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Anna Comnena and the West

Relations between Byzantium and the Western countries had already had a long, complicated and controversial history by the time of Anna Comnena. Religious controversies, traditional stereotypes about the so-called “barbarians”, political and military conflicts stirred hostile reactions in the Byzantine society, while common Christian faith, examples of personal greatness and achievements of cooperation strengthened tolerance and acceptance towards the Western people. In my paper I intend briefly to discuss this trend, then examine how the Latins were portrayed in Anna Comnena’s work, *The Alexiad*. As an exceptionally educated imperial princess, Anna knew this formidable trend very well, since she had special personal experiences and access to the state archives. Her work represents a unique, more enlightened view than most of her contemporaries, so her accounts are worth studying.

First of all, for centuries the West had only minor importance for Byzantium. Since none of the Western countries was either a formidable enemy or potentially useful ally of the Empire, Byzantine diplomacy and individuals concentrated on the East and North, where the Arabs and Southern Slavs posed a significant threat. It also means that the number of sources providing us with information about Greek attitudes toward the West is relatively low. For a long time no clear definition for the concept of “the West” existed. For instance, The DAI tells that Cephallonia was part of Longobardia, and mentions Dalmatia under Byzantine control as a part of Italy, which mirrors a kind of obscurity.¹

In order to better understand the topic it is not only useful but also inevitable for us to become familiar with the terminology used by Anna and her contemporaries. In Byzantine Studies, the Western world is usually described with the term *Latins*, in contrast to Byzantium. As Kazhdan states, the ethnonym *Latinoi*

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SHEPARD, J.: Aspects of Byzantine Attitudes and Policy Towards the West in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries. *Byzantinische Forschungen* 13 (1988) 67-118. esp. 67-69.

is not used by Theophanes the Confessor and Patriarch Nicephorus in their chronicles, they mention different people and tribal groups north and west of the Empire. In the *De administrando imperio* by Constantine VII we find the same, and even in the work of Ioannes Skylitzes, who wrote his *Chronicle* around 1100. According to the data collected by the Dumbarton Oaks Hagiography Project, including the *vitae* of saints who died between 700 and 1000, there are only a few records using the name *Latinoi*, in all cases from legends of Calabrian and Apulian holy men, always contrasting Latin language with Greek. To Kazhdan's best knowledge, a patriarchal decision of 1054 uses the Greek term *Latinos* as a generic appellation of Westerners for the first time.²

Apart from their collective name, all Latins had two common features in the eye of the Greeks: on the one hand, they were barbarians, and on the other hand, they were Christians. Briefly, the concept of barbarism, which originated from the ancient Hellas, was anything but positive. It included vanity, greed, cruelty, bad manners, illiteracy and so forth. Although Byzantines did not usually emphasize the barbarian character of their friends and allies, and many of them honestly recognized the virtues of the non-Greeks, the above mentioned traditional stereotypes were deep-rooted and were always ready to resurface.

Christian faith meant a special religious and cultural connection between Byzantium and the West, but this bond should not be overestimated. As time passed, theological controversies and differences in the rites increased the spiritual distance of Rome and Constantinople more and more, just like political conflicts. For instance, the greatest theological problem of the Photian schism was the *Filioque*, but its direct cause was the question of the pope's canonical jurisdiction over the Eastern churches. In the eleventh century, a third one emerged in addition to these two major problems: the usage of unleavened bread, or *azymes* in the Eucharist by the Latins, which seemed to be a Judaist practice for the Eastern clergy.³ As the conflict escalated, the tone of anti-Latin texts became harsher, but even after the Great Schism it was not as hostile as after the Fourth Crusade. In the age of the Comneni, the borders between the denominations were still crossable.⁴

² KAZHDAN, A.: Latins and Franks in Byzantium: Perception and Reality from the Eleventh to the Twelfth Century. In: LAIOU, A. – MOTTAAHEDEH, R. (eds.): *The Crusades from the Perspective of Byzantium and the Muslim World*. Washington D. C. 2001. 82-101. esp. 84-86.

³ KOLBABA, T. M.: Byzantine Perceptions of Latin Religious "Errors": Themes and Changes from 850 to 1350. In: LAIOU – MOTTAAHEDEH (n. 2) 117-143. esp. 119-125.

⁴ KOLBABA (n. 3) 132-137.

During the reign of Alexius I, the situation changed considerably. The Norman wars and the successes of the Venetian fleet had shown that the Westerners couldn't be disdained anymore, but the most impressive experience was the First Crusade, which saved Byzantium, but created a new threat too with the chance of a new one – this time against the Empire. The Byzantines in most cases saw this danger in the Crusaders' activities and the "usurpation of Roman territories", therefore their attitude was suspicious and rather hostile.⁵ In such an atmosphere wrote Anna Comnena her *Alexiad*. Now it is time to examine how she saw the Latin question in her work.

First of all, a few words about her use of words. In the *Alexiad*, Anna uses 97 times the noun *Latinos* and 4 times the adjective *Latinikos* for the Western. However, the far most common term is *Keltos*, which she applies 176 times, but we meet the adjective *Keltikos* an additional 20 times. She also uses specific designations, such as *Franks* 20 times, *Frankikos* 14 times, in 7 cases *Italos* and occasionally *Germanos*/*Germanikos*. Beside the dominance of *Keltos*/*Keltikos*, the frequency of *Latinos*/*Latinikos* is prominent, showing a general tendency.⁶

Since the First Crusade has central importance in the work and the Latins were heavily involved in the events, it is practical to have a look at Anna's accounts about the Crusade. Magdalino and Stephenson interpreted Anna's depiction of the Crusade with the activities of Manuel I's eulogists, on the first place Manganeios Prodromos, who praised Manuel's Crusader politics by comparing it to that of his grandfather's. This forced Anna to write apologetically about the events, proving his father's talent and success and showing the situation even more dangerous than it really was. In her description, the Crusade's main goal was the capture of Constantinople, motivated by the greed of the "Franks". Alexius played no role in the declaration of the holy war, and even averting the danger is a great success in itself. From this perspective, the inability to join the Latin troops was not a tactical error from the emperor's side. She also depicts the Latin clergy as greedy, condemns their participation in military actions and ironizes on certain practices of the Roman Church, for instance on the use of *azymes* in the Eucharist.⁷

⁵ KOLIA-DERMITZAKI, A.: Die Kreuzfahrer und die Kreuzzüge im Sprachgebrauch der Byzantiner. *JÖB* 41 (1991) 163-188. esp. 184-186.

⁶ KAZHDAN (n. 2) 84.

⁷ STEPHENSON, P.: Anna Comnena's *Alexiad* as a source for the second Crusade? *Journal of Medieval History* 29 (2003) 41-54. esp. 47-53; MAGDALINO, P.: The Pen of the Aunt: Echoes of the Mid-Twelfth Century in the *Alexiad*. In: GOUMA-PETERSON, T. (ed.): *Anna Komnene and Her Times*. New York 2000. 15-43. esp. 24-29.

The reader faces several pieces of discreditable information about the Latins too. Anna writes about Latin habits (ἔθη) among which arrogance, greed for power and avarice are also listed. A common term used for them in the pages of *The Alexiad* is “barbarian” and Anna notes that an educated Latin is as strange (/rare) as a Hellenized Scythian. At this point, the picture seems to be quite negative, and one could say that it is a typical stereotypical view of the Westerners. But Anna also mentions other, positive Latin characteristics. The most important of these is their military skills. Anna writes in details about Latin troops (φάλαγγες and στρατεύματα), qualifying them as “irresistible”, describes Latin horses and weapons as being “very effective”, particularly the long spears. She shows genuine interest in their habit of swearing an oath, and finds that many Latins have a “noble” nature.⁸

It is especially interesting that Anna often admits that some Latins hostile to the Empire have really positive traits. For instance, she praises the cunning of Bohemund, son of Robert Guiscard, perhaps the deadliest enemy of her father. During the Siege of Antioch by the Byzantine in 1104, Bohemund started to circulate the rumour that he was dead, and then escaped to a ship. On the open sea, he moved freely aboard the ship, but whenever they had to approach the Byzantine shores, the sailors sealed him into a coffin with secret air vents – and with a dead rooster, killed for the occasion. The stench emitted by the prince’s coffin was enough to convince all the sceptics that it contains a decomposing body. Anna finds Bohemund’s astuteness very impressive and characteristic to the Normans, identified as crafty and fond of trickery.⁹

As it has already been mentioned, Anna often brands the Latins as “barbarians”. It is a fact, but interestingly enough the expression is not used when they confront the Muslims. When a Catholic-Muslim conflict occurs, Anna consequently uses the attribute βάρβαρος for the non-Christians, expressing her sympathies. However, even the educated and Greek-speaking Norman prince, Tancred is only a half-barbarian (μιξοβάρβαρος) in her eye. So in *The Alexiad* we find strongly stereotypical, condemning and positive, praising accounts about the Western people too. But what did Anna base her judgement on? Is there a consideration which determines the records’ content and tone, or is it simply a question of personal opinion?

⁸ KAZHDAN (n. 2) 87.

⁹ ALBU, E.: Bohemund and the Rooster: Byzantines, Normans and the Artful Ruse. In: GOUMA-PETERSON (n. 7) 157–168. esp. 159; 163. We can find the story only in Anna Comnena’s work.

Perhaps both statements are true at the same time. A fact which must be kept in one's mind when dealing with the *Alexiad* is that Anna wrote it to record her father's deeds. That is the reason why she edited her work very carefully, and why the depiction of the Latins changes to serve the purpose of the actual passage. For example, the Franks must be hostile to show the tactic of Alexius successful. Furthermore, if Alexius is considered as the positive hero of the work, this would make his greatest enemy, Bohemund the main antagonist, whose qualities should be recognized, because this makes the victory over him a much greater deed. Nevertheless, his personality is morally evil. Imperial and religious ideology also had its effects on Anna's views, for instance on Catholic religious practices.¹⁰ But she also tried to find the motivations behind the acts of the Latins, and, if it suited her purposes, she recognized their values and that in some fields they matched the Greeks or even surpassed them. She tried to understand the other side, which was so rare in medieval historiography.

¹⁰ LILIE, R. - J.: Anna Komnene und die Lateiner. *Byzantinoslavica* 54 (1993) 169-182. esp. 177-181.