



△ The Byzantine Emperor, Alexios I, being blessed by Christ, from a twelfth-century manuscript. Alexios, like Christ, is shown with a halo to suggest that he has been chosen and blessed by God.

## The young emperor

In February 1081, fearing that the Empire would collapse if he did not intervene, a powerful general in the Byzantine army used bribery, deception and family ties at court to make himself the new Byzantine Emperor. On Easter Day 1081 a dark, powerfully built, twenty-four-year-old took the Byzantine imperial throne as Emperor Alexios I.

The situation that Alexios I inherited was perilous. Within a month of being crowned Emperor, he faced a massive Norman invasion of the Balkans. He had to reinforce what remained of the weakened army with **mercenaries** hired from far and wide. These included Vikings from Scandinavia, Franks from northern France and Anglo-Saxons from England, some of whom had recently fought against a different Norman invasion in 1066. Alexios even brought in Turks from Asia, including some who had recently helped to conquer Byzantine lands in Anatolia.

He would use any warriors with a reputation for skill in battle and who were prepared to fight for a fee.

The young emperor also bought the support of the navy of Venice, a growing sea power in northern Italy. He granted the Venetians trading privileges in Constantinople in return for their help. They were delighted to win this advantage over their rivals. Venice had been gradually building trading links with the Byzantine Empire in the eleventh century. The Venetians did manage to destroy quite a few Norman ships carrying troops from Italy to the Byzantine lands in the Balkans. But, despite these losses, Robert Guiscard, ably assisted in battle by his ferocious wife and his ambitious son Bohemund of Taranto, won a victory over the Byzantine army in 1081.

In the end Alexios I saved his lands in the Balkans by paying the Pope's enemy, Henry IV, the German Emperor, to launch an attack on Rome. He knew that the Pope would call at least some of the Norman army back to Italy to defend him. This is exactly what happened in 1082. More through his cunning than military power, Alexios was safe, at least for a short time.

When Robert Guiscard's Norman armies attacked the Empire again in 1084, it was luck rather than money or planning that saved Alexios. After defeating the Venetians at sea, the Normans were all set to march on Constantinople, but an epidemic (probably typhoid) killed thousands of their soldiers, including Robert himself. The immediate threat from the Normans was over but Alexios had been greatly impressed by their ability to fight.

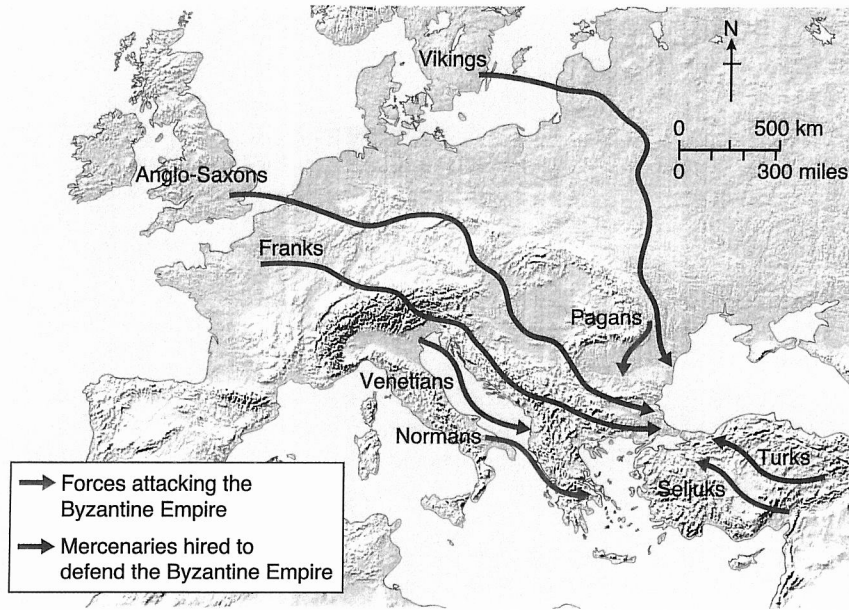
In that same year, 1084, Alexios once again spent enormous sums on mercenaries to launch a counter attack against the pagans who had occupied the northern Byzantine lands in the 1050s. By 1091 the tribes had been completely defeated. He could now turn his attention to the threat in the south – the Seljuk Turks.

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While Alexios I was in the 1080s in Anatolia, which was under the control of the Seljuk sultan, the Seljuk empire was expanding from becoming his chief power and could. By the situation defeated. Most by 1095: built up imperial his daughter records t specialis were criq his peop of Anatol gather at they had the Chris fighting : knights t was to s



Why did the First Crusade erupt in 1095?



Map showing how foreign forces were being drawn into the Byzantine Empire c. 1050–95.

While Alexios had been fighting in the north and the west of his Empire in the 1080s, Seljuk and other Turkish warlords extended their power in Anatolia. They even took important cities such as Antioch and Nicaea, which was barely 60 miles from Constantinople. For some years the Seljuk sultan, Malik Shah, the son of Alp Arslan, worked with Alexios to limit Seljuk expansion in Anatolia. The sultan wanted to stop rival warlords there from becoming too powerful. But in 1092 Malik Shah died just weeks after his chief adviser had been murdered. The loss of these two men created a power vacuum in Anatolia. Rival warlords rushed to take all the land they could. By 1094 many important coastal towns had fallen to Seljuk lords. The situation was serious, but Alexios could now take on the Seljuks as he had defeated the enemies who had been attacking his other borders.

Most historians argue that Alexios was in a position of relative strength by 1095: he had defeated the Normans and the pagan tribes and he had built up his finances by melting down treasure from churches and from the imperial palaces to make new coins. He had also raised taxes. Certainly his daughter Anna Komnena, who wrote a history of her father's life, records that Alexios was more than ready to take on the Seljuks. But some specialists on Byzantine affairs insist that the new coins and high taxes were crippling the economy and that Alexios was losing the confidence of his people. His nobles insisted that he must win back the wealthy lands of Anatolia. Either way, from confidence or desperation, he decided to gather an army that could push the Seljuks back and recapture the lands they had taken since 1071. Early in 1095 he decided to ask for help from the Christians of western Europe, whose knights were renowned for their fighting skill. He sent letters to various western lords urging them to send knights to fight alongside the Byzantine army. But his most significant act was to send ambassadors to the leader of the Latin Church, Pope Urban II.

Check that the notes you have made support each of the main points shown on page 17. How might each main point help to explain why the First Crusade erupted in 1095?

# The crusaders' world: Western society, 476 to c. 1040

■ 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. This section is a little longer than the ones you have done so far.

The fear of hell and purgatory shaped the lives of western Christians.

Western lords and knights were famous for being powerful warriors.

The Church was closely involved in the violence of society.

## Christian faith

You have seen why the Emperor Alexios I called for help from western Christians in 1095. Now you need to understand what made them so ready to respond. Not surprisingly, at the heart of the matter lies religion.

It is hard for our twenty-first-century minds to imagine the importance of faith to people's lives in eleventh-century Europe. Almost everyone accepted the truth of Christian teaching even if their own lives were not especially holy. In particular, all would believe in the existence of heaven and hell. To them, these were real, physical places, not just abstract ideas.

The hope of heaven and the fear of hell was communicated through images such as those carved over the doorway to the church at Conques in southern France around 1100 (see the photograph on page 21). High on the left, Christ sits in judgement over mankind at the end of time. To his right, the saved are being welcomed into heaven, but that is not shown here. Instead, this image shows those on his left-hand side – the damned. Four angels block any chance of these sinners reaching heaven. Below Christ's feet, facing each other, another angel and a demon weigh each soul to judge whether it should pass to heaven or hell. The cord between the angel's hand and the two balances in the scales has crumbled away, but you may be able to see the demon trying to tip the scales in his favour by pushing down with his finger! Behind and below this demon, all sorts of suffering is being inflicted in hell.

## Penance and penitence

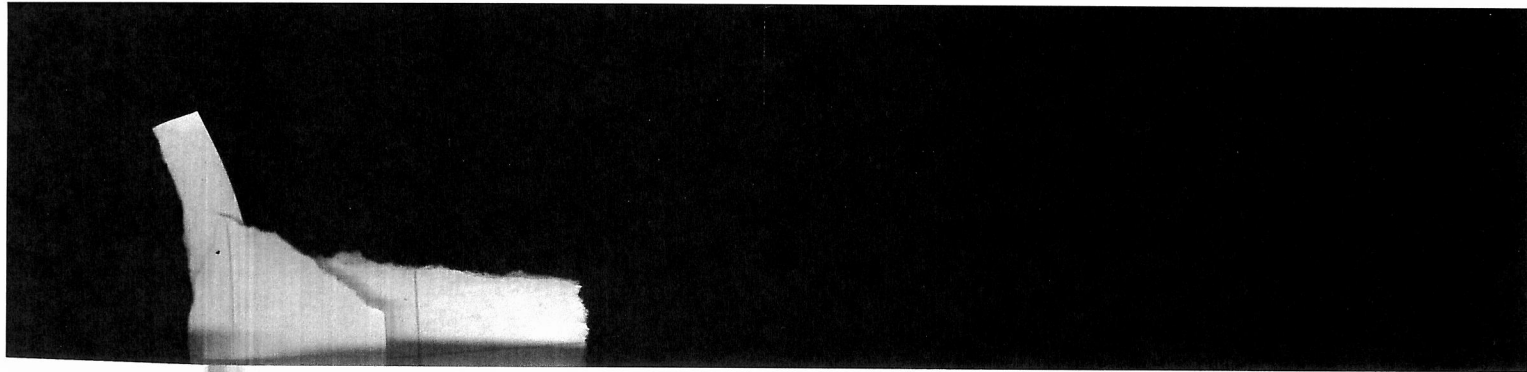
This hope of heaven and fear of hell explains the medieval doctrine of **penance** and acts of **penitence**. The Latin Church taught that Christ's death and resurrection opened the way to heaven but only if people confessed their sins to priests who would grant them forgiveness, in God's name. But, even after confession, a believer's soul still needed to be cleansed of sins committed on Earth. This meant that, after death, the soul would spend time in **purgatory** being purged.

The cleansing of the soul in purgatory involved a prolonged period of pain and suffering, but this could be limited if the person carried out 'acts of penitence'. These might involve saying prayers, giving alms (money) to the poor, avoiding food or sexual activity, or going on a penitential pilgrimage to a holy site. During the eleventh century more and more Christians travelled to, and were obsessed by, the holiest and most sacred site of all: the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in the city of Jerusalem.

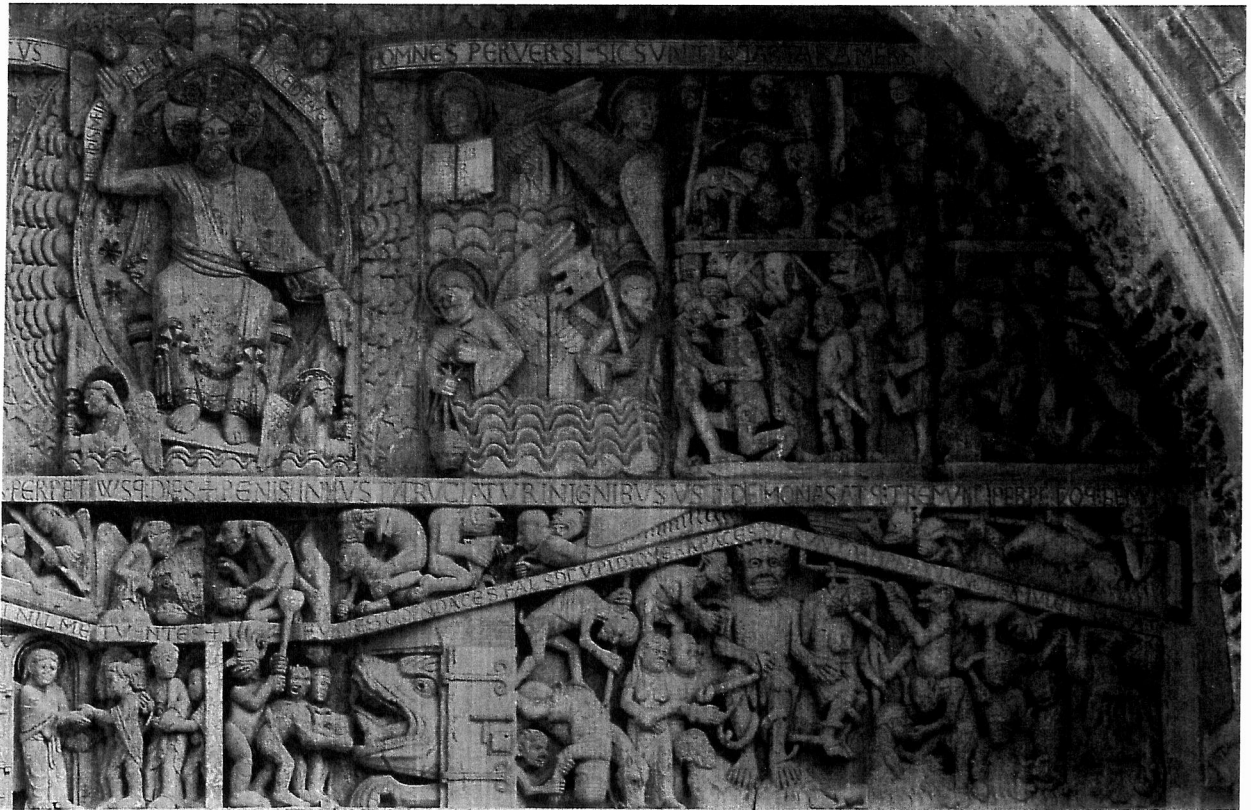


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Why did the First Crusade erupt in 1095?



Most holy sites also kept relics. These were believed to hold special powers that reflected a saint's close relationship with God. They ranged from shreds of the dead saint's clothing or fragments from the coffin to parts of the body (such as bones, hands or even heads) or glass phials filled with blood. From the tenth century, a trade grew up in relics and many were simply stolen to be taken from one holy place to another. People assumed that God would only allow the object to be removed if He approved of the new home for the relic.

A pilgrimage by a penitent sinner to pray before a relic at a holy site might produce a miracle such as healing, or so it was commonly believed. But the main purpose of pilgrimage was penitential: suffering a long, hard journey was worth the pain if it would allow a soul to pass more quickly to the greatest prize – a place in heaven for eternity. The more special the relic or site, and the more hardship the penitent endured, the more powerful it was in washing the soul. What every Latin Christian most prized was a full **indulgence**. This was a promise of complete forgiveness so that the person's soul could pass straight to the joys of heaven, needing no acts of penitence or cleansing in purgatory. This was rare and very special and usually reserved only for the rich and powerful. But – as we shall see a little later – that changed in 1095, when Pope Urban II made a remarkable announcement.

△ Part of the portal at Conques Abbey, France. It was built at almost exactly the same date as the First Crusade. Originally it was painted in bright colours to add to the effect of the terrors it showed.

■ How might belief about heaven, hell and purgatory help to cause the Crusade?

## Christian violence

You may be puzzled by the heading above. But consider these two descriptions:

He was a deeply religious man. The fear of hell drove him to seek God's forgiveness: he built a great abbey; he collected relics; he went on long pilgrimages; he ended one pilgrimage by walking naked to the place in Jerusalem where he believed Jesus had risen from the dead. As he walked, he prayed for forgiveness while, as a sign of humility, he allowed his servant to beat his bare back with a stick.

He was a cruel and violent man. When he learned that his young wife had been unfaithful to him, he had her burned alive in her wedding dress. He murdered a rival and may also have murdered his own grand-nephews. He stole valuable property, even from churches. He fought many brutal battles to take the lands of his near neighbours, slaughtering enemy soldiers without mercy.

Surprisingly, both these descriptions are about the same man: Count Fulk Nerra of Anjou. Fulk was a French nobleman. He lived from 972 to 1040. This extreme example shows us that medieval people could be genuine believers and still live cruel, greedy and violent lives.

### A broken and brutal society

The western world in the eleventh century was a strange mix of all-pervading religion and regular bloodthirsty violence. It had been that way for hundreds of years since the fall of the Roman Empire in western Europe, around 476. Political power was fragmented. There was a brief period of unity around 800 under the French King Charlemagne who declared himself the Emperor of western Europe, but soon after his death his empire broke up and power returned to the regions.

Kings might claim to rule a large area, but in effect each locality was in the hands of a lord (like Count Fulk) who ruled as he wished. Land meant power, bringing the labour and taxes from all who lived on it. Lords were regularly drawn into wars with their neighbours to take extra land or to settle disputes between rivals. This culture of violence disturbed the entire local society: peasants became foot-soldiers and farming and trade was disrupted. No one could hide from the effects.

Just below the nobility were knights, men who had enough wealth to supply their own horse, armour and weapons. Most inherited this wealth as land. The custom on the continent of Europe was that a father's lands would be shared among all his sons on his death. Over time, this divided land into smaller portions and increased both the number of knights and the likelihood of violent land disputes. By the eleventh century, knights often terrorised their own neighbourhoods in their attempts to increase their power. Even when they were enforcing the law, they imposed vicious, physical punishments rather than fines. It was brutal, but it all helped to make these men highly effective warriors.

You might imagine that the Church would be horrified at such a culture of violence. Some Christian leaders did speak out against it but, by the

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Why did the First Crusade erupt in 1095?

start of the eleventh century, the Church in western Europe was simply another part of this brutal society. Duke William of Normandy's conquest of England in 1066 is a well-known example of a powerful lord settling a dispute by violence. What is less well known is that his brother Odo fought alongside him at the Battle of Hastings – and Odo was a Bishop.

The warrior aristocracy and wealthy knights funded monasteries and churches, while bishops or abbots like Odo, often from the same powerful families as the lords, led knights into battle. Around AD1000, one French knight brutally butchered a man who had murdered his brother. He then gave the murderer's blood-soaked armour to the local monastery as a way of thanking God for his success. The monks accepted the gift.

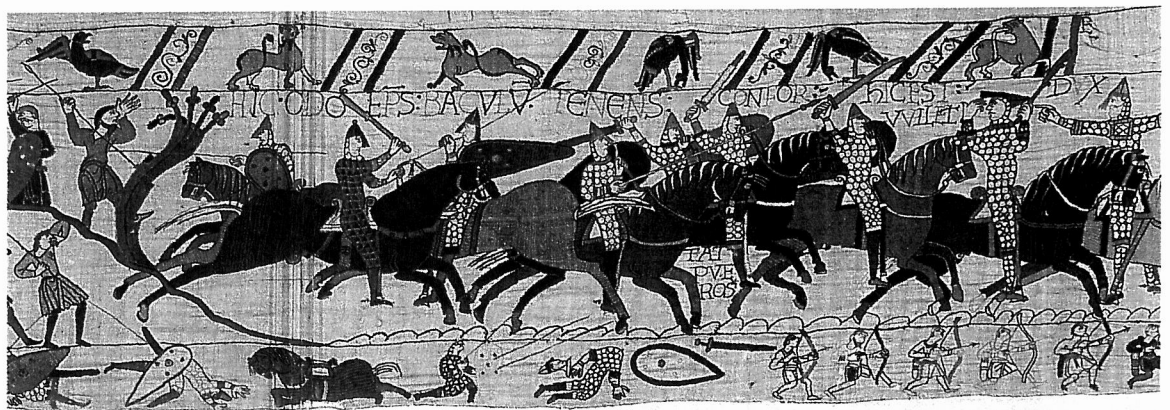
### A Just War

Later we shall see how the Church eventually tried to end the worst excesses of this violent way of life, but even then it never attempted to take a fully pacifist position. Centuries before, when the Roman emperors first made Christianity the official religion of the Empire, the Church had developed teachings to explain why it was acceptable for the state to build and use mighty armies in war. In the fifth century, one of the early Church's greatest thinkers, St Augustine, a north African bishop, set down the conditions under which Christians could wage war:

- The war must be proclaimed by a legitimate authority, such as a king or bishop. It could not be done on the whim of an individual.
- The war must be in a just cause, such as defending people against an enemy attack.
- The war must show 'right intention'. It should be restrained, using the minimum violence necessary to achieve its aims.

If it met all these conditions, this could be a **Just War** – but Augustine maintained that it was still sinful for any Christian to fight even in these circumstances. The warrior would still need to pay for his sins with acts of penitence or hope for an indulgence. From this cautious starting point, the Church and Christian leaders grew more ready to engage in war over the following centuries.

■ Check that the notes you have made support each of the main points shown on page 20. How might each main point help to explain why the First Crusade erupted in 1095?



△ The Battle of Hastings in 1066, from the Bayeux Tapestry. Duke William (right) is lifting his face visor. His brother, Bishop Odo, is towards the left, holding a club.