

The Crusaders Capture Jerusalem, 1099

In the year 637 the armies of Islam lead by the Caliph Omar conquered the city of Jerusalem, the center of the Christian world and a magnet for Christian pilgrims. The city's Muslim masters exhibited a certain level of religious tolerance. No new churches were to be built and crosses could not be publicly displayed outside church buildings, but the pilgrims were allowed to continue their treks to the holiest shrines of Christendom (the pilgrims were charged a toll for access). The situation remained stable for over 400 years. Then, in the latter part of the 11th century, the Turks swarmed westward out of Central Asia overrunning all that lay in their path. Jerusalem fell to them in 1076. The atmosphere of tolerance practiced by the followers of Omar was replaced by vicious attacks on the Christian pilgrims and on their sacred shrines in the Holy City. Reports of robberies, beatings, killings, degradation of holy sites and the kidnapping for ransom of the city's patriarch made their way back to Europe. To the Europeans the Holy Land was now in the smothering grip of the Infidel and something must be done.

In response, Pope Urban II called a conference at the city of Clermont, France in 1095, concluding the eight days of deliberation with one of history's most influential speeches. Mounting a lofty scaffold, the Pope exhorted the assembled multitude to wrest the Holy Land from the hands of the Infidel and assured them that God would absolve them from any sin associated with the venture. His words fell on receptive ears as the crowd responded with cries of "It is the will of God!", "It is the will of God!". The Crusades had begun.

The First Crusade was the most successful in that it actually accomplished what it set out to do - conquer Jerusalem. But it had its problems. Responding to the Pope's challenge, thousands of peasants rallied to the cause motivated by a combination of religious fervor and the desire to escape their squalid condition at home. Led by Peter the Hermit and Walter the Penniless the hapless rabble marched across Europe to Constantinople, only to be slaughtered by the Turks soon after crossing the Bosphorus into Asia Minor.

In the meantime, the nobility of Europe raised an army of thousands that made its way through various routes and with much mishap to Constantinople. Unfortunately, many of these crusaders could not wait until they met the Muslims on the field of battle to demonstrate their religious zeal. As they progressed

through Europe many Jewish communities became the target of their wrath and thousands were massacred.

In the spring of 1097, a host of over 100,000 crusaders joined forces on the eastern side of the Bosphorus. The combined army then fought its way along the coast of the Mediterranean reaching the gates of Jerusalem in June of 1099.

Capture of the Christian "Navel of the World"

The name of the author of the following eyewitness account is unknown, but it is considered a reliable description published before 1101:

"Exulting with joy we reached the city of Jerusalem on Tuesday, June 6, and we besieged it in a wonderful manner. Robert of Normandy besieged it on the northern side, near the church of St. Stephen, the first martyr, who was there stoned for Christ's name. Next to him was Robert, Count of Flanders. Duke Godfrey and Tancred carried on the siege on the west. The Count of St. Gilles operated from the south, on Mount Sion, near the church of St. Mary, the Lord's mother, where the Lord supped with His disciples. . . .

During the siege we were unable to find any bread to buy for about the space of ten days, until a messenger came from our ships; also we were afflicted by great thirst, so much so that in fear and terror we had to water our horses and other animals six miles away. The fountain of Siloam, at the foot of Mount Sion, sustained us, but the water was sold among us at a high price. . . . We sewed up skins of oxen and buffaloes in which we brought the water six miles. The water we drank from such receptacles was fetid, and what with foul water and barley bread we daily suffered great affliction and distress. Moreover the Saracens hid near all the springs and wells and ambushed our men, killing and mutilating them and driving off the animals into their dens and caverns.

Then our leaders planned to attack the city with machines, in order to enter it and adore the sepulchre of our Saviour. They made two wooden towers and many other machines. . . . Day and night on the fourth and fifth days of the week we vigorously attacked the city on all sides; but before we made our assault the bishops and priests persuaded all by their preaching and exhortation that a procession should be made round Jerusalem to God's honour, faithfully accompanied by prayers, alms and fasting. Early on the sixth day we attacked the city on all sides and could do nothing against it. We were all surprised and alarmed. Then, at the approach of the hour at which our Lord Jesus Christ deigned to undergo the passion of the cross for us, our knights in one of the towers fought bravely, amongst them Duke Godfrey and his brother, Count Eustace.

One of our knights, Letholdus by name, climbed on to the wall of the city. When he reached the top, all the defenders of the city quickly fled along the walls and through the city. Our men followed and pursued them, killing and hacking, as far as the temple of Solomon, and there there was such a slaughter that our men were up to their ankles in the enemy's blood. . . .

The emir who commanded the tower of David surrendered to the Count [of St. Gilles] and opened the gate where pilgrims used to pay tribute. Entering the city, our pilgrims pursued and killed the Saracens up to the temple of Solomon. There the Saracens assembled and resisted fiercely all day, so that the whole temple flowed with their blood. At last the pagans were overcome and our men seized many men and women in the temple, killing them or keeping them alive as they saw fit. On the roof of the temple there was a great crowd of pagans of both sexes, to whom Tancred and Gaston de Beert gave their banners [to provide them with protection} . Then the crusaders scattered throughout the city, seizing gold and silver, horses and mules, and houses full of all sorts of goods. Afterwards our men went rejoicing and weeping for joy to adore the sepulchre of our Saviour Jesus and there discharged their debt to Him. . . .

On the eighth day after the capture of the city they elected Duke Godfrey prince of the city, to fight the pagans and protect the Christians. Also, on the day of St. Peter in chains, they elected as Patriarch a most wise and honourable man, named Arnulf. The city was captured by the Christians on Friday, July 15."

References:

Cox, George, W, The Crusades (1886); Laffan, R.G.D (ed. and trans.), Select Documents of European History 800 - 1492, (1929)

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