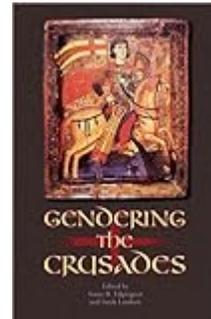




**Susan B. Edgington, Sarah Lambert, eds.** *Gendering the Crusades*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. xvi + 215 pp. \$25.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-12599-4; \$83.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-12598-7.



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## Military Women in the Middle Ages

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>From their inception, historical narratives of the Crusades referred to the conflicts as inherently masculine events. Pope Urban II's call for the First Crusade in 1095 used explicitly masculine language to describe who might be eligible to gain the spiritual blessings of war. An anonymous account of the Third Crusade stated that "A great many men sent each other wool and distaff, hinting that if anyone failed to join this military undertaking, they were fit only for women's work. Brides urged their husbands and mothers incited their sons to go; their only sorrow being that they were not able to set out with them, because of the fragility of their sex."<sup>[1]</sup> Most historians, uncritically following sources like this one, have examined the Crusades as if they were events in which only males participated. Indeed, we might say this has been the case for most of the historiography of medieval warfare. With the exception of Joan of Arc, medieval women's roles in military endeavors have a young historiography, to say the least. To the best of my knowledge, the first study directly exploring these issues appeared only in 1990, when Megan McLaughlin argued

that women in the early and central Middle Ages were more likely to participate in battles because of the domestic nature of the lord's armies. As armies became more professional in the late Middle Ages, McLaughlin argued, women lost access to military culture.<sup>[2]</sup> In 1997, Helen Nicholson explored the contradictions between the apparent non-participation by women in the Crusades and the Muslim accounts that specifically mention Christian women's active involvement.<sup>[3]</sup>

This collection of essays by a mostly-British contingent of scholars on gender and women in the Crusades will certainly fill a massive gap in the historiography. If the interests of the contributors are any indication, we should see more quality work on this subject in years to come.

Collectively, the essays show that women played important roles in the Crusades. Women filled roles as camp followers and as supportive spouses, mothers, and wives. But the essays also show that women were important advisors and even violent participants. Muslim accounts of the fighting stressed Christian women's participation in the events, as donning armor and fighting

alongside knights. While the scholars show in what capacities women participated in the events, they also reveal the ways in which the wars were imagined and re-told, and gender lies at the heart of these issues. Medieval narratives were gendered in that they reflected the social lives and expectations of the wider society, but gender also actively framed the meaning of the wars and cultural conflicts for people who lived at the time as well as for the people in later generations who would read about the wars in historical narratives.

The thirteen essays are not divided into thematic sections, but the first four contributions set the theme for the book by establishing the relationship between gender and crusading. All four essays, beginning with Sarah Lambert's excellent examination of gender in the Crusade narratives, have as their focus the paradox between the historical presentation of the Crusades and the lived-reality of the people involved in them. Lambert notes how Crusade narratives, from Guibert of Nogent's description of the call for the First Crusade to the Third Crusade's *Itinerarium Peregrinorum*, present the events as masculine and use femininity as a "symbol of weakness" (p. 6). At the same time, nearly all of the writers noted that women were present during the military conflicts. Which statements should we believe? Lambert argues that the narratives represent an "ordering of society" rather than the actual events. The narratives helped construct an "idea" of Crusading that was "based on and contributed to the organization of their culture" (p. 13).

Michael Evans shares Lambert's insights and applies them to the descriptions of women wearing armor and bearing arms. If fighting was a masculine activity, how might we explain the descriptions of European women fighting from Muslim chroniclers such as Imad ad-Din and Usamah ibn-Munqidh? Evans argues that Muslim narratives were formed through a literary culture that stretched back to ancient Greek and Persian stories, especially with the tradition of Amazons who evidently rejected their femininity and their nurturing social roles. On the other hand, Evans argues that these women were not totally figments of the authors' imaginations. Women were present, he argues, and he shows how various authors described a "gendered weaponry" that signal women's involvement in emergency battle situations (p. 53). The European narratives never describe women wearing armor. They used "unknightly weapons" such as knives instead of swords and bows instead of crossbows, so Evans concludes (and most of the other contributors concur) that women were present during the fighting but entered the fray only when the situation became desper-

ate.

In another excellent essay, Constance Rousseau explains how gendered perceptions of involvement in the Crusades by the papacy changed over time. Rousseau's examination of papal attitudes between 1095 and 1221 (First through Fifth Crusades) shows how the papacy shifted toward an inclusionary idea of Crusading after the fall of Jerusalem in 1187. While Pope Urban II used masculine language (that limited the availability of spiritual benefits to males) to appeal for volunteers for the First Crusade, Pope Innocent III called for both genders to participate. By the thirteenth century, Rousseau argues, "liturgical, penitential and financial support which involved both sexes became an established feature in the crusade movement" (p. 39).

Other contributions consider important subjects such as famous female personages in the Crusades, the experiences of women in the fighting and in Middle Eastern society, and the devotion to female saints. Keren Caspi-Reisfeld shows the different ways that women were involved in the eastern battles. Women were actively involved in Crusading diplomacy. Queen Melisende effectively ruled the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem from 1131 to 1152, and western Queens and princesses, such as Eleanor of Aquitaine and Queen Marguerite of France supported the Holy Wars in many ways. Hildegard of Bingen's spiritual fame allowed her to give advice to Philip of Alsace, Count of Flanders, between 1176 and 1177. But the contributions also nicely show how women of the lower ranks participated. Few medieval wars were fought on battlefields and so the conflicts often included people who happened to be present, armed warrior knight or not.

Washerwomen and prostitutes moved with the army; other women sent water and ammunition to the front lines and helped fill the moats. These efforts were recognized by the male warriors, Caspi-Reisfeld argues, because the chronicles often note women sharing in the plunder and booty of the battles. If the methods of medieval warfare encouraged women to become actively involved, as Yvonne Friedman explains, this type of warfare also made women extremely vulnerable to captivity. While elite women might be spared for the highest ransoms, most women were sexually assaulted and many were sold into slavery. Christian women's return from captivity was more problematic than men's, Friedman argues, as even married women were believed to be dishonored by their time with Muslims and thus many freed women ironically ended their lives in European convents.

This collection will make an important contribution to the historiography of the Crusades and to the burgeoning study of women in military history.

The excellent bibliography of primary and secondary sources utilized in the essays will be very helpful for students interested in conducting further research on the Crusades; for this reason alone the text should be in the general library collections of all colleges and universities.

Columbia University Press has evidently priced the paperback with the hope that instructors offering courses on the Crusades, the Middle Ages, Women's History, and Gender Studies might include the text among their course books. The collection could work for courses on the Crusades or Middle Ages, but I would hesitate to use it in more general courses in Gender Studies or Women's History unless the instructors are willing and prepared to provide extensive background on the Crusades and their significant events and figures for their students. No general narrative of the period is included and important events and persons are not explored in any length. The inclusion of dates for significant figures, to cite a minor but revealing example, evidently depended on the individual contributors rather than a set editorial policy. Thus while Constance Rousseau provides dates for the papacies of Pope Urban II (1088-99) and Pope Innocent III (1198-1216), students will be at a loss to know when significant women such as Anna Comnena (b. 1083) and Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) lived.

More significant, however, is the lack of an introduction to the essays. The book only includes a short (three-page) preface by James Powell. Not only will students be unable to find an overview of the Crusades and their context in this book, but the editors missed an important opportunity to outline significant issues in the study of women in the Crusades, military history, or of debates relating to the study of gender in the Middle Ages. As it stands, the onus will be on the instructor and the students to fill in the important contextual and historiographic blanks that undergird these interesting essays. This is all the more important because the essays reveal very different views on what "gendering the Crusades" actually means for contemporary historians. For instance, Lambert, Evans, Rousseau, and several other contributors show a nuanced view of gender as an essential part of how humans interpret and order their world. But some contributors appear to view gender as simply finding women and women's activities in the past. Peter Frankopan's interesting piece on the virtues of Anna Comnena's *Alexiad* falls apart when he asks what we can

learn about women and gender in Byzantium from Comnena. He states that Comnena "tells us very little about what it meant to be a woman.... the question of gender is largely hidden from the text, and it is only from Anna's occasional emotional outpouring about her husband that we are aware the source was written by a woman" (p. 68). In her essay on Hildegard of Bingen and Philip of Flanders, Miriam Rita Tessera states that since "the abbess's authority was received in contemporary society without consideration of her gender ... her idea of crusade ... was not influenced by her female perspective" (p. 84). Do we need to know whether a source was written by a man or a woman to see how gender is an essential lens through which people have viewed their world? These comments border on essentialism and fall very short of the standard set in many of the essays, where the historians meticulously analyze the sources to see how gender was an essential way in which these people interpreted their world, which is certainly not the same as seeing an "emotional outpouring" nor a necessarily "female perspective" in the sources.

#### Notes

[1]. *Chronicle of the Third Crusade: A Translation of the Itinerarium Peregrinorum and Gesta Regis Ricardi*, trans. Helen Nicholson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997), p. 48.

[2]. Megan McLaughlin, "The Woman Warrior: Gender, Warfare and Society in Medieval Europe," *Women's Studies* 17 (1990): 193-209.

[3]. Helen Nicholson, "Women on the Third Crusade," *Journal of Medieval History* 23 (1997): 335-349. Few other historians have directly addressed the issue. See, for example, James Brundage, "Prostitution, Miscegenation and Sexual Purity in the First Crusade," in *Crusade and Settlement: Papers Read at the First Conference for the Society for the Study of the Crusades and the Latin East and Presented to R. C. Smail*, ed. Peter W. Edbury (Cardiff: University College Cardiff Press, 1985), 57-64; Ronald Finucane, *Soldiers of the Faith: Crusaders and Moslems at War* (London, 1977); James M. Powell, "The Role of Women in the Fifth Crusade," in *The Horns of Hattin*, ed. B. Z. Kedar (Jerusalem, 1992), 294-301; and M. Purcell, "Women Crusaders: A Temporary Canonical Aberration?" in *Principalties, Powers and Estates: Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Government and Society*, ed. L. O. Frappell (Adelaide, 1979). A new reference book on military women in world history should appear shortly: Reina Pennington, ed., *Military Women Worldwide: A Biographical Dictionary* (Westport, Conn., forthcoming).

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