



The Siege of Acre, 1189–1191: Saladin, Richard the Lionheart, and the Battle That Decided the Third Crusade by John D. Hosler.

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Those who believe they understand the events and implications of the two-year siege of Acre during the Third Crusade will reevaluate their assumptions after reading this book. Historian John Hosler (US Army Command and Staff College) has produced a masterful narrative and analysis in what he rightly calls the “first ever comprehensive study of the siege in any language” (3). The book offers much to ponder for both specialists and those who know nothing about the siege, the Crusades, or even the Middle Ages. Although all three of Hosler’s books concern the same chronological era, their subject matter—a biography of an English monarch,¹ a military analysis of an English philosopher,² and now the examination of a siege within a crusade—shows a flexibility of range and approach.

The author believes that the siege of Acre was the hinge-point of the Third Crusade and that it provides the “ideal snapshot of twelfth-century warfare” (163). In less than two hundred pages, he discusses medieval warfare writ large, strategy, tactics, command and control, leadership, logistics, technology, and the possible culpability for a war crime. To do this, he has scoured the primary sources, both Christian and Muslim, as well as the relevant secondary literature and archaeological evidence. Many readers will already know the end of the tale—Acre fell to the crusaders—but the skilled narrative of the how and why will hold their attention. Along the way, the author discusses many subjects that have received little attention, including specific battles, assaults, and (often daily) engagements.

The book’s strengths include discerning assessments of the personalities and command decisions on both sides. The Third Crusade involved more western monarchs than any other, and included the most famous western commander of the era, Richard the Lion-Heart. Saladin, Sultan of Egypt and Syria and unifier of much of the Muslim world, also played a critical role at Acre. Richard’s reputation as soldier and monarch has fluctuated in modern scholarship, though he is generally considered a highly skilled commander, especially for his tactical victory over Saladin on the battlefield of Arsuf, less than two months after Acre’s fall. On the other hand, Saladin emerged in western historiography and popular culture as a paragon of Muslim chivalry, largesse, enlightened thought, and military prowess.

Hosler critiques both rulers’ reputations and argues that neither distinguished himself at Acre (5, 46, 61, 73, 101, 163–68). Richard was at the siege for only about two months, in its final stages, and illness incapacitated him for much of it. He spent the rest of the time grandstanding with nobles and common crusaders while sparring with Philip Augustus, the French monarch. In short, he did

1. *Henry II: A Medieval Soldier at War, 1147–1189* (Boston: Brill, 2007).

2. *John of Salisbury: Military Authority of the Twelfth-Century Renaissance* (Boston: Brill, 2013), with review at *MiWSR* 2013-100.

little to expedite the siege. As for Saladin, he too suffered periods of illness and often ignored opportunities to end the siege by attacking more aggressively. What is more, he did not meet the terms under which Acre finally surrendered to the crusaders.

Hosler sheds welcome light on commanders who have been overshadowed by the larger-than-life Richard and Saladin. For instance, he turns the historiography on its ear by suggesting that Philip Augustus, Richard's ostensible co-commander and certain rival, did more than Richard to end the siege successfully. Although he ranks as France's most effective monarch of the High Middle Ages, historians have not generally seen Philip as a brilliant tactician, despite his victory at the battle of Bouvines (1214). In particular, he has drawn criticism, beginning with the medieval sources, for leaving the crusade early and returning to France to take back the English king's continental lands. While Hosler agrees that Philip departed prematurely, he argues persuasively that, during his time at the siege, the French king, when healthy, acted more energetically and made better tactical decisions than Richard. It was under his aegis, not Richard's, that the garrison of Acre negotiated a surrender. Philip comes across as a pragmatic, unsung hero, not the jealous and craven opportunist that primary and secondary accounts make him out to be. Beyond Philip Augustus's military rehabilitation, Hosler also showcases the contributions of several Christian and Muslim commanders, such as Henry of Champagne and Taqī al-Din, who are rarely discussed even by crusade specialists.

After admonishing his readers to eschew presentism, Hosler bravely dissects the most infamous episode of the Third Crusade. Some weeks after the garrison surrendered Acre (12 Aug. 1191), Richard had thousands of Muslim prisoners marched out of the city and stabbed to death or decapitated. The sources report as many as five reasons why he did so; Hosler evaluates the veracity and merits of each. The most likely is that Saladin simply could not or would not meet the exact terms under which the garrison had negotiated its surrender. Not long after the executions, Richard wrote a letter explaining his reason: he believed Saladin had violated the terms of the surrender, for which the prisoners paid with their lives. By modern standards, the execution of unarmed, bound human beings makes Richard a war criminal. But Hosler's thorough examination of the pertinent Christian and Muslim primary sources as well as the modern historiography leads him to conclude that Richard acted within the accepted parameters of medieval warfare.

Hosler establishes that no primary source mentions massacres of women or children. In other words, the POWs, however callous their treatment, were able-bodied soldiers of Acre's garrison, not townspeople. Nor were they municipal elites or military leaders, since the sources specifically report that Richard kept them alive. They were common soldiers not worth any political points in a prisoner exchange or financial rewards in a ransom negotiation. Even within Christian Western Europe, captured soldiers often lost their lives after surrendering, especially when an agreement had been broken, or perceived to have been.

Saladin, too, by all accounts a gracious, generous man by twelfth-century standards, often executed prisoners, most notably after the Battle of Hattin in 1187. Hosler follows a curious thread in the sources that suggests Saladin may have killed his own captives at Acre *before* Richard acted, upon hearing a rumor that the king might be planning to kill his prisoners. The more traditional and likely story is that Saladin killed his prisoners *in retaliation* for Richard executing his. No matter; the fact remains that both leaders slaughtered unarmed POWs. Hosler maintains that the scale of Richard's executions may make them seem so barbaric that we conveniently forget that Saladin did the same thing at Acre and elsewhere during his reign. Based on the body counts of both kings, neither was more guilty of war crimes than the other. In fact, the phrase "war crime" is

itself patently anachronistic, given the accepted cultural, political, diplomatic, and military norms of the time.

In assessing the siege's importance, Hosler presents an original, counterintuitive argument: that the amount of blood, treasure, and time expended on winning Acre effectively weakened and distracted western efforts from the real goal of taking back Jerusalem. Thousands of Christians and Muslims died at Acre and thousands more, suffering from physical exhaustion, disease, and perhaps psychological trauma, left right after the siege, never to be replaced. Even Richard's resurgent leadership talents in the following weeks and months were not enough to take back Jerusalem. In the end, winning Acre cost so much that further success proved illusory and impossible.

John Hosler has written an exceptional work of nuanced scholarship.³ His research and conclusions will provide the fodder for many other scholars following in his footsteps.

3. The book includes helpful lists of the number and kinds of military and naval engagements and an appendix identifying the sub-commanders during one of the eight pitched battles that transpired during the siege.