

The Forgotten Crusaders—A Comparative Analysis of the Roles of and Effects on Christian Women in the West and the East during the Crusading Era

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Although the crusades were a predominantly male-initiated and executed movement, any serious attempt at analyzing and understanding their true impact would be remiss in ignoring women and the varying effects the crusades had on their lives and social status. The crusades, in order to be truly understood to their full extent, must be considered as not merely a series of military campaigns or even simply as the result of religious and political agenda. Rather, one must examine the crusades in their holistic sense as a social impetus spanning numerous centuries and affecting nearly every person of the Middle Ages—specifically women. This critical lens can and must be applied to the women who lived during the time to enable a comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the crusades. Just as the crusades dramatically altered the lives of Christian men, the Christian women living during the crusades had a similar experience taking on roles as active participants or supporting elements that can be examined as they differed with geography in the east and west. This widely differing experience sheds new light upon an extremely engaged, though frequently historically neglected, demographic of the crusades. Also, contrary to some historians who claim that time was the catalyst that sparked power for women in the crusades, there was an additional geographical factor that created an environment in the east in which Christian women became empowered to a far greater extent than their counterparts who remained in the west.

The limited involvement of women in the west was apparent in the first moments of the crusades. While it is difficult to identify with pinpoint accuracy the inception of the crusades, Pope Urban II's address at Clermont in 1095 can be marked with fairly unanimous agreement as the moment when the papal office first issued a call to arms for the crusades, and he did so with a clear

intention of limiting women in the west. Pope Urban II's initial message was interpreted as one in which he "tried to confine participation to arms bearers" by simultaneously discouraging "the old, the infirm and women" from becoming active members in the efforts.² However, Pope Urban II did grant the exception that women "could accompany their husbands or brothers with permission from church authorities."³ The women who obeyed Pope Urban II and remained behind in the west had an entirely different role in the crusades and were affected in noticeably different ways than their peers who ventured east.

Although the crusades were an appealing concept for both men and women in the west, they were wrought with intimidating obstacles including the financial toll, danger, and a great degree of personal sacrifice. For these reasons many men were dissuaded from taking up the cross; as such, most women did not frequently go east on the crusades either. Though they might not have taken the pilgrimage to the east, their contributions should by no means be overlooked. Those women who remained in the west still took on an extremely important role that could best be described as a supporting element for crusading culture. Of course, just as history tends to make note of men of a certain status, the historical documents that detail the involvement or effects on women are similar in the sense that they document women who tended to be noteworthy in status. However, by comparing the accounts regarding these sparsely mentioned women, scholars prove their varying involvement and further support the enormous effect that geography had on their roles.

Western women were pivotal in fostering and supporting a culture that promoted crusading. In some instances, their dedication to the crusades even superseded their spousal support to their crusading husbands. One can observe this phenomenon in the slightly comical example of Adela of Blois. When Count Stephen of Blois returned home in 1101 after he disgracefully deserted the First

² Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The Crusades: A History*, 2nd ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), 15.

³ *Ibid.*

Crusade, it was his wife, Adela of Blois, who persuaded—or rather shamed—him into taking up the cross once more. Adela, fully aware of the public outcry and humiliation her family would face, urged him “to recall the brave deeds of his youth” and “persuaded her reluctant spouse to rejoin the crusade.”⁴ As a result, chroniclers such as Orderic Vitalis hailed her as a “wise and bold woman.”⁵ From this rather humorous account, one can infer that while men departed for the east, women on the western home front contributed greatly to crusading culture as they subscribed to and were charged with perpetuating the ideology and importance of crusading.

Yet western women were not simply charged with promoting the crusade ideology. They also were affected greatly by it as attested to when examining their status in society and the evolution of an ideal medieval woman in the west. Just as the notion of male chivalry and knighthood that had “emerged in the tenth century” evolved with the crusades, so too did the construct of an ideal woman.⁶ The male ideal that arose in the crusades came to possess attributes such as servitude to God, fidelity, and piety.⁷ As women in the Middle Ages were expected to act with the utmost regard and consideration to aid their husbands, they were subjected to similar characteristics with the sole exception being that women were not expected to have the martial attributes of a knight. Essentially, the concept of an ideal woman during the crusades was one who waited for her husband, maintained the household while he was gone, and served as an administrator who stepped in to fill the masculine role he had vacated when necessary. One medieval historian, Sarah Lambert, best described the state of women who remained behind in the

⁴ Constance M. Rousseau, “Home Front and Battlefield: The Gendering of Papal Crusading Policy (1095-1221),” in *Gendering the Crusades*, eds. Susan B. Edgington and Sarah Lambert (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 31.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Giles Constable, “The Historiography of the Crusades,” in *The Crusades From the Perspective of Byzantium and the Muslim World*, eds. Angeliki E. Laiou and Roy P. Mottahedeh (Washington, D.C., 2001), 14.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1-22.

crusades as being left in “a widowed state, while their husbands lived on”—in accordance with the social expectations of an ideal crusade-era woman that had developed.⁸

This notion of a perfect crusade-era woman came to be echoed and exemplified in crusading rhetoric, which had a strong emphasis on the Virgin Mary and Eve. Mary epitomized the highest level of servitude and devotion that every woman in the west should strive to imitate.⁹ Additionally, crusading rhetoric included references to the Genesis story of Eve in which Adam asserted that she was sent by God to serve as his “helpmate.”¹⁰ Thus, women in the west were expected to act with the willing obedience to their men that Eve exemplified while possessing the virtues of the immaculate Virgin Mary.

This image of an idealistic western woman contributed to what was perhaps the most important role that women in the west assumed during the crusades. As crusading men flocked east to reclaim Jerusalem and urged by the promises of “immediate remission of sin,” a problematic vacuum was created.¹¹ In these inevitable absences, women rose to the demanding circumstances and fulfilled their new duties serving as the heads of their houses, regents of assets, and financial managers.¹² Many who preached the crusade assured their listeners that their family members being left behind would be cared for. Quite often, this resulted in females beginning to “call on their husbands’ assets at a time when the male members of the family were short of cash.”¹³ As the crusades grew in popularity and took men away from home, the daily responsibilities that normally

⁸ Sarah Lambert, “Crusading or Spinning,” in *Gendering the Crusades*, eds. Susan B. Edgington and Sarah Lambert (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 8.

⁹ Elizabeth Casteen, “Women, Gender, and the Crusade,” Lecture from Binghamton University, Binghamton, NY, 13 November 2013.

¹⁰ Frances Gies and Joseph Gies, *Women in the Middle Ages* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Publishing, 1978), 41.

¹¹ Fulcher, “Urban II’s Call for Crusade.” trans. O.J. Thatcher and E.H. McNeal, in *The Crusades: A Reader*, 2nd ed., eds. S.J. Allen and Emilie Amt (Toronto: University of Toronto Press Publishing, 2003), 40.

¹² Elizabeth Casteen, “Women, Gender, and the Crusade.”

¹³ Riley-Smith, *The Crusades*, 21.

fell to male patriarchs were thrust upon their women. Women in the west were charged with the critically important role of maintaining a society in which crusading could occur.

Oddly enough, though some crusading rhetoric included examples of religiously revered women, the ancillary contributions of women were largely ignored and undermined in crusading culture and language. Perhaps the best historical attempt to recognize women of the Middle Ages is that of Constance Rousseau, who argues that women became progressively more involved and included as the crusades progressed. While she substantiates this argument with several examples of crusade rhetoric, her argument neglects the geographical component that contributed to this progression for women. Rousseau contextualizes her argument with the supposition that that “the sexes enjoyed equality in the sphere of grace.”¹⁴ However, Rousseau ignores the glaring fact that in all eras of history one must consider the divide that exists between theory and practice. In the case of her claimed equality, this only came to fruition around the Third Crusade for western women.¹⁵ Initially, when Urban II wrote recruiting letters or spoke to his audience at Clermont he “addressed the recipients as ‘brethren,’” using the gender selective term *fraternitatem*, or he addressed them as “sons of God (*fili Dei*), and very deliberately used “male-gendered language linked to knighthood.”¹⁶ These nuances of crusading rhetoric indicate that while crusading was in fact a gender-inclusive effort that relied upon the support of western women, the language did not reflect such recognition.

This discrepancy was found most importantly in the rewards for those who went on crusade. Unfortunately as one historian states, “the spiritual benefits of crusade were to accrue only to the male fighter”—a claim that is clearly supported in the aforementioned crusading language.¹⁷ According to some first-hand accounts, Urban even went so far in his gender-biased orations as to

¹⁴ Rousseau, “Home Front,” 32.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 32-36.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

warn men that they “should not permit the allure of their women” to deter them from taking up the cross.¹⁸ From these early speeches and writings one can see just how male-centered the culture of crusading was despite the fact that any crusading effort would have extensive ramifications on western women.

It was not until the short-lived 12th century papacy of Pope Gregory VIII that a “broader understanding of other aspects of the crusade on the home front.”¹⁹ At this point in the crusades the situation in the east was in absolute disarray. In order to remedy this “grave situation,” Pope Gregory VIII called “explicitly for intercessory and penitential activities in support of a crusade,” and commanded women to partake in specific religious practices and prayers intended to spiritually benefit the cause and well-being of crusaders.²⁰ His language broke the tradition of his predecessors and used gender-inclusive terms such as *omnes*, a precedent that was followed by his successors.²¹ It was at this point that leaders finally began to appreciate the roles of western women. Because of this, the crusades transitioned from a male effort to one in which the success of crusading “had become a collective commitment for all Christians, regardless of sex.”²²

The highlight of papal recognition for women in the west came during the papacy of Innocent III from 1198 until 1216. According to some sources, “Innocent understood crusade participation as a series of gender-indifferent religious activities” to a much greater extent than any other pope.²³ In his 1213 papal opus, *Qui maior*, western women were not only taken into consideration, but also for the first time explicitly mentioned. In the encyclical, Innocent expanded upon the work of Gregory VIII and called for more liturgical activities to be conducted by women. Most importantly, this sparked a movement in crusading that allowed women to earn the same

¹⁸ Ibid., 33.

¹⁹ Ibid., 35.

²⁰ Ibid., 36-37.

²¹ Ibid., 35.

²² Ibid., 40.

²³ Ibid., 36.

crusading benefits of men. According to one letter written by Innocent III to Robert Courcon in April 1213, “women, without travelling to the Holy Land, could gain salvific benefits from the crusade.”²⁴ Additional decrees by Innocent III such as his *Ad liberandum* continued his use of gender-neutral language, using terms “such as the Latin *hominum*, or human, rather than *virum* or male persons.”²⁵

Unfortunately, while Innocent’s rhetoric was a tremendous improvement for the status of women in the west during the crusades, once the reality and difficulty of the crusades set in, the women who were left behind to deal with the effects of their husbands’ absences continued to be neglected and unappreciated. Despite his inclusive language, when Pope Innocent III began preaching the Third Crusade, he presented the situation in the east as being so dire that “a man could take up the cross without his wife’s consent.”²⁶ While this does indicate that for the Third Crusade women’s objections to their husbands’ departures were largely ignored and disregarded, one can infer, however, that prior to this papal order, women were consulted and the hardships they would face with their husbands’ absences were recognized when considering going on crusade.

From the aforementioned sources and examples one can easily see just how important women were in their role as a supporting element in the west. Though the language initially did not reflect this effect on women and their role, without women’s ability to maintain families, financial stability, and assets in light of their husbands’ departures, the crusades arguably would not have been possible. For the most part, however, these roles were merely just indirect support from afar. Contrastingly, the women who inhabited the Latin East took on an increasingly more active and vital role that was far more visible and served the immediate needs of the crusading armies. One of the most-documented manners in which women became more empowered as they progressed east

²⁴ Ibid., 40.

²⁵ Ibid., 36-37.

²⁶ Riley-Smith, *The Crusades*, 165.

was in their role as military participants. While some of these women—like men who took up the cross—were impoverished and hoped to find a new affluent life in the east, others were of such notability that they have been included in the annals of crusading history. Perhaps the most notable of these crusading women was Eleanor of Aquitaine whose journey is one of both political and crusading lore.

Eleanor of Aquitaine was crowned Queen of France in the early 12th century and when her husband, King Louis VII of France, departed for the east during the Second Crusade she too left France for the east—not as a supporter or a faithful wife, but rather as a very present and noteworthy crusade leader. Because of her actions and merits, Eleanor “perceived herself as a maker of policy distinct from her royal husband,” a description that is echoed by others in the history of crusading.²⁷ Eleanor was such a force in crusading history that following the Second Crusade she was even blamed for some of the unsuccessful aspects. While this is not a positive example, it undeniably affirms the power she held.²⁸ Eleanor’s journey east is one of undeniable importance when analyzing the varying roles of women in the west versus the east.

Yet another interesting case is that of Maria Comnena, who came not from the medieval west, but rather came to the Latin East from Constantinople as a Byzantine princess. Maria was noted for her shrewd—albeit borderline manipulative—political prowess particularly when considering her “political machinations surrounding the succession of her daughter to the kingdom of Jerusalem.”²⁹ She and Eleanor of Aquitaine represent a blended or hybrid woman, born in another region yet each one coming to the zenith of her power in the east; together they represent

²⁷ Matthew Bennett, “Virile Latins, Effeminate Greeks and Strong Women: Gender Definitions on Crusade” ? in *Gendering the Crusades*, eds. Susan B. Edgington and Sarah Lambert (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 22.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

²⁹ Natasha Hodgson, “The Role of Kerbogha’s Mother,” in *Gendering the Crusades*, eds. Susan B. Edgington and Sarah Lambert (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 165-166.

ultimate proof that women in the east could come to hold more powerful roles than those in the west.

Additionally, there existed other examples of lesser-known women who participated much more actively than their western sisters. Of the crusaders in the Second Crusade, Niketas Choniates wrote that, “females were numbered among them... bearing lances and weapons... convey[ing] a wholly martial appearance.”³⁰ Women additionally worked in the crusading army camps serving as aides. This type of involvement can be visibly observed in historical manuscripts from the Peasants’ Crusade which showed Peter the Hermit addressing a group of crusaders clad in armor and holding lances who were about to depart. Standing alongside were women prepared to leave with them.³¹ One such woman gained immortality in *The Itinerary of the Pilgrims and Deeds of Richard*. The author wrote with clear reverence of “a woman who labored with great diligence and earnestness,” inspiring her female and male peers and boosting morale.³² Additional examples existed in which women were credited with their participation as archers in the line of crusading duty.³³ These roles, which had a first-hand impact on crusading, certainly would not have been afforded to the women had they not ventured east. Had they remained west, they would have been limited in their roles to simply a spiritual or cultural supporting element from afar.

Though not directly connected to Christian women, it is worth noting that active military participation was not exclusive to Christian women. This direct participation additionally included Muslim women. In *The Memoirs of Usamah Ibn Munqidh* the author, a Syrian prince, recounts a story of an elderly woman named Fanoun who in a fit of inspiration and religious zeal, “covered her

³⁰ Niketas Choniates. *O City of Byzantium, Annals of Niketas Chonniates*. trans. H.J. Magoulias, in *The Crusades: A Reader*, 2nd ed., eds. S.J. Allen and Emilie Amt (Toronto: University of Toronto Press Publishing, 2003), 211.

³¹ Casteen, “Women, Gender, and the Crusades.”

³² H.G. Bohn, ed., *The Itinerary of the Pilgrims and Deeds of Richard*, G.A. Giles, trans., in *The Crusades a Reader*, 2nd ed., eds. S.J. Allen and Emilie Amt (Toronto: University of Toronto Press Publishing, 2003), 212.

³³ Imad Ad-Din, *Frankish Women of Peace and War*, Francesco Gabrieli, trans., in *Arab Historians of the Crusades* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press 1969), 204-207.

face with a veil, seized a sword, and rushed into the fight.”³⁴ Furthermore, select women in the east served in incredibly powerful political roles. While some select noblewomen in the west held political titles, their effects on the crusades were limited by the geographical distance if not by gender. Then this geographical obstacle, which restrained women in the west from becoming anything more than crusade supporters, was not an issue for women in the east. The women who held power in the Latin East were directly involved in the policy and legislation that had an immediate impact on crusading. In Jerusalem some women played a crucial political role that can be seen through two of the most prominent examples.

For three decades from 1131 to 1161 it was not a man who held supreme power in the holy city of Jerusalem, but rather a female—Queen Melisende. Queen Melisende ruled with historically documented tenacity and “dominated the political arena despite many challenges.”³⁵ Perhaps the largest testament to her role as a powerful figure came in 1145 when her son was eligible to take over the throne and she refused to abdicate.³⁶ This was not the last time Jerusalem would have a female ruler. In the late 12th Century, Sibylla, sister of King Baldwin IV and mother of his successor Baldwin V, came to power. Through her brother’s leprosy and politically arranged marriages, Sibylla had an undeniable “connection to the throne of Jerusalem” even before she was queen.³⁷ In 1194 following the death of her brother and son, Sibylla was crowned as Queen of Jerusalem and assumed power at a particularly critical time in the history of the Third Crusade.³⁸ One important detail to note when considering women such as Melisende, Maria, or Sibylla is that they were inherently set up for power through relationships such as marriage or ancestry. Additionally, they were often subject to acting on behalf of the political desires of others. However, these factors by

³⁴ Usamah, Ibn Munqidh, *The Autobiography of Usamah*, G.R. Potter, trans., in *The Crusades: A Reader*, 2nd ed., eds. S.J. Allen and Emilie Amt (Toronto: University of Toronto Press Publishing, 2003), 116.

³⁵ Bennett, “Gender Definitions,” 27.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Meriem Pages, *The Image of the Assassin in Medieval European Texts* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts- Amherst, 2007), 118-119.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 118-120.

no means detracted from their power that increased in the Latin East, particularly when considering that they more directly affected the crusade more so than the noblewomen of the west.

Just as women in the west were important to crusading ideology, so too were the women who inhabited the east or arrived during the crusades. However, these women who arrived in the east were often used in a vastly different manner. Quite often they were propagandized and used by Muslim jihad leaders to emasculate their Christian opponents. In Imad Ad-Din's chronicles, he described a most likely exaggerated instance in which "three hundred lovely Frankish women" arrived by ship, each one "glow[ing] with an ardour for carnal intercourse."³⁹ Though probably altered for political purposes, his account, riddled with euphemistic descriptions of the women "who invited swords to enter their sheaths and... caught lizard after lizard in their holes" proves that women were vital in the east to both crusading culture and the perception of the crusades in Muslim eyes.⁴⁰ In this instance, women were used as a means to create an aura of weakness in Christian men who, despite claimed holiness, were susceptible to even the simplest human needs, thus denigrating their opponents. Therefore, one can see how women who ventured to the east not only held active roles in the execution and policy of the crusades but also were of paramount importance in the aura that surrounded the crusades.

While the crusades had a varying effect on every demographic involved and the roles of their participants ranged greatly, one can certainly conclude that Christian women, though frequently overlooked in crusading history, were irrefutably involved and affected. Just as Christian men in the west played a far lesser role than the Christian men in the east, so too did Christian women. Though it is impossible to accurately apply generalized descriptors to these roles and levels of involvement, one can undeniably see from examples of individual participants and rhetoric that Christian women in the west served as a source of inspiration from abroad that enabled the crusades

³⁹ Imad Ad-Din, *Frankish Women*, 204.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 206.

to occur and contributed to crusading ideology. While some historians, such as Constance Rousseau argue that time was the largest contributing factor for women's influence, geographical proximity is, as proved by the aforementioned examples, a more important factor. The Christian women in the east, just like their male counterparts, took on a far more active role as leaders in the crusading era. Surely, in a movement as large and lengthy as the crusades, no one can simply summarize the effects on or roles of one demographic. By comparing the roles of Christian women in the east versus those in the west and the effects the crusades had on both groups, however, it is apparent that those in the east held greater power that more directly affected the course of the crusades.

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