

DIVIDING CHRISTENDOM: PERCEPTIONS, STRATEGY, AND GEOPOLITICS IN THE FIRST CRUSADE

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The Byzantine Empire stood on the brink of collapse and the Latin West was torn between Pope and Antipope. In 1095, Pope Urban II called upon Christians to take up the cross and the sword in order to deliver the Holy Sepulcher from the forces of Islam. In the preceding centuries, Arab armies had swept across the Middle East and the Mediterranean, penetrating into Western Europe as far as France, and since then were being driven back bit by bit by Christian forces. Meanwhile, the Byzantine Empire bore the brunt of the Muslim tide from the beginning of its wave of conquest. At the Battle of Manzikert in 1071, the Turks annihilated a Byzantine army, and as a result seized the majority of Asia Minor, a region which would eventually bear their name – Turkey. This was a devastating blow to the Byzantines that sent shockwaves throughout the Empire and all of Christendom.¹

The concept for Pope Urban II's intervention came from contact between the Byzantine Emperor Alexius Comnenus and Robert, Count of Flanders, while the latter was on a pilgrimage. Robert later sent some of his knights to serve Alexius, who was greatly impressed by the martial prowess of the Flemish chevaliers. The Emperor's daughter, Anna Comnena, remarked, "a Frank on horseback is invincible, and would even make a hole in the walls of Babylon."² Alexius expanded his request for assistance in fending off foreign and internal foes from Count Robert, a

¹ Geoffrey Regan, *First Crusader: Byzantium's Holy Wars* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 232.

² Anna Comnena, *The Alexiad*, trans. Elizabeth A.S. Dawes (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd., 1928), 342.

significant but peripheral western lord, to the Pope himself, arguably the most powerful man in western Christendom.³

Alexius was in dire need of this assistance. His strategic position was “not so much desperate as catastrophic,” with external threats from foreign foes and internal threats from factions who were losing faith in his ability to protect the Empire.⁴ He got more than he bargained for. To honor his request, the Pope called for a war to liberate the Holy Land from the Turk, which became a far more ambitious end than the military supplementation that Alexius had requested. Rather than amalgamating western knights and soldiers into Byzantines armies, multitudes of Christians embarked upon the warlike pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The first wave was a rowdy rabble led by the preacher known as Peter the Hermit, followed by the Crusade proper, made up of the hosts of the great lords who embraced the cause and the masses of pilgrim followers. A complex political situation emerged: pious warriors joined forces with ambitious adventurers to reconquer lands neither they nor their forbears had ever held, in a holy war called for by a western Pope at the request of an eastern Emperor who likely viewed most of those lands as out of reach. Additionally, the Latin view of the conflict was fundamentally different from that of their Byzantine coreligionists. The First Crusade was a tremendous success, despite the divisions in the Christian ranks. It was fortuitous timing that they invaded the Near East during a period of deep disunity in the Islamic world.⁵ The clashing designs of the various Christian leaders and their relationships with the Byzantines also contributed to the divided nature of the Crusade. The differing perceptions and strategic goals of the Latin Franks and Byzantine Greeks were the defining factors in the decision to begin the First Crusade and the nature of the alliance that reconquered Asia Minor and the Levant for Christendom.

The nature of Christendom was an open question in the eleventh century. Its western, or Latin, and eastern, or Greek, halves had been drifting apart for centuries. The ghost of the universalist Roman Empire hung over the Christian world, providing a framework for the concept of empire and a source of political authority. The Byzantines, direct heirs of the eastern half of the Roman Empire, perceived their empire as holy and as universal. The Emperor was head of the Church, counting “*Isapostolos*” (“Equal to the Apostles”) among his titles. It was his right

³ Geoffrey Regan, *First Crusader: Byzantium's Holy Wars* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 233.

⁴ Peter Frankopan, *The First Crusade – The Call from the East* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), 70.

⁵ Jonathan Phillips, *Holy Warriors: A Modern History of the Crusades* (New York: Random House, 2009.), 16.

and duty to appoint the Patriarch of Constantinople, as well as the other Patriarchs of the East.⁶ The only great churchman independent of this Caesaropapist system was the Bishop of Rome – the Pope – whose office, over the centuries, had developed far more independent of Imperial control than its eastern counterparts. When the rotting body that was the Western Roman Empire finally collapsed, it was the Church and the Papacy that “saved all that could be saved” of high Roman civilization.⁷

The existence of the Holy Roman Emperor in the West, in reality a German monarch, was a threat to the exclusive status of the eastern Emperor and the religious significance and centrality of Constantinople. In the West until the eleventh century, the Emperor was for all purposes the senior member in the relationship between himself and the Pope.⁸ The Popes, particularly Gregory VII, after whom this “Reform” or “Revolution” is named, asserted their political independence and

sovereignty by targeting a number of church practices, including clerical marriage, simony (the selling of church offices), and lay investiture (the investing of bishops by lay authorities).

The particular issue of lay investiture developed into the “Investiture Controversy,” pitting the Pope against Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV, with Henry going so far as to appoint an Antipope, Guibert of Ravenna, who called himself Clement III. This struggle continued past Gregory’s tenure as pontiff, and was a major factor in Urban II’s reaching out to the Byzantines and his call for holy war. Urban faced an Antipope and the monarchs of Europe, threats to both his moral and political legitimacy. In response he reached out to the East, developing a healthy working relationship with Emperor Alexius.⁹ His alignment with the Byzantines was part of a “wider scheme to establish himself at the heart of Christendom.”¹⁰ To Urban, the Crusade was an assertion of his sovereignty; to Alexius it was a desperate play for survival.

The practice of Byzantine Emperors requesting military assistance from the west was well-established by the time of the First Crusade. Alexius’ request for troops was not unusual, although after the fact some

⁶ Alfred Duggan, *The Story of the Crusades: 1097-1291*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 12-13.

⁷ Hilaire Belloc, *The Crusades: The World's Debate* (Milwaukee, WI: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1937), 11.

⁸ Andrew A. Latham, *Theorizing Medieval Geopolitics – War and World Order in the Age of the Crusades* (New York: Routledge – Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 125.

⁹ Peter Frankopan, *The First Crusade – The Call from the East*, 24.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

western chroniclers exaggerated his requests to fit with the magnitude and devotion of the response.¹¹ The Great Schism of 1054 was not between all Christians of the Latin and Greek Churches. Eastern and Western Christians still saw each other as brethren in faith. Eastern Orthodox bishop Kallistos Ware explains that “the two parts of Christendom were not yet conscious of a great gulf of separation between them, and men on both sides still hoped that the misunderstandings could be cleared up without too much difficulty.”¹² At Antioch, the Crusaders reinstated the Greek Patriarch, who in turn consecrated a *Provençal* as bishop of an eastern see.¹³ Though differences existed, they were not barriers to cooperation. Indeed, for centuries, despite the widening gap between the Latin and Greek Churches, “co-operation between east and west was the norm rather than the exception.”¹⁴

November 27, 1095, was the fateful day on which Urban lit the world on fire in order to save it. The Council of Clermont consisted of more than the calling of the Crusade, but the preaching of the pilgrimage was its lasting effect. Sources differ on exactly what Urban said that day, but taking all of them into account it is clear that he made reference to both the cause of liberating the Holy Land and relieving the pressure on the Byzantine Empire. What made the call to arms at Clermont so important was that it was the culminating point of a fundamental transformation of the geopolitical role of the Latin Church. Clermont and the response to it showed that the Church had evolved into a sovereign actor on the world’s stage. International relations scholar Andrew A. Latham writes that “the Church was decisively reconstituted in both law and the collective imagination of Latin Christendom as a geopolitical actor with a legitimate authority to wage war.”¹⁵ While the Papacy did not directly control the Crusading forces, Latham explains that “states [in this era] typically did not exercise either a clear monopoly over or strict control of the legitimate use of force...the difference between... states and the Church...was one of degree rather than kind.”¹⁶ Additionally, he states that “sovereignty was not uniform in that sometimes it was exercised through intermediary

¹¹ Jonathan Harris, *Byzantium and the Crusades* (New York: Hambledon and London, 2003), 48-49.

¹² Timothy Ware. *The Orthodox Church* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, United Kingdom: Penguin Books Ltd., 1964), 67.

¹³ Alfred Duggan, *The Story of the Crusades: 1097-1291*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 69.

¹⁴ Peter Frankopan, *The First Crusade – The Call from the East*, 17.

¹⁵ Andrew A. Latham, *Theorizing Medieval Geopolitics*, 125.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 117.

powers with substantial autonomy.”¹⁷ Indeed, he says that “for all intents and purposes, the Church was just as much a war-making unit as the kingdoms and lesser principalities that populated the late medieval Latin geopolitical system.”¹⁸

But no kings answered Urban’s call to arms. The west’s monarchs were either fighting the Moors in Spain or at odds with the Pope himself; the French and German monarchs were actually excommunicated. Instead, a collection of the great lords of Europe roused themselves to war. Although many powerful men joined the movement, including Robert Curthose, Duke of Normandy and brother of the King of England, and Hugh of Vermandois, brother of the King of France, the three principal leaders of the Crusade were Godfrey de Bouillon, Bohemond of Taranto, and Raymond of Toulouse.

Godfrey de Bouillon, Duke of Lorraine was the picture-perfect Crusader – devoted, dedicated, and renowned for his skill in single combat. He was also broke. Godfrey’s devotion to the Crusade was widely acclaimed. His brother Baldwin accompanied him, and would prove to be one of the Crusaders seemingly more interested in new titles than in Jerusalem – ironic for a man who once prepared to be a cleric. Historian Edward Gibbon notes, “of the chiefs and soldiers who marched to the holy Sepulcher, I will dare to affirm, that *all* were prompted by the spirit of enthusiasm; the belief of merit, the hope of reward, and the assurance of divine aid. But I am equally persuaded, that in many it was not the sole, that in *some* it was not the leading, principle of action.”¹⁹ Godfrey seemed to have been a more well-intentioned Crusader, and was certainly viewed as such, but he did become King of Jerusalem at the end of the Crusade (although he technically deferred from being called “King,” saying that the only King of Jerusalem was Christ Himself). It is useful to view Baldwin, however, in light of Gibbon’s observation.

Count Bohemond of Taranto, like Baldwin, was one of the more temporally-motivated Crusaders, regardless of whatever religious motivations he may have had. A Norman from Italy, he exemplified the daring, cunning, and determination for which the Normans were so renowned. Count Bohemond was well known to the Byzantines. He spoke multiple languages, and was clean-shaven with short, neat hair, unlike his peers, whom the Byzantines considered barbaric. With his

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁹ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Volume 5 (Project Gutenberg: 2008), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/894/894-h/894-h.htm#link2HCH0046.html> (accessed November 17 2013).

cultivation came ruthlessness. Princess Anna provided a memorable description of him:

“he was a marvel for the eyes to behold, and his reputation was terrifying... [he was] perfectly proportioned...A certain charm hung about this man but was partly marred by a general air of the horrible... His wit was manifold and crafty and able to find a way of escape in every emergency. In conversation he was well informed, and the answers he gave were quite irrefutable. This man who was of such a size and such a character was inferior to the Emperor alone in fortune and eloquence and in other gifts of nature.”²⁰

It should not escape attention that the Normans seized Bari, the Empire’s final foothold in Italy, in 1071, the same year as the disaster of Manzikert. During the 1080’s Bohemond and his father, Robert Guiscard, even struck into Balkans and Greece, the heartland of the Empire. If any single man could be called the sworn enemy of Emperor Alexius Comnenus, it was Count Bohemond. Bohemond was hated and mistrusted, and was rightly believed by many to have been seeking new territory.

Raymond of Toulouse was a wealthy, powerful, and pompous man. He ruled large territories in southern France and prior to the Crusade had gained a strong reputation as a champion of the Christian faith by supporting the *Reconquista* of the Iberian Peninsula. Raymond was thoroughly committed to the Crusade and made sure everyone around him knew it. Pope Urban reached out to him before the Council of Clermont, and Urban’s representative, the warlike Bishop Adhemar of Le Puy, rode with him.²¹ It was by virtue of his reputation that many others joined the Crusade.²² Thus, Raymond saw himself as the expedition’s natural leader.

Command of the Crusading army was always in contention. Alexius keenly comprehended both the passions that had been unleashed by the Crusading movement and the fact that some of the west’s most powerful men were leading it.²³ His grasp of the situation led him to demand oaths of fealty from the Crusader lords. The very fact that he dealt directly with them was remarkable, since meeting any sovereign, let alone the Byzantine Emperor, was rare.²⁴ Alexius intended to impress the

²⁰ Anna Comnena, *The Alexiad*, 347.

²¹ Jonathan Phillips, *Holy Warriors: A Modern History of the Crusades* (New York: Random House, 2009.), 13.

²² Peter Frankopan, *The First Crusade – The Call from the East*, 102.

²³ *Ibid.*, 118.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 128.

Crusaders with his majesty, and he certainly did.²⁵ Some of the lords required persuasion to accept Imperial authority – Godfrey received a hefty sum, and Bohemond received a room packed so full of treasure that he could scarcely step into it.²⁶ The Franks saw the Empire as a viable political framework – “some [Normans even] entered the ranks of the Byzantine ruling class” – so these agreements were not unordinary.²⁷ Alexius’ terms, in general, were that conquered lands would be returned to the Empire, and that he would provide military assistance. That Alexius was able to forge these agreements is a testament to his political adroitness, since the relationship was strained from the start – the Crusaders and the Greeks came to blows frequently on the road to and at the walls of Constantinople, engendering a great deal of mistrust and suspicion.²⁸

Raymond, however, refused to swear fealty, declaring that he only served God. He did end up making agreements with Alexius, but not directly swearing fealty. Bohemond was clever enough to set himself up as the mediator between the two, thus winning over his former (and future) rival for the time being and showing the ranks of the army that he was committed to keeping the pilgrimage moving towards Jerusalem.²⁹ He also distanced himself from Raymond. Bohemond was able to align himself more closely with the northern French faction, which included his Norman kinsmen, whereas Raymond and his southern French chafed with both the northern French and Bohemond’s Italians.

The Crusaders’ expectations of military support from the Emperor were fulfilled in the short term. Robert the Monk, the most popular chronicler of the First Crusade, shares that it was in fact an explicit part of Alexius’ oath to them.³⁰ Alexius actually considered leading the campaign himself. Yet, he decided against doing so, considering the Latins “fickle...unstable...[and] faithless.” He also had far fewer soldiers than

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Anna Comnena, *The Alexiad*, 266.

²⁷ Alexander Kazhdan, “Latins and Franks in Byzantium: Perception and Reality from the Eleventh to the Twelfth Century,” in *The Crusades from the Perspective of Byzantium and the Muslim World*, ed. Angeliki E. Laiou and Roy Parviz Mottahedeh, (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2001), 91.

²⁸ Robert the Monk, *History of the First Crusade – Historia Iherosolimitana*, trans. Carol Sweetenham (Padstow, Cornwall, United Kingdom: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 93-100.

²⁹ Peter Frankopan, *The First Crusade – The Call from the East*, 135.

³⁰ Robert the Monk, *History of the First Crusade*, 100.

they did.³¹ Alexius warned the Crusaders about the Turks' martial

pro prowess and quickly sent them on their way, making sure to keep the various contingents as separate as possible until they had crossed the Bosphorus and were safely away from Constantinople.

There was more behind Alexius' decision to not assume command, however. He alerted Muslims, probably the Egyptian Fatimids, that the Franks were coming and that they had designs on Jerusalem itself. From the account of Ibn al-Qalanisi, it seems that he was using the Crusading army as diplomatic leverage against his Muslim rivals – without their knowledge, of course.³² Thomas Asbridge notes that “By avoiding direct involvement, Alexius was able to maintain a thin façade of impartiality, leaving a door open for diplomacy and détente with [the Turks]...”³³ The Byzantine Emperor acutely recognized his tenuous geopolitical situation and intended on covering his bases.

Once the Crusaders crossed into Asia Minor they laid siege to Nicaea. This engagement was the high point of cooperation between the Greeks and the Franks. Alexius attached a small force under his general Taticius to the Crusading army and provided siege equipment and naval support in order to assist in the siege. After roughly a month, the Byzantine general Manuel Butumites took the city by treachery, and once inside he restricted the Franks' access to the city. Chronicler Guibert de Nogent wrote, “[the Crusaders' anger at this] was not unjust... [since] they carried, ‘the burden and heat of the day.’”³⁴ Nicaea started out as a successful allied operation and ended as a source of friction.

Antioch was the focal point of the campaign for the Byzantines. They had not ruled Jerusalem for centuries, and Alexius did not think it was likely the Crusaders would get close to reaching it. The siege of Antioch was a struggle of epic proportions. The Byzantines provided naval support and supplies via the sea, but that was the last material assistance the Crusaders received from them.

The Turks did not sit idly by during the siege. Kerbogha, the Turkish ruler of Mosul, set out with a large relief force. Upon hearing this news, the Crusader Lord Stephen of Blois abandoned the army. Alexius, meanwhile, was on his way to Antioch with his own army, presumably to help take it and further his legitimate claim to the city. Stephen crossed

³¹ Anna Comnena, *The Alexiad*, 272.

³² Carole Hillenbrand, *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 69.

³³ Thomas Asbridge, *The First Crusade – A New History* (London: The Free Press, 2004), 120

³⁴ Guibert de Nogent, *The Deeds of God through the Franks*, trans. Robert Levine (Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk, United Kingdom: The Boydell Press, 1997), 65.

Alexius on the road, and told him that all hope was lost. His exact reaction to the news is unclear. Robert the Monk tells us that “[he] was extremely upset...his princes and magistrates...were saddened and wept for the death of our men.”³⁵ Guibert de Nogent, whose main source was the anonymous but likely Norman author of the *Gesta Francorum*, describes Alexius as “the traitor” and “the tyrant,” saying that he “was undoubtedly pleased with himself, because he had heard that those whom he hated no less than the Turks had been killed.”³⁶ Whatever actually happened, Alexius’ decision to turn around was the most devastating breach of faith between the Latins and the Greeks. From this point onward the Crusaders felt that they were no longer obliged to pay homage to the Emperor. If he was abandoning them, they would abandon him.

This highlights the very different way in which the Crusaders and the Byzantines perceived the oaths they swore at Constantinople. The Byzantine view of these agreements was that they had essentially amalgamated the Crusaders into the Imperial war effort. The Emperor was the absolute authority and did not bargain for loyalty, even if he might award titles and lands to ensure it. The Crusaders, on the other hand, came from the feudal west, where government was by mutual agreement between lord and vassal. The vassal was subject to the lord, and the lord was responsible for governance and protection. Both were expected to contribute to military campaigns. The agreement could be considered broken if either side failed to live up to its end of the bargain. To the Crusaders, Alexius’ abandonment constituted such a failure. Bohemond’s brother Guy, himself a member of the Byzantine Court, gave Alexius a prescient warning upon receiving the ill news from Stephen of Blois: “If it becomes known that you have permitted profane hands to deliver [the Crusaders] to a horrible death, whom will you find willing to obey your commands, since everyone will judge you unable to defend your own people?”³⁷

Meanwhile at Antioch, Bohemond was scheming to seize the city for himself. He bribed the guard of one of the city’s towers to sneak the Crusaders into the city, but kept the agreement a secret from his peers. First, he tricked Taticius into leaving the army so as to remove the Emperor’s representative, and then he told the other Crusaders that if he could take Antioch, he should be able to keep it. He reasoned that immediate action was necessary or they all would be crushed between the

³⁵ Robert the Monk, *History of the First Crusade*, 159.

³⁶ Guibert de Nogent, *The Deeds of God through the Franks*, 105-106.

³⁷ Nogent, *The Deeds of God through the Franks*, 105.

Turks within Antioch and the advancing forces of Kerbogha. The other lords, barring Raymond, agreed, and Bohemond went ahead with the attack over the city walls, seizing most of the city very quickly. After the nearly miraculous defeat of Kerbogha outside the walls (it had been an extremely precarious situation), Bohemond declared himself Prince of Antioch. Alfred Duggan contends that this particular title “meant that [he] did not regard himself as the vassal of any secular ruler...”³⁸

However, Bohemond’s claim was not universally recognized. Alexius, naturally, was displeased by his old Norman enemy claiming his own principality in lands that he considered his, but he was far enough away to not have much say in the matter. More presently, Raymond offered intense opposition, with his men holing up in one section of the city while Bohemond’s holed up in another. Thomas Asbridge notes that as long as the situation was so, “Bohemond could be nothing more than the city’s partial-ruler or ‘half-prince.’”³⁹ In August of 1098, Bishop Adhemar, long a mediator between the Crusader lords, died. The holy mission that had kept the various Latin factions working together was not the binding force that it had been before, at least not for the Crusade’s leadership.

A year was spent in Antioch debating the city’s future. Together, the lords penned a letter to Pope Urban, inviting him to come to Antioch, take personal command of the Crusade, and lead it to Jerusalem. This was an unrealistic invitation. For political reasons Urban could not leave the west, and besides, it would take far too long for him to even arrive in Antioch. All of them must have realized that, so the letter itself may have been a negotiation tool to ease tensions within Antioch. Supplies were thin, and the Syrian countryside was almost void of anything worth raiding at that point. Finally, the rank and file of the Crusading army stirred their leaders to action, threatening to proceed to the Holy Sepulcher without them. In January of 1099, Raymond set off for Jerusalem, to be followed by the majority of the army. Bohemond ensured the continued logistical support of those who went onward by courting the Italian maritime states as replacements for the now-estranged Byzantines. The seafaring Italian merchants were more than eager to support the holy cause and to make a profit.

The Siege of Jerusalem was a cataclysmic ordeal that ended in the slaughter of many of the Muslims inside the city. Many, if not most, of the Crusaders went home afterwards, their vows fulfilled.⁴⁰ By his

³⁸ Alfred Duggan, *The Story of the Crusades: 1097-1291*, 70.

³⁹ Thomas Asbridge, *The First Crusade – A New History*, 252.

⁴⁰ Jonathan Phillips, *Holy Warriors*, 28.

presumptuousness and pomposity, Raymond had managed to distance himself from his peers so profoundly that he was denied the Crown of Jerusalem, which instead went to the respected and uncontroversial Godfrey. It is worth mentioning that Godfrey was succeeded by his brother Baldwin, who, like Bohemond, stayed in his own newly carved out fief in Syria and missed the Siege of Jerusalem and the decisive Battle of Ascalon that ensured the very survival of the Kingdom. Baldwin and Bohemond were much alike in their quest for personal gain.

The starkly different perceptions of the First Crusade and the rivaling personalities and strategic visions of the Christians involved defined the conflict. Pope Urban and Emperor Alexius reached out to one another in order to secure their own positions in their own realms. For the Emperor, it was a matter of survival. For the Pope, it was a matter of asserting his political sovereignty and religious authority. His status was greatly increased now that the eastern Emperor had begged for his aid. Those who answered the call had liberated Jerusalem from the Muslims, and they had done it on their own. The Emperor's authority was less respected in the West as a result. Likewise, the Byzantines harbored ill will towards the West, viewing the Crusader lords as impudent and faithless violators of sacred oaths to the august Emperor. This breach in the alliance between East and West deepened the divide between the Eastern and Western Churches, a divide which lasts to this day. These divisions shaped the Crusade as a war and defined its lasting effect upon Christendom.