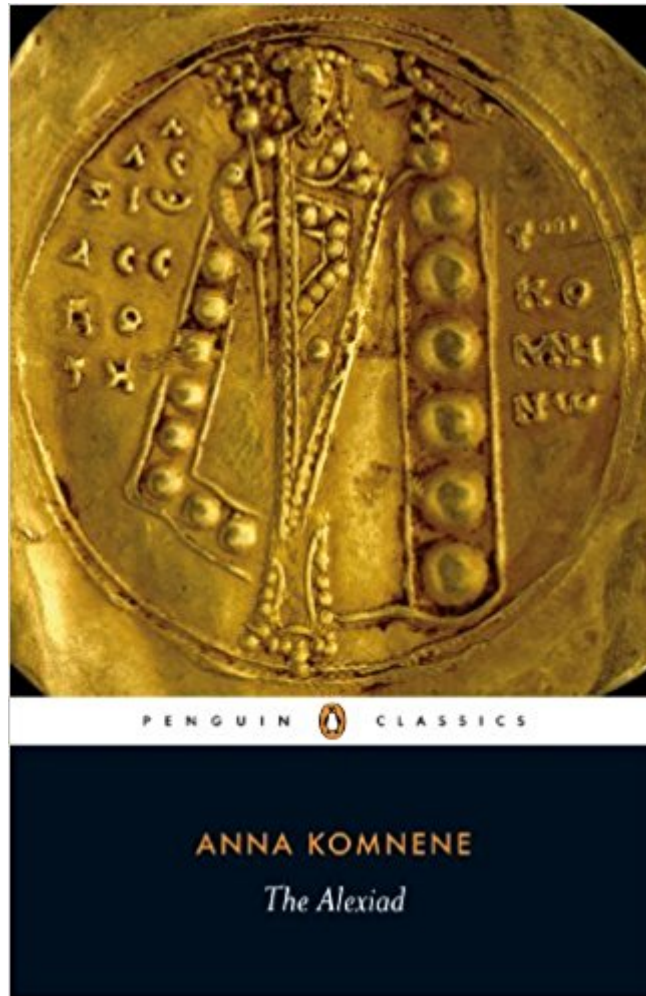




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The Alexiad (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

A revised edition of a medieval masterpiece—the first narrative history written by a woman. Written between 1143 and 1153 by the daughter of Byzantine Emperor Alexios I Komnenos, *The Alexiad* is one of the most popular and revealing primary sources in the vast canon of medieval literature. Princess Anna Komnene, eldest child of the imperial couple, reveals the inner workings of the court, profiles its many extraordinary personages, and offers a firsthand account of immensely significant events such as the First Crusade, as well as its impact on the relationship between eastern and western Christianity. A celebrated triumph of Byzantine letters, this is an unparalleled view of the glorious Constantinople and the medieval world. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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Customer Reviews

As usual, I am not reviewing Anna Komnene as an historian. I am reviewing this particular edition of her work. This is a relatively recent edition of the 'Alexiad'. While the core of E.R.A. Sewter's 1969 translation remains in place, many changes have been made and they are all good. The first, and most visually obvious, is the jacket. The 2003 edition of the Alexiad featured a figure in mosaic,

which the book identified as Alexios Komnenos, as depicted in a 12th c. mosaic in the Hagia Sophia. This isn't entirely wrong, in that the mosaic is of Alexios Komnenos, it's just the wrong one. The figure depicted was Alexios, son of John II Komnenos and heir-apparent until his early death. His mosaic is attached but is rotated 90 degrees from the famous mosaic panel of his parents, making the mis-identification understandable for a badly-informed tourist guide, but not a serious publication. Thankfully, Penguin has fixed this issue and replaced the cover image with a high-quality picture (the coin it is a picture of is about the size of a thumbnail) of one of Alexios I Komnenos' hyperpyra (meaning: fire-refined) coins. The new editor, Oxford's Peter Frankopan has also adopted a more regular transliteration style based upon that used in the The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium (3-Volume Set), in place of Sewter's original Latin-based transliteration style. These changes extend into the text as well, which generally seems to be mostly unchanged, although Frankopan's updates allow for more precision. Titles and important Greek terms are left transliterated. The book's appendices are also much overhauled.

Anna Comnena, the eldest daughter to the Byzantine Emperor Alexius I Comnenus, in her later years, wrote this biography of her father. She was continuing an effort started by her deceased husband Nicephorus Bryennius who was a general in the imperial army (among other things). Emperor Alexius was an extraordinary emperor. He ruled during a turbulent time where every neighbor wanted to conquer them. The condition of the empire had been severely weakened for many years and the frequent internal conflicts continued to leave the empire vulnerable. Anna succeeds in her goal of showing what an impressive leader her father was. She relates the continuous warfare and intrigues that Alexius had to endure. A lesser man would certainly have become overwhelmed, but Alexius was able to weather the storm and hold the empire together. What I found truly remarkable is that Alexius seemed to lose more battles than he won, but he was still able to win each war. But Anna is a biased source. Her scorn of the enemies of Byzantium should be considered. Here are a couple examples of her selective testimony. The introduction of Robert Guiscard and Pope Gregory VII is a little too concise and filled with much prejudice. The story that she gives of Robert Guiscard's rise to power may or may not be true, but she certainly left out the more important acts of Robert. She also neglects to mention that Robert Guiscard had driven Byzantium out of Italy only 7 years earlier. This is what led to Emperor Michael VII Ducas suing for peace with Robert with the marriage proposal. Late in the book, she professes the greatness of her mother Irene, saying that Alexius never let her leave his side.

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