

## The Crusader States

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**Author:**

Malcolm Barber

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Jay Rubinstein

In comparison with the many recently published one-volume histories of the crusade movement, Malcolm Barber has undertaken a relatively modest task: a history of the crusader states from the time of the First Crusade (1096–1109) to the end of the Third (1187–92). As such, it covers roughly the same territory as *The Kingdom of Jerusalem and the Frankish East, 1100–1187*, the second installment of Steven Runciman's still popular three-volume history of the crusades. Despite what is, by standards of medieval history, a glutted market of books about the crusades, surveys of the crusader states have been surprisingly rare. Because tremendous advances have occurred in the scholarship about these settlements, Barber's sophisticated and impressively detailed history makes a welcome addition to the crusade historian's library.

The greatest area of progress in crusader studies has been the advances in our understanding of cultural and diplomatic relations between Frankish settlers and the Muslim and Eastern Christian communities with whom they necessarily had to interact. For this topic the work of Joshua Prawer has been foundational. Prawer, drawing insights and inspiration from colonial theory, provided students of the Frankish Levant a thorough reconstruction of the legal and economic foundations of that world. The more recent work of Ronnie Ellenblum, based on archaeological work, has built on Prawer's legacy while at the same time suggesting a radically different interpretation. Rather than living as distant colonial settlers, Ellenblum has taught us to see a greater degree of integration with local societies than we might otherwise have suspected. Recently Christopher MacEvitt, following Ellenblum's lead, has further deepened our understanding of these issues by showing the many ways in which Syriac and Armenian Christian communities – as little noticed by modern historians as by their medieval Latin counterparts – helped shape the world of the Frankish

Levant. At the same time, the monumental work of Carole Hillenbrand, both in her path-breaking book *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives* and in her translations of previously unknown Arabic sources, has made the nuances of 11th- and 12th-century Islamic society more intelligible to Latin medievalists than has ever before been the case. Finally, undergraduate and graduate students have grown more familiar with a wide range of Arabic and Latin sources thanks to Ashgate's ongoing project of publishing *Crusade Tests in Translation*. All told, it is an extremely propitious moment for a new assessment of this most difficult area in medieval history, one whose relevance to the modern world seems more obvious with each passing headline.

While *The Crusader States* does integrate almost all of this recent scholarship into its narrative, Professor Barber avoids engaging with it on a theoretical plane. Instead his book's approach remains, like crusade historiography in general, traditional – a series of military engagements and political maneuvers led by notable men and quite a few remarkable women. 'Political and military narrative inevitably forces itself upon anybody who reads the sources in depth', Barber observes in the book's preface (p. xii). Such an assertion is, of course, questionable. Historians have any number of options before them when they set out to make sense of their sources. One might argue that the narrative approach Barber advocates is best suited for a survey volume such as this one, but in the case of the crusader states, a straightforward political recounting does not necessarily make the material more accessible. The story is so labyrinthine, so full of fascinating but largely forgotten characters, that even the simplest chronological threads become quickly, hopelessly tangled. The task of keeping track of events would be difficult enough if Barber were just focusing on the Latin settlers (and their relatives back in Europe). But it becomes well nigh impossible when their crossed bloodlines run through an ever-shifting network of Turkish, Kurdish, Greek, and Arab enmities and alliances. What seems the most straightforward and welcoming approach thus brings its own difficulties. At the same time, a political and military focus risks detracting from the spiritual and ideological components by which the crusaders themselves would have made sense of their purpose and activity in the world.

In this connection, some of the book's finest passages are those where Barber sets aside the constraints of chronology and examines artistic or archaeological evidence. Early in the book, for instance, he leads his readers on a descriptive tour of Jerusalem that really brings the medieval city to life. The discussion of the foundation and construction of the abbey of St Lazarus et Bethany is similarly dazzling, as is Barber's analysis of the massive, if ultimately ephemeral, construction project of the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth. His use of the famous column capitals from the Church of the Annunciation, unearthed in 1908, is especially effective and affecting – sophisticated historical analysis that reads like bravura storytelling.

The lion's share of the book, however, is, as promised, a careful, chronological retelling of the first century of the history of the crusader states (not of the entire 200 years, as the title implies). It is a story so intricate that it requires about 50 pages of setup. After a perfunctory summary of the First Crusade in the opening chapter, followed by, in the second chapter, a superb overview of the topography, climate, and cultures of Palestine and Syria, Barber settles into his narrative proper. He devotes the third chapter to the first two years of the kingdom of Jerusalem. Being a kingdom built essentially out of nothing except a warrior ethos and an appreciation for Davidic Kingship, the circumstances of the birth of Frankish Jerusalem are crucial for understanding its subsequent development. The key aspects of the drama grow out of the vexed relationships between the kingdom's first rulers and the Latin patriarch Daibert, who attempted to impose an ecclesiastically-centered vision on the structure of the new government. In the usual retelling Daibert is either a radical Gregorian reformer or else a man of boundless greed and ambition, a papal legate who sought to turn Jerusalem into his own sacerdotal fiefdom. His dreams were apparently helped along by Godfrey of Bouillon, the kingdom's first ruler. As a crusader, Godfrey was best known for wrestling with a giant bear and for cutting a Saracen in two with a single stroke of his sword. As ruler of Jerusalem, he seemingly turned into something of a milquetoast, refusing out of humility to wear a crown and preferring not to be called King but rather 'Advocate of the Holy Sepulcher'. When Godfrey died suddenly after less than a year in Jerusalem, Daibert aggressively sought to appoint his own candidate as ruler – either Bohemond of Antioch or else Bohemond's nephew Tancred. The patriarch failed in these plans, and Godfrey's brother Baldwin assumed not only the office of king but also the title. Daibert, however, did wring some fairly substantial concessions out of both Godfrey and Baldwin, including, perhaps, a promise of

eventual control of the entire city as well as the possession of a substantial quarter within the nearby city of Jaffa.

Barber's analysis of these highly contentious moments is both balanced and cautious. The nebulous character of Godfrey's title, for example, probably grew out of the genuine uncertainty and unease of creating a Christian king where none had been before, or at least at doing so without the hand of a pope to guide the crusaders and infuse their decisions with an appropriate sense of sacrality. As for Daibert, what seemed to some contemporaries an unseemly ambition was probably instead a simple determination born out of what were surely Urban II's direct instructions to him: 'to strengthen the Latin Church in the East as far as he was able' (p. 59). Barber's circumspect reading of his sources is commendable, though a reader such as me might wish for more blood and thunder – or at least for a sudden flash of heavenly light. For in this meticulous reconstruction of the vexed relations between king and patriarch, Barber passes over the most dramatic confrontation between the two offices, when the miracle of the Holy Fire failed to appear on Holy Saturday in 1101. So dire were the consequences of this near liturgical disaster that Daibert temporarily resigned his office as patriarch, and Baldwin reportedly considered setting aside his crown (which, unlike Godfrey, he had accepted in a coronation celebrated the previous Christmas in Bethlehem). In a narrative driven-history, it is an odd decision to pass over one of the best documented and most theatrical moments in the history of the kingdom, giving it only a brief mention, without any analysis of its political and spiritual implications (p. 68).

But setting aside particular criticisms over authorial decisions, I must express genuine admiration at the scope of Barber's narrative – especially in its central chapters, which give nearly equal treatment to each of the four crusader states. In doing so, Barber balances his use of Latin and Arabic sources, thus providing multiple viewpoints for the book's several interlocking narratives. During the first half of the 12th century, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt together constituted a kaleidoscopic frontier society. The Sunni Turkish world was divided into several mutually hostile sultanates and emirates. The Egyptian Shi'i Fatimid Caliphate was in serious decline but nonetheless a dangerous adversary. The Latin Christian principalities meanwhile – despite their common point of origin at the First Crusade – presented nothing like a unified front against their many rivals. Complicating the picture further were the frequent intervention of outside powers, notably Rome, Baghdad, and Constantinople, the last of which maintained a proprietary claim to most, if not all, of the territory occupied by the crusader states. Enmities and alliances rapidly intertwined, broke apart, and rearranged themselves. As early as 1108, Baldwin of Edessa and Tancred of Antioch fought against one another at the Battle of Turbessel (or Tell Bahsir), each side employing Turkish warriors. Less than a decade after Jerusalem's conquest, therefore, one Latin-Turkish army had already taken the field against another Latin-Turkish army, with Baldwin's warriors supported by Armenian troops representing the Armenian leader Kogh Vasil.

As noted, juggling all these different characters and cultures requires real concentration, on the part of both the author and the reader. For if there is one theme that unites the whole story, it is an ongoing, continually worsening, state of crisis. The kings of Jerusalem were singularly unfortunate in their inability to establish orderly dynastic successions. Male heirs were in short supply, necessitating often desperate marriage strategies and creating frequent long periods of unsteady regency governments. Baldwin IV of Jerusalem, for example, when he succeeded his father Amalric as king in 1174, was famously both a minor and a leper. Further complicating the political landscape is the regularity with which prominent crusade leaders were taken prisoner by the Turks. To take only two examples, Bohemond as Duke of Antioch was held captive from 1100 to 1103, and Baldwin II was imprisoned both as Count of Edessa from 1104 to 1108 and again as King of Jerusalem from 1123 to 1124. Such chronic instability allowed several extraordinary female leaders to hold power for significant intervals, notably Melisende and Sibylla, as queens of Jerusalem, and Constance, as duchess of Antioch. Among the few cohesive forces in the 12th-century Latin East were the military orders – the Templars and Hospitallers – whose origins and growth are seamlessly woven into the grander historical narrative here. Indeed, Barber's earlier, definitive history of the Templars probably made him the researcher most able to bring some degree of clarity and orderliness to an otherwise entropic historical reality.

Real clarity, however, does begin to characterize the final third of *The Crusader States*, when Barber's balanced narrative style gives way to a more familiar, Jerusalem-centered description of the rise of Saladin and the collapse of crusader rule. The build-up to the battle of Hattin and the conquest of Jerusalem in 1187 is obviously well-trodden historical ground. As Saladin successfully and aggressively united Syria and Egypt under his rule, bringing an end to the Shi'i Fatimid Caliphate in the process, the Frankish leaders remained as divided and quarrelsome as ever. The calamitous failure of the Second Crusade (1145–9), moreover, had discouraged large-scale intervention from the homeland. On a related note, Barber adds, a subtle, important change in the culture of crusading in Europe had occurred. In the immediate aftermath of the First Crusade, the Franks could count on regular large-scale pilgrimages whose leaders would willingly be co-opted into the local princes' own expansionist plans. In the latter 12th century, by contrast, European crusaders capable of fielding large armies – men like Philip of Flanders – invariably arrived in the Levant with their own agendas, which did not necessarily coincide with what the Frankish princes deemed essential. There still were many less prominent pilgrims who journeyed east and who were willing to help in whatever ways necessary. Their middling status, however, meant that they were unable to make any meaningful military contributions to the Frankish war effort.

As Barber discusses the outcome of the Battle of Hattin, he suggests that Saladin's victory was not inevitable. The unpopular King of Jerusalem, Guy of Lusignan, might actually have prevailed, a point that would be apparent to modern readers if we could only rid ourselves of the curse of hindsight. But the political and military situation of Jerusalem, as Barber has described it, would seem to suggest otherwise. The traditional interpretation of Hattin as an all but predetermined Muslim victory still seems the more plausible. The steadily increasing disunity that characterized the Latin settlers, who continued to behave as if they were living in a frontier society with no formidable, centralized powers to oppose them, could not have long withstood the greater cohesion with which Saladin had, almost literally, encircled them. If not at Hattin, the Frankish Levant could not have maintained its established way of life and borders much longer. The real surprise is that they were able to regroup at all after the Third Crusade and soldier on, albeit in a truncated form, for nearly another century after Barber's narrative ends.

Nuanced, balanced, and densely presented, *The Crusader States* will take its place as the new standard work on the 12th-century Frankish Levant. Crusade specialists, graduate students, and advanced undergraduates alike will learn to consult its pages as a court of first resort. Because of its intricately constructed narrative, however, it likely will not reach a readership beyond these specialized academic circles. Barber has aimed at thoroughness, perhaps at the expense of a good story. The ever delightful Usama ibn-Munqidh, for example, is notable for his near total absence. But even as a reference aid, *The Crusader States* is not as accessible as one might hope. While Barber has packed his book with numerous, terrifically useful maps, he (or his publisher) have provided readers with only a single, one-page genealogy of the descendants of Baldwin II of

Jerusalem – a chart which, strangely, does not include Baldwin III. Given the importance of bloodlines to the narrative, several more genealogies would have been appropriate, tracing not just the lineages of the several crusading clans, but also of the European, Byzantine, Turkish, and Kurdish families who play such crucial roles in the story. With the maps, we are well served; with the chaps, less so.

A more serious lacuna in the text is Barber's reluctance to engage with the theoretical paradigms associated with the crusader states. In the book's conclusion, he describes the Frankish settlements as 'entities which resist the stereotyping of modern historical constructs and predetermined models' (p. 356). The observation is certainly valid (and true of most every other historical phenomenon), but economic and social modeling are important tools of the historian and have played significant roles in crusade historiography. In a scholarly overview such as this one, readers will miss the kind of informed and thoughtful guidance that Barber could have brought to theoretical underpinnings of his subject.

The same scholarly readers, however, will be deeply grateful to Barber for providing such a thorough, and often engaging, account of the crucial personalities, events, and cultural achievements of an era and a landscape still too often overlooked, avoided, or ignored by students of the medieval world.

The author is happy to accept this review, and does not wish to respond.

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