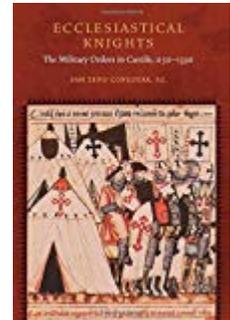




Sam Zeno Conedera. *Ecclesiastical Knights: The Military Orders in Castile, 1150-1330.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2015. xi + 258 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8232-6595-4.



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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

For me as a Middle East specialist the military orders represent a tangential interest as they intersect Middle East history only in relation to the Crusades; however, developing a proper view of their nature, role, and mission is important. It is difficult to obtain this from much of the historiography of the Crusades and the military orders as it currently stands. The historiography has mostly stagnated and has become overwhelmingly the preserve of pop historians, such as W. B. Bartlett. These “historians” often merely pantomime the easily accessible and uncritical lower scholarly shelf views and attitudes towards the military orders, of which there were many beginning around 1150, the Templars and Hospitallers being only the most widely recognized. Many of these historians’ volumes subsist on gossip and rumors in addition to blanket judgements regarding spirituality and whether they were “good” or “bad” in order to make a quick sell, seldom offering sober assessments.

The book *Ecclesiastical Knights: The Military Orders in Castile, 1150-1330* by Sam Zeno Coned-

era S.J. (Society of Jesus) is a book that concentrates on the three Spanish orders of Santiago, Calatrava, and Alcantara. It is not a thorough history of the orders; rather the approach is to broadly define their role as existing ambiguously between the role of a spiritual, monastic community like the Cistercians or Augustinians and acting as full-fledged knights in response to the needs of the kings. There is more extensive literature on many of the topics that Conedera raises as a part of his thesis and these are issues regarding land tenure, cooperation, and organization. However, the strength of the text lies in his ability to bring these strands together in service to his thesis without appearing to use them inappropriately; they fit seamlessly together and amplify his message. The content of the book is well laid out and properly presented. The organization of the chapters allows for a clear building of thought and argumentation and is not a random mix only to be brought together comprehensibly at the end. This allows the reader to develop an understanding of the orders, and Conedera offers good, succinct sum-

maries for those who are making their first foray into this area.

The reader should take note that the introduction to this work is vital. In most circumstances the introduction serves as an enlarged preface, sometimes with near verbatim repetition and slight expansion. In this work, the introduction is where Conedera has chosen to lay out his central thesis behind the work, to overturn and discard the terminology of “warrior monks” in favor of the terminology “ecclesiastical knights.” Conedera effectively demonstrates how this terminology appears to serve as a more useful and accurate term as it covers the wide breath of complex rules, relationships, and obligations that can be at times hard to reconcile. The thesis overturns the framework of all representations of the military orders and changes the representation of ceaseless agitation and politicizing and converts it into a framework of knights whose service was at one time spiritual and temporal; they were knights of the kingdom of God and man.

The first chapter begins to lay out the principle arguments for what Conedera has already described in his extensive introduction. There is first explanation of the origin and structural details of the orders as they developed. Here Conedera gives his first and most extensive mention of the Hospitallers and Templars. He uses them to map out the lines of development divergence—social-military or military-social—and explain how each of the three Spanish orders either developed from a social awareness base and evolved into a military order or began as a military order and evolved a social awareness program that was operated in or out of balance with the other aspect. Conedera further traces their roots by exploring the Reconquista, or reconquest of Spain, and the impetus behind it. What is interesting is his discussion of the development of the notion that the Reconquest was primarily a form of land fighting; he shows that it had slowly begun to be recast as a

part of the Crusader movement by the years 1120-40.

The second chapter explores the structure of the orders. It is in this chapter that Conedera makes his strongest case that the Iberian orders, more so than the Hospitallers and Templars, were a strange amalgamation of religious order and military organization and reflected the contemporary struggle to define their role within the Catholic Church structure of monastic orders. Conedera demonstrates that these orders were under stricter regulations and rules than some of the traditional monastic orders. In other areas the typical monastic rules were modified to accommodate the military aspect of their lives and their approach to fulfilling the regular monastic vows. The portion that stood out in particular was the portion relating to dress. The knights did not wear continually the tunic with the red cross emblazoned on it. The knights wore this only during periods of combat, in the field, and were otherwise modestly dressed. For the most part, all the orders, except for Santiago, dressed in simple habits and wore these continually during the day and at night during sleep. They had this single outfit and only changed the clothing once a year, at which time they received a new, identical habit. Santiago’s rule called for more elaborate clothing and a red cruciform sword. The orders also observed strict vows of poverty and chastity, at great variance with popular notions. This is how the Spanish orders were at strong variance with the French orders such as the Templars and Hospitallers. However, one order, that of Santiago, did allow for married men and women, with once-a-year separations for a month-long period.

Chapter 3 covers the responsibilities and physical work of the orders and works to separate a significant amount of myth and reality. Conedera sets forth that the orders’ military roles were far more limited than initially presumed and became further reduced the longer they existed, almost entirely ceasing their military function by the

time their charter was cancelled. The orders initially had very strong military impulses, or had stronger military impulses when they were added to their structure. However, by the midpoint of their existence and into the fourteenth century, the Iberian kings could barely muster a combined total of three hundred knights from all of the military orders, particularly Santiago, Calatrava, and Alcantara. According to Conedera this was regarded by the abbots and popes as a sign of spiritual decline. It soon became that the orders' military contribution was one of quality rather than quantity.

Conedera fleshes out the additional roles of providing convalesces to sick pilgrims or persons on the road, providing assistance to the local community, and the paying of ransom of soldiers captured by Muslim enemies. Sometimes ordinary persons were abducted and large ransoms, often in the form of cattle or food, were paid out.

Chapter 4 lays on a great capstone in regards to building the case for seeing the orders as ecclesiastical knights rather than warrior monks by observing the similarities and divergences between the agreements signed between the various houses of the orders and the same type of document that was signed between the various spiritual orders, such as the Cistercians and Augustinians. By looking at these it is clear that there were knightly duties imposed; however, the orders had some obligations that were heavily spiritual and reflective of the monastic orders. It is in this vein that the still odd amalgamation came into sharpest view. There were many obligations that the monastic houses had in relation to each other and this is shown to have been reproduced between the military monastics. The rules came together in such a way as that even contemporary readers and sponsors went to great pains to understand and differentiate.

Conedera's work is valuable because it further develops and clarifies proper understanding of the military orders, especially those outside of

the Templars and Hospitallers. The book significantly undermines the pseudo-historical and mass-marketing approaches to the medieval orders that has been pervasive for some years in print and on television, à la the History Channel. Although not a direct concern of the author, the weight of the text clearly delineates the distinction between the orders of the Hospitallers and Templars and those whose foundations were more focused on the church with a secular outlet. Conedera's text directly shows that the orders, particularly the Spanish orders, balanced the spiritual and the martial. However, Conedera is at pains to show that the martial was also not seen as an unspiritual exercise, and decline was defined as their lack of martial involvement. This perception of Conedera's is not shared by other authors; however, he demonstrates a higher level of detail and investigation in pursuing his claims.

Conedera's text does not engage in some of the more, almost omnipresent, modern moralizing regarding the orders' position vis-à-vis modern understandings of the Crusades, the dealings with Muslims, and other areas already mentioned. His text stands perfectly neutral in this aspect, thus most closely fulfilling the Rankean ideal of presenting history as it was, without making value judgments or casting aspersions on the knight's motives, morals, or methods. Conedera presents a straightforward assessment of the orders and leaves all of the other aspects to the reader.

I highly recommend this book and would suggest its use in any class dealing with the medieval period and that it be read by those with a non-academic though strong desire for historical knowledge and reading. It is well worth reading and chewing on the finer points of Conedera's thesis.

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