

# VIRTUS

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Elizabeth den Hartog

## ‘Defending the castle like a man’: on belligerent medieval ladies

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In medieval times, numerous women donned full armour, took up arms and rode out in front of the troops. Others built and/or defended castles. According to medieval sources like Giovanni Boccaccio’s *De mulieribus claris* (c.1362), those women transcended their female frailty and acted like men. In doing so, they emulated the female heroes of Antiquity, Camilla from Virgil’s *Aeneid* and the Amazons, models that were well-known in medieval times. In the medieval *Roman d’Eneas* of c. 1155-1160, Camilla is said to have ‘had no interest in any women’s work, neither spinning nor sewing, but preferred the bearing of arms, tourneying, and jousting, striking with the sword and the lance: there was no other woman of her bravery’ (lines 3968-76).<sup>1</sup>

One real-life medieval lady who was compared to these Antique heroines was Isabel of Conches, wife of Ralph of Tosny, who in the 1090s, according to Orderic Vitalis’ (c. 1075-1142) *Historia Ecclesiastica*,

when her vassals took to war, rode armed as a knight among the knights [and ...] showed no less courage among the knights in hauberks and sergeants-at-arms than did the maid Camilla, the pride of Italy, among the troops of Turnis. She deserved to be compared to Lampeto and Marsepia, Hippolyta and Penthesilea and the other warlike Amazon Queens.<sup>2</sup>

1 L. Kochanske Stock, “Arms and the (wo)man” in medieval romance: the gendered arming of female warriors in the Roman d’Eneas and Heldris’s Roman de Silence’, *Arthuriana* 5-4 (1995), 56-83, spec. 59.

2 L. Grant de Pauw, *Battle cries and lullabies. Women in war from prehistory to the present* (Norman,



Christine de Pizan and the Three Virtues (*Christine de Pizan, Livre des Trois Vertus, folio 2v, 1405-1406; gallica.bnf.fr /Bibliothèque nationale de France, NAF 25636*)

Another woman who is compared to the viragos of Antiquity was Gaita or Sichelgaita of Salerno (1040-1090). She was the wife of the Norman leader Robert Guiscard and is mentioned in Anna Comnena's *Alexiad* of c. 1148. Anna claims that Gaita frequently accompanied her husband in battle wearing full armour and that she also conducted campaigns by herself, like the siege of Trani in 1080. In 1081, during the battle of Dyrrachium, her men lost courage and fled into the sea but 'Robert's wife Gaita, who used

1998), 87; A.J. Truax, 'Anglo-Norman women at war: valiant soldiers, prudent strategists or charismatic leaders', in: D.J. Kagay and L.J.A. Villalon, eds, *The circle of war in the Middle Ages: essays on medieval military and naval history* (Woodbridge, 1999), 111-125, spec. 118; S.M. Johns, *Noblewomen, aristocracy and power in the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman realm* (Oxford, 2013), 16-17.

to accompany him on campaign, like another Pallas, if not another Athena, seeing the runaways and glaring fiercely at them, shouted in a very loud voice: “How far will ye run? Halt! Be men!” – not quite in those Homeric words, but something very like them in her own dialect. As they continued to run, she grasped a long spear and charged at full gallop against them. It brought them to their senses, and they went back to fight.<sup>3</sup>

Christine de Pizan, in her *Cité des Dames*, describes the Amazons and a host of other warlike women, whom she borrowed but reshaped from Boccaccio’s *De mulieribus claris*, as role models for the medieval noble lady. She also widened the scope by including various medieval French women who had shown similar warlike qualities.<sup>4</sup>

Until quite recently, the martial women named above were considered as the stuff of legends or were thought of as exceptions. Compared to the number of men partaking in such events, the role of women is indeed likely to have been negligible, but as Megan McLaughlin demonstrated in her 1990 article ‘The woman warrior: gender, warfare and society in medieval Europe’, throughout the Middle Ages quite a number of women did personally participate in warfare and they did build castles and fortresses, and organized the castle’s defence when necessary, especially in the period predating the mid-fourteenth century.<sup>5</sup> According to McLaughlin, access to the male-dominated sphere of warfare and arms was easier for medieval women than for those living in later centuries, because, at least up to the fourteenth century, military training and recruitment of warriors occurred within the context of the household and the family. In the later Middle Ages, when warfare gradually came to be professionalised and as training moved out of the home, it became increasingly out of bounds for the female sex.<sup>6</sup> Since McLaughlin’s article, scholars, especially those concerned with gender studies, have greatly amplified the list of medieval military-minded women; so many examples have been confirmed, that the matter can no longer be dismissed out of hand.

Even so, despite the evidence for female participation in military matters, in modern studies the conduct of martial women in medieval times is still often received with unbelief, disregarded, or explained away as satire. When, on the other hand, the evidence is taken at face value, it is said that the female participation in warfare was incited by crisis situations, when the absence of male authority created a pow-

3 V. Eads, ‘Sichelgaita of Salerno: Amazon or trophy wife?’, *Journal of Medieval Military History* 3 (2005), 72-87.

4 H. Johnston, ‘Redressing the Virago in Christine de Pizan’s *Livre de la cité des dames*’, in: F. Lachaud and L. Scordia, eds, *Hommages à Robert Fossier et Henri Dubois. Au-delà des miroirs: la littérature politique dans la France de Charles VI et Charles VII* (Cahiers de Recherches Médiévales et Humanistes 24, 2012), 439-460; L. Rinaldi Dufresne, ‘Woman warriors: a special case from the fifteenth century: the city of ladies’, *Women’s Studies* 23 (1994), 111-130.

5 M. McLaughlin, ‘The woman warrior: gender, warfare and society in medieval Europe’, *Women’s Studies* 17 (1990), 193-209.

6 *Ibidem*.

er vacuum that could only be filled by the lady of the manor. However, this is not doing women justice: even though the above scenario was quite a common one, it was by no means an exclusive one. This was shown by Truax, who published material in 1999 which proved that some powerful women mustered their own troops, even while their husbands were alive, and sometimes even in opposition to their wishes. Other women joined their husbands on military campaigns, and some even fought their own husbands or fathers. Neither was female participation in the Crusades uncommon.<sup>7</sup> Rachel E. Kellett has recently shown that women did also, on occasion, take part in judicial combat, against each other and even against men.<sup>8</sup> In the latter case, allowances for differences in gender were apparently made, as men are physically stronger.<sup>9</sup>

This female participation in warfare and combat, as discussed above, raises questions. For one, if women did indeed build and defend castles, lead troops into battle and fight, even if only when necessity arose, what gave them the ability to do so? Such tasks could hardly have been performed without prior training. And if women did indeed participate as combatants in war, why do the medieval sources, when they acknowledge female participation at all, do so in rather ambiguous terms and rarely mention them shooting or hacking and chopping away at their enemies?

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In order to answer these questions, I will first discuss the exploits of military-minded medieval women as described in the sources between roughly the eleventh and mid-fourteenth century. In doing so, I will review the evidence for women defending and building castles, leading their troops into battle and sometimes even actively partaking in the fighting, as well as their role in the Crusades, and then consider the evidence for women being trained for warfare. Next, medieval views on female militancy and participation in acts of war will be scrutinized in order to understand why medieval sources played down female involvement to the point of hushing up women's roles in military events almost completely. My focus is on noble ladies

7 Truax, 'Anglo-Norman women at war', 111-125.

8 R.E. Kellett, 'Royal Armouries MS I.33: judicial combat and the art of fencing in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century German literature', *Oxford German Studies* 41-1 (2012), 32-56, spec. 47-48; See also. R.L. Pearsall, 'Some observations on judicial duels, as practiced in Germany', *Archaeologia* 29-2 (1842), 348-361.

9 In a judicial single combat whereby the woman was not represented by a man but fought her opponent herself, the man was required to stand in a trench up to his navel, with one hand bound behind his back, being armed with a stick only, while the woman in question was to attack him with a sling carrying a stone weighing three pounds. If she failed to overcome the man by midday, he would be considered victorious. However, such proceedings are unlikely to have been commonplace and by the later Middle Ages had taken on a mythical status. Konrad Justinger's *Berner Chronik*, compiled between 1420 and 1430, mentions such a fight taking place in 1288, with the woman prevailing. This event was pictured in Diebold Schilling's *Spiezer Bilderchronik* of c. 1480 by showing a man in full armour being succumbed by a lady in fashionable dress piercing his shoulder with a lance and carrying a sword at her side. Both authors are quoted by W. Meyer, *Ritterturniere im Mittelalter. Lanzenstechen, Prunkgewänder, Festgelage* (Mainz, 2017), 162-164. See also G. Hergsell, *Talhoffers Fechtbuch aus dem Jahre 1467, gerichtliche und andere Zweikämpfe darstellend* (Prague, 1887).

(with a slight bias towards examples from the Low Countries as these women are seldom mentioned in the existing literature), even though there is evidence that women from the lower strata of society were likewise engaged in warfare.<sup>10</sup>

### Women on the battlements

The most common scenario that has women involved in military matters concerns the defence of castles. An early example is the daughter of William FitzOsbern, who married Earl Ralph of Norfolk and Suffolk in 1075. During this event a plot was hatched to overthrow King William the Conqueror. When the plan fell foul because of local opposition, Earl Ralph fled and took ship at Norwich, leaving his wife to defend the castle, which she held until she was given terms and safe conduct.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, Emma, wife of Ralph, Earl of Norfolk and Suffolk, held her husband's castle at Norwich in 1075 when it was under attack by siege engines, whilst he fled to Denmark to seek aid. When this aid took too long to arrive, and the situation in the castle became desperate, Emma accepted the lenient terms of surrender offered to her and her men. She later accompanied her husband on the first crusade.<sup>12</sup> Again, in July 1092, Radegunde, the wife of one Robert Giroie, attempted to hold her husband's fortress at Saint-Céneri (Normandy) from an attack by Robert of Bellême, Earl of Shrewsbury, whilst her husband was away aiding the future King Henry I of England (c. 1068-1135). When rumour spread that her husband had died, the men charged with defending the castle defected, thus forcing Radegunde to surrender, as 'one woman alone could not uphold what she believed to be right against determined men'. The castle was sacked.<sup>13</sup> In 1095, the wife and steward of the captured Robert of Mowbray, Earl of Northumberland, held on to his castle until the king threatened to blind Robert, which made them surrender.<sup>14</sup>

The following centuries also yield ample evidence for women defending castles. In 1121 Hugh of Montfort made his wife responsible for the defence of the stronghold of Montfort-sur-Risle (Normandy) against Henry I's advancing army, while Hugh, who had conspired against the king, went to Brionne.<sup>15</sup> Then there was Sibyl, the wife of Robert Bordet of Tarragona, who was 'as brave as she was beautiful'. In

10 J.F. Verbruggen, 'Vrouwen in de middeleeuwse legers', *Revue Belge d'histoire militaire* 24 (1982), 617-34; B.C. Hacker, 'Women and military institutions in early modern Europe: a reconnaissance' *Signs* 6 (1981), 643-71.

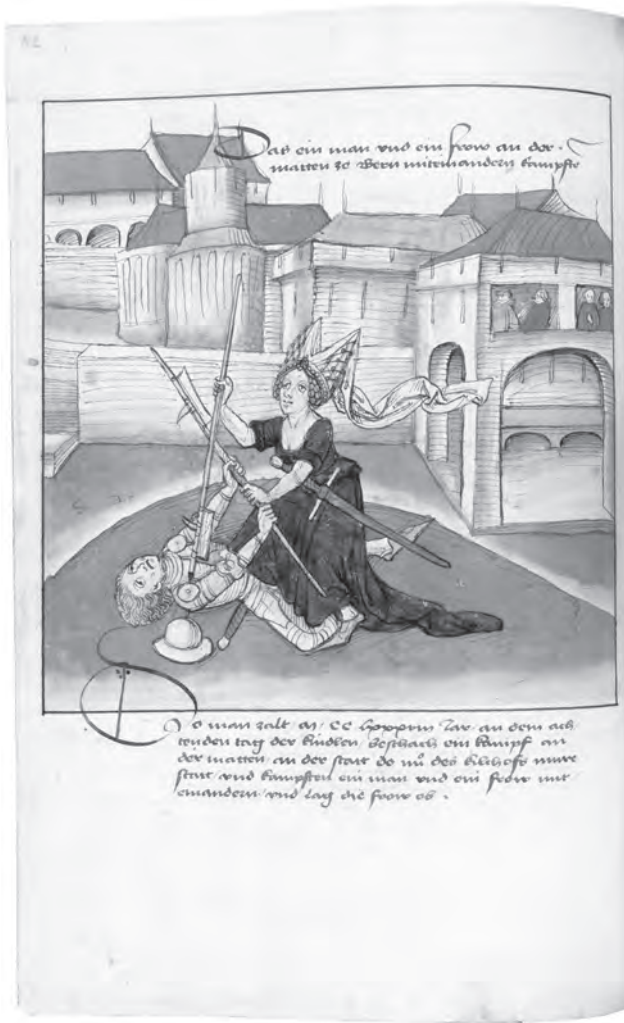
11 *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. and transl. G.N. Garmonsway (London, 1953 (reprint 1984)), versions D and E, 210-211.

12 M. Strickland, 'Military technology and political resistance: castles, fleets and the changing face of comital rebellion in England and Normandy, c. 1026-1087', in: J. Hudson and S. Crumplin, eds, *The making of Europe*. *Essays in honour of Robert Bartlett* (Leiden/Boston, 2016), 177-178.

13 Truax, 'Anglo-Norman women at war', 114-116.

14 *Ibidem*.

15 *Ibidem*.



A man in full armour being succumbed by a lady in fashionable dress piercing his shoulder with a lance and carrying a sword at her side (Diebold Schilling, *Spiezer Chronik*, circa 1480; *Burgerbibliothek*, Bern, *Mss.h.h.I.16*, folio 112)

c. 1124-1125, with her husband away to raise auxiliary forces, she mounted the battlements dressed as a knight, patrolled the circuit of the walls and kept 'sleepless watch' with the guards.<sup>16</sup> In 1139, Mathilda of Ramsbury, mistress of Bishop Roger of Salisbury, together with her son, Nigel, Bishop of Ely, defended castle of Devizes against King Stephen, but she surrendered when the king captured Roger and two of

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem.

his sons, mistreated them, whilst threatening to kill them.<sup>17</sup> Agnes, Countess of Dunbar and March, in 1338 held off a siege of the English at Dunbar for five months until the enemy retreated.<sup>18</sup>

A late example from the Low Countries is Bauck Popma (or Poppema), who first features in Peter Jacobsz. van Tabor's sixteenth-century history of Frisia. During her husband's absence in 1496, their castle tower in Berlikum (Frisia) was besieged by troops from Groningen. The defence was initially led by her husband's brother, but when things started going wrong and he and three of his men escaped to get help, Bauck took over. When the castle fell, she was brought to Groningen in chains, where she remained in captivity until an exchange of prisoners took place the following year.<sup>19</sup>

### Women in command

Most examples of women involved in military matters show them defending castles in the absence of their husbands. Some, however, were of a more militant nature and actively took part in warfare by building castles, leading attacks or commanding troops, activities that often went hand in hand.

One of the best-known warrior ladies is Aethelflaed († 918), eldest daughter of Alfred the Great, who began building fortresses during the rule of her husband, Aethelred, Lord of the Mercians. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* states that in 910, after the battle at Tettenhall, in which the English defeated the Danes, Aethelflaed built a fortress at Bremeasburh. Following Aethelred's demise, she was made 'Lady of the Mercians' in 912 and built the fortresses at Scergeat and Bridgnorth in the same year. In the following years she continued to build fortresses. In 916, Aethelflaed sent her armies into Wales and stormed Breconmere, capturing the king's wife and thirty-three other persons. A year later she seized the borough of Derby and early on in 918 secured possession of the borough of Leicester by more peaceful means. The people of York also pledged to accept her rule, but shortly after this promise was made, she died, 'in the eight year of her rule over Mercia as its rightful lord'.<sup>20</sup> The twelfth-century chronicler William of Malmesbury assessed her achievement as follows: Aethelflaed 'protected men at home and intimidated them abroad'.<sup>21</sup> No less courageous was Aethelburh (c. 673-740), who stormed Taunton in 722 and razed it to the ground, while her husband King Ina of Wessex was fighting the West-Saxons.<sup>22</sup>

17 R. Wickson, *Kings and bishops in medieval England, 1066-1216* (London/New York, 2015), 78-79.

18 J.D. Mackie, *A history of Scotland* (Harmondsworth, 1984), 80.

19 Peter Jacobsz. van Tabor, *Historie van Vrieslant*, H.W.C.A. Visser and H. Amersfoort, eds, (Amersfoort, 1824; reprint Leeuwarden, 1973), 100-101 and 111-124.

20 *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 94-105.

21 Grant de Pauw, *Battle Cries and Lullabies*, 83-84.

22 Truax, 'Anglo-Norman women at war', 118.



Another lady who knew how to fend for herself was Richilde, Countess of Hainaut (c. 1018-1086). Not only was she a castle builder, erecting one at Beaumont in Hainaut, she was also fierce in protecting her own rights. On her husband's death she had hoped that her two children would succeed him in Hainaut and Flanders, but her position in Flanders was challenged by her husband's younger brother Robert the Frisian. In 1071, the conflict led to a confrontation at Cassel, where her son Arnold died and she herself was captured. Richilde soon lost all support in Flanders but continued to rule in Hainaut until 1083, when she retired to the abbey of Messines and died soon after.<sup>23</sup> Constance, the wife of King Robert II of France (996-1031) built the castle of Le Puiset.<sup>24</sup> Annie Renoux, in her study of elite women in northern France, mentions several other early French examples of lady castle builders.<sup>25</sup>

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A unique, and somewhat later case is Lincoln's Nicola de la Haye, who, according to the contemporary chronicler Richard of Devizes, when Lincoln Castle was besieged in 1191, 'proposing to herself nothing effeminate, defended the castle like a man' for forty days until a peace was negotiated. When her husband Gerard died in 1214, the castle reverted to Nicola, who had originally inherited the post of constable from her father. In 1216, when King John visited Lincoln Castle

the said Lady Nicola went out of the eastern gate of the castle carrying the keys of the castle in her hand and met the king and offered the keys to him as her lord and said she was a woman of great age and was unable to bear such fatigue any longer. And he besought her saying, "My beloved Nicola, I will that you keep the castle as hitherto until I shall order otherwise".

Better still, on 18 October 1216 King John appointed Nicola joint sheriff of Lincolnshire, alongside Philip Mark, one of John's most notorious henchmen. Again, during the Battle of Lincoln in 1217, she held the castle against French forces until the royal army arrived. In May 1217 she was released from her duties as sheriff, but she held on the Lincoln castle until 1226, dying at her manor of Swaton in 1230.<sup>26</sup> In 1304, King Edward I gave Bamburgh Castle in fief to Isabella de Beaumont, a kinswoman of his, and the widow of Ralph of Vescy, Lord of Alnwick.<sup>27</sup> These cases were exceptional though, as in England only eleven out of some 460 licenses to crenellate were granted to women.<sup>28</sup>

23 K.S. Nicholas, 'Countesses as rulers in Flanders', in: T. Evergates (ed.), *Aristocratic women in medieval France* (Philadelphia, 1999), 115-116.

24 Truax, 'Anglo-Norman women at war', 113.

25 A. Renoux, 'Elite women, palaces, and castles in northern France (ca. 850-1100)', in: T. Martin, eds, *Re-assessing the roles of women as 'makers' of medieval art and architecture*, Visualizing the Middle Ages 7 (Leiden/Boston, 2012), 739-782.

26 L. Wilkinson, *Women in thirteenth-century Lincolnshire* (Woodbridge, 2007); J. Hodge, *Lincoln Castle* (London, 2015).

27 M. Prestwich, 'Isabella de Vescy and the custody of Bamburgh Castle', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 44 (1971), 148-152.

28 P. Davis, 'English licenses to crenellate, 1199-1567', *The Castle Studies Group Journal* 20 (2006-2007), 226-245.

Women are also known to have led troops into battle. Mathilda of Tuscany (1046-1115) did so for the first time in 1061, at the age of fifteen, alongside her mother: ‘Now there appeared in Lombardy at the head of her numerous squadrons the young maid Mathilda, armed like a warrior, and with such bravery, that she made known to the world that courage and valour in mankind is not indeed a matter of sex, but of heart and spirit’. As Mathilda defended the pope (and had no husband or father), she was given a less severe press than most other women in arms. Mathilda’s conduct even led to certain polemicists and canonists accepting and defending a woman’s right to exercise military command.<sup>29</sup>

According to the account given in the *Histoire des duc de Normandie et les rois d’Angleterre*, written by a Flemish mercenary around 1220, Empress Mathilda (1102-1167) fought her cousin Stephen over their respective claims to the English throne: ‘Every day the empress rode with the army and gave the best and most valuable advice. In the whole army there was not a baron as astute and experienced as she was, and there was much talk about her throughout England’<sup>30</sup>

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Beatrice of Burgundy (1143-1184), wife of Frederick Barbarossa, during the 1159 siege of Crema, provided her husband with reinforcements from her own county of Burgundy, arriving at the fray in the company of Henry the Lion, Archbishop Conrad of Augsburg, and 1,200 knights.<sup>31</sup> Margaret, Countess of Flanders in her own right from 1191 to her death in 1194, was praised by Gislebert of Mons, the chancellor and later chronicler of Hainaut, for defending castles attacked by her husband’s vassals.<sup>32</sup>

In his *Rijmkroniek* (rhymed chronicle) of circa 1305, Melis Stoke has Bertha van Heukelom leading the siege of the castle of IJsselstein in 1297, where her husband had been imprisoned by enemy forces. She apparently was ‘so brave, that she was not prepared to give up her house for all the gold in the world, not at the request of her friends or her relatives’.<sup>33</sup>

In 1342, Joanna of Flanders, Countess of Montfort and Brittany, was besieged in the town of Hennebont on the Brittany coast. According to the chronicler Froissart: ‘clad in armour, and well mounted, she made the womenfolk in the town tear stones from the streets and carry them to the battlements to drop on their enemies; and pots

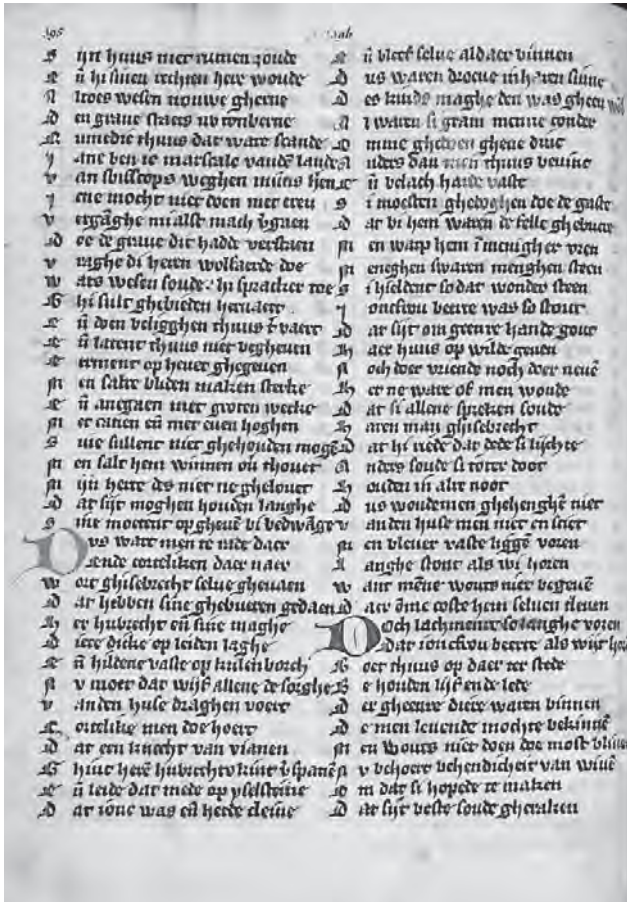
<sup>29</sup> D. Hay, ‘Canon laws regarding female military commanders up to the time of Gratian: some texts and their historical contexts’, in: M.D. Meyerson, D. Thiery and O. Falk, eds, *A great effusion of blood? Interpreting medieval violence* (Toronto/Buffalo/London, 2004), 288.

<sup>30</sup> H. Nicholson, ‘Women on the Third Crusade’, *Journal of Medieval History* 23-4 (1997), 335-349, spec. 345.

<sup>31</sup> J.B. Freed, *Frederick Barbarossa: the prince and the myth* (Yale University Press, 2016), no page number given: <https://books.google.nl/books?id=uXk8DAAAQBAJ&pg=PT275&lpg=PT275&dq=beatrice+of+Burgundy+crema&source=bl&ots=kYuuUI8th5&sig=ACFu3U3feeEDMdiURS-YzXbnAgP-oKEu-sw&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewipxjXMg6ToAhVMC-wKHc2nCN4Q6AEwDnoECAsQAQ#v=onepage&q&f=false> (accessed 18 March 2020).

<sup>32</sup> Nicholas, ‘Countesses as rulers in Flanders’, 113.

<sup>33</sup> <http://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/vrouwenlexicon/lemmata/data/BerthaVanHeukelom> (accessed 26 September 2020).



'Joncfrou beerte' (Bertha van Heukelom), who was leading the siege of the castle of IJsselstein in 1297, was so brave, that she was unwilling to give up her house for all the gold in the world, not at the request of her friends or her relatives (*Melis Stole, Rijmkroniek van Holland, 'Manuscript A', folio 49v, second quarter fourteenth century; KB, National Library of the Netherlands, The Hague, 128 E 3*)

of quicklime were put up to the same purpose. The countess also performed another very gallant deed: after climbing a tower to watch how her troops were acquitting themselves, she noticed that all the lords and their followers had left their camp outside and had come to join the assault. She therefore collected three hundred horsemen who were guarding one of the gates at which no attack was being made; she rode out of the gate, at the head of her men, and galloped up to the tents and lodgings of her attackers, and cut them down and burned them with impunity.<sup>34</sup> The assault of the town was broken off in order to pursue the countess and her men, who escaped to Brest, from where she returned with many more troops. Froissart also mentions Joanna as fighting in person 'with the heart of a lion, and in her hand, she wielded a sharp

34 *Froissart's Chronicles*, J. Jolliffe, trans. and ed. (London, 1967), nr. 80.

glaive, wherewith she fought fiercely'. Joanna's conduct was considered virtuous as she acted on her husband's behalf, protecting his rights after he was captured.

### Unacceptable warlike behaviour in women

Whereas the women mentioned above are not criticized in the sources and are even praised for their bravery, the behaviour of some other war-minded ladies was considered far less acceptable. In *De diversitate temporum*, written between 1005 and 1017, Adela of Elten (952 - after 1021) is described as a very bad sort of woman, who talked loudly, uttered bad language, dressed the way she behaved, whilst throwing glances that betrayed her fickleness of character. The only civilized trait she is credited with is having a good hand at weaving and surpassing all other women in the fabrication of rich and costly textiles. Disputing the way her father had seen fit to settle his inheritance, she cajoled her husband Balderic into doing all sorts of mischief, like attacking the abbey of Elten on which most of her father's property had been bestowed and where her sister was abbess, committing murder and much else, which caused his territories and castles to be besieged in 1016. Balderic defected, leaving Adela to defend the castle of Uplade with too few retainers. With the women dressed up like men, wearing helmets, they gave their besiegers the idea that a considerable force was holding the castle. This worked for a couple of days but eventually Adela surrendered.<sup>35</sup>

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In his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Orderic Vitalis (c. 1075-1142) mentions several female warriors, who, in his eyes, acted in an ignominious way. First there was Juliana (1090-after 1136), an illegitimate daughter of King Henry I of England, who rebelled together with her husband against her own father in 1119. While her husband went away to strengthen his castles at Lire, Glos, Pont-Saint-Pierre and Pacy, she was left in command of the defence of Breteuil Castle, where she was besieged by her father's troops, which fell through treachery. Orderic has little good to say about Juliana: 'As Solomon says, there is nothing as bad as a bad woman'. As she had shot at her father with a cross-bolt 'by the king's command she was forced to leap down from the walls' into the moat 'shamefully with bare buttocks'.<sup>36</sup>

Mabel, the heiress of Bellême, who actively defended the inheritance her father Talvas had left her, was another infamous woman, again according to Orderic. She travelled round with a retinue of one hundred men when necessary, seized at least one castle and disposed of her rivals, accidentally poisoning her brother-in-law in the process. She came to a bad end, being murdered in her own home. Her epitaph described her as 'the shield of her inheritance, a tower guarding the frontier, to some

35 Alpertus van Metz. *Gebeurtenissen van deze tijd & Een fragment over bisschop Diederik I van Metz*, H. van Rij, ed., (Amsterdam, 1980), 11, 71.

36 Johns, *Noblewomen, aristocracy and power*, 16-17.

neighbours dear, to others terrible'.<sup>37</sup> Maybe even more infamous was Aubrée, wife to Ralph of Ivry, who in the late eleventh century erected an 'almost impregnable castle' at Ivry-la-Bataille, and when it was finished, supposedly had the architect Lanfred killed so that he could not build another like it for another warlord. Like Mabel, she came to a bad end, meeting her death at the hand of her own husband for attempting to expel him from the said castle.<sup>38</sup>

The reason for the defamation of these ladies was not so much the fighting, but the fact that they were out of control and put themselves above the men who had command over them, thus upsetting the gendered hierarchy. Adela ignored her father's will and bossed her husband around; Juliana ignored her father's authority altogether; Mabel took things in her own hand as did Aubrée, who did not accept her husband's authority.

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## The Crusades

The Crusades provided opportunities for women, since, with their husbands being absent and often for longer periods than anticipated, they were required to take care of matters at home. Clemence of Burgundy, wife of Count Robert II of Flanders (1093-1111), for example, effectively ruled his lands when he joined the First Crusade. She did this so well that on his return she remained Robert's co-ruler. Following the demise of her husband and son, she supported William of Ypres as the successor to the throne of Flanders against Charles the Good, and even raised an army to oust Charles (although unsuccessfully in the end).<sup>39</sup> Sybil of Anjou, wife of Thierry of Flanders, also acted as regent when her husband was away in the Holy Land in 1138-1139 and 1147-1149. During this second trip, Baldwin IV of Hainaut took up arms against the Countess, to which she retaliated, so Lambert of Waterlos has it, 'with a virile heart', in spite of her being pregnant. She assembled an army and repelled the Hainaut invaders.<sup>40</sup> On his third trip to the Holy Land, Sybil accompanied her husband and stayed behind when Thierry returned to Flanders. In 1164, he made a fourth trip to Jerusalem, maybe to visit Sybil.<sup>41</sup>

Like Sibyl, a great number of women accompanied their male kin to the Holy Land.<sup>42</sup> Some even went independently, as did Margaret of Beverley, who travelled to the Holy Land during the 1180s and 1190s in order to visit the Holy sites. She got

37 P. Stafford, 'Women and the Norman Conquest', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 4 (1994), 221-249, spec. 227; Johns, *Noblewomen, aristocracy and power*, 15.

38 Truax, 'Anglo-Norman women at war', 113.

39 Nicholas, 'Countesses as rulers in Flanders', 117-120.

40 *Ibidem*, 123.

41 Nicholas, 'Countesses as rulers in Flanders', 128-129.

42 K. Caspi-Reisfeld, *Women warriors during the Crusades 1095-1254*, in: S.B. Edington and S. Lambert, eds, *Gendering the Crusades* (Cardiff, 2001), 91-108, spec. 94.

caught up in the turmoil of the Third Crusade and helped defend Jerusalem during an attack, throwing stones from the wall while using a cooking pot as a helmet. On her return home, she took the veil. Her journey, adventures and above all her sufferings were described by her younger brother, Thomas of Froidmont, in a book entitled *Hodoeporicon et percale Margarite Iherosolimitane*.<sup>43</sup> In spite of the dangers, women went to the Holy Land in such numbers that in 1210 the legal prohibitions against women doing so were lifted.<sup>44</sup>

While some noble ladies came as pilgrims, engaged in diplomacy or provided physical and emotional succour, others (not necessarily noble ladies) partook in the fighting, or so some of the sources would have it.<sup>45</sup> William of Tyre (c. 1130-1186), in his *A History of Deeds Done beyond the Sea*, writes that during the events leading up to the conquest of Jerusalem in 1099: 'Even women, regardless of sex and natural weakness, dared to assume arms and fought manfully, far beyond their strength'. Arab sources, among them the chronicler Imad ad-Din (1125-1201), also mention female warriors for the Third Crusade (1189-1192), writing that 'among the Franks, there were indeed women who rode into battle with cuirasses and helmets, dressed in men's clothes: who rode into the thick of the fray and acted like brave men although they were but tender women'. This was only discovered when the bodies were stripped after the battle was done. In recent years, the veracity of these accounts has been questioned, William of Tyre not having been an eye witness, and Imad ad-Din's account being seen as a construct, as he, by using a century-old *topos* concerning women fighters, intended to represent the crusaders as barbarians who even made their women fight. This idea was given substance by the fact that eyewitness accounts of the events only mention women bringing water to the fighting men and at best throwing stones from ramparts. However, it seems that scholars have been over-critical as in 1982 the skeleton of a female warrior wearing a hauberk was excavated in Caesarea.<sup>46</sup>

43 P.G. Schmidt, "'Peregrinatio Periculosa": Thomas Von Froidmont über die Jerusalemfahrten seiner Schwester Margareta', in: U.J. Stache, W. Maaz and F. Wagner, eds, *Kontinuität und Wandel: Lateinische Poesie von Naevius bis Baudelaire. Franco Munari zum 65. Geburtstag* (Hildesheim, 1986), 461-485.

44 H. Solterer, 'Female militancy in medieval France', *Signs* 16-3 (1991), 522-549, spec. 536. See also J.A. Brundage, *The crusader's wife: a canonistic quandary* (Bologna, 1967), 434; J.A. Brundage, *Medieval canon law and the crusader* (Madison, 1969), 77; E. Siberry, *Criticism of crusading, 1095-1274* (Oxford, 1985), 44-46.

45 Solterer, 'Female militancy', 541; Caspi-Reisfeld, 'Women warriors', 96-100; Nicholson, 'Women on the Third Crusade', 123-124.

46 R.J. Bull et al., *King Herod's dream: Caesarea on the sea* (New York, 1988), 224; cited by K.R. Hager, 'Endowed with manly courage: medieval perceptions of women in combat' (MA thesis, Clemson University, 2018), 12 (accessed at: [https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all\\_theses/2841/](https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses/2841/)).

## On women fighting and their military education and training

The many, and by no means exhaustive examples given above of ladies defending towns and castles, and even taking to battle, raise questions. As Martin Jones put it in his discussion of Willehalm's wife Gyburg, in Wolfram von Eschenbach's epic twelfth-century poem *Willehalm*:

The ubiquity of siege warfare made it [being in charge of the defence of a city or castle] a type of military activity of which they [women] would be fortunate to have had no experience. Indeed, in view of the likelihood of their being exposed to it, it might be said that, of all the forms of medieval warfare, the siege was the one of which it was most appropriate that noblewomen should have some knowledge, sufficient at least for them to take a leading role if the need arose.<sup>47</sup>

92 It is indeed obvious that noblewomen cannot have simply laid down their needlework to take charge of the battlements without any prior military training or knowledge of tactics. That women were taught tactics is shown by Christine de Pizan's *Livre des Trois Vertus* (also known as *Le Trésor de la cité des dames*) of c. 1406, in which she writes that the lady landowner was required to replace her husband in all things during his absence. For this reason was expected to know about law, the management of the estate and she needed to be able to run the entire household wisely, without being extravagant. More importantly for our purpose is that she upheld that noblewomen were also to learn military skills in order to defend their own property: '[w]ith the heart of a man', a woman ought to know how to use weapons and be familiar with everything pertaining to them, to enable her to command her men if the need arose. She should know how to launch an attack or to defend the castle against one, if the situation required this. She should take care that any fortresses under her care be well garrisoned.<sup>48</sup> That Christine herself was well versed in military matters is best exemplified by her *Livre des Faits d'Armes et de chevalerie*, a military handbook written in 1410 for the dauphin Louis of Guyenne at the order of John the Fearless. The book was used by men and women alike. Margaret of Anjou apparently received the treatise as a wedding present from John Talbot, first Earl of Shrewsbury, in 1445 on her marriage to Henry VI of England, and the book was translated into German and English, evidencing its popularity over a prolonged period.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> M.H. Jones, 'Giburg at Orange: the siege as militant event and literary themes', in: M.H. Jones and T. McFarland, eds, *Wolfram's 'Willehalm'. Fifteen essays* (Rochester N.Y./ Woodbridge, 2002), 97-121, esp. 119.

<sup>48</sup> C. de Pizan, *The treasure of the city of ladies, or the book of three virtues*, S.L. Lawson, trans. (Harmondsworth, 1985), part 2, chapter 9, 129.

<sup>49</sup> London, British Library Royal 15.E.VI; Michel-André Bossy, 'Arms and the bride: Christine de Pizan's military treatise as a wedding gift for Margaret of Anjou', in: Marilyn Desmond, ed., *Christine de Pizan and the categories of difference* (Minneapolis, 1998), 236-256.

But tactics are one thing, and truly fighting another. From medieval accounts it appears that women were quite adept at hurling down stones from castle or city walls. When they took up arms, they tended to rely on bow and arrow and crossbows, rather than on battle axes and swords, as they were easier to handle, even though some even knew how to fight with swords.

After the death of her father in 1052, Mathilda of Tuscany came into the possession of a vast part of Italy. As was usual for a noble lady she was taught to embroider and practice other arts according to her station, but, in addition, she was apparently also taught to use various weapons, a sword among them.<sup>50</sup> Whereas the embroidery troubled no one, the idea that Mathilda could handle weaponry has generally been taken with a pinch of salt, and scholars have questioned the veracity of the source. There is however more evidence, dating from a good two centuries later, which suggests that some women at least received an education in sword fighting. A medieval fighting manual made in Franconia (London Royal Armouries manuscript I.33) between 1270 and 1320, teaches advanced sword and shield techniques. Not only is this the first known fighting manual still in existence, it also describes and features four illustrations of a woman named Walpurgis seriously training with a tonsured fencing master to fight in single combat with a sword and buckler, using stances and postures that were adapted to her smaller, female frame.<sup>51</sup>

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But if women did fight, and if some even received military training, why do the medieval sources say so little about this? As Truax already remarked in 1999, the evidence for women being engaged in actual warfare is contradictory:

References to women left in command of besieged castles are numerous, but there is a frustrating lack of detail about the exact role that these women played. Furthermore, descriptions of the same events sometimes differ, and often only one of the accounts mentions the presence of a woman in command. The few accounts of women leading offensive actions are also frustratingly ambiguous, and it seems doubtful that any of the women actually fought in battle and exchanged blows with the enemy.

It is this question that will be addressed below.

One of the main issues was, of course, that women fighting reflected badly on the men who for whatever reason, had failed their primary task in life, that of protecting their women folk. The Old-French *Chanson d'Antioche* of the last quarter of the twelfth century recites how the women in the Crusader camp at Nicaea were either murdered or taken captive by the Muslims (verses 2033-2040).<sup>52</sup> Further on in the poem, the chanson relates how a battalion of women partook in the battle of An-

<sup>50</sup> Grant de Pauw, 'Battle cries and lullabies', 84-85.

<sup>51</sup> K.R. Hager, *Endowed with manly courage*, 5, 7-8 and 20. [https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all\\_theses/2841](https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses/2841) (accessed 26 September 2020).

<sup>52</sup> S. Duparc-Quioc, ed., *La Chanson d'Antioche*, 2 volumes (Paris 1977).



tioch (which did not actually happen). Preferring to die in battle to being taken prisoner and dishonoured if the battle was lost, they took up their staffs, fixed wimples on their heads, collected stones in their sleeves, filled bottles with water and went out of the gates to join their husbands. When the enemy forces became aware of this, they were saddened by the thought that they might not be able to enjoy these women when the fight was over. The husbands on the other hand increased their efforts to win the battle.<sup>53</sup> The poem thus relates the fate of women whose men failed to stand up against the enemy, indicating that women would take their lot into their own hands if the men failed. Seeing their women folk fighting to save their own honour was thus shameful to the men, putting a blot on their manly virtue.<sup>54</sup>

That fighting women reflected badly on the men, is clear from other sources as well. In her article on female militancy in medieval France, Helen Solterer has argued that female participation in the Crusade may even have triggered the anonymous thirteenth-century author to commence his *Li Tournoiement as dames* as follows: ‘These days when chivalry is everywhere on the decline, and no one dares to tourney anymore, and all knights are cowards, women are all the more courageous in battle’.<sup>55</sup> In this version of the poem, attributed to Pierre Gencien, the ladies wear armour, carry weapons and know how to wield them. They combat each other furiously, even wound one another and in the end a winner emerges, who makes Gencien exclaim: ‘No man has seen her like. Ah. Roland (...) if you had had women of such strength in your company’ (lines 1624-1627). During the combat, the ladies intended to show their prowess at combat and prove ‘how they could bear arms for the holy voyage overseas’ (lines 53-56).<sup>56</sup> Interestingly, the oldest version of the poem has survived in two manuscripts where its authorship is claimed by ‘Me sire Hues d’Oisi’, the warden of Cambrai Huon III, Lord of Oisy (Pas-de-Calais), who died in 1190.<sup>57</sup> Apparently, he was disgusted by the lack of action from the king and his nobles following the retaking of Jerusalem by the sultan of Egypt in 1187, and therefore wrote the poem to show that even women had more guts.<sup>58</sup> Again, the female participation in combat was intended as a reproach to the men who had failed to act when Jerusalem had fallen.

53 S.B. Edgington, ‘Sont çou ore ls fems que jo voi la venir? Women in the *Chanson d’Antioche*’, in: S.B. Edgington and S. Lambert, eds, *Gendering the Crusades* (Cardiff, 2001), 154-162, spec. 155-156.

54 Edgington writes that the passage was intended as a comic interlude, an opinion that I do not share.

55 H. Petersen Dyggve, ‘Personnages historiques figurant dans la poésie lyrique française des XII e et XIII e siècles. III: Les dames du ‘Tournoiement’ de Huon d’Oisi’, *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 36-2 (1935), 1-29, 65-91, 145-192 and 37 (1936), 257-283; quoted by Solterer, ‘Female militancy’, 522.

56 Solterer, ‘Female militancy’, 524 and 537.

57 Petersen Dyggve, ‘Personnages historiques’, 67.

58 Ibidem, 67-68.

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## Silence

Clearly, a belligerent lifestyle was not one a medieval lady was expected to aspire to. On the authority of the Bible book Deuteronomy 22:5 – '[t]he woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God' – women were forbidden to dress like men and the Church was also averse to them bearing arms and wearing armour. Women who did not heed this were considered wicked, evil creatures, particularly in the writings of the Church. The attitude of canon law towards powerful and military-minded women therefore tended to be that of rejection.<sup>59</sup> What is more, being of the weaker sex, it was considered unthinkable that women could be successful fighters, for in order to gain 'virtus' in war, surely one needed to be a 'vir', a man.<sup>60</sup> Medieval men therefore did not like fighting women. What they did like was described in the twelfth-century *Roman d'Eneas* (verses 7075-81 and 7084-88), where a knight named Craton criticizes the extremely successful female warrior Camilla:

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I see you striking down our knights, but a woman should not do battle, except at night, lying down; there she can defeat any man. But a bold man with a shield will never be defeated by a woman ... Stop exhibiting your prowess. That is not your calling, but rather to spin, to sew, and to clip. It is good to do battle with a maiden like you in a beautiful chamber, beneath a bed curtain'.

He then offers her money to enjoy her, a slight that she answers by hacking him to death.<sup>61</sup>

For a woman to take an active part in warfare, even though it could not be avoided at all times, was not considered to be very lady-like.<sup>62</sup> It is also true that some ladies at least were quite good at fending for themselves and their deeds and exploits at arms often met with respect. This was especially so if such acts of violence were conducted out of a necessity to defend oneself, one's castle or one's faith, but only then. In 1141, Queen Mathilda freed her husband King Stephen, who had been captured at Lincoln, by raising an enormous army and by besieging her husband's rival, Empress Mathilda, in Winchester. The freeing of her husband having been achieved, 'Mathilda returned to her chambers and never wanted to get involved in war again'.<sup>63</sup>

The following passage from Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Willehalm* therefore sums up to perfection why we read so little about women doing the actual fighting. In this

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59 Hay, 'Canon laws', 287-315.

60 Hager, 'Endowed with manly courage', 27. Of course, this is not to deny that women could not achieve 'virtus' in other fields.

61 Kochanske Stock, 'Arms and the (wo)man', 65.

62 H.J. Nicholson, 'La Damoisele del Chastel', in: M. Sinibaldi et al., eds, *Crusader landscapes in the medieval Levant. The archeology and history of the Latin East* (University of Wales Press, 2016), 387-402.

63 Nicholson, 'Women on the Third Crusade', 346.

tale Willehalm's wife Gyburg defends the castle of Orange while he rides to Munleon to find support for his war against the pagans. Left alone with her women and some old men, Gyburg suggests they put on armour to defend the besieged castle. In so doing, Gyburg acted as a man: 'manlîch sprach das wîp, als ob si manlichen lîp, und mannes herze trüege'.<sup>64</sup> The ladies defend the castle by shooting arrows with a crossbow and hurling down stones. Just as they manage to break the siege, Willehalm announces his return with the auxiliary troops. The women remove their armour and wash away all traces of blood and gore from their bodies. Gyburg tells them to not speak of the troubles they have endured, but to put on their best clothes to welcome the returning knights and to entertain them with their female arts.<sup>65</sup> In short, everyone acted as if the female participation in the siege had never happened.

96 Women fighting? In the medieval view, although it could not be helped at times, the least said about it the better. It is no coincidence that the heroine of Heldris de Cornuaille's thirteenth-century Old-French romance was given the name Silence. Her parents brought Silence up as a boy to enable her to inherit their estates and she grew up to be a formidable warrior, thus challenging commonly held gender notions.<sup>66</sup>

64 E. Feistner, 'Manlîchiu wîp, wîplîche man: zum Kleidertausch in der Literatur des Mittelalters', *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 119-2 (1997), 235-260.

65 K. Starkey, 'Das unfeste Geschlecht. Überlegungen zur Entwicklung einer volkssprachlichen Ikonographie am Beispiel des *Welschen Gasts*', in: *Visualisierungsstrategien in mittelalterlichen Bildern und Texten* (Berlin, 2006), 99-139, spec. 129.

66 Heldris de Cornuaille, *Le roman de Silence*, R. Psaki, ed. and trans., (New York/London, 1991); P. McCracken, "'The boy who was a girl": Reading gender in the "Roman de Silence"', *Romantic Review* 85-4 (1994), 517-536.

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**Elizabeth den Hartog**

## ‘Defending the castle like a man’: on belligerent medieval ladies

Contemporary evidence shows that between approximately the eleventh and fourteenth centuries noble women not only defended and built castles and commanded troops, but sometimes even partook in fighting. In fact, the examples of women involved in warfare are so numerous that they must have received some sort of military education. This article is concerned with the question why medieval sources, if female participation in war acts was indeed fairly widespread, played down this female involvement to the point of hushing up women’s role in military events almost completely. It will be suggested that the main reasons for this were, firstly, that it was considered unladylike to fight, even though it was a necessary evil when things got out of hand, and, secondly, that the necessity for women to fight reflected badly on men. The least said about female participation in warfare was therefore considered the better.

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**Elizabeth den Hartog** is senior lecturer in medieval art and architecture at the Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society. She specialises in architecture, sculpture and the furnishings of medieval churches in the Netherlands, but also has an interest in castles and country houses. Apart from her ongoing research into the architectural sculpture in relation to the liturgical division and use of space in Dutch churches and on medieval building inscriptions in the Netherlands, her current interests include castle building around the world and the sixteenth-century iconoclasm in the Netherlands.

Leiden University, Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society, P.N. van Eyckhof 2, 2311 BV Leiden  
– E.den.hartog@hum.leidenuniv.nl

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