

Discuss the reasons why noblemen and knights participated in the Crusades.

As the subject of the Crusades is widely known throughout the world, searching for reasons behind participation in them is a task that does not require much work. The four main reasons are often mentioned and are quite logical in their nature. To find those four reasons as to why the noblemen and knights, but also the common people participated in the crusades one has to look no further than what is commonly known about the Middle Ages. Sometimes, to find the answer one does not have to dig deeper.

The first and most well-known reason for participation in the crusades was the religion. The second was the wish for wealth, land or prestige. Another one would be a desire for adventure, to return from crusade a hero, to see the world. The last, but not least, would be political reasons. One of the secrets to understanding such a deep engagement in the Crusades is to imagine how the world looked like a thousand years ago. The church held incredible power over not only the politics but also the culture. The masses were led in Latin, a language not known by many, whilst the various paintings presented the passion of Christ, and the stories that were told explained how evil and malicious deeds were and what torture awaited the sinners in hell. Such was the Faith presented by the Church, which put itself in the position of the only saviour, as only prayer, confession and financial donations could make God look at his followers in a more positive light. It ultimately led to widely spread feelings of shame due to sins and fear of what awaited a person after death. It is also worth mentioning that participation in masses and celebrations of Christian holy days were some of the small numbers of entertainment for the people. Such an outlook on existence and division into fragile and short mortal life and everlasting soul made the idea of participating in a crusade seem enticing, as it gave the option of improving one's standing with God. It should also be mentioned that even the Knights were split between those who were rich and those who were poorer, therefore more and less educated. The faith in One and Only God was mandatory, as any signs of atheism or paganism were severely punished. Thus, the first reason behind the crusades appeared, the option of being closer to god, proving one's worth and cleansing the soul, as it was believed that God would notice the actions of the crusaders, forgive their sins and invite them to heaven.

Therefore, the first connection between the reasons for participation in the crusades. On one hand, people wished to be closer to God, showing their pure hearts and devotion, yet on the other, the problem of human's duality came to light. The first and the most successful crusade led to Jerusalem being conquered and its inhabitants, be they Jews or Muslims, being murdered and raped, with no mercy even for the children.¹ Conquering the Holy Land from the hands of the nonbelievers must have been such an honourable act, that it even erased the deadliest of sins. At this point yet another reason for the participation in the crusades appears, that is the wish for adventure. A person deeply involved in a mediaeval life happened to be capable of the most immoral acts, to participate in adventures that otherwise he would never experience, but which were justified as a fight for God.

The subject of the adventure of a lifetime does not only mean an inner wish to cause justified evil. The form the mediaeval society took, where people mostly lived in the villages or in the towns and never moved should also be taken into account. The books existed, but access to them was limited and almost no one could read. There were also maps, but it was rare for someone even to see them. Society lacked the technology we are used to these days such as not only immediate international communication, but also photography, radio, internet or television.

The world was very simple and the information of what happened elsewhere was usually brought

¹ Epic History, *An Epic History Of The First Crusade (All Parts)*, online video recording, YouTube, 10 December 2021, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jiakD6Pm9eE>> [accessed 27 December 2024].

by the merchants. The crusades therefore created an opportunity to see the world and go on adventure which would take one through Europe and towards the end of what was considered a civilised world – Byzantine Empire therefore learning different cultures and seeing various countries. Such an adventure could end in death, but in such a simplistic world, focused on eternal life it posed no threat. The medicine was underdeveloped, the knowledge of death was restricted mostly to the religious preaching that a person died because God willed it.

Fame and prestige also played a crucial role, as well as the opportunity that during such a tasking and long journey a person will find a place for themselves where they could settle and live out the rest of their days. A place that would be nicer, more interesting and simply different. Additionally, there was also the option of returning from the crusade a hero, who journeyed through the world. People were motivated by positive thoughts, as every crusader was a believer, certain that the crusade would be a success, and the Holy Land would be taken from the barbarians, therefore opening an avenue for return in glory.

Taking into account the wish to experience such an adventure, its hardships should also be mentioned. Those embarking on a crusade had to travel through France, Germany, Italy and even the hot Balkans. The currently well-known Hollywood productions do not accurately portray this issue, twisting the reality to suit the story they wish to tell. The knights mostly travelled by horse, but it did not mean that they travelled half the world instantaneously to immediately jump into the fray of another battle. Horses back then were alike cars now. Some were able to purchase horses that were more expensive whilst others had to settle for those cheaper. Contrary to the cars these days, horses had to be trained and such training was costly and long. Such a long journey could not consist only of the horses galloping ahead. The horse could start limping, suffer from colic or lose the horseshoe. Every knight had to take good care of his steed, which meant travelling peacefully, at least carefully enough to ensure the animal's health and safety. It is important that alongside the knights travelled simple people, women, and unarmed men, often on foot or in a carriage, through this long and hard journey, vastly different to their usual routine. The crusade began with preparations of food provisions which would quickly run out, but of course, it was people's belief that God would have mercy and lead them in such a way that they would be able to find more of it.

One of the ideas that motivated the Crusaders but is not often said out loud, was the opportunity to increase their wealth. The retaking of Jerusalem was one issue. Jerusalem was but one city, unable to survive the attack of hordes of Muslim soldiers, therefore the Crusaders had to assume that even if they managed to reclaim the city, they would have to reinforce the city and move the Christian forces further east, which would be by the cost of Syrian lands, but of course, the lands taken from the Muslims would be left under Christian administration. Therefore, even if it was to be an assumption, that even the first Crusade moved out with the intention of rebuilding Byzantium and its lands being given back to the Emperor, it was then meant to move south to Jerusalem, and then it is certain that their goal would be to secure the Holy Land, which in turn would mean conquest of new lands. Of course, everyone, believing in the success of their God-given mission, was consciously aware that the next step would be to further conquer the pagan lands. It was their strong belief that this was an achievable goal, therefore the only choice they had to make was between returning home in glory, most likely receiving a reward in the form of a title and land or staying in the Holy Land and ruling over the conquered territories. Of course, with an utter faith that the Good God would help them.

One does not have to look for the reason behind conquest and wish to gain land as far as through reinforcement of Jerusalem and expanding the Christian influence east. Even Baldwin of Boulogne took Edesse giving himself the title of a Count.² At the same time, after a bloodied battle for

2 Epic History, *An Epic History Of The First Crusade (All Parts)*.

Antioch, ultimately Bohemond of Taranto took it for himself in similar fashion.³

The last of the commonly named reasons for joining the Crusades was the political aspect of it. The Ottoman Empire rose to power. The number of Muslims attacking and conquering new territories was immeasurable. In reality, the entire European world remained under the pressure of conquest. Half of the Byzantine Empire was already conquered, and the Ottoman Empire moved through the entire area of Northern parts of Africa. The speed with which the Muslims would attack and take new territories was unbelievable. Even though for lacking geographical knowledge villagers or people living in the city meant nothing as they could not even imagine where Constantinopol was, The Kings, Dukes and Nobles as well as educated Knights realised, that the Ottoman Empire was progressing west and if they did not stop them, they would claim the territories of what would now be Germany, Italy, France or even the British Isles. The more educated people feared the barbaric Muslims whose goal was to convert people of all cultures and countries to Islam. Only simple questions remained, often repeated over the course of the next years: where to create the front of resistance? Should the hope be that they will be satisfied with their conquests and stop expanding at some point? Or maybe to pray for their country to fall apart in some miraculous way? Or maybe to gather the army and await the attack targeting the centre of Europe, as the Ottoman Empire already started by conquering a part of what would now be considered Spain. The horde of invaders from the east, who with their presence desecrated the grave of Christ had to be repelled, which required appropriate political decisions about where the battles should take place. It remained known that the Muslim Hordes were very dangerous. The gathered should be sent to the battle, but until the second crusade, during which the army was led by Richard The Lionheart, no head of state wanted to risk their life and lead an army against the Ottoman Empire. It was a much better strategy to send high-ranking and eager nobles. Only the first crusade ended with a victory paid in the blood of the Crusaders, as they managed to reclaim a big part of Byzantium and the Holy Land – Jerusalem from the pagans. The second crusade led by King Richard The Lionheart consisted of many victories, the King himself gained his name because even though he won no war, he lost no battle. The rest of the crusades brought no tangible success even though many people participated in them. All of this is because of the four most recognisable reasons for the high levels of engagement: religion, wealth, being granted land and a title, a promise of an adventure that ends with a heroic return, a wish to see the world. And of course the political reasons.

3 Ibid.

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