When the First Crusade captured Jerusalem in 1099 it had achieved its primary aim and Latin Christians were now in possession of the Holy City. However, there is no evidence that the crusade’s instigator, Pope Urban II, or any of the leaders had planned beyond this point: the city of Jerusalem was of enormous religious significance but it was strategically vulnerable, more than a day’s journey from the nearest sea harbour at Jaffa, the only coastal town so far in Christian hands. The early weeks after the capture demonstrated this vulnerability: Egypt was able to ship a large army to Ascalon, south-west of Jerusalem, and the exhausted crusaders were obliged to elect a ruler for the new state in a hurry and to march out to meet the enemy. Against overwhelming odds the crusaders were victorious. The new ruler, Godfrey of Bouillon, undoubtedly realised the importance of the coastal towns, both to open them up for reinforcements and pilgrims from western Europe and to prevent their use by enemy fleets as bridgeheads for attack. His brief rule – just short of a year – prevented his achieving a great deal, but his brother Baldwin who succeeded him as King Baldwin I (1100–1118) made the conquest of the littoral a priority. Acre was high on the list of coastal cities because it had a uniquely good harbour, as had been recognised in previous centuries.

It used to be thought that Acre was a developed seaport during Phoenician times, but Alex Kesten, using archaeological and literary sources, argued that the settlement was on the tell (an artificial mound created by previous human occupation), and the peninsula itself was not occupied during the Hellenistic period. The harbour walls were built in the ninth century CE by Ahmad ibn Tulun (868–905), Acre’s Egyptian governor. The late-tenth-century historian Al-Muqadassi wrote: “The town of Acre was not fortified until the visit of ibn-Tulun who had seen the town of Tyre and its fortifications and the wall surrounding its harbour. This he wanted to build for [Acre] as it was in Tyre.” The author described how his own grandfather had overseen the building of the submarine walls, ending: “The harbour was closed off at night, after the

ships had been brought in, by a chain drawn across the entrance, as at Tyre."² Nasr Kursau, a Persian traveller, wrote in 1047:

The town of Acre is sited on an elevation, partly sloping partly level. All along this coast the towns are built on elevations for fear of incursion by the waves ... the sea is on the west and the south. [Also] on the south is the harbour. [...] It resembles a large pen whose rear, closed end abuts the town, with the two side walls projecting into the sea. In the side facing the open sea is the entrance, some 50 cubits wide, with a chain stretched from the end of one wall to the end of the other [...] To admit a ship, the chain is lowered into the sea to a depth that allows the ship to pass over it. Then the chain is again raised so as to prevent stranger vessels from attacking the ships within.³

The south-facing harbour was a feature unique to Acre, and invaluable to shipping on a rocky and west-facing coast. The prevailing winds in winter in the Mediterranean area were (and are) westerly, and medieval accounts of shipwrecks confirm the dangers, with the winds driving the ships onto the shore. Acre was protected from westerlies, but southerly winds presented a danger, as the German pilgrim Theoderic recorded in c.1170: "[T]he port of Ptolemais or the anchorage of the ships is very often difficult or dangerous to enter when the south wind is blowing. In fact the edge of the shore shakes with the frequent beat of the huge waves of the sea violently breaking against each other, and ... the waves wash over the mainland for over a stone's throw."⁴ The harbour walls were evidently not a complete protection, but the south-facing harbour was generally Acre's strength as a port.

The First Crusaders seem not to have recognized Acre's potential when they first came into contact with the city in the spring of 1099. After leaving Antioch and undertaking a fruitless siege of Arqa they began their march south along the coastal route, which exposed them to fewer dangers than an inland journey to Jerusalem, but entailed passing very close to the maritime cities, mostly ruled by quasi-independent amirs. The terrain did not allow the crusaders much leeway to avoid confrontation. However, according to the Gestas Francorum, the key eyewitness source for these events, the crusaders responded to

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² Cited in Kesten, 22.
³ Cited in Kesten, 25.