

AN ANALYSIS OF THE STRATEGY AND TACTICS OF

ALEXIOS I KOMNENOS

by

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

“Warfare is the art of deceit.”¹

The strategic and tactical military abilities of Alexios I Komnenos, ruler of the Byzantine Empire (1081-1118), have been much discussed among Byzantinists. Historians have varying opinions regarding his military prowess.² His daughter, Anna Komnena, praised her father as not only an effective emperor but also a military genius. In the *Alexiad*, she described Alexios as “another Aemilius, the famous Roman, or a Scipio, or a second Carthaginian Hannibal.”³ Some modern historians agree with the popular historian John Julius Norwich’s description of Alexios: “He had always been, first and foremost, a soldier.”⁴ On the other hand, current historiography suggests that Alexios was, at best, a mediocre general. The most recent work on the subject, *The Development of the Komnenian Army* by John Birkenmeier, depicts Alexios as a poor commander initially who luckily managed to survive long enough to evolve into an average military general—one who was perceptive enough to adjust his tactics to fit his

¹Sun-Tzu, *The Art of Warfare*, trans. Roger T. Ames (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 104.

²It should be noted that all dates are C.E. and in agreement with Ostrogorsky unless otherwise indicated.

³Anna Comnena, *The Alexiad of Anna Comnena*, trans. E.R.A. Sewter (Suffolk: The Chaucer Press, 1969), 32-33.

⁴John Julius Norwich, *Byzantium: The Decline and Fall* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 52.

numerous enemies.⁵ Certainly, part of that statement appears true, but larger questions loom.

Other authors oppose the view asserted by Birkenmeier. John Haldon suggests, “Alexios was undoubtedly a good tactician.”⁶ Norwich, a less specialized scholar, claims that Alexios was “...the greatest military commander that Byzantium had seen since Basil II nearly a century before.”⁷ Joan Hussey sings the praises of Alexios, describing him as an all-around savior, who was able to prevent the collapse of Byzantium for more than a century.⁸ Charles Oman claims: “A true military spirit existed among the noble families of the eastern empire; houses like those of Skleros and Phocas, or Bryennius, Kerkuas, and Comnenus are found furnishing generation after generation of officers to the national army.”⁹ Michael Angold believes Alexios remained emperor for so long simply “because he had the support, almost always whole-hearted, of the aristocratic families, who had come to power with him.”¹⁰ However, if Birkenmeier is correct, the question remains: how was an initially mediocre general with a depleted treasury, a minimal, demoralized army, and an empire surrounded by ruthless, jealous and capable

⁵John Birkenmeier, *The Development of the Komnenian Army: 1081-1180* (Boston: Brill, 2002), 81-84.

⁶John Haldon, *The Byzantine Wars* (Charleston: Tempus Publishing Inc., 2000), 135.

⁷Norwich, *Byzantium: The Decline and Fall*, 52.

⁸Joan M. Hussey, *The Byzantine World* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1961), 53.

⁹Charles Oman, *The Art of War in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), 51.

¹⁰Michael Angold, *The Byzantine Empire, 1025-1204: A Political History* (London and New York: Longman, 1997), 129. Angold is partially right; however, it was much more than simply support from those Alexios placed in key positions. Alexios placed these members of the nobility in places of power for a reason. This topic will be dealt with in chapter V.

enemies able to prevent the seemingly inevitable collapse of the empire in the late eleventh century? In addition to survival, Alexios I also increased the Byzantine Empire's borders and aided in repairing the damaged prestige and economic situation of the empire. Thanks to Alexios, the Komnenian rule would continue until 1185.

Since most generals and emperors could not have accomplished this monumental task even with extensive resources, how could Alexios have protected and rejuvenated the empire while it was in such a state of disarray? There is little doubt that he faced enormous challenges as he assumed the imperial dignity in 1081. Warren Treadgold openly admits, "the army Alexios inherited from Nikephoros Botaneiates in 1081 was in deplorable condition."¹¹ In addition, John Baggot Glubb contends, "Alexios was to reign for 37 years, but when he assumed the purple in 1081, it seemed unlikely that he would survive more than a few months."¹² According to Alexios's daughter Anna:

Alexios knew that the Empire was almost at its last gasp. The east was being horribly ravaged by the Turks; the west was in bad condition... He was worried and vexed ... However, being not only a courageous man and undaunted, but having excellent experience in war, he wanted to restore his Empire and bring it again to a safe anchorage after its terrible buffering and by God's aid to break up like waves spent on the rocks, the enemies who in madness had risen up against him.¹³

¹¹Warren Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 612. See also Birkenmeier, 56. Military historian John Haldon disagrees with this assessment of the army left to Alexios after his ascension in 1081. Although the casualties of the battle of Manzikert vary widely, all agree that the Byzantine military was at least in disarray and demoralized by the defeat. See John Haldon, *The Byzantine Wars*, 127.

¹²John Baggot Glubb, *The Course of Empire: The Arabs and their Successors* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1965), 211.

¹³Anna, *Alexiad*, 124-125.

Alexios's future and the future of his empire looked bleak. The Byzantines were still only ten years removed from the battle of Manzikert, one of the worst losses in their history. Asia Minor, for the most part, was occupied by the Seljuk Turks. To survive, Alexios was prepared to use any means necessary, whether diplomacy, armed conflict, bribery or deception.

In analyzing Alexios's success, there are several questions to be addressed. What exactly were the ideals of Byzantine warfare? How did Alexios compare to the ideal Byzantine general according to his tactics and strategy? Was Alexios a military genius or simply lucky in his choice of strategies? However, more importantly, how should his generalship be perceived in a larger perspective? Great generals are typically defined by their victories and overall achievements, especially in the face of overwhelming odds and dire circumstances. Take Hannibal, Alexander, and Genghis Khan to name but a few. In this essay, Alexios's strategies and tactics will be scrutinized according not only to Byzantine military manuals but also to elite military treatises by non-Byzantine authors. Such analysis should provide good insight into the dilemma with which Byzantinists have struggled—how good was Emperor Alexios I Komnenos in fulfilling his role as a general and later as Commander-in-Chief of the Byzantine army?

Ideals of Warfare

Throughout the ages, war has been defined in varying terms by diverse authors. According to the modern dictionary, war is armed fighting between countries or within a

country.¹⁴ War has both created and destroyed nations. It has brought glory to some, disgrace to others. It has turned some men into heroes and others into cowards. Some of the greatest literary classics have been set during times of war. Weapons and armies are the first images brought to mind in any dialogue about war. However, any examination of war, by necessity, must include a discussion of strategy, logistics, and politics. Sun-Tzu (circa 500 B.C.E.), the famous Chinese general and military strategist, believed simply that “warfare is the art of deceit.”¹⁵ Flavius Vegetius Renatus (circa 390), the Roman soldier, believed that in regards to victory in warfare: “only skill and discipline will insure it.”¹⁶ The Prussian general and military theorist, Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831), viewed warfare as “*an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.*”¹⁷ From the Byzantine point of view, warfare was considered a necessary evil only to be fought if all other options had been exhausted. This was not to say that the Byzantines did not have their share of military philosophy and texts, including: Maurice’s *Strategikon*, Leo’s *Taktika*, and more than a dozen other strategic manuals. However, each placed an emphasis on the need to fight only unavoidable wars and wars that were considered just, those in defense of Byzantium and Christianity. The theories of war explained by these authors provide will be used in the analyses made in this essay.

¹⁴*Webster’s New World Dictionary and Thesaurus* (1996), s.v. “war.”

¹⁵Sun Tzu, *Art of Warfare*, 104.

¹⁶Vegetius, *De Re Militari*, in *The Roots of Strategy*, ed T. R. Phillips (Harrisburg: Stackpole Books, 1985), 75.

¹⁷Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (“Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 75. All italicized quotations are the author’s italics.

Most military texts espouse some parallel philosophies. They advocate certain timeless principles, which provide direction to leaders facing common military situations. The grandfather of all military texts, *The Art of Warfare* by Sun-Tzu, would be a reasonable starting point for a basis of comparison. The most common of all military maxims is that of defeating the enemy by means other than open combat. This was mentioned numerous times by Sun-Tzu and is prevalent in many military manuals.¹⁸ It should be noted that Clausewitz did not agree with this principle; however, he was a much more contemporary author and was certainly influenced by the invention and use of modern weapons, such as firearms, on the battlefields. Clausewitz claimed, “Of all the possible aims in war, the destruction of the enemy’s armed forces always appears as the highest.”¹⁹ However, the Byzantines, Vegetius, and Sun-Tzu all believed that capturing or subduing the enemy without resorting to open battle was the apex of generalship. Such a strategy is referred to as indirect warfare. Speed was also of the essence in battle to Sun-Tzu; thus, one should seek the quick victory.²⁰ This was, perhaps, another of the most common and basic principles of war as a long, protracted campaign is hardly beneficial for any state.²¹ The proper use of terrain was mentioned repeatedly in Sun-Tzu, Clausewitz, and Vegetius; however, Byzantine military theorists are less specific than any of the aforementioned strategists. With these minor exceptions, the Byzantines,

¹⁸Sun-Tzu, *Art of Warfare*, 107, 111, 126, and 136. See also Maurice, *Strategikon*, 64-65, 80-81, 85, and 88 and Vegetius, *De Re Militari*, 128, 143, and 146.

¹⁹Clausewitz, *On War*, 99.

²⁰Sun-Tzu, *Art of Warfare*, 107 and 109.

²¹*Ibid.*, 107. See also Maurice, *Strategikon*, 9 and Vegetius, *De Re Militari*, 144.

Sun-Tzu, Clausewitz, and Vegetius share the same outlook on good generalship and principles of warfare.

Alexios himself was a master of indirect warfare. With the one exception of 1081 when he met Robert Guiscard in open combat at Dyrrakhion, he aimed to end every threat with some form of indirect warfare. Whether through diplomacy, alliances, marriage proposals, bribery, deception, or skirmishing, Alexios sought to resolve the situation without resorting to open combat. This policy was based on both culture, considering the Byzantines' view of warfare, and common sense, the lack of manpower for the Byzantine army. Particularly early in Alexios's reign, this shortage of manpower made this policy a necessity.

Goals

One thing to be wary of in evaluating the strategies and tactics of Alexios is the fact that "the critic will, as a rule, have more information than the participant;" therefore, "situations giving rise to an event can never look the same to the analyst as it did to the participant."²² Naturally, the historian or military analyst will never fully understand the situations that Alexios faced, and many of the nuances of eleventh and twelfth century warfare have been lost to modern historians.

In addition to evaluating the abilities of Alexios, this paper will attempt to identify Alexios as the ideal Byzantine general and, in fact, the ideal general on a much broader scale. In attempting to do such, a myriad of sources will be examined. Given that the

²²Clausewitz, *On War*, 164.

military texts used will range from Sun-Tzu, the oldest in existence, to Clausewitz, written during the nineteenth century, a broad range of military thought will permeate the pages of this essay. Byzantine military manuals, particularly Maurice's *Strategikon*, will provide the information needed to measure the strategies and tactics of Alexios against those possessed by the ideal Byzantine general. Other non-Byzantine military manuals will be assessed to present a full picture of the timeless generalship of Alexios. As Alexios's accomplishments reached past the borders of the Byzantine Empire, so too should he be viewed outside the narrow Byzantine scope of military ideals. There are many criteria to examine when evaluating the military prowess of Alexios: leadership ability, management of resources, defensive capability, tactical ability, strengths and weaknesses, and the ultimate success of Alexios as a military commander. In addition, it will be my argument throughout the essay that the Byzantine idea of warfare included diplomatic ruses, both on and off the field of battle, as shown through Byzantine texts, and they should be considered among Alexios's battle capabilities. We must remember "*...war is only a branch of political activity; that it is in no sense autonomous.*"²³ Although this policy, according to Clausewitz, may become one of battles and not "diplomatic notes,"²⁴ it is my argument that such "diplomatic notes" were considered critical and the most important part of warfare according to the Byzantines.

²³*Ibid.*, 605.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 607.

CHAPTER II
ALEXIOS AND HIS WORLD

Sources

The Alexiad

The most valuable Byzantine source for the life and times of Emperor Alexios I Komnenos comes from his daughter Anna Komnena. The material covered in her *Alexiad* is extremely rich and illuminating in the study of all aspects of Byzantine life—social, religious, political, and military. Anna began her account prior to Alexios's ascent to the throne, and she included information about the succession struggle and the deposing of both Michael VII Doukas and Botenaites. Prior to the rise of Alexios to the purple, the information provided was primarily a military account of his deeds and heroism in battle. When Alexios assumed the throne, the tone and content of Anna's work shifted slightly from a purely military account to a complex and sometimes-garbled combination of panegyric and military history.²⁵

Certainly a few of the accounts of Alexios's deeds given in the *Alexiad* were at best slightly embellished, but, most likely, there were few fabrications. It is doubtful that Anna would alter major events that occurred in the course of a battle; however, the details were obviously filtered by her personal bias and love for her father. Although her father may have used her in his political dealings, such as her initial arranged marriages to Constantine Doukas and Nikephorus Bryennius, it is obvious that Anna was very close to

²⁵Anna, *Alexiad*, 124.

Alexios and admired him greatly. Since she was born in 1083, she was not an eyewitness to some of these conflicts and events. Therefore, one must naturally consider the sources of the material she used for her account, prior to her maturation. It is possible; however, that Anna was present on certain occasions and was an eyewitness to later events; for instance, the skirmish between the Byzantines and the crusaders while the latter were camped outside of Constantinople.

It is likely that she used her husband Nikephorus Bryennius and his *Historia* as a main source for her early accounts. Bryennius's *Historia* covered the events prior to the founding of the Komneni dynasty in 1081. However, James Howard-Johnston provides a radical new theory on the authorship of the *Alexiad*. He argues that it was Nikephorus who was given the duty of recounting the history of Alexios I Komnenos, and only after Nikephorus's death in 1138 did Anna inherit the task of finishing his work.²⁶

Howard-Johnston's new hypothesis on the authorship of the *Alexiad* must be considered carefully: "Anna did not carry out the extensive archival research which seems to have gone into the *Alexiad*; this work was done by Nikephoros and was one of his main contributions."²⁷ If Nikephorus is the main author of the *Alexiad* as Howard-Johnston claims, then more weight should be given to the account than if Anna was the sole author. While Anna could have been responsible for the 'embellishment' of deeds

²⁶James Howard-Johnston, "Anna Komnena and the *Alexiad*," in *Alexios I Komnenos*, ed. Margaret Mullet and Dion Smythe. Belfast Byzantine Texts and Translations 4 (1), (Belfast: Belfast Byzantine Enterprises, 1996), 268. For a heated rebuttal to this hypothesis, See R. J. Macrides, "The Pen and the Sword: Who Wrote the *Alexiad*?" in *Anna Komnene and Her Times*, ed. Thalia Gouma-Peterson (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 63-81, esp. 66. However, her argument seems dubious at best as she states that Howard-Johnston's theory is merely an attempt to imply "that all that is good and all the makes the *Alexiad* a world-class history derives from Nikephoros Bryennios."

²⁷*Ibid.*, 280.

and the ‘Homerization’ of the work, it is more likely that the majority of the text is factual, if not chronologically challenged. Bryennius would have had much less reason to flatter Alexios, given it was Bryennius’s father that Alexios defeated and subdued in the rebellion of 1078. Although Bryennius would later marry Anna, it seems less likely that he would wish to flatter Alexios more than a particular situation warranted.

There is evidence to support Howard-Johnston’s claim. For example, two passages, which reflect a substantial knowledge of Byzantine warfare. Anna made the claim:

The general (I think) should not invariably seek victory by drawing the sword; there are times when he should be prepared to use finesse, if the opportunity occurs and events allow it, and so achieve a complete triumph. So far as we know, a general’s supreme task is to win, not merely by force of arms, but also by relying on treaties; and there is another way—sometimes, when the chance offers itself, and the enemy can be beaten by fraud.²⁸

She continued:

For my part, I think that to win a victory by sound planning calls for courage; force of character and energy uninformed by thought are not enough—they end not in courage, but in foolhardiness. We are courageous in war against men whom we can beat; against men too strong for us we are foolhardy. Thus when danger hangs over us, being unable to make a frontal assault we change our tactics and seek to conquer without bloodshed. The prime virtue of a general is the ability to win without incurring danger...²⁹

These opinions expressed by Anna show an impressive grasp of the true concept of Byzantine warfare. There are two possible explanations for these views. Either they verify the direct influence of Nikephorus on the work, or they are a result of Anna’s own

²⁸Anna, *Alexiad*, 405.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 77.

recognition of military strategy, resulting from her association with her father and husband. I personally believe that the former is the case. These statements presuppose a significant understanding of warfare according to Byzantine military texts and, as Anna had a propensity for philosophy, it is doubtful that she would have been terribly intrigued with the conduct and study of warfare.³⁰ Regardless, the author seemed to have a firm grasp of Byzantine maxims, as “There is no one method of achieving victory, nor one form of it, but from ancient times up to the present success has been won in different ways.”³¹

The crusaders also kept records of their travels, and many of these accounts corroborate Anna’s (or Nikephorus’s) view. Every western European contemporary agreed that Alexios was a remarkable and charismatic man, if not always necessarily truthful in his dealings. In addition, Anna freely admitted that she also gathered writings from monks who had been soldiers under her father. She obtained information from these accounts that “...were written in simple language...they adhered closely to the truth...”³² She also incorporated the stories told by her family and other contemporaries. Finally, she used her own memories and experiences. Anna declared, “From all these materials the whole fabric of my history—my true history—has been woven.”³³

³⁰*Ibid.*, 17.

³¹*Ibid.*

³²*Ibid.*, 461.

³³*Ibid.*

Other Sources

In addition to the *Alexiad*, I have also used bits and pieces of the works of John Zonaras and Niketas Choniates to paint a more complete picture of Alexios and his world. In addition, there are numerous anonymous military texts by Byzantine authors that will aid in the evaluation of Alexios as a commander. Emperor Leo VI also penned a *Taktika*, and it will be used indirectly as well. However, Leo's *Taktika* relies very heavily on Maurice, and much of the two texts overlap. There are also several accounts of non-Byzantine contemporaries that will help to balance Anna's account of Alexios and his dealings with the crusaders. Fulcher of Chartres, Albert of Aix, Stephen of Blois, Raymond of Toulouse, and the *Gesta Francorum* are appropriate sources to balance the scales. Fulcher was the chaplain of Baldwin I, who, after the success of the first crusade, became the first crusader King of Jerusalem. Albert of Aix never actually participated in the first crusade, nor did he ever visit Constantinople; however, he did base his history on eyewitness accounts of the crusade. Stephen of Blois, the son-in-law of William the Conqueror, was, perhaps, the most favorable towards Alexios. His account should help provide an alternative view of Alexios, unlike most of the Latin sources. Raymond of Toulouse was the eldest and the wealthiest of the crusader leaders. He participated at the sieges of both Nicaea and Antioch. The anonymous author of the *Gesta Francorum* was a disciple of Bohemond and, therefore, was naturally inclined to present Alexios in the worst possible light. These are the majority of primary sources I will call upon to piece together the generalship of Alexios.

Context

The tenth and early eleventh centuries had been glorious for the Byzantine Empire, most notably with the destruction of the First Empire of the Bulgars at the hands of Basil II, the Bulgar-Slayer (976-1025). However, by the middle eleventh century, the military situation had become difficult for the Byzantine Empire and its rulers. The rule of strong emperors was followed by internal conflict among the Doukas, Komneni, and other families, which led to disorder in politics and struggles for succession. This internal chaos weakened the empire and left it vulnerable to invasions. The empire lacked not only money but also recruits for its army and navy. By mid-century, it faced assaults from all sides: the Slavs to the north, the Normans to the west, and the Turks to the east. At age fourteen Alexios was sent by his mother, the relentless Anna Dalassene, to enter the military service of Emperor Romanus IV (1068-1071); however, he was turned away due to his young age.³⁴

After the young Alexios had been rejected for military service, the most disastrous blow to the prestige and future of the empire soon occurred at the battle of Manzikert where the Byzantine Army was decisively defeated. However, modern scholars are uncertain about the exact date or even the location of the battle. Norwich laments this truth: “It is a curious and somehow frustrating fact that neither the date nor the location of one of the most decisive battles of the world can be universally agreed.”³⁵

What is not in question is that, in 1071 Byzantium armed itself with the intent of

³⁴Angold, *Byzantine Empire 1025-1204*, 116.

³⁵John Julius Norwich, *Byzantium: The Apogee* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1997), 350. There is disagreement on the exact place and the day of the week where the battle occurred between Byzantine and Turkish sources.

recapturing Armenia and halting the Turkish Seljuk intrusion. The Byzantine Emperor, Romanus IV, raised a large army of “...a grand total of perhaps 40,000 may be reasonable, and would certainly explain the emperor’s apparent confidence and the fact that the Turkish Sultan was clearly worried about the size of the threat.”³⁶ Romanus, rather than waiting for the Turks and fortifying the army’s position, displayed both impatience and imprudence by deciding to march into the field and confront the enemy. He felt this was his chance to rid the empire of the Turks once and for all.³⁷ However, the clever Sultan Alp-Arslan set a trap for the emperor and his men. He sent horsemen riding as fast as they could around the outskirts of the Byzantine camp. Romanus should have been aware of the steppe-tactics the Turks were using, given the fact they were mentioned in the *Strategikon*, usually attributed to the Emperor Maurice (582-602).³⁸ These attacks continued until the emperor’s forces charged away from camp toward enemy lines. John Haldon, a leading Byzantine military historian, believes that the commander of the Byzantine right wing, a rival noble, lied to his men claiming that Romanus fell in battle. Haldon states, “These accounts all report the fact that Andronikos deliberately spread the rumor that the emperor had fallen in order to persuade the

³⁶Haldon, *Byzantine Wars*, 117. Previous historiography has suggested that Romanus’ army was larger, somewhere from 60,000-100,000. See Norwich, *Byzantium: The Decline and Fall*, 346. Islamic sources claim the army was 200,000-600,000 men. However, given the size of the Byzantine army after the conflict and the unreliability of medieval military numbers, it is doubtful that the Byzantines could have mustered such a force for one battle at any point in their history, much less in 1071

³⁷Norwich, *Byzantium: The Apogee*, 350.

³⁸Maurice, *Strategikon: Handbook of Byzantine Military Strategy*, trans by George T. Dennis (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 117.

remaining divisions to abandon the field.”³⁹ Once the bulk of his army believed this rumor, they retired from the battle, leaving the emperor surrounded with only a contingent of his personal bodyguard. The loss at Manzikert was a catastrophic defeat for the Byzantine Empire. Although the common opinion of the battle contends the Byzantine army was virtually wiped out, Haldon disagrees. Thus Haldon declares, “In contrast to most popular judgements, therefore, the defeat at Manzikert was not a military disaster and did not entail the destruction of the eastern Roman army.”⁴⁰ Regardless, the Byzantine army was in disarray, and the empire descended into internal infighting.

In one horrible day, the empire had lost the region that it used for recruiting its army, for its grain production, and for its strategic trade position between Constantinople and the Far East. Norwich believes that it was the most devastating event in the history of the empire.⁴¹ The battle of Manzikert was a crushing loss for the Byzantine Empire and, in many respects, should be viewed as groundwork for the empire’s eventual demise. 1071 proved to be one of the most important, yet demoralizing, years in the distinguished history of the Byzantine Empire. The Slavs overran the frontier along the Danube, and the remainder of Italy would prove unrecoverable from the Normans after Bari fell in 1071. Soon, northern Syria and numerous Greek Islands disappeared from Byzantine

³⁹Haldon, *Byzantine Wars*, 125. Haldon mentions that the Byzantine accounts of the battle, although contradictory on the events of the battle, all point to the betrayal of Andronikos with the exception of only one, most likely an ally of Andronikos. There is no mention of such a betrayal in the *Alexiad*; not surprising since Andronikos was a relative of Anna.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 126. Haldon argues that most of the Byzantine army fled rather than engage the Turks. His estimate suggests that perhaps only 10 percent of those present at the beginning of the battle were wounded or killed. However, as much as 20 percent of the Byzantine force may have been captured.

⁴¹Norwich, *Byzantium: The Apogee*, 357.

control. With the loss of the aforementioned territory, the Byzantine Empire declined greatly in territory, prestige, and power.⁴² Although Romanus was humiliated by the defeat at the hands of the Seljuk Turks, his life was spared, and he was eventually ransomed. On his return to Constantinople, however, he was blinded, forced off the throne, and replaced by Manuel VII Doukas (1071-1078). The political chaos that resulted was probably more destructive than the battle of Manzikert itself. It was during the reign of Manuel that Alexios would gain his first taste of battle.

In 1078 Botaneiates would rebel against Manuel VII and obtain the throne. Alexios did not originally support Botaneiates and remained loyal to Manuel during the rebellion. However, Alexios's mother, Anna Dalassene had positioned her family so strongly at Constantinople that Botaneiates lacked either the power, or more likely, the inclination to exact retribution. Because of Anna and the ability of Alexios, the Komnenian family actually gained power during the reign of Botaneiates. Equally important, Alexios had an opportunity to serve with able generals who later would remain loyal to him. Eventually, this would cost the Botaneiates the throne. In 1081, Alexios, with the aid of Caesar John Doukas, revolted against Botaneiates and successfully seized the purple.

As Alexios I Komnenos ascended to power, he attempted to repair the political, economic, and military damage to Byzantium. As another popular historian wrote, "Alexios, who cherished Byzantium more than any woman was devoting his life to bring

⁴²A. A. Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1952), 356-357.

about such a change after the chaos wrought by the ghost-emperors.⁴³ As Alexios donned the mantle, Warren Treadgold says, the emperor, although “still just twenty-four ... had led armies for six years with surprising success.”⁴⁴ Before Alexios gained control of the empire, he had entered military service, served as a general for two emperors, and fought in three campaigns against rebel factions. Unfortunately, for the youthful emperor, the empire had dwindled down to only parts of Asia Minor, Greece, and the Balkans. Yet, it still possessed Constantinople, which continued as its capital. In terms of wealth, population, and political powers, Constantinople remained the greatest Christian city. Additionally, Alexios had the power and respect that accompanied the rightful heir to the Caesars. He had influence over not only political and military matters but also religious ones. Nevertheless, the emperor could not rule alone, leading to a constant need for alliances and diplomacy. Alexios was particularly adept at using arranged marriages to solidify alliances and limit possible enemies. Over the long history of the Byzantine Empire, its emperors had relied on their military prowess and their tactful diplomatic skills to ensure survival. Alexios was no different; he combined an innate quality of diplomacy with the ability to use cunning and force to protect his empire.

⁴³Harold Lamb, *The Crusades: Iron Men and Saints* (Garden City: International Collectors Library, 1930), 79.

⁴⁴Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society*, 612. Treadgold believes that the prominence of such a young general was due to the lack of military ability within the empire. However, more likely, it was a sign of the limited loyalty of Byzantine military officers during such a period of internal political strife. Emperors had to be extremely selective in whom they chose to lead their armies, as a disloyal general, particularly a talented one, could easily lead a coup. Alexios would be a prime example. Treadgold also is using the birth date given by Anna for Alexios (1056) as opposed to that given by John Zonaras (1048).

At this time the Byzantine army, by necessity, included large numbers of foreign mercenaries—Varangians, Russians, Patzinaks, Cumans, Turks, Frenchmen, Germans, Englishmen, Bulgars, Abasgi, and Alans. Because of the weakened state of the army Alexios inherited, he found that it was much more efficient to use treasury funds or imperial titles to reward tribal and Turkish leaders for military aid than to use his own army. He replaced many soldier-farmers with mercenaries.⁴⁵ Birkenmeier recognizes the weakness of Alexios's army: "The soldiers available to Alexios constituted a meager force compared with the powerful armies Of Basil II."⁴⁶ Alexios's first army was a small one, composed of foreign mercenaries called Varangians, the emperor's personal bodyguards, who were primarily English soldiers; the *Exkosibitoi*, elite imperial guards; the *Athanatoi* or "Immortals," most of whom were lost during the Norman wars; some native troops from Thrace and Macedonia and some hired Franks and Turks.⁴⁷ However, this original army was reduced by the Normans in 1081 at Dyrrakhion and finally lost to the Patzinaks in 1087.⁴⁸ In order to raise money for his mercenaries, Alexios sold church property. Realizing the peril to his empire, Alexios also began negotiations on several fronts—with Pope Gregory VII, Henry IV, and the Doge of Venice. In 1090, he then gathered an army consisting of his guards, 500 Flemish knights from Robert of Flanders,

⁴⁵George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, trans. Joan Hussey (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1969), 359-361.

⁴⁶Birkenmeier. *Development of the Komnenian Army*, 57

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 240 and 242.

⁴⁸Haldon, *Byzantine Wars*, 137. Haldon argues that, at most, 25 percent of the Byzantine army was lost at Dyrrakhion.

some drafted peasants, and 2,000 men whose fathers were former soldiers, the Archontopuli.⁴⁹

In these first few years of his rule, it was obvious that the Byzantine army, in fact the whole of the Byzantine defensive plan, was inadequate. There were virtually no defensive units at the local level. The imperial army faced the impossible task of defending the empire on all frontiers. However, by the end of the first decade of his reign, Alexios had stabilized the situation, and his strategy began to succeed. He arranged his army into three types of units: mercenaries, the Patzinaks, and troops drawn from the estates ruled by imperial relatives. The mercenaries consisted of both foreigners and natives. He also enforced the requirements involving military service and land ownership. Many of the Patzinaks, whom he had crushed with Cuman aid in 1091, joined his army. He required landed foreigners who had settled in the empire to provide soldiers as a condition for keeping their land.⁵⁰ Alexios's army relied extensively on mercenary units and units formed from retainers of the landed class.

After Manzikert, the Turks continued their attack on the empire, taking Antioch in 1085 without any bloodshed. Alexios recognized that the Turks had gained control of Asia Minor; however, in his concession, he gave rights to the Turks to colonize the territory so that the rights of the Byzantine Empire were preserved.⁵¹ His contention was that the Turks were occupying the land by imperial indulgence. Alexios applied a similar

⁴⁹Anna, *Alexiad*, 222-223.

⁵⁰John Haldon, *Warfare, State, and Society in the Byzantine World 565-1204* (London: London University Press, 1999), 94.

⁵¹Rae Dalven, *Anna Comnena* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1972), 113.

strategy to the Patzinaks in the Balkans until he virtually eradicated them in, as mentioned above, 1091.

Persistent assaults on the empire motivated Alexios's appeal to Robert of Flanders. Alexios wrote to Robert:

...I am writing to inform Your Prudence that the very saintly empire of Greek Christians is daily being persecuted by the Pechenegs and the Turks... Therefore in the name of God and because of the true piety of the generality of Greek Christians, we implore you to bring to this city all faithful soldiers of Christ... Come, then, with all your people and give battle with all your strength, so that all this treasure shall not fall into the hands of the Turks and Pechenegs...⁵²

Since the emperor considered himself head of the Church, his role was that of the true defender of the Christian faith. Robert had already given aid to the Byzantine Empire in 1089—500 Flemish knights, a significant gesture.⁵³ Alexios managed to keep the Turks in check until 1095 by pitting one faction against another, exploiting their mutual jealousies and rivalries. As the war against the Turks escalated, momentum gradually began to swing in Alexios's favor. Seljuk power was slowly declining, largely thanks to numerous deaths among the dynasty; however, some was the result of Alexios's diplomacy and manipulation. Tutush, after killing an ally of Alexios, Sulayman, was a serious threat to the security of the eastern border.⁵⁴ The death of Tutush, at the hands of Pouzanas's cousin was a victory for Alexios as Tutush was the most powerful Turkish sultan prior to the crusade. Later, in 1091/1092, Alexios prevented a siege of

⁵²Robert Payne, *The Dream and The Tomb: A History of the Crusades* (New York: Stein and Day Publishers, 1984), 28-29.

⁵³Anna, *Alexiad*, 232. 1089 is Anna's date for the arrival of the Flemish knights.

⁵⁴*Ibid*, 208.

Constantinople by having Kilij Arslan kill Tzachas, a fellow kinsman.⁵⁵ Despite his successes against the Turks, Alexios still had a major problem. The Byzantine army was short of soldiers. To remedy this shortage, Alexios realized that help must be found elsewhere. Therefore, he looked toward the Western Church.

Byzantium's relationship with the Papacy had been anything but friendly when Alexios was crowned. The battle for supremacy between Pope Gregory VII and King Henry IV of Germany had further deteriorated relations between Alexios and the west. John Julius Norwich stated, "The Pope...had been similarly appalled to learn that Henry IV was in the pay of Alexios..."⁵⁶ In 1085 the discord between the Papacy and the Byzantine Empire was as bad as it had ever been. However, two years after the death of Gregory in 1085, Urban II took control of the Papacy, and, eventually, the gap between the east and west was mended. Urban was a highly skilled diplomat; in 1089, he lifted the excommunication on Alexios, allowing all Latin Churches in Constantinople to be reopened. Because of this healing process, Alexios received an invitation to the Council of Piacenza, and he accepted at once. Norwich states, "The council might also provide him [Alexios] with the opportunity he had long sought, to appeal for western aid against the Turks."⁵⁷ Alexios realized that the Church could be a powerful force to motivate western kingdoms to send any mercenaries they could spare. This diplomacy would have a

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 274-275.

⁵⁶Norwich, *Byzantium: The Decline and Fall*, 29.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 30.

long-lasting, far-reaching effect on the world since Alexios, while trying to defend his empire, would be responsible for inciting the first crusade.

Alexios was without question a shrewd and skilled diplomat, adept at manipulating alliances and formulating treaties. Since support of the Church was extremely crucial, his ambassadors emphasized the hardships that the Christians suffered at the hands of the Turks. Alexios worded his plea to appeal to a sense of Christian duty. Although Urban was impressed at the piety of the Byzantine representatives, he was simultaneously appalled at the description of the horrors committed by the Turks, which the Byzantines exaggerated. Later that year, Urban was to attend a council at Clermont, France. Although that council lasted ten days, it was hardly significant until Urban made his famous speech on the second to last day. Although his exact words are unknown, in his speech he called for a crusade against the infidels who currently occupied the Holy Lands. He emphasized (and probably embellished) the persecution of Christians at the hands of the Turks. In addition, he promised to grant both spiritual indulgences and earthly exemptions from taxes to those who were willing to embark on the armed pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Alexios's daughter, Anna, documented his greatest call for aid, the first crusade in detail. After pleading his case to Pope Urban II, Alexios was shocked, and somewhat unsettled, when perhaps some 80,000 crusaders appeared on the outskirts of Constantinople.⁵⁸ Anna gave a brilliant account of these "Franks" and their behavior at

⁵⁸Anna, *Alexiad*, 318. Anna has probably overestimated the number of men; however, many estimates do range between 30,000 and 80,000. See Lillie, *Byzantium and the Crusader States: 1096-1204*, 3.

Constantinople. Amazingly, after several minor conflicts between the crusaders and the Byzantines, Alexios was able to convince the leaders of the crusade, including his Norman arch-nemesis Bohemond, to take an oath to return to the empire all previously owned Byzantine lands. Although Alexios now had help, it was not exactly the type of western aid he had hoped to gain.⁵⁹ He had indeed requested help from the westerners. However, he did not ask them to go straight to Jerusalem—as was the goal of the crusaders. He had more important issues closer to home. Alexios did not envision such a grand religious movement as the “first crusade.” However, we cannot ignore that fact that it was Alexios who incited it. Munro supports this claim, “Further corroboration for the connection of the Greek emperor with the inception of the crusade is to be found in the fact that Constantinople was made the official rendezvous for all the bands, and in relations between the emperor and the Western leaders, especially Bohemond.”⁶⁰ The largely successful manipulation of the western army would play a significant role in the restoration of much of Byzantine prestige and some of its previous territory in Asia Minor.⁶¹

After the crusades, Alexios spent the remainder of his life battling to restore both the territory and grandeur of the Byzantine Empire. In all fairness, though the threats to his throne would eventually subside, the position of the empire would constantly be in

⁵⁹Steven Runciman, *A History of the Crusade, Volume I: The First Crusades and the Foundation of the Kingdom in Jerusalem* (London: The Folio Society, 1994), 95. See also Ralph-Johannes Lilie, *Byzantium and the Crusader States: 1096-1204*, 2.

⁶⁰D.C. Munro, “Did the Emperor Alexius I Ask for Aid at the Council of Piacenza?” *The American Historical Review*, 27 (1921-1922), 733.

⁶¹Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World 565-1204*, 95-96.

jeopardy. The greatest threat to both his reign and the empire was Robert Guiscard and his son Bohemond. After the death of Guiscard in 1085, Alexios and Bohemond would be enemies for nearly three decades, with a slight break in overt aggression during the first crusade, until Bohemond's defeat at Dyrrakhion in 1107 and ultimately his death in 1108. Alexios would fight another ten years with his final campaign in 1117-1118 against the Turks.

In 1081, it seemed that when Alexios assumed the throne he would not survive the year. Through his military and political adaptability, he reigned for thirty-seven years. However, perhaps the most impressive accomplishment was both the expansion and increased security of the empire's borders. The advantage of having a general as emperor is apparent not only in the numerous wars Alexios was able to win but also in others he was able to prevent defeat by using an amalgamation of military and diplomatic strategy. He accomplished all of this despite a weakened army, damaged Byzantine prestige and a depleted treasury. Finally, in 1118 Alexios died of illness. Even John Zonaras, who was, more often than not, unkind to Alexios, described the emperor favorably:

He was a man...neither disdainful and arrogant nor quick to anger. Nor was he particularly avaricious nor a slave to money. [He was not the kind of person who] likes to hoard it, so that he possesses hidden treasure and caches of money. When he died, not much was to be found in the treasury. He was inclined to mercy and was not vindictive; in manner modest and easily approachable. He ate in moderation and did not over-imbibe. He paid attention to men of virtue (i.e. monks) and gave them due honour. He did not appreciate learning as much as he should have, but he

did appreciate it. He was fair-minded and well disposed to those around him, often treating them almost as equals.⁶²

This description of Alexios depicts the perfect disposition for a Byzantine general according to Maurice.⁶³ For example, in the *Strategikon* “The general’s way of life should be plain and simple like that of his soldiers; he should display a fatherly affection toward them; he should give orders in a mild manner...”⁶⁴ In addition, “He should be temperate in his way of life and vigilant.”⁶⁵

⁶²John Zonaras, as quoted by Michael Angold, “Alexios I Komnenos: an Afterword,” in *Alexios I Komnenos*, 414.

⁶³Maurice, *Strategikon*, 79, 87, 88, and 91.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 79.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*

CHAPTER III
GOOD GENERALSHIP EXEMPLIFIED IN CLASSICAL
WORKS OF MILITARY STRATEGY

As briefly mentioned above, there are numerous definitions of what constitutes a good general. Given the continuous change in warfare over time, we must seek out timeless principles that can help to indicate how a successful general should act. Although weapons have changed greatly from the time of Sun-Tzu to the present, the following sources are an appropriate cross-section to use in measuring what strategies and tactics should be employed. While there are minor differences among these sources, for the most part, they generally agree on the traits of an effective and successful general. While various strategies are placed differently and emphasized by Byzantine and non-Byzantine military strategists, the core elements of a general remain clear throughout this brief survey of military texts.

The Strategikon

After the fall of Rome (476), the Byzantine Empire struggled to retain the power and strength necessary for its continued existence. Recognizing the pitfalls that led to the demise of the Western Roman Empire, its emperors realized that the military must be reorganized to secure its very survival. However, not until the Emperor Maurice attained power in 582 did the late Roman Empire begin to evolve into the new dynamic medieval Byzantine Empire. While reorganizing both civil and military authorities in the western

territories, his most noteworthy accomplishment was the restructuring of the army. To accomplish this feat Maurice is said to have written a handbook, the *Strategikon*, which outlined specific guidelines for the organization of the Byzantine military. Maurice is usually given credit for the authorship although there is some question about this attribution.⁶⁶ The *Strategikon* was used in the field by Byzantine generals for centuries and, along with Leo VI's *Taktika*, was among the most important Byzantine military texts. Leo's *Taktika*, closer to the reign of Alexios, changed little from Maurice's original text.⁶⁷ Although the military changes proposed by Maurice were not popular with the soldiers, his revisions led to a uniformity that created greater cohesiveness within the Byzantine army.⁶⁸ The army was transformed from one of fragmented parts, serving individual warlords, to a single unified command answering to the state and the emperor. By the middle of the eleventh century, the army had once again become fragmented; however, this time it would be Alexios I who would unify it using the principles authored by Maurice.

To understand the necessity that impelled Maurice to write the *Strategikon*, a brief examination of the events leading up to the sixth century is necessary. In the fourth through the sixth centuries, drastic changes occurred in the Roman world. Previously guarded and expanded under the protection of the Roman legion, the empire found the

⁶⁶Alexander P. Kazhdan, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium, Volume 3* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 1962. The actual authorship is less important than the snapshot it gives the Byzantinist into Byzantine military theory in the late sixth century.

⁶⁷Maurice, *Strategikon*, xiii.

⁶⁸*Ibid*, xii.

legions reduced in size, and it relied on a smaller, disorganized military. The face of war also changed; the famous Roman legion, armed with sword and shield, was no longer a match for the mounted German or Kelt. To meet the challenge, the legion transformed into mounted cavalry, armed with lances and bows. Mobility became an important asset. However, the Roman army suffered a crippling defeat at Adrianople in 378 and lost over 40,000 men, including the emperor Valens.⁶⁹ This loss of life provided the motivation to search for new ways to supply the needed manpower to the army. Foreign soldiers were hired as mercenaries, and treaties were signed with various warlords and chieftains to enlist their service. Eventually in the western part of the empire, Germanic warlords raised their own private armies. These new methods of recruitment led to a disorganized and fragmented military.

The Emperor Justinian I (527-565) made a gallant effort to restore the empire during the mid-sixth century. His victories included the Vandals, the Ostrogoths, and a section of Spain. However, these conquests were costly in both lives and coin. The piecemeal composition of the military represented a huge problem. There was virtually no loyalty to the empire itself; loyalty was directed towards individual generals or warlords. While Justinian fought in the west, the frontiers on the east and north were vulnerable. Slavs and Avars first raided and then settled in those areas.⁷⁰

⁶⁹*Ibid*, viii.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, viii-xii.

Maurice recognized the disorder and discord of the army he inherited:

The state of the armed forces has been neglected for a long time and has fallen so completely into oblivion, so to speak, that those who assume the command of troops do not understand even the most obvious matters and run into all sorts of difficulties.⁷¹

With this in mind he wrote his military handbook; in it he outlined guidelines for every aspect of military life—types and sizes of units, building and placement of camps, weapons, training, strategies, and tactics.

Maurice reorganized the entire structure of the Byzantine army. The basic unit was the *tagma*—a type of mounted cavalry. The size of these *tagmata* varied from 200 to 400 men; Maurice warned that they should not be the same size because the enemy could estimate the size of the force by counting *tagmata*. A brigade consisted of three or more *tagmata*; a division was three brigades. Since the *tagmata* were of varying size, the brigades and divisions were also of varying size. Byzantine enemies feared the *tagmata* because they employed a combination of archers and lancers, a deadly combination. Changing earlier strategies, Maurice had the mounted archers take a position behind the lancers. A continuous volley of arrows was needed to keep the enemy distracted while the lancers charged ahead. Both horses and men were trained on all terrains and in all conditions.⁷² Maurice emphasized training and skill at all levels; a good soldier was prepared for every situation in every terrain for every enemy.

According to Maurice, a Byzantine general should never be surprised and with the proper training and skill, he was prepared for every possible scenario. Maurice believed,

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 8.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 10-15.

“A general who takes nothing for granted is secure in war.”⁷³ However, the successful battle plan was not rigid but flexible; it should be able to adjust to any circumstance. He warned that these plans should not be shared with the soldiers—only with a few close comrades. In addition, fake drills and formations should be performed to keep the enemy off guard and confused. While insuring the confidence and ability of his own troops, it was the duty of a general to increase the uncertainty while decreasing the confidence of his opponents. Deception was encouraged through the spreading of rumors and the creation of fake battle plans. Ambushes were especially effective—both in daylight and in darkness. The author urged action, but only after careful planning. Once these plans and strategies were in place, a general was expected to seize victory at precisely the right moment. Enemies must also be followed if they retreat, and they should be completely defeated so they do not return to fight again. However, Maurice urged the general to be exceptionally vigilant against false retreats. For example, “If the fleeing enemy should turn upon the pursuers as the Scythians frequently do, or if some other force should suddenly appear out of ambush, then the pursuers will certainly be forced to take to flight since, as mentioned above, there is nobody to ward off this unexpected attack.”⁷⁴

Maurice urged generals not only to prepare the troops but also to analyze opponents. His view of war was not rushing into battle with the most troops and biggest weapons. He advocated the study of all aspects of the war—supplies, troops, weapons, food, deceit, bribery—in short, strategy. His philosophy was simple: carefully study the

⁷³*Ibid.*, 87.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 24.

enemy to determine his strengths and weaknesses then avoid the strengths and attack the weak points. He was very specific in telling exactly what to do in certain situations.⁷⁵

Ultimately, Maurice believed that the ideal Byzantine general “realizes that victory could be attained ‘even without actually fighting’ and thus Byzantine strategy represents a wide range of tactical options for the general, which might include ploys, diplomacy, bribery and treachery in addition to traditional battlefield strategies.”⁷⁶

The Art of Warfare

Sun-Tzu’s, *The Art of Warfare*, is the oldest known military treatise in the world. Although the exact date of its origin is still in dispute, many historians claim it was written around 500 B.C.E. while others believe it was written later, during the Early Warring period in China, 453 B.C.E. to 221 B.C.E. Even though it was written over two thousand years ago, Sun Tzu’s *The Art of Warfare* is considered, with little argument, the greatest work of military strategy in history. Unlike many other works in military thought, *The Art of Warfare* not only focused on the military aspect of war but also the burden war placed upon the state and civilians. Actually, Sun-Tzu spent more time focusing upon how to wage war with a minimum loss of manpower and resources. On numerous occasions, Sun-Tzu stated that the only way to win in warfare is to prevent defeat. Perhaps the greatest reason Sun-Tzu’s *The Art of Warfare* has been considered so crucial to warfare is his emphasis on the effect war has on civilian life; he shows the

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 59.

⁷⁶Woodrow, “Byzantine Military Technology and Strategy as observed in the *Strategikon* of Maurice” (Master’s thesis, University of New England, Australia, 1995), 1.

devastating results of war that affect not only soldiers in the field and governments but also the common everyday citizens.

Attributed to the Chinese general and military strategist, Sun-Tzu, the original work was thought to contain thirteen chapters, addressing different areas of military strategy. The focus of the work stated that war does not primarily rely on battles and physical strength but can be fought with politics, negotiations, and even deception. In fact, the work showed a real aversion for war. In 1972 an older copy of Sun Tzu's work, including a previously undiscovered five chapters, was unearthed in Ch'ing Province. This was an important discovery because today the new translations are from a copy one thousand years older than the one previously used.⁷⁷

Weapons have changed in the past twenty-five hundred years, but the principles and fundamentals that he expounded are still as relevant today as they were when they were written.⁷⁸ Although a military treatise, its concepts have been adapted to other areas of conflict besides military warfare, including politics, personal and business.

In supplementing Sun-Tzu's primary concern, the goal in waging a war was not only to win but also, more importantly, not to lose. In this, a country must be concerned with both the affairs of the military and state. In order not to lose, not only must you minimize your losses on the battlefield but also prevent financial and emotional stress on the common people. To prevent the losses on the battlefield, Sun-Tzu outlined certain precautions that should be taken. The most obvious was to keep the soldiers well fed and

⁷⁷Sun-Tzu, *Art of Warfare*, 4.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*

well equipped. The loss of men was acceptable on the battlefield because it was expected, but it was a sign of incompetence by a commander to lose men to hunger and desertion.⁷⁹

Those who were most affected by the waging of a distant and drawn-out war were the soldiers. The further an army traveled from its base of operation, the more dangerous the war became for the traveling army. The supply lines became longer, more dangerous, and less efficient. Alexios would discover this against the Patzinaks in 1087.⁸⁰ With an efficient supply line, morale of the troops can be maintained. Health will remain at a respectable level, and desertion can be kept at a minimum with a steady supply of food and payments for the officers and soldiers. If waging a distant war became necessary, one way to minimize the negative effects of such a war was to forage and sustain your army off the enemy's land.⁸¹ This was perhaps the most critical tactic in successfully waging a long distance war. Not only will this supply one's own army, but it also will prevent the enemy from sustaining its forces. Employing this tactic eliminates the risks of forcing suppliers to travel over dangerous and unfamiliar terrain. If an army chooses not to use suppliers but to carry its own supplies, the army travels more slowly and becomes more susceptible to ambush.

⁷⁹Sun-Tzu, *Art of Warfare*, 108.

⁸⁰Anna, *Alexiad*, 223-225.

⁸¹Sun-Tzu, *Art of Warfare*, 108.

De Re Militari

De Re Militari by Flavius Vegetius Renatus is the only Latin military treatise that survives. This work was written during the last century of the Western Roman Empire, circa 390. As a high-ranking official in the court of Emperor Valentinian II, Vegetius was commissioned to write the treatise for the emperor. Written during the declining years of the Roman Empire, *De Re Militari* had little opportunity to influence the Roman army. However, in later years it became “a military bible for innumerable generations of European soldiers.”⁸² Because Vegetius wrote specifically for the Roman legion, some of his work did not apply to Byzantine military history. However, much of his strategic thinking, particularly Book III, certainly was applicable.

In the three books of his work, Vegetius covered a wide variety of military areas. In Book I, he outlined the process for selecting, training and disciplining the troops. He emphasized training and discipline; asserting that constant drill instills both skill and discipline into military forces. He stated, “Victory in war does not depend entirely upon numbers or mere courage; only skill and discipline will insure it.”⁸³ In Book II, he addressed the actual organization of the military into three branches: cavalry, infantry and marine. He continued by delineating the responsibilities of each branch and their further division into smaller units. Responsibilities of officers were listed and procedures

⁸²Vegetius, *De Re Militari*, 69.

⁸³*Ibid.*, 75.

for promotion were given. He also described other aspects of the military organization: music, soldier's pay, tools, machines, and battle alignments.⁸⁴

Vegetius advocated maintaining a large army as a deterrent to attack. Do not invite attack by presenting a weak defense. Book III gave insights into strategies and tactics to be used by the military. He described seven different troop formations to be used in various scenarios. Vegetius had a variety of strategies to keep the enemy off guard. His advice was to leave a trapped enemy an escape route; his reasoning was that if trapped they would fight to the death and many Roman soldiers would be lost. If allowed a line of retreat, the cavalry would decimate them easily with far fewer Roman casualties. He encouraged the destroying of homes, land, crops, and animals. This was a precursor to the ideal of total war, in which the attacking of both military and civilian targets was warranted to end fighting at all costs. These raids actually had two purposes: they struck terror into people who might aid the enemy, and they prevented a sustained siege because the enemy would be denied needed supplies. Vegetius encouraged the use of surprise attacks. He urged avoiding face-to-face combat if possible since soldiers were valuable and not easily replaced. He felt, "It is better to overcome the enemy by famine, surprise or terror than by general action; for in the latter instance fortune has often a greater share than valor."⁸⁵

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 99.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 172.

On War and Principles of War

Carl von Clausewitz wrote his books on military strategy and tactics in the Romantic Era of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. *On War* is one of the most influential books on military philosophy written in the western world. He was convinced that, in order to define both the art of warfare and successful theories of war, it was necessary to define war itself. He argued that prior to the War of Austrian Succession (1740-1748) there was no pattern to allow for categorizing past wars. Because of the dynamic nature of history, each era had its own unique circumstances and situations. He did not accept the oft-used premise that history repeats itself; however, examples from the past could be used to detect very limited trends in military theory. Unlike the other authors discussed here, Clausewitz did not write *On War* as a manual that commanders in the field should carry. His work was to expound a theory that could be studied, learned, and finally put into practice by the soldier.

Clausewitz saw war as merely the means to an extended political end. He declared, “The political object—the original motive for the war—will thus determine both the military objective to be reached and the amount of effort it requires.”⁸⁶ Battle may be necessary to fulfill such an end. Within every individual battle, there is a differing set of goals, which only the commanding general fully comprehends. Furthermore, each battle has a unique set of circumstances that the commander can never fully grasp, regardless of how much intelligence he has received. This point is especially crucial to keep in mind when evaluating Alexios, especially given the speed of military

⁸⁶Clausewitz, *On War*, 81.

intelligence in the eleventh and twelfth century. Clausewitz believed it was the responsibility of the commanding officer to adjust to each issue that arose, both before and during the battle. With this in mind, Clausewitz discouraged historians and military theorists from evaluating historical generals solely based on their tactical decisions. Neither historian nor theorist could know the specific issues in historical battles, given the intricacies of past warfare. Clausewitz was also convinced that luck played a significant role in the outcome of both battles and wars. For him, “In the whole range of human activities, war most closely resembles a card game.”⁸⁷

Although many of his Clausewitz’s musings on war referred to war in his era and do not apply to the Byzantines, numerous principles are timeless, and these remain relevant when applied to Alexios’s campaigns. For example, in Clausewitz’s *Principles of War*, he argued, “Even when the likelihood of success is against us, we must not think of our undertaking as unreasonable or impossible; for it is always reasonable, if we do not know of anything better to do, and if we make the best use of the few means at our disposal.”⁸⁸ Clausewitz understood that no general, however great, would be able to win all of his battles because of the constant change of warfare, the gambling factor in war, and the restrictions placed on him, in some situations, by political leaders. It is also interesting to note that Clausewitz agreed with the Byzantines in that one should not

⁸⁷*Ibid*, 86.

⁸⁸Carl von Clausewitz, *Principles of War*, trans. and ed. Hans W. Gatzke. (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 2003), 13

“bring all our troops into combat immediately.”⁸⁹ Keeping troops in reserve is a time-honored tradition among military strategists.

Clausewitz believed that this maxim was the most important: “Pursue one great decisive aim with force and determination,” but “to increase caution at the expense of the final goal is no military art.”⁹⁰ Certainly, Alexios would have agreed with him on this subject, as Alexios was not afraid to confront formidable foes when no other choice was present. While addressing the topic of defensive battles, Clausewitz was voicing praise in the abilities of Alexios: “The few defensive battles that have ever been won, you will find that the best of them have been conducted in the spirit of the principles voiced here.”⁹¹ Clausewitz, like the Byzantines, also believed in the power of the surprise attack as a crucial tool for the smaller army. Much like Sun-Tzu, and unlike the Byzantines, Clausewitz outlined extensive tactics for using terrain in campaigns in *Principles of War*.

As far as the abstract ideas of strategy, Clausewitz outlines three main objectives of war: “(a) To conquer and destroy the armed power of the enemy; (b) To take possession of his material and other sources of strength, and (c) To gain public opinion.”⁹² Clausewitz argued that the most effective way to obtain an objective (a) is through a large show and concentration of force to crush enemy troops. In a sense, Alexios was unlike most of the emperors before him as he only had one large force and,

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 15.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, 19.

⁹¹*Ibid.*

⁹²*Ibid.*, 45.

therefore, he was forced to use it to halt the advances of numerous enemies. It is remarkable that the empire did not fall, given that a couple of his armies were nearly destroyed. Clausewitz made note of a reason for fighting a defensive war, which explains the situation of Alexios in 1081 exceptionally well. He stated, “When lack of trust in our troops and generals forces us to wage defensive war, we often like to combine tactical with strategic defense.”⁹³ However, Clausewitz continued by warning of the dangers of continuing a defensive campaign: “For if we remain continually on the defensive, we run the great risk of always waging war at our own expense. This no state can endure indefinitely.”⁹⁴ According to Clausewitz, all that is required to learn or understand and use these principles were “cunning or shrewdness.”⁹⁵ He did argue, however, that to be successful with these principles it is necessary to be consistent in their application. Perhaps, Clausewitz created an appropriate motto for Alexios when he stated that a true disciple of war “cannot be readily ruined by a single error.”⁹⁶ Consequently, Clausewitz suggested that a general should be judged on his military acumen by definite and concrete results, such as whether or not he won his wars.

⁹³*Ibid.*, 54.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*, 57.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, 60.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, 63.

Conclusion

Although spanning the course of over two millennia, the aforementioned military works suffice to present an ideal image of a general and of the aims of warfare. The following chapter will contrast these ideals with Alexios and his strategy. It is clear that Alexios was exceptionally well versed in Byzantine military manuals, particularly Maurice. Not only did he follow Maurice's suggestion for the size and construction of his military units, but he also followed many of his other strategies. The heavier emphasis will be upon Alexios's use of Byzantine strategy and tactics, but I will also attempt to note instances where he followed non-Byzantine maneuvers. There were certain principles, whether by coincidence or through sheer knowledge and ability, used by Alexios which were non-Byzantine. He faced many problems and situations that were universal to generals and, regardless of the outcomes, his solutions tended to have precedents, whether in Byzantine or non-Byzantine military thought. In addition, regarding Byzantine military texts, called *Strategika*, "...soldiers, often great bibliophiles such as the 11th-C. warrior John Doukas avidly collected and read them."⁹⁷ Given the close relation between Alexios and John, it would not be surprising to discover that Alexios was an exceptional Byzantine general.⁹⁸ By evaluating the more detailed accounts of Alexios's battles, not only will a clearer picture of Alexios as a Byzantine general surface but also insight into his abilities outside the limits of Byzantine military theory will emerge.

⁹⁷Kazhdan, *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, Vol 3, 1962.

⁹⁸Anna, *Alexiad*, 87-88. John Doukas aided Alexios in his revolt.

CHAPTER IV
MILITARY CAMPAIGNS OF ALEXIOS

Byzantine Warfare

After the days of the Emperor Justinian, the Byzantine army seldom attempted to expand the empire. When the army took to the field, it was typically to either defend or reclaim its own lands, particularly those that had fallen to the Turks. Thus, in essence, Byzantine ‘warfare,’ was the act of obtaining the goals of the empire by any means available without necessarily having to resort to armed conflict. This purpose accounts for much of the strategy used by the Byzantine military. However, Walter Kaegi is careful to remind the Byzantinist that, “it is always necessary to remember that primary sources rarely permit the Byzantinist to have any detailed and accurate understanding of Byzantium’s battles.”⁹⁹

The common Byzantine soldier has usually been portrayed as having courage, skill, pride, and religious motivation.¹⁰⁰ In contrast to this perception, Jonathan Shepard argues, “the works of his daughter and his son-in-law, in so far as they reflect Alexios’ outlook, suggest that he early formed certain contempt for the lack of military expertise, indiscipline and cowardice of Byzantine soldiery.”¹⁰¹ If Shepard’s theory is correct, it

⁹⁹Walter E. Kaegi, *Some Thoughts on Byzantine Warfare* (Brookline: Hellenic College Press, 1983), 3.

¹⁰⁰Oman, *The Art of War in the Middle Ages*, 32-33.

¹⁰¹Jonathan Shepard, “‘Father’ or ‘Scorpion’? Style and Substance in Alexios’s Diplomacy,” in *Alexios I Komnenos*, 102.

would certainly explain Alexios's heavy reliance on mercenaries and various tribes as the staple of the Byzantine army rather than on native Greeks.

Byzantine leaders based their military campaigns on strategy, guerilla warfare, and planned retreats. Their view was that skill could make up for an inferior number of soldiers. The Byzantines did not use war as an excuse to seek personal fame and glory. Battle was only one of many ways to achieve the goals of the empire. They much preferred to use diplomacy, trickery, and inducements—with battle only as a last resort. In fact, Byzantine military theory considered eagerness to enter a battle a reckless act, a ludicrous trait of the barbarians. As Leo's *Taktika* mentioned, echoing Maurice, "We must always prefer peace above all else and refrain from war."¹⁰² As an anonymous author wrote to Justinian, "I know well that war is a great evil, even the greatest of evils."¹⁰³ The Byzantines were notorious, even in their own day, for playing their enemies against one another, and Alexios was especially effective at this strategy. Most likely this view was not simply molded around morals or other religious convictions—it was formed by common sense and economics. It was cheaper to pay mercenaries to fight or to pay off would-be invaders; this practice was better than losing highly trained military forces in needless battles. Charles Oman summarizes this philosophy:

The generals of the East considered a campaign brought to a successful issue without a great battle as the cheapest and most satisfactory consummation in war. They considered it absurd to expend stores, money, and the valuable lives of

¹⁰²Leo VI, *Taktika*, as quoted in George Dennis, "The Byzantines in Battle," in *Byzantium at War*, edited by K. Tsiknakis (Athens: Idryma Goulandr, 1997), 165. See also Maurice, *Strategikon*, 84.

¹⁰³Anonymous, as quoted in Walter E. Kaegi, *Some Thoughts on Byzantine Warfare*, 3.

veteran soldiers in achieving by force an end that could equally well be obtained by skill.¹⁰⁴

The Byzantine military historian George T. Dennis believes that two broad statements can be made of Byzantine generals:

The first such observation is that the Byzantines fought their wars, especially their battles, in accord with the instructions laid down in the military manuals. The second observation, making due allowance for all sorts of unexpected and extraneous circumstances, is that when they followed the rules in the manuals, they usually won their battles.¹⁰⁵

When Alexios did have to fight, the basic formation of the army was the ordered line, which consisted of three parts: left, center, and right. Second and third lines reinforced each of these parts. There was a reserve attached to the emperor; these units could be used to reinforce the ordered line. With the position of these second and third lines, they protected the front line from ambush and could attack from the flank. These units could also skirt the enemy and attack them from the rear.¹⁰⁶ The main attack force was the cavalry, otherwise known as the “Immortals.”¹⁰⁷ However, this unit would be either disbanded or wiped out during Alexios’s battles with the Normans.¹⁰⁸ The Varangian Guard, an imperial bodyguard, also participated in open battle during Alexios’s reign. His army also contained archers and slingers. The infantry used heavy armor and breastplates. Alexios arranged his troops so that the best infantrymen and

¹⁰⁴Charles Oman, *A History of the Art of War in the Middle Ages; Volume I: AD 378-1278* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1924), 201.

¹⁰⁵George T. Dennis, “The Byzantines in Battle”, in *Byzantium at War*, ed. K. Tsiknakis (Athens: Idryma Goulandr), 14.

¹⁰⁶Anna, *Alexiad*, 205.

¹⁰⁷*Ibid*, 38-39.

¹⁰⁸Birkenmeier, *Development of the Komnenian Army*, 58.

cavalry were protected in the center of the formation surrounded by the rest of the troops.¹⁰⁹ It is not surprising that the formations used by Alexios adhered closely to those called for by Maurice.¹¹⁰

Although Alexios was skilled in warfare, he certainly was not above resorting to deception, chicanery, bribery, and paying tributes in order to avoid battle. Alexios had several favorite tactics and strategies he used in battle throughout his military career. Most of these tactics had clear precedents in the military manuals discussed above. While Byzantine generals in the time of Maurice were obviously familiar with the *Strategikon*, it is also probable, according to Woodrow, that “Romano-Byzantine generals of this time were widely versed in the strategic handbooks of Vegetius, Frontius or the other anonymous military writers of the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries.”¹¹¹ Whether these works had any impact on the contents of the *Strategikon* is uncertain. However, it will be shown that Alexios was extremely familiar with the *Strategikon* of Maurice.

Numerous Byzantine ruses were outlined in the *Strategikon*, which should give the reader a good idea of the cunning involved Byzantine warfare. The first ruse was the practice of writing false letters that speak of treason between the lieutenants of the enemy. These letters were allowed to fall into the possession of the commander of opposing armies. This tactic was used brilliantly by Alexios against Bohemond at

¹⁰⁹*Ibid*, 59.

¹¹⁰Maurice, *Strategikon*, 25-26.

¹¹¹Woodrow, “Byzantine Military Technology and Strategy,” 4.

Dyrrakhion in 1107.¹¹² The second ruse was to circulate a rumor that a high-ranking official in the enemy country was a traitor and to give credence to this rumor by having Byzantine troops bypass his estate when raiding neighboring estates. The Byzantines often proclaimed false victories on the front before battle to bolster the troops' courage and morale. This tactic was used by Alexios during battle against Nikephorus Bryennius in 1078.¹¹³ In addition, emissaries were often sent into enemy camps with messages for the opposing commanders, but the true purpose was to spy and assess the enemy's strength.

Specific strategies were also used to combat certain armies. The Byzantines considered the "Franks" and various tribes daring and reckless, lacking discipline and organization.¹¹⁴ Because of their disunity, these troops were easily defeated by simultaneous attacks from flank and rear. As Alexios learned, this approach would not work well against the Normans. However, the Byzantines still believed that victory would be easy to accomplish because the Latins and other barbarian tribes neither reconnoitered the countryside nor fortified their camps.¹¹⁵ Alexios would exploit this at Larissa in 1083.¹¹⁶ These are just a few examples of the tactics and strategies that Byzantine generals employed in an effort to avoid open battle. Anna claimed that

¹¹²Anna, *Alexiad*, 405-407.

¹¹³*Ibid.*, 42.

¹¹⁴Maurice, *Strategikon*, 119.

¹¹⁵Woodrow, "Byzantine Military Technology and Strategy," 203.

¹¹⁶Anna, *Alexiad*, 169-171.

Alexios always encouraged and desired battle, but overwhelming evidence suggests otherwise.¹¹⁷

Although not all of Alexios's battles in the field were totally successful, the Byzantines were able to survive—thanks to the shrewd diplomacy and overall military strategy of the emperor. There are numerous ways to measure victory, and victory on the battlefield was only one of many. During his reign, Alexios fought enemies from all sides. They had their own unique equipment, troops, and tactics—all of which Alexios needed to understand in order to devise an effective strategy. To get a fair estimate of Alexios as a commander, a view of his campaigns and abilities over the passage of time is necessary. Given their number, it is necessary to examine only some of the most important ones to analyze his actions (where the sources permit), to determine his adherence to military texts and, ultimately, to evaluate his overall military ability.

Crushing Rebellions

Prior to Alexios's coup, he was in the service of the two emperors: Emperor Michael VII Doukas (1071-1078) and Emperor Botaneiates (1078-1081). While in the service of Michael, he would put down the threat of Roussel of Bailleul. During his service to Botaneiates, he put down two rebellions, those of Nikephorus Bryennius and Basilacius. Sadly, there is far less information regarding the revolts of Roussel and Basilacius than that of Nikephorus Bryennius.

¹¹⁷*Ibid.*, 223.

Roussel of Bailleul

As early as 1073, Alexios was given the task of capturing a menace to the empire, Roussel of Bailleul, a Norman. Roussel had allied himself with Tutush, a Turk, against the empire. By playing Roussel and Tutush against one another in a true stroke of genius, Alexios was able to easily capture Roussel and return to the capital in triumph. Alexios was able to convince Tutush that Roussel was a danger to both Byzantium and the Turks. According to Anna, Alexios was able to collect the money to pay-off Tutush, even though the Emperor Michael would not provide it.¹¹⁸ Tutush betrayed and captured Roussel. Anna claimed that as a captive Roussel was not blinded and that Alexios, "...devised a plan worthy of Palamedes himself," to avoid committing such cruelty.¹¹⁹ As Jonathan Shepard states, "Alexios was operating against a formidable commander who had just inflicted a crushing defeat on caesar John Doukas at the head of a full-scale Byzantine army."¹²⁰ This not only enhanced the reputation of Alexios at Constantinople but also gave the young commander his first chance to display both his military and diplomatic prowess.

¹¹⁸*Ibid.*, 36-37. See also Maurice, *Strategikon*, 83 and 116. Maurice believed deception was a proper way to avoid pitched battle. He is also clear about dealing with "Turks."

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*, 36. It was common practice among the Byzantines to blind a possible threat to the empire, particularly, if the individual was a military commander or had rebelled.

¹²⁰Shepard, "'Father' or 'Scorpion'?", 98-99.

Nikephorus Bryennius

The second rebellion, led by Alexios's future son-in-law's father, Nikephorus Bryennius, was skillfully stamped out by Alexios at Calavrytae in 1078. Once Bryennius made his intentions known, the Emperor Botaneiates responded by appointing Alexios Domestic of the Schools, essentially the head of the Imperial army.¹²¹ The emperor also sought to delay the conflict, but at the same time, he needed to keep Bryennius away from Constantinople. As Norman Tobias mentions, "The avoidance of battle was always a cardinal principle of Byzantine strategy, which found an early proponent in Belasarius and which is repeated in the *Strategikon* of Maurice, the *Taktika* of Leo and the *Taktika* of Nicephorus Phocas."¹²² Nevertheless, considering the dire nature of the Byzantine army, Botaneiates realized what the effects of a siege on the capital would mean. Delaying combat was, therefore, unacceptable, and given the gravity of the situation, Alexios was ordered to intercept Bryennius before he could reach Constantinople.

Alexios sped to the battle site. Speed was of the essence, and in his *Taktika* Leo mentioned an anecdote concerning Alexander the Great: "When he was asked how he was able to accomplish so much in so short a time, he said, 'By not putting off for tomorrow what I could do today.'"¹²³ Sun-Tzu also recognized the need for speed, "Generally he who first occupies the field of battle to await the enemy will be rested; he

¹²¹Anna, *Alexiad*, 38.

¹²²Norman Tobias, "The Tactics and Strategy of Alexius I Comnenus at Calavrytae, 1078," *Etudes Byzantines* 6 (1979): 196-197.

¹²³Leo VI, *Taktika*, as quoted in Tobias, "The Tactics and Strategy of Alexius I Comnenus at Calavrytae," 198-199.

who comes later and hastens into battle will be exhausted.”¹²⁴ He also claimed: “War is such that the supreme consideration is speed.”¹²⁵ Norman Tobias mentions that when Alexios arrived, he did not fortify camp, a serious breach of protocol according to Leo’s *Taktika*. However, Tobias allows for this, stating “perhaps he (Alexios) did not want to fatigue his men with the enemy so dangerously near or to reduce their morale. Leo’s *Taktika* allowed for this in his XIVth Constitution.”¹²⁶ Vegetius, agreeing with Leo, stated, “Troops must never be engaged in a general action immediately after a long march, when the men are fatigued and the horses tired.”¹²⁷ Therefore, it would be expected that Alexios would not wish to force his men to exhaustion. Alexios also personally surveyed the lay of the land, a tactic called for by Leo and Maurice.¹²⁸

John Birkenmeier believes that “if Bryennios had about twelve thousand men it is reasonable to assume somewhat fewer for Alexios, perhaps eight to ten thousand.”¹²⁹ Military historian John Haldon disagrees with Birkenmeier’s assessment of Alexios’s troop count, believing that, including his Turkish allies, which were late in arriving, he had 5,500 to 6,500 troops.¹³⁰ Anna made no mention of the number of troops Alexios had at his disposal. Because he was undoubtedly outnumbered, Alexios chose to keep his

¹²⁴Sun Tzu, *Art of Warfare*, 123.

¹²⁵*Ibid.*, 157.

¹²⁶Tobias, “The Tactics and Strategy of Alexius I Comnenus at Calavrytae,” 199.

¹²⁷Vegetius, *De Re Militari*, 151.

¹²⁸Anna, *Alexiad*, 40. See also Tobias, “The Tactics and Strategy of Alexius I Comnenus at Calavrytae,” 201. See also Maurice, *Strategikon*, 85.

¹²⁹Birkenmeier, *Development of the Komnenian Army*, 58.

¹³⁰Haldon, *Byzantine Wars*, 128.

men out of view from Bryennius's forces.¹³¹ Maurice and Leo were both clear about the purpose of this tactic; if Alexios's men had seen how outnumbered they were, it certainly would have disheartened them.¹³² However, Vegetius contradicted Maurice, believing the sight of the enemy will accustom the men to the enemy.¹³³ It is important to note that Alexios followed Maurice's suggestion.

It also did not help that Alexios had a force of mostly foreign mercenaries, which were unaccustomed to Byzantine tactics and were inexperienced in warfare. Because he was heavily outnumbered, Alexios needed to rely on some type of indirect warfare.¹³⁴ In addition, he used the proper topography called for by Leo in selecting the spot for an ambush.¹³⁵ Sun-Tzu mentioned the usefulness of ambushes: "Move the troops under a cloak of silence into their battle formation, and lay detachments in ambush."¹³⁶ Obviously, Alexios was familiar with Maurice, who stated, "These assaults can be shown to be very effective not only against forces of equal strength, but also against vastly superior ones."¹³⁷ Maurice thought it better to try to secure victory through

¹³¹Anna, *Alexiad*, 39.

¹³²Maurice, *Strategikon*, 70-71. See also Tobias, "The Tactics and Strategy of Alexius I Comnenus at Calavrytae," 201.

¹³³Vegetius, *De Re Militari*, 152.

¹³⁴Tobias, "The Tactics and Strategy of Alexius I Comnenus at Calavrytae," 211. Tobias compares Alexios's strategy to those of Belasarius, with which the indirect strategy has its origins in Byzantine warfare.

¹³⁵*Ibid*, 202.

¹³⁶Sun-Tzu, *Art of Warfare*, 247.

¹³⁷Maurice, *Strategikon*, 93.

ruses and deception, especially when heavily outnumbered.¹³⁸ This is a clear strategy addressed in the works of both Sun-Tzu and Vegetius.¹³⁹ Facing such circumstances, Alexios realized his best chance of success was to avoid direct contact with the enemy forces and lure them into an ambush. Haldon agrees with this opinion: “In such a context, Alexios’s only option was to attempt to draw the enemy into terrain prepared in advance and use ambush and feigned withdrawal to even the balance.”¹⁴⁰ Vegetius declared, “A rash and inconsiderate pursuit exposes an army to the greatest danger possible...”¹⁴¹ As Tobias mentions, “Note the words of Leo the Wise: “To master the enemy, wisdom and generalship [i.e., strategy] are preferable to open attack.”¹⁴²

Bryennius’s men consisted of Italians, Thessalians, Macedonians and Thracians. Forced to fight by command of the emperor, Alexios divided his forces, mainly Kelts, Turks, Chomatenians and the Immortals, into two groups and blocked Nikephorus’s path to Constantinople.¹⁴³ Alexios placed his left flank against a hill, following Vegetius’s tactical protocol. Considering Alexios was outnumbered as much as two to one, it would follow that he would be concerned about being outflanked. In battle, “Your first care is to secure your left wing from being surrounded by the enemy’s numbers or attacked in

¹³⁸*Ibid.*

¹³⁹Sun-Tzu, *Art of Warfare*, 111. See also Vegetius, *De Re Militari*, 159 and 172.

¹⁴⁰Haldon, *Byzantine Wars*, 128.

¹⁴¹Vegetius, *De Re Militari*, 166.

¹⁴²Tobias, “The Tactics and Strategy of Alexios I Comnenus at Calavrytae,” 200.

¹⁴³Anna, *Alexiad*, 40-41.

flank or rear by flying platoons.”¹⁴⁴ It is also clear that if your numbers are inferior you need to protect at least one of your flanks with some sort of natural or manmade obstacle.¹⁴⁵ Despite this wise precaution, Alexios’s left broke after a few minutes of successfully ambushing the enemy. Alexios, realizing the potential for a rout, sought to kill the enemy commander. Although this ploy has often been considered reckless, Tobias correctly states, “In ancient and medieval warfare the general was the army’s moral dynamo and also its brain--its general staff. That is why it was imperative to kill him. Leo’s *Taktika* noted the dramatic effect this can have on an army.”¹⁴⁶ However, Alexios would eventually be dissuaded. The tactics used by each commander were roughly the same, excepting Alexios’s ambush, but Bryennios had the advantage in both manpower and discipline, accounting for the initial defeat of Alexios’s forces. Alexios had attempted to use the terrain to his advantage.

Birkenmeier believes that Alexios remained on the field as long as he could because he dreaded his return to Constantinople because he had been defeated.¹⁴⁷ I disagree with this conclusion. I must concur with Maurice’s view: “When a battle ends in defeat there must be no indecision or delay, unless of course there is reason to hope for the arrival of allies or some other form of support.”¹⁴⁸ Sun-Tzu also agreed with that idea: “to order a retreat, not realizing the army is in no position to withdraw—this is

¹⁴⁴Vegetius, *De Re Militari*, 159.

¹⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 173.

¹⁴⁶Tobias, “The Tactics and Strategy of Alexius I Comnenus at Calavrytae,” 206.

¹⁴⁷Birkenmeier, *Development of the Komnenian Army*, 95.

¹⁴⁸Maurice, *Strategikon*, 73.

called “hobbling the army.”¹⁴⁹ Incentive for remaining on the battlefield was obvious—Alexios had been ordered by the emperor to prevent Nikephorus from reaching Constantinople, and he was still counting on his Turkish allies to arrive. Clausewitz believed that one of the aims to a defensive battle is simply to gain time; therefore, waiting for the tide to turn in the defender’s favor is a good strategy.¹⁵⁰ The longer he remained on the field, the better the odds became that Alexios could rally his troops. In addition, during the retreat of Alexios’s men, the Scyths of Nikephorus began to loot Nikephorus’s camp.¹⁵¹ Alexios could clearly see this from the hill to which he retreated.¹⁵² Sun-Tzu warned generals about this potential problem: “if you abandon your base camp to contend for advantage, your equipment and stores will be lost.”¹⁵³ However, I doubt that Sun-Tzu anticipated base camp being lost to one’s own forces. Anna recalled this event: “...before they (the Scyths) are absolutely sure of the enemy’s defeat and before consolidating their own advantage, they ruin their victories by carrying off the loot.”¹⁵⁴

Alexios waited for his opportunity. While the Scyths were looting, Alexios’s Turkish reinforcements arrived. He knew exactly how to handle the situation.

¹⁴⁹Sun-Tzu, *Art of Warfare*, 112.

¹⁵⁰Clausewitz, *On War*, 613-614.

¹⁵¹Haldon, *Byzantine Wars*, 129. There is no mention of the Scyths looting Nikephorus’s camp in the *Alexiad*. There is mention of looting however. See also John Birkenmeier’s *Development of the Komnenian Army*, 95. Either way, Alexios took advantage of this with both patience and daring.

¹⁵²Anna, *Alexiad*, 43.

¹⁵³Sun-Tzu, *Art of Warfare*, 129.

¹⁵⁴Anna, *Alexiad*, 42.

Clausewitz contended: “Tactical successes, those attained *in the course* of the engagement, *usually occur during the phase of disarray and weakness.*”¹⁵⁵ Sun-Tzu believed anytime the enemy is in disarray, one must go on the offensive. That is exactly what occurred. Sun-Tzu declared, “So it is the expert at battle that his strategic advantage (*shih*) is channeled and his timing is precise.”¹⁵⁶ Alexios knew exactly what the situation required. A direct example of this strategy can be found in Maurice: “If the fleeing enemy should turn upon the pursuers as the Scythians frequently do, or if some other force should suddenly appear out of ambush, then the pursuers will certainly be forced to take to flight.”¹⁵⁷ The Scyths had made a mistake that Alexios could capitalize on: “To plunder the dead or to attack the baggage train or camp of the enemy before the battle is entirely over is very dangerous and can be disastrous.”¹⁵⁸

Alexios remained on the field, provided a false report of Nikephorus’s death, divided his army into three divisions, laid an ambush, and crushed the remainder of Breynnios’s army.¹⁵⁹ Anna recalled the ambush: “The Turks, however, and my father, after holding their ground for a little while against the enemy, pretended to make an orderly withdrawal, gradually luring them and cunningly drawing them into the ambush.”¹⁶⁰ A description of the use of this kind of ploy can be found in Maurice’s

¹⁵⁵Clausewitz, *On War*, 206.

¹⁵⁶Sun-Tzu, *Art of Warfare*, 120

¹⁵⁷Maurice, *Strategikon*, 24.

¹⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁵⁹Anna, *Alexiad*, 44.

¹⁶⁰*Ibid.*

Strategikon.¹⁶¹ In addition, Tobias makes an astute observation: "...an identical description to Alexius' tactics can be seen in Chapter 42 of the XIVth Constitution of Leo's *Taktika*."¹⁶²

Haldon also gives a remarkable description of the ambush:

Alexios's opening assault took Bryennios's troops by surprise, but after a while they re-established order and began to push him back. His men alternately resisted and then fell back, the Turkish mounted troops wheeling about and dashing through the gaps between his other units to keep the pursuers at a reasonable distance, all the while drawing the enemy force towards the location of the concealed troops. Bryennios's force, as Alexios had surmised, grew less and less disciplined as the pursuit wore on.¹⁶³

What Haldon fails to mention is that this tactic was related in Vegetius's *De Re Militari*:

When the enemy pursues a retreating foe, the following snare is usually laid. A small body of cavalry is ordered to pursue them on the direct road. At the same time a strong detachment is secretly sent another way to conceal itself on their route. When the cavalry have overtaken the enemy, they make some feint attacks and retire. The enemy, imagining the danger past, and that they have escaped the snare, neglect their order and march without regularity. Then the detachment sent to intercept them, seizing the opportunity, falls upon them unexpectedly and destroys them with ease.¹⁶⁴

Alexios frequently employed ambushes, primarily, I would argue, because he was outnumbered in many of his battles. A false report of victory was also outlined in Maurice: "Courage should be roused in our troops by fabricating a report of a victory

¹⁶¹Maurice, *Strategikon*, 55-56.

¹⁶²Tobias, "The Tactics and Strategy of Alexius I Comnenus at Calavrytae," 211.

¹⁶³Haldon, *Byzantine Wars*, 130.

¹⁶⁴Vegetius, *De Re Militari*, 166-167.

over the enemy won by our men someplace else.”¹⁶⁵ Thus, with the added Turkish reinforcements and increased morale of the troops, Nikephorus Bryennios and his brother John were surrounded and captured. As Maurice’s wisdom once again declared, “Often enough this sort of thing has caused troops who have already won a battle to be defeated and even annihilated.”¹⁶⁶

Although outnumbered and fighting with inexperienced and undisciplined soldiers, Alexios was able to emerge victorious using strict Byzantine protocol for a general.¹⁶⁷ Birkenmeier believes that the victory of Alexios was more luck than skill. Certainly, the arrival of his Turkish allies was fortuitous. However, I disagree that the victory was more luck than skill. Birkenmeier is correct when he mentions “. . .in this case, Alexios fought because he needed to keep Bryennios away from Constantinople.”¹⁶⁸ However, the decision to fight was not that of Alexios but of his commander, the Emperor Botaneiates. Clausewitz would remind us that sometimes political restraints hamstring a general’s options. As the anonymous author of a military strategy handbook translated by George Dennis stated, “If our territory is unprotected and great danger would result from our refusal to join in battle, we must choose to fight.”¹⁶⁹ If

¹⁶⁵Maurice, *Strategikon*, 80. In the battle, Alexios had captured Nikephorus’s swords; thus claiming he was defeated.

¹⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁶⁷Norman Tobias disagrees with my assessment of the lack of discipline of this army. See Tobias, “The Tactics and Strategy of Alexius I Comnenus at Calavrytae,” 209. See also Haldon, *Byzantine Wars*, 128.

¹⁶⁸Birkenmeier, *Development of the Komnenian Army*, 60.

¹⁶⁹George Dennis, trans. *Three Byzantine Military Treatises* (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1985), 103.

Birkenmeier is to be believed and Alexios's goal was to keep Bryennios from reaching Constantinople, which it was, Alexios had no choice but to remain on the field of battle for as long as possible.¹⁷⁰ Remember, "notwithstanding an entire defeat, all possible remedies must be attempted, since many generals have been fortunate enough to repair such a loss."¹⁷¹ Obviously, Alexios was able to find the solution to a potential rout.

Haldon also believes that, "In this second phase of the encounter, Alexios had used, to outstanding effect, classic steppe tactics against a far superior force, not only in terms of numbers but also in terms of battle experience – Manzikert on a much smaller scale."¹⁷² In this "second phase," Alexios also placed his units with their back to a hill. As Sun-Tzu stated, "...do not go against an enemy that has his back to a hill..."¹⁷³ Either Bryennios did not believe Alexios's forces could withstand a second assault, or he was unaware of such a maxim. Thus, the battle against Nikephorus Bryennios at Calavrytae demonstrated that, even early in his military career, Alexios was very familiar with the principles articulated by Leo, Maurice and other Byzantine maxims of indirect warfare. He was able to successfully apply his knowledge of time-honored Byzantine tactics to emerge victorious, despite being outnumbered roughly two to one. Many of his actions also paralleled those expounded by Vegetius and Clausewitz. In many ways, it almost

¹⁷⁰Birkenmeier, *Development of the Komnenian Army*, 59. Birkenmeier believes that Alexios was hesitant to return to Constantinople after a defeat; however, if his goal was to keep Bryennios from the capital, as Birkenmeier suggests, it would make sense that he would remain on the field until the last possible moment.

¹⁷¹Vegetius, *De Re Militari*, 170.

¹⁷²Haldon, *Byzantine Wars*, 130.

¹⁷³Sun-Tzu, *Art of Warfare*, 131.

seems as if Alexios was familiar with Sun-Tzu's principles although it is extremely doubtful that he had any exposure to *The Art of Warfare*. Most likely, this was a result of the timelessness of many strategies and tactics in warfare. Although the discipline of his army was suspect at best, his correct and timely appraisal of the situation allowed the rebel Nikephorus to be captured. Thankfully for Alexios, his allies arrived at the optimal time, and he was able to recall his knowledge of Leo, Vegetius, and Maurice. As Clausewitz proclaimed, "If a losing battle can be caught before its conclusion and turned into a success, the initial loss not only disappears from the record, but becomes the basis for a greater victory."¹⁷⁴

Basilacius

Immediately after the quashing of Nikephorus Bryennius, Alexios was ordered by the emperor to subdue Bryennius's successor, Basilacius. Alexios pitched camp near the River Vardar at a prime location, in tune with the guidelines of Maurice.¹⁷⁵ Once camp was established, Alexios ordered the men to prepare to march out of camp in full battle gear. Taking a cautious stance, Alexios ordered that the campfires be left burning, believing Basilacius was going to attack the camp that night.¹⁷⁶ As an anonymous Byzantine text on campaign organization states, "If our holy emperor should find out that the enemy plan to attack at night, let him organize ambushes not very far from the

¹⁷⁴Clausewitz, *On War*, 243.

¹⁷⁵Anna, *Alexiad*, 48. See also Maurice, *Strategikon*, 160-161.

¹⁷⁶*Ibid.* See also Maurice, *Strategikon*, 81 and 89. While these two tactics outlined by Maurice are not exactly the same as the tactic Alexios used, it is not difficult to see the relation and the improvisation that Alexios made.

camp.”¹⁷⁷ Although not the emperor yet, Alexios’s hunch proved correct, and he followed Byzantine procedure. Anna claimed Basilacius led 10,000 men into the camp.¹⁷⁸ Once Basilacius’s army was inside the camp, Alexios immediately sprang his trap. After intense fighting, Basilacius fled the battle and sought refuge in Thessalonica. His asylum was short-lived because Alexios pursued Basilacius and threatened to besiege the city to retrieve his prey. With little resistance, the townspeople allowed Alexios to enter the city, and Basilacius was captured.¹⁷⁹ Once again, Alexios emerged victorious using tactics outlined in Maurice’s *Strategikon*. He did not have to resort to a siege to capture his foe.

The Siege and Battle of Dyrrakhion

In 1081, the year of Alexios’s revolt, the Normans, under the leadership of Robert Guiscard, began the siege of Dyrrakhion. The Norman strategy was to use Dyrrakhion as a base of operation for an invasion of both the Balkans and Constantinople herself. As Alexios assumed the throne, he realized the significance of Dyrrakhion and sent one of his most trusted relatives, George Palaiologos, to defend the city. Anna claimed that “the battlements were constructed according to the emperor’s advice, catapults were set up everywhere on the walls, the demoralized soldiers were encouraged and scouts posted all

¹⁷⁷Dennis, trans., *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*, 283.

¹⁷⁸Anna, *Alexiad*, 48. Anna’s numbers are probably high; however, if Alexios did not receive reinforcements (Anna does not mention any) after the battle at Calavrytae, it would stand to reason that Alexios was probably outnumbered again.

¹⁷⁹*Ibid*, 51-52.

along the ramparts.”¹⁸⁰ Alexios’s strategy was to repel the Norman attack by any means necessary because it was the primary threat to the security of the empire. Birkenmeier correctly assesses the situation Alexios faced:

A strategy of indirect warfare presupposes considerable experience and a high level of discipline among the ordinary soldiers. At Dyrrachion it also required a large fleet such as only the Venetians possessed. Indirect warfare also required a stable political situation in the capital, for it risked creating the impression of cowardice.¹⁸¹

However, I must disagree with Birkenmeier on the following: he believes that Alexios was unfamiliar with the ideal of skirmishing with the Normans, methodically wearing them down.¹⁸² Given Alexios’s strict adherence to Roman and Byzantine tactics at Calavrytae, it seems highly unlikely that such a prime doctrine of Byzantine warfare would have eluded him at such an important battle. More likely, Alexios chose to ignore it—perhaps, for the reasons Birkenmeier mentioned above, or, perhaps, for the reasons I will mention below.

Robert Guiscard had planned, under the pretense of backing the son of a former deposed emperor, to claim the right to the Byzantine throne. Once word of the siege reached Alexios, he immediately recognized Robert’s plan and the importance of Dyrrakhion. With the situation of the Byzantine military fragile at best, he resorted to requesting aid from his Turkish allies. As Anna described it: “He (Alexios) knew that

¹⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 135.

¹⁸¹Birkenmeier, *Development of the Komnenian Army*, 61.

¹⁸²*Ibid.*, 91. Birkenmeier believes that Alexios was completely unfamiliar with this concept. I disagree, given his adherence to Maurice, Leo, other anonymous Byzantine military treatise and even Vegetius, probably coincidentally, during the battle of Calavrytae. For further support on my opinion, see Haldon, *Byzantine Wars*, 130. For Alexios’s brilliant and appropriate use of steppe-tactics, see Haldon, *Byzantine Wars*, 136 and Anna, *Alexiad*, 44.

his own forces were vastly outnumbered by the Latins and decided that he must call on the Turks from the east.”¹⁸³ After negotiations, which must have been favorable to the Turks, they agreed to aid the Byzantines. In addition, Alexios contacted the Venetians, the most formidable naval power in the Mediterranean. Alexios recognized the importance of an alliance with them. They possessed a good geographic location on the coast and a valuable naval fleet. In 1082, a treaty was signed with Venice. Titles were bestowed on Venetian leaders, but, more importantly, exemptions from custom duties were given to Venetian traders. This was a significant concession because it even included Constantinople where Venetians were permitted to have warehouses. After Alexios agreed to dismiss all taxation on Venetian trade, the Doge granted the emperor’s request.¹⁸⁴ After several battles, the Venetian and Byzantine navies destroyed Robert’s fleet and blockaded the Normans camp outside of Dyrrakhion.

Gathering all available troops, Alexios set out for Dyrrakhion. His army was beset with a myriad of problems; it was inexperienced, poorly trained, and outnumbered.¹⁸⁵ Alexios recognized the necessity of extensive training of recruits as described in the *Strategikon* and in accordance with Vegetius. In fact, Anna related her father’s attempt to rectify the weaknesses in his army: Alexios “put them through a course of intensive training in archery, lance-fighting, riding on horseback, and practicing

¹⁸³Anna, *Alexiad*, 137.

¹⁸⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵Birkenmeier, *Development of the Komnenian Army*, 231. Although Birkenmeier claims this, he will also blame Alexios, rather than the undisciplined troops, for failing to support the Varangians who charged after the broken Norman right. See Birkenmeier, 66. Most likely, Alexios was the one who was in the right.

the various manoeuvres.”¹⁸⁶ However, he had little time to instill the necessary skill and discipline into his troops. Therefore, Alexios devised a simple plan; he would trap the Normans between his forces and the coastline, thus surrounding Robert’s forces and severing both their supply lines and all routes of escape. Several of Alexios’s military advisors recommended that he delay the initial assault on the Norman forces. Such wisdom can be seen in the *Strategikon*: “If we find ourselves at war with a powerful people and one whose ways are strange to us, and the army, not knowing what to expect becomes nervous, then we must be very careful to avoid getting into an open battle with them right away.”¹⁸⁷ Although Maurice outlined a plan of action for dealing with Franks, the Normans would prove to be somewhat different from the Franks of Maurice’s time, particularly with the advent of the Norman heavy cavalry charge. In addition, Maurice believed, “the general achieves the most who tries to destroy the enemy’s army more by hunger than by force of arms.”¹⁸⁸ The idea of starving an enemy rather than engaging in open combat is certainly not an uncommon theme among military strategists.¹⁸⁹

It is curious that Alexios, being familiar with Maurice and Byzantine strategy and tactics, would disregard what seemed like solid advice. Birkenmeier offers several possibilities: If Robert was defeated, his army would be destroyed, and if Dyrrakhion fell, Robert had a base to continue operations against the empire. The city could also be a

¹⁸⁶Anna, *Alexiad*, 478.

¹⁸⁷Maurice, *Strategikon*, 67.

¹⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁸⁹Vegetius, *De Re Militari*, 172. Also see Sun-Tzu, *Art of Warfare*, 111.

refuge for Robert in defeat.¹⁹⁰ My conclusion is that Alexios was considerably worried that Dyrrakhion was in imminent danger of falling, despite the destruction of the first siege-tower built by the Normans. In addition, George Palaiologos was seriously injured in a sally from Dyrrakhion, and Alexios must have been concerned.¹⁹¹ Most likely, I believe, he was extremely desperate to end this threat and return to Constantinople because he had recently ascended the throne, and prior emperors had not succeeded in retaining power for long. He certainly did not want to use any form of indirect warfare that would prevent him from returning to Constantinople quickly. Like Sun-Tzu, Alexios also realized that “there has never been a state that has benefited from an extended war.”¹⁹² He may have also believed that having the Normans apparently boxed-in and suffering a brutal winter where one-third of Robert’s troops had died would be enough to ensure victory.¹⁹³ In addition, a general “should take the fight to the enemy on terrain from which there is no way out.”¹⁹⁴ Parallels to Alexios’s reasoning are also be found in Sun-Tzu, “...in war prize the quick victory, not the protracted engagement.”¹⁹⁵ Perhaps, the most obvious reason for engaging Guiscard is that “*the probable character and general shape of any war should mainly be assessed in the light of political factors and*

¹⁹⁰Birkenmeier, *Development of the Komnenian Army*, 102.

¹⁹¹Anna, *Alexiad*, 141-143

¹⁹²Sun-Tzu, *Art of Warfare*, 107.

¹⁹³Anna, *Alexiad*, 139. Anna gives the number of deaths at 10,000 men over a three month period.

¹⁹⁴Sun-Tzu, *Art of Warfare*, 135.

¹⁹⁵*Ibid.*, 109.

conditions.”¹⁹⁶ Given the political condition, Alexios may have felt that he had to fight. This type of political climate was addressed by Clausewitz: “Situations can thus exist in which the political object will almost be the sole determinant.”¹⁹⁷ As Rogers mentions, “Many of the great battles of the Middle Ages were fought, on the strategically defending side, by rulers who had recently claimed, reclaimed, or usurped their thrones...and so did not have the political capital necessary to mount a Vegetian defense.”¹⁹⁸ There is little doubt that Alexios felt pressure to resolve the conflict as quickly and judiciously as possible so he could return to his throne.

Regardless, John Haldon believes that the Normans were “a very substantial force, and the emperor almost certainly had a smaller army with which to engage the Normans.”¹⁹⁹ Birkenmeier puts the number of the Byzantine forces between twenty and twenty-five thousand.²⁰⁰ Alexios, selecting to attack, decided to use a night attack from two sides. When he moved, Dyrrakhion would then open its gates and join the battle.²⁰¹ This seemed to be a solid plan, as enemy morale is lowest in the evening and at night. Therefore, “the expert in using the military avoids the enemy when his morale is high,

¹⁹⁶Clausewitz, *On War*, 607.

¹⁹⁷*Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁹⁸Clifford J. Rogers, “The Vegetian ‘Science of Warfare’ in the Middle Ages,” *Journal of Medieval Military History*, I (2002): 18. Rogers mentions Alexios at Dyrrakhion specifically.

¹⁹⁹Haldon, *Byzantine Wars*, 134.

²⁰⁰Birkenmeier, *Development of the Komnenian Army*, 100. Anna gives no mention of the size of Alexios’s army.

²⁰¹Anna, *Alexiad*, 146-147.

and strikes when his morale has flagged and drained away.”²⁰² As anonymous author of a Byzantine text on strategy stated, “At night, though, attack them when they are resting and sleeping.”²⁰³ Vegetius also advocated such a stratagem.²⁰⁴ Unfortunately, for Alexios, the night attack was never carried out; according to Maurice, it would have been successful.²⁰⁵ Whether Robert was warned or whether his tactical prowess saved him is pure speculation.²⁰⁶ The anonymous author of a treatise on campaign organization stated that Alexios’s plan of a night attack on the enemy camp was possible: “If it is not far from our own camp, say, less than a day’s journey, so that it is possible to begin the march in the evening and to reach the enemy camp by early dawn, the emperor should set apart a force of horsemen larger than that which the enemy has.”²⁰⁷ However, it is uncertain whether Alexios had more horsemen than Robert. More than likely, Alexios’s cavalry was outnumbered considering that he intermingled them with light infantry.²⁰⁸ Once again this tactic is in accordance with Vegetius who advocated this method as the best way to deal with a superior cavalry force.²⁰⁹

²⁰²Sun-Tzu, *Art of Warfare*, 131.

²⁰³Dennis, trans., *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*, 103.

²⁰⁴Vegetius, *De Re Militari*, 158.

²⁰⁵Maurice, *Strategikon*, 119.

²⁰⁶See Haldon, *Byzantine Wars*, 134. Also Birkenmeier, *Development of the Komnenian Army*, 102.

²⁰⁷Dennis, trans., *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*, 313.

²⁰⁸Anna, *Alexiad*, 146-147. See also Birkenmeier, *Development of the Komnenian Army*, 73.

²⁰⁹Vegetius, *De Re Militari*, 155.

As the battle began, the Normans were divided into three parts with Robert commanding the center troops, Bohemond commanding the right, and Count Amehitas the left. To counter this strategy, Alexios aligned his troops opposite Robert. He commanded the center; Nikephorus commanded the right, and Pakourianos the left. In advance of the imperial army was a force of barbarians armed with axes.²¹⁰ Early in the battle, the Norman wings broke; however, the Varangians chased after it. Haldon mentions, “Alexios was undoubtedly a good tactician, but he was badly let down by the undisciplined rush to pursue the beaten enemy wings, a cardinal sin in the Byzantine tactical manuals.”²¹¹ Norwich also believes it was the lack of discipline among the troops that Alexios commanded which was responsible for the defeat.²¹² In addition, Alexios was always careful to keep troops in reserve as the *Strategikon* suggested.²¹³ As Birkenmeier mentions, “She (Anna) is also quite specific about the difference between archers, *peltasts*, and *psiloi*, and it appears that Alexios retained a reserve of these men to deal with emergencies.”²¹⁴ However, Alexios’s troops broke under the Norman charge, and he was forced to retreat.²¹⁵ After this defeat, as Anna described it: “...he had two objects in view: first, to summon allies from all quarters, cleverly luring them with

²¹⁰Birkenmeier, *Development of the Komnenian Army*, 64.

²¹¹Haldon, *Byzantine Wars*, 136-137. I agree with Haldon’s assessment that it was the Varangians that over-pursued the fleeing Normans. However, Birkenmeier believes that it was Alexios who failed to properly support the Varangian flank. See Birkenmeier, *Development of the Komnenian Army*, 66.

²¹²Norwich, *Byzantium: Decline and Fall*, 18-19.

²¹³Maurice, *Strategikon*, 26-27 and 92.

²¹⁴Birkenmeier, *Development of the Komnenian Army*, 64.

²¹⁵Anna, *Alexiad*, 151.

expectations of liberal gifts; and, second, to demand from his mother and brother the provision of money – from any source whatever.”²¹⁶ Such is a primary means of defense according to Clausewitz. He believed, “...a defender’s *allies* can be cited as his ultimate source of support.”²¹⁷ Clausewitz continued, “The defender’s purpose...is to keep his territory inviolate, and to hold it for as long as possible. That will gain him time, and gaining time is the only way he can achieve his aim.”²¹⁸

Even with this setback, Haldon puts the number of casualties of the battle at a maximum of twenty-five percent of the Byzantine force.²¹⁹ While this percentage may seem high, Haldon also admits of the Norman forces: “...there must have been substantial casualties among the troops on the two wings that broke and fled back towards the sea or the lagoon.”²²⁰ Angold, who is more astute in Byzantine political matters than military ones, argues that, “In military terms it (Dyrrakhion) was a more severe defeat than Manzikert.”²²¹ However, if Haldon’s figures are anywhere close to correct, that would put the lost lives at Manzikert at roughly two thousand dead and four thousand captured or wounded and the losses at Dyrrakhion at roughly five thousand lost.²²² Once we factor in the capture of Romanus IV at Manzikert, the ransom paid for

²¹⁶*Ibid.*, 157.

²¹⁷Clausewitz, *On War*, 373.

²¹⁸*Ibid.*, 614.

²¹⁹Haldon, *Byzantine Wars*, 137.

²²⁰*Ibid.*

²²¹Angold, *Byzantine Empire, 1025-1204: A Political History*, 130.

²²²Haldon, *Byzantine Wars*, 126, 137.

his release, the loss of prestige and the collapse of almost all of Asia Minor, Dyrrakhion looks much better from a military standpoint than Manzikert. Consider further that Romanus IV was immediately deposed while Alexios managed to keep his throne and eventually drove out the Normans. It seems impossible to believe that Dyrrakhion could have been as catastrophic as Angold claims. Certainly, considering these facts, Dyrrakhion cannot be considered a military disaster. Birkenmeier freely admits that a decisive defeat could have caused the end of the empire and the crowning of Guiscard as emperor.²²³ It would be hard to consider this a decisive defeat considering that Alexios would eventually defeat the Normans. However, Alexios would continue to suffer losses on the battlefield at the hands of Bohemond. Although it was severely crippled, the Byzantine army was not destroyed. As the enemy advanced deeper into the empire, Guiscard was called to Italy to help quell an uprising resulting from Alexios's diplomacy with Henry IV of Germany. However, once Henry learned of Alexios's defeat at Dyrrakhion, he promptly returned to his lands. Thankfully for Alexios, Guiscard had already returned to Italy, and this ploy bought the Byzantines precious time.

After Guiscard's departure, Byzantine forces fought back and gradually forced a Norman retreat. It was at Larissa that Alexios used his imperial standards to draw Bohemond away from his camp, and Alexios himself then attacked the unprotected camp.²²⁴ Alexios had learned his lesson in regards to meeting the Normans in open

²²³Birkenmeier, *Development of the Komnenian Army*, 70.

²²⁴Anna, *Alexiad*, 168-170.

combat.²²⁵ The main reason for the retreat of Norman forces, however, was Alexios's negotiations with Bohemond's counts. He bribed them to demand their wages from Bohemond, who was unable to produce them; thus, Bohemond was forced to return with them to Italy.²²⁶ This type of stratagem is outlined in numerous military texts.²²⁷ This first Norman attack on the empire would end in 1085 with the death of Robert Guiscard.

I believe, as the anonymous author of a Byzantine military manual claimed: "If our territory is unprotected and great danger would result from our refusal to join in battle, we must choose to fight."²²⁸ Alexios had no reasonable alternative but to attempt to stop Robert Guiscard and the Normans at Dyrrakhion. He had just obtained the throne, and Guiscard was the most serious threat to both Alexios and the empire. Had the Varangians not chased after the broken Norman right, it is possible that Alexios could have ended the Norman threat once and for all.²²⁹ Because Alexios had obtained the Venetians to cut off supply lines, Robert seemed completely surrounded by the coastline, Alexios's army, and the Venetians. Although the battle was lost, Alexios was not defeated. In fact, he eventually ended the threat by military negotiation with Henry IV

²²⁵Angold, *Byzantine Empire, 1025-1204: A Political History*, 131. I believe Alexios had actually learned his lesson prior to Larissa; however, his attempt to use caltrops and "chariots" to prevent the Norman heavy charge had failed and he was outflanked on both occasion. See Anna, *Alexiad*, 163-165. Finally, he fell back on the steppe-tactics used against Nikephorus Bryennius at Calavrytae and pure deception from Larissa onwards.

²²⁶Anna, *Alexiad*, 173.

²²⁷Vegetius, *De Re Militari*, 148. See also Maurice, *Strategikon*, 80 and Sun-Tzu, *Art of Warfare*, 104 and 111.

²²⁸Dennis, trans., *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*, 103.

²²⁹Haldon, *Byzantine Wars*, 133.

and by other diplomatic tactics, such as bribing Guiscard's counts to demand their pay.²³⁰ According to Maurice, "The general is at fault if most of the army is destroyed in a single battle."²³¹ Thankfully to Alexios, and more importantly to the empire, that did not occur.²³² If it had, Alexios would not have been able to slow the Norman advance. Furthermore, Alexios made the correct decision, calling upon Henry IV for aid. Clausewitz confirmed, "The outcome of a lost battle must not be taken as an argument for deciding on a new one; rather, any such decision must be based on the rest of the circumstances."²³³

Even more remarkably, after Guiscard and Bohemond returned to Italy, Alexios was able to negotiate the surrender of Dyrrakhion and other Norman occupied cities, thus retaking vital strongholds without shedding any further blood.²³⁴ By explaining the importance this type of strategy, Sun-Tzu supports the policy followed in Alexios's retaking of Dyrrakhion and his handling of the Normans: "Therefore, the best military policy is to attack strategies; the next to attack alliances; the next to attack soldiers; and the worst to assault walled cities."²³⁵ Thus, Alexios was able to attack the strategy of Guiscard and Bohemond by disrupting their plans through negotiation, and he crippled

²³⁰Anna, *Alexiad*, 126.

²³¹Maurice, *Strategikon*, 87.

²³²Haldon, *Byzantine Wars*, 137. Haldon suggests only 25 percent of the Byzantine troops were lost and that Norman casualties must have been fairly significant, given both wings initially broke.

²³³Clausewitz, *On War*, 243.

²³⁴Anna, *Alexiad*, 192-193.

²³⁵Sun-Tzu, *Art of Warfare*, 111.

the feudal alliance Guiscard had with his counts, ultimately, causing their withdrawal back to Italy. Unfortunately, for many in the Byzantine army, he had chosen to engage the Normans; however, the lessons learned at Dyrrakhion would not soon be forgotten. In the future Alexios would use skirmishing tactics to wear-down the Norman heavy cavalry, attempting to avoid their headlong charge.²³⁶ Lastly, Alexios managed to re-take Dyrrakhion without losing additional soldiers and preventing Bohemond from staging future assaults from such a strategic location. Angold ultimately exonerates Alexios: “It was a fortunate outcome, but it seemed to justify Alexius’s strategy...”²³⁷

As Haldon muses, “It is remarkable that, within a few years, he had succeeded so far as to be able to throw the Normans out of the Balkans and defeat the Pechenegs and the Seljuks—although in the case of the last enemy the arrival of the first crusade was undoubtedly an important factor in the recovery of Byzantine fortunes in Anatolia.”²³⁸

Alexios’s ability to think as a general, even in his political dealings, would be crucial to the Byzantines and an ability that his successors lacked, especially in regards to the Latins. Of course, it is argued by some, me included, that it was Alexios’s plan to recruit westerners to help regain parts of Anatolia—not, however, on the huge scale of the first crusade. Regardless, thanks to Alexios’s diplomatic skill, he was able to buy time for the empire and to allow himself to raise another army.

²³⁶In fact, Alexios would begin to use indirect warfare on the Normans as opposed to open battle as early as 1083 during his victory at Larissa. See Anna, *Alexiad*, 169-171.

²³⁷Angold, *Byzantine Empire, 1025-1204*, 131.

²³⁸Haldon, *Byzantine Wars*, 137.

Alexios's dealings with the Normans would not end here; in addition to the first crusade, Bohemond would attempt another assault on Dyrrakhion in 1107. Once again, Alexios was able to surround Bohemond, sever his supply lines, and guard essential passes. This time Alexios had been in power for a substantial period and could respond beforehand—unlike 1081, when the Normans were preparing to take Dyrrakhion, even before Alexios's ascension. Thankfully, for Alexios, Maurice was exact in his description of "...the Light-Haired Peoples, such as the Franks..."²³⁹ Maurice believed that the best way to deal with such foes was to sever supply lines and to avoid all-out battle.²⁴⁰ Alexios had learned that lesson against the Normans. He immediately guarded all the mountain passes, a tactic called for by Maurice.²⁴¹ To weaken the Norman cavalry Alexios disrupted Bohemond's foraging; another tactic endorsed by Maurice.²⁴² Alexios also used false letters to alienate Bohemond from some of his captains.²⁴³ Alexios followed Maurice's manual exactly this time, and he was able to force Bohemond into a humiliating treaty, the Treaty of Devol (1108).²⁴⁴ This campaign was one of Alexios's best examples of indirect warfare. He was also politically secure enough to engage in this type of warfare, as compared to his situation in 1081. In addition, the Treaty of

²³⁹Maurice, *Strategikon*, 119. See above for an explanation as to why Alexios did not adhere to Maurice's suggestions of indirect warfare initially against the Normans.

²⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 119-120.

²⁴¹*Ibid.*, 89.

²⁴²*Ibid.*, 64.

²⁴³Birkenmeier, *Development of the Komnenian Army*, 70.

²⁴⁴Dalven, *Anna Comnena*, 142.

Devol was very specific and exceptionally demanding on Bohemond.²⁴⁵ The treaty, had it been honored fully, would have been a brilliant piece of negotiating by Alexios.²⁴⁶ Regardless, discouraged by this defeat, Bohemond returned home where he died in 1108.²⁴⁷ With the death of Bohemond, Alexios was now free from the Norman threat in the west and could concentrate solely on the east.

Coordination with Crusade Armies

By 1095, both the Norman and tribal threats had been subdued, and Alexios turned his attention to the Turks and Asia Minor. The Byzantine Empire had been at war with the Turks for years; it waged war every day with these adversaries. In the past, as Alexios dealt with the Normans and Patzinaks, he had simply played the various Turkish sultans against one another in diplomatic ploy after ploy. Nonetheless, he needed manpower, and an answer to his plea to Pope Urban II finally came in 1096-1097. Alexios expected a manageable number of mercenaries to defend the empire.²⁴⁸ However, he was not prepared for the massive numbers that descended on Constantinople. He found himself confronted by wave after wave of skilled and unskilled western warriors, all demanding shelter and provisions. According to Lilie, Alexios's goal, "was to use this great army to support Byzantine interests as far as

²⁴⁵Ralph-Johannes Lilie, *Byzantium and the Crusader States: 1096-1204*, trans. J.C. Morris and Jean E Ridings (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 76-79.

²⁴⁶*Ibid*, 79-81.

²⁴⁷Anna, *Alexiad*, 435. This is Anna's date; however, some historians believe Bohemond died in 1111. See Lilie, *Byzantium and the Crusader States: 1096-1204*, 81.

²⁴⁸Lilie, *Byzantium and the Crusader States: 1096-1204*, 2.

possible without risking any direct confrontation and without neglecting or abandoning his own claims.²⁴⁹

Nevertheless, Alexios pledged his assistance and provided these necessities. This was confirmed in the *Gesta*: “The Emperor also pledged good faith and security for us all...would faithfully give us provisions, he would not cause or allow any pilgrims to be disturbed...”²⁵⁰ However, Alexios found that the crusaders were unruly and often violent. As the Lombards moved toward Byzantium, they sent messages to the emperor requesting market privileges. Alexios agreed to this request, subject to the good behavior of the crusaders. Despite their promise to the emperor, the crusaders began to pillage—first cattle and poultry, compounding this crime by eating the meat on Lent and on fast days. They also committed larger crimes—violating Greek shrines and committing various atrocities.

Alexios ordered them to Constantinople so he could watch them, but they continued to pillage and plunder. When he asked them to move across the Strait, they refused, and he had no recourse but to cut off their market privileges. They retaliated by attacking the palace at Blackernae, killing a young relative of the emperor. Alexios still did not resort to violence but again relied on diplomacy and generosity. He convinced the leaders to swear an oath of loyalty to him, and he insisted on ferrying them across the Strait, putting a safe distance between them and his people. The emperor was also a shrewd diplomat in his dealings with Hugh of Vermandois and Godfrey of Bouillon. He

²⁴⁹*Ibid*, 3.

²⁵⁰*Gesta Francorum*, as quoted in, *Chronicles of the Crusades: Eye Witness Accounts of the Wars Between Christianity and Islam*, ed. Elizabeth Hallam (Surrey: CLB International, 1989), 72.

received Hugh with great honor and lavish gifts, but in return he required a promise to restore imperial lands and an oath of allegiance to return future conquered lands. Hugh agreed, however Godfrey presented a problem. His troops had arrived before him and acted poorly, ravaging the land. Alexios sent Hugh to ask Godfrey to take an oath. When Godfrey refused, the emperor did not resort to violence but cut off his supplies in an attempt to control the crusaders and obtain Godfrey's loyalty. Godfrey raided the countryside and moved his army. Alexios, trying to negotiate a peaceful settlement, decided to provide supplies again.

More princes arrived; their troops acted poorly, and they refused to take the oath of loyalty. Alexios again cut off supplies. Godfrey attacked and pillaged. Alexios, still acting with restraint, ordered his army to fire arrows over the heads of Godfrey's men. He did not want to harm his "allies" or create more enemies. According to Anna, the Franks had attacked first, and the volley of arrows was only fired to frighten them into a truce.²⁵¹ The emperor once again asked Godfrey to meet him, but the members of the imperial embassy were attacked. Finally, Alexios had no choice but to send out his regular army against the unruly Franks.²⁵² He attacked his allies only to defend his people. When the princes finally agreed to the oath, Alexios transported their armies across the Bosphorus. Then Godfrey, Baldwin and the other leaders were entertained at a lavish banquet and rewarded with gifts of money as a reward for their loyalty to

²⁵¹Anna, *Alexiad*, 321.

²⁵²*Ibid*, 323.

Alexios.²⁵³ This is verified by Fulcher of Chartres in his account, “To them [the princes] indeed the Emperor himself offered as many numisma and garments of silk as pleased them and the horses and money which they needed for such a journey.”²⁵⁴ Alexios, even though besieged by supposed friends, had used common Byzantine tactics and strategy by employing minimal force in defense of his empire, by extracting an oath of loyalty, and by rewarding that “loyalty” generously.

The next event in this campaign, the siege of Nicaea in 1097, was a stroke of genius by Alexios. He was loyal to the crusaders by providing a flotilla to blockade the lake so the Turks could not receive messages and supplies. During the battle, Alexios moved himself to Pelecanum where he could communicate with both Nicaea and Constantinople. In addition, Alexios positioned his troops in such a manner that as any reinforcing Turkish force arrived, it would be the western army that would absorb the brunt of the Turkish assault. To the Byzantines, this was a common ploy—to allow barbarians, the Franks and Turks, to kill one another while the Byzantines watched.

While Alexios continued the ruse of helping the crusaders and their siege, he was secretly negotiating the surrender of the Turks. Anna claimed that, “it was wiser, they thought, to cede Nicaea voluntarily to Alexius and share in his gifts, with honourable treatment, than to become the victims of war to no purpose.”²⁵⁵ The Turks, believing

²⁵³Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire*, 285.

²⁵⁴Fulcher of Chartres, *Historia Hierosolymitana*, as presented in *A History of the Expedition to Jerusalem 1095-1127*, trans. Frances Rita Ryan, ed. Harold Fink (Knoxville: The University Of Tennessee Press, 1969), 80, Book I, Chapter IX.

²⁵⁵Anna, *Alexiad*, 334.

Alexios's claims, handed the city over to Boutoumites.²⁵⁶ While Boutoumites was inside the city, he let Taticius, whom Alexios ordered to aid the Franks in the siege, prepare a ruse that tricked the Franks into believing the city had been taken by force.²⁵⁷ Therefore, Alexios was able to capture Nicaea with virtually no loss of Greek lives. Sun-Tzu praised such actions: "So to win a hundred victories in a hundred battles is not the highest excellence; the highest excellence is to subdue the enemy's army without fighting at all."²⁵⁸ A further endorsement of Alexios's abilities was echoed in the following: "Therefore the expert in using the military subdues the enemy's forces without going to battle, takes the enemy's walled cities without launching an attack, and crushes the enemy's state without a protracted war."²⁵⁹ As Jonathan Shepard correctly states: "The Byzantine role in the reduction of Nicaea had been far from insignificant, but if the crusaders had known its precise nature, their sense of Alexios's double-dealing would have been all the sharper. Alexios essentially used them as bogeymen..."²⁶⁰ This simply reinforces the stroke of genius Alexios used to capture the city, especially since Anna claimed Alexios viewed it as an impenetrable fortress.²⁶¹

After the surrender, he allowed only a few crusaders into the city because he feared they would pillage and plunder. The emperor refused to let his future subjects

²⁵⁶*Ibid*, 337.

²⁵⁷*Ibid*, 337-338.

²⁵⁸Sun-Tzu, *Art of Warfare*, 111.

²⁵⁹*Ibid*.

²⁶⁰Shepard, "Father or Scorpion?," 124.

²⁶¹Anna, *Alexiad*, 336.

undergo a sack or to allow his relations with the Turks to worsen. Other chroniclers of the period told stories of Alexios and his use of negotiation and tribute in order to avoid conflicts and to gain loyalty. In the capture of Nicaea, Raymond related the rewards that Alexios proposed to the Franks to gain their approval of the surrender: “Alexios had promised...the Franks that he would give them all the gold, silver horses, and goods in the city...besides he would give the army so much of his own possessions that they would always want to fight for him.”²⁶² Fulcher gave the same account of this occurrence; Alexios ordered the wealth of the city to be dispersed among the army and its leaders. Stephen also praised the generosity of the emperor; he described Alexios as a great ruler who distributed the spoils of the city.²⁶³

However, the crusaders saw his compassion and kindness differently and were infuriated by the emperor’s intervention. They felt robbed of riches, ransom, and glory. Many considered Alexios guilty of treason, which would lead to further claims by Bohemond and others as to Alexios’s two-faced nature. Alexios, in another adept move, returned the captured Sultana to her husband without the common ransom demand. This was one of his more critical moves, which allowed Alexios to keep his agreement with the Turks secret. On the other hand, there is little controversy that Alexios was very generous to the crusaders at Nicaea. Every one of them was given a great gift of food, and their leaders were given gold and jewels from the sultan’s treasury.²⁶⁴ Stephen of

²⁶²Raymond of Toulouse as presented in Krey, *The First Crusades: The Accounts of Eyewitnesses and Participants* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1958), 104.

²⁶³*Ibid.*, 106-108.

²⁶⁴Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire*, 291.

Blois praised the emperor. He wrote to his wife that he was received with great affection and given precious gifts. Stephen confirmed that Alexios sent ships carrying food and supplies to Nicaea to feed the poor. He greatly admired Alexios I as shown in the following: “Truly I tell you, in our day there is not another such man living under heaven. For he is most generous to all leaders, he assists all knights with gifts and he refreshes all the poor with feasting.”²⁶⁵

Alexios, although he did not participate in the siege of Antioch, was very instrumental in its successful capture by the crusaders. Alexios desired to aid the Franks personally, but he discovered that his Turkish enemies were moving against him. He recognized the danger of venturing so far into the interior of Asia Minor leaving not only Nicaea but also, more importantly, Constantinople unguarded.²⁶⁶ However, Bernard Bachrach argues that Byzantine naval support was crucial to the siege of Antioch.²⁶⁷ In an exceptionally detailed logistical analysis, Bachrach declares that support by sea is the only viable option that the crusaders would have been able to sustain in the nine-month siege of Antioch.²⁶⁸ He continues to support his claim by pointing out that the crusaders continued to use coastal paths on their conquest of the Holy Lands and further supports Byzantine involvement.²⁶⁹ If Bachrach is correct, which I conclude he is, this would not

²⁶⁵Stephen of Blois, as presented in Hallam, *Chronicles of the Crusades: Eye Witness Accounts of the Wars Between Christianity and Islam*, 72.

²⁶⁶Anna, *Alexiad*, 349-350.

²⁶⁷Bernard S. Bachrach, “Some Observations on the Role of the Byzantine Navy in the Success of the First Crusade,” *Journal of Medieval Military History* I (2002) : 85-86.

²⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 89.

²⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 96.

be surprising. Alexios would have had numerous reasons to continue to aid the crusaders. First, he would have expected that Antioch would be returned to Byzantium. In addition, Maurice was also clear that “In no way should a sworn agreement made with the enemy be broken.”²⁷⁰ Although in this case the crusaders were supposed to be allies, with Bohemond involved and the existing enmities between the east and west, Alexios, always thinking as a general, would, most likely, have honored his oath.

It is truly amazing that he was able to expedite the movement through his empire of tens of thousands of crusaders on their quest to reclaim Jerusalem. It is quite clear from any source, whether eastern or western, that one false move and the crusaders could have very well turned on Alexios and attacked Constantinople, as they would eventually do in 1203 and 1204. Diplomatic and strategic ploys, as outlined in the *Strategikon*, managed to avert the ultimate result of the Fourth Crusade for another century. As Jonathan Shepard so eloquently puts it, “Alexios’s handling of the first crusade is an elaborate set-piece, illustrating his skill in protecting the empire—or at least the City—from a huge onrush of Latins, who might easily have been manoeuvred by their leaders into seizing Constantinople.”²⁷¹

Birkenmeier incorrectly states, “Before the arrival of the Crusaders, Alexios had no coherent eastern policy.”²⁷² Actually, the crusaders were the eastern policy of Alexios. To deal with the Turkish threat he had previously sought aid from westerners

²⁷⁰Maurice, *Strategikon*, 82.

²⁷¹Shepard, “‘Father’ or ‘Scorpion’?”, 68.

²⁷²Birkenmeier, *Development of the Komnenian Army*, 72.

prior to the crusade. As he was faced with many threats prior to 1095, he had been forced to deal first with the most immediate ones—the Normans, then the Patzinaks, and lastly the Cumans. Although the eastern frontier did not succeed as much as Alexios had hoped, it does not mean that he did not have a strategy for it. Clearly, the Latins were expected to return previous Byzantine holdings and act as type of a buffer or distraction for the Turks. Prior to the first crusade, the Turks were usually only interested in raiding before retreating into Turkish lands. Alexios correctly assumed that there was no threat to his throne or to the survival of the empire—at least, in the short term.

Confronting Tribes and Turks

Not only were the Normans a threat but also the Patzinaks, Cumans and Turks. Early in his reign, Alexios chose simply to manipulate the various Turkish emirs into bickering amongst themselves; when necessary, however, Alexios would order raids into Turkish lands. It is not surprising that these tactics were outlined in Maurice.²⁷³ Birkenmeier suggests that the Byzantine tactics were similar: “His (Alexios’s) strategy was to attack and retreat, offer battle when expedient, flee and again skirmish as soon as the enemy had turned its back.”²⁷⁴ However, by 1087 the Patzinaks were a significant threat to the northern borders of the empire. In 1087 at Dristra, Alexios crushed a large force of Patzinaks; however, he was defeated soundly when, according to Anna, he decided to press his advantage, and thirty-six thousand Patzinak reinforcements

²⁷³Maurice, *Strategikon*, 96-100 and 116-120.

²⁷⁴Birkenmeier, *Development of the Komnenian Army*, 70.

arrived.²⁷⁵ Alexios had made the mistake of venturing too far into enemy territory and away from his base of operations. He had over-extended his supply lines and was forced to fight rather than retreat, constantly being harassed by the more mobile Patzinaks. Thankfully, for Alexios, the Cumans, then allied with the Patzinaks, demanded pay for their services even though they were late arriving and had not participated in the battle. When the Patzinaks refused their demand, the Cumans attacked and drove away their former allies—buying Alexios time to regroup.²⁷⁶

Tzachas, the Emir of Smyrna, allied with the Patzinaks to attack the empire from all sides—land and sea. This assault began in the winter of 1090-1091. The plan was that Tzachas's fleet would strike Constantinople from the sea while the Patzinaks assailed its walls. When the Cuman army arrived, it seemed the empire's enemies were unending. Although Alexios had met with some success against the tribes in the past, he thought it best to manipulate another tribe into defeating the Patzinaks. In a dangerous yet brilliant move, Alexios courted and gained the help of the Cumans in the struggle with the Patzinaks. As Norwich relates, "And so, just as Leo the Wise had called in the Magyars against Symeon of Bulgaria almost exactly two centuries before, Alexius Comnenus now appealed to the Cumans."²⁷⁷ In 1091, Alexios's army with the help of the Cumans destroyed the Patzinaks at Lebunium. Thanks to this monumental victory, the Patzinaks

²⁷⁵ Anna, *Alexiad*, 224-225. It should also be noted that Alexios was undoubtedly outnumbered again, considering he linked his infantry and cavalry together.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 228-229.

²⁷⁷ Norwich, *Byzantium: Decline and Fall*, 26. According to Anna, there were 40,000 Cumans. See Anna, *Alexiad*, 253.

would cease to be a threat to the empire. Norwich believes it to have been "...by far the most decisive victory to have been won by the Byzantine army in the field since the days of Basil II. Not only did it deliver the Empire for the next thirty years from the Pecheneg menace; it provided a healthy example for other tribes..."²⁷⁸

On the Turkish front, John Ducas eventually was able to defeat Tzachas thanks to the advice of Alexios. The emperor sent John, who had already been beaten twice, a message to fight in the evening when the enemy will be facing the sun.²⁷⁹ Anna described this battle: "At the time a strong wind was blowing and when they came to close quarters a dust cloud rose high in the air. The barbarians had the sun glaring into their faces and the dust, blown into their eyes by the wind, partly blinded them..."²⁸⁰ In Roman military lore, such a strategy was believed to be one reason Hannibal defeated the Roman army at Cannae (216 B.C.E.). That, of course, and the double envelopment of the Roman forces. Perhaps, at least in this case, Anna's claim that Alexios was another Hannibal can be substantiated.²⁸¹ Although Alexios was not participating in this particular engagement, his military knowledge played a factor. This exact maxim was delineated in Maurice: "It is a good idea to maneuver so that the sun, wind, and dust are behind our men and in the face of the enemy. By so obscuring his vision and making his

²⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 27.

²⁷⁹Anna, *Alexiad*, 270-271.

²⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 271.

²⁸¹*Ibid.*, 32-33.

breathing difficult, we should quickly be victorious.”²⁸² Vegetius also warned about the sun, the wind and the dust. He advised, “The sun in your face dazzles the sight: if the wind is against you, it turns aside and blunts the force of your weapons...”²⁸³ Although Tzachas was defeated, he would return. Rather than continue to confront Tzachas’s forces and lose valuable soldiers in the process, Alexios caused dissension within the enemy, and convinced Tzachas’s son-in-law, Kilij Arslan, to kill Tzachas and usurp the throne. Alexios then signed a treaty with the new sultan, ensuring the safety of his empire. Such a deceptive tactic had been advocated by Maurice, Vegetius, and Sun-Tzu alike.²⁸⁴

With the Turks and Patzinaks contained, the Cumans certainly were not initially impressed. It was not until 1094 that Alexios would regain control over the Balkans and keep the Cumans in check.²⁸⁵ Perhaps this victory, along with the near genocide of the Patzinaks, put the fear of Alexios into the Cumans. The Cumans tried to invade Phillippopolis in 1114. Once it was discovered that Alexios would lead the Byzantines into battle, the Cumans dispersed.²⁸⁶ Whether this was fear of being eradicated, or whether Alexios simply bribed them to return home is unknown.

²⁸²Maurice, *Strategikon*, 86.

²⁸³Vegetius, *De Re Militari*, 153.

²⁸⁴Maurice, *Strategikon*, 116. See also Vegetius, *De Re Militari*, 148 and Sun-Tzu, *The Art of Warfare*, 111.

²⁸⁵Angold, *Byzantine Empire, 1025-1204: A Political History*, 134.

²⁸⁶Dalven, *Anna Comnena*, 120.

CHAPTER V

ALEXIOS AS MILITARY STRATEGIST

Establishing a Base of Operations

Birkenmeier claims that the internal politics of the empire were much less complex and more stable when Alexios ascended the throne in 1081.²⁸⁷ I find it hard to believe such a claim given the tremendous internal upheaval in the decade prior. Birkenmeier contradicts himself by admitting that Alexios faced numerous coup attempts.²⁸⁸ Such a series of events is hardly conducive to a stable and unified political environment. Alexios was eventually able to establish unity and found a dynasty—if for no other reason than the hands-on approach he applied to everything. His style of leadership and rule kept most of the power within his immediate grasp. Alexios’s intelligence-network and power base must have been exceptional to root out so many coup attempts.

Sun-Tzu believed that “It is best to keep one’s own state intact.”²⁸⁹ I doubt we needed to be reminded by the greatest military strategist in history that one must have a strong base of operations to succeed in warfare or politics. However, to secure his reign, the first and most important move that Alexios made as emperor was to create new government offices for his immediate family. In addition, those noble families who supported him were also rewarded with high-ranking positions within the court. This

²⁸⁷Birkenmeier, *Development of the Komnenian Army*, 235.

²⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 82.

²⁸⁹Sun-Tzu, *Art of Warfare*, 111.

would allow him to solidify his position on the throne, while also having those he could control in key positions of the government and military.²⁹⁰ Using these deft governmental reforms and key political alliances, he was able to halt the disintegration of the Byzantine state and re-solidify the empire. Having loyal, military commanders in strategic strongholds would allow Alexios to keep his army prepared to move at his will and in his delegated control.

Although blatant nepotism is not necessarily the most effective governmental system, Alexios had few other options. During the decade of rebellions prior to Alexios's coup, the lack of loyal generals was clear. While numerous titles were created and given generously, Alexios was still hesitant to delegate too much authority as that had greatly contributed to the rebellions prior to his ascension. Any distant relation of the emperor or even that of a deposed emperor could gain access to an imperial army and stake a claim to the throne. In the later years of his reign, Alexios would begin to delegate more responsibility, particularly in the east.

This sort of governmental organization would certainly have had the feel of a military occupation rather than of a civil state. However, given the ten years of civil war and the condition of the empire prior to his ascension, personal and family security were initially his primary concerns. Once he was firmly entrenched, perhaps then he could give the entire scope of the problem its due attention. That attitude should be the expected strategy of a military mindset. In order to advance, whether on the battlefield or in the political arena, a leader must first have a solid base with which to operate. This

²⁹⁰Birkenmeier, *Development of the Komnenian Army*, 128.

step would serve as a building block for the rest of his military and diplomatic strategy. Alexios worked to fortify key positions in the provinces, particularly in the Balkans, by placing loyal family members in military power. According to Paul Magdalino, “The Komnenian family and their affinity were largely a military aristocracy, and it was primarily in the military sphere that Alexios was served by his relatives.”²⁹¹ This is not a surprising fact from an emperor who remained a general throughout his long reign.

According to Kaegi, the fault with the early Byzantine military structure is that the emperor, in fact, did not take the field. It was considered an unnecessary risk, and generals led the armies while the emperor stayed out of the fight. He argues that this “required him (Justinian) to entrust the decision making to generals who sometimes even acted as diplomats plenipotentiary.”²⁹² This attitude was a contributing factor in the military crises of the middle to late eleventh century. Although Romanus IV had gone into battle, it was obvious what could happen to an emperor in an unsuccessful battle. Alexios had to be exceptionally careful with both himself and those he chose to trust. Whittow claims that “on the eve of the Turkish invasions Byzantium did not have a militarized aristocracy based in the provinces and linked with central government and the imperial court.”²⁹³ Alexios would cure this ill, particularly in the western provinces of the empire.

²⁹¹Paul Magdalino, “Innovations in Government,” in *Alexios I Komnenos*, 152.

²⁹²Kaegi, *Some Thoughts on Byzantine Military Strategy*, 5.

²⁹³Shepard, “‘Father’ or ‘Scorpion’?,” 66.

Indirect and Political Warfare As Primary Military Policy

Indirect Warfare

On the Byzantine ideal of ‘indirect warfare,’ Peter Woodrow believes that Maurice’s *Strategikon* is the ultimate text. In addition to Maurice, Sun-Tzu also subscribed to the ideas of indirect warfare. In his words, “The direct method may be used for joining battle, but indirect methods will be needed in order to secure victory.”²⁹⁴ Therefore, the numerous uses of ambushes, bribing, false letters, and skirmishing tactics should be considered masterful. According to Maurice, “Our commander ought to adapt his stratagems to the disposition of the enemy general.” This idea was a stark contrast to Sun-Tzu.²⁹⁵ Combined with his views on deception and diplomacy, Alexios would have been praised as one of the ultimate Byzantine generals by Maurice without question. Sun-Tzu also proclaimed that is always the best policy to attack strategies rather than troops.²⁹⁶

It is clear that Alexios heeded numerous texts on military strategy and must have been well versed in the Byzantine ideals of war. For example, as stated by Kaegi, “The anonymous strategist recommended that, “If the enemy attacks and we are unable to respond” the Byzantines should raise up other nations to force the enemy to call off his intentions.”²⁹⁷ Given the dire situation prior to Alexios’s coup and his loss of a quarter of

²⁹⁴*Ibid.*, 31.

²⁹⁵Maurice, *Strategikon*, 87. See also Sun-Tzu, *The Art of Warfare*, 123-127.

²⁹⁶Sun-Tzu, *Art of Warfare*, 111.

²⁹⁷Kaegi, *Some Thoughts on Byzantine Military Strategy*, 6.

his army at Dyrrakhion, it is no surprise that he depended upon the Turks, Patzinaks, Cumans, and Franks to increase his troops. Alexios consistently relied on mercenaries and various tribes throughout his entire reign.²⁹⁸ In 1090-1091, he took the huge risk of keeping a Cuman army camped outside of Constantinople to aid in the battle against the Patzinaks.²⁹⁹ Had the Cumans betrayed the trust of the Byzantines and sided with the Patzinaks, the results could have been disastrous. Fortunately, Alexios was skilled enough to control the situation. Early in his reign, such a strategy was clearly used out of necessity because of the severe lack of available manpower. However, he continued this policy even in circumstances when it was not critical to the empire's survival. Whether, as Shepard believes, Alexios had a certain disdain for the common Byzantine recruit or he simply wished to keep his subjects out of harm's way is uncertain.³⁰⁰ Most likely, Alexios realized that the numerous foreigners he kept in his army, such as the Franks, Turks, Patzinaks, and Cumans, displayed a more warlike nature and were better soldiers than the native Greek recruits he had left after the Turkish occupation of Asia Minor.

Kaegi also argues that, "a critical element was a readiness to exploit uncertainties while minimizing one's own casualties, preferring a combination of artifices, diplomacy, delay, dissimulation, sowing dissention, corruption, and above all, employing caution and

²⁹⁸Vegetius would have opposed this strategy, as he believed that mercenaries were more expensive than the Roman legions; however, such a view would have been archaic at best and given the shortage of manpower the empire faced, mercenaries were essential. See Vegetius, *De Re Militari*, 96.

²⁹⁹Anna, *Alexiad*, 253-254.

³⁰⁰Shepard, "'Father' or 'Scorpion'?", 102. Although I believe Shepard is probably correct, Alexios certainly did have the welfare of his subjects in mind.

the indirect approach to warfare, in an effort to reduce risk and gambling in warfare.”³⁰¹ Even Clausewitz would certainly agree with the last statement about the need to reduce the idea of gambling in warfare: “If we now consider briefly the *subjective nature* of war—the means by which war has to be fought—it will look more than ever like a gamble... In the whole range of human activities, war most closely resembles a game of cards.”³⁰² Alexios negotiated every angle and employed numerous ruses both on and off the battlefield to reduce the potential risks his forces might face in the field.

Political Military Strategy

As Woodrow believes, Byzantine military and political strategy indeed depended mainly on diplomacy.³⁰³ This sentiment is echoed by Jonathan Shepard in his article entitled “‘Father’ or ‘Scorpion’? Style and Substance in Alexios’s Diplomacy.”³⁰⁴ Without question, I concur with both of their interpretations of Alexios’s actions. However, like Shepard, I agree that his diplomatic maneuvers were greatly influenced by his background as a general.³⁰⁵ In fact, I would take Shepard’s hypothesis even further and argue that military factors were Alexios’s main consideration if not his sole drive in negotiations. However, the indirect effects of treaties were not lost on Alexios; his concessions to Venice, though much maligned by many Byzantinists, served the empire

³⁰¹Kaegi, *Some Thoughts on Byzantine Military Strategy*, 10

³⁰²Clausewitz, *On War*, 85.

³⁰³Woodrow, “Byzantine Military Technology and Strategy,” 6.

³⁰⁴Shepard, “‘Father’ or ‘Scorpion’?,” 68-132.

³⁰⁵*Ibid.*, 92-93.

in other ways besides support militarily.³⁰⁶ His abilities to act as a diplomatic general were the main reason his reign was so long, if not always peaceful.

Alexios was very effective in avoiding war with the use of treaties, tribute payments, and manipulation. He constantly did this with the Turks prior to the first crusade. In fact, his early successes against the Normans, as limited as they were on the battlefield, depended upon such a strategy. He would consistently use such stratagems with the numerous tribes with which he was forced to deal. He would continue this policy throughout his reign. One such incident is related by Anna: Alexios, to avoid further battle against the Turks, said “you will receive liberal gifts...if you reject it, you can be sure of this: I will exterminate your race.”³⁰⁷ He continued his negotiations and according to Anna, “He (Manalugh) promised to ratify the agreements on the next day.”³⁰⁸ Sun-Tzu would have been impressed.³⁰⁹

Clausewitz would have high praise for Alexios, as he would “argue that a commander-in-chief must also be a statesman, but he must not cease to be a general. On the one hand, he is aware of the entire political situation; on the other, he knows exactly how much he can achieve with the means at his disposal.”³¹⁰ As Alexios ruled from the capital, he also marched into the field, conducted his own diplomacy, and appointed loyal

³⁰⁶The concessions made to Venice in 1082 not only provided Alexios with a powerful ally against the Normans but also revived the Byzantine economy and required Venetian aid in the future since they essentially enjoyed their status from Alexios himself and, therefore, could feel compelled to defend him. See below.

³⁰⁷Anna, *Alexiad*, 488.

³⁰⁸*Ibid.*

³⁰⁹Sun-Tzu, *Art of Warfare*, 136.

³¹⁰Clausewitz, *On War*, 111-112.

family members to military posts who would follow his orders without question.

Alexios's ability and desire to actively participate in his dual role as emperor and general closely resemble Clausewitz's description: "To bring a war, or one of its campaigns, to a successful close requires a thorough grasp of national policy. On that level strategy and policy coalesce: the commander-in-chief is simultaneously a statesman."³¹¹ It should be noted here, although it should be clear to any historian, that Alexios brought all of his wars to a successful conclusion.

As Walter E. Kaegi states in his *Some Thoughts on Byzantine Military Strategy*, "Few Byzantinists read the substantial corpus of Byzantine strategic texts, or even any one of them, and yet they are a very characteristic part of Byzantine intellectual activities."³¹² I would add to Kaegi's statement that much of Byzantine culture is also apparent within the pages of military texts. Kaegi, however, finds himself falling into the trap of a semantical argument when he states, "The masking of intentions, the employment of ruses and deceptions attained a level of perfection under Belasarios that later Byzantine captains never equaled."³¹³ Perhaps when Kaegi mentioned 'captains,' he was omitting Alexios from this list. However, if Clausewitz is to be believed or given any weight, one must remember that military operations and political ruses are inexorably tied at all times. For example:

It is possible to increase the likelihood of success without defeating the enemy's forces. I refer to operations that have *direct political*

³¹¹*Ibid.*

³¹²Kaegi, *Some Thoughts on Byzantine Military Strategy*, 3.

³¹³*Ibid.*, 5.

repercussions, that are designed in the first place to disrupt the opposing alliance, or to paralyze it, that gain us new allies, favorably affect the political scene, etc. If such operations are possible it is obvious that they can greatly improve our prospects and that they can form a much shorter route to the goal than the destruction of the opposing armies.³¹⁴

Sun-Tzu also believed that “the commander is the side-guard on the carriage of state. Where this guard is in place, the state will certainly be strong; where it is defective, the state will certainly be weak.”³¹⁵ Certainly few, if any, would argue that the Byzantine state was in worse shape in 1118 than in 1081. Sun-Tzu’s claim becomes all the more powerful if the general also happens to be the emperor. Clausewitz explained, “We see, therefore, that war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means.”³¹⁶ In addition, he concluded, “The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose.”³¹⁷ In short, policy and war must be intertwined at all times. In Byzantine society, it is clear from the *Strategikon* that military and diplomatic ruses both fell under their concept of ‘war.’ Alexios was a master at achieving his purpose, in many instances without the use of Clausewitz’s idea of ‘war’—that is using battle as a means to an end. In some instances, simply the threat of battle would suffice for Alexios to gain his objective; but that tactic too falls under the Byzantine concept of war. Sometimes, Alexios was able to use diplomacy to end a

³¹⁴Clausewitz, *On War*, 92-93.

³¹⁵Sun-Tzu, *Art of Warfare*, 112.

³¹⁶Clausewitz, *On War*, 87.

³¹⁷*Ibid.*

campaign or prevent one; that falls under the definition of Byzantine ‘warfare.’ Therefore, given the nature of Alexios’s successes, he must be regarded in the same breath as Belasarios—not that he conquered as many lands (which would be lost nevertheless), but that he was able to implement ruses to perfection both on the field of battle, with properly trained troops, and especially off the field of battle. Shepard reinforces both this statement and my opinion when he concludes that, “And, as our glance at Alexios’ technique suggests, much of this ‘diplomacy’ consists of tactical maneuvers applied by Alexios himself in the course of, or in liason with, military campaigning.”³¹⁸

Jonathan Shepard mentions, “Nonetheless, Alexios does seem to have been outstanding, and original, in his ability to orchestrate straightforward military qualities such as courage and tactical skills with diplomatic ploys.”³¹⁹ Maurice also preached, “...the general ought to be ready, even after victory, to listen to proposals of the enemy for peace on advantageous terms.”³²⁰ If this is truly the essence of Byzantine warfare, then, indeed, Alexios was surpassed by none. Alexios, given the numerous problems he inherited, had no choice but to always be willing to listen to peace offerings, particularly if they heavily favored the Byzantine Empire, but even when he could obtain only small concessions—the Treaty of Devol was a prime example. Alexios chose not to completely

³¹⁸Shepard, “‘Father’ or ‘Scorpion’?,” 91-92.

³¹⁹*Ibid.*, 100.

³²⁰Maurice, *Strategikon*, 87.

humiliate his archenemy even though he had dealt him a crippling blow at Dyrrakhion in 1108.

Adherence to Military Texts

Although Byzantine warfare was heavily dependent on indirect warfare, Kaegi claims, “The greatest weakness of these techniques of ruses, deception, clever stratagems and commitment to war of slow attrition was the development of excessive overconfidence and intellectualism in military operations.”³²¹ While the latter may apply to rulers other than Alexios I, certainly he did not over intellectualize the principles of basic warfare. When he was forced by circumstance to fight, he usually did so effectively. Alexios was exceptionally careful to avoid battle unless it was necessary to the survival of the empire, but when he did go to battle, it was not without careful thought and planning. Sun Tzu said, “Do not repeat the tactics which have gained you one victory, but let your methods be regulated by the infinite variety of circumstances.”³²² Maurice also warned about this weakness in a general.³²³ Alexios was perhaps guilty of relying too much on ambushes; however, given the lack of troops, especially early in his reign, perhaps such a repetition could be understandable. Sun-Tzu and Maurice both agree that warfare has an immeasurable number of variables, which can never be accounted for by any general. Clausewitz would echo this ideal over two millennia after

³²¹Kaegi, *Some Thoughts on Byzantine Military Strategy*, 10.

³²²*Ibid.*, 36.

³²³Maurice, *Strategikon*, 80.

Sun-Tzu. Much like Maurice, Sun-Tzu stated, “In surrounding the enemy, leave him a way out; do not press an enemy that is cornered.”³²⁴ Vegetius also agreed with this assessment.³²⁵ Alexios was careful to destroy an enemy when he had the chance—the Patzinaks in 1091 is a good example; however, he also realized the danger in pressing a surrounded foe too hard. Rather than attempt to completely destroy Bohemond’s army in 1108 at Dyrrakhion, Alexios chose to accept peace negotiations, even after his victory.³²⁶

Kaegi also claims that there was no attempt at a ‘grand strategy’ in Byzantine military texts. ‘Grand strategy’ is essentially the mobilization and implementation of a nation’s resources for a particular military strategy. Kaegi’s claim is true, although Alexios seems to have followed the ideas Constantine VII Porphyrogenitos, whom Dennis claims seemed to be the closest to a ‘grand strategy.’³²⁷ As Jonathan Shepard states, “Besides this medley of diplomatic devices, Alexios’s general means of dealing with foreign peoples or groupings call to mind certain textbook axioms of Byzantine diplomacy, notable *De Administrando*.”³²⁸ Not only did he shape his diplomacy largely around the *De Administrando*, but he also adhered closely to Maurice in dealing with foreign peoples, whether on or off the battlefield. Shepard continues by stating, “Alexios’s efforts to divert the Normans through a German intervention into southern

³²⁴Sun-Tzu, *Art of Warfare*, 132.

³²⁵Vegetius, *De Re Militari*, 164.

³²⁶Maurice, *Strategikon*, 87.

³²⁷Kaegi, *Some Thoughts on Byzantine Military Strategy*, 15.

³²⁸Shepard, “‘Father’ or ‘Scorpion’?,” 82.

Italy would have been appreciated by Constantine Porphyrogenitos.”³²⁹ Obviously, anytime a general can force an enemy to fight on two fronts, he will certainly have the advantage. In addition, Alexios would use this strategy when he discovered the number of crusaders he had to deal with in 1096. If he could surround Turkish territories with Christian provinces, the Turks would not be able to concentrate their full might against Constantinople, and Alexios could reclaim at least the western parts of Asia Minor. Perhaps this is one reason the Treaty of Devol was so lenient and why Alexios so quickly accepted Bohemond’s request for peace. Once more, Shepard contradicts Kaegi by claiming, “The starkest example of Alexios’s application of ‘divide and rule’ concerns, appropriately, the steppe-nomads, the principle object of Constantine VII’s injunction.”³³⁰ By consistently inciting internal disputes among the Turks in Asia Minor, Alexios was able to give his full attention to more pressing matters in the early years of his reign. Finally, Shepard concludes his opinion on this matter with the following: “In his hand-outs of money and titles, in his assumption that he could orchestrate the movements of barbarian hosts and in his frequent recourse to ‘divide and rule’ and ‘carrot and stick’, Alexios ranks as a true disciple of Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos.”³³¹ It is quite evident that Alexios attempted to combine all aspects of his reign into a military policy...it was simply impossible to keep politics and war separate, especially considering the personality of Alexios, the situation he faced, and the doctrines of

³²⁹*Ibid.*, 82.

³³⁰*Ibid.*, 83.

³³¹*Ibid.*, 91.

Byzantine culture and warfare. Even though Alexios never published a manual on his ‘world view,’ nor did any other Byzantine ruler or general, his reign was an example of how following the maxims of Maurice the ideal Byzantine emperor-general should conduct diplomacy and campaigns.³³² I would argue that Alexios was exceptionally successful and did have a ‘grand strategy’ for the empire.

Maurice also agreed with Sun-Tzu’s assessment of war: “Hence, if one is not fully cognizant of the evils of waging war, he cannot be fully cognizant either of how to turn it to best account.”³³³ Alexios used caution and surveyed the circumstances before he charged into battle, a key ingredient for any Byzantine general, particularly an emperor. For example, Anna described a situation where the Turks had plundered a camp and fled. Although the Byzantines wanted to chase down the barbarians swiftly, they “meditated” and decided to proceed slowly because the horses were tired. How effective could the Byzantine cavalry possibly have been with exhausted horses, particularly against a more mobile foe?³³⁴

Perhaps one of the most important maxims mentioned by Sun Tzu is “the good fighter is able to secure himself against defeat, but cannot make certain of defeating the enemy.”³³⁵ Although Alexios may have lost battles, resulting in damage to prestige or loss of lives, he was always able to stave off complete defeat. Loss of life is not

³³²*Ibid.*, 15.

³³³Sun-Tzu, *Art of Warfare*, 107-108.

³³⁴Vegetius, *De Re Militari*, 151.

³³⁵*Ibid.*, 29.

unexpected in war; but Alexios always did his best to keep the losses at a minimum. A lesser general would have certainly not been able to keep the empire intact after Dyrrakhion in 1081, or in 1087 against the Patzinaks, or even during the first crusade. Sun-Tzu argued: “It is best to keep one’s own state intact; to crush the enemy’s state is only a second best.”³³⁶ Alexios was certainly able to keep his state intact at a time where it seemed certain to shatter.

In every battle, save Dyrrakhion, he followed the Byzantine military manuals exactly, particularly the ideals of Maurice and Leo. Actually, in the battle of Dyrrakhion in 1081, Alexios did follow the principles of Byzantine warfare in combat; however, according to those same principles, he should have never engaged the Normans. Generally outnumbered, he did not always emerge victorious in battle, particularly early in his career. In addition to Maurice and Leo, Alexios sometimes seemed familiar with the theories of Vegetius although direct or even indirect exposure is highly doubtful (unless, by some chance Maurice had some exposure to Vegetius’s work prior to writing his *Strategikon*). Regardless, Alexios would be forced to adapt his own tactics to match those of his enemies. In many cases, these strategies resembled those timeless principles of warfare from Sun-Tzu or Clausewitz. Such an adaptation suggests that either he was very well educated in military warfare manuals, or he was able to extrapolate what was needed to combat the better equipped and more aggressive Norman army. Most likely, both seem to be the case. It is, I think, abundantly clear that Alexios was very well educated in Byzantine numerous military texts. This certainly would not be unexpected

³³⁶Sun-Tzu, *Art of Warfare*, 111.

for someone from a noble family such as the Komneni—one so interested in history that a daughter would emerge as one of Byzantium’s greatest historians.

Although Alexios followed Maurice’s handbook closely, he did devise at least one new formation. According to Anna, the emperor “taught them the new battle formation which he himself had invented.”³³⁷ This formation was to be used against the Turks during his last campaign: “...the Turks would have to shoot from their right at the Roman left (which was protected by the shield); the Romans, on the contrary, would shoot *left*-handed at the Turkish exposed right.”³³⁸ Anna described the formation:

The lines were now drawn up in the new formation with all the prisoners in the centre, as well as the women and children...all along the route the march proceeded in perfect safety; in fact, if you had seen it, you would have said that these men marching in his new formation constituted a city with bastions, living and on the move.³³⁹

Even in his creation of this new formation, Alexios was following Maurice’s guidelines of being flexible. He followed the strategies that had been successful but improvised when he deemed it necessary.

Seemingly, ‘tactics’ played less of an integral part of Alexios’s success than his overall ‘strategy.’ Although Alexios was a competent tactician on the battlefield, this skill was not what led to his ultimate successes. Alexios had the unique ability among later Byzantine emperors to detect the greatest threats to the empire and deal with them in whatever way necessary. He lost battles, in some instances armies. However, regardless

³³⁷Anna, *Alexiad*, 478.

³³⁸*Ibid.*, 480. Sewter suggests that if this was truly the formation that Alexios devised, the formation could be altered constantly with the movement of the Turks.

³³⁹*Ibid.*

of the setback, he always had a secondary or even tertiary plan—whether inciting tribal conflicts, liberal bribing of enemies, relying on mercenaries, or using military-minded diplomacy to masterfully manipulate any situation to his advantage. In addition, Alexios fought few sieges; Sun-Tzu would have appreciated such a general.³⁴⁰ I think Alexios would have also been lauded as an exceptional general to Clausewitz. Where Clausewitz saw battle as the “*means to the end*,” Alexios was able to use not only battle but also diplomacy and bribery equally well.³⁴¹

Overall Accomplishments of Military Policy

Alexios was outnumbered at Dyrrakhion in 1081 by the Normans and very heavily outnumbered at Dristra in 1087 by the Patzinaks.³⁴² These battles were his main losses in his thirty-seven year reign. For Alexios to be outnumbered was not uncommon. As Clausewitz reminded us, “In tactics, as in strategy, superiority of numbers is the most common element in victory.”³⁴³ In *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*, a Byzantine author claimed, “The general must be judged on his actions, and it is preferable that he be chosen for command on the basis of his record.”³⁴⁴ There are numerous points here that

³⁴⁰Birkenmeier, *Development of Komnenian Army*, 182. He attributes this to Alexios fighting mainly defensive battles. While that is partially true there were several important cities he was able to retake without having to resort to a siege. Both Dyrrakhion and Nicaea come to mind.

³⁴¹Clausewitz, *On War*, 248.

³⁴²Anna, *Alexiad*, 224-225. Although no initial numbers for the battle at Dristra, Anna claimed the battle was even until 36,000 Scythian reinforcements appeared. The numbers are undoubtedly high, but the claim is probably accurate.

³⁴³Clausewitz, *On War*, 194.

³⁴⁴Anonymous in *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*, trans. Dennis, 21.

can be applied to Alexios. Initially, based on his records, he was not chosen for Domestic of the Schools by the Emperor Botaniates although the capture of Roussel most assuredly did not hurt his reputation. Later, however, he was chosen largely because of the power of the Komnenos family.

In addition, Alexios himself was forced to select many of his generals based on their loyalty, given the fact that he had just dethroned Botaneiates. Alexios did have generals of great ability: therefore, in many instances, he chose to lead his armies himself. There were several reasons: at Dyrrakhion, the battle was crucial to the survival of the empire: in other cases, the sheer distance of the battles made it impossible for him to participate; in his early career, he simply could not afford to risk another coup. The Byzantine state, most likely, would not have survived another shift in power.

Woodrow mentions that the Byzantines, during the period of Maurice, were surrounded by enemies and “simply could not afford any reverses or serious losses on any front. To incur such could mean disaster for the state.”³⁴⁵ Yet the state of the Byzantine Empire at the time of Alexios was far more fragile. Since Manzikert in 1071, the Byzantine army was in disarray. There had been four regime changes; generals and imperial relatives battled over the throne, and the once vast treasury was all but empty. In addition to these problems, Asia Minor, a major recruiting area for the Byzantines was firmly in the hands of the Seljuk Turks. This made the western provinces all the more valuable, but Robert Guiscard and the Normans threatened from the west, giving support to a royal imposter, and Alexios was constantly being harassed by various tribes. As

³⁴⁵Woodrow, “Byzantine Military Technology and Strategy,” 4.

Margaret Mullett says, “That we do not speak of the Norman conquest of Albania as we do of the Norman invasion of Ireland may make Alexios’s achievements worth our scrutiny.”³⁴⁶ Had Albania fallen to Guiscard, I doubt Byzantinists would have ever written of Alexios in positive terms, much less written about a thirty-seven year long reign.

In addition, Mark Whittow admits Asia Minor was lost to the Byzantines, much as the Normans conquered Spain and Sicily from the Arabs:

...not because of the military conquests of a particular day’s battle, nor yet because of political dismay among the defeated—although, of course, it is easy to identify these factors at work in Spain, Sicily, and Asia Minor—but rather because in each region one culture came up against another which was more militaristic, more violent, and—most important—more willing to make the sacrifices to dominate the contested land.³⁴⁷

Whittow goes on to solidify his point with the evidence that “the Komnenoi are of course a major example of a family which had owned estates in Asia Minor, but which showed no inclination to stay and fight.”³⁴⁸ Certainly, if the Emperor Alexios believed that Asia Minor was essential to the immediate survival of the empire, the army, or to his family, he would have responded in full-force to reclaim such a vital area. According to Whittow, land had little, if any, bearing on political influence or power in Byzantium during the Komnenian rule.³⁴⁹ Therefore, more pressing matters had to be addressed

³⁴⁶Margaret Mullett, “Introduction: Alexios the Enigma,” in *Alexios I Komnenos*, 2.

³⁴⁷Mark Whittow, “How the east was lost: the background to the Komnenian *reconquista*,” in *Alexios I Komnenos*, 56.

³⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 67.

³⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 61-62.

before Alexios could launch any kind of offensive campaign. He began this campaign in 1095 after the virtual extermination of the Patzinaks and the defeat of the Cumans.

Whittow continues to contend that the warlike nature of the Turks and Normans was so much greater than that of the Byzantines. The Spanish Jew, Benjamin of Tudela, noted that the Byzantines “hire from amongst all nations warriors ... to fight with the Sultan of the Turks; for the natives are not warlike, but are as women who have no strength to fight.”³⁵⁰ Alexios also seems to have been disdainful of Byzantine troops; perhaps, this explains one reason that he was so reliant on mercenaries, even in the years of his reign when it was no longer necessary.

In regards to the Normans, Jonathan Shepard believes that “Alexios triumphed in the end, foiling Bohemond’s invasion of 1107-1108.”³⁵¹ Lilie claims that Bohemond made a critical error attacking the Byzantines in 1107, as “Byzantium was no longer as weak as had been the case in the 1180s.”³⁵² Michael Angold, who is usually very astute on Alexios’s political situation, claims: “...Alexios’ masterstroke had been his appeal to the papacy for military aid.”³⁵³ However, I disagree with his assessment that “by the end of his reign it was clear that it had brought Byzantium relatively little in terms of

³⁵⁰Benjamin of Tudela, as quoted by Mark Whittow, “How the east was lost: the background to the Komnenian *reconquista*,” in *Alexios I Komnenos*, 57.

³⁵¹Shepard, “Cross-Purposes: Alexios Comnenus and the First Crusade,” in *The First Crusade: Origins and Impacts*, ed. Jonathan Riley-Smith (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1997), 108.

³⁵²Lilie, *Byzantium and the Crusader States: 1096-1204*, 74. Perhaps this is merely a typographical error and Lilie meant the 1080s as opposed to the 1180s. Even if he meant the 1180s, it is a compliment to the reign of Alexios and his military abilities.

³⁵³Angold, “Alexios I Komnenos: an Afterword,” in *Alexios I Komnenos*, 417.

territorial gain and much in the way of potential danger.”³⁵⁴ Haldon also disagrees; he claims Alexios’s manipulation of the crusaders helped the Byzantines reclaim a sort of buffer between themselves and the Turks.³⁵⁵ The crusader states were by no means a cohesive collection of entities, and Alexios consistently kept them busy with drawn out negotiations even though little was resolved. Tancred provided the only possible threat to Alexios and the Byzantines. However, Tancred would be too entangled with the Turks and Alexios’s constant scheming to be a serious threat to the Byzantines as his father Bohemond had been. In addition, the crusader states would keep the Turks busy for a substantial period, allowing Alexios’s successors to attempt to push further into Asia Minor. It is a shame that neither John nor Manuel was as talented as Alexios, either politically or militarily.

By no stretch of the imagination was the Byzantine Empire ever completely safe during Alexios’s reign. Although at the end of his reign, it was far more secure than in 1081. In addition, had John been as skilled as his father, he would have been able to play the Turks and the crusader states against one another as Alexios had done with them and various tribes during his reign. Jonathan Shepard agrees, describing Anna’s purpose in writing the *Alexiad*, as “Alexius, her message seems to be, knew how to keep the

³⁵⁴*Ibid.* It is more likely that the Turks would present more of a long-term threat than any crusader states possibly formed. Arguably, Alexios was seeking to restore the gap between east and west, thereby using the westerners as a buffer and perhaps using them as mercenaries as well. Of course, Alexios’s plan of using the crusaders as a distraction would have been unfathomable prior to 1096, when he finally learned of the sheer numbers of crusaders heading to Constantinople.

³⁵⁵Haldon, *Byzantine Wars*, 137. Actually, it would be less of a buffer than forcing the Seljuks to split their forces, fighting on two fronts. Certainly, it would prevent the Turks from focusing all their strength on the Byzantines.

Latins in their place whereas his successors did not.”³⁵⁶ Although not fond of one another, the east and west were still a long way from the eventual result of the fourth crusade. The sacking of Constantinople during the fourth crusade can hardly be placed on Alexios’s shoulders. That he courted western aid over a century prior is certainly no reason for *post hoc ergo propter hoc* history. To suggest such a theory would suggest an oversimplification of the complexities of Byzantine diplomacy and politics in the years leading up to the fourth crusade.

In addition, Alexios has been almost universally criticized for granting trade privileges to the Venetians in 1082. In fact, that has been claimed to be the cause of the fall of Byzantium. However, an article by Gadolin adequately describes the reasoning behind the treaty as “*an attempt to draw trade back to the markets it (the Venetians) had, by and by, been deserting.*”³⁵⁷ Gadolin continues by stating that Pisa was able to procure a less favorable trading agreement and argues that the agreement with Venice must have provided at least a pulse to the Byzantine economy.³⁵⁸ The principle for this, Gadolin argues, is the same as the reason behind the Venetian privileges, “The Normans of Antioch favored Genoa so Alexis would naturally choose to promote Pisa’s interests—evidently for the same reason, which I have suggested, Venice once got her treaty, namely to draw trade back to within the borders of the empire.”³⁵⁹ In support of

³⁵⁶Shepard, “Cross-Purposes: Alexius Comnenus and the First Crusade,” 109.

³⁵⁷A.R. Gadolin, “Alexis I Comnenus and the Venetian Trade Privileges,” *Byzantion* 50 (1980) : 442.

³⁵⁸*Ibid.*

³⁵⁹*Ibid.*

Gadolin's contention, Birkenmeier adds, "The state's wealth increased indirectly, the result of increased Venetian activity stemming from privileges that they received from Alexios I."³⁶⁰

Given Alexios's negotiating skill, it seems unlikely that he would have been so completely outmaneuvered by the Venetians; Alexios must also have gotten much of what he wanted. Certainly, the Venetians would have been eager to exact revenge on the Normans.³⁶¹ Alexios was an excellent negotiator and always obtained the most favorable position in the alliances and diplomatic agreements he entered. It seems unlikely that he would have been desperate enough in 1082 to potentially hamstring the Byzantine economy. However, if he was desperate enough, or if he had been out-negotiated, it seems extremely unlikely that the Pisans would have bettered him again in the diplomatic arena. It seems much more plausible that he would have been willing to go to virtually any lengths to attempt to re-establish Byzantine trading dominance in the Mediterranean. If Gadolin's argument is valid, then I would hold that the Venetian agreement was a masterstroke beyond the level of requesting papal aid from Urban II. Alexios would have rejuvenated, at least to a limited extent, the stagnant Byzantine economy. In addition, he would have gotten the most powerful fleet in the Mediterranean to combat the most serious threat in his thirty-seven year reign—twice. I would argue that, without the aid of the Venetian fleet at Dyrrakhion in 1082, in the best-case scenario, Alexios would have been deposed, or in the worst Robert Guiscard might have overrun Constantinople.

³⁶⁰Birkenmeier, *Development of the Komnenian Army*, " 154.

³⁶¹Gadolin, "Alexis I Comnenus and the Venetian Trade Privileges," 439.

According to James Howard-Johnston, “There is no reason to suppose that there was a temporary collapse of Byzantine statecraft in the time of Alexios.”³⁶² Howard-Johnston continues by stating:

On the contrary, other sources as well as the not inconsiderable body of material based on diplomatic documents which is included in the *Alexiad* provide ample evidence to show that he set about orchestrating the movements and conflicts among near and distant peoples in a never ending attempt to increase Byzantine leverage and open up opportunities for successful military action against key targets.³⁶³

This certainly seems to be the work of a man with a larger picture in mind, and Alexios would have received high praise from Sun-Tzu for his successful manipulation of certain peoples.³⁶⁴ The very worst you could say of Alexios is that he was a reactionary who won his wars and brought a temporary halt to the disintegration of the fifty years prior to his coup. Such a claim, in my opinion, would be completely unsubstantiated and would ignore his vast accomplishments.

My own research has shown that he was an extremely talented man, both militarily and politically. His military ‘tactics’ on the battlefield were the least successful aspect of his military abilities, and he was, at the very worst, a good military tactician. His tactical use was exquisite and, in many instances, timeless; however, early in his reign he was forced to use inexperienced soldiers. Most of the tactics he knew had come from previous Byzantine military texts, and Alexios was either able to adapt existing Byzantine tactics or he was able to formulate or emulate other tactics. The story of the

³⁶²Howard-Johnston, “Anna Komnena and the *Alexiad*,” in *Alexios I Komnenos*, 297.

³⁶³*Ibid.*

³⁶⁴Sun-Tzu, *Art of Warfare*, 136.

“living city” formation (or the ‘Fighting March’) used when evacuating Greeks on the plain of Doryleon in 1116 comes to mind.³⁶⁵ Of course, the implementation of such a tactic would have been difficult, if not impossible, in the first half of his reign due to the undisciplined forces Alexios had to use.

Birkenmeier would no doubt disagree with my assessment. He claims that the majority of Alexios’s battles were defensive.³⁶⁶ Certainly, this was necessarily the case. However, defensive or not, his goals would have remained the same because of the Byzantines’ outlook on warfare and the situations that Alexios faced. The constant ability of Alexios to gain power and to reconquer his territory was remarkable in the midst of such adversity. In addition, Clausewitz noted, “If we consider the relative exhaustion of forces on both sides, the defender is at a *disadvantage*.”³⁶⁷ Certainly this would be true with the shortage of manpower for the Byzantines. Although the defender is at a disadvantage, fighting on the defensive is certainly the more effective method of battle and should be considered the correct decision for the Byzantine Empire, given its situation early in Alexios’s reign.³⁶⁸ Clausewitz argued, “...that *defense is simply the stronger form of war, the one that makes the enemy’s defeat more certain*.”³⁶⁹ With a lack of disciplined manpower, Alexios needed to fight on the defensive while replenishing his numbers with various mercenaries until he could prepare for an offensive

³⁶⁵ Anna, *Alexiad*, 478-479. See also Matthew Bennett, “The Crusaders ‘Fighting March’ Revisited,” *War in History* 8 (2001): 1-18.

³⁶⁶Birkenmeier, *Development of the Komnenian Army*, 80.

³⁶⁷Clausewitz, *On War*, 613.

³⁶⁸*Ibid.*

³⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 380.

campaign, which finally came late in his reign in Asia Minor. Once again, this would have been expected of an ideal Byzantine general—fighting an offensive war only to reclaim territory that had recently been lost to the empire—in other words, a just war. However, Birkenmeier is more forgiving of Alexios in his conclusion. He reminds the reader that, despite a lack of proper resources, “...he won his wars.”³⁷⁰ Nikephorus Bryennius believed this to be the case, as he stated of the Byzantine economic situation leading into Alexios’s reign that “the treasury was void of money.”³⁷¹ Such an endorsement from Birkenmeier would tell Clausewitz all he needed to know about Alexios’s battle capabilities.

Stephen Morillo has also rendered several valid points in his article “Battle Seeking.” In one of his points, he states, “that strategic decisions happen in cultural contexts, and that different contexts make some strategies more useful than others.”³⁷² Although he was applying it to the principle of Vegetian warfare, I believe it is also applicable to the Byzantine experience. Given the Byzantine aversion for war, which has been well documented, I believe that Byzantine military culture had much more to do with heavy reliance on diplomacy, bribery, and, in fact, the heavy use of mercenaries than it did with open battle. Although the use of some of these stratagems during Alexios’s reign was out of sheer necessity, especially during the first decade of his reign, I believe

³⁷⁰Birkenmeier, *Development of the Komnenian Army*, 84.

³⁷¹Nikephorus Bryennius, as quoted in Tobias, “The Tactics and Strategy of Alexius Comnenus at Calavrytae” 196.

³⁷²Stephen Morillo, “Battle Seeking: The Contexts and Limits of Vegetian Strategy,” *Journal of Medieval Military History* I (2002) : 41.

that an underlying cultural factor remained, since the time of Maurice, which kept Alexios's tactics and stratagems close to those of Maurice.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

As Alexios assumed leadership of the Byzantine world, he faced many challenges, and the empire was on the brink of collapse. Given the religious, political, and military circumstances of the period, Alexios was forced to play the role of emperor, diplomat, and general. He was consistently adept at analyzing a situation and formulating a plan of attack. Whether by design or by accident, it is quite clear that he implemented strategies and tactics that closely follow those espoused by many military theorists. He proved to be both a shrewd and practical diplomat as well as a courageous and skilled strategist. According to Chalandon:

Whoever desires to come to a fair estimate of Alexius Comnenus must realize that his reign marks a temporary arrest in the decline of Constantinople. In Europe, as in Asia, he succeeded in beating back the attacks of the enemies of the Empire. During his reign the Crusade forced new problems on Byzantine diplomacy. It must be acknowledged that Alexius was able to discern the solution which most tended to advance the interests of the Empire, and that he traced out the road which his successors were to follow.³⁷³

Horodysky echoed Chalandon's sentiment: "The later Emperor Alexius deserves credit for having raised Byzantium from a condition of anarchy and decay when it was being threatened on all sides by new dangers. No emperor devoted himself with a greater sense of duty to the task of ruling."³⁷⁴ Niketas Choniates believed that Alexios "was, beyond

³⁷³Chalandon, as quoted in "Chapter XI: The Early Comneni," *Cambridge Medieval History, IV*, ed. J.R.Tanner, C.W. Prevote-Orton, and Z.N. Brooke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1923), 350.

³⁷⁴John Horodysky, "Byzantium and Rus' Relations During the Reign of the Comneni Dynasty" (Master's thesis, Rutgers University, 1982), 224.

all others, a dissembler, deeming secretiveness a clever thing and never saying much about what he intended to do.³⁷⁵ This should be expected from a Byzantine military mindset—if that mind was familiar with Maurice.³⁷⁶ Such an outlook probably lent itself to Alexios’s long reign as emperor.

When he was forced to confront the Normans, he was initially unable to conquer them on the field of battle, but he was able to defeat them. The difference is paramount. War is not always decided on the battlefield—at least, not in the Byzantine view of warfare. With that in mind, I believe that, particularly in Alexios’s case, strategy and diplomacy are terms that could, and should, be used interchangeably since his diplomatic outlook was constantly that of a general. Clausewitz agreed that political considerations played an exceptional part in the planning of a strategy or even a battle.³⁷⁷ This is not to say that Alexios was incapable of leading his armies on the field. When he was not outnumbered, he generally won his battles. When he was unable to outmaneuver his opponents tactically on the battlefield (usually due to the inexperienced forces early in his reign), he would diplomatically and strategically outmaneuver them according to Byzantine maxims, particularly those of Maurice. He would either avoid war if he believed that was the only way for Byzantium to emerge with the advantage, or he would deceive or bribe another faction to attack or harass his enemies. We must remember,

³⁷⁵Niketas Choniates, *O City of Byzantium, Annals of Niketas Choniates*, trans. and ed. Harry J. Magoulias (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984), 6.

³⁷⁶Maurice, *Strategikon*, 88-89. See also Vegetius, *De Re Militari*, 174.

³⁷⁷Clausewitz, *On War*, 606.

“policy is the guiding intelligence and war only the instrument, not vice versa.”³⁷⁸

Alexios was truly a man who used every resource at his control to defend the interests of Byzantium throughout his long reign. Utilizing classic strategies and tactics, he was in fact, the ideal Byzantine general.

So was Alexios a military genius or simply lucky? Warren Treadgold certainly believed Alexios was a military genius.³⁷⁹ Clausewitz felt that “the most highly developed societies produce the most brilliant soldiers, as the Romans.”³⁸⁰ A genius can be defined as someone that excels at a particular occupation.³⁸¹ Alexios was a military genius, at the very least, in Clausewitz’s definition of a military genius: “history and posterity reserve the name of “genius” for those who have excelled in the highest positions—as commanders-in chief—since here the demands for intellectual and moral powers are vastly greater.”³⁸² A military genius must know the political situation and know what he can accomplish with the resources at his disposal.³⁸³ To quote Clausewitz, a “general can best demonstrate his genius by managing a campaign exactly to suit his objectives and his resources, doing neither too much nor too little. But the effects of genius show not so much in novel forms of action as in the ultimate success of the

³⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 607.

³⁷⁹Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society*, 611.

³⁸⁰Clausewitz, *On War*, 101.

³⁸¹*Ibid.*, 100.

³⁸²*Ibid.*, 111.

³⁸³*Ibid.*, 112.

whole.”³⁸⁴ It is, after all, “the *average result* that indicates the existence of military genius.”³⁸⁵ The average result of Alexios’s military successes in a Byzantine and, in fact, an overall context cannot be ignored. Neither can we minimize the overall success of his reign.

For the intents and purposes of Alexios’s reign, Alexios was emperor, general, and what Kaegi describes as the “Joint Chiefs of Staff” as his strategies were comprehensive and interlocking.³⁸⁶ Although he did have military advisors, it is clear that it was Alexios himself, who formulated and implemented political, diplomatic and military policy. Vegetius argued, “It is the nature of war that what is beneficial to you is detrimental to the enemy and what is of service to him always hurts you.”³⁸⁷ Few generals have ever been able to gain what was beneficial to them and their state the way Alexios I Komnenos was. Ultimately, in the analysis of Alexios’s strategies and tactics, we must conclude, “*all the meaning that should be attached to a judgment of right and wrong that we deduce from success, or rather that we find in success.*”³⁸⁸

In the words of Clausewitz, “...if the commander’s superior intellect and strength of character did not express themselves in the final success of his work, and were only taken on trust, they would rarely achieve historical importance.”³⁸⁹ As the overall

³⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 177.

³⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 103.

³⁸⁶Kaegi, *Some Thoughts on Byzantine Military Strategy*, 15. The capitalization is Kaegi’s.

³⁸⁷Vegetius, *De Re Militari*, 171.

³⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 167.

³⁸⁹Clausewitz, *On War*, 112.

success and historical importance of Alexios's reign is clear, we should believe that Alexios made the correct tactical and strategic decisions simply because they were successful. Did Alexios's strategies and tactics make him an ideal general? Further research will be needed to conclude with certainty; however, a strong case can definitely be made based on several of history's most elite and influential military texts.

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