

Holy wars

by [Kevin Madigan](#) in the [November 22, 2000](#) issue

*The Crusades, c.1071-c.1291* (Cambridge Medieval Textbooks), by Jean Richard, translated by Jean Birrell

Seven centuries after Christians relinquished the last pieces of Levantine territory they had conquered in the 12th and 13th centuries, the Crusades continue to hold our attention. What is it about this quintessentially medieval series of events that makes them seem increasingly impossible for moderns to ignore? Their Cecil B. de Mille scale? The vast improbability of the outcome? The impossible grandeur of the effort required and of the financial and familial sacrifices made? The boldness, bravery and folly of the Crusaders themselves? The romance of horses, lances and individual martial skill and heroism? The ambition and arrogance of the popes who sponsored, publicized and launched them? The theology of sacred land, the love of Palestine, the attachment to the holy places? The mobilization of an entire society for the "war effort"? The intoxication and exoticism of adventurous travel to the Orient? The novelistic quality of the narratives?

All of this and more. But one factor that especially accounts for the Crusades' contemporary attraction is that they involved a clash of cultures, especially of European and Muslim powers. (They were much less obviously a religious clash between Christianity and Islam.) This clash also involved a complex triangle of European, Byzantine and Asian cultures. The results? The beginning of European colonization; the first large and widespread massacres of Jewish communities in the West; the envenoming of relationships between Eastern and Western Christians and between Christians and Muslims; the popularization of indulgences, one of the causes of the Reformation; the transformation of the rhetoric of international relations and war, visible nowhere so vividly as in the recent gulf war. Above all, the Crusades remain the perennial symbol and warning of the dangers inherent in wedding religious conviction, self-righteousness and rhetoric with bellicose exuberance and martial force.

All of these themes find expression in this translation of a magnificent history of the Crusades first published in French (*Histoire des Croisades*, 1996). Jean Richard's

work deserves to be much better known in the English-speaking world. A student of the great French historian René Grousset and long professor of history at the University of Dijon and a member of the Institut de France, Richard has written a number of important books on the Crusades. His acute appreciation for the religious as well as economic motives of the Crusaders makes his most recent book especially important.

And not just the cruder sorts of religious motivations. Indeed, as Richard points out, the plenary indulgence first given to the Crusaders soon ceased to be the primary motive for undertaking a Crusade. Nor was it fanatical anti-Muslim sentiment which propelled the Crusaders across difficult seas and lands and through terrible ordeals. No, it was above all what Richard calls "a visceral attachment" and a deep attraction to the Holy Land and a profound sense that the treasures of the Holy Land were God's and belonged to Christendom, not to the infidel. To recover the land for God's faithful was to perform a duty owed to God.

This was an end that all of Europe judged glorious, right and meritorious. We might well disagree with our medieval predecessors on the worthiness of that end and especially on its religious sponsorship. But that is what makes the Crusades worth studying still. One would be hard-pressed to think of a better place to start than with this shining example of deep and mature scholarship, enlivened not just by an almost unparalleled understanding of the political and military history of the Crusades but by critical sympathy with the religious sensibilities of the actors.