

# The Spread of Anti-Islamic Sentiment in Middle Age Europe

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The history surrounding the First Crusade is unique in its relation to religious authorities' role in influencing society. Before the First Crusade, anti-Islamic sentiment existed throughout Europe from Muslim conflicts such as the Reconquista. Pope Urban II called upon European Christians during the Council of Clermont in 1095 to free the Holy Land. This speech then inspired the pan-European movement of the First Crusade. Anti-Islamic rhetoric gained traction from the desire to return the Papacy to power. The perpetuation of propaganda and negative rhetoric in feudal Europe and the recollections of survivors of the Crusades ingrained the accepted idea of Islamic barbarism into European culture. The impact of anti-Islamic rhetoric when initiated by the Church was significant because it inspired a pan-European response, which initiated the first portion of one of the longest and most deadly wars in human history. By portraying the Muslims as enemies of Christianity, Pope Urban II's speech and accounts from crusaders reinforced a sense of Christian identity that inspired a pattern of violence against non-Christians for centuries to come.

Resources such as *What Were the Crusades?* by Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The Concise History of the Crusades* by Thomas F. Madden and *A History of Medieval Europe: From Constantine to Saint Louis* by R.H.C Davis provide context to the state of Europe

and a reconstruction of the Crusades. Riley-Smith, Madden, and Davis' pieces are all examples of deep chronologies of the Crusade period, but they do not focus on the evolution, implementation and impact of anti-Islamic rhetoric. In contrast, *Sons of Ishmael: Muslims through European Eyes in the Middle Ages* by John Victor Tolan and *Peter the Hermit: A Tale of Enthusiasm* by Daniel A. Goodsell dive into the concept of the development and distribution of this negative rhetoric but only preceding the First Crusade, not during or after. While the journal article, "The Council of Clermont (1095), and Latin Christian Society," discusses the purpose of the Council of Clermont in 1095 and the sequence of events at this moment in history, it does not consider the specific words spoken by Pope Urban II during his infamous speech and its effect on its listeners. Using these secondary sources in conjunction with primary sources from the First Crusade period enables a comprehensible narrative to be constructed of how anti-Islamic rhetoric gained traction and escalated in the Middle Ages.

The renowned conquest of the Crusades was a series of religiously inspired wars approximately between the years of 1095 and 1400, with the intention of Latin Christians recovering Jerusalem from Islamic rule. The Crusades were not the first set of holy wars. The concept existed in Islam nearly since its inception considering the

Prophet Muhammad had armies at his disposal during his reign.<sup>1</sup> It was not until 312 CE when the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity that a military was established in the name of Christ.<sup>2</sup> It is important to distinguish that not every conflict between Europeans and Muslims qualified as a 'crusade'. The idea of a war in the name of Christianity's deity directly contradicted the Fifth Commandment ("Thou shall not kill"), so for a violent conflict to be justifiable it had to be initiated for the purpose of enacting God's will.<sup>3</sup> This religious justification was one of the factors which initiated the rise of anti-Islamic sentiment in Europe.

Before the initiation of the First Crusade, sentiments towards Islam were divided amongst scholars. Some intellectuals had great appreciation for the academic and cultural advancements of the Islamic world. Heavy scrutinization mostly came from the works of Christian scholars. Many Christian authors perpetuated the narrative of Muslims practicing paganism<sup>4</sup>, a sin in the eyes of the Catholic Church. Other authors had researched the Islamic faith and used this knowledge to spread false perceptions. Reconstructions of the Prophet Muhammad's death written before the Crusades shed unfavorable light on Islam. For example, such negative rhetoric would be from an anonymous Christian author from the Iberian Peninsula, who in his critique displayed a vast knowledge of the Arab religion by describing Muhammad's first and second

marriage, the titles of Quranic Suras, as well as the divorce of one his disciples.<sup>5</sup> In these retellings, the Christian author twists these narratives dramatically and alludes to Muhammad being the Anti-Christ, especially through the depiction of his death. In this version of Muhammad's death, the author emphasizes the rotting of the false prophet's corpse, being a sign of him not being in God's favor.<sup>6</sup> This view became prominent in the world of scholarship and would aid the Pope's ammunition during his speech in Clermont.

In the decades leading up to the First Crusade, the papacy was gradually losing influence over the lives of medieval Christians. After decades of fighting invaders such as the Vikings and the Hungarians, the Latin Christians in Europe became increasingly divided. A focal point in this separation was the Investiture Controversy, a conflict initiated by medieval state's opinions concerning who has the power to appoint clergy members. This widespread disagreement led reigning popes during the 11th and 12th centuries to undermine European monarchies' authorities and initiated a civil war in Germany.<sup>7</sup> The waning authority of royalty led to an increase of violence between regions, a trend that the Church attempted and failed to hinder with movements such as the Peace of God and the Truce of God. This jurisdiction threatened religious sanctions against those who attacked noncombatants or engaged in warfare on holy days.<sup>8</sup>

Pope Urban II recognized an opportunity

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1 Thomas F. Madden, *The Concise History of the Crusades* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014): 14.

2 Madden, *The Concise History of the Crusades*: 13.

3 Jonathan Riley-Smith, *What Were the Crusades?* (The Macmillan Press LTD, 1977): 16

4 John Victor Tolan, *Sons of Ishmael: Muslims through European Eyes in the Middle Ages* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013): 67.

5 Tolan, *Sons of Ishmael: Muslims through European Eyes in the Middle Ages*: 22.

6 Tolan, *Sons of Ishmael: Muslims through European Eyes in the Middle Ages*: 23.

7 R. H. C. Davis, *A History of Medieval Europe: From Constantine to Saint Louis* (Taylor and Francis, 2013): 273

8 Madden, *The Concise History of the Crusades*: 17.

to combat this power dynamic when he received a message from Alexios I Komnenos, the Christian emperor of the Byzantines, in 1094. The Seljuk Turks, an Islamic and nomadic people, were quickly taking control of Asia Minor, and the Emperor asked the Pope for military assistance. In his famous speech at the Council of Clermont in 1095, Urban II announced a call to action for Latin Christians to take up arms and reclaim the Holy Land.

The Council of Clermont was initiated by Pope Urban II in November of 1095 for the purpose of reforming the church. The location, Clermont, was by no means a political or ecclesiastical nucleus. Against the wishes of both Vézelay and Le Puy, Pope Urban decided to follow his previous trend of holding his councils beyond Rome.<sup>9</sup> Upon learning of the location of the Council and the potential announcement of the crusade, Archbishop Renaud of Reims made arrangements to have “the most eminent men of your diocese, and especially Count Baldwin of Mons...” present at the event.<sup>10</sup> Although the exact numbers of attendees is unclear to historians, it is accepted that bishops, archbishops,

abbots, clerics, and laymen attended the Council.

An official transcript of Pope Urban II’s words during the Council of Clermont does not exist. The historical reconstruction of this speech is created through witness recollection as well as interpretations from secondary sources. The versions of this speech that would most closely reflect the actual words spoken by Pope Urban II would be the interpretations of Guibert de Nogent, Robert the Monk, and Fulcher of Chartres, as these figures were believed to have been present at the Council of Clermont in 1095. In these recollections, Muslims are accused of committing cruel acts against Christians, such as the destructions of churches<sup>11</sup> and heinous forms of torture such as circumcision and rape.<sup>12</sup> These versions also assigned numerous villainous titles to the Muslims: vile, despised<sup>13</sup> and accursed race.<sup>14</sup> The version by Guibert de Nogent calls Muslims “pagans” and insinuated they were in alignment with the Antichrist.<sup>15</sup> This specific word choice not only resonated with the words of the scholars who defiled Islam, but with the uneducated population as they understood the sin associated

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9 Robert Somerville, “The Council of Clermont (1095), and Latin Christian Society” *Archivum Historiae Pontificiae* Vol. 12 (1974): 29

10 Somerville, “The Council of Clermont (1095), and Latin Christian Society”: 29

11 Paul Halsall, “Urban II (1088-1099):Speech at Council of Clermont, 1095, Five versions of the Speech”, by Robert the Monk: *Historia Hierosolymitana*. in [RHC, Occ III.], Internet History Sourcebooks Project, November 1996. November, 2021, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/urban2-5vers.asp>

12 Halsall, “Urban II (1088-1099):Speech at Council of Clermont, 1095, Five versions of the Speech”, by Fulcher of Chartres: *Gesta Francorum Jerusalem Expugnantium*, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/urban2-5vers.asp>

13 Halsall, “Urban II (1088-1099):Speech at Council of Clermont, 1095, Five versions of the Speech”, by Fulcher of Chartres: *Gesta Francorum Jerusalem Expugnantium*, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/urban2-5vers.asp>

14 Halsall “Urban II (1088-1099):Speech at Council of Clermont, 1095, Five versions of the Speech”, by Robert the Monk: *Historia Hierosolymitana*. in [RHC, Occ III.], <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/urban2-5vers.asp>

15 Halsall “Urban II (1088-1099):Speech at Council of Clermont, 1095, Five versions of the Speech”, by Guibert de Nogent: *Historia quae dicitur Gesta*, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/urban2-5vers.asp>

with practicing paganism.

Other versions of the Council of Clermont such as the Gesta Version, the version by Balderic of Dol, and the Gentile version may not be the most reliable sources in terms of accuracy but are important for alternative reasons. These revisions of Pope Urban II's speech were written by authors who were not present to witness it, yet they heavily emphasize specific anti-Islamic themes decades later. In Balderic of Dol's version he iterated claims of violence committed by Muslims similar to those of Pope Urban II and wrote "...the oppressors of children, plunderers of widows; you, guilty of homicide, of sacrilege, robbers of another's rights; you who await the pay of thieves for the shedding of Christian blood...".<sup>16</sup> These versions of the Council of Clermont are important because of the ideas and details that were deemed important and translated from the original speech. As the audience were either devoted members of the clergy or the uneducated public, they were quite receptive to the anti-Islamic sentiments. Positive perceptions of the Islamic world were only held amongst scholars and intellectuals who were not strongly affiliated with Christianity; these individuals were not present at the Council of Clermont. It was for this reason that this negative rhetoric, as it was so clearly remembered and reiterated for years after the announcement.

After the Council of Clermont, preachers and bishops marched across Europe to spread the word of the crusade. Their persuasive tactics not

only included asserting their religious authority while reciting specific Scripture and advertising promises of eternal life, but artistic depictions of the apparent cruelties committed by the Muslims. Some of these images included Christ's crucifixion, but instead of the Romans acting as the torturers during this event they were replaced by Muslims<sup>17</sup> who were distinguished by their turbans. The drive from the Church successfully spread the news of the Crusade, but individual contributions would prove to be crucial for the war effort.

In contrast to the persuasion from authoritative figures, one common man played a crucial role in recruiting for the People's Crusade in 1095: Peter the Hermit. Peter the Hermit was a poor old man, a social outcast who rode on the back of a donkey across multiple regions of Europe proclaiming the news of the crusade.<sup>18</sup> This man strongly believed the large-scale preparations from the Church and nobility were unnecessary, that if Christians fought in the name of God they could not possibly lose.<sup>19</sup> Peter the Hermit had a variety of persuasive content at his disposal, one of these being his own experience in Jerusalem bearing witness to the horrific crimes committed against Christians.<sup>20</sup> Historians also believed that Peter the Hermit carried with him a letter he claimed to be a direct message from God. In this letter, God called out to all Christians to aid in the fight against the Turks so that He may punish them.<sup>21</sup> The combination of details of his own experiences in the East, a considerably powerful message, and his

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16 Halsall "Urban II (1088-1099):Speech at Council of Clermont, 1095, Five versions of the Speech", by Balderic of Dol, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/urban2-5vers.asp>

17 Madden, *The Concise History of the Crusades*: 19.

18 Daniel A. Goodsell, *Peter the Hermit: A Tale of Enthusiasm* (New York: NY: Eaton and Mains, 2007): 32.

19 Goodsell, *Peter the Hermit: A Tale of Enthusiasm*: 24.

20 Goodsell, *Peter the Hermit: A Tale of Enthusiasm*: 36.

21 Madden, *The Concise History of the Crusades*: 24.

own fiery and persuasive charisma made Peter the Hermit capable of recruiting a substantial army of commonfolk which included women, children and elderly from all over Europe.<sup>22</sup> Although the People's Crusade failed almost immediately upon entering the East, the ability of Peter the Hermit to recruit as many serfs as he did proves the effectiveness of the message.

It is true that anti-Muslim sentiments already existed in Europe previous to the Crusades, some of the most prominent examples during the Reconquista. The Spanish Reconquista was a conflict between Spanish Christians and Muslim invaders over territory on the Iberian Peninsula starting in the 8th century B.C.E. This conflict not only predated the First Crusade, but outlasted it by hundreds of years. Although a few notable historical figures such as the French king Charlemagne provided aid to this religious conquest, the war on the Iberian Peninsula did not receive an amount of attention and aid comparable to the Crusades because it was not directly advertised by the Papacy. Unlike the First Crusade, the Reconquista remained a locally confined conflict and did not inspire hundreds of Europeans to cross the continent to fight alongside their fellow Christians.

The widespread legacy of Islamic barbarism in survivor recollections of the First Crusade helped continue the trend of anti-Islamic sentiment in Middle Age Europe. Firsthand accounts of the war are imperative to this argument because not only

do they reconstruct the events of the war, but they also penetrate the mindsets of the individuals who fought in it. In a recollection of the siege of Antioch in 1097 from Raymond of Aguilers, the crusader described a moment in battle where their enemy, the Turks, ambushed the European soldiers. In this account he claimed, "The enemy came...began to kill our men who they found thus straggling and unarmed..."<sup>23</sup> The choice to include this specific detail of the battle is important because it specifically defiles their Muslim foes, making them appear ruthless and dishonorable.

Other recollections focus on disgracing the eastern armies on the grounds of religion. Not only are there multiple references to their foes' alleged allegiance to paganism,<sup>24</sup> but also to their apparent demonic nature. In a retelling of the Battle of Dorylaeum on July 1st in 1097 by the anonymous *Gesta Francorum*, the European recalls the actions of their Islamic opponents as they rushed into battle. According to *Gesta*, "The Turks began to whistle and chatter and shout...uttering a diabolical sound, I know not how, in their own tongue...shouting from afar with demoniacal voices..."<sup>25</sup> The choice for *Gesta* to go on in detail concerning the unholy nature of the Turks' language displays the contempt he held for his foes. Another example of *Gesta's* contempt is seen in his recount of the capture of the city Jerusalem in 1099. When retelling the third day of the siege, he valiantly describes his European crusaders as they fought the Saracens, writing, "They

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22 Goodsell, *Peter the Hermit: A Tale of Enthusiasm*: 44.

23 August C Krey, *The First Crusade: The Accounts of Eye-Witness and Participants* (Evolution Publishing, 2012), Chapter 4: From Nicaea to Antioch, by Raymond of Aguilers: 144-145

24 Krey, *The First Crusade: The Accounts of Eye-Witness and Participants*, Chapter 4: From Nicaea to Antioch. by Raymond of Aguilers: 131, 137

25 Krey, *The First Crusade: The Accounts of Eye-Witness and Participants*, Chapter 4: From Nicaea to Antioch, by Gesta Francorum: 125

encountered a force of two hundred Arabs, and the soldiers of Christ fought these unbelievers...”<sup>26</sup> By analyzing the specific rhetoric used in firsthand accounts of the war, a greater understanding of the crusaders’ mentality and motives is reached.

After the First Crusade such rhetoric continued to prosper and some propaganda was created with the intent of instigating further conflict. This anti-Islamic sentiment is transparent in the transcript of “A Christian/Moslem Debate of the 12th Century” which dates back to the year 1165. This translation includes the first three installments of a debate between Christian Abbot George and Muslim clerics during the reign of Saladin. During this debate, the Christian monk criticized his opponent by addressing his inherently aggressive nature. This critique is recorded as such: “Abu-Salamah, we do not want to give lies instead of truth. But we fear that you bring lies following the roughness of your nature...”<sup>27</sup> In this debate, the monk also alludes to the unholy nature of the Islamic religion by stating that the only satanic content in this debate has come from Muhammad and the Qur’an.<sup>28</sup> The most compelling piece of evidence in this transcription is the final line of the text, which is not a line of dialogue but instead

a described action; the transcriber writes, “Then Abdul-Fadl, ashamed, went away...”<sup>29</sup> This example is important because of its choice of wording. By including the word “ashamed,” the transcriber is insinuating the cleric lost the debate and that he became doubtful of his beliefs. This insinuation is critical to its audience’s interpretation and it clearly implies Christian superiority.

An elaborate example of such rhetoric would be the Morgan Crusader Bible; this piece of art included an extensive series of illustrations—some infused with liquid gold—depicting biblical events and was commissioned by the French King Louis IX in 1250. The propaganda depicted a wide variety of events, many of them moments of graphic violence during the First Crusade. In the illustrations, images are depicted of the brutal slaughtering of their Arab foes, European crusaders carrying the heads of deceased Muslims as trophies of war, and the burning of the enemy’s decapitated body.<sup>30</sup> The graphic nature of these illustrations was quite intentional, according to Faksimile Verlag Luzern’s informational pamphlet: “The artists were required to direct their attention to the war scene in order to underline the importance of the crusades and to provide encouragement for the conquest of

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26 Krey, *The First Crusade: The Accounts of Eye-Witness and Participants*, Chapter 4: From Nicaea to Antioch, by Gesta Francorum: 303

27 Paul Halsall, “A Christian/Moslem Debate of the 12th Century”, Internet History Sourcebooks Project, November 1996. November, 2021, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/christ-muslim-debate.asp>.

28 Halsall “A Christian/Moslem Debate of the 12th Century”, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/christ-muslim-debate.asp>.

29 Halsall “A Christian/Moslem Debate of the 12th Century”, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/christ-muslim-debate.asp>.

30 Daniel H Weiss., Louis IX, King of France, J. Paul Getty Museum, Pierpont Morgan Library, and Bibliothèque nationale (France). *Die Kreuzritterbibel: The Morgan Crusader Bible = La Bible Des Croisades*. New York;Luzern;: Faksimile Verlag, 1998.



the Holy Land...”<sup>31</sup> These specific instructions from King Louis IX indicate the continuation of Islamic contempt and the desire to reconquer the Holy Land.

The anti-Muslim rhetoric utilized by Pope Urban II at the Council of Clermont and the persuasive language and imagery produced by Christian scholars, preachers and Peter the Hermit, encouraged and inspired the pan-European response that was the First Crusade. The crusaders, common folk and nobility alike, justified the waging of war on

the Muslims through the words and encouragement spread by the Church. Although such sentiments existed prior to the conflict, specific word and imagery choices enabled these ideas to take root and be intensified in the uneducated public over the course of the war. By analyzing the timeline of this rhetoric’s implementation, a greater understanding is attained as to how one of the longest and bloodiest wars in history was effectuated.

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