The Massacre at Acre—Mark of a Blood-thirsty King?

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Abstract

The Crusades began in 1095 as an effort to resist the spread of Muslim forces into Asia Minor, present-day Turkey, and to prevent Muslims from moving into Christian Europe. The Third Crusade, during the end of the twelfth century, was also known as the Kings' Crusade because the Christian forces were led by some of the most important and powerful kings of the time. One of these was Richard I, King of England. In 1191, Christian forces successfully took the city of Acre, in present-day northern Israel, after a long siege. Following the siege, however, many unarmed Muslim prisoners were killed. Some modern scholars contend that the massacre of these prisoners was ordered by Richard I as a blood-thirsty and ruthless act. This study draws on primary sources and the analysis of modern scholars to determine the validity of these claims against Richard I. Through a synthesis of primary sources, I argue that the massacre, although unfortunate, was not the act of a blood-thirsty killer, but rather a strategic last resort.

The Christian forces in the Holy Land during the mid- to late-1100s had, for many years, requested assistance to maintain their dwindling and increasingly challenged control in the Holy Land, but no help came.[1] The tenuous rule of Guy of Lusignan, King of Jerusalem, in the mid-1180s, led to further internal conflict. The lack of military support, however, would soon change. The Third Crusade was called in 1187 by Pope Gregory VIII after the disaster of Hattin earlier that year. At Hattin, Saladin, the now-famous Muslim leader and military commander, lured the Christian forces led by King Guy out through the desert and to battle in the area known as the Horns of Hattin. There Saladin surrounded and attacked the Christians and essentially destroyed the Christians' military forces. According to Thomas Madden, "the Horns of Hattin marked the greatest defeat in crusading history."[2] Subsequent victories by Saladin led to an almost total reclamation of the Holy Land by the Muslims, including the city of Jerusalem. The news of the defeat was so powerful that Pope Urban II, the leader of the Roman Catholic Church, died of grief on October 20, 1187.[3] His successor, Gregory VIII, issued *Audita tremendi*, a papal bull that created a seven-year-long truce throughout Europe so that the Christians of Europe could focus on contributing to

the crusades.[4] The Third Crusade, which was intended to re-conquer the Holy Land from Saladin, was the height of the Crusading Movement. Many important figures took the cross, the donning of a cloth cross on one's clothing or some other method of signifying that one intended to make the pilgrimage to the Holy Land. A few notable individuals included King William II of Sicily, Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa, King Henry II of England, and King Philip II of France. William II, Frederick, and Henry II died, however, before making the pilgrimage to the Holy Land. After Henry II's death, his son Richard I became king of England.[5]

Richard I of England is one of the most recognizable characters in medieval history. Even today, his life is marked by legend and prestige. Richard I's reputation as a gallant knight and effective military commander often precedes him, and his exploits in the Holy Land against the great Saladin have essentially solidified his legendary status. During his time in the Holy Land, Richard I's campaigns against Saladin made the Third Crusade one of the more successful forays by Christians in the Levant, the region around the Holy Land. There is, however, a great cloud that hangs over this legacy. While on crusade, Richard I was accused of a blood-thirsty and heinous act, namely, the massacre of Muslim prisoners after the siege of Acre in 1191. This massacre has been viewed as a malicious act by the generally praiseworthy king.

For modern historians, however, the massacre at Acre does not seem to have had a definitive impact on Richard I's reputation. Little consideration of the Third Crusade has been made to this point, and no single work exists that is written in study of the Third Crusade. Subsequently, little, if any, consideration of Richard I's actions at Acre outside a few passing paragraphs or pages has been made. Steven Runciman, in his three-volume *A History of the Crusades*, asserts that it was a cold-blooded act against the roughly 2,700 prisoners that took place after an attempted ransom payment in exchange for the prisoners on August 11, 1191. The number of prisoners is confirmed in the *Itinerarium Peregrinorum et Gesta Regis Ricardi*, an anonymous account of Richard I's deeds on crusade.[6] Runciman further explains that the attempted exchange on August 11 did not meet the standards expected by Richard I, and the negotiations soon fell apart. On August 20, Richard I determined that Saladin had not met the terms of the bargain and subsequently ordered the prisoners to be executed.[7]

In contrast, Jonathan Riley-Smith believes that "the negotiations with Saladin broke down when the first installment of the ransom became due,"[8] implying that Saladin had made no payment. Christopher Tyerman contends that this was indeed an atrocious act but that it was "not uncommon in war."[9] He does allow that this action could have been in response to Saladin's massacre of the Templars and Hospitallers after Hattin in 1187, but he eventually concludes that Richard I's actions were "a deliberate act of policy,"[10] i.e. that Richard I's goal was never to take prisoners.

Finally, John Gillingham, arguably the leading scholar on Richard I, states that the massacre at Acre "has been called both barbarous and stupid and has been cited to show that there were no depths to which he could not sink in order to relieve his frustrations."[11] Gillingham places the events at Acre in context with those four years prior at Hattin and ultimately wonders what other recourse Richard I could have taken.[12] There are two questions that surround Richard I's actions at Acre: Did Richard I have justification as a military commander to kill these prisoners? And, depending on the answer to that question, how should the events after the siege of Acre

be incorporated and integrated into Richard I's history and legacy? To answer these questions, a comparison of the sources is necessary.

This examination of the massacre at Acre will draw on five important accounts of the events in the summer of 1191 beginning with the chronicle by Richard of Devizes. Little is known about Richard of Devizes outside the information provided in his chronicle of Richard I. Early in life he was a monk at St. Swithin's Priory in Winchester and later became a Carthusian of Witham.[13] Next I will examine the chronicle by Geoffrey de Vinsauf, who is believed to be an Englishman of Norman descent living during the time of Richard I and the Third Crusade. He wrote an important eyewitness chronicle "of those furious assaults which the army of Saladin made upon the Christians, and of the firmness with which the lion-hearted Richard I withstood and repulsed them."[14] "The Old French Continuation of William of Tyre, 1184–97" is my third source. As Peter Edbury explains in his introduction to *The Conquest of Jerusalem and the Third Crusade: Sources in Translation*, William of Tyre's account ended in 1184, and in the early thirteenth century Tyre's work was "translated into French, and many of the manuscripts of the French translation have continuations tacked on to the end,"[15] of which "The Continuation" is one. The fourth source is a letter from Richard I to Garnier of Rochefort, who was then Abbot of Clairvaux. Lastly is the account of Baha ad-Din, a Muslim eyewitness to the Third Crusade. He entered the service of Saladin in 1188 and is best known for his biography of the great Muslim leader.

Before determining why the Muslims were killed or if the killings were justified, a timeline of events must be established. From all the accounts it is clear that the siege of Acre ended through a negotiated surrender. The terms of this surrender were that the Muslim defenders of Acre would be set free if a ransom was paid and the True Cross relic, a piece of what was believed to be the cross upon which Jesus was crucified, returned to the Christians. The sources are unclear as to the extent of Saladin's involvement in the negotiations. Geoffrey de Vinsauf's account claims that the negotiations began on the advisement of Saladin,[16] whereas "The Continuation of William of Tyre," Baha ad-Din, Richard I's letter, and Richard of Devizes say that the negotiations were made in Saladin's name but that he was unaware of the terms until afterward. "The Continuation," Richard of Devizes, and Richard I agree that Saladin eventually approved the terms. Conversely, Baha ad-Din tells of Saladin's unwillingness to agree to the conditions and of his attempt to write to the leaders of the city to disapprove of them, but by that time the Christians had already taken the city's walls.[17] After the peace terms were made, the sources reveal that a date was set for Saladin to pay the ransom and turn over the True Cross. The sources also show that, once the date came, the ransom was not paid. It is that twist of events which best explains why the prisoners were executed.

Although it is clear that the exchange of prisoners for the ransom was not made, the immediate circumstances are unknown. Richard I's account merely says that "the time-limit expired, and . . . the pact which he had agreed was entirely made void."[18] "The Continuation" says that "on the day that he [Saladin] had promised he did not come. He sent word requesting another day, saying that he had a good reason why he had been unable to come on the date he had promised. The kings had a great desire to recover the Holy Cross. They took counsel and agreed another day."[19] After the

additional day, the Christians came out in great anticipation of regaining the True Cross but were once again disappointed when "[Saladin] withdrew and reneged on the agreement and the promise that he had made."[20] According to Geoffrey de Vinsauf, Saladin not only failed to provide the True Cross, he "sent constant presents and messengers to King Richard I to gain delay by artful and deceptive words."[21] Richard of Devizes states that "the heathen could by no entreaty be moved to restore the Holy Cross."[22] The most important account, however, with regard to the payment of the ransom and fulfillment of the terms of surrender, is that of Baha ad-Din.

In his account, Baha ad-Din explains how, after the Christians moved into the city, Saladin ordered maneuvers to draw the Christians out to attack him with the hope of gaining a more favorable position.[23] It is crucial to note that these movements came after the terms of the treaty had been negotiated, and, according to Baha ad-Din, it was these delays that caused Richard I to "[break] his word to the Muslim prisoners."[24] From the sources, several details are clear. First, there was a treaty made for the exchange of Muslim prisoners for ransom to be paid to the Christians. Second, the deadline established for payment was not met due to Saladin's delays. The sources agree that the missed deadline was the justification used for the execution of prisoners.

The next factor in the sequence of events sheds light on the overall character of Richard I—how soon after the deadline was missed were the prisoners executed? Unfortunately, the sources present great ambiguity. Richard of Devizes, Geoffrey de Vinsauf, "The Continuation," and the letter of Richard I are all unclear in their presentation of when it was determined that Saladin was not going to pay and when the execution occurred. According to Baha ad-Din, the date of the execution was August 20. The only date given prior to this is July 14, after Saladin's delaying maneuvers.[25] If it is correct that these delays were the ones that caused the execution of the Muslims, the gap of time is roughly a month. The *Itinerarium Peregrinorum* reconfirms the month-long gap of time and states that "as the time limit had expired long before, King Richard was certain that Saladin had hardened his heart and had no concern about ransoming the hostages."[26] Overall, it is not clear how quickly the decision to execute the prisoners was made after it was determined that the terms of the ransom would not be met. Frankly, once it became evident to the Christians that the terms would not be met, the time between became irrelevant.

This irrelevancy came from a general standpoint of military strategy. Once it was clear that the payment was not to be received, the Christian leaders, including Richard I, needed to determine how to proceed in order to continue on their campaign. According to J. O. Prestwich, Richard I, although often reckless, was highly adept at medieval military strategy. Because he was such a military expert, Richard I would, without a doubt, have known that staying indefinitely at Acre to wait for the True Cross and ransom would be wasteful. This sentiment is even offered by Baha ad-Din, who says that, "many reasons were given to explain the slaughter. One was that they [the Christians] had killed them [the prisoners] as a reprisal for their own prisoners killed before then by the Muslims. Another was that the King of England had decided to march on Ascalon and take it, and he did not want to leave behind him in the city a large number (of enemy soldiers). God knows best."[27] Although it may have been a terrible experience to see comrades killed, Baha ad-Din understands that sound military strategy would not have left thousands of enemies at Acre. Overall, Richard I would

have had, at best, four other options: (1) leave the prisoners at Acre and men to guard them; (2) wait for Saladin to pay the ransom; (3) take the prisoners with him on the march south; or (4) sell the prisoners into slavery. The first scenario could be ruled out because leaving men behind to guard prisoners would put the army at a disadvantage on an offensive campaign. The second, it soon became clear, would not happen. The third would also put the army at a disadvantage having to feed several thousand more people. The fourth option would have been possible, and probably acceptable, but in all likelihood would have taken more time than the Christian forces were willing to spare. Ultimately, when it became clear that the True Cross and ransoms were not forthcoming, Richard I was forced to make a military decision.

One important, final point must be made. Two of the sources raise the question of whether or not Richard I was in fact the one who ordered the execution. In his letter to the Abbot of Clairvaux, Richard I states that "as the pact which he [Saladin] had agreed was entirely made void, we quite properly had the Saracens that we had in custody . . . put to death."[28] Arguably, this "we" could merely be the proverbial "royal we." Interestingly enough the account of Geoffrey de Vinsauf, which is, as previously noted, an eyewitness account of the actions of Richard I, states that Richard I "called together a council of the chiefs of the people, by whom it was resolved that the hostages should all be hanged, except a few nobles of the higher classes."[29] Although the other accounts do not mention this council, it must be taken into consideration that none of the other accounts were written by eyewitnesses. The only exception is the account of Baha ad-Din, and he would clearly not have been present at a council on the execution of Muslim prisoners.

Overall, the two accounts that stand out as the most accurate portrayals of Richard I's actions after Acre are those of Geoffrey de Vinsauf and Baha ad-Din. Geoffrey de Vinsauf's appeal comes not only from being an eyewitness account, but most of the events portrayed match those written by Baha ad-Din, the other eye-witness. Baha ad-Din's appeal lies in his ability to understand the enemy's view, no matter how much he disliked it. Additionally, be it intentional or not, Baha ad-Din's account of Saladin's delay places blame onto Saladin for the execution of prisoners, which an acutely biased author would have avoided. Conversely, "The Continuation" cannot be seen as an entirely reliable source because it was not written during the time the events were occurring but many years later. Additionally, Richard I's mention of the massacre at Acre cannot be trusted outright either because, although it may be the most intimate window into the thoughts of the king, it is also the easiest way for Richard I to have included any biases he may have had, or to present himself in a better light. Ultimately, the fact that the two eyewitness accounts have various similarities and that one of the accounts is from an enemy's chronicle suggest that Baha ad-Din's and Geoffrey de Vinsauf's accounts are most trustworthy and accurate.

In regard to Richard I's reputation, it cannot be said that this was a blood-thirsty act or that this was a deliberate act of policy. It is very likely that, had Saladin paid the ransom and returned the True Cross, the prisoners would have been exchanged. The sources make clear that the Christian forces eagerly anticipated the ransom—and especially the return of the True Cross—and allowed Saladin to delay several times before taking action. Although there was likely an emotional motivation behind the massacre, it cannot be said that the decision to execute the prisoners was any more than a last resort and strategic decision.

Notes

1. Thomas Madden, *The New Concise History of the Crusades* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 79.
2. Ibid., 76.
3. Ibid., 79.
4. Ibid., 79.
5. Ibid., 79–85.
6. "Itinerarium Peregrinorum et Gesta Regis Ricardi," in *The Chronicle of the Third Crusade: Itinerarium Peregrinorum et Gesta Regis Ricardi*, ed. Helen J. Nicholson (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 1997), 231.
7. Steven Runciman, *A History of the Crusades*, vol. 3, *The Kingdom of Acre and the Later Crusades* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1954), 53.
8. Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The Crusades: A History*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 144.
9. Christopher Tyerman, *God's War: A New History of the Crusades* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 456.
10. Ibid., 456–57.
11. John Gillingham, *Richard the Lionheart* (New York: Times Books, 1978), 182.
12. Ibid., 184.
13. Henry G. Bohn, *Chronicles of the Crusades* (New York: AMS Press, 1969), iii.
14. Ibid., iii–iv.
15. Peter W. Edbury, *The Conquest of Jerusalem and the Third Crusade: Sources in Translation* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 3.
16. Geoffrey de Vinsauf, "Chronicle of Richard the First's Crusade," in *Chronicles of the Crusades*, ed. Henry G. Bohn (New York: AMS Press, 1969), 214.
17. Baha ad-Din, "The Enemy Takes Possession of Acre," in *Arab Historians of the Crusades*, ed. Francesco Gabrieli (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1993), 222.
18. Richard I, "Correspondence to the Abbot of Clairvaux," in *The Conquest of Jerusalem and the Third Crusade: Sources in Translation*, ed. Peter W. Edbury (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 180.
19. "The Old French Continuation of William of Tyre, 1184–97," in *The Conquest of Jerusalem and the Third Crusade: Sources in Translation*, ed. Peter W. Edbury (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 107.
20. Ibid., 107.
21. Geoffrey de Vinsauf, "Chronicle," 221.
22. Richard of Devizes, "Concerning the Deeds of King Richard the First, King of England," in *Chronicles of the Crusades*, ed. Henry G. Bohn (New York: AMS Press, 1969), 42.
23. Baha ad-Din, "Enemy Takes Possession of Acre," 223.
24. Baha ad-Din, "Massacre of the Muslim Prisoners," in *Arab Historians of the Crusades*, ed. Francesco Gabrieli (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1993), 223.
25. Ibid., 223–24.
26. "Itinerarium Peregrinorum," 218–31.
27. Baha ad-Din, "Massacre of the Muslim Prisoners," 224.
28. Richard I, "Correspondence to the Abbot of Clairvaux," 180.
29. Geoffrey de Vinsauf, "Chronicle," 222.

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