

# A Commentary on Anna Komnene's "the Alexiad", Books X and XI

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**ABSTRACT:** This commentary explores Books X and XI of Anna Komnene's *The Alexiad*, which recount the events surrounding the First Crusade from a Byzantine perspective. Written over forty years after the events by the daughter of Emperor Alexios I Komnenos, Anna's narrative aims to defend her father's actions while critiquing the Latin crusaders, particularly Bohemund. The commentary identifies two central themes: the portrayal of Bohemund as deceitful and the exoneration of Alexios from accusations of oath-breaking. Anna's depiction of the Latins, particularly their barbarity and breach of trust, serves to absolve her father of responsibility while framing the Crusade as a betrayal of Byzantium. Despite its valuable insights into Byzantine geopolitics and imperial strategy, the historical reliability of *The Alexiad* is undermined by omissions, contradictions, and an anti-Latin bias, reflecting Anna's partiality and the challenges of interpreting events through a retrospective lens. Ultimately, the text serves more as a politically motivated narrative than a straightforward historical account, illustrating the complex interplay of power, loyalty, and identity in the context of the Crusades.

Authored by Anna Komnene, daughter of emperor Alexios I Komnenos, the books X and XI of *The Alexiad* describe the events during the First Crusade and immediately preceding it. Anna created her version of the Crusade during the reign of Manuel I Komnenos, at least 40 years after the events took place. Still confined in the Kecharitomenes monastery for conspiring to usurp the throne, the author provides a tantalising history of the Crusade from a Byzantine perspective. By immortalising this turning point in Byzantine history, Anna expresses her support for Alexios' management of the First Crusade. Two major themes dominate the *Alexiad's* chronicle of the crusades. Firstly, the establishment of Bohemund's devious character, and second, the exoneration of Alexios from the allegations of oath-breaking. The first theme has its roots in the First Norman War (1081-1085), which marked the defeat of the Norman army led by Robert Guiscard and Bohemund. The latter's status as an enemy of Byzantium is persistently enforced to relocate the accusation of oath-breaking, hence making the narration an interlude to a broader struggle with the Normans.<sup>1</sup> Byzantine involvement in First Crusade was marked by a feeling of betrayal in the West due to Alexios' refusal to provide military help, influencing Anna's apologetic tone when explaining the emperor's strategies.

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<sup>1</sup> R. D. Thomas, 'Anna Comnena's Account of the First Crusade. History and politics in the reigns of the emperor's Alexius I and Manuel I Comnenos', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 15 (1991), 273.

The author's major concern of proving Alexios' innocence is contingent on proving Bohemund's guilt, therefore, the two themes intertwine.

Establishing the profane nature of the Latins, but more importantly Bohemund's, was paramount to Anna's interpretation of the First Crusade. Throughout both books Anna employs a degrading description of the Franks, accusing them of being barbarians who have no decency nor regard for truces. Narrowing her criticism to Bohemund while offering a presentation of Alexios in the Kaiserkritik tradition reveals the contrasting depiction of Latin and Greek attributes.<sup>2</sup> Certainly reliable in offering a byzantine account of the impact of the Crusade on Byzantine geopolitics, Anna significantly defends Alexios' strategy and actions during the expedition. Disagreeing with the western view that Byzantium had committed the treacherous crime of oath-breaking, Anna orchestrated a convincing story where Bohemund's decision of betraying Alexios in Antioch is the pinnacle of the crusading narrative. No more than a story, the historical interpretation of the Crusade in the Alexiad is dubious. While describing the oath-taking of the leaders of the crusade, Anna conveniently omits Alexios' promises to the crusaders. By presenting the help Alexios provided as a string of gracious acts instead of an obligation imposed by the oaths, the author manipulates the events of the Crusade to her father's favour.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, absolving Alexios from the accusations of the crusaders was, for Anna, contingent on creating a narrative of Norman treachery.

Despite offering significant insight into the imperial Byzantine perspective of the First Crusade, Books X and XI as historical texts contain irregularities, contradictions, and omissions that affect their reliability. At the beginning of Book X, the inception of the First Crusade is marked by the arrival of the People's Crusade, led by Peter the Hermit, to which Alexios is presented as having limited knowledge of its scale and composition. Arguably, this should be interpreted as an attempt by Anna to show the disruptiveness and undesirability of the movement, while omitting Alexios' involvement in its creation. In reality, the Byzantine Emperor's realpolitik entailed a growing interaction with the West in the years preceding the crusade, where the troubles in Jerusalem were communicated to western Christendom. For instance, in 1091 envoys were sent to the court of Zvonimir, in Croatia, with the news that Jerusalem had fallen. Additionally, Alexios sent relics of Christ to churches in France blessed by Pope Urban II

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas, *Account*, 301.

<sup>3</sup> John France, 'Anna Comnena, the Alexiad and the First Crusade', *Reading Medieval Studies* 10 (1984), 30-31.

between 1095-96, indicating the emperor used the lure of Jerusalem and gifts to appeal to a sense of Christian obligation for the benefit of Byzantium.<sup>4</sup>

Henceforth, the *Alexiad* omits the pre-existing relationship between East and West to propel its anti-Latin views while exonerating Alexios. The lack of mention of the Pope, the papal legate, or the events in the West and containing a fragmented account of the Crusade that excludes most of the Siege of Antioch and the capture of Jerusalem is indicative of two things. Firstly, Anna's lack of knowledge of the wide events of the Crusade can be attributed to the *Alexiad* being written forty years after the events described and the manner she obtained the information presented, from veterans who had entered the monastic life.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, Manuel I's friendly attitude towards Latins coupled with the author's concern about exonerating Alexios explains the *Alexiad*'s focus on events that directly affected the charge of oath-breaking, such as the conflict in Nicaea.

Books X and XI are significant in narrating the Byzantine perspective on the First Crusade, especially concerning the charge of oath breaking. Revealing the difficulties faced by the emperor, as his daughter, Anna brilliantly creates a narrative in which the Latins are antagonised for their interference in Byzantine affairs. Also invaluable in showing the importance of Alexius' strategies in the reconquest of Asia Minor, the *Alexiad* provides a significant opposition to the western understanding of Byzantine treachery in the crusades. However, being written in hindsight significantly affects the reliability of the *Alexiad* as a historical source. Evident from its superficial account of the Crusade, providing a historical narrative was only a secondary aim to the author. The bigotry towards the Latins and the constant idolatry of the emperor reveal the author's partiality, leading to an orchestrated interpretation of the events in which Byzantium and its emperor are the victims of Latin malice.

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Frankopan, *The First Crusade: The Call from the East* (London: Vintage, 2012), 96.

<sup>5</sup> France, *Alexiad*, 20.

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