

A New Reading of the Muslim Elite in the *Estoire de la guerre sainte**

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The *Estoire de la guerre sainte* is an Old French verse chronicle of the Third Crusade (1189-92). The narrative focuses on the struggle between King Richard I Lionheart (1189-99) and the Ayyūbid sultan Abū'l-Muzaffar Yūsuf b. Ayyūb Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn (570-89 AH/1174-93 AD).¹ The author of the work was an Anglo-Norman cleric known as Ambroise. It is possible that Ambroise took notes throughout the course of the crusade, as did the anonymous author of the contemporaneous *Chronicon Terrae Sanctae*. A scribe then redacted the *Estoire* at some point between 1194 and 1199.² Ambroise describes Frankish-Muslim diplomacy but his account rarely appears in modern crusade historiography.³ Most studies that refer to the *Estoire* focus on its contradictory images of Muslims as both heroes and villains. Historians link such contradictions to conventional depictions of Muslims in the *chansons de geste*. The authors of the *chansons* often depict Muslims as “ideal enemies”, that is, non-Christian opponents worthy of Christian heroes. Muslims also play a role as instruments of divine retribution for Christian sins in the *chansons*. Marianne Ailes, however, points to the humanness of the “other” in the *Estoire* as an indication of Ambroise’s departure from *chanson* conventions. Yet Ailes still confines the Muslims in the *Estoire* to a literary role.⁴ Do the incongruous images of Muslims in the *Estoire* merely announce a *topos* of an “admirable enemy”?

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¹ Marianne Ailes, “Introduction”, in *The History of the Holy War: Ambroise’s Estoire de la guerre sainte*, eds. Marianne Ailes, Malcolm Barber, volumes 1-2 (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2003), II: 20-3. See also Michael Routledge, “Songs”, in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Crusades*, ed. Jonathan S. C. Riley-Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 91-3.

² Ailes, “Introduction”, I: xi-xii; II: 1-3. On the note-taking of the *Chronicon*’s author, see William Stubbs, *Chronicles and Memorials of the Reign of Richard I*, volumes 1-2 (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, and Green, 1864-1865), I: lxiv. See also the discussion in John L. La Monte, “Introduction”, in Ambroise, *Estoire de la guerre sainte*, trans. Merton Jerome Hubert, Reprint edn, *The Crusade of Richard Lion-Heart*, ed. John L. La Monte (New York: Octagon Books, 1976), pp. 6-10.

³ On the historical value of the *Estoire*, see La Monte, 23, 27; Ailes, “Introduction”, II: 16-7. Most studies on Frankish-Muslim diplomacy focus on the thirteenth and early twelfth centuries. Yvonne Friedman very briefly refers to the text in *Encounter between Enemies: Captivity and Ransom in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), pp. 95-6.

⁴ Marianne Ailes, “The Admirable Enemy? Saladin and Saphadin in Ambroise’s *Estoire de la guerre sainte*”, in *Knighthoods of Christ: Essays on the History of the Crusades and the Knights Templar, Presented to Malcolm Barber*, ed. Norman Housley (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), esp. p. 55; cf. Marianne Ailes, “Heroes of War: Ambroise’s Heroes of the Third Crusade”, in *Writing War: Medieval Literary Responses to Warfare*, eds. Corinne Saunders, Françoise Le Saux, Neil Thomas (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), pp. 43, 47; John V. Tolan, *Sons of Ishmael: Muslims through European Eyes in the Middle Ages* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008), pp. 86-7; cf. La Monte, 25; Paul Bancourt, « De l’image épique à la représentation historique du musulman dans L’Estoire de la guerre sainte d’Ambroise », in *Au carrefour des routes d’Europe : la chanson de geste : Xe Congrès international de la Société Rencesvals pour l’étude des épopées romanes, Strasbourg, 1985*, volumes 1-2 [Société Rencesvals, Congrès international, volume 10] (Aix-en-Provence: CUERMA, Université de Provence, 1987), I: 224.

For John V. Tolan, Ambroise's ambivalent attitude towards the Ayyūbid elite is also a reflection of the process by which Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn became a respected and admired figure in western medieval literature. Tolan argues that "the negative portrayal of Saladin gives way to mutual admiration" over the course of the narrative.⁵ Conversely, Ailes identifies a specific point in the text after which Ambroise's appreciation of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn *diminishes*: the siege of Acre and its conquest by the crusaders (June 1189-July 1191).⁶ Do Ambroise's views merely reflect European views of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn? And does the Acre episode really mark a turning point?

Ambroise blames Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn for having abandoned the Muslim hostages of Acre and for having made their execution a necessary burden upon Richard:

The time set for the fulfilment of the terms passed; two more weeks passed, indeed more than that, from the time when they [the Saracens] said they would keep their word to the Christians. In this way the sultan defaulted and in so doing he acted in a false and treacherous manner when he did not redeem or deliver those who were condemned to death. Because of this he [the sultan] lost his renown, which was great, for his name was celebrated in every court in the world.⁷

Ailes argues that Ambroise is thenceforth more critical of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn and more approving of his brother, Sayf al-Dīn (d. 615/1218). But Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn is described as "generous and valiant" later in the narrative.⁸ And the sultan avoids a military confrontation with Richard throughout the narrative.⁹ Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn plays no significant role before the siege of Acre. His early absence leaves Ambroise with little opportunity for commentary, critical or not.

There is an alternative way of reading the contradictions in the *Estoire*. The notion that Ambroise's "religious and military enemy is shaped by his didactic intention" underestimates how historical context can also inform the author's mind-set.¹⁰ I argue that Ambroise's depiction of the Muslim elite was more closely tied to diplomatic encounters and political circumstances than to templates of the "ideal enemy". Furthermore, many scholars overlook the diplomatic role played by Sayf al-Dīn as an intermediary between Richard and Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn.¹¹ In addition, Ambroise's depiction of Sayf al-Dīn undergoes a significant transformation over the course of the narrative.

⁵ Tolan, *Ishmael*, 86-9.

⁶ Ailes, "Admirable Enemy", 57-60.

⁷ Et li termes iert trespassez/Quinze jorz, voire plus assez,/Des covenanz que cil diseient/Qu'a la cristienté tendreient,/Dont li soldans s'iert defailliz,/Qu'il fist que faus e que failliz,/Quant cels qu[é] a la mort livra/Ne rainst ne ne delivra./Lors perdi il sa renonee [sic]/Qui tant aveit esté nomee, /Car n'aveit cort el mode eüe/Ou el ne fust amanteüe [...]. Ambroise, lines 5482-93 (pp. 88-9), trans. Ailes, II: 108-9. For Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's reputation in medieval Europe, see Tolan, *Ishmael*, 79-80, 85.

⁸ Einz manda a Salahadin,/Au large, ou vaillant Sarazin [...]. Ambroise, lines 10871-2 (p. 175), trans. Ailes, II: 177.

⁹ Ailes, "Admirable Enemy", 57.

¹⁰ Ailes, "Admirable Enemy", 51, cf. 55, 63-4 where Ailes considers the impact of the historical context.

¹¹ On the role of Sayf al-Dīn as an intermediary, see M. C. Lyons, D. E. P. Jackson, *Saladin: the Politics of the Holy War* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1982), 328, 336, 347-8 (cited in Ailes, "Admirable Enemy", 62, n. 34); but Tolan, *Ishmael*, n. 45 (p. 179). Cf. Ailes, "Admirable Enemy", 59, 62 for the literary function of Sayf al-Dīn as the sultan's *alter ego*.

To begin with, it is important to understand the context of the diplomatic relationship that developed between Richard and Sayf al-Dīn. Ambroise claims that Sayf al-Dīn was deceitful during his first negotiations with Richard in November 1191 (when Richard's demands were extravagant).¹² Ambroise does not comment on Sayf al-Dīn's intentions when he describes the negotiations between Richard and Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn in July 1192.¹³ At that point, Richard witnessed deserters leaving his army but still had abundant resources at his command. In a later passage, Ambroise claims that Sayf al-Dīn sent replacement horses to Richard in the midst of battle.¹⁴ This passage in the *Estoire* indicates a complete transformation of Sayf al-Dīn's character from treacherous to chivalric.

Richard was in a more desperate situation when he called upon Sayf al-Dīn for the last time. In the autumn of 1192, Richard's forces were depleted after they had defended Jaffa from attack and Richard risked the loss of several other towns. He was also eager to return to his territories in Europe.¹⁵ He once more called upon the French knights and military orders for support. Ambroise reports their refusal and the king's reaction;

When the king saw that everyone, everyone had let him down, no-one was either loyal or blameless, then was he troubled and disturbed and very perplexed. My lords, do not wonder at it that he did the best he could in the time that he had. For he who shuns shame and seeks honour chooses the lesser of two evils. So he would rather seek a truce than leave the land in danger [...]¹⁶

Whereas the account of the aftermath of Acre is the most thorough *apologia* in the chronicle, this account is the strongest expression of Ambroise's emotional state at the time of writing. If there is a single turning point in the narrative, it is this passage. Richard subsequently called upon Sayf al-Dīn, "who respected him [i.e. Richard] because of his valour, asking that, sparing no effort, he [Sayf al-Dīn] would seek for him the best truce that he could". Sayf al-Dīn in turn "made great efforts" to fulfil his request.¹⁷ It is as if King Richard felt less sympathy from his Frankish allies than from Sayf al-Dīn, who became his ally at the negotiating table. It is likely that Sayf al-Dīn's role as an intermediary effected his transformation in Ambroise's eyes.

The final scene of the narrative presents us with the most extraordinary encounter in the *Estoire*. Ambroise claims that Bishop Hubert (archbishop of Canterbury, 1193-1205) met with Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn after Richard's departure from the Levant. During the meeting, the bishop complimented the king and the sultan on equal grounds. In response, the sultan claimed that he "would prefer to

¹² Ambroise, lines 7358-68, 7386-410 (pp. 119-20); trans. Ailes, II: 131-2.

¹³ Ambroise, lines 10722-9 (p. 173), trans. Ailes, II: 175.

¹⁴ Ambroise, lines 11512-33 (p. 186), trans. Ailes, II: 184. See Ailes, "Admirable Enemy", 59-60. For power relations expressed through gift-giving, see Yvonne Friedman, "Gestures of Conciliation? Peacemaking Endeavours in the Latin East" in *In Laudem Hierosolymitani* [Society for the Study of the Crusades and the Latin East, Crusades Subsidia volume 1] (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 42-7.

¹⁵ Andrew Jotischky, *Crusading and the Crusader States* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2004), p. 161.

¹⁶ Quant li rois vit que tot li mondes,/Qui n'est guaires ne liaus ne [mondes,/Lui fu tot en travers failliz,/Lors fu troublez e maubailliz/E durement desconseillez./Seignors, ne vos esmerveilliez./S'il fist del mielz qu[è] il savoit/Selonc le tens qu[è] il avoit,/Car qui crient honte e aim henor/Choisist de deus mauls le menor./Si velt mielz une triwe quere/Que leisser en peril la terre [...]. Ambroise, lines 11718-29 (p. 189), trans. Ailes, II: 186.

¹⁷ Ambroise, lines 11734-6, 11740 (pp. 189-90), trans. Ailes, II: 186.

exercise generosity and judgement with moderation, than boldness without moderation".¹⁸ The sultan also fulfilled the bishop's request to allow the worship of Latin rites in Bethlehem, Jerusalem, and Nazareth.¹⁹ Ambroise depicts Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn as a wise king in this encounter. The underlying message is that Ambroise *qua* the sultan imparts advice to the reader through the sultan's reply to the bishop. Perhaps his words are meant for any ruler conscious of the need to balance bravery and prudence.²⁰ Throughout the text, the Muslim *amīrs* also appear as prudent and reserved advisors to the sultan, which completes the picture of the wise ruler surrounded by wise councillors.²¹

Importantly, the historical context informed much of the above account. The sultan's *qāḍī al-askar* (judge of the army), Bahā' al-Dīn ibn Shaddād, recounts a message that Richard delivered to the sultan in July 1192. According to the message, Richard told the sultan that "men of religion have asked you for churches and you have not grudged them what they asked."²² In addition, Ambroise's depiction of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn may reflect the sultan's prudence as a general during the crusade. And Ambroise's depiction of the Muslim *amīrs* reflects an actual degree of cordiality that existed between the *amīrs* and Richard. This cordiality is preserved in the Arabic accounts and Ambroise could have observed Richard's meetings with the *amīrs*.²³ If the territorial frontier of the Latin East was crossed by merchants and physicians, the mental frontier between the Frankish and Muslim elite was similarly negotiable through dialogue. Moreover, successful diplomacy required and fostered a degree of mutual understanding, which could manifest itself through rituals and "gestural language".²⁴ The numerous diplomatic encounters that occurred during the Crusade Period undoubtedly informed the opinions of Arabic and Latin authors.

It is important to recall Ambroise's purpose before over-emphasising the influence of diplomatic encounters on his work. It is possible that Ambroise depicts Sayf al-Dīn in a positive manner to emphasis the shortcomings of the Frankish nobility.²⁵ A denigration of the French contingent simultaneous with praise of the Muslim elite, as well as the respect accorded to Richard by Sayf al-Dīn, all reinforced Ambroise's eulogy of Richard.²⁶ Yet Ibn Shaddād attests to the development

¹⁸ Ambroise, lines 12115-8 (p. 196), trans. Ailes, II: 191.

¹⁹ Ambroise, lines 12136-49 (p. 196), trans. Ailes, II: 191.

²⁰ For Richard's recklessness, see Ailes, "Admirable Enemy", 57, 62-3; Ailes, "Heroes", 39-40; Tolan, *Ishmael*, 87-9, 100. Cf. Bahā' al-Dīn Yūsuf ibn Rāfi' Ibn Shaddād, *Al-Nawādir al-sultaniyya wa'l-mahasin al-Yusufiyya*, trans. D. S. Richards, *The Rare and Excellent History of Saladin* [Crusade Texts in Translation, volume 7] (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), p. 150, who calls Richard "wise and experienced in warfare".

²¹ Cf. Tolan, *Ishmael*, 86, who refers to Ambroise's portrayal of "Saladin and his men" or "Saladin and his soldiers". However, Ambroise does not praise the Muslim rank-and-file. Rather, he shows respect for the elite class exemplified by the refined warrior and poet Usāma Ibn Munqidh (488-584/1095-1188).

²² Ibn Shaddād, 213.

²³ See Ibn Shaddād, 193.

²⁴ For mental frontiers, see David Abulafia, "Introduction: Seven Types of Ambiguity, c. 1100-c. 1500", in *Medieval Frontiers: Concepts and Practices*, ed. Nora Berend (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), p. 24. For the role of "gestural language" and "gesture-based rituals" in successful diplomacy, see Friedman, 31-2, 38, 45.

²⁵ See Ailes, "Admirable Enemy", 63. For a parallel contrast of Christian fault to Muslim virtue, see Farhad Daftary, *Ismailis in Medieval Muslim Societies* [Ismaili Heritage Series, volume XII] (London: I. B. Tauris, Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2005), p. 155; cf. Nasseh A. Mirza, *Syrian Ismailism: The Ever Living Line of the Imamate, AD 1100-1260* (Richmond: Curzon, 1997), p. 38.

²⁶ On Ambroise's purpose, see Ailes, Introduction, II: 2, 4, 19-20; on his audience, see 13.

of close relations between Richard and Sayf al-Dīn.²⁷ Their close relations probably facilitated negotiations. At most we can propose that King Richard's encounters with the Muslim elite informed *in part* a change in Ambroise's perspective of Muslims. It is clear that Ambroise's background in Europe provided him with his first perspectives of Islam. Polemical tracts on Islam as well as many *chansons* consisted of false contrivances that could have informed Ambroise's initial view of Muslims.²⁸ Thus, the final work may reflect how he reacted to events as they happened. In contrast, the author of the "original" *Itinerarium peregrinorum*, another chronicle of the Third Crusade, had little occasion to diverge from stereotyped depictions of Muslims. The original *Itinerarium* only covered the crusade up to the year 1190.²⁹

Therefore, the contradictory images of Muslims in the *Estoire* cannot be reduced to literary functions. This interpretation of the *Estoire* also demonstrates that the "other" was not always an ideal *warrior* enemy. Muslim elites could be portrayed as wise and virtuous persons of non-Christian faith.³⁰ Finally, this reading suggests that western perceptions could change as a result of actual contact with the "other". Tellingly, the complete *Estoire* survives in only one manuscript, which suggests that Ambroise's admiration of the Muslim elite found little appreciation in Europe.³¹ Readers of the *Estoire* must be wary of literary tropes but can also discover how historical reality informed Frankish perceptions. The inverse problem exists for the chronicles of the Crusade Period; historians must appreciate the literary tropes, ideologies, and political agendas that inform accounts in order to evaluate their historical reliability.³² In brief, the *Estoire* is overemphasised for its literary value but underappreciated for its historical insight.

²⁷ Ibn Shaddād, 173-4, 182-3, 185, 187, 193, 195-7, 228. See also 223 for Richard's other acquaintances from among the Muslim elite. It is noteworthy that Ibn Munqidh also developed close relations with the Templars when he visited Jerusalem in the mid-twelfth century as a diplomat. See Paul M. Cobb, *Usama ibn Munqidh: Warrior-Poet of the Age of Crusades* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005), pp. 29-30.

²⁸ For twelfth century European perspectives on Islam, see John V. Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), ch. 6; cf. Suzanne Conklin Akbari, *Idols in the East: European Representations of Islam and the Orient, 1100-1450* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), esp. ch. 5; and Sharon Kinoshita, *Medieval Boundaries: Rethinking Difference in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), esp. ch. 1 for a reassessment of medieval views in the *Chanson de Roland*; Siobhain Bly Calkin, *Saracens and the Making of English Identity: the Auchinleck Manuscript* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 1, 3-4, 53-9, 103-4, 135, 150-60, 165-6 for traces of encounters with "historical Muslims" in a 14th century English manuscript. See Ailes, "Introduction", II: 1-2, 12 for Ambroise's background and access to *chansons*.

²⁹ For the dating and authorship of the original *Itinerarium peregrinorum* (IP1), see Helen J. Nicholson, "Introduction", in *Chronicle of the Third Crusade*, trans. Helen J. Nicholson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010), 6-10.

³⁰ A wise Saracen councillor also appears in the *Chanson de Roland*. See Kinoshita, 17.

³¹ Ailes, "Introduction", I: xi. Of the Ayyūbid elite, only Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn was widely admired in Europe from the time of the crusade. See Tolan, *Ishmael*, ch. 6.

³² See P. W. Edbury, John G. Rowe, *William of Tyre: Historian of the Latin East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 1, 6-7, 26-9, 151, 159-60, 167, 170 on the influence of William of Tyre's background and aims on the *Historia*, and its modern reception. Cf. Tuomas M. S. Lehtonen, "By the Help of God, Because of Our Sins, and by Chance: William of Tyre Explains the Crusades", in *Medieval History Writing and Crusading Ideology*, eds. Tuomas M. S. Lehtonen, Kurt Villads Jensen, with Janne Malkki, Katja Ritari (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2005), pp. 72-80. See Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval & Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 133-7 for an overview of rhetoric and method in medieval crusade historiography. See Chase F. Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 69 for Ibn Shaddād's depiction of his ideal warrior, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn; see also Konrad Hirschler, *Medieval Arabic Historiography: Authors as Actors* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 100-1.