Yes, the crusades were marked by fanaticism and savagery. But, argues Suleiman A Mourad, they were also a time of collaboration and respect between Muslims and Christians.

**Brothers in arms**
The Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II reaches an accord with the Muslim sultan al-Kamil in 1229 that saw Jerusalem handed to the crusaders. This is just one instance of cooperation between east and west in the era (though the two men never actually met in person).
When crusader history is treated as ‘European’ history, it becomes easy to think of it as a past extension of modern Europe, tied to the national narratives of modern European countries (Italy, France and Germany), to name a few – none of which existed as such in the Middle Ages. This also tempts scholars and readers to reassess and evaluate the crusades in terms of the values they personally cherish. The Eurocentric agenda led some to imagine the crusaders as predecessors of those later colonialists whose duty was ‘to civilise’ the world – as in the French scholar Joseph-François Michaud’s 1840 Histoire des Croisades (‘The History of the Crusades’), a book that still exerts tremendous impact in Europe in general, and France in particular. Other Europeans, influenced by the ideals of the Enlightenment or enraptured by oriental romanticism, were critical of the crusades and treated them as an ugly mix of religious fanaticism and savagery – the Europe they wanted to condemn. Two examples of this trend are Sir Walter Scott’s 1825 novel The Talisman and the 1935 movie The Crusades by the great American film-maker Cecil B DeMille.

The Eurocentric reading of crusader history also gave medieval European sources a place of dominance in writing the modern narrative of the crusades. As such, non-European medieval sources, which document the experiences of Greeks-Byzantines, Armenians, Muslims and Arab-Christsians, are read according to the European sources. I do not mean to say that these other sources furnish a more accurate history, but they are indispensable for a proper understanding of the complexity of crusader history, and must be given a central place in the rewriting of the narrative, rather than a secondary role.

A humiliating fate

Similarly, the Islamocentric reading of crusader history was shaped during the years of colonial subjugation of most Muslim-inhabited lands, starting in the 19th century. Modern Muslim scholars have both imagined and used the crusades as a predecessor of European colonialism, they forewarn of the colonialists’ evil schemes and augur that they will assuredly meet the same humiliating fate as their medieval ancestors. A great example of this trend is found in the popular survey Al-Haraka al-Salibiyya (‘The Crusader Movement’) by the Egyptian Sadi Ashour, which was first published in 1963. These Islamocentric readings selectively employ Arab sources from the period, and champion specific figures – such as Saladin and Baybars – by exaggerating their anti-crusader

We have inadvertently allowed modern agendas to determine the way we have reconstructed crusader history
accomplishments, and ignoring their friendly interactions with certain groups among the crusaders.

In more recent decades, the Eurocentric reading has been nuanced but never completely challenged, while the Islamocentric reading has not changed at all, thanks to the political situation in the Muslim world. “Christian pigs and filth” the crusades was not a clash of civilisations. “Christian pigs and filth”...
frequently visited and prayed in the Islamic shrine known as the Dome of the Rock. The crusaders had transformed the building into a church, which they called ‘Templum Domini’, or the ‘Temple of the Lord. Al-Harawi, who was fanatic about alchemy, was a regular feature in the royal court of Jerusalem’s King Amalric.

More importantly, in his A Lonely Wayfarer’s Guide to Pilgrimage, al-Harawi criticised and deconstructed many of the popular customs of making pilgrimage to particular shrines and religious sanctuaries in Palestine and the surrounding regions as reflective of popular Muslim superstitions and false associations. Yet his observations attest to numerous cases of Muslims, Christians and Jews converging on the same spots to worship. Some of these locations were under crusader rule; others were under Muslim rule.

It must be made clear that what I am talking about here is not a convivencia – the disputed ‘golden age’ of tolerance that supposedly existed between faith groups in medieval Andalusia – but instead a complex web of interactions between crusaders and Muslims that cannot and must not be reduced to one thing only: violence.

**Avenues of knowledge**

In the history of the transmission of knowledge between the Islamic civilisation, which featured a burgeoning scientific culture, and medieval Europe, two main avenues have been identified. One was through medieval Spain, which has received most of the modern scholarly attention. The other is via the Byzantine empire. There is also Sicily, but attention to this possibility has largely been limited to Frederick’s reign in the 1200s. Another location that witnessed the direct exchange of knowledge was crusader Antioch. Pisans, in particular, benefited from the fact that they had developed a commercial base in the city, picking up a lot of Arabic scientific books which they brought home and translated into Latin.

It was in Antioch in the 1120s that Stephen of Pisa (see box, p66) came across Ali ibn al-Abbas al-Majusi’s 10th-century Kitab al-Malaki (‘The Complete Book on the Craft of Medicine’), translated it into Latin and then brought it home to Italy. For several centuries, the book became a must-read on the practice and theory of the medical profession. Also, more complete manuscripts of Ptolemy’s Almagest, the infamous mathematical-astronomical masterpiece, were brought from Antioch and retranslated into Latin, infusing new energy into both areas of study.

**The mightiest battle**

During the winter of 2016, the Al Jazeera network aired the first episode of its documentary on the crusades, which featured a lineup of notable scholars. The narrator opened the episode with these words: “In the history of conflict between east and west, the mightiest battle between Christianity and Islam. A holy war in the name of religion. For the first time: the story of the crusades from an Arab perspective.”

It is clear that this new, ‘first time’ story is the same old yarn about violence that has been told and retold since the 18th century. But medieval sources, especially the Muslim chronicles, tell us a different story. Many people today will refuse to listen to it, however, because the one that feeds the clash of civilisation discourse is more captivating, more exploitable.

The period was, for some, an opportunity to kill, loot and amass riches and fame. Others saw it as an occasion for commerce, alliances or the exchange of knowledge. There were some who pursued both. This is crusader history as it was, and it is this complexity that we as historians ought to present. We might not be able to free ourselves of our biases, but we should at least be beholden to the intricacy of history.

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