

The success of the first crusade



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The first crusade was a military expedition by European Christians to regain the holy lands and occurred in 1095. It was viewed as an unprecedented success by historians of the day and by contemporary historians. The reasons for this great success, if it can be named great at all, are numerous. From Pope Urban II's fiery call to arms at the Council of Clermont, to the lack of preparation from the Turks, there are many reasons for this success. Indeed the extreme faith displayed by the crusaders, the quality of their leaders, and the allies which they gained during their extensive journey were further factors which contributed to their success.

After receiving the call for military aid from Alexius I, the Byzantine Emperor in 1095, Pope Urban II seized upon this opportunity for him to renew Papal control and influence in the east and to reunite the churches of Rome and Constantinople. Through his highly charismatic sermon given on 27th November 1095 at the Council of Clermont, Urban was able to arouse enthusiasm from the clergy and nobles present for a Holy War on the Muslims in the east. They then went out to their diocese and spread the command of a call to arms from God. This call to arms created a huge influx of people from all works of life and they were all keen to embark on this pilgrimage to the holy land. This was a good thing as more people would mean a larger army for which to defeat the Muslims with. However a lot of people who showed enthusiasm for this pilgrimage were not knights or trained soldiers but were ordinary men, women and children, and so they can be seen as more of a hindrance than of help. On the other hand, by there being women, usually wives, on the journey they would have

undoubtedly helped the men on this hazardous journey by providing them with the necessary motivation needed to complete this pilgrimage.

However the crusaders did not answer the call for arms from Pope Urban likely; they knew that it would be an arduous journey. But for most it was their undoubted faith which made them embark on this journey and it was faith which was a key factor that carried them to Jerusalem. Until recently it has been thought that one of the main motives for people embarking on the crusade was power and profit which could be gained in the supposedly lucrative east. But contemporary historians now believe that a lot of the crusaders were just devout Christians and wished to secure their place in heaven which the Pope had stated would happen if they liberated Jerusalem from the infidel. Faith is a powerful tool; it can make people push beyond their limits and to achieve unattainable goals, as is stated by Setton and Baldwin ' without zeal and a burning faith it could never have been achieved' and hence it was definitely a positive factor in helping the success of the crusaders. The crusaders were from all different parts of Europe and spoke many different languages. It was their belief in achieving the one aim of capturing Jerusalem that made them work effectively together as a fighting force. This can be seen when the crusaders captured Antioch. As soon as they captured Antioch, after a gruelling siege of seven months, the crusaders themselves were besieged by an army of Kerbogha of Mosul's. The crusaders were hungry and tired. Furthermore their morale was dangerously low, they were fighting night and day to keep the besiegers out, and just when they thought that all was lost a minor monk called Peter Bartholomew claimed to have discovered the holy lance in the city. This was enough of a sign to give

the crusaders faith that they would win and made them fight on. On June 28th they defeated Kerbogha's forces. This is a prime example to prove that it was their faith which encouraged the Crusaders to go forth and to face the enemy head on instead of giving up.

The first crusaders were indeed many but they were in foreign lands, far away from home and without a reliable source of supplies and so it was important for them to make allies within the region. Though there were some troubles between the crusaders and the Byzantine's, the Byzantine Emperor Alexius I was very willing to help the crusaders with supplies, a small military force and engineers. The engineers were extremely useful and necessary for the building of siege engines from which they made the capture of towns much easier. Hence the alliance with Alexius was a necessity for the success of the crusade. A further asset to the crusaders was the help from the Armenians. With their help some of the crusaders were able to conquer Edessa and hence form the first of the crusader states called the County of Edessa of which Baldwin was their ruler. Also it was an Armenian guard who Bohemond bribed at Antioch to open the cities gates. Furthermore, it was also an Armenian commander who helped the crusaders capture Jerusalem by surrendering his tower on the main walls to them. Otherwise the crusaders quite possibly would have had to have gone through a lengthy siege in which many of them would have died. Baldwin of Boulogne also had an Armenian called Pakrad on his staff whom he relied on for advice on the area and the diplomatic stance between states and rulers. Another main ally who the crusaders had but were not as prominent was the Christian people who were already there. They tried their best to help the crusaders by giving

them what provisions they could spare and by trying to help overthrow the garrisons of towns of which the crusaders were trying to capture. But there is evidence that a lot of Christians within these Muslim states were quite content with their Muslim overlords and so were not keen in helping a foreign army even if it was a Christian one.

Another key factor which can be seen during the first crusade is that of the competency of the crusaders leadership. The crusaders were in the hands of experienced princes whom had seen combat in various wars. This can be seen through the tactics which they employed, such as them used on June 30th 1097 when Bohemond's army was surrounded by a Turkish army. The papal legate Adhemar of Le Puy performed an ingenious diversion of crossing the mountains to flank the enemy and come up on their rear, ' which caused them to flee in panic and confusion'[1]. But even though the crusaders leaders were highly skilled at leading they were not always a unifying force. There was a growing tension between Raymond and Bohemond. But other than that there was not much quarrelling within the army itself. Some of the main leaders were driven to a degree by their own ambition and this sometimes led to atrocities occurring. An example of this is the massacre of 300 Norman troops who Baldwin of Boulogne had forced to camp outside the walls of his newly captured town of Tarsus because he did not trust them and hence they were slaughtered by the town's former garrison under nightfall. But through all of the bad decisions, most of the time when they were needed to unify and attack together they did just that. They worked as one army, even if they disagreed on tactics when they assaulted and besieged major cities such as Antioch and Jerusalem. Indeed

the assault on Jerusalem was impeded time wise by the arguing between the leaders over who should be given Antioch, but when they eventually got there the remaining princes worked together to gain success. But the fact that most of the princes true ambitions lay in their own personal gain is shown by Bohemond who selfishly never took any further part in the crusade after becoming Prince of Antioch. He never even went to Jerusalem. This was a major reason in why it took so long for the crusaders to take Antioch, because Raymond had wanted to storm the city but Bohemond refused and wanted to besiege it even though there wasn't enough troops to encircle the city. Bohemond's decision to siege was due to his own greed; he wanted Antioch for himself and so wanted it intact. The siege was perhaps harder on the crusaders than the defenders as they quickly ran out of food which led to desertion and cannibalism. Even though these blasphemous events were occurring, Bohemond still held the siege which shows that he didn't care much about the religious side to the crusade but by taking Antioch he did succeed in completing his own agenda and furthered the crusaders cause.

One of the most important reasons for the success of the first crusade was the disunity within the Muslim nations in and around the holy land and their underestimation of the threat to which the crusaders posed. During the time of the first crusade, Anatolia, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt were all under Muslim control. But they were politically and, to some extent, culturally fragmented and hence this would have certainly contributed to the success of the first crusade. These differences can be seen through the internal rivalry which had been going on between competing territories. Anatolia and Syria were controlled by the Sunni Seljuk's, and used to be unified in one big

empire but in 1092 Malik-Shah, the Seljuk sultan, died and his sons quarrelled over who would succeed him. So the sultan's once large empire was split between the competing sons. Hence when the crusaders came marching through, these states were on the whole more concerned with consolidating their own territories and gaining control of their neighbours, than with cooperating against the crusaders.

There was also a failure to react quickly enough to the crusading threat by the Turks and the rest of the Muslim states. During the People's crusade The Turkish king Kilij Arslan's capital, Nicaea was situated close to where the crusaders were based. He was happy enough to watch them ravage the countryside but as soon as they threatened his city he easily defeated them. This easy defeat of the Christian forces lulled him into a false sense of security. When he heard that another Christian force had amassed at Constantinople he assumed that it would be of the same type of incompetent soldiers as before and so took the majority of his army to attack a rival state, ' he had not foreseen that the crusading army would be so strong'[2]. This same sort of misconception of the crusading forces was common among many of the Muslim leaders, and hence played a major part in the success of the first crusade. This can be proven by the failure of the second crusade. It contained around the same amount of people as the first crusade but by this time the Muslim leaders were more prepared and swiftly defeated the crusaders in two battles[3].

Even though the main reason for the success of the first crusade was the disunity between the Muslim states, all of the factors mentioned contributed to the crusades success. The crusaders allies played their part in helping the

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crusaders to succeed in their goals. Also the faith of the people played a major part. Their faith cannot be underestimated, it kept them going and forced them onwards to Jerusalem; it was their faith which stopped them from turning back even when they were dying from starvation and disease. It was ultimately their faith which drove them to succeed.

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[3] J. Riley-Smith , The Crusades: Idea and Reality 1095-1274, (London, 1981), p. 14.