

The Tarantino-like End of Richard the Lionheart

I admit it. I still picture Richard the Lionheart as the handsome, smirking, fellow Sean Connery depicted in the Robin Hood movie that came out in 1991. I do this even though I know that Richard I was not that fellow.

Lionized for centuries, modern historians have treated Richard's legacy less kindly than their forebears; but I think it's fair to say Richard was both an impressive and brutish figure. He launched his Holy Crusade when he was only 33 years old, gaining fame for leading Christian forces to victory at Acre after the unexpected death of Frederick Barbarossa. At six foot four, he was a massive figure for his day, but he was not just a fearsome warrior and keen strategist. He was a fine orator ("the eloquence of Nestor, one contemporary wrote), lover of music, and even wrote poetry.

Modern historians have highlighted Richard's salient flaws: an apparent thirst for war, a cruel streak, rampant philandering, and most glaring: the Massacre at Ayyadieh that left some 3,000 Muslim captives dead. (The record suggests that Richard felt he had no choice but to slay the captives when Saladin refused an offer to exchange prisoners as he awaited field reinforcements, but, well, dead is dead.)

Perhaps because the Lionheart's life was so fascinating, parts of the strange story behind his death have gone largely unnoticed. And the tale is a fascinating one, at once beautiful, gruesome and tragic.

On March 25, 1199, while checking the perimeter of a castle in Châlus, France, Richard, who was not wearing armor, wandered into crossbow range. From a parapet, a young man named Pierre Basile, whose father and two brothers had been killed during

Richard's wars in France, fired off a bolt. The projectile found its mark, and though the wound was not immediately mortal, it soon festered.

Days later, knowing he was dying, Richard demanded to have Basile brought before him. To the surprise of everyone, Richard forgave and pardoned the shooter.

Sadly, the story does not end there.

The medieval ages being what they were, Richard's men defied the wishes of their king, who died on April 6, 1199. Shortly after the Lionheart had taken his final breath, Richard's men took it upon themselves to storm the lightly-defended castle.

The defenses were easily breached, and Pierre Basile was seized, flayed alive, and then hanged.

The event, reminiscent of a Tarantino movie, goes to show we don't use medieval as an adjective today for nothing.

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