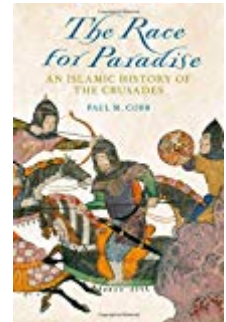


Paul M. Cobb. *The Race for Paradise: An Islamic History of the Crusades.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 360 pp. \$31.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-935811-3.



Reviewed by Ann Zimo

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“Harun Ibn Yahya may have been lost or just in the wrong place at the wrong time, but he might never have left the slightest trace on the historical record had he not been taken captive by the Greek navy off the coast of Palestine sometime in the later ninth century” (p. 9). Thus opens the first chapter of Paul M. Cobb’s *The Race for Paradise: An Islamic History of the Crusades*, a remarkable political narrative of the medieval phenomenon of the Crusades as depicted in Muslim, predominantly Arabic, sources. Covering some 600 years of history in a relatively brief 279 pages of text, the book does not give a total history of the Crusades, but rather “it is an attempt to relate the history of the Crusades as medieval Muslims understood them” (p. 8). Aimed at an audience not deeply familiar with the medieval Islamic world or its scholarship, Cobb weaves a political history that is informative, clear, and witty, while still engaging in important and topical historiographical conversations.

A historian of the premodern Islamic world with monographs devoted to the Abbasids, the

Crusade author Usama Ibn Munqidh, and the latter’s famous work *The Book of Contemplation*, Cobb is well suited to the task of writing such a narrative.[1] The book begins by orienting the reader with a chapter setting out Islamic attitudes towards and knowledge of Europe and Christianity, and the state of rulership in the Islamic world. He focuses on the important political theory of the Circle of Equity that holds that a ruler must rely upon an army, which relies on revenues from agriculture, which in turn depends upon equity and good governance (p. 23). For the rest of the book, the use of *jihad* is set against the backdrop of this political theory. Chapters 2-7 present a narrative of the Muslim encounter with Crusade from the eleventh through the early thirteenth century and represent the heart of Cobb’s argument. The author emphasizes the Mediterranean-wide nature of this phenomenon by interweaving of the events in Sicily, al-Andalus, and North Africa with those in Syria. Chapter 8 covers the entirety of the Mamluk Sultanate, focusing on its preoccupation with the Ilkhanid Mongols but

eventual elimination of the Franks from the Syrian coast, ending with their ongoing dealings with the Franks until the Sultanate's demise in the sixteenth century. The final chapter covers the emergence of the Ottomans and their dealings with the Byzantines, Hungarians, and Franks, ending with the conquest of Constantinople in 1453.

Experts in the field will recognize that the narrative strikes at the heart of several scholarly debates, including the impact of the Crusades on the narrative of Middle Eastern history. Another critique offered, and the one I will focus upon here, concerns what Cobb labels the "traditional narrative" of the Crusades, drawn primarily from medieval European sources beginning in 1095 and ending in 1291, and centered mostly on Syria. Indeed, he demonstrates that from the Muslim perspective, the Crusades were part of a much broader series of incursions by Latin Christians into the dar al-Islam spanning from the mid-eleventh century through the sixteenth across the breadth of the Mediterranean world. As he aptly puts it, "What marked the mid-eleventh-century wars with the Franks was not their ideology but the fact that they were more frequent, more menacing, and—for the first time that any Muslim observer could remember—successful" (p. 41). Like al-Idrisi's map discussed in the first chapter of the book, the entire work flips the narrative generated by Crusades scholars, reorienting the reader away from European social and political trends to those in the Islamic world. A real strength of the book is its clear and enjoyable account of the fluctuating and complicated politics of the region under the various dynasties that came and went and how these intersected with the Frankish presence and military activities. Unsurprisingly given Cobb's expertise in Abbasid Syria, he most successfully accomplishes this in the chapters set in the twelfth century, which form the majority of the book. Cobb's sustained discussion of jihad as one of the many tools at the disposal of Muslim rulers and deployed within varying and specific contexts, uncontroversial from the perspective of

Middle East history, is in fact a direct critique of the norm within the traditional Crusade narrative. Unfortunately, the lack of conversation across disciplines has meant that many textbooks as well as more scholarly works on the Crusades written by Europeanists continue to present jihad as "rising" and part of a unified counter-Crusade initiated by Zangi, continued by his son Nur al-Din, and perfected by Saladin. For this corrective alone, all Crusades scholars and anyone who will teach the Crusades should read this book and take note.

If the discussions of the eleventh and twelfth centuries are a real strength of the book, Cobb is less successful at maintaining the thread of the use of jihad and attendant attitudes towards the Franks when he moves into the later thirteenth century. In chapter 8 he shows that the Ilkhans dominated Mamluk concerns, but that in moments of respite such as following the death of Hülegü in 1265, the Mamluk sultans pursued a deliberate strategy of pushing out the Franks for good. What is lacking is an explanation for why. Towards the end, when the author refers to the Mamluk desire to "cleans[e] the land of Frankish pollution" (p. 235) and the successful response to the preaching of jihad at Sultan Qalawun's funeral in 1290, it is implied that the reason was due to increased religious sentiment. However, this jarring shift in interpretive lens from the political to the religious requires further development. Although Cobb does mention that like the Ayyubids before them, the Mamluks endowed and built Islamic institutions, jihad itself barely appears in his account of the Mamluk ethos. For example, the section titled "Jihad by Treaty" discusses Mamluk diplomatic efforts with the divided Frankish polities of Syria but does not connect the treaties to Mamluk-period ideas of jihad. Thus when Cobb presents Baybars's attacks on the Nizaris and Armenians as part of the sultan's larger strategy against the Franks specifically, the reader is left confused as to why this cannot just as easily be re-

garded as efforts to strengthen the Mamluk military position against the Mongols.

The interpretive lens returns to the political in the final chapter, devoted to the Ottomans. Cobb begins by mentioning that the dynasty's founder Osman called himself *ghazi*, emphasizing his status as a frontier fighter against the foes of Islam (p. 246), but similar to the Mamluk chapter, this facet of the Ottoman claim to authority is subsequently dropped. The discussion of the development of the Ottoman dynasty focuses on the complicated and shifting sets of alliances that allowed their power and territorial control to expand, highlighting how frequently Christians indeed were part of the Ottoman forces, in a strike against the perception of these wars as part of a "clash of civilizations." But in a departure from the twelfth-century chapters, how and to what extent Ottoman rulers deployed religious ideology and jihad in these actions, as well as their recognition of their enemy's use of the language of holy war, is discussed only briefly.

The Race for Paradise has much to offer people on all levels, despite the author's own explanation that the work is intended for nonspecialists. It falls neatly between the two previous works that it most directly parallels: Amin Maalouf's literary telling *The Crusades through Arab Eyes* (1984) and Carole Hillenbrand's encyclopedic *Crusades: Islamic Perspectives* (1999). While Cobb does include direct quotations from primary sources, making great use of vignettes from texts to begin chapters, this is not a sustained critical engagement with the source material. For that, one must go to Hillenbrand. Rather it is a highly accessible, synthetic piece of political history based on deep familiarity with those sources, with occasional quotations for emphasis and useful endnotes and short bibliographic essay for scholars wanting to look deeper into a text or issue. Accordingly, those looking for a discussion of popular Muslim sentiment about the Crusades or a grappling with piety or the religious impact of the

Crusades on Islam will also have to look elsewhere. Nonetheless, a work of this length, accessibility, and temporal and geographic scope can hardly be faulted for a failure to be comprehensive or for not diving into the minutiae of source criticism. *The Race for Paradise* is highly recommended for the interested non-academic, for an undergraduate class, and for an academic who wants to brush up on the state of the field of Crusades scholarship or to become better acquainted with Middle Eastern sources.

Note

[1]. *White Banners: Contention in 'Abbasid Syria, 750-880* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001); *Usama ibn Munqidh: Warrior-Poet of the Age of Crusades* (London: Oneworld, 2005); *The Book of Contemplation: Islam and the Crusades* (London: Penguin Classics, 2008).

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