

During the Crusades, East and West first met—on the battlefield

BY ANDREW CURRY

It was the fall of 1187, and an emissary from the besieged city of Jerusalem had come to beg Saladin, the sultan of Egypt, for mercy. After barely four days of assaults, the Christian defenders saw that Saladin had them hopelessly outmatched. Waiting in his tent outside the city's walls, the Muslim ruler knew both sides had a lot riding on the outcome of this battle.

For the city's defenders, the prospect of Saladin's wrath loomed. The last time Jerusalem was sacked by an invading army—a Christian one—its narrow streets ran red with blood. For Saladin, his honor depended on capturing Jerusalem. All summer his armies had battled their way north through the Holy Land, sweeping through the Christian fiefs like an angry desert wind, with only one goal: recapturing the holy city that had been occupied by European invaders for 88 years.

Now the sultan stood on the hills north of Jerusalem. But the Christian emissary trudging toward him had no prize to offer, only surrender. For days Saladin's men had bombarded the city from the heights to the north, finally breaching St. Stephen's Gate. The few defenders who remained knew that prolonging the fight would only worsen the consequences of defeat.

And so a triumphant Saladin entered Jerusalem on Oct. 2, 1187. For the sultan's army, it was a moment of both joy and sadness. The

The first Crusaders entered Jerusalem with Peter the Hermit (left, with cross) and Godfrey of Bouillon (center, on horse).



THE FIRST



REUNION DES MUSEES NATIONAUX / ART RESOURCE

HOLY WAR

Christians had profaned some of Islam's holiest sites. The al-Aqsa mosque had been used as a stable for horses. Pieces of the rock from which Mohammed was said to have ascended to heaven had been chipped away to sell in Constantinople.

But the victorious Saladin forbade acts of vengeance. There were no more deaths, no violence. A token ransom was arranged for the thousands of residents. Saladin and his brother paid for hundreds of the poorest themselves and arranged guards for the caravans of refugees.

Sound familiar? If not, don't feel bad. Saladin doesn't get much play in Western history books. You're more likely to read about Richard the Lion-Hearted, the leader of the European expedition to retake Jerusalem—and even he is most often remembered as a peripheral character in Robin Hood tales. But ask most Muslims, and they'll tell you all about Saladin and his generosity in the face of Christian aggression and hatred. And they'll be right.

The battle between Saladin and Richard marked the high point of the Crusades, the first major clash between Islam and Western Christendom, which lasted more than three centuries. And though they are only faint in the Western consciousness, in the Muslim world the Crusades still loom large in cultural memory. When Osama bin Laden declared his own jihad in 1998, he accused America of "[spearheading] the crusade against the Islamic nation." And in a tape released to his followers last year, he promised that the world would "see again Saladin carrying his sword, the blood of unbelievers dripping from it."

His words tapped into a reservoir of ill will. "The impact of the Crusades created a historical memory which is with us today—the memory of a long European onslaught," says Akbar Ahmed, chair of Islamic studies at American University in Washington, D.C. Its legacy was profound. For Muslims, then probably the strongest and most vibrant civilization on the globe, the Crusader victories and the destruction that followed were a confidence-shaking blow. At the same time, the Crusades were a tipping point for Europe, pushing the continent out of an isolated dark age and into the modern world.

Christian soldiers. From their beginnings in 1095, the Crusades inspired more passion than anyone expected. The First Crusade was preceded by droughts and famine and heralded by meteor showers. The idea of an expedition to reclaim Jerusalem from the unbelievers seized the imagination of people from all social classes. Led by deeply religious knights like Godfrey of Bouillon and Tancred, armies of "Latin" Christians (followers of the Church of Rome) from France, Germany, England, and elsewhere marched through what is now Hungary to Constantinople, the great center of Christianity in the East. When the Crusaders arrived in the Holy



RICHARD THE LION-HEARTED
Fighting Saladin in the Holy Land, the ruthless English king became one of the Crusades' best-known figures.

Tyre, a Christian stronghold north of Jerusalem, hurried west to Italy on a black-sailed ship with news of Jerusalem's fall, along with letters begging for help—and a crude drawing of an Arab beating a bloodied Jesus. Chroniclers say that when Pope Urban III learned of Saladin's victory, he died of grief. His successor, Gregory VIII, sent messengers to spread the word of a new Crusade to wrest back the holy city. "Every person of ordinary discretion is well able to appreciate both the greatness of the danger and the fierceness of the barbarians who thirst for Christian blood," he wrote. "The goal of those who profane the holy places

is nothing short of sweeping away the name of God." Echoing Urban II, the pope promised salvation through violence: He would "acquit before God all the sins of those who would bear the sign of the cross to go recover the Promised Land, provided that they had confessed and were truly penitent," wrote contemporary chronicler William of Tyre.

The pope's message of salvation and the opportunity for earthly glory drew the most powerful kings of Europe—like the young Richard the Lion-Hearted, who sailed east leading armies of knights and peasants. Expeditions like Richard's would be repeated on a smaller scale over and over again for almost five centuries, from 1095, when the First Crusade was declared, to 1578, when the last true Crusade was launched against Turks in Morocco. Though historians used to write of eight distinct Crusades, scholars today argue that "Crusades were going to the Holy Land all the time during the 200 years that the Franks were able to hold onto their states in the Middle East," as author



SALADIN, SULTAN OF EGYPT
His chivalry and generosity stood in sharp contrast to many of the Christians he fought at Jerusalem.

Karen Armstrong writes in *Holy War: The Crusades and Their Impact on Today's World*. "Long after they lost these states it was not uncommon for kings and barons to take the cross and vow to march on Jerusalem." Many scholars now also believe that crusading eventually spanned the entire continent of Europe, as the church used it to fight "heretical" Christians and convert pagans at sword point.

The First Crusade, in which wide swaths of the Holy Land were seized by Latin Christians, is the only one that can be considered a European victory. Crusades thereafter were either catastrophes or barely successful attempts to preserve European strongholds in the Middle East known as the "Latin kingdoms." But the Third Crusade is the best remembered, perhaps because of the personalities involved. Like Richard the Lion-Hearted, the handsome and temperamental king of England: Though known today as a paragon of chivalry, Richard was a merciless adversary. The son of Eleanor of Aquitaine, queen of France and England, he was already a veteran warrior and strategist when he arrived in the Holy Land in 1191 at the age of 33. He took a different view of war from Saladin's.

After one battle, he had the captured men—16,000 of them, according to William of Tyre's occasionally inflated account—beheaded within full view of their own armies. For 16 months, Saladin and Richard battled across the parched plains of the Holy Land. Finally, ill and leading an exhausted army, Richard negotiated a truce with Saladin and headed home. He never returned.

Colonial West. But Richard did come back in the popular imagination—if in a different guise. Marching into a Jerusalem captured from the Turks in 1917, a British general, Sir Edmund Allenby, proudly declared "today the wars of the Crusaders are completed," and the British press celebrated his victory with cartoons of Richard the Lion-Hearted looking down at Jerusalem above the caption "At last my dream come true." The colonial powers glorified the Crusaders as their ideological forebears.

At the same time, Western expansion into the Middle East embittered Arabs. "For [Muslims], imperialism is a dirty word, and they turned the Western memory of the Crusades on its head and demonized it," says Jonathan Riley-Smith, a historian at the University of Cambridge in Britain and author of *The Crusades: A Short History*. Angry Muslim nationalists adopted the Crusades as a convenient metaphor. It still works. "Since the late 19th century, Western imperialism and Zionism were portrayed as a modern crusade," says Hebrew University historian Benjamin Kedar. "This is why the topic is so timely in Arab political discourse."

Undoubtedly, George W. Bush had a different sense of the term in mind after September 11 when he told the nation "this crusade, this war on terrorism, is going to



POPE URBAN II

Salvation through violence was a revolutionary idea when he preached it in 1095 to call up the Crusaders.

the idea that the Crusaders were motivated by genuine religious feeling. But recently Crusades scholarship has recognized that faith could move people to violence as easily as could greed or land. The best example is the First Crusade, called by Pope Urban II. Eager to unite warring Christians, on Nov. 27, 1095, he spoke to a massive crowd gathered near Clermont in France. Describing the cruelties inflicted by Muslims on Christian pilgrims trying to visit Jerusalem and the defeats suffered by the Byzantine Christians, he called on all of Western Christendom to rescue their Eastern brethren. "They should leave off slaying each other and fight instead a righteous war, doing the work of God, and God would lead them. For those that died in battle there would be absolution and the remission of sins," Runciman writes. "Here they were poor and unhappy; there they would be joyful and prosperous and true friends of God."

The response was tremendous. Urban's speech was interrupted by cries of "*Deus lo volt*"—"God wills it." Hundreds crowded up to Urban begging permission to go on the holy expedition. Soon tens of thousands of commoners and knights were heading off to the Holy Land. Across Europe, preachers called the faithful to sew crosses on their clothes, to mark them until they succeeded in their quest.

United under the cross and ruled by strict religious principles, the Crusaders were able to set aside their differences. "Among those people who spoke so many different languages there were the strongest pledges of concord and friendship," reads a Crusader's code written in 1147. "In addition to this they enforced the severest laws, for example that a death was to be demanded for a death, a



PETER THE HERMIT

Charismatic itinerant preachers promised peasants a better life. But few made it to the Holy Land.

tooth for a tooth. They forbade every kind of display of rich clothes; and women were not allowed to go out in public." The key to Urban's call was a revolutionary (and doomed) theology: salvation through the sword. "There is a very powerful devotional element," says Riley-Smith. "West European Catholics believed they could aid their salvation by fighting the infidel in the East. [Crusading is] as much a penance as fasting on bread and water. . . . This idea is without precedent in Christian history."

"Milk and honey." Jerusalem was the medieval Christians' equivalent of Mecca, Christ's tomb their quest. To take up the cross in the city's defense was a deeply spiritual act. And more: Ever on the edge of starvation, usually tied to a lord's land, superstitious peasants saw the journey as a road to heaven. "To ignorant minds the distinction between Jerusalem and the New Jerusalem was not very clearly defined," writes Runciman in *History of the Crusades*. Fiery itinerant preachers like Peter the Hermit, whose army of starving peasants had no place in Urban's vision of an orderly march on Jerusalem, promised paradise. "Many . . . believed that he was promising to lead them out of their present miseries to the land flowing with milk and honey of which the Scriptures spoke," Runciman writes.

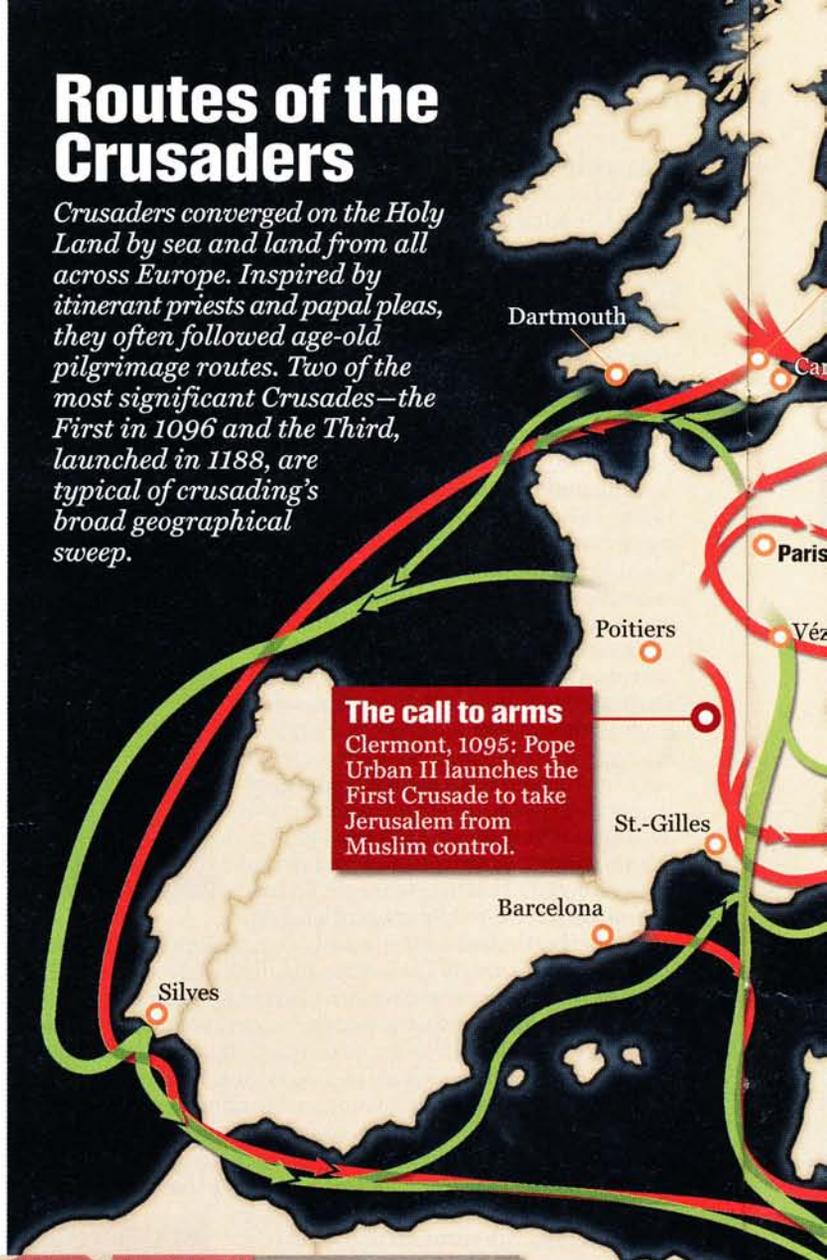
Peter's success was cited over and over again in the years to come. The defeats suffered by better-organized Crusades led many to believe that it was the humble who were destined to succeed, not the proud, rich military classes. In the end, these "People's Crusades" ended in disaster too. None ever reached the Holy Land, and most of the peasant Crusaders were either slaughtered as they plundered their way across Europe or disbanded before ever reaching a port. Without the resources to reach the Holy Land, most turned on more-convenient targets, namely Europe's Jewish communities. "[Why] are we going to seek out our profanity and to take vengeance on the Ishmaelites for our Messiah, when here are the Jews who murdered and crucified him" was the rationale, as recorded by a Jewish eyewitness.

But persuading landed knights to take up the cross took more than antisemitic rants and vague stories of the Promised Land. Europe's warrior class, the fighting force Pope Urban II really wanted, had a lot to lose: Crusaders faced death, disease, or capture. There were also more-mundane risks. A knight's lands and title could be stolen in his absence. If his Crusade failed, the returning knight risked the scorn of those who blamed him for failing to do God's work. And the costs involved in crusading were a risk in themselves. King Louis IX of France (later to become St. Louis) set out in 1249 on crusade from a harbor he had specially constructed with an artificial canal and grand tower, stocked with plentiful supplies. He spent six times his annual revenue on the venture, which ended when he was captured and forced to pay a 400,000-pound ransom. "Most Crusaders engaged in a dangerous, unpleasant, unprofitable, and extremely expensive enterprise, and they do not seem to have expected anything else," says Riley-Smith.

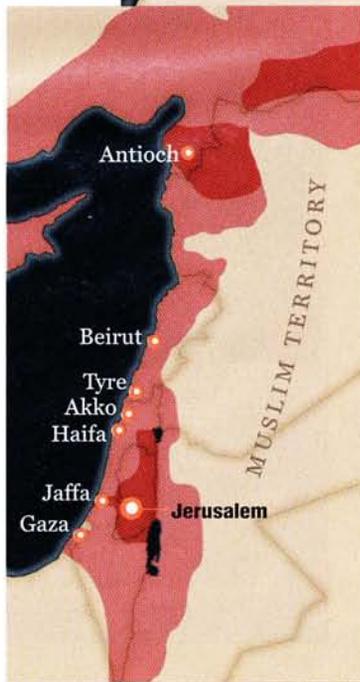
Though most were military and financial fiascoes, the Crusades had a long-term impact on European civilization that went beyond finding an outlet for the violence of warring Christian kingdoms. "[The Crusades] made the Continent more cosmopolitan and gave Europeans a far greater awareness of the wider world. Like all wars, veterans came back and had seen things they never would have if they had stayed in their villages," says James Reston Jr., author of *Warriors of God: Richard the Lionheart and Saladin in the Third Crusade*. The stories they brought back also sparked a creative blaze in Europe. Beginning in the 12th century, or

Routes of the Crusaders

Crusaders converged on the Holy Land by sea and land from all across Europe. Inspired by itinerant priests and papal pleas, they often followed age-old pilgrimage routes. Two of the most significant Crusades—the First in 1096 and the Third, launched in 1188, are typical of crusading's broad geographical sweep.



The call to arms
Clermont, 1095: Pope Urban II launches the First Crusade to take Jerusalem from Muslim control.



Spoils of the Holy War

The territory held by European Christians peaked in the century after the First Crusade, and the Crusaders' initial gains were the most dramatic. After 1144, most Crusades to the Holy Land were attempts to preserve those original footholds. None saw much success.

- Gains made by First Crusade
- Christian territory at peak in 1144

Source: *The Atlas of the Crusades*, Facts On File

London

Worms

May

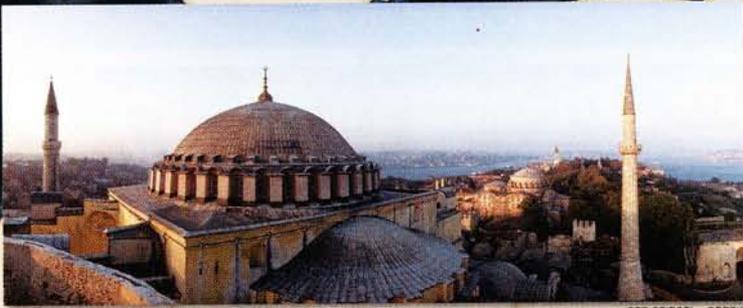
0 200
MILES

General routes

First Crusade
Third Crusade

Third Crusade

Modern country borders



TED SPIEGEL—CORBIS

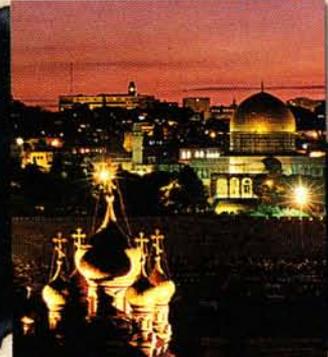
LOOTING. Crusaders' violence was not always directed at Muslims. In 1204, a Crusader army sacked Constantinople, the jewel of Eastern Christianity. St. Sophia's basilica, now a museum called Hagia Sophia, was desecrated and looted.

PETER ESSICK—AURORA

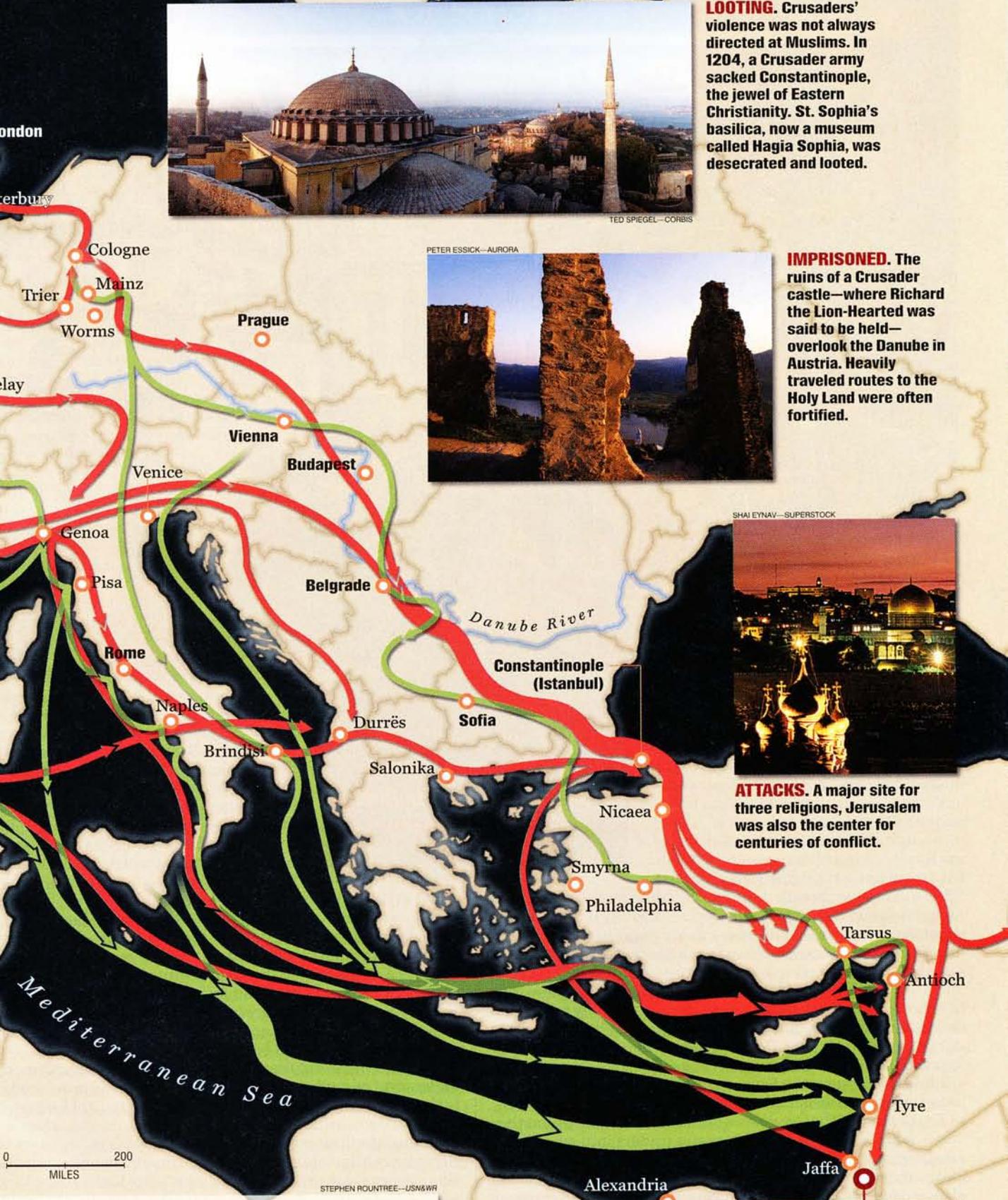


IMPRISONED. The ruins of a Crusader castle—where Richard the Lion-Hearted was said to be held—overlook the Danube in Austria. Heavily traveled routes to the Holy Land were often fortified.

SHAI EYNAV—SUPERSTOCK



ATTACKS. A major site for three religions, Jerusalem was also the center for centuries of conflict.



The goal: Jerusalem
Pope Urban's call is answered. The city is taken from Muslims by Crusaders in 1099.



around time of the First Crusade, literature and verse flowered in the form of memoir and song. Coming after the virtual silence that marked the Dark Ages, the proliferation of Crusader epics like the French *Song of Roland* is referred to by some scholars as the “12th-century Renaissance.”

Many chose not to return at all, especially second and third sons with no chance of inheriting land back in Europe. Those who stayed created a cultural, military, and mercantile outpost in the Holy Land. The fortresses they built after the First Crusade were usually transplanted reflections of the European feudal system, but over time the “Latin kingdoms” in the Holy Land also served as a powerful integrating force. Contact with the libraries of the Arab world opened up new worlds for the isolated scholars of Europe, who gradually gained access to a wealth of ancient Greek texts that had been preserved for centuries in Arabic. “Violent interactions were paralleled by economic and conceptual exchanges,” argues Georgetown’s Voll. “In some ways the Crusades’ positive intellectual dimensions outweigh the negative impact.”

First contact. “The Crusades were an absolute failure, but they did integrate European travelers and traders into an ongoing world system,” says Janet Abu-Lughod, author of *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350*. Increased demand for Middle Eastern luxury items meant that Europeans had to come up with trade goods of their own, helping build industries like wool and textiles. “By stimulating an interest in the goods of the East, they had a double-back effect on the de-

JERUSALEM

In 1099, invading Christians besieged the holy city, then looted it and bathed its streets in blood.

velopment of European economies.” Even later failures may have hidden some positive benefits. The end of the Crusades and the Latin kingdoms meant the end of easy access to Asian trade goods, but not to demand. Some historians have speculated that the closing of the Middle East to European merchants in the 15th century accelerated the voyages of discovery that led to the New World.

But even the Europeans’ increasing sophistication did little to redeem them in the eyes of the Muslims whose land they occupied and controlled. To the Arabs they were “illiterate barbarians, for whom physical force is a supreme virtue, their religion is a despised polytheism, their medicine a collection of superstitions,” writes historian Joshua Prawer in *The Crusaders’ Kingdom: European Colonialism in the Middle Ages*. “Far from feeling inferior to the conqueror, the conquered regarded himself not only as his equal but by far his superior.”

More than nine centuries after Urban II called the first Crusade, the legacy of misunderstanding and animosity is still with us today. In the West, many of the most lasting misperceptions of Islam stem from that time. In the Arab and Muslim world, the Crusades have made an unfortunate rhetorical comeback. “Such analogies are really not very helpful to understand the Crusades or present-day realities—they obscure rather than clarify,” says Kedar. “People get so obsessed with . . . the past that they don’t react to the reality but to the reflection.” With that reflection distorted almost beyond recognition by rhetoric and misunderstanding, a clearer vision of the past has never been more important. ●