

[The Crusades: When Christendom Pushed Back](#)[Print](#)

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The year is 732 A.D., and Europe is under assault. Islam, born a mere 110 years earlier, is already in its adolescence, and the Muslim Moors are on the march.

Growing in leaps and bounds, the Caliphate, as the Islamic realm is known, has thus far subdued much of Christendom, conquering the old Christian lands of the Mideast and North Africa in short order. Syria and Iraq fell in 636; Palestine in 638; and Egypt, which was not even an Arab land, fell in 642. North Africa, also not Arab, was under Muslim control by 709. Then came the year 711 and the Moors' invasion of Europe, as they crossed the Strait of Gibraltar and entered Visigothic Iberia (now Spain and Portugal). And the new continent brought new successes to Islam. Conquering the Iberian Peninsula by 718, the Muslims crossed the Pyrenees Mountains into Gaul (now France) and worked their way northward. And now, in 732, they are approaching Tours, a mere 126 miles from Paris.

The Moorish leader, Abdul Rahman Al Ghafiqi, is supremely confident of success. He is in the vanguard of the first Muslim crusade, and his civilization has enjoyed rapidity and scope of conquest heretofore unseen in world history. He is at the head of an enormous army, replete with heavy cavalry, and views the Europeans as mere barbarians. In contrast, the barbarians facing him are all on foot, a tremendous disadvantage. The only thing the Frankish and Burgundian European forces have going for them is their leader, Charles of Herstal, grandfather of Charlemagne. He is a brilliant military tactician who, after losing his very first battle, is enjoying an unbroken 16-year streak of victories.

And this record will remain unblemished. Outnumbered by perhaps as much as 2 to 1 on a battlefield between the cities of Tours and Poitiers, Charles routs the Moorish forces, stopping the Muslim advance into Europe cold. It becomes known as the Battle of Tours (or Poitiers), and many historians consider it one of the great turning points in world history. By their lights, Charles is a man who saved Western Civilization, a hero who well deserves the moniker the battle earned him: Martellus. We thus now know him as Charles Martel, which translates into Charles the Hammer.

### The Gathering Threat in the East

While the Hammer saved Gaul, the Muslims would not stop hammering Christendom — and it would be the better part of four centuries before Europe would again hammer back. This brings us to the late 11th century and perhaps the best-known events of medieval history: the Crusades.

Ah, the Crusades. Along with the Galileo affair and the Spanish Inquisition (both partially to largely misunderstood), they have become a metaphor for Christian "intolerance." And this characterization figures prominently in the hate-the-West-first crowd's repertoire and imbues everything, from movies such as 2005's *Kingdom of Heaven* to school curricula to politicians' pronouncements. In fact, it's sometimes peddled so reflexively that the criticism descends into the ridiculous, such as when Bill Clinton gave a speech at Georgetown University and, writes Chair of the History Department at Saint Louis University Thomas Madden, "recounted (and embellished) a massacre of Jews after the Crusader conquest of Jerusalem in 1099 and informed his audience that the episode was still bitterly remembered in the Middle East. (Why Islamist terrorists should be upset about the killing of Jews was not explained.)" Why, indeed. Yet, it is the not-so-ridiculous, the fable accepted as fact, that does the most damage. Madden addresses this in his piece, "The Real History of the Crusades," writing:

Misconceptions about the Crusades are all too common. The Crusades are generally portrayed as a series of holy wars against Islam led by power-mad popes and fought by religious fanatics. They are supposed to have been the epitome of self-righteousness and intolerance, a black stain on the history of the Catholic Church in particular and Western civilization in general. A breed of proto-imperialists, the Crusaders introduced Western aggression to the peaceful Middle East and then deformed the enlightened Muslim culture, leaving it in ruins. For variations on this theme, one need not look far. See, for example, Steven Runciman's famous three-volume epic, *History of the Crusades*, or the BBC/A&E documentary, *The*

*Crusades*, hosted by Terry Jones. Both are terrible history yet wonderfully entertaining.

But what does good history tell us? Madden continues:

Christians in the eleventh century were not paranoid fanatics. Muslims really were gunning for them. While Muslims can be peaceful, Islam was born in war and grew the same way. From the time of Mohammed, the means of Muslim expansion was always the sword. Muslim thought divides the world into two spheres, the Abode of Islam and the Abode of War.... In the eleventh century, the Seljuk Turks conquered Asia Minor (modern Turkey), which had been Christian since the time of St. Paul. The old Roman Empire, known to modern historians as the Byzantine Empire, was reduced to little more than Greece. In desperation, the emperor in Constantinople sent word to the Christians of western [sic] Europe asking them to aid their brothers and sisters in the East.

[The Crusades] were not the brainchild of an ambitious pope or rapacious knights but a response to more than four centuries of conquests in which Muslims had already captured two-thirds of the old Christian world. At some point, Christianity as a faith and a culture had to defend itself or be subsumed by Islam. The Crusades were that defense.

The reality is that in our modern conception — or, really, misconception — of the word, it is the Muslims who had launched “crusades” against Christendom. (In the true sense of the word, the Moors couldn’t be Crusaders, as the term means “those who are marked with a cross,” and the Muslims just wanted to erase the cross.) And like Martel before them, who ejected the Moors from most of southern Gaul, and the Spaniards, who — through what was also a Crusade — would much later wrest back control over Iberia, the Crusades were an attempt to retake conquered Christian lands. So how can we describe the view taken by most academics, entertainers, and politicians? Well, it is the Jihadist view. It is Osama bin Laden’s view. It is a bit like ignoring all history of WWII until December 8, 1941 — and then damning the United States for launching unprovoked attacks on Japan.

### **Christendom Pushes Back**

So now the year is 1095. Just as the Muslims had invaded Europe from the west in the days of Charles the Hammer, now they are pushing toward it from the east. And just as they had taken the Byzantine lands of the Mideast and North Africa in the seventh century, they now have seized Anatolia (most of modern Turkey), thus robbing the Byzantines of the majority of what they had left. The Muslims are now just a few battles away from moving west into Greece itself or north into the Balkans — the “back door” of Europe. Rightfully alarmed and fearing civilizational annihilation, Byzantine emperor Alexius I in Constantinople reaches out to a rival, Pope Urban II, for aid. Inspired to act, in November of 1095 the pope addresses the matter at the Council of Clermont, an event attended by more than 650 clerics and members of European nobility. On its second-to-last day, he gives a rousing sermon in which he appeals to the men of Europe to put aside their differences and rally to the aid of their brothers in the East. Here is an excerpt of the sermon as presented by the chronicler Fulcher of Chartres:

Your brethren who live in the east are in urgent need of your help, and you must hasten to give them the aid which has often been promised them. For, as the most of you have heard, the Turks and Arabs have attacked them and have conquered the territory of Romania [the Greek empire] as far west as the shore of the Mediterranean and the Hellespont, which is called the Arm of St. George. They have occupied more and more of the lands of those Christians, and have overcome them in seven battles. They have killed and captured many, and have destroyed the churches and devastated the empire. If you permit them to continue thus for awhile with impunity, the faithful of God will be much more widely attacked by them. On this account I, or rather the Lord, beseech you as Christ’s heralds to publish this everywhere and to persuade all people of whatever rank, foot-soldiers and knights, poor and rich, to carry aid promptly to those Christians.

In addition to this call, the pope articulates a second goal: the liberation of Jerusalem and other Mideast holy sites. The pope’s words are so moving that those in attendance are inspired to shout, it is said, “God wills it! God wills it!” The first crusade is born.

### **Modernity, the Middle Ages, and Myth**

Yet, in modern times, much cynicism would be born. People just can’t believe that these medieval “barbarians” didn’t have ulterior motives. This brings us to the “ambitious pope” and “rapacious knights” bit, the 20th-century myths about 11th-century motivations. Let’s examine these one at a time.

First we have the notion that the Crusaders were imperialists. This is an understandable perspective for the modern mind, as the not-too-distant past has been one of a dominant West colonizing a world of backwaters. Yet this was a recent and relatively short-lived development. Do you remember how Abdul Rahman Al Ghafiqi considered the eighth-century Europeans barbarians? It was no different in the 11th century; Dar al-Islam was the burgeoning civilization. It was the imperialist force — and this wouldn't change for another 600 years.

Next we have two myths that contradict each other; although, considered individually, they may seem tenable. One is that, despite the Crusaders' purported religiosity, they were just seeking riches by the sword. The other myth is, they were so darn religious that they were seeking to convert Muslims by the sword. It seems unlikely that both could be true, and, as it turns out, neither is.

Today we like to say "Follow the money." Well, if you followed it in the 11th century, it led right back to Europe. The reality is that most Crusader knights were "first sons," men who had property and wealth — much to lose (including their lives) and little to gain. And just as the United States can drain the public treasury funding Mideast interventions today, medieval warfare was expensive business. Lords were often forced to sell or mortgage their lands to fund their Crusading, and many impoverished themselves. It also doesn't seem that the average knight entertained visions of becoming "the man who would be king" in a faraway land, either. As Madden said in an October 2004 *Zenit* interview, "Much like a soldier today, the medieval Crusader was proud to do his duty but longed to return home."

As for conversion, the Crusaders were warriors, not missionaries. They had no interest in converting Muslims; in fact, I doubt the notion ever entered their minds. They viewed the Muslims as enemies of God and His Church and a threat to Christendom, nothing more, nothing less. Treating this matter in a piece entitled "The Crusades: separating myth from reality," *Zenit* cited medieval history expert Dr. Franco Cardini and wrote:

"The Crusades," says Cardini, "were never 'religious wars,' their purpose was not to force conversions or suppress the infidel." ... To describe the Crusade as a "Holy War" against the Moslems is misleading, says Cardini: "The real interest in these expeditions, in service of Christian brethren threatened by Moslems, was the restoration of peace in the East, and the early stirring of the idea of rescue for distant fellow-Christians."

Yet, whether or not the Crusades were religious wars, they certainly flew on the wings of religious faith. And when the Crusaders sought treasure, it was usually the kind that was stored up in Heaven. As to this sincerity of belief, Madden has pointed out that Europe is peppered with thousands of medieval charters in which knights speak of their deepest motivations, of their desire to do their Christian duty. Then, Professor Rodney Stark, author of the new book *God's Battalions: The Case for the Crusades*, tells us that while the knights were serious sinners, they were also serious about becoming more saintly. Anne Godlasky of *USA Today* quotes him as stating, "These knights did such terrible things that their confessors kept saying, 'I don't know how you will ever atone for this — why don't you try walking to Jerusalem barefoot.' And they would do it — they took their faith very seriously." Moreover, when the Crusaders met with failure, Europeans embraced a characteristically religious explanation: They blamed their own sinfulness. Then, seeking to purify themselves, piety movements arose all across their lands. Perhaps this is why Oxford historian Christopher Tyerman has called the Crusades "the ultimate manifestation of conviction politics."

We should also note that the Crusaders didn't see themselves as "Crusaders"; the word wasn't even originated till the 18th century. They viewed themselves as *pilgrims*.

Having said this, it would be naïve to think that all Crusaders' worldly endeavors were animated by heavenly thoughts. Some say that Pope Urban II might have hoped he could regain control over the Eastern Church after the Great Schism of 1054. It's also said that Urban and others wanted to give those militant medieval knights someone to fight besides one another. As for those on the ground, the Crusades involved a motley multitude encompassing the regal to the rough-hewn, and it is certain that some among them dreamt of booty and betterment. Yet is this surprising or unusual? People are complex beings. Within a group or even an individual's mind, there are usually multiple motivations, some noble, some ignoble. Charles the Hammer might have very well relished the glory won on the battlefield, for all we know. But it would be silly to think that was his main motivation for fighting the Moors. Likewise, if the Crusaders were primarily motivated by covetous impulses, it was the most remarkable of coincidences. For those dark urges then

manifested themselves just when a Christian emperor appealed for aid, just when Europe again seemed imperiled — and after 400 years of mostly unanswered Muslim conquests.

### **Into the Mouth of Dar al-Islam**

But however great the Europeans' faith, the first Crusade was a long shot. The soldiers had to travel on foot and horseback 1,500 miles — traversing rivers, valleys, and mountains; braving the elements; dealing with hunger and thirst and whatever unknowns lay ahead — and then defeat entrenched Muslim forces. And the endeavor had gotten off to a rather inauspicious start: An unofficial Crusade comprising peasants and low-ranking knights had already departed — only to be massacred by the Seljuk Turks.

So, now, it is August 15, 1096, and the official Crusader armies depart from France and Italy. Arriving in Anatolia many months later, they lay siege to Muslim-occupied Nicea; however, Emperor Alexius I negotiates with the Turks, has the city delivered to him on June 1, 1097, and then forbids the Crusaders to enter. They then fight other battles against the Muslims on the way to their next objective: the great city of Antioch. It is a must-win scenario; if they do not take it, they cannot move on to Jerusalem. The siege continues for seven and a half months, during which time the Crusaders are hungry, tired, cold, and often discouraged; Antioch's formidable walls seem an impenetrable barrier. On June 2, 1098, however, they are able to enter the city with the help of a spy. It is theirs.

Yet the Crusaders soon find themselves besieged and trapped in Antioch with the arrival of Muslim relief forces. Nevertheless, they manage a break-out on June 28, defeat the Turks, and, after a delay caused by internecine squabbling, move south to Jerusalem in April 1099. Starving after a long journey, they arrive at the Holy City on June 7 — with only a fraction of their original forces. Despite this, Jerusalem will not pose the problems of Antioch, and they capture it on July 15.

The First Crusade successes give Christendom a foothold in the Mideast for the first time in hundreds of years with the establishment of four outposts known today as “Crusader states.” They are: the County of Edessa and the Principality of Antioch, founded in 1098; the Kingdom of Jerusalem, founded in 1099; and the County of Tripoli, founded in 1104. Perhaps the tide has finally turned in Christendom's favor.

But it was not to be. It was still a Muslim era, and more Crusades would be launched in the wake of Islamic triumphs. In fact, there was a multitude of Crusades — if we include minor ones — lasting until the end of the 17th century. However, it is customary to identify eight major Crusades, dating from 1096 through 1270, although this does omit many significant campaigns.

Great passion for a second Crusade was sparked when the County of Edessa was overcome by Turks and Kurds in 1144. Led by Kings Louis VII of France and Conrad III of Germany and advocated by St. Bernard, it was an utter failure. Most of the Crusaders were killed before even reaching Jerusalem, the campaign did more harm than good — and Muslim power continued to grow.

Because of this, Madden writes, “Crusading in the late twelfth century ... became a total war effort.” All are asked to answer the call, from peasants to patricians, either by devoting blood and treasure to the defense of Christendom or through prayer, fasting, and alms to make her worthy of victory. Yet these are the days of the great Muslim leader Saladin, and in 1187 he destroys the Christian forces and takes one Christian city after another. And, finally, after almost a century of Christian rule, Jerusalem surrenders on October 2.

The loss of the Holy City inspires the Third Crusade. Led by storybook figures such as England's King Richard the Lionheart, German Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa, and France's King Philip II, it is sometimes called the Kings' Crusade. Yet it is no fairytale affair. Frederick's army quits the campaign in 1190 after their aged German leader drowns while crossing a river on horseback, and King Philip leaves after retaking the city of Acre, owing to continual friction with Richard. Despite this, the English King is undeterred. Displaying brilliant leadership and tactical skill, he fights his way south, taking on all comers, and eventually recaptures the Holy Land's entire coast. Yet the crown jewel, Jerusalem, eludes his grasp. Believing he would not be able to hold it (since most Crusaders will be returning home), he must swallow hard and settle for what he can get: an agreement with Saladin to allow unarmed pilgrims unfettered access to the city. Richard then returns home and never sees the Holy Land again, dying from a battle-related wound sustained in Europe in 1199.

While the passion for Crusading remained strong in the 13th century and the Crusades were greater in scope, funding, and

organization, they were lesser in accomplishment. There would be no more Richard the Lionhearts. Mideast Christian lands would slowly be overcome. And Jerusalem would never again be in Crusader hands. In fact, by 1291, the Crusader kingdom had been wiped off the map.

### The Next Crusades Battle: The History Books

Because the Crusades ultimately failed to achieve their objectives, they are typically viewed as failures. And this brings us to a common Crusades myth. It's said that those medieval campaigns are partly to blame for anti-Western sentiment in today's Middle East, but this is nonsense. The reality is, as Madden told *Zenit*, "If you had asked someone in the Muslim world about the Crusades in the 18th century he or she would have known nothing about them." This only makes sense. Why would the Crusades have been remembered? From the Muslim perspective, they were just routine victories — like so many others — events that would just naturally fade into the mists of time. What in truth is partly to blame for Islamic anti-Western sentiment is 19th-century pro-Western propaganda. That is to say, when England and France finally started colonizing Arab lands, they wanted to rubber-stamp imperialism. To this end, they taught Muslims in colonial schools that the Crusades were an example of an imperialism that brought civilization to a backward Middle East. And, not surprisingly but tragically, when imperialism was later discredited, the Crusades would be discredited along with it. Muslims would start using the false history against the West.

But there are many Crusade myths. For example, some would characterize the campaigns as anti-Semitic. Yet, while there were two notable massacres of Jews during the Crusades, there is more to the story — as Madden also explained in the *Zenit* interview:

No pope ever called a Crusade against Jews. During the First Crusade a large band of riffraff, not associated with the main army [the aforementioned "People's Crusade"], descended on the towns of the Rhineland and decided to rob and kill the Jews they found there.... Pope Urban II and subsequent popes strongly condemned these attacks on Jews. Local bishops and other clergy and laity attempted to defend the Jews, although with limited success. Similarly, during the opening phase of the Second Crusade a group of renegades killed many Jews in Germany before St. Bernard was able to catch up to them and put a stop to it.

This obviously adds perspective. In every war there are rogue forces that commit transgressions. Why, the United States had the My Lai Massacre in Vietnam and Abu Ghraib in Iraq. Yet, to echo Madden on this count, it would be unfair to claim that the goal of American forces was to, respectively, murder innocent civilians or commit sexual abuse.

There were other Crusader sins as well. In the Second Crusade, the warriors foolishly attacked Muslim Damascus, which had been an ally of the Christians. Worse still, the Fourth Crusade saw the sacking of Constantinople itself — occupied by the very eastern Christians the Crusades were designed to protect — after the Crusaders helped an imperial claimant gain the Byzantine throne and then were refused the aid he had promised them as a *quid pro quo*. In response, the pope at the time, Innocent III, condemned the attack (and he had already excommunicated the Crusade). Nevertheless, the damage was done. The act widened the Great Schism of 1054 to perhaps irreparable proportions.

Yet, again, perspective is necessary. Medieval armies didn't have modern discipline or rules of engagement, and they were, above all, medieval. You could not have put hundreds of thousands of men in the field during the course of centuries in that age without writing some dark chapters. Really, though, you couldn't do it in the modern age, either.

With all these failures and missteps, we may wonder why Europeans continued Crusading well beyond the 13th century's close. We may ask, was it worth the blood and treasure? Yet the answer boils down to one word: survival. The threats to Europe mentioned earlier would not remain theoretical. The Muslims would extinguish the Byzantine Empire — and Constantinople would be renamed Istanbul. They would cross into the Balkans, and their descendants would clash with Christians there in the 1990s. The Ottoman Turks would capture the Italian town of Otranto in 1480, prompting the evacuation of Rome. The Ottomans would occupy what is now Hungary for 158 years. And, in 1529 and 1683, they would reach the gates of Vienna.

Yet the tide would finally turn against Dar al-Islam. The Ottomans would lose the Battle of Vienna in 1683, and, more significantly, Europe was blossoming. It would outpace the Muslim world technologically, and in its march toward modernity, the Christian "barbarians" would become the burgeoning civilization. In fact, they would become dominant enough to forget how recent their time in

the sun is — and how, perhaps, it almost never was.

So, were the Crusades really a failure? Sure, there was no Charles Martel and Battle of Tours, no Duke of Wellington at Waterloo; there was no history-changing engagement where we could say, ah, that is where we slew the dragon or “this was their finest hour.” And they accomplished none of their stated goals. But the Crusades era might have constituted a “holding action,” a time when Christendom was pushed toward the abyss and, outweighed and wobbling, pushed back. Of course, this isn’t the fashionable view. But it is easy today to characterize those medieval warriors any way we wish; they are no longer around to defend themselves. But had they not defended the West, we might not be troubling over the past at all — because we might not have a present.