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The Significance of the Crusades: A Brief Overview

By Jacob Hafer

What comes to mind when we think of the Crusades? Noble knights and warriors fighting for the glory of God, a series of military campaigns lead by ambitious kings, or a clash of civilizations? Whatever we may think of these conflicts, they will always be thought of as just another medieval power struggle between feudal lords. However this statement is untrue, in fact the Crusades are considered to be the most pivotal series of events in all of medieval history. The Crusades are significant in because they showed how powerful the Catholic Church became in the middle ages, displayed how Europeans developed intellectually through the transition of ideas from the East, and we learn how animosity started between Christians, Muslims, and Jews.

The origins of the Crusades starts with Islam's expansion throughout the Middle East in the 8th century. By the 11th century, the Byzantine Empire, which had Christianity as the state religion, had just lost Syria-Palestine, Egypt, and North Africa to Islam.¹ The Byzantines needed outside help in order to save the empire so Byzantine Emperor Alexios Comnenos sent ambassadors to Pope Urban II, leader of Western Christendom, asking for help against the Islamic threat.² The Pope hoped that by assisting the emperor, he could improve repair relations between the Church in Constantinople and the Church in Rome, uniting Christendom once again³. In 1095, Pope Urban II called for a Crusade to retake the Holy Land from the Islamic

¹ Thomas Madden. *Crusades: The Illustrated History*. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2004), 20.

² Helen Nicholson. *The Crusades*. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004), 6.

³ *Ibid*, 6.

Turks, rallying thousands of devout Christians under the authority of the Church. Dozens of Christian kingdoms were now under the influence of the Christian Church, which granted the papacy more power than ever before. The Church ordered the Crusaders to occupy the Holy Land, where they benefited from the learning about the Islamic world.

As the Crusaders conquered major portions of the Holy Land and especially Jerusalem, the holiest city in all of Christendom, they became influenced by the vast knowledge of art, technology, trade from the indigenous population. Many churches that were built by the Crusaders were inspired by classical Syrian architecture from painted panels to illuminating mosaics.⁴ The Crusaders also discovered that the abundance of natural resources such as wine, olives, and sugarcane were essential in building up the crusader economy.⁵ The Christian soldiers soon found out that trading these resources can help bring in a great deal of funding for the war effort, prompting the Europeans' interest in trading. The longer the Crusaders stayed in the Holy Land, the more they learned from their Muslim counterparts. For centuries Islamic nations had kept their vast quantity of knowledge from the rest of the known world, refusing to share what they know. However, as the Crusaders were able to obtain scrolls and books containing the studies of mathematics, philosophy, and medicine, they brought their discoveries back to their European homeland.⁶ These educational ideas were brought back to Europe, prompting the construction of universities like Cambridge and Oxford so that knowledge can be available for everyone.

⁴ Andrew Jotischky. *Crusading and the Crusader States*. (Edinburgh: Pearson Education Limited, 2004), 146.

⁵ Ibid, 150.

⁶ Karen Armstrong. *Holy War: The Crusades And Their Impact On Today's World*. (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 415.

Despite the acquisition of knowledge by the Christian Europeans, the Crusades created long-term cynicism between Christians, Muslims, and Jews. Ever since the First Crusade, Christians started to despise both Jews and Muslims as they saw them as inhuman monsters who did not follow the true faith⁷. Jews had been accused of stealing the sacred Eucharist, looting holy relics from churches, and they were even falsely charge for murdering a Christian.⁸ Christians became afraid of Muslims because of the Catholic Church's constant talk of the Islamic Empire expanding daily and the accusations that Muslim Turks were vandalizing holy sites throughout the Holy Land.⁹ Christians wanted to punish those responsible for the desecration of holy shrines so during the First Crusade, the Crusaders took it upon themselves to kill anyone who wasn't Christian in Jerusalem. This resulted in the deaths of thousands of innocent Jews and Muslims which prompted a jihad (Islamic word for holy war) by all Muslims in the Middle East to fight the Christian invaders.¹⁰ The constant persecution of Jews in Europe and the atrocities on Muslims instigated a fierce distrust of Christians long after the Crusades ended. In present times, the historic hostilities and suspicion between Christianity, Islam, and Judaism have prompted efforts by world leaders of the three faiths to promote mutual understanding.¹¹

The effects the Crusades had on the world can be seen up to the present day. If not for the Crusades, the Catholic Church would not have seen its rise to power in the western world and expanded its influence through its military campaigns. Europeans would not have gained new ideas and technologies from the Islamic world that would improve Europeans intellectually and

⁷ Ibid, 374.

⁸ Ibid, 434.

⁹ Ibid, 150.

¹⁰ Thomas Madden. *Crusades: The Illustrated History*. 47

¹¹ Ibid, 211.

economically if there had been no call to fight in the Holy Land. However, in hopes of improving the relations between the religious sects of Catholicism, Islam, and Judaism means looking at the problems the Crusades caused and how to repair what the conflicts have destroyed. This is why the Crusades are extremely significant in world history. There is much more insight to the legacy of the Crusades than just calling them pointless destructive military conflicts, and that legacy is something everyone should be aware about.

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