

Terror in the Old French Crusade Cycle: from Splendid Cavalry to Cannibalism

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Synopsis

Westerners, including former president George W. Bush, use the term “crusade” casually. However, the term evokes dark memories in Arabic traditions. This paper explores “terror” techniques such as cannibalism and catapulting of Muslim remains into besieged cities as recounted in the now-neglected cycle of Old French texts narrating the First Crusade, studying the narrator’s representation of the manipulation of fear in the context of extreme battle situations.

Biography

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Essay

It is worth examining memories of the crusading experience in discussions of terrorism in history as well as the current political situation. The main piece of propaganda that linked Osama Bin-Laden to the 9/11 attacks, the “World Islamic Front Statement urging Jihad Against Jews and *Crusaders*,” evoked a Muslim memory of the crusades largely forgotten in the West. It conflates the modern Westerners present in Arab lands with the crusaders:

The Arabian Peninsula has never -- since Allah made it flat, created its desert, and encircled it with seas -- been stormed by any forces like the crusader armies spreading in it like locusts, eating its riches and wiping out its plantations. All this is happening at a time in which nations are attacking Muslims like people fighting over a plate of food. In the light of the grave situation and the lack of support, we and you are obliged to discuss current events, and we should all agree on how to settle the matter.¹

Former president George W. Bush’s call for a “crusade” on September 16, 2001 provoked a good deal more alarm from Europe than America, and in particular from Muslims (Ford). If, ten years later, we are still engaged in this “crusade,” the “terrors” of the crusades must be included in the history of terrorism. The Middle Ages, and indeed most any period or event prior to the past two centuries of even the past five decades, are lacunae in that history.²

The works of the Old French Crusade Cycle are unique texts remembering as well as fantasizing the encounter with Muslims and other “others” in the Mediterranean, recounting the First Crusade (1095-1099). The Crusade Cycle is one of the most obscure works in medieval French today, yet was quite popular in its day. Indeed, its obscurity may be due in part to shame at the use of what could be termed “terrorist” techniques by parts of the Frankish host. The *Song of Antioch* and *Song of Jerusalem* represent these acts ambivalently, with both jocular humor and discomfort with the sin involved. This paper examines representations of fear inspired by battle tactics: when do the Franks (as the crusaders are called in the text) imagine they have terrified the Saracen (as Muslims are called in Old French literature)? Since few here are likely familiar with the work, some background is in order first.

My focus will be limited to the central nucleus of the Old French Crusade Cycle, composed by a poet calling himself Graindor de Douai between 1190 and 1212, so in the period of the Third (1188-90) and Fourth (1204) crusades and in the wake of the fall of Jerusalem to Saladin (1187). The examples are primarily from the oldest episode (or “branch”) of the cycle, the *Chanson d’Antioche* (*Song of Antioch*). This is based on an earlier, lost poem, supposedly composed by an eyewitness named Richard the Pilgrim, dating to the generation after the First Crusade (Nelson 27-29). The Antioch narrative, when it has been studied at all, has attracted interest for its significant degree of corroboration of historical accounts (Duparc-Quioc 1955, Hatem 1932, Paris 1877, 1878). It differs from many other crusade narratives in its historical accuracy, and from chronicles for its depiction of the common crusaders, as opposed to an exclusive focus on great knights. Numerous prequels and sequels were attached to the cycle in the thirteenth century. The Crusade Cycle has only recently been fully edited, and still remains among the more obscure works in medieval French.³ Yet in its day, the cycle was quite popular: some fifteen different branches are extant in from two to fifteen copies, in a total of sixteen known manuscripts and fragments copied from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries. Moreover, library inventories such as those of king Charles V of France and duke Philip the Good of Burgundy list volumes whose incipits suggest they contained all or parts of the cycle, now lost (Meyers xiii-lxxxviii). This number is significantly larger than many single-manuscript medieval works that have received far more scholarly attention, such as a good number of the *chansons de geste*. A 700-line fragment of a Provençal version of the *Song of Antioch* exists (Meyer 1884, Paris 1888, 1890, 1893, Sweetenham and Paterson 2003). A Spanish translation, the *Gran Conquista de Ultramar*, was made some time between 1293 and 1312, and an edition was printed in the sixteenth century (Cooper 1979). In short, interest in the crusade cycle saw frequent renewal across Europe over at least four centuries, long beyond the actual period of crusading, and was more influential than might be supposed given its current status.

How anachronistic is it to speak of terrorism and the First Crusade? The OED traces the term “terrorisme” back to 1798, from the French “terrorisme,” a word coined to process events of the recent past.⁴ Such words are often born old. “Crusade,” for example. The term only appears later. At the time, the

people sewing crosses to their garments called themselves “pilgrims,” the knights “*militēs christi*.” Their general aim was to defend access to the holy sites in Jerusalem and Palestine, although different groups--the pope, clerical intellectuals, land-owning barons and the heterogeneous groups of men, women and children who set off on crusade-- certainly each held their own aims and ideals of the project (Riley-Smith). Audrey Cronin’s work supports the study of historical models for understanding terrorism. She notes that “groups that use terrorism are as different as the charismatic leaders that typically lead them.” Terrorism is a strategy focusing on perception, shifting with the perceptions of its audience (Cronin, *Ending Terrorism* 12). The sociolinguist Steven Pinker defines large-scale terrorist plots as “novel, undetectable, catastrophic, and inequitable,”; they “maximize both unfathomability and dread” (Pinker, “Terrorism”). I will not argue that what happened on the First Crusade was a plot. It was not secret, and it was not terribly well-organized. On the contrary, much of what happened was improvised. Given space limitations, excluded from this study will be instances of standard battle tactics that aroused terror, e.g. splitting a man in two from horseback or other types of prowess. I will focus on some instances that exhibit qualities of novelty, unfathomability, and which induced dread.

In the *Chanson d’Antioche*’s version of the First Crusade, Peter the Hermit embarks as a pilgrim to Rome, then visits the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, which he finds has been turned into a stable. He protests to the patriarch, who asks for help from fellow Christians. Peter is told in a dream to organize a rescue. He convinces the pope to raise an army. Peter takes this group as far as Civetot, near Nicaea, where they are slaughtered by the men of Corbaran, commander of the Persian army, who is in town to receive tribute owed the Sultan of Persia by the Turks in that area. The Saracens attack during the celebration of the mass, decapitating the priest, whose body miraculously remains standing, a presage. The battle rages three days. The Christians are slaughtered; Peter slips away to seek more help, and few remaining fighters surrender, becoming prisoners of Corbaran and getting to know him quite intimately in the branch called *Les Chétifs (The Captives)*. Peter the Hermit reports his defeat to pope Urban II, who preaches the crusade at Clermont, raising a powerful army of Frankish barons, joined by the land-ambitious Normans Bohemond and Tancred of Sicily and southern Italy, among others. They meet with Estatin the noseless, nephew of the Byzantine emperor, but there is treachery among the Greeks: the emperor is not interested in supporting the crusade. The crusaders threaten the city. Diplomatic negotiations ensue, and they manage to cross the Bosphorus. They make it to Civetot and the fortified city of Nicaea, which the crusaders attack without success. Soliman of Nicaea sends his interpreter, a Burgundian, disguised as a crusader (literally “faus pelerins,” line 1605) through the siege positions for reconnaissance. The Normans Bohemond and Tancred catch on: they capture the interpreter, learn of Soliman’s plans, and then bind his hands and legs and catapult him in to the walled city (*laisse* 65).⁵ I would argue that this is a first instance of terror strategy. The Frankish host is suffering from bad conditions, lack of supplies, and an inferior position. The song represents this act as sending a clear message about spies: “Pour çou l’ont fait François que

c'est honte et viutés" (Thus the Franks showed them it was shameful and vile, line 1629). The text then imagines the reaction from the city:

Quant par miliu de Nike fu la nouvele oïe,
N'i a Turc ne Persant qui durement ne crie:
"Ahi! Mahomet, sire, a cest[u]i fai aïe!
Se li cors en est mors, l'arme ne soit perie!
Li Diu[s] u li Franc c[r]oient, que il ne l'emport mie!"

(When the news was heard throughout Nicaea,
There was not a Turk or a Persian who did not cry out woefully,
"Alas! Mohammed, lord, help that man!
If his body is dead, may his soul not be lost!
May God, in whom the Franks believe, may He not carry it away!" lines
1630-1634)

The literary convention is to make Muslims pagan idolators. They express their horror to a mute and impotent god. It is worth remarking that the World Islamic Front fatwa calls "crusaders" pagans, as well.

Pinker remarked that "The effects of terrorism depend completely on the psychology of the audience. Terrorists are communicators, seeking publicity and attention, which they manufacture through fear." In the Old French reliving of the crusade, there is both recognition and denial of the language barrier between Muslims and Christians. The Norman's startling reversal of their inferior position through the manipulation of fear effectively jettisons the need for the interpreter, literally: the bold and savage act of catapulting the turncoat Burgundian communicates a clear message. It does not matter what the Saracens pray, or what exact words they uttered. Tancred and Bohemond managed to get them visibly on their knees: they orchestrated perception, for both the crusade army and the city's citizens. Through terror-inducing shows of prowess such as this, they manage to get the leaders of the city to flee and achieve a surrender.

Siege warfare is highly theatrical: rather than evenly matched clashes of warriors on the battlefield, it consists of surrounding the inhabitants of a walled city, cutting off their supply and communication lines, and waiting until they surrender, starve, or succumb to disease. It can take a long time. There are good sight lines. The two groups watch one another at all times. Managing perception is essential.

Terror breeds dread. Once the Normans begin to send such messages, there are several instances in the cycle when the Franks scares the Saracens simply by their appearance. After the battles at Civetot and Nicaea, the crusaders set out for Tarsus through a sand storm, and many die. They ride four days without finding food or pasture. Their horses are exhausted, the squires are wearing the halberks (the coats of mail) for the barons, who are dragging along behind. Their boots are worn through, their soles split open, their feet hurt, they are fainting from the pain (lines 2804-11). They look ahead, they think they see Muslims and ready for battle, putting on the halberks; but it turns out it is

Tancred's men. When the Turks in Tarsus see the men in shining armor embracing joyfully at this unexpected reunion, and Baldwin setting his tent, the reality of the starving and exhausted state is erased: the Turks see only a confident host. They are filled with fear, and eventually will surrender the city, feeling betrayed and inadequately protected by their ruler Soliman: "Quant ce voient li Turc, si sont espoenté/ Et dist li .i. a l'autre: 'Mal somes engané!...'” (When the Turks see this, they were terrified, and said to each other, 'This is a bad deal!' lines 2823-24). At another point, just seeing the normally starving Franks eating well is enough to terrify the Turkish citizens to the point of surrender (lines 2938-39).

Speaking of food, we progress to the most appalling examples. The crusaders march on the city of Antioch and organize a siege. There is a fortified iron bridge at the main gate, and attempts to take it using standard battle tactics and siege engines fail, with great bloodshed. Disgruntled, the Franks decide to construct a fortress on the site of a mosque outside the city. As they excavate the foundations they dig up the adjacent cemetery, finding all sorts of valuable buried weapons, silver, fine Asian fabrics and Almerian silks, which they share piously with their poor; and in so doing, they unearth Muslim corpses. The desecration enrages the locals, who attack. The Franks kill them, and catapult their heads along with “twenty-five times twenty” cadaver skulls through the fine polished stone walls of Antioch (laisse 164). Here is the representation of Antioch's reaction:

Quant païen l'ont veü, grant i fu l'estormie:
 Et li pere et la mere, lor serors, lor amie
 Qui connurent les tiestes, cescus en brait et brie
 Et maudient la tiere u no jens fu norie!
 Et dist li .i. a l'autre: "N'i porons garir mie
 Quant il les mors destierent—çou est grans diable—
 Et les vis nos ocient par lor grant felounie!
 Mahons, vengiés nos ent que cascuns vous en prie!
 Perdu avons l'isçue devers cele partie
 Se nous de l'amiral n'e[n] avoumes aïe,
 Tout seroumes destruit et livré a hascié."
 Este vous la cité de grant doel raemplie!

(When the pagans saw this, great was the outcry:
 And fathers and mothers, their sisters, their beloveds,
 Whoever recognized their heads, every one of them laments and cries
 And curses the land where our race was raised!
 And each says to the other: "We will not recover easily
 When they ravage our walls—this is great devilry—
 They massacre our faces with their evil crimes!
 Mohammed, avenge us all, we who pray to you!
 We will have lost the access on this side
 If the emir does not bring us aid,

We shall all be destroyed and hacked to pieces.”
Here is the city filled with great woe! Lines 3989-4000).

Note that the narrator represents the Turks as labeling this behavior “diablie,” the work of the devil, and “felony,” a word used normally to describe the most uncourtly behavior possible. The narrative does not claim that this was good, moral, or Christian; on the contrary, there is indirect *mea culpa* in this stanza. The narrator himself does not comment. The reader is left to decide whether to feel triumphant, or guilty and dismayed here. The narrative does present the deeds as effective, however. The Tafur’s catapulting of massacred bodies is repeated in the *Chanson de Jérusalem* (laisse 85), where this rag-tag group takes on a much larger role in helping Godfrey of Bouillon take and hold the city, as many of the other crusaders return home.⁶ There were no suicide bombers on the crusade, strictu sensu, but if suicide bombing is analogous to breaking a taboo and violating oneself in the interest of communicating a strategic message, the Tafurs welcomes opportunities for self-violation with the goal of intimidating others.

The situation in Antioch got worse before it improved. Everyone was starving: eating the pack animals, buying a two beans at a week’s wages, the war horses eating their harnesses. Peter the Hermit speaks to the “King of the Tafurs,” a group on foot whom the chroniclers call “ribauds,” literally rogues, scoundrels, the depraved. He says to go take the dead Turks in the valley and eat them. They sort the fresh from the rotten, skin them, roast them, and eat them at the base of the walls of the city.

Quant paien l’ont veü des murs de la cité,
S’en furent esmaïé et forment esfraié.
Pour le flair de la car sont au mur aceuré;
De .XXX.M. paiens sont Ribaut esgardé
Que n’i ait .I. tout seul ki n’a des jous ploré,
De la jent qu’il manjuent ont grant doel demené.

(When the pagans saw this from the walls of the city,
They were terrified and horribly afraid.
The smell of meat drew them to the wall;
The Ribauts were watched by 30,000 pagans,
Not a single one with cheeks dry of tears.
There was great mourning for the people they were eating.
(lines 4956-61).

There follow some forty lines of laments to Mohammed and Apollin, details of cuts of meat and uses of cutlery, comments on how it “tastes better than pork or venison,” and defecating afterwards on the tombs of the cemetery (lines 4962-5014). The poem gives ample attention to this moment, dwelling on the reactions of the populace through the device of prayers to their supposedly false gods. The great knights are listed, which is a standard epic trope in recounting a

battle, but in this case the narrator says they laughed, asking the King of the Tafurs if he was full. When Garcion, the governor of Antioch, approaches Bohemond about it, Bohemond disavows responsibility, saying “this was not by our command or our will;” the Tafurs are strange and not like us (lines 5036-51). This tactic of anthropophagy by the Tafurs is corroborated (with much less emphasis) in Latin chronicles (Krappe, Sumerberg). French audiences sought to relive, to revisit the successes of the First Crusade, especially in times when subsequent crusades failed. The “terrorists” were Christian, but also not; from the lands of the Franks, but not really of their race (*gens*). Their psychological victory over the inhabitants of Antioch, as well as over their own hunger and misery, is a marvel. The narrator does not rehearse the French armchair-audience’s reaction, does not tell the reader how to react. The episodes are presented with full moral ambiguity.

These episodes, largely forgotten in the West, give considerable insight into the above-mentioned fatwa’s reference to “crusader armies spreading in it like locusts, eating its riches.” The notion of “attacking Muslims like people fighting over a plate of food” is not strictly figurative, as most Western readers would assume. There is a tradition of Arab popular poetry that remembers the cannibals of Ma’arra (as the area outside Antioch is called in Arabic) even to this day, and which associates the term “crusade” with anthropophagy and desecration (Maalouf 36-55). President Bush’s speech writers were evidently not aware of this, thinking of Eisenhower’s book on D-Day when they put “crusade” in his speech,⁷ or the many common uses of the term from Campus Crusade to the evangelistic campaigns of Billy Graham. If Americans are first cousins to the Europeans, and decide to use terms such as “crusade,” there is an argument for knowing its highly negative connotations in Arab cultures.

In Cronin’s analysis, “Terrorism’s strategic logic is to draw enough power from the nation-state so as to enable a weaker, non-state actor to accomplish its political aim” (11). This model fits the situation of the crusades, in which a very heterogeneous group from afar descend upon well established fortified merchant cities who had been minding their own business. The First Crusade is the only completely successful one of the nine numbered crusades, and this is why: the citizens of these cities were not expecting them. Terror works on the First Crusade because the crusaders are non-state actors confronting states. Catapulting cadaver heads offers, as Pinker puts it, “a large psychological payoff for a small investment in damage.” It could be compared to using box cutters to hijack a plane: the crusaders employed simple, found resources and desperate attitudes to send a message to a complacent populace from a vastly inferior position.

Cronin’s key argument for ending terrorism is to understand that all terrorist movements come to an end, usually irregardless of efforts to combat them. This was true on crusade. They win Jerusalem, but no one wanted to be king. Godfrey, a bastard son from the Lorraine, accepts the crown after many others refuse. He must ally with the Tafurs to win and hold Jerusalem. He soon dies, and the next century saw many succession crises. The states in the Levant were much more prepared for subsequent crusades, which were all failures to

varying degrees. The Tafurs get written out: on later crusades proclamations limited the “rabble” allowed to embark. The deluxe noble and royal codices which preserve the Crusade Cycle include illuminated miniatures of great knights on horseback, city walls, and threatened city governors fleeing, but none celebrate or even depict the Tafurs.⁸ The Tafurs are strange, as Bohemond says, and ultimately marginalized. We should, however, remember them, and use the word “crusade” with care.

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¹ <http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/980223-fatwa.htm> Accessed 9 September 2011.

² For instance, one “Chronology of Modern International Terrorism” (Sloan 5-18) begins with the Muslim Assassins (8th-14th centuries), the Jewish Zealots (1st century C.E.), jumps to the French Revolution (1789-1799), then chronicles a series of events beginning in 1968. Cronin traces events from the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

³ Modern French translations have appeared only in abridged form, and just the two historical pieces, *the Song of Antioch* and the *Song of Jerusalem* (Régnier-Bohler, 1997). English translations of a few passages appear in Foulet 1989, and a translation of the *Chanson d’Antioche* by Susan B. Edgington and Carol Sweetenham is forthcoming from Ashgate. For summaries of the works, see Bender 1989.

⁴ "terrorism, n.". OED Online. June 2011. Oxford University Press. 7 September 2011 <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/199608?redirectedFrom=terrorism>>.

⁵ The text is versified in monorhyme “laises,” i.e. stanzas without a set number of lines which narrate a particular topic or moment. I am using Nelson’s edition (2003). Translations are my own.

⁶ In the *Chanson de Jérusalem* (ed. Thorp), the Tafur king is given the honor of making the first assault, laisse 78, and leading attacks at other points, laisse 107; the nobleman Thomas of Marle does homage to their “king” to be able to participate in their attack, laisse 136. Godfrey is crowned king of Jerusalem by the Tafur king, laisses 156-157. When most of the crusaders leave, the Tafurs parade in front of Saracen messengers ten times wearing different clothes (laisse 184 and again, 204).

⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tenth_Crusade accessed 5 September 2011.

⁸ See Meyers, xxiv-xlvi for descriptions of illustrations in the manuscripts. Several manuscripts (BnF français 786, 795, 12258, used in the presentation) are digitalized and available through the Bibliothèque nationale de France website, <http://mandragore.bnf.fr> accessed 5 September 2011.