‘Women’, *mulieres*, or, more rarely, *feminae*, are not a social stratum in the sense of *pauperes, milites* or *principes*. From the very large numbers of women on the First Crusade who could be ranked among the *pauperes* through to the much smaller number of women who came with their relatives and guardians among the male magnates, the women of the crusade could, in fact, be distributed among these social layers and be considered as a component part of them. To divide the women of the movement in this way would be reasonable and reflect the very different experiences of women from different social backgrounds. Can, say, Elvira, wife of Count Raymond of Toulouse have had much in common with a runaway female serf? But the women of the First Crusade were also, in several instances, identified collectively by the sources and treated as a coherent grouping; consequently any discussion of their presence on the expedition and their contribution to the social dynamics of the crusade has to examine this sense that women were a distinct category of those persons present.

A striking comment occurs in the history of Albert of Aachen, as he described the popular enthusiasm for the crusade to which he was an eyewitness: ‘crowds from different kingdoms and cities gathered together, but in no sense turning away from illicit and sexual intercourse. There was unbridled contact with women and young girls, who with utter rashness had departed with the intention of frivolity; there was constant pleasure and rejoicing under the pretext of this journey.’ ¹ This comment and others of a similar nature have, at times, led modern historians to assume that when the sources referred to the women of the First Crusade, they were indicating the presence of ‘camp followers’.

¹ AA i.25 (48): *Hiis itaque per turmas ex diuersis regnis et ciuitatibus in unum collectis, sed nequaquam ab illicitis et fornicationibus auseris, inmoderata erat commissatio cum mulieribus et puellis, sub eiusdem levitatis intentione egressis, assidua delectatio, et in omni temeritate sub huius uie occasione gloriatio.*
prostitutes. After all, women dependent for their living on soldiers have travelled in the wake of European armies for centuries.

This natural assumption is, however, mistaken with regard to the First Crusade. Albert of Aachen was a monk and this affected his perception of women joining the crusade in two ways. Firstly, a pilgrimage is a time of abstinence, a time for penitence. Given that Albert saw the expedition as a pilgrimage, it was entirely inappropriate in his eyes for men and women to undertake the journey together without adhering to a spirit of abstinence. Secondly, for a medieval monk to leave their monastery without the agreement of their abbot was an extremely serious breach of discipline. Cases of ‘wandering monks’ were treated with a sense of outrage that proper social order had been undermined. There is something of this same outrage in Albert’s comment about women using the crusade as a pretext to leave their former lives. In other words, this passage is not about prostitution, it is about women who may have had perfectly respectable careers, indeed may have been married. Nevertheless, they were upsetting the proprieties of the enterprise by their unregulated presence among the pilgrims.

There is another aspect to the report made by Albert that deserves attention. He described how there was a sense of rejoicing among the women who joined the crusade. This observation might well reflect an important feature of their involvement. Did some women seize upon the opportunity presented by the expedition to cast aside roles and circumstances that oppressed them, to obtain a new form of freedom? Albert’s report is echoed by another eyewitness to the gathering of the crowds who set forth on the expedition, Ekkehard, abbot of Aura and member of the crusade of 1101. Ekkehard wrote that a great part of the common people set out with wives and children, laden with the whole household. These included ‘degraded women’ who had joined the Lord’s host under the guise of religion.

Certainly there were women who, when they learned of the crusade, emerged from obscurity to be local leaders of pilgrims. The most notorious example of this, seized upon by contemporary writers across Europe, was the woman who claimed to be the mistress of a goose that was divinely inspired. Guibert of Nogent was amused rather than outraged at the ‘wretched woman’ whose fame spread through

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2 EA 140.
3 EA 144: *inhonestas feminei sexus.*