



Looking for Interpreter Zero: (14) The First Crusade & the Byzantine Story

A body of interpreters & translators was active during the reign of Alexios I Komnenos', a ruler open to foreigners and diplomacy.

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"Lord aid Sphenis, patrikios (patrician) and interpreter of the English." [\[1\]](#)

After Alexios I Komnenos (reigned 1081-1118) seized power in Byzantium 1081 he became involved in a series of negotiations, understandings and alliances as he sought to protect his land from depredations and conquest from all sides. His agreements with Normans and Turks in the 1080s can be read as a prelude to his most significant rapprochement: the embassy he sent to Pope Urban II in the spring of 1095 which led to the First Crusade. His manifest openness to foreigners and willingness to engage in the niceties of diplomacy characterised his turbulent reign.

One reason for the Emperor's open-mindedness could well be the fact that he was raised with a Turk – Tatikios - who was the son of one of his father's captives. It may have been felt useful to provide him with some exposure to Turkish as it was expected that he would have contact with Turkish mercenaries later in life. It has even been suggested that for an emperor "not to have to rely on interpreters was obviously important" [\[2\]](#) but that was probably a minor consideration in a land that depended heavily on mercenaries and had a large immigrant community. The need to address foreigners was built into the structures of Byzantium.

There is evidence of a body of interpreters/translators responsible for interpreting at diplomatic meetings and translating correspondence into and out of Greek. Many of them were part of the Office of the Drome, or postal service, which dealt with communications and intelligence. Its top official, the Logothete of the Drome, effectively came to play the role of counsellor or 'prime minister' to the Emperor from the Ninth Century onwards. The service had a complicated organisational chart with interpreters in seventh position on the list of posts, between inspectors and the keeper of the *apokrisiarierion*, or palace for accommodating diplomats.

The evidence of these linguists comes from what might seem to be an improbable source: V Laurent's volume on the lead seals of the central administrative officers of the Empire. This volume gives an account of just some of the countless lead (instead of wax) seals used on correspondence. Two stages were involved: stone moulds were used to produce two-sided blanks made available to those with correspondence to seal. The ends of the string tied around the documents were passed through the channel between the two discs which were then pressed together with a heavy metal punch or *boullaterion* that impressed the sender's device on either side of the flattened seal. These personalised mottoes are often the only traces of Byzantine officials and their many documents. In

Laurent's tome, seals number 467, 468, 469 and 470 are those of interpreters. The inscription on the seal of Number 469 - Christophorus, from the 10th or 11th century - indicates that he was a Bulgarian interpreter. John, the next interpreter listed, lived in the 11th century. It includes a reference to his being 'des Romains'.

La précision finale: des Romains, doit souligner l'appartenance de ce fonctionnaire au bureau central des Affaires étrangères. Elle peut toutefois être purement formelle et quelque peu ostentatoire. Je retiens néanmoins la première hypothèse et vois dans le signataire un interprète de langue romane, latine ou franque, voire italienne." [3]

The Office of the Drome was not the only place where interpreters served. There were others working for the imperial army or guards where there were Nordic, Turkish or Frank contingents. The fleet also had its interpreters; given the many foreigners serving in the fleet that protected Constantinople and the naval bases in the Adriatic and Ionian Seas, the Droungarios (or Commander of the Fleet) needed help in communicating with his men. [4]

There was admiration for the military tactics of western knights in Byzantium, which is why they were encouraged to enter imperial employment. This was not always successful as "this enthusiasm helped lose them the battle of Manzikert against the Seljuk Turks in 1071". [5] This was not because of interpreter failure: the western fighters deserted. That disaster did not change things and when Alexios came to power he had a system in place that made an appeal for outside help against his enemies seem reasonable. He reached an agreement with a Turkish chieftain, Suleyman (d 1085), who prevented raids and incursions by Turks who could not cross the Drakon River which was set as a boundary. After Suleyman's death the emperor made a deal with Malik-Shah, the Sultan of the Seljuk Empire (reigned 1072-1092). And Robert, Count of Flanders sent five hundred Flemish knights were sent to assist him in battle against Pecheneg nomads who were soundly defeated in 1091.

The death of Malik-Shah in 1092 was a severe blow to Alexios I as he lost an ally who had helped to counter the Turkish threat in Asia Minor; Alexios I made another appeal to the western church for Christian solidarity. There was every incentive to gloss over the split between the eastern and western churches or conspiracies against Alexios I in Constantinople and to focus on the ways in which Urban II and Alexios I Komnenos could rally support for the victims of Muslim incursions into the Holy Lands in the broadest sense of the term. The embassy sent to Pope Urban II in Piacenza in March 1095 emphasised the pagan menace to eastern Christians and to Constantinople itself, the need for unity within the Church and the need to reclaim Jerusalem. The consistency of reports reaching Western Europe about the fate of Eastern Christians has been ascribed to the Emperor's control of that message. [6] When Urban II responded positively to the appeal from Constantinople, the Byzantine Emperor had yet another ally in his quest for power, territorial integrity and the protection of his church.

One of the key sources of information about the Byzantine approach to the First Crusade is the account of Alexios I's life, *The Alexiad*, written by his daughter, Anna Komnene (1083-1153). Book 10 gives an account of the run-up to the First Crusade which indicates that the central bureaucracy and communication services were enlisted in preparation for the vast eastern movement of western Europeans. Every effort was made to guarantee food supplies and keep the peace. Military leaders were instructed to:

Receive the voyagers kindly and to supply them abundantly with provisions gathered from all over along their route; they were to watch over them carefully and shadow their

movements, so that if they saw them making raids of running off to plunder the neighbouring districts they could check them by light skirmishes. These officers were accompanied by interpreters who understood the Latin language; their duty was to quell any incipient trouble that might arise.” [7]

Some of the officers could communicate directly with the Crusaders. One of the contingents sailing across the Ionian Sea to Epirus mistook the Byzantine fleet for pirates and launched a crossbow attack on it. The Byzantine commander, Mariano Maurokatakalon, “speaking in their language, told the Latins there was no need for alarm; her urged them not to fight against fellow Christians.” [8] One of the priests on board proved to be one of the hardest of warriors, firing his bow at Maurokatakalon. When he ran out of arrows, he used a sling-shot and finally resorted to hurling barley cakes at his enemy. This unpriestly behaviour demonstrated - according to Anna Komnene - that “the Latin customs with respect to priest, differ from ours ... the barbarian Latin will at the same times handle sacred objects, fasten a shield onto his left arm and grasp a spear in his right.”[9]

While most of the journeys from East to West went smoothly, the Empire’s communication networks were vital to the operation. It is estimated that some fifty to seventy thousand fighting men reached Asia Minor in 1096-7. As we have seen, *The Alexiad* does always give a flattering account of the voyagers who flowed into Constantinople. Whatever their religious commitments they were often spoiling for a fight. There are many tales of looting, violence and brutality occurring before the Crusaders even left for Jerusalem, which explains Anna Komnenos’s scepticism as to their motives. Her father, however, played a very cool game as the various contingents streamed into his territory. It is a sign of his command of the situation – and the significance of his gamble for his future – that he made full use of his intelligence gathering throughout the early months of the Crusade. There was one incident where a nobleman had the temerity to perch on the imperial throne. He was made to stand by Count Baldwin who cautioned that he should show respect for local custom. The nobleman allowed himself some derogatory comments about what a peasant Alexios I was.

The Emperor saw his lips moving and calling one of the interpreters who understood the language asked what he had said. Being told the words he made no comment to the man at the time. However, when they were all taking their leave of him, he sent for the arrogant, impudent fellow and asked who he was, where he came from and what his ancestry was.” [10]

He then gave him some advice about how best to fight the Turks. The Crusaders had many a battle on their hands before they reached Jerusalem and, as we shall see, the Emperor had every interest in following their progress closely.

Access all chapters of this series [here](#).

Footnotes

[1] Zacos, G. Byzantine Lead Seals II. 1984. Compiled and edited by Nesbitt, J. Berne. No. 706

[2] Brand, C.M.1989. The Turkish Element in Byzantium, Eleventh-Twelfth Centuries. Dumbarton Oaks Papers, Vol 43 pp. 1-25, p.15

[3] Laurent, V. 1981. Le Corpus des Sceaux de l’Empire Byzantin. Editions du CNRS. Paris p.230. The last piece of information: of the Romans, must show that he worked for the main office in Foreign Affairs. It might be just *pro forma* and a little self-serving. I would subscribe to the first hypothesis and see the seal-holder as an interpreter of a Romance language, Latin, Frankish or

Italian. (*My translation.*)

[4] Laurent. p.540

[5] Tyerman, C. 2006. God's War: A New History of the Crusades. Allen Lane. London. p.82

[6] Frankopan, P. p.90

[7] Sewter, E.R.A (Translator), Frankopan, P. (Reviser), 2009. Anna Komnene, The Alexiad. Penguin Classics, p276

[8] *ibid.* p.282

[9] *ibid.* p.283

[10] *ibid.* p.291

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