

al-Hurab al-Salibiyya: An Islamic View of the Battle with Christendom

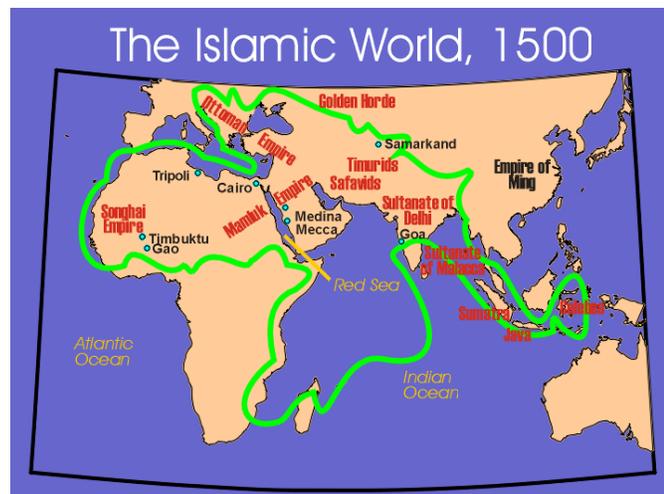
by Michael Pezone (zenmap@aol.com) with Sharissa Khan

Too often, the global history curriculum is a history of Europe with tangents to other parts of the world. For example, the conflict between a culturally, economically and politically advanced Islamic society and a culturally backward, superstitious, war-like and divided Europe are presented as part of the inevitable march toward European global dominance and the triumph of “western civilization.” The Islamic struggle to repeal European invaders between 1095 AD and 1270 AD, known in the Islamic world as the “Wars of the Cross,” are presented to students from the European point of view as a series of religious Crusades to regain the mythical Christian Holy Land.

This play is designed to introduce students to these events from an Islamic perspective, and to challenge them to examine the course of history in different terms. If it had not been for the accidental “discovery” of the Americas by European sailors and the subsequent rape of the resources of the Americas and the wealth generated by the transatlantic slave trade, Islam and Arabic might have emerged as the world’s dominant religion and language.

The letters and poems contained in this play are taken from a translation of the Arabian manuscript “Essulouk li Mariset il Muluk” by Makrisi (<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/makrisi.html>). Makrisi was born in the 769th year of the Hegira (1372 AD in the Christian era).

The play opens in the 620th year of the Hegira, or as those in Christendom might say, the year 1223 AD. All around the Mediterranean world - in Spain, North Africa, Palestine, Syria, and throughout Christendom - warfare has been raging for centuries. Christians killing Christians, Muslims killing Muslims, Muslims killing Christians, Christians killing Muslims and Jews, and lately, a new and violent power has arrived from the east, the Mongols. So much murder, and most of it carried out in the name of Allah, or God! Here in the Muslim world, the wars of Christians against Muslims is called al-Hurab al-Salibiyya, or the “Wars of the Cross.” Christendom will come to refer to them as the Crusades.



The Islamic world, circa 1500, was unified by trade, religion and Arabic, the language of exchange and learning.

Before we turn our eyes to war and war-makers, however, let us meet a man of peace, a man of culture and refinement, a Jew named Abraham, who sits in his home in the beautiful city of Cordoba, in Muslim Spain. Cordoba is one of the most wonderful cities on Earth, a leading light of culture that rivals the great cities of Cairo and Baghdad.

Cordoba is a showcase of great learning and new Muslim discoveries and achievements, in science, math, architecture, medicine, and art—such as the first telescope, the first watch, the pendulum, algebra, papermaking, sewers and hospitals, the creation of universities, soap, the translation of ancient Greek and Latin texts, and more. One Muslim scientist, Ibn al-Nafis, has even figured out that the heart is a great pump, pumping blood throughout the body, and another great thinker and inventor, Abbas ibn Firnas, has constructed a pair of wings out of feathers and made the first attempt at human flight! These great Muslim cultural achievements have been slowly carried, especially by Arab and Jewish merchants and scholars, into backward Europe, and will soon help to trigger a rebirth of culture there.

St. Louis, the Sultana, and the Battle between the Islamic and Christian Worlds

Cast of Characters (in order of appearance)

Narrators (8)	Abdul, the pigeon-keeper	Giovanni, an Italian merchant
Kareem, resident of Cordoba	Sultan, Ayyubid dynasty in Egypt	Farik, an Arab merchant
Abraham, Jewish exile in Cordoba	Advisor to the Sultan	Victor, a French nobleman
King Louis IX of France	Second Advisor to the Sultan	Sultana of the Ayyubid dynasty
Andrew, the King's advisor	Third Advisor to the Sultan	Essahib, Muslim poet
Khailid, grandson of pigeon-keeper		

Scene One. The city of Cordoba in Muslim Spain

Narrator 1: Abraham is an exile from the Kingdom of France. Like many other Jews, at least the ones not massacred, he was forced to flee from his home. He sits now with a Muslim friend Kareem in the Muslim city of Cordoba in Spain. They are discussing what appears to be a bleak future.

Kareem: I have more bad news, my friend. It seems very unlikely that our forces will be able to hold off the advancing armies of the Kingdom of Castille. I believe it is only a matter of time before our beloved Cordoba will fall into the hands of the Christians. I know how this news must tear at your heart.

Abraham: My life has been a spinning wheel, my friend. I never told you much about my life back in France. My childhood there was a happy one. . . so happy. . . but then the nightmare began. . . it seems so long ago now, like another lifetime. . . It started when the property of Jews was confiscated, and we were forced to pay special taxes. My father, my dear father, was once arrested and forced to pay a ransom for his freedom. I don't know how we survived. We were made to wear identification badges. . . patches on our clothing! Worst of all were the forced baptisms. . . those who refused were massacred, Kareem! Three thousand or more were killed! Many Jews were expelled, readmitted, and expelled again. This is what brought me here to Cordoba.

Kareem: You have been happy here.

Abraham: I have been incredibly happy these past years. The friendship and respect my people have received from Muslims here! With what kindness your people treat the Jews!

Kareem: We are proud that throughout the Muslim world those of different faiths have received kind treatment: not just the Jews, Abraham, but Christians too. All of us are people of the book. My friend, I simply cannot understand what is happening in Christendom. It seems the leaders there have a thirst for blood that cannot be quenched. And it seems the greatest hatred is directed against their own. . . Think of the poor Cathars, the Albigensians, there in France. How many tens of thousands of them have been slaughtered as heretics! And they themselves are Christians! The world has gone mad, my friend.

Abraham: And now this madness will soon arrive again at our doorstep. . . Plans must be made, my friend. . . I must go now to the synagogue, where meetings of my people are underway, to discuss our future. . . Ah, where on Earth must we go to be safe and happy?

Scene Two. King Louis's palace in Paris

Narrator 2: We are now in year 641 of the Hegira (1244 AD). King Louis IX of France is about to embark on a crusade to free the Holy Land from Muslim control. He is meeting with an advisor named Andrew. The King has put an end to the Albigensian revolt in southern France. During his reign, he has strongly supported the Church's Inquisition against heretics, himself issuing a decree punishing blasphemy by branding with a hot iron. He has also been very successful in hounding the Jews. He is considered a holy and devout ruler, a godly man of great morality.

King Louis: All our preparations are complete. We sail for Cyprus on the morrow. William Longsword and two hundred English nobles have joined us. May the good Lord protect us and give us strength against the heathens!

Andrew: The time is ripe Your Majesty. Our enemies are divided, fighting amongst themselves. And now they must turn their attention to the East where Mongol armies are driving into Syria.

King Louis: Yes, the Mongols. I have dispatched an ambassador to treat with them. An alliance with these barbarians may greatly aid the cause of Christ!

Andrew: Indeed, my King! Soon Jerusalem and all the Holy Land shall once again be in Christian hands!

King Louis: So have I vowed! Let us kneel and pray to our sovereign Lord that we may put all our enemies to the sword!

Scene Three. Pigeon tower in the city of Cairo, Egypt

Narrator 3: Pigeon towers are found across the expanse of Egypt and Syria. The pigeons are used to carry messages, and are said to travel further in one day than people can travel in twenty days. Our pigeon-keeper, Abdul, is an old man who has seen and heard many things during his long life. He is speaking with his grandson, Khailid, about events past and present, including stories he was told as a young man about the liberator of Jerusalem and founder of the current Ayyubid dynasty in Egypt and Palestine, the man known in Christendom as Saladin. It is the year 647 of the Hegira (1249 AD).

Khailid: Grandfather, tell me again about the great Salahud-din.

Abdul: Salahud-din was a noble warrior, a great leader. I learned a poem when I was a boy, not half your age. It was a poem written by Al-Abiwardi after the fall of Jerusalem, after the Christians slaughtered thousands of our brothers and sisters there. Let me see if I can repeat it now:

“How can the eye sleep between the lids at a time of disasters
That would wake any sleeper?
While your Syrian brothers can only sleep on the backs of their
Chargers, or in vultures’ bellies!
This is war, and the infidel’s sword is
Naked in his hand, ready
To be sheathed again in men’s necks and skulls.”

And when a boy, I was made to memorize the great Salahud-din’s words... words he spoke to the Christian king, Richard by name. I remember the words still. Salahud-din said this: “Jerusalem is to us as it is to you. It is even more important for us, since it is the site of our Prophet’s nocturnal journey and the place where the people will assemble on the day of Judgment. Do not imagine therefore that we can waver in this regard.” These words, my child, were the words of a man who had the wisdom and bravery to free his people, and to free the holy city from the infidels. Salahud-din!

Khailid: And tell me, grandfather, how he retook the holy city, and washed the Dome of the Rock with rose water, to clean it of the filth of the infidels!

Narrator 3: Just then, a pigeon flaps into the tower, carrying a message wrapped around its leg. Abdul quickly grabs it, unwinds the paper, and reads silently.

Abdul: Grave news! Hurry, boy, you must bring this news to the palace!

Khailid: What news, grandfather? What is happening?

Abdul: The army of the Franks has arrived off the coast of Damietta! They are led by their King. His name is Louis. He is bringing war to Egypt. The Sultan must be alerted!

Scene Four. The palace of the Sultan in the city of Cairo, Egypt

Narrator 4: It is the 21st day of the moon Sefer, in the year of the Hegira 647 (1249 AD). The Sultan, surrounded by advisors, has just received a letter from King Louis. He bids an advisor translate the letter aloud.

Sultan: Let me hear the words of this heathen king. Read.

Advisor: This is what the French King writes, Your Highness: “You are not ignorant that I am the prince of those who follow the religion of Jesus CHRIST, as you are of those who obey the laws of Muhammad. Your power inspires me with no fear. How should it? I who make the Muslims in Spain tremble! I lead them as a shepherd does a flock of sheep. I have made the bravest among them perish, and loaded their women and children with chains. They endeavor by presents to appease me, and turn my arms to another quarter. The soldiers who march under my standards cover the plains, and my cavalry is not less redoubtable [impressive]. You have but one method to avoid the tempest that threatens you. Receive

priests, who will teach you the Christian religion, embrace it, and adore the Cross; otherwise, I will pursue you everywhere, and God shall decide whether you or I be master of Egypt.”

Sultan: This troubles me greatly. How sad! How sad! This man, this Christian, is bent on our destruction. What should I do? What say you all?

Second Advisor: Your Highness, we are in great danger. We must not underestimate our enemies. They have come with many ships, and many thousands of mounted soldiers. Already our army is fleeing from Damietta!

Third Advisor: Do not fear, your Highness! Our forces shall regroup, and we shall defeat the infidels. We are fighting to defend our homeland, and we must not forget that the enemy is far from their homes, far from any hope of re-supply!

Sultan: It is so! Let me respond to this King Louis. Write this as I say it: In the name of Allah, most gracious, most merciful, salvation to our prophet Muhammad and his friends! I have received your letter: it is filled with menaces, and you make a boast of the great number of your soldiers. Are you ignorant that we know the use of arms, and that we inherit the valor of our ancestors? No one has ever attacked us without feeling our superiority. Recollect the conquests we have made from the Christians; we have driven them from the lands they possessed; their strongest towns have fallen under our blows. Recall to your mind that passage of the Qu’ran which says, ‘Those who make war unjustly shall perish’; and also another passage, ‘How often have the most numerous armies been destroyed by a handful of soldiers’! Allah protects the just, and we have no doubt of his protection, nor that he will confound your arrogant designs.

Scene Five. An outdoor café in the Italian city of Genoa, Italy

Narrator 5: Across the Mediterranean Sea, in Italy, two merchants meet to discuss business. One, Giovanni, is Italian, and the other, Farik, is an Arab who is representing the business interests of the Ayyubid Sultan. It is year 648 of the Hegira (1250 AD).

Giovanni: Your ships will be loaded by tomorrow evening my friend.

Farik: Very good. I am in no hurry to leave your fine city, but I have little choice. My cargo is eagerly awaited in Egypt.

Giovanni: How is the war going there Farik?

Farik: King Louis’ forces have taken Damietta and are threatening Mansoura, but I believe it is only a matter of time before the Sultana’s forces gain the upper hand.

Giovanni: Sultana?

Farik: Oh, yes. Have you not heard? The sultan was assassinated by the sultana and Mameluke slaves! The Mamelukes are great fighters. No matter; the sultan was less than useless, and she is proving to be a brave and worthy leader. She was a Turkish slave, if you can imagine. She’s the first slave to ever sit on the throne of Egypt! Strange times indeed.

Giovanni: Interesting news. I too believe that Louis’ forces will meet with defeat, especially with your steady supply of Italian timber! Egypt can have no fighting ships without our timber!

Farik: So true! What a history our families have! You have no idea how many times my grandfather told me of his grandfather, of how he purchased Italian timber from your ancestors for the navy of Salahuddin! And here we are again! Let’s hope your pope in Rome does not find out!

Giovanni: God forbid, Farik! But even the pope understands there is a higher law that must be obeyed! After all, business is business!

Scene Six. Prison cell in the house of Lokman, in Mansoura, Egypt

Narrator 6: King Louis has been captured and his forces defeated! Hundreds of his soldiers have been captured, beheaded, and their bodies thrown into the Nile. Louis paces in his cell, which he shares with a French nobleman. Guarding the cell is a Turkish eunuch. The King and his noble followers have been imprisoned for almost a year. Finally, his release has been negotiated. For his freedom, he has agreed to pay one thousand pieces of gold. It is year 648 of the Hegira (1250 AD).

King Louis: Soon we shall be released Victor.

Victor: Yes, my Lord. And soon we shall be back in France, back home to friends and family!

King Louis: Not so! We will return to France one day, God willing, but not before we regroup our forces and continue our holy mission! From here we sail to Palestine! To the Holy Land!

Victor: I am faithful as always, my Lord, and shall remain by your side! To the Holy Land!

King Louis: May God protect us, and lead us to victory against the heathens!

Scene Seven. Cairo, Egypt

Narrator 7: King Louis and his attendants have been released. In the palace, the poet Essahib recites to the sultana a poem he has written about the departure of Louis.

Sultana: Essahib, my good man, let us hear your song to King Louis of the Franks! Recite it, if you please!

Essahib: It is my honor, Your Highness. Here it is: “Bear to the king of France, when you shall see him, these words, traced by a partisan of truth. The death of the servants of the Messiah has been the reward given to you by Allah. You have landed in Egypt, thinking to take possession of it. You have imagined that it was only inhabited with cowards! You who are a drum filled with wind. You thought that the moment to destroy the Muslims had arrived, and this false idea has smoothed, in your eyes, every difficulty. By your excellent conduct, you have abandoned your soldiers on the plains of Egypt, and the tomb has gaped under their feet. What now remains of the seventy thousand who accompanied you? Dead, wounded, and prisoners! May Allah inspire you often with similar designs! They will cause the ruin of all Christians and Egypt will no longer dread anything from their rage. Without doubt, your priests announced victories to you, but their predictions were false. Refer yourselves to a more enlightened oracle. Should the desire of revenge urge you to return to Egypt, be assured the house of Lokman still remains, that the chain is ready prepared, and the eunuch awake.”

Sultana: Brilliant, Essahib! Most brilliant! But let us hope and pray we have seen the last of King Louis, and of all who would bring violence and sorrow to our sweet land! Praise be to Allah!

Conclusion

Narrator 8: Thus ends our play. But this was not the end of King Louis. After leaving Egypt, he sailed to Palestine where he supported Christian forces that had temporarily recaptured Jerusalem. A few years later, he returned to France where, among other things, he founded the University of the Sorbonne, built a hospital for the blind, and became famous for distributing charity to the poor. In the year 668 of the Hegira (1270 AD), when Louis was fifty-two years old, news of another crusade was heard. This would be the last crusade to trouble the shores of Africa and the Holy Land, although Christian and Muslim armies would continue to clash in Spain and southeastern Europe for centuries to come. King Louis sailed with his crusading army to Tunis, on the north coast of Africa, where he and his eldest son contracted typhoid fever. Fearing his end was near, Louis received the last sacrament, and before dying it is said that he uttered these dying words: “God, I will go to your home to worship you and to glorify your name. . . Into your hands I commend my spirit.” The bones and heart of Louis were returned to France and deposited in the church of Saint Denis. There they rested peacefully until they were destroyed centuries later during the French Revolution. In the 695th year of the Hegira (1297 AD), Louis IX of France was canonized by the Roman Catholic Church, to become forever known as Saint Louis.

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