

Portrayal of Women in the Crusades

Though their actual actions are debated, women played a vital role in the legacy of the crusades as the subject of narratives written during the time period; the authors used their image along with cultural context to incite desired feelings in their audience. Because the authors came from different backgrounds and had various motivations, they represented women in different (and sometimes conflicting) ways. In their narratives, the authors used images of women to create a positive or negative perception of a population, and encourage the activity of men.

By: Caitlin Rusnak
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The authors of the crusade narratives portray Christian women differently depending on their cultural alligences. The largest discrepancy between narratives is whether or not women actively fought in battle. The sources that tell stories of women fighting are mainly non-Christians. Muslim writers, Im dal-Din and Baha' al-Din wrote of women both leading men, and fighting as if they were men during the crusades. Im-dal Din tells the story of a woman leading a raid of 500 knights by sea. (Nicholson 338). Although no Christian narratives have documented this woman, the plausibility of her existence is high because her position is consistent with those of other documented medieval women. In other parts of Europe, noblewomen could lead defenses of their castles and act as military generals; however, many historians assume that these women allowed males to lead the physical battles (Nicholson 334). Whether or not women actively fought in these situations, Im-dal-Din's story is plausible due to historical context. The presence of leading women in Muslim texts that are not in Christian texts could suggest that the Christians were less willing to attribute military success to female leaders.

Muslim texts also describe women fighting in battle alongside men. Records show that the Muslim armies did not even identify some knights as women until they took the armour off the dead bodies. Baha' al-Din wrote: "I noticed the bodies of two women. Someone told me that he had seen four women engaged in the fight, of whom two were made prisoners" (Nicholson 338). Women actively fighting is also documented in other medieval texts outside of the crusades. Some historians suggest that it was more common for women to fight during that era than it is in modern day. In the feudal societies, most military training occurred in familial groups. For this reason, women had greater access to this training, especially in the earlier portion of the medieval age (Maier, 68). Additionally, historians agree that women did

join the crusades in some capacity. The First Crusade, or People's Crusade, is particularly noted for its heterogeneous make-up because it included women, children, and other peasants. Entire familial groups made the journey. (Malkiel, 183-184). Women on this crusade were killed in action, but not necessarily from actively fighting. Christian accounts documented women as serving more through encouragement and prayer (Nicholson 336).

The disparity between the Muslim and the Christian texts describing

the roles of women on the crusade can be explained by the author's audience and motivation for portraying the Christian populations. In both Muslim and Christian culture at the time, the dominant belief was that virtuous women

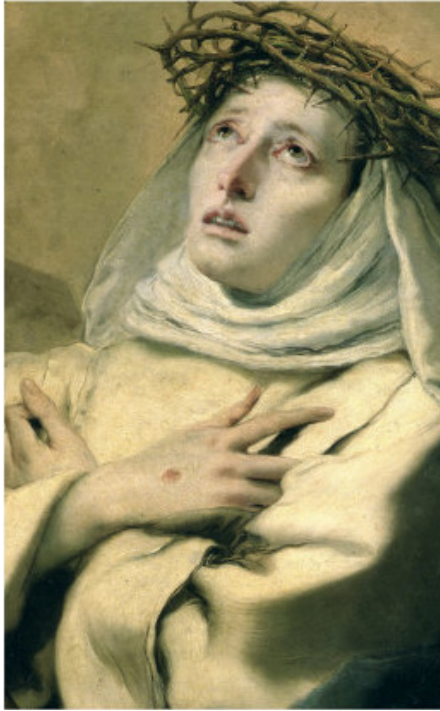
did not and should not fight. Women were believed to be particularly susceptible to evil (Nicholson 340). For this reason, it is likely that Muslim scholars were not only willing to accurately depict women in battle, but also use their image to portray the Christians as barbarous to Muslim audiences. Muslims believed the Europeans were careless with their women because they were unable to protect them when killed in battle. The Muslim authors wrote of their own women as wanting to join the

fighting but reserving themselves instead (Nicholson 341). Muslim authors' portrayal of women fighting in their narratives heightened a sense of "otherness" between the two cultures and the barbarity of the Christians.

For similar reasons, Christians were hesitant to include women in their narratives, not only leaving out images of them in battle, but on the entire journey itself. The Crusades were "holy wars" which were sanctioned by divine authority, and the individuals who went on the crusades did so for the salvation of their souls. Having women along on the journey meant sexual temptation. For this reason, some people blamed the failure of the first and second crusades on their inclusion of women (Nicholson 347). In the *Itinerarium Peregrinorum*, one of the most prominent Christian crusade narratives, the author tells of men preparing for the third crusade: "Brides urged their husbands and mothers incited their sons to go, their only sorrow being that they were not able to set out with them because of the weakness of their sex" (Maier 73). However, both Muslim and European accounts tell of noblewomen on the journey who helped their husbands with some manual labor and dealing with prisoners (Nicholson 340). Women were guaranteed by canon law the right to go on crusades if their husbands or fathers consented (Maier 72). *Itinerarium Peregrinorum* denial of women's presence on the crusade is an example of the Christian authors' fear of discrediting the crusades if they included women in their narratives.



<http://www.womeninworldhistory.com/heroine2.html>



<http://www.stcatherine-ml.org/About/Patron.htm>

However, women were included in some Christian narratives to motivate male action. This was done through both verbal encouragement and through example. The verbal encouragement is one area where women have their own voices and are not merely used as images. For example, Catherine of Siena, a mystic and Dominican tertiary, was an enthusiastic promoter of the crusades to the Holy Land in the late 14th century. She wrote letters to the pope and Italian kings, queens, and noblemen to encourage their participation in the crusade (Maier 78). She believed that the crusades were a source of universal salvation, so she made religious appeals to motivate both men and women to join the war. To a group of nuns, she wrote, "I am inviting you to shed your blood for him [i.e. Christ] just as he shed his for you" (Maier 79).

Additionally, beyond the works of women, there are stories depicting women who promote the crusades in both word and deed. Ibn al-Athir writes of his conversation with a Christian soldier whose mother had sold her house so that he could pay for a crusade journey (Nicholson 339). Womens' verbal encouragement is prevalent in the *Itinerarium Peregrinorum*. The author writes, "The enthusiasm for the new pilgrimage was such that already it was not a question of who had received the cross but of who had not yet done so. A great many men sent each other wool and distaff, implying that if they exempted themselves from this expedition they would only be fit for women's work. Brides urged their husbands and mothers incited their sons to go..." (Nicholson 335).

Women also encouraged men through their own self sacrifice and in military action. If a women could perform courageous actions, men were expected to do the same. In her essay "A Separate People?," Baumgarten writes, "all medieval societies shared a social order in which men were considered superior to women. In regard to the hierarchy of God-man-woman, all agreed on women's inferior position." Stories of women who fought in battle encouraged men to fight because they did not want to face the shame of acting less bravely than the inferior gender. Though this seems to raise the crusaders' view of women, it is still objectifying because they are used as images. As Maier explains, "women on crusade were represented not in their own right, but with reference to an ideal of the crusader who was male, pious, obedient to God and fearless in battle" (62).

This objectifying use of women is not limited to Christian texts or even Christian women as the subjects. The stories of Jewish women's Martyrdom during the First Crusade called upon Jewish men to be willing to self sacrifice. In Solomon bar Samson's narrative of the siege at Mainz, he tells

of women being the first to sacrifice themselves: "The women there girded their loins with strength and slew their sons and their daughters and then themselves. Many men, too, plucked up courage and killed their wives, their sons, their infants. The tender and delicate mother slaughtered the babe she had played with, all of them, men and women arose and slaughtered one another. The maidens and the young brides and grooms looked out of the Windows and in a loud voice cried: "Look and see, O our God, what we do for the sanctification of Thy great name in order not to exchange you for a hanged and crucified one...." (fordham.edu). He also tells the story of a woman named Rachel who killed herself and all of her children. Her husband killed himself only when he realized his family was dead (fordham.edu). The theme of women

being the first to self-sacrifice before being forcibly baptized or killed by uncircumcised Christians is repeated in many Jewish texts. Some historians believe that the women could have been motivated by economic reasons, for they were forbid to continue marriage after being captured by a non-Jew (Malkiel 177). Malkiel suggests that the narrators depicting the events could have only imagined women as the leaders of the mass-suicides because they thought them to be more naturally inclined towards martyrdom. He explains, "Martyrdom is the weapon of the powerless, a status to which women were traditionally relegated" (177). Whether imagined or rightly depicted, the images of Jewish women leading in self sacrifice encouraged Jewish males to do the same. The stories could have also played a part in boosting Jewish morale because

the triumph of the Jewish women was thought as humiliating for the Christians (Maier 179).

It is difficult to discern what the true roles of women were during the crusades. The narratives written during this time period are incongruous in their stories of women's actions. The reason for these differences can be explained by what message the author wanted to send and to which audiences he was writing. Since most of history is written by males, women do not have their own voice to tell their own experiences. The crusades are no exception. The most prominent role of a woman in the crusades was not her support of her husband from home or her death on the battlefield; a woman had the greatest effect on the crusade through her image written in historical narratives.

Sources

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