

The Justification of Crusade: Constantinople, the Baltic States, and Southern France

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The scope of what a crusade is has changed and been challenged in the examination of the first crusade through the Albigensian Crusade. We have been motivated to examine the ideals and attitudes that have provoked the actions of crusading armies over a nearly two century long quest to spread Christianity. Names and dates are useful for constructing a time line of events important to understanding the ebb and flow of territorial loss and gain. However, they do not shed light on the human thought process that ultimately inspired men to take the cross and spread the word of Christianity.

The attitudes and beliefs of the crusaders are often conflicting with those inhabitants of lands containing potential Christians and serve as a catalyst for military action and occupation of foreign lands. After all, the ideal of crusade is based on Christian principles and ultimately to assist the inhabitants, whether they are open to Christianity or violently resistant.

Conversion to Christianity is not always the goal as we have seen in battles among Greeks and crusaders at Constantinople (1203-1205). Monetary necessity was a focal point in laying siege to Constantinople, although the attack was launched under a slightly different guise, as will be discussed later, which seemed to justify the crusader's actions against fellow Christians. How was this justification reached? Launched in 1147, the Baltic Crusade appeared to be a crusade undertaken with the best of Christian intentions in mind, namely, to convert the inhabitants of Eastern Europe. What made Christians think they had the right to strike out on such an endeavor?

The Albigensian Crusade (1209-1229) provided a unique challenge to the church. Christians were faced with an alternative faith that was not outwardly lacking in virtue and temperance. Nonetheless, the Cathar religion represented a threat to Christianity in southern France and, as a result, a crusade was launched to "take back" these lands in the name of God. The trick was convincing others that this was a just and necessary crusade. This was done with a degree of patience and diligence not yet experienced in previous crusades. How were these crusaders able to construct their argument for military action in southern France?

The aforementioned crusades will be analyzed using sources by Geoffroy Villehardouin, Henry of Livonia, and William of Puylaurens. At the conclusion of this analysis we will gain further understanding for how the Christian crusaders were able to legitimize their military action based on their perception and attitude toward their respective enemies.

War with the Greeks

The war with the Greeks, which involved the siege at Constantinople, was a bizarre chapter in the history of the crusades. Since the Greeks were already Christian it would be difficult to make a case for this foray into the emperors' city as a Christian endeavor. To make the case for war, the Franks were able to turn the war with the Greeks into a religious issue.

The Franks did this by applying religious importance to monetary issues which enabled the crusaders to view the Greeks as violators of the Christian faith. Additionally, the crusaders were able to

legitimize deposing Murzuphlus by mandate of the Pope, once again showing that the crusaders thought themselves better than the Greeks in a religious sense and prompted them to act accordingly.

The crusaders were in dire need of resources. We know this because of the fiscal debacle in Venice that forced the crusaders to concede to sacking Zara (Villehardouin 43). The crusaders, many of whom had decided to take alternate routes, were unable to meet the terms of their agreement with the Venetians who were providing transport and resources. Furthermore, the crusaders grossly overestimated the number of ships and supplies required, even including those who traveled different routes, which further inflated the already lofty debt per man. They wished to go to Syria but with no way to finance a journey by sea, and a land route that was seemingly impossible to safely traverse, there was intense pressure to procure resources. This led to the encounter with young Alexius IV who promised the crusaders a substantial payday if they could place him on the throne of Constantinople as emperor: 220,000 silver marks, provisions, 10,000 men to fight, and 500 knights to serve overseas.

At this point, the crusaders devised a strategy to rationalize action against the Greeks. After all, they would be attacking a Christian city and Innocent III required a good reason to permit such an undertaking. So the argument was constructed by Conon de Bethune, a knight and poet, that attacking Constantinople was just, because in his words “since he (Alexius III) has wrongfully taken possession of this land, in defiance of God, and of right and justice” (63).

The invoking of the name of God is critical in establishing how the crusaders viewed Alexius III. He is showcased as being a violator of the Christian faith and thus deserving of any military action against him. The crusaders are able to turn what, at the outset, looked like the sacking of a friendly Christian city, into a righteous quest to place the true ruler onto the throne of Constantinople. The new leadership would be beneficial to all the Greeks because they would then have the proper Christian leadership.

The Byzantines and the Franks have had their quarrels since the first crusaders marched toward Jerusalem. So, it is reasonable to say that the crusaders may have been looking for a way to attack the Byzantines with the support of the church, whose permission would have been paramount. The crusaders were desperate for money and religious vilification of Alexius III furthered rationale to remove him, and in the process increase the coffers of those who would go to Syria. It would have been unthinkable to leave an impious man on the throne in such a prominent Christian city. By making a case that presented Alexius III as a thief to the throne and “in defiance of God and right”, (64) the crusaders had clearly shown the treachery of this deceitful leader and justified action against him.

Similarly, the crusaders once again invoked religious authority to attack Murzuphlus after he had imprisoned Alexius IV. Upon hearing of his self-ordained emperorship and imprisonment of Alexius IV, Villehardouin exclaims “Have you ever heard of any people guilty of such atrocious treachery” (84). With the subsequent murder of Alexius, a papal mandate is issued proclaiming “anyone guilty of such a murder had no right to hold lands, while those who consented to such a thing were accomplices in the crime; and over and above all this the Greeks as a people had seceded from the Church of Rome” (85).

The Greeks are now directly viewed, with no uncertainty, as defilers of the faith and no longer worthy of being called Christian. Military action was not only justified, but necessary to return the Greek people to the path of Christianity. War was now “just and lawful” (85) and arguably mandatory to uphold the faith.

The Baltic Crusade

The Baltic Crusade was a more “conventional” crusade than the battles with the Greeks. The goal was to convert a pagan region and bring the inhabitants into the arms of the church. The Christians looked at the Balts as a “backward people” and “lesser breeds without the law” (Henry of Livonia 21). This condescending attitude toward the Baltic people actively urged a crusade to help them achieve a better life with Christianity as a focal point.

Henry of Livonia creates a picture of the Baltic people as helpless children that were waiting to be saved. This view of the Balts as being a flock in need of a shepherd is shown in this statement by Henry of Livonia:

“Thus, therefore, this untamed people, overly given to pagan rites, through the summons of Christ was steadily led to the yoke of the Lord and, leaving behind pagan darkness, through faith looked upon the true light, which is Christ” (53).

Not only was the pagan religion portrayed as a “dark” path, but the Balts were compared to stupid animals that must be taken to the appropriate place, lest they slip away into eternal damnation. With this mindset toward the pagans, the Christians could validate their military incursion into a land whose peoples had been largely peaceful toward the west.

This view of superiority is not simply a matter of Christian versus pagan. Even after the Balt’s had been baptized, they were continually seen as inept to rule their own lands. Take, for example, how the crusaders justified taking a fort controlled by baptized Balts:

It seemed to them that the Livonians were unworthy of such a large fort, although they had been baptized, they were nonetheless still rebels and unbelievers. For this reason, they sent Conrad in to take possession of his benefice and left with him certain strong pilgrims ready for war. (52).

We see by this example that the crusaders held a view of superiority over the Balts that did not concentrate strictly on religious difference. Even after the Balts had become Christian they were looked upon as unpredictable savages that must be governed by a superior group. Utilizing this viewpoint of superiority it was easy for the crusaders to exonerate themselves from any wrongdoing because, in their minds, the Baltic people were in need of guidance and any violence and acquisition of property is justifiable.

The Albigensian Crusade

The Albigensian Crusade is perhaps the most complicated of all crusades. The Cathar inhabitants of Toulouse looked like Christians and lived in a similar fashion as other Franks. They were not barbaric or lacking in technological sophistication like the Baltic peoples and they had not done anything outwardly evident to enrage the Christians of Western Europe. Yet, the Cathars practiced a religion that was not Christian and this presented a challenge of authority to the Christian Church, intentional or not, on the part of the Cathars.

The debates at Montreal were of particular importance to the Christians. Here they were able to portray the Cathars as against God, or perhaps even on the side of the devil. Consider the comments

made by Cathar Arnold Oth “who stated that the Roman Church, was neither holy, nor the bride of Christ, but a church of the devil” (Puylauren 26). Notice that Oth is not equating Christianity, as a faith, with the devil but rather the institution of the Catholic Church. Whether or not the statement is contextually accurate, it served to effectively polarize Cathar ideology from that of the Church. Once it became clear, verbally, that the Cathars were not willing to accept Catholicism, Christians could view them as heretics and justly go to war in defense of the faith.

It was important for the Church to paint a picture of God being on the side of the Christians and correspondingly, the devil being allied with the Cathar. The formation of the Grand White Confraternity in 1210 sought to do that. The Confraternity separated the Christians from the Cathars in a battle of good versus evil, or quite literally, white versus black. The Confraternity could be used to create a miasma of fear surrounding Cathar intentions toward Christians, making military action against them acceptable. Consider this excerpt from Puylauren, “The situation developed to the extent that the confraternity in the cite was named ‘White’ and ‘Black’, and the two sides frequently became involved in armed combat” (37). The polarization of the two groups made justifying the slaughtering of heretics, armed or not, acceptable to those involved. Since the crusaders would be acting in the name of God they were encouraged to continue the purge of Catharism.

By analyzing the overthrow of the Byzantine Empire, the Baltic Crusade, and the Albigensian Crusade, it is evident that the attitudes adopted by the crusaders were unique and vital to justifying military action. Perceived religious impiety within the Christian faith, on the part of the Greeks, resulted in the siege and sacking of Constantinople. The crusaders attitude of superiority toward the Baltic people and their view that they, as Christians, were called to guide these helpless pagan people to the salvation of the church became the rallying cry for action in Eastern Europe. The idea that the Cathars were blasphemous heretics prompted Franks from the north to slaughter many innocents when we know that the Cathars were not aggressive toward the Christians.

As different as each of these crusades were, there is one common thread that links all three. None of the groups opposite the Christians was outwardly hostile to the Church prior to each crusade. Thus, we can conclude that the Church had to develop reasoning to shift the mindset of its secular leaders so that they could validate armed conquest in the name of God. The Catholic Church was overwhelmingly successful in using their vast resources to create an advantageous perception of their enemies surrounding each crusade that advanced their cause.

References

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Biography

Matthew Jacobs is senior psychology major in the College of Arts & Science. His paper on the justification of crusade was originally produced for History 300, the Crusades, taught by Professor Samantha Kahn Herrick. A member of Psi Chi, the national honor society for undergraduate psychology majors, Matthew is currently conducting a line of independent research with Dr. Barbara Fiese on the predictive and/or causal influence the family exerts on pre-adolescent obesity. Matthew works as a research assistant for The Family Life and Asthma Project at SU. Upon graduating this spring, he hopes to attend graduate school for clinical psychology in the fall of 2006. Matthew has a general interest and enjoyment of ancient and European history that he plans to pursue outside of the classroom upon graduation.