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## Origins

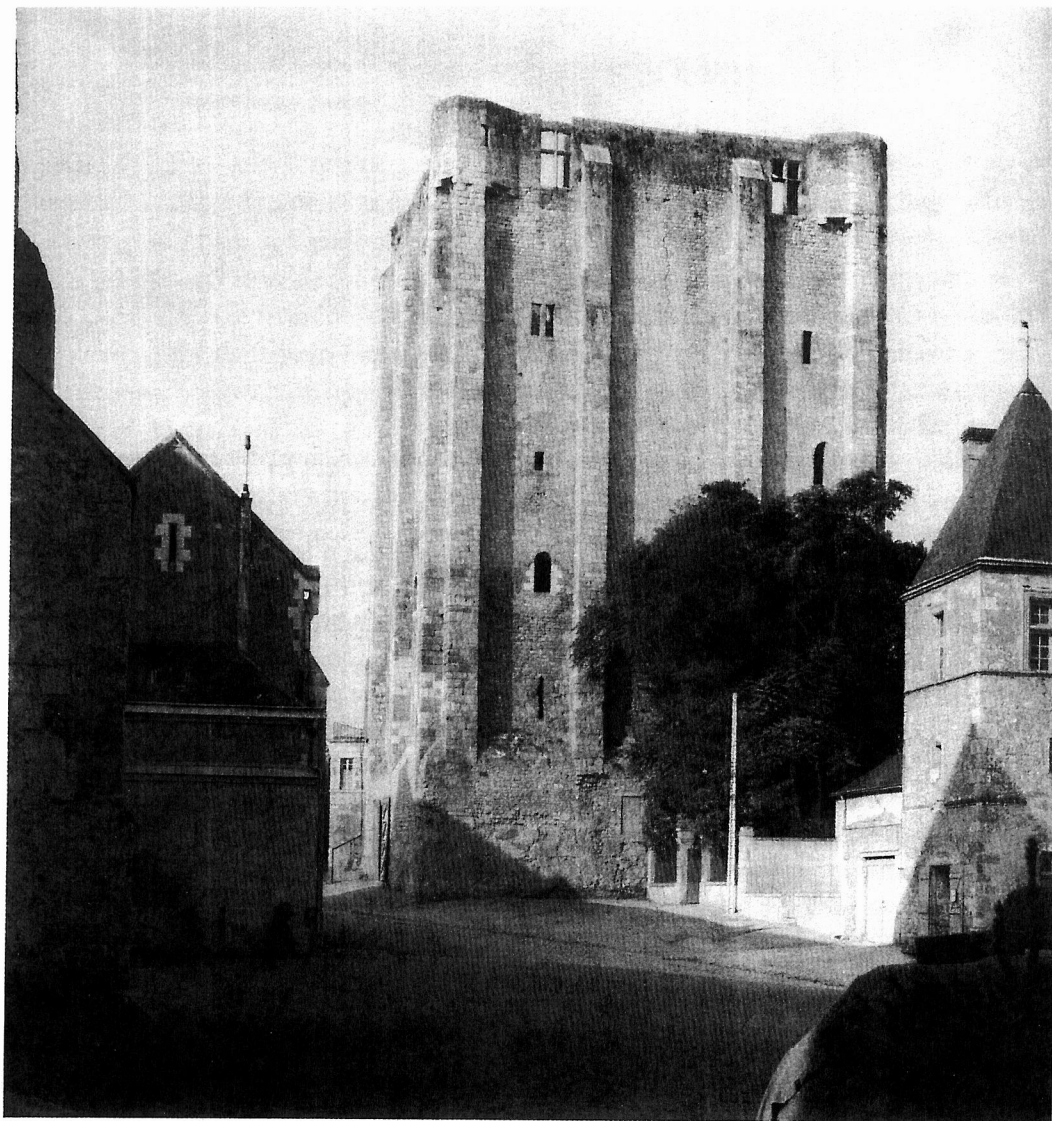
MARCUS BULL

*The Oxford  
Illustrated History  
of The Crusades*

*Ed Jonathan  
Riley-Smith.*

His thirst for blood was so unprecedented in recent times that those who are themselves thought cruel seem milder when slaughtering animals than he did when killing people. For he did not establish his victims' guilt of a crime and then dispatch them cleanly with the sword, which is a routine occurrence. Rather he butchered them and inflicted ghastly tortures. When he forced his prisoners, whoever they were, to pay ransoms, he had them strung up by their testicles—sometimes he did this with his own hands—and often the weight was too much to bear, so that their bodies ruptured and the viscera spilled out. Others were suspended by their thumbs or private parts, and a stone was attached to their shoulders. He would pace underneath them and, when he could not extort from them what was not in fact theirs to give, he used to cudgel their bodies over and over again until they promised what he wanted or died from the punishment. No one knows the number of those who perished in his gaols from starvation, disease, and physical abuse as they languished in his chains.

**T**HIS vivid description was written in 1115 by Guibert of Nogent, the abbot of a small monastery near Laon in north-eastern France. It concerned a prominent local lord named Thomas of Marle. The passage quoted does not exhaust Guibert's thoughts on Thomas: there is more in the same vein, a mixture of righteous indignation and wide-eyed fascination which veers between the grimly realistic and the anatomically preposterous. From the point of view of the First Crusade, the description is of considerable interest because of the careers of the two men involved. Guibert was the author of a long chronicle of the crusade. The small number of surviving manuscripts suggests that it was less popular than some of the other histories produced by contemporaries, but it is nevertheless a valuable source for modern historians, not least because Guibert attempted to elaborate upon the facts—his information came to him second-hand—by explaining the crusaders' experiences in learnedly theological terms. Thomas, for his part, was one of those who had taken part in the expedition. In the process he had earned himself a very favourable reputa-



BEAUGENCY, near Blois. From around the beginning of the eleventh century the number of fortifications in Europe increased substantially. By the time of the First Crusade stone structures were replacing wooden and earthwork constructions: Beaugency is an early illustration of stone castles' ability to embody and project the power of society's military élites.

tion, which Guibert attempted to twist around by claiming that he used to prey upon pilgrims journeying to Jerusalem.

It has often been Thomas's lot to be cast as the archetypal robber baron of eleventh- and twelfth-century Europe, the sort of untamed social menace which thrived when governments were weak and the Church's moralizing imperfectly respected. This is unfair. Thomas's problems seem to have been more dynastic than psychological. Victimized by a hostile father and stepmother, he found himself forced to struggle for control of the castles, lands, and rights he believed were his rightful inheritance. A case can also be made for arguing that, far from being a threat to society, Thomas's energetic lordship brought a measure of stability to an

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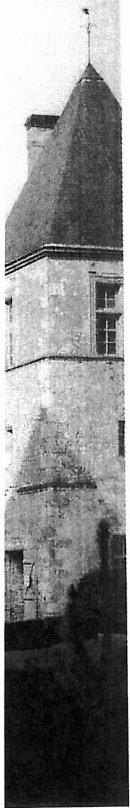
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area of France where competition between various jurisdictions—royal, episcopal, and comital—created the potential for disorder. Treated as a piece of reportage Guibert's pen portrait is clearly tendentious and overstated. Its true significance lies in its exaggeration, since this implicitly reveals the standards of normal behaviour by which notorious misdeeds had to be judged. In order to denigrate Thomas effectively, Guibert could not simply portray him as brutal but as excessively and indiscriminately so. In other words, Thomas and Guibert, two men intimately connected with crusading in their different ways, lived in a society where violence was endemic and in itself unremarkable.

This constitutes perhaps the greatest mental adjustment which a modern observer must make when considering the central Middle Ages. Violence was everywhere, impinging on many aspects of daily life. Legal disputes, for instance, were often resolved by means of trial by battle or by recourse to painful and perilous ordeals. Around the time of the First Crusade it was becoming increasingly common for convicted felons to suffer death or mutilation, a departure from the traditional emphasis on compensating the victims or their families. Vendettas within and between kindreds were frequent. Seldom neatly contained aristocratic combats, they had wide repercussions, for crude but effective economic warfare was regularly waged on opponents' assets, and that meant peasants, livestock, crops, and farm buildings. Brutality was so common it could be ritualistic. In about 1100, for example, a knight from Gascony prayed at the monastery of Sorde that God would enable him to catch his brother's murderer. The intended victim was ambushed, his face was horribly mutilated, his hands and feet were cut off, and he was castrated. In this way his prestige, his capacity to fight, and his dynastic prospects were all irreparably damaged. Moved by feelings of gratitude for what he believed had been divine assistance, the avenging knight presented his enemy's bloodstained armour and weapons as a pious offering to the monks of Sorde. These they accepted.

This case is one small but revealing illustration of the medieval Church's inability to distance itself from the violent world around it. Historians used to believe that the Church had been pacifist in the early Christian centuries, but had then become contaminated by the values of its host societies in a process which culminated during the period when crusading was at its height. But the idea of charting attitudes in such a linear way is unrealistic, because in any given period individuals and institutions were capable of varying their approaches to violence. Reactions depended on context. The crucial element in the medieval world's relationship with violence was choice. Lay society knew this instinctively whenever it came to assess conduct. Was, for example, one knight sufficiently closely related to another to warrant inclusion in a vendetta, either as an aggressor or a potential victim? Was military service on a proposed campaign covered by the contractual obligations which a vassal owed to his lord? Did a given criminal's offence merit execution, and had he been convicted by a competent authority? How perilous need a knight's predicament in battle be, or how desperate the condition of a besieged castle, before surrender could be countenanced without dishonour? The list of such questions is potentially very long because reactions to violence were nuanced by value judgements based on a host of variables.



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The Church approached violence in essentially the same way, though its fund of accumulated learning and near-monopoly of the written word naturally enabled it to deal more confidently than the laity on the level of theory and abstraction. Above all, the Church was equipped to impose a degree of systematization and consistency upon the issues which violence raised. It had inherited from Roman Law, the Old and New Testaments, and the early Christian Fathers, pre-eminently St Augustine of Hippo (354–430), various terms of reference by which to analyse instances of violence and pronounce upon their quality. The standard position, which became associated with Augustine and was refined in later centuries, was that the moral rectitude of an act could not be judged simply by examining the physical event in isolation: violence was validated to a greater or lesser degree by the state of mind of those responsible, the ends sought, and the competence of the individual or body which authorized the act.

Thus allowed considerable ideological flexibility, the Church was able to take an active interest in warfare on a number of fronts, including those areas where Latin Christendom came into direct contact with the Muslim world. The second half of the eleventh century was a period of Latin expansion. In the Iberian peninsula the small Christian states in the north were learning to exploit political weakness in Muslim al-Andalus. The most impressive gain was made when Toledo, once the capital of the Visigothic kingdom which had been destroyed by Arab and Berber invaders in the eighth century, fell to King Alfonso VI of León-Castile in 1085. In Sicily Norman warlords, already the dominant force on the southern Italian mainland, gradually eliminated Muslim power between 1061 and 1091. The popes were generally supportive of this expansion. Theirs was not the decisive contribution which brought about Christian successes, for they could do little more than give their encouragement and hope to supervise the difficult task of reorganizing the Church in conquered territories. But the experience of Spain and Sicily was significant because it meant that for two generations before the First Crusade the Church's central authorities came to see the West as engaged in a single struggle characterized by its deep religious colouring. What the Mediterranean theatres of war had in common, irrespective of the specific circumstances in each case, was that formerly Christian lands were being wrested from infidel control. Consequently the Holy Land, which had been overrun by the Arabs in the seventh century, was bound to attract the Church's attention sooner or later.

It is important to note a distinction between the senior clerical policy-makers who would one day devise the First Crusade and the lay people who would volunteer to go on it. The perspective of a Mediterranean-wide struggle was visible only to those institutions, in particular the papacy, which had the intelligence networks, grasp of geography, and sense of long historical tradition to take a broad overview of Christendom and its threatened predicament, real or supposed. This is a point which needs to be emphasized because the terminology of the crusade is often applied inaccurately to all the occasions in the decades before 1095 when Christians and Muslims found themselves coming to blows. An idea which underpins the imprecise usage is that the First Crusade was the last in, and the culmination of, a series of wars

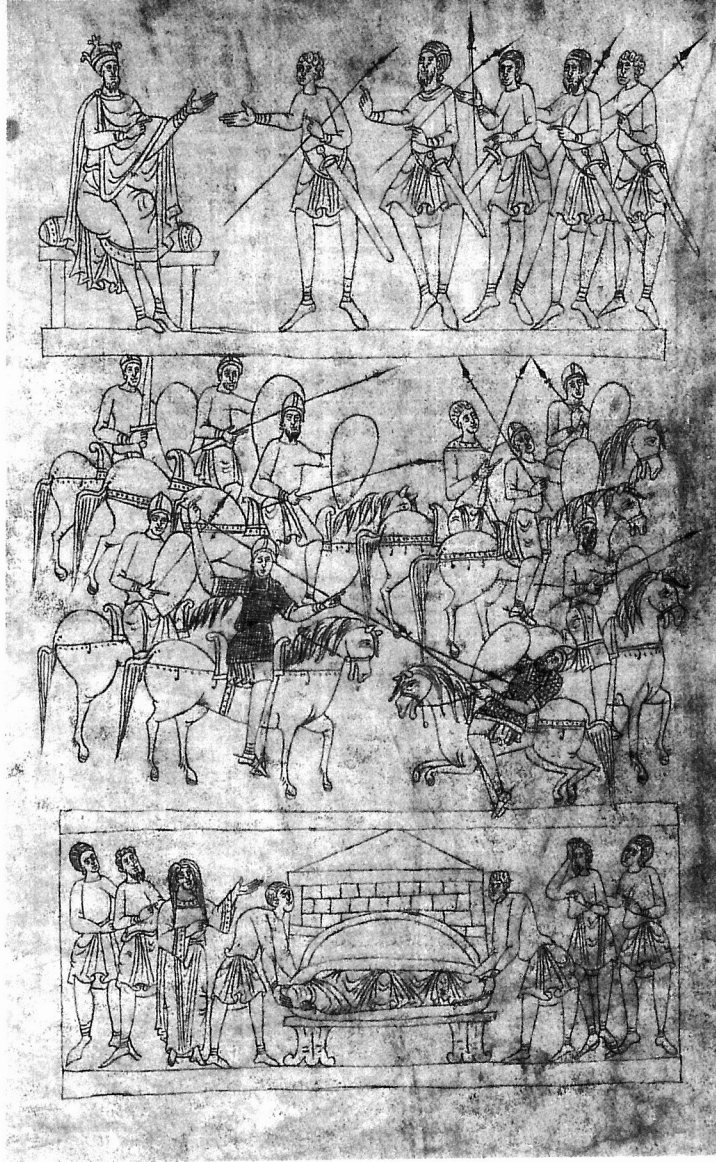


in the eleventh century. The First Crusade had introduced a new element into the history of the West. There is plenty of evidence to show that the crusades of 1095–6 are precisely because they reflected upon the Christianization of a vast and important and mysterious world. It should be noted that the crusades depend on

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MOUNTED WARRIORS in eleventh-century Spain. In the thirty years before the First Crusade the frequency and intensity of warfare between Muslims and Latin Christians increased. The struggles in Spain and Sicily, though not crusades, were significant precedents to the extent that they contributed towards a mood of religious confrontation and belligerency within the papacy.

in the eleventh century which had been crusading in character, effectively 'trial runs' which had introduced Europeans to the essential features of the crusade. This is an untenable view. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that people regarded Pope Urban II's crusade appeal of 1095-6 as something of a shock to the communal system: it was felt to be effective precisely because it was different from anything attempted before. Contemporary commentators reflecting upon the crusade's attraction seldom argued in terms of a continuation and amplification of a pressing anti-Muslim struggle. If they did they tended to hark back to the distant and mythologized world of Charlemagne (d. 814) and his Frankish empire rather than to much more recent events in Spain or Sicily.

It should be noted that the response of western Europeans to the First Crusade did not depend on a developed hatred of Islam and all things Muslim. There existed, to be sure,

crude stereotypes and misapprehensions: it was supposed that Muslims were idolatrous polytheists, and fabulous stories circulated about the life of the Prophet Muhammad. But such ideas fell far short of amounting to a coherent set of prejudices which could motivate people to uproot themselves from their homes and families in the dangerous and costly pursuit of enemies in distant places. Those first crusaders who had gained prior experience of the Muslim world were much more likely to have done so on an unarmed pilgrimage to Jerusalem than on the battlefield. Most had never seen a Muslim before. It is significant that the crusaders experienced mixed feelings once they had grown familiar with their enemies' methods. They were so impressed by the fighting qualities of the Turks that they speculated whether their resilient adversaries might in fact be distant relatives, a sort of lost tribe which centuries before had been diverted from its migration towards Europe and Christian civilization. This was no idle compliment in an age when character traits were believed to be transmitted by blood and stories about the descent of peoples from biblical or mythical forebears went to the very heart of Europeans' sense of historical identity and communal worth.

Popular understanding of the crusades nowadays tends to think in terms of a great contest between faiths fuelled by religious fanaticism. This perception is bound up with modern sensibilities about religious discrimination, and it also has resonances in reactions to current political conflicts in the Near East and elsewhere. But it is a perspective which, at least as far as the First Crusade is concerned, needs to be rejected. The thrust of research into crusading in recent decades has been to focus at least as much attention on ideas and institutions in the West as on events in the East. Crusading used to be regarded as operating on the margins of western Europe's historical development: it was a series of rather exotic and irrational episodes of limited significance. The study of the crusades, moreover, tended to be dominated by scholars who approached the subject from specialisms in eastern Christian or Muslim culture, which meant that their judgements were often unduly harsh. But now medievalists have become more concerned to integrate crusading within the broader history of western civilization. An important element of this approach has been an examination of those features of western Europeans' religious, cultural, and social experience which can account for the enthusiastic interest shown in the crusades.

What, then, was it about late eleventh-century Europe which made the First Crusade possible? One basic feature was the thorough militarization of society, a characteristic rooted in long centuries of development. The political units which had emerged from the slow and painful dissolution of the western Roman empire were dominated by aristocratic kindreds which derived their wealth and power from the control of land and asserted their status by leadership in war. An inescapable fact of life in medieval Europe was that governments lacked the resources, administrative expertise, and communications to impose themselves upon society unaided. The best they could hope for was to reach accommodations with the ruling élites which had day-to-day power on the ground. The ideal arrangement was for central authority (usually a king) and regional warlords to find a common purpose so that cooperation and the pursuit of self-interest could combine harmoniously. The ways in which

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