Byzantine Anxiety and the Crusades

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From the First Crusade to the end of the twelfth century, Byzantium was the only major Chrristian power in close proximity to the Near East. Armies fighting for the first three Crusades all passed through Byzantine territory, and Byzantium frequently involved itself in the affairs of the Crusader states. As a result, the relationship between Byzantium and the Crusaders (Or the Latins, as the Byzantines called them[1]), played a significant role in the overall development of both the Crusader states of Outremer and of the Byzantine Empire itself. This essay will examine the question as to exactly how consistent the Byzantine attitude towards the Crusaders was, and how the attitudes of the Byzantine Empire explains their interactions with the Crusaders and the Crusader states. The twelfth century was one of great upheaval for the Byzantine Empire, seeing both the height and collapse of the Komnenoi rulers of the Empire, as well as a fundamental shift in the nature of Crusading itself. By investigating the reigns of Alexios Komnenos, John Komnenos, Manuel Komnenos, and Isaac Angelos, and how they interacted with the first three Crusades and the Crusader states, one can determine that despite the very visible changes in circumstances, and the strong personalities which dominate the period, for both the Latins and the Byzantines, the actions of the Byzantine Empire reveal that there was one overarching and continuous constant in the attitudes of the Byzantines towards the Crusaders — apprehension and anxiety about the security risks that the Crusaders posed to the Empire.

A lot of ink has been spilled discussing the reasons for western European, and Crusader mistrust of the Byzantines, but in order to understand the Byzantine attitudes toward the Crusaders in the twelfth century one must first understand that this mistrust went both ways. Much of this mistrust predated the twelfth century, and permeated the Byzantine relationship with the Crusaders throughout. Past historians have placed a great deal of emphasis on the religious and cultural differences between the Greek Byzantines and the Latin Crusades, such as the inclusion of the Filioque in the Nicene Creed, the use of leavened or unleavened bread in the

[1] For consistency and clarity, the term “Latin” will be used in the sense that it was meant by the Byzantines, that is, as an umbrella term which encompasses the people of Western Europe and the Western European settlers in the Crusader states — members of the Latin church of Rome. “Crusader” will be used only to refer to those actually on Crusade.

eucharist, and the cultural differences associated between the imperial structure of the Byzantine state (and aristocracy) and the feudal military aristocracy of the Latins.[2] These differences form the basis of what Jonathan Harris refers to as the "clash of civilizations" hypothesis, which argues that the Crusades brought two fundamentally irreconcilable cultures together, leading to growing hostility between the two societies over the course of the twelfth century. However, most modern historians reject this hypothesis for a variety of reasons, one of the most significant being that the Crusaders and Byzantines were able to work closely together for extended periods of time throughout the century, namely by intermarrying and serving as mercenaries.[3] More compellingly, Chris Wright argues that the reason as to why the Byzantines could never get fully behind the Crusading movement was that the very concept of Crusading diminished Byzantium's role as the "sole worldly authority and protector of the church".[4] This explains why from the very outset of the Crusades, Byzantium engaged with the concept of the Crusade on a more pragmatic level as opposed to the more ideological approaches of the Latins in Western Europe. Rather than a building crescendo of antagonism, this essay will argue against the "clash of civilizations" theory, instead suggesting that Byzantine attitude towards the Crusaders in the twelfth remained largely constant.

Even though the First Crusaders entered Byzantine territory at the invitation of the Emperor Alexios, the Emperor's past interactions with the Latins ensured that Alexios would treat the Crusaders with caution and even suspicion. The past interaction in question was the Norman invasion of the 1080s, which saw Norman armies led by Robert Guiscard and his son Bohemond, the latter of whom would play a leading role in the First Crusade, attempt to conquer Byzantine territory. Guiscard first launched an invasion which conquered the last remaining Italian territories of the Byzantine Empire,[5] and then set his sights on the Balkan, wherein he and his son established a foothold in the key port city of Dyrrachium, defeating an army led by Alexios in the process.[6] Although Alexios was eventually able to dislodge the Norman conquerors from their foothold in Dyrrachium, the severe defeat that the Normans inflicted upon

[2] Jonathan Harris, *Byzantium and the Crusades* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 2-4.
[3] Harris, *Byzantium and the Crusades*, 2-4.
[4] Chris Wright, "On the Margins of Christendom: The Impact of the Crusades on Byzantium" in *The Crusades and the Near East: Cultural Histories*, ed. Conor Kostick (London: Routledge, 2011), 61.
[5] Christopher Tyerman, *God's War: A New History of the Crusades* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of University of Harvard Press, 2006), 14.
[6] William B. McQueen, "Relations Between the Normans and Byzantium 1071-1112", *Byzantion 56*, (1986): 442.

Alexios in 1081 pointedly illustrated the dangers Latin armies posed to Byzantium and historians such as Michael Angold, have argued that in the decade prior to the First Crusade the Normans were at least as much of a threat to the Byzantine Empire as the Turks were.[7] The experiences of the 1080s undoubtedly coloured the Byzantine perception of the Crusaders in the decades that followed. In her history of her father's reign, Anna Komnene refers to the crusaders as "barbarians",[8] and while this pejorative term could be attributed to cultural prejudice (which certainly existed) it nevertheless reflects the dim view that the Byzantines took towards the Latins. Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that from the outset of the First Crusade, Alexios was aware of the potential threat the Crusaders posed, namely the risk of the Latins turning on Byzantium by carving themselves kingdoms from imperial territory. When discussing Peter the Hermit, Anna makes reference to Latins who "had long coveted the Roman Empire and wished to acquire it for themselves".[9] Alexios' awareness of this risk is further supported by the actions he took to prevent it from occurring. The first step he took was extracting oaths from the Crusading leaders, wherein the leaders promised to return any territory that had once been part of the Empire to Alexios.[10] The very fact that Alexios' extracted this oath suggests that he was aware of the threat the Crusaders posed. Alexios also used the fragmented nature of the Crusaders' arrival to separate them by ferrying the earlier arrivals across to Asia minor before the later leaders arrived,[11] preventing the Crusaders from building up an army outside the walls of Constantinople. These cautious measures strongly suggest that Alexios was anxious about the threat that the Crusaders posed to the security of the Empire.

John Komnenos, the son and successor of Emperor Alexios I is often overlooked in accounts of Byzantine and Crusading history. This is somewhat understandable, as the reigns of his predecessor and successor were both longer and more eventful, as they coincided with the First and Second Crusades. However, in order to understand the Byzantine attitude towards the Crusaders, John's reign is significant as it highlights the continuity of Byzantine policy towards the West, specifically Byzantium's continual awareness of the threat posed by Crusades. Historian Johnathan Harris posits that "if there was a precise moment when it began to dawn on

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[7] Michael Angold, *The Byzantine Empire 1025-1204: A Political History* (New York: Longman Press, 1984), 107–109.
[8] Anna Kommene, *The Alexiad*. trans. E.R.A Sewter (London: Penguin, 2009), 276.
[9] Anna Komenene, *The Alexiad*, 279.
[10] Thomas Asbridge, *The Crusades: The War for the Holy Land* (London: Harper Collins, 2010), 50-52.
[11] Asbridge, *The Crusades*, 50-52.

some members of the Byzantine ruling classes that their ideology, policies and tactics were slowly alienating them from the Christians of the West, it was probably the winter of 1189-1190".[12] That is, according to Harris, it was not until the third Crusade and the arrival of the hostile Kaiser Frederick Barbarossa, that it became clear to the Byzantines that they were alienating themselves from the Latin world, and that this alienation posed a potential threat. The reign of John Komnenos undercuts this claim, as he very clearly factored in the threat they could pose to the Empire in his dealings with the Crusader states. Of particular interest is the agreement that John reached with Raymond of Antioch in the year 1137, wherein Raymond would cede Antioch to John, but only once the condition that John conquer Aleppo and give it to Raymond as compensation had been met. [13] This agreement completely undercuts the notion that the Byzantines of the early twelfth century were unaware of the potential consequences of alienating western Europe. Unlike the Crusading forces proper, as a rule the Crusader states did not pose a direct military threat to the Byzantine Empire. The distance between the Byzantine heartlands in the Balkans, combined with the obvious threat posed by the Islamicate empires immediately bordering the Crusader states, meant that even if the armies of Outremer were superior to those of Byzantium, there was no possibility of them ever being offensively deployed against the Empire. At this moment in time, it was also true that the forces of Antioch were unable to even defend themselves against John, who had just conquered the lands of Cilicia from Antioch. Therefore, it is clear that John's hesitancy about conquering the city outright was not due to any misgivings about his chances in battle, but about the political repercussions of eliminating one of the Crusader states entirely.[14] This demonstrates that the Byzantines were very much concerned about provoking a Western response, even as early as 1137/38 when it was unclear if there even could be such a thing as a Second Crusade. It is also worth considering John's exact relationship with Raymond — namely that John assumed a loose form of fealty over him, not unlike the oaths which Alexios had the Crusaders take.[15]

John's diplomatic interactions with the Latins went beyond simply avoiding outright provocations. In 1138, when Pope Innocent II publicly condemned Emperor John II for his

[12] Harris, *Byzantium and the Crusades*, 147.
[13] Anthony Kaldelis, *The New Roman Empire: A History of Byzantium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 669.
[14] Ralph-Johannes Lilie, *Byzantium and the Crusader States* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 120–121.
[15] Ioannes Kinnamos. *Deeds of John and Manuel Comnenus: By John Kinnamos*. trans. Charles M. Brand. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 24.

attempts to reincorporate Antioch into the Byzantine Empire, John responded by floating the potential for the reunification of the Greek and Latin churches.[16] This shows that the Byzantines were aware of the possibility of Latin aggression, and were actively taking steps in order to ensure that they would not be the target of a Crusade well before the end of the century. Furthermore, although Manuel I is often credited with being a unique and visionary Emperor who saw the benefits of befriending the Latins, the exchange between John and Innocent II proves that his predecessors were also capable of assessing the Latins as a threat and engaging them in diplomacy. All this goes to show that throughout John's reign, the Byzantines were acutely aware of the potential threat posed by a Crusade, and were anxious enough about it to take measures to avoid provoking one against them.

Although the reign of Manuel Komnenos is often perceived as signalling a shift in Byzantine attitudes towards the Latins there is remarkable continuity between the attitudes of Manuel and his predecessors towards Crusades. Specifically, Manuel maintained his predecessors' goal of extending Byzantine control over Outremer, most especially towards Antioch, as well as an extremely cautious approach when it came towards the Crusades themselves. That is to say, even though Manuel I has a reputation for being a Latinophile, when one takes a look at his interactions with the Crusaders and the Crusader states, it becomes clear that just as Manuel's predecessor John II was more diplomatic in his dealings with the Latins than he is often given credit for, Manuel was not as much of a Latinophile as his reputation would suggest. The most apparent way in which the Emperor Manuel interacted with the Crusaders came in 1147, during the second Crusade, when King Louis VII and Frederick Barbarossa followed in the footsteps of the first Crusade by marching their armies through the Byzantine Empire and Asia minor. It is noteworthy that one of the primary Byzantine sources for the second Crusade, *The Deeds of John and Manuel Comnenus* by John Kinnamos mirrors *The Alexiad* in referring to the Latins as barbarians.[17] Although this point is relatively minor, it suggests that the view of Latins as barbarous was widespread in Byzantium (at least among the educated class), as opposed to being the result of Anna Komnena's personal biases.

The second Crusade provides an excellent piece of evidence demonstrating the

[16] Kaldelis, *The New Roman Empire*, 669.
[17] Kinnamos, *The Deeds of John and Manuel Commenus*, 65.

limitations of Manuel's Latinophilia. Manuel clashed with the first wave of German Crusaders under Emperor Conrad, when Manuel attempted to divert the Crusaders away from Constantinople, suggesting that they march towards Gallipoli to make the crossing over to Asia at the Dardanelles instead. Conrad resisted this suggestion and continued to march towards Constantinople, which Manuel responded to by attacking the German army, inflicting a defeat on the German Emperor.[18] This shows remarkable continuity with the policies of his grandfather in that his primary goal was to impose his authority over the Crusaders, and to ensure that they would not pose a threat to Constantinople. Just as Alexios used the wealth of the Empire and transport over to Asia as leverage over the Crusaders, Manuel used military force to extract concessions. While these are ostensibly different approaches, in both cases it is abundantly clear that the primary motivation was to preserve the territorial integrity of the Empire, and mitigate the danger that the Crusaders posed.

Another one of Manuel's most telling interactions with the Latins came when he assisted King Amalric of Jerusalem in his attempted conquest of Egypt. Manuel married a Byzantine princess to King Amalric, forming a marriage alliance, which was honoured when Manuel provided approximately two hundred ships as well as supplies in order to support King Amalric's amphibious invasion of Egypt. The invasion of Egypt was a complete failure that ended in a humiliating retreat.[19] While it is unclear whether or not the joint campaign in Egypt ever had achance of success, Kinnamos attributes the defeat to the treachery of King Amalric, who shirked his military obligations.[20] However, Manuel's eagerness to commit considerable resources in support of alliances with the Crusader states is worth investigation. While it is clear that the Kingdom of Jerusalem benefited from the alliance with Byzantium due to considerable Byzantine support in the form of money and seapower, it is less obvious what exactly Manuel gained from the alliance. Certainly, Amalric was not in a position to be providing the same kind of material support for the Byzantines, even if he was so inclined. Historian Anthony Kaldelis argues that Manuel was attempting to create a network of Latin client states in Outremer, acting as their principal benefactor.[21] By doing this Manuel temporarily supplanted the role of Western Europe as the patron of the Crusader states, rendering Crusades from Europe unnecessary, which

[18] Harris, *Byzantium and the Crusades*, 104-105.
[19] Angold, *Byzantine Empire 1025-1204*, 187–188.
[20] Kinnamos, *Deeds of John and Manuel Commenus*, 209.
[21] Kaldelis, 685.

in turn had the benefit of preventing additional Crusading armies from marching through Byzantine territory. Therefore, although Manuel has an excellent reputation in Latin chronicles and is perceived as a Latinophile,[22] it is very clear that he regarded the Crusaders as a threat and went to great lengths in order to mitigate the potential dangers posed by the Crusading movement, explaining his role as a patron and suzerain (at least in name) of the states of Outremer as well as his lukewarm response to the Second Crusade.

The last Emperor of major significance to the discussion of Byzantine attitudes towards the Crusades is Isaac Angelos. Although there were other Byzantine rulers in the late twelfth century, it was Isaac Angelos who was given the unenviable task of managing the passage of the third Crusade, and as such is the most relevant when answering the question of continuity in Byzantine attitudes towards the Crusaders. While the Empire had been in a relatively strong position during the passage of the first two Crusades, the passage of the third Crusade (in 1189) could hardly have come at a worse time for the Byzantines. For one thing, their diplomatic reputation with the West was at an all time low, as Isaac's predecessor Andronikos Komnenos had allowed a massacre of Italians in 1182.[23] On top of that, Isaac's status as a usurper meant that he was in a much weaker position than his Komnenoi predecessors. While the third Crusade is often correctly perceived as different to the first two in that many of the Crusading armies arrived via ship, a shift from armies which marched overland in 1097 and 1147, this apparent shift did not mean much for the Byzantine Empire. This was the case for several reasons. For starters, Richard the Lionheart demonstrated that naval passage of Crusaders could also be damaging for the Empire, as his conquest of Cyprus permanently detached the island from the Empire.[24] Of far greater significance however, was the army of Frederick Barbarossa which travelled to Palestine via the Balkans, meaning that the Byzantine Empire once again was in the unenviable position of playing host to a Crusading army. Isaac imprisoned the German ambassadors, and attempted to extract promises of loyalty and half of all captured territory from Frederick Barbarossa, much as his predecessors had done. He also deployed his army in close proximity to the German one, in order to pressure them into compliance.[25] While most of these actions (excepting the imprisonment of ambassadors) were not especially dissimilar to the

[22] Kaldelis, 684.
[23] Harris, 121-122.
[24] Asbridge, *The Crusades*, 429–430.
[25] Harris, 143-145.

approach taken by Isaac's predecessors, the outcome most assuredly was. The Germans attacked Isaac's army, defeated it, and forced him to release the German ambassadors, grant the Germans passage to Asia, and pay an indemnity.[26] The key takeaway from the story of Isaac Angelos and the third Crusade is that the Byzantine attitudes towards remained largely constant, it was the reactions of the Crusaders that changed. His attempt to impose his will on the Crusaders who passed through Byzantine territory, although unwise, reflects the same anxieties that the Kommenoi Emperors had about the Crusaders with the key change being that Isaac lacked the ability to meaningfully control the Crusaders as Alexios and Manuel did.

The fundamental undercurrent of Byzantine attitudes towards the Crusaders in the twelfth century was one of anxiety; the Crusaders were a threat to be managed as opposed to an inherent friend or foe. The differences in circumstances over time and personal character of the various Emperors sometimes resulted in different strategies being employed in order to maintain the security of the Empire: Alexios extracted oaths from the Crusaders, his son John utilised the tempting possibility of Church union, Manuel built a network of client states in Outremer, and the usurper Isaac attempted to cow the Crusaders with military force. Although these strategies had varied results, it is clear overall that the attitude towards the Crusaders themselves was remarkably consistent over the course of the twelfth century, and demonstrated anxieties about the potential for Crusades to become weaponized against the Byzantines themselves, a fear that, in spite of all the efforts taken to prevent it in the twelfth century, would become the Byzantine reality in the thirteenth.

[26] Ibid.

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