

Byzantium and the First Crusade: Three Avenues of Approach

Abstract

A recurring theme in the historiography of the First Crusade is that of the Byzantine emperor asking Pope Urban to send a small contingent against the Turks and receiving instead vast armies over which he had no control. The crusade was thus completely unexpected and the emperor played no part in its genesis. Recent work has challenged that thesis and two approaches have emerged. One argues that this was a novel approach to foreign policy. The emperor was in fact deeply involved in the origins of the First Crusade and played a leading role in shaping its ideals and goals. The other is more modest in scope: it argues that he was certainly involved but this was no unprecedented innovation, simply the extension of a tried and tested response to crisis.

Text:

In his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) recounts the fable of a shepherd who, feeling thirsty in the Indian sun, prayed to the gods for water. The obliging deities answered his request but not in the way he expected. They diverted the river Ganges and the flood waters swept away the shepherd's flock and his home. Gibbon tells the story in order to compare the Byzantine emperor Alexios I Komnenos (1081-1118) with the luckless shepherd. Alexios had sent envoys to Pope Urban II at the council of Piacenza in 1095 to ask if he would encourage some western knights to enter Byzantine service and fight against the Seljuk Turks. Instead of this useful addition to his forces, he got the veritable flood of the First Crusade.¹

This idea of Alexios asking for one thing and getting another has remained a feature of the historiography of the First Crusade for literally centuries. One prominent exponent of it was the ardent philhellene Sir Steven Runciman (1903-2000). Writing

about Alexios's reaction to the news of the approach of the crusade, Runciman claimed that the emperor was surprised and horrified: 'Instead of the individual knights or small companies that he expected to join his forces, whole Frankish armies were now on the move. He was not pleased ...'² The view is by no means restricted to Anglophone historiography. For Paul Lemerle (1903-1989) the Byzantine emperor: 'ne s'agissait dans son esprit que de quelques contingents d'élite, peu nombreux, qu'il prendrait à sa solde contre les Musulmans...'³ Ralph-Johannes Lilie says much the same thing, that Alexios I was aiming only at: 'die Anwerbung von einzelnen Söldnern oder kleineren Abteilungen ... die unter byzantinischem Oberbefehl gegen die Seldschuken kämpfen sollten ...'⁴

Universal though this theme is, it has not lacked its critics and in recent years it has come increasingly under scrutiny. Its great weakness is that it reflects almost exactly what Alexios I's daughter and biographer Anna Komnene says about his reaction to the arrival of the First Crusade, namely complete surprise and dread.⁵ Not surprisingly then, some historians have suspected that Anna could have been concealing a much more active role that her father might have played to shield him from being blamed for the unwelcome outcome of the crusade.⁶ The question remains, however, of just how far the emperor's role might have gone. This short article will explore two possible ways in which the traditional understanding of Alexios I's role in the origin of the First Crusade might be modified. The first is the radical one: that Alexios was in fact deeply involved in the genesis of the First Crusade and played a leading part in shaping its ideals and goals. The second is rather more modest in scope: that Alexios was certainly involved but he was simply using a tried and tested response to crisis that the Byzantines had used in the past and extending it to the Latin West. The difference may seem minor but when the arguments are scrutinised closely, two very different avenues of approach emerge.

The most recent exponent of the first and more radical view is Peter Frankopan.

In his own words:

The catalyst for the expedition to Jerusalem was not the pope, but another figure entirely: the call to arms issued by Urban was the result of a direct appeal for help from the emperor of Constantinople, Alexios I ...⁷

For Frankopan, Alexios was prompted to make his appeal by the rapid deterioration of the situation in Asia Minor after 1089 when the control that the Byzantines had exercised over the Turkish tribes in the region had broken down. Particularly unwelcome was the occupation of Smyrna by Emir Tzachas since he mustered a fleet in the port with which to attack Constantinople. To remedy the situation, Alexios set out deliberately to encourage and to organise a huge Christian expedition to come to the aid of his empire.

Frankopan's approach is clear enough but, like all historians of the origins of the First Crusade, he has to deal with the paucity of specific evidence. There are texts that historians can draw on but they are all very problematic. The near-contemporary Byzantine historians who give an account of the crusade, Anna Komnene and John Zonaras, do not mention any prior contact with the pope at all.⁸ There is an alternative Byzantine source in the chronicle attributed to Theodore Skoutariotes which does mention Alexios' involvement and even claims that the emperor used the lure of Jerusalem as an inducement to western knights to head east to his aid. But Skoutariotes, or whoever it was who compiled the chronicle, was writing in the early fourteenth century, some two hundred years after these events which inevitably calls the value of its evidence into question.⁹

Consequently, it is from Latin sources that details of Alexios I's approach to Urban II have to be reconstructed. The evidence for Alexios's embassy to Pope Urban comes from the monastic chroniclers Ekkehard of Aura and Bernold of St Blasien, with

Bernold alone saying that it was directed to the council of Piacenza in March 1095. Both are very brief and do not necessarily reflect what the Byzantine envoys actually said, merely giving their own interpretation.¹⁰ Other Latin sources suggest that Alexios was sending emotive appeals for help to western Europe during the earlier 1090s before the council of Piacenza. One is what purports to be a letter sent by Alexios I to the count of Flanders in around 1091 but it is quite clear that the text is either completely fabricated or very heavily interpolated.¹¹ Then there is an early twelfth-century *translatio* known as the Cormery Text which describes how the emperor ‘sent envoys everywhere with letters, heavy with lamentation’. But like Ekkehard of Aura and Bernold of St Blasien, the Cormery Text is very short on details and it is not concerned with accurate details of Byzantine diplomatic dealings with western rulers, only about the finding and translation of a relic.¹²

Frankopan therefore has to base his arguments on this limited and difficult body of evidence and in some respects he does so successfully. After all, there is a precedent for the Byzantine emperor and the pope co-operating against a non-Christian enemy: in 915, a joint Byzantine-papal force had had stormed a Saracen stronghold at Garigliano in Southern Italy.¹³ Frankopan goes beyond the precedent in that he argues that it was the emperor, not Pope Urban II, who first introduced the goal of Jerusalem into the quest for western aid for the Byzantine empire. The Holy City is indeed mentioned in the supposed letter to the count of Flanders of 1091 and by the Skoutariotes chronicle.¹⁴ Frankopan strengthens the evidence of these sources by adducing a joint Byzantine-papal embassy which was sent to the court of King Zvonimir of Croatia in 1091. According to the chronicle of the Priest of Duklja, the envoys painted an emotional picture of the sufferings of Jerusalem under infidel rule and urged Zvonimir to send help to the Christians of the East.¹⁵ There is, moreover, a possible precedent

from before the reign of Alexios for the Byzantines using the lure of Jerusalem to attract western support. According to a letter of Benzo, bishop of Alba, three Byzantine envoys who arrived in Rome in May 1062 bore letters from the Byzantine emperor which urged the pope not only to assist the Byzantines in expelling the Normans from Italy but also to lead an expedition to liberate Jerusalem and the Holy Sepulchre from infidel rule.¹⁶ Thus the suggestion that the Byzantines enhanced their appeal by associating their plight with that of the Holy Sepulchre is convincing and is substantiated as far as possible within the limits of the evidence.

Another issue that Frankopan considers is whether the Byzantines were behind the atrocity stories that were circulating in western Europe in the later eleventh century. Both the letter to the count of Flanders and the Cormery Text give a gruesome account of the cruelty supposedly committed by the Seljuk Turks during their occupation of western Asia Minor. Frankopan's interpretation here is that the similarity of these reports with stories told in Urban II's 1095 Clermont sermon, suggests that the information coming out of Asia Minor was being carefully stage-managed by Alexios I:

The consistency of their reports shows how efficiently, on the whole, information was being managed from the centre ... The narrative was so universal because so much of the information was emanating from the emperor.¹⁷

That was, of course, not necessarily the case. Account of the hardships endured by Christians in the Holy Land had long been carried back to western Europe both by pilgrims and by envoys sent by the patriarch to seek financial assistance.¹⁸ These stories seem to have increased in number in the decades before the First Crusade, quite independently of the emperor, and they contributed to the stock of crusade propaganda circulating in the 1090s, including the forged encyclical letter of Pope Sergius IV.¹⁹ Given that most Jerusalem pilgrims probably travelled by land via Constantinople they

would have passed through Asia Minor and might well have picked up information there which was subsequently circulated in the west. On the other hand, there is nothing intrinsically unbelievable in the idea that Alexios' envoys to Piacenza enhanced their appeal by recounting horror stories of persecutions of Christians, just as they might have done by making reference to Jerusalem and the Holy Sepulchre. It would have made sense to present as compelling a case as possible. Moreover, atrocity stories had been used in this way in the past. In a letter to the Frankish emperor Louis the Pious of 824, the Byzantine emperor Michael II had described the rebel Thomas the Slav as a brigand who robbed a pillaged at the head of an army of infidels, even though the revolt seems to have enjoyed a considerable following among Christians.²⁰ The aim was to evoke western sympathy and to present Michael's cause as just.

Frankopan further argues that Alexios was behind the use of holy relics to enhance the crusade appeal. The emperor might even, he surmises, have provided the small fragments of the True Cross which Urban II donated to the many churches that he consecrated in France in the months after his appeal at Clermont.²¹ There is no specific evidence that Alexios ever made such a gift or that if he did he envisaged that the relics would be circulated as part of the recruiting drive. On the other hand once again, there is nothing intrinsically unlikely about this possibility. It was generally accepted that the Byzantine emperor possessed most of what was believed to be the True Cross on which Christ had been crucified: it was housed in the chapel of the Holy Virgin of the Pharos inside the Great Palace. The emperor was not averse to passing small parts of the cross and other relics to passing dignitaries or potential allies. He sent a gold reliquary containing the bones of saints to the German emperor, Henry IV (1056-1106).²² Again there are precedents from before the reign of Alexios for relics had long been distributed as diplomatic gifts. Ulfric, bishop of Orleans was given a small

portion of the True Cross when he visited Constantinople in the 1020s and a golden reliquary containing the bones of saints was sent to the English king Edward the Confessor (1042-1066).²³

The lure of Jerusalem, atrocity stories and relics as incentives in Alexios I's approach to Urban II are therefore all perfectly plausible even if the evidence for them is often rather tenuous. A problem arises, however, when Frankopan goes further and uses these possibilities as a basis for suggesting that Alexios somehow dictated both the content of Urban II's 1095 sermon and the route and strategy taken by the expedition once it set out. 'Urban's words', he claims, 'were carefully chosen to speak to his western audience but his appeal was shaped by an agenda which was to a large extent set by Alexios in Constantinople'.²⁴ When it came to defining the form that the expedition would take: 'It was Alexios who was to set the strategic goals ... The emperor's vision was also fundamental in shaping the recruitment process for the crusade'.²⁵ Although he admits that there is little evidence to link the choice of route to the emperor, Frankopan nevertheless claims that 'the intervals at which these contingents travelled seem too convenient and perfect to be coincidental'.²⁶ It is at this point that Frankopan's theory begins to unravel partly because it is founded purely on a set of possible developments but mainly because even if the emperor had been acting in the way he suggests, that would not amount to shaping or controlling the crusade. Urban II was far from Constantinople and had agendas of his own to fulfil and it is far more likely that he used aspects of Alexios's propaganda to inform his own ideas rather than blindly follow the emperor's dictation. The arguments of H.E.J. Cowdrey, who makes the case for Urban II making his appeal out of personal concern for the fate of Jerusalem and the holy places, are much more convincing, based as they are on the pope's letters written in the months after the council of Clermont.²⁷

Frankopan and Runciman therefore represent the two extremes of the argument: from an emperor who is the main mover in setting the First Crusade in motion to one who had nothing whatsoever to do with it. That naturally leads to a third possibility: that Alexios was certainly involved but was simply extending a tried and tested response to crisis to the Latin West.²⁸ After all, it is worth asking why it was that Alexios made an appeal to western Europe in the first place. Frankopan's response is that over previous decades 'a heightened sense of Christian solidarity' had grown up between east and west and it was this that prompted Alexios to look in that direction.²⁹ One could, however, look at these events in a different light. Alexios was not acting the way he did because of some new development. On the contrary he was implementing a very traditional response to crisis that the Byzantines had used time and again in the past. One can discern three main threads in the response. The first instinct of the Byzantines was to seek outside allies and the second to provide them with a financial incentive for fighting on the empire's behalf. The third element, however, is the most important and controversial for the purposes of this discussion: the Byzantines were very fond of bringing a spiritual element into their agreements with their allies.

Numerous previous examples can be found of the first element. In 989 Basil II (976-1025) enlisted the help of Vladimir, prince of Kiev (980-1015), against the rebel Bardas Phokas. Constantine IX Monomachos (1042-1055) looked to the papacy for an alliance against the Normans in Southern Italy.³⁰ Alexios' appeal to Pope Urban II at Piacenza in 1095 therefore fits into this pattern. Similarly the financial incentive is well attested. An envoy of the western emperor Otto I to Constantinople in 969, was threatened by the Byzantines not with an attack by their own forces but with the prospect that others would be paid to do the job:

With our money, which gives us power, we will rouse the whole world against him, and we will break him in pieces like a potter's vessel ...

An example of this kind of incentive in practice occurs in 967 when Nikephoros II Phokas (963-969) paid 1500 pounds of gold to Svyatoslav, prince of Kiev, to attack Bulgaria.³¹ Again the parallels with the First Crusade are obvious, both Anna Komnene and the Latin accounts are constantly describing the largesse lavished on the crusade leaders.³²

So far, there is nothing uncontroversial. No one would dispute that the Byzantines were very fond of paying other people to fight their battles for them. The idea that a spiritual element was brought into the agreement is much less familiar but it can certainly be discerned when the Byzantines were dealing with potential Christian allies. After all, if the Byzantine emperor was really the Roman emperor, the sovereign placed on earth by God to protect the Christian people, to fight against him was a sin and by extension to fight for him was a religious duty. This idea is well attested. In 924, Patriarch Nicholas I Mystikos told Tsar Symeon of Bulgaria who was besieging Constantinople that:

Is it well for you, my son, in your desire of usurpation – you who are a Christian and hope to be an inheritor of Christian glory – to fall below the standard of a barbarian?³³

One simply could not be a good Christian and fight the Byzantine emperor. By the same token, treaties with those who were allying themselves with the emperor were worded to show that in doing so they were aligning themselves with the proper order of things. Take this treaty with Robert Guiscard in 1074:

For your part, you [Robert] undertake to show Us the submission and good intentions which We are due, not only by not violating Our frontiers, but also by attacking those who violate them.³⁴

This spiritual element, this moral value attached to alliance with the emperor was reinforced by requiring allies to swear an oath, something that in the Middle Ages was seen as a sacred thing, often taken on the Bible or holy relics. An oath was required from the western emperor Henry IV when a treaty was concluded with him in 1081 and from the count of Flanders who agreed to send five hundred knights to serve under Alexios in 1089.³⁵ The attachment of an oath publically proclaimed that fighting for the Byzantine emperor was a religious duty. An oath was also required from the crusaders when they arrived in Constantinople in 1096-7. There is some disagreement between the Byzantine and Latin sources on exactly what the terms of these undertakings were. Anna Komnene says only that the crusaders promised to hand back to the emperor any towns and cities that they captured which had previously belonged to the empire.³⁶ The Latins tend to lay stress on the help and supplies that the emperor agreed to provide for the expedition once it moved east from Constantinople.³⁷ It is likely that the oaths did contain those two elements but also, like that of Robert Guiscard, some kind of acknowledgement of the supremacy of the Byzantine emperor.

Given that this spiritual element was so central to the Byzantine recruitment of allies it is very likely that it was extended to the recruitment efforts of the 1080s and 1090s which were to lead to the First Crusade and that participants were told that by fighting for the emperor they would not only be well paid but would also be doing their Christian duty. The problematic letter to the count of Flanders may preserve an echo of this, having the emperor say:

So, for the love of God and the piety of all Greek Christians, we beg you to bring here whatever warriors true to Christ you can find in your lands ... to help me and the Greek Christians.³⁸

Thus far this third approach to the problem has much in common with that of Frankopan. Both suggest that Alexios' efforts helped to make the crusade the spiritual expedition that it was. The difference between them lies in the explanations they offer for why Alexios and the Crusaders ultimately fell out. For Steven Runciman it was simple: the rough and uncultured crusaders could not understand sophisticated Byzantine civilisation and so turned on it.³⁹ An explanation which places all the blame on the barbarous crusaders is clearly simplistic and very few serious scholars would subscribe to it. Frankopan's answer is much less dramatic but considerably more realistic. The breach occurred purely and simply over Alexios's failure to relieve Antioch in 1098 and Bohemond's refusal to hand the city back.⁴⁰ Yet in dating the rift to Antioch, Frankopan ignores the quite evident tension that already existed when the crusaders were in Constantinople, believing that this is something that was written into the sources with hindsight. That is hard to believe, given what Raymond of Aguilers who was an eyewitness says on that point. Since his master the count of Toulouse later became an ally of the Byzantine emperor he might have been expected to suppress the fact that the count and the emperor very nearly went to war in the spring of 1097. He does not and anyone looking back at the events can see quite clearly that there was acute tension long before Bohemond's seizure of Antioch. The routine demand for an oath was deeply resented as is clear from the vociferous objections of some of the leaders made to the requirement. They complained that it was unworthy of them, that they had no other lord than God and that it was not possible to serve both the common good and the 'king of the Greeks'.⁴¹ They seem to have

interpreted it as some kind of 'feudal' undertaking between lord and man. Albert of Aachen claims that Godfrey of Bouillon became 'a vassal with hands joined'. It was, of course, quite a different kind of oath altogether.⁴²

The third approach offers a solution to the problem by arguing that the rupture between Alexios I and the First Crusade and the subsequent relations between Byzantium and the Crusades were the result of the application of traditional policies and tactics in circumstances where it was to prove inappropriate. Money was not the problem: the crusaders were perfectly happy to take it and fight alongside him against the Turks. It was the third element that caused the trouble. The Byzantine assumption that serving the Christian emperor in Constantinople and defending his empire was in itself a spiritual duty came into direct conflict with the crusaders' belief that it was the liberation of Jerusalem that was the ultimate goal. Both Anna Komnene and Raymond of Aguilers record how Alexios decided not to accompany the crusaders to Jerusalem, because he put the security of his own empire first.⁴³ In the long run, by pursuing very different ends to those of the reformed papacy and the leaders of crusade armies, and by employing methods that were often considered by western Europeans to be dishonourable, the Byzantines succeeded in giving the impression that the empire was failing to participate in the pious cause of defending Jerusalem and the Holy Land from the common Muslim foe. That development largely explains what was to happen later.

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¹⁵ Frankopan, 92.

¹⁶ Benzo of Alba, *Ad Henricum Imperatorem Libri VII*, ed. K. Pertz (Monumenta Germaniae Historica Scriptorum 11), Hannover 1854, 591-681, at 616-17; H.E.J. Cowdrey ‘Pope Gregory VII’s “crusading” plans of 1074’, in B.Z. Kedar-H. E. Mayer-R. C. Smail (eds.), *Outremer: Studies in the History of the Crusading Kingdom of Jerusalem Presented to Joshua Prawer*, Jerusalem 1982, 27–40, at 38-9.

¹⁷ Frankopan, 90. Cf. *ibid.* 101.

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- ²⁰ P. Lemerle, 'Thomas le Slav', *TM* 1 (1965) 255-97, at 256.
- ²¹ Frankopan, 106.
- ²² Anna Komnene, 114 (=III.10); trans. Sewter and Frankopan, 103. On the Chapel of the Holy Virgin, see: J. Harris, *Constantinople: Capital of Byzantium*, London and New York 2007, 64-6; I. Kalavrezou, 'Helping hands for the empire: imperial ceremonies and the cult of relics at the Byzantine court', in H. Maguire (ed.), *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204*, Washington DC 1997, 53-79.
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- ²⁴ Frankopan, 101.
- ²⁵ Frankopan, 111.
- ²⁶ Frankopan, 115.
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- ²⁹ Frankopan, 87.
- ³⁰ John Skylitzes, *Synopsis Historiarum*, ed. J. Thurn (CFHB 5), Berlin and New York 1973, 336; English translation by J. Wortley, *A Synopsis of Byzantine History, 811-1057*, Cambridge 2010, 319; Yahya of Antioch, *Cronache dell'Egitto fatimide e dell'impero bizantino (937-1033)*, trans. B. Pirone, Milan 1997, 196; William of Apulia, *Le Geste de Robert Guiscard*, trans. M. Mathieu, Palermo 1961, 137.
- ³¹ Liudprand of Cremona, 271; Leo the Deacon, *Historiae Libri Decem*, ed. C.B. Hase (CSHB), Bonn, 1828, 63. English translation A.-M. Talbot and D. Sullivan, *The History*

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³³ Nicholas I Mystikos, *Letters*, ed. and trans. R.J.H. Jenkins and L.G. Westerink (CFHB 15), Washington DC 1973, 35.

³⁴ P. Bezobrazov, 'A chrysobull of Emperor Michael VII Doukas' (in Russian), *VV* 6 (1899) 140-3, at 141: Καὶ σὺ μὲν συμφωνεῖς ἔμοι συνεισενεγκεῖν τὴν πρέπουσαν ὑποταγὴν τε καὶ εὐνοίαν; French translation in H. Bibicou, 'Une page d'histoire diplomatique de Byzance au XIe siècle: Michel VII Doukas, Robert Guiscard, et la pension des dignitaires', *Byz* 29-30 (1959) 43-75, at 45.

³⁵ Anna Komnene, 113, 218 (=III.10, VII.6); trans. Sewter and Frankopan, 102, 199.

³⁶ Anna Komnene, 313 (=X.10); trans. Sewter and Frankopan, 289.

³⁷ Ed. R. Hill, *Gesta Francorum et Aliorum Hierosolimitanorum* Oxford 1962, 12; Albert of Aachen, 87-8.

³⁸ Hagenmeyer, 133; Robert the Monk, 220: 'Pro Dei amore et pro omnium Graecorum Christianorum pietate rogamus ut quoscumque fideles Christi bellatores ... in terra tua acquirare poteris ad auxilium mei et Graecorum Christianorum huc deducas?'

³⁹ Runciman, vol. 3, 475.

⁴⁰ Frankopan, 169.

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