Reconfiguring the Fifteenth-Century Crusade

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For generations of historians, the fall of the Christian-held city of Acre to the Mamluk forces of al-Ashraf Khalil in 1291 brought about the end of the crusading era. The final destruction of the Latin States of the eastern Mediterranean coast, which had been established during and in the wake of the First Crusade, offered a fittingly dramatic climax to a narrative that spanned very nearly two centuries. While this traditional *terminus ad quem* still exerts considerable influence, scholars have demonstrated time and again in recent years that crusading remained an important and multifaceted aspect of Latin Christian society for centuries after Acre's fall; and of all the historians to have explored the subject of the later crusades, the name of Norman Housley is justly prominent. It has not been his sole area of scholarly interest, but Housley has dedicated a sizable proportion of his career to examining the survival and mutation of crusading into the early modern world. Although not the first to explore this period of crusading (1), Housley's seminal *The Later Crusades* (2), was a landmark work when published in 1992, and that influential monograph has been followed by numerous books, articles and projects that have all sought to explore crusading in the late Middle Ages, many of them his own.

This latest collection of essays, *Reconfiguring the Fifteenth-Century Crusade*, is the second publication to emerge from a Leverhulme Trust International Network, headed by Housley, which was active between 2013 and 2015. While the earlier collection, *The Crusade in the Fifteenth Century: Converging and Competing Cultures* (3), was the direct result of a conference held in London during September 2014, and many of its contributors speakers on that occasion, this second volume follows more closely the overarching themes of the wider project, which Housley summarises as goals, agencies and resonances (p. 1). These are broad themes, and in some respects conservative avenues of investigation for a recent work on crusading – an area of enquiry that is increasingly keen to innovate through engagement with fields such as gender studies, materiality and the history of emotions, to name only few of many. For Housley, though, this approach offers a conducive framework through which to consider the topic. He argues that the 15th century revitalised the centuries-old practice of crusading through interaction with ideological, social and technological developments (p. 2). As this collection demonstrates, Housley's framework is vindicated. While a great deal could be gleaned by adopting conceptual approaches to the study of 15th-century crusading, it is clear from this book that historians are still wading through and mastering an enormous body of source materials. As Housley comments in his conclusion, many aspects of crusading in the 15th century

are at an early stage of the research cycle, highlighting the point by noting that we still require a greater understanding of some of the basic chronology of crusading in areas of the Balkans during the period (p. 327). It is no surprise, then, that many of the chapters adopt what some may consider to be a traditional approach.

Excluding the introduction and conclusion (both provided by Housley), this volume comprises eight chapters written by historians working at European and American universities. All papers are in English and between them cover a period spanning from the mid-14th to the early 16th centuries. One of the great strengths of this collection is the international nature of the collaboration, which has made the scholarship of several contributors who publish the bulk of their work in languages other than English available to an Anglophone audience. For instance, Dan Ioan Mureșan and Emanuel Constantin Antoche, both Romanian, often write in French, Antoche almost exclusively; Benjamin Weber's work is primarily Francophone, and he discusses aspects of the topic he dealt with in his important 2013 monograph, *Lutter contre les Turcs*⁽⁴⁾, here in English; Pavel Soukup, publishes considerable amounts in Czech; and much of Jürgen Sarnowsky's work is in German. The fact that this book has been produced in English will of course mean that it has a wider readership than it would have done otherwise, but, more importantly, it brings the work of scholars publishing in a variety of languages, some such as Romanian and Czech less-well known among the wider field of crusader studies, into a monolingual publication. This is, then, an examination of crusading in the long 15th century that draws on the expertise of an international team of researchers, and it is a very welcome addition to the growing body of studies of crusading in the late Middle Ages.

If there is a single thread that runs through the entire book, it is an exploration of the interplay of established crusading ideals and practices with the issues that occupied the attention of 15th-century Christendom. In chapter two, which follows the introduction immediately, Benjamin Weber examines the destinations of papal envoys in the period c.1400–c.1480. After scrutiny of papal letters and financial accounts, Weber demonstrates the expanding world view of the late medieval papacy, in which crusading remained a prominent aspect of papal identity. The picture emerging from Weber's research is one in which the papacy became increasingly willing to cast an ever-wider net in attempts to find allies in the struggle against the Ottomans. As the century wore on, the *curia* transformed its outlook of war against all non-Latins on all fronts, shifting its agenda to try and unite Christendom in an attempt to battle the Ottomans. Chapter three is Norman Housley's own. By homing in on church councils in the period, he considers the relationship of crusade and church reform in the 15th century, asking whether the two were allies or rivals. It is not Housley's contention that crusading plans and a reforming agenda were contradictory aims so much as they were both goals that required considerable focus – one had to take precedence over the other at any one time.

Pavel Soukup's chapter concentrates on several 15th-century theoretical treatises that deal with the issue of crusading against Christians and that often focus on the indulgences offered for such action. Most of Soukup's texts remain unedited, which in itself makes this chapter important, and several of his sources are yet to be dealt with at length by crusade historians. By concentrating on attitudes towards crusade indulgences evident in these texts, Soukup's analysis provides insights into the doubts about and justifications for crusading against Christians in the 15th century. For Soukup, there were numerous factors at work that took the debate on crusading against Christians in new directions in the 15th century. Conciliarism and the Great Schism had both exerted their influence, but so too did the increasing involvement of lay rulers in European-wide theological debate.

Following Soukup, Jürgen Sarnowsky's chapter is the only one in this volume to focus on the Military Orders. Having explored views, both internal and external, of the Hospitallers and the Teutonic Knights, he argues that they remained true to their original objectives throughout the 1400s; however, for Sarnowsky, their priorities had to remain flexible to survive the ebbs and flows of their successes and failures and thus contribute to the crusading cause. Likewise, Stefan Stantchev's contribution deals with the issue of adaptability. As his focus, Stantchev tackles the complex relationship between Venice and its Mediterranean neighbours, especially the Ottomans. He argues that Venetian policy remained flexible throughout the 15th century, adapting to the vicissitudes of political reality. Venice was, however, heavily embroiled in

crusading warfare during the period, and Stantchev explores the dynamic of competing responsibilities: first, to ensure its own safety and prosperity; and second, its duty to Christendom. For Stantchev, when it came to the Ottomans, Venice wanted peace or a conflict sizable enough to eliminate any threat they may pose. The worst-case scenario for the serenissima was ongoing, sporadic warfare.

Dan Ioan Mureşan explores the topic of crusade propaganda in chapter seven. Specifically, Mureşan examines Cardinal Basilios Bessarion's *Orations against the Turks*, written in the early years of the 1470s in reaction to Mehmed II's victory at Negroponte in 1470. Although offering only a brief overview of Bessarion's *Orations*, Mureşan's primary goal here is to contextualise the text and its transmission, especially in relation to the presence of printers in Paris and the 1471 Diet of Regensburg, and he successfully elucidates these complex matters. We are left with the impression of a man with access to broad networks of distribution and an awareness of the potential power of printing. Reactions to his cry for support were regionally diverse, though, and outside of Italy largely stifled by political crises in Europe.

In chapter eight, Emanuel Constantin Antoche turns to military history and offers us an account of the Second Battle of Kosovo, which took place in October 1448. This is not a blow-by-blow narrative, though. Antoche analyses conflicting source materials to highlight the importance of the encounter – one he likens to a 15th-century Hattin in terms of impact. He demonstrates that the battle was a pivotal instance in the growth of the Ottoman Empire, the moment when Sultan Murad II curtailed the crusading threat to his expansion and laid the foundations for the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Antoche's detailed handling of military matters and logistical statistics will be particularly appealing to those with an appetite for military history.

In the final chapter, Nancy Bisaha examines how the fall of Constantinople in 1453 influenced notions of human rights. In doing so, Bisaha's chapter is most overtly connected to the theme of resonances, but from the outset she makes clear that any discussion of human rights in the Middle Ages risks anachronism and teleology. Bisaha, however, is careful not to draw a straight line from 1453 to the present. Rather, she examines whether the discourse surrounding the rights of non-combatants in the period after 1453 is indicative of a break in thinking from the earlier Middle Ages. Having considered the responses of several humanists, Bisaha contends that the capture of the Byzantine capital made the Ottomans into a 'target of unalloyed moral indignation' (p. 313) for Europe's 15th-century commentators, who rallied together to condemn the atrocities of this powerful 'other'. Bisaha leaves little doubt that she believes this event acted as an impetus for European thinkers to consider the place of non-combatants in warfare.

In his concluding remarks, Housley suggests that, while there were military victories for crusading armies in the period, it was in the field of debate that crusade enthusiasts exerted their greatest impact on European life (p. 329). In many respects, the chapters of this volume build towards that conclusion. Crusade-related tracts and discourse on crusading, be it positive or negative, form a significant proportion of the source base for this work.

Of all the issues that are dealt with, one that comes to the fore time and again is the adaptability of crusading in the 15th century. Although centuries old by the 1400s, crusading institutions such as the Hospitallers remained proactive in the face of new threats, crusade preachers adapted to new technologies, making use of them to disseminate their messages, and the papacy elicited the support of new allies, seeking out relationships that would previously have been entirely unpalatable in attempts to preserve its authority over the movement and ensure its survival. In analysing the issues that affected crusading in the 15th century, this work also demonstrates that the study of the crusades provides a fruitful means by which to explore European society more broadly. The issues that forced crusading to adapt were exerting an impact on many aspects of life in 15th-century Europe.

In addition to monographs, articles and related publications, Norman Housley has now edited three collections of essays solely dedicated to the topic of crusading in the 15th century. Predating the two that arose from this recent project, *Crusading in the Fifteenth Century: Message and Impact* was published in 2004.⁽⁵⁾ In total, there have been 29 contributors to these works, proving Housley's claim that there is a

‘thriving community of researchers currently engaged in the study of crusading in the fifteenth century’ (p. 8). One of the many valuable aspects of this book is Housley's conclusion, in which he provides suggestions for future avenues of research. Crusading in the Balkan lands is one stated priority. Second, Housley points to the need to examine the influence of crusade rhetoric on the formation of European identity. Finally, the dynamic between crusade and Reformation is highlighted as a field that requires further work. Judging by this book, there are innumerable other avenues of investigation that researchers will pursue when exploring crusading in the 15th century.

Notes

1. For instance, Aziz S. Atiya, *The Crusade in the Later Middle Ages* (London, 1938); and Kenneth Setton, *The Papacy and the Levant, 1204–1571*, 4 vols (Philadelphia, PA, 1976–84).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Norman Housley, *The Later Crusades: From Lyons to Alcazar, 1274–1580* (Oxford, 1992).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *The Crusade in the Fifteenth Century: Converging and Competing Cultures*, ed. Norman Housley (New York, NY, 2017).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Benjamin Weber, *Lutter contre les Turcs: les formes nouvelles de la croisade pontificale au XVe siècle* (Rome, 2013).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. *Crusading in the Fifteenth Century: Message and Impact*, ed. Norman Housley (New York, NY, 2004).[Back to \(5\)](#)

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