

The First Crusade – A New History by Thomas Asbridge. The Free Press 2004.

The First Crusade, as well as its successor endeavours, were seismic events that not only profoundly affected the world of their day but continue to have repercussions in our own time.

Thomas Asbridge's analysis of the First Crusade explains the genesis of the Crusade, its impetus from within a Catholic Church and a papacy struggling to impose its authority on medieval Europe and beyond, and the social and practical impact of the movement of a huge force of soldiers and hangers-on through Europe to the Middle East.

While the events in all their horror and brutality figure large in the book, the sieges, massacres of Jewish communities in the Rhineland, pitched battles and skirmishes between Christian and Muslim forces, and the final conquest of Jerusalem itself in 1099, it is the individuals of the First Crusade, their actions, motivations and inter-relationships that are the most intriguing.

Pope Urban himself, who launched the Crusade, famous knights such as Godfrey of Bouillon, Tancred of Hauteville, Baldwin of Boulogne and Raymond of Toulouse, and the clerics such as Peter the Hermit and Adhémar of Le Puy are leading figures in the drama, but there are more besides, both heroes and villains.

The brutality of each side's combatants was terrible, though the loathing that supposedly existed between the faiths was often tempered by pragmatism on the ground. Asbridge shows how the Muslims, had they been able to overcome their own petty rivalries, could have smashed the First Crusade quite easily, but repeatedly lost opportunities to gain the upper hand.

The First Crusade is an excellent read, and an extremely relevant one in these times of heightened tensions between Islam and Judaeo-Christian civilisation.

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