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### The Battle of Kalavrye Revisited

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ΙΝΣΤΙΤΟΥΤΟ ΙΣΤΟΡΙΚΩΝ ΕΡΕΥΝΩΝ  
ΤΟΜΕΑΣ ΒΥΖΑΝΤΙΝΩΝ ΕΡΕΥΝΩΝ  
ΕΘΝΙΚΟ ΙΔΡΥΜΑ ΕΡΕΥΝΩΝ



# BYZANTINA ΣΥΜΜΕΙΚΤΑ

BYZANTINA SYMMEIKTA

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JAMES MICHAEL GILMER

THE BATTLE OF KALAVRYE REVISITED

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## THE BATTLE OF KALAVRYE REVISITED

The Battle of Kalavrye, a military engagement in the civil war between Nikephoros III Botaneiates (r. 1078–1081) and Nikephoros Bryennios the Elder, took place in the Byzantine province of Thrace on the Halmyros River in 1078. Botaneiates and Bryennios had both rebelled against the previous emperor, Michael VII Doukas (r. 1071–1078); when Botaneiates' rebellion succeeded in toppling Michael VII, Bryennios was invited by the new emperor to end his rebellion. When negotiations broke down, however, Botaneiates dispatched the young general Alexios Komnenos with a small army to end Bryennios' rebellion by force.

We are fortunate to have not one but four sources that cover the details of this important battle: in chronological order of composition, Michael Attaleiates' *History*<sup>1</sup>; John Skylitzes' *Continuation*<sup>2</sup>; Nikephoros Bryennios

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1. *Michaelis Attaliatae Historia*, ed. E. TSOLAKIS (CFHB 50), Athens 2011 [hereafter *Attaliatae Historia*]; English transl. in: *Michael Attaleiates, History*, Trans. A. KALDELLIS – D. KRALLIS, Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library, 2012 [hereafter *Attaleiates, History*].

2. Ed. E. TSOLAKIS, *Ἡ Συνέχεια τῆς Χρονογραφίας τοῦ Ἰωάννου Σκυλίτση*, Thessalonica 1968 [hereafter *Scyl. Cont.* (TSOLAKIS)]; the text is reproduced in: *Byzantium in the Time of Troubles: The Continuation of the Chronicle of John Skylitzes (1057–1079). Introduction, translation and notes* by E. McGEER. *Prosopographical index and glossary of terms* by J.W. NESBITT, Leiden: Brill, 2020 [hereafter *Scyl. Cont.* (McGEER)]. While there is still some debate on the authorship of the *Continuation* [see for the details E. TSOLAKIS, *Συνεχείας Συνέχεια*, *ByzSym* 25 (2015), 115–142], McGEER (*Byzantium in the Time of Troubles*, 4–11), reads the *Continuation* as the work of John Skylitzes and thus part of the *Σύνοψις Ἱστοριῶν* proper.

the Younger's Ὑλη Ἱστορίας<sup>3</sup> [hereafter *Hyle*]; and Anna Komnene's *Alexiad*<sup>4</sup>. Modern historians traditionally rely almost exclusively on the *Hyle*, an account written by the grandson of Nikephoros Bryennios the Elder and replete with detailed and dramatic commentary on the course of the battle. The *Alexiad* follows the *Hyle* very closely, altering a scant few details that will be explored below. However, Attaleiates' account of the Battle of Kalavrye is often overlooked and does not feature in any of the modern histories of the battle surveyed below<sup>5</sup>. While not radically different from the more detailed and dramatic account provided in the *Hyle* and the *Alexiad*, Attaleiates' *History* suggests a fundamental shift in agency that would substantially change our assessment of Alexios Komnenos' generalship and overall tactical preparations for the Battle of Kalavrye vis-à-vis the *Hyle/Alexiad* account of this battle.

Where were the Turks? This is the question which separates the four historical accounts of the Battle of Kalavrye that will be explored below. Modern accounts follow the *Hyle* closely and argue that a force of Turkish mercenaries dispatched by Nikephoros III Botaneiates arrived after the battle had already begun (and effectively been lost) and that the serendipitous arrival of reinforcements allowed Alexios Komnenos to reengage with Bryennios and defeat the rebel general. While the *Hyle* and the *Alexiad* diverge on Alexios' role in deploying these mercenaries after their fortuitous arrival, both sources agree that a large force of Turkish mercenaries *arrived after the battle had commenced*<sup>6</sup>. Both Michael Attaleiates and the *Continuation* of Skylitzes, however, do not mention

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3. Nikephoros Bryennios, *Material for a History*, edition and french translation by P. GAUTIER, *Nicephori Bryennii, Historiarum Libri Quattuor* (CFHB 9), Brussels 1975 [hereafter Bryennios].

4. Annae Comnenae, *Alexias*, ed. D. REINSCH – A. KAMBYLIS (CFHB 40), Berlin-New York 2000 [hereafter *Alexias*]; English translation: E.R.A SEWTER, *The Alexiad*, London: Penguin Classics, 1969; revised edition 2009 [hereafter *Alexiad*].

5. *Scyl. Cont.*'s account follows Attaleiates' very closely, as shall be examined below.

6. Cf. J. BIRKENMEIER, *The Development of the Komnenian Army: 1081-1180*, Leiden: Brill, 2002, 58-59; J. HALDON, *The Byzantine Wars*, Cheltenham: Tempus, 2001, 127-133; L. NEVILLE, *Heroes and Romans in Twelfth-Century Byzantium: The Materials for History of Nikephoros Bryennios*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012, 126-129; N. TOBIAS, *The Tactics and Strategy of Alexius Comnenus at Calavrytae, 1078*, *Etudes Byzantines* 6, Pts. 1-2 (1979), 193-211.

the timely arrival of these mercenaries, suggesting instead that they had been cunningly concealed by Alexios Komnenos *before* the battle began and deployed deliberately when Bryennios' forces were otherwise engaged.

Conflicting accounts of the tactics employed at the Battle of Kalavrye can easily be reconciled: Alexios Komnenos knowingly and deliberately spread misinformation regarding the location of his Turkish mercenaries. He then used the confusion this move generated to his advantage, placing his Turkish mercenaries in ambush positions and guiding his cautious adversary, Nikephoros Bryennios the Elder, into an ambush using a fighting withdrawal. Alexios' tactics were misunderstood –perhaps intentionally– by one of our main sources for this battle, Nikephoros Bryennios the Younger<sup>7</sup>. The *Hyle* itself preserves evidence that supports such an interpretation of the tactics used by Alexios Komnenos at Kalavrye, reinforced by observations drawn from Michael Attaleiates' contemporary account of the battle. The Turkish mercenaries were always there, despite Nikephoros' account of their sudden arrival in the *Hyle* and despite modern historians' preference for Nikephoros' carefully constructed narrative.

#### THE ACCOUNT OF NIKEPHOROS BRYENNIOS THE YOUNGER

According to Nikephoros Bryennios the Younger, the Battle of Kalavrye began as a result of careless scouting operations. He records that Alexios Komnenos encamped beside the Halmyros River and *Ἐκεῖσε τοίνυν στρατοπεδεύσας, οὔτε τάφρον ὥρυξεν, οὔτε ἐπήξατο χάρακα· ἐβούλετο γὰρ αὐτοῦ μὴν πολεμίων ἐφοδεύειν ἔφοδον καὶ τὴν νίκην κλέπτειν, εἰ οἶδόν τε, καὶ γὰρ ἔμελλε μετ' ὀλίγων μάχεσθαι πρὸς πολλοὺς στρατηγούς τε ἅμα γενναίους καὶ πολυπειροτάτους* (“neither dug a trench nor placed stakes, for he wanted to watch over the approach of the enemy himself and to steal the victory if it were possible, for he was about to do battle with

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7. The way in which a battle was presented, and the degree to which a general followed or deviated from Byzantine tactics as they were expressed in the military manuals, was “due in part to the personal preferences of the authors, whether they wanted to praise the military leader in question” or not: T. G. KOLIAS, *Η πολεμική τακτική των Βυζαντινών: Θεωρία και πράξη*, in: *Το εμπόλεμο Βυζάντιο (9ος-12ος αι.)* [IBR/NHRF, International Symposium 4], Athens 1997, 157 (Translations by Z. SKIATHAS).

a few men against many generals both brave and highly experienced”)<sup>8</sup>. Alexios then dispatched scouts who discovered Nikephoros Bryennios the Elder’s nearby camp in the plains of Kedoktos. Unfortunately for Alexios, καὶ γὰρ τῶν μετὰ τοῦ Κομνηνοῦ Ἀλεξίου Τούρκων τινὲς νύκτωρ ἀπιόντες ἐπὶ <τῷ> τὸ τοῦ Βρυεννίου στράτευμα κατασκέψασθαι τοῖς σκοποῖς ἐμπεσόντες ἐάλωσαν καὶ ἀχθέντες πάντα ἀπήγγειλαν (“some of the Turks in Komnenos’ army had marched out at night toward Bryennios’ army to spy on him and had fallen in with his scouts. The Turks were captured and, after being brought [to the camp], confessed all”)<sup>9</sup>. As a result both generals were aware of the location of the other, preventing Alexios from ambushing Bryennios’ forces as he had no doubt planned.

With Bryennios now aware that Alexios held the road to Constantinople with an imperial army, he proceeded to divide his forces into a traditional battle order. Bryennios commanded the center; his brother John Bryennios commanded the right wing, with Katakalon Tarchaneiotēs commanding the left wing. Each division is estimated at about four to five thousand men. Beyond the left wing, Bryennios stationed a contingent of Pecheneg mercenaries at a considerable distance from the main body of the army<sup>10</sup>. Alexios was well aware that he was outnumbered, but ἐβούλετο τῷ πλήθει καὶ ταῖς δυνάμεσιν ἐλαττούμενος ὁ δομέστικος τῶν Σχολῶν μὴ τόλμῃ μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ μελέτῃ καὶ ἀγχινοῖα καταστρατηγῆσαι τῶν πολεμίων (“although his army was inferior to the multitude arrayed against him [he] planned to outgeneral the enemy not only by daring, but also with care,

8. Bryennios, IV.5: 267; all translations from the *Hyle* are my own. Cf. *Alexias*, I.4: 19; *Alexiad*, I.4: 17. HALDON, *The Byzantine Wars*, 128, notes that Alexios’ choice to occupy the main road between Bryennios and Constantinople was a deliberately provocative move and forced a response from Bryennios.

9. Bryennios, IV.6: 269.

10. *Alexias*, I.5: 20; *Alexiad* I.5: 18. Bryennios, IV.6: 269. These forces would have been used as ‘outflankers’ whose purpose would have been to slip past the enemy’s flank and attack enemy’s army from the side/behind; TOBIAS, *Tactics*, 201. Both Maurice and Leo VI recommend this tactic: *The Taktika of Leo the Wise*. Greek text –english transl. G. T. DENNIS (CFHB 49), Washington 2010 [hereafter *Leo VI*], VII.34: 122; also *Leo VI*, XII.21: 226. Compare Maurice, *Strategikon*, III.14: ed. G. T. DENNIS, German transl. E. GAMILLSCHEG (CFHB 17), Wien 1981, 184; English transl. G. DENNIS, *Maurice’s Strategikon: Handbook of Byzantine Military Strategy*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984, 49.



and shrewdness”)<sup>11</sup>. Nevertheless, Alexios “concealed his whole army in the hollows” and decided to “conceal the enemy from his army” as his forces were badly outnumbered, and he was concerned that his men might rout at the approach of so large a force<sup>12</sup>. Nikephoros relates that Alexios was hesitant to engage in battle as he had received letters from Botaneiates the evening before *κελεύοντα μὴ πολεμεῖν, ἀλλὰ μένειν τὴν ἔλευσιν τῶν ἄρτι πεμφθέντων πρὸς τῶν Τούρκων συμμάχων* (“commanding him not to wage war, but rather to await the coming of an allied contingent already sent from the Turks”)<sup>13</sup>. Alexios was outnumbered; advancing aggressively while reinforcements were on their way would be reckless indeed.

Although he had been commanded not to engage in battle until reinforcements arrived, according to Nikephoros, Alexios believed he could win the battle through subterfuge. Consequently, Alexios deployed forces in concealed positions hoping to ambush the advancing rebels’ right wing and cause enough damage in that moment of surprise to turn the tide and precipitate a rout. Thus, when *Ἐπεὶ γοῦν κατὰ τοὺς κοιλώδεις τόπους τὸ τοῦ Βρυεννίου γέγονε στράτευμα, καὶ τοὺς κατὰ δεξιὸν κέρας ταττομένους ὑπεδείκνυε καὶ χωρεῖν κατὰ τούτων σφοδρᾷ τῇ ῥύμῃ ἐκέλευε. Καταπηδήσαντες οὖν ὥσπερ ἀπὸ ἐνέδρας καὶ τῷ αἰφνιδίῳ τοὺς ἀντιπάλους καταπλήξαντες ...* (“Bryennios’ army came through the hollows,

11. Bryennios, IV.5: 267. The verb (*καταστρατηγεῖν*) Bryennios uses here is the same verb he uses to describe Alexios’ plan to defeat Roussel in an earlier engagement in Alexios’ career. See below, note 36.

12. Bryennios, IV.7: 269-271: *Ὁ δὲ Κομνηνὸς Ἀλέξιος, μαθὼν διὰ τῶν σκοπῶν ἐγγίξειν ἤδη τοὺς πολεμίους, τὸ μὲν στράτευμα ἅπαν ἐν κοιλάσι κατέκρυπεν, αὐτὸς δὲ ἐπὶ λόφον ἀνελθὼν κατεσκόπει τὰ ἐκείνων. Ἰδὼν δὲ πλῆθος καὶ διανοησάμενος μήπως οἱ ὑπ’ αὐτὸν τεταγμένοι πρὸ τοῦ προσβαλεῖν τούτους τοῖς πολεμίους εἰς φυγὴν ἐξορμήσωσιν, ἐβουλεύσατο βουλὴν ἀρίστην ὁμοῦ καὶ συνετωτάτην, ὥστε μηδὲν καταφανεῖς γενέσθαι τῷ τούτου στρατεύματι τοὺς πολεμίους.* (“When Alexios Komnenos learned through his scouts that the enemy were already approaching, he concealed his whole army in the hollows and, going up onto a crest, surveyed the doings of Bryennios’ men. When he saw how many men were arrayed against them he considered whether or not his men might send the enemy into flight, and he considered what would be the best plan for him to employ, and at the same time the most wise – that he might conceal the enemy from his army”). Anna has half of Alexios’ forces hidden in the hollows, while the other half were in plain view (*Alexias*, I.5: 21; *Alexiad* I.5: 18).

13. Bryennios, IV.7: 271. Anna does not record this detail.

Komnenos unveiled the men arrayed against the right wing and ordered them to march against their enemies with violent force. This attack fettered Bryennios' men as if by snares and many were struck down by this unseen blow ...")<sup>14</sup>. But their success was short lived; John Bryennios personally led a charge that rallied the troops of Bryennios' shaken right wing and drove off Alexios' ambushing force.

At this point in the narrative Alexios found himself behind Bryennios' lines with a small force of bodyguards and cut off from his own army. Nikephoros relates that Alexios considered a desperate ploy: he would personally infiltrate Bryennios' army, approach Bryennios himself and strike him down before he and his companions were themselves struck down by Bryennios' retainers<sup>15</sup>. The success of this strategy hinged upon the vital role played by a general in the medieval army: without the general, even an otherwise victorious army often fled the field<sup>16</sup>. While Alexios considered this plan and was advised against it by his retainers, Bryennios' left wing engaged with Alexios' remaining troops and routed the rest of his army. With the battle essentially over, a division of Pecheneg mercenaries in Bryennios' employ abruptly decided to plunder Bryennios' camp and quit the field<sup>17</sup>. In the ensuing chaos Nikephoros narrates a dramatic scene: Alexios advanced alone and τῶν ἵπποκόμων ἓνα τοῦ Βρυεννίου καταβαλὼν <ἵππον τινὰ τῶν βασιλικῶν ἐπισυρόμενον> ἐκείνου τῇ ἀλουργῇ ἐφειστέριδι καὶ τοῖς χρυσοῖς φαλάροις κοσμούμενον <αἰρῶν> ("threw down one of Bryennios' horse-grooms and dragged off one of Bryennios' 'imperial' horses. He took

14. Bryennios, IV.8: 271. *Alexias*, I.5: 21; *Alexiad* I.5: 18.

15. TOBIAS, *Tactics*, 206 argues that both Anna Komnene and Nikephoros Bryennios the Younger [as in previous note] present this dramatic episode as a means of highlighting Alexios' personal bravery. Both Haldon and Neville accept Bryennios' account of Alexios' exploits at face value.

16. The leader is described as the "Achilles' Heel" of the medieval army; killing him nearly invariably precipitates a rout among the surviving troops. E. McGEER, *Sowing the Dragon's Teeth: Byzantine Warfare in the Tenth Century*, Washington D. C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library, 2008, 307-308; TOBIAS, *Tactics*, 206. Cf. Leo VI, XIV.65: 330.

17. *Alexias*, I.5: 22; *Alexiad* I.5: 20; Bryennios, IV.9: 273. Anna attributes this to the temperament of "the Scythian nation" – τοιοῦτον γὰρ τὸ ἔθνος τὸ Σκυθικόν – just Scythians being Scythians. Cf. Leo VI, XVIII.45: 452.



one which was adorned with a purple mantle and a golden bridle”) and loudly proclaimed that Bryennios himself had fallen<sup>18</sup>.

Having successfully rallied his remaining forces, Alexios’ good fortune continued when ξυνέπεσε δέ τι καὶ ἕτερον, Τούρκων οὐκ ἐλαχίστην μοῖραν πρὸς συμμαχίαν ἄρτι πρὸς βασιλέως ἀπεστάλθαι, οὓς συνεκύρησε κατὰ τὸν καιρὸν ἐκεῖνον καθ’ ὃν ἡ μάχη συνέστη καὶ ἡ τροπὴ παραγενέσθαι. Ἰδόντες οὖν φεύγοντας καὶ τὸν δομέστικον ζητήσαντες τῶν Σχολῶν καὶ παρὰ τοῦτω γενόμενοι θαρρεῖν τε ἐκέλευον καὶ τοὺς πολεμίους ἐξήτουν θεάσασθαι (“chanced upon [a] large division of Turks which had just been sent by the Emperor according to his alliance with them. The Turks saw men fleeing and sought out Alexios. They came into his presence and urged him to take heart”)<sup>19</sup>. According to Nikephoros, the Turkish mercenary commanders then independently surveyed the battlefield from a nearby ridge. They decided *among themselves* to divide into three divisions; two were deployed in ambush positions, while a smaller third division advanced ahead as bait. The Turks attacked Bryennios’ forces –on their own initiative– then πρὸς τοὺς πολεμίους χωρεῖν οὐ κατὰ φάλαγγα συντεταγμένους

18. Bryennios, IV.9: 273; *Alexias*, I.5: 23; *Alexiad*, I.5: 19-20. To claim that an enemy general had fallen during a battle in order to bolster the morale of one’s own troops while undermining the morale of the enemy’s troops was a well-established ruse attested in Leo’s *Taktika*: Leo VI, XIV.97: 344. Note the usage of the same verb (*καταστρατηγεῖν*) in Leo’s tactical advice and Nikephoros’ account of Alexios’ intention to ‘outgeneral’ Bryennios. TOBIAS, *Tactics*, 207 suggests that Alexios may have used the confusion created by the withdrawing Pechenegs to exit Bryennios’ army, but this is unconvincing; see below, note 50.

19. Bryennios, IV.10: 275. Compare *Alexias*, I.6: 24; *Alexiad* I.6: 20: εἴτα ἡ τύχη ξυνέβαλε καὶ τι τοιοῦτον ἀπόμοιρά τις ἐκ τῆς συμμαχίας τῶν Τούρκων καταλαμβάνει τὸν δομέστικον τῶν σχολῶν Ἀλέξιον, καὶ ὡς καθειστήκει τὰ τοῦ πολέμου μαθόντες .... ἐπὶ λόφου τινὸς συνεληλυθότες τῷ Κομνηνῷ Ἀλεξίῳ καὶ ἐμῷ πατρὶ ἐκεῖνον δεικνύντος τῇ χειρὶ τὴν στρατιὰν ἐθεῶντο τούτους ὥσπερ ἀπὸ τινος σκοπιᾶς (“Then fortune, too, contributed the following incident to Alexios’ success. A detachment of the Turkish allies happened upon Alexios ... and on hearing that he had restored the battle ... they accompanied him, my father, to a little hill, and when my father pointed out the army, they looked down upon it from an observation tower”). Haldon, Neville, and Tobias accept Nikephoros’ claim that Turkish reinforcements arrived by chance at this opportune moment; NEVILLE, *Heroes*, 127-129, uses this detail to assert that Bryennios the Younger sought to diminish his grandfather’s defeat by removing Alexios’ agency in bringing about Bryennios the Elder’s battlefield loss, ascribing his defeat to Fate/the Turks, and not Alexios himself.

ἀλλὰ κατὰ λόχους ὀλίγους καὶ διεσκεδασμένως, ἑλᾶν τε τοὺς ἵππους καὶ τοῖς τοξεύμασι χρῆσθαι καὶ πέμπειν βέλη συχνὰ κατ' ἐκείνων ("to march against the enemy not in order but scattered according to plan and sought to assail the horses too with arrows, and to shower many missiles down upon those who pursued them")<sup>20</sup>. In this second phase of the battle, Bryennios' men are easily overcome. They are simply no match for the rapid sequence of blows to their morale: first the Pecheneg mercenaries desert; then the Pechenegs plunder Bryennios' camp; then Alexios presents Bryennios' horse and claims that Bryennios is dead; then the Turks emerge from nowhere and launch a disciplined ambush supported by showers of arrows. It is simply too much, and Bryennios' men melt away. Bryennios himself is eventually overcome as well – by a Turkish mercenary – and surrenders<sup>21</sup>.

#### MICHAEL ATTALEIATES' ACCOUNT

In contrast to Nikephoros Bryennios the Younger, Michael Attaleiates offers a much simpler, far more concise account of the Battle of Kalavrye. Preparations for the battle begin after negotiations between Botaneiates and Bryennios break down. Botaneiates then *δυνάμεις ῥωμαϊκὰς ἐκ Κρήτης συναθροίσας εἰς τὸ πρὸ τῆς πόλεως πεδῖον καὶ Τούρκους διαπεραιωσάμενος καὶ καταριθμήσας τοῖς ἑαυτοῦ στρατιώταις* ("assembled troops from Crete in the plain before the City [Constantinople] and ferried Turks across the straits and enlisted them among his own soldiers")<sup>22</sup>. Alexios Komnenos, assuming command of this force at Botaneiates' command, marched against Bryennios' advancing army. Alexios' scouts encountered Bryennios' forces while the army was encamped

20. Bryennios, IV.10: 275. NEVILLE, *Heroes*, 127-128; 186, argues that it is essential to Nikephoros' narrative of this battle that the Turks decide for themselves how to deploy their forces. Their arrival is presented as an instrument of fate, and their tactical decisions *must* be their own in order to deny Alexios credit for the victory to follow. Anna Komene's account (*Alexias*, I.6: 24; *Alexiad* I.6: 21) challenges Nikephoros' on this point, emphasizing Alexios' agency in directing the attacks of the Turks: *καὶ τὸ ξύμπαν τῆς τοιαύτης διαταγῆς ἐς τὸν ἐμὸν πατέρα Ἀλέξιον ἀνεφύετο*.

21. Bryennios, IV.11-13: 275-279; *Alexias*, I.6: 24-26; *Alexiad* I.6: 20-22.

22. *Attaliatae Historia*, 221; *Attaleiates, History*, XXXIV.4: 524. *Scyl. Cont.* (TSOLAKIS), 180 = *Scyl. Cont.* (Mc GEER), VII.3: 178, does not comment on the origins of these forces, only noting that Botaneiates gathered a force and placed Komnenos in command of it.

at Kalavrye. Alexios Τούρκους ἔξαποστείλας νυκτὸς ἐπιφανῆναι πρὸς ἡμέραν τοῖς ἐναντίοις ἐκέλευσε καὶ φόβον ἐνσεῖσαι τούτοις καὶ ταραγμὸν ἐκ τῆς σκοπιάς φαντάζοντας πόλεμον καὶ οὕτω κατασεῖσαι μὲν τὰς τῶν ἀντιθέτων ψυχάς, ταραχὴν δὲ τῷ στρατοπέδῳ ἐμποιῆσαι (“dispatched some Turks at night with orders to appear before the enemy during the day and put fear into them, to rattle them by giving their scouts the impression that they were seeking battle, and in this way to shake the enemy’s morale and fill their army with commotion”)<sup>23</sup>. In Attaleiates’ version of events, Alexios’ Turks succeed in their forays against Bryennios and τούτου δὲ γενομένου, οἱ μὲν τοῦ Βρυεννίου στρατιῶται ταραχῶν πλησθέντες τὰς ψυχὰς κατεσπάσθησαν, οἱ δὲ Τούρκοι πολλοὺς ἀποσπάδας καταβαλόντες κὰν τούτῳ τῷ ἔργῳ τοὺς Βρυεννίτας καταμοχλεύσαντες .... (“the soldiers of Bryennios were in fact thrown into disorder and their morale was shaken, while the Turks eliminated many of them who were detached from the main army, thereby disrupting the supporters of Bryennios ....”)<sup>24</sup>.

After some skirmishing of this nature, Alexios mustered his forces into battle order. Attaleiates narrates a straightforward engagement: Alexios and his forces advanced against Bryennios’, and when τὸ ἐννάλιον ἀλαλαξάντων ἑκατέρων, πόλεμος συνέστη καρτερὸς καὶ ἐπίδοξος ... καὶ διὰ τοῦτο γέγονε φόνος ἐξ ἀμφοτέρων πολλὺς καὶ φόβος οὐτι μικρός (“the battle cry was raised from the two sides, a strongly contested and glorious battle was joined ... as a result, there was much killing on both sides and great terror everywhere”)<sup>25</sup>. Although Alexios’ forces were outnumbered they fought hard and gradually wore down the rebel army’s morale. Attaleiates relates that Bryennios’ Pecheneg mercenaries fled early, plundering Bryennios’ camp and then departing from the battlefield. At this point Attaleiates records that Bryennios himself and his retainers joined the

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23. *Attaliatae Historia*, 222; *Attaleiates, History*, XXXIV.4: 526; *Scyl. Cont.* (TSOLAKIS), 180 = *Scyl. Cont.* (MC GEER), VII.3: 178. Incidentally, this accords well with Nikephoros Phokas’ injunction to harry an adversary who fields a larger and stronger army with raids and skirmishing to undermine his morale before a general engagement. Phokas, *Praecepta Militaria*, ed. –english transl. E. MC GEER [as in n. 16], IV.19: 50.

24. *Attaliatae Historia*, 222; *Attaleiates, History*, XXXIV.5: 526; *Scyl. Cont.* (TSOLAKIS), 180 = *Scyl. Cont.* (MC GEER), VII.3: 178.

25. *Attaliatae Historia*, 223; *Attaleiates, History*, XXXIV.5: 528; *Scyl. Cont.* (TSOLAKIS), 180 = *Scyl. Cont.* (MC GEER), VII.3: 178.

melee in an attempt to stabilize morale. As the fighting intensified, Alexios gave the signal and sprung an ambush: he had kept his Turkish mercenaries in hidden reserve until this point. They οἱ καὶ παρ' ἐλπίδα φανέντες ἐπὶ τοῦ λόφου καὶ τοῖς ἐναντίοις ἐπιχυθέντες καὶ τοῖς τοξεύμασι βάλλοντες ἐκ μέρους τοῦ τὸν λόφον ἐγκάρσιον ἔχοντος, τροπὴν αὐτῶν μετὰ τῶν συμπολεμούντων Ῥωμαίων εἰργάσαντο ("suddenly appeared on a hilltop, pouring down on the enemy while shooting their arrows...and, along with the Byzantines who were fighting with them, caused a rout")<sup>26</sup>. Bryennios, cut off by the rout of his forces, was then surrounded and captured.

The main points of the Battle of Kalavrye as they are presented by Michael Attaleiates, Nikephoros Bryennios the Younger, and Anna Komnene are as follows: Alexios Komnenos is placed in command of an army of Byzantines, mercenaries, and Turkish auxiliaries; Alexios encamped at Kalavrye and dispatched scouts to harry Bryennios' forces; a general melee ensues; the Pechenegs plunder Bryennios' camp; there is an intervention by Turkish mercenaries; Bryennios' forces rout and Bryennios is captured. Yet, while there is general agreement on the outlines of the battle, the particulars vary considerably with each chronicler. Were Alexios' scouts successful in disrupting Bryennios' forces? Did the imperial forces hold Bryennios at bay in a general melee, or were they routed after a failed ambush attempt? Under whose orders were the Turkish mercenaries operating? Most importantly, did Turkish mercenaries arrive serendipitously on the battlefield at Alexios' hour of need or had they been present throughout the battle?

#### NIKEPHOROS BRYENNIOS THE ELDER

What do we know of Nikephoros Bryennios the Elder and his command style? Nikephoros and Attaleiates describes Bryennios as a cautious commander. He is mentioned by Attaleiates in connection with the Battle of Manzikert and the skirmishes that preceded that fateful battle, in which Attaleiates presents Bryennios as a cautious, even timid commander. Bryennios was commanded by the Emperor Romanos IV Diogenes (r. 1068–1071) to engage Turkish forces that were harrying the army's foragers and

26. *Attaliatae Historia*, 223–224; *Attaleiates, History*, XXXIV.6: 528–530 (Cf. below, p. 171). *Scyl. Cont.* (TSOLAKIS), 180 = *Scyl. Cont.* (Mc GEER), VII.3: 178. *Scyl. Cont.*'s account is much sparser in details but follows the same course of events narrated by Attaleiates.

servants. Bryennios at first engaged the Turks in skirmishing, but with mixed results. He sent to the emperor for aid and was initially rebuffed; eventually, however, Romanos dispatched a relief force under the command of Nikephoros Basilakes. When the Turks could still not be pinned down, Basilakes organized a cavalry charge against them. Bryennios followed at first with the bulk of the forces under their combined command, but eventually halted the advance. Basilakes, unaware that Bryennios was no longer near, advanced all the way to the Turks' camp. There he was easily overpowered and captured<sup>27</sup>.

Bryennios' decision to call a halt to the advance demonstrates his cautious command style. He would certainly have understood the Turks were notorious for employing the "Scythian Ambush" – a maneuver in which a portion of the army serves as bait, attacking a larger enemy force and then withdrawing in apparent terror<sup>28</sup>. Unwary commanders would follow the smaller force into an ambush and quickly find themselves under attack from all directions. Byzantine military manuals are replete with advice against advancing incautiously precisely because this tactic could be exceptionally effective at bringing Byzantine forces to disaster; both Maurice's *Strategikon* and Leo's *Taktika* emphasize the need for caution *specifically* when fighting adversaries who, like the Turks, rely upon horse archers<sup>29</sup>.

Bryennios may come across as callous in Attaleiates' account of the preliminary skirmishes leading up to the Battle of Manzikert, but Nikephoros Bryennios the Younger paints a more generous portrait in the *Hyle*. In Nikephoros' version of events, it is *Basilakes* who advances first against the Turks. Contrary to the established precepts of Byzantine military strategy, Basilakes charges headlong against the Turks<sup>30</sup>. His forces

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27. *Attaliatae Historia*, 120; *Attaleiates, History*, XX.16: 282; Cf. *Scyl. Cont.* (TSOLAKIS), 146 = *Scyl. Cont.* (MC GEER), IV.8-10: 116-118.

28. A tactic recommended for use by the Byzantines themselves, see among others, *De velitatione*, ed. G.T. DENNIS, *Three Byzantine Military Treatises* [CFHB 25], Washington 2009, XI: 184; Cf. also Leo VI, XIV.38: 310-312 and Leo VI, XVIII. 38, 452. Compare Maurice, *Strategikon*, IV.2, ed. DENNIS (as in n. 10), 194; english trans. by DENNIS (as in n. 10), 52-53.

29. Cf. Leo VI, XIV.7: 292 and Leo VI, XX.59: 556; Maurice, *Strategikon*, II.1; english trans. by DENNIS (as in n. 10), 24.

30. E.g. Maurice, *Strategikon*, VIII. 1. xxii, ed. DENNIS (as in n. 10), 272; english trans. by DENNIS (as in n. 10), 81.

lose all cohesion and sense of discipline and are easily baited into a Scythian ambush. Nikephoros then relates that Romanos dispatches *Bryennios* to rescue Basilakes, inverting Attaleiates' narrative. Bryennios advances in good order, perceives that a Turkish force is poised to ambush him, and withdraws in good order<sup>31</sup>. In the *Hyle*, Bryennios is a disciplined and cautious commander who executes a difficult fighting withdrawal under fire; in the *History*, he is a cool, callous commander who calls off the advance before his forces can be drawn into an ambush while consigning the reckless Basilakes to his fate. Both accounts emphasize Bryennios' caution – he is not a man who blunders recklessly into an ambush.

After the Battle of Manzikert, Bryennios drops off Attaleiates' radar until his rebellion against Michael VII Doukas/Nikephoros III Botaneiates. Nikephoros, however, continues to follow Bryennios' career and records that Bryennios was next appointed Doux of Illyrikon. While governor of the province Bryennios led an expedition against the Croatians and Diocleians in which Bryennios demonstrated his customary caution and good discipline. He deployed his soldiers throughout the lands he sought to subdue in fortified camps; when he needed to traverse mountain passes, Bryennios deployed axemen to clear the path ahead of the army so as not to be caught in an ambush launched from the heavily wooded terrain. In terrain where other, less cautious generals had often come to disastrous ends at the hands of sudden ambushes, Bryennios succeeded through patience and good sense<sup>32</sup>.

Bryennios –as he is presented by both Michael Attaleiates and Nikephoros Bryennios the Younger– was a cautious general who would not easily be lured into a trap. Both chroniclers attest that he avoided falling into an ambush by Turkish forces at Manzikert, and Nikephoros argues that Bryennios also avoided being ambushed by the Croatians and Diocleians in his Illyrian campaign. Both groups were notoriously adept at ambushing Byzantine forces, which serves to highlight Bryennios' achievements. Yet I

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31. Bryennios, I.14 – I.15: 109-113.

32. Bryennios, III. 3: 213-215. For other, less successful forays by the Byzantines into this territory, see also P. STEPHENSON, About the Emperor Nikephoros and How He Leaves His Bones in Bulgaria: A Context for the Controversial «Chronicle of 811», *DOP* 60 (2006), 87-109.



will argue below that he met his match in Alexios Komnenos, and that the Battle of Kalavrye was a carefully constructed ambush designed to ensnare even the highly cautious Bryennios.

#### ALEXIOS KOMNENOS

Much of what we know about Alexios Komnenos as a general derives from the same four sources that describe the Battle of Kalavrye: the *History* of Michael Attaleiates, the *Synopsis Historion* and *Continuation* of John Skylitzes, the *Hyle Historias* of Nikephoros Bryennios the Younger, and the *Alexiad* of Anna Komnene. Throughout all four chronicles, Alexios Komnenos is portrayed as a remarkably consistent general who employs the same sorts of tactical devices again and again throughout his career. This is especially true of Alexios' early campaigns, during which he routinely commanded numerically inferior forces against stronger enemies.

Alexios' campaign against the Frankish mercenary-gone-rogue Roussel provides a case in point. Nikephoros Bryennios provides a lucid account of the tactics employed by Alexios in suppressing Roussel's separatist campaign. Alexios, accompanied by a small retinue, encountered a 'handful' of Alan mercenaries –a force of about 150 men– who were leaderless survivors of previous campaigns to suppress Roussel's rebellion<sup>33</sup>. Alexios incorporated these men into his expeditionary army, and then dispatched some of his forces to plunder the regions under Roussel's control while himself concealed

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33. Bryennios, II.20: 185. Michael Attaleiates does not provide a narrative of these events, leaving us completely dependent upon Bryennios' account. Attaleiates' account does corroborate Bryennios', however, in that Attaleiates relates that Alexios was considered worthy of a later command by the Emperor Nikephoros III Botaneiates *because* he had "cunningly apprehended Roussel in the Armeniac *thema* and safely brought him back" to Constantinople (ὅς τὸν Ρουσέλιον ἐν τῷ θέματι τῶν Ἀρμενιῶν εὐμηχάνως ἐχειρώσατο καὶ διέσωσεν εἰς τὴν βασιλεύουσαν (*Attalatae Historia*, 222; *Attaleiates, History*, XXXIV.4: 526). Skyl. Cont. also presents Roussel's capture as the result of cunning *diplomatic* efforts by Alexios, rather than military action, with Alexios arranging for Roussel's capture by the Turks through judicious use of bribery [*Scyl. Cont.* (TSOLAKIS), 160-161; *Scyl. Cont.* (Mc GEER), VI.9: 144]. See a detailed report of the facts in relation to Roussel's end in G. LEVENIOTIS, *Τὸ στασιαστικὸ κίνημα τοῦ Ουρσελίου (Ursel de Bailleul) στὴν Μικρὰ Ἀσία* (1073–1076), Thessalonica 2004, esp. 169 ff.

with a larger division waiting in ambush<sup>34</sup>. When Roussel dispatched men to challenge the raiders, they fled and were eagerly pursued by Roussel's men; the raiders withdrew, with Latin mercenaries close behind, to the point Alexios had chosen as an ambush site<sup>35</sup>.

While ambushes provided Alexios a useful tool in thinning Roussel's numerical superiority and undermining the confidence of his opponent, Alexios was still badly outnumbered. So, he decided to turn Roussel's advantage –greater numbers– into a disadvantage. Alexios' men, in addition to drawing unwary Latin mercenaries into 'Scythian' ambushes, began to target Roussel's foragers. Over time the rogue mercenary commander ran short of supplies. Roussel determined to march against Alexios with his entire force: ὁ μὲν γὰρ ἀξιόμαχον ἔχων δύναμιν ἐβούλετο μάχη μιᾷ κριθῆναι τὰ κατ' αὐτόν, ὁ δὲ στρατοπεδάρχης δυνάμεως ἀπορῶν καταστρατηγεῖν τὸν βάρβαρον ἔσπευδε, καὶ ὀπηνίκα ἐκεῖνος τὸ ἑαυτοῦ συνήθροιζε στράτευμα, οὗτος ἡρμεῖν προσεποιεῖτο καὶ διασχὼν ἡμέρας τινὰς ἐξῆι λάθρα καὶ τοὺς <τὰ ἀναγκαῖα> ἐπὶ τὸ στράτευμα διακομίζοντας ἐζώγρει ("for he, having a battle-ready force, wanted the matter settled with one battle, while Alexios, because he lacked a strong force, made haste to *outgeneral* the barbarian. Whenever Roussel gathered his own army, Alexios feigned quietude, but after a few days he would go out secretly and set up traps not far from Roussel")<sup>36</sup>. Gradually, Alexios' raids and ambushes wore Roussel and his forces down and Alexios returned to Constantinople with Roussel as his prisoner<sup>37</sup>.

34. Alexios' tactics follow those recommended in the handbook on border defense, the *De Velitatione Bellica* (as in n. 28), X: 174-175: καὶ εἰ μὲν εὐχερές ἐστι τῷ στρατηγῷ τοὺς ἐς τὴν λείαν ἐκδραμόντας διεσκεδασμένους καταλαβεῖν καὶ τούτους κατατροπώσασθαι ("If it can be done easily, the general should attack the men who have ridden out to plunder while they are scattered, and he will make them turn to flight"). Gradually this would prevent an adversary from remaining in the field, as supplies would eventually run out. See also *De Velitatione Bellica*, XXII: 226.

35. Bryennios, II.20: 185.

36. Bryennios, II.20: 185. Emphasis mine. The verb (καταστρατηγεῖν) Nikephoros uses here will be the same verb he uses to describe Alexios' plan to defeat Nikephoros Bryennios the Elder; see above, note 11.

37. Anna Komnene (*Alexias* I.2: 13; *Alexiad*, I.2: 11) reports that Roussel πολλάκις ὑπὸ τοῦ στρατοπεδάρχου στενοχωρούμενος καὶ ἄλλα ἐπ' ἄλλοις φρουρία ἀφαιρούμενος (καίτοι στρατιὰν πολλὴν ἐπαγόμενος καὶ πάντας λαμπρῶς καὶ γενναίως

Alexios emerges from Nikephoros' narration of these events as a shrewd general who knew how to outmaneuver a stronger opponent and carry the day through cunning and intelligence. Nikephoros provides a further example of Alexios' military cunning in his account of John Bryennios' siege of Constantinople in the late 1070s. He relates that John advanced against Constantinople at the head of a sizeable contingent loyal to John's brother, Nikephoros Bryennios the Elder. John sought to seize control of the capital in his brother's name; Michael VII Doukas, the reigning emperor, organized a resistance under the joint command of Alexios Komnenos and Michael's younger brother Constantine Doukas. Alexios and Constantine organized a garrison from new recruits and their own personal retainers and braced to weather a lengthy siege. Alexios happened to notice a group of foragers departing from John's camp during one of his patrols. He quickly assembled a band of followers and attacked John's foragers, capturing twenty men and withdrawing behind the safety of the walls of Constantinople before the rebels could rally in pursuit<sup>38</sup>. Michael VII lavished praise upon Alexios for his boldness and tactical savvy in launching an attack on John's foragers, thus endangering the rebel's ability to supply himself and his army. Nikephoros relates that John abandoned the siege shortly thereafter, attributing this directly to Alexios' battlefield successes. He also notes that John Doukas, the *Kaisar* and Emperor Michael Doukas' uncle, arranged a marriage alliance with Alexios at this point, having recognized the young general's talents and having decided that Alexios would make a useful ally<sup>39</sup>.

While the Battle of the Vardar River (c. 1078) – a contest which pitted Alexios Komnenos against Bryennios the Elder's old colleague from Manzikert and fellow rebel against the crown, Nikephoros Basilakes – follows the Battle of Kalavrye and is not chronologically next, a close examination of this battle will demonstrate two things: first, that Alexios Komnenos employed remarkably consistent tactics throughout his career; and second,

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*καθωπλισμένους, εὖμηχανία παρὰ πολὺν ἡττάτο τοῦμοῦ πατρὸς Ἀλεξίου* ("was often hard pressed by the general [Alexios], and losing one fortress after another *in spite of his large army and his men being excellently and generously equipped*, because *in ingenuity he was far surpassed by my father Alexios*"). Emphasis mine.

38. Alexios' tactics in this engagement closely parallel those he employed successfully against Roussel in Anatolia; see above, n. 34.

39. Bryennios, III.13: 235.

that Michael Attaleiates' and Nikephoros Bryennios the Younger's histories largely confirm one another when political biases are not at play<sup>40</sup>. Attaleiates relates that Alexios marched against Basilakes, setting up camp on the road to Thessalonike at the banks of the Vardar River<sup>41</sup>. Nikephoros adds that Alexios dispatched scouts who encountered Basilakes' army on the move; once Alexios realized that the rebel was aware of his presence and intended to launch a night raid on his camp, Alexios began preparing for Basilakes' arrival<sup>42</sup>. All four chroniclers relate that Alexios created a trap for Basilakes' advancing forces<sup>43</sup>. Nikephoros elaborates on Attaleiates' terse description, relating that Alexios concealed his army and that the general entrusted his camp servants generally and a faithful monk companion specifically with the task of remaining in camp with torches and campfires blazing while the army itself concealed themselves in a "thickly covered place" (*εἰς τινα συνηρεφῇ τόπον εἰσῆει*)<sup>44</sup>.

When Basilakes arrived, his men easily occupied Alexios' camp. They proceeded to search, rather comically in Nikephoros' description of the events, for Alexios for some time<sup>45</sup>. With Basilakes' men scattered and off their guard, Alexios marshalled his concealed forces and charged headlong back into his abandoned camp, taking Basilakes and his men unawares. A running fight ensued in which Alexios and his forces gained the upper hand

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40. Attaleiates, as a partisan of Nikephoros III Botaneiates, fervently disliked Nikephoros Bryennios the Elder for his rebellion against Nikephoros III Botaneiates. Conversely, Nikephoros Bryennios the Younger strove to maintain a delicate balance of allegiances: he was married to Anna Komnene, the daughter of Alexios Komnenos, and himself the grandson of Nikephoros Bryennios the Elder.

41. *Ἐκ τινος δὲ διαστήματος τὸν χάρακα θεῖς ἀντιπέραν τοῦ ποταμοῦ τοῦ λεγομένου Βαρδαρίου* (*Attaliatae Historia*, 230; *Attaleiates, History*, XXXV.7: 546).

42. Bryennios, IV.20: 287-289, *Attaliatae Historia*, 230; *Attaleiates, History*, XXXV.7: 546. *Alexias*, I.7: 28-29. *Alexiad*, I.7: 25.

43. Alexios appears to have employed a ruse, frequently mentioned in Byzantine handbooks as a means of enabling a cover withdrawal from a stronger adversary, with the intention of creating a trap rather than covering a retreat. Cf. Leo VI, XX.21: 544; Maurice, *Strategikon*, VIII.1.xxvii: ed. DENNIS [as in. n. 10], 274; translation DENNIS [as in. n. 10], 84, a stratagem going back to Onasander X.12.

44. Bryennios, IV.21: 289.

45. Anna quotes Aristophanes, noting that Basilakes would not stop "groping about in darkness." *Alexias*, I.8: 30; *Alexiad*, I.8: 26.

despite their inferior numbers. Nikephoros and Attaleiates both record a personal confrontation between Alexios and Basilakes; both assert that Basilakes fled the battlefield after losing the majority of his men<sup>46</sup>.

What emerges is a portrayal of Alexios Komnenos as a general who consistently utilizes tactics designed to throw an adversary off-balance. This combination of ambushes, feints, flanking maneuvers, and other ‘tricks’ became Alexios’ signature style of generalship throughout his career. There is a remarkable degree of consistency among our four principal sources – Michael Attaleiates, John Skylitzes, Nikephoros Bryennios the Younger, and Anna Komnene – that Alexios fought in this manner. Nikephoros’ account of the Battle of Kalavrye thus represents an outlier. Would Alexios attack with an inadequate force, knowing that his adversary was advancing to battle confident in his numerical superiority and aware of Alexios’ presence? To do so would be reckless and foolish in equal measure: Alexios consistently defeated his adversaries by utilizing the element of surprise, whittling away at an adversary’s morale through ambushes and attrition when badly outnumbered. Is it not more likely that he would conceal an important piece of information and a portion of his army to gain an advantage over Bryennios, as he was later to do at the Battle of the Vardar River?

If we instead approach the Battle of Kalavrye under the assumption that Alexios Komnenos employed the same sort of tactics that he had utilized earlier in his career against Roussel and John Bryennios – tactics, moreover, which he was to employ later in his career against Basilakes, e.g. – then we must reevaluate the account provided by Nikephoros Bryennios the Younger in the *Hyle Historias*. Nikephoros, as has been demonstrated persuasively by Leonora Neville, emphasizes the role of chance in this battle in a deliberate attempt to present Nikephoros Bryennios the Elder as a general of similar caliber to Alexios Komnenos<sup>47</sup>. Nikephoros’ account of

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46. Bryennios, IV.24–IV.26: 293–295. *Attaliatae Historia*, 230; *Attaleiates, History*, XXXV.7: 546. *Alexias*, I.8–9: 30–34. *Alexiad*, I.8–9: 26–29.

47. See above, note 20. NEVILLE, *Heroes*, 116–119, argues that Nikephoros strove to undermine Alexios’ credibility as a talented general by ascribing the crucial intervention of Alexios’ Turkish contingents to their chance arrival and willingness to engage in what was otherwise a lost cause. However, this reading is not consistent with Nikephoros’ portrayal of Alexios throughout the remainder of the *Hyle*, in which he appears as a skilled commander who is usually in control of the situation. The Battle of Kalavrye is a lone exception and

the battle is problematic, however, as he presents an Alexios who offers battle seemingly without a concrete plan<sup>48</sup>. Nikephoros relates that Alexios launched a concealed ambush on Bryennios' right flank, but that this maneuver was easily repelled when John Bryennios rallied his rattled forces<sup>49</sup>. With his forces dispersed, we are told that Alexios proceeds to consider several daring stratagems: however, we are not told *how* Alexios and his personal retinue find themselves *behind* Bryennios' lines and in a position to infiltrate the rebel's army. Nikephoros provides a dramatic account of Alexios' planned assassination attempt on Bryennios, a stratagem which he is dissuaded from attempting by his retinue and the serendipitous departure of Bryennios' Pecheneg mercenaries.

However, this dramatic account is suspect and does not appear in Attaleiates' account of the battle<sup>50</sup>. Instead, Attaleiates narrates a

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departure from Alexios' usual tactics – and is, not coincidentally, a battle which Nikephoros Bryennios the Younger has an emotional investment in and a compelling reason to present a biased account of.

48. Bryennios, IV.7: 269-271 (See n. 12 above). Consider the irony of this situation: Alexios is concealing *the enemy* from *his own army*, a dramatic reversal of his habitual approach – namely, to ambush the enemy by concealing his own army from the enemy. Phokas, whom Alexios' ancestors studied under Basil II and Alexios himself likely also studied, counseled indirect warfare when confronted by a stronger foe. See n. 23 above. For the Komnenoi family's ties to Basil and military training, see also Bryennios, *Hyle*, I.1: 75. That the Byzantine military aristocracy was well-versed in the military manuals described throughout has been well established by others, e.g. KOLIAS [as in n. 7], 157; K. J. SINCKLAIR, *War Writing in Middle Byzantine Historiography: Sources, Influences and Trends* (PhD Dissertation, University of Birmingham, 2012), 23.

49. Bryennios, IV.8:271. Incidentally, this account of the battle presents John Bryennios in a very positive light. He emerges as a dashing, dauntless commander who deflects a prepared ambush and then proceeds to rout the forces arrayed against him – a role which he does not play in Attaleiates' account of the same battle. Nikephoros' biases are readily apparent.

50. Alexios appears to have favored a direct approach to generalship, fighting on the front lines of several engagements later in his career. Are we to believe that the battle passed him by, and that he found himself behind Bryennios? That he was then able to infiltrate Bryennios' army unnoticed, steal a warhorse, and emerge unscathed on the opposite side of Bryennios' forces? Nikephoros would also have us believe that Bryennios' scouts easily detected and apprehended Alexios' Turkish scouts the day before the battle ... yet they managed to miss the imperial commander as he marched through their lines? In fact, R.



straightforward engagement between the two armies. Bryennios' Pecheneg mercenaries broke first, looting Bryennios' camp as they departed<sup>51</sup>. As the fighting intensified, Attaleiates relates that Bryennios himself entered the fray<sup>52</sup>. It was too late: Alexios "gave a signal to his unit of Turks, *whom he had kept in reserve for use in a moment of need*, ordering them to assist his men. They suddenly appeared on a hilltop, pouring down on the enemy while shooting their arrows... [which] caused a rout"<sup>53</sup>. It is significant that

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J. LILIE [Reality and Invention: Reflections on Byzantine Historiography, *DOP*, 68 (2014), 179-180], argues that the riderless horse prompting panic among partisans of a general and precipitating a rout is a common trope in Byzantine historiography. Medieval soldiers *did* panic if their general fell in battle –or was perceived to have fallen– and this could lead to defeat for an otherwise successful army.

51. *Attaliatae Historia*, 223; *Attaleiates, History*, XXXIV.5: 528. Compare Nikephoros' account (Bryennios IV.9: 273): *Κατὰ δὲ τὸ εὐώνυμον οἱ περὶ Κατακαλὼν τὸν Ταρχανειώτην Σκύθαι ἰδόντες Χωματηνοὺς εὐθὺς ἐξώρμησαν κατ' αὐτῶν ξὺν βοῇ πολλῇ καὶ ἀλαλαγμῷ καὶ θάπτον ἢ λόγος τοῦτους τρεψάμενοι, τοῦ διώκειν πανσάμενοι, σὺν τάξει ὑπέστρεφον καὶ κατὰ τῶν τὴν οὐραγίαν τηρούντων <τοῦ> τοῦ Βρυεννίου στρατεύματος ἐξώρμων σὺν προθυμίᾳ πολλῇ καὶ ὅσον θητικὸν σκυλεύσαντες καὶ ἵππους καὶ λάφυρα λαβόντες ἀπήεσαν οἷκαδε* ("The Scythians around Katakalon Tarchaneiotēs saw the Chomatēnes and straightaway charged forth against them with a great shout and a war cry; they then turned away swifter than thought, breaking their pursuit. Just as quickly, they turned back in good order against those guarding the rear of Bryennios' army. They surged forth with great spirit and despoiled Bryennios' camp and, taking their horses and spoils, they left the battlefield."). In the *Hyle*, the Pechenegs' motives are obscure and attributed to chance – part of Nikephoros' wider commentary on the battle as a whole and therefore suspect as it serves Nikephoros' narrative argument and does not objectively make sense in light of the facts presented by the chronicler.

52. Bryennios' decision to avoid the melee until absolutely necessary accords well with the injunctions of Byzantine military manuals, which advise the general *not* to engage unless absolutely necessary. E.g. *De Velitatione Bellica* [as in n.28], XVI; 202.

53. *Attaliatae Historia*, 223-224; *Attaleiates, History*, XXXIV.6: 530: *σύνθημα δοὺς τοῖς τὸν λόχον ἔχουσι Τούρκοις ὁ Κομνηνός, οὗς εἰς καιρὸν ἀπεκρύψατο χρεῖας, παραβοηθῆσαι τοῖς οἰκείοις προσέταξεν· οἱ καὶ παρ' ἐλπίδα φανέντες ἐπὶ τοῦ λόφου καὶ τοῖς ἐναντίοις ἐπιχυθέντες καὶ τοῖς τοξεύμασι βάλλοντες ἐκ μέρους τοῦ τὸν λόφον ἐγκάρσιον ἔχοντος, τροπὴν αὐτῶν μετὰ τῶν συμπολεμούντων Ῥωμαίων εἰργάσαντο*. Emphasis mine. (Cf. also above, p. 162). Note that the Turkish mercenaries are assumed to have been present throughout, contra Nikephoros. Cf. Bryennios, IV.10: 275, above, p. 159 and n. 19.

Attaleiates' account emphasizes that the Turks were *always* present on the field of battle; they attack at a prearranged signal from Alexios<sup>54</sup>.

The Battle of Kalavrye, then, emerges as an example of Alexios' favored tactic: a "Scythian Ambush"<sup>55</sup>. Although Nikephoros' account of the battle is overly sensationalized and biased in favor of the Bryennioi, the basic outline of events – a short engagement between imperial and rebel troops, from which the imperial troops withdrew – accords well with what we know of the relative strength of each army. The crucial moment of the battle is the intervention of the Turks in an unexpected attack on Bryennios' lines; this attack precipitated a rout of Bryennios forces. Attaleiates is undoubtedly correct in asserting that this was an ambush commanded by Alexios Komnenos himself; however, it is difficult to believe that Alexios and his men, outnumbered though they were, were fighting Bryennios to a standstill – let alone winning the fight alone, as Attaleiates seems to imply. Alexios knew that he could not win a straight fight, so he never intended to fight one. Furthermore, it is highly improbable that Alexios could have rallied his scattered forces *on the very day of the battle* for a counterattack. Byzantine military manuals routinely advise against immediately resuming an attack – the expectation was that defeated troops would need time to recover their resolve and will to fight<sup>56</sup>.

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54. This is implied in Nikephoros' own account of the preparations leading up to the battle: *Ἐξήκει οὖν ὁ Κομνηνός, σχὼν μεθ' ἑαυτοῦ τοὺς τε ξυμμάχους Τοῦρκους καὶ τοὺς Χωματινοὺς λεγομένους, ... , καὶ Φράγγων τῶν ἐξ Ἰταλίας ἐλθόντων ἀπομοιρᾶν τινα καὶ τῆς τῶν Ἀθανάτων καλουμένων φάλαγγος ἐπαγόμενος* ("Then Alexios Komnenos was sent forth, taking with him the allied Turks, hand-picked Chomatenes ... Franks coming from Italy and a division of the 'Athanatoi.'"). Bryennios, IV.4: 265. Attaleiates corroborates this reading, noting that the Emperor Nikephoros III Botaneiates gathered *δυνάμεις ρωμαϊκὰς ἐκ Κρήτης ... καὶ Τοῦρκους διαπεραιωσάμενος καταριθμήσας τοῖς ἑαυτοῦ στρατιώταις, οὓς ὁ πρὸ αὐτοῦ βασιλεὺς ὁ Μιχαὴλ πολλὰς ἐπαγγελίας καὶ δώροις ἀμέτροις οὐκ ἠδυνήθη συμπεῖσαι καὶ περαιῶσαι ...* "forces from Crete ... and ferried Turks across the straits and enlisted them among his own soldiers, those whom the previous emperor Michael had failed to persuade to be ferried across to the western parts despite his many promises and countless gifts." *Attaliatae Historia*, 221; *Attaleiates, History*, XXXIV.4: 524; see above, p. 160 and note 22.

55. See above, note 28.

56. Leo VI, XIV.14-15: 308.

Instead, Alexios baited Bryennios into an ambush. This was likely accomplished through planned ‘defections’: Nikephoros alleges that Bryennios captured some of Alexios’ Turkish scouts before the battle. Could this have been deliberate? We know that Byzantine military manuals recommended this type of stratagem; we know that Alexios was fond of employing stratagems; we further know that Bryennios had avoided being drawn into a Scythian-style ambush before, namely at the Battle of Manzikert<sup>57</sup>. If Alexios dispatched his Turkish mercenaries some distance from his army and then spread word that they were not present but still some distance off, *and* Bryennios should have learned this from Alexios’ ‘captured’ Turkish scouts, Bryennios could have advanced confident that his forces outnumbered those arrayed against him. This reading of the chronicle evidence has the advantage of reconciling Alexios’ otherwise uncharacteristic battle plans at Kalavrye with what is recorded of his tactics in both earlier and later campaigns. Alexios employed nearly identical tactics against Basilakes; furthermore, this reading of Alexios’ tactics at Kalavrye accords well with Attaleiates’ account of the battle. Moreover, we can safely assume that any discrepancies in the two accounts emerge from Nikephoros’ partiality toward his ancestors: after all, Nikephoros could hardly report that his grandfather had been duped by Alexios Komnenos and led into a trap<sup>58</sup>.

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57. This type of stratagem is frequently recommended in Byzantine military manuals and derives from the stratagems of Polyaeus. The Byzantines were particularly fond of Polyaeus, whose works they frequently copied, abridged, and incorporated into larger works like Leo’s *Taktika*. For Polyaeus in Byzantium, see F. TROMBLEY, *The Taktika of Nikephoros Ouranos and Military Encyclopaedism*, in *Pre-modern Encyclopaedic Texts: Proceedings of the Second COMERS Congress*, Groningen, 1-4 July (1996), 261-274. For Byzantine recommendations to utilize this type of stratagem: Leo VI, XX.15: 542; (Leo is citing Maurice, *Strategikon*, VIII.1.xi). Ultimately this advice derives from Polyaeus II.1.iii. Cf. Leo VI, XX.8; 540 (Leo is citing Maurice, *Strategikon*, VIII.1.viii).

58. If we are generous, it is even possible that Nikephoros misunderstood the accounts from which he composed his history; feigned withdrawals were notoriously difficult for chroniclers to recognize, and what is presented as a general rout here may well have been a deliberate and calculated withdrawal designed to draw Bryennios’ forces into an ambush. However, it is unlikely that a member of the military aristocracy –steeped in the military manuals, as we have seen above– would have misidentified such a tactic unintentionally. See above, notes 7 & 48.

## CONCLUSION

Alexios Komnenos deployed Turkish mercenaries in a concealed ambush at the Battle of Kalavrye. This maneuver won him the battle. The conflicting accounts regarding Alexios' Turkish scouts, who were either captured by Bryennios' men or who harassed Bryennios' beleaguered forces at will, represent a misunderstanding of Alexios' tactics: a ruse, designed to lure Bryennios into battle and then spring an ambush using troops that were 'not there' at the start of the battle. Alexios prompted Turkish soldiers within his army to 'defect' –or, perhaps, simply to get themselves caught– and to provide Bryennios with seemingly trustworthy information about Alexios' army and its disposition. Bryennios, believing that Alexios' forces were less numerous than they actually were and that Alexios was awaiting substantial reinforcements, chose to attack immediately and force the road. This was an uncharacteristically bold move by Bryennios, as I have demonstrated above, and would have required prompting – of the sort provided by defectors peddling the information suggested above. It then remained only for Alexios' main forces to fight a delaying action, serving as the bait in a drawn out fighting withdrawal until Alexios' Turkish mercenaries could be mobilized in an ambush. These forces were *always* present on the battlefield, despite Nikephoros' claims of their serendipitous arrival – these are the arguments of a devoted grandson attempting to exonerate his grandfather of the onus of failure by railing against the vagaries of Fate. My interpretation of the Battle of Kalavrye serves to align Alexios' tactics with what we know of his career generally, reconciling what would otherwise emerge as an uncharacteristically reckless engagement by the young general with what we know of his style of generalship.

## ΚΑΙ ΠΑΛΙ ΓΙΑ ΤΗΝ ΜΑΧΗ ΤΗΣ ΚΑΛΑΒΡΥΗΣ

Στο άρθρο επανεξετάζονται τα σχετικά με την μάχη της Καλαβρύης (1078), της κρίσιμης αυτής αντιπαράθεσης μεταξύ Αλεξίου Κομνηνού και Νικηφόρου Βρυεννίου, και προτείνεται μία άλλη ερμηνεία για την εξέλιξή της. Η σύγχρονη βιβλιογραφία βασίζεται στην εξιστόρηση του νεωτέρου Νικηφόρου Βρυεννίου στην *Υψηλή Ιστορία*, με σύντομες αναφορές στα λίγα σημεία διαφοροποίησης που υπάρχουν στην αφήγηση της Άννας Κομνηνής στην *Αλεξιάδα*, και η ακρίβειά της θεωρείται δεδομένη. Έχει αγνοηθεί όμως σε μεγάλο βαθμό η λίγο παλαιότερη εκδοχή που παρουσιάζει ο Μιχαήλ Ατταλειάτης. Στο άρθρο επιχειρείται να αποδειχθεί ότι μία βασική λεπτομέρεια που αναφέρεται στην σύγχρονη βιβλιογραφία –η αιφνίδια άφιξη των Τούρκων μισθοφόρων που έγειρε την πλάστιγγα υπέρ του Αλεξίου– βασίζεται στην παράδοση της *Υψηλής Ιστοριών* και της *Αλεξιάδας*, δεν επαληθεύεται όμως από την *Ιστορία* του Μιχαήλ Ατταλειάτη. Η αναφορά σε «αιφνίδια άφιξη» των Τούρκων μισθοφόρων οφείλεται σε παρερμηνεία της τακτικής του Αλεξίου: οι Τούρκοι ήσαν εξ αρχής παρόντες στο πεδίο της μάχης.

