

Launching the First Crusade

When Muslim power grew in the east, Pope Urban II called on the knights of Europe to defend the Holy Land. **Rebecca Rist** recounts a quest that devolved into massacres, treachery and greed



“When Pope Urban had said these and very many similar things in his urbane discourse, he so influenced to one purpose the desires of all who were present that they cried out, ‘It is the will of God! It is the will of God!’”

So wrote the monk Robert of Rheims in his *Historia Hierosolymitana* (‘History of Jerusalem’) during the early 1100s. Some years earlier, on 27 November 1095, Urban II preached a public sermon outside the town of Clermont in central France, summoning Christians to take part in the First Crusade, a new form of holy war. It was a carefully stage-managed event, in which the pope’s representative, the papal legate Adhémar of Le Puy, supposedly moved by the pope’s eloquence, tore up strips of cloth to make crosses for the crowds. Urban had been travelling through France accompanied by a large entourage from Italy, dedicating cathedrals and churches and presiding over reforming councils, and his proposed crusade was part of a wider programme of church reform. In March that year, at the Council of Piacenza, a desperate Byzantine emperor, Alexius I Comnenus, had pleaded for western help against the Seljuk Turks, whose conquests were decimating Byzantium and preventing Christians from reaching pilgrimage sites. Urban wanted to extend the hand of friendship to the Orthodox church and to heal the schism with Catholicism, which had gone from bad to worse since the time of his predecessor Leo IX.

We have a number of accounts of Urban’s speech, contemporary and later, although they differ somewhat in what they record. Yet we know that he called on knights to vow to fight in a penitential pilgrimage on Christ’s behalf, in a war to defend the Holy Land from Muslim oppressors, and that he used the Christian symbol of the cross as an emotive sign of commitment to the enterprise. Urban promised the crowds that crusading would not just benefit the church and European Christian society but their own souls, since all sins, past and present, would be wiped away through his dramatic promise of the ‘remission of sins’.

Of course, those who responded to his call were inspired by a range of motives beyond the religious: material, economic, political, social and cultural. Nevertheless, they were drawn to Urban’s vision of a military campaign that soldered together ideas of pilgrimage, holy war and just war.



Urban promised the crowds that crusading would wipe away all sins, past and present



A knight's cross from the First Crusade. The cross became an emotive sign of commitment to fight

For would-be crusaders, the religious and political situation of 11th-century Europe was complex and confusing. In Rome, popes were trying to reform the Church, beset by problems of simony (the buying and selling of ecclesiastical office), Nicolaitanism (clerical marriage) and the need to reform monasticism. These drives for reform, particularly over the issue of investiture – who had the right to invest the clergy with their spiritual office – had caused great divisions between the papacy and the Holy Roman Empire, and chaos in Europe.

Indeed, though embryonic nation states had begun to emerge in Germany, France, England and the Iberian peninsula, led by powerful dynasties such as the Norman, Capetian and Salian kings, Europe was still a fractured, violent place of lawlessness, hardship, civil war and famine. It is easy to see why Urban’s crusading message appealed to the knightly classes: it gave many the opportunity to harness the military skills in which they had been trained for a greater, religious cause. Furthermore, a resurgence of millennial fervour was now gripping many Christians, who believed that the end of the world was at hand and wanted to seize the opportunity of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to witness the Last Days. Urban’s speech sparked a wave of recruitment in which those who took the cross were promised a



Charismatic preacher Peter the Hermit urges warriors on to the Holy Land, in a c1270 image of the First Crusade's disastrous opening sally, the People's Crusade

host of special privileges including protection of their families, lands and assets and exemption from repaying debts while they were absent on crusade.

Onward, Christian soldiers

Nevertheless, most westerners knew little of the situation in the Holy Land that Urban believed sparked the need for a crusade. For centuries, the Muslim world had been divided between two major caliphates: the Abbasid at Baghdad (modern-day Iraq), which espoused Sunni Islam, and the Fatimid caliphate at Cairo, which followed Shia Islam. In 1009, the Holy Sepulchre, which housed the tomb of Christ himself, had been vandalised by the Fatimid caliph al-Hakim, who led a campaign of persecution and prevented pilgrims journeying to Jerusalem. In recent decades, the Byzantines had also been troubled by a new wave of aggressors: the Seljuk Turks, against whom they had suffered a cataclysmic defeat at the battle of Manzikert in 1071. Alexius I's ambassadors were present at the Council of Piacenza in March 1095. Relations had been rocky in recent years between east and west, not least because a former pope, Gregory VII, had formally excommunicated the Byzantine emperor. Urban listened carefully to the ambassadors' appeal from Alexius to western knights to help him restore lost

Byzantine territory, and planned his speech for Clermont accordingly. He might well have had in mind that Gregory VII had earlier also issued (unsuccessful) appeals to help Byzantium.

So Urban II had appealed to the knightly classes of medieval Europe. But the result was not what he had anticipated. His promise of 'remission of sins', together with the hope of material gain, was so popular that huge crowds of peasants began to dedicate themselves to the cause, incited by charismatic, itinerant and determined preachers such as the persuasive Peter the Hermit and the dubious Walter the Penniless. From the spring of 1096, disorderly mobs began to journey across Europe in what came to be called the People's, or Peasants', Crusade. These groups travelled across Germany and Hungary, often clashing with Hungarians and Byzantine mercenaries, yet met outside Constantinople, relatively intact, at the end of July 1096.

Alexius was dismayed at the disorderly rabble that had appeared. These were not the fearsome western Christian knights he had hoped for! He advised Peter the Hermit to await the arrival of the better-armed main contingents, but was not heeded.

At the beginning of August, many crossed the Bosphorus and marched towards the city of Nicomedia (modern Izmit). Some, Germans and Italians led by a nobleman named Reinald, captured the castle of Xerigordos before being besieged by Muslim forces and taken captive, or dying of heat and thirst. Others, without their leader, Peter, who had returned to Constantinople, marched out of Civetot, were ambushed by the Turks, and captured. By October 1096, the People's Crusade was over.

Luckily for Alexius, from late 1096 onwards more effective military forces in the shape of the Princes' Crusade began to arrive outside Constantinople. These warriors, some more reluctantly than others, swore an oath of allegiance to him before crossing into Asia Minor, accompanied by Byzantine forces. No kings took the cross, but there was an illustrious list of nobility, including the pious Godfrey of Bouillon, Duke of Lower Lorraine; his pragmatic brother Baldwin I; the handsome Bohemond I, son of Robert Guiscard; his nephew Tancred; as well as Raymond IV, Count of Toulouse; Robert II, Duke of Normandy; Robert II, Count of Flanders; Hugh the Great of Vermandois, brother of the King of France; and Stephen of Blois, brother-in-law of the King of England. All hoped for penance, glory, adventure and land.

ANTI-SEMITISM AND THE PEOPLE'S CRUSADE

How mob fervour led to forced baptism and murder

The first wave of the First Crusade, the People's Crusade of 1096, was a mixture of peasants and knights led by dynamic and persuasive rabble-rousers such as Peter the Hermit, Walter the Penniless, Count Emicho of Leiningen, the priest Volkmar, and the monk Gottschalk.

Although many of these crusaders got no further than the Balkans, they often took part in ferocious persecution of Jews, particularly in the Rhineland, in towns such as Cologne, Mainz, Speyer and Worms, but also in France, Hungary, Bavaria and Bohemia, where they sacked Jewish quarters, massacred the inhabitants and destroyed whole communities. Some tried forcibly to baptise Jews, despite the fact that forced baptism was contrary to canon law.

In response, some Jews preferred to martyr themselves – the practice of *Kiddush ha-Shem* ('sanctifying the Name of God') – and even their own children rather than be forced to convert. We know of these forced baptisms and massacres not only from Catholic sources but also from Jewish writers, who recorded in Hebrew chronicles what happened, to record the atrocities for posterity and to keep their faith alive.

The reasons for these massacres were manifold. Whipped up by crusading rhetoric and fervour, mob armies were likely to become disorganised, unruly and predisposed to violence. Since they had taken the cross to kill Muslim 'infidels', they may have thought it was their duty to kill other 'infidels' – the Jews – whom they encountered, not only in the near east, but in Europe, in their very midst.

These ideas were enhanced by the belief that it was the Jews who had killed Christ, whose death it was the crusaders' duty to avenge. Hence, in committing these atrocities, the crusaders may have been driven by ideas of purification, vengeance and a desire to scapegoat an 'other'.

The first target the crusaders besieged was the Turkish-held town of Nicaea. Its governor, Kilij Arslan, immediately fled the scene and his attempt to gather a relief force was unsuccessful. The town surrendered in June 1097 – but to the Byzantines, to the crusaders' dismay. Manuel Butumites, the crafty Byzantine commander, had struck a deal with the Turks that restored Nicaea to Alexius. The westerners were far from happy, but there was nothing they could do about it. Meanwhile, Kilij Arslan waited in the nearby hills and attacked Bohemond's forces at Dorylaeum. After a hard-fought victory, the crusaders opened a strategic road to Antioch, and through cooperation with another Byzantine leader, Tatikios, soon won back many towns – but for Alexius.

This was not at all to Baldwin and Tancred's taste, and they split off from the main contingent to carve out territories for themselves. After the pair quarrelled, however, Tancred rejoined the main army while Baldwin marched north to the town of Edessa. Although its citizens made him joint ruler with their own lord, Thoros, Baldwin staged a coup and the county of Edessa became the first crusader state.

Meanwhile, the main body of crusaders reached and besieged the city of Antioch in October 1097. Its siege lasted months, and low morale deepened still further. Finally, after Bohemond persuaded a traitor to open the gates to the crusaders, the city fell in June 1098 and its inhabitants were massacred. Almost immediately, the crusaders were themselves besieged by a new Muslim army led by the formidable Kerbogha, the atabeg of Mosul. In dismay, Alexius and other Christian deserters, including Stephen of Blois, returned to Constantinople. The morale of the army was only saved by the discovery of the Holy Lance – which supposedly had pierced Christ's side – by a peasant-soldier named Peter Bartholomew in the Church of St Peter. This supposed relic was certainly fake, but it gave the army's mood a vital boost. The crusaders marched out of Antioch and routed the Muslims in a famous victory. Bohemond, who by now had no intention of marching onwards to Jerusalem, seized control of the city and established the principality of Antioch.

Territorial armies

Nevertheless, with the death of the papal legate Adhémar of Le Puy, who had kept the crusader armies together, relations between Byzantines and crusaders could only worsen. The latter continued their march to Jerusalem and, led by Raymond IV of Toulouse, laid siege to the town of Arqa in the spring of 1099. On reaching Jerusalem,

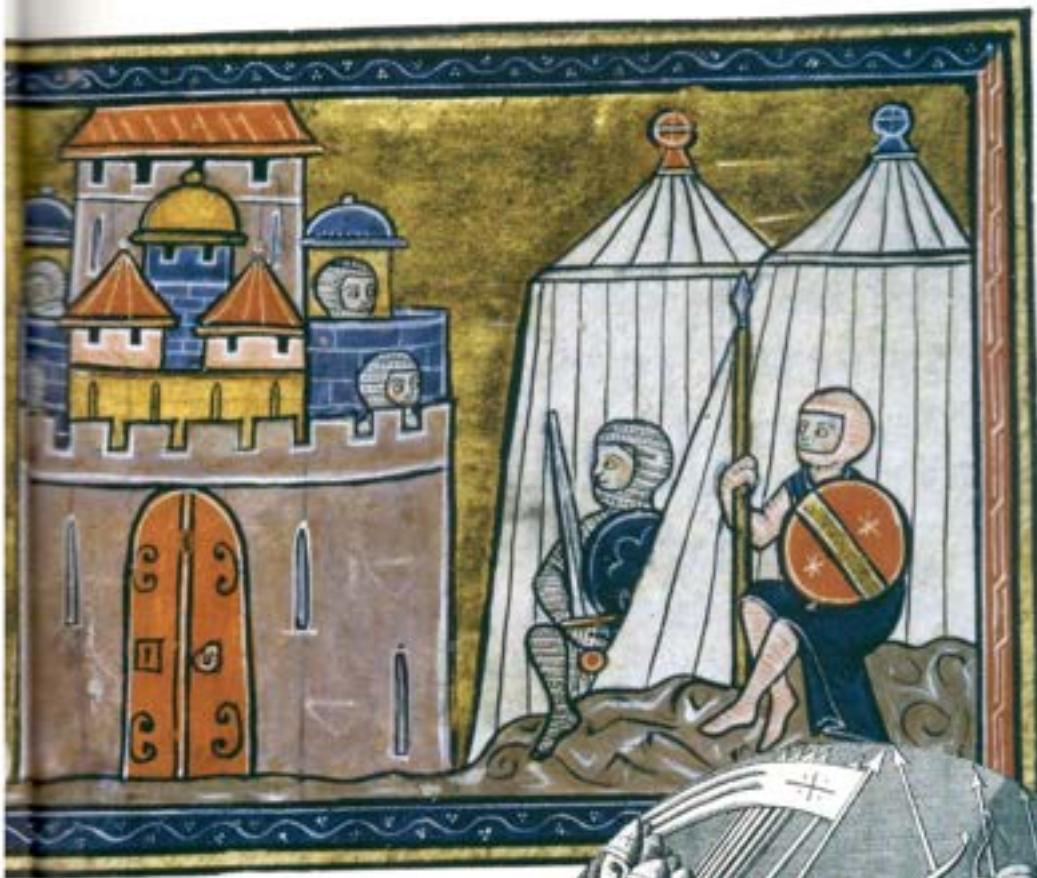


A depiction of the siege of Antioch in 1098. Amid a food shortage, the invaders' morale dipped to dangerous lows before Bohemond I persuaded a traitor to open the gates. The inhabitants were slaughtered

they besieged that too, and on 15 July Godfrey of Bouillon and his troops entered the city, slaughtering the inhabitants. The anonymous *Gesta Francorum* ('Deeds of the Franks'), described how: 'Rejoicing and weeping for joy, our people came to the Sepulchre of Jesus our saviour to worship and pay their debt.'

Yet the capture of Jerusalem did not bring harmony. Godfrey and Raymond argued over who now owned the city. Eventually, Godfrey was declared 'defender of the Holy Sepulchre', and rallied his crusaders to defeat an Egyptian counter-invasion force, which was repulsed on 12 August near the coastal town of Ascalon. The kingdom of

Starstruck by the exploits of their illustrious predecessors, new armies arrived to support the crusader states



Crusader states during the early 12th century



Jerusalem was born. Raymond had lost the ultimate prize, and had to content himself with carving out land to the north of Jerusalem, which became known as the county of Tripoli.

So, through their combined endeavours, western crusaders had managed to create four distinct territories in the east which together formed the crusader states: the county of Edessa, the principality of Antioch, the county of Tripoli and the kingdom of Jerusalem. Godfrey was succeeded by his brother Baldwin, who took the title 'King of Jerusalem'. Many knights now went home, but Urban II had already commissioned the archbishop of Milan to preach the cross anew in Lombardy, and in 1100 new recruitment drives began in France and Germany. After Urban's death, papal successors such as Paschal II (1099–1118) and Calixtus II (1119–1124) continued to encourage crusaders to travel to the near east with great 'encyclicals' (papal letters) distributed far and wide. Starstruck by the exploits of their illustrious predecessors, new armies arrived to support the crusader states, which then saw the imposition of western European culture on eastern indigenous peoples including Muslims, Greeks and Jews.

During the 12th and 13th centuries, popes continued to call for the defence of the crusader states, and to issue the plenary indulgence – a remission of the temporal punishment owed for sin – for crusading in



The crusaders engage with the Fatimids of Egypt at the battle of Ascalon on 12 August 1099, having captured Jerusalem a few weeks earlier. Their victory on that day effectively ended the First Crusade

the east. Their calls resulted in large-scale expeditions such as the Second Crusade, which aimed to recover Edessa; the Third Crusade to recover Jerusalem; the Fourth Crusade, which sacked Constantinople and established the Latin empire; the Fifth Crusade to Egypt; and the two crusades of Louis IX. They also indirectly inspired countless smaller expeditions, including

grassroots, 'popular' crusades. None were as successful as the First. Nevertheless, from 1099 onwards, the crusader states, despite gradual loss of territory, continued in one form or other until the last crusader stronghold of Acre fell in 1291, marking the end of the 'golden age' of crusading.

Also as a result of the First Crusade's success, popes began to call for crusades in other theatres of war. These included crusades against Muslims in the Iberian peninsula as part of the *Reconquista*, and against non-Muslim opponents, such as the Baltic crusades against pagan peoples, the Albigensian Crusades in the south of France against Cathar heretics, and 'political crusades' against enemies of the papal states. Crusades widened to become any holy wars authorised against heretics, pagans and enemies of the papacy for which crusaders took vows and gained special privileges. Furthermore, from the 14th to the 18th centuries, popes continued to call for crusades against Turks and Ottomans to protect Christian Europe. Although the crusades were originally a medieval phenomenon, their legacy lived on. ■

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