**THE CRUSADES**

A series of armed conflicts in the Near East, the Crusades started in 1096 CE and continued on and off for several hundreds of years. They began when Christians from Western Europe set off to recapture the Holy Land (the city of Jerusalem and surrounding areas) from the Muslims who now inhabited the area.

The Crusades had economic, social, and political goals as well as religious motives. Muslims controlled Palestine and threatened Constantinople, and the Byzantine emperor in Constantinople appealed to Christians to stop Muslim attacks. In addition, the pope wanted to reclaim Palestine and reunite Christendom, which had split into Eastern and Western branches. Kings also saw the Crusades as an opportunity to get rid of quarrelsome knights who fought each other. Others were looking for land, money, and adventure.

THE FIRST AND SECOND CRUSADES

After Pope Urban II issued a call for a “holy war,” an army of 12,000 gathered to fight. Those who died on the Crusade were assured a place in heaven and with red crosses sewn on their tunics worn over their armor, Crusaders were fired by religious zeal. Very unorganized and with no strategy, these 12,000 men approached Jerusalem and in a little over a month, they captured the city. Although victorious, the Crusaders were extremely vulnerable to Muslim counterattack and in the Second Crusade, Jerusalem had fallen once again under the control of the Muslim leader Saladin.

THE THIRD CRUSADE

Led by three of Europe’s most powerful monarchs, the plan to take back the city began. On the way, one king left, another drowned, and so Richard the Lion-Hearted was all that was left to fight for the Christian world. After many battles, Richard and Saladin called a truce in 1192. Jerusalem remained under Muslim control and in return, Saladin promised that unarmed Christian pilgrims could freely visit the city’s holy places. There was a Fourth Crusade, but it failed, again. The knights did not reach Holy Land, but instead ended up looting the city of Constantinople.

IMPACT OF THE CRUSADES

GROWTH OF COMMERCE

Many European trading centers were pushed to the limit to furnish supplies for the crusaders. The city-states of Italy—Venice, Genoa, Pisa and others—provided ships to transport many of the crusaders to the Middle East. The ships returned filled with perfumes, spices, jewels, silk, dyes, and other products which the Europeans gradually came to value. The merchants of Genoa, Pisa, and other Italian cities established new trade routes throughout Europe. Trade routes tied all parts of Europe together. Wool went from England to the cities of Flanders, northern France, and Italy to be woven into cloth and re-exported. Fleets of ships took salt from the coast of France to the Baltic Sea and to Scandinavia where it was used to preserve fish for export.

Increasedtrade led to the growth of banking. Business became increasingly complex and traders began traveling great distances for long periods of time. Letters of credit and documents of exchange—similar in idea to credit cards—became necessary so that traders could conduct their business more easily. Merchants also increased their wealth by lending money to kings, nobles, and other merchants.

GROWTH OF TOWNS AND CITIES

The expansion of trade, wealth, and capital as well as population hastened the growth of towns during the later Middle Ages. Fourteenth-century towns and cities were usually small by modern standards. Populations ranged from 5,000 to 10,000 people. But even this relatively small number of persons found themselves packed tightly within the protecting walls of the city. Townspeople solved the problem of cramped spaces by building upward. They built their houses with three, four, and five stories. To gain additional space, each story was extended a little farther out so that the top floors of facing buildings almost met over the narrow streets. This gave the townspeople more space but it also made life hazardous for passersby. It was not uncommon for those living on upper floors to empty their garbage and sewage out the windows.

Gradually the people of the growing towns and cities obtained greater liberties and privileges from the one who ruled them. Often they bought these privileges with their new wealth. Sometimes rulers granted privileges to cities because of their service. In Spain, for instance, the rulers of Leon and Castile granted special charters to cities that protected the frontiers against the Moors.

Around this time townspeople in France, Germany, and England were also gaining freedom from feudal control. They gradually were released from a number of obligations, including payment of feudal dues. Additionally they gained the freedom to buy and sell as they chose and could organize their own courts of law. A number of towns gained the right of self-government.

THE MIDDLE CLASS

With the development of cities a new and powerful social group arose. It became known as the bourgeoisie or middle class. The power of the middle class was centered in the cities and founded on its new freedoms: knowledge, wealth, and independence. Representatives of the new middle class were received at royal councils and gained a voice in assemblies and parliaments.

The primary reason that the rulers requested middle-class representatives at these meetings was money. Kings and queens needed money and the clergy and nobility were traditionally exempt from taxation. However, the middle class provided a valuable source of income. In return for agreeing to pay taxes, the middle class began to require additional privileges and rights from rulers. These rulers used this money to equip and outfit soldiers which reduced their dependence on the nobility.

Thus, what began as an effort to free the Holy Land had profound and unintended consequences. The Crusades increased trade and banking which sped the movement of people to towns. In these towns emerged a new and wealthy class which was outside the traditional power structure of medieval society. This new middle class was utilized by monarchs to create a new political order that was not dependent on feudal obligations. This laid the foundations for the emergence of the modern nation state.

Welty, Paul. *The Human Experience.* New York: J.B. Lippincott. 1977