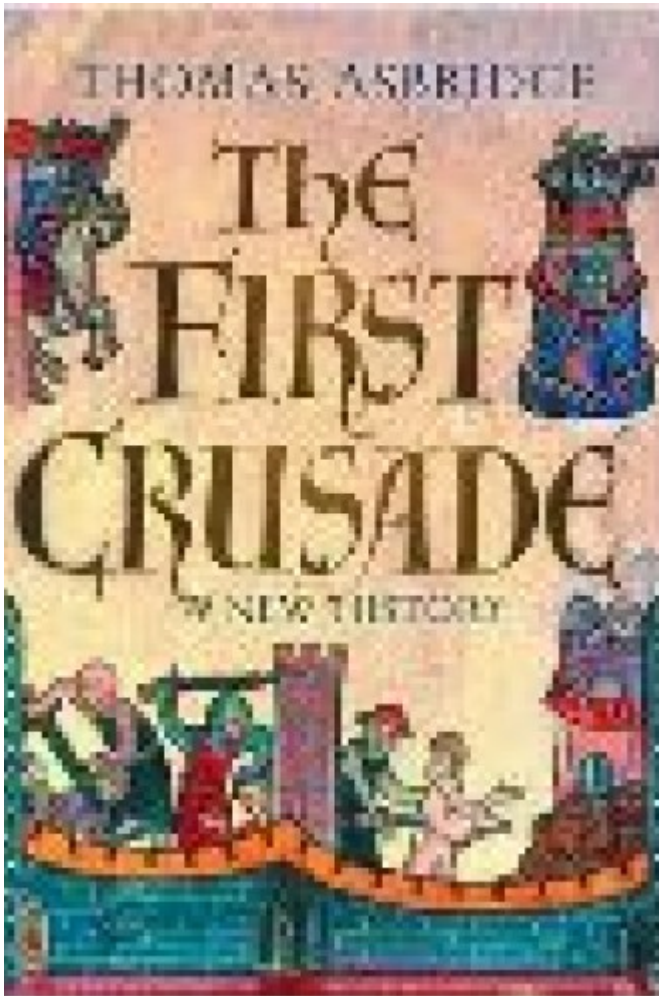


Crusader zeal

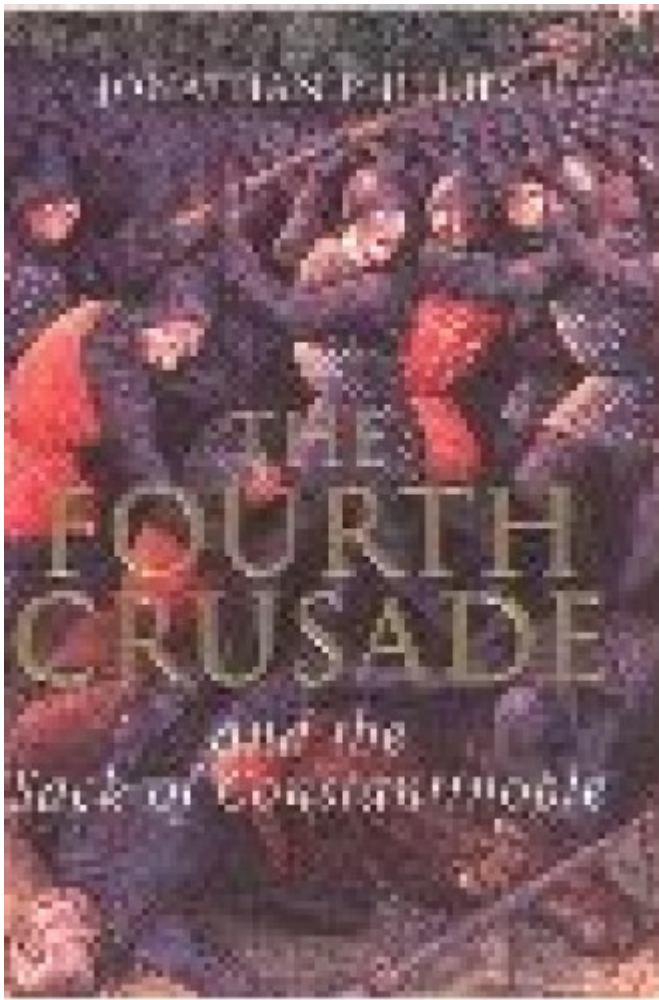
by [Timothy Mark Renick](#) in the [January 25, 2005](#) issue

In Review



The First Crusade: A New History

Thomas Asbridge
Oxford



The Fourth Crusade and the Sack of Constantinople

Jonathan Phillips
Viking

The leader of the Western world stands before his compatriots and outlines a list of atrocities allegedly committed by a demonic and militaristic Muslim power. He warns that even more horrendous crimes are imminent, perhaps this time to be committed on home soil. Sketching the conflict as a battle of good against evil, he calls for a preemptive strike against the foe. As public passions mount, more than 100,000 soldiers embark for the Middle East, confident of a swift and easy victory. But the enemy is persistent and fierce, the war bogs down and longstanding Western alliances are strained to the breaking point. Eventually the leader's original accusations are revealed to be false—even fabricated—conjured to rally support for a war that, critics suggest, was motivated by politics and economics more than by a concern for security and justice.

Although this scenario might sound painfully familiar, the year in question is 1095, not 2004; the leader is Pope Urban II, not President George W. Bush; and the call to arms initiates not a war in Iraq but the long and bloody conflict between Islam and the West known as the Crusades.

Most contemporary pundits reject comparisons between the war in Iraq and the Crusades. Granted, President Bush did make a public relations misstep in the days immediately following the 9/11 attacks when he called the coming U.S.-led war against global terrorism a “crusade” and promised that terrorists would face the “full wrath” of the U.S. “A lot of people think that America is out to get Islam, anyway,” Joshua Salaam, director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, warned at the time. “We’ve got to be very careful of the words we use.”

The president immediately heeded such warnings. Within days he was visiting mosques and calling for religious unity, and had permanently retired the word “crusade” from his public addresses. The war on terrorism is a war against al-Qaeda, not Islam, he says, and the reason for the war is our foes’ clear aggression against innocent people, not their religious convictions. “Islam is a peaceful religion,” the president said. The 9/11 attackers had “hijacked” the faith.

The message seemed clear, and the media nodded in agreement: while the Crusades were a Christian holy war against Islam, the war on terrorism is a secular campaign in defense of justice. The two have nothing to do with each other.

But readers of Thomas Asbridge’s and Jonathan Phillips’s substantive, accessible and surprisingly timely new books on the history of the Crusades will wonder whether this widely held conclusion has been drawn too hastily.

When Pope Urban II called for the First Crusade in a speech before a French crowd at Clermont, he demanded that Christians reestablish their claim to the Holy Land and to the most sacred sites of the religion—Bethlehem, Golgotha and the Holy Sepulchre. These sites had been under Islamic control for more than 400 years, and Urban chastised his audience for allowing this religious injustice to continue for so long. Asbridge notes that the pope’s call to arms was founded on just-war arguments. Urban suggested that war must be initiated to protect the innocents of Jerusalem—to end “the appalling violation of women” and to bring to justice enemies who “cut open the navels of those whom they choose to torment with loathsome death, tear out their most vital organs, and tie them to a stake.” The fact

that these accusations were pure fabrications did not diminish their appeal. Urban knew that Christians would rally behind a moral cause.

No recent atrocities inspired this call to arms, Asbridge and Phillips agree; the threat Islam posed to the West was nebulous at best. Islamic forces had poured into Spain in the early eighth century and had been repelled at the French border by the army of Charlemagne's grandfather, Charles the Hammer. But centuries had passed by the time of Urban's charge. Muslims had integrated peacefully into Spanish society, and Islamic Iberia had blossomed into one of the world's most sublime civilizations. Christians were far better tolerated in most Muslim-ruled countries than Muslims were in Christian-controlled territories.

The power of Muslim Turks in Asia Minor was indeed a growing concern for the Eastern Church. (Urban is speculated to have thought that a Western-led crusade against Islam might help to mend the schism which had split the Eastern and Western churches just a few years before, in 1054.) But while they shared a common religion, Muslims in Turkey, Spain, Syria and Palestine were not united in politics or purpose. By the 11th century, Muslims were far more likely to pursue jihad against their fellow Muslims than against Christendom.

Ironically, it was the brutality of the crusading expeditions that unified Islam. Jerusalem was taken by Christian forces at the end of the First Crusade in 1099, but Western control of the city was short-lived—lasting only about 90 years—and Muslims consistently routed the crusaders in the decades and centuries to follow. Phillips reports that “during the 1170s Saladin emerged as the leader of the Muslims, and he gathered forces of Egypt, Syria, and the Jazira (northern Iraq)” to defeat the crusaders, thus creating the biggest Muslim threat that Christianity had ever faced. The crusaders' attack on Islam provided Muslims with a unity of purpose which had evaded them since the death of Muhammad in the seventh century.

In retrospect, the failure of the Crusades seems almost inevitable. Urban faced serious challenges of “coalition building” from the start. He was not able to convince a single Latin monarch to participate in the First Crusade. This was at least in part because, despite his moral arguments, his call to arms was seen as specious and politically motivated. For years, Urban had struggled to stabilize his power base in Italy and to reassert papal authority in France, his homeland. The call to crusade was seen as a transparent attempt to promote these dual goals.

While kings and knights largely remained deaf to his plea, the lower orders did not. Inspired by a mix of spiritual fervor and hatred for an allegedly demonic enemy, startlingly large numbers of average folks took up arms. The numbers surprised Urban himself. This was a mixed blessing. The response was a public testimony to the continuing power of the papacy, but “tapping into this innate well-pool of discrimination and prejudice was akin to opening a Pandora’s Box,” Asbridge writes. Thousands of peasants set out for Jerusalem on foot, with few provisions, no training and little supervision. They were soon committing the very atrocities of which Muslims had been (falsely) accused.

While passing through Germany crusaders spontaneously slaughtered thousands of Jews, nearly wiping out the Jewish population of the city of Worms. According to one 1096 eyewitness account, “They put a rope around [a Jewish man’s] neck and dragged him throughout the entire city. . . . They said to him, ‘You may still be saved. Do you wish to convert?’ He signaled [no] . . . and they severed his neck.” When Jerusalem was at last sacked in 1099, the peasants, now joined by many knights, were even more brutal. The crusader Raymond of Aquilers recounts: “Some of the pagans were mercifully beheaded, others tortured for a long time [or] burned to death in searing flames. Piles of heads, hands and feet lay in the houses and the streets.”

While there is no indication that Urban directly advocated such acts of barbarism (any more than President Bush advocated the atrocities committed at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq), the acts can be traced to passions he had set in motion. When one’s enemies are repeatedly depicted as animalistic and demonic, one can hardly be surprised when they are treated accordingly. The barbarism confirmed the Muslims’ worst fears about their Christian foes and convinced them that they must strengthen their resistance.

Saladin and other Muslim warlords unabashedly seized upon the crimes of the First Crusade as a motivational tool. “Demanding revenge, they re-ignited the fires of *jihad*, and under the cover of this ideal set out to unify Islam under their despotic rule,” Phillips writes. Osama bin Laden tried a similar tactic when he attempted to rally Muslim unity upon the initiation of the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan in 2001. “This war is similar to the previous crusades, led by Richard the Lionheart, Barbarossa, and Louis of France. In the present age they [the crusaders] rally behind Bush,” bin Laden declared.

Crusaders through the centuries repeatedly found out the difference between subduing a territory through military force and controlling it over the long haul. Clearly, the group of knights and peasants who sacked Muslim-controlled Jerusalem at the end of the First Crusade was better equipped to fight than to rule. Urban had no real “plan for the peace” (to borrow the contemporary phrase). With the sacking of the city, the crusaders considered their job done. Many immediately headed back to Europe. There was no true program for the continued rule and protection of the city. (As was the case in Iraq in 2003, many of Jerusalem’s priceless antiquities were lost in the chaos that followed victory.)

What is striking is how consistently difficult it was for subsequent generations of crusaders and popes to rule their conquered territories. Pope Innocent found it so difficult to maintain an adequate number of troops in Jerusalem that he actually issued a “crusade bull” in December 1198, imposing an annual tax to provide a fund for crusaders who vowed that they would “remain to defend the eastern half for a year or more.”

The Fourth Crusade provides an even more prophetic example of the challenges of ruling a conquered people. Initially intended to target the Muslim military stronghold of Cairo and then to retake Jerusalem, the crusade—through a series of bizarre twists carefully detailed by Phillips—ended up targeting the Christian city of Constantinople. Perhaps schooled by previous conquests, these crusaders brought with them their own candidate for imperial ruler, Prince Alexius, an exiled Byzantine. When one reads Phillips’s description of the crusaders’ arrival at their destination 800 years ago, it’s impossible not to think of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s 2003 predictions that the American forces would be greeted by Iraqis as liberators. “When they arrived at Constantinople in 1203, the crusaders expressed genuine surprise at the hostile reception. . . . It was anticipated that a wave of popular support would sweep [Prince Alexius] back into power without the need for military action.”

In response to the hostile reception in Constantinople, the crusaders set siege to the city, and in April 1204 they plundered it. Again, they had won a military victory, but not control. “In the eleven months between June 1203 and April 1204 no fewer than six men . . . held the imperial title: indication enough of rampant and chronic instability.”

What, then, do we see in the Crusades? Fabricated accusations about a demonized enemy; failures of coalition building; acts of torture and barbarism performed by the alleged defenders of justice; misplaced expectations of popular support from a conquered people; an enemy unified by the very attacks intended to divide it; inadequate planning for postconquest rule; and rampant and chronic instability after victory has been won.

Asbridge and Phillips do not explicitly critique the Iraqi situation and the war on terror. Both are careful historians who refrain from such conceptual leaps—and the historical tales each tells are gripping in their own right. Each book has much to commend it. Asbridge's work is the more general and accessible; for readers unfamiliar with the Crusades, it is the place to start. Phillips's book fills a gap in the current literature, covering in detail an episode not well known even to scholars of the period; for readers with a general knowledge about the Crusades, his will supply fresh and entertaining elements.

But history at its best—and these books clearly represent good history—not only entertains, it informs. As we grapple with a new war fought against a Muslim threat and new efforts to control and transform a conquered people, history can provide insights not only into where we have been, but into where we may be going. Our leaders tell us that the Crusades were a Christian holy war against Islam, whereas the war in Iraq is a just war against terror. But these books vividly demonstrate that the gap between then and now may be smaller than some would like us to believe. They suggest that the holy wars of the past were as much a product of politics and secular desires as any war today, and that the war in Iraq may be neither holy nor just, but merely business as usual.