

The Third Crusade: A Complex Conflict

In October 1187, Margaret of Beverley, a woman from Yorkshire, stood on the walls of Jerusalem with a cooking pot on her head. With her slingshot, Margaret furiously hurled rocks at the Muslim attackers. Margaret may not have seen the Muslim leader, a warlord called Salah ad-Din, but she could see that the Christian occupation of Jerusalem was over. The shockwaves were felt around Europe. Pope Gregory VIII was so angry he called a Third Crusade. Once again, Christians were being called to journey to Jerusalem. How had it come to this?



You will remember reading about the First Crusade. Losing Jerusalem in 1099 was a terrible blow for Muslims. Nur ad-Din, an important Muslim thinker in the middle of the 12th century, had a clear opinion on what should happen next. Nur ad-Din concluded that recapturing Jerusalem was so important to Islam, someone should unite all the different Muslim groups and call this quest a *Jihad*. Jihad means 'religious war'. In the First Crusade, the Muslims had not realised that the Christian crusaders had a religious purpose. The Muslims just saw the Crusade as an invasion. Now it became a religious war for the Muslims as well.

By 1170, Salah ad-Din had decided to act on Nur ad-Din's ideas. Salah ad-Din would unite the Muslim world and recapture Jerusalem. This was far from easy! As he gained influence and power, Salah ad-Din nearly brought about a civil war with Nur ad-Din himself. Nur ad-Din died, however, just as he was raising an army to fight Salah ad-Din. The next decade saw Salah ad-Din try to impose his authority all over the Middle East, wherever Nur ad-Din's heirs and relatives held power.

If it was a struggle for the Muslims to unite, it was an even bigger struggle for the Christians. Across Europe Christians just could not agree with each other. At one point the Christian Byzantium Emperor was actually helping Salah ad-Din! Despite occupying the city everyone wanted, Christian settlers in the Holy Land argued about who should rule the Kingdom of Jerusalem. It was in this chaos that Salah ad-Din was able to unite the Muslims and recapture Jerusalem in 1187.



Even after the Pope's impassioned call for a Third Crusade in 1187, the Christians couldn't unite! Three major kings of Europe led the Crusade: Richard I (of England), Philip II (France) and Frederick Barbarossa (Holy Roman Empire). These three could all command many soldiers, but they didn't trust each other. Richard I and Philip II were rivals. Even after they sat opposite each other to settle their differences in 1189, the two kings were concerned that the other would ally with their rivals back home.

The divided Christians were not completely unsuccessful. They recognised that the hot, humid, bustling port of Acre was a gateway to the Holy Land. If the Christian armies could hold on to Acre they had a chance, especially as Crusaders were increasingly arriving by sea. Against all odds, a Christian army seized Acre in 1187, and two years later Richard's army held on to the city in a ferocious battle. Now Richard had a launchpad to drive the Crusaders towards Jerusalem.



Historians have painted an interesting picture of Richard I as a leader. Sources have shown his ruthless streak; such as when 2,700 Muslim prisoners were massacred at Richard's command following his victory at Acre. However, sources show that twice he neared Jerusalem, and twice he turned his armies back. Richard feared that, even if they were successful in battle, they would not be able to secure Jerusalem once Salah ad-Din had gathered reinforcements.

By 1192, the Third Crusade had reached a stalemate and the leaders agreed a truce. Jerusalem would remain a Muslim city, while the Christians could keep their strip of coastline. Richard and Salah ad-Din were relieved! Richard faced domestic trouble with his brother John in England, while Salah ad-Din, whose health was suffering, had held together a diverse Muslim force for long enough.



Was this a failure for the Crusaders? The coastline had no religious significance. Therefore, in 1202 another Crusade was launched to retake the Holy Land. This was a fiasco. The Christians headed towards Egypt instead, attracted by its wealth. The Pope couldn't contain his fury as they landed at Zara, a Christian city in south east Europe, and attacked its inhabitants. As if this wasn't enough, in 1204 the Crusaders attacked and captured the biggest Christian city in the world: Constantinople! The fight for the Holy Land was not a simple matter of 'East v West', 'Christian v Muslim' or even 'men v men'. Within groups there were conflicting beliefs, aims and loyalties.

By 1218, with Muslims controlling the Holy Land, rumours started to spread of a mighty army travelling across Asia. Who could it be? Some Christians said that this was Prester John, a mythical Christian who was going to help them. Others knew the truth. And the truth was terrifying. It was terrifying both for Christian and for Muslim. The Mongols were coming.