

CENTRAL EUROPEAN MEDIEVAL STUDIES



Larisa Orlov Vilimonović

Structure and Features of Anna Komnene's *Alexiad*

Emergence of a Personal History

Amsterdam
University
Press

Structure and Features of Anna Komnene's *Alexiad*

Central European Medieval Studies

The series focuses on the geographical centre of the European continent, but also a region representing various historically changing meanings and concepts. It challenges simplistic notions of Central Europe as a periphery to the medieval 'West', or, equally, a border between barbarity and civilization; an area of a lively convergence of different ethnic groups, and a socially and culturally framed common space; a point where different 'Others' met, or an intermediary 'bridge' between the Roman Catholicism and Latinity of the West, and the Slavic Orthodoxy and Hellenism of the Byzantine East.

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Source: The British Museum (London_BM_1843.1103: Athena, Ajax and Odysseus), by
courtesy of professor Danijela Stefanovic from her private collection.

Cover design: Coördesign, Leiden

Lay-out: Crius Group, Hulshout

ISBN 978 94 6298 038 9

e-ISBN 978 90 4852 964 3 (pdf)

DOI 10.5117/9789462980389

NUR 684

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Blame Homer,
Because of the hidden depths of his ideas
– Tzetzes, *Allegories of the Iliad*, p. 379 (645.648)

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Acknowledgments

This book presents the conclusion of a seven-year project, which started with my PhD programme. Without constant and generous support of my mentor, friend and colleague, Professor Vlada Stanković, and participation on his project *Christian Culture on the Balkans in the Middle Ages: Byzantine Empire, the Serbs and the Bulgarians from 9th to 15th centuries*, it would have been impossible to finish this undertaking. I am deeply thankful to Vlada Stanković for all my interest and ideas regarding the Komnenian epoch, which were firstly introduced to us, young students, in the second year of our undergraduate studies. Ever since then, he has been appreciative and supportive of my advancement in this particular field. With his help, I have chosen the theme of my academic interest, and with his encouragement, I have continued my work on Anna Komnene's *Alexiad* after the PhD defence.

When I decided to submit a book proposal on Anna Komnene's *Alexiad* to the Amsterdam University press, I had full support from the members of my department, and all the necessary funds at my disposal to participate in the several conferences that greatly contributed to my book. Especially important were the conferences in Upsalla (Sweden) and in Munich (Germany) hosted by Ingela Nilsson, to whom I am very grateful for her precious and valuable comments on my papers and drafts, and her general support for the young academics. In addition, I am greatly indebted to Anthony Kaldellis who always found time to go through my papers, giving me a plenty of insightful comments and remarks, and for his support while working on the final version of the manuscript. I owe a debt of gratitude to professor Dimitris Krallis, who was supportive throughout the final phase of my work and who kindly accepted to read parts of my final draft.

As a young member of the department of history, Faculty of Philosophy, I had immense support of the senior professors from my department. Firstly, the head of the Seminar for Byzantine Studies, Professor Radivoj Radić, was always supportive and ready to help me with his vast and thorough knowledge of numerous aspects of Byzantine history, and I am heartily grateful to him. I have always had immense respect and admiration for professor Radić's zealous research and the unwearying passion for Byzantine history, which were highly inspiring for my own research. Also, I had support and huge help from my colleagues from the PhD programme, Milena Repajić and Dragoljub Marijanović. Our long and inquisitive talks were always a leap into some new dimension of Byzantine history and the methodology of research. Especially the talks I had with Milena Repajić, who successfully

concluded her PhD project on Michael Psellos' *Chronographia*, helped me immensely in my understanding of the possible correlation between the two writers.

Professor of medieval environmental history, Jelena Mrgić, as a friend and senior colleague, was also ready to comment and give valuable scholarly advices, and I am very thankful for her understanding of young academics and unconditional support.

In addition, I would like to thank professor of Ancient Studies and head of our department, Danijela Stefanović, for all the logistical support she had shown, and for her appreciation and support of young woman scholars. Her outstanding scholarly outreach in international circles has always been a stimulus for me to continue. She was also very kind to provide a cover photo for my book from her private collection.

Without my first teacher of Greek and now a very good friend from the Classical department, Assistant professor Il Akkad, I would not ever be able to plunge into such a demanding Greek composition such as the *Alexiad*. From my first steps in learning ancient Greek to the completion of this book, he was always ready to comment, give advice and help me in untangling the complicated structures of the Greek Language.

When it comes to friendship and ancient Greek, I would not be able to conclude without mentioning my friend Aleksandar Jovanović, Teaching Assistant at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada, who was all these years my constant encouragement, and mental and emotional buttress.

The list of the people who have helped me all these years is long and goes far beyond academic circles and there is not enough space to do justice to all of them here. Nevertheless, one of the people I am mostly indebted is my best friend Nataša Stanković, who has always checked my English and whose knowledge and advice helped immensely in my progress with English. Apart from that, she was my crucial support in the moments when I felt exhausted from writing in a foreign language and I am especially grateful for that.

To conclude, all the professional support I had would not be enough had not there been the constant crucial support from my family. My late mother, Vesna Popivoda, remains in my memory as the strongest and most outstanding woman I have ever known, and so many times in her life she reminded me of the astonishing female members of the Komnenian house. Her support for my work was immeasurable, and especially her incessant encouragement and help, which she provided me in coping with both career and motherhood. With my mother's support, the hardest years of my academic life and my motherhood were easy and fulfilling. She was a modern woman and my role model who understood my needs to be fulfilled

in both career and motherhood. And last, but not least at all, my greatest and deepest gratitude goes to my family, to my broad-minded and forbearing husband Veljko Vilimonović, a wonderful father to our incredible sons, Vuk, Constantine and Athanasius Noah. My husband and my children are my constant source of energy, strength and inspiration. With all my love and admiration, I dedicate this book to my family, with a wish that their dreams be fulfilled.

Preface

For the English quotations of Anna Komnene's *Alexiad* I have used Sewter's translation, since I did not want to mix all three translations (Dawes', Sewter's and Frankopan's). Where I thought that a more literal translation was needed, I have made my additions in parentheses. For the transliteration of the names and places, I have chosen to stick to the Greek version, where I needed also to alter all the names of Sewter's translation, who uses Latinized version of names. For some names that are already widely accepted I have used those versions, and not the Greek version, such as Constantine and not Konstantinos, George and not Georgios, John and not Ioannes.

With regard to the other sources that are used, I have either used some available English translations, or I have provided my own translations, for which I take full responsibility.

Readers will notice the repetition of several passages from the *Alexiad*, but that was due to the necessity to analyse some of the most important literary aspects of Anna's work, from various angles. Also, I felt a need to highlight some words, phrases or sentences, which I consider to be crucial for the argument.

Introduction: Behind the narrative poetics of Anna Komnene's *Alexiad*

The *Alexiad* of Anna Komnene is a masterpiece of Byzantine historiography, which the first Komnenian princess wrote over the course of almost twenty years in the middle of the twelfth century (ca. 1138-ca. 1153).¹ Its central narrative theme presents a history of the reign of Alexios I Komnenos (1081-1118), the founder of the Komnenian dynasty. In its stylistic features, the *Alexiad* belongs to the literary vogue set half a century before by the writings of Michael Psellos.² However, the structure, stylistic register, and rhetorical virtuosity of Anna's narrative position her literary endeavour within the rich and blooming Hellenism of the Komnenian epoch, that engendered new modes of literary expression by reviving and adapting long forgotten ones and adding new flavours to the composite blend of twelfth-century culture.³ Komnenian culture was marked by a resurgent interest in rhetoric and Homer, and we see an increasing production of rhetorical treatises by court intellectuals, an interest in theory and grammar, in profane, worldly matters, in irony, criticism, and ridicule.⁴ Trajectories of cultural trends in the Komnenian epoch were a direct consequence of the fundamental political changes that occurred in Byzantine society with the ascent of the Komnenian dynasty. The profound changes that affected the social structure and political constitution of the Byzantine Empire starting with the ascent of Alexios, were visible in the next two generations of Komnenian rulers, and inevitably left some powerful families dissatisfied with the sudden eclipse of their influence.⁵ In an epoch of such profound and substantial transformations, literature was both a leading medium for the expression of political tensions and a means by which the dominant political discourse

1 The composition of the *Alexiad* was a process that lasted more than ten years. It is widely accepted that Anna set out to write her history after her husband's death, which is a thesis that derives from her own testimony in the Prologue. This dating is coupled with the dating of John II's Syrian campaign, which was conducted in 1138. On the other hand, conventional wisdom has it that Anna wrote until her death, for which J. Darouzzes proposed between 1153. or 1155., the years in which George Tornikes, her eulogist was *hypomnematographos* – See Tornikes, *Éloge*, p. 220, n.1, and Browning, 1990, p. 397.

2 On the close connection between this two works, and the literary trends of the Komnenian epoch in general see Kaldellis, 2008, p. 225-228; Papaioannou, 2013, p. 253-259.

3 Kaldellis, 2008, p. 225-317.

4 Ibid; Magdalino, 1993, p. 355 et sq.

5 Magdalino, 1993, p. 185-187.

was perpetuated. In this changed environment, the first-born daughter of the emperor Alexios set out to compose the story of his martial deeds.

Since the first English translation of the *Alexiad* by Elizabeth Dawes in 1928, and the following first scholarly monograph on the *Alexiad* of Anna Komnene by Georgina Buckler in 1929, academic interest in the study of this work remained steady. Anna Komnene's history was always deemed exotic and controversial, due to the gender of its author, the alternative history of the First Crusade that it offers, and to the place and role that Anna Komnene herself occupied within the Komnenian family. Firstly, the *Alexiad* is considered a highly valuable source for the reconstruction of Alexios' reign, being the only sustained narrative dedicated solely to this emperor's rule. Thus, the *Alexiad* was an inexhaustible source for both Byzantinists and medievalists in their pursuit of a better understanding of the First Crusade. Secondly, the *Alexiad* is immensely valuable as a source that comes from the pen of Alexios' first and oldest offspring, providing us with information about the family structure and power relations within the composite Komnenian *oikos* at the onset of their rule. It is a rich narrative landscape of Komnenian warfare, internal and international politics, diplomacy, Byzantine-Norman wars, church politics, the Byzantine aristocratic mindset and much more. Thirdly, if we move to the field of linguistics, the *Alexiad* opens a door for scholars of language, style, structures, rhetorical figures and narrative tropes. One of the first Byzantinists to focus specifically on literariness of the *Alexiad* was Jakov Ljubarskij who also, not coincidentally, continued his studies in Byzantine literature on the work of Michael Psellos and his *Chronographia*. Some of the themes recurrent in the field of Byzantine literature that Ljubarskij opened for discussion with regard to these two histories were *mimesis*, authorial intrusions in text, subjective and personal narration, building of the narrative, *dramatis personae*, context, dialectic approach to characters, sculptural style, portrayal of characters, moral qualities and psychology.⁶

Anna's history, by this point, has been subjected to case-studies which have shown that the *Alexiad* speaks through the cultural logic and political context of the mid-twelfth century, and that its subtext is permeated with veiled criticism of the emperor Manuel I Komnenos (1143-1180), her nephew.⁷ Nevertheless, Anna's criticism of Manuel also contains some blatant accusations against his father, Emperor John II Komnenos (1118-1143). As Reinsch has

6 Ljubarskij, 1965; Ljubarskij, 1976; Ljubarskij, 1978; Ljubarskij, 1992; Ljubarskij, 1993; and esp. Ljubarskij, 2000.

7 Thomas, 1991, p. 269-312; Magdalino, 2000, 15-45; Stephenson, 2003, 41-54.

shown, the manuscripts of the *Alexiad* have undergone major interventions because of their politically sensitive semantic value. As opposed to open accusations, Anna's silences were also considered an idiosyncrasy of her literary style, used to discredit political opponents.⁸

Anna's writing has also been examined in relation to her husband's history, Nikephoros Brynneios and his *Material for History*, which was an issue triggered by James Howard-Johnston in his long article on the questionable authorship of Anna's *Alexiad*. Howard-Johnston's assumption that Anna acted as an editor of Bryennios text, by putting in order the material her husband had already provided, was convincingly rebutted in the articles by Ruth Macrides and Dieter Reinsch. In addition, other papers from the same volume dedicated to the life and work of Anna Komnene all show the originality of Anna's text, revealing specific authorial practices that could have resulted only from Anna's pen.⁹ However, the investigation of the peculiar relationship between the spouses' histories did not come to its end in this volume. Vlada Stanković made a significant breakthrough in several of his articles in which he dealt with important literary aspects of both Bryennios' and Anna's histories.¹⁰ Stanković attributed the discrepancies between spouses' histories in their presentations of events and characters to the different political perspectives of the two authors and the contrasting final aims of their histories.¹¹

Leonora Neville has also offered a somewhat different picture of the mutual relationship between the spouses' histories, arguing that, to a certain extent, the *Alexiad* could be interpreted as an answer and corrective action to Bryennios' history, mainly in those parts that concern the characterization of the emperor Alexios I Komnenos.¹² Neville offered an insightful approach toward both histories, delineating them as histories that perpetuated a different cultural logic in presenting the leading character.

The question which arises at the very beginning of this book, is why we need a third study of the *Alexiad* in the span of only four years (Buckley, 2014; Neville, 2016). In fact, the appearance of these monographs provided a strong stimulus to continue, since the approach I have chosen to apply in my reading of the *Alexiad* has not been exhausted yet. Penelope Buckley's interpretation of the *Alexiad* was the first of the two recent studies to be

8 see Leib 1958; Stanković, 2006.

9 Gouma-Peterson (ed.), 2000.

10 Stanković, 2007; Stanković, 2010; Stanković, 2011.

11 Stanković, 2007, *passim*.

12 Neville, 2012, p. 182-193.

published, and it gives us a grandiloquent reader's experience of the *Alexiad* that mostly concentrates on purely literary aspects of Komnene's history and on the artistic impression that Anna's work leaves on its audience. Buckley does not, however, address the reasons why Anna constructed her narrative in such a way and why her characters were presented in that particular fashion from the perspective of the historical context of that period. Buckley does not speculate on the rationale behind the *Alexiad*, and in that sense I offer a different reading of Komnene's work, focusing on the motivation behind Anna's literary endeavour and the political agenda of her history. Leonora Neville, who was particularly active in recent years on the topic of Anna's gender discourse and her position as a woman writer in the masculine world of Byzantine historiography, published another industrious study of the *Alexiad* in 2016. Neville has opened her inquiry about the *Alexiad* in her book on Bryennios' *Material for History*, which was a starting point for an argument further expanded in several articles and finally scrutinized in a single monograph. Neville's approach has been distinctive for its focus on the gendered aspects of Anna Komnene's history, and for her doubts that Anna participated in the conspiracy against John II Komnenos. Thus, she set out to mitigate Anna's unjustified portrayal in modern scholarship as a 'power-hungry conspirator', inspecting that appraisal of Komnene as an outcome of a scholarly gender bias, starting with Edward Gibbon and repeated ever since.¹³ Gender aspects of the *Alexiad* should never be disregarded, and I find Neville's approach precious for the vindication of the uniqueness of the *Alexiad* in that respect. However, I have doubts about Neville's assessment of Anna's political activity and disavowal of Anna's negative disposition toward her brother John II. Neville has proposed to overturn Anna's alleged conspiracy against her brother John II in the light of the new reading of the histories of both Zonaras and Choniates, with a different appraisal of their gendered discourse. However, in this analysis, I would take issue with the selection of the material from the *Alexiad* presented in the study, and with the conclusions drawn about Anna Komnene's silences.¹⁴ Conversely, Anna's omissions make a case for her *argumentum ex silencio*, which will be discussed at length in the present study.

13 For the most recent discussion about the gendered bias of the modern scholarship see Neville, 2016, p. 170-171.

14 Neville, 2016, p. 141-142; It is already clear that Anna's silences were intentional, and that in her case, as Stathakopoulos observed correctly 'the pen was mightier than the sword', through condemnation of him to 'deafening and awkward silence' – Stathakopoulos, 2016, p. 1.

Even though Neville contends that the primary source for Anna's conspiracy and hostility toward her brother is the highly problematic history of Niketas Choniates, I will argue that it is precisely the *Alexiad*, which furnishes the information in support of Anna's political ambition, and her negative disposition toward her brother. I will read the *Alexiad* against the historical events of the fourth and fifth decades of the twelfth century, which were the two most turbulent decades for the Komnenian dynasty, a period in which John II Komnenos was determined to bring to fulfilment the idea about the hereditary throne that solely benefited his direct male descendants.¹⁵ Some might argue that such political concept had always been present in Byzantine political thought and that it was already perpetuated by the members of the Macedonian dynasty. However, such a detailed program as was envisaged by Alexios I to keep the throne solely in the hands of his direct descendants had become, in the time of John II, part of imperial politics and propaganda promulgated through both discursive media and visual culture.¹⁶ We have all been lulled by the uniform picture of the omnipotent Komnenian *oikos*, which had established a composite family rule, discarding the complexity of power relations among the aristocratic houses of the late 11th century.¹⁷ While Paul Magdalino dwelled on this particular subject in his pathbreaking study on Manuel I Komnenos, his estimates of the aristocratic tensions inside and outside the Komnenian *oikos* have not been pursued afterwards by scholars. The especially problematic relations between the Komnenoi and the Doukai have only been subjected to thorough analysis in a study by Vlada Stanković about the evolution of the Komnenian *oikos*, that was, and still is, unfortunately, unapproachable to non-Slavic readership.¹⁸ As was clearly outlined by Magdalino and further substantiated in Stanković's study, through analysis of the ample discursive material of the Komnenian epoch, the Komnenoi and the Doukai seem to have been at odds for the greatest period of their joint family life.¹⁹ Although many aristocratic houses

15 This approach has been applied in the volume of collected essays *Anna Komnene and her Times*, and also in the study of the Komnenian family by Stanković, 2006.

16 Stanković, 2006.

17 See Kazhdan-Epstein 1985, p. 56-120; Cheynet, 1990; Magdalino, 1993.

18 Stanković, 2006.

19 Stanković proposed arguably that Eirene Doukaina had formed a secluded circle inside the Komnenian *oikos*, and that her intentions were to preserve the imperial legacy of the Doukai. Stanković actually built on Magdalino's correct estimate of the power relations between these two aristocratic houses, and very similar political thread was observed by Neville in her study of Bryennios' history where she stated that he gives us the 'politically apologetic portrayal of Caesar John', which was a part of the general positive presentation of the members of the Doukai family in Bryennios' history: Neville, 2012, p. 50-53. And even more important is Neville's hypothesis

were absorbed into the Komnenian family structure, there were also those, such as the Doukai, Gabrades, and Taronites that did not acquiesce to the ambitious family program of the Komnenian dynasty.²⁰ I push this thesis further in my analysis of the *Alexiad*, taking as a starting premise the idea that the *Alexiad* was a history that emerged from the side of the Doukai and engendered an alternative political discourse in which the Doukai were the rightful holders of the imperial legacy. In that alternative discourse, Anna was considered an heir-apparent.

After the publication of the *Byzantine Republic* by Anthony Kaldellis, a theory about Byzantine Roman identity has again come to the fore in our understanding of Byzantine social relations and the political implications of the imperial rule.²¹ The craving for the reestablishment of the ancient Roman political values was recognized in the world chronicle of John Zonaras who criticized Alexios for appropriating the empire for himself, acting as *despotes* instead of *oikonomos*, and cancelling the *res publica* through promulgation of the empire as the *res privata* of his family.²² Although Zonaras' voice was probably the voice of the senate, it definitely records a strong reaction to a sudden change that took place in the constitution with the ascent of the Komnenian dynasty.²³ The imperial throne was never considered a vested hereditary right, and it could not be claimed as property of one family, although there were numerable challenges to this 'constitutional clause' throughout Byzantine millennial history.²⁴ In that sense, Anna voiced the view of a powerful aristocratic family, that of her mother, that was at loggerheads with the political logic of Alexios' appropriation of the throne solely for his male successors.²⁵ Zonaras' republican ideas were expedient for Anna's political philosophy – the most meritorious individual should

on the existence of a history written by caesar John Doukas, a 'pro-Doukas text' from which Bryennios had extracted important sections for his narrative in order 'to make John Doukas look good': Neville, 2012, p. 49-59; and also Neville, 2008. These all amounted to the political discourse of the secluded circle around Eirene Doukaina that was highly biased in favour of the Doukai.

20 Magdalino, 1993, p. 181 et sq.

21 Kaldellis, 2015; for the earlier discussion about Byzantine Roman identity see Beck, 1978.

22 For the discussion see Magdalino, 1983.

23 See Magdalino, 1983.

24 Although Byzantium never had a written constitution as such, nevertheless, Hans Georg Beck discussed precisely the topic of the Byzantine constitution with regard to its republican traditions. See Beck, 1978.

25 According to Magdalino, 'Anna exaggerated the Doukai's family contribution' – Magdalino, 1993, p. 202 – which could have been understood clearly in terms of Eirene Doukaina's policy who put the interests of the family into which she was born before those of the family in which she was married: Magdalino, 1993, p. 201.

be granted the imperial scepter. Behind that she actually vouched for the supremacy of the other imperial *oikos*, that of her mother. In doing so, Anna had to also provide an answer to Zonaras' history. This accounts for those parts where her narrative is at odds with Zonaras' argument, specifically in the image she constructs and the role she attributes to Alexios' women, Anna Dalassene and Eirene Doukaina.

My exposition so far has weaved together some of the most important tenets of the analysis that will be conducted in the course of this book. Nevertheless, I must do justice to the title of my book and present the rationale behind such choices. Structure and features of the *Alexiad* mainly refer to the ancient concept of the rules of poetics, which will be in the focus of my research. With regard to this, we must go back to Aristotle and the exordium of his *Poetics*:

Let us here deal with Poetry, its essence and its several species, with the characteristic function of each species and the way in which plots must be constructed if the poem is to be a success; and also with the number and character of the constituent parts of a poem, and similarly with all other matters proper to this same inquiry; and let us, as nature directs, begin first with first principles.²⁶

While thinking about the generic structure of the *Alexiad*, I was unable to discern where the tragedy and epic give way to history and where the rules of rhetoric yield to the rules of history. It occurred to me that these generic fluctuations were necessary for Anna Komnene to tell a particular story. Some ends could have been attained only through carefully chosen genres – epic poetry and tragedy were 'metrical representations of heroic action'²⁷ and the tragedy was 'a representation of an action that is whole and complete and of a certain magnitude, since a thing may be a whole and yet have no magnitude.'²⁸ Epic differed from tragedy only 'in the length of composition and in metre', and was more advantageous than tragedy since 'several parts can be portrayed as being enacted at the same time', which added to its richness and variety.²⁹

My aim is to discuss in which way Anna presented her 'poem in prose' so that it would 'be a success'. Tragedy and epic poetry were essentially

²⁶ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1447a.

²⁷ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449b.

²⁸ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1450b.

²⁹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1459b.

arts of 'representing life in action', two principle genres that aroused fear and pity in spectators.³⁰ On the other hand, evocation of *pathos* among the audience was at the core of the art of persuasion. Furthermore, rhetoric was a cornerstone of any literary endeavour since it thought basic elements of the discourse structure.

To understand the poetic background of the *Alexiad*, I need to tackle the issue of the Byzantine art of historical writing, which is the main topic of the first chapter. With an inevitable recourse to Graeco-Roman historical, philosophical and rhetorical tradition, I aim to underpin crucial concepts of this evasive topic, and balance them with Anna's reflections on the art of history, its rules, its nature and its laws. Anna's perception of history, the ideas that lie beneath her theoretical deliberations present the main aspect of my interest before plunging into deeper analysis of the plot, structure and characters of the *Alexiad*. The inquiry about the idiosyncratic style of Anna's *Alexiad* will be squared with Michael Psellos' observations on the proper literary style and his genuine concept of history since Psellos was arguably the most influential literary role model for Anna Komnene. His intellectual legacy provided Anna with a stimulating textual and stylistic landscape for embedding a personal political agenda into the narrative of the allegedly objective historical truth. Finally, the first chapter concludes with the thesis that Komnene's *Alexiad* was part of the ongoing political debate, in which she was making huge amends to the family of her mother, and in some places was directly confronting Zonaras' story.

An in-depth study of the *Alexiad* inevitably calls for an analysis of the leading character of the history, Alexios I, and of the leading narrative, the Byzantine-Norman war. These are the starting points for understanding the author's reasons and motives for constructing a highly idiosyncratic narrative. This analytical trajectory should also lead to the assessment of what could have been the possible impact of this kind of narrative presentation on the audience. As it has already been stressed, Anna was indeed creating an image of the ideal ruler, by crafting a composite patchwork of the Odyssean warrior and Eusebian ruler.³¹ I intend to show how Anna crafted an image of her ruler through the rules of the imperial *enkomion*, and how she answered some of the allegations against Alexios I, mainly by John the Oxite who wrote an overt critique of the emperor and his family

30 Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1453b.

31 For the Constantinian image of Alexios, see Buckley, 2014, 261-263; and for the Odyssean like character see Macrides, 2000, p. 68-69; Neville, 2012, p. 189-90; Buckley, 2014, p. 143; Neville, 2016, p. 147.

rule. In another section, which I have dedicated to the analysis of Alexios' war with the Normans, I have chosen to discuss its Homeric background. The reason for this was to assess why such particular imagery was employed by the authoress, in what manner, and what could have been the impact of the Homeric imagery regarding the perception of the *Alexiad* in the 12th century Constantinople. For although, as Aristotle exclaims, Homer deserves praise for many things, he had also 'taught the others the proper way of telling lies, that is, by using a fallacy', and he 'conceals the absurdity by the charm of all his other merits.'³² The idea of Homer as a versatile rhetor and skilful stylistic trickster was not coincidentally embedded in Tzetzes' exegesis of the *Iliad*. The 12th century was the epoch of profound interest in both Aristotle and Homer, and Anna intricately culled both to achieve her literary success.

The third large section of the book focuses on Anna's self-presentation and gives us a glimpse into various authorial practices that she used for purposes of positioning herself both within and against the Komnenian *oikos*. Anna's lament and the staged tragedy will be analysed with reference both to the authorial practice of delivering an inoffensive self-praise under the guise of ill fortune and to the rhetorical practice of arousing the emotions of the audience for attaining unanimous consent.

The last two large sections will be dedicated to Anna's portrayals of the leading protagonists of her life story. I have, therefore, intentionally divided them into two family groups, those of the Doukai and the Komnenoi. My intention here was to show how Anna distorted some events, changed focus, or gave agency to specific members of these groups that were personally important for her political ambition. Through an analysis of Anna's characterisation and presentation of events, the turn of plot, or the applied imagery I have tried to present the multitude of possibilities that Byzantine authors used to embed political messages into their narratives.

As a concluding remark, it would be appropriate to say a word about the methodology I have applied for investigating the narrative poetics of the *Alexiad*. My primary goal has been to pursue the politics of Anna's text through the images of family and power relations, the cultural logic of Homeric discourse and political codes of vocabulary register during the mid Komnenian century. In that sense, it was crucial to deconstruct the complex architecture of the text, to understand its foundations, its scaffolding, and its inner and outer appearance. I have tried to give an answer as to the meaning of this text for Anna herself and for its wider contemporary readership,

32 Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1460a-b.

thinking of the time in which Anna's message could be apprehended when it started to circulate, and of the possible impact of this literary endeavor in the political context of the mid 12th century. The tools I used were mostly intertextual analyses between Anna Komnene's *Alexiad* and other preceding or contemporary literary works that were not strictly limited to the genre of history. My aim has been to pursue the main elements of the dominant discourse of the mid Komnenian epoch in order to understand the tenets of the alternative political discourse. Apart from intertextuality, I found highly valuable tools in the rhetorical manuals, which provided me with the means to read Byzantine sources and to decipher the codes of ethical and esthetical values of the period in question. Finally, the tools provided in the feminist narratology for understanding and hearing the female voice in the literature have been fruitful for further investigation on the topic of Anna's gendered discourse.

Byzantine texts are unique for their composite architecture. The impression that they leave on their beholders varies a lot and even nowadays, as the studies of *Alexiad* clearly show, the impression we get might be different or even mutually exclusive. However, that does not betoken good or bad readings; it just means that we have grasped different layers of the text. Since 2000 we have achieved much. I hope that this study will prove an insightful supplement to the understanding of the complexity and literary richness of Anna Komnene's *Alexiad*.