

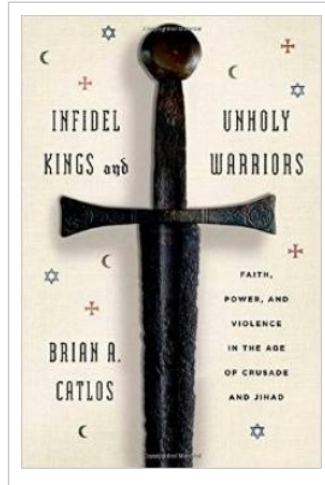
Medieval Mediterranean History: Putting Religion in its Place

Infidel Kings and Unholy Warriors

By Brian A Catlos
Farra Staruss and Giroux, New York, 2014

By Bobby Gulshan

Reconstructions of the Middle Ages usually invoke romantic images of brave knights, scheming kings, zealous holy warriors and legendary locales of antique glory. Unsurprisingly, for medieval scholars, the period proves a time of nuance and complexity—as would any historical period examined with similar scrutiny. However, more often than not the popular imagination—particularly in the West—leads to an emotionally potent oversimplification and mythical reduction of the medieval period. Brian Catlos' "Infidel Kings and Unholy Warriors," deftly manages to compose a narrative that explores the period's often dizzying historical, political and cultural complexities while simultaneously infusing the text with moments of entertaining, accessible prose.



The central thesis of the work asserts that, upon closer examination, historical evidence reveals that religion and religious identity often played a secondary role in defining conflict in the Medieval Mediterranean world. Instead, as with most periods of human history, the motivations of power and sustained dominance—whether for glory or treasure, or both—tend to be the primary drivers of medieval conflict. Here, religious identity and piety provide useful cover or can be used to manipulate and navigate complex political and cultural waters.

To this end, Catlos chronicles the careers of certain historical figures, some more famous than others. The cases of Yusuf Ibn Naghrillah, El Cid, the Norman conquerors of Sicily, and the early Crusaders elucidate the shifting identities and allegiances favored by influential figures of the period. Naghrillah, for example, deeply immersed himself in the dominant Arab culture of Granada, despite his Jewish ancestry. Rather than a matter of simple expediency to his position as vizier to the Sultan, his hybrid identity reflected the cosmopolitanism of Granada during his time. Similarly, the great Spanish hero El Cid, although a Christian, sometimes fought for as well as against Muslim kings in Andalusia, depending on which way his military and political fortunes turned.

One might be quick to accuse the writer of harboring a crypto-political agenda, disguising this vision of religion and history during the age of the Crusades and Medieval Jihad as an attempt to universalize certain tendencies that will subsequently point to our contemporary world. However, only the shallowest of readings supports such a suspicion. The notion that those in power often instrumentalize religion in order to sway populations in their favor is hardly controversial. In fact, it practically constitutes a truism to anyone with an even cursory understanding of human history. But when one moves beyond this common critical sense to read and examine the actual scholarship, it further validates the writer's thesis.

While the writer takes occasional license, rendering historical scenes for which no records exist, he can be afforded some leeway. He clearly identifies each instance, explaining his desire to pepper the narrative with a little imaginative color in the endnotes. This results in a text that moves between moments of accessible, almost cinematic levity, and moments of dense and complex historical narrative. Again, this results in a fair tradeoff, as the writer certainly faced the challenge of making intelligible the complex web of associations—familial, regional, and cultural—that defined the Mediterranean of this period. For example, the inclusion of family tree diagrams clearly benefits attentive readers who might find themselves asking which Baldwin was which.

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