

# Islam

## A Threat to England

A seldom mentioned incident from the Middle Ages

by

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# Islam — A Threat to England

Even those few whose knowledge of English history is confined to what they learned from *1066 And All That*, the immortal retelling of all that is worth remembering about Great Britain's long struggle for freedom, will know that King John was a bad king.

How bad? And what does bad mean? And as no tabloid newspapers survive from the early 13th century, how can one be certain anyway that his reputation was justified?

Well, actually, although they were not known as tabloids, there were the records known then and now as chronicles, and those who wrote them have had their names passed down the years as reliable witnesses. Matthew of Westminster, Roger of Wendover, and Matthew Paris, a monk at St Albans, are three from that time, the last of whom will be known to many readers for his *Liber Additamentorum*, the earliest roll of arms, and it is from the first mentioned that one learns that King John not only raped his barons' wives and deflowered their daughters and sisters as a matter of routine, but also continually boasted of it.

It was not just the treatment of their womenfolk that was to bring the barons, supported in time by increasingly powerful citizens from the principal trading centres, to revolt against their liege lord. There were the taxes. His stupidity in the management of his French possessions eventually lost him Normandy, Blois, Maine, Anjou, Poitou, Limousin, Auvergne, and Angoulême, the rich patrimony he inherited after his brother Richard Lionheart had died, and he had killed his nephew, and to support these wars he extorted money by every foul means possible to imagine.



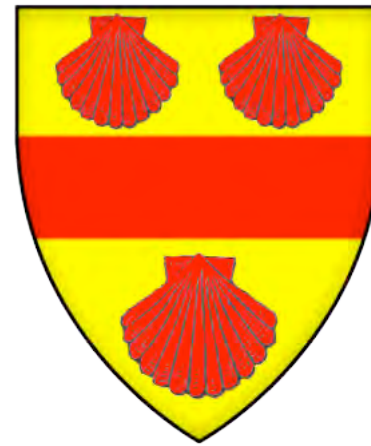
He may not have been so ugly as his coinage suggests, but his record is more vile than any other English monarch. To persuade the Jews to give him everything he authorised torture on an industrial scale. One case recorded by Roger of Wendover described how a Jew who was believed to have, despite the torment, withheld something, had one tooth smashed from his jaw every day. On the eighth day he remembered where the remainder of his silver was stored. His barons had their estates seized on any pretext, and as routinely they had been forced to send him their children as hostages, resistance was not feasible.

The Reformation started much earlier in England than is usually described in schoolbooks, for it was in John's time that certain churchmen recognised the profit to be gained if the King would break away from Rome, and the division between those clerics that stayed true and those known as the reformists added to the problems of government. The reformists called for their opponents to be shackled and the nobles to be manacled, advice John was very willing to accept, but in the crunch year of 1212 he found that everyone except the reformist churchmen were against him — his exorbitant taxes, his tyrannical rule, military defeats, and institutionalised cruelty had united nobles, clerics, peasants and burghers at home with the enmity of the Pope and the King of France on the continent, while his one ally, Otto, the Holy Roman Emperor, won him only greater opposition from the Church. A Papal interdict freed the barons from their allegiance to him, and in 1213 Pope Innocent III ordered King Philip to take the French army on crusade against him, to expel him from England and to seize the crown. To whom could he now turn? Conciliation must first delay matters, but what then?

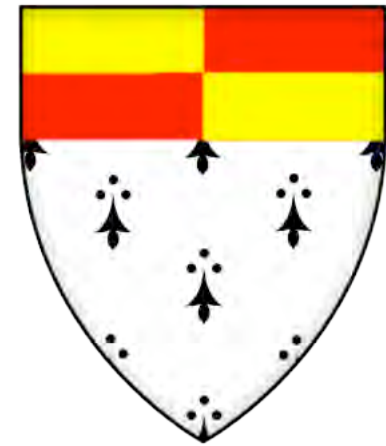
Reconciliation with his most powerful enemy, the Pope, meant accepting unconditionally, on bended knee, everything demanded of him — the restoration of their estates to his principal enemies and reparation to the Church for her confiscated treasures, the acceptance of Rome’s supremacy in the religious conflict, an annual tribute to the Holy See of 1,000 marks, and then, most humiliating of all, the surrender to God, to the Holy Mother Church, and to Pope Innocent and his successors, the whole realm of England and the whole realm of Ireland, then to receive them from the Pope as a fief.

With the French crusade now stopped, John decided to attack Poitou to recover his lost lands there, but his barons were united in their opposition not only to fighting for him but also to paying scutage, insisting that while he had the right to call on them to defend England he could not demand that they go to France and would not pay money to support him. Instead, he recruited mercenaries and was heavily defeated by King Philip at Bouvines in 1214.

It was while he was despairingly seeking an escape from his worsening situation, recognising the approach of disaster on every side (before the disgrace of Bouvines), he initiated a mad-cap scheme whose consequences, if he had been successful in his purpose, would have changed the history of England in such a way as to alter the history of the world. His resentment of the Pope’s treatment of him had turned him away from his religion and he began to examine the advantages of conversion to Islam, imagining that as a means of securing new allies. In Spain the Christian kings had been pushing back the Muslim conquest and Alfonso VIII, the King of Castile, had recently won the strategically important battle of Navas de Tolosa — so, John thought, the defeated Emir of Morocco would see the advantages to be



Sir Thomas Hardington



Sir Ralph FitzNicholas

gained by having an ally who could attack the combined armies of the Spanish kings from the north. Accordingly he dispatched an embassy led by two knights, Thomas Hardington and Ralph FitzNicholas, to explain that the high and mighty King of England, whose people were rich and accomplished, fluent speakers in French, Latin and English, and very religious, wished now to become a Muslim and would bring his people into the faith with him. Moreover, he would surrender his kingdom to the Emir and receive it from him as a fief.

With the two knights John had sent a chaplain, Master Robert, and it is to the story later told by him to his friends in the Abbey of St Albans, where Matthew Paris was a monk, that historians are indebted. The Emir had listened gravely to the knights’ representations, but had judged that an ally such as a king who betrayed his religion and his subjects so easily could be of little use to him. Apostasy, of course, to a Muslim, is the greatest sin, worse even than the surrender of sovereignty.