

MAREK MEŠKO, *Alexios Komnenos in the Balkans, 1081–1095* (New Approaches to Byzantine History and Culture). Cham: Palgrave MacMillan 2023. xvi + 425 pp. – ISBN 978-3-031-26295-1

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This book analyses the measures that Alexios I Komnenos (1081–1118) took to defend Byzantium’s Balkan provinces against the invasions of the Normans, the Pechenegs, and the Cumans. It covers the period from the beginning of his reign to the eve of the First Crusade which changed completely the strategic position of the empire. MEŠKO’s aim is to provide a balanced assessment of Alexios I as a monarch and general: he considers him a resourceful military commander who pulled the empire out of crises that threatened its very existence and restored much of the strength it had lost after the battle of Mantzikert (1071).

The book’s introductory section, intended to help readers understand the condition of the Byzantine army when Alexios I seized the throne, briefly surveys the evolution of Byzantine forces during the eleventh century. MEŠKO follows most modern scholars’ opinion that the first signs of military decline can be traced back to the tenth century, when the empire turned from defence to aggression. This led to a sense of external security, resulting in reduced funding for the troops. The author distinguishes two schools of strategic thought: one sought the continuation of conquest through the *tagmata* and *themata*, the other supported the creation of a smaller but full-time professional army that would be more efficient and would rely on mercenaries (pp. 11–16, 29). There is then a brief survey of the units and command structure of the eleventh-century Byzantine army and an analysis of a Byzantine military commander’s expected capabilities, as described by military manuals (pp. 17–28, 32–35). The chapter’s last part discusses the military impact of the battle of Mantzikert: MEŠKO supports the view that the Byzantine army collapsed not because of its defeat at the hands of the Seljuks but due to the ensuing civil conflict. Meanwhile, the weakness of the Byzantine navy allowed the Seljuks to reach the Aegean. On the eve of Alexios I’s rise to power, the only combat-worthy units remained the western *tagmata* (pp. 35–50). MEŠKO’s survey of the military organization of the empire in the eleventh century is followed by a brief account of Alexios I’s career before 1081 (pp. 51–55).

The book's main part starts, in Chapter Four, with an examination of the war against the Normans who invaded the empire's western territories in 1081. MEŠKO provides a detailed analysis of this conflict, focusing on the topography of the area where the battles were fought, the routes of the two armies, and the impact of geography and climate on the effectiveness of the Byzantine and Norman forces (pp. 57–65). This is supplemented with a discussion of the war's chronology: in some cases, such as the battle fought between the Byzantines and the Normans in Larissa, MEŠKO treats the primary sources critically and proposes a new dating, arguing in this case that the battle was fought on 3 October 1082 and not, as previously thought, in April 1083 (pp. 66–71).

MEŠKO assesses the level of threat that the Normans posed to the Byzantines and the size of the armies involved in the war. In his opinion, the main factors which led Robert Guiscard to invade the Adriatic coast were the humiliating end of negotiations with Michael VII and the fact that Dyrrachion could form the base for a possible Byzantine attack on South Italy. The author lists the leading commanders of Guiscard's troops and concludes that the size of the Norman army was limited, since territories in Italy could not be left unguarded and the available vessels could not transport a large force. MEŠKO justifies the late response of the Byzantines: the emperor needed to consolidate his power, faced a severe financial crisis, and had to deal with the Pechenegs in the north and the Seljuks in Asia Minor. Moreover, the Byzantine elite felt more threatened by the Normans than by the nomadic Pechenegs and the Seljuks: these were both expected to succumb to Byzantium's superior culture; Robert Guiscard, on the other hand, could claim the imperial throne and deprive the empire of its Balkan provinces, the only ones that functioned properly at that time (pp. 85–92). MEŠKO provides an equally detailed account of the land force which the emperor led to Epiros and points out that, contrary to what Anna Komnene wants us to believe, the Byzantines enjoyed numerical superiority over the Normans, while the emperor secured the aid of the Venetian navy, larger than its Norman counterpart (pp. 91–108).

In his examination of the battle of Dyrrachion, MEŠKO discusses Anna Komnene's account of the war council which decided to fight the Normans: the experienced commanders had suggested to blockade the enemy and not engage them, but the views of younger officers who pushed for a head-on attack prevailed. According to MEŠKO, this demonstrates that Alexios I was determined to attack regardless of the outcome of the council, because his army outnumbered that of the Normans and held a tactically

favourable position. The emperor also needed to face off his domestic opponents. MEŠKO adds that his movements agreed with the instructions provided by older military manuals, the *Strategikon* of Maurice and *Kekaumenos* (pp. 114–118). His argument is legitimate and likely to be correct. Nonetheless, it cannot be excluded that Anna Komnene blamed the younger officers for the decision to attack the Normans in order to free her father of responsibility for the eventual Byzantine defeat or, as G. THEOTOKIS argues, Alexios I's and the so-called younger officers' decision might have been motivated by their sense of pride and honour¹. The description of the actual battle of Dyrrachion complements other modern accounts and discusses the divergences among them (pp. 119–132). MEŠKO calculates that the Byzantines lost around $\frac{1}{4}$ of their manpower on the battlefield. Even so, the harsh winter conditions made it difficult for the Normans to advance and extend their territorial gains.

In MEŠKO's view, after their victory at Dyrrachion the Normans under Bohemond did not attack Thessalonica because the march on that city and on Constantinople was to be led by Robert Guiscard. Instead, Bohemond advanced towards Ioannina. Although his army was reinforced by local troops who provided local knowledge, Bohemond led a smaller army than his father. MEŠKO estimated that Guiscard's 1300 knights might have been reduced to 700. The Norman army, which may have reached 11,000 men, had the advantage of experience, not size. Describing the composition of the Byzantine army, MEŠKO compares the Norman victory at Ioannina to that at Dyrrachion. He questions whether the battle which Anna Komnene records immediately after the one of Ioannina was ever fought, arguing that if there was an engagement at all, it occurred not around Arta but near Kozani and Grevena, in June or July 1082 (pp. 147–149).

MEŠKO's account of the remainder of the conflict between Alexios I and Bohemond is by no means limited to describing how armies moved from one position to another: it emphasizes, rather, the impact of geographical and meteorological factors on the performance of military forces. While Bohemond was able to expand the Norman possessions, he failed to capture many well-defended Byzantine strongholds and received no reinforcements due to the winter conditions, the severity of which almost caused his army to mutiny (pp. 149–156). MEŠKO observes that from October 1082 until March 1083, Alexios I had transformed the Byzantine army:

1. GEORGIOS THEOTOKIS, *The Norman Campaigns in the Balkans 1081–1118*. Woodbridge 2014, p. 150.

the names of the commanders and the inclusion of Uzes, Turks, and Seljuks suggests a turn closer to a nomadic style of warfare. These tactics proved useful and led to a Byzantine victory near Larissa (pp. 156–169). The Norman invasion ended with a final and failed attack of Robert Guiscard in 1084–1085 (pp. 177–200).

Chapter Five discusses the war between the Byzantines and the Pechenegs from 1083 until 1091. MEŠKO is a leading researcher on the relations between Byzantium and the Pechenegs, so here he supplements arguments he has made in previous works of his.² As with the war against the Normans, MEŠKO examines in detail the conflict's geographical and chronological setting. He treats critically much of the information provided by the *Alexiad*, arguing that the war against the Pechenegs started earlier than Anna Komnene claims (pp. 216–221). By dating the Pecheneg inroads to 1083–1085, MEŠKO connects Alexios I's two campaigns against the Normans and the Pechenegs and discusses how they affected one another (pp. 229–230).

In his analysis of the battle of Beliatoba, in which the Byzantines were defeated at the hands of the Pechenegs, and of the encounter near Philippoupolis, MEŠKO notes that the Byzantines were familiar with Pecheneg tactics due to centuries of experience in fighting nomads. This explains the cautious approach of the general Tatikios at Philippoupolis (pp. 231–239). However, there are many examples of Byzantine generals being unable to respond effectively in such cases: even if aware of the steppe manner of fighting, they could not impose on their troops the discipline necessary for an effective response to it.

MEŠKO dates the establishment of the *theme* of Anchialos, a reaction to the Pecheneg threat, to 1086 and not to 1087 – as MAGDEARU does³. He demonstrates that the invasion in 1087 was carried out by a different group of Pechenegs, who came from north of the Danube and not from the Paradounavion (p. 242). He adds that this attack was not a sudden raid

2. See MAREK MEŠKO, Pechenege Groups in the Balkans (ca. 1053–1091) according to the Byzantine Sources. In: FLORIN CURTA – BOGDAN PETRU MALEON (eds), *The Steppe Lands and the World beyond Them. Studies in Honor of Victor Spinei on His 70th Birthday*. Iași 2013, pp. 179–205; MAREK MEŠKO, Nomads and Byzantium: Problematic Aspects of Maintaining Diplomatic Relations with the Pechenegs. In: MAREK MEŠKO et al. *On Research Methodology in Ancient and Byzantine History*. Brno 2015, pp. 181–193.

3. ALEXANDRU MADGEARU, *Byzantine Military Organization on the Danube, 10th–12th Centuries*. Leiden 2013, p. 85.

aimed at collecting booty, as the *Alexiad* depicts it, but a large-scale war with complex economic and strategic motives. After providing a detailed reconstruction of the routes followed by the Byzantine army and the Pechenegs, the author describes the Byzantines' victory at Koule. Analysing the battle's geographical setting, MEŠKO concludes that the Byzantines had managed to pin the Pechenegs in a narrow field and force them to fight in close combat, which was generally advantageous when facing nomad adversaries (pp. 250–251). The author dates the subsequent battle of Dristra to 14 August 1087. For him, the younger commanders' view, reported by Anna Komnene, that the Byzantines should advance deep into enemy territory reflects the emperor's determination to carry out the campaign (pp. 255–256, 260–261). It is likely, however, that Anna Komnene lays the blame for the defeat on unnamed inexperienced leaders so as to exonerate her father (pp. 261–267). One should note that the author of the *Alexiad* attributes two defeats, at Dyrrachion and at Dristra, to younger, inexperienced officers' insistence on fighting.

The next section of this chapter is a discussion of the consequences of the battle at Dristra and Alexios I's inability to recruit locally due to the impact of the Pecheneg raids. The author points out that lack of local recruits caused Alexios I either to create new units, such as the *Archontopouloi*, or to seek the employment of foreigners (pp. 271–273). Thus, the effort to hire mercenaries should not be seen as a desperate measure or a consequence of the emperor's mistrust of native soldiers: it was a military necessity. MEŠKO points out that despite Anna Komnene's vivid accounts, the clashes between the Byzantines and the Pechenegs in 1089 and in 1090 were not decisive. He also observes that it was not easy to ward off the Pechenegs in the first half of 1090, since the emperor was busy facing a threat from the Seljuk chieftain Çaka (p. 278).

MEŠKO also concludes that the identity of the commanders and the units that were sent against the Pechenegs during that period shows increased reliance of the Byzantine army on nomadic warfare, something that had already started during the war against the Normans. These commanders either were of Pecheneg, Uz, and Cuman origin or had personal experience in the nomad tactics of fighting. He adds that units such as the short-lived *Archontopouloi* were probably trained in the same type of fighting: this is demonstrated by the account of the battle of Hades, where the Byzantines used nomad-style tactics and relied on archery (pp. 279–281). Despite temporarily successful defence, the Pechenegs continued to put pressure on the empire in 1090–1092. MEŠKO notes, however, that their inability to cap-

ture cities helped the Byzantines, who knew that the enemy had to return home after a period of fighting (pp. 290–292). The discussion of the Pecheneg invasions ends with an account of the battle of Levounion (29 April 1091), which MEŠKO places some 12 km southwest of the location proposed by other scholars (p. 299). MEŠKO estimates that the Byzantine army comprised some 13,000 men, including Norman mercenaries and Flemish knights. He provides a short but comprehensive description of the battle of Levounion, observing that, contrary to what Anna Komnene says, many Pechenegs survived it and joined the Byzantine army (pp. 300–305).

Chapter Six investigates the Cuman invasion of the Balkans. By analysing the information provided by sources such as the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, and reconstructing the chronological order of the events Anna Komnene describes in Books VIII and IX of her *Alexiad*, MEŠKO dates the Cuman invasion not to 1094 or 1095, as other historians do, but between March 1095 and February 1096 (pp. 310–315). He argues that the Cuman attacks were neither mere raids for the sake of booty, nor simply instigated by Byzantine conspirators: they were the result of the political opportunism of the Cuman leaders, as well as of diplomatic developments between the Byzantines and the Cumans and between the Byzantines and Kievan Rus'. Rus' territories were under pressure by the Cumans and some Rus' princes formed alliances with Cuman leaders in order to claim the throne. This affected Byzantine interests in the area of Kherson and was the reason why in 1094 Alexios I seized Tmutarakan from Oleg Sviatoslavich (pp. 318–319). Using a combination of written sources and recent archaeological evidence, the author reconstructs the route followed by the Cumans in the Paradounavion (pp. 320–322). He views the Byzantines' decision not to defend with all their strength the area north of the Haimos as justified, since the Byzantine military leadership was not familiar with the territory (p. 321). MEŠKO points out that the Cumans were unable to take control of the entire territory of the Paradounavion, because they lacked the capacity to seize fortified strongholds (p. 322). An important point is that the defeat at Dristra in 1087 had made the war against the Cumans unpopular among the Byzantine elite and that the emperor needed to persuade his military council to carry out a campaign (p. 323).

MEŠKO makes a prosopographical survey of the commanders sent by Alexios I to fight the Cumans. His analysis is supported by sigillographic evidence. The appearance of many new names indicates an influx of new blood in the military command, which is partly explained by the failed plot of Diogenes. Nonetheless, despite the changes in military leadership, these

new generals were relatives of the emperor – a feature which remained a fundamental criterion for military appointments (pp. 324–330). The last part of this chapter discusses the conflict between the Byzantines and the Cumans in Thrace: MEŠKO shows how Byzantine commanders responded effectively to the enemy’s nomadic fighting techniques and took advantage of the fact that the Cumans did not possess siege engines (pp. 336–350).

In a final chapter entitled ‘Synthesis’, MEŠKO summarizes the transformations which the Byzantine army underwent during the first years of Alexios I’s reign. His discussion focuses on changes in the troops’ composition, reflecting the military and financial needs of the empire. These changes show neither decline of the army nor any sense of desperation on the part of the Byzantine military leadership (pp. 351–363). Assessing the military and political abilities of Alexios I, MEŠKO evaluates this ruler’s tactics and strategy. The emperor is accused of losing control over the Varangians in the battle of Dyrrachion: this, however, could happen to any commander, and the decision to attack the Normans was tactically correct, since Alexios I was informed of the enemy’s moves and the Normans were neither better equipped nor more numerous than the Byzantines. In addition, as a new emperor he needed to prove his leadership skills (pp. 364–366). This view contradicts the conclusions of other modern studies of the battle of Dyrrachion.⁴ Moreover, MEŠKO rightly points out that Alexios I’s army was not composed of disloyal mercenaries of diverse ethnic origin and disloyal Byzantines (pp. 364–365). He argues that the Pecheneg victory at Dristra is not easily explicable, because Alexios I knew the nomads’ fighting techniques better than that of western European armies. This failure is attributed to political factors and miscalculations beyond the control of the emperor (pp. 369–370). One could add that Alexios I was neither the first nor the last Byzantine general who knew how nomadic groups fought yet failed to deal with them effectively. MEŠKO concludes his monograph by providing examples which show that despite initial heavy defeats, Alexios I was able to respond quickly, adapt to changing situations, and display personal bravery on the battlefield (pp. 373–375). The author’s most important point in this concluding section is that Alexios I could not have been able to launch a campaign for the restoration of Byzantine rule in Anatolia (pp. 378–383).

In sum, this is a well-structured and well-researched monograph which provides new insights into the military challenges the empire faced in the pe-

4. See THEOTOKIS, *The Norman Campaign*, pp. 154–155.

riod 1081–1095 and focuses on the personality, motivations, political and martial qualities of Alexios I Komnenos. It reinforces the favourable treatment that Alexios I has received from many scholars. MEŠKO provides informative discussions of the clashes between the Byzantine empire and its enemies in the Balkans during the last decades of the eleventh century. He shows that the Pecheneg and Cuman invasions were organized operations and not merely large-scale raids aimed at capturing booty. His attention to the geographical and chronological background of the conflicts, his critical approach to the available source material, and his use of archaeological evidence provide deeper insights into the reaction of the Byzantines to the threats they faced in the 1080s and 1090s. Another advantage of this book is that it describes the three major military conflicts as interconnected, rather than examining them separately. Alexios I's reign is one of the most frequently discussed periods of Byzantine history, yet MEŠKO makes an original contribution to its study.

Keywords

Alexios I Comnenus; Balkans; Byzantine warfare