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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Author of a biography dedicated to the epitome of the Brienne clan, *John of Brienne, King of Jerusalem, Emperor of Constantinople, c. 1175-1237* (2013), Guy Perry pursues in this volume his foray into the dynastic history of one of the major families of the Crusades era, the Briennes. In five chapters, he tracks the senior and cadet branches of the dynasty (the Ramerupt, Eu, and Beaumont), from the 950s to the mid-fourteenth century. Perry first traces their obscure origins and their tentative holds on certain territories of Champagne, between Bar-sur-Aube and Rosnay, along with their initial engagement in the Crusades. The second chapter covers the internationalization of the family and its best representatives: the brothers Walter III and King/Emperor John, and cousin Erard I of Ramerupt. By the early to mid-thirteenth century the family was wide and dispersed, thus Perry tracks members geographically, from Champagne to Francia, the Levant and its islands, Great Britain, Spain, Italy, and the Low Countries. Next Perry addresses the Briennes’ entanglement with the fortune of the Angevins, and he ends his discussion with the activities of the last count of the senior line, Walter VI.

His concluding remarks enlighten his readers on the purpose of his inquiry on “how we are to understand the nature, let alone the expansive dynamic, of Latin Christendom in the ‘age of the crusade,’” concluding further that “families and dynasticism should be regarded as the fundamental building blocks, as much—if not more—than realms and state structures” (p. 191). While his concluding remarks clarify the purpose of the investigation, I wish that he would have made his aims clearer from the start and followed through in each one of his chapters.

Perry initiates his introductory discussion with mentions of the ideology of these medieval aristocrats. Adventurous, pious, and skilled at war for sure but also at what I would label “lineal” diplomacy, they marched through time, marriages, and conquests with the simple goal of grandizing themselves. As the author proposes on page 2, “a much greater understanding of the links and connections that tied crusaders to each other, and to their friends and supporters back in the West,” will advance Crusades studies. By the way, I thought this approach had a name, “prosopography.” The word is never uttered. Perry backs his endeavor with the current popular fascination with “dynastic” literature and TV shows—such as the unnamed but barely masked *Game of Thrones*—to demonstrate the current enthusiasm for epic dynastic history. I would stop right here. I am not sure that it is dynastic history that fascinates—because it humanizes historical character—or just
the temptation of seeing wicked people doing wicked things to relatives! In any case, this book certainly does not read like a George Martin novel. And, let us not mix genres. Serious history remains what it is, and while I appreciate the need for relevance, and actually benefit from the surge of students these types of shows have brought to our enrollments—ergo our popularity as medieval historians—I do not think that we should tie our worth to passing fashion.

The lack of a clear problématique throughout the material creates issue with the aim of the work in general. Specialists looking for acute, specific information on the family will be happy to read through the abundance of material and information. It is after all a major aim of the work to offer the first study on “all of the branches of the dynasty, and not just the senior line” (p. 5). But nonspecialists will be put off by the old-fashioned, almost antiquarian genealogical approach to the material. One wades through names looking for a solid footing that is often escaping. This genealogical character also brings me to question Perry’s historiographical approach. The author refuses to engage with the economic, social, and cultural historiographies of our days.

For example, it would be a cliché to state that the Champagne region profited from the agricultural revolution of the eleventh century. Without the increased revenues that it produced, especially in one of the cradles of this economic renewal in north central France, dynastic ambitions would have been curtailed. Champagne was the booming center of a revived economy, which culminated with the development of many international fairs, attracting a wide-ranging clientele of merchant-bankers. This was an area in full growth (I would cite the works, for example, from dated to contemporary, of Henri Pirenne, George Duby, Jean Gimpel, Robert Lopez, Jean Favier, Michael Postan, David Abulafia, Theodore Evergates, and many more). The northwest of France, Champagne included, was one of the cradles of what historians have labeled “feudalism.” Even if minimized, the acknowledgment of a certain symbiotic relationship between economic feudalism and dynastic aggrandizement should have been at least mentioned.

The work also seems to have evaded the historiography of societies in the Middle Ages. I frankly did not know that historians were still so utterly unconcerned with cultural and social analyses. Women pass through the pages of the book married, dead in childbirth, with inherited land, with lost land to husbands, widowed, remarried, as countesses, as empresses, with children, with no children, etc. This litany reminds me of medieval Florentine ricordanze (diaries) discussed by Christiane Klapish-Zuber (Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy [1987]) whose authors mention these “passing mothers” who made the fortunes of dynasties with their dowries—and sons—but who were recorded as simply “passing through” time and marriages, from the tutelage of a father to a husband’s: a life’s purpose encapsulated in the wealth and political power they brought to agnatic lineage. Women lived short lives, breathed to deliver sons, and could die in peace with the satisfaction of knowing that they had accomplished the goal of their short lives. Please, even if an author thinks that only white chivalrous males are worth ink, editorial presses, like Cambridge, should at least “hum hum” to remind their authors that we live in the twenty-first century and that regardless of one’s conservative views, history should encompass all—gender, race, class.

Perry’s limited historiographical approach may found its origin in his sources. And one can fault the author for not discussing them openly and clearly. It is obvious, reading through the work, that Perry relies heavily on charters and their lists of witnesses. This is an extremely valuable work. Charters enlighten us on medieval society as much as testaments. Further, Brigitte Bedos-Rezak, for example, has demonstrated that
charters and their seals also belonged to the construction of dynastic identity (*When Ego Was Imago: Signs of Identity in the Middle Ages* [2011]). Signators and witnesses allow the author to recreate the alliances that he is addressing. But he should of course have discussed their uses and caveat. We know that the cohort of witnesses was defined by their presence at a certain time in a certain location, that Roman law set some limits, and that men served the most often. Why not offer tables identifying charters, dates, names, etc.? This approach would have demonstrated scientific accuracy and broadened the rationale for relying on these types of sources. It would also have clarified their shortcoming.

Additionally, the reliance on genealogical data is muddled by the unfortunate decision to have anglicized most of the French and medieval names, and modernized other ethnic names. Thus, specialists will constantly need to readjust their search and translate names back and forth to their original identifications. Most readers are expected to be medievalists, so I would assume that they can deal with linguistic standardizations. But how would Gautier de Brienne have felt being called Walter? *Fama* (renown) was tremendously important to medieval people and this onomastic standardization now so prevalent seems to hide a certain historical reality, especially when the author makes a point of reminding us that so and so was named after certain ancestors and defines affinities and kin accordingly.

Perry put a lot of research into this book, and he is thorough in tracing the highest number of relatives he can identify. The abundance of material can seem overwhelming at times, and the speed of discussion is dizzying—a lot of people in three hundred years of history for 191 pages of text. It is a shame the book is not organized thematically but rather chronologically. It is obvious that a section on women's dynastic role would have reestablished historical fairness in the balance of power, but other interesting historical factors disappear in the mass of information. For example, vassals needed to be physically there to present their homage to their lords. This of course included travel, and when dynasties established themselves at the other end of the medieval globe, one can wonder how their location affected their choice of feudal relations. An entire chapter could have been focused on the logistics of allegiances. Living in the Middle East and owing allegiance in the West required travel and huge efforts. Could this have influenced the choice of allegiances?

In summary, yes, the book is interesting because the characters discussed are compelling individuals on their own, males and females. But the presentation ends up as a long, tedious list of names and genealogical facts that will mainly interest the unconditional fans of the family—the primary audience of this book. Anyone working with lineage and the medieval Latin states will find useful information in the text, abundant footnotes, maps, and the genealogical maps that initiate the discussion. One can regret the lack of clear historiographical directions from the start. Studying lineage dynamics at a given time and in a large given place is of course extremely valuable for our understanding of the Middle Ages, even more so when it is related to Crusades studies. I regret that Perry did not start up front by clarifying his aims. This would have made the reading more engaging. Regardless of my reservations, the work will interest students of the French nobility and its accomplishments during the central Middle Ages, and of course of the Crusades at large.
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