

## Anna Comnena

Anna Comnena was born in 1083, the first child of Byzantine emperor Alexius Comnenus and empress Irene. Friends described her as lively, spirited, and stable. Because of her important position as a princess, Anna was well educated. A good student, she studied Plato and Aristotle and became an expert in Greek and rhetoric (persuasive speaking or writing), which was extremely unusual for a woman in the Middle Ages. When Anna was born, her mother expected her to become the next empress. However, her fate changed dramatically when her brother John was born a few years later. Although Irene still wanted Anna to succeed her father as the Byzantine ruler, Alexius chose their son instead. Still, Anna was proud of her royal upbringing and of the wise actions and decisions made by her father.



Anna Comnena

### Stop Here and Discuss



- *When and to whom was Anna Comnena born?*
- *Why was she able to receive such a good education?*
- *How did her brother's birth change her life?*

Anna Comnena's chronicle of her father's rule, *The Alexiad of the Princess Anna Comnena*, is the only Greek account of the First Crusade that has survived. It describes the problems she and her family faced when the crusaders arrived, despite the fact that they had supposedly come to help Anna's family and the Byzantine Christians against the Turks. Comnena was shocked and amazed at seeing such vast numbers of fanatical crusaders storm into Constantinople. At the same time, despite all the difficulty the crusaders presented for her father, according to Comnena he treated them kindly because they were Christians. He answered their questions calmly and gave them money and supplies even when his own resources were exhausted.

### Stop Here and Discuss



- *What was The Alexiad of the Princess Anna Comnena?*
- *What shocked Comnena?*
- *How did Comnena's father treat the crusaders?*

Comnena had mixed feelings about the crusades. On one hand, she respected the crusaders because they were, like herself and the Byzantines, Christians. She understood that one of the reasons for the crusade was her father's need for help in fighting the Turks and defending the Christian Byzantine Empire. At the same time, Comnena expressed fear and dislike of many of the crusaders, whom she described as unstable and dangerous. She saw that huge numbers of fanatical Christians were overtaking her city: "And the sight of them was like many rivers streaming from all sides, and they were advancing towards us." To Comnena, this seemed to be an invasion.

### Stop Here and Discuss



- *Why did Comnena respect the crusaders?*
- *What other feelings did she have about the crusaders?*
- *How did Comnena describe the arrival of the crusaders in Constantinople?*

### From the Crusades to New Muslim Empires

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Comnena believed that once the Europeans had begun to fight for a cause, they were uncontrollable. She described the results of the violence the crusaders did to nearby Muslims: “When they piled up the corpses of the slaughtered men which were lying on either side they formed, I say, not a very large hill or mound or a peak, but a high mountain... so great was the pyramid of bones.” She included descriptions of crusaders roasting children in the fire and tearing off the limbs of others. Especially representative of the violent crusader spirit, according to Comnena, was the leader Bohemond. For her, he stood for the intense mixture of courage and violence, dedication to God, and lust for battle that she observed in the First Crusade: “The sight of him inspired admiration, the mention of his name terror... there was a hard, savage quality to his whole aspect... in him both courage and love were armed, ready for combat.”

#### Stop Here and Discuss



- According to Comnena, how did Europeans react once they began to fight for a cause?
- According to Comnena, what did the crusader leader Bohemond represent?

Comnena was also suspicious of the crusaders. Although she admired the dedication of some of the soldiers to Christianity, she questioned whether many were truly fighting for God. She believed that some of the crusaders, men like the leader Bohemond, fought mainly for glory in battle and the greedy urge to acquire more wealth and land. Emperor Alexius was similarly suspicious. Comnena defended her father’s decision to stay in Constantinople as emperor and not to go on the crusade.

#### Stop Here and Discuss



- In what way was Comnena suspicious of the crusaders?
- Why did she think men like Bohemond were fighting in the crusades?
- How did she feel about her father’s attitude toward the crusaders?