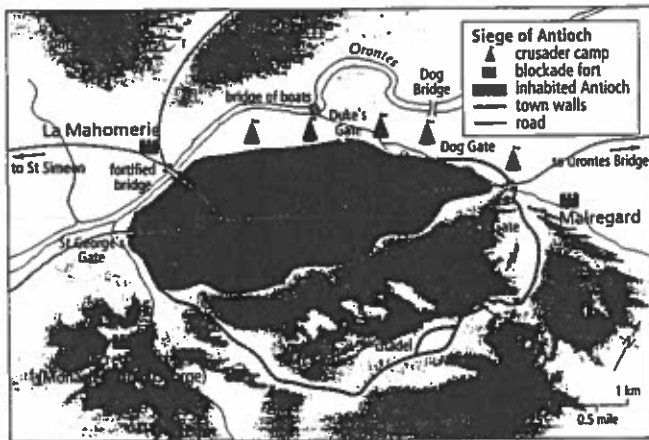


THE SIEGE OF ANTIOCH

The fortifications of Antioch were effectively impregnable if the defenders kept their nerve. They consisted of 33 feet (10m) high walls and 400 towers 65 feet (20m) high within mutual bowshot; the citadel was on the 1,000 feet (330m) high Mount Silpius, and to the north the river Orontes and its marshes gave further protection. The Turkish commander Yaghi-Siyan had a loyal and well-supplied garrison. Only the city's largely Armenian population gave him cause for concern.



Alexius' representative, Tatlikios, urged an arm's-length siege strategy based upon the fortress of Baghras 12 miles (20 km) to the north, but the crusader leaders were conscious of the need to keep their forces united and preferred a close blockade. In November, the garrison launched cavalry sorties against foragers across the Orontes, so the crusaders built a pontoon bridge to enable them to deploy rapidly against such sallies. As winter drew on, supplies became short. At Christmas, Bohemond and Robert of Flanders led a raid against Aleppo, gaining flocks and booty. They also encountered and defeated a relief force under Duqaq of Damascus. Despite this, the supply situation became critical in January as camp prices rocketed and many poorer crusaders starved. The knights' horses suffered too; barely 1,000 were reckoned serviceable.

On 9 February, a relief force under Ridwan of Aleppo attacked, supported by a vigorous sally from the garrison. The crusaders, though weakened, repulsed both attempts and captured many desperately needed horses. In March, their situation began to improve, as ships arrived at St Simeon, Antioch's port. But the first food convoy from the coast came under attack and had to be rescued by a force led by Bohemond, which inflicted 1,500 casualties on the Antiochene cavalry. This was a crucial boost to crusader morale. They promptly constructed two siege castles to tighten the blockade of Antioch. In March, the mosque opposite the fortified bridge was provided with two towers and walls made from Muslim tombstones and put under the command of St Gilles.

In April, Tancred fortified the monastery of St George opposite the gate of the same name. The former protected crusader supplies from the coast, the latter prevented convoys reaching the city.

The tables had been turned and now it was the besieged's turn to starve. Firuz, a prominent Armenian Christian, negotiated secretly with Bohemond. On the night of 2 June, a tower was betrayed to the crusaders who broke into the city and ran amok. Large areas caught fire, while Yaghi-Siyan's garrison withdrew to the citadel. The events that followed seemed truly miraculous. On 5 June, the relieving army under Kerbogha of Mosul, sent by the Baghdad caliph, arrived to besiege the erstwhile besiegers. He had been delayed for a fortnight besieging Baldwin in Edessa. The fortified mosque (La Mahomerie) was wrested from crusader control by 8 June, leaving them in a dire situation, trapped between two forces in a devastated city exhausted of supplies, and with no escape route evident. Some notables did manage to slip away, including Stephen, count of Blois, and Peter the Hermit, who was caught and returned in disgrace.

Crusader morale was boosted by the discovery of the 'Holy Lance', supposedly a relic of the Crucifixion in St Peter's cathedral in Antioch. Not all the crusader leaders were convinced of its authenticity, but it served to inspire a desperate sortie. On 28 June, six 'battles' (divisions), each of infantry, and a few cavalry issued from the city to attack the besiegers. Perhaps taken by surprise, certainly disorganized by the lack of trust between Kerbogha and the Syrian emirs, the Muslim forces were driven back. Only on the western flank did Turkish horse-archers threaten to encircle the crusader battle line. The reserve division, mounted on the few remaining horses, drove off the outflanking attempt. Kerbogha's superior forces seem to have crumbled rapidly, firing the grass to facilitate their escape. The crusaders ascribed their surprising victory to the appearance of a supernatural host of men on white horses led by the military saints George and Demetrius:

