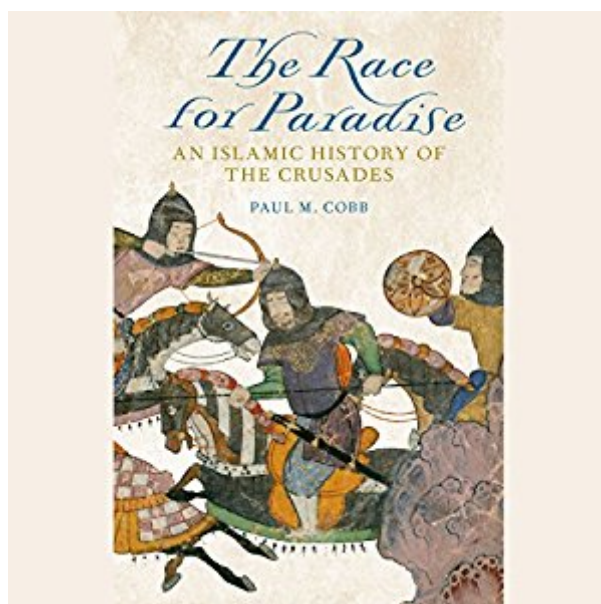


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The Race For Paradise: An Islamic History Of The Crusades



Synopsis

In 1099, when the first Frankish invaders arrived before the walls of Jerusalem, they had carved out a Christian European presence in the Islamic world that endured for centuries, bolstered by subsequent waves of new crusaders and pilgrims. The story of how this group of warriors, driven by faith, greed, and wanderlust, created new Christian-ruled states in parts of the Middle East is one of the best-known in history. Yet it offers not even half of the story, for it is based almost exclusively on Western sources and overlooks entirely the perspective of the crusaded. How did medieval Muslims perceive what happened? In *The Race for Paradise*, Paul M. Cobb offers a new history of the confrontations between Muslims and Franks we now call the "Crusades", one that emphasizes the diversity of Muslim experiences of the European holy war. There is more to the story than Jerusalem, the Templars, Saladin, and the Assassins. Cobb considers the Arab perspective on all shores of the Muslim Mediterranean, from Spain to Syria. In the process, he shows that this is not a straightforward story of warriors and kings clashing in the Holy Land, but a more complicated tale of border-crossers and turncoats; of embassies and merchants; of scholars and spies, all of them seeking to manage a new threat from the barbarian fringes of their ordered world. When seen from the perspective of medieval Muslims, the Crusades emerge as something altogether different from the high-flying rhetoric of the European chronicles: as a cultural encounter to ponder, a diplomatic chess-game to be mastered, a commercial opportunity to be seized, and as so often happened, a political challenge to be exploited by ambitious rulers making canny use of the language of jihad. *The Race for Paradise* fills a significant historical gap, considering in a new light the events that distinctively shaped Muslim experiences of Europeans until the close of the Middle Ages.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Professor Paul Cobb's *The Race for Paradise* does what few books can -- appeal to academic specialists with detail and original sources while constructing an engaging and very interesting narrative story that informs how Mediterranean Muslim societies saw, reacted to, and adapted to the European crusades. His story is broad, beginning with Muslim-Christian conflict well before the traditional first crusade in 1095-1101. As Cobb elaborates, the tension between crusade and jihad had been ongoing for some time in places such as Sicily, Spain/Portugal, North Africa, eastern Mediterranean, long before Pope Urban II called for his holy war to retake Jerusalem. The book's final chapter take the reader past the Mamluk conquest of Acre in 1291, which marked the collapse of the Latin kingdoms in the Holy Land, to assess the rise and emergence of the Ottoman Empire, which was equally smitten with holy war as a means to expand and strengthen the Islamic world. The Ottoman conquest of Constantinople and the subsequent clashes in the Balkans and Hungary set the tone for conflict in that unhappy part of Europe for five hundred years -- and it's still going. This book has many strengths, least of which is the broader view taken as described above. More importantly, Cobb explains well the particular Islamic concepts of warfare, political legitimacy, the social contract, and theology that are necessary to understand how Muslims perceived these events. (Incidentally, these same concepts operate in our time too, but there are few non-academics who understand them, so there is much to be learned about modern Islamic society and culture as well.) This context is vital to the story and well worth the time to grasp. The centerpiece of any good history is the people.

The alleged originality of this book is that it claims to look at the "Crusades" from the Islamic point of view by using medieval Islamic sources. This is largely, but perhaps not entirely true. Paul Cobb has, of course, used numerous Islamic sources, but he has used them alongside the others (Latin, Byzantine, and Armenian). He has also adopted the more modern view of the Crusades, that of a period much longer and more geographically diverse than the less than two centuries during which the Latins set up principalities in the Near East. This in itself gives a lot of value to this book in several respects. It shows that the wars between Muslims and Christians and the "Reconquista" of territories lost by the latter started decades before the First Crusade. In particular, the Christians in Spain, with some help from those in France (and including some Normans) took Toledo some 14 years before the capture of Jerusalem, while Palermo, at one time

one of the largest Muslim ports, fell to the Norman Hautevilles brothers some twenty seven years before. Interestingly, the author goes on well beyond AD 1291 and the fall of Acre. Since he had chosen to adopt a Muslim point of view, he ends his book with a chapter on the Ottomans, with the fall of Constantinople soon to become Istanbul and the conquest of most of the Balkans, but also with the fall of Grenada and the end of the last Muslim state in Spain. Another strongpoint is to show the impact and interactions of these events and the complex relationships between medieval Muslim states, between Christian states and between the two sets of states. Interestingly, even if not entirely originally, he clearly shows to what extent the success of the First Crusade was due to division among the Muslims themselves.

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