

The Importance of the Siege of Acre during the Third Crusade, 1189-1192

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An important part of Islamic history consists of the Crusades where the Western Christians fought against the Eastern Muslims. Evaluating the Siege of Acre during the Third Crusade shows the beginnings of a Latin re-conquest and a Western pathway into the Holy Land. Through looking at the causes of the Third Crusade, Saladin, Richard I, Philip II, the reasons to capture Acre, the siege of the city, the surrender of Acre, the hostage situation, and the aftermath of the battle, it can be presented that the Siege of Acre could be considered a turning point for the Crusaders in defeating Saladin. Acre may not have been a major city as Jerusalem, but its capture by the Christian crusaders was significant because it created a Christian territory near the Holy Land marking the beginning towards a re-conquest by Christians of the lands taken by the Muslims during the Crusades.

Analyzing the causes of the Third Crusades helps to explain how and why the Siege of Acre occurred and why it's significant to understand. In 1187, the Third Crusade began as "Jerusalem had been captured by the Infidel and an apparently flourishing Christian Kingdom was tottering on the brink of total ruin."¹ In other words, Saladin had conquered Jerusalem and had expelled the Christians from the holy city. Saladin fought for Jerusalem because it "was his duty before his God and his faith" as well as to "have liberated the holy city from the yoke of the invaders without a bloodbath, destruction, or hatred."² Due to his conquests of the Holy Land, King Philip II of France and King Richard I of England began the Third Crusade on July 4, 1190 to "win land and plunder as well as glory"³ The goal for the Christian Crusaders was to recapture the Holy Land, which would lead them to Acre. The importance of capturing the Holy Land by

¹ John Gillingham, *The Life and Times of Richard*, London: Wiedenfeld and Nicolson., 1973), 38.

² Amin Maalouf, *The Crusades through Arab Eyes*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1984), 200.

³ John Gillingham, *The Life and Times of Richard*, 61.

both Muslims and Christians would cause the Siege of Acre to be a critical battle during the Crusades as it was a battle for territory near the Holy Land.

One of the most influential figures of the Siege of Acre includes Saladin, who led the Muslims during part of the Crusades. Saladin was born in Egypt and would become the “Emperor of Syria, and Egypt” during his lifetime creating “united front against the Christians.”⁴ Before the Siege of Acre, Saladin captured Jerusalem stating that ““when God gave me the land of Egypt, I was sure that he meant Palestine for me as well.””⁵ Saladin was the first to unite the Muslims against the Crusaders and would be known for his victory at Jerusalem. In the Siege of Acre, Saladin would be forced to surrender leading to the end of his conquests and the beginning of the re-conquests of the Christians in the future Crusades except for Jerusalem. Understanding the influential Saladin shows how the Siege of Acre during the Third Crusade became a crucial moment as Saladin was defeated.

Also, Richard I or Richard the Lionheart affected the Siege of Acre by aiding in defeating Saladin, which gave western Christians territory near the Holy Land once again. On Sunday, September, 1189, Richard I “was crowned in Westminster Abbey” beginning a new rule in England and the Third Crusade against the Muslims in the East.⁶ Richard I was described as:

He far surpassed other men in the courtesy of his manners and the vastness of his strength; memorable was he for his warlike deeds and power, while his splendid achievements would throw a shade over the greatest praise we could give them.⁷

⁴ James Reston, Jr., *Warriors of God, Richard the Lionheart and Saladin in the Third Crusade*, (New York: Anchor Books, 2002), 8.

⁵ James Reston, Jr., *Warriors of God, Richard the Lionheart and Saladin in the Third Crusade*, 8.

⁶ John Gillingham, *The Life and Times of Richard*, 51.

⁷ T.A. Archer, *The Crusade of Richard I, 1189-92*, (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1979), 8.

Shortly after Richard I took the oath as the King of England, he would join Philip II in a quest to “rescue the kingdom of Jerusalem” and begin the Third Crusade.⁸ Richard I knew the Crusades were “a religious act as well as a great military adventure.”⁹ Through the Third Crusade, Richard I would capture Cyprus, Acre, and Ascalon. Richard I’s Crusades would only last a few years, but his success against Saladin would help in Christian re-conquests during the Fourth Crusade. Richard I’s role in Acre will be furthered examined as he became the one to defeat Saladin and began the re-conquest of lands around the Holy Land through the next century. Overall, Richard the Lionheart would aid in creating the turning point at the Siege of Acre.

Without Philip II of France, Richard I would never have become King of England or participated in the Crusades. Since Philip II played a role in the beginnings of the Siege of Acre, a brief background is needed to understand his significance. Philip II became King of France in 1180 and “made France a powerful kingdom.”¹⁰ After the conquest of Jerusalem by Saladin, Philip II would join with Richard I in the Third Crusade, in which they “divided [area] equally between them.”¹¹ In the Siege of Acre, Philip II would begin the siege on the city that would lead to Saladin being defeated at the time and lead to a gain of Christian territory near the Holy Land. Though Saladin and Richard I were the most famous names of the Third Crusade, Philip II played a major role as well at the Siege of Acre.

In order to understand the significance of the Siege of Acre to the Crusaders, one must evaluate the reasons that led to the Siege of Acre. Due to the conquest of Jerusalem

⁸ Peter W. Edbury, *The Conquest of Jerusalem and the Third Crusade*, (Great Britain: Scolar Press, 1996), 92.

⁹ John Gillingham, *The Life and Times of Richard*, 45.

¹⁰ John Gillingham, *The Life and Times of Richard*, 34.

¹¹ John Gillingham, *The Life and Times of Richard*, 61.

by Saladin, the Christian Crusaders wanted to acquire land once again in the Holy Land. “Acre had been the chief port and the largest town in the kingdom of Jerusalem,” which meant taking the city of Acre would help the Christian Crusaders gain territory in the Holy Land and gain authority over Saladin and Muslims.¹² Also, another factor that led to the Siege of Acre was that King Guy, a former prisoner of Saladin’s, had already begun a “march to Acre” in 1189 in an effort of “recovery of his kingdom.”¹³ Richard I and Philip II went to Acre not only to gain territory in the Holy Land, but also to help King Guy from being defeated.

Great was the faith of God’s people in that so few dared to undertake so great a deed as laying siege to Acre, for there were so many Saracens within the city that there was scarcely one Christian for every ten of them.¹⁴

In conclusion, Acre was an important city for the Christians to conquer as it was a part of the territory in the Holy Land. This Siege of Acre would affect the future of the Crusaders’ conquests and the future of the Muslims’ power in the Middle East.

Regarding the beginning of the fight at Acre, it had become a stalemate between Saladin and King Guy preventing the access to new territory in the Holy Land for the Crusaders. For the two years at the Siege of Acre, even though the “Muslim army won several successive victories, the Franj immediately compensated for their losses,” which meant neither side could conclude a victory.¹⁵ During this time before the arrival of Richard I and Philip II, the Crusaders with reinforcements began to “complete the landward blockade of Acre” as well the sea blockade, but “the occasional supply ship got

¹² John Gillingham, *The Life and Times of Richard*, 108.

¹³ R. L Wolff, *The Later Crusades, 1189-1311*, 1969, 50. <<http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/cgi-bin/history/history-idx?type=goto&id=History.Crustwo&size=m&submit=go+to+page&page=45>>

¹⁴ Peter W. Edbury, *The Conquest of Jerusalem and the Third Crusade*, 80-81.

¹⁵ Amin Maalouf, *The Crusades through Arab Eyes*, 206.

through” maintaining the stalemate at the time.¹⁶ Also, Muslims would acquire supplies by boarding French ships.

A group of Muslims boarded the ship...They were dressed like Franj; they had also shaved their beards, sewn crosses to the mast...our brothers [Muslims] unfurled all sails for a rush to the port of Acre, where they were greeted with cries of joy, for hunger was stalking the city.¹⁷

Towards the end of the two years, “the chances of a Muslim victory...seemed increasingly remote.”¹⁸ As the Siege of Acre continued with the Muslims weakening, the conquest of Acre became more important to the Crusaders as it could become a turning point for them in defeating Saladin and gaining access to the Holy Land for the first time since the conquest of Jerusalem.

After the first two years, Philip II and Richard I arrived at Acre in 1191 affecting the success of Saladin and helping to acquire new land and power for the Crusaders in the Middle East. Philip II arrived first and stated that:

He could easily have taken the city had he wished, but he was awaiting the arrival of King Richard of England...and had made an agreement after they had left their lands...So he waited for him, as he wanted him to share in the joy and conquest of the city.¹⁹

As soon as Richard I arrived at Acre, Philip II began his assault on Acre with “the armed men approached the city walls and delivered a terrific assault, firing stones and missiles without interruption from their balistas and engines.”²⁰ After Philip began the assault on Acre, the Turks and Saladin fought back.

They (Franks) were unable both to attack the city and at the same time keep up their defense in the face of an attack by the Turks outside the town. Many of the

¹⁶ John Gillingham, *The Life and Times of Richard*, 108.

¹⁷ Amin Maalouf, *The Crusades through Arab Eyes*, 208.

¹⁸ Amin Maalouf, *The Crusades through Arab Eyes*, 208.

¹⁹ Peter W. Edbury, *The Conquest of Jerusalem and the Third Crusade*, 99.

²⁰ “Itinerarium Peregrinorum et Gesta Regis Ricardi: The Siege and Capture of Acre, 1191.” Medieval Sourcebook. <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/1191acre.html>>

Franks were killed there by the spears, by the missiles and stones of the balistas and by the spreading of Greek fire.²¹

After Saladin's attempt to defeat Philip II and his army, Richard II began his assault on Acre. Before Richard II's final assault on Acre, "the city was now completely cut off from the outside world and racked by famine as well."²² Richard II "ordered the criers to proclaim that anyone who removed a stone from the wall next to the aforesaid tower would receive two pieces of gold from the King," which caused the men "inspired with courage, overcame danger and removed a great many stones from the massive wall."²³ After this assault, the stalemate had come to an end with Saladin defeated on July 12, 1191, and the Crusaders succeeded in gaining territory in the Holy Land creating a turning point for the Christian Crusaders.

One of the major events that occurred at the end this battle was Saladin's surrender to Richard I and Philip II. This surrender can be seen as the turning point in which the Christians Crusaders finally regained territory near the Holy Land. Saladin surrendered because he "concluded that further delay would be dangerous" since "he would only be losing a city, rather than such upright people."²⁴ It was important for Saladin to "protect the besieged according to the forms of their law and to secure honorable terms for men who were in such extreme peril" meaning he rather lose territory

²¹ "Itinerarium Peregrinorum et Gesta Regis Ricardi: The Siege and Capture of Acre, 1191." [Medieval Sourcebook](#).

²² Amin Maalouf, *The Crusades through Arab Eyes*, 209.

²³ Itinerarium Peregrinorum et Gesta Regis Ricardi: The Siege and Capture of Acre, 1191." [Medieval Sourcebook](#)

²⁴ Itinerarium Peregrinorum et Gesta Regis Ricardi: The Siege and Capture of Acre, 1191." [Medieval Sourcebook](#)

than lose his people.²⁵ The reactions of the Crusaders and the Muslims were of joy and of sorrow.

The Franj let out an immense cry of joy, while in our [Muslim] camp everyone was stunned. The soldiers wept and lamented. As for the sultan, he was like a mother who has just lost her child.²⁶

Overall, the surrender of Saladin was unexpected for many, but it was also a crucial moment for the Christian Crusaders as they had weakened Saladin tremendously. Due to his surrender, Saladin gave the Christian Crusaders a gateway into the Holy Land as well as authority over the new and future acquired territories in the future Christian Crusades.

Understanding the peace agreement ending the Siege of Acre made between Saladin and Richard I shows the new influence of the Christian Crusader leaders had now over the weakened Saladin. The peace agreement consisted of the following:

Along with the city, five hundred Christian captives and two hundred thousand gold bezants would be handed over. Two thousand Muslims would remain captive, and in addition, one hundred of the richest, most eminent personages of the town would become hostages.²⁷

Also, in addition to these conditions, Saladin also had to provide the “restoration of the Holy Cross” to the Christians in exchange for the hostages.²⁸ This peace agreement showed the new authoritative power that the Christian Crusader leaders had acquired after Saladin’s surrender. Overall, this agreement showed how Saladin had lost his great power as the Crusaders had gained part of the Holy Land. Though they would never gain Jerusalem, the Crusades would never be the same after this peace agreement following the Siege of Acre.

²⁵ T.A. Archer, *The Crusade of Richard I, 1189-92*, (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1979), 100.

²⁶ Amin Maalouf, *The Crusades through Arab Eyes*, 210.

²⁷ James Reston, Jr., *Warriors of God, Richard the Lionheart and Saladin in the Third Crusade*, 200.

²⁸ John Gillingham, *The Life and Times of Richard*, 115.

Following the peace agreement, Saladin failed to abide to the terms, which led to the killing of hostages. This hostage situation showed how Saladin had become the weaker leader after the Siege of Acre as the Christian leaders had more control over the situation and the Crusades. The killing of the hostages occurred because “on the date at which Saladin was supposed to deliver the Cross, all the Christian prisoners, and half of the money, he was unable to produce certain of the promised prisoners” and also the Holy Cross.²⁹ Saladin had been hoping that “by using the Holy Cross he could gain much greater concessions in negotiation.”³⁰ Due to his disregard for fulfilling the treaty, Richard I “was perfectly within his rights to kill the garrison” meaning Saladin was not as powerful as he had once been in negotiating terms with the Crusaders.³¹ On August 21, 1191, Richard I “had 2,700 Muslim soldiers tied together...they were marched out of the city...and there one by one, they were slaughtered.”³² Through evaluating the hostage situation that followed the Siege of Acre, it can be concluded that Saladin’s rise of power against the Christian Crusaders had ended as well as the Christian Crusaders had began to re-conquest Muslim lands. This turning point would have an effect on Islamic history for centuries to come.

Finally, evaluating the end of the Third Crusade and the agreement reached between the two Kings shows how the Crusades had shifted in power from the Muslims to the Crusaders, which was a shift that would not change until the Mongols’ conquests of the land. A year after the Siege of Acre, the end of the Third Crusade occurred in

²⁹ Adam J. Kosto, “Hostages during the First Century of the Crusades.” *Medieval Encounters* 9.1 (April 2003), 22.

³⁰ “Itinerarium Peregrinorum et Gesta Regis Ricardi: Muslim Hostages Slain at Acre, 1191.” Medieval Sourcebook. <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/1191hostages.html>>

³¹ Adam J. Kosto, “Hostages during the First Century of the Crusades.” *Medieval Encounters*, 23.

³² James Reston, Jr., *Warriors of God, Richard the Lionheart and Saladin in the Third Crusade*, 204.

1192. At the end of the Third Crusade, Saladin and Richard I made their last peace agreement together “to seek to make a truce rather than to desert the depopulated land.”³³ In this agreement, the two leaders agreed for “both free passage and access to the Holy Sepulcher of the Lord” and that Richard I “could return and wrest the whole territory of Jerusalem from Saladin’s grasp” after “he had augmented his money and his men.”³⁴ This agreement of allowing more freedom to Jerusalem and the opportunity for Richard I to conquer the city showed how Saladin had become the weaker leader in negotiations after the Siege of Acre. Also, in showing the turning point that the Siege of Acre caused, looking past the Third Crusade into the Fourth Crusade in 1204 shows how the Latin Crusaders “sack[ed] Constantinople” exceeding their territory beyond the Palestinian coast.³⁵ The Christian leaders would maintain control of these and more territories in the Middle East until the invasions of the Mongols starting in 1244. After the Siege of Acre, it is shown now that there was a turning point where Christian Crusaders gained the upper hand over Saladin as well as gained more territory in the Muslim lands towards the Holy Land.

After evaluating the Siege of Acre in the Third Crusade, it can be determined that this event became a turning point for the Latin crusaders. Due to the Siege of Acre, the Christian Crusaders gained territory near the Holy Land and began defeating Saladin. This change would lead to the defeat of Saladin and the beginning of Christian reconquests. Overall, the before, during, and after events prove how significant the Siege of Acre was in reacquiring territory for the Christian crusaders. After the Third Crusade, the

³³ “Itinerarium Peregrinorum et Gesta Regis Ricardi: Richard the Lionheart Makes Peace with Saladin, 1192.” Medieval Sourcebook. <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/1192peace.html>>

³⁴ “Itinerarium Peregrinorum et Gesta Regis Ricardi: Richard the Lionheart Makes Peace with Saladin, 1192.” Medieval Sourcebook.

³⁵ Amin Maalouf, *The Crusades through Arab Eyes*, 222.

Crusaders would continue to conquer Muslim lands until the conquests of the Mongols affecting Islamic history for centuries.

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