

# Teaching the Crusades: Encountering the Other

A Round Table Discussion for Leeds International Medieval Congress 2010

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The round table “Teaching the Crusades” was organized after the great success of a session on this same topic in July 2009. As a young scholar on crusades and a teacher in French university, I was invited to speak of my own experience of teaching the crusades in France. I found this theme seducing, since I’ve always been interested by the complex relations between historical research, history classes and the current social and political situation of a given country. How much are historians influenced by the broad political and social situation of their time and the country they live in? How are these influences echoed in teaching history? Teaching is a mix between scientific research and necessary vulgarization, but is also strongly dependant on the wills and expectations of a given society. One must be aware of these three parameters and their respective importance.

The goal of this round table was confronting the point of view from teachers and scholars from various countries: besides France, scholars from the USA, England, and Finland were contributing in order to put side by side as different situation as possible. I was really interested in doing so, because it seems the best way—or even the only way—to really understand the specificity of each national experience and situation. Research and teaching on crusades seemed strongly linked to the events in the Near East. I hoped that the parallel between the English, the American, the Finnish and the French situation would help us understand how much and to what extent. The various papers showed the difficulty of simplifying the complex debates about crusades at school and the problem faced by every scholar when he comes to teach his own research. They enhanced too the importance of various attitudes toward war in the Near East on the way crusades are perceived by a society and, hence, taught in schools or universities. The importance of September 11<sup>th</sup>, for example, was stressed by all speakers as an important factor for the current popularity of crusading classes.

The round table was thus very instructive, for it explained national situations in the light of others. Even if our teaching cannot be completely revised by this confrontation, understanding how far our classer can be from the idealistic “pure transmission of knowledge” is very helpful. We must remain aware of all various social and political factors that can transform our way of considering past events, and thus teaching them.

Such an experience is really important for a young scholar. In this kind of round tables, an older and more experimented scholar do not only brings you more—or more precise—information, it helps understanding the very meaning of your research and teaching experience. The discussion over the influence of September 11<sup>th</sup> on the interest and reception of history classes in UK, Finland, USA and France was enlightening. Contrary to what one may think—and what is often said—the current situation (wars in the East, growing Muslim fundamentalism) doesn’t make teaching the crusades more difficult: every speaker agreed it had strengthened the curiosity of children and students about cultural encounters and confrontations. Teaching the crusades may be easier in the 21<sup>st</sup> century than thirty years ago. But crusades aren’t understood, and thus taught, in the same way as they used to. The importance of religious factors in the crusading movement and in the Muslim *Jihad* has been stressed in recent years, as a consequence of the growing interests for these questions nowadays. The national situation has a strong influence too: French teaching seems to be much more interested by the peaceful confrontation between East and West than English or American teaching. This is partly a consequence of the minor French involvement in the East, especially in the war in Iraq.

For a crusading scholar and teacher these outcomes are very interesting for they offer a new perspective on the so-called “historical truth.” But what is clear about crusading is true in every historical field. Teachers as well as scholars should never forget it. What we teach is not only the result of scientific research. It is transformed and simplified (one would say oversimplified) because of academic necessities (programs, time-tables). Most of all, it is strongly influenced by the society we’re living in, the events we’re involved in, and our own citizen experience. We shall not conclude that our teaching is relative and worth noting. On the contrary, it is this integration of history in a social environment that makes it living and interesting for children and students alike.

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