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The First Crusade: The Forgotten Realities

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The First Crusade is widely regarded as a pivotal moment in medieval history. Europe saw a great massing of tens of thousands of lords, knights, and ordinary people for this extraordinary expedition into the Holy Land. The recapture of Jerusalem reverberated throughout Christendom. It set the tone for the following centuries. The crusader victory appears to be a mystery because of the seeming lack of centralized leadership and planning. Many dismiss the Crusade as an aimless expedition in the Middle East that landless younger sons could exploit for their own financial gain. Scholars essentially blame the victory on the division of the Islamic state. Through close examination, however, it is apparent there was a method to the madness. The First Crusade succeeded based on the pivotal role of strategic and logistical forethought, communal leadership, and spiritual devotion.

Initially, the First Crusade appears to be devoid of any caution. Pope Urban II received an urgent call for assistance from the Byzantine emperor, Alexius I Comnenus, in driving out the Seljuk Turks out of Anatolia. Afterwards, Urban's call to arms in his Speech at Clermont (1095) was answered by both peasants and noblemen alike. The peasants organized under Peter the Hermit and quickly set out for the Levant despite being undersupplied and having little to no combat experience. This group of peasants was called the People's Crusade and largely failed. The knights and nobles to follow would comprise the Prince's Crusade. The Prince's Crusade would ultimately fulfill the objectives set by Pope Urban II by 1099.

The crusaders, even though lacking developed supply lines, had deliberate and calculated plans. While not overseeing the Crusade personally, Pope Urban II assisted the crusaders by setting the grand objective of capturing Jerusalem amongst other things. During his speech at Clermont, "The Pope set the time of departure, ordered who should go and who should not go,

offered privileges to the participants...¹ Urban additionally advised the princes to depart after mid summer so that the crusaders would be well-supplied with food from harvest and enjoy somewhat favorable weather for traveling before winter. He made sure to send them to Constantinople so that the Byzantine emperor could guide and assist them. Urban's choice of Constantinople for the rendezvous point for the crusade was beneficial in that the city lay on the overland route into the Levant. It was important that the crusaders visit the Byzantine emperor before embarking to foster good relations between the West and East, as the Western crusaders would have to rely on the Byzantines for supplies and reinforcements. Ultimately, Urban's deliberations would prevent the crusaders from failing before setting foot into the Holy Land.

Although there was a grand plan, there was a lack of consistent supplies, but this absence was expected by the crusaders and does not indicate a lack of logistical planning. The shortcoming was supplemented by the crusaders living off the surrounding land, surviving through subsistence, and later being resupplied by naval support. They would rely on markets and foraging as the burden of a long supply chain would be too great. The crusaders planned for a lack of supply as evident by their financial preparations. Crusading nobles prepared by "liquidating property rights to free up portable wealth" to "accrue equipment and mounts."² Asbridge says, "Archaeological and textual evidence indicates that the Latins brought a wide array of European coinage with which to trade during the journey east, seven separate currencies being noted in Raymond of Toulouse's contingent."³ This money would be used to purchase

¹ Munro, Dana C. "The Popes and the Crusades." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 55, no. 5 (1916): 348-56.

² Asbridge, Thomas (2004). *The First Crusade: A New History*. Oxford. 90.

³ *Ibid.*, 90.

supplies from the towns along the journey to Jerusalem. The amount of money brought by the princes even saved the crusading armies from disaster, specifically in the Battle of Antioch where princes gave money to poor crusaders. To this extent, the troop movements of the crusaders were based around the depravity of supplies. The separate armies traveled to Constantinople in different groups to avoid draining resources from surrounding areas. While the crusaders were campaigning, Pope Urban II took the task of encouraging maritime forces to support the crusaders intermittently at key ports. A supply fleet “dared to sail through the strange and vast surface of the Mediterranean [and] after great trials arrived at Antioch and Latakia in advance of our army.”⁴ Effectively, the crusading armies would be resupplied as they progressed to the Levant. The fleets brought desperately needed supplies and reinforcements, and overall improved morale. This amount of preparation showcases that the crusaders were well aware of the obstacles ahead. In sum, the strategic and logistical foresight was essential to the success of the Crusade.

Furthermore, there is more evidence of strategy in the Battle of Antioch. Asbridge gives a summary of events leading up to the siege:

Raymond of Toulouse had earlier sent a contingent under Peter of Roaix to secure the Ruj valley, one of the two southern approaches to Antioch. From Baghras the main army could have taken a direct route south to Antioch, but instead they went east around the Lake of Antioch to secure fertile plains north-east of the city. Robert of Flanders was dispatched with 1,000 troops to capture Artah, a fortified town that lay some twenty-two kilometers from Antioch, on the intersection of ancient Roman roads from Marash, Edessa, and Aleppo.⁵

⁴ Raimond, John Hugh Hill, and Laurita Lyttleton. Hill. *Historia Francorum Qui Ceperunt Iherusalem*. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1968. 134.

⁵ Asbridge, Thomas (2004). *The First Crusade: A New History*. Oxford. 157.

Capturing Artah was part of a process to eliminate the surrounding defenses of Antioch. While allocating manpower for an extraneous mission before the siege of Antioch would certainly have been detrimental to the initial fighting capabilities of the crusaders, the manpower was well spent. The move spared the sieging armies from harassing forces; the crusaders could now attack Antioch freely. With all these instances of strategic and logistical planning, it is quite clear that the First Crusade included tactics, contrary to the popular belief that it was a mad, disorganized land grab.

All of the strategic planning would've been in vain if the princes' council did not cooperate with each other and foster a sense of unity. Through communal leadership, the princes were able to combine their forces and win. The princes' council included men such as Raymond of Toulouse and Bohemond. When the council was initially founded, they pronounced the creation of a "common crusader fund through which all plunder could be channelled and redistributed."⁶ This would allow even the poor crusaders to be equipped with better equipment and have their share of war spoils. The common crusader fund and the leadership's decision to share their wealth in times of despair also aided in the crusader's perseverance. Stephen of Blois, grandson of William the Conqueror, reflected, "Many have already exhausted all their resources in this very holy passion [the siege]. Very many of our Franks, indeed, would have met a temporal death from starvation, if the clemency of God and the princes' money had not succoured them."⁷ From the decision of wealth allocation, the council of princes led the

⁶ Edgington, Susan B. *Albert of Aachen: Historia Ierosolimitana: History of the Journey to Jerusalem*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007 32-43.

⁷ Chartres, Foucher De, and Martha Evelyn. McGinty. *Fulcher of Chartres: Chronicle of the First Crusade*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1941. 224-226.

campaign past roadblocks. Additionally, the princes' council decided on the strategies that would win battles and ultimately lead to the capture of Jerusalem. The council of princes discussed the strategy to siege Nicaea and decided on combining the two styles of siege warfare: blockade and assault. An unnamed crusader said, "On 14 May 1097 Bohemond and the southern Italian of Bouillon and Robert of Flanders were deployed to the east, and work began on a series of siege engines."⁸ Incorporating the two methods was ingenious as it mercilessly choked the city of Nicaea and defeated the Turkish garrison. Beyond the strategy, the victory may have not been possible if the princes didn't collaborate. The ability for the council to make decisions together with efficiency was critical to the success of the Crusade. The council allowed leaders to be included in discourse so that factions could be represented properly. Despite the council fragmenting as the campaign advanced towards to Jerusalem, it had a lasting effect on the war and the crusaders could still rely on the leadership of God.

When the crusaders had nothing worldly left, they turned to God for assistance. The ferocity that the crusaders displayed in combat, specifically in the Battle of Antioch, can be tied to their spiritual devotion. In the Speech at Clermont, Pope Urban II invoked images of apocalypticism that would've persuaded a crusader to fight to the death and essentially become a martyr. The crusader would've had a preconceived notion of the apocalypse from the Book of Revelations. Marshall states that Urban portrayed the clash between Islam and Christianity as "good" and "evil."⁹ Urban said, "it shall please God to send before the coming of Antichrist, so

⁸ Dass, Nirmal. *The Deeds of the Franks and Other Jerusalem-bound Pilgrims: The Earliest Chronicle of the First Crusades*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011. Print. 127-130.

⁹ Baldwin, Marshall W. (1969). *A History of the Crusades: The First Hundred Years*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press. 27.

that the head of all evil, who is to occupy there the throne of the kingdom, shall find some support of the faith to fight against him.”¹⁰ This idea causes apocalypticism to be linked with duality. In every apocalyptic battle, there are good and evil sides, and they are distinctly different from each other. Rubenstein argues that since Urban was calling for an earthly battle in Jerusalem, and the biblical prophecies had predicted a heavenly battle in Jerusalem- it was impossible to not see the link between the two battles. One motivation for people joining the First Crusade was that they believed that the Apocalypse was nigh, and they wanted to be in Jerusalem when it took place. Additionally, some crusaders believed that by going to Jerusalem, they could “set in motion the events of Apocalypse.”¹¹ During the Battle of Antioch, the crusaders were able to capture the city, however, a substantial force of Muslims encircled Antioch soon after. Under threat of being overrun and supplies and morale dwindling, the crusaders were too afraid to break through the Turkish encirclement. Reaching a breaking point, the crusaders prayed for “God to return His Lance to the crusaders so as to bring strength and victory to His people.” And God answered: “Finally, in His mercy, the Lord showed us His Lance and I, Raymond [of Aguilers], the author of this book kissed the point of the Lance as it barely protruded from the ground. What great joy and exultation then filled the city.”¹² The

¹⁰ Munro, Dana C. "The Speech of Pope Urban II. At Clermont, 1095." *The American Historical Review* 11, no. 2 (1906): 231-42.

¹¹ Rubenstein, Jay. *Armies of Heaven: The First Crusade and the Quest for Apocalypse*. New York: Basic, 2011. Print. 23.

¹² Dass, Nirmal. *The Deeds of the Franks and Other Jerusalem-bound Pilgrims: The Earliest Chronicle of the First Crusades*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011. Print. 127-130.

“discovery” of the Holy Lance, a Christian relic, imbued the crusaders with renewed spirit and courage. Thus, the crusaders made the bold action to rush out of the city and face the Muslim army. The crusaders succeeded in battle, due in part to their spiritual motivation by the discovery of the Lance. Without the crusaders’ devotion to God, the First Crusade would’ve failed.

Scholarship, for the most part, has iterated that the primary reason for the crusader’s victory is that Islam had serious political and religious fractures during the advent of the First Crusade. While this is indeed correct, the other reasons as mentioned in this paper also contributed greatly. To undercut these contributing factors’ significance would be foolish. Muslim forces put up quite a defense of the cities that they garrisoned. Muslim rulers did resist, as in the case of Antioch, which the crusaders finally captured after nine months.¹³ By logic of blaming the divisions that Islam faced for their defeat, that logic could be applied to the crusaders as well. Likewise, the crusaders faced political and religious fractures with the princes’ rivalries and the disparity between the East and West. Yet, the crusaders were able to demonstrate their military ability in the sieges of Nicaea, Antioch, and Jerusalem - cities on which the crusaders had no prior intelligence. The militarization of Europe due to feudal conflicts greatly contributed to the crusaders’ victory. They would’ve had experience already in advanced combat tactics of sieging. For these reasons, the council of princes and the strategies they implemented were so effective. This warrants at least some credit for the Crusader victory. Scholars also discount the religious piety of the crusaders. It is true that the crusaders committed barbaric acts during the First Crusade. These barbaric acts, such as pillaging and scorched earth,

¹³ Dajani-Shakeel, Hadia. *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28, no. 3 (1996): 426-28. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/176399>.

were not too foreign to the acts they committed back home in Europe. But these crimes should not detract from the impact of the crusaders' devotion. Libertini argues, "On a spiritual and moral level, the Crusades offered the chance to redirect militant passions of the knightly class of Europe into what was seen as being a truly noble quest, thereby helping countless men to save their souls and improve their moral dispositions."¹⁴ The Crusade was a religiously charged event, and would never have occurred if the crusaders did not care for their souls. The crusaders were motivated spiritually and that is a considerable component of the Crusader victory.

The First Crusade was not an easy victory for the knights who embarked on the campaign, however, they were able to trump seemingly insurmountable odds with planning and collective management by the princes and the overarching motivation of salvation. The consequence of the First Crusade was more crusades that were less than honorable and poorly executed. This paper explored underplayed reasons that the Crusade succeeded and showed that nothing should be dismissed. If these factors are rejected, it creates a single story. This single story diminishes the planning, brotherhood, and spiritual devotion of the Crusaders. What is known about the First Crusade is limited by the scope of sources which affects the amount of analysis. The road ahead for analyzing the First Crusade is simple, one must take an interdisciplinary approach.

¹⁴ "Economic Motives: Were the Crusades Motivated Primarily by Economic Considerations?" *History in Dispute*, edited by Mark T. Schipper, vol. 10: The Crusades, 1095-1291, St. James Press, 2003, pp. 71-78. *World History in Context*, Accessed 07 Jan. 2017. link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/CX2877000020/WHIC?u=tlc199095657&xid=f58c78a4.

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