



Summary :

A Byzantine general who was praised for his victories over the Turcomanic tribes in Asia Minor during the years 1293-1295. After a failed attempt to usurp the throne in 1295, he was blinded, and his name briefly disappears from historical sources. Though blind and of an old age, during the third and fourth decade of the 14th century he commanded successfully the Byzantine army in the battles for Philadelphia and for Lesvos.

Other Names

Alexios Doukas

Date and Place of Birth

c. 1270

Main Role

military officer

1. Life

Alexios was the most prominent member of the Philanthropenos family, which appeared in Byzantium in the middle of the 13th century and was related to many other notable families. He took the surname of his mother, to honour his uncle, the excellent general Alexios Doukas Philanthropenos. Alexios Philanthropenos was the second son of the **protovestiarios** Michael [Tarchaneiotes](#) and of a female descendant of the family of the Philanthropenos, whose name is unknown. The existing sources do not allow to determine when exactly Alexios Philanthropenos was born. However, all evidence concerning his life and career taken into consideration, we are allowed to assume that he was born around 1270.¹ He was married to Theodora Akropolitissa, daughter of [Constantine Akropolitis](#) and granddaughter of the historian and politician [George Akropolitis](#).

2. A young general

The career of Alexios Philanthropenos was rather unusual and full of sudden changes. In short, all main facts of his life could be divided into two main chronological periods: the beginnings of the last decade of the 13th century and the third and fourth decades of the 14th century.

Alexios Philanthropenos's field of action was mainly the western Asia Minor, which in late 13th and early 14th century was still under Byzantine rule, and where the Byzantine army had to engage into an uncertain struggle against the Ottomans. The emperor [Andronikos II Palaiologos](#) (1282-1328) had resided in that particular region from 1290 until 1293;² by his presence and by strengthening the fortifications, he sought to encourage the Byzantine population, who was gradually abandoning that region of Asia Minor seeking refuge in the European provinces, discouraged by the constant enemy raids. On his departure in 1293, he left the young and capable general Alexios Philanthropenos, after having granted him the title of the **doukas** of the [theme of Thrakesion](#) as well as the title of **pinkernes**,³ a rather high office (according to the pseudo-Kodinos catalogue, it ranked 15th among of the titles of the court).⁴ With the authorization of the supreme commander of the army of the East, Alexios had to fight against the Ottomans, who had recently started plundering the valley of the river Maiandros area. Cavalry from Crete served as Philanthropenos's shock troops.

The hopes of not only the emperor and his court but also of the Byzantine population was placed on the young general. Shortly after, news of great victories of the Byzantine army began to arrive from the valley of Maiandros. Such success deeply impressed the Ottomans, and Alexios Philanthropenos became the terror of theirs. [Maximos Planoudes](#) notes that in those days one needed more money to buy a sheep than to buy a Muslim prisoner.⁵ Inspired by the victories of Philanthropenos, the poet Manuel Philes devoted



one of his poems to praise the general's achievements.⁶ The military victories of the Byzantines forced the Ottomans to enter a treaty with the Byzantines. Since Philanthropenos proposed a fair settlement, the Turks recognized the supreme authority of the Byzantine emperor. Moreover, a battalion of Turkmen would serve trustfully in the Byzantine army. That was the peak of the rapid career of Alexios Philanthropenos.

3. The failed attempt of usurpation

"There is a time of war and a time of peace", wrote Maximos Planoudes to his young friend. "You shone in both of them".⁷ These were times –it was in 1295- when praises and recognition arrived from all sides and there was no personality more famous in the empire than Alexios Philanthropenos. Then came the abrupt and tragic fall.

In the autumn of 1295, a rumour that spread across the empire had it that Alexios Philanthropenos revolted against the emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos (1282-1328). The conditions under which this revolt had broken out remain partly obscure. The discontent of the rest of the provinces of Asia Minor concerning the policy of the government of Constantinople should well have played an important role in this movement. Supported by his soldiers as well as by the local population, who was possessed by a certain local patriotism, Alexios Philanthropenos gained rather easily full control of the regions that had been his jurisdiction. In that region the name of the emperor was not mentioned anymore, as reported by [George Pachymeres](#), "unless as a joke".⁸ Some of the monasteries ("many in number and the biggest ones", notes Pachymeres)⁹ would commemorate the name of the young general instead of the name of the emperor in the mass. This information might also suggest that the *pinkernes* also enjoyed, to a certain degree, the support of the [arseniatai](#).

The young usurper could count on the appreciation, if not on the open support, of the population not only of Asia Minor but even of the rest of the Empire too. Andronikos II had every reason to be afraid. However, the lack of decisiveness of the young general prevailed, giving the emperor the time to react. Andronikos II played a double diplomatic game. Through an emissary the emperor offered the insurgent the title of **caesar** and his forgiveness, while at the same time he was preparing to get rid of this dangerous adversary once and for all.

On Christmas of 1295 the young general Alexios Philanthropenos was arrested and binded by the soldiers of Andronikos II Palaiologos. A contemporary account compiled among the so-called *Short Chronicles*, briefly informs us that "in the year 6805 from the creation of the world the *pinkernes* was blinded".¹⁰ Due to his physical disability, that would be the point where his career would have been expected to end.

4. The achievements of the blind old man

4.1. Philadelphia

During the next thirty years, no mention of Alexios Philanthropenos can be traced in historical sources. In 1323, however, the patriarch Isaiah (1323-1332), who had just risen to his throne, advised Andronikos II to send the blind and almost forgotten general to Asia Minor. During the third decade of the 14th century the position of Byzantium in this region was much worse than in 1295. The city of [Philadelphia](#) was already for a long period under siege by the Ottomans and everything pointed to disaster. In this desperate situation Andronikos II Palaiologos (1282-1328) resorted to rather desperate measures. Accepting the patriarch's advice, he sent Alexios Philanthropenos to the area.

This awkward mission had an impressively successful outcome. The glorious general saved the Byzantine city of [Lydia](#) without money and without enough army, thanks to the authority he still preserved and to the fact that amongst the Ottomans he had become a legendary figure. The hearing of Alexios' name was enough for his foes to abandon the siege of Philadelphia. [Nikephoros Gregoras](#), for whom this achievement of Philanthropenos was equal to a miracle, reports the later prosperity of the city. "One **medimnos** of wheat cost one drachma in maximum".¹¹ In 1324 Alexios Philanthropenos resumed command of the city, a position which he held



until 1327.

4.2. Lesvos

But neither this was the end of the glorious general's career. Meanwhile Andronikos II Palaiologos had been forced to abdicate his throne after a long civil war and in 1328 the power was taken by his grandson, [Andronikos III](#) (1328-1341). His rise to the throne was accompanied by the rise of a new generation of Byzantine aristocrats lead by John Kantakouzenos, the future emperor (1347/1354-1355), a generation which was nevertheless able to appreciate the authority and the abilities of Philanthropenos, though the former had achieved his greatest victories when the young emperor and Kantakouzenos were not even born (1293-1295). Andronikos III Palaiologos turned to the old general after the reconquest of the island of [Lesvos](#). When Lesvos was captured by Domenico Cattaneo, the [Genoese](#) lord of [Phokaia](#) of Asia Minor, a fleet was sent from Constantinople, which in winter 1336, after a long siege, captured the island except of its main fortress, Mytilene. Then Andronikos III sent Alexios Philanthropenos, already in an advanced age, to the island, as the commander who would accomplish the task.

Once again the blind old man was to fulfil the expectations of the emperor in full terms and by capturing the city of Mytilene turned the campaign of the Aegean into a real triumph for the Byzantine army. There is no doubt that in these victories, in Philadelphia during the third and at Lesbos during the fourth decade of the 14th c., took great satisfaction this marvellous general, who was called by his contemporaries "Belissarius of the Palaiologean era".¹²

The latest information on Alexios Philanthropenos relates to the reconquest of Mytilene and the title of the ruler of Lesvos that he was offered subsequently. Some letters of Nikephoros Gregoras to Alexios, from the fifth decade of the 14th century, have also been preserved.¹³ The date of his death remains uncertain, though, and it is possible that he did not survive to see the outbreak of the new civil war, in 1341.

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1. Polemis, D., *The Doukai. A Contribution to the Byzantine Prosopography* (London 1968), no. 171, p. 169.
 2. Laiou, A., *Constantinople and the Latins. The Foreign Policy of Andronicus II, 1282-1328* (Cambridge Mass. 1972) p. 76-84.
 3. Failler, A. (ed), *Georges Pachymérés relations historiques*, III (CSHB 24.3, Paris 1999), p. 237. Bekker, I. - Schopen, L. (ed.), *Nicephori Gregorae Byzantina Historia*, I (CSHB, Bonnae 1829), p. 195.
 4. *Pseudo-Kodinos. Traité des offices*, ed. J. Verpeaux, (Paris 1966) p. 137.
 5. *Maximi monachi Planoudis epistulae*, ed. Leone, P.A.M. (Amsterdam 1991), no. 78, p. 118-120.
 6. *Manuelis Philae Carmina, I*, ed. Miller, E. (Paris 1855), no. LXXXV, p. 262-264.
 7. On Planudes' epistles to Alexios Philanthropenos, see Laiou, A., *Constantinople and the Latins. The Foreign Policy of Andronicus II, 1282-1328* (Cambridge Mass. 1972) p. 82. In Epistle no. 78, Planudes specifically commends the general's valour, see *Maximi monachi Planoudis epistulae*, ed. Leone, P.A.M. (Amsterdam 1991), no. 78, 23-29
 8. Failler, A., (ed), *Georges Pachymérés relations historiques*, III (CSHB 24.3, Paris 1999), p. 245.
 9. Failler, A., (ed), *Georges Pachymérés relations historiques*, III (CSHB 24.3, Paris 1999), p. 245.
 10. Schreiner, P. (ed.) *Die byzantinische Kleinchroniken, I* (Wien 1975) p. 194, no. 4.



11. Bekker, I. - Schopen, L. (ed.), *Nicephori Gregorae Byzantina Historia*, I (CSHB, Bonnae 1829), p. 362.
12. Bakker, W.F. – van Gemert, A.F., *Ιστορία του Βελισσαρίου* (Αθήνα 1988), p. 120. The exceptional skills of Philanthropenos are also stressed by Nikephorus Gregoras, who says that the general combined virtue and boldness, the first as a natural attribute and the second thanks to his experience and practice for many years, see Bekker, I. - Schopen, L. (ed.), *Nicephori Gregorae Byzantina Historia*, I (CSHB, Bonnae 1829), p. 535.
13. *Nicephori Gregorae Epistulae II. Epistulas continens*, ed. Leone, P.A.M. (Matino 1982), nos. 9, 72, 76, 84, 107, 127.

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Glossary :

	caesar
In the Roman Empire the title of Caesar was given to the Emperor. From the reign of Diocletian (284-305) on this title was conferred on the young co-emperor. This was also the highest title on the hierarchy of the Byzantine court. In the 8th c. the title of Caesar was usually given to the successor of the throne. In the late 11th c. this office was downgraded and from the 14th c. on it was mainly conferred on foreign princes.	
	doukas (lat. dux)
Antiquity: Roman military commander who, in some provinces, combined military and civil functions. Buzantium: a higher military officer. From the second half of the 10th c. the title indicates the military comander of a larger district. After the 12th c., doukes were called the governors of small themes.	
	medimnos
A unit of capacity in Antiquity and Byzantium, used especially for grain and cereals.	
	pinkernes
[also pikernes or epikernes, possibly from the Latin pincerna, a word deriving from the greek verb <i>epikerannymi</i> , meaning to	



mix (wine)). Cup-bearer of the palace. Official at the personal service of the emperor. In the Late Byzantine years, the pinkernes was a very honorary title, while in the 14th century it was awarded to very important figures, such as Alexios Philanthropenos.

protovestiarios

(and protovestiaries) Honorary title given to high-ranking officials and future emperors during this period. The protovestiarios was originally responsible for the imperial wardrobe, but in the 9th-11th centuries the holders of the title could command an army or conduct negotiations with foreign states.

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Quotations

Alexios Philanthropenos gains the Ottomans' respect in Asia Minor

ἔδοξε τοίνυν ἐν ὀλίγῳ τῷ χρόνῳ μέγας γενέσθαι κατὰ τὰς μάχας τῶν Τούρκων ὁ Φιλανθρωπηνός, καθάπερ ὕλης ἐπιτυχούσα φλόξ ἰσχυρά· ἦν γὰρ καὶ φιλοδωρότατος ὁ ἀνὴρ καὶ ἄλλως κοινωνικὸν τὸ ἦθος τοῖς ὑπ' αὐτὸν παρεχόμενος· ὁ δὲ κράτιστον ἐφόδιον τοῖς στρατηγούσιν εἰς νίκας καὶ τρόπαια...
καὶ διωκόμενοι μὲν ἐκεῖθεν παρὰ τῶν Σκυθῶν οἱ Τούρκοι, ἀνατρεπόμενοι δ' ἐντεῦθεν παρὰ τοῦ πιγκέρνη, τὴν κουφοτέρην ἐξ ἀνάγκης οἱ πλείους τῶν ὁμορούντων ἐβάδιζον καὶ ἅμα γυναιξί τε καὶ τέκνοις ἠυτομόλουν πρὸς τὸν πιγκέρνην, οὐ τοσοῦτον δεδιότες τοὺς κατὰ νῶτων κειμένους ἐχθροὺς, ὅσον οἶά τισιν ἰϋγξιν ἐλκόμενοι ταῖς τοῦ πιγκέρνη δεξιώσεσι καὶ φιλοδωραῖς· ὡς ἐν βραχεῖ μεγάλην κὰκ τούτων γενέσθαι μοῖραν τῷ τούτου στρατῷ.

Bekker, I. – Schopen, L. (επιμ.), *Nicephori Gregorae historiae Byzantinae*, I (CSHB, Bonn 1829), 196.

Philanthropenos is persuaded to revolt again Andronikos II

ἐπεὶ γε μὴν ἠκηκόεισαν καὶ αὐτοὶ τὰ περὶ τοῦ πιγκέρνη ψιθυριζόμενα, φόρτον εἰσάγουσι λογισμῶν χαλεπῶν ἐς τὴν καρδίαν τάνδρος, οὐχ ὡς ἦν τὰ τοῦ πράγματος ἀπαγγέλλοντες, ἀλλ' οἷον ἐκ μυίας δημιουργοῦντες ἐλέφαντα, καὶ ἐπὶ τούτοις πείθειν ἐπιχειροῦσι τάχιστα πρὸς ἀποστασίαν χωρῆσαι, πρὶν παθεῖν ἂν πρὸ βραχέος οἱ δυστυχεῖς πεπόνθασιν ἄνδρες ἐκεῖνοι, τοὺς περὶ τὸν Στρατηγόπουλον λέγω καὶ τὸν Πορφυρογέννητον. (Ε) Ταῦτα πρὸς ταραχὴν ἐξιστῶσι τὸν ἄνδρα καὶ ὥσπερ εἰς μεταίχιμον φέρουσι λογισμῶν ἀμφιβόλων, ἐκατέρωθεν ἄλλα ἐπ' ἄλλοις συχνὰ ἐπαντλούντων τὰ τοῦ τοιοῦδε κλύδωνος κύματα... ἀλλὰ μετὰ πολλὰς τῶν λογισμῶν τὰς παλαιστράς νικῶσιν οἱ τὰ τῆς ἀποστασίας ὑποτιθέμενοι· καὶ σιωπὴν ἐπὶ τοῦ στρατοῦ τῆς τῶν



βασιλικῶν ὀνομάτων εὐφημίας ὁ πιγκέρνης προστάττει τὰ πρῶτα.

Bekker, I. – Schopen, L. (επιμ.), *Nicephori Gregorae historiae Byzantinae*, I (CSHB, Bonn 1829), 197-198.

Maximus Planudes on Alexios Philanthropenos's valour

...καὶ σὺ δὴ γε μὴ παρ' ἐκείνοις ἕα κείσθαι μάχης καιρὸς καὶ εἰρήνης, ὡς ἤνικα μὲν ἂν βούλωνται πολεμεῖν, ἤνικα δ' ἂν αὐτοῖς βέλτιον εἶναι δοκῆ σπένδεσθαι. ἀλλὰ σὸς ὁ καιρὸς ἔστω καὶ ἀμφοτέρων ἢ μᾶλλον θατέρου μόνου τοῦ πολεμεῖν. δῆλον δὲ ὅτι καὶ τοῦ νικᾶν (καὶ τοῦτο γὰρ ἀεὶ σόν), σπονδὰς δὲ τὰς ἐκ βαρβάρων ἥκιστα πάντων προσίεσθαι.

Leone, P.A.M. (επιμ.), *Maximi monachi Planoudis epistulae* (Hakker 1991), epistle no. 78, 23-29

Chronological Table

1293-1295: Alexios Philanthropenos governor in Asia Minor

1295: Unsuccessful attempt of Alexios to usurp power

1324 - c. 1327: Alexios becomes commander of Philadelphia

1335-1336/7: Alexios becomes governor in Lesbos