

# A Crusading Outpost

the City and County of Edessa: 1095-1153

— KENNETH THOMSON

Edessa was one of the earliest Christian cities and for a half century in the middle ages experienced direct rule by Christians of the West.

## Counts of Edessa

1098-1100 Baldwin of Lorraine  
1100-1118 Baldwin of Bourg  
1118-1131 Joscelin the First of Courtney  
1131-1150 Joscelin the Second of Courtney

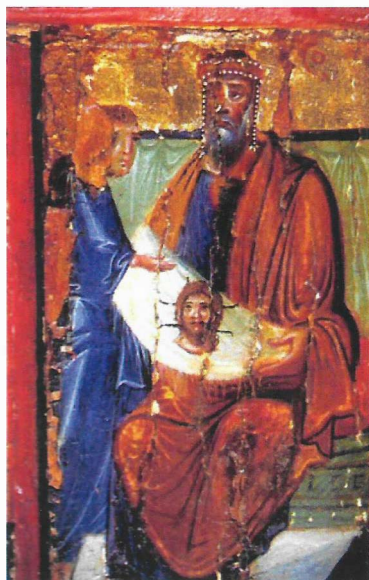
## Main events

1098 Acquiring of Edessa by Baldwin  
1104 Battle of Harran  
1110 Mawdud of Mosul's attack upon Edessa.  
1144 Capture of city of Edessa by Zengi of Mosul  
1151 Extinction of County by Zengi's son Nured-din.

Edessa is not now to be found on maps of the Near East; instead there is Urfa, the Turkish name for the former Christian city lying in the upper region of the Euphrates valley some two hundred and fifty kilometres from the Mediterranean. Like Christian Edessa, Moslem Urfa is a frontier city, where the mountains of Anatolia meet the Fertile Crescent, a situation helping to explain the city's chequered history.<sup>1</sup> It is with the last phase of the city's Christian history, before it changed for ever at the hands of the conquering Moslem leader Nur-ed-Din that this article is concerned.

This last phase saw Edessa and its neighbourhood ruled by Latin Counts as a consequence of the First Crusade, which, though concerned with the taking of Jerusalem, saw several other Latin states established in an arc ranging from the Euphrates to Galilee. The history of Edessa, of interest to Crusade historians, has also fascinated those concerned with the wider history of the Levant, as an illustration of which Edessa's frontier situation is peculiarly fitted. Moreover, the rule there of the Counts has its own qualities, since the county, of which Edessa was the chief city, contained a variety of faiths. Latins, Orthodox, Armenians and Jacobites coexisted in the County along with Moslems. The Latin rulers, few in number, were in no position to favour their brand of Christianity at the expense of the rest of the inhabitants.

The city of Edessa lay across two trade routes, one from the Mediterranean coast by way of Antioch, modern Antakya, the other from central Anatolia into Mesopotamia. Edessa's Latin rulers were thus wealthy, their trade riches augmented by the produce of the cultivated plain of the upper Euphrates. Edessa was a nodal point, a meeting place for commercial and political interests, which produced intermingling of faiths. The situation of the city gave it a strategic importance, through centuries of independence, though prepared at times to acknowledge an overlordship. Until the battle of Manzikert in 1071 this had been exercised by the Byzantine Emperor in Constantinople, but afterwards until the time of the First Crusade by representatives of the Seljuk Turks. The city still hoped for a return to Christian rule as the Latin armies, in name allies of the Emperor, approached in 1097.<sup>2</sup> Edessa was a prize, since it controlled the route to Antioch; its possession would drive a wedge between the Moslem states of northern Mesopotamia,



King Abgar of Edessa receiving a cloth bearing image of Jesus in the first century AD.



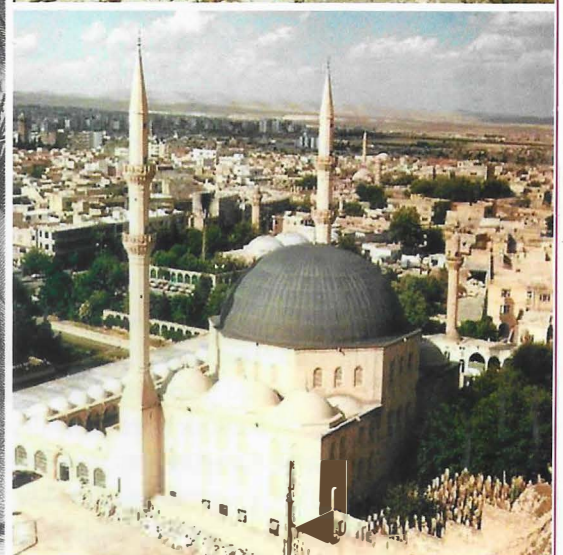
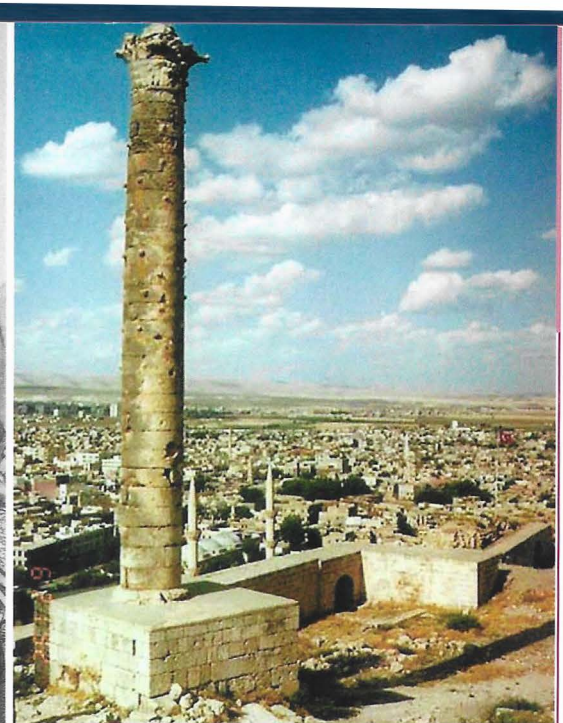


and the dominions of the Seljuks in Anatolia. Yet the city's exposed situation might make it open to Moslem counter-attack, when their forces rallied.

The city was one of the earliest cities of the Near East to be converted to Christianity, a process which produced legends.<sup>3</sup> Two Apostles, St. Thomas, the missionary to the East, and the lesser known St. Thaddeus, were involved in the city's conversion, and it was the work of the latter which gave rise to a remarkable story. Eusebius declares that Thaddeus was instrumental in delivering to the first century King Abgar of Edessa an image of Christ made by him on a cloth, which the city preserved. This image became an object of pilgrimage, and has been equated with the Mandylion of Byzantine and Russian emperors,

and with the Shroud of Turin.<sup>4</sup> Though no chronicler suggests that the Latins took the city because of its religious associations, a later letter from Hugo, Latin Archbishop of Reims testifies to his interest in the saints of the city, and after it was taken by the Moslem Zengi the authorities in the West appealed to its Christian traditions as grounds for its recapture.

Though the First Crusade's primary aim was the opening up of a safe route for pilgrims to Jerusalem, there was another aim, the defence and liberation of the Christians of the East from Moslem rule. Latin popes might disagree with Orthodox Emperors on points of theology; but they had no wish to see Christians in Asia overrun by the Seljuk Turks. Emperors had



(above left) Baldwin outside the walls of Edessa, engraved by Thibault  
(above) Two views of Edessa

appealed to popes to send armies to help them defend Constantinople and its hinterland and such appeals were an element in the preaching and launching of the crusade by Pope Urban II in 1095.

The Orthodox were part of an eastern Christendom, which included Armenians and Jacobites, but they were politically the most important. In the event of any successful Latin re-conquest of lands where they lived, the Orthodox would expect to return to the suzerainty of the Emperor at Constantinople. To restore the frontier of 1070 was the prime aim of the Comneni dynasty. Edessa and its surroundings was such a region and the emperors were



insistent upon their rights there. They felt with some justification that Moslem rulers would be more ready to accept the restoration of Christian rule in northern Syria than they would be in the southern land of Palestine.

The Orthodox were not the only Eastern Christian group with political ambitions. Armenian Christianity had always at its heart the ideal of an independent Armenian entity, an ideal in suspense since the conquest by the Turks of the ancient homeland of Great Armenia. The Armenians had shared in the Byzantine defeat at Manzikert, but many cities of southern Anatolia, with large numbers of Armenians might form the basis for a revived Armenian polity. Edessa was such a city and in the 1080s it had formed part of an ephemeral Armenian entity under the Byzantine general Philaretos. By 1095 the city was under Turkish overlordship, though its ruler, the Orthodox Thoros, recognised the Emperor in Constantinople. Such multiplicity of lordship was common in the Levant and scarcely affected the ordinary life of town and country. Only serious violence could do that; hence the dismay and anger in the region at the crusaders' behaviour in Jerusalem in 1099.<sup>5</sup>

The Armenian nobles of Edessa, anxious to rid themselves of the Turks, saw their opportunity in the arrival in Asia Minor in 1096 of the armies of the First Crusade. Though Urban II saw the Crusade as one unified movement, it consisted of several great armies, under leaders with ambitions. They would make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem; they would help their fellow-Christians; they would acquire lands in the Levant. Two great families were in rivalry: Baldwin and his cousin, Baldwin of Bourg of Lorraine, and the Normans, Bohemond of Taranto, and his nephew Tancred. The Normans were destined to rule in Antioch, the Lorrainers in Edessa; their rivalry was to determine the history of northern Syria.<sup>6</sup>

The Latin lords would not rule outright; on their arrival at Constantinople, they were made to swear an oath to Emperor Alexius to recognise his lordship of territories that they might conquer. The Emperor had Edessa in mind; the Latin rulers there were to be reminded of these claims. The Armenians of the city had plans of their own and saw Baldwin of Lorraine as a possible candidate for liberator from Turkish rule. The chronicler Albert of Aachen tells how Pancratius, an Armenian lord, accompanied Baldwin through Asia Minor in 1097, leading his forces away from the main army advancing on Antioch, over the Euphrates towards Edessa. Baldwin's chaplain, Fulcher of Chartres, also gives an account of Baldwin's taking power in the city.

This was largely peaceful. The Turkish governor fled and Thoros welcomed Baldwin and his knights. He adopted Baldwin as his son, though he later died in mysterious circumstances. Baldwin, having overcome a plot against him, became ruler of the city and Count of its province, still nominally part of the Byzantine Empire. Baldwin then proceeded to assert with force his authority over the province: the Christian city of Samosata to the north, the Moslem Sorors to the south, and the important fortress of Turbessel, to the west. He installed Latin lords, but these were few and ruled as protectors, not colonists.

Memories of Byzantium determined the boundaries of the County, which followed those of the former kingdom of Osroehene. The western frontier of Edessa brought it into contact with the new principality of Antioch under Norman rivals. It was a rivalry strengthened by old advocacies, for Antioch as a principality had the greater

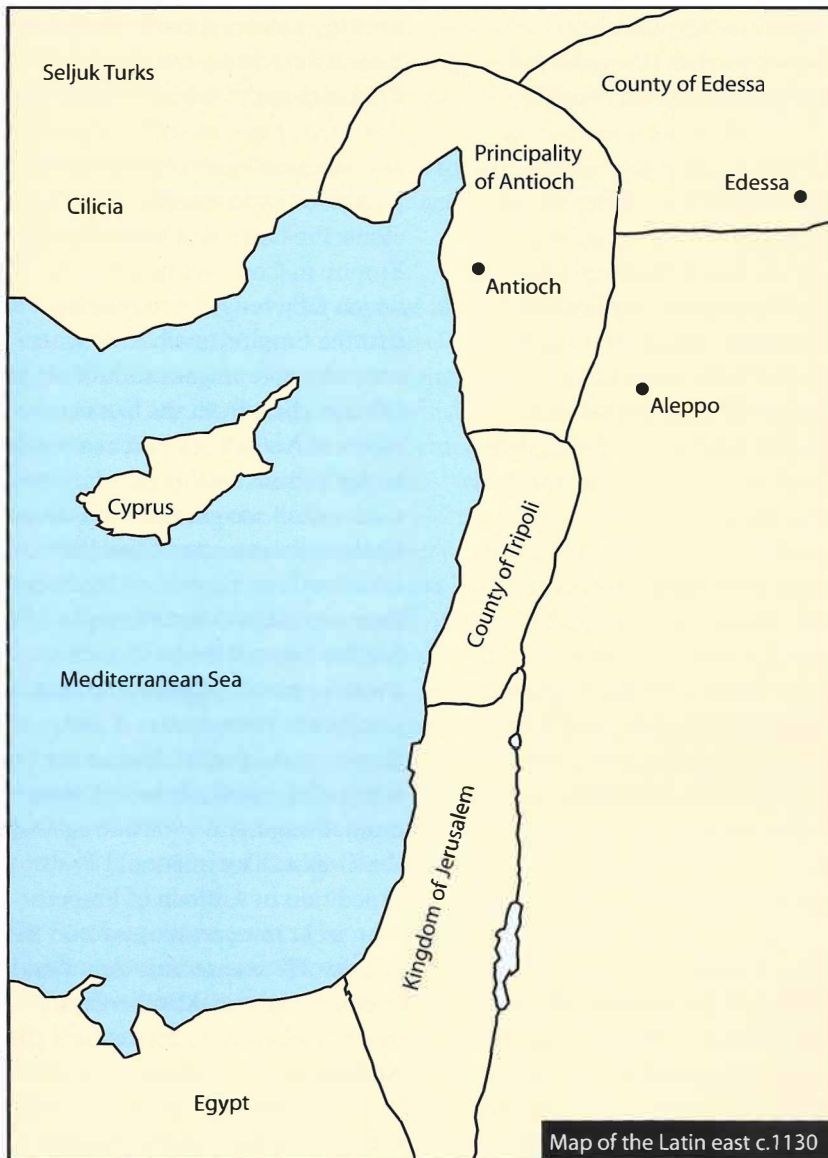
prestige, claiming overlordship of Edessa, and had a patriarch, holding a see founded by St. Peter. Relations with Antioch, sometimes friendly, more often hostile, became a feature of Edessa's short Latin history. The Armenians were thus not to live in the capital city of an Armenian state and their chronicler Matthew was to grumble against the Latin rulers, though he was to remain tolerant of their presence. Neither was Byzantium to have an integral province though the Commeni watched and waited for opportunities to assert their claims.

Edessa, on its occupation by Baldwin, was to prove its military value to the crusading cause immediately for it held up the forces of the Moslem leader, Kerbogha, of Mosul, on their way to attack Latin forces besieging Antioch. Time was bought for the Christian armies enabling them to take the city before Kerbogha arrived. One might have expected that the two Latin states, facing powerful Moslem enemies based at Aleppo and Mosul, would have worked together in attack and defence. At times they did but often they did not. This Latin disunity contributed to the County's downfall, for once the Latin lords had consolidated their rule in northern Syria they behaved like their Moslem neighbours, making war and peace in accordance with their interests. Baldwin, the first Count, having secured the boundaries of his County, improved his position by marrying Tafroc, a lady of Greek connections, and later his cousin Baldwin was to marry the Armenian Morphia, daughter of Gabriel, the powerful Armenian lord of the city of Melitene, modern Malatya. After the campaign against the Moslem city of Harran





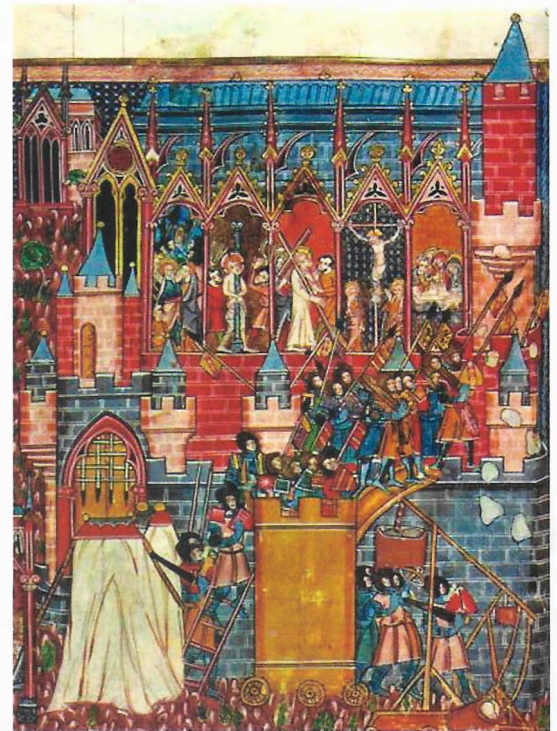
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Map of the Latin east c.1130



Map of County of Edessa c.1130



The Fall of Edessa

in 1104 the counts turned their attention to the more congenial task of fighting the princes of Antioch.

1108 found Prince Tancred, regent of Antioch, at war with Baldwin of Bourg, now the second count of Edessa; they acted as local lords making alliances with neighbouring Moslem rulers. Baldwin allied himself with Tawali, lord of the Upper Euphrates, Tancred made an agreement with Ridwan, lord of Aleppo. Baldwin also made an alliance with the Armenian warlord Kogh Vasil, the act of an eastern potentate. He was surpassed by Tancred, in the early twelfth century the most powerful prince in northern Syria, for a time also regent of Edessa, not a post he relinquished willingly.<sup>7</sup>

The rivalry between the two states was not merely one of dynasties, but of Antioch's claim to lordship of Edessa. Though Tancred's regency of Edessa was based on that assumption, its counts never accepted that claim until in the 1140s the growing power of Zengi, Atabeg of Mosul, forced Count Joscelin



II to do so. The rivalry was unwise for the success of the First Crusade in establishing the Latin states owed much to prevalent Moslem disunity. Once the Moslem world had consolidated itself, the Latin states, particularly the exposed Edessa, would be in peril.

There was no rivalry between the rulers of Edessa and those of Jerusalem, though there was independence signified by the counts issuing their own coinage. Baldwin of Bourg, the second Count, took an oath of loyalty to his cousin Baldwin when he relinquished Edessa for the crown of Jerusalem but the County did not become a feudal dependency. One should see the connection between the County and the Kingdom as one of kinship. The Lorraine unity of the Baldwins was continued through the two Count Joscelins of the Courtney family, who arrived in the east in the wake of the failed crusade of 1101. This family also held lands in the Kingdom thus maintaining the Jerusalem connection. Lesser lords such as Waleran, who held Birijek in the County were connected to the ruling family.

There were few such lords; a small group of Latins ruled the largely Armenian population and were responsible for defence and other military activity. Such activity was mainly local but, on one important occasion, it was not. In 1104 King Baldwin of Jerusalem encouraged a campaign by the northern Latin states against the Moslem city of Harran, close to Edessa on the Euphrates; its taking might in time have threatened Mosul. Some three thousand knights and nine thousand infantry moved against Harran. The contingent from Edessa was ambushed and destroyed; that from Antioch managed to escape. Count Baldwin was captured. Tancred became regent of Edessa and a few years later Mawdud, Moslem ruler of Mosul, attacked the city of Edessa with the aid of dissident Armenians. From 1110 to its fall, the County was on the defensive.

The Latin lords were the heirs of their Byzantine predecessors, but whereas they had ruled from cities, the Latins retreated into their castles. As a result the countryside, from which came the Armenian peasantry, the backbone of the field army, was ravaged by invading forces. By 1140 the County, despite the introduction by Joscelin II of the Hospitallers into Turbessel, was almost indefensible.

Rulers maintained their authority through local officials; the city of Edessa had officers with Byzantine titles. The Greek language was used, though Armenian was the main source of communication. There was no attempt to force Latin Christianity upon the inhabitants; Edessa had no patriarch, which meant that the Latins felt no need to exercise control over that Orthodox office as they had done in Antioch. All bishops were free to conduct their own affairs though the Latin archbishop appears to have felt a responsibility for the Christian life of the city.<sup>8</sup>

The Armenians were the largest Christian group and their ambitions had brought the Latins into the region as protectors. Once Edessa had gained its new, masterful lords there was no going back and the Armenians were surrounded by hostile Moslem powers growing in strength. Yet to their chronicler, Matthew, the episode of Latin rule over the Armenians of the region was just one part of the history of his people. Not that the Latin rulers of Edessa had merely lorded it over their Armenian subjects; rulers had married Armenian ladies and had endeavoured to maintain good relations with nearby independent Armenian cities such as Melitene. But the Counts had no wish to further Armenian ambitions and the tide

of rising Moslem power around Edessa turned against any Christian polity there.

The Jacobites had no political ambitions and wished to be left alone; the Orthodox looked to the Empire in Constantinople, with which they sought reunion. Not that the Empire, involved as it was with struggles to gain control of the Cilician coast from the Norman rulers of Antioch, as well as warfare in the Balkans, had done much to secure Orthodox control in Edessa. Oaths were extracted from the Latin lords by Emperor Alexius on their arrival in Constantinople. The Empire was not able to exercise control over the County's affairs, run for the most part as if the Empire did not exist. Unlike the rulers of Antioch, those of Edessa did not wage active warfare against the Empire. The Imperial expedition to Antioch of Emperor John in 1138 never crossed into the County. He asserted his claims and had them accepted by the Count but, without forces, they could not be made permanent.

Since Moslems once had control over the city of Edessa it was natural that some Moslems desired to regain it, even if rulers were ready at times to ally themselves to the Latins. This pressure upon the County grew with the coming to power in Mosul of Zengi. He exerted pressure in the 1140s upon Joscelin II, who tried to withstand it from the fortress of Turbessel. Joscelin was not helped by the refusal of Raymond, Prince of Antioch, to come to his aid. Zengi, rather than a counter-crusader, should be seen as an opportunist seeking to profit from Latin weakness to regain for Islam a city that it had lost.





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## On the Web

### A place from the past

Though the twelfth-century Moslem world was not anti-Christian, it was anti-Latin. Moslems felt that these Franks were barbarous intruders with little respect for the East, and who had committed great atrocities in Jerusalem. A leader who could inflict a substantial defeat upon the Franks was a hero. Zengi did not wish to take Edessa merely because it was there; it had a Christian significance; it was rich; it commanded the route to Antioch.

In his attack of 1144 only the city was assaulted and taken; the rest of the County, including the base of Turbessel, was still in Latin hands. The siege of Edessa was brief but bitter. Zengi used siege engines and undermined the city's walls, tactics which in places succeeded. The Moslems overcame the defenders by emerging from their artificial caves. Joscelin being absent, the city's defence was undertaken by the Latin archbishop, making the Latins the objects of Zengi's wrath. The men were killed, the women sold into slavery, but the Eastern Christians were spared. Upon Zengi's murder two years later, Count Joscelin attempted to retake the city with the aid of a revolt of local Christians. The reply of Zengi's son Nur-ed-Din in 1147 was devastating. He revealed himself as a counter-crusader by driving out all Christians and destroying their churches. It was the end of a thousand years of history, though that was not yet realised.<sup>9</sup> The County was still intact and to rescue Edessa the West launched the Second Crusade. The religious significance of Edessa was there as Pope Eugenius IV used in his bull *Quantum predecessores* the words of Eusebius that the city was the first to accept Christianity.

The Second Crusade was to be a failure. Edessa was abandoned for an assault upon Damascus. The result was to seal the fate of the County as a Christian entity. After the capture of Count Joscelin by Nur-ed-Din, his wife Beatrice tried to hold the remains of the County together, but decided to offer it to Emperor Manuel. Byzantine forces, however, were unable to withstand those of the Moslem leader and by 1151 the whole of the County was in his hands.<sup>10</sup> The Latins hoped for its re-conquest; young Joscelin, supported by his mother, asserted his claims from the Courtney lands in Galilee, in the Kingdom of Jerusalem, and the recovery of Edessa was to be proclaimed as one aim of the Third Crusade. Yet it was all in vain. The loss of Edessa proved to be the first sign that the balance of forces in Western Asia had swung against Christianity.

### References

- <sup>1</sup> Freely, J., *The Companion Guide to Turkey*, (1979, London), pp. 347-349.
- <sup>2</sup> Runciman, S., *A History of the Crusades*, Vol. I, (1971, Penguin), pp. 201-203.
- <sup>3</sup> Segal, J. B., *Edessa - The Blessed City*, (1970, Oxford), pp. 70-75.
- <sup>4</sup> McGregor, N., *Seeing Salvation*, (2000, London), pp. 88-90.
- <sup>5</sup> Segal, op.cit., pp. 221-227.
- <sup>6</sup> Mayer, H. E., *The Crusades*, (1971, Oxford) pp. 45-48.
- <sup>7</sup> Runciman, op.cit., Vol. II, pp. 36-50.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., Vol. II p. 109.
- <sup>9</sup> Segal, Op.cit., pp. 237-240.
- <sup>10</sup> Runciman, op.cit., pp. 235-244.

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One of the enticing aspects of historical study refers to the endurance of past events in present development. Such is the case concerning the city and county of Edessa, an episode in the early exploits of the Crusades but a name which is still used to rally and connect 'Christian Assyrian people round the world' ([www.edessa.com/default.htm](http://www.edessa.com/default.htm)). In fact, the name itself constitutes only a comparatively brief period of denominating a place which has been and is claimed by a long list of cultural, economic, political and religious interests (alphabetically indiscriminate) even today. Think only of the present warring turmoil besetting the region to consider, in different ranking order, the same interests now.

Under different names since antiquity and in our time, its roll-call of practically everybody who was historically anybody includes that it 'was an important Armenian center' ([www.armenianhistory.info/edessa.htm](http://www.armenianhistory.info/edessa.htm)) and that, as a county ([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/County\\_of\\_Edessa](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/County_of_Edessa)), it had several Christian rulers ([genealogy.euweb.cz/pan/edessa.html](http://genealogy.euweb.cz/pan/edessa.html)), one of whom does not seem to have made a good impression on some people, since they consider that 'Tancred saw Edessa as his chance to cut himself a piece of real estate' ([www.medievalcrusades.com/edessa.htm](http://www.medievalcrusades.com/edessa.htm)). Culturally, anyhow, the School of Edessa is deemed to be 'the birthplace of Syrian literature and philosophy' ([www.nestorian.org/the\\_school\\_of\\_edessa.html](http://www.nestorian.org/the_school_of_edessa.html)) which, together with Nisibis, is on a 'parallel with its richer and better-known Greek and Latin counterparts' ([www.britannica.com/eb/article-67686](http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-67686)). In this context, it figures in the process of 'orthodoxy and heresy in early Christianity' ([ccat.sas.upenn.edu/~hummm/Resources/Bauer/bauer01.htm](http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/~hummm/Resources/Bauer/bauer01.htm)) and in the 'development of the Canon of the New Testament' ([www.ntcanon.org/Edessa.shtml](http://www.ntcanon.org/Edessa.shtml)).

Furthermore, please note that the 'Shroud of Turin' history stretches from Edessa to Turin' ([www.factsplusfacts.com/shroud-of-turin-history.htm](http://www.factsplusfacts.com/shroud-of-turin-history.htm)) and that, apart from its modern place-name in Turkey, you can visit its namesake in Greece ([www.edessacity.gr/tourism/ed800-01\\_en.htm](http://www.edessacity.gr/tourism/ed800-01_en.htm)) or a bar/club in Brooklyn, New York, 11215.

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