

History of the Crusades.
Episode 1.
Latin Christendom in 1090.

Welcome to the first episode of History of the Crusades. As I briefly mentioned in the introduction to this series, the Crusades were a series of holy wars taking place in the Middle Ages, the first of which, called the First Crusade, commenced in 1096. While it's tempting to launch straight into the First Crusade, I think that'd be a mistake. The Crusades were very much a product of their time, and we really need some background information so you can more fully understand the motivation and reason behind the Crusades. So today I'll be talking about Latin Christendom in 1090, five years before the First Crusade was launched.

By Latin Christendom I'm referring to the area which was previously the western part of the Roman Empire, which is now generally known as Western Europe. Much like today, it comprised people from different territories with their own culture and customs. Since the western part of the Roman Empire had fallen in the 400's, there was no unifying force across Western Europe, except perhaps the Catholic Church. The Church, administered by its head the Pope and based in Rome, was Latin speaking and provided some level of unity in what was a very fractured society. So that's what I mean by the term "Latin Christendom".

Obviously, Western Europe in 1090 was vastly different to the Europe of today. For instance, take the population. In 1090, London and Paris each had a population of between 20,000 to 30,000 people. There were some bigger towns. The trading centers of Rome, Venice, Florence, Milan and Cologne contained around 30,000 to 40,000 people, but that was as big as it got. So in 1090, even if you lived in one of the biggest cities in Western Europe, you'd be surrounded by familiar faces. But most people in 1090 didn't live in cities at all. They lived in small rural enclaves.

While we're on the subject of population, England today has a population of around fifty million. Based on studies of the Domesday book, which was compiled in 1086, we can estimate the population of England in 1090 to be just over the one million mark, and that's not really surprising, considering the high infant mortality rate, the fact that a percentage of the population were cloistered away in monasteries or nunneries and were, in theory at least, celibate, and the many terrifying and violent ways there were in 1090 to meet your end. This, coupled with the fact that health care consisted of little more than having a bit of a lie down, meant the people generally died between the ages of 35 and 50.

Another aspect of society in 1090 which was vastly different to our own and worth a mention, is communication. These days we take virtually instant communication and easy access to a massive amount of information for granted. In 1090 it was unusual to be able to read or write, unless of course you were a scholar, in which case you probably lived in a monastery and conducted your studies in Latin, which was still considered the language of learning, despite the fact that the Roman Empire in the West had fallen some 600 years ago. The printing press had not yet been invented. Books were rare and extremely valuable items which were laboriously copied out by hand. If the average person wanted to get a message to someone, you pretty much had to go and tell them yourself, or send someone to do it for you. If you are wealthy, you go by horseback, taking care due to the

poor state of the roads, which in many cases hadn't been upgraded since the fall of the Roman Empire, and the fact that lone riders were easy prey for brigands.

Western Christendom in 1090 was starting to undergo some major changes. Generally speaking, there was a lack of centralized power. The heady days of unity in continental Europe, under the leadership of Charlemagne, were a distant memory. Instead, Europe was divided into areas of varying size, ruled by powerful families who struggled against each other for land and prestige. There were kings, but often their influence didn't extend beyond their own family lands. Some of these aristocratic families were expanding, looking beyond their ancestral seats to new lands, where younger sons especially could go plundering, conquer new territory, clear the forest for planting (but this, of course, will be done by peasants and not by the conqueror personally), and erect a castle in the middle, to defend the new acquisition against other like-minded younger sons.

A great example of an aristocratic family on the up were the Normans. From France, they extended their horizons to England. A young Norman son, William the Bastard, took an army across the English Channel and defeated the English King in 1066, becoming known to history by the much nicer title William the Conqueror. Earlier, in 1015, a bunch of young Normans were on a pilgrimage to Italy. They were persuaded to stay on for a while as mercenaries to help expel the occupying Byzantine forces from the Italian peninsula. To cut a very long and interesting story short, by 1090 the Normans, who had allied themselves with the Pope, had conquered much of southern Italy and Sicily and set themselves up nicely as occupying rulers.

So to summarize, the aristocracy were on the move. Castles were springing up everywhere. Generally speaking, these weren't the impressive stone castles of the 12th and 13th centuries, but cruder, more hastily built castles, constructed mostly from timber. In 1090, England alone may have had more than 500 castles, most of them built in the last 50 years. This averages out at one castle every 10 miles. As I mentioned previously, the castle's occupants were supported by peasants who cleared and worked the surrounding land. Peasants were uneducated, led harsh and often short lives, but they were worth protecting. Throughout most of this time, it was more common for lords to have land and a lack of men to work it than the other way around. In a sparsely populated land with plenty of forest to be cleared, labor was a scarce commodity.

Who protected presents from raids, defended the castle, and went on campaigns to secure more land? Knights did. But, if you have an image in your head of a knight in shining armor, displaying courtly manners and chivalry, regarded for courage and bravery, you need to put that image right out of your head. Those knights came much later in the Middle Ages. In 1090, a knight was basically anyone who owned a horse and could wield a weapon, regardless of their social status. Operating without restriction, in places with no central authority, no centralized laws and no police, they were often brutal individuals whose actions were only restricted by their own consciences.

The Roman Church provided guidance to Christians about their consciences. From the newly-built, impressive stone cathedrals which were being built in towns, to the smaller churches springing up in communities on newly cleared land, churches made it pretty clear what would happen to sinners who didn't atone for their sins. In this time of widespread illiteracy, churches were decorated with elaborate paintings, depicting in graphic detail the miseries awaiting sinners in the afterlife. Naked sinners were shown having their eyes

gouged out by demons. Others were being tortured with pitchforks and other farm implements while being roasted, slowly, for all eternity.

Not surprisingly, many people who had behaved badly were concerned about this. Luckily, the Church provided a solution. You could repent. Undertaking a form of penance during your lifetime could absolve you of sin and removed the risk of being roasted on a spit by devils after you died. A common form of penance was the pilgrimage, and the greater your sin, the more arduous and lengthy the pilgrimage had to be for it to be wiped out. Hence, pilgrimages to remote places, such as Jerusalem and the Church of St James at Santiago de Compostela in the north western tip of Spain became popular.

Take, for example, Fulk Nerra. He lived in France around the year 1000, some 90 years before the period we are interested in, but he nevertheless provides a good example. He was the overlord of Anjou County in what is now west central France. He'd spent most of his life defending his territory and attacking neighboring counties for land and plunder. He had done some things on the battlefield that he wasn't proud of, and his conscience was further troubled by some of his deeds, including burning his wife at the stake for adultery. As penance, he undertook three pilgrimages to Jerusalem during his lifetime, hoping that the harshness of the 2,000 mile journey would be sufficient to expiate his sins. On his final pilgrimage, on reaching Jerusalem, he was led naked to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre with a leash around his neck, whilst being whipped by his servant. That should do it.

Violence was everywhere in the Middle Ages. People took the law into their own hands and meted out punishment as they saw fit. Disputes were often resolved by battle or painful ordeals, and disagreements between neighbors or family groups often descended into physical confrontations.

Where there was violence, there was sin. The only way you could ensure that you remained free from sin was to remove yourself entirely from society and closet yourself away, dedicating your life to God, preferably with others of a similar mind. Hence the development of monasteries. Monasteries started appearing in the 10th century. They were initially established along Benedictine lines. They were independent of other monasteries, ruled by an Abbott and were supported by villages and lands around them. They provided a highly regulated environment where learning, particularly that of a religious nature, could be fostered.

So in a very small nutshell, there you have it. Europe in 1090 can be summed up in three words: Violent, Religious and Fragmented.

While we weren't able to go into too much detail, I hope this episode is giving you some idea of what Latin Christendom was like in the time just prior to the First Crusade.

If you would like to read a firsthand account of life in this time, I recommend you track down a copy of "The Letters of Abelard and Heloise", and the "Historia Calamitatum" by Abelard. Peter Abelard was a French scholar whose gift for teaching attracted the young girl Heloise, famous throughout the land for her rare talent for learning letters, to be his pupil. They had an affair, and things ended badly, very badly. Since they were both literate, they wrote each other copious letters which have survived and which you can read. But I recommend Abelard's work "Historia Calamitatum", in which he describes his life, which was basically a chain of calamitous disasters. You can't go past it for

descriptions of the brutality of life in the early 1100's, and for accounts of monks behaving badly.

Also, should you wish to know a bit more about those favorite sons of medieval Europe, the Normans, you can download Lars Brownworth's podcast "Norman Centuries" from iTunes.

I realize this has been a short episode, but it's my first one and I'm still figuring out how this all works. Next week's episode will be longer and more detailed, I promise. So I hope you'll join me, then, for a look at the situation in the Middle East and the Byzantine Empire just prior to the First Crusade. Bye for now.

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