

The Alexiad of Anna Komnene: Artistic Strategy in the Making of a Myth

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Penelope Buckley's recent monograph, *The Alexiad of Anna Komnene* sets out to present the first thorough literary study of Anna Komnene's renowned 12th-century history. As a literature specialist first and foremost, whose background is in English drama and poetry (p. 290), in many ways Buckley succeeds in her brief. Buckley's work represents a new departure in *Alexiad* studies, one where Anna's literary style and influence take precedence over her merits as a historian. There are, however, certain drawbacks to such a significant focus on the literary elements of Anna's text.

Firstly, to set the stage, it is worth offering a brief introduction to the *Alexiad* itself. This is a work imbued with socio-political significance – written by Anna Komnene, the first-born daughter of the emperor Alexios I Komnenos (1081–1118), who is the focal point (and namesake) of her historical epic. Anna was witness to many of the events she describes and, when not personally present, claims to have had considerable access to firsthand accounts from 'trustworthy men'. She was, however, writing the *Alexiad* in the 1140s, several decades after her father's death. As such, seeming confusion and ambiguity abound – certain episodes are misplaced, persons conflated and battle scenes repeated. Scholars have long contemplated the proper use of the *Alexiad* within historical studies – how to cope with material clouded by bias and subject to the forgetfulness of time. When Anna so often and blatantly manipulates her plot, what can we really learn about the world of the Komnenoi from her text?

Buckley's work opens by placing this question within a historiographic overview of *Alexiad* studies, commenting on the various ways in which Anna's history has been approached. She discusses certain important themes to keep in mind, such as the Byzantine fixation on continuity despite the reality of constant change, and states her purpose to explore the literary art forming the basis of Anna's piece. Buckley's principal interests exist in the development of a narrative conscious and the progression of the character Alexios throughout the history.

Her study then continues, following along in the order of Anna's *Alexiad*. She begins with a discussion of the prologue and there follow six chapters, which examine each of the 15 books of the history in the order

they appear. In the first chapter, she focuses on the theme of the 'Emperor Alexios, my father', a recurrent linguistic construction that she feels epitomises the early parts of Anna's text – the princess stressing the connection between herself and the emperor. In this section she examines books one through three, which account for Alexios's early days, his rise to power through rebellion and his accession of the imperial throne. The second chapter then sees the so-called 'soldier-emperor' theme come to the fore in books four through eight. Here Buckley contends that classicising military history reigns supreme and the prowess of the emperor is the central quality expressed. The third chapter takes the reader into the second half of the *Alexiad*, focusing on a narrative transition Buckley sees as occurring in books eight and nine, in which Alexios takes on further characteristics of a holy ruler, relinquishing his more martial presence. The fourth chapter details book ten, on the beginning of the crusades, which is then continued in the fifth chapter focusing on the Norman wars in books 11 through 13. The sixth, and final, main body chapter discusses books 14 and 15 in which Buckley highlights Anna's nuanced usage of the Constantine model for her father. Her arguments are then summarised in a conclusion and followed by an appendix relating the *Alexiad* to Renaissance literature.

Throughout Buckley's study, she makes deft usage of various primary source texts, in particular the *Chronographia* of Michael Psellos and the *Hyle* of Nikephoros Bryennios – both of which are well known histories employed extensively by Anna in the creation of her *Alexiad*. Buckley, however, does not end her examination simply by commenting on the already well-established association of Anna's work with these earlier precedents. Instead, she draws further attention to the ways in which Anna's skilful manipulation of past literary frameworks informs the presentation of her history. The *Vita Basilii* and Eusebius's *Life of Constantine* are especially conspicuous in this regard. Buckley contends that Anna modelled her father on the emperor Basil I (as well as Basil II) throughout much of her piece and then moved on to a more specifically Constantinian representation in the latter parts of her history. Buckley's focus upon these literary precedents is the real strength of her monograph, reframing the debate on Anna's intentions in writing. Many earlier scholars have viewed the *Alexiad* foremost as an account of history, albeit distorted by artistic flourishes drawn from the repertoire of Byzantine tradition. Buckley inverts this, instead reading the *Alexiad* as primarily a work of literature in the traditional vein, transposed onto the historical events of Alexios's reign.

While Anna's employment of these past models is a sound (and important) point to highlight, I do hesitate to fully accept the distinct differentiation Buckley proposes between the Basil and Constantine models. Within her text, Buckley freely admits to the *Vita Basilii*'s reliance on the Eusebian precursor (p. 248). Furthermore, we cannot be sure Anna had read the *Vita*, whereas we can be more confident of her familiarity with Constantine's *Life* (p. 150). Anna never explicitly references Basil, as she does Constantine. My question then follows – why must we assume the intermediary stage of the Basil model? Could not Anna have simply been marking her father as a new Constantine from the beginning? It seems more likely that she was working towards a Constantinian depiction all along, rather than merely moving towards it within the last books of the history – a point, which Buckley implies in her first chapter (p. 83) before contradicting in later analysis. This suggestion, however, would negate one of Buckley's primary contentions regarding the division of the text.

Within her writing, Buckley's central concern is the proposition that the *Alexiad* is comprised of two separate and discrete halves, governed by two counterbalancing narratives. The first is predominantly focused on the militaristic side of Alexios's reign whilst the latter half is more concerned with the religious element – proving Alexios to be God's rightful representative on earth. She believes the narrative within each half is mirrored so as to demonstrate the same basic outline of events confronted by the emperor in two different ways – in the first half by martial power and secular authority and then in the second by divine influence and religious zeal (p. 168, example of the division employed p. 266). The differentiation between Basil and Constantine as two individualised models plays into this perceived dichotomy – Basil as a more militaristic figure and Constantine, the founder of the Orthodox empire, as the pious ideal. Although this is an interesting interpretation of the *Alexiad*, it prioritises a purely literary theory over the potential lived reality being recorded by the history. Anna's text has been shown to be chronologically confused at times, however, it is not always so far removed from the history indicated by other accounts as to seem arbitrarily

arranged. While Anna was in many ways constructing her text to suit her purposes, not everything can necessarily be fit within this systematised approach nor should it all be considered as strictly representative of pre-existing models. Sometimes we must take into account that certain events may in fact have happened in similar ways described by the princess, without this needing to be an echo of previous authors or the adherence to a literary model. Buckley's view of the Treaty of Devol is an example of perhaps going too far with some of her literary pretensions (p. 198). By seeing the treaty within a bipartite framework as a pacific act, fitting within the narrative intentions of the second half of the *Alexiad*, Buckley seems to disregard the fact that the circumstances of this treaty are attested to elsewhere. It is not complete fiction, formatted by Anna – there is some grounding within reality and a chronological reason why it has been placed where it has been placed.

Furthermore, it is also difficult to accept the proposed binary layout of the *Alexiad* due to the many points of thematic continuity across Anna's text, seemingly oblivious to any supposed dualistic structure. Most notably, Alexios's reliance on God's aid is evidenced throughout the 15 books, not only the later ones; his penchant for forgiveness in the face of treasonous acts is demonstrated in each confrontation recorded, whether in book one or book 11. In addition, his involvement in military campaigns continues well into the second half of the text, albeit he does eventually relinquish a degree of his martial prowess due to age and frailty – conditions that need not be tied so directly to a more intentional narrative model. In fact, the most brutal and unforgiving encounter recorded within the *Alexiad*, the burning of Basil the Bogomil, is reserved for book 15 – a rather aggressive feat which is the centrepiece of a section Buckley sees as being devoted to the model of Alexios as quarter-giver. There may be some thematic strands, which are exploited more thoroughly at different points within the *Alexiad*, and Buckley does well to discuss the emperor's transition towards a more explicit god-king persona by the end of Anna's work. To delineate the 15-book epic into simply two diverging halves, however, undervalues the interwoven frameworks so delicately manoeuvred by the princess historian. I do not argue against Anna's usage of both a soldier-emperor and a pious ideal – but I remain unconvinced by the reading of these as somehow independent entities, promoted in contrasting halves of the history.

Having mentioned the Bogomil episode in which Basil is sentenced to the pyre, it must also be noted that Buckley's overall treatment of heresy in the *Alexiad* leaves much to be desired. Anna's depiction of 'outsiders', and specifically heretics, holds a considerable historiography of its own, with which Buckley does not engage. The contrast she draws between Italos and Neilos – Italos seen as a danger to the state whereas Neilos given a more 'exclusively theological profile' (p. 191) – is questionable and cannot be so firmly maintained if we draw upon other sources such as the *Synodikon of Orthodoxy*, in which both figures are anathematised in a similar manner. And, more significantly, her analysis of Basil's trial in distinctly literary terms is extremely problematic on several levels. Buckley implies the potential for western influence on this event, despite the fact that the primary example she uses of a western burning is that occurring in 1143. She justifies this by placing the scene within the context of the Second Crusade – the period in which Anna was writing (p. 272). While this is a fully acceptable means of interpreting a piece of literature generally (placing the narrative within the socio-political context of its authorship), it comes close to denying the reality of Basil having been sent to the stake for his heresy and fails to take into account other contemporaneous recordings of the events. Notably, Euthymios Zygabenos (who is referenced by Anna in her *Alexiad*) provides the most thorough overview of Bogomil beliefs and an account of Basil's trial within his *Dogmatic Panoply*, which was presented to Alexios sometime before his death in 1118. Zygabenos's work corroborates many of the details later described by Anna, in particular the fundamental truth of Basil having been burnt. Buckley does not reference Zygabenos at any time – an omission, which greatly weakens her arguments. Although it has been suggested that heretics were sent to the stake as early as 1022 in Orléans (admittedly predating the Bogomil incursion in Constantinople), remarks on the transmission of such a penalty from the West to the East (or *vice versa*) cannot be substantiated by any evidence currently available and contending that we place Basil's trial in light of the Second Crusade is not wholly appropriate given Zygabenos's confirmation of the incident decades before the crusade's arrival.

Buckley further contends that the heresiarch's trial scene in general would have been a 'scene familiar to

western readers because of the inquisition' (p. 273). While it is certainly accurate to comment on the inquisition's presence in the West and absence in the East, this is a rather confusing comment. Firstly, it again implies Anna's depiction of Basil's trial (an event occurring in c.1099) may have been influenced in some way by the West and specifically by the inquisition, despite the inquisition being a later mediaeval phenomenon not attested until the mid-13th century. And, perhaps even more troubling, such a proposal of 'familiarity' suggests a broader readership of Anna's text. Any extended audience for the *Alexiad* is, however, highly unlikely given the circumstances of Anna's writing (as a political outcast in a forced monastic retirement) and, subsequently, her text's limited manuscript tradition. These pertinent questions of audience and transmission are conspicuously missing from Buckley's study, again leaving the reader at a loss for the complete picture.

As briefly touched upon in regard to the historiography of heresy, Buckley's overall interaction with secondary scholarship appears somewhat lacking within the main body of her study. Although her historiographical discussion in the introduction is well informed and insightful, there is limited engagement with scholarly debates in the greater part of her monograph. This is particularly noticeable in Buckley's comments about gendered images in the *Alexiad* – a theme, which has unsurprisingly long occupied the interests of historians, especially in terms of proto-feminism. For instance, Buckley describes Alexios's mother Anna Dalassena, a figure often examined for her masculine qualities and power. Yet, specifically drawing attention to the lack of Anna Dalassena's physical description within the *Alexiad*, Buckley provides no citation for the extensive discussions about this woman and specifically Anna's handling of her within the narrative – relevant secondary material for her assertion (p. 100).

This paucity of secondary citation is coupled with another significant shortcoming – Buckley's lack of original translation, which is troubling in a work aimed at an academic audience. The available translations of the *Alexiad* by E. R. A Sewter and Peter Frankopan are both well respected and undoubtedly quite accurate, and Buckley's engagement with them (indicating where Frankopan or Sewter provides a better representation of the actual Greek passage) does demonstrate her personal ability to work with the original text. It is, therefore, a shame to see her study – a piece so deeply grounded in the literary aspects of the *Alexiad* – reliant upon these existing translations and largely deficient of citation from the available critical editions of her primary source. The reader is provided with only the English translation (and reference) for the many quotations employed, with very few exceptions. This is particularly troublesome in the opening comments made about book 14, where Buckley states that this section begins by placing the emperor within a genitive absolute, reflecting a 'rare note of serenity' (p. 255). There is, however, no direct quotation of the passage to validate this comment, nor in fact any reference to even a translation of the *Alexiad* itself. While this may not appear a hindrance for the recreational reader, it is frustrating for scholars trying to make use of Buckley's work in their own studies.

Despite these criticisms of Buckley's work, it is important to acknowledge that her monograph is not intended to be a comprehensive historical analysis of the material held within the *Alexiad*. She set out to write a book focused on Anna's text as a piece of literature, and for this she deserves praise. Filled with references to earlier Byzantine sources as well as comparison forward to later Mediaeval and Renaissance period texts, *The Alexiad of Anna Komnene* is an excellent analysis of the literary sources informing the construction of the 12th-century work. There is, however, one caveat: such a strictly literary focus can at times place too much emphasis on the authorial construction of a text. Anna was indisputably guilty of exploiting her material – choosing to manipulate her narration in order to produce a text resonating with her personal world-view. This, however, does not mean that she was writing fiction. Sifting through her study, there are images drawn from earlier sources, but we need to be cautious about how far we take a literary deconstruction. Most writing has precedent, but that does not have to mean that every facet of a text must fit squarely into a preconceived mould.

As a historian, I cannot help but find Buckley's text somewhat challenging – it is not a study to be relied on in isolation as an introduction to the *Alexiad*. It is nonetheless an immensely valuable addition to the scholarship on this 12th-century epic, providing important analysis of Anna's work as a piece of literature. Buckley's achievement is to produce a thought-provoking and well-written literary analysis that will surely

stimulate further debate on how modern scholars view Anna as an author.

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