



Beyond a Religious War: The Socio-Economic Foundations of Colonialism in the Crusades

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Abstract

The Crusades remain a religious war in popular memory, reducing historical inquiry to a clash between empires rather than the emergence of a new socio-economic reality. The Crusades were Medieval Europe's chief apparatus to advance administrative, ideological, and economic institutions, expanding its empire. The need for war mobilisation led to centralised governance, official bureaucratic roles, special taxation, and logistics. These became their chief modes of resource control and funding as European Crusaders expanded their influence across port cities, trade routes, and foreign territories, showing early traces of economic colonialism. Emotional manipulation and propaganda in terms of the sanctification of violence were hidden apparatuses that religious leaders masked in their attempt to mobilise the population. These practices evolved into structures that made colonial governance a one-of-a-kind operative system. Art was appropriated through cultural exchange and became an economic commodity and a marker of superiority. By discussing the Crusades through a socio-economic perspective, this essay argues that they were not isolated conflicts but crucial in shaping beliefs, governance, economic structures, and cultural exchange, which later strengthened European colonialism. The paper finds that population pressures and limited resources catalysed the Crusades, however, they evolved into a time of restructuring society and economy, which challenges traditional narratives that dismiss the Crusades as a Holy War and fail to see Medieval Europe as an early example of rapid state-building in warring conditions.

Introduction

European colonialism relied on several systems of power and social operations to create deeper structures of authority. The large-scale adaptation of colonialism across different territories of the world was a result of a period of trial and error during the Crusades, a time which emboldened systems that worked in galvanizing masses and created sources of funding expansionist missions and centralised governance and banking systems. The Crusades seemed to validate methods to formalise different sectors of society; there were new innovative methods of taxation, administration, and popular mobilisation. The Crusades were not isolated conflicts but a period of formation of beliefs, establishment of governance, an attempt to create a lucrative economy, and develop a superior understanding of their own statehood and artistic excellence through cultural exchange, which later strengthened European colonialism. This essay explores the call to arms and sanctification of violence, the emergence of an evolved governance and administration, the economic structures of the Crusades, and the cultural exchange and its ambivalent meaning.

The initial Crusades were driven by a confluence of religious zeal to reclaim the Holy Land, a response to the Byzantine Empire's plea for aid, and the ambition to establish Christian rule and influence in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Byzantine Empire was engaged in a prolonged war with the Sasanian Empire, which ended in 628 CE. At that time, towards the south of Arabia, a growing Muslim presence emerged closer to the frontier zone,¹ an area full of barriers and a rugged landscape. In 630, Prophet Muhammad led the Expedition of Tabuk with 30,000 Muslim soldiers towards the territories that were under Byzantine control. There was no immediate battle, but the expedition foreshadowed the protracted Muslim-Byzantine wars that would go on until the First Crusades. Territorial expansion meant better opportunities for the empires. By 637 CE, Muslim forces besieged Jerusalem, and in 638 CE, Patriarch Sophronius peacefully surrendered. This marked the beginning of four centuries of Muslim rule, formalized through the Pact of Umar.

Christian pilgrimage to Jerusalem continued under Islamic rule with political pragmatism rather than religious hostility. By the mid-11th century, pilgrimage remained largely unimpeded. The Fatimids had commercial interests and made the pilgrimage a lucrative venture. The

¹ Michael Bonner, ed., "Introduction," in *Arab-Byzantine Relations in Early Islamic Times* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2017), xxv-xxvi.

arrival of the Seljuk Turks in the Levant (c.1070-1073)² introduced the Atabeg system, distributing power among family members and creating a decentralised military. Trade and travel security suffered under the Seljuks and the Battle of Manzikert (1071),³ severing overland pilgrimage routes that once provided stability. While the Seljuks did not impose direct restrictions on Christian pilgrimage, the condition of political fragmentation, lawlessness, and increasing reports of banditry created a crisis. By the late 1080s, returning pilgrims brought back accounts of harassment and desecration, implying that the holiest sites of Christendom had fallen into hostile hands.⁴

The Call to Arms and the Sanctification of Violence

The imminent danger compelled Byzantine Emperor Alexius I to make a special request to Pope Urban II, seeking military assistance against the Seljuk Turks who had established control over large parts of Byzantine territory. He requested Western mercenaries, however, Pope Urban II was interested in reinstating the papacy's role and uniting Europe under Christianity. Instead of just deploying envoys, he saw an opportunity to develop a new narrative by referring to the Muslims as 'an accursed race, a race utterly alienated from God.'⁵

Pope Urban II's Call

In 1095, the Pope responded with instruction, "wrest (tear) that land from the wicked race and subject it to yourselves,"⁶ calling warriors to fight for the Holy Land. Pope Urban II's call was the outcome of a century of reform that redefined the Church's authority. Leo IX, Nicholas II, and Alexander II sought to restore clerical purity, aiming to eliminate corruption and ensure that the clergy adhered to strict religious standards. Gregory VII's *libertas ecclesiae* extended these reforms, and the

² Georg Braun, "The Holy City" (plate), in "Islamic Encounters: Travelers in the Ottoman Empire," *John Carter Brown Library*, Brown University, https://www.brown.edu/Facilities/John_Carter_Brown_Library/exhibitions/islamic/pages/travelers.html#:~:text=When%20the%20Seljuk%20Turks%20secured,the%20west%20for%20military%20assistance.

³ "Battle of Manzikert (1071 A.D.)," The Latin Library, accessed 13 March, 2025, <https://www.thelatinlibrary.com/imperialism/notes/manzikert.html>.

⁴ Chris Parry, "Assess the Impact of Arrival of the Seljuk Turks in the Holy Land in the 11th Century," *Research Gate*, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.4156.8085>.

⁵ Edward Peters, ed., *The First Crusade: The Chronicle of Fulcher of Chartres and Other Source Materials* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 2-3.

⁶ Robert Firth, *Beat the Drum Slowly*, eBookIt.com, 2019, [https://www.google.co.in/books/edition/Beat_the_Drum_Slowly/jCf9ysI0VvMC?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=wrest+\(tear\)Tear+that+land+from+the+wicked+race+and+subject+it+to+yourselves&pg=PT110&printsec=frontcover](https://www.google.co.in/books/edition/Beat_the_Drum_Slowly/jCf9ysI0VvMC?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=wrest+(tear)Tear+that+land+from+the+wicked+race+and+subject+it+to+yourselves&pg=PT110&printsec=frontcover).

campaign cemented papal supremacy. Urban's call caused a shift and made the Church seem independent from secular rule and duty-bound to defend the faith. By 1095, these reforms had positioned the papacy as the guardian of Christendom's frontiers. In Robert Firth's work, Pope Urban II's cited sermons and speeches denote that the Byzantine Empire faced shortages of resources in the late 11th century, weakened by topographical constraints as it was "shut in on all sides by the sea and the mountain peaks...too narrow for your (the) large population." This scarcity, alongside Seljuk advances, made Pope Urban II's call for aid strategically compelling, connected with what Firth assesses as the Malthusian theory of war that population growth leads to war, famine, or disease as natural checks.⁷ Emperor Alexios I's appeal and the Pope's response were motivated by imperial exigency and religious solidarity, leading to the beginning of a new ideology.

Sanctification of Violence

The cross instituted by Pope Urban II was a permit to use violence for "greater purposes." Crusading recruits had to "receive and wear a cross, usually of cloth or silk, which they sewed onto their cloaks or tunics, commonly on the right shoulder, distinguishing their status both from other laymen and from Holy Land pilgrims."⁸ The cross became a defining symbol of the Crusades to the extent that a crusader said, "crux enim gladius est; the Cross is the sword."⁹ Crusaders internalised the belief that the cross paved the way to ecclesiastical protection and spiritual salvation, such as remission of sin. During the 4th century, Emperor Constantine claimed to have seen a vision of the cross accompanied by the words, "Conquer with this." However, historical accounts suggest that this vision, including the inscription, may have been a later embellishment, with evidence pointing to Constantine potentially interpreting a natural phenomenon as a divine symbol.¹⁰ The hidden propaganda of the religious leaders is evident in the restating of the cross as a justified symbol, almost attempting to create a hallucinatory state of belief and irrational faith.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Christopher Tyerman, *The World of the Crusades* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019), 43.

⁹ Ibid., 45.

¹⁰ Michael Grant, *The Emperor Constantine*, (London: Orion Books, 2011), accessed February 1, 2025, https://www.google.co.in/books/edition/The_Emperor_Constantine/75ChbKPElCwC?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=Constantine++++%E2%80%9CIn+this+sign,+conquer%E2%80%9D&printsec=frontcover.

The Crusaders promoted a narrative of moral and divine justice, blending the concept of Just War with the religious imperative of a Holy War. The idea of holy warfare allowed participating crusaders to be ignorant of the “nature and extent of the violence they conducted in the holy wars.”¹¹ The idea of the Holy War had been elucidated by virtuous killing. St Augustine of Hippo wrote:

“There are some whose killing God orders, either by a law, or by an express command to a particular person at a particular time. In fact, one who owes a duty of obedience to the giver of the command does not himself “kill” – he is an instrument, a sword in its user’s hand. For this reason, the commandment forbidding killing was not broken by those who have waged wars on the authority of God.”¹²

According to the above statement, when God commands killing, whether through law or direct command, the individual acting on this order is not personally culpable for homicide but serves as an instrument of divine will. This sanctification meant absolution from sin. This close association with God allowed violence to be normalised and, ostensibly, justified. Therefore, it can be inferred from the initial years of the Medieval Period that the cross was used as a symbol of violence. In biblical scripture, the cross was a symbol of sacrifice: “Take up your cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23) meant to sacrifice one’s own way and follow Jesus’s humble path,¹³ but the Crusades transformed the cross into a call for action. Individuals who ‘took up the cross’ were promised spiritual rewards in the form of forgiveness and earthly rewards, such as freedom from taxation, fame and power.¹⁴ Pope Urban II’s speeches were anti-Islamic and propagandistic, which instigated hatred by justifying expansion. His rhetoric “wars against infidels”¹⁵ or “they have killed and captured many, and have destroyed the churches and devastated the empire (*Imperium*)”¹⁶ was instrumental in

¹¹ Megan Cassidy-Welch, “Introduction,” in *Crusades and Violence* (Amsterdam University Press; 2023), 1-18, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781802701296>.

¹² St. Augustine, *City of God*, Book 1, trans. G. Evans (London: Penguin, 2003), 21.

¹³ Ibid., 40.

¹⁴ Rachel Rooney and Andrew Miller, “The Crusades: Motives, Administration, and Cultural Influence,” *Digital Collections for the Classroom*, Newberry, June 25, 2012, <https://dcc.newberry.org/?p=14390>.

¹⁵ Brian Thai, “The Secular and Religious Motivations of the Crusades.” *ResearchGate*, 2018, https://researchgate.net/publication/329289027_The_Secular_and_Religious_motivations_of_the_Crusades/link/5c608c25a6fdccb608b75e05/download.

¹⁶ Jacques Bongars, ed., *Gesta Dei per Francos*, vol 1, (Hanoviae 1611), 517-19.

the dehumanisation of the other and became an ideological apparatus. The Just War Theory religiously justified warfare and further solidified the link between the Church and the empire.

During this time, the Church established the 'Peace and Truce of God' or *Pax et Treuga Dei* movement,¹⁷ through which it was upheld that war was not to be waged on those who could not defend themselves, namely the clergy, women, and children who were under the threat of excommunication. Temporary protection was guaranteed for all churches, monks, pilgrims, and merchants. This mission was sanctified by prioritising the care of the perceived weaker section.

In 1145, Pope Eugene III issued the *Quantum praedecessores*,¹⁸ a papal bull sent to King Louis VII and the nobles of France, calling for the defence of Christendom and reclaiming the holy lands. He said:

“And so in the Lord, we impress upon, ask and order all of you, and we enjoin it for the remission of sins, that those who are on God’s side, and especially the more powerful and the nobles, should vigorously gird themselves to oppose the multitude of the infidels who are now rejoicing in the victory they have gained over us, to defend in this way the eastern Church, which was freed from their tyranny, as we have said before, by so much spilling of your fathers’ blood, and to strive to deliver from their hands the many thousands of our captive brothers, so that the dignity of the name of Christ may be enhanced in our time and your reputation for strength, which is praised throughout the world, may be kept unimpaired and unsullied.”¹⁹

This statement justifies war as both duty and salvation. It urges Christians to fight, asserting that the enemies are infidels and drawing from an emotional connection to ancestry. Rescuing captives reinforces Christian rule as rightful and just. War is portrayed as a means to honour

¹⁷ Mary Dicken, *Access to History: The Crusades 1071–1204* (London: Hodder Education, 2020), 27, Kindle.

¹⁸ Jonathan Phillips, “Chapter 3 Quantum Praedecessores The Crusade Appeal of Pope Eugenius III – Context and Content,” in *The Second Crusade: Extending the Frontiers of Christendom*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 37-60, <https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300168365-009>.

¹⁹ Jonathan Phillips, “Appendix 1: Translation of Quantum Praedecessores Pope Eugenius III to King Louis VII and His Subjects, 1 March 1146,” in *The Second Crusade: Extending the Frontiers of Christendom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 281, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vm7jf.23>.

Christ and faith, power, and conquest became deeply connected and complex narratives.

Popular Mobilisation

On one hand, the nobility embraced heroic combat and lordly warfare; on the other, the intensifying piety of the post-Feudal Revolution era posed violence as fundamentally sinful. By endorsing sacralised violence, the Church provided a solution to this contradiction: one could fulfil the social imperative of martial display and cleanse one's soul of sin through this newly sanctified form of warfare. This was a strategic and emotional manipulation. Pope Urban II's call to arms offered remission of sins in exchange for military service. Fighting for Christ now stood alongside prayer and fasting as a path to salvation. This sacralised warfare enabled the papacy to command unprecedented human resources, instituting popular mobilisation. Over time, these mechanisms laid the foundation for broader European expansion, merging religious imperatives with emerging political and economic structures of empire-building.

Colonisation Incorporated: Crusading Violence

In *Colonialism: A Global History*, Veracini Lorenzo writes, "violence is both foundational to colonialism and defines its ongoing operation: it can be murderous and senseless, it can be rationally dispensed, it can be threatened or promised, it can be exemplary."²⁰ Violence also became a prerequisite to domination and the maintenance of superiority and order. It can be argued that by normalising, justifying, glorifying, and subsequently internalising violence during the Crusades, colonialism too gravitated to violent measures of plundering, killing, and capturing territories. Micheal Mitterauer calls the Crusades 'proto colonialism' in his book *Why Europe? The Medieval Origins of Its Special Path*.²¹

During European colonial conquests, conversion to Christianity masked Crusading ideology. The 19th century "civilising missions", often justified the establishment of overseas colonies, which led European colonisers to acclaim themselves as "saviours" who, enlightened, brought Christianity to the "barbaric people."²² 1885-1914

²⁰ Lorenzo Veracini, *Colonialism: A Global History*, (New York: Routledge), 9, Kindle.

²¹ Michael Mitterauer, *Why Europe? The Medieval Origins of Its Special Path*, trans. Gerald Chapple (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010).

²² Kenneth Pomeranz, "Colonialism," *National Geographic*, 15 April, 2019, accessed February 1, 2025, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/colonialism>.

saw the Scramble for Africa.²³ European nations such as Britain, France and Germany divided and colonised the continent. Cardinal and archbishop Charles Lavigerie established the Society of Missionaries of Africa, also called the White Fathers, to pursue his dream of proselytising Africans. He even dreamed of “resurrecting”²⁴ the early Church of Africa to establish a “Christian Kingdom.”²⁵ Missionaries established schools and education to convert and train Africans, giving rise to the slogan ‘Transforming Africa by the Africans.’ Ideas of religious superiority established during the Crusading period made European territorial conquests in Africa appear legitimate, necessary, and beneficial.

Evolution of Governance and Administration

During the Crusades, finance and governance were parallel evolutions. Funds and governance were the two directors of control and determined the success of the crusading mission. Large-scale mobilisations of troops and ammunition required unprecedented coordination and centralisation of power within Europe’s monarchies and newly established states. The administrative reformation and military mobilisation developed during the Crusades were manifested in the 19th-century colonial era. European states relied on their state powers, the foundations of which were laid centuries ago.

Feudal Decentralization and Its Challenges

The feudal system was a decentralised political authority reliant on contractual relationships, making it challenging to set up a large-scale military campaign for the Crusades. The system allowed feudal lords to govern territories independently; their obligations to the crown were conditional and often dictated by self-interest. They did not have a national allegiance. Jonathan Riley-Smith states that vassals, bound to their lords through personal homage and exchanges of land for military service, functioned within limited territorial jurisdictions and independently administered local resources.²⁶

²³ “Scramble for Africa,” *St. John’s College*, accessed 30 January, 2025, https://www.joh.cam.ac.uk/library/library_exhibitions/schoolresources/exploration/scramble_for_africa.

²⁴ Viera Vilhanová, “The Scramble for Africa: The Clash of Cultures,” *Asian and African Studies* 16, no. 2 (2007): 249-260, https://www.sav.sk/journals/uploads/102313498_Vilhanov%C3%A1.pdf.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 249-260.

²⁶ Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The Feudal Nobility and the Kingdom of Jerusalem, 1174-1277*. (London: Macmillan Press, 1973).

Kings constantly asked their vassals for troops and supplies, making the process inefficient. The competing interests of the feudal lords could hold back larger strategic objectives. The crystallised elite networks prevented political cooperation that would have helped in mobilisation, gathering resources, or forming a centralised military base.²⁷ Christopher J. Tyerman argues that crusader armies continually grappled with logistical hardships rooted in their inability to centralise supply chains effectively across large distances due to reliance on localised feudal provisioning systems.²⁸ The military mobilisation of the First Crusade revealed structural inadequacies within feudal Europe, evident in the inconsistent commitment of vassals who viewed military obligations through local or regional allegiance rather than as a coherent national duty.²⁹

The feudal system was not suitable for creating professional and disciplined armies, and made contingent feudal levies bound by fixed-term service. The participation was not constant, and military efforts remained reactive and episodic rather than systematically planned. The consequence was that while feudal Europe led several ambitious military ventures like the Crusades, its political structure inherently limited the ability to sustain these efforts, ultimately necessitating the introduction of a centralised state. The limitations of feudal military organization were not incidental flaws but intrinsic features of a system that prioritized local autonomy over collective military capacity.

Development of Institutionalised Administration

The extensive sale of land by crusading elites seeking to finance their expeditions eventually disrupted traditional feudal structures and concentrated economic power in the hands of a more centralized monarchy, weakening the local autonomy of lords and reinforcing royal authority. This process was particularly evident in France and England. Transforming logistical and financial requirements was also necessary for military campaigns. As rulers attempted to control the transfer of money across Europe and the Levant, the Crusades also brought about the introduction of strict financial supervision. Rulers took control of military logistics. It pushed monarchs to expand the bureaucracies and

²⁷ Lisa Blaydes and Christopher Paik, "The Impact of Holy Land Crusades on State Formation: War Mobilization, Trade Integration, and Political Development in Medieval Europe," *International Organization* 70, no. 3 (2016): 551–86, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24758130>.

²⁸ Christopher J. Tyerman, *The English Historical Review* 122, no. 499 (2007): 1377–78, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20108314>.

²⁹ Claude Cahen, "An Introduction to the First Crusade," *Past & Present*, no. 6 (1954): 6–30. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/649812>.

build new administrative centres by establishing supply chains, financial administration, and rapid enlistment. They also began filing records of payments and managing taxes, and became responsible for expenditures and accountability. This is what the Pipe Rolls of England highlight, which was also seen in the legal systems of France. The erosion of noble autonomy was a result of the sale of land to the crown to secure ample funds. The actual root of centralised monarchy was the need to fund the wars, which caused the destruction of the vassal system. The more the kings took control of the warfare, the less control the kings gave to vassals.

Link to Colonial Administration

The move from feudal administration and levies to bureaucratic and economic systems increased the fiscal capacity of the state and set a precedent for central governance, a central feature of European colonial rule. Early financial innovations proved it possible to establish remote control of large economic affairs, also a necessity in maintaining imperial rule over remote empires. The origin of head taxation during the Crusades presaged the capitation taxes imposed on the colonial subjects. When viewed from a Weberian perspective, these developments reflect the rationalization of governance. Medieval states evolved from patrimonial rule to bureaucratic states characterised by systematic taxation, financial oversight, and institutionalized military-administrative coordination. The colonial expansion later came to enforce the dynamics of governance seen during the Crusades in an attempt to rationalize governance.³⁰ For example, the *jizya* imposed by European powers in North Africa and South Asia extracted revenue and established socio-political control. Equally important, the Italian banking networks on which crusader funds were dependent foreshadowed the preeminent role of, for example, the Rothschilds and Barings in the financial backing of imperial expansion, reliant as such expansion was on financial support across stretches of space.

Taxation and Funding the Crusades

The centralisation of power and introduction of taxes during the Crusades strengthened the European state. The crusading cities were an early example of economic viability. The development of taxation, and funding the crusades led to the establishment of professional banking networks that funded large-scale political endeavours.

³⁰ Stephen Kalberg, "Max Weber's Types of Rationality: Cornerstones for the Analysis of Rationalization Processes in History," *American Journal of Sociology* 85, no. 5 (1980): 1145–79, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2778894>.

Taxation Systems

Early efforts to raise funds for expeditions in the Holy Land were relatively informal until Henry II of England (1154-1189) imposed a non-institutionalised levy on clergy and laity in 1166.³¹ By the 1180s, the concerns of secular and ecclesiastical leaders culminated in the 1185 tax. Similar to the later Saladin Tithe, it was “provided for by King Philip Augustus of France and King Henry II of England with the common assent of the bishops, counts, and barons”³² (enlisting Templars and Hospitallers as collectors in each diocese),³³ pairing local oversight with the religious orders’ networks. Although later replaced by the 1188 tithe, the 1185 levy was “almost equally novel,” each new tax drawing from earlier experiments.³⁴ This experimentation would determine the most suitable model for colonial expansion.

This momentum of experimentation culminated in 1188 with the Saladin Tithe, a decima on revenues and moveable goods.³⁵ Implemented at a great council of 11 February 1187-8, it required urgent payment within a year. It also spurred new administrative approaches: official exchequer clerks documented coin shipments, stored in locked barrels, for eventual transport abroad.³⁶ The Saladin Tithe was hefty and burdensome, but it set a precedent for ecclesiastical-secular collaboration and helped normalise special taxes for crusading. It has been called the brainchild of the papacy.³⁷

Henry II expanded royal authority by reforming the exchequer and judicial systems, maximizing tax receipts to sustain the Crusades. His *Exchequer*³⁸ became a model for financial administration that laid the

³¹ Fred A. Cazell, “The Tax of 1185 in Aid of the Holy Land,” *Speculum* 30, no. 3 (1955): 384. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2848077>.

³² *Ibid.*, 384.

³³ *Ibid.*, 385.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 387.

³⁵ “The Saladin Tithe”, 447, Archive.org, accessed on March 12, 2025, https://ia600607.us.archive.org/view_archive.php?archive=/8/items/crossref-pre-1923-scholarly-works/10.1093%252Fehr%252Fxxx.cxxvii.183.zip&file=10.1093%252Fehr%252Fxxxi.cxxiii.447.pdf.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 449.

³⁷ Daniel Edwards, “Finance and the Crusades: England, c.1213-1337” (PhD diss., Royal Holloway University of London 2019), 53, https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/36724221/Thesis_Finance_and_the_Crusades_Final_Hand_in_Version.pdf.

³⁸ Thomas Asbridge, *The Crusades: The War for the Holy Land* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), https://assets.cambridge.org/97813165/04390/excerpt/9781316504390_excerpt.pdf.

foundation for more centralized fiscal systems used by other monarchs.³⁹ Later states institutionalized war taxation, such as England's Scutage, France's Taille, Spain's Alcabala, and the Dutch Republic's Excise Taxes. Consistent systems of taxation funded war extensively, especially in the Hundred Years' War and the Spanish Reconquista.⁴⁰ Blaydes and Paik write, "Crusade tithes were also among the first per-head taxes to be levied on European populations, creating precedent for later forms of centralized taxation and encouraging the development of representative institutions."⁴¹ This established a precedent for direct taxation by monarchs and contributed to the rise of bureaucratic institutions responsible for collection and record-keeping, such as the English Exchequer and similar financial bodies in France and the Holy Roman Empire.

Taxation became more institutionalised by the early 13th century when Pope Innocent III introduced a three-year twentieth on all clerical revenues. His successor, Honorius III, enacted them in detail. The introduction of centralised collection changed the extent of funding as a team of four: two clergymen, a templar, and a hospitaller, would evaluate and collect payments.⁴² By the late 13th century, the need to manage funds led to the expansion of state financial institutions, including the establishment of permanent treasuries and a greater reliance on professional financiers, particularly Italian banking families,⁴³ who provided loans to monarchs and crusaders. The necessity of coordinating complex supply chains for crusader armies encouraged the creation of more sophisticated logistical infrastructures, laying the groundwork for early state bureaucracies capable of managing large-scale mobilization.

Assemblies also considered national taxation and forming parliamentary institutions, seen clearly during King Edward I (1272-1307)'s reign. He set up parliaments that included knights, barons, clergy, and later, burgesses, and commoners to raise revenues to fund military campaigns, including the Crusades and wars in Wales and Scotland. These were precursors to the modern system of the parliament.⁴⁴ While

³⁹ W. L. Warren. *Henry II* (California: University of California Press, 1973).

⁴⁰ Thomas F. Madden, *The New Concise History of the Crusades* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005).

⁴¹ P Blaydes and Paik, "The Impact of Holy Land Crusades on State Formation", 553.

⁴² Jochen Schenk and Mike Carr, eds., "Pope Honorius III, the Military Orders and the Financing of the Fifth Crusade: A Culture of Papal Preference?", in *The Military Orders: Volume 6.1, Culture and Conflict in the Mediterranean World* (London: Routledge, 2017), 3.

⁴³ Edwards, "Finance and the Crusades", 109.

⁴⁴ John Maddicott, *The Origins of the English Parliament, 924-1327* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

many crusaders aspired to return home, most of them either could not or, if they did, returned with diminished finances than when they left. The subsequent reduction in elites and nobility further drove the development of centralised administration.

Reflecting on these developments, every new ordinance – 1166, 1183, 1185, or 1188 – borrowed prior features and added clarity. Each stage saw an increasing precision of terminology, refinement in exemptions, accounting, and distribution. By Honorius III's day, cross-regional coordination and documentation extended beyond earlier ad hoc models, creating a unified, methodical mechanism to fund the Fifth Crusade.

Control of Trade Routes

Several commercial networks were established that led to economic development in Medieval Europe as crusading armies relied on maritime logistics. New oceanic networks linked Byzantium, Egypt, and crusader enclaves, resulting in a triangular dynamic superseding the traditional East and West polarity.⁴⁵ Through agreements negotiated with Levantine states, Italian cities such as Venice and Genoa became main ports, securing concessions that effectively transferred commercial might from older Byzantine and Islamic networks to Western powers. Venetians harnessed “specific knowledge” derived from prior expeditions to redirect the Fourth Crusade in their favour.⁴⁶ Venice secured extensive trading quarters abroad by controlling logistical support and broadening its commercial and mercantile empire. The spoils of Levantine trade fortified royal treasuries. The European powers took control of lucrative markets, built wealth accumulation, and changed the geopolitical prowess of the medieval Mediterranean region.⁴⁷ Modern scholarship also shows that the Crusades led to massive changes on the workaday world of the Near East.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ David Jacoby, *Commercial Exchange Across the Mediterranean: Byzantium, the Crusader Levant, Egypt and Italy*, 1st edition (London: Routledge, 2005), 104, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003418788>.

⁴⁶ James B. Hooper, “A Calculated Crusade: Venice, Commerce, and the Fourth Crusade,” *Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II* 10, no. 10 (2005): 87, <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/historical-perspectives/vol10/iss1/10>.

⁴⁷ P Blaydes and Paik, “The Impact of Holy Land Crusades on State Formation,” 551.

⁴⁸ Gerald W. Day, “The Impact of the Third Crusade upon Trade with the Levant,” *The International History Review* 3, no. 2 (1981): 159, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40105123>.

Early Forms of Economic Colonialism

The resource extraction mandated by the papacy through royal decrees reveals an early form of resource extraction, which was also seen later during the colonial period. Twelfth- and thirteenth-century authorities initially procured wealth from distant territories, later implementing taxation in the colonies. The Crusader states also developed taxation and trade mechanisms to sustain their rule and used them in consolidating authority and securing long-term control over newly acquired territories. Acre, Tyre, Jaffa, Sidon, Tripoli, and Beirut became important Crusader ports, serving as essential landmarks for shipping, trade, and military supplies. Italian maritime cities like Venice, Genoa, and Pisa established influential trading quarters and gained economic dominance within them. Acre was the last major Crusader stronghold, falling in 1291. It had been a major commercial centre in the Eastern Mediterranean for most of the 13th century.⁴⁹ Islands like Cyprus, Rhodes, Crete, and Corfu played strategic roles, with Cyprus becoming a crucial base after Richard the Lionheart captured it in 1191. It was first sold to the Templars, but by 1192, it became the seat of Lusignan rule, making it a long-standing Crusader stronghold.

The early ventures of economic colonialism connected Byzantium, Egypt, and crusader states, allowing Western powers to shape pricing, levies, and commodities flow, which would be beneficial for the expansion of colonisation as these would fund their prospects. Italians and other Europeans used military pressure to obtain advantageous arrangements that undermined local intermediaries, an approach similar to that of European colonial treaties in Africa, Asia, and America in the following decades. Portugal and Spain also utilised centralisation and taxation tactics,⁵⁰ developed during the Reconquista and Crusades, to govern Asian colonial territories. One such tactic was the establishment of a bureaucratic system by the Spanish Crown in 1503. It comprised the *Casa de Contratación*,⁵¹ the central trading house, and *The Council of the Indies*, tasked with governing the Spanish empire and looking into religious conflict. Similar patterns were followed in Portugal. In *The Portuguese in India and Other Studies*, A.R. Disney highlights how the use of administrative systems, particularly the viceroynalty of Goa, alongside the calculated placements of trading ports

⁴⁹ Holt, *The World of the Crusades*, 19.

⁵⁰ Charles Jameson, *A Short History of Spain and Portugal* (Stanford University), http://aero-comlab.stanford.edu/jameson/world_history/A_Short_History_of_Spain_and_Portugal.pdf.

⁵¹ J. H. Parry, *The Spanish Seaborne Empire* (University of California Press, 1990), <https://www.ucpress.edu/books/the-spanish-seaborne-empire/paper>.

and forts and the *Estado da Índia*, were used to govern far Asian territories, allowing the Portuguese to monopolise trade routes and maintain military presence.

The commercial practices developed during this time would be emulated in subjugating distant markets. By transitioning from informal levies and ad hoc agreements to firmly entrenched enclaves and monopolies, profit-driven objectives trumped local sovereignty in the colonies, with Western powers dictating duties, privileges, and trade ports to their advantage. The commercial strides of the crusading era were not merely incidental to a Holy War but rather foreshadowed the systematic exploitation that would form Europe's global empires in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Cultural Exchange and Its Complexities

After the establishment of a unified political system, the Europeans paid attention to the advancement of life and culture. The development of cultural markers also led to a perceived superiority of European culture; however, the process of appropriation reveals several complexities in giving Medieval art and technology its rightful due diligence.

Exposure to New Ideas and Technologies

Naval technology and warfare improved as maritime powers adapted to the demands of transporting armies and supplies across the Mediterranean. The interactions between Europeans and the Middle East facilitated exchange of knowledge in armour, weaponry, and cavalry tactics which improved military engagements. European and Middle Eastern forces developed handheld weapons, siege engines, and defensive walls. Medical practices were of necessity in the Crusader states, where hospitals and medical practitioners integrated European and Middle Eastern knowledge. European exposure to Islamic knowledge facilitated the transmission of advanced medical, scientific, and engineering texts, developing fields such as surgery. Innovations like Greek fire, gunpowder, and trebuchets contributed to battlefield strategies, while the 12th-century Renaissance saw the introduction of these ideas into European intellectual life.⁵²

Greek philosophy was transformed by centuries of Islamic commentary, mainly through the Islamic philosophers and polymaths Avicenna and Averroes, whose Aristotelian interpretations reintroduced

⁵² Holt, *The World of the Crusades*.

empiricism and logical rigor into a Latin scholastic tradition. This was not a passive transmission; it provoked theological crises, compelling Peter Abelard to apply dialectical reasoning, culminating in Aquinas' synthesis that used Aristotelian logic in Christian epistemology. There were advancements in mathematics that facilitated banking. Italian mathematician Fibonacci studied under a Muslim tutor in Algeria and introduced Hindu-Arabic numerals to Europe, creating a simplified version of calculations and commerce. Islamic mathematics, including Al-Khwarizmi's algebra, influenced European systems, revolutionizing finance with innovations like letters of credit and bookkeeping.⁵³

Impact on European Culture

Cultural exchange was seen through glassware and glassmaking technology.⁵⁴ The Muslim artists were known for glassblowing techniques. Glassware in Syria dated 1260 was made of a near-transparent material laced with coloured, gold, and enamel designs, which hinted at trade and exchange of raw materials. Islamic imagery and Arabic script were illustrated harmoniously alongside an image of Jesus Christ entering Jerusalem on a grey donkey. A treaty mentioned in the following account between the Prince of the Syrian city of Antioch, Bohemond VII, and the ruler of the Italian city of Venice further reveals cultural transactions:

“A treaty for the transfer of technology was drawn up in June A.D. 1277... It was through this treaty that the secrets of Syrian glassmaking were brought to Venice, everything necessary being imported directly from Syria – raw materials as well as the expertise of Syrian-Arab craftsmen. Once it had learnt them, Venice guarded the secrets of technology with great care, monopolizing European glass manufacture until the techniques became known in seventeenth-century France.”⁵⁵

As some glassmakers were introduced to coloured pigments and specialised tools, Churches in Italy, namely the Basilica of San Francesco,

⁵³ Nicky Huys, *Mathematics for Beginners*, 2023, accessed February 1, 2025, https://www.google.co.in/books/edition/Mathematics_for_beginners/wfbBEAAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=Persian+mathematician+al-Khwarizmi%E2%80%99s+work,+introduce+the+concept+of+zero&pg=PT17&printsec=frontcover.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ “The Silk Roads: Highways of Culture and Commerce,” United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), accessed January 31, 2025, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000097070>.

the first Gothic institution in Assisi, began adopting Islamic art. Crusaders travelling to and from the Holy Land learned about architecture from both the Byzantine Empire and Islamic regions of Constantinople, the Levant, and Jerusalem. The Basilica incorporated the pointed arches, a characteristic feature of Islamic architecture. The central part of the Church has eight-pointed stars with more minor eight-pointed stars inside them, a design which is a variation of an Islamic geometric pattern called the tessellated star and cross pattern, signifying acculturation during the Crusades. Crusading nobles and rulers brought Muslim craftsmen to Europe to work on buildings and churches. This helped facilitate the dissemination of artistic and architectural techniques and styles. For instance, the Norman kings of Sicily employed Muslim artisans to build and decorate their palaces, gardens, and churches.⁵⁶

The Gothic architecture in Europe also adopted Islamic ribbed vaulting, while Spanish architecture absorbed the *Mudéjar* tiling and brickwork. Light-filtering interiors, complex geometric vaulting, and an emphasis on verticality also influenced European art and architecture. It changed how Europeans saw divine space.⁵⁷ The cathedrals that symbolised Christian hegemony in Europe were ironically partly indebted to the art and architecture of the Islamic world.⁵⁸ Manuscript illumination was a decorative form of presenting handwritten books developed by Byzantine compositional techniques. It evolved from iconography to a more sophisticated presentation. The *Melisende Psalter* is often cited as an emblem of this exchange. The fundamental transformation lies in thought. European artists who were exposed to the fluidity of Islamic ornamentation and the narrative complexity of Byzantine mosaics began to see their traditions as malleable rather than fixed.⁵⁹

The traces of intercultural exchanges of the Crusades were observed during the colonial era. The Europeans revolutionised the

⁵⁶ Anthony Klein, "Trade and Cultural Shifts in Sicily under the Norman Kings from 1130 to 1189," *Electrum Magazine*, March 30, 2024, <https://www.electrummagazine.com/2024/03/trade-and-cultural-shifts-in-sicily-under-the-norman-kings-from-1130-to-1189/>.

⁵⁷ Maria Georgopoulou, "The Artistic World of the Crusaders and Oriental Christians in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries." *Gesta* 43, no. 2 (2004): 115–28. <https://doi.org/10.2307/25067099>.

⁵⁸ Mariëtte Verhoeven, "Jerusalem as Palimpsest: The Architectural Footprint of the Crusaders in the Contemporary City," in *The Imagined and Real Jerusalem in Art and Architecture*, eds. Mariëtte Verhoeven, Jeroen Goudeau, and Wouter Weijers, 114–35. Brill, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctt1w8h335.11>.

⁵⁹ Georgopoulou, "The Artistic World of the Crusaders", 115–28.

colonies through the transmission of ideas, cultural practices, and methods of governance that were proven to work during the Crusades. Instances of the same can be seen from the period of Islamic rule in Al-Andalus, where advanced knowledge of medicine and philosophy was facilitated in the Iberian Peninsula. Napoleon Bonaparte's campaign led to studies in Egyptology and Orientalist discourse. Scientists documented Egyptian art and antiquities, and writers also published texts such as the 'Description de l'Égypte,' a collaborative compendium of the work of over 150 scholars, through which Europe was viewed under the lens of hieroglyphics and archaeology.

Ambiguous Legacy

The Crusades as a movement rooted in religious conflict ultimately produced some of the medieval period's most significant artistic and architectural syntheses.⁶⁰ The introduction to new knowledge challenged Europe's insularity by staging a reality of a parallel intellectual tradition, compelling the West to improve its understanding of science, philosophy, and material progress in ways that would later define its entry into modernity and its colonial advances. However, this process was also an assertion of dominance. Crusaders did not merely appropriate but reconfigured and repurposed. The conversion of the Dome of the Rock into the *Templum Domini*, for instance, was one of ideological redefinition, imposing Christian meaning onto an Islamic sacred space.⁶¹ Castles like Krak des Chevaliers employed European fortification techniques with Levantine construction methods, not as an act of artistic collaboration but for militarism.⁶²

As European powers expanded globally, they used glass beads and mirrors as trade goods, particularly in Africa. Glass beads became a form of currency in the transatlantic slave trade, exchanged for enslaved people, gold, and other commodities. European colonialists also attempted to establish local glass industries in places like India and the Caribbean, similar to their efforts in establishing and controlling silk production. The knowledge of art here transforms into an economic and political commodity, which raises the question of whether art was seen primarily for its economic value. Colonial powers continued appropriating art and inviting indigenous craftsmen to produce art and

⁶⁰ Tomasz Borowski and Christopher Gerrard, "Constructing Identity in the Middle Ages: Relics, Religiosity, and the Military Orders," *Speculum* 92, no. 4 (2017): 1056–1100. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26583619>.

⁶¹ Georgopoulou, "The Artistic World of the Crusaders", 115–28.

⁶² Anthony Cutler, review of *The Art and Architecture of the Crusader States*, by Harry W. Hazard, *Speculum* 54, no. 4 (1979): 810–12, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2850344>.

architecture for European tastes, controlling economic production by facilitating demand and establishing stronger systems of commerce. This selective borrowing, seen in Indo-Saracenic architecture and colonial luxury goods, mirrors how empire-building relied on extracting cultural forms.

The artistic exchange was a selective adaptation and an ideological restructuring process. When European artisans borrowed techniques in textile production, metalwork, and architectural ornamentation, they did it through appropriation rather than collaboration. Looting and forced conversions of sacred spaces and Jerusalem's monuments showed not cultural reverence but domination. Yet the materials of conquest, like pillaged relics, mosaics, and fortifications, became the foundation for new artistic expressions. The Crusades intensified Europe's sense of cultural superiority while incorporating Islamic and Byzantine artistic forms. The transmission of luxury objects and architectural motifs also led to the 'exoticisation' and fascination with the East. This duality of cultural appropriation and artistic development reveals the ambiguous nature of Crusader influence, where artistic progress emerged from violence, and admiration coexisted with erasure.

Conclusion

The Crusades shaped a new social order and belief system, reforming the economic institutions and restructuring governance and hierarchies, which became the groundwork for the expansion of European colonialism. Pope Urban II's call to arms made the mission sacred and was a two-way imperative, which secured the defence of Byzantium and the recovery of Jerusalem. The First Crusade was not just a reaction to the impositions of the Seljuk Turks; it emerged from the convergence of several contingencies, like the fragmentation of militarism, scarcity of resources to meet the needs of the large population, and the papacy's ambition to assert Latin authority over Eastern Christendom. The Crusades were a mission to impose a new ecclesiastical and political order.

During this mission, the formation of beliefs galvanised masses as the crusades were posed as a religious revolution by the dehumanisation of the other by calling them infidels and propagandistic ideologies. The Europeans branded themselves as saviours. A sanctification of violence through recurrent narratives propagated by religious leaders provided a justification for conquest. This ideology of emotional manipulation persisted into the era of European colonisation, in Africa, where the civilizing mission had such ideological similarities. The Crusades also

showed that feudal lords had no national allegiance, political cooperation, or resource control. The emergence of a centralised supply chain and bureaucratic systems would also help in establishing political order.

The Crusades also transformed the economy through a more systematic fiscal policy. The Saladin Tithe of 1188 further institutionalised taxation, integrating ecclesiastical networks and professional collectors such as the Templars and Hospitallers. The development of professional banking systems towards the 13th century would later advance the amount of economic support rendered to the crusading mission. The increasing sophistication of these financial networks laid the foundation for later economic practices, including state-sponsored banking systems, keeping public records, and maintaining accountability of expenditures. The possibility of extracting knowledge from the Middle East led to the growth of architecture, art, technology, and medicine, however, there were also the realities of cultural appropriation and erasure. Letters of credit and bookkeeping were also the result of the exchange of knowledge.

This introspection of the Crusades shows how it not only created systems that worked, but also created diligence in financial planning, accountability, and the political ideology of creating a whole system with cooperative moving parts across different sectors, including belief and culture. It was an early example of state-building during a time of instability and war. The development of state economies, better governance structures, and the sanctification of violence become the chief modes of deployment of control and establishing stable resources to fund crusading ventures. Ultimately, the legacy of the Crusades is in its establishment of these forms of orders and ideology that could direct mass output, which led to the unification and socio-economic development of European society as it prepared to enter an era of colonialism.

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