



The Sacred & the Profane:

Understanding the Motives of the First Crusaders

In one of his many rants against the bourgeoisie in *The Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx proclaimed that “the need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, and establish connections everywhere”.¹ While Marx only made a single passing reference to the Crusades in his most famous treatise, the broader Marxist notion of economic interests and exploitation driving historical developments has had a significant impact upon how the Crusades are perceived: particularly the question of why people participated in these medieval expeditions.

On November 27, 1095, in the city of Clermont in central France, Pope Urban II called upon the faithful to join an expedition to aid eastern Christians and liberate Jerusalem from Muslim control. The response to Pope Urban II’s famous sermon surely surpassed what the pontiff—even in his most optimistic mood—might have anticipated. Perhaps as many as 100,000 Europeans would participate in the campaign known to history as the First Crusade.² And while it should be noted that this number only represented a small portion of the population of medieval Europe, the size of the response was remarkable and considerably larger than the numbers usually involved in medieval European warfare. Therefore, understanding the surge of enthusiasm for the nascent crusading movement has been the source of great scholarly endeavor and debate.

Various explanations have been proposed to explain why tens of thousands of medieval men and women would travel several thousand miles and endure great hardship in order to try to reassert Christian

control over the Holy Land. For example, in his celebrated multi-volume study *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Edward Gibbon claimed that many crusaders were inspired by an inherent bloodlust, for “war and exercise were [their] reigning passions”.³ Some have utilized psychological concepts, like cognitive dissonance, to explicate what was propelling this crusading enthusiasm.⁴ A PBS documentary series on Islam matter-of-factly asserted that anti-Islamic hostilities were what chiefly galvanized these early crusaders.⁵ But of all these problematic proposals, the most commonly cited motive to explain crusader participation is economic gain.

This materialist explanation has been more durable than a cockroach. There are a number of strands to this argument. At its core is a quasi-Marxist and modernist view of history and the human person. From this perspective, only economics can satisfactorily explain why so many people would enlist in an unprecedented and curious endeavor like the First Crusade. Thus any non-materialist indications, like religious concerns, should be regarded as a smokescreen for the economic intentions that are truly spurring participation.

Crop failures and drought in Western Europe in the decade preceding the pope’s crusading summons are sometimes highlighted in order to add some specificity to this materialist thesis. This tactic is not completely baseless. In his history of the First Crusade, the twelfth-century chronicler Ekkehard of Aura mentioned these developments as he considered why people joined the expedition. Undoubtedly this agricultural chaos prompted some, particularly peasants, to view Urban’s proposal in a different light. Even so, these upheavals

should not be overemphasized as a central catalyst for crusade participation. After all, most surviving crusaders returned to Europe following the capture of Jerusalem in the summer of 1099. While Malcolm Barber has recently reminded us that peasants comprised a portion of the crusading remnant that decided to remain in the East in the aftermath of the campaign, this decision was typically more due to their lacking the resources to finance their return trip than it was to the prospect of the Holy Land offering opportunities for them that might not have been present back in France.⁶

Among the most influential of these materialistic explanations for why people went on crusade, is the theory that the campaign was an outlet for the younger sons from aristocratic families whose prospects for inheritance had been mostly marginalized by primogeniture.⁷ In other words, it was not so much the “holy” but more the “land” part of the Holy Land that ignited their crusading desires. This thesis was first popularized by the influential French medievalist, Georges Duby. It is astonishing how durable this supposition has been considering that Duby proposed it in passing and only offered the example of *one* family as evidence for this rather sweeping assessment!⁸ Even more damning to this premise: the contemporary evidence suggests the exact opposite. First, as previously noted, when the First Crusade ended in 1099, the vast majority of the surviving participants returned home. If the crusade was just a land-grab by avaricious younger sons, then it stands to reason that most crusaders would have remained in the East and that the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem (along with the other newly established crusader states) would not have been continually plagued by

manpower shortages. But that is not what occurred. On the contrary, prosopographical analysis of the first crusaders has shown that aristocratic participation in the expedition was in fact largely comprised of the oldest sons.⁹

Moreover, the reason why oldest sons of noble families formed a sizeable component of the crusader army is yet another blow to the material-motivations paradigm. Jonathan Riley-Smith, one of the leading crusades scholars of the past thirty years, has conclusively demonstrated that participating in a crusading expedition was an extremely costly venture. Crusade charters are a valuable source for detailing the financial challenges of crusading. These legal documents illustrate how many had to liquidate assets in order to underwrite the cost of their crusade participation. Crusading bankrupted many medieval knights. Indeed, the financial burden did not rest solely on the crusader, but it affected his whole family. They would have to make economic sacrifices to make their kin's participation viable.

Besides illustrating the enormous expenses of going on crusade, these charters also offer an insight into the mindset of many crusaders. While most of these legal documents focus on the details of the transaction being recorded—such as how much money a monastery is paying a noble family for a piece of land—many of these charters offer an explanation for why some of these nobles wished to participate in the crusade. The charter of Nivello, a French nobleman near Chartres who intended to participate in the campaign, conveys sentiments and language that permeate many of these documents:

Anyone who is the recipient of pardon through the grace of heavenly atonement and who wants to be more completely freed from the burden of his sins, whose weight oppresses the soul of the sinner and prevents it from flying up to heaven. . . . And so since, in order to obtain the pardon for my crimes which God can give me, I am going on pilgrimage to Jerusalem



which until now has been enslaved with her sons, the monks have given me 10 pounds in *denarii* towards the expenses of the appointed journey.¹⁰

There are many fascinating elements in this excerpt, but of particular note is how Nivello describes his crusading endeavor: a “pilgrimage to Jerusalem”. Many crusade charters employ variations on this phrase to describe the expedition. While the word “crusade” did not come into existence until nearly a century after the First Crusade, the use of pilgrimage language in the charters is clearly significant.

The tendency to invoke pilgrimage imagery and terminology in conjunction with the crusade began with Pope Urban II. The pilgrimage movement was an increasingly popular devotional activity during the eleventh century. A penitent would undertake a journey to a shrine or holy place to atone for past sins. Urban was intentionally appropriating pilgrimage ideas and imagery in his newly created campaign. Themes of penance and personal salvation are rife in crusade charters. The vow sworn by crusaders mirrored the vow taken by any pilgrim. The indulgence that the pope offered all participants echoed the remission of sins that pilgrims received for traveling to a holy site or shrine (such as Santiago de Compostella). Jerusalem was regarded as the greatest pilgrimage site because of its association with the passion, death, and res-

urrection of Christ. The ultimate goal of the First Crusade was the liberation of the holy city, which would enable them to complete their crusade vows by venerating the tomb of Christ in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. As one crusade scholar bluntly remarked, “[T]he crusader’s pilgrimage outclassed all other pilgrimages, because Christ outclassed the saints.”¹¹ This innovative fusion of pilgrimage and holy war received great support throughout Europe and inspired many to enlist.

Being chiefly inspired by religious concerns does not mean that all crusaders had entirely pious motives. Some undoubtedly enlisted with the hopes of enriching themselves. Others may have regarded this possibility as a secondary benefit of their decision to take the cross; spiritual and economic interests were by no means mutually exclusive. The pope was clearly aware of these temptations for the decree on the First Crusade in the canons of the Council of Clermont states: “Whoever for devotion alone, not to gain honor or money, goes to Jerusalem to liberate the Church of God can substitute this journey for all penance.”¹² But again, instead of securing personal estates from the lands conquered during the campaign, the vast majority of surviving crusaders returned to Europe. While Gouffier of Lastours apparently brought back a lion from the East and a number of crusaders returned with relics from the Holy Land, few arrived home with

anything that could be labeled “riches”.¹³ In fact, what was most commonly brought back by returning crusaders were palm fronds, as these symbolized that a participant had indeed fulfilled his vow and completed this pilgrimage.

The First Crusade was undeniably a very different sort of pilgrimage, but it was this penitential component that made the enterprise unique. The significance of this aspect has prompted some scholars to describe crusading as “penitential warfare”. A large percentage of the first crusaders were actually non-combatants. The military components of this expedition were not a draw for them; truth be told, they had little to offer in this sphere and were often a burden to the army. Rather, it was the pilgrimage elements that moved many of these non-combatants to join: the prospect of visiting the holiest site on earth—the tomb of Christ—and the indulgence that they would receive for being part of the campaign. The First Crusade was so effective in capturing the zeitgeist of this period because it tapped into contemporary religious concerns and provided great spiritual opportunities and rewards for participants. Charters, letters, chronicles, and especially the behavior of the crusaders clearly illustrate that religious motivations were the biggest factor driving participation in the expedition. In conse-

quence, those specious arguments touting materialism as the primary motivation of the crusaders need to be definitively cast into the dustbin of history where they belong.

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References

1. Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* (Penguin Classics, 2011), p. 67.
2. John France, *Victory in the East: A Military History of the First Crusade* (Cambridge, 1994), proposes that 60,000 is a more accurate figure. For a discussion of the issue of these differing numbers see France, pp. 122–42.
3. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 6 (London, 1898), p. 271.
4. For an example of this see John R.E. Bliese, “The Motives of the First Crusaders: A Social Psychological Analysis”, *Journal of Psychohistory* 17 (1990), pp. 393–411.
5. *Islam—Empire of Faith* (2000). Take a moment to appreciate that your tax dollars helped fund that penetrating historical analysis.
6. Malcolm Barber, *The Crusader States*

(New Haven, 2012), p. 17.

7. Johannes Fried, *The Middle Ages*, trans. Peter Lewis (London, 2015), pp. 161–62, is a recent example of the continuing Sirens-like allure of this phony argument. While discussing the First Crusade the author, a highly-regarded German medieval historian, readily acknowledges that the “main motivation [of crusaders] was the hope of attaining salvation”, but then a few sentences later trots out the discredited “younger sons” theory!

8. Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The First Crusade and the Idea of Crusading* (Philadelphia, 1986), p. 42.

9. Jonathan Riley-Smith’s landmark study *The First Crusaders, 1095–1131* (Cambridge, 1997) is an essential read for anyone interested in these issues.

10. *Chronicles of the First Crusade*, edited by Christopher Tyerman (Penguin Classics, 2012), pp. 28–29.

11. Norman Housley, *Fighting for the Cross: Crusading to the Holy Land* (New Haven, 2008), p. 25.

12. Robert Somerville, *The Councils of Urban II* (Amsterdam, 1971), p. 74.

13. The logistics of how Gouffier accomplished this continue to fascinate me, but alas contemporary sources offer little illumination on his process and so this remains one of history’s mysteries.

New Voices

New Poetry in English

Jacob Rieff



In Hiezechielem

Gregory told us how it is.
Around us a single voice: relentless,
limiting the bones, the joints, the very
brain. Lurching and crushed and caught.

A multitude of voices urges us onward:
calling now and calling then,
skirting edges and freeing time.

From us a single voice: relentless,
ripping and tearing with loving echoes,
while here is all our echoes know.
Gregory told us how it is.