

**WILLIAM OF TYRE : A HISTORIAN OF THE CRUSADES AND THE
KINGDOM OF JERUSALEM (c.1130-84)**

by

PETER W. EDBURY

(University College Cardiff)

No one can read very far in any study of the crusades to the Eastern Mediterranean in the twelfth century AD without coming across references to William, archbishop of Tyre, and his historical writing. William's History covers the period of the First Crusade of 1095-9/488-92 and then describes the fortunes of the Kingdom of Jerusalem, the kingdom set up by the crusaders in Palestine immediately after the Crusade, from then until his own day, stopping in the year 1184/580. It is a major work of medieval historical writing, much of it our only source for the events concerned. It is also a long work - the new edition of the Latin text fills about a thousand pages, as does the older and well-known English translation of Babcock and Krey.⁽¹⁾

William's History is an essential source of information for the history of the states founded by the crusaders in the twelfth century, but, as is true of all historians, his information was not invariably correct and his understanding sometimes may have been wrong. He also wrote with a purpose - medieval writers of history, at least those in the intellectual of western Europe, did not write history simply for its own sake - and, like all men who hope to influence their readers, his intentions in writing would have shaped what he had to say and how he said it.

Some appreciation of William's message and his intentions are important for all modern historians who want to use his work. We need to understand why he wrote in the way he wrote if we are to be able to assess the historical value of his statements. We also need to know when he is being a propagandist and for what, just as we need to know when he is well informed and when his information is less likely to be correct.

The easiest approach to his history is consider the man himself and the circumstances under which he was writing. In fact we know quite a lot

about his career. In 1962 Professor R.B.C. Huygens of Leiden University discovered the missing chapter (Book XIX, chapter 12) in which William told of his own early career and his studies in western Europe⁽²⁾. It had long been known that there was such a chapter - in several manuscripts its heading is included in the table of contents - but in all the manuscripts except one it is lacking, and it so happens that no one had previously studied this particular copy of the work. (Unfortunately the chapter has never to my knowledge been translated out of the original Latin into any modern language; Babcock and Krey, the two scholars responsible for the English translation, were at work long before 1962.) Thanks to this discovery we now have far more information about William's personal history. He seems to have been borne around 1130/524 in Jerusalem itself, a member of a leading burghess family. For almost twenty years he studied in western Europe - in France at Paris, Chartres and Orleans and in Italy at Bologna - and eventually, in 1163/560, he returned to the Kingdom of Jerusalem. Like all educated men of his age he was destined for a career as a churchman, and he soon received ecclesiastical posts in the cathedrals at Akko and Tyre. But in fact he had entered the service of the king of Jerusalem, King Amalric. It was common at this time throughout western Christendom for kings to employ priests in government service, rewarding them with church appointments over which they had influence, and William, as an educated man who embarked upon a career in government employment in this manner, was typical of his age.

In 1168/563 Amalric sent William on an embassy to the Byzantine emperor, Manuel Comnenus. Then from 1170/565 he was the tutor to Amalric's son and future successor, the leper king Baldwin IV, and indeed William claimed that he himself had been the first to realize that the young prince was suffering from leprosy. He also tells us that Amalric had asked him to write his history and also a history of the Muslim world which alas has not survived, although I do not think we should read too much into these statements. Certainly in its completed form the work is not an "official" history of the kingdom, and Amalric himself emerges from its pages as one of the least attractive of the kings.

In 1174/569 King Amalric died. His son Baldwin was too young to rule and so after a brief interlude a regency was established under Amalric's cousin, Count Raymond III of Tripoli. It was presumably thanks to Raymond's patronage that towards the end of 1174/570 William became chancellor of the kingdom and then in 1175/571 archbishop of Tyre. As

archbishop of Tyre he ranked second only to the patriarch of Jerusalem in the Church; as chancellor he was in charge of the royal writing office.

It is at this point that we get into difficulties. As we read the History we find William emphasizing his ecclesiastical role: conducting funerals, attending Church councils and the like. To a large extent he gives the impression of having withdrawn from royal service and to have been concentrating on his religious duties. In 1177/572-3 it is true he was engaged in diplomatic dealings with Count Philip of Flanders, and in 1182/578 he was appointed a receiver of taxes. But these tasks may not have amounted to very much. As for his role as chancellor, we find that in the mid 1170s he had a deputy to perform his functions for him, and in 1183/578 he leaves us in no doubt that he was absent from the important council which appointed Guy of Lusignan regent for the king who by now was very ill with leprosy. So it looks as if William had become a conscientious bishop and had largely given up being a royal servant and politician.

The problem is did he choose to concentrate on his duties as an archbishop, or was he forced out of politics by his opponents and so had little else to keep him occupied? Most of the books give the impression that for much of Baldwin's reign William was in a political wilderness. Raymond of Tripoli was out of power from 1176 until 1183, while his enemies led by the queen mother were in the ascendant, and, so the story goes, William suffered because he had been Raymond's protégé. Is this accepted opinion correct? I'm not sure that it is. It is true that in one place William launches into an attack on the queen mother. It is also true that in 1180/576 he was passed over for promotion to the patriarchate of Jerusalem in favour of Eraclius, the archbishop of Caesarea. In the past Eraclius has had a bad press, but recent work has stressed his abilities; it may well be that his appointment was largely on merit and that the scandalous allegations against him were no more than hostile gossip.⁽³⁾ Concerning all these issues there is much that has to remain uncertain – as also for example there is over the date of William's own death. But rather than allow myself to become enmeshed in the finer details of the subject of William's career in the time of Baldwin IV – a subject which could occupy a whole lecture – I should like to think more generally about his one great surviving historical work

Scholar, politician, diplomat – William of Tyre was all three. We know that he had begun work on his history by 1169/564 because in one place he explicitly tells us so. He was still writing in 1184/580 as he makes clear in his prologue, and he ends with events from the early part of that year. So he was at work over a fifteen-year period. This is a long time, and there are three developments which were taking place during these years which are essential if we are to understand his History and the assumptions which lie behind it.

(1) The growth of Muslim power. In the 1160s King Amalric of Jerusalem was on the offensive. The Fatimid regime in Egypt was weak and Amalric was attempting first to place Egypt under tribute and then to conquer it.

But this aggressive policy failed. As is well known, Nur al-Din, the ruler of Damascus and Aleppo, sent his army to Egypt, and in 1169/565 his commander, Shirkuh, took power. Shirkuh was followed by his nephew Salah al-Din, and in 1171/566 Salah al-Din did away with the Fatimid dynasty once and for all. When in 1174/569 Nur al-Din died, Salah al-Din usurped power in Damascus. The kingdom of Jerusalem was now surrounded. Until 1183/579 Salah al-Din concentrated his efforts on capturing Aleppo, but from 1174/569 the Muslims were a far greater threat to the crusaders than ever before, and William of Tyre was clearly well aware of this fact.

(2) The problem of Baldwin IV. Baldwin was a leper. At the time when the Muslim threat to their kingdom was greater than ever, the crusaders settled in the East had saddled themselves with a king who was chronically ill and so unlikely to be able to give either the political or the military leadership required. Because of his illness he could not marry and have heirs, and so at his death there was certain to be a dynastic crisis. Under these circumstances it comes as no surprise to find that political factions developed among the baronage of the kingdom.

(3) The decline of Byzantine influence. In the past the Byzantine empire had intervened directly to aid the crusaders in the East. In 1169/564-5 there had been a joint expedition against Egypt and as late as 1177/572-3 there were proposals for another joint expedition. In the 1150s people had believed that the Byzantine under Manuel Comnenus could and would aid the Crusaders. But after about 1170 things were going wrong. In 1176/571 Manuel was defeated by the Turks at Myriokephalon: at the

same time the fleet was being run down; in Cilicia the Armenians were taking control. In 1180-576 Manuel died, and his death was followed by a prolonged and bloody dynastic crisis. By the mid 1180s Byzantium could do nothing to help the crusaders even if the emperor had wanted to, and the emperor had wanted to, and the emperor, the violently anti-western Andronicus Comnenus, did not want to.

So in the years that William of Tyre was at work there was a growing Muslim threat, the king was an invalid and the crusaders could no longer expect any help from Byzantium.

So how did he set about writing? As I said earlier, he returned to Palestine in 1165/560. His account of the early 1160s is thin, but suddenly, in 1167/562 with the description of King Amalric's largely successful campaign of that year into Egypt he becomes very detailed. It could well be that this was the first thing he wrote. Some historians have gone further and have suggested that his original intention was simply to write a history of King Amalric's reign, perhaps modelled on Einhard's life of Charlemagne. William, writing at Amalric's request, could have started with the intention of telling the story of his king's conquest of Egypt. It was not to be, and even if William had started with this intention, the finished work as it survives to this day is completely different.

William wrote in Latin, and so there can be little doubt that he intended that his work should be read by other clergy – normally the only people who would have been capable of reading it. The opening books retell the history of the First Crusade and here William adapted the earlier writings he had at his disposal including the *Gesta Francorum*, Fulcher of Chartres, Albert of Aachen or perhaps a common source that he and Albert both used. After the First Crusade we find an increasing use of material not to be found in any of the surviving chronicles. The best of these sources is Fulcher of Chartres who had taken his account as far as 1127/521. So William either had other writings available to him which have not survived, or was relying on the memories of men and women older than himself to cover the period from the 1120s until his own return to the East in 1165/560. It is not surprising therefore that we find his chronology is slightly wrong in places or his information inadequate. For example, he was frequently in error concerning the accession dates of the kings of Jerusalem, and in writing about the Second Crusade of

1147-8/542-3 it is clear that he did not know much about what actually happened either in Asia Minor or at Damascus.

After 1165/560 William was back in the East and was an eyewitness. But of what? Reading his account carefully it would seem that he did not ever go with the army on campaign as many other clergy did. He was well-placed as a royal servant and archbishop to know what was going on, but he seems not to have been a participant in much of what he describes.

But anyhow, William worked away at his history; tutor to the future king; then chancellor and archbishop. Exactly how fast he worked and how his work proceeded is hard to tell. But what we do know is that in the early 1180s he was engaged in making extensive revisions. Every so often he makes statements which draw attention to this fact, and most if not all of these instances were duly noted by Krey in the footnotes to his translation. What I believe happened was this. In 1179/575 William attended the Third Lateran Council. This was a gathering of catholic bishops from all over Christian Europe held in Rome, summoned by the pope, and William was in fact away from Tyre for almost two years. At Rome he met his counterparts from among the clergy of the West and the conversations he would have had with them would have made him more conscious of what it was that he wanted his readers to know. When he came to dedicate his work, he offered it to his "venerable brothers" – in other words, his fellow bishop. These were the people he had met in Rome. Having met them he could now see far more clearly what they needed to be told and he revised his work accordingly.

At one level he realized that he ought to remind his readers in the West that the Church in the East – the Catholic Church, that is, of which he was a representative – was an integral part of Christendom, and it seems likely that in the course of his revisions he introduced much of the material into his history which related to church affairs. Partly he was hoping thereby to hold the attention of his audience, but also he was trying to emphasize the point that the Kingdom of Jerusalem was a province of Christendom and therefore entitled to the support of the other provinces of Christendom in western Europe.

But there was far more to it than this. What I suspect he found at the Lateran Council was a remarkable ignorance about the history and the

present conditions in the kingdom of Jerusalem. He would have come across a number of ideas with which he would have disagreed and would probably have found deeply disturbing. He had to point out that the kingdom was in danger – Salah al-Din was ever more threatening and that the crusaders needed western help. It was no good people in the West saying "Let's leave it to the Byzantines", because there was no longer any help to be had from that direction. At one time, it is true, William had imagined that Byzantium would help, and it is interesting to trace his changing attitude from the cautious optimism about Byzantine assistance when writing about the events of the 1140s and 1150s to his virulent hostility at the end of his career when recording developments in Constantinople in the 1180s.

But there were other points which William had to answer. In particular there was the belief in western Europe that the crusaders settled in the East were obstructing western efforts to assist them, and secondly there was the idea that the king's illness and consequent incapacity was itself a reason why people in the West were not coming to the defence of the Christian Holy Places in Jerusalem as they might.

Two episodes in particular had damaged the reputation of the Kingdom of Jerusalem in the eyes of the West: the Second Crusade and its failure outside the walls of Damascus, and the expedition of Count Philip of Flanders to the East in 1177-8/573-4. Why did the Second Crusade fail? People in the West had blamed the crusaders settled in the East, and in his account of the expedition William was careful to ensure that the responsibility for its failure was laid upon the western participants and not on his compatriots among the eastern settlers. The failure of the Second Crusade certainly made raising further crusades in the West more difficult. But a few years later, in 1153/548, the king of Jerusalem, unaided by western support, captured the important city of Ascalon. William described this success in theological terms. It was a victory bestowed by God, and in William's eyes the failure of the Second Crusade was effaced: the Christian success at Ascalon was God-given and so the settlers in the East were vindicated.

Much more recent was the expedition to Jerusalem of Count Philip of Flanders. He was a western nobleman and a close relative of King Baldwin IV as well as of the kings of France and England. In Jerusalem he achieved

nothing; at Antioch he participated in the unsuccessful siege of Harim, and he then returned home with nothing to show for his efforts. It is easy to imagine that he would have blamed the Palestinian Franks for his failure, and his tales would have helped confirm people in the West in the impression that the settlers in the East could not be aided because they themselves refused to allow westerners to do anything worthwhile even when they went to the trouble and expense of going to Jerusalem. William of Tyre tried to head off such criticisms by going out of his way to suggest that Philip's failure in the East was the result of his own stupidity and lack of tact. And he goes further. In 1177/573, while Philip was in Antioch, the king of Jerusalem had won a major victory over Salah al-Din near Ramla at a place William calls Mont Gisard⁽⁴⁾ It was another God-given victory - a miracle. William uses the same sort of language that he had for the victories of the 1st Crusade and the capture of Ascalon of 1153. God had favoured His people in a miraculous way; simultaneously the actions of the count of Flanders had come to nothing. His readers could draw their own conclusions.

So God is on the side of the crusaders settled in the East: therefore, by implication, if Christians in the West genuinely want to help - rather than behave with high-handed arrogance like Philip of Flanders - they can be assured of a welcome and the chance to join in future God-given victories.

But there was still the problem of the leper king, Baldwin IV. William went out of his way to portray him in a favourable manner so as to avoid all possible criticisms. Firstly, Baldwin was the rightful king. Throughout his History William was careful to stress that each new king was legally entitled to be king, both by descent from the previous king and by undergoing a proper coronation at the hands of the bishops. Baldwin IV was no exception, although in his case there was a problem: his parents had been divorced. But William nevertheless insisted on his legitimacy. He was the true heir of Godfrey of Bouillon and Baldwin I, the heroes of the First Crusade.

Secondly, despite his illness, Baldwin was a surprisingly effective king. He himself is cast as a sort of tragic hero. On a number of occasions, he led his army on campaign. Indeed, I think that William may have overstated his argument in certain respects. In 1177/573 at least there is good evidence to suppose that the Christian army which defeated Salah al-Din at Mont Gisard was commanded not by Baldwin, as William claimed, but

by Raynald of Châtillon, the leading baron whose later behaviour was said to have brought about Salah al-Din's invasion in 1187. But the meaning is clear. Baldwin was the rightful king and had been more in a long line of successful kings stretching back to the time of the First Crusade.

Then, at the very end of his History, William was able to show that although Baldwin had had to relinquish his control the kingdom of Jerusalem was now safely in the hands of the most capable man in the kingdom, none other than his own patron, Count Raymond III of Tripoli.

So what then is William's message? The kingdom of Jerusalem needs western aid. It deserves western aid. The History is not in itself an appeal for a new crusade; rather it is an attempt to educate opinion through that the defence of Jerusalem is the concern of all Christian and provide an apologia for the deeds of the crusaders who had settled in the East. The First Crusade had been a triumph given by God; later victories down to the present as at Mont Gisard have similarly been triumphs given by God. The kings had all been able - even the leper king Baldwin IV. The whole work is propaganda for the kingdom of Jerusalem - an attempt to put the kingdom in a more favourable perspective than was normal at that time.

There is much else I might say. But let me end with just one more point. As we read this work, we all know what happened next: in 1187 the army of the king of Jerusalem was crushed by Salah al-Din and Jerusalem recovered for Islam. But by then William was dead. He had not lived to see the growing Muslim threat to the crusaders come to fulfilment. But anyone who had read his work before 1187 and understood the growing power of the Muslims and the difficulties facing the Kingdom of Jerusalem would not have been too surprised to learn how things turned out.⁽⁵⁾

[A lecture delivered in the Faculty of Arts of the University of Alexandria on 3 February 1987.]

Notes

- (1) A new edition of the Latin text which will now supercede the nineteenth-century edition in the *Recueil des Historiens des Croisades* has been edited by R.B.C. Huygens as *Willelmi Tyrensis Archiepiscopi Chronicon* (*Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis*, 63–63A; Turnholt, 1986). The English translation by E.A. Dabcock and A.C. Krey was published as *A History of Deeds Done Beyond the Sea* (New York, 1943).
- (2) R.B.C. Huygens, 'Guillaume de Tyr étudiant. Un chapitre (XIX, 12) de son "Histoire" retrouvé', *Latomus*, 21 (1962), 811–29.
- (3) See B. Hamilton, *The Latin Church in the Crusader States: The Secular Church* (London, 1980), 79–84; B.Z. Kedar, 'The Patriarch Eraclius' in *Outremer: Studies in the history of the Crusading Kingdom of Jerusalem* (Jerusalem, 1982), 177–204.
- (4) For a discussion of the location of this battle, see M.C. Lyons and D.E.P. Jackson, *Saladin: The Politics of the Holy War* (Cambridge, 1982), 123.
- (5) A study on William of Tyre by P.W. Edbury and J.G. Rowe entitled *William of Tyre: Historian of the Latin East* is to be published by the Cambridge University Press in 1987 or 1988.