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Knightly heroes in the later Middle Ages

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Elizabeth Morrison, ed., *A knight for the ages. Jacques de Lalaing and the art of chivalry* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2018, 192 p., ill., index); and Gero Schreier, *Ritterhelden. Rittertum, Autonomie und Fürstendienst in niederadligen Lebenszeugnissen des 14. bis 16. Jahrhunderts*, *Mittelalter-Forschungen*, LVIII (Ostfildern: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 2019, 393 p., index)

Jacques de Lalaing (1420/21-1453), the scion of a prominent noble family from the county of Hainaut, became a famous knightly hero during his lifetime, and his reputation was perpetuated by legend after his death. In his short life, Jacques de Lalaing sought to embody the knightly values of piety, chivalry and valour, but his life was anything but typical for fifteenth-century noblemen in the Low Countries. As a teenager, Jacques de Lalaing joined the Burgundian court as a squire of the Duke of Cleves. The martial exercises at the court prepared him for a military career, and Jacques de Lalaing proved to be exceptionally talented in the (playful) practice of arms. In 1443, for example, he was part of the Burgundian army that besieged the town of Luxembourg, and, two years later, he participated in a *pas d'armes* (a form of tournament in which a knight defended a particular spot against other knightly challengers) in Nancy during a visit of the French king. In the remaining ten years of his life, Jacques de Lalaing took part in numerous tournaments, travelling as a knight-errant to France, Spain, Portugal, Scotland and Italy in search of opponents, all of whom he defeated. In 1450, he made a pilgrimage to Rome, and in the following year he was admitted to the Burgundian Order of the Golden Fleece. In the last stage of his life, Jacques de Lalaing served the Burgundian duke in his war against the rebellious city of Ghent. On 4 July 1453, he was mortally wounded, struck by a part of a wooden shield that was hit by a cannon during the siege of the fortress of Poeke.

The life and deeds of Jacques de Lalaing are not only known due to the fame and reputation that he accrued during his lifetime. They were documented after his death in a knightly biography titled *Le livre des faits de Jacques de Lalaing* (c. 1470), which drew on several other sources, such as the chronicle of Georges Chastellain. Jacques de Lalaing is also an often-cited example in the historiography of late medieval nobility, as embodying the crisis of the nobility and the decline of chivalry. According to Johan Huizinga, for instance, it was ironic that a cannonball killed the most eminent, but by then anachronistic, Burgundian knight-errant. However, more recent historiography puts the assumed clash between medieval knightly bravery and modern military efficiency into perspective by showing how chivalry, as an adaptable code of conduct, found new meanings in a changing late medieval world. The two books under review, in which Jacques de Lalaing figures prominently, follow this line of thought. The authors raise the important question of what role knightly heroes fulfilled in this dynamic era and consider how the memory of their valorous deeds was preserved in word and image.

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In *Ritterhelden*, Gero Schreier explores the symbolic meaning of knightly heroes in Europe from the fourteenth till the sixteenth century. The monograph is a commercial edition of a dissertation that he defended at the University of Freiburg in 2016. The life of Jacques de Lalaing is one of the six knightly biographies examined in detail by Schreier, who also draws on other narrative sources from France, the German Lands and the Burgundian Lands. The book is organised into three sections. The first two chapters are introductory and briefly sketch the situation and self-image of the nobility in the late Middle Ages. Schreier then develops his argument in two steps. The first, main part examines the historical discourse of knightly heroism, one chapter of which is devoted to an analysis of political and didactical treatises and the second offers a close reading of six knightly biographies. The second part of his argument involves an examination of the context in which knightly hero-worship took place. The origins and uses of the biographies of three heroes are contextualised in detail. The conclusion is a short summary rather than a synthesis.

The construct of the knightly hero in the late Middle Ages was more than a literary theme. It was, according to Schreier, a response of the nobility to the transformation of their social-political world, in which their autonomy and military activities were increasingly subject to princely control. Although processes of political centralisation and military professionalisation challenged the medieval nobility's traditional autonomy and martial self-understanding, the appreciation of knightly heroes was not a sign of crisis – these models negotiated the tensions that arose from the integration of the nobility into stately structures and offered nobles the opportunity of social reorientation. Thus, the key argument, in the author's own words, is 'dass Helden weniger Symptome einer Krise denn vielmehr Anzeichen und Ausdruck einer Phase der Anpassung und Neuorientierung waren, in der Altes weitergetragen und an neue Verhältnisse adaptiert wurde' (p. 335). In order to substantiate this claim, Schreier analyses the historical discourse about knightly heroes that, according to him, emerged in the late fourteenth century, thereby assuming this discourse to be constitutive of social reality, shaping human action, self-understanding and self-representation, and subject to contestation and change.

The title page of Adam Reißner's first edition of *Historia Herrn Georgen und Herrn Caspam von Frundsberg* (Frankfurt a.M., 1568), in which he not only glorified the chivalric deeds of Georg von Frundsberg (1473-1528) as a commander of the imperial army during the Italian Wars, but also rehabilitated the role of the German nobility that was ignored by Italian historians



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Schreier adequately sketches the changes which the late medieval nobility faced, but slightly overstates the transformative power of state formation and military professionalisation in the later Middle Ages. Nobles were part of these processes, and not outsiders who merely adapted. Moreover, the question remains if the nobility could oversee the potential consequences of these processes at the individual and collective levels. In this respect, the 'niedere Adel' is ill-defined; it is difficult to see how Jacques de Lalaing, for example, can be classified as belonging to the lesser nobility. More important, however, is the 'close reading' of the sources at the heart of his 'Diskursgeschichte', which fixed and transmitted examples of knightly heroism in a stylised and literary form. Scheirer begins with didactical and political treatises to show how the idea that nobles derived their personal honour from valour and violence, articulated for example by Geoffroy de Charny, was criticised by reformers, such as Christine de Pizan, who argued that true nobility was the result of service to the common good, thereby redefining and preserving knightly heroism in relation to princely service.

Subsequently, Schreier analyses the ways in which authors of the heroic deeds of Bertrand du Guesclin, Jacques de Lalaing, Georg von Ehingen, Wilwolt van Schaumberg, Pierre de Bayard and Georg von Frundsberg tied valour and autonomy to princely service. From this careful reading and nuanced interpretation follows the argument that the biographies contained different narratives of knightly heroism that appealed to different readerships. Moreover, the biographic descriptions of the heroic deeds of the main characters resolved the assumed opposition between chivalric values and stately efficiency, as princely military service offered new opportunities for pursuing personal prowess and military honour. The knightly heroes offered examples of how to hold on to traditional noble-chivalric values, while keeping up with and shaping the new social, political and military reality.

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In an effort to go beyond a textual analysis of the sources, Scheier seeks to pin down the meaning of this discourse about knightly heroism by discussing the historical 'Heldenmacher' and 'Verehrergruppen'. He specifically focuses on the social contexts in which the biographies of Guesclin, Lalaing and Frundsberg were written, compiled, received and transmitted. In three chapters he addresses the motives of the authors and their patrons, the intended reading public of each biography, and the political context in which different groups made competing claims about these knightly heroes. In the case of Jacques de Lalaing, Schreier argues that he was a state hero during his lifetime, whose chivalric deeds in front of courtly and urban audiences in the Low Countries served the political interests of the Burgundian dukes, who was later turned into a family hero, and whose memory embodied the noble habitus and honour that legitimised the family's privileged position in later centuries. The analysis of the construction of Jacques de Lalaing's heroism, together with the other two case studies, makes for an informative and stimulating read, but as a result of all their differences it is difficult to discern a common narrative about these heroic models of chivalry, especially since Schreier treats them separately (the possible intertextuality is not systematically addressed, nor are other forms of hero worship). In fact, as the author acknowledges, the creation and veneration of knightly heroes served multiple purposes and could not be controlled by one interest group, raising questions about the potential of hero figures to ease general social tensions, as well as restricting the scope of this late medieval discourse (the core analysis is limited to three texts, which are regarded as representative). The interest of the nobility in heroes, and their written and unwritten construction and transmission, can also be understood as a continuation of older forms of noble self-understanding, self-representation and social differentiation, especially because the late medieval nobility and the princely state were less opposed to each other than Scheier seems to recognise. Notwithstanding these considerations, *Ritterhelden* offers a fine analysis of wide-ranging sources about the dynamic self-understanding of the nobility in the later Middle Ages, in which he makes new and unexpected observations. He presents a clear argument that will hopefully result in further debate and research on the ways in which the medieval nobility sought to justify its social dominance.

Jacques de Lalaing, or rather an illuminated manuscript of the *Livre des faits de Jacques de Lalaing*, is also at the centre of the volume *A knight for the ages*, edited by Elizabeth Morrison, a senior curator of manuscripts at the J. Paul Getty Museum. The publication was prompted by the museum's acquisition of the manuscript (Ms. 114) in 2016. The manuscript

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was originally commissioned by the Lalaing family and produced around 1530 in Flanders; the neat manuscript contains a frontispiece depicting the unidentified author of the text and seventeen miniatures that mainly illustrate the chivalric feats of Jacques de Lalaing. In the first part of the book these magnificent illuminations are reproduced in full colour with the accompanying text in English translation (a full edition and translation of the text is not provided, and only the images can be digitally consulted at the website of the J. Paul Getty Museum). The second part contains short essays that highlight aspects of the life of Jacques de Lalaing, and particularly the manuscript: the historical context (Wim Blockmans), the genre of knightly biographies (Rosalind Brown-Grant), historical sources of the biography (Zrinka Stahuljak), illuminations (Elizabeth Morrison), visual traditions (Hanno Wijsman), clothing (Margaret Scott), armour and combats (Tobias Capwell) and the provenance of the manuscript (Anne-Marie Legaré). Taken together, the authors of these contributions provide a proper contextualisation of the manuscript, which predominantly focuses on its art historical characteristics and meaning.

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A recurrent question in the contributions is how the text and images combine in the manuscript, dissecting the non-simultaneity of the life of Jacques de Lalaing, the writing of his biography and the production of the manuscript. This also raises the questions for whom and why the manuscript was produced in the early sixteenth century. The contribution of Legaré, systematically discussing the preserved copies of the *Livre des faits de Jacques de Lalaing* in particular, sheds light on these issues. She has found thirteen manuscripts with copies of the text (five more than Schreier lists in his book), and provisionally identifies Antoine de Lalaing, count of Hoogstraten, as the most likely commissioner of this particular manuscript. He was a grandson of Jacques de Lalaing's uncle Simon de Lalaing, but, more importantly, a well-known bibliophile who served Duke Philip the Handsome and Emperor Charles V. If this identification holds, the commissioning of a manuscript narrating and illuminating the life of a family member who fell eighty years earlier appears to support the supposition that noble chivalric ideals complemented princely service in the sixteenth century.

The volume on the manuscript containing the *Livre des faits de Jacques de Lalaing* is a good example of the interdisciplinary scholarship required to interpret particular examples of knightly biographies. By developing a broader perspective on the historical meaning of knightly heroes, Schreier's original study offers the necessary background for assessing the historical context and significance of these hero narratives. Both books rightly react against the idea of a late medieval nobility in crisis, but in doing so they are still bound and limited by the same historiographical perspective that fails to place the late medieval nobility in a longer timeframe.

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