

The Crusades and the Near East: Cultural Histories

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Jonathan Harris

As the editor notes in his introduction to this collection, the events of 2001 and after have created intense interest in the Crusades and the conflict between Christianity and Islam and the West in the Middle Ages. A wealth of publications has appeared from popular histories to detailed articles in academic journals. Much of that interest, however, has been focused on the political history of the Crusades and on the motivations of the crusaders. The articles published here aim to explore a relatively neglected area: the cultural history of the Crusades and how they shaped European identities. All ten are lively and accessible but they are also exhaustively footnoted. They both synthesise previous work and bring new insights of their own.

Sini Kangas, for example, investigates one literary aspect of the western encounter with Islam during the crusades: the often scurrilous 'lives' of the prophet Mohammed produced in Latin from the mid-12th century onwards as crusade propaganda. The sudden growth of this type of literature in this period has often been seen as a response to the resurgent power of Islam. Kangas does not dispute that but she also places these writings in the context of increasing concern about heresy in the Christian west (p. 132, 150). She focuses on four of the earliest texts, written by Embricon of Mainz, Adelphus, Guibert of Nogent and Gautier of Compiègne. Their main sources of information seem to have been oral, for Guibert of Nogent complained that he was unable to find any information about Mohammed in the Latin Church Fathers (p. 133). Even so, some literary texts seem to have been consulted such as the Latin translation of the *Chronographia* of Theophanes (p. 137). Theophanes, a Byzantine monk writing in the early 9th century, presented Mohammed's life in a ludicrous and farcical way. The prophet was an epileptic camel dealer whose wife saw money making possibilities in presenting his fits as religious visions.⁽¹⁾ The 12th-century texts certainly reflect that approach, portraying Mohammed not so much anti-Christ as a low and impoverished trickster, selling a concocted religion to the gullible. In Gautier of Compiègne's *Otia de Machumete*, written between

1137 and 1155, Mohammed starts out as a Christian but he presents his fits as visions in an attempt to win the hand of a wealthy heiress and having done so finds himself the religious leader of his society. Guibert of Nogent claimed that Mohammed was set on the wrong path by a Christian hermit who was embittered because he had not been appointed patriarch of Alexandria (pp. 144–5). References to specific Islamic teachings, however, are few and far between in these travesties. Kangas therefore concludes that they should not be seen as an attack on the teachings of Islam but rather as crude attempts to smear it by defaming its founder (p. 152). An interesting point of comparison here are the polemics against Islam produced by Byzantine authors in earlier centuries. These did attempt to counter Islamic teachings but not always with great success. Niketas Byzantinos who wrote between 842 and 867 had a copy of the Koran in Greek translation and he made use of this to identify the tenets of Islam. Unfortunately the translation was not a good one for it rendered Sura 96.2 as saying not that man was created from clots of blood but from leeches. Niketas then spent pages refuting this ‘error’.⁽²⁾ Given that the Byzantines had been in direct contact with the Islamic world for centuries, it is perhaps not so surprising that Gautier of Compiègne and others were so ignorant of what it was that Muslims believed.

Moving on from polemic, issues of peaceful cultural interaction between crusaders and Muslims are addressed by Sue Edgington and Jürgen Krüger. Edgington provides a useful overview of the state of research into the possible influence of Arab medicine on medical practice in the crusader states. She argues against the widespread assumption that Arab medicine must have been superior simply because so many medical texts in Arabic survive. The treatments described in these texts may have borne no resemblance whatsoever to what was carried out in practice. Rather it would seem that Frankish and Arab physicians learned from each other (p. 208). Krüger looks at architecture and especially that of the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. He discusses spolia, discarded fragments of earlier buildings that were incorporated into the walls and the extent to which the hand of individual artists can be discerned in stone carvings. Pointers are given at the end as to where the study of architectural imitation and influence may proceed from here.

Alan Murray looks at the impact of the crusades on a neglected aspect of Western European consciousness: national sentiment. The first crusade was a truly pan-European enterprise with numerous mutually incomprehensible languages being spoken by the different contingents. Murray argues that language was both less and more important as a signifier of identity than it is now. Allegiance was the primary indicator, above all to a king, and it was this which marked one out as French, German or whatever. Within those kingdoms a multiplicity of languages was spoken (p. 111). On the other hand, most of the rank and file on the crusade would never have heard any other language apart from their local dialect (and the Latin of church services presumably). Even among those broadly termed ‘Franks’ there must have been endless communication problems and they would not have had access to any lingua franca to overcome the difficulty. Murray assesses whether this was a factor in the numerous conflicts that arose among the crusaders. He points out that the frequent stand-offs between Raymond of Toulouse and the other leaders may not be unconnected with the Provençal language spoken by his followers which would have been incomprehensible to the other Franks (p.118). The article ends with a brief survey of ‘national’ histories of the crusades compiled in the later Middle Ages, which sought to play up the role of a particular ethnic group.

Three articles, those of Natasha Hodgson, Chris Wright and Léan Ní Chléirigh, examine the impact of the crusades on the Christian neighbours of Frankish Outre-Mer, the Byzantines and the Cilician Armenians. Natasha Hodgson looks at diplomatic marriages between Armenians and Latins, providing detailed examples and analysis. Both sides were well aware of their cultural differences and would even exploit them. Baldwin II of Jerusalem married Morfia, daughter of Gabriel of Melitene, an Orthodox Armenian, and received 50,000 gold bezants as the dowry. He was, however, to extort even more. He publically announced that he was so ashamed that he could not pay his debts that he would shave his beard off. His father-in-law was horrified because for Armenians the loss of the beard was the worst possible dishonour and would bring shame on the family. Gabriel duly paid up (p. 89).

A broad ranging contribution by Chris Wright surveys Byzantine interaction with the Crusades from 1095 until the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Wright recounts how the Crusades and the ambivalent Byzantine

response helped to marginalise the empire on the international stage during the 12th century. In an interesting departure he then turns to consider how the Crusades impacted on the Byzantines' perception of their own empire and its role (p. 68ff). In striking contrast to the claim of Donald M. Nicol that the Byzantines became more anti-Latin and xenophobic as their empire shrank (3), Wright lays emphasis on how in the later Middle Ages, educated Byzantines ceased to refer to western Europeans as barbarians and even came to question the unique status of their own state. He sees the Crusades as having played a role in the gradual shift whereby the literati of the 14th and 15th centuries came to see themselves as heirs not of Rome but of ancient Greece and to refer to themselves as 'Hellenes' rather than 'Romans'. These were, of course, minority views among a certain intellectual coterie but they have seldom been considered in the context of Byzantine relations with the crusades.

Léan Ní Chléirigh looks at the issue from the other direction, examining how the crusades changed western views of Byzantium through the accounts of the First Crusade written by Guibert of Nogent and Fulcher of Chartres. While both accounts are heavily indebted to the anonymous *Gesta Francorum* for their account of events, both depart from it in their attitude to the Byzantines and their emperor, Alexios I Komnenos. Guibert takes a decidedly more hostile line, introducing elements of criticism not found in the *Gesta*. While the latter generally restricts its attacks to the emperor alone, Guibert fulminates against all 'Greeks' taking the classical line that their effete and idle character was influenced by climate. He also introduces an element that is entirely lacking in his source, the religious errors of the Byzantines. Presumably, however, the statement that 'Guibert attacked the Eastern Church for its use of the *Filioque* clause in the Creed' (p. 167) is a slip. The Byzantines never used the *Filioque* which only appeared in the Latin version of the Creed. Fulcher, by contrast, avoids almost any criticism of Alexios and the Byzantines. Chléirigh suggests that this may reflect the experience of the contingent to which he was attached during the crusade but also an adherence to the policy of Urban II who hoped that the expedition would bring about a reunion of the Churches of East and West (p. 180).

Even in a volume devoted to cultural histories, it is not possible to escape warfare altogether. John France's contribution synthesises much work that he has published elsewhere but presented in this compact form it gives a fresh look at warfare in the Mediterranean region in the Crusades era. Western and Turkish military tactics are compared and contrasted and related to the societies in which they evolved. By contrast, Yvonne Friedman focuses on the considerable periods of peace that punctuated this era of holy war with 120 Muslim-Crusader treaties mentioned in the sources. Both Christianity and Islam, after all, lay great stress on peace. Friedman examines the mechanics of peace making from choice of envoys to prisoner exchange to agreeing a set of gestures and symbols. As regards the latter, the overcoming of cultural differences was one of the first steps. At the battle of Ascalon in 1099, the defeated Egyptians gave their standard gesture of surrender by throwing themselves flat on the ground. The crusaders proceeded to kill them, presumably not recognising their intention. By 1150, however, as a new gesture had evolved that was recognised by both sides: laying down weapons and clasping the hands together, first on one side of the body and then on the other (p. 242).

Yehoshua Frenkel looks at the Muslim response to the arrival of the Franks in Palestine in 1099. He plays down the popular idea of a united Muslim population engaged in constant *jihad* to expel the western intruders in favour of an approach that takes into account the complexity of local conditions. He traces how a jihadist response to the crusades developed during the first half of the twelfth century but also pays attention to the frequent truces between crusaders and Muslim rulers. He argues that the conflict should not be seen as endless jihad but as a political rivalry for hegemony in the region with the Franks not as invaders but competitors (p. 42).

Many volumes of collected essays can be something of a mixed bag with no linking theme. Not so this book. Whether thanks to the hard work of the editor or the co-operation of the authors (or both), the articles presented here complement each other very well and all contribute to the overall theme. A helpful afterward by Bernard Hamilton pulls their main points together, highlighting the similarities and contrasts in the approaches of the authors. So while this book will be of interest to researchers in the field, it will also be

useful for teaching the crusades especially to those teachers who wish to go beyond the stereotyped 'clash of cultures' and explore complexity and diversity in the ways that human societies interact.

Notes

1. *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor: Byzantine and Near Eastern History AD 284-813*, trans. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott (Oxford, 1997), pp. 464-5.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. John Meyendorff, 'Byzantine views of Islam', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 18 (1964), 113-32, 122.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Donald M. Nicol, 'The Byzantine view of western Europe', *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*, 8 (1967), 315-39, 330 and reprinted in D.M. Nicol, *Byzantium: its Ecclesiastical History and Relations with the Western World* (London, 1972), No. I.[Back to \(3\)](#)

Having read the review, the editor has no further comment, finding it very insightful and, indeed, generous.

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