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John D. Hosler. The Siege of Acre, 1189-1191: Saladin, Richard the Lionheart, and the Battle That Decided the Third Crusade.

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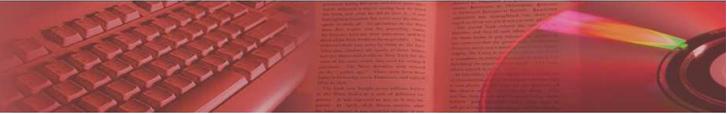
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John D. Hosler. *The Siege of Acre, 1189-1191: Saladin, Richard the Lionheart, and the Battle That Decided the Third Crusade.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018. Illustrations, maps. 272 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-21550-2.

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The Siege of Acre, 1189-1191 is the first book-length study of the two-year siege of Acre, which dominated the Third Crusade and provided crusaders with a strategic port on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean for the next hundred years. John D. Hosler presents an exhaustive and invaluable analysis of the siege through the careful study of Latin and Arabic texts (in translation) in dialogue with available archaeological studies. Through the synthesis of this impressive collection of sources, the work simultaneously undermines the heroic figures of Richard the Lionheart and Saladin that have become so associated with this campaign. This impressive study, however, also falters when it seeks to assert the Mediterranean-wide importance of the siege.

The book contains a short introduction, six substantive chapters that chart the siege and its repercussions, a conclusion, and four descriptive appendices. In the introduction, Hosler outlines the historical significance of the siege of Acre and his research methods for studying the campaign. He argues that the prolonged conflict between Christians and Muslims at Acre made the city “the center of the European and Mediterranean worlds,” a place where four heads of state were brought together in the same conflict (p. 3). However, he sees some of these leaders, like Richard the Lionheart and Saladin, as having received a “sort of celebrity treatment” from previous scholars, who have effectively obfuscated the crucial roles that lesser-known figures played during the siege. Hosler looks to rectify this narrative imbalance by synthesizing a sizable corpus of often-contradictory medieval texts. In doing so, he draws on the pioneering work of John France by approaching the siege of Acre

strictly from the perspective of military history. Hosler is less concerned with the political or religious history of the siege and more with “military events,” situating the siege as “a locus of conflict where different and competing forces traveled, lived, and waged war” (p. 5).

The subsequent six chapters painstakingly trace how various forces traveled, lived, and waged war during the two-year campaign. Hosler evaluates the decisions that various commanders and factions made during the course of the siege and narrates the battles that they fought at and around the city. These collected encounters present an “exhibition of the advanced methods and contrivances” of siege warfare in the twelfth century, through which the strategies of both the crusaders and Ayyubid generals were played out (p. 172). A handful of maps and images are helpful aids for much of this analysis, which is (understandably) quite heavy on names and locations. What is most striking about Hosler’s research is the relative absence of the names that are so often synonymous with the siege and the Third Crusade: Richard the Lionheart, Philip II, and (to a lesser extent) Saladin. Instead, lesser-known generals emerge as points of interest in the campaign, including the Ayyubid prince Taqī al-Dīn, whom Hosler considers to be “the finest and most capable Muslim general at Acre” (p. 169). On the Christian side, the contributions of lords like Henry of Champagne and Geoffrey of Lusignan far outweigh those of the monarchs from western Europe with whom they joined forces near the end of the siege. In the course of his analysis, Hosler does not hesitate from criticizing the crusader leaders when he thinks that they committed tactical errors, particularly in the case of Saladin, who, he argues,

made a number of mistakes that had a “deleterious impact” on the course of the siege for the Ayyubid side (p. 166).

Hosler pays careful attention to one episode in the wake of the crusader capture of Acre that has loomed large in modern memories: the execution of hundreds of prisoners by both Richard the Lionheart and Saladin. The Latin and Arabic sources present different narratives of these executions, before which the crusaders and Ayyubids attempted (but failed) to come to terms for the exchange of prisoners in the summer of 1191. While Hosler does an admirable job of weighing the veracity of the contradictory medieval sources in this violent episode, the conclusion that he draws is ultimately more important. He argues that modern analyses of this event have been “overly presentist” and that attempts to classify the execution of these prisoners—especially Muslim ones—as a “hate crime” or a “war crime” belie the medieval circumstances of the event itself. Richard the Lionheart and Saladin both violated the terms of their treaties, which ultimately doomed the lives of their respective soldiers. When viewed in such a light, any attempt to “convict or absolve” Richard the Lionheart for such an act must also fall upon the more esteemed Saladin as well (p. 157).

This detailed analysis of the siege of Acre and its consequences is complemented by four useful appendices that comprehensively detail the geography of Acre, military encounters during the siege, commanders who participated in the siege, and every named participant in the encounter. Hosler is at his strongest when maneuvering through the various narratives found in medieval sources to chart the course of the siege. At times,

however, he falters when undertaking larger analyses of the importance of the siege. Hosler claims that the siege caused the city to be at “the center of the European and Mediterranean worlds” and that soldiers from “northern and southern Europe, Syria and Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Maghreb” participated in its battles (pp. 3, 163). While Hosler convincingly argues for the importance of the two-year siege to the politics of Latin Christendom and the eastern Mediterranean, he does not adequately address the importance of the siege to the western Mediterranean and North Africa. The Almohad Caliphate has little presence in this narrative and relevant Arabic-language sources from the dynasty are not considered in Hosler’s analysis. So too is there little indication that Christian rulers in Iberia were affected by the course of the Acre campaign. Likewise, I was unable to locate the significance of the Maghreb in this narrative or non-Ayyubid Africa, save for one mention of the presence of slave soldiers from sub-Saharan Africa in the armies of Saladin. While it is possible that these groups were affected by the campaign at Acre, if that is the case, their viewpoints are not considered in sufficient detail in this study. Future research into these diverse perspectives could add further weight to the importance of the siege of Acre to larger political and military networks in the Mediterranean.

These small criticisms should not detract from the substantial and important research that Hosler has conducted in his monograph. *The Siege of Acre* is as an invaluable resource for historians of the Crusades and a useful reference for scholars and students of medieval military history.

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