

## **Medieval Christian Historiography of the First Crusade: Justification Through Narration**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines three Christian accounts of the First Crusade in order to examine how this literature served a political purpose in legitimizing the power of the Church at home and abroad. In support of current critical scholarship undertaken by Natasha R. Hodgson, Sophia Rose Arjanam, Marcus Bull, and Ernst Breisach, I argue that these accounts produce a narrative of the “Christian hero” and the “Muslim anti-hero,” which helps to portray the institution of the European church as righteous and benevolent. In this way, historical accounts of the Crusades work as what Giovanni Levi has called “a political weapon.” Nevertheless, this article also shows how accounts of the First Crusade are filled with tension; Christian writers sometimes oppose the binary narratives of “good” Christians and “bad” Muslims, and communicate more nuanced understandings of ethics, religion, and socio-political developments. In this way, I argue that accounts of the First Crusade must not just be understood as top-down religious propaganda, but also as products of individual opinions and experiences, leaving room for complexity and self-critique.

**keywords:** The First Crusade; Christianity; Islam; historical narrative;

The First Crusade is integral to understanding the origins of the relationship between Christians and Muslims in modern history.<sup>1</sup> For western Christians in particular, the event was a fundamental part of legitimizing a new relationship between religious and political authority. The First Crusade resulted in a massive chronicling of the Christian military history, which would be used by the Latin Church in its pursuit of seeking primacy in the power structures of Europe. As Natasha R. Hodgson argues, these writings should also be seen as a form of state propaganda aimed at creating a long-lasting narrative of Christian superiority over Muslims.<sup>2</sup> As such, studying early historiography of the crusades does not just help us understand how literature was used domestically to facilitate the growing power of the Church in Europe, but also how this writing was used to legitimize the assault on non-Christian populations in the Middle East. This research can aid in understanding how this event led to waves of destructive and violent crusades in the centuries to come and explores the roots of enduring hostility and fear between the Church and communities in the Middle East.

The three accounts I focus on in this article produce a narrative of the “Christian hero” and the “Muslim anti-hero,” which help to portray the institution of the European Church as righteous and benevolent. In this way, historical accounts of the crusades work as what Giovanni Levi has called “a political weapon.”<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, this article also shows how accounts of the First Crusade are also filled with tension; Christian writers sometimes oppose the binary narratives of “good” Christians and “bad” Muslims, and communicate more nuanced understandings of ethics, religion, and socio-political developments. In this way, I argue that accounts of the First Crusade must not just be understood as top-down religious propaganda, but also as products of

individual opinions and experiences, leaving room for complexity and self-critique.

This paper begins by providing a political and religious context for the First Crusade, as well as an analysis of contemporary practice in history-writing by Christians. It then discusses how Christian sources characterized Muslims and crusaders, revealing the politically and religiously tinged nature of their historiography. Finally, this paper rationalizes the differences within Christian accounts through the evaluation of the consistency of overarching themes present in each account.

The three Christian accounts interrogated by this paper were written by Fulcher of Chartres (d.1127), Robert the Monk (d.1120), and Guibert de Nogent (d.1124). Fulcher of Chartres and Robert the Monk participated in the Council of Clermont—the assembly in which the crusades were initiated—and provided descriptions of the major battles of the First Crusade. Fulcher of Chartres was a famous warrior, clergyman, and an advisor to Baldwin I. Historians believe he was educated at the Cathedral School of Chartres.<sup>4</sup> During the First Crusade, he reached Jerusalem where he remained for the rest of his life, serving as a chaplain, joining further military campaigns and completing his chronicle of the First Crusade.<sup>5</sup> Fulcher of Chartres’s chronicle is considered to be one of the most realistic depictions of the First Crusade by contemporary historians.<sup>6</sup> Unlike Fulcher of Chartres, Robert the Monk’s real identity is dubious, but he is believed to have been part of the monastery of St. Remi in France.<sup>7</sup> Some scholars suggest that his writings of the First Crusade were guided by his abbot, and therefore the focus of his piece was on constructing a narrative more than an unbiased recounting of events. He describes the battles of the First Crusade from the point of view of a soldier.<sup>8</sup> Guibert de Nogent was a French historian, an abbot, and later a

theologian, and his book uses the most hostile language of all three pieces.<sup>9</sup> This paper analyzes the portrayal of Muslims in these Christian sources, as well as their self-characterization in context of military encounters.

### **Background: Political and Religious Context**

The First Crusade was the result of political and religious tensions that had accumulated since the collapse of the Roman Empire.<sup>10</sup> In the seventh century, the Carolingian Frank dynasty dominated western Europe, while the Isaurian dynasty gained control over the Byzantine Empire in eastern Europe. Each of these dynasties was affiliated with a different church. Over the course of the next few centuries, threats from non-Christian forces, including Muslims from the east and Scandinavian tribes from the north, helped consolidate alliances within the realm of Christendom. The domination of the Church in regard to formation of states and legal systems continued to grow up until the First Crusade, when the papacy had achieved enough political authority to initiate conflict on behalf of western Christendom against perceived external threats.<sup>11</sup>

Over time, political and religious developments in Europe and the Near East culminated in the First Crusade. For one, the threat of Islamic expansion was becoming more pressing for many Christian leaders both in eastern and western Europe, as the followers of Muhammad spread across the Levant, Anatolia, North Africa, and Iberia.<sup>12</sup> In 1071, one of the newly-formed Muslim dynasties, the Seljuqs, defeated the crumbling Byzantine empire in Manzikert. This allowed the Seljuqs to establish control of what had previously been considered Christian land. The loss of land to the Seljuqs was later used by the western Church to

justify the First Crusade as a means of protecting the eastern borders of Christendom, which in turn required crafting an ideological narrative that appropriately vilified Muslims in order to justify the holiness of the military endeavor.<sup>13</sup> Although the loss of Christian lands to Muslims primarily affected the Byzantine and Levantine Church, the Latin Church soon became involved, responding to eastern calls for a military campaign to take back Christian lands. Western motivations for this alliance were multiple: the Latin Church both wanted to project and extend its power in Europe and grow its influence over the eastern Churches.<sup>14</sup>

Beginning in the late eleventh century, a Christian campaign outside of Europe was called by several popes. In 1074, a letter from Pope Gregory VII was sent to the king of England, Henry IV, demanding military action against Muslim aggression towards the struggling Byzantine empire: “Aided by the prayers of all Christian men, are under compulsion to go over there for the same faith and for the defense of Christians.”<sup>15</sup> These ideas were repeated by the papacy in subsequent decades. In 1095, Pope Urban II gave a speech in Clermont, France where he began to call for a crusade. Initially, the enthusiasm of Pope Urban II gave rise to several unorganized, spontaneous campaigns by mobs known as “the People’s Crusade.”<sup>16</sup> This crusade—ostensibly led by a priest known as Peter the Hermit—resulted in the massacre of thousands of Jews in Eastern Europe in 1096. In 1097, the first formal crusade to the holy land started. Following an extensive recruitment campaign led by Pope Urban II, tens of thousands of men (and to a lesser extent women)—most of whom were peasants—gathered under the lead of several notable princes and members of the European high nobility to head for the holy land.

The First Crusade consisted of a series of wars and campaigns targeting different sites in the eastern Mediterranean. Initially, the crusaders moved through towns in the Eastern Byzantine empire, eventually arriving at Antioch to siege the city.<sup>17</sup> Antioch stood strong, resulting in shortage of supplies for the crusaders, damage to their morale and crusaders fleeing the battlefield. Amidst the siege, Bohemond the Crusader managed to convince the head of the city's guards to sneak the crusaders in. In the middle of the night, crusaders stormed and captured the city using ladders. The crusaders used Antioch as a base to hold off the wave of Muslim reinforcements, becoming besieged by Kerbogha, the Turk *atabeg* ("governor") of Mosul.<sup>18</sup> Overcoming Kerbogha, moving through Marrat an-Numan and Arqa, the crusade army arrived at its final destination Jerusalem. The clash in Jerusalem was a victory for the crusaders. Finishing in July 1099, it resulted in a devastation of the Muslim armies and the city's population.<sup>19</sup> The crusaders promptly established the kingdom of Jerusalem. The news about the capture of Jerusalem was celebrated in Europe and made the First Crusade as an astonishing military and political success for the Church.<sup>20</sup>

### **Christian Writing Practices at the Time of the First Crusade**

Beginning in the tenth century, western Christian European historians were known for their effort in producing world-history chronicles. These chronicles are characterized by Ernst Breisach as "world chronicles," and feature a combination of biblical and religious history, military and political narratives, and moral and spiritual lessons.<sup>21</sup> In the early eleventh century, these chronicles started to be appreciated as a powerful weapon in the struggle for power

between the pope and European kings. Both the papacy and European kings offered patronage to historians in order to produce literature that would support their struggle for political authority. The papacy sought to promote its political autonomy by shifting the focus of historians to, *inter alia*, the history of the church, the admiration of warriors and noble values, and the promotion of anti-imperial ideas.<sup>22</sup> European kings used court historians to promote historiography that favored imperial ideas and ordered the issues of biographies to serve as examples for proper Christian life.<sup>23</sup>

Towards the end of the eleventh century, this historiographic feud came to a halt, as did the popularity of "world chronicles."<sup>24</sup> The initiation of the First Crusade brought a new opportunity for western European Christian writers to record a unified Christian history instead of choosing sides in the conflict between kings and the papacy. Instead of focusing on European political order, many western Christian historians emphasized the bravery of crusading knights and their holy goal, narrating the story of the First Crusade.<sup>25</sup> Originating in Latin-Christian culture between 800-1200 CE, literature produced within this genre was not aimed at making an accurate reconstruction of the past, but rather at showing how God's will is expressed through the deeds of Christian soldiers and nobles.<sup>26</sup> The First Crusade and its outcomes perfectly suited this theme. The chronicles that were written by Church clerics and monks gave divine legitimacy to Latin Church authority over newly conquered territories.

### **Characterization of the Self: The Christian Hero**

Through their accounts of the First Crusade Fulcher of Chartres, Robert the Monk, and

Guibert de Nogent all contributed to the formation of a new Christian post-world chronicle literature. A central tenet of this literature was the perception of the heroic Christian self. The figure of the hero has been an essential motif and character in Western literature since the time of the first Greek epics in the early Archaic period (ca. 800-500 BC).<sup>27</sup> This style of Greek epic seems to have been adopted by medieval Christian writers, who appear to share a similar theme and language to those in Greek epics, constructing a figure of the “Christian hero.” This includes telling history in extravagant language, emphasizing the influence of the Gods on historical events, and portraying superior characters that performed heroic deeds. Indeed, the “Christian hero” was not only a hero because of his bravery in battle, but also due to divine obligation and motivation; punishing the heathens in the name of God and helping brethren in faith. The features of the Christian hero in the stories of the First Crusade formed a character that is unquestionably righteous; the perfect representation of the Church. I argue that the Greek epics style that is used in the chronicles of the First Crusade might have been chosen to increase their popularity with readers and to glorify the deeds of crusaders.

In all sources analyzed, the figure of the Christian hero is immediately introduced by the authors through their reference to the 1095 speech delivered by Pope Urban II. The speech, which is used as an opening quote by all three writers, was delivered by the Pope in Clermont, France, and discusses the importance of helping the brethren in faith in the East, which are the Christians under the rule of the Byzantine empire. In it, Pope Urban II called for defending Christianity against Muslim oppressors and recapturing the Holy Land:

Concerning this affair, I, with suppliant prayer—not I, but the Lord—exhort you,

heralds of Christ, to persuade all of whatever class, both knights and footmen, both rich and poor, in numerous edicts, to strive to help expel that wicked race from our Christian lands before it is too late.<sup>28</sup>

Pope Urban II’s speech encompasses the papacy’s characterization of Muslims as aggressors and Christians as heroic, divinely-sent defenders even before the First Crusade took place. As such, the authors identify to their readers that the Christian crusader is a hero risking his life to fight evil.

When it was first delivered, the Clermont speech had a strong and immediate impact on the crowd and on all of Christian Europe. In his chronicles, Fulcher of Chartres describes how this speech influenced the crowd—“the audience inspired to enthusiasm... thinking that nothing could be more worthy, at once promised to go.”<sup>29</sup> It is therefore clear why all the writers open their chronicles about the First Crusade with this speech. The original speech was part of an institutionalized programme of propaganda aimed at justifying violence in the Middle East, which allowed the Christian writers to use the speech to set the scene for a Christian hero fighting against the Muslim threats.

As the Christian chronicles continue their depiction of the First Crusades, the heroic qualities of the Christian fighter are continuously reasserted. For one, all three writers go to great lengths to describe the crusaders’ fighting spirit. Fulcher of Chartres, for instance, writes that in the last battle of Antioch, crusaders won the battle despite their exhaustion and lack of supplies:

Everybody, placed in such great need and stress, blessed and glorified God in a voice of exultation, God, who in the righteousness of His compassion liberated those trusting in Him from such savage enemies.<sup>30</sup>

In comparison, the account of Robert the Monk is copiously richer with admiration of the heroic crusader’s fighting spirit:

Our men virtually confined to their tents up to this point, found fresh reserves of courage and revenge themselves on the enemy for their wounds and serious injuries.<sup>31</sup>

This enthusiasm is shared by Guibert De Nogent who also applauds the bravery of the Christian soldiers, describing how “closely packed and filled with courage, our troops went to fight, each man encouraging the other by his close presence.”<sup>32</sup> In addition to the stamina and fighting spirit of the Christian crusaders, the surveyed sources highlight the courage shown by crusaders on the front-line. Fulcher of Charles documents how the crusaders keep on fighting fearlessly despite facing certain death based on the description of siege of Jerusalem:

Then a few but brave soldiers, at a signal from the horn, climbed on the tower. Nevertheless, the Saracens defended themselves from these soldiers and, with slings, hurled firebrands dipped in oil and grease at the tower and at the soldiers, who were in it.<sup>33</sup>

The description of a collision between Crusaders of great valor and petrified enemies appears frequently in the chronicles of the First Crusade. In Robert the Monk’s account, Muslims are portrayed as fearful of the crusaders:

The Christians gloried and exulted in the knowledge; to the Persians and Arabs it brought fear and trembling. The courage of the former grew; the latter were paralyzed with fear.<sup>34</sup>

These descriptions of the fearful enemy and the brave Christian soldiers are also apparent in the writings of Fulcher of Chartres. In one account, he describes the following battle between Turks and Franks:

But fear having been let loose from heaven against [the Turks], as if the whole world had fallen, all of them took unrestrained flight, and the Franks chased them with all their might.<sup>35</sup>

Both sources’ perspectives on the fear of the Muslim enemy and the courage of the crusaders match the military achievements of the First Crusade, each seizing the opportunity of a victorious battle to elevate crusaders’ heroism and exaggerate the enemy’s fear.

Christian sources of the First Crusade also highlight the bravery of their soldiers through a “looking-glass self” writing style, in which they discuss how Muslims perceive Christians. This writing style was not only useful for Christian writers to glorify crusaders bravery but also to demoralize the Muslim armies they faced. This rhetoric was expressed via letters, speeches and private conversations that Muslim leaders and soldiers allegedly communicated to each other about the crusaders. Robert the Monk, frequently uses the looking-glass self to depict courage and bravery. The first notable appearance of this reflection starts before the battle of Antioch, when he describes Kerbogha, the *atabeg* of Mosul, in preparation for the arrival of the crusaders to Antioch. Initially, Kerbogha is described mocking crusaders’ swords and their ability to win. This description is paired with a quotation of Kerbogha in which he claims that the Christians are an arrogant race that falsely believe that they can beat his army: “They are a presumptuous race and too ambitious for the possessions of others.”<sup>36</sup> Later, however, Robert the Monk quotes a supposed dialogue between Kerbogha and his mother, where she warns him not to go to war with the Christians because the strength of their God and the superiority of the Frankish race: “You [Kerbogha] have no experience of the strength of the God of the Christians, and especially of the race of the Franks.”<sup>37</sup> In this way, and as pointed out by Natasha R. Hodgson, this fictitious dialogue was used by Christian writers to justify Christian superiority. Hodgson explains that the attention Christian writers give to

Kerbogha's mother's warnings demonstrate how Christian writers narrated her character as "a mouthpiece for propaganda on crusading."<sup>38</sup> Christian writers were infatuated with documenting themselves as heroes, protecting their religion and joining forces for a "divine" goal.

### **Characterization of the Other: The Corrupt Muslim**

The image of the Christian hero is not solely produced through depictions of bravery and religious zest, but also through its juxtaposition with the image of a dehumanized, immoral, and corrupt Muslim. As Sophia Rose Arjana discusses in *Muslims in the Western Imagination*, representation of Muslims as villains in Christian writings in the past was part of a political ideology in which "Muslims [were] presented as a related enemy that helped to constitute European identity—the shadow of an age-less ghost."<sup>39</sup> In this way, writers of the First Crusade relied heavily on producing a negative image of Muslims to describe and understand themselves.

#### *Zoomorphic Language and Barbarism*

In accounts of the First Crusade analyzed in this paper, the writers each employ a shared set of literary techniques to dehumanize their enemy. First, they tend to describe their enemy using zoomorphic language. In his description of the battle for Jerusalem, for example, Fulcher of Charters describes Muslim soldiers as obedient animals to their leaders:

You should have seen the animals which had been captured, as if at a signal from the leaders, march in a straight line on the left and right of the battle lines, although herded by no one.<sup>40</sup>

Robert the Monk also uses zoomorphic language when describing Muslim soldiers in battle:

When they get ready for attack, they come forward in disciplined ranks... silenced as if they were dumb. But when they reach their enemies, they then rush forward to attack, slacking the reins, as if they were lions raging with the hunger of starvation and thirsting for the blood of animals.<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, Robert the Monk writes a story about a howling Turkish Sultan, likening his screams with that of an animal.<sup>42</sup>

Christian writers also promoted the notion of the animalistic Muslim through highlighting "barbaric" behavior and characteristics. Often times, this bestiality was expressed through hypersexuality. This is typical in the literature advocated by the Church that used the idea of immoral sexuality as a very powerful tool against Muslims and Jews. As Edward Said argues, a "bad sexuality" has historically been ascribed to Arab men by western writers and is an integral part of an Orientalist gaze that can be traced back to the Classical period in Ancient Greece.<sup>43</sup> In this context, Guibert de Nogent's writing provides several depictions of Muslim's sexual matters. For instance, he describes infidelity in marriage, prostitution of virgins, and the rape of men as integral to Muslim society:

They took virgins and made them public prostitute, since they were never deterred by shame or felling for marital fidelity... According to their own judgment, this wretchedness may have many women, that is not enough, but they must stain their dignity at the hog-trough of such filth by using men also.<sup>44</sup>

Notably, raping women was not seen by Guibert de Nogent to be as immoral as raping men. He sums up his point of view on Muslims by stating that "they became worse than animals."<sup>45</sup> The hypersexualization of the Arab men in the First Crusade chronicles

clearly resembles rhetoric used by modern Orientalists and shows how this historic discourse affected contemporary Western perceptions.<sup>46</sup> Robert the Monk uses similar language when he quotes a letter that was supposedly sent to a high ranked crusader about horrific acts Turks committed against Christian populations, claiming that “[the Muslims] rob and mock noble women and their daughters, taking turns to defile them like animals.”<sup>47</sup> The letter also notes that Muslims enjoy circumcising Christian boys and raping men and children. In this way, Guibert de Nogent and Robert the Monk depict Muslim men as sexually immoral beings that are products of a sexually immoral society.

Another barbaric quality attributed to Muslims is that of greed. In the Christian accounts, Muslim greed for gold and silver was a central and reoccurring theme. In Guibert de Nogent’s writings, for example, he describes Muslims cutting the stomachs of pilgrims’ corpses to find out if they had swallowed gold.<sup>48</sup> In Robert the Monk’s account, the writer supposedly quotes the defeated Emir of Babylon. In this speech, the Emir cries for his loss of the battle against the crusaders. It appears from the speech that what interested the Emir more than the loss of lives and the loss of Jerusalem is the loss of money. He expressed grief and sorrow for the cost he paid in vain. Moreover, in his cry, the Emir shares details about the so-called shrine of Muhammad—“O Mohammed... who has ever invested more in the magnificence of your worship with shrines ornate with gold and silver?”<sup>49</sup> In this way, the Christian writers depict Muslims as fixated on money rather than expressing grief.

#### *Anti-Christian Nature*

Christian writers also seek to produce the Christian hero and the Muslim anti-hero by depicting the latter as positioned as far from

religious enlightenment as possible. First, the written accounts analyzed in this paper highlight the ways in which Muslim rulers and populations mistreat Christians. Fulcher of Chartres points out that the ruler of Antioch saw the Christian inhabitants of the city as a threat: “The Turks hated these Christians, for they feared that somehow the latter might assist the Franks against a Turkish attack.”<sup>50</sup> In his book, Fulcher of Chartres writes that when the Armenian population under Islamic rule saw the crusaders, they rejoiced.<sup>51</sup>

The idea of Christian imprisonment by Muslim overlords was a common topic amongst Christian writers. Christian prisoners were considered to suffer greatly at the hands of their barbaric capturers, and the authors argue that crusaders are better-off dying than being imprisoned by Muslims. Guibert de Nogent, for example, maintains that the Christian soldiers that died in battle had a better fate than those that survived and ended up as prisoners. He reasons his argument by further explaining that the Christian captives were either killed, became slaves under the “cruellest masters” or were forced to convert:

the faithful who died received in exchange eternal life, while those who survived led lives wretchedly bound by the yoke of slavery, harsher I believe, than what those who died endured.<sup>52</sup>

The Christian writers’ alarming descriptions of imprisonment by Muslims might be the outcome of stories told by soldiers that survived captivity, or the outcome of a lack of actual knowledge that sparked rumors and excited the writers’ imagination. Moreover, it is possible that in order to prevent conversion and promote courage in battle, Christian writers, influenced by Church propaganda, tried to convince crusaders that it was preferable and more dignified to die in battle.

Furthermore, Muslims are often characterized as having a special hatred for

Christianity. For instance, in the account of Robert the Monk, the writer describes the battle of Ashkelon that took place in the summer of 1099. He gives an explanation of why Muslim rulers decided to fight against the Christian forces, claiming that “[t]he root of all malice hoped thus to destroy all the Christians and their city and to eradicate all the memory of the sculpture of the lord.”<sup>53</sup> Robert the Monk extends his argument by explaining that Jerusalem bears no religious importance to Islam. As mentioned in his writings, the only reason why Muslims want to fight for Jerusalem is to destroy it. In order to convey this message, Robert the Monk quotes the supposed words of the defeated Emir of Babylon that led the Muslim forces in Jerusalem: “O Jerusalem, whore and adulteress of cities, if you ever fall into my hands I shall raze you to the ground and destroy the Sepulcher of the One buried in you.”<sup>54</sup> Here, the idea of a Muslim threat to Jerusalem has also an important role in presenting crusaders as protectors of Jerusalem.

Finally, to highlight the heathenism of Muslims, Christian writers also sought to patronize and delegitimize their religious beliefs. For instance, although the Prophet Muhammad is mentioned many times as the most important figure of his religion, the Christian sources are filled with demoralizing descriptions of Muhammad. This specifically appears in the writings of Guibert de Nogent who presents Muhammad as a false prophet whose divine visions are in fact epileptic seizures: “He [Muhammad] often suffered terribly while the terrified prophets watched his eyes turning upward, his face twisting, his lips foaming, his teeth grinding.”<sup>55</sup> Guibert de Nogent also repeatedly misspells Muhammad’s name—seemingly on purpose—and claims to not remember it: “whose name, if I have it right, was Mathomus.”<sup>56</sup> In his account of the battle of Antioch, Robert the Monk also belittles

Muhammad by claiming that he cannot resurrect Muslim soldiers that died in battle as their fate was determined by Jesus.<sup>57</sup> Christian writings thus established Muhammad as an enemy of Christianity, legitimizing their attack on Muslims.<sup>58</sup>

### **Tension in Christian Writing**

Although the overarching narrative of the Christian hero and the corrupt Muslim seeps through in all accounts of the First Crusade surveyed for this article, depictions of either group are not always so black-and-white. In many instances, Christian writers show a more dynamic understanding both of the self and the other. For one, Muslim opponents are sometimes described positively. Guibert de Nogent, for instance, shows an understanding and appreciation of politics in the Muslim world. He specifically highlights the Turks as an important and developed nation amongst Muslims, explaining that the Turks are superior in military matters, horsemanship, and courage: “the kingdom of the Parthians, whom we, because of changes in the language, call the Turks, is pre-eminent in military matters, in horsemanship, and in courage, although it is a very small country.”<sup>59</sup> Similarly, Fulcher of Chartres also glorifies Turk soldiers in the battle of Antioch, emphasizing their fighting spirit despite their loss in the battle.<sup>60</sup> In another chapter of his book, Fulcher of Chartres describes a noble Turkish knight that bravely led his soldiers in the battle against the crusaders in Antioch.<sup>61</sup> In a specific instance, he also describes the crusaders’ retreat from a battlefield because of Turks’ archery skills: “the Turks were howling like wolves and furiously shooting a cloud of arrows. We were stunned by this... We soon took flight. Nor is this remarkable because to all of us such warfare was unknown.”<sup>62</sup> Muslim bravery is also mentioned by Robert the

Monk, who describes the Turks he encountered in one of the first battles of the crusade as “boldly attacking”; by using scouts, the Turks managed to optimally time their attack on the crusaders in a castle near Nicaea.<sup>63</sup> Impressed, he further explains that the Turks won the battle by cutting off the crusaders’ water supply.<sup>64</sup> In the account of Fulcher of Chartres, the writer praises Turk archers and mentions them several times.

As Marcus Bull proposes, the frequent accolades of the Turks in accounts of the First Crusades may be due to the fact that some writers would have considered them distantly akin to the Franks.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, the accounts under study sometimes point to a latent Christian nature in the Turkish fighters. Fulcher of Chartres, for instance, tells a story about a Turk that cooperated with the Christian forces in the battle of Antioch. This Turk dreamt that the “Lord of Christians” told him to help the crusaders against his own people and so he did.<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless, the instances of praise for Muslims, whatever the motivation, is a testament to the ability of Christian writers to portray Muslim communities not solely as barbaric.

There are also instances of Christian writers portraying the crusaders in a negative light. This is particularly so in the writings of Fulcher of Chartres, who often goes to a great extent to criticize the Christian mission, in a way that Ernst Breisach calls “less enthusiastic reporting.”<sup>67</sup> For example, Fulcher of Chartres describes the manipulation of Christian soldiers by a Christian religious figure that planted the holy lance in Antioch and fibbed a vision of its finding.<sup>68</sup> Muslim accounts corroborate the story of Fulcher of Chartres.<sup>69</sup> In addition to the story of the lance, Fulcher of Chartres attests to many instances where crusaders behaved dishonorably and cowardly. He provides first-hand examples of crusaders fleeing the battlefield, describing how

some of our men as you have heard about withdrew from a siege which was so difficult, some from want, some from cowardice, some from fear of death, first the poor, then the rich.<sup>70</sup>

He also bluntly criticizes the behavior of some leading crusaders:

Then Stephen, Count of Blois, left the siege and went home to France by sea. We all grieved on this account because he was a very noble man and was mighty in arms...If he had preserved he would have greatly rejoiced with the rest, for what he did was a disgrace to him.<sup>71</sup>

In addition to pointing out unheroic deeds of the crusaders, Fulcher of Chartres portrays extremely vividly the immoral and gruesome acts his fellow crusaders committed due to the starvation they faced. In one particularly horrific scene, he describes that the famine during the siege of Ma’arra was so severe that it led to cannibalism where Christian soldiers ate “the flesh of Saracens.” This is an example of the realistic nature of Fulcher of Chartres’s account and his unyielding way of describing the negative features of the First Crusade.

In most accounts surveyed for this article, the relative status and appreciation of Muslims and Christians also shift over time as the narrative progresses. Throughout the battles of the First Crusade, the writings of Robert the Monk and Fulcher of Chartres fluctuate between using demoralizing language when speaking of Muslims to more neutral or even positive terms. In these two accounts, we can discern a clear trend. When the crusaders lost in battles, feared for their fate, and starved due to successful Muslim tactics, Christian perceptions of the Muslim enemy became neutral, and even positive. However, when the crusaders accomplish a military objective, their negative perceptions of the Muslim enemy intensify. In these cases, the writers attempt to point out differences and fueled a sense of Christian superiority.

Nevertheless, although all accounts show a tendency to depart from the Christian hero/corrupt Muslim binary, the extent to which these employ a nuanced analysis of the Crusades differ between writers. Guibert de Nogent, for instance, always depicts the crusaders as superior to their Muslim enemy in battle, and Fulcher of Chartres' account often comes across as the most self-reflective and critical. In this context, the personal lives of these Christian writers have to be taken into account in order to understand how it affected the shaping of each book. Fulcher of Chartres, for instance, was well educated and also enjoyed high social and political status, basing his career in the Christian kingdom of Jerusalem.<sup>72</sup> His status and his established position in Jerusalem, might have given him the opportunity to be more independent in his writing. Indeed, unlike the chronicles of Robert the Monk and of Guibert de Nogent, Fulcher of Chartres's account was not written in Europe, and his physical separation from the Church is likely to have also been accompanied by a separation in knowledge production. Moreover, Fulcher of Chartres directly participated in the battles of the First Crusade, which might have contributed to his relatively more realistic and nuanced narration of the Christian mission.

Similar to Fulcher of Chartres, Guibert de Nogent's account—which appears more aggressive and argumentative in its conviction of the Christian mission and superiority—can also be explained by an analysis of his life. Guibert de Nogent was a theologian and historian who worked as an abbot in an abbey in northern France.<sup>73</sup> His style of writing and use of language suggests that he was well educated, and that he did not participate in the First Crusade.<sup>74</sup> In this way, it is not surprising that his account is more one-sided in its descriptions, as this is likely to be the message the church would want to communicate. At the same time, the writing of Guibert de Nogent also seems to have

departed from Church standards. Compared to other accounts of the First Crusade, his writing stands out in its engagement with the history and culture of the Muslim world. Marcus Bull argues that this interest made Guibert de Nogent's book unpopular with the Church in the early days after its publication,<sup>75</sup> most likely because the Church actively tried to minimize any interest in Islamic history and culture.

## **Conclusion**

This article has looked at how Christian historical writers conceptualized the First Crusade. The accounts analyzed for this purpose reflect the adoption of ideologies that were compatible with legitimizing violence against Middle Eastern communities on behalf of the Church. In particular, this often took the form of a hero versus anti-hero narrative, in which Christian writers portrayed the self—the crusaders and the Church's mission in the Near East—as heroic, civilized, and righteous, while portraying the other—the Muslim communities and supporting armies—as barbaric, corrupt, and immoral. By helping to propagate these stereotypes, Christian writers would influence the expanding relationship between Europe and the Middle East over the next few centuries, and contribute the idea for Europeans, and particularly western Europeans, that Muslims were dangerous and can be understood best as the subhuman “other.” Through the years, just as what happened with the First Crusade, this type of dehumanization has proven to be effective in mobilizing mobs and in providing an organizing theme for more official armed expeditions.

At the same time, Christian writing of the Crusades was not always determined by official ideologies, but also showed some complexity in the depiction of both

Christians and Muslims. Often times, the way in which a writer would depict the Church mission and its Muslim counterpart depended on their unique positions and life experiences. Importantly, instances of praise and critique, whatever the motivation, point to a deviation from Church-mandated narratives. They reveal that both the Christian accounts per se and the relationship between historians and the Church are much more complicated than what the general overview of events would suggest. Nevertheless, this complexity should not detract from the ways in which all three accounts featured in this article still contribute(d) to larger themes regarding western superiority and moral justifications for violence against Middle Eastern communities.

In essence, this article's close analysis of three primary Christian accounts of the First Crusade help to provide a better understanding of the origins of Christian perceptions of Muslims on an interpersonal scale. Papal propaganda intermingles with individual opinions informed by physical encounters, which both make their way into accounts of the First Crusade. These accounts soon became a tool used by the Church both during and after as a form of validation for its doctrine of holy violence, fueling crusades to follow and shaping perceptions for centuries.

<sup>1</sup> Ziya Polat, "Self-Perception in Fulcher of Chartres: How the Crusaders Saw Themselves," *Journal Al-Tamaddun* 13 no. 2 (2018): 149-160.

<sup>2</sup> Natasha R. Hodgson, *Women, Crusading and the Holy Land in Historical Narrative* (United Kingdom: Boydell Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Levi, "The Distant Past: On the Political Use of History," 61.

<sup>4</sup> Marcus Bull, "Fulcher of Chartres," in *Christian-Muslim Relations 600 - 1500*, eds. David Thomas and Alex Mallett. (Brill Reference Online), Web. 16 May 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Bull, "Fulcher of Chartres," in *Christian-Muslim Relations 600 - 1500*.

<sup>6</sup> Bull, "Fulcher of Chartres," in *Christian-Muslim Relations 600 - 1500*; Breisach, Ernst. *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, & Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> David Thomas and Alex Mallett (eds.), *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History, 1050-1200* vol. 3 (Boston: Brill, 2011), 312.

<sup>8</sup> Fulcher of Chartres. *A History of the Expedition to Jerusalem 1095-1127*, trans. Frances R. Ryan (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1969); Robert the Monk, *Historia Iherosolimitana*, trans. Carol Sweetenham (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005); Bull, 'Fulcher of Chartres,' in *Christian-Muslim Relations 600 - 1500*.

<sup>9</sup> Guibert De Nogent, *The Deeds of God through the Franks: A Translation of Guibert De Nogent's Gesta Dei Per Francos*, trans. Robert Levine (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Asbridge, "Holy War Proclaimed," in *The First Crusade: A New History* (Oxford:Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Johan A. Garrity and Peter Gay, *The Columbia History of the World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

<sup>12</sup> Asbridge, *The First Crusade: A New History*, 18-19; 35-42.

<sup>13</sup> Garrity and Gay, *The Columbia History of the World*.

<sup>14</sup> Asbridge, *The First Crusade: A New History*, 35-42.

<sup>15</sup> Pope Gregory VII, *The Correspondence of Pope Gregory VII: Selected Letters from the Registrum*, trans. Ephraim Emerton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

<sup>16</sup> Philip Slavin, "Crusaders in Crisis: Towards the Re-assessment of the Origins and Nature of the 'People's Crusade' of 1095-1096," *Imago Temporis: Medium Aevum* 4, no. 1 (2010): 175-199.

<sup>17</sup> Asbridge, *The First Crusade*.

<sup>18</sup> Asbridge, "Dissent into Discord," in *The First Crusade: A New History*.

<sup>19</sup> Asbridge, "The Faltering Path." In *The First Crusade: A New History*.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Frankopan, *The First Crusade: The Call from the East* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, & Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

<sup>22</sup> Breisach, *Historiography*, 123.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., 121.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., 132-134.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., 126-129.
- <sup>27</sup> Gregory Nagy, "The Epic Hero," *Center for Hellenic Studies*, 2nd ed. (2006). Available from: <https://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/1302.gregory-nagy-the-epic-hero>.
- <sup>28</sup> Fulcher of Chartres, *Expedition to Jerusalem*, 65-66.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., 67.
- <sup>30</sup> Edward Peters, ed., *The First Crusade: The Chronicle of Fulcher of Chartres and Other Source Materials*, original manuscripts by Fulcher of Chartres, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).
- <sup>31</sup> Robert the Monk, *Historia Iherosolimitana*, trans. Carol Sweetenham (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005).
- <sup>32</sup> Guibert, Abbot of Nogent-Sous-Coucy, *The Deeds of God Through the Franks: A Translation of Guibert de Nogent's Gesta Dei Per Francos*, trans. Robert Levine (United Kingdom: Boydell Press, 1997).
- <sup>33</sup> Peters, *The First Crusade: The Chronicle of Fulcher of Chartres*, 90.
- <sup>34</sup> Robert the Monk, *Historia Iherosolimitana*, 82, 141, 188.
- <sup>35</sup> Peters, *The First Crusade: The Chronicle of Fulcher of Chartres*, 80.
- <sup>36</sup> Robert the Monk, *Historia Iherosolimitana*, 153.
- <sup>37</sup> Robert the Monk, *Historia Iherosolimitana*, 154.
- <sup>38</sup> Guibert De Nogent, *Deeds of God*, 95-98; Robert the Monk, *Historia Iherosolimitana*, 154-157; Hodgson, *Women, Crusading and the Holy Land in Historical Narrative*.
- <sup>39</sup> Sophia Rose Arjana, *Muslims in the Western Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 2015).
- <sup>40</sup> Peters, *The Chronicle of Fulcher of Chartres*, 94.
- <sup>41</sup> Robert the Monk, *Historia Iherosolimitana*, 114.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., 113-124.
- <sup>43</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (United States: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2014), 21.
- <sup>44</sup> Guibert De Nogent, *Deeds of God*, 33.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid., 37.
- <sup>46</sup> Said, *Orientalism*.
- <sup>47</sup> Robert the Monk, *Historia Iherosolimitana*, 219.
- <sup>48</sup> A similar, but somewhat conflicting story, appears in the chronicle of Fulcher of Chartres where the writer points out that poor crusaders were those who cut open stomachs of Muslims. In both instances, Muslims are presented as full of greed, either accused of swallowing their possessions before they die or behaving immorally by cutting up bodies for gold.
- <sup>49</sup> Robert the Monk, *Historia Iherosolimitana*, 210.
- <sup>50</sup> Fulcher of Chartres, *Expedition to Jerusalem*, 94.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid., 91.
- <sup>52</sup> Guibert De Nogent, *Deeds of God*, 37; 50-51.
- <sup>53</sup> Robert the Monk, *Historia Iherosolimitana*, 204.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid., 210.
- <sup>55</sup> Guibert De Nogent, *Deeds of God*, 33.
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid., *Deeds of God*, 32-35.
- <sup>57</sup> Robert the Monk, *Historia Iherosolimitana*, 85.
- <sup>58</sup> Robert the Monk, *Historia Iherosolimitana*, 154; see also Nirmal Dass, *The Deeds of the Franks and Other Jerusalem-Bound Pilgrims: The Earliest Chronicle of the First Crusade* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011).
- <sup>59</sup> Guibert De Nogent, *Deeds of God*, 36.
- <sup>60</sup> Guibert De Nogent, *Deeds of God*, 132. Chartres, *Expedition to Jerusalem*, 105.
- <sup>61</sup> Fulcher of Chartres, *Expedition to Jerusalem*, 103, 104-105, 186.
- <sup>62</sup> Fulcher of Chartres, *Expedition to Jerusalem*, 105.
- <sup>63</sup> Robert the Monk, *Historia Iherosolimitana*, 85.
- <sup>64</sup> Robert the Monk, *Historia Iherosolimitana*, 85.
- <sup>65</sup> Bull, 'Historia de Hierosolymitano Itinere,' in *Christian-Muslim Relations 600 - 1500*.
- <sup>66</sup> Fulcher of Chartres, *Expedition to Jerusalem*, 98.
- <sup>67</sup> Breisach, *Historiography*, 133.
- <sup>68</sup> Fulcher of Chartres, *Expedition to Jerusalem*, 104.
- <sup>69</sup> Ibn al-Athir, the historian, writes about the discovery of the holy lance in Antioch by Christians. In his book, al-Athir accuses a Christian monk of planting the holy lance in the church of Antioch – "He had previously buried a lance in a place there and removed his traces." Al-Athir goes on to claim that the monk encouraged Christian soldiers to find the lance, by exclaiming that this would lead them to victory. Fulcher of Chartres's acknowledgement of the fallacy of the lance provides an uncommon example of corroborating Muslim sources within the Christian writing of the First Crusade. Ibn al-Athir, *Crusading Period*, 16.
- <sup>70</sup> Fulcher of Chartres, *Expedition to Jerusalem*, 97.
- <sup>71</sup> Ibid., 112.
- <sup>72</sup> Fulcher of Chartres, *Expedition to Jerusalem*, 3.
- <sup>73</sup> John F. Benton, ed., *Self and Society in Medieval France: The Memoirs of Abbot Guibert of Nogent*, original manuscripts by Guibert de Nogent, (United Kingdom: University of Toronto Press, 1984).
- <sup>74</sup> Guibert de Nogent. *Self and Society in Medieval France*, 9-19.
- <sup>75</sup> Bull, 'The Western Narratives of the First Crusade,' in *Christian-Muslim Relations 600-1500*.