

History of the Crusades.

Episode 2.

The Middle East and the Byzantine Empire Prior to the First Crusade.

Hello again. Last week we took a brief look at Latin Christendom in the 1090's. Today we are turning eastward to look at the political and religious situation there just prior to the First Crusade.

Firstly, we're going to look at the Middle East. In the early 600's AD the desert lands of the Arabian Peninsula were populated by warring tribes of pagans, but this was all about to change. In 610 AD, a 40-year-old Arabian businessman experienced visitations by the Archangel Gabriel in which he received the text of a new Scripture. This man later became known as the Prophet Muhammed, and the scriptures he received formed the basis of the Koran, and a new religion, Islam, was created. Muhammed's message was similar to that of Jesus, Abraham and Moses, who had come before him. The message was this: there is only one God and pagan gods should no longer be worshiped. Muhammed attempted to convert the pagans around the city of Mecca. It did not go well. He was forced to flee to the nearby city of Medina, where he took up arms and waged war against Mecca, finally defeating the city some ten years later.

To cut a long story short, Islam then spread and spread. By the time of his death, the warring tribes of the entire Arabian Peninsula were united by Islam. This was a significant development. Individuals living in Arabia were used to struggling against each other. Once you were born into a certain tribe, you were destined to fight against other tribes, within an endless cycle of vendettas and violent conflict. Islam, for the first time, provided the tribes with an opportunity to stop fighting each other and become united under a common belief system.

Instead of fighting amongst themselves, the new converts turned to conquering neighboring territories, which they did with astonishing success. By 650 AD, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Egypt had all been absorbed into Islamic territory, and they kept going. By 711 AD Muslim forces had conquered North Africa and had crossed the Strait of Gibraltar into Christian Spain. Twenty-one years later their spread into Europe was halted in France, where they suffered a defeat at the hands of Charles the Hammer, who incidentally was Charlemagne's grandfather, and then retreated to their territory in southern Spain.

Just a word here about the conquering Muslims. Generally, there were tolerant of the other "religions of the book" as they were known, Christianity and Judaism. Jews and Christians within conquered Islamic territory were free to worship as they pleased and were not forced to convert to Islam. Basically, the Muslim faith viewed itself, Christianity, and Judaism as different facets of the one faith, tracing their common ancestry back to the spiritual teachings of Abraham, and the three religions have become known as the Abrahamic religions.

Despite their astonishing military success, it was not all plain-sailing for the Muslims. They failed to conquer Constantinople twice, in 673 and 718 AD, and divisions started appearing within the religion itself. A new sect emerged, the Shia, who argued that only the descendants of Ali, who was Muhammed's cousin and the first convert to Islam, and Fatima, Muhammed's daughter, could hold the title of "Caliph", or "Leader". Over time, the

Shias grew further and further apart from the mainstream Sunni Muslims. Sunni Islam shifted away from the Arabian homelands, founding the spectacular city of Baghdad in Iraq in 750 AD, which grew into one of the world's most respected centers of scientific learning. The Shias rejected Baghdad's authority, and set about taking land off the Sunnis, conquering the cities of Jerusalem and Damascus.

And, now, enter the Turks. From 1040 onwards, these agile, warlike, nomadic tribesmen, known for their skill as mounted archers, began to arrive in the Middle East. The most important of these, for our purposes, was the Seljuk clan from the Russian steppes. They converted to Sunni Islam, and in 1055 a Seljuk warlord was appointed the Sultan of Baghdad. He spearheaded some important military victories on behalf of Sunni Islam, including recapturing the cities of Damascus and Jerusalem from Shia control.

That brings us to one of the two core non-European cities of importance to the Crusades, Jerusalem. Ah, Jerusalem, the Holy City. Remote from Mediterranean trade routes, arid and inhospitable, it seems an unlikely place to be central to the three Abrahamic religions, but it is. People had been living there as early as 5,000 BC, but it really came into importance in a religious sense after King David was elected King of the Hebrews, who were also known as the Israelites. The Israelites had fled from Egypt into the land surrounding Jerusalem, and had hoped to establish a permanent home there. However, things had not gone to plan. They had suffered a series of military defeats, and their most holy object, the Ark of the Covenant, had been captured. By electing King David, they hoped to reverse their fortunes. It worked.

David and his army conquered the land around Jerusalem, recaptured the Ark of the Covenant, and eventually overran the stronghold of Jerusalem. He promptly renamed it the City of David and set up his capital there. Before he died, King David directed his son Solomon to build a temple on Mount Moriah in the city, to house the Ark of the Covenant. Solomon eventually built his temple, and it was a masterpiece. The temple was not just a shrine but was supposed to house God himself. Temple Mount thus became the sacred center for Judaism.

Christianity, which began as an off-shoot of Judaism, with gentiles in the early days having to convert to Judaism before they could become Christian, also had Jerusalem as its spiritual home, it being the place of the crucifixion and resurrection. Likewise, Jerusalem became the third most holy city of the Islamic religion, after Mecca and Medina, being the site of the "end of days", as described by the Koran. The beautiful Dome of the Rock Muslim shrine in the Temple Mount area was completed in 692 AD.

For the purposes of the Crusades, Jerusalem was the Holy City of the Christian faith. Maps drawn around the time of the First Crusade place Jerusalem in the center of the world, and the most holy place for Christians in the city of Jerusalem was the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The first Christian Roman Emperor, Constantine the Great, arranged for the Church of the Holy Sepulchre to be built on the Hill of Calvary, the site of the crucifixion, and it was also said to have contained the site of Jesus' tomb, the Sepulchre. Constantine's mother, Helena, oversaw the church's construction, and it was completed around 326 AD.

When Jerusalem fell to the Muslims in 638 AD the church suffered no harm, due to the policy of the Islamic conquerors to allow other Peoples of the Book to continue to practice their faith while under Islamic rule, as I mentioned before. However, once the Shia Muslims took

control of Jerusalem, things didn't go so well. In September 1009 the largely insane Caliph Hakim, whose reign was distinguished by such acts as ordering the killing of all dogs in Egypt followed by all the cats, ordered the total destruction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The church was obliterated stone by stone, then the Caliph turned his attention to other churches and synagogues in the Holy City. Not content with persecuting Christians and Jews, he turned his attentions to Muslims, not just the opposing Sunni sects but even those of his own Shiite faith. He banned Ramadan, ordered the killing of his own court tutors, judges, cooks and poets, and decided it would be a good idea to cut off the hands of female slaves, a task which he often undertook personally. Eventually, at the age of 36 he died, possibly murdered by his sister. But his madness left permanent scars. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre was never rebuilt in its original form. The next Caliph, Zahir, accepted assistance from the Emperor in Constantinople to help rebuild the church, which was completed in 1048.

Talking of Constantinople, that's the second non-European city of importance to the Crusades, and we shall turn and discuss that now. Just so you know which city I'm talking about, Constantinople changed its name to Istanbul after it fell to the Turkish Ottoman Empire in 1453, and it was originally known as Byzantium, on its establishment as a Greek colony in the seventh century BC. It became known as Constantinople in 330 AD, after the Roman Emperor Constantine, the same one who built the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, moved the capital of the Roman Empire from Rome to the site. In the fourth century AD, the Roman Empire was split into two halves, the western half ruled by an Emperor based in Italy, and the eastern half ruled by an Emperor based in Constantinople. When Rome fell in the fifth century, the west fell to ruin and the eastern part of the Empire, with Constantinople as its capital, remained.

Throughout late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, the Eastern Roman Empire, or the Byzantine Empire as it came to be known, attempted to re-conquer the West and return the former Roman Empire to its past glories under a Byzantine yoke. Although it enjoyed some degrees of success, it never managed to conquer the west, and by the 600's had decided to abandon the same.

By the 1090's, Constantinople was a wealthy, Greek-speaking, cosmopolitan, vibrant city, which was the capital of an empire which stretched from Croatia in the west, across Greece, and into modern-day Turkey. To a degree, it had kept the imperial trappings of the Roman Empire. It boasted a wealth of beautiful buildings, marble statues and columns, a sophisticated drainage system, and a hippodrome which could seat 80,000 people. Remember last week when we mentioned that at this time Paris and London were cities of around 20,000 to 30,000 people? Constantinople was much bigger, with a population of around 600,000. While we're talking about the size of cities, Baghdad, the seat of Sunni Islam, had, at this time, a population of around 500,000 people.

In the same way that the western and eastern parts of the former Roman Empire evolved separately (or de-evolved, so far as Rome was concerned), so did the forms of Christianity practiced in the two parts. The western part, comprising Latin Christendom or Western Europe, was headed by the Pope in Rome. The eastern part, comprising the Byzantine Empire, was Orthodox Christian, with the Patriarch of Constantinople as its head. Orthodox Christianity stretched from the Byzantine Empire up through parts of Russia.

As you can imagine, there were often clashes between the two Churches. The Catholic Church of Rome believed itself superior to the Eastern Orthodox Church, due to a passage

in the Bible where Jesus says to Peter “On this rock I will build my Church”. The Catholic Church asserts that the Papal Basilica of St Peter in the Vatican is the burial place of St Peter, therefore the Papacy must be superior to that of the Orthodox Church. On the other hand, the Orthodox Church found itself secure under the patronage of an Emperor in a flourishing city.

The same, of course, couldn't be said for Rome, which was a crumbling wreck of its former self, and the Pope was constantly having to seek alliances with various kings and powerful European families, with varying degrees of success. The relationship between the Pope in Rome and the Patriarch in Constantinople up until the 1090's varied according to the individuals involved. Sometimes they experienced cordial relations and relatively united. At other times, their relations were downright hostile, demonstrated by the attempt of the Legate Pope Leo IX to excommunicate the Patriarch of Constantinople, Michael Cerularius in 1054.

Catholicism and Orthodoxy weren't the only forms of Christianity in Europe during late antiquity and early medieval times. Arian Christianity was one of a number of forms of Christianity which competed with Rome and the Eastern Church for converts. Just a note here. Arianism has nothing whatsoever to do with the Nazi racial policy; they're, even spelt differently. I just thought I mentioned that to save some confusion. Arian Christians rejected the divinity of Christ, espoused by the Latin and Orthodox Christians, and believed Jesus to be a human, who lived, suffered, and died as a human, yet was resurrected by God to save mankind. The barbarian ruler Theodoric, who ruled the Western Empire from the Italian city of Ravenna after the fall of Rome, was Arian, as were many other barbarian tribes: the Goths, the Lombards and the Vandals.

Of particular note was the powerful barbarian king within the former Western Empire who was based in Northern Gaul, named Clovis. His successors came to be known as Merovingians. He extended his territory through the provinces of Gaul, until by the late 400's it covered, for the most part, the area which is now the country of France. Clovis was an Arian, but he married a Catholic woman, Clothilde, a Burgundian Gothic princess, and she managed to convert him to the Catholic faith. As well as conquering Gaul and paving the way for the establishment of Frankish rule, he became a powerful military ally of the Pope in Rome, a move which elevated the power of the Roman Church.

Arianism was eventually crushed through a series of military conquests, and its writings and art were systematically destroyed by the Eastern and Western Churches. There is a distinct possibility that, if Clovis had remained Arian, the Arian Church may have taken sway in Europe, while the Roman Catholic Church may have withered away and been forgotten to history, in the same way as Arianism has been. Clothilde, therefore, is one of those rare people who play an incredibly important role in formulating the history of the world, probably without even realizing it. If she hadn't converted her husband to Catholicism, there is a chance that the history of the Catholic Church and the history of Europe could be startlingly different to what it is now. Anyway, I digress.

Basically, the situation just prior to the Crusades was thus. Latin Christendom covered most of what is now Western Europe. Islam had spread from Arabia, across the Middle East, into northern Africa and southern Spain. In the middle was the Greek-speaking and Orthodox Christian Byzantine Empire. What was the relationship between these three powers? Well, it was a bit touchy, but for the most part it was cordial. The Islamic rulers tolerated Jewish and Christian people within their states, and allowed Christian pilgrims to

travel through Muslim territory to Jerusalem. There was the odd incident of pilgrims being attacked, but nothing major. There were slight tensions on the border lands, but that was it.

And yet, in the next little while, Latin Christendom declared war on the Islamic states, vowing to march to Jerusalem and take it by force. "Why?" I hear you ask, "How did this happen?" There's one man who could answer those questions, Pope Urban II, and we'll meet him in next week's episode.

Right, that concludes this week's episode, and I just thought I'd let you know that I'll put some maps on the website, which should help you understand the political and religious situation at the time we've been talking about. In case you've forgotten, the website can be found at www.historyofthecrusades.webs.com (which is W.E.Bs dot com). If you're really interested in the subjects we've been discussing, there's some further reading you can do. I would recommend the books "Jerusalem" by Simon Sebag Montefiore (and that, probably, is nothing like how you pronounce his name); "The History of Christianity" by Diarmaid MacCulloch, and "Islam, A Short History" by Karen Armstrong, and finally the wonderful "Byzantium" trilogy by John Julius Norwich. Until next week, bye for now.

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