

The Castle of Montfort

by [Geoffrey Clarfield](#) (November 2020)



The Crusaders occupied Syria piecemeal and in their local divisions...one would expect to find different schools of architecture.

–Crusader Castle, T.E. Lawrence, 1910

I am standing at the top of a partially excavated and reconstructed Crusader tower in the middle of a castle complex in the northern Galilee. To the west is the Mediterranean Sea, calm and blue in the distance where its safire waters merge with a blue sky. To the northwest is the green, forested border with Lebanon, a mere ten miles away, that can be seen without binoculars.

On either side of me, the steep sides of the hill upon which the castle was built would have protected it from any

hostile attack. Below is the Kziv stream which acts as a kind of natural moat on the north and south side of the complex. Behind me to the east is a small, flat plateau.

There are olive groves nearby, carob and pine trees and that hard-to-describe, dense, evergreen plethora of Mediterranean grasses and bushes, with their noisy insects and chirping birds and which have its own unique smell of pine resin, olives on the branch, ground flint dust and the stony, brown earth of the land of Israel.

You can hear other birds singing in the distance and as the car park is about a kilometre from the entrance path to the ruin, the soundscape is natural, pre-industrial. The site is not marked. There are no garish signs, no visitor's centre. It is you, the castle on its hill and even the modern Israeli villages with their red tiles and plaster walls across the valley can be seen (but not heard) in the near distance. This is what it must have sounded like in the 13th century.



I could imagine the sound of knights on horses, the

horses walking slowly, the knights in their armour with their white cloth gowns and painted crosses on their clothes, the shimmer of their swords, the glint of the sun on their helmets—and their supporters; men and women with donkeys piled high with the produce that kept the community alive. The men who lived here were knights living by a monastic rule who were dedicated to fighting the Saracens, to protect that land where their saviour Jesus once walked and preached. Almost every believing Christian in medieval Europe would have wanted to go on pilgrimage, if they had the time and means to do so, to this land. It was these knights, Teutonic Knights of the castle, whose job it was to protect them and their routes in and out of the Holy Land.

In the Middle Ages the Crusaders knew that this eastern approach to Montfort was the most vulnerable, and so they created protected, steep paths and ingenious byways which would have prevented any horseman or soldier entering in any way other than in single file. From where I stood defenders could have showered invaders with arrows and other projectiles.

When the Crusaders evacuated the complex in 1271, they beat an orderly retreat to the Crusader port city of Acre which was still controlled by the Latin Kingdom. The Mamluk Sultan Baibars who negotiated their surrender allowed the knights to retreat with their archives intact. They perhaps managed to smuggle out a treasure of great value with them.



I have not been the only visitor who has been

enchanted by the Crusader castles of the Levant, now spread across the independent states of Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey. The Crusaders came to reclaim the land of Israel from its Islamic conquerors who had in turn taken it from the former Byzantine rulers. The Crusades was an idea, the Church militant, God's own, the Christians of Europe taking back the land of their saviour from the Muslims.

T.E. Lawrence was fascinated by the Crusades and Crusader military architecture. Before he became known as "Lawrence of Arabia," as a history student at Oxford, he toured the ruined castles of the Levant and wrote his [undergraduate thesis](#) on them. One scholar has argued that his tactics in managing the tribally based tribes of the Hejaz in the revolt against the Ottoman Turks may have been inspired by his understanding of the leaders and lineages who pursued their internecine wars in late medieval France based in similar castles.

I spent a good two hours walking around the ruins. I climbed all the towers and visited the recently excavated Great Halls. I imagined the knights at their high table, speaking German to each other and perhaps French to their servants, perhaps even Arabic as that part of the Galilee had its Arabic-speaking Christian villagers.

I felt I could hear them at prayer and the gentle cadences of Gregorian chant floated through my mind. I could almost taste the wine that they must have mixed with their water to protect themselves from disease. And no doubt they went on patrol, north, south, east and west to ensure that their lands were intact and the enemy was at bay. Perhaps they had even visited the Jews of Pekiin nearby who, since the time of the Romans, have never left their village.

The entire Crusader effort was a failure and they eventually lost all of their Kingdom in the East. I suddenly recalled a melody written by Richard the Lion Heart himself,

composed after his failed Crusader ventures, during his captivity in Europe. He lamented:

Indeed, no captive can tell his story truly, unless it be sadly.

But with an effort he can express the sadness in song.

I have many friends, but their gifts are poor.

They show me no honour, if for want of a ransom,

I am held prisoner here for two more winters.

Montfort castle has two dry moats, a tower keep, a longish two-story building, a three story administrative building, another building on the west, and a mill and guest house below the castle. It has wonderful gothic-like arches, which are the cliché of medieval architecture but in this green Mediterranean setting seem exotic; European transplants in the sun drenched middle east.



In 1877, Horatio Kitchener of the British Survey of

Western Palestine examined the castle. It then caught the interest of wealthy Anglo-Americans and an expedition excavated the site in 1926. The expedition was led by William Calver and sponsored by Bashford Dean, a Curator at the MET in New York.

For the last ten years the site has been excavated by Professor Adrian Boas of the University of Haifa. During the excavations of 2017 he discovered an upscale dining room and evidence of board games as Montfort, "Strong Mountain," (*Starkenberg* in German) was a place of regional administration. So, strike from your thoughts ideas of violent, sex-starved medieval knights who honoured their vows of chastity. It may not have been quite what it seemed.

On a recent visit to Jerusalem I spent a leisurely hour talking to Adrian at his dining room table at his apartment in Rechavia, about his excavations and his fascination with the Crusaders in Israel.

He told me,

I first came across Crusaders when I was in high school in Australia, where I grew up. My family had been there since 1814, the first members being two teenagers sent out in the convict shipments from England (once a shameful episode in our family history, today rather a point of pride). Anyway, there was a textbook we studied about England during the high Middle Ages and I was inspired. Being of an imaginative and artistic nature (I had hope of becoming a painter) I was fascinated by the details and the many illustrations that accompanied the text.

This interest in the past lay dormant for several years. When I was 16 my family left Australia and emigrated to Israel. I studied Hebrew at Ulpan, did my military service, got work various jobs and spent two

years in London where I studied painting and sculpture. For a visual artist, and a person with a love of history and literature London is a wonderful place to be. I then returned to Israel, and, with no profession, as many young Israelis do after army service, I got work in security.

I spent a year in Rome working at Fiumicino airport. Then, in Israel for my brother's wedding I saw my future wife. Without having exchanged a word with her I knew that she was my future. I moved back to Israel, we were married, and I had to choose a career. I worked for several years in graphic art, but my heart was not really into it. My love of history however, had never faded, but as I had not gone to college or university it seemed an academic career was not an option. But I was fortunate in that the Hebrew University had introduced a new program that enabled me to begin university studies at the age of 32. I was rapidly drawn to medieval history and the history and archaeology of the Crusades.

I was fortunate to be able to study under two of the finest Israeli scholars in the field, both of high international repute, Professor Joshua Prawer and my MA and Ph.D supervisor, Professor Benjamin Kedar. I completed my doctorate and began to excavate Crusader sites in Israel and teach courses at the Hebrew University and later at the University of Haifa. Most interest in the field of the Crusades has been in the study of churches and castles, but I have spent much of my career focussing on domestic archaeology and, some might say, mundane aspects of daily life. I find a delight in the intimacy with the past and with people of the past that can be obtained through the study of simple routine things such as food, clothing, day-to-day activities.

I asked Adrian about the logistics of excavating the site. He said, "They are daunting. It is almost as if we are back in the Middle Ages. Everything must be carried up and

down the hillsides by hand; the tools we use, the utensils we need for eating, the food and the artifacts. It gives one a sense of being close to the experiences of those who occupied the castle in the thirteenth century, in an age when there were few machines and physical efforts were the currency of work and value.”

I asked him about the stereotype of celibate Germanic warriors. He said, “The evidence suggests otherwise. The MET expedition found a child’s shoe and there was possible evidence for a female presence. Probably in a castle of this size there were camp followers, and women could have fulfilled various roles such as cooks, laundresses, and perhaps other more intimate services. Every year we discover something new, for example a series of carved stones from the ribs that supported the roofing of one of the great halls, and the remains of wooden beams that formed a floor. We discovered and excavated the castle stables and have begun work exposing the latrines. We have published much of this in a monograph, rather costly, but you can borrow it from one of the university libraries. But if you are interested in a more general look at archaeological finds of the period you might gain more by reading some of my other books that cover many aspects of life in the crusader period.”



Castles in folklore, Jewish and medieval, are often associated with the supernatural and with hidden treasure like the stories of the Holy Grail. I read out to him a paragraph from an article by one of his Israeli colleagues.

In 2005, an historical document was published by the University of Innsbruck's library, which contained a reference to the transferring of the Armenian crown (*Corona regni Armeniae*) from the Armenian Kingdom to the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem. This document, dated 1253, which is incomplete, included an explicit demand concerning the Armenian crown, made by Emperor Conrad IV, son of the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II—and addressed to the Teutonic Order's master and convent in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem. Archbishop Elect of Palermo, retrieve the crown from the custody of the Teutonic Order and brings it back to the Armenian Kingdom, to King Het'um of Armenia. This was the very crown that his father, Emperor Frederick II,

had entrusted with the Teutonic Order during his 1228-1229 Crusade in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem.

I asked Adrian, "Is it just possible that the crown was left behind, hidden in or around Montfort Castle?" He paused, smiled and told me, "I have a copy of the Teutonic archives that were originally kept at Montfort on my shelf. The documents have survived, so it is possible perhaps that the crown has survived too. We don't really know if it was ever at Montfort but every summer our volunteers joke that this time we just might find it. I suppose, you can't entirely rule it out."

We then talked about a wide range of things having to do with the Crusades and the archaeology of the land of Israel. He closed our meeting with a humorous anecdote. He explained, "The Crusades and Crusaders are a popular field of interest in Europe and America. In Israel however, despite the fact that Israel has produced some major historians like Praver and Kedar, the attraction to the general public remains undeveloped. Israelis are traditionally, and perhaps understandably, more interested in excavating Jewish and Biblical sites.

I once had the unpleasant experience of being in a downtown street in Jerusalem when three suicide bombers blew themselves and several people around them, up. I was hospitalized for about a week. By protocol, the President of Israel visited me as I was recuperating. I told him about my work. His reaction was not altogether untypical. Often when I, an orthodox Jew, am asked about my work and explain that I am involved in studying the Crusades, I get a similar reaction: "Why don't you do something involving 'our' past?"

I think that if one day we were to make a dramatic find—the crown of Armenia if you like—the general public might show a greater interest. As it is, people love Crusader castles for the beauty of their remains, but the

general public still has little interest in this period. Hopefully we will be able to get people to realize that all of the past is part of our heritage, not only that of those who shared our religious beliefs.

I thanked Adrian for his time. I got on my cell phone and ordered two of his books. The first is called [Montfort: History, Early Research and Recent Studies of the Principal Fortress of the Teutonic Order in the Latin East](#). The second is [The Crusader World edited by Adrian Boas](#). As I walked out of his house onto the busy, noisy streets of modern Jerusalem Amazon sent me a text message stating that the books will arrive at my house in seven days time which is about the same amount of time it would take for me to walk from Jerusalem to Montfort.



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Geoffrey Clarfield is an anthropologist at large. For twenty years he lived in, worked among and explored the cultures and societies of Africa, the Middle East and Asia. As a development anthropologist he has worked for the following clients: the UN, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Norwegian, Canadian, Italian, Swiss and Kenyan governments as well international NGOs. His essays largely focus on the translation of cultures.

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