

Kingdom of Heaven: Fact vs. Myth - Crusades and Crusaders

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7-9 minutes

Baldwin IV of Jerusalem: King, Leper, Crusader - History vs. Myth



My passion for the History of the Crusades was ignited in the fall of 2005 when I first saw the film, *Kingdom of Heaven* in one of UNBC's few spacious theatre-type classrooms. I enjoyed that movie so much, I put it at the top of my Christmas wish-list. Much to my delight, I held a copy of *Kingdom of Heaven* in my hands on Christmas morning that year.

Ever since then, I've watched *Kingdom of Heaven* several times over. I was so much in awe of the historical time and place the movie captures, and of the characters, Balian d'Ibelin, Baldwin the Leper King and Salah-ad-Din. Curious to know more about 12th century Palestine and whether *Kingdom*

of Heaven was based purely on fact or fiction, I did extensive research on this subject matter. I discovered that, while Ridley Scott – the producer of *Kingdom of Heaven* – was accurate in some areas, he missed the mark in so many other areas.

Here below are the historical facts that Ridley Scott did stick to.

- The Christian army was utterly crushed at the Battle of Hattin in July 1187.

- Salah-ad-Din then marched on Jerusalem; laid siege to the Holy City and captured it in 1187. Unlike the First Crusaders, Salah-ad-Din spared the Christians from slaughter. Thanks to his good relations with Balian d'Ibelin and to his own skills as negotiator. Unfortunately, Salah-ad-Din also took thousands of Christians as slaves as those unfortunate people were unable to pay the fee necessary to buy their freedom.

- Balian d'Ibelin defended Jerusalem and the people within its walls.

- Jerusalem didn't have a strong garrison. Balian and a few of his knights – ones who escaped the slaughter at Hattin — were the only men capable of defending the city, so Balian knighted all men he thought were capable of bearing arms.

- Guy de Lusignan did in fact marry Princess Sybilla and he was arrogant, foolish and incredibly ignorant: he knew nothing about Levantine politics and military strategy.

- Reynald de Chatillon was a ruthless, bloodthirsty adventurer. He mercilessly attacked Arab caravans even after King Baldwin negotiated a 2-year truce with Salah-ad-Din. While Reynald terrified Muslim pilgrims, his actions aided the destruction of the Kingdom of Jerusalem because they gave the Arabs a valid reason to rally behind Salah-ad-Din in the spirit of Jihad.

- Guy de Lusignan was captured and held captive following the capture of Jerusalem.

- After the Battle of Hattin ended, Salah-ad-Din had Reynald slain in front of Guy after Reynald took a cup of water that was meant for Guy to drink.
- King Baldwin was a leper. Whether he wore a mask is unknown. No doubt he did given his royal status.
- Balian was well-liked and highly respected by his fellow men-at-arms, including – and especially – by King Baldwin.

Now, here is where Ridley Scott strayed from the path of historical accuracy and entered into the realm of fiction in order to appeal to many people.

- In the film, Balian is a blacksmith who meets his estranged father (Godfrey) and moves from Europe to the Holy Land to fight for the Cross. The real Balian d'Ibelin was born in Palestine; the third son of the nobleman Barison d'Ibelin.
- The film Balian had a wife who committed suicide after her child died at birth. In Jerusalem, he met Princess Sybilla and fell in love with her. The real Balian married the Dowager Queen Maria Comnena (widow of the former King Amalric I) and had four children with her. It was Baldwin, Balian's older brother, who had a love affair with Princess Sybilla.
- In the film, Balian was portrayed as an agnostic. He constantly questioned his faith and even doubted Christianity. He was also somewhat of a wimp. The only time he showed any courage was when he defended Jerusalem near the end of the movie. The real Balian was deeply Christian and chivalrous. His marriage to Queen Maria was as close to a love match as marriage was in those days (in medieval times, marriage was seldom based on love). Yet, he was courageous; a lion in battle and merciless when necessity compelled.
- In the film, Balian stayed in Jerusalem while the rest of the Christian army was annihilated under the horns of Hattin. He willingly defended the Holy City against Salah-ad-Din's numerically superior army. In truth, Balian fought at the Battle of Hattin and was lucky enough to escape. After

learning that his wife and children were in Jerusalem, Balian negotiated with Salah-ad-Din the safe conduct of his family out of the Holy City. He had no intention of defending the Holy City. He only stayed and defended Jerusalem because the people there begged him to do so.

– The film version of Baldwin IV sought peace with Salah-ad-Din. The real Baldwin IV was not the peace-loving leper king that Ridley Scott desired him to be: like all medieval men, Baldwin was deeply religious and ardently committed to the defense and preservation of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. Watch the video above.

– The film Sybilla was kind, honest, yet meek. The real Sybilla was a frivolous, arrogant brat who was incredibly lustful. Ridley's Sybilla also disliked and – to a point – feared Guy. The real Sybilla was head-over-heels in love with Guy.

– In the film, Templars were hung for taking part in Reynald's bloody raids on Arab caravans. Also, Reynald was a Templar himself. In reality, the Knights Templar was a religious order that swore their fealty to the Pope and only the Pope. No secular order, including the King of Jerusalem, had any authority over them. Yet, the King relied heavily on them for the defense of the Kingdom because they were the fiercest fighters of all the warriors.

The real Reynald of Chatillon was not a Templar although he was an ally of the Templars. He was a lord, albeit not a well-liked one.

– In the film, Salah-ad-Din and the Muslims in general are portrayed as a peaceful-loving people who were hard done by the Christians. That is completely inaccurate. There were several moments in time between the First Crusade and the fall of Jerusalem in 1187 when Christians and Muslims lived with and worked together peacefully. In fact, as Salah-ad-Din worked hard to unite Islam in the latter half of the 12th century, political and social divisions within the Kingdom of Jerusalem tore the kingdom apart, leaving it vulnerable to its enemies. Muslim-Christian tensions heated up once again, but that time, the Christians were on the defensive.

– At the end of the film, after Salah-ad-Din captured Jerusalem, he found a cross lying on the floor of the Royal Palace. He placed that cross respectfully on a table. In reality, Salah-ad-Din and his followers had no love or respect for the Christian faith. They dragged the True Cross through the streets of Jerusalem.

It would have been nice if Ridley Scott had followed the history of the film's setting much more closely and portrayed the characters' as how they really were, or as best as he was able to. Regardless, *Kingdom of Heaven* is an enjoyable movie. Despite the fictional elements, it captures all the color, drama and bloodshed of the times.