

# History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

## Jerusalem, the Crusades

**Contributed by Prof. Dr. Nazeer Ahmed, PhD**

The fall of Jerusalem was the price paid by the Muslims for the continued civil wars brought on by competing Sunni and Shi'a visions of Islamic history. The Crusades, declared in 996, were an intercontinental invasion across a front line extending more than 3,000 miles from Spain to Palestine. At the time, the house of Islam was divided into three households. The Turks championed the Abbasids in Baghdad, the Fatimids in Cairo controlled North Africa and Syria and the Spanish Umayyads ruled from Cordoba. Each claimed to be the sole legitimate heir to the Caliphate.

Meanwhile, powerful forces were working both in Europe and Asia, which would determine the turn of events. By the year 1000, the conversion of the Germans to Christianity was complete. The Swedes, who as Viking pirates had ravaged Europe for two hundred years followed suit. With the infusion of German blood, Europe reasserted itself. By 1020, the Muslims who had occupied southern France and the mountain passes in Switzerland were ejected. The island of Sardinia was lost in 1016. In 1072, Palermo fell and by 1091 all of Sicily was lost. The end of the Umayyad Caliphate in Spain was an open invitation to the Christians. Spain split up into warring emirates, which fell one after the other to the Christian onslaught. The Visigoth capital city of Toledo fell in the year 1085. In 1087, the old Fatimid capital of Mahdiya (in modern Tunisia) was sacked. In 1090, Malta was captured, providing a base for transportation to Palestine and the Syrian coast.

While Europe consolidated its hold on the northern Mediterranean and struggled to lift itself out of the stupor of the Dark Ages, open warfare raged among Muslims among the three contestants for the Caliphate. Throughout the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the Fatimids fought pitched battles on two fronts-with the Umayyads in Spain to the west and with the Turks in Syria to the east. In 1057, in a reprisal for an uprising from the Sunni population, the Fatimids razed North Africa, sacking the great learning center of Kairouan. Algeria and Morocco did not recover from this onslaught for two hundred years. In 1077, Hassan al Sabbah, founder of the Assassin movement, visited Cairo and forged a secret alliance with the Fatimid court. In 1090, he seized control of Alamut in northern Persia and used it as a base to train his band of *fidayeen*. In 1091, the Assassins murdered Nizam ul Mulk, grand vizier of the Seljuks. Soon thereafter, in 1092, Sultan Malik Shah died. The Fatimids used the ensuing turmoil among the Seljuks to regain control of Jerusalem in 1095, which they had lost to the Turks ten years earlier. Not only were the Muslims divided between Fatimids, Turks and Umayyads, but within each camp, there were fierce feuds for lines of succession.

So, when Rome heard the plea for help from the Byzantine monarch Alexius following the defeat of Manzikert (August 1072), Pope Urban II saw in it a great opportunity not only to heal its rift with the Church of Constantinople which had taken place in 1032 over the issue of icons in the Church, but also to retrieve the Cross and the Holy Sepulcher from the Muslims. In a rousing speech in 1095, he declared the First Crusade. The Pope was a consummate politician and an accomplished orator. He traveled throughout southern France stirring up people to take the oath of the Cross and march on Jerusalem. In return, he promised forgiveness of sins, retribution of debts and a reward of heaven. Hundreds of thousands responded to his call. Counts, knights, farmers, artisans, paupers, all joined in the march. The Crusades were thus more of a mass movement than a war fought by a trained army with a well thought out plan. According to Ibn Khaldun, almost 900,000 people participated in the first Crusade. The sheer mass of this humanity had a decisive impact on the military tactics used in the conflict.

The Crusaders started from two staging areas. One was at Blois near Paris and the other near Cologne in Germany. The southern group marched through Italy, picking up more recruits and was ferried by the Venetians from Italy to the Balkan coast before moving on to Constantinople. The northern group marched down the Danube, ravaging the Hungarian lands as it went. Alexius, the Byzantine Emperor, aware of the frenzy of these mobs, deftly kept both groups out of his capital. From Constantinople, this motley group of warriors, peasants and adventurers advanced into Anatolia.

One of the astonishing facts about the Crusades is the small resistance offered by the Turks and the Arabs to the Crusader advance. The Seljuks had conquered the Anatolian peninsula during the previous century but had not yet consolidated their hold on the hinterland. The entire territory was lightly defended. They were caught unprepared. The first battle took place at Nicaea (1098), which was located in Seljuk territories. The Turks, whose success on the battlefield depended on their ability for rapid deployment and encircling cavalry, could not maneuver their forces amid the frenzied mobs attacking them. They found themselves in slugging matches with the Europeans wherein they had little advantage. The day belonged to the Crusaders and the Seljuks had to retreat. This defeat encouraged the local Greek and Armenian populations to rise up against the Turkish garrisons in many of the cities. Dorylæum (near modern Ankara) was lost the following month. An informer betrayed Antioch in northern Syria. From Antioch, the Crusader mobs split into two: one advanced down the Lebanese coast (held by the Fatimids), which offered no resistance and the other moved through eastern Lebanon (held by Turkish emirs) towards Homs, wherein only light resistance was offered.

Even as the invaders advanced through Anatolia and northern Syria, the Fatimids in Cairo were engaged in negotiations with the Crusaders to divide up the conquered Seljuk territories. The Fatimids saw in the death of Malik Shah (1092) and the ensuing contest for succession among the Seljuks a golden opportunity to recover the territories they had lost to the Turks in Syria and Palestine. The Byzantines, who were guiding the Latin Crusaders through the intricate politics of the region, were well aware of the internal squabbles among the Muslims. The Crusaders sent a delegation to Cairo in 1097 to negotiate terms of an understanding. A memorandum was signed in Antioch in February 1098 according to which the Fatimids resumed control of Tyre and Sidon. But further negotiations broke down in May 1099 over the issue of Jerusalem. The Latins, aware that Cairo would need about two months to raise an army to defend Jerusalem, hastened their march towards that city.

A small garrison of 5,000 troops lightly defended Jerusalem, which the Fatimids had recaptured from the Seljuks in 1095. So confident were the Fatimids about reaching an accord with the Latins that they had made no attempt to reinforce this small contingent. The Crusaders knew of this weakness through information gathered from their spies within the city walls. The battle for Jerusalem began on the 10<sup>th</sup> of June 1099. The Crusaders blew their horns and shouted their slogans in the expectation that the walls of

the city would come tumbling down. When this did not materialize, a direct assault on the citadel began. Initial assaults were unsuccessful because the Latins had little technical knowledge about building engines of war. But help soon arrived from Constantinople and Venice. On the 17<sup>th</sup> of June, a fleet of six Venetian ships arrived at Jaffa carrying fresh troops, timber and Byzantine engineers experienced in the art of building ramparts, rams and catapults. The infusion of this know-how along with fresh supplies changed the course of the siege. Sturdy ramparts were built and the assault was resumed.

Jerusalem fell on the 15<sup>th</sup> of July 1099. To quote from Al Kalanisi's contemporary account: "They (the Crusaders) proceeded towards Jerusalem, at the end of Rajab. The people fled in panic before them. They descended first upon Ramallah and captured it after the ripening of the crops. From there, they marched to Jerusalem, the inhabitants of which they engaged and blockaded and having set up the tower against the city they brought it forward to the wall. The news reached them that al Afdal (the vizier of the Fatimid Caliphate in Cairo) was on his way from Egypt with a powerful army to engage in a jihad and destroy them and protect the city. The Crusaders therefore attacked the city with increased vigor and prolonged the battle that day until the daylight faded, then withdrew from it, after promising the inhabitants to renew the attack upon them the following day. The townsfolk descended from the wall at sunset, whereupon the Franks renewed their assault upon it, climbed up the tower and gained a footing on the city wall. The defenders were driven down and the Franks stormed the town and gained possession of it. A large number of the townsfolk took sanctuary at Haram as Sharif, where they were slaughtered. The Jews assembled in the synagogue and the Franks burned it over their heads. The Haram was surrendered to them on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of Shaaban, but they destroyed the shrines and the tomb of Abraham". According to Ibn Kathir, the Crusaders in Jerusalem alone slaughtered 70,000 Muslims and Jews. This figure is not unreasonable considering the topography of Palestine, which was dotted by a few defended towns and a large number of small villages. When under attack, the villagers sought protection within the walls of the nearest fort swelling the population of the city. The Crusaders set up their headquarters at the Haram and converted the mosque of Al Aqsa into a stable for their horses.

Upon hearing of the fall of Jerusalem, al Afdal, the grand vizier in Cairo hastened to recapture the city. Egypt was no longer the formidable power that it was under Muiz but it was by no means bereft of military prowess. 10,000 infantry and thousands of volunteers augmented an initial contingent of 5,000 cavalry. This force marched up the Sinai Peninsula and camped at Ascalon waiting for further reinforcements by sea and by land. Ascalon, located near modern Gaza, was the last major stronghold of the Fatimids before Jerusalem. News of the movement of this contingent arrived in the Latin camp, whereupon the Crusaders moved south to meet the Egyptians. Al Afdal's intelligence failed him at this crucial juncture. On the 12<sup>th</sup> of August 1099, Al Afdal's camp was ambushed. The formidable Egyptian cavalry did not have a chance. The infantry was routed. Al Afdal managed to escape with a few of his bodyguards.

Soon after the fall of Jerusalem, quarrels broke out among the warring Latins as to who should govern the city. The Church, which had masterminded the entire adventure, intervened at crucial moments, ensuring that disagreements would not jeopardize the overall mission. The Crusaders were not accustomed to a centralized administration. They imposed on the conquered territories the only governing system they knew, namely feudalism, and installed Baldwin as the King of Jerusalem.

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