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The Land of War: Europe in the Arab Hero Cycles

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Historians may perhaps object to the Aristotelian distinction that separates history, as the study of particulars, from poetry, whose aim is to produce universals.¹ This does, however, provide a convenient setting for a definition of hero legend, in which the particulars of historical fact are mixed with the universals of folklore and fantasy. Whether or not such a literary form can serve any serious academic purpose beyond its own boundaries must, in part, depend on the reasons why it was created in the first place. Here it can be noted that in pre-Islamic and early Islamic poetry, in whose tradition there is very little narrative, there are frequent references to tribal gatherings and evening conversations in which factual narratives were presented and embroidered and stories exchanged. At times such stories revolved around universally identifiable motifs of folklore. In a tribal context, however, of more immediate relevance is the self-identification of the clan and of its members, positively in relation to its own merits and negatively in contrast to the demerits of its opponents. Where these opponents represent a nation rather than a rival clan, the positive identification is more widely shared, and so it is that the pre-Islamic battle fought by Bakr against a Persian army at Dhū Qār serves poets like an Arab Bannockburn as a source of general pride for at least the next two and a half centuries.²

Here although the negative, represented by the enemy, provides a necessary contrast to the heroic positive, its emotional coloring is not a uniform shade of black. Persians were on the wrong side at Dhū Qār, but in both early poetry and later hero legend individual Persian rulers are presented as figures of dignity and splendor. Similarly, while the expression “the land of war” serves to distinguish non-Muslims from Muslims, what is perhaps its earliest intrusion into Arabic poetry is emotionally neutral. Miskīn al-Dārimī writes: “I stay in *Dār al-Ḥarb* as long as I am not humiliated there, but if I fear disgrace in my dwelling, I leave it.”³ This, from the pre-Islamic poet al-Shanfara onward, is the familiar boast of the proud man who will only remain even among his own clan as long as his dignity is respected.

Tribal identification is an obvious starting point for many of the extant Arabic hero

¹ *De arte poetica* 1451b6.

² For Islamic poetic references to Dhū Qār, see Abū Tammām, *Dīwān*, ed. M. A. ‘Azzām (Cairo, 1951), 1:195.25, 215.28; al-Akḥṭal, *Dīwān* (Beirut, 1969), 226.4, 317.4; al-Farazdaq, *Dīwān* (Beirut, 1960), 2:111.3.

³ *Dīwān* (Baghdad, 1970), 25.2.

cycles, as where the ‘Antara legend combines the glories of its eponymous hero with praises of the clan of ‘Abs, while the heroes of the cycle of Dhāt al-Himma are from Kilāb. Over the centuries, however, the development of the cycles has accommodated a wider audience, and their printed form represents a continuous accretive narrative process. As a result of this, facts of history and geography are inevitably distorted, jumbled, or misinterpreted, but the corruptions represent not a conscious rewriting of history but what has been assimilated into the collective memory of the storytellers and their unsophisticated listeners. If Europe in general, and the Crusades in particular, were of real significance to these audiences, traces of this, positive or negative, should still be detectable.⁴

Because of the nature of the tradition, it is no real surprise to find that even ‘Antara, the quintessential desert warrior of pre-Islamic days, is given a European role, ostensibly dated to the second half of the fifth century. He first encounters Franks when he is fighting on the side of the Persians against Byzantines reinforced by the Frank al-Khalījān, who has brought an army of two hundred thousand men “to aid the servants of the Cross and to destroy the fire-temples of the Persians,” with the declared intention of “staying in Syria and visiting Jerusalem.” Al-Khalījān accuses the Byzantine emperor of hypocrisy and tells his Franks that, when he has finished with the Arabs, he proposes to take over “the kingship of all the Messiah’s lands.” The episode ends when he himself is killed by ‘Antara.⁵

Later, following the murder of al-Ḥārith, the Byzantine client king of Damascus, ‘Antara espouses the cause of al-Ḥārith’s nine-year-old son, defeats a Byzantine rebel, and is invited to Constantinople by the grateful emperor, Caesar. On being told of this, Līlimān, Lord of the Isles, sends a message to Caesar, who is addressed as “king of the Christians,” demanding that the guest be seized. It is explained that Līlimān is not a Byzantine subject, that his lands are a forty-day journey distant, and that they extend for another four months’ journey in length and breadth. There follows an extended sequence of adventures in which ‘Antara, accompanied by Caesar’s son Herakleios, sails out to deal with a sequence of European enemies. Of these the most formidable is the giant king of Andalus, twelve cubits tall, who speaks “in Frankish and the languages of Andalus” and who proposes to seize both Rome and Constantinople and then to attack the Ḥijāz, ‘Irāq, Khurasān, and Transoxiana. Like al-Khalījān, he too is killed by ‘Antara, who now moves back through North Africa before returning home via Constantinople, which he reaches after a twenty-day voyage with fair winds from the Oases Island.⁶

As can be seen, this account is hardly a storehouse of historical fact. Its proper

⁴ The evidence presented here is derived from anonymously edited and undated publications designed for a semiliterate market in the early decades of the twentieth century. Manuscripts exist, but an effective study of their traditions has still to be completed. In general, the position is that of the *Arabian Nights*, whose manuscript tradition can be extended to the 9th century and whose early popularity is recorded in the 12th. As both the *Arabian Nights* and the hero cycles represent accretive oral tradition, their value as historical sources does not lie in the exactitude of their dating but in their function as filters for popular attitudes and traditions.

⁵ Because of the difficulties associated with the printed texts of the cycles, all references to them refer to the sections of the relevant *sīras* into which they are divided in *The Arabian Epic*, vols. 2 and 3, ed. M. C. Lyons (Cambridge, 1995) (hereafter *Epic*). The ‘Antara reference here is to sections 45–46.

⁶ *Epic*, 80–82.

names can at times be recast into European forms, but except in the case of Herakleios, who was well known to the Arabs, they can scarcely be related to real people. As for geography, it would be naive to base investigation on a fluid text whose details may be purely imaginary. All that is confirmed here is that the Mediterranean was known to lead to island, or peninsular, kingdoms, these being “the islands of the Franks” to which, according to Ibn Shaddād, Saladin hoped to extend the boundaries of Islam.⁷ Less common is the distinction drawn between Andalusians and Franks, while the reference to the languages spoken by the Andalusian king underlines a significant difficulty that the Arabs experienced with regard to Europe. At a time when Richard Coeur de Lion was easily able to have the captured draft of al-Harawī’s geographical work identified for him,⁸ the Muslims were complaining that they needed relays of interpreters for the interrogation of prisoners, each translating into a language that the next in the chain could understand.

In what may be thought of as the political content of the cycle, Byzantines and Persians are presented as natural rivals, each with their own client kings, who normally find it convenient to live at peace. Equilibrium in the region is upset by Franks, more formidable fighters than the Byzantines, who wish not merely to conquer but to colonize, and in this context Arabs are natural supporters of whoever opposes them. Here there are, of course, historical precedents, as when the Goths attacking Constantinople after the battle of Hadrianople in 378 A.D. were turned back by a so-called Saracen force,⁹ and it is true that the term “Franks” could apply in retrospect to Westerners in general, such as the Gauls at Āmid during its siege by Sapor. It must be suggested, however, that ‘Antara’s adventures do not merely reflect old memories, transmitted in part by the Qur’ān, of Byzantine/Persian wars. Rather, the formidable Western seafarers who acknowledge the emperor as “the king of Christendom” but are prepared to attack him and take his lands, are of a later vintage and their introduction reflects, if not the Crusades themselves, at least the disturbing influence that the Crusaders exerted on the balance maintained between Islam and Byzantium.

The *Sīrat Ḥamzat al-Pahlawān*, whose hero, a pre-Islamic Meccan paladin, is unhistorically represented as overthrowing the Persian Empire, is of less importance here. At an early stage of his career, Ḥamza is sent to collect dues from Persian tributary states, which include Aleppo, Tripoli, Beirut, Sidon, Tyre, and Acre.¹⁰ He is welcomed at Constantinople by the wise king Stephanos, and he then visits Greece and the country of Caesar, “king of the Rūmān.” He fights his way down the Levant coast and moves through Egypt to North Africa. Here he finds “The City of Andalus,” whose army helps him in a battle fought, surprisingly, against the Persians at Tangier.¹¹

Where geography is concerned, while Ḥamza’s Constantinople is correctly placed, Greece appears to lie to the east of the Aegean. Andalus is in the south of the Mediterra-

⁷ *Al-nawādir al-sultāniya*, ed. J. al-Shayyāl (Cairo, 1962), 22.

⁸ Al-Harawī, *Kitāb al-ishārāt ilā ma‘rifat al-ziyānāt*, ed. J. Sourdél-Thomine (Damascus, 1953), 3.

⁹ Cf. *Cambridge Medieval History*, ed. H. M. Gwatkin and J. P. Whitney (Cambridge, 1924–), 1:252.

¹⁰ *Epic*, 8 f.

¹¹ *Epic*, 15.

nean, and the capital of the Rūmān king is more likely to be Anatolian Caesarea than Rome. In this context the chief point of interest is that the Rūmān, unlike the Byzantines, are hostile to the Arabs, as are the cities of the Levant coast. Although these were among the territories recovered from the Persians by Herakleios, their resistance to Ḥamza would fit more appropriately into a distorted memory of the Crusades.

The published texts of the *Banī Hilāl* cycle can be dismissed briefly. The eponymous Hilāl is represented as one of the companions of Muhammad, and the fortunes of his clan are due in part to the defeat by one of his descendants of an invasion aimed at Mecca and led by a Byzantine emperor.¹² Later, Franks occur in an Arabian Nights–type story of a bride searching for her missing bridegroom who has been carried off from the coast by a party of raiders. Familiar folklore motifs dictate the development of the story, but reality intrudes where a Frankish leader says: “our prisoners herd pigs, grind salt, carry stones, and row ships,” a remark that would apply to both sides of the Mediterranean through centuries of piracy and conflict.¹³

The *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* is an extended paean of praise for the Banū Kilāb, who are represented as the only effective guardians of the northern frontier of the Islamic empire between the reigns of the Umayyad ‘Abd al-Malik and the ‘Abbāsīd al-Wāthiq. Within the text the framework of Islamic geography, from Khurasān to Andalus, is clear and reasonably accurate, and real sites mix with the imaginary on the eastern shore of the Dardanelles. Outside these borders, the story’s heroes travel south to Africa and east to the Indian Ocean, while to the west and north are lands where fact has been dislodged by fantasy. Sicily provides an obvious landfall on a passage to the west, but it is found to be within a fortnight’s voyage of a Christian kingdom that is itself a year-and-a-half’s journey from Constantinople. Greece is, not unreasonably, described as a land of narrow passes, but it also contains a forest frequented by lions and snakes.¹⁴ The forty Castles of the Sun, reached by ship from Anatolia and set in the seventh clime, may be on the Sea of Azov, if it can be thought that this was visited by Indian cotton merchants.¹⁵ The Island of Rūbīs is forty days’ sail from the Island of Mines, after which it takes two months to get to the Atlantic and the Farthest Cape, beyond which lies an island that exports both gold and pearls.¹⁶ In the north are found the Qarāzima, whose country is as far from the Land of the Slavs as Malatya is from Constantinople. Its roads are blocked by snow in the winter, but its ships are said to trade with both India and the West.¹⁷

This geography can at times be linked to religion. Thus islands in the far north are ruled by Magian kings, recalling al-‘Udhri’s description of Ireland as “the only (remaining) Magian base in the whole world.” The editor of Abū Ḥāmid of Granada, referring to a similar entry in Idrīsī, suggests a connection with what he calls “the German fire-cult,” and it may have acquired a racial rather than a religious significance by the

¹² *Epic*, 3.

¹³ *Epic*, 6–8.

¹⁴ *Epic*, 44 f.

¹⁵ *Epic*, 73.

¹⁶ *Epic*, 139.

¹⁷ *Epic*, 92.

time that it is applied to Normans in Sicily.¹⁸ In the *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, however, the Magians are fire-worshippers pure and simple. For the rest, all other European kings are Christians, and when Hīlūn, a king of the Franks, refuses to answer the summons of Emperor Manuel to join in an expedition against the Muslims, his mind is changed by an order from “the Patriarch.”¹⁹ In a similar incident, Kundafrūn—presumably a corruption of “the Count of . . .”—joins Manuel after having been threatened with excommunication. More remarkably, in the account of the country of the Qarāzima there is an apparent reference to the *homoousia/homoiousia* debate.

The historical account of relations between Islam and Europe starts with a romanticized version of Maslama’s attack on Constantinople in 717 A.D.,²⁰ while later Mu’taṣim’s capture of Amorium is correctly dated.²¹ For the rest, there is a seesaw pattern of unspecific raids, interspersed by periods of truce, but in all this it is clear that Byzantium enjoys favored enemy status. When Leon, whose name at least is borrowed from Leo III, is attacked by the king of Portugal, it is Fāṭima, the amazonian heroine of the cycle, who comes to his rescue,²² while the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd allies himself with one of Leo’s successors to fight Muslim rebels at Āmid.²³ The Franks, huge, clean-shaven men, are at times a formidable component of Byzantine armies. They are distinguished from the Venetians, who also give unhistorical support to the Byzantines,²⁴ while on their own Western ground Franks campaign without success in Spain.²⁵ The presence of a better-defined crusading stratum is indicated by the repetitive adventures of a series of Western, or specifically Frankish, kings. Of these the first is Baḥrūn,²⁶ who collects ten thousand ships for an attack on Constantinople, where he marries the emperor’s daughter before proceeding to march against the Muslims. Baḥrūn is followed by Armānūs from the Outer Isles,²⁷ who is joined by Syrian bedouin in his eastern campaign, and he is then deposed by the formidable Bohemond.²⁸ After Bohemond has fallen, yet another Frank, Mīlās, is instructed in a dream to rescue Jerusalem and to sit on the throne of Constantinople.²⁹ His venture is short-lived, but to end the series another, and more serious attack, is launched by Bohemond’s son, Michael.³⁰

The *Sīrat Baibars* is a conglomeration of narrative motifs each attached to one of the various narrative strands of which the cycle is composed. Of these strands, that of wonder tales has its own geography, the Land of Wonders itself being set beyond the territories

¹⁸ Al-Qazwīnī, *Athār al-bilād wa-akhbār al-‘ibād* (Beirut, 1960), 577.11.

¹⁹ Ed. C. E. Dubler (Madrid, 1953), 243; this work contains an excellent summary of what was known by Arab geographers and travelers of the geography of the West.

²⁰ *Epic*, 62.

²¹ *Epic*, 8 f.

²² *Epic*, 137 f.

²³ *Epic*, 53 f.

²⁴ *Epic*, 104, 170.

²⁵ *Epic*, 69.

²⁶ *Epic*, 111.

²⁷ *Epic*, 117.

²⁸ *Epic*, 142.

²⁹ *Epic*, 148.

³⁰ *Epic*, 163.

of Byzantium and Persia in a region where there are two suns and two moons.³¹ Elsewhere this geography is allowed to borrow familiar names. A galleon with a golden prow and a stern of silver carries Baibars in six months to England, where time is suspended so that, although he has been entertained for twelve years, he is returned to Alexandria on the day after he left.³² A second English episode introduces another Kundafrūn, Lord of all the English islands, who attacks Aleppo.³³

More generally, islands and distant lands are hostile to the Muslims. The queen of the archipelago of al-Manī‘a prepares a fleet with which to attack them,³⁴ and similarly, the king of the Islands of Gold demands the hand of the Byzantine emperor’s daughter as a preliminary to an eastern campaign.³⁵ Baibars is taken as a prisoner to the City of Snow near the land where the sun sets, and it is in his absence that Alexandria is attacked by a five-decked ship with seven masts, sent by the king of Seville, which is now found to be in Christian hands.³⁶

Ships, in fact, are of particular importance in this cycle, and the Muslims are fortunate to have the help of Abū Bakr of Tangier, a sailor “unique in his age,”³⁷ as well as a seafaring saint whose skiff miraculously tows a whole Muslim fleet.³⁸ This allows them to deal with a number of European cities which make their only appearance in the cycles. Thus Genoa is attacked three times;³⁹ and the city of Catalan, with its two harbors, is burned.⁴⁰ The kings of the Franks and of the Rūm are called to a crusading muster at Barcelona, which the Muslims proceed to capture.⁴¹ One of Baibars’ companions is sent to Rome to collect ransom money, and for his return journey narrative geography allows him, albeit with the loss of all but one of his force, to travel by land.⁴² Portugal supplies the story with a halfhearted villain who is eventually converted to Islam; its king pays tribute to Baibars and is only unwillingly and unsuccessfully led to oppose him.⁴³ Rhodes is ruled by a hostile cannibal.⁴⁴ Cyprus is one of Baibars’ tributaries,⁴⁵ and the Muslims retaliate against the holding of their captives in Macedonia by capturing its capital city.⁴⁶

The historical Baibars enjoys only an attenuated narrative strand in his own cycle. In this his questionable rise to power leaves him suspected of having murdered Tūrānshāh during St. Louis’ crusade, a charge the dead man himself is made to refute. Details of

³¹ *Epic*, 144.

³² *Epic*, 115 f.

³³ *Epic*, 168.

³⁴ *Epic*, 162.

³⁵ *Epic*, 199.

³⁶ *Epic*, 193.

³⁷ *Epic*, 62.

³⁸ *Epic*, 115.

³⁹ *Epic*, 41, 68, 104.

⁴⁰ *Epic*, 89.

⁴¹ *Epic*, 98.

⁴² *Epic*, 61 f.

⁴³ *Epic*, 99.

⁴⁴ *Epic*, 136.

⁴⁵ *Epic*, 208.

⁴⁶ *Epic*, 73.

the fighting at al-Manṣūra and Faras Kūr are given, but St. Louis himself has left no personal mark, the invaders being led by four unnamed Frankish kings, all of whom are killed.⁴⁷ Earlier in his career Baibars had fought against the Franks of Syria where, after a quarrel over the division of grain revenue, a Frankish leader Sarjawīl was captured in an abortive attack on Damascus and then allowed to ransom himself.⁴⁸ This same pattern of private feuding accompanied by a readiness to accept ransom or tribute is followed throughout the confused accounts of Syrian campaigns, where towns are taken from the Christians but are then promptly found back in their hands. These campaigns cover the whole of the Levant coast from Tripoli down to al-‘Arīsh, whose lord, Franjīl, buys immunity from al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ, who is on his way to confront the Mongols.⁴⁹

At the center of the pattern, both historical and geographical, is Aleppo. In the *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, enemy attacks follow the Byzantine invasion route down the Euphrates toward Baghdad. Here, however, the cycle’s heartland is Egypt. When Aleppo is attacked by the Mongols in the reign of al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ, who is represented as a saintly simpleton, it has to be explained to him that its loss will involve that of all Syria, from where the enemy will attack Egypt.⁵⁰ Antioch is used as a Christian base from which Aleppo can be threatened, on one occasion in conjunction with the Mongols.⁵¹ A more elaborate plan involves a synchronized strike from the sea against Alexandria and Damietta and a land attack on Aleppo,⁵² while immediately after Baibars’ death the king of Rome fails in an attempt to recover Antioch.⁵³

It would, of course, be easy to multiply such details, but there must be a limit to the acceptance of any such accumulation of faulty geography and distorted myth-history. It remains to be asked whether in evidence of this type there is anything that can be used to throw light on the relationship of the Crusades to the Muslim world, a relationship that has been dismissed by some scholars as insignificant, while elsewhere in recent approaches to the pope it has been magnified as a continuing source of friction between Islam and the West.

It is obvious that, for the storytellers, relations with the the European world begin with Byzantium, either as represented by its client-kings in Syria or by the splendor of Constantinople itself, and one stratum of the cycles clearly contains fossilized remains of the pre-Islamic Byzantine/Persian wars. Another holds maritime memories. Among these are landsmen’s tales that admit no difference between champions sitting on horseback in front of their armies or sailing out alone from their fleets to challenge their enemies. European sea power, however, based not only in vaguely described islands but in Venice, Genoa, and the Spanish littoral as far as Portugal, made it reasonable for the audiences throughout the period of the cycles’ development to welcome the general reassurance that here too the Muslims have the upper hand.

⁴⁷ *Epic*, 42.

⁴⁸ *Epic*, 10.

⁴⁹ *Epic*, 34.

⁵⁰ *Epic*, 33.

⁵¹ *Epic*, 123.

⁵² *Epic*, 203.

⁵³ *Epic*, 215.

Beyond this there are certainly remains of a crusading stratum, eroded though this may be. In the *Sīrat Baibars* it is made clear that the closure of the church of the Holy Sepulcher will provoke a Christian reaction.⁵⁴ After their abortive muster at Barcelona, the kings of Christendom are summoned to a holy war by the pope, who thus confirms his position as “the Messiah’s deputy.” St. Louis’ attack is neither more nor less serious than many others, but a more obvious threat is posed by the misplaced Franks in the *Sīrat ‘Antara*, specifically because they want to stay in Syria. Traces remain of the Latin Kingdom and the County of Tripoli in the towns held by Franks in the *Sīrat Baibars*, but for the storytellers Jerusalem itself is comparatively unimportant, being described baldly as “a noble place in which other prophets prayed as well as Muhammad.”⁵⁵ In fact, it is Constantinople and Egypt that are the prime targets for Frankish attacks.

Throughout all this, Europe and the Franks add piquancy to the conventional formulae of identification. The fictional Byzantines were scarcely ever allowed to be a serious threat to the Muslims, and so to maintain the interest of the audiences more impressive enemies were needed. In the *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, the bravest of the Franks, the grand duke, is “a very wicked and guileful man,”⁵⁶ but he comes low on the scale of strength and savagery in comparison with Bohemond, who imprisons his own father and can drive his fist clean through a man’s body from breast to backbone,⁵⁷ while another angry king crushes the skull of his son with his bare hands.⁵⁸ Queens are no less formidable, among them being Karna, who is strong enough to lift a camel,⁵⁹ and Miriam, who when displeased cuts through one of her own retainers with a single blow.⁶⁰ That even enemies like these can be defeated adds to the status of the cycles’ heroes and enhances the glories of Islam. But violent as they are, they represent elemental forces of aggression, which are matched by similar forces on the side of the Muslims—this being the point of the equation of Muslim Spain to the Latin Kingdom made by the contemporary polymath al-Qazwīnī.⁶¹ By contrast, the real villains are those who release these forces for their own ends, in the case of the *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* this being done by the recreant Muslim ‘Uqba, and in the *Sīrat Baibars* by the false Christian Juwān. In neither case are these men motivated by religion, but rather by a restless wickedness that impartially hates both sides and wants to destroy stable society.

For the external observer this underlines what appears to be an important point. The Muslims, as such, are distinguished from their enemies in the same general way that the Land of War is distinguished from the lands of Islam, and this distinction can be seen as an extension of Ibn Khaldūn’s loose principle of “group feeling.” It must be noted, however, that it is not the Muslims as a whole who repel Franks and Byzantines in the *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, but the clan of Kilāb, while similarly in the *Sīrat Baibars* the effective

⁵⁴ *Epic*, 36.

⁵⁵ *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* 268.

⁵⁶ *Epic*, 112.

⁵⁷ *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* 142.

⁵⁸ *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* 128.

⁵⁹ *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* 92.

⁶⁰ *Sīrat Baibars* 162.

⁶¹ *Athār al-bilād wa-akhbār al-‘ibād* (Beirut, 1960), 503.22.

groupings are those of the Kurds, followed later in the work by the *Ismāʿīlīs*. Historically, *Nūr al-Dīn*, and more particularly Saladin, tried to universalize “group feeling” by enlisting it in the service of a holy war. In propaganda terms the comparative failure of this attempt can be seen in the ungrateful reaction of the ‘Abbāsid caliph to the recovery of Jerusalem, a triumph that, in turn, has left no impression on the extant hero cycles. More immediately, when transferred to the battlefield, “group feeling,” as embodied in Saladin’s volunteers and his lightly armed bedouin, proved now to be of only limited use, the battles being won or lost by the contingents of highly trained cavalry and archers.⁶² In spite of the fictional *Kilābīs*, in practice we are no longer dealing with clans that are their own armies and still less with citizen forces such as those of the early Greek *poleis*. Warfare has become increasingly professionalized, and, as Saladin discovered early in his career, in such a context success depended on money.

Toward the end of his fictional career, Baibars is shown as suffering a series of disasters in an attempt to defend Aleppo from fire-worshipping Mongols. In spite of the danger, the Aleppans themselves are lukewarm in their support for him, saying that they will open their gates to whichever side wins. Baibars cannot reequip his troops, as his treasury is empty, and when he tries to raise money at Damascus for what is, after all, a war against the infidel, he is told: “you are a king. . . . Kings meet one another and fight for their positions, and we serve whoever is on the throne.” He is refused a loan by merchants who claim that this would upset their trade, and when as a last resort he decides to raise money by a tax, he is warned by the religious leader, the shaikh al-*Nūrī*, that this is unlawful. When he presses the point, al-*Nūrī* goes so far as to curse him, as a result of which he is temporarily blinded.⁶³ Although all this is fiction, the obvious point is that the audience is supposed to accept its verisimilitude.

It might be argued pragmatically that, although there must be some emotional validity in the self-identification of the cycles’ audiences with the heroes of Islam, money comes nearer to their own experience of reality. Thus the universal divide between rich and poor is underlined by the Cairene crowds in the *Sīrat Baibars*, who believe that “only the poor die; these kings have the water of life.”⁶⁴ On this line it could be suggested that the difference between the importance of the Crusades in the French *chansons de geste* and their limited role in the Arabic hero cycles depends directly on the difference of audience, comprising in the one case the consumers and in the other the producers of wealth. This, however, would be a dubious generalization, and a more fruitful line of investigation may be to add to identification the concept of identity.

The original building blocks of the hero cycles were the bedouin clans where the clan’s identity is a product of the individual clansmen who identify with it. In urban settings, the cycles show us that the place of the clan as a unit is taken by groupings organized in accordance with some common factor, such as district, guild, or sect, whose

⁶² The weight of the Crusaders’ charge, together with the length of their lances and their defensive armor, could not be countered, as *Imād al-Dīn* noted, by those who were without experience of Frankish fighting; *Kitāb al-faiḥ al-quṣṣī fī l-faiḥ al-Qudsī*, ed. Comte C. de Landberg (Leiden, 1888), 97.

⁶³ *Epic*, 188.

⁶⁴ *Epic*, 87.

sense of identity is strong, but for whom the importance of identification has been diluted.⁶⁵ In such a context, Europe and, by extension, the actions of the Europeans can be identified in terms of the general concept of the Land of War, within which there is little, if any, individual identity. The challenge to Crusader historians is to avoid being restricted to a similarly generalized identification in respect of Islam.

The preaching of the Crusades sought to rally the single, optimistically identified, entity of Christendom against Islam. With similar optimism Saladin's secretary, 'Imād al-Dīn, commenting on the threat posed by Frederick Barbarossa, wrote: "the Muslims will rise up for us."⁶⁶ Later, however, Saladin was forced to ask: "where are the Muslims? God forbid that they should be abandoning Islam."⁶⁷ In the same way that "Christendom," as a shared identification, failed to restrict the internal rivalries of the Crusaders, so contemporary Arab accounts confirm what is suggested by popular narrative, that the threat posed by the Crusades was not met by a united response, either among the competing leaders or at a lower social level, at which the Qādī al-Fāḍil complained of the prevalence of "acts of disobedience to God" and "the scent of sedition."⁶⁸

The society that confronted the Crusaders was a complex cellular structure. Translated into medical terms, the body of Islam was faced at this period with a serious threat from a virus that it could instantly identify as belonging to the category of "nonself." To counter this it employed defense mechanisms, which were, of course, already in place, but which now can be argued to have developed a form of gigantism that, in turn, removed them from the category of self to what approximated nonself. In other words, the effective defense against the Crusaders was provided, in the main, by non-Arabs, whether Turks, Kurds, negroes, or Mamluks. The hero cycles suggest that, although these groups were accepted, and appreciated, as fighting for Islam, they were not integrated into the main body of civilian society. The Mamluk Baibars, for instance, has to be provided with a noble Islamic pedigree to win acceptance, and in his cycle it is not the Mamluks but the Syrian Ismā'īlīs who show themselves to be the lions of Islam. The most popular, or specifically the most widespread hero of the cycles, is not an irresistible fighter but the poor man's friend, the Man of Wiles. In the same way that in the *chansons de geste* Charlemagne has an uneasy and at times hostile relationship with his paladins, so in the cycles orthodox authority in the form of the caliph or the sultan may fall out with Islamic heroes, and in these cases it is the Man of Wiles who is invariably, and invincibly, in the right.⁶⁹ This suggests that one effect of the Crusades was to provide a clear and immediate test of the emotional validity of a catchall identification of "Islamic" society, a test that proved negative. On a practical level they helped to develop, and perhaps to

⁶⁵ The account of Baibars' rise to power in his *sīra* gives a number of details of urban organization which tend to confirm this point. The inhabitants of the "ideal" urban quarter founded by Baibars have no tribal, racial, or specifically religious identification. Its identity has been superimposed on it by Baibars and shows itself through cooperation.

⁶⁶ *Kitāb al-faiḥ al-qussī fi'l-fatḥ al-Qudsī*, 216.

⁶⁷ Abū Shāma, *Kitāb al-rauḍatayn fi akhbār al-dawlatayn*, ed. M. H. M. Aḥmad and M. M. Ziyāda, 2 vols. (Cairo, 1956–62), 2:157.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 166; Ms. Munich 402, fol. 104.

⁶⁹ See above for Hārūn al-Rashīd's alliance with the Byzantines against al-Baṭṭāl, the Arab Maugis.

unbalance, its defense mechanisms. In general, the cycles suggest that for many social groupings the main fear was of an upset in the delicate social equilibrium that allowed them to maintain their own identity derived from or expressed in patterns of life that were set at a level below that of power, wealth, and culture. Fictionally the Crusades did not produce such an upset, but whether the military organization that they helped to produce, leading most obviously to the Mamluk state, intensified a “we and they” social dichotomy must be the subject of another inquiry. In turn this must cover on a wider basis of evidence the questions of identity and identification, insofar as these are both the products of any given society and among its most potent shaping forces.

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