

CURRENT wisdom would have it that five centuries of peaceful co-existence between Muslims and Christians were brought to an end by political events and an imperial-papal power play, that was to lead to a centuries-long series of so-called "holy-wars" that pitted Christendom against Islam, and left an enduring legacy of misunderstanding and mistrust.¹

A school textbook, *Humanities Alive 2*, for Year 8 students in the Australian State of Victoria, carries the anti-Christian/anti-Western argument further:

¹ John Esposito, *Islam: the Straight Path*, 3rd ed. OUP, 1998, p.58.

Those who destroyed the World Trade Centre are regarded as terrorists. Might it be fair to say that the Crusaders who attacked the Muslim inhabitants of Jerusalem were also terrorists?²

Muhammad died in Medina on June 8, 632 AD.

The first of the eight Crusades to free the Holy Places in Palestine from Muslim control, and offer safe passage to the Holy Land for Christian pilgrims, was called only in 1095. At the risk of sounding pedantic, the period in question is not five centuries but four hundred and sixty-three years; and those years, we contend, were not characterized by peaceful coexistence³

Islam's attack on Christianity

For the Christian states bordering the Mediterranean, it was a four hundred and sixty-three year period of regular, disorganized (and occasionally organized) bloody incursions by Muslim mainly Arab and Berber land and sea forces. These came intent on booty of gold, silver, precious stones and slaves or on destroying churches, convents and shrines of the infidels and on the spread of politico-religious Islam throughout Europe from their bases in the Mediterranean and the Adriatic.

At the time of Muhammad's death there were flourishing Christian and Jewish communities in Arabia, and throughout the major centres of the Persian Empire. The whole of the Mediterranean world on its European, Asian and African sides, was predominantly Christian.

It had taken only a few years for Muslim tribesmen from Arabia, inspired by Muhammad's revelations and example, to invade the Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire whose emperors devoted more time to religious disputation than to defending their empire. In 633 Mesopotamia fell. After a few years the entire Persian Empire fell to the marauding Arab tribesmen who drove the young Persian emperor Yazdagird into the farthest reaches of his empire, to Sogdiana [Uzbekistan], where he was eventually murdered by his Tartar bodyguard in a miller's hut.

Damascus fell in 635, and Jerusalem capitulated five years after Muhammad died, in February 638.

The fall of Alexandria in 643 sounded the death knell of more than thousand years of Hellenic civilization that once enriched the whole of the Near East with its scholarship and culture. Henri Daniel-Rops claims that from the point of view of the history of civilization, Alexandria's fall was as significant as the fall of Constantinople to the Turks eighthundred years later.⁴

² See 'Civilizing influence of previous wars fought between East and West. *The Weekend Australian*, March 18-19, 2006.

³ This article restricts itself to a brief discussion of these claims and counter claims. We plan future articles that will discuss other controverted issues like the collaboration, in the initial phase of Islamic expansionism after the death of Muhammad, with Muslim military forces, by Christians and others, for political and sometimes religious reasons. We will also look at the claim that the Crusades were anti-Islamic, put relations between the Crusaders and the Byzantines, and the sacking of Jerusalem and Constantinople in context. We will consider the degree to which ongoing anti-Catholic polemic since the 16th century has now become a weapon in the hands of radical Islamists.

⁴ *The Church in the Dark Ages*, J.M. Dent and Sons, London, 1959, p.336.

Cyprus fell in 648-9 and Rhodes in 653. By 698 the whole of North Africa was lost.

Spain invaded

Less than eighty years after Muhammad's death, in 711, Muslims from Tangiers poured across the 13 kilometre wide strait of Gibraltar into Spain. By 721 this Arab-Berber horde had overthrown the ruling Catholic Visigoths and, with the fall of Saragossa, set their sights on southern France.

By 720 Narbonne had fallen. Bordeaux was stormed and its churches burnt down by 'Abd al-Rahman ibn 'Abdullah al-Ghafiqi in early spring 732. A basilica outside the walls of Poitiers was razed, and Abd al-Rahman headed for Tours which held the body of St Martin [who died in 397] apostle and patron saint of the Franks.

He was to be defeated and killed by Charles Martel and his Frankish army on a Saturday in October, 732, one hundred years after Muhammad's death, on the road from Poitiers to Tours ó a defeat that was hailed by Gibbon and others as decisive in turning back the Muslim tide from Europe.

Attacks on France, however, continued, and in 734 Avignon was captured by an Arab force. Lyons was sacked in 743. It wasn't until 759 that the Arabs were driven out of Narbonne. Marseilles was plundered by them in 838.

Muslim incursions into Italy had been a feature of life from the early 800s. The islands of Ponza (off Gaeta) and Ischia (off Naples) had been plundered, and then, in 813 Civitavecchia, the port of Rome, whose harbour had been constructed by Trajan, was sacked by the Arabs.

In 826 the island of Crete fell to Muslim forces which retained it as their base until 961. From around 827 they then began nibbling at Sicily. They captured Messina and controlled the Strait of Messina by 842, and finally took the whole island in 859, after Enna fell to them.

In 836 the Neapolitans self-interestedly invited the Muslim forces to help them against the Lombards and set the stage for more than a century of Muslims raids along the Adriatic, involving the destruction of Ancona, and Muslim progress as far as the mouth of the Po. 'Saracen Towers'⁵ south of Naples, built in the ninth century to warn locals of the approach of Arab fleets from Sicily and Africa still charm visitors to the Neapolitan coast.

Bari, now home to the relics of St Nicholas of Myra, the original 'Father Christmas' fell to Khalfun, a Berber chieftan, by another act of treachery in 840. From 853-871 the notorious Muslim brigand al-Mufarraj bin Sallam, and his successor, another Berber named Sawdan, controlled all the coast from Bari down to Reggio Calabria, and terrorized Southern Italy. They even plundered the Abbey of St Michael on Mt Gargano. They claimed the title of Emir, and independence of the Emir in Palermo.

⁵ The term 'Saracen' is sometimes mistakenly derived from the Arabic Sharqi or 'Eastern' St Jerome considered it to be the name the Arabs gave themselves, deriving their origins from Sarah, Abraham's free wife, rather than from Hagar, his slave. In many of the sources we have used, the term Agareni, or 'Hagarines' is found.

Sacking of St Peter's

Naples herself had to beat off a Muslim attack in 837. But in 846 Rome was not to be so fortunate. On August 23rd 846, Arab squadrons from Africa arrived at Ostia, at the Tiber's mouth. There were 73 ships. The Saracen force numbered 11,000 warriors, with 500 horses.⁶

The most revered Christian shrines outside the Holy Land, the tombs of Sts Peter and Paul, were desecrated and their respective Basilicas were sacked, as was the Lateran Basilica along with numerous other churches and public buildings.

The very altar over the body of St Peter was smashed to pieces, and the great door of St Peter's Basilica was stripped of its silver plates. Romans were desolated and Christendom was shocked at the barbarism of the Muslim forces.

Three years later Pope Leo IV (847-855) formed an alliance with Naples, Amalfi and Gaeta, and when a Saracen fleet again appeared at the mouth of the Tiber in 849, the Papal fleet joined forces with its allies and they repelled the Muslim fleet which turned, and ran into a violent wind-storm that destroyed it, like Pharaoh's army long before.

Survivors were brought to Rome and put to work helping to build the Leonine Wall around the Vatican. Twelve feet thick, nearly forty feet in height and defended by forty-four towers, most of this wall, and two of the round towers, can be seen still by visitors to the Vatican. These defensive walls were finished and blessed by Pope Leo IV in 852.

Taranto in Apulia was conquered by Arab forces in 846. They held it until 880.

In 870 Malta was captured by the Muslims. In 871 Bari, the Saracens' capital on mainland Italy, was recaptured from the Muslims by Emperor Louis II, who in 872 was to defeat a Saracen fleet off Capua.

223 years from the First Crusade

*At this point in our examination of the 'peaceful coexistence', which is made much of by Muslim apologists, we are still two hundred and twenty-three years away from the calling of the first Crusade. Perhaps readers may better understand, now, why Emperor Louis II, grandson of Charlemagne was absolutely convinced, in the ninth century, of the need for a Crusade. 'He was quite sure that Islam must be driven right out of Europe.'*⁷ But still there was no call for a Crusade.

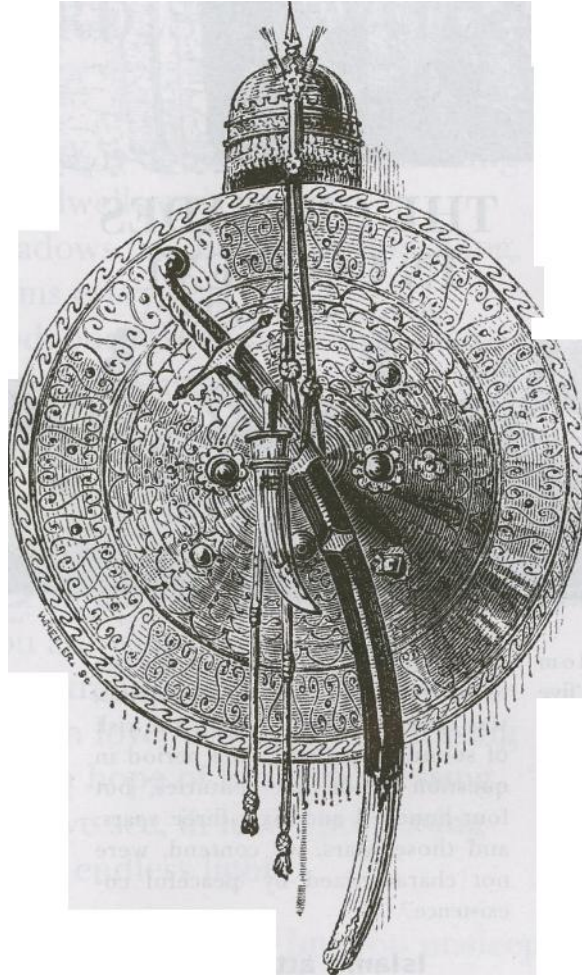
I haven't spoken of Muslim attacks against the Byzantine Empire even though these, too, played a part in setting the stage for the Crusades. The much vaunted military might and political power of the Eastern Roman Empire carried with it responsibility for protecting the West from Muslim invaders. This it generally failed to do.

Taranto in Apulia was conquered by Arab forces in 846. They held it until 880.

In 870 Malta was captured by the Muslims. In 871 Bari, the Saracens' capital on mainland Italy, was recaptured from the Muslims by Emperor Louis II, who in 872 was to defeat a Saracen fleet off Capua.

⁶ Letter From Adelbert, Marquis of Tuscany and protector of the Papal territory of Corsica, to Pope Sergius II in *Liber Pontificalis*, n.xliv, ed. Farnesiana.

⁷ Henri Daniel-Rops, *The Church in the Dark Ages*, ed. cit., p.472.



223 years from the First Crusade

At this point in our examination of the 'peaceful coexistence', which is made much of by Muslim apologists, we are still two hundred and twenty-three years away from the calling of the first Crusade. Perhaps readers may better understand, now, why Emperor Louis II, grandson of Charlemagne was absolutely convinced, in the ninth century, of the need for a Crusade. 'He was quite sure that Islam must be driven right out of Europe.'⁸ But still there was no call for a Crusade.

I haven't spoken of Muslim attacks against the Byzantine Empire even though these, too, played a part in setting the stage for the Crusades. The much vaunted military might and political power of the Eastern Roman Empire carried with it responsibility for protecting the West from Muslim invaders. This it generally failed to do.

Constantinople had been attacked in 673, and then for the next five years Arab armies and fleets attempted unsuccessfully to break through the Byzantine defences. Greek Fire, that mysterious substance that burned on water, destroyed the Muslim fleets and won the day for the defenders.

⁸ Henri Daniel-Rops, *The Church in the Dark Ages*, ed. cit., p.472.

Then, in 717, the Muslims returned to the attack, emboldened by their successes in Spain.

Fate intervened, and like Charles Martel and his Franks at Poitiers in 732, Emperor Leo the Isaurian [717-740] turned back the Muslim tide. Constantinople was saved for a time. Leo, for all his military skills, was a usurper, and an iconoclast. Despite defeating the Muslims, his policies ultimately further weakened both the Western and Eastern Roman Empires.

In 870, when Bernard the Wise from Brittany wanted to visit Palestine he had to obtain a laissez-passer from Muslim authorities in Bari, on the Adriatic Coast.⁹

In 873 the Muslim forces devastated Calabria in southern Italy to the point that it was reduced to the state in which it had been left by the Great Flood and the Saracens expressed their intention of destroying Rome, the city of the "Peterus senex" the ineffective old man, Peter.¹⁰

In 874 Pope John VIII did all he could to dissuade Amalfi, Naples, Benevento, Capua, Salerno, and Spoleto from forming a pragmatic alliance with the Saracens. Amalfi, Capua and Salerno alone heeded his pleas for Christian solidarity.

From the close of 876 Pope John VIII had been sending letters in all directions to obtain help against the Arab forces which were devastating southern Italy and even threatening Rome itself. He sought the aid of Duke Bosone of Milan whom Emperor Charles the Bald had appointed his legate in Northern Italy to no avail. He wrote for cavalry horses to Alfonso III, king of Galicia in Spain; and for warships to the Byzantines, and from 876 until May 877 he sent numerous letters to the Frankish Emperor begging him to aid the Catholics in Italy.

The Emperor proved to be a frail reed, and in 879, upon his death, the Duke of Spoleto turned on the Pope. John VIII, unable to cope with both Saracens and Spoleto, at once, had to pay tribute of 25,000 *mancuses* annually to the Arabs. A silver *mancus* was worth roughly AUD\$25. This situation lasted for two years.

In 881 the Muslim allies of the Neapolitans captured the fortress on the Garigliano (the ancient Liris) 14 km east of Gaeta close to Anzio, just north of Naples, and plundered the surrounding countryside with impunity for forty years.

Returning from a synod at Ravenna (February 882) Pope John VIII found, as he put it, that "the Saracens are as much at home in Fundi (close to Rome, in Latium) and Terracina (80 km SE of Rome) as in Africa. "Though we were seriously unwell," wrote the Pope, "we went forth to battle with our forces, captured eighteen of the enemy's ships, and slew a great many of their men."¹¹ Six hundred captives of the Saracens were liberated.

Syracuse fell to the Muslims in 878 after a nine month siege from which few escaped alive. The Byzantine city was pillaged and destroyed. Its collapse freed up more numerous bands of marauding Muslims to harry the Italian towns and cities.

880 saw victory over Saracen forces at Naples by Byzantine Commanders and also the arrival in waters off Rome of warships sent by the emperor Basil to give the Pope the

⁹ Quoted Runciman, *A History of the Crusades*, Cambridge University Press, 1951, vol. i, p.43.

¹⁰ See Horace Mann, *The Lives of the Popes in the Early Middle Ages*, 12 vols Kegan Paul, London, 1906, vol. iii, p.321.

¹¹ Epistle 334 – fragment of a letter to the Emperor.

means of defending the territory of St Peter.¹²

Meanwhile, the Saracens had turned their attention again to southern France and northern Italy. They had taken Avignon in 734 and Marseilles in 838 and they were ravaging Provence and North Italy from their bases in the Alps. The most important of these bases was Fraxinetto or Frejus, not far from Toulon, which they captured in 889.

They were displaced temporarily from their base in 942 by Hugh of Arles who had a Byzantine fleet harry them from the sea, while he attacked from land. Horace Mann comments that it is symptomatic of the kind of pragmatic leaders who controlled the destiny of Europe at that time, that instead of wiping out this bloodthirsty band of Muslim invaders, Hugh allowed them to stay where they were on condition that they did all they could to prevent his rival as king of Italy, Berengerius Marquis of Ivrea, from returning to Italy.¹³

The latter managed to return from Germany to Italy in 945, and the Muslims were not to be expelled completely from their lair until 972 ó almost one hundred years after capturing Fraxinetto ó by a league of Italian and Provençal princes.

In the meantime they infested the passes of the Alps, robbing and murdering pilgrims on their way to Rome. In 921 a large band of Englishmen on pilgrimage to the tombs of the Apostles in Rome were crushed to death under rocks rolled down on them by Saracens in the passes of the Alps.¹⁴

174 years from the First Crusade

At this point in the alleged peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Christians, we are still one hundred and seventy four years away from the calling of the first Crusade to free the Holy Places.

Meanwhile, Muslim fleets sacked and destroyed Demetrias in Thessaly, Central Greece, in 902, and Thessalonica the second city of the Byzantine Empire fell to them in 904. Muslim armies took Hysela in Carsiana in 887, and Amasia, the metropolitan city of Pontus in Asia Minor.

The bishop of Amasia named Malacenus wanted to ransom those of his people who had been captured but knew that the Byzantine Emperor Leo VI would not help; so he appealed to Pope Benedict IV in Rome.

The Pope received him kindly, and gave him an encyclical letter addressed to all bishops, abbots, counts and judges and to all orthodox professors of the Christian faith asking them to show Malacenus every consideration, and to see him safely from one city to the next.

In 905 Pope Sergius III helped Bishop Hildebrand of Silva Candida restore some of the damage done to his See by the ravaging Saracens who had devastated the Church of Silva Candida in the neighbourhood of Rome.

In 915 Pope John X successfully created a Christian League with the help of Byzantine Admiral Picingli and his fleet. Even the bickering princes of southern Italy joined forces against the Saracens, along with King Berengarius and his armies from

¹² Epistle 296 to the Byzantine Emperor Basil, August 12, 880 AD.

¹³ Op.cit. vo14, p.10

¹⁴ Flodoard [894-966] *Chronique de France 919-966*, entry for 921

North Italy. The enemy were holed up in their fortresses on the Garigliano near Gaeta, north of Naples. After three months of blockade, they tried to fight their way out only to be repelled by a victorious Christian force.

In 934 the Fatimid imam al-Ka'im planned an audacious invasion of Liguria led by Ya-kub bin Ishaq. The latter attacked Genoa that year, and took it in 935.

It wasn't until 972 that Duke William of Provence succeeded in driving the Saracens finally from the fastnesses of Faxineto. In 976 the Fatimid Caliphs of Egypt had sent fresh Muslim expeditions into southern Italy. Initially the German emperor Otho II, who had set up his headquarters in Rome, successfully defeated these Saracen forces, but in July 982 he was ambushed and his army was almost cut to pieces.

In 977 Sergius, Archbishop of Damascus, was expelled from his See by the Muslims. Pope Benedict VII gave him the ancient church of St Alexius on Rome's Aventine hill, and he founded a monastery there and placed it under Benedictine rule, with himself its first abbot.

The pontificate of Pope John XVIII (1003-1009) was marred by famine and plague and by marauding bands of Saracens who plundered the Italian coast from Pisa to Rome from bases on Sardinia.

By 1010 they had seized Cosenza in southern Italy. Then Sardinia fell to the Arabs in 1015, led by a certain Abu Hosein Mogehid (thus the Latin Chronicles). I take this person to be Mujahid bin 'Abd Allah whom Arab sources credit with the invasion. The Saracen force based on Sardinia, over the next few years, torched Pisa, seized Luna in northern Tuscany, and ravaged the land. Pope Benedict VIII managed to assemble a fleet and challenged the Saracen chief who turned tail and fled to Sardinia, leaving his fleet at the mercy of the papal force which was victorious.

Mujahid bin Abd Allah then sent the Pope a bag of chestnuts and a message that he would arrive in the following summer with as many soldiers as there were nuts in the bag. Benedict accepted the chestnuts and sent back a bag of rice: 'If your master; he said to the astonished messenger, 'isn't satisfied with the damage he has done to the dowry of the Apostle, let him come again and he will find an armed warrior for every grain of rice.'

The Pope did not wait for an answer but carried the war into the enemy's territory. He co-opted the combined fleets of Pisa and Genoa and they sailed for Sardinia in 1017 only to find Mujahid in the act of crucifying Christians on Sardinia. The Muslim leader fled to Africa, and Sardinia was occupied by the Pisans. Mujahid kept trying to re-take Sardinia until 1050 when he was captured by the Pisans and the island was made over to them by the Pope.

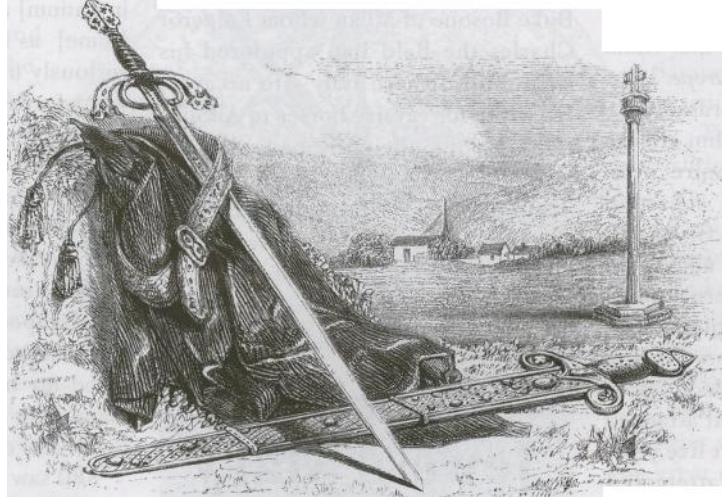
Muslims from Spain sacked Antibes in 1003. They sacked Pisa in 1005 and 1016, and Narbonne in 1020.

Sometime around 1025 Pope John XIX granted the pallium (sign of Ecclesiastical jurisdiction) to Archbishop Peter of Gerona in northeast Spain, on condition that he redeemed Christian captives of the Saracens as he had promised the Pope when he had come on his 'ad limina' visit.

The First Crusade: what made it a reality

The four hundred and sixty-three years that elapsed between Muhammad's death in 632 and the calling of a Crusade to free the Holy Places in 1095 was not a time of

peaceful co-existence between Muslims and European or Byzantine Christians. Nor was it, for Christians living in Muslim occupied territories. They enjoyed peace only by keeping the lowest possible profile, paying the jizya, or head-tax, and accepting non-person status in lands that had been Christian before the Muslim invaders arrived.



The new millennium saw the situation go from bad to worse. In 1009, the Fatimid Caliph of Egypt, abu-ʿAli Mansur al-Hakim, ordered the destruction of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. The edict of destruction was signed by his Christian secretary ibn-ʿAbdun. The Muslims destroyed the Tomb of Jesus, the Dome and the upper parts of the Church until their demolition was halted by the great mound of debris at their feet. For eleven years Christians were forbidden even to visit the rubble or to pray in the ruins.

Shocked by the destruction of Christendom's holiest Shrine, Pope Sergius IV appealed for help to go to Palestine to rebuild it. His appeal fell on deaf ears.

At the beginning of the fifth century, two hundred years before Muhammad appeared, there were seven hundred Catholic bishops in Africa.¹⁵ Two hundred of them attended the Council of Carthage in 535 AD. By the middle of the 900s there were forty left. By 1050, as a result of peaceful coexistence there were only five left.

In 1076 there were two. We learn this from a letter that Pope Gregory VII, Hildebrand wrote to Cyriacus, Archbishop of Carthage in June 1076. As three bishops are needed for the valid consecration of another bishop, Pope Gregory asked him to send a suitable priest to Rome who could be consecrated assistant bishop, so that he [Cyriacus] and Servandus, bishop of Buzea in Mauritania, and the new bishop could consecrate other bishops for the African Catholics.¹⁶

Gregory VII, on his deathbed in 1085, dreamt of forming a Christian League against Islam and said, 'I would rather risk my life to deliver the Holy Places, than govern the Universe.'¹⁷

It seems to have been the Seljuk Turkish capture of Jerusalem in 1076 that finally swung the balance, exhausted the patience of the European Christians, and fulfilled

¹⁵ H. Daniel-Rops, *The Church in the Dark Ages*, ed. cit., pp.340, 344.

¹⁶ Register of Gregory VII, 111, 19.

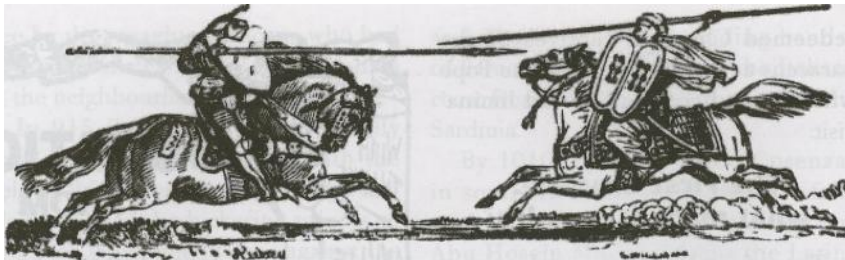
¹⁷ H. Daniel-Rops, *Cathedral and Crusade*, J.M. Dent and Sons, London, 1957, p.434.

Gregory's wish. Pilgrimage to the Holy Places had become more difficult; a poll-tax was imposed on visitors. Those who dared journey there were harassed, robbed and some even enslaved.

At the Council of Piacenza summoned by Pope Urban II and held in March 1095, Byzantine delegates emphasized the danger facing Christendom from Muslim expansion, and the hardship facing Eastern Christians until the infidel be driven back.¹⁸ They repeated an appeal made by Emperor Alexius to Robert of Flanders asking him to return to the East with some knights to assist the Byzantines in their struggle with the Muslims.

Towards the end of that same year, Urban II, at another Council held at Clarendon in France, took up the suggestion, and urged Europe's Christians to "Take the road to the Holy Sepulchre! let each one deny himself and take up the Cross." The Assembly rose to its feet and shouted "God wills it."

Muhammad died on June 8, 632 AD. It had taken four hundred and sixty-three years for Europe's Christians to combine their forces and rise up in defence of themselves and of their Faith.



PAUL STENHOUSE, MSC PhD has recently completed, for the first time, a translation from Arabic into English of the 16th century *Futuh-Habasha*, "The Conquest of Abyssinia" by Shihab al-Din Ahmad bin 'Abdu l Qader bin Salem bin 'Uthman. Notes to the translation have been provided by Professor Richard Pankhurst in Addis Ababa. This text is a key to understanding current events in the Horn of Africa. It gives an eye-witness account of *jihads* waged by Muslims against Ethiopian Christians in the early part of the sixteenth century. It is available through Amazon.

Illustrations from *Ancient Spanish Ballads*, by J. G. Lockhart, London, 1859.

¹⁸ Steven Runciman, *A History of the Crusades*, ed. cit., vol.i, p.105.