
Reviewed by Matthew King (University of South Florida)

Published on H-War (August, 2023)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

The history of the Crusades is a staple undergraduate class in many universities, and over the past hundred years, scholars have compiled a handful of sourcebooks to facilitate the teaching of the subject. Muslim Sources of the Crusader Period: An Anthology manages to differentiate itself from previous sourcebooks through its original translations of underutilized Arabic sources across a variety of genres. The quality of these translations and the footnotes that accompany them are such that scholars should be able to make use of these underappreciated texts as well.

James E. Lindsay and Suleiman A. Mourad’s sourcebook contains six main chapters flanked by an introduction, maps, and a handful of appendices. The introduction provides a basic overview of crusading historiography and a rationale for the sources included in the book. Lindsay and Mourad chose to include Arabic texts that are not accessible in recent English translations, that provide eyewitness or near-eyewitness accounts of the Crusades, and that represent a number of genres to showcase the diversity of contemporary source evidence. This is a wonderful rationale for the creation of a new sourcebook. Previous compilations have tended to focus on crusader-centric texts from the Latin tradition, and, when Arabic texts are included, they tend to be from later narrative chronicles. Even the second edition of the stellar sourcebook The Crusades: A Reader by S. J. Allen and Emilie Amt (2014), which makes a great effort to showcase diverse sources (and is the sourcebook that I presently use in my Crusades class), tends to rely on dated translations for its Arabic texts. The criteria for which Lindsay and Mourad selected Arabic sources thus helped them locate valuable and underutilized Arabic sources in a crowded field.

The six substantive chapters of Muslim Sources of the Crusader Period are arranged by genre: “Travel Literature and Geographical Guides,” “Jihad Books and Juridical Directives,” “Chronicles, Memoirs, and Poetry,” “Biographies,” “Correspondences, Treatises, and Truces,” and “Inscriptions.” The texts within these chapters range in scope and length in accordance with the genre of source; thus, the excerpts from travel literature in chapter 1 are longer than the dedicatory inscriptions featured in chapter 6. The variety of texts within this sourcebook is excellent. Scholars of the Crusades will be pleased to see selections from familiar authors rendered in accessible, modern English like Ibn Jubayr and Ibn al-Athir. More valuable, though, are the translations of un
derutilized sources that will provide students of the Crusades with a more nuanced understanding of the medieval Levant. An entry from Ibn ʿAsakir’s biographical dictionary entry on Jesus, Ibn Taymiyya’s directive against Shi’a Muslims, and poems from al-Qaysarani about seductive Frankish women are a few of the sources that hold great potential at enriching students’ perceptions of religion, culture, and society during the time of the Crusades.

Lindsay and Mourad should also be applauded for the care they have taken to ensure that their translations are accessible to students and scholars alike. All of their translations can be clearly understood in modern English, which is no small feat given the complexity of these medieval Arabic texts, and the short introductions for each entry provide crucial context for understanding them. Footnotes (often accompanied by relevant citations) further help to clarify places and terms as they occur in translations. The appendices in the back of the book additionally provide an overview of the Islamic calendar; a summary of Quranic verses on war and peace; a bibliography of Muslim sources for the Crusades; and a glossary of relevant people, groups, and terms that will be of utility to anyone who becomes lost in the details of these medieval texts. Educators, too, will benefit from the thoughtful discussion questions that can be found after most translations.

If there is one weakness of this excellent sourcebook, it is its scope. Lindsay and Mourad acknowledge at the beginning of their introduction that recent scholarship has shown that “Crusader campaigns continued long after 1291, that they targeted areas elsewhere throughout Europe and the Mediterranean, and that they were not exclusively against Muslims” (p. xiii). Their sourcebook, though, focuses almost entirely on the eastern Mediterranean, the rationale for which is buried in a footnote as “for reasons of space” (p. xiv). The only text that I could locate in the book that considers events outside of the eastern Mediterranean is a passage from Ibn al-Athir that frames the First Crusade as part of a larger campaign of Frankish aggression against Muslim lands that spanned Iberia, Sicily, and North Africa. Given the tendency in recent scholarship to consider the geographical diversity of crusading, perhaps this passage from Ibn al-Athir could have served as a springboard from which to consider a handful of other Arabic sources that consider Christian-Muslim conflict outside of the Levant.

This minor critique should not detract from the incredible value of this sourcebook. Lindsay and Mourad have assembled an impressive collection of underutilized Arabic sources that can help students and scholars better understand the complex world of the Crusades. I can only hope that the authors will take their considerable talents for translation and contextualization to compile additional Arabic texts from outside of the eastern Mediterranean that consider interfaith interactions during the time of the Crusades.