

## 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>	Prof. Dr. hab. Kiril Marinow
<b>Reviewer's home unit, institution</b>	Department of Byzantine History, Institute of History, Faculty of Philosophy and History, University of Lodz Narutowicza Street 68, 90-136 Lodz, Poland

Already at the beginning, I must point out that in this particular case we are dealing with a detailed and erudite scholarly study, focused, above all, on military issues concerning the earliest period of emperor Alexios I Komnenos' reign (1081–1118), when, after the loss of the eastern territories in Anatolia (the battle of Manzikert in 1071), the weakened empire had to deal with another wave of invaders in the Balkan area – the Normans in the West and the Pechenegs and Cumans in the North. Dr. Marek Meško's main goal was to describe and analyse the military and, to some extent, political measures taken by the emperor to deal with the difficult situation in which the Byzantine state found itself at the time. As he himself points out, his research was also intended to support one of the two basic views existing in scholarship about the person and rule of the aforementioned autokrator – a positive one, according to which he was the saviour of the empire, or a negative one, according to which his incompetent rule significantly prolonged the crisis of the state. Based on the results of His work, the Author comes to the conclusion that he can significantly support the first option, and thus positively assess Alexios' actions and confirm his reputation as a capable and strong leader and an ingenious and skilled, yet pragmatic, military commander (pp. VII–VIII, 377). I emphasise this fact not coincidentally, as in this way the Applicant goes beyond strictly military issues by contributing to a broader discussion of the reign of the most famous Komnenos, apart from the fact that by doing so He fits perfectly into the classical Roman valuation of an efficient ruler – a military victor – and the *Kaiserkritik*, typical for Byzantine literature. The Author reports that the research on the topic undertaken took more than a decade, although it grows out of his doctoral dissertation on the so-called second Byzantine-Pecheneg war (1083–1091), thus becoming a significant development of those early interests. Undoubtedly, this fact makes Marek Meško a mature specialist in the subjects discussed and in the early period of Alexios' reign.

This quite extensive monograph (441 pp.) is conceptually divided into seven chapters, preceded by an Introduction and culminating in a general Conclusions. Chapters Two and Three serve, in my opinion, as a kind of extended introduction, a necessary background, before going into a detailed consideration of the emperor's subsequent wars with invaders, discussed in parts Four (the war with the Normans), Five (the struggle with the Pechenegs) and Six (the Cuman invasion). The Seventh chapter is a kind of mirror image of the Second one, as it presents the state of the imperial army at the end of the struggles discussed, i.e. its evolution during the presented conflicts and the final defeat of the threats in the Balkan territory. This conception of the work seems to me fully justified, logical and persuasive.

Thus, in the Introduction (pp. 1–9), the Author emphasises the vital importance of the reign of Alexios I Komnenos, who, in fact, devoted his entire adult life to offsetting the

negative effects of the Byzantine defeat at Mantzikert on the state, before moving on to discuss the most important scholarly studies that have dealt with the 11th century and the reign of this ruler and concluding the necessity of revising them.

The Second chapter (pp. 11–50) addresses, mainly based on contemporary literature on the subject, the development of the Byzantine army and fleet in the 11th century, the characteristics of its troops, its command structure and the strategoi themselves. In discussing the latter issue, a clearer source motif appears, as the Author relies on selected Byzantine military manuals (the anonymous work on strategy, Leo the Wise's *Taktika* or Kekaumenos' *Strategikon*) to point out the requirements for commanders, which I personally find particularly interesting. Dr. Meško points to a paradigm change, until the 10th century based on the thematic system, which then began to decline, to the increased mobility of the imperial armies in the following century, which resulted in new conquests in the East, and to their unpreparedness for the clash with the Seljuk Turks. The same applied to the imperial fleet, which had *de facto* ceased to exist in the period before Alexios' accession to the throne. It is worth adding at this point that this fact was particularly unfortunate for the Byzantine Empire, since the rule over the seas and through them the support of strategically important ports, isolated from the rest of the Roman lands, was a typical policy of the empire and allowed it to maintain its influence in distant territories, remaining under foreign rule (cf. p. 379). In the context of the significance of Manzikert, I would point to a habilitation work by Jack Bonark, unknown to the Author<sup>1</sup>.

In the short Third chapter (pp. 51–55), the Author takes a closer look at the history of the Komnenian family and Alexios' early military career, making it clear that his successes and effective command of the army in the West guaranteed him a reputation of a capable leader, which ultimately paved the way for his rise to the throne. As I have already mentioned, these two chapters are intended to give a context for the central part of the book, devoted to the overcoming of old (the condition of the state, including the army), and completely new (the Norman and Pecheneg invasions and, a little later, the Cumans), problems by the new ruler. In other words, they showed the state he found when he ascended the throne.

The Fourth and most comprehensive chapter of the monograph (pp. 57–200), and the first of the three that form the 'heart' of the book, is devoted to a detailed analysis of the struggle between the Byzantines and the Normans between 1081 and 1085. Based on an in-depth analysis of the various sources and a discussion in contemporary scholarly publications, the Author characterises in detail the three main phases of the conflict, namely the Norman invasion and the Battle of Dyrrachion in 1081, Boemund's offensive of 1082–1083 and Guiscard's final attack of 1084–1085. I have no doubt that these considerations, particularly with regard to military matters, constitute, next to the book by Georgios Theotokis<sup>2</sup>, the most modern study of this conflict in contemporary scholarly literature. Even so, the works of Jarosław Dudek and Tomasz Pelech could be useful in some aspects<sup>3</sup>. From the conclusion of the work (p. 383), I deduce that, due to the advanced publishing process of His book, the Applicant could not use in the characterisation of Macedonia's geography and geo-historical road network the TIB volumes published in 2022 by Peter Soustal<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Bonarek, *Bizancjum w dobie bitwy pod Manzikert. Znaczenie zagrożenia seldżuckiego w polityce bizantyńskiej w XI wieku* [Byzantium at the Time of the Battle of Manzikert. The Meaning of the Seljuk Power for the Byzantine Policy in the XI-th Century], Kraków 2011.

<sup>2</sup> G. Theotokis, *The Norman Campaigns in the Balkans, 1081–1108*, Boydell Press 2016.

<sup>3</sup> J. Dudek, „Cała ziemia dyrracheńska” pod panowaniem bizantyńskim w latach 1005-1205 [„The whole Dyrrachion land” under the Byzantine rule between 1005 and 1205], Zielona Góra 1999; T. Pelech, *Obraz „obcego” w „Aleksjadzie” Anny Komneny. Przypadek Normanów* [The Image of the „Other” in Anne Komnene's *Alexiad*. The Case of Normans], Wrocław 2016.

<sup>4</sup> P. Soustal, *Tabula Imperii Byzantini*, Bd. 11, *Makedonien, Südlicher Teil*, Bd. I–II, mit Beiträgen von Andreas Pülz und unter Mitwirkung von Mihailo St. Popović, Wien 2022.

In the Fifth part of the book (pp. 201–306), Dr. Meško focuses on the changing fortunes of Alexios' struggle with the Pechenegs in the years 1083–1091. As in the previous part of the monograph, the Author, on the basis of a meticulous analysis of source accounts, establishes the course of the Pechenegs' invasions of 1083–1086, while at the same time undermining the hitherto prevailing scholarly dating of the first invasion of imperial lands and shifting it to 1083. This issue seems important to me insofar as it directly affects the already ongoing Byzantine–Norman conflict, virtually forcing the Roman autokrator to wage a two-front war. In the following section He analyses the course of events surrounding the invasion of 1087 and the heavy battles with the invaders in 1087–1091. He characterises the challenges faced by the imperial army in its clash with the nomads, the strategic and tactical solutions employed by both sides of the conflict, and does not omit diplomatic issues. More recently, Momchil Mladenov has written on the operations related to the Haimos massif, but his work has been published in a local museum publication and is difficult to access<sup>5</sup>. With regard to the historical geography of the Thracian area, one could still refer to Krassimira Gagova's study, and on the strategic role of Haimos in military operations to my own works<sup>6</sup>.

The Sixth chapter (pp. 307–350) continues the analysis of Byzantine fighting to the north, this time with the Cumans, first reconstructing in broad terms the causes that led to their invasion, before discussing in turn the occupation of Byzantine Paradunavon and the struggles in Thrace. Traditionally, the Author draws attention to the battle strategies and tactics employed by both sides, their effectiveness and the changes introduced in them, as well as their consequences.

In the Seventh chapter (pp. 351–375), which, as I have already indicated, forms the buckle of the whole discussion and returns to the analogous thread taken up in the Second part of the monograph, namely the condition of the Byzantine army and fleet, here in the first period of Komnenos' reign. The Author argues persuasively that, although Alexios made efforts to reconstruct the former power of the Byzantine army, the constant external threat in the period in question, the financial crisis and the reliance on mercenary forces prevented him from achieving significant success in this endeavour. He was therefore forced to focus on *ad hoc* solutions aimed at resolving a specific danger threatening the state at a given moment. As it turns out, only the Imperial fleet saw a more significant revival.

The work culminates in the Conclusions (pp. 377–383), in which the Applicant returns to the fundamental issues highlighted at the very beginning of the book, namely how Alexios and his reign should be evaluated in the chronological period under discussion. The Author emphasises that, in the light of the analyses carried out in the monograph, the emperor, without doubt, belonged to the group of the most capable Eastern Roman military commanders, and his accession to the throne prevented further disintegration of the state. More than that, he even succeeded in leading it into a period of flourishing, rightly defined as the Komnenian era. In addition, He addresses the issue of whether Alexis lost the eastern territories of the empire and whether he could have recaptured them, pointing out that the circumstances in which he found himself immediately after assuming power and for a period of several more years, as well as Byzantium's scarce military resources in Asia Minor, basically offered no chance of any reconquest in the East.

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<sup>5</sup> М. Младенов, *Старопланинският регион и византийско-печенежките отношения през втората половина на XI век*, „Известия на Регионален исторически музей - Габрово“ 3, 2015, pp. 32–45.

<sup>6</sup> К. Гагова, *Тракия през българското Средновековие. Историческа география* [Thrace during the Bulgarian Middle Ages. Historical geography], София 2002; К. Маринов, *Стратегическата роля на Старопланинската и Средногорската вериги в светлината на българо-византийските военни сблъсъци през VII–XI век* [The strategic role of Stara Planina and Sredna Gora ranges in the light of the Bulgarian-Byzantine military clashes during the period of 7th–11th c.], „Известия на Регионалния Исторически Музей – Габрово“ 2, 2014, pp. 111–134; idem, *The Haimos Mountains and the Geopolitics of the First Bulgarian Empire: An Overview*, „Зборник Радова Византолошког Института“ 51, 2014, pp. 17–32.



In His analysis of the particular conflicts, Dr. Meško adopted the following consistently repeated arrangement of presenting the materials and problems – He first characterises the so-called theatre of war, i.e. the geographical conditions and the associated road system in a given area, then considers the chronology of the individual struggles, so that, having set the events in time and space, He can move on to a detailed analysis of specific warfare. This solution is understandable and logical to me. This is because it is impossible to analyse wars in a reasonable way without considering the first two issues, especially for the most early epochs, when geographical matters and the accessibility of a given area were decisive for the war strategy and tactics adopted. Moreover, the layout used makes the Author's deliberations fully legible. The Applicant also rightly draws attention to the most important urban centres in the territory, both the coastal ones, such as Dyrrachion and Thessalonika, providing access to the Byzantine lands from the sea, and the inland ones, such as Okhrid or Kastoria, as well as the possibilities of supplying the army with food in the given area (pp. 57–62).

I agree with the observation that the mountainous territories of Epirus and Western Macedonia hampered the free movement of the larger military bands, forcing them to move along routes imposed by the terrain, in addition to using pack animals rather than the classic wagons. Similarly, when it came to the issue of traversing these routes in winter, when, due to snow cover and low temperatures, they became impossible to cross at all. The Applicant points out that military operations in such terrain were limited to partitioning, blocking passages and controlling them, while the routes were defended by fortresses, difficult to access. As a result, extensive military operations could not be conducted in such terrain, and they most often concentrated on sieges of the aforementioned strategic fortifications (pp. 65–66). Personally, I would add that elevated terrain, apart from forests – and there were many of the latter – was also perfect for ambushing an enemy moving along the valley bottom or mountain gorge. In battles on such terrain, the most important measure was to take up a higher fighting position, so that the enemy could not only be observed and, if necessary, reacted to, but also shot upon him from a height. Moreover, in the areas indicated, the large numbers of troops did not necessarily represent an advantage. On the other hand, moving under cover of the mountains often guaranteed concealment of operations almost to the last moment. In the context of the so-called 'mountain war' discussed in the book, it would have been possible to turn to some, as indeed there are few, studies of this topic based on the analysis of ancient and Byzantine military manuals<sup>7</sup>. Examples of Byzantine-Bulgarian battles from the early medieval period and even from the turn of the 12th/13th century could have been a good analogy and comparative material, all the more so as they concerned armed campaigns in the same areas as those discussed in the book under review, i.e. the area of Macedonia and the Haimos Mountains<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> В. В. Кучма, *Теория и практика ведения горной войны по данным византийской полемологии*, [in:] *Военная организация византийской империи*, Санкт-Петербург 2001, pp. 360–373; К. Маринов, *Преминаването на планинските проходи според византийските и някои антични трактати за военното изкуство* [The passing by the mountain Passes according to Byzantine and selected ancient Works devoted to the Warfare], [in:] *Българско средновековие: общество, власт, история. Сборник в чест на проф. д-р Милияна Каймакамова*, ред. Г. Н. Николов, София 2013, pp. 205–220; idem, *Как трябва да се водят планински сражения. Препоръки в някои византийски и антични стратегикони* [How to fight in the mountains: Recommendations of selected Antique and Byzantine military manuals], "Bulgaria Mediaevalis" 4/5, 2013/2014, pp. 363–381; idem, *Przez wąwozy i lasy. Armia bizantyńska wobec trudno dostępnych obszarów w świetle IX konstytucji Taktyk Leona VI Mądrego* [Crossing forests and ravines: the struggles of the Byzantine army in difficult terrain in the light of Constitution Nine of the Taktika by Leo VI the Wise], "Acta Universitatis Lodziensis. Folia Historica" 99, 2017, pp. 11–32.

<sup>8</sup> Е.г. К. Маринов, *Бунтовният Хемус. Масивът като база за нападения и убежище по време на първите Асеневици* [The Rebellious Haemus. The Mountain Range as an attack Launching Point and a Refuge in the Period of the Early Assen Dynasty], "Епохи" 23, 2015, no. 2, pp. 330–347; idem, *Mountain warfare in the Byzantine-Bulgarian military struggles, the end of 10<sup>th</sup> – the beginning of*

I fully support the statement that Haimos constituted the actual northern boundary of the empire in the early reign of Alexios (p. 204), despite the fact that nominally Paradunavon was part of the Roman state. Let me specify that, yes, the southern slopes of these mountains do indeed descend steeply towards the Upper Thracian Plain, but only in their eastern and central parts, while in the western part, the one north of Saridka/Sophia, it is quite the opposite<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, it should be clarified that ancient, Byzantine and largely modern authors did not exclude the aforementioned Sărmena Gora (p. 204) from the Haimos massif. Moreover, Sărmena Gora is the eastern part of the Sredna Gora massif, whose proper, highest section is further west, towards the modern Sofia Valley. The Haimos also included the area of the entire Pre-Balkan, i.e. the foothills lying to the north of the Stara Planina massif. The entire length of Haimos identified with Stara Planina is about 550 km, and not 444 km as indicated by the Author (p. 204)<sup>10</sup>. Although in reconstructing the road network in the north-eastern part of the Balkans, the Applicant uses the authoritative work of Peter Soustal and the article by Veselin Beševliev (pp. 204–205, 208), it should be emphasised that there are studies that more precisely discuss the roads of that time, especially when it comes to the southern slopes of eastern Stara Planina<sup>11</sup> and the mountain passes there. Similarly, the most detailed description of the famous *Via Militaris* is offered by two now-classic studies<sup>12</sup>, which cannot be replaced even by the good article by Klaus Belke (p. 207, fn. 27).

In the book, Dr. Meško used 47 linguistically diverse source editions and 380 studies by contemporary scholars, among which those published in Western European languages – English, French and German – predominate (182, 84 and 36 publications respectively). Also richly represented is the Modern-Greek literature (43 publications), less so the Russian and Italian works (8 and 4 publications respectively). Less well represented, however, are those reporting in languages that do not belong to the group of so-called congress' ones (Slovak, Czech, Polish, Bulgarian, Serbian and Romanian – 9, 4, 3, 3, 3 and 1 publications respectively). Of course, the group of sources can also include those studies that present the results of archaeological research, as well as sphragistic and numismatic data. The above proportions are not surprising, as, on the one hand, they reflect the output of contemporary Byzantine studies and the steadily increasing number of studies in English prepared by scholars of different ethnic backgrounds, and, on the other hand, they show that the Applicant himself is professionally prepared according to the classical standards in Byzantine Studies, typical for Western European or Greek education. The only questionable issue is the

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*11<sup>th</sup> century between theory and practice (An outline)*, [in:] *Европейският Югоизток през втората половина на X – началото на XI век. История и култура*, ред. В. Гюзелев, Г. Н. Николов, София 2015, pp. 95–107; M. Salamon, *The Belasitsa Battle or Belasitsa Military Operation?*, [in:] *Европейският Югоизток...*, pp. 108–141; K. Marinow, *Across Haimos: Inconveniences and Dangers in Crossing the Mountains of Bulgaria in the Middle Ages*, "VTU Review: Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences" 2, 2018, no. 1, pp. 11–24.

<sup>9</sup> В. Николов, М. Йорданова, *Планините в България*, София 2002, pp. 28–29, 32.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> Д. Момчилов, *Пътна и селищна система между Източна Стара Планина и „Еркесията“ IV-XIV в. (Върбишки, Ришки и Айтоски проход)* [Road and Settlement System between Eastern Stara Planina and "Erkesiyata" IV-XIV c. (Varbishki, Rishki and Aitoski pass)], Варна 1999; Г. Ковачев, *Българските земи между Източна Стара планина и Странджа през XII–XIV век (историко-археологическо изследване)* [The Bulgarian Lands between Eastern Stara Planina and Strandzha in the 12th–14th centuries (historical-archaeological research)], Велико Търново 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Vide J. K. Jireček, *Die Heerstrasse von Belgrad nach Constantinopel und die Balkanpässe. Eine Historisch-Geographische Studie*, Prag 1877 [reed. Amsterdam 1967]; П. Мутафчиев, *Старият друм през „Траянови врата“* [The Old Road through „Trajan's Gate“], „Списание на Българската академия на науките. Клон Историко-филологичен и Философско-обществен“ 55, 1937, no. 27, pp. 19–148; see also: M. Popović, *Von Budapest nach Istanbul. Die Via Traiana im Spiegel der Reiseliteratur des 14. Bis 16. Jahrhunderts*, Leipzig 2006.

poor use of literature in South Slavic languages, especially if one takes into account the fact that most of the military actions the Author discusses took place in territories that remain the focus of scholars writing in Bulgarian, Croatian, Macedonian or Serbian. However, let us be honest – as far as military issues are concerned, the period of Alexios I's reign is not particularly popular among local scholars writing in the aforementioned languages, which does not mean, however, that there are no works devoted to this topic at all.

To sum up. The comments posted above are, first of all, of a complementary nature, i.e. possible additions to the Author's analyses and in no way affect the fully positive opinion on His academic achievement, which the discussed monograph undoubtedly is. Its strengths are the coherent and well-thought-out conception of the work, the detailed analysis of the sources, accompanied by a reliable use of the rich and varied scholarly literature, with which the Applicant conducts a genuine discussion, but above all the clear, logical and convincing conclusions showing the discussed period of Komnenos' rule as a key period for the Byzantine state in the transition from the crisis caused by the Seljuk invasion and the times of Byzantine empowerment under Komnenoi. The book also brings numerous and important considerations of a military nature, enriching our knowledge of the strategic and tactical solutions applied by the warring sides. Taking all this into account, I strongly conclude that Dr. Marek Meško is a well-formed, experienced and independent historian-Byzantinist, who fully deserves habilitation.

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

1. What was the actual role of the terrain and road network in the armed struggle between the troops of emperor Alexios I Komnenos and the invaders? Did the emperor intentionally exploit the features of the landscape, its facilities or limitations, in his strategy or tactics against the enemies? And if so, did this bring him any real benefits? Please provide example(s).
2. How did the Byzantines view, perceive their enemies – the Normans and the nomads – and did or could this image influence Byzantine diplomacy towards them? Is it possible to notice its influence on the battlefield, e.g. in the way they were treated? Do we have any source information at all in this regard?
3. The Vlachs played their part in Alexios' activities in the northern frontiers of the empire, especially in the Haimos massif. Who were they – ethnic Wallachians or a conglomerate of a diverse pastoral population? Or perhaps both?

## **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: 05 Feb 2025

Signature: