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The Crusades Uncovered

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Preface

In memory of my friend in the field,
Ronnie Ellenblum (1952–2021)

I had never intended to become an archaeologist. Archaeology is not the first profession that comes to mind for a child growing up, as I did, in Australia. However, history has always captivated me, its seeds perhaps planted on long ago Saturday afternoons when, with no other occupation, I would leaf through three huge scrapbooks that a great-great-uncle had put together in the 1880s. They transported me back to a different world, to a time that was somewhat obscure, yet somehow familiar, a sepia past of horse carriages, gas lamps, dark interiors with overly elaborate furnishings, bearded gentlemen in frock coats and top hats, women in black lace dresses with high collars, elaborate head gear, silk flowers, ribbons, and black jet jewellery, and children who might easily have stepped out of a Tenniel illustration from *Alice through the Looking Glass*. If the present sometimes seemed dull, the past appeared to be full of interest. And it may be that a curiosity about the Middle Ages began to evolve back then as well. A favourite children's book was *Nicholas and the Wool-Pack* by the English author, Cynthia Harnett, a tale about rural life in late medieval England. And I wonder if a fascination in medieval knights might have had its source in a famed national hero, an armour-bearing bushranger who,

in his final showdown with the police, dressed himself and his gang members in medieval-looking suits of armour fashioned from plough mould boards. But certainly none of this would have led me down the path I have taken, were it not for the move my family made when I was sixteen, all the way across the world to a place where the past mingled with the present, a land of Biblical scenery, studded with walled cities, battlefields, and fortresses, where one could pick up an Iron Age stone tool in a field, speak and be understood in an ancient language, shop in a medieval bazaar, carry in one's pocket coins impressed with the same designs found on coins minted two millennia back. As I discovered the rich history of the Holy Land, I became acquainted with the crusades; through field trips to castles and battlefields and through a great deal of reading, that led eventually to academic studies and the decision to make a career of exploring, studying, and teaching about the crusades and about Frankish settlement in the Levant.

Over the years I have worked on surveys and excavations of many different sites—cities, villages, and fortresses—but most of my career has been devoted to the exploration of the ruins of one of the greatest crusader fortresses—Montfort Castle in the western Galilee, the chief fortification of the German Teutonic Order in the Holy Land. The excavations at Montfort are in a way indicative of the changes that archaeology has undergone over the past century. Montfort was the very first crusader castle to be excavated. In 1926 a small team sent out on behalf of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in search of a thirteenth-century suit of armour, uncovered a large part of the upper ward of the castle. That venture, although it resulted in a thoughtful study of the castle and its material remains, started out with the limited aim of finding a specific object to fill a gap in a museum collection. It was not untypical of the period. By the time of our renewed project at Montfort eight decades later, archaeology was no longer a form of “treasure-hunting,” but a serious scientific field of study.

The title of this volume was suggested to me by my editor in order to distinguish these short studies as the works of an archaeologist. I was initially inclined to choose something else, perhaps because I have never felt entirely comfortable with the limitations of this professional label, and also because these particular writings, originally published as bi-weekly blog posts, are not only about archaeology, and indeed, not only about the crusades. They are about science and art and architecture; they are about travel and nature, memory, and nostalgia; they are about the present, the recent past, and the more distant past. But in retrospect, the suggested title is probably the most appropriate one, for the crusader period is the thread that I have chosen to bind all of these issues together, and indeed I have spent a considerable part of my life uncovering the crusades, or to be more precise, uncovering evidence of the Frankish presence and settlement in the crusader states.

Archaeology entails much physical effort, with pick and hoe, heaving buckets and barrows, sweeping, dusting, brushing. It involves long hours in the summer heat, and it requires rising in the early mornings, working through the long days, and finally trudging up steep hills and over rocky terrain at the end of the day for an all too brief respite before getting back to the work of sorting, recording, and writing up. Archaeology is an earthy activity. The archaeologist breathes the dust, smells, and tastes the soil. He lives in nature, his companions are not only fellow archaeologists, students, and volunteers, but snakes, scorpions, and fleas, hawks flying above, wild boars rummaging through the undergrowth, and jackals howling across the valley at dusk. This closeness to nature is a good thing, not only for the opportunity it provides to observe it at close range. It breaks down barriers with the past and brings one closer to the experiences of the people one is investigating. What better way to understand a labourer who was once engaged in building a fortress, or a soldier who lived in and battled over it, than to dig into its foundations, and in doing so, to inhale the same dust and perspire under the same harsh sun? At the end of a morning's

work at Montfort, hoeing the earth, clearing sage bushes, gingerly lifting rocks and taking care that there are no venomous creatures lurking beneath, you acquire an intimacy with the labourer who eight centuries ago on this very spot, cautiously upturned these stones, hoed into this same earth, uprooted these same fragrant plants. Add to that the profound emotion one experiences when holding in one's hands an object that some unknown and long-forgotten individual had held ages ago. This is indeed a remarkable vocation and this closeness with the past is a large part of its appeal. The "outdooriness," the being-in-nature aspect of fieldwork, has a particular appeal for academics who might otherwise spend their entire lives at their desks, the only dust they breathe being that which has settled on library shelves. And there are other appealing aspects. Archaeology is detective work. The past is a puzzle, a plot—partly seen, mostly obscured. It needs to be slowly and painstakingly exposed, analysed, put back together. The archaeologist is a Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot, who must apply his intuition, his "little grey cells" in order to make heads or tails of what he has found.

After having physically exposed the past, the archaeologist has another task, an additional "uncovering" to carry out, albeit an abstract one—the interpretation of what has been found in academic papers, lectures, and books. The following digressions represent one form of this second, cerebral "uncovering," in this case mini-essays, informative but casual, drawing on my earlier blog posts. Archaeology exposes chronologically – from the present to the past. In the sections below I have taken a less restricted approach, moving from the past to the present and from the present to the past and back again, and through partly autobiographical accounts and musings, I have tried to show how archaeologists and historians can respond to such a complex and contested subject as the crusades. I have grouped my reflections under the categories of Perceptions, including subjects such as travel, legends, warfare, and wonderment; Places, under which I consider the battlefield of Hattin, Crac des Chevaliers and other fortresses, Jerusalem, Acre, Mount Tabor and the

countryside of the Holy Land; and People, where I discuss Guy de Lusignan, Marino Sanudo, Germain, and Saladin; before making some closing remarks on how history reverberates in time. Mine is a personal approach. Each historian's story is unique, but a personal approach is, I believe, the best way to bring the past to life, and I hope through these ponderings to entice a new generation to engage in this field.

Chapter I

Perceptions

Dream delivers us to dream,
and there is no end to illusion.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience"

Travel¹

Aldous Huxley referred to travel as a vice, "...imperious, demanding its victim's time, money, energy and the sacrifice of comfort."² That is true enough, but like all vices it also provides a gratification that makes the adversity seem somehow worth putting up with, at least in retrospect.

The "delights" of modern air travel are considerable: the sleepless night before, the rush to get to the airport in time, the fear that one has forgotten something (passport, e-ticket, toothbrush), the endless zigzagging queues, the need to half-undress at the security counter with a line of people waiting on you (removing the belt from your trousers becoming a herculean task). And then there is the cramped seating space, the unpalatable airline food, screaming chil-

¹ This section was written prior to the current COVID-19 pandemic, which has made the unpleasantnesses of the following few lines seem such trivial discomforts.

² Aldous Huxley, *Along the Road. Notes and Essays of a Tourist*, 2nd ed. (London: Chatto, 1948), 11.