Clearly the Byzantine army was no longer very effective. Few themes were still manned with citizen-soldiers, and the emperor’s army was also largely made up of mercenaries—Turks and Russians, as had long been the case, and increasingly Normans and Franks as well. But the Byzantines were not entirely dependent on armed force; in many instances they turned to diplomacy to confront the new invaders. When Emperor Constantine IX (r.1042–1055) was unable to prevent the Pechenegs from entering the Balkans, he shifted policy, welcoming them, administering baptism, conferring titles, and settling them in depopulated regions. Much the same process took place in Anatolia, where the emperors at times welcomed the Turks to help them fight rival dynatoi. Here the invaders were sometimes also welcomed by Christians who did not adhere to Byzantine orthodoxy; the Monophysites of Armenia were glad to have new Turkic overlords. The Byzantine grip on its territories loosened and its frontiers became nebulous, but Byzantium still stood.

There were changes at the imperial court as well. The model of the “public” emperor ruling alone with the aid of a civil service gave way to a less costly, more “familial” model of government. To be sure, for a time competing dynatoi families swapped the imperial throne. But Alexius I Comnenus (r.1081–1118), a Dalassenus on his mother’s side, managed to bring most of the major families together through a series of marriage alliances. (The Comneni remained on the throne for about a century; see Genealogy 5.2: The Comnenian Dynasty.) Until her death in c.1102, Anna Dalassena, Alexius’s mother, held the reins of government while Alexius occupied himself with military matters. At his revamped court, which he moved to the Blachernai palace area, at the northwestern tip of the city (see Map 4.1 on p. 116), his relatives held the highest positions. Many of them received pronoiai (sing. pronoia), temporary grants of imperial lands that they administered and profited from.

Genealogy 5.2: The Comnenian Dynasty

- Isaac Comnenus (1057–1059)
- John = Anna Dalassena
- Alexius I Comnenus (1081–1118) = Eirene Doukaina
  - Isaac the Sebastokrator
  - Anna Comnena
  - John II Comnenus (1118–1143)
    - Theodora = Constantine Angelos
    - Manuel I Comnenus = Maria of Antioch (1143–1180)
  - Isaac
  - Manuel I Comnenus = Maria of Antioch
  - Alexius II Comnenus (1180–1185) = Agnes-Anna = (2) Andronicus I Comnenus (1183–1185)