The history of the crusades and the so-called medieval »Latin East« appears to be populated by popes and preachers, kings and sultans, Templars and Assassins, and even chroniclers and troubadours – but burgesses? Who or what were these burgesses? »Simply put«, Marwan Nader states, they were »Latin non-feudatories who arrived in the Holy Land either as crusaders, pilgrims, or colonists, and settled in the cities or rural villages« (p. 1). In this book, which is a contribution to the social, legal, institutional, and economic history of the eastern Mediterranean from the early twelfth to the early fourteenth century, Nader argues that being a burgess in the Latin kingdoms of Jerusalem and Cyprus was determined by three inseparable factors, namely religion (a burgess had to be a Latin Christian), jurisdiction (a burgess had to be under the legal authority of a so-called »Cour des Bourgeois«), and property (a burgess had to hold a so-called »borgesie« for example a house, a shop, or a piece of land).

Following an introduction that provides Nader’s perspective on the relevant sources and scholarship, the first chapter (»Burgess Origins and the First Crusade«) seeks to demonstrate that the legal and social developments in eleventh-century Europe »served as a template for Latin settlement in Palestine and Syria« (p. 32). Nader postulates that the crusades did not launch a major migration of Europeans to the East, but, rather, that most settlers came with the actual crusading expeditions. The second chapter (»Burgess Law-Making and Legal Institutions«) relates how the laws and the courts dealing with burgesses came into being; it contains a detailed discourse on the important thirteenth-century »Livre de la Cour des Bourgeois« (p. 48–57); and it concludes that, rather than featuring a code of burgess law that was valid throughout the entire realm, the various cities and villages of the kingdom of Jerusalem had their own codes of burgess law which were, however, not radically different »because cities … adopted each other’s customs« (p. 69). In the third chapter (»Borgesies«), which features a wide range of real-life examples from the documentary evidence, the reader is introduced to the different types of properties held by burgesses and to the problems attached to dividing, alienating, renting, inheriting, selling, exchanging, pledging, and bequeathing these properties, as well as giving them as donations »in alms«; with regard to the latter, Nader finds that the »material countergift« that burgesses received from the Church when they donated properties »in alms« did not signify a »disguised sale«, but, rather, was intended »to deter the person, his relatives or others from challenging the donation in future« (p. 116). The fourth chapter (»Courts of Burgess Jurisdiction«) deals with the development, functions, officers, and actual operations of the »Cour de Bourgeois«; Nader argues that the favoring of Latin Christians in burgess law was
something »the Church was eager to uphold as an incentive to natives who wished to convert« (p. 166). In the fifth and last chapter (»Church Courts«), the author outlines how ecclesiastical institutions in the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem adapted burgess law to meet the needs of their settlers. The conclusion summarizes the main findings of the book which is further supplemented by a useful map, a bibliography, and an index.

This study, which is based on Nader’s 2001 Cambridge University Ph. D. dissertation, relies on published material in the form of legal texts (particularly from the thirteenth century), charters (especially those pertaining to the Holy Sepulcher and the Order of the Hospital of St. John), and chronicles (such as those written by William of Tyre and his continuators). Nader states that »no comprehensive history of non-feudal crusading and eastern burgess settlement has been written« (p. 2). Yet, it must be noted that, in 2000, Christiane Tischler had published a 370-page study, titled »Die Burgenses von Jerusalem im 12. Jahrhundert« (based on her 1996 Düsseldorf University Ph. D. dissertation). However, there is no reference to Tischler’s work in Nader’s book (which was published six years later). Tischler argues, among other things, that one cannot come to a reliable definition of »burgess« because there was no homogeneous burgensis-class (p. 248: »ebenso wenig kann eine sichere Definition für diese Personengruppe gefunden werden, da es keinen homogenen burgensis-Stand gegeben hat«). One would have liked to see Nader interact with this and others of Tischler’s findings.

There are other omissions in Nader’s bibliography. The document (Reinhold Röhricht, »Regesta Regni Hierosolymitani«, no. 59) which, according to Nader, is »the earliest reference to burgesses as a distinct class« (p. 7) and, thus, arguably a text of some importance for a study on burgesses and burgess law, was redated (to 1109/1110) and discussed extensively by Hans Eberhard Mayer in his 1977-publication »Bistümer, Klöster und Stifte im Königreich Jerusalem« (p. 44–80). The latter is not cited in Nader’s study – neither is the same author’s two-volume 1996-study, »Die Kanzlei der lateinischen Könige von Jerusalem«, which contains numerous references to burgesses and the »Cour des Bourgeois.« Apart from these »Germanica«, there is also no reference to »The Latin Church in Cyprus, 1195–1312«, by Nicholas Coureas (published 1997), or to Paul Sidelko’s 1998-dissertation, »The Acquisition of the Landed Estates of the Hospitalers in the Latin East, 1099–1291«, even though both contribute significant insights to the subject matter of Nader’s book. One hopes that a future edition of Nader’s book, which, it must be emphasized, presents many significant issues as well as astute conclusions, might address these concerns.