



The walls of Antioch,  
19th century litho-  
graph.

## THE CHURCH ACROSS TIME

# An Eastern Church Amid the Struggles of Rome and Constantinople: The Patriarchate of Antioch During the Crusades

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The Age of the Crusades is by far one of the most popular subjects in the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue (or rather, in the ongoing Orthodox-Catholic polemics), a time period which constantly arises in the field of historical as well as theological deliberation. The Christian East, suffering from the aggression of the Latins, is indeed a popular image, constantly present in the Orthodox perception of history and in Orthodox historical memory. This image is, in fact, one of the principal generators of the 'victim complex' in the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox mindset. In many ways, this complex derives from the fear of change: the fear to be changed by the other and, ultimately, by communion with the other. That is why in the Eastern Christian communities one may find an overly protective attitude in which the Catholic West is perceived as a force of subjection, latinization,

and a threat to the traditions and spirituality of the East that is protected and harbored by Byzantium.

Yet in the case of the Patriarchate of Antioch in the age of the Crusades (11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries) we see an Eastern Orthodox Church that was beset equally by prolonged, intensive periods of Latin and Byzantine intervention, episodes that had immense consequences for its history and tradition. The position of the Chalcedonian Orthodox Church of Antioch during the period of the Second Byzantine (969–1084) and Latin rule (1098–1291) in Syria is often entirely overlooked, since most authors concentrate exclusively on the conflicts of Rome and Constantinople, seeing the latter as the single voice of Orthodoxy. But is the Orthodox Church bound to the position of Constantinople, and the Orthodox world to the Byzantine

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Empire? This is a fundamental question, pertaining to Orthodox Christians' identity and perception of history.

In the seventh century the Byzantine Empire lost immense territories to Arab conquerors, including Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. The end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century marked the start of the Byzantine Reconquista in the Levant; under the emperor Nicephoros II Phocas and his successors, Byzantium reclaimed the lost cities and vast regions of Cilicia, Cyprus, and Northern Syria (with Antioch and Edessa). For more than a century these lands were safely held by the Empire. At the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Byzantine Northern Syria and Cilicia were briefly lost to the Seljuk Turks, only to be reclaimed by the "armed pilgrims" of the First Crusade, who established Frankish states and Latin Patriarchates in the East. Thus, the coastal regions of the Levant, as well as some inland territories, remained a predominantly Christian region, under Frankish and, in the north, Armenian rule. The fall of these Crusader States to the Mameluke sultans, who personally oversaw and initiated the destruction of numerous Christian cities and monasteries, marks one of the greatest tragedies and cultural catastrophes in Medieval History.

Now, to the question of the Church of Antioch in this time period. Orthodox theologians and church historians often remind us that the Crusaders imposed a foreign, Latin hierarchy in the Patriarchates of Jerusalem and Antioch. Seldom do they remind us that during the second period of Byzantine rule in Syria (996 onwards), Syrian Melkites<sup>1</sup> and even the Metropolitans of the Antiochian Church had neither the right to vote in patriarchal elections nor the chance to become the Patriarch of Antioch, since their primate was always selected directly by the Emperor from

among the clergy of Hagia Sophia.<sup>2</sup> Until the late 11<sup>th</sup> century, Orthodox Patriarchs were sent to Antioch from Constantinople. The last of these was Patriarch John V the Oxite, imprisoned by the Seljuks and reinstated with honor by the Papal Legate Adhemar of Le Puy and the leaders of the First Crusade in 1098.<sup>3</sup> In 1100, John was forced to abdicate by the first Norman Prince of Antioch, Bohemond I, and was replaced by a Latin Patriarch. In the following century, a line of titular Orthodox Patriarchs of Antioch persisted in Constantinople, yet these patriarchs never left the imperial capital and had little or no contact with their flock in the East. Meanwhile, Byzantines, Syriac- and Arabic-speaking Melkites, Georgians, and Chalcedonian Armenians in Antioch, northern Syria, and Lebanon remained under the jurisdiction of Latin Patriarchs.

The revival of the truly local Church of Antioch was made possible only under the patronage of the Crusader Prince of Antioch-Tripoli, Bohemond IV, in 1206. This fact is often overlooked by contemporary church historians, who prefer to focus exclusively on the traditional Byzantine imperial patronage over all the Orthodox in the East. Trying to appease the Orthodox population of Antioch, Bohemond allowed for an Orthodox Patriarch—a Syrian, Simeon ibn Abu Saib—to be elected and consecrated as Patriarch, and transferred the Byzantine and Syriac Chalcedonian Rite parishes and monasteries to his care. Throughout his long tenure (1206–ca. 1242), Simeon proved to be an able politician, ready to make alliances with any Christian ruler that proved to be the most potent patron of the Church of Antioch. He offered Holy Communion to Bohemond and his nobles (all excommunicated by the Latin Church) in 1206–1208. From 1210 onwards he sought refuge in the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia and won

<sup>1</sup> In this period, the designation "Melkite" refers to Eastern Chalcedonian Christians allied with the Chalcedonian Byzantine church, rather than its contemporary application to Eastern Rite Middle Eastern Christians in communion with the Roman Catholic Church.

<sup>2</sup> This subjugation of the Church of Antioch to Constantinople is described in detail by Nikon of the Black Mountain, one of the most prominent Byzantine ascetic writers of the late 11th century. See Willem J. Aerts, "Nikon of the Black Mountain, Witness to the First Crusade?" in *East and West in the Medieval Eastern Mediterranean I* (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 147; Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 164.

<sup>3</sup> The reinstatement of the Orthodox Patriarch as the sole canonical "Prince of the Church of Antioch" by members of the First Crusade is described in: *Historia Ierosolimitana: History of the Journey to Jerusalem*, trans. and ed. Susan B. Edgington (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 338.

the patronage of its king, participating in ceremonial processions alongside allegedly “heretical” Armenian and “schismatic” Latin clergy. Yet on arriving at the Byzantine imperial court at Nicaea in the 1220’s, he changed his policy, opposing any idea of reconciliation with Rome. Simeon’s successors (with one exception) were all elected in the East, either in the Crusader Principality of Antioch-Tripoli or in the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia. These Patriarchs were elected and consecrated by Metropolitans of the Church of Antioch; only after ascending the patriarchal throne would they seek recognition from the Byzantine Emperor and the Ecumenical Patriarch.

Thus, the resurrection of the Church of Antioch as a local Church was made possible only due to the initiative and political action of the Crusader Princes of Antioch-Tripoli and their Armenian rivals. Even after the fall of the Crusader States, the Patriarchate remained in the East, with Syrian (or Greek Cypriot) Patriarchs ascending to the throne of Antioch and sustaining complete independence from Constantinople. This changed only in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with the so-called Melkite Schism of 1724.

The periods of Byzantine and Latin domination in Syria can, in many ways, be seen as periods of great prosperity for the Church of Antioch. Cathedrals, churches, and monasteries were founded or rebuilt; Greek and Syrian iconographers worked on murals, mosaics, and panel paintings; books were filling the monastic libraries, being copied and translated in the scriptoria; religious houses enjoyed a steady and generous income from their gardens, wineries, villages, and city property. But one cannot miss the striking fact that, for the Patriarchate of Antioch, continuing Byzantine intervention proved to be far more destruc-



tive than the ecclesiastical dominance of the Latin Patriarchs. For if the Latins were focused primarily on questions of ecclesiastical (or more precisely, administrative) unity, the Byzantines yearned for the complete assimilation of the liturgical life and traditions of their Eastern brethren to the rite of the Great Church of Constantinople. It was only in Frankish, Armenian, and Muslim-ruled territories that the Chalcedonian Orthodox were able to preserve their ancient Eastern rites—most notably the Antiochian Rite and the original Liturgy of St. James.

This precious part of the Eastern liturgical heritage was tolerated by the Franks, yet despised by Byzantine canonists and reformers such as Patriarch Theodore IV Balsamon of Antioch, who would become one of the key figures in Byzantium’s war against the non-Byzantine rites within the Chalcedonian Orthodox Church. Balsamon was a brilliant scholar and codifier of canon law, a cleric and the librarian of the Great Church (Hagia Sophia) who became Patriarch of Antioch in exile, and whose entire life (including his patriarchal tenure) was spent in the heart of the Byzantine Empire in Constantinople. For him, the only true and acceptable practice was that of the Church of Constantinople and he made no distinction between theology and rite. Distressed by the diversity in liturgical practice between the Patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch, and

Coin of St. Peter, minted in Antioch during the reign of the second Norman Prince Tancred (1100–1112).

Jerusalem, Balsamon simply ordered the ancient eastern traditions to be forbidden, excluded, and forgotten. When asked by the Patriarch Mark III of Alexandria whether his clergy and flock could continue to serve the ancient liturgies of St. James and St. Mark, Balsamon was quick to reply that these liturgies should be forbidden, “because the Catholic Church of the Most Holy Ecumenical Throne of Constantinople does not recognize them. Thus, we consider them unacceptable. . . . For all Churches of God must follow the Rites of the New Rome-Constantinople, and serve the liturgy following the rules of the great teachers and lights, St. John Chrysostom and St. Basil.”<sup>4</sup>

Balsamon’s Frankish contemporaries—the Latin Patriarchs of Jerusalem, such as Amalric of Nesle (1158–1180) and Heraclius (1180–1191)—showed a totally different attitude towards the ancient rites of the Middle Eastern Orthodox population. These Crusader clerics never questioned the right of their Eastern (Orthodox) flocks to follow their own individual rites. And while Balsamon forbade his Eastern brethren to celebrate the ancient liturgy of St. James, Patriarch Amalric of Jerusalem allowed it to be served, according to the Antiochian Rite, on high altars erected in the center of the Cathedral of the Holy Sepulchre.<sup>5</sup> And it was in the regions ruled by the Franks, the Armenians, and the Muslims that Chalcedonian Orthodox of Antioch were able to sustain their old Eastern rites at least until the late 13<sup>th</sup> century. When the Crusader states fell to the Mameluke sultans, and Antioch itself

was completely destroyed—along with its churches, monasteries, population, and the entire patriarchal diocese—the Antiochian Orthodox Church (as well as her sister-Churches of Alexandria and Jerusalem) had no choice but to comply with Byzantine policies; the Orthodox of the Levant found themselves stranded between Mameluke oppression and the spiritual dictatorship of the Byzantine imperial and ecclesiastical authorities. A local Church which united Greek-, Arabic-, Syriac-, Turkish-, Sogdian-, Georgian-, and Armenian-speaking Chalcedonian Christians, and followed two diverse rites (Byzantine and Antioch), went through the last and final phase of Byzantinization. Byzantine intervention proved to be much more detrimental for the Church of Antioch than any administrative intrusion initiated by the Crusaders, for Byzantium yearned not only for hierarchical domination, but also for the chance to rewrite the traditions of its Orthodox brethren in accordance with its own practice. It was not the Franks, but the Constantinopolitan imperial and ecclesiastical authorities that were to blame for the “lost” Eastern Rites in Chalcedonian Orthodoxy. Frankish rule in the East allowed the Church of Antioch to regain its independence from Constantinople in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and to sustain its ancient traditions for at least a century following Balsamon’s reforms. This period in the history of the Church of Antioch has immense importance for Orthodox historical consciousness as a countervailing corrective to the ‘traditional’ views on the role of Byzantium and on Latin interventions in the East. ✱

<sup>4</sup> Theodore Balsamon, *Responsa ad Interrogationes Marci* (Patrologia Graeca 138:954–55).

<sup>5</sup> This fact is attested to by a German pilgrimage account of the 1160s; see A. Stewart, *Description of the Holy Land by John of Würzburg* (Palestine Pilgrim Texts Society: London, 1890), 48.



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