

Peter the Hermit and the First Crusade

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A prominent figure in many historical accounts, Peter the Hermit is remembered for the part he played in the First Crusade. Mentioned in many reliable primary sources, it is possible through first hand accounts to discover who he was, where he went and what he did. The chronicler Guibert of Nogent writes about Peter's generous, witty and inspiring, yet authoritative nature. Albert of Aachen, the German chronicler, also discusses Peter and his part in the 'Popular Crusade' to Jerusalem. Furthermore, Anna Comnena (though probably in this instance not so reliable) credits Peter the Hermit as the originator of the crusades as a whole and in 'The Alexiad', describes his arrival in Byzantium. Although his life may have been embellished somewhat by legend, these sources tell us that Peter the Hermit played a prominent role in preaching and recruiting participants for the First Crusade, often leading the ill-disciplined crowd across Europe with skill and wisdom.

When Pope Urban began the movement for The First Crusade, many preachers and demagogues supported him by preaching throughout the country, rallying support to embark on expeditions to Jerusalem. Peter the Hermit led the most notably famous of these expeditions known as 'The Popular Crusade' or 'The People's Crusade'. He was an oldish man, born somewhere near Amiens, in France. According to Runciman (19 p), he had previously tried to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, but was forced to turn back by the Turks. He was known by his contemporaries as 'Little Peter' or *chtou* in the Picard dialect. However, as he was usually attired in a hermit's cloak he acquired the nickname 'Peter the Hermit'. Peter was a short, ugly man with a long, lean, dark-skinned face that, according to Runciman, looked somewhat like the donkey he always rode. He was consistently dirty, as he lived the ascetic lifestyle.

He used to wear the simplest woollen tunic, with a hooded cape over it, both down to his ankles, and over that, without sleeves, a cloak, and he went barefoot. He lived on wine and fish, bread rarely or never. Guibert of Nogent (Hallam 1989, p.65)

Peter was a generous man, even though he was poor and Guibert of Nogent describes him in 'Historia Hierosolymitana' after meeting him personally.

... he was generous in the way he made very liberal gifts to the poor out of things which had been given to him; he bestowed prostitutes as wives and provided their dowries; he settled disputes and restored peace on all sides with wonderful authority. Guibert of Nogent (Hallam 1989, p.65)

Peter was seen as a visionary and was popular amongst the common people for his charisma and self less behaviour. He was sharp-witted and had considerable influence over others. According to Guibert of Nogent *whatever he said or did seemed like something half divine* (Runciman 1951, p.113). Despite his slovenly appearance he had the power to move men, as he was an eloquent and persuasive speaker. As he travelled throughout the country, many people came to hear him speak.

Peter began preaching at the end of 1095. His calibre and personality attracted thousands of people to join him on 'The Popular Crusade'. He inspired such enthusiasm that huge crowds

of people abandoned their homes, most of their possessions, friends and family to join him on the crusade to Jerusalem.

While all the princes, who required large funds and great retinues of supporters, were arranging their affairs in an organized and scrupulous fashion before they left for the Holy Land, the common people, who were poor in possessions but rich in numbers, attached themselves to a certain Peter the Hermit. Guibert of Nogent (Hallam 1989, p.65)

Peter and his crusaders travelled throughout Northern France and by April 12, 1096 they reached Cologne. The army consisted mainly of peasants, but there was also a number of noblemen, mostly landless knights or youngest sons of noble families, along with some criminals and brigands.

...There was such universal eagerness and enthusiasm that every highway had some of them; along with the soldiers went an unarmed crowd, more numerous than the sand or stars, carrying palms and crosses on their shoulders... Anna Comnena (Hallam 1989, p.66)

His motley crew was not only men, but also women and children, as many of the crusaders had brought their families along. Peter wanted to stay in Cologne for a time, as the food was plentiful and he could preach to the Germans. However, several thousand of Peter's group were eager to continue and split from the main group on April 15, led by Walter the Penniless. Peter set out on the 20th of April after successfully persuading many Germans to join his army, now around twenty thousand strong. Led by Peter on his donkey, the army of men, women and children, connected only by their faith, marched overland towards Hungary and Constantinople. King Coloman of Hungary allowed them to travel peacefully through his lands, but after having had trouble with Walter's group warned them any attempt to pillage would be punished. The Crusaders respected his wishes and arrived peacefully at Semlin on June 20. Peter's crusaders soon came upon trouble after their arrival in Semlin. Rumours reached Peter's army that

... a man named Guz¹ was tainted with greed and had collected a force of armed knights. It was further reported that Guz had entered into an evil plot with the aforementioned Duke Nicetas² to attack and kill Peter's first battalions, while Guz was to follow behind and lop off the rear guard. Albert of Aachen (Brundage 1962, p.28)

Though Guz may just have been alarmed at the size of the army and trying to tighten up police regulations, the crusaders were highly suspicious after hearing rumours about the mistreatment of Walter's army. Peter the Hermit refused to believe that his fellow Christians were plotting against him, but when they reached the city to see the arms of Walter's sixteen men hanging from the battlements, a dispute over a the price of a pair of shoes led to a riot. Peter's army, led by the Frenchman Geoffrey Burel attacked the town and stormed the citadel. The crusaders killed four thousand Hungarians and captured a large store of provisions. Afterwards, terrified of the Hungarian King's vengeance, they made haste to cross the River Save (Runciman 1951, p.124). Nicetas³ ordered his mercenaries to prevent Peter's barges crossing, except at the proper place, then left to his men warn Nish and Constantinople about the Crusaders barbaric actions. Peter's army forced its way across the River. When the Petcheneg mercenaries tried to restrict them to one passage, Peter's army attacked and sunk several boats. The soldiers captured were put to death. The villages of the nearby Belgrade heard of the crusaders imminent arrival and fled their town to hide in the woods. Arriving in the empty Belgrade, the crusaders pillaged the village then set fire to it. They then travelled

on for seven days until they reached Nish on July 3. Peter sent word of their arrival to Nicetas to ask for food and supplies.

Nicetas knew that Byzantium troops were approaching to officially convey Peter's troublesome army to Constantinople. However, he also knew it would be unprofitable to allow them to stay in Nish for long. He requested Peter to provide hostages in exchange for food and he suggested they move on as soon as possible. The next day the Crusaders set out along the road to Sofia. But as they were leaving the town, some of the German crusaders set fire to a group of mills, in retaliation for an argument they had with a townsman the previous night. Nicetas ordered his troops to attack the rear guard and took prisoners, who he held as hostages. When Peter heard of this news he rushed back to talk to Nicetas and arrange a ransom for the captives. He had almost sorted it out until wild rumours began circulating his army and a few of the company hotheads assailed the fortifications of a town. Nicetas turned his troops loose and Peter's troops disbanded. Peter suffered a humiliating rout, as he and five thousand of his men fled from Nicetas's army to a near by wood. One quarter of Peter's army were slain, but Peter and several thousand other pilgrims continued on to Sofia, arriving on July 12. As a safeguard against further misdeeds Peter's crusaders were carefully escorted by Byzantine soldiers when travelling through the Byzantine territory, maintaining some discipline in the ill-organised crusading party.

The Crusaders then moved through Philipopolis and the Greek inhabitants, *so deeply moved by the stories of their suffering* (Runciman 1951, p.127) gave them money, horses and supplies. The crusaders continued on and two days out of Adrianople, Peter received a letter from the emperor.

It was decided that the expedition should be forgiven for its crimes, as it had already been sufficiently punished. Peter wept for joy at the favour shown him by so great a potentate. (Runciman 1951, p.127)

Peter arrived at Constantinople on the August 1. Emperor Alexius gave Peter money and advice, warning him that if he continued into Asia, the Turks would destroy his army. While Peter agreed with Alexius, his control over the troops was waning and he knew he would have to continue. Alexius was obliged to move Peter's troops out of Constantinople as soon as possible, as they lacked discipline and committed endless thefts, even against their fellows Christians. Peter's authority was completely forgotten when the troops arrived in Asia Minor and they quarrelled amongst themselves splitting into small cliques. Peter returned to Constantinople, seeking council from the Emperor. However, while he was absent his army exploited every opportunity to raid, pillage and loot the nearby towns in small un-organised groups. Anna Comnena commented on these events after hearing these barbaric rumours circulating the city.

But as many as ten thousand crusaders separated from the rest of the army and, with utmost cruelty, plundered the Turkish territory around Nicea. They dismembered some of the babies, others they put on spits over a fire, those advanced of years they subjected to every form of torture. Anna Comnena (Hallam 1989, p.67)

The Kilij Aslan⁴ also heard these rumours and attacked the crusaders with his profession, highly trained army. The Crusaders' small, unorganised groups were no match for his army and were massacred. Thus ended 'The Popular Crusade'.

Peter the Hermit was an influential man, who managed to lead an un-disciplined, un-organised group of men, women and children as far as Constantinople and Asia Minor. Although his army, for the most part, behaved in unscrupulous and barbaric ways, Peter remained, in all sources, somewhat of a legend. He was dedicated to his faith and his country and although his crusade failed, he still accomplished an outstanding feat. He persuaded thousands of Christians to take up the sword for their religion and with no professional training, reached the further than anyone ever expected. Although Peter the Hermit went on to play a smaller role later in the First Crusade the part he played in the Popular Crusade will not be forgotten and Peter the Hermit will be remembered through the works of Guibert of Nogent, Anna Comnena and Albert of Aachen.

Endnotes

1. Though a leading man in the Hungarian kingdom Runciman suggests Guz might have been a Ghuzz (or Oghuz) Turk.
2. Prince of the Bulgarians and governor of Belgrade.
3. Governor of Bulgaria
4. The Seldjuk Sultan

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