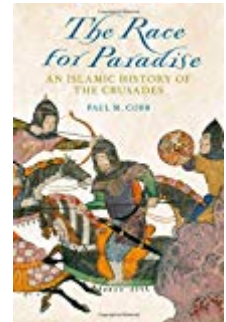


Paul M. Cobb. *The Race for Paradise: An Islamic History of the Crusades.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 360 pp. \$31.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-935811-3.



Reviewed by Matthew King

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The words “crusade” and “jihad” are firmly entrenched in modern political rhetoric and often function to reinforce monolithic notions of a clash of civilizations between Christianity and Islam or West and East. This popular discourse makes the publication of Paul Cobb’s *The Race for Paradise: An Islamic History of the Crusades* all the more timely. *The Race for Paradise* provides the first accessible, narrative overview of the Crusades based on Arabic source materials that is written by an expert in the field. Intended for “readers with no background in Arabic or Islamic history,” this book presents a “history of the Crusades as medieval Muslims understood them” in a broad temporal and geographic context (p. 8).

Previous works that have approached the Crusades from the perspective of Muslim sources have either been geared toward a more scholarly audience, such as Carole Hillenbrand’s *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives* (2000), or have been published by nonspecialists, such as journalist Amin Maalouf’s *The Crusades through Arab Eyes*

(1989). Conversely, popular histories of the Crusades from the perspective of the European crusaders abound in numerous volumes by Thomas Asbridge, Thomas F. Madden, Jonathan Riley-Smith, and Christopher Tyerman, in which Latin sources are typically favored over Arabic ones. Cobb’s work thus fills an important historiographical gap by presenting a well-researched, thorough, yet also accessible history of the Crusades based on the careful reading of medieval Islamic sources so as to show how medieval Muslims perceived events that we today categorize as “Crusades.”

The Race for Paradise is divided into nine chapters flanked by an introduction and conclusion. Cobb gives a brief historiographical introduction that establishes the relevance of the Crusades in modern world, evoking such images as the triumphant statue of Saladin in front of the Citadel of Damascus and Ridley Scott’s historical epic *Kingdom of Heaven*. With such popular interest in the Crusades today, it thus behooves us to consid-

er how people who lived during the time of these historical episodes considered them, a perspective that guides the rest of *The Race for Paradise*. Cobb lays a necessary foundation for this in his first chapter with an overview of how medieval Muslims saw the world, their place in it, and the place of the Franks (Arabic, *Afranj*) in it.

Chapter 2 details interfaith conflicts in Sicily and al-Andalus during the eleventh century that give way to the events of the First Crusade in chapter 3. The overarching theme of these chapters is the disunity of various Muslim powers in the Mediterranean and how this contributed to the success of the Frankish conquests, particularly in Sicily and the Levant. Chapters 4 and 5 explore Muslim responses to Frankish rule in the Mediterranean during the early twelfth century, with a particular focus on the Levant. Chapter 6 further explores the career of Saladin, relationships between Christian and Muslim powers in Spain, as well as the economic realities of competing interfaith powers in the Mediterranean.

In chapter 7, Cobb considers the encounter of Richard the Lionheart and Saladin in the Third Crusade before turning to the history of the dynasty that Saladin founded, the Ayyubids. Chapter 8 chronicles the conflict between the Mamluks (successors to the Ayyubids), Mongols, and Crusader states in the thirteenth century that culminated in the sack of Acre in 1291, an event commonly seen as the end to the Crusades in the Levant. Cobb, however, makes a concerted effort to extend the scope of crusading beyond this traditional terminus, noting the survival of the Christian kingdom of Cilician Armenia into the fourteenth century and the Crusader stronghold of Cyprus into the fifteenth. Cobb concludes his final chapter with an examination of the varied fate of Muslim communities in the Middle East, the Balkans, Sicily, and al-Andalus, effectively bringing to a close the theaters of conflict (excepting the Balkans) with which he opened the book.

In his conclusion, Cobb marks the year 1492 as one that permanently changed "Islamdom's Frankish problems" although he argues that the more far-reaching consequences of the crusading period in the history of Islam were new attitudes that developed in the realms of law, theology, government, and devotional practice (pp. 275-276).

The geographical breadth of Cobb's study is impressive. In keeping with recent trends in the field of crusading studies, the scope of *The Race for Paradise* is quite broad and includes the theaters of al-Andalus, Sicily, and North Africa. Indeed, this is a crucial component of his argument. There was no classical Arabic word for "Crusade" and Cobb convincingly argues that Muslim authors saw the traditionally defined Crusades to the Levant as one small part of a larger Frankish assault upon Islam. This surge of Frankish aggression lasted roughly from the eleventh century in Spain and Sicily until the Ottoman conquests in the fifteenth century. To these authors, there was little difference between the campaigns of King Roger II in North Africa, Alfonso VIII in al-Andalus, or Richard the Lionheart in Syria.

Although Muslim authors homogenized the Frankish threat to Islam across multiple theaters of conflict over the course of many centuries, Cobb brings to light the multiplicity of ways that Muslim rulers reacted to this external threat. He demonstrates that Muslim rulers responded to Frankish aggression in ways that benefited their own agendas, ranging from making alliances with Frankish rulers to calling for jihad against them. The instance of Saladin is particularly telling. The famed sultan spent the majority of his military career campaigning against Muslim rivals in Egypt and Syria. It was only when Saladin was pressed by the needs of his army and advisers that he evoked the concept of jihad against the Franks (pp. 163-170). Through this example and many others, Cobb effectively undermines any notion that jihad against Christians was the universal or

inevitable result of Frankish incursions into the house of Islam.

In mirroring the structure provided by previous Euro-centric histories of the Crusades, Cobb unfortunately falls into one of the pitfalls of these works. The vast majority of *The Race for Paradise* concerns events of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The thirteenth century, particularly Cobb's account of the Levant during this period, is largely limited to a rather brief discussion of the interactions between Mongols, Mamluks, and the Crusader states. The last mainland city of the Crusader states, the port of Acre, fell in 1291, which means that nearly a century of interactions between Christians in the Crusader states and the Muslims who bordered them is reduced to the content of roughly a chapter-and-a-half. An accessible narrative of the events in and around the Crusader states in the thirteenth century thus remains to be written.

This very minor criticism should not undermine the quality of the book provided to us by Paul Cobb. Accessible to nonspecialists and undergraduate students but also thought-provoking for specialists, *The Race for Paradise* is an important work for an evolving field.

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