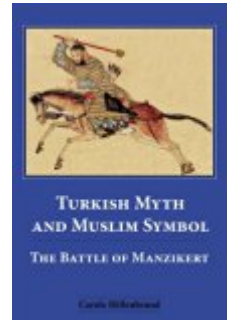


Carole Hillenbrand. *Turkish Myth and Muslim Symbol: The Battle of Manzikert.*
Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007. x + 288 pp. \$45.00, paper, ISBN
978-0-7486-2573-4.



Reviewed by Timothy May

Published on H-War (December, 2008)

Commissioned by Brian G.H. Ditcham

Books on the Crusades and the Byzantine Empire often discuss the importance of the Battle of Manzikert in 1071. Indeed, scholars usually mention the battle as the reason for the decline of Byzantium and a factor in the launch of the Crusades. While the event certainly influenced both, it was not the only cause of either. What is usually absent from most discussions on Manzikert is the Islamic perspective. What did the battle mean to the Muslims, and, more important, how was the battle perceived through time? Carole Hillenbrand addresses these questions in *Turkish Myth and Muslim Symbol*.

Hillenbrand's approach to the battle is simple, but effective. The book is divided into two sections. The first part focuses on medieval interpretations of the battle, while the second concerns the legacy of the battle over time. After an introduction that discusses the battle, traditional interpretations of the event, and sources, she works through the Muslim sources one century at a

time. In addition to her valuable translations, each chapter contains her analysis of each text.

Although the battle took place in the eleventh century, it is not until the twelfth century that Muslim accounts of it appear. Thus, Hillenbrand begins her study of the battle with twelfth-century sources and continues to examine it through the lens of the passing centuries by including an examination of thirteenth-, fourteenth-, and fifteenth-century material. In total, Hillenbrand includes translations and analysis of the battle from six twelfth-century manuscripts, five thirteenth-century sources, three fourteenth-century manuscripts, and one fifteenth-century document. Although the sources after the twelfth century cannot truly be considered primary sources, they do provide insight into how the battle was viewed in the Islamic world over time.

What is notable about the texts is that they all vary considerably, even though some borrow heavily from their predecessors. As one might expect, their interpretations often reflect events of

their own era, which Hillenbrand addresses in two chapters. In chapter 5, she discusses “the writing of the battle” (the title of the chapter). This chapter will be useful to students and scholars alike in its discussion of the nature of Islamic history. After a brief introduction to Islamic historiography, Hillenbrand then examines the Manzikert narratives not just as texts, but also as illustrations of the variety of purposes these narratives served. For instance, the narratives might have been used as instruments of faith. This use involves not only the use of verses from the Quran being applied to certain scenes of the battle, but also the transformation of Alp Arslan, the Seljuq sultan and victor of the battle over Romanos Diogenes, as the model mujahid, or holy warrior. Hillenbrand also shows readers a number of anti-Christian tropes within the narratives. These become more prevalent the further the author is from the event in both time and space. Hillenbrand also discusses other motifs, such as the narratives as examples of Persian prose, theatric elements found in the texts, and the “Mirrors” genre in Islamic literature—literature used by advisors to guide leaders, basically setting a model to follow.

The other chapter that deals with the interpretation of events comes in the second part of the book, which focuses on the legacy of Manzikert. In chapter 6, Hillenbrand considers the role of the Turks in the confrontation between Islam and Christianity. Hillenbrand rightly points out that Arabs and Persians wrote most of the sources on the battle, as indeed throughout medieval Islamic history. In the medieval Islamic world, the Arabs were men of the Turban (religion), the Persians were men of the Pen (bureaucracy), and the Turks were men of the sword (the ruling elite). Turkic domination of the Islamic world east of Cairo began in the eleventh century and continued until 1918. In the transitional period of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, however, there are clear indications that many were not entirely comfort-

able with the new reality. Thus, the victory at Manzikert becomes a justification for the domination of the Turks. It is important to remember that the authors of the narratives were not Turks, so we have Arab and Persian authors justifying and legitimizing the Turkic ruling elite on the basis of their role as mujihadeen as well as good warriors. The chapter continues with an examination of Manzikert in early Turkish folklore and a discussion of how other battles, such as Nicopolis, the siege of Constantinople, and Mohacs, were used to justify and explain the rule of the victors. This analysis provides a nice comparison, and also demonstrates a connection back to literary devices found in the Manzikert narratives, particularly the emphasis of the ghazi or mujahid origins of Turkic domination in Anatolia.

The book concludes with the role of Manzikert in modern Turkish national mythology. With Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s establishment of a national and secular Turkish state, he wished to distance the state from the legacy of the Ottomans as well as from universalist movements, such as Pan-Islam and Pan-Turanism. Since the Seljuqs first defined the Turkic presence in Anatolia, it was to them that Atatürk turned his attention. By sponsoring and encouraging study of pre-Ottoman history, Atatürk taught that Anatolia was the true Turkey, the homeland of the Turks and the place where their nation was forged. This was truly important in the context of a national psyche that reeled from the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, followed by invasion in the 1920s. Hillenbrand then discusses the incorporation of the Seljuqs in school curriculum and national identity in a series of instructive essays. This chapter is particularly useful in understanding contemporary Turkish identity as well as illustrative of the use (or misuse) of history, in politics and in forging national identity.

In addition to the text, Hillenbrand has included line drawings and color plates of various illustrations connected to the battle, both from the

medieval and modern periods. Her use of illustrations is very effective as the modern illustrations, including postage stamps, provide a lucid demonstration of the importance of the battle to modern Turkish identity.

The only weakness of the book is the absence of any discussion of why the Muslim sources do not mention the battle until at least thirty years after it was fought. Considering that it was a major victory, it is somewhat surprising that there is no mention of it prior to the twelfth century--though it is possible that earlier accounts had been lost or remain undiscovered. This is, however, a minor quibble in a truly excellent book that scholars and students of Middle Eastern, Islamic, Crusading, and military history will find useful.

T

is often discussed in books on the Crusades and of course, the Byzantine Empire

it is

ed

s

, however,

.

This is what

the

done by Hillenbrand

of them

of

s

name

to

e

The

is also shown

seem to

also as part of

to

, are written by Arabs and Persians

the

the

being

a

but

the

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Timothy May. Review of Hillenbrand, Carole. *Turkish Myth and Muslim Symbol: The Battle of Manzikert*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. December, 2008.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23601>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.