

History of the Crusades.
Episode 81
The Children's Crusade.

Hello again. Last week we caught up with events in the Middle East. This week we return to Europe to examine one of the most bizarre events in the history of the Crusades, the Children's Crusade.

Now this episode comes with a huge disclaimer. The events surrounding the Children's Crusade are far from clear. Unsurprisingly, a great deal of mythology and exaggeration surrounds this Crusade, and even today, historians disagree about what exactly happened, or indeed, whether it occurred at all. Having said that, I will be relying on the trusty group of historians whom I've depended on for most of this podcast series up until now, and I reckon they'll steer us in the right direction.

Right, well, before we set off on the Children's Crusade, there's a couple of things to keep in mind. Firstly, the Children's Crusade is very much a product of medieval Europe. It's difficult to imagine any other period in history when thousands of children could be so carried away by religious zeal that they would embark on a campaign which common sense would dictate was utterly doomed from the start. To make more sense of it, we need to take a quick look at the role of children in society back in the 13th century.

Now, as we've discussed previously, life expectancy in medieval Europe was much shorter than it is today. Healthcare was minimal, disease was often seen as a sign of divine displeasure, and there are a dizzying amount of ways you could die back in the Middle Ages, which due to advances in healthcare, science, sanitation, and so on you just don't find today. Because life was often brutal and short, children were expected to take on responsibility at an early age.

In fact, the age of seven seems to be the year when it all starts happening for the medieval child. Once they reached the tender age of seven, a child was expected to start earning a living, and making his or her own way in the world. A boy from an agricultural family was expected to start working in the fields from the age of seven. Higher up the social ladder, boys were often sent to the household of a knight at the age of seven to start learning the skills that would set them up as a fighter. Likewise, those destined for the Church were sent off at the age of seven to join a monastery.

Reflecting the responsible role a seven year old had in society at large, a boy of seven was deemed to be legally responsible for his actions and could be hanged for crimes such as theft. Children could marry from the age of 14 in medieval times, and upon reaching 15 years of age, a boy was expected to serve in an army if required. So it's pretty clear the children back in the 13th century were viewed quite differently from today, in so far as their capabilities and their responsibilities were concerned.

The other thing you need to keep in mind before we embark on the Children's Crusade is the feeling in Europe at the end of the Fourth Crusade. Pope Innocent III has done a pretty good job of whipping up Crusading zeal across Europe, and he's far from finished. While Latin Christians are in the grip of a kind of Crusading fever, there is also a degree of dissatisfaction about the outcome of the Fourth Crusade. The fact that the soldiers and knights of the Fourth Crusade failed to make any impact whatsoever in the Holy Land was

adding to the general feelings of restlessness and the need for action. A groundswell of support was rising for the idea that, where the wealthy noblemen and experienced soldiers of the Fourth Crusade had failed, the average person blessed with divine favor might succeed.

It was into this heady mix of frustration and crusading fervor that the seeds of the Children's Crusade were sown. In the winter of 1211 to 1212, groups of clerics, some of them talented writers such as James of Vitry, were conducting Crusading recruiting drives in the Rhineland and across northern France. These were intended to whip up enthusiasm for Pope Innocent's new campaign, the Crusade against the Cathars in southern France, and action against the Muslims in Spain. But it seems that the impassioned pleas for assistance made by the clergy had some unintended consequences.

At the feast of the Pentecost on the 13th of May 1212, in a cathedral near the town of Chartres, a special ceremony was held in honor of a relic held by the church, a tunic worn by the Virgin Mary. While local residents were gathered together for this ceremony, prayers were said for the success of the Pope's new campaigns, and this seems to have inspired some of the poorer residents of the region to take action. The chronicle of Mortimer describes the event as follows, and I quote "In the realm of France, boys and girls, with some mature males and old men, carrying banners, wax candles, crosses, censers, made processions and went through the cities, villages and castles, singing aloud in French "Lord God, raise up Christendom. Lord God returned to us the True Cross." This thing, unheard of in past ages, was a wonder to many." End quote.

Now, at the moment, these processions of people are composed mainly, but not exclusively, of children between the ages of seven and fourteen. There are also elderly men within the group and other people at the bottom of the hierarchies of power, the landless, the widowed, and the very poor. There are no clergy amongst them, and at the moment they are a leaderless mass of people, marching, singing, and making their way from town to town. Eventually, a leader did emerge: a child, a shepherd boy, Stephen of Cloyes. Stephen told the group that he had a vision from God and that Christ had appeared to him in the form of a pilgrim, and had given him letters, along with instructions to deliver the letters to the King of France.

The King of France was currently at Saint-Denis, just north of Paris, and Stephen led the growing band of children and impoverished adults on the road, intent on handing the letters to the King. By the time the group arrived at Saint-Denis, it had swelled to around several thousand participants, most of whom were children. Stephen handed his letters to the King's advisers. The King himself was unimpressed and refused to meet with Steven. Undeterred, the shepherd boy, who was clearly one of the more eloquent shepherd boys around at the time, began to preach at the entrance of the Abbey of Saint-Denis. He announced that he would lead his band of followers to the Holy Land, to drive the Muslims out of Jerusalem and to rescue the True Cross. With the infectious enthusiasm and optimism of a child, he told the masses that transport to the Holy Land wouldn't be a problem, as God had told him that the seas would part before them and, like Moses through the Red Sea, they could walk through the Mediterranean to the Middle East.

This seems to have caught the imagination of those present, and the numbers in the group swelled even further. Stephen told his followers to disperse far and wide across France to gain new recruits. He then arranged for them all to meet at Vendome in a month's time. From there, they would set off on Crusade to the Holy Land. According to some

contemporary sources, when the meeting date rolled around, the children who had gathered to follow Stephen on Crusade numbered around 30,000, with all of them under 12 years of age. Modern historians however, believe that perhaps a few thousand Crusaders were present, and while the majority may have been children, the demographic of the gathering reflected Stephen's previous followers, with many elderly, poor, and landless people joining the children on their march. There may also have been a handful of noble-born children, who joined the expedition in secret, without the permission of their parents.

After being blessed by the local clergy, the children set off on their Crusade. Their destination was the southern French coastal town of Marseilles. From there, Steven advised them that the sea would part for them, and it would then be a matter of walking to the Holy Land, where with divine assistance they would seize Jerusalem and recover the True Cross.

Unfortunately for the children, it was summer when they set out, and the summer of 1212 proved to be the hottest for many years. Like all Crusaders before them, they experienced problems with supplies of food and water en route. The problem was exacerbated for the children, as they were relying almost exclusively on charity for the supply of provisions for the journey. Unlike adult Crusaders, they hadn't brought with them piles of coins which they could use to purchase food at local markets. A recent drought meant that locals had little to spare by way of food, and the heat and drought made water scarce. Many children left the Crusade and tried to return home. Others perished by the roadside.

When the remaining children reached Marseilles they were confronted with some good news and some bad news. The good news was that the people of Marseilles welcomed them into their midst. Unlike the little towns and villages that they had encountered along their march, which were overwhelmed by the number of children, the bigger city of Marseilles did its best to ensure that the children were fed, watered, and accommodated.

The bad news was that the Mediterranean Sea did not part on Stephen's command. This was a source of deep disappointment for some children, who left the Crusade and made their way home. Others apparently were undeterred.

According to tradition, two local merchants, Hugh the Iron and William the Pig, offered to supply seven ships to carry the children to the Holy Land, free of charge. The children eagerly boarded the ships and sailed off towards the horizon. Unfortunately, little is known of their fate. Stephen Runciman, in the third volume of his series on the Crusades, recounts the tale of a priest who arrived in France from the Holy Land in the year 1230, eighteen years after the children set sail. He professed to have been part of the Children's Crusade, and advised that he had been aboard one of the seven ships that had departed from Marseilles in 1212. He said that a few days into the journey they were hit by a storm. Two of the ships were wrecked off the coast of Sardinia, with the loss of all those on board. The five remaining ships sailed on and then found themselves surrounded by a fleet of Muslim vessels from Africa.

The children had been betrayed. The kind merchants who had offered to transport them to the Holy Land free of charge had actually arranged to sell them into slavery. They were taken to Algeria, where most of them were sold at the slave markets and spent the rest of their lives in captivity. The young priest, however, was fortunate. He, along with some of the more educated children, were shipped to Alexandria in Egypt, where they would obtain

a better price. The young priest and a handful of other literate children were purchased by the governor of Egypt, al-Adil's son al-Kamil, who was interested in Western languages. The slaves were kept in comfortable conditions, and after many years the priest was allowed his freedom.

The priest had heard of the fate of the remaining children. He believed that of the thousands that had set out, only around 700 remained alive. He had heard that eighteen of the children had been executed in the slave markets at Baghdad, after failing to convert to Islam.

Understandably, the priest's tale led to an outpouring of grief and anger back in France, and the two merchants who had betrayed the expedition were called upon to explain themselves. Apparently they were unable to do so, as they had both been executed some years before, for plotting to kidnap the German Emperor Frederick.

Thus ends the sorry tale of the Children's Crusade, led by Stephen of Cloyes.

Now there was another Children's Crusade in 1212, which set out from Germany. Historians are unable to agree whether this was an entirely separate Crusade, or whether the German children joined up with the French children, but for the purposes of this episode, I will treat it as a separate Crusade.

Around the same time that Steven set out from Vendome, another child, Nicholas from the Rhineland, began preaching the Crusade from Cologne in Germany. Like Stephen, he was unusually eloquent and persuasive for a child, and like Stephen, he told his followers that the sea would part before him, and that he would lead them through the parted sea to the Holy Land. Unlike Stephen, Nicholas' German children seemed more intent on converting Middle Eastern Muslims to Christianity than retaking Jerusalem by force. Word spread of Nicholas' expedition, and after a few weeks a small army of children gathered in Cologne, ready to march to the coast.

Contemporary sources estimated that around 20,000 children set out on this Crusade, but as was the case with the French expedition, it's likely that this was an exaggeration. The party actually numbered perhaps a few thousand. According to contemporary sources, there were more girls in this expedition and more boys of noble birth, but overall, like the French expedition, the participants were mostly children, the elderly and the poor.

The Crusaders split into two groups. The first group was led by Nicholas himself. He led his followers up the Rhine into Switzerland, and from there chose an arduous route across the Alps, down into Italy, and on to the coastal city of Genoa. This was a difficult journey, and apparently only a third of those who set out made it alive to Genoa. Once at Genoa, they experienced the same feelings of disappointment as the French children when the sea failed to part for Nicholas. Many children settled down to stay in Genoa, and others attempted to return home, but the rest followed Nicholas down the coast to Pisa, heartened by his advice that he had picked the wrong spot and that the sea would definitely part once they reached Pisa. At Pisa, more disappointment. Yet again, the sea failed to part on Nicholas' command. Apparently, some ships at Pisa which were due to sail for the Middle East, agreed to take some of the children, while the rest followed Nicholas to Rome. Once at Rome, Nicholas met with Pope Innocent, who spoke sternly to him and told him to go home.

By this time, the children had had enough of traveling, and most didn't make it home, choosing to stay in Italy. Only a handful of children made it back to Germany, and it appears that Nicholas wasn't among them. Angry parents of lost Crusading children apparently took their grief out on Nicholas' father, who was seized and killed.

A similar fate awaited the other German expedition. They too traveled to Italy via Switzerland, and reached the coastal town of Ancona. Yet again, the sea failed to come to the party, and the disappointed children dispersed. Some of them may have found passage on ships sailing for the Holy Land, but most ended up staying in Italy. Only a handful of them made their way safely back home to Germany.

So the Children's Crusade, or Crusades however you wish to look at it, failed to reclaim Jerusalem for Latin Christendom. But don't panic. Pope Innocent is doing his best to rectify the situation. Join me next week to hear Pope Innocent calling for another Crusade, this one comprised, thankfully, of adults, as we begin our series of episodes on the Fifth Crusade. Until next week, bye for now.

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