

How historically accurate is the movie the Kingdom of Heaven?

14-17 minutes



[The Kingdom of Heaven](#) is a 2005 historical epic directed by Ridley Scott, who directed some of the most memorable movies of recent decades such as *Gladiator*. The historical epic was produced in Spain and Morocco. The movie starred Orlando Bloom, Eva Green, Liam Neeson, and Jeremy Irons, among others. The movie was scripted by Academy Award winner William Monahan. It was one of the most anticipated releases in 2005 but the theatrical release did not live up to expectations. The motion picture was something of a box-office flop and was not liked by the critics who complained that felt incomplete and fragmentary.

Most of the movie's problems because Ridley Scott was forced to cut his original version of the picture by the studio executives. He did this against his will and these cuts gutted the movie. Later, Scott was allowed to

release a director's cut of the movie on Blu-ray and DVD. The new cut included many scenes that Scott was forced to delete and is fifty minutes longer than the theatrical release. The director's cut was a dramatic improvement and was widely praised by the critics. It is now regarded as the definitive version of the movie. This article evaluates the director's cut of Kingdom of Heaven and its historical accuracy instead of the dramatically inferior theatrical version.

The historical background

The aftermath of the Battle of Hattin from a medieval manuscript

The background to the British director's movie was the decline and the fall of the First Kingdom of Jerusalem (1091-1087). This kingdom was established by the Crusaders after they had captured the city in 1081. They were Christian knights and soldiers who had taken a religious vow to recapture the sacred sites in the Holy Land (modern Israel). The Kingdom of Jerusalem had been under near constant attack from the Arabs and Muslims, for whom the city is of great religious significance.^[1]

The movie captures the constant and brutal conflict between the Christians and the Muslims in the area. The Crusaders were motivated to fight in the Holy Land out of religious fervor and they genuinely believed that they could save their souls from eternal damnation by fighting the Muslims. The movie concentrates on the growing threat posed to the Kingdom of Jerusalem by the rise of the Ayyubid Sultanate. This was a kingdom founded by Saladin who deposed the last Fatimid Caliph in Egypt and later captured Syria. He was the most powerful Islamic ruler in the region in a century. The movie captures the threat posed by Saladin to the Crusaders because he was often regarded as a military genius.

Scott's movie accurately depicts the lead up to the Battle of Hattin (1187). While the Battle of Hattin is one of the most significant battles in world history, it was a one-sided slaughter. Scott does not spend much time on

the Hattin and the climax of the movie focuses on the defense of Jerusalem. Scott's decision makes a lot of sense because the defense of Jerusalem is a far more compelling story.^[2]

Scott's depiction of the Crusaders near-annihilation at Hattin and Saladin's siege of Jerusalem and Scott's are both fairly accurate. The capture of Jerusalem was a complete disaster for the Crusaders, and they lost most of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. In the movie, this is shown as leading to the start of the Third Crusade and attempt by mainly English and French Crusaders to recapture Jerusalem.^[3] This is also historically accurate. In general, the historical background of the movie and its portrayal of major events such as sieges and battles are not only accurate but extraordinarily well done.

The historicity of the main characters

Balian of Ibelin surrendering Jerusalem to Saladin from a 15th-century manuscript

The main character of the Balian who is played by the English actor Orlando Bloom. The screenwriter loosely based this character on a real-life character. In the movie, Balian is a young blacksmith who decides to go on Crusade when he meets his natural father, who is a knight and who is played by Liam Neeson. Balian is shown as both as both an illegitimate and a humble young man who goes on Crusade to help to secure his wife's salvation after her suicide. The character played by Bloom was based on Balian of Ibelin's. Unlike the movie version, he was a member of the nobility and the legitimate son of his father Barisan of Ibelin. He also was not a blacksmith.^[4]

Instead of using Balian's real father, the movie created a character, Godfrey of Ibelin, played by Liam Neeson. Neeson has played this type of role (the father-like mentor who dies in the movie) several times. In the movie, Neeson's character knights his son right before his death. By recognizing

Balian as his son, Bloom's character inherits his father's holding in the Holy Land. In reality, the knighting of an illegitimate son would not have been legally possible in the Middle Ages without some dispensation from a monarch or the Catholic Church. Ridley Scott introduces Balian as living in France, but his origins are unknown, and his family may have been Italian.

The character is also shown as making his way to the Holy Land, and he did make this journey at some time. His father in the motion picture is shown to be a crusader, and this was indeed the case. The motion picture shows Godfrey of Ibelin as a noble knight who went on Crusade for religious reasons. Balian's father was one of the most powerful lords in the Crusader States. He ruled the County of Jaffa (modern Israel) and was a vassal of the King of Jerusalem .^[5] In the movie we see Balian going on crusade with his father who died before arriving in the Kingdom of Jerusalem. It is likely that Balian had been living in the Crusader kingdom since he was a young man. He was not the only son of Barsian of Ibelin and was, in reality, his youngest son. His father gave Balian a large area of land and a castle and he too became a vassal of the King of Jerusalem.^[6] He would have been very familiar with the culture and politics of the region. Scott's depiction makes sense from a storytelling perspective. Most viewers would have been unfamiliar with the Crusader Nation. Balian provides a window into this world for the audience. While it is inaccurate from a historical perspective, it allows Scott to introduce this bizarre world to a modern audience.

Balian is portrayed as a young man in Kingdom of Heaven, but by this time period, the real Balian was already a mature man. The movie does correctly show that in the 1180s that Balian was a major figure in the politics of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. He was very involved in the power struggles that greatly weakened the realm. In the movie, the hero is shown as struggling to save the Kingdom from various factions who were only interested in power. In reality, Balian was quite Machiavellian and sought to increase his own power and influence at the expense of his rivals. However, the movie does accurately show that the character played by Bloom was a great and brave knight.

To the movie's credit, it does a good job accurately portraying the defense of Jerusalem by Balian and his forces. In the movie, Balian was shown as an outstanding swordsman, a brave leader, and an outstanding tactician. Bloom's character became the commander of the Christian garrison of Jerusalem before the Battle of Hattin and he devised the defense of Jerusalem that effectively beat off countless attacks by the Muslims. Balian was the commander, but the movie diminishes the importance of other leaders who were also pivotal in the defense of Jerusalem. Balian is essentially a composite character for the purposes of this battle.



Balian and Saladin reaching a negotiated settlement that ended the bloody siege. This was actually the case and the Christian did agree to surrender the city on terms in 1187. In one of the most memorable scenes, we see the main character as leading the Christians safely out of Jerusalem as he hands it over to Saladin. This actually happened and the Muslims did allow the garrison and the Christian population to leave the city unmolested. In the movie after the surrender of Jerusalem to the Muslim Sultan that he returns to Europe with Sybilla. In one scene he is shown as living happily as a blacksmith in his native village and refusing the entreaties of English knights to go on the Third Crusade. In fact, after the fall of Jerusalem Balian stayed in the region and he became one of the leaders of the Crusader states. He actually participated in the Third Crusades and was a key advisor to the legendary Richard the Lionheart. Scott shows the main character as having good relations with Muslim and indeed in real-life Balian of Ibelin had a good relationship with Saladin.

Sibylla of Jerusalem

In *Kingdom of Heaven*, Balian has a passionate affair with Sibylla of Jerusalem. She was a real-life character and a sister of King of Jerusalem and later became Queen of the Kingdom after she married Guy Lisignan.^[7] She was a very powerful woman and had an extraordinary amount of influence among the Crusaders. I

In real life, she was married to Guy de Lusignan (1150-1194), but Sibylla did not have affair with Balian. Additionally, Sybilla did not return to Europe and live in a remote village as shown in the climax of the movie. Balian was married to a Byzantine Princess and Sibylla remained married to Guy and never left him. Ultimately, she succumbed an epidemic while campaigning with Guy in 1190, dying at the age of thirty.^[8] The love affair between Sibylla of Jerusalem and Balian while an important part of the movie was completely fiction.

Guy de Lusignan

One of the key characters in the Kingdom of Heaven is Guy de Lusignan. He was a real-life historical character and critical in the fall of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. He is the villain in *Kingdom of Heaven*, and that's essentially correct. He had been expelled from France for murder, and he had fled to the Kingdom of Jerusalem. Guy later married Sibylla and became King of Jerusalem after the death of Sibylla's brother. In the motion picture, he is shown as a radical anti-Muslim and is closely aligned with the Knights Templars.^[9] In the movie, Guy repeatedly made horrible decisions. Each of the decisions was driven by his hatred of Muslims and his desire to expel them from the Holy Land. Essentially, his choices led to the Battle of Hattin, the slaughter of the army of Jerusalem, and the expulsion of the Crusaders from Jerusalem.

In one of the key scenes in the movie, Guy and his allies are to shown attacking a caravan of Muslims. The then kill every man, woman, and child in the caravan in violation of their agreement with Saladin. This attack forced Saladin to invade the Kingdom of Jerusalem, which was a disaster for the Crusaders. This attack occurred, and Guy's massacre of innocent Muslims provoked Saladin. This incident precipitated the capture of Jerusalem by the Muslims.^[10]

The movie shows Balian and Guy as implacable enemies, and this is only partially true. The men in real life had a complicated relationship.

Occasionally, they were enemies and other times allies. In the movie, there is a duel between Balian and Guy. Balian easily defeats Guy and utterly humiliates him. Balian's victory elevated him and disgraced Guy. While it's enjoyable to watch Balian school Guy, it is unlikely that the duel ever took place. There are no records of Balian and Guy engaging in hand to hand combat.

Moreover, Guy, after the fall of Jerusalem, still had a claim on the kingship of the Crusader states through his wife, Sybilla. He remained in the former Kingdom of Jerusalem and began a civil war in a desperate bid to become king but was defeated. Ultimately, he was forced to flee from the Holy Land. Despite his repeated failures, he was able, after he fled, to seize control of the island of Cyprus and become its Lord. He even established a dynasty, and his successors ruled the islands as kings, until the coming of the Ottomans in 1476.^[11]

Conclusion

Despite its rocky start, *Kingdom of Heaven* after the release of the Director's Cut has been hailed by critics and has been discovered by audiences. Remarkably, the movie does a good job balancing historical accuracy and telling a story. The historical background and major events such as the Battle of Hattin are portrayed in a fairly accurate way. It does a good explaining the decline and fall of the First Kingdom of Jerusalem. The nature of warfare at the time is shown very well. Moreover, it does present a realistic portrait of Saladin. In essence, this the type of historical accuracy most movies should strive for.

The Kingdom of Heaven does take liberties with the historical figures involved in the Fall of Jerusalem, but these choices made a lot of sense. Balian, Sibylla, and Neeson's character were either heavily fictionalized or created specifically for the movie, but each of these characters is critical to tell the story. Balian, in addition to being the hero, serves as a guide for the

viewer. It is through his eyes that the viewers are introduced to the Crusades, learn about the history of the Kingdom of Jerusalem, and are shown the divisions with the Kingdom that lead to its destruction. Sibylla also helps connects the viewer to the decaying Kingdom and humanizes the King of Jerusalem, played by Edward Norton.

Ultimately, *Kingdom of Heaven* does a pretty good job telling an exciting and surprisingly historically accurate story.

Further Reading

Bernard Hamilton, "Women in the Crusader States: The Queens of Jerusalem", in *Medieval Women*, edited by Derek Baker. (London, Ecclesiastical History Society, 1978).

Hindley, Geoffrey. *Saladin: Hero of Islam* (London, Pen & Sword, 2007).

Hillenbrand, Carole. *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives* (London, Routledge, 2000).

References

1. [Jump up ↑](#) Runciman, Steve. *A History of the Crusades, vol. II: The Kingdom of Jerusalem* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1952), p 167
2. [Jump up ↑](#) Runciman, p 189
3. [Jump up ↑](#) Runciman, p 189
4. [Jump up ↑](#) William of Tyre, *A History of Deeds Done Beyond the Sea*. E. A. Babcock and A. C. Krey, trans (Columbia, Columbia University Press, 1943), p 114
5. [Jump up ↑](#) William of Tyre, p 201
6. [Jump up ↑](#) William of Tyre, p 212
7. [Jump up ↑](#) Bernard Hamilton, "Women in the Crusader States: The Queens of Jerusalem", in *Medieval Women*, edited by Derek Baker. (London, Ecclesiastical History Society, 1978), p 17
8. [Jump up ↑](#) William of Tyre, p. 178

9. [Jump up](#) ↑ Runciman, p 212
10. [Jump up](#) ↑ Runciman, p 213
11. [Jump up](#) ↑ Edbury, Peter. The Kingdom of Cyprus and the Crusades, 1191–1374 (Cambridge, 1991), p 22