



**Steven Runciman.** *The First Crusade*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. vi + 201 pp. \$17.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-61148-0; \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-84739-1.



**Reviewed by** David Hay (Department of History, University of Lethbridge)

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### Superbly Written, but Showing Its Age

*The First Crusade* is a reprint of the abridged edition of volume 1 of Steven Runciman's monumental *A History of the Crusades* (first edition 1951; abridged edition 1980). This work has become one of the standard introductions to crusading history. The author's abridgment cuts out the full edition's bibliography and appendices, which addressed the primary sources and the numerical strength of crusading armies. It also combines several chapters; hence, the original edition's first and second chapters—"The Abomination of Desolation" and "The Reign of Antichrist," respectively—are here amalgamated into a single first chapter, with the latter title. Runciman has also added a brief epilogue describing the fates of the major figures to survive the crusade (material that was covered in the second volume of the 1951 edition).

The choice of materials to add and abridge is generally logical and clearly marks the work as intended for a more popular readership. The critical apparatus of the original edition was always rather scant, and dropping it altogether makes considerable sense (given the intended audience). One glaring omission, however, is the lack of any maps. The 1951 edition contained several, which

traced in detail the crusaders' diverse routes across Asia Minor and Syria, and Runciman's text, at times, implicitly refers to them. Inexplicably, the present volume contains none of these maps. Runciman's long verbal descriptions are clearly insufficient for casual readers—few of whom, one would expect, could place Vahka or Maarat an-Numan on a map. The problem becomes particularly acute in Runciman's accounts of the crusaders' routes across Asia Minor (pp. 99-100) and the complicated siege of Antioch (esp. pp. 128 ff.), both of which were supplied with corresponding maps in the 1951 edition. Non-specialists and undergraduates can therefore expect to be confused by the geography of the various troop movements and bewildered by the frequent barrages of place names. I would recommend having a copy of Jonathan Riley-Smith's *Atlas of the Crusades* handy.

Runciman's work is lively, entertaining and wonderfully written. It is, nevertheless, showing its age. The abridgement of 1980 did not add substantial new material or update the work to account for recent scholarship, and the present publication is not a new edition but a posthumous reprint. Few historians would now accept Runci-

man's characterization of Cluny's influence at the papal court in the mid-eleventh century as "dominant" (pp. 35-36). Lotharingian reformers such as Bruno of Toul, the first of the reforming popes (Leo IX, 1049-54), were just as prominent as Cluniacs. Nor would most historians likely agree that the Cluniac order had the tight monopoly on pilgrimage traffic that Runciman ascribes to it (p. 19). They might also find fault with Runciman's argument that Godfrey of Lorraine's enthusiastic response to crusading could be attributed to Cluny's teachings. More recent studies have traced the development of indigenous reform movements in Lorraine, as well as elsewhere in Europe. It would be more accurate to say that Lorraine had developed strong reforming traditions of its own, rather than that it was "impregnated with Cluniac influences" (p. 71).

In contrast to most other crusading historians working in English, Runciman writes primarily from the Byzantine perspective. This is a refreshing change that broadens our understanding of the course and consequences of the expedition. At times, however, the author himself identifies rather too closely with his subjects. He is ready to excuse Emperor Alexius for his failure to reinforce the crusaders at Antioch (pp. 148-149), as well as for his opportunism in negotiating with the Fatimids even as the crusaders were marching out to fight them (pp. 175). Runciman seems to feel that the emperor's only obligation was to his Orthodox subjects. He fails to acknowledge that most of the crusaders interpreted the oaths they had taken at Constantinople to imply reciprocal obligations and full imperial support. The crusaders were dying by the thousands, after all, in a campaign that was, ultimately, a response to the emperor's own appeal for help. Similarly, Runciman attributes to Raymond of St. Gilles, the crusading leader who feuded with Bohemond and spoke up for Byzantine interests, a military sagacity that his actions and counsel do not merit (e.g. p. 130 and below). Alexius's *bête noire* Bohemond, by contrast, is portrayed as jealous and treacherous throughout, and is even blamed for the conduct of soldiers over which he had no control (p. 166). Runciman also frequently adopts the Eastern Emperor's patronizing tone towards the Latin soldiers. Hence, he writes of the crusaders' inferiority complex towards the Byzantines (p. 92), characterizing the Latins as "naughty children" for not immediately acquiescing to Byzantine demands (p. 78). The same attitude towards the crusaders emerges in Runciman's descriptions of the sack of Antioch. When the Latins burst into the city, he writes, they "scattered or wantonly destroyed" the "treasures and arms" they found in the city

(pp. 143-145). It is difficult to imagine ambitious men such as Bohemond and Tancred, for all their many faults, wantonly destroying treasure. It is even more difficult to picture the poorer crusaders—many of whom were literally starving to death, at the time—throwing away the wealth and weapons they needed to keep themselves and their expedition alive. Nor do the primary sources warrant such a description. After the fall of Jerusalem, these same crusaders would collect and burn the corpses of their enemies, diligently searching the ashes for the coins they were rumored to have swallowed. Runciman's portrait of irrational, childlike crusaders is no longer convincing.

Runciman's work is an enjoyable romp, but one that has now largely been superseded. Readers interested in a more trustworthy account of the military history of the crusade would be better advised to read John France's *Victory in the East* (1996). Although twice as long (and lacking Runciman's literary flair), it is far more accurate. Military history was never Runciman's strong suit, and his hold on strategic and tactical realities is tenuous. Thus, he states that the crusaders lost their one chance of quickly capturing Antioch when they rejected Raymond's appeal for an immediate assault in the fall of 1097 (pp. 129-130). Runciman's explanation is that Bohemond desired to take the city himself at a later date, and so influenced the other crusaders to hold off the attack. In actuality, however, the crusaders lacked the means necessary to storm Antioch's formidable defenses. They did not have siege towers or ladders, and even wood for making them was scarce. Albert of Aachen reports that the crusaders were so short on wood they tried to build a fort out of stone and earth.[1] Without adequate siege equipment, an immediate assault on Antioch was likely to have resulted in failure, heavy casualties and demoralization—as it would at Jerusalem in 1099. Moreover, as France correctly points out, the initial debate at Antioch was not over whether to make an immediate assault, which was obviously impractical, but rather whether to engage in a close or a long-distance blockade. In this respect, France also notes, the other crusading leaders did follow Raymond's advice.[2]

As a stand-alone introduction to the crusade for general readers, then, Runciman's work is likely to spark intense interest and further reading. Runciman was a gifted writer who offered a revealing Byzantine perspective on the dramatic expedition. *The First Crusade* is a fun read. For research purposes, however, one should probably look to more current works, which are fortunately plentiful. Those interested in a bare-bones nar-

rative would probably find Jonathan Riley-Smith's *The Crusades: A History* (2005) most useful, while France's *Victory in the East* has become the standard for military historians.

[1]. John France, *Victory in the East: A Military History of the First Crusade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 212.

[2]. Ibid, p. 222 ff.

#### Notes

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