

## Book Review

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William Chester Jordan, *The Apple of His Eye: Converts from Islam in the Reign of Louis IX. Jews, Christians, and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), xiii + 177 pp. ISBN: 978-0-691-19011-2. Price: \$35 (cloth).

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Louis IX's crusading efforts have been a central part of his historical legacy.<sup>1</sup> In this meticulously researched and highly readable book, however, William Chester Jordan shifts the focus from crusade to conversion. Jordan argues convincingly that the conversion of Muslims (and, to a lesser extent, of pagans) was among the chief goals of Louis IX's thirteenth-century crusades. He situates the king's enthusiasm within the broader thirteenth-century vogue for converting both Muslims and Jews. This was a period when, for example, the newly created Dominican and Franciscan orders established convent schools to teach their friars Arabic and Hebrew. The goal

was not only for the friars to preach to Jews and Muslims in Europe and abroad without needing an interpreter, but also for them to read Jewish and Islamic scripture and theology in their original languages, so that the friars might use their prospective converts' own doctrines to prove the superiority of Christianity.<sup>2</sup> Louis IX himself encouraged ecclesiastical efforts to convert domestic unbelievers, such as French Jews, Christian heretics, and prostitutes. But when faced with the question of whether Louis IX's evangelical efforts among Muslims actually produced converts, or what might have become of such converts after their baptisms, most historians would demur; given the limited

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1. On this subject, Jordan's own first book is still required reading: William C. Jordan, *Louis IX and the Challenge of the Crusade: A Study in Rulership* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).

2. See, for example, Robert Chazan, *Barcelona and Beyond: The Disputation of 1263 and Its Aftermath* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Benjamin Z. Kedar, *Crusade and Mission: European Approaches Toward the Muslims* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); Christoph T. Maier, *Preaching the Crusades: Mendicant Friars and the Cross in the Thirteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Robin Vose, *Dominicans, Muslims and Jews in the Medieval Crown of Aragon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).



documentation that survives, how could such questions be answered? Nevertheless, Jordan has answered them.

*The Apple of His Eye* mines thirteenth-century records to reveal that Louis IX's efforts did result in the conversion of a modest but substantial number of Muslims from North Africa and Acre. Some were captives from Louis IX's first crusade, the so-called Seventh Crusade of 1248–1254, in which the king conquered Damietta, was captured and held for ransom by the Ayyubids, and subsequently established himself in Acre, then the capital of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem. Other converts were residents of Acre who were attracted to Christianity by lavish royal gifts and the promise of more to come. Still others were slaves purchased by the king, to whom he promised freedom (and more material rewards) in exchange for baptism. The chronicler Geoffrey of Beaulieu proudly reports that Louis not only oversaw the conversion of "many" Muslims during his stay in Acre but promised them financial support and resettled them in France. Although at first glance this claim seems dubious—why would the king send his converts to France, and why would they agree to go?—Jordan demonstrates that Louis IX did exactly as Geoffrey reports and continued to provide for his immigrant converts out of royal funds for as long as they lived.<sup>3</sup>

Jordan does this largely through fiscal accounts, which show royal outlays for the maintenance of "converts from overseas" beginning in 1253. Local administrative records indicate that the converts were

dispersed among the cities and towns of northern France—but, notably, only those within the royal domain. The crown's agents in those regions paid out regular sums for housing, clothing, and pensions for "Saracens converted to the Christian faith." On the basis of the numbers of convert households listed in the records, Jordan estimates that Louis IX resettled somewhat more than a thousand recently baptized people—men, women, and children—in France. This was not, in other words, a negligible group, and it could only have been the result of sustained conversionary efforts.

Needless to say, the records of Louis IX's reign have been mined for all kinds of information before now, and Jordan is not the first to have noticed references to "newly baptized" individuals. But previous scholars have assumed that the people in question were all either converted French Jews, who did suffer considerable pressure to accept baptism under Louis's regime, or, at most, orphaned Muslim infants. Jordan clearly shows that this was not the case: that there were in fact Muslim converts, that they had come from "overseas," and that they included people of all ages. He thus makes this group of people visible again in the history of France.

To demonstrate the existence of the resettled Muslim converts through references in geographically scattered records is already an achievement. But Jordan goes further, using inference and historical imagination to reconstruct the immigrants' lived experience—from their adjustment to northern winters to the sorts

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3. The book's title, a biblical phrase, was used by the chronicler William of Chartres to characterize Louis IX's attentiveness to all his subjects. Jordan adopts it to represent a key part of his argument: that Louis not only engineered the conversion of these people but also ensured financial and social support for them thereafter.

of lifestyles they might have maintained on their royal pensions. He is careful to distinguish between documentary evidence and creative induction, as well as to explain the basis for assertions that cannot be traced to the archival record. The result is a book that would make an excellent addition to a graduate syllabus in historical methodology. For example, it utilizes some of the techniques of microhistory in its approach to the converts' lives. We encounter, among others, an unmarried and newly baptized woman named Margaret, who lived in the city of Tours with her mother; Jordan suggests that her mother was physically or mentally disabled, since it was Margaret who drew the king's pension. Margaret may later have married another convert from Islam, baptized as Martin. A third Muslim convert, Dreux of Paris, received ten pounds from the king for his wedding in 1256—a rather spectacular sum, since, as Jordan points out, the pensions of converts like Margaret and Martin ranged from six to twelve pounds a year. Why was Dreux so specially favored? Jordan marshals evidence that Dreux became the king's agent, bringing royal largesse to other converts living in his region and serving in the process as a kind of walking advertisement for the opportunities available to Louis's cherished converts. But the book is not strictly a microhistory; the documentation is too spare to make that approach feasible. Instead, it draws on onomastics, environmental history, and prosopography, among other disciplines, to fill in documentary gaps. Graduate students are likely to find ample material for discussion in Jordan's blending of evidence and inference.

One of the most intriguing implications of the documents Jordan describes is that not all of the king's treasured converts bloomed where he had planted them. Some of their children seem to have struggled economically, and a few converts may have come to regret leaving their homelands. A 1260 document from Orléans notes that the number of convert households there had dropped by six; the heads of those six households, it reports, had either died or "fled." Jordan sensitively explores the reasons such converts might have had for "fleeing" (were they hoping to return to Islamic lands and resume life as Muslims? had they committed crimes for which they sought to evade justice?) and the recourses they might have found.

*The Apple of His Eye* is a short book, consisting of only three chapters with an introduction and an epilogue. The introduction establishes the thirteenth-century context for Louis IX's conversion program—one in which the Latin Church had grown steadily more interested in efforts to convert both Muslims and Jews to Christianity. Chapter 1, "The Crusade of 1248–1254," focuses on Louis IX's first crusade to Egypt and his subsequent visit to Acre, where he put his conversion program into practice. Chapter 2, "The Resettlement of the Converts," traces the journeys and destinations of the converts from the eastern Mediterranean to the French royal domains and interrogates how royal policy shaped both the settlement of converts and their livelihoods. Chapter 3, "Living in France," examines how the converts and their children may have adapted to their new homes. Regrettably, after the second generation, almost all trace of the converts disappears from the record. In the brief

epilogue, “The Last Crusade,” Jordan argues that Louis IX carried his dream of conversion even into his 1270 campaign in Egypt, the so-called Eighth Crusade—though very little came of it.

Apart from its methodological innovation, *The Apple of His Eye* is likely to appeal to scholars of religious interchange in the Mediterranean, as well as to historians of France, the Crusades, and conversion in general. Jordan deftly uses the converts’ experience to evoke questions about cultural and religious identity, alterity, migration, and the larger goals of crusade and conversion in the Middle Ages. What made a person “French” in the thirteenth century, when regional dialects and cultures even within the kingdom varied so widely as to be mutually incomprehensible? Did dispersing new converts among

different towns and regions encourage or impede their assimilation to Christian society? Would it have been possible for a disillusioned ex-Muslim not only to flee France but to reach and reintegrate into a Muslim community elsewhere? Did the faltering of crusade efforts in the later thirteenth century, when the conquest of Jerusalem was an ever more clearly unattainable goal, help fuel enthusiasm for conversion as an alternative means of extending Christendom? Jordan’s book invites a reexamination of all these topics from an entirely novel perspective: that of Louis’s prized but previously unrecognized converts and immigrants. In doing so, it also makes a noteworthy contribution to the history of nonelites, who are often omitted—but sometimes merely overlooked—in the documentation.