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## The Crusades: A Response to Islamic Aggression

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One of the most potent myths of our age is that the Crusades were little more than an unprovoked attack by a barbarous Europe against a quiescent and cultured Islamic world. According to conventional ideas, the seventh and eighth centuries constitute the great age of Islamic expansion. By the eleventh century – the time of the First Crusade – we are told that the Islamic world was quiescent and settled and that, by implication, the Crusaders were the aggressors. Indeed, the Crusaders are routinely portrayed as a horde of barbarians from a backward and superstitious Europe irrupting into the cultured and urbane world of the eleventh century Near East.

This at least is the populist language often employed on television and in newspaper articles. In my recent book *Holy Warriors: Islam and the Demise of Classical Civilization*, I have shown however that before the advent of Islam Christians had no concept of “Holy War” at all, and that it was from the Muslims themselves that Europeans took this idea. I showed too that the Crusades, far from being an unprovoked act of aggression on the part of Christian Europe, were part of a rearguard action aimed at stemming the Muslim advance which, by the start of the eleventh century, was threatening as never before to overwhelm the whole of Europe.

Notwithstanding the evidence presented in *Holy Warriors*, the consensus, until very recent times at least, among the majority of medieval historians is that the threat from Islam had very little, if anything, to do with the Crusades; the Muslims were simply the convenient targets of a savage and brutal Europe, mired in a culture of habitual violence and rapine. It is true that this picture is now coming under attack, as for example the recent comments of Bernard Lewis illustrate. In Lewis' words:

“We are now expected to believe that the Crusades were an unwarranted act of aggression against a peaceful Muslim world. Hardly. The first call for a crusade occurred in 846 CE, when an Arab expedition to Sicily sailed up the Tiber and sacked St Peter's in Rome. A synod in France issued an appeal to Christian sovereigns to rally against ‘the enemies of Christ,’ and the pope, Leo IV, offered a heavenly reward to those who died fighting the Muslims. A century and a half and many battles later, in 1096, the Crusaders actually arrived in the Middle East. The Crusades were a late, limited, and unsuccessful imitation of the jihad – an attempt to recover by holy war what

was lost by holy war. It failed, and it was not followed up.” (Bernard Lewis, 2007 Irving Kristol Lecture, March 7).

The same line has also been taken by a small group of other writers, most notably by Thomas F. Madden, who argues that the prevailing view of the Crusaders as early European colonialists (barbarous colonialists) is one that owes far more to modern American and European anti-colonialist prejudices than to the facts of history. Madden too emphasizes the defensive nature of the Crusades and is extremely critical of those historians who fail to see this. (See Madden’s “Crusade Propaganda” article and book on the Crusades)

Notwithstanding these voices of dissent, the view that yet prevails in popular culture and indeed in academia is of an advanced, cultured and urbane Islamic civilization subjected to an almost entirely unprovoked attack by a backward and semi-barbarous Europe. This is the view, for example, expressed in David Levering Lewis’ recently published, *God’s Crucible: Islam and the making of Europe, 570-1215*, and it is one that is predicated upon the belief – still almost universally held – that for centuries (during the so-called “Dark Ages”) Europe was a semi-literate and semi-savage backwater, a cultural graveyard mired in poverty, brutality and illiteracy.

For David Lewis, as for academia in general, the impact of Islam upon Europe was entirely beneficent; for it was precisely during Europe’s Dark Age that Islam experienced its Golden Age – three centuries during which Islam led the world in terms of culture and learning. According to this view, which yet remains the default one, Classical Civilization was terminated in the 5<sup>th</sup> century by the arrival of the Barbarian tribes from Germany and Central Asia (Goths, Vandals, Huns, etc), and it was only the timely arrival of the Muslims on the scene, during the 7<sup>th</sup> century, that preserved any of the learning of the Classical world at all. It was from the Muslims, so the story goes, that in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries primitive Europeans “rediscovered” Classical learning and set out on the long road that led to the Renaissance.

It will be obvious that as long as this narrative holds sway, the Crusaders, for all the protestations of Bernard Lewis and Thomas Madden, will continue to be seen as aggressive savages. Yet the antidote to such ideas had already been provided in the 1930s, when Belgian historian Henri Pirenne found that Classical Civilization did not die as a result of the Barbarian Invasions of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, and that the same literate and urban civilization continued to flourish in the West – under Germanic kings – until the arrival of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Pirenne showed that it was actually

Islam's blockade of the Mediterranean, mainly through piracy, which impoverished the West and led to the abandonment of cities and the loss of literacy. Thus, for Pirenne, Islam *caused* the Dark Age, it did not end it.

Pirenne's work has been fiercely criticized and his conclusions on the whole rejected and discarded – especially in the English-speaking world. My own work, which seeks a complete reassessment of the history of Islam's and Christendom's interaction, concentrates primarily on a defense of Pirenne, whom I believe offered us the key to a proper understanding of the Medieval world. For the present, however, I wish to add my own voice to that of such historians as Madden and Bernard Lewis, who have now called for a fundamental reconsideration of the Crusading phenomenon.

As noted above, to generations of historians raised on the belief that a European Dark Age coincided with a Muslim Golden Age, the Crusades, coming at the end of that Golden Age, represent little more than a stark illustration of European backwardness and savagery. The “energies” of Europe's warrior-class, it is held, were simply directed by the Papacy away from internal destruction onto the convenient targets of the Islamic world. This is the line of reasoning taken by Marcus Bull in his examination of the origins of the Crusades in *The Oxford History of the Crusades*. In an article of almost 10,000 words, Bull fails to consider the Muslim threat at all. Indeed he mentions it only to dismiss it:

“The perspective of a Mediterranean-wide struggle [between Islam and Christianity] was visible only to those institutions, in particular the papacy, which had the intelligence networks, grasp of geography, and sense of long historical tradition to take a broad overview of Christendom and its threatened predicament, real or supposed. This is a point which needs to be emphasized because the terminology of the crusades is often applied inaccurately to all the occasions in the decades before 1095 when Christians and Muslims found themselves coming to blows. An idea which underpins the imprecise usage is that the First Crusade was the last in, and the culmination of, a series of wars in the eleventh century which had been crusading in character, effectively ‘trial runs’ which had introduced Europeans to the essential features of the crusade. This is an untenable view.” (Bull, p. 19)

With what justification, we might ask, does Bull dissociate the earlier Christian-Muslim conflicts of the 11<sup>th</sup> century in Spain, Sicily, and Anatolia from the First Crusade? The answer can hardly be described as convincing. “There is plenty of evidence,” he says, “to suggest that people regarded Pope Urban II's crusade appeal

of 1095-6 as something of a shock to the communal system: it was felt to be effective precisely because it was different from anything attempted before.” (*Ibid.*)

Of course it was different — the Pope had called a meeting of all the potentates and prelates of Europe to urge the assembly of a mighty force to march to Constantinople and eventually to retake the Holy Land. It was new because of its scale and its ambition. But to thus dismiss the connection with what went before in Spain and Sicily – and Anatolia – is ridiculous. Such a statement can only derive from a mindset which somehow has to see the Crusaders as the aggressors and to thereby detach them from the legitimate defensive wars which Christians had been fighting in Spain and throughout the Mediterranean in the decades immediately preceding 1095.

The fact is, in the 20 years before the First Crusade, Christendom had lost the whole of Anatolia, an area greater than France, and a region right on the doorstep of Europe. In 1050 the Seljuk leader, Togrul Beg, undertook Holy War against the Christians of Anatolia, who had thus far resisted the power of the Caliphs. We are told that 130,000 Christians died in the war, but that, upon Togrul Beg’s death in 1063, the Christians reasserted their independence and freedom. This was however to be of short duration, and no sooner had Togrul Beg’s nephew, Alp Arslan, been proclaimed Sultan than the war was renewed.

In 1064 the old Armenian capital of Ani was destroyed; and the prince of Kars, the last independent Armenian ruler, “gladly handed over his lands to the [Byzantine] Emperor in return for estates in the Taurus mountains. Large numbers of Armenians accompanied him to his new home.” (Runciman, p. 61) Indeed, at this time, the entire Armenian nation was effectively transplanted hundreds of miles to the south and west.

But the Turkish attacks continued. From 1065 onwards the great frontier-fortress of Edessa was assaulted yearly. In 1066 they occupied the pass of the Amanus Mountains, and next spring they sacked the Cappadocian metropolis of Caesarea. Next winter the Byzantine armies were defeated at Melitene and Sebastea. These victories gave Alp Arslan control of all Armenia, and a year later he raided far into the Empire, to Neocaesarea and Amorium in 1068, to Iconium in 1069, and in 1070 to Chonae, near the Aegean coast. (*Ibid.*)

These events make it perfectly clear that the Turks now threatened all the of Empire’s Asian possessions, with the position of Constantinople herself increasingly insecure. The imperial government was forced to take action. Constantine X, whose neglect of

the army was largely responsible for the catastrophes which now overwhelmed the Empire, had died in 1067, leaving a young son, Michael VII under the regency of the Empress-mother Eudocia. The next year, Eudocia married the commander-in-chief, Romanus Diogenes, who was raised to the throne.

Romanus was a distinguished soldier and a sincere patriot, who saw that the safety of the Empire depended on the rebuilding of the army and ultimately the re-conquest of Armenia. (*Ibid.*) Within four months of his accession, Romanus had gathered a large but unreliable force and set out to meet the foe. "In three laborious campaigns," writes Gibbon, "the Turks were driven beyond the Euphrates; in the fourth, and last, Romanus undertook the deliverance of Armenia." (Gibbon, Ch. 57) Here however, at the seminal battle of Manzikert (1071), he was defeated and captured and all of Anatolia was irretrievably lost.

Any honest reading of these events leaves us in no doubt whatsoever that the aggressor was Alp Arslan and his Turks, and that Romanus Diogenes' march into Armenia was a last-ditch counterattack by the Byzantines to prevent the loss of all of Anatolia. Yet observe how the battle is described in the recently-published *Chambers Dictionary of World History*: "The Byzantine Emperor, Romanus IV Diogenes (1068/71), tried to extend his empire into Armenia but was defeated at Manzikert near Lake Van by the Seljuk Turks under Alp Arslan (1063/72), who then launched a full-scale invasion of Anatolia." (Lenman (ed.) p. 585)

We see in the above a graphic example of the disinformation disseminated by the mentality of political correctness, where the victim is transformed into the aggressor and the aggressor portrayed as the victim.

Alp Arslan was killed a year later, and the conquest of Asia Minor, virtually all that was left of Byzantium's Asiatic possessions, was completed by his son Malek Shah (1074–1084). These conquests left the Turks in possession of the fortress of Nicaea, on the southern shore of the Sea of Marmara, putting the survival of Constantinople in question.

These then are the major political events which prefigured the First Crusade. Within a space of 35 years the Turks had seized control of Christian territories larger than the entire area of France, and they now were a real threat to Europe. We are accustomed to think of the Crusades as first and foremost an attempt by Christians to retake the Holy Land and Jerusalem; but this is a mistake. Byzantine Emperor Alexius Comnenus then made his famous plea to the Pope, not to free Jerusalem, but to drive

the Turks from his door and to liberate the huge Christian territories in Asia Minor that had so recently been devastated and annexed by the followers of the crescent.

It is true, of course, that the Turks, who had also assumed control of Syria/Palestine, also imposed a barbarous regime in that region; and that the sufferings of Christian pilgrims, as well as native Christian populations in that region, described so vividly by Peter the Hermit and others, provided a powerful emotional impetus to the Crusading movement among ordinary Europeans. However, the relief of pilgrims was not – to begin with at least – the primary goal of the Crusaders. Nonetheless, the barbarous nature of the Turkish actions in Palestine was a microcosm of their behavior throughout the Christian regions that they conquered, and the nature of their rule in the entire Near East is described thus by Gibbon in his usual vivid manner:

“The Oriental Christians and the Latin pilgrims deplored a revolution, which, instead of the regular government and old alliance of the caliphs, imposed on their necks the iron yoke of the strangers of the north. In his court and camp the great sultan had adopted in some degree the arts and manners of Persia; but the body of the Turkish nation, and more especially the pastoral tribes, still breathed the fierceness of the desert. From Nicaea to Jerusalem, the western countries of Asia were a scene of foreign and domestic hostility; and the shepherds of Palestine, who held a precarious sway on a doubtful frontier, had neither leisure nor capacity to await the slow profits of commercial and religious freedom. The pilgrims, who, through innumerable perils, had reached the gates of Jerusalem, were the victims of private rapine or public oppression, and often sunk under the pressure of famine and disease, before they were permitted to salute the holy sepulcher. A spirit of native barbarism, or recent zeal, prompted the Turkmans to insult the clergy of every sect; the patriarch was dragged by the hair along the pavement and cast into a dungeon, to extort a ransom from the sympathy of his flock; and the divine worship in the church of the Resurrection was often disturbed by the savage rudeness of its masters.” (Chapter 57)

The ordinary peasants of Europe may not have been fully cognizant of the danger from the east, but the ruling classes and the Church could not have been anything but alarmed. Yet even if the peasantry and artisans of Europe knew little about Anatolia, they would certainly have had some knowledge of the Muslim threat. It is Marcus Bull's suggestion that they did not, which is untenable. The advances of Abd er-Rahman III and Al-Mansur through northern Spain in the latter years of the 10<sup>th</sup>

century would have sent a flood of Christian refugees into southern France; and the raids even into southern France which continued well into the 11<sup>th</sup> century would have sent refugees from there fleeing into central and northern France. These people would have spread knowledge of the danger throughout Western Europe.

Granted, peasants and manual laborers would have had a very imperfect understanding of Islam and what Muslims actually believed; but that is not the point: They knew enough to know that Muslims were enemies of Christ; that they waged war against non-combatants and enslaved women and children, and that they had conquered all of Spain and threatened France.

And this is a point that needs to be stressed repeatedly: The reality is that, far from being quiescent and peaceful, by the latter years of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Islam was once again on the march. Muslim armies waged wars of conquest against non-believers from one end of the Islamic world to the other; from Spain in the west to India in the east; and this new aggression was not confined to the eastern and western extremities, but proceeded along the entire length of Islam's borders.

The Christian kingdoms of Armenia, Georgia and Byzantium were threatened with extinction, and Muslim armies fought with Christians in Sicily and other Mediterranean lands. Many aspects of this new Islamic thrust, particularly those which occurred around the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century in Spain and India, are strangely reminiscent of the earlier Islamic expansion in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, so reminiscent indeed that they might even cause the casual observer to wonder whether the birth of Islam has been somehow misdated and moved into the past by several centuries.

So, for example, we are told that the main Islamic invasion of India began with the conquests of Mahmud of Ghazni, a Turkic-speaking prince based in Afghanistan, who launched a series of 17 campaigns into Northern India. These began in 1001 and ended in 1026, just four years or so before his death; a series of campaigns, we should note, that caused immense destruction and loss of life in the country. By the 1020s, Mahmud ruled an empire that included much of the Indus Valley, Afghanistan and Persia. Yet these conquests, at the start of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, seem to echo those of Muhammed bin Qasim, three centuries earlier, who created an Islamic Empire in roughly the same region (circa 710).

It is strange too that Mahmud of Ghazni's name differs but little from that of his predecessor. Only the "n" in Ghazni differentiates it from Qasim, a word which could equally well be written as Qasmi.

In the western end of the Islamic world we encounter the same phenomenon. "In the 10<sup>th</sup> century," says Runciman, "the Moslems of Spain represented a very real threat to Christendom." (p. 89) Under Abd er-Rahman III (912-961) the followers of Muhammad found a leader who promised to repeat the successes of the eighth century. As founder of the Cordoba Caliphate, he presided over a new age of splendor and military power. His forces battled the Christians to the north, and the boundary between the two religions was marked by the battles he fought. The most decisive of these were at Simancas (939), between Salamanca and Valladolid on the Duoro River, where he was stopped. These were areas that had been overrun by the Muslims two centuries earlier, though the Christians had apparently retaken them in the interim.

In many ways then Abd er-Rahman III resembles his ancestor and namesake Abd er-Rahman I, who conquered these areas in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. And this new conquering impulse continued under Al-Mansur (980-1002), whose career was to see Muslim power once again enveloping all of Spain, including the far north. He burned Leon, Barcelona, and Santiago de Compostela, and, copying his Muslim predecessors almost three centuries earlier, advanced over the Pyrenees. We are told that in Al-Mansur's time, "Never had the Christians found themselves in such a critical position." (Bertrand, p. 57)

It was the attacks of Al-Mansur that finally roused Christian Europe into undertaking the *Reconquista*, which commenced with the campaigns of Sancho III (called the Great) of Navarre and the Norman Baron Roger de Tony in the 1020s. Yet these events recall the earlier beginning of the *Reconquista* with the victory of Don Pelayo at Covadonga around 718.

The reader might well wonder why this "revival" of Islamic conquest in the 11<sup>th</sup> century seems so uncannily to resemble the Islamic conquests of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries. That indeed is a moot point: one to be discussed in a future article. For the moment, all that needs to be emphasized is that, contrary to popular belief, the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries constitute a period of massive expansion by Islam, an expansion felt all along Islam's boundary with Christendom. The Crusades were clearly part of an attempt to stem this aggression.

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