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The Image of the Crusade Woman through Islamic Writings Contemporary with the Crusades

Brahim EL Kadiri Boutchich

Moroc

I found out that we agreed on many points and diverged on many others because of our different perspective and analysis. However, I must say that I have benefited a great deal from his way of reading the sources. Bearing in mind that the results of any research are but the beginning of a new one, I hope that my paper will add new things to the topic of the Crusade woman in Bilad Asham during the Crusades.

The Crusades were a real opportunity for Muslims and Christians to co-habit, deepen their knowledge of each other, and discover each others customs and traditions. Prior to this period, there were only travels and trade that enabled Muslims and Christians to get acquainted, but with the settlement of Christians in Bilad Asham , Muslims could have a clearer idea about the European society . So, Muslim Historians who were contemporary with the Crusades wrote some impressions about the Crusade society, especially about the Crusade woman.

The difficulty that faces the researcher who relies on Muslim sources, however, remains in the fact that Muslim historians did not deal with the topic of the Crusade woman in itself, but they just referred to it in the flow of news reporting on the Crusades, Muslim historians gave flashes in different references with no linking thought, hence making it strenuous on the researcher to gather the scattered texts and to order them carefully .

Nevertheless, the importance of Muslim writings lies in the fact that the authors were contemporaries with the Crusades, cohabited with the Crusade woman in Bilad Asham, got in contact with her, talked to her, and registered in their books what they saw and heard about her.¹ Thus, their writings are considered original documents with a great degree of importance.

Islamic sources refer to the Crusade woman as " Ifrandjia ", which is a derivation from the word " French". There is no difference in appellation though it does not confine itself to French women as one may understand from it, but it includes all women from European countries that took part in the Crusades. Despite the fact that we do not know the number of European women who lived in Bilad Asham because of the absence

of statistics, one has to assume that they were few, for most of the comers were men fighters.²⁾ However, there are references in Islamic sources which point to the participation of women in the Crusades as we shall see in this study .

Pernoud insists in his study which is based on Western references that a number of horsmens wives left Europe to accompany their husbands, while a group of European woman went on pilgrimage to the holy tomb.³⁾

We believe that the desire of Christians to settle in Bilad Asham pushed a lot of European wives to stay with their husbands. Periods of peace were also opportunities for a number of European women to settle in this region some time without their husbands.⁴⁾ Also, the fear from the disintegration of a whole generation because of non-procreation was an incentive to the European woman to migrate in order to join their husbands in the Islamic orient.⁵⁾

Anyway, the Crusade woman imposed herself in the Islamic society and played various roles. She was always present in the political and military lives, carried out commercial transactions, and participated in public services. What is, then, the image of this woman presented by the Muslim historians?

The Crusade Woman had attracted the attention of he the Muslim historians, and though they did not deal with its case as an independent subject, her image in the general frame implies that the European woman had a special position in the Shami society and that she assumed a variety of political and military responsibilities .

The first thing that attracted Muslims historians attention is the degree of freedom which was granted to the European woman. As an evidence supporting this truth , the historian Oussama Ibn Munkid gave a funny story about a man who surprised his wife sleeping with another man in the bedroom . The husbands reaction was limited to warning the man and threatening him so that he would not come a second time to his house! ⁶⁾

The same historian also noticed that a European woman, accompanied by her husband, could leave the latter to talk with another man on the street. Moreover, if their conversation lasts for a long while, the husband may leave his wife with her "boy friend " and go away!⁷⁾

He also said that the European woman had the habit to go to the public bath where she could get completely naked before other men in the presence of her husband⁸⁾. On the other hand, he narrated that a Crusade man accompanied by his motherless daughter went to a public bath. The

daughter disrobed and took a bath totally nude before the men⁹⁾. This historian was determined to divulge such practices though seeming exaggeratedly portrayed. In any

case, the Muslim historians writings give us a picture of the freedom of the European women in comparison to the Muslim creed and habits. Hence, we find some historians who expatiated upon what is considered, from their vantage point, unusual, such as Al Asfahani who attributed this to the fact that she was characterized by grooming, coquetry and eroticism. He also elaborated on her sexual independence in a long text.^{[10\)](#)}

Nevertheless, it seems that some Crusade women succeeded in having a good social status among the Shami society. We have the example of a queen described by one of the historians as a highly respectable woman, having authority over her country. He also related that she came on a ship accompanied by 500 knights with their attendants and horses, and she had enough money to spend on these followers who totally and blindly obeyed her.^{[11\)](#)}

Despite being independent and despite enjoying a distinguished status in society, the Crusade woman did not have a say in her marriage. Without generalizing, there are a few texts which prove this. King Richard Lion heart, for example, met a strong opposition because of his decision to marry his sister to the Muslim King Al-Adil without the Popes Consent.^{[12\)](#)}

Although this opposition had a politico-religious reference, for the English King did not oppose his nieces marriage, these practices reveal the fact that these decisions concerned women rather than men. Like commodities, women were exchanged according to the whims of powerful religious men and of decision-makers. Generally, it was known that spinsters were married following the Popes order whereas virgins were married by the family. In both cases, we notice that the marriage of Crusade women was not the latters decision.

In addition to , Alsfahani narrates that King Richard nominated his nephew, Henry, ruler of the city of Sour instead of the Marquis who left his wife . So, his nephew married her even pregnant, thing which aroused the Muslim historians astonishment.^{[13\)](#)}

Yet, there are other behaviors worthy of praise in the European woman, such as her brilliant military role, as Ibn Athir relates after the fall of Al Quds in Muslim hands. Among the prisoners captured by Muslims, there were three warrior women in mens clothes, known just after their capture.^{[14\)](#)} Another tale related by a soldier, and reported by Ibn Shaddad during the siege of Akka, that a Crusade woman who, while fiercely fighting, succeeded in wounding several Muslim fighters before being killed, thus as well winning Salah Dins admiration.^{[15\)](#)}

The Crusade women participation in wars interested the historian Al Asfahani who devoted a great part of his book describing her courage and likened her to male fighters.

On the other hand, old women prompted the fighters and considered the participation in wars a sort of worship.^{[16\)](#)}

On another level, Ibn Munkid was the first to quote an anecdote that concerns the Crusade women's positive behavior, he relates that an old woman took part in a race that was organized by the Crusades within games they used to organize in Bilad Asham.^{[17\)](#)}

Due to Salah Addin Al Ayubis related gentlemanly behavior, the Crusade woman was always respected and forgiven despite her enmity to Muslims. After freeing Al Quds, Salah Addin Al Ayyubi forgave some Crusade princesses, such as Cibila to whom he permitted to take her money and attendants and allowed her to follow her imprisoned husband in Nablus Castle.^{[18\)](#)} Moreover, he returned back a girl taken by one of his fighters to her begging mother.^{[19\)](#)}

On his part, Ibn Jubir throws light upon the Crusade woman and her habits. Describing the city of Banias, he cited that it was owned by a "Queen like a sow!".^{[20\)](#)} When he reached the city of Akka in late 12th century, and while he was waiting for the boat to travel to Andalusia, he descended at a hosting house that was owned and run by a Crusade woman^{[21\)](#)}. The same traveler noticed in the city of Sour the participation of the Crusade woman with man in general activities that caused his astonishment. He also described a Christian wedding and the procession, but did not like some of the Crusade traditions.^{[22\)](#)}

Despite differences between Islam and Christianity, and despite the religious animosity that resulted, some Muslims did get married to Crusade women. This was true especially for women who felt prisoners in the hands of Muslims. Chihab Eddine Malek Ibn Slim Ibn Malek, the owner of Jabar Castle, turned a Crusade woman prisoner into a slave and then married her. She gave birth to his son Badran and became a powerful housewife. yet, she ended up by escaping and marrying a Christian shoe - repairer.^{[23\)](#)}

Having clarified the image of the Crusade woman as related by Muslim historians the following remarks can be made:

1) The view of Muslim historians to the European woman was shaped through the mentality and customs of the Islamic society, hence, some of the negative judgments which appeared in their writings came in consonance with Muslim traditions and reference. They found in the European woman a different kind they were not used to in their daily life in comparison to the Eastern woman. So, their judgments emanated from what they were used to in their societies.

2) Despite their negative view to the European woman, Muslim historians expressed their admiration by referring to her courage during wars and to her political influence that sometimes surpassed that of man. They also admired her beauty and her ability to affect feelings, an aspect in their writings that showed objectivity despite the Crusades of the time and the civilizational struggle between Muslims and Christians .

3) The importance of Islamic texts lies in the fact of correcting the negative image of the European woman as sinful and devilish which the church has established. So, through her different roles the Muslim historians highlighted and through the outstanding position the European woman held within the Christian society, this negative image of the church of the medieval ages was eradicated.

4) Despite what Islamic sources reveal of the condition of the Crusade woman, her image remains unclear even if the researcher gathers the scattered texts and puts them coherently. The cause is that these texts are few and are not enough to present a whole image.

5) Through a comparison between the European woman and the oriental woman during the Crusades, it becomes clear that the role played by the former was more important. Her role was not confined to housework as was the case with the oriental woman, but it extended to politics, wars, trade, hotel management and other economic services.