

The Crusades: The Essential Readings

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This collection is a new addition to Blackwell's 'Essential Readings in History' series, which reprints important academic articles on historical topics. The books in the series are useful acquisitions for academic libraries, as they take the pressure off over-used journals, but, more importantly, they also make the scholarship and advances contained in the articles available to a readership that may not have access to university libraries or obscure journals, and so allows a wider public access to the process of debate and reformulation. The series is also useful for researchers, since the inclusion of an index allows themes, individuals and events to be traced across all the contributions. Unlike Ashgate's excellent *Variorum 'Collected Studies'* series, however, the original pagination is not retained.

The editor of this volume on the crusades, Thomas F. Madden, has picked out some of the plums from crusade scholarship of the last 35 years. Not surprisingly, Jonathan Riley-Smith looms large, contributing two of the twelve articles. His provocatively-entitled 'Crusading as an act of love' is a superlative attempt to understand crusade motivation on its own terms, while his later 'Early crusaders to the east and the costs of crusading, 1095-1130' forcefully argued against the notion that crusaders were Europe's landless sons, going east solely in the hope of material gain. There are articles by Giles Constable, Marcus Bull, R. A. Fletcher, John France, Norman Housley, and, of course, H. E. J. Cowdrey's classic 'Pope Urban II's preaching of the First Crusade'. This last has also been reprinted as number XVI in Cowdrey's own collection, *Popes, Monks and Crusaders* (Hambleton; London, 1984), but there is certainly no harm in it appearing again. Cowdrey considered the question of whether the objective of Jerusalem was integral to Urban's original vision for the expedition to the East as expressed in the sermon at Clermont in November 1095, and in subsequent letters

and encyclicals. His argument that Jerusalem was central to the enterprise from the beginning has been largely accepted ever since.

Also included is Jonathan Tyerman's radical 'Were there any crusades in the twelfth century?', which argues that it is misleading to regard crusades as a separate phenomenon from the general development of attitudes to warfare in western Europe before the pontificate of Innocent III (1198-1216). Taken to their logical conclusion, Tyerman's iconoclastic ideas would put an end to any debate on the crusades before 1198, since the very term is retrospective and inappropriate. So far, however, he has not been as influential as Riley-Smith or Cowdrey, although as an alternative voice, he well merits inclusion here.

Thomas Madden's contribution to the book is to give it unity and to provide very helpful clarifications of the main points at issue. He gives, at the beginning of each article, a short summary of the argument and some indication of how it influenced subsequent scholarship. He has also provides an introduction which traces the fluctuating approaches to crusading in western Europe and America from the Renaissance to the world after 11 September 2001. This survey is very well pitched towards a general readership, placing the academic debates in the wider context of world events and how they have changed attitudes to ideologically motivated warfare.

There is only one aspect of this book that strikes an odd note and that is the decision to include Sir Steven Runciman's 'Byzantium and the Crusades'. Like all of Runciman's output, the nine pages reproduced here are a compelling read with a clear and forcefully argued thesis. The First Crusade was, he believed, tantamount to a barbarian invasion of the civilised and sophisticated Byzantine empire and its consequences were ultimately to bring about the ruin of Byzantine civilisation. This mass migration was unwittingly triggered by the Byzantine emperor, Alexius I Comnenus, when he had sent ambassadors to the pope at the Council of Piacenza in March 1095 to ask for mercenary soldiers to enrol in his armies. The emotive appeal made in response by Urban II at Clermont, however, had the effect of sending thousands of Frankish knights to Constantinople under their own leaders, quite a different outcome from what Alexius had expected.

Consequently, in the words of his daughter, Anna Comnena, Alexius 'dreaded' the arrival of the crusaders, and there was misunderstanding and tension from the start. 'It is commonly believed by worthy people', wrote Runciman, 'that the more we see of each other, the more we shall like each other. It is a sad delusion' (p. 214). There had been differences between Byzantium and the West in the past, but since contact between the two societies was sporadic, open animosity had little chance to develop. Now that the westerners were brought into the heart of the empire in large numbers, those differences, especially those between the Byzantine and western churches and the more tolerant attitude of the Byzantines towards Muslim powers, became more noticeable and led to resentment. Although Runciman lays some of the blame at the door of the Byzantine emperors who reigned after 1143, the sack of Constantinople by the Fourth Crusade in April 1204 was the culmination of 'the mounting dislike and suspicion that all western Christendom now felt towards the Byzantines' (p. 219).

Cogent though Runciman's views are, the fact remains that they are hardly new. Although published in 1986, this contribution is in fact a straight summary of the position adopted by Runciman in his *History of the Crusades* which was published between 1951 and 1954 (3 vols, Cambridge University Press). That singles it out immediately from the rest of the articles. The next earliest is Cowdrey's, which came out in *History* for 1970, while the rest all appeared in the 1980s or 1990s.

Moreover, while Cowdrey's thesis has stood largely unchallenged since its first appearance, Runciman's most certainly has not. One of the main problems is its almost uncritical acceptance of the main Byzantine source for the First Crusade, Anna Comnena's *Alexiad*, which presents Alexius I's actions throughout the episode as motivated solely by Christian charity and places the blame for subsequent disagreements on the shoulders of the crusade leadership and particularly of the Norman, Bohemond of Taranto. Runciman also takes at face value Anna Comnena's descriptions of some of the crusaders as uncouth louts and this is largely the basis for belief that the two peoples were mutually estranged from the start. It could be objected that the classicising literary genre in which Comnena wrote dictated that foreign peoples be presented as 'barbarians'

and that this did not necessarily mean that the entire populations of the two halves of Christendom were in a constantly increasing state of mutual antipathy.

Madden is, of course, well aware of all this. He openly admits in his introduction that many aspects of Runciman's work have been criticised since he wrote (pp. 6, 11), and he himself has done much to mitigate Runciman's picture of mutual intolerance leading directly to the sack of Constantinople. The second edition of Donald E. Queller's *The Fourth Crusade: The Conquest of Constantinople* (University of Pennsylvania Press; Philadelphia, 1997), which Madden co-authored, presents the diversion to Constantinople as the outcome of a series of accidents, in no way related to any previous history of east-west hostility. One can even detect a certain antipathy to the Runciman thesis on Madden's part in his introduction to this collection, albeit expressed in oblique fashion. He is highly critical of the 1995 BBC Television series, presented by Terry Jones, because it portrayed the crusades as 'a long, misguided war of intolerance, ignorance and barbarism against a peaceful and sophisticated Muslim world' (p.1). Substitute 'Byzantine' for 'Muslim', and you are left with the essence of Runciman's opinion on the matter, one that he expressed succinctly in interviews given for the Jones programme. Jones was, moreover, heavily dependent on Runciman as his main historical source. He even faithfully reproduced some of Runciman's errors. In the second episode, for example, while recounting the siege of Antioch in 1097-8, Jones mentions how Alexius I obligingly sent the English exile, Edgar the Aethling, from Constantinople with a shipload of siege engines for the hard-pressed crusaders. The story appears in *History of the Crusades*, vol. 1, p. 227, but subsequent investigations have shown that it has no basis whatsoever.⁽¹⁾ It therefore seems impossible to criticise Jones without, by implication, criticising Runciman as well.

All this begs the question as to why Madden includes Runciman at all, in a book which, he asserts, is designed to explode popular myths and disseminate a more thoughtful approach to the problem (p.12). *History of the Crusades* is still in print and is probably much more widely available than the works of any of the other authors featured in this collection. It is not as though people need to be encouraged to read Runciman. He jokingly boasted that he had made more money for his publisher, Cambridge University Press, than any other author apart from God, since his books were only outsold by the Bible.

Nevertheless, Madden is facing a genuine difficulty here. He has included two articles on the Muslim experience of the crusades: Nikita Elisséeff on the slow response to calls for *jihad* after the First Crusade, and Benjamin Kedar on Muslims under crusader rule. It is, however, difficult to find alternatives to Runciman which sum up the Byzantine experience in the same accessible and engaging way. There are surveys by Joan Hussey and Anthony Bryer which cover the period 1081 to 1204, but both are now fairly dated and in any case, they tend to mirror Runciman's central contention that cultural differences were the ultimate source of conflict.⁽²⁾

There are, of course, a number of scholars who have reinterpreted aspects of Byzantine-crusader relations. Of these the three most prominent must be Paul Magdalino, Ralph-Johannes Lilie and Jonathan Shepard. Magdalino's and Lilie's close studies of Byzantine policies towards the crusader states of Syria show not steadily mounting tension, but periods of animosity interspersed with co-operation and alliance.⁽³⁾ Shepard re-examines the whole question of Byzantine involvement with the genesis of the First Crusade in two masterly articles. Adopting a more critical stance towards Anna Comnena, Shepard argues that there was far more to the episode than an innocent Byzantine emperor taken aback by the turn of events and that Alexius was cleverly exploiting the situation for his own ends. While Runciman unabashedly labels Bohemond as a 'villain', whose greed and lack of scruple poisoned relations with the Byzantines, Shepard argues that this picture is an uncritical and literal reading of Anna Comnena, who vilified the Norman leader with the hindsight acquired in the forty-year interval between these events and the writing of her history. There is intriguing evidence that in 1096-7, Alexius viewed Bohemond as a potential tool, ally and recruit, a kind of imperial agent to oversee the re-conquest of Asia Minor.⁽⁴⁾

Yet there are problems in using the works of these authors for a volume of this type. Lilie's articles are in German, with only his major book being available in English. Magdalino's work tends to be extremely detailed, making it far less accessible and readable than the broad canvas of Runciman. Shepard, like

Magdalino, is a painstaking scholar who has little interest in broad generalisations. He often tends to write at length in order to bring out the full potential of the evidence he adduces. 'When Greek meets Greek' covers almost a hundred pages, which would create difficulties of space in a small paperback publication.

In short, even though his work is now fifty years old and many of his ideas discarded, in one respect, namely his sheer accessibility combined with genuine erudition, Runciman remains unsurpassed. For this reason, Madden is justified in including him. Yet his very inclusion is also ample proof that a re-examination of east-west relations at the time of the crusades is long overdue.

Jonathan Harris

Notes

1. Nicholas Hooper, 'Edgar the Aethling: Anglo-Saxon prince, rebel and Crusader', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 14 (1985), 197-214, at pp.208-209.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. J. M. Hussey, 'Byzantium and the Crusades, 1081-1204', in K. M. Setton, gen. Ed., *A History of the Crusades* (6 vols, University of Wisconsin Press; Madison,1969-89), ii, pp. 123-51; A. A. M. Bryer, 'The first encounter with the West AD 1050-1204', in *Byzantium: An Introduction*, ed. P. Whitting (2nd edn, Blackwells; Oxford, 1981), pp. 85-110.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. R-J. Lilie, *Byzantium and the Crusader States 1095-1204*, trans. J. C. Morris and J. C. Ridings (Oxford University Press; Oxford, 1993); Paul Magdalino, *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos 1143-1180* (Oxford University Press; Oxford, 1993), pp. 66-108.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. 'Cross-purposes: Alexius Comnenus and the First Crusade', in *The First Crusade Origins and Impact*, ed. Jonathan Phillips (Manchester University Press; Manchester, 1997), pp. 107-29, and idem, 'When Greek meets Greek: Alexius Comnenus and Bohemond in 1097-98', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 12 (1988), 185-277.[Back to \(4\)](#)

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