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978-1-107-03722-9 - The Alexiad of Anna Komnene: Artistic Strategy in the Making of a Myth

Penelope Buckley

Frontmatter

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## THE *ALEXIAD* OF ANNA KOMNENE

This is the first full-scale study of the literary art of Anna Komnene's *Alexiad*. Her history of her father's reign is well known and much used by Byzantinists and historians of the First Crusade, but the art with which it shapes its central character has not been fully examined or understood. This book argues that the work is both history and tragedy; the characterization of Alexios I Komnenos is cumulative; it develops; the models for his idealization change; much of the action takes place in his mind, and the narrative relays and amplifies his thought while building a dense picture of the world in which he acts. Engaging critically and responsively with other texts, Komnene uses the full range of current literary genres to portray the ideal culture of his rule. She matches her art of literary control to his of government over the adverse forces of his time.

PENELOPE BUCKLEY is a Fellow of the Melbourne University School of Historical and Philosophical Studies.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Frontmatter

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Penelope Buckley

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

*For Roger Scott, teacher, mentor, friend.*

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03722-9 - The Alexiad of Anna Komnene: Artistic Strategy in the Making of a Myth

Penelope Buckley

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Contents*

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xii
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xiv
Introduction	I
Continuity and change	II
Hellenism	15
Theocracy	19
Some bad weather	23
The outsider	32
The will	34
The Prologue	37
1 The Emperor Alexios, my father	44
Imperial destiny and task	45
Alexios the rebel	73
Alexios invested	83
2 The soldier-emperor	107
The soldier	107
The great warrior	147
3 The second story begins	168
The debt to Psellos	176
Rebuilding	189
4 West into East	195
The first appearance of the Crusade	198
Bohemond	208
5 The second Norman war and the Crusade	215
The emperor for peace	228
Playing God	232

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03722-9 - The Alexiad of Anna Komnene: Artistic Strategy in the Making of a Myth

Penelope Buckley

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii

*Contents*

Military stagecraft and paralysis	235
The Treaty of Devol	236
6 The second Constantine and the last	245
The second Constantine	245
The last act	270
The end of everything	277
Conclusions	285
<i>Appendix: The Alexiad as pre-Renaissance text</i>	290
<i>Bibliography</i>	298
<i>Index</i>	308



Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03722-9 - The Alexiad of Anna Komnene: Artistic Strategy in the Making of a Myth

Penelope Buckley

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## *Preface*

This book aims to examine the *Alexiad* as a great literary work. Since it is in classicizing Byzantine Greek, and I am writing in English, I have needed a great literary translation. E. R. A. Sewter has provided one and that is the default translation I will use. It has long been available in Penguin Classics and more recently Peter Frankopan has edited and revised it, again for Penguin. Both versions are excellent and any reader of the *Alexiad* not fluent in Greek would do well to consult both. I will cite both throughout. Where there are slight but negligible differences (on the spectrum between a comma or hyphen and a synonym that makes no difference to the meaning or closeness to the Greek), I have quoted the Sewter version. Frankopan edits in more paragraphing than Sewter does and where I use Frankopan's version, especially to quote only parts of a passage, I do not always observe his paragraph breaks.

To avoid unsightliness and readerly discomfort, I have taken editorial advice to unify the spellings of names. Sewter uses mostly Latin name-spellings and Frankopan uses mostly Greek. During the forty-odd years between translation and revision there has been a gradual move towards Greek names. The change is not complete but seems set to continue. Frankopan has kept the Latin names of familiar historical figures and of certain given names well-known in English – Constantine for all the Constantines, John, Isaac, Adrian, though not Eirene. With one exception, I have adopted virtually his whole system for the spelling of names in both *Alexiad* translations, in quotations from Sewter's translation of Psellos' *Chronographia* in the main text and in presenting my own case. The exception is Frankopan's hybrid spelling, following Sewter, of 'Kelts'. I have changed this in all the above cases to 'Keltoi' on the grounds that 'Kelts' represents a temporary compromise in the ongoing shift. I feel more comfortable in doing this because the name is to some degree Komnene's literary fiction, like her 'Persians' and perhaps 'Scyths'. Replacing the familiar English 'Celts' with the Greek 'Keltoi' calls attention to the element of artifice or deeming.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03722-9 - The Alexiad of Anna Komnene: Artistic Strategy in the Making of a Myth

Penelope Buckley

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

'Doux' has been used for the Byzantine title but I have retained Frankopan's 'Duke' for western leaders.

The spelling of names in other primary-source translations and in secondary commentaries has been left intact.

Where the difference between Sewter and Frankopan is worth marking, I have italicized the chosen translator's initial in bold. Generally, where I have preferred Sewter's version, it is for the sake of his style and turn of phrase, or for his ear for an English parallel to a Greek cadence. Sewter's translation is peculiarly responsive to Komnene's turn of mind. He has a rare gift as a translator and some of his apparent freedoms do, when scrutinized, represent every aspect of the meaning while allowing him to give a true English equivalent to the Greek. Similarly, where I have preferred Frankopan's, it is most often on grounds of accuracy. Now and then Sewter is simply wrong: the chief case for the revision. Sometimes Sewter has introduced a name to help the reader or taken some other small liberty that Frankopan shows was not needed. In all these instances, I have not given my reasons in footnotes but refer the reader to this guideline. Where I have made a choice on other grounds I have said so, as when Frankopan is stylistically better or Sewter seems to me to render the Greek more exactly. Of course, both translators have themselves been balancing the claims of accuracy and style throughout. Now and then they both introduce a name to help the reader. Where they differ, there is often in each a mix of good decision-making with a slight non-fit.

Generally, Frankopan has respected Sewter's greatness in the greatest passages, and in these he has allowed the relative formality of Sewter's diction to stand. Elsewhere he has modernized the idiom somewhat, with mixed results. Some of his corrections are insignificant and can seem wordy beside the Greek. For my purposes, Sewter's deftness and ability to represent the pith of the original often remain more attractive. At other times, Frankopan's more literal approach is also truer to the text. One of his valuable restorations is worth singling out: quite often, where Komnene has referred to her father as the emperor or as 'the emperor and my father', Sewter has substituted Alexios' name or some other term. Frankopan has rightly restored what is there. Komnene's theme throughout has been *the emperor and my father*, and sometimes Sewter overlooks this in the interest of style. Both occasionally use Alexios' name where the original has 'himself' – a usage that would be perfectly understood in Ireland and gives another view of Alexios' centrality to all that takes place.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03722-9 - The Alexiad of Anna Komnene: Artistic Strategy in the Making of a Myth

Penelope Buckley

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

xi

Given Komnene's<sup>1</sup> classicizing style, where Sewter habitually translates *polis* as 'city' and Frankopan renders it as 'town', I have mostly preferred Sewter: whatever the historic status of the settlement in question, 'city' represents Komnene's mode of thought.

My brief comments interspersed through the footnotes offer a critique of the translations. Each version gives a full experience of the original, however, in so far as a translation can.

Where I use my own translations from the *Alexiad*, I say so. The translations from the *Hyle* are mine except where I am quoting Neville.<sup>2</sup>

Where the name 'Constantine' occurs without specification, it refers to Constantine the Great.

<sup>1</sup> The conventions of Byzantine history as well as of Byzantine studies make it normal and respectful to refer to her as 'Anna'. I need to explain that, since my background is in English literary criticism, where 'dear Janeism' is a well-known mode of degrading or at least domesticating female writers, I can no more refer to her as 'Anna' than cross a picket line. Where she reconstructs a past self, I sometimes make an exception.

<sup>2</sup> Neville 2012.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03722-9 - The Alexiad of Anna Komnene: Artistic Strategy in the Making of a Myth

Penelope Buckley

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03722-9 - The Alexiad of Anna Komnene: Artistic Strategy in the Making of a Myth

Penelope Buckley

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Acknowledgements*

xiii

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The book's defects are my own contribution.

## *Abbreviations*

Fuller details for the primary sources listed here may be found in the Bibliography.

AABS	Australian Association for Byzantine Studies ( <i>Byzantina Australiensia</i> )
Alexiad	Komnene, Anna, <i>The Alexiad</i>
BMGS	<i>Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies</i>
BS	<i>Byzantinoslavica</i>
Byzantion	<i>Byzantion. Revue Internationale des Études Byzantines</i>
BZ	<i>Byzantinische Zeitschrift</i>
CFHB	Corpus fontium historiae Byzantinae
Chon., <i>Hist.</i>	Choniates, Niketas, <i>Niketas Choniatae Historia</i>
CSHB	Corpus scriptorium historiae Byzantinae
<i>Deeds</i>	William of Tyre, <i>A History of Deeds Done Beyond the Sea</i>
F	Komnene, Anna, <i>The Alexiad of Anna Komnene</i> (tr. E. R. A. Sewter; rev. Peter Frankopan)
Fulcher	Fulcher of Chartres, 'Deeds of the Franks on their Pilgrimage to Jerusalem'
<i>Gesta</i>	<i>Gesta Francorum et Aliorum Hierosolimitanorum</i>
GRBS	<i>Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies</i>
<i>Hyle</i>	Bryennios, Nikephoros, <i>Hyle historias</i>
Psellos, <i>Chron.</i>	Psellos, Michael, <i>Chronographia</i>
R-K	Komnene, Anna, <i>Alexiad in Annae Komnenae Alexias</i> (ed. D. R. Reinsch and A. Kambylis)
S	Komnene, Anna, <i>The Alexiad of Anna Komnene</i> (tr. E. R. A. Sewter)
Skyl.	Skylites, John, <i>Ioannis Scylitzae Synopsis Historiarum</i>
SPBS	Society for the Promotion of Byzantine Studies

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03722-9 - The Alexiad of Anna Komnene: Artistic Strategy in the Making of a Myth

Penelope Buckley

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*List of abbreviations*

xv

TLG	Thesaurus Linguae Graecae (The Regents of the University of California), <a href="http://www.tlg.uci.edu/">www.tlg.uci.edu/</a>
VB	<i>Vita Basilii Imperatoris</i>
VC	Eusebius, <i>De vita Constantini</i>
Zon., <i>Epit.</i>	Zonaras, John, <i>Ioannis Zonarae Epitomae Historiarum</i>