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978-1-107-66909-3 - The Crusaders in the East: A Brief History of the Wars of Islam with the Latins in Syria During the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries

W. B. Stevenson

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION.

LATE in the summer of 1097 an invading army entered Syria. It streamed out in bands from Asia Minor and the gates of the Taurus. The invaders came from Western Europe and were the soldiers of the first "European concert." But their enterprise itself was no novelty. Syria is a stage which waits from century to century for a repetition of the same drama. Its destiny is to be invaded and to be conquered. Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, Roman, Arab, Turk, a long succession of aliens have been the makers of Syrian history. The land is geographically distinct, a natural unity, yet the people have never achieved the unity of a national state. Their central and exposed position invites attack. The mountains which crowd the land from north to south have favoured the growth of petty city-states and kingdoms. And so the Syrians have always been a people ready to perish.

Syria in 1097 was not effectively part of any empire. Its latest conquerors, the Seljuḡ Turks, were engaged in civil war. Every city ruler was prince again for the time. The cities seldom or never change, so that the city-states of the period are those also of older times. Damascus, Jerusalem, Hamath (Ḥama), Tyre, Aleppo (Ḥaleb) and Antioch are among the most important. Disunity was their fatal weakness, in spite of many advantages which they possessed. The defence of fortified towns against attack was even easier then than now. The invaders were far from their nearest base of supplies, and were not themselves united. They had taken the Sign of the Cross as a symbol of that which they had in common, the Latin form of Christianity. But international jealousy and rival ambitions

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marred their concert. They had combined to make a conquest, but without any agreement regarding the future division or government of the country. The leaders were in full earnest only where there was a prospect of making gain for themselves. The joint conquest was a scramble for a share in the spoil. The establishment of rival spheres of government was the natural result. The enterprise lost the character of one which aimed at a systematic conquest.

Yet the success of the Latins was rapid, for the native states were small and disunited. By the end of the century, or a little later, the first invaders, aided by fresh supports from the West, established in Syria four principalities or states. These embraced not only the greater part of Syria, they included portions of Asia Minor and of Mesopotamia. They are called by the names of their capital cities, in order from north to south, Edessa, Antioch, Tripolis and Jerusalem. The political history of these states during the period of their existence is one of constant struggle with the Moslem princes opposed to them. Their original success was due only to the disunion of their enemies. Afterwards they maintained themselves by the reinforcements which came in a constant stream from Europe. Their own resources were unequal to the contest. But interest waned in Europe and a new Turko-Arab power rose to empire in the East. Within a hundred years the end of the Latin states seemed imminent. Fragments of the conquest survived another century. It is a time of expiring interest in the West, and in the East one of waiting for the end. The history of the establishment of the Latins in the East is the history of the first crusade. An account of their subsequent fortunes in Syria may be called the history of the crusaders in the East.

The crusades were military expeditions to establish and maintain a Latin power in Syria. They belong to a period nearly co-extensive with two centuries, the 12th and 13th. Many nationalities shared in the enterprise, but principally those of Western Europe. They joined together in the name of obedience to the Latin Church. Two features in the movement are obscured by the terms in popular use when the crusades are spoken of. The first is that Western Europe was continuously

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THE CRUSADES A PART OF EASTERN HISTORY 3

at war with the Moslem East for nearly two centuries. The second that Syria is the station from which the course of events should be watched; the crusades are essentially a chapter in Eastern history.

The crusades have been numbered as if they were a series well-defined and easily counted. Some eight of all the bands and armies which passed by sea or land to Syria have been selected as the eight crusades. They are chosen on no clear principle. Those generally named are not uniformly the largest nor the most successful. But why should even size or success be made the test? No expedition which went to help the Latins can be refused the name crusade. Together they form a continuous stream for the greater part of the 12th and 13th centuries. The numbering of a selected few obscures this fact. Only the first crusade is rightly defined by the numeral attached. The meaning is definite and the name appropriate. Similar expressions applied to the other crusades should seldom or never be used.

A history of the crusades to have an organic unity, after the commencement, must be written as a history of the crusading states in Syria. Such treatment alone explains the rise and fall of interest in the West, and gives to each of the greater expeditions an appropriate setting and its full significance. The influence of the smaller expeditions is also most easily taken account of in this way. Every difficulty of treatment is not indeed removed by adopting an Eastern point of view. The problem of unifying the history of the four Latin states remains. Their first systematic historian was William of Tyre. His method was to make the kingdom of Jerusalem the centre of interest. He was influenced by national and religious considerations. The other states were little to him in comparison with his own. Its capital, besides, was Jerusalem, the holy city. But the northern states, Edessa, while it existed, and Antioch, were politically far more important. They bore the brunt of Moslem attack, and their failure involved the failure of all. A history of the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem cannot be an adequate treatment of the political history of the Latin states. Indeed if their external history is to be viewed as a whole, it is

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better definitely to come outside their borders and view them from a Moslem standpoint. Their history is part of the general history of Syria and the Moslem East. It is treated as such by the Arabic historians of the period, who contribute much to our knowledge, and even Western writers do best to follow them. The story is one of a contest between Moslems and Latins. Very soon the unity and definite purpose lie wholly on the side of the former. It is that which really determines the best point of view. Not only are the crusades an essential part of the history of the Turkish empire, they are best treated in the main as such.

The first stage of the crusading movement, especially, is the part which properly belongs to Western history. As the Eastern point of view is that adopted in the following pages it is most convenient to deal briefly here, in the introduction, with this portion of the history. The question may be put in this form : what moved the people of Western Europe to set out on their first expedition? It is matter of common knowledge that they were summoned by the authority of the Pope and of a Council which ratified his suggestion. But what prepared the people to respond? And what suggested the Pope's action?

The popular enthusiasm of the movement finds its principal explanation in the religious ideals of the time. These were not satisfied at all by any common round or daily task. The vast majority of men were constrained to live lives which their ideals condemned as worldly. In their estimation monks and nuns were "the religious." This contradiction between the real and the ideal found a solution in the crusading movement. It was possible as a crusader to satisfy religious conviction without sacrifice of lay character, or the adoption of a monkish life. That was one great attraction. Again, appeal was made to one of the great passions of Latin Christianity, its reverence for holy things and places. It came as a marvellous thought to thousands that *they* should be privileged to kiss the rock where our Saviour died, and kneel in prayer within His tomb. Besides the holy places called for deliverance. They were profaned by infidel hands; it was said perhaps that such evil was rampant round them as there had never been before. The effect on Europe of

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THE PREPARATION FOR THE CRUSADES

5

the capture of Jerusalem by the Seljuk Turks has probably been exaggerated. But a new era of travel and pilgrimage had commenced. Men knew more of the Holy Land than in earlier times, and their knowledge stirred their action.

The lower classes were affected by social conditions as well as by religious ideals. The depressed condition and perhaps, in some cases, almost hopeless misery of great masses of the people, made it a relief to leave their homes, and not a sacrifice. The crusade offered a way of escape from starvation and oppression. It promised temporal as well as spiritual blessing.

There were special secular inducements which appealed to the upper classes also. A spirit of adventure and a love of war prevailed. An expedition against the East was an unequalled opportunity in the eyes of all knights and princes. Some needed greater scope for their ambition than they found at home. The crusade appealed especially to certain peoples. The Norman Bohemond went without doubt in quest of a principedom to the East. His spirit was characteristic of his race. For two centuries the stream of Norman conquest had been sweeping over the seas. France, England, and Sicily had been touched or flooded by its waves. Its energy was still unexpended. The Moslems had already been met and conquered in Sicily. The Italian island lies like a stepping stone between West and East. From it the Normans now looked across the sea. Much of the response to the Pope's appeal was given by men of vigorous Norman blood.

In northern Italy another race was tending eastward under a different impulse. The republics of Venice, Genoa, and Pisa were commercial states in possession of growing fleets. Their expanding commerce had already brought them into hostile contact with the Moslems of Sardinia and Africa. Half the shores of the Mediterranean were in these alien hands. The creation of a Christian Syria gave the Italians a new outlet and another open door. Very soon, though not at first, the highway to Syria was found to lie over the sea in the track of the Italian ships. The republican fleets supplied the needed lines of communication between Syria and Western Europe. In return for trading privileges they gave the Latins their firm support. The part they played in the capture of sea-port towns was of vital

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importance. Without them, it may be said, Syria could neither have been conquered nor held for a single year.

In southern France also there was an element of national hostility to a Moslem state. Several times in the latter part of the 11th century the people there had aided the Christians of Spain in their constant struggle with the Moors. The idea of federating Christendom to wage a holy war may have gained something from this example. It was in southern France that the crusade was first proclaimed. It was probably the attitude of such men as Raymond of Toulouse that encouraged the Pope to the final step.

In these various ways Western Europe was prepared to respond to the Pope's appeal. But what, we have now to ask, suggested that appeal and led up to it? The growth of papal power, the establishment of the Turkish empire and the consequent danger of the Byzantine emperors are also parts of the preparation for the crusades. Among the direct political causes of the first crusade the establishment and growth of the Turkish empire must be given a foremost place. The Turkish advance westward suggested and called forth a Latin counter advance eastward. One most prominent aspect of the crusades is that they formed a barrier against Turkish advance. They originated indeed in an appeal which aimed at nothing further. It was sent to the Pope by the Roman emperor of the East, the Byzantine or Greek emperor. It was inspired by fear of fresh Turkish conquests. The empire of the Seljuk Turks was founded under the vigorous rule of the sultan Togrul Beg (1038). It gradually absorbed the territories of the caliphs of Bagdad. It even added to their extent, notably at the expense of the Greek empire. Within ten years from the battle of Manzikert (1071) Asia Minor was practically over-run. It was only another step to Europe and to Constantinople itself.

The emperor turned for help to the West. Common interest and old association might be pleaded. Christianity also was a bond of union, for the enemy were Moslems. The request was directed to the Pope as the head of the Latin Church, and of the kingdoms of the West. It came to him when and because the Papacy was prepared to respond. The growth of Papal

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THEIR ORIGIN

7

power is an essential part of the preparation for the crusades. This was the authority which united the Latins in their enterprise. The Church had entered on the period of its greatest temporal power. Step by step the Popes had gained a position in which they were as truly the successors of the emperors of Rome as those who claimed the title. The great Hildebrand, Gregory VII, now wore the papal crown. He had formulated without reserve his doctrine that every temporal power owes obedience to the Church, and to its earthly head, the Pope. But this was not easily established in practice. Contests with Henry IV, the Western or German emperor, occupied much of Hildebrand's energy. He was never sufficiently free to summon Europe to the Holy War. His successor was a man of different temper, and during his pontificate there was truce between Greek and Turk. The delay was not without importance. In those years of waiting the emperor's suggestion matured in the western mind to a new conception. Palestine was more to it than Asia Minor.

The next motion came in the year 1095. It was a favourable time for an aggressive movement in Asia Minor. The great sultan Malik Shah had died (1092), and the Moslem states were plunged in endless confusion. With some help from the Latins the emperor Alexius (1081-1118) hoped easily to recover the lost provinces of his empire. He appealed to the Pope as his predecessor had done. Urban II occupied the chair of Hildebrand, and renewed his policy. He felt the power of the call to engage the armies of the Church in a holy war. In spite of conflicts with the German emperor and others, his position seemed secure enough. Without doubt he first consulted some of the leading princes. Then at the Council of Clermont in November 1095, he proclaimed his summons to the people. *Deus le volt, Deus le volt*, they replied, deeply convinced that the call was divine. The message was carried far and wide by preachers like Peter the Hermit¹. Everywhere the same enthusiasm pre-

¹ It remains Peter's fame that he was one of the most successful preachers in northern France. His legendary history still appears in recent books on the crusades in place of a sober account of the preparation for the movement. It is sufficiently well known to be passed over here. Popular thought seeks to explain every great

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vailed. But neither Pope nor people gave much heed to the service asked by the Eastern emperor. The Pope had summoned Christian Europe to unite under the banner of the Cross for the release of Jerusalem. Possibly this was not even a part of Alexius' scheme. The recovery of Asia Minor was certainly his principal object. Hildebrand's thoughts had also moved in that direction. It seems that his motive was the hope of extending his power as head of the Church over the Christians of the East, Greek and Armenian. He was prepared to help the Greek empire in return for acknowledgment of the see of Rome. Pope Urban, by the form of his appeal, inaugurated another movement. By his official action, whatever his personal share in the matter¹, he gave the Latins a cause which was independent of the need of the Byzantine empire. It suited better the policy and position of the Church and the temper which inspired Latin Christendom. War with the infidel for its own sake and for the release of Jerusalem was the purpose to which they vowed themselves. The crusade so conceived was not merely an adoption of Alexius' proposal, though still capable of attaining some of its objects. There was to be war with the Turks. The expedition was to start from Constantinople. Syria was to be conquered, and a Christian state established there. The Greek empire must gain directly. If Syria were handed over to Alexius it would also gain indirectly. But there is no evidence that even the Pope intended this. The Latin leaders certainly hoped to establish princedoms for themselves.

event by the initiative and achievement of some one individual. The necessary criticism of the sources will be found in H. Hagenmeyer's *Peter der Heremite*. In the legend Peter represents the supernatural agency which early writers believed to be the real cause of the crusading movement (Hagenmeyer).

¹ In March 1095 at the council of Piacenza, Urban is reported to have made appeals for help against the Turks on behalf of Alexius. The project for a deliverance of the Holy Land does not come to the surface until the Council of Clermont in November. It is accordingly possible that the ruling conception of a crusade for the deliverance of Jerusalem and the Holy Land was definitely formulated for the first time in the interval between these two councils. For a full discussion of the part played in the crusading movement by Popes Gregory and Urban respectively see Riant, *Archives* i. 60 ff. He minimises somewhat the extent and urgency of Alexius' appeals for help and lays stress on the movements of the Moslems in Spain as accounting for the papal policy (i. 101 ff.). The papal records for the years 1095-97 unfortunately are not available, having been burned in the year 1098.

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THEIR PURPOSE

9

Here were the germs of a fatal situation. The emperor expected an expedition to his aid. The Latins were sending one to accomplish their own purposes and realise their own ideals.

The first crusade had one aspect in the mind of Alexius, another in the heart of the Pope. There is a third aspect which comes nearer than the others to the true character of the crusade as estimated by its actual results. It was a joint expedition for the conquest and partition of Syria. In this aspect the most important features are the composite character of the crusade, and the rivalry of its leaders. There was no supreme authority to direct the army and its movements. The Papal Legate has most claim to be regarded as formally at the head of the expedition. But in military matters each chief claimed the right to act for himself. When the leaders met in council national jealousy and suspicion disturbed their deliberations. The key to an understanding of the issue of the crusade is a knowledge of its national elements and of its various leaders. The conspicuous elements are three in number, Provençals, or southern French, Normans from Sicily and the north of France and Burgundians or the men of Lorraine. Of the Frenchmen, perhaps the most notable was the wealthy and powerful prince Raymond of Toulouse. It was said that he had vowed to spend the rest of his days in the East. There need be no doubt of his religious sincerity. But of course he counted on being a ruler in conquered Syria as he had been at home. The spirit of the Norman has been described already. Robert of Normandy, eldest son of the Conqueror, was weak and without much influence. The foremost Norman chiefs were from Sicily. Bohemond, son of Robert Guiscard, was the ablest and the most ambitious. He possessed exceptional military and political capacity. He knew better than any other the situation in the East. He had nothing to lose at home, and the crusade offered him that very opportunity which his ambition desired. His reputation and ability gathered round him an army far beyond his slender means. He aimed at a principedom in Antioch. Tancred was Bohemond's nephew¹ and his successor as prince

¹ Tancred was Bohemond's nephew according to Albert ii. 19, Mt. Ed. i. 50, and Ekk. p. 329. The view that he was Bohemond's cousin rests on a wrong interpretation

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INTRODUCTION :

of Antioch. He was wanting perhaps in his uncle's foresight but invaluable where dash and energy were demanded. The Burgundian leaders were two brothers and a nephew. Godfrey was the future prince of Jerusalem. Round him therefore legend has wound her fairest garlands. It is the more difficult to estimate his position as a leader of the crusade. He does not seem to have stood quite in the foremost rank. But his position was strengthened by his brother Baldwin, founder of the first Latin state, Edessa. Their nephew, another Baldwin, also played an important part in the after history. It is instructive to note how the Normans and Burgundians seem to race and jostle for their princedoms as they approach the borders of Syria.

What may be termed the official purpose of the crusade was necessarily something more than the deliverance of Jerusalem and the Holy Sepulchre. If these were to be permanently secured for Christendom it was essential that they should become part of a Christian state. This was certainly recognised by the responsible leaders of the movement. Presumably they also assumed that the new state would be occupied and maintained by western colonists and knights, whatever their relation to the Greek emperor might be. The goal of the first crusade, therefore, was the establishment of a Latin power in Syria. Had the crusaders been of one nationality or even had they recognised the authority of one sovereign the result might have been the establishment of a single state in the conquered territories. But the conflicting ambitions of the Latin chiefs and the jealousies of the national elements which were represented made that impossible. Of course Jerusalem was to be delivered. That was every man's business. But the immediate object to which each leader gave his separate attention was the winning of a princedom for himself. Neither Bohemond of Antioch nor Baldwin of Edessa took any part in the capture of Jerusalem. They were too much engaged with the affairs of their own territories in northern Syria. The aim of the leaders stamps the character of the crusade. Effectively it was an enterprise for

of the words "cognatus Boamundi" which are found in several of the sources (Hagenmeyer, Ekk.).