



Nichole Chareyron. *Pilgrims to Jerusalem in the Middle Ages*. Donald Wilson. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. 287 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-13230-5.

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A Literary Journey to Jerusalem

In today's complex world of Western presence in the Middle East where the Crusades have been invoked as an antecedent for contemporary political relations, having a clearer understanding of the history of the West's interaction with this region is essential. In making available this translation of Nicole Chareyron's French volume, originally published in 2000, Columbia University Press may have been hoping to meet some of the desire for a historical background for these current-day political and religious interactions. On the book jacket flap this work is billed as "reveal[ing] the complex interactions between Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the Holy Land." While this interaction does become a minor element of Chareyron's path through the Jerusalem journey, this book is not focused on developing the religious studies' dialogue on medieval interactions.^[1] Instead this work offers a solid examination of the practical realities and literary nuances of Jerusalem pilgrimage and pilgrimage accounts in the later Middle Ages.

Recognizing Chareyron's background and intent is essential to appreciating her contribution in clarifying this era of Western travel to the Middle East. The very nature of an interdisciplinary field such as medieval studies allows students and scholars of the era to learn from those in different disciplines; however, this cross-disciplinary approach to shared topics can also be a source of frustration. Chareyron is working neither strictly in the field of religious studies, nor in the field of history. She is a professor of medieval languages and literature. It is also important to note that this is specifically a compendium of late medieval pilgrimage accounts, focusing on the fourteenth through the early sixteenth centuries, not a broader analysis of medieval pilgrims to Jerusalem.

Understanding her focus and professional interests helps to clarify the contributions of this work as well to account for that which is lacking. Chareyron's natural strength is her storytelling ability. It was during

the later Middle Ages that the number of pilgrim texts dramatically expanded, and Chareyron offers a synthesis of over a hundred of the published late medieval texts. She manages to distill the general pattern while allowing individual voices and personalities to add flavor and concrete illustrations. The organization of the book follows the journey of the pilgrims a chapter at a time: to Venice to arrange passage; across the Mediterranean in anticipation and discomfort ("Five Weeks in a Galley"); arrival at the Holy Land with joy; and then, step by step, to Jerusalem and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. For some pilgrims with adequate means the journey continued on to the sacred places of Sinai and beyond to "Cairo, City of Lights" and "Alexandria, Sentry of the East." The topics of the seventeen chapters of the book follow the sequence of pilgrims' journeys to the East and back, ending with a reflective chapter and a helpful appendix of "Pilgrims' Profiles."

Chareyron's eye for detail as well as the general narrative arc of the book makes this account generally accessible for a reader with little background in this field. Her close reading of so many sources gives her ample resources to illustrate the concrete realities of medieval life on the road. Issues of food, sanitation, discomfort, and worries about being overcharged resonate with modern readers and these familiar themes make the medieval conditions understandable and also all the more striking. The end result of her mining this extensive pilgrimage literature for quotes and data is generally effective and an important contribution. At times, however, the effect of bringing authors' quotes together on the same subject feels awkward and artificially cobbled together. This occasional unevenness can be noted in a few places where the transitions seem a little awkward or confusing: "Singing like a wolf was not a very serious offense. But woe betide anyone who chanced to meet outlaws!" (p. 136, see also pp. 203, 204). While the English translation is generally smooth, there are a few occasions where the

French sense of a word is preserved, making for an awkward rendering. Such is the case with the term “hero” (pp. 204, 206). Speaking of Niccolò da Martoni’s journey after he was forced to disembark by pirates, she comments: “There, in spite of himself, our hero fell into a depression” (p. 206). The somewhat discordant literary sense of the term may also be related to her thesis about changes in literary form. Earlier she comments that “In the fifteenth century the transformation of the desert and its way of life into a narrative subject led to the emergence of a heroic figure who was not merely an observer but also an imitator” (p. 141).

While the familiarity of a travel narrative’s framework makes the pilgrims’ experience fairly easily accessible, it is, in fact, this accessibility that is worrisome from a historian’s point of view. The framework of Chareyron’s perception inevitably shapes her selection of data and often the issues and reference point have a distinctly modern slant. The devotional dimension of pilgrimage seems overshadowed by the interest in the journey. Referring to their arrival at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, she says: “It was there that they all united for a procession led by the Franciscans and where they discovered the entire spectrum of the world’s churches and the astonishing spectacle of their respective rites” (p. 91). The role of the Franciscans in shaping the experience of Jerusalem pilgrimage into a meditation on the Passion of Christ is underdeveloped and I believe that this focus minimizes the pilgrims’ religious goal of participating in Christ’s sufferings. It is difficult to know to what extent this feeling is a result of the focus of the bulk of texts themselves or the interpretive voice of a secular academic.[2]

Although the narrative of *Pilgrims to Jerusalem* is filled with concrete details, the sense that contemporary issues and theories rather than the late medieval world dominate Chareyron’s focus continues to resurface (pp. 101, 136, 184, 197, 207, 217). Accompanying Chareyron’s ongoing travel narrative appear somewhat disjointed (but very French) references to theories and philosophical issues of such as the experience of time and space (p. 57 n. 37). With this loose application of theoretical issues the book reads more like a personal meditation on these broader themes. Her primary analytical focus is the literary style of texts rather historical movements, which again is not surprising for a professor of literature. A pervasive theme she continues to return to is that the discourse of exoticism developed over time during this era. This argument is, however, not systematically developed and thus she is not able to make as strong a case as she might have.

Chareyron has a keen eye for the literary style of texts, but she uses these texts in a straightforward and almost naive way that is quite surprising to a historian. Her discussion of the sources sometimes seems too credulous and she seems willing to accept all sources at face value. A striking example of this is the very light treatment of the question of the historicity of John Mandeville’s journey, a notorious issue in late medieval pilgrimage texts (pp. 10, 226-27). This reading of the texts is an interesting contrast to challenges raised by literary theory-influenced history (post-“linguistic turn”). A strikingly opposite reading that rejects the historicity of the text for literary creation is, for example, Lynn Staley’s reading of the *Book of Margery Kempe* as Kempe’s creation of Margery’s pilgrimage as a fiction.[3] This approach can have serious drawbacks, however, and Chareyron’s straightforward presentation of the pilgrimage accounts can serve as a counterbalance to extreme skepticism. While the questions of the historicity of events will always remain complicated from a historical point of view, Chareyron’s careful reading of these texts does give some insights into cultural history by observing changes in topics of concern over time (pp. 171, 182).

With Chareyron’s thorough exploration of these rich texts we have a clearer sense of the composite experience of the journey to Jerusalem. While her own interest is primarily literary, she makes an outstanding contribution to understanding the everyday life of this voyage. The pilgrims’ trials and hardships become tangible and she offers a solid foundation for understanding the logistics and dynamics of pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the later Middle Ages.

Notes

[1]. A very helpful recent study of how Islam was perceived in the medieval West is provided by John Tolan’s *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

[2]. Within this literature there are clear examples in which the inner life of the pilgrim becomes the highlight of the text, but these writings are not typical. The challenge of discerning the widespread late medieval devotional attitudes of Passion piety in Jerusalem pilgrimage accounts is discussed by Colin Morris in “Pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the Late Middle Ages,” in *Pilgrimage: The English Experience from Becket to Bunyan*, ed. Colin Morris and Peter Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 141-63.

[3]. See Lynn Staley, *Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fictions* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).

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