

The Writings Of Usamah Ibn Munqidh

Posted on January 27, 2020

Usamah Ibn Munqidh and the Crusading World of the Twelfth Century

Usamah Ibn Munqidh was Syrian soldier during the era of the Crusaders. He was around during the 12th century. He had some of the most amazing, phenomenal, intense and extraordinary experiences during his life, given the significance of the era in which he was born. Usamah Ibn Muqidh needs to be given credit for the effort that he put into the record and preserve his experiences towards the end of his life. In the English world of today, he is known and remembered as an Arab-Syrian Gentleman and Warrior in the period of the crusaders. His autobiography is of particular importance and great significance because it has provided historians with an excellent detailed description and analysis of the everyday activities, the relationships of people with one another, the social structure and the social order of the Middle East and North Africa from the time of the first Crusade through the second Crusade. ("The Crusaders and Franks", n.d.)

Born in 1095 in northern Syria, Usamah spent the early years of his life in the castle of Shayzar. A very famous Christian Pope, who had a great following and who led the Christians of the time, had given a speech to his Christian adherents calling for a 'holy war' against the Muslims shortly before the birth of Usamah. The purpose of this enmity against the Muslims was due to Jerusalem. It was under the control of the Muslims during that time, and the Christians wanted to regain control because of the historical and symbolic importance of their religion. This speech, calling for a war against the Muslims and declaring open and outrageous enmity with them, was critical because it marked the beginning of a conflict and rivalry that lasted for around two hundred years.

In today's day and age, Islam happens to be the fastest-growing religion in the world, with the largest number of people converting to it. To explain and understand the history of today's Islamic world, a detailed scrutiny of the Islamic historical records and memoirs, written by Islam scholars is necessary. One such scientist happens to be Usamah Ibn Muqidh. However, one needs to be extremely careful about the authenticity of the texts and historical accounts that are being used to recreate the events of the past. While dealing with the accounts and memoirs of Usamah Ibn Munqidh, this should be given particular attention. He described the relationships between the Muslims and the Crusaders as very brutal. He happens to have been present as a young man during most of the Crusades and, thus, found himself participating in many of the battles. He killed many Christians in the context of the ongoing war and eventually developed strong bonds based on friendship with those who moved to his homeland. ("Usamah ibn Munqidh", n.d.)

Bias, Exaggeration, and the Portrayal of the Franks

The accounts of Usamah are extremely biased and exaggerated to the extent that they describe the Franks as nothing but animals who had the courage and audacity to fight the Muslims. He gives numerous examples that describe their thinking and doings. If one reads Usamah's narratives, he/she finds his description of the Franks as almost barbaric. For example, in one part of the story, he describes how a Christian doctor treated an infected leg of a person. According to him, he removed all the ointments and herbal medicines from the skin that were supposed to cure the illness and washed his leg with very concentrated vinegar. It caused the patient to be treated with excruciating and unbearable pain. But this immediately caused the leg to heal. Though this treatment immediately cured the person, Usamah describes the treatment to have been carried out by 'an ignorant European.'

The vast cultural differences that lay between the Christians and the Muslims during Usamah's life are what caused him to view them in the way that he did. He made generalizations about them and stereotyped them. He portrays them in an extremely negative light. For example, at one point, he mentions an incident when a Muslim slept with the wife of a Frank. He seems to have described Frank's reaction as very cool. He did not appear to have been angered as much as he should have and simply told the Muslim fellow not to do this again because if he did, they would be on 'bad terms' with one another. It was particularly strange to him and to the other Muslims as well because for a Muslims man, (at least during those times, and in some cases even today) the honor and protection of the female members of his family, especially his wife, is of great importance. Furthermore, the purpose of describing this incident is to show the Franks as immortal beings with no values attached to important things, such as being loyal to your spouse.

Warrior Culture, Personal Contact, and Contradictions in Usamah's Account

On multiple other occasions, Usamah mentions many things that make it seem like he considered the Franks to have been weak warriors. He had some close ties at a personal level with many of the Christian fighters who called themselves 'knights.' Usamah describes them as nothing more than animals who had the strength to carry a lot of weight on their backs and had a lot of capacity and courage to fight. He also makes hints to show that they were dim-witted. The only thing that made them warriors was their courage and fearlessness. It is important to note that not only Usamah but other Muslim writers of the times have similar views and opinions of him. They give the same kind of description of the Franks in their narrations and memoirs, causing the reader to conceive the Franks as some barbaric beings with absolutely no honor, integrity, brains or mannerisms.

In concluding the essay, I would like to make my position clear on the fact that the writings of Usamah Ibn Munqidh, as well as other Muslim writers of the time, cannot be relied on and cannot be used for

the purposes of understanding the events that took place during the Crusades because they are extremely exaggerated, and in some cases, might not even be true. However, it must also be borne in mind that the records of the Christians of the time who interacted with the Muslims in the same way are also just as biased. They also talk about the Muslims as uncivilized, backward, conservative and brutal towards their women. Thus, if the Muslim texts cannot be relied on, the Christian texts must also not be used for the same reasons. However, these texts and analyses of the other cultures are important in showing one thing: both the Muslims and the Christians were very ethnocentric. They thought their own cultures to be superior to that of the enemy and thus exaggerated the other side's practices to such an extent that it leaves the reader wondering how someone could engage in such bizarre practices. ("Usamah ibn Munqidh", n.d.)

The only way the writings of both sides could make sense is to read them while being mindful of their exaggerations. It would also not be helpful to read the accounts of only one side. Writings of both the Europeans as well as the Muslims must be read, and a middle ground must be found between the two to reach a true understanding of the historical events.

References

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