



ADVISORY EDITOR: BETTY RADICE

The Byzantine historian ANNA COMNENA (AD 1083–1153) was the eldest child of the Emperor Alexius I, and from earliest childhood was in daily contact with the leading figures of the Empire. Through her social position and own interest, she obtained an education in literature and philosophy given to few women in the Middle Ages. Betrothed in childhood to Constantine Ducas, the rightful heir to the throne, she became bitter when the engagement was broken off and her brother John became heir. When Alexius I died in 1118, Anna and her mother did all they could to prevent John from succeeding, and a little later Anna was apparently involved in a clumsy attempt to assassinate her brother. As a result, she was sent into a comfortable exile in a convent.

Defeated in the struggle for power, Anna turned to scholarship and organized a group of philosophers who stimulated the revival of Aristotelian studies. After the death of Nicephorus Bryennius, the man she did marry, she continued the *History* he had begun, which became the *Alexiad*, a history of her father's reign. The *Alexiad* is a vivid, detailed and generally trustworthy narrative, every page of which reveals the writer's passionate personality. It is a uniquely valuable source, particularly as it provides a picture of the Crusade from a different perspective to that of Western historians.

E. R. A. SEWTER was a well-known Byzantine scholar and editor of *Greece and Rome*. His translation of *Michael Psellus: Fourteen Byzantine Rulers* is also published in Penguin Classics. E. R. A. Sewter died in 1976.

ANNA COMNENA

The Alexiad

Translated by E. R. A. SEWTER

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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

FORTY years have passed since Elizabeth Dawes produced the first English translation of the *Alexiad* in full. At the time her version was highly praised. In the following year (1929) Georgina Buckler's *Anna Comnena* appeared, an excellent study of great value but somewhat amorphous and difficult to use – a scholar's book. Unfortunately Miss Dawes hoped that her readers would find in this volume all the aid they required; consequently she provided virtually no annotation; no maps were furnished, no appendixes of any kind, no genealogical tables and no bibliography. *Anna Comnena*, though recently reissued, has long been out of print, and it had become more than ever necessary to publish a fresh version, with a brief commentary and other essential help for the reader.

The translator is at once faced with the question: How literal should it be? The old word-for-word construe, of course, was thoroughly abandoned at least a generation ago, but there are still those who like to adhere very closely to the Greek, not merely in diction but even in syntax. Miss Dawes herself preferred the almost literal interpretation, and this inevitably led to solecisms: 'If they did not whet their swords, they certainly did their souls'; 'By reason of their terror they were almost constrained to belch forth their souls into thin air.' A determination to observe hypallage in the Greek can also have bizarre results: 'Demetrius with murder in his heart whetted his sword and got his bloody right hand ready.' It could be argued that this method more truly reflects Anna's own thoughts and style, but in general the historian is best served, I think, by a straightforward modern idiom common to scholars on both sides of the Atlantic. The present volume therefore tries to express in contemporary Anglo-American the ideas and language of a Byzantine princess who wrote some eight hundred years ago – no easy task. Nothing must be omitted and at all costs obscurity must be avoided, even if need be by a short paraphrase. For example, when Anna writes of Bohemond that 'by his nostrils nature had given free passage for the high spirit which bubbled up from his heart' (Dawes) – a particularly awkward sentence in Book XIII – one must make an effort to be lucid. What does Anna mean? Presumably Bohemond had broad nostrils (apparently a mark of manhood, for she mentions the fact more than once), nostrils that allowed the breath to escape from his lungs in great gusts – or should we say, allowed him to breathe deeply? The whole idea is alien to us. Maybe Normans suffered inordinately from catarrh and Bohemond was an exception. To be fair to Anna, she does not often present such difficulties, for in narrative her style is usually unaffected. She is much more forthright than Michael Psellus, whom she admired and sometimes plagiarized. Where her style becomes elevated and approaches an almost poetic diction, the English must harmonize with her mood, but with due restraint: to reproduce her exclamations, her rhetoric, her passionate outbursts in their Byzantine glory is apt to end in bathos.

There remains the problem of archaisms. It has been said that Anna wrote in pseudo-Classical Greek, a learned language totally unknown to the ordinary people of Constantinople, 'an almost entirely mummiform school language'¹. If this is true of Anna, then it is true of Byzantine historians from Procopius to Phrantzes. Naturally there were variations, but in essence all used the same form of Greek. There is a famous anecdote in Psellus's *Chronographia* (VI, 61) which proves how readily these same ordinary people of the

capital recognized and appreciated the point of a line quoted from the *Iliad*. Nor is this really surprising: most intelligent people are bilingual. My American students at a mid-west university spoke good English; their essays differed hardly at all from those of undergraduates here; but the University *Daily News*, written in their own jargon, was esoteric in the extreme – only the initiated could have understood a quarter of it. Millions of people in these Isles speak their own dialect – Cockney, Geordie, broad Scots and so on, all mutually incomprehensible – but all can understand the B.B.C. News and write the Queen's English (with varying degrees of success). So it must have been in Constantinople: the Greek element (the majority) read and wrote the Byzantine form of the language; the vernacular was probably quite different. There is no need, therefore, to inject 'thou', 'thee' and 'thy' into a translation of the *Alexiad*.

The maps are not intended to be exhaustive – indeed, they cannot be, for many place-names are still unidentified – but they should enable the reader to follow Alexius's campaigns with fair ease. I am no more consistent in the matter of names than any of my predecessors: I write Dyrrachium rather than Durazzo or even Durres, but Brindisi rather than Brundisium; I retain Smyrna where the moderns would read Izmir, but prefer Joscelin of Courtenay to Iatroulinos. The alternatives, however, are listed in the notes. In the case of the Crusaders I have for the most part followed Runciman, and where Turks or Patzinaks are concerned I accepted the lead of the *Cambridge Ancient History*. In this arbitrary behaviour euphony is bound to influence one's choice: Abul-Kasim sounds more convincing than Apelchases and Raymond de Saint-Gilles than Isangeles. On the other hand, I have carefully retained Anna's Franks, Normans, Latins and Kelts; also her Turks, Ishmaelites, Persians, Agarenes and Saracens. These names she uses indiscriminately for the western and eastern enemies of the emperor respectively, sometimes substituting the pejorative 'barbarians'.

The translation is based on the text of Bernard Leib, who published his own French version of the *Alexiad* some thirty years ago. European scholars are much indebted to his labours. I am grateful, too, to Professor J. M. Hussey, who with Baynes, Talbot Rice, Moss and Runciman has done so much to revolutionize the British attitude to Byzantina in the postwar era. I must also thank the publishers for their unfailing courtesy and forbearance and in particular the editor of the Penguin Classics, Mrs Betty Radice. Mr Andrew Pennycook and Miss Julia Vellacott have also been helpful. Finally, I thank my wife who for two years has endured the drone of this typewriter while the book was once written and twice revised.

Newbury, Berkshire
March 1968

E.R.A.S.

INTRODUCTION

‘THE life of the Emperor Alexius has been delineated by a favourite daughter, who was inspired by a tender regard for his person and a laudable zeal to perpetuate his virtues. Conscious of the just suspicion of her readers, the Princess Anna Comnena repeatedly protests that besides her personal knowledge she had searched the discourse and writings of the most respectable veterans: that after an interval of thirty years, forgotten by, and forgetful of, the world, her mournful solitude was inaccessible to hope and fear; and that truth, the naked perfect truth, was more dear and sacred than the memory of her parent. Yet instead of the simplicity of style and narrative which wins our belief, an elaborate affectation of rhetoric and science betrays in every page the vanity of a female author. The genuine character of Alexius is lost in a vague constellation of virtues; and the perpetual strain of panegyric and apology awakens our jealousy to question the veracity of the historian and the merit of the hero....’

So wrote Edward Gibbon in the ninth volume of the *Decline and Fall*. Modern critics, less hasty in judgement and turgid in declamation, pay tribute to Anna’s high intelligence and good education. Runciman protests that modern historians are too ready to belittle her work. Ostrogorsky refers to the *Alexiad* as a ‘historical source of first importance’; Vasiliev says it is ‘extremely important from the historical point of view’; Krumbacher that her memoirs remain ‘one of the most eminent works of medieval Greek historiography’¹; Marshall that Anna is ‘an outstanding figure among Byzantine historians’²; Hussey, more sympathetic, refers to her work as ‘mature and markedly individual’, the product of an unusually cultivated society. Now, nobody could deny that Anna was less than partial in the matter of her father, but there is a tendency now to acquit her of deliberate falsehood: her sins were sins of omission only – and the translator, who spends months, even years, in her company, has better opportunities than most of ‘sensing’ where she is failing to tell the whole truth; her discomfort is reflected in subtle changes of diction. She may not say that Alexius made a fool of himself in this or that situation, but one can feel the implication. Gibbon, no stranger himself to prejudice, censures her bias and treats her with scorn; maybe today’s scholars are more understanding – their verdict is generally favourable, certainly not patronizing.

The *Alexiad* was not her only work. Like her father and her brother Isaac, she is said to have written poems; if it is true, they seem to have won no commendation. Some years ago Kurtz published the prologue to her Will, apparently written sometime during the interval between her father’s and mother’s death (1118–23).

Anna was born at dawn on a Saturday, 1 December in the seventh indiction (1083), the morning after her father ‘returned to the capital with the laurels of victory’. It was a happy moment for Alexius and Irene, disappointed though they must have been that the first-born was not a son. Anna was in fact the eldest of seven children (four daughters and three sons). Attempts have been made by some modern historians to prove that Alexius was unfaithful to his wife in these early years and seriously considered an alliance with the deposed Empress Maria – and there was some scandalous talk, which Anna quickly dismisses. But the family seems to have been remarkably united, at least while the children were young, except for one thing: Anna very soon grew to dislike her brother John. Her troubles began, she tells us, in

her eighth year. She had been betrothed to Constantine Ducas, the Empress Maria's son and the rightful heir to the throne, and in the Byzantine way she had gone to live with her prospective mother-in-law. Constantine was treated with great generosity by Alexius and was allowed to share the privileges of an emperor; he was, of course, the junior partner, for at the time he must have been no more than a boy. Anna had every reason to hope that in due course she and young Constantine would follow Alexius and Irene on the throne. Whether Alexius never really intended the marriage to take place, or whether the feud between her grandmother, the formidable Anna Dalassena, and the Ducas family eventually made it impossible, we shall never know, but the engagement was broken off and Constantine's place as heir was taken by her brother John. The latter was then (1092) four or five years old, and from that moment Anna became his enemy. John was small, thin and dark-skinned – hardly a prepossessing child – but he was the emperor's eldest son. The Byzantines, who loved to give their rulers nicknames, called him Calo-Johannes, 'Handsome John', and in later life, as a beloved emperor and virtuous father of his people, he retained the name. Anna says little about him in the *Alexiad*, but that little betrays her enmity, and when John did become emperor she instigated a rebellion against him; it failed, and she was sent into a comfortable exile, fortunate to escape a worse fate.

However, let us return to Constantine. The young man, no longer a public figure, retired to his estate in the country, where we find him entertaining Alexius; relations between them were still most friendly and we are told that he was loved by Alexius as his own son. The plot of Nicephorus Diogenes (1094), which was known to Constantine's mother although she took no active part in it, must have ended for ever any hopes of reinstatement. He died soon after, certainly before 1097. In that year Anna married 'her Caesar', Nicephorus Bryennius – against her wishes, if we are to believe the prologue to her Will, for she declares that she agreed to the ceremony only to please her parents: she would have preferred to live unwed. Maybe Alexius arranged it all as a political move: Bryennius was the son of his old rival.³ Anyhow, the marriage proved to be happy enough; they had four children and lived together in harmony for forty years, until Bryennius contracted some illness on campaign with her hated brother and died in 1137 (he at least bore no grudge and served John faithfully). This husband of hers was a man of culture, a historian whose work is still extant and often studied for its valuable contribution to our knowledge of Botaniates' reign. If he was no great military commander (although clearly a brave one), he was a most persuasive and eloquent speaker: Alexius used his talents to win over Gregory Taronites, Bohemond and the Manichaean heretics (not always successfully, but obviously he had faith in Bryennius' oratory). His death and the loss of her parents finally embittered Anna: when she wrote the *Alexiad* (she was still engaged on the work in 1148) she was full of self-pity, a disappointed old woman. When she died we do not know.

Despite the underlying current of misery and her tendency to over-praise Alexius, the history makes good reading. Her narrative is vivid and, when the digressions are consigned to footnotes (as they are in this book, with the addition of 'A.C.'), fast-moving and interesting. Her character-sketches at their best are unforgettable (of Anna Dalassena, for example, or Bohemond, or Italus); nearly always they are shrewd and the princess clearly had a more than superficial acquaintance with human nature beyond the palace walls. She reminds us

herself that she had led no cloistered existence. Of course she has her prejudices, like any historian worth his salt (only Polybius, I believe, was almost completely impartial – and nobody reads him from choice). She dislikes Armenians, loathes the Pope Gregory VII, is unfair to Mohammedans, despises the Latins in general and (somewhat reluctantly) Bohemond in particular. There is a curious love-hate in her account of him. She greatly admires physical beauty, but was not apparently much impressed by fine architecture. (In this she differs from Psellus, who delights in descriptions of magnificent buildings and their wonderful symmetry.)

She excels in her detailed accounts of machines or instruments, like the cross-bow and the various helepoleis⁴ invented by allies or enemies. This was unusual in a woman, but Anna had a catholic education and was interested in science (in the narrow sense of the word). Like Psellus, she had studied medicine and was considered good enough to act as arbiter at the doctors' conference held when Alexius was on his death-bed. She knew something of astrology – enough to respect its most famous exponents; but she refused to accept the claim that the stars could in any way influence human destiny. Her religion was strictly orthodox and utterly sincere. Miracles, angels and demons are frequently mentioned, and quotations (not invariably accurate) from the Holy Scriptures are numerous; she alludes to certain superstitious beliefs, too, but mostly without comment. One has the impression that her Christian faith was based on reason and genuinely free of medieval superstition; her father, the 'thirteenth apostle', no doubt saw to it that his family eschewed all heresies. In this respect Anna is incredibly cruel; there is nothing charitable in her abhorrence of heretics. The gloating triumph in her account of Basil's death by burning is really horrible. To her the Bogomils are indeed devils incarnate.

Anna was well aware of the importance of her work. It was something more than a record of the Comnenian revival and the triumph of Byzantine arms; it vindicated the old *mores* before the rot set in. With the reign of Alexius there was a return to order and discipline, not only in the physical sense but also through the spiritual life of East Rome. At least that is how she saw it. In an age of cynicism and denigration it is perhaps no bad thing to be reminded that not all rulers are corrupt: Alexius was no plaster saint; he was cunning and 'versatile' (in the Odyssean fashion), at times harsh and uncompromising, a bit of a hypocrite, maybe, but essentially he was a good man with honourable intentions, certainly courageous and mindful of his duty to God and man. Anna's history has justly been described as 'the remarkable account of a remarkable man'.

But, of course, nothing in this world is perfect. Anna has her defects. Her geography is vague; there are difficulties in chronology, and in general she avoids precision in dates or even avoids them altogether; there are anomalies and contradictions (mostly in minor details); there are lacunae in the text, where she failed to give names (perhaps through forgetfulness, or lack of revision, or because, like Psellus, she prefers occasionally to tantalise the reader); her battle scenes are the least impressive passages in the history, and the famous *parataxis*, the emperor's new formation which so amazed Manalugh, seems to us nothing more than the ancient hollow square, or something so intricate as to be unworkable. There are many unanswered questions: Why did Maria adopt Alexius? How did a court eunuch prevent her remarriage and what were the timely words of wisdom he imparted to her? Why are we

not told of Anna Dalassena's death? Who were the ungrateful persons Anna would dearly love to mention, but refrains from doing so? Who was the 'third cause' of the emperor's gout, the mysterious somebody who never left him? What was the true story of Alexius' last hours?

More than anything else in her writing, I suppose, the modern reader misses the evidence of a sense of humour. She derives a certain grim amusement from the predicament of Bohemond in his coffin; and the tiny Scyth leading in chains a gigantic Frank perhaps caused her to smile; but she completely lacks the light, subtle humour of Psellus and many other Byzantine writers. Tears came more easily to Anna than laughter.

Yet when all is said the *Alexiad* is eminently readable, a document more urbane, more vivid, more inspiring than any produced by her Latin contemporaries in the West.

Let her speak now for herself.

PREFACE

THE stream of Time, irresistible, ever moving, carries off and bears away all things that come to birth and plunges them into utter darkness, both deeds of no account and deeds which are mighty and worthy of commemoration; as the playwright says, it ‘brings to light that which was unseen and shrouds from us that which was manifest’¹. Nevertheless, the science of History is a great bulwark against this stream of Time; in a way it checks this irresistible flood, it holds in a tight grasp whatever it can seize floating on the surface and will not allow it to slip away into the depths of Oblivion.

I, Anna, daughter of the Emperor Alexius and the Empress Irene, born and bred in the Purple,² not without some acquaintance with literature – having devoted the most earnest study to the Greek language, in fact, and being not un-practised in Rhetoric and having read thoroughly the treatises of Aristotle and the dialogues of Plato, and having fortified my mind with the Quadrivium of sciences³ (these things must be divulged, and it is not self-advertisement to recall what Nature and my own zeal for knowledge have given me, nor what God has apportioned to me from above and what has been contributed by Opportunity) I, having realized the effects wrought by Time, desire now by means of my writings to give an account of my father’s deeds, which do not deserve to be consigned to Forgetfulness nor to be swept away on the flood of Time into an ocean of Non-Remembrance; I wish to recall everything, the achievements before his elevation to the throne and his actions in the service of others before his coronation.

I approach the task with no intention of flaunting my skill as a writer; my concern is rather that a career so brilliant should not go unrecorded in the future, since even the greatest exploits, unless by some chance their memory is preserved and guarded in history, vanish in silent darkness. My father’s actions themselves prove his ability as a ruler and show, too, that he was prepared to submit to authority, within just limits.

Now that I have decided to write the story of his life, I am fearful of an underlying suspicion: someone might conclude that in composing the history of my father I am glorifying myself; the history, wherever I express admiration for any act of his, may seem wholly false and mere panegyric. On the other hand, if he himself should ever lead me, under the compulsion of events, to criticize some action taken by him, not because of what he decided but because of the circumstances, here again I fear the cavillers: in their all-embracing jealousy and refusal to accept what is right, because they are malicious and full of envy, they may cast in my teeth the story of Noah’s son Ham⁴ and, as Homer says, ‘blame the guiltless’.

Whenever one assumes the role of historian, friendship and enmities have to be forgotten; often one has to bestow on adversaries the highest commendation (where their deeds merit it); often, too, one’s nearest relatives, if their pursuits are in error and suggest the desirability of reproach, have to be censured. The historian, therefore, must shirk neither remonstrance with his friends, nor praise of his enemies. For my part, I hope to satisfy both parties, both those who are offended by us and those who accept us, by appealing to the evidence of the actual events and of eye-witnesses. The fathers and grandfathers of some men living today saw these things.

The main reason why I have to write the account of my father's deeds is this: I was the lawful wife of the Caesar Nicephorus,⁶ who was descended from the Bryennii, an extremely handsome man, very intelligent, and in the precise use of words far superior to his contemporaries. To see and hear him was indeed an extraordinary experience. For the moment, however, let us concentrate on what happened afterwards, lest the story should digress. My husband, the most outstanding man of the time, went on campaign with my brother, the Emperor John,⁷ when he (John) led an army against other barbarians and also when he set out against the Syrians and again reduced the city of Antioch. Even in the midst of these wearing exertions the Caesar could not neglect his writing and, among other compositions worthy of honourable mention, he chose in particular to write the history of the Emperor Alexius, my father (on the orders of the empress), and to record the events of his reign in several books, when a brief lull in the warfare gave him the chance to turn his attention to historical and literary research. He did indeed begin the history – and in this, too, he yielded to the wishes of our empress – with references to the period before Alexius, starting with the Roman emperor Diogenes⁸ and carrying it down to the times of his original subject. In Diogenes' reign my father was only a youth; he had done nothing worthy of note, unless childhood doings are also to be made the object of encomium.

The Caesar's plan was such as I have described; his writings make that clear. However, he was disappointed in his hopes and the history was not completed. After carrying on the account to the times of the Emperor Nicephorus Botaniates⁹ he stopped writing because circumstances prevented any further progress, to the detriment of the history itself and the sorrow of its readers. That is why I have chosen to record the full story of my father's deeds myself, so that future generations may not be deprived of knowledge about them. Everyone who has encountered his literary work knows with what symmetry and grace the Caesar wrote, but having reached the point I have mentioned, he brought back to us from foreign parts his work half-finished and hastily put together, and also, I am sorry to say, an illness which was to prove fatal, caused by too much soldiering, excessive fatigue and inordinate concern for ourselves. He was by nature a worrier and a worker; he could not relax. The unpleasant changes of climate, too, contributed to his death. He was a very sick man, then, when he set out for the Syrian and Cilician wars; his health continued to fail in Syria; after Syria came Cilicia, Pamphylia, Lydia and Bithynia before he returned to us in the Queen of Cities. He was ill in all these countries, already suffering from an oedema, the result of so much fatigue. In this weak condition, although he wanted to give a graphic account of his adventures, he could not because of his illness; besides, we would not let him do it – the strain of talking might open up his wound.

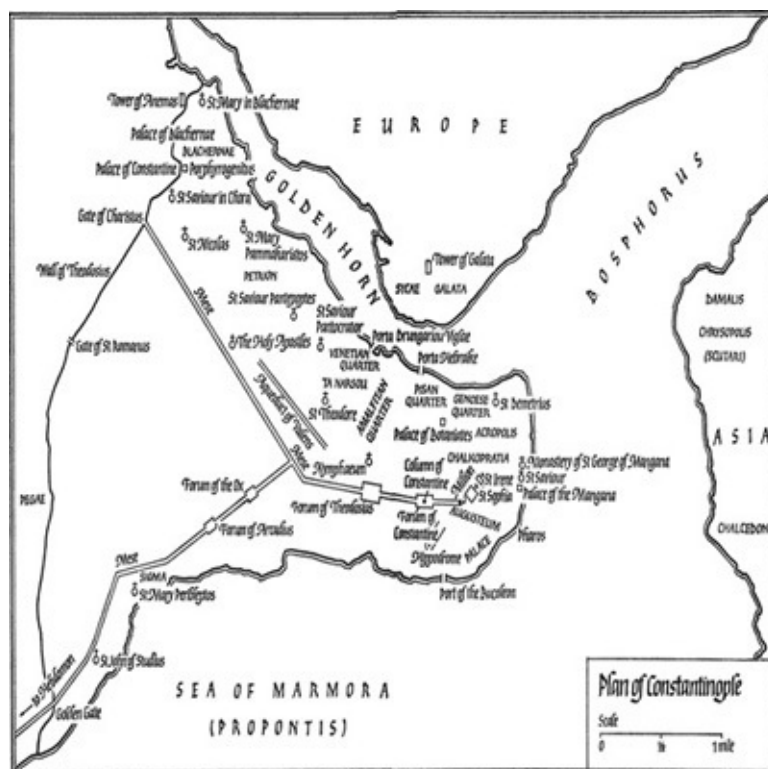
At this point my mind is *distract*; floods of tears fill my eyes when I think of Rome's great loss. His wisdom, his vast practical experience, gained over so wide a field, his knowledge of literature, the diverse learning acquired abroad and at our own Court – these were grievous losses. Charm suffused all his body and a majesty befitting not, as some say, a human throne but something higher and more divine. My own lot has been far from fortunate in other ways, ever since I was wrapped in swaddling-clothes in the Porphyra, and I have not enjoyed good luck – although one would not deny that fortune did smile on me when I had as parent an emperor and an empress, and when I was born in the Porphyra. The rest was full of

troubles, full of revolution. Orpheus with his song moved rocks and forests, even inanimate nature; Timotheus the flute-player by his Orthian strains¹⁰ once stirred the Macedonian Alexander to take up the sword and arm himself without delay for battle; the story of my afflictions would move no one physically to arms or battle, though it would stir the reader to weep with me and wring sympathy from nature, animate and inanimate alike.

The Caesar's untimely death¹¹ and the suffering it brought about touched my heart deeply and the pain of it affected the innermost part of my being. The calamities of the past, in the face of this infinite disaster, I regard as a mere drop of rain compared with the whole Atlantic Ocean or the waves of the Adriatic Sea. They were, it seems, the prelude of these later woes the warning smoke of this furnace-flame; the fierce heat was a herald of this unspeakable conflagration, the daily signal-fires of this awful funeral-pyre – a fire that lights up with torches the secret places and burns, but does not consume with burning; parching my heart imperceptibly, although its flames pierce to the bones and marrow and heart's centre.

But I see that I have been led astray by these thoughts from my subject; the Caesar stood over me and his sorrow provoked heavy sorrow in me too. I will wipe away the tears from my eyes, recover from my grief and continue my story, earning thereby a double share of tears, as the playwright says,¹² for one disaster recalls another. To put before the public the life-history of such an emperor reminds me of his supreme virtue, his marvellous qualities – and the hot tears fall again as I weep with all the world. When I remember him and make known the events of his reign, it is for me a theme of lamentation; the others will be reminded of their loss. However, this is where I must begin the history of my father, at the point where it is better to begin, where the narrative will become at once clearer and more accurate.

MAPS





FROM THE BOYHOOD OF ALEXIUS TO THE LAST MONTHS OF BOTANIATES' REIGN

THE Emperor Alexius, my father, even before he seized the throne had been of great service to the Roman Empire. In fact, his military career began in the time of Diogenes Romanus, when he impressed the emperor's friends by his great courage. On that occasion, although he was only fourteen years old,¹ he wanted to serve on campaign under Diogenes, who was leading an expedition against the Persians² – a most important task – and this ambition of the young Alexius threatened the barbarians: he made it clear that one day he would come to grips with them, and when that happened his sword would have its fill of blood. Despite the youth's warlike fervour the emperor did not let him go on this campaign, because his mother had suffered a grievous loss. She was mourning the recent death of her eldest son Manuel, whose great and heroic deeds had made him famous in the Empire. In order that she might not be left comfortless, the young man was compelled to return to her. It was hard enough that the burial place of one son was still undecided; if another were sent off to the wars, she feared that he too might die before his time on some unknown battle-field. So he was left behind by his comrades against his will, but the future gradually opened up to him a fine opportunity for brave exploits. In the reign of Michael Ducas,³ after the downfall of the Emperor Diogenes, the Roussel episode proved how valiant he was. Roussel⁴ was a Kelt and had previously joined the Roman army. His good fortune made him conceited and he gathered an army of his own, a considerable force made up partly of his own countrymen and partly of other nationalities. He was a formidable rebel. His attack on the Roman Empire was launched at a moment when its leadership had received many setbacks and the Turks had established their superiority. Roman prestige had fallen; the ground was giving way, as it were, beneath their feet. Roussel was in any case an extremely ambitious man, but at this crisis, when the condition of the Empire was so desperate, he was even more tempted to rebel openly. He plundered almost all the eastern provinces. The operations against him were entrusted to many generals renowned for bravery, men who had vast experience in battle as army commanders, but he was clearly master of these veterans. Sometimes he attacked in person, defeating his adversaries and falling upon them like a whirlwind; at other times, when he sought aid from the Turks, it became so impossible to withstand his onslaughts that he even took prisoner some of the greatest generals and routed their armies. My father was then serving under his brother⁵ who had been put in command of all soldiers in both East and West; Alexius was in fact second-in-command. It was at this crucial moment in Roman affairs when the barbarian was everywhere on the move, attacking with lightning speed, that the admirable Alexius was promoted to supreme command by the Emperor Michael. He was a worthy opponent for Roussel. He called on all his experience as a general and a soldier, all his wisdom (accumulated over a short period of time). Despite his youth – he had only recently shown evidence of the proverbial 'first beard' – he was even then considered by Roman experts to have attained the summit of the general's art, through devotion to sheer

hard work and constant vigilance; to them he was another Aemilius, the famous Roman,⁶ or Scipio,⁷ or a second Carthaginian Hannibal. As Roussel was descending on our people like a flood in full spate, he was captured and within a few days the affairs of the East were settled. Alexius was quick to see the opportune course of action, even quicker in carrying it out. As to the manner in which Roussel was caught, that is described by the Caesar in his second book, but I will also give my account, as far as it concerns my own history.

Not long before, the barbarian Tutush had come down from the remoter parts of Anatolia to plunder Roman territory with a powerful army. Roussel, meanwhile, was being repeatedly hard-pressed by the Roman general and one after another his strongholds were falling, although he was at the head of a numerous force thoroughly equipped with fine and impressive weapons. My father completely outwitted him. To save himself Roussel decided to adopt a new policy, for he was now at the end of his resources. He met Tutush, made a friend of him and asked for an alliance. His scheme was thwarted by Alexius, who by cordial offers backed persistently by arguments, gifts, and every device and stratagem, won Tutush over to our side. Nobody surpassed my father in ingenuity; under the most difficult circumstances he found ways and means. The most convincing point in the persuading of Tutush can be summarized as follows: ‘Your sultan⁸ and my emperor are friends. This barbarian Roussel prepares to attack both of them, and is indeed a fearful enemy of both. His incursions against the emperor are continually whittling away some part of his Roman domain, bit by bit. At the same time Persia is being deprived of all that she herself might win. His whole plan of campaign is carefully thought out: for the moment he is pursuing me with your help; later, when the time is propitious, he will leave me, thinking he is now free from danger, alter his tactics again and make war on you. My advice to you is this: when he returns to you, seize him, for which we will pay you well, and send him to us in chains. You will profit from this in three ways: first, you will have more money than anyone else has ever received before; secondly, you will win the friendship of the emperor, thereby quickly attaining great prosperity; and thirdly, the sultan also will be delighted to see so formidable an enemy out of the way, an enemy who trained his men to fight both of us, Turks and Romans.’ Such was the message sent to Tutush by my father, as commander-in-chief of the Roman army. At the same time he sent as hostages certain distinguished persons and persuaded Tutush’s friends to seize Roussel on a predetermined day and for a set sum of money. Roussel was at once taken and sent to Amaseia to the Roman general. After that there was trouble. The money promised was slow in arriving and Alexius himself was unable to pay the full amount. The emperor took no interest in the affair. Far from coming ‘with measured tread’, as the tragic playwright⁹ says, the money was nowhere to be seen at all. Tutush’s men pressed for payment in full or the return of the captive who had been bought; he should be allowed to go back to the place where he had been seized. The agreed sum could not be paid, but Alexius, after spending the whole night in deep perplexity, decided to collect the money by contributions from the inhabitants of Amaseia. He knew it would be no easy matter. However, on the next morning he summoned the people, especially those in positions of authority and the richer folk. Fixing his eyes on the latter in particular, he made a speech. ‘You all know,’ he said, ‘how this barbarian has treated all the cities of the Armenian province, how many townships he has ravaged, how many citizens he has cruelly subjected to intolerable persecution, how much

money he has extorted from you. But now you have a chance to free yourselves from his evil deeds – if you wish. It is essential that he should not be allowed to go. As you see, he is our prisoner, thanks entirely to the Will of God and our zeal, but Tutush captured him and demands the reward from us. We are quite incapable of paying the money, being on foreign soil and having already exhausted our capital on a long war against the barbarians. Of course if the emperor were not so far away and if the Turk granted some respite, I would make haste to get the money from Constantinople, but as that is altogether out of the question (you know that yourselves) you will have to contribute the money, and the emperor will repay you in full on my promise.’ Hardly had he ended this speech when the Amaseians broke into loud uproar. Openly defiant, they hissed him. The confusion was made worse by the criminal element and troublemakers expert in rabble-rousing. At any rate there was a tremendous hubbub, some wanting Roussel to be kept and urging the mob to lay hands on him, while others, in utter confusion (as is the way with the dregs of the people in a crowd), wanted to grab him and strike off his chains. Seeing the people in such a rabid mood, Alexius realized that his own position was extremely precarious. Nevertheless, he did not lose heart and bracing himself made a sign with his hand to enforce silence. After a long time and with much difficulty he stopped the uproar and addressed them. ‘Men of Amaseia,’ he said, ‘I am amazed that you have so completely misunderstood the intrigues of these men who deceive you, buying their own safety at the cost of your blood and continually plotting your absolute ruin. What will you get out of Roussel’s revolt, except massacres, blindings and mutilations? Yet the men who engineer such things for you, by courting the favour of the barbarian, made sure that their own welfare would not be affected. At the same time they were gorging themselves on the emperor’s gifts and humoured him with assurances that they did not yield you, or the city, to the enemy. So far they have never given a thought to you. The reason why they wanted to help Roussel in his revolt, flattering him with high hopes, is that they may keep their own fortunes intact, *and* continue to beg for honours and gifts from the emperor. If their luck should somehow alter, they will withdraw from the business and stir up the emperor’s anger against you. Take my advice. Tell the troublemakers to go to blazes. Now go home, every one of you, and consider what I have said. You will know who gave you the better advice.’

On hearing these words, as unaccountably as the way a potsherd falls this or that side up, they changed their minds and went home. Alexius was aware how on the slightest pretext the common folk will reverse a decision, especially when influenced by scoundrels, and he was afraid that agitators would harangue them during the night, attack him, lead Roussel from his prison and set him free. Resistance against such overwhelming numbers would be impossible. However, he devised a plan worthy of Palamedes himself.¹⁰ He pretended to blind Roussel. The man was stretched out on the ground, the executioner brought the branding-iron near to his face, and Roussel howled and groaned; he was like a roaring lion. To all appearances he was being blinded. But in fact the apparent victim had been ordered to shout and bawl; the executioner who seemed to be gouging out his eyes was told to glare horribly at the prostrate Roussel and act like a raving madman – in other words, to simulate the punishment. So he was blinded, but not in reality, and the people clapped their hands and noisily spread the news all over the city that Roussel had lost his eyes. This bit of play-acting persuaded the whole mob, citizens and foreigners alike, to give money to the fund. They were busy as bees. The whole point of my father’s stratagem was that those who were disinclined to contribute

and were plotting to steal Roussel away from him might give up in despair when they were foiled; they might abandon their original plan for his and quickly become his allies. Thus the emperor's displeasure would be averted. With this in view he seized Roussel and kept him like a lion in a cage, still wearing bandages over his eyes as evidence of the supposed blinding.

Despite the glory already won, he was far from satisfied; other tasks still remained to be done. Many other cities and strongholds were subdued; those areas which had fared badly under Roussel's government were incorporated in the Empire. After that he turned his horse head straight for the imperial city, but in his grandfather's town ¹¹ there was a short rest from labour for himself and all his soldiers. It was here that he afterwards performed a feat worthy of the famous Hercules when he rescued Alcestis, the wife of Admetus. Doceianus, nephew of the former emperor Isaac Comnenus and cousin of Alexius, himself a man of distinction not only because of his lineage but also on account of his own worth, saw Roussel wearing the bandages, apparently blinded, and being led by the hand. He sighed deeply, shed tears and accused my father of cruelty. He even went so far as to rebuke him personally for having deprived a man so noble and a true hero of his sight; he shouted that Roussel should have been saved from punishment altogether. For the moment Alexius merely remarked, 'My dear fellow, you will soon hear the reasons for his blinding.' But not long afterwards he took him to a little room and there uncovered Roussel's head and disclosed his eyes, fiercely blazing. Doceianus was astonished at the sight; the miracle filled him with wonder and amazement. Again and again he put his hands on Roussel's eyes, to convince himself that it was not a dream or a magic trick or some other newly-invented manifestation of that sort. When he did learn of his cousin's humane treatment of the man and with his humanity his artifice, he was overcome with joy. He embraced and kissed Alexius repeatedly and his wonder turned to happiness. The members of the Court and the emperor were similarly affected; so was everybody else.

Later Alexius was sent back to the west by the Emperor Nicephorus, who was now at the head of affairs, to deal with Nicephorus Bryennius. The latter was throwing the whole of the West into confusion. He had already assumed the imperial crown and proclaimed himself emperor, although Botaniates had established himself on the throne immediately after the deposition of Michael Ducas, ¹² and having won the hand of the Empress Maria ¹³ was governing the Empire. During Michael's reign Nicephorus Bryennius had been appointed Duke of Dyrrachium and even before the accession of Botaniates he had begun to play the part of an emperor and planned revolt against Michael. Why and how this came about it is unnecessary for us to explain: the Caesar's history has set out the reason for the rebellion. But I must briefly explain – this is most important – how he overran and subdued the whole of the western provinces, using the city of Dyrrachium as his operational base, and how he was captured. Those who wish to learn the details of the revolt can refer to the Caesar's account. Bryennius was a mighty warrior, one of the most extraordinary men – tall of noble lineage, very handsome, dignified and thoughtful, physically strong – an outstanding candidate for the imperial throne in that generation. So persuasive were his arguments and so great his ability to influence all men, even at first sight and the beginning of their acquaintance, that everyone, both soldiers and civilians, united in giving him precedence and judging him

worthy of rule over the whole Empire, East and West. In fact, all the cities received him at his coming with hands raised in supplication, but sent him on his way from city to city with applause. This worried Botaniates, threw his army into extreme confusion and caused anxiety throughout the Empire. It was my father, therefore, Alexius Comnenus, whom they decided to pit against Bryennius. Alexius had recently been promoted Domestic of the *Scholae*¹⁴ and he had with him the available military forces. The truth is that in this area the Empire was reduced to its last men. Turkish infiltration had scattered the eastern armies in all directions and the Turks were in almost complete control of all the districts between the Black Sea and the Hellespont, the Syrian and Aegean waters, the Saros and the other rivers, in particular those which flow along the borders of Pamphylia and Cilicia and empty themselves into the Egyptian Sea. So much for the eastern armies; those in the west joined Bryennius and left the Roman Empire with quite small and insignificant forces. Some 'Immortals'¹⁵ were left to fight for it, but they had only touched sword and spear a short time before. There were also a few soldiers from Choma¹⁶ and a Keltic regiment which was far below strength. At any rate, these were the men whom they gave to my father and at the same time they (the emperor's advisers) called on the Turks to supply help. He was then ordered to set out for a campaign against Bryennius. They had less confidence in the army than in the general's own intelligence and his strategic and tactical skill. Alexius did not await the arrival of reinforcements, but hearing that the enemy was advancing rapidly at once armed himself and his followers, left the capital and in Thrace near the River Halmyros pitched camp without ditches or rampart. He discovered that Bryennius was bivouacking on the plains of Kedoktos and he wanted to keep the two armies, his own and the enemy's, a considerable distance apart, for to attack Bryennius head-on was impossible: the state of his own forces and their inferiority in numbers might become known. He would have to fight with a handful of inexperienced soldiers against a large force of seasoned veterans. Thus he gave up the idea of a bold, open attack, and planned a victory by stealth.

Now that the history has brought these men, Bryennius and my father Alexius Comnenus, both heroic men, to the point of battle, it is worthwhile to arrange them in their opposing battle-lines and then to examine the fortunes of the war. Neither was inferior to the other in bravery, nor was one surpassed by the other in experience. Certainly they were both handsome and brave, in skill and physical strength equally balanced as on a scale. Our task is to see how fortune inclined to one side. Bryennius, confident in his soldiers, relied on his own knowledge and the good discipline of his army, whereas on the other side Alexius had small hopes, and very thin hopes, so far as his own forces were concerned, but in reply put his trust in the strength of his own ingenuity and in his art as a general. When they had made contact and determined that now was the time for battle, Bryennius, who had learnt that Alexius, encamped near Kalaura, was intercepting his own line of march, moved to the attack with the following formation. His army was drawn up on right and left: his brother John¹⁷ was in command of the right, where there were 5,000 men in all, Italians and members of the detachment of the famous Maniaces,¹⁸ as well as horsemen from Thessaly and a contingent, by no means despicable, from the Hetaireia.¹⁹ On the other wing, the left, Tarchaniotis Catacalon was in command of Macedonians and Thracians, well armed and numbering altogether 3,000. Bryennius personally commanded the centre of the line, where

Macedonians and Thracians were posted with the élite of all the nobles. All the Thessalians were mounted on horseback; with their breastplates of iron and the helmets on their heads they flashed like lightning. Their horses alert with pricked-up ears, their shields clashing one on another, the brilliant gleam of their armour and their helmets struck terror into the enemy. Bryennius, circling round in their midst like some Ares ²⁰ or a Giant standing out head and shoulders above all others, taller by a cubit, was in truth an object of wonder and dread to those who saw him. Apart from the main body, about two stades ²¹ distant, were some Scythian allies equipped with barbaric weapons. They had been ordered to fall upon the rear as soon as the enemy appeared and the trumpet sounded the charge; they were to shoot at them and harass them ceaselessly with showers of arrows, while the others in close order, shield to shield, were to attack the strongest part of their line. So much for Bryennius' formation. His adversary, after inspecting the lie of the land, stationed one part of his army in some ravines, and the rest facing Bryennius' line. When both the men hiding and the visible contingent had been duly arranged, Alexius addressed his soldiers, individually inciting them to deeds of bravery. The section already lying in ambush he ordered to fall upon the unsuspecting enemy as soon as they found themselves in their rear; they were to dash against their right wing with the maximum violence and energy. He kept for himself the so-called 'Immortals' and some of the Kelts; these he commanded in person. Catacalon was put in charge of the men from Choma and the Turks; he was to be responsible for the general surveillance of the Scyths and the repulse of their forays.

So much for the disposition of Alexius' army. Now for the battle. When Bryennius' men reached the ravines, my father immediately gave the signal and the party in ambush leapt upon the enemy with loud war-cries, each man striking and killing any who happened to come in his path. The suddenness of this attack terrified the others and they were thrown in flight. John Bryennius, the general's brother, however, 'mindful of his furious might'²² and still courageous, turned his horse's bridle and with one blow struck down the 'Immortal' who came at him. Thereupon the breaking line was restored and discipline returned: the ambushers were driven off. The 'Immortals' in some disorder began to flee headlong, losing men at the hands of their relentless pursuers. My father hurled himself into the midst of the foe and fighting nobly spread havoc wherever he went, striking and at once cutting down all who opposed him. He hoped that some of his men were following and protecting him, and he continued to fight with unrestrained fury. But when he saw that his army was by now utterly defeated and scattered in many directions, he gathered together the more courageous men, six in number, and told them to draw sword and when they got near Bryennius to make a violent assault on him; if necessary they should die with him. This plan was thwarted by a common soldier, Theodotos, who had served my father from boyhood; he said that the enterprise was foolhardy. Alexius was persuaded, and adopted the contrary plan: he decided to retire a little way from the enemy, collect some men who were known to him from the scattered army, reorganize them and again plunge into the fray. However, before he could disengage from the enemy, the Scyths with much shouting and yelling began to harass Catacalon and his Chomatenians. They drove them back and put them to flight without any difficulty, and then turned to plunder, following the national custom of the Scyths: before they are absolutely sure of the enemy's defeat and before consolidating their own advantage

they ruin their victories by carrying off the loot. Now all the camp-followers, fearing they might suffer some damage from these Scyths, caught up with the rear of Bryennius' army and mingled with the soldiers, and as others constantly joined them (having escaped the Scythian bands) they caused no little confusion in the ranks and the standards were thrown into chaos. Meanwhile, my father was cut off, as we have said above, and as he darted here and there in the enemy's ranks he saw one of the grooms dragging away a horse from the imperial stable. It was decked out with the purple-dyed saddle-cloth and had discs plated with gold; the men running beside it, too, had in their hands the great iron swords²³ which normally accompany the emperors. Seeing all this Alexius covered his face, drawing down the vizor fastened to the rim of his helmet, and with the six men I spoke of before rushed violently against them. He knocked down the groom, caught the emperor's horse and took it away together with the great swords. Then he slipped away unnoticed from the enemy. Once he reached a safe place he sent off the horse with its gold-plated bosses, and the swords brandished to the right and left of emperors. He also sent a herald, who was to run through all the army and in a stentorian voice proclaim that Bryennius had fallen. The announcement brought together crowds of hitherto scattered men (soldiers of the Great Domestic of the *Scholae*, i.e. my father). They came from all directions and marched back to their general. The news also encouraged the others (who had not fled) to stand their ground. Wherever they happened to be they stood motionless, looking back to the rear and amazed beyond all belief by what they saw. It was indeed an extra-ordinary sight: the horses on which they rode were gazing to the front, but the faces of the riders turned backwards; they neither advanced nor had they any intention of wheeling about, but just stopped, dumbfounded and utterly unable to understand what had happened. The Scyths thought of home and were already on their way; they had no further interest in pursuit, but far off from both armies wandered around at random with their booty. The proclamation of Bryennius' capture and downfall put courage into the hearts of those who only a little while before had been cowards and fugitives; moreover, the general display of the royal horse with its insignia and the sight of the great swords (which all but spoke for themselves) convinced them that the news was true: Bryennius, who was guarded by these swords, had fallen into the hands of his enemies.

Chance then took a hand in the proceedings. A detachment of Turkish allies found Alexius, the Great Domestic, and having learnt how the battle stood, they asked where the enemy had gone. Then with Alexius they climbed a little hill and when he pointed it out to them they saw Bryennius' army. They looked down on it as if from a watch-tower and the situation below seemed to be as follows: his men had not yet re-formed rank; they were disordered, apparently believing the victory was already won, and so, contemptuous of their adversaries they thought the danger was past. The fact that my father's contingent of Franks had gone over to them after the first rout was the main reason for this attitude. The Franks had dismounted from their horses and given them their right hands (their way of pledging faith). Thereupon a crowd gathered from all directions to see what was going on, for a rumour spread through the army that the Franks had abandoned their supreme commander Alexius and actually joined Bryennius. My father and his men saw them in this state of confusion; they also took into consideration the Turks who had recently come up to them and decided to split up their combined forces into three groups: two were to stay in ambush somewhere near the hill, the third was ordered to advance against the enemy. My father was responsible for

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