

Introduction to the Crusades

We are going to consider the time between 1096 and 1291, which spans about 200 years. Stop now and think about that period of time. Has Christopher Columbus sailed yet? How long has it been since the fall of Rome? Is most of Europe Christian yet, or is it still peopled by the Celts and pagans? Has the bubonic plague struck Europe yet? What's happening, by your best guess, in the American continents at this time? Is it the time of Robin Hood or Boyz in the Hood? Don't move on until you know where you're standing.

The year 1096 in medieval Europe was neither the gentlest nor the most intellectual. That's not to say that people were stupid, but they certainly were very naive. They believed the priests of the Roman Catholic Church who told them they were sinners and that life was tough and was meant to be – that they were paying for Adam and Eve's disobedience a long time ago. They believed that the misery of this life would be erased in the second life everlasting after they had died. They didn't have much food; they didn't have much schooling; they certainly didn't have much in the way of breaks in life. They did have the church, and the church ruled their lives and gave them hope.

Making the church angry, then, was serious business. The church gave (and sometimes sold) the forgiveness that medieval people needed to get into heaven. A torturous and evil hell was a very real thing to these people. They were already living it; they certainly didn't need more of it after death. So the people listened to the church and its holy fathers and tried to do as they were told.

Also during these 200 years, people followed the principle of primogeniture. This meant that the oldest son inherited all the land and riches. Standing around in their armor, doing not much else but grumbling, were a bunch of nobles' second, third and fourth sons. They couldn't even go about causing problems by using their superior advantage to spread misery because the church had made rules about when and where they could fight. A bunch of strong boys with sharp toys looking for a place to rumble: sounds like trouble!

The leaders of the church didn't like all these unemployed knights getting into trouble. They also didn't like the idea that the church and Christendom (the geographic areas that followed Christianity) were basically split into two parts. Years ago, the eastern part of the Roman Empire divided off and returned to following Greek ways of life. This division was called the Byzantine Empire and its capital was Constantinople. The Byzantine Empire had slightly different rules and very different lifestyles from the Roman Empire, even though both empires' people were Christian. The Byzantines were much more civilized than the barbarian-influenced western area. Rome's pope and the church leaders of the western region wanted to bring both sides together under the leadership of the pope, but there was no easy way to do that.

Bingo! The Turks were threatening Alexis Comena, who was the emperor of the Byzantine Empire. The Turks had pushed their way across and through several civilizations, had overrun Jerusalem and were now knocking on the door of Comena's empire. Comena wrote to Pope Urban II, leader of the western church, and asked for help. The pope took all these bored, misbehaving knights and promised them heavenly forgiveness and lands (except for the eastern half of Christendom) if they would reunite Europe and the church under the western pope's influence. He was a man with a plan; however, the best laid plans often go astray.

As you learn about the Crusades (the word means "war of the cross"), you'll see that this period is the beginning of a long and hard conflict between Muslim and Christian people. The Crusades led to quiet and almost unnoticed changes in the Christian world. However, those changes turned out to be very important in changing the medieval world into the Renaissance world.

The people who came back from the Crusades adopted new fashions, manners, foods, spices, cultural outlooks, learning and weapons. But the people who waited behind changed as well. They became less trusting of the church and its motives and people. They began to question. They also were given their first opportunity and permission to ignore the desires of their lords and masters. The world was changing; it just didn't know it yet.

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Timeline of the Crusades

The People's Crusade: 1096 (April to October)

To conquer the Holy Land

The First Crusade: 1096 to 1099

To conquer the Holy Land

The Years After the First Crusade: 1099 to 1144

Knights Templar and Hospitallers created

The Second Crusade: 1145 to 1149

To recapture the Holy Land

The Third Crusade: 1189 to 1192

To recapture the Holy Land

The Fourth Crusade: 1202 to 1204

To capture Constantinople

The Children's Crusade: 1212

To bring goodness and innocence to quest

The Fifth Crusade: 1217 to 1221

To establish secure base in Egypt

The Sixth Crusade: 1228

To recapture the Holy Land

The Seventh Crusade: 1248 to 1254

To capture a base in Egypt and regain the Holy Land

The Eighth Crusade: 1270-1291

To convert Bay of Tunis to Christianity and recapture holy places in the Holy Land