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# **WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN CRUSADES FROM THE ELEVENTH TO THIRTEENTH CENTURIES**

A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts at Massey University

**SUZANNE HELEN CORRY**

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*For My Parents*

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# **ABSTRACT**

This thesis studies the involvement of women in the four great armed pilgrimages, the crusades of 1096-1204. A crusade was a pilgrimage, an act of penance for the sins of its participants, as well as being a holy war. Women were entitled to join pilgrimages because it was an act they had enjoyed for centuries. When, therefore, the armed pilgrimage was preached by Urban II in 1095, women too were permitted to journey although it was not anticipated at first by the papacy that they would. The presence of women in ritually pure camps and on the battlefields was objected to. The biblical beliefs of chroniclers and moralists of the period held that the presence of women on these campaigns compromised their purpose. This thesis will examine in primary sources the beliefs of the moralists and writers of the crusades, and the responses to the presence of women on campaigns.

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# **INTRODUCTION:**

## **WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN CRUSADES FROM THE ELEVENTH TO THIRTEENTH CENTURIES**

This thesis will examine the participation of women in the crusades from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries. The crusades were simultaneously pilgrimages, rituals of purification in that the participant was purged of sin and defilement in journeying, and military campaigns. Furthermore, these expeditions were collective attempts to establish a godly order, a new Jerusalem. Women were entitled to join pilgrimages - a rite they had enjoyed for centuries - hence to go on a crusade, although it was not anticipated at first that they would. Their presence, however, in camps of a holy war and on the battlefields was objected to, and not only by male crusaders. Religious ideologies in the Bible and in the writings of the chroniclers and moralists of the period held that the presence of women on these campaigns compromised their purpose. I will examine in primary sources those beliefs held up by moralists and writers of the crusades, and the responses to the presence of women on campaigns.

The literature on the presence and involvement of women in the crusades is limited, although James A. Brundage's article on 'Prostitution, Miscegenation and Sexual Purity in the First Crusade' was extremely useful as was B. Hamilton's paper on 'Women in the Crusader States: the Queens of Jerusalem, 1100-1190'.<sup>1</sup> Megan McLaughlin's article on 'The Woman Warrior' and Helen Solterer's essay on 'Figures of Female Militancy' were also of great interest and

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<sup>1</sup> James A. Brundage, 'Prostitution, Miscegenation and Sexual Purity in the First Crusade', in P.W. Edbury (ed.) *Crusade and Settlement*, Cardiff: University College Cardiff Press, 1985, and B. Hamilton, 'Women in the Crusader States: The Queens of Jerusalem, 1100-1190', in D. Baker (ed.) *Medieval Women*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1978.

value.<sup>2</sup> Two recent works, Helen Nicholson's 'Women on the Third Crusade' and Jonathan Riley-Smith's *The First Crusaders* arrived too late for use in this thesis.<sup>3</sup>

This thesis will be divided into four chapters of which the first will study woman and the sacred in the era of the crusades. Leading on from this, chapter two will discuss woman as a pilgrim, and chapter three will focus on woman in camps and on the battlefields. The final chapter looks at woman and crusade. The actual narrative accounts of women and the expeditions are examined mainly in chapter four. While the chapters concerning woman as a pilgrim, woman in camps and on the battlefield, and woman on crusade deal mainly with events, the first chapter concentrates on the condition(s) of woman in these events. These four chapters have not been chosen randomly, but have strong parallels with the Bible, particularly the Old Testament.

In Exodus, Moses had taken the children of Israel out of Egypt and away from their enslavement to the promised land. This journey was seen as a pilgrimage during which the presence of God was strongly felt. Because His presence made the Israelite camp so sacred, it had to be kept pure, and this was done by sending the bewitching and defiling influence of women (and other pollutants) outside the camp. In times of war, the children of Israel believed they were the army of God, which had to defend the faith against pagan enemies, such as the Philistines and Amorites. This is very similar to the notion the crusaders had of themselves, that is, theirs was a holy war. The crusades were journeys to a sacred goal (Jerusalem); journeys which were holy and therefore should not be impure or polluted; journeys which would result in, so the crusaders believed, the regaining of the Holy Land for God's chosen by fighting and overcoming the Infidel and establishing the Kingdom of God.

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<sup>2</sup> Megan McLaughlin, 'The Woman Warrior: Gender, Warfare and Society in Medieval Europe', *Women's Studies*, 17, (1990), pp.193-209. Helen Solterer, 'Figures of Female Militancy in Medieval France', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 16, (1991), pp.522-49.

<sup>3</sup> Helen Nicholson, 'Women on the Third Crusade', *Journal of Medieval History*, 23, 4, (1997) and Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The First Crusaders, 1095-1131*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997

Women were largely not featured on these journeys in the writings of the chroniclers or historians,<sup>4</sup> unless to blame them for failures at sieges or battles.

Woman and the sacred in the era of the crusades will be examined in chapter one. This chapter will analyse four different concepts used in the Bible and by medieval man to depict woman and to keep her under male control. The first of these ideas looks at the depiction of woman as a weak and inferior being. This is directly related to the Book of Genesis in which Eve, the lesser creation, was seduced by Satan to eat of the forbidden fruit. Eve then led man to fall from grace. Because of such a sin, Adam and Eve were banished from Eden, and the female descendants of Eve were, thereafter, to remain under the guidance and control of their male counterparts, for fear they would fall into evil and sin. Another view held in the Bible was of the powerful and dangerous woman. Such a woman caused havoc and even death as seen in the example of Dalila in the Book of Judges.<sup>5</sup> She was able to seduce and deceive Samson; later allowing him to fall into the hands of his enemies, the Philistines. The third view held in the Bible was of woman as a pollutant of sacred sites, rites and rituals. A woman could contaminate such places and rituals because she menstruated, had sexual relations, or gave birth. Because of her condition, a woman had to be placed outside the camp until she was purified.<sup>6</sup> The final concept examines woman as a harlot. Throughout the many different books of the Testaments, there is a strong emphasis on women who were deemed as 'loose' or portrayed as prostitutes. Such women were to be avoided at all costs by men if they wished to achieve salvation. These views of women prevailed into the early Church and the Church of the Middle Ages, and were prevalent in the crusades as the various chronicles illustrate.

In chapter two I will examine woman as a pilgrim. Women journeyed to the sacred sites of Christendom just as men did. These sacred sites were places

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<sup>4</sup> Although not all, as we see with Ambroise in chapter four. See *The Crusade of Richard the Lion-Heart*, trans. Merton Jerome Hubert, notes and documentary by John L. La Monte, New York: Columbia University Press, 1941.

<sup>5</sup> Judges XVI.

<sup>6</sup> Leviticus XII, XV.

where God's love or power had been manifest, such as in Jerusalem, the place of sacrifice, centre of God's transcended order and the base of immortality. Many pilgrims wished to get as close to God as they could to mystically join with the events or miracles related with these sacred sites or to re-enact the events. This chapter will study whether a woman was welcome on these journeys or at the sacred sites. It will be subdivided into two sections:

The first of these sections will investigate early pilgrimage so as to get an idea of the history of pilgrimage leading up to the crusading period. It will look at why and where people journeyed over the centuries, the differing forms of pilgrimage, opposition to pilgrimage, and how this ancient practice gave rise to the crusading movement in the eleventh century. The second section will focus on why women went on pilgrimage and how this may have differed from the male reasons for going. It will look at women's roles in pilgrimage and whether these changed over the centuries, especially in the crusades, coupled with the male attitude towards women and pilgrimage. In this, chapter two will centre on the writings of men, of whom the majority believed women should be excluded from pilgrimage as they were impure or a danger for other male pilgrims. This section will therefore determine whether women were welcome on the journey of pilgrimage or at the sacred sites and investigate the contradiction which arises between women as legitimate pilgrims and their unacceptability as impure women on a pilgrimage/crusade.

The third chapter will concentrate on woman in camps and on the battlefields. This will explore the notion of warfare as interpreted in the Old and New Testaments. The place of women in war and in the camps of warriors will be examined to determine whether their presence was acknowledged, and if so, whether women were accepted on the battlefield.

The fourth and final chapter will examine woman and crusade by following through contemporary accounts of the first four crusades. Although women were entitled to join pilgrimages and therefore allowed to go on crusade

because they had been active in pilgrimage for centuries, and it was a practice denied to no one, their presence on the battlefield and in the camps provoked a negative response from most crusaders and clergymen. They believed a woman could contaminate sacred and religious places because she menstruated, or seduced and infected men with lust and sin.<sup>7</sup> The presence of women (and especially 'loose' women) on crusade shocked some chroniclers, who lamented that harlots and other dishonest and sinful types infested the crusading armies and infected the soldiers with their vices. The anonymous *Gesta Francorum* stated that in a vision of Stephen at Antioch, Christ had said: '... you [crusaders] are satisfying your filthy lusts both with Christian and loose pagan women, so that a stench rises up to Heaven.'<sup>8</sup> This was a grave sin as the crusade was a holy expedition and the presence of these women on it compromised its purpose. With regards to war it was believed women were not capable of fighting, or it was deemed unseemly and unwomanly for them to fight.<sup>9</sup> However, some had a more positive response to those accompanying crusaders. Ambroise, for example, believed women were capable in battle and in coping with pain and suffering.<sup>10</sup> Women were also praised for the aid they provided during and after battles such as at the successful battle of Dorylaeum.<sup>11</sup> But not all shared in these beliefs, especially if failures occurred. Women were treated as the cause of such failures as their presence hindered the expedition. This chapter will examine the contradictory nature of chroniclers when writing of women who accompanied the crusaders. Coupled with the chapter on 'Woman and the Sacred in the Era of the Crusades', this chapter will look at why the blame for failure fell heavily on those women present.

This thesis will study the role of women in the crusades and will examine why women went on crusade, and what their reasoning or justification was for their presence in camps and on the battlefields. It will also try and resolve how

<sup>7</sup> Leviticus XV, 19; Judges XVI, 1-20.

<sup>8</sup> *Gesta Francorum et Aliorum Hierosolimitanorum*, (ed.) and trans. Rosalind Hill, London: Nelson, 1962, p.58.

<sup>9</sup> Anna Comnena, *The Alexiad of Anna Comnena*, trans. E.R.A. Sewter, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969, Book IV.

<sup>10</sup> Ambroise, p.152 and p.162.

<sup>11</sup> *Gesta Francorum*, p.19.

much the Old Testament models shaped the recording of crusade history and therefore how much such chronicles can be relied on at all for accounts of 'what happened'.