

**Norman Housley. *Crusading & the Ottoman Threat, 1453-1505*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. ISBN: 978-0-19-922705-1. Pp. xii, 242. Hardback. £68.00.**

The dramatic fall of Constantinople in 1453 to the Ottoman Turks under Mehmed II ('the Conqueror' 1432-1481) seemed to crown the final failure of the crusading movement of the Middle Ages. After nearly four hundred years of intermittent conflict, not only were Christian gains reversed, but nearly the whole of the Christian east lost, and the heartland of Europe suddenly exposed. Attempts at reviving crusade for use against the Turks largely failed, and the effort has sometimes been viewed as an ill-fated anachronism of the early Renaissance.

In *Crusading and the Ottoman Threat*, however, Norman Housley argues that attempts by Rome to organise a crusade against the Turks were not the 'last gasp of a dying movement' but a large scale and 'resonant' effort that had been retooled to meet current conditions and threats. (p. 1) While they failed to achieve their goals, these efforts did have a significant impact on contemporaries in terms of the mobilisation of men and finances, and the evolution of communication (messaging) and organisational efforts. (p. 1) Housley builds on a growing literature dealing with regional initiatives and impacts, and the influence of humanist thought on crusading messaging as well as the role of the papal *curia*. This book begins by looking at the premise of crusade, its proposed strategy and mobilisation, the practical effects of the aforementioned, communicating the church's arguments and rhetoric, and finally the role of indulgences in fund raising. Since little actual campaigning materialised, the usual sort of sources do not exist and so Housley looks at the promotion of crusades and related literature/documents, preaching, letters, dispatches from envoys, diplomatic exchanges, records of assemblies and so on. This presents something of a problem which then permeates sections of this book as the sources allow Housley to write more about how Rome tried to sell its argument for crusade than the tangible effects that this effort had.

Housley's first chapter on premises

demonstrates how the church argued its case against an evolving threat and amidst changed international dynamics. The Turks were often portrayed as classical barbarians who threatened European civilisation and culture, while crusade was argued as an anecdote to this threat to Christendom. Within this new *topos*, outreach was made even to orthodox Christian states in the call to crusade. Certain states in particular (such as Hungary and Venice) were seen as *antemurales* or 'bulwarks' against the Turkish menace, and messaging often followed the Horatian quote that it is also your business when your neighbour's house is on fire, although this 'became less relevant the further away the burning house was'. (p. 35) Here Housley acknowledges, yet largely skirts, what should be a more central issue for his work: the reasons why this modernised effort at crusade largely failed. This is not the focus of his work, none the less, Housley seems to explain the ultimate failure of crusade as the result of grand political constellations, self-interest, the natural 'synergy' between French and Ottoman diplomatic interests, German divisions and increasing hostility to Rome, decreasing papal credibility and so on. (For example, pp. 38-9.) However, based on the evidence presented here, it could be argued that one of the major reasons was the double edged sword provided by the defensive, humanist rhetoric. While it might well have mirrored wider social and literary trends, it was also an inherently weak argument for crusade. If war against the Turks was as much practical as spiritual – to defend the borders of Christendom – then it stood to reason that those most threatened would be far more moved by this argument than those dwelling outside the Turkish shadow. The regional nature of responses also raises the question of what constituted a crusade in the first place since Hungarians, irrespective of who convinced them to take up arms, had their own motivations separate from those arriving from distant lands. Indeed, as Housley notes, the majority of the crusading force that arrived at Belgrade in 1456 appears to have been

Hungarian, although they were belatedly joined by significant numbers of Germans after the siege was lifted. (p. 113) Perhaps it was easier to convince the restless to seek glory, riches, and serve god through offensive crusade than to mobilise to defend someone else's home. The latter argument could hardly have been enhanced when one considers that 'someone else' often meant yesterday's enemy. Again, Housley does not thoroughly address these issues, and they sit uncomfortably within the wider framework of his thesis. Perhaps, the crusading message was not as malleable as Housley argues.

Housley's strongest chapter is the one dealing with more practical affairs: mobilisation of men and resources. Here he demonstrates that tens of thousands of men were mobilised in the period 1456-64 (though they were disproportionately drawn from threatened areas). He also sheds some light on the sometimes overlooked success at Belgrade in 1456 which owed much to the commitment of thousands of Hungarian and German 'crusaders' as well as the charisma of their leader, John of Capistrano (1386-1456). His other chapters, which deal more with messaging and the activities of a select number of papal agents, are interesting but provide less firm evidence for his main thesis, which implies that these orations and so on had a significant practical effect. Housley's scope is also far smaller than might be imagined by the reader looking to understand European wide responses to these anti-Turkish crusading efforts. Most of the book focuses on papal led organising efforts, the so called 'bulwark' states (especially Hungary), and activity in Italy and Germany. Relegated to only occasional mention are France, England, Iberia and the Knights of St. John (despite their prominence in fighting the Ottomans from their Mediterranean outposts).

Ultimately, while over-ambitious in his argument, Housley does demonstrate that later attempts at crusade attracted significant numbers of volunteers and monetary donations, and that the message was adapted to meet current conditions. Although the inherent nature of these adaptations probably helped limit its success. Crusade may have proved to

be unworkable in the context of the later fifteenth century, but it was not obsolete per se. Where this work is weaker, is both in the limits of its scope and sources (as far proving the central thesis) as well as exploring how the evolution of messaging may have presented, and represented, the inherent weaknesses of a centrally organised, pan European crusading movement in the context of this period.

**Avram Lytton  
King's College London**

---