

The Tenth-Century Collapse in West Francia and the Birth of Christian Holy War

The tenth-century social and political collapse in West Francia constituted a major disruption in the order of Frankish society. As the power of the crown weakened, *castellans* (minor nobles or soldiers who could afford to build a castle) built their own power bases, defended by a new breed of enforcer violent mail-clad peasants who became known as *cnichts* or knights, across the south of the kingdom. With no central authority to prevent this balkanisation, the Roman Church became the main bastion of peace and law in the region, enforcing ceasefires through religious ceremonies. This led in turn to a second major disruption: the rewriting of the Church's theology to sanctify the concept of religious warfare, a move which led, within a century, to the First Crusade. This paper will argue that although these two disruptive changes brought major shifts in European society, and fuelled contemporary millennial anxieties, they were also part of a wider context of greater changes. As such, while the tenth-century collapse and the change in Rome's view of religious warfare could be seen as major breaks from tradition, they could also be seen as part of a series of evolving processes of slow-change; processes that were also connected to the spread of feudalism throughout western Europe, the slow fragmentation of Charlemagne's territories, and the spread of Norman power as far afield as England and southern Italy.

In 1095 AD the new Pope, Urban II, called a Peace Council at Clermont in France. The Peace Council movement had been an attempt to restore order after the tenth-century Frankish collapse by channelling the energies of knights and castellans into the defence of the Church and the peasantry by making them knights of God, and had succeeded in bringing at least nominal peace to much of present-day France. As was the tradition at these Peace Councils, the Pope extended the full protection of the Church to all Christians without weapons and brought a new innovation to the old hope that the castellans could become knights of God, offering 'an immediate remission of sins' for those who died while trying to liberate Jerusalem from 'the heathen' and commanding those who went to wear a cross on their foreheads or chests (hence the term 'Crusade').¹

¹ Tom Holland, *Millennium: The End of the World and the Forging of Christendom* (London: Little, Brown, 2008), p. 409; Fulcher of Chartres 'Pope Urban II's Exhortation to the Crusade at Clermont' in *Sources for the History of Medieval Europe*, ed. by Brian Pullan (Oxford: Barnes & Noble, 1966),

This speech was the culmination of the reform movement's gradual reversal of the Church's condemnation of violence. Although there were precedents for religious warfare or Church-sponsored wars, the aims and scale of the Crusade made it virtually unprecedented in the history of Christendom. As Christians from all walks of life 'took the cross', vowing to join an armed pilgrimage to Jerusalem, they were both drawing on a tradition that stretched back to the Roman Empire and helping to create a new one that would add the word 'Crusade' to everyday English vocabulary. The very fact that they were vowing to liberate Jerusalem was surprising; Alexius I, the Byzantine emperor, had appealed for western help fighting the Turks in Anatolia and had hoped to exploit the Islamic occupation of Jerusalem in order to get it.² Instead, the troops raised by Urban journeyed to a city that had been Muslim for centuries, where Christians (particularly non-Orthodox ones) were treated reasonably well, no major persecution had occurred since 1009, and which had sent no appeals for help.³ The largest army in medieval Europe (accompanied by thousands of non-combatant pilgrims), whose formation lay in a century shaped by millenarianism, was travelling to the city in which they believed the world would end, with consequences for religious and political relations between Europe and the Islamic world that are still being felt to this day. These momentous changes had their most immediate roots in the collapse of royal power in West Francia a century earlier.

The Tenth-Century Frankish Collapse and the Peace of God

In 987, Louis V – king of West Francia and the last Carolingian monarch in Europe – died childless.⁴ The West Frankish nobles decided to elect a new king with proven leadership qualities, passing over Louis' uncle Charles and electing Hugh Capet, Duke of the Franks, a war hero tenuously connected to the Carolingian dynasty.⁵ However, Charles' subsequent rebellion achieved moderate success with support from some of those who had initially elected Hugh, leaving the new royal family in a very precarious position.⁶ Under Hugh and his son Robert, West Frankish society underwent many changes, some of which had been initiated by the Capetians even before they became royalty. Like many East Frankish nobles, Hugh's grandfather had realised that the benefits of a large extended family might be outweighed by the advantages of bequeathing a unified territory to one's immediate descendants.⁷ By 956, when Hugh became Duke of the Franks, he had inherited all of the family's core holdings intact: the Capetians had become the first West Frankish family to adopt the principle of primogeniture.⁸ Other families in the Loire valley region, including the Counts of

p. 58; Robert the Monk, 'Speech of Pope Urban II at the Council of Clermont' in *The Medieval World, 300-1300* 3rd ed., ed. by Norman F. Cantor (New York: Macmillan, 1968), p. 208.

² Peter Charanis, 'A Greek Source on the Origin of the First Crusade', *Speculum*, 24 (1949), p. 94;

Claude Cahen, 'An Introduction to the First Crusade', *Past and Present*, 6 (1954), pp. 15-17.

³ Cahen, 'Introduction', pp. 12-15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁵ Richer, 'The Election of Hugh Capet' in *A Source Book of Mediaeval History: Documents Illustrative of European Life and Institutions from the German Invasions to the Renaissance*, ed. by Frederic Austin Ogg (New York: American Book Co., 1972), pp. 178-180; Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: A History of Europe from 400 to 1000* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 427.

⁶ Holland, *Millennium*, p. 132.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

Flanders, followed suit and began to build consolidated power bases, allowing them to challenge the royal authority to greater extents than ever before.⁹ A demonstration of the detrimental effect this had on royal power came in 1008, when agents of Fulk Nerra, Comte d'Anjou, killed King Robert's chamberlain while he was hunting with his master.¹⁰ However, these newly-powerful lords never openly revolted against the crown or declared themselves kings: that would have destroyed the basis of their legitimacy – their position as vassals of the king – leaving them vulnerable to the erosion of their own authority, something which may have helped to shore up the monarchy's position.¹¹

Further south in the kingdom, royal power was only a memory, but here the nobility had an even greater reason to pay lip-service to it: their authority was often as illusory as Robert's.¹² The reason for this was also one of the sources of Fulk's power: castles. According to Frankish tradition, battlements were the exclusive property of royalty, so the sudden proliferation of castles in southern France and southern Italy during the late tenth- and early eleventh century was symptomatic of a breakdown of law and order.¹³ Fulk Nerra's rampant castle-building in Anjou was part of a trend towards the erosion of any central authority, especially as he had realised the castle's strategic potential for attack as well as defence.¹⁴ Despite this, as he ruled his castellans with an iron fist, his lands did not slide into lawlessness.¹⁵ In the south, however, castles were appearing with astonishing frequency; as many of these new castellans had no legitimate authority, they went to great lengths to retain power.¹⁶ Factors other than the collapse of Capetian authority were adding to both the castellans' determination to increase their power and the general sense of impending doom. There were a number of famines in West Francia during this period, and yet simultaneously, there were new opportunities to exploit the land. Climate change was making much of Europe warmer and wetter; glaciers in the Alps were receding and wetlands were drying up. While the noticeably hotter and wetter weather was fuel to the fire of millenarian fears, it also provided ruthless lords with new economic opportunities.¹⁷ A more temperate climate meant that farming could continue virtually year-round, as long as there was someone to work the land. All over West Francia, *paupores* – peasants – were being forcibly resettled in villages next to their lords' castles, forced to work in the fields all year to maximize crop yields, and banned from their traditional methods of supplementing their food supplies by hunting and foraging, obliterating the distinctions between freemen and serfs, as they were all bound to their local warlord's land.¹⁸ In the south, where the illegitimate castellans needed optimum levels of efficiency from their lands to defend themselves and expand their

⁹ Ibid, p. 133; Christopher Brooke, *Europe in the Central Middle Ages, 962-1154* 3rd ed. (Harlow: Longman, 2000), p. 256.

¹⁰ Holland, *Millennium*, p. 140; Wickham, *Inheritance*, p. 442; Bernard S. Bachrach, 'Enforcement of the *Forma Fidelitatis*: The Techniques Used by Fulk Nerra, Count of the Angevins (987-1040)', *Speculum*, 54 (1984), p. 817.

¹¹ Holland, *Millennium*, pp. 144-145.

¹² Ibid, p. 145; Brooke, *Central Middle Ages*, p. 256.

¹³ Holland, *Millennium*, p. 140.

¹⁴ Bernard S. Bachrach, 'The Angevin Strategy of Castle Building in the Reign of Fulk Nerra, 987-1040', *The American Historical Review*, 88 (1983), pp. 522, 539-540, 543.

¹⁵ Wickham, *Inheritance*, p. 524.

¹⁶ Holland, *Millennium*, p. 154.

¹⁷ Ibid, pp. 151-152.

¹⁸ Ibid, pp. 151-2; N.J.G. Pounds, *An Historical Geography of Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 166-7.

territories, assaults on the traditional *paupore* way of life were particularly ruthless.¹⁹ Castellans employed bands of mail-clad mounted troops – often peasants who had spotted an opportunity for betterment – as enforcers, a novelty that chroniclers initially struggled to name. In England, they became known by the derogatory term *cnichts*, an Anglo-Saxon word for household slaves which later became ‘knights’.²⁰ These men, often little more than legalised thugs, were used to violently impose a new feudal order on the peasantry.²¹ To the *paupores*, such a brutal overturning of the social order may have suggested that the end of the world was imminent; indeed, many of their social superiors would have agreed.

The first recorded Peace Council had been in Aurillac in 972 when the local clergy, led by three bishops and several nobles and supported by the peasantry, demanded that the neighbouring castellans cease their violence against, and oppression of, the poor.²² The trend for such councils spread across West Francia as the political situation worsened after Louis V’s death, reaching the famous Abbey of Cluny in 994.²³ Cluny had been founded in Burgundy in 910 by Duke William of Aquitaine and the violent times had meant that its exterior resembled a fort.²⁴ The monks followed a version of the Benedictine Rule living humbly, distributing alms, and healing the sick.²⁵ These were necessary duties in tenth-century Burgundy, one of the few parts of West Francia where Robert Capet made a stand against the castellans. His decision to stand and fight had turned the duchy into a battlefield where Cluny was often the sole provider of medical care, food and protection for terrified peasants and wounded or insane soldiers.²⁶ This aspect of the abbey’s work earned it praise from the papacy as a ‘haven of piety and salvation’, while St. Peter Damien called it ‘a field of the Lord’.²⁷ However, many West Frankish bishops and castellans were hostile towards Cluny because of its perceived eccentricities, self-promotion, and wealth.²⁸ It was surrounded by castellans, who dealt with what they saw as a threat in their usual fashion: violence. Peasants farming Cluny’s land were attacked and its storehouses burned; the election of a new abbot, Odilo, in 994 led to a particularly explosive outbreak of violence.²⁹ Odilo realised that millenarianism was making the castellans feel more threatened by Cluny’s authority but also more fearful for their souls; while this period saw more raids on Cluny it also saw an increase in land grants from raiding warlords who wanted to clear their consciences.³⁰ Taking advantage of this, Odilo called an emergency council presided

¹⁹ Holland, *Millennium*, pp. 154-5.

²⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 154-5.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 155, John France, ‘Recent Writing on Medieval Warfare: From the Fall of Rome to 1300’, *The Journal of Military History*, 65 (2001), p. 453.

²² H.E.J. Cowdrey, ‘The Peace and the Truce of God in the Eleventh Century’, *Past and Present*, 46 (1970), p. 44.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 44.

²⁴ Holland, *Millennium*, p. 161.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 161; R.W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 230.

²⁶ Holland, *Millennium*, p. 160.

²⁷ Dominique Iogna-Prat, *Order and Exclusion: Cluny and Christendom Face Heresy, Judaism and Islam (1000-1150)* trans. Graham Robert Edwards (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 37; Southern, *Society and Church*, p. 230.

²⁸ Holland, *Millennium*, pp. 164-5.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 166.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 167.

over by two archbishops in the neighbouring town of Anse. Cluny's properties and servants were declared sacrosanct but the abbot also tried to include the castellans in his new order, recruiting them to God's cause.

St. Odo, Cluny's first abbot, had said that 'a layman who serves as a warrior is perfectly entitled to carry a sword... in order to defend those who have no swords'.³¹ This was a pattern repeated across West Francia in the following years, as castellans and their soldiers swore in the presence of holy relics to protect the weak and serve God, a process which became increasingly militarised when Robert Capet and Duke William of Normandy held secular peace councils.³² Personal piety was being made into a public, popular phenomenon in which everyone was given a place in the heavenly (and earthly) hierarchy. Despite being an attempt to use religion as a means of enforcing peace across West Francia, the Peace Councils showed a new, warlike side to the Church, even if this stance was more rhetorical than practical. The once-despised castellans and knights, who took the oath to preserve the peace, could legitimately consider themselves part of an elite group of holy warriors fighting to enforce God's peace: the earthly equivalent of the Cherubim and Seraphim.³³ Within a century, they would go to war as soldiers of the Church.

Clermont

Alexius I had appealed for help with his attempts to reconquer Anatolia, and Urban's advisers had hoped that sending troops might mend the breach between the Papacy and the Patriarchate of Constantinople.³⁴ Instead, when Urban addressed the Council of Clermont he proposed a strategically illogical war with a primarily religious motivation. The prudent way to reconquer the Holy Land would have been to start by helping Alexius capture Anatolia from the Turks, and then use the province as a base from which armies could expand southwards, capturing fortresses and consolidating Christian control in the area before eventually reaching Jerusalem. Instead, Urban wanted to raise an army that would immediately set out to conquer Jerusalem and the Holy Land, an aim which, if taken literally, would create an isolated Christian enclave surrounded by hostile Muslim rulers hundreds of miles from help. Urban was not only going to have to convince the Church to break its tradition of non-violence; he also had to induce Frankish and Norman nobles, men known for their tactical sense, to take part in a campaign whose initial conception was seemingly without reference to strategic necessities, and he did this by leaving the wording of his proclamation vague enough to allow for the conquest of the whole Muslim eastern Mediterranean.³⁵

Urban called an ecclesiastical council at Clermont to rally the Church to his cause, visiting major institutions, such as Cluny, and initiating sought-after reforms before even approaching the subject of the war against Islam.³⁶ It is understandable that he would have approached such a momentous announcement cautiously, but his message seems to have been well-received. No contemporary accounts of his speech remain,

³¹ St Odo, *Life of St. Gerald of Aurillac*, 1.8, quoted in Holland, *Millennium*, p. 167.

³² Holland, *Millennium*, pp. 168, 174-175.

³³ Loren C. MacKinney, 'The People and Public Opinion in the Eleventh-Century Peace Movement', *Speculum*, 5 (1930), p. 186; Holland, *Millennium*, pp. 172-173.

³⁴ Steven Runciman, *A History of the Crusades* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 99.

³⁵ Runciman, *Crusades*, pp. 107-108.

³⁶ Thomas Asbridge, *The First Crusade: A New History* (London: Free Press, 2004), p. 32.

even those written by eyewitnesses were set down after the capture of Jerusalem, but all of the accounts agree that it was greeted with popular acclaim and a wave of religious fervour; it is claimed that those who heard it spontaneously began chanting '*Deus vult*' ('God wills it') and tearing strips of fabric off their clothes to fashion into crosses which they wore on their chests.³⁷ Even if the idea of religious warfare constituted a major theological shift from the perspective of those in charge of the Roman Church, at the grassroots level it was met with devout enthusiasm.

Much of the groundwork for this enthusiasm had been laid by the Peace Councils of the tenth and eleventh centuries, but the Church of Rome had a long history of entanglement with politics and warfare – such as the endless struggles for supremacy between generations of Pontiffs and Holy Roman Emperors – and the concept of religiously-motivated warfare was not particularly alien to Christian thought and history. In 312 AD, the Roman general Constantine marched on Rome in an attempt to seize the throne.³⁸ His army was outnumbered and his enemies had occupied the capital, but, after having a vision of a cross and hearing a voice saying 'by this sign, conquer', he decided to embrace this imagery and fight under the Christian banner, and had all his troops paint the sign of the cross on their shields; however, whether he fundamentally changed his religious beliefs and practices is unknown. They won the subsequent battle, and Constantine became emperor. Long after his death, he would be remembered somewhat inaccurately as the emperor who won a war due to Christ's intervention and strove to build an *imperium christianium*, or Christian Empire.³⁹ However, as the Christian Church developed towards its official form, and articulated its doctrine under subsequent emperors, it slowly eschewed any form of dispensation for violence in defence of the Church, and treated soldiers as sinners who needed to be absolved through penance.⁴⁰

Christendom's next encounter with holy war came through being on the receiving end of the Islamic *jihad*.⁴¹ Many clerics and theologians, particularly in the Byzantine Empire, saw the Qur'anic attitude towards warfare as proof of Islam's infernal origins with the 'false prophet' Muhammad.⁴² In 732, a Córdoba army entered southern Francia.⁴³ Charles Martel ('the Hammer'), Duke of the Franks and mayor of the Merovingian Palace, led a Frankish force to Poitiers to halt the Muslim advance.⁴⁴ In the ensuing battle, Frankish axemen routed the Muslim cavalry and the Córdoba army was defeated. This battle, seen in Europe as a decisive moment in the war between Christendom and Islam, entered popular mythology as a contest between devilish Muslim infidels and devout Frankish Christians, with some poems and stories portraying the latter as saintly warriors.⁴⁵ However, while the Church may have been thankful for the victory, it did not change its stance on the use of violence.

³⁷ Holland, *Millennium*, p. 409.

³⁸ Holland, *Millennium*, pp. 4-5.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴¹ David Levering Lewis, *God's Crucible: Islam and the Making of Europe, 570-1215* (New York: Norton, 2008), pp xiv-xv.

⁴² John Meyendorff, 'Byzantine Views of Islam', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 18 (1964), p. 115.

⁴³ Stephen O'Shea, *Sea of Faith: Islam and Christianity in the Medieval Mediterranean World* (New York: Walker, 2006), p. 73.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 76-77.

In 768, Martel's grandson Charles, later known as Charlemagne ('Charles the Great'), became king of Francia.⁴⁶ In 772 he invaded Saxony, whose inhabitants had been launching raids across his kingdom's eastern border, conquered the Saxons and forced them to convert to Christianity.⁴⁷ However, while Charlemagne was zealous about enforcing this conversion, his primary motivation seems to have been strategic rather than religious; he needed to end the costly incursions by pillaging bands and the Church was unimpressed by this violent method of spreading the Gospel.⁴⁸ Although Charlemagne framed this war in a religious context, and despite Pope Leo III crowning him Holy Roman Emperor in 800, the Church still did not relax its attitude towards warfare.⁴⁹

When the Papacy found itself threatened by Islamic pirates based in Sicily, this official position remained unaltered, although successive Popes did nothing to actively discourage wars against the Islamic Caliphates. The next change in Rome's policy on warfare came, as has been discussed, in tenth-century Francia. However, although the Peace Councils had recognised Christian knights as part of God's order, they were encouraged not to conquer new lands but to protect the peace and uphold the law.⁵⁰ This stance began to evolve under the reformist Pope Leo IX. Afraid that the Norman conquerors of southern Italy would overrun Rome itself, he recruited an army and personally led it into battle. This horrified traditionalist members of the clergy, who were also shocked by his decision to absolve the sins of his troops.⁵¹ When the army was annihilated by a significantly smaller Norman force, some took it as a sign of God's disapproval of Leo's attempt to sanctify warfare, but six years later, these same men gave papal approval to a Norman invasion of Sicily.⁵² However, both of these wars were primarily motivated by strategic considerations: Leo went to war against his fellow-Christians to defend his own territory, while the Sicilian expedition was as much about eliminating the threat to Rome from Muslim pirates and keeping the Normans occupied as about reclaiming the island for Christendom.⁵³ Similarly, the Norman invasion of England in 1066 received papal support, but as William was considered the rightful king by most of Europe, the war was seen as a counter-insurgency, while the reformists used it as an opportunity to spread their programme of changes to the English Church.⁵⁴ During the 1070s, a priest called Gerold d'Avranches told instructional stories about warrior-saints to the men and boys serving the Earl of Chester.⁵⁵ In 1077, the Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV came to the fortress of Canossa in Lombardy to beg forgiveness from Pope Gregory VII for his attempts to disempower the Holy See, in an event that, for some, marks the beginning of the concept of the formal separation of Church and State.⁵⁶ However, these did not promote violence; they portrayed lives of

⁴⁶ Derek Wilson, *Charlemagne: Barbarian and Emperor* (London: Hutchinson, 2005), p 1, 5.

⁴⁷ Holland, *Millennium*, pp. 27-28.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 28.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 21.

⁵⁰ Lewis, *Crucible*, pp. 167-168.

⁵¹ Holland, *Millennium*, pp. 275-6.

⁵² *Ibid*, pp. 276-277, 355.

⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 355.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 319.

⁵⁵ James B. MacGregor, 'The Ministry of Gerold d'Avranches: Warrior-Saints and Knightly Piety on the Eve of the First Crusade', *Journal of Medieval History*, 29 (2003), p. 219.

⁵⁶ Southern, *Society and the Church*, pp. 180-1; Holland, *Millennium*, pp. xvi-xvii; Lewis, *Crucible*, p.

monkish humility in which knights served (and donated land to) the Church.⁵⁷ None of these events, even Leo's decision to lead his army in the field, signalled the complete endorsement of violence by Rome.

Conclusion

The militancy of previous reformist Popes was a slender theological precedent on which to build the grand scheme envisioned by Urban II. From a pragmatic perspective, Urban's speech at Clermont was the result of a series of processes and pressure that had built over centuries and been brought to a head by the reform movement's militant tendencies, rather than a revolutionary disruption of centuries-old tradition. It was a disruption in theology as the reformists sought to crest the wave of social change, rather than a sudden shift in practical reality. Similarly, although the tenth-century political collapse in West Francia was taken by many contemporaries to be a sign of the impending apocalypse, it can be seen as part of a series of slow changes. The climate was becoming more temperate. The Carolingian empire was finishing its slow dissolution, due to royal lines dying out and nobles squabbling over the remains, with the process being hastened by the introduction to West Francia of primogeniture and new strategies for conquest and control based around castle construction. Ambitious Norman warlords continued their opportunistic expansions into regions that were ripe for conquest, and ruthless petty nobles developed new ways to exploit the peasantry for economic gain. Thus, the tenth-century Frankish collapse and the birth of crusading can be seen as both disruptions in the medieval European order and parts of wider processes of slow change.

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⁵⁷ McGregor, 'Ministry', p. 219.

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