



The Crusades and the Conflict over the Emperor

Yuanhang Chen

College of Humanities, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua, China

Email: 740476464@qq.com

How to cite this paper: Chen, Y.H. (2026) The Crusades and the Conflict over the Emperor. *Open Access Library Journal*, 13: e15590.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1115590>

Received: June 8, 2026

Accepted: July 5, 2026

Published: July 8, 2026

Copyright © 2026 by author(s) and Open Access Library Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

This paper examines the origins, development, and impact of the Crusades on the medieval world through an analysis of Cécile Morrisson's work *The Crusades*. The author pays particular attention to the complex relationship between Byzantium and the Crusaders. By investigating the deep-rooted contradictions between the two sides, the paper reveals the hostile relationship between the Byzantine Empire and Crusader leaders during the Crusades. Drawing upon Anna Komnene's *Alexiad* and other sources, this report further analyzes the defamatory propaganda spread by Crusader leaders such as Bohemond I against the Byzantine emperor Alexios I, as well as the influence of such propaganda on subsequent Crusades. The paper also points out the limitations of Morrisson's work and, by incorporating the perspectives of Peter Frankopan, comprehensively discusses the origins and evolution of the contradictions between the Crusaders and Byzantium.

Subject Areas

History

Keywords

Crusades, Byzantine Empire, Cécile Morrisson, Alexios I, Bohemond, Anna Komnene, Contradiction, Defamatory Propaganda

1. Introduction

Cécile Morrisson's *The Crusades* not only discusses the origins and development of the Crusades, but also provides an in-depth analysis of their profound influence on the medieval world, especially the complex relationship between the Byzantine Empire and the Crusaders. The book adopts a distinctive perspective by focusing on the Crusades as a whole rather than limiting itself to the local history of the

Crusader states. It reflects both the Byzantine hostility toward the Crusaders and the Crusaders' accusations of Byzantine treachery, thereby revealing the deeper causes of the conflict between the two sides. In analyzing these contradictions, Morrisson does not merely remain at the surface level, but further explores their origins and historical evolution.

This paper primarily serves as a critical review of Morrisson's work, engaging with its arguments while also situating it within broader historiographical debates. Through a close reading of Morrisson's text, supplemented by the perspectives of other scholars such as Peter Frankopan and an examination of primary sources including Anna Komnene's *Alexiad*, this paper aims to achieve two interconnected objectives. First, it will assess the strengths and limitations of Morrisson's analysis of Byzantine-Crusader relations. Second, it will offer a focused case study on the defamatory propaganda against Emperor Alexios I, particularly by Bohemond I, as a means to illustrate and deepen our understanding of the conflict's origins and escalation. By doing so, this paper seeks to provide a more nuanced comprehension of the complex relationship between Byzantium and the Crusaders and its impact on medieval history.

2. The Author and the Topic of the Crusades

Born in 1940, Cécile Morrisson is a French historian and numismatist widely recognized for her extensive research on Byzantine history, especially in the fields of monetary history and economic exchange. Works such as *Byzantine Coinage* greatly advanced research on Byzantine currency, trade networks, and medieval economic structures, thereby enriching the broader field of medieval studies.

The Crusades refer to military pilgrimages initiated by papal decree. The pope granted both ecclesiastical and secular privileges to participants in the Crusades, whose declared objective was the liberation of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

The Crusades mainly deals with the origins, contents, structure, and impact of the Crusades on the medieval world. It is grounded in an overall study of the Crusading movement, meaning that it does not limit itself to the history of the Crusader states in Syria-Palestine, which had long been regarded as the fundamental objective of the Crusades. Instead, it also considers Crusading expeditions that diverged toward targets beyond the Holy Land, wars for which the papacy issued Crusading decrees, and the resistance movements these campaigns provoked. The book insists upon this often-neglected aspect, combining an understanding of the Crusades and their transformations with an understanding of anti-Crusading resistance.

3. Highlights of the Crusades

Among the most invaluable sources for the First Crusade is Anna Komnene's *Alexiad*, which stands as the sole surviving Byzantine eyewitness account, written from the perspective of the imperial court. In the chapter "Byzantium and the Crusades", the book focuses on reflecting the complex relationship between By-

zantium and the Crusaders. The Byzantine view of the Crusaders as brutal mobs and the Crusader perception of Byzantium as treacherous and deceitful together vividly illustrate the complicated condition of relations between Byzantium and the Crusaders during and after the First Crusade.

From the Byzantine perspective, there was never any demand for a “holy war”; the original purpose was merely to obtain a mercenary force capable of helping resist Seljuk incursions into Anatolia. For the Crusaders who had come from afar, however, recovering the Holy Land and the city of Jerusalem, and liberating Eastern Christians from Islamic rule, gradually became the ultimate goal of the broader Crusading masses. Yet under the ambitions of the Crusader leaders, conquered territories were regarded as assets and sources of power. For example, Baldwin marched into Armenia along the Euphrates. The only means by which he could claim European lands and wealth disappeared when his wife died during the expedition, leaving him with no reason to return to Europe. Baldwin therefore resolved to seize a fiefdom in the Holy Land, ultimately establishing the first Crusader state, the County of Edessa. From this, it becomes clear that the aspirations of ordinary believers participating in the Crusades and the objectives of the noble leaders were fundamentally different. Consequently, the contradictions between the Crusaders and Byzantium should also be deconstructed and examined according to their specific origins. More than twenty years later, Anna Komnene wrote about these events and undoubtedly reflected the thoughts of her father, Emperor Alexios I: he did not doubt the sincerity of the “poor pilgrims”, but he remained suspicious of the great nobles whose intentions were far from peaceful. Nevertheless, the Crusader aristocratic leaders could easily transform their own conflicts with Byzantium into contradictions involving the entire Crusading movement through propaganda and similar methods, thereby advancing their own objectives.

Thus, the Westerners established four Crusader states in the Levant: the Kingdom of Jerusalem, the County of Tripoli, the Principality of Antioch, and the County of Edessa. They refused to return the conquered territories to the Byzantine Empire, which undoubtedly aroused great Byzantine dissatisfaction. For this reason, whether the First Crusade should be characterized as defensive or aggressive remains a matter of controversy. Therefore, earlier explanations mentioned in the book—such as Alexios’s refusal to participate in the Crusade, or his prohibition against the Crusaders looting Nicaea, which angered Crusaders seeking spoils of war—remain somewhat superficial as explanations for the escalation of contradictions during the Crusades. The core conflict between Byzantium and the Crusaders did not merely exist within “wartime contradictions” such as poor coordination and inadequate supply. Rather, the very origins and objectives of the Crusades were already fundamentally unacceptable to Byzantium.

4. A Discussion with the Author: The Origins of the Conflict between the Crusaders and Byzantium

The limitations of this work lie in the fact that although it successfully reveals the

deeper origins of the contradictions between the Crusaders and Byzantium, it does not provide a detailed account of how these conflicts were “initiated”, “developed”, and “intensified”, nor how the Crusader aristocratic leaders transferred these contradictions to the Crusading armies as a whole. Therefore, I independently consulted Anna Komnene’s *Alexiad* and other sources in an attempt to better understand the development of these conflicts. In my view, the so-called “conflict between the Crusaders and Byzantium” may be concretely studied through an examination of “the Crusaders’ and Westerners’ defamation of the Byzantine emperor Alexios I”.

The First Crusade brought Crusader leaders into direct contact with the Byzantine emperor, making misunderstandings and prejudices inevitable. Yet even though the contradictions were rooted in the original causes of the Crusade itself, the conflict between the Crusaders and Byzantium was neither fully formed nor particularly severe at the beginning. As ruler of the Byzantine Empire, then the most powerful state in the Christian world, Alexios I appears to have commanded a degree of respect and recognition among some Western leaders before the First Crusade. For instance, he was known for his diplomatic correspondence with Western powers and his reputation as a capable military commander [1]. “However, beginning with the First Crusade, and especially after the failure of the Crusade of 1101, Alexios I was portrayed as faithless, treacherous, and traitorous. The theme of ‘Greek perfidy,’ exaggerated by the Normans, thereafter appeared in every Crusading narrative, just like the sins of great lords and the will of God, providing a convenient explanation for the failures of various expeditions”. Once again, Morrisson reveals the origins of the conflict between the Crusaders and Byzantium from a new and deeper perspective: on the one hand, such narratives provided excuses for later Crusading failures; on the other hand, they reflected exaggerated Norman propaganda.

The conflict between the Westerners led by the Crusaders and Byzantium manifested primarily in the demonization of the image of the Byzantine emperor Alexios I. Alexios was accused of being a heretic and of obstructing the Crusade. William of Tyre stated: “In essence, the emperor is like a scorpion: one need not fear its face, but must beware the harm caused by its tail”. By 1101, Latins such as Ekkehard of Aura even accused him of being the root of disaster and the instigator behind Turkish attacks on the Crusaders [2].

Clearly, with the First Crusade as a dividing line, the evaluation of the Byzantine emperor Alexios I among Westerners underwent a tremendous transformation. This process is only lightly described by Morrisson, but in reality it permeated the entirety of the First Crusade and continued to develop afterward.

5. Bohemond: The Key Figure Hidden within the Pages

In this process, one name that cannot be ignored is Bohemond I [3]. By examining the life of Bohemond I, I gained a deeper understanding of the development of this process. As one of the leaders of the Crusade, after capturing Antioch in 1098,

he remained there instead of participating in the assault on Jerusalem. After the Crusaders returned home, he became the ruler of the newly established Crusader state, the Principality of Antioch, and remained a long-term enemy of the Byzantine emperor Alexios I. In 1081, at the age of twenty-three, Bohemond led the vanguard in military campaigns against the Byzantine Empire. In fact, Byzantium already harbored considerable resentment toward his father, Robert Guiscard, even describing his brutal military activities as “a second Herod” [4]. The Byzantine court had held negative views of Bohemond from the very beginning: “He was exactly like his father, a living image of his father’s character. Upon his arrival, he was like a thunderbolt, bringing threats and irresistible force”. “How frightening it was that Bohemond, once an invader fifteen years earlier, reappeared in his old lands dressed in Crusader garb!” Thus, even before the Crusade began, contradictions between Byzantium and this Crusader leader had already been gradually ignited.

Under such mutual hostility, Bohemond’s attacks on and defamation of Byzantium began very early. Before arriving in Constantinople, he warned the Crusader leader Godfrey not to meet Alexios on the grounds that the emperor intended to murder him [5]. Bohemond even sent envoys requesting that Godfrey withdraw to Bulgaria and join him in conquering the Byzantine emperor and empire. However, this scheme ultimately failed. Alexios I firmly demanded that all Crusader leaders swear fealty to him. After prolonged negotiation, Bohemond agreed to swear allegiance to the emperor and promised to return conquered territories to Byzantium. In return, the emperor provided logistical supplies and reinforcements throughout the campaign and granted Bohemond the title “Commander of the East”, making him the leader of the First Crusade. Despite these honors, Alexios consistently distrusted Bohemond’s motives, while Bohemond feared that Alexios intended to harm him. This long-standing relationship of mutual suspicion naturally led to increasing conflict and struggle.

Bohemond continued to develop anti-Byzantine propaganda. On June 28, 1098, he occupied Antioch. He then exploited the religious differences between Byzantium and the West, as well as the dissatisfaction of Crusader leaders toward Byzantium, to persuade them to jointly write a letter to the pope on August 1, 1098. In order to secure papal support, the letter used the East-West Church Schism to denounce the Greeks (that is, the Byzantines), Armenians, Syrians, and Monophysite Christians as heretics, urging the pope to come to Antioch to eliminate heresy so that the entire world might submit to papal authority [6]. After returning to the West, Bohemond further exploited religious differences between Byzantium and the West, vigorously spreading anti-Byzantine propaganda by portraying the emperor as a heretic and an enemy of Christians who fully supported infidels. The *Gesta Francorum et aliorum Hierosolimitanorum*, written by one of Bohemond’s followers, was employed for propaganda purposes, and Bohemond even altered the text to further defame Alexios I. Bohemond’s propaganda achieved enormous success. The pope blessed his invasion of Byzantium and even

granted him papal legate authority for recruitment [7]. To a great extent, this also shaped Western perceptions of Byzantium after the First Crusade.

6. Prospects for Future Research

The above discussion roughly outlines the development of the Crusaders' hostility toward the emperor and supplements a deficiency in this work. However, another issue remains worthy of further discussion: to what extent were the Crusaders' accusations against the emperor true? Were these accusations merely exaggerated interpretations of certain historical facts, or were they deliberate fabrications and distortions constructed for political purposes? This question is of great importance because it concerns not only the historical image of Alexios I, but also the broader problem of how the Crusades themselves were interpreted and remembered within medieval Western historiography.

On this issue, the renowned British scholar Peter Frankopan provides an important answer in his work *The First Crusade: The Call from the East*, which significantly supplements our understanding of the relationship between the Crusades and Byzantium. Frankopan conducts a detailed reexamination of the role played by Alexios I during the First Crusade and argues that many of the accusations directed against the emperor were either unfounded or heavily distorted by later Western narratives. In particular, Frankopan emphasizes that the alliance agreement between Alexios I and the Crusader leaders never required the emperor personally to accompany the Crusading armies throughout the entire campaign. Therefore, later Western accusations claiming that Alexios had "betrayed" the Crusaders by failing to join the march to Jerusalem were based upon expectations that had never actually formed part of the original agreement.

Frankopan further argues that the image of Alexios I as deceitful, cowardly, or treacherous emerged gradually through the political propaganda of Crusader leaders, especially those whose ambitions conflicted with Byzantine interests. Leaders such as Bohemond I had strong incentives to portray the emperor negatively. Since many Crusader princes hoped to establish independent lordships in the East, the Byzantine insistence that conquered territories should be returned to imperial authority directly threatened their political ambitions. As a result, portraying Alexios as an unreliable ally became an effective means of legitimizing the Crusaders' refusal to fulfill their oaths to Byzantium. In this sense, anti-Byzantine propaganda was not simply the product of cultural misunderstanding or religious hostility, but also a conscious political strategy employed by Crusader elites.

Moreover, Frankopan points out that Western chroniclers often interpreted events entirely through a Latin Christian perspective while ignoring Byzantine strategic concerns. For the Byzantine Empire, the arrival of massive and poorly coordinated Crusading armies created enormous political and military risks. Alexios I therefore adopted cautious diplomatic and military policies intended primarily to preserve imperial stability rather than to satisfy the ambitions of Western nobles. Yet these pragmatic Byzantine policies were frequently misun-

derstood by Western chroniclers as evidence of duplicity or weakness. The contrast between Byzantine political realism and the Crusaders' ideological expectations gradually deepened mutual suspicion and contributed to the deterioration of relations between the two sides.

In Frankopan's view, the demonization of Alexios I not only severely damaged the reputation of the Byzantine emperor, but, more importantly, shaped the long-term Western interpretation of the Crusades themselves. By transforming the emperor into a symbolic "traitor" figure, Western writers established a convenient explanatory framework through which the difficulties and failures of later Crusading expeditions could be interpreted. Military defeats, logistical problems, and internal divisions within the Crusader movement could thus be blamed upon Byzantine "betrayal" rather than upon the contradictions within the Crusading movement itself. Consequently, the anti-Byzantine narrative became deeply embedded in medieval Latin historiography and continued to influence Western perceptions of Byzantium for centuries afterward.

This interpretive framework also contributed to the gradual alienation between the Greek East and the Latin West. Religious divisions following the Great Schism of 1054 were increasingly reinforced by political hostility and mutual cultural prejudice. During subsequent Crusades, especially the Fourth Crusade and the sack of Constantinople in 1204, anti-Byzantine sentiment among Western Crusaders reached unprecedented levels. Therefore, the negative image of Alexios I created during and after the First Crusade should not be understood as an isolated phenomenon, but rather as part of a broader historical process that intensified tensions between Byzantium and Western Europe.

These interpretations constitute an excellent supplement to Morrisson's *The Crusades* because they reveal how historical narratives themselves became political instruments. By comparing Byzantine and Western sources, scholars such as Frankopan demonstrate that many traditional Western depictions of Byzantium reflected ideological construction rather than objective historical reality. Such research not only deepens our understanding of the Crusades, but also encourages a more critical approach toward medieval historical writing as a whole.

Furthermore, another major strength of Morrisson's work, reflecting her expertise as a numismatist, lies in her discussion of the unique structure of the Crusader states from the perspective of currency, especially the issue of "minting rights". Unlike many traditional political histories of the Crusades, Morrisson pays close attention to the economic and institutional foundations of Crusader rule in the Levant. Through an analysis of coinage systems, fiscal administration, and feudal relationships, she demonstrates that the Crusader states were not merely temporary military occupations, but complex political entities that required stable financial mechanisms in order to survive.

In particular, the right to mint coins represented far more than a technical economic issue; it symbolized political sovereignty and legitimate authority. By controlling currency production, Crusader rulers could strengthen their political in-

dependence, regulate commercial activity, and support military expenditures. Morrisson's analysis therefore highlights the close relationship between military necessity and institutional development within the Crusader states. Constant warfare, defensive pressures, and the need to maintain mercenary forces forced the Crusader rulers to develop highly flexible fiscal systems adapted to the realities of the eastern Mediterranean world.

At the same time, the coinage of the Crusader states also reflected broader processes of cultural interaction between East and West. Crusader currencies frequently incorporated Byzantine, Islamic, and Western European monetary traditions, illustrating the hybrid nature of Crusader society itself. Through this perspective, Morrisson successfully moves beyond purely military or religious interpretations of the Crusades and instead situates the Crusader states within wider networks of Mediterranean economic exchange and political adaptation.

Therefore, Morrisson's contribution lies not only in her reinterpretation of the political and ideological dimensions of the Crusades, but also in her ability to illuminate the institutional and economic realities that underpinned Crusader rule. Her interdisciplinary approach, combining political history with numismatic and fiscal analysis, provides a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the Crusading world.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References

- [1] Shepard, J. (1997) Cross-Purposes: Alexius Comnenus and the First Crusade. In Phillips, J., Ed., *The First Crusade Origins and Impact*. Manchester University Press, Manchester, 120-121.
https://books.google.com/books/about/The_First_Crusade.html?id=C-JRAQAAL-AAJ
- [2] Ekkehard of Aura (1895) Hierosolymita. In: *Recueil des Historiens des Croisades. Historiens occidentaux*. Tome V. Imprimerie Nationale, 1-40.
- [3] Luo, C.M. (2009) An Analysis of the Reasons for the Western Demonization of Alexios I. *Journal of Southwest University (Social Sciences Edition)*, **35**, 190-195.
- [4] Comnena, A. (1969) *The Alexiad*. Penguin Books, London, 20.
- [5] Albert of Aachen (1879) *Historia Hierosolymitana*. In: *Recueil des historiens des croisades. Historiens occidentaux. Tome IV*. Imprimerie Nationale, Paris, 271-713.
<https://sourcebooks.web.fordham.edu/source/albert-cde.asp>
- [6] Peters, E. (1998) *The First Crusade: The Chronicle of Fulcher of Chartres and Other Source Materials*. 2nd Edition, University of Pennsylvania Press.
[https://hsb-rhein-waal.digibib.net/search/katalog/record/\(DE-605\)99370813214406441?be-katalog-sort=relevance&q-ky=%22crusades%22&start=-19&count=20&hitcount=161&pos=20](https://hsb-rhein-waal.digibib.net/search/katalog/record/(DE-605)99370813214406441?be-katalog-sort=relevance&q-ky=%22crusades%22&start=-19&count=20&hitcount=161&pos=20)
- [7] Edgington, S. (1997) The First Crusade: Reviewing the Evidence. In: Phillips, J., Ed., *The First Crusade: Origins and Impact*. Manchester University Press, Manchester.