

2 Why did the First Crusade erupt in 1095?



Clermont has grown since the Middle Ages, It is now known as Clermont-Ferrand. You can just make out the dark, volcanic mountains in the distance.

This photograph shows the city of Clermont in central France. It occupies a dramatic setting on a high plain surrounded by a great ring of dormant volcanoes. The volcanoes seem very appropriate because it was from this ancient city, in 1095, that there erupted a movement of such dramatic power and energy that its repercussions still affect our world today. We call it the First Crusade.

On the face of it, the cause of this explosion of crusading force was a sermon delivered not far from the site where the thirteenth-century cathedral now stands. On 27 November 1095, a crowd of several hundred gathered in a field just outside the ancient city to hear the words of a special visitor, the leader of the Church in western Europe, Pope Urban II.

In his great speech the Pope was passing on an urgent plea for help that had been sent to him earlier that year. It came from the Emperor Alexios I who ruled the distant Byzantine Empire thousands of miles to the east. Urban's words were powerful: within weeks, his message had been carried all over western Europe. Observers at the time recognised that something completely new was happening. As the shock waves spread, somewhere between 50,000 and 100,000 men and women, rich and poor, headed east for the Holy Land confident that they were doing the Pope's will and God's will. They were going to fight Muslims to win control of what they believed to be the holiest place on God's Earth: the city of Jerusalem.

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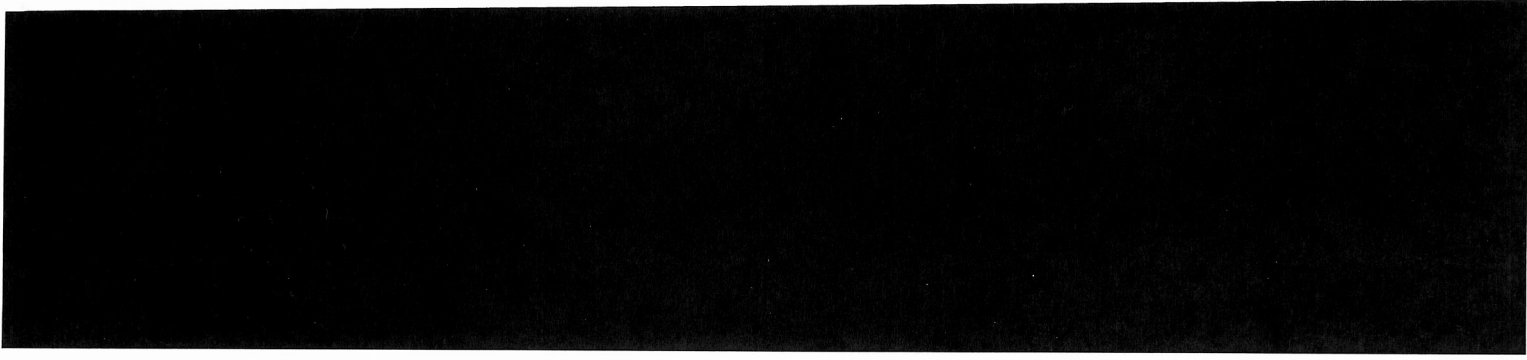
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■ **Enquiry Focus:** Why did the First Crusade erupt in 1095?

Events as resounding as the First Crusade cannot simply appear from nowhere. No matter how moving Pope Urban II's sermon may have been, one man's words cannot on their own change history. We need to look deeper if we are to understand what caused the First Crusade. Just like the eruption of a volcano, events like this are usually created by deep and powerful forces that have been rumbling away and building over many years. It just needs some shifts and changes to take place for that energy to burst into life.

The events behind the First Crusade go back many centuries and cover a wide geographical area, from Arabia in the east to France in the west. It also involves three main groups. These are:

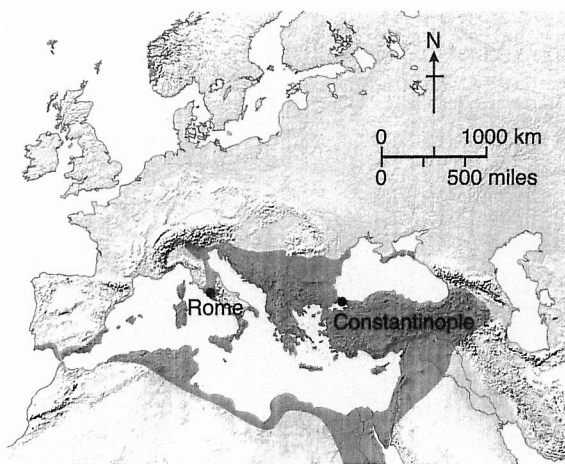
- the eastern (Greek) Christians of the Byzantine Empire
- the western (Latin) Christians of western Europe
- the Muslims.

As so often in history lots of other questions are hiding below the big enquiry question we have given you. We have structured the enquiry to help you tackle these stage by stage as the summary below shows:

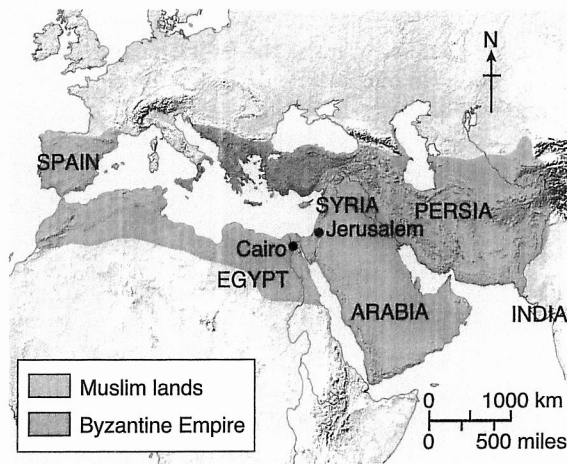
	The stages of the enquiry	'Hidden' questions that you will be considering
1	Weakening empires: Trouble in the Near East, 330 to 1071	What was happening in the Near East that made the Byzantine Emperor Alexios ask for help from western Christians?
2	The plea for help: Alexios I, 1071 to 1095	
3	The crusaders' world: Western society, 476 to c.1040	What was it about life in the western world that made so many Christians answer the call to fight an unknown enemy thousands of miles from home?
4	The power of popes: Church reform, c.1040-95	
5	The call to action: Urban II and the Council of Clermont, 1095	Why did Pope Urban II help Alexios I and how did he achieve such a massive response from western Christians?

Whatever question they are tackling, historians always need to respond with strong, relevant ideas backed up with carefully selected supporting evidence. To help you in this enquiry we will be giving you three 'main points' at the start of each section. Your challenge is to identify and select really useful, short but precise 'support points' for each one. At the end of the enquiry you will use these main points and support points to answer a host of different questions, including the main enquiry question: 'Why did the First Crusade erupt in 1095?'

Weakening empires: Trouble in the Near East, 330 to 1071



△ The Roman Empire c. AD600.



△ Muslim lands c. AD750.

■ Here are the first three main points you will be using to explain why the First Crusade erupted in 1095. As you work your way through this section, make short, precise notes for each one, so that you can support the point that it makes.

Jerusalem never lost its importance for Christians.

The stability of the Near East had been lost by 1071.

Instability in the Near East posed threats to Christians by 1071.

The Byzantine Empire

To understand why the Crusade was proclaimed in the west in 1095, we first need to understand forces that had been at work for centuries in the east. These maps should help.

On the left you see the Roman Empire as it was in AD600. By that date the Romans had left Britain and most of western Europe but their empire had not disappeared completely. It lived on for many centuries in the east. Its capital city moved from Rome to Constantinople, the Greek-speaking city where Europe and Asia almost touched. It was in AD330 that the Roman Emperor, Constantine, moved the capital there and named it after himself. The old Greek name for the city was Byzantium so the Roman Empire in the east became known as the Byzantine Empire.

Constantine's other great change was to accept Christianity as the official religion of the entire Roman Empire. As you saw on pages 10 and 11, this meant that the city of Jerusalem, was officially recognised as a place of enormous significance. For over three centuries dating from AD326, when Constantine sent his mother there to supervise the building of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem was ruled as a Christian city and grew to be a great centre of pilgrimage. After fighting a lengthy and exhausting war to expel an invading army from Persia in the first part of the seventh century, Jerusalem's place in the Christian Byzantine Empire seemed secure – but it was not.

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The Muslim Empire

In AD610, in a cave in southern Arabia, the Prophet Muhammad believed God had revealed to him a new religion, now known as Islam. Before he died in 632, Muhammad saw this Muslim faith spread with extraordinary speed. Driven on by their belief in jihad, lightly armed but fiercely committed warriors carried the faith far beyond its birthplace.

In 637 the Muslims took **Palestine**. At the Battle of Yarmuk they simply wiped out the Byzantine Christian forces, which had been greatly weakened by their recent, long war with Persia. The following year the Muslim **Caliph**, Omar, accepted the surrender of Jerusalem in person. It is said that he respectfully rode through the main gates unarmed and dressed in the rough, white robes of a Muslim pilgrim. Omar found the Christians had been using the Temple Mount as a rubbish tip, but ordered that it be cleared so that he could pray on the holy site where Muslims would soon build the Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock.

In keeping with Muslim practice, the Christian and Jewish populations of Jerusalem were allowed to follow their own religion so long as they paid a special tax called the *jizya*. They also had to accept certain restrictions such as wearing distinctive clothes, not riding horses or trying to convert or marry Muslims. This relative tolerance allowed a fairly small number of Muslims to rule over a larger population of Christians and Jews. It also explains why, hundreds of years after it fell to Islam, Jerusalem still had a largely Christian culture, even though many inhabitants had probably become Muslims. Churches and holy sites still existed, customs were maintained and pilgrims still flooded in from all over the Christian world, even though the True Cross and other **relics** had been taken to Constantinople for safe keeping.

The Battle of Yarmuk had been such a devastating loss that, although they defended their lands in **Anatolia**, the once mighty Byzantines were too weak to launch any effective counter attacks against the Muslims. Instead, this Islamic empire spread even further and with extraordinary speed across north Africa. By AD750 Muslims ruled an empire that stretched from the Iberian peninsula (the lands we know today as Spain and Portugal) all the way to northern India (see the map on page 14).

Stability

Quite soon after 638, a border that was more or less stable was established between Muslim-held lands and the Byzantine Empire. This followed roughly the line we now recognise as the southern and eastern borders of modern Turkey. Over the following centuries there were occasional wars in that border region and, in the Mediterranean, the Muslims managed to take the island of Sicily and some parts of southern Italy from the Byzantines. But these wars were really more about land than religion. The zealous commitment to jihad, so obvious in the early years of Islam, seems to have waned.

As for the Byzantines themselves, they had no strong drive to interfere in **Syria** and Palestine. The churches there were not being persecuted and did not ask for outside help. The Greek Byzantine church had no Christian teaching equivalent to jihad that might have commanded them to make war against Islam, especially as the Muslims still allowed Christians from all over Europe to travel as pilgrims to Jerusalem. They did no harm and they brought trade to the city.



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▽ This coin was made in modern Turkey in 1971. It shows Alp Arslan, who led the Seljuk Turks to victory at Manzikert in 1071.

His moustache may look large here, but sources from the time say he would throw both ends back over his shoulders as he rode into battle!



■ Check that the notes you have made support each of the main points shown on page 14. How might each main point help to explain why the First Crusade erupted in 1095?

Instability

In the second half of the tenth century the picture began to change. From their base in Baghdad, the ruling Muslim family, the **Abbasids**, were losing their hold on power. As they weakened, the Muslim world destabilised. This allowed Byzantine armies to regain a foothold in northern Syria by capturing the city of Antioch in 969. In that same year a rival Muslim group, the **Fatimids**, broke free from Abbasid control and took charge of Egypt and Palestine, including Jerusalem. Struggles between Fatimids and Abbasids in the Near East made pilgrimages much harder in the last years of the tenth century. Then, in 1009, a mentally deranged Fatimid ruler, Caliph Hakim, who had already persecuted many of his own Muslim people, suddenly ended the toleration of Christianity and ordered the complete destruction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Pilgrimages stopped and in Europe anger towards Muslims grew, although no one felt strong enough or concerned enough to raise an army to take revenge. The Fatimid rulers who came after Hakim quickly did all they could to restore relations with Christians. They invited Byzantine architects to rebuild the Holy Sepulchre church and re-opened the city to Christian pilgrims. The crisis had passed.

Just as the pilgrimage numbers seemed to be fully restored by the middle of the eleventh century, another group emerged to take advantage of the continued weakening of Abbasid power. This was a fierce and ambitious people from central Asia: the Seljuk Turks. This tribe had converted to Islam in the late tenth century. In the 1040s they moved into the area we now call Iraq and by 1059 they had forced the Abbasid family to let them rule all their lands on their behalf.

In practice this led to a time of lawlessness. In 1064 over 5000 Christian pilgrims from Germany and Flanders were brutally butchered in a single attack by Muslim tribesmen. This was not typical and many pilgrims continued to make their way to and from Jerusalem successfully, but safety could not be taken for granted.

Some Seljuks could not stop themselves from pressing for new land as well. In 1071, when they tried to move into the eastern Byzantine Empire, the Emperor tried to turn them back, but the Seljuks crushed the Byzantine army at the Battle of Manzikert. Breakaway Seljuk groups and other Turks from Asia began moving into unprotected Byzantine territory in Anatolia taking rich farmlands for themselves. Meanwhile the Seljuk leader, **Sultan** Alp Arslan, turned his armies south and took Syria, Palestine and Egypt, destabilising the region still further.

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The plea for help: Alexios I, 1071 to 1095

The Byzantine Empire was very weak by 1081.

Alexios I's tactics for defending the Empire created closer links with western Christians.

In 1095, Alexios I decided the time had come to drive the Seljuks from Anatolia.

■ Here are the main points for this section. Once again, as you work your way through this section, make short, precise notes for each one, so that you can support the point that it makes.

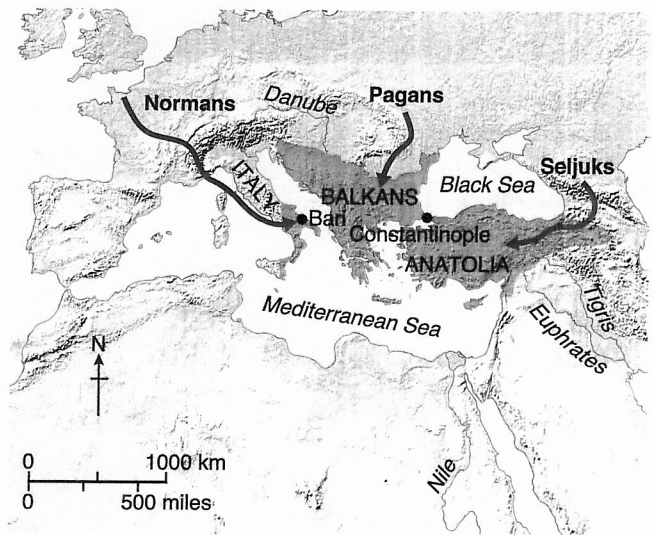
Threats on all sides

The Seljuks' victory at Manzikert shocked and shamed the population of Constantinople. For most of its history, the Byzantine Empire boasted one of the greatest armies in the world, but by 1050 it was in serious decline. In previous centuries, peasants who lived on the emperor's land had to serve in his army, but after AD1000 a series of emperors sold this land to rich families. Naturally the number of peasants who owed military service fell. The army was being weakened just when the Empire faced attack from three sides:

In the north, fierce pagan tribes crossed the river Danube in the 1050s. They forced the Byzantines to let them settle within the Empire. It seemed certain that they would push further before too long.

In the south, the Seljuks controlled so much of Anatolia by 1077 that they declared it to be their own and called it the **Sultanate of Rum** (their version of 'Rome'). In their minds they had conquered the old Roman Empire in Asia. In fact, many key cities of Anatolia, especially around the west coast, were still fairly securely held by local Byzantine rulers or by **Turks** who had done deals with Alexios I. Nonetheless, much valuable land had been lost to the Seljuks and the fairly stable border that had lasted for so many years between the Byzantine Christians and the Muslims had been shattered.

In the west, the Byzantine lands in Italy had been taken by a warlike people who first moved into the area around 1015. These were the Normans. They were from the same northern French families who conquered England in 1066. In 1071 the Norman leader, Robert Guiscard (nick-named Robert the Cunning), captured the last Byzantine possession in Italy, the southern city of Bari. By 1081, Robert was planning a full-scale invasion of the Byzantine lands in the **Balkans**.



△ Threats to the Byzantine Empire c. 1070.