

# A clash of civilisations?



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)



Lying in his own blood on the battlefield near Mansoura, his standard covering his grievously wounded body, Emir Fakhr al-Din departed this world on 8 February 1250. He had left his encampment with a handful of guards to assist the army of King Louis IX and devise a plan to defend Egypt from the onslaught of what became known as the Seventh Crusade. But before he could make it back to safety, he was cut down in an ambush. This was a sad ending for someone who only a few months earlier had become the de facto ruler of the Ayyubid sultanate.

Luck as well as talent had destined Fakhr al-Din for greatness. His mother had nursed the future Ayyubid sultan al-Kamil, which strengthened the bond between the two families. So when al-Kamil became sovereign in 1218, Fakhr al-Din was his closest confidant, and never left his side except on important missions.

One of these missions was an embassy to Sicily to negotiate an alliance with Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen. Fakhr al-Din achieved much more than that. In the short time he stayed in Palermo, he profoundly impressed the emperor. The two conversed about science, falconry and poetry (see box on page 66), and before sailing back to Egypt, Frederick held a ceremony to knight his Muslim friend.

**The two agendas**

The story of Fakhr al-Din sums up the history of Muslim-crusader interactions during the period. There were times for war – a lot of it. There were other times for diplomacy, alliances, friendships, commerce and the exchange of science and knowledge. There were also times when war and peace coincided. This complex legacy of the crusader period in the Middle East is little known. The reason is simple: many modern histories of the crusades have focussed on the violence of the period – and, in doing so, have blurred our ability to see the other side. This was no honest mishap. We have inadvertently allowed modern agendas – one Eurocentric, the other Islamocentric – to determine the way we have reconstructed crusader history.

Indeed, since the 18th century, the Eurocentric and Islamocentric agendas have imposed themselves on the historiography of the crusades. They have shaped its narrative as a clash of civilisations. In the process, all the evidence to the contrary has been silenced or ignored; if acknowledged at all, it has only been seen as inconsequential marginalia.

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 condemned. 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 Greek-Byzantines, Armenians, Muslims and Arab-Christians, 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 Said 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

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A jeweller, herbalist, butcher and baker in a 13th-century Turkish manuscript. Despite the wars, commerce moved freely between crusaders and Muslims

GETTY IMAGES



Ian Keith (left) as Saladin and Henry Wilcoxon (centre) as Richard the Lionheart in Cecil B DeMille’s 1935 film *The Crusades*, which delivered a damning verdict on Christian Europe’s military campaigns in the near east





## INFORMATION EXCHANGE

Muslim-crusader collaboration produced innovations in several different areas



The Islamic world produced the first specially trained pharmacists, and attracted Christian scholars hoping to improve the west's understanding of medicine

## MEDICINE

In the 1110s and 1120s, Stephen of Pisa journeyed to Antioch in search of Arabic knowledge, specifically philosophy. His desire for learning the superior sciences of the Muslims led him into other fields, including medicine and astronomy. In Antioch, he led a team, including a Muslim convert to Christianity, to translate various works into Latin for

European scholars. It is thanks to the list Stephen composed as a result of his translation of Ali ibn al-Abbas's *The Complete Book on the Craft of Medicine* that many Arabic medical names entered the medieval vocabulary in Europe. Some, such as 'cornea' and 'abdomen', are still in use today.



A c12th-century Fatimid ceramic bowl featuring a mounted falconer. Emperor Frederick II drew on Arabic works when writing his treatise on falconry

## FALCONRY

Emperor Frederick II developed such a passion for falconry that he once decided to author a book on the subject. He first asked some scholars in his court to translate for him the authoritative Arabic book on falconry, *Kitab al-Mutawakkili*, attributed to the ninth-century Abbasid caliph al-Mutawakkil, and other Arabic books as well. They showed Frederick how to study falconry as a science, based on observations and tests. Together, they inspired Frederick's *De Arte Venandi cum a Vibus* ('On the Art of Hunting With Birds'), which scholars consider the first 'scientific' study on birds of prey.

## ARCHITECTURE

When Saladin took control of Egypt and ended the reign of the Fatimids in the 1170s, he constructed his palace on a promontory beneath the Muqattam hills in medieval Cairo, away from the alien Shia and Christian communities. Many of the artisans who worked there were captive crusaders, and employed techniques unknown to the Muslims and others in the Middle East.

Crusader architecture was much stronger and more durable, and allowed for bigger structures than those the locals were used to. The Muslims gradually learned these techniques of building and fortification, often by observing and studying the crusader castles that were spread all over the eastern Mediterranean.



A keystone from the 13th-century Montfort Castle in Israel. Muslims often learned the techniques of fortification by studying crusader strongholds



A flock of sheep pictured in a 14th-century handbook of health. A dispute regarding ovine ownership was the subject of a pioneering lawsuit brought about by Usama Ibn Munqidh

## JUSTICE

During one of his many visits to crusader-occupied Acre, Usama Ibn Munqidh, a nobleman who fought many battles against the Christians, brought a case against the Lord of Baniyas for seizing a flock of sheep belonging to him. Usama presented his grievance there to the King of Jerusalem, who convened a jury

of knights to adjudicate the case. After hearing both sides, the jury retreated to a room to deliberate, and came back to deliver a verdict in favour of Usama. The king had no choice but to accept their verdict. This was how the Muslims came to know about jury justice.

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. Only a fool would say that the Muslims and crusaders loved each other, but this does not justify going to the other extreme – for the contemporary sources (especially the Islamic ones) draw a mosaic picture of the period, featuring wars and alliances, boycott and exchange, hatred and amicability and

myriad shades in between. In other words, there were never two camps. There were, however, many actors, with different agendas and varying schemes to achieve them.

A window into this complex reality is provided in *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*. A Muslim secretary from medieval Iberia (Spain), Ibn Jubayr, who died in 1217, sojourned in the eastern Mediterranean and saw things not always palatable to his taste. One observation he made was that, despite occasional wars between the Muslims and crusaders, merchants and commerce continued to move freely between the two realms as if everything was normal. For him, this was a sign of the corruption of rulers on both sides. In one instance, in 1184 he crossed the plain from the Sea of Galilee to

Acre, where he discovered countless farming villages inhabited by Muslims who seemed to him to live in complete harmony with the crusaders.

What shocked Ibn Jubayr the most was not only that the crusaders were not harming the Muslims. He bemoaned the fact that these Muslims did not seem bothered by their mingling with – to use his words – “Christian pigs and filth”. As such, in Ibn Jubayr's eyes, these Muslims could not have been good Muslims.

The complexity of the crusader period is apparent in the contemporary Muslim sources. For instance, the physician and chronicler Ibn Abi Usaibia (died 1270) recounts the story of an envoy from Emperor Frederick II arriving sometime in the 1220s

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at the court of the Muslim ruler of Mosul bearing a list of questions on astronomy for a specific scholar, Kamal al-Din Ibn Yunus. The emperor knew from his court philosopher, Theodore of Antioch, that only Ibn Yunus could solve them. Ibn Yunus obliged and provided the answers to the envoy, who carried them back to Sicily. On a different occasion, another envoy was sent to Cairo to seek answers for mathematical problems, and Sultan al-Kamil instructed his court's mathematicians to write down their solution and send them back to Frederick.

### Courts and embassies

The scholarly cooperation between Frederick II and the Ayyubids was sustained

for several years. Al-Kamil's son, Sultan al-Salih Ayyub, delegated the logician and jurist Siraj al-Din al-Urmawi to the court of Frederick in Palermo, and while there al-Urmawi authored a book on logic for the emperor. A few years after that, in 1261, the jurist and logician Ibn Wasil travelled to Apulia in southern Italy on an embassy from the Mamluk sultan Baybars to Frederick's son King Manfred. He stayed for two years in Manfred's court in Barletta, and like al-Urmawi before him, Ibn Wasil wrote a book on logic that he dedicated to his host, which he titled *The Imperial Treatise*.

There is also the example of the scholar al-Harawi, who, almost a century before, took up residency in Jerusalem for several weeks in 1173, during which time he

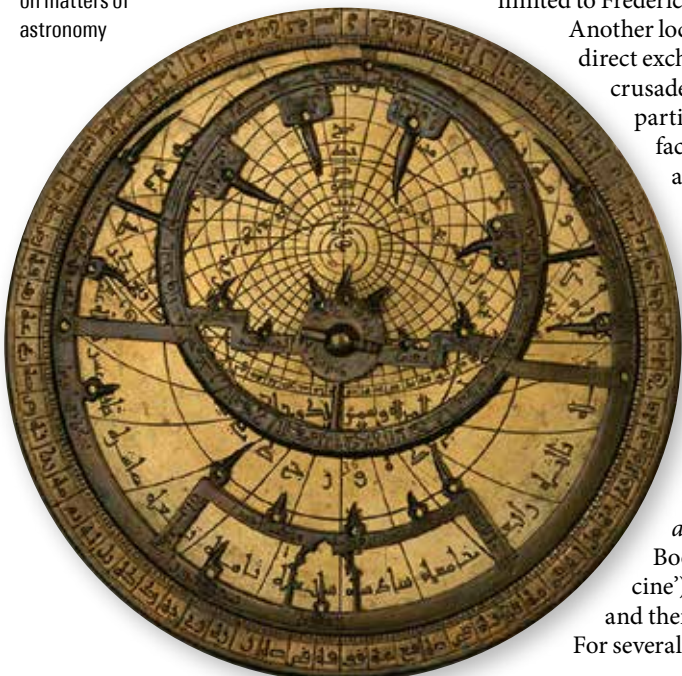
## The Islamic sources draw a mosaic of war and alliance, boycott and trade, hatred and amicability and myriad shades in between





Charts from a Persian edition of the medieval Arabic work *The Wonders of Creation*. Muslim scholars refined older scientific ideas

An Islamic astrolabe from Zaragoza, dated to c1079. Muslim experts were consulted by their Christian peers on matters of astronomy



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 fanatical 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

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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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