

History of the Crusades.  
Episode 13.  
The First Crusade IX.

Hello again. When we left the Crusaders last year, they had found themselves in a bizarre predicament. The good news was, after eight months of trying, they had finally managed to breach Antioch's walls and had taken over the city. The not so good news was that once inside, they found Antioch's stores depleted and discovered there was nothing much worth plundering. The bad news was, soon after taking the city a large Muslim force, led by Kerbogha of Mosul, surrounded Antioch, trapping the Crusaders inside.

Now, in case you had too much egg-nog over the holidays and have forgotten most of the previous episodes dealing with the siege of Antioch, these are the things you need to know. Tatikios, the representative of the Byzantine Emperor Alexius, abandoned the siege, so there is currently no one who can claim Antioch on behalf of the Emperor. Stephen of Blois also deserted the siege, strangely, on the morning of the very day that the Crusaders stormed the walls, and is currently making his way back home to Europe. Bohemond has taken a shine to the city. He wants Antioch. He wants it very, very badly, and has been doing everything in his power, overtly and covertly, to position himself to take possession of it. Right, everyone on board? Let us proceed.

This was the situation facing the Crusaders at Antioch. The entire Crusading forces now numbered less than 30,000 people, and a large number of these were non-combatants. They were down to around 150 horses. They did manage to procure a few hundred horses as part of Antioch's booty, but these horses have been educated in the way of Turkish warfare, and needed to be retrained before they could be of much use to the Crusaders. There is a pocket of Turkish resistance in the city. Shams al Dawla, the son of Antioch's Turkish ruler, who had worked tirelessly to seek military aid from neighboring rulers, was holed up in the fortified citadel high on Mount Silpius overlooking the city, with a handful of men from the Turkish garrison. And last but certainly not least, Kerbogha's army has surrounded the city, an army of 30,000 fresh, well fed, fully horsed men, all combatants, who are familiar with Antioch and the surrounding countryside. Hmm. Things really aren't looking that good for the Crusaders.

It was all too much for one knight. Roger of Barneville, a southern Italian Norman, spied a scouting party of thirty or so cavalymen from Kerbogha's army when they first arrived at Antioch. Before his brain had time to think things through, he, along with fifteen of his most experienced men, left the safety of Antioch's walls and charged out to confront the horsemen. The horsemen fled, and Roger the knight eagerly gave chase. Unfortunately for Roger, the Turks were using their classic tactic of feigned retreat, a strategy which the Crusaders seemed to fall for time after time. The thirty Turkish cavalymen led Roger and his men straight into a trap. They were soon surrounded by 300 Turkish horsemen, and were all killed. Roger's head was mounted on a Muslim spear and paraded in front of the walls for all to see. The Crusaders were able to recover his body, and Bishop Adhemar ensured he was buried with full honors in Saint Peter's Basilica within the city. Still, it was a bad start, and many Latin Christians viewed it as an omen of things to come.

But the Princes aren't going to give up that easily. Bohemond in particular, gets straight to work. They have two priorities. Firstly, to secure the citadel at the top of Mount Silpius, and secondly to maintain their line of supply to the port of St Symeon.

One of the first moves Kerbogha made when arriving at Antioch was to take command of the citadel from Shams al Dawla. Bohemond recognized the danger the city faced. It was clear that, if Kerbogha's men poured unimpeded out of the citadel and down the slopes of Mount Silpius and into the city, Antioch would be lost. Instead of launching an assault on the almost impregnable fortress, Bohemond established a defensive post opposite the citadel and to the south along the mountain ridge. From here, Bohemond was separated from the citadel only by a rocky valley. His plan was to use this position to prevent any Muslims using the path from the citadel down to the city. While Bohemond was making his preparations, Kerbogha's forces started massing in and around the citadel, in preparation for an attack.

Meanwhile, Robert of Flanders is doing his best to retain control of La Mahomerie, the tower the Crusaders painstakingly built near the Bridge Gate. The Crusaders appear to have abandoned the other two fortresses, Tancred's tower and Malregard, but control of La Mahomerie is vital if the Latin Christians are to maintain their line of supply to the nearby port of St Symeon. With 500 men, Robert of Flanders gallantly holds the fort against wave upon wave of Muslim attackers. After three days of resistance however, he sees the writing on the wall. Kerbogha has a huge army at his disposal and is able to send fresh troops to attack the tower at regular intervals. Robert of Flanders and his defenders are exhausted. They declare defeat and make their way back inside Antioch's walls, destroying La Mahomerie to prevent it falling into Kerbogha's hands.

Kerbogha's men continue massing outside the citadel and along the defensive walls containing the main gates to the city, then on the 10th of June, seven days after arriving at Antioch, he launches an all out assault on the city. His attack was two-pronged, concentrating on the citadel on Mount Silpius, as well as the gates in front of the city. The attacks were relentless. From dawn to dusk, Kerbogha's forces threw themselves at Antioch, with no respite. A Crusader involved in the defense of the city observed that "a man with food had no time to eat and a man with water no time to drink". The situation was desperate. The Latin Christians were exhausted and clearly facing a formidable foe.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, people began to desert the city, using rope ladders to lower themselves over the walls. They also began to lose hope. Bohemond, deep in his desperate defense of the upper part of the city near the Citadel, became aware that a number of men were hiding in quarters in the southwestern part of the city. Critically short of manpower, and with no time to find them and persuade them to rejoin the fighting, he ordered the houses in that sector to be burnt to the ground. The fire got out of control and nearly took out some of Antioch's prized old churches, but it had the desired effect. A number of fresh troops suddenly found themselves joining the defense of the city under Bohemond's command.

After four days of fighting, Kerbogha's forces ceased their assault. Like the Crusaders before him, he found Antioch's defensive walls too effective for his liking and, also like the Crusaders before him, he decided that encircling the city and starving the occupants into submission would be an easier way of taking Antioch. So the cordon tightened and the siege began.

Now there were a couple of external factors happening around this time, which would affect the siege and which we need to take a look at. The first concerned the nature of Kerbogha's army. To the Crusaders, the army appeared to be one massive united force,

but not so. In his book "The Crusades Through Arab Eyes", Amin Maalouf provides us with a behind-the-scenes look at what was actually happening within the Muslim camp. As we have discussed previously, Syria at this time was ruled by various men based in its main cities, all of whom held territorial ambitions. Kerbogha was the ruler of Mosul, but his forces were made up of men from across the region. When the Muslim forces reached Antioch, Shams al Dawla met with some of the Emirs who had joined the army. Shams berated them, asking why they had delayed so long in coming to Antioch's aid. If they had only come sooner, the Christians would have been caught outside the walls. They would not have taken the city, and many Muslim lives, including that of his father, would have been spared. Amin Maalouf reports that, instead of defending the decisions that had been made, the Emirs launched a tirade against their commander, calling him Kerbogha the Arrogant, the Pretentious, the Inept, the Coward. The instigator of anti-Kerbogha sentiment was none other than King Duqaq of Damascus, who had joined the Muslim force on its passage through Syria. He was there not to assist Kerbogha to defeat Latin Christians, but to counter Kerbogha's territorial ambitions.

As far as King Duqaq of Damascus and King Ridwan of Aleppo were concerned, the Franj were welcome to Antioch. Remember at this stage, the Muslims believed the Latin Christians to be mercenaries sent on behalf of the Rum, meaning the Romans or the Byzantines, to take the city. Antioch had been part of the Byzantine Empire a little more than a decade previously, and it wasn't surprising that Constantinople wanted it back. What they didn't want to see was Kerbogha taking Antioch. If that happened, Kerbogha would have control over a vast swathe of territory, and it would only be a matter of time before he turned his attentions and ambitions towards Aleppo and Damascus. So, as Amin Maalouf elegantly observed in relation to Kerbogha's forces, this superb army was a colossus with feet of clay, ready to collapse. But we should keep in mind that the Crusaders were unaware of this. They just saw the colossal army, and not the feet of clay.

The second major event happening at this time concerned the Emperor Alexius and Stephen of Blois. Alexius and the Byzantine forces have been spending their time productively, mopping up behind the Crusading army, and securing as much territory as possible for the Empire. A few days after Kerbogha's forces are resting following the assault on Antioch and are digging in for a siege, Alexius and his forces have united with another large Byzantine contingent, which has been securing cities such as Ephesus along the coast, and are resting at Philomelium, which is near Iconium in central Anatolia, before resuming their march to Antioch.

Around the 20th of June, Stephen of Blois arrives at Philomelium, along with a rag-tag bunch of fellow deserters, including two knights who had deserted Antioch after it had been surrounded by Kerbogha's army. They painted a grim picture of the events at Antioch, the striving in detail, the size of Kerbogha's forces, and the depleted and exhausted state of the Latin Christians. They swore that by now Antioch would have fallen to the Turks, and the Crusader army annihilated. Another deserter, who had abandoned his post at Comena in north eastern Anatolia, pitched in, saying that a Turkish army was advancing, preparing to attack the Byzantine forces as they marched to Antioch.

The Emperor had no reason to doubt the reports. Stephen of Blois was a respected senior member of the Crusading army. If he said that Antioch had fallen, and if reports were coming in that Kerbogha's huge army was now heading towards newly secured Byzantine territory, then it was time for action. He was head of a vast and unstable Empire, and his priorities lay with the security of that Empire. To proceed to Antioch to rescue the remains

of the Latin Christian forces would place his Imperial forces at too great a risk. The Emperor abandoned the idea of marching to Antioch, and instead turned his forces northwards, executing a scorched earth policy as they retreated, to slow the progress of the supposedly approaching Turkish force.

So there you have it. The Crusaders are now officially on their own. There are no Imperial forces coming to their rescue. It's unclear when this devastating news reached Antioch, but it made its way pretty quickly to Europe. Stephen of Blois was no doubt looking forward to an affectionate welcome from his beloved wife, to whom he had written such charming letters. But when he finally got home to France, his reception was decidedly frosty. Steven Runciman, in his book "The First Crusade", puts it nicely. After describing how the Crusaders never forgave Byzantium for abandoning them at Antioch, Steven Runciman goes on to say, and I quote, "The Crusaders realized that Stephen of Blois was also to be blamed. Their chroniclers talked angrily of his cowardice, and the story soon reached Europe. He himself returned, by easy stages, home to a wife who was furiously ashamed of him and who never rested till she had sent him out again to the east, to make atonement." Hmm, that's pretty funny.

So, anyway, in another disastrous twist of fate for the Crusaders, no outside help is forthcoming. So how are things in Antioch at the moment? Well, to say they are terrible would be an understatement. The Latin Christians are trapped inside Antioch, surrounded by a much larger army. No Byzantine forces are coming to save them. The Muslims still hold the citadel above the city. Their lines of supply to the port of St Symeon have been cut, and Kerbogha's cordon is starting to do the trick. They are beginning to starve. What little food there is available inside the city is sold at exorbitant prices. The non-combatants, and the rank-and-file members of the army who were low on funds, were forced to boil the leaves of thistles and plants and animal skins as food. Some of them chewed pieces of leather they found in homes. And morale, morale was rock bottom. Defeat was seen as inevitable. It was only a matter of time, a time in which there was much suffering to be endured. Everyone agreed: only a miracle could save the Crusaders.

On the 10th of June a peasant requested an audience with Bishop Adhemar and Count Raymond of Toulouse. His name was Peter Bartholomew, and he had embarked on the Crusade as the servant of a French pilgrim. Peter Bartholomew had a remarkable tale to tell. He had been visited by visions of the Apostle St Andrew and Christ himself, not once but many times. They had revealed to him that the Holy Lance, the Roman spear which had pierced Christ's side during the crucifixion, was buried inside Saint Peter's Basilica in Antioch. The visions urged Peter Bartholomew to find the Lance, so it could be used as a battle standard in their fight against the Muslims for, the Apostle said, whoever carried the Lance in battle could never be defeated.

Just a word here about religious relics in the Middle Ages. They were everywhere. Any church worth visiting had a relic of some sort, ranging from the most sought after, things like fragments of the cross and other items involved in the crucifixion, and body parts and garments from the apostles, right down to the other end of the spectrum, which included body parts of local saints and even the soil upon which the body of a local saint had lain. The Middle Ages were a time of faith and miracles, and these relics weren't just passive objects. They were seen as tangible manifestations of the Christian faith, and by being close to the relic, by praying at the relic for divine intervention, or by digesting the relic, in the case where the relic was made of soil, or dust, or wood, or even stone. Remember the sixty-foot-high pillar upon which St Symeon lived for 37 years? Remember that it's now just

a stump? That's because people kept scraping bits off, mixing it with water and drinking it. You could gain a greater connection with the divine, and your prayers may be answered.

Consider, for instance, if you had a sick child in the Middle Ages. Say your child was blind. Once your home remedies had failed to make any impact and your prayers had failed to heal the child, there weren't that many options available to you. You clearly couldn't take the child to a hospital or a medical practitioner specializing in restoring eyesight, because they didn't exist. What you could do was take the child to a local church and pray for a miraculous cure near a relic. Even better, you could take the child on a pilgrimage, to a church holding a more important relic, where the prayers for divine intervention would be further enhanced. And it might work. Some relics were so successful at working miracles that the Bishops of the church housing them kept a comprehensive list of the miracles they had produced.

Now, of course, there were questions over the authenticity of some of the relics. Relics weren't really collected until some 300 years after Christ died on the cross, and it's likely that a fair few of the relics were not what they claimed to be. But as long as they kept producing miracles, people didn't really mind. Some relics, in fact, accompanied the Crusaders. Bishop Adhemar reputedly carried a fragment of the True Cross with him at all times, while Raymond of Toulouse carried a chalice which had once belonged to a saint. Apparently, some relics had been obtained en route. A priest in Robert of Flanders' forces reputedly stole an arm of Saint George from a Byzantine monastery. Anyway, this gives you some idea of how momentous an event it would be to find the Holy Lance in Antioch.

Now, when Peter Bartholomew related his visions, Bishop Adhemar was skeptical. There was, after all, the Holy Lance on display at Constantinople. But then again, in Europe at this time, there were two heads of John the Baptist, so these things happened. So they decided there was no harm in looking. Peter Bartholomew was given permission to excavate inside Saint Peter's Basilica, and on the 14th of June, along with twelve helpers, he began to dig. The digging went on at length, until eventually, taa-daa, Peter Bartholomew raised a shard of metal into the air. He had found it: the tip of the Holy Lance.

Word spread through Antioch like wildfire and the effect on the Crusaders was remarkable. Finding the Lance was seen as evidence of God's favor, and in an instant, the feeling among the Crusaders that defeat was inevitable changed completely. To those of faith, victory was now inevitable.

Now I can imagine some of you are rolling your eyes and saying the whole thing must have been a set up, and you might be right. In reality, there are a number of things that could have happened. Firstly, the vision could've been concocted and the Lance planted, ready to find. Or the vision could have been true, at least for Peter Bartholomew, and the Lance planted to authenticate the vision. Or both the vision and the Lance may have been true, and un-manufactured.

The Muslims certainly thought the whole escapade was a set up. It's worth quoting the account of Ibn al-Athir who states, and I quote, "Among the Franj was Bohemond, their commander-in-chief, but there was also an extremely wily monk who assured them that a Lance of the Messiah, peace be upon him, was buried in the Kusyan, a great edifice of Antioch. He told them, 'if you find it, you will be victorious. Otherwise it means certain death.' He had earlier buried a lance in the soil of the Kusyan, and erased all his tracks. He

ordered the Franj to fast and make penance for three days. On the fourth day, he had them enter the building with their valets and workers, who dug everywhere and found the lance. The monk then cried out 'Rejoice for victory is certain.' " End of quote.

I guess we will never know whether the visions and the Lance were authentic, and to be honest, it doesn't really matter. What does matter was the effect the event had on the Crusade.

And just as an aside, in his recent book "Holy Bones, Holy Dust; How Relics Shaped the History of Medieval Europe", Charles Freeman states that the Lance found in Antioch is believed to be the one currently displayed beneath the Dome of St Peter's Basilica in the Vatican. But then again, it may also be the one which, in the Middle Ages, was displayed in Constantinople. Or since the Lance found in Antioch was really just a metal tip, the two may have been combined. Who knows?

Anyway, the finding of the Holy Lance was a morale-booster. Now, you might think, with their conviction that victory was certain, that the Crusaders would have gathered their weapons and launched an immediate attack on the Muslims encircling the city. But no, it didn't work like that. Even though their faith assured them of certain victory, cool heads to some extent prevailed, and 10 days after the lance was found, the Crusaders sent an envoy, to Kerbogha's camp to negotiate on their behalf.

Who did they choose to represent them? I'll give you a clue. The person needed to be both persuasive and expendable. Okay, here's another clue. He was short, scruffy, and barefooted, and his preferred mode of transport was riding a mule. Still no ideas? Okay, These two words should do it for you. Here we go. "Peasants' Crusade". Yes, you've got it. The person chosen by the Council of Princes to leave the safety of Antioch and walk into the midst of the Muslim forces to negotiate with Kerbogha himself was none other than, drum roll please, actually forget the drum roll, Peter the Hermit.

When you think about it, it's not such a surprising choice. Peter is clearly a very persuasive speaker. He did, after all, managed to convince tens of thousands of peasants to embark on a shambolic crusade that, to most sensible people, was doomed from the start. And he must have been held in some regard by the leaders of the Crusade, evidenced by the fact that he was brought back from desertion, while others, such as Stephen of Blois, were left to depart the expedition. Peter couldn't speak Kerbogha's language, so he was accompanied by an interpreter, a French Crusader who spoke both Arabic and Persian.

So what did Peter say when he met Kerbogha? Unfortunately, we don't actually know. Different accounts, by contemporary and later sources, range from Peter issuing an ultimatum to Kerbogha, telling him to leave Antioch immediately, to him proposing to settle the issue of the possession of Antioch by each side choosing an agreed number of soldiers who would then do battle, with the victors winning the city, to Peter asking for a conditional surrender, effectively asking Kerbogha for the safe passage of the Latin Christians out of the city. Clearly, these accounts differ wildly, and unfortunately, we'll never know what actually happened. What we do know is that Peter's envoy was unsuccessful. Kerbogha sent Peter back into the city with a message that he would accept nothing less than the unconditional surrender of the Christian forces.

Since this was unacceptable to the Crusaders, a brave decision was made. The half-starved, near-horseless Crusader army would take on the might of the combined Muslim forces. They were going into battle.

Bohemond took command. He would need all his skills in strategy and tactics. The Crusader forces were now infantry based. They were down to so few horses that the leaders themselves were struggling to find mounts, and the horses they had were half-starved and weakened. The Christians had in fact taken to drinking blood from the animals, in a desperate attempt to ward off starvation. So footmen and archers were what Bohemond had to work with. And while they were half starved, the men who were left at this stage of the siege were tough and battle-honed. And they would need to be. Kerbogha's army was cavalry based, well fed, and much larger than the Christian army.

The battle plan Bohemond came up with was this. The Crusaders would break through the cordon around the city. The Bridge Gate was chosen as the exit point, due to the fact that the river would limit the movement of the Muslim forces. Hugh of Vermandois was chosen to lead a squadron of archers to push back the Muslim army, and the plan was for the rest of the Crusading forces to march over the bridge to the plains of Antioch, where they would face Kerbogha's army in battle. Leadership of the army was divided as follows. Robert of Normandy and Robert of Flanders would lead the northern French. Godfrey of Bouillon was in charge of the Lotharingians and Germans. Bishop Adhemar led the southern French, and Bohemond placed himself in charge of the southern Italian Normans. Once the Bridge Gate was cleared, the plan was for the contingent to march over the bridge and deploy to the left of those in front of them, fanning out in a rough semi circle. They would then be in a position to take on the might of the Muslim army. The plan was bold, audacious, and bore all the hallmarks of Bohemond's talent for military command.

Now, the observant amongst you might be wondering what happened to Raymond of Toulouse, as he wasn't mentioned amongst the leaders. Well, he was sick, so Bohemond ordered 200 soldiers to remain inside Antioch and guard the citadel. Raymond of Toulouse, was given command of these men from his sick bed. Some historians have implied that Raymond's illness may have been feigned, but that's just speculation.

Right. On the 28th of June 1098, after a siege lasting nine long months, the members of the First Crusade are about to take the fight to the Muslims, in an engagement that will later be known as the Great Battle of Antioch. Everyone ready? Right, let's go.

At dawn on the 28th of June, Hugh's archers are in place, and columns of soldiers under their various leaders are lining up near the Bridge Gate. Clergy line the walls, saying prayers and blessing the soldiers. Bohemond orders the Bridge Gate to be opened, and Shams al Dawla, high in the citadel above the city, sees what's happening and raises a black flag to alert Kerbogha. Hugh's forces let fly a wave of arrows into the Muslim cordon surrounding the city, and columns of Crusaders begin to march through the gate.

Kerbogha at this moment has a choice to make. His men are spread out pretty thinly as they have been guarding the walls all around the city. Still, he could order them to gather and attack the Latin Christians as they are streaming across the Bridge Gate. Strangely, very strangely in fact, he doesn't do this. Many have speculated why he didn't order an immediate attack. Some have suggested that he was in the middle of a game of chess in his tent and didn't want to be interrupted, which you would have to say is unlikely. Others

have postulated that he wished to face the entirety of the Crusading army on the battlefield, where they could be annihilated once and for all.

Whatever the reason, when the leading Christians marched over the Bridge Gate, the might of Kerbogha's army failed to react. There were skirmishes, of course. The Muslims guarding the Bridge Gate fought back, and as the Crusaders were making their way to the plains to get ready for battle, Muslims who had been blockading the gates of the Duke, the Dog Gate, and Saint Paul's gate attacked them from the side and the rear. But Bohemond had anticipated this. The Christian forces not only held their ground but engaged the Muslim forces, remaining in their tightly ordered columns. As Kerbogha was still massing his main forces, the Crusaders managed to overrun their Muslim opponents, who fled back towards Kerbogha.

Remember earlier in this episode where we discussed King Duqaq of Damascus' concerns about Kerbogha being victorious at Antioch? Well, at this moment, King Duqaq quietly takes his forces and deserts the battlefield, followed by the forces from other cities not aligned with Mosul. The fleeing front-line forces then collide with the remaining advancing Muslim forces, and chaos breaks out. Kerbogha's army, seeing so many of their compatriots deserting, breaks and fractures. It disintegrates and scatters. Kerbogha is forced into retreat. Fearing some sort of trick, the Crusaders do not give chase, but overrun Kerbogha's camp, finding gold, silver and furnishings, but perhaps even better, sheep, oxen, horses, mules, camels, corn, wine, flour, and other supplies which were desperately needed. The remaining Muslim forces in the citadel surrender, and Kerbogha manages to make his way back to Mosul, his reputation and ambitions in tatters.

The Great Battle of Antioch resulted in an unexpected and decisive victory for the Crusaders. Its impact on the outcome of the First Crusade can not be overstated.

So there we have it. After nine long months of hardship and suffering, against seemingly insurmountable odds, and after three long podcast episodes, the Siege of Antioch is over. Well, I hear you say, I guess there's just a quick and easy march to Jerusalem coming up next. Wrong. Join us next week as we face discord, conflict and some dark, dark days in the Crusader camp.

For further reading this week, I recommend Charles Freeman's book "Holy Bones and Holy Dust; How Relics Shaped the History of Medieval Europe". It may be a bit of an obscure topic, but it really is very interesting. Until next week, bye for now.

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