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The Importance of Richard Lionheart in the Third Crusade

Western Civilization 101

Ms. Balzer

May 13, 2020

See the cunning of this accursed man! To obtain his ends he would first employ force and then smooth words; and even now, although he knew he was obliged to depart, he maintained the same line of argument. God alone could protect the Muslims against his wiles. We never had to face a craftier or a bolder enemy.¹

This excerpt from Bahā' ad-Dīn Yusuf ibn Rafi ibn Shaddād's chronicles on the third crusade describes the influence that King Richard "The Lionheart" had. He was, and still is, revered as one of the greatest military leaders of the Middle Ages. In the third crusade however, his involvement was not enough to secure victory. Due to unforeseen circumstances, the third crusade was a failed attempt to recapture Jerusalem². While the crusaders had moderate success, their forces were not sufficient enough to retake the Holy City³ from Saladin, the sultan of Egypt and Syria.⁴ While they did not gain victory over the Muslims, the crusaders came very close, even to within sight of Jerusalem. Most of these small victories were because of Richard Lionheart. He almost single-handedly led the crusaders to gain territory, including Cyprus and Sicily. Had King Richard gathered more soldiers, he would have ultimately succeeded in retaking the Kingdom of Jerusalem, in turn removing the Muslims from the Holy Land.

¹ Bahā' ad-Dīn Ibn Šaddād and Donald Sidney Richards, *The Rare and Excellent History of Saladin or Al-Nawādir Al-Sultāniyya Wal-Mahāsin Al-Yūsufiyya*. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 353-9.

² The third crusade's primary motive was to recapture Jerusalem, which the crusaders had lost during the second crusade.

³ In this essay the "Holy City" and "Jerusalem" are used interchangeably. The term "Holy Land" is also used and refers to the region the crusaders were attempting to conquer.

⁴ James Reston, "Foreword." In *Warriors of God: Richard the Lionheart and Saladin in the Third Crusade*, (London, UK: Anchor Books, 2002), XIII - XXI.

The famed ruler was born on September 8, 1157 to Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine. He had three brothers, John, Geoffrey, and Henry. Being the middle child, he was not the original heir to the throne. However, his brother Henry died in 1183 and Geoffrey in 1186, making Richard the heir. Although he was the rightful heir, father preferred his younger brother John for the throne. Richard I then partnered with Philip II of France and pursued his father until his death in 1189.⁵

A major segment of Richard I's career was the third crusade. Ordered by Pope Gregory VIII in 1187, the third crusade was led by several powerful Western European Leaders: King Richard I of England, King Philip II of France, and Frederick I Barbarossa, Holy Roman Emperor and King of Germany. Disaster struck soon after the campaign to retake Jerusalem began in 1190. A few months after his departure from Thrace, King Frederick I Barbarossa drowned in the River Saleph. This greatly weakened the German forces and left only two rulers as leaders of the crusade. Further, after the successful Siege of Acre on the borders of the Kingdom of Jerusalem, Philip II departed because of political issues in his kingdom. This left only Richard I leading the broad coalition of crusaders. Moreover, the crusaders had no allies in the Holy Land to help them against the armies of Saladin, which were remarkably powerful because of their numbers and exceptional military strategy.⁶

Despite the poor odds, King Richard still managed to conquer the crucial Muslim port at Jaffa by winning the Battle of Arsuf. Furthermore, he had previously conquered Cyprus and

⁵Jones, Barry, "R." In *Dictionary of World Biography*, (Acton ACT, Australia: ANU Press, 2019): 742, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvh4zjz.22.

⁶ Mark Cartwright, "Third Crusade," *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, last modified November 7, 2019, https://www.ancient.eu/Third_Crusade/.

Sicily, strong strategic points for an attempt to retake Jerusalem. Richard I's fierce leadership guided the crusaders to several smaller victories, but not the ultimate prize. The crusaders even managed to come within sight of Jerusalem, but King Richard decided against an attack, as he did not believe he could defend the city after taking it. Despite this apparent failure, evidence suggests that King Richard was highly capable of winning against the Muslims. Before his narrow victory at Arsuf, Richard I won at Acre, a port north of Jerusalem. The Siege of Acre is a prime example of the military might of the crusaders with additional allies and leadership. Mostly led by Richard I, the Siege of Acre was highly successful, and the crusaders managed to capture a large portion of Saladin's navy.⁷

Both the crusaders and the Muslims had distinctive military styles. "The Christians had the advantage of disciplined and well-armoured knights while the Muslims often used light cavalry and archers to great effect."⁸ While this simplifies the capabilities of both armies, it accurately describes their most distinguishable characteristics. Both the Muslims and the crusaders relied heavily upon siege warfare, as most of the battles in the crusades involved attacking forts or fortified cities instead of open field warfare. However, neither of these unique styles had a distinct advantage, and the battles were more heavily influenced by the military tactics of each side.⁹

⁷ Cartwright, "Third Crusade".

⁸ Mark Cartwright, "The Armies of the Crusades," *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, last modified November 15, 2018, <https://www.ancient.eu/article/1281/the-armies-of-the-crusades/>.

⁹ Cartwright, "The Armies of the Crusades".

Because the troops themselves had minimal effects on the outcome of battles, King Richard's military leadership was essential in crusader victories. His leadership was a driving force behind the win at the battle of Acre¹⁰, which is demonstrated by the tactical advantages he gave the crusaders, such as siege weapons.¹¹ Moreover, his forces managed to conquer Sicily, Cyprus, and Jaffa without the support of Frederick I Barbarossa and Philip II. Jaffa proved to be essential in truce negotiations, and Richard I was able to secure a crusader presence in south Palestine. Among these negotiations, it was decided that Christian pilgrims were allowed entry to the Holy City; the crusaders also gained a large portion of land between Beirut and Jaffa. Not only did King Richard manage to conquer Jaffa, he managed to defend it from a large force of Saracens¹². The attacking side sustained heavy losses and the defending army sustained minimal casualties. King Richard's ability to fight stronger, more numerous enemies, was crucial in his limited successes.

Just as Richard was preparing a decisive encircling attack on all fronts at once, the bruised and battered Hospitallers, on the left flank. . . charged, taking with them the French division on their right. Richard immediately grasped the tactical imperative and ordered a general attack that threw the Turks back. As Saladin regrouped, Richard, having kept the Anglo-Norman brigade in reserve as a rallying point around the royal banner. . . managed to restore order to his lines, prevent them breaking up in pursuit of the enemy.¹³

¹⁰ Acre was the only major battle in which King Richard had support from King Philip I of France, thus its distinction from the other battles.

¹¹ Mark Cartwright, "The Siege of Acre, 1189-91 CE," *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, last modified August 29, 2018, <https://www.ancient.eu/article/1263/the-siege-of-acre-1189-91-ce/>.

¹² Used interchangeably with Muslims.

¹³ Christopher Tyerman, "Palestine War 1191-2". In *Gods War: a New History of the Crusades*. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 450.

Richard's successes at Jaffa were an exceptional demonstration of his military prowess. He was an expert in terms of military strategy and this led to several decisive moments in the third crusade. However, strategy was not the only characteristic of the crusading army. Richard's armies possessed immense courage. While Richard was planning an attack on Beirut in Acre, the Saracen armies mounted a surprise offensive against the crusader-controlled Jaffa. Saladin's armies were able to gain a foothold in the city, but Richard arrived soon thereafter.¹⁴ "Richard, heavily outnumbered, launched his famous attack, being one of the first to wade ashore from his boats at the head of his small army. Shock, surprise, and the power of his crack force gave Richard a highly improbable, if dramatic, victory."¹⁵ This second victory at Jaffa was of huge importance in the third crusade, because victory for Saladin would have possibly pushed the crusading forces out of Palestine. While the defenders should have been overtaken by Saladin's forces, the stout heart of Richard Lionheart and his armies, the very heart that earned him the name "Lionheart", reigned superior.

The idea of courage in Richard Lionheart's armies is further evidenced by Benedict of Peterborough's account of the conquest of Cyprus by the English. He describes Richard saying "he who rejects the just demands of one armed for the fray, resigns all into his hands. And I trust confidently in the Lord that He will this day give us the victory over this Emperor and his people."¹⁶ King Richard was able to unite numerous people under the same flag, a flag of

¹⁴ Cartwright, "Third Crusade".

¹⁵ Tyerman, Christopher, "Palestine War," 450.

¹⁶ Benedict of Peterborough and Neophytus, "Two accounts of the conquest of Cyprus, 1191," In *Excerpta Cypria: Materials for a History of Cyprus and an Attempt at a Bibliography of Cyprus*, ed. Claude D. Cobham (Cambridge: University Press, 1908).

Christianity. With more troops, Richard would have been able to accomplish the same task, but to a greater effect. His successes at Cyprus prove that he could unite many people, not just his own. This ability to instill courage in his troops coupled with his military genius would have proven decisive in the third crusade, had he more men.

Richard Lionheart's reputation was also influential in his successes. With more troops, his fame combined with the power of numbers would have struck fear into his enemies. This fear would have given him a distinct advantage in terms of troop morale. On the topic of troop morale, E. H. Phelps Brown writes "'To lose heart,' after all, is almost synonymous for 'to do less.'"¹⁷ The importance of military morale is undeniable, and the combination of a fearless leader and a sizable army would have kept morale high and severely damaged Muslim morale. This boost in confidence would have been crucial in a potential crusader victory. Richard Lionheart was already elevated to a nearly godlike tier among his people, and many others feared his power. This is demonstrated in Benedict of Peterborough's account of the conquest of Cyprus, in which he portrayed Richard I in an almost reverent light.¹⁸ Eyewitness to the Siege of Acre, Baha' al-Din Yusuf Ibn Shaddad, said "I have been assured ... that on that day the king of England, lance in hand, rode along the whole length of our army from right to left, and not one of our soldiers left the ranks to attack him. The Sultan was wroth thereat and left the battlefield in anger..."¹⁹ Baha' al-Din Yusuf Ibn Shaddad's narrative evidences the idea of Richard Lionheart

¹⁷ E. H. Phelps Brown, "Morale, Military and Industrial," *The Economic Journal* 59, no. 233 (1949): 49, doi:10.2307/2225844.

¹⁸ Benedict of Peterborough and Neophytus, "Accounts of Cyprus".

¹⁹ Baha' al-Din Yusuf Ibn Shaddad, *Saladin Or What Befell Sultan Yusuf*, trans. Wilson, (C.W. London Committee of the Palestine Exploration Fund, 1897), 376.

being a nearly godlike figure. With additional troops, this already frightening leader would've been even more frightening, which would damage enemy morale and hand a crucial advantage to the crusaders.

Along with mental advantages, the crusaders obtained tactical advantages through their various conquests. One such tactical advantage was the territories they controlled. After the conquest of Cyprus, Sicily, Acre, and Jaffa, the crusaders had a direct path to Jerusalem. Travel from England through friendly territories would have been simple enough by going west to east through crusader-controlled Cyprus. The conquest of Cyprus forced the Cyprian ruler, Isaak Komnenos, to negotiate a peace treaty with the English, and he eventually swore his allegiance to King Richard.²⁰ At this point, Cyprus was a part of the Byzantine Empire. Peace with Cyprus would have secured passage into Palestine. From Cyprus, the crusaders would have then sailed to either Jaffa or Acre, which have close proximity to Jerusalem.²¹ These strategic conquests would have provided safety to crusaders travelling to fight in the Holy Land. Moreover, these territories could hold supplies and reinforcements essential to crusader success. With more men, King Richard could have more successfully exploited this advantage via sending troops and supplies through these lands. These resources would then be helpful in defending Jerusalem once it was captured.

²⁰ Savvas Neocleous, "Imaging Isaac Komnenos of Cyprus (1184-1191) and the Cypriots: Evidence from the Latin Historiography of the Third Crusade," *Byzantion* 83 (2013): 307, www.jstor.org/stable/44173212.

²¹ Wikimedia Commons contributors, "File:Europe mediterranean 1190.jpg," *Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository*, last modified October 9, 2019, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Europe_mediterranean_1190.jpg&oldid=369941386

Saladin also had a huge tactical disadvantage. His forces were confined to the city²² and had few, if any, reinforcements. This left them susceptible to siege attacks and made them dependent upon external resources. With more soldiers, these supply lines could have been cut, making it a battle of attrition that only the crusaders could win. Entrapment in the city would also leave the Saracens vulnerable to being completely surrounded. An attack from all sides would have been much more difficult to defend than a one-sided attack.

King Richard had allies working for him outside of the Holy Land, which proved to be advantageous. Despite his long absence from his kingdom, his elected officials maintained his lands well, alleviating that problem from his shoulders. Richard was able to elect his officials despite his prolonged absence. He had the “royal right of regalia” which gave him “custody of church lands during an episcopal vacancy and the right to authorize new elections and to approve bishops-elect.”²³ Richard’s ability to control the English church through elections allowed him to maintain his focus elsewhere. Additionally, King Richard's reign “coincided with the pontificate of the elderly Pope Celestine III, chiefly remembered for being the uncle of his successor, Innocent III. The pontiff was unlikely to seek confrontation with a powerful secular ruler, particularly not the leader of a crusading army.”²⁴ Without fear of conflict with the church²⁵ Richard had no political interruptions. His full focus was on the crusade, which was all the worse

²² Jerusalem.

²³ Ralph V. Turner, “Richard Lionheart and the English Episcopal Elections,” *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 29, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 1, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4051592>.

²⁴ Turner, *English Elections*, 3.

²⁵ Refers to the Christian/Catholic church.

for his enemies. With more military allies, this would have been more apparent. With his proven exceptional leadership, and with a respectable army, logic clearly tells us that he would have succeeded in his endeavours.

While there is clear evidence pointing to a crusader victory, there are valid counter arguments that need to be taken into consideration. One such argument is the church's potential involvement in King Lionheart's territory. At the time of the third crusade, the church was conflicting with King Richard's kingdom. This is evidenced by the eventual capture of Bishop Philip of Beauvais. The conflict began with the bishop's imprisonment of King Richard. After completing his term of imprisonment, Richard attacked the bishop's lands in retaliation, as the bishop had continually harassed Richard's lands during his imprisonment. The bishop "armed himself and joined a battle in which many were slain."²⁶ His desire to join the battle led to his imprisonment. This was a clear incidence of Richard's conflict with the church. Furthermore, this meddling from the church could have forced a return to his kingdom, effectively ending the third crusade. However, Richard had people in place to prevent such matters from escalating.²⁷ Additionally, despite conflict with King Richard, the church still would have supported the ultimate objective of the crusade. They would by no means withdraw support for such a pro-Christian endeavour. Potential conflicts with the church aside, Richard would have had things in motion to prevent any extremely damaging scenarios. The effects of his volatile relations with the church would have been negligible in the overall outcome of the crusade.

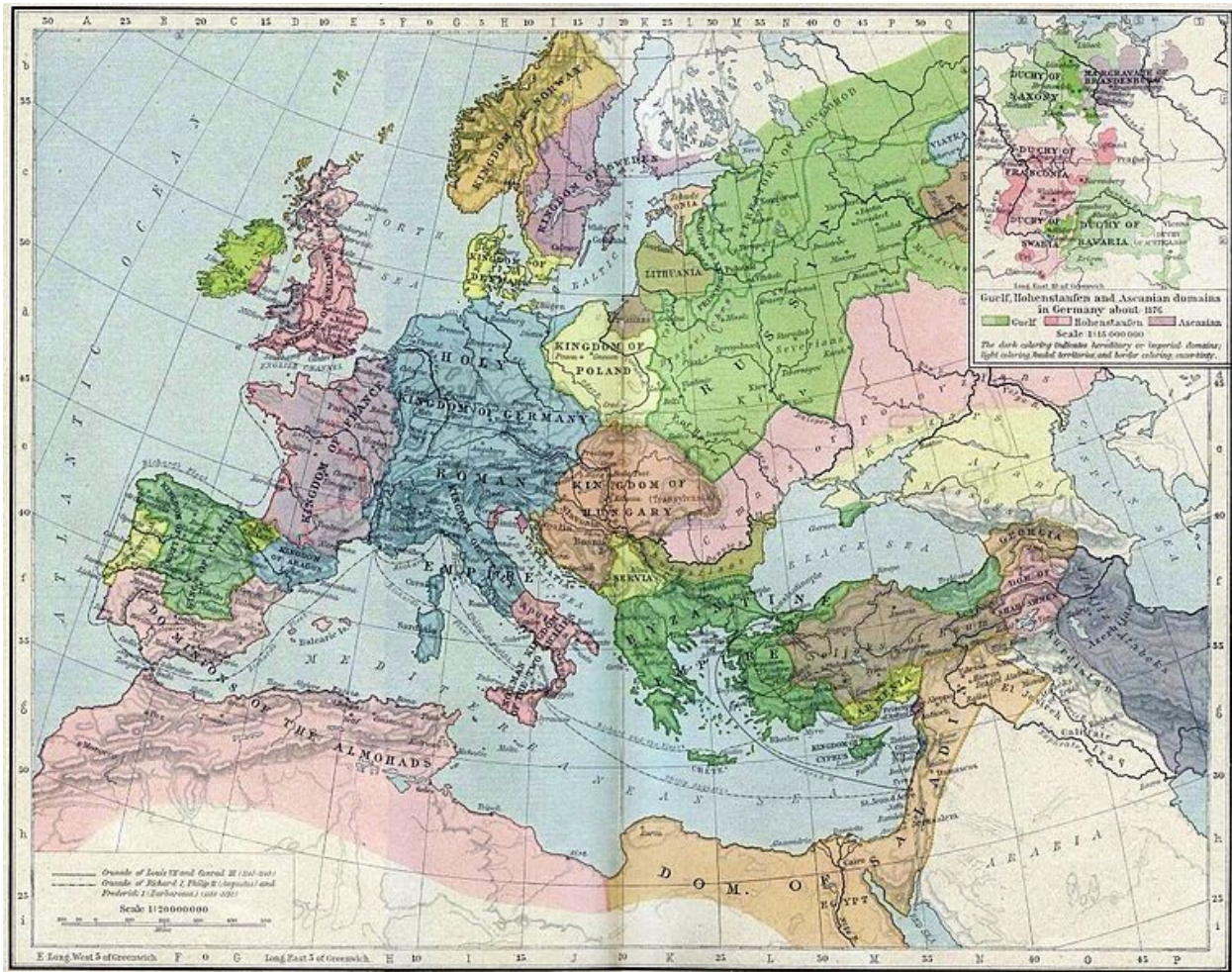
²⁶ James A. Brundage, "The Crusade of Richard I: Two Canonical Quaestiones," *Speculum* 38, no. 3 (July 1963): 446, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2849170>.

²⁷ Turner, *English Elections*, 1.

The historical accuracy of these sources also has to be considered. Accounts of these events may be biased favorably towards Richard Lionheart, and they may also be slightly inaccurate, as sources from this time period are sparse and unreliable. The overwhelming majority, however, describe Richard Lionheart similarly. Because of this phenomenon, we can assume that these sources are accurate simply because they are in agreement with each other. While some sources may be faulty, it can be determined, by the sheer number of agreeing sources, that the ideas and events are accurate.

With more troops, the third crusade would have been a success for the crusaders. The forces led by King Richard I were successful in their endeavours because of the confident, experienced leadership of King Richard. With a mix of superior military strategy and courage, Richard was a formidable opponent. He also managed to oversee affairs in his homeland over a long distance, which was crucial in his prolonged absences from his kingdom. This potential success in the third crusade would have shaped European history. Future scholarship in this field should focus on the factors that led the crusaders to failure. Only one such factor is discussed in this piece. This particular topic needs further research because it is essential in understanding modern issues, such as the religious conflict between Islam and western culture. Much of that conflict was caused by the crusades. Studying the turning points in the crusades, such as the failure of the third crusade, may help to ease modern tensions and to understand Eastern perspectives.

Figure 1: Map of the Mediterranean region circa 1190 CE



Source: Wikimedia Commons contributors, "File:Europe mediterranean 1190.jpg," *Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository*, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Europe_mediterranean_1190.jpg&oldid=369941386

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