

Institution: Queen Mary University of London (QMUL)
Unit of Assessment: UoA 30 History
Title of case study: The Public Understanding of the Crusades through Television
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>This case study concerns two forms of impact from the 2012 BBC2 television series, <i>The Crusades</i>, based on the research of Asbridge (www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01b3fpw): on the public understanding of the crusades; and on the creative industries. Asbridge's landmark television series, which he wrote and presented, informed public understanding of the crusades as an historical event with contemporary echoes in international political debate. In this example of one area of the School's historical research, a Queen Mary historian has drawn upon two decade's research on the history of the crusades to mediate his findings for a national and international public audience. Asbridge's series presented his research in an accessible, non-technical form to over two million viewers in the UK and to audiences across the world from Australia to Russia. In achieving a major BBC television commission to produce a series based on his research, Asbridge also made a contribution to the creative industries. <i>The Crusades</i> led to employment and prosperity for a television production company (<i>360 Productions</i> - www.360production.com/) and to the development of BBC television history.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The School has a well-established international reputation for medieval history and employs eight scholars who research its various aspects (Asbridge, Davis, Denley, Edgington, Hillman, Poleg, Rapoport, and Rubin). Asbridge, who joined Queen Mary in 1999, is a Reader in Medieval History. Over the past 20 years he has specialised in the history of the medieval crusades to the Holy Land and Levantine crusader states. His research is grounded in the critical analysis of written primary source evidence, but also informed by archaeology, art history, numismatics (the study of coins, tokens and medals) and prosopography (the study of peoples and groups). He has published four books, numerous articles and other publications and has become an authority on the history of the crusades and in the interaction and relationship between the Christian and Muslim worlds in the Middle Ages. Beyond the academic world, Asbridge has also become respected as a public medieval historian.</p> <p>Asbridge's first two books examined western Christian settlement of the Near East in the wake of the First Crusade. <i>The Creation of the Principality of Antioch</i> (2000) was the first major study of this northern Syrian crusader state's foundation, reasserting the significance of Antioch, and challenging the dominant position of the kingdom of Jerusalem in modern crusading historiography. This book explored the formation of Antioch's political, military and ecclesiastical frameworks and also demonstrated that Latin Antioch was shaped by the complex world of the eastern Mediterranean, facing a diverse range of influences and potential threats from the neighbouring forces of Byzantium and Islam. Asbridge's translation of the early 12th-century Latin chronicle <i>Walter the Chancellor's The Antiochene Wars</i> (1999, with Susan Edgington) examined Walter's narrative strategies and his contribution to our understanding of Latin-Muslim relations.</p> <p>Based on four years of research (including one semester of research leave funded by Queen Mary in 2002), Asbridge's next book <i>The First Crusade: A New History</i> (2004) re-examined the history of this expedition. Amongst the book's most significant new findings were the revelation that the discovery of the Holy Lance in Antioch in June 1098 did not mark a critical watershed in the expedition's fortunes, and the demonstration that the language of alterity and hatred that peppered the crusade's preaching did not prevent its participants from engaging in extensive negotiation and even alliance with their Muslim opponents. These themes were developed in Asbridge's 220,000-word history of the medieval crusades – <i>The Crusades: The War for the Holy Land</i> (2010). This</p>

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book was the product of six years of research and writing, including one year of QMUL research leave in 2006. It is the first general history to divide its focus equally between the Christian and Muslim perspectives and challenge conventional thinking. Asbridge disputes Richard the Lionheart's reputation for martial genius and Saladin's supposed clemency; explaining how the crusader states survived through the power of international trade rather than the force of war. He also reveals why the modern shadows of the crusades depend upon illusions, not reality. At its heart, *The Crusades* argues that the war for the Holy Land revealed a marked capacity for coexistence as well as conflict between Christians and Muslims. *The Crusades* is a work of international significance. The book has been widely praised in the likes of the *Wall Street Journal* (USA), the *Guardian* (UK) and *Die Zeit* (Germany), and variously described as 'masterful', a 'powerful, assured and epic book' and a 'compelling [work that] sheds light upon the present as well as the past'.

3. References to the research

The Crusades: The War for the Holy Land (London: Simon & Schuster, 2010)

'Talking to the Enemy: The role and purpose of negotiations between Saladin and Richard the Lionheart during the Third Crusade', *Journal of Medieval History*, vol. 39 (2013), pp. 275-296.
[DOI: 10.1080/03044181.2013.787542]

'The Holy Lance of Antioch: Power, devotion and memory on the First Crusade', *Reading Medieval Studies*, vol. 33 (2007), pp. 3-36.

'Knowing the Enemy: Latin relations with Islam at the time of the First Crusade', *Knighthoods of Christ*, ed. N. Housley (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 17-25.

The First Crusade: A New History (UK Edition: London: Free Press, Simon & Schuster, 2004)

The Creation of the Principality of Antioch 1098-1130 (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2000)

4. Details of the impact

Enhancement of public understanding of the crusades

It was the transference of the authority and originality of the narrative and argument in Asbridge's 2004 and 2010 books to the small screen and online that created its success as a piece of public history, thus leading to very high viewing figures in the UK (watched by two million viewers) and overseas. The impact of Asbridge's series in conveying his research and enhancing public understanding of the crusades rested on the central role he played in planning, structuring and researching the television series. He wrote and presented each of the three episodes and was closely involved in the editing process. In fact, the series was essentially an unfiltered expression of his research findings, analysis and views on crusading history drawing directly on his scholarly investigations. Asbridge's involvement is best explained by the series producer and director of episode 1 who said: 'Tom's research was invaluable in shaping every aspect of the filming process. The shooting scripts were drawn almost entirely from material in the book. Also – just as importantly – we took full advantage of Tom's personal local knowledge of particular locations, and his contacts with academics and specialists in the UK, the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Thus, many of the locations featured were chosen because Tom had visited before, and many of the experts and academics featured in the series were Tom's own friends and colleagues. Tom was involved throughout the editorial process – from agreeing the overall editorial shape, to detailed work on script during filming and editing.' The Creative Director of *360 Productions*, the company that produced *The Crusades* with Asbridge, confirms this judgement: 'The show was closely based around Tom's book. No book, no Tom, no show.'

With *The Crusades*, for the first time, a television audience was presented with a scholarly account

and analysis grounded in original research and modern historiography. The main impact on public understanding rested on Asbridge's key research argument and its presentation as the central argument of the series: that the crusades have to be understood not only from the Christian perspective, as they have been in the past, but from both the Christian *and* the Muslim, and that they were not only wars of religion, but also a period of Christian-Muslim interaction and accommodation. This fundamental point, and the direct way that Asbridge's research formed the series, is best exemplified by examples of the connection in each episode between his research and the presentation of it to inform the audience of new findings:

Episode 1, Holy War. one of the central and most novel arguments of the first episode of the series was drawn directly from Asbridge's work on the significance of the discovery of the Holy Lance in Antioch to Christian attitudes. To demonstrate the textual evidence during the documentary, and reflect on the historical importance of the Holy Lance and its importance for Asbridge's overall argument about the nature of the crusades, he ensured that the episode included scenes in the archive of the island monastery of San Lazzaro degli Armeni (Venice) to examine the early manuscript of Matthew Edessa's chronicle and what it reveals about the Lance.

Episode 2, The Clash of Titans: critical to Asbridge's argument was his reinterpretation of Muslim leader Saladin's intentions on conquering Jerusalem on 2 October 1187 and the role and importance of negotiations between Saladin and Richard the Lionheart during the Third Crusade (all covered in *The Crusades: the War for the Holy Land* and Asbridge's *Journal of Medieval History* article). Episode 2 of the series concentrated on documentary evidence at the Bodleian Library to demonstrate Asbridge's case, as did location filming in the Aqsa Mosque archive in Jerusalem to see one of the two earliest surviving manuscripts of Baha al-Din Ibn Shaddad's *Life of Saladin*.

Episode 3, Victory and Defeat: the final argument of Asbridge's 2010 book about the dangers in ahistorical 'crusade parallelism' with present day relations between Islam and the West was transformed into the final ten minutes of the third episode of his series to make one of its two most important arguments (alongside the need to see the crusades from both perspectives).

The Crusades therefore enhanced the public understanding of this epochal event in medieval history principally by reframing them by considering Christian and Muslim perspectives and by communicating the latest academic research on the subject in a publicly engaging and digestible form. With each of the three episodes watched by over two million viewers in the UK and by millions across the world, it was a highly successful piece of history programming. Its reach and significance is corroborated by the series producer and director of episode 1: 'The series was a huge success on many levels. In terms of audience figures, and the quality of audience response, it exceeded expectation ... It made a particularly strong impact in terms of i-player and digital download figures'. These viewing figures are testament to the success of the series as are the positive notices that it received in the press on airing. *The Guardian* described it as 'storytelling of the highest quality' with Asbridge striking the 'perfect balance between broad-brush and the personal'. Similarly, *The Telegraph* noted that 'Asbridge and his producers are confident enough to let the history tell the story' in a series of 'proper, old-fashioned narrative history of the sort that TV has almost forgotten how to do'. And *The Times* described the series 'thrilling and revisionist' (see sources to corroborate the impact below). Post-airing viewing figures of the series on YouTube also speak of its reach and significance. In September 2013, episode 1 had been viewed 14,513 times; episode 2, 7,408 times and episode 3, 10,561 times.

Contribution to the creative industries

Asbridge's series directly contributed to the employment and prosperity of the company which produced it. The Creative Director of *360 Productions* notes that Asbridge's research achieved the BBC television commission for a documentary on the crusades that he had been seeking for eight years (Asbridge's 'vision won the impossible commission'). The result was that over the six months of the series' production, 15 staff were employed on it at *360 Productions*, with an additional number (circa 10) of freelance staff, all at professional grade. This employment was largely facilitated by the approximate BBC budget per episode of £150,000. The success of the series for

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360 Productions was not only measured in the commission budget itself, but also in the sales of the series internationally (the Creative Director explained that the series was 'sold to major broadcasters all over the world (literally)' as '*360's* best-selling international show [in 2012]'). Moreover, the success of the series led the BBC to commission a further medieval history documentary presented by Asbridge and produced by *360 Productions* which was filmed in 2013.

Setting a benchmark for television history

Asbridge has also impacted upon the way that the BBC produces television history. According to the series producer, *The Crusades* was 'a big success as a "reputational" piece, generating significant press interest and coverage (Tom did a number of radio and TV appearances)'. The Creative Director at 360 productions added that the 'BBC liked the shows a lot. They were referred to in internal reports by the commissioner for History [...] and BBC2 controller [...] as positive models of historical programme making where the content not the style led the show.' For the Creative Director, this was much to do with the way Asbridge presented his research on screen: 'By taking a vexed issue and giving a detailed, perceptive and contra-intuitive sense of what actually happened and how long the Crusades' shadow really is, Tom set the benchmark for that [2013's] history programming'.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact**Reviews of the series:**

- www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2012/jan/18/the-crusades-thomas-asbridge-review
- www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/9020899/The-crusades-holy-warriors.html
- <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/arts/tv-radio/reviews/article3306032.ece>
- www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/reviews/last-nights-viewing-the-crusades-bbc2br-jonathan-meades-on-france-bbc4-6298088.html

Individuals who can be contacted to corroborate impact:

1. Creative Director, 360 Productions on: Asbridge's involvement in the commissioning and creation of *The Crusades* and its importance to 360 Productions.
2. Commissioning Executive Producer, History on the BBC view of *The Crusades*.
3. Television Director and Producer; Commissioning Editor, Factual, Sky Television on: Asbridge's role in the making of *The Crusades* and the significance of the series.