

The Origins of European Expansionism of the High Middle Ages: Revisiting the Crusades

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Abstract

The Crusaders' movement was not only a response to the challenge of Islam but also a pivotal episode of Europe's religiopolitical expansion of the High Middle Ages. Why did this geopolitical turnaround take place? Many scholars view the source of Europe's expansionism in the unique sociopolitical dynamism of the Western world. Others underscore the institutional power of the Christian church. After comparing the evolution of the Latin West with the political developments in the Islamic Caliphate and the Byzantine East, I attribute the occurrence of the Crusaders' movement (and Europe's geopolitical expansionism more broadly) to the unique synthesis of political dynamism *and* institutional coordination in the West, the combination which did not transpire at that time in the worlds of Islamdom and the Byzantine East.

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In common wisdom, the process of European colonization and empire-building began in the late 1400s - early 1500s, with the daring overseas expeditions of the Portuguese and the Spaniards. Nonetheless, historians contend that there are good reasons to believe that it started much earlier, during the “First European Revolution” of the long eleventh century (Moore 2000). After centuries of the incessant attacks of the Arabs, the Normans, and the Magyars the tide began to turn. The Christian oikumene expanded and the frontier Christian kingdoms were now firmly ensconced in Scandinavia, Poland, Hungary, Southern Italy, Spain, and the Baltic region. The Crusaders’ passage to the Holy Land was only the most visible manifestation of this grand reversal. Beginning in the mid twelfth century, the Crusading movement was universalized and replicated in the frontier regions of the Iberian Peninsula and Eastern Europe (Bartlett 1993; Mitterauer 2010).

Contemporary sociologists have little to say about the Crusades. There is one notable exception, however, a Rodney Stark’s polemical book “God’s Battalions” (2009). In this study Stark wished to debunk the popular stereotype of the Crusades as expansionist, imperialistic drive of medieval Christians who attacked the tolerant and peaceful Muslims. Stark has stated: “The Crusades were not unprovoked. They were not the first round of European colonialism. They were not conducted for land, loot, or converts. The crusaders were not barbarians who victimized the cultivated Muslims. They sincerely believed that they served in God’s battalions” (p. 248). Polemical simplifications aside, Stark’s argument is generally consistent with the work of contemporary historians. Two of his statements are worth reiterating: (1) The Crusades represented a Christian response to the Muslims’ expansionism; (2) The Crusaders were driven by idealistic motives; their struggle was a religious war.

Nonetheless, Stark's argument, from my standpoint, needs contextualization. Stark narrates the Crusaders' movement placing it in the context of the centuries of conflict between Christianity and Islam. Surely, looking back through the centuries of multifaceted interactions of two religions one can identify numerous conflicts between their earnest believers. But why did the Crusades begin in the late eleventh century? In this paper I will argue that the Crusades were a pivotal episode of Europe's religiopolitical expansionism of the High Middle Ages. To understand the nature of the Crusades, we need to explore certain peculiar features of the European development of that time that directed it to the path that began to diverge from the developmental trajectories of other civilizations (see Moore 2000).

Putting aside the dubious thesis of medieval Europe's economic superiority, which was challenged by recent scholarship (e.g., Goldstone 2000, 2009; Pomeranz 2000), historians and sociologists highlight two characteristic features of European development. One of them was unique political dynamism, extraordinary restlessness of the premodern Europeans (e.g., McNeill 1963; Mann 1986). Another feature was strong institutional power of the Christian Church (Hamilton 2013; Morris 1989). But are these features exceptional? Until recently, much of the academic work has failed to provide consistent comparisons of medieval European societies with the other, non-European civilizations. Not surprisingly, many such analytic narratives were debunked as Eurocentric (Blaut 1993, 2000).

And yet it is still important not to throw the proverbial baby (i.e., Europe's developmental peculiarity) out with the dirty water. It were (West) European Christians who invaded and colonized the lands that surrounded the former Frankish core. The military advantage they possessed over their neighbors did not make them economically or culturally superior, the same way as military advantages of the seventh century Arabs over Persians or thirteenth century

Mongols over Chinese did not render them superior. Yet, it were the Arabs who defeated the Persians, and the Mongols who conquered the Chinese, not the other way around.

In this essay, I will adopt Backman's (2015: 139-142) tripartite model of Medieval Europe: the Latin West, the Byzantine East, and the Islamic Caliphate. By comparing the evolution of the Latin West with the contemporaneous political developments in Islamdom and Eastern Christendom, I aim to attribute the occurrence of the Crusaders' movement (and Europe's geopolitical reversal more broadly) to the unique synthesis of political dynamism *and* institutional coordination in the West, the combination which did not fully transpire in the worlds of Islamdom and Eastern Christendom. There was much dynamism in the Islamic world but little of institutional coordination. Conversely, the Byzantine empire displayed a high degree of institutional coherence, but its hegemonic position and centralized nature tended to work against the institutional innovations that would optimize its competitiveness in the increasingly turbulent political environment.

Latin West

Political Dynamism

As stated above, many scholars view political volatility of the medieval West as its defining characteristic. From my viewpoint, there were two primary sources of such dynamism. The first source was competitive fragmentation of power and a transition to the multistate political system after dissolution of the Carolingian empire (Scheidel 2019: 154-170). A series of divisions and redivisions of the Frankish empire after death of Charlemagne has led to serious weakening of the public order in the Latin West. This transformation was most visible in the western part of it (i.e., modern France). By the eleventh century downward fragmentation of power in this region

resulted in domination of local lords and significant increase of political violence. Aristocratic feuding became ubiquitous; castles were built all over Francia. Political infighting devolved downwards reproducing capillary violence at the ground level (e.g., see Bloch 1961: 411-412).

Consolidation of the hereditary holdings and transition to primogeniture contributed to internecine violence (Dunbabin 2000: 239-240). Naturally, inheritance of a domain by the first-born son led to marginalization and dissension of younger sons. For such nobles, warfare served as the only way to regain land and social status. As Bates (1982: 55) commented, “Aggressive war was a vital ingredient of effective government in a world in which notions of authority and of the obligation demanded by ties of fidelity between man and man had been gravely weakened. The society of eleventh-century northern France was changing rapidly and convulsively.”

At that time, the parcellated manor economy did not allow fielding large infantry or cavalry armies. Usually, princely armies numbered a few hundred soldiers, and only occasionally a few thousand. Although foot soldiers constituted a majority of the troops, since the time of Charles Martel the Franks actively employed cavalry, a more effective force to fight off the invaders than foot soldiers. The spread of stirrups allowed better seating and using heavier weaponry, such as a long lance (White 1962). Because a warhorse, the armor and the weaponry were expensive, only men of means could serve as mounted warriors. Furthermore, mounted combat required long and arduous training, which most of the commoners could not afford. Thus, relatively small but efficient armies of heavily armed and well-trained horsemen have come to dominate warfare in the Latin West. The shock charge of the Frankish heavily armed cavalry often decided the outcome of the battle.

The key social implication of the rivalry-ridden, competitive environment was significant expansion of the class of professional soldiers, commonly known as the *milites*. By the eleventh

century, this term was applied exclusively to the mounted warriors, who also became known as the knights (Keen 1995: 27). Step by step, a social divide has emerged between the *miletes* and the foot soldiers (Bloch 1961: 290). In one kingdom after another, the knights were given land and acquired the status of lower nobility. Their possessions became hereditary. In Italy, for instance, a law promulgated by Emperor Conrad II in 1037 conceded to all *milites* the right to inherit their holdings (Wickham 2009: 520).

The Frankish aristocracy needed knights in their wars with one another and in order to control castellans in their own domains while the knights were much dependent on the nobles' largess (Keen 1995: 29). However, the situation was complicated by the intermittent pattern of the feudal warfare. On numerous occasions, when the opportunities for service were depleted, supply of military power began to exceed demand. Thus, there emerged the ubiquitous type of the roving knight, knight-errant, searching for a generous patron. For such armbearers, a return to peace meant return to misery: "the disdainful indifference of the great, who have no need of them; the importunities of money-lenders; the heavy plough-horse instead of the mettlesome charger; iron spurs instead of gold – in short an economic crisis as well as a disastrous loss of prestige" (Bloch 1961: 298).

The second source of Western political dynamism was exogenous. Militarization of the Latin West was to a large extent the consequence of the invasions of the Saracens, the Magyars, and the Normans. Unlike the raids of the Saracens and the Magyars, that affected mostly the frontier areas and were containable, the Norman warbands penetrated the very core regions of the Frankish world. These intrusions have had particularly lasting effects. According to Dunbabin (2000: 43), the raids of the Vikings have triggered the militarization of Carolingian society, which infiltrated into every aspect of aristocratic life.

Judith Green (2022: 50) claims that Normans were not uniquely excellent warriors. Maybe not, but they were most readily available warriors. This phenomenon can be traced back to peculiarity of social organization of the Scandinavians. In the Carolingian realm, feudalism weakened the traditional horizontal, kinship-based solidarities, replacing them with vertical vassalage bonds. Dependence on land facilitated “caging” of Frankish society by the aristocratic authority structures. Contrastingly, the Normans were migrants, freebooters, and adventurers who had little to lose. Unlike the Franks, the Vikings considered themselves equal. When a Frank asked a band of raiders, “By what name does your leader go?” the answer was straightforward, “By none, for we are all of equal power” (Searle 1988: 19).

In many ways the Normans, before their settlement in the Frankish West were similar to itinerant Eurasian pastoralists, such as the Arabs, the Turks, and the Mongols. Like the steppe nomads, the Scandinavians arrived from harsh, inhospitable environments that offered a narrow range of scarce resources. Like the pastoralists of the arid zone, they tended to migrate to more prosperous areas with milder climates. The Normans were integrated by strong bonds of kin-based solidarity and involved in perennial interclan rivalry. If a certain clan was defeated, it usually had to go into exile searching for the new sources of livelihood. Numerous groups of Norse lived off raiding the settler population of the neighboring regions in search of booty and slaves. Viking’s extraordinary mobility provided them with strategic advantage over the settled population, which was slow to mobilize (Collins 2010: 349-354).

Yet there was one significant difference. Unlike the armies of the Eurasian nomads that could count tens of thousands of horsemen, the Viking warbands were relatively small while the largest Viking armies counted only a few thousand fighters (Haywood 2015: 59-60). Unlike the Eurasian horsemen, the maritime Norse travelled on boats. Usually, the Vikings preferred to

attack locations which provided a large source of booty, such as coastal monasteries. They also entered the mouths of the rivers and moved upstream until they found a suitable place to camp, often an island. After camping, the Vikings raided the surrounding settlements. Occasionally, they began wintering in these places, that could become their permanent settlements. Due to fragmented structure of authority and challenges by aristocratic rivals at home, the Frankish and Anglo-Saxon rulers had hard time dealing with the Vikings. Therefore, often the rulers preferred to reach an agreement, which sometimes involved payment of a sizeable amount of money. Very soon the lords, who were short on manpower, discovered that the Viking warbands could serve as effective mercenary force.

Thus, due to the porous political environment of the Frankish realm, the Normans were able to create their own enclaves, some of which soon turned into centralized principalities. Most well-known of them was of course Normandy established in the early tenth century. The process of state-building was arduous though. After initial expansion and consolidation in the early eleventh century, Normandy entered period of interregnum in 1040s-1050s. After death of Duke Richard in 1035, power formally devolved to his illegitimate son William, who was seven or eight years old. The coalitions of lords of the neighboring principalities used this situation in order to attack the principality. For William, it has taken a great effort to defeat the aristocratic rivals. It was around this tumultuous time many young Normans chose to find a better fortune in other regions of Europe.

The second half of the eleventh century became the heyday of Norman expansionism. The Norman mercenaries on service of the Lombards and the Byzantines in Southern Italy turned against their paymasters and were able to carve out their principalities. From these enclaves the Normans, blessed by the Pope, invaded Arab Sicily and conquered the island. In 1080s, the

Italian Normans embarked on ambitious expeditions against Byzantium. In 1066, Duke William of Normandy landed on Anglo-Saxon England, defeating the army of Harold Godwinson at Hastings and in five subsequent years completed the conquest (Wickham 2016: 117-119).

To sum up, the political fragmentation of the Frankish empire and the havoc of noble violence were conducive to the militarization of European society. The emergence of the large class of the Frankish knighthood and migration of the restless Norman warriors created in the Latin West the phenomenon that may be called a surplus of belligerent capital (see Christensen 2025 on belligerent capital). There existed numerous arms-bearers who loathed the misery of peace and were willing to embark on military adventures abroad, particularly if they promised to bring about generous rewards, either material, or spiritual, or both.

Institutional Coordination

Effective institutional coordination by the Christian church, I argue, was the second necessary condition for the Crusades. Institutional coordination in this context refers to institutional ability of the church to reach local elites and tap on their resources. There were three preconditions for effective institutional coordination by the church in the West. The first one was development of the extensive infrastructural power of church in the Latin West. The networks of bishoprics, canons, and monasteries was indispensable for organizing the crusades (Bull 1993: 14; Hamilton 2013: 308). This dense network of ecclesiastic institutions in Latin Europe was the legacy of the Carolingian era. It was Charlemagne, who instituted during his long reign the hierarchical structure of the Frankish church, from provinces, to bishoprics, and down to local parishes (McKitterick 1977, 2008). To support the church, the king made obligatory pay of tithes. The numerous monasteries spread across the Frankish realm. After the breakup of the Carolingian empire and subsequent devolution of secular authority to the local lords, Christianity remained

the only normative system governing lives of the nobility and regular people alike (Hamilton 2013). The failure of the late Carolingians to provide peace and security, induced the local bishops to take a greater responsibility for public order (Morris 1989: 144). Even kings had to respect the norms of the Christian society, as the humiliating public penance of Louis the Pious, a Charlemagne's son, had attested (De Jong 2009). Beginning with the tenth century, the leaders of the church commonly practiced excommunication – exclusion of persons from the Christian rites and contacts with other Christians – as an effective weapon against the intractable secular lords (Dunbabin 2000: 58; Hamilton 2013: 322-323).

The second and closely related precondition was strengthening of inner piety among the European nobility and the commoners, the condition, which manifested religion's intensive power. In the Medieval Europe, religion provided a universal interpretative framework for everything that happened in the Christian realm. Any misfortune, pestilence, or crops' failure was commonly attributed to pervasive incidence of sin. As Thomas Asbridge (2004: 6) observed: "Medieval minds were plagued by one overwhelming anxiety: the danger of sin. In death, it was believed, every human soul would be judged. Purity would bring everlasting paradise, but an eternity of gruesome torment awaiting those polluted by sin. This universal obsession, shared by king and peasant alike, shaped all custom, morality, and law." To be condemned to the everlasting torture had to be avoided in any possible way. A monastic life was one of the ways to ensure salvation. The lay people were more susceptible to sin and were in much more precarious situation. However, they still had an opportunity to avoid damnation, if they confessed in their sins and underwent penance. Typically, public penances were conducted by the bishops and local priests in the beginning of the Lent and involved making confessions of sins and accepting some forms of punishments, usually fasting (Hamilton 2000). Serious transgressions required serious

forms of expiation such as a pilgrimage to one of the sacred places, usually shrines dedicated to Christian saints (Bull 1993: 204- 249; Tellenbach 1993: 98-100). Of course, not all pilgrims were driven by the goal of atonement; many of them were motivated by their sincere devotion to saints and the sacred places (Hamilton 2013: 310). The majority of pilgrimages involved visits to the local or regional shrines, but some pious persons chose to travel to the most revered Christian places such as Jerusalem, Rome, or Santiago de Compostela in Northern Spain (Hamilton 2013). Such undertakings were expensive and available mostly to the nobles who possessed enough wealth to afford travelling on horseback or, if one wished to visit Jerusalem, paying for a cross-Mediterranean trip on a boat. Nonetheless, in the eleventh century, pilgrimages to Jerusalem became increasingly frequent (Riley-Smith 1998: 23-39).

The third precondition refers to Rome's transregional organizational capacity to reach out and tap on the power of local lords. Until the middle of the eleventh century organizational capacity of the Holy See was limited. In the tenth century and the early eleventh century, popes, with few exceptions, were brought to power by the factions of Roman nobility, promoted their interests, and had little influence outside the eternal city. The change has come in the mid eleventh century. In 1046, German ruler Henry III, eager to find a suitable pope to consecrate him as an emperor and dissatisfied with the existing candidates, convened a Synod of Sutri, which deposed Italian popes and elected a German bishop as Pope Clement II. This act opened the era of the "papal revolution." The reforms of the extraordinarily activist popes – Leo IX, Nicholas II, Alexander II, and Gregory VII – were able to emancipate the Holy See from local and regional interests (Tellenbach 1993: 145-147). The introduction of the new protocol of pope's election by the College of Cardinals has fortified institutional autonomy of the Papacy (Heather 2023: 465-466). The Holy See made strenuous efforts to establish effective leadership

over the ecclesiastic and secular authorities over the entire Latin West. Pope Gregory VII, the most ambitious reformer in this respect, issued *Dictatus Papae*, a remarkable document, which proclaimed the universal power of the Roman pontiff. Simultaneously, the popes began showing interest in the military campaigns against the Saracens. In 1059, Nicholas II concluded an agreement with the Italian Normans and recognized their leader, Robert Guiscard, as the Duke of Apulia, Calabria, and, notably, Sicily (the latter was still under the Muslim control at the time) (Loud 2000: 129-130). In 1063, Alexander II gave the Christian participants of the campaign to relieve the Muslim town of Barbastro in Spain a remission of penance (Bull 1993: 73). In 1072, Gregory VII briefly contemplated the idea of an armed campaign against the Turks in the East (Erdmann 1977: 164-165). In the following years Gregory's political ambitions distracted the Papacy from the challenge to Christianity in the East and delayed the launching of the Holy War. Only after adopting a modest but more effective role of a power broker under Urban II, was Rome able to deliver an effective call to arms to the Frankish and Norman nobility. Were there a possibility of the crusade to be launched without the pope? Michael Mittenauer's answer is unambiguous: "Without the pope there was no Crusade. Only the pope could summon one; only the pope could dispatch preachers of a Crusade to Western Christendom's farthest reaches so they might motivate knights to take the Crusader's oath – "to take the Cross," as the eloquent formula of the age had it. Most important of all, only the pope could promote the gifts of grace associated with the Crusade and that constituted, in religious sense, its special character" (2010: 196-197).

Islamdom

The world of Islamdom on the eve of the Crusades represents a fitting contrasting case. Like Latin Europe, the Islamic world epitomized a conflict-torn multistate civilization, which showed little internal unity. Although the Abbasid caliph in Baghdad retained symbolic preeminence, since the mid-eleventh century most of the Middle East was governed by the powerful Seljuk Turks, the Sunni warriors from the Central Asia, who, after defeating the Karakhanids and the Ghaznavids, wrestled Baghdad from the Buyid dynasty in 1055. The Seljuks state was expansive but like other nomad-dominated empires internally unstable. After death of the Malik-Shah in 1092, whose twenty-year reign represented the high point of the Seljuk domination, the Seljuk state plunged in the prolonged period of political turmoil while the Seljuks of Anatolia (contemporary Turkey) formed the separate Sultanate of Rum. Egypt remained under control of Shia dynasty of the Fatimids. Several Shia enclaves also existed in Iran, with the Order of the Assassins being most famous of them. The Umayyad caliphate of the Muslim Spain (al Andalus) segmented into the multitude of the local principalities (*taifas*) that fought against one another and the Christian kings of Castille and Aragon. In meantime, a new confederation of the austere Berber tribesmen, known as the Almoravids, established its control over the western Maghreb. After receiving requests for help from *taifa* rulers, the Almoravids arrived in Spain to rescue the beleaguered Iberian Muslims.

No doubt, even before the Seljuks the fragmented Muslim world, like the Latin West, generated strong violent impulses. The arrival of the Seljuks from the East has added an additional ferment to the expansionist drive. However, even successful military campaigns, such as the Seljuks' campaigns against the Byzantines and the Almoravids expeditions in Spain, remained the ventures of the individual rulers who fought against other Muslim dynasts as

fiercely as they fought against the Christians. The arrival of the Crusaders has not changed the state of disunity. Only in the late twelfth century did the Kurdish warlord Saladin conquer a large area of the Middle East, inflicting a major blow on the Crusaders and recapturing Jerusalem in 1187.

The main predicament of the Muslim world in the Middle Ages was the same as it is today. Despite the enormous expanse and vibrancy of the Muslim civilization, it lacked cultural and institutional coherence, and, because of that, effective transregional coordination to counter the external challenges. Could the Islamic religious authorities adopt the coordinating function similar to the role of the Latin Church in Western Christendom, as limited and inconsistent as it was? The answer is unambiguously no. Except for the time of the Prophet and his three immediate successors, such phenomenon as the universally recognized Islamic authority simply did not come to exist.

The Muslim world represented the transcendental community of the faithful (the *umma*) who follow the teachings of Prophet Muhammad as inscribed in Quran. Formally, the caliph, the leader of the *umma*, was recognized as the deputy of God and as such embodied supreme religious and political authority (Crone and Hinds 1986). Nonetheless, Islam remained first and foremost a religion of the book. The teachings of Quran and the *sunna* (religious law) provided universal knowledge and cultic practices equally accessible and imperative to all faithful. Mitterauer (2010: 161) states: “There were no eucharistic liturgies, no sacraments, and consequently no priests or any cultic authorities acting as intermediaries between God and mankind. Therefore, a split between laity and clergy like one in Christendom could not exist in Islam, so it did not construct any hierarchies. Islamic religious authorities had no priestly functions. They were scholars of religion, befitting Islam’s nature as a religion of the book.”

Thus, in contrast to the pope, the caliph's symbolic capital did not rest on the institutional infrastructure that could be used for projecting his power independently of secular rulers. The Islamic community has not organized itself into a church. There were no church councils that defined the doctrine and condemned heresies. The Muslim world lacked any counterparts of bishops and priests entrusted with supervisory power and pastoral care. Beginning with the tenth century, the caliphal power in religious and secular matters was essentially nominal. The Buyid and Seljuk rulers who came to rule in Baghdad used the caliphs as ceremonial figureheads for legitimizing their usurpation of authority but did not leave them any real power.

Needless to say, the symbolic authority of the Abbasid caliph was not recognized as legitimate by the large Shia population. The Shia Muslims believed in the line of succession going back to the Prophet's daughter Fatima and her husband Ali. The positions of the Shia were traditionally strong in Iraq, Iran and Jazira. Beginning the tenth century the Shia influence in the Muslim world expanded. In the tenth century the powerful Fatimid empire was established in Egypt and North Africa. For the Shia Muslims, it was the Fatimid caliph who was a representative of Allah and obedience to him was a religious duty.

Byzantine East

Unlike the multicentered civilizations of the Latin West and the Islamic East, Eastern Roman Empire was a centralized tax-based state characterized by fusion of political and religious power in the person of the emperor. Religious institutions in the East were not institutionally separate from the imperial system. The patriarch in Constantinople, according to one apt observation, held essentially the position of a court bishop (Mitterauer 2010: 171)

Overall, the Byzantine state displayed a remarkable degree of institutional coherence. As Anthony Kaldellis (2017: 2) described it, “By ancient or medieval standards, and for the realm of its size, Byzantium was culturally homogeneous, socially integrated, and unified by exclusive and sovereign state institutions. It is important to stress how different it was in this respect from western medieval kingdoms. Unlike the lands of the former Roman empire, the core territories of the realm were not quasi-autonomous domains ruled by hereditary local lords, within whom the emperors had to engage in internal diplomacy to obtain support, tribute, or soldiers. They were rather administrative provinces governed by magistrates sent out from the capital for brief periods in rotation. Taxes, recruitment, law, religion, and salaries were fairly standardized and administered across imperial territory by bureaus that were headquartered in Constantinople. The grids of administrative coherence (including the Church) were parallel, hierarchical, and centralized, and they bound the provinces to the capital in overlapping ways.”

However, institutional coherence did not bring about political stability. The political system of the empire was shaken by aristocratic rivalries, periodic usurpations of imperial power, and civil wars. How did it affect state performance? Theoretically emperors possessed full power. In practice, emperors were vulnerable and insecure (Kaldellis 2024: 56-57). Often, to sustain their authority the rulers embarked on ambitious military campaigns. According to the deeply entrenched Roman tradition, every emperor was expected to have his own triumph. However, such military campaigns risked resulting in geopolitical overextension and logistical overreach. At some point, military defeat became likely. A military defeat of an individual ruler in the segmented state system like the Latin West could not destabilize the system. The military defeat of the emperor in a monocentric empire was likely to be a cause of state crisis. In absence

of serious external challenges, state crisis did not necessarily have to be fatal. But if such challenges do materialize, internal instability can be a serious aggravating factor.

The key point here is that for a long time the Eastern Roman Empire did not encounter external challenges that would threaten its security. The eleventh century was a period of economic and demographic expansion (Ibid: 169). Such an auspicious set of conditions has had two consequential implications. First, the effective fiscal policy of the imperial state allowed to accumulate a considerable amount of wealth. By the time of death of Basil II, the state treasure contained 200,000 talents of gold (Angold 1984: 7). Apparently, prosperity of the “Greeks” was not unknown to their less prosperous neighbors in the West and the East. Second, the period of socioeconomic stability imparted a certain sense of complacency and reluctance to innovate. The government was run mainly by civil officials and eunuchs. In the military matters, it prioritized static defensive strategy. The abundance of resources allowed greater reliance on mercenary troops. In the eastern provinces of the empire the mandatory military service of the territorial troops (themata) was partially commuted into tax payments. After period of centralization and militarization under Basil II, political life in Constantinople returned to the usual pattern of aristocratic infighting and the palace intrigues (Kaldellis 2017: 224-225)

And that was the moment when the existential threats have materialized. The Seljuks, who had infiltrated the eastern provinces of the empire, inflicted the crushing defeat to the imperial army at Manzikert in 1071. Emperor Romanus Diogenes was captured by the Turks. The state plunged into a long period of disorder. In the West, Normans landed in Thrace and ten years later defeated Byzantine troops at Dyrrhacium. The nomadic Pechenegs threatened the Romans from the North. The fate of the state hung on balance. That was the moment when

Emperor Alexius I appealed for the military assistance to the pope. His request has initiated the chain of events that culminated in the First Crusade.

To sum up, the Byzantine centralized imperial system imparted a significant degree of institutional coherence but could not preclude intraelite conflicts. The empire did not experience a socioeconomic decline for most of the eleventh century, instead it has been a period of prosperity (Ibid: 228). At the same time, the very effectiveness of the centralized tax-based state disincentivized possible institutional innovations that would have optimized its competitiveness in the increasingly turbulent political environment. It has survived the crisis of the late eleventh century but had to pay a high price by inviting the Latins to ensconce themselves within its political space.

Conclusion

In his ambitious and perceptive book “Escape from Rome” Walter Scheidel argued that a single critical condition that made Europe’s developmental breakthroughs possible was competitive fragmentation of power (2019: 9). My preliminary analysis of the Latin West, the Byzantine East, and the Muslim world indicates that that Scheidel’s argument, insofar it concerns with the medieval period, might be contested on the grounds that competitive fragmentation of authority and perennial conflict were not the exclusive characteristics of the Latin Europe. The Muslim East was also politically divided and torn by violent conflicts. It was primarily institutional coordination by the Christian church, no matter how limited and incoherent, which was able to channel internal violence in the Latin West towards external expansionism and enable the great geopolitical reversal of the “long” eleventh century.

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