

Irene Doukaina

Irene Doukaina or **Ducaena** (Greek: Ειρήνη Δούκαινα, *Eirēnē Doukaina*; c.1066 – 19 February 1138) was a Byzantine Empress by marriage to the Byzantine emperor Alexios I Komnenos, and the mother of the emperor John II Komnenos and of the historian Anna Komnene.

Contents

Life

- Succession of Alexios
- Empress
- Empress Dowager

In literature

Children

Sources

Irene Doukaina	
	
	
	
	
Born	c. 1066 <div>Constantinople</div>
Died	February 19, 1138
Noble family	Doukas
Spouse(s)	Alexios I Komnenos
Father	Andronikos Doukas
Mother	Maria of Bulgaria

Irene Doukaina



Lead seal of Irene

Life

Irene was born in 1066 to Andronikos Doukas and Maria of Bulgaria, granddaughter of Ivan Vladislav of Bulgaria. Andronikos was a nephew of Emperor Constantine X and a cousin of Michael VII.

Succession of Alexios

Irene married Alexios in 1078, when she was still eleven years old. For this reason the Doukas family supported Alexios in 1081, when a struggle for the throne erupted after the abdication of Nikephoros III Botaneiates. Alexios' mother, Anna Dalassene, a lifelong enemy of the Doukas family, pressured her son to divorce the young Irene and marry Maria of Alania, the former wife of both Michael VII and Nikephoros III. Irene was in fact barred from the coronation ceremony, but the Doukas family convinced the Patriarch of Constantinople, Kosmas I, to crown her as well, which he did one week later. Anna Dalassene consented to this but forced Kosmas to resign immediately afterwards; he was succeeded by Eustratios Garidas.

Empress

Alexios' mother Anna continued to live in the imperial palace and to meddle in her son's affairs until her death 20 years later; Maria of Alania may have also lived in the palace, and there were rumours that Alexios carried on an affair with her. Anna Komnene denied this, although she herself was not born until December 1, 1083, two years later.

Anna may have been whitewashing her family history; she has nothing but praise for both of her parents. She describes her mother in great detail:

"She stood upright like some young sapling, erect and evergreen, all her limbs and the other parts of her body absolutely symmetrical and in harmony one with another. With her lovely appearance and charming voice she never ceased to fascinate all who saw and heard her. Her face shone with the soft light of the moon; it was not the completely round face of an Assyrian woman, nor long, like the face of a Scyth, but just slightly oval in shape. There were rose blossoms on her cheeks, visible a long way off. Her light-blue eyes were both gay and stern: their charm and beauty attracted, but the fear they caused so dazzled the bystander that he could neither look nor turn away...Generally she accompanied her words with graceful gestures, her hands bare to the wrists, and you would say it was ivory turned by some craftsman into the form of fingers and hand. The pupils of her eyes, with the brilliant blue of deep waves, recalled a calm, still sea, while the white surrounding them shone by contrast, so that the whole eye acquired a peculiar lustre and a charm which was inexpressible."

It "would not have been so very inappropriate," Anna writes, to say that Irene was "Athena made manifest to the human race, or that she had descended suddenly from the sky in some heavenly glory and unapproachable splendour."

Irene was shy and preferred not to appear in public, although she was forceful and severe when acting officially as empress (*basileia*). She preferred to perform her household duties, and enjoyed reading hagiographic literature and making charitable donations to monks and beggars. Although Alexios may have had Maria as a mistress early in his reign, during the later part of his reign he and Irene were genuinely in love (at least according to their daughter Anna). Irene often accompanied him on his expeditions, including the expedition against Prince Bohemund I of Antioch in 1107 and to the Chersonese in 1112. On these campaigns she acted as a nurse for her husband when he was afflicted with gout in his feet. According to Anna she also acted as a sort of guard, as there were constant conspiracies against Alexios. Alexios' insistence that Irene accompany him on campaigns may suggest that he did not fully trust her enough to leave her in the capital. When she did remain behind in Constantinople, she acted as regent, together with Nikephoros Bryennios, Anna's husband, as a counselor.

Empress Dowager

Irene frequently suggested that Alexios name Nikephoros and Anna as his heirs, over their own younger son John. According to Niketas Choniates, who depicts her more as a nagging shrew than a loving wife, she "...threw her full influence on the side of her daughter Anna and lost no opportunity to calumniate their son John... mocking him as rash, pleasure-loving, and weak in character." Alexios, preferring to create a stable dynasty through his own son, either ignored her, pretended to be busy with other matters, or, at last, lost his temper and chastized her for suggesting such things.

Irene nursed Alexios on his deathbed on 1118, while at the same time still scheming to have Nikephoros and Anna succeed him. Alexios had already promised the throne to John, and when John took his father's signet ring Irene accused him of treachery and theft. When Alexios finally died, she felt genuine grief, and wore the mourning clothes of her daughter Eudokia, whose own husband had died previously. However, she soon conspired with Anna against John, but their plots were unsuccessful and both Irene and Anna were then forced into exile at the monastery of Kecharitomene, which Irene had founded a few years previously. It was not a harsh exile, and Irene lived there in peace, distributing food to the poor and educating young orphan girls. Irene may have inspired the history written by her son-in-law Nikephoros Bryennios and corresponded with or patronized several important literary figures, including Theophylact of Ohrid and Michael Italikos.

In literature

The great modern Greek poet Constantine Cavafy includes a reference to Irene Doukaina in his poem "A Byzantine Nobleman in Exile Composing Verses", which refers to Doukaina as "that viper Irini Doukaina" and that as the cause of the titular nobleman's exile, "may she be cursed". It is a clear reference to her reputation as a plotter.

Children

Irene died on February 19, 1138. With Alexios I Komnenos she had nine children:

- Anna Komnene^[1] (1083–1153)
- Maria Komnene
- John II Komnenos (1087–1143)
- Andronikos Komnenos
- Isaac Komnenos
- Eudokia Komnene
- Theodora Komnene, who married Constantine Angelos. Among their children were John Doukas (who took his grandmother's surname), father of the first two rulers of the Despotate of Epirus, Michael I Komnenos Doukas and Theodore Komnenos Doukas, and Andronikos Doukas Angelos, father of the emperors Isaac II Angelos and Alexios III Angelos.
- Manuel Komnenos
- Zoe Komnene

Sources

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<p>Irene Doukaina Doukas Born: c. 1066 Died: 19 February 1138</p>		
Royal titles		
<p>Preceded by <u>Maria of Alania</u></p>	<p><u>Byzantine Empress consort</u> 1081–1118</p> <p><u>Empress-Mother of the Byzantine Empire</u> 1118–February 19, 1138</p>	<p>Succeeded by <u>Irene of Hungary</u></p>

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