

## Fighting for the Cross: Crusading to the Holy Land

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**Reviewer:**

Nicholas Morton

*Fighting for the Cross* introduces the subject of crusading by exploring the experiences and ideas of individual crusaders travelling to the Holy Land between 1095 and 1291. After a brief narrative history of the crusades, the book's structure follows the journeys of crusaders from the time of their recruitment through to their homecoming, seemingly to allow an audience to engage with the rigours and challenges posed by the undertaking. The book is aimed primarily at students or at an audience with little/no former knowledge of crusading history. Housley has used case-studies taken from translated material where possible, so that his intended readership can access and learn more about the sources cited in the book.

Given his audience, *Fighting for the Cross*' structure is not conventional. Typically, introductory works on the crusades to the Eastern Mediterranean centre on a narrative history of crusading and the Latin East over a set period, perhaps interspersed with some thematic chapters. Housley's work does not follow this pattern and, in its structure, bears closer comparison to more academic studies focused on individual crusading expeditions. Powell's *Anatomy of a Crusade* (1), for example, (as the name suggests), breaks down the Fifth Crusade into its component parts, i.e. recruitment, finance, leadership etc, and dissects them individually. Similar structures can be found in Lower's *The Barons' Crusade* (2) and Phillips' *The Second Crusade: Extending the Frontiers of Christendom* (3), to name but a few. What Housley has done is to adopt this theme-based approach, but to draw his examples from all the major crusades to the Holy Land between 1095 and 1291. In this way, the chapter on transportation 'Eastward bound' compares the difficulties posed by the First, Second and Third Crusades' overland marches to the Holy Land against other seaborne expeditions. This innovative structure is effective because it allows him to build a clear picture of the general 'practice'

of crusading whilst comparing various expeditions to show developments over time.

*Fighting for the Faith*'s first chapter is a 21-page narrative of crusading to the Holy Land between 1095 and 1291. It is written with a clear and engaging style that will assist a reader to grasp almost 200 years of crusading history in a short space of time. Certainly it is necessary to acquire a firm understanding of this chronology because the rest of the book constantly includes anecdotes from all the crusades with only limited contextual information. Nevertheless, it might be best for newcomers to this subject to read a chronological study of the crusades as a prelude to this work, to give them a firmer grounding in the passage of events.

With this narrative in place, chapter two begins to explore the early stages of crusading operations. It discusses the contemporary appeal of crusading, explaining: the medieval preoccupation with sin; the resulting need for penance; pilgrimage as a penitential act and subsequently crusading as an expression of this process. In this way the author outlines the perceived need for crusading from the grassroots of contemporary society's fundamental beliefs. This is elaborated by a series of colourful examples that convey both the nature and the intensity of these religious convictions. This approach is highly effective and builds reader's knowledge, from scratch, to a point where quite sophisticated ideas become accessible.

Like many of the other chapters, Housley draws attention to the way that contemporary ideas concerning crusading evolved over time. In this chapter, for example, he talks about the initial appeal of Jerusalem at the time of the First Crusade and how this was affected later by: Saladin's conquest in 1187; its recovery in 1229; and its subsequent fall in 1244. This developmental approach is taken throughout the work and creates a strong picture of the evolving medieval perception of crusading.

Chapter three looks at the way that crusaders prepared themselves for their expeditions. Again, colourful examples are introduced, such as Richard I's quip that he would sell London to raise money for his expedition if he could. A further strength lies in Housley's analysis of regional differences between crusaders and the way these affected the preparation, conduct and popularity of the crusade. Indeed, throughout the work, Housley builds a broad picture that charts the development of crusaders' ideas both during the progress of their individual campaigns and in the longer chronological arc of the 12th and 13th centuries, whilst simultaneously accommodating regional differences and disparities of class. All these strands are explored without any sense of friction or misunderstanding and this chapter really underlines this key strength.

Having covered the early stages of crusading in Western Christendom, the following four chapters head east into the wars of the Eastern Mediterranean. The first deals with transportation and contrasts the relative merits of travelling to the Levant on land or by sea. It also discusses the difficulties posed by desertion and logistics. The next section dives immediately into battle, detailing sieges, battles and the use of tactics by both sides. It contains a number of case-studies from the various campaigns and evaluates the Franks' awareness of Muslim battlefield tactics and the way they sought to overcome them. These are supported by some small, but useful, maps that give context to the written descriptions. This chapter also covers the history of the Levant before the First Crusade, outlining the significance of the Turkish invasions and their effect on the political world of the medieval Levant. To supplement these key topics, Housley then discusses the military role played by different forms of personnel within a crusading army, including non-combatants, knights, infantry and clerics. He also addresses contemporary ideas concerning chivalry, largely with reference to the way it affected the Franks' battlefield performance. This analysis is logical and builds a very clear picture of the changing military realities of a crusading frontier. It is methodical and filled with lively examples, but it also seems that a stage has been missed out.

Housley's analysis jumps straight from travel to battle without considering the intermediate stages. A factor that had a deep impact on the progress of a number of crusades was the diplomatic contacts between the crusaders and the Franks in the Levant. During the Second Crusade, for example, the behaviour of the prince of Antioch and Eleanor of Aquitaine was a vital factor affecting the subsequent expedition. Other controversies took place during a number of further campaigns including those of Philip of Flanders 1177,

the Third Crusade, the Fifth Crusade, Frederick's Crusade and the Barons' Crusade. Housley does cover relations between crusaders at a later point, particularly between King Richard I of England and Phillip II of France, but the important diplomatic dynamic with the Levantine Franks is generally overlooked.

The following chapter, 'The Needs of the Flesh', explores the crusaders' physical demands. It considers the issues posed by the need to feed tens of thousands of crusaders in hostile territory and the effect that famine and disease had upon the progress of these operations. Within this examination, it is shown how the desire to acquire plunder may not indicate avarice, but rather be a necessary element of gathering supplies. The strength of this chapter lies in the way it forces a reader to confront the practical realities of crusading, encouraging them to engage with the problems posed by these campaigns and the attempts made to overcome them.

Chapter seven, 'Storming Heaven', examines the way that crusaders interpreted their actions through their religious faith. It begins by discussing the many stories found in chronicles in which an individual is reported to have conducted an act of pure piety. In relation to these accounts, Housley informs his audience that there are moments when they should set aside the scepticism they might feel about such tales and view the crusaders on their own terms. This example is indicative of the ongoing challenge within this work, which is to understand the crusaders on their own terms. The considerable context offered throughout the book and the continual references made to the prevailing attitudes of the medieval period support this end. Given that students have to make the leap from our modern capitalist and largely secular society to the deeply pious 12th century, this approach is vital and well executed. This chapter then engages with some of the imagery used by crusaders and chroniclers to explain their expeditions. It draws attention to the parallels made between the Israelites and their struggle to hold the Holy Land and the wars of the crusaders. Within these descriptions Housley uses occasional Latin phrases, for example, *Christi milites*. On these occasions he generally explains what these terms mean, allowing a reader both to engage with phrases common to academic usage and preparing them for other works where such terms might be used as a matter of course. He then covers the monastic and liturgical aspects of crusading and how they changed over time as well as the theological explanations given for victory and defeat.

The next two chapters concern the crusaders' world view and the way they interpreted Islam and the other civilisations they encountered. The first of these sections begins by exploring contemporary Christian preconceptions concerning Muslims and the 'Saracens'. It then shows how these views developed over time, influenced by crusade propaganda and cross-cultural contact. The following chapter examines the crusaders' perceptions of the Middle East in the medieval period and how they interpreted their surroundings geographically and spiritually. Cumulatively, these chapters offer a very detailed and evolving portrayal of common views held by participants. From this foundation, a student would be well prepared to engage with the imagery and ideas contained in most primary texts and would be able to see how a range of concepts that might sound very strange to a modern audience would have fitted together to form the medieval world view.

The final chapter deals with the crusaders' return journey and their reception by family, friends and fellow countrymen. It also considers the longer term effects of a crusading expedition, with reference to its memorialisation and remembrance and the way that such commemorative acts shaped future crusading expeditions. This analysis underlines the importance of the First Crusade and its immense impact on the Christian world as a whole and crusading in particular. Throughout this chapter, and at various points throughout the book, Housley draws upon a range of different types of source including stained glass and architecture, demonstrating the importance of an inter-disciplinary approach to this subject.

With a book of this kind the overriding issue for a teacher of history is always: 'Given the range of high-quality introductory materials available, would I recommend this work to my own students?' In this case the answer is definitely 'Yes'. Housley has clearly thought very carefully about his audience and his work makes allowance for their lack of familiarity with the medieval period and, starting with basic principles, builds a compelling and rich picture of the experience of crusading. The written style and use of suggestive and colourful case-studies makes the work a compelling read, while its scholarly authority is absolutely solid. The text is supplemented by a range of maps, colour and black/white illustrations and a timeline,

which provide further valuable context. In general, *Fighting for the Cross* brings together a wide range of different themes, time-periods, regions, ideas and personalities and shows how they interacted with one another. This takes place within an innovative and highly-effective structure. In the analysis above, a number of minor queries have been raised; however, these should not detract from an extremely valuable and effective piece of work that *will* help students to engage with this period, while motivating them to learn more.

## Notes

1. James M. Powell, *Anatomy of a Crusade: 1213–1221* (Philadelphia, PA, 1986).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Michael Lower, *The Barons' Crusade: a Call to Arms and its Consequences* (Philadelphia, PA, 2005).  
[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Jonathan Phillips, *The Second Crusade: Extending the Frontiers of Christendom* (New Haven, CT, 2007).[Back to \(3\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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