

# *Santorini and the Crusades*

By  
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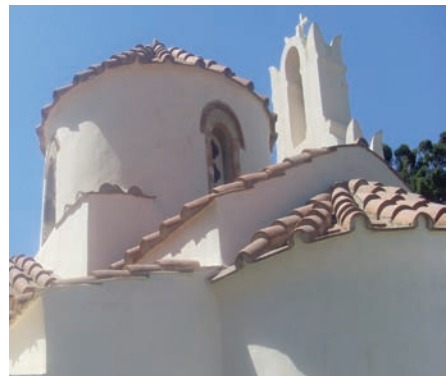
**S**antorini is a Greek island, part of the Cyclades, situated in the Aegean south of Athens. It is a beautiful volcanic island full of history and has a vibrant culture. The whitewashed villas, the caves buried deep in the caldera, and the many blue-domed churches provide Santorini with arguably the best scenery of any Greek island.



A photo showing modern Santorini taken by the author.

One of the island's historical gems dates to the Byzantine period; a beautiful early domed church dating to 1100 AD and founded by the Byzantine Emperor Alexios I Komnenos; the Emperor who, based in Constantinople (Istanbul), had a direct hand in starting the first crusade; his appeal to the Pope in 1095 triggering the crusades. The church's frescoes were commissioned at the personal expense of the Emperor Alexios, and many fine examples still survive.

The first crusaders were an unorganized shambles led by Peter the Hermit, and Alexios sent them on to Asia Minor where knight templar



A photo of the Byzantine church "Panaghia Episcopi" taken by the author.

the Turks massacred them. With the second wave of crusaders the Byzantines witnessed a more formidable force, but Alexios managed to obtain an oath of homage and an acknowledgement by the crusaders to hand re-conquered land back over to the Byzantine Empire. Because of this diplomatic approach, the crusade was a success for Alexios and the Empire, with the recovery of a number of islands and cities. It was during this successful era that Alexios founded “Panaghia Episcopo,” the Byzantine church on Santorini. The island was occupied by the Franks in 1207 during the fourth crusade and then the Venetians, the church becoming Catholic and the Greek Orthodox clergy being expelled.

The fortified hill top village of Pyrgos is strikingly similar to the hill top villages found in



A photo of the Byzantine church “Panaghia Episcopo” taken by the author.

the South of France and Italy. Alleyways wind themselves to the top of the Venetian castle, one of five “Kastelia” on the island, almost forming a labyrinth. Pyrgos alone is said to have around thirty-three churches, and the monastery that stands above the village on the nearby mountain of Prophitis Ilias is now a museum, housing 15<sup>th</sup> century icons and manuscripts. The fortified village of Akrotiri also boasts a castle, and these fortified structures helped Santorini to withstand the Turkish invasion until the later sixteenth century after which the island passed into the Ottoman Empire. With the Ottoman’s, the Orthodox clergy were restored.

Santorini certainly has excellent historical examples of crusader activity, from the Byzantine church founded by the Byzantine Emperor Alexios himself, to the “Kastelias” constructed by the Venetians who resided on the island after the fourth crusade. It constitutes, like other Greek islands such as Kos and Rhodes, an island of crusader history.

To the right, a photo of the fresco of the Byzantine Emperor Alexios I Komnenus above the doorway to the church, his face wiped out, taken by the author. An inscription, also disappeared, read “Alexios in Christ, the God, Emperor of the Romans, Comnenos, and pious.”



A photo of the fortified hill top village of Pyrgos taken by the author.



A photo of the inside of the church showing the Byzantine interior taken by the author.



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Dr. David Harrison is a history lecturer, having completed his Ph.D. on the history of Freemasonry in 2008 at the University of Liverpool. The thesis was published by Lewis Masonic titled *The Genesis of Freemasonry* and is available at all good book outlets. The author can be contacted via the Lewis Masonic website: [www.lewis-masonic.co.uk](http://www.lewis-masonic.co.uk).