Activity: *"Seeing the Crusades Through Usamah's Eyes"*

Teacher Context Paragraph (for introduction)

> Usamah ibn Munqidh (1095–1188) was a Muslim warrior and nobleman who lived in the vicinity of Jerusalem during the Crusades. He fought alongside Muslim leaders like Saladin but also had many opportunities to interact with the European Christian Crusaders, known as the Franks. Usamah wrote an autobiography around 1175 CE, sharing stories about war, daily life, friendship, and the unusual customs he observed. His writings give us a personal look at how people from different cultures saw each other during this time. They show that life during the Crusades was complicated: people could be enemies, friends, and neighbors all at the same time.[1]

Student Excerpts

Excerpt A — Friendship and Respect

In the Crusader army of King Fulk was a Frankish reverend knight who had arrived from their land in order to make the holy pilgrimage and then return home. He was always with me, so much so that he began to call me "my brother." We were close friends. When he was preparing to sail back to his homeland, he said to me:

"My brother, I am leaving for my country and I want you to send with me your son (my son, who was then fourteen years old, was with me at the time) to our country [in Europe], where he can see the knights and learn wisdom and chivalry. When he returns, he will be wiser."

I knew that these words would never come out of the head of a sensible man, for, even if my son were to be taken prisoner, his captivity could not bring him a worse misfortune than spending time in the lands of the Franks! However, [to not hurt his feelings,] I said to the man:

"By God, I had this same idea! But the only thing that prevented me from carrying it out was the fact that his grandmother, my mother, is so fond of him and did not let him come out with me today until she took an oath from me that I would swear to bring him back to her."

So he asked, "Is your mother still alive?" "Yes." I replied. 'Well," he said, "You better not disobey her."

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[1] All excerpts are adapted from Usamah ibn Munqidh, *An Arab-Syrian Gentleman and Warrior in the Period of the Crusades*, trans. Philip K. Hitti (New York: Columbia University Press, 1929).

Excerpt B — Medicine Part I

The lord of al-Munaytirah [in Syria] wrote to my uncle asking him to send a physician to treat some of the sick among his people. My uncle sent him a Christian physician named Thabit. Thabit had been absent for ten days when he returned. So we said to him, "You must have healed your patients so quickly!"

He said: They brought to me a knight in whose leg an abscess had grown; and a woman afflicted with a feeble mind. To the knight I applied a small poultice until the abscess opened and became well; and the woman I put on diet and made her humor wet. Then a Frankish physician came to them and said, "This man knows nothing about treating them." He then said to the knight, "Which would you prefer: living with one leg or dying with two?" The knight replied, "Living with one leg." The physician said, "Bring me a strong knight and a sharp ax." A knight came with the ax. And I was standing by. Then the physician laid the leg of the patient on a block of wood and told the knight to strike his leg with the ax and chop it off at one blow. So he struck it—while I was watching—one blow, but the leg was not severed. He dealt another blow, upon which the patient died on the spot. He then examined the woman and said, "This is a woman in whose head there is a devil which has possessed her. Shave off her hair." So they shaved it off and the woman began once more to eat their ordinary diet—garlic and mustard. Then her feeble mind took a turn for the worse. The physician then said, "The devil has penetrated through her head." He therefore took a razor and attempted an operation. The woman also died instantly. After that, I asked them whether my services were needed any longer, and when they replied in the negative I returned home, having learned of their medicine what I didn’t know before.

Excerpt C — Medicine Part II

Among the Franks was a knight named Bernard, who (may Allah's curse be upon him!) was one of the most cursed and wicked among them. A horse kicked him in the leg, which was subsequently infected and which opened in fourteen different places. Every time one of these cuts would close in one place, another would open in another place. All this happened while I was praying for his divine punishment. Then came to him a Frankish physician and removed from the leg all the ointments which were on it and began to wash it with very strong vinegar. By this treatment all the cuts were healed and the man became well again. He was up again like a devil.

Another case illustrating their curious medicine is the following: In Shayzar [a city in Syria] we had an artisan named Abu al-Fath, who had a boy whose neck was afflicted with scrofula [a type of infection]. Every time a part of it would close, another part would open. This man happened to go to Antioch [a city in what is now Turkey] on business of his, accompanied by his son. A Frank noticed the boy and asked his father about him. Abu al-Fath replied, "This is my son." The Frank said to him, 'Will you swear by your religion that if I prescribe to you a medicine which

will cure your son, you won't charge anyone for prescribing it yourself? In that case, I shall prescribe to you a medicine which will cure the boy." The man took the oath and the Frank said:

"Take uncrushed leaves of glasswort [a type of plant], burn them, then soak the ashes in olive oil and sharp vinegar. Treat the scrofula with them until the spot on which it is growing is eaten up. Then take burnt lead, soak it in ghee butter and treat him with it. That will cure him."

The father treated the boy accordingly, and the boy was cured. The sores closed and the boy returned to his normal condition of health.

I have myself treated with this medicine many who were afflicted with such disease, and the treatment was successful in removing the cause of the complaint.

Excerpt D — Customs and Daily Life

I once went with al-Amir Mu'in-al-Din (may Allah's mercy rest upon his soul!) to Jerusalem. We stopped at Nablus [a city in Palestine]. There a blind man, a Muslim, who was young and well-dressed, presented himself before the prince carrying fruits for him and asked permission to work for him in Damascus. The amir agreed. I asked about this young man [and how he became blind] and was informed that his mother had been married to a Frank whom she had killed. Her son used to practice ruses [deceptive tricks] against the Frankish pilgrims and cooperate with his mother in assassinating them. They finally brought charges against him and tried his case according to the Frankish way of procedure.

They installed a huge cask and filled it with water. Across it they set a wooden board. They then bound the arms of the man charged with the act, tied a rope around his shoulders and dropped him into the cask, their idea being that in case he was innocent, he would sink in the water and they would then lift him up with the rope so that he might not die in the water; and in case he was guilty, he would not sink in the water. This man did his best to sink when they dropped him into the water, but he could not do it. So he had to submit to their sentence against him.

Excerpt E — The Leopard Who Wages Holy War

In the church of the village of Hunak was a high window. Every day at noontime, a leopard would come and jump to the window, where it would sleep until the end of the day, at which time it would jump down and go on its way.

At that time, Hunak was ruled by a Frankish knight named Sir Adam. Sir Adam, when he heard the story of this leopard, ordered that he be informed when the beast next appeared. The following day, the leopard came as usual and leapt through the window, and one of the village peasants came and told Sir Adam about it.

The knight put on his armor, mounted his horse, took up his lance and shield, and came to the church, which was all in ruins with the exception of one wall, upon which the window was located. As soon as the leopard saw Sir Adam approaching, it jumped from the window and landed upon the mounted knight, knocking him clean off the horse. It then went away.

The peasants then started to call the animal 'the leopard who wages holy war.'

Activity Directions

Step 1 — Small Group Reading:

- Students read **one or more excerpts**.
- Highlight anything that seems **friendly, strange, or surprising**.

Step 2 — Group Discussion Questions:

1. What is happening in the excerpt?
2. How does Usamah describe the Franks? (Positive, negative, or both?)
3. What surprised you most about their behavior or customs?
4. What does this tell us about **life during the Crusades** and relationships between Muslims and Christians?

Step 3 — Class Share:

- Each group shares one interesting fact or story with the class.
- Teacher asks:
    - Can enemies still respect each other?
    - What might these stories tell us about war, culture, or friendship?

Step 4 — Exit Ticket:

Write 2–3 sentences: Based on Usamah's writings, describe one way Muslims and Franks interacted during the Crusades. Include one specific example from the text.