

Curia and Crusade: Pope Honorius III and the Recovery of the Holy Land, 1216-1227

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History has not been kind to the reputation of Pope Honorius III (1216–27). This is largely because he had the misfortune to reign as pope between the pontificates of Innocent III (1198–1216) and Gregory IX (1227–41), whose actions in reforming the church and expanding the scope of the medieval crusading movement, and struggles to exert papal authority over the German emperors, have cast exceedingly long shadows which dominate the narrative of papal history in the early-13th century.

Honorius's achievements have been eclipsed by those of his two contemporaries, and there has been a general dearth of detailed research into Honorius's pontificate in comparison to his more prominent predecessor and successor. Wedged between these two imposing figures, Honorius has been consistently characterised as a weak man, gentle or simple in nature, whose pontificate was but an echo of Innocent III's. However, more recent publications from James Powell, Rebecca Rist, and others [\(1\)](#) have challenged this traditional interpretation of Honorius III, and begun to create a more favourable image of his frequently underrated and disparaged papacy. Thomas W. Smith, in this insightful, highly detailed, and much needed volume, builds upon these previous works and provides us with a thorough analysis of Honorius III's pontificate, his diplomacy, and his contribution to the crusading movement which led, albeit briefly, to the recovery of the Holy Land for Latin Christendom.

This is the sixth publication to appear in Brepols' *Outremer: Studies in the Crusades and the Latin East* series. In this splendid work, Smith sheds new light onto Honorius III to successfully brings him out of the shadows of his more illustrious contemporaries, and place him more prominently as a leading actor in the political affairs of the early-13th century. Smith argues convincingly that Honorius was more than just an executor of Innocent III's crusading vision, but that he was able to take the initiative and implement his own policies, though these could be quite fluid as they were shaped by external forces on the papal curia, most notably the German emperor, Frederick II Hohenstaufen. While Honorius's papal government was responsive in nature to these external stimuli, this should not be confused for weakness, and Honorius careful approach was ultimately successful, though he would not live to see the fruits of his labours.

The work is divided into three parts. The first section deals with the historic background of Honorius's

pontificate and the crusading movement in the early-13th century, as well as the bureaucratic processes and functions of the papal chancery. The second section, which contains the key arguments of the work, chronologically analyses Honorius's diplomatic efforts with the primary lay crusading powers in his efforts to launch the Fifth and Sixth Crusades and oversee the recovery of the Holy Land. The final section of the work builds upon the chronological framework of the second, to thematically explore Honorius's use of instruments of papal government, such as legates and taxation, to support his crusading efforts. Each section deftly contributes to creating a detailed picture of Honorius's pontificate and the nature of the diplomacy that he conducted. The importance of the practices of the papal chancery in the production and registering of letters, and what a detailed reading of those documents can reveal, is a consistent theme that runs throughout the entirety of the work, and Smith aptly demonstrates just how much can be learnt about Honorius's goals by a closer reading of the very documents through which his diplomatic efforts were conducted.

Part one comprises two chapters, the first of which explores the origins and career of Honorius III. This provides a short biography of Honorius and his career in the church up until his accession as pope in 1216. This account is quite brief, as is often the case with medieval biography where source material for an individual's early life is often lacking, but to flesh out the character of Honorius III further, Smith examines his largely unexplored role as a patron of art and architecture. This is an excellent contribution to the overall narrative of Honorius's career, and suggests that Honorius was a man aware of his own status and not averse to displaying his success. When combined with what is known about Honorius, who at one time held the important dual role of Chamberlain-Chancellor at the papal curia, the figure of a very capable and experienced individual possessed of political acumen emerges. Smith is correct to point out that given his background prior to 1216 and his quick election as pope, it is unwise to continue to characterise Honorius as a weak or incapable man who was but a shadow of his predecessor, and that his abilities have been consistently underestimated. The next chapter explores the mechanics and practices of the papal chancery in the production of documents relating to the petitions and letters it received. While this chapter does break the overall flow of the wider narrative, it is a very important chapter that needs to be located early on in the work, as its discussion of how the papal registers of Honorius III can be used to explore his pontificate are essential to the arguments throughout the rest of the book. The different types of documents produced by the chancery, their form and function, as well as the plethora of ecclesiastical and secular officials operating there are all amply detailed. Likewise, it is here that Smith discusses the use and limitations of Honorius's papal registers as a source. This chapter gives the reader an excellent insight into the bureaucracy of the medieval papal curia. Smith is clear and concise in his explanation of the complex workings of chancery administration, making what might otherwise be a rather dry topic much more engaging, and providing a good introduction to the subject suitable for novices to the field.

Part two is comprised of three chapters that each explore in considerable depth Honorius III's efforts to promote crusading during his pontificate. These three chapters constitute the core of the book, which provides a detailed account and analysis of Honorius's diplomacy with the secular powers of Christendom during the course of the Fifth Crusade, and the preparations for the Sixth Crusade. The first chapter deals with Honorius's attempts to secure the involvement of King Andrew II of Hungary as leader for the Fifth Crusade. Smith firmly refutes the long held notion that the Fifth Crusade was to be a papal crusade in which the influence of royal powers were minimised or excluded. Smith demonstrates through an investigation of Honorius's registers that significant energy was expended by the papacy on securing Andrew II's leadership for the crusade, and that it was initially Andrew and not the emperor Frederick II, as is often argued, who was preferred for the prestigious command role. Indeed, Andrew's participation in the Fifth Crusade has often been downplayed, as he appears as a rather reluctant crusader who accomplished very little of value in the Holy Land before returning to his own kingdom, his reputation much sullied by his lack of achievements. However, Smith points out that from examining Honorius's registers and the diplomatic communications between Andrew and the papal curia, Andrew's genuine commitment to the crusade should not be doubted nor his extensive preparations for the campaign dismissed, even if he did ultimately bungle his opportunity. Smith, therefore, offers some much needed rehabilitation of Andrew's character, and demonstrates the value that a detailed study such as this can make to challenge traditional historiography.

The second and third chapters moves on to explore Honorius's efforts in the wake of Andrew's failure to secure the participation of Frederick II as the new commander of the Fifth Crusade, and, following its failure in 1221, to ensure Frederick's continued support for the Latin East and eventual departure on a new crusading expedition. Smith provides an almost blow by blow account of the diplomacy conducted between the papal and imperial courts in relation to crusading. This approach allows us to see the action and reaction by both parties. Smith's narrative and analysis is clear and precise, taking the reader through the numerous rounds of diplomatic exchanges between pope and emperor, the passing of deadlines for Frederick's crusade, and the appeals for assistance from beleaguered crusaders in Egypt, without becoming distracted by the intricate chronology of surrounding events, which could very easily be the case. It is here that Smith persuasively shows the responsive nature of Honorius's papal government. Far from being a mild or weak willed pontiff who was easily manipulated by Frederick II, Honorius appears as a careful planner and diplomatic mediator, who was persistent and tactful in his managing of international relations, able to flex his political muscles and oppose Frederick II when needed, all the while pursuing his strategic goals and objectives regarding the fate of the crusade and the Holy Land. External forces and lay powers may have been largely setting the agenda, but Honorius responded in ways to ensure that papal interests were met by playing different political angles when and where he needed. Honorius's reaction to the deposition of John of Brienne, the titular king of Jerusalem, by Frederick II in 1225 is such an example. Honorius may have been critical of Frederick's usurpation, but supported it after the fact as it advanced his goal to get Frederick to depart on crusade. Compared to his predecessor and successors who acted much more sternly in their dealings with lay powers, especially Frederick II, this may appear as weakness, but it was through Honorius's careful mediation and consistent efforts that Frederick eventually departed on crusade and was able to secure the return of the holy city of Jerusalem in 1229. Honorius's approach was successful, albeit very belated.

Smith keeps the focus of these chapters firmly centred on Honorius III and his efforts to achieve his strategic goals. Indeed, given the scope of the topics and personalities covered in these chapters it would be all too easy to lose sight of the argument by providing too much context. While the Fifth Crusade and crusading were central to Honorius's diplomatic efforts throughout his pontificate, Smith avoids becoming bogged down in the particulars of the campaign or any other extraneous detail. Just enough context is provided to sufficiently illuminate the responsive nature of Honorius's diplomacy. However, as regards Honorius's diplomatic interactions with Frederick II, whose participation on the crusade was a leading papal objective and whose narrative dominates the latter two chapters, the analysis is a little too one-sided in some places, and Frederick can appear somewhat divorced from the events under discussion. We understand Honorius's position quite clearly, but not always how it relates to Frederick's. In this instance, just a bit more context to

flesh out Frederick's reign and his political position as emperor would have been beneficial to the overall narrative, and would have helped to shed a little more light on Honorius III by further qualifying how much he was able to achieve with Frederick.

Part III of the volume contains three chapters that explore different facets of Honorius's diplomacy across his pontificate. These include the arengae of his diplomatic letters, the use of legates, and finally papal taxation. Arengae are the perambulatory sections of papal letters that draw upon biblical references to provide a justification for the papacy to decide upon a matter. Smith provides us with a systematic study of Honorius's arengae, which were more than just empty rhetoric, but rather were carefully constructed theological statements, rich with declarations of papal ideology, that are crucial to understanding the papacy's diplomatic position. One theme that emerges from a study of Honorius's arengae in his letters to Frederick II is the idea of papal guardianship over the emperor, and that papal-imperial relations should be reevaluated in this light. Smith goes on to examine Honorius's use of papal legates across Christendom, in particular the role of Cardinal Pelagius, whose stubbornness and arrogance is often blamed for the failure of the Fifth Crusade. As with the details of the Fifth Crusade in earlier chapters, Smith does not become bogged down in the details of Pelagius's life or his role on the campaign specifically, but focuses upon his relationship with Honorius as a papal official carrying out papal policies, which provides a much more balanced view of this much maligned legate. The section closes with an examination of Honorius's efforts to enforce papal taxation to support the crusades. This was the only clearly identifiable programme of action formulated and successfully carried out by Honorius III during his pontificate, but it was one that was still administered in a largely responsive manner. Centralised methods were used, but devolved methods were employed where needed in response to petitions by lay and ecclesiastical powers. Smith concludes that the papacy of Honorius III was limited in the initiatives that it took to implement its own crusading policies, and while Honorius was able to forge his own diplomatic path, this was consistently in response to entreaties presented to the papal court by external powers.

The book's investigation is very detailed and highly focused, and its central argument is well made. However, it is restricted to the business of the crusades and Honorius III's support for the Holy Land, which was the defining diplomatic issue of his pontificate and the one to which he was most committed. Other areas of Honorius's diplomacy fall beyond the volume's immediate scope of enquiry. To explore them in any sufficient detail would clutter the book and detract from its overall argument. However, the reader is left wondering how responsive Honorius's policies may have been in these other areas, and how his attitudes to other diplomatic issues may have compared to the matter of the crusade. While some examples are given in the thematic chapters, further comparisons to other diplomatic affairs in Honorius's pontificate would have been beneficial in indicating how prevalent and consistent this attitude was. Likewise, Honorius is a very isolated figure in this work, and some direct comparisons to the practices and policies of other popes would have been helpful in contextualising him more clearly. Such areas may prove to be fruitful avenues of future research. However, I believe these are relatively minor issues in a work that is otherwise very thorough, insightful, and a pleasure to read.

Notes

1. 1. James M. Powell, *Anatomy of a Crusade, 1213–1221* (Philadelphia, PA, 1986); and Rebecca Rist, *The Papacy and Crusading in Europe, 1198–1245* (London, 2009). [Back to \(1\)](#)

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