



2012-054

Jay Rubenstein, *Armies of Heaven: The First Crusade and the Quest for Apocalypse*. New York: Basic Books, 2011. Pp. xiv, 402. ISBN 978-0-465-01929-8.

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Jay Rubenstein (Univ. of Tennessee) has added yet another volume to the growing library dealing with the Crusades, particularly the First Crusade, published since 9/11. Fortunately, *Armies of Heaven* is neither an anti-West justification for a modern Jihad in retaliation for the Crusades nor a plea for Christian unity in the face of the koranic imperative for the conquest of those not living under Islamic rule. Rather, Rubenstein argues that the First Crusade was nothing less than an apocalyptic event that initiated a “new phase in God’s plan” (xi) for the world.

The book is based primarily on the handful of extant contemporary and near contemporary Latin histories of the First Crusade. Rubenstein does not, however, sufficiently emphasize that many of them are often dependent upon each other. His method is to cull stories from these narratives, to which he claims to give “equal weight” (341), regarding putative omens, relics, and other quasi-religious phenomena in order to explain how the many thousands of men who took part in the Crusade and thousands of women and children camp followers experienced the posited apocalyptic events they witnessed.

Rubenstein’s policy is to treat as plain text the accounts he uses as “evidence” for “a sudden leap forward in salvation history” (xiv). Such an approach is inadvisable when dealing with obviously biased materials and highly unlikely to yield an accurate representation of the views and feelings of the writers he cites. He should have alerted his readers to each author’s prejudices, at least on key points. While extraordinary “dreams, visions, and miracles” may reflect the views of some contemporary historians, they are very doubtful evidence for the supposed apocalyptic feelings of actual participants in the Crusade. In short, the effectiveness of this presentation will depend upon each reader’s view of what constitutes proper historical method.

Rubenstein carefully sifts his sources for “evidence” to support his apocalyptic thesis. For example, in discussing the discovery of the Holy Lance at Antioch, he gives short shrift to Ralph of Caen’s “rationalist” version of events, which states that “Bohemond at once understood that this was an empty and false discovery and that the discoverer had acted falsely with false claims.” Bohemond, like a modern critic, is said to have observed that the Holy Lance cannot have been brought to Antioch—no historian records that either the soldier who stabbed Jesus or “Pilate ever came to Antioch.” Indeed, Ralph shows that the man who claimed to have found the Holy Lance was proved to be a charlatan.¹

Its dubious historical methodology aside, what does *Armies of Heaven* have to tell students of military history that is either new or interesting about the First Crusade? While it is heartening to read that the author has “As often as possible ... placed the progress of the army alongside the apparent progress of the Apocalypse” (xiv), the actual details of Crusader warfare do not much concern Rubenstein and recent scholarly works on grand strategy, military demography, logistics, and siege warfare generally are not cited. The lack of a proper bibliography makes it difficult to follow the references in his highly truncated endnotes. Moreover, military operations are covered in an indiscriminating scissors-and-paste account gleaned from those narrative texts, for example, Albert of Aachen and Baudri of Bourgeuil, that best suit Rubenstein’s fascination with the bizarre.

In chapters 2-4, the author’s effort to make sense of Pope Urban II’s grand strategy is summed up in the observation that “The plan was to meet in Constantinople... All of the Armies knew it” (55). Just how this happened does not interest Rubenstein, who overlooks that Urban, by sending Crusader armies to Constan-

1. See *The Gesta Tancredi of Ralph of Caen: A History of the Normans on the First Crusade*, ed. and tr. Bernard S. Bachrach and David S. Bachrach (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005) 120, 126-27.

tinople rather than Jaffa, contradicted the goal of capturing Jerusalem set out in his sermons. In fact, the pope's main war aim was to put a large western army in the environs of the Byzantine capital to convince the emperor Alexios to heal the schism in the Church by recognizing the religious supremacy of Rome. Rubenstein appears not to know that the pope could have sent an army of some twenty thousand effectives by sea to Jaffa and easily taken the ill-defended city of Jerusalem.²

Once the Crusade is underway (chapter 4, "The Road to Constantinople"), Rubenstein must deal with two exceptionally complex matters: military demography and logistics. His treatment of the former is confused and misleading: in general, he uncritically accepts at face value the figures provided in the narrative sources without considering their implications in terms of length of marching columns, the quality of roads, travel time, and supplies.³ Thus, he glibly observes that "Unlike modern warfare, medieval armies did not bring food with them" (56), contradicting his own later observation that the sources refer to baggage trains (61–62). Had he consulted the relevant modern studies of Crusade logistics, he would have known that armies of this era, like those of the earlier Middle Ages and the late Roman Empire, in fact carried large quantities of supplies. Even foot soldiers, the poorest of Crusaders, could carry enough biscuit and dried meat or fish to provide rations for a month or more.⁴

In regard to military demographics, not only in chapter 4, but throughout *Armies of Heaven*, Rubenstein is unmindful that ancient and medieval historians routinely inflate enemy force numbers in a David and Goliath topos that provides the greatly outnumbered home side either credit for amazing victories or a ready excuse for defeat.⁵ Oddly for a specialist in religious history, he also fails to recognize the symbolic meaning of the number 300 as standing for the cross, so that Crusaders who led precisely 300 men into battle were in effect accompanied by God. Instead, he simply accepts the number as evidence for the actual size of the units at issue.

In chapter 6, "The Nicene Deal," Rubenstein describes the siege of Nicaea. Strongly privileging Albert of Aachen's text, he does not accord due value either to other primary sources or to modern military historians' reconstruction of events based on all the relevant texts. He not only gets the chronology of the siege wrong, but fails to understand the Crusader siege fortifications—that is, the vallation (rampart construction) and contra-vallation of the landward parts of the city. Nor does he discuss just how the Crusaders acquired the large quantities of equipment and raw materials required to build their defense works and siege engines. Further, he exaggeratedly claims that Raymond of Toulouse himself commanded a force of forty thousand combatants at Nicaea. Finally, he treats neither the logistics system that undergirded the Crusader siege nor the ruse perpetrated by Byzantine naval assets on the Ascanian Lake. These are only some of his major delicts.⁶

Chapter 8, "Enemy Country," recounts the four-month march from Nicaea to Antioch, including the Battle of Dorylaeum, in fewer than fifteen pages. Due to his neglect of communications, speed of travel, and topography, Rubenstein provides little insight into the exceptional tactical importance of the pincer movement deployed by the Crusaders in this battle. His skimpy treatment of the complex and important details of Crusader operations during the march to Antioch exposes his lack of interest in and command of both the primary sources and the pertinent modern scholarly literature. Nothing of substance is said of the Crusader line of march, for example, along available Roman roads. Logistic arrangements are ignored, especial-

2. See, e.g., my "Papal War Aims in 1096: The Option Not Chosen," in *In Laudem Hierosolymitani: Studies in Crusades and Medieval Culture in Honour of Benjamin Z. Kedar*, ed. I. Shagrir et al. (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007) 319–43.

3. For an introduction to these topics, see, e.g., my "Early Medieval Military Demography: Some Observations on the Methods of Hans Delbrück," in *The Circle of War in the Middle Ages: Essays on Medieval Military and Naval History*, ed. D. Kagay and L.J. Andrew Villalon (Rochester, NY: Boydell Pr, 1999) 3–20.

4. See, in general, John H. Pryor, ed., *Logistics of Warfare in the Age of the Crusades* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006) and, specifically, my chapter therein on "Crusader Logistics: From Victory at Nicaea to Resupply at Dorylaion" (43–62).

5. Thus Herodotus (7.186.2) calculates Xerxes's invasion force in 480 BC as 5,283,220 strong!

6. For a recent discussion of these matters, see my "Some Observations on the Administration and Logistics of the Siege of Nicaea," *War in History* 12 (2005) 249–77, and "Some Observations on the Role of the Byzantine Navy in the Success of the First Crusade," *Journal of Medieval Military History* 1 (2002) 83–100.

ly the securing of enough fresh water to sustain tens of thousands of troops and many thousands of horses and camp followers. A sound evaluation of how many had to be fed and how provisions were arranged is critical to any understanding of Crusader planning and competence as well as Byzantine cooperation, which the Latin narratives try to hide.⁷

The next nine chapters, with a six-page excursus on Baldwin's operations in Edessa that lacks a serious military analysis, treat the eight-month siege of Antioch. Rubenstein obsesses here about the Crusaders' adoption of the Muslim custom of decapitating enemy prisoners and dead, apparently not knowing that contemporary Welsh Christians vigorously practiced this form of deterrence behavior. He is also distressed by the notion that starving Crusaders engaged in cannibalism, reports of which are but one of many topoi in the primary-source accounts of the Crusade. Had he properly assessed the biases of his sources and their methods, Rubenstein would have recognized the supposed lack of food as a narrative conceit meant to convey Crusader suffering en route to, during, and after the siege. Again, a careful examination of the size of the Crusader army and its logistics would have made Rubenstein more skeptical of grossly exaggerated claims about starvation and cannibalism.⁸

From the perspective of the military historian, the remaining chapters, on the capture of Jerusalem and the battles of Ascalon and Ramla, are even less useful than previous ones. Topography, military demography, logistics, and military equipment still do not get their due. What scant, unfocused consideration of the essentials of military operations there is here tends to be misleading. Consequently, the military historian may safely ignore *Armies of Heaven* or use it only as a foil to teach students what should *not* be done in writing about warfare.

7. See my "The Crusader March from Dorylaion to Herakleia," in *Shipping, Trade and Crusade in the Medieval Mediterranean: Studies in Honour of John Pryor*, ed. R. Gertwagen and E. Jeffreys (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012) 231–54.

8. See my "The Siege of Antioch: A Study in Military Demography," *War in History* 6 (1999) 127–46.