



Summary :

Founder of the dynasty of the Grand Komnenoi and first Emperor of Trebizond. Together with his brother, David Komnenos, and supported by the queen of Georgia, Tamar, they captured Trebizond effortlessly in 1204. He was then proclaimed emperor of the new-founded state with this Pontic city as its capital. He remained in power until his death, on the Sunday of Orthodoxy of 1222.

Date and Place of Birth

1182, Constantinople

Date and Place of Death

Sunday of Orthodoxy 1222, Trebizond

Main Role

emperor

1. Biography

Alexios I was born in Constantinople in 1182. He was the eldest son of **sebastokrator** Manuel Komnenos, grandson of the Byzantine Emperor [Andronikos I Komnenos](#) (1183-1185) and brother of [David Komnenos](#), a **strategos** and co founder of the [Empire of Trebizond](#). He had two children: a daughter, who married the subsequent emperor of Trebizond, [Andronikos I Grand Komnenos](#), and a son, John, who ascended the throne in 1235.

In 1185, after the revolt of the 12th September against Andronikos I,¹ Alexios and David escaped to Iberia, in the court of their aunt and queen of Georgia, Tamar.² There is no information about the life and activity of the two brothers during the years they spent in Iberia. They reemerge in [1204](#): in late March or early April 1204, in charge of the Iberian forces granted by Queen Tamar,³ they recaptured [the city of Trebizond](#) without meeting resistance.⁴ Alexios was proclaimed emperor, while David was appointed **strategos** and undertook to expand the newly founded state, with Trebizond as its capital, to the west. However, the ultimate purpose of Alexios was the ascension to the imperial throne of Constantinople, which led to his immediate and long-term conflict with the emperor of Nicaea, [Theodore I Laskaris](#) (1204-1222), and his aspirations. Alexios died on the Sunday of Orthodoxy (the first Synday after the Lent) of 1222.

2. External Policy

While David Komnenos was expanding the empire to the west, Alexios defeated the Seljuks and recaptured [Amisos](#), [Sinope](#), Oinaion and Chalybia. In 1206, he successfully confronted the forces of the [sultan of Ikonio](#), Kay-Khusraw I (1192-1197, 1204/5-1211), who had turned against Trebizond, and defended the independence of his empire.⁵ In 1214, he confronted another Seljuk attack under the leadership of the new sultan of Ikonio, Kay-Kā'ūs I (1211-1220). Fearing that the emperor of Nicaea, Theodore I (1204-1222), would expand his dominion over the region, the sultan turned to the major port of Sinope on the Black Sea and besieged it. Alexios did not manage to repel the Seljuk forces and lost Sinope on the 2nd of November of the same year, while he was captured himself. He was released after a treaty signed between the two sides, according to which the Empire of Trebizond would pay tribute to the sultanate. At that time the empire extended from the east of Sinope to the region of mythical Colchis.

3. Political Rivalry between Nicaea and Trebizond

Alexios and his brother, David, aimed to create an independent territory, which would allow them to later assert their legal rights, as descendants of the [Komnenoi](#), to the throne of Constantinople. These aspirations were implied by the addition of the epithet "Grand" to the surname of Alexios, which indicates their descent from the imperial lineage of the Komnenoi, as well as his proclamation as



emperor under the title "faithful king and emperor of the Romans", used by the Byzantine emperors. In this way, the Komnenoi established their power in the region of Trebizond, while they also expanded their state to [Paphlagonia](#) and the western coasts of the Black Sea. However, this expansion and the pretension to the throne of Constantinople caused their conflict with Theodore I Laskaris (1204-1222), who was also proclaimed "king of the Romans" in the same period in the state of [Nicaea](#).⁶ The victory of Theodore Laskaris over the forces of David in Paphlagonia in 1207 cancelled the plans of the Grand Komnenoi, while when the emperor of Nicaea, [Michael VIII Palaiologos](#), later [restored the empire in Constantinople](#) (1261), they had to permanently abandon the title and their claims to the throne of Constantinople.⁷

4. Ecclesiastical Policy

Alexios and David aimed to create an autonomous and autocephalous Church of Trebizond. In this framework, they did not recognise the jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Nicaea, Manuel I, and the Patriarchal Synod over matters concerning the Church of Trebizond and, in particular, the appointment of the bishops of [Amastris](#), Bosphorus, Cherson and Sougdouphoula, who were their opponents. What is more, David ordered that they be deposed and expelled. Their attitude and actions caused reaction even from the members of the clergy of Trebizond, whom they illegally attempted to appoint to senior offices, without the approval of the Patriarchate of Nicaea. The unavoidable rupture between the Churches, which lasted between 1212 and 1214, was partly settled in 1260-1261 by the emperor of Nicaea, Michael VIII Palaiologos (1259-1282), and the emperor of Trebizond, Manuel I, after the archbishopric of Trebizond recognised, in January 1260, the authority of the Patriarch of Nicaea, Nikephoros II.⁸

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1. This revolution started from the feudalistic aristocracy which grew in power and, under the dynasty of the Angelus family, managed to further increase it. A member of the family, Isaac II, assumed the throne, while Andronikos I Komnenos was terribly killed by the mob of Constantinople and his son, Manuel Komnenos, was blinded. See Σαββίδης, Γ.Κ.Α., *Βυζαντινά στασιαστικά κινήματα στα Δωδεκάνησα και στη Μικρά Ασία 1189-σ.1240 μ.Χ.* (Athens 1987), p. 262.
 2. There are different views about the year they escaped to Georgia. According to O. Lampsidis (Λαμπιδής), they left Constantinople shortly after the fall of the city to the knights of the fourth Crusade in July 1203, and they founded the Empire of Trebizond in early April of the following year. See Λαμπιδής, Ο., 'Περί την ίδρυση του κράτους των Μεγάλων Κομνηνών', *Αρχαίον Πόντου* 31 (1971-1972), p. 17. On the other hand, M. Kursanskis argues that they left Constantinople already in 1201. See Kursanskis, M., 'Autour des sources georgiennes de la fondation de l'empire de Trebizonde', *Αρχαίον Πόντου* 30 (1970-1971), pp. 107-115.
 3. The decisive role of the queen of Georgia, Tamar, in the detachment of Trebizond from the territory of the Byzantine Empire led some scholars to assume that the newly established state was subjected to the Kingdom of Georgia, at least in the first years of its existence, in the 13th century. See Vasiliev, A., 'The foundation of the Empire of Trebizond 1204-1222', *Speculum* 11 (1936), pp. 3-37, and Ostrogorsky, G., *Ιστορία του Βυζαντινού κράτους* 3 (Athens 1997), pp. 102, 305. As for the peaceful surrender of Trebizond to the Komnenoi by the doux Nikephoros Palaiologos, who had been assigned as toparch (local governor) by emperor Manuel I Komnenos in 1165, see Σαββίδης, Γ.Κ.Α., *Βυζαντινά στασιαστικά κινήματα στα Δωδεκάνησα και στη Μικρά Ασία 1189-σ.1240 μ.Χ.* (Athens 1987), p. 265.
 4. The local commander doux Nikephoros Palaiologos, who had become the toparch (local governor) of Trebizond in 1165, did not put up an effective defence against the more powerful Georgian forces. See Σαββίδης, Γ.Κ.Α., *Βυζαντινά στασιαστικά κινήματα στα Δωδεκάνησα και στη Μικρά Ασία 1189-σ.1240 μ.Χ.* (Athens 1987), pp. 264-265.
 5. This information is provided by Ibn al-Athir, although no Byzantine or Western source mentions it. See Σαββίδης, Γ.Κ.Α., *Βυζαντινά στασιαστικά κινήματα στα Δωδεκάνησα και στη Μικρά Ασία 1189-σ.1240 μ.Χ.* (Athens 1987), p. 271.
 6. According to Sabbidis (Σαββίδης), the citizens of Constantinople, who were under the Frankish dominion, put David on an equal footing with Theodore Laskaris. See Σαββίδης, Γ.Κ.Α., *Βυζαντινά στασιαστικά κινήματα στα Δωδεκάνησα και στη Μικρά Ασία 1189-σ.1240 μ.Χ.* (Athens 1987), p. 265.
 7. In 1282, following negotiations between the emperor of Trebizond, John II (1280-1297?) and the Byzantine emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos (1259-1282), the title of the king of the Romans was abolished and replaced with that of the 'faithful king and emperor of the entire East, Iberia and Perateia',



which partially connects the dynasty of the Grand Komnenoi with the geography and the cultural and political tradition of the region. See Ahrweiler-Γλύκατζη, E., 'Η αυτοκρατορία της Τραπεζούντος', *ΙΕΕ Θ'* (Athens 1980), p. 326.

8. According to the clauses of the agreement, the metropolitan of Trebizond is elected and consecrated in Trebizond on condition that the representative of the Patriarch agrees. See Λαμψίδης, Ο., 'Ο ανταγωνισμός μεταξύ των κρατών της Νίκαιας και των Μεγάλων Κομνηνών διά την κληρονομία της Βυζαντινής ιδέας', *Αρχείον Πόντου* 34 (1977-1978), p. 16.

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Glossary :

	sebastokrator
Honorary title of the Byzantine court. The office was established in 1081 by Alexios I Komnenos for his elder brother Isaac, equivalent to the one of regent	
	strategos ("general")
During the Roman period his duties were mainly political. Office of the Byzantine state's provincial administration. At first the title was given to the military and political administrator of the themes, namely of the big geographic and administrative unities of the Byzantine empire. Gradually the title lost its power and, already in the 11th century, strategoi were turned to simple commanders of military units, responsible for the defence of a region.	

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Chronological Table

1182: Alexios I Grand Komnenos is born.

1185: After the revolt of the 12th September against Andronikos I, Alexios I escapes to Iberia.

March-April 1204: Trebizond is captured and the trapezuntine empire is founded. Alexios I is proclaimed emperor. He expands his dominion over Amisos, Simope, Oinaion and Chalybia.

1206: Alexios I confronts the Seljuk forces of Ikonio.

1214: The Seljuks of Ikonio besiege Sinope. Alexios I is captured.

Orthodox Sunday 1222: Death of Alexios I