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Contest for Egypt.

The Collapse of the Fatimid Caliphate, the Ebb of Crusader Influence, and the Rise of Saladin

Leyde, Brill, (History of Warfare, 139)

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The book engages with a transformative decade in the history of the Middle East: the years 1164-1174. That decade resembled in its broader ramifications another crucial decade in the history of the region: the years 1250-1260. Fulton offers a richly woven narrative, skillfully moving between Egypt, the Latin Outremer, Muslim Syria, and Byzantium, while also keeping an open eye on the Mediterranean world, especially Pisa and Norman Sicily. The attention to the geography of both Syria and Egypt constitutes an additional merit of this book and reminds us that geographical constraints should always be taken into account when discussing any aspect of medieval history.

While the events of the period are well known and require no further elaboration here, I would like to point out what I believe is the main significant contribution of the book. It offers an explanation for the main allure that Fatimid Egypt held for its powerful neighbors: the country's agricultural wealth. It is clearly borne out from reading the book that the knowledge of the Franks concerning Egypt's agricultural wealth was limited to the region of the Nile Delta. The interest in the Delta reflected the Franks belief that they would be able to achieve direct control over the Delta and to tap its agricultural wealth and taxes. They were focused on Lower Egypt, stretching from Fustat-Cairo to the Mediterranean. The question whether they had any knowledge of Egypt's agriculture in the Fayyum and Upper Egypt is irrelevant (p. 82-90).⁽¹⁾

(1) For the role of Gilbert of Assailly in the envisioned partition of Egypt, see also Alan V. Murray, "The Grand Designs of Gilbert of Assailly. The Order of the Hospital in the Projected Conquest of Egypt by King Amalric (1168-1169)", *Ordines Militares*, vol. XX (Torun, 2015), p. 7-25.

Fulton also discusses the unique position of Damietta and explains why the joint Frankish-Byzantine invasion of Egypt (October 1169) focused on this port. Rosetta (Rashid), for example, was closer to Frankish territory but was a smaller and less fortified settlement, while Alexandria was not situated on one of the main branches of the Nile.⁽²⁾ The capture of Damietta would have given the Franks and Byzantines the opportunity to conduct the envisioned conquest at their leisure, being unconstrained by a single campaign season (p. 115-116).

Pisa's involvement in the Eastern Mediterranean in the Kingdom of Jerusalem, Fatimid Egypt, and Byzantium, prominently figures in Fulton's narrative. Pisa participated in the First Crusade and played an active role in the envisioned partition of territories and incomes in Egypt in the preparations for the 1169 invasion of Egypt (p. 114-115). Pisa had considerable commercial interests in Egypt, and its commercial network in the Eastern Mediterranean demonstrates the significance of Egypt's maritime trade, for which Alexandria was the main outlet. While the Norman attack on Alexandria (28 July – 1 August 1174) is fully discussed by Fulton, the rationale behind the attempt still appears to elude modern historians (p. 156-160).⁽³⁾

Finally, Fulton's indeed offers a significant contribution to the understanding of a crucial decade in the history of the Eastern Mediterranean and illustrates the benefits of micro-history.

Although the book is richly annotated, Nikita Éliasséff's trilogy on Nur al-Din and David Bramoullé's book on Fatimid maritime history and trade are listed only in the bibliography and not referred to in the text.

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(2) The commerce of Alexandria and its connection to Fustat-Cairo were related to the high and low ebbs of the Nile. The Alexandria Canal (Khalij) became fully navigable during the Coptic month Misra (August-early September), when the Nile reached its plenitude. See Charles Pellat, *Cinq calendriers Égyptiens*, Le Caire, IFAO, 1986, p. 93, second paragraph, p. 129, last paragraph (text and trans.).

(3) For the 1154 crisis in Pisa's trade relations with Fatimid Egypt and its resolution, see, Enrica Salvatori, "Corsair's Crews and Cross-Cultural Interactions: The Case of the Pisan Trapellicinus in the Twelfth Century", *Medieval Encounters*, 13, 2007, p. 32-55.