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Women's Roles in the Crusades

Introduction

Women played multiple roles throughout the crusading period. From abbesses to Queens, they had a range of expected responsibilities that mostly revolved around caring for and supporting the men who were fighting. While they were not expected to fight themselves, women played an important role in supporting the crusades religiously and financially. However, there are multiple cases where both Muslim and Christian women took on unprecedented roles for the time and ruled cities, controlled empires, and led crusades. In this paper, I will discuss the views on and roles of Christian and Muslim women before and during the Crusades, how those roles and views transformed with the coming of the Crusades, stories of women who accomplished various feats (both good and bad) as leaders in the Crusades, and commonalities and differences in how views and expectations of Christian and Muslim women affected their newly-forged roles as sovereigns and leaders.

Typical Roles of Medieval Women

Medieval women were often limited to the role of caretaker or supporter, but Christian women were much less restricted than their Muslim counterparts. Societal perceptions of women affected how "good" Muslim or Christian women were expected to behave; these beliefs are reflected in medieval literature and historical chronologies of the Crusades. Here, I will examine the roles of Christian and Muslim women before the Crusades, how they changed with the

coming of the Crusades, and how women were framed throughout the crusades by both Christian and Muslim writings.

Alongside the many other positions Christian women held in medieval society, they were responsible for childbearing and caretaking (Nicholson). They were teachers, nuns, abbesses, artists, writers, and merchants, and they worked in the fields and cared for livestock alongside their husbands. Christian women were also patronesses of culture: queens, widows, and abbesses played a huge part in facilitating culture by commissioning paintings, providing or writing books, or creating music (Great). During medieval times, Christian women were expected not to fight. However, noblewomen and landowners were still expected to defend their land and estates. Oftentimes, they would hire soldiers to fight for them. It was also expected that a noblewoman would defend her husband's estates if he were unable to, as well as her underage son's inheritance (Nicholson).

Christian women were primarily portrayed as virgins, mothers, or evil temptresses in medieval literature. Warrior women, specifically, were often shown to be "operating outside the proper scheme of things" and were forced back into their proper place (Nicholson). However, Christian warrior women were often portrayed in a positive light, and they were often used to show the failings of male characters (Nicholson).

Christian women's role did not transform much with the coming of the Crusades. In Europe, they still took on a supporting role for the men: encouraging them to go on crusades,

praying in support of the expeditions, and providing financial support were some of the main expectations of women. Generally, women were discouraged from partaking in the Crusades because they were viewed as a "sexual threat to spiritual purity." However, noblewomen still accompanied their husbands on crusading expeditions, and common women traveled to the Holy Land as peaceful pilgrims (Nicholson).

While common Christian women are mentioned sparingly in Christian histories of the Crusades, Muslims often portrayed them as promiscuous, fighting women to appeal to the belief that Christians were uncivilized barbarians (Great). These inconsistencies are likely due to the belief that civilized women did not partake in war which was held by both Christians and Muslims: Christians would avoid writing about their women fighting because it would refute the idea that they were righteous, god-fearing people, but Muslims wanted to emphasize their fanaticism.

Like Christian women, Muslim women were also expected to avoid the battlefield, and they occasionally went to mosques and acted as farmers, merchants, cooks, and nurses. Because Islamic society had become more patriarchal, noblewomen were more limited in how they could interact with men and enter public spaces. However, they also acted as patronesses of culture by financing mosques and schools. Medieval Muslim noblewomen could be very influential: they negotiated political alliances and were often influential at court and as regents ("Medieval"). The "tendency for women in… palaces in the Islamic world to… often become the real rulers" is reflected by the role they took in political affairs (Perry). In general, Muslim women had more

independence than in other medieval societies and were able to manage independent wealth and initiate divorce.

Sources like Usama ibn Munqidh explain that during the crusades, Muslim women were very much able to fight or assist Muslim warriors if they were under attack but would never fight otherwise. Because Christians believed that women were more susceptible to evil, they often portrayed Muslim princesses as potential converts who would see the "truth" of Christianity and convert Muslim men (Nicholson). Muslims, on the other hand, also held this belief of Christian women and portrayed them similarly.

Christian and Muslim women held similar roles in medieval society and were held to similar expectations. Both acted as caretakers and supporters of their men, patronesses of culture, and financial sources for political alliances and missions. During the crusades, their roles did not change much, as they were actively discouraged from crusading and fighting. However, women were expected to break traditional norms during extreme circumstances, such as fighting or ruling when their husband was unable to.

Female Leaders of the Crusades

Some crusader women were able to gain great power, even controlling entire cities, empires, and even Crusades. Their leadership, although typically somewhat limited, sometimes had lasting effects on the Crusades. While there are multiple examples of women leadership in Christian cities and battles, there are very few (perhaps only one) instances of female Muslim

leadership throughout the Crusades. In this section, I provide overviews of powerful crusader women during their time of leadership.

Florine of Burgundy

Florine, daughter of Duke Eudes I of Burgundy, may have been a French crusader who led an army with her husband, Sweyn II of Denmark. They were attacked by Turkish soldiers after passing through Constantinople, and she fought by her husband's side until she either died or was captured. Her accomplishments and existence are disputed, as she is only featured in the chronicle of Albert of Aix (Legend).

Ida of Austria

Ida, mother of Leopold III, Dowager Margravine of Austria, led an army in the Crusade of 1101 (Ida). On her way to Constantinople, she joined the massive army coming from Europe. After passing through Constantinople, the army was ambushed by Turkish soldiers. It is unknown what happened to Ida, but legends say that she was captured and later gave birth to Zengi, leader of the Turkish empire (Runciman). Ida is one of few women who physically led Crusader armies toward battle, though her reasoning for doing so is not clearly stated.

Melisende, Queen of Jerusalem

Melisende was one of Baldwin II's four daughters and heiress to the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem. Her position was unique in that Baldwin II specified that she would take over the kingdom after his death if anything happened to her son, Baldwin III. His motivation for this was

keeping the crown in his family rather than letting the lineage of Melisende's husband, Count Fulk V of Anjou, take the throne (Hodgson). In the first five years of her reign, Fulk mainly took charge and excluded her from power. After his death in 1143, she became queen regent of Jerusalem, and her son was named the heir. Because he was underage, she essentially ruled on her own; this later caused tension between them when she began issuing documents without reference to Baldwin.

This tension resulted in them splitting the crusader kingdom. Soon after he went north, he raised an army and invaded Melisende's area of the kingdom. When he arrived at Jerusalem, many of Melisende's supporters deserted her, but she negotiated successfully for control of Nabulus and its adjacent lands. After leaving Jerusalem, she stayed involved in crusader affairs, even planning a successful military operation in which she recovered the lands of Gilead (Hamilton).

As effective ruler of Jerusalem from 1131 to 1152, Queen Melisende sent soldiers to Edessa when Zengi laid siege to it in 1144, but her army arrived too late (Edgington). She was also responsible for improving crusader relations with the Jacobite and Armenian Churches (Runciman). It is said that she played a part in starting the Second Crusade through her pleas for assistance from Europe. After her reign ended, she remained involved in crusader business until she had a stroke in 1160; she died a year later (Hamilton).

Alice of Antioch

Alice of Antioch was another of Baldwin II's children. When her husband Bohemond II died, she claimed the principality of Antioch as her own without her father's approval. Alice wanted to be reigning sovereign of Antioch, but when word got back to Baldwin, he set off to the city to stop her. During this time, she attempted to make a deal with Zengi in which she would pay him homage in exchange for possession of Antioch. However, Baldwin's army arrived before she could leave. She barricaded the city, bought temporary support from the soldiers and people, and refused to let her father enter. When he finally did, he exiled her to Lattakieh and Jabala, the lands Bohemond gave as her dowry (Runciman). After Baldwin II died, Alice attempted to retake Antioch two more times, both unsuccessfully.

Eleanor of Aquitaine

After Eleanor of Aquitaine took the cross, which was very uncommon for women to do, alongside her husband, Louis VII, she accompanied him on the Second Crusade from 1145 to 1147. Scholars speculate that she may have been influential in gathering much-needed soldiers for the expedition, hence the reason she also took the cross (Hodgson). During this crusade, Eleanor acted mostly as a diplomat, writing letters to others in power (Nicholson). There are also stories of her leading an army of Amazonian-dressed women and knights during a battle in the Second Crusade (Edgington), but some scholars say this is nothing more than legend (Nicholson). She is also rumored to have had an affair with her uncle, Prince Raymond of

Antioch, that put a lot of strain on her already tense marriage. This may have played a part in why Louis wanted to go to Damascus to fight instead of Ashkelon or Aleppo.

Shortly after divorcing Louis VII in 1152, Eleanor married King Henry II of England, and she ruled England for a time as regent for her then underage son, Richard the Lionhearted, while Henry II was away on the Third Crusade. After Eleanor's participation in the Second and Third Crusades, the Christian Church publicly discouraged women rulers from participating in the crusades because they were viewed as a source of sexual temptation for crusading men (Great). When the crusades went badly, women were often blamed for this, but Eleanor of Aquitaine was outright blamed for the outcome of the Second Crusade by many historians. This was abnormal, as many other crusader women were not so forcefully judged in descriptions of them, but it reflects societal views of the time.

Sibylla, Queen of Jerusalem

Baldwin V, son of Sibylla and William of Montferrat, was chosen as Baldwin IV's successor upon his death in 1185. Because of the potential of rivalry between Sibylla and Isabella, Baldwin IV's sisters, over their claims to the throne, Raymond III of Tripoli was granted regency over Jerusalem. However, the young king died a year later, and Sibylla was able to come into power due to her support from Jerusalem's nobility. As she was King Amalric's daughter and Baldwin's sister, her supporters justified breaking their oath to support Raymond's regency by emphasizing that her claim did not require external adjudication because she was the closest heir. However, the people of Jerusalem hated Sibylla's second husband, Guy of

Lusignan, and felt he was not suitable for kingship; this became an obstacle to her throne, but her claim was so strong that she managed to keep her husband after becoming queen (Hodgson).

After the couple's coronation, Raymond III attempted to overthrow Sibylla by crowning Isabella. However, her husband, Humphrey IV of Toron, destroyed the plan by going to Jerusalem and swearing fealty to Sibylla (Hamilton). In doing this, he also deemed himself a coward unfit to rule, which may have been why Isabella later divorced him.

Sibylla's main duty as queen was tracking Saladin's movement through the crusader kingdom. During her reign, Sibylla became trapped in Jerusalem after Saladin captured Guy at the Battle of Hatim; she chose to leave Jerusalem and join him in captivity. Upon their release in 1188, she accompanied him to Tyre, where they were refused entry by Conrad of Montferrat. She also accompanied him during the Third Crusade to lay siege on Acre, where she died in 1190 (Hamilton).

Margaret of Provence

Margaret of Provence accompanied her husband Louis IX, otherwise known as St. Louis, on the Seventh Crusade. When St. Louis was captured in Egypt, Margaret acted as the political leader of the expedition and took on a role in the decision-making process (Hodgson). In 1259, she commanded the crusader defense in Damietta from her childbed and negotiated with Shajar al-Durr for St. Louis's freedom (Nicholson). Margaret was the only woman to lead a crusade, but never actually fought in person.

Shajar al-Durr

Shajar al-Durr was a Turkish slave woman who became the wife of Sultan al-Salih, and she is thought to have played a large role in bringing about the fall of the Ayyubid empire and the rise of the Mamluks; she may even be considered the first Mamluk sultan (Perry). Shajar came into power when her husband died during the Seventh Crusade: she formed an alliance with his Mamluks, trained soldiers who were originally Turkish Muslim slaves, to keep his death a secret so she could be in control (Nicholson). After her stepson Turanshah returned from a military campaign, the Mamluks murdered him because of their alliance with Shajar (Perry).

During her rule, Shajar negotiated for the surrender of Damietta in exchange for St. Louis's freedom (Nicholson). After it was revealed that her husband was dead, Shajar married a Mamluk commander, Aybak, to take the title of Sultan while she continued to rule. When he chose to marry another woman, she had him assassinated. This resulted in her murder soon after (Perry).

We see that many of these women were able to come into power when their husbands were unable to maintain control for various reasons. Alice and Shajar, for example, both took control as legitimate rulers after their husbands died. Similarly, Sibylla claimed the throne as the closest heir after the death of her son. Eleanor and Margaret, on the other hand, ruled while their husbands were either captured or on an expedition. Melisende was recognized by her father as the heiress of Jerusalem, so she was the only one to come to power through official means rather than emergency situations. It is also important to note that while some women, like Ida and

Florine, participated in the fighting, it may be the case that they were only meant to accompany the army rather than fight in battle.

Analysis of Women's Roles in the Crusades

While this analysis cannot be considered complete due to the lack of accounts of Muslim women in power, it will hopefully shed some light on commonalities in how these women came to power and how their reigns were affected by societal views.

It was often easier for women to rule through their husbands or underage sons. Because women were viewed as more susceptible to evil by Christians and Muslims alike, it is likely that this made it easier for them to be taken seriously or not experience blowback about their decisions (Nicholson). We see this in Eleanor, Shajar, and Melisende. Eleanor of Aquitaine briefly ruled England as regent for her underage son while her husband was away on the Third Crusade, and her involvement in both the Second and Third Crusades was greatly criticized because of her alleged affair. Shajar al-Durr came to power under the pretense that her husband was ill, not dead, and she remained in power by remarrying after she was found out. Melisende's marriage to Fulk of Anjou seemed to be nothing more than a legitimizing factor she needed to become Queen of Jerusalem. Her father specified she would be in control rather than him, giving the idea that the marriage was more a formality to ensure she could take the throne if he died before Melisende's son came of age. She also acted as regent for her son early on in her rule and therefore gained power through him being the heir. Thus, it appears that channeling power

through the husband's or son's title was common in medieval times, especially considering that women often provided financial support for political alliances and expeditions.

Some crusader women, on the other hand, were able to rule independently of their husbands or sons. For example, Alice took over control of Antioch after the death of her husband, and Sibylla gained power in Jerusalem when her son died. Both were legitimate rulers who had strong claims to their thrones, and both entered their reign without official permission. Their reigns were short-lived and contested by others in the kingdom, but unlike Alice, Sibylla successfully kept her power despite attempts to dethrone her. So, we also see that women were able to rule without their husband's or son's titles being the main method of them doing so. This appears to be a rare instance within the crusading period.

Medieval Christian and Muslim women rarely fought unless in extreme circumstances, such as being under attack. Florine of Burgundy and Ida of Austria are outliers in this. Since we do not know Ida's motivation for crusading, and it appears that Florine was accompanying her husband, it is possible that both were not intending to fight in the Crusades but were forced to because they were with their armies when they were attacked. This aligns with expectations for Christian women at the time. None of the other women discussed ever fought in person, which furthers the argument that fighting women in the crusades was a rare occurrence despite the popularity of depicting Christian women as fighters in Muslim chronologies.

Through looking at these various women, we see that while it was possible for women to rule independently, they often channeled their power through their husbands or sons to increase

their legitimacy. Women also rarely fought unless they had to. In looking at how societal views and portrayals of medieval women affected these women's ability to rule, we see that they were often trusted less and more quickly blamed for problems of the crusades. We also see how important their role as supporters of the crusades was – without many of these women acting in place of their husbands or contributing to the crusades in some way, the crusades may have gone very differently.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the crusades enabled women to take on new, more powerful roles than they were typically offered. With this ability, however, came various obstacles: women were expected to rule in conjunction with their husbands and not to fight. When these women found ways to overcome these obstacles, they were often subject to disapproval and criticism. Eleanor, Alice, Melisende, Shajar, Margaret, and Sibylla all experienced some sort of blowback when they took power because they did not fit in the box of a normal crusader woman – they either ruled as independent queens rather than as regents or took the throne without official permission. Because of the crusades, women were able to become more powerful and independent.

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