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Michael Lower has written a lucid and compelling history of the Tunis Crusade of 1270. He achieves this by skillfully combining a traditional political narrative of events with an interpretive framework, taken from recent historians of the medieval Mediterranean, that views Muslim-Christian relations not through a dichotomy of “conflict vs. coexistence”, or crusade vs. trade, but rather sees both violence and peaceful relationships as two sides of the same coin, even as mutually reinforcing. He frames this as a navigation between the “Clash of Civilizations” school, which highlights the sincerity of medieval commitments to religious warfare, and the “Mediterranean Studies” school, which tends to see economic or political pragmatism as underlying most conflict. By showing how the attack on Tunis served the purposes of both dedicated crusaders and tribute-hungry dynasts, and how a conflict framed in religious terms opened the possibility of more stable economic exchange between Muslims and Christians, Lower is able to give a convincing answer to the question: “Why Tunis?”

Four individual rulers are at the heart of Lower’s project: King Louis IX of France (1226–1270), his younger brother Charles of Anjou, king of Sicily (1266–1285), the Mamluk sultan Baybars (1260–1277), and the Hafsids caliph al-Mustansir (1249–1277). Explanations of the crusaders’ decision to target Tunis have differed widely, and have their roots in thirteenth-century commentators. Much of the disagreement revolved around which of the four men mentioned above was given more responsibility for the crusade. Was the attack on Tunis a “diversion” from Syria, masterminded by Charles? Was it a long-standing dispute over tribute that escalated into a war of conquest, or a last-minute decision by Louis? By framing the Tunis Crusade as the result of decades of negotiations and rivalry between these men and their contemporaries, Lower is able to put the conflict in the context of a truly wide-ranging diplomacy that linked France, Sicily, Ifriqiya, Egypt, Syria, and the Mongols in the mid-thirteenth century, giving the crusade, and Lower’s book, a “pan-Eurasian” rather than a strictly Mediterranean focus (71).

As the book demonstrates, the decision by Louis and Charles to target Tunis in 1270 was the result of decades of diplomatic and military activity that combined religious zeal with dynastic politics. Louis, chastened by the failure of his first crusade in Egypt in 1248, devoted much of the rest of his reign to reforming his administration in preparation for a second attempt. He was also a sincere missionary, deeply attracted to efforts by the Dominican friars to evangelize Muslims, including in North Africa. By contrast, his brother Charles, who seized Sicily at great expense in 1266, was keen to secure his new conquests and squeeze as much money out of them as possible. This led to tensions with Hafsids Tunis, which had tight

commercial and political ties to Sicily under the Hohenstaufen. Al-Mustansir vacillated between resistance to and acceptance of Charles' dominion in Sicily. When Louis announced his intention to embark on another Crusade against the Mamluks, Tunis presented itself as an ideal compromise destination for both brothers. Intent on Syria, Louis may have genuinely believed that al-Mustansir could be "encouraged" by a large crusading army to convert to Christianity, while Charles saw an attack on Tunis as a golden opportunity to settle his relationship with the Hafsid on advantageous terms. Tunis, far from being a distraction or diversion, was in fact the first stage of a plan of "chilling grandeur" that would ultimately target Syria (173). One remarkable episode captures the pan-Mediterranean scope of the Tunis campaign: a fistfight between two delegations, one from Baybars and one from the Mongol Ilkhan Abaqa, which took place in the streets of Genoa during the diplomatic build-up to the Crusade. The fact that Lower found this event recorded in a German monastic chronicle (S. Peter of Erfurt) is testament both to the breadth of his reading and the interest that these negotiations provoked in unlikely quarters!

The book is a quick and engaging read. Lower has a keen eye for detail, and his focus on individuals allows for incisive character studies. His four major protagonists are well-studied figures in medieval scholarship, particularly the brothers Louis and Charles, and Lower draws on work by Bill Jordan, Jean Dunbabin and others, but adds the critically important perspective of Egyptian, Syrian, and Tunisian Arabic writers to reinforce his interpretation of the motives that led three of the four to the battlefield outside Tunis in the summer of 1270. Reflecting his earlier work on mercenaries in Ifrīqiya, Lower has a particular gift for portraying the challenging logistics of large-scale military campaigns in the Mediterranean. The reader is repeatedly struck by the disconnect between the vast ambitions of these rulers on the one hand, and the exigencies of moving ships, people, and money across the sea on the other. Al-Mustansir's bold assumption of the caliphal title, in 1259, contrasts with his inability to control the Berber and Arab tribesmen who flocked to Tunis to defend him against Louis. Charles' ambitious marriage diplomacy and multiple simultaneous military commitments so stretched his resources that he was reduced to asking the city of Zara for ships to help transport his court across the Straits of Messina (96–7).

Lower's character-driven narrative certainly pays off, but one wonders whether it at times obscures what the Crusade may have meant for the many other people who fought it or suffered because of it. The thousands of Berber tribesmen and Catalan mercenaries who rallied to al-Mustansir, or the Genoese sailors and French knights in Louis' army do appear in the narrative, and Lower acknowledges their roles in the campaign, but surely more could be said of how they experienced the Crusade. Of course, this would have required quite a different book, and reconstructing the views of these mostly nameless men and women is an imposing task; perhaps, given the scarcity of available sources, impossible. Nonetheless, while Lower makes a convincing case that the Crusade "stabilized interreligious relationships" for the major actors in the Crusade, it could be asked whether this interpretation privileges royal diplomacy over the day-to-day lives of Christian merchants and mercenaries who had established themselves over generations in Muslim Tunis before Louis and Charles arrived. For these people, the Crusade, though disruptive in the short term, did rather little to change the conditions of trade and work in Hafsid Tunis: what exactly was "unstable" about their relationship with their Muslim hosts before 1270? However, this observation does not detract from the overall force and persuasiveness of Lower's book, which deserves the attention not only of crusade historians, but of anyone interested in statecraft and interreligious relations in the medieval Mediterranean.

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**Author's Response:**

The author was provided with an opportunity to respond to the review, but declined.

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