

On the cover this month:

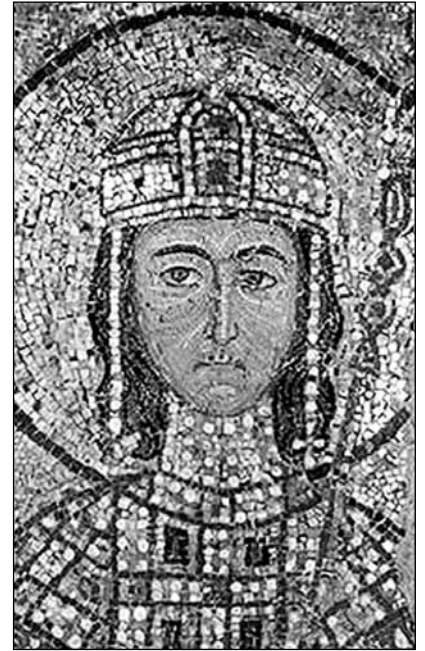
Although not an image of the First Crusade, this painting captures the spirit and imagination of the Crusades in general from the point of view of the Western mind. The painting depicts the hand-to-hand combat between King Richard I (Lionheart) and Saladin. It was painted by Philip James de Loutherbourg in the mid-18th century. As with so much we have been taught about the Crusades, it is not historically accurate. The two rulers never faced each other in combat and, indeed, never met.

Sacking Jerusalem

The soldiers and noblemen of the First Crusade entered Jerusalem in July 1099. After the fall of the city, the crusaders sacked the place, massacring much of the population and not limiting themselves to the Muslims but killing Jews and even Christians. They shocked even their contemporaries with the violence of the sack. Godfrey of Bouillon was now elected guardian of Jerusalem, but faced one more threat, when a Fatamid relieving army arrived from Egypt. Despite outnumbering the crusaders five to one, the Fatamid army was nowhere near as dangerous as the Turks had been, and Godfrey won a crushing victory at the Battle of Ascalon (August 12, 1099). The crusade had been a seeming success, but the seeds of eventual failure were already present. The crusaders, having betrayed their Christian allies, the Byzantines, established four principalities (Jerusalem, Edessa, Tripoli and Antioch), which were often at odds with one another. Many of the crusaders returned home soon after their victory, reducing the crusader strength in the east. Despite that, the crusader foothold in the Levant continued until the fall of Acre in 1291.



THE SURPRISING PURPOSE OF

THE
FIRST
CRUSADE

The Emperor Alexius I as portrayed in a mosaic in the church of Hagia Sophia in present-day Istanbul.

While the First Crusade is overwhelmingly portrayed as a decidedly Catholic (i.e., Western) affair, the aims and objectives of its chief participants from the West must never obscure those of the great Byzantine Empire to the East. This essay examines four main areas in which a diverse set of motives can be shown to have been at work during the tumultuous events, which left their mark on the world during the final years of the 11th century and affected the way we live today. The author seeks to interpret the rationale that led the Byzantine Emperor Alexius I, Pope Urban II, and vast numbers of crusaders to engage in a historical episode of staggering proportions.

BY TROY SOUTHGATE

During the reign of Pope Gregory VII, the tense relationship between Catholicism and its estranged counterparts in Constantinople had rarely been so bad. With the advent of Urban II, however, the mutual tension between these opposing strands of Christianity was alleviated somewhat by the pope's decision to reverse the excommunication imposed on Alexius I some years earlier. Consequently, Alexius himself "welcomed this new gesture of friendship from the papacy and responded at once by calling a synod in Constantinople, attended by the patriarchs of Constantinople and Antioch and some 20 prelates."¹

This synod is significant in that it represented a genuine attempt to bring an end to the contentious rivalry, which had threatened the unity of Christendom. That Alexius felt confident enough to initiate such proceedings demonstrates that the first 10 years of his reign had been relatively successful. He confronted the two most prominent questions of the period head-on. On the one hand he had used diplomacy and tact with which to calm

the perpetual threat of Norman aggression, and, through sheer force of arms on the other, had successfully crushed the Pechenegs. (See our informational item on the Pechenegs on page 6.)

This allowed Alexius to turn his thoughts toward strengthening and maintaining his frontiers with Asia. However, due to the fact that the Byzantine "treasury was short of money, while recruitment for the navy and army slackened seriously,"² Alexius was faced with a dilemma. While on the one hand the empire "would previously have resented, and resisted, any attempt by the barbarians of the Latin West to interfere in Palestine or Syria,"³ on the other Alexius "seems to have felt that the western European market, which could provide an abundance of luckless knights and cheap soldiers, had not been sufficiently exploited."⁴

When the Byzantines had lost almost the whole of Anatolia to the Seljuk Turks at the Battle of Manzikert, Alexius had appealed for help to Gregory VII, although the Investiture Controversy inevitably meant that the pope was so busy trying to sort out the problems of the West that he had either little or no time to think about those of the East.

In 1090, Alexius also had serious negotiations with Count Robert of Flanders as the latter happened to travel through Constantinople on his return from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Robert agreed to send a contingent of 500 knights to assist the Byzantines in their struggle against the Pechenegs, who at that time were threatening to encroach upon the capital itself. But while Alexius was keen to secure Constantinople's eastern frontiers and eager to hire Western mercenaries in order to achieve such an objective, he never envisaged that his counterparts in the West would launch anything like a huge military crusade to remove the infidel from the Holy Land. As far as he was concerned, Palestine was irrelevant if the Byzantine Empire itself was in danger of collapse and his primary motive was to reclaim the lands that had been stolen by his enemies.

On November 27, 1095, at Clermont in central France, Pope Urban II delivered the emotional speech that launched the First Crusade. Employing a multitude of colorful adjectives with which to motivate and inspire his listeners, the pope described how “the Turks, a Persian race, have overrun the eastern Christians right up to the Mediterranean Sea. Occupying more and more of the land of the Christians on the borders of Romania [the Byzantine Empire], they have conquered them . . . slaughtering and capturing many, destroying churches and laying waste the kingdom of God. So, if you leave them alone much longer they will further grind under their heels the faithful of God.”⁵

There is little doubt that Urban II sought to play upon the emotions of his audience, but, according to author Marcus Bull—who has recently taken a fresh look at the events leading up to the First Crusade—few people were actually present during the meeting at Clermont, “and only a small minority of those who went on the crusade could claim that they had heard”⁶ the call to

arms. In fact the meeting was mostly comprised of ecclesiastical representatives, and few lay folk were actually present. The pope's message found its way across Europe by way of preachers—men like Peter the Hermit—but who could have foreseen that tens of thousands of people from all walks of life would seek to converge upon the “Holy Land” in defense of their faith?

While the actual motives of the participants themselves will be discussed in due course, the Catholic Church does seem to have been driven by a genuine sense of religious piety. In addition, “Urban was well disposed toward Alexius as a result of their earlier negotiations, and he sincerely wanted to help and protect the eastern Christians. He felt that if the Christians of the West went to the support of their brothers in the East, the eastern

Emperor, who had already shown himself amenable, would be so grateful that all differences would be resolved and the whole of Christendom united (as it must be) under the leadership of Rome.”⁷

However, Urban II did consciously seek to exaggerate the problems that had beset the eastern fringes of Christendom. Indeed, whilst he vilified the character of the murdering, pillaging Turk, he also severely overestimated the potential of the Turkish army. Despite all the scare-mongering at Clermont, by 1098 the Turks had lost control of Jerusalem to the Egyptians.

But my use of this example is not necessarily intended to suggest that the papacy was somehow adhering to a secret agenda or that the pope was seeking to deceive those who sought to take his words in a literal sense. On the contrary, perhaps Urban II simply got slightly carried away by his own propaganda. Any Christian worthy of the name was certain to be outraged by the rise of a “heathen” (since Christians of that era regarded Islam as heathen) enemy that sought to impose its alien methods across the very land in which Christ and his disciples had walked more than a millennium before.

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Who Were the Pechenegs?

The Pechenegs were a Turkic race, like many others who migrated west from the steppes. Driven by the Oguz and then the Khazars, they collided with the civilizations of Russia and Byzantium. By the late 9th century, they controlled most of southern Russia. It is likely the Pechenegs were armed and fought very much like other steppe races, with felt or leather lamellar armor, shooting the bow from horseback.

Byzantium made alliances with them, finding them useful in keeping the Magyars and Rus from encroaching on Byzantine territory.

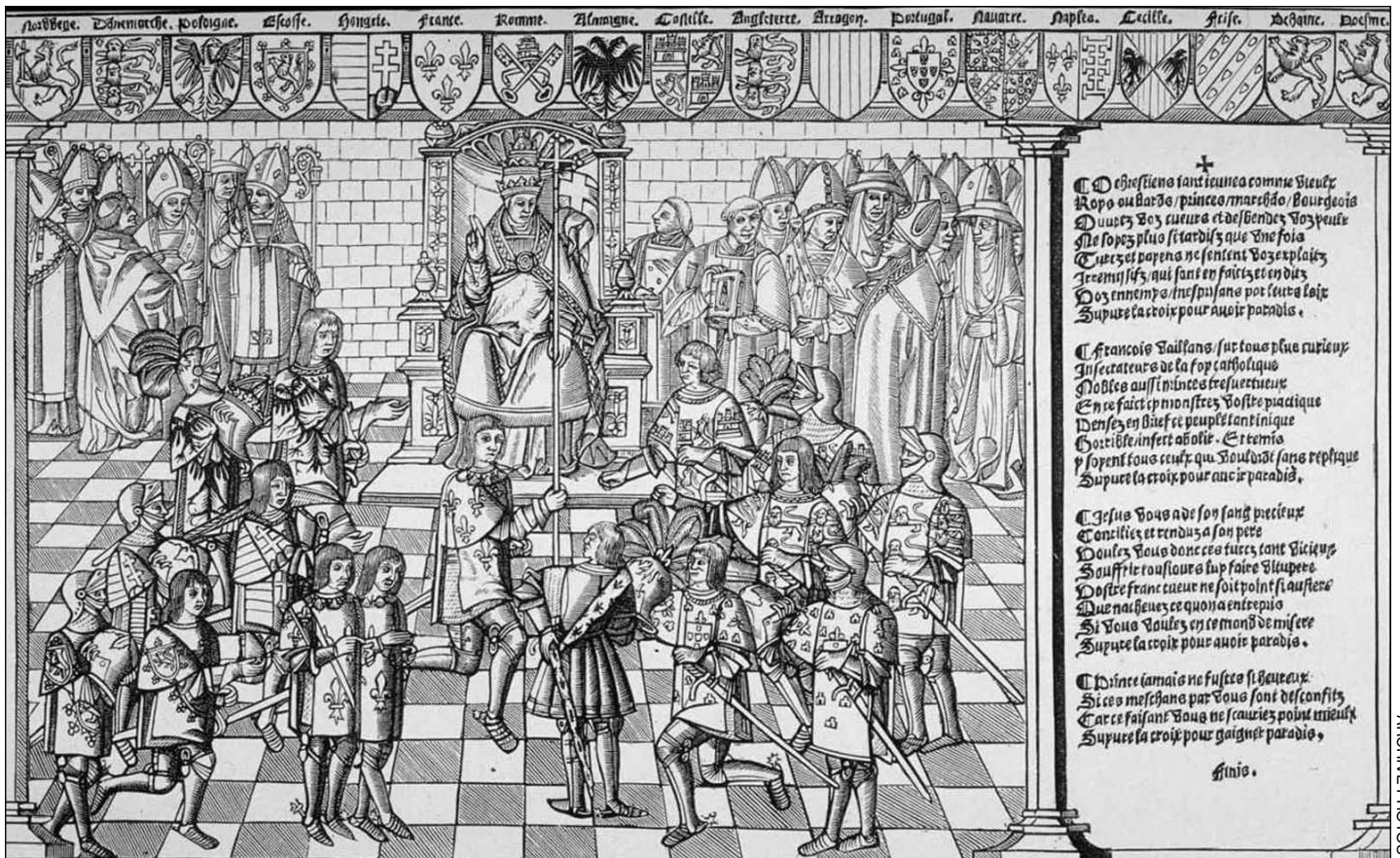
In the late 9th century, the two superpowers of the Balkan region were Byzantium and Bulgaria. In 894, a huge Bulgarian army invaded the Byzantine province of



EMPEROR LEO VI

Thrace. Byzantium's forces were already stretched to the limit, involved in southern Italy and in the east against the Arabs. While a hastily assembled imperial army was put into the field, Emperor Leo VI (the Wise) bribed the Magyars, a steppe tribe, to attack the Bulgarians. Symeon, the Bulgarian czar, took a leaf out of Byzantium's book and hired another steppe nation, who dwelt in southern Russia, the Pechenegs, to attack the Magyars. They were so effective in this, that the Magyars fled west into Pannonia, which they took for their own, and which became Hungary, the land of the Magyars.

In 944 the Pechenegs allied with the Rus to invade Byzantium, but both armies were bought off with rich bribes. The Russians went home, and the Pechenegs were persuaded to ravage Bulgaria instead.



ARCHIVE PHOTOS

Meanwhile, however, Alexius I was greatly dismayed at the incredible reaction his request for help had inadvertently set in motion: “He had asked for mercenaries and auxiliaries to fight with the Byzantine armies. But what he provoked was a whole army, a succession of whole armies, almost a mass migration from West to East; and he can hardly have enjoyed discovering that four of the eight leaders of the First Crusade were Normans.”⁸

At first, the crusaders appeared to be guided by spiritual motives, believing that “if people fought God’s enemies on earth and completed a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, their actions would receive a spiritual reward of remarkable magnitude.”⁹

This attitude was expressed in the following manner by Nivelon of Fréteval (in France, near Vendôme), who sought to redeem himself for the crimes he had committed against the village of St. Peter: “Whenever the onset of knightly ferocity stirred me up, I used to descend on the aforesaid village, taking with me a troop of my knights, and a crowd of my attendants, and against nature I would make over the goods of the men of St. Peter for food for my knights. And so, in order to obtain the pardon for my crimes which God can give me, I am going on pilgrimage to Jerusalem.”¹⁰ But were the penitential motives of the average crusader really that sincere?

The call to arms had initially sought to create a unified military force, an international network controlled and directed by an aristocratic elite under the watchful eye of the papal legate, but those who comprised the knightly contingents of Europe had formed themselves into four distinct armies. The first (and truly official) contingent came from southern France and was

November 27, 1095: Pope Urban II inspired the First Crusade when he addressed the Council of Clermont, motivating European Christians to aid the Byzantines. The only successful crusade, the First Crusade arose partly from a religious fervor to improve oneself in the eyes of God by recapturing Christian sites in the Levant from the Muslims. According to Fulcher of Chartres in his *History of the Expedition to Jerusalem*, Urban’s edict read in part: “For your brethren who live in the East are in urgent need of your help, and you must hasten to give them the aid which has often been promised them. For, as most of you have heard, the Turks and Arabs have attacked them and conquered the territory of Romania as far west as the shore of the Mediterranean and the Hellespont. They have occupied more and more lands of those Christians and have overcome them in seven battles. On this account I, or rather the Lord, beseech you as Christ’s heralds to publish this everywhere and to persuade all people of whatever rank, foot-soldiers and knights, poor and rich, to carry aid promptly to those Christians and to destroy that vile race from the lands of our friends.”

led by Count Raymond of Toulouse; the second came from northern France and was directed by Hugh of Vermandois (the brother of the French king), Count Robert of Flanders, Count Stephen-Henry of Blois and Robert, Duke of Normandy; the third was drawn from the French-German borderlands and was led by Godfrey de Bouillon, Duke of Lower Lorraine and his brother Baldwin; and finally, the fourth wing came from southern Italy and was directed by Bohemond, the son of Robert Guiscard. The latter, in particular, did not receive a very warm welcome from Alexius I. Bohemond’s father had been a bitter enemy of the Byzantine Empire and Alexius Comnenus could

hardly be expected to trust the offspring of a hated adversary, and rightly so, for Bohemond's motives were far from honorable. Both he and his father had invaded the Empire on many occasions, "and their valor and treachery were well known."¹¹

As a result, Alexius demanded that the crusaders take an oath of fealty, something with which they were forced to comply in order to receive a safe escort through Byzantine territory. Alexius also agreed to provide the crusaders with supplies, although the men of the West had to promise that "in return they would restore to him any provinces of his Empire which they should recover from the Muslims."¹²

At this point it becomes apparent that the two sides in this uneasy alliance had very different motives, for the leaders of the First Crusade had shown suspicious alacrity in swearing their allegiance to Alexius and were more eager to conquer the Near East for themselves, despising the Levantine Christians almost as much as the Muslims. Bohemond revealed a snipet of his true designs when he asked the emperor to appoint him grand domestic of the East, the Byzantine equivalent to regional commander-in-chief. Alexius managed to avoid granting this ambitious request by insinuating that such a move was far too premature. But the emperor could hardly expect the crusaders to risk their lives simply to enable him to recover lost Byzantine territory. Indeed, that Alexius sought to use the crusaders as mere pawns in his efforts to rebuild a shrinking empire is best demonstrated by the fact that, in May 1097, the Anatolian Turkish capital at Nicæa chose to surrender to the Byzantines rather than to the crusaders themselves (thus depriving them of the spoils of war). Consequently, however, after defeating a Seljuk army at Dorylæm and attacking Antioch on October 21, 1097, the crusaders captured the city several months later (on June 3, 1098) and set about exterminating its inhabitants. Bohemond clearly had no intention of relinquishing the territory that he himself had acquired by way of his own inspirational

leadership, and was fully aware that Antioch was an important center for trade between East and West. Furthermore, the astute Bohemond must have realized that the city and its hinterlands occupied a strategic position on the fringes of the Byzantine Empire and the mutually contentious Turkish emirates of Aleppo, Mosul and Damascus. In accordance with the prevailing 11th-century mindset, territory was all and the future of the First Crusade was now hampered by the fact that "Bohemond had claimed Antioch and had preferred to secure the conquest of its surrounding territory rather than to advance on Jerusalem."¹³

Elsewhere, of course, "many other crusaders were showing unmistakable signs of ambition either for themselves or their protégés."¹⁴ Similarly, whilst Urban II had originally agreed that all recaptured territory should be handed back to Alexius, "in both Spain and Italy, the pope had maintained (successfully) that all territories conquered from the Muslims should be held as papal fiefs, and signs were not lacking that he had the same intentions in Palestine."¹⁵

Whilst Urban II had agreed that all recaptured territory should be handed back to Alexius, the pope maintained that all territories conquered from the Muslims should be held as papal fiefs.

After the fall of Jerusalem on July 15, 1099, Godfrey de Bouillon refused to accept the title of king and, instead, was made "defender of the city" or, to give him his full title, advocate of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. But whilst Godfrey's own motives were to establish a Latin government and grant the papacy ultimate rights over the whole area, the same cannot be said of his brother, Baldwin. Instead of accepting the authority of the pope once Godfrey had died in 1100, Baldwin had himself elected king and ruled for a further 18 years. As far as the motives of the church itself are concerned, although Urban II had been genuinely committed to the spiritual and temporary liberation of the Holy Land right up until his death in 1099, his successor, Paschal II, appeared to pursue the acquisition of Eastern territory in an exceedingly blatant fashion. In 1107, with the blessing of the pope himself, Bohemond—"[f]ickle, malicious, courageous,

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tenacious”¹⁶—threw caution to the wind and returned to the East, determined to crush the perfidious Alexius and replace the empire of the Byzantines with a Norman alternative. The fact that his resources proved inadequate and led to failure, however, does not in any way obscure Bohemond’s ambitious mentality; a mentality, of course, which he had been forced to suppress during those first tentative steps of the First Crusade. But what of the ordinary pilgrims? What were their motives?

When Urban II launched the First Crusade he intended for it to be an entirely military affair. However, his message had undoubtedly struck a deep chord with people from a variety of social and economic backgrounds and it soon became clear that women, children, the elderly and the poor “would hinder the progress of an army because they had to be fed and protected. The pope tried to limit their involvement by requiring people to consult their parish priests before taking their vows, but this measure failed and the crusade set out accompanied by many non-combatants.”¹⁷

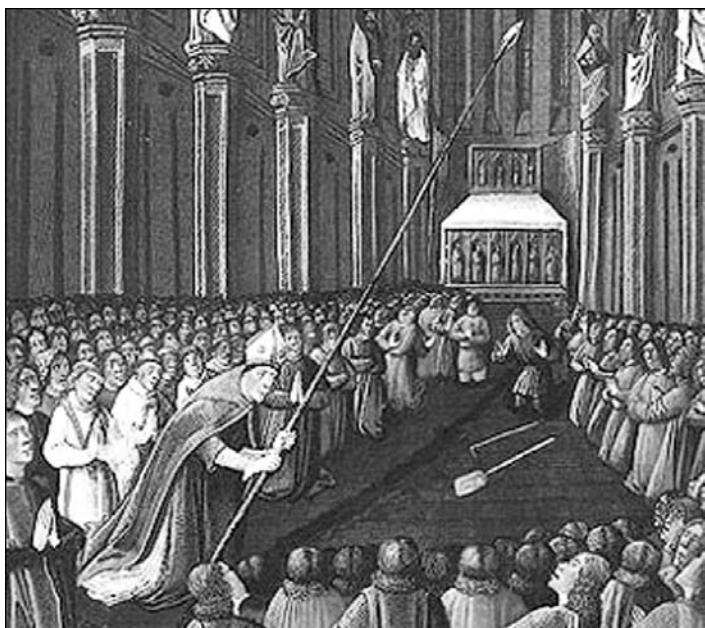
While some wanted to atone for their sins, others wanted to sample the delights of an exotic culture. The largest and most important group of pilgrims was recruited by Peter the Hermit, an apostle of the First Crusade and a native of Amiens in France. But although the participants in the “popular” crusade were numerous, only a tiny fraction of them were to succeed in reaching the Middle East; even fewer survived to see the ultimate triumph of the crusade at Jerusalem. In 1096, Peter the Hermit led his raggle-taggle band of pilgrims through Constantinople and onward to Asia Minor, where they were annihilated by the Turks while he was busy seeking help elsewhere. The “popular” crusaders were simply townspeople or peasants, many of whom had been caught up in the wave of folkish enthusiasm and religious piety that swept across medieval Europe. Their motives were clearly sound; it was their judgment that was flawed. It is easy to trivialize the hopes and desires of a past generation whilst looking back from an age in which the glossy travel brochure has achieved a god-like status of its own, but there remains little doubt that these 11th-century pilgrims were totally oblivious to the dangers such an expedition entailed.

So while I have accounted for the various motives behind the First Crusade, we must never lose sight of the fact that two distinct worlds had collided as a result of Islamic expansion at the vast expense of the Byzantine empire; a scenario in which the



Godfrey of Bouillon, the leader of the First Crusade, held that there could be only one king in Jerusalem, Jesus Christ, but his successors exercised no such scruple. The Kingdom of Jerusalem included three significant feudal dependencies as shown in the map above: the County of Edessa (1098-1144), the Principality of Antioch (1098-1268), and the County of Tripoli (1109-1289). Antioch and Edessa ended up acknowledging Byzantine suzerainty, which had been claimed from the first as part of the agreement with the crusaders when they passed through Constantinople. The fall of Edessa to Islam in 1144 set off the Second Crusade (1147-1149), but the city and county were never recovered. **At upper left** is a panoramic view of the mighty 12th century Krak des Chevaliers, situated on a hilltop in Syria. The word “*krak*” means castle or fortress. It is an extremely well preserved crusader castle. It was never breached during the crusades.

spiritual—and let us not forget the temporal—desires of Western Christendom were taken to extreme lengths in order to reassert the supremacy of Rome. Had the Turks been able to seize control of the East, Christianity would have been faced with an enemy the like of which the world had never seen. In reality, however, the Byzantine Empire was almost sacrificed completely during the cataclysmic struggle between the Earth’s most bitter rivals: Christianity and Islam—a struggle, perhaps, which has yet to be resolved because of the perceived decline of Christian values in our own era. History may be about to repeat itself. In the words of Hilaire Belloc: “We are divided in the face of a Mohammedan world, divided in every way—divided by separate



It was rumored at the time of the First Crusade that the Holy Lance (discovered by Helena, mother of Constantine) that pierced the side of Christ had been buried in St. Peter's Basilica in Antioch to prevent it from falling into the hands of the Saracens, who later captured the city and turned the church into a mosque. But where in the church it was buried, no one knew. On June 15, 1098, a group of knights and clergy, including Raymond of Toulouse, Raymond of Aguilers and Peter Barthelemy, a poor monk who had received a vision of where the lance could be found, began digging in St. Peter's. The head of a standard

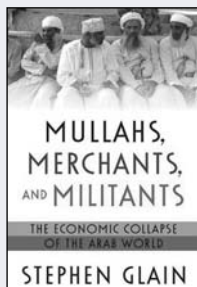
was found by Peter. Bishop Adhemar of Antioch was skeptical of Monk Peter's claims of holy visions and the veracity of the unearthed lance (Peter later died of "trial by fire" after suffering from massive burns for 12 days) but by then news of the discovery of the relic had spread. It was carried before the Christian army during the attack on Emir Kerbogha's fractious Saracen forces and a great victory was won. Some scholars believe that this lance is the one presently preserved at Etschmiadzin in Armenia. **Above left**, the lance displayed in St. Peter's in Antioch. **Right**, the famed Peter the Hermit leads a group of knights.

national rivalries, by the warring interests of possessors and dispossessed—and that division cannot be remedied because the cement which once held our civilization together, the Christian cement, has crumbled.”¹⁸

ENDNOTES:

Mullahs, Merchants and Militants: The Economic Collapse of the Arab World

By Stephen Glain. The author documents the cause of the decline of the Arab world which, 1,000 years ago, was the global trader, dominating other economies in ways that Western multinationals do today. The neo-con's policy in the Middle East will fail unless the Arabs once again establish a sound middle class. The author, a former journalist with the *Wall Street Journal*, takes Israel to task for its shortsightedness which is destroying all chances for peace in the Middle East. Read this book! #408, hardback, 350 pages, \$25.95 minus 10% for TBR subscribers. Add \$3 S&H per book inside the U.S.; \$6 S&H per book outside the U.S. Send payment with ordering form on page 80 of this issue to TBR BOOKS, P.O. Box 15877, Washington, D.C. 20003 or call 1-877-773-9077 toll free to charge to Visa or MasterCard. Order more books online at www.barnesreview.org.



¹ D.M. Nicol, "Byzantium and the Papacy in the Eleventh Century," in *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 1962, Vol. 13, 15.

² Kenneth M. Setton, *A History of the Crusades: Volume II*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1962, 125.

³ R.H.C. Davis, *A History of Medieval Europe: From Constantine to Saint Louis*.

⁴ Nicol, *op. cit.*, 17.

⁵ Pope Urban II at the Council of Clermont, November 27, 1095.

⁶ Marcus Bull, "The Pilgrimage Origins of the First Crusade" in *History Today* March 1997, 10.

⁷ Nicol, *op. cit.*, 18.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

⁹ Jonathan Phillips, "Who Were the First Crusaders?" in *History Today*, *op. cit.*, 16.

¹⁰ Nivelon of Freteval, in *A Charter to the Abbey of St. Peter of Chartres*, 1096.

¹¹ Davis, *op. cit.*, 269. Deutschen Reichstag, February 26, 1891, p. 1805.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 270.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 271.

¹⁶ Setton, *op. cit.*, 127.

¹⁷ Phillips, *op. cit.*, 19.

¹⁸ Hilaire Belloc, *The Crusade: The World's Debate*, Cassell, 1937, 306.

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TROY SOUTHGATE currently lives in Great Britain and is an up-and-coming writer within the national-anarchist movement. Southgate's website contains much of the recent theory of this new movement. Visit the site at www.national-anarchism.org