



# Whose Middle Ages?

TEACHABLE MOMENTS FOR AN ILL-USED PAST

*Andrew Albin*

*Mary C. Erler*

*Thomas O'Donnell*

*Nicholas L. Paul*

*Nina Rowe*

EDITORS

Forthcoming from  
Fordham University Press  
Fall 2019

For Editorial and Licensing Inquiries please contact Will Cerbone  
at (646) 868-4203 or by e-mail at [wcerbone@fordham.edu](mailto:wcerbone@fordham.edu)

For Ordering Information please contact Ingram Content Group LLC  
at (866) 400-5351 or via e-mail at [IPSOders@ingramcontent.com](mailto:IPSOders@ingramcontent.com)  
or on ipage at <https://ipage.ingramcontent.com>





# Modern Intolerance and the Medieval Crusades

Nicholas L. Paul

Among the events and ideas we link with the Middle Ages perhaps none is invoked as frequently, as forcefully, and in as bewildering an array of circumstances as the Christian holy wars known as crusades. Epic battles pitting helmeted knights against turbaned adversaries in dusty settings are the backdrop for popular movies, TV shows, novels, and million-selling electronic games; figures from the crusades are held up as mascots for sports teams and as iconic figures in the histories of nations and religious and cultural groups. Memories of the crusades are not just popular, they are also powerful, and claims about the meaning and legacy of the crusades have never been as contentious, nor as potentially explosive, as they are today.

Although the crusades have always occupied an outsized place in popular perceptions of the Middle Ages, in the western world the term “crusade” gained a new political currency after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States. Only five days later, the US President George W. Bush famously quipped that “this crusade, this war on ter-

ror, is going to take a while.” The remark appeared to have been unscripted, and the administration did not take long to apologize, but none of this made the comment any less momentous. For one thing, the president’s words came at a moment marked by extreme statements about Islam and its relationship to Christianity and the western world. Two days earlier, columnist Ann Coulter—still a frequent invitee to speak on American college campuses—had written in the *National Review Online* that rather than worrying about offending Muslims through racial or religious profiling at airports, “we should invade their countries, kill their leaders, and convert them to Christianity.” Bush’s words were also an omen, for they heralded a new appropriation of the crusades among some white Europeans and Americans who saw themselves as locked in a global struggle against a resurgent and threatening Islam.

In Europe and the United States, anti-immigrant activists and white supremacists have explicitly associated themselves and their actions with the crusades. Anders Behring Breivik, a Norwegian ethno-nationalist terrorist who murdered 77 people in 2011, wrote a manifesto that made extensive reference to the crusades. Breivik claimed to be a member of an organization that was called the “Knights Templar” after a medieval crusading military order. In 2016, members of a Kansas militia calling themselves “The Crusaders” were arrested plotting to blow up mosques in the United States. At the time of writing, online neo-Nazi discussion forums brim with discussions of the history of the crusades. Images of armored knights sporting the banner of the cross are frequently deployed as memes on social media, often with anti-immigrant or fascist connotations.

The widespread perception of the crusades as a “clash of civilizations” in which white European supposedly resisted or even subjugated non-whites, non-Christians, and espe-

cially Muslims has become an inspiration to those inclined to racist ideologies. A similar intensification of references to the crusading past in terms of existential conflict can be observed in the media of Islamist extremist militants. While “crusade” and “crusader” have long been familiar epithets cast at perceived enemies of the Muslim world, in the age of international terrorism these terms have been directed at perceived “crusader” enemies, such as the United States, Europe, and Israel. The neo-medieval Islamist group known in the United States as ISIS made the West’s “Failed Crusade” against them a cover story of the October 2014 issue of their magazine *Dabiq*.

The fiery language of Islamic extremists and European ethno-nationalists is only the most recent chapter in a longer story of the appropriation and reinterpretation of the crusades over time. The representation of the crusades in the most extreme rhetoric of the present moment is most often drawn not from a direct engagement with medieval materials, but from centuries of modern remembering, re-assigning, and reinterpreting, much of it carried out in art and literature. In the eighteenth-century, French Enlightenment philosophers had used the crusades as an example of the ignorance and superstition of traditional religion. In the mid-nineteenth century, readers thrilled to the novels of the British author Walter Scott, who used the crusades as the backdrop for tales of chivalry and romantic adventure. Not long afterwards, European writers celebrated their newly won empires in North Africa, the Middle East and (in the case of Germany) Central and Eastern Europe, by comparing their troops to conquering crusaders, finishing the job of colonization that their crusading ancestors had started. But by the same token, children educated under colonial occupation grew up to understand the crusades as evidence of the timeless drive by European powers to conquer and subject others to their will.

This sense of having been “crusaded” is no less important in the Orthodox Christian world, where the memory of invasion of Orthodox Slavic territory by the German crusading order of the Teutonic Knights in 1240 was a key element in Soviet propaganda during the Second World War. The sack of Constantinople by the Fourth Crusade in 1204 and the failure of crusaders to prevent the Ottoman conquest of the Byzantine empire have also played an important role in modern Greek national history and identity.

All of these interpretations of medieval Christian Holy War, rationalist and romantic, colonial and nationalist, now co-exist in a kind of muddy soup from which modern impressions of the crusades are formed. So muddled had even the scholarly situation become in the later twentieth century that one medieval historian thought it necessary to return to the basic question: *what were the crusades?* It is a more challenging question than might be apparent at first glance. Although we can find the origins of the word “crusade” in terms that appear in the later Middle Ages (*cruzada/crozada* or *crucesignati*, for its warriors who were “signed with the cross”), the medieval terminology was applied inconsistently. The large military expeditions we might call the “First Crusade” or the “Third Crusade” were as likely to be known to contemporaries simply as a “journey” or a “[sea] crossing” made by “pilgrims” or “soldiers of Christ.”

Like any important historical question, we still debate the best answer to the question *what were the crusades*, but most specialists have settled on four main characteristics:

1. Crusades originated with the authority of the church; the call to arms was issued by the papacy and announced by the church through preaching.
2. Like initiation into a monastic order, becoming a crusader involved a major change in status that was sig-

naled through rituals. Crusaders often took a solemn vow, symbolized by the sign of the cross worn on their clothing.

The assumption of crusading status was recognized in turn by the extension of valuable privileges:

3. With regard to worldly goods, crusaders could expect protections for their family and property while they were preparing to depart and, most importantly, while they were away.
4. Arguably the most valuable of all privileges was the plenary indulgence. Offered to crusaders upon successful completion of their vow or in death, the indulgence meant that the crusader would not have to fear God's punishment for any sins they had confessed.

Nothing as complicated and new as this could emerge out of thin air—it took time for the fundamental ideas to develop and the practices to spread. Some aspects, like the vow, the change of clothing and status and the indulgence were clearly related to the practice of pilgrimage. The first key architect of the crusading idea was Pope Urban II (r. 1088-1099). It was Urban who first called upon Latin Christians to march to the East at the Council of Clermont—in modern-day France—on November 27, 1095. We actually have very little idea about what precisely Urban said that day, but it likely combined a proposal to defend the Christian church in the East with the notion of penitence (suffering to alleviate the consequences of sinful behavior). Penitence was already a very popular idea—it enjoyed widespread popularity in pilgrimage—and this was a potent combination of penitence and violence, of pilgrimage and war. The idea was an instant success, generating an enormous popular response in the chain of events that we call the “First Crusade.”

The four-point definition of crusade offered here (known as the “pluralist” definition) is perhaps most notable for what it does *not* include. There is, for instance, nothing about crusading being directed at a particular target, be that a region (the Holy Land), holy site (Jerusalem), or avowed enemy (followers of Islam). Crusading could and did happen anywhere in the medieval world within Christian reach, including the Iberian peninsula, the Baltic region, north Africa, and the Canary Islands in the North Atlantic. It could also take place within Christendom against those viewed as schismatics like the Orthodox population of the Byzantine empire, against those seen as supporters of heretics like the Catholic population of southern France, and political enemies of the Roman church like the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II. The latter case is a reminder that crusades were directed not only against Christians, but even against other crusaders.

The medieval experience of crusading, then, differs in very significant ways from many modern representations, and most starkly from the ideas of today’s racist ideologues. Racial and religious hatred did exist in the Middle Ages, and it was certainly marshaled as a tool of recruitment for particular crusade expeditions. But in this harnessing of ideas of difference, of “us vs. them,” the promoters of one or another crusade expedition did not differ very much from the promoters of war in other periods and throughout the world. Campaigns to recruit crusaders and the crusade armies themselves could occasion considerable violence toward vulnerable communities caught in the path of crusading armies or para-military groups hoping to join or support crusades. The preaching of several major crusade expeditions destined for the East and also the “popular crusades”—grassroots movements undertaken without papal sanction—inspired massacres of Jewish communities within Europe, for instance. But this violence toward minority groups, like the steadily rising rhetoric of

fear, anger, and hatred directed at non-Christians, existed both before the coming of the First Crusade and long after the papacy ceased to make calls for new crusades. Crusades were only one avenue of opportunity for the types of violence and intolerance that were (and still are) carried out locally by individuals acting to their own advantage and by states and elites seeking to extend and consolidate power over their subjects. Violence and oppression are major features of the history of the crusades, but they are far from the most distinctive features of the broader crusade phenomenon, which owed its longevity and popularity to its engagement with the devotional lives of individual Christians, their concern over the implications of their sinful lives, and their desire to leave those lives behind and participate in the drama of salvation on an epic stage.

From the modern perspective, that epic stage of crusading conflict is made up of the famous, large scale military expeditions under the command of kings like Richard the Lionheart, Frederick Barbarossa, or Saint Louis. These are the crusades to which we attach a canonical number (e.g. “First” “Second” “Third” etc.) and which were fought predominantly by Latin (Roman Catholic) Christians against Muslim Arab and Turkish armies. Apart from common adherence to the Roman Christian religious tradition, however, the crusader armies that were drawn from many different regions and kingdoms had little in common and often could not agree on either the objective or basic strategy of the expedition. Both Muslim and Christian armies hired mercenaries and recruited allies of different faiths; crusader armies in the Near East were diverse, composed of Armenian engineers, Arab scribes, and mixed-race “Turcopole” auxiliary troops. Writing decades after he was held captive in Egypt in 1250, the crusader John of Joinville recalled the man he called “my Saracen” who had provided him security and comfort in his

darkest hours. In a work he dedicated to Saladin, arch-enemy of the crusaders who re-conquered Jerusalem in 1187, the Syrian Muslim writer Usama ibn Munqidh remembered the many friendships he had with Latin Europeans living in the crusader kingdoms, including those he had with the Knights Templar. Crusading was a pan-European phenomenon, but it was not a project for the defense of Europe or Europeans, and crusaders collaborated with and even befriended those who did not look or worship as they did.

Taking the long view, it is easy to see how the crusades became associated with the later familiar story of European colonization and conquest. A unified project of overseas European conquest and domination was in fact how some contemporary Muslim observers perceived the coming of the crusaders. Living as they did in what was undeniably an era of expansion and territorial consolidation along the frontiers of Christendom (of the “Making of Europe” to cite the title of a now famous book), the Muslims of the Near East like the jurist Ibn al-Tahir al-Sulami (*d.* 1106) understandably assumed that the First Crusade was just another element of a global drive for mastery. But al-Sulami was far better informed about what was happening across the Mediterranean than the crusaders, most of whom would have been only dimly aware of what their co-religionists were up to in north-eastern Spain or Sicily. Theirs was not a coordinated effort. Where co-ordination did come, it was to rationalize crusading as part of a larger effort of ecclesiastical reform and to ensure papal sovereignty over the earth: a kingdom of heaven rather than a terrestrial empire. In the minds of some, crusading was both an agent and a sign of the end of time, which further supports the idea that what the crusaders sought was the installation of a heavenly kingdom in place of the corrupt empires of mankind.

I have suggested above that crusade commanders (at least those fighting in the Near East) rarely agreed upon a clear strategy, but it is nevertheless true that crusades in the eastern Mediterranean resulted in the conquest of territory in areas of modern-day Syria, Palestine, Turkey, Lebanon, Israel, Egypt, Greece and Cyprus. The later modern history of colonialism probably has much to teach us about the experiences of those living under crusader dominion. Nevertheless, specialists in the study of these territories strongly object to the idea of continuity or even similarity between the crusader conquests, which yielded no clear economic benefit to the patchwork of communities who sustained them, and later European colonization, which went hand-in-glove with economic exploitation and the construction of great national overseas empires by organized, centralized states.

The romance and the horror of the crusades, and so their fascination, are undeniable and enduring. For the student of history, this fascination only grows as we learn more about the shaping of ideologies of religious violence, the challenge of travel over great distances, the experience of colliding cultures, languages, and beliefs, and the countless human stories caught up in the first truly global drama of the Middle Ages. But just as the memory of the crusades belong to myriad communities across the world, the identities of “crusader” and “crusaded” are worlds away. The complex devotional frameworks that made crusading possible are as alien today as the social and political structures that elevated lords in stone towers or the technologies that made a mounted warrior a pre-eminent force in war. Past stories provide no salve nor excuse for those who would seek to legitimize or explain the violence and intolerance of the present. Viewed in the medieval mirror, the demands of our own ideologies reflect back to us only our own troubled image.

## Further Reading

Jonathan Riley-Smith's *The Crusades: A History* (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, 2014) is the best introduction to the history of the crusades from the "pluralist" perspective. It is also possible to write a history of the crusades from other points of view, including from the perspective of the Islamic world, and this has been masterfully done by Paul Cobb, *The Race for Paradise: An Islamic History of the Crusades* (2014). An account of the changing attitudes of historians toward the crusades from the Middle Ages to the modern era is provided in Christopher Tyerman, *The Debate on the Crusades* (2011). For a focused study of the reception of crusading in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries see Mike Horwell, *The Rise and Fall of British Crusader Medievalism: c. 1825-1945* (2018). An important recent contribution to understanding contemporary challenges of talking about the crusades can be found in Matthew Gabriele, "Debating the 'Crusade' in Contemporary America," in *The Mediaeval Journal* (2016). For the crusades in contemporary media and politics see Bruce Holsinger, *Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on Terror* (2007) and Andrew B.R. Elliott, *Medievalism, Politics, and Mass Media: Appropriating the Middle Ages in the Twenty-First Century* (2017).