CRUSADES

What are commonly referred to as "The Crusades" were actually one long conflict between Christian Europe and the Islamic Near East over the land and holy sites of modern-day Palestine. It encompassed several aggressive attempts by European nobility, at the command of successive popes, to reinforce the Latin kingdom or regain territory lost to Islam, which gave the illusion of multiple invasions. Battles would continue to be fought, cities would be won and lost, but the great Christian victories of the First Crusade would not be repeated.

Motivations

During the seventh and eighth centuries BCE, Islam swept out of the Near East, across North Africa, and into Spain, where it began to encroach on central Europe. During the 10th century, European Christianity went on the offensive, and by the 11th century, the tide began to turn against Islam. Christian Europe meant not only to overthrow Muslim rule but also to expel it from Europe and recover Jerusalem for Christianity. The desire to spread the gospel was mixed with a desire to open new markets and conquer new territories.

By 1095, the power and influence of the papacy, as well as the sanctity of the majority of the clergy, were on the decline, while the power and influence of the German empire were on the rise. Pope Urban II, fearing the Church would lose what little influence it had, and despising the results of continued fighting among the Christian nobility, sought a way to unite Christendom in a common cause. At the Council of Clermont, he preached the First Crusade. It was a mixture of misinformation concerning the alleged cruelty of Muslims to Christian pilgrims; a request for aid by Byzantine emperor Alexius I Comnenus; a call for display of righteous action in the recovery of Jerusalem; and an offer of reduction of sins for those who participated.

The effect was overwhelming. Not only did the nobility heed Urban's call, but so did many peasants of the cities. Others also took to preaching the crusade, most notably Peter the Hermit, whose call went mostly to peasants and street rabble. The nobility were led by Godfrey of Bouillon, Raymond of Toulouse, and Bohemond I. Altogether, they made up six hosts of 100,000 to 200,000 *cruciata*, or cross-signed, who traveled overland to meet in Constantinople before continuing on to Jerusalem.

The First Crusade

The March East

The so-called Peasants' Crusade led by Peter the Hermit consisted primarily of peasants and petty criminals. It preceded the main group of nobility and men-at-arms and turned into a binge of pillage, thievery, and eventual widespread murder of innocent Jews. Many of Peter's "army" died at the hands of the Turks, and only a few ever reached Constantinople.

The main forces under command of the nobility reached Constantinople in 1096. The leaders were required to swear allegiance to Alexius, emperor of the Byzantine Empire, in return for immediate gifts and a promise of future help, which was never forthcoming. Alexius' main objective was to get the
crusaders to help him regain territories lost to the Turks, who were seeking to take over his empire. Before they were allowed to leave for Jerusalem, however, the crusaders were coerced into helping Emperor Alexius capture the city of Nicaea in 1097.

The Muslim world was unprepared for the Christian invasion; the strength and power of the mounted knights, as well as the bravery of the common foot soldier, were more than a match for the Muslim cavalry. The march to Palestine was marked by a decisive victory at the Battle of Dorylaeum and the conquest of Tarsus by Baldwin I and Tancred. The crusaders and their camp followers were not prepared, however, for the long and grueling march through the Black Mountains toward Antioch. This journey meant the death of many through hunger, thirst, and heat.

Antioch fell to the crusaders in the Battle of Antioch in 1098 after eight months, despite poor provisions and ill health among the besiegers. The crusaders' confidence in the leadership of their God and the righteousness of their cause helped them to overcome numerous attempts by the inhabitants to break the siege and defeat reinforcements attempting to relieve the city. Antioch finally fell, after betrayal by one of its citizens. The crusaders spent the next several months in Antioch recuperating, making local conquests, and repelling Turkish attempts to regain the city. Bohemond finally secured Antioch for himself as the others continued on to Jerusalem.

Capture of Jerusalem

Tales of the seeming invincibility of the Christian army preceded it, and the march toward Bethlehem and Jerusalem was without incident. God, it seemed, was surely guiding and protecting the crusaders, and no one dared stand in their way. They reached Jerusalem in 1099 and immediately placed it under siege. It fell to Godfrey and Raymond on July 15. For several days, any Muslims who could be found were put to death.

After the 1099 siege of Jerusalem and the securing of the surrounding territory, most of the crusaders returned home, feeling that they had done what was required of them by their God and their pope. Only the adventurers stayed on to establish the four Crusader States. These four states, the Kingdom of Jerusalem and the states of the County of Edessa, Principality of Antioch, and eventually the County of Tripoli, were islands of Christianity in a hostile sea of Islam.

The Muslim world was now much more aware of the crusaders' presence and purpose, their strengths and weaknesses. The Muslims wasted little time in trying to regain what had been taken from them. Communications between the four Crusader States was difficult, if not impossible, and the Christians' only hope of survival lay in reinforcements from Europe. In the meantime, however, their strength, bravery, audacity, and faith would have to keep them alive and in possession of the holy sites and the fortified cities.

The Second and Third Crusade

The Second Crusade was preached by the pope and Bernard of Clairvaux after the fall of Edessa in 1144 to Zangi, governor of Mosul. This crusade was led by Louis VII of France and Conrad III of Germany during 1147–1149. The two armies were unable to cooperate and were separately defeated in Asia Minor. An attempt to capture Damascus failed, and the crusaders returned home.
Muslim power was consolidated under Zangi, his son Nur al-Din, and later Saladin, who sought a holy war with Christianity. In 1187, Saladin's army captured Jerusalem. This caused the pope to preach the Third Crusade of 1189–1192. It was led by Philip II Augustus of France, Richard the Lionhearted of England, and Holy Roman emperor Frederick I Barbarossa. Frederick drowned in Asia Minor, and Philip and Richard were unable to work together because of jealousy. Philip returned home and left Richard in the Holy Land; Richard won the siege of Acre but was unable to recapture Jerusalem. The best he could manage was a treaty with Saladin to allow safe passage for pilgrims visiting Jerusalem.

**The Later Crusades**

In 1198, Pope Innocent III's influence finally brought peace to the feuding nobility of Europe, and he tried to reestablish the Fourth Crusade as a holy cause. This crusade was ultimately determined by the Venetians, however, whose only goal was to expand their trading empire by destroying the influence of Constantinople. They accomplished this by leveraging their strategic position over the crusaders, who could not afford their passage to the Holy Land. At the Venetians' bidding, the crusaders destroyed Constantinople in 1204.

In 1215, Innocent III proclaimed the Fifth Crusade of 1218–1221. Emperor Frederick II of Germany obtained the title of king of Jerusalem by marriage in 1225 but was excommunicated in 1227 for delaying his start. In 1228, Frederick finally went to the Holy Land in the Sixth Crusade, gaining Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth, and a connecting strip of land to Acre by treaty rather than conquest.

In 1244, Jerusalem fell to the Muslims, and a new crusade was proclaimed by Innocent IV in 1245. This Seventh Crusade was led by Louis IX of France during 1248–1254. Though he invaded Egypt and captured Damietta, Louis was taken prisoner, and Damietta was lost. Egypt revolted, and a new Muslim movement called for the recovery of Syria. Within the next few years, all remaining Christian possessions in Syria were captured.

**Final Crusades**

The Crusades effectively came to an end after the Seventh Crusade, but some continued to fight. In 1269, King James of Aragon in Spain reluctantly launched the Aragonese Crusade under pressure from the pope. James was driven off by heavy storms and failed in his attempt to land in Asia Minor. In 1270, Louis IX renewed his crusade with the Eighth Crusade. Instead of going to the Holy Land directly, he sailed to Tunis, on the mistaken information that the ruler there was interested in converting to Christianity. When that proved incorrect, Louis laid siege. An epidemic killed a large part of the invading force, including Louis. His brother negotiated some tribute and left.

Peter I of Cyprus began a crusade in 1365 that lasted until 1369. This crusade consisted of harassment of the Muslim Mediterranean coast and the 1365 capture of Alexandria. It ended with Peter's assassination. In 1396, Pope Boniface IX called for the Crusade of Nicopolis, to halt Muslim expansion in the Balkans. French knights made up the bulk of the force that responded, but they were soundly defeated by the Turks at Nicopolis in Bulgaria.

The Last Crusade was fought during 1443–1444. King Ladislas of Poland organized a group of Hungarians, Poles, Bosnians, Wallachians, and Serbians to expel the Muslims under Murat II from the Balkans. A Venetian fleet was to ferry the crusaders from Varna to Constantinople and then stop any Muslim
reinforcements from crossing the Bosporus. The fleet failed, and Murat's army crushed the crusaders at the Battle of Varna. The Crusades were definitively over.

Consequences

The major military goals of the Crusades—driving Muslims from the Holy Land and imposing Western culture on the captured territory—were never accomplished. On the contrary, the Crusades strengthened and united the Islamic world and weakened the Byzantine Empire until it was overcome by the Turks in the 15th century. They succeeded, however, in accomplishing Pope Urban II's original goals of returning the papacy to its previous position of power and influence and eventually ending feudal warfare.

In the Near East, the influence of Europe remained for some time to come. Italian merchants were able to establish trading privileges in the major ports of Acre and Tyre. By controlling the sea lanes of the Mediterranean Sea, they provided Muslim merchants with access to European goods while remaining the sole distributors of Asian goods to the West. Italian traders were able to move and work freely in dedicated districts of these cities and gained some legal control over citizens and visitors within those districts. Their basic problem was that although they provided a conduit to the West, they could deal only with Muslim traders who handled Asian goods.

The long-term consequences of the Crusades for the West were generally negative, as the high cost of foreign warfare bankrupt the aristocracy. The population of Europe was reduced, and the Catholic Church lost much of its stature after successive defeats. In spite of its decreasing influence over the crusaders, however, the Church enjoyed a power rarely exercised before or since. Unfortunately, the power corrupted. The sale of indulgences and the exaction of tithes led away from spirituality and into worldliness, which people like Martin Luther would later use as justification for the Protestant Reformation.

There were some positive aspects for Europe, however. A sense of unity prevailed for a time under the banner of the Church. France began unifying into a single country, although it would be fought over by internal and external group for a long time to come. Although the Knights Templar and Knights Hospitaller suffered a severe decline, the Teutonic Knights (another military order of monks) went to work fighting the Church's enemies in Eastern Europe and in so doing, laid the foundations for the countries of both Poland and Germany.

The Crusades had a profound effect on commerce and trade, both inside and outside Europe. Feudalism and serfdom fell apart. A money economy began to prevail, which created a need for banks. Spheres of influence were set up in port cities of Palestine by the trading powers of Venice, Genoa, and Pisa, providing easier attainment of goods from both the Near and Far East. Navigation and shipbuilding improved with the increased need for transportation of people and goods. But many of the developments attributed to the Crusades were merely the end result of changes that had begun before Pope Urban's call to retake the Holy Land. The Crusades served only to facilitate and accelerate them.

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Further Reading


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