

Cultural Encounters
during the Crusades

Cultural Encounters during the Crusades

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University Press of Southern Denmark 2013

University of Southern Denmark Studies in History and Social Sciences vol. 445

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Printed by Narayana Press

Layout and cover design by Donald Jensen

Cover illustration: Charlemagne in battle. Illustration from *Grandes Chroniques de France*, c. 1375.

Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Fr. 2813, fol. 119.

Maps, front and back: Johnny Grandjean Gøgsig Jakobsen.

ISBN 978-87-7674-659-9

Printed with support from

The C.L. David Foundation and Collection

University Press of Southern Denmark

Campusvej 55

DK-5230 Odense M

press@forlag.sdu.dk

www.universitypress.dk

Distribution in the United States and Canada:

International Specialized Book Services

www.isbs.com

Distribution in the United Kingdom:

Gazelle Books

www.gazellebookservices.co.uk

Note on transliteration: The contributors to this volume come from diverse academic traditions and have applied different systems of transliteration from Arabic and other languages. The editors have decided not to attempt to apply a standardisation, but to keep the forms the authors have chosen. However, the indices do have cross-references between all different forms of any name.

A warm thank you to Professor Thomas Pettitt, University of Southern Denmark, for his help and advice.



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Introduction

Kurt Villads Jensen, Kirsi Salonen and Helle Vogt

Cultural encounters and cultural conflicts are important issues in modern societies and have given cause for great concern, both among individuals and on the national and supranational levels. If measured in terms of the number of persons moving from one place to another, the amount of goods exchanged all across the globe, or the accessibility of information about other peoples or cultures in electronic media and through the internet, globalisation has taken off during the last two generations to an extent that was unimaginable a hundred years ago. We now, in principle, should possess much greater knowledge about others than we have ever had before. However, at the same time, it is commonly assumed and often stated directly that international conflicts, which are born out of mutual mistrust, have grown stronger and more severe in recent decades. It is even frequently claimed that such conflicts should be understood as a clash between different civilisations, on an immense scale, unavoidable, and age-old.

From an overall perspective, it is doubtful whether the world today has become less secure and more predisposed to conflict compared to earlier epochs. Such things are difficult to measure, and the uneasy sense of a higher level of tension among different societies or different groups in societies may perhaps be explained by the simple fact that mass media provides us all with the latest updating on global conflicts and violence on a daily basis, so that mutilated and dead bodies have become frequent visitors into our own homes as close-up pictures on the television screen.

The globalisation of the western world after the late 1960s was followed, if not by a loss of tradition, then at least by a much more open understanding of tradition in which individuals felt that they could choose more freely and that they were less obliged to share certain beliefs and attitudes with their parents' generation. Due to this change in attitude, old pictures of indisputable enemies dissolved. It became easier and much more acceptable to be interested in other religions, other cultures, and other ways of life. To young people in Northern Europe with a Lutheran background, Catholics were no longer per se and necessarily suspicious and dangerous, and some even became interested in more exotic and Oriental religions. With regard to the exchange of ideas and attitudes and the aptitude to learn from others, the world has become much more open in recent years. This fact is admitted both by those who welcome it and by those who vehemently oppose it and urge a return to older values and traditions.

History, and especially medieval history, has increasingly come to play an important role in contemporary discussions about cultural encounters. To those arguing for the necessity of maintaining a local or national tradition as a protection against globalisation, the Middle Ages are still the ‘cradle of nations’, the time when Danes became Danes and all other nations became what they are. National institutions, law, language, and even attitudes were allegedly formed in the Middle Ages and have determined the fate of the nation ever since. Conversely, those arguing for an open society with a free exchange of ideas and goods have increasingly referred to Medieval Europe as almost a precursor for the European Union, a period prior to national economic policies, passports and border control.

Also, those contemporary conflicts which take place in the Middle East and which in public discourses are presented as a conflict between Islam and the West, have very often been explained as some sort of continuation of the medieval crusades. They are seen as the persistence of Western aggression and imperialism, or, increasingly since the 1990s as the necessary persistence of Western defence against Muslim aggression. In all these cases, not only modern attitudes, but also hard political decisions on economics and culture and war and peace are based on an understanding of medieval history – be it a well founded understanding or not.

During the summer of 2008, the two faces – of conflict and reciprocal interest – of modern global encounters across cultures inspired discussions in two contexts for intense studies, but thousands of kilometres distant from each other. One was at the world’s second largest congress on medieval studies at the University of Leeds in England, where Helle Vogt and Kurt Villads Jensen agreed to attempt organising a conference on cultural encounters in the Middle Ages. Helle Vogt suggested exploring if it would have been possible to hold it at the Danish Institute in Damascus. At the same time, in Damascus, the director of the Danish Institute, H.C. Korsholm-Nielsen, suggested to one of the visiting scholars at the institute, Lars Visti Hansen, that he investigated if it would be possible to organize a conference at the Institute on crusading history and cultural encounters. On the initiative of Helle Vogt, these two projects were combined, and resulted in an international conference at the Danish Institute in Damascus 5th to 9th October 2009.

The venue for the conference was chosen for the reason that for thousands of years, Damascus has been the meeting place for different cultures, the physical location for cultural encounters in practice. Today, it is still a city characterised by a very mixed population in terms of religion with different Jewish, Muslim and Christian communities. Some of the earliest Christian communities were founded in Syria and are still alive and have churches in the city, and Damascus became the centre of the Caliphate in 750. Throughout Syria, churches, monasteries, mosques and castles are all remnants of former cultural encounters, and they still exist side by side albeit often in a troublesome balance.

The main part of the conference took place in the court-yard of the Danish Institute, a wonderfully restored Mamluk building from the mid fifteenth century, located in the core area of the old *sukh*, the bazar. The responsibility for the organizing was divided between Denmark, where Helle Vogt, Lars Visti Hansen and Kurt

Villads Jensen prepared the scholarly side of the programme, and Damascus, where the staff at the Institute took care of the practical part of the event. Both before, and not least during the conference, the main burden of solving all the practical challenges fell upon the director of the Danish Institute without whose efficiency the conference would never have succeeded. The generous support from the C.L. David Foundation and the Carlsberg Foundation made it possible to organise the conference in these fine surroundings. The conference was open to all those interested and was attended by around 50 scholars.

The presentation of papers and discussions at the Institute was supplemented by excursions to places illustrating cultural encounters in the Middle Ages and during the crusades. In the old town of Damascus, we saw the great mosque, which comprises at the same time the tomb of Saladin, the great Muslim conqueror who wrested Jerusalem from the crusaders, the grave with the head of John the Baptist and the tomb of Hussain. We were also shown around one of the great historical attractions of the city, the medieval castle or citadel, by its director, who gave us access to areas that were normally closed, and who guided us together with Paul E. Chevedden, the great expert on the Damascus Citadel. Another excursion went to the impressive fourteenth-century crusader castle of Crac des Chevaliers and other crusader sites north of Damascus. Here, other papers were presented, and the participants were shown around the monuments by Hugh Kennedy, the leading expert on crusader castles.

Cultural Encounters during the Crusades is an attempt to cover two distinct research areas – cultural studies of encounters and crusade history – that are both well developed internationally, but seldom combined.

Cultural studies of encounters have been pursued both on a global scale and at the local level, e.g. in border areas. Common to an extensive and very diverse research tradition is the circumstance that cultural encounters have often been understood as adaptation, inspiration and loan from one culture to another. These forms of exchange could be with regard to concrete matters such as the economy, coins or architecture, but could also concern diverse ways of ordering societies such as legal systems or concern values and beliefs such as literature and religion. Studies of cultural encounters have often concentrated upon exploring how themes from one culture were transformed when encompassed within another culture – e.g. the different version of the universal tale about young, strong, but impossible love. Other aspects have been how the encounter between two distinct cultures develops into a third, distinct culture, often in the form of a mixed language or a syncretism between two religions. Another aspect of the encounter between members of two cultures is the extent to which it has been possible to have parallel systems within the same society, for example how different legal systems have been in existence at the same time. All in all, it is hardly an unfair claim that studies in cultural encounters most often have concentrated on how societies have overcome differences and been able to continue a kind of *convivencia* and, as far as possible, have reduced the potential for conflict.

Crusading studies, on the other hand, have almost by the very nature of the topic been concentrated on the violent side of encounters. One part of these studies

has delved into the practical aspects of warfare – on equipment, tactics castles, and on alliances across the religious border. Another part has been absorbed with the ideological aspects of crusading, the theology of indulgence and martyrdom, the creation of a literature illustrating the cruelty of the enemy, a history-writing which stressed the unavoidable conflict between the two cultures, between Christians and non-Christians. An important element in crusading studies has been to understand the genesis of the crusade movement. While earlier in the twentieth century it was explained by economic and social factors and thereby seen as an inner development in European societies, since c. 1970 ideological explanations have become more and more common and thereby also the focussing upon conflict between cultures rather than within Europe. This tendency has been even more pronounced since 2001.

The aim was to bring together cultural studies and crusading studies. These two research traditions are both major and influential in diverse fields of history, but they have basically had two very different approaches to understanding encounters. They have seldom been brought together, and a declared aim of the Damascus conference was precisely to do so, in order to broaden both areas and to create a discussion among researchers from different disciplines.

Chronologically, the conference concentrated on the crusading period in the Middle East, from around 1100 to after 1300, but with a background stretching back to the seventh century, and with an epilogue discussing the impact of the crusades and cultural encounters today.

In geographical terms, the conference included studies on the Mediterranean and the Baltic Sea. As the conference took place at the Danish Institute, it was natural to include a number of Scandinavian scholars, but the main reason to combine the two areas was again to broaden the approaches and bring two scholarly traditions together. Studies in crusades and cultural encounters in the Baltic have become much more international during recent decades compared to previous studies and are now increasingly being published in English, but they are still based on research literature and source material in languages that are unfamiliar to most scholars working with the Mediterranean sphere – and vice versa. This is regrettable as many of the questions and problems in these two areas are similar or analogous, for scholars today as for people living in the Middle Ages. The conference in Damascus aimed at bringing some of these questions to the fore and at inviting a common discussion, aims which certainly succeeded during the conference.

Cultural encounters are not only a topic for historians. Many disciplines were therefore naturally represented among the participants, who included historians, philologists, legal historians, theologians, linguists and orientalists, as well as scholars working with modern media. They came from eight different countries and with different religious backgrounds – a further and emphatic illustration that Damascus is still the point of encounters between different cultures.

This collection of articles includes revised presentations from the conference, with the exception of a few whose authors for various reasons have chosen not to have their papers published in this context. Janus Møller Jensen was at very short notice prevented from attending the conference, but his contribution has been included

here. Otherwise, the articles in this volume appear almost in the same order as they were given at the conference.

This book begins with an introductory article by Kurt Villads Jensen, “Cultural Encounters and Clash of Civilisations. Huntington and Modern Crusading Studies”, in which he discusses the concept of cultural encounters against the background of the thesis of the American political consultant Samuel Huntington from 1993 and its impact upon recent scholarly studies. It discusses the extent to which Huntington continues a tradition within Western Europe stretching back to the crusading period, or maybe even embedded in Christian Bible-understanding.

Kurt Villads Jensen’s presentation was intended as the opening keynote lecture, designed to suggest some of the important themes for discussion during the conference, but eight hours before it was to be given, the paper and the whole conference were banned by the Syrian Ministry of Culture. Only the prompt intervention of the director H.C. Korsholm Nielsen and subsequent negotiations ensured that the conference could take place, but on condition that Kurt Villads Jensen did not read his paper. The reason for censoring the paper was that – on the basis of the abstract submitted to the Ministry of Culture – it was misunderstood as a defence of Huntington. This is in fact not the case, as can be seen from the version of it printed here, but the incident well illustrates how difficult intercultural communication can be. What seemed obvious from a Northern European perspective should evidently have been differently formulated in order to be clearly understandable in a Syrian context.

The book continues with a discussion of crusades in the Mediterranean and cultural encounters in the Baltic. Paul E. Chevedden opens with “The View of the Crusades from Rome and Damascus. The Geo-Strategic and Historical Perspectives of Pope Urban II and ‘Alī ibn Ṭāhir al-Sulamī”’. This study positions the author in and against much of the contemporary crusading research by insisting that crusades were understood from the beginning and planned as a great, common Christian fight against evil; and that crusades were also understood as such from the Muslim side. The article contributes to and challenges recent discussions about how to define the crusades. Torben K. Nielsen in “Saints, Sinners & Civilisers – or Converts, Cowards & Conquerors. Cultural Encounters in the Medieval Baltic” offers a theoretical discussion about definitions of crusades in a Baltic context, but especially regarding the concepts of culture and of encounters. With concrete examples, he also shows how similarities and differences were constructed in medieval history writing in the Baltic.

The two following articles concentrate on two individuals from the Mediterranean and the Baltic respectively. Jonathan Phillips’ “The Travels of Ibn Jubayr and his View of Saladin” follows the Spanish Muslim traveller and learned scholar Ibn Jubayr and analyses, by referring to some of the lesser known passages of his work, his attitude to Saladin and the Muslim struggle against crusaders as a holy war, jihad. Ibn Jubayr is well known and has left his own account of his travels and contemporary events. In contrast, Janus Møller Jensen in “King Erik Emune (1134–1137) and the Crusades. The Impact of Crusading Ideology on Early Twelfth-Century Denmark” treats an individual who apart from a few charters left no written record for later historians, and who is normally not considered a crusader at all. Janus Møller Jensen

argues that in his wars the Danish King Erik Emune acted as a crusader, that (later) narratives present his expeditions in crusader language, and that the image of King Erik fitted well into a general European idea of crusading at this time. The two articles illustrate the huge difference in available source material for the Mediterranean and the Baltic crusades respectively.

The next three articles are based on analyses of a very different source type, namely literary material. Helen J. Nicholson in “The Hero Meets His Match. Cultural Encounters in Narratives of Wars against Muslims” gives a number of examples of how Muslims were described in the widely diffused and popular epics of the crusades, and she shows how the image of the Muslim changes over time when general knowledge of the enemy grew in Western Europe. One example of this is the figure of Saladin, who until the Third Crusade was depicted in the Western literary tradition in negative terms, but thereafter became the noble enemy. Sini Kangas in her “First in Prowess and Faith. The Great Encounter in Twelfth-Century Crusader Narratives” continues the analyses of epic texts, but also compares them with a number of the early narratives written shortly after the First Crusade’s conquest of Jerusalem. These are normally studied for their descriptions of historical events, but Sini Kangas shows how they share values and ideals with the epic texts, with emphasis upon single combat and with an idea of a fundamental hostile encounter between good and evil, which could only end with death or the conversion of the opponent. This new interpretation documents how seemingly historical records contain literary motives, which reflect contemporary reality only to a very limited degree. Osman Latiff’s contribution, “Qur’anic Imagery, Jesus and the Creation of a Pious-Warrior Ethos” uses parallel source material, but from the Muslim side. He analyses poetry from Damascus for its content of historical information on how much knowledge contemporary Muslims had about the crusades, but especially to show how a concept of jihad and a theology of jihad were launched and developed during the twelfth century, and how Muslim rulers and elite reacted to it. The three articles together illustrate how much knowledge actually can be gained from including narrative texts in the study of cultural encounters.

Papal legislation and administration are treated in the two articles by Bertil Nilsson on “Gratian on Pagans and Infidels. A Short Outline” and by Kirsi Salonen on “Unlicensed Pilgrims and Illegal Trade. Late Medieval Cultural Encounters in the Mediterranean according to the Archives of the Apostolic Penitentiary 1458–1464”. Bertil Nilsson’s contribution presents the legal foundation of the medieval church’s attitudes to ‘pagans and infidels’ by analysing the relevant passages in Gratian’s *Decretum*. These general principles from the mid-twelfth century became the basis for future church decisions throughout the Middle Ages. Kirsi Salonen investigates the concrete situation 300 years later and through the source material of the Apostolic Penitentiary sees how the church tolerated and punished Christians who had illicit contact with non-Christians. The archives of the Apostolic Penitentiary were opened to scholars only in 1983, and Kirsi Salonen’s article contributes to bringing this until now unknown source material to the attention of scholars studying the crusades and cultural encounters.

The four following articles take their starting point rather in different secular laws. Christian Høgel’s “One God or Two – the Rationality behind Manuel I Kom-

nenos' Attempted Reform of the Abjuration Formula for Converts from Islam" analyses a legal formula from mid-twelfth century Byzantium which converts from Islam to Christianity had to swear to become accepted members of the Christian community. In tracing the background for the formula, Christian Høgel offers a broad overview of Byzantine attitudes to Muslims and Muslim theology. Hubert Kaufhold in "Der Einfluß des Islams auf die christlich-orientalische Rechtskultur" follows the influence of Islamic law and jurisprudence on the laws of the Oriental Christians in detail. The concrete example is the translation of Islamic inheritance laws into Syriac in the ninth century and how this influenced later law collections in the Middle East, but the article also serves as a broad introduction to the history of the Eastern Christians and their encounters, with each other and with Muslims. Peter Edbury's "Cultural Encounters in the Latin East. John of Jaffa and Philip of Novara" is based on very different source material in the sense that the two treatises from the mid-thirteenth century, describing how the high courts of Jerusalem and Cyprus actually worked, are products of a Western aristocratic class and show little or no influence from other legal sources in the Middle East. However, they do reveal glimpses of daily life encounters between Frankish lords and the indigenous population that needed legal regulation. Helle Vogt in "Legal Encounters in Estonia under Danish Rule, 1219–1347" revisits the old question of whether or not Estonia under Danish rule had Danish law. She concludes that on the one hand, German feudal law was the legal foundation in rural Estonia and Hanseatic law in the towns, but on the other hand, the Danish king actually functioned as lawgiver. Together, these four articles illustrate how diverse the legal systems could be in areas with a mixed population. Similar problems were solved in different ways: sometimes legal systems were influenced by adjacent systems, sometimes definitely not.

The two following papers deal with cultural encounters and accommodations in practice, but on two very different levels. Andrew Jotischky in "Pilgrimage, Procession and Ritual Encounters between Christians and Muslims in the Crusader States" has collected the evidence for shared cultic rituals and shared holy places between Muslims and various denominations of Christians in the Middle East. He discusses the importance of the creation of identity and the feeling of belonging to a specific locality across religious differences, but also how shared devotion did not preclude sharp polemics. Angus Stewart takes a very different approach in "The Armenian Kingdom and the Mongol-Frankish Encounter", in which he investigates cultural encounters at the highest political level and follows the diplomatic balancing act around 1300 of the Christian Armenian kingdom, pressed between the Mongols of Persia, wavering between Islam and a friendly attitude to Christians, and the Mamluks of Egypt and Syria. For a period of time, Armenia became the conduit between the Mongols and the powers of Western Europe and an important element in European crusading plans. After the political realities changed, the memory of Armenia in the Orient was continued in popular English prose.

The last two articles present aspects of the modern use of the memory of Middle Eastern Crusades and cultural encounters, one from a Western, one from an Eastern perspective. It was the original plan even to include an analysis of the modern use

of the Baltic crusades, but this was unfortunately not possible. In “The Arabists and Crusader Studies in the Twentieth Century” Robert Irwin concentrates on a close reading of the studies of the crusades by the British historian Sir Hamilton Gibb (1895–1971), and the Frenchman, Claude Cahen (1909–1991). They are placed in the context of the development of historical studies at their time, and Robert Irwin shows their influence upon later crusade historians up to the present. He argues that crusading studies have contributed to an unbalanced picture of Middle Eastern and Muslim history and have emphasized far beyond reason the confrontation during the crusades. Furthermore, such studies have been based on a very selective and limited source material from Western Europe and have to a very large extent neglected Arabic and other Middle Eastern sources. Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen opens “The Crusades in Arab Film and TV. The Case of Baybars” with the observation that the crusades had not been part of Arabic history writing and had not attracted any popular interest in Muslim countries until the very late nineteenth century. Since then, crusades have been presented as e.g. the beginning of Western colonialism and used internally in political discourses in countries in the Middle East. This has been studied in written media, but not in theatre or in film and TV. The Muslim hero fighting against the evil crusaders and against bad Muslims has become extremely popular in lengthy series on TV, typically during Ramadan. Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen has chosen in this article to concentrate upon Sultan Baybars (1223–1277) in twentieth century Arab popular culture, in novels, in films and in two television series from 2005, one Egyptian, one Syrian. He shows how the good figures in the series are characterized by high morals, how religion is markedly absent and plays almost no role, and how the clash of civilisations is depicted as a fight not between Christianity and Islam, but between civilisation and non-civilisation, between rulers of a civilised society with books and learning on one side and the all-destructive Mongols from the steppes on the other side.

The contributions in the book discuss a broad spectrum of aspects of cultural encounters, both in the North and in the South. Not only it covers crusading studies, but also concentrates on the legal and cultural side of the encounters. It is not possible to cover all pertinent aspects of such a large theme in a single volume, and a lot of research is still to be done to get a more general picture of this complex issue. Hopefully, this volume can function as an opening for further research and conferences.