

Historian Alex von Tunzelmann assesses the accuracy of Kingdom of Heaven

Alex von Tunzelmann

6-7 minutes

Director: Ridley Scott

Entertainment grade: E

History grade: C–

Kingdom of Heaven tells the story of the fall of Jerusalem to Saladin in 1187, the climax of the Saracen sultan's dramatic reconquest of the Holy Land from the Crusaders. Saladin's victory triggered the Third Crusade, led by Richard the Lionheart. In Ridley Scott's film, it is also replete with allusions to modern American adventures in the Middle East.

People



▲ Disastrously miscast ... Orlando Bloom in Kingdom of Heaven

The film's hero, Balian (a disastrously miscast Orlando Bloom), is a composite of two real-life brothers, Balian and Baldwin of Ibelin. In 1184, he sails for the Holy Land, but a storm wrecks his ship. Washed up on a Syrian beach, he makes for a watering hole. Two Arabs ride up, and there's a macho standoff. This plotline has nothing to do with the Crusades, but it is stolen shamelessly from Lawrence of Arabia. Almost seven and a half centuries out. Not a promising start.

Politics



▲ Like the Green Goblin ... Edward Norton in Kingdom of Heaven. Photograph: Kobal

In Jerusalem, King Baldwin IV (Edward Norton) is busy dying of leprosy. He's wearing a silver mask that makes him look a bit like the Green Goblin, but he can be forgiven that, because he reminisces correctly about his victory as a 16-year-old lad over Saladin's forces at the Battle of Montgisard.

War



▲ Some passable scenes ... the Crusades in Kingdom of Heaven. Photograph: Kobal

Hawkish fundies Reynald de Châtillon and Guy de Lusignan try to start a war with the Saracens at Kerak. But it becomes a bit of a washout when the Green Goblin has a friendly chat with Saladin, and everyone decides to calm down and go home. If only more of the Crusades could have been settled with a friendly chat. The real Saladin backed down from a fight at Kerak because his armies were called away to defend Egypt. By this point, the movie is far too busy trying to draw tiresome parallels between Reynald de Châtillon and Donald Rumsfeld to show anything so interesting as an actual battle.

Dialogue

"I once fought for two days with an arrow through my testicle." A proud boast, but implausible. However badass twelfth-century warriors may have

been, an arrow lodged in one's testicle from any angle makes it extremely difficult to walk.

Violence

Following the king's death, Guy accedes to the throne of Jerusalem. He meets Saladin to negotiate. Saladin offers him a cup of water filled with precious ice, which Guy dismissively hands to Reynald. 'I did not give you the cup,' snarls Saladin. He whips out a curved dagger and slashes Reynald's throat, spraying blood all over the tent. Factually, this scene is spot on. But the brief moment of genuine historical thrill does little to quicken the pulse. Even the actors look bored.

More war



▲ Saladin's armies mass digitally outside Jerusalem ... Kingdom of Heaven. Photograph: Kobal

As Saladin's forces assemble digitally outside Jerusalem, Balian rallies the inhabitants for a last stand. What isn't shown is that the real Balian of Ibelin only ended up in Jerusalem by mistake, while he was in the process of doing a runner. Far from being a hero, he tried to weasel out of defending the city. In the film, Balian and Saladin sort things out with another friendly chat. In reality, Balian's behaviour was disgraceful, threatening that he would murder 5000 Muslim slaves and torch the Dome of the Rock and the Mosque al-Aqsa unless Saladin let him surrender.

Religion

Saladin enters Jerusalem and, walking through a church, picks up a fallen crucifix and reverently replaces it. Some western audiences scoffed, but this scene is justified. Saladin's victory is renowned as one of the most honourable in history.

Verdict



▲ Washed up on a Syrian beach ... Orlando Bloom in Kingdom of Heaven. Photograph: Kobal

Kingdom of Heaven has several passable scenes, especially if you can face another 45 minutes and watch the Director's Cut. But it is hampered by its desire to show that, apart from a few bad apples, Crusaders and Saracens were all moderate, tolerant and jolly reasonable chaps. The message: war is bad, and most Muslims are not villains. Admirable sentiments, but ones that are difficult to take seriously coming from the director of *Black Hawk Down*. The Crusades were never this dull.

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