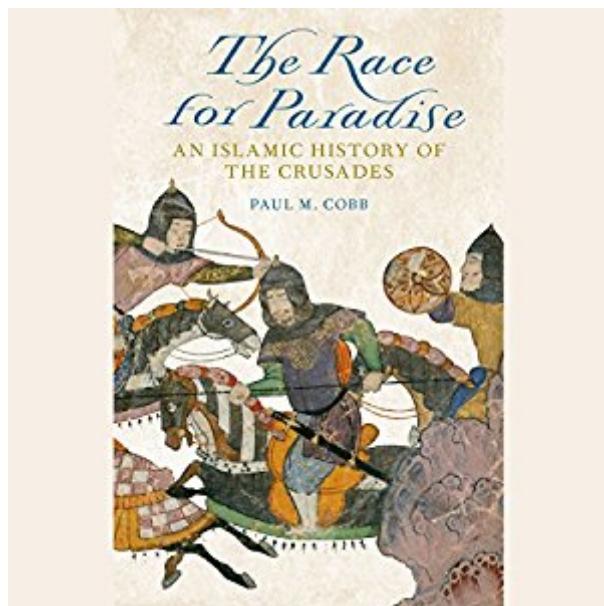


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# The Race For Paradise: An Islamic History Of The Crusades



## 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

Brilliant! A highly informed and riveting account of events that took place in the Near East eight centuries ago that continue to shape our world. Paul Cobb is a unique creature — a New Englander, who studied at the University of Chicago and teaches at the University of Pennsylvania, who learned to read documents which few Western scholars of what we call 'the Crusades' that few western scholars have troubled to consult. The results of all this research turned my understanding of the rift between the European world and the east around completely. Cobb's book is deep, provocative, healing and a terrific pleasure to read!

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. He also shows that Saladin, the great hero of Islam (and for good reason) spent perhaps as much time subduing rival Moslem States than he spent actually fighting the Christians. Another interesting, but much weaker, piece are the military, cultural and economic interactions and influences. It could have been interesting, for instance, to show to what

extent these conflicts influenced military architecture and to what extent trade continued, despite the conflicts, especially between the Italian Republics and North Africa and Egypt. These interactions, however, are not entirely explored and only partly discussed. Another strongpoint, however, is the author's clear descriptions and explanations of Islamic concepts related to Jihad, a Muslim's duties, political legitimacy, Muslim Community, Muslim law and its sources and a number of other key notions that help to create Islamic civilisation up to our days, and to understand how Muslims at the time might have perceived the Crusaders. In addition, the style is clear and rather engaging and the book is easy to read. Having praised this book, which is in fact the complement and opposite of one of John France's books (*The Crusades and the Expansion of Catholic Christendom, 1000-1714*), I also had a few reservations. A minor one is the existence of a couple of factual mistakes. For instance, and contrary to what the author claims, neither Kerak nor the Krak of Montreal fell to Saladin in 1182-83. They fell in 1188 and 1189, well after the disaster of Hattin (or the triumph of Hattin, from a Muslim perspective) after bitter sieges that last about a year in each case. However, Ely, and more generally the control of the road from Egypt into Syria and Damascus along the shores of the Gulf of Aqaba, were lost in the 1170s to Saladin, allowing him to conquer his rivals in Syria and deprive the Crusader States of potential allies. A slightly more serious point is that the author has little to say about the other Christians, starting with the Orthodox and the Byzantine Empire, and just about nothing about all the other Eastern Christians (Armenians, but also Maronites, Nestorians etc.). It would have been interesting to compare what Islamic sources had to say about them with how these sources (and the Eastern Christian sources) viewed the Latins. This, however, was slightly out of scope and not exactly the author's purpose, although it would have shown that the simple opposition between Latins and Muslims in the East is a bit simplistic. A final point is that, at times, I felt that the narrative was a bit too condensed or even rushed, presumably because of a page constraint imposed by the editor. To some extent, this is a bit of a pity, although it also means that I wanted more of it. Finally, there is a rather short annotated bibliography that the author terms a sketch but which contains many of the most recent titles on related topics. There are also, however, numerous endnotes that contain references with comments that are fit for anyone wanting to go further on some of the aspects that this book touches upon. Four strong stars.

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. There are lots of actors in Cobb's story, which gives it richness and makes it interesting. The anecdotes and stories show that civilizational differences really aren't so profound as we often assume . . . there is much continuity between societies engaged in the fundamentally similar pursuits called "life." Other useful bits: the maps are generally good; the note on Arabic names is very interesting as is the list of characters, which is also useful as a quick reference to maintain one's bearings in the narrative. The notes are remarkable for their completeness, accuracy and as a guide for future reading. I would have liked to see more in the bibliographic sketch, which is a good opportunity to see what an author thinks the state of the field is with regard to publications. So, you'll pick up this book to learn about the crusades, and you'll be rewarded with a lot more. Highly recommended.

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