CRUSADE BY CHILDREN

Trusting faith carried thousands of children to the European shores of the Mediterranean—and even aboard ships setting sail for the Muslim-held Holy Land of the Middle East—in the most remarkable Crusade of all.

By Timothy Baker Shutt

In the year 1230, a middle-aged priest returned to France after eighteen years as a slave in the household of Al-Kamil, son of the Caliph of Egypt. His duties had not been onerous, for Al-Kamil was a broad-minded man interested in his people’s Western adversaries, and he needed the services of interpreters, teachers and secretaries familiar with Western languages and letters.

In the year 1212, the future slave had set out as one of a number of enthusiastic younger clergy serving as spiritual guides to tens of thousands of northern French children seeking to win the Holy Land through innocence and simplicity of faith where the military prowess of their elders and betters had failed in the earlier Crusades. As a middle-aged man, the priest proved the sole returnee from this remarkable adventure—at least the only one of whom we know anything today. Had he died in Egypt, or had he been sold to a less understanding master than Al-Kamil (the future Sultan of Egypt), our knowledge of the 13th-century Children’s Crusade would be scanty indeed.

But the crusade in which the priest had participated was not, technically, a crusade in the sense that medieval Europeans understood the term—it had lacked Papal sanction, and its participants marched without the customary indulgences granted to those engaged in warfare to defend the Faith. It was also an extremely brief campaign, lasting only for a few surprising months during the year 1212.

Aberrant though it was, the Children’s Crusade was a revealing chapter in medieval history. It exemplified the depth of crusading zeal, the sincerely held and simple faith of the age and the excesses of which that zeal and faith were capable.

In late August 1212, ragged rows of enthusiastic children and the priests guiding them had stood on the quay at Marseilles awaiting a miracle to surpass even the wonders recorded in Scripture—they hoped for a parting of the Mediterranean to permit the passage of the young crusaders to the Holy Land.

Leading this remarkable pilgrimage was an ordinary
shepherd boy, Stephen of Cloyes, who claimed that Christ himself had appeared to him in the guise of a pilgrim to deliver a scrap of parchment. This document, Stephen declared, was nothing less than a communication from God designating Stephen as a prophet. The shepherd lad took his commission seriously, and it was his burning zeal, and his alone, that had inspired the remarkable crusade. Stephen had even pleaded his cause before King Philip of France, and had preached to crowds of people from the steps of the cathedral of St. Denis.

Stephen had gathered a large following of his childish peers—as many as 30,000 according to the Chronicle of Aubrey of Trois Fontaines, the chief written document on the Children’s Crusade. Setting out from Vendôme, a town in the Orleanais, some 90 miles southwest from Paris, the youthful army had spent a long, hot march across France, suffering greatly from thirst, hunger, confusion, homesickness, brigands and the bands of roving mercenaries who constituted one of the chief banes of the age. But such hardships did not deter the several thousands who completed the incredible march—they believed that the chosen of God had always suffered, only to be vindicated in the end. To the crusading children of 1212, the expected parting of the Mediterranean would be that awaited vindication. After all, they believed that Stephen of Cloyes, their leader, had been chosen by Christ to serve as the new Moses to lead them to the Holy Land.

Along with Stephen’s young followers, the townspeople of Marseilles, rich and poor alike, gathered to await either a miracle or a bitter disappointment. Dressed in all the splendor of an age in love with finery, the bright colors worn by the city fathers and wealthy burghers of the sunny Mediterranean port must have presented a great contrast with the travel-stained rags of the crusading children, who were largely from the poorer classes of northern France, the Rhineland and Flanders.

There were prayers, of course. The young clergymen accompanying the Children’s Crusade swung censers and invoked the powers of God, the Virgin and numerous saints. The old crusader prayer of “Lord, restore to us the true cross” must have risen from many young lips. In the end, however, the Mediterranean’s aspect remained an unbroken expanse of blue water. No miracle transpired. The children of western Christendom would not witness a greater repetition of the miracle that had led Israel into the Promised Land in millennia before.

Amazingly, though, the movement survived such potential disillusionment. Perhaps few were willing to completely discredit one claiming a letter from God, for the age was one filled with claims of visions and special communications from Heaven. Instead of derision, the disappointed children apparently found pity in the eyes of the city fathers.

Two substantial-seeming citizens, Hugo the Iron and William the Pig, took special interest in the children. Declaring themselves pious men, they volunteered the use of seven ships to carry the children to the Holy Land free of charge. The offer was gratefully accepted, and a few days later the ships embarked.

And then silence. Nothing more was heard of the children for a span of 18 years. The fate of the young crusaders was revealed only in 1230, when Al-Kamil’s nameless priest-slave returned from his bondage in Egypt.

After leaving Marseilles, the much-chastened priest reported, the party had run into a terrible storm, and two of the ships were lost in heavy seas near the island of San
Pietro, off the southwest coast of Sardinia. The remaining five bore onward, only to be overtaken by a Saracen squadron a few days later.

This was a prearranged encounter, for William the Pig and Hugo the Iron were not the devout men they had seemed. In midsea, all the children and their priests were turned over to the Muslim privateers and carried off to Bougie on the coast of present-day Algeria where, block by block, they were sold into slavery to serve for life the Muslims they originally sought to conquer.

Many of the children were probably purchased at once by the local landholders from the hinterlands of Bougie. Others—including the then-young priest who would later recount the misadventure—were shipped to Egypt, where they would command a better price. Of these, most were bought by the governor of Alexandria to serve as agricultural laborers on his estates. When the priest returned to France in 1230, he reported that 700 members of the Children’s Crusade were still living as plantation slaves in Egypt. A few others, he reported, had been sent as far east as Baghdad, where 18 had been martyred for refusing to convert to Islam.

All the literate among the slaves, however, had been bought by Al-Kamil. Most of these were probably clergy, for the Children’s Crusade had been largely a movement of the children of the poor—a class that would remain largely illiterate for another three centuries or so.

How and why the priest was released we do not know. Al-Kamil may have released him (and perhaps others) on payment of a ransom by relatives of the captives or by certain charitable organizations devoted to ransoming Christian captives in Muslim hands. In some rare instances, captives were released as a gesture of generosity. In most such cases, however, those released had outlived their usefulness.

Various other sources suggest that the traffic in Christian lives carried on by the aptly named William the Pig and Hugo the Iron did not stop with mobs of credulous peasant children from the other side of Europe. Some later tales maintain that they attempted to kidnap the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II and turn him over to the Saracens, but failed. They finally paid for their treachery on a communal gallows.

The punishment suffered by William the Pig and Hugo the Iron did nothing to relieve the misery of the children whose sale had doubtlessly provided them with windfall profits. Coming from the cool and damp climate of northern Europe, the children sold as agricultural laborers in the malarial regions of the Nile delta must have suffered mortality rates noticeably high even for an age when few lived past 30. The girls among them would have been especially unfortunate, for Muslim society often saw no reason to treat unprotected young females chivalrously. Those fortunate enough to be sold as concubines and serving girls in wealthy households would have often found themselves victims of their mistresses’ jealous wrath—a jealously made all the fiercer by the special circumstances of a polygamous society. But as none of the enslaved children seems to have returned to Christian Europe—and few could have written about their experiences even if they did indeed return—our picture of their fate must remain conjecture based on the observations of the single returning priest and what is generally known about slavery in Muslim culture and society.

To many medievals and moderns alike, the Children’s Crusade was a pathetic affair bearing an obvious moral:
energies of western Europe elsewhere—against an expansionist and highly dangerous Islam—would bring peace to the West. Such a course of action would also help heal the still-aching breach between Eastern Orthodoxy and Western Catholicism, the two great branches of Christendom separated since 1054. Thus, Urban preached a crusade against Islam at the Council of Clermont in 1095, offering a papal blessing and full indulgence to all who would accept the crusader’s cross.

The idea took hold of Christendom almost at once. The popular preachers Peter the Hermit and Walter the Penniless fanned crusading zeal into white heat. But the result was quite at variance from the one for which Emperor Alexius had hoped: the thousands who answered Urban’s appeal with impassioned cries of “Deus le vult!”—“God wills it”—took up the cross not to restore Anatolia to Byzantine hands, but to put the Holy Land and Jerusalem into Frankish ones.

The First Crusade produced a mass migration to the East. Mobs of penniless townspeople and peasants took up the cross, as did the warrior aristocracy of Europe. Popular enthusiasm for the venture was so strong that an unofficial “people’s crusade” marched a year earlier than the crusade of armed knights and their retainers.

Although the First Crusade took Antioch in 1098 and Jerusalem in the following year, crusader success was short-lived. The crusaders had entered a Muslim world divided by rivalry between the Seljuk Turks and the Fatimid Caliphate of Egypt. The Christian invasion provided the catalyst needed to reunite Islam. In 1144, the Muslim leader Nur-ad-Din recaptured Edessa, an outlying crusader state founded in northern Syria. Although this loss prompted western Christians to undertake the Second Crusade, the slow disintegration of the crusader states in Syria and Palestine had begun. In the 1180’s Nur-ad-Din’s successor, Salai, defeated the crusader forces at Hattin in Galilee and then went on to retake Jerusalem.

The Third Crusade found able leaders in the Holy

THE ALTERNATIVE TO CRUSADES

Unlike their elders and social betters who had taken the cross before them, the youthful followers of Stephen of Cloyes and Nicholas of Cologne who went crusading in 1212 bore no arms. They seemed to have believed that the pure faith of Christendom’s children would suffice not only to part the Mediterranean Sea, but also to convert the infidel.

Although their self-confidence was misplaced, the crusading children shared a belief held by many sensitive believers in the West—that the spiritual “weapons” of faith and holy living were still those preferred by Christ. Thus, an alternative “crusade” seeking the conversion of the Muslims, rather than military conquest, grew up alongside the military crusades.

Francis of Assisi was an earnest young Italian who sought to recapture the simplicity and warmth of the primitive Christianity he had read of in the Gospels. Accompanying crusading warriors to Egypt in 1219, he was granted an audience with Malik Al-Kamil, the man who had purchased the literates and clergy found among the crusading children sold into slavery by the shipowners of Marseilles. By 1219, Al-Kamil had become Sultan of Egypt.

In that interview, Francis earnestly but unsuccessfully sought to persuade the Sultan to change his religion. In spite of his failure, Francis deeply impressed the Muslim potentate with his sanctity and zeal.

The early Franciscans followed Francis’ example in seeking to convert the Muslims without any help from the worldly weapons of the crusading knights. One, Bernard of Carpio, went to Morocco to preach Christianity. Other Franciscans and Dominicans followed him, especially after 1225, when Pope Honorius III began to actively advocate missionary labors in North Africa and the Muslim-ruled portions of Spain.

These early missionaries enjoyed
Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa, King Richard I of England and King Philip Augustus of France. But Frederick drowned en route to the Holy Land, and rivalry between the English and French kings further weakened the effort. In spite of Richard’s able generalship, Saladin proved able to contain the crusaders, confining their victories to a single one at Acre.

In 1202, a Fourth Crusade set out. This crusade, however, fell into a tangled skein of political machinations between Venice and the Byzantine Empire and sacked Constantinople in 1204 on behalf of its Venetian and other Italian creditors. It succeeded only in permanently weakening Christendom’s Byzantine bulwark against the Turks and creating a permanent hostility between the Greek and Latin wings of Christendom. Despite all the setbacks, by the early 13th century, the crusading ideal had become so pervasive in Western Europe that the term “crusade” was applied to every armed campaign against the enemies of the church. The long-running Spanish campaign against the Moors became a crusade, as did the violent suppression of the Albigensian heretics of southern France. Thus, Europe’s warrior elite had crusading options other than the main one of regaining the Holy Land.

Still, by 1212, the freeing of the Holy Land from the Muslims was still something for which all of Christian Europe hoped deeply. If the nobility and ecclesiastical hierarchy found themselves better employed in Spain and southern France, perhaps it was time for the “humble and meek”—the peasantry and psupers—to undertake the liberation of Jerusalem.

That seems to have been one of the guiding notions of the crusading children of 1212. The crusading context itself seemed to warrant such a belief.

The only successful crusade had been the First, and that crusade above all had been so marked by the participation of the humble folk of Christendom as to give it more the appearance of a migration than that of a military campaign. A miracle at Antioch, the first great crusader victory, seemed to confirm the important place the poor of Christendom held in the crusading venture. Before the great victory, St. Andrew had appeared to a peasant crusader to reveal the resting place of the Holy Lance. The bulk of the crusader host—trained warrior and peasant wayfarer, alike—believed that St. Andrew had chosen his man precisely because the poor and humble were preeminent in merit and grace.

Furthermore, during the First Crusade, the fearsome “Tatars” won reknown among the crusading host. These were the dregs of the crusading movement, the poor of Europe further degraded by their removal from traditional means of support. Fighting with farm implements or clubs, they marched ragged or nearly naked across the Middle East. They were so hungry and ferocious that both other crusaders and their Muslim enemies believed them to be cannibals, indiscriminately roasting and eating any Muslims, Jews or Eastern Christians unlucky enough to stand in their pathway. Yet, in spite of their frightening reputation, the Tatars were supposed to be especially blessed in their poverty.

To all classes, then, the crusades—which had been going on for well over a century by the time Stephen of Cloyes led his huge youthful flock across France—represented a powerful ideal. The recovery of the Holy City where Christ had died and risen again from the dead was a goal that seemed especially pleasing to God.

At the same time, the crusading ideal survived long enough to enter an age of considerable religious ferment.
Stephen of Cloyes and other leaders of the Children’s Crusade. People believed that a new age was about to dawn, when God would finally exert visible control of history and intervene directly in all human events.

The divine presence seemed very near, bearing a promise of new prophecies, wonders and miracles. Any moment, God might bring to conclusion the cycle of the ages, and woe to those failing to recognize the harbingers of the momentous event.

The divine preference for the humble and meek had special reference to children. Christ himself had taught that children were especially fit to receive the Kingdom of Heaven. Many viewed the Bethlehemite children slain by Herod at the time of Christ’s birth as the first martyrs; the feast commemorating that event—the Feast of the Holy Innocents—was a popular holiday. The willing sacrifices of child martyrs of old—considered especially pleasing to God and meritorious in a way that served all of Christendom—were common objects in the Middle Ages of pious contemplation.

In such a spiritual climate many were ready to believe that God could indeed conquer the Holy Land or bring about the conversion of the infidel by means of children. Nothing else could better reveal the divine power or more thoroughly exalt the humble and confound the mighty. Should the children of Christendom succeed in the conquest of the Holy Land, they would prove the verity of the Gospel text teaching that the last would be first and the first, last.

Close to the time Stephen of Cloyes issued his claim, a boy named Nicholas began to preach a crusade from the steps of the shrine of the Three Kings in Cologne, a major city of the Rhineland. He successfully competed for popular attention with papal emissaries seeking volunteers for the campaigns against the Moors in Spain and the Albigenians in southern France.

Like his French contemporary, Nicholas appeared inspired as he preached that children could succeed where adults had failed. Many believed his message that Christendom’s children would regain the Holy Land for Christ, walking through the waves of the sea dryshod. In response to that message, a mass migration of German children occurred, in all respects similar to the one going on in France at about the same time. Contemporary Rhineland chroniclers spoke with wonder of the youthful hordes drifting southward to reach the Mediterranean and the Holy Land beyond it.

This children’s crusade consisted of two large parties, one of which, originally numbering some 20,000, was led by Nicholas himself. At about the time Stephen of Cloyes’ party reached Marseilles, approximately a third of Nicholas’ band reached Genoa, Italy (the other two-thirds had either deserted the cause or perished).

The Genoese authorities had no desire to see their city overrun by hungry hordes of unsupervised German children. They were willing to allow any individual children who wished to settle in Genoa to stay, but they permitted the horde as a whole to rest only a single night. Had things gone as planned, that would have been enough, but here, as at Marseilles, the sea obstinately refused to open.

Many of Nicholas’ followers thereupon decided to stay put at Genoa or to make the hazardous trek homeward. Nicholas himself, however, was not so easily discouraged. He took what was left of his band to Pisa.

Once again, the sea refused to open. The Pisans, however, put two ships at the children’s disposal. And after those ships sailed, nothing was heard of their young passengers again, either. Perhaps they, like their French counterparts, ended up in the slave markets of North Africa or
Egypt, for the Pisans and other Italians were experienced in trading with the Muslim countries.

Nicholas did not sail at Pisa, but continued onward to Rome with the hardest and most faithful of his flock. Pope Innocent III spoke to them in person, advising them to return home and releasing them from any vows they might have made. The Pope’s advice to those who wished to crusade was to take up the cross as adults. But dismayed as Innocent might have been at the children’s temerity, he was impressed by their courage. He later remarked, “These children put us to shame; they rush to recover the Holy Land while we sleep.”

Most of the children took the Pope’s practical advice, ruefully taking up the long trek northward and homeward. The season was late, and the pitiful survivors not only had to face mockery but also the rigors of the Alpine autumn. Many were robbed or otherwise accosted—few made it back to the Rhineland.

Accounts concerning Nicholas’ own fate differ. Some say that he died on the return journey. Others maintain that he survived to join a crusade as an adult. His father, who seems to have encouraged his preaching, either fell victim to irate parents who had him hanged for slave trading or forestalled their wrath by suicide.

The other large group of Rhineland children worked its way southward along the eastern coast of Italy, ultimately reaching Brindisi in the very heel of the Italian boot. The disgruntled archbishop of that city refused them permission to sail eastward. Most, like Nicholas’ other followers, then made their way homeward, but a few seem to have made it to Palestine. Needless to say, they converted few Muslims and got nowhere near Jerusalem, which was at that time in Muslim hands.

Ironically, Stephen of Cloyes seems to have had little interest in specifically embarking on a crusade. Although he did indeed appear before the king of France in May or June of 1212, bearing the document he claimed was a letter from heaven, his interest was to promote devotional processions—spectacular enough, but hardly the same thing as a crusade. How his procession of 30,000 French children turned into a crusade remains one of the mysteries of history. Shortly after his brief period of notoriety, the shepherd boy disappeared into the obscurity from which he had come.

The unhappy adventure of 1212 speaks of a medieval world that was still largely intact, in which the crusading ideal of bishops and princes was so pervasive that it was shared by the children of the poor. If the faith of the young crusaders was misguided, that faith was still a link joining the crusading children to the society of their elders and better. When the poor and humble of medieval Europe next would assert themselves, it would be in a destructive series of peasant revolts that sought to overturn the authority of nobles and bishops.

Ill-considered by standards of modern “realism,” the Children’s Crusade was nonetheless not a destructive movement that preyed on those in its path, as the earlier crusades had done. Where crime followed in its wake, its participants were the victims, not the perpetrators. The children marched unarmed, and some notion of converting the Muslims seems to have taken the place of the usual crusader zeal for battle.

In its own way, the Children’s Crusade bespeaks a curiously appealing trustfulness, a simple faith. It was the common faith of its time reflected in the actions of the lowest members of society. If those actions had tragic consequences, the idealism that motivated them was a powerful one, and the world today is only the poorer for having lost it.