

Al-Franj: the Crusaders in the Levant

Between AH 487 / AD 1095 and 538 / 1144, 14 Latin Crusader campaigns targeted many parts of the Islamic Mediterranean coast: nine crusades to the Holy Land, two to Byzantium, two to Egypt, and one to Tunisia. Baldwin of Boulogne conquered Edessa and established the first Crusader State in al-Raha in 491 / 1098. Over the next 200 years many Latin states were won and lost in the area. The European Crusaders were known as 'al-Franj' – the Franks. Although Frankish Crusader history began with a terrible massacre in Jerusalem in 492 / 1099, two centuries later, the Franks who settled there had changed and adapted to living in the Middle East among Muslims. Before the Crusades Arab-European contact in the eastern Mediterranean was minimal, and information concerning each other was scant and influenced by negative religious perceptions. The Crusader period, although violent, brought about a degree of religious tolerance and encouraged a certain amount of cultural exchange. The Middle East did not witness a similar period of direct interaction with the West until the 20th century. The beauty of the Dome of the Rock overwhelmed the invaders and by virtue of this contact, the Latin Crusaders formed a more favourable impression of the Islamic Orient, which was reflected in the literature of the period. Islamic religious buildings were converted to churches and Christian institutions. In Jerusalem both the Dome of the Rock and the Aqsa Mosque were converted into churches, with the latter also accommodating Crusader knights. In Hebron, the original ceiling of the Ibrahimi Mosque was replaced with one in the Romanesque style. The influences stretched beyond architecture, however, to include fashion and cuisine as well as religious customs and popular culture. By the end of the 7th / 13th century the Ayyubids and Mamluks had expelled the Crusaders, and many buildings, such as churches were converted or reverted back to mosques. This process enriched the general aesthetic of the region and led to a harmonious combination of the Latin style with Islamic art.



Sword

About hegira 6th century / AD 12th century
Crusader
Burrell Collection, Glasgow Museums
Glasgow, Scotland, United Kingdom



Frankish Letter

Hegira 575–79 / AD 1180–8
Crusader
Islamic Museum, al-Aqsa Mosque / al-Haram al-Sharif
Jerusalem



Warrior relief

Hegira 6th century / AD 12th century
Anatolian Seljuq
Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts
Sultanahmet, Istanbul, Türkiye