

The Crusades

Three major religious groups all claimed Jerusalem in the land of Palestine as their holy city.

- To Christians, it was the place where Jesus was crucified and ascended to heaven
- To Muslims, it was the place where Muhammad ascended to heaven
- To Jews, it was the site of the ancient temple built by Solomon

In 600 CE, Arabs entered the city and took control. But the Arabs allowed Christian and Jewish pilgrims to visit Jerusalem. In fact, Jews and Christians could live in Palestine as long as they paid their taxes like everyone else.

The First Crusade:

The Problem: Around 1095, a new group of Arabs took control of Jerusalem. They closed the city to Jewish and Christian pilgrims.

The Solution: The Pope acted. He called for a crusade - a volunteer army whose goal was to retake Jerusalem. Many people volunteered. About 30,000 men left Western Europe to fight in Jerusalem.

- For knights, this was a chance to use their fighting skills, something they enjoyed and did well. They were delighted to have such a worthy battle to fight.
- For peasants, this was a chance to escape from their dreary life in the feudal system. The pope promised that if they died while fighting a holy crusade, they would automatically be welcomed into heaven.
- For others, it was a chance to have an adventure, and perhaps even to get rich.

Sign of the Crusade - The Red Cross: Each crusader had a huge red cross, made out of fabric, stitched onto their shirts or armor. It made all crusaders, irrespective of rank or background, appear to be a unified army. It reminded the crusaders that they were fighting a holy cause. The red cross was added to flags and banners

The Results: After about two years of harsh traveling, hunger, disease, freezing weather, and quarrels amongst themselves, the crusaders finally arrived in Jerusalem. After a two-month siege of the city, the city fell. Many Jews and Muslims living in the city were killed when the Christians finally entered the city. The crusaders had won back Jerusalem. Some men stayed. Some headed home. Those who returned brought back new foods and new forms of culture.

More Crusades: It was a short victory. Less than 50 years later, Muslims once again conquered Jerusalem. Again the pope called for a crusade to take back the city.

- The Second Crusade lasted from 1147-1149. It was not successful.
- The Third Crusade lasted from 1189-1192. It was not successful.

- The Fourth Crusade lasted from 1202-1204. Instead of attacking Jerusalem, the crusaders attacked Constantinople. They stole statues, money, paintings and jewelry. They burned libraries. They destroyed churches. Their excuse was that they needed money to defend Constantinople from the same fate as Jerusalem, as well as to fund the rescue of Jerusalem. The people of Constantinople did not find this excuse acceptable, and they were filled with hatred for the west.
- The Children's Crusade in 1212 was a terrible tragedy. Many thousands of French and German children died trying to reach Jerusalem. They believed God would help them because they were children. Many died of hunger. Other froze to death. When the survivors reached the Mediterranean Sea, they expected the waters to part and let them pass. When this did not happen, many tried to cross the Sea by boat – it is believed that the ships sank and/or were taken by pirates and sold into slavery.
- Over the next 70 years, there were several other crusade attempts, but they were motivated more by personal gain than by religious purpose. None succeeded. By 1291, 200 years after the first crusade, European leaders lost interest. Western Europe never admitted defeat. They simply stopped asking for new crusaders.

Although the crusaders failed in their attempts to take Jerusalem, they had a major impact on Western Europe.

They helped to break down feudalism by increasing the authority of kings.

- Some nobles died in battle without leaving an heir. Their lands passed to the king.
- Some nobles sold their land in an effort to raise money to pay the special tax levied by the king to offset the cost of the crusades.
- Some nobles gave their serfs a chance to buy their freedom in an effort to raise money they needed to buy armor and weapons
- Some young men who could buy their way out of feudal obligation joined the crusades. Many died. That reduced the work force. If a farm failed, it passed to the king.

From their exposure to superior Muslim technology, Europeans learned how to

- Build better ships
- Use a compass

Western Europe began to express an interest in trade. The crusaders brought back luxury goods. These items were vastly popular. To get more, Western Europe began to trade with her neighbors. Goods brought back included:

- Silk
- Spices
- Sugar
- Art
- Literature