

## HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

### Masaryk University

<b>Applicant</b>	Mgr. Marek Meško, PhD.
<b>Habilitation thesis</b>	Alexios I Komnenos in the Balkans, 1081-1095
<b>Reviewer</b>	doc. Florin Leonte, Ph.D.
<b>Reviewer's home unit, institution</b>	Department of History, Palacky University of Olomouc

Marek Meško's monograph offers a detailed study of the military and political history of the first fifteen years of Alexios I Komnenos' reign, focusing on his campaigns and conflicts in the Balkans. The book addresses three major military confrontations that shaped this period: the war against the Normans (1081-1085), the war against the Pechenegs (1083-1091), and the Kuman invasion of 1095. Meško examines Alexios' military leadership, tactical innovations, and his ability to defend and consolidate Byzantine power in the Balkans during a critical period.

The strength of Meško's work lies in its careful chronological reconstruction and detailed analysis of military operations. The author reconciles conflicting chronologies in the sources, particularly in Anna Komnene's *Alexiad*, the main narrative for the period. He supplements this with other Byzantine sources and Latin chronicles, especially for the Norman war where sources provide important alternative perspectives. The author also incorporates archaeological, sigillographic, and geographic evidence to reconstruct the military landscape of the Balkans. Particular attention is paid to the role of terrain and climate in military operations, the importance of supply lines and fortifications, and the challenges of coordinating land and naval forces. This approach helps explain both successes and failures in Alexios' campaigns and concomitantly points to the broader transformation of Byzantine military capabilities under his leadership.

The book makes several other contributions. First, it challenges the traditional periodization that treats these conflicts as separate events, demonstrating instead their interconnected nature and overlap, particularly between the Norman and Pecheneg wars. Second, it provides insights into Alexios' evolution as a military commander, showing how he adapted Byzantine tactics to face different types of opponents. Third, it offers a detailed reconstruction of the Byzantine military system during this transitional period, examining how Alexios worked to rebuild and reform the army following the crisis of the 1070s.

The Introduction establishes the context and scope of the monograph. The author highlights the significance of Alexios I Komnenos' reign, a period marked by the recovery for the Byzantine Empire. Meško acknowledges the vast body of scholarship dedicated to eleventh-century Byzantium, but argues for the need to re-examine existing interpretations. Meško identifies several limitations within the existing scholarship: an overemphasis on decline and lack of attention to the Balkans.

Chapter 2 lays the groundwork for understanding the military challenges and transformations Alexios I Komnenos inherited upon becoming emperor. Meško analyzes the evolution of the Byzantine army and navy throughout the eleventh century, culminating in a bleak picture of their state by 1081. Meško notes that the thematic system, which had once formed the backbone of Byzantine military strength, had begun to decline by the tenth century. At the same time, the greater mobility of the tagmata and their training made them better suited for offensive operations, particularly during the Byzantine reconquest of territories in the East. The limitations of this reformed military structure became evident as new enemies appeared in the mid-eleventh century. The Normans in the west, the Pechenegs in the north, and the Seljuk Turks in the east all posed significant threats, overwhelming a system designed for localized conflicts. The analysis sets the stage for understanding the magnitude of the challenges Alexios I Komnenos faced upon assuming power and underscores the need for decisive action.

Chapter 3 focuses on the background and early career of Alexios I Komnenos. Meško shows that his military successes prior to 1081, particularly against the Seljuk Turks and in the Byzantine civil wars, contributed to his reputation as a decisive and capable leader. It is argued that Alexios' early military experience played a crucial

role in shaping his approach to the challenges he faced as emperor, highlighting his strengthening of the Byzantine armed forces and securing the empire's borders.

Chapter 4 examines the conflict between the Byzantine Empire under Alexios I Komnenos and the Normans led by Robert Guiscard, Duke of Apulia and Calabria. This conflict represented the first major test of Alexios's reign, erupting immediately upon his ascension to the throne on 1 April 1081. The author discusses the challenges posed by this conflict by detailing the geographical setting of the conflict and focusing on the western Balkans as the primary theatre of war. The chapter effectively makes use of primary sources to reconstruct the conflict's key events and analyze the strategic decisions of both sides.

Chapter 5 moves to the protracted conflict between the Alexios and the Pechenegs. Meško challenges the traditional view that the war began in 1086, arguing instead for an earlier start date of 1083 based on a close reading of the sources. Meško analyses the geographical and chronological context of the conflict, traces its key phases, and assesses the strategic decisions of both sides, discussing the details of Byzantine-Pecheneg relations and the challenges of warfare against nomadic adversaries. Meško concludes by assessing the long-term consequences of the Byzantine-Pecheneg war. With the Pechenegs ceasing to be a major threat, their remnants were incorporated into the Byzantine army, foreshadowing the future role of nomadic groups like the Kumans in Byzantine military affairs.

In chapter 6, Meško discusses the Kuman invasion, including its causes, the course of events, the military strategies employed by the Byzantines, and its consequences. The immediate trigger for the invasion, Meško argues, was the actions of a man named Charakenos, who falsely claimed to be Leo Diogenes, the son of the former emperor Romanos IV. Charakenos sought Kuman support for his bid to usurp the Byzantine throne, promising them rewards. The invasion can also be understood within the broader context of Kuman-Byzantine and Kuman-Rus' relations. Among the most important events in the course of the invasion, the chapter identifies the following: the initial Kuman advance; the undermining of the Byzantines' defensive strategy by the actions of Vlach communities in the Balkan Mountains; the siege of Adrianople; and the eventual Byzantine victory. Meško points to the importance of military strategies, the role of intelligence, and the significance of the Vlachs. Also, the biased approach of Anna Komnene's *Alexiad* is analyzed against the background

of the realities on the ground which saw a shift of interest from the Seljuks to the Balkans.

In chapter 7 the author concentrates on Alexios I Komnenos's efforts in rebuilding the Byzantine army and navy during the period 1081–1095. The author proceeds from the observation that Alexios I Komnenos inherited an army that was severely weakened due to the Battle of Manzikert in 1071 and the subsequent civil war. The disintegration of the professional tagmata had left the Byzantine army reliant on provincial troops and foreign mercenaries. While the chapter acknowledges Alexios' efforts in recruiting new troops and reorganizing the army, it notes that his attempts to restore the army to its former glory were largely unsuccessful. This was due to a number of factors, including: financial constraints (Byzantium was facing a severe financial crisis, which limited the emperor's ability to raise and equip a large professional army); reliance on mercenaries (Alexios I was heavily reliant on foreign mercenaries, such as the Normans and the Turks, which raised concerns about their loyalty and reliability); lack of time (the constant military threats facing the empire forced Alexios to focus on short-term solutions rather than long-term military reforms). The chapter also suggests that even if the emperor made progress in rebuilding the Byzantine armed forces, his achievements were uneven. The army remained a patchwork of disparate elements, while the navy experienced a more significant revival, albeit in response to an immediate threat.

Overall, Meško concludes that Alexios I Komnenos's adept handling of the crises he inherited allowed Byzantium to enter a period of resurgence. It emphasizes that the emperor's position in 1081 was precarious. Faced with multiple threats, he was often forced to make difficult choices with potentially far-reaching consequences. The author suggests that anyone else in his position would likely have been overwhelmed by the circumstances and unable to implement the necessary remedies. Alexios frequently had to choose between two undesirable options, as illustrated by his decision-making in the early weeks of his reign. He was forced into armed conflict but had to decide which enemy to confront first: the Seljuk Turks or the Normans.

Meško's research is convincing in showing that Alexios I Komnenos was a pragmatic leader who, rather than pursuing unattainable goals like a full-scale reconquest, effectively addressed a volatile international landscape to stabilize the Byzantine Empire.

**Reviewer's questions for the habilitation thesis defence** (number of questions up to the reviewer)

1. The book concludes that Alexios was a pragmatic leader who prioritized stability over unattainable goals like a full-scale reconquest of lost territories. Could Alexios have realistically pursued a more ambitious reconquest strategy? What were the key constraints limiting his options, and how did he balance the need for both the defensive and offensive?
2. What role did other political instruments like diplomacy play in Alexios I Komnenos' Balkan campaigns, and how did it interact with his military strategies?
3. Did Alexios follow any identifiable model of kingship in his campaigns and political career?

## **Conclusion**

The habilitation thesis entitled Alexios I Komnenos in the Balkans, 1081-1095 by Mgr. Marek Meško, PhD., **fulfils** requirements expected of a habilitation thesis in the field of History.

Date:

17.12.2024

Signature: