



The Crusader Armies: 1099–1187 by Steve Tibble.

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Review by Laurence W. Marvin, Berry College (lmarvin@berry.edu).

This book's title is likely to mislead potential readers. Steve Tibble's Crusader armies were not made up of religious zealots called upon by a pope to liberate Jerusalem and thereby earn themselves indulgences. They were, rather, forces assembled by pragmatic states and rulers who engaged in near-constant warfare: set up after the First Crusade, they were denizens of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem and its neighboring Christian-controlled principalities, living on islands in a sea of hostility. Lacking sufficient resources, they were slowly enveloped by various Muslim states, leaders, and armies during the twelfth century.

Tibble (Royal Holloway–Univ. of London) showcases the era of the Latin States' heyday, which ended after Saladin's army annihilated Latin-Christian forces at the Horns of Hattin (1187) and then recaptured Jerusalem. Thereafter, the Latin States' territory was confined to westerners hugging the Mediterranean coast rather than occupying large chunks of the hinterland.

Unlike most historians of the Crusades, Tibble concentrates on battles, campaigns, and strategy rather than sieges (treated only in chap. 1). His emphasis on the composition of field armies makes the book a welcome addition to the historiography. He acknowledges the debt he owes to trail-blazers like R.C. Smail¹ and his book does not entirely supersede studies by other scholars; it does draw on current historiography and explores novel lines of scholarly inquiry. In addition, the author makes good use of non-western-focused secondary sources and recent, as yet little used, translations of Arabic and Syriac primary sources.

The author argues that the Crusades did not play out as a Huntingdon-style "clash of civilizations"² along clear religious fault-lines. The true division was, he contends, between people living in stable agrarian and urban societies on the one hand, and nomads and immigrants, on the other. Of course, this is not an entirely new idea.³ European crusaders were themselves nomads and immigrants to the Eastern Mediterranean. But Tibble reminds us that the Turkic nomads who pushed their way into Syria in the eleventh century were outsiders, who posed equally grave, if not graver, threats to the settled, sedentary, mainly Muslim communities there decades before the First Crusade and even when the Crusaders shoe-horned themselves into the region after it. As the Latin Christian states struggled to hold their own during the twelfth century, Turkic-based armies under capable and ruthless leaders like Il-Ghazi, Nur al-Din, and especially Saladin, slowly displaced the old governments and took over Syria and Egypt. In so doing, they tightened a strategic noose around the Latin-Christian-controlled states. Their best soldiers—hardened, highly skilled light cavalymen—provided a superb but delicate spear point for armies facing western-style heavily-armored knights. Ironically, Tibble notes, the soldier elites of both societies were most likely to be immigrants to the region or their close descendants.

1. *Crusading Warfare, 1097–1193* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 1956; 2nd ed. 1995).

2. See *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (NY: Touchstone, 1996) 158–61, 174–79, 207–18, 254–72.

3. See, e.g., Archibald R. Lewis, *Nomads and Crusaders, A.D. 1000–1368* (Bloomington: Indiana U Pr, 1988).

The book's great strength is its detailed analysis of the types of armies of both sides. They were, Tibble shows, heterogeneous in function, ethnic and cultural background, and religion. The Latin States' field armies, for instance, deployed infantry drawn from local communities and mercenary forces. Heavily armored knights, either first or second generation European crusaders or immigrants, could mount irresistible charges as well as skillfully engage in hand-to-hand fighting. Though Latin field armies lacked speed, together knights and foot soldiers were quite effective against more mobile but more lightly armed Muslim armies.

Western forces adjusted to local conditions by incorporating mounted archers called "Turcoples" ("sons of Turks") to neutralize the Muslim advantage in that arm. Europeans had not produced such specialists, so their appearance in western armies in the Middle East was a clear innovation. All these various unit types were, certainly after a few decades, composed not only, or even mainly, of western Europeans and their descendants; they included various indigenous locals or others from farther afield. Thus labels like "western," "Christian," "Latin-Christian," and, most of all, "crusader," only imperfectly describe an ethnic and religious soup of Syrians, Palestinians, Armenians, Greeks, Arabs and, of course, some men of Frankish descent. Besides those from the West, many of the others were Christian but not Latin-Christian, and some were Muslim.

The same diversity held true on the Muslim side. Infantry units came mostly from Egypt and sub-Saharan Africa. Though predominately Sunni, they served a Shi'ite regime till 1171. Muslim armies made use of (highly unreliable) Bedouins as raiders and to conduct mop-up operations after battles. The *crème-de-la-crème* of Muslim field armies was their light cavalry horse-archers, mostly Turks or Kurds but also many Greeks, Armenians, and Arabs. Some had lived in the region for a generation or two but clung to their traditional style of fighting. Over the decades, Muslim commanders encouraged wealthier light cavalymen to arm and armor themselves more heavily to compete with Frankish knights, just as western armies increasingly used light cavalry. Tibble rightly stresses that no Christian or Muslim army was ever remotely homogeneous. Broadly Sunni Muslim armies included Armenian and Egyptian Christians as well. Hence, the allegiance of their soldiers was complicated compared to armies of other times and places.

In terms of its limitations, the book's often highly original analytical chapters alternate with standard narratives of particular battles fought after the First Crusade—the Field of Blood (1119), Mont Gisard (1177), and Hattin (1187). In these accounts, Tibble frequently leans heavily on one or two secondary or primary sources. In general, he devotes too much space to battle narratives, at risk of overwhelming his ostensible audience of general readers. And, too, many of the battles have been well described elsewhere.

Tibble enjoys debunking conventional wisdom, but tends to set up straw man arguments. He presents a stereotyped line of thinking about the Crusades, the Middle East of the day, or crusader warfare but never cites a relevant source or scholar (71, 83, 124, 178, 328, 345). For example, he writes that "The crusaders were, so the argument might run, a tiny group of invaders, loathed by the locals, trapped in their fortifications, and emerging only to brutalise their subjects" (178), but leaves us to wonder who, if anyone, ever said or thought this.

Despite these shortcomings, *The Crusader Armies: 1099–1187* is a worthy and sound contribution to the literature on its subject. In particular, its stress on the theme of nomads versus sedentary peoples is a refreshing alternative to the tired old notion of a titanic religious struggle between Christians and Muslims. Steve Tibble paints a compelling picture of continual systemic warfare between long-time adversaries who learned to adapt each to the other's strengths. The result is a salutary corrective to the outdated image of western Christian hordes hurling themselves at their Muslim counterparts.