ Once again, this omission could be due to a lack of information available while she was in the monastery. However, in addition, there are inconsistencies in Comnena’s work that cannot be attributed to a lack of resources. Comnena often described particular locations twice in her work, but defined them clearly only the second time she mentioned them.³² She additionally confused the death of Leo Diogenes with that of his brother Constantine, who died during a campaign in Antioch. In reference to Nicephorus Diogenes, she described him as a hero in one passage and then as the center of public hostility in another.³³ The most likely reason for inconsistencies in her work that are unrelated to her bias towards her family is perhaps a lack of ability to edit her work. Comnena died shortly after finishing the *Alexiad*, and perhaps she was unable to correct the errors her manuscript contained. However, despite these omissions and inconsistencies historians still value Comnena’s work primarily because she had access to the imperial archives, giving her factual accounts on which to base her works.

Comnena did use information from the imperial archives, but in addition she seems to have used these archives as motivation to write her account. Buckler argues in her study that “her standard of good writing was; it must err neither on the side of bombast nor on that of simplicity.”³⁴ In Comnena’s opinion, the imperial archives strayed from her concept of ideal writing in one of the two aforementioned ways. The archives contained enactments and her father’s letters, but they additionally contained written accounts that she regarded as worthless. To create her account, Comnena preferred to use her own memory and discussions that she had with monks.³⁵ These monks provided her with accounts of her father’s coming into power. This was information she needed because she was not born until two years after her father had began his reign. Comnena did address her choice of sources in the *Alexiad*. She wrote, “I am not writing about things of ten thousand years ago, but there are many still living to-day who knew my father and tell me of his doings; and no small part of my history has been gathered from them, and another another, all are of the same opinion.”³⁶ Although she had access to the imperial archives, Comnena argued that she trusted accounts that were told to her and her own memory of events over these archives.

Comnena understood that she would be under a great deal of scrutiny for her work, the *Alexiad*. She was not blind to the fact that readers and critics would accuse her of being biased towards her family, especially her father. She addresses this criticism in a telling quote from the penultimate book of her account. “And wherever I perceive my father made a mistake, I unhesitatingly transgress the natural law and cling to the truth,

³⁰ Editor’s note: “Stades” refers to a unit of measurement.

³¹ Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, 409.

³² Buckler, Anna Comnena, 253

³³ *Ibid.*, 254.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 176.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

³⁶ Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, 381.

for though I hold him dear, I hold the truth dearer still."³⁷ This statement fits with her argument that good writing must be a balance between simplicity and elaboration. Although her bias towards her father is undeniably present in her work, she admittedly tried not to allow this bias to sway from the major truths written in the *Alexiad*.

Overall, Anna Comnena did live a good life in comparison to the general standard of living in the Byzantine Empire during the First Crusade. She was a woman of nobility which gave her more freedom than most women in both her words and actions. Her love of family was additionally an important value of the Byzantine Empire. Finally, her ability to become a historian, specifically the first woman historian, allowed her to assert her opinions and defend her family in writing. This was an opportunity that no other woman had during her time. Although her work can be regarded as biased, the *Alexiad* is still an extremely important work in Western history. Not only does Comnena provide a unique perspective of the Crusades in Greek, but she additionally gave historians accounts of daily life and customs in Byzantium during this time. Information about the Byzantine Empire is by no means vast. Without Anna Comnena's account, though it is hindered by a few inaccuracies, knowledge of this period in history would be much more limited.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 380-81.

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