A Plea for Help

In 1095, the Byzantine Empire was in trouble. A recent invasion of Turks had seized control of the Byzantine holdings in Asia Minor and was beginning to threaten the city of Constantinople itself. The Byzantine emperor, Alexius Comnenus, wanted to reconquer this lost territory, so he wrote a letter to the pope asking for help.

Comnenus probably just wanted the pope to send him some Western mercenaries to help with the fighting. It is unlikely he ever imagined the repercussions of his letter. The emperor's plea for help was received by Pope Urban II. Unfortunately for Comnenus, Urban had a very different response in mind.

Pope Urban II

Rather than a band of mercenaries fighting for cash, Urban would send the Byzantine emperor a horde of Crusaders fighting the infidel for the glory of God. However, Urban's plan, probably inspired by the Spanish Reconquista, was more about increasing the authority of the Church and pope than it was about helping the Byzantine emperor.

Indeed, one major incentive for the First Crusade was the Pope's desire to bring the Greek Orthodox Christians of the East under the control of the Roman Catholic Church in the West. By helping Byzantium reclaim its territory, Urban hoped to make the Byzantines dependent upon the West and bring its people back into the fold of Western Christendom.

Yet Urban was not just interested in expanding his power in the East. He also wanted to reinforce his power back at home in the West. The recent Investiture Conflict & Gregorian Reforms had shaken up Western Europe and challenged the pope's authority. The papacy was being challenged by the lay nobility, especially the Holy Roman emperor, Henry IV, whose growing military power had driven the Pope from Italy to France. The First Crusade can be seen as the Pope trying to reassert his power and authority in Europe.

All of these reasons seem very practical and only marginally related to religion. Though it is tempting to view medieval history through this cynical lens, it is also important to remember that this was a very religious time. The Pope may have had a number of religious reasons to call this crusade. The most likely religious reason for the First Crusade was Urban's desire to establish peace in Western Europe.

This whole concept may seem odd, since the Crusades were, essentially, a call to arms. Yet Urban had made his peaceful intentions clear earlier in the year. Urban had already given papal approval to several peace-minded policies, including the **Peace of God**, which protected non-combatants, and the **Truce of God**, which forbade warfare on certain holy days. Yet Urban knew that warfare was an integral part of medieval society.

As we've noted in other lessons, the entire feudal system was set up to build feudal armies. Yet as Europe became fully settled with territorial borders established and the last heathen barbarians driven from Europe, the armies of Christian lords had no one to fight but one another. Urban did not mind Christians killing Muslims; he just didn't want Christians killing Christians. Urban hoped to redirect the warlike tendency of Europe in a more productive vein and assert his power unto both Eastern and Western Europe all in one fell swoop.

The Pitch: Clermont

Urban delivered his sales pitch for the First Crusade at a council of clergy in the French town of Clermont. There, Urban gave a speech calling on the people of France to rescue Jerusalem from the hands of the infidel. The speech exaggerated the threat of Islam in apocalyptic terms. Listening to Urban, one would think that all of Christendom faced the imminent threat of annihilation from Muslims. To rile up the crowd, Urban accused Muslims of committing horrible atrocities against Christians.

It is worth noting that these claims were almost all false. Islam displayed a religious tolerance that was remarkable for its time. In the years to come, the real religiously motivated atrocities would be committed by Christians against Muslims, not the other way around.

Though Urban played upon the French reputation for piety and bravery, he also offered incentives for those with more selfish motivations. He promised papal protection of Crusaders' property and family. He hinted at the opportunity to carve out new kingdoms in the Holy Land.

Most importantly, he offered indulgences for those who could take the Crusader's oath. Essentially, this meant that anyone who went on Crusade would have all their sins forgiven and go directly to Heaven upon their death. Though these get-out-of-Hell free cards would cause the Church a great deal of trouble in the centuries to come, at the time, it proved an incredibly powerful motivation for lords and peasants alike.

Religious Motivations

Such suicidal religious fervor on the part of peasants highlights the desperate state of city peasants in the 12th century. It also draws our attention to the power of religious piety in this age.

Scholars have offered a variety of explanations for this religious fervor. Some point to the apocalyptic energy of the Millennials, who thought the world would end in the year 1000. In the disappointment that followed, this energy was redirected towards religious fervor.

Other scholars have suggested a far more secular cause. One of the most entertaining is the notion that the increased cultivation of rye and ignorance on how to store this grain resulted in an outbreak of ergotism. When rye rots, it creates a poison, which causes convulsive movements and even hallucinations. The fact that these ergot-driven spells came on so suddenly must have seemed demonic to the people of Europe. The fact that this affliction could be relieved simply by stopping the consumption of rotten rye from dank basements may well have given rise to a new wave of religious conviction.

This explanation also helps us to understand the popularity of pilgrimages in this age. As Europe began to stabilize, pilgrimages to holy sites became ever more popular. Though many factors contributed to the popularity of these pilgrimages, the rise of ergotism might have played its own part. A man struck with ergot poisoning might well go on a pilgrimage to attain healing. People who went on pilgrimages stopped eating rotten rye from dank cellars and thus returned healthy. In many respects, the Crusades can be seen as an armed pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

The Failures of Crusaders

So, how do we explain the failure of the later Crusades?

Well, to begin, we must remember that the success of the First Crusade was something of a fortuitous fluke. It was not won by the superior arms and tactics of the Crusaders, but rather by the disorganization of the Arabs. The once-united Arab nations had recently been shattered by invading Turks and internal strife.

The Crusaders were able to take advantage of this chaos in the First Crusade. In the later Crusades, the Holy Land was prepared for the Crusaders, and the many failings of the crusading movement led to a series of unmitigated disasters. The gross ignorance of the Crusaders combined with their lack of clear leadership and failure to commit all combined to doom the later Crusades.

The Crusaders had no real notion of the geography, climate, or political structure of the Near East. Crusaders often failed to even make it to the Holy Land. Northern Europeans, in their full armor, sweltered in the heat of Mediterranean summers. The shifting political power of the Middle East meant that a Crusader would sign a peace treaty with one leader, only to have that peace treaty violated by another. The Crusaders also had no clear leadership. Lords and kings squabbled among themselves, and popes struggled to keep the crusading armies pointed in the right direction.

The Crusaders never seem to have made a real commitment to retaking the Holy Land. The kings of Europe had more important matters to deal with, like expanding their territory and maintaining the dynasties at home. Had Europe turned its full power on the Middle East, they very well might have held on to the Holy Land. Instead, the efforts of Western kings in the Holy Land became ever more half-hearted. Going on crusade became something of a moral obligation. It was just something one was expected to do.

Many leaders simply went through the motions, bringing a small fraction of their armies on a sort of armed pilgrimage to the Holy Land. They'd engage in some minor skirmishes, slaughter a few handy Muslims, and then head back to Europe, to bask in unearned praise for their piety and bravery. So, let us take a look at the tales of incompetence and treachery that made up the later Crusades.

Social Impact of the Crusades

The social repercussions of the Crusades began with the very First Crusade. Perhaps the most obvious of these repercussions involved the role of violence in Christianity. Christianity was, at its inception, an intensely pacifistic religion. Christianity did not come to dominate the Roman Empire through strength in arms, but through the strength of their example.

It was Christians' willingness to suffer horrible violence in the name of their God that inspired so many to convert to Christianity. Once Christianity became the state religion of Rome, it adapted to allow for the violence necessary to build and maintain an empire. Though Church fathers, like St. Augustine, had laid groundwork justifying violence in the name of faith, their attitudes towards violence seem more like an apology for a necessary sin, rather than an endorsement of holy warfare.

This concept of violence as at best, a necessary evil, seems to have been the attitude of medieval Christians before the Crusades. Indeed, Pope Urban II may well have called the First Crusade in an attempt to reduce violence among Christians, by redirecting that violence toward Muslims. Unfortunately for the Pope, his plan backfired. Whatever his intentions, Urban had not only justified violence, he'd commanded it.

Holy warfare became the will of God, the duty of every Christian. Did the Pope actually make the kings of Europe violent? No. They were plenty violent to start with. Pope Urban was clearly playing to the violent tendencies of his audience when he called for the First Crusade. However, by promoting divinely sanctioned violence, the Pope had removed whatever restraint Christianity had held over the warlike kings of Europe.

Rather than feeling guilty about murdering people, Crusaders came to expect heavenly rewards for murdering people. The indulgences, or get-out-of-hell-free cards, that the Pope granted to crusading knights can be seen in much the same light as the 72 virgins promised to suicide bombers on Jihad.

Yet, in many ways, the medieval crusades were far worse than anything attempted by modern religious terrorists. Rather than being carried out by a small sect of extremists, like today's suicide bombers, the religiously fueled murderous rampages of the Crusades were carried out by lords, kings and emperors, leading entire nations in centuries of futile, suicidal, senseless bloodshed.

If Urban had hoped to bring about peace in Europe by promoting **xenophobia**, or the fear and hatred of foreigners, he must have been sorely disappointed, for in the years that followed, Europe became an ever more violent place, while at the same time, it became much more cosmopolitan. Compared to the ancient and advanced civilizations of Constantinople and the Middle East, Western Europeans must have felt rather primitive. That's certainly how the Greeks and Arabs saw them; illiterate, degenerate, unwashed, uncivilized barbarians.

Western Europe's literacy rate was dismal compared to the highly literate Greeks. Western European culture was primitive and violent compared with the refined civilizations of the East. Arabs and Greeks could relax in heated baths or shower beneath running water, while Western Europeans rarely bathed at all.

Constantinople was one of the largest cities on Earth. Its population was greater than Paris, London and Rome combined. Though the Westerners berated the Easterners as decadent and soft, it's clear that the Westerners wanted what those Eastern cultures had. They wanted running water, they wanted massive wealth, they wanted to command huge armies, they wanted to wear silks, eat spiced foods and smell perfumes.

Europeans returned from the Crusade full of new desires and ambitions. Western aristocrats developed a taste for Eastern luxuries, and Western scholars began to embrace a philosophical tradition, which had begun with the Greeks and had flourished under Islam. These impressions from the East would be instrumental in shaping the civilization of the West.

Economic Impact of the Crusades

The trade of ideas and luxuries with the East had already been underway for a century or two before the Crusades even began. Italian city-states, like Venice and Florence, were making a killing bringing Eastern goods to the Western market. With the Crusades, the West's appetite for these luxuries grew exponentially. To meet this demand, the Italian city-states had to overcome several obstacles. The first was the Arab dominance of the Mediterranean. Yet, the Arabs were not a great naval power, and by the end of the First Crusade, they had been essentially driven from the seas, and the Italians had established trading outposts along the coast of the Eastern Mediterranean.

Yet, between Italy and their new Eastern marketplaces lay the ancient and powerful Byzantine Empire. The Byzantines had an excellent navy, and for centuries they had thwarted the efforts of the Italians to gain a stranglehold on Mediterranean trade. The Venetians solved this problem by leading the crusaders to sack Constantinople, the capitol of the Byzantine Empire, in the Fourth Crusade.

With the Byzantines out of the way, the Italians, and especially the Venetians, enjoyed unchallenged power over the Mediterranean Sea. As if the lucrative trade in luxuries were not enough, the Italian city-states enjoyed another huge windfall from the Crusades. European monarchs did not just want to bring Eastern luxuries to the West; they wanted to bring Western armies to the East. They wanted to establish colonies in the Holy Land.