

William of Tyre

Willelmus Tyrensis, Guillaume de Tyr

DATE OF BIRTH about 1130

PLACE OF BIRTH Jerusalem

DATE OF DEATH 29 September, 1184, 1185, or 1186

PLACE OF DEATH Unknown, though almost certainly
somewhere in the Kingdom of Jerusalem

BIOGRAPHY

William was born in Jerusalem, the crusader capital, around the year 1130, probably to a non-noble family of burgess stock. When he was about 15, he went to western Europe to be educated, and studied liberal arts, theology, and canon and civil law at Paris, Orleans, and Bologna. He returned to the Holy Land in 1165 and was immediately made a prebend at the cathedral of Acre. He claims that he impressed the King of Jerusalem, Amalric, and because of this he was granted the position of archdeacon of Tyre. Amalric's trust in him and his education led to further important positions, and he became a leading figure in the politics of Jerusalem until the king's death in 1174, being sent as an envoy to the Byzantine Emperor Manuel I Comnenus in 1168, and to western Europe around the year 1169. In 1170, he was granted the position of tutor to Amalric's son, the future King Baldwin IV.

On the death of Amalric, with Baldwin IV a minor and a leper, and with the Muslims around them becoming ever stronger, factional rivalries began to emerge at the Jerusalem court. In this, William showed a strong partiality for the faction that grew up around the late Amalric's second wife, Maria Comnena, against which was ranged the faction of his first wife, Agnes of Courtenay. During the early period of this factionalism, William's political influence grew stronger when he was given the position of chancellor of the kingdom, and was promoted to be archbishop of Tyre, in 1174 and 1175 respectively. However, in 1177 the rival faction gained the upper hand in the power struggle and William was sidelined somewhat. He still had his previous positions, but was no longer involved in political

decisions, although he was again sent to Constantinople in 1179–80. It may thus have been at this point that he started to concentrate more on his writings, which he had begun around 1170, as well as devoting his time to carrying out ecclesiastical business.

What happened during the last few years of his life, from 1183 until his death, is uncertain. The last official correspondence from his chancery is dated March 1183, while he finished his history of the crusader states in 1184, and one later writer states that he was excommunicated in 1183 by Heraclius, Patriarch of Jerusalem, whose lax morals he had criticized. Thus, his life in politics petered out slowly until his death, on 29 September, sometime around 1185.

MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Primary

Chronicon, particularly the autobiographical Book XIX.12

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Secondary

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WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

Unknown title: possibly *Gesta orientaliū principū*, 'The deeds of the rulers of the East'

DATE About 1180

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Latin

DESCRIPTION

This work was a history of the Muslim world written by William after, he claims, a request by King Amalric, and covering the period from Muḥammad to his own day. Copies of it circulated in Europe in the medieval period, but no extant manuscript is known, and our knowledge of its existence and our evidence for it come solely from references to it in the *Chronicon*, which William was writing simultaneously. The only explicitly named source William used was the *Annals* of Saʿīd ibn Baṭrīq (q.v.), the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Alexandria, which ended in the year 938, although other Arabic sources were given to William by Amalric, and it has been suggested that these included the histories of Yaḥyā ibn Saʿīd and Sāwīrus ibn al-Muqaffaʿ (q.v.). However, the question of the sources used by William remains open.

SIGNIFICANCE

The existence of a Latin history of the Muslim world, written in the crusader states, demonstrates that, to some at least, there was a real effort to understand the Muslim foe.

MANUSCRIPTS —

EDITIONS & TRANSLATIONS —

STUDIES

Murray, 'William of Tyre and the origins of the Turks', p. 218

Edbury and Rowe, *William of Tyre, historian of the Latin East*, pp. 23-24

H. Möhring, 'Zu der Geschichte der orientalischen Herrscher des Wilhelm von Tyrus. Die Frage der Quellenabhängigkeiten', *Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch* 19 (1984) 170-83

Davis, *William of Tyre*, p. 71

Unknown title: *Chronicon*, 'A history of deeds done beyond the sea'

DATE Between about 1170 and 1184, when the narrative abruptly breaks off

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Latin

DESCRIPTION

William of Tyre's history of the crusader states is one of the most magisterial works in 12th-century Latin historical writing. Sweeping in its scope, both geographically and temporally, it covers the whole history of the crusading movement up to 1184, including the long period of 1127-84, which would otherwise be a large gap in the Latin historical record. It is thus the main source for the history of the crusader states in the 12th century.

The original title is unknown, as most manuscripts do not carry one, the exception being those that Huygens labelled as the MP group, which carry the opening words *Incipit Historia/Hystoria rerum in partibus transmarinis gestarum a tempore successorum Mahumeth usque ad annum domini M.C.LXXXIII, edita a venerabili Willelmo/Guillielmo Tyrensi archepiscopo*. There is no reason, however, to assume that this is the original title, and Huygens has named his edition, the latest, *Chronicon*, though others have called it *Historia Ierosolymitana*. In English, it has been translated as *A history of deeds done beyond the sea*, and with various other titles in other European languages, but is usually referred to by one of the Latin titles.

The purpose of the work was three-fold. First, it was written not only to recount events in the crusader states in the 12th century, but also to explain how those events came to pass. Thus, it addresses the role of the monarchy, the church, the papacy, relations with the Byzantines, the place of the Muslims both historically and spiritually, and God's role in events. Particularly important is William's explanation of how the crusader states fell from the height of power in the first part of the 12th century to the position they were in during his writing, being surrounded by Saladin's forces. Second, it was addressed primarily to his fellow-churchmen, whose responsibility it was, he believed, to help solve the problems that confronted the kingdom of Jerusalem. Finally, as the work was commissioned by King Amalric, and this presumably continued with Baldwin IV, the work praises the kings of Jerusalem for their achievements in difficult circumstances.

Because the focus of the work is the history of the crusader states, Islam, and particularly Muslims, figure prominently throughout. Mostly their appearance is as a mass of people, usually in battle, and on these occasions William has little to say. However, he includes plenty of information about Christian-Muslim relations throughout his chronicle. He narrates how kings of Jerusalem made treaties with

Muslim powers, such as Damascus in the 1140s and Egypt in the 1160s, which provide insights into cross-community diplomacy, and in one instance he describes the splendor of the Egyptian Fatimid court in Cairo, which he visited, and gives an insight into how it operated. He also describes Muslim attacks on the crusader states, particularly in the years 1174-84 when Saladin united the territories around into one political unit, threatening the destruction of the Frankish territories, which happened soon after his death, at Hattin in 1187.

William also includes several digressions, including an explanation of how the Muslims' power had grown between the First and the Third Crusades – the cause was a combination of Christian sins and Muslim political co-ordination – and a report on how the differences between Sunnīs and Shī'īs came about. At the beginning of his history, he also describes the life of Muḥammad, writing that he believed he was a prophet from God, that he had led the people of the east, especially Arabia, into false beliefs, and that his religion had been spread by a combination of the sword and appealing to people's desires. William is scathing about Muḥammad, calling him 'the first-born of Satan' and the Muslims' 'prophet, or, rather, their destroyer'.

SIGNIFICANCE

The *Chronicon* gives invaluable insight into relations between the Latin Franks of the crusader states and the Muslims around them. Illuminating the greater part of the 12th century, William's writings demonstrate how the differing paths of war or diplomacy were chosen and taken, and how relations between the two sides changed, as well as including contemporary Latin explanations for the condition of the Muslim world.

MANUSCRIPTS

For an exhaustive study, see Huygens' edition, vol. 1, pp. 3-32

See also J. Folda, 'Manuscripts of the *History of Outremer* by William of Tyre. A handlist', *Scriptorium* 27 (1973) 90-95

EDITIONS & TRANSLATIONS

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