

The Crusades

The Holy Land and the Threatened Empire

During the Middle Ages, the people of Western Europe lived in a world in which all spheres of life were dominated by religion: culture, tradition, and even social order were based on Christianity. Consequently, the Western Europeans regarded Palestine – the land where Jesus had lived and Christianity has its roots – as the *Holy Land*, and the City of Jerusalem as the centre of the world.

5 However, the cradle of Christianity was not in Christian hands as the Arabs had conquered Palestine in the 7th century. Even though Muslims were now the owners of the Holy Land, the new rulers usually tolerated other religions. Christians and Jews were allowed to live in Palestine and could practice their religion openly as long as they paid special taxes and abided by the rules that the Arab lords had established for them. The Muslim rulers even allowed pilgrims from Europe to visit Palestine, and European traders could do business there as well.

10 In the course of the 11th century, however, this relatively peaceful coexistence of Muslims and Christians suffered a decisive setback when Seljuk Turks conquered Palestine and invaded large parts of Asia Minor*. The Seljuks were fierce warriors, a people from Central Asia who had adopted the Muslim faith. The problem was that the Turks began occupying more and more territory that had belonged to the Byzantine Empire*, the Christian power that had ruled over the Balkans and large parts in Asia since the collapse of the ancient Roman
15 Empire. It had always been regarded as a bulwark of Christianity against the threat of a Muslim invasion of the European continent from the east.

However, during the 11th century, tensions developed between the Catholic Church of the West and the Eastern Orthodox Church of the Byzantine Empire. The Eastern Orthodox Church refused to accept the pope's claim that he was the only head of the Church. This dispute reached a climax in 1054 when Pope Leo IX and
20 Patriarch Michael Cerularius, head of the Byzantine Church, formally excommunicated each other. Since then, a schism* between the two great branches of Christianity has separated Western and Eastern Christians until today. Moreover, internal problems weakened the once mighty Byzantine Empire.

In 1074, the Byzantine army was decisively defeated by the Seljuks in the Battle of Manzikert. Since the Byzantine Empire rapidly lost ground to the new Muslim invaders, the Turks soon threatened the capital city of
25 Constantinople. Emperor Alexius, the Byzantine ruler, saw no alternative but to appeal to the pope in Rome. In addition to that, European pilgrims coming home from the Holy Land reported on persecutions of Christians in Palestine. Both Christian pilgrims from Europe and the Christian population of Palestine were said to be discriminated against by the Seljuks. The Byzantine emperor's call for help found overwhelming response in Europe. However, a crusade was not what Emperor Alexius had in mind.

“God wills it!”

30 In the course of the 11th century, the pope in Rome gained enormous reputation and power, as can be seen from the dramatic developments during the Investiture Controversy. Being well aware of the strong position he had, Pope Urban II was eager to wrest the Holy Land from the Muslims. Thus, he summoned major Church leaders and French nobles to a meeting in the French town of Clermont in 1095. At the gathering he urged the powerful feudal nobles and knights to stop fighting against each other in endless feuds. Instead of killing Christians, they
35 should join in one great war against the “infidels”*.

Pope Urban's call ignited his audience with enthusiasm, and after a blazing speech, they all joined in one mighty cry, “Deus lo volt!” (= “God wills it!”). The news spread like wildfire because people travelled throughout France promoting the cause. Those who joined the expeditions regarded themselves as armed pilgrims chosen by God to liberate Jerusalem and the Holy Land from the Muslims. They sewed a cross of cloth

on their garments claiming they were followers of Christ. That is why they were later called “crusaders,” from the Latin word *cruciata*, meaning “marked with a cross.”

However, even though the Byzantine Emperor Alexius had only called for military aid, it was not only pious knights who took the cross. People joined the crusades for a variety of reasons. In most parts of France, for instance, all the property of a nobleman usually went to his oldest son (*primogeniture*). The younger sons often had little confidence in their future. So the lure of adventure, lands, and plunder in the rich Middle East dazzled the knights. Thus, for a nobleman of the High Middle Ages, this was an extremely tempting offer: either to conquer new lands and become a well-respected lord in the Holy Land or to die for God’s cause and reap the rewards of eternal life in heaven.

10 The knights were not the only group attracted by the pope’s call for a crusade. Many merchants simply wanted to take the opportunity to make a profit. However, the pope not only promised earthly rewards to the crusaders: those who would die on the crusade were promised to go straight to heaven. Pope Urban II guaranteed Church protection of the property and family the crusaders left behind during their absence. Debtors had their debts cancelled if they took the cross. Criminals and sinners could join the crusade in order to be relieved of punishment and penance. The crusades therefore appealed to a variety of people, not only to professional soldiers as Emperor Alexius had expected.

The First Crusade

The First Crusade lasted from 1096 to 1099 and consisted of four large, organized armies. They were led by Robert of Normandy* (the Northern French), Godfrey of Bouillon* (crusaders from Flanders and Lorraine), Raymond of Toulouse* (the Southern French), and Bohemund of Tarentum* (Normans from Southern Italy).

20 After having marched across Europe on different routes, the four armies met near Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire.

The crusaders were not given a warm welcome though. The Byzantine Emperor Alexius had asked for some military assistance against the Seljuks, but four large armies of crusaders approaching his city were definitely not what he had had in mind. Understandably enough, Alexius feared that the crusaders might seize the opportunity to capture and plunder Constantinople. After a long discussion, Alexius allowed the crusaders to pass through the Byzantine capital to cross the Bosphorus. Having set foot on Asia Minor, the crusaders’ long and hot march towards Palestine – which would last more than two years – began.

25 The knights and foot soldiers from Western Europe were confronted with an environment they were neither used to nor prepared for. Wearing wool, leather, and heavy armour, the crusaders suffered extremely from the heat. Since they only had few pack animals, there was a permanent shortage of food and water. Moreover, the rivalry among the leaders of the crusade frequently caused problems, especially when they quarrelled over fiefs* in the lands they were about to conquer. In spite of these difficulties, the crusaders marched on and managed to capture the mighty city of Antioch. However, in Antioch, the quarrels among the leaders of the crusade reached a climax. For nearly one year the crusaders remained in Antioch because their leaders did not trust each other. The lower ranks and commoners* among the crusaders were becoming restless because the original aim of the campaign, Jerusalem, seemed out of reach. If the Turks had not been disunited too, the crusade would have failed and ended in Antioch.

35 In spring 1099, the crusading armies finally continued their march towards Jerusalem. As they marched down the coast of the Mediterranean Sea towards Palestine, their situation improved. Since ships of the Italian cities Genoa and Pisa could now supply them with food and reinforcements, the crusaders were able to capture Jerusalem on 15 July 1099. After having taken control of the city, the Christians killed all Muslim inhabitants: 50,000 men, women and children were slaughtered. One leader of the crusade wrote to Pope Urban II that his

horse's legs had been stained with blood from riding through the city because of the dead Muslims' bodies that had been piled up everywhere.

After the fall of Jerusalem, the crusaders established four small states in the Middle East: the County of Edessa, the Principality of Antioch, the County of Tripoli, and – most important of all – the Kingdom of Jerusalem. The new Christian rulers introduced Western European feudalism* and divided the conquered land into fiefs governed by vassals. Very soon Italian cities like Genoa and Pisa seized the opportunity to establish busy trade routes between Western Europe and the Middle East. After some time, the religious fanaticism of the new European lords diminished because they started to appreciate the highly developed culture and the pleasant way of life in the Middle East. Christians and Muslims lived together in the crusader states and began to respect each other. The Christians were undoubtedly the new rulers, but gradually they adopted oriental customs and started to prefer Eastern food and clothing.

The Second Crusade

In 1146, half a century after the First Crusade had begun, the County of Edessa – the oldest of the four crusader states in the Middle East – became the first to be recaptured by the Seljuk Turks. The Turks were determined to take action against the European invaders and threatened the Kingdom of Jerusalem. In 1147, the Holy Roman Emperor Conrad III and King Louis VII of France decided to come to Jerusalem's defence and led their armies across Europe to the Holy Land. The Second Crusade had begun.

The campaign of the two monarchs was ill-fated. They met many difficulties on their way to the Holy Land. One problem was that they marched and fought separately and did not join forces until they reached Damascus, the capital of their and Jerusalem's most dangerous enemy: the Emirate of Damascus. Conrad and Louis' combined forces laid siege to Damascus, but they failed to capture the city. In 1149, the royal armies returned to Europe in disappointment.

The Third Crusade

In the course of the 1180s, Sultan Saladin* managed to unite the quarrelling Muslim emirates of the Middle East under his leadership. In 1187, he annihilated the army of the Kingdom of Jerusalem in the Battle of Hattin and consequently was able to recapture Jerusalem. In Europe, the news of Jerusalem's fall came as a bombshell. Europe responded with the Third Crusade. This "Crusade of the Three Kings" was extremely well organized and began in 1189. The Holy Roman Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa*, King Richard I (Richard the Lionheart) of England*, and King Philip II Augustus of France* each started out at the head of a great army of knights and foot soldiers to regain the Holy Land for the Christians.

This time the Europeans seemed well prepared, but once again they failed. After great victories of his army against the Turks in Asia Minor, Emperor Frederick Barbarossa drowned in the River Saleph while taking a bath in June 1190. Philip and Richard, who had regularly waged war against each other in Europe before, quarrelled all the time, and finally Philip took his army home to conquer English lands in France. Now Richard was alone in the Holy Land. Several times he had the chance to win the whole Kingdom of Jerusalem by negotiating with Saladin, but he preferred to rely on the strength of his army. Without having made any significant gains, Richard made a truce with Sultan Saladin in 1192, and thus the Third Crusade ended.

Later Crusades

In 1202, a new chapter in the history of the crusades began. In the Fourth Crusade, Pope Innocent III called on the nobility of France to conquer Jerusalem by means of an invasion via Egypt. The city of Venice offered transportation to the crusaders on the condition that they attack Zara for the wealthy Italian city-state. Zara was a Christian city on the Adriatic coast and had long been a commercial rival of Venice. However, attacking a

Christian city was definitely not what Pope Innocent had in mind and so he immediately excommunicated the whole army for attacking Zara.

The Fourth Crusade got out of control. Having formed an alliance, the Venetians and the crusaders planned to attack Constantinople. The Byzantine capital was a Christian city, too, but the crusaders were lured to Constantinople by the city's fabulous riches and the prospect of irresistible plunder. To Venice the capture of Constantinople meant enormous commercial advantages.

So, in 1204, the crusaders looted Constantinople. Apart from money and goods, they also stole countless sacred relics* and took them to the West. Although the Byzantines could recapture Constantinople 50 years later, the Byzantine Empire never really recovered from the grave defeat inflicted on it by the crusading armies. The once mighty Eastern Roman Empire finally collapsed when the Turks conquered Constantinople in 1453.

In 1212, another tragic episode in the history of the crusades occurred: the "Children's Crusade." A large number of children from France started out on a journey to the Holy Land. Having God on their side, it was their firm belief that they were invincible, but, in reality, this crusade had inexperienced leaders and lacked equipment. When a group of children reached the port of Marseilles, they were promised to be transported to the Holy Land. Instead of shipping the children to Palestine, corrupt merchants carried thousands of the boys and girls off to Alexandria in Egypt where they were sold to Muslim slave traders.

Further crusades were undertaken after 1204, but historians differ on the question as to how many took place. The crusades to the Holy Land finally ended in 1291 when the city of Acre* – the last Christian stronghold in Palestine – was captured by Muslim Mamelukes*. For nearly 200 years Western Europeans had flocked to the Holy Land. The religious endeavour of the first crusades, however, gradually faded and made way for more pragmatic interests in the Middle East.

Results of the Crusades

Taking a retrospective look at the crusades, one has to distinguish between the short-term and the long-term effects. From a military point of view, all the crusades except the first were failures. After a short episode of Christian rule in the Middle East, the Muslims eventually recaptured Jerusalem and Palestine by 1291. The only visible remnants of the crusaders' conquests are their castles.

However, in the long run, the crusades had a profound impact on both Western Europe and the Middle East. The crusaders obtained a lot of important military knowledge from their Muslim and Byzantine enemies. The crossbow, for instance, a highly efficient bow which was held horizontally and fired by pulling a trigger, became an indispensable element of Western European warfare in the Late Middle Ages. The Europeans also learned to send messages over long distances with the help of carrier pigeons. From the Byzantines the crusaders learned new ways of laying siege to mighty castles and towns, e. g. by undermining walls and using catapults. The Muslims, who had acquired the knowledge of gunpowder from the Chinese, also brought the crusaders from the West into contact with explosives used for military purposes.

The crusades also affected the feudal system in Western Europe. Kings became more powerful because they had imposed new taxes in order to levy armies from all parts of their realms. On the other hand, many nobles died fighting far away from their home soil or sold political liberties to towns so that they could raise the money needed to go on a crusade. The pope and the high clergy increased their power because of their leadership role in initiating the crusades. With their husbands being absent, many wives increased their social status as they found themselves in charge of feudal estates. Moreover, Europeans were inspired by the ideas exchanged among the crusaders from different European countries and between the crusaders and the other cultures they met on their campaigns.

The Italian city states – e. g. Venice, Genoa, and Pisa – enormously gained from the crusades. Since these cities provided transportation for the crusading armies, they made a huge profit. Apart from that, the trade

between Europe and the Middle East experienced an unprecedented peak because it was stimulated by new goods such as cotton, rice, sugar, lemons, apricots, peaches, melons, etc.

The crusades, however, also had a horrible side effect that would haunt European society for generations: the first widespread attacks on the Jews began with the crusades. As some Christians argued, to undertake holy wars against infidel Muslims while the “murderers of Christ” ran free at home was unbearable. The massacre of Jews became a frequent feature of medieval European life.

Today, the word “crusade” still is regarded as an ambiguous and even explosive term, especially in the Middle East. Even though the crusades ended more than 700 years ago, Muslim societies often associate this word with the conflict between the Muslim East and the Christian West, in which Western civilization strove for the political and cultural domination of the Oriental world. One recent example of the ambiguity of the term “crusade” could be observed in the year 2002 when George W. Bush was president of the USA. Bush described his campaign against terrorism as a “crusade.” Although not having intended to insult the Muslim world, President Bush caused furious reactions in the Middle East because the term was regarded as highly offensive by the Muslim population.

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