

Alexius I Comnenus

1048

Constantinople

August 15, 1118

Constantinople

Byzantine emperor



Alexius I was the emperor of the Byzantine Empire, the eastern portion of the old Roman Empire based in Greece and Asia Minor, at the time of the First Crusade (1095–99). The first of the Comnenus dynasty, or ruling family, Alexius I inherited a weakened empire at the time of his crowning as emperor in 1081. Byzantium, as the empire was also called, was under attack from all sides, especially from the Seljuk Turks, who had recently converted to Islam. Nevertheless Alexius I managed to restore some of the strength to his land during his thirty-seven-year reign. Alexius I is best known in history as the Byzantine emperor whose call for help against the Turks and Islam was taken up by **Urban II** (see entry), the western pope and spiritual leader of the Catholic Church. This, in turn, played an important part in bringing about the First Crusade and launching the Crusade movement, which resulted in two centuries of conflict between the Christian and Islamic worlds.

“The blood of Christians flows in unheard-of scenes of carnage.... Therefore in the name of God ... we implore you to bring to this city [Constantinople] all the faithful soldiers of Christ.”

—Alexius I, letter to Robert of Flanders, which partly inspired the First Crusade; quoted in *The Story of the First Crusade*, http://www.brighton73.freesev e.co.uk/firstcrusade/People/Eastern_Christians/alexius_comnenus.htm

Alexius I Comnenus.

Courtesy of the Library of Congress.



An Empire of Many Names

Alexius I ruled an empire that was called many names by different people. Initially these lands were part of the original Roman Empire. But in 284 C.E. this empire was split into an eastern half and a western half for administrative purposes. The part that lay in Asia Minor and Greece was called the eastern Roman Empire. Less than half a century later Constantine, the first Christian emperor, decided to move the capital of the Roman Empire east to Asia Minor, to the city of Byzantium, or Byzantion. Thus the empire gradually began to be called the Byzantine Empire, or simply Byzantium, by Europeans even though Constantine insisted on calling the place “Nova Roma,” or New Rome. To confuse matters even more, the city of Byzantium was later called Constantinople after its founder; when the empire ended in 1453, this name was again changed, finally becoming the Istanbul of modern times.

During the time of Alexius I the citizens of the Byzantine Empire nevertheless thought of themselves as the *Rhomaioi*, occupants of New Rome. In medieval times Alexius’s empire was often referred to as Romania. In fact, the Byzantine Empire kept many of the aspects of the old Roman Empire for much of its existence. Though

Christianity had come to play a more significant public role by the third and fourth centuries, the legal, political, and military structures remained much the same as they had been under the Roman emperors. Even the old imperial Roman title of “Augustus” was used for its emperors. This ultimately changed when the emperor Heraclius (ruled 610–41) declared that from now on the title would be *Basileus*, the Greek word for emperor. Nor was Latin to remain the official language, which was replaced by Greek. Such a change was logical, since the empire was now based both in Greece and Asia Minor. Thus the empire was often referred to as the Greek Empire in the Middle Ages. In turn, the citizens of Byzantium often called their European cousins “Latins.” They did not have a very high opinion of these Latins; except for being able to wage war, they were looked upon as dirty and uncivilized barbarians.

Despite all these name changes, the Byzantines continued to think of themselves as Romans. One final name change occurred in 1453, however, which took the “Roman” out of their name. That year Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks and the former eastern Roman Empire was no more, replaced first by the Ottoman Empire and then by modern Turkey.

The First of His Line

Born in Constantinople (present-day Istanbul) in 1048, Alexius Comnenus was the third son of John Comnenus and the nephew of the Byzantine emperor Isaac I, who

ruled from 1057 to 1059. He thus came from a well-connected and powerful family and was trained from an early age in the arts of war and politics. Both of these skills were necessary for survival in eleventh-century Byzantium. Intrigue and palace plots were the order of the day in this eastern Christian kingdom. Not even emperors were safe from cruel treatment at the hands of their rivals. When the emperor Romanus IV Diogenes lost the Battle of Manzikert in 1071 to the Seljuk Turk **Alp Arslan** (see entry), thus exposing the empire to further attack from these Turkish invaders, Romanus was hunted down by his enemies in Constantinople, blinded, and exiled to a small island prison, where he eventually died. Alexius was thirteen at the time, but the lesson was surely not lost on him: Watch your back!

Alexius was raised mainly by his mother, Anna Dalassena, a woman with a strong sense of purpose for her son, who educated him in matters of politics and diplomacy, or international relations. In the art of war Alexius soon earned a name for himself. This was important, for Byzantium was under attack from enemies on all sides. To the southeast lay the land of the infidel, or nonbelievers: the Islamic world of Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), Syria, and Arabia. Also, following their victory at Manzikert, the Seljuk Turks pressed on into the empire, and by 1081 they had reached Nicaea, an ancient city close to Constantinople. To the west were the Normans, fierce fighters from the French province of Normandy who were of Viking origin. These warriors had carved out a kingdom for themselves in Sicily, in the far south of Italy, where Byzantium also had part of its empire. In 1071, the same year that the Byzantines were defeated by the Seljuk Turks at Manzikert, they were dealt another major defeat by the Normans under the leadership of Robert Guiscard (1016–1085). That year the Normans took the city of Bari, ending Byzantine rule in Italy. Even worse, as far as the Byzantine Empire was concerned, was the fact that Robert and his son Bohemund decided to invade Constantinople itself. Added to these military problems were the Pechenegs, a Turkic nomadic tribe that repeatedly attacked Constantinople from the east.

In 1059 Alexius's father had declined to take the throne after Isaac I stepped down. Thus the Comnenian line was broken, and the role of emperor was taken on by four

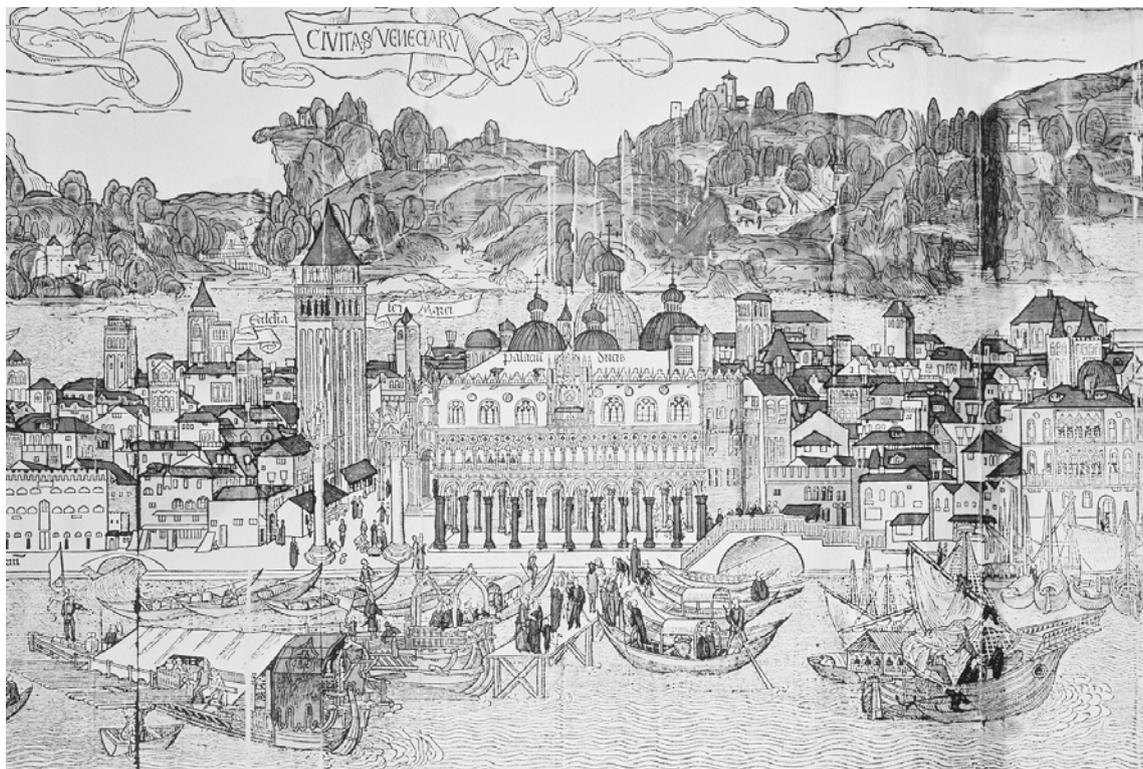
leaders, including Romanus IV Diogenes, who brought the empire to the edge of ruin. Alexius's daughter, **Anna Comnena** (see entry), wrote a multivolume biography of her father, *The Alexiad*, a book that deals more with military matters than with personal affairs. In it she mentions that her father served under Romanus at the Battle of Manzikert. He served under three other emperors as a military leader and then a general, gaining fame for some of his victories. He was also employed, along with an older brother, Isaac, to put down rebellions against the empire in parts of Greece. Soon, however, he was plotting his own rebellion.

Alexius Becomes Emperor

Alexius's success made others jealous. The emperor Nicephorus III and his ministers thought Alexius was becoming too popular among the people and were about to get rid of him and his dangerously powerful Comnenus family when Alexius struck first, taking the crown away from Nicephorus III and sending him to a monastery (religious community). When Alexius's older brother Isaac refused the crown, Alexius took it, becoming Alexius I on April 4, 1081. He had no time to celebrate, however, for his first job was to deal with the invading Normans, who had already taken the island of Corfu, to the west of Greece.

From the beginning Alexius I combined military might with diplomacy and building alliances to defeat his enemies. While fighting the Normans, he brought in the navy of the powerful state of Venice to help. With this naval force he was finally able to push the Normans back. With the death of Robert Guiscard, duke of Apulia, in 1085, the Norman threat ended for the time being. As a reward for their help, the Venetians gained important trading rights in the Byzantine Empire. Similarly, Alexius made treaties with the Seljuks and other Muslim leaders on his eastern borders, using diplomacy where force would not work. In 1091 he defeated the Pechenegs by hiring a rival Turkish tribe, the Cumans, to help eliminate this threat. He thus managed to secure his northeastern borders.

Such operations were not really victories, however. Each of the negotiations came at a heavy price for Byzantium, especially his deals with the Seljuk Turks, which involved giv-



ing up land in exchange for peaceful relations. Despite his efforts, roving bands of the Seljuks continued to take over and settle various parts of Asia Minor, creating a constant threat of further invasion to the Byzantium empire. Alexius I decided to call for help from a completely different part of the world.

View of the center of Venice, Italy, whose naval fleet Alexius I hired to help in his battle with the Normans in the late eleventh century. © Archivio Iconografico, S.A./Corbis.

Alexius Turns to the Pope

It is a sign of how desperate Alexius I was—or how desperate the situation was—that in 1093 he sent a letter to a European noble, Robert of Flanders, to ask for help against the Seljuk Turks. This letter was meant to be passed on to Pope Urban II, but there was no reason Alexius I should have expected any aid from that quarter. The Byzantine Empire saw itself as the legal and moral inheritor of not only the Roman Empire but also the Christian religion. Its Eastern Orthodox Church was a rival to Europe's Catholic Church. For the Byzantines the pope was simply the bishop, or religious

leader, of Rome, one among many bishops. The true leader of Christianity was the leader of the faithful in Constantinople—the patriarch, as the office was called. This split between the two parts of Christianity grew even deeper in 1054 when the Eastern Orthodox Church in Constantinople excommunicated, or excluded from the faith, a messenger from the pope in Rome. There had been little communication between the rival branches of Christianity since then.

Alexius's communication, however, caught the attention of Urban II. In his letter Alexius supplied a long list of terrible deeds that the Seljuk Turks supposedly had committed, some of which were true and others of which were not. He also claimed that all of Asia Minor and Byzantium was about to fall to the Turks and that the treasures of his empire, both physical and spiritual, would go to the Turks if that happened. In his letter to Robert of Flanders, Alexius I also provided a motivation for those who might come to his assistance: "Remember that you will find all those treasures and also the most beautiful women of the Orient. The incomparable beauty of the Greek women would seem to be a sufficient reason to attract the armies of the Franks."

What Alexius I was actually looking for was an army of hired soldiers to keep the peace in his empire. He never bargained for the huge forces that landed on his shores in 1096 as a result of the pope's preaching in favor of a holy war to fight Islam and recapture the Holy Land. These Crusaders, as they were called, answered Urban's plea for a variety of reasons: a sense of religious duty, a love of adventure, a desire to occupy new lands, or the need for food and shelter. The armies that arrived in Alexius's city were hardly the manageable group of soldiers he had hoped for. His scheme to get western help clearly backfired.

The first to arrive was the army of common people led by **Peter the Hermit** (see entry), a priest from Amiens in France who inspired thousands of peasants, or poor workers, to follow him to the Holy Land. Once in Asia Minor, his untrained force was slaughtered by the Turks. A second wave of Crusaders arrived shortly thereafter under the leadership of **Godfrey of Bouillon** (see entry), and these soldiers presented even more difficulties for Alexius I. It was clear that these men had not come simply to retake lands in Asia Minor for

the Byzantines. Alexius I saw them as mercenaries, or paid soldiers, in his service, but Godfrey and his soldiers had different goals. They intended to move into the Holy Land and conquer Jerusalem for the Catholic Church. From the very beginning the two camps did not get along, but in 1097 they did manage to take the city of Nicaea from the Turks. The Crusaders went south, attacking centers of Muslim power in Syria, such as Antioch. Alexius I ultimately failed to aid the Crusaders in this siege, which completely destroyed relations between the Byzantines and the Crusader armies.

From his viewpoint, Alexius I was right in his less-than-friendly greeting of the Crusaders. After all, they were trying to capture lands in Syria, such as Antioch, that were once held by Byzantium. To Alexius these lands were rightly part of his empire. However, it soon became obvious to him that the Crusaders had no intention of returning such spoils of war to him. Instead, they began setting up Crusader states, or principalities, carving up the Holy Land among themselves. The Crusaders knew only about making war, never thinking of diplomacy or using the skill of playing off one enemy against the other. In fact, their siege of Jerusalem in 1099 and the bloody massacre of Muslims that followed risked uniting the Islamic world against them. The only thing that had allowed Alexius I and his empire to remain partly intact was the fact that Islam was divided politically.

When Alexius's old Norman enemy, Guiscard's son Bohemund, took Antioch for himself, Alexius was suddenly faced with yet another foe at his borders. Between 1104 and 1108 the two fought each other off and on until finally Alexius's forces beat those of Bohemund. The death of Bohemund in 1111 left the question of possession of Antioch unresolved. Alexius I went on to battle the Seljuk Turks in Asia Minor, taking back more lost territory. A battle in 1117 against the Turks marked Alexius's final victory in the field. At home a palace plot—hatched by his wife, Irene, and daughter, Anna, to install his son-in-law on the throne instead of the rightful heir, Alexius's son, John—spoiled his last days. On his deathbed the emperor had to use all his strength to get power transferred to John. He died on August 15, 1118.

Alexius I managed to hold together what was basically a dying empire through his skillful use of diplomacy and his

ability to form alliances with even his worst enemies. He played rival tribes against each other and struck with his military might when necessary. But he miscalculated when he invited Latin or European troops into his empire at the beginning of what became known as the First Crusade. For him these troops ultimately became one more power center that he had to battle in the region. They replaced the Byzantine Eastern Orthodox faith with the Catholic Church and created Crusader kingdoms in the Holy Land that rivaled and challenged his own. Alexius's plotting and policies, however, did leave his empire stronger than when he took the throne. By securing his borders through treaty and war alike, he kept the Byzantine Empire alive. He is remembered in history as the man whose call for help to fight Muslims started the Crusades.

For More Information

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