

‘Causes Essay’

The Crusades to the Holy Land: the Essential Reference Guide,
ed. Alan Murray (Santa Barbara: 2015)

In the popular imagination, there were only a handful of well-known ‘numbered’ crusades to the Holy Land and Egypt. These involved such legendary figures as Godfrey of Bouillon, Richard the Lionhearted, and Saint Louis IX of France. But between the public proclamation of the First Crusade in 1095 and the Mamluk’s capture of Acre, the last bastion of *Outrémer* (or the crusader states in the East) in 1291, there were literally scores of smaller, lesser known Christian military operations directed towards Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. Although the organisers of the First Crusade viewed their enterprise as a unique event, it is perhaps easiest to see the crusades as a succession of Christian military expeditions planned and executed over a period of nearly 200 years. Conducted against an immediate backdrop of their own unique set of circumstances, the campaigns ultimately share common origins and causes. This essay will offer an overview of the modern scholarly debates and popular explanations for the origins of the crusade movement, and as such will not rehearse the largely groundless, socio-economic explanations popular in the 1950s.

Scholars in the 1970s offered socio-economic explanations for the origins of the crusades which can be summed up thus: medieval Europe’s overcrowding and conventional systems of primogeniture created a profusion of landless younger sons who had been trained for combat. Without a landed, financial base the young warriors hoped to win the patronage of a great lord or else became free-booters terrorizing western Europe in pursuit of material gain. The crusades were seen to offer solutions to these problems. The papacy was able to direct the martial tendencies of land hungry nobles away from western Europe and towards the Holy Land. These same noble warriors were attracted to crusading because it held the prospect of fighting, offered them adventure, and most importantly, it provided an opportunity for creating a landed base of their own. Urban II and his successors were seemingly concerned with halting and perhaps

exporting endemic violence. But the socio-economic model still does not bear up to close scrutiny. In the first place there were plenty of local opportunities for adventure and fighting. A war-loving warrior need not have journeyed to the Holy Land to satisfy such desires. Eleventh-century western Europe was already undergoing rapid, albeit uneven growth in agricultural production and trade, and new wealth might be attained in the West through land reclamation and territorial expansion. These were considerably easier ways of obtaining wealth and land than undergoing the many uncertainties of campaigning in the Near East. Besides, the prosperity of late eleventh-century Syria and Palestine was based on urban commerce. Most European wealth in the middle ages was based on the ability to exploit an agricultural surplus. Agriculture obviously existed in the Near East, but the predominantly arid lands of the Holy Land would have held little economic attraction for those that knew something of the region.

Most importantly, a warrior had to already own land to be able to afford to embark on crusade with an armed following capable of acquiring territory in the Holy Land or Egypt. Alternatively, families faced severe financial strains in sending family members on crusade. In pure cost-benefit terms, crusading was not an attractive proposition. Moreover, it cannot be proved that younger sons were predominant amongst crusaders; nor that regions which practiced primogeniture contributed more warriors to the crusade movement than those areas where partible inheritance was customary; and evidence demonstrates that very few surviving crusaders actually settled in newly conquered territories. Material motivation for embarking on crusade certainly has to be considered at an individual level, but no serious scholar would now argue that demographic pressure led to the creation of the crusade movement.

There is a popular notion that the crusades were initiated to defend and protect pilgrims and pilgrimage routes. There is evidence of the maltreatment of Christian pilgrims at the hands of local Muslim groups in the Holy Land, but such acts were not widespread nor as common as was once thought. Similarly, whilst it is true that many crusaders seem to have wanted to cleanse

Jerusalem of a polluting, demonic Muslim presence, this notion was largely a product of crusade propaganda. As such, the view was rarely expressed before the crusades were promoted. The vast majority of people in western Christendom knew little of Islam and cared even less, and neither eastern-orientated explanation for the origins of the crusades is satisfactory.

Only one set of circumstances played out east of the Adriatic directly influenced the first call to crusade. The Byzantine Empire's defeat at the Battle of Mantzikert in 1071 by Seljuk and Türkmen forces ushered in a period of Byzantine civil war and a subsequent collapse in the empire's eastern frontier and defensive capabilities. Within a decade virtually the whole of western Asia Minor was under the control of Turkish chieftains and the empire also faced severe geopolitical challenges in the North and West. At the Church Council of Piacenza in March 1095, Byzantine envoys asked Pope Urban II to recruit western forces to help the empire expel the Turkish invaders. The exact content of his sermon is unknown although Urban definitely relayed a version of this appeal to his audience on the last day of the Church Council of Clermont in November of the same year. The subsequent response to the pontiff's plea was astonishing: tens of thousands of men, women, and children mobilized to undertake a very long, intensely grueling, and extremely dangerous journey to the Holy Land; an act subsequently repeated many times in defense of the four states created by the first crusaders. On one, very simple and immediate level, the above explains the cause of the crusades to the Holy Land and Egypt. But the events of 1095 should only be seen as the sparks that ignited a ground swell of popular Christian enthusiasm for Holy War in the Near East.

Historians now lay stress on the devotional origins of the crusade movement although the perceived central role played by the eleventh-century reforming papacy should first be considered. The most rigorous papal reformer, Gregory VII, pursued an agenda which included three highly significant and related objectives: first, that the pontiff, as the heir of St Peter, should be recognised as the head of the Church and indeed of the whole of Christian society;

second, that the Church must be free from any secular control or interference; and third, that this liberated Church had the duty and God-given authority to ensure peace and justice in the lay world. Some historians have interpreted Urban II's call for the warriors of western Christendom to go to the aid of their eastern brethren as primarily an appeal for a Holy War. In effect a demonstration of papal primacy over the Church and Christian society, Urban hoped his war would bring about the reunion of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. Other historians have seen the crusades as the natural extension to, or complement of, the Church's Peace movement, more of which will be discussed below. No doubt Urban hoped to further the aims of the reforming papacy, but most historians have now moved away from these lines of thinking. Instead, it is generally agreed that the pope's apparently subsequent proposal to free Jerusalem from the yoke of Muslim control was central to his aims from the very beginning - just as it appears to have been for the vast majority of crusaders.

The papal reformers are thought to have influenced the origins of the crusades in other ways. Gregory VII's attempts to free the Church from secular interference led to a protracted conflict misleadingly known as the 'Investiture Contest'. With actually much more at stake than his perceived right to invest Bishops with the symbols of office, the German imperial claimant, Henry IV, invaded Italy looking to depose Gregory in favour of his own candidate. The pope responded by recruiting forces to defend the Church and the seat of St Peter. Building on the ideas and practices of his reforming predecessors and contemporary theologians, Gregory went as far as to instruct one of his supporters, Matilda, countess of Tuscany, to fight Henry IV for the remission of her sins.

Gregory was not the first churchman to promote sacred violence. Christian Holy War was a product of an historic Jewish and adopted Hellenistic heritage in which violence could be both righteous and just. For example, clerics instigated a Peace movement in the late tenth century in response to alarming levels of armed conflict in many regions of France. Warriors swore oaths

on holy relics to adhere to peace initiatives known as the Peace of God and the Truce of God. Significantly, some churchmen expected those same warriors to enforce the Peace movement. Historians once suggested the Peace movement was crucial to the idea of the crusade. However, there is a large time-lag between the great age of the peace and truce councils and Urban's sermon at Clermont. No correlation exists between those regions in which the Peace and Truce were most successful and those regions that provided the largest number of crusaders. Whilst the Peace movement played less of a role in the origins of the crusades than was once thought, the idea of clerics directing the martial activities of oath-bound lay lords certainly helped pave the way for Urban's famous address. Clerics also supported the so-called Christian '*Reconquista*' of the Muslim dominated Iberian Peninsula. The *Reconquista* is now rarely considered a 'testing ground' for crusading ideas because few of the Iberian Christian activities before 1095 were principally influenced by religious ideology. Nonetheless, the papacy largely viewed the conflicts as Holy Wars deemed necessary in the defense of Christianity.

So Gregory VII's promotion of violence had its precedents, but what he proposed to Matilda, the countess of Tuscany, was revolutionary. All forms of armed conflict, no matter how righteous and just, had always been deemed sinful. The repentant sinner was therefore required to do penance. Now certain prescribed acts of violence were no longer deemed sinful, and indeed, actually engaging in violence in the defense of the Church and Christendom could in of itself count as penance leading to the absolution of sin.

Gregory's initiative, his special spiritual privilege offered for defending the Church and Christendom, developed into the Crusade Indulgence. The Indulgence was promised in one form or another to would-be crusaders by Pope Urban II and every other pope who formally proclaimed a crusade. An appreciation of the devotional milieu in which Urban initially promised the Indulgence is the key to understanding the origins of the crusade movement. A plethora of medieval sources leave historians in little doubt that concerns for one's spiritual well

being and salvation were central to one's life in the middle ages. Indeed, the warrior aristocracy, the main social group to which every crusade appeal was directed and the lay group responsible for sustaining the crusade movement, was a guilt ridden society. Land owners frequently engaged in small scale conflict in pursuit of worldly ambitions and obligations. Importantly, it seems likely that an expanding number of eleventh-century monks and clerics began to warn the laity of the moral dangers involved in what often amounted to engaging in political life.

Most significantly, clerics taught malefactors that acts of penance and engaging in other penitential activities could absolve them of sin. Penitents knew they had to perform such deeds should they wish to escape the eternal punishments of Hell. To this end many aristocratic families had close relationships with monastic houses and churches. Having a cloistered relative guaranteed that the family would be remembered in the monastery's liturgical devotion. Aristocratic gift giving to a religious house enabled the family to share in the spiritual rewards earned by the monks through their daily lives of prayer and fasting. These normative practices were reinforced by the penances imposed for sin. Aristocratic sinners might be obliged to engage in a whole range of penitential activities. The actual penitents often showed a preference for undertaking a penitential pilgrimage to the shrine of a miracle working saint who could petition God on the sinner's behalf.

The ultimate penitential pilgrimage destination was of course Jerusalem and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Housing Calvary, the site of Christ's crucifixion and of his tomb, the Holy Sepulcher and indeed Jerusalem was linked to the history of Christian salvation like no other place. The land itself was holy and all evidence suggests that the Holy Land attracted a particular kind of intense devotion. Perhaps stretching the patchy documentation too far, some historians have emphasised the eschatological origins of the crusades. The supposed imminent arrival of the anti-Christ and the conquest of the Last Days are thought to have focused people's minds on the Christian possession of Jerusalem. The city was also frequently portrayed as Christ's

patrimony, a notion that resonated strongly with the warrior aristocracy. Crusade documents, whether records of bulls, sermons, or papal/Church letters, or those sources created by and for the participants of crusades, demonstrate that the recovery and defence of the Lords' inheritance and indeed of the lands of *Outrémer* was perceived as a just and knightly duty.

Urban II, the son of a middle-ranking nobleman and his papal successors from similar backgrounds, were fully aware of the special status of the Holy Land and of the warrior-caste's compulsion to engage in penitential activities, and so they couched their crusade appeals accordingly. And through the careful examination of chronicles, letters, charters and many other forms of contemporary evidence, crusade historians conclude that there could not have been a crusade movement unless the vast majority of those that committed themselves to the enterprise placed a premium on their spiritual well-being and above all on their chances of salvation. In calling for the pious warriors of western Europe to journey to the Holy Land and recover Jerusalem for Christianity, Urban II married the familiar concepts and practices of Holy War, penance, and pilgrimage. Thus, the pope's novel idea was not greeted with incomprehension but with astonishing enthusiasm. His offer of the remission of sins for liberating Jerusalem from the Muslim yoke offered an arms' bearing, spiritually anxious society the promise of salvation by engaging in one penitential activity that became known as the crusade. So began the series of military operations now known as the Levantine crusade movement.

The origins of the crusades are therefore to be found in the devotional and above all the penitential needs and practices of an arms bearing population. The council of Piacenza in March 1095 served as the immediate trigger for the crusades. Popular theories that other events in the eastern Mediterranean or that widespread hatred of Islam were the causes of the First Crusade are very problematic. Likewise, socio-economic explanations for the crusades are unsustainable. Historians now place less emphasis on a papal-centric explanation for the origins of the crusade movement. There is no doubt, however, that the eleventh-century reforming papacy was

instrumental in the early theological development of the penitential aspect of crusading. We are therefore left with the overwhelmingly dominant picture presented in a wealth of detailed and varied sources; namely, the pre-eminence of religious beliefs and values in explaining the origins of the crusades.

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