

Who wanted the crusades?

The date is November 27, 1095. Pope Urban II is attending the Council of Clermont. He wants to proclaim a very special message. It's the message of the holy war! Under the motto "Deus lo vult", he sends thousands of people to an armed pilgrimage to the Holy Land. The crusades will change the medieval world, in the West more than in the East. But what gave Urban II the idea of proclaiming a crusade? And how came this idea was such a huge success?

01

Who wanted the crusades?

The Byzantine Emperor asks for help

It was triggered by the request of the Byzantine Emperor Alexius I. He wants to step up the fight against the Seljuks who brought rich Asia Minor – more or less the territory of modern-day Turkey – under their control. Asia Minor had been part of the Byzantine Empire once. Alexius wants to recapture it. For this he needs additional soldiers; preferably well-trained soldiers in heavy armor. Alexius thinks of a few hundred mercenaries, who used to be very successful in the imperial Varangian Guard. He could not foresee the repercussions of his request...



Christ blesses Alexius I (1081-1118). Book painting, 12th century AD.

02

Who wanted the crusades?

Papal ambitions

In March 1095, the ambassadors of Emperor Alexius approached the Pope with a request for support. Perhaps they exaggerated the extent of the emergency. As a result, Pope Urban II started to hope that the Byzantine Emperor might be willing to make theological concessions in return for military aid. In 1054 the Pope had fallen out with the Patriarch of Constantinople. The Pope didn't succeed in asserting his supremacy over all Christian churches in the East. Urban II considered this a perfect opportunity to extend his domination to the Byzantine Empire.



Urban II preaching the First Crusade. Illustration from Charles Mackay, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, published in 1841.

03

Who wanted the crusades?

No pope like anyone else

This Urban II is a very special pope. He is born as Eudes of Châtillon, the younger son of a nobleman from the North of France. His parents took care of him by handing him over to the Church. For a piece of land they secured him training and lifelong maintenance. A fair price? In those days that was a common procedure. And the chance to rise in the church hierarchy constitutes an additional bonus. Following his education, Eudes goes to Rome to make a career. In 1070 he makes the most important decision of his entire life: He becomes a monk in Cluny, France. After an appropriate amount of time, Abbot Hugo sends him back to Rome. There, Eudes is more useful when it comes to representing the interests of Cluny. Actually, as Urban II, Eudes is elected Pope in 1088.



Monument of Urban II in Clermont-Ferrand, 1902. Photo: Mussklprozz / CC BY-SA 3.0

04

Who wanted the crusades?

And why is this important for the success of the First Crusade?

Through the election of Urban II as head of the Christian Church, Cluny gains influence on a pope. And the pope in turn is backed by Cluny. This became pivotal when the First Crusade was prepared. Back then, no other institution had better connections with the Christian nobility. Urban doesn't need to turn to a king or an emperor for setting up an army. He has Cluny on his side. Everywhere in France, Spain, Southern Germany and Northern Italy, there are monasteries that live in accordance with the Rule of Cluny and foster a close relationship with the local nobles.



Abbot Hugo of Cluny, one of the most powerful men of Europe, sits above Emperor Henry IV who is begging for forgiveness in Canossa. Book painting of the Vita Mathildis, around 1115.

05

Who wanted the crusades?

Cluny and the ideal of the Christian knight

After all Cluny has invested the noblemen with a new self-understanding. They hold the ideal of the Christian knight in high esteem. Abbot Odo of Cluny himself wrote the first life description of a saint who wasn't a monk or a cleric but a knight. To his fellow-citizens the Vita of Gerald, Count of Aurillac, means that they, too, can gain the heavenly kingdom even though it's their life purpose to struggle. To a nobleman seeking salvation Cluny offers as many as three possibilities: 1st: Taking a monk's vow. This is what many men do, including members of the high nobility. 2nd: Founding one's own monastery, where monks live in accordance with the Rule of Cluny and pray for the founder's family. 3rd: Supporting Cluny through gifts. Many noblemen take one of the three ways to buy themselves heaven.



Gerald of Aurillac. Icon, early 20th century.

06

Who wanted the crusades?
A fair deal?

Cluny promotes the last of these three possibilities. Not everybody should give in to the temptation of entering the monastery. Christian knights are needed in the secular world, to guarantee the Christian world order. Their gifts become a means to praise the Lord. Through them the Abbot of Cluny builds the then biggest Church of Christendom and funds the maintenance of its more than 300 monks. And he cares for the poor. Whoever knocks at the gates of the monastery is being given. There are thousands of them. We have a number that dates from the beginning of a fasting period in the mid-11th century. At that time, 17,000 people were collecting their share of the 250 fitches of smoked bacon distributed in the name of Christ.



A knight, too, can now go to paradise – with his weapons. Main portal of the Bern Minster. Photo: Mueffi / CC BY-SA 3.0

07

Who wanted the crusades?

Redistribution

And so the circle is complete: The noblemen exploit their subjects to accumulate wealth. Out of fear for hell, they donate it then to Cluny, which gives a part of it back to those who are among the victims of the aristocracy-controlled economy.



In the early Middle Ages, the Church controlled the redistribution of goods. Graphic: Björn Schöpe.

08

Who wanted the crusades?

Back to the Crusades: What's in it for a knight?

What does this have to do with the crusades? Well, long before Urban II proclaimed the First Crusade, he had the assurance of the most important members of the nobility thanks to the connections of Cluny. They're all ready to enter the holy war – even though the trip is expensive as it is. It's a big investment and it's not yet clear if it's going to pay off. Of course, the Pope has promised that anyone who is killed in the battle against the gentiles will gain eternal salvation. But another reward is more appealing. The Spanish Reconquista has shown that in the holy war land could be gained. Land! This is the dream of every younger son.



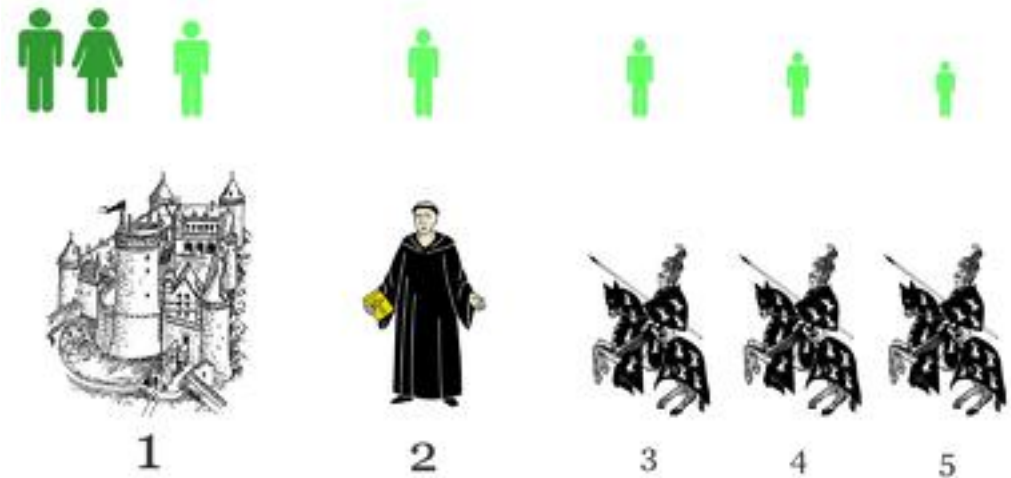
To gain land, the younger sons of knights went to Spain in the sign of Saint James 'the Moor-Slayer'. Illustration of the main portal of the Hospital de los Reyes Catolicos in Santiago de Compostela. Photo: KW.

09

Who wanted the crusades?

No inheritance for the later-born

For early in the 11th century, the right of primogeniture had prevailed. Only the eldest son of an average nobleman can expect a stable income. After the death of the father, he gets the entire family property. Only he can marry and beget children. For all the other sons the father is looking for an apprentice position. One son is placed in the Church – only one son because a place in the Church was expensive. All the others are sent to a relative to become a knight.



For the oldest son the heritage, for the second son the Church, for all other sons a training as a knight.
Graphic: Björn Schöpe.

10

Who wanted the crusades?

And after the training?

The training of a young knight ends with his accolade. Coinciding with this, he's no longer entitled to a steady supply. Depending on the wealth and the generosity of the castle-owner who had trained him, he not only gets a sword but also an armor, a horse, and provisions. About 20 years old, the knight is thus left to his own devices. Society expects him to earn his livelihood. He's striving to find himself a new master, whom he can serve, and who provides him with food and clothing in return.



In a solemn accolade, the armor-bearer of King Wenceslas II of Bohemia hands a weapon and a belt to a squire. Illustration of the Codex Manesse, 1305-1340.

11

Who wanted the crusades?

And what about the women?

The aristocratic women play a decisive role. Depending on the wealth of their father, they are equipped with a dowry for which they will be married. Every knight – with or without a fixed position – dreams of such a rich heiress. It's not romance that drives him, but the practical knowledge that this heiress will bring enough into the marriage to pay the rent for him, her and their children. But the fathers prefer to marry their daughters with the expensive dowry rather to influential nobles than to wandering knights. In most cases, therefore, the rich heiress remains a dream for those who possess nothing but their courage.



The knightly minstrel Kristan of Hameln is brought into the castle by his mistress. Not a reality, but a wishful dream. Illustration of the Codex Manesse, 1305-1340.

12

Who wanted the crusades?
The holy war

For all the knights lacking their own land, the crusade is a gift from heaven. If their family can afford enough money for the journey, they can play in the big lottery for fiefs and salvation. Urban II doesn't have to beat the big drum. His call is the offer many desperate men had been waiting for.



The course of the First Crusade. Map: Captain Blood / CC BY-SA 3.0

13

Who wanted the crusades?

Unwelcome participants

But not only knights felt addressed by Pope Urban II. Up to 40,000 men, women and children decided to give up their hopeless lives to move towards the Holy Land. They went hungry as drought and cold destroyed the harvests. They have seen friends, relatives, and fellow citizens being killed by St. Anthony's fire. And now a comet, a lunar eclipse, and a meteor shower appear in the sky. They interpret this as a sign that the end of the world is approaching. Why not embark and reach heavenly Jerusalem? Only very few understood that the Jerusalem in heaven and the one on Earth weren't the same at all.



Peter the Hermit preaches to the poor. Painting by James Archer (1822-1904).

14

Who wanted the crusades?
The outcome

Of the 40,000 poor less than 3,000 survived. Jerusalem was conquered and rivers of blood were pouring. Some Christian knights succeeded in starting a new life in the East. Did the others at least find salvation? Who can judge? The crusades bring suffering – for people both in the Western and in the Eastern world. And they change the economy of Europe considerably. Our next picture tour will tell you how much exactly.



The City of Jerusalem. Oldest printed cityscape, 1493.