BOOK REVIEWS

Loïc Chollet, *Les Sarrasins du Nord: Une histoire de la croisade balte par la littérature (XII^e–XV^e siècle)*, Neuchâtel: Éditions Alphil-Presses universitaires suisses, 2019. 544 p. ISBN paper 978-2-88930-282-6; ISBN PDF 978-2-88930-283-3; EPUB 978-2-88930-284-0

In recent decades, the Northern Crusades against the infidel ensconced in the cold climes of Europe have attracted considerable attention from scholars based in Western Europe and North America. Back in 1980, when Erich Christiansen penned his small masterpiece, it emerged, with just a slight exaggeration, like a lonely star in a Europe still divided by the Berlin Wall.¹ In less than a decade, the wall was gone, and Western rediscovery of the Baltic world had a fresh start. The milestone in the field of our concern was Werner Paravicini's *Die Preußenreisen des europäischen Adels*.² With no exaggeration, this opus proved a seminal work for quite a large family of crusade historians interested in the Baltic Sea region. Loïc Chollet is one of a number of those scholars who made (very) good use of Paravicini's masterpiece. By choosing to focus on the literary side of the crusading story, he has sought to kill two birds with one stone. Generally, the material is marshalled in chronological order, and the respective literary works are taken into consideration along the way in presenting the main historical developments. The reader starts the journey from the modest beginnings of the crusades in the north of Europe in the late 12th century, then climbs up to reach the pinnacle of crusading military and literary activities in the 14th

¹ E. Christiansen, *The Northern Crusades: The Baltic and the Catholic Frontier, 1100–1525* (London, 1980, 2nd ed. London, 1997). Of course, the works by William Urban representing the meticulous and largely reliable reconstruction of events in the Baltic theatre of crusading warfare should be kept in mind and consulted when necessary: W. Urban, *The Baltic Crusade* (DeKalb, 1975); idem, *The Livonian Crusade* (Washington, 1981); idem, *The Prussian Crusade* (Chicago, 2000); idem, *Tannenberg and After: Lithuania, Poland and the Teutonic Order in Search of Immortality* (Chicago, 2002).

² W. Paravicini, *Die Preussenreisen des europäischen Adels*, Part 1–2 (Sigmaringen, 1989–1995); idem, *Adlig leben im 14. Jahrhundert. Weshalb sie fuhren: Die Preußenreisen des europäischen Adels*, Part 3 (Göttingen, 2020).

century, and, after having passed the turning point of the Battle of Tannenberg (1410), enjoys a comfortable descent into the lush meadows of cultural memory, where the din of battle reverberated long after the heroes of the actual fighting and romance had been laid to rest in peace. The 300-year-long story presented by Chollet reflects faithfully the vicissitudes of crusading, the most salient feature of which may rightly be seen in the volte-face of the Lithuanians, from the target of the crusades in their pre-conversion life, to their post-conversion role as welcomed allies in the pan-European crusade scheming against yet another infidel in the guise of Tatars and Turks (especially pp. 311–331). In the first place, francophone students will be thankful to the author for providing them with up-to-date coverage of crusading activities in the north.³ The array of literature in a variety of languages is impressive enough, and the unearthing of probably the coiner of the term 'Northern Saracens' in the 1870s (J. Klaczko) speaks volumes about the author's seamanship in the sea of primary and secondary sources related to the crusades.⁴ Less so, however, as far as Lithuanian historiography is concerned. Chollet draws on practically all known written sources, and, by letting them speak for themselves, makes his own narrative quite vivid and reflective of the ideas of the age of chivalry in their own setting. The more specific engagement with literary sources *tout court* starts with King John I

³ L. Chollet's book will certainly enrich the library of crusading literature in French concerned with the Baltic Sea region, which is not as vast as that in English, German or Polish, but nevertheless has to be reckoned with by every serious student of the crusades. By virtue of illustration: A. Bertrand, 'Un seigneur bourguignon en Europe de l'Est: Guillebert de Lannoy (1386–1462)', in: *Le Moyen Âge* 95 (1989), pp. 293–309; N. Bourgeois, 'Les Cisterciens et la croisade de Livonie', in: *Revue Historique* 307/3 (2005), pp. 526–538; S. Gouguenheim, *Les Chevaliers teutoniques* (Paris, 2007); idem, *Tannenberg 1410* (Paris, 2012); M. Olivier, '"Veteres relegendes historias": la place des chroniques dans la polémique entre l'Ordre teutonique et la Pologne au Concile de Constance (1414–1418)', in: *Chroniques en tous genres. Actes du colloque d'Amiens* (Mars 2006), eds. P.H. Andersen, D. Buschinger (Amiens, 2006), pp. 87–97; K. Toomaspoeg, *Histoire des Chevaliers teutoniques* (Paris, 2001).

⁴ J. Klaczko, Une annexion d'autrefois: L'Ordre Teutonique et le Royaume de Jagello, in: *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 82/3 (1869), p. 653. One of the latest but by no means the last author to use the evocative term 'Northern Saracens' is A.V. Murray, 'The Saracens of the Baltic: Pagan and Christian Lithuanians in the perception of English and French crusaders to Late Medieval Prussia', *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 41 (2010), pp. 413–429. See also Idem, 'Heathens, Devils and Saracens. Crusader concepts of the pagan enemy during the Baltic Crusades (twelfth to fifteenth centuries)', in: *Crusading on the Edge: Ideas and Practice of Crusading in Iberia and the Baltic Region, 1100–1500*, eds. T.K. Nielsen, I. Fønnesberg-Schmidt (Ser. *Outremer. Studies in the Crusades and the Latin East*, Vol. 4) (Turnhout, 2016), pp. 199–223 (esp. pp. 217–222).

of Bohemia and his court poet Guillaume de Machaut, followed by including somewhat later writers like Philippe de Mézières, Peter Suchenwirt, Jean d'Outremeuse, the biographer of Jean II le Meingre dit Boucicout, and the chroniclers who heaped praise on their heroes decades after their chivalrous deeds had been accomplished (pp. 167–205). Even making an allowance for the well-known high-handed approach of the knights to their real and imaginary adversaries, it is still amazing to come, once again, to the realisation that for them there was no big difference in offering battle either in the frozen marshlands of Lithuania or under the scorching sun in North Africa. The same tit-for-tat could well be administered to the French once the English had gained the upper hand on the battlefield (p. 213). Such indiscriminate adversaries remind us of the far from black-and-white intercourse between adversaries separated by different world-outlooks, religions and languages, and Chollet makes good use of the interplay between bloody and peaceful modes of contact between the Teutonic Knights and their pagan adversaries. One may note in passing that in the years of the Cold War, the Teutonic Order was portrayed by Soviet propaganda as the scarecrow of the eternally aggressive West, and as good proof of perennial German revanchism. This view has in recent decades been rightfully relegated to the dustbin of history, and scholars from many countries, Lithuania included, adduced much evidence indicating the whole spectrum of relations that were operative between the Teutonic Knights and their pagan and, for that matter, Christian adversaries. However, one should not lose sight of the general brutality of Medieval warfare and should be wary of falling into the trap of literary imagination. Few, if any, dwellers of burnt-down villages could relate and bequeath their experiences to future historians. In contrast to the silent majority of the Middle Ages (A. Gurevich), the vociferous minority left us plenty of texts, many of them containing a large amount of propaganda. In my opinion, one of the best sections of this book is the one that deals with the post-Tannenberg perception of reality on the part of West European chroniclers. Chollet charts the long awakening of Western eyes to the fact that the infidel enemy *par excellence* turned out to be 'one of us' (pp. 249–298). In essence, it took the Battle of Tannenberg to begin to dispel the Teutonic-produced smokescreen enveloping the Lithuanians and their rulers in the guise of 'Saracens' or 'bad Christians', more than 20 years after their official conversion to the Roman Catholic creed! In this regard, and curiously enough, the role of anticipators may be ascribed to the dissenting voices of Heinrich

der Teichner and John Gower, who sounded their criticism of the *Reyssen* in the 1370s, that is, well before the conversion of Lithuania (pp. 331–334). The changing perceptions and images of crusading institutions and their targets thus becomes riveting reading. The author may also be commended for his inclusion of the ethnographic and chorographic imagery and stereotypes surrounding the Baltic lands in general, and Lithuania in particular. Placed in a contemporary francophone milieu, this book in its final passages turns into kind of modern version of the work of Jean de Mandeville. Just as that Medieval author expanded the view of his contemporaries to the then hardly imaginable expanses of the world beyond relatively small Europe, so in likewise manner the author of *Les Sarrasins du Nord* offers a vast panoramic view of the works by which Western men of letters came to familiarise themselves with and appropriate the Baltic ‘Other’. The last stop in Chollet’s representation halts at the idiosyncratic image of life in the most romantic part of Lithuania, Žemaitija (Samogitia), as portrayed by Prosper Mérimée in his 1869 novella *Lokis* [The Bear] (pp. 449–450). The time-resistant image of a peripheral country where people continued to live in intimate proximity to wild nature thus survived throughout the centuries as though nothing of importance came about during all the time since the last crusaders left the country for good. Once Lithuanians became a Christian people, they largely lost their alterity, and in the eyes of Western authors they evinced less and less interest as a result. The same rings true with regard to the Teutonic Knights: once they lost the Battle of Tannenberg and proved to be of no (or little) use in the fight against the infidel any longer, the days when they basked in public glory and enjoyed prosperity were also gone. The Western spotlight turned from the Teutonic Order and Lithuania to the Kingdom of Poland (p. 444). Here, the simple wisdom of where two are fighting the third wins is offered as an apt illustration that may easily take us beyond the mere fixation on historical narratives to spheres that are more readily accessible to writers and poets, and which are of interest to the general thinking reader. Chollet’s book is a good invitation to the historical, literary and even philosophical smorgasbord served by our European ancestors.

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