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Knighthood and noble society in the European Middle Ages

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David Crouch and Jeroen Deploige, eds, *Knighthood and society in the High Middle Ages*, *Mediaevalia Lovaniensia* 48 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2020, xii + 317 p., ill., index)

The figure of the knight is synonymous with the public perception of the Middle Ages and is now the focus of a large body of modern scholarship across numerous national historiographies. Due to the breadth and depth of its contribution on knights, knighthood, and the origins of chivalry, this volume deserves to occupy a position of prime importance in this densely populated historiographical field.

There are eleven chapters by individual contributors, in addition to a co-authored introduction by the editors. This introduction gives a very useful outline of the main contours of the historiography (pp. 4-10) and the issue of knighthood and nobilisation (pp. 10-16), as well as a succinct summary of the chapters to follow. The main theme of the volume is how, when, and why the knight became noble: how, between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, 'knighthood evolved from a set of skills and a lifestyle that was typical of an emerging elite habitus, into the basis of a consciously expressed and idealised chivalric code of conduct' (p. 1). This book, then, examines the dynamics and consequences of the medieval confluence between knighthood and nobility over time and space, and seeks to open up discussions within and across areas of study.

The chapters themselves are organised thematically, in sections entitled 'Noble Warriors, Warring Nobles', 'Knighthood and Lineage', 'Martial Ideals in Crusading Memories', 'Women in Chivalric Representation', and 'Didactics of Chivalry'. The first two chapters in

Section I provide broad overviews of the subject in France and the Holy Roman Empire respectively. Dominique Barthélemy examines the French evidence for dubbing, tournaments and norms of war and, in keeping with his many seminal works on French social history, rejects the mutationist-thesis that the knight rose into noble society around the year 1000 as a result of radical social change. Instead, Barthélemy sees more continuity in the status of knighthood from the ninth century to the twelfth and suggests dubbing functioned as a rite which conserved the status of noble heirs when they came of age, rather than transforming the position of a lower status mounted warrior (pp. 39-40). In the Empire, on the other hand, Jörg Peltzer does detect a fundamental shift in the status of knighthood in the central Middle Ages. The position of the *ministeriales*, unfree men who served their lords as administrators and warriors, was central to this shift. Under the influence of courtly literature and clerical teaching, chivalry emerged by the end of the twelfth century and bound nobles of all ranks together. Simultaneously, knighthood became a way for *ministeriales* to claim membership of this aristocratic, chivalric world: ‘the differences between knighthood and aristocracy became blurred. Being a knight became almost synonymous with being an aristocrat’ (p. 66). Indeed, Peltzer sees the knighting ceremony as becoming particularly important for the lower nobility, since it distinguished the noble from the non-noble (pp. 66-68). The final chapter in this section examines the position of the paid soldier. Eljas Oksanen shows how English attitudes towards those who took money for military service became increasingly negative through the second half of the twelfth century. In the case of Flemish and Welsh soldiers, these English attitudes were bound up in views of national superiority but, more broadly, the mercenary came to be seen as the chivalric knight’s dark shadow. Crucially, however, a great deal of tension and some self-deception was involved in this process, and Oksanen shows how those most invested in chivalric self-definition often also took the financial rewards of paid military service (pp. 90-92).

The next section features two essays which explore the noble family. The first, by Sara McDougall, is less directly concerned with the changing status of knighthood which informed the essays in the previous section. It is, however, seminal. Drawing on research into family identities, marriages, and inheritance customs across Western Europe in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, McDougall argues that there was no rigid system of inheritance, let alone a settled form of primogeniture, and that maternal kin should be emphasized far more in defining the family. Therefore, ‘we cannot imagine medieval social order as governed by the kind of male-dominated legalism imagined by Duby’ (p. 113). Although there is not space to discuss it directly, the chronology of primogeniture may therefore tie into the ‘chivalric transformation’ elucidated by other contributions in this volume. Jean-François Nieuws, by contrast, examines how one family – from Chocques in southern Flanders – thought of itself over time. Nieuws argues that one Sigard occupied a high-ranking military position in the service of the Count of Flanders in the late tenth century. Sigard’s descendants are then traced in detail until the twelfth century, in pursuit of ‘a retrospective view of Sigard’s own place in his world, and what sort of a man might be a *miles* at the court of Arnulf I’ (p. 127). Sigard’s great-grandson (also Sigard) is revealed as a magnate of considerable means and high standing in both Hainault and southern Flanders, and Nieuws argues that the groundwork for this was laid by Sigard I, and therefore that a *miles* belonged to the upper echelons

of the late tenth-century Flemish aristocracy. The research underpinning this chapter is exemplary but there is a danger of anachronism here in reading status backwards through time in such a manner.

The next section shifts the focus to crusaders and their memorialisation. John D. Hosler examines four eyewitness accounts of the siege of Acre (1189-91) during the Third Crusade. He argues that writers 'often attributed positive or negative outcomes to the mere behaviour of warrior elites, even when tactics or other elements were really to blame' (p. 147) and that in these accounts prowess was linked to status, honour and piety to form a moral code for military conduct which informed contemporary views of war. Nicholas L. Paul provides a fascinating account of a collection of texts (probably composed 1177-1211) which commemorated the translation of a major relic of the True Cross to the abbey of St Gerard of Brogne (near Namur). These works comprise 'one of the largest programmes of writing dedicated to a lay nobleman primarily in his capacity as a knight and nobleman' (p. 169) and, crucially, 'fall within the period between roughly 1180 and 1220 identified by some historians of chivalry as the critical time for the codification of aristocratic behaviour' (p. 170). Paul's micro-history reveals how Manasses of Hierges was positioned as an ideal 'avatar' for the new chivalry by the monks of Brogne.

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Part IV provides a welcome consideration of aristocratic women and the chivalric world. In a scholarly tour de force, Louise J. Wilkinson argues that such women were intimately intertwined with chivalry, which offered important ideals of appearance, moral virtue, and proper behaviour. Idealised representations of female conduct are examined, before Wilkinson turns to the role of aristocratic women in hosting, education, dancing, marriage preparations, heraldry, architectural patronage and religious observances. Perhaps most revealing is the focus on the nature of nobility, which allows Wilkinson to suggest: 'If true nobility was virtue and virtue was the central tenet of chivalry then a woman could by that measure be as chivalrous as a man' (p. 203). Nicolas Ruffini-Ronzani examines the *Tournoiement des dames*, a poem written 1185-89 by Hugh of Oisy, a prominent figure in Champagne, Flanders and the Latin East. This extremely interesting work imagined a tournament attended not by knights but by their wives, and Ruffini-Ronzani suggests: 'Hugh emphasises the role of women in courtly milieus, in which the relationships between the sexes were an important topic' (p. 240). Indeed, most of the women were based on real people (p. 241), and Hugh may even have performed his poem in front of them, so the author argues that 'the objective of the lord of Oisy was to enlarge, or to reinforce, his networks in an area in which his family had not been established for all that long' (p. 246).

The two essays in the final section on didactics work well in tandem. Claudia Wittig provides a formidable survey of German-language conduct texts written primarily for an audience of ministerial knights and argues that they discussed knighthood (*Ritterschaft*) in a new way in the twelfth century. Their clerical authors 'aimed to construct and teach a particular image of chivalry that integrated the chivalrous knight into the divine order of the world' (p. 254). This important and erudite chapter shows how chivalry came in the second half of the century to function as a behavioural norm shared both by the great lords and the noble knights who administered their lands. David Crouch discusses didactic tracts from across western Europe. His chapter is organised around three sub-genres of conduct litera-

ture: a Latin ‘Catonian’ tradition derived from schoolroom exercises; a more explicitly theological ‘Salomonic’ tradition of sermon literature; and a vernacular ‘instructional’ tradition. In the decades around 1200, elements of these sub-genres mutated into the classic chivalric tract, which taught the hyper-moral code of chivalry to the now-consciously noble knight. Thus, chivalry grew from earlier codes of conduct teaching courteous behaviour to one and all into a socially exclusive and restricted code of conduct focused on the figure of the knight (pp. 293-5).

The volume itself is handsomely produced by Leuven University Press and contains numerous illustrations. All of the contributions have something important to offer. Specialists in their respective regions will need to read the most relevant chapters, and historians of the Iberian Peninsula, Italy and central Europe will wish to test the ideas contained here on their own patches of ground. But the editors have also managed to forge a volume which is more valuable than the sum of its collective parts. It achieves two particularly important aims.

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Firstly, it forces numerous national historiographies to talk to one another, which is extremely beneficial if sometimes intellectually uncomfortable. The Anglophone reader (and reviewer) in particular will find much new here, not least in the frequent use of literary evidence rather than administrative or legal material. Secondly, our understanding of the key theme of the nobilisation of the knight is greatly enhanced by the conceptual richness and sound scholarship of this volume. It is certainly notable that many of the contributors place this nobilisation – and the associated origins of chivalry – towards the end of the twelfth century. But there is no full consensus on chronology. As the editors themselves note (pp. 23-24), Barthélemy and Nieuw place the noble knight significantly further back in time than, for example, Peltzer or Crouch. And since many of the chapters date the chivalric ‘cultural turn’ quite precisely to ca. 1180-1230, the idea of a ‘long’ twelfth century is not a wholly convincing way to reconcile these differences (p. 26). Clearly, more work is needed on the chronology of nobilisation, how this varied across regions, and whether, in the end, what we are looking at is part of a common, connective phenomenon or something more regional, where the differences are as marked as the similarities. That such paths for research can now be seen with more clarity and precision is the achievement of this book. Along these lines, there are two bibliographic supplements readers may wish to pursue. First is David Crouch’s *The chivalric turn. Conduct and hegemony in Europe before 1300* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), which expands on his chapter here. Secondly, readers may wish to contrast the arguments of Thomas Bisson, *The crisis of the twelfth century. Power, lordship, and the origins of European government* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009): this is cited only once (p. 251) and never discussed, but Bisson does focus on norms of aristocratic behaviour, although in a very different way.

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