The First Crusade: A Truly Novel Idea Or Old Ideas Revisited?

Pope Urban II's influential speech at the Council of Clermont in November 1095 launched the medieval crusading movement,[1] with the first crusade departing for Jerusalem in August 1096.[2] Christian warriors were asked to participate in an armed pilgrimage to reclaim the Holy Land from Muslim control. This call to arms, sanctioned by God and offering religious salvation, was met with great enthusiasm and unlike previous militarised campaigns 'people of all social ranks'[3] participated. The crusades continue to be regarded as having been a new idea and as an original conception of a holy or just war. However, debate has questioned how novel the idea of the first crusade truly was. This essay explores this question.

Defining a Crusade

The definition of a crusade must first be addressed when considering the first crusade's originality. Peter Hecht suggests crusades had occurred earlier, with important differences in objectives and how these were attained.[4] Differences in opinion on the key characteristics of a crusade and how these relate to the notion of originality in the first crusade can be seen in crusade scholarship. For example, Carl Erdmann and John Gilchrist's views support crusading acts having taken place before 1095, mostly concentrated on war against heretics, whereas Jonathan Riley-Smith's stance is that 'the crusades…[shared]…a single set of common [unique] characteristics',[5] often identified as 'papal authorisation, indulgence, vow, cross and crusader privileges'.[6] He argues that the crusade was unique and revolutionary from previous holy wars due to its 'institutional and penitential nature'.[7] All viewpoints are relevant and need to be considered, however, it also must be recognised that an exact agreed definition may never be reached.

The first crusade can be classed as a holy war due to its objective in defending a religious cause; however, identifying it as a legitimate just war is more complex. The first crusade was originally justified as being a just war, an existing concept, the phrase 'just war' believed to have been first used by Aristotle (Fourth Century BC) to categorise acceptable warfare.[8] Jonathan Riley-Smith asserted that the just war theory underpinning the crusades exhibits

---

[1] History.com Editors, *Pope Urban II Orders First Crusade* (2009) (Last Updated 13 March, 2025) https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/november-27/pope-urban-ii-orders-first-crusade [accessed 6 April 2025].

[2] Emily Briffett, 'The First Crusade: Your Ultimate Guide', *HistoryExtra.com* (2023) https://www.historyextra.com/period/medieval/first-crusade-guide-when-why-happened/ [accessed 7 April 2025].

[3] Jonathan Phillips, 'The Crusades: A Complete History', *History Today*, Vol. 65, Issue 5 (2015) https://www.historytoday.com/archive/feature/crusades-complete-history [accessed 29 April 2025].

[4] Peter Hecht, 'Crusading As Philosophical Construct: Thoughts And Actions Of Pope Urban II, St. Bernard And Peter The Venerable', *Comparative Civilians Review*, Vol. 84: No 48, Article 6, pp. 37-63 (p. 39) https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol84/iss84/6 [accessed 6 April 2025].

[5] Hecht, 'Crusading As Philosophical Construct', pp. 37-63 (p. 39-40) https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol84/iss84/6 [accessed 6 April 2025].

[6] Ibid. pp. 37-63 (p. 40) https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol84/iss84/6 [accessed 6 April 2025].

[7] Andrew Holt Ph.D., 'Jonathan Riley-Smith On The Motivations Of The First Crusaders', *apholt.com blog*, 8 June 2016 https://apholt.com/2016/06/08/jonathan-riley-smith-on-the-motivations-of-the-first-crusaders/ [accessed 7 April 2025].

[8] Ibid. p. 32.

violence directly by or on behalf of Christ, justified to achieve mankind's intentions and was 'morally neutral'.[9] It could therefore be adjusted to fit the needs of the perpetrators.[10] The way the established justification for war was employed for the crusades is plausibly novel, encompassing other individual characteristics to create a holy pilgrimage to attain their goals, permitting violence and appealing to different parts of society.

In essence, a crusade is a combination of pilgrimage and military action with religious purpose. All of which, as Erdmann and Gilchrist's arguments support, existed prior to the eleventh century. Riley-Smith's required defining characteristics are strongly evident in the first crusade, however, other aspects are also identifiable, some pre-existing and others new. The reclamation of Christian religious territory for God and western Christendom was a key characteristic in the first crusade. Later crusades, such as the Baltic Crusade, saw a larger economic territorial focus. It appears that what made up the definition of a crusade could alter, as such, we must consider that the nature and approach to religious warfare could also alter. Consequently, whilst containing common pre-existing characteristics the first crusade may have been seen as original at its conception, with essential traits combined together successfully exuding peace and popularity whilst being heavily situated in acts of war.

Crusading Characteristics Identified Prior to the First Crusade

As noted, crusading characteristics can be identified earlier than the eleventh century. Pilgrimages to the Holy Land by western Christians had taken place since the Fourth Century as mostly peaceful expeditions.[11] Warfare against enemies for territorial land gain or with political objectives was also nothing new. Neither was the attachment of God, conversion of pagans or ecclesiastical involvement in campaigns. All of which can be attributed to the first crusade. Three centuries before the first crusade, Charlemagne (c.768-d.814)[12] invaded Anglo-Saxon England, and whilst other objectives existed, we know of his 'baptism of pagans'.[13] The conversion of pagans is well attested to have been part of crusading goals and actions. 'The Normans made significant contributions to both' crusading and pilgrimage[14] and their actions can be understood by an 'interplay between warfare and faith',[15] demonstrated by carrying of a cross banner blessed by the pope in their invasion of England in 1066,[16] which is comparable to the crusades being blessed, as well as authorised, by the pope and the

---

[9] Jonathan Riley-Smith, 'Rethinking The Crusades', *First Things 101,* (2000), originally printed in and reprinted with permission from 'First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life' published by the Institute on Religion and Public Life, pp. 20-23. https://web.archive.org/web/20010723130919/http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/history/world/wh0042.html [accessed 2 April 2025].

[10] Ibid. pp. 20-23.

[11] Jean Richard, *The Crusades c.1071-c.1291*, originally pub. in French as *Historie Des Croisades* by Librairie Artheme Fayard, 1996, first pub. by Cambridge University Press, 1999 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) p. 16.

[12] Christopher Tyerman, *God's War A New History Of The Crusades*, first pub. by Allen Lane Books, 2006 (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2007) p. 5.

[13] Richard, *The Crusades c.1071-c.1291*, p. 2.

[14] Kathryn Hurlock, Paul Oldfield, 'Introduction', *Crusading And Pilgrimage In The Norman World*, ed. by Kathryn Hurlock and Paul Oldfield (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2015) pp. 1-10 (p. 4).

[15] Hurlock, Oldfield, 'Introduction', pp. 1-10 (p. 1).

[16] English Heritage, *The Power Of The Church The Story Of 1066: Collectables*, (n.d) https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/teaching-resources/story-of-1066/collectible-2/ [accessed 17 March 2025].

adoption and adornment of the cross symbol by crusaders. Further east, in AD 988, Vladimir I of the Kievan Rus'[17] converted to Eastern Orthodox Christianity.[18] During the suppression of paganism he ordered the conversion of the occupants of Kyiv and Novgorod.[19] As with Charlemagne's activity, we see conversion of pagans by Christians outside of the Roman Catholic Church and the crusading narrative. The Muslim Moors had invaded and conquered the Iberian Peninsula in the early eighth century seizing land and power and subjugating Christians and Jews.[20] The Muslim occupation of the Iberian Peninsula by a specific religious group can be identified as a territorial land and power gain comparable to the crusaders territorial actions within the Holy Land. The Church's Peace and Truce of God movements from earlier in the eleventh century 'directly influenced the inception of the first crusade'.[21] The Peace of God, reinforcing the Truces of God (c.1020), saw arms-bearers agree, under oath, to protect non-military classes.[22] We can identify a knightly role similar to that of the later military orders and violence in God's name as seen in the first crusade. These earlier examples show that utilisation of religion within warfare or politics was nothing new by the time of Urban II's call for a militarised pilgrimage; nor was the conversion of 'heathens' to a rulers preferred belief system or the identified actions or objectives unique to the efforts of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Sign of the Cross

One individual characteristic of the first crusade that appears more novel than others is the adoption of the sign of the cross as a crusading emblem, which became an identifiable and wearable symbol for participants in 1095 and all crusades which followed. Contemporary texts indicate this began with the papal representative Adhemar of Le Puy tearing up pieces of cloth to make crosses for the crowd during Urban II's speech.[23] Whether this was planned or a random occurrence is debatable, however, the strength of Le Puy's actions appears to have created enthusiasm for the call to arms and help create a unique characteristic in aiding a sense of identity, unity and purpose amongst crusaders. Whilst not mandatory, the cross symbol was worn by many. Christopher Tyerman reminds us that 'the adoption of the sign of the cross' distinguished those swapping 'the militia of the world' for the 'militia of God'.[24] When combined with their vow and crusading actions they would gain 'penance and remission of sins'.[25] The importance of taking the vow of the cross cleverly helped Urban II's aim to stop the infighting within Christian Europe by providing alternative opportunities. Whilst, it could be seen to be developed from earlier religious battle symbols, such as the

---

[17] The Editors Of Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Kievan Rus* (last updated March 2025) https://www.britannica.com/topic/Kyivan-Rus [accessed 22 March 2025].

[18] Christian History Institute, *988 Vladimir Adopts Christianity*, Christian History Institute (2025), originally pub. in Christian History Magazine, Issue 28 (1990) https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/vladimir-adopts-christianity [accessed 22 March 2025].

[19] The Editors Of Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Kievan Rus* [Accessed 22nd March 2025].

[20] BBC, *Muslim Spain (711-1492),* (last updated 2009) https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/spain_1.shtml [accessed 24 March 2025].

[21] Christopher Tyerman, *God's War A New History Of The Crusades*, first pub. by Allen Lane Books, 2006 (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2007) p. 44.

[22] Tyerman, God's War, p. 43.

[23] Rebecca Rist, 'Launching The First Crusade', *HistoryExtra.com* (2021) https://www.historyextra.com/period/medieval/launching-first-crusade-pope-urban-holy-land/ [accessed 7 April 2025].

[24] Tyerman, *God's War,* p. 63.

[25] Ibid, p. 63.

Norman's cross banner, its importance and significance in the first crusade was arguably an innovative and new utilisation of a well-known, respected and powerful Christian symbol.

Andrew Holt suggests that Urban II's rhetoric in his call to arms was not 'particularly new or revolutionary'.[26] Examination of crusade characteristics supports this statement. What has been argued as being at the centre of a crusade and it's 'most radical and defining feature' was its penitential nature.[27] The idea of a crusade warrior borrows strongly not from warfare, but from pilgrimage tradition with combatants considered pilgrims and required to take vows, with the innovative move from traditional pilgrimage being that crusaders carried weapons.[28] This idea separates the crusading notion from that of typical warfare. Urban II himself referred to this crusade as a 'holy pilgrimage',[29] differentiating it from other militarised campaigns and underpinning the religious force driving it.

Conclusion

Can we conclude the first crusade as a truly novel idea? The answer is not definitive. Defining a crusade, and consequently the originality of the first crusade, is complex. The ideas proclaimed as new in 1095 by the call to arms were old ideas presented in a new way.[30] Yet, the inception of crusading was arguably the first event to significantly utilise them all together, on a larger and broader scale than before. The first crusade was carefully constructed to combine holy warfare, religious pilgrimage, seizure of territory, power and spiritual reward, whist sitting within wider church reform and attempts to heal relations with the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Holy Roman Emperor. It was presented as an innovative pilgrimage with a chance to use military skills for 'good' towards a necessary cause with the promise of salvation. Whilst individual aspects of the first crusade may have pre-existed, in the late eleventh century, the combination and presentation of identified characteristics to achieve the objectives behind Urban II's call to arms may have been seen as truly novel.

---

[26] Andrew Holt Ph.D., 'Crusading As A Form Of Pilgrimage', *apholt.com blog*, 1 January 2018, https://apholt.com/2018/01/01/crusading-as-a-form-of-pilgrimage/ [accessed 7 April 2025].

[27] Holt, 'Crusading As A Form Of Pilgrimage' [accessed 7 April 2025].

[28] Ibid. [accessed 7 April 2025].

[29] Ibid. [accessed 7 April 2025].

[30] Christopher Tyerman, *God's War A New History Of The Crusades*, first pub. by Allen Lane Books, 2006 (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2007) p. 57.

Bibliography

BBC, *Muslim Spain (711-1492),* (last updated 2009) https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/spain_1.shtml [accessed 24 March 2025].

Briffett, Emily., 'The First Crusade: Your Ultimate Guide', *HistoryExtra.com* (2023) https://www.historyextra.com/period/medieval/first-crusade-guide-when-why-happened/ [accessed 7 April 2025].

Christian History Institute, *988 Vladimir Adopts Christianity* (2025) https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/vladimir-adopts-christianity [accessed 22 March 2025].

The Editors Of Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Kievan Rus* (2025) https://www.britannica.com/topic/Kyivan-Rus [accessed 22 March 2025].

English Heritage, *The Power Of The Church The Story Of 1066: Collectables*, (n.d) https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/teaching-resources/story-of-1066/collectible-2/ [accessed 17 March 2025].

Hecht, Peter., 'Crusading As Philosophical Construct: Thoughts And Actions Of Pope Urban II, St. Bernard And Peter The Venerable', *Comparative Civilians Review*, Vol. 84: No 48, Article 6, pp. 37-63 https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol84/iss84/6 [accessed 6 April 2025].

History.com, *Pope Urban II Orders First Crusade* (2009) https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/november-27/pope-urban-ii-orders-first-crusade [accessed 6 April 2025].

Holt, Andrew (Ph.D.)., 'Jonathan Riley-Smith On The Motivations Of The First Crusaders', *apholt.com blog*, 8 June 2016 https://apholt.com/2016/06/08/jonathan-riley-smith-on-the-motivations-of-the-first-crusaders/ [accessed 7 April 2025].

Holt, Andrew (Ph.D., 'Crusading As A Form Of Pilgrimage', *apholt.com blog*, 1 January 2018, https://apholt.com/2018/01/01/crusading-as-a-form-of-pilgrimage/ [accessed 7 April 2025].

Hurlock, Kathryn, and Paul Oldfield., 'Introduction', *Crusading And Pilgrimage In The Norman World* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2015).

Phillips, Jonathan., 'The Crusades: A Complete History', *History Today*, Vol. 65, Issue 5 (2015) https://www.historytoday.com/archive/feature/crusades-complete-history [accessed 29 April 2025].

Jean Richard, *The Crusades c.1071-c.1291* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Riley-Smith, Jonathan., 'Rethinking The Crusades', *First Things 101* (2000) https://web.archive.org/web/20010723130919/http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/history/world/wh0042.htm [accessed 2 April 2025].

Rist, Rebecca., 'Launching The First Crusade', *HistoryExtra.com* (2021) https://www.historyextra.com/period/medieval/launching-first-crusade-pope-urban-holy-land/ [accessed 7 April 2025].

Tyerman, Christopher., *God's War A New History Of The Crusades* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2007).