



Clio

Women, Gender, History

39 | 2014

Gendered laws of war

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/cliowgh/454>

DOI: 10.4000/cliowgh.454

ISSN: 2554-3822

Publisher

Belin

Electronic reference

Sophie Cassagnes-Brouquet, « In the service of the Just War: Matilda of Tuscany (eleventh-twelfth centuries) », *Clio* [Online], 39 | 2014, Online since 10 April 2015, connection on 25 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/cliowgh/454> ; DOI : 10.4000/cliowgh.454

In the service of the Just War: Matilda of Tuscany (eleventh-twelfth centuries)

Sophie CASSAGNES-BROUQUET

The last two decades have seen the publication of numerous studies dedicated to female combatants from the contemporary, early modern, and even medieval eras.¹ In medieval Europe, as it still is largely today, the art of war was thought of as specifically masculine, if not the very quintessence of masculinity. And yet in the course of studying chronicles and archival documents, it is possible to come across many women warriors, who have been overshadowed by the emblematic figure of Joan of Arc.² Certainly very unusual but well attested, did this aspect of warfare have the support of the law or, to the contrary, did it brave all the prohibitions of civil and religious codes? It would appear that the negative answer reigned; however, on occasion, the Church's response sometimes seems more ambiguous. This was the case in the eleventh and twelfth centuries when, in the context of the Investiture Controversy, Countess Matilda of Tuscany was at the heart of a debate pitting the supporters of Gregorian reform against those of the Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV, a debate which precisely centered on this question: do women have the right to make war?

What does the law say?

If we admit that women sometimes took up arms in the Middle Ages, did they do so illegally or under some legal ruling? The eleventh and twelfth centuries saw the shaping of Church law – canon law. Ahead

¹ McLaughlin 1990.

² Cassagnes-Brouquet 2013.

of the civil law, and alongside theology it was the first in the Middle Ages to try to reflect on the violence of war and to formulate rules for military behavior. The first steps in shaping the laws of war were contemporary with the violent dispute between the priesthood and the empire, or more precisely in this case, Pope Gregory VII (1073-1085) and his successors against the Emperor Henry IV (1056-1105). It was also in this context of war that the supporters of Reform and the Papacy tried to clearly demarcate the functions attributed to Christians, divided into three orders: the *oratores*, the *bellatores* and the *laboratores*, or those who pray, those who fight and those who work.³ The years around 1000 therefore saw the establishment of an ideology of orders that clearly accepted the existence of an order of warriors within Christian society, excluding the two others: the clerics and the workers (essentially farmers). This ordering was consistent with Church law which forbade clerics to bear arms, a function reserved for the laity. The distinction between the sexes also seems quite obvious. Women, as well as the humble, belonged to the *inermes* category, the unarmed, designated victims of feudal violence.

But it was also obvious to the clerics that gender did not constitute an order as such. In fact women and men alike belonged to the three orders that they had identified, especially noble women to that of *bellatores*. There was thus an internal contradiction in the thinking of the three orders, which the clerics did not attempt to remedy, as the misogynist tradition within the Church stopped them from imagining that a woman could claim her right to make war. However, while Roman law explicitly prohibited women from going to war since they were not citizens, and for the Romans all war must be declared by an authority, male of course, and led by men, feudalism saw power as a patrimonial property, a heritage that could fall into female hands. Women, as heiresses, spouses and mothers, could thus find themselves temporarily in a position of authority.⁴

³ Duby 1978.

⁴ Truax 1999.

Canon law

The aim of canon law was to organize the Church on earth as an institution and to fix the rights and obligations of its members. The earliest canons appeared in the second century, first in the Eastern Empire and then in Rome. At the beginning of the third century, these rules were compiled in a collection of eight books, the *Canons Apostolic*. The law continued thereafter to be enriched through the integration of regional council decisions. With the authorization of Christianity by the Edict of Milan in 313, canon law became that of the official Church and was supported by the Emperor. It was enriched through decisions made during the great councils of the fourth century which founded Church law, parallel to and separate from imperial law. After the fall of the Western Empire, canon law remained the single universal legal repository in Europe. Throughout the Middle Ages, it was fueled by two main sources: council decisions and decretals. Compilers assembled the canons, without any higher authority for guidance or restriction, under the form of collections. The Carolingian period was marked by considerable development of canon law. However, the division of the Empire, the second wave of invasions suffered by the West in the second half of the ninth century and into the tenth century, then the establishment of feudalism in the eleventh, slowed down the renewal of Church law. It reached its “golden age” in the second half of the eleventh century and during the twelfth, in line with the Gregorian reform that saw an expansion in the number of councils and decretals.

Canonic collections took on imposing dimensions and sought to define the position of the Church and clerics on nearly all aspects of society. It may be surprising to see the Church so focused on war, since it defined itself as belonging to the order of *oratores* and *inermes*, but as an earthly institution, an owner of domains and fiefs, and a State, that of the pope, it found itself in a position of authority, likely to face an offensive or defensive war.

The Church, the idea of a just war, and women

Church law was the heir to a long reflection on war whose first foundations were built by Aristotle. For the philosopher, war was not to be judged as such. It was not in itself an objective, but a means to

acquire peace or glory. Roman authors continued and modified Aristotelian thought by giving it a more legal twist. They considered war as the breaking of a pact made between two parties. For Cicero, the just war was intended to regain lost property taken by an enemy. It was therefore not simply violent action, but a duty caused by an injustice, and this is what distinguished it from banditry. For there to be war, a *casus belli* was required, along with a declaration of war by a legitimate authority.⁵ War therefore took the form of a legal process. The Roman Republic, and later the Empire thus saw the formation of *ius militare*, military law. It was synthesized in the two major manuals on military strategy and tactics written by Frontinus in the first century and Vegetius in the fourth century, works which were fundamental to reflections on war in the Middle Ages.⁶

Two other sources were essential to the formation of canon law: the Old and New Testament. The former mentions many examples of wars waged by the Hebrew people. Deuteronomy (20) provides a primer for the most brutal military code, without pity or guilt: Israel's enemies must be destroyed and all those refusing to submit, men, women, children, are to be killed. The New Testament is more ambiguous. While Jesus said that he came not to bring peace, but a sword (Matthew, 10-34), certain passages from the same Gospel, especially the Sermon on the Mount, seem rather to condemn war (Matthew, 5, 7).

Christian thinkers were thus the heirs of contradictory traditions, but the alliance between Church and Empire led to their acceptance of war, provided that it was practised only by laymen, under the Empire's authority.⁷ At the start of the fifth century, Augustine was the first to offer a synthesis of Christian positions. For him, war was not an evil in itself, but an instrument of God to punish evildoers. The just war was a response to the violation of legitimate rights, or a sanction targeting crimes against the faith, such as heresy. It could only be waged under the auspices of a legitimate and civil authority. The soldier must obey his orders whatever they might be and Augustine absolved him of all responsibility. Soldiers thus became

⁵ Russell 1975: 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*: 9.

⁷ *Ibid.*: 12.

milites Christi when fighting for the Church.⁸ The reflections of clerics changed little until the fall of the Carolingian Empire and the establishment of feudalism. The notion of legitimate authority and that of “enemy powers” then became difficult to define in a period when the Christians were warring among themselves. The Church therefore sought to enlist the violence of the *milites* in the service of the faith and to turn it against the infidels, transforming just war into holy war under the pope’s authority.

This mutation emerged in a very specific context, that of the Investiture Controversy (1075-1122).⁹ This violent crisis led on both sides to the spread of polemical treatises feeding into the debate on war and later into canon law. Just like civil law, canon law was both the product of a tradition but also that of an era, in this case that of the papacy’s struggle against the Empire.

Around 1085, one of the key thinkers of the Gregorian reform, Anselm of Lucca, posed in the last two books of his *Collectio canonum* the question of how the pope could compel schismatics to obey.¹⁰ Faced with the exactions perpetrated by the emperor’s supporters, he supported the clergy’s right to take up the sword (*ius gladii*) and to use armed force (*vis armata*) against heretics, the excommunicated, enemies to the faith, and infidels.¹¹ However, a long tradition prohibited clerics themselves from bearing arms and shedding blood. The war for the preservation of the Church was a just cause, a service done for God.¹² In exceptional circumstances, the pope even had the right to declare war and to select his military arm, and why not a woman?¹³

Matilda of Tuscany, military leader

If Anselm advanced this not very “canonical” hypothesis, it was because he was precisely faced with exceptional circumstances in Italy.

⁸ Russell 1975: 22-28.

⁹ Cushing 1998: 122.

¹⁰ Anselm of Lucca: Book XII, *De excommunicatione*, and XIII, *De iusta vindicta*.

¹¹ Anselm of Lucca: XII, 55; Anselm of Lucca: XIII, 4.

¹² Cushing 1998: 127-130.

¹³ Anselm of Lucca: XIII, 14-17.

Since his election in 1073, Pope Gregory VII had been at odds with imperial power during a long drawn-out conflict, the Investiture Controversy, which only got worse over the years.¹⁴ Threatened with excommunication by the pope, Emperor Henry IV (1050-1106) met with the German bishops in Worms on 24 January 1076. Each bishop had to approve a text that challenged the way in which Gregory had been elected. His arrogance and taste for innovation had made his election a source of discord, and he was disputing the authority of the bishops, who also denounced the scandal arising from his association – deemed rather too close – with a woman, Matilda of Tuscany.¹⁵

Born into a powerful lineage, the countess did not hide her Gregorian convictions. She had inherited vast territories in Lombardy, Tuscany and Lotharingia, making her one of the most powerful Italian *seigneurs*. It was in Matilda's castle, Canossa, that the emperor submitted to the pope in 25 January 1077. When the Controversy reemerged in 1080, she remained the pope's main support. On 21 May, Henry IV held a synod in Mainz to depose Gregory VII, and then had it elect the anti-pope Clement III. The Controversy between the pope and the emperor was transformed into an armed conflict; in Volta, near Mantua, on 15 October 1080, the troops of Gregory and Matilda suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of the vassals of the emperor. But Gregory VII did not recognize his defeat and could count on the unswerving support of the countess. Henry IV left Germany on 4 April 1081 to try to have himself crowned by the anti-pope in Rome, but without success. The following year, he accused Matilda of treason, condemned her to have her lands forfeited and ravaged her Italian domains. On 21 March 1084, the emperor entered Rome and was crowned by Clement III in Saint Peter's, while Gregory VII, taking refuge in the Castel Sant'Angelo, watched powerless the triumph of his enemy. His main military supporter continued to be Matilda, who won a striking victory against the emperor's Lombard allies on 2 July 1084 in Sorbara, near Modena.¹⁶ After his Roman coronation, Henry IV

¹⁴ Cowdrey 1998: 96.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*: 137.

¹⁶ Healy 2005.

returned to Germany and would never come to Italy again. When Gregory VII died on 25 May 1085, the Investiture Controversy was far from over (until the Concordat of Worms in 1122) and Matilda continued until her death in 1116 to be the military arm of the reformers.¹⁷ The chronicler Berthold of Constance, a monk from the abbey of Reichenau, and her contemporary, saw in her “the most loyal of Saint Peter’s soldiers.”¹⁸

All the witnesses of the era highlight the importance of the countess’s military activity and her skills as a strategist, as recently brought to light by David J. Hay.¹⁹ Defeated in Volta in 1080, Matilda adopted, like many captains of the feudal period, a defensive strategy, that of refusing to fight and shutting herself up in her fortresses.²⁰ But she also set up ambushes against Henry IV’s supporters. The chronicler Hugh of Flavigny described her as a *virago*, displaying virile courage against Henry, and powerful and cunning in battle.²¹ Donizo depicts her as recruiting mercenaries, defending her castles and fighting off Henry’s attacks.²² When she learned that her enemies, Marquis Obert and the bishops of Parma and Reggio, were threatening her fortress of Sorbara, the countess sent a troop to defend it. Her cavalry launched a surprise attack on her adversaries, forcing them to flee, and killing or taking prisoner many of them.²³ All the witnesses were agreed on the fact that the countess, while she did not participate directly in the battle, took the decision to attack and organized her troops. After the victory at Sorbara, Matilda adopted a more offensive strategy.²⁴ During the six years that followed, she militarily dominated the Po Valley.²⁵

The chroniclers did not particularly question the origin of the countess’ talents in strategy. Like other women of the feudal

¹⁷ Cowdrey 1998: 302.

¹⁸ Berthold of Constance 2003: 161-381.

¹⁹ Hay 2008.

²⁰ *Ibid.*: 87-88.

²¹ Hugh of Flavigny 1848: 462.

²² Donizo 1940: ca 293-295.

²³ *Ibid.*: ca 6503-6508.

²⁴ Hay 2008: 117.

²⁵ Eads 1986: 167-181.

aristocracy, in Italy as elsewhere, Matilda had always been confronted with war.²⁶ Coming from a lineage of warriors, she had doubtless learned the art of war from her father Boniface and her father-in-law Godfrey. From a young age, she had experienced defeat, her father having been assassinated, his lands overtaken, and herself held prisoner by the emperor before the age of ten.²⁷ As opposed to some of her female contemporaries, Matilda never bore arms herself. Her biographer, the monk Donizo of Canossa, never depicts her at the heart of battle, but leading troops from a distance.²⁸ It was indeed this position of authority that was more problematic for her contemporaries than if she had actually fought. In his treatise, Vegetius accepted that women might exceptionally take up arms to defend their city, but he did not imagine that they could command soldiers.

Matilda, soldier of Christ

The High Middle Ages inherited from antiquity the tradition forbidding a woman from exercising political authority and, consequently, from commanding an army. The fifth-century *Statuta Ecclesie Antiqua* and the 19 canons of the Council of Nantes in 896, all of which were included in the two main canonical collections preceding the Gregorian reform, those of Regino of Prüm ca 906²⁹ and that of Burchard of Worms at the start of the eleventh century, denied a woman any authority.³⁰

The emperor's supporters based themselves on this tradition to denounce Matilda's position, which was considered a "scandal" and a usurpation of masculine authority.

The canonical tradition indeed posed a problem to Matilda's supporters. To defend the Gregorian cause, those closest to her, Anselm of Lucca and Cardinal Deusdedit, compiled new canonical collections. Neither of them, not Anselm's written between 1081 and 1086, nor Deusdedit's dating from 1087,³¹ included the texts most

²⁶ Cassagnes-Brouquet 2013: 29-37.

²⁷ Hay 2008: 8.

²⁸ Donizo 1940.

²⁹ Regino of Prüm 1840.

³⁰ Burchard of Worms 1970. It was apparently composed from 1012 to 1023.

³¹ Deusdedit 1967.

hostile to women's authority. In the eleventh century, before the establishment of Gratian's *Decretum Gratiani* of around 1140, canon lawyers were free to compose their collections as they wished, choosing the rules according to their commitments. Nevertheless, Matilda's defenders were obliged to underpin her exceptional case with some legal foundation, and to back it up by reference to scriptural and legal tradition.

A first justification of Matilda's military command was found in the Holy Scripture, particularly in the Old Testament. Anselm of Lucca put forward a new concept, not only of a just war, but a holy war. Matilda was fighting as a new Deborah or Judith.³² Confronted with the power of the Antichrist on earth, she had to obey God as a vassal through her advice and arms.³³

She was also compared to heroines from the Old Testament like Judith and Jael who fought against the enemies of God. Under Anselm's pen, Matilda became a *miles Christi*, a soldier of Christ, and Henry IV the Antichrist.³⁴

John of Mantua continued these same ideas in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, written between 1081 and 1083, when he exhorts the countess, then in difficulty, to continue her fight against the emperor. While the pope could not himself fight, he had delegated his secular sword to Matilda, *virago catholica*, for the defense of the Church. Her military actions were as a result not only legitimate but also necessary.³⁵

Another justification was to emphasize Matilda's masculinity, as a *virago*, surpassing all women.³⁶ Her biographer Donizo depicted her as a virile woman leading her troops. Matilda's power could only come to her through her masculinity and her supporters voluntarily set her femininity aside. Ranger, Anselm of Lucca's biographer, compared her to Penthesilea; the emperor's supporters also did so, but their aim was to make fun of her, calling her the "female Mars."³⁷ In his

³² Ranger of Lucca 1856: cap. 11, 20-21, 16, 19-20.

³³ Cowdrey 1998: 302.

³⁴ Hay 2008: 199.

³⁵ Ranger of Lucca 1856: cap. 23, 20.

³⁶ Ranger of Lucca 1856: vv. 3705-3706.

³⁷ *Ibid.*: v. 5404.

Etymologies, Isidore of Seville (ca 560-570-636) defines the *virago* as a woman who has the vigor of a man.³⁸ However, the *virago* is very much a woman, acting like one for the most part. She is set up as a opposing parallel to the virgin, as the *virago* occupies the office of a male, whereas the virgin, repressing her carnal impulses considered by the cleric as typically female, displays masculine constancy. *Viragos* were therefore not considered as monsters as such; their actions alone incurred the judgment of their contemporaries. When they defended the Church's interests, clerics were very ready to praise their actions.

Conversely, Cardinal Deusdedit in his pamphlet against simonists and schismatics, c.1097, stressed Matilda's femininity, in order to show that the countess could only be victorious with God's support and because her cause was just, much like David against Goliath.³⁹ Ranger also insisted on the emperor's shame in having been vanquished by a woman.

Matilda's military career provoked among her contemporaries stupefaction, embarrassment and admiration. She challenged the canonical tradition and led clerics to question and sometimes to contradict themselves. Bonizo of Sutri (c.1045-c.1094) completed the compilation of his canonical collection at the end of 1089.⁴⁰ His seventh book was devoted to the secular elite and its second to last chapter examines the code of conduct of those adopting the military profession. In the last chapter, Bonizo gives examples of women from holy or lay history having held military and legal authority, functions reserved by God for men. He mentions Cleopatra and Fredegonde whose actions only brought about ruin and destruction. He concludes by advising women to stay home and busy themselves with spinning wool.⁴¹

This chapter, which seems to be a perfect example of the misogyny of medieval clerics, was for a long time reinterpreted as the criticism of a very specific woman, the same Countess Matilda of Canossa, towards whom Bonizo had developed great animosity over the years. After having been expelled by the emperor from his bishopric of Sutri, he found refuge with Matilda, and in about 1085-

³⁸ Helvetius 1999: 190; Cassagnes-Brouquet 2013: 22.

³⁹ Deusdedit 1967: 330.

⁴⁰ Bonizo of Sutri 1998; Berschin 1972.

⁴¹ Fournier 1915: 294-295.

1086 he wrote for her his *Book addressed to a friend* in which he describes her as a very excellent, very noble and very glorious countess, a true soldier of God, and praises her for her virile spirit.⁴² But then, disappointed by her desire to reconcile the emperor and the new pope Urban II, Bonizo transferred all his bitterness against her.

Through the figure of Matilda, the Gregorians had constructed a new image of the soldier and of war, that of the *miles Christi* and the holy war in the service of the papacy. Gregory VII even went as far as to build a parallel between Christ's sacrifice on the cross and the combat against the infidel, the heretic and the schismatic, thus opening the door to the right to wage the Crusades.

A constantly revisited model

While the Investiture Controversy was one of the reasons for the renewal of canon law, it was not the only source of clerical reflection on warfare. Other dangers awaited the papacy and the Church, such as heresy, which reappeared around the year 1000, as well as the presence of Infidels at the gates of Christianity.

Just war and holy war

As John of Mantua highlighted, war waged on behalf of Christ was not only a just war, but also a necessary war, a holy war.⁴³

Even before her quarrel with the emperor, the countess Matilda considered going to war with the Infidels. The Byzantine defeat at the hands of the Seljuk Turks at Manzikert in 1074 resonated throughout the West as a threat against Christianity. Despite the Schism of 1053, Gregory VII, with military help from Matilda, tried to raise an expedition to come to the aid of Christians in the East. Already, he viewed the participation of the countess's vassals as a holy war, describing the troops who were ready to march to Jerusalem as *fideles sancti Petri*, vassals of Saint Peter.⁴⁴

This expedition came to nothing, but two years after Gregory VII's death, Matilda supported Pope Victor III in his desire to mount a

⁴² Bonizo de Sutri 1956; Fournier 1915: 293.

⁴³ John of Mantua 1973.

⁴⁴ Gregory VII 1920-1946: 70.

maritime expedition with the Pisans and Genoese against the coastal city of Mahdia in Tunisia in 1087.⁴⁵ While for the naval commanders from the two Italian cities this raid was primarily an act of piracy enabling them to secure considerable treasure for their cities, there was no doubt in the minds of the pope and the countess: it was indeed a holy war. It was only by a few years that it preceded the call to crusade made by Urban II, a reformer pope who had Matilda's support, during the Council of Clermont in 1095.

The crusade, the law and the reality

Matilda was never able to go on crusade, since she was kept in the West by the Investiture Controversy, which ended only with the Concordat of Worms in 1122. But she undoubtedly felt like many other western women, and not only those from the feudal aristocracy, an immense enthusiasm for the pope's call to liberate the Holy Land.

The chronicles of the time suggest that these women pushed their husbands and sons to participate in the holy war, bitterly resenting that their sex prevented them from doing so themselves.⁴⁶ In reality, canon law did not prohibit women from making a vow of crusade, even if it recommended that they should be accompanied by a male family member, who would be responsible for protecting them but also for monitoring their morality. It also specified that married women should receive permission from their spouses, but the inverse was also necessary.⁴⁷ All male witnesses of the time are agreed that women participated in the crusades. The Church could not impede these women's opportunity to be saved. They left home with their husbands or sons, but some were also unaccompanied. But did they have the right to participate militarily? The chroniclers are silent about their direct participation in the crusade in different forms: diplomatic, moral, but also as combatants.⁴⁸ Yet the same chroniclers mention women being killed in combat during the first three crusades, while displaying a certain reluctance to show them fighting.

⁴⁵ Hay 2008: 13.

⁴⁶ *Itinerarium Peregrinorum* 1962.

⁴⁷ Maier 2004: 66.

⁴⁸ Caspi-Reisfeld 2001.

Following them, historians of the Crusades concede that women certainly participated in the crusades, but continue to debate whether they actually fought. Ronald Finucane emphasizes that there are very clear indications of women participating in combat,⁴⁹ whereas Maureen Purcell, while admitting the fact that women did take part in combat, rejects the idea that they were true crusaders.⁵⁰ James Brundage sees them as *vivandières* [female sutlers or canteen keepers] and prostitutes accompanying the armies.⁵¹ Studying the fifth crusade, James Powell shows that women indeed made vows of crusade and took up the cross, that they held important functions in the camps, caring for the wounded and the sick, but he is not clear whether they participated in battle.⁵²

Yet several sources mention this possibility, particularly for the first crusade. The chronicler William of Tyre, describing the capture of Jerusalem in 1099, in which, to be sure, he did not himself participate, reports that: “even the women, forgetting their sex and their weak nature, dared to carry arms and fight in virile manner, well beyond their force.”⁵³ The *Itinerarium peregrinorum*, written by a crusader during the siege of Acre (1189-1192) and then continued between 1216 and 1220 by an English cleric, mentioned women in the crusader army many times. He depicted them massacring the crew of a Muslim ship captured during a naval battle off the coast of Acre.⁵⁴ Queen Joan [or Joanna] of Sicily, Queen Berengaria of England, and the daughter of the emperor of Cyprus accompanied Richard the Lionheart to Acre, then Jaffa,⁵⁵ and when the king tried to prevent the women from joining him in his march along the coast, it was without great success.⁵⁶

However, combatant women are never explicitly mentioned in the Christian sources, whereas they actually are in the Muslim sources. The historians Imad ad-Din and Baha ad-Din, contemporaries of the events, make many references to them. Imad mentions a lady of high birth,

⁴⁹ Finucane 1983: 174-184.

⁵⁰ Purcell 1979.

⁵¹ Brundage 1985: 57-65.

⁵² Powell 1992.

⁵³ William of Tyre 1982: 403; Evans 2001: 45-58.

⁵⁴ *Itinerarium peregrinorum* 1962: book I, ch. 35.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*: book 2, ch. 42, book 4 ch. 27.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*: book 4, ch. 26.

arriving by sea in late autumn 1189 with an escort of 500 knights, squires and servants, paying all the expenses and leading the men in raids against the Muslims. He goes on to say that there were many women in the crusader armies who wore armor like men, fought like them in battle, and were only recognized when dead and their armor removed.⁵⁷ This rather vague anecdote is strengthened by more precise facts.

On 25 July 1190, the crusader army besieging Acre launched an attack against the camp of Saladin. Initially victorious, it ended in disaster: the battlefield was littered with Christian corpses. Imad and Baha walked among them to examine the dead and Baha said: "I noticed the bodies of two women. Someone told me that he had seen four women engaged in combat, two of whom had been taken prisoner." Imad specified: "We observed one woman killed in battle and we heard her express herself in tears while she still breathed."⁵⁸ Two witnesses reported the presence of a female archer among the Christians besieging Acre. Baha provides the most complete description:

A very intelligent old man was found among those who forced their way through the enemy ranks that day. Behind the wall, he told me, there was a woman wearing a green mellûta, who kept shooting arrows from a wooden bow, wounding many of our men. In the end, she was overtaken by numbers, we slew her and brought the bow she had used to the sultan, who was greatly surprised.⁵⁹

These are the only precise accounts of female combatants.

However, the author of the *Itinerarium peregrinorum* mentions the presence of old women in the crusader camps, who engaged in what the aristocrats considered with contempt as a "dirty war":

Our women caught the Turks by the hair, treated them with dishonor, humiliated them by cutting their throats; and finally, decapitated them. The physical weakness of women prolonged the pain of death because they cut their heads off with knives instead of swords.⁶⁰

On top of the pain of a much less than chivalrous death was added the humiliation of being killed by a woman.

⁵⁷ Abu Shama 1872-1906: 433-434.

⁵⁸ Baha ad-Din 1972: 239-240.

⁵⁹ Baha ad-Din 1972: 312.

⁶⁰ *Itinerarium peregrinorum* 1962: 89.

Given the Christian chroniclers' extreme discretion and the Muslim historians' somewhat suspicious eloquence, the truth is no doubt to be found in between, namely the very exceptional participation of women in crusading combat. The Christian chroniclers probably did not want to mention these women, who would have discredited, through their gender and their practice of war, the holiness of their cause. On the other hand, the Arab historians mention them to highlight the foreignness and barbarity of the Christians. The presence of women in the crusades is however well attested and their participation in combat in case of danger generally accepted in the East and West alike.⁶¹ But they are only mentioned by Christian chroniclers in the context of a more canonical conception of the war: for example, when in 1187, Lady Eschiva of Tiberias commanded the defense of her castle besieged by Saladin's armies.⁶²

While the position of clerics and of canon law remained unchanged until the late Middle Ages, prohibiting women from exercising authority and thus from commanding an army, their stance retained all its ambiguity. The great thirteenth-century scholastic authors, Albert the Great [Albertus Magnus], Thomas Aquinas and Giles of Rome forbade women to fight, while being obliged to note that great ladies of their time continued to lead armies.⁶³ With the multiplication of conflicts in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, including the Hundred Years' War, some thinkers on the law of war like Honoré Bouvet came to recognize, as a result, that women could be compelled into waging war in certain conditions.⁶⁴ These occasional female warriors continued to take on the mantle of Judith and Deborah, and their supporters brandished the same arguments as the eleventh-century canonists had put forward to justify Countess Matilda's combat, those of the just war and the holy war.

Translated by Michèle GREER

⁶¹ *Itinerarium peregrinorum* 1962: 341-342.

⁶² William of Tyre 1982: 43-45, 56.

⁶³ Blythe 2001: 242-269.

⁶⁴ Bouvet 1883: IV, 109.

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