The Crusades and Islam

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Abstract
Although crusading was not solely responsible for the deterioration of relations between Christianity and Islam in the central Middle Ages, it made a substantial and distinctive contribution toward it. The military needs of the crusader states placed the papacy in a situation of normative antagonism toward the Islamic powers of the Middle East. And while the primary motor of crusading was devotional and individual, the need to arouse people to take the Cross, as well as the creation of an “image of the enemy,” shaped a dominant picture of Islam, its founder, and adherents that was inaccurate, stereotypical, and lacking in humanity. The twin processes of soul searching and information gathering that were stimulated by repeated defeat in the East had little effect on the negativity of this picture, because their purpose was not to mend relations between the faiths, but to revitalize the Christian cause in order to achieve the recovery of Jerusalem. After the fall of the crusader states in 1291, the image of the enemy was transferred to the northern Turks; although it became much more complex and rounded, it retained a function that was overwhelmingly Euro-centric.

Keywords
Christianity, Islam, Crusades, Holy Land, Saracens, Turks

At the close of the thirteenth century, following two centuries of crusades against the Muslims, two events may be taken as representative of their impact on relations between Christianity and Islam. The first was the Mamluk capture of the port of Acre on 18 May 1291. This was accompanied by the killing of thousands of soldiers and civilians and by the dispatch into slavery of those who survived the massacre and were unable to

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escape. The second was the destruction in 1300 of Muslim Lucera, the town in southern Italy where the Staufen and Angevin rulers of the kingdom of Sicily had for about seventy years permitted large numbers of Muslims to live in peace. In addition to economic motives, Charles II of Anjou was led to wipe out this thriving community, about twenty thousand strong, by the desire to please Pope Boniface VIII by conducting an ersatz crusade: he came from a family noted for its crusading commitments and exercised a dynastic claim to be king of Jerusalem. In much the same way that Heinrich Himmler, in 1943, hoped to be able to present Adolf Hitler on his birthday with a Warsaw that was Judenrein, Charles gave Boniface VIII, in the papal year of Jubilee, a vassal kingdom that was purged of the practice of Islam. At each end of the Mediterranean, large numbers of Christians and Muslims thus experienced death, dispossession, the breakup of their families, and a life of slavery because of their religious faith.

I start with the fall of Acre and the destruction of the colony at Lucera not just because I think it is important to remind ourselves of this subject’s tragic human context but also because there is no point in disguising the fact that the effect of the crusades on Christian-Muslim relations was profoundly destructive. Recent research and writing have emphasized just how negative that effect was on both sides of the religious divide. I will take the Muslim perspective first. The main lesson that we learn from Carole Hillenbrand’s recent study of the Islamic sources on the crusades is that the view that Muslims held of their Western opponents throughout the period of what one might term “classical” crusading (1095-1291) was characterized by generalized stereotyping, abuse, and contempt. Even the so-called memoirs of the Arab nobleman Usāmah ibn Munqidh, so often held up in the past as showing how easily the ice of religious antagonism melted in the sun of human contact and friendship, are viewed by Hillenbrand in a much less optimistic light; Usāmah’s underlying viewpoint, she emphasizes, was no different from that of his peers. It is true that there existed a small group, composed of both settlers and crusaders, who attracted the respect, even the admiration, of the Muslims, especially King Baldwin II, Richard Cœur de Lion, Emperor Frederick II, and King Louis IX. And Muslim chroniclers could display admiration for the

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