
Muslims and Crusaders:

Christianity's Wars in the Middle East, 1095-1382, from the Islamic Sources

By Niall Christie

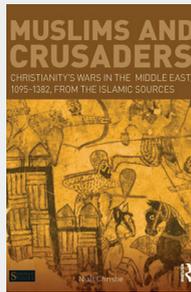
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Much has been written on the Crusades – one of the most astounding events the medieval world ever witnessed. However, what has been written on the subject often gives only one side of the story, as the books written so far have often shown little interest towards the people – the Muslims – against whom the Crusades were waged. Filling this gap, the current book attempts to present the Crusades “from the viewpoint of the Muslim people of the Levant,” and aims to provide a supplemental and counterbalancing work to the body of literature that narrates the story of the crusading period from the European point of view, thus “enabling reader[s] to achieve a broader perspective on the period than they might do otherwise” (p. 1). *Muslims and Crusaders* is comprised of nine chapters, mainly devoted to describing the Muslim response to the Crusades.

Niall Christie at the outset describes the limitations of his work, which, being short, can only offer a brief introduction to the major topic of the Muslim side of the Crusades. Therefore, the book focuses succinctly on Muslim responses to the Crusades in the Levant during the “core” period of crusading (p. 3).

Christie traces a picture of the Muslim world before and on the eve of the Crusades. He describes a power vacuum that extended from Syria to Egypt. Internal struggles and disunity



were further exacerbated when a number of strong Muslim leaders died in a span of just four years 1090–1094; the year 1094 was named as the year of the deaths of leaders and caliphs (chapter two). Under these apathetic conditions, one would not have expected any sort of response to the Crusaders, who embarked for the First Crusade in 1095. However, Christie argues that a number of Muslim sources reveal that the first Muslim who had a clear understanding of the aims and objectives of the crusaders, was the famous Damascus preacher and theologian, ‘Alī ibn Sulamī. Although some religious scholars clearly understood the objectives of the Franks, it is not known how the politico-military elites reacted to their initial appearance, and for this reason, Christie argues, we have to rely on later Muslim works (p. 21) and interpretation of historical facts. For example, all Muslim historians who treat the period have recorded with great empathy the martyrdom of the region’s two most influential scholars, the Malikiite faqhī Yūsuf al-Findālāwī and the devout Sufi scholar ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Hālḥūlī, who were martyred while defending the city of Damascus against the Crusaders during Nūr al-Dīn’s reign. Both aged men, the two were on the battle field combating the enemy on horseback. Their appearance together on the battle field explicitly made clear the alliance of religious circles and the political leadership against the crusaders. Christie points out that

the Muslims had different interpretations as to why the Franks had come to the East, “ranging from desire for plunder and an urge to spread Christianity to a simple love of violence” (p. 22). He articulates Zangī as the first great “counter-crusader”; a term loosely presented for it symbolizes Muslim response also as a replica of the Crusades (chapter three).

Chapter four examines Nūr al-Dīn’s Jihād campaign and his deteriorating relations with Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn. Christie believes that Nūr al-Dīn wittingly embarked on various initiatives to garner support from the Muslim rulers against the Franks. These efforts include the revival of the Jihād campaign; the establishment of madrasas, colleges, mosques; and, specifically, Nūr al-Dīn’s patronage of the building of a minbar intended to be placed in the al-Aqsa mosque after his anticipated conquest of Jerusalem (pp. 35-37). This argument runs contrary to some modern scholars who have questioned Nūr al-Dīn’s devotion to Jihād, arguing that his efforts were “simply a way of advancing his political ambitions” (p. 40). Christie demonstrates that “[Nūr al-Dīn’s] religious beliefs and worldly desires could be seen as inextricably linked” (ibid). It was thanks to Nūr al-Dīn’s efforts that for the first time Muslim unity began to emerge and resulted in the defeat of the Franks in the second Crusade.

The next chapter describes the career of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, the hero of the conquest of Jerusalem who united the Muslim world extending from Syria to Egypt. According to Christie, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn employed the “same methods used by Nūr al-Dīn” (p. 49). His piety, diplomacy, and conduct of war earned him a glowing reputation and admiration not only from Muslims, but from non-Muslims who held him in high regard for his treatment of the crusader prisoners of war. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn’s acumen helped Muslims to flourish at every civilizational

front: politics, military, economics, religion, and education, to name a few. However, according to Christie, after Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn’s death the Muslim unity did not enjoy the same power and strength (p. 57).

The sixth chapter, “War and Peace in the Twelfth-Century Levant,” is the longest and most interesting chapter of the book. It examines and highlights some important but often ignored aspects of the Crusades: most prominently, the Muslim-Frank cultural exchange and interaction. It mainly discusses how far the Muslims and Franks influenced each other, both on and off the battle field; despite the continuous hostility, there were numerous examples of trade and truces between them. As mentioned earlier, the book mainly examines Muslim sources, although Christie draws many limitations which are open to question, that show mixed, though mainly negative, attitudes towards the Franks culture and people. Christie takes much effort to highlight Ibn Jubayr’s comment on the fair treatment of Muslim inhabitants under Frankish rule after the Crusaders had established their power in the Levant. But, he criticizes Usāma bin Muṣṣalḥ’s comments about the inferiority of Frankish culture: religion, law, medicine, morality, and technology. Christie believes that the Franks learnt a lot from Muslim culture, but that the cultural barrier remained the biggest hurdle in their mutual interaction (pp. 84-85).

The next chapter scrutinizes the Ayyubids – the successors of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn. Christie mentions that the later Ayyubids adopted vibrant diplomatic relations and entered into alliances with the Franks, pursuing the greater Jihād more enthusiastically than the military Jihād (p. 94). Christie also demonstrates that this period (1193-1249) “witnessed the full integration of the Franks as local rulers” of the

Near East, leading to a great deal of mutual relations between the Franks and the Muslims (p. 94). However, he points out that this friendly approach sometimes earned bitter resentment from the Muslim thinkers and religious scholars, for it was the fourth Ayyubid ruler, al-Kāmil, who returned the command of Jerusalem to the Franks, albeit for a short time, after negotiating a ten-year truce with Frederick II, in 1229 (p. 96).

The eighth chapter illustrates the establishment of the Mamluks who overthrew their former masters, the Ayyubids, and finally helped with the expulsion of the crusaders from the Levant once for all. However, Christie argues that Mamluk encounters with the Franks had not been unremittingly hostile, as there were short periods of friendly relations between the Mamluk rulers and the Franks. For this policy, Mamluk rulers received bitter criticism from religious circles, and especially from the influential scholar Ibn Taymiyyah (pp. 108-109). Like the Ayyubids, the Mamluks also had diplomatic relations with the Franks, negotiating peace treaties, exchange of religious sites and prisoners of war, and other war-related issues.

The conclusion in the final chapter explains the impact of the Crusades on the medieval Middle East and on the modern-day Muslim consciousness. Christie emphasizes that a full picture of the impact of the Crusades can only be gained if they are viewed from a perspective wider than the violence, bloodshed, and hatred they brought. He argues that the solely negative interpretation of the Crusades was re-awakened only “in the nineteenth century, as a result of increasing encounters with the European colonial powers” (p. 113), and that otherwise the remaining effects of the Crusades were little felt in the eastern Muslim world. He further castigates the fact that modern political leaders in the Muslim world often empha-

size the Muslim heroes of the Crusade period as models, using them for their own political goals. Although the Crusades did in many ways have a negative impact on Christian-Muslim relations, historians and opinion makers of the Muslim and Christian world could also find, in the words of Umej Bhatia, “...concrete examples of positive cooperation instead of merely highlighting instances of conflict.”

Christie’s presentation of the chapters needs further elaboration, as he analyses in the beginning of each chapter the “problem of the Muslim sources” such as late or/narrow recording of the events. At the end, he provides a list of further readings on the chapter discussed. Christie’s methodology is very similar to that adopted by the famous Crusade historian, Carole Hillenbrand, in her *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives* (Edinburgh University Press, 1997); nevertheless, Christie’s efforts in producing this book demands appreciation for it provides the readers (pp. 122-169), with 21 valuable documents (translated) from the primary Muslim sources all cited in the text. Image plates (9 in number), detailing the period’s chronology, glossary, and who’s who, further help readers comprehend the material more readily.

Although Christie brought forth nothing new in this book – it is a repetition of what has already been written and said about the Crusades – he should nonetheless be appreciated for his efforts to highlight the Crusades for their instances of cultural exchange and mutual cooperation between Muslims and Christians. His presentation is simple, making it easy to understand and explore various aspects of the Crusades through Muslim sources. Muslims and Crusaders will be a helping tool and quick guide for general information about the Crusades for undergraduate and graduate students, general readers and scholars alike.