

Mediterranean ecologies and maritime crusaders

There has been much debate among historians of the crusades about the motivations of crusaders. While Jonathan Riley-Smith's views about the religious impetus of crusading currently predominate concerning crusaders from northern Europe, the Italian maritime republics still occupy a space which excludes them from this model. The broad concessions of territory and legal rights demanded by the Italian cities for their assistance to crusaders seems to lend itself to the interpretation that material gain was their primary concern. However, an ecological approach to the Mediterranean environment drives home the enormous importance of the assistance which was provided, and the gargantuan logistical difficulties involved. This makes the extensive demands of maritime actors appear far more reasonable and fair. The sea was a highway that aided connection but also served as a barrier to it. Sailors faced a plethora of nearly insurmountable dangers: The disorientation of never quite knowing their precise location, lackluster ship design which had very little keel to resist leeway, and sails which performed poorly at tacking or hauling into the wind, leaving ships at the mercy of the prevailing wind patterns and currents of the Mediterranean. The need for good ports to water and supply large groups of ships was frequently a deciding factor in what could be accomplished militarily and economically at sea. A deeper understanding of these environmental factors can help us better grasp the emerging relationships and encounters between western European and eastern Mediterranean peoples during the time of the crusades.