

The Truth about the Crusades: Historian reviews of "Kingdom of Heaven"  
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Not quite three weeks after the film's release we can say one thing for sure: the First Crusade was much more successful than Ridley Scott's movie.

I was stunned to hear Islamic anti-defamation groups condemn Scott's "Kingdom of Heaven." The Muslims appear much nobler than the Christians in the film, and on the Christian side the only remotely sympathetic characters are at best agnostic. Jonathan Riley-Smith, an expert on the Crusades, described the movie as "rubbish" for just this reason - the film, he says, is "not historically accurate at all" in its depiction of "the Muslims as sophisticated and civilized, and the Crusaders are all brutes and barbarians. It has nothing to do with reality." More important than the film itself, though, is the history behind the Crusades themselves. Moviegoers who knew little of the period walked away with a distorted understanding of the Crusades that played into politically correct stereotypes.

Proper context for the Crusades must begin at the beginning, with the First Crusade (1096-1099). Yet - and here is the point - even the First Crusade was not the real beginning of the story. The real beginning came in the century following the death of Muhammad in 632. During that incredible hundred years, Muslims spread their religion by force throughout Arabia, and into the modern Middle East, including Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria, as well as into Egypt, north Africa, and Spain. Further progress into Western Europe was stopped cold by Charles Martel and his Frankish warriors at the battle of Poitiers/Tours in 732.

It is easily forgotten that some of these territories had been heavily Christian when the Muslims took them over. No one today thinks of Syria and Egypt as Christian centers, but in the seventh century they certainly were. The ancient city of Antioch had been home to a school of Christian thought second only to that of Alexandria, and Egypt had been the birthplace of Christian monasticism.

At the battle of Manzikert in 1071 much of Byzantine Asia Minor was lost to the Seljuk Turks, a group of non-Arab Muslims who were influential in the Middle East during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Alarmed, the Byzantine emperor Alexius I Comnenus issued an appeal to the Pope in Rome, from whom the Eastern world had been estranged since the Great Schism of 1054. That pope, Gregory VII, much as he wanted to help, wound up having other fish to fry. It was Pope Urban II who issued the call for the crusade in 1095.

When the Seljuk Turks conquered Palestine in the early eleventh century they at first carried out atrocities against Christians, destroying churches and killing some of the faithful. Although this approach was soon abandoned, the internal divisions of the Seljuk Turks translated into instability in the Holy Land, where Christian pilgrimages to the city's holy places became perilous. Thus the crusade called by Urban would try to ease some of the pressure from the troubled Byzantines, but also set its sights on liberating the once-Christian Holy Land from the hands of the Muslims.

At no time did the crusaders come anywhere near Arabia, the heart of Islam, and yet most people seem to think that the Crusades were an attempt by wicked Christians to invade the Muslim world and convert its inhabitants to Christianity. To the contrary, the Christians engaged in no such forced conversion of Muslims - which would explain why, during the years following the First Crusade in which the Christians occupied Jerusalem, Muslims remained the overwhelming majority of the

population.

In fact, if you had asked a Muslim as recently as the eighteenth century what the Crusades were, he would have had no idea what you were talking about. From the Muslim point of view the Crusades were such a minor affair that they were scarcely worth noting. It is largely thanks to historically recent Western guilt and hand-wringing that modern Muslims have become conscious of the Crusades at all.

None of this is an attempt to whitewash the truly despicable and inexcusable aspects of the Crusades. There were plenty of atrocities on all sides, though that is a wartime phenomenon that is not exactly unknown to the modern world. But to focus on these incidents, however cruel and however contrary to the Christian Gospel they were, in the absence of this contextual material is to miss the forest for the trees.

Thus it was that in 1095, with the assistance of no secular ruler, Pope Urban II called upon Western Christians to assist their Eastern brethren. Over the past two millennia, the Church's influence on our civilization - as I show in my new book, *How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization* - has typically involved the pursuits of peace: the university system, the sciences, international law, economic thought, charitable work, the arts and architecture, and much more besides. But it also meant encouraging the Spaniards to wage a just war against their Islamic conquerors, and in the case of the Crusades to lend assistance to fellow Christians in the East who found themselves under a similar threat.

That, stated simply, is what the Crusades were about.