

Teaching the Crusades:

*A Report on a Session at the 2009
International Medieval Congress*



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Session Descriptor

The crusades are often viewed as ‘emotive, controversial and difficult’ to teach based on assumptions and misconceptions of what crusades actually were, who went on crusade, and causes of crusade. Undergraduates often have (mis)-perceptions of the crusades and crusading ideals based on popular culture and films, media, and their exposure (or lack thereof) to this subject. This session brings together early career academics who have done ground breaking research in this field and/or have taught this subject in schools or university. It will introduce innovative and alternative approaches to teaching an often complex and challenging period of medieval history.

Paper Titles

The Christian glories in the death of the pagan': Crusading Piety and the 21st – Century Student
Teaching the Prosopography of the Crusades
Theory and the Teaching of the Crusades

On 14 July 2009 the Subject Centre for History, Classics and Archaeology sponsored a very successful session on 'Teaching the Crusades' at the annual International Medieval Congress at Leeds. Papers were presented by Patrick Parsons, Kathryn Hurlock and Conor Kostick illustrating the different approaches to teaching this subject to varied learners in varied institutions.

Patrick Parsons (DACE, Faculty of Education, University of Glasgow) shared with the audience his course taught to learners that come from different backgrounds to those who have opted to study history as a core subject. These learners, he described, are those who will eventually become primary or secondary teachers and may not have a wider understanding of the background of medieval history or Catholicism. His primary focus was the use of media and tools that allow his students to understand the background or motivation of the Crusades/Crusaders. He shared the overview of his twenty-two week course and provided some of the handouts he gives to his students. The latter part of the presentation focused somewhat on how he assisted students to make the mental leap to understand the mentality of the Catholic Middle Ages and the religious practices—which were very different to their experiences in the modern world.

Kathryn Siân Hurlock (History Department, Manchester Metropolitan University) gave a more formal presentation that provided useful research/teaching linkages on using prosopography to teach the crusades. She gave the audience a background on prosopography and what has been done using this methodology to study varied subjects. She then provided a practical approach to how prosopography can be used to teach the crusades in a classroom or in a seminar setting. Her students are asked to look for crusading individuals in reference material, monographs or textbooks and attempt to find out as much information about these individuals as possible. This task is made somewhat simpler because Kathryn provided lists for her students to use but also allowed her students some freedom to 'discover' crusaders on their own. This methodology has proven a positive way for students to become closer to historical figures and provided ideas for dissertations.

The last presentation was much more informal than the others. Conor Kostick (School of Histories and Humanities, Trinity College, Dublin) reflected on the lack of grand theory in crusade studies of the type that polarised historians of the seventeenth-century civil wars in Britain, and of the type he adopted in his recent publication on the social structure of the First Crusade. His discussion brought to light the kinds of monographs and studies that are ‘missing’ from crusade studies, most especially those from the Muslim world. This further emphasized our lack of understanding of the ‘whole picture’ and difficulty in teaching undergraduates a balanced view of the crusades. Further to this, he indicated that using theory to teach the crusades, while valuable, can be limiting as students may have been trained in different theoretical or historical models in other subjects.

The session was brought together in the end by a ‘mini roundtable’ discussion that was opened up to the audience. These varied presentations created a great deal of subsequent discussion in which it became apparent that the panelists and audience alike held a multitude of views on how best to teach the crusades. Most of the focus tended to emphasise the lack of understanding we have of our students—either in their abilities to comprehend difficult subjects but also their academic abilities. Some students, depending on their backgrounds, can firmly grasp concepts such as motivation to go on crusade and individual piety, while other students have difficulty understanding Christianity, the separation of ‘medieval holy war’ and modern day terrorism and the importance of media influences on student learning. We did not solve the problems associated with teaching such a controversial subject, but our attempt to hold a mini-round table within the format of an ordinary session was a success on many levels. It allowed for seasoned academics to give their views but also support those early career academics on the panel. We realised the session had much more potential and sparked a great deal of interest; so much so that we have been invited to propose a formal Round Table at next year's Leeds IMC. In addition, it has prompted discussions on creating a formal teaching and learning resource for teaching medieval subjects that can be used for primary, secondary and higher/further education teachers.

Postgraduate Feedback

Lean Ni Chleirigh, Medieval History Department, Trinity College, Dublin

Prior to attending this seminar, I had little idea what it would entail. As a postgraduate researcher in the area of the Crusades and a teaching assistant, I hoped to gain the benefit of other teacher's experience and improve my own 'classroom' performance. All three papers were extremely interesting however they did not prompt me to overhaul my own methods and practices.

I felt that the first speaker rather underestimated his students' ability to grasp the mindset of another era and I would have reservations about the use of modern cultural artifacts such as film to bridge the perceived gap in understanding. I am not sure that the mindset of the middle ages is so unfathomable as to be beyond the empathic borders of the modern mind. I would also be concerned that a course on the First Crusade was the first exposure that many of his students would have to the middle ages. I have found that when students are familiar with the social and religious structures of the Middle Ages in Europe, the Crusades do not appear as anomalous as they might to an audience exposed to Medieval Europe for the first time.

The second speaker was extremely interesting in her use of prosopographical methods into her small-group teaching. In the case of a special subject or master's course, I would certainly consider the discussion of prosopography as a valuable addition to the range of methodologies which I would introduce my students to. The use of 'mass prosopography' in particular would satisfy some students thirst for a more inclusive history of the Middle Ages which can prove elusive in the sources.

The third paper was not clearly directed at the speaker's own teaching methodologies but rather at the special case of crusade studies as an area which the recent theoretical developments in historiography have had little impact. The thrust of the argument was that there is a danger in assuming that you have no theoretical model. This is an issue which affects students as well as researchers and ought to be considered in the classroom, in particular if students have been introduced to historiographical trends in other areas.

The main benefit I found in attending the session was that I was made aware of issues surrounding the teaching of the Crusades which are current in Britain. In my home institution, there has been no discussion of the appropriateness of teaching the Crusades in universities (the Crusades do not form part of the primary or second level education syllabus in Ireland).

I found the session extremely enjoyable and informative, in that it prompted me to consider the range of teaching methodologies which can be employed as well as making me consider my own methodology and its positive and negative aspects. I would suggest perhaps, that in the future both early career and more experienced academics could give presentations.

Proposal for 2010 Session

A recent report conducted by The Historical Association and funded by the government's Department for Education and Skills found that teachers were "unwilling to challenge highly contentious or charged versions of history", and at one school they "deliberately avoided teaching the crusades...because their balanced treatment of the topic would have directly challenged what was taught in some local mosques". A session on teaching the crusades was organised at last year's IMC (2009) in direct response to the report's conclusions. It became clear that teachers within higher and further education establishments likewise faced numerous pedagogical challenges when discussing the concept and practice of medieval Holy War. Bringing together an international range of teachers and scholars at various stages of their career and from both the secondary and tertiary sectors, this round table will discuss the challenges faced with and potential routes to teaching such an "emotive and controversial" field of history.