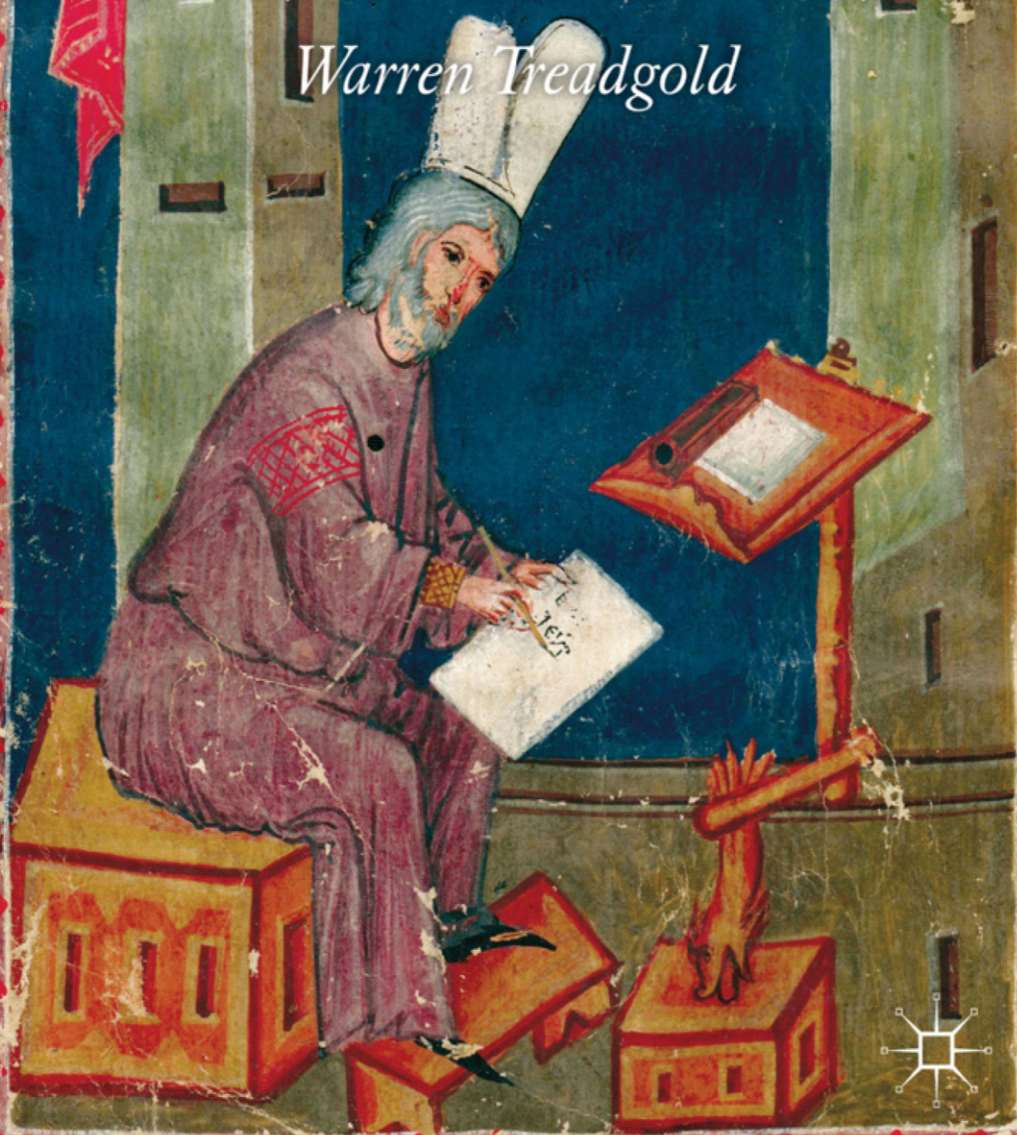


ἄχρι καὶ οὐ γὰρ ἐστὶν ἡ βλ. ταύτη

THE MIDDLE BYZANTINE HISTORIANS

Warren Treadgold



finish their histories. As it is, Bryennius' *Material for History* is the mature work of an intelligent and cultivated man, and its title is best understood as an expression of the author's modesty.

Anna Comnena

With Anna Comnena, we come to the second great historian of the middle Byzantine period (after Michael Psellus), the first Byzantine historian of imperial blood (excluding Constantine VII), and the only female Byzantine historian of any period.⁶³ Our information about her life is relatively ample. She not only refers to herself in her history but was an important historical figure in her own right and the subject of a eulogy by the priest George Tornices, who knew her and was probably commissioned to write by her daughter Irene.⁶⁴ Anna was born on Saturday, December 2, 1083, in the Purple Room of the Great Palace, which served as the empress's bedchamber, the first child of the emperor Alexius I and his wife, Irene Ducaena. Alexius had returned the day before from a successful campaign against the invading Normans of Sicily. Anna relates that her mother had felt labor pains several days earlier, but made the sign of the cross over her womb and told her baby, "Wait, little child, for your father to come." Anna asserts that as an infant she resembled her father in every way. This we may take more as a sign of filial pride than as literal truth, but both father and daughter were apparently short, dark, energetic, self-possessed, and good-looking, with fine eyebrows.⁶⁵

Perhaps that Christmas, Anna was crowned and betrothed to her second cousin once removed, the nine-year-old Constantine Ducas, who as the son of the deposed Michael VII and Maria of Alania had an hereditary claim to the throne.⁶⁶ According to a rumor that Anna mentions but naturally rejects, on taking power, in 1081, Alexius had considered divorcing his wife, Irene, and marrying the

⁶³ On Anna, see especially Buckler, *Anna*, Dalven, *Anna*, Leib, *Anne I*, pp. vii–clxxxi, Ljubarskij, "Why?" Karpozilos, *Βυζαντινοί ιστορικοί III*, pp. 397–425, Hunger, *Hochsprachliche profane Literatur I*, pp. 400–409, Reinsch and Kambylis, *Annae Comnenae Alexias I*, pp. 3*–57* (primarily on the text), Lilie, "Erste Kreuzzug" (cf. Reinsch, "*De minimis*"), Varzos, *Γενεαλογία*, pp. 176–97, Skoulatos, *Personnages*, Neville, "Lamentation," and *PBW*, Anna 62.

⁶⁴ See Darrouzès, *Georges*, pp. 20–32 and 316–17 n. 101.

⁶⁵ Comnena VI.8.1–2. Her birthdate is sometimes erroneously given as December 1, the day her father returned, but she makes it clear that she was born the next day at dawn. Comnena III.3.1 describes her father, but at XIV.7.4 she declines to describe her own appearance, probably out of modesty. Tornices, *Eulogy* p. 247, describes her beauty in old age in fairly conventional terms that include a commanding presence, energy, and striking eyebrows; cf. Theodore Prodromus' description of Anna c. 1122 in Gautier, *Nicéphore*, p. 347, which also mentions her eyes.

⁶⁶ Comnena VI.8.3 ("a certain number of days" after Anna's birth, making Christmas the first suitable festival for a coronation). Constantine was "not quite seven years old" on April 4, 1081 (Comnena III.1.3), but he was already born when Psellus completed his supplement to the *Chronography*, before mid-1074. (See above, p. 280 n. 48.) For the exact relationship between Constantine and Anna, see the genealogical table in Polemis, *Doukai*, after p. 216. Further on Constantine, see Skoulatos, *Personnages*, pp. 55–60, and *PBW*, Konstantinos 62.

beautiful Maria. The Ducas family defended the interests of their relative Irene by demanding that Maria leave the Great Palace; but they had nothing against her son, Constantine, who was himself a Ducas. After Alexius agreed to recognize Constantine as co-emperor, Maria moved to the nearby Palace of the Mangana.⁶⁷ When Anna was born, Alexius betrothed her to Constantine to bring him into the imperial family and soon sent Anna to the Mangana to be raised by her prospective mother-in-law.⁶⁸ Anna was much taken with Maria and her son and expresses admiration for both of them in the *Alexiad*.⁶⁹ Presumably Maria was responsible for the early stages of Anna's excellent education. Constantine's tutor was the learned Theophylact, the future archbishop of Ochrid, and according to Tornices Anna was more interested in learning than Constantine was.⁷⁰ Even in September 1087, when Irene bore Alexius his first son, the future John II, Constantine seems to have kept his imperial privileges, and the three-year-old Anna continued to live with him and his mother at the Mangana.⁷¹

Anna says in the *Alexiad* that she was "brought up with [Constantine Ducas] by the empress [Maria] from early childhood until I was not quite eight years old, and she, having a strong affection for me, shared all her secrets with me." Later Anna laments that to describe "how many things afflicted me from the time I was not quite eight years old, and how many enemies the baseness of the human race raised up for me, demands the siren song of Isocrates, the eloquence of Pindar, the roar of Polemo, the Calliope of Homer, the lyre of Sappho, or some other power beyond those."⁷² Since both times Anna gives her age as "not quite eight years old," evidently she felt that her misfortunes had begun with her separation from Maria and transfer to the Great Palace, in 1091. Maria became a nun, probably at the convent of the Mangana. Constantine retained his imperial insignia for a short time and, even after losing them, remained engaged to Anna and enjoyed favor with Alexius.⁷³ In spring 1094 Constantine accompanied the emperor on a

⁶⁷ Comnena III.2.1, 2.3, and 4.7.

⁶⁸ Comnena III.1.4.

⁶⁹ Comnena I.12.3 and III.1.3, 2.1, and 2.4.

⁷⁰ See Gautier, *Théophylacte* I, pp. 22–67 (though I would date Theophylact's oration addressed to Constantine, and consequently the beginning of Theophylact's episcopate, to 1091, while Gautier prefers 1089/90; see n. 73 below); cf. Tornices, *Eulogy*, p. 253.

⁷¹ John was born on Sept. 13, 1087; cf. Schreiner, *Byzantinischen Kleinchroniken* I, p. 55, no. 5.3, with Comnena VI.8.4–5.

⁷² Cf. Comnena III.1.4 (οὐπω τὸν ὄγδοον ὑπερέλασσα χρόνον) and XIV.7.4 (οὐπω τὸν ὄγδοον ὑπερέλασάση χρόνον). By "Polemo" Anna presumably means the orator Antonius Polemo of Laodicea (c. 88–c. 144); see *RE* XXI.2 (1952), cols. 1320–57 (with col. 1356 on Anna's reference).

⁷³ Theophylact of Ochrid, *Oration*, pp. 185–91, shows that Maria was already a nun when Theophylact addressed his oration to Constantine, at a time when Constantine was still emperor and Theophylact was not yet archbishop of Ochrid. The date was presumably in 1091, since Maria did not become a nun before Anna was separated from her in that year and Theophylact was archbishop by spring 1092. (Cf. Gautier, *Théophylacte* I, pp. 33–34 and 67, who is, however, uncertain of the date.) See Zonaras, *Epitome* XVIII.21.16–20, on Constantine's loss of the imperial insignia.

campaign against the Serbs as far as Constantine's estate in Serres, in Macedonia. There the young man fell ill, and Alexius insisted on his going no further. Apparently Constantine died of his illness the next August, when he was twenty and Anna was, at ten, not yet of marriageable age.⁷⁴ Soon afterward Constantine's mother, Maria, was implicated in a plot to replace Alexius with a son of Romanus IV. She seems to have been relegated to a convent on the island of Principo, in the Sea of Marmara.⁷⁵

Anna claims still to have been unable to restrain herself from tears when she mentions Constantine in the *Alexiad*.⁷⁶ While he may well have been a charming young man, and since she was only a child she probably looked up to him, much of his charm surely lay in his claim to the throne. Maria was presumably the one who told little Anna that she and her betrothed had been repeatedly acclaimed as "Constantine and Anna" after their engagement.⁷⁷ Even after John Comnenus was recognized as Alexius' heir, Maria probably advised Anna that her situation was like that of Helen Lecapena, the daughter of the usurper Romanus I, who was married by Romanus in 919 to the legitimate emperor, Constantine VII. Eventually, after Romanus' eldest son and heir had died and Romanus' younger sons had discredited themselves by deposing their father, Constantine VII and Helen became senior emperor and empress, and despite other temporary usurpations the Macedonian dynasty went on reigning until it died out a century later. Presumably Anna hoped that something similar would happen to her, Constantine Ducas, and the Ducas dynasty, and many years later she continued to brood over what might have been.

Although Anna evidently loved her parents, her leaving Maria's care meant not just separation from Constantine and a decline in her status and prospects but probably an interruption of her secular education. According to Tornices' eulogy, Anna's parents had no interest in secular literature and no desire for their daughter to study it. Anna had to resort to taking surreptitious lessons from palace eunuchs until her mother relented, still before Anna had reached her full height, and allowed her to study with philosophers in the palace.⁷⁸ Anna remarks that the Ducas family were "extremely fond of learning" and had patronized Michael Psellus and the philosopher John Italus, Psellus' student, whom Alexius

⁷⁴ See Comnena IX.5.4–6. The anonymous introduction to Bryennius, pp. 65–67, indicates that this was the same illness that later killed Constantine. He died on August 12, 1094 (Kouroupou and Vannier, "Commémoraisons," p. 67, no. 32).

⁷⁵ Cf. Comnena IX.8.2 (Maria's knowledge of the conspiracy of Nicephorus Diogenes) with Theophylact of Ochrid, *Letters* 4, pp. 137–41 (Maria's residence on Principo, not mentioned by Anna, when Theophylact was already archbishop of Ochrid, thus after 1091, though he could conceivably be referring to a temporary stay sometime before 1094). Zonaras, *Epitome* XVIII.21.19, says that Maria became a nun "at one time willingly, at another time somewhat under compulsion," apparently contrasting her voluntary retirement at the Mangana, in 1091, with her largely involuntary relegation to Principo, in 1094.

⁷⁶ Comnena I.12.3.

⁷⁷ Comnena VI.8.3.

⁷⁸ Tornices, *Eulogy*, pp. 243–47 and 263–65.

prosecuted and excommunicated for heresy in 1082. While endorsing this condemnation, Anna insists that Italus later repented of his errors. Since she describes his appearance and mannerisms as if she had met him, he may have been one of the philosophers she says she saw in the palace.⁷⁹

Alexius ceded most authority over the empire's domestic affairs to his widowed mother, Anna Dalassena, during the first part of his reign, when he spent most of his time campaigning. According to her granddaughter, Anna Dalassena was openly hostile to the whole Ducas family.⁸⁰ Presumably she favored demoting Constantine Ducas; the patriarch Cosmas I (1075–81) obviously thought that she wanted Alexius to divorce Irene Ducaena.⁸¹ A pious old woman who according to the *Alexiad* wanted to enter a convent and ran the palace like a monastery, she seems also to have disliked secular learning.⁸² Anna Comnena must have resented this hostility to her beloved mother and fiancé and to the education she pursued as a child, but by the time she wrote she had no wish to emphasize these family differences. Her description of her grandmother, for whom she must have been named, is long and laudatory but ends with the subtly ambiguous remark that a panegyrist would have praised Anna Dalassena above all the famous men of history, but an historian should not be allowed to use such "license."⁸³ The *Alexiad* records that Anna Dalassena forced the abdication of the patriarch Cosmas, whom it praises for his holiness, and promoted the patriarch Eustratius Garidas (1081–84), whom it criticizes for accepting Italus' heresy.⁸⁴ Zonaras tells us that Alexius came to begrudge his mother's power, leading her to retire, around 1095, to a convent in Constantinople, where she remained until her death, in 1102.⁸⁵ Anna expresses or implies strong affection for her mother, father, husband, fiancé, and fiancé's mother, but not for her grandmother. She refers to her grandmother's death only by observing that both Alexius' mother and his pet lion died on days when false prophecies had said Alexius would die himself.⁸⁶

⁷⁹ Comnena V.8.4–8.

⁸⁰ Comnena III.2.1.

⁸¹ Comnena III.2.7.

⁸² Comnena III.6.2 and 8.2.

⁸³ Comnena III.8.5 (ᾄδειαν).

⁸⁴ Cf. Comnena III.2.7 (replacement of Cosmas with Eustratius), with III.4.4 (Cosmas' holiness) and V.9.5 (Garidas and Italus).

⁸⁵ See Zonaras, *Epitome* XVIII.24.8–11. Her last attested act before her retirement was in 1095 (Cheynet and Vannier, *Études*, pp. 96–97), and by late 1095 her administration must have seemed less necessary, because the empire was as secure as it had been since the beginning of Alexius' reign, and more secure than it would be after the Crusaders arrived, in 1096. She died on a November 1 (Kouroupou and Vannier, "Commémoraisons," p. 51, no. 9), a year and a few months before her son Isaac Comennus (Zonaras, *Epitome* XVIII.24.11); Isaac died on a February 19 (Kouroupou and Vannier, "Commémoraisons," pp. 55–56, no. 16; on p. 56, "29 février" is a misprint for "19 février") of a year that must be 1104, because Isaac seems to have been alive in 1103 (Comnena XII.6.3) and was dead before November 17, 1104 (Papachryssanthou, "Date," especially pp. 252–53).

⁸⁶ Comnena VI.7.5.

Probably in 1096, not much past the canonical age of twelve, Anna married Nicephorus Bryennius, who received the rank of panhypersebastus and later that of Caesar.⁸⁷ Though she soon began to bear children and to have the responsibilities of a wife and mother, she continued her education in philosophy, rhetoric, poetry, and history.⁸⁸ When she heard several of Italus' students speak in the palace, she could follow what they were saying.⁸⁹ She evidently witnessed the arrival of the Crusaders at Constantinople, in 1097, and declares that "for the most part" she accompanied her father and mother on military campaigns.⁹⁰ Irene had gone on campaign with her husband, and slept with him in his tent, as early as 1094; after 1097, when he began to suffer from gout, she habitually accompanied him so that she could massage his feet, advise him, and ward off conspirators.⁹¹ Anna made at least a cursory study of medicine, no doubt largely out of concern for her father's health.⁹² She mentions coming to help her mother tend her father on campaigns, including that of 1105 against the Normans and apparently those of 1107 against the Normans and of 1114 against the Cumans.⁹³ Probably in 1103, when Anna saw the four Anemas brothers being pitifully paraded through Constantinople on their way to be blinded for plotting against Alexius, she persuaded her mother to ask the emperor to commute their sentence. He did so, but we may reasonably suspect that he had staged the whole dramatic episode to gain more credit for his usual clemency.⁹⁴

While Anna certainly admired her father, Tornices tells us that she and her mother were inseparable and spent most of their time together.⁹⁵ Anna's dislike of her brother John led her to insinuate that the general rejoicing at his birth was insincere, that he deserted his dying father to seek power, and that everything Alexius had achieved was ruined after his death through the "stupidity" of John and his son Manuel.⁹⁶ She compares Alexius to Christ, "rejected, assaulted, beaten, and finally condemned to the cross by lawless men," before declaring that she must restrain herself from naming the "cruel men" who persecuted her father at the end. Here she can scarcely mean anyone but John and his supporters. A little

⁸⁷ See above, p. 345 and n. 9.

⁸⁸ On her education, cf. Comnena, preface 1.2, and XV.7.9, with Tornices, *Eulogy*, pp. 257–59, Nicetas Choniates, *Chronological Narrative*, p. 10, and Zonaras, *Epitome* XVIII.26.15–16.

⁸⁹ Comnena V.9.2.

⁹⁰ Comnena XIV.7.4.

⁹¹ Comnena IX.5.3 (campaign of 1094), XII.3.2–7 (Irene's ministrations for Alexius' gout), and XIV.4.2–8 (the beginning of Alexius' gout, allegedly caused by spending too much time sitting with the Crusaders in 1097).

⁹² Cf. Comnena XII.3.7 (relating to 1105), XV.11.3 (Anna's consultation with her father's physicians), 11.10, 11.15, and 11.19 (Anna at Alexius' deathbed), and Tornices, *Eulogy*, pp. 267–69 and 283. Buckler, *Anna*, pp. 215–21, collects the references that show Anna's knowledge of medicine.

⁹³ Comnena XII.3.7 (1105), XIII.1.1 (1107), and XIV.8.2 (1114).

⁹⁴ Comnena XII.6.5–9.

⁹⁵ Tornices, *Eulogy*, pp. 257–63.

⁹⁶ Comnena VI.8.4 (the reaction to John's birth), XIV.3.8 (ἀβελτηρία), and XV.11.17 (John's alleged desertion).

later, discussing the causes of her father's gout, she refers to an unnamed villain who was Alexius' constant companion and never left him alone. "Moreover, if one looks at this man's nature, he was not just a cause of [Alexius'] disease, but a disease itself and its most severe symptom." She promises to return to this subject "at the right time," but she never does. Her reference looks very much as if it applies to John, accusing him at the least of hastening his father's death by constantly pressing his claim to the throne and deserting Alexius during his final illness—and at the most, of somehow poisoning him.⁹⁷

In this context, Nicetas Choniates and John Zonaras were evidently right that Irene and Anna aspired to have Nicephorus Bryennius made emperor in 1118. They depict Alexius as favoring his son's claims against his wife's persistent support for Bryennius while being unwilling or unable to silence her. Impelled by her attachment to Anna, Irene insisted that John was reckless, dissolute, indecisive, and sickly whereas Bryennius was capable and well educated. When Alexius was on his deathbed in the Mangana Palace, both John and Bryennius had prominent partisans at court. Though John was already co-emperor, Bryennius had the still-prestigious rank of Caesar. What seems to have decided the succession is that Bryennius, Anna, and Irene stayed by Alexius' deathbed in the Mangana Palace while John acted decisively. He managed to obtain the emperor's signet ring, probably with Alexius' consent, and to have himself acclaimed by a crowd outside the Mangana. Appealing in vain to John to desist, to Bryennius to seize power, and to Alexius to intervene, Irene accused her son of sedition and berated her gasping but smiling husband for tricking her as he had already tricked so many others. When John went to the Great Palace and found that the Varangian Guard would not open its doors, he had the doors taken off their hinges and locked himself in with his partisans. After Alexius died the same night, John secured his throne, ignoring Irene's demands that he attend his father's funeral the next day.⁹⁸

Even after John had become emperor, Irene and Anna could portray him as having treated his father with disrespect, and Anna may well have spread a rumor that John had poisoned Alexius. The men she denounces as her enemies evidently included those Choniates names as John's allies: his brother Isaac, his cousins John Comnenus and Gregory Taronites, and his friend John Axuch. Nicetas claims that the next year Anna was the prime mover in the conspiracy to assassinate

⁹⁷ Comnena XIV.3.6 and 4.9. Cf. Buckler, *Anna*, pp. 249–50: "[W]e may well believe that by these 'bosom' enemies of her father she meant her brother John. ... [M]ay she not when conspiring against him have seized on some real or fancied grievance in the hopes of driving him from the throne to which she never denied his rights?"

⁹⁸ Nicetas Choniates, *Chronological Narrative*, pp. 5–8; cf. Zonaras, *Epitome* XVIII.24.19–26, 26.14–18, and 28.13–29.10. Neville, *Heroes*, pp. 16–24, discusses these circumstances at length, if inconclusively. She is, however, mistaken that "setting the beginnings of his history in the context of Alexios's dysfunctional household contributes to Choniates's larger agenda of explaining the fall of Constantinople in 1204 in terms of Comnenian failings" (p. 20), because Nicetas wrote this part of his work before 1202, when he could not have foreseen the events of 1204; see below, p. 428 and n. 37. That Alexius' family was dysfunctional seems indisputable in any case.

John II in the suburban palace of Philopatium. Irene, if Anna approached her, refused to join the plot, and later said that she was unwilling either to overthrow an established emperor or to have her own son killed. We have seen that the conspiracy miscarried when Bryennius, after promising to join it, failed to act at the last moment, to Anna's fury. At first John confiscated Anna's personal property, including many precious objects, much cash, and her wardrobe, and awarded it to his friend Axuch—who, however, persuaded him to give it back to her.⁹⁹

John quickly reconciled with Bryennius, but never really with Anna. She writes in Book XIV of the *Alexiad*, "This is the thirtieth year, I swear by the souls of the emperors of blessed memory [Alexius, Irene, and Nicephorus Bryennius], that I have not beheld, not seen, not spoken with any of my father's men, not just because many of them have perished, but because through the vicissitudes of politics many are held back by fear."¹⁰⁰ The obvious interpretation is that Anna was writing in 1148, the thirtieth year after the failure of her conspiracy, in 1119, and had been in disgrace ever since. As for where she lived, her mother, Irene, retired to a mansion attached to the Convent of Mary Full of Grace, in northwestern Constantinople, probably just after Alexius' death, in 1118. There, in the mid-1120's, Irene specified that after her death

my very dear Lady Anna, the Porphyrogenita and wife of the Caesar, should have and hold without hindrance, as long as she may live, not just all the chambers in which she was residing during my lifetime, but also all the buildings in the Convent of Mary Full of Grace that were used by my majesty and my children and my male and female servants, along with the outer courtyard located directly next to the courtyard of the more sumptuous buildings.

Irene also bequeathed to Anna a church of St. Demetrius and two bathhouses, with permission to build whatever other buildings she wished around them.¹⁰¹ Evidently in 1119, if not the year before, Anna went to live with her mother in the "sumptuous buildings" attached to the convent. Neither Irene nor Anna appears to have become a nun before she was on her deathbed.

While some prominent courtiers must have found it prudent to stay away from Anna, as she claims, and she doubtless found life less interesting in the precincts of a convent than it had been in the Great Palace, she was by no means isolated. Her mother lived with her in the same palatial residence. Anna attended the double wedding of her sons around 1122, when she was said to be "sharing her bed" with Bryennius.¹⁰² Most of the time he probably lived with her in her quarters, where

⁹⁹ Nicetas Choniates, *Chronological Narrative*, pp. 8–12.

¹⁰⁰ Comnena XIV.7.6.

¹⁰¹ See Gautier, "Typikon," pp. 8 (for the retirement of Irene and Anna after 1118), 14 (for the date of the second part of the *Kecharitomene Typikon*, between 1120 [actually 1122, the date of the marriage of Anna's sons] and 1130), and 137–38 (the text of chapter 79). For the approximate location of this convent, see Janin, *Géographie*, pp. 188–91.

¹⁰² See Theodore Prodromus in Gautier, *Nicéphore*, pp. 347–49.

he talked with her mother, eventually worked on the history that Irene commissioned him to write, and was nursed by his wife during his last illness, in 1138.¹⁰³ Anna admits that she was visited by old men who had served under her father and later became monks.¹⁰⁴ Tornices says that she received not just learned monks but secular scholars with whom she discussed Aristotle, Plato, Euclid, and Ptolemy, and that she commissioned commentaries on Aristotle from the philosopher Michael of Ephesus. Tornices also mentions her reading oratory, history, tragedy, comedy, and philosophy, including Democritus and Heraclitus.¹⁰⁵ The *Alexiad* shows that Anna had a remarkably comprehensive knowledge of Greek poetry, drama, novels, historiography, philosophy, medicine, and literature in general, as well as the Scriptures and Church Fathers. The books to which she alludes most often, more even than to the Bible, are the *Iliad* and the *Chronography* of Michael Psellus.¹⁰⁶ Rare though Psellus' history evidently was, it reached Anna, who to judge from her frequent imitations of it must have read it again and again. She was evidently fascinated by its elaborate style and descriptions of power struggles in the courts of so many recent emperors, and it became a major inspiration for her own history. In the *Alexiad* she praises Psellus for both his genius and his erudition.¹⁰⁷

Anna took care first of her mother and then of her husband during their final illnesses, in 1138. Anna had been closer to them than to anyone else, and we can easily believe that their deaths, coming so close to each other, left her feeling utterly bereft. She was not quite fifty-six years old. In the *Alexiad* she says, "Bewailing my misfortune, by this time mourning three emperors—my father the emperor, my lady and mother the empress, and (alas!) my husband the Caesar—for the most part I sit in a corner and devote myself to books and to God."¹⁰⁸ She decided to take on the task of writing the history of her father's reign that her mother had requested and her husband had left unfinished. Yet she never says that the dying Nicephorus had asked her to continue his history, and if he had asked, she had no obvious reason not to tell us so. While she was unusually well educated, thus far she seems to have been more a reader than a writer of literature, who had not attempted any lengthy literary work. She apparently wrote her will and four or five short poems totaling nineteen lines, but ordinary Byzantine aristocrats could do as much. Her father, Alexius, was no scholar, but he had addressed two longish poems to his son John.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰³ Comnena, preface 3.4.

¹⁰⁴ Comnena XIV.7.7.

¹⁰⁵ Tornices, *Eulogy* pp. 281–83.

¹⁰⁶ See the index in Reinsch and Kambylis, *Annae Comnenae Alexias* II, pp. 261–71. Note that they list sixty-one verbal allusions to the *Iliad*, sixty to Psellus' *Chronography*, and forty-five to the Bible.

¹⁰⁷ Comnena V.8.3.

¹⁰⁸ Comnena XIV.7.6, and Tornices, *Eulogy*, pp. 295–97 and 305 (for the problem with Irene's death date mentioned by Darrouzès, *Georges*, p. 304 n. 90; see pp. 346–47 and n. 22 above).

¹⁰⁹ See Buckler, *Anna*, pp. 5–10 and 23 (quoting a fifth short poem that may possibly be Anna's, though calling herself "beautiful," even in an Homeric quotation, seems uncharacteristic of her; note her refusal to describe her physical appearance in XIV.7.4).

Alexius' reign must have had great appeal for Anna as a subject. She genuinely admired her father, who was in many respects a remarkable man. She owed her position, and the rights that she thought went with it, entirely to him. She could remember most of his reign, which was the time when she had been happiest and had hoped for an even happier future. By 1138, eighty-one years had passed since Alexius' birth, and twenty years since his death. Eyewitnesses were rapidly dying off, and Anna knew of nobody still alive who was planning to write about him. Although she may originally have thought of continuing Bryennius' work from the point where it broke off, in 1080, she eventually decided to write an independent history that would incorporate much of Bryennius' material. In Book XIV, which as we have seen she seems to have been writing in 1148, she says that she collected her information "mostly under the third holder of the scepter of the empire beginning with my father."¹¹⁰ Therefore she started gathering material before the accession of Manuel I, in 1143, but did most of her work after that date.

She naturally had her own memories of life at court, of the times when she had accompanied her father on his campaigns, and of the war stories that she had heard him tell his family.¹¹¹ As she puts it, "Having learned about these matters in one way or another, I know some things from my own experience and others from men who campaigned with my father; I heard other things by means of couriers who conveyed to us what had happened in his battles; and in particular I often heard in person the emperor and George Palaeologus describing them."¹¹² Yet the events that Anna remembered from her father's reign were at least twenty years in the past when she decided to write her history. George Palaeologus, her mother's brother-in-law, last appears in the *Alexiad* in 1101, almost forty years before Anna wrote, and since he was an important person and nothing more is heard of him, he probably died soon afterward.¹¹³ Even direct recollections, especially of names and dates, fade and become confused over time, as Anna admits her own had done.¹¹⁴

We have seen that Anna collected most of her material under Manuel I. She says that "there are men who survive today, knew my father, and tell stories about him, by whom many things in this present history have been contributed, because each of them described and recalled what had happened to him, and all of them corroborated each other."¹¹⁵ She sums up:¹¹⁶

The things that I have compiled in my history, let God and His celestial Mother my Lady know, I gathered from inelegant writings without any literary

¹¹⁰ Comnena XIV.7.5.

¹¹¹ See Comnena I.6.9 and VII.3.11.

¹¹² Comnena XIV.7.5.

¹¹³ Comnena XI.3.2; cf. *PBW*, Georgios 61. Skoulatos, *Personnages*, pp. 99–105, however, believes that George died after 1119, because he is not mentioned among the dead in the *Kecharitomene Typikon*.

¹¹⁴ Comnena V.9.4.

¹¹⁵ Comnena XIV.7.4.

¹¹⁶ Comnena XIV.7.7.

pretensions, and from old veterans who were serving when my father took up the scepter of the Romans, who have had many experiences, and who were transferred from the tumults of the world to the tranquility of the monks. That is to say, the writings that have come into my hands were simple in style and artless, adhering to the truth, displaying nothing at all refined, and clothing themselves in no rhetorical majesty; and the things related by the veterans adhered closely to the same sort of language and thinking as those writings. I have determined the truth of my history from these, combining and comparing what I knew with what they said, and what they said with what I knew—whatever I had heard from my father himself and from my paternal and maternal uncles, on many occasions. From all these things the whole substance of the truth has been woven together.

By the standards of Byzantine historians, this is an unusually clear and detailed explanation of an unusually systematic but quite credible historical method. Anna describes three kinds of sources: her own memories, nonliterary documents, and what seem to have been interviews with old soldiers, during which she apparently took notes or had notes taken for her by a secretary. In her narrative she refers several times to these veterans. She says that some of them had told her of the miserable condition of the empire at her father's accession, in 1081; she mentions an informant who had been present at the Normans' siege of Dyrrhachium that same year; she cites retainers of George Palaeologus as sources for Alexius' campaign against the Pechenegs in 1091; and she cites eyewitnesses, probably the same men, for how that campaign ended.¹¹⁷ At some point Anna also spoke with a Westerner who claimed to have been with the Norman expedition that invaded the empire in 1081.¹¹⁸ We may safely assume that much more information in the *Alexiad* comes from such oral sources. The oldest of these informants must have been elderly, since a man who was eighteen in 1081 would have been eighty-five in 1148. Anna collected her information just in time.

Obviously Anna consulted not only oral sources but written ones, especially for the years before her father's accession. The "inelegant" writings that she used included official documents, of which she quotes at least two and may paraphrase others.¹¹⁹ Her "artless" sources may also have included personal letters or annals with extremely brief entries. We still have a page-long chronicle that records the birthdates of Alexius I's nine children from 1083 to 1098 in one short sentence each, and Anna may well have been able to refer to one or two more such records.¹²⁰ Yet from what she says she seems very unlikely to have found a

¹¹⁷ Comnena III.9.1, IV.5.1, VIII.2.5, and IX.1.2.

¹¹⁸ Comnena III.12.8. This man, who told Anna that he had been a representative of the bishop of Bari in 1081, presumably came to Constantinople in another capacity much later, probably while Anna was researching her history.

¹¹⁹ See below, p. 381 and n. 197.

¹²⁰ Schreiner, *Byzantinischen Kleinchroniken* I, pp. 54–56, no. 5. See below, p. 372 and n. 150.

chronicle that covered her father's whole reign in connected prose. In the first three books of the *Alexiad* she used, and sometimes copied, the formal literary histories of the earlier period by her husband, Psellus, and Scylitzes.¹²¹ She can scarcely have forgotten that she had done so, because, besides her direct references to Bryennius' work, in Book IX she refers her readers to "various historians" who wrote on the reign of Romanus IV, evidently meaning Bryennius, Psellus, and Scylitzes.¹²² Yet in the description of her method quoted above she appears to be referring only to Alexius' reign, which those three historians do not cover. While the world history of John Zonaras extends to 1118 and was probably finished before the *Alexiad*, Anna seems not to have known about it, or at any rate to have chosen to ignore it because its treatment of Alexius' reign is brief and not very favorable. She seems not to have known Attaliates' history either.

Although the *Alexiad* is obviously a labor of love, Anna, like all scholars and writers, sometimes found her task tedious, particularly as it seemed to grow longer with no end in sight. In Book I, after describing the self-important pretender in the Norman court who claimed to be Michael VII, she remarks, "I begin to smile when I think of these things, and laughter reaches my lips as I move my pen under the lamp."¹²³ By Book XIII, however, in discussing Alexius' war with the Normans, in 1108, she finds that her work has become more burdensome, especially toward the end of the day:¹²⁴

As I have come this far, and move my pen and almost doze over my writing around the time of the lighting of the lamps, I realize that my narrative is straying. Whenever the use of barbarian names and the relating of one subject after another are necessarily called for, both the substance of my history and the coherence of my prose seem to come apart where they were joined together. I should not be blamed for this by those who come to my book with sympathy.

These endearingly personal asides show that Anna worked long hours and habitually wrote with her own hand, even though she could easily have afforded a secretary. A secretary may of course have made fair copies of her corrected drafts.

George Tornices says in his eulogy of Anna that at first she tried to conceal her last illness, which appears to have been a brain tumor. She rallied after her physicians despaired of her, and she diagnosed her own condition. Predicting her death, she became a nun at her convent of Mary Full of Grace, following the custom of many pious Byzantines who realized their end was near, and declared that even if she should recover she would not renounce her monastic vows. Tornices, comparing her peaceful death to that of Socrates, describes her taking leave of

¹²¹ See the index in Reinsch and Kambylis, *Annae Comnenae Alexias* II, pp. 266 (Scylitzes *Continuatus*), 266–67 (Psellus), and 268 (Bryennius).

¹²² Comnena IX.6.1.

¹²³ Comnena I.15.6.

¹²⁴ Comnena XIII.6.3.

her daughter Irene, who was to inherit the mansion adjoining the convent and appears to have commissioned Tornices' eulogy.¹²⁵ Since that eulogy seems to have been delivered in 1154, after some delay, Anna probably died sometime in the middle of 1153, at the age of sixty-nine.¹²⁶ By then she had apparently spent almost fifteen years on researching and composing her *Alexiad*.

Although Anna finished writing the narrative, she died before adding a few final touches. Besides some lacunae owing to copyists' errors and damage to our manuscripts, the text has about a dozen blanks that must have been left for information that Anna meant to fill in later. Five of these gaps are for place names, four for personal names, two for dates, and one for a distance. As we might expect, the blanks become somewhat more frequent as the text goes on. Rather surprisingly, one blank is left for the year when Alexius first heard of the approach of the Crusaders (seemingly 1095/96), which Anna must have considered important, since like most formal Byzantine historians she includes very few dates.¹²⁷ When she gathered accounts from aging eyewitnesses, no doubt some of them were unable to recall information that she hoped she might learn from other witnesses, or from annals or documents. Yet if she had allowed the *Alexiad* to be copied and distributed, she would presumably have revised it one last time and either filled in the gaps or rewritten the text to remove them. Otherwise the *Alexiad* reads like a finished composition, up to its account of Alexius' death, in Book XV: "Here let our history have its end, so that in recording these painful things we may not become even more bitter."¹²⁸

Anna insists that, apart from being born to an emperor and empress, she was supremely unfortunate.¹²⁹ The main misfortunes she lists were the deaths of her father, mother, husband, fiancé, and favorite brother, and the triumph of her "enemies," which caused her virtual exile. In fact, her father died at the age of sixty-one, her mother at seventy-one, and her husband at about fifty-six, all respectable ages by Byzantine standards.¹³⁰ Though in her Book XV Anna implies that her mother and husband died soon after her father, they actually outlived

¹²⁵ Tornices, *Eulogy*, pp. 311–15. On her daughter Irene, see Darrouzès, *Georges*, pp. 20–21 and 316–17 n. 10; cf. Gautier, "Typikon," p. 139.

¹²⁶ See Darrouzès, *Georges*, pp. 20–22 and 226 n. 8.

¹²⁷ Place names: Comnena I.6.8, V.5.3, VII.6.6, XIII.1.10, and XV.2.3. Personal names: Comnena VI.13.4, IX.8.4, XII.5.4, and XIV.5.3. Dates: Comnena X.5.4 (the year when Alexius first heard of the Crusaders) and XV.8.1 (the year when the Bogomils appeared). Distance: Comnena XI.2.8.

¹²⁸ Comnena XV.11.24.

¹²⁹ For her admission that her birth was an exception to her bad luck, see Comnena, preface 4.1; cf. the detailed discussion of Anna's "self-pity" in Buckler, *Anna*, pp. 35–46.

¹³⁰ Alexius was born c. 1057, because he was fourteen in spring 1071 and very young in 1078, and he died on August 15, 1118 (Comnena I.1.1, II.1.3, and XV.11.13; Zonaras, *Epitome* XVIII.29.11, is obviously guessing when he says that Alexius died at roughly the age of 70). If we accept the prophecy of Bishop Nicetas of Chonae, reported in Nicetas Choniates, *Chronological Narrative*, p. 219, that Manuel I, who died at the age of sixty-one years and ten months, had a slightly longer life than his grandfather, Alexius was born between October 1056 and spring 1058. Irene was born soon after April 1066 and died on

Alexius by some twenty years.¹³¹ Anna's fiancé, Constantine Ducas, died at the age of twenty, when she was a child of ten; but she professes great attachment to Nicephorus Bryennius, whom she would presumably not have married if Constantine had lived.¹³² Although in Book XV Anna implies that her favorite brother, Andronicus, died very young, on Alexius' campaign against the Turks in 1116, in fact he died around 1131, at the age of about forty.¹³³ As for her "enemies"—her brother John II and his supporters—John was the rightful heir to the throne according to Byzantine tradition and his father's choice. Given that Anna had been at the head of a plot to murder him, he was entitled at the least to have her tonsured. Instead, advised by his friend Axuch and probably influenced by regard for her husband, John allowed her to keep her property and to live the rest of her long life in luxury with her mother, under restrictions that seem not to have been at all harsh.

Anna's *Alexiad*

The *Alexiad* owes much of its interest and appeal to its main subject—the energetic and charismatic Alexius I. Even though Byzantine historians showed a marked tendency to arrange their material by imperial reigns, surprisingly few of them focused so exclusively on a single emperor as Anna did. The only examples seem to be Eusebius' *Life of Constantine*, two other histories of Constantine I, the *Life of Basil*, probably by Theodore Daphnopates, and the history of Basil II by Theodore of Sebastea.¹³⁴ The three histories of Constantine were written in the first half of the fourth century, and two are lost and seem not to have made much impression. Eusebius' *Life of Constantine* found a number of readers but had little influence on historians, even if it had more influence on hagiographers. The tenth-century *Life of Basil* appears to have had a quite limited circulation. Theodore of Sebastea's eleventh-century history of Basil II, apparently composed as a short supplement to the much longer history of Theodore of Side, was lost after reaching few readers. Moreover, the *Life of Constantine* and *Life of Basil* are better termed biographies than histories. Since Anna wrote not a biography but a history centered on a single figure, she followed no obvious precedent.

Alexiad is a similarly anomalous title for a history. In the seventh century George of Pisidia had composed a relatively brief epic poem that he called the

February 19, 1138. (See pp. 347 n. 22 and 349 n. 33 above.) Bryennius was born around 1083 and died late in 1138. (See pp. 345 n. 9 and 347 n. 22 above.)

¹³¹ Comnena XV.11.22.

¹³² See above, pp. 354 and n. 66 (Constantine's birth) and 356 and n. 74 (Constantine's death).

¹³³ Comnena XV.5.4; but Andronicus, born on September 18, 1091 (Schreiner, *Byzantinischen Kleinchroniken* I, p. 55, no. 5.5), died around 1131 (Gautier, "Obituaire," pp. 249–50); cf. PBW, Andronikos 108, and Skoulatos, *Personnages*, pp. 17–19.

¹³⁴ See Treadgold, *Early Byzantine Historians*, pp. 41–46 (on Eusebius' *Life of Constantine*) and 47–48 (on the lost histories of Constantine I), and above, pp. 165–80 (on the *Life of Basil*) and 247–58 (on Theodore of Sebastea).

Heracliad in honor of the emperor Heraclius, but Anna's work is far longer and in prose. Both Anna and George were of course alluding to Homer's *Iliad*, which they knew well, as most well-educated Byzantines did. Anna quotes the *Iliad* more often than the Bible, and her Homeric allusions are more frequent than her biblical allusions.¹³⁵ While the title of the *Iliad* means the epic of Ilium (Troy) rather than of its hero Achilles, Anna's coinage was presumably also influenced by the title of the *Odyssey*, the epic of Odysseus. Alexius was in fact much more like Odysseus, a wily survivor of many perils, than like Achilles, a reckless champion on the battlefield, though Anna would probably have preferred the comparison to Achilles as the more glorious. She quotes many words and phrases from Homer, and her style has much of the epic about it.

Anna's preface, even though composed in formal language with allusions to Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Plutarch, and Polybius, is much less conventional, more personal, and more informative than most prefaces to Byzantine histories. While naturally affirming the importance of her subject, she omits the customary protestations of the writer's inability to do it justice. On the contrary, she mentions her fine education and expresses her concern that readers will think she is biased in favor of her father or will blame her for criticizing him, though she insists that her duty as an historian is simply to tell the truth. She explains that her husband, Nicephorus Bryennius, had been commissioned by the empress Irene to record the deeds of the emperor Alexius but "time did not allow him to continue his history further, thus doing harm to the topic of the history and depriving its readers of pleasure."¹³⁶ Anna therefore decided to record her father's deeds herself. She professes to be reduced to tears at recalling the deaths of her husband and her father, which were great misfortunes not only for her but for the whole empire, but she will continue nonetheless.

Book I, largely summarized from Bryennius' history, begins not with Alexius' birth but with his mother's refusing to let him join Romanus IV's campaign of 1071, when he was fourteen. Anna retells the story of how Alexius was sent against the rebel Roussel a few years later and managed to ransom him from the Turks with inadequate funds and to avoid a rebellion by pretending to blind him. Alexius was then sent against the rebel Nicephorus Bryennius, captured him with insufficient troops, and providentially avoided being killed by him afterwards. Sent next against the rebel Nicephorus Basilaces with another inadequate army, Alexius captured him too, completing a third labor of Hercules.¹³⁷ Now turning to material that was not in her husband's history, Anna rounds off the book by recording how the emperor Michael VII betrothed his son, Constantine Ducas, to

¹³⁵ The index in Reinsch and Kambylis, *Annae Comnenae Alexias* II, pp. 261–62 (Scripture) and 264–65 (Homer), lists 45 scriptural quotations (starred) out of 110 allusions, and 79 Homeric quotations (starred; 61 from the *Iliad* and 18 from the *Odyssey*) out of 126 allusions (96 to the *Iliad* and 30 to the *Odyssey*). Such numbers should not be considered exact but are useful indicators.

¹³⁶ Comnena, preface 3.3.

¹³⁷ Comnena I.9.6.

the daughter of the Norman Robert Guiscard of Sicily, and after Michael's abdication Robert prepared to invade the empire together with a pretender who claimed to be Michael.

Book II begins with conspiracies in early 1081 that cause Alexius to enlist the Ducas family as his allies and to be proclaimed emperor by his army. He then seizes Constantinople, which his men plunder, and forces the abdication of Nicephorus III. In Book III Alexius takes power and placates his squabbling supporters by distributing new ranks, replacing the patriarch of Constantinople, sending Maria of Alania from the palace, doing penance for his men's sack of the capital, and granting his mother authority over domestic affairs. The book closes with the Normans' landing in imperial territory after losing many of their ships in a storm. Book IV, entirely devoted to the Norman war during 1081, describes Robert Guiscard's siege of Dyrrhachium, the defeat of the Norman fleet by the Byzantines' Venetian allies, and Alexius' march west from Constantinople. He attacks the Normans near Dyrrhachium but suffers a crushing defeat, from which he barely escapes.

Book V opens with the surrender of Dyrrhachium to the Normans early in 1082, which forces Alexius to borrow sacred objects from the Church to continue the war. After Robert returns to Italy and leaves his army with his son Bohemund, Bohemund defeats Alexius—who, however, incites so much dissension among the Norman nobles that he can return to Constantinople in 1083. In the rest of the book Anna goes back to the previous year to describe the heresy trial of John Italus. Book VI returns to 1083 with Alexius' subduing many of the Normans, deporting many Bogomil heretics, and doing penance for his borrowing of church property. Anna skips forward to 1085 to a naval victory of the Venetians over the Normans and the death of Robert Guiscard, which leads to the surrender of Dyrrhachium to Alexius. Then Anna returns to 1083 to record her own birth and the births of her sister Maria in 1085 and her brother John in 1087. The rest of the book describes the occupation of Anatolia by the Turks up to 1092 and raids on Thrace by the Pechenegs up to 1086.

Book VII opens in spring 1087 with the Pechenegs' raiding across the Danube and severely defeating Alexius, who once more barely escapes and can make a truce only because the Pechenegs are attacked by Cuman raiders. After further Pecheneg raiding, Alexius makes another truce, but in 1090 the Pechenegs defeat his forces again. Apparently at the same time, Chaka, the Turkish emir of Smyrna, builds a fleet and takes Lesbos and Chios; but here Anna seems to be confused, because next she reports Alexius' sending his brother-in-law John Ducas against Chaka, which apparently happened in 1093.¹³⁸ After the Pechenegs defeat Alexius again, he defeats them, evidently in 1090. In Book VIII Alexius enlists Cuman raiders as allies and inflicts an overwhelming defeat on the Pechenegs in spring 1091. The rest of the book describes an alleged plot against Alexius by his nephew

¹³⁸ See below, pp. 371–72.

John Comnenus and the insubordination of Theodore Gabras, the practically independent ruler of Trebizond.

Book IX returns to the dispatch of John Ducas against Chaka, evidently at its correct date of 1093. John retakes Lesbos from Chaka and Crete and Cyprus from Byzantine rebels, and Chaka is killed by the sultan (actually in 1098). Also in 1093, the Serbian ruler Bolkan invades imperial territory and defeats the duke of Dyrrhachium John Comnenus. Apparently the next spring, Alexius marches out and, despite having to suppress a plot by Romanus IV's son Nicephorus Diogenes, makes peace with Bolkan. Book X opens oddly with the condemnation of the heretic Nilus by a church council, an event that had occurred in 1087. Then Anna describes a Pseudo-Diogenes who claims to be a son of Romanus IV and leads a force of Cumans across the Danube, apparently in 1095, but is captured and blinded. Alexius is fortifying the city of Nicomedia against Turkish raiders when he hears the news that the First Crusade is on its way to imperial territory.

In the rest of Book X Anna describes the arrival of the Crusaders, beginning with Peter the Hermit's irregulars, who are followed by regular troops, in late 1096 and early 1097. Relations between Alexius and the Crusaders are tense, but Alexius patiently wins them over, especially his old enemy Bohemund, who is leading the contingent from Norman Sicily. In Book XI the Crusaders advance to besiege Turkish-held Nicaea, whose garrison surrenders to a small Byzantine force to avoid a sacking by the Crusaders. The Crusaders then march to Antioch and take it by treachery, only to be besieged there by a large Turkish army. Meanwhile John Ducas captures the region of Smyrna from Chaka (who according to Anna should already have died), and Alexius conquers central Anatolia. The Crusaders defeat the Turks besieging Antioch and take Jerusalem in 1099. Alexius asks Bohemund to hand over Antioch, which had recently been Byzantine territory, and on his refusal sends an expedition against him. Surrounded by Byzantine forces, Bohemund pretends to be dead and is smuggled out of Antioch in a coffin, in 1104.

In Book XII Bohemund prepares to invade the empire again, and in autumn 1105 Alexius marches into the Balkans to prevent him, returning to the capital only in late 1106.¹³⁹ Then Anna describes the conspiracy of the four Anemas brothers, seemingly in 1103, and the rebellion of Gregory Taronites at Trebizond, between 1104 and 1106. Late in 1107, Bohemund finally invades the empire and besieges Dyrrhachium, and this news reaches Alexius at the end of the book. Book XIII is devoted to Alexius' campaign against Bohemund. Anna describes in detail the various devices used unsuccessfully by Bohemund against Dyrrhachium until Alexius sends a relief force that defeats him. At last Bohemund runs short of supplies and sues for peace. Anna completes the book by quoting the lengthy

¹³⁹ Comnena XII.3.1 says that Alexius left Constantinople in September 1105, and Comnena XII.4.4 says that he remained in the central Balkans for a year and two months, until the approach of winter, evidently in November 1106, after celebrating the Feast of St. Demetrius (October 26) at Thessalonica on his way back to Constantinople.

text of the treaty between Bohemund and Alexius of September 1108, in which Bohemund agrees to hold Antioch as Alexius' vassal.

Book XIV begins with Bohemund's withdrawal to Apulia and his death, reportedly in 1109. Next Anna describes a successful Byzantine campaign against the Turks in western Anatolia and fruitless attempts to form an alliance with King Baldwin of Jerusalem against Bohemund's nephew Tancred, who continues to hold Antioch. After various ordeals, Alexius, who suffers increasingly from gout, campaigns against the Turks and wins an important victory, apparently in 1113. Anna makes this the occasion for a digression on her historical method. Hearing of a possible Cuman invasion, in fall 1114 Alexius marches to Philippopolis in Thrace, where he stays to convert Bogomil heretics. Book XV begins with raids by the Turks of Anatolia that lead Alexius to launch a major campaign, evidently in 1116, which results in a victory and a favorable peace. Alexius returns with many Byzantines freed from Turkish captivity to the capital, where he lodges many of them in an orphanage he has founded. Next Anna describes the trial for heresy and burning alive of Basil the Bogomil, which must actually have happened years earlier. The book and the *Alexiad* end with a moving account of Alexius' final illness and death.

Contrary to what might be expected of a history written more than twenty years after the events it covers, the *Alexiad* treats the earlier part of Alexius' reign at greater length than the later part. The history is two-thirds over before it reaches the midpoint of Alexius' reign, in 1100. The first three books after Alexius' accession (II–IV) record his first year (1081), while the last two books (XIV–XV) record his last ten years (1109–18). These proportions reflect the fact that most of the *Alexiad* describes Alexius' military campaigns, and Alexius campaigned more during the military crises of the earlier part of his reign than later, when he was increasingly suffering from gout and the empire's military needs were less pressing. Anna gives extensive coverage to the Normans, especially to their two invasions of the region of Dyrrhachium, in 1081–85 and 1107–8; she is less interested in the Crusades, in which Alexius took a comparatively small part. The placement of the book divisions, which are certainly Anna's, is sometimes peculiar.¹⁴⁰ Although Anna obviously realizes the importance of the Crusaders, she reports their arrival without starting a new book in the middle of Book X, and leaves blanks for the year and indiction when Alexius learned that they were coming.¹⁴¹ Perhaps she was reluctant to give the Crusaders more prominence than necessary.

While Anna evidently arranged her material in roughly chronological order, and dates various events to the year of the indiction, the world, or an imperial reign, or by some other chronological indication, her text often leaves not just the dates but the sequence of events uncertain. Establishing her chronology can be difficult, because many of her references are vague and we seldom have

¹⁴⁰ Note that Anna refers to her own book divisions at Comnena I.16.9 and III.12.8.

¹⁴¹ Comnena X.8.5. Possibly Anna was unsure whether Alexius had heard the news before or after the Byzantine year began, on September 1, 1096, though the correct date was presumably before.

sources that are clearly preferable to the *Alexiad*. The main exceptions are our best Western sources for the First Crusade, which show that Anna often reports its events inaccurately; but the reason usually seems to be that she and her Byzantine informants found the Crusade of secondary interest, not that they were biased against the Crusaders.¹⁴² Especially confusing is her mentioning in four different places in Books V and VI the same return of Alexius to Constantinople, in December 1083, as if it were four separate events, and assigning it a date only the last time.¹⁴³ The reason is presumably that this was the date when Anna herself was born, and though Alexius had not then won his war with the Normans she wants to give the impression that he had been victorious by describing his later successes before they actually had happened.

The heresy trials of John Italus, Nilus, and Basil the Bogomil, though they receive considerable attention in the *Alexiad*, are all out of their chronological places in Anna's narrative. One reason may be that they would otherwise have interrupted her accounts of Alexius' wars; another reason may be that Anna and the old soldiers who supplied her with information were unable to recall when these events in Constantinople had occurred in relation to the military campaigns.¹⁴⁴ Either of these reasons could explain Anna's placement of the plot of the Anemas brothers after rather than before Alexius' Balkan campaign of 1105 to 1106.¹⁴⁵ Anna may also have wanted to shift more of her material to the later books of her history, when she had fewer campaigns to report, in order to avoid giving the correct impression that Alexius had been less active during the latter part of his reign.

Anna seems particularly confused about Chaka, the Turkish emir of Smyrna, who she says began raiding the islands of the Aegean in 1090. At that time she mentions that John Ducas had been sent against Chaka as grand duke, after serving as duke of Dyrrhachium for eleven years. Since elsewhere she says that the duke of Dyrrhachium was George Palaeologus in late 1081 and John Comnenus in early 1094, John Ducas must have served in that post from 1082 (when the Normans held the city of Dyrrhachium but probably not the whole ducate) to 1093.¹⁴⁶ Anna appears to show further confusion by saying that Chaka was

¹⁴² See especially Lilie, "Erste Kreuzzug," and *Byzantium*, pp. 1–95 and 259–76.

¹⁴³ Comnena V.7.4, VI.1.4, VI.3.1, and VI.8.1 (dated).

¹⁴⁴ See Comnena V.8.1 (Italus' trial in 1083 rather than 1082), X.1.1 (Nilus' trial in 1094 or 1095 rather than 1087), and XV.8.1 (Basil's trial around 1117 [but note the blank left by Anna for the year] rather than c. 1105), 8.4 (mentioning the sebastocrator Isaac, who died in 1104), 8.6 (mentioning the patriarch Nicholas III, who died in 1111), and 10.4–5 (calling the imprisonment of Basil's followers after Basil's death "the final deed and ordeal" of Alexius); cf. *PBW*, Ioannes 66, Neilos 15001, and Basileios 179.

¹⁴⁵ Comnena XII.6.3 mentions that the plot was detected by the sebastocrator Isaac, who died in February 1104. (See p. 357 n. 85 above.) *PBW*, Michael 194, dates the plot tentatively to 1103. Cheynet, *Pouvoir*, pp. 100–101, prefers to date it to 1100/1101, because he believes that Anna must have been very young at the time to be so strongly affected by the scene, though I see no need for this to have been so.

¹⁴⁶ Cf. Comnena IV.8.4 (George Palaeologus), VII.8.8–9 (John Ducas and Chaka, whom Anna calls "Tzachas"), and VIII.7.2 (John Comnenus; see *PBW*, Ioannes 128, for the date).

ravaging the islands with his fleet “again” in 1091.¹⁴⁷ Probably his raids continued between 1090 and 1093, when John Ducas arrived and defeated him. Anna’s mistake seems to have been to think that Alexius dispatched John Ducas immediately after Chaka started raiding, in 1090, though the actual date was three years later. Then Anna appears to record Chaka’s murder by the sultan Kilij Arslan in 1094, only to mention Chaka’s still holding Smyrna in 1098.¹⁴⁸ Here Anna’s mistake seems to have been to think that Chaka was killed not long after his defeat in 1093, though the actual date was 1098. Probably Anna learned from different old veterans about Chaka’s raiding in 1090–93, John Ducas’ service at Dyrrhachium in 1082–93, and Chaka’s murder in 1098, then combined their chronologically vague reports in her work without properly resolving their inconsistencies.

Anna does appear to have arranged her narrative with some help from an annalistic source or sources. She knows the dates of the reigns of emperors and patriarchs. The only years of the world that she includes (not counting years of the world left blank) are for the accession of Alexius, in 1081, and the accession of the patriarch Nicholas III, in 1084; but she may have used the same annalistic source for Alexius’ death, in 1118, the accession of Patriarch Cosmas I, in 1075, the length of Cosmas’ patriarchate, and perhaps the birth of Alexius’ son John.¹⁴⁹ Since for Alexius’ Norman war of 1081–85 she knows six specific dates and the length of the life and reign of Robert Guiscard that marked its end, one of her “artless” written sources may have been a brief and simple chronicle of the war, especially because she records the war at such length.¹⁵⁰ She knows the indictional years of the beginning and end of the not particularly important revolt of Gregory Taronites in Trebizond (1104–6), and of Alexius’ departure on campaigns against Bohemund, in 1107, and against the Cumans, in 1114; these she may have found jotted down together somewhere.¹⁵¹ Otherwise she includes only dates by seasons, months, or saint’s days that her informants could have remembered, if not always accurately. For example, her date for the battle in which Alexius crushed the Pechenegs evidently depends on a popular saying that the Pechenegs missed seeing the month of May by one day.¹⁵² Often, however, Anna must have had no

¹⁴⁷ Comnena VIII.3.2.

¹⁴⁸ Cf. Comnena IX.3.4, XI.5.1.

¹⁴⁹ Comnena II.10.4 (A.M. 6589, the 4th indiction [1081]: Alexius’ accession), III.2.6 (the 4th year of Michael VII, the 13th indiction [1075]: election of Cosmas), III.4.4 (Cosmas was patriarch 6 yrs. 9 mos. [1075–81]), VI.8.4 (the 11th indiction [1087]: the birth of John II), X.2.5 (A.M. 6592 [1084]: the accession of Patriarch Nicholas III), and XV.11.13 (the 5th indiction [1118]: Alexius’ death).

¹⁵⁰ Comnena IV.1.1 (June 17 of the 4th indiction [1081]), IV.4.1 (August of the 4th indiction [1081]), IV.5.2 (October 15 [1081]), IV.6.1 (October 18 of the 5th indiction [1081, since the indiction changed on September 1]), V.4.2 (May [1082]), VI.6.1–2 (Robert ruled 25 years [1059–85] and lived 70 years [perhaps correct]), and VI.8.1 (December 1 of the 7th indiction [1083]).

¹⁵¹ Comnena XII.7.1 (the 12th indiction [1103/4]), XII.7.2 (the 14th indiction [1105/6]), XIII.1.1 (November 1 of the 1st indiction [1107]), and XIV.8.1 (November of the 8th indiction [1114]).

¹⁵² Comnena VIII.5.8.

obvious place to look for precise dates, though the places she left blank show that she still hoped to be able to fill them in.

We should also realize that, for all her efforts to gather detailed information on Alexius' reign, Anna was not particularly interested in systematic organization or chronology. With the exception of Thucydides, whose influence on Anna was relatively slight, few classical, Hellenistic, or Byzantine historians of their own times had ever cared much about recording specific dates, though world chroniclers were different in this respect. The traditional practice of contemporary historians, which Anna followed, was to use chronological order except when it would have interrupted the flow of the narrative. Her main purposes were to write a satisfactory literary work, to provide a comprehensive and fundamentally accurate picture of Alexius' reign, and to convince her readers that her father had been a great emperor. For these purposes her system of organization was satisfactory. In most cases readers of the *Alexiad* are unlikely to become confused as they read it, unless they subject it to a scrutiny that Anna did not expect it to receive. The narrative is lucid, readable, and interesting, and the story progresses in a logical fashion. These are no small achievements for an account of so many events of different kinds that happened in different places, compiled many years after they had occurred.

The character of the *Alexiad*

Because the *Alexiad* is not really a biography or a panegyric, Anna felt free not to record Alexius' birth or to describe his ancestors, or even to say much about his private life. Though Anna must have been proud of her family, for information on the earlier Comneni she simply refers her readers to Bryennius' history.¹⁵³ Yet Alexius is the organizing principle of the *Alexiad*. Events are presented from his point of view, and he is involved or at least interested in almost everything mentioned in the text. Anna identifies herself so closely with her father that she gives the impression that her viewpoint was virtually identical with his. When she says that she resembled him, she primarily means her spirit.¹⁵⁴ The narrative shows that she shared her father's overriding concern with war and politics. Both father and daughter seem to have regarded religion, or at least church councils and heresy trials, largely as an aspect of politics. While he had less enthusiasm for secular learning than she did, education receives little attention in the *Alexiad*. How much their interests may have differed in other respects is hard to judge, since most of what we know about each of them depends on what Anna chose to tell us in her history.

Even more than most Byzantine histories, the *Alexiad* concentrates on warfare. Wars and preparations for war occupy most of its pages. The major battles and sieges in which Alexius took part are described in vivid detail, and a number

¹⁵³ Comnena II.1.1; see Bryennius I.1–6.

¹⁵⁴ Comnena VI.8.1.

of technical aspects of warfare, like weapons, armor, battle formations, and siege engines, are carefully explained. Since Anna, even when she accompanied Alexius on campaign, cannot have participated in battles or witnessed them at close quarters, this concentration on warfare has been used to argue that Anna relied on reports drafted by Bryennius.¹⁵⁵ What she seems rather to have done is to combine information from her interviews with Alexius' veterans with what she remembered hearing from her father, her husband, George Palaeologus, and other generals. The result is a skillful feat of research and synthesis, which usually gives a clear idea of how each battle and campaign progressed. Moreover, for a Byzantine historian Anna shows an unusual interest in people and events outside the empire, because Alexius was constantly affected by what happened among the Normans, Germans, Crusaders, Turks, Serbs, Pechenegs, and Cumans.

Anna is much less interested in the army as an institution. In recording her father's wars she includes dozens of numbers of troops, but not the full strength of any Byzantine army except the eight thousand men of the rebel Bryennius in 1078, which she copied from her husband's history.¹⁵⁶ Yet Anna cites large figures for armies of Normans, Crusaders, Turks, Pechenegs, and Cumans, sometimes remarking that they greatly outnumbered the Byzantine army. She says that Robert Guiscard invaded the empire with thirty thousand soldiers in 1081, when Alexius had no force to match it.¹⁵⁷ She records that in 1091 a Byzantine army including five thousand irregulars killed tens of thousands of Pechenegs and captured so many that (including women and children) they outnumbered the Byzantine soldiers who guarded them by thirty to one.¹⁵⁸ Anna says that Alexius knew in 1097 that his whole army was far smaller than the host of the Crusaders, which allegedly included eighty thousand men under Godfrey of Bouillon and fifteen thousand more under an otherwise unattested Raoul, not counting the one hundred eighty thousand men of Peter the Hermit and ten thousand Normans mostly killed by the Turks in 1096.¹⁵⁹ Apparently in 1109, Anna reports that twenty-four thousand Turks hopelessly outnumbered the opposing Byzantine force—which, however, prevailed by attacking them separately when they were divided.¹⁶⁰ Apparently in 1113, she mentions a Turkish army of forty thousand that faced a contingent of just five hundred Byzantines. In 1116 she says the major expedition led by Alexius was greatly outnumbered by the Turks of Iconium, who nevertheless sued for

¹⁵⁵ Howard-Johnston, "Anna," especially p. 275: "[A] second hand, that of a highly placed army officer, contributed to Anna's text."

¹⁵⁶ Cf. Comnena I.5.1 (Bryennius' right wing of 5,000 men and left wing of 3,000 men), with Bryennius IV.6.

¹⁵⁷ Cf. Comnena I.16.1, with III.9.1.

¹⁵⁸ Comnena VIII.5.2 (5,000 irregulars), VIII.5.8 (the number of Pechenegs), and VIII.6.1 (the proportion of captives).

¹⁵⁹ Comnena X.5.10 (Peter the Hermit's 80,000 infantry and 100,000 cavalry), X.6.1 (10,000 Normans), X.9.1 (Godfrey's 10,000 cavalry and 70,000 infantry), X.10.1 (Raoul's 15,000 cavalry and infantry; cf. *PBW*, Raoul 15002), and XI.22 and XIV.4.3 (Alexius' awareness that the Crusaders far outnumbered his army).

¹⁶⁰ Comnena XIV.1.5–7.

peace.¹⁶¹ Though Anna had probably heard all these figures from someone, only the numbers of Normans and Turks seem credible. Admittedly, most historians tend to overestimate the number of their enemy.

They should, however, have a better idea of the size of their own forces. For various parts of the Byzantine army, Anna gives such numbers as a garrison of only three hundred men in Constantinople in 1081, a company of twenty-eight hundred “Manichaeans” (Bogomils), a company of two thousand Archontopuli (sons of officers), five hundred Flemish mercenaries, five hundred new recruits in 1091, a detachment of twenty thousand men sent to help the Crusaders besiege Nicaea in 1097, and three hundred new officers commissioned in 1107. The largest number Anna mentions for a Byzantine force during Alexius’ reign is seven thousand Turkish auxiliaries sent by a Turkish ally in 1082, who never became a permanent unit of the Byzantine army.¹⁶² How big the full establishment of the Byzantine army was in any part of Alexius’ reign we can only guess—perhaps typically in the range of twenty to thirty thousand. Even if Anna was unaware of that figure, she must have known roughly how many Byzantine soldiers had gone on some expeditions; but she never tells us. She seems to use numbers mainly to emphasize the great disparity between the enormous forces of the empire’s enemies and the small forces of the Byzantines, assuming that this makes her father’s defeats more excusable and his victories more brilliant. That the discrepancy may also reveal his failure to maintain an army of adequate size seems not to have occurred to her.

Always obsessed by court politics, Anna shows almost as much interest in the plots against Alexius as in his wars. Besides revolts under Michael VII and Nicephorus III, including Alexius’ own, she mentions sixteen conspiracies or acts of disloyalty against her father. Their leaders were the duke of Dyrrhachium, several noble generals, the duke of the Manichaeans, and the duke of Trebizond in 1081, a Manichaean soldier around 1083, the commanders of Crete and Cyprus around 1090, a commander of Trebizond and a Frankish officer in 1091, the duke of Dyrrhachium and the duke of Crete around 1094, the Pseudo-Diogenes in 1095, the Anemas brothers and the duke of Trebizond around 1103, a Bulgarian officer in 1107, and the commander of Acroënus around 1111. Most of this sedition is recorded only by Anna, and we know of just three minor conspiracies against Alexius that she fails to record, not counting Anna’s and her mother’s plotting around her father’s deathbed.¹⁶³ She emphasizes her father’s clemency to the conspirators, which is well attested, and his refusal to have himself properly

¹⁶¹ Comnena XIV.5.3–4 (the numbers in 1113) and XV.6.4 (Alexius in 1116).

¹⁶² Comnena III.9.1 (the garrison of 300), IV.4.3 (2,800 Manichaeans), V.5.2 (7,000 Turks), VII.7.1 (2,000 Archontopuli), VII.7.4 (500 Flemish), VIII.1.1 (500 recruits), XI.2.1 (2,000 men sent to Nicaea), and XIII.2.1 (300 new officers).

¹⁶³ The references are conveniently collected by Cheynet, *Pouvoir*, pp. 90–103, and discussed on pp. 359–77. (The plots not mentioned by Anna are nos. 120–22 and 134 on pp. 94–95 and 103.) I omit the “revolt” of the Turk Chaka (“Tzachas”) listed by Cheynet (no. 118, p. 93), since though Chaka held a Byzantine title, he was not a Byzantine subject.

guarded, which she probably exaggerates. All the conspiracies she mentions were led by military men.

Anna's focus on military officers distinguishes the *Alexiad* from nearly all earlier Byzantine histories. In the *Alexiad* the civil officials, palace eunuchs, patriarchs, bishops, monks, scholars, and other civilians who played influential parts in Byzantine history from the fourth century to the eleventh almost disappear from view. In the years before Alexius' accession, Michael Psellus, the eunuch and logothete Nicephoritzes, and the patriarch John Xiphilinus wielded real political power. Yet among the many people Anna describes as even moderately influential under Alexius not one is a civil official or palace eunuch. Of Alexius' four patriarchs of Constantinople, Anna seldom mentions the first three and never mentions the fourth, John IX Agapetus (1111–34), though he served under Alexius for seven years. The only prominent bishop in the *Alexiad* is Leo of Chalcedon, who irresponsibly criticizes Alexius' confiscations from the Church and is deposed. The most prominent monks are Nilus and Basil the Bogomil, and the most prominent scholar John Italus, all three of whom were condemned for heresy. Anna may have exaggerated the preponderance of military influence in Alexius' empire to some extent, but her implication that military officers were the main group that Alexius cultivated appears to be correct. Since he was never overthrown, and the only ones who even came close to overthrowing him were military men, they seem to have become much more important than civil or palatine officials, patriarchs, or bishops. Zonaras specifically criticizes Alexius for disregarding his civil officials and preferring his relatives.¹⁶⁴

Unlike some other Byzantine historians, who record the opinions of the citizens of Constantinople and sometimes even agree with them—especially when crowds defended the legitimacy of Constantine VII in 945 and of Zoë and Theodora in 1042—Anna has little patience with commoners. She emphasizes how many people Leo of Chalcedon, Italus, Nilus, and Basil the Bogomil misled, and depicts each condemnation less as a matter of upholding right doctrine than as suppressing a dangerous conspiracy.¹⁶⁵ (She reveals, however, that George Palaeologus thought he had been saved from death on the battlefield by a vision of Leo of Chalcedon.)¹⁶⁶ Once she remarks that “subjects are for the most part disaffected from their rulers but adopt all sorts of pretenses and fawn on the powerful with their flattery.”¹⁶⁷ This generalization, which was probably true of many ordinary Byzantines, suggests that Anna had some knowledge of their views, perhaps from her servants and nuns in her convent. While she surely knew many scholars and palace eunuchs and some bureaucrats, monks, and priests, she found scarcely any place for them in her history. Few Byzantine histories tell us less than the *Alexiad* about ordinary people and daily life. She does not have much to say even about Alexius' domestic policies. She devotes a paragraph to his activities in peacetime,

¹⁶⁴ Zonaras, *Epitome* XVIII.29.23–24.

¹⁶⁵ Comnena V.2.6 (Leo), V.9.4–6 (Italus), X.1.4 (Nilus), and XV.8.1–3 (Basil).

¹⁶⁶ Comnena VII.4.1.

¹⁶⁷ Comnena VI.8.4.

which include doing justice to widows and orphans but also reading the Bible, hunting, and playing polo.¹⁶⁸ In Book XV she has more to say about the Orphanage of St. Paul, which Alexius founded, as if she realized she had been neglecting his charitable activities; but she rather implausibly concludes by emphasizing the contribution the orphanage's school made to higher learning.¹⁶⁹ Higher education was an interest of Anna's that her father evidently did not share.

Otherwise Anna's lack of interest in domestic affairs, in the bureaucracy and church hierarchy, and in commoners is probably an accurate reflection of Alexius' own attitudes, which she must often have heard him express. Although circumstances practically compelled him to spend much of his time fighting, had he wished he could safely have assigned more campaigns than he did to other capable generals. Yet he seems to have enjoyed campaigning, or at least thought that he needed to be present to ensure the loyalty of his army and to make sure the most important operations were properly conducted. In comparison with most of his predecessors and successors, Alexius seems not to have cared much about building churches or palaces. He reformed the badly debased coinage, but that was a necessity for paying the army. He appears to have had little time for the bureaucracy, church hierarchy, or population at large, though in order to avoid offending them so much as to risk a major conspiracy or uprising he did penance for his troops' looting Constantinople and for his confiscation of church property.¹⁷⁰ While Anna and her father must have had rather different experiences during his reign, in most respects the *Alexiad* seems to reflect his ideas of what things and which people were most important.

Although Anna naturally saw much more of the women's quarters than Alexius did, the people he considered important included his mother, whom he gave unprecedented power during the first part of his reign, and his wife and daughter, whom he broke with custom by bringing along on campaigns. Zonaras tells us that Alexius came to resent his mother's power, and that early in his marriage his wife resented his love affairs—but also that he respected his mother enough to let her retire voluntarily and that later in his marriage he was strongly attached to his wife.¹⁷¹ We hear from Nicetas Choniates that Alexius patiently listened to his wife's unwelcome demands that he disinherit his son in favor of Nicephorus Bryennius.¹⁷² While Anna's omitting these differences within the imperial family is understandable, otherwise she says very little about what went on in the women's quarters, mentioning women only when they played a significant part either in politics or in her father's life. We have seen that despite her conventional panegyric Anna seems to have had strong differences of opinion with her grandmother Anna Dalassena and implies disapproval of that matriarch's choice of patriarchs

¹⁶⁸ Comnena XIV.7.5.

¹⁶⁹ Comnena XV.7.4–9. For the little that we know about this orphanage, see Janin, *Géographie*, pp. 399–400.

¹⁷⁰ Comnena III.5.1–5 and VI.3.1–5.

¹⁷¹ Zonaras, *Epitome* XVIII.24.8–9 (on Anna Dalassena) and 24.14–15 (on Irene).

¹⁷² Nicetas Choniates, *Chronological Narrative*, pp. 5–7.

during her administration.¹⁷³ The historian pointedly praises her own mother for her great reluctance to appear in public.¹⁷⁴ While Anna loved her mother and would surely have liked to exercise power as the wife of an emperor, she shows no signs of promoting the influence of women as any general principle.¹⁷⁵

In comparison with other Byzantine historians, Anna pays somewhat more attention to personalities and much more attention to physical descriptions. Like other historians she mentions the personalities and good and bad qualities of the people in her history, but she gives unusual attention to their looks. She describes the appearance not only of her father, mother, husband, and brother, and of Constantine Ducas and Maria of Alania, but of the heterodox philosopher John Italus, the conspirator Nicephorus Diogenes, the Normans Robert Guiscard and Bohemund, and a number of others. Anna herself had probably seen almost all of these except Robert Guiscard and Bohemund, whom her informants had presumably described for her. Nearly all, even Alexius' enemies, are described as remarkably handsome or beautiful, except for Italus and Anna's brother John, who are at least depicted as striking. Anna's descriptions resemble those of the Homeric epics, in which men tend to be heroes or worthy adversaries and women to be worthy consorts or prizes worth fighting for. Thus Anna claims that Bohemund was such an outstanding warrior that only Alexius could have defeated him.¹⁷⁶ A few other descriptions, like those of the imperial crowns and the Purple Room of the empress, enhance the impression that Alexius' reign was an heroic age.¹⁷⁷

Anna wrote in an Atticizing Greek somewhat less difficult and considerably less correct than that of Psellus. She uses tenses and moods indiscriminately, making almost no distinction between the perfect and the aorist (simple past), and she frequently violates various other classical rules of grammar and syntax.¹⁷⁸ The reason for her lapses from classical usage, at least some of which must be unintentional, was probably that instead of being drilled in the rules of classical grammar at a regular school she had learned from respectful tutors who taught her only what she wanted to learn. She evidently did not mind writing Greek that is sometimes more Homeric, scriptural, or patristic than classical, but her language is scarcely

¹⁷³ See above, p. 357.

¹⁷⁴ Comnena XII.3.2–7.

¹⁷⁵ For a contrasting view, see Hill, "Vindication," and "Actions."

¹⁷⁶ Comnena, preface 3.1 and 4.1 (Bryennius), I.10.4 (Guiscard), I.12.3 and III.1.3 (Constantine Ducas), III.2.4 (Maria of Alania), III.3.1–4 (Alexius and Irene), V.8.8 (Italus), VI.7.6 (Guiscard again), VI.8.5 (John II), IX.6.5 (Diogenes), and XIII.10.4–5 (Bohemund). For whatever reason, or by inadvertence, Anna never describes the physical appearance of Anna Dalassena.

¹⁷⁷ Comnena III.4.1(crowns) and VII.2.4 (Purple Room).

¹⁷⁸ The best discussion of Anna's style and language is still in Buckler, *Anna*, pp. 481–516, which can now be supplemented by the extensive indices of Greek words and usage in Reinsch and Kambylis, *Annae Comnenae Alexias* II, pp. 83–259. Cf. also Browning, "Language," p. 120: "In spite of her outstanding talent as a writer, the classicizing language which she uses, and which she handles without the creative imagination necessary, is a hindrance rather than a help to her. Much of what she has to say lacks clarity, and probably lacked it for the educated élite for whom she wrote her *History*."

ever colloquial. She abstains from the dual number until the middle of Book I, when she uses it seven times to compare Alexius to her husband's grandfather before reverting to the plural; she uses the dual less obtrusively in the rest of the *Alexiad*.¹⁷⁹ Her style shows the influence of the elegantly convoluted constructions of Psellus, but it reveals that her education was inferior to his.

Anna's style is erudite and difficult, but her meaning can almost always be determined with a little effort. While frequently inserting classicisms like "Persians" for Turks, "Celts" for Normans, or "Scyths," "Dacians," or "Sarmatians" for Pechenegs, she calls peoples by their contemporary names often enough to make clear who they actually were. Her Hellenizations of Latin and Turkish names are usually not so drastic that we cannot identify them, though she confusingly uses the name "Bryennius" for a Norman who was perhaps the count of Brienne.¹⁸⁰ She generally calls Constantinople, Adrianople, and Dyrrhachium by those names, but reminds us that they had once been called Byzantium, Orestias, and Epidamnus. She quotes a popular jingle praising Alexius' ingenuity, but she carefully translates it into literary Greek in case an ancient Athenian should return from the dead to read it.¹⁸¹ She makes no attempt to substitute classical equivalents for most Byzantine titles and technical terms, or even for some Western titles and terms like constable, liege, or sergeant. She tells us how sorry she is to need to use "barbarian" names, but observes that Homer does it too.¹⁸²

If Anna's style falls short of Atticizing perfection, her literary references are perhaps the most impressive of any Byzantine historian. The *Alexiad* draws quotations or allusions from the histories of Polybius, Theophylact, Scylitzes, and Bryennius, the plays of Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes, the novels of Achilles Tatius and Heliodorus, the orations of Demosthenes, the sermons of John Chrysostom, a poem of Sappho, and various works of Aristotle and Plutarch, besides Psellus, Homer, and the Bible. Anna adds more oblique references to many other authors.¹⁸³ Her knowledge of Herodotus, Thucydides, and Plutarch, whom she had presumably read in her youth, is admittedly a bit rusty. She refers to Cyrus instead of Darius in a story from Herodotus, substitutes Alcibiades for Themistocles in a story from Thucydides, and turns the Sacred Band of three hundred Thebans in Plutarch into two thousand Spartans.¹⁸⁴ Even if she knew many passages from Homer, the Bible, and Psellus by heart, she must have written with copies of the histories of Psellus, Scylitzes, and Bryennius on hand. She largely

¹⁷⁹ Comnena I.5.1 (τὸ μὲν γὰρ ἄνδρε τούτῳ καὶ ἄμφω ἦσθην καλῶ καὶ γενναίῳ. ...). For other uses of the dual, see Reinsch and Kambylis, *Annae Comnenae Alexias* II, p. 227.

¹⁸⁰ Comnena V.6.1–7.1, etc.; cf. *PBW*, Bryennios 102.

¹⁸¹ Comnena II.4.9.

¹⁸² Comnena VI.14.1, X.8.1 (her reference to Homer), and XIII.6.3. Cf. Reinsch and Kambylis, *Annae Comnenae Alexias* II, pp. 154 (κονοσταύλος), 158 (λίσιος), and 198 (σεργέντιος).

¹⁸³ For the authors cited, see the passages marked as probable quotations in Reinsch and Kambylis, *Annae Comnenae Alexias* II, pp. 261–71 (indicated by asterisks). See also the remarks on Anna's allusions in Buckler, *Anna*, pp. 191–208.

¹⁸⁴ Comnena VI.10.11 (cf. Thucydides I.90–91), VII.7.1 (cf. Plutarch, *Pelopidas* 18), and X.4.1 (cf. Herodotus III.154–58).

copies the episodes in her husband's history concerning Alexius' dealings with the rebels Roussel, Bryennius, and Basilaces under Michael VII.¹⁸⁵ Later she copies most of an account of Isaac I's Pecheneg campaign of 1059 from Psellus and adds passages on Isaac's church of St. Thecla from the supplemented edition of Scylitzes' history, which her husband seems not to have known.¹⁸⁶ Such copying was of course standard practice for Byzantine historians.

Anna also includes some of the historical, geographical, and other digressions that were a customary feature of classicizing histories. Her own digressions are relatively few, fairly short, not very distracting, and more or less relevant to her subject. Once in Book I, Anna remarks of a digression, like the horsewoman she probably was, "Enough of that: the horse of history has strayed from the highway, and since he has become unbridled let us bring him back to his original road."¹⁸⁷ She makes room for her encomium of her grandmother chiefly in order to defend Alexius' giving his mother so much power.¹⁸⁸ Anna includes a digression on prophecies mostly to justify her own knowledge of astrology by expressing a qualified skepticism; but some of the prophecies in the *Alexiad* come true, including the prediction of the death of Robert Guiscard that introduces this digression.¹⁸⁹ Her description of her historical method is designed to show that her account of Alexius' wars is reliable.¹⁹⁰ She allows herself only brief digressions on the Purple Room, Nicephorus Bryennius the Elder, the lake called Ozolimne, the crossbow, the region of Dyrrhachium, Norman armor, Philippopolis, and the Balkan Mountains.¹⁹¹ All these digressions fit smoothly into her narrative, and none of them is allowed to distract the reader from concentrating on Alexius.

Invented speeches were another attribute of classicizing histories that Anna, unlike some of her predecessors, uses sparingly. Alexius and others often speak in direct discourse in the *Alexiad*, but never at much length and always to the point. In Book I Anna slightly revises three speeches ascribed to Alexius in her husband's history.¹⁹² She attributes other noteworthy speeches to Robert Guiscard when he begins his campaign against Dyrrhachium, and later when he transfers

¹⁸⁵ Comnena I.1.3–3.1 (cf. Bryennius II.22–23), I.4.2–6.1 (cf. Bryennius IV.5–10), and I.7.3–9.6 (cf. Bryennius IV.18–29). See above, p. 347, for Bryennius' knowledge of Scylitzes.

¹⁸⁶ Cf. Comnena III.8.6–10, with Psellus, *Chronography* VII.67 and 70, and Scylitzes *Continuatus*, pp. 107–8.

¹⁸⁷ Comnena I.16.7.

¹⁸⁸ Comnena III.7.1–8.5.

¹⁸⁹ Comnena VI.7.1–5; cf. Comnena VI.6.1–2 (another prophecy of Robert's death), X.5.7 (a plague of locusts that showed the Crusaders would harm Muslims but not Christians), and XII.4.1 (a comet that presaged a Norman invasion).

¹⁹⁰ Comnena XIV.7.3–7.

¹⁹¹ Comnena VII.2.4 (the Purple Room), VII.2.5–7 (Bryennius the Elder), VII.5.2–3 (Ozolimne [perhaps in the Danube Delta, which may have included a larger lake in Anna's time than in ours]), X.8.6 (the crossbow), XII.9.4–6 (the region of Dyrrhachium), XIII.8.2 ("Celtic" armor), XIV.8.3 (Philippopolis), and XIV.8.4–8 (the Balkan Mountains).

¹⁹² Comnena I.2.2 (cf. Bryennius II.21), I.2.5 (cf. Bryennius II.22), and I.2.7 (cf. Bryennius II.23).

the command of his army to Bohemund.¹⁹³ Alexius is given important speeches when he defends his appropriation of sacred objects, encourages his men to attack the Pechenegs, and announces his discovery of the conspiracy of Nicephorus Diogenes.¹⁹⁴ On the whole, however, Anna invents dialogue more often than she invents speeches, and she never allows a speech to become tedious or to interrupt her narrative for long.

Anna also invents some texts of letters, which she qualifies with phrases such as “they said something like this” to distinguish them from genuine documents.¹⁹⁵ When she omits such a qualification, as she does for a quite circumstantial letter from Alexius to the German emperor Henry IV, the text may very well be genuine.¹⁹⁶ Following a tradition that went back to peace treaties in Thucydides, Anna includes at least two authentic documents, Alexius’ chrysobull of 1081 granting his mother authority over domestic affairs and Alexius’ treaty of 1108 with Bohemund.¹⁹⁷ This treaty was one of Alexius’ greatest successes, even if it never went into full effect. Anna may simply have included the chrysobull of 1081 as an interesting document composed by Alexius. Because Alexius must have left many more documents of comparable interest, we should not assume that Anna had full access to the archives. Nonetheless, her ability to quote these government records shows that she still had some well-placed connections after her husband’s death.

Because Anna was an exceptionally intelligent and well-informed twelfth-century Byzantine, her mistakes and misunderstandings are instructive. Some of them are relatively trivial and show nothing more than that she lacked comprehensive and accurate reference books. She conjectures that the Blue chariot-racing faction (pronounced *véneton*) was named for the Venetians, with whom it had nothing to do. She calls Thessalonica the city “of the Thessalians,” though despite its name (for a Macedonian queen) it was and is in Macedonia, not Thessaly. She declares that Great Preslav was originally a Greek city named *Megalē* (“Great”), to which the Bulgarians added the Slavic name Preslav. She says that Philippopolis was founded by the Roman emperor Philip the Arab on the site of the ancient town of Crenides, though Philippopolis was actually founded by Philip II of Macedon, who also founded the different city of Philippi on the site of the ancient town of Crenides.¹⁹⁸ Yet not even consulting a copy of the *Suda* could have helped Anna avoid such mistakes. Psellus makes worse errors in his *Concise History*, though admittedly he wrote it much more hastily and carelessly than Anna did the *Alexiad*.

¹⁹³ Comnena IV.5.5–7 and V.3.5.

¹⁹⁴ Comnena VI.3.3–4 (on church treasures), VIII.1.4 (on the Pechenegs), and IX.9.4 (on Diogenes).

¹⁹⁵ E.g., Comnena II.8.1–2 (οὕτωςί πως διεξιούσας) and VIII.7.4–5 (τοιαῦτα διαλαμβάνουσιν).

¹⁹⁶ Comnena III.10.2–8 (note the specific sums of money); see Kresten, “Auslandsschreiben,” pp. 23–37, arguing that the letter is genuine.

¹⁹⁷ Comnena III.6–7 (the chrysobull) and XIII.12 (the treaty).

¹⁹⁸ Comnena IV.2.2 (the Blues and Venetians), IV.7.2 (Thessalonica), VII.3.4 (Great Preslav), and XIV.8.2 (Philippopolis).

A few of Anna's other errors appear to show misconceptions common among even well-educated Byzantines of her time. She asserts that the Council of Chalcedon had granted the patriarch of Constantinople primacy over the papacy, though any knowledgeable Byzantine churchman should have known that the council had put Constantinople just after Rome.¹⁹⁹ She declares that Muslims worshipped the goddesses Astarte and Astaroth and revered "the sign of the star" (the moon?) and "the golden Khobar" (the black Kaaba?).²⁰⁰ She also claims that the Roman empire had once stretched from the arctic to the tropics and from the Pillars of Hercules to the "Pillars of Dionysus, which lie near the boundary of India." Rome had indeed ruled as far as the Pillars of Hercules (the Straits of Gibraltar), and the "Pillars of Dionysus" cannot be securely identified. Yet Anna's idea that the Roman frontier had once approached India fits uncomfortably well with her persistent confusion of Iraq with Khorasan (northeastern Persia). Her styling the Seljuks "Persians" may have helped to muddle her geography, because the Sassanid Persians had ruled both Iran and Iraq, as the Seljuk Turks did in her day. Like Leo the Deacon, Anna seems to have conflated Iraq and Iran.²⁰¹

In other cases Anna presumably knew the facts but distorted them for effect. She strongly implies that Alexius' victory over the "Scythian" Pechenegs in 1091 exterminated them as a people, which is not only an absurd exaggeration but inconsistent with her references to companies of "Scythians" at a later date.²⁰² We should also be skeptical of her assurances that Alexius humanely rejected the advice of his officer Synesius to kill his dangerously numerous Pecheneg prisoners of war, since when all of them were killed, supposedly in violation of the emperor's orders, he punished Synesius only symbolically.²⁰³ Later Anna implies that not just Bohemund and his Normans but all the Crusaders except Peter the Hermit only pretended to be going to Jerusalem, "and in fact wanted to deprive the emperor of his empire and to conquer his capital." To support her assumption, she describes an unsuccessful Crusader attack on Constantinople on Holy Thursday (April 2) of 1097 that must be an exaggeration of a minor clash, if indeed any fighting happened at all.²⁰⁴ Anna's excessive suspicion of the First Crusade is mostly due to her justified suspicion of the Normans, who certainly did have designs on Byzantium.

Anna further claims that Alexius took over the empire when it extended only from the Bosphorus to Adrianople and left it stretching from the Adriatic Sea to the Tigris and the Euphrates.²⁰⁵ Byzantium had, however, reached the Adriatic at

¹⁹⁹ Comnena I.13.4.

²⁰⁰ Comnena X.5.7.

²⁰¹ Cf. Comnena VI.11.3 (the "Pillars of Dionysus"), with VI.12.4 (Baghdad identified as Khorasan), XI.4 (Mosul identified as Khorasan), and XI.8 (the Crusaders' plan to march to Khorasan, presumably meaning Iraq). For the geographical confusion of Leo the Deacon, see above, pp. 243–44.

²⁰² Cf. Comnena VIII.5.8, with XII.8.4, XIII.6.1, XV.6.1, etc.

²⁰³ Comnena VIII.6.1–2.

²⁰⁴ Comnena X.9.1 and X.9.5–9; cf. Lilie, "Erste Kreuzzug," pp. 55–61.

²⁰⁵ Comnena VI.11.3.

Alexius' accession, even if Alexius had yet to establish full control over the empire, and at no time during his reign did Byzantine territory reach either the Tigris or the Euphrates, though it would almost have reached the Euphrates if Alexius' treaty of 1108 had secured Byzantine control over Antioch. Later Anna maintains that in a treaty in 1116 the sultan of Iconium accepted Alexius' demand to evacuate all of Anatolia.²⁰⁶ That the sultan agreed to any such treaty is incredible, though Anna may have thought that the sultan's subsequent murder made her overstatement hard to refute. Somewhat later Anna makes the confusing observation, "After [the reign of Romanus IV], no emperor, except for a few (I mean [John I] Tzimiscēs and Basil [II]), dared to set foot in Asia [Minor] at all until my father."²⁰⁷ John I and Basil II had reigned long before Romanus IV, and after Romanus just Michael VII and Nicephorus III had reigned before Alexius. Perhaps Anna at first wrote, accurately, that neither of those two emperors had campaigned in Anatolia (though Nicephorus had campaigned there before his accession). Then, realizing that this was faint praise of Alexius, she may have tried to make him look better by a confused comparison with the great emperors John I and Basil II.

Of course the *Alexiad*, as its title implies, is the epic of Alexius. Anna's argument that it can nonetheless be an accurate history is logically sound: if a man is praiseworthy, an historian can praise him and still tell the truth. Anna insists in Book XV, "I have undertaken to write the true story of a good man."²⁰⁸ She was certainly right that at his accession Alexius had inherited a badly damaged empire, which was threatened by the Turks in the East and the Normans in the West and severely short of both troops and money. She cites old soldiers who, apparently reporting what they had heard from even older men, said that the empire's cities had never been in such a wretched condition.²⁰⁹ She adds a plausible report that Alexius had found the treasury ruined by the irresponsible expenditures of Nicephorus III, and her remark that no one even bothered to lock the treasury doors can be excused as literary hyperbole.²¹⁰ Anna's claim that no previous emperor had faced such a serious crisis is defensible, since even Heraclius, Constans II, and Leo III had confronted the threat of the empire's collapse with stronger armies and more resources than Alexius commanded.²¹¹

Anna insists in her preface and in Book XIV that she will criticize Alexius whenever he deserves it.²¹² Opportunities to criticize him seem, however, to have eluded her. Even when she reports that Alexius felt the greatest remorse for his troops' sack of Constantinople in 1081, she insists that he bore no responsibility whatever.²¹³ While no doubt Alexius was dismayed at his men's looting his own

²⁰⁶ Comnena XV.6.5–6.

²⁰⁷ Comnena XV.10.5.

²⁰⁸ Comnena XV.3.4.

²⁰⁹ Comnena III.9.1.

²¹⁰ Comnena V.1.4.

²¹¹ Comnena XIV.7.1.

²¹² Comnena, preface 2.2, and XIV.7.3.

²¹³ Comnena III.5.1–3.

capital, not even Anna implies that he made much of an effort to stop them. His first priority was, understandably, to seize power, and before doing that he could hardly afford to alienate his own soldiers by trying to punish them or to make them return their loot. She acknowledges that many people blamed him for his confiscations of church property; but she claims, somewhat inconsistently, that he had needed the money desperately and that he had taken scarcely anything.²¹⁴ The first of these justifications is much more plausible than the second, given the emptiness of the treasury and the necessity of mounting an expensive defense against the Normans at once.

In Book XV Anna mentions that at the time of his campaign in 1116 many people blamed Alexius for not retaking more of Anatolia from the Turks. She insists that the emperor was eager to attack the Turkish capital at Iconium. On the other hand, she says that the sultan had burned all available supplies; a priest, told to choose one of two papers from an altar, chose one saying that the Byzantines should not go to Iconium; the Byzantines won a great victory anyway; the Turkish army still outnumbered them; and finally the sultan agreed to cede all of Anatolia to the empire, though afterwards he was unfortunately murdered.²¹⁵ Here Anna's justifications are too numerous to be entirely convincing. A skeptical reader may even suspect that the priest had been given two papers with the same message. In 1095 Alexius had asked the patriarch Nicholas to choose one of two papers to decide whether to march against the Pseudo-Diogenes, and the favorable answer allowed the emperor to campaign despite the supposedly unanimous advice of his officers.²¹⁶ Allowing the Turks to establish themselves securely in central Anatolia was in fact the greatest failure of Alexius' reign. Nonetheless, Anna makes a strong case that her father was a good general and a masterful politician, who survived danger after danger year after year and slowly nursed a gravely weakened state back to health.

The suggestion has been made that one of Anna's main preoccupations in writing the *Alexiad* was criticism of John II and especially of his son Manuel I, the two emperors under whom she wrote.²¹⁷ Anna certainly hated both of them, though she bore a more personal grudge against John. She plainly expresses her belief that both John and Manuel had stupidly thrown away the gains Alexius had made, and that Manuel's reign was a time "when everyone flatters the prevailing power."²¹⁸ On the other hand, she could have done little to turn knowledgeable readers against John or Manuel by emphasizing Alexius' successes against the Crusaders and Seljuk Turks, his disdain for astrology, or his mother's strict morals. Anna herself shows almost as much interest in astrology as Manuel did; John

²¹⁴ Comnena VI.3.1–3.

²¹⁵ Comnena XV.3.1 (the criticism), 4.3–4 (Alexius' eagerness to go to Iconium, the burned crops, and the two papers), and 6.1–10 (the victory, the superior Turkish forces, the peace, and the sultan's murder).

²¹⁶ Comnena X.2.5.

²¹⁷ See Magdalino, "Pen."

²¹⁸ Comnena XIV.3.8 and 7.5.

and Manuel were almost as successful as Alexius in dealing with the Crusaders and Turks; and, puritanical though his mother may have been, the young Alexius had been as notorious a philanderer as Manuel.²¹⁹ Moreover, Anna had no reason to think her history would find more than a handful of readers under Manuel; it was her good fortune (and ours) that it survived at all. Anna's main purpose in composing the *Alexiad* was obviously to glorify her father for his own sake, and for hers as his historian.

While the *Alexiad* is our best source for the reign of Alexius almost by default, it is a splendid history in its own right. It provides us with a highly detailed and generally reliable account of Alexius' wars and gives us a unique depiction of the life and preoccupations of a Byzantine emperor and his family and advisers. Like Psellus in his *Chronography*, Anna presents personalities who seem entirely real, though not always sympathetic. Her treatment of the Normans, Crusaders, and Turks is unfavorable but perceptive. While her concerns are mainly limited to wars, conspiracies, and the military aristocracy, most bureaucrats who had written histories before her had shown much less understanding of warfare, conspiracy, and the empire's generals. Although her chronology is often vague, that is a common failing of formal Byzantine histories. The steadiness of her focus is impressive, if sometimes a little disturbing. She includes very few variant accounts in her narrative, and her assurances that her oral sources never disagreed with each other are hard to believe.²²⁰ Yet historians need to have a point of view if they are to combine their facts and impressions into a coherent account. The *Alexiad* is only one of a number of notable histories from antiquity to the present that maintain, often with good reason, that a single ruler or general had a decisive effect on his times.

A great history needs a great subject, and Anna's was Alexius. In the *Alexiad* she achieves something rare in Byzantine literature: a plausibly favorable portrait of an historical figure. While the Byzantines wrote many persuasive criticisms and condemnations of emperors and others, their panegyrics were deliberately conventional and not historical, even when they appeared in histories. No intelligent Byzantine reader would have thought that Psellus' encomium of Michael VII or Attaliates' encomium of Nicephorus III was sincere or accurate. Some Byzantine saints' lives, usually those written by hagiographers who had known the saints personally, make a credible case that the saints had been admirable people who were devoted to the service of God. Yet most secular historians, especially when they wrote about emperors, either criticized candidly or followed the traditional form of the vacuous panegyric. Far from depicting Alexius as a superman who

²¹⁹ Zonaras, *Epitome* XVIII.24.14.

²²⁰ The only variants seem to be two versions of how the monk who claimed to be Michael VII appeared at the court of Robert Guiscard (Comnena I.12.6–10), the rumor rejected by Anna that Alexius was thinking of marrying Maria of Alania (Comnena III.2.1), and Anna's uncertainty about whether the Comneni agreed to recognize Maria's son as Alexius' heir before or after their revolt (Comnena III.4.6). See Comnena XIV.7.4 for her assurances that her veterans never disagreed.

advanced from victory to victory admired by all, as a conventional encomium would have done, Anna generally avoids listing his virtues and virtuous deeds, and instead relates his many hardships and the means by which he overcame them. While she sometimes makes him appear more successful and admirable than he must have been in reality, she also shows that he suffered many defeats, had many enemies, and sometimes survived only by luck or guile. As a result, he appears human and sympathetic as well as decent and capable.

With Alexius at its center, the *Alexiad* tells its story clearly and well, with few of the abrupt transitions found in most Byzantine histories. Anna also had the advantages of recording events from her lifetime, not needing to flatter the current ruler, composing a single homogeneous edition, being familiar with excellent models, and researching and writing carefully for a number of years. Most other Byzantine historians either praised the reigning emperor or made pastiches of earlier histories, and had read far less and written more quickly and carelessly than Anna had. Psellus had surely read more books than Anna, but probably fewer histories. He certainly wrote with more speed and less care, and in two editions, one of them badly distorted by his fawning on Michael VII. Anna avoided his faults and was inspired by his merits, particularly his interest in characterization. If her history, like his, had a limited circulation, the main reasons were probably its difficult style and specialized subject, since most Byzantines who read histories of such a length wanted to learn about more than a single reign. She also seems to have died before producing copies of her work, which would in any case have been hard to distribute widely under Manuel I. Yet the *Alexiad* found a select and discriminating audience, and survived to pass on a new style of contemporary historiography that had begun with Psellus and was to continue with Nicetas Choniates.