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Jay Rubenstein. *Armies of Heaven: The First Crusade and the Quest for Apocalypse.* New York: Basic Books, 2011. 424 pp. $29.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-01929-8; ISBN 978-0-465-02748-4.

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Crusading Seen through the Lens of Apocalypse

The production of English-language volumes on the history of the crusading movement has become something of a boom industry in recent years. Indeed, few fields of scholarship have seen as much of a spike in book-length contributions as have the crusades over the past decade, and it is relatively clear why this should be the case. Few things have the ability to spur on and increase the amount of ink spilled on a particular subject as does public demand, and one clear effect of the events of September 11, 2001, has been an ever-increasing public fascination with the crusades and crusades-related terminology. What exactly did al-Qaeda and President George W. Bush mean when they used terms/phrases like âjihadâ or âcrusade against terrorismâ? People wanted to know, and historians of the crusades have since quickly and consistently responded to this development in current events by reexamining the movement in numerous new volumes. It is too simplistic to attribute this recent increase in the publication of crusades histories to public demand alone, however, because these new volumes are also representative of a long-running debate among crusades historians concerning the very definition of the movement. Indeed, it is not easy to define just what contemporaries meant by a âcrusade,â given the fact that they did not use this term to describe their actions. Modern scholars have nevertheless enthusiastically embraced the challenge, developing their own varied conclusions as to what exactly constituted a crusade in many an article and book over the years.[1] One can thus interpret this recent surge in crusades-related volumes, and the consequent necessity of an entire âCrusadesâ section at most contemporary bookstores, as the inevitable result of popular fascinationâs collision with ongoing scholarly discussion. It is to this ever-growing body of literature on the crusades that Jay Rubensteinâs most recent book, *Armies of Heaven: The First Crusade and the Quest for Apocalypse*, makes a valuable contribution.

Rubenstein, professor of history at the University of Tennessee, is certainly not new to creating psychological profiles for his historical subjects, as his readers know well. Indeed, this is exactly what he did in his dissertation-turned-first book,*Guibert of Nogent: Portrait of a Medieval Mind* (2002). It is therefore no surprise that he does the same in *Armies of Heaven*, although this time his subject is not a medieval author/intellectual, but the throngs of nobles, peasants, clerics, pilgrims, and others who participated in the First Crusade (1095-99). Rubenstein, like so many others before him, seeks to answers several questions of fundamental importance to the movementâs history: in 1096, what motivated approximately 100,000 Europeans to leave their homes and travel thousands of miles to wage war on people whom they had never met? Beyond this, and perhaps more importantly, what did they hope to accomplish in the end? Rubenstein fully acknowledges that he is breaking no new ground in posing said questions; what he takes issue with are scholarsâ traditional answers to them. While

acknowledging that penance, possible land acquisition, papal desires to see the Latin and Orthodox Churches reunited, and good old-fashioned greed all played a part in launching the First Crusade, Rubenstein instead argues that the crusadersâ biggest inspiration for the enterprise stemmed from the belief that their actions would bring about the prophesied Apocalypse. The crusadersâ thus viewed their march towards Jerusalem as much more than a mere military campaign against a foreign enemy, but indeed no less than a catalyst for the end of days and the final battle between the forces of good and evil.

Rubensteinâs characterization of the First Crusade as an apocalyptic event is not altogether a new observation, but the pride of place he gives to apocalyptic thought as a motivational force driving the crusade is uncommon among historians. The author does not see this as an inexplicable lacuna in crusade historiography, but instead as completely understandable, given historians' reluctance to incorporate the abundant evidence for it into their analyses. Rubenstein agrees with the majority of historians who consider three particular crusade narratives to be especially important for their independent composition and early dates of completion (finished no later than 1101): the anonymous *Gesta Francorum*, and the histories of Raymond of Aguilers and Albert of Aachen. He does not however share their opinion that several other early twelfth-century narratives are not to be trusted because of their relatively late composition (finished no later than 1107) and the fact that most of them are little more than revisions of the *Gesta Francorum*.[2] Rubenstein argues that, although the authors of these later narratives do not offer the âeyewitnessâ evidence favored by most historians, these works are nevertheless valuable historical sources because they provide information, not found in the *Gesta* or histories of Raymond and Albert, that was based on crusade veteransâ testimony. The relegation of these texts to a position of lesser importance has furthermore, in the authorâs opinion, âdistracted us from the warâs original meaning. Through the efforts of modern, eleventh-century men, an event of apocalyptic proportions, if not the Apocalypse itself, had just occurredâ (p. xiii). This apocalyptic mindset of the crusaders is easy to discern in the sources, if one is willing to take seriously in them what most historians have hitherto ignored or downplayed: the numerous dreams, visions, and miracles experienced by the crusaders on their way to Jerusalem. If one views this movement through the lens of these extraordinary events, possible motivations such as foreign conquest, personal piety, or a reunion of the Latin and Orthodox Churches no longer seem sufficient to explain the crusadersâ fervor for the undertaking; the stakes were much higher than that. The crusaders, in Rubensteinâs view, were convinced they were participating in a series of events that would bring about no less than the end of days; they were not just retaking the terrestrial Jerusalem, but also causing the celestial Jerusalem to descend from the heavens.

Rubenstein certainly makes a persuasive case for widespread apocalyptic beliefs among the crusaders. Indeed, there are few aspects of the First Crusade in which an apocalyptic mindset did not somehow play a role, as the author makes clear when he writes, âPreachers had proclaimed it. The first waves of soldiers had tried to eradicate the Jews in fulfillment of its prophecies. A vision of the enemy as servants of Antichrist had shaped crusader understanding of the Saracens. And the scale and brutality of warfare would have called to mind stories from the Old Testament and prophecies from Revelationâ (p. 264). Yet, the question quickly becomes for the reader: did the crusaders have anything other than apocalypse on the brain? Was nothing else motivating them on the march to Jerusalem than their desire to bring about the Last Days and the end of time? Rubensteinâs heavy emphasis on apocalyptic thinking as the driving force behind the movement, at times, gives readers this very impression, which consequently has the effect of downplaying the importance of other factors leading people to take up the cross, such as noble restlessness, greed, the hopes of seeing a newly reunited Christian Church, personal piety, and also Pope Urban IIâs encouragement to do so. It is the de-emphasis of Urban IIâs role as an initiator of the First Crusade that is perhaps the most problematic of all, considering the plentiful and persuasive evidence demonstrating that crusaders firmly viewed him as such. Nor is it easy to argue that Urban II saw this endeavor as apocalyptic in nature when, as Rubenstein himself admits, he only rarely couched crusade-related correspondence in apocalyptic terms (pp. 42-43).The authorâs consistent reading of the sources through the lens of apocalypse also tends, in many cases, to undervalue other equally plausible explanations for both crusade events and their portrayal by chroniclers. When, for example, writers such as Guibert of Nogent describe the religious fervor of townspeople being stirred by a she-goat or goose supposedly infused with the Holy Spirit, were they paying homage to the peopleâs piety and desire to do Godâs work, or were they instead mocking them as simpletons (p. 47)?

To whatever degree Rubensteinâs argument con-

vinces his readers, there is no doubting his firm command of the source material. The author has a happy talent for weaving together seamlessly the many different story lines of the First Crusade into a single, fascinating narrative. Moreover, many readers will appreciate the lively and playful-yet-critical tone of Rubensteinâs prose, which is regrettably absent from many scholarly monographs. Indeed, this reviewer finds refreshing the authorâs frequent attempts both to explain the historical significance of and relate the main characters of the First Crusade to the modern world. This has the effect of making the actions of men such as Raymond of Saint-Gilles, Bohemond, Baldwin, Peter the Hermit, Peter Bartholomew, and others more understandable and accessible to the modern reader. Rubenstein, for example, describes the post-crusade fate of Duke Godfrey of Bouillon as follows, âOf all the major crusade leaders, only Godfrey left this world with his reputation intact–perhaps because he died in 1100, less than a year after the victory at Ascalon. Like a medieval JFK, his followers were free to imagine the long reign that he might have had and to paint him as whatever sort of hero they wished him to beâ (p. 317). Beyond this, the volume itself is very well constructed overall, with exceptionally few typographical, grammatical, etc. errors of any kind. In fact, this reviewer only found a single error in the entire book: at the top of page 238, one reads, âHe wanted to eradicate the Saracens and, according toone writer, fill the city with new landholders, or *colonis*â (p. 238). The legions of endnotes accompanying each chapter are very helpful and quite comprehensive, as is the index. The volume also includes a series of color images of both physical objects and manuscript illuminations depicting apocalyptic scenes, which are not only beautiful, but also a very helpful feature for those readers who might be less well acquainted with the crusades and apocalyptic thought than the author.

There will inevitably be a wide range of reader reactions to this particular volume; some readers will find Rubensteinâs argument thoroughly convincing, some will be thoroughly unconvinced of it, and yet others will only take issue with particular aspects of his contentions. But, in the final analysis, it matters very little in which of these categories his readers fall. The importance of Rubensteinâs book lies in its fresh take on a subject of historical inquiry that is quite well-trodden. This is not the extent of the authorâs accomplishments, however, because he has also succeeded in producing a book that engages all interested readerships, whether academic, student, or casual crusade enthusiast. *Armies of Heaven* is a thoroughly researched, well-written, and exciting examination of how those participating in the First Crusade viewed the undertaking. It is a welcome addition to the ever-increasing corpus of studies on the crusades, and achieves what many good books do: it makes a familiar subject seem foreign and causes readers to reimagine what they thought they knew about it.

Notes

[1]. A very good summary and explanation of the various camps into which scholars have fallen over time is Giles Constable, âThe Historiography of the Crusades,â in *The Crusades from the Perspective of Byzantium and the Muslim World*, ed. Angeliki E. Laiou and Roy Parviz Mottahedeh (Washington DC: Dumberton Oaks, 2001), 1-22.

[2]. This is the case with four historical narratives, three of which were composed by monks in northern France named Guibert, Baudry, and Robert, and the other probably in the monastery of Monte Cassino by a fourth anonymous monk. Rubenstein does not stop there, however, also incorporating into his analysis Ralph of Caenâs biography of Tancred, the chronicle of Fulcher of Chartres, as well as Bartolph de Nangisâs revision of Fulcherâs chronicle.

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