

In his book *Baudolino*, Umberto Eco tells the story of a young man named Baudolino as he and his friends attempt to find the legendary kingdom of Prester John. The story is told in the context of Baudolino recounting his life to a chancellor of Byzantium whom he has just saved during the Fourth Crusade's sacking of Constantinople. This report will aim to use this book and Baudolino's story to argue that well researched fiction can be an excellent source of information for understanding the historical context of an event.

Historical fiction can make the historical events more real to its readers by providing a human context to the facts of the time. The story of Baudolino starts in Constantinople as it is being sacked by the crusaders initially sent to help the city. The fact that the crusaders sacked the city they came to save during the Fourth Crusade is well established and often mentioned when talking about the crusades. The sacking is often cited as one of the contributors to the schism between the eastern and western churches<sup>i</sup>. When the events of the sacking are described in primary sources the description often fails to fully portray the true horrors committed in a way that modern readers can empathize with. Primary accounts from the Western Church often take a victorious light to the sacking of Constantinople, as in Emperor Baldwin I's letters to the world, which greatly weakens how horrific these events truly were<sup>ii</sup>. Even the contemporary sources that condemned the crusaders did so with a list of crimes, such as in Cardinal Peter's letter to the Pope<sup>iii</sup>. This method of listing crimes, or accomplishments, depending on your stance, does little to humanize the situation. Even accounts from the Byzantium side of the conflict rarely portray the events of the sacking in a human context and instead describe the loss of many great works of art. The exception to this are the works of Niketas Choniates in his *History* and Gunther of Paris in his *Historia Constantinopolitana*. Both of these works tell a first hand account of the author's time in the city during its sacking, Niketas as a official trying to escape<sup>iv</sup> and Gunther as a monk following his Abbot in to the city<sup>v</sup>. It is highly likely that the description of the sacking in *Baudolino* is based on these works, especially as Niketas is the man Baudolino tells his story to. Both of these works are told from the perspective of men in that time with a side to their story.

This is not the case in Baudolino. Without a vested interest of telling his side of the story, Umberto Eco can provide a much clearer description of the sacking of Constantinople with emphasis on the aspects that would shock modern readers. There is a very large difference in the reaction evoked between saying that the crusaders desecrated an altar and having a man that prayed there describe his emotions at seeing a prostitute dance on it<sup>vi</sup>. A contemporary author might brush off the rape of women, or mention it in passing. However, Eco describes a scene in which a woman is dragged around by crusaders yelling that she's a virgin and they should "stick a finger in and see if it was worth it"<sup>vii</sup>. These exact events might not have happened, but they work to let the reader understand the revulsion that members of the Eastern Church felt at the events that transpired over the three day sack. When told from the human context it becomes clearer why the sacking of this city would drive a greater wedge between the two churches despite the fact that they worship a common god and share an enemy. Humans need a human story to empathize with to fully understand the context of a situation and these kinds of stories are often only found in historical fiction.

Historical fiction, when well researched, can convey information in a more palatable format allowing readers to more clearly grasp what is happening. One of the largest hurdles to historical study is keeping track of the many names and places when reading about events. This is why many secondary sources focus on a single perspective. For primary sources this becomes even more difficult as the names used were common knowledge for the author and their contemporaries, but not the reader. This results in them being used with little explanation or background. One of the main themes in Baudolino is the titular character's relationship with Emperor Frederick Barbarossa as his adoptive son. This provides a forum for the many events and interactions of the tumultuous times leading up to the Fourth Crusade to be discussed as elements of the story. Frederick often discusses the politics of his time with Baudolino, frequently accepting his advice. This makes understanding the political climate much easier as it is explained in a conversation with a perspective. Baudolino, as narrator, frequently inserts

anecdotes and stories to let the reader know the role each country plays as it is mentioned in conversation. This narrative thread is much easier to follow than a strict statement of facts.

An example of this is the description of Barbarossa's campaigns into Italy. To learn this from a primary source you might look to *The Deeds of Frederick Barbarossa* by Otto of Freising. This work contains a single paragraph that explains the geography of Italy and the politics of its provinces<sup>viii</sup>. While it accurately conveys the information it needs to, the author of this report had to go back to reread it because in the process of typing the previous sentence they had forgotten how many provinces there were in Italy. The work accomplishes its goal of conveying information, but it fails to do so in a way that is memorable. In contrast to this Eco spends almost a full chapter in which Baudolino, Fredrick, and Freising (once again Eco has inserted a contemporary author as a character) discuss the situation in Italy and how it pertains to Fredrick's current campaign<sup>ix</sup>. Baudolino is an Italian himself and frequently provides insight into the politics as seen by peasants. By putting facts in the context of a narrative they become tied to the characters and events in the story which makes them much easier to remember and understand.

Along with the facts, historical fiction can provide a arena to explore the unproven or undocumented rumors in history far better than nonfiction can. The central story to Baudolino is the main character's quest to find the kingdom of Prester John. The origin of the Prester John story is, for the most part, unknown. He was a popular fantasy character in medieval Europe that supposedly ruled over a long lost Christian nation in the Orient. There is very little proof of his existence and any ties he had to nobility have been completely debunked<sup>x</sup>. It's very hard to write factually about what is essentially a fictional character. Most of what is known about Prester John comes from a letter composed by an unknown writer claiming to be Prester John<sup>xi</sup>. Almost every other fact about Prester John comes from references made by fictional sources. It is understandable that most works of nonfiction about Prester John have to stress the unreliability of their sources. The fictional work Baudolino can instead assume that Prester John existed and tell his story more completely. In the novel,

Baudolino does come across Prester John's letter and uses it to try to find his kingdom. Along the way the history of this character is flushed out and we learn his story. This story can be told as a complete narrative instead of a piecewise assembly of references as one would have to if approaching it from a historical standpoint.

This format of explaining facts in a narrative is much more palatable for readers and lets the facts sink in more readily, as explained above. When this story is then tied to the events surrounding the Fourth Crusade and the reign of Fredrick Barbarossa it allows the reader to learn about Prester John as if he were a real person. This makes his story feel more complete and important. Prester John was very prevalent in medieval culture and dismissing his story because it is fiction undermines the effect he had on the society around him<sup>xii</sup>. This story gives insight into how the people of that era approached stories and their tellings. Examining this from a factual stance removes that feeling of discovery and excitement that the people of medieval Europe felt about Prester John. Only when this story is told from a fictional stance can it be understood as its original creators meant. This is just one example. History is riddled with unfounded stories and rumors that need to be told from a fictional stance to truly capture their meaning. In this sense reading well written historical fiction can breathe life into these tales in a way that nonfiction cannot.

Historical fiction, when well researched, can convey the facts and context of a historical event as well as, if not better than, a nonfictional recount. By residing in the fiction genre the work can extrapolate on historical events to tell the human stories that might not have been recorded anywhere, but probably happened. These stories allow the writer to humanize events, which in turn allows the reader to connect to the story on a more concrete level. Fiction also allows the writer to explain the facts of the event in the context of a narrative. This allows the readers to form connections between the facts, story, and characters which makes the telling of complicated events much easier to understand and remember. Historical fiction is fictional, and because of that it can tell fictional stories from history better. There is more room for the author to fill out missing details and make the story more real.

Nonfiction cannot ever fill in gaps in a story and must leave it lacking, which, for the readers, is quite unsatisfying. While historical fiction should never be the only source for research, and it should not be trusted implicitly, neither should it be completely disregarded. Sometimes the best way to tell a story, no matter how factual, is in a novel.

- i Cross, F. L., and E. A. Livingstone. *The Oxford dictionary of the Christian church*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- ii Andrea, Alfred J., and Brett E. Whalen. *Contemporary sources for the Fourth Crusade*. Leiden: Brill, 2008.
- iii Andrea, Alfred J., and Brett E. Whalen. *Contemporary sources for the Fourth Crusade*. Leiden: Brill, 2008.
- iv Acominatus, Nicetas, and Harry I. Magoulas. *O city of Byzantium*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984.
- v Gunther, and Alfred J. Andrea. *The Capture of Constantinople: the Hystoria Constantinopolitana of Gunther of Pairis*. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Press, 1997.
- vi Eco, Umberto. Baudolino, trans. William Weaver, 23. New York: Harcourt, 2003.
- vii Eco, Umberto. Baudolino, trans. William Weaver, 24. New York: Harcourt, 2003.
- viii Freising, Otto Af, Rahewin, and Charles Christopher Mierow. *The deeds of Frederick Barbarossa*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.
- ix Eco, Umberto. Baudolino, trans. William Weaver, 51-63. New York: Harcourt, 2003.
- x Brewer, Keagan Joel. Prester John. *The legend and its sources*. Aldershot, Hamps.: Ashgate Publishing, 2015.
- xi Brewer, Keagan Joel. Prester John. *The legend and its sources*. Aldershot, Hamps.: Ashgate Publishing, 2015.
- xii Brewer, Keagan Joel. Prester John. *The legend and its sources*. Aldershot, Hamps.: Ashgate Publishing, 2015.