

The House of Rotrou and the Crusades

Many of the members of the House of Rotrou were known for their religious benefactions. In fact, especially for the early members, it is the trace of the cartulary documents concerning these benefactions, that we can examine, and glean so much about the family. There is however another reason for which the males of the House of Rotrou were so well known and so highly respected. Several of them participated in the different crusades, and distinguished themselves through their acts of bravery. The House of Rotrou paid a heavy tribute, as several of them died in different battles in the Holy Land.

The decision of making a trip to the Holy Land to participate in the Crusades, was called "Taking the Cross".

The Crusades were a series of religiously sanctioned military campaigns waged by much of Latin Christian Europe, particularly the Franks of France and the Holy Roman Empire. The specific crusades to restore Christian control of the Holy Land were fought over a period of nearly 200 years, between 1095 and 1291. The Crusades originally had the goal of recapturing Jerusalem and the Holy Land from Muslim rule. The Crusades had far-reaching political, economic, and social impacts, some of which have lasted into contemporary times.

In 1095, Pope Urban II proclaimed the First Crusade with the object of restoring access by Christians to holy places in and around Jerusalem. In the struggle to gain control of the Holy Land, there were six more major crusades, the last one in ended in 1291 with the fall of the city of Acre. The Church decided to make no more attempts to recover the Holy Land.

First Crusade	1095-1100
Second Crusade	1147–1149
Third Crusade	1187–1192
Fourth Crusade	1202–1204
Albigensian Crusade	
Children's Crusade	
Fifth Crusade	1217–1221
Sixth Crusade	1228–1229
Seventh Crusade	1248–1254
Eighth Crusade	1270
Ninth Crusade	1271–1272

The Holy Land



First Crusade (1095-1100)

In March 1095 at the Council of Piacenza, ambassadors sent by Byzantine Emperor Alexius I called for help with defending his empire against the Seljuk Turks. Later that year, at the Council of Clermont, Pope Urban II called upon all Christians to join a war against the Turks, promising those who died in the endeavor would receive immediate remission of their sins.

Following abortive popular crusades in early 1096, the official crusader armies set off from France and Italy on the papally-ordained date of 15 August 1096. The armies journeyed eastward by land toward Constantinople, a force estimated at nearly 100,000, where they received a luke-warm welcome from the Byzantine Emperor. Pledging to restore lost territories to the empire, the Crusaders were supplied and transported to Anatolia where they laid siege to Seljuk-occupied Nicaea. The city fell on 19 June 1097. The Crusader armies fought further battles against the Turks, facing grave deprivation of both food and water in their summer crossing of Anatolia. The lengthy Siege of Antioch began in October 1097 and endured until June of 1098.

Rotrou III had first accompanied his uncle Ebles II, Count of Roucy, to Spain, to combat the Moors, with another uncle, Sanchez I, King of Aragon. He then took part in the First Crusade, under the orders of Robert Courteheuse. He illustrated himself at the battle of Antioch, and then at the conquest of Jerusalem.

A large Muslim relief army under Kerbogha immediately besieged the victorious Crusaders within Antioch. Bohemund of Taranto led a successful break-out and defeat of Kerbogha's army on the 28th of June. The starving crusader army marched south, moving from town to town along the coast, finally reaching the walls of Jerusalem on 7 June 1099 with only a fraction of their original forces. The city of Jerusalem was finally captured on July 15, 1099. The Crusaders massacred all Jewish and Moslem civilians and destroyed all the mosques, end then the entire city.

Second Crusade (1147–1149)

After a period of relative peace in which Christians and Muslims co-existed in the Holy Land, Muslims conquered the town of Edessa. A new crusade was called for by various preachers, most notably by Bernard of Clairvaux. French and South German armies, under the Kings Louis VII and Conrad III respectively, marched to Jerusalem in 1147 but failed to win any major victories, launching a failed pre-emptive siege of Damascus, an independent city that would soon fall into the hands of Nur ad-Din, the main enemy of the Crusaders. On the other side of the Mediterranean, however, the Second Crusade met with great success as a group of Northern European Crusaders stopped in Portugal, allied with the Portuguese King, Afonso I of Portugal, and retook Lisbon from the Muslims in 1147. A detachment from this group of crusaders helped Count Raymond Berenguer IV of Barcelona conquer the city of Tortosa the following year. In the Holy Land by 1150, both the kings of France and Germany had returned to their countries without any result. No members of the House of Rotrou took part in the Second Crusade.

Third Crusade (1187–1192)

In 1187, Saladin, Sultan of Egypt, conquered Jerusalem after nearly a century under Christian rule, following the Battle of Hattin. After the Christians surrendered the city, Saladin spared the civilians and for the most part left churches and shrines untouched to be able to collect ransom money from the Franks. Several thousand apparently were not redeemed and probably were sold into slavery. On hearing the news of the loss of Jerusalem, Pope Urban II had a heart attack and died. However, Saladin is remembered respectfully in both European and Islamic sources as a man who "always stuck to his promise and was loyal." The reports of Saladin's victories shocked Europe. Pope Gregory VIII called for a crusade, which was led by several of Europe's most important leaders: Philip II of France, Richard I of England (aka Richard the Lionheart), and Frederick I, Holy Roman Emperor, who died en route. Rotrou III accompanied Richard to the Holy Land. Before their arrival in the Holy Land, Richard captured the island of Cyprus from the Byzantines in 1191. Cyprus would serve as a Crusader base for centuries to come, and would remain in Western European hands until the Ottoman Empire conquered the island from Venice in 1571. After a long siege, Richard the Lionheart recaptured the city of Acre and took the entire Muslim garrison under captivity, which was executed after a series of failed negotiations. Rotrou IV was fatally injured and died under the walls of Saint Jean D'Acre ¹. Philip left, in 1191, after the Crusaders had recaptured Acre from the Muslims. The Crusader army headed south along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. They defeated the Muslims near Arsuf, recaptured the port city of Jaffa, and were in sight of Jerusalem. However, Richard did not believe he would be able to hold Jerusalem once it was captured, as the majority of Crusaders would then return to Europe, and the crusade ended without the taking of Jerusalem. Richard left the following year after negotiating a treaty with Saladin. The treaty allowed unarmed Christian pilgrims to make pilgrimages to the Holy Land (Jerusalem), while it remained under Muslim control.

The Fourth Crusade (1202-1204)

The Fourth Crusade was initiated in 1202 by Pope Innocent III, with the intention of invading the Holy Land through Egypt. Geoffroy IV, Count of Perche died in 1202 at Soissons while he was preparing for the Crusade ². Because the Crusaders lacked the funds to pay for the fleet and provisions that they had contracted from the Venetians, Doge Enrico Dandolo enlisted the crusaders to restore the Christian city of Zara (Zadar) to obedience. Because they subsequently lacked provisions and time

¹ Rotrou was not the only one of his generation to die in the Holy Land. Although not involved in a crusade, Rotrou's brother Stephen, Bishop of Palermo had died in Jerusalem in 1169.

² Contemporary Sources for the Fourth Crusade (A. J. Andrea) (P.213) - Geoffrey died probably on April 5th. His brother Lord Stephen accepted his cross.

on their vessel lease, the leaders decided to go to Constantinople, where they attempted to place a Byzantine exile on the throne. After a series of misunderstandings and outbreaks of violence, the Crusaders sacked the city in 1204, and established the so-called Latin Empire and a series of other Crusader states throughout the territories of the Greek Byzantine Empire. The Fourth Crusade never even reached the Holy land, due to lack of funds, and internal quarrels. The Crusaders agreed to divert the invasion to Constantinople, and to share the loot to pay for their troubles. As a result of this fiasco, Pope Innocent excommunicated the Crusaders and many were killed at Adrianople, far from their original goal. Stephen of Perche, brother of Geoffrey, Count of Perche, had taken up the cross, but died at Andrianople in April, 1205. This is often seen as the final breaking point of the Great Schism between the Eastern Orthodox Church and (Western) Roman Catholic Church.

In the Perche, the story was told :

"Thus did the pilgrims make ready in all lands. Alas! A great mischance befell them in the following Lent, before they had started, for another notable chief, Count Geoffrey of Perche, fell sick, and made his will in such fashion that he directed that Stephen, his brother, should have his goods and lead his men in the host. Directly after the death of Geoffrey, Stephen, took up the cross, together with Rotrou of Montfort, Ives of La Jaille, Aimery of Villeroi, Geoffry of Beaumont, and many others whose names were not noted.

Of this exchange the pilgrims would willingly have been quit, had God so ordered. Thus did the Count make an end and die; and much evil ensued, for he was a baron high and honoured, and a good knight. Greatly was he mourned throughout all lands.
3"

Fifth Crusade 1217–1221

By processions, prayers, and preaching, the Church attempted to launch another crusade, and the Fourth Council of the Lateran (1215) formulated a plan for the recovery of the Holy Land. In the first phase, a crusading force from Austria and Hungary joined the forces of the King of Jerusalem and the Prince of Antioch to take back Jerusalem. In the second phase, crusader forces achieved a remarkable feat in the capture of Damietta in Egypt in November, 1219, but under the urgent insistence of the papal legate, Pelagius, they then launched a foolhardy attack on Cairo in July of 1221. The crusaders were turned back after their dwindling supplies led to a forced retreat. A night-time attack by the ruler of Egypt, the powerful Ayubid Sultan Al-Kamil, resulted in a great number of crusader losses and eventually in the

³ Memoirs or Chronicle of the Fourth Crusade - Geoffrey de Villehardouin , 1150-1213 - translation by Frank T. Marzials.

surrender of the army. Al-Kamil agreed to an eight-year peace agreement with Europe.

Al-Kamil had put a bounty of a Byzantine gold piece for every Christian head brought to him during the war. During 1219, St. Francis of Assisi crossed the battle lines at Damietta in order to speak with Al-Kamil. He and his companion Illuminatus were captured and beaten and brought before the Sultan. St. Bonaventure, in his Major Life of St. Francis, says that the Sultan was impressed by Francis and spent some time with him. Francis was given safe passage and although he was offered many gifts, all he accepted was a horn for calling the faithful to prayer. The Crusaders left Egypt. This act eventually led to the establishment of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land.

No member of the House of Rotrou participated in the fifth Crusade.

Sixth Crusade (1228–1229)

Emperor Frederick II had repeatedly vowed a crusade but failed to live up to his words, for which he was excommunicated by Pope Gregory IX in 1228. He nonetheless set sail from Brindisi, landed in Palestine, and through diplomacy he achieved unexpected success : Jerusalem, Nazareth, and Bethlehem were delivered to the crusaders for a period of ten years. In 1229 after failing to conquer Egypt, Frederick II of the Holy Roman Empire, made a peace treaty with Al-Kamil, the ruler of Egypt. This treaty allowed Christians to rule over most of Jerusalem, while the Muslims were given control of the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aksa mosque. The peace brought about by this treaty lasted for about ten years. Many of the Muslims though were not happy with Al-Kamil for giving up control of Jerusalem and in 1244, following a siege, the Muslims regained control of the city. Rotrou IV de Montfort (1180-1229) perished in this crusade.

So did several members of the Rotrou family take part in several crusades, showing great courage and bravery. Several died either on the way to the Holy Land, or during the sieges of the cities of Palestine.

Although several other half-hearted Crusades were mounted in future years, they were often not immediately directed to freeing Jerusalem but rather to settle internal European affairs.