



## What the Crusades Were Really Like

THOMAS F. MADDEN

**The Crusaders were not unprovoked aggressors, greedy marauders or medieval colonialists, as portrayed in some history books.**

Thomas Madden, chair of St. Louis University's history department and author of *A Concise History of the Crusades*, contests that the Crusaders were a defensive force fighting defensive wars, not wars of conquest and that they did not profit from their ventures by either earthly riches or land.

Madden shared with ZENIT the most popular myths about the Crusades and the modern findings that prove them wrong.

Zenit: What are some common misconceptions about the Crusades? the Crusaders?

Madden: The following are some of the most common myths and why they are wrong.

**Myth 1:** The Crusades were wars of unprovoked aggression against a peaceful Muslim world.

This is as wrong as wrong can be. From the time of Mohammed, Muslims had sought to conquer the Christian world. They did a pretty good job of it, too. After a few centuries of steady conquests, Muslim armies had taken all of North Africa, the Middle East, Asia Minor and most of Spain.

In other words, by the end of the 11th century the forces of Islam had captured two-thirds of the Christian world. Palestine, the home of Jesus Christ; Egypt, the birthplace of Christian monasticism; Asia Minor, where St. Paul planted the seeds of the first Christian communities — these were not the periphery of Christianity but its very core.

And the Muslim empires were not finished yet. They continued to press westward toward Constantinople, ultimately passing it and entering Europe itself. As far as unprovoked aggression goes, it was all on the Muslim side. At some point what was left of the Christian world would have to defend itself or simply succumb to Islamic conquest.



This early twelfth-century sculpture depicts a crusader and his wife just before his departure for the Holy Land. In his right hand is a staff, which identifies him as a pilgrim. On his chest is the cloth cross, the symbol of his vow. His sword is only just visible beneath his cloak.

**Myth 2:** The Crusaders wore crosses, but they were really only interested in capturing booty and land. Their pious platitudes were just a cover for rapacious greed.

Historians used to believe that a rise in Europe's population led to a crisis of too many noble "second sons," those who were trained in chivalric warfare but who had no feudal lands to inherit. The Crusades, therefore, were seen as a safety valve, sending these belligerent men far from Europe where they could carve out lands for themselves at someone else's expense.

Modern scholarship, assisted by the advent of computer databases, has exploded this myth. We now know that it was the "first sons" of Europe that answered the Pope's call in 1095, as well as in subsequent Crusades.

Crusading was an enormously expensive operation. Lords were forced to sell off or mortgage their lands to gather the necessary funds. Most were also not interested in an overseas kingdom. Much like a soldier today, the medieval Crusader was proud to do his duty but longed to return home.

After the spectacular successes of the First Crusade, with Jerusalem and much of Palestine in Crusader hands, virtually all of the Crusaders went home. Only a tiny handful remained behind to consolidate and govern the newly won territories.

Booty was also scarce. In fact, although Crusaders no doubt dreamed of vast wealth in opulent Eastern cities, virtually none of them ever even recouped their expenses. But money and land were not the reasons that they went on Crusade in the first place. They went to atone for their sins and to win salvation by doing good works in a faraway land.

They underwent such expense and hardship because they believed that by coming to the aid of their Christian brothers and sisters in the East they were storing up treasure where rust and moth cannot corrupt.

They were very mindful of Christ's exhortation that he who will not take up his cross is not worthy of Christ. They also remembered that "Greater love hath no man than this, than to lay down his life for his friends."

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**Myth 3:** When the Crusaders captured Jerusalem in 1099 they massacred every man, woman and child in the city until the streets ran ankle deep with the blood.

This is a favorite used to demonstrate the evil nature of the Crusades.

It is certainly true that many people in Jerusalem were killed after the Crusaders captured the city. But this must be understood in historical context.

The accepted moral standard in all pre-modern European and Asian civilizations was that a city that resisted capture and was taken by force belonged to the victorious forces. That included not just the buildings and goods, but the people as well. That is why every city or fortress had to weigh carefully whether it could hold out against besiegers. If not, it was wise to negotiate terms of surrender.

In the case of Jerusalem, the defenders had resisted right up to the end. They calculated that the formidable walls of the city would keep the Crusaders at bay until a relief force from Egypt could arrive. They were wrong. When the city fell, therefore, it was put to the sack. Many were killed, yet many

others were ransomed or allowed to go free.

By modern standards this may seem brutal. Yet a medieval knight would point out that many more innocent men, women and children are killed in modern bombing warfare than could possibly be put to the sword in one or two days. It is worth noting that in those Muslim cities that surrendered to the Crusaders the people were left unmolested, retained their property and were allowed to worship freely.

As for those streets of blood, no historian accepts them as anything other than a literary convention. Jerusalem is a big town. The amount of blood necessary to fill the streets to a continuous and running three-inch depth would require many more people than lived in the region, let alone the city.

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**Myth 4:** The Crusades were just medieval colonialism dressed up in religious finery.

It is important to remember that in the Middle Ages the West was not a powerful, dominant culture venturing into a primitive or backward region. It was the Muslim East that was powerful, wealthy and opulent. Europe was the Third World.

The Crusader States, founded in the wake of the First Crusade, were not new plantations of Catholics in a Muslim world akin to the British colonization of America. Catholic presence in the Crusader states was always tiny, easily less than 10% of the population. These were the rulers and magistrates, as well as Italian merchants and members of the military orders. The overwhelming majority of the population in the Crusader states was Muslim.

They were not colonies, therefore, in the sense of plantations or even factories, as in the case of India. They were outposts. The ultimate purpose of the Crusader states was to defend the holy places in Palestine, especially Jerusalem, and to provide a safe environment for Christian pilgrims to visit those places.

There was no mother country with which the Crusader states had an economic relationship, nor did Europeans economically benefit from them. Quite the contrary, the expense of Crusades to maintain the Latin East was a serious drain on European resources. As an outpost, the Crusader states kept a military focus.

While the Muslims warred against each other the Crusader states were safe, but once the Muslims united, they were able to dismantle the strongholds, capture the cities, and in 1291 expel the Christians completely.

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**Myth 5:** The Crusades were also waged against the Jews.

No pope ever called a Crusade against Jews. During the First Crusade a large band of riffraff, not associated with the main army, descended on the towns of the Rhineland and decided to rob and kill the Jews they found there. In part this was pure greed. In part it also stemmed from the incorrect belief that the Jews, as the crucifiers of Christ, were legitimate targets of the war.

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.

These misfires of the movement were an unfortunate byproduct of Crusade enthusiasm, but they were not the purpose of the Crusades. To use a modern analogy, during the Second World War some American soldiers committed crimes while overseas. They were arrested and punished for those crimes. But the purpose of the Second World War was not to commit crimes.

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Zenit: Do you think the struggle between the West and the Muslim world is in any way a reaction to the Crusades?

Madden: No. That may seem a strange answer when you consider that Osama bin Laden and other Islamists often refer to Americans as "Crusaders."

It's important to remember, though, that during the Middle Ages — really up until the late 16th century — the superpower of the Western world was Islam. Muslim civilizations were wealthy, sophisticated and immensely powerful. The West was backward and relatively weak.

It is noteworthy that with the exception of the First Crusade virtually every other Crusade launched by the West — and there were hundreds — was unsuccessful.

The Crusades may have slowed Muslim expansionism, but they in no way stopped it. Muslim empires would continue to expand into Christian territories, conquering the Balkans, much of Eastern Europe and even the greatest Christian city in the world, Constantinople.

From the Muslim perspective the Crusades were not worth noticing. 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. They were important to Europeans because they were massive efforts that failed.

However, during the 19th century, when Europeans began conquering and colonizing Middle Eastern countries, many historians — in particular nationalist or royalist French writers — began to cast the Crusades as Europe's first attempt to bring the fruits of Western civilization to the backward Muslim world. In other words, the Crusades were morphed into imperialist wars.

Those histories were taught in the colonial schools and became the accepted view in the Middle East and beyond. In the 20th century, imperialism was discredited. Islamists and some Arab nationalists then seized on the colonial construction of the Crusades, claiming that the West was responsible for their woes because they had preyed on Muslims ever since the Crusades.

It is often said that people in the Middle East have long memories; it is true. But in the case of the Crusades, they have a recovered memory: one that was manufactured for them by their European conquerors.

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Zenit: Are there any similarities between the Crusades and the war against terror today?

Madden: Aside from the fact that soldiers in both wars want to serve something greater than

themselves that they hold dear and long to return home when it is over, I see no other similarities between the medieval Crusades and the war against terror. Motivations in a post-Enlightenment secular society are very different from those in the medieval world.

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Zenit: How are the Crusades different from Islam's jihad, or other wars of religion?

Madden: The fundamental purpose of jihad is to expand the Dar al-Islam — the Abode of Islam — into the Dar al-Harb — the Abode of War. In other words, jihad is expansionistic, seeking to conquer non-Muslims and place them under Muslim rule.

Those who are then conquered are given a simple choice. For those who are not People of the Book — in other words, those who are not Christians or Jews — the choice is convert to Islam or die. For those who are People of the Book, the choice is submit to Muslim rule and Islamic law or die. The expansion of Islam, therefore, was directly linked to the military successes of jihad.

The Crusades were something very different. From its beginnings Christianity has always forbidden coerced conversion of any kind. Conversion by the sword, therefore, was not possible for Christianity. Unlike jihad, the purpose of the Crusades was neither to expand the Christian world nor to expand Christianity through forced conversions.

Instead, the Crusades were a direct and belated response to centuries of Muslim conquests of Christian lands. The immediate event that sparked the First Crusade was the Turkish conquest of all of Asia Minor in the 1070s through 1090s.

The First Crusade was called by Pope Urban II in 1095 in response to an urgent plea for help from the Byzantine emperor in Constantinople. Urban called the knights of Christendom to come to the aid of their Eastern brethren.

Asia Minor was Christian. Part of the Byzantine Empire, it had been first evangelized by St. Paul. St. Peter had been the first bishop of Antioch. Paul had written his famous letter to the Christians of Ephesus. The creed of the Church was penned at Nicaea. All of these were in Asia Minor.

The Byzantine emperor begged the Christians of the West for aid in recapturing these lands and expelling the Turks. The Crusades were that aid. Their purpose, though, was not only to reconquer Asia Minor but also to recapture other formerly Christian lands that had been lost due to Islamic jihads. This included the Holy Land.

In a nutshell, therefore, the major difference between Crusade and jihad is that the former was a defense against the latter. The entire history of the Eastern Crusades is one of response to Muslim aggression.

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Zenit: Did the Crusaders have any success at converting the Muslim world?

Madden: I would note that in the 13th century some Franciscans began a mission in the Middle East to seek to convert Muslims. It was not successful, largely because Islamic law makes conversion to another religion a capital offense.

This attempt, though, was separate from the Crusades, which had nothing at all to do with conversion. And it was by peaceful persuasion.

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**Zenit:** How did Christendom rationalize its defeat in the Crusades? Were the Crusaders defeated?

**Madden:** The same way that the Jews of the Old Testament did. God withheld victory from his people because they were sinful. This led to a large-scale piety movement in Europe, whose aim was to purify Christian society in every way.

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**Zenit:** Did Pope John Paul II in fact apologize for the Crusades? Has he actually condemned them?

**Madden:** This is an odd myth, given that the Pope was so roundly criticized for failing to apologize directly for the Crusades when he asked forgiveness from all those that Christians had unjustly harmed.

Our Holy Father did not condemn them, nor did he apologize for them. He apologized for the sins of Catholics. More recently it was widely reported that John Paul II apologized to the patriarch of Constantinople for the Crusader conquest of Constantinople in 1204.

In truth, though, the Pope only reiterated what his predecessor Pope Innocent III [1198-1216] said. That too was a tragic misfire that Innocent had done everything he could to avoid. He apologized for the sins of Catholics who took part in the Crusades. Yet he did not apologize for the Crusades themselves or even the outcome of the Crusades.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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