
The “medieval encounters” among Christians, Muslims, and Jews that took place in the context of the Crusades featured an extraordinary variety of modes of contact. After the conquest of Jerusalem in 1099, the presence of Latin Christian states clinging to the shores of the Levant altered the dynamic of such encounters throughout the medieval world. Even after the fall of Acre in 1291, the consequences of the changed dynamic continued to influence both actual encounters and the rhetoric and imagination about such encounters. Christopher Tyerman has examined this history in an ambitious study of the Crusades from origin to oblivion.

Depending on the topic at hand, Tyerman shifts between chronological and thematic organization. His book has eight sections, each consisting of two to four chapters. He begins with a section on the First Crusade that looks at the origins of Christian Holy War, the actions of and reactions to Pope Urban II (1042-1099), and the military campaign itself. In this section, as throughout the book, the author endeavors to relate the actions of crusaders to theological and institutional innovations. He marks the ways that medieval people held both cohesive and disparate views on the meaning of holy war and its means of execution; thus, he lays the groundwork for further discussion of papal engagement and the actions of Europeans in the West. His second section does likewise for the East. In this section, his overview of the history of twelfth-century Frankish holdings, which contains a clear picture of the development of these new states and the relationships with their neighbors, is excellent.

Tyerman follows these initial offerings with three clear sections on the Second through Fourth Crusades. In each case, he describes the conditions in the Near East and the medieval West, discusses the theological and political implications of the papal call to war, then looks at the response within European society. This type of contextual analysis provides the body of each section. Tyerman does not ignore crucial developments or eschew military narrative, but it is the evolution in the ideas and practice of medieval Christian holy war that holds his interest.

The thirteenth century presents a greater organizational challenge to the author. During this era, crusading and other forms of papally sponsored warfare spread from the Levant to North Africa, southern France, the Baltic, and to anywhere else that a given Pope found enemies. Popular crusading
movements also sprung up in central Europe without papal intervention. To address this burgeoning complexity, Tyerman provides four chapters on “the expansion of crusading.” These discuss the Albigensian Crusades, the Fifth Crusade, Spain, and the Baltic. This single section therefore introduces the reader to the first campaign directed at Egypt, the many conflicts in the Baltic, the multi-faceted struggles in southern France, and the expansion of holy war in medieval Iberia. The whole section feels, unfortunately, overly compressed. Although it is difficult to ask for a book of a thousand pages to be longer, why does the Fifth Crusade deserve so much less attention than the Second, Third, or Fourth? One could ask a similar question about the crusades of Louis IX, also dealt with in a single chapter that covers the emergence and conquests of the Mamluks of Egypt.

A section entitled “The Defense of Outremer” contains the chapter on the deeds of St. Louis. The section begins, however, by examining said defense throughout the entirety of the thirteenth century, then steps backward to focus on the region’s defense only from 1221 to 1244. The concluding chapter not only touches on Louis the IX and the Mamluk coup but sweeps forward to 1291 as well. This is the weakest section of the book. The political and military narratives do become less clear when considering the decay and demise of the Crusader States and the arrival of new forces such as the Mongols. Condensing this vast array of details presented the author with a difficult challenge, but the resulting level of analysis and exposition is, in comparison to other sections, unsatisfying. God’s War finishes with a brief, but strong, section on the later crusades and the consequences of the Crusades within postmedieval society. These chapters, too, provide a condensed overview, yet do not seem as harried.

Within this thousand-page tome, there is much to like. Although the author eloquently invokes the topos of humility, he sets this work in direct comparison to the three-volume general history of the crusades by Steven Runciman (published between 1951 and 1954). Like Runciman, Tyerman is a master stylist. Moreover, he takes full advantage of the fifty years of scholarship since the publication of Runciman’s work. Tyerman eloquently dispenses with myths that, despite being consistently rejected by medieval scholars, have proved difficult to kill in the popular imagination—for example, that crusaders were all “second sons” seeking profit or were all mindless fanatics.

One cannot exclude a discussion of atrocity and terror from this history, as to do so would be to deny the very real human costs. However, the temptation to render moral judgment on the actions of medieval crusaders