

"I would not praise the Boldness of Alexander...": Alexander the Great as an Imperial Foil in Twelfth-Century Byzantium

The Late Antique rhetorical instructor Menander Rhetor offers a guide on how to construct a speech of praise for an emperor. In it, he suggests that an emperor should be compared favorably to his predecessors without disparaging them, specifically mentioning Alexander the Great as a valuable figure for comparison. In the mid-twelfth century, as the eastern Roman emperor Manuel I Komnenos cultivated an image as a brave and skilled fighter, originating from his headlong charge against the Turks during his father Ioannes II's siege of Neokaisareia, his martial vigor made a comparison with Alexander natural for any aspiring court intellectual looking to win imperial favor.

A comparison to Alexander was not without difficulties. A writer was supposed to emphasize his subject's superiority to past rulers without reducing the value of the comparison by undercutting those predecessors. Since Manuel could not compete with Alexander in the scale of his conquests, his propagandists were forced to engage more creatively with the Alexander legend. Temperament seemed an arena in which Manuel could more credibly engage with Alexander. Alexander offered many examples of noble behavior, for example, courteously informing Darius' family that the king had escaped after the battle of Issus, but his record was not universally positive. His drunken murder of Kleitos the Black was a mark against him, while he occasionally demonstrated an unseemly lust for battle. He was also corrupted by the absolute power afforded to the Persian monarch.

In later Roman society, all of these were both gendered and moral failings. Masculinity was primarily expressed through self-control, while being swayed by emotion and circumstance was a marker of inferior femininity. An examination of the ways in which Manuel's partisans

shaped the Alexander legend to portray him as a perfected version of the ancient conqueror offers valuable insights about later Roman engagement with ancient texts along with their ideas about gender and leadership.

While a number of twelfth-century sources creatively engaged with Alexander's memory, this paper will focus on only one of them. The court historian Ioannes Kinnamos' *Epitome and Narration* reshapes a number of episodes from the life of Alexander to show Manuel's greater self-control. Subtle references to Alexander allow Kinnamos to depict Manuel as Alexander's equal in valor and his superior in masculine restraint. This paper interprets passages in Kinnamos as engaging with the narratives of Alexander's murder of Kleitos, his overbold assault on the Malloi, and his courteous treatment of the Persian women as reported in Arrian's *Anabasis of Alexander* and shows how, by having his hero avoid pitfalls that caught Alexander, Kinnamos finds a way to praise his hero as Alexander's equal without resort to embarrassing hyperbole.