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# A GREEK SOURCE ON THE ORIGIN OF THE FIRST CRUSADE

By PETER CHARANIS

A GREEK chronicle contains the following passage concerning Alexius Comnenus and the role he played in bringing about the First Crusade:<sup>1</sup>

Σκεψάμενος οὖν ὡς οὐχ οἷός τε ἐστὶ μόνος τὴν ὑπὲρ πάντων ἀναδέξασθαι μάχην, συμμάχους καὶ τοὺς Ἰταλοὺς δεῖν ἔγνωκε προσλαβεῖν, καὶ τοῦτο μετὰ τινος κρυψινολίας καὶ βαθυγνώμονος οἰκονομίας καὶ ἐπιτηδειότητος. Εὐρὼν γὰρ πρόφασιν ὡς τοῦτο τὸ ἔθνος οὐκ ἀνεκτὸν ἦγεται τὴν ἐν Ἱεροσολύμοις τῶν Περσῶν ἐπικράτησιν, καὶ τοῦ ζωοποιοῦ τάφου τοῦ Σωτῆρος ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, τοῦτο ὡς ἔρμαιον εὐρηκώς, καὶ ἀποστολαῖς πρέσβειων πρὸς τε τὸν τῆς πρεσβυτέρας Ῥώμης ὡς ἀρχιερέα προῖστάμενον, καὶ πρὸς τοὺς κατὰ τόπους ὡς ἂν οὗτοι φαῖεν ρηγάδας καὶ ἄρχοντας, ἀξίους λόγους χρησάμενος, οὐκ ὀλίγους ἴσχυσε τούτων τῆς πατρίδος ἀπαναστήσαι καὶ πρὸς τὸ ἔργον ὁλοτρόπως ὑπαγαγεῖν. Ἐφ' ᾧ καὶ πολλοὶ τούτων ἐς χιλιοστίας καὶ μυριάδας κατ' ἀριθμὸν κορυφούμενοι, τῇ Κωνσταντινουπόλει, οὐ διὰ χρόνου περσεύοντες, ἐπιδεδημήκασιν τὸν Ἴόνιον διαπεραιωθέντες μεθ' ὧν καὶ πιστεῖς ἐνόρκους ἐκθέμενος, καὶ συμβάσεις συντεθεικώς, πρὸς ἔω χωρεῖ, καὶ δι' ὀλίγου συνάρσει θεία καὶ συμμαχία τούτων, καὶ οἰκείας σπουδαῖς, ἴσχυσε τῶν Ῥωμαϊκῶν χωρῶν ἐξωθήσαι τοὺς Πέρσας, καὶ τὰς πόλεις ἐλευθερώσαι, καὶ τὴν τῆς ἔω διακράτησιν πάλιν εἰς τὴν πρὶν εὐκλειαν ἐπαναγαγεῖν.

Τοιοῦτος ἦν ὁ βασιλεὺς οὗτος μεγαλόβουλος καὶ μεγαλουργός.<sup>2</sup>

## Translation

Having considered, therefore, that it was impossible for him alone to undertake the battle on which everything depended, he decided that it was necessary to take the Italians as allies, and to succeed in this he used dissemblance of thought, wise tact and cunning. For he found it a godsend that this nation considered unbearable the domination of Jerusalem and the life-giving Sepulchre of Our Savior Jesus Christ by the Persians [Turks] and this he used as a pretext. By the dispatchings of ambassadors to the bishop of Old Rome and to, as they would say, kings and rulers of those regions, and by the use of appropriate arguments, he prevailed over not a few of them to leave their country and succeeded in directing them in everyway to the task. That is the reason why many of them, numbering thousands and tens of thousands, having crossed the Ionian Sea, reached Constantinople with all speed, and, having exchanged assurances and oaths with them and concluded agreements, he advanced towards the East. With the aid of God and their alliance and by his own efforts he expelled the Persians [Turks] from the Roman territories, liberated the cities and restored the control of the East to its former glory. Such was this emperor: great in the conception of plans and the doing of deeds.

The chronicle containing this important text was composed in the thirteenth century and was published anonymously by Sathas under the title of *Synopsis Chronike*.<sup>3</sup> It has since been established, however, that it is the work of Theodore

<sup>1</sup> This is an abbreviated part of my paper on 'Byzantium, the West and the Origin of the First Crusade,' read before the Seventh International Congress of Byzantine Studies held in Brussels, Belgium, 5-15 August 1948. My attendance at the Congress was made possible by the financial assistance granted me by the American Philosophical Society, the American Council of Learned Societies and by Rutgers University in order to continue my research in European libraries.

<sup>2</sup> C. Sathas, *Bibliotheca Graeca Medii Aevi*, VII (Paris, 1894), 184-185.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-556.

Skutariotes, an important personality of the second half of the thirteenth century. The *Synopsis Chronike* is a world history which comes down to 1261. Its principal sources are known; but here and there it contains information found nowhere else. This is particularly true for the period of the early Comneni. Skutariotes obviously had access to sources of information now lost. It was no doubt from such a source that he drew the text presented here.<sup>4</sup> There is no reason to doubt its accuracy.

Thus, what is reported by the Latin chroniclers, Ekkehard and Bernold—that Alexius I repeatedly asked the West for help—we now learn from a Greek source. But the Greek chronicler is more precise than the Latin sources. Ekkehard and Bernold speak only generally concerning the reason Alexius offered for his request for help. Ekkehard simply says the request was made for defense of the oriental churches;<sup>5</sup> Bernold, for the church of the empire.<sup>6</sup> The Greek chronicler is more specific. He distinguished between the real and the pretended motives of Alexius. His real motive was to drive the Turks out of Asia Minor; his pretended motive was to liberate Jerusalem from the domination of the infidels. Thus in order to achieve his real purpose, Alexius exploited the feeling, widely prevalent in the West, that the domination of the Holy Land by the Turks was intolerable. He no doubt knew of this feeling from the various pilgrims who passed through Constantinople;<sup>7</sup> he may have also learned about it from the patriarch of Jerusalem, Euphymius, who was in Constantinople in 1083.<sup>8</sup> It was certainly widely known in Constantinople, as we learn from Anna Comnena, who says that the rank and file among the crusaders were really impelled by the desire to venerate the Sepulchre of the Lord and to visit the Holy Land.<sup>9</sup> Alexius thus employed the most powerful argument — the need of liberating the Holy Land — in order to gain the support he needed to carry out his offensive against the Turks. He must be considered therefore, along with Urban II, the instigator of the First Crusade. The two men had different motives. Alexius' motive is known; that of Urban II is more difficult to determine. But the union of the churches, no doubt, figured among his objectives.<sup>10</sup> This would have greatly increased his prestige at a time when the investiture struggle had by no means been decided.

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<sup>4</sup> On Skutariotes and the credibility of his chronicle, especially for the period of the early Comneni, see G. Moravcsik, *Byzantinoturcica*. I. *Die Byzantinischen Quellen der Geschichte der Türkvolker* (Budapest, 1942), 329 f.

<sup>5</sup> H. Hagenmeyer, *Ekkehardi Uraugiensis Abbatis Hierosolymita* (Tübingen, 1877), 81–83.

<sup>6</sup> Bernold, *Chronicon*, MGH SS, v, 462.

<sup>7</sup> We know for instance, that Alexius had an interview with Robert I of Flanders when the latter passed through Constantinople on his way back to the West from Jerusalem where he had gone as a pilgrim. See C. Verlinden, *Robert I<sup>er</sup> le Frison, comte de Flandre* (Paris, 1935), 158.

<sup>8</sup> We know this from a document which Bezobrazov published in the *Journal of the Ministry of Public Instruction* (Russian), CCLIV (1887), 77. It is there stated that the patriarch Euphymius was sent by Alexius to negotiate with Bohemond who was then invading the empire. Concerning the reason why the patriarch of Jerusalem was designated for the task, see the interesting remarks by L. Bréhier *L'Eglise et L'orient au moyen-âge. Les croisades* (Paris, 1928), 53.

<sup>9</sup> The *Alexiad*, II (Bonn, 1878), 32.

<sup>10</sup> On this point, see the interesting article by A. C. Krey, 'Urban's Crusade — Success or Failure,' *American Historical Review*, LIII (1948), 235–250. Cf. *American Historical Review*, LIII, 941–944.