The Beginning of the Crusades

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The Crusades go back more than a dozen years.

The first crusade was announced by Pope Urban II, in 1095, during the Council of Clermont.

Before the whole history of the Crusades, the Byzantine Emperor Alexios I Comnenus, whose army had been weakened by the protracted battles against the Seljuk Turks, proposed to Pope Urban II that he free the Holy Land, arguing that the great Christian shrines were in Muslim hands and that Christian pilgrims were being persecuted.

Urban II agreed, seeing no doubt the benefits in uniting Christians after the schism, as well as gaining control of the Holy Land.



Fig. 1 “Pope Urban II.”

The Pope’s ideas quickly resonated with society, but most of those involved thought only of their own enrichment.

After the first campaign, separate states were established, such as:

1. The Countship of Edessa.

2. The Principality of Antioch.

3. The Countship of Tripoli

4. The Kingdom of Jerusalem.

But these states were under constant threat of conquest by Muslims and on top of that, they were bogged down in internal squabbles and problems.

At the end of the 12th century, Pope Innocent III began urging the monarchs to assemble a new crusade, but the monarchs understood that this would weaken their own states as well as condemn them to a long stay in the Middle East.

After much wrangling and disagreement, Count Baldwin I of Flanders and Margrave Boniface of Montferrath became the leaders of the crusade. Under their banners 12 to 32 thousand warriors gathered together, and Byzantium was designated as the place of assembly. An agreement was made with the Venetian doge Enrico Dandolo to transport soldiers, horses and equipment to Egypt, as it was the Venetian fleet that was considered the best in all Europe at the time.

Enrico was old and blind, but retained a clear and sharp mind; he quickly realized that the Crusaders could be used to his advantage.

So Venetian ships ferried the crusaders to the island of Lido, absolutely free, but they could not sail away from it, Enrico asked 85,000 marks in silver for the way back, which at that time was a huge and unaffordable sum.

The crusaders faced starvation, but Enrico offered them a way out of the situation: they had to capture the city of Zadar in Dalmatia, which was a direct rival to Venice in the Andriatic. The crusaders agreed, and in 1202 they took the city.

Afterwards, when Pope Innocent III learned of this, he was furious and imposed an anathema on all, which he himself later removed.

Later, Dandolo had a new plan, he wanted to send crusaders to Byzantium.

He presented the campaign to Byzantium as a restoration of the law of power and justice, because the Byzantine emperor Isaac II Angel had been deposed and blinded by his brother Alexei. The son of the deposed emperor sought help from European monarchs.

Dandolo himself was not particularly interested in the fate of Byzantium and the fate of the dynasty. According to his idea, the crusaders were to weaken Byzantium after the invasion and overthrow of the “impostor”, which would rid Byzantium of a direct trade competitor in the Mediterranean.

Byzantium was at the time mired in noble warfare, and Alexius Angelus promised to pay crusaders 200,000 marks, help with the fleet and provide an army to invade Egypt, as well as to keep 500 soldiers in the Holy Land, but most importantly, to subject the Byzantine Church to the Holy See.

In June 1203 the crusaders besieged the city and dealt his army a severe defeat; the emperor fled; Isaac III took his place and his son became co-consul.

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