

# **The Barbarization of the Northerners as a result of the First Crusade**

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by

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The first crusader to enter the wall of the Holy City of Jerusalem on 15th July nine hundred years ago was not a Dane, nor an Englishman, a Norwegian, or a Scot. Nor was he a Frenchman, although he could easily have been. On the 14th July, Raymond of St. Gilles had had his siege tower pushed to the wall, but the defenders here were too strong and he could not enter. The first one to set foot on the wall became instead a Flemish knight by name of Letold from Tourney, and he was immediately followed by Gottfried of Bouillon and by Tancred. In the forefront of the crusading army in 1099 were Flemish and French and Norman-Italian knights. This is important to keep in mind because what I shall try to argue in this short presentation is that especially the French crusaders have been give far to much prominence in historical literature for political and theological reasons. This does not mean, however, that the French crusaders were of no importance at all or did not participate in the First Crusade, but it simply means that I want here to discuss the role of other participants.

I shall talk first about some of the crusade chronicles till about 1120, second about other evidences for Northern European and Scandinavian participation in the first Crusade; and third about modern Danish historiography and its dependency upon the medieval chroniclers.

## **I Pope Urban II's sermon**

The question is simply: who participated in the First Crusade? The answer to that question was elaborated upon and given different formulation during the first generation of crusading historians. Maybe the earliest chronicle was the anonymous *Gesta Francorum*, written by a member of the contingent of the Norman ruler Bohemund before 1100. According to him, the crusade began as a major movement in all regions of France, initiated by the sermon of pope Urban II in Clermont. When the words of this sermon spread through the patrias, the duchies and counties, of France, the French began to have crosses sewn on their shoulders and wanted to follow Christ. They formed three major groups taking three different routes to Constantinople and to the Holy Land - and here it becomes complicated as regards terminology. The *franci* of the chronicle first designates the inhabitants of France, but they then formed three groups consisting of people from France, from Southern France - Raymond of St. Gilles - and of people from Flanders and Southern Italy. The anonymous author here changes the meaning of the word *franci* to cover not only those from France, but also those following these French. Later in his narrative, the author distinguished between French and for example Normans, so he was, of course, aware of the difference between these groups which must led to the conclusion that the shift in the use of the word *franci* in the opening chapters is deliberate. It reflects his concept of the crusade as being a French movement, which was joined by Norman and Flemish princes. Other participants are not mentioned in the introduction. This is also the case with the other chroniclers who had participated in the First Crusade themselves or came immediately after the conquest as Fulch of Chartres, Peter Tudebode, and Raymund of Agiler.

Albert of Achen, however, who wrote shortly after the First Crusade, had a considerably broader concept of the crusade. According to him, it began after the sermon of Pope Urban in France where the magnates made a conjuration and swore with their right hand to go on the holy way to the sepulcher of the Lord. In divine confirmation of this oath happened a big earthquake that was nothing but the marching legions from different kingdoms, not only France, but also Lothringen, Germany, England, and Denmark. So although the initiative was originally French, Albert already in his opening chapter emphasizes that the movement from the beginning attracted followers from other countries. Why were these mentioned specifically?

One reason is of course that it is true, that they actually participated. Another and more important is that the whole understanding of the First Crusade must have changed very much after the actual conquest of Jerusalem. Modern crusade historians have argued, that the crusaders had had no plan and no idea about what to do with Jerusalem before the conquest. The factual possession of the Holy City seems to have come as a surprise to the crusaders. And this led to speculations about why the crusaders had succeeded in such a holy expedition, which had never been undertaken by anyone before in history. The answer of contemporaries was that "God wants it", that the crusade was a war of God through all Latin Christians. Theologically speaking, the crusade could not have been a French expedition, but must have been a mass movement including all Christians. This is an important reason why chroniclers began to include more and more people among the participants in the First Crusade.

This is the case in the chronicle of Baldric of Bourgeuil, written 1108. Baldric is much dependant upon the anonymous *Gesta Francorum*, but his introduction is very different from this work. Baldric begins in high rhetorical style: "Who ever heard about so many princes and dukes and nobles and foot soldiers fighting without a king, without an emperor." This could only be explained by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit who is now introduced as the driving force behind the crusade. Baldric continued that the sermon of Urban had inspired the great princes of France and Flanders to launch the crusade, and that he intends to describe their great deeds later in the chronicle. This is actually also what he does: His story is concerned with the French and Flemish leaders; but before he concentrates upon them, he concludes his introduction

by describing, how the rumor of Urban's preaching spread to all Christianity. "It came to England and the other maritime islands separated from France by the abyss of the wave-sounding sea"; it came to Bretagne, to Gascogne, to Galicia in Spain, and it came to the cities of Venice, Genua and Pisa which provided ships for the army. What we see in the introduction of Baldric's is an understanding of the crusade as having a center - in France - but also as being a mass movement including the peoples of the periphery of Christianity - along the shores of Western Europe. This dichotomy between center and periphery is mentioned only by Baldric, it is not explained or analyzed, as it was to be by other historians.

One of these was Guibert of Nogent, who also used the *Gesta Francorum* extensively, who also wrote around 1108, who also wrote in Northern France as did Baldric, and who should also describe the crusade as both a mass movement and as a specific French expedition. Guibert entitled his work *Gesta dei per Francos*, The deeds of God by the French, and they are the heroes of his narrative. He sums up neatly in conclusion that the conquest of Jerusalem was not due to military tactic as victories were in Antiquity, but to faith and strength and to French audacity and bravery. But in his introduction, Guibert emphasized how the crusade began as a mass movement without leaders. The crusaders were like grass hoppers that have no king but cover the whole earth with their crowds. When it is cold they do nothing, but when they are warmed by the sun - in this context the sun of justice, they begin to swarm. The exhortation of the pope to go on crusade came to the French people alone; but the heath of the French attracted all other peoples who swarmed towards the French, tried to imitate them and to communicate with them. People came from the remotest confines of the Ocean. You would see groups of Scots coming from their damp and marshy border regions, barelegged and with filthy cloaks, wild and ferocious at home but peaceful elsewhere, carrying their ridiculous old-fashioned weapons in great quantities, but they would give help to the French by their piety and devotion. Guibert himself had heard numbers of men from barbarian peoples who had no known language but could only cross their fingers to show that they were joining the crusade.

What Guibert was doing was not only to operate with a French center and a common Christian periphery of the crusading movement. He also introduced a new distinction between a French center that militarily conquered Jerusalem and a barbarian periphery or a barbarian north that participated and gave spiritual help, but which meant nothing in military terms.

This barbarization of the northerners became a success in the sense, that the distinction of Guibert was taken over and elaborated on by later historians, also those writing outside French territory. Just a single quotation from one of these must suffice. William of Malmesbury wrote around 1120: "Not only the Mediterraneans, but also those on the farthest away islands and the barbarian nations were moved by love of God". Fields were left without farmers, houses without inhabitants. The Welsh left their poaching, the Scots their familiarity with flies, the Norwegians their gorging in fish, and the Danes their continuous drinking to participate in the crusade. So the northerners participated, but they were depicted as barbarians.

William of Malmesbury had a scientific explanation for this, which he attributed to Urban II. In the long rendering of the pope's sermon in Clermont, William let the pope say that nations live under different climates. In the south under the burning sun, the peoples are dried out and have little blood, but know a lot. They are wise, but not fighters, as attested by the Turkish tactic of fleeing and avoiding open battles. The Turkish success in Spain and Northern Africa is caused by their cunningness and their use of poisoned arrows. In the cold north, in contrast, people are remote from the warmth of the sun, they are un-reflective, but fight willingly because they are filled with blood in abundance. "But you - and here Urban is addressing the French audience - you live in the temperate zone, you do not lack prudence, and you have enough blood to show contempt for death and wounds, our are outstanding in both knowledge and strength, you go on this glorious expedition". With William of Malmesbury, the barbarization of the

northerners is made not only a question of cultural difference, but also an unavoidable and unchangeable scientific fact.

## II Response in the North

Is it true then that the crusading appeal was directed primarily to the nation or the people of the French, as medieval authors claimed more and more insistently throughout the twelfth century. Maybe not.

A very different picture has been presented recently, by John France and by J. Riley-Smith in his book on the first crusaders. Those responding to pope Urban's sermon were vassals of the pope - vassalli sancti Petri - or they belonged to families with a strong tradition for such vassalage. The personal loyalty towards the pope was the driving force, not the belonging to an ethnic or linguistic group. This is confirmed by the fact that in certain areas, members of one family would go on crusade, while members of the neighboring family would not. A great number of such vassals of St. Peter actually lived in France, but many also lived in the periphery - perhaps more than we can realize now, because the sources from the peripheral countries are much fewer than from France.

One such vassal of St. Peter was the Danish King Sven Estridsen who died 1076. Among his many sons, one was married into the ducal family of Flanders that played a decisive role in the First Crusade. Another son actually participated in the crusade, according to Albert of Achen accompanied by 1500 Danish knights and by his fiancé, the daughter of the Duke of Burgundy. A third son went on a crusade in 1103, but died on his way on Cyprus. A fourth son was engaged in a crusade-like war against Slavs in 1108. One grandson went crusading to the Holy Land in 1101 and was even offered the crown of Jerusalem in 1123, which he prudently refused. Other grandsons and great grandsons took the cross - to the Holy Land or during the twelfth century to the campaigns in the Baltic against Slavs.

These informations can be extracted from brief references in charters or annals or from later sources, but put together they indicate that there must have been a very strong crusading tradition in the Danish royal families and probably also among Danish magnates. One narrative from about 1191 refers to such a tradition, but we have no other sources left to confirm that.

If this claim is true - that Denmark and probably also other countries on the northern periphery were actively engaged in crusading, why do we not know more about it; why has it not become part of our common understanding of crusade history?

One explanation is the very basic that people in the maritime periphery sailed to the Holy Land, they did not walk. In contrast to the French and German crusaders, they would meet few people and would not pass through cities, and their presence would not be noted in the city-annals.

Another reason is the uneven distribution of sources. There are fewer sources left from the North because of an unlucky mixture of Lutheran reformation during which much of the parchment from popish time simply was thrown out, and later, extremely centralized governments that collected all archival material in one place where most of it disappeared if the place burned as happened in Copenhagen in 1728. Also, there are no contemporary great narrative sources from the north that could have described the crusaders' expedition and praised their heroic efforts.

A third reason is, as indicated above, that the crusade historical tradition was formulated in the early

twelfth century in Northern France which deliberately distinguished between French, and barbarians of no importance. This explains, I think, why modern crusading historians have paid little attention to the countries in the periphery. It does perhaps also explain, why national historians in e.g. Scandinavian countries to a large extent seem to have neglected crusading history totally. But there are more reasons for this neglect, and I would like, in conclusion, to point to a few of them.

### **III Modern Danish historiography**

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, crusading and chivalry were integrated parts of many Danish historians' understanding of their own past. Such studies reached a zenith with the magisterial work of - actually a French scholar - Paul Riant, on Scandinavian pilgrimage and crusading to the Holy Land. His book came in 1865 and was soon translated into Danish. But in 1864, Denmark had lost about one fifth of its territory to Prussia. This was felt to be a national catastrophe, and among historians it led to a narrow focusing upon the history of the modern nation state, the history of the area within the modern borders and not far away as in Palestine. It also led to an understanding of Danish history as solely dictated by the relationship to the German neighbor, not to other countries further south. It led also to an attempt to understand Danish history as an internal development, independent from and different from the history of other European countries.

These trends among Danish historians were combined with a strong emphasis upon economic and agrarian history in which there was no room for crusading ideals. The book of Paul Riant came, thus, at the worst possible moment. In spite of his great work, in spite of all the material he collected, his book was simply passed over in silence by Danish medieval historians. They did not use him; they did not even refer to him in the bibliographies of their books. And when they came across Danish medieval sources that unequivocally spoke about crusades - as the Danish expeditions in the Baltic area in the thirteenth century - these historians would dismiss them as not genuine crusades, but simply as a pretext for economic exploitation.

Crusading history has since 1864 fallen outside the imagination of Danish Historians for all these reasons. But maybe also because they have taken over the medieval distinction between center and periphery, between the French and the Barbarians. Danish and Scandinavian historians have operated with a time-lack between Europe and Scandinavia, and claimed that central European institutions came to Scandinavia only some 50 or 100 years later, which is simply not the case. Mobility and adaptability was high in the Middle Ages. These historians have also sometimes contrasted individuals in North and South directly to show the backwardness of the Northerners. In 1075, pope Gregory VII wrote to the Danish king and invited him to send an army to help the pope and to send his son who would then get a duchy, probably in Italy, to fight heretics. The Danish medievalist and theologian Hal Koch commented upon this letter in 1964 and wrote that the proposal was totally unrealistic, and that a Danish prince would have made a miserable figure in the cultivated south. Hal Koch believed Danish princes in the late eleventh century to have been barbarians, and he did so because of the historical tradition created by the first generation of crusading historians in the early twelfth century.

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