

To Follow in their Footsteps: the Crusades and Family Memory in the High Middle Ages

Review Number:

1384

Publish date:

Thursday, 28 February, 2013

Author:

Nicholas Paul

ISBN:

Date of Publication:

2012

Price:

£30.00

Pages:

368pp.

Publisher:

Cornell University Press

Publisher url:

Place of Publication:

Ithaca, NY

Reviewer:

Guy Perry

The main characteristic of Crusade studies in the post-Runciman era has been expansion and diversification (much like the crusading 'movement' itself). One of many new ways into the topic is to focus on how crusades and crusading were received, understood and interpreted by different social groupings. Perhaps the most interesting of these groupings, naturally enough, is the Latin aristocracy, the military backbone of the movement. In the English-speaking world, at least, the key work in shaping the nature of this particular debate has probably been Marcus Bull's seminal *Knightly Piety and the Lay Response to the First Crusade*. (1) But there are many other contributions that one could list – for instance, by Jonathan Riley-Smith, William Purkis, and so on and so forth. In *To Follow in their Footsteps*, Nicholas Paul aims to tackle a fundamental question head-on: how aristocratic 'family memory' of the Crusades was constructed, and to expose the variety of forces that went into creating, shaping and transmitting it. A chief strength of the book is the range of unusual elements that, he discovers, fed into this: from the impact of tangible memorials of crusades, to the paramount importance of possession of crusader remains, to the characteristic role of women as repositories of 'family memory'. (Women, it seems, have been the 'kin-keepers' – the ones who remember to send out the birthday cards – for a very long time.) From such a broad diversity of sources – and, it has to be said, some of this looks distinctly unpromising at the start of the book! – Paul paints a compelling picture of aristocratic beliefs and culture in relation to the Crusades.

It has long been recognized that dynastic traditions and kinship ties were crucial in shaping aristocratic responses to the call to crusade. The book shows how such traditions were created, reshaped and transmitted, both to the noble family in question and to the wider world. Paul demonstrates conclusively that individual

families' traditions of crusades and crusading were as 'constructed' as any other form of collective memory. And the process by which such memories were fashioned, reformulated and conveyed was a profoundly ideological one. There is much more to it than a given dynasty's desire for prestige or renown, or even for the aura of holiness that crusading could bring with it. Having an ancestor or 'avatar' as a crusader could well lumber his family with the desire – or even the obligation – to live up to his reputation and standing, which could be done most effectively by fighting for the same sacred cause. Paul is particularly strong on the atmosphere of heightened rhetoric about good and bad knights – the celebrated *militia/malitia* pun – which was doing the rounds in the late 11th and early 12th centuries. There is surely much more to say, though, about how far this rhetoric shaped activity, and how far it was a purely literary trope.

Paul suggests that it was women, in particular, who bore the burden of commemorating the crusading commitments and achievements of their menfolk. That said, his favourite example, St Elisabeth of Thuringia (whose image appears on the cover), represents a rather extreme case. Paul stresses that medieval aristocratic families were not simply a strictly 'lineal sequence of male lords' (p. 16). Rather, the medieval sense of family could be much more fluid and inclusive than that, incorporating members, quite happily, from a range of connected branches. It is worth stressing the importance that women could have in this respect.

But, of course, how ancestors were seen was not solely the preserve of the family in question. Physical objects often served as powerful local reminders of the 'pull' of crusades and crusading to society at large. Here, as might be expected, Paul trots out the usual discussion of relics, but he goes much further than this. The range of 'other trophies' he has discovered is fascinating: an exotic topaz presented to St Thomas at Canterbury, a prized Arab steed in Fife, a range of rings from Jerusalem and Constantinople – and the list goes on (pp. 103–10). Such spoils of war were often received and displayed by clergy with impressive ceremonial. One of the most remarkable case studies explains how King Fulk of Jerusalem allegedly sent back an object called an 'ivory *tau*' ('thau eboreum') to the canons of Saint-Laud at Angers, with instructions on how to use it (pp. 125–8). In many ways, of course, the best artefacts of all were the actual bodies of crusader forebears (and here Paul neatly dismisses the strangely persistent myth that crossed legs on a tomb signifies a crusader).

Paul is at his best, though, when he turns to commemoration in the form of writing history: a field in which monastic authors were so prominent. The secular and cloistered spheres are often considered very separate (in part, a legacy of the ecclesiastical reform movement), but Paul shows just how closely linked they actually were. This brings us back to the old idea of Cluny as an ultimate expression of aristocratic values, for all that it proclaimed its independence and difference from them. Paul is right to emphasize that monasteries were as involved in discourse about custom and tradition as they were about sin, punishment and redemption. Perhaps his most fascinating idea, though, is the notion that the 'social memory' of crusaders, in the form of written texts, was gradually overtaken by the 'chivalric imagination' (pp. 83–9). Paul does not miss his opportunity to mention the obvious example: that is, how the legend of the Swan Knight came to overshadow the far more fascinating career of Godfrey of Bouillon.

The book is divided into two parts. The first is labelled 'Family Memory: Form and Function', but it is actually far more comprehensive than this. Moving on from his introduction, Paul looks, by turns, at the significance of crusader ancestors (chapter one); how memories were shaped by being written and re-written (chapter two); and the role of physical remains (above all, noble bodies and what happened to them) (chapters three and four). In the fifth chapter, Paul looks back on the curious fact that many aristocratic pilgrims were later refashioned in the guise of proto-crusaders, and a variety of tales sprang up around them. In many ways, this is the most interesting chapter of the book, but it is also the only one that does not hang together particularly well.

This first section is, beyond any doubt, the heart of the book. Almost all of the key ideas are enunciated here, and we move clearly from theme to theme. The first section is illuminated with a remarkable range of examples, and some particularly effective case studies. Fulk of Anjou's 'tau' has already been mentioned. The book also introduces us to Gouffier I of Lastours. An almost completely forgotten figure today, he was the hero at Ma'arrat an-Nu'man in 1098, and a crusading exemplum *par excellence* in the early 12th century.

There is also a particularly fine section devoted to crusading ‘souvenirs in context’ at the end of chapter three (pp. 128–33). In it, the well-worn story of the Young King’s revolt against his father, in 1182–3, is told in an exhilarating new way, through means of the crusading memorabilia scattered around the Limousin. No less enjoyable is the scatalogical story of Fulk Nerra on pilgrimage in 1035 (which I will not describe further, here, so as not to offend any delicate readers).

Indeed, the book as a whole is littered with interesting ideas. Building on the work of James Naus, Paul shows us how quickly the Capetians moved to ally themselves, through marriage, with the new First Crusade heroes. Paul is equally good, if not better, on a perennial problem that faced Anglo-Norman historians of the crusades in the 12th century. Robert Curthose was, on the one hand, the greatest Anglo-Norman figure in the crusading movement before Richard the Lionheart. On the other hand, though, Robert’s memory reminded everyone of rival claims to the Anglo-Norman *regnum*, that Henry I had suppressed. Paul offers us an fascinating whistle-stop tour of the process by which various 12th-century chroniclers tried to fudge the problem – with only a limited degree of success, despite the best efforts of William of Malmesbury, Henry of Huntingdon, Wace and Benoît of Sainte-Maure. In fact, by the end of the first section of his book, Paul is on the edge of a remarkable question: why some aristocrats *did not* take the cross, despite – in some cases – a considerable pressure of ‘family memory’ bearing down on them, driving them towards doing so.

Naturally, there are some weaknesses too. Some of the examples and asides are good; others are not so useful. To some extent, the book is ‘bulked out’ with extra details that do not advance the basic thesis all that much. Attention could be drawn here, in particular, to part two: that is, to the case studies devoted to the Angevin, King Henry II of England, and to King Alfonso II of Aragón. Paul admits that these are ‘special cases’ (p. 18), and he is right to stress that their common features make them all the more easily comparable. But perhaps it would have been better to select two more dissimilar figures when choosing case studies. A more varied aristocratic duo could have illustrated, in a much better way, the main points that Paul wants to make in this book. A final and more serious complaint is the comparative neglect of crusades and crusading in the 13th century, and later, in the book as a whole. Paul almost concedes this point when, at the end, he discusses the changes that were taking place in around 1200. But in a book that has ‘High Middle Ages’ in its title, one would have hoped for something a little less ‘12th-century-centric’. However, it has to be said that this is a problem in Crusade studies more broadly, and this charge is not directed against Paul’s work alone.

Paul writes both well and engagingly, and some of his phrases stick in the mind. For example, ‘whether the scene was set at the siege of Antioch in 1098, Almería in 1147, or Acre in 1190, the crusade provided universally established contexts, as recognizable as Roncevaux, for the establishment of a legacy of honor in the increasingly competitive and exclusive cultural world of nobility’ (p. 74). The book is well presented, clearly laid out, and has a thorough index. Maps and genealogies are provided at the pertinent points in the text. There are four appendices in total. The first and second briefly list the relevant dynastic narratives that contain references to crusades and crusading, and which can be found within local and monastic chronicles. The third and fourth provide a description and transcription of particular documents used in the case study of Alfonso of Aragón.

The real achievement of this book is not so much that it is the ‘last word’ on aristocrats and the Crusades. Rather, in the sheer variety of the themes that it tackles, it broadens scope for discussion of this crucial issue. Paul’s book may well follow in Marcus Bull’s footsteps, and set the agenda for the ‘next generation’ of investigation into the topic. That is no mean achievement for the author’s first book.

Notes

1. Marcus Bull, *Knightly Piety and the Lay Response to the First Crusade* (Oxford, 1993). [Back to \(1\)](#)

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1384>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/51674>