

Stefan Vander Elst. *The Knight, the Cross, and the Song: Crusade Propaganda and Chivalric Literature, 1100-1400.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017. 288 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-4896-8.

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Published on H-Diplo (August, 2017)

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The cover of Stefan Vander Elst's *The Knight, the Cross, and the Song: Crusade Propaganda and Chivalric Literature, 1100-1400* features the painting *God Speed!* by Edmund Blair Leighton—a pure shot of undiluted nineteenth-century romanticism. A mustachioed knight on a white stallion prepares to depart for battle while a fair-haired maiden ties a red scarf around his chain-mailed arm, in pledge and prayer for his safe return. The image suggests that Vander Elst's book will be an exercise in medievalism, and it is indeed a study of nostalgia, an examination of imagined worlds and highly fictionalized crusading expeditions. The texts he examines, however, are by medieval writers: historians, troubadours, and composers of *chansons de geste* and Arthurian romances. Beginning in the aftermath of the First Crusade and continuing until 1396 and the failed siege of Nicopolis, Vander Elst aims to show how celebrants, proponents, and propagandists drew upon contemporary literary traditions to engage and inspire audiences, just as Edmund Blair Leighton would do five centuries later.

In developing this argument, Vander Elst proceeds chronologically, each chapter offering an overview of historical events paired with an examination of texts produced in connection with those events. The historical-narrative trajectory

begins with the text usually considered the *ur*-chronicle of the crusades, the anonymous *Gesta Francorum*. Vander Elst somewhat misleadingly describes it as a book that enjoyed “wide and enduring popularity” (p. 28). In fact, it survives in relatively few manuscripts of early date. Vander Elst also speaks of the text's “sophisticated Latin” (p. 49), though its linguistic quality is, by any fair standard, primitive. It was influential for other reasons. First, more talented writers chose to rewrite it in a higher diction. These chroniclers were drawn to the *Gesta* at least in part because its author had great storytelling instincts—a product, likely, of his familiarity with *chansons de geste*, a point which Vander Elst forcefully demonstrates. The goal of the *Gesta Francorum*, Vander Elst suggests, was similar to that of the *chansons*: to inspire knightly audiences to feats of valor, specifically in this case to join the crusade and shore up the nascent crusader states. The *Gesta* author drew on the language of the *chansons* to create new crusaders, not because their images and ideas necessarily connected to the crusade itself.

Vander Elst next focuses on Robert the Monk, one of the three aforementioned writers who thoroughly revised the *Gesta*. Robert's *Historia Iherosolimita* was the most popular of any of the

crusade histories, surviving in eighty-four manuscripts, based on the count of Damien Kempf and Marcus Bull, its most recent editors. According to Vander Elst, Robert reinterprets the *Gesta* in two fundamental ways. First, he stresses the exegetical parallels between Christian victories in the Levant and Old Testament stories of wars in the Promised Land. Second, the Franks—understood now as the people of Francia rather than western Europeans more generally—had claimed the mantle of “the new chosen people.” The crusade thus becomes more akin to an adventure story infused with Old Testament values, a tale of Frankish heroes on a quest rather than a penitential journey leading pilgrims to a Jerusalem both ethical and literal. When the crusaders suffered from hunger, thirst, disease, or military setback, they did so not as acts of purification, but rather because God was admonishing them to correct their behavior. It is a subtle but crucial distinction, and it is a reversal of the usual interpretation of the project undertaken by Robert and his monastic peers. Long ago defined by Jonathan Riley-Smith as a practitioner of “theological refinement,” Robert the Monk is seen by Vander Elst instead as someone who divested the crusade story of theological baggage.[1] Instead of obsessing over indulgence and penance, Robert delights in the pure adventure of his tale.

There is some doubt about the historical narrative presented in Vander Elst’s arguments. Specifically, he preserves the traditional model that Bohemond of Antioch, while touring Europe in 1106 to raise a new army, distributed copies of the *Gesta Francorum* as propaganda pamphlets to his audiences. Crusade historians have begun to reject this interpretation on at least two counts. First, Kempf and Bull have proposed a later date for the composition of Robert’s *Historia*, thus separating its conception from Bohemond’s preaching tour.[2] Second, Nicholas Paul has argued against Bohemond’s use of the *Gesta Francorum* for recruitment purposes altogether, noting Bohemond’s preference for visual and oral propagan-

da.[3] Only a few scholars, Jean Flori and me among them, still argue for a direct connection between Bohemond and the spread of the *Gesta Francorum*, so it is therefore at least possible to maintain this reading.[4] Vander Elst, however, needed to do due diligence here. Rather than simply acknowledge the existence of a debate in endnotes, he needed explain why he accepts a school of thought now held suspect in many quarters.

Vander Elst next turns to *chanson* literature proper, particularly the Old French Crusade Cycle—the *Chanson d’Antioche*, *Les Chétifs*, and the *Chanson de Jérusalem*. These poems (particularly the earliest of them, the *Chanson d’Antioche*) contain resonances with the Latin chronicles, but Vander Elst views them primarily as literary creations intended, again, to inspire crusading passions among the nobility, particularly after the successive failures Second Crusade in 1148 and the loss of Jerusalem in 1187. The recurring themes in these *chansons* are family ties and the acts of vengeance that those family ties so often demand. Crusading families, however, extend beyond kin groups and shared bloodlines. They also include the rival confessional families of Christians (sons of Christ) and Saracens (sons of Antichrist), and the grand social family of France. In connection with this last grouping, Vander Elst observes that in the world of the *chansons*, all levels of French society fight together in harmony. This sense of unity is especially apparent in Jerusalem, where a prominent role is given to the lower-class Tafurs (their notorious cannibalism here receives only passing mention in an endnote).

The last of these *chansons*, the *Chanson de Jérusalem*, is the most problematic and serves as a transitional text leading into the second part of *The Knight, the Cross, and the Song*. It marks, in Vander Elst’s analysis, the moment when romance displaces the ideals of the *chansons de geste*. Women take more prominent roles in the *Chanson de Jérusalem*, and romantic love serves as a primary motive for the activity of the knights. In

his fascinating sixth chapter, Vander Elst finds similar romantic sensibilities at work in a history of the Teutonic Knights, the *Chronica Terre Pruissie* by Peter of Duisburg, or at least in a contemporary translation of it. For the translator, Nicolaus of Jeroschin, introduces plot elements (damsels-in-distress) and narrative techniques (entrelacement, the equivalent of cinematic cross-cutting) taken directly from the works of romance writers like Chrétien de Troyes. The conceptualizations here of “romance” and its cousin “courtly love” are traditional, which risks eliciting another skeptical response from historians. After all, Georges Duby long ago downplayed the significance of women in knightly culture, and Richard Kaeuper more recently interpreted the lion’s share of chivalric literature as a celebration of masculinity and violence.[5] Kaeuper’s work is briefly referenced in endnotes, but *The Knight, the Cross, and the Song* would have benefited from a full-throated engagement with the revisionist scholarship of him and others.

Traditional or not, however, the intersections between crusade and romance that Vander Elst highlights are often surprising and delightful. To take my favorite example: In the fourteenth-century *Le Bâtard de Bouillon*, a text seldom referenced and even less frequently read, the historical King Baldwin I of Jerusalem leads a fictional campaign against Mecca and crosses the Red Sea. From there he finds himself in the land of Faërie, where he holds court with King Arthur. Camelot on the Arabian Peninsula? In a similar, if less charming, instance, Vander Elst treats the works of Guillaume de Machaut, particularly his *Prise d’Alixandrie*, a celebration of the fleeting military successes of Peter I of Cyprus against the Mamluk Sultanate. Borrowing classical imagery (Peter is the product equally of Mars and Venus, created by Nature at the behest of the Roman pantheon) and from Chrétien de Troyes (as with Lancelot, Peter is not named until several hundred lines of poetry have passed), Machaut creates an ideal crusader altogether disassociated from the expedition’s

original program. By this point, Vander Elst concludes, “there was little holy about holy war” (p. 188). Of course, one might wonder if there were ever anything holy about holy war, or whether territorial acquisition represents “a less elevated motive” for warfare or whether wars founded on greed represent an appeal “to the darker side of human nature” (p. 15). Killing in the name of religious purity, after all, is as base or dark and often as brutal an enterprise as one can imagine. But the basic narrative trajectory here is sound. By the late fourteenth century, the original justifications for crusade had vanished.

The Knight, the Cross, and the Song thus presents a coherent, well argued, and engaging narrative about the development of crusade literature and the interactions between history and poetry. Inevitably, with a chronology so wide and a potential source selection so vast, there will be quibbles as to what topics are engaged, what scholars cited, and what sources analyzed. The interpretation of Saracen characters, for example, seems an underdeveloped theme, and the work of Suzanne Conklin Akbari, especially *Idols in the East: European Representations of Islam and the Orient, 1100-1450* (2009), is notably absent from the bibliography. As for primary sources, the metrical history of the First Crusade by Gilo of Paris is potentially a missing link between the narrative of Robert the Monk and the *chanson* literature of the later Middle Ages, but it goes unexplored here.

Moving to a more fundamental criticism, Vander Elst is not always well served by his core assumption—that crusade texts were primarily *excitatoria*, intended to increase enthusiasm and recruitment for the enterprise. Many of the texts examined, particularly the chronicles of the First Crusade, could surely have served less as propaganda and more as celebrations—monuments or memorials to the achievements of the crusaders. As such, they would have drawn on the language of the *chansons de geste* not only because the writers wanted to recruit knights, but also be-

cause that was where writers—and presumably knights, too—found the conceptual and emotional vocabulary necessary for understanding war against Islam. Vander Elst is thus absolutely correct to place historical narrative in dialogue with epic and romance, but he may have underestimated the degree of reciprocity characteristic of this dialogue. The story of Godfrey of Bouillon's descent from the Swan Knight, which Vander Elst associates with a turn toward romance in the thirteenth century (pp. 113-116), was first mentioned in the twelfth-century chronicles of William of Tyre, who expressed skepticism about it but acknowledged that it was already a popular tale. Likewise, the trope of a crusader befriending a lion in the East, presented here as a product of the thirteenth-century legend of Gille de Chyn, with presumed borrowings from Chrétien de Troyes's *Yvain* (pp. 121-122), finds its first enunciation in twelfth-century legends about the crusader Gouffier of Lastours. Likewise, one did not need to await the fourteenth century to find a reconciliation (or at least a healthy interplay) between courtly love and holy war. This tension most obviously animates the memoirs of Jean de Joinville, St. Louis's companion. Earlier still, the crusader Robert of Clari imagined Greek women inside the walls of Constantinople in 1204 swooning at the prowess of Latin knights. The sense of adventure and the amatory ideals that did come to dominate crusade literature were thus as much a creation of the crusade as they were an attempt by narrators to adapt their stories to changing cultural tastes. Not wholly products of nostalgia like Leighton's painting, the chronicles, *chansons*, and romances offer not just windows onto a society's dreamy self-conception; they did not simply respond to ethical and romantic sensibilities in the name of recruitment. Rather, in tandem with the wars they described or celebrated, they actively gave form to those same sensibilities.

These criticisms, however, ought not detract from the qualities of this monograph, which at times made me, as a crusade historian, feel like

the proverbial kid in the candy shop. Avalon next to Mecca—how cool is that? It also could potentially serve as a starting point in what ought to be a crucial, interdisciplinary dialogue. The crusade set in motion all at once cultural, literary, and military revolutions. Students of history, theology, and literature—of East and West, of Christianity and Islam in their various guises—need to be talking with one another and thinking about each other's base of sources. Thanks to *The Knight, the Cross, and the Song*, we can move closer to setting these different genres, events, and transformations into a proper conversation.

Notes

[1]. Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The First Crusade and the Idea of Crusading* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 135-152.

[2]. Robert the Monk, *The Historia Iherosolim- itana of Robert the Monk*, ed. Damien Kempf and Marcus G. Bull (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2013).

[3]. Nicholas Paul, "A Warlord's Wisdom: Literacy and Propaganda at the Time of the First Crusade," *Speculum* 85 (2010): 534-566.

[4]. Jean Flori, *Chroniqueurs et propagandistes: Introduction critique aux sources de la Première croisade* (Geneva: Droz 2010); and Jay Rubenstein, "The *Deeds of Bohemond: Reform, Propaganda, and the History of the First Crusade*," *Viator* 47 (2017): 113-135.

[5]. Richard Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Notes

[1] Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The First Crusade and the Idea of Crusading* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 135-152.

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Citation: Jay Rubenstein. Review of Vander Elst, Stefan. *The Knight, the Cross, and the Song: Crusade Propaganda and Chivalric Literature, 1100-1400*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. August, 2017.

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