



THE FALL OF ACRE

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I often say that the Crusades were a high point of Western civilization. And they were, but they were also an example of flawed glory. Certainly, the goal of the Crusades was peerlessly laudable, and the virtues shown by Crusaders admirable.



At the same time, the Holy Land Crusades illustrated key weaknesses of the West, and, after all, if nothing succeeds like success, nothing fails like failure. In Roger Crowley's *The Accursed Tower* all of this is on display, though Christian valor is probably the dominant theme, as it should be. In a sane society, the events of this book would be used for a blockbuster movie featuring the Christians as doomed heroes. Not in today's society, to be sure, but maybe in tomorrow's.

The book's focus is the final years of the Crusader States, which were founded after the epic success of the First Crusade in reconquering Muslim-occupied Palestine in A.D. 1099, and are generally deemed to have ended with the fall of the ancient city of Acre to the Mamluk sultan [Al-Ashraf Khalil](#) in 1291.

The Crusader States had been in decline since [Saladin's](#) victory at the [Horns of Hattin](#) in 1187, and what intermittent respite the Crusaders had gotten from Muslim pressure came from Muslim disunity, not Crusader gains. Then as now, Muslim discord was the norm ([Frederick II](#) took advantage of it to regain Jerusalem by treaty in 1228; it was lost again in 1244).

But off and on, due to religious fervor or political consolidation, which usually went hand-in-hand, pressure on the Christians spiked, so the writing had long been on the wall. In the end, it was simple: the Muslims were both rich and close to [Outremer](#), effectively surrounding it, while at this time the West was relatively poorer and farther away.

The book's title comes from one of the towers defending Acre, a sea port defended on its landward side by extensive fortifications, including a double wall and numerous barbicans and towers. (It mostly could not be approached from its seaward side, and its harbor was protected by the chain formerly guarding the [Golden Horn](#) in Constantinople, stolen by the Crusaders sacking Constantinople during the Fourth Crusade, in 1204).

As Crowley notes, much of the precise layout of both the city and its fortifications can only be conjectured at this point, but all agree that the Accursed Tower (a name of uncertain origin) lay at the crucial bend in the walls, and thus was the key pressure point during the Muslim siege. [Acre](#) had belonged to the Crusaders since it was retaken from the Muslims in 1104 (who had taken it from the Eastern Romans in the late seventh century), except for a two-year period after Saladin conquered it in 1187—it was retaken in a brutal siege in 1189, part of the Third Crusade.

But the [Third Crusade](#) failed to free Jerusalem from its occupiers, and the Crusader States for the next one hundred years were sadly diminished, consisting of a string of principalities and fortresses, the latter typically operated by the military religious orders, most famously the Hospitaller citadel at [Krak des Chevaliers](#), north of Acre, near Tripoli (the Outremer Tripoli, not the one in North Africa).

Acre became de facto the center of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem, the south end of the Crusader States, both for trade and war, thus becoming a very wealthy and cosmopolitan city. It was also, in the way of rich port cities at the crossroads of civilizations, a pit of vice, although no doubt this was somewhat exaggerated by pious Western churchmen shocked upon their first arrival. And like most of the Crusader States, Acre debilitatingly lacked coherent political leadership.

The King of Jerusalem was an absentee landlord and the strongest power was the Pope's representative, the Patriarch of Jerusalem (who lived in Acre, not Jerusalem), but other powers, including the [Templars](#) and [Hospitallers](#), were nearly independent.

Acre's existence as a Christian stronghold throughout the century was therefore tenuous, but daily life not all that different from a hundred years before, or from any other Mediterranean port. Muslim and Christian merchants struck deals; the Genoese and Venetians traded with everyone, including the enemy, and fought each other; everybody got along in some years and not in others.

The Christians talked about retaking Jerusalem and did nothing, but on the other side, chronic Muslim civil war, and the threat of the Mongols, kept the Muslims from concentrating on permanently dislodging the Crusaders. And, often as not, the trade brokered by the Christians was of great benefit to Muslim rulers, reducing their incentive to do more than issue vague endorsements of jihad and in practice to curb Muslim fanatics eager to fulfill the Prophet's commands for ceaseless war against the infidel. All in all, no doubt daily life was fairly pleasant for most people, contrary to the myth of medieval suffering.

The first half of the book is a lively narration of the thirteenth century in Outremer. Crowley covers the mid-century Seventh Crusade, where Louis IX's armies came to grief in Egypt. He covers the Mamluk defeat in 1260 of the Mongols at [Ain Jalut](#), Goliath's Spring, neither hindered nor helped by the Crusaders, who at least gave the Muslims safe passage to the battlefield.

He narrates the takeover of Egyptian power by the military slave Mamluks from their Ayyubid overlords, and their welding into a disciplined conquering force under the sultan [Baybars](#), the "Lion of Egypt," a puritanical Muslim like so many successful conquerors. (As Crowley notes, because the Christians of Damascus had dared to drink wine and ring bells when the Mongols were admitted to Damascus, Baybars collectively punished Christians by, among other crimes, destroying "the hugely significant [church of St. Mary in Nazareth](#), the supposed site of the Annunciation").

Most relevantly for the current narrative, Baybars systematically increased pressure on the Crusader States, killing peasants in the fields and intermittently besieging and conquering towns and cities. These included the southern towns of Caesarea, Arsuf, and Jaffa, and the critical northern city of Antioch.

He made life difficult for Christians, who were incapable of mounting a unified response, and lacked the military manpower to do much more than man their fortresses and battlements. And he didn't care much that the Christians provided economic benefits to his realm; jihad was far more important, and this was what sealed the fate of the Crusader States.

The Christians in Europe were well aware of what was going on, but as so often, mustered only a feeble response accompanied by a great deal of hot air. Henry III's son, [Edward Longshanks](#) (later Edward I, made famous several years back by the movie Braveheart), along with Louis IX, led the Ninth Crusade.

Edward landed in Acre with his knights in 1271 (shortly after Baybars finally managed to capture Krak des Chevaliers), and won some major victories over Baybars, but soon enough departed (though he left behind several men who were critical to the final defense of Acre), changing nothing.

The second half of the book narrows the focus to the Fall of Acre. In 1280, Baybars died (probably poisoned), to be succeeded as sultan (after the usual civil war) by another Mamluk general, [Qalawun](#), who continued what Baybars had accomplished, following much the same religious and political

policies. He prepared to attack Acre, but died in 1290, to be succeeded by [Khalil](#), who again continued his predecessors' program. Men and material, called to jihad with its dual rewards of paradise and booty, swarmed to Khalil from every direction, and he began the siege in April, 1291.

Unlike towns earlier conquered by the Muslims, however, Acre was very strongly defended (though, due to internal conflict, the defenders had not beefed up the defenses adequately before the siege) and had a full garrison, of infantry, mounted knights, and such ancillary critical personnel as Pisan siege engineers.

It could be re-supplied from the sea (the Mamluks never had any navy to speak of) and thus had to be taken by force, not by starving out the defenders. On the debit side of the balance sheet, though, the defenders had unclear military command, and failed to coordinate properly, a problem the Sultan did not face. The man effectively in overall charge was the Patriarch, [Nicolas de Hanapes](#) (the only canonized Crusader), but his hold was persuasive, not dictatorial. And, the biggest problem of all, Khalil had functionally infinite resources with high morale and strong incentives, so the result was largely inevitable.

Crowley does an outstanding job of narrating the siege and the Fall. Attacks and counterattacks; siege machines; mining; sorties by land and sea. He uses fascinating stories from contemporary sources, both Muslim and Christian, most interestingly from the "Templar of Tyre," an anonymous Arabic-speaking knight who was probably not a Templar but was included within the councils of the Templars.

On both sides, the heroism often found in such battles, ancient and modern, was on display—the men from the book *Red Platoon*, fighting in twenty-first-century Afghanistan, would fit right in here, and the men fighting in Acre would fit in there. Over several weeks, the Muslims wore the Christians down; not enough men arrived to replenish losses, and the Christians grew short of ammunition.

By mid-May, the battle was nearing its end. On May 18, after bombardment and mining broke in the walls, Khalil's troops, coming in endless waves of heavily armored, highly disciplined men, overcame Christian resistance at the Accursed Tower, and thereby entered the space between the double walls, which allowed them to spread out to attack the gates. Last-ditch resistance of the city itself was organized by the Marshal of the Hospitallers, Matthieu de Clermont, who is depicted on the cover of the book in a nineteenth-century French painting (note the double walls).

Clermont and his men rode out and died in the streets, and the Muslims then slaughtered and raped their way through the city, killing or enslaving everyone not able to get away by ship. (Such behavior was the norm in medieval warfare, of course, but is always talked about nowadays as if it was only something Christians did, so it is refreshing to see historical honesty).

A few of the internal citadels, such as the Templar's castle, held out for a while, but were soon ground down and the same treatment meted out to the survivors. Khalil then demolished much of the city, though its skeleton was a landmark for passing ships for centuries.

So ended the Holy Land Crusades, mostly forgotten in the East until resurrected as part of resistance to colonialism in the nineteenth century, and remembered mostly only in distorted fashion in the West, a propaganda tool for Protestants and atheists up to the present day.

But today I am less focused on politics; today is mostly straight history. One reason I very much enjoyed this book is that I have long had a fascination with medieval weaponry and siege equipment, and Crowley also appears entranced by siege weaponry, especially catapults and trebuchets, about which he talks a great deal.

Why I have such an interest, I have no idea, but it has always been true. I had castle-building Lego analogues as a child, with which I played endlessly. I had toy soldiers, knights in armor, one of which now stands by me as I write, wielding a morning star (a real, if rare, weapon, despite occasional modern claims to the contrary).

I know from reading Howard Pyle's *Men of Iron* at the age of five what a [glaive-guisarme](#) is (a weapon consisting of a blade on a wooden pole, used to slash and stab, with a hook on the other side, used in the novel in the climactic duel by the underdog). Perhaps my personal interests made this book more gripping to me than it would be to others, however, so if this type of thing bores you, maybe this book is not for you.

Accuracy is key for Crowley, to the extent that a narrative of any ancient event can be made fully accurate. Unlike many modern writers, he does not ascribe to Muslims inventions they did not make. He notes that the Chinese invented most of the catapult-type siege weapons used by Khalil, including the traction trebuchet, which the Byzantines had also used.

The more powerful counterweight trebuchet, a vital weapon in Khalil's arsenal, able to topple stonework like the Accursed Tower, was probably invented by the Byzantines, though the record is unclear. (With both stonethrowers and, later, gunpowder, the Europeans took the basic idea that had existed for hundreds of years with incremental improvements, and proceeded to reinvent and massively improve the technology within a few decades.

No doubt that is why many of Khalil's catapults were *ifrangi*, "Frankish catapults"). The only error that Crowley does make is to claim, repeatedly, that the Mamluks used [Greek Fire](#), by giving that name to all incendiaries, not actual Greek Fire, a liquid that burned on water and was dispensed under pressure, the secret of which was probably lost by this time even to the Byzantines. But that's a pretty small and common error, that does not detract from the book.

Crowley wrote an even better earlier book, *Empires of the Sea*, which centers on the 1565 [Siege of Malta](#), where the Christians won. I have been to Malta, and there is no experience like standing where such an epic battle took place, seeing in your mind's eye what it must have been like. That's not really possible in Acre, anymore, but reading this book nearly puts you there.

Strangely, Crowley mentions modern Acre quite a bit, but never once mentions that it is in Israel, and most of its modern population is Jewish. Which goes to show that times change, I suppose. I won't predict the future for Acre, but looking backward allows the reader to grasp, in outline, the life and death of the Crusades.

The Fall of Acre is in many ways a microcosm of that age of action, showing both the good and the bad: heroic men performing acts of glory, and bad men betraying each other and indulging in vice. Often it was the same men. These are the sorts of stories we should tell our children, and, as I say, make movies about. One can hope.

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The [image](#) shows, "The Siege of Acre," by Dominique Papety, painted ca. 1840.

