SCRIBBLING HISTORY WITH AN AGENDA

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Category: Opinions

By Jirair Tutunjian, Toronto, 14 April 2024

Armenians have, for long time, maintained that the West and its media have been unfair—if not hostile—towards Armenians and Armenia. The unfairness—some Armenians would even say hostility—takes many shapes. One of them is ignoring Armenians and their contribution to civilization.

History Today is a British magazine about…history. Its cover story last August was *Queens of the Crusades* by historian Helen J. Nicholson. Since the 12-page article promised to discuss the contribution of royal women to the Crusades, I assumed the first woman Nicholson would spotlight would be Queen Melisende, the Armenian queen of Jerusalem. I also assumed the article would be comprehensive since the subhead promised to discuss *royal* women's contribution to the Crusades as "promoters, propagandists, patrons and warriors."

Although the author promised to demonstrate that royal women "were involved in crusading from the beginning…" it went on to mention a bevy of unknown noble women who were not royalty.

1. Nicholson mentions Countess Matilda of Canossa and her mother, Countess Beatrice were supposed to aid one of the Crusades. But Nicholson says their plans "came to nothing." If so, why mention them?
2. The author mentions Queen Urraca of Castile and her step-sister Teresa, queen of Portugal. They were involved in the fight against Muslims in Spain. They had nothing to do with the Crusades.
3. Countess Alice of Blois traveled with a large body of troops to the Holy Land. She did "many good things to all sorts of people." She was not royalty despite the article's promise.
4. Despite Nicholson's promise of featuring royalty, the next Crusader noble woman she mentions is "Lecia from Yorkshire." When she was summoned in relation to the death of her son, she absconded to the Holy Land. Nicholson doesn't" mention how commoner Lecia Malatyahelped the Crusaders.
5. The next mention of Crusader "royalty" is a woman named Domatilla. She was a commoner who didn't go to Palestine or take part in the Crusades because of "internal conflicts" in the Roman Church establishment

Queen Melisende was not mentioned even once. She was born in Urfa/Yetesia/Edessa in 1105—six years after the Crusaders conquered Jerusalem. Her mother was Princess Morphia, daughter of Prince Gabriel. Her father was Baldwin de Bourg, Count of Edessa. Melisende, the eldest of four girls, spent the first ten years of her life in Urfa and had an Armenian education and attended Armenian church. When her father was picked king of Jerusalem to become Baldwin II, the family moved to Jerusalem.

After her father's death, Melisende became co-ruler with her husband. When he died in a hunting accident, Melisende became sole ruler.

Through her intercession, the Holy Sepulcher was reconstructed and altered. She also founded the vast St. Lazarus Bethany Abbey. She built an Armenian church over the grave of Virgin Mary. She granted lands in Jerusalem to the Armenian Church and built St. Anne Church which is the finest example of Crusader architecture in Jerusalem. Concerned in urban development, she built three adjoining bazaars which are still in use in the Old City of Jerusalem. Patron of the arts, she established a scriptorium where monks could produce books and illuminated manuscripts.

A deft diplomat, she prevented wars with the Saracens who threatened the Crusaders. And to strengthen her family's prestigious presence over the Mediterranean's eastern littoral, she arranged the marriages of her two sisters to the prince of Antioch and the Count of Tripoli.

Contemporary chronicler William of Tyre wrote that Melisende was "beautiful, wise, sweet, and compassionate." Others report that tenderness was not her way. She was brisk in manner and didn't suffer fools gladly. Queen Melisende died in 1161 at the age of 56. She was the most prominent of all the female Crusader leaders.

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A few days after reading History Today, I came across a book about twice Oscar-winning actress Vivien Leigh. The author said she was of Irish-Scottish background. In fact, Vivien's mother was Armenian. Her last name was Yackji. Her roots went back to the Armenian community of New Julfa.

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That same week, while scanning a book titled *Babel* by Gaston Dorren, I noticed that a long chapter (pp. 67-82) was devoted to the Turkish language. The index had no "Armenian" listing. What caught my attention were the etymological blunders of the author. He listed twelve words which, according to him, the Turks had given to the English language. In fact, of the twelve words, only one word could be attributed to the Turks. Here are the misattributed words:

Hummus: Arabic for chickpeas
Yogurt: From the Armenian "yough vort."
Baklava: Armenian-Arabic: Bak (Lent in Armenian) and Arabic halawa (sweet)
Pasha: Old Persian
Fez: City of Fez in Morocco
Minaret: Arabic
Lilac: Turkish
Tulip: Persian for turban
Kiosk: Persian for pavilion
Divan: Bundled papers in Persian
Harem: Arabic for forbidden
Jackal: From Sanskrit "srgala" by way of Persian Shaghal.

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Comments

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While tossing old magazines, I came across a National Geographic (Dec. 1983) whose cover story was about Byzantium. Although nearly half of the Byzantium emperors were Armenian, the 60-page article didn't mention Armenia or Armenians. At the end, the story mentioned half-a-dozen Jerusalen priests, including Armenians.