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Kostick, Conor

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The trial by fire of Peter Bartholomew: a case study in medieval social conflict

Conor Kostick

If Omnipotent God talked to this man face to face, and Saint Andrew revealed the Holy Lance to him when he was keeping vigil, let him walk through the fire unhurt; but if this is a lie let him and the Lance he will carry in his hand be consumed by fire.¹

The ordeal by fire of Peter Bartholomew during the course of the First Crusade (1096-1099) is one of the more dramatic examples of a medieval trial by ordeal. Much discussed by historians of the crusades, it deserves wider attention as a case study of a particular type of legal case: one where contending political and social factions agree to put their dispute to a test, a test whose outcome they then attempt to influence.

Despite the canonical hesitancy over the legitimacy of the practice of the ordeal,² at the time of the First Crusade the trial by ordeal was a powerful tradition, invoked especially in circumstances where other evidence was lacking.³ In his *An Introduction to English Legal History*, however, J.H. Baker notes that in the last days of the ordeal the acquittal rates were surprisingly high and concludes that this suggests that those who administered the ordeal began to feel a responsibility to facilitate the result they felt right.⁴ A well-documented ordeal that gives a useful case study for examining this suggestion is the trial by fire of Peter Bartholomew on 8 April 1099, Good Friday, during the course of the First Crusade.

¹ J. France, *A Critical Edition of the Historia Francorum of Raymond of Aguilers*. Unpublished PhD. Thesis, University of Nottingham (1967) [hereafter RA]. I am grateful to John France for permission to quote from his thesis. References to the more easily accessible RHC edition, Raimundi de Aguilers, *Historia Francorum qui ceperunt Iherusalem*, Recueil des historiens des croisades: Historiens occidentaux III (1841-1895) [hereafter RHC Oc.], are in brackets. 283 (289): 'Si Deus omnipotens huic homini locutus est facie ad faciem, et beatus Andreas lanceam dominicam ostendit ei, quum iste vigilaret, transeat iste illaesus per ignem. Sin autem est mendacium, comburatur iste cum lancea quam portabit in manu sua.'

² J.W. Baldwin, 'Preparation for the Canon of 1215 against Ordeal', *Speculum* 36.4 (1961) 613-636: 627-628.

³ R. Bartlett, *Trial by Fire and Water: the Medieval Judicial Ordeal* (Oxford 1986) 26.

⁴ J.H. Baker, *An Introduction to English Legal History* (Oxford 2000) 5.

Our main source for the ordeal of Peter Bartholomew was a Provençal cleric, Raymond of Aguilers. Raymond was a canon of the cathedral church of St. Mary of Le Puy, in the Auvergne region of France, who was ordained a priest during the course of the First Crusade and became chaplain to one of the main princes of the crusade: Count Raymond IV of Toulouse.⁵ The *Historia Francorum* was Raymond of Aguilers's account of the First Crusade, written soon after the completion of the expedition. The finished history, as John France has noted, seems to be based on notes that Raymond wrote during the course of the expedition.⁶ The main theme expressed by Raymond in writing his account was a sincere belief that the First Crusade was an *iter Dei* and that God was working miracles through the participants of the journey.⁷

Raymond's belief that divine interventions were taking place to assist the Crusade are no more evident than in the priest's attitude towards one of the most interesting characters to emerge as a leading figure during the course of the three-year expedition: the lowly visionary Peter Bartholomew. Thanks to Raymond's adoration of Peter, with whom he shared a tent for some nine months, we are given a great deal of information about the visionary that would have been lost, had we to depend on other sources for the First Crusade.

Peter Bartholomew was a servant of William Peyre of Cunhlat, from Provence.⁸ Peter's humble social status made him an unlikely candidate for a leader of the Crusade, but in the eyes of Raymond of Aguilers it was entirely appropriate someone so modest should be favoured by God. For the Crusade was echoing the journey of the Children of Israel, and far from

⁵ RA 5 (235), RA 11-12, 17 (237-238), RA 100 (255).

⁶ RA cxxxix-cxliii.

⁷ *Itinere Dei* see RA 202 (276); 'miracles' see RA 59 (247).

⁸ For Peter Bartholomew see J. Riley-Smith, *The First Crusaders 1095-1131* (Cambridge 1997) 216; C. Morris, 'Policy and Visions – The case of the Holy Lance at Antioch' in: J. Gillingham and J.C. Holt ed., *War and Government in the Middle Ages: essays in honour of J.O. Prestwich* (Woodbridge 1984) 33-45; J. France, 'Two Types of Vision on the First Crusade: Stephen of Valence and Peter Bartholomew', *Crusades* 5 (2006) 1-20; R. Rogers, 'Peter Bartholomew and the Role of "The Poor" in the First Crusade' in: T. Reuter ed., *Warriors and Churchmen in the High Middle Ages* (London 1992) 109-122; C. Kostick, *The Social Structure of the First Crusade* (Leiden 2008) 134-149; J. Rubenstein, *Armies of Heaven: the First Crusade and the Quest for Apocalypse* (New York 2011) 157-262.

poverty being a barrier to divine approval, it was the fact that the Christian army as a whole was suffering and in poverty that brought it close to God.⁹

Although a servant, Peter Bartholomew entered the battlefield alongside the professional combatants. He was among those who went out of the recently captured city of Antioch on 10 June 1098 to skirmish with the vanguard of a newly arriving army command by the atabeg of Mosul, Kerbogha. When the Christian forces beat a hasty retreat to the protection of the city, Peter Bartholomew became trapped between two knights and was nearly crushed to death in the confusion.¹⁰ After this harrowing experience, Peter, in keeping with the rest of the Christian army, suffered from famine conditions that developed as the crusaders found themselves trapped by the Muslim army outside Antioch. Their enemies were also inside the city walls, as the remnants of the former garrison retained control of the mountainside citadel.

The three weeks before the crusaders finally reached a decision to confront Kerbogha were the low point of the crusade. From the perspective of many, the situation was hopeless and those with the means to escape began to do so. Several Christian knights lowered themselves by rope from the walls of the city and escaped during darkness. According to Albert of Aachen – not an eyewitness, but someone writing a history based on his interviews with crusaders – when it was discovered that even illustrious lords had fled the city, many people considered making a similar escape.¹¹ Worse, there were princes so terrified of the plight of the crusade that, unknown to the commoners, they had formed a conspiracy to leave the city together.¹²

In these desperate circumstances, Peter Bartholomew gathered his nerve and came forward with a set of policies at whose core was the idea that the army should march out against Kerbogha before it disintegrated. At first, Peter's approach to the senior princes was hesitant. After all, a servant who dared advise his masters on their conduct was liable for a beating, if not worse. At a meeting with those senior leaders who shared his own Provençal language – namely, the papal legate, Bishop Adhémar of Le Puy, Count Raymond of Toulouse and Peter Raymond of Hautpoul (one of the

⁹ Kostick, *The Social Structure of the First Crusade*, 31-36.

¹⁰ RA 89 (253).

¹¹ Albert of Aachen, *Historia Iherosolimitana*, S.B. Edgington ed. (Oxford 2007) [hereafter AA] 307.

¹² AA 309.

Count's leading vassals) – the servant claimed that he had seen Saint Andrew in five separate visions.¹³ As proof of the visions, Peter Bartholomew said that St. Andrew had revealed to him the hiding place of a valuable relic that would save the crusaders: the Lord's Lance.¹⁴

There was a problem with this announcement, as Steven Runciman first noted, which is that Constantinople already housed a relic that was supposedly part of the Lance that had pierced Christ's side.¹⁵ And, indeed, at first Adhémar and his clerical entourage expressed his mistrust of the servant and his visions. This hesitancy, Peter later claimed, was to cost the papal legate three days in Hell's fires.¹⁶ But as Peter's revelations became public and were met with popular enthusiasm, it suited Adhémar and all those leaders of the crusade wanting to rally the army to fight Kerbogha to allow the story to go unchallenged in the hope of reviving the flagging morale of the knights. Moreover, Raymond of Toulouse was willing to back the servant with enthusiasm, since one of the major themes of the visions described by Peter Bartholomew was that God had allocated a special role in the expedition to the count.¹⁷ This bid for the patronage of a prince who already saw his role on the expedition as being that of another Moses was entirely successful and Peter Bartholomew was taken into the care of Count Raymond's chaplaincy and thus into the companionship of the person who would document his rise and fall: Raymond of Aguilers.¹⁸

On 14 June 1098, digging began in the Church of St. Peter in order to unearth the Holy Lance. Having locked out all other persons, Count Raymond himself undertook the work, along with his most important lay and clerical followers. But by evening these men were overcome with tiredness. And here we have the first sign that despite an utter conviction in the belief that God was actively assisting the crusade, Raymond of Aguilers had not lost his critical faculties. Raymond, although desperate to believe in Peter Bartholomew, nevertheless noted a contradiction in Peter's story. According to Peter's account of the vision in which St. Andrew showed the

¹³ RA 254 (284). For Peter Raymond of Hautpoul see: Riley-Smith, *First Crusaders*, 217.

¹⁴ RA 94 (254).

¹⁵ S. Runciman. 'The Holy Lance Found at Antioch', *Analecta Bollandiana* 68 (1950) 197-205.

¹⁶ RA 138-140 (263).

¹⁷ RA 93 (254).

¹⁸ RA 100 (255).

servant where the Lance was buried, the saint placed the Lance in the ground while the visionary was watching, implying that it was close to the surface; but the initial twelve men had dug a considerable hole and found nothing. Indeed 'by evening some had given up hope of unearthing the Lance.'¹⁹ A new set of men were asked to take over the digging, until they too became tired. Finally, Peter Bartholomew dropped into the deep hole and urged everyone to pray at length, which conveniently meant that no one was standing and looking down at him. A moment later the visionary hailed the discovery of the Lance, whose point was protruding from the earth. The dubious circumstances of the find were not lost on Raymond of Aguilers, who is all the more convincing for having to acknowledge a fact that went against his religious beliefs: namely that while everyone else present was above the pit, praying on their knees, Peter alone discovered the Lance.²⁰

Despite the unconvincing manner in which the Lance was found, as several modern historians have noted, all the crusading army at the time united in acclaiming the discovery of the Lance.²¹ So, for example, the view expressed in the *Gesta Francorum*, the work of an Italian-Norman eyewitness, was that – as foretold by Peter Bartholomew – the relic had been found with subsequent boundless rejoicing.²² A letter to Pope Urban II of the united princes, headed by Bohemond, leader of the Normans, the faction that was later the most hostile towards Peter Bartholomew, also referred favourably to the Lance, reporting that through its discovery and many other divine revelations the Christians were much strengthened and more willing to do battle.²³

The enthusiasm for the relic and its discoverer was to soar stratospherically as a result of the relief felt by all factions after their successful confrontation of Kerbogha's huge army in the battle of 28 June 1098. The great Muslim army, however, was less of a fighting force than it appeared, for there were deep divisions between the Muslim lords present

¹⁹ RA 257 (285): *In vespere desperare quidam de inventione lanceae coeperunt.*

²⁰ RA 203 (276).

²¹ For example, C. Morris, 'Policy and Visions', 36; J. France, *Victory in the East. A Military History of the First Crusade* (Cambridge 1994) 278-279.

²² *Gesta Francorum et aliorum Hierosolimitanorum*, R. Hill ed. (London 1962) [hereafter GF] 65.

²³ Letter of Bohemond and the other princes to Pope Urban II, H. Hagenmeyer ed., *Epistolae et Chartae ad Historiam Primi Belli Sacri Spectantes Quae Supersunt Aevo Aequales ac Genuinae: Die Kreuzzugsbriefe aus den Jahren 1088-1100* (Innsbruck 1901) 163.

outside Antioch. In particular, Duqāq of Damascus was more concerned about the consequences of Kerbogha being victorious and thus uniting Mosul with Antioch than with the victory of the Christians. Other Muslim rulers, such as Janāh ad-Daulah of Homs, also had fears for their future in the event of Kerbogha being victorious.²⁴

As soon as he could decently do so, Duqāq took his troops from the field and the rest of the Muslim cavalry soon followed, leaving their infantry to be destroyed and their camp to be overrun, with Kerbogha's own tent a prize of battle. From the Christian perspective it was an astonishing victory with very few casualties. More than astonishing, it was a miracle. The Holy Lance had been carried into the battle by our historian, Raymond of Aguilers, who felt that it had protected him.²⁵ Above all, it was the Christian poor who rejoiced in the victory and celebrated the fact that they had not been stranded in Antioch by the knights. As a result of his association with the miracle, Peter Bartholomew found himself in a position of great authority. He could now speak to the other princes as an equal, knowing that a large part of the poor and the clergy were devout enthusiasts of his visions.

After the death of Adhémar on 1 August 1098 during the outbreak of plague in Antioch, Peter Bartholomew made a bid to fill the leadership role formerly given by the legate. The night that Adhémar's body was buried, 3 August 1098, Peter Bartholomew claimed that both St. Andrew and Adhémar came to talk with him in the chapel of Count Raymond of Toulouse. Speaking to Peter from beyond the grave, Adhémar explained that he had been in Hell for the period between his death and his burial due his lack of belief in the Holy Lance. As a result, he appeared before Peter Bartholomew, showing horrific burns on his head and face, which would have been even worse but for the intervention of the Lord Himself, who presented Adhémar with a robe that protected him from the fire. The robe was that which the legate had given away to a poor person on the occasion of his ordination as bishop of Le Puy. Moreover, a candle, offered in prayer by the bishop's friends, and three *denari* that the legate himself had offered

²⁴ I. al-Athīr, *al-Kamil fī'l-ta'rikh* I, D.S. Richards tr., (Aldershot 2006) 16-17; K. al-Dīn, *Extraits de la Chronique d'Alep*, RHC Oc. 1-5: 3 (Paris 1841-1895) 577-690: 582-583.

²⁵ RA 263 (286).

to the Holy Lance, were the most effective items in restoring him as he departed Hell.²⁶

These aspects to the vision served – somewhat crudely – to reinforce the importance of the Holy Lance as a relic, as well as to point out the spiritual value of supporting the poor. The message was directed in particular to the relatively large body of Provençal clergy who had come with Adhémar on the crusade and were now leaderless. Adhémar had a message for them and the knights of his household (*familia*), which was that they should follow Count Raymond of Toulouse. In return for his services to them the Count would be rewarded by God. This was in fact the arrangement that was adopted up until the death of Peter Bartholomew and it seems natural enough that crusaders of the same language group, travelling from the same region of France, should amalgamate together. But there was at least one major fault line between these two Provençal contingents: Count Raymond and his vassals intended to settle in the region while Adhémar's followers, on the whole, wanted to complete their vows and return to France. This difference would become a significant factor in the political struggle surrounding the trial of Peter Bartholomew. For now, though, Peter had successfully offered a way forward for the crusade, one that appealed to Count Raymond's desire to be the leading figure of the whole expedition.

That the visionary felt secure in his political position within the crusade is evident from the surprisingly confident tone in which one of the poorest of the crusaders felt he could address the mighty Count Raymond, who although singled out for a leading role on the crusade by the vision was also publicly reminded of his faults and given instructions by Peter. The reception of this vision, with its demand for the public accounting of the wealth of the princes and bishops, among the main body of the crusading army was initially enthusiastic. But the faction of Provençal clergy and poor crusaders that was most dedicated to the cause of the visionary were unable to impose the practical elements of policy contained in the message from Heaven upon the princes. Instead, the whole expedition stalled while the princes wrangled over the ownership of Antioch and over the question of whether to acknowledge the Byzantine emperor as overlord.²⁷

As time passed, with no sign of the crusade uniting in order to continue on to Jerusalem, the poor quickly used up the few resources they

²⁶ RA 138-140 (263).

²⁷ RA 264 (286).

had and famine conditions developed in Antioch, leading to an outbreak of plague that killed an uncountable multitude.²⁸ Throughout this period, August to October 1098, Peter Bartholomew consolidated his position within the Provençal contingent with further visions. One, in mid September, had a very strong message for Count Raymond coming directly from the Lord Himself, speaking in the company of St. Andrew. Peter Bartholomew announced to the crusading army that although Count Raymond had received the gift of the Holy Lance he had nonetheless sinned badly. The crusade should be marching towards Jerusalem. Christ and St. Peter declared it was now necessary that the count perform a penance: a penance that effectively would set by Peter Bartholomew.²⁹ The political content of the vision consisted of a demand for an immediate resumption of the crusade and an attack on the advisers of the count for their evil counsel.

On 5 November 1098 the senior princes, their immediate followers, and the clergy met in the cathedral of St. Peter. The people (not merely the *pauperes* but the broader *populus*) gathered outside and threatened to choose one of their own as leader to take them forward and even to tear down the walls of the city if the princes could not agree to resume the march.³⁰ As we shall see below for Ma'arra, this was no idle threat and this incident helps illustrate that some six months before his ordeal, Peter Bartholomew was far from isolated: there were a considerable body of crusaders expressing even greater determination to press on to Jerusalem than that articulated by Peter. Under such popular pressure, the princes announced that the expedition be resumed and that their first goal would be the reduction of the town of Ma'arra. On 23 November 1098, the crusade resumed and a week later Peter Bartholomew had a new vision to report to a mass assembly outside the walls of Ma'arra. The visionary had been met by Saints Peter and Andrew, with the saints initially clad in the ugly and filthy clothing of *pauperes*. The saints made an important point about God's favour being with the poor, when they explained that this dress was the garb in which they came to God.³¹ Their initial appearance also gave an answer to the critics of Peter Bartholomew who could not believe that God would reveal

²⁸ AA 341.

²⁹ RA 265 (286).

³⁰ RA 163-164 (264-267).

³¹ RA 269 (287).

himself to one so lowly.³² The saints then outlined their criticisms of the crusade and demanded that the poor be protected from the violence of the rich crusader. The saints also called upon the army to tithe all wealth to provide sustenance for the poor.

Between Raymond of Aguilers' report of this vision and a corroborative one from the eyewitness Peter Tudebode,³³ we can detect four policy ideas that give us absolute clarity that at this point Peter Bartholomew was articulating the views of the poor crusader, his main political base. Firstly, justice was required on behalf of the poor, to defend them from violence from their fellow Christian oppressors. Secondly, that the solution to the presence of large numbers of unmarried women on crusade was that they be married, a response that contrasts with the policy of the senior clergy who were more inclined to drive unattached women from the crusade altogether.³⁴ Thirdly, again Peter Bartholomew raised the idea of a public accounting of the resources available to the crusaders, this time of those suspected of taking goods from the poor. Lastly, the vision raised the idea of taking a tithe for the church and the poor. These ideas addressed the harsh poverty that existed among the Christian forces at the siege: conditions were so desperate that some of the poorest crusaders were shortly to be driven to acts of cannibalism.³⁵

At a council of the united Provençal faction the following day, which was attended by the common people as well as the nobles, a partial concession was made to Peter Bartholomew's demands. A collection was taken to which the faithful offered generous alms.³⁶ Having been inspired by this vision of Peter Bartholomew, the army was now aroused and willing

³² RA 229-230 (280-281).

³³ Peter Tudebode, *Historia de Hierosolymitano Itinere*, J.H. Hill and L.L. Hill ed. (Paris 1977) [hereafter PT] 122.

³⁴ Guibert of Nogent, *Gesta Dei per Francos*, R.B.C. Huygens ed., CC LXXVIIa, (Turnhout 1996) 196. For women and the First Crusade see also: J.A. Brundage, *The Crusades, Holy War and Canon Law* II (Aldershot 1991) 380 and XIX, 59; C. Kostick, 'Women and the First Crusade: Prostitutes or Pilgrims?' in: C. Meek and C. Lawless ed., *Studies on Medieval and Early Modern Women 4: Victims or Viragos?* (Dublin 2005) 57-68; A.V. Murray, 'Sex, Death and the Problem of Single Women in the Armies of the First Crusade' in: R. Gertwagen and E. Jeffreys ed., *Shipping, Trade and Crusade in the Medieval Mediterranean: Studies in Honour of John Pryor* (Farnham 2012) 255-270.

³⁵ PT 124-125, GF 80.

³⁶ RA 269 (287).

to attempt to seize the city.³⁷ The subsequent attack, 11 December 1098, convinced the population of Ma'arra that they could not hold out any further and although the city survived until nightfall, the Christian poor broke in that night, for once obtaining the best of the booty.³⁸

In the aftermath of the crusader victory at Ma'arra a major political crisis emerged. Count Raymond had hoped to use the town as a base for a principality that he could hold as a vassal of the Byzantine emperor. But in the harsh circumstances of December 1098 this was an ambition that neither the poor nor the majority of the knightly class could tolerate. Around Christmas 1098 at a council of the Provençals a new political development took place. The knights, who up until this point had not sided with the radical ideas expressed by popular visionaries, now aligned themselves with Peter Bartholomew in insisting that the Count lead the way to Jerusalem. They failed to make the Count hand over the Lance and marched to Jerusalem with the Lord as their leader.³⁹ This mutiny of all but his most senior vassals forced his hand and Count Raymond therefore arranged a conference with the other princes to negotiate the terms on which the expedition would continue. This meeting took place at Chastel-Rouge, probably on 4 January 1099, but came to nothing.

After this conference, Count Raymond showed no sign of resuming the march towards Jerusalem, indeed, he assigned a significant number of his knights and footmen to garrison Ma'arra. This drove an angry body of poor crusaders to revolt. They set about toppling the walls of the town, so that it would be useless as a base for Count Raymond's evident desire to create a principality for himself. Although the newly appointed bishop of Albara, acting for the Count, tried to halt the mutiny, he lacked the troops to guard all the length of the walls and soon the destructive task of the poor was complete. Furious, the Count gave in to the revolt and resumed the crusade.⁴⁰ This mutiny must have strained the relationship between count and visionary. While Peter Bartholomew was not directly associated with the revolt, the repeated message of his visions was that although the count was specially chosen by God, his failure to march to Jerusalem was a sin. Such a message can only have helped justify the action of those who defied the count and pushed over the walls of his town.

³⁷ RA 173 (269).

³⁸ RA 270 (287).

³⁹ RA 270-271 (287).

⁴⁰ RA 183 (272).

During the march southwards, Count Raymond remained alert for any opportunity to obtain a sizeable town or city for himself, his envoys reported that Tripoli was a particularly lucrative city. The emir of Tripoli, however, bribed Count Raymond with a considerable quantity of gold and silver to leave his city alone. Count Raymond managed to divert the crusade to 'Arqah ('Akkār) where a siege began on 14 February, 1099. The operation was not without support in its early stages, but 'Arqah was not strategic to the expedition's progress and enthusiasm for the effort faltered.⁴¹

On the night of 5 April 1099, during the now deeply unpopular siege, another vision occurred to Peter Bartholomew, one which he personally dictated to Raymond of Aguilers and so we have Peter's voice in the documentary record. Beginning by explaining the circumstances of the vision, Peter Bartholomew stated that he had been wondering why Christ had favoured another visionary, Stephen of Valence. That night Peter Bartholomew caught up to his rival with a vision of St. Peter, St. Andrew, another silent near-bald fleshy man and – crucially – Christ Himself. The Lord spoke to Peter Bartholomew before mounting a cross, supported by the three other saints. Then Christ introduced a set of instructions by drawing attention to the fact that he had five wounds while crucified (a nail in each hand and foot as well as a spear thrust). Having imbued the number five with a mystical quality in this way, Christ then explained that there were five ranks of person in the expedition.

The first rank were utterly dedicated to the expedition. Willing to die for Christ, they were guaranteed a seat at God's right hand side upon death. The second rank were solid and committed, providing a rear guard and a shelter in case of flight. The third rank, while not putting themselves in the way of danger supplied important assistance, such as by bringing stones and spears to those who fought, and they were spiritually worthy. The fourth rank, however, tended to their own affairs and did not believe Christ was the Son of God. Worse, the fifth rank were cowards who were actively undermining the efforts of the true followers of Christ through treachery: they were like Judas.

As Jay Rubenstein has analysed, this is not a conventional division of persons, either socially or militarily.⁴² Rather, it is an assessment of the political strata of the expedition based on a person's adherence or otherwise

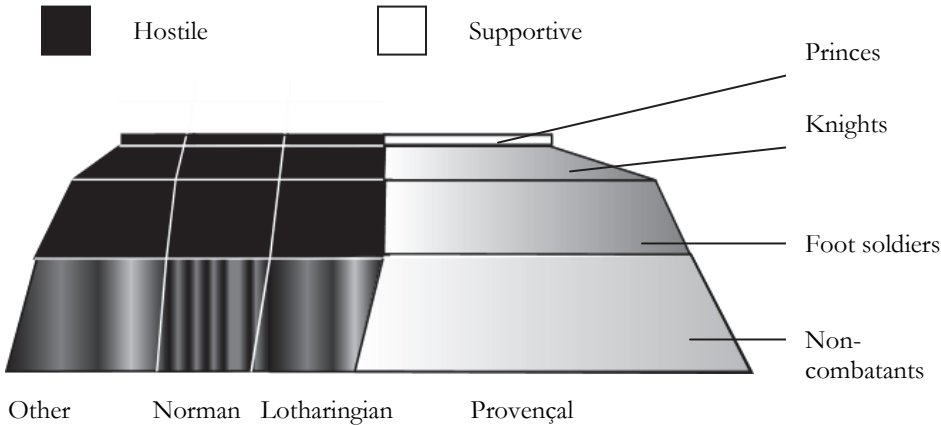
⁴¹ AA 383-385; William of Tyre, *Chronicon*, R.B.C. Huygens ed., CC 63 (Turnhout 1986) [hereafter WT] 366.

⁴² Rubenstein, *Armies of Heaven*, 252-256.

to the goals of Christ as interpreted by Peter Bartholomew: in each category can be found persons of different social rank, military role and region. What unites them is their beliefs. One way to understand the vision is suggested by John France, who notes that since there were five armies at ‘Arqah, we could read the five ranks as respectively the armies of: Count Raymond, Robert of Normandy, Robert of Flanders, Godfrey of Bouillon and Tancred.⁴³ This is not an obvious reading, even if we allow Tancred the status of the other senior princes. If it were the meaning of the vision, then Peter was abandoning any supporters of his who may have existed among the lower social orders of the Lotharingian and Norman contingents.

It is helpful, perhaps, to attempt a diagram of the support that existed for Peter Bartholomew at this time. Any such figure has to be understood to be an impressionistic one: historians have great difficulty establishing the numbers of crusaders and the relative proportions between the social groupings let alone in providing a tighter focus on their political and spiritual attitude to Peter Bartholomew.⁴⁴

Fig. 1: Estimate of levels of support for Peter Bartholomew at the time of his ordeal.



⁴³ France, ‘Two Types of Vision on the First Crusade’, 17.

⁴⁴ For a summary of the various approaches to providing an estimate of numbers on the First Crusade, see: Kostick, *The Social Structure of the First Crusade*, 288-289.

The largest faction of crusaders at this time were those under the leadership of Count Raymond, who had attracted a significant body of dependents to his army. Despite a growing independence of policy from the count, Peter Bartholomew and the Holy Lance were an important asset in the count's efforts to establish hegemony over the entire army. Thus the visionary had a very sizeable Provençal base. But it should be noted that some, especially the soldiers who had formerly served with Adhémar, disagreed with Count Raymond over both the siege of 'Arqah and the longer term perspective of the expedition; these troops would soon burn their tents to force the count to leave the siege.⁴⁵ Hence the figure has some darker shading, even within the Provençal section. Similarly, within the regional sections that were hostile to the visionary, there is likely to have been support for Peter Bartholomew from the lower social orders. After all, he was advocating policies that were essential to their survival. The striations in the figure are indicative of the presence of this support.

In any event, this was a highly politicised vision, announced to a deeply divided army. And the vision itself was proof that the army was polarised between two committed and hostile factions, with a substantial middle ground.

The point of dividing the expedition into five ranks was made explicit through Peter Bartholomew's statements concerning Christ's orders to Count Raymond. The count should summon the whole army to arms and expose the cowards by deploying as if for battle or siege. Those who shirked from the muster proved themselves unbelievers. Their punishment? They should then be executed and their worldly goods given to those of the first rank. In other words, Peter thought the time had come to launch a coup against his opponents and consolidate the influence of his loyal believers over the waverers.

The Lord also went on to give a command to the crusaders regarding justice, which was that they appoint judges according to family and kin. These judges should have the right to take the possessions of a defendant, giving half to the plaintiff and half to the authorities.⁴⁶ Thus, in the post-coup organisation of the army, a system of popular justice was to spring up: essentially to devolve decision making from the council of princes to the lower social orders of the army. There was clearly enormous resentment by the poor, not only that the princes were misdirecting affairs, but that they

⁴⁵ RA 289 (290).

⁴⁶ RA 280 (288).

had the means to live well while everyone suffered. For example, it was noted by the army that despite the most difficult of circumstances a supply of wine and grapes abounded for those who had money.⁴⁷

This vision at 'Arqah was to cost Peter Bartholomew his life. There had always been a contradiction in the policies of his visions between advocacy on behalf of the poor crusader and the promotion of Count Raymond as a divinely chosen figure to direct the crusade. Up until the siege of 'Arqah this contradiction had been resolved by Count Raymond, at times bitterly, being obliged to make concessions to the demands of the poor. Now, however, the greater part of the army – and not just the poor – wanted to leave 'Arqah and as Count Raymond was refusing to move, they were at boiling point. Another mutiny was developing. But unlike the revolt at Ma'arra, this time Peter Bartholomew placed himself openly against the mutineers. Although the latest vision did not explicitly refer to the ongoing siege, its martial spirit and the leading role given to Count Raymond meant that the message was understood to be one of urging the army to make a renewed effort to capture 'Arqah. Perhaps Peter hoped that the galvanising effect of the vision, like at Ma'arra, would lead to a decisive assault on the town. But at 'Arqah the idea of further sacrifices against the town's defences was unpalatable for all but Count Raymond's immediate followers.

At the same time as weakening his support with the poor, Peter Bartholomew had alarmed the opponents of the Holy Lance that their scoffing at the relic and dismissive attitude to it might have serious consequences. The visionary was attempting to galvanise a popular pogrom against the dissenters and for them it was now an urgent matter to strike back. Peter Bartholomew's enemies primarily consisted of the nobility of the other factions, especially the Normans, who had clashed with Count Raymond over control of Antioch. Raymond of Aguilers reported that the main line of attack on Peter Bartholomew was to belittle his lowly social status: 'they began to say they would never believe that God would speak to a man of this sort and overlook bishops and princes and reveal himself to a rustic man.'⁴⁸ By siding with the unpopular perspective of the count at 'Arqah, the visionary had made a fatal mistake. Sensing an opportunity to

⁴⁷ AA 411.

⁴⁸ RA 280-281 (289): 'Caeperunt (...) dicere quod nunquam crederent quod hujuscemodi homini loqueretur Deus, et dimitteret principes episcopos, et ostenderet se rustico homini: unde etiam de lancea Domini dubitabant.'

rid themselves of a dangerous popular agitator, it was the Normans who led the counter-cry that Peter Bartholomew was a charlatan.

The legitimacy of the Lance was challenged at a two-day council of the clergy, 6 and 7 April 1099.⁴⁹ Leading the attack on Peter was Arnulf of Chocques, the friend and chaplain of Count Robert of Normandy.⁵⁰ No more dangerous opponent remained among a clergy who had lost nearly all of their senior leaders. Arnulf of Chocques was skilled at logic and had taught the subject to Cecilia, daughter of William the Conqueror, at the Holy Trinity convent in Caen. In grammatical learning too, Arnulf was educated for a high position in the church. On the death of the crusading bishop Odo of Bayeux at Palermo, early in 1097, Arnulf inherited control of a great deal of the bishop's funds and valuable possessions. With this came a higher profile among the Christian army and Arnulf proved to be a very capable speaker and leader of Christian services.⁵¹

When Arnulf, therefore, made the case against the Holy Lance being an authentic relic, he did so with a powerful presentation. Surprisingly, however, the popular clergy rallied and threw Arnulf back on the defensive. Raymond of Aguilers – in a section of his history that John France has helpfully described as reading like a legal document drawn up for the trial⁵² – reports the testimony of a number of southern French clergy in support of Peter Bartholomew. First came the priest Peter Desiderius, chaplain to Isoard I, count of Die (a senior noble in the company of Raymond of Toulouse), who at Antioch had come forward with a vision concerning the relics of St. George.⁵³ In support of Peter Bartholomew, Peter Desiderius stated that he too had been visited by Adhémar and that the legate did indeed have the burns that Peter Bartholomew had spoken of. Another visionary to confirm the status of the Holy Lance as a relic was Ebrardus, a priest, who said that at the time Kerbogha had trapped the crusader army in Antioch, Saint Mark, the evangelist, brought him a message via a Christian Syrian. The message was that Christ was in Antioch and together with his disciples would assist in the coming battle. Moreover, it was foretold that

⁴⁹ H. Hagenmeyer, *Chronologie de la Première Croisade 1094-1100* (Hildesheim 1973) 224.

⁵⁰ WT 7.18 (366).

⁵¹ C.W. David, *Robert Curthose, Duke of Normandy* (Cambridge, MS 1920) 217-220.

⁵² France, 'Two Types of Vision on the First Crusade', 17.

⁵³ RA 111-113 (257). For Peter Desiderius see: Riley-Smith, *The First Crusaders*, 216; For Isoard I, count of Die see: RA 66 (2); Riley-Smith, *First Crusaders*, 213.

the Christians destined to capture Jerusalem would not break out of Antioch until they found the Holy Lance. Ebrardus offered to cross an ordeal fire as proof of his testimony.⁵⁴

Next to speak at the council was another priest, Stephen of Valence, who repeated his story of Christ's appearance before him at Antioch, and said that although Christ did not specifically name the Lance, He promised aid by the fifth day: the day the Holy Lance was found. Stephen pointed out that he had offered before Adhémar to undergo the ordeal by fire in the presence of the crowd or jump from the highest tower of Antioch to prove himself. And he offered the same to the council.⁵⁵

The bishop of Apt and Raymond of Aguilers himself were both keen to support the Lance, but hedged their testimony; the bishop by being uncertain if his vision of the Lance may have been a dream, and the chronicler through his wavering defence of the Lance.⁵⁶ Again, it strengthens the value of Raymond of Aguilers as a source that he was unwilling to invent or exaggerate in order to provide testimony from his own experience. Having once again described the finding of the Lance, Raymond gave only indirect evidence in support of the relic, reporting a vision told to him by a priest, Bertrand of Le Puy, a member of Adhémar's household. In a vision of Adhémar, the dead legate told Bertrand to believe in the Holy Lance even more than he did in the Lord's Passion.⁵⁷ Raymond of Aguilers was later confronted by Peter Bartholomew and in tears admitted to the visionary that in fact he did have reservations about the authenticity of the relic: Raymond had secretly desired to see the miracle of the Lance confirmed by ordeal.⁵⁸

The council of crusading clergy was now deeply divided. Albert of Aachen's report of a schism among the Christian forces suggests the matter was the cause of a serious split.⁵⁹ Given how effectively the southern French clergy had rallied to the visionary, the attack on Peter Bartholomew had faltered. Arnulf of Chocques considered retreating, even if that meant having to perform penance for a false accusation, but in the end he held to

⁵⁴ RA 238-240 (282).

⁵⁵ RA 240-243 (282).

⁵⁶ RA 240-243 (282).

⁵⁷ RA 243 (282).

⁵⁸ RA 284 (289).

⁵⁹ AA 377.

his course.⁶⁰ And suddenly, in the middle of this crisis, Peter Bartholomew announced that he would voluntarily take the ordeal of fire with the Holy Lance in order to convince the doubters.⁶¹

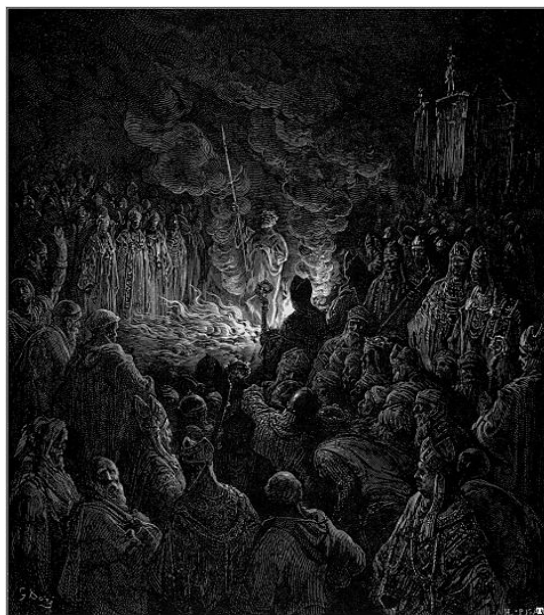


Fig. 2. Barthelemy undergoing the ordeal of fire by Gustave Dore in the 19th century.

This brings us to the actual ordeal. In what state of mind is a person who volunteers to expose himself or herself to deadly fires? The obvious answer, and the most common one in regard to discussions of Peter Bartholomew, is to say it must be a person who has a devout spirituality and a sincere belief that he or she will be aided by miraculous and divine intervention. But given the statistic that in roughly half of all ordeals by fire (albeit a different type of ordeal, involving carrying or walking over hot iron) the accused was successful,⁶² then to this answer can be added the following idea: that depending on the opinion of those responsible for conducting the trial, the

⁶⁰ RA 243 (282).

⁶¹ RA 244 (282).

⁶² Baker, *English Legal History*, 6.

circumstances of the trial might not be too arduous. It is notable that Ebrardus and Stephen too, offered to undertake the ordeal. To the survivor of such a test would come enormous authority with the crusading army and when these two visionaries made their declarations, Peter must have felt a certain amount of pressure in regard to his status as the Lord's most favoured visionary. As we have seen, before his last vision Peter had admitted to brooding on Christ's appearance to Stephen of Valence.

There were medieval charlatans who exploited the popular desire for relics and miracles. Forgery was common, and it was a sin. But at the same time, when a medieval monk amended a monastic document in order to promote the holdings of his monastery he did not see this as forgery but rather a correction to make the document conform to the proper state of affairs. If anything, the monk was earning God's approval rather than the opposite. On the spectrum from sincere visionary to out-and-out rogue, it seems reasonable to place Peter Bartholomew somewhere in the middle. There can be little doubt that Peter himself planted in the ground the metal that he announced as the Holy Lance. But in doing so, he might well have adopted the same outlook as the monastic 'forger'. Peter Bartholomew was doing God's work: he was saving the expedition and the lives of the poor crusaders. In facing the trial by fire he could hope for divine assistance, but he did not have to depend on this to survive, especially if his supporters took charge of the arrangements. Offering to undergo the ordeal was a risk, but it was a realistic way forward for him personally and the crusade as a whole.

The date of the trial was set for 8 April 1099, Good Friday. Over the intervening four days Peter Bartholomew fasted, while the various factions of the crusading army made their preparations. The master of ceremonies for the trial was none other than Peter's companion and enthusiast for the Holy Lance, Raymond of Aguilers. At dawn on Good Friday the huge crowds assembled, the clergy barefoot. Two piles of dry olive branches had been created, about four feet in height, thirteen feet in length and with a space of one foot between them for Peter to walk along. Once the timber was lit and the flames began to soar over forty feet in height, Raymond of Aguilers proclaimed the nature of the test with the words that opened this article: if Peter Bartholomew were lying, then he and the Lance should be consumed by fire. The crowd around him knelt and declared 'Amen'. Then

Peter Bartholomew came forward from his tent in Count Raymond's camp.⁶³

The visionary was dressed in a simple tunic. He too bent, before Peter of Narbonne, to swear that he had seen Christ on the cross and that none of his reports were fabrications. It is worth pausing here to note that Peter of Narbonne was the bishop of Albara, raised to that position as Count Raymond's appointee. Also noteworthy is that Peter Bartholomew was standing by his last vision, with its call to action against unbelievers. The stakes were high, with Peter Bartholomew making it clear that if he survived the day, he would not cease to agitate for a violent purge of his enemies. With the bishop handing Peter the Lance, the visionary walked confidently through the flames. Although he was delayed mysteriously on the path, he soon emerged triumphantly from the other side to shout '*Deus adjuva!*'⁶⁴

For Peter's supporters, this was the miracle they had wanted. A huge crowd rushed to the pyre to grab burning sticks to save as relics. Soon only the blackened ground remained. The gamble had worked. Or had it? Before Peter Bartholomew could relish his success, the mob – and at this point Raymond of Aguilers's language turns against the crowd – charged the visionary. Among those who wished only to venerate the man through whom God was working miracles were more sinister figures, armed with blades. Slashed three or four times in the legs, with his flesh cut away, and with his backbone shattered, Peter was mortally wounded. He would have died on the spot but for the belated intervention of Count Raymond's most powerful vassal, Raymond Pilet, who charged the crowd and battled his way through for the body.⁶⁵

On 20 April 1099, Peter Bartholomew died of his wounds. According to Raymond of Aguilers, Peter's burns were of no consequence. Those who came to the dying man's tent to examine his face, head, hair and other parts were amazed that the visionary showed so little evidence of burns. He had failed the ordeal, however, for exactly the same reason as he very nearly passed it. His supporters successfully created a test that looked miraculous but was survivable. His enemies anticipated this and surprised the organisers of the ordeal with an unruly assault on the visionary. As I suspect was the case for very many medieval ordeals the result was

⁶³ RA 283 (289).

⁶⁴ RA 284 (289).

⁶⁵ RA 252 (284).

manipulated, in this case, by two opposing political factions of a crusading army. And in the practical fashion of many such ordeals, it probably did provide a cruel but accurate verdict on the overall balance of public opinion.