

## *Review Essay*

# **Historiography in the Twenty-First Century: The Relevance of the Crusades**

**Books Reviewed:** Thomas F. Madden, *The Concise History of the Crusades*, 3d ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014); Paul M. Cobb, *The Race for Paradise* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014); Jonathan Harris, *Byzantium and the Crusades*, 2d ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

During the last six decades, historians have adopted various approaches to studying the Crusades. Unfortunately, few contemporary Muslim scholars have dealt with this topic at all. In the aftermath of 9/11, however, this series of European military invasions of the Middle East began to reappear in the media as analysts, historians, and academics posited that they were a precursor of the region's present sociopolitical disorder as daunting as the current East-West discourse and relations between the Christian and Muslim worlds.<sup>1</sup> Some works deconstruct the perception that there is no connection between them, whereas others view the Crusades from the Islamic perspective in an attempt to balance the general triumphalist western narrative.<sup>2</sup>

This essay focuses on three recent works that, although dealing with different standpoints, are explicitly interwoven. Thomas F. Madden's *The Concise History of the Crusades* "is an attempt to illuminate the complex relationship of the past to the present" and narrates the Crusades in a "concise, understandable, and engaging manner" (pp. vii, viii) based on modern scholarship; Paul M. Cobb's *The Race for Paradise* shows how medieval Muslims perceived the Crusades and is based on his research primarily from original Islamic sources (p. 6); and Jonathan Harris' *Byzantium and the Crusades* concentrates on the relations between Byzantium and the Latin West during the Crusades.

Madden's book comprises ten chapters. Chapter 1, "The Call," discusses the crusading movement's background as primarily an act of piety despite an underlying current of selfish/secular desires, a fact that western scholars often overlook. He also criticizes historians who believe that many Crusaders were motivated by medieval Europe's policy of "castoffs," wherein only the first son could inherit his father's estate, by stating that the majority of crusading

knights were already lords of their estates (pp. 11-13). Thus, according to Madden, they were primarily motivated by spiritual gains vis-à-vis pilgrimage and holy war.

Chapter 2, “The First Crusades,” deals with the Peoples Crusades, “the largest and most ambitious military operation” ever launched from western Europe against the Muslim world (p. 15). Madden highlights the crucial role of Peter the Hermit (c. 1050-1115) here, especially the fact that his narration of false tales “mesmerized [his] audience with fiery and emotional sermons” (p. 16) and attracted thousands of participants.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, he rejects the general view that so many Jews and Christians were massacred that their blood inundated Jerusalem’s streets with knee-high rivers of blood. In his words, only 3,000 to 5,000 inhabitants of the city were killed. In other words, he tries to soften the Crusaders’ brutality because leading experts on the subject recount the severity of the massacre.<sup>4</sup>

Chapter 3 deals with the rise of the Latin kingdoms in the Levant and the Second Crusade. Intermittent forays continued after Jerusalem fell, but there was no large-scale combat until the 1119 “Field of Blood” battle, which lies north of the Edessa-Aleppo road. The Crusaders established their fourth kingdom at Tripoli in 1109. When the Zangi brothers defeated the Crusaders at Edessa in 1144, King Louis VII of France and King Conrad III of Germany began calling for the Second Crusade. This crusade failed and was coupled with mutual Greek and Latin hostility. In fact, the Europeans held Byzantium responsible – they accused the emperor of having made a secret truce with the Turks (p. 55). However, this seems to be a half-truth because if such a treaty had existed Arab historians would certainly have mentioned it. In fact, it is far more likely that European historians covered up the crusade’s failed strategy by attributing the defeat to Byzantine treachery.

Chapter 4 explains the decline of the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem, which engendered the Third Crusade. The Muslims were now commanded by Nur al-Din Zangi (1118-74, who for the first time combined the theology and practice of jihad. However, his interests were “limited to the acquisition of power, not religious revivalism,” as he rejected several calls to fight the Crusaders (p. 62). Madden seems to ignore that Muslim unity was the prerequisite for success. In fact, Salah al-Din (1138/38-1193) followed this same policy. Madden admits this, for “the crusader states had prospered because of their relative unity in the face of Muslim chaos. Now the situation was reversed” (p. 74).

Thus Jerusalem was liberated without any bloodshed by the Muslims on October 2, 1187. Shocked and horrified, according to Madden, “Pope Urban III (1185-87) died of grief when he heard the news on October 20, 1187” (p. 77). But according to Archer, “[In fact] Urban died on October 20, 1187, be-

fore the fall of Jerusalem could have been known in Europe.”<sup>5</sup> But for Europe, this account acted as a provocateur and invoked the Third Crusade, “the height of the crusading movement,” because it was led by kings and the highest elites of France, Germany, and England (p. 77). However, unlike the First Crusade, all subsequent ones failed to achieve any victory.

Chapter 5 explains various facets of the Fourth Crusade, which was launched primarily to recapture Jerusalem. However, it first went to Zara in the Dalmatian region and ended by sacking Constantinople and slaughtering Greek Christians in 1204. Madden sees this episode, which is still the subject of intense debate, as a legitimate undertaking. However, it proved to be a disappointment to the pope and to the Crusader states (pp. 110, 114). Chapter 6 describes the internal crusades against the Carthars, the Albigensians, and the Children’s Crusade led by Stephen, a twelve-year-old French shepherd. To his disappointment, none of these achieved their projected goals (p. 133).

Chapter 7 recounts the Fifth Crusade’s attempt to recapture Jerusalem. Pope Innocent III, who might have been compelled to do so due to the recent failure, did all that he could to create a massive crusade. Setting off in 1217, the undertaking was led by Andrew II of Hungary and Leopold VI of Austria. They were defeated at al-Mansura but managed to capture Damietta in Egypt, then ruled by al-Kamil. Jerusalem was offered in exchange for Damietta, but Cardinal Pelagius turned down the offer and ultimately made the Fifth Crusade yet another disappointment. Madden defends the Sixth Crusade (1228) of Frederick II, who struck a ten-year truce with al-Kamil and thereby acquired Jerusalem for the time being, as a great success because European pilgrims could now easily visit the Holy Land (p. 153). However, could this not also be viewed as merely a compromise, an attempt to show off, and a betrayal of Europe’s leaders, who had been unable to gain access to the Holy Land? An astute leader, regardless of the complication, would not be led astray due to mere political ambition.

Chapter 8 is devoted to the Seventh (1248) and Eighth Crusades (1267) led by Louis IX (1226-70). The catastrophic events of 1243, during which all of Frederick II’s gains were lost, aroused in Louis the desire to prepare for the most organized and funded Crusade ever launched (p. 158). While he managed to capture Damietta, the Mamluks defeated the Crusaders at every front and compelled Louis to retreat to Europe before he prepared the Eight Crusade. Historians claim that his destination was unknown; however, he attacked Tunis. Both of these campaigns proved disastrous to the Latin states in the East. In response, King Edward I of England led the Ninth Crusade (1271) against the Mamluk sultan Baybars. After his defeat, Edward signed a ten-year truce with Baybars and went home (p. 172).

Chapter 9 deals with the fall of Acre, the last Latin holding in Palestine, which “surrendered without a fight” to the Mamluks in 1291 (p. 175). Madden also records the changing crusading environment: In the West the Crusade ideology was now at its lowest ebb, but in the east the Ottomans were gaining control of the realm. Chapter 10 nuances the legacy of the Crusades on both sides. Madden writes that the term and concept of the Crusades had been protean and exploited from the inception of the modern era. For him, the historical understanding and popular perception of these campaigns have led to their condemnation. Yet he still defends them as an act of piety (i.e., bravery coupled with faith) and rejects the dominant perception that they are in any way responsible for modern tensions between the Middle East and the West (p. 205).

Paul M. Cobb’s *The Race for Paradise* is among the few books that deals with the Islamic perspective. The author of this nine-chapter book, a professor of Islamic history at the University of Pennsylvania, consulted both Islamic and non-Islamic sources. The prologue, “Damascus Crossroads,” opens by describing the gallant personality of Salah al-Din, known and admired in the West as Saladin, the conqueror of Muslim Jerusalem. Cobb asserts that the Crusades “can and should be understood in the context of the Islamic world” because they represent an “integral part of the history of Islamic civilization itself” (pp. 7-8). For a balanced perspective, one must consult the Islamic sources thoroughly.

Chapter 1, “The Abode of Islam,” presents a brief history of Islamic civilization in order to provide a theoretical framework and to recount that “to medieval Muslim eyes, western Europe was superficially an impoverished one might even say ‘developing’ region on the margins of the world” (p. 19). Moreover, while comparing jihad with Crusade, he interestingly asserts that jihad “is not militarism, to be contrasted with pacifism, but rather war with a pious intent, to be contrasted with the vast taxonomies of war that are secular” (p. 30). However, he mistakenly argues that the “goal of Jihād was the conversion of infidels to Islam” (p. 29). Had that been the case, no non-Muslim communities would have survived at least in the Middle East; rather the goal was to foster and uphold justice.

Chapters 2 and 3 explain the causes of the Crusades and the Franks’ capture of Jerusalem in 1099 (i.e., the First Crusade). Basing himself on Muslim sources, Cobb attributes this defeat to Muslim disunity. The loss of Muslim Sicily to the Normans actually manifested that the Crusade was already underway (p. 41). Moreover, the loss of Jerusalem was a bolt out of the blue for the Muslims. Cobb recounts the Frank’s merciless butchering in the aftermath and that “for nearly a century after 1099, Jerusalem remained in Frankish hands” (p. 103).

Chapters 4 and 5 delineate the Muslim response. Right after the capture of Jerusalem, the Muslim jurist al-Harawi harangued the caliph in Baghdad about the Muslim realm's pervasive disunity and luxurious lifestyle, claiming that such realities explained what had just happened. There were ongoing intermittent battles, but the only serious one occurred at the "Field of Blood," south of Aleppo, where the Muslims totally defeated the Franks (p. 122). Imad al-Din Zangi united the Muslims and conquered Edessa, the first Crusader kingdom, in 1144. Cobb states that in him, "Syria first found the combination of military success and ideological certainty" (p. 127). He then goes on to recount the simultaneous reverse wave of Muslim defeats in Farther al-Andalus (Spain) and North Africa (Sicily).

Chapter 6 describes the milieu that brought to the forefront the virtuous and courageous Saladin, who defeated the Crusaders at Hittin in 1187 and eventually recaptured Jerusalem. Here Cobb draws attention to an important but rather ignored impact of the Crusades: "the rich legacy of Frankish-Muslim relations [rather] than a strictly military narrative" (p. 170) under Saladin. Chapter 7 explains the Franks' reaction to the loss of Jerusalem; for the first time, three of Europe's most famous and wealthiest kings joined a Crusade. But due to Saladin's astute and sense of geopolitics, the Franks lost their grip on Jerusalem once and for all.

Chapters 8 and 9 explore the Mongol onslaught that threatened the Mamluk dynasty just as it was trying to expand its rule in the Frankish lands in the Near East. But, as Cobb says, they settled their differences and signed a peace treaty (p. 240). Now, when Europe was struggling with its own internal divisions, even fighting fellow Christians at Constantinople, the Ottomans took the opportunity to capture Constantinople, the one-time pinnacle of the Christian world, in 1453. The author nicely presents the reverse waves of victories in two other continents: "the Ottomans were driving Westward using the very invasion route favoured by the Crusaders," who had first marched to the East long before. On the contrary, in Sicily and al-Andalus, Muslims succumbed to the Franks in 1492; thus culminated a long and rich chapter of Muslim civilization in the Europe (pp. 50-69). It was mainly through Spain that the Muslim world's intellectual legacy was taken to and developed in Europe.

In the epilogue, which summarizes all of the Crusades, Cobb asserts that the Islamic perspective "allows us to understand the context of the Muslim population who were the targets of the Frankish conquest from Spain to Syria, the economic, political, and social settings of actors in these events who were," he argues, "poorly represented in the traditional [European] perspective." Moreover, he contends that those who view the Crusades as a clash between Islam and Christianity are mistaken; rather, they were the outcome of specific Frank-

ish politics warring with specific Muslim ones (p. 278). Cobb is perhaps correct here. Although it may not be acceptable to European scholarship, it will help soften the West's now-pervasive anti-Islam prejudice.

Jonathan Harris' *Byzantium and the Crusades* addresses a very important issue: the sacking and takeover of Constantinople, one of Christendom's largest cities, by an army purportedly committed to saving Christians and Christianity. In 1204 the Fourth Crusade, which was supposedly heading for Egypt, went first to Zara, a Christian city in the Dalmatian region, and then to Constantinople. Historians have still not devised a satisfactory theory (e.g., the clash of civilizations, Byzantine and Latin West hostility, and conspiracy) to explain why a movement originally launched to help the Byzantines ultimately stormed their capital city. Harris points out serious flaws in these theories and constructs a new one based on the interaction between the Fourth Crusade and the Byzantines: Byzantine ideology and foreign policy entailed the empire's disintegration. The following eleven chapters deal with the relations between Byzantium and the West from the death of Emperor Basil II (1025) to the reign of Andronicus II (1282-1328).

Chapter 1 recounts Byzantium's glamor that, Harris asserts, was illuminated by its strength, size, wealth, and the holiness of its capital, which was ranked higher than both Rome and Jerusalem (p. 17). Chapter 2 explains the next important element of Byzantine ideology: the Emperor's supremacy as leader of the *oikoumene* (world order). His dealings with foreign partners was regulated by a strong imperial civil administrative system of educated and qualified persons acquainted with classical education. They acted as advisors to formulate domestic and foreign policy, and those well-versed in contemporary affairs often served as ambassadors. Harris suggests that some of the key elements of Byzantine foreign policy (e.g., showering lavish wealth and gifts, pomp coronations to impress foreigners, and their cunning "carrot and stick" diplomacy [threatening the enemy to preserve the Emperor's status and security]), are responsible for their disintegration.

Chapter 3 describes the empire's crises and the subsequent deterioration of relations between it and the Crusaders. Byzantium was now facing attacks along its eastern and western frontiers. But its ineffective and traditional responses, even its new policy of recruiting foreign mercenaries, did not address the changing environment. The Pecheneg invasion (started in 1046-47), defeat by the Seljuks at Manzikert (1171), and internal political instability after 1025 opened the way for Turkish warlords to occupy Asia Minor and the Norman invasion of 1081.

Harris considers the failed alliance between Pope Leo IX and Byzantine in 1051 as a major turning point (p. 48). The Byzantine assertion of the em-

peror's supreme leadership of Christendom antagonized the reformed papacy in Rome. On the other hand, the empire's worsening security situation demanded the deployment of more troops in its western regions in the 1090s. All of these realities engendered a rising level of tension.

Chapter 4 traces the First Crusade's passage through Byzantium. Emperor Alexios I, who had not expected this, was quite desperate to protect his empire. He therefore demanded that its leaders take an oath that they would hand over control of any lands taken in the East. Implicit in this was that they should follow the emperor's command, given his stature. This caused great animosity among the Crusaders and the West (p. 66). According to Harris, relations worsened when the Crusaders refused to hand over Antioch. He blames Alexios for his policy, which aroused resentment among the Crusaders. Their use of it to justify their seizure of Antioch would dictate the two Christian empires' future relationship.

Chapter 5 illustrates the dealings of Alexios I and his successor John II with the newly created Latin states in the East. Byzantium was still pursuing its traditional foreign policy with the same goals and methods; however, both of them saw the key issue as securing recognition of the emperor's stature, which dictated relations with Antioch and Jerusalem (p. 79). On the other hand, the Crusaders were hoping to expand their Latin kingdoms. This mutual resentment was on the rise even though John II tried to influence Rome. But Byzantium only learned from its mistakes during the second half of twelfth century, after which the emperors tried to make their policy more acceptable to the West (p. 97).

Chapter 6 describes the dealings of John II's successor, Manuel IV, with the new Crusaders during 1147-49. Harris says that Manuel handled them astutely and even succeeded in maintaining his hegemony over Antioch and Jerusalem by making the "carrot and stick" approach acceptable and becoming far better informed about Rome and the Crusades' ideology (pp. 111, 120). At the time of his death (1180), the dismal political landscape of Byzantine resembled that of fifty years before. Andronicus I reversed all of this not because of his anti-Latin attitude, Harris argues, but because of the changing environment, which led to his seizure of power in 1182 and the perpetrated massacre of Latins in Constantinople. Moreover, his collusion with the Muslims coupled with the massacre sparked off anti-Byzantine propaganda in the West (chapter 7).

Chapter 8 recounts the growing anti-Byzantine resentment in the Latin West after Jerusalem's fall that, according to the author, peaked in the assertion that Emperor Isaac II allegedly had a hand in this event. His handling of the Third Crusade and the pervasive rumors about his alliance with Saladin were

beginning to be seen as a sinister plot in the Latin West. However, Harris rejects these notions and argues that this supposed alliance was no more than a rumor and a tool in the Latins' hands to excuse of their failure (p. 138). However, the Crusaders apparently believed it.

Chapter 9 describes the crippling years of Constantinople. According to Harris, apart from the empire's bad image in the Latin West, "its weakness furnished an opportunity and its wealth an incentive" (p. 159) that directly led to its sack by the Latins in 1204. In 1199, Pope Innocent had sent letter to Alexios III to provide the necessary funds to the Crusaders; otherwise, force would be used against Byzantium. Such a forcible seizure of wealth for the cause was seen as legitimate, for there was a precedent: Richard I's capture of Cyprus in 1191 (pp. 152-53). The sack of Constantinople thus represented the complete defeat of Byzantine ideology and foreign policy.

Chapter 10 details the empire's division and replacement by the Latin empire of Constantinople. Harris writes that three Greek successor states emerged at Nicaea, Arta, and Trebizond (pp. 180, 182). Latin hegemony was soon toppled as the Latin empire's economic and military weakness reached a crescendo. Constantinople was restored in 1261 largely by Nicaea's propaganda: the ideological battle against the Latins with regard to illegitimacy of their regime (p. 193). Chapter 11 recounts the fall of Acre in 1291 and the Crusades' impact on the ultimate disappearance of Byzantium. Harris maintains that the Crusades, especially the fourth one, is one of the major factors responsible for Byzantium's fall in 1453. He further argues that various aspects of its civilization were perpetuated in the Orthodox churches of eastern Europe (pp. 210-11).

Each of these books seems to touch upon important aspects of the Crusades in their own right. What distinguishes them from each other is the central theme running through them like a thread. Madden, probably, illustrates the dominant triumphal narrative of the Crusades due to his belief that they were a defensive act of Christian piety, chivalry, and bravery exclusively launched for the safety of fellow Christians and the Holy Land and thus have nothing to do with contemporary East-West tensions. Furthermore, and ironically, apart from other arguable statements, he ridicules the Muslims for their ignorance about the Crusades and argues that "the first Arabic history of the crusades was not written until 1899" (p. 201).

But this is not true for, as Cobb lucidly states, Muslims were well-experienced and have lived ever since with the memory of these military campaigns. As he recounts on page 277 in his *The Race for Paradise*, in 1519 a short treatise on the Frankish wars in the Near East was written by 'Ali al-Hariri that manifests ambient memory of the Crusades coupled further in pan-

egyrics, folk epics besides loomed castles, walls, ruins continuously shaped the picture of the Crusades among Muslims. Cobb's book demands more attention in the sense that it is more balanced than the other two. It also covers a neglected aspect of cultural exchange between the Franks and the Muslims during the Crusades.

On the other hand, Harris proffers new dimensions to the Byzantine-Crusader relationship. He argues that Byzantium disappeared because it continued to pursue its traditional policy, for "no human institution can survive unchanged indefinitely as conditions change and new challenges arise" (p. 210). He also did not take into consideration other external factors, among them the direct impact of the Byzantine and Latin West's relations and Muslim expansion. Apart from the contentious statements, while Harris' book is a revised edition with some important new insights, overall it is an excellent and timely contribution to Byzantine-Crusader relations. Cobb is well worth to read, for it elucidates the story of the Crusades encompassing two continents, five centuries, and incisively depicts the medieval Muslim perspective together with lessons for the present. Now in its third edition, Madden's book beautifully presents the story of the Crusades in a simple, scholarly, and convincing manner. All three works, given their content, intent, and style – not to mention their maps, illustrations, and figures (colored in Cobb's work) – certainly deserve a wide readership.

## Endnotes

1. Karen Armstrong, *Holy War: The Crusades and Their Impact on Today's World* (New York: Doubleday, 1988).
2. Carole Hillenbrand, *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).
3. T. A. Archer, *The Crusades*, 5th ed. (London: T. Fisher Unwin Ltd., 1919), 26.
4. See Steven Runciman, "The First Crusade: Constantinople to Antioch," in *A History of the Crusades*, ed. Marshal W. Baldwin (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1955), 1:337 .
5. Archer, *The Crusades*, 306. It usually took two months to reach France from the Holy Land.

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