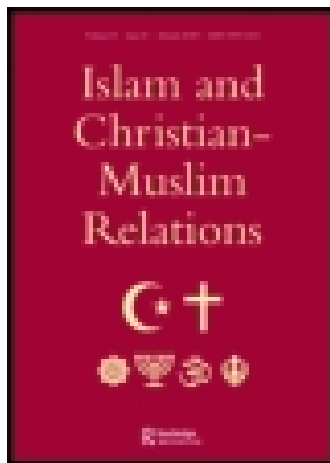


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Infidel Kings and Unholy Warriors: Faith, Power, and Violence in the Age of the Crusade and Jihad

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BOOK REVIEW

Infidel Kings and Unholy Warriors: Faith, Power, and Violence in the Age of the Crusade and Jihad, by Brian A. Catlos, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014, 390 pp., \$28.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-8090-5837-2

We live in strange times. In principle, time and tide should be having their effect and the mediaeval world should be drifting slowly away from us towards the twilight of the historical horizon. And yet this is so very obviously not the case. Interest in the Middle Ages – and in the themes of crusade and jihad in particular – is as great now as it has been in centuries. *Infidel Kings and Unholy Warriors* strikes at the epicentre of popular demand, providing precisely the kind of information that many people want to read. In essence, it offers detailed and wide-ranging discussion upon the relationship between Christianity, Judaism and Islam in its Mediterranean frontier zones, from Iberia to Constantinople. It is not alone of course in providing this kind of coverage. Many public facing histories have covered this kind of theme before. David Levering Lewis's *God's Crucible* (2008) and Stephen O'Shea's *Sea of Faith* (2006) touch upon many of the same topics, albeit encompassing a rather wider period. Histories of the crusades in both Iberia and the eastern Mediterranean are legion. Even so, given the seemingly limitless demand for works of this kind, the wide range of texts available for the informed reader is – even now – not disproportionate.

Perhaps, the most attractive element of this work is its readability. Brian Catlos really can write. His narrative focuses on the lives of a series of extraordinary individuals, some well-known (Reynald of Chatillon and the Cid), some less so (Yusuf ibn Naghrilla). Through rebuilding and retelling their colourful careers and exploring the pressures and events that shaped their lives, Catlos paints a vivid picture of the dynamic world of the mediaeval Mediterranean that – at times – makes his work very hard to put down. Indeed, *Infidel Kings* stands as testimony to the power of story-telling within the context of a professional and well-researched piece of popular history.

Structurally, Catlos's work travels from west to east, following the Christian/Islamic faith frontier from Spain to Byzantium. The first four chapters start this journey, rebuilding the world of the Iberian eleventh century. This is perhaps the strongest part of the book. Catlos displays a real sureness of touch with the source material and an eye for detail. The way in which he recreates with confident brush strokes the urban world of al-Andalus's great emporia is very impressive and reveals a clear-sighted understanding of his readers' desire to be both informed and entertained. I did feel, however, in these chapters and throughout, that the Muslim world's cultural and technological superiority over western Europe was a little overstressed. This disparity was true enough (although the gap was closing throughout this period), but to dismiss London as a "clutch of huts surrounding a single stone building" (130) goes too far. Late-eleventh-century Europe was after all on the brink of building its enormous Gothic cathedrals, which still dominate the skyline today; these did not emerge out of a clear sky and they were hardly the products of a primitive society.

The next two chapters (5 and 6) shift our focus to Norman Sicily. Catlos ably recreates the fascinating and colourful world of a Norman elite ruling over a diverse and cosmopolitan urban society. His main case-studies here are Philip of Mahdia and Robert II, whose lives serve as entry points for discussion of Sicily's multicultural royal court and its rising presence in maritime affairs.

This discussion neatly sets up the following two chapters (7 and 8), which concentrate on one of Sicily's major trading partners – Fatimid Egypt. It is in these sections that this book fills a major gap in the historiography. Many authors have tackled Christian and Islamic Iberia before and there are some studies on Sicily, but general histories of Fatimid Egypt are conspicuous by their absence. Thus these chapters are especially welcome. I am already sizing them up as possible background reading on the “Fatimids” for students taking my courses! It is a shame, however, that Catlos does not seem to have read Ellenblum's *The Collapse of the Eastern Mediterranean* (2013), which would have added useful environmental context to his discussion.

The final two chapters (9 and 10) cover the crusades and the Latin East. Discussion on the First Crusade begins in Chapter 8 and then expands into a history of the crusader kingdoms up to the time of Hattin (1187). It is here that *Infidel Kings* is perhaps at its least strong. Several statements or arguments are advanced that sit a long way from the academic mainstream on these topics and which grate uncomfortably with the sources. An example can be seen in Catlos's discussion on the role of the Italian cities in the crusading movement following the loss of Jerusalem in 1187. A case is made for the Italians (and seemingly the “Latin” as a whole) not being particularly committed to the recapture of the holy city post 1187 – a point which sidesteps the colossal commitment made by multiple rulers (including the Italian cities) to secure its restoration in subsequent decades.

There is then a rather short epilogue, which passes briefly over the Byzantine Empire and, following this, an Afterword entitled “Holy War: A User's Manual,” which considers major questions of religious warfare and integration. This “Afterword” consolidates many of Catlos's earlier arguments, advancing explicitly a major line in his overall thesis: that when we approach the religious history of the Mediterranean, we should see mediaeval “religion” more as a marker of political and cultural identity than as a source of passionate spiritual conviction whose internalized beliefs shape daily behaviour and attitudes. This conclusion is offered at the end of a book that has supplied example after example of moments where economic motives or Realpolitik have led individuals and groups to bend or break religious precepts in the name of expediency, thereby providing the evidential underpinning for this view. It is an interesting thesis, but I do not happen to share Catlos's view on this matter. I take the position that religion was far more deeply internalized than many modern historians allow. Still, that does not detract from the fact that Catlos advances a mature and well delivered argument.

Overall, this is a thought-provoking book that advances an original line. It is widely at variance with my own view on several points, but these are – for the most part – differences of interpretation. There is much here that is exciting and much that is new and whether readers find themselves agreeing with Catlos' main argument or not, they will certainly find *Infidel Kings* hard to put down!

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