

Byzantium: On the Alexiad of Anna Comnena

Muriel

Anna Comnena's Alexiad has long been considered an invaluable historical source, not only for its detailed account of the reign of Alexius I, but also for the remarkable insight it gives into the Byzantine world of the middle ages. While the Alexiad was written to record the deeds of her father, Alexius I, Anna Comnena's distinctly Byzantine perspective can clearly be seen in her writing. In the Alexiad, the reader can see that Anna's own background has a marked effect upon her history. It would appear, on first glance, that the evidence of Anna's personal background, as evident in her bias towards her father, would prohibit historical accuracy. However, on closer observation, one finds that this is not necessarily the case. Rather, one finds that the evidence of Anna's background adds to the Alexiad in providing the reader with an insider's account of events in Byzantium and thus reveals the Byzantine world. Anna's pride in her noble birth and her education are evident throughout the history. As a Byzantine princess and the daughter of the very ruler she writes of, Anna also provides a distinctly Byzantine view of events, while her personal regard for individual members of her family can be seen in her account of her family's involvement in Alexius' life.. As Anna's background becomes evident to the reader through her pride in her education and status, her markedly Byzantine view of events and her account of events concerning her family personally, one is given a remarkably vivid depiction of Byzantium and its people.

Upon reading the Alexiad, one is struck by the evidence of Anna's bias towards her father. Throughout the book, Anna's own opinion of Alexius is evident through her own lavish praises of him. When telling of how Alexius' men swore loyalty to him, Anna states that:

His exceptional courage and wisdom won their loyalty. They had an extraordinary affection for him, because he was a very liberal man, with hands unusually ready to dispense gifts. (p. 81)

Clearly, Anna's own view of Alexius is presented here. Anna could not have known exactly how his men felt towards Alexius and instead has given her own opinion of Alexius. However, the evidence of her bias does not render Anna's book historically inaccurate. Although Anna Comnena might frequently praise her father and record others as doing so, her bias towards her father does not hinder her telling of events. While Anna might read the best possible outcome for Alexius of every event, her telling of the events is nonetheless accurate. It would certainly appear that the evidence of Anna's own background is not a limitation in this respect. One can thus see that the picture of Byzantium that Anna Comnena presents would appear to be accurate. Anna's pride in her heritage and education are made clear to the reader from the very beginning. In her preface, Anna claims that:

I, Anna, daughter of the Emperor Alexius and the Empress Irene, born and bred in the Purple ... (p.17)

Anna is careful to put this claim first, before all others, including her claim to historical objectivity in her writing. In this way, the reader can see Anna's own feeling of the immense importance of her status. During her life, Anna was deeply aware of the honour and dignity of her family and considered it the ultimate offense to in any way tarnish the name of her family. Thus, throughout her history, Anna's repeated references to her noble birth provide the reader with a powerful insight into her own regard for her status. In this way, the Alexiad

reveals the manner in which the Byzantine nobility perceived themselves. Anna's pride in her education also can be seen in her preface, as she goes on to further claim that:

... having devoted the most earnest study to the Greek language, in fact and being not unpracticed in Rhetoric and having read thoroughly the treatises of Aristotle and the dialogues of Plato, and having fortified my mind with the Quadrivium of sciences ... (p. 17)

One can thus see the great pride that Anna took in her notable education which is further reflected later in her history. In modern times, it is likely to strike the reader as excessive self-praise. However, it is a pride that is certainly understandable, given the context in which a relatively small proportion of society was educated. In this way, one can see that the influence that Anna's own background has on her history does not necessarily detract from the history but can indeed aid the reader in gaining a better understanding of Byzantine society as a whole. One is able to see the immense value that was attached to education in a world where so few had access to it.

Anna Comnena's uniquely Byzantine perspective is evident in her account of events directly affecting the state of Byzantium itself, particularly on Constantinople. Throughout the *Alexiad*, Anna describes these events from the point of view of a Byzantine. This is never more evident than in her account of the First Crusade as Anna tells of Alexius' feelings towards the crusaders:

He dreaded their arrival, knowing as he did their uncontrollable passion, their erratic character and their irresolution, not to mention ...their greed for money, for example, which always led them ...to break their own agreements. He had consistently heard this said of them and it was abundantly justified. (p. 308)

Clearly, these words reflect a Byzantine perspective, one who sees the crusaders from a Byzantine point of view. Anna presents the crusaders as uncontrolled and riotous louts, a striking contrast to the view that many westerners would have had to the same crusaders. In this passage, Anna Comnena expresses her own opinion of the Latin crusaders. However, in doing so, she also shows the view that many easterners would have had of the western crusaders. Indeed, it is partly because of her Byzantine perspective of the First Crusade that her history is so highly valued. In this way, Anna Comnena's *Alexiad* benefits from her background as it reveals the way in which the Byzantine world viewed the First Crusade.

Anna's personal background can also be seen when she is describing events in which her family members play a role. One of the main criticisms of the *Alexiad* is its numerous omissions and lack of details in its account of certain events. While most tend to be fairly minor points, one event for which Anna's description is widely criticized is the death of Alexius I. In her account of her father's death, Anna's only mention of her brother John is:

The emperor's heir has already gone away to the house set apart for him, he hastened his departure and went off quickly to the Great Palace. (p. 512)

However, Nicetas Chionates, a Byzantine historian quoted by Ray Dalven, presented a vastly different account:

His son John, seeing his father near death ...took into his confidence those of his relatives who were friendly to him and told them of his plans. John entered his father's bedroom, fell

down beside him, as if about to break into tears, and stealthily removed the signet ring from his finger. (p. 92)

This account is also supported by Zonaras. As Anna was, according to her own account, with her father during the time of his death, she could not have failed to notice her brother's actions. What is thus evident from her account is her own personal feelings for her brother. Throughout her life, Anna maintained a bitter resentment and animosity towards her brother, John. In refusing to acknowledge John's role in her father's death, Anna attempts to distance him from her family. By instead stating that John has gone away, Anna attempts to show John's lack of loyalty to his family in failing his father at his deathbed. One can thus see that through deliberate omission, Anna's own personal feelings can be detected. In this way, the reader is given an insight into the emotions and disputes prevalent within the Byzantine ruling family. One can see that, in this instance, the influence that Anna's background has upon the *Alexiad*, far from undermining the historical significance of the book, reveals some of the tension and internal conflicts present in Byzantine society.

It is thus evident that through the evidence of Anna Comnena's background, the *Alexiad* reveals to the reader much of Anna's own world. Throughout the book, her pride in her noble heritage and education can be seen in her writing. Anna's own markedly Byzantine perspective can also be perceived in her account of events of western significance. Furthermore, her own personal feelings towards her family are evident in her description of family events. However, far from detracting from the history's objectivity, the evidence of the author's personal background greatly adds to the reader's comprehension of Byzantine events. One is able to view events from an insider's point of view, that of a Byzantine princess. The evidence of her personal feelings in her account of events greatly helps the reader to gain a better understanding of Byzantine internal conflicts and prejudices. In this way, the influence Anna's background has on the *Alexiad* helps to make known to the reader the Byzantine society of her day. One can thus see that, through Anna Comnena's own background, the *Alexiad* reveals much of the Byzantine world.

Bibliography

Comnena, Anna 1969, *The Alexiad*, Penguin Classics, Middlesex.

Dalven, Rae 1972, *Anna Comnena*, Twayne Publishers, New York.

Buckler, Georgina 1929, *Anna Comnena: A Study*, Oxford University Press, London.

Mullett, Margaret & Smythe, Dion, 1996, *Alexius I Komnenos*, Belfast Byzantine Enterprises, Belfast.