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Review of Penelope Buckley's *The Alexiad* of Anna Komnene: Artistic Strategy in the Making of a Myth

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Penelope Buckley

*The Alexiad of Anna Komnene:
Artistic Strategy in the Making
of a Myth*

**Cambridge: Cambridge University
Press, 2014. xv + 318 pp.**

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Penelope Buckley's recent monograph on *The Alexiad of Anna Komnene* brings into focus a renowned, though problematic, historical text and a demanding literary work of twelfth-century Byzantium; a prose paean meant to immortalise its protagonist, Anna's father, namely the Byzantine emperor Alexios I Komnenos (1081–1118), founder of the Komnenian dynasty. Her text, in classicising Greek, was written decades after her father's death, in the 1140s, when Anna, an outcast of the ruling imperial family, was isolated and confined to a monastery.

Buckley's reading first and foremost is a systematic and detailed literary study. Komnene sets out to create a myth about her father purporting to use the medium of history – an oxymoron in itself – while Buckley meticulously and painstakingly traces, outlines and reads into Anna's literary strategy and "artillery", her artistry of accumulation, appropriation and manipulation, as well as her agile shift in between different literary genres (history and drama, epic and romance), in order to achieve her goal. As Buckley writes: "Her [Anna's] work seeks to recover and renew him [Alexios], to reauthorise his being. What Alexios did

for the empire, she is trying to do for him. It is an exercise of mind conducting mind ... Alexios' mind through the narrator's" (1). I would risk sharing my impression that this kind of mental *symbiosis* and identification – symbiosis after all is a word that reoccurs emphatically in Buckley's analysis with regard to the quality of the relationship Komnene maintains with the idealised memory of the historical persona of her father – extends perilously into the relationship that the book's author establishes with the subject of her own study, Anna and her *Alexiad*.

In her introduction she methodically reviews and challenges the various historiographical approaches to the *Alexiad* and expounds Anna's demanding shape-casting of Alexios in a composite mould that combines the traditional imperial role of the restorer, the zealous and heroic Christian leader and fighter that engages in a new cultural and military conflict with the West, represented in her time by the Normans and the First Crusade, until finally she presents Alexios as having been brought up within a Helleno-Christian aura of sanctity. He stands side-by-side with Constantine the Great as the Last Constantine, whose death eventually seals the empire's destiny and marks its end in an eschatological crescendo. Her character develops through the course of events and naturally emerges as the historical-mythical persona Komnene makes of him and wishes him to be remembered for.

After a brief chapter dedicated to Komnene's *Prologue* on the provenance of her work, there follow six chapters in which Buckley continues with her reading and analysis of the 15 books of the *Alexiad* in consecutive order. It comes

as no surprise that the first chapter examining books one to three is entitled "Emperor Alexios, my father". It precisely epitomises the complex mental symbiosis of Anna and her father and sets out to recount his early military career, rebellious advancement to power and ultimately his ascension to the Byzantine throne. His beginning foreshadows the charismatic leader that will emerge and anticipates the rhythm of his reign divided between home affairs and dispersal abroad. In the second chapter, "The soldier-emperor" (books four to eight), the author follows a classicising military history. It covers the period of recovery and re-expansion when Alexios demonstrates the rescue of the empire with which the history began. He is methodically elevated to the status of a great strategist and general who can only compare with and equal the two great Basils of Byzantine history, namely Basil I the Macedonian and Basil II the Bulgar-Slayer. This is the climax of the first part of Alexios' bipartite glorious reign. The third chapter, entitled "The second story begins", covers the story of book nine and transfers the reader into the second half of the *Alexiad*, where Alexios attains the status of the great strategist and soldier, yet he sets out on a second journey to become a somewhat different kind of emperor through a narrative scheme that will eventually bestow on him the saintly aura of the ideal Christian ruler. Chapter four, "West into East", covers the events in book ten and the crossing of the First Crusade. Her main concern here is the exposure of hidden agendas and the long-term consequences for Byzantium. Chapter five, "The second Norman war and the Crusade", focuses on Alexios' and the empire's engagement with the Normans from books 11 to 13. In her sixth chapter, "The second Constantine and the last", Buckley deals with the *Alexiad's* final two books, 14 and 15, where she details Alexios' transformation and recasting into the Constantinian mould in order to be-

come Anna's Last Constantine. Finally, her main points of argument are summarised in a conclusion, which is followed by an appendix that resonates as an *apologia* (at least to my ears) and tries to squeeze Komnene's *Alexiad* into the guise of a precursor of Renaissance literature.

Throughout her study Buckley pursues a systematic parallel reading and analysis of the primary sources Anna evidently and extensively exploited in the composition of her *Alexiad*. In particular, her debts are due to her "Kaisar" and husband (Nikephoros Bryennios and his *Hyle Historias*) and to Michael Psellos (*Chronographia*). Buckley's contribution, though, exceeds the limits of identifying a mere association of Anna's work with these earlier precedents. She delves into Komnene's art of manipulation and demonstrates the composite way she appropriates and recasts past literary frameworks to meet her character's needs and the demands of her own narrative. An excellent case in point is described in chapter three, "The debt to Psellos" (176–189), recounting in particular Nikephoros Diogenes' conspiracy against Alexios. Anna resourcefully builds on Psellos' stagecraft genius in order to stage for her own protagonist an imperial spectacle that frames Alexios as the upcoming ideal of a Christian ruler.

In conclusion, Buckley's monograph is a thorough and thought-provoking work that certainly enriches and broadens the spectrum of *Alexiad* studies. I would definitely endorse her thesis that the *Alexiad* is an "outstanding literary text from a distinguished mind with highly developed powers and stamina" (44). Nonetheless, I remain sceptical and rather unconvinced by the bold statement that "The *Alexiad* is everything you could ask a history to be" (44). While Buckley endeavours to explore and demonstrate the literary merits of Anna's

work – and indeed she succeeds in this impeccably and most eloquently – she succumbs to Komnene’s historical pretensions, her skilful and persuasive artistry of distortion. On this front, that is, on Anna the historian, Buckley is rather defensive and loses her otherwise self-possessed scholarly insight. Komnene has not “raised a monument to an emperor, a civilisation, an age and to the discipline of history itself” (44) but a distorting mirror whose biased reflection – Alexios and his conservative theocratic autocracy – eased her nostalgia and compensated for the bitter taste of her distressing isolation from the exercise of power. The *Alexiad* is most definitely a good read in the guise of history, but as with every guise meant to be used as a historical source and not as mere recreational fiction, it demands our constant vigilance and caution.

Julia P. Cohen

Becoming Ottomans: Sephardi Jews and Imperial Citizenship in the Modern Era

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. xxi + 219 pp.

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This book begins and ends by way of references to the contemporary activities of a Turkish organisation headed by Jewish and Muslim entrepreneurs, named the Quincentennial Foundation, in celebration of the passage of five centuries since Sultan Bayezid II welcomed the expelled Sephardi (Ladino-speaking) Jewry of Habsburg Spain into the Ottoman empire in 1492. This choice seems only appropriate given that, in the author’s own words, “the aim of the book is to present the story of Jewish allegiance to the Ottoman state not as the history of a sentiment, but rather as the history of a process and a project” (4). She explicitly identifies it as a nineteenth-century phenomenon of internal modernisation in conjunction with wave upon wave of Ottoman reforms effecting fast changing social realities. To this end, the book’s main body is divided into four chronological chapters, each of which is centred on one or more significant historical events affecting Ottoman Jewish communities (especially the largest ones, in Salonica, Izmir and Istanbul), beginning with the promulgation of the first Ottoman constitution in 1876, followed by the 1877–78 Russo–Ottoman war, and ending with Sultan Mehmed V Reshad’s 1911 visit to Salonica. The author places special emphasis on the mapping of communal self-perceptions and intracommunal debates on a number of issues surrounding the nature and gamut of acceptable manifestations of