

History of the Crusades.  
Episode 4.  
The Peasants' Crusade.

Hello again. Last week we saw Pope Urban II call upon the “princes” or nobility of Europe to march to the Holy Lands and take Jerusalem in the name of Christianity.

At the same time that Pope Urban was appealing to the aristocrats of Europe, there was another man traveling around France, calling for participants in a Crusade to the Holy Lands. His name was Peter the Hermit, and his target audience was not the nobility of Europe, but the people on the opposite end of the social scale, the peasants. Edward Gibbon, in “The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire”, reports that Peter the Hermit was from a good French family, and had received military training in the French county of Boulogne. After visiting the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem as a pilgrim, Peter had then renounced the sword and the world, dedicating his life to the sole purpose of driving the Muslim occupiers out of the Holy Lands.

Except that may not have been the case. Peter certainly preached that he had been to Jerusalem, but in his impassioned speeches that were designed to whip up religious fervor, he made lots of claims which weren't exactly true, as we will see.

So, what do we know about Peter the Hermit? He was a short, energetic, persuasive religious man with a knack for preaching to crowds. He was one of those quaint figures of the Middle Ages. He was short, skinny, unwashed and rode a donkey. His clothes were simple and homespun, and he went barefoot. He didn't eat much. Apparently he refused to eat bread or meat, and ate mostly fish and drank wine, and spent a good deal of his day in fervent prayer.

Travelling through north-eastern France and across to Germany, Peter preached to the masses at every opportunity. Whipping up anti-Muslim sentiment, he described in loud terms the horrors besetting Christian pilgrims in the Islamic states, and decried the desecration of sacred Christian holy places in Jerusalem. With every speech at each town or village, it's likely that his stories became more and more embellished, until no listener could fail to be moved by his detailed descriptions of the desecration and destruction of Christian sacred sites by the evil Muslim rulers.

Peter also claimed to have a letter written by God, which had fluttered down into his hands from heaven. The letter gave Peter the authority to lead a host of the faithful to the Holy Land. Producing the letter to rapturous crowds, most of whom were illiterate, Peter also mentioned that he had been visited by saints and angels, all of them imploring him to lead an army to the Middle East, the land of milk and honey, where followers would be rewarded for their faith and their sins redeemed.

Peter implored the local inhabitants, wherever he happened to be preaching, to sell their possessions and follow him to Jerusalem. Many thousands of peasants did exactly that, and it's not hard to see why. Life as a peasant in the Middle Ages was never easy at the best of times, but the past few years have been particularly harsh. Floods and pestilence in 1094 had been followed by drought and famine in 1095. The thought of abandoning the harsh, uncertain, violent life they had endured in Europe and embarking on a mission from God to a land of milk and honey had a certain kind of appeal.

By the time he arrived in Cologne on the 12th of April 1096, Peter the Hermit had attracted many thousands of people to his cause. To his relief, some of them were even lesser knights who had arms and equipment. One of these was Walter, Lord of Boissy-sans-Avoir in the Ile-de-France. He formed his own infantry force, led by eight knights, and they left Cologne immediately after the Easter celebrations on the 15th of April. Acting as an advance guard for the larger, and less-equipped contingent led by Peter, the force under Walter Sans-Avoir, numbering a few thousand men, followed the traditional pilgrimage route: up the Rhine and down the Danube towards the Hungarian frontier.

Peter left Cologne five days later, leading a band of around 20,000 people, mostly comprising peasants, many of whom were women and children, with a smattering of knights. Peter rode his donkey, the knights rode on horseback, and wagons carried the stores Peter had collected, as well as a chest of money which served to finance the Crusade. Most of the peasants walked, being too poor to afford a horse or donkey. Initially, they traveled pretty well. Their line of march stretched out to over a mile long, and this army of the faithful covered around 17 miles per day, increasing to 25 miles when the roads were good. And it's not really surprising that things started off well. It was spring. The sun was shining; the stores were full; their shoes and equipment had not yet worn out; and everyone was thrilled to be joining a man chosen by God to liberate the Holy Land.

But by the time they were approaching the Hungarian border, the initial thrill was starting to wear off. People were tired and exhausted, and were just starting to appreciate just how faraway Jerusalem was. There were reports that the children in the march began asking, whenever they reached a new village or castle, "Is this Jerusalem?" Next village or castle, "Is this Jerusalem?", in a medieval version of "Are we there yet?", which probably started getting on the adults' nerves in the same way the modern version does today.

To make matters worse, their supplies were running low. As I mentioned last week, Pope Urban II had instructed the first Crusade, or the Princes' Crusade, not to leave Europe until August 1096. This was sensible. It gave the nobility plenty of time to get their affairs in order, and it coincided with the bringing in of the autumn harvest. Not only would they have plenty of food to take with them, it also meant the villages along the pilgrimage route would be stocked with plenty of stores to get them through winter, some of which they may be willing to trade with the Crusaders.

Emperor Alexius in Constantinople was also doing his bit to prepare for the influx of troops, by stockpiling stores of provisions in each major center through which the Crusade would pass within the Byzantine Empire. But the Peasants' Crusade had left much too early for these preparations to be of any use. Peter had chosen his departure date poorly. Spring and early summer were the hungry months during the Middle Ages. The harvest set aside for the cold winter months was running out, and the new crops planted in spring were not yet bearing anything edible.

The members of the Peasants' Crusade were beginning to experience a problem which would also be faced by the main Crusade a few months later. Obtaining food or replenishing stores from the local population on the pilgrimage route was proving tricky. It was a different thing entirely to that experience by pilgrims in previous times. If you were traveling to Jerusalem by yourself or with a small band of pilgrims, it was relatively easy to beg a night's lodging at a farmhouse and a rough meal. Not so if you were part of an army numbering in the thousands. Say, for instance, you are the owner of a modern-day cafe in

the middle of nowhere. Ten people drop by unexpectedly for a burger and milkshake. That's great. That's a good day. But if 10,000 people drop in for a meal, that's something altogether different.

So, by the time the marchers arrived in Eastern Europe, they were hungry, probably disillusioned, possibly having second thoughts about the whole Crusading idea, and tempers were fraying. Let's see what happens next.

First, we'll follow Walter and his army of a few thousand foot soldiers and a handful of knights on their journey to Constantinople. Walter reached the Hungarian border on May 8th and received permission from King Coloman in to pass through his land. He was also granted access to the local markets to re-stock his provisions, and they passed through Hungary without incident. So far, so good.

Next, Walter and his men arrived at the frontier of the Byzantine Empire, which began at Belgrade. Officials at Belgrade were taken totally by surprise. They weren't expecting any Crusaders to be arriving for some months, and they weren't sure how to deal with them. The local governor, an official called Niketas, sent a messenger post-haste to Constantinople for instructions.

Of course, it was going to take a while for the message to be carried by horse to Constantinople, and for the answer to be received back. So in the meanwhile, Walter asked for food to be provided to his troops. But for reasons we have already explored, it seemed that the harvests had not yet been gathered and there was none to spare. By this time, Walter's mood had soured. He had received reports that some stragglers from his army back in Hungary had tried to rob a market in the town of Zeman, near the border. The Hungarians captured the sixteen offenders, stripped them naked, and hung their clothes and weapons on the walls of the town as a warning. The men were then forced to proceed naked to Belgrade. This incident, along with unnecessary delays caused by the local bureaucracy, seems to have frazzled Walter's temper, and he ordered his troops to take what food they needed by pillaging local farms and countryside. The local commander tried to restrain them by force and several of Walter's men were killed, some being burnt alive in a church. Walter then moved his men onto the local capital, Nis, where the governor Niketas did his best to supply Walter's army with food, while they awaited the Emperor's instructions.

The Emperor's reply eventually came. Walter and his men were to be escorted through Byzantine territory to Constantinople. They arrived in Constantinople in mid-July 1096 with no further incident.

How did Peter and his peasants fare on the same leg of the journey? We're about to find out. Like Walter, King Coloman granted permission for the 20,000 strong band to pass through his territory, on the condition there was no looting or pillaging. Things went well until they reached the town of Zeman. Yes, the same town which had stripped sixteen of Walter's men naked.

At this stage, Peter's army started to get tetchy. Maybe it was the sight of sixteen sets of clothes and weapons displayed disrespectfully on the city walls. Maybe it was hunger. Maybe it was none of these things, but the straw that broke the camel's back was a dispute over the sale of a pair of shoes. Yes, shoes were important. They were wearing out, and no one wanted to walk barefoot to Jerusalem. But for some reason, the shoe

dispute turned into a riot, which then turned into a pitched battle, which resulted in one of Peter's knights leading a raid into the city and storming the citadel. Four thousand Hungarians were killed and a large store of provisions was captured.

Fearing reprisals from the Hungarian King, who after all had treated them with every courtesy, Peter and his army hastily made their way to the border to cross into Byzantine territory. Governor Niketas saw the army, fresh from pillaging and rampaging, and possibly not under the control of its commanders, and he was understandably worried. The army needed to cross the river Sava to get to Belgrade, and Niketas ordered imperial mercenaries to ensure the army only crossed at one ford in the river. This would slow Peter's Army down, and it would make it easier to control once it crossed.

However, he didn't seem overly optimistic that his plan would work, given the size of Peter's army and the limited number of Byzantine troops, so he retreated to the capital, Nis. The residents of Belgrade saw the approaching army, watched their governor flee, and decided to do the same. Most people fled to the mountains or surrounding areas.

Peter's army forced their way across the river, killing any Byzantine soldiers who tried to resist their passage. And once they had crossed, they set about pillaging the town of Belgrade, eventually setting it on fire. Peter and his army then proceeded onwards to Nis, which they reached after a seven day march. Niketas had strengthened his garrisons as much as he could, but he was eagerly awaiting the arrival of officials and a military escort that were being sent from Constantinople to escort Peter and his army to the city.

Peter requested food for his troops while they awaited the escort's arrival. Peter was requested to provide hostages in return for the food, and he duly handed over two of his knights. Niketas was starting to worry about the consequences of Peter's Army remaining in Nis for any length of time, and he requested the Peter move them on as soon as possible, escort or no escort.

The next morning, the army started along the road to Sofia. As they were leaving Nis, some stragglers from Peter's Army set fire to some mills near the river. Niketas ordered his men to attack the rearguard of Peter's army, and to take hostages. When Peter heard about this, he made his way to the back of his army to talk to Niketas, to see whether they could work things out.

During the delay, rumors of fighting and treachery began spreading through Peter's army, and a group of his soldiers broke off to attack the town's fortifications. The town garrison drove them off and counterattacked. Peter tried to impose some discipline and order, but it didn't work. More of his men attacked the fortifications and, fearing the worst, Niketas ordered a full-scale attack on the Crusaders.

The well-trained Imperial troops were no match for Peter's ill disciplined rabble, and they were totally routed. Many of Peter's troops were killed and many more, including women and children, were taken prisoner. Peter, along with two of his knights and about 500 men, fled to the hills, and for a while they thought that they were the only survivors.

But thousands of stragglers eventually caught them up. With no supplies and without his money chest, Peter led the remaining Crusaders onwards. They had lost around one quarter of their contingent.

They reached Sofia a few days later, met up with their escort. Chastened, fearing the wrath of the Emperor, and perhaps realizing for the first time that religious fanaticism and blind self-belief cannot make up for inexperienced, ill-disciplined troops, Peter and his army made their way quietly to Constantinople without further incident. In Constantinople he met up with Walter, and was summoned to an audience with the Emperor.

At this point, Emperor Alexius was more than a little exasperated. When he had asked for assistance from Latin Christendom a year earlier, he was probably expecting the Pope to send a few contingents of highly trained knights, which would join the Byzantine army in Anatolia. Yet here he was, a year later, confronted with tens of thousands of hungry, ill-disciplined troops, which had already killed thousands of his subjects.

But, ever the diplomat, the Emperor didn't seek to punish Peter. Instead, he ordered the army to remain outside the city gates, with only small, escorted parties of sightseers allowed into Constantinople itself. Still, reports filed in of robberies, looting and rape by the thousands of troops camped outside the gates, and in early August the Emperor, despite knowing that once in Anatolia Peter's army would have little chance against the Seljuk Turks, made arrangements for Peter's army to be ferried across the Bosphorous into hostile territory. From there, the army pillaged and looted its way along the coast to Nicomedia, an old Roman town which was currently deserted.

There, Peter's army quarreled and split in two. The French stayed under Peter's command, but the German and Italian forces elected themselves a new leader, the knight Rainald. Both sections of the army then proceeded down to Kibitos, the well-supplied, fortified base on the coast from which supplies could easily be shipped from Constantinople. Peter had been counseled by the Emperor to wait here for the main Crusading force to arrive.

By this time, Peter appears to have had second thoughts about his invincibility, and about leading an all-conquering army of God to certain victory. Sensibly, he decides that waiting at Kibitos for reinforcements would be a good idea. However, his army at this stage was all but out of his control. The French forces and the forces under the knight Rainald began competing with each other to see who could plunder and pillage the most from the surrounding countryside. Victims of their forays were not only Muslims but also the local Christian populations.

In September, the French contingent raided as far as Nicaea, some 25 miles away from Kibitos. Nicaea was the Seljuk Turk Capitol, and the base of their leader Kilij Arslan. They plundered the suburbs of the city, rounding up livestock, raping, massacring and torturing the mostly Greek inhabitants. There were reports of children being burnt alive and babies being roasted on spits, although this may have been a later embellishment. They returned victorious to Kibitos with their booty. Not wanting to be outdone by the French, Rainald then led a force of around 6,000 mostly German troops on a raid beyond Nicaea, to a castle Xerigordon, which they captured.

The Sultan led a Turkish force from Nicaea to recapture the castle. What the Turks knew and what the Crusaders were yet to discover was that the water supply for the castle was located outside its walls. The Turks knew that they didn't need to storm the castle, they would just need to wait. After a week, during which time the men inside the castle had resorted to drinking the blood of their horses and their own urine, the knight Rainald decided to surrender. In his book "The Crusade Through Arab Eyes", Amin Maalouf notes

that the Sultan Kilij Arslan, was surprised when, having asked Rainald to publicly renounce his religion as part of the conditions of surrender, the knight went further and offered to convert to Islam and fight against his countrymen.

Rainald and a few other knights who were prepared to surrender were spared and were sent in captivity to Antioch, Aleppo and other cities across Asia. The rest of the 6,000 strong force was put to the sword.

The Sultan then decided it was time to deal with the rest of the Crusader forces. He sent two Greek spies into the Crusaders base Kibitos. The spies spread rumors that Rainald and his men had captured Nicaea itself, and were intending to keep the spoils for themselves. The Turks then intended to ambush the army as they marched to Nicaea. The ruse worked for a while, but eventually the truth came out about the annihilation of Rainald's army at Xerigordon.

Peter himself was absent at this time. He had returned to Constantinople to negotiate the sending of more supplies. Walter, along with other leaders in the French contingent, wanted to wait for Peter to return before avenging the deaths of their comrades. But the army was restless, and the popular vote won the day.

At dawn, on the 21st of October, the entire remaining Crusader army marched from Kibitos, leaving behind only old men, women, children, and the sick. But the Turks were waiting for them, and they were ambushed. A significant proportion of the knights, including Walter, were killed by arrows. The army panicked. Some crusaders were massacred and others retreated, fleeing back to Kibitos. The Turks overran the camp at Kibitos, some three miles away, within minutes. They met no real resistance. Some women and children were taken as slaves, and the rest were put to the sword.

A few Crusaders managed to flee and made their way to an abandoned castle near the sea. Despite being besieged by Turkish fighters, they managed to hold out until they were rescued by Byzantine forces. The Emperor Alexius allowed them entry into Constantinople, but their weapons were confiscated.

Thus ends the sad and sorry tale of the Peasants' Crusade. But it isn't the last we'll hear from Peter. He was safe in Constantinople while his army was being decimated, and he'll pop up again in a future episode.

You might think that the Peasants' Crusade was just some strange and irrelevant footnote to the history of the Crusades, but not so. It had consequences. Firstly, it made the Turkish troops complacent. Seeing the aristocratic Crusaders from the upcoming First Crusade marching towards them, they assumed they were of the same ilk as those from the Peasants' Crusade. They thought to themselves "Not these guys again", and prepared their military response accordingly, with fateful consequences. Secondly, it meant that forces from the First Crusades would encounter problems trading for supplies on route. Seeing the Crusaders approach from a distance, recalling the pillage and destruction meted out by the Peasants' Crusade, farmers who might ordinarily have traded with the aristocrats took all they could carry and fled with their families. So, the Peasants' Crusade did leave its mark on history, albeit not quite the kind of mark originally envisaged by its proponent, Peter the Hermit.

Next week, we move away from the support act to the main event, the event known to history as the First Crusade. I hope you'll join me then.

There's nothing to recommend for further reading this week, but I should point out if you are looking for information about the Peasants' Crusade, most modern commentators call it the People's Crusade. I stuck with the traditional name, the Peasants' Crusade, because I think it suits them, but if you're searching through the index for information, you'll find it under People's Crusade, not Peasants' Crusade. I'm glad we cleared that up. Until next week, bye for now.

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