

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

Crusades, the Beginning of

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Civilizations collide when the transcendental values that govern them are used to define identity. During the Crusades, the Christian belief that God was immanent in the person of Jesus Christ collided with the Islamic vision that God is transcendent. For the Christian world all that was holy and venerable was embodied in the Cross of the Holy Sepulcher on which Jesus is believed to have been crucified. For the Islamic world, divided though it was between the Orthodox and the Fatimid, the unity of God was beyond compromise. The Christian and the Muslim each considered the other to be an infidel and was willing to kill to impose on the other his own particular brand of transcendence.

The Crusades grew up in the womb of the European Dark Ages. In the 4th century, barbaric Gothic (Germanic) tribes overran Europe. The western Goths controlled Spain and southern France whereas the eastern Goths occupied Italy and territories to the east. Central authority disappeared. Fiefdoms proliferated. There was a brief interlude during the period of Charlemagne (circa 800) and the succeeding Carolingian dynasty when it appeared that Europe might be consolidated under the Holy Roman Empire. However, by the year 850, Charlemagne's successors were at each other's throats for the crown of France, and Europe slipped back into anarchy. The Viking (Swedish) pirates raided the coast of Europe all the way from Denmark to Spain. To the south, resurgent Islamic empires projected their power across the Mediterranean. Southern France was occupied and from there Muslim armies advanced into Switzerland, occupying the mountain passes around Geneva and levying tolls for travel in and out of Western Europe. The Aghlabids in Algeria captured Sicily and mounted raids into the heart of Italy. In the 10th century, Abdur Rahman III of Spain captured the islands of the western Mediterranean while the Fatimids under Muiz occupied those in the central Mediterranean. The Huns invaded from the east and occupied Hungary, sealing off Western Europe from the east. Europe was thus hemmed in from all sides.

For 200 years, the principal exports of Eastern Europe were fur and slaves. The Vikings, in their relentless raids into Europe, captured slaves who were transported in large numbers down the Volga River and sold to Muslim and Jewish merchants in the bazaars around the Caspian Sea. Under Islam, these slaves were incorporated into the armies of the Sultans and rose to become generals and kings. These were the Mamlukes.

Cut off from effective contacts with the outside world, Europe turned inward. Bereft of a rational stimulus, the European mind turned to the contemplation of the supernatural. The talisman and magic replaced rational enquiry. Relic worship became common. The tombs of saints, or parts of their bodies,

became places of pilgrimage. Such visits were supposed to cure diseases and result in miracles. Darkness enveloped the continent. Into this vacuum moved the Church and became the intermediary between the natural forces of this world and the supernatural. The chief product offered by the Church was the talisman, which the ordinary man could use to communicate with the supernatural. Monasteries and churches sprang up everywhere. The Goths were simple-minded folks, highly susceptible to the power of miracles and were converted to Christianity early in the 9th century.

The Church grew rich dispensing indulgences. Forgiveness of sins and rites of birth and death were all done through the Church, which was the intermediary between heaven and earth and had to be mollified before it would pass on the requests from the poor of the earth to the higher ups in heaven. With time, the earnings of the peasants were transferred to the treasury of the Church. The monasteries grew in wealth. And with wealth came the capability to establish and control a police force. Each abbey and each parish had walls, which were like mini-fortresses, stronger and better built than those of the princes and the kings who had lesser means to enforce taxation. Decentralization was at its height. Each abbey and each prince ran its own fiefdom without fear of the power of any centralized force.

Of all the objects that excited the imagination of medieval Europe, the vision of the Cross occupied the highest veneration. Jerusalem, the place where (according to Christian belief) Christ died on the Cross for man's sins and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher that contained the Cross which Jesus carried on his way to crucifixion, were the centers of divine veneration. A visit to Jerusalem conferred on an individual immeasurable honor.

When Pope Gregory declared a Crusade in 996, he excited the imagination of a continent like nothing had excited it before. Not that the Christian world was ready to take on the vast and dynamic Islamic world. It had as yet no resources to challenge the Muslims. This was still a dream, but a dream that offered an enormous advantage to the Church to keep the imagination of the population riveted on the supernatural and to ensure the continued flow of gratis money into Church coffers.

For 300 years Europe hurled itself at the Islamic world. Wave upon wave of Europeans-French, German, English, Italian, Spanish, Greek-invaded Muslim lands in the name of the Cross, killing Jews and Muslims alike and leaving a bitter trail of death and sorrow. The military engagement of the two civilizations was across a broad front in the Mediterranean extending from Spain to Anatolia. The Crusades started in 996, one hundred years before the First Crusade to Jerusalem. The first battles were fought on the Andalusian Peninsula. The disintegration of the Umayyad Caliphate in Cordoba in 1032 provided the Christians their opportunity. The Spanish Crusaders waged war on the emirs of Spain, terrorizing the Muslim population and extracting vast tributes. Toledo fell in 1085. This alarmed the *ulema*, who invited the Murabitun under Yusuf bin Tashfin from across the Straits of Gibraltar to intervene and halt the Christian advance. The focus then shifted to southern Italy and Sicily. The Crusaders attacked and after a long and bitter struggle lasting more than forty years, captured Sicily (1050-1091).

Events in West Asia influenced and hastened the onset of the First Crusade. The first event was the Battle of Manzikert (August 1072) in which the Seljuks decimated Byzantine power in Anatolia. The second was the assassination of Nizam ul Mulk (1091) in Baghdad by the *fidayeen*. In the Battle of Manzikert, Alp Arslan, the Seljuk Sultan, captured and then set free the Byzantine Emperor Romanus. The capitulation did not sit well with the Greek population. When Romanus returned to Constantinople, he was blinded and overthrown. Civil war broke out among the Greeks and in the melee the Turkish warriors consolidated their hold on Anatolia.

The victory at Manzikert placed the Turks squarely along the pilgrim routes from Europe to Jerusalem. The Turks were less experienced than the Arabs in the political intrigues of the Middle East and some of the Turkish tribes imposed taxes on the Christian pilgrims. This added fuel to the fury created by the defeat at Manzikert. Finally, in 1081, a rich aristocrat Alexius was installed as the Byzantine Emperor in Constantinople. Shrewd, politically suave, Alexius kept a close watch on political developments both in the Seljuks territories to the east and among the Latins to the west. Soon, the internal turmoil among the Seljuks provided him with an opportunity to recover lost territories in Anatolia.

The assassination of Nizam ul Mulk in 1091 at the hands of the Fatimid assassins was a disaster for the Seljuks. The political structure among Muslims since the time of Emir Muawiya was pyramidal, with the Caliph or the Imam at the apex and the masses at the bottom. Under the Turks, political and military power was delegated from the caliphs to the sultans. The sultans, in turn, appointed viziers to conduct the affairs of state. When the head of state was wise and competent, there was peace and prosperity in the land. When he was incompetent, turmoil set in. Some of the sultans and viziers were outstanding statesmen, but some were totally incompetent and a few were downright scoundrels.

Nizam ul Mulk, the grand vizier for the Seljuk Sultan Malik Shah, was undoubtedly one of the most able administrators in Islamic history. Under his leadership, the Seljuk Empire had prospered. Universities were established. Scholarship and learning were encouraged. Agriculture and trade flourished. Militarily, the Seljuks drove the Byzantines from territories in northern Iraq and Syria that the Byzantines had captured at the height of Fatimid-Sunni military conflicts (950-1050). Driving deeper into Syria, the Turks captured Jerusalem from the Fatimids (1085). Jerusalem had been in Fatimid hands for over a hundred years, since 971. With the assassination of Nizam ul Mulk (1091) and the death of Seljuk Sultan Malik Shah soon thereafter (1092), disintegration of the Seljuk Empire set in. Malik Shah had entrusted the governorship of Syria to his brother Tutush. Upon Malik Shah's death, a battle for succession began. First, there was a tussle between Turkhan Khatun, wife of Malik Shah and Barkyaruk, a son of Malik Shah from another wife. Turkhan's son died soon thereafter. She gave up the struggle and Barkyaruk ascended the throne. He was challenged by his uncle Tutush but the latter was defeated and killed. Tutush's son Ridwan retained control of Aleppo and as we shall see later, proved to be a traitor in the upcoming struggle against the Crusaders. Another of Tutush's sons Duqaq held Damascus.

The disintegration of Seljuk power provided an opportunity to the Fatimids in Cairo. Egypt was no longer the regional power that it was at the turn of the century under Muiz. The armed forces of Egypt were a composite of Africans, Berbers, Egyptians and Turks and there were serious differences among these competing groups. By 1075, Badr al Jamali, the grand vizier, had brought the situation under control. After Badr al Jamali, his son al Afdal became the grand vizier in Cairo. Taking advantage of the turmoil among the Seljuks, al Afdal advanced into Syria and recaptured Jerusalem in 1095. The Fatimid armies advanced up the coast of Palestine and Lebanon. By 1096, the cities of Gaza, Jaffa, Accra and Tripoli were in Fatimid hands.

So deep was the cleavage between the Fatimids and the Abbasids, that even as the Crusaders advanced through Seljuk territories in 1098, the Fatimids were more interested in forming an alliance with the Crusaders than in resisting the invaders. The Seljuks held the Syrian hinterland as well as Arabia and Iraq. The Armenians held Edessa. Anatolia itself was divided between five different Turkish tribes: the Saltukids, Menguchidis, Danishmends, Seljuks of Rum and the Emirate of Smyrna. The eastern Mediterranean was thus a checkerboard of local lords whose loyalties shifted from day to day. While the Fatimids and the Seljuks were at each others throats trying to decide by the sword who should be the Caliph or the *Imam*, the Crusader knight rode into Jerusalem, clad in his steel armor and thrust his dagger right into the heart of the Islamic world.

One should not underestimate loot and the promise of booty as a factor in the Crusades. The early Crusaders in Spain had tasted the splendor of Muslim Spain and had extracted large booty from the warring emirs of the peninsula (1032 onwards). The capture of Toledo (1085) with its vast riches had whetted the appetite of the knights and their financial backers in the Church. In medieval Europe, which was steeped in ignorance, money flowed through magic, talisman and relics, of which the Church was the principal beneficiary because it controlled the rites. The monasteries grew enormously rich dispensing the talisman and healing by faith. Sensing opportunity, the most capable minds joined the monasteries, not only to contemplate the supernatural but also because the monasteries offered the most secure and rich careers. By the 10th century, only the Church had the financial muscle to conjure up or sponsor a large enterprise such as the war on Muslim Spain, or the Crusades to Jerusalem. Pope Urban, a firebrand politician, knew instinctively the value of a march on Jerusalem. The war to liberate Jerusalem was no ordinary war. It was a great march in cooperation with the supernatural for union with the ultimate of the mysteries. It was also potentially a financially rewarding enterprise.

The Crusades were a turning point in the history of both Christian and Islamic civilizations. It was during the Crusades that Europe turned its back on the age of imagination, accepted a materialist framework for its world view, discarded the overbearing influence of the Church and charted a course dictated by self interest and the pursuit of wealth rather than by the dictates of the Church. Europe gained from a transmission of knowledge, military art, engineering technology and Islamic ideas.

With the fall of Toledo and Sicily, the immense knowledge of the Greeks, embellished and enhanced by the Muslims, fell into Christian hands. The wisdom of Islam, its arts and architecture, along with the mathematics of India and the technology of China became accessible to Europe. Schools of translation from Arabic to Latin were established first in Spain and then in France. The logic of Aristotle, the mathematics of Pythagoras, the medical encyclopedia of Ibn Sina, the dialectic of al Ghazzali, the optics of Ibn Ishaq, the algebra of al Khwarizmi, the geometry of Euclid, Indian astronomy and the numerals, the technology for making silk and chinaware, were now available in Paris and Rome as they were available in Bukhara and Baghdad. There was also a tremendous infusion of wealth from the captured cities. Trade routes were opened with Asia and the Europeans cultivated a taste for the finer goods of the East. The prosperous cities of Venice, Florence and Genoa sprang up on the Italian coast.

Civilizations change when the guiding paradigms and governing frameworks that underlie them change. In the march of each civilization, it is possible to identify events that contributed to a major turn in that flow. At other times, the change in the direction of a civilization is much more subtle, like the gentle turn of a river, which leads over a period of time to a shift in direction. In sifting through the events that contribute to such changes, small heroes-and unknown scoundrels-emerge. These little people make as much of a difference to the affairs of humankind as do the giants who are celebrated in history.

The Crusades gave birth to the archetype of the economic man whose instincts were more oriented towards gold than towards God. When we scan the 300 years during which Europe thrust itself upon West Asia and North Africa, the single most important person among the Crusaders, he who gave a radical turn to the civilization of the Latin West, was not King Richard of England, not even Pope Urban II who preached the First Crusade, but a little old Italian by the name of Dondolo. It was he, who through his sheer mendacity changed the focus of the Crusaders from the Cross of the Holy Sepulcher to the gold of Constantinople. In 1204, during the Fourth Crusade, it was he who showed the knights and barons of Europe that there was indeed a light at the end of the tunnel and that light was not the Cross in

Jerusalem, but the accumulated gold and treasures of Byzantium. *The seeds of the modern materialist civilization were sown during the Crusades and Dondolo may justly be called one of the founding fathers of that civilization.*

The Muslims gained nothing but grief and tears from this encounter. Europe had nothing to offer to the Islamic civilization, which was centuries ahead of Europe in development. However, the Crusades did influence the internal dynamics in the Islamic world. They hastened the termination of the Fatimid Caliphate in Cairo and the consolidation of military power under the Turks. The orthodox (Sunni) vision of Islam won over competing visions. The Muslims lost Sicily, Sardinia and Spain but retained control of Jerusalem. The Mongol invasions (1219-1261) coincided with the later stages of the Crusades.

Faced with a combined onslaught from the Crusaders and the Mongols, Islam turned inwards. Al Gazzali (d.1111) who lived during the time of the first Crusade, brought tasawwuf into the orthodox framework of Islam. So, when the Crusades were over and Islam emerged from the devastations of the Mongols and expanded into Pakistan, India, Indonesia, southeastern Europe and southwestern Africa, it was a more spiritual and inward looking Islam, an Islam different in its modalities from that of the classical Islamic civilization (665-1258), which was more empirical and extrovert.

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