

‘A complete failure.’ To what extent is this a fair assessment of the Crusading movement?

The Crusades was a phenomenon which captivated its contemporaries as much as it still captivates many today. Its inception induced high hopes for medieval Europe, not only for spiritual attainment and the recovery of the Holy Land, but it also provided the circumstances for glorious deeds which transformed into legends and stories; further it boosted the morale of the Christian population who was preoccupied with battle and warfare and harmonized their violence with their deep religiosity. Yet, despite the fascination the Crusades still manage to hold today, its history is littered with bloodshed, defeat, and failure. Excepting the First Crusade which triumphantly recaptured Jerusalem from Islamic control, the following Holy Wars were disappointments that resulted in countless deaths, early surrenders, and what seems to be utter failure. This essay hopes to evaluate the history of the Crusading movement; the aim at its inception compared to the results and the reality of the wars which followed. Finally, it will examine how the Crusading ideal declined, resulting in the final fall of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. Were any of the Crusades a success? Or was the whole movement an inadequate fumble that echoes through history?

The blueprint for the whole Crusading movement originated at the council of Clermont in 1095. When Urban II called for the First Crusade, it was in response to the Byzantine Emperor Alexios I's appeal for aid. In his speech, he warned that if western Europe did nothing to impede the Muslim's infernal expansion, 'the faithful of God will be much more widely attacked by them.'¹ The goal was to pick up arms and 'carry aid' to their Christian brothers, driving the 'vile race from the lands of our friends.'² Avenging the desecration of holy places, the wrongs committed against their Greek brothers, and recovering the land of Jerusalem was paramount.³ Not only this, but Urban II whose friendly relations with Alexios I allowed him to instigate negotiations for the union between the two churches in 1088, saw the Crusades as 'a chance to move closer to the Orthodox and heal the rift.'⁴ With the promise of the remission of sins for any who participated, the First Crusade roused a spiritual fervor that spurred the crusaders on to conquer Antioch; Count Baldwin established the first Crusader state in Edessa; and four years after Pope Urban II's call to arms, the Crusaders reclaimed the Holy Land. The First Crusade was a success in what it had set out to accomplish. Christian pilgrims could travel to and from the Holy Land safely once again, and as the Christians conquered the coastline, 'the basic

¹Fordham University 'Urban II (1088-1099) Speech at Council of Clermont, 1095,' *Internet Medieval Source Book*, para. 4 < <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/urban2-5vers.asp> >

² *ibid.*, para. 4.

³ Fordham University, 'Urban II Speech at Clermont,' para. 2.

⁴ Johnathan Phillips, 'The Crusades: A Complete History,' *History Today* (2025) < <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/feature/crusades-complete-history> > [accessed 14 May 2026], para. 7.

rationale behind the Crusades was fulfilled.’⁵ Yet, after their aims were achieved, many of the crusaders returned home to their families and their lands, leaving behind a paltry three hundred knights—a fact that Fulcher of Chartres, who wrote a stirring endorsement of the blessings and abundance to be found for the westerners who immigrated to the eastern lands, lamented. It was not enough manpower to keep control of the territory the crusaders had just won.⁶

It could have been due to the renowned success of the First Crusade that when the shocking news came of the fall of Edessa in 1144, the response of Pope Eugenius III was to call for a Second Crusade. Outremer was divided due to squabbles amongst itself, particularly the ‘very dangerous strife which had arisen between Prince Raymond of Antioch and Count Joscelyn.’⁷ When Zengi united his powerful Syrian forces and attacked Edessa, none came to her aid. However, Eugenius III relates, much like Urban, the danger posed to the Church of God and the greater whole of Christianity. By calling upon the bravery and love that fueled the first crusaders to acquire the lands of the Levant, he urges that same attitude to now be found in their sons; to defend what their forefathers had won.⁸ Unfortunately, the victory of the previous generation was not repeated in their immediate successors. The Second Crusade neither reached nor reconquered the land of Edessa. Lack of cooperation between French and German forces, supply difficulties, and ultimately, the betrayal of the princes who worked to thwart the siege upon Damascus, caused the Second Crusade to be an utter failure after the glorious hope of the First Crusade. Without proper provisions, the crusading armies were forced to head home ‘covered with shame and disgrace, with their mission unfulfilled.’⁹

With the fatal defeat at the Battle of Hattin and the de-moralizing loss of the Relic of the True Cross, Saladin and his forces moved onto Jerusalem where after eighty-nine years in Christian hands, the kingdom fell. At this point, Gregory VIII called the Third Crusade (1187-92) also known as the King’s Crusade because it was led by the three kings of England, France and Germany: Richard the Lionheart, Phillip II, and Frederick I. While there were moments of triumph such as the conquering of Cyprus and the Siege of Acre, Frederick I drowned while leading his army, and Phillip returned home after the victory in Acre, leaving Richard to command the remaining crusaders. Although, he made it all the way to Jerusalem, he never reclaimed the city. Pressure mounted not only in England where his return was necessary to

⁵ *ibid.*, para. 16.

⁶ *ibid.*, para. 15

⁷ Fordham University ‘William of Tyre: The Fall of Edessa,’ *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, (1996) <<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/tyre-edessa.asp>>, para. 1.

⁸ Fordham University, ‘Eugene III: Summons to a Crusade, Dec 1, 1154,’ *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, (1996), <<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/eugene3-2cde.asp>> para. 2-4.

⁹ Fordham University, ‘William of Tyre: The Fiasco at Damascus, 1148,’ *Internet Medieval Sourcebook* (1996), <<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/tyre-damascus.asp>>, para. 17.

‘safeguard his own interests there’ due to the plotting of King John and Phillip II,¹⁰ but the King, was forced to return to defend Jaffa against Saladin where he managed to retrieve control of the city after a closely-contested battle. It was here that Saladin and Richard agreed to a peace treaty which concluded the crusader’s third campaign, never having achieved their ultimate objective. Jerusalem remained in Muslim hands. However, it was not a total loss as it allowed the Franks to recover lands along the coast for future offensive campaigns.¹¹

The Fourth Crusade’s objective, called by Pope Innocent III, was to accomplish what the Third Crusade had not—the retaking of Jerusalem from Islam. With no kings leading the charge, the crusaders determined to travel by sea, attacking Egypt before turning to Palestine.¹² However, in need of a fleet, they employed the Venetians who would supply them with ships, horses, squires and foot-soldiers. Yet, the crusaders severely lacked men and money, only able to provide 50,000 of the 85,000 marks required to pay the Venetians.¹³ Doge Enrico Dandolo acquiesced to remit the debt if the crusaders would aid the Venetians in reconquering the city of Zara now under the authority of Hungary whose Christian king had pledged to join the crusaders himself. This marked the first time crusaders launched an attack against other Christians.¹⁴ This went against Pope Innocent III’s command, and he threatened the entire crusading force with excommunication.¹⁵ Shortly after, the crusaders’ course changed once again from Egypt and headed instead towards Constantinople with the goal of reinstating Alexius IV to his throne. This effort was backed by the leaders of the Crusade, especially by Phillip of Swabia and Boniface of Montferrat. Thomas F. Madden refutes the dramatic claims, fueled by heated debates over the crusader’s diversion to the Byzantine Empire and the ensuing fatal events, of dark plots and devious plans laid by the Venetians or by Phillip and Boniface. Through a series of misfortunate events that left the crusaders in deep debt and little options, they marched to Constantinople in return for Alexius’ money and reinforcements. After reinstating him, however, the Byzantines murdered their new emperor and his uncle stole off with all the money, leaving the crusaders, once again, without money and resources. They sacked Constantinople, ‘devastating one-sixth of

¹⁰ Fordham University, ‘*Itinerarium Peregrinorum et Gesta Regis Ricardi: Richard the Lionheart Makes Peace with Saladin, 1192*,’ *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, (1996) <<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/1192peace.asp>>, para. 3.

¹¹ Phillips, ‘The Crusades,’ para. 25.

¹² Dennis Romano, ‘The Fourth Crusade and the Creation of a Mediterranean Empire,’ *Venice: The Remarkable History of the Lagoon City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024) <<https://academic-oup-com.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/book/55872/chapter/439222515>>, p. 108.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 108.

¹⁴ Jessica Brain, ‘Timeline of the Crusades,’ *Historic UK* (2023) <<https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofEngland/Timeline-Crusades/>>

¹⁵ *ibid.*, ‘Timeline of the Crusades.’

the city, making one-third of the inhabitants homeless.’¹⁶ Innocent III’s letter regarding this attack is scalding.

It was your duty... to give careful consideration, not to the capture of the Empire of Constantinople, but rather to the defense of what is left of the Holy Land and, with the Lord’s leave, the restoration of what has been lost... How, indeed, is the Greek church to be brought back into ecclesiastical union and to a devotion for the Apostolic See when she has been beset with so many afflictions and persecutions that she sees in the Latins only an example of perdition and the works of darkness...¹⁷

It highlights the failure, once again, to recover Jerusalem; the crusaders never fought any Islamic enemies but instead assailed fellow Christians resulting in a greater schism between the eastern and western Churches. However, it did unite the Church under papal authority due to a Latin Patriarch and the establishment of a Latin Empire, though it would not last.¹⁸

The Fifth and later Crusades brought the conclusion of the crusading movement. The Children's Crusade, unofficial due to the lack of papal endorsement, ended in death for many and slavery for others.¹⁹ The Fifth Crusade with its plan to conquer Egypt ended with the crusaders surrendering to Egyptian forces and relinquishing the territory they had won in Damietta. There was not another multi-national attempt to retrieve Jerusalem, though Frederick II, the Holy Roman Emperor, did manage, through peaceful negotiation with the Egyptian Sultan, to reclaim Jerusalem and crown himself its king. However, his intention was not to conquer his Muslim neighbors but instead to expand his dominion and force the Crusader states to acknowledge his rule.²⁰ He also did all of this while excommunicated by the Pope. Both of King Louis IX’s crusades ended in disappointment; though they conquered Damietta, Louis was captured and held prisoner before being released. During his second attempt in 1270, he died of dysentery; the Eighth Crusade accomplished nothing. Jerusalem fell for a final time into Muslim hands in 1244

¹⁶ Thomas F. Madden, 'Outside and Inside the Fourth Crusade,' *The International History Review*, 17, 4 (1995), p. 743.

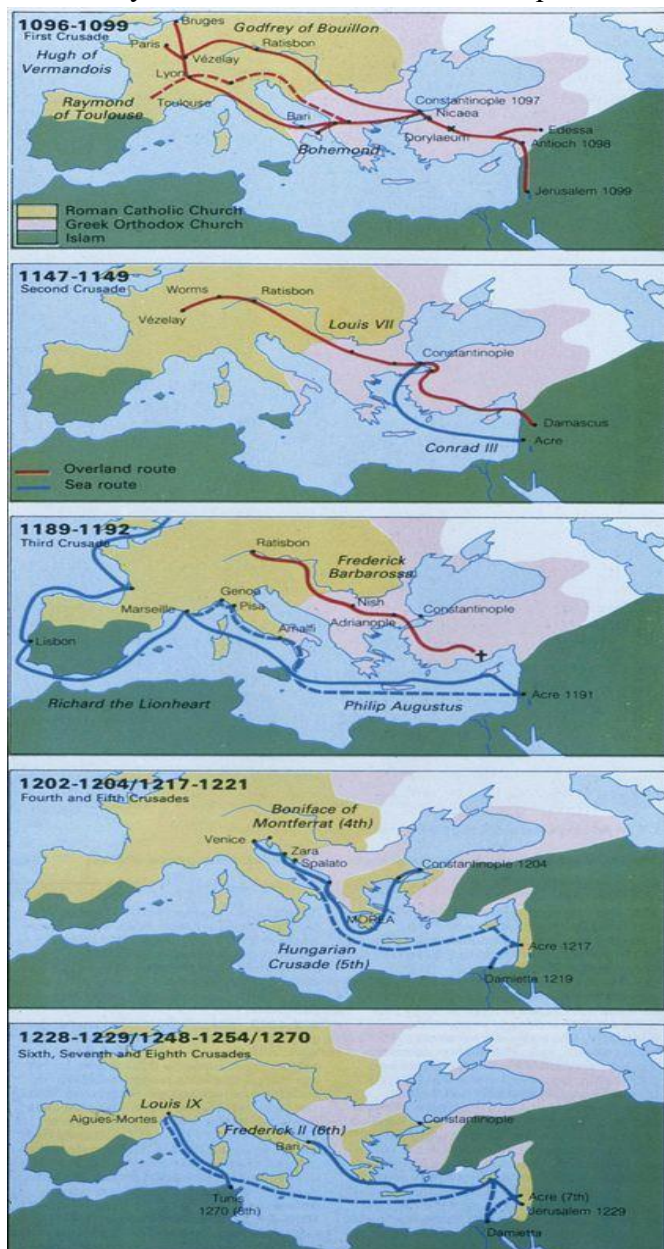
¹⁷ Fordham University, 'Pope Innocent III: Reprimand of Papal Legate,' *Internet Medieval Sourcebook* <<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/1204innocent.asp>>, para. 2-4.

¹⁸ Edward A. Siecienski, 'The Fourth Crusade to the Eve of the Council of Florence,' *The Papacy and the Orthodox: Sources and History of a Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 286.

¹⁹ Brain, 'Timeline of the Crusades.'

²⁰ Fordham University, 'Phillip de Novare: *Les Gestes des Ciprois*, The Crusade of Frederick II, 1228-29,' *Internet Medieval Sourcebook* <<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/1228frederick2.asp>>, para. 13.

and slowly, the Crusader states were conquered in the following years.



JSTOR, 'Crusades,' (11th-13th century).

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After the triumphant success of the First Crusade, the crusading ideal of a Holy War declined despite the continued campaigns and efforts trying to reach back to the glorious first victory. Pope Urban held lofty ambitions at the time of the council of Clermont, centered on the

²¹ STOR, 'Crusades,' (11th - 13th century) < <https://www-jstor-org.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/stable/community.13575043>>

pilgrimage to and recovery of Jerusalem.²² He had an objective of rescuing Christendom and 'its Holy Places from the infidel.'²³ However, by the end of the whole Crusading movement, the Holy Land was even more entrenched in Islamic control and surrounded by an encroaching Mongolian threat. The Church itself had transformed the Holy War from a fight against the infidel with spiritual privileges and indulgences for those who participated into an 'instrument of Papal policy in Europe'²⁴ exhibited in the Crusade launched against Frederick II due to political strife. The enthusiasm waned as well from the First Crusade to even the Fourth when not enough men even showed up to pay the Venetians. Louis IX's Crusade seemed to reveal the loss of God's approval when the saint himself was captured, and many accused the Church of having caused his downfall.²⁵ Steven Runciman was correct to say that 'the romantic story of the Crusades was an epic written in blood.'²⁶

In conclusion, the First Crusade achieved what it set out to do and inspired all of Europe to back its cause. Yet each Crusade afterwards, while having moments of triumph, ultimately ended in defeat and failed in its endeavor to protect and permanently recover the Holy Land from Muslim control. While it never succeeded for any lasting period in its objective, the Crusades have pervaded history and continue to hold a fascination in the modern period. That in itself is a triumph of ideology and speaks to the magnitude of the crusading phenomenon amongst its contemporaries.

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²² Steven Runciman, 'The Decline of the Crusading Ideal,' *The Sewanee Review*, 79, 4 (1971), p. 498

²³ *ibid.*, p. 499.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 506.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 505.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 513.

University, Fordham, 'Eugene III: Summons to a Crusade, Dec 1, 1154,' *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, (1996), < <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/eugene3-2cde.asp>> [accessed 14th May 2026]

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