

The First Crusade

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Background and motives

When Pope Urban II made his famous speech that launched the expedition we now know as the First Crusade on 27 November 1095 it met with an extraordinary response from his intended audience and beyond. In considering the ‘Why?’ of the crusade there are therefore two aspects to consider: why the pope made the speech and why the response was so enthusiastic. The weight given to different factors in each case varies from one historian to another, but the following are the more important.

Why did Urban II call for a crusade?

- He was responding to an appeal for assistance from the Byzantine emperor, Alexios I Komnenos, who was alarmed by the proximity of the Seljuk Turks. This tribe from central Asia had adopted Islam and defeated Byzantium at the battle of Manzikert in 1071. They advanced westward across Asia Minor and by 1092 were established in Nicaea, just across the Bosphoros from Constantinople. Emperor Alexios sent envoys with an appeal for military assistance against the Turks and the pope received them at Piacenza in March 1095. A recent reinterpretation that focuses on this aspect is Peter Frankopan, *The First Crusade: The Call from the East* (2012).
- A component of the ‘Byzantine’ motivation may have been the pope’s desire to mend the rift between the Eastern and Western Churches that originated in 1054, the ‘Great Schism’. Reasserting the primacy of Rome over the whole of Christendom was an aim of the Reform Papacy, which was also pushing an agenda in the West that included attacking the right of secular monarchy to invest bishops with their badges of office, the ‘Investiture Contest’.
- Jerusalem was in Muslim hands, and although this was nothing new, it seems that after the city was captured by Seljuk Turks in 1073 Christian pilgrims were subject to some persecution, from tolls charged to enter the city to physical violence. This was stressed in most of the accounts of the pope’s speech (see below for these), but it is disputed how accurate these reports were. Persecution in Jerusalem may have been a reason for Urban’s speech, or a pretext he used for recruitment reasons or a rationalisation by the various writers after 1099 when the reports were written.
- It used to be thought that Urban wanted to motivate unruly knights in the West to direct their disruptive energies against a non-Christian foe. The chronicler Guibert of Nogent believed so: ‘The knightly order and the errant mob who were engaged in mutual slaughter would find a new way of earning salvation.’ A variation of this idea, expressed by Steven Runciman among others, was that these were landless and restless younger sons of noble families, but this is no longer credited since Jonathan Riley-Smith pointed out in *The First Crusaders* (1997) the enormous expense of equipping a knight.

Pope Urban II at the Council of Clermont. Illustration from Sébastien Mamerot’s *Livre des Passages d’Outre-mer* (Jean Colombe, c. 1472–75, BNF Fr. 5594). This image, along with that on page 40, was created long after the events supposedly depicted. Despite this, these images can be used productively by asking students to explain why they are misleading in their portrayals of these two events.

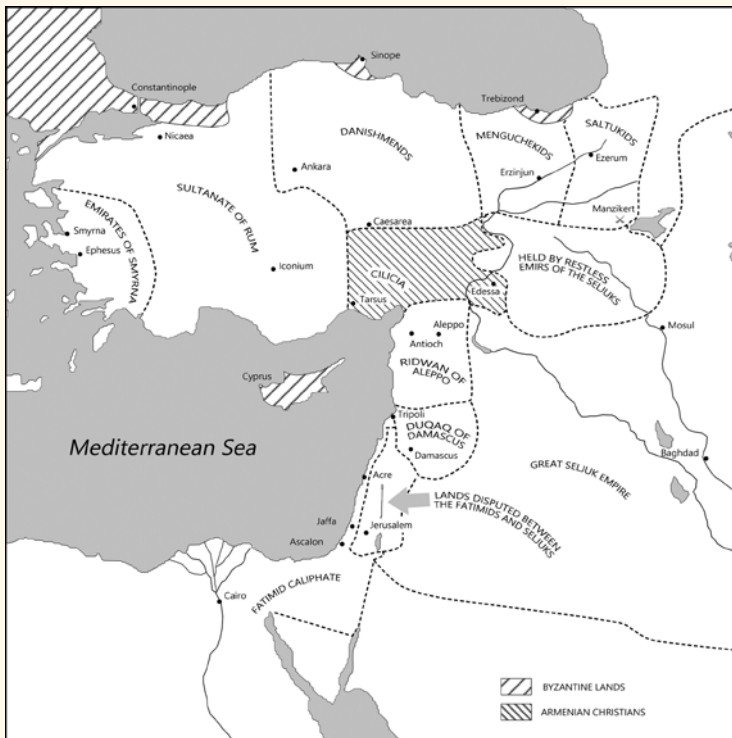


Why did people of all ranks respond with such enthusiasm?

Undoubtedly the mixture of motives varied from individual to individual, but key components are likely to have been:

- **Genuine religious piety.** Pilgrimage to Jerusalem had become increasingly popular through the Middle Ages, following the excavation of the ‘True Cross’ by the Roman emperor’s mother St Helena in the 320s. The church of the Holy Sepulchre was built on the site of the discovery and by the eleventh century it attracted thousands of pilgrims from western Europe. Many who took part in the First Crusade were probably seizing the opportunity to make the journey in a group of thousands. It is important to note that pilgrims had customarily been unarmed, so the inclusion of knights in their number was a big and potentially provocative change.
- **Remission of sins.** The doctrine of purgatory was being formalised at the time of the crusade. According to this, sins committed during one’s lifetime would be paid for by suffering after death. Conversely, by undergoing penance (i.e. suffering sanctioned by the Church) while still living,

Figure 1: Political complexities in 1095



- The **Byzantines** were ruled by Emperor Alexios Komnenos (1081-1118). He had asked for assistance against the Turks and so the crusading armies converged on Constantinople as the first stage of their campaign.
- The **Seljuk Turks** dominated Asia Minor. They had defeated the Byzantine army at Manzikert in 1071 and swept westward, capturing Nicaea in 1092. This brought them too close to Constantinople and led to the appeal for a western army to fight them.
- **Other Turkish groups** nominally recognised the Seljuks as overlords, but following the death of Malik Shah in 1092 his empire disintegrated and rival, independent rulers emerged.
- The **Armenians** were Christians and were nominally ruled from Constantinople, but they maintained a precarious quasi-independence by playing off Byzantines and Turks.
- The **Fatimids** of Egypt (usually called Saracens by the crusaders) were Shi'ite Muslims while the Turks were Sunni Muslims. They sought to profit from the collapse of order among the Turks by invading Syria and Palestine from the south.

a person could 'buy' time off purgatory. Pilgrimage was a widespread form of penance imposed by priests for serious sins. In his speech at Clermont in 1095 Urban II declared a plenary indulgence, that is, that anyone who had made full confession of his sins would earn full remission by participating in the crusade.

- **Apocalyptic ideas.** The Book of Revelation in the Christian Bible foretold the Second Coming of Christ after a thousand years. The place would be Jerusalem. As the millennium passed and nothing happened, one explanation was that Jerusalem was in the hands of infidels and needed to be delivered by Christendom to usher in the final days. A recent history that centres on this aspect is Jay Rubenstein, *Armies of Heaven: the First Crusade and the Quest for Apocalypse* (2011).
- **Looking for a better life.** This applied more to the crowd of non-combatants who joined Peter the Hermit's crusade or tagged along with the main armies later. Guibert of Nogent wrote of general famine on the eve of the crusade and people setting off as families with their scant possessions. Whenever the children spied a town ahead of them they would ask, 'Is that Jerusalem?'
- **Ambition.** The pre-eminent example of the ambitious noble was Bohemond of Taranto. He had no prospects at home, since he was the son of Robert Guiscard's first marriage that had been annulled and Robert's second wife provided at least three sons. He seems to have set out on the crusade with the intention of carving out a lordship for himself in the East, and by cunning and force of personality he acquired Antioch. Raymond of Saint-Gilles signalled his intention to stay in the East by taking his wife with him, as did Baldwin of Boulogne. It was more common among the nobility to leave wives at home in charge of the estates, and the majority of crusaders who completed the journey did indeed head for home when they had fulfilled their pilgrimage vow by praying at the Holy Sepulchre.
- **Adventure!** We might suspect this was an incentive, but no one owned up to it.

- **Opportunism.** Likewise, there must have been people escaping local feuds or unhappy family circumstances; petty criminals and prostitutes on the make. How many cannot be estimated.

How did the crusade succeed?

As indicated above, Urban's appeal of November 1095 attracted many more people than he intended. His letters to different communities following the speech show rather desperate attempts to limit participation. For example he wrote to Bologna in September 1096 that clerics and monks must not go without the permission of their bishops or abbots; parishioners must get advice from the clergy; young married men had to have the consent of their wives (letter in Peters, p. 44, see page 41). However he was too late to prevent a great number (perhaps tens of thousands) setting out with the unofficial crusades in the spring of 1096, three months before the appointed day for departure, 15 August.

Given the array of motives among the crusaders and the lack of control from the top, the fact that the expedition succeeded in reaching Jerusalem and capturing it needs explanation.

- Part of it lies in the situation in the Middle East, that had changed during the 1090s, (see figure 1, Political complexities in 1095). There is debate among historians as to how aware the westerners were of this as an opportunity to march into a power vacuum, but there is no doubt that it assisted them. An accessible article was published in *History Today*, 67 issue 3, March 2017: Nicholas Morton, 'Was the First Crusade Really War Against Islam?' At the time of writing it was available online: <http://www.historytoday.com/nicholas-morton/was-first-crusade-really-war-against-islam> [accessed 22 July 2017]
- **Religious faith** was a major, if incalculable, part of the crusaders' success. They believed they were doing God's work and that He was fighting for them as they were for Him. There was widespread belief in miracles. The two most important took place at Antioch. The first was the discovery

The conquest of Jerusalem in the First Crusade.
Illustration from a ms. of Guillaume de Tyr, *Histoire d'Outremer* c.1280, Bibliothèque municipale, Lyon



of the Holy Lance after the dream of a Provençal peasant while the crusaders were under siege within the city. Most contemporaries and many modern historians believe that, regardless of the relic's dubious authenticity, faith in it enabled the enfeebled crusaders to defeat the massed army of Turks at the Battle of Antioch in June 1098. It should be noted that the lance was widely discredited after the event, and its efficacy as a morale booster has been thrown into doubt, e.g. by Thomas Asbridge, *The First Crusade: A New History* (2004). The second widely attested miracle was the appearance of St George and other military saints leading a ghostly battalion against the Turks in the same battle.

- **Effective leadership?** This is discussed in the next section.

Leadership

One remarkable and much debated aspect of the First Crusade was its lack of an overall leader and whether this helped or hindered its progress. It's easy to find instances of disputes and disagreements between the leaders and the different participating armies, but in the end, John France has argued (*Victory in the East*, 1994), the leaders who captured Jerusalem in 1099 had established good working relationships and an effective 'war council'.

- **God** was, of course, the real leader: see the title of Guibert of Nogent's chronicle, *Dei gesta per Francos* – 'The deeds of God through the Franks'.
- God's representative on earth was **Pope Urban II**, who launched the crusade but did not join the expedition.
- The pope's deputy, or legate, was **Bishop Adhemar of Le Puy** who was much admired but died on 1 August 1098, soon after the battle of Antioch, leaving the crusaders with no clear spiritual leader.

- **Count Raymond of Saint-Gilles** (aka of Toulouse) was almost certainly in on the pope's plans for the expedition. Bishop Adhemar travelled with Raymond's Provençals, the largest of the armies on the crusade. One of the fault-lines in the crusader host was the rivalry and distrust between Raymond and the rest, especially Bohemond.
- An army from northern France was led by a number of counts – **Robert of Normandy**, **Stephen of Blois**, **Robert of Flanders**, **Eustace of Boulogne** – and the king of France's brother, **Hugh 'Magnus'**. These were recruited by the pope, who toured northern France to preach the crusade.
- **Godfrey of Bouillon** (in the area of modern Belgium) was not among the invitees as he had supported the German Emperor in recent conflicts against the pope. He was, however, very pious and became the first ruler of Jerusalem. He was accompanied by his brother (and heir) **Baldwin of Boulogne** who struck out on his own in 1097 and became the first Latin (i.e. western European) ruler of the county of Edessa. After Godfrey died in 1000 Baldwin became king of Jerusalem.
- **Bohemond of Taranto** was a Norman of southern Italy. His motives in joining the crusade were suspect from the very beginning, as he had attacked the Byzantine Empire with his father in the 1080s. His later activities confirmed his ambitions, as he engineered the capture of Antioch in 1098 and kept it for himself, failing to join the other leaders who went on to besiege Jerusalem. Bohemond's nephew **Tancred** travelled with the Italian Normans. He was a rival of Baldwin of Boulogne, but when the two fought over territory in Cilicia (Christian Armenian territory) he had to give way to Baldwin and joined the other leaders in the siege of Antioch. He later continued to Jerusalem with Godfrey's army rather than stay with his uncle in Antioch. We should add:
- **Peter the Hermit**. Peter led the so-called 'People's' or 'Peasants' Crusade (there were a number of knights too). His charismatic preaching attracted an enormous number of followers whom he led overland. His big mistake was to leave in the spring, before the main armies, when food was short. Nevertheless, he kept reasonable order until his crowd came to Constantinople, where their numbers alarmed the emperor. They were shipped across the Bosphorus, and in Peter's absence they provoked an attack by the Turks and were massacred. Peter himself joined the main crusade and remained a respected figure. However, other less disciplined groups followed in Peter's footsteps and these were responsible for attacks on the Jews of the Rhineland cities. Most members of these rabble deserted or were killed in Hungary and never reached Constantinople.
- **Alexios I Komnenos** expected to command the western armies when they arrived in Constantinople and he tried to assert his authority over them by eliciting an oath from their leaders. This was to cause a rift in the leadership after the capture of Antioch, which according to one interpretation should have been surrendered to Alexios, but was in fact appropriated by Bohemond.

Success! What next?

A four-year, gruelling campaign brought the crusaders to Jerusalem at the beginning of June 1099. On 15 July they broke into the city and massacred most of the inhabitants – although the widely reported 'blood up to the crusaders' ankles' or 'their horses' bridles' is now discredited. However strong their beliefs, the success of the First Crusade (which was unique in this respect) was surely unexpected, and the crusaders had to deal with many problems in the short and longer term. The most immediate were:

- **Governing the city.** After a debate, Godfrey was elected as ruler. He refused to wear a crown 'where Jesus had worn a crown of thorns', i.e. to take the title of king, but he became defender of the kingdom of Jerusalem (not, as used to be written, Advocate of the Holy Sepulchre). A controversial character called Arnulf of Chocques, a Norman priest, was appointed patriarch (archbishop) until the pope could be consulted.
- **The Egyptian threat.** The Saracens commanded many of the coastal cities, including Ascalon, and they soon invaded from Egypt. On 12 August the crusaders defeated the Egyptian army in battle.
- **People wanted to go home.** The majority of crusaders had signed up only to deliver the Holy City. When they had spent Christmas 1099 fulfilling their vows (and no doubt celebrating their success) they prepared to leave as soon as the ports were open for their departure, in spring 1100. This left very few to defend and expand the new kingdom.

Reference Section

Primary Sources

The success of the First Crusade gave rise to an impressive number of accounts written (in Latin) within ten or twenty years of the capture of Jerusalem. The more prominent of these can be accessed in translation via the Medieval Sourcebook hosted by Fordham University: (see link provided below) or in Edward Peters (ed.), *The Chronicle of Fulcher of Chartres and Other Source Materials*, 2nd edn (Philadelphia, 1998). See below for a summary list.

Because there is such a number, you might think that they can easily be reconciled to establish a reliable narrative. Students will be accustomed to source analysis, but there are a few pointers to bear in mind:

- These accounts were written by the winning side, as was (and is) usually the case. They were all written after the capture of Jerusalem and therefore interpreted events in the light of the crusade's success. See, for example, conflicting accounts of the contents of Urban II's speech at Clermont. Did he focus on Jerusalem as the goal of the crusade, or not?
- The exception to this hindsight bias is a handful of letters written during the crusade. These are invaluable, but a medieval letter sent by one high-born noble or cleric to another was very different from a modern letter. For a start it wasn't private, it was more like an official report to be delivered publicly. It was carried by a courier and might well fall into enemy hands, so no sensitive information could be included (though it might be conveyed orally by the courier). Look for exaggerations or obvious attempts to reassure. Stephen of Blois' letter to his wife Adela from Antioch is a good place to start: <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/1stcrusade2.html> [accessed 18 July 2017]
- Returning to the narrative sources, be aware that the authors shared a very narrow world view: they were all western European clerics and therefore part of an educated, male elite. (The same is true of Caffaro, who was not a cleric but a Genoese civil servant, see below.)
- The sources are not independent of one another, even those written by participants. Almost all of them had access to the anonymous *Gesta Francorum* ('Deeds of the Franks') and made use of it.
- In a related point, even if an author was a participant, he wasn't necessarily an eye-witness to all the events he described. A good example is Fulcher of Chartres, who was with Baldwin of Boulogne in Edessa while the main body of crusaders captured Jerusalem and so he had to borrow from the *Gesta Francorum* and probably also used oral evidence to relate that part of the story.

Key dates

- 1071** The battle of Manzikert. The Seljuk Turks defeated the Byzantine army and founded the sultanate of Rüm in Asia Minor.
- 1081-1118** Alexios I Komnenos ruled as emperor of Byzantium.
- 1088-1099** Urban II reigned as pope.
- 1092** The Seljuk Turks captured Nicaea.
- 1095** **March.** Council of the Roman Church at Piacenza. Pope Urban II is thought to have received an appeal for assistance against the Turks from Emperor Alexios.
27 November. Following another church council at Clermont, Urban II called for an army to go to the East
- 1096** The Fatimids of Egypt recaptured Jerusalem from the Seljuk Turks.
March. The so-called '**People's Crusade**' set out.
May/June. Some of them killed Jews in the Rhineland cities.
October. Most were massacred near Civetot in Asia Minor.
Meanwhile, **15 August**, the main armies set out on the appointed day.
November-December, they assembled outside Constantinople.
- 1097** **19 June.** The crusaders captured Nicaea from the Turks.
1 July. They were victorious in the battle of Dorylaeum.
Baldwin of Boulogne left the main armies and became count of Edessa.
20 October. The crusaders began to besiege Antioch.
- 1098** **3 June.** They finally captured Antioch after a long, hard siege.
4 June. A Turkish relieving army, commanded by Kerbogha, besieged Antioch, trapping the crusaders inside.
28 June. The crusaders won an amazing victory in the Battle of Antioch.
Bohemond succeeded in making good his claim to the city.
- 1098-99** The leaders spent the winter quarrelling and raiding around Antioch.
The lower ranks and non-combatants were increasingly discontent with the delay in advancing towards Jerusalem.
- 1099** **16 May.** Finally the crusaders set out for Jerusalem.
7 June. Their first sight of the Holy City.
15 July. The capture of Jerusalem.
22 July. Godfrey elected the first ruler of the kingdom of Jerusalem.
12 August. The crusaders defeated the Fatimid army at the battle of Ascalon.
- 1100** **After Easter** most of the surviving crusaders left for home.
18 July. Godfrey died and his brother Baldwin was summoned from Edessa to be the first king of Jerusalem.

The Latin authors

- We do not know the author of the *Gesta Francorum*. It is an account of the crusade to 1099 written in a straightforward style. It used to be assumed the *Gesta* was by a layman, but more recently it has become accepted that it was written by a cleric. There is some evidence that it reached western Europe when Bohemond was recruiting for a new crusade in 1106. It is very closely related to **Peter Tudebode's** chronicle and was formerly thought to be an abbreviated version of it, but Peter's chronicle is now considered to be a version of the *Gesta* with some details added from personal experience. Peter was rather less admiring of Bohemond than the *Gesta* author.
- **Raymond of Aguilers** was chaplain to Raymond of Saint-Gilles, leader of the Provençal army. His first-hand account of events to 1099 was written soon after they occurred, but he also used some details from the *Gesta*. Raymond was fiercely protective of Raymond of Saint-Gilles' reputation and a passionate advocate of the Holy Lance found at Antioch. He comes across as pious but credulous.
- **Fulcher of Chartres** continued writing about the affairs of the Latin East into the 1120s. He set out with the northern French in 1096 but joined Baldwin of Boulogne's diversion to Edessa in the autumn of 1097 and so did not experience the siege of Antioch or the capture of Jerusalem. Recent research has demonstrated that Fulcher revised his account of the First Crusade considerably in the 1120s and it therefore reflects later political attitudes rather than contemporaneous ones.
- Three northern French Benedictine monks rewrote the *Gesta Francorum* in the first decade of the twelfth century. **Robert the Monk's** account became very popular (in medieval terms) though, as its recent editors observe, this was largely by chance: the copying of a manuscript based on its availability tends to increase the number of copies exponentially. Robert's *History* added a number of anecdotes to the tale, and some heroic exaggeration. **Guibert of Nogent** retitled the 'Deeds of the Franks' to make it clear that they were God's deeds and the Franks were only God's agents. After he had completed his rewriting of the *Gesta*, Guibert came across an early version of Fulcher of Chartres' history and added a seventh book to include some additional information from Fulcher and from hearsay. This included an assessment of Peter the Hermit and gossip about the popular crusade. **Baldric of Bourgueil's** *History* is the least well known of the three, although this should change now that there is a new edition and translation.
- **Albert of Aachen's** *Jerusalem History* used to be greatly undervalued because Albert was not a participant and because his information and attitudes sometimes contradicted the other Latin sources. However, as has been shown above, these were all interdependent while Albert wrote without knowledge of them. As an independent source he often provides an important corrective to them, and – importantly – other non-Latin sources that were not available before the last century corroborate his account. Nevertheless, any collection of sources written before about 2000 will probably use only Albert's first and second books, which recount the overland journeys of Peter the Hermit and Godfrey of Bouillon respectively.
- Other Latin accounts are less likely to crop up. **Caffaro of Genoa** and **Ekkehard of Aura** both visited Jerusalem in 1101 and incorporated short narratives of the crusade into longer and more general histories.

Other languages

There are no strictly contemporary sources in Arabic, perhaps showing that the Saracens attached less importance to the

western invasion than the invaders did. The Turks, who were on the front line, had no written culture at the time.

- **Anna Komnene**, the daughter of the Byzantine emperor Alexios I Komnenos, wrote (in Greek) a biography of her father (r. 1081-1118) that conveys vividly her own reaction as a teenager to the arrival of the various armies from the West. She wrote in the 1140s. The old Penguin Classic translation of Anna's *Alexiad* has been revised by Peter Frankopan (2009).
- **Ibn al-Qalanisi** (c. 1073-1160) wrote a *Damascus Chronicle* that covers the period of the First Crusade, but not in any great detail: it becomes more important for the later period. It was used by other, later Arabic chroniclers.
- **Matthew of Edessa**, an Armenian Christian monk, concentrated on events in his home city and was less well informed about the events in Syria and Palestine. He was fiercely anti-Byzantine.
- There are three **Hebrew sources** describing the Rhineland massacres of 1096. Their relationship has been much debated, as has their nature: are they history or liturgy? Extracts may be found in the collections cited above.

Secondary works

Some titles on particular aspects or with particular focuses have been mentioned above. A readable and reliable narrative is: Thomas Asbridge, *The First Crusade: A New History* (London: The Free Press, 2004; pbk Simon & Schuster, 2005).

Internet resources

All of the following were secure and available at the time of writing.

- For a sound narrative account, regularly updated, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Crusade
- or see: www.historytoday.com/jonathan-phillips/crusades-complete-history
- Podcasts by Jonathan Riley-Smith are available at <https://www.history.org.uk/> (The Historical Association). A search on 'First Crusade' will reveal more resources for members.
- Similarly, see the BBC History Magazine site at www.historyextra.com (more resources available for subscribers)
- A range of primary sources in translation is available at: [http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/Halsall/sbook1k.asp#The First Crusade](http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/Halsall/sbook1k.asp#The_First_Crusade) (Stephen of Blois' letter from Antioch is at <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/1stcrusade2.html>)
- For secondary sources, follow the links at deremilitari.org for (a rather random selection of) articles.
- For biographies of modern historians of the crusades, see www.crusaderstudies.org.uk (The site is 'under development' but has not recently been updated.)
- You should also look at www.youtube.com/results?search_query=first+crusade – if you don't, be sure your students will!

The First Crusade has been Susan B. Edgington's passion since university. Her PhD thesis, an edition of Albert of Aachen's *History of the Journey to Jerusalem*, was published with an English translation in 2007. Susan continues to work on primary sources for the crusades, with a translation of the history by Baldric of Bourgueil forthcoming in 2018, and to publish articles and chapters on aspects of the twelfth-century crusades. She is currently writing a biography of King Baldwin I of Jerusalem (1100-18). She is a Research and Teaching Fellow at Queen Mary University of London and a Fellow of the Historical Association.