

ABSTRACT

In the Shadow of Mantzikert: Alexios I Komnenos and military and political struggle over the Balkans (1081-1095)

Byzantine emperor Alexios I Komnenos is a historical person perceived rather diversely by many scholars. Their opinions tend to gravitate towards two major points of view. The former group of historians holds that Alexios Komnenos was an undisputed savior of the crippled Byzantine Empire which in 1081 was tottering at the verge of disintegration because of the fateful defeat at Mantzikert in 1071 and the ensuing civil war. The latter group of scholars tends to view this emperor much more critically, and some of them are even suggesting that because of his rather inefficient way of handling military and political matters, the crisis after the battle of Mantzikert lasted for a longer period than if a more capable emperor reigned the Empire.

The main goal of this work is to describe and analyze the military and, to some extent, also the political measures of Alexios Komnenos in the Balkans prior to the coming of the first crusade. In this way it is possible from 1081 onwards to discern and to evaluate Emperor's steps and actions during the long-lasting conflicts endangering this very important geographical area which was rapidly becoming the sole core territory of the Byzantine Empire after the loss of its Eastern territories in Anatolia which played this role since the 7th century until 1071. The present detailed reconstruction focuses on the Byzantium's armed forces whose evolution can be traced thanks to various historical Byzantine and non-Byzantine accounts in the period under review, during which they had to provide safety and protection to the Byzantine Balkans against the onslaught of the Normans, the Pechenegs, and the Cumans. By this it is also possible to furnish substantial support to the view of Alexios Komnenos as a capable and strong ruler and resourceful military commander who in spite of his hard-fought successes against the Normans in 1085, against the Pechenegs in 1091 and eventually against the Cumans in 1095 was during the whole period under concern finally not in position to initiate and to organize a full-scale Byzantine *Reconquista* of the lost territories in the East prior to 1095.