

The Second Crusade – Extending the Frontiers of Christendom by Jonathan Phillips.
Yale University Press 2008.

Jonathan Phillips is one of the world's foremost experts on the history of the Crusades and his latest, meticulously researched and superbly-written, tome on the subject takes the Second Crusade of 1145-1149 as its focus.

The Second Crusade is undoubtedly the forgotten Crusade, lacking the impact of the first, the glamour of the third, and the horror and disaster of the fourth, in fact Phillips points out that the previous major work on it was published in 1866! Nevertheless, the Second Crusade was significant for a number of reasons, not least in the way in which it diversified its focus into a three-pronged attack, on Muslims in Iberia (where it achieved some success) on Muslims in the Holy Land (where the results were at best mixed) and against pagans in the Baltic region known as the Wends (where it achieved minor success).

Phillips sets the Second Crusade in its historical context, particularly in the aftermath of the First, as well as in the context of papal and clergy aspirations with regard not just to the safeguarding of Christian holy places in the Middle East but in turning back the Islamic tide and making more Christian converts: he also details the political ferment in Western Europe at the time which contributed to the Crusade in unexpected ways.

Several major figures bestride this book, the European kings Louis VII of France and Conrad of Germany, Pope Eugenius III and the egregious Bernard of Clairvaux, and the Muslim general Imad ad-Din Zengi, whose capture of Edessa in 1144 was the ostensible catalyst for the Crusade.

The conflict between the Islamic and non-Islamic world now being played out in Iraq and Afghanistan, and across the Middle East, cannot be properly understood without a through knowledge of the Islamic Conquests of the post-Mohammed era and the Christian fight back of the Crusades. Jonathan Phillips has made a major contribution to an informed understanding of the Crusades, whose influence on Islam is unremitting and through whose lens most western engagement with the Islamic world is seen by Muslims. The Second Crusade should be essential reading for anyone seeking to understand 21st century Middle Eastern affairs, as well as being excellent material for the serious historian, lay or professional.

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