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A NEW FANTASY OF CRUSADE:
SARRAS IN THE VULGATE CYCLE

By

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B.A., University of Louisville, 2016

A Thesis
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in History

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ABSTRACT

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Christopher Michael Herde
March 27 2019

The Lancelot-Grail Cycle was written at a critical juncture for the crusading movement, twenty years after the fall of Jerusalem. Its popularity rose through the 13th and 14th centuries during which the last crusader kingdom of Acre fell. With its combination of religious and chivalric themes and repeated motif of Christian knights in the East, the Cycle draws many parallels between its Arthurian narrative and the crusades. Despite this, the city of Jerusalem is almost completely absent from the text, overshadowed by Sarras, a nonexistent city. As the text's most important eastern location, Sarras serves as a commentary on Jerusalem, Islam and the crusades. By examining text of the *History of the Holy Grail* and *Quest for the Holy Grail* and comparing Sarras to contemporary crusade sermons, polemics, and chronicles, it is possible to better understand the message of the Cycle as well as one potential reason for its popularity.

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INTRODUCTION

In one of the most gruesome scenes in the entire Lancelot-Grail Cycle, the Christian bishop Josephus temporarily abandons his duty of baptizing Saracens in order to intervene in a demonic massacre of pagans who had refused to convert. Before he can confront the demon, he is stopped by an angel “whose face was as red as a burning thunderbolt, as were his feet and hands, while his clothes were as black as pitch.” The angel rebukes him for abandoning converts to save those who had rejected salvation, then stabs him in the leg with a spear. This wound, the angel tells him, “will endure all the days of your life, and do not be surprised if you pay for it elsewhere.” The narrator promises that this dire prediction will be fulfilled later in the story. Norris Lacy, editor of this particular volume of the Cycle, helpfully notes below that this event is never brought up again.¹ This thread is but one of many throughout the Lancelot-Grail Cycle which appears and disappears without reason or resolution. Others will be repeated multiple times, with each retelling adding, changing, or dropping details without explanation. To a modern reader this is intensely frustrating and has certainly contributed to a decline in the Cycle’s popularity relative to other examples of Arthurian literature. However, these problems do not seem to have bothered medieval audiences. Based on its survival - all or

¹ *History of the Holy Grail, Lancelot-Grail : The Old French Vulgate and Post-Vulgate Cycles in Translation*. ed. Norris J Lacy, vol 1. Routledge Revivals. (Oxon: Routledge, 2010). 49.

in part - in over a hundred manuscripts, this cycle was one of the most popular secular texts of the Middle Ages.² It represents a synthesis of all previous legends of King Arthur and the Holy Grail into one grand narrative, starting with the Crucifixion of Jesus and ending with the death of Arthur. All later works on these subjects have their roots somewhere in this text.

Written in the early 13th century, the Cycle consists of five volumes of Old French prose: *History of the Holy Grail*, *History of Merlin*, *Lancelot Proper*, *Quest for the Holy Grail*, and *Death of Arthur*. Unusually, the texts were written out of chronological order. The *Lancelot*, *Quest*, and *Death* were all compiled together sometime between 1215 and 1225, while the *History* and *Merlin* were not written until after 1230.³ The identity of the Cycle's author - and whether there was more than one author - is unknown and has been long debated. The Cycle attributes itself at various points to Robert de Boron; Walter Map; Blaise, writing based on Merlin's dictation; the scribes of Camelot based on the dictation of various knights; and an unnamed monk translating the words of Jesus himself. The resulting narrative is exactly as convoluted and inconsistent as that variety of attributions suggests. At various times, the Cycle reads like a biblical continuation, a history of great battles and kings, a romance of knights errant and courtly love, and a grand tragedy. As a result, finding themes that pervade the entirety of the Cycle is tricky to say the least, and something this paper will not be attempting. Rather, this paper will trace themes of interreligious and intercultural contact

² Alison Stone, "Mise en page in the French Lancelot-Grail: the First 150 years of the Illustrative Tradition", in *A Companion to the Lancelot-Grail Cycle*. ed. Carol Dover. Arthurian Studies, 54. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003). 125.

³ E. Jane Burns, *Lancelot-Grail : The Old French Vulgate and Post-Vulgate Cycles in Translation*. Routledge Revivals. (Oxon: Routledge, 2010). xv.

through the stories of the Holy Grail. In particular it will focus on Sarras, an imaginary city which features prominently in the *History of* and *Quest for the Holy Grail*,⁴ and the similarities and contrasts between Sarras and the holy city of Jerusalem. As shall be demonstrated, Sarras supersedes and replaces Jerusalem in both texts.

The story of the Holy Grail, for the purposes of this paper, begins after the Crucifixion. On that day, Joseph of Arimathea goes to the site of the Last Supper and takes the bowl used by Christ. He then uses it to collect the blood from Jesus' body while he moves it to a tomb. That night, a Jewish mob seizes Joseph and imprisons him within a hollow pillar in the house of Caiaphas. He remains there for 40 years, sustained and kept young by the Holy Grail. Meanwhile, the story shifts to Rome, where Vespasian learns of the healing performed by Jesus and his disciples and vows to take vengeance upon the Jews for killing him. He sacks Jerusalem and frees Joseph, who heals the emperor and is reunited with his now-adult son Josephus. They then take the Holy Grail and a small contingent of followers out of Jerusalem. By divine command, they travel several days before coming to the city of Sarras, which is presented as the origin city for Saracens and Islam. Immediately upon arriving, Joseph and Josephus travel to the palace of the city's king, Evalach. Evalach is at that moment in the middle of a war with Tholomer, the king of neighboring Egypt. Joseph promises him victory and salvation if he converts to Christianity. The king listens, but is unconvinced by Joseph's description of the Trinity and virgin birth. That night he experiences visions which clarify Joseph's words, but remains hesitant. Meanwhile Josephus is anointed bishop by the Holy Spirit. The next day, he sends one of his clerks to debate with Joseph, at which point Josephus -

⁴ From here on, this paper will refer to these two texts as *History* and *Quest*.

speaking for God - rebukes Evalach. He proclaims that the king will suffer defeat against Tholomer for three days, after which point he may call on God's help and be saved. The battle plays out exactly as predicted. When Evalach finally gives in and fully accepts Christianity, a white knight appears on the battlefield and defeats Tholomer's army. Upon returning to Sarras, Evalach accepts baptism, changing his name to Mordrain. His brother Seraphe does as well, changing his name to Nascien. Most of their subjects convert as well. Several of Joseph's original company are anointed priests and remain to minister the people of Mordrain and Nascien's realms, at which point Joseph, Josephus, and the Holy Grail depart. Their adventures in the *History* continue, until they ultimately reach Britain and convert it as well.

The *Quest* begins with the arrival of Galahad in Camelot. Several signs accompany him, predicting that he will complete the Grail Quest. Shortly thereafter, the Grail appears in King Arthur's court. It provides bountiful food for the knights, but they are all transfixed by its presence and thus do not react until it departs. Gawain recognizes this as a problem and pledges to seek the Grail for a year in order to see it more clearly. Many other knights, including Lancelot, Perceval, Galahad, and Bors, do so as well. They depart Camelot together, but quickly split up and spread out into the countryside. The majority of the *Quest* is taken up recounting their individual adventures. Each knight is spiritually tested, but most fail. Only Galahad, Perceval, and Bors succeed - those marked by their virginity or chastity. These three are reunited at Corbenic Castle, where they find the Grail and receive the Eucharist from Josephus himself. They witness the literal transformation of communion, and are granted a personal audience with Jesus. He orders them to take the Grail out of Britain and return it to Sarras. The knights fulfil this last

command, but upon their arrival in Sarras the new king imprisons them. They remain imprisoned for a year - sustained by the Grail - until the king has a change of heart and releases them on his deathbed. The people of Sarras choose Galahad to be their new king, and he rules for another year. Finally, the quest is concluded when the Grail is then carried up into heaven by a giant hand, taking Galahad's soul with it. Perceval retreats to a hermitage and dies soon after. Bors returns alone to Camelot to recount the story to King Arthur and his court.

Though it does not occupy as many pages of the Lancelot-Grail Cycle as other settings, Sarras appears at key points in the story of the Holy Grail. It bookends the Holy Grail's time on Earth, and serves as the final climactic high-water mark for the Arthurian world before its total collapse in the *Death of Arthur*. In this way it occupies the narrative space that would traditionally be associated with Jerusalem: the destination of pilgrimage, the point of return, and the place of ultimate spiritual attainment. The city of Jerusalem, meanwhile, is almost completely absent from the Cycle. Given the Cycle's origins in the Holy City, its exclusion from the rest of the text in favor of a fictional city is telling. There are numerous similarities between the two cities beyond their function as narrative equivalent, indicating an allegorical connection between the two.

The best contemporary guide for medieval students of allegory was Hugh of St. Victor. Writing in France in the early 12th century, he created several works on the subject, most notably *De Scripturis et Scriptoribus Sacris* and the *Didascalicon*. In these didactic texts, he lays out the four senses of scripture, or the four different lenses through

which words or passages should be interpreted.⁵ The first is the literal or historical, wherein the literal interpretation of the word or passage is to be accepted as true. Second is allegorical, meaning the passage is meant to stand in for something else, predominantly Old Testament episodes foreshadowing those in the New. The third is the tropological sense, in which the passage is intended to figuratively convey a moral lesson. Finally, the anagogical sense is a subdivision of the allegorical, wherein the passage reveals something of the divine or of the life to come. Any given passage of scripture could be correctly viewed through any number of these senses according to Hugh. Biblical references to Jerusalem in particular were a popular example of all four senses being applied at once.⁶ For the purposes of this paper, the most frequently cited of these will be allegory, wherein the “past” - the Old Testament or the events of the *History* - directly foreshadows the “present” - the New Testament or the present day. Sarras’ allegorical connections to Jerusalem, when combined with the Cycle’s uniquely confusing combination of chivalric and religious themes, indicate a significant preoccupation with the Crusading movement underlying the entire narrative of the Holy Grail.

Much of the scholarly discussion surrounding the Lancelot-Grail Cycle has focused on the problem of authorship. It is as of yet uncertain who was originally responsible for compiling the Cycle, and whether or not there were multiple authors. The earliest commentators on the cycle took an intensely negative view of the theoretical

⁵ Note that Hugh of St. Victor did not invent this concept. The four senses of scripture were originally developed by St. Augustine. Hugh’s works are simply the most straightforward and popular contemporary guides.

Grover A Zinn, "Hugh of St. Victor's "De Scripturis et Scriptoribus Sacris" as an "Accessus" Treatise for the Study of the Bible." *Traditio* 52 (1997) 125.

⁶ Emile Male, *Religious Art in France of the Thirteenth Century*, trans Dora Nussey (Mineola: Dover Publications 2000), 139.

author. In his assessment of the text, 17th-century poet Chapelain called it a literary “dungheap.” Frustrated by its frequent repetition and seemingly haphazard shifts in plot and focus, he concluded that the cycle’s author must have been a “barbarian.”⁷ Later scholars such as Alfred Jeanroy claimed that this incoherence was the result of multiple different authors compiling different sections. In this interpretation, the repetitive nature of the narrative is simply the result of multiple similar stories being written independently of one another, the “gratuitous, unfortunate by-product of a long and uncontrolled process of textual transmission and reworking.”⁸ Rejecting these claims, scholars such as Alexandre Micha and Albert Pauphilet have argued that the Cycle is the work of a single ingenious author, interlacing the adventures together while still keeping track of a strict chronology. Of those who support this view, Ferdinand Lot is perhaps the most outspoken. Most notably, he argued that the entire cycle was a “well-composed tragedy in five acts” and the result of a single authorial vision.⁹

This view of total textual unity has been criticized by numerous scholars since its introduction. While accepting the idea of interlace and its use in the *Lancelot Proper*, E. Jane Burns contended the assertion that it maintains a similarly strict coherence in the other texts as well is unsupported.¹⁰ Elspeth Kennedy, meanwhile, convincingly proved that the allusions and callbacks cited by Micha were not always perfectly aligned. Rather, by investigating the manuscript tradition of the Cycle, she found that several manuscripts contained disagreements about prophesied events or relationships in later sections. She

⁷ Burns, *Lancelot-Grail*, xvi

⁸ E. Jane Burns, *Arthurian Fictions: Rereading the Vulgate Cycle*. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1985). 83

⁹ Burns, *Lancelot-Grail*, xvii

¹⁰ *Ibid* xvii

pointed to several early manuscripts in which the prophesied “winner” of the Grail quest was Perceval rather than Galahad, drawing on the earlier Grail texts such as *Perlesvaus* and Chrétien de Troyes’ *Perceval*. Furthermore, she noted that these sections were changed in later manuscripts and concluded that later scribes were aware of the overarching story and took steps to correct perceived mistakes in the flow of the narrative.¹¹ She also indicated that the interlacing of narrative plot lines appeared only at specific points in the narrative, where the characters themselves were confused and otherwise misdirected. The intent of the author, assumedly, was to put the audience in a similar position of having limited information. In particular, she cites an episode in which Lancelot is imprisoned by Morgana as a narratively confused section of the text. The interlacing becomes much more frequent and asynchronous as Camelot’s knights attempt to penetrate Morgana’s misdirecting magic. The interlace, then, reflects the confusion of the characters.¹² This interpretation can be followed into the *Quest*, as the narrative splinters when the knights set off, and only coalesces again once the final questers have found the Grail.

The question of authorship is further complicated by the text itself. As has been noted, the Cycle at various points claims to have been created by a range of authors, many of whom are fictional characters and therefore impossible as sources for the text. Two of the possible authors, Walter Map - associated with the *Lancelot*, *Quest*, and *Death* - and Robert de Boron - associated with the *History* and *Merlin* - are historical

¹¹ Elspeth Kennedy, “The Making of the Cycle” in *A Companion to the Lancelot-Grail Cycle*. ed. Carol Dover. Arthurian Studies, 54. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003). 17-21.

¹² Elspeth Kennedy, “Variations in the Patterns of Interlace in the Lancelot-Grail” in *The Lancelot-Grail Cycle : Text and Transformations*. ed. William Kibler. 1st ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994). 42.

figures. However, Burns points out that the historical Walter Map died before the Cycle was written, and that his name may have even been a pun.¹³ Scholars have found Robert de Boron a more likely author, given his earlier works that seem to parallel the Cycle: namely, his verse and prose *Romance of Joseph of Arimathea* and prose *Merlin*.¹⁴ However, Robert's romance has major discrepancies with the Cycle. For the purposes of this paper, his influence is unverifiable and unhelpful as his romance makes no mention of Josephus, Sarras, Evalach, or any of the stories connected to them. His description of Joseph's early journeys and even his family share no similarities to the way they are presented in the *History*.¹⁵ Additionally, Rupert Pickens has argued that the *History* does not specifically claim Robert de Boron as a source, but rather indicates that he produced a different translation from the same source.¹⁶ Alexandre Leupin, meanwhile, rejected the idea that the attributed authors were in any way connected to the actual author. He wrote that the plurality of authors was intended to draw on as many sources of legitimacy as possible, including eyewitness testimony, known historical translators, and divine revelation. To him, the individual or contrasting sources were less important than the repetition of authoritative veracity.¹⁷

While an exact identity or even number of authors has thus far eluded scholarly consensus, some commentators have sought clues from the narrative to draw conclusions

¹³ Burns, *Lancelot-Grail*, xxi.

¹⁴ Burns, *Arthurian Fictions*, 39.

¹⁵ Robert de Boron. *Merlin and the Grail : Joseph of Arimathea, Merlin, Perceval : The Trilogy of Prose Romances Attributed to Robert De Boron*. ed. Nigel Bryant. *Arthurian Studies*, 48. (Woodbridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2001). 35.

¹⁶ Rupert Pickens, "Autobiography and History in the Vulgate *Estoire*" in *The Lancelot-Grail Cycle : Text and Transformations*. ed. William Kibler. 1st ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994). 105.

¹⁷ Carol Chase, "Or dist li Contes: Narrative Interventions and the Implied Audience in the *Estoire del Saint Graal*", in *The Lancelot-Grail Cycle : Text and Transformations*. ed. William Kibler. 1st ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994). 118.

about the author(s) and their background. Richard Barber argued that the text reflected Cistercian influence, and that the author may have been a member of that order. Most convincingly, he pointed to numerous scenes in which the text depicts white-robed monks, an image associated with the Cistercians.¹⁸ He also cited Etienne Gilson, who claimed that the theological message of the Cycle was reflective of Cistercian teachings on grace; approaching God through feeling rather than intellect.¹⁹ Finally, Barber drew a connection between the Cistercians and chivalry through their work and writings in connection with the Crusades.²⁰ Unfortunately, he did not explore any further into the themes of crusading present within the Cycle.

In addition to the plurality of attributed creators, scholars have explored at length the multiplicity of narrators within the Lancelot-Grail Cycle. In addition to the many attributed authors and their implied narratorial voices, the narration also contains a number of narrative interventions by “li conte” (the story) or by an unexplained “I”. This narration furthermore transitions frequently mid-sentence to direct, quoted speech and back. Norris Lacy claimed that these frequent shifts were intended to present the Cycle as an aggregate of its many appropriated authorial sources.²¹ This view was echoed by Richard Trachsler, who argued that the multiplicity of narrators gave the effect of being just a part of a much larger work of collected first person accounts.²² Carol Chase, on the other hand, combined this conflation of first- and third-person narration with a repetition

¹⁸ Rupert Barber, “Chivalry, Cistercianism, and the Grail”, in *A Companion to the Lancelot-Grail Cycle*. ed. Carol Dover. Arthurian Studies, 54. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003). 9.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid 6.

²¹ Norris J Lacy. "Emergent Direct Discourse in the Vulgate Cycle." *Arthuriana* 4, no. 1 (1994) 25.

²² Richard Trachsler. “A Question of Time: Romance and History.” in *A Companion to the Lancelot-Grail Cycle*. ed. Carol Dover. Arthurian Studies, 54. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003). 28.

of narrative reminders. She drew out several instances when the narration switched to “I”, and noted that each was a reminder of events past or an announcement of future intent. These narrative interventions indicated a listening audience, who could forget or get distracted and thus require such direct appeals. The text, therefore, preserves not just the legacy of oral creation, but also of oral performance.²³ Ultimately, the effect of this narratorial confusion is similar to that of the multiple authors: combining multiple different sources of authority, from eyewitness testimony to historical record.²⁴

Another point of contention surrounding the Lancelot-Grail Cycle has been how to classify its genre. Traditionally, romances - including those which inspired the Cycle such as Chretien de Troyes’ *Perceval* and *Knight of the Cart* - were composed in verse. However, the Cycle was written in prose. Prose was traditionally associated with historical or religious texts. While the Cycle draws on their authority, it was written in vernacular French, whereas they would have been published in Latin.²⁵ Vernacular prose, according to E. Jane Burns, was only used in legal documents and public-facing religious texts such as sermons.²⁶ Furthermore, it mixes the genres between and even within individual volumes of the Cycle. The early chapters of the *History* are a continuation of the Gospels, but spend a dozen pages describing the battle between Evalach and Tholomer in depth in a manner reminiscent of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain*.²⁷ Meanwhile, Albert Pauphilet argued that the chivalric episodes of the

²³ Chase 119.

²⁴ Burns, *Lancelot-Grail*, xxix.

²⁵ Burns, *Arthurian Fictions*, 37.

²⁶ Burns, *Lancelot-Grail*, xxvii.

²⁷ *History of the Holy Grail* 33-46.

Quest were frequently bent to fit a didactic, religious purpose.²⁸ In tying the Cycle to the Cistercian monasteries, Barber also acknowledged its religious message, but ultimately could not come to a conclusion whether it was a secular author incorporating religious themes or a clerical author drawing on chivalric literature.²⁹ Of these, Burns produced the most complete theory, arguing that the Lancelot-Grail Cycle embodied a conflict between secular and divine literature, drawing on the elements of both to challenge the distinction between “high” forms - religious texts - and “lower” literature - such as romance.³⁰ While convincingly argued, Burn’s case necessitates an incredible amount of forethought and intentionality which is difficult to square with the uncertainty surrounding the identity of the Cycle’s author. This paper will argue for a simpler explanation - at least in relation to the *Quest for the Holy Grail* - in Chapter 3.³¹

In exploring the genre of the Cycle, many authors have focused on its religious themes. While scholars such as Pauphilet argued that the entire narrative was structured around religious allegories, this view has been widely criticized. Pointing to the self-referential nature of many of the explanations given by hermits throughout the Cycle, Tzvetan Todorov argued that it contains no true allegories. Rather, all of its supposed allegories are directed back to the text. Todorov argued that this was intentional, telling the audience that they cannot reach God through a simple text in the same way that the knights could not reach the Grail through a normal quest.³² Burns argued instead that the

²⁸ Burns, *Arthurian Fictions*, 57.

²⁹ Barber 12.

³⁰ Burns, *Arthurian Fictions*, 34.

³¹ It should be noted that while I stand behind the conclusions ultimately reached in Chapter 3 concerning genre and the fusion of religious and chivalric themes in the *Quest*, I am by no means suggesting that those conclusions can be generalized to the rest of the Cycle.

³² Burns, *Arthurian Fictions*, 39.

hermetic explanations pointed out historical analogues rather than elevated interpretations. Instead of taking physical events and relating them to spiritual truths, the hermits primarily related the events of the story to events of another story, be they in biblical times or the chronology of Joseph of Arimathea. In effect, the text established chronology rather than allegory.³³ However, she also noted that this historical form of allegory was grounded in the exegesis of Hugh of St. Victor. The Cycle frequently highlights parallels between the lives of Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea, and Galahad, intending each to call to the audience's mind images of the other.³⁴ Other scholars have pointed to religious themes directed specifically at the audience. Pickens pointed to the concerns held by the unnamed translator of the *History* over the Trinity as one such theme. The unnamed monk confesses his doubts, and then within the material he supposedly translated, the difficult theological concept is explained both verbally and visually to Evalach. This, according to Pickins, was aimed at an audience similarly unsure about the doctrine.³⁵ Michelle Szkilnik argued that the entire theological debate between Joseph and Evalach was meant to educate the reader. According to her, the debate sets out a clear delineation for the reader between being a Christian and being a pagan: pagans ask for logical proof of Christian doctrine, Christians ask for faith.³⁶ However, this conflict could similarly be related to the rise in respect for Arabic rationality and logic among Christian scholars.³⁷ Despite referencing events occurring in

³³ Burns, *Arthurian Fictions*, 61.

³⁴ Ibid 62.

³⁵ Pickens 106.

³⁶ Chase 122.

³⁷ John Victor Tolan. 'Peter the Venerable on the 'Diabolic Heresy of the Saracens'', in *The Devil, Heresy, and Witchcraft in the Middle Ages: Essays in Honor of Jeffrey Burton Russell*, ed. A. Ferreiro Leiden, (1998) 26.

Sarras, as well as its close parallels to both biblical and contemporary events and locations, none of these authors explored the allegories inherent in the city itself. Despite its pivotal role in the stories of the Holy Grail, Sarras has been largely left out of the scholarship around those stories.

While many scholars who study the Grail Cycle mention Sarras in passing, very few have addressed it specifically. Michelle Warren noted several connections between Sarras and Jerusalem, including a spatial link between the two cities via the Euphrates river. Additionally, she found another crucial link through Champenois royalty: Henry of Champagne and his descendants held or advanced claims on the throne of Jerusalem from 1192-1197, while Evalach eventually learns from Joseph that he was born in Meaux, a town described later in the Cycle as being between Champagne and Burgundy.³⁸ However, Warren ultimately sees Sarras as a parallel to Camelot rather than to Jerusalem³⁹ and makes no mention of Sarras' connections to Islam.

John Tolan, with the assistance of Michelle Szkilnik, did briefly address the connections between Sarras and Islam, concluding that the *History* used the words “Saracen” and “Pagan” interchangeably, as did most medieval Europeans, but differentiated between the pre-Islamic paganism of Sarras and Islam.⁴⁰ However, his analysis missed the fact that the text sets up a direct lineage between the two. Additionally, while the passage he quoted will be discussed at length in this paper, it is by no means the only significant episode of the Cycle revolving around Sarras. The

³⁸ Michelle Warren. *History on the Edge : Excalibur and the Borders of Britain, 1100-1300*. Medieval Cultures, V. 22. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000). 182.

³⁹ Ibid 183.

⁴⁰ John Victor Tolan, *Saracens : Islam in the Medieval European Imagination*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). 128.

assumption that Sarras has no deeper connections to Islam is undermined by the specifics of Joseph's encounters there and by the Holy Grail's return.

To date, no scholarly analysis of the Lancelot-Grail Cycle has yet established what purpose Sarras serves in the overarching narrative of the Holy Grail. Questions remain as to why this city is presented as it is, and why is it given such a prominent role in a story. Finally, there is still no explanation for why the story opens with such an emphasis on Jerusalem but then abandons it. In answering these questions, this paper will argue that they are all connected by a preoccupation with the state of the crusading movement in the 13th century. By reading the *History* and *Quest* through the lense of the crusades, the confusing relationship between Sarras, Jerusalem, and the Holy Grail becomes clearer. Sarras is established as an allegorical representation of Jerusalem, and occupies the latter's place in the narrative. By inventing a fictional stand-in, the Lancelot-Grail Cycle comments on the histories of both Islam and Christianity. In the *History*, the relationship between the two cities is firmly established and used to cast Muslims as the 'other' and eliminate any claim they may have to the Holy City. In so doing, it valorizes those who are working to convert or liberate Jerusalem and castigates those who are not doing enough, or are approaching crusading incorrectly. These themes are carried on into the *Quest*, which uses the Holy Grail and Sarras to put forth criticisms of the crusading movement and offer a new model toward which it should be reformed.⁴¹

⁴¹ It should be noted again that the *Quest* was written before the *History*, making this ordering of the texts somewhat inaccurate from an authorial standpoint. However, despite the order of their compilation, this paper will analyze the *History* first before proceeding on to the *Quest*. This order was selected both because it is the order in which the vast majority of the Cycle's readers would have experienced it, and because the themes this paper will be exploring in the *History* were written to specifically to build up to the conclusions in the *Quest*.

HISTORY OF THE HOLY GRAIL

The first mention of Sarras occurs in the earliest chapters of the *History of the Holy Grail*, where it is the first city to which Joseph of Arimathea and the Holy Grail come after leaving Jerusalem. This first description locates it “between Babylon and Salamander.”⁴² The editor helpfully notes that Babylon was the popular medieval name for the city of Cairo, but the city of Salamander is harder to place. It is mentioned once again in the *History*, when Nascien meets the Emir of Cordoba on his way to war with the King of Salamander in Greece.⁴³ Assuming then that Salamander is in Greece, the text is most likely placing Sarras somewhere in Egypt or the Levant. This conclusion is bolstered by several other scattered geographical references. First, Evalach, king of Sarras, is recorded as being at war with neighboring Egypt.⁴⁴ Later in the text, the tower of a nearby castle is described, from which it is supposedly possible to see both “the walls of Baghdad gleaming and the river Nile flowing in Egypt.”⁴⁵ Finally, at the end of the *Quest for the Holy Grail*, Bors remains in Egypt for a time after completing the quest.⁴⁶

⁴² *History of the Holy Grail* 15.

⁴³ *Ibid* 121.

⁴⁴ *Ibid* 16.

⁴⁵ *Ibid* 33.

⁴⁶ William W Kibler, and R. Barton Palmer, eds. *Medieval Arthurian Epic and Romance : Eight New Translations*. (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2014), 271.

Joseph's journey from Jerusalem to Sarras is reportedly along the length of the biblically-significant Euphrates river, establishing from the outset a thematic link between the two cities.⁴⁷ The city is introduced as follows:

From this city came the first Saracens. Those who say that Saracens are named after Abraham's first wife Sara are not to be believed, for this was falsely invented nor does it seem reasonable. It is not unknown that Sara was a Jew, and her son Isaac was a Jew, as were all those who were Isaac's issue. Because the greatest part is considered to represent the whole and since Jews descended from Sara, it does not seem reasonable that Saracens took their name from her. But they were called Saracens after this city named Sarras because this was the first city where they became certain of what they worshiped. And in this city was founded and established the sect that the Saracens maintained until the coming of Mohammed, who was sent to save them, though he damned himself first, and them afterwards, by his gluttony. Before the founding of the sect, the people of Sarras had no faith, but worshiped everything that pleased them, so that what they worshiped one day was not worshiped the next. But then they established the worship of the sun and moon and other planets.⁴⁸

Erasing Abraham from the City of Saracens

Before any information concerning its relevance to the Holy Grail or its journey, the introduction to Sarras places it within the context of a Christianized image of Islamic history. The objective of this description appears to be the creation of an origin story of sorts for Muslims. The invented city is presented as the literal and spiritual origin point for the Saracens, which is used to decouple the history of Islam from that of Judaism. The insistence that Saracens were named after this mythical city is stated as directly counter

⁴⁷ Michelle R. Warren, *History on the Edge : Excalibur and the Borders of Britain, 1100-1300*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 182.

⁴⁸ *History of the Holy Grail* 15.

to the idea that the name comes instead from Abraham's wife, Sarah. The text denigrates the idea that there is a link between Sarah and the Saracens, laying out its argument that Sarah, Isaac, and all of their descendants were Jews and therefore the Saracens would not have taken her name. The text makes no reference to Ishmael despite the fact that countless Muslim and Christian scholars throughout the late antique and medieval period referred to Arabs and later Muslims as "Ishmaelites" or "Hagarenes." Most notably, Isidore of Seville's 7th-century *Etymologies* defines the descendants of Ishmael as "the Ishmaelites, who are now called, with corruption of the name, Saracens, *as if they were descended from Sarah.*"[emphasis mine]⁴⁹ Later, it is elaborated that "they are called Saracens from an alteration of their name because they are proud to be descendants of Sarah." Isidore also allows for the alternate possibility that "they are of Syrian origin, as if the word were *Syriginae*. They live in a very large deserted region."⁵⁰ The *History* echoes Isidore's claim that Saracens have no legitimate right to the legacy of Sara, but the two diverge as concerns the connection between the name and biblical figure. Whereas Isidore implies that Saracens hold Abraham and his wife in high regard, the *History* rejects that possibility as unreasonable.

It is clear that the *History* is primarily concerned with separating Saracens from Sarah. It totally ignores Hagar and Ishmael, thereby eliminating any possible claims to Abraham's legacy except through Sarah. By using as the primary piece of evidence the fact that Sarah and her descendants were Jews, it specifically denies any historical connections between Islam and Judaism. In so doing, the text "others" Islam from the

⁴⁹ Stephen A Barney ed., *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). 192.

⁵⁰ Ibid 195.

lineage of Abraham entirely. It removes any kinship between Christians and Muslims, specifically skirting around mentions of Hagar and Ishmael to deny the Saracens any place in Christian scriptures. This turns them into a universal “other” totally outside the True Law until the characters bring it to them. Replacing the traditional history of Islam with a fictional city has a further benefit in giving Muslims a single, definable, and independent point of origin. Because, as the *History* says, “the greatest part is considered to represent the whole,”⁵¹ Sarras can serve as an allegory for all Muslims in the same way that biblical texts used Jerusalem to stand for all Hebrews. Sarras can be manipulated as an allegorical device free from the intersectional implications of the biblical stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Ishmael as well as the potential danger of contradicting revealed scripture.

Additionally, by ignoring the established origins and history of Islam with Hagar and Ishmael, the text sets up for the reader a new history of the rise of Islam. The Saracens are first described as people without faith. From their first introduction in the text, the Saracens are continuously marked by their inconstancy. Over the course of a few sentences, their religion changes three times. Even their conversion to Christianity ultimately wavers.⁵² Western writers throughout the Middle Ages portrayed the East as religiously inconsistent. Guibert of Gautier, in his 12th century *Dei Gesta per Francos*, described the faith of those in the East as “variable and unsteady, searching for novelty.”⁵³ Similarly, the willingness of Muslims to abandon their faith is a repeated trope in medieval romances, such as *Ferumbras* and the *Song of Roland*. By immediately

⁵¹ *History of the Holy Grail* 15.

⁵² See the return to Sarras in the *Quest for the Holy Grail* in the next chapter.

⁵³ Tolan, *Saracens*, 144.

preceding the story of Muhammad and the rise of Islam with these ideas of Saracen inconstancy, the text undermines the legitimacy and sincerity of contemporary Islamic faith. It presents Islam as nothing more than one of a long succession of ever-changing religious distractions.

Muhammad is then presented much in the same vein as the apostles, being “sent to save [the Saracens]”. Given that there is only one figure in medieval Christian thought which is capable of saving, the text implies that Muhammad’s message was at one point divinely inspired. This view is somewhat at odds with most medieval Christian polemics. Rather than viewing Muhammad as a Christian or prophet who went astray, writers like Peter the Venerable described him as “one who was of the Arab nation, of low birth, at first a worshipper of the old idolatry.”⁵⁴ His transition to monotheism and prophethood comes later not as a result of divine revelation, but as aspirations toward social advancement: “When, with everyone equally resisting him and condemning his low birth, he saw that he could not pursue [kingship] as he had hoped, he attempted to become king under the cloak of religion and under the name of a divine prophet.”⁵⁵ Heretical Christian and Jewish teachings are only added on later, a means to an end. The *History*, on the other hand, implies that Muhammad originally proclaimed the message of God but abandoned it.

Both the *History* and contemporary polemics are, at least, in agreement on the reason for Muhammad’s damnation. The *History* attributes the fall of Muhammad and his followers to gluttony. While traditionally applied to over-consumption - typically of food

⁵⁴ Peter the Venerable, *Writings against the Saracens*. trans. Irven Resnick, *The Fathers of the Church. Mediaeval Continuation, Volume 16*. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2016) 38

⁵⁵ Peter the Venerable 38.

and drink - gluttony was thought to encompass all prioritization of worldly goods above spiritual ones. In *De Doctrina Christiana*, St. Augustine differentiates between *using* and *enjoying* the things of this world. To enjoy something is to take pleasure or satisfaction from a thing for its own sake. Using a thing, on the other hand, means employing it in service to a higher goal or desire. For Augustine, a proper relationship with worldly goods involves using them to reach spiritual goals.⁵⁶ By Peter's account, Muhammad's path to prophethood involved the exact opposite: co-opting spiritual goods in service to worldly ends. This gluttony was transferred to his followers in part through his description of heaven. According to Peter's reading, he:

 painted a paradise that is not the company of angels, nor of a vision of the divine, nor of that highest good 'that no eye has ever seen nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the human heart,' but painted one such as truly flesh and blood desired, or rather the dregs of flesh and blood and one which he desired to have prepared for himself. There, he promises to his followers a meal of meats and of every kind of fruit, rivers of milk and honey, and of sparkling waters; there he promises the embrace and sexual satisfaction of the most beautiful women and virgins, in which the whole of his paradise is defined.⁵⁷

The *History's* account of the life of Muhammad and rise of Islam is not substantially different from that of contemporary polemics. However, when combined with new origin story in Sarras, it presents Saracens as an entirely worldly people. They have no connection to the Bible or the Abrahamic tradition, and no previous conception of the divine or any spiritual truths. By denying their traditional links to Abraham, the

⁵⁶ Augustine of Hippo, *On Christian Doctrine, in Four Books*. trans. JJ Shaw, (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2005). 9.

⁵⁷ Peter the Venerable 42.

History makes Muslims identical to all other pagans, a fact it reinforces by using the word Saracen to refer to every other pagan group in the text.

Sarras and Jerusalem

Though the *History* goes to great lengths to deny any connection between Saracens and the Abrahamic tradition, the city of Sarras itself is specifically connected to Judaism, and to Jerusalem in particular. Upon entering Sarras,

Joseph and his disciples did not stop until they came before the Temple to the Sun, the most beautiful temple in the city. The Saracens honored and revered it above all others, because it was a temple to the sun, the noblest of all the planets. At the entrance to this temple there was a very high, beautiful chamber that had been built and established for the peers of the city to hold their courts of justice and business assemblies. This room was called the Seat of Judgement.⁵⁸

These buildings are the only two described in the city and Joseph walks straight to them upon entering, implying they were visible even from outside the city. This description mirrors the appearance of the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. The Dome of the Rock would have been the most impressive sight to an outsider entering the city, and given its position on Temple Mount it would also be the most visible. The great golden dome, which was lit through the night for much of its history,⁵⁹ looks enough like a rising sun to be seen as a celestial temple. Though most medieval authors identified it as the temple of Solomon, the building's physical appearance was frequently described in contemporary pilgrim itineraries.⁶⁰ Al-Aqsa Mosque, sitting in front of the Dome of the Rock, was identified as a palace and occupied

⁵⁸ *History of the Holy Grail* 16.

⁵⁹ Chareyron 89.

⁶⁰ Hanna Vorholt, "Touching the Tomb of Christ: Notes on a Twelfth-Century Map of Jerusalem from Winchcombe, Gloucestershire." *Imago Mundi* (2009), 246.

by the Latin kings of Jerusalem during their rule over the city.⁶¹ Its parallel in Sarras, therefore, is referred to as the “Seat of Judgement,” and is the home of King Evalach and his court.⁶² The text does not identify either building by the names that would be recognizable to the medieval reader, but employs familiar descriptions to imply a connection between the Holy City and its fictional counterpart.

The text gives one more piece of Sarras’ history a few chapters later. While in Sarras, Joseph and his followers stay in a place called the Spiritual Palace. According to the text:

Daniel the prophet had given it this name, when he returned from battle with King Nebuchadnezzar, who had captured him along with other Jews and taken them to Babylon. As he returned, Daniel went through this city; when he came to the palace, he saw Hebrew letters written on the door in charcoal that said this palace was spiritual. It was the custom to use this name; it never changed, and as long as the palace stands it will be called spiritual. But before Joseph stayed there the people of the city had never known or heard why it was called this.⁶³

This passage, first and foremost, gives the city of Sarras a Jewish past while still denying that past to its citizens and thus Saracens as a whole. The Saracens had in their midst a holy but neglected shrine, which is only truly recognized upon the arrival of Christianity. This palace will be the center of much of the divine activity in Sarras and will also become the ultimate point of return for the Holy Grail at the end of the *Quest for the Holy Grail*.⁶⁴ This palace stands in for the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, a shrine ignored by the Saracens which will - by Christians - be called spiritual for all time.

⁶¹ Carol Herselle Krinsky, "Representations of the Temple of Jerusalem before 1500." *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* (1970), 6.

⁶² *History of the Holy Grail* 16.

⁶³ *Ibid* 23.

⁶⁴ See the discussion of the *Quest* in Chapter 3.

Second, the story of Daniel related here has no connection to the biblical book of Daniel. In the Bible, Daniel serves as an advisor and member of Nebuchadnezzar's court.⁶⁵ Though he occasionally rebukes the Babylonian king, at no point do the two engage in anything which could be described as a battle. Finally, the story of the Hebrews' return from the Babylonian Captivity comes as after Babylon is defeated by the Persian king Darius, an event which occurs in the Book of Ezra and includes no mention of Daniel at all.⁶⁶ However, the *History* is clearly more interested in the allegorical image than in accuracy with respect to the biblical events. The Babylonian Captivity began with the siege and conquest of Jerusalem by a pagan king. The chosen people of God were displaced and enslaved, and the relics of the Temple were carried off to Babylon.⁶⁷ Parallels between this event and those surrounding the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem were alluded to in Pope Urban II's speech at Clermont calling for the first crusade. According to Robert the Monk's record of the speech, Urban II observed how:

a race from the kingdom of the Persians, an accursed race, a race utterly alienated from God...has invaded the lands of those Christians and has depopulated them by the sword, pillage and fire; it has led away a part of the captives into its own country, and a part it has destroyed by cruel tortures; it has either entirely destroyed the churches of God or appropriated them for the rites of its own religion...This royal city, [Jerusalem] therefore, situated at the centre of the world, is now held captive by His enemies, and is in subjection to those who do not know God, to the worship of the heathens. She seeks therefore and desires to be liberated, and does not cease to implore you to come to her aid.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Daniel 1:17-21.

⁶⁶ Ezra 1:1-4.

⁶⁷ Daniel 1:1-3.

⁶⁸ Dana C. Munro, "Urban and the Crusaders", *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European History*, Vol 1:2, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1895), 5-8.

The speech's focus on captivity and enslavement of Christians by pagans echoes the biblical image of Nebuchadnezzar's conquest. Furthermore, by branding the Muslims as "from the kingdom of the Persians", the Pope connects them to Babylon and the ever-sinister orient.

The reference in the *History* to Daniel and his prophecies also carried specific connotations for a crusader audience. In Guibert de Nogent's record of the Pope's Clermont speech, Urban explicitly cites the prophecies of Daniel as interpreted by Jerome.⁶⁹ Due to their political nature and their themes of changing empire, the prophecies of the Book of Daniel were particularly popular during the Crusades. Perhaps the most popular of these was the first, Nebuchadnezzar's Dream. In chapter two of the biblical book, the Babylonian king has a dream which none of his advisors can interpret save Daniel. The dream concerns a statue made of several different metals being destroyed by a block of stone, and is interpreted as by Daniel thusly:

Your Majesty, you are the king of kings...You are that head of gold. After you, another kingdom will arise, inferior to yours. Next, a third kingdom, one of bronze, will rule over the whole earth. Finally, there will be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron—for iron breaks and smashes everything—and as iron breaks things to pieces, so it will crush and break all the others. Just as you saw that the feet and toes were partly of baked clay and partly of iron, so this will be a divided kingdom...And just as you saw the iron mixed with baked clay, so the people will be a mixture and will not remain united, any more than iron mixes with clay. In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever. This is the meaning of the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands—a rock that broke the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold to pieces.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ August Krey, *The First Crusade: The Accounts of Eyewitnesses and Participants*, (Princeton: 1921), 36-40.

⁷⁰ Daniel 2:37-45.

Though set during the Babylonian captivity, the Book of Daniel was written contemporary to the revolt of the Maccabees against the Seleucids. This prophecy, then, was intended to predict the eventual success of that revolt. However, it was frequently reinterpreted by later Christian writers, most notably St. Jerome. Writing in the 5th century, Jerome saw the prophecy being fulfilled in his lifetime. He interpreted the gold kingdom as the Babylonians, the silver as the Persians, and the bronze as the Greeks or Macedonians. He saw the iron kingdom as his own Roman empire, divided as it was by Germanic tribes and civil wars. After Rome's fall, he predicted the return of Christ and the coming of the eternal kingdom of God.⁷¹

An alternate but not entirely contradictory interpretation was popularized by the crusading veteran Bohemond of Taranto in 1207. While he was stirring up support for further crusades, one of Bohemond's sermons at Saint-Leopard-de-Noblat was recorded by Bishop Galeran of Naumburg. According to the Bishop's account, Bohemond discovered a new interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream while languishing in a Turkish prison:

Now, just as in the vision of King Nebuchadnezzar; the stone cut from the mountain without human hands has shattered and laid low the pagans, That multifarious statue has been struck a blow from that stone and been reduced to dust - iron, clay, bronze, silver, and gold. The iron Persians of Nicea and Antioch were laid low. The clay Egyptians of Jerusalem and Ascalon, the bronze and silver Chaldeans the golden Arabs, partly put down by the sword, partly reduced to ashes in fires, countless others cast down headlong as if by a storm's wind into the sea.⁷²

⁷¹ Jerome, *Commentary on Daniel* trans. Gleason L. Archer (1958). 32.

⁷² Jay Rubenstein. *Nebuchadnezzar's Dream : The Crusades, Apocalyptic Prophecy, and the End of History*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019). 13.

This new interpretation breaks significantly from the biblical text by assigning each material in the statue to concurrently-existing peoples or kingdoms. However, it remains more or less consistent with Jerome's interpretation of the uncut rock: from a medieval perspective, Jerome's interpretation elevated Rome's Christian successors, while Bohemond associated the apocalyptic final kingdom with the successful crusades. Both readings indicated that the end times and final victory of Christ are at hand.

By bringing Daniel to Sarras right after a victory over an eastern, pagan foe, the *History* reinforces Sarras' connection to Jerusalem. It foreshadows the end of pagan control over God's temple and the return of the chosen people to the center of the world. Finally it calls to mind Daniel's prophecies, which foreshadow the end of the world. In so doing, the *History* reminds its reader that victory over the Muslims is a prophesied inevitability, and that those who maintain the faith and continue the struggle in God's name will be rewarded on the fast-approaching day of judgement.

Approaching Conversion and Confrontation

Inside the chamber, Joseph engages in a lengthy philosophical debate with Evalach, the King of Sarras, trying to convert him to Christianity. Evalach is at that moment in the middle of a war with Egypt, and Joseph promises victory and eternal life if Evalach converts and believes in Jesus. Evalach agrees to listen, but is ultimately unconvinced by Joseph's explanation of the Trinity and the birth of Jesus. While Joseph's position is a standard recitation of contemporary doctrine, Evalach's brief responses are not those of an uninitiated pagan. Evalach's specific responses mirror the positions of contemporary Muslim polemics, or at least the medieval European perception thereof.

The first European attempt outside of Spain to explore Islamic doctrine is found in Peter the Venerable's polemical works *Summa Totius Heresis Saracenorum* and *Liber Contra Sectam Sive Heresim Saracenorum*. Written sometime between Peter's Latin translation of the Qur'an in 1143 and the final compilation of his works before his death in 1156, both texts treated Islam as a heretical sect of Christianity rather than a new religion.⁷³ Though not the first Latin texts to describe and refute Islam - Petrus Alphonsi's *Dialogi Contra Iudaeos* was a major source for these texts - Peter's works were emblematic of the informed Christian understanding of Islam. Certainly, the author of the *History* appears to have been familiar with its description of Islam, given the parallels between Peter's polemic and Evalach's positions.

Evalach objects to two major points of Christian doctrine, both of which echo the "greatest errors" of the Saracen heresy according to Peter.⁷⁴ The Saracen king's first objection is to the parentage of Christ. He argues that "since [Jesus] had both father and mother...he was not born without the union of man and woman,"⁷⁵ and again "you still affirm that your God had a father, and yet you say that He was not engendered through carnal relations."⁷⁶ The virgin birth of Jesus is not something to which Islamic doctrine objects,⁷⁷ but these objections echo very specific "errors" identified in the beginning of Peter the Venerable's *Summary*. Peter claims that Muslims "deny that God the Creator is the Father, because, according to them no one becomes a father without sexual

⁷³ Peter the Venerable 11.

⁷⁴ Ibid 34.

⁷⁵ *History of the Holy Grail* 17.

⁷⁶ Ibid 18.

⁷⁷ Qur'an 3:47.

intercourse.”⁷⁸ Evalach’s objections to the virgin birth center around definition of fatherhood and the act of intercourse. Viewed alongside Peter’s tract, it becomes clearer that the Saracen king’s objection is not exclusively to the possibility of virgin birth, but to the title of “Father” being applied to God. Later in the same section of the *History*, Evalach raises concerns about the Trinity, saying “...you say that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are only one God, yet each of the three is God by Himself.”⁷⁹ This again parallels Peter’s summary of Islamic doctrine. For Peter, the “first and foremost” error is “that they deny the Trinity in the unity of the deity, and in this way, while shunning number in unity, they do not believe in a triune number of persons in the one essence of divinity.”⁸⁰ This aspect of the Trinity was brought up frequently in Islamic polemics. Writing in the late 13th century, the Islamic scholar Ibn Taimiya wrote a similar argument responding to the Christian polemic, the *Letter to a Muslim Friend*. In it he claimed that if the three persons of the Trinity present different attributes of God they cannot be of the same substance.⁸¹ In the same way, Evalach is told about the Trinity and then he is even shown it visualized in the form of a tree in a dream, but he still hesitates to convert. Rather, he sends one of his clerks to argue against Joseph, using the same positions as the Muslim polemicists:

For if the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit were only one God, none of the three was a complete, perfect God, or else the persons of the Son and the Holy Spirit had no part in God. And if they were both completely divine, there would therefore be three deities. No one could reasonably dispute this, for any man who did could not reasonably prove or establish as truth that one of the three persons was a complete deity in itself, once either of the

⁷⁸ Peter the Venerable 35.

⁷⁹ *History of the Holy Grail* 19.

⁸⁰ Peter the Venerable 35.

⁸¹ Aḥmad Ibn Abd-al-Ḥalīm Ibn Taimīya, *A Muslim Theologian's Response to Christianity : Ibn Taymiyya's Al-Jawab Al-Sahih*. Ed. Thomas F Michel, (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1999), 271.

others was mentioned. If it were said that the Holy Spirit was a perfect complete God, and that the three were only one deity, it would be clear that one was worth as much as the three. Thus it is true that the two are nothing when the third is honored, because the two persons lose their power through the third, everyone can clearly see and recognize that none of the three is a perfect and complete deity.⁸²

Therefore, despite the conversation taking place well before the rise of Islam, Joseph's profession of the Catholic faith is challenged from a specifically Islamic perspective, as it would have been understood in 13th-century France. In this way, the conversion of Evalach is specifically reminiscent of an episode reported in many chronicles of the fifth Crusade wherein St. Francis of Assisi met with and attempted to convert the Egyptian Sultan al-Khamil.

The story of St. Francis and the Sultan was a popular one that appears in chronicles and saints' lives throughout the 13th and 14th centuries. The earliest account of this encounter is found in Jacques de Vitry's *Historia Occidentalis*. A participant of the fifth Crusade, Jacques de Vitry wrote his account in 1223, four years after the episode in question. Four years after that, the *Ernoul Chronicle* included a similar account of St. Francis' adventure. In both, the authors claim that St. Francis traveled to the Sultan's court intending to preach. De Vitry describes the Sultan as a "cruel beast," but upon meeting Francis he "changed his attitude into one of gentleness, and for some days he listened very attentively to Francis."⁸³ The saint was permitted to stay and preach for several days, and only ultimately removed from the Sultan's presence out of fear that he would convert some of the Sultan's men. While al-Khamil did not convert to Christianity,

⁸² *History of the Holy Grail* 29.

⁸³ John Toland. *Saint Francis and the Sultan : The Curious History of a Christian-Muslim Encounter*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 20.

de Vitry claims he asked Francis to “pray for me, that God may deign to reveal to me the law and the faith which is more pleasing to Him.”⁸⁴ While similar scenes did occur in literature and occasionally in fact all throughout the 13th century, the vast majority of other examples ended in martyrdom.⁸⁵ Francis’ attempt, while unsuccessful, still stood out, and inspired chroniclers and hagiographers across Europe. The authors of the *History of the Holy Grail* drew many parallels between these stories and the meeting of Joseph and Evalach. The setting in a king’s court during a war, the religious debate with a pagan king, and his partial but incomplete acceptance of Christianity, are all highlighted in each story. Drawing on this popular account, the *History of the Holy Grail* reinforces the allegorical connection between Sarras and Islam as it appeared to the authors, and provides a model for how the reader should approach Muslims.

Conversion and Violence

Because of his hesitancy to convert in spite of divine signs, Evalach is condemned to three days of defeat in his war with Tholomer. This final threat is enough to convince the king to accept Christianity in exchange for the promise of eventual victory. He swears to “no longer hold to [his] present faith but...immediately receive yours.”⁸⁶ Upon receiving this pledge, Josephus orders Evalach to present his shield:

Once it was brought, Josephus asked for a piece of rich red silk. The king had this brought; Josephus then took the cloth, cut it, and made a cross that was a good foot long and a half-foot wide. He pulled it over the straps of the shield and attached it securely with small nails...”for anyone who fully believes in this sign, there is no earthly peril from which he will not escape, as long as he calls on it sincerely. And do you know what you shall do? You shall cover it with a white canvas, and when you are in great need, when you

⁸⁴ Tolan, *St. Francis*, 20.

⁸⁵ *Ibid* 12.

⁸⁶ *History of the Holy Grail* 32.

fear death, uncover it and call upon him for whom we hold it dear and honor it sincerely. Every time you uncover the sign of God you shall say, 'God, who with this visible sign killed death, lead me safely and honorably to receive Your faith.'⁸⁷

This scene makes specific allusions to the famous battlefield conversions of Constantine and Clovis. Perhaps one of the most famous conversions in medieval church history, Constantine's conversion immediately before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge was recorded by the 3rd-century bishop Eusebius of Caesarea. According to Eusebius' *Life of Constantine*, the Emperor-to-be

saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and bearing the inscription, CONQUER BY THIS...A long spear, overlaid with gold, formed the figure of the cross by means of a transverse bar laid over it. On the top of the whole was fixed a wreath of gold and precious stones; and within this, the symbol of the Saviour's name, two letters indicating the name of Christ by means of its initial characters, the letter P being intersected by X in its centre: and these letters the emperor was in the habit of wearing on his helmet at a later period...The emperor constantly made use of this sign of salvation as a safeguard against every adverse and hostile power, and commanded that others similar to it should be carried at the head of all his armies.⁸⁸

The device on the shield which is so popularly linked to Constantine is combined with the battlefield prayer of Clovis. At a critical point in battle, the *Chronicle of St. Denis* records that Clovis looked up to heaven humbly, and spoke thus: "Most mighty God, whom my queen Clothilde worships and adores with heart and soul, I pledge you perpetual service unto your faith, if only you give me now the victory over my

⁸⁷ *History of the Holy Grail* 32.

⁸⁸ *Library of Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series (New York: Christian Literature Co., 1990), Vol I, 489-91.

enemies."⁸⁹ By referencing these two events, the *History* calls to mind the events most responsible for the spread of Latin Christianity. However, the conversion of Evalach is noticeably different from its sources in one crucial way: Evalach does not just accept Christianity, he “takes the Cross.” The symbol emblazoned on Evalach’s shield - a red cross on a white background - is specifically evocative of the crusading orders and their vows. By having Evalach renounce his idolatry in favor of the marks of a Crusader, the *History* strengthens the thematic connection between its fictional Saracen king and the Ayyubid Sultan al-Khamil. The *History* introduces Evalach as an enemy of Christianity who ultimately joins the crusade, a fate which St. Francis and his chroniclers likely wished for Khamil.

The final episode of the conversion of Sarras takes place after the battle wherein Evalach completes his conversion and is saved by a divine white knight. He and his court are baptised, prompting him to change his name to Mordrain.⁹⁰ Josephus finds and exorcises the demon who had been presenting himself as the Saracens’ god. This act drives many of the citizens of Sarras to convert and convinces the king to issue a proclamation that everyone should either be baptized or depart the city. Those who chose to leave were a sizeable number, but

when those who did not wish to receive [baptism] left the country, they fell dead of sudden death as soon as they had passed through the last gate. There were some who went out of their senses; there were some who were struck in the body so that the wound was seen but not the one who did it; and others who did not have these ills were injured either in the limbs or in the thigh, or their necks were broken...Upon approaching the gate, [Josephus] looked ahead

⁸⁹ *The Chronicle of St. Denis*, I.18-19, 23 from *Readings in Ancient History: Illustrative Extracts from the Sources*, 2 Vols., ed. William Stearns Davis (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1912-1913) 331.

⁹⁰ *History of the Holy Grail* 47. For the sake of consistency, this paper will disregard the change and continue to refer to Evalach by that name. However, it should be noted that the change occurs, as some later citations may appear as Mordrain in the text.

and saw the devil he had just released, holding in his hand a bloody sword.⁹¹

Josephus hears of this massacre and rushes out to investigate. Upon reaching the gates, he discovers that the demon he had just banished was carrying out the massacre “by Jesus Christ’s order.”⁹² Josephus attempts to intervene, but is wounded in the thigh by the angel mentioned in the introduction, who admonishes him for “[stopping] baptizing in order to rescue those who scorned my faith.”⁹³

The conversion of a city from one side of the crusades to another was a fairly common occurrence in the 12th and 13th centuries, and generally followed a similar pattern: the city would be captured, and the citizens would be given a choice between conversion and emigration. When the Muslims of Ascalon surrendered to the crusaders in 1154, they were given three days to evacuate the city.⁹⁴ Similar terms were presented to the Christians following Saladin’s conquest of Jerusalem. After the city fell in 1187, the Christian inhabitants were allowed to ransom themselves and depart if they could pay.⁹⁵ However, the *History* rejects this paradigm in favor of a choice between conversion or death. Those who scorn the faith, it concludes, are not worth saving. The description of the violence meted out among those attempting to flee the city is more closely associated with the original sack of Jerusalem perpetrated by the Crusaders in 1099. In contrast to the negotiated surrenders of the later crusades, the conclusion of the First Crusade was

⁹¹ *History of the Holy Grail* 49.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ William of Tyre, *Historia rerum in partibus transmarinis gestarum*, XVII, 22-25, 27-30, *Patrologia Latina* 201, 696-708, translated by James Brundage (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1962), 136.

⁹⁵ *De Expugatione Terrae Sanctae per Saladinum* translated by James Brundage, *The Crusades: A Documentary History*, (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1962), 163.

recorded even by Latin chroniclers as a particularly bloody affair. According to Fulcher of Chartres' chronicle of the First Crusade:

Forthwith, they joyfully rushed into the city to pursue and kill the nefarious enemies, as their comrades were already doing. Some Saracens, Arabs, and Ethiopians took refuge in the tower of David, others fled to the temples of the Lord and of Solomon. A great fight took place in the court and porch of the temples, where they were unable to escape from our gladiators. Many fled to the roof of the temple of Solomon, and were shot with arrows, so that they fell to the ground dead. In this temple almost ten thousand were killed. Indeed, if you had been there you would have seen our feet colored to our ankles with the blood of the slain. But what more shall I relate? None of them were left alive; neither women nor children were spared.⁹⁶

Raymond d'Aguilers, another priest and chronicler, presented the conquest similarly and made a direct connection between the events he described and the judgement of God:

But now that our men had possession of the walls and towers, wonderful sights were to be seen. Some of our men (and this was more merciful) cut off the heads of their enemies; others shot them with arrows, so that they fell from the towers; others tortured them longer by casting them into the flames. Piles of heads, hands, and feet were to be seen in the streets of the city. It was necessary to pick one's way over the bodies of men and horses. But these were small matters compared to what happened at the Temple of Solomon, a place where religious services are ordinarily chanted. What happened there? If I tell the truth, it will exceed your powers of belief. So let it suffice to say this much, at least, that in the Temple and porch of Solomon, men rode in blood up to their knees and bridle reins. Indeed, it was a just and splendid judgment of God that this place should be filled with the blood of the unbelievers, since it had suffered so long from their blasphemies.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Fulk of Chartres, *A History of the Expedition to Jerusalem*, trans. Frances Rita Ryan, (Nashville: University of Tennessee Press, 1969). 109.

⁹⁷ Krey 262.

The chroniclers of the First Crusade present their violence as not only justified, but a service performed at God's behest. Raymond's description in particular is echoed by the demon of the *History*, shouting "Now look, Josephus, how I take vengeance on the enemies of your God!"⁹⁸ The destruction of the Saracens in both texts is taken as punishment for crimes committed against God, namely the crime of refusing the True Faith. This moment represents the total conquest of Sarras by Christianity, and therefore *History* draws on images from the Christian conquest of Jerusalem to reinforce that point. Furthermore, it places a hard and violent limit on the encouragement toward debate and conversion established in earlier chapters. Converting and baptizing pagans is clearly prioritized, but those who do not consent are not to be spared. As Josephus learns, it is not just pointless but against God's will to "[try] to rescue the unbelievers from the hands of the devil, to whom they belong."⁹⁹

Following the final conversion of Sarras' population and the subsequent conversion of the neighboring lands, the *History* departs from Sarras. Joseph, Josephus, Evalach, his brother Nascien, and the Holy Grail all depart the city for various adventures which will ultimately result in the establishment of Christianity in Britain. Sarras' narrative utility in the *History* has been fulfilled. It introduces the imagery of Jerusalem and Islam to the text by drawing on familiar symbols from biblical and contemporary sources, setting up an allegorical connection between them and Sarras. The *History* uses this connection to create a new history for Muslims which sets them apart from the history of Christianity and emphasizes the importance of those who bring them to the

⁹⁸ *History of the Holy Grail* 49.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

“true faith”. Finally, it uses Sarras as a stand-in for the Holy City to comment on crusades past, in preparation for the return to Sarras and discussions of future crusading movements in the *Quest for the Holy Grail*.

QUEST FOR THE HOLY GRAIL

As has been discussed, the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* has proved incredibly difficult for scholars to place into recognizable medieval literary genres. While the *Cycle's* combination of religious and secular styles and themes is confusing, it is not entirely unique. The story of the Holy Grail, and in particular the *Quest for the Holy Grail*, shares many similarities with the genre of crusade romance as defined by Lee Manion. Additionally, by reading the *Quest* through this lens, the message of the text and the role Sarras plays within it become clearly linked.

Though the crusade romance is not a new genre, it has historically been applied quite narrowly: focusing primarily on texts explicitly about the clash between Christian and non-Christian armies.¹⁰⁰ While texts such as *The Siege of Jerusalem* and *Richard Coer de Leon* are certainly exemplars of the genre, they are not the only literary texts reflecting the themes and concerns of the crusading movement. In *Narrating the Crusades: Loss and Recovery in Medieval and Early Modern English Literature*, Manion argues that throughout the late Middle Ages, the definitions of crusading became more diverse. As organized crusades failed in the 14th century, much of the action of the crusading movement was personalized - organized or executed alone or in small groups -

¹⁰⁰ Lee Manion, *Narrating the Crusades: Loss and Recovery in Medieval and Early Modern English Literature*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). 7.

or taken without official sanction. Manion points to the fall of Acre in 1291 as the inspiration for the rise of personal and popular crusades across Europe. The frustration with crusading elites and experimentation with crusading form was reflected in the literature of the time, leading to texts directly connected to the movement but very different in appearance from earlier narratives.¹⁰¹ While Manion claims these conditions as the origins of the genre, the *Quest for the Holy Grail* provides compelling evidence for a much earlier point of origin.

Crusade Romance in the 13th Century

Many of the conditions Manion describes in the early fourteenth century exist in parallel at the beginning of the thirteenth. The decades preceding the writing of the *Quest for the Holy Grail* also saw the inconclusive end of the 3rd Crusade in 1192 and the disastrous conclusion of the fourth Crusade in 1204. However, the central disaster of the era was the fall of Jerusalem in 1187, a particularly traumatic event which Manion's own research indicates was still fresh in the minds of Europeans a century and a half later. Multiple contemporary chronicles blame the shock of Jerusalem's fall for the death of Pope Urban III¹⁰² and contemporary commentators lamented this event as evidence for the power of Islam over Christianity.¹⁰³ Explanations for the defeat ranged from squabbling and factionalism among the lords of the crusade¹⁰⁴ to moral failings among

¹⁰¹ Manion 68.

¹⁰² Pope Urban's death in October of 1187 is attributed to shock in the Ernoul Chronicle and the Annals of Roger of Hoveden.

¹⁰³ *De Expugatione Terrae Sanctae per Saladinum* ed. Joseph Stevenson, Rolls Series, (London: Longmans, 1875), trans. James Brundage, *The Crusades: A Documentary History*, (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1962), 163.

¹⁰⁴ *Chronicle of Ernoul*, trans. Peter Edbury, *The Conquest of Jerusalem and the Third Crusade* (Scolar Press: Aldershot, Hants., 1996).

the Latin Christians.¹⁰⁵ In addition to textual condemnation, the most notable protest against the traditional model of ecclesiastically-defined, aristocratically-led crusades was the Children's Crusade in 1212.

The Children's Crusade was a popular outburst of crusading zeal, not unlike the Peasants' Crusade a century earlier¹⁰⁶ or the People's Crusades a century later.¹⁰⁷

According to the Royal Chronicle of Cologne:

About the time of Easter and Pentecost, without anyone having preached or called for it and prompted by I know not what spirit, many thousands of boys, ranging in age from six years to full maturity, left the plows or carts which they were driving, the flocks which they were pasturing, and anything else which they were doing. This they did despite the wishes of their parents, relatives, and friends who sought to make them draw back. Suddenly one ran after another to take the cross. Thus, by groups of twenty, or fifty, or a hundred, they put up banners and began to journey to Jerusalem....Everyone accounted them foolish and imprudent for trying to do this. They briefly replied that they were equal to the Divine will in this matter and that, whatever God might wish to do with them, they would accept it willingly and with humble spirit.¹⁰⁸

This movement, which Peter Raedts has claimed likely consisted of poor rather than young people,¹⁰⁹ arose only two years after the completion of the *Quest* in 1210. It was opposed by both religious and secular authorities, but drew thousands of individuals from their homes regardless.¹¹⁰ This event, coupled with the failure of the crusades and

¹⁰⁵ This view will be expanded upon and cited below in the section entitled "Individual Struggles for Salvation and the Recovery of Physical or Spiritual Goods".

¹⁰⁶ James M Powell. *Anatomy of a Crusade, 1213-1221*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986). 8.

¹⁰⁷ Manion 80.

¹⁰⁸ *Chronica Regiae Coloniensis Continuatio prima*, translated by James Brundage, in *The Crusades: A Documentary History*, (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1962), 213.

¹⁰⁹ Powell 8.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid* 9.

the fall of Jerusalem, indicate that the conditions which led to the diversification of crusading practice and literature in the 14th century were already developing in the 13th. This interpretation is supported by the *Quest for the Holy Grail* itself, which falls perfectly within the parameters Manion sets for the crusade romance genre.

In *Narrating the Crusades*, Manion enumerates six features of crusade romances. Found commonly throughout crusade sermons and legal documents relating to the Crusades, he argues that the crusade romance should be defined by the adherence to or inclusion of these features in a given text. These features are: an ecclesiastically-defined military campaign against non-Christians; individual struggles for salvation and the regaining of physical or spiritual goods; the transformative imagery of the cross; the defense or reform of the church or Christendom; pilgrimages leading to or involving armed combat; and the combination of indulgences or penitence with the conversion of or conflict with non-Christians.¹¹¹ Though all need not be present, Manion claims that texts falling into this genre contain at least a majority of these elements, united by the underlying theme of loss and recovery. While some of these elements are present in the *History of the Holy Grail*,¹¹² the story of Sarras in the *History* lacks the theme of loss and recovery. It is inherently about active conversion, patterned on the biblical Acts of the Apostles. Joseph of Arimathea is simply another of Jesus' disciples going forth to spread his message to a non-Christian world. There is no loss except perhaps the loss of Jesus, one which is recovered before the story actually begins. Consequently, the conversion of Sarras and then Britain is not a recovery but an evangelization or ideological conquest.

¹¹¹ Manion 8.

¹¹² Such as Joseph of Arimathea's defense of the Church from Evalach's ministers and the coding of Joseph and his follower as pilgrims arriving just before Evalach's battle with Tholomer.

The themes of crusading romance, of loss and recovery, do not enter the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* until the conclusion of the Grail's story: the *Quest for the Holy Grail*, a narrative which builds to an ultimate return to Sarras. Reading the *Quest* as a crusade romance, one can identify each of Manion's features throughout the narrative. Furthermore, identifying them helps to define the structure of the text as a whole.

Defense or reform of the church or Christendom

The origins of the titular Quest lie - as with most stories of the Holy Grail - with Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval*. Written in the late 12th century, this poem is the earliest known source for the Grail in the Arthurian canon. Though the unfinished poem does not identify the Grail as anything more than "a grail", it does introduce the relic as an object of questing importance. Following Perceval's failure to recognize or inquire about the Grail in the court of the Maimed King, he is confronted by an "ugly damsel" in King Arthur's court. She curses him and claims that all of King Arthur's realm will be cursed until this mistake can be corrected.¹¹³

The *Quest* begins with this paradigm already in place. Though it is not specified, various characters imply that the troubles caused by Perceval's failure have afflicted Camelot for some time. Galahad's arrival in Camelot prompts excitement and hope that he might "put an end to the extraordinary wonders of this land and bring to a close an adventure that no one among us has been able to accomplish." It is further elaborated that "every other knight who has wanted to carry out this adventure has either died or been maimed before he could complete it."¹¹⁴ Following his arrival, the Holy Grail itself

¹¹³ Chretien de Troyes, *Percival, or, the Story of the Grail* 4650-4700.

¹¹⁴ *Quest for the Holy Grail* 6.

appears amidst the Arthurian court, which Arthur takes as a sign of favor.¹¹⁵ However, the scene echoes the pivotal episode of *Perceval*. As in the earlier poem, when the Grail appears, the knights lose their ability to move or speak. Furthermore, after its departure Gawain points out that the Grail's physical form was hidden from the knights. He explicitly connects the events he has just witnessed to Perceval's failure in the Maimed King's court, where "the observers there were so deceived that they couldn't see the Grail clearly; its true form remained hidden from them."¹¹⁶ Though it may seem trivial, the importance of seeing clearly in this case cannot be overstated. The Holy Grail is the most important symbol of faith in the Arthurian tradition, and King Arthur and his knights cannot see it properly. They are powerless in its presence and unable to comprehend its true form. This is the crisis that prompts first Gawain, then all the knights of the Round Table to undertake the quest. The problems afflicting Britain are the result of the court's lack of proper faith. Gawain leads the knights in pledging to recover their faith, saying "I will not return to court, no matter what happens, until I have seen the Grail more clearly than I did today."¹¹⁷

This vow represents the beginning of the quest as well as the first of the feature of crusading romance: defense or reform of the Church or Christendom. Gawain acknowledges the need for reform both in himself and in the kingdom. The Christian world represented by Arthur and his knights is losing sight of the true faith, and must venture forth beyond their borders to regain it.

Ecclesiastically-Defined Military Campaign against non-believers

¹¹⁵ *Quest for the Holy Grail* 8.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Though the initial vows to undertake the quest are spurred by Gawain's proclamation, the quest and its parameters are defined by the hermit Nascien. While his appearance in the narrative appears almost arbitrary, it is important to note that hermits serve as religious teachers and confessors to questing knights throughout the Cycle. Nascien therefore serves as the voice of the clergy, reflecting another feature of crusading romance: the quest is an inherently military venture based on its participants and the types of adventures in which they engage, but it is a religious figure who defines it. Nascien sets the parameters of the quest:

Anyone taking a lady or young lady along on the Quest will fall into mortal sin. No one should undertake this quest without having confessed his sins and having been absolved, for no one has been cleansed and purged of all faults and mortal sins. This is not a quest for earthly goods. Rather, it should be understood as the search for the great secrets of our Lord and the great mysteries that the Almighty will reveal openly to the special knight he has chosen from among all others to be his servant. The Lord will show this knight the great wonders of the Holy Grail and allow him to contemplate what mortal hearts could never imagine or human tongue describe.¹¹⁸

The three conditions, broadly speaking, are celibacy, avoidance and repentance of sin, and a rejection of earthly goods or rewards in favor of spiritual ones. In essence, those engaging in the quest are therefore agreeing to some variation on the vows of a monk or pilgrim. These rules echo some of the earliest attempts to regulate or institutionalize pilgrimage, such as the 9th-century Bishop Haito of Basel, who insisted that pilgrims receive absolution at home before setting out on their pilgrimage.¹¹⁹ Accordingly, after hearing the terms of the quest, the knights attend mass and then swear

¹¹⁸ *Quest for the Holy Grail* 8.

¹¹⁹ Jennifer Price, "Cruce signatus: the form and substance of the crusading vow, 1095-1216". Ph.D Diss., (University of Washington, 2005) 34.

their vows upon holy relics. These oaths are given in public and - in keeping with the tradition of high-ranking medieval pilgrims¹²⁰ - recorded by clerical scribes.¹²¹ Though the quest is not initially envisioned as a campaign against non-believers, its commencement combines military activity with clerical sanction, echoing the imagery of crusade vows.

Pilgrimage leading to armed conflict

Despite the religious nature of the quest, the vast majority of the text is concerned with martial action. Though the vows taken by the knights make no mention of violence or conflict, the knights dress in full armor and carry their swords into the church to receive communion and swear their devotion to the quest.¹²² Over the course of the narrative, there are 22 distinct instances of armed conflict between the questing knights and their various adversaries, including at least 638 knights, nine of whom are other companions on the Quest.¹²³ These combative adventures take up the majority of the text, but stop suddenly after the final three companions reach Corbenic castle. Once the Grail has been found, there are no more descriptions of conflict or combat in the main narrative.

Individual struggles for salvation and the recovery of physical or spiritual goods

¹²⁰ Price 28.

¹²¹ *Quest for the Holy Grail* 10.

¹²² Ibid 9.

¹²³ From a rough tally of the text. The conflicts between questers include Galahad fighting Lancelot and Perceval (20), Gawain fighting Yvain (49), Lionel fighting Bors (60), and Lionel fighting Calogrenant (61), Galahad fighting Gawain (62), and a reference to Gawain fighting Bademagu (82). The 629 other knights are counted from all the adventures in which a specific number of knights is listed. It does not include several instances of knights fighting large groups of unspecified size.

Despite the large number of knights involved in the quest - one hundred and fifty at the outset¹²⁴ - there appears to be very little organization. Following the tradition of Chrétien and his continuers, the questing knights almost always travel alone or in small groups. In this way, the *Quest* highlights that the adventures of each knight are part of their personal struggle for salvation. Though many martial challenges do confront the various knights, their success or failure is always dependent upon their faith and purity rather than their martial strength. Furthermore, each knight's journey represents a different aspect of the new crusading ideal of the *Quest*. Particularly emblematic for the symbolism of crusade romance are the stories of Lancelot and Perceval.

Throughout the first few chapters, Lancelot is described by multiple characters as the "best knight in the world,"¹²⁵ a title he cedes upon the arrival of Galahad. He encounters the Grail on his first adventure, but is weighed down and unable to move as it passes him by.¹²⁶ It instead is carried to a wounded knight nearby and it heals him. The knight's squire informs him that Lancelot "is living under the weight of a great sin that he has never confessed. He happens to be so impure that Our Lord didn't want him to see this extraordinary event."¹²⁷ This sinful obstacle is the primary focus of every episode about Lancelot. In this way, Lancelot becomes the allegorical representative of the secularly-minded knights of Europe. While commentators attributed crusading failures to numerous causes, most determined the ultimate cause to be the loss of God's favor. Bernard of Clairvaux's apology most notably attributed the failure of the Second Crusade

¹²⁴ *Quest for the Holy Grail* 10.

¹²⁵ *Ibid* 2.

¹²⁶ *Ibid* 20.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*.

to the punishment of God for the moral failings of the crusaders rather than any strategic or military errors.¹²⁸ Other clerics throughout Europe blamed this loss of favor on the moral conduct of the defenders of the Holy Land. Gerhoh of Reichersberg was one of the earliest and loudest voices of condemnation, advocating for church reform in the mid-12th century. Gerhoh was most offended by the worldliness and greed of the crusaders and clerics, blaming them for the defeat.¹²⁹ His accusations would be echoed by more and more writers in the 13th century. Writing shortly after the publication of the *Quest*, Jacques de Vitry accused the Franks in Acre of being “devoted to carnal pleasures,”¹³⁰ just as Lancelot is accused of being devoted to Guinevere and not God. The theme of lust destroying the Crusader kingdoms would be carried through to the fall of Acre by Caesarius of Heisterbach and Fidenzio of Padua.¹³¹ Even the more secular chronicle of William of Tyre - more concerned with recording military details than religious ones - highlights the greed and worldliness of the Latin knights as a contributing factor in their defeat.¹³²

Lancelot’s humiliation is repeated and intensified throughout the first half of the text. The squire calls him “not an honorable man nor a true knight, but a faithless unbeliever”.¹³³ He is portrayed as an enemy of faith, choosing to side with the “worldly

¹²⁸ *De Consideratione Libri Quinque*, II, 1., in *Patrologia Latina* 182,: 741-45, translated by James Brundage, *The Crusades: A Documentary History*, (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1962), 121.

¹²⁹ Sylvia, Schein. "The Image of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem in the Thirteenth Century." *Revue Belge De Philologie Et D'histoire* 64, no. 4 (1986): 712.

¹³⁰ *Ibid* 711.

¹³¹ *Ibid* 713.

¹³² William of Tyre, *Historia rerum in partibus transmarinis gestarum*, XVII, 22-25, 27-30, *Patrologia Latina* 201, 696-708, translated by James Brundage, *The Crusades: A Documentary History*, (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1962), 130.

¹³³ *Quest for the Holy Grail* 38.

knights” against the “celestial knights” and being defeated as a result.¹³⁴ Many of these sentiments are echoes of accusations hurled against unsuccessful crusaders in the late 12th and early 13th centuries. Freidank of Aachen and Jacques de Vitry, writing a few years after the *Quest*, castigated the crusaders for making treaties with the Muslims rather than making war upon them. Both insinuated that the lords of the crusade cared more for the Muslims than for their own soldiers of faith.¹³⁵ The advice given to Lancelot by a wise hermit seems directed specifically at the crusading audience: “you will undertake this quest in vain if you do not agree to abstain from mortal sin and curb your preoccupation with earthly thoughts and the delights of this world. Be assured that your knighthood will prove useless on this quest if the Holy Spirit does not guide your way through the adventures that you encounter.”¹³⁶

Lancelot’s quest becomes one for his own personal salvation. He confesses his sins to another hermit and repents, taking up a shirt of coarse hair previously worn by a deceased holy man.¹³⁷ His armor thus replaced, he is further admonished to leave his sword and trust in God’s protection instead of his own might.¹³⁸ Only by completing his transition from warrior to pilgrim is he finally allowed to see the Grail, if only from a distance.¹³⁹

¹³⁴ *Quest for the Holy Grail* 46.

¹³⁵ Schein 710. Though Freidank and de Vitry were writing in response to the negotiated settlement of the 5th crusade in 1221, their opposition to the crusade’s conclusion indicates a lack of appetite among the clergy in particular for any kind of compromise with non-believers potentially dating back to the settlement of the 3rd crusade.

¹³⁶ *Quest for the Holy Grail* 38.

¹³⁷ *Ibid* 45.

¹³⁸ *Ibid* 80.

¹³⁹ *Ibid* 81.

The adventures of Perceval, on the other hand, serve as a foil for Lancelot. Perceval is prophesied at the beginning of the text to be one of the knights destined to succeed in the quest.¹⁴⁰ He faces constant temptation but, unlike Lancelot, is able to resist it and preserve his purity. Additionally, Perceval's temptations line up particularly well with the accusations made against crusaders at the time.

Perceval's first solo adventure, much like Lancelot's, leaves him without a horse. Lancelot's was stolen while he was immobilized by the Grail along with his weapons and armor. Perceval's is killed in battle. Both lose a key symbol of their status as knights and must continue on in the quest as common pilgrims. However, where Lancelot's status is only regained after his repentance and confession, Perceval is quickly supplied a new horse of a much darker origin. In the first of many encounters, the devil appears to him in the form of a woman, offering him the thing he most desired in that moment. Perceval accepts the gift and is subsequently led astray and nearly killed by his steed. Only by making the cross at the last minute and thus scaring away the devil does he avoid being plunged into a dangerous river.¹⁴¹ When finally made aware of his surroundings, Perceval finds himself alone on an island, which would be the setting for the remainder of his solo adventures. The devil appears to him again in the form of a woman after several days. She offers him all manner of physical comforts after his lonely ordeal on the island: shade, food, strong drink, and finally intercourse. Perceval is unable to resist these temptations until he sees the cross engraved in the pommel of his sword. Once again, he falls back on the protection of God and the devil is forced to depart from him.¹⁴² Perceval

¹⁴⁰ *Quest for the Holy Grail* 27.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid* 31.

¹⁴² *Ibid* 35-36.

eventually escapes the isle, rejoins Galahad and Bors, and successfully finds the Holy Grail, having proven himself worthy of completing the quest.

Notably, the greatest obstacle for both knights is women. Bors, one of the other knights who completes the quest, is similarly tempted by the devil in female form,¹⁴³ and the primary quality that Galahad, Perceval, and Bors possess which qualifies them to succeed in the quest is their chastity or virginity.¹⁴⁴

Lancelot and Perceval encounter similar obstacles during their adventures. Both suffer a material loss, and are physically separated from the object of the quest. A parallel is therefore drawn between the knights of Camelot and those of crusading Christendom. They are presented with a choice between the worldly pleasures - status, physical comfort, and female companionship - and those of heaven - absolution and salvation. Just as the crusaders were accused of giving in to the former, Lancelot is barred from achieving the Holy Grail by his sins. Only by resisting or repenting these failings do the knights finally succeed, regaining their temporal honors along with their salvation.

The transformative image of the Cross

While the image of the cross is the symbol most closely associated with the crusading movement, it plays a limited role in the text. Most notably, Galahad receives a magical white shield emblazoned with a red cross. This shield, he is told, is the same one carried by Evalach in his battle with Tholomer.¹⁴⁵ Following this adventure, Galahad becomes *crucesignatus*: one who is signed with the Cross. However, the more significant symbol of faith in the text is the Holy Grail itself. Originating at the Last Supper, the

¹⁴³ *Quest for the Holy Grail* 58.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid* 27.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid* 13.

Grail shares a close connection with the Cross as a symbol of Christ's sacrifice and the Eucharist. Furthermore, the Grail serves as the symbol for faith as well as the object of the quest. It is important to note that the quest begins because of the court's failure to "see the Grail clearly."¹⁴⁶ To the medieval audience, sight was the sense most closely connected to the intellect,¹⁴⁷ and thus to see something clearly is to understand it. The whole quest, therefore, revolves around the image of the Grail. As a result, miracles occur throughout the text whenever knights truly see the object of their quest. There are numerous examples of knights being healed or provided with sustenance by the Grail, but the greatest religious transformations occur as knights reach the end of the quest. When Lancelot reaches Corbenic Castle and is finally allowed to see the Grail, he receives absolution for his sins with Guenevere, accompanied by a physical transformation such that those who encounter him afterwards do not recognize him, "even though there were many knights present who had seen him often and should have recognized him."¹⁴⁸ Despite the constant refrain that Lancelot is the lowest of knights for having scorned God and sinned so profoundly, the Grail grants him the one thing he had despaired of achieving. Lancelot is ultimately the knight who gets closest to Grail, with the exception of the three who actually complete the quest. When Galahad, Perceval, and Bors arrive at Corbenic castle - the same castle where Lancelot failed to approach the Grail - they not only see the Grail, but receive the Eucharist from it:

Then Josephus appeared to begin the sacrament of the Mass...he took from the vessel a host made in the form of bread. And when he raised it up, a figure in the form of a child descended from above; his red countenance seemed to

¹⁴⁶ *Quest for the Holy Grail* 8.

¹⁴⁷ Suzannah Biernoff. *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages*. (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002). 72.

¹⁴⁸ *Quest for the Holy Grail* 81.

burn like fire. As he entered the bread, those present saw clearly that the bread took on the form of human flesh...Then, as the three companions gazed upon the Vessel, they saw and unclothed man issue from it. His hands were bleeding, as were his feet and body.¹⁴⁹

Based on the medieval understanding of sight, the knights have seen and thus now fully comprehend the greatest mystery of their faith in literal form. The Grail goes beyond the traditional transformation of the Eucharist and manifests Christ so completely that he is able to converse with the knights at length. In addition to the three knights of Camelot, the mass is witnessed by three knights each from Gaul, Ireland, and Denmark.¹⁵⁰ Connected as they are via their completion of the quest, Jesus transforms them into a new company of apostles, saying “just as they ate with me the day of the Last Supper, now you will eat with me at the Table of the Holy Grail. You are twelve, as they were twelve apostles...Just as I dispersed them throughout the world to preach the true law, so too will I disperse your group.”¹⁵¹ As a relic from the Last Supper, the Holy Grail is the greatest symbol of faith in the text. Its presence leads to conversion, healing, and the immediate presence of the divine. Whenever it appears, the quest is either altered or extended.

Combination of indulgence or penitence with conversion or conflict with non-believers

After the Mass of the Holy Grail, Jesus instructs the knights to depart with the Grail from Logres, or England, “because it is not respected or rightfully served by the people of this land. They have turned to dismal, worldly life, despite having once been

¹⁴⁹ *Quest for the Holy Grail* 85.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid* 84.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid* 85.

nourished by the grace of the Holy Vessel. Because they have so poorly repaid the favor, I divest them of the honor I had conferred upon them.”¹⁵² This is a dire indictment of a Christian kingdom by Christ himself. Given that the Grail represents the Christian faith and divine salvation, the accusation is that the people of King Arthur’s realm have turned their backs on the True Faith itself. Again, it is possible to see echoes of the accusations hurled against the contemporary crusaders reflected in the story of the *Quest*. The sins of greed and lust supposedly committed by Jerusalem’s defenders are sins of the material world. They represent a prioritization of the physical over the spiritual. Criticisms of this type became even more pronounced following the fourth Crusade and the conquest of Constantinople. In a letter to his legate on the crusade, Pope Innocent III condemned the crusaders, saying: “we sent you to gain, not temporal, but rather eternal riches. And for this purpose, our brethren provided adequately for your needs.”¹⁵³ Despite their vows, the knights of Christendom “exposed both matrons and virgins, even those dedicated to God, to the sordid lusts of boys. Not satisfied with breaking open the imperial treasury and plundering the goods of princes and lesser men, they also laid their hands on the treasures of the churches and, what is more serious, on their very possessions. They have even ripped silver plates from the altars and have hacked them to pieces among themselves. They violated the holy places and have carried off crosses and relics.”¹⁵⁴ The crusaders, previously sustained by the charity and faith of the Church, turned away and sought after worldly goods. For this sin Pope Innocent declared that Christians should “rebuke [the

¹⁵² *Quest for the Holy Grail* 85.

¹⁵³ Pope Innocent III, Ep 136, *Patrologia Latina* 215, 669-702, translated by James Brundage, *The Crusades: A Documentary History*, (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1962), 208.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Legate] before God and on God's account".¹⁵⁵ In the *Quest*, the rebuke comes from God himself and thus the honor of the Grail is withdrawn from Britain. The knights are then ordered to take the Holy Grail to Sarras, where they might finally witness it fully.

Despite predating the description of Sarras in the *History*, the story of Joseph of Arimathea and Sarras is recorded much the same way in the *Quest*. All of the knights learn the history of the Grail at various points in their adventures, albeit in much less detail. Evalach is once again described as a "Saracen King", though without the *History*'s exploration of etymology.¹⁵⁶ Evalach's conversion to Christianity¹⁵⁷ and his subsequent wars in service to the faith are similarly reproduced.¹⁵⁸ However, when the knights finally arrive in the city, it has at some point fallen away from Christianity. The king who greets them, named Escorant, is described as "treacherous and cruel, like all those who descend from the wicked lineage of pagans."¹⁵⁹ No explanation is given for how Sarras fell back into pagan hands, but it must be assumed that some outside influence broke the line of Evalach's succession. As Evalach is described in the *Quest* primarily as a Christian king and in the *History* as a European transplant,¹⁶⁰ his descendants could not be the "wicked lineage of pagans" who produced Escorant.

Regardless of where he came from, the new king betrays and imprisons the knights. They remain imprisoned with the Holy Grail for a year until Escorant is near

¹⁵⁵ Innocent III 208.

¹⁵⁶ *Quest for the Holy Grail* 13. This history is repeated several times throughout the *Quest*. It appears in full or in part every time a knight hears the story, and there are few if any variations between tellings. Each of these elements will be cited to separate sections of the text to indicate the number and location of the accounts, but each element can be found at nearly any one of the presented citations.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid 44.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid 28.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid 86.

¹⁶⁰ *History of the Holy Grail* 31.

death. On his deathbed, the king repents and frees them, living just long enough to receive their forgiveness. The people of Sarras are told by God to choose Galahad as their new king. After a year spent ruling Sarras, Galahad witnesses the final mysteries of the Grail and dies. A hand descends from heaven to carry his soul - along with the Holy Grail - away from this world forever. Perceval dies after another year living as a hermit outside the city and is also immediately carried off to Heaven. Bors then returns to Camelot and, having completed the quest, dictates the entire story to King Arthur's scribes.¹⁶¹

The end of the *Quest* combines the final elements of crusade romance. The knights return to a city intrinsically connected to Saracens and ruled by a pagan king. They overcome his initial opposition by the assistance of God and one of their number replaces him as king. The unbelievers are converted and Sarras has a Christian monarch once more. This event is combined with penitence - the sins of the people of Britain are redeemed by the knights' virtue¹⁶² - and indulgence - Galahad and Perceval are both admitted to Heaven. The message of quest's conclusion is clear: Simply finding the True Faith is not enough. The good knight must also carry it to others, particularly those in the East.

Loss, Recovery, and Fantasy

Underlying these elements is the constant repetition of tropes of loss and recovery. The knights of Camelot fail to see the Grail when it is among them, but those who are worthy finally see it by the end. Lancelot, Perceval, and all the knights are defeated variously by their sins or temptations and through faith recover their honor and

¹⁶¹ *Quest for the Holy Grail* 87.

¹⁶² *Ibid* 86.

status. The honor of the Grail is withdrawn from Britain but regained by the faithful few knights who complete the quest. Finally, Sarras falls from the stalwart Christian kingdom it had been under Evalach and has to be recovered once again by Galahad. Each represents a cycle of falling from Grace and then returning to the Divine. The overarching narrative of the Holy Grail follows that of Christ himself: descending from Heaven to Earth and then returning. However, in the case of the Holy Grail, the cycle appears incomplete. It is taken from Jerusalem by Joseph of Arimathea but returns to Sarras. At no point does the Grail return to the city wherein it served at the Last Supper. In fact, no character in the entire *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* ever returns to the holiest city in the world.

Jerusalem's absence and the focus on Sarras strengthens the idea that the latter city is meant to represent the former. During the Middle Ages, Jerusalem was thought of as the *Omphalos*, meaning the navel or center of the world. Jerusalem was the place where Heaven and Earth touched. This was often literally represented on medieval maps. It was also the "point of return", the place where the final judgement would occur.¹⁶³ In the Book of Revelations, the paradise which will forever house the faithful after the end of the world is described as a "new Jerusalem" which descends from the sky.¹⁶⁴ In the *Quest for the Holy Grail*, all of these functions are fulfilled by Sarras. It is Sarras to which the faithful return at the end of their quest. Sarras is the place to which God's hand descends to recollect the Grail and from which Galahad's soul ascends to Heaven. The

¹⁶³Suzanne Akbari. *Idols in the East : European Representations of Islam and the Orient, 1100-1450*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009) 50.

¹⁶⁴Rev 21: 1-27.

narrative space for Jerusalem still exists within the text, but the city itself is specifically omitted.

In order to determine why this replacement occurs, it is necessary only to look to other texts of the crusade romance genre. Several medieval texts which share the elements listed above also ultimately resolve around nonexistent cities. Most notable among these are the poems *Sir Isumbras* and *The Sultan of Babylon*. *Sir Isumbras*, written in the early 14th century, ends with the following lines: “Thenne was the kyng Ser Ysumbras/ Off more welthe thenne evere he was,/ Thre londes hadde he thare./ Everylkon he gaf a land/ And corownyd hem with hys owne hand.”¹⁶⁵ The titular character, having become king of a Saracen city, conquers other nearby lands to divide amongst his sons. Meanwhile, in the late 14th century *Sultan of Babylon*, Charlemagne leaves the titular Sultan’s lands in Spain under the authority of one of his knights and a converted Saracen prince: “Alle the londe of Spayne/ Kinge Charles gyfe hem two/ To departe bitwyxt hem twayne,/ Ferumbras and Gy also.”¹⁶⁶ In both cases, the victorious Christian knight becomes king of the conquered Saracen city just as Galahad is chosen to be king of Sarras.

Leila Norako, in her article on *Sir Isumbras*, elaborated on this subset of crusade romances, defining them as “fantasies of crusade”. Norako points out that the pilgrimage *Sir Isumbras* undertakes has explicit references to crusade imagery.¹⁶⁷ As in the *Quest for*

¹⁶⁵ *Sir Isumbras*. From *Four Middle English Romances : Sir Isumbras, Octavian, Sir Eglamour of Artois, Sir Tryamour*. ed. Harriet Hudson. (Middle English Texts. Kalamazoo, Michigan: 2006). In. 760-4.

¹⁶⁶ *Sultan of Babylon*. From *Three Middle English Charlemagne Romances : The Sultan of Babylon, the Siege of Milan & the Tale of Ralph the Collier*. ed. Alan Lupack. (Michigan.: Western Michigan University, 1995). In. 3195-8.

¹⁶⁷ Leila K Norako. "Sir Isumbras and the Fantasy of Crusade." *The Chaucer Review* 48, no. 2 (2013): 180.

the Holy Grail, his success depends on properly prioritizing secular and spiritual needs.¹⁶⁸ By the end of the text, the final fate of Jerusalem is unknown but heavily paralleled in the conquered Saracen city. She contends that this is intentional, because “by rendering Jerusalem as a specter—an ‘absent center’—Isumbras leaves the audience with the ultimate crusader goal still there for the taking.”¹⁶⁹ The purpose of this type of romance is to impart to the reader a blueprint of how to accomplish the ultimate goal: retaking the Holy Land. Extensive parallels are drawn between the fictional city and Jerusalem, and within the actions taken by the characters, the reader can see the author’s proposal for how they should approach the crusades. By leaving Jerusalem itself conspicuously out of the narrative, the author denies his audience the catharsis of seeing the ultimate goal achieved until they take action and achieve it themselves.

¹⁶⁸ Norako 184.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid 187.

CONCLUSION

The early 13th century saw numerous authors attempt to bring religious messages and imagery to popular romance through the medium of the Holy Grail. Among these are Robert de Boron's *History of the Grail*; *Perlesvaus*, the anonymous continuation of Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval*; and, of course, the Lancelot-Grail Cycle. The inclusion of the Grail in these otherwise secular romances remakes them into vehicles for Christian doctrine and devotion. The Lancelot-Grail Cycle presents itself as the most complete of these early stories, recounting the journey of the Holy Grail from its creation to its return to Heaven as well as its effects upon the secular world in which it existed. Its narrative echoes that of Christianity itself: everywhere the Grail is taken, faith and new converts follow. Then, in an increasingly secular world, the Grail can be found by only a few who are worthy to enter Heaven. The rest are left behind as their world comes crashing down around them.

In this totalizing narrative, Sarras appears at the pivotal beginning and conclusion. Taken as an allegorical representation of the arc of Christianity and the world, the story of the Holy Grail places Sarras directly in the narrative space of Jerusalem. This connection is then strengthened both by physical description and biblical allusions. However, the image is complicated by the fact that this Jerusalem is occupied not by

Jews of Christians but by Muslims. In both the *History* and the *Quest*, the Holy Grail's arrival in Sarras is greeted with some amount of hostility by the city's Saracen king. The story of the Grail in Sarras, then, is a story of recovery through overcoming non-Christian resistance. These themes, when taken in the context of the crusading movement of the early 13th century, mark the text as specifically preoccupied with that movement.

Reading the *Quest for the Holy Grail* as a crusade romance, it is possible to see the thread running through all of the stories of Sarras and the Holy Grail. The *Quest* is a call for a new type of crusade centered on faith, piety, and individual devotion. It is noteworthy that despite the rhetorical skill of Joseph and Josephus and the martial prowess of Camelot's knights, it is only through God's intervention that the hearts of the Saracens are changed. Like the children's crusade which followed, the text reflects frustration with the worldly concerns and repeated failure of the papal and royal crusades. By having the Grail abandon Britain, the text condemns the sins of Europe. Through the success of the virtuous few, the pure knights, it reveals what will be required of those who remain committed to the great quest.

These ideas are reinforced by the *History of the Holy Grail* and its revision of the history of Islam. In the first book, the text goes to great lengths to define Muslims in relation to Christianity and paint it as completely foreign. Though Sarras is repeatedly linked to Jerusalem narratively, the text insists that Sarras and Saracens share a link which explicitly excludes Abraham and thus the Abrahamic religions associated with Jerusalem. This is the second purpose of Sarras: to stand in for all Muslims. As an independent and universal origin point for all Saracens, Sarras becomes - as the text says - the greatest part considered to represent the whole. Read through that lens, the fate of

Sarras and its inhabitants is emblematic of the author's vision of the fate of all Muslims: peaceful conversion and rule by a Christian European king or utter destruction by God's hand.

These two messages are combined in the Lancelot-Grail Cycle's overall eschatology. Sarras is directly connected to the return of the Grail to Heaven and thus the collapse of the Arthurian world. In its capacity as a narrative echo of the arc of the Christian universe, the Lancelot-Grail Cycle progresses linearly from creation to final judgement. On this journey Sarras serves as both the final destination and the final obstacle; representing both Jerusalem and its Muslim occupiers. The crusading movement, by the same token, is the vehicle through which the latter is overcome and the former is achieved. Ultimate victory in the crusades is, according to the text, the final step to reach the end of days. The new model of crusade embodied by Galahad and reflected in the Children's Crusade is therefore a necessary step toward bringing about the second coming of Christ and the end of the world.

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