Alexius I Comnenus

Alexius I Comnenus, also spelled Alexios I Komnenos   (born 1057, Constantinople, [Byzantine Empire](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/87186/Byzantine-Empire) [now Istanbul, Turkey]—died August 15, 1118), Byzantine emperor (1081–1118) at the time of the First [Crusade](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/144695/Crusades) who founded the Comnenian dynasty and partially restored the strength of the empire after its defeats by the Normans and Turks in the 11th century.

The third son of John Comnenus and a nephew of [Isaac I](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/294945/Isaac-I-Comnenus) (emperor 1057–59), Alexius came from a distinguished Byzantine landed family and was one of the military leaders who had long urged more effective defense measures, particularly against the Turks’ invading Byzantine provinces or territories. From 1068 to 1081 he gave military service during the short reigns of Romanus IV, Michael VII, and [Nicephorus III](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/413997/Nicephorus-III-Botaneiates). Then, with the support of his brother Isaac and his mother, the formidable or tough Anna Dalassena, and with that of the powerful Ducas family, to which his wife, [Irene](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/293932/Irene-Ducas), belonged, he seized the Byzantine throne from [Nicephorus III.](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/413997/Nicephorus-III-Botaneiates)

Alexius was crowned on April 4, 1081. After more than 50 years of ineffective or short-lived rulers, Alexius, in the words of [Anna Comnena](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/26072/Anna-Comnena), his daughter and biographer, found the empire “at its last gasp,” but his military ability and diplomatic gifts enabled him to fix the situation. He drove back the south Italian [Normans](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/418283/Norman), who were invading western Greece (1081–82). This victory was achieved with Venetian naval help, bought at the cost of granting [Venice](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/625298/Venice) extensive trading privileges in the Byzantine Empire.

In 1091 he defeated Turkic nomads. Alexius also halted or stopped the further encroachment of the [Seljuq](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/533602/Seljuq) Turks, who had already established the sultanate of Rūm (He made agreements with [Sulaymān ibn Qutalmïsh](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/572352/Sulayman-ibn-Qutalmish) of Konya (1081) and subsequently with his son Qïlïch Arslan (1093), as well as with other Muslim rulers on Byzantium’s eastern border. A sultanate is a territory that is ruled by a sultan or Muslim king.

At home, Alexius’s [policy](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/467341/policy) of strengthening the central authority and building up professional military and naval forces resulted in increased Byzantine strength. But he was unable or unwilling to limit the considerable powers of Byzantine nobles and leaders who had threatened the unity of the empire in the past. Indeed, he strengthened their position and he had to reward services, military and otherwise, by granting financial rights over specified areas. This inevitably lessened the money going to central government. Concerning religion, he repressed or stopped heresy (the rejection of Christianity) and maintained the traditional emperor’s role of protecting the Eastern Orthodox church. He did not hesitate to seize church treasure when in financial need. He was later called to account, or have consequences, for this by the church.

To later generations Alexius appeared as the ruler who pulled the empire together at a crucial time, thus enabling it to survive until 1204, and in part until 1453, but modern scholars tend to regard him, together with his successors John II (reigned 1118–43) and Manuel I (reigned 1143–80).

We must be careful to judge Emperor Alexius because the Byzantine Empire was at the center of European [Crusaders](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/144695/Crusades) from 1097 onward. The Crusading movement, motivated partly by a desire to recapture the holy city of Jerusalem, partly by the hope of acquiring new territory, increasingly intruded on Byzantine preserves and frustrated Alexius’s [foreign policy](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/213380/foreign-policy), which was primarily directed toward the reestablishment of royal authority in Anatolia. His relations with Muslim powers were disrupted on occasion, and former valued Byzantine possessions, such as the territory of [Antioch](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/28320/Antioch), passed into the hands of arrogant Western princelings, who even introduced Latin Christianity in place of Greek. Thus, it was during Alexius’s reign that the last phase of the clash between the Latin West and the Greek East happened.

He did regain some control over western Anatolia; he also advanced into the southeast Taurus region, securing much of the fertile coastal plain around Adana and Tarsus, as well as along the Syrian coast. But neither Alexius nor succeeding Comnenian emperors were able to establish permanent control over the Latin Crusader territories. Nor was the Byzantine Empire immune, unaffected, from further Norman attacks on its western islands and provinces. Continual Latin (particularly Norman) attacks, constant attacks from Muslim principalities, the rising power of Hungary and the Balkan kingdoms—all conspired to surround Byzantium with potentially hostile forces. Even Alexius’s diplomacy (negotiation skills), whatever its apparent success, could not avert the continual erosion that ultimately led to the Ottoman conquest.

"Alexius I Comnenus". *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online.* Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2014. Web. 13 Nov. 2014

<<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/14548/Alexius-I-Comnenus>>.

**Prepare for the Talk-It-Out:**

1. Make sure you know the following about your historical figure:

• How was your historical figure involved in the Crusades?

• What is most significant or memorable about your figure’s participation in the Crusades?

• What would you say was the “high point” of the Crusades for your figure? The “low point”?

2. Prepare a two- to three-sentence description of your historical figure based on

your answers to the questions above. Then share your description with your fellow

group members.