



The Crusading Vow before and during the First Crusade

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Abstract

Crusading vows were a unique phenomenon that arose out of a combination of the Roman Catholic Church's hierarchical structure, its roots in the Roman Empire and the vassal and lord feudal relationship of the Early Medieval Period. This article examines the history of vows up to the First Crusade, examining the history of how Roman law and politics had an element of vows to the Roman pantheon for the good of the state. Additionally, how vows were used during the First Crusade and some of the effects those vows had on the military campaign itself. Crusading vows changed and formalized over the subsequent centuries and crusades across the Middle East and Europe. The military campaign, particularly in Asia Minor and during the Siege of Antioch saw the use of the vow to keep the morale of the soldiers high, to motivate the army to continue the struggle and to fortify them for hardships. The monastic vows made by clergy beginning in the 6th century through to the military oaths of today's armed forces are a historical offshoot of the vows and oaths made by knights and the military orders originating during the crusading period.

Keywords: History, Medieval, Crusades, Religion, Warfare

1. Introduction

In examining the crusading vow, the history behind the use of vows is an important place to understand historical, social, and societal clues. A "vow" is deeply rooted in human history, serving as a powerful commitment that binds individuals to their promises. The word "vow" originates from the Latin term *votum*, meaning a solemn promise or pledge, often directed toward a deity (Beard 2015). The Roman Catholic Church's roots in the Roman Republic and Empire trace the origins of the vow made publicly for the good of the state and privately for the good of the house and highlight how those vows changed as society changed. The context of making vows reflects directly on society, religion, law, and values at the time (Collins, 2009) (MacMullen, 1981). The goal of this paper is to examine the history of crusading vows in the centuries leading up to the First Crusade and how those religious vows shifted during the start

of the First Crusade into something much more militant and, at the same time, religious during subsequent crusades in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

2. Methodology

Research into the use of crusading vows over the past twenty years has examined how the sign of the cross carried significance and formed how the lens of history viewed the Crusades and crusading movement (Ann Price, 2008). Additionally, Johnathan Riley-Smith, the eminent historian of the Crusades, wrote about how the faith of Christians, both Eastern and Latin, believed God had a plan in place, and those who carried out that will on earth would be rewarded in heaven. God's work on earth occurred through 'taking the cross' and traveling and fighting on a crusade. (Riley-Smith, 2001). Research specifically on the origins of the Crusading movement and the First Crusade, in particular, is lacking, and the paper attempts to fill that gap through primary and secondary source analysis and assessment. A brief historical review of how those vows came to be at the Council of Clermont in 1096, a pivotal event in the history of the Crusades, is required. The methodology of this article and assessment is qualitative, examining the historiography of the vow up to the First Crusade and how it was shaped and changed over time.

Votum carried significant religious connotations, often involving a promise made to a deity in exchange for divine favor. The term was used both in public and private contexts, with implications ranging from personal devotion in the house and household divine worship to civic duty for the betterment of society. *Votum* was central to religious practices, particularly in Roman rites and rituals, where it denoted an offering or sacrifice promised to the gods in exchange for a blessing or favor. The Roman state, presiding over matters that concern the good of all citizens, would offer sacrifices to the Roman gods daily to tempt the gods to provide favorable outcomes. Examples would include the consul making sacrifices alongside the pontifex for the various religious cults for the good and benefit of the state. More locally, consuls would also do this prior to leading a legion on a campaign or battle (Beard, 2015). This interest gave the Roman religious practices efficient uses, as the form done during the religious ceremonies, both privately and publicly, benefited the state through the family. For centuries, the top tier of patrician society led the Roman city populace in religious rites, primarily public, to beseech the gods to support all civic ventures. These public rites were communal practices, where the entire city would come together to seek divine favor, and each Roman family leader privately led his household in something similar (Collins, 2009).

Additionally, the landscape of Rome itself changed as the resulting public works and temples throughout the city were a combination of vow fulfillment and rejoicing publicly for salvation from calamity. (MacMullen 1981). Recent research into the history of the Roman Republic and Empire vows by Moshe Blidstein in 2017 notes that the oath during the Roman period consisted of a statement clause and a verifying or empowering clause, which occurred through invoking a god as a witness to the vow. (Blidstein, 2017).

3. Discussion

Beyond religious contexts, vows also played a crucial role in Roman law and politics. Vows formalized treaties and alliances and other agreements between states or individuals. The sanctity of a vow in the eyes of the Romans made it a powerful tool for ensuring compliance, as breaking a vow was a breach of trust and an affront to the gods. Political leaders and officials were often required to take oaths, or *vota*, upon their appointment or election, pledging to uphold the laws and faithfully serve the state (Beard, 2015). These oaths were considered

binding under human and divine law (Gabriele & Palmer, 2019). The Roman Empire under Christianity continued this idea and tradition by introducing a single deity appointed by God to rule the empire. (Lactantius, 2003), (Leclercq, 1982).

As the Roman Empire declined and Christianity spread, the concept of the vow was absorbed and transformed within the new religious framework. Christian vows retained their Roman predecessors' solemnity and binding nature directed towards the Christian God and the intercession of saints. Adopting vows within Christian practice is particularly evident in monasticism, where vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience became the foundation of monastic life (Gabriele, 2019). The Rule of St. Benedict, written in the 6th century, played a pivotal role in formalizing these monastic vows, establishing a structure that would dominate Western monasticism for centuries—the monastic life built on the ascetic life of Saint Anthony of Egypt. The Benedictine vows were not just personal commitments but also spiritual contracts with God to be upheld seriously (Lactantius, 2003), (Leclercq, 1982).

In the feudal system, which characterized much of the Early Medieval Period after the dissolution of the Roman Empire, vows took on a new dimension as the basis for relationships between lords and vassals. These feudal vows, or oaths of fealty, were not just words but crucial in establishing and maintaining the hierarchical structure of medieval society. A vassal's vow to serve his lord was a sacred promise involving legal obligations and profound religious undertones, often sealed by swearing on holy relics or portions of the Bible stored for reading and use in services (Collins, 2009). The manor, evolving out of the Roman villa, continued in this lord and vassal relationship at the micro level, as counties and demesne did at the macro level (Leclercq, 1982). The sanctity of vows in this period extended beyond the monastery and the battlefield into the fabric of social and political life, reinforcing the idea that breaking a vow was a personal failing and a sin against God. Robert the Monk quotes directly from his recollection of Urban II's speech, "Whoever, therefore, shall determine upon this holy pilgrimage and shall make his vow to God to that effect and shall offer himself to Him as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, shall wear the sign of the cross of the Lord on his forehead or his breast..." (Sweetenham, 2015). The sign of the cross did not at this time have the same connotation that it would later, with a formal ceremony attended by the bishop or high ecclesiastical official presiding over the event. Preachers, tasked by Pope Urban II's papacy, sent monks and priests into Christendom to preach the First Crusade in a way that would attract followers (Riley-Smith, 1986; Tyerman, 2004).

The First Crusade marked a significant moment in the history of vows, as thousands of Europeans took up the cross in response to Pope Urban II's call to liberate the Holy Land from Muslim control. The vows taken by the crusaders were deeply religious in nature, combining the traditional concept of a vow with the emerging Christian ideology of holy war. Crusaders vowed to God to undertake the perilous journey to Jerusalem, and these vows were seen as binding commitments that could not be broken without severe spiritual consequences (Riley-Smith, 1986, Tyerman 2004, Tyerman, 2006). The consequences of previous sin necessitated the penance which the First Crusade and its indulgence provided the pilgrims with a powerful motivation to sign up.

One of the most significant aspects of crusader vows was their association with penitence and the promise of spiritual rewards. Pope Urban II's call to arms included the assurance that those who took up the cross and fulfilled their vows would receive a plenary indulgence, absolving them of all sins. This intertwining of military duty and spiritual salvation made the vow to crusade a potent motivator that resonated deeply with the religious fervor of the time. The fulfillment of crusader vows was paramount, as breaking such a vow was seen as a grievous sin (Riley-Smith, 1986). Chroniclers of the First Crusade, such as Fulcher of Chartres and

William of Tyre, emphasized the importance of keeping one's vow, often linking the crusade's success or failure to the crusaders' faithfulness in fulfilling their promises. The legacy of these vows extended beyond the First Crusade, influencing the nature of later crusades and shaping the broader Christian concept of holy war (Tyerman, 2004). The idea that a vow could lead to spiritual and temporal rewards resonated in medieval society, reinforcing the connection between religious devotion and martial duty (Tyerman, 2006). In reacting to Urban's preaching during the council, Robert the Monk describes Urban calling those who took the vow to "Most beloved brethren...Let this then be your war cry (God wills it) in combats because this word is given to you by God. When an armed attack is made upon the enemy, let this one cry be raised by all the soldiers of God: It is the will of God! It is the will of God! (Sweetenham, 2005). Recent studies into the First Crusade noted the use and belief in the duty and religious nature of the armed pilgrimage, as well as the eschatological or judgment placed on the towns and cities the Crusaders captured, but less on how the Crusaders thought on the nature of the vows taken prior to departing or while on campaign (Tyerman, 2006).

The martial duty of the First Crusade changed Western Europe's political and spiritual landscape. The military campaign, which aimed to march to Constantinople, linking various Western European regional armies into a more significant force alongside Byzantine forces, aimed to clear Asia Minor, former Byzantine-held lands before reclaiming the Holy Land from Muslim control, ignited fervor and devotion across Europe. The vows taken by knights and laypeople were central to the mobilization and inspiration of Crusaders and kept them in the fight when the journey turned difficult. Deeply rooted in religious conviction and knightly ideals of oath-keeping and honor, these vows played a pivotal role in shaping the motivations and actions of those who embarked on this perilous and brave journey (Duby, 1980). The increasing public nature of the vow, where others of the community observed the vow and traveled together, formed a tight bond of accountability. The formation of the crusading vow, drawing inspiration from the Holy Scripture, early Church fathers, Roman Republic and Empire military traditions, as well as the social norms and practices of the various successor kingdoms and states of the Western Roman Empire, all influenced the development of what became the crusading vow during the First Crusade and latter campaigns (Cowdrey, 1970) (Erdmann, 1977). The decades right before its initiation were fundamental to bringing together the social, religious, and military dimensions into the event that became the First Crusade.

Just prior to the commencement of the First Crusade, the Papacy in the early to mid-eleventh century, such as Pope Gregory VII (r. 1073–1085), sought to elevate the profession of arms from a realm of the laity to the realm of the spiritual. The Peace of God and Truce of God began in the tenth century and initially had a regional focus. Bishops in their respective diocese, alongside local secular leaders in the Frankish kingdom, endeavored to prevent the nobility of the area from attacking paupers on the roads and from theft (Cowdrey, 1997). The procession of relics, coupled with the masses at the local parish level, exerted pressure on local magnates to assist in cleaning up the roadways, a testament to the Church's commitment to societal welfare and promoting trade (Erdmann, 1977). As masses became more formalized in the eleventh century, the belief that daily masses could contribute to the common good gained traction. Consequently, the Western Church was the authority for spiritual and sometimes secular punishment for those who opposed this goodness (Purkis, 2008). The authority of the bishops in their respective dioceses would continue to be a point of contention between the nobility and the Papacy for much of the Early to High Middle Ages.

Local bishops' punishments included public penance, interdict, and formal oaths and vows, which always had a religious formula. The local and regional synods in the tenth and eleventh centuries addressed much of this to provide legal proceedings against unnecessary violence and create solutions to problems alongside secular leaders (Kempf, 1982). An example of this

would be in the Synod of Poitiers in 1000 and 1014, which recommended the creation of a peace militia to enforce the peace and truth of God. Taking a more militant approach by clerical leaders to secular problems began to occur throughout the eleventh century, with the crusades or the armed pilgrimage being an outcome only realized decades later (Cowdrey, 1970). Despite the efforts of the Peace of God and the Truce of God, violence persisted, highlighting the urgency of the issue. In the decades following the localized movement toward a more general peace, the Papacy took steps towards formalizing violence away from Europe and from those who could not protect themselves (Head & Landes, 1992) (Gabriele & Palmer, 2019).

The right moment for a general movement towards an armed pilgrimage came during the reign of Urban II in the final decade of the eleventh century. The First Crusade marked a significant moment in the history of vows, as thousands of Europeans took up the cross in response to Pope Urban II's call to liberate the Holy Land from Muslim control (Riley-Smith, 1986). Those at the council heard Urban's plea and traveled throughout Western Europe through local preachers and monks traveling between religious houses (Tyerman, 2004). The Crusaders' vows were deeply religious, combining the traditional concept of a vow with the emerging Christian ideology of holy war. Crusaders vowed to God to undertake the perilous journey to Jerusalem, and the vows were binding commitments that could not be broken without severe spiritual consequences (Tyerman, 2006).

4. Conclusion

The commitments to the vow impress upon the individual the consequences of vow breaking. The aspect of penitence in the vow taken by those going on the First Crusade was central. In the previous century, the Truce and Peace of God attempted to turn the populace away from the secular world and back towards the spiritual. Occasionally, a popular religious movement would take hold in a region led by a charismatic leader, reminding the laity of the spiritual rewards to those who lived a faithful life. Pope Urban II's call to arms included the assurance that those who took up the cross and fulfilled their vows would receive a plenary indulgence, absolving them of all sins. This intertwining of military duty and spiritual salvation made the vow to crusade a potent motivator that resonated deeply with the religious fervor of the time. The fulfillment of crusader vows was paramount, as breaking such a vow was considered a grievous sin. Chroniclers of the First Crusade, such as Fulcher of Chartres and William of Tyre, played a significant role in shaping the narrative, emphasizing the importance of keeping one's vow and often linking the crusade's success or failure to the crusaders' faithfulness in fulfilling their promises. Their storytelling powerfully influenced the legacy of these vows, extending beyond the First Crusade and shaping the nature of later crusades. Their narratives also contributed to the broader Christian concept of holy war, reinforcing the idea that a vow could lead to both spiritual and temporal rewards, and continued to resonate in medieval society, reinforcing the connection between religious devotion and martial duty and keeping the crusading movement alive to the Early Modern Period (Riley-Smith, 1986; Tyerman, 2004; Tyerman, 2006).

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