

Medieval as Modern: The Historical Accuracy of *Kingdom of Heaven*

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11-13 minutes

A film based on a well-known historical episode elicits an immediate question: “How accurate is it?” For a controversial episode of history such as the Crusades, the issue of historical accuracy becomes even more relevant. When Ridley Scott released his Crusade epic *Kingdom of Heaven* in 2005, his film provoked widespread controversy from historians and derision from film critics. The film’s historical denigrators were divided into “Muslim historians offended at the film’s purported misrepresentation of the Saracens and non-Muslim historians offended by misrepresentations of the Christians.” Film critics thought the film’s theatrical cut shallow and truncated.

However valid these criticisms were, many of them were muted by the release of a 192-minute director’s cut of the film in 2006, which was both more historically accurate and artistically satisfying. Important historical episodes like the crowning of the young King Baldwin V were added back into the film, and the characters’ motivations were made clearer with the extra running time.

While it may be going too far to take the view of Dr. Hamid Dabashi and say, “You don’t go to a work of art to learn about history,” the artistic purpose of a film will always trump its need for historical accuracy, even in the case of a historically-based film. Such is the case with *Kingdom of Heaven*. The film’s historical inaccuracies are not the result of a lack of research, but deliberate creative decisions.

By analyzing the film alongside the historical reality of the situations it depicts, one comes to a better understanding of how *Kingdom of Heaven* presents a readily comprehensible twenty-first century fable set in the twelfth-century. Through its portrayal of Reynald de Chatillon, Guy de Lusignan and the Templars, Saladin, and Balian of Ibelin, Ridley Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven* sacrifices rigid historical fidelity in order to secure relevance in modern society.

In *Kingdom of Heaven* Crusaders are seen mostly in a negative light, with Reynald de Chatillon, Guy de Lusignan, and the Templars occupying the necessary roles of villains. The depiction of Reynald is the most historically accurate portrait of any character in the film. According to a contemporary Muslim historian Ibn al-Athir, "Prince Reynald, lord of Kerak, was one of the greatest and wickedest of the Franks, the most hostile to the Muslims and the most dangerous to them." As the film depicts, Reynald had a running rivalry with Saladin, raiding his caravans and even capturing his sister in a raid that became the provocation for Saladin's invasion of Jerusalem. Even Christian historians agreed that Reynald was an evil figure. William of Tyre saw Reynald's aggression towards Muslims and his illegal raiding of caravans as the "pretext for the loss of the kingdom of Jerusalem." The twelfth-century Muslim view of Crusaders was that they were courageous and skilled warriors, but barbaric in all other aspects.

Kingdom of Heaven certainly portrays the Crusaders in such a light. Although King Baldwin IV and Tiberias are seen as moderates with a philosophical commitment to religious pluralism – things they were not in reality – Reynald, Guy, and the Templars embody the ultraviolent religious fanaticism that the Crusades are known for. In actuality, Guy de Lusignan was little more than an ineffective king who had won the heart of Sibylla. However, because the film includes a romance between Balian and Sibylla, the need for an antagonist to Balian arises, and Guy is made more villainous to fill the role. He is a counterpoint to Balian – a knight who demonstrates all the negative qualities of knighthood just as Balian demonstrates all of its positive qualities. He becomes closely associated

with Reynald, a man who in reality thought him a pathetic king, in order to assert his villainy.

Together, Reynald, Guy, and the Templars become both an embodiment of our twenty-first century view of the “barbaric” Crusaders and a reflection of the arch-villain of our own time: the religious fanatic. It is no accident that because *Kingdom of Heaven* was made after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, the film depicts violence done in the name of religion as the ultimate evil. The Templars’ belief in their divine authority – “God wills it!” – and their overzealous hatred of Muslims defines them as such villains.

The film ignores the fundamental Crusader concept that violence done in the name of God can be good and just, because such a concept is impossible to relate to the modern moviegoer. Modern audiences see violence done in the name of religion as indisputably evil and medieval opinions that would endorse said violence are unacceptable. This is why the heroes of *Kingdom of Heaven* are religious skeptics and the Templars are the film’s villains. In order for *Kingdom of Heaven* to relate to modern audiences, the villains had to embody the Crusader as he has come to be seen in the post-colonial world.

In medieval Christendom there existed two opposing views of Saladin. One was that he was a murderous infidel prince, an apocalyptic figure connected with End Times concepts from the Book of Revelation. The other was a romanticized infidel king, the best of the non-Christian rulers as portrayed in *The Divine Comedy* by Dante. The version of Saladin found in *Kingdom of Heaven* is the latter. Saladin is viewed as a humanist ruler.

When Balian first meets Tiberias, Tiberias comments that “Saladin and the King between them would make a better world.” Saladin is presented as the Muslim counterpart to Baldwin, another skeptical, moderate king who rules with honour and justice. In reality, Saladin was seen as magnanimous but also ruthless by both Christians and Muslims. Saladin became the hero of the Islamic world by uniting the Muslim kingdoms together in order to oppose the Crusaders. It was his dream to drive the Crusaders out of Jerusalem and reinstate Islamic control of the Holy Land. In a few

instances, *Kingdom of Heaven* does show glimpses of Saladin's ruthlessness. The episode where he slits Reynald's throat and then beheads him after the Battle of Hattin is an example of his desire for revenge, a scene taken right out of historical fact. However, for the most part Saladin is seen more as the romanticized philosopher king. A significant event that is left out of the film is Saladin ordering his Sufi mystics to execute the Templar prisoners after the Battle of Hattin. Saladin's demand for ransom for the people of Jerusalem is also omitted from the film, simplifying the climax's resolution and making Saladin seem more generous.

The Saladin in *Kingdom of Heaven* is a deliberate depiction of the moderate Muslim, an olive branch-of-sorts to Muslim viewers of the film. *Kingdom of Heaven's* Saladin is religious, but does not allow religion to make him a fool. In one instance he lectures one of his angry generals, asking him, "How many battles did God win for the Muslims before I came?" In order to have a hero on both the Christian and the Muslim sides, Saladin could not be presented in radical terms, and thus, both his religiosity and ruthlessness are downplayed. Instead like Balian and Baldwin, it is his moderate nature and honour that is emphasized, and he is one of the few characters in the film whose virtue remains intact throughout. If nothing else, *Kingdom of Heaven's* Saladin defies the stereotypes of Hollywood's Muslim, becoming the film's non-Western hero and mitigating any perceived western bias.

Balian of Ibelin as presented in *Kingdom of Heaven* has almost no basis in history. The only historical facts that the film's Balian shares with the real Balian are his name, his renown, and his defense and surrendering of Jerusalem to Saladin. The historical Balian of Ibelin was not born in France, but in Ibelin; was not the illegitimate son of Godfrey but the legitimate son of Barisan of Ibelin; did not have a relationship with Sibylla, princess of Jerusalem, but was married to Maria Comnena, the widow of the father of Baldwin and Sibylla; and fought at the Battle of Hattin.

The main reason for the disparity between fact and fiction is the convention in historical fiction to have a completely fictional protagonist whom the

audience sympathizes with. The filmmakers were adamant that their hero be the man who surrendered Jerusalem to Saladin, but that was where their fidelity to history ended. The filmmakers made Balian an outsider of Jerusalem so that the audience would be introduced to the world of the Holy Land along with him. He is the audience's window into the film, the reluctant perfect knight with whom we sympathize throughout the film.

Although the biographical details of *Kingdom of Heaven's* Balian of Ibelin have no basis in history, the moral character of Balian does. In the historical accounts, Balian is seen as the one Christian to retain his wisdom and composure leading up to and after the disaster of the Hattin. The film uses Balian as the template for a perfect knight, portraying his journey to Jerusalem to seek forgiveness for himself and his dead wife as an example of the purer motivations of the Crusades. Balian characterizes the medieval ideals of knighthood: honour, courage, chivalry, and military prowess. The historical Balian was such a revered knight "whose standing...was equal to that of the king" that the Patriarch of Jerusalem begged him to defend the city against Saladin's impending attack, being the last defender of Jerusalem just like in the film. Balian's speech to Saladin at the defense of Jerusalem – "Before I lose it, I will burn it to the ground. Your holy places – ours. Every last thing in Jerusalem that drives men mad." – is very similar to Balian's actual speech to Saladin, which persuaded Saladin to offer terms.

The Balian of *Kingdom of Heaven* may lack all the historical details of the actual Balian, but he shares his namesake's attributes of a perfect knight. Historically, it was "thanks largely to Balian's perseverance and diplomacy [that] the majority of the people [of Jerusalem] were escorted to Christian-held territory." The film's Balian of Ibelin becomes our window into the world of the Crusades and an example of both modern and medieval concepts of a perfect knight.

When discussing the Crusades in the twenty-first century it is necessary to rethink the Eurocentric notions that have dominated such discussions over the centuries. A modern film dealing with the Crusades has to be sensitive to the East-West dialectic that has arisen due to the terrorist attacks of 11

September 2001. Although *Kingdom of Heaven* veers starkly from the historical records, it depicts characters that are relevant to the modern-day moviegoer and also helps us reevaluate the world of the Crusades. Every consecutive culture has a particular way of understanding the past. Although it does not accurately depict the fall of the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem, *Kingdom of Heaven* is a valid exploration of the clash of Crusader and Muslim over the Holy Land, albeit astutely packaged for modern day sensibilities.