

**Franks and Saracens:  
Reality and Fantasy in the Crusades**

*Avner Falk*

*London: Karnac Books, 238 pages.*

Avner Falk's *Franks and Saracens: Reality and Fantasy in the Crusades* is presented in the opening pages as the first psychoanalytic study of the Crusades. The book is written for both a general readership and an academic audience. The fact that it was published by Karnac Books, one of the premiere publishers of psychoanalytic theory and practice, leads one to think that the psychoanalytic community is a particularly important audience. The book's opening chapter, "Us and Them," introduces psychoanalysis as a theoretical source for helping us to think about cultural identity and conflict, particularly "us vs. them" identity conflicts. Following this general foregrounding of the Crusades and psychoanalytic theory, the author turns to how the Crusaders, namely, the "Franks," created a larger fantasy that drove their violent engagement with Muslims, one that was tied to a political effort to build a collective European identity.

Rather surprisingly, the term *fantasy* is never defined thoroughly, although the author's central claim is that the Crusades functioned as a way to

develop a unified cultural identity for Europe, a project that was itself tied to a fantasy. This project of building a singular Frankish identity, and what would eventually come to be a European identity, is the focus of the second, third, and fourth chapters. In them, Falk pays particular attention to the evolution of the term *Saracen*, which the Europeans invoked to refer to all of the different kinds of Muslims they encountered during the various crusades. The term was initially deployed to specify all Muslims, but by the Third Crusade it began to connote Eastern European and Baltic Christians as well. *Saracens* would later be applied to Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians during the Baltic crusades, which lasted for four centuries. This word eventually came to designate anyone who was not European and Christian, and even Christians like the Basques who had fought the Franks (p. 132).

The etymology of this term, which means “empty of Sarah,” emphasizes how Hagar is recognized as Ishmael’s mother in the Islamic tradition in distinction to Christianity. The primary motivation for deploying *Saracen* was meant to resolve this outer collective state project of a unified Europe, as well as to resolve a far more abstract psychological identity conflict that was felt across Crusader culture. As Falk states:

The religious fervor which took hold of Christian Europe in 1095 to wage a “holy war” against the “evil Saracens” was a way of resolving its inner conflicts, as well as a fantasy of rescuing the Good Mother in the shape of the “Holy Land” from the Evil Father in the shape of the “Saracens.” (p. 86)

The author defines this interior psychological framework as “Oedipal,” which is meant to refer to an individual and collective diagnosis of Crusader subjectivity within the larger fantasy. However, it is unclear exactly how this “psycho-fantasy” functioned in European culture more broadly, because the author provides no primary sources to support this claim and no compelling examples of how the fantasy was acted out. Most of his primary accounts are from political and military sources that capture an elite-level picture of the political and military figures who drove the Crusades, for the diaries and voices of the soldiers and knights conscripted to fight these wars are completely missing. One is left to assume that the ruling elite is the primary actor who played this fantasy out, but nothing is said of how this fantasy may or may not have functioned in the public sphere. This omission is perhaps tied to the scant historical sources available on public life during Europe’s Middle Ages. It is also worth noting that the author says practically nothing about how the fantasy of the Crusades played out on the Muslim side.

Falk presents two psychoanalytic concepts for understanding what he calls the “psycho-geographical fantasy” of the Crusades: splitting and projec-

tion. Splitting is the “unconscious psychological processes by which the infant defends itself from unbearable ambivalence and anxiety by splitting its world (its mother) into all-good and all-bad parts” (p. 26). Projection refers to how human beings attribute painful feelings to the other. Both of these interior psychological processes lead to a massive acting out on a collective socio-cultural level. This passage encapsulates this acting out rather nicely:

The crusades were the acting out on a mass scale of a psychogeographical fantasy. They fulfilled several psychological needs at the same time. After all, the European Christians could have gone on a crusade to liberate the “Holy Land” centuries earlier. (p. 85)

Chapters 7 through 18 take the reader through each crusade by examining their political and military causes and conclusions. However, an account of how the psychical fantasy was modified and changed throughout these various campaigns is missing. While Falk does acknowledge that the latter crusades dealt primarily with the problem of an inability to mourn, he does not carefully account for how the fantasy modified over time, which leaves the reader to assume that it remained relatively static. The psychoanalytic theories brought up to account for this posited fantasy are not situated in relation to the larger power struggles that Falk is examining; rather, they are so general that they might easily be transplanted to the psychodynamics of any conflict, regardless of time and place.

This general framing of psychoanalytic theory onto this important period of history makes aspects of the book feel ahistorical. Falk’s ahistorical method is evidenced in the concluding chapter, where he presents the Israel-Palestine conflict along the same blueprint of the psychogeographical fantasy of the Crusades. In fact, he suggests that it follows the same centuries-old pattern of religious conflict. Not only is Israel-Palestine rendered as a primarily religious conflict, but Falk argues that the Arabs have “lived in the past for a long time, just as the Jews did for fifteen centuries, after their loss [of] sovereignty, country, holy city, and temple in 70 CE” (p. 200). In other words, the Arabs are presented as living in the past and as being overly tied to religion and religious identity. Is religious identity inherently a fantastical mode of identification? Falk runs the risk of seeming to suggest that Arabs are still caught in the religious fantasy framework of the medieval period, and that the Jews have grown out of this. Although it is not a central part of the book’s argument, this pivot to the present comes across as clichéd and ahistorical.

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