Introduction

The *Alexiad* is a history of the reign of Alexios I Komnenos in Byzantium from 1081 to 1118 CE, written decades later by Alexios' daughter Anna in classicizing Greek. She calls it a bulwark against the flood of time: a monument to his character and deeds; and, if she sought to enhance the importance of Alexios in Byzantine history, she monumentally succeeded. The work is justly famous: a richly inviting source for scholars and cultural historians,[1] while the degree to which discussion concentrates on its factual accuracy is a measure of the seriousness with which it is regarded as a history. But it is much more than a history of a single reign. It is a shapely, intricate construction compressing ideas about Byzantium's ethos, history and destiny. It shows awareness of the act of writing as itself a form of government, of rescue and control, its strategies mirroring the strategies ascribed to Alexios in ruling. It is a history and also a drama, one in which 'the Emperor Alexios, my father' is the mask, and 'I, Anna', the voice.[2] Her work seeks to recover and renew him, to reauthorize his being. What Alexios did for the empire, she is trying to do for him. It is an exercise of mind conducting mind, moment by moment, as if he were alive: Alexios' mind through the narrator's. Equally, it gives a framework and a definition. My aim is to consider it as a work of literary art, one that constructs a legend in the medium of history.

Clearly, Komnene sets out to create a legend about her father. My purpose is to show not that she does this but to examine how she does it and to what effects. These are neither simple nor unchanging. She achieves consistency through accumulation and revision. Her picture moves. Its shape appears by stages. Her myth takes other myths into itself. For these

[1] Garland 1999, for example, uses it extensively in building a picture of royal women and women in power. Kazhdan and Epstein 1985 use it variously to map cultural change. See Ostrogorsky 1969 and Mango 1980 for examples of the range of use by general historians.
[2] *Alexiad* 6.8.1 (R-K 184, S 196, F 167).

and similar reasons, I need to quote frequently and sometimes at length: the quotations are my data; without them, I cannot demonstrate what I assert.

There have been many fine literary insights into the *Alexiad* already. Buckler prepared the ground generously in her scholarly monograph.[3] Chrysostomides grasped the importance of the structure. '[Anna Komnene] groups and organizes her evidence to highlight and illuminate the emperor's character, his values, his perceptions, his aspirations, his actions and reactions which had a bearing on the course of history. As the narrative progresses the figure of Alexius acquires a central historical significance inextricably interwoven with the events that shaped the fortunes of the Byzantine Empire.'[4] Indeed, Komnene does all this. Her history coordinates changes in Alexios with developments in events: events are moulded into phases, his dominant aspect modified to govern those. Into this synchronized development she catches up – someway between evocation and incorporation – figures, memories and legends from Byzantium's past deriving from, and adding lustre to, its complex myth about itself. All move with him towards a symbolic end. The impression left is that Alexios so fulfilled the imperial ideal as to embody or at least evoke Byzantium's passage through time.

Her undertaking combines three projects in particular: it shows Alexios in the traditional imperial role as the restorer, with specific reference to the great Byzantine defeat at Manzikert in 1071;[5] it engages in religious as well as heroic terms in a new cultural and military conflict with the West, whose spearhead in her time was Norman but whose future spearhead she foresaw as being possibly Venetian or else Pisan; and it shapes an answer to Psellos' *Chronographia*. These projects work together to give Alexios the character of the final Constantine. As he restores a shattered empire and its culture, Alexios serially matches great preceding emperors, until his efforts to remake that empire bring him up beside the Constantine imprinted on cultural memory by Eusebius' *De vita Constantini*. Meanwhile, in fighting off the Normans and containing the First Crusade, he asserts himself not just as an Homeric hero but also as the true head of the Christian empire. Then, as the *Alexiad* takes up a standard for imperial behaviour desiderated by Psellos – defined by him as out of reach for any emperor – Komnene maps a reign that meets this standard but in turn defines it as being out of reach for any other. Thus she rebuts Psellos' work while building on it, to

[3] Buckler 1929. [4] Chrysostomides 1982: 30.
[5] As the Byzantines saw and mythologized it. Harris 2003: 33–4 argues that 'the defeat itself was not a disaster. The terms . . . were generous', and that it was the civil war after Romanos' return that led to most of Asia Minor being lost.

reinforce her claim that Alexios is the Last Constantine and his death the end of the true empire. All these claims and views of him emerge as if naturally from the course of events and seem as naturally to serve and reinforce each other. That is her art.

So extended a development is not easy to discuss in the short term. Some years ago, a burst of lively short criticism was stimulated by Howard-Johnston when he argued that the strong parts of the *Alexiad* must have had another author, namely Nikephoros Bryennios, Anna Komnene's husband, and that her contribution had been to elaborate the surface of the narrative and make it dull. He claimed that the *Alexiad* allowed us to see a Byzantine historian – Bryennios – at work and offered to say which passages were written by whom.[6] Several critics responded together in a book of essays, edited by Gouma-Peterson: *Anna Komnene and Her Times*. Reinsch, Komnene's editor and champion, demonstrated that her revision of an episode from Bryennios' *Hyle* was a tightening and focussing, not a dull elaboration.[7] Macrides dealt definitively with Howard-Johnston's view that Komnene could not have written military history.[8] Hill and Gouma-Peterson essayed the work's complexity, using different mixes of biography, theory and textual analysis and considering which feminist terms might be most usefully applied.[9] Ljubarskij discussed the consistency with which the *Alexiad* is constructed round its central figure in the manner of Homeric epic.[10]

Such discussions are invigorating and illuminating yet they tend to give an either/or view of a given question and make the *Alexiad* seem just one thing or entirely something else. But what is true of Alexios, or one part of the *Alexiad*, is often not true of another, or is true on different terms. Single insights or sets of insights need counterbalancing and synthesizing with others. Macrides, for example, in her fine and apposite rebuttal of Howard-Johnston's claims, accepts his view that 'Alexios is presented as a ruler who cannot anticipate nor forestall danger'[11] in the interest of her argument that his character is Odyssean and the *Alexiad* an epic.[12] In fact, Alexios is

[6] Howard-Johnston 1996: esp. 285–8.
[7] Reinsch 2000. He had already argued elsewhere (1996) that her omission of less relevant material enabled her to create a purposive progression through the three episodes directly borrowed from the *Hyle*.
[8] Macrides 2000: 67–70. [9] Hill 2000; Gouma-Peterson 2000a. [10] Ljubarskij 2000.
[11] Howard-Johnston 1996: 297 cited by Macrides 2000: 68.
[12] Macrides 2000: 68–70. So the assumption creeps into discussion that if Alexios is one thing he is not its opposite: if he improvises brilliantly, like Odysseus, he cannot look ahead. This overlooks one of Komnene's basic strategies, discussed in detail later, that of balancing Alexios' characterization by endowing him with antithetical virtues. Alexios improvises brilliantly *and* looks ahead.

often presented as a ruler who does anticipate and forestall danger. His whole handling of the First Crusade – once it moves towards imperial territory – shows this. He is indeed an Odysseus whose reflexes and ingenuity are lightning-quick but he is also given to anxious forethought. As the vicar of Christ, he exemplifies *pronoia*. Komnene balances these qualities continually in a portrait that is never static. To give a different example, when Macrides says that she 'writes about the women in her family ... as good and supportive mothers and wives rather than as women exercising independent power',[13] she emphasizes that Komnene's narrative admits the values of her culture. Certainly, Alexios' mother, Anna Dalassene, is presented as a pious mother governing with her son to help him, not from ambition. But her drive and energy and the chrysobull indemnifying her decisions go beyond the normative, and there is a further dimension to her presentation. The unnamed exemplar behind Anna Dalassene is the Theotokos, the queen of heaven, whose maternal love and power are limitless and undivided.[14] The long-term picture in the *Alexiad* is of a reign that went much further than any other towards mirroring the heavenly empire of which it was a nominal copy. The brief apologia for Dalassene's power rests on this foundation and makes part of a gradual enlargement of the picture.

The variety of the essays in *Anna Komnene and Her Times* is a tribute to the depth of the work but their brevity necessarily means that specific features tend to be singled out and not traced to their function in the overall design. Magdalino identifies the burlesque element in the way the Norman leaders are presented[15] and Albu isolates one of the most important features of the history: 'When Byzantines and Normans scheme to outwit one another, their shared love of theatrical wiles offers a valuable clue towards understanding the electrical tensions generated by this competition.'[16] Both are right, but more needs to be said. This burlesque treatment, carefully counterpointed with heroic Norman grandeur, is both a writerly and a life strategy towards controlling an otherwise unmanageable element. Alexios and his historian practise it together and in parallel. Alexios is exempt from the burlesque while colluding in the theatre. Threaded into this is a systematic practice of distinction-making, as Komnene identifies the similarities and stimulus to both parties in the engagement but also points out their

[13] Macrides 2000: 71. In support of her point, see Hill 1997: esp. 89–91 on the ideology concerning widowed mothers.

[14] Hill 1999: 184 makes another point relevant to the early years, at least, of this administration: 'it could be argued that a division of life into two spheres at all is inaccurate for the Komnenian era, where the family circle was nearly identical to the pool of public officials'.

[15] Magdalino 2000a: 27. [16] Albu 2000: 165.

differences. She presents Alexios as fighting under the disadvantages of a conscience, family loyalties and imperial responsibility. It takes a long time, therefore, to subdue the uninhibited Norman enemy but, over time, the good, the pious, the civilized prevails. This process is worked out with much ingenuity and care: stylistically and in behaviour.

Clearly Alexios is an idealized figure. Almost as clearly, he embodies not just one ideal but many, in ways that illustrate how variable the tension is between legend and history yet how constant is the fact of tension. Alexios, at any time, is what the imperial situation requires, and the way he is seen illuminates the empire's need. Perhaps I may make the point simply by looking at Alexios' idealization as a military leader, taking Chrysostomides' account of Leo VI's military treatise the *Taktika* as a guide.[17] I quote from her summary of the preamble:

> The only remedy against . . . evil is for man to take the field with the sole aim of restoring and maintaining peace . . . with one's enemies. In other words, war must be undertaken for the restoration of the terrestrial order, which is a reflection of the heavenly one. To achieve this mission, the knowledge of military science and how one should conduct it becomes imperative.[18]

The *Alexiad* is covertly constructed on that principle; it is revealed midway.

Among the precepts and advice of the *Taktika* and other treatises[19] are the following:

> The art of war demanded knowledge in weaponry, tactics, construction for the erection of siege machines and fortresses, logistics, astronomy and medicine. It was considered essential for the general in charge of an expedition to take advice from experienced veterans . . . but also that he should have some knowledge of these disciplines.
>
> It was the general's task to inspire loyalty and sacrifice . . . by sharing all hardships with his men.
>
> If some of the soldiers . . . were seized by fear . . . they were sent away from the battlefield . . . or given other tasks that did not carry danger . . .
>
> In the event that foreign troops happened to belong to the same tribe as the enemy, they had to be moved . . .
>
> Often a pragmatic and an ethical approach seems to have been intertwined . . . For example . . . soldiers were instructed to shoot not only at the riders but also at the horses . . .

[17] Chrysostomides 2001. [18] Chrysostomides 2001: 93.

[19] Particularly *Maurice's Strategikon*. Alexios fulfils its recommendations almost as strikingly – e.g., 'The general should appear calm and untroubled; his food should be plain and simple': Book I Introduction (Dennis 9). Alexios' ambush of Bryennios follows 4.1 precisely, while many of the maxims (7.17.2) bring him directly to mind (Dennis 52 and 83–92).

> To avoid a long drawn out siege . . . the commander in charge would persuade the inhabitants to surrender, either through released prisoners, or by letters shot over the wall . . .
>
> The issue of the treatment of prisoners forms another important subject of the military treatises. There was no question of their being maltreated or put to death . . . On the other hand, captives were paraded . . .
>
> Propaganda also played an important role . . . Special treatment was given to visiting ambassadors . . .
>
> Byzantine military texts . . . make a distinction between the Persians and the Arabs on one hand and the Turkic tribes on the other . . .
>
> [But] the Turkic tribes . . . easily broke their oath and did not honour the treaties . . . The Byzantines were forced either to strike an agreement with the foes of their opponents, or try to bring them within their sphere of political and cultural influence.
>
> The Persians . . . though themselves reluctant to put forward proposals for a treaty . . . accepted it when it was offered to them . . . [and] on the whole it was respected.
>
> The negotiations [for peace] began first with the exchange of envoys . . . [then were] taken up at a higher level . . . and in this second instance it was appropriate to exchange gifts.
>
> [For] the aim of war was to re-establish peace among peoples in accordance with the divine order.[20]

Alexios fulfils every one of the above prescriptions, either precisely or in a rationally adapted form. He is everywhere seen practising 'the art of war'. Recruitment, training, disposition of troops, formation in advancing, marching and retreat, ambushes and feints, sieges, fortresses, trench-digging, river- and lake-crossing, logistics, even astronomy, are all in his repertory of expertise. However, the form the art takes varies with the military problem. It varies with his stage of development and with the tenor of the current narrative. Moreover, it is freighted with further considerations and belongs within broader developments. In Books Five and Six, the problem is the invincibility of the Frankish cavalry charge: when Alexios solves that, he is free to give attention to his empire. Against the Scythians, in Book Seven, he employs a mix of strategy and tactics, concentrating on the archers: 'He had no sleep that night . . . Throughout the hours of darkness he was summoning his soldiers, especially the expert archers . . . stimulating them to battle, as a trainer encourages athletes before a contest. He gave them useful advice . . . how to bend their bows and fire their arrows, when to rein in a horse, when to relax the bridle, and when to

[20] Chrysostomides (2001: 94–9. Her wording but the precepts are not laid out in exactly this order.

dismount.'[21] All this meets requirements but does more: it gives the reader entry to Alexios' active mind, full of ideas and anxiety; it matches his concern for the troops with his inability to sleep as he lies shivering from fever. Such passages produce a sensation of closeness to Alexios and intimate the way his body will break up under the weight of empire. Much later, while being misjudged and forced to wait, he invents a new army formation to deflect the Turkish arrows. The formation is strategic – and 'a battle-order inspired by angels'.[22] It illuminates a change in him and in the narrative as that moves towards eschatology.

By received Byzantine wisdom – even contradictory wisdom – he is an *ideal general*. But each of Alexios' desired behaviours is seen in the thick of crises and events, arising out of forethought yet often in quick response to some new circumstance. They illuminate situations and Alexios' role in them. One cannot do justice to Komnene's method by abstracting them because the ideal values are inter-knitted with the lived history. And they are not characterized by sameness. Among many instances of Alexios' showing leadership by sharing hardships with his men, just two will show how differently they work. In Book Two, the Doukai make a speech to the rebel army to persuade them to prefer Alexios to his older brother: ' "he has shared salt with you, fought bravely at your side . . . sparing neither his body nor his limbs nor even life itself for your safety's sake . . . crossing with you over mountain and plain . . . He is a real soldier, with a deep affection for the fighting man".'[23] This is political rhetoric to a political end. Moreover, it grows out of the *Hyle*-ethic and the early characterization of Alexios there, while having some corrective function. Neville sees a solitary mountain-crossing episode in the *Hyle* as deliberately ridiculous.[24] Komnene's may then be a 'therapeutic' picture of Alexios crossing mountains *with* his men. And it is rhetoric Roman-style. So if, as

[21] *Alexiad* 7.10.3 (R-K 230–1, *S* 241, F 210–11). [22] *Alexiad* 15.3.8 (R-K 470, S 480, F 440).

[23] The speech reads as if voiced by John Doukas, who has just been mentioned: *Alexiad* 2.7.2 (R-K 73, *S* 90, F 66–7).

[24] 'The story of Alexios' escape constitutes more two-edged praise. The acts of climbing a mountain in his armour and disdaining his personal appearance show a strong military character. Yet a good general would work never to be in the position of escaping a fortress alone on a mule. How heroic could Alexios have been when the blood that horrified the villagers had come from his own nose? The claims to exaggerated masculine roughness only point out Alexios' youth': Neville 2012: 164. Neville concentrates on those components in the text that can be identified with a Roman – or Romanizing – tradition, and accounts for romance elements in various ways according to the characters involved in them. Thus she places the romance-style flight from prison of young Michael Doukas in a positive way among 'family stories' (2012: 201) but sees episodes in the same genre involving Alexios, such as this escape over a mountain, as deliberately absurd, designed to make him look un-Roman. I suspect that Bryennios was more positive about romance than Neville allows, even if his liking for it was ambivalent. Considered as romance, escaping alone and unscathed is almost de rigueur. Sleeping in

Neville argues, Bryennios denied Alexios a traditionally Roman fighting style, Komnene reclaims it for him here.[25]

By Book Eight, before the big Scythian battle, Alexios is immersed in action, assuming the character of Basil I and long past the need for campaign-speechifying. There is movement over the terrain, Alexios always in the lead, reconnoitring, deciding: 'at daybreak the emperor was the first to make the crossing; he was followed by the whole army.'[26] A little later, 'When the infantry had crossed, the emperor . . . had a trench dug at great speed . . . After that the cavalry were given the signal to cross. Alexios himself stood by the bank and watched the whole operation.'[27] These crossings occur in a dense narrative where Alexios shows leadership in many forms, overseeing, showing *pronoia*, thinking on his feet; it draws him as a strategist, but one *in medias res*, sharing the hardships and the dangers. He may not yet appear as the visibly heroic figure cut by Basil I that Chrysostomides cites as 'an example of outstanding leadership . . . when his army had to cross the river Paradeisos at the dead of night.'[28] That is to come. But there may be a reference to that figure and a suggestion that Alexios would do the same were it required.

Parading prisoners is used sparely. In a context of bloodless Byzantine reconquest during the Crusade, the empire regains the eastern seaboard after the fall of Nicaea: this belongs within the characterization of Alexios as mastermind and non-violent opportunist amidst the bloody chaos wrought by the Franks. The display of prisoners in the coastal cities is told with gentle dignity, as the sultana is involved. But, towards the end of the long Norman war, another prisoner is paraded before Alexios for quite different purposes: Bohemond's cousin, 'a gigantic man ten feet tall and as broad as a second Herakles . . . the prisoner of a tiny Scyth, a pigmy . . . In came the Scyth leading this tremendous Keltos on a chain. He was not even tall enough to reach his captive's buttocks.'[29] This is a joke, to amuse a tired and depressed emperor and perhaps remind him of his own feats as a David overcoming the Goliaths of Book One.[30] The story encapsulates

one's armour is the same (Gawain is still doing it in the fourteenth century), while the mirror-topos in the same episode is sheer romance detritus. Komnene may have edited such stories out for the reason Neville gives, because by Roman and Greek standards they do Alexios no credit, or because they are poorly told. In any case, she is highly critical of the romance-genre – more so than Bryennios, I think – and, after some wavering in Book Two, she reserves romance for westerners.

[25] See the later discussion of Neville's views.

[26] *Alexiad* 8.3.5 (R-K 242, S 253, F 221).

[27] *Alexiad* 8.4.4 (R-K 244, S 254, *F* 222).

[28] 'Surrounded by torchlight, the emperor stood in the middle of the river encouraging his men to cross and came to the rescue of those who were in danger of being swept away': Chrysostomides 2001: 96.

[29] *Alexiad* 13.6.6 (R-K 402, *S* 413, F 374).

[30] Komnene does not make this likeness explicit but her Alexios calls on David's example when he defends himself for his church appropriations and Eirene is likened to David in Book Twelve.

Komnene's practice of subjecting the Normans to burlesque and carries a suggestion that the Norman war itself may end in ridicule: as, indeed, it does. The humane treatment of prisoners, however, is consistently seen as essential and given key narrative positions. It is introduced at the end of the Bryennios rebellion as a marked departure from the *Hyle* to show Alexios thinking like a worthy future emperor, not just a lucky victor. It is even more prominent after the last Scythian battle as a turning point in both Alexios and the history.[31]

Context and sequence matter. Furthermore, unlike the *Vita Basilii*, say, Komnene does not characteristically work by adding or overlaying moral reflections upon his actions: she embeds them. One cannot abstract the points she makes about him or take an epitome and expect it to hold true. Komnene's reticence in not naming Alexios' great predecessors has the same effect: they are made part of his lived reality as a character, not decorations. Just as Helena and the Theotokos stand silently behind Anna Dalassene, so emperors and great Byzantine heroes inhere in the particulars of Alexios' behaviour. Figures from myth are named, being recognizably figures of speech, but only Constantine is named beside Alexios and only when the appellation has been earned.

Perhaps the main difficulty for the critic is just that combination of the consistency of focus that Ljubarskij talks of and the 'crossbreeding of inherited literary forms' that Magdalino finds.[32] It is almost too inviting to analyse the *Alexiad* in terms of one genre or another when in fact they are sometimes counterpointed, sometimes blended imperceptibly: one genre will dominate to serve one sequence of events and then give way to, or join, another, as different material comes to the fore. The *Alexiad* is not a military manual, nor a mirror of princes, nor a funeral oration. It is not romance or court satire or even wholly epic. It draws on all these genres among others,

[31] Other instances that show Alexios fulfilling the desiderata in a lived context, are as follows. (1) The Scyths and Cumans are not tribally the same but have closer ties to one another than either to Byzantium: Alexios, therefore, adapts the principle of shifting foreign troops to prevent their fighting their own people. The Scythian war is largely won because the Cumans are 'allowed' to fight the Scyths, but the antagonism currently between these peoples may break down. He watches them during the battle and, when some Scyths approach the Cumans, he quickly sends his ensign to their section. In victory, he sends them extra booty. The story shows how he controls the Cumans in a precarious situation, while displaying his magnanimity. (2) Shooting at the horses is a solution to the forced defence of the city in Holy Week and part of an attempt to demythologize the Frankish cavalry. (3) When Alexios has letters shot over the walls of Antioch he is playing for time and parodying Bohemond. (4) His peace negotiations with the 'Persians' are formal and courtly within the Constantinian conclusion: they belong in that larger development. All these instances, like those above, will be cited in the main discussion.

[32] Magdalino 2000a: 15–16.

and counts on readerly familiarity with them, but it does not conform itself to any. Angelou has examined the 'tension between history and rhetoric' in Choniates' *History*.[33] It is tension that holds the *Alexiad* together as a sinewy whole: tension between history and the shifting blend of its other genres; between continuity and change, factuality and myth, the life story of Alexios and the trajectory of Byzantium itself.

Komnene names her two chief genres at the beginning: tragedy and history, the second a method for reclaiming what the tragic force of time has swept away. These are set in parallel in the Preface and they dominate the work. From the beginning, her history is a work of restoration, like Alexios' own. But even as she builds, there is the tragedy of time itself, which stamps its character on the story: bringing him back, it sweeps Alexios away again. Within these genres there are others. She is writing classicizing history but, as Mullett has shown, it is enlivened by the influence of novel-writing.[34] She draws deeply as well as superficially on Homeric epic,[35] and she also uses the more contemporary matter of chronicles. She places Alexios in a tradition of public discourse and imperial propaganda.[36] For her ground plan she adapts the imperial Life made famous in the *Vita Basilii*, shading towards the end into hagiography. Selectively, she employs romance. She seems to anticipate and invite feminist readings.[37] Her last books move powerfully into a tradition of apocalyptic writing variously discussed in other texts by Magdalino.[38] Finally, she narrows tragedy to dirge. She uses all these genres with awareness of their value-systems and systems of perception, bringing them to bear on Alexios in such a way as to show how he embodies the multiple values of the culture that gave rise to or retained them. The interplay of these resources equally defines the mind that gives him to us. The writing of the history is the correlative of its content: each displays the rich compendium of Byzantine civilization.

To see how it combines its functions, the whole course of the *Alexiad* should be traced. The work is cumulative. Its character unfolds. Much of its

[33] Angelou 2010: 290. Davis (2010: 57) has compared Choniates' *History* with the *Alexiad* for their combination of 'serious historical composition' and 'rich mantle of rhetorical and literary artifice, which . . . involves . . . a sophisticated alternation of detailed focus and grand vistas'.
[34] Mullett 2006.
[35] As many have pointed out, including Buckler 1929: 197–201, Dyck 1986, Ljubarskij 2000: 171–5 and Macrides 2000: 67–70.
[36] See Mullett 1996b: 359–67.
[37] Such as those of Smythe 1997, Hill 1999 and 2000 and Gouma-Peterson 2000b. Papaioannou 2013: 200–9, 226–31 has revealed a comprehensive and far-reaching precedent in Psellos for Anna Dalassene's superiority to men and women alike: it has implications for gender theory but may not readily lend itself to feminist analysis.
[38] Magdalino 1993b; 1996b: 203.