



**27 November 1095**

## **Pope Urban II Preaches the First Crusade**

**The Franks Declare Holy War**

*'Let those who have wearied themselves to the destruction of  
body and soul now work for the honour of both!'*

Pope Urban II (1035-99) at Clermont (1095)

Enthroned on a dais which had been set up on a hillside, Pope Urban II delivered an open-air sermon addressed to a great throng of the French nobility, clergy and common populace assembled at Clermont in the Auvergne. Urban, a Frenchman, described himself as 'chief bishop and prelate over the whole world' – a figure who had to respond to a profound crisis. In March, while holding a synod at Piacenza, he had received renewed and urgent appeals for help from the Greek emperor Alexius I Comnenus. Byzantium had lost all of its territories in Asia Minor, including the holy places of Palestine, to the Seljuk Turks. Alexius wanted his lands back as well as protection against further Turkish advance. Now, eight months later, at the synod he was holding in Clermont, was the time for Urban to announce his response. France, he said, had her own particular problems of over-population and feudal violence as great nobles fought each other but there was a solution. European Christians should stop their internal quarrels and observe the 'truce of God'. Forces would then be available to 'aid Christians in expelling the Turks from regions belonging to our kin'. There was, he said, a danger to Christianity as a whole and not just to the Greeks. In France herself, 'Let robbers become knights'.

The Pope was advocating war of a particular kind, since the First Crusade, like its successors, was also a pilgrimage. Penitential exercises would be performed en route and a Papal decree meant that all those on the crusade would receive full and complete penance for sins committed. Urban had hit the right note. Cries of *Deos Lo Vult* (God Wills It) were heard among the crowds. Papal indulgences which counted as 'satisfaction' (or expiation) for past sins provided excellent crusading motives. As a sign of their intention to crusade thousands now 'took the cross' and the first to do so was Bishop Adhemar of Puy. A holy war, thought Urban, had to be led by a priest and so he appointed Adhemar to be in charge. The Pope fixed 15 August 1096 as the date of departure for the First Crusade and Constantinople would be the rendezvous for a very French adventure. The idea of an anti-Islamic crusade had already been popularized in the contemporary poem *Chanson de Roland*. France was also the home of the great movement of spiritual renewal associated with the abbey of Cluny whose profound impact on the eleventh-century Church in Europe prepared it for a great missionary expansion. Chivalry, basic to the crusading ethic, was a French invention and the country could also supply the necessary manpower in the form of footloose feudal lords. Primogeniture meant that there were also plenty of under-occupied younger sons. This, moreover, was Norman France and the crusades appealed to the old Norse wanderlust which was still there in the bones of these men of the north. In 1095 the Normans had already colonized England and Sicily. Palestine was next on their list.

The crusades started as an ecclesiastical coup, a direction of lay energy towards a Church goal, and a Papal attempt at conducting an independent foreign policy. Feudalism, the codifying of a relationship between lord and vassal, was the basis of eleventh-century territorial order in Europe but it could also lead to private wars between the forces loyal to individual nobles. The Church gave that internecine energy an external outlet and feudalism became the basis of crusading military discipline.

Jerusalem had fallen to the conquering Arabs in 637 and their initial tolerance

had allowed Christians to make pilgrimages to the shrines of their faith. After the Turkish victory at Manzikert (1071) such access became much more difficult. But there was an antecedent problem: since 1021 the Greek Church had been the official custodian of the Holy Places and, after the great schism between the Greek and Latin Churches in 1054, the Byzantines interfered regularly with the pilgrimage plans of the Latins. Successes in western Europe made the Latin Christians intolerant of such frustrations. Italy, threatened by the Arab forces in the ninth century, was securely Christian in the tenth century. The thirty years of war waged by the Normans between 1060 and 1090 for control of Sicily ended in Arab defeat while the long *reconquista* of Spain by Christian forces started in the eleventh century and amounted to the great crusade of the west. There were other motives to look east: the Italian towns were keen on establishing their own markets in Palestine in order to trade directly with the region.

There would be six major crusades in the east. The enthusiasm, as well as the violence, unleashed by Urban's call is seen in the spontaneous crusade of the poor which came before the start of the crusade proper. Aroused by the preaching of Peter the Hermit right across France, neo-military divisions of the poor marched in their thousands in the spring of 1096, massacring Jews in the Rhine valley before being themselves slaughtered by Hungarians as they marched east. The official crusade that crossed the Bosphorus consisted of three divisions and a total of some 150,000 men: Godfrey of Bouillon and his brother Baldwin led the crusaders of Lorraine; Raymond IV, count of Toulouse, led the Provençals; Bohemund of Otranto led the Normans.

Syria, initially, proved good terrain: the occupation was tenuous and the conquered natives proved friendly. The crusaders took Nicaea and, after a year's siege, Antioch. Godfrey of Bouillon then asserted his leadership over the quarrelling Bohemund and Raymond. He led the crusaders to Jerusalem which was captured in 1099 and the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem was established with Godfrey as its first ruler. The Order of the Knights of St John of Jerusalem (the Hospitallers) was founded in the same year. After Godfrey's death in 1100, his brother was crowned as Baldwin I by the newly appointed patriarch of Jerusalem, Dagobert, who was then deposed by the king. The Papacy had wanted a system of church government in Palestine similar to its own administration in central Italy. What it got instead was a feudal kingdom of French noblemen. Antioch, Edessa and Tripoli accepted the new kingdom's suzerainty, Genoese and Norwegian allies helped it to expand. In May 1104 Baldwin seized Acre and by 1110 the kingdom stretched along the coast from Beirut to the Egyptian border. A connection to the Red Sea served its shipping needs. Control of the caravan routes – especially the one from Damascus to Egypt and the Red Sea – gave the kingdom its commercial base.

The fall of Edessa to the Turks led to the proclamation of the Second Crusade in 1145 but Damascus could not be taken in 1148 and the formidable Syrian warrior Nur ad-Din forced the withdrawal of the crusading army. From 1171 Saladin, as sultan of both Egypt and Syria, established a regional unity which robbed the crusaders of an earlier advantage. In 1187 he took Jerusalem. The Third Crusade which followed was a major military expedition of the great powers: England, France and the Hohenstaufen

dynasty of German princes. Cyprus now came under Latin rule and would be governed by western Europeans until 1571. But Saladin could not be dislodged and Richard I of England had to negotiate with him on gaining Christian access to Jerusalem.

The Fourth Crusade (1202-04) started as an attempt at re-establishing papal authority, dissolved in internal quarrels and ended in the occupation of Constantinople by the Latins. The Fifth Crusade (1217-21) ended in an ignominious withdrawal from Palestine and the final major crusade (1228-9) was dominated by the quarrel between the Papacy and Emperor Frederick II. As king of Sicily, and as a Hohenstaufen, Frederick ruled in the centralizing manner of his Norman predecessors on that throne and his negotiations with the sultan of Egypt were those of an independent ruler pursuing a secular diplomacy. This resulted in the Christian-Muslim partitioning of Jerusalem and Frederick had himself crowned as king of Jerusalem in 1229. Fifteen years of struggle followed in Jerusalem between Frederick's imperial style and the local feudal nobility before the final loss of Jerusalem to the Ayyubid dynasty of Egypt in 1244. Acre, the last crusader stronghold, fell to their successors, the Mamluks, in 1291. The total evacuation of Syria followed.

Crusades were a pan-European, and not just an eastern, policy. In the thirteenth and fourteenth century the Papacy used them in Italy against the Hohenstaufen threat to the Papal States. The Baltic crusades into north-eastern Germany were led by the Teutonic knights, established in Palestine during the Third Crusade in 1190. These crusades, which were also wars of conversion, lasted into the fifteenth century and pushed German frontiers to the east. Crusades also tried to extinguish Christian heresy: the Albigensian crusade against the Cathars of the Languedoc was launched by Pope Innocent III in 1208. Similar campaigns followed in the thirteenth century against the Cathars of Lombardy and in the 1420s and 1430s against the Hussites in Bohemia.

By 1300 the rulers of European states were preoccupied with building up their own internal authority and the crusading impulse faded away but its consequences were profound. Trade expansion led to urban growth, especially along the great trade routes from Venice, over the Brenner Pass and along the Rhine to Bruges. Paradoxically, this urbanizing side-effect of the crusades undermined the land-based feudalism which had originally sustained them. The missionaries, and the travellers such as Marco Polo, who explored further east, opened up Asia to European discovery and to European curiosity about other cultures. Christian missions to the east studied oriental languages and the greatest historical work of the middle ages is William of Tyre's *Historia Transmarina*. The crusades are also an episode in the history of taste. Sugar and maize, lemons and melons, cotton, muslin and damask, powder, glass mirrors and even the rosary: all made the journey from east to west. European military technology became more sophisticated because of the advanced techniques of fortification and castle building learnt from both the Muslims and the Greeks. And the machinery of government run by European royal households increased in scope and ambition because of the experience of raising taxes to pay for the crusades. The crusades, started on French soil, helped to make France the dominant European power of c. 1300. But the Greeks, having asked for the crusades, found themselves trapped between the competing thrusts of the Latin west and the Islamic east.