

The true story of Baldwin IV: the Leper King who challenged Saladin

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Index

I.	Abstract	3
II.	A brief premise	4
III.	Youth and illness	4
IV.	The Leper King faces Saladin	6
V.	The last challenges and the lineage	8
VI.	From Baldwin's death to the fall of Jerusalem	10
VII.	Baldwin IV on the big screen	12
VIII.	Bibliography and Images	13

I. Abstract

For a remarkable number of centuries during the Middle Ages, the idea of the "good, upright and just" Christian world against the great Muslim enemy continued to oppose two realities that were socially, structurally and above all religiously different from each other. It circulated again during the years of the Battle of Lepanto (1571) and then began to gradually diminish during the XVII and XVIII centuries and was never revived, neither by the most important European sovereigns nor by the popes.

The context in which the figure of Baldwin IV, king of Jerusalem from 1174 to 1185, was born and developed is therefore that of the Crusades, the set of military expeditions that the Western kingdoms undertook to conquer and defend the Holy City. It should be remembered that, during the XII and XIII centuries, the term "crusades" (which was actually coined during the 1700s) was not used to indicate these great undertakings but they were referred to as "armed pilgrimages", with the aim of exalting the fundamental religious component at their base: it is, in fact, also the culminating moment of papal influence in the Christian world, who will succeed with his word in starting long, tremendously expensive and uncertain expeditions.

There are many factors that during the first centuries after the year 1000 will contribute to the increase of the tensions between the two worlds, the Christian and the Muslim: we are in fact in the middle of the Spanish Reconquista of the Iberian Peninsula, which will end only in 1492 with the surrender of the Caliphate of Granada, and the invasion of the Anatolian peninsula, previously controlled by the Byzantine Empire, by the Turkic populations from the steppes of Asia following their resounding victory at the Battle of Manzikert (1071). It's not wrong to speak of the Crusades as global wars involving Syria as well as Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey and the Red Sea coasts; the war against the "infidel" will always continue, from the conquest to the fall of Jerusalem, from the Christian kingdoms of the XIII century in the Near East to the fall of Acre, a symptom of two completely different worlds but united by the need to triumph in the name of their God.

II. A brief premise

Year 1174. Amalric I, king of Jerusalem on the throne since 1163, died at the age of thirty-eight following a terrible fever in the middle of the negotiations he himself had begun with the king of Sicily William II, in order to obtain sufficient reinforcements to attack Egypt.

The barons of the kingdom, called upon to make up for the unexpected and disconcerting loss, elected as legitimate successor the son of the deceased sovereign, a child of just thirteen years old who had already been suffering from leprosy for some time, convinced that it would not last long. However, in the following years the young man will surprise everyone with his courage, vigor and wisdom, going down in history as one of the most important kings of the Kingdom of Jerusalem.

His name, was Baldwin IV.

III. Youth and illness

Born in 1161 to the marriage of Amalric and Agnes of Courtenay, he grew up at his father's court in Jerusalem where he was instructed by Archbishop William of Tyre, the future chancellor of the kingdom. It was William himself who first noticed the signs of the imminent illness due to a partial paresis of the prince's right arm and hand while he was playing with the sons of the nobles. Unfortunately, the limited medical knowledge of the time did not allow a certain diagnosis to be reached, which was made possible only in the years of puberty due to the rapid worsening of the disease that afflicted the young man. As if that were not enough, the impressive course of the disease, which will prevent him from having heirs, also degenerated into the most oppressive form in nature, the lepromatous one, which would also directly affect the bone structure and eyesight of the future sovereign.



(William of Tyre discovers the first signs of Baldwin's illness, from the manuscript *L'Estoire d'Eracles*)

The nature of leprosy was not unknown in the Holy Land, in fact, even before the capture of Jerusalem by the commanders of the First Crusade, sick pilgrims who arrived in the Holy Land used to go to the hospital of St. Lazarus (erected around 1063) where they would find assistance and a minimum of relief from their sufferings. After the conquest of the city, many sick knights continued to visit the community, taking monastic vows while still maintaining their knightly

prerogatives. The medieval order of St. Lazarus of Jerusalem came to life from the hospital of the same name and the order that ran it from 1119, although it is not clear when, exactly, it took on military connotations. One of the main objectives of this new community was to be able to guarantee the possibility of continuing to serve, fighting for the cause of the crusaders in the East until, of course, the forces would allow it to the sick: Baldwin II himself, sovereign from 1118 to 1131, took them under his protection and also guaranteed them plots of land (as Fulk V of Anjou would also do in the future, monarch from 1131 to 1143). After the fall of the Holy City, the leper knights participated in the reconquest of Acre, which took place in 1191 at the hands of an extraordinary Richard Lionheart, and again in 1227 they were on the side of the crusade led by Frederick II Hohenstaufen, from whom they received numerous gifts. The testimonies of their deeds allow us to understand how, despite the dreaded disease, they were not relegated to the margins of society alone, without care and deprived of the possibility of serving; the knights of the order of St. Lazarus undoubtedly set a courageous example for all the pilgrims to follow on their way to the Holy Land.

Baldwin IV was officially crowned on July 15, 1174 (a date considered auspicious as it represented the seventy-fifth year of the conquest of Jerusalem after the success of the First Crusade) even though the High Court did not have much hope for the young man's survival, for this reason, in guaranteeing an heir to the throne of the Holy City, Sibyl and Isabella, the sovereign's sisters, will play a role of great importance. The first of the two was in fact already of marriageable age and the choice for her new husband fell on William of Montferrat, also known as Longsword: young, skilled in battle and related to both the king of France, Louis VII, and the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, Conrad III, he represented the ideal profile to guide the destiny of the kingdom in case of need. He arrived in the Holy Land and immediately married Sibylla, becoming Count of Jaffa and Ascalon, but unfortunately, after a short period of illness he died in 1177 leaving Sibylla pregnant with the future Baldwin V (designated as legitimate heir) and bitterly reopening the game for the throne of Jerusalem.



Baldwin IV crowned in Jerusalem on 15 July 1174 (illustration from the Chronicle of William of Tyre)

The quests to ensure the transfer of power in the event of the king's sudden death did not end there, in fact, what prompted many members of the nobility and clergy of the Holy Land to turn urgently to the European kingdoms was also the extreme need to receive military aid against the growing threat of Saladin, who over the years had assumed more and more power in Egypt and Syria.

Baldwin IV's official rule began in 1176 and, despite his condition, he was described by William of Tyre (in his chronicle entitled "*Historia rerum in partibus transmarinis gestarum*") as a young man of great calmness in spite of his age, with a keen intellect and an extraordinary memory. Very skilfull on horseback, he also proved wise in listening to the good counsels of the court, and this was what more than anything else enabled him to unite, even if for a short time, a large part of the Christian kingdoms in the East for the salvation of Jerusalem.

IV. The Leper King faces Saladin

Ill and barely a teenager, the young king immediately had to face many difficulties and an extremely complex landscape. According to agreements still in force with the Byzantine Empire of Manuel Comnenus, strongly weakened by the advance in Anatolia of the fierce Turkic populations from the steppes of Asia, he had to continue his father's ambitious project of an invasion of Egypt, considered of fundamental importance both from a commercial and a strategic point of view. The courtiers and nobles of Jerusalem were in fact terrified by the idea that Egypt and Syria could unite to face the Christians in the Holy Land together, thus suffocating the Crusader dominions: a fear destined to become reality when Saladin, once he had overcome the resistance of the Zengids, managed to annex the fundamental cities of Damascus and Azaz to his Egyptian dominions. To further amplify the tensions with the sultan, there was also the desire on the part of the newly crowned sovereign not to renew the peace treaty that Raymond III of Tripoli had stipulated a short time earlier with the Kurdish leader to ensure a minimum of stability for the Christian kingdoms. This strong stance is an indication of great initiative and courage on the part of Baldwin, who was convinced that the clash had to move in the direction of the enemy without waiting to fall into the traps that his sharp rival could have set for the crusader army in the Holy Land.



The Crusader Kingdoms in the Holy Land at the end of the Second Crusade (1147-1150)

The young monarch's willingness to undertake an aggressive policy towards the enemy was followed by a decision that would prove to be, in the long run, very unfortunate: in the spring of 1177 he entrusted to one of his most loyal vassals, Raynald of Châtillon, the fortress of Kerak, located in the border region of Transjordan and considered a real bulwark against the explosive Arab incursions. Unfortunately, Baldwin would realize only years later that loyalty and shrewdness were not qualities common to all the knights of the kingdom.

The brave aims of the Leper King will be further frustrated by the internal disagreements between the High Court of Jerusalem and Philip of Flanders (the closest in the line of kinship with the sovereign of the Holy Sepulchre) which led the nobleman to leave the Holy City together with his guard, a large number of knights and as many as eighty Templars, heading to the nearby County of Tripoli, on excellent terms but independent from the Kingdom of Jerusalem.

Saladin, careful to what was happening within the Christian territories and determined to immediately inflict a mortal blow on the government of Baldwin IV, wanted to exploit the moment of confusion and apparent weakness to his advantage: at the command of 26,000 men, he moved towards the strategic stronghold of Gaza, controlled by the Templar Knights. At the news of the imminent arrival of the enemy in Jerusalem, now defended by only a handful of horsemen, panic spread. The young sovereign, then just sixteen years old but already very ill, did not lose heart and instead of remaining in the Holy City delegating to his generals the task of countering the new threat, he rode at the head of his army (much reduced, the figures indicated by William of Tyre refer to only 1400 knights) blocking the access road to the fort of Ascalon. On the strength of his superiority, the sultan divided his army with the aim of plundering the southern provinces of the Crusader kingdom before aiming for Jerusalem, which remained unguarded, however, he was taken by surprise by the maneuvers of Baldwin who, following the advice of Raynald of Châtillon and the Count of Edessa Josselin III, had also joined the Templar Knights of the neighboring regions and was now charging the heart of the Seljuk array.

The clash was bitter and violent and although greatly outnumbered, the Crusader knights won a very important victory in the plain of Montgisard (near Ascalon) so much so that they were one step away from killing Saladin himself. The victory reinvigorated the Christians and was one of Baldwin's greatest achievements, and on his return he was hailed with joy by all of Jerusalem. It is November 25, 1177.



The Battle of Montgisard depicted by Charles Philippe Larivière (1842)

As the years passed, the young king's health did not improve, leprosy gradually began to rob him of his sight, and even riding now required considerable effort. In spite of the difficulties and his own conditions, Baldwin continued to take an active part in the events of the kingdom, both on the battlefield and at the negotiating tables, demonstrating a strong character (perfectly in line with that of his father Amalric, again according to William of Tyre) and determined to defend the city, symbol of Christianity, with every means at his disposal. From this point of view, it is impossible not to underline how much the psychological impact of a sovereign so close to the action, even if seriously ill, affected the nobles of the kingdom and the troops: the Leper King represented the weapon that Jerusalem and the faithful needed to fight in uncertain years and against enemies at the gates.

The war resumed just two years later. During 1179 the crusaders suffered two very serious defeats that brought the conflict back to a state of absolute equality: in april, while the young sovereign was conducting raids in the town of Banyas, he was surprised by the bulk of Saladin's forces and barely managed to save himself, while in June of the same year, at the end of a bloody battle near Mari Ayun in which Baldwin was also thrown from his horse, the castle of Jacob's Ford fell into the hands of the Sultan of Egypt and Damascus, and numerous templar knights of the garrison were massacred (including their Grand Master, Balian of Ibelin).

The consequences were very heavy, in fact, they completely nullified the advantage obtained by the Christians after the extraordinary victory of Montgisard. During the early months of 1180 the territories of Tripoli County were also devastated by the Muslim army, which now, strengthened by its advantage, forced the king and the High Court of Jerusalem to accept a two-year truce.

V. The last challenges and the lineage

At court, the years passed accompanied by worries for Baldwin's descendants: the match for the throne of the Holy City, in fact, reopened as soon as William of Montferrat died in 1177 at the end of a short period of illness, leaving Sibylla and little Baldwin V. The fifteen years of waiting for the child of their union to reach the age of majority represented too long a period of time to be able to rely on it serenely: it was necessary to find a new husband for Sibylla as soon as possible. The latter will be identified in Guy of Lusignan, a nobleman and Frankish knight who, just like the "Longsword", immediately married the sister of the sick sovereign, inheriting the title of Count of Jaffa and Ascalon. Although he had been appointed regent of the kingdom until Baldwin V came of age, the rumors did not help Lusignan at all, considered by many as one of the many nobles who arrived in the Holy Land without particular gifts or domains but, on the other hand, immediately ready to take on tasks of great prestige.



Guy of Lusignan (c. 1150 - 1194) in a painting by François-Eduard Picot, 1845

The marriage between Guy and Sibylla thus opened a deep rift within the court of Jerusalem; Lusignan himself further exacerbated the tensions and, moreover, demonstrating very poor diplomatic skills, instead of expanding the ranks of nobles and knights loyal to him, concentrated on favoring his followers, proving to be extremely hostile towards the already existing aristocracy.

The spring of 1182 saw the expiration of the truce stipulated years earlier and the consequent resumption of hostilities between Saladin and the Kingdom of Jerusalem. The sultan, who had long been in full control of Egypt and Syria, and could count on the support of the other Arab cities farther from the coast, used as a pretext to march again against the Christian kingdoms a series of incidents near the Red Sea between Christian and Arab ships that had greatly damaged the supply lines, established by the Kurdish general in previous years; his new target was the city of Beirut which, in Muslim hands, would guarantee free access to the regions just north of Jerusalem without interrupting supplies from neighboring Damascus.

Once again, although increasingly weakened by the illness that had made him almost blind, Baldwin IV rode at the head of his army together with his trusted Raymond III of Tripoli and in a joint action with the Christian fleet forced Saladin to lift the siege. It is August 1182. For the third time, after the plundering of Syria and after Montgisard, the sultan was caught unprepared by the resourcefulness of his ailing, but obstinate and courageous, rival.

On November 20, 1183, Baldwin V was crowned sovereign, in co-regnum with his uncle who was still ill and now unable even to walk, in the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre, ensuring, at least apparently, the continuity of the lineage. Unfortunately, this happy news was soon overshadowed by other much more ominous ones: Saladin's raids had resumed more violently than ever in the region of Galilee without encountering resistance, since Guy of Lusignan opted for a passive and wait-and-see strategy that had the only consequence of sending Baldwin IV into a rage (whose military forces were far more prepared and ready to fight than were the small armies that the Sultan had tasked with ravaging Christian territories). The accusations of cowardice and the terrible policy put in place by his brother-in-law led the leper king to relieve him of the regency, judging him incapable of playing such an important role in such a delicate moment for Jerusalem.

At the end of the same year, the wedding between Isabella (the king's younger sister) and Humphrey IV of Toron was also being celebrated at the fortress of Kerak, where Lusignan and Raynald of Châtillon were also located, whose actions

a few months earlier, however, would have terrible consequences. Heedless of the delicate situation in which the kingdom found itself, squeezed in a mortal grip by the military pressure of Saladin on the one hand and by the intrigues of the court on the other, the lord of Transjordan had given life to a real campaign of raids and looting of Arab caravans and boats near the Red Sea with a precise objective, weaken supplies from Egypt for the sultan's army (also with a view to a large loot. On his return from Damascus, the Kurdish leader did not hesitate to consider the raids perpetrated against Arab merchants a real sacrilege and began to gather every possible army, with the aim of federating once and for all the Muslim forces against the crusaders. The provocations only made Raynald a particularly loathed enemy.

With disarming speed, Saladin attacked and laid siege to Kerak and his garrison, which would certainly have fallen into enemy hands if Baldwin IV had not intervened again at the head of the entire army of Jerusalem, messing up the sultan's plans for the umpteenth time.



Partial view of the walls of today's Kerak Fortress

VI. From Baldwin's death to the fall of Jerusalem

The imprudence of Raynald, the expeditions to the rescue of Beirut and Kerak and the dynastic troubles, had enormously weakened the Leper King who died, after a long agony, on March 16, 1185, leaving Baldwin V (at the time still a five-year-old child) as his legitimate heir flanked by Raymond III of Tripoli in the role of regent.

His reign lasted less than twelve years and has been described by the historian René Grousset in these words: "a long agony, but an agony lived on horseback, all comprehended in the feeling of royal dignity, Christian duty and the responsibilities of the crown, in the tragic hour in which the drama of the king corresponded to the drama of the kingdom".

Despite his terrible illness, Baldwin IV ruled during the most stormy period in the history of Christian Jerusalem, facing a formidable opponent who at the time of the events narrated was at the height of his power. He made sure that Saladin was promptly confronted by the army of the Holy City on the occasion of each of his offensives. The exploits of a boy with leprosy, who ascended the throne

at the age of thirteen, at the head of a kingdom short of men and resources against a pressing and intelligent enemy, helped to make him one of the most important rulers the Crusader kingdoms have ever had.

His descendants, unfortunately, did not enjoy particular fortune and the date of his death also represented the beginning of the end of Christian dominions in the East. A little more than a year after his death in August 1186, the young Baldwin V also died, at the age of six, plunging the kingdom once again into a dynastic crisis. The regency of Raymond III of Tripoli expired and between the end of September and the beginning of October of the same year, Princess Sibylla (as the legitimate heir of Amalric and mother of the deceased heir) came to the throne accompanied by her husband, Guy of Lusignan.



The coronation of Guy of Lusignan and Sibylla as the new rulers of the kingdom

While Raymond tried in vain to remind them that the question of succession should also be submitted to the kings of the West, Raynald of Châtillon and the new master of the Templars, Gerard of Ridefort, also allied themselves with Sibylla and Guy. The government was now in the hands of those whom Baldwin IV had, until recently, ousted from power.

The consequences of such acts were not long in coming.

Taking advantage once again of the discord among the Christians, Saladin struck his last, deadly blow against the crusaders in the Holy Land. In March 1187 he summoned his army and all the princes of upper Mesopotamia to lay waste to Transjordan and its fortresses; in vain was the sortie of Gerard of Ridefort, who was defeated, captured and beheaded along with all the Templars who had accompanied him in his mad venture.

Realizing the magnitude of the danger, Guy and Raymond made peace and, after uniting an immense army of about 25,000 men, marched against the enemy, who in the meantime had plundered and destroyed a large part of Tiberias (not far from Nazareth).

Once the forces present in the Holy Land had been gathered, the nobles of the kingdom and the sovereign found themselves at a crossroads: wait for Saladin at the gates of the city for a last strenuous defense or march to meet him in the open field? Although Raymond of Tripoli and the more shrewd aristocrats leaned towards a wait-and-see strategy, Guy did not prove as wise as his young predecessor in listening to good advice, and, by virtue of the accusations of

cowardice he had previously received, which had deprived him of the esteem of Baldwin IV, he ordered the march to be set out. The lack of water, the long journey under the scorching June sun and the terrible military tactics adopted, contributed to transforming the plain of Hattin (also located in the region of Tiberias) into the tomb of thousands of crusaders.



Guy of Lusignan surrenders his arms to Saladin as a sign of defeat

On 5 July 1187, Guy's army was routed by Saladin's technical and tactical superiority, and he was captured along with Raynald of Châtillon (who was personally executed by the sultan shortly afterwards). A few thousand were saved under the command of Raymond, the only one who, together with Baldwin, had understood the danger of his rival.

A few months after the devastating defeat, on October 2, 1187, the Holy City fell into the hands of the Kurdish leader. It was the end of the Kingdom of Jerusalem.

VII. Baldwin IV on the big screen

The Leper King first appeared on the big screen in 2005 in Ridley Scott's film "The Kingdom of Heaven". Translated into Italian with the title "The Crusades" it presents itself in an innovative way, eager to deal with a thorny theme such as that of armed pilgrimages to the Holy Land during the XII century, however it cannot be defined as historical. At the center of the film there would in fact be the story of the relationship (extremely fictionalized without any historical confirmation in the sources available to us) between Balian of Ibelin, a simple French farrier who has just arrived in the Holy Land after taking orders of chivalry and the sovereign's sister, Sibyl, at the time already married to Guy of Lusignan.

The most interesting character, by virtue of the subject matter of this article, however, is that of Baldwin IV (played by Edward Norton): in 1184 the king of Jerusalem has been ill for some time, weakened by leprosy and almost blind, however, he arouses great curiosity for the way in which he has been chosen to be represented:



The presence of the decorated mask is undoubtedly noteworthy. If on the surface its introduction may seem correct since at the time leprosy was considered extremely contagious and it was recommended to avoid any kind of physical contact with the sick, unfortunately we do not possess any testimony, or depiction of Baldwin himself, that proves its existence. A further factor to consider, in case the king had really used the famous mask, were the merciless temperatures of the Christian provinces in the East: the knights and templars, if forced to march for hours under the scorching sun as in the case of the Hattin disaster, would be suffocated in their metal armor; it is difficult to think that a Baldwin, exhausted by the ride and worn out by leprosy, would have been able to clothe it without the danger of dying of asphyxiation.

Secondly, Scott's film paints the picture of a leper king eager for peace, willing to accept Saladin's conditions in order to save the Kingdom of Jerusalem from the clutches of the enemy, however, the historical accounts, the exploits accomplished and the aggressive policy pursued by the young ruler prove the exact opposite. On four occasions he caught the sultan unprepared, forcing him to change his plans and proving to be a formidable obstacle to the conquest of the Holy City by the Arabs. Only illness was able, together with not a few questionable decisions taken by his successors (decidedly not up to the task), to extinguish the soul of the brave, as well as very young, monarch.

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