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# COMNENING FOR THE THRONE

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The Succession Crisis of Anna Comnena



OLIVER RUSSELL  
TUMUN VIII

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## Letter From the Crisis Director

Dear Delegates,

Hi! Welcome to the committee on Anna Comnena's succession crisis. My name is Oliver Russell. I'm a junior at Tufts from New Canaan, Connecticut, double majoring in history and classical studies. This is my seventh year participating in Model United Nations and my first year as a crisis director (though you may remember me as the Director General from TUMUN VII). I am so excited to meet you all in just a few months!

Byzantine history has long been ignored by historians. This ignorance derives from the thoughts of an 18<sup>th</sup> century English historian. In 1776, Edward Gibbon published a book titled *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. This book covered the peak of the Roman Empire all the way to the fall of the Byzantine Empire. In the text, Gibbon misrepresented Byzantium and harshly criticized it. Gibbon's hostility set Byzantine studies back decades. It has been only in recent years that historians have started to focus on it more. With this increased interest, scholars have discovered that the empire was not as byzantine and backwards as originally thought but instead immensely modern and progressive compared to empire's western European counterparts.

As a student of ancient history who has spent several semesters studying Byzantine history (as well as the Latin language), I am especially excited to be facilitating this committee. While this is a historical committee, you all have the power to steer this event in a completely different direction. And thus, you all can be sure that this weekend will be full of convoluted political plots, salacious rumors, and many twists and turns!

MUN conferences were always a great time for me in high school and so I hope to create similar experiences for all of you during TUMUN VIII. Please do not hesitate to email me if you have any questions about the committee or your specific role. I can't wait to meet you all!

Best wishes,

Oliver Russell

[oliver.russell@tufts.edu](mailto:oliver.russell@tufts.edu)

## Note on Sensitivity

Since this committee will be focused on a political conflict in which gender identities played a significant role, I expect all delegates to conduct themselves with the utmost diplomacy and decorum. Byzantium was a patriarchal society but there were many opportunities for women to hold immense political power which will be explored below. I expect all of you to grapple these contradictions with maturity and civility. There will be a zero-tolerance policy for any sort of sexism, gender-based violence, or any sort of action that perpetuates the harmful ideologies and actions of the past. If you see this type of behavior occurring during the conference, please bring it to the attention of the Crisis Director, the Chair, the Staff, or the Secretariat. Everyone should feel comfortable when engaging with these issues and have an overall positive attitude during committee. This will only happen if we behave with the maturity and sensitivity that this topic requires from us. We must also hold each other accountable to these standards.

## Technology Policy

Out of the spirit of being historically accurate, there will be limitations on the use of technology in the committee. During moderate caucuses and debate, computers are not allowed. Your attention should be on the person speaking and the happenings of committee. However, you can use technology during unmoderated caucuses.

## Background on the Byzantine Empire

The Byzantine Empire was founded in the Fourth Century C.E. (the exact date is debated by scholars) and lasted until May 29, 1453. It started as a continuation of the Roman Empire in the east, but over one thousand years it developed its own unique culture, society, and political systems. Throughout most of its existence, the empire was a major power within the Mediterranean, European, and Middle Eastern spheres. And thus, it impacted the artistic, legal, religious, cultural, and political development of all these areas.

Two important facets are needed in order to understand the political happenings of the empire: Constantinople was the heart of the empire and there were four pillars that upheld the political legitimacy of the emperors, the church, the military, the people, and the senate. To become emperor, a political figure would need two out of the main three (the main three being the church, military, and the people), with the senate as an extra bonus. More details about these facets are below.

The Byzantine Empire at its peak in 565 AD



Figure 1 The Byzantine Empire at its Peak

**Constantinople:** The city of Constantinople is, by all means, the beating heart of the empire. The city was home to many important people, social, and political structures: the imperial palace, where the emperor and his family lived; Hagia Sofia, the main church of empire and the headquarters of the Ecumenical Patriarch; the Senate Building; and a majority percentage of the empire's people. It was also integral to the empire's economy, as it was a major trading port and thus was luxurious and wealthy. Trade was the economic foundation for the empire. Therefore, in order for the Byzantine Empire to function, Constantinople needed to be alive and well.

**The Church:** The Byzantine Empire was a Christian empire; from its very beginning, the empire's society and politics were intertwined with Christian values and teachings. The emperor was seen as the

vice-gerund of God on earth and had immense religious powers including the right to call ecumenical councils (church councils, made of up of Bishops, convened to discuss doctrinal or administrative issues).<sup>1</sup> While the emperor did have power and control over the church, the Patriarch (the leader of the Greek Orthodox Church) had the power to deprive the emperor of legitimacy and make decisions, depending on the power of the emperor and patriarch ruling at the time. There were established precedents where a patriarch excommunicated an emperor (Theodosius I).<sup>2</sup> In 1054, the Great Schism occurred which split Christianity forever, due to doctrinal issues and a power struggle between the regional religious leaders. Therefore, at the time of the committee, there was a Western Catholic Church led by the Pope in Rome and an Eastern Orthodox led by a patriarch in Constantinople.

**The Military:** The military was obviously and very important part of the Byzantine empire. While originally organized by Roman tradition, they eventually developed their own style and structure. In the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, the military became

increasingly filled with foreign mercenaries and reliant on battalions. The military had the power to both make an emperor and depose one, which is why it was imperative an emperor had them on their side.

**The People:** The people of the empire, especially the people of Constantinople, were an important part of the imperial administration. Emperors relied on a system of pomp and circumstance, elaborate titles, and public rituals to demonstrate their power. Many of the most successful emperors and empresses held public ceremonies that gave out gifts and appeased the people.<sup>3</sup> The people have immense power in the structure of the empire. Emperors needed their support. There have been multiple examples where the people have rioted and deposed a dynasty or have come close to it.

**The Senate:** The Byzantine Senate derived from the Roman Senate. It did not have much power to start, and it only decreased over time. While it was not the most important thing for emperors to have control over, it was still a nice sign of one's legitimacy.

<sup>1</sup> Timothy E. Gregory, *A History of Byzantium* (United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 54.

<sup>2</sup> Gregory, *A History of Byzantium*, 88.

<sup>3</sup> Gregory, *A History of Byzantium*, 98.

## Women in the Byzantine Empire

*To note: since this is committee discusses a political crisis, this section discusses instances of female rulers in the empire's history, but I implore delegates to research the women's general role in the empire when preparing for the conference.*

The Byzantine Empire was a patriarchal society; however, many women were able to work against these limitations and become successful businesspeople, academics, writers, philosophers, and even empresses that ruled by themselves.<sup>4</sup> However, most of the women that became immensely powerful were from the upper classes. Nonetheless, the fact that women were even able to be powerful sets Byzantine women apart from their European counterparts.

Empresses traditionally had the role as “conduit to the people” as they were supposed to be public figures that work to gain the support of the people, in order to expand the emperor’s power. However, there have been multiple examples of empresses becoming even more powerful. Pulcheria

(399-453 C.E.) was one of the greatest examples: after acting as a regent and being the behind-the-scenes power for her brother Theodosius II, she ruled the empire by herself, accepted by every institution. She even called an ecumenical council to deal with a religious crisis. She did eventually marry a man named Marcian but that was only to deal with the Huns as they would not have respected a female military leader.<sup>5</sup> Regardless, she had a truly impressive political career.

Theodora (490-548 C.E.) was another example of a powerful woman in the Byzantine Empire. She rose out of poverty and a job as an “actress” or prostitute and became the wife of Justinian I who is widely considered to be the most important emperor in Byzantine history. She had immense control and influence over the policies of her husband. She even helped smash the Nika riots which was violent popular unrest that occurred throughout Constantinople.<sup>6</sup>

The most dramatic example of an empress ruling by herself was Empress Irene (775-797 C.E.). During the Iconoclasm (a conflict over the use of religious images), she became the sole ruler of the empire. She

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<sup>4</sup>Mark Cartwright "Women in the Byzantine Empire," *World History Encyclopedia*, Last modified April 06, 2018, <https://www.worldhistory.org>.

<sup>5</sup> Gregory, *A History of Byzantium*, 98.

<sup>6</sup> Gregory, *A History of Byzantium*, 127.



even took on the male title of basileus or emperor.<sup>7</sup> Throughout her reign, she faced multiple plots against her, but she always prevailed. In fact, she even blinded her own son to protect her power. She was eventually deposed at the end of her life, but her reign is a miraculous story.

It is important to note that these are just three examples of politically powerful women in the empire; there are many more wives, daughters, and mistresses that played important roles in the politics of the Byzantine empire.

## Before the Reign of Alexius I

Before Alexius I came to power and started the Comneni Dynasty, the empire was ruled by the Ducas family. Under this dynasty's leadership, the empire was in major trouble. They had lost control of Bari, one of the last Byzantine strong posts in Italy in 1071. The Normans, under Robert Guiscard, besieged the city. It was a bitter battle, but Guiscard won and threw out direct Byzantine power. This was part of Guiscard's plan to become the heir of the Byzantines in Italy.<sup>8</sup>

However, the Normans were not the only threats to Byzantine power at this time. The Seljuk Turks were also on the rise. This resulted in the catastrophic Battle of Manzikert in 1071, in which the Byzantine army lost their Anatolian lands. The combination of these two defeats in the same year (thus earning the name of the Time of Troubles) caused huge internal problems for the empire and there was much civil strife. This was not helped by the massive economic issues, as the currency became significantly devalued.<sup>9</sup> massive economic issues as the currency became significantly devalued.<sup>10</sup>

Nikephorus III Bontaniates became emperor in 1078 C.E. after revolting in a district of Anatolia. During his reign, he was faced with four revolts, which harmed the internal stability of the empire. Since he was technically a usurper, he gained the support of the people by distributing money, which depleted the imperial treasury.<sup>11</sup> Eventually, Alexius I revolted against him with a substantial military behind him. Alexius then deposed him and put him in a monastery.

<sup>7</sup> Gregory, *A History of Byzantium*, 197.

<sup>8</sup> David John Proctor, "The Time of Troubles; The Double Disasters & Rise of Alexius I Comnenus," November 17, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Proctor, November 17, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Proctor, November 17, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Proctor, November 17, 2021.



Figure 2 The Byzantine Empire Right Before the Reign of Alexius I

## The Reign of Alexius I

When Alexius came to power in 1081, he was faced with a chaotic situation. Italy and Anatolia were gone, the Seljuk Turks were overrunning Asia Minor, and local administrators were acting on their own accord. His greatest threat, though, was Robert Guiscard who was attempting to invade Byzantium through the Adriatic Coast. He took the city of Drryachium, but eventually Alexius took it back. This conflict appeared as if it was going to continue for a while, but Guiscard died suddenly from an epidemic in his army. This subdued the Norman threat.

Alexius next addressed the Seljuks. He inflicted major defeats against them and retook some of the empire's land in Asia Minor. He was able to do this with the support of Crusaders coming from Western Europe.

Alexius had successfully appealed to Pope Urban II for support from the

Crusaders. Many of the knights were poorly trained and unmanageable. However, he eventually got a group that was helpful. As the Crusaders kept coming in, Alexius forced them to take oath that said that they had to restore the towns they captured to Byzantium (if they were Byzantine areas), apart from Syria and Jerusalem. And thus, the Crusaders set up their own states in the area including Syria, Jerusalem, and Armenia.



Figure 3 The Crusader States

Many of the crusaders hoped to conquer the Byzantine empire and make it Roman Catholic. However, at that point in time there was not enough support for it. Yet there were many proponents for the

Catholicization of Byzantine throughout Alexius's reign.<sup>12</sup>

There was also an increase of Venetian and Pisan influence over the empire during his reign. They both came to get special quarters within Constantinople and special trading agreements, which negatively impacted the economy.<sup>13</sup>

Alexius also made many changes towards the internal policies of the empire. He made it much more feudalistic, though the power was still very much centralized in the hands of the empire. He also had to use many mercenary troops due to the nature of the military situation at that time.

Alexius tried to solve the economic crisis and stop the debasement of their currency system, but he couldn't. In fact, the situation got worse as the currency got even more debased. Since he was using mercenary troops, the cost of them was a burden shouldered by taxpayers, in a tax system that was being abused by tax farmers.

He also made one crucial change to administrative structure. He centralized the running of the empire within his family. Thus, the higher echelons were dominated by his relatives. Nepotism was running wild.

<sup>12</sup> David John Proctor, "Alexius I & Revival," November 22, 2021.

## Status of the Empire in 1118 AD

Overall, Alexius I started to stabilize the empire and bring back its glory. While there were still problems, Alexius was driving it the right direction. He ended the Time of Troubles and repulsed all his enemies from the central core of the empire. All the empire needed was a successor to continue his policies and continue to fix the situation.

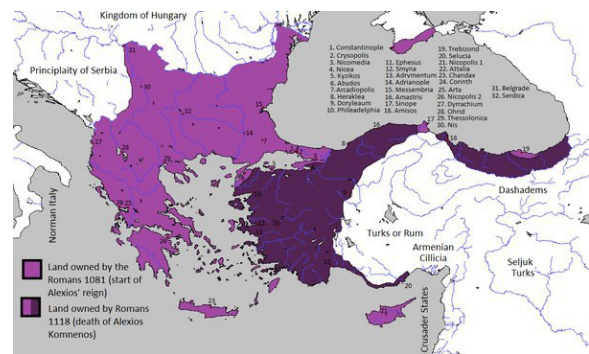


Figure 4 The Empire Throughout Alexius's Reign

However, the line of succession proved to be a problem. Alexius had married Irene Ducaena and they had seven kids. Their first child was girl named Anna in 1083. As the first child, she was immediately made the heir to the throne. She was thus educated and groomed from a young age to be the next empress of Byzantium. However, in 1088, Irene had a son named John, making him the heir to the throne. This switch in decision angered

<sup>13</sup> Proctor, November 22, 2021.

many in the imperial administration and family, especially Irene and Anna.

And thus, at the time of the committee, as Alexius lied on his death bed in 1118, tensions were rising in the empire

over who should become the next ruler of the empire. That is where you delegates come in...

## Questions to Consider

- Who should be the next emperor/empress of the Byzantine Empire?
- Who should be in control of the imperial administration as Alexius lays dying?
- How would one go about winning the support of the four pillars of the empire?
- Is there any way to avoid a violent civil war or compromise? If war is the only option, what measures should be taken in order to prevent external enemies from taking advantage of it?
- What decisions should the committee make in order to make sure that the empire does not fall into another Time of Troubles?

## Roles

The characters listed below have been assembled to discuss the pressing issues of the empire as Alexius is on his deathbed. While this is a historical committee, backroom will not necessarily stick to the historical script. We encourage delegates to be creative with their crisis arcs.

Each character below has their latinized name and Greek name in order to help with research. In committee, however, I encourage all to use their latinized names as they are easier to pronounce and spell.

**Anna Comnena/Anna Komnene** was the first born of Irene and Alexius. At her birth, she was named to the heir and engaged to Constantine Ducas. Her education was guided by her mother, future mother-in-law, and her grandmother. However, Constantine died at a young age, and she was then engaged to and eventually married to Nicephorus Bryennius, to whom she was very devoted. Due to her rigid education, she had the training to be someone great. During her father's reign, she was put in charge of hospitals and orphanages, taught doctors, treated Alexius's gout, and ran literary salons. Due to the change in

succession, Anna had a deep hatred for her brother John.

**John Comnenus/John Komnenos** was the third child of Alexius I and his first son. Since he was made heir, he was educated and trained to become emperor. He was an extremely pious individual and a successful military commander. In 1104, he married Irene of Hungary, the daughter of the king of Hungary.

**Irene Ducaena/Irene Doukaina** was the wife of Alexius I. She was a member of a wealthy and illustrious Byzantine family and her relatives once ruled the empire. Their marriage was a political match and thus it took many years for her to win her husband over. Eventually, she became his chief confidant and he depended on her help to run the empire as he became sicker and sicker. Whenever Alexius I was on campaign, she would act as regent with Nicephorus as her advisor. She was a strong proponent of Anna becoming empress.

**Andronicus Comnenus/Andronikos Komnenos** was the fourth born child and second born son of Alexius and Irene. He was a talented military commander and even commanded part of the army during his

father's reign. He had a very close and personal relationship with his sister Anna.

**Isaac Comnenus/Isaac Komnenos** was the fifth child and third son of Irene and Alexius. During his father's reign, he was awarded the title of Caesar which was senior title in the imperial administration thus giving lots of influence. However, he always wished to rise even further in the government. He was a strong supporter of his brother John.

**Maria Comnena/Maria Komnene** was the second child and second daughter of Alexius and Irene. She married Nikephoros Katakalon who was the son of one of Alexius's most trusted generals. As a result of their marriage, Nikephoros was raised to a high-ranking court title for aristocrats allied with the dynasty. As her father laid dying, Maria helped attend and care for him.

**Eudocia Comnena/Eudokia Komnene** was the sixth child and third daughter of Alexius and Irene. She was married to Constantine Lasites who was in charge of the palace, but Irene forcefully ended their union. She was then confined to a convent. Eventually, her mother put her in charge of Kecharitomene Monastery.

**Theodora Comnenus/Theodora Komnene** was the final child and fourth daughter of Alexius and Irene. She married Constantine Kourtikes who was a powerful nobleman. However, he died soon after their union. In 1118, she started to court Constantine Angelos, an extremely powerful aristocrat and military commander, despite her mother condemning it.

**Nicephorus Bryennius/Nikephoros Bryennios** was the husband of Anna and a successful general and scholar. He was extremely loyal to Alexius and played important roles in many of his conquests. He was also named Caesar by Alexius. No matter who was in charge, Nicephorus would always be loyal to the imperial throne.

**Maria of Alania** was the mother of Anna's first husband. Born in the Kingdom of Georgia, she was the daughter of its king. She was the wife of Emperor Nikephorus III Bontaniates until 1081, in which he became a monk after being deposed. She raised Anna in her home after she was engaged to her son. After her son's death, she moved back to Georgia into a monastery and strengthened the ties between the two countries. She was an avid supporter of Anna.

**John Axouch/John Axouchos** was John's closest friend. He was a Turk at birth but was captured and then raised in the imperial palace. He became a constant companion of John and even served as John's servant for a while. The rest is history.

**John IX Agapetos** was the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople during the end of Alexius's reign. He was the nephew of a powerful church official in Chalcedon. He was initially a cleric and eventually rose through the ranks until he reached the top.

He was anti-secularization and wanted to increase the power of the church.

**Michael of Ephesus/Michael Ephesius** was a prominent and widely known scholar in the Byzantine empire. He worked in the University of Constantinople in the philosophy department. He took part in many of Anna's intellectual salons where he met and developed relationships with many other intellectuals, bureaucrats, and aristocrats.



## Resources for Delegates

Cartwright, Mark. "Anna Komnene." World History Encyclopedia. Last modified May 03, 2018. [https://www.worldhistory.org/Anna\\_Komnene/](https://www.worldhistory.org/Anna_Komnene/).

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Mediavlists.net, <https://www.medievalists.net/>

In our Time: Byzantium, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00547j9>

**\*\*\*These resources provide a jumping off point for gaining more general knowledge about our committee topic. Most of these sites should be free, but please let me know if you have any difficulties accessing them as you conduct your research.**

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