Williams on Morton, 'The Field of Blood: The Battle for Aleppo and the Remaking of the Medieval Middle East'

Review published on Thursday, July 18, 2019


Reviewed by Rebecca Williams (University of South Alabama) Published on H-War (July, 2019) Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)


Nicholas Morton has written an engaging book about the failed attempt by the crusader states to conquer the city of Aleppo—a failure epitomized and finalized at the Field of Blood in 1119. Morton argues that the failure to take Aleppo doomed the crusading movement as a whole, as its conquest would have allowed the crusader states, especially the Principality of Antioch, to expand into the interior and away from their more exposed holdings along the eastern Mediterranean coastline. Such an expansion would have allowed the Latin states a firmer foothold in the region and could, he argues, have made them permanent fixtures in the Near East. Here he is arguing against historians who claim that failure was necessarily the end result for the crusading endeavor. Although he admits the conquest of Damascus or Cairo would have been just as effective—and the crusaders did attempt to take these cities—the fact that they came closest to achieving their goals at Aleppo pushes this failure to the top of the list.

Morton’s work is broken up into five chapters, along with a prologue and afterword. The first chapter, “The Rival Architects of the Crusader States: Baldwin of Boulogne and Tancred of Hauteville (1100-1110),” begins at the end of the First Crusade with the rivalry of Baldwin, ruler of Edessa, and Tancred, ruler of Tibersias, for the throne in Jerusalem. The former is victorious and is crowned Baldwin I, but Morton points out that his kingdom, like the rest of the crusader states, is relatively weak and in constant need of defending. The crusaders continue to take territory and over time form a hierarchy in which Antioch, Edessa, and later Tripoli are all subsumed under the Kingdom of Jerusalem. Chapter 2, “Riding the Storm: Seljuk Turks and Arab Emirs (1111-1118),” details the complex political and ethnic situation in the Levant during the twelfth century, with much of the local Muslim population consisting of Arabs who are ruled by relative newcomers, the Seljuk Turks. Chapter 3, “The Battle (1119),” examines what Morton argues is the single most decisive battle in the attempt by the Principality of Antioch to take the city of Aleppo. This battle, at the Field of Blood in northern Syria, saw the defeat of the crusaders by the Turkic leader Ilghazi, the death of Antioch’s ruler (Roger of Salerno), and nearly ended in the fall of Antioch itself. In chapter 4, “Fields of Blood (1120-1128),” Morton reveals the shift in power from Antioch to Jerusalem, as Baldwin II first attempts to move on Aleppo, but then changes his focus to Damascus. The loss at the Field of Blood had weakened the crusaders in northern Syria, and the rise to power of a new Turkic ruler, Zangi, put Aleppo permanently off the list of possible conquests. Chapter 5, “Aftermath (1128-1187),” follows the course of the crusader states’ attempts to take Damascus and then Cairo in their quest to expand beyond the thin strip of land they controlled on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea.
Ultimately, the crusaders not only failed to expand but also lost Edessa and even Jerusalem itself by the end of this period. In the afterword, Morton compares the violence and instability surrounding Aleppo during the crusading period to the city’s current situation due to the Syrian civil war.

Whereas *Field of Blood* is a solid, if popular, military history, a few issues detract from its overall effectiveness. While Morton attempts to portray the complexities of religious, ethnic, and political alliances and motivations connected to all sides in the crusading conflict, he sometimes falls into terminology and descriptions that seem to promote a more positive view of the crusaders at the expense of their Muslim enemies. For example, when he talks about the motivations of the crusaders, he states, “This was also a profoundly religious war, waged in the name of God. Tancred may have used every ounce of realpolitik at his disposal to defend and expand his principality, but the mere existence of the Principality of Antioch, or indeed of the other Crusader States, speaks of their conquerors’ deep faith” (p. 45). By contrast, when he discusses the Muslim leader Saladin, he questions his religiosity by asking, “Was he a genuine heartfelt advocate of the jihad? Or was his pious commitment to holy war merely a polished façade covering his own selfish ambitions” (p. 189)?

In addition, Morton refers to Muslims by ethnic designations throughout his work, using such terms as Arabs, Turks, or Kurds, but usually refers to the crusaders collectively as Christians. While this likely reflects an attempt to combat Western society’s monolithic view of Islam, which is commendable, it tends to negate the fact that Muslims in this conflict may have been just as faithful to their religious beliefs as were the crusaders who invaded their territories. Finally, Morton tends to intersperse his narrative with lengthy asides that flesh out the big picture of the crusading conflict but that could make his story line difficult for his readers to follow. Overall, however, *Field of Blood* is a positive addition to the military history of the Crusades and allows nonspecialists a more complete look at the strategies and tactics the crusaders used in their attempts to secure a permanent place in the Near East.


This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.