THE CRUSADES

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In November 1095, Pope Urban II preached a sermon in a field outside the French town of Clermont in which he exhorted the people of Europe to travel to the Holy Land and retake Jerusalem and other Christian holy places from the Muslims. Unifying a number of strands of medieval European culture, including the obligation to fight for one’s master (in this case Christ), the martial spirit of the knightly classes, pilgrimage, and the perception that Muslims were pagan or heretical, together with relatively new ideas, such as remission of sins for those who died on the journey, his sermon evoked an astonishing response. Tens of thousands of people left their homes for the Levant and, less than four years later, they had captured Jerusalem from the Muslims and set up four ‘crusader states’ based at Jerusalem, Antioch, Tripoli and Edessa. The presence of these Latin Christian states in the Levant was to last, in one way or another, for nearly 200 years.

Following the success of this, the First Crusade, their own unity and the disunity of the Muslims allowed the Europeans (‘the Franks’) gradually to capture dozens of other towns and cities in the Levant over the next few decades, including every coastal town, meaning they had control of practically the whole of the Levantine coast and, crucially, the ports which linked them with Europe. They were helped in this by the arrival of waves of new crusaders, such as those of the Norwegian Crusade of 1110, which helped capture Sidon. Consequently, within a few years the Franks had become the pre-eminent power in the area, and treaties and alliances made between them and the Muslims during this early period reflected that.

With the exception of a few abortive campaigns sent out from Baghdad, fruitless Egyptian Fatimid attempts to prevent the Franks from taking their last remaining possessions on the coast and occasional victories such as that of the battle of Balât/the Field of Blood in 1119, Muslim resistance to the Franks in the initial decades of the twelfth century was limited. In 1128, however, Zengî, ruler of Mosul, took control of the city of Aleppo in northern Syria, meaning that for the first time the Franks were confronted by a strong Muslim opponent, and in 1144 Zengî opportunistically captured Edessa, essentially putting an end to that Latin state. While later Muslim writers would, rather hyperbolically, refer to this event as the first major strike in the jihād against the Franks and portray Zengî as a great jihād warrior when he was anything but, this was certainly the greatest setback the Franks had suffered. Europe’s response was immediate: the Second Crusade was launched, led for the first time by major monarchs in the person of the French King Louis VII and German Emperor Conrad III. However, it was a disaster. On the march east the armies were ravaged by
flooding, food shortages and the Turks of Anatolia, and, having reached the Holy Land, their siege of Damascus in 1148 was a debacle, the army withdrawing after only five days and achieving nothing. Six years later, in 1154, Zengi’s son, Nur al-Din, who had succeeded his father in 1146, himself captured Damascus and ruled it jointly with Aleppo, meaning the Franks were now faced with a single, united Muslim state to the east for the first time. The tide was beginning to turn in favour of the Muslims.

The fate of the crusader state was, essentially, sealed at the end of the 1160s. With the Franks and Muslims in Syria locked in stalemate, both sides looked further afield as they attempted to alter the balance of power, and the eyes of both fell onto Egypt. By the 1160s, the power of the ruling Fatimid was in inexorable decline, and both protagonists in Syria knew that Egypt’s vast riches could be crucial in the struggle between them. Thus, a ‘scramble for Egypt’ took place, with the Franks at one point managing to station their soldiers in the capital, Cairo. However, in the end Nur al-Din won out, and he sent his lieutenant, Shirkuh, and the latter’s famous nephew Saladin (Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn) to take charge. Saladin was, for a brief period, vizier to the last Fatimid caliph, but once the latter had conveniently died in 1171 Saladin had the khutba preached in the name of the ‘Abbāsid caliph in Baghdad, effectively reuniting Syria and Egypt under Sunni rule. The Franks of the crusader states were now effectively surrounded by their enemies.

Nur al-Din died in 1174, as did Amalric I, the king of Jerusalem. Nur al-Din’s (usurping) successor was Saladin, while the Franks were led by Baldwin IV, an underage leper. While Saladin spent the next decade consolidating and extending his rule in Muslim lands, the Franks were racked by internal divisions. When Baldwin IV died in 1185, he was succeeded by his nephew, Baldwin V, but following the latter’s death just a year later with no heir, there followed a bitter succession dispute which, though legally resolved, left the Franks divided and significantly weakened. At this point Saladin struck, and in early summer 1187 he invaded the kingdom of Jerusalem, destroying its army at the battle of Hattin on 4 July, reducing almost all its towns and fortresses, capturing Jerusalem, and restoring the Islamic holy sites there. The Franks were left with just a tiny toehold on the coast.

However, this was enough; the response from Europe, the Third Crusade, led by Richard I of England among others, first consolidated and then retook a large proportion of the territory they had lost before a ceasefire was agreed with the Treaty of Jaffa in 1192. The Franks retained a narrow strip of coastline centred on Acre, and Latin pilgrims were permitted to visit the Christian holy sites in Jerusalem. Saladin died the next year, and his empire disintegrated as his successors, the Ayyubid dynasty, ruled as a type of confederacy. Knowing that the Franks of Europe could must large armies and concerned for their own position, the Ayyubids followed a path of diplomacy instead of warfare against the Franks, only resorting to battle when a major crusade arrived from Europe, such as the Fifth Crusade (c. 1218) and the Crusade of Louis IX to Egypt (c. 1248). Such was the extent of the Ayyubids’ desire to avoid conflict with the Franks that, when the German Emperor Frederick II arrived in the Holy Land on Crusade in 1229, they voluntarily handed Jerusalem itself over to him. However, it was lost by the Christians for the last time in 1244 when it was sacked by the Khwarazmians, nomadic Turks who had fled west from Asia in the face of the Mongol invasions. In 1250 the Ayyubids were overthrown by their own soldiers, the Mamluks, who took power for themselves, employed a militantly Sunni definition of Islam, and used the principle of jihād against the Mongols, Franks, and any other non-Sunni groups as the basis of their legitimacy. As such, over the next 40 years the remaining crusader states were slowly ground down, and the final enclave, the city of Acre, fell on 18 May 1291, thus putting an end to the Crusades in the Holy Land (see Riley-Smith 1987; Tyerman 2006; Phillips 2009; Asbridge 2012).
Images of the ‘other’ in writings from the crusading period

The earliest Latin writings from the period of the Crusades unsurprisingly based their portrayal of Muslims on images already circulating within Europe. Starting with the writings of the German nun Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim (d. c. 1000), European texts depicted Muslims in the form of pagans draped in the familiar garb of those of classical Rome: for example, they worshipped idols of gold which were, in fact, images of demons, the main one being in Mecca and which was a shrine to Venus. This perception was enthusiastically taken up by later writers, such as the author of the *Chanson de Roland*. In these texts, Muslims are often directly referred to as pagans (as were all other non-Christian groups, such as the Wends, with the exception of the Jews), making their relation to classical pagans explicit (Tolan 2002: 105–7).

The way in which this image was used in the crusading period can be seen in one of the clearest examples, Ralph of Caen’s First Crusade chronicle *Gesta Tancredii* (‘The deeds of Tancred’). Following the capture of Jerusalem by the First Crusade in 1099, the hero, Tancred, enters the Dome of the Rock to see ‘a cast image, made from silver, sat on the highest throne. It was so heavy that six men with strong arms could barely lift it . . . it was an image of Mohamet, entirely covered with gems, purple cloth and shining with gold’. The idol was taken outside and smashed to pieces (Ralph of Caen 2005: 144).

The idea of the hero of the story finding, and then destroying, a Muslim idol is seen in other chronicles related to the First Crusade, such as the *Chronicles of the Archbishops of Salzburg* (Tolan 2002: 108), and the First Crusade chronicles almost entirely present Islam as a form of paganism by which Christians are martyred and the holy places despoiled (Tolan 2002: 110–20). These are themes that seem to have been emphasised by Pope Urban II during his speech at Clermont that began the crusading movement (Riley-Smith 1982: 41–53). The Crusade was thus presented to Latin Europe as a means by which vengeance could be wreaked on those who polluted Christian holy places, who persecuted Eastern Christians, and who, through their imagined links to the pagans of Rome, killed Christ. The success of the First Crusade, and the way in which it captured the imagination of the people of Europe, cemented these ideas, and so they began to appear in European epic poems from the twelfth century onwards, developing the idea of Muslims worshipping an ‘anti-Trinity’ of Muḥammad, Apollo and Tervagent (Conklin Akbari 2009: 210–13, 235–6, 239–45). However, such images only occur in ‘elite’ writings that deal with the First Crusade, at least in the Latin East. Once the Franks there had had prolonged contact with Islam, presentations of it became slightly more accurate, with Muslims referred to as worshipping one God, but with Muḥammad as a heretic in the mould of Arius or Nestorius (Tolan 2002: 135–69).

Thus, criticism of Muslims continued, both for following a heresy and, in a number of surviving Latin works, for their perceived violence and depravity. A clearer example of this can be seen in Walter the Chancellor’s (d. after 1122) *Bella Antiochena* (‘The Antiochene wars’) (Walter the Chancellor 1999: 5–6). The author of this text was an eyewitness to the 1119 battle of Balāṭ/the Field of Blood, in which the army of Antioch was destroyed by a Muslim force commanded by Il-Ghāzī, the ruler of Aleppo, and Walter was taken prisoner in its aftermath. During his captivity in Aleppo, he witnessed numerous acts that horrified him, and for which he squarely placed the blame at the feet of Il-Ghāzī and Islam itself. For example, he writes that:

[S]ome of them (the Frankish prisoners) were hanged by ropes from a post, with their heads turned downwards and their feet upwards, and exposed to constant blows of arrows as the stuff of dreadful slaughter. Some were buried up to the groin, some up to the navel, and some up to the chin in a pit in the ground, as the hands of wicked
ones brandished spears, and they underwent for Christ the end of a life full of sorrow. Several of them, indeed, were thrown with every single limb cut off into the squares and districts.

(Walter the Chancellor 1999: 163)

The Muslim ruler’s delight in such torments is clearly expressed, and the writer makes clear the connection between such cruelties and Islam itself; the former is referred to as the ‘star of the law’ by a soldier, while a qāḍī attempts to persuade ʿIl-Ghāżī to kill a seneschal, as it would be ‘an act of respect for our law’ (Walter the Chancellor 1999: 134, 169; Mallett 2010). This image of Islam and Muslims as violent is reflected by other Latin writers from the crusading period, such as the anonymous author of De excidii Aconis (‘The fall of Acre’) (De excidii Aconis 2004).

One consequence of images of this type for Latin Christians was that the church was forced to find explanations for Muslim victories over the Franks, which by their very definition would be against the will of God. Following the pattern of explanations found in the Old Testament, Muslim victories were generally interpreted as being a punishment on the Christians for their sins, a sign from God that the Christians should purify themselves for the struggle ahead. As such, the Muslims became an instrument for divine vengeance – outside of God, but still useful as a tool by which He could punish His people (Siberry 1985: 72–95).

Similarly negative remarks about ‘the other’ are to be found in many of the Muslim texts describing the Franks. Saladin’s secretary, ʿImād al-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī, for example, paints the Franks as idolatrous polytheists, his image of them ‘a curious mixture of genuine, contemporaneous Christian beliefs and Quranic representations of Christianity’ (Richter-Bernburg 2014: 47). His description of Frankish behaviour, especially the sexual behaviour of the women, displays a prurient fascination, as it seriously challenged norms expected by the upright Sunnī ʿulamāʾ, of whom he was an important member (Richter-Bernburg 2014: 47–8), while Richard I’s massacre of Muslim prisoners outside Acre in 1191 is again highlighted to demonstrate Frankish depravity (Richter-Bernburg 2014: 50). Such perspectives are found in presentations of the Franks from across the crusading period; among the earliest extant writings are three poems that recount the Franks’ attacks on Muslim lands in strongly emotive language: the Franks’ violence and depravity is emphasised, as is the manner in which they polluted the Islamic holy places in Syria, the fear they engendered, and the size of and threat posed by their armies (Hillenbrand 1999: 69–71). Other writers who follow the same line include al-Sulamī (d. 1106) (al-Sulamī 2015) and Sībṭ ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1256) (Mallett 2014b).

However, such strongly negative images of those on the ‘other side’ are not found in all, or indeed in most, of the surviving sources. Instead, they must be regarded as products of the specific political environment of composition. The Latin sources that picture Muslims as pagans were produced to persuade people in Europe to go on crusade, a daunting prospect that could only have been encouraged by presenting the enemy as something totally repulsive. Walter the Chancellor’s disturbing account is the product of being caught up in acts of violence that shocked him to his core. On the Muslim side, ʿImād al-Dīn was attempting to justify the usurpation of power by his master, and did so by presenting Saladin as the only person who could fight such deviant religious ‘others’. The poets and Sībṭ ibn al-Jawzī were attempting to rouse negligent Muslim rulers to fight the Franks, as were a number of other authors who, while not directly mentioning the Franks, did produce works in various genres expounding the virtues of jihād and which can only have been a response to the Frankish presence (Hillenbrand 1999: 150–66).

Some Muslim writers, such as the Aleppan al-ʿAẓīmī (d. after 1160) and the historian of Mārdīn, Ibn al-Azraq, instead paid little attention to the Franks, with only the briefest mention made of their capture of Jerusalem or of other events (al-ʿAẓīmī 1984; Ibn al-Azraq 1990). Similarly, Ibn
al-ʿAdım (d. 1262) shows little criticism of or hostility towards the Franks in his chronicle, except for those who were particularly aggressive towards his home city of Aleppo, such as Joscelin II of Edessa and Baldwin II of Jerusalem, who participated in rather incendiary acts during their siege of Aleppo in 1124–5 (Eddé 2014). Other writers who had a generally neutral view of the Franks include the town chronicler of Damascus, Ibn al-Qalânisî, and Ibn al-Athîr, author of the voluminous Al-kamîl fî l-taʾrikh, although that is not to say they did not occasionally criticise the Franks, particularly when copying verbatim from other works. Some Muslim writers even seem to have positively welcomed relations with the Franks, of whom the clearest example is the historian of the Ayyûbids, Ibn Wâsîl (d. 1298). Writing in a general environment of détente between the Muslim rulers and the Franks, his aim was to highlight the sensibleness of that approach, and so his lack of concern with the Franks is consequently rather unsurprising. However, he seems not only to have been accepting of this approach but to have rather enjoyed his encounters with the Franks, particularly during a stay in Sicily, where he took part in intellectual pursuits with the island’s ruling Christians (Hirschler 2014a).

Many Latin writers also showed little inclination to criticise Muslims, with some describing or praising their actions. William of Tyre, for example, wrote an account of a Frankish embassy to Fâṭimid Egypt, in which the court is described in fantastic detail, while he also wrote a now lost history of the Muslim world, although this was seemingly based primarily on Arab Christian writings (Edbury and Rowe 1990). The thirteenth-century writer John of Joinville, who wrote an account of the Crusade of Louis IX to Egypt, is even keen to describe the kindness of some Muslims to him after he had been captured (Smith 2008).

**Christian–Muslim interactions**

The massacre that accompanied the capture of Jerusalem by the First Crusade in 1099 is perhaps the strongest image in the popular mind of the brutality of the crusaders; it still evokes passion and revulsion in equal measure today. However, research has demonstrated that, on both sides, the scale of the massacre was wildly exaggerated in order to further political and religious agendas (Kedar 2004; Hirschler 2014b). Even so, the killing of much of the population of a captured town was an established part of medieval warfare and had occurred many times before the crusading period; only 30 years before the Frankish conquest, the Seljuqs had taken the town and, in a similar manner to the Franks, killed a large part of the population. Massacres also continued throughout the crusading period, on both sides, such as after the Muslim capture of Edessa (1144) and Acre (1291) and the Frankish capture of Acre (1191).

While the killing of the population of a captured town did sometimes happen, it was not the most usual result, whichever of the two sides had been victorious. Sometimes the population could be enslaved, at others ransomed. Some inhabitants fled to safety to lands controlled by their own co-religionists, perhaps hoping to return once the assaults were finished. On other occasions, populations could surrender the city, in which case they were permitted to stay or leave as they pleased. Such actions on the part of the conquerors were not driven by religious zeal but were instead based on prevailing military norms. It is also to be noted that some Frankish rulers, such as Tancred, the regent of Antioch (1100–12), even sought to persuade local Muslims to remain in his lands and not move to Muslim territory. Such an attitude has its basis in both a lack of Christian manpower to work the lands and in Tancred’s experience with Muslims in Sicily, from his background as a south Italian Norman (Mallett 2014a: 121–40; Kedar 1990).

Unfortunately, lack of documentary evidence means it is not possible to know how many Muslims lived under Frankish rule, nor their modes of existence. However, some tentative ideas have been posited. Muslims seem to have formed the majority of the population in the lands of
the Kingdom of Jerusalem, but in other states, centred on northern Syria, native Christians were in the majority. There is very limited evidence for the existence of mosques – many of which were changed into churches during the period – and only one qāḍī is mentioned, but this does not mean there were not more; the type of documents that would have detailed these have been lost, and they now only appear in chronicles whose writers were not concerned with such matters. No Muslim (or Jew) was allowed to live in Jerusalem, probably due to one of the core original ideas of the crusade being to ‘cleanse’ the Holy City of any non-Christian religion (Kedar 1990: 148–9).

While there is a lack of documentary evidence and little in the chronicles, information for interactions on an everyday basis can be seen in other texts. Some of the most famous examples come in the ‘memos’ of Usâma ibn Munqidh, a member of Syrian nobility in the mid- and late twelfth century. In many ways, the comments made about the Franks in his work are based squarely on existing stereotypes – they are referred to as devils, have the usual curses called down upon them, and are regarded as more like animals than humans, having courage but no civilised qualities (Cobb 2005: 93–7). Usâma demonstrated this with a number of detailed and famous anecdotes, such as examples of laughable Frankish medicine and legal procedures, and, particularly scandalously, the loose sexual behaviour of the women (Usama ibn Munqidh 2008: 145–53). In Usâma’s rather mocking account, one Frank even offered to show him a picture of God as a child (Usama ibn Munqidh 2008: 147–8; Cobb 2005: 104–14). However, despite the overall condescending tone about the Franks’ activities and beliefs, what these anecdotes demonstrate is that there were close social relations between Muslims and Franks on an everyday level; many of the anecdotes he gives are based on his own experience, while others are reported by others to him. He also draws a distinction between those Franks who have arrived recently and those who have been in the Levant for some time and have thus become more attuned to the situation. A famous example of this is Usâma’s retelling of his experience in al-Aqṣā mosque in Jerusalem; he would sometimes pray there, permitted to do so by his Templar friends – an important fact in itself – and on one occasion a newly arrived Frank attempted to prevent him from doing so. At this, the Templars ejected the man and apologised to Usâma for his lack of manners, stating that he was new and did not know the local mores (Usâma 2008: 147). Another example is of a Frank who gave up eating pork, meaning Usâma could eat with him (Usâma 2008: 153). Similar examples can be found in the writings of the Andalusi traveller Ibn Jubayr, who wrote about his experiences in Syria in the mid-1180s. Despite his obvious detestation of the Franks, he cannot help but praise some of their actions, such as the continuing of trade between the two sides despite war going on all around, the security the Muslims enjoy under Christian rulers, the light taxes enjoyed by the Muslims, and the justice given to the Muslims by their Frankish landlords (Ibn Jubayr 1952: 300, 301, 316, 317).

Despite, or perhaps because of, such interactions occurring, church authorities sought to limit the amount of contact that Christians had with Muslims. An early example of this is the laws drawn up by the Council of Nablus (1120), which restricted contacts, particularly sexual ones, between Christians and Muslims (Kedar 1999). This approach was taken much more firmly by the papacy in the thirteenth century, particularly following the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), in which a number of rules were drawn up that sought to protect the spiritual purity of Christians by preventing as far as possible their mixing with non-Christians (Tolan 2002: 195–8). However, despite this general prohibition, which applied mainly to the lower classes of society, a number of churchmen attempted to convert Muslims, particularly in the thirteenth century, when conversion became one of the main goals of crusading, if not the main one (Tolan 2002: 196). Thus, for example, during the Fifth Crusade both Oliver of Paderborn and Francis of Assisi attempted to persuade the Ayyubid Sultan al-Kâmil of the truth of Christianity. Attempts at converting other Muslim leaders were also made, as it was hoped that if such a leader converted
the rest of the population would follow suit, as had happened amongst the pagans of Europe (Tolan 2009; Tolan 2002: 214–55). Others, however, such as Fidentius of Padua, believed it was only through the crusade conquering Muslim lands that such conversions could take place (Tolan 2002: 209–12).

While the usual mode of living was coexistence, there is some limited evidence for Muslim resistance at a local level, which took various forms, including individual opportunistic attacks, refusing to work the land, joining invading Muslim armies, and revolts, but it seems that generally Muslims only did so when they believed there was little risk. The general lack of violence by the Franks, the permission for Muslims to practise their religion with no forced conversions, and probably the ability of the Muslims to look after their own internal affairs, meant there was little reason to revolt. Yet, and unsurprisingly given their religious difference and their third-class status in the Frankish states, which included having to pay the poll tax, they often supported Muslim armies when the latter invaded Frankish lands (Mallett 2014a: 49–60; Kedar 1990: 154–60).

Over the course of the crusading period, through trade and cultural contact, objects and knowledge were transferred between both sides. As has been noted, the Latin understanding of Islam grew during the period so that, by the late thirteenth century, William of Tripoli and another, anonymous author were able to produce pieces that accurately describe the life of Muhammad, Islamic history and beliefs, the contents of the Qur’an and Islamic rituals, although both are written from the perspective of predicting the future downfall of Islam and the inevitable triumph of Christianity (Tolan 2002: 203–8). In terms of culture, there were many objects and ideas that moved across the frontier: Arabic numerals, terms used in commerce, scientific instruments, textiles and spices. While it is true that not all of these were the result of Christian conquests of Muslim lands and some were instead produced by trade, increased trade was itself a by-product of the Crusades. Thus, not only did the Crusades produce warfare and suspicion on both sides, they also contributed positively to trade and culture (Atiya 1966; Abulafia 1994).

Impact on native Christians

Following the hardening of attitudes amongst the Muslims as jihād propaganda took hold, native Christians living under Muslim rule found themselves increasingly on the end of retribution from Muslims. There were instances of this near the beginning of the crusading period, such as during the Frankish siege of Aleppo in 1124–5, when, in response to Frankish desecration of Islamic shrines outside the city, its qāḍī ordered four of the churches within the city to be turned into mosques. Yet such were no more than isolated incidents until the Ayyūbids and particularly the Mamlūk periods (1250–1517). The Mamlūks were a militantly Sunnī dynasty of slave soldiers who looked to assert their control over any other religious group. During their rule, pressure was put upon Christians to convert, the stipulations of the Pact of ʿUmar were enforced, and many churches were destroyed. Following the Mongol capture of Damascus in 1260 and their subsequent defeat by the Mamlūks, the Christians who had helped the former in their fight against the Muslims were on the receiving end of fierce reprisals. Christians, particularly the Copts in Egypt, where both the Ayyūbids and Mamlūks were based, were accused of weakening the Islamic state and collaborating with the Franks and Mongols; thus, following various direct crusader attacks on Egypt, including the Fifth Crusade (1218–21), the Crusade of Louis IX of France (1248–50), and the later Crusade against Alexandria in 1365 led by the ruler of Cyprus, Coptic and other native Christians bore the brunt of reprisals. In the centuries after the Franks had departed from the Levant, not only was it Christians inside Mamlūk territory but also those with their own states in the Near East, such as the Armenians and Byzantines, who were targeted, first by the
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Mamlūks and then by the Ottomans. It must be emphasised, however, that it is difficult to state precisely how far the Crusades caused this and whether such attacks would have occurred even without the Frankish presence (Hillenbrand 1999: 407–19).

References


Tolan, J. (2009), St Francis and the Sultan, Oxford: Oxford University Press.


Further reading