

Popular Muslim Reactions to the Franks in the Levant, 1097–1291

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Contemporary interest in the period of the Crusades has intensified in the last decade or so, partly because of the inflammatory invocations of holy war and jihad made immediately after the traumatic events of 9/11. Prior to this renewed interest in the historical contexts of holy war, academic scholarship had gradually moved from the often vexatious issue of how to define a crusade and instead come to focus on these wars as a series of religious movements that needed to be contextualised amid the bigger reforms proposed by medieval churchmen from the late 11th century. In western scholarship much attention has been paid to the issue of crusade motivation and a nuanced picture has been gradually built of what it meant to take up the cross for individuals, communities, families, men and, increasingly, women. Yet western scholarship has been slower to integrate the history of Muslim responses to the crusades into these new social and cultural frameworks of crusade historiography. There are notable exceptions, of course. The work of Carole Hillenbrand has done much to bring the experiences of medieval Muslim communities in the Levant to western attention. Benjamin Kedar's series of detailed studies have considered the 'subjected' Muslims of the Levant and the immediate effects of the presence of the Franks in the communities of what came to be known as Outremer. This is the historiography in which Alex Mallett situates his study of popular Muslim reactions to the Franks. Arguing that the historiography to date still focuses on the military actions of the Muslim political elite detailed in Emmanuel Sivan's study of *L'Islam et la croisade* (1968), Mallett puts forward a mostly convincing argument that 'popular', or non-elite Muslim voices can be heard in the sources and that they can furnish us with important insights into the impact of the Crusades in the Levant.

The book deals with the period from 1097–1291, the traditional sweep of time from the arrival of the first crusaders in Muslim lands until the loss of the port city of Acre toward the end of the 13th century. During this period, Frankish/Muslim encounters were diverse: military confrontations punctuated these years, while there is ample evidence to show that diplomacy, negotiation, tolerance and even friendship flourished at times throughout the crusading era. Mallett, however, is most interested in the so-called 'Counter-Crusade', or the series of attempts by Muslims of the Levant to fight back against the Frankish invaders, and as such paints a picture of a deeply hostile Muslim social landscape from the late 11th century. Military efforts coordinated and led by the political elites were only part of the effort to resist the Frankish presence. Other efforts at resistance were more opportunistic and even symbolic: attacks could be made on non-combatants, on the symbols of Frankish occupation, on the ability of Frankish armies to sustain themselves by refusing to

sell them food. These are the activities undertaken by the 'non-elite' populations of the Levant that are the focus of Mallett's book.

The notion of the Counter-Crusade is a pervasive but problematic conceptual category which Mallett does much to refine. The Counter-Crusade is conventionally tied to the concept of military jihad which was revived particularly from the 12th century under the leadership program of Nur-Al Din. Mallett clarifies and nuances the reader's understanding of both these categories by carefully considering whether - as much modern scholarship assumes - that they are the same thing.

The book is divided into two parts. The first, containing the majority of the chapters (seven) considers acts of resistance to the Franks. The second part of the book contains three chapters which look at aspects of Muslim accommodation of the Franks. The highly urbanised Middle East is the focus of chapter one, which deals with resistance to Franks in besieged cities, including Nicaea, Antioch, Damietta, Acre, Tyre and others. Mallett finds that cities under siege resisted invasion in a range of ways, from military resistance to bribery, and that many groups engaged together in acts of resistance that, for short periods of time, created solidarity of purpose among often very disparate communities. Mallett asks the pertinent question of why Muslims resisted Frankish invasion, finding that the risky option of fighting back was (at least in part) always an act of defensive jihad. This chapter is followed by an analysis of appeals for help to test whether a desire for fighting back was evident among Muslim communities from the very start of the crusading period, especially in the city of Aleppo. The outcome of such appeals could have long-term consequences, as was the case in Cairo in 1168-9 which gave Nur ad-Din the impetus he needed to destroy the Fatimid caliphate in Egypt and unite Syria and Egypt against the Franks.

Why Muslims chose to fight alongside their co-religionists' armies is the subject of chapter three, which finds that Muslims were more prepared to join in offensive missions against the Franks than to engage only in defensive acts of resistance. Some of these fellow fighters were motivated by religion and others by the prospect of material gain; the latter group, Mallett notes, cannot be said to have been engaging in jihad. This raises the interesting distinction between the term 'counter-crusade' which could include all resistance to the Franks and jihad, which had to be based on sound religious motives. The fourth chapter expands on acts of religious piety including prayer, martyrdom and *majalis al-wa'z* (assemblies of exhortation), which were deployed to underpin the defensive jihad. Attempts to convert Frankish prisoners to Islam are also evident, and Mallett finds overall that Muslims from outside the political elites used spiritual support to create and sustain the religious atmosphere 'in which the struggle with the Franks was framed' (p. 74). Chapter five considers unilateral and opportunistic attacks on the Franks by individuals and groups with no affiliation to elite groups. These groups included bandits, raiders and pirates, and those who massacred pilgrims and other non-combatants. Such groups were part of the Counter-Crusade effort, but must be distinguished from the jihad. The final two chapters in this section of the book investigate non-military forms of resistance, including financial resistance (donations of money to the military effort), acts of violence against local Christian (non-Frankish) populations, commemorative events of rejoicing to celebrate military successes, acts of extreme violence including massacre, and personal sacrifice.

The second part of the book is much shorter, containing only three chapters, each dealing with an example of 'non-resistance' or accommodation of the Frankish presence by Muslim communities. The aim here is not to provide as detailed an analysis of non-resistance as was achieved for resistance in the first seven chapters of the book, but rather seeks to 'make some progress in this field' (p. 106). This is a field that could be fruitfully expanded, to my mind. Chapter eight looks at voluntary conversion of Muslims to Christianity during the crusader period. Rightly acknowledging that what exactly constitutes 'conversion' is not always easy to establish, Mallett focuses on Muslim sources to show that Muslim conversions to Christianity were almost entirely experienced by non-elite groups. A more difficult question to answer is why Muslims converted, given that Latin writers in particular are not reliable interpreters of this point. Genuine religious conviction seems to have motivated some, while others were enticed by the prospect of more earthly gains. Some attention is given to forced conversions and to conversions effected by fear, too. The penultimate chapter considers why in some situations, Muslims chose to flee the Franks, surrendering or abandoning

their cities. It seems that in some cases, this was understood to be an acceptable response in the face of overwhelming numbers of Frankish troops (although Frankish sources often represent flight as cowardly). The last chapter explores various instances of Muslim cooperation with the Franks in more active terms, discussing cases of Muslims who fought alongside the Franks, those who supplied the Franks with intelligence or advice and those who refused to fight on the side of their Muslim brethren. The Bedouin seem to have been the group that assisted the Franks most frequently, mostly for economic reasons as was the case with other, individual Muslims.

The book concludes by noting that although ‘popular’ reactions to the Frankish presence on the Levant are not immediately visible in the sources written by the elite, consideration of a wide range of primary material through the category of ‘resistance’ is nonetheless not only possible but also fruitful. The overall argument of the book is that resistance did occur at a number of social levels and on occasion, the actions and views of non-elite Muslims influenced the outcome of policies and events. The religious motivation for resisting the Franks was not always present, despite the hopes of many Muslim writers, and economic and personal reasons often played a part. This underscores the very germane point that Muslim groups in the Levant during the crusading period were not always united in one purpose governed by religion; in order to understand not just reactions to the Franks but Muslim culture in general during this time, the historian must attend to the actions of people at local and even personal level.

Indeed, this careful analysis of both Christian and Muslim material is the strength of the book, which contains myriad examples across the entire period from the First Crusade to the fall of Acre. The collation of a very disparate group of sources will be of enormous benefit to scholars and students of the crusading period. At the same time, the difference between the Counter-Crusade and jihad is carefully delineated to separate carefully the various motivations for military and non-military action against the Franks. The focus on non-elite individuals and groups is a welcome divergence from a scholarship mostly wedded to the texts penned by the upper levels of Muslim and Christian society.

However, more conceptual depth around the principal categories of historical analysis would have been very welcome. The term ‘resistance’, for instance, which is deployed in the first half of the book very frequently, might have been teased out a little further – not so much in terms of the activities it entailed as Mallett so carefully details – but in terms of what it can reveal about power relations between people and groups. The work done by James Given in the context of power and resistance in the Languedoc during the period of the inquisition explores some cognate issues in a very different historical setting, but its careful analysis of what, exactly, the concept of resistance can do for our understanding of medieval social and political history might have furnished Mallett with a model of how deeper reflection on this issue can widen our historical view even further. Likewise, the short section on what ‘non-elite’ groups entailed might have been expanded to grapple with the bigger issue of how history ‘from below’, as it were, provides us with particular and unique insights into the actions of past figures and our own investments in this sort of scholarly inquiry. These reflective questions are hinted at throughout this book, but more sustained and considered conceptual analysis would have added further strength to the book’s claims for a significant intervention into the field.

Nonetheless, this is a book that tells us much about the lived experiences of people living with invasion and occupation. The focus on the actions of the Counter-Crusade and its occasional intersections with jihad theory shed many fascinating insights into the ways individuals and groups negotiated war and its aftermath. From personal decisions to aid or resist Frankish occupation, to collective attempts to repel or accommodate these invaders, the Muslims of the 12th and 13th-century Levant have left plenty of evidence of their involvement in the political events of their time. Mallett has written a book that shifts our view of these events quite profoundly.

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/82801>