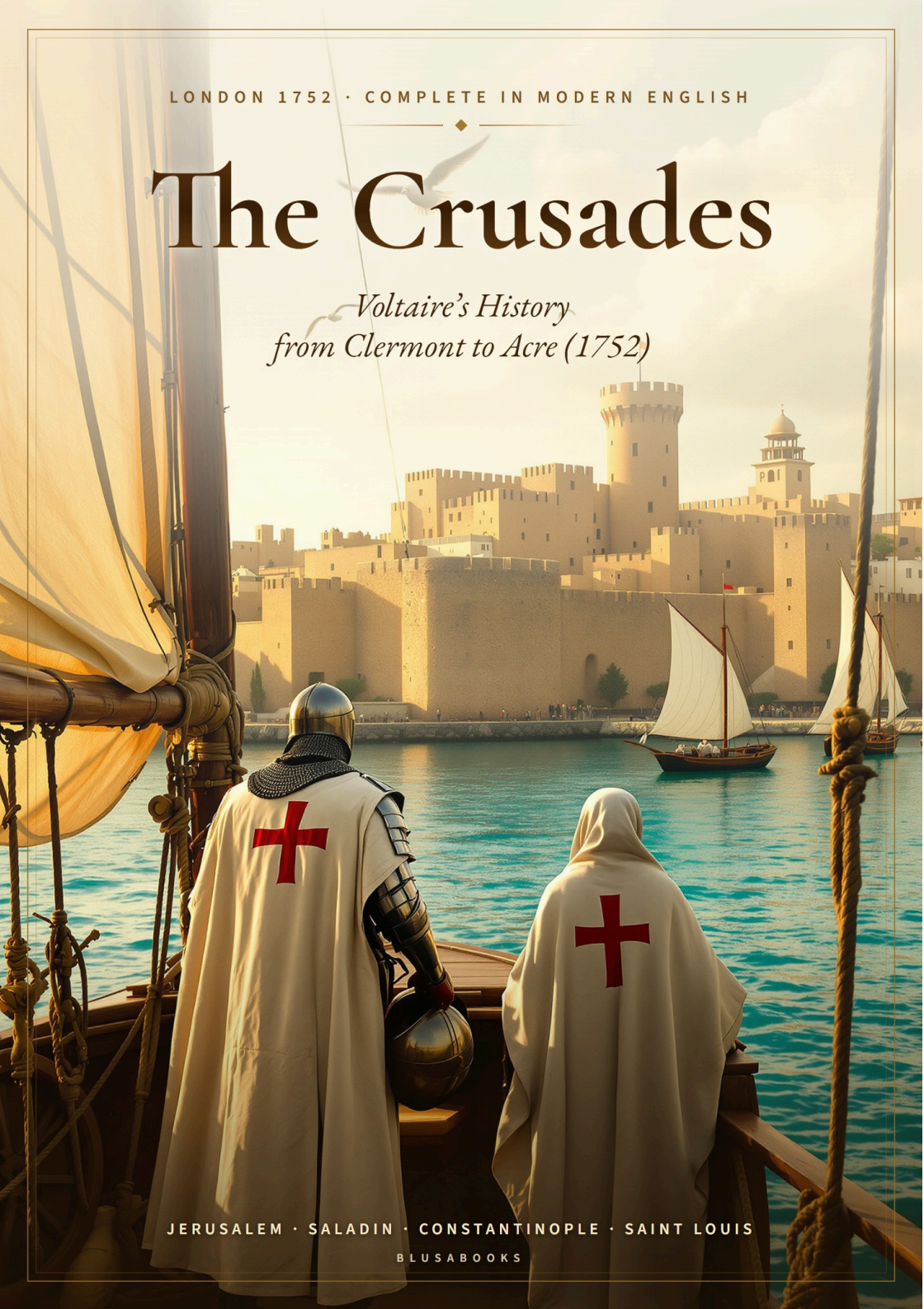
LONDON 1752 · COMPLETE IN MODERN ENGLISH

The Crusades

Voltaire's History from Clermont to Acre (1752)



JERUSALEM · SALADIN · CONSTANTINOPLE · SAINT LOUIS

BLUSABOOKS

BOOKS OF WISDOM · HISTORY

The Crusades

Voltaire's History (1752)

Voltaire on the crusades from the Council of Clermont to the fall of Acre (1095–1291): Godfrey of Bouillon, Saladin, Richard the Lionheart, the taking of Constantinople and Saint Louis. Complete in modern English

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Source: Voltaire, *Histoire des Croisades*, printed together with *Micromégas* (London, 1752). Rendered into modern English from images of the pages of that edition.

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FOREWORD

Two centuries, millions of people, one city. From 1095, when Pope Urban II called on the knights of the West at Clermont to march to Jerusalem, until 1291, when Acre, the last crusader stronghold in the Holy Land, fell, Europe sent armies, pilgrims, kings and even children to the East again and again. Thousands of books have been written about the crusades. This is one of the first whose author looked at them not as a holy feat of heroes but as a story of human passion, faith and calculation — and who asked the awkward question: what did all this actually give Europe?

Who was Voltaire. François-Marie Arouet (1694–1778), who called himself Voltaire, was the most famous French writer of the eighteenth century — playwright, poet, storyteller and tireless controversialist. As a young man he was twice imprisoned in the Bastille; afterwards he spent more than two years in England, where he came to know Newton's physics, Locke's philosophy and English religious toleration. All his life he fought what he considered humanity's greatest enemy — the fanaticism and superstition that make people kill in the name of God.

Voltaire the historian. It is less well known that Voltaire was also one of the leading historians of his age. He wrote a history of Charles XII of Sweden (1731) and *The Age of Louis XIV* (1751), and in the early 1750s, while living at the court of Frederick II of Prussia, he was working on a vast history of the whole world, which appeared in 1756 as the *Essay on the Manners and Spirit of Nations* (*Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*). His idea was new: history is not merely a list of kings, battles and dynasties — it is the history of peoples, customs, trade, the arts and the human mind. He deliberately wrote about China, India and the

Islamic world, not only about Christian Europe. *The History of the Crusades* is a part of this great work that first appeared on its own.

Why so critical. Voltaire sees the crusades as a disaster: millions died, whole regions were emptied, the money went to the Venetians and Genoese, and in the end Jerusalem remained in Muslim hands. With irony he tells of the preachers who swept the crowds along, of lords who sold their lands to the churches, of the ambition of popes and legates, and of the crusaders who in 1204 sacked Christian Constantinople. Yet his book is not only an indictment. With obvious respect he writes of Saladin, who in 1187 spared the people of Jerusalem and in his will left gifts to the Muslim, Christian and Jewish poor alike; of the sultan who listened to Saint Francis; of the high level of Arab science and art. He praises Frederick II, who won Jerusalem by treaty rather than by the sword, and writes with real admiration of Saint Louis as a just ruler — and yet shows, sadly, how that very king's zeal led to two catastrophes.

What the book covers. Voltaire begins with the state of Europe, of the Turcomans, of Constantinople and of Palestine in the eleventh century, and then tells of the expeditions of Peter the Hermit and Godfrey of Bouillon, the Kingdom of Jerusalem, the Second Crusade and Saint Bernard's part in it, the victories of Saladin and the campaign of Richard the Lionheart and Philip Augustus, the taking of Constantinople in 1204, the Children's Crusade, Damietta and Frederick II, the onslaught of the Mongols and the Khwarazmians, and both crusades of Saint Louis — down to the fall of Acre. At the end he draws up his own balance sheet of the crusades.

How to read it today. Voltaire wrote some 270 years ago, often from memory and from the sources available to him. Some of his dates and figures are inaccurate, some of his anecdotes are legends, and his judgements on the steppe peoples or on the Jews reflect the notions of the eighteenth century. We have neither corrected nor softened his text: it is translated in full, sentence by sentence. Instead, the footnotes calmly say what historians know today, and at the end of the book each part has a commentary — "In plain words" and "What historians

say": where Voltaire was far-sighted and where he was wrong. His opinions remain his own; we neither defend nor condemn them. We treat all the religions and peoples spoken of here with respect.

Our edition. This rendering into modern English was made from the pages of the 1752 edition (its title page reads "Londres", London), in which *The History of the Crusades* was printed together with Voltaire's philosophical tale *Micromégas* and his *New Plan for a History of the Human Mind*; these too we publish as separate books. Voltaire's own section headings are kept; for convenience we have divided the book into ten parts with titles of our own, and gathered Voltaire's four short opening sections into the first part. All the footnotes are ours.

PART I

THE WORLD BEFORE THE CRUSADES

Illustration in the manner of 15th-century crusade chronicle miniatures

The State of Europe

When these wars began, this was the situation of the affairs of Europe: Germany and Italy were torn apart; France still weak; Spain divided between Christians and Muslims; the latter driven out of Italy entirely; England beginning to dispute her liberty against her kings; feudal government established everywhere; chivalry in fashion; priests turned into princes and warriors; a politics almost wholly different from that which animates Europe today. It seemed that the countries of the Roman Communion formed one great Republic, of which the Emperor and the

Pope both wished to be the heads. This Republic, though divided, had long been agreed upon the project of these Crusades, which produced such great and such infamous deeds, new kingdoms, new settlements, new miseries, in short a great deal more misfortune than glory.

The State of the Empire of the Turcomans

Religions always outlast empires. Islam was flourishing, and the Empire of the Caliphs was being destroyed by the nation of the Turcomans.[1] One wearies of searching for the origin of these peoples; it is the same as that of all peoples who are purely conquerors. They were all savages, living by plunder; the Turks and the Turcomans formerly dwelt beyond the Taurus and the Imaus,[2] and, it is said, very far from the Araxes. They were included among those Tartars whom Antiquity called Scythians. This great continent of Tartary, four times as vast as Europe, was never inhabited by anyone but barbarians, at least since any faint knowledge of this globe has existed.

Their antiquities scarcely deserve a continuous history any better than the wolves and tigers of their country. They spread out at the beginning of the eleventh century toward Muscovy; they flooded the shores of the Black Sea and those of the Caspian Sea. The Arabs, under the first successors of Muhammad, had subjugated almost all of Asia Minor, Syria and Persia. The Turcomans came at last, and subjugated the Arabs. Baghdad, seat of the Empire of the Caliphs, fell around 1055 into the hands of these new plunderers.

Togrul Beg, or Ortogul Beg,[3] from whom the race of the Ottomans is said to descend, entered Baghdad in much the same way as so many Emperors have

1. Turkic nomadic tribes from Central Asia (the Oghuz). The Seljuk dynasty, which conquered Persia, Iraq and Asia Minor in the 11th century, arose from among them.
2. Imaus was the ancient name for the mountain ranges of Central Asia (Pamir, Hindu Kush, Himalaya).
3. Tughril Beg (c. 990–1063), the first Seljuk sultan, entered Baghdad in 1055. Voltaire confuses him with Ertughrul, father of the founder of the Ottoman line; the Seljuks and the Ottomans were different dynasties.

entered Rome. He made himself master of the city and of the Caliph, by prostrating himself at his feet. Ortogul led the Caliph Caiem[4] to his palace, holding the bridle of his mule; but, more skillful or more fortunate than the German Emperors have been in Rome, he established his power, and left to the Caliph only the task of opening the Friday prayers at the Mosque, and the honor of investing with their states all the Muslim tyrants who made themselves sovereigns.

It must be remembered that, just as these Turcomans imitated the Franks, the Normans and the Goths in their invasions, so they imitated them also in submitting to the laws, the manners and the religion of the vanquished. It is thus that other Tartars behaved toward the Chinese; and this is the advantage that a civilized people, though the weaker, must have over a barbarous people, though the stronger.

Thus the Caliphs were no longer anything but the Heads of the Religion, just as the Popes had been under the Lombard Kings.

The Princes of the Turcomans took the name of Sultans. There were soon among them, as elsewhere, illustrious men, and even such as deserved to be so.

The State of Constantinople

The Empire of Constantinople held out; not all its Princes had been unworthy to reign. Constantine Porphyrogenitus,[5] son of Leo the Philosopher, and a philosopher himself, brought back, like his father, happy times. If the Government fell into contempt under Romanus, son of Constantine, it became respected among the Nations under Nicephorus Phocas, who had retaken Candia from the Arabs in 961, before being Emperor; if John Zimisces assassinated this Nicephorus and stained the Palace with blood, if he joined hypocrisy to his crimes, he was nonetheless the defender of the Empire against the Turks and the Bulgars; but under Michael the Paphlagonian Sicily had been lost; under Romanus

4. Al-Qa'im, Abbasid caliph (1031–1075).
5. Constantine VII (905–959), emperor and scholar; his father was Leo VI, called "the Wise".