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Women on the Third Crusade

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Abstract

Historians remain undecided over whether or not women actually took up arms during crusading expeditions. Opinions vary widely, from denying that women could ever be true *crucesignati* to concluding that they took an active role in the fighting. This study focuses on the Third Crusade, for which the chronicle evidence is particularly full. Some of the narrative accounts of the crusade never mention women or even deny that they took part, while others describe their assisting crusaders in constructing siege works or performing menial tasks. The Muslim sources for the Third Crusade, however, depict Christian women taking part in the fighting, armed as knights. The study discusses the reasons behind these divergent depictions of women in the Third Crusade. It examines the evidence for women taking an active part in military activity in Europe, and concludes that women could certainly have taken an active military role in the Third Crusade. Yet, as the European sources are silent on the subject, it is unlikely that women did play a significant military role, although it is possible that some fought in particularly desperate battles. © 1997 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved

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The enthusiasm for the new pilgrimage was such that already it was not a question of who had received the cross but of who had not yet done so. A great many men sent each other wool and distaff, implying that if they exempted themselves from this expedition they would only be fit for women's work. Brides urged their husbands and mothers incited their sons to go, their only sorrow being that they were not able to set out with them because of the weakness of their sex. (*Itinerarium Peregrinorum*)¹

With these words, the writer of the first version of the *Itinerarium Peregrinorum*, or 'IPI' as its most recent editor dubbed it, dismissed any possibility of the participation of women in the Third Crusade. He demonstrated their enthusiasm for the enterprise, and

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¹The most recent edition of the Latin text is *Das Itinerarium Peregrinorum: eine zeitgenössische englische Chronik zum dritten Kreuzzug in ursprünglicher Gestalt*, ed. H. E. Mayer (Schriften der Monumenta Germaniae historica 18, Stuttgart, 1962), 277.

depicted them as encouraging their menfolk to participate²—but he insisted that they did not take part themselves.

With the modern interest in ‘putting women back into medieval history’, the role of women in crusading has received some attention. Yet historians disagree profoundly over the extent and nature of women’s involvement. For example, Ronald Finucane, noting the various accounts of women taking part in crusades, observed that ‘there are clear indications that women sometimes took a more active part in the fighting’.³ However, Maureen Purcell, while admitting that women took part in crusades, denied emphatically that they were true crusaders, *crucesignata*, except for a brief period in the second half of the thirteenth century. When they accompanied a crusade, they did so as pilgrims rather than as crusaders, and they certainly did not fight.⁴ James Brundage commented on the various roles women played in the armies of the First Crusade, supporting the fighting men with food and water, encouragement and prayer. He noted that some women were killed in action, but not that they actually took an active role in the fighting.⁵ James Powell studied the role of women in the Fifth Crusade, and argued that women certainly did take the cross and went in person ‘to fulfill their vows by carrying on important functions’, such as serving as guards in the camp, killing fugitives, and perhaps tending the sick and wounded. However, he was not sure whether they took part in the general fighting.⁶

So did women take part in the Third Crusade, and did they fight? Despite the evidence of IP1, it seems that they certainly took part in the crusade. Whether they fought, however, is more difficult to tell. The problem with the evidence cited by Finucane for women fighting during the Third Crusade is that it all comes from Muslim sources, who had their own reasons for depicting Christian women fighting. Overall, it seems likely that women sometimes fought on crusade, but the evidence for the crusade must be supplemented by evidence elsewhere of European women fighting.

IP1 was written by a crusader during the siege of Acre, 1189–1192. In the period 1216–1220 it was expanded and continued by an English cleric, probably Richard de Templo, a canon of Holy Trinity, London.⁷ This version has been dubbed ‘IP2’ by Hans Mayer, and I shall use this title here, for convenience. Richard de Templo drew on a number of sources, including an account of the crusade by a French trouvère named Ambroise and possibly his own memories of the crusade, to produce an account of the

²For other evidence of women promoting crusades see J. M. Powell, ‘The role of women in the Fifth Crusade’, in: *The Horns of Hattin*, ed. B. Z. Kedar (Jerusalem and London, 1992), 294–301—the women of Genoa promoted the Fifth Crusade; and J. Riley-Smith, ‘Family tradition and participation in the Second Crusade’, in *The Second Crusade and the Cistercians*, ed. M. Gervers (New York, 1991), 101–108.

³R. C. Finucane, *Soldiers of the Faith: Crusaders and Moslems at War*, (London, 1983), 174–184: 177–8.

⁴M. Purcell, ‘Women crusaders: a temporary canonical aberration?’ in: *Principalities, powers and estates: Studies in medieval and early modern government and society*, ed. L. O. Frapell (Adelaide, 1979), 57–64.

⁵J. Brundage, ‘Prostitution, miscegenation and sexual purity in the First Crusade’, in: *Crusade and Settlement: papers read at the first conference of the Society for the Study of the Crusades and the Latin East and presented to R. C. Smail*, ed. P. W. Edbury (Cardiff, 1985), 57–65: 58.

⁶Powell, ‘Women in the Fifth Crusade’.

⁷For the dates and compilation of IP1 and IP2 see the introduction to my forthcoming translation, *Chronicle of the Third Crusade: a translation of the Itinerarium Peregrinorum et gesta regis Ricardi* (Ashgate Publishing).

whole of the Third Crusade which included several references to the activities of women in the crusading army. Women killed the crew of a Muslim vessel which was captured in a sea battle off Acre (Bk. 1 ch. 35); women helped to fill in the ditch around Acre, so that siege machines could be brought up to the wall (Bk. 1 ch. 50); washerwomen were allowed to accompany the army (Bk. 4 ch. 9); Queen Joanna of Sicily, Queen Berengaria of England and the daughter of the deposed emperor of Cyprus accompanied King Richard of England to Acre and then to Jaffa (Bk. 2 ch. 42; Bk. 4 ch. 27). Richard de Templo also referred to the efforts of King Richard to prevent women accompanying the army on its march south along the coast from Acre (Bk. 4 ch. 9)—only elderly washerwomen were allowed to stay in the army. However, these efforts were only successful for a short period (Bk. 4 ch. 26). The French trouvère Ambroise added rather unkindly that the elderly washerwomen were good for picking lice from the crusaders' hair and bodies.⁸

So clearly women did accompany the crusading army: noblewomen accompanied their husbands or brothers and women of lesser rank assisted the crusading army by killing Muslim captives, doing the manual labour preparatory to an assault and performing the unpleasant jobs necessary for general hygiene.

Other European sources for the Third Crusade endorse this picture. Roger of Howden listed in his *Gesta Regis Henrici Secundi* the names of those who died during the siege of Acre, 1189–1191. These included the viscount of Châteaudun and his mother;⁹ again a woman accompanied her male relative on crusade. In his *Chronica*, Roger noted that when King Béla III of Hungary died (1196) his wife Margaret, sister of King Philip of France, who had formerly been queen of England as wife of Henry the young king, took the cross for the journey to Jerusalem, *accepit crucem Jerosolimitanae profectionis*, and remained in the land of Jerusalem at Acre in the Lord's service until the end of her life.¹⁰ In this case a woman is specifically stated to have taken the cross herself rather than simply accompanying a male relative, but we have no evidence that she fought when she reached the Holy Land.

So far the picture for the Third Crusade looks much like that for the Fifth. However, for the Third Crusade we also have specific evidence of women taking part in the fighting. As I have mentioned, there are problems with this evidence; but I shall set it out first, and then discuss the problems.

The contemporary Muslim historians 'Imād al-Dīn and Bahā' al-Dīn agree that women took an active role in the fighting during the Christian siege of Acre. 'Imād al-Dīn recorded that a woman of high rank arrived by sea in late autumn 1189, with an escort of 500 knights with their forces, squires, pages and valets. She paid all their expenses and also led them in raids on the Muslims. He went on to say that there were many female knights among the Christians, who wore armour like the men and fought

⁸Book 1 of IP2, in *Das Itinerarium Peregrinorum*, 324, 339–40; Books 2–6 in *Itinerarium Peregrinorum et gesta regis Ricardi*, ed. W. Stubbs, (Rolls Series 38.1, London, 1864), 248, 204, 286, 248, 284; *L'Estoire de la Guerre Sainte, histoire en vers de la troisième croisade (1190–1192) par Ambroise*, ed. G. Paris (Paris, 1897), line 5698.

⁹*Gesta Regis Henrici Secundi: the chronicle of the reigns of Henry II and Richard I*, ed. W. Stubbs, 2 vols. (Rolls Series 49, London, 1867), vol. 2, 148–9.

¹⁰Roger of Howden, *Chronica*, ed. W. Stubbs, 4 vols. (Rolls Series 51, London, 1868–71), vol. 4, 14.

like men in battle, and could not be told apart from the men until they were killed and the armour was stripped from their bodies.¹¹

No Christian chronicler mentions this European noble woman warrior, whom 'Imād al-Dīn does not name; nor do they mention the female knights, although 'Imād al-Dīn claims that these women saw their participation in warfare as an act of devotion, 'thanks to which they believe themselves assured of their salvation'. However, these rather vague anecdotes receive more substantial support in incidents recounted elsewhere in 'Imād al-Dīn's work, and by Bahā' al-Dīn. On 25 July 1190, the Christian crusading army, which was besieging Acre, made an attack on Saladin's camp. Although initially successful, the attack was heavily defeated and the field of battle was left littered with Christian bodies. 'Imād al-Dīn and Bahā' al-Dīn rode out together to examine the dead. Bahā' al-Dīn recorded: 'I noticed the bodies of two women. Someone told me that he had seen four women engaged in the fight, of whom two were made prisoners.' 'Imād al-Dīn recorded: 'We remarked a women killed in the fighting, and we heard her express herself by the tears she was still shedding.'¹²

In July 1191, both of them record the presence of a female archer among the Christian besiegers of Acre. Bahā' al-Dīn gives the fullest description:

One very intelligent old man . . . was amongst those who forced their way into the enemy's trenches that day. 'Behind their rampart', he told me, 'was a women, wrapped in a green *mellûta*, [a kind of mantle] 'who kept on shooting arrows from wooden bow, with which she wounded several of our men. She was at last overpowered by numbers; we killed her, and brought the bow she had been using to the Sultan, who was greatly astonished'.¹³

'Imad al-Dīn's account is briefer: 'There was a woman on one of the points of the defence holding a bow of wood, firing well and drawing blood; she did not stop fighting until she was killed.'¹⁴

These are the only specific accounts of women fighting. However, both writers also mention the presence of women among the crusaders. The most famous of these references is 'Imād al-Dīn's description of the Christian prostitutes who came to join the siege of Acre to make a gift of their charms to the crusade, each wearing a cross on her chest.¹⁵ Just before this anecdote, he mentions the Muslims' capture of a number of Christian prostitutes during an attack on the besiegers' camp.¹⁶ However, 'Imād al-Dīn also several times mentions the presence of women among Christians coming by ship

¹¹ 'Imād al-Dīn, quoted by Abû Shāma, in *Le livre des deux jardins*, in vols. 4 and 5 of *Recueil des Historiens des Croisades, Historiens Orientaux (RHC Or.)*, pub. Académie des Inscriptions et de Belles-Lettres, 5 vols. (Paris, 1872–1906), vol. 4, 433–4.

¹² Bahā' al-Dīn, *The life of Saladin*, trans. A. Stewart (Palestinian Pilgrims Text Society, London, 1897), p. 195 (the Arabic text of this work, with French translation, is in *RHC Or.* vol. 3, 3–370); 'Imād al-Dīn al-Isfahāni, *Conquête de la Syrie et de la Palestine par Saladin*, trans. H. Massé (Documents relatifs à l'histoire des croisades 10, Paris, 1972), 239–240.

¹³ Bahā' al-Dīn, 261.

¹⁴ 'Imād al-Dīn, 312.

¹⁵ 'Imād al-Dīn, 202–203.

¹⁶ 'Imād al-Dīn, 202.

from Europe to join the crusade, or carrying supplies or merchandise.¹⁷ He also mentions the presence of women in the Christian besieging camp who are not called prostitutes, including the heartwarming tale of the mother whose three month old baby girl was stolen from her at night by a Muslim and restored to her by Saladin. This occurred in May 1191.¹⁸ Bahā' al-Dīn also recounts this story—twice.¹⁹ 'Imād al-Dīn also records that the crusaders' camp was full of old women who stirred the crusaders up to fight for the sake of God and the Holy Sepulchre.²⁰

Bahā' al-Dīn endorses 'Imād al-Dīn's picture. Some of his anecdotes are the same; as they were both close to Saladin and worked side by side in his service, it is not surprising that some of their material is similar. He also records the capture of women (not called prostitutes) from the Christian camp, and of Christian women among Christians coming by ship from Europe to join the crusade.²¹ Interestingly, he also records the presence of women in the army as it marched south from Acre in late August/early September 1191, although IP2 and Ambroise specifically inform us that all women except washerwomen had been left behind at Acre.²² Bahā' al-Dīn informs us that a knight, fourteen Franks and a woman, the knight's daughter, were captured by the Muslims during the march south. These were all put in prison and later executed on Saladin's orders.²³ After the battle of Arsuf, four Franks and a woman were captured by the Arabs and taken to Saladin, who ordered them to be kept in strict confinement.²⁴

Although we are not usually given any further information about these women, clearly one of them at least was a relative of a male crusader. At one point 'Imād al-Dīn also suggests that two women captured by the Muslims when a French ship was shipwrecked were travelling with their husbands.²⁵

Another Muslim historian of the Third Crusade supports the picture given by 'Imād al-Dīn. Ibn al-Athīr was an eye witness of some of the events of the war between Saladin and the Franks, although for the siege of Acre he seems to have used second hand sources, including Bahā' al-Dīn's and 'Imād al-Dīn's histories. In his 'Universal History' he explains that when the European Christians were aroused to come to Palestine to recover Jerusalem, many women came with the men and fought alongside them in the siege of Acre. He also recounts a conversation he had with a Christian prisoner, who told him that although he was his mother's only son she had sold the family home in order to equip him for the crusade and sent him out to recover Jerusalem—a story which endorses the picture painted by the writer of IP1 that European Christian women were urging their menfolk to join the crusade.²⁶

¹⁷ 'Imād al-Dīn, 193, 258, 286, 292.

¹⁸ 'Imād al-Dīn, 287, 294–5.

¹⁹ Bahā' al-Dīn, 41–2, 243–4.

²⁰ 'Imād al-Dīn in Abū Shāma, vol. 4, 434.

²¹ Bahā' al-Dīn, 196, 238, 243.

²² *Itinerarium Peregrinorum et gesta regis Ricardi*, 248; Ambroise, *Estoire*, lines 5690–4.

²³ Bahā' al-Dīn, 281.

²⁴ Bahā' al-Dīn, 294.

²⁵ 'Imād al-Dīn, 286.

²⁶ Ibn al-Athīr, *El-Kāmel Altevarykh*, in *RHC Or.*, vol. 2, 4–5. For an assessment of this historian see H. A. R. Gibb, 'The Arabic sources for the life of Saladin', *Speculum*, 25 (1950), 58–72. Although this is only a secondary source, in that it draws heavily on the work of 'Imād al-Dīn, it nevertheless reflects the attitudes of Muslims at the time of the Third Crusade.

Ibn al-Athīr mentions two specific instances of women's involvement in the crusade. After a description of the battle outside the city of Acre on 4 October 1189 he adds: 'Three Frankish women who had been fighting on horseback were found among the prisoners. Their sex was recognised when they were captured and their armour was removed'. He later records that in August 1190 'a queen among the Franks who lived beyond the sea left her country accompanied by around a thousand combatants. She was made prisoner in the neighbourhood of Alexandria, and her companions were also captured'.²⁷

The first of these anecdotes is reminiscent of 'Imād al-Dīn's general statement that European Christian women fought among the crusader cavalry and were only recognised when they were captured and their armour removed. Was this the incident to which 'Imād al-Dīn was referring? If it was, it is odd that he did not recount the incident himself. As 'Imād al-Dīn's account of the battle of 4 October 1189 is eyewitness, while Ibn al-Athīr's is not, it is tempting to think that the latter's anecdote about women fighting in this battle is a fanciful assertion based on 'Imād al-Dīn's claim that women were sometimes found among the prisoners. The bitterly fought battle of 4 October 1189 could have seemed to Ibn al-Athīr to have been a reasonable occasion for this to have occurred.

In the same way, Ibn al-Athīr's anecdote about the European queen who was captured near Alexandria seems to be a combination of half-remembered stories in 'Imād al-Dīn's history: his story about the European Christian noblewoman who came to the siege of Acre and led her troops into battle, and his account of the capture on 17 October 1190 outside Acre of two crusader ships with all those on board, including 'a woman of high birth, rich and very respected'. The story seems unlikely to be true, as the capture of this European queen is not mentioned by 'Imād al-Dīn nor by Bāha' al-Dīn, nor by any European source.²⁸

Nevertheless, even if his specific examples seem open to criticism, Ibn al-Athīr's history provides general confirmation of the picture painted by 'Imād al-Dīn and Bāha' al-Dīn: European Christian women were very enthusiastic about the crusade; they encouraged their menfolk to take part and they went on crusade themselves.

In short, the Muslim writers endorse the Christian European chroniclers: women were present on the crusade, despite what the original *Itinerarium Peregrinorum* tells us. If we combine the evidence of the European Christian and the Muslim sources, we see that noblewomen accompanied their sons, fathers, brothers and husbands on the crusade, and some remained with the army although others stayed in safety at Acre after it was captured in July 1191. Women assisted in manual labour, in dealing with prisoners, as washerwomen, as prostitutes; and they also joined in the fighting.

Or did they? We only have the word of the Muslim historians for women's participation in the fighting. Our problem is that in both the European Christian and the Muslim culture, it was expected that good, virtuous women would not normally fight, for it was believed that in a civilised, godly society women should not have to fight. Conversely, women were regarded as being particularly susceptible to evil. Therefore

²⁷Ibn al-Athīr, vol. 2, 13, 29.

²⁸'Imād al-Dīn in Abū Shāma, vol. 4, 433–4; and in *Conquête de la Syrie*, 258.

Christian writers would not record women fighting in the crusading army, because this would discredit the crusaders—who had to appear as godfearing in all their actions. On the other hand, Muslims would gladly depict Christians as allowing their women to fight, as this would show that they were either barbarous or degenerate people who had been led astray.

The Muslims regarded the European Christians as careless in guarding the virtue of their womenfolk. This carelessness was important evidence for their barbarity. The Muslim nobleman Usāma ibn Munqidh described in shocked tones how a European Christian in Palestine would leave his wife alone in the street, talking with another man, or allow a male barber to shave his wife, and would not be excessively distressed to find a strange man in his wife's bed.²⁹ Admittedly, he did describe the courage of certain Muslim women in the face of attack, showing that Muslim women were prepared to fight or to assist Muslim warriors in defence of home and family; but they did not go out on campaign, and his description indicates that he regarded such women as exceptional.³⁰

'Imād al-Dīn's attitude to women is somewhat bizarre. He lays particular stress on the sufferings of Christian women during the Holy War. He seems to imply that the sufferings of these women showed the utter failure of Christianity: the Christians could not even protect their women, who fell prey to the victorious Muslims.³¹

In 'Imād al-Dīn's eyes, even Christian castles became women who would fall before the victorious Muslims. The Hospitaller's castle of Kaukab was 'an inviolable woman, a maid who could not be asked for in marriage'; the captured castle of ash-Shughr was 'a virgin fortress taken by force'.³² At the same time, the Sultan Saladin going to besiege the city of Jerusalem was like a lover going to ask Allah for the hand of the city in marriage; going to besiege the Templars' fortress of Baghras he was like a lover going to beg for a woman to yield to him.³³

Among the Christian women, he tells us, were beautiful, intelligent, virtuous women such as Stephanie, lady of Transjordan and Isabel, heiress of the kingdom of Jerusalem. While Stephanie's own Christian vassals turned traitor to her, the sultan kept his promises to her. Isabel was shamefully treated by the Christians, who forced her to divorce her beloved husband and marry another man while she was pregnant by her first husband; then, when her second husband was murdered, she was forced to marry a third who all but forced himself into her house at night—even though she was then pregnant by her second husband.³⁴ 'Imād al-Dīn's picture is open to question: no other source mentions Isabel's pregnancy at the time of her marriage to the marquis of Montferrat, while IP2 and Ambroise depict Count Henry of Champagne as hesitating before marrying her after the marquis' murder.³⁵ Yet details aside, the point 'Imād al-Dīn

²⁹Usāma ibn Munqidh, in: *An Arab-Syrian gentleman and warrior in the period of the crusades: Memoirs of Usāmah ibn-Munqidh*, trans. P. K. Hitti (Princeton, 1929), 164–5.

³⁰Usāma ibn Munqidh, 152–4.

³¹'Imād al-Dīn, 34, 50, 202, 258, ('the Franks tried to rescue them but in vain,') 286 ('the sultan gave them to those who captured them').

³²'Imād al-Dīn, 81, 135.

³³'Imād al-Dīn, 94, 143.

³⁴'Imād al-Dīn, 105–6, 106–7, 304–5, 377.

³⁵*Itinerarium Peregrinorum et gesta regis Ricardi*, 343; Ambroise, *Estoire*, lines 8936–8950.

wishes us to understand is clear: the European Christians treat their women abominably, and this demonstrates their barbarity and godlessness.

Yet women could also be a source of fear, as in his descriptions of Christian women who fought or who came as prostitutes to serve God with the cross on their breasts. Moreover, he describes the mangonels of the Christian besieging force which hurled rocks at the walls of the city of Acre as 'pregnant women', who gave birth to 'the worst calamities'.³⁶ In using such imagery he seems to be underlining the alien culture of the European Christians, their 'otherness', and the threat which they presented to Muslim normality, where society was male-dominated and women's sphere of operation was strictly within the home.

Bahā' al-Dīn's work does not share his colleague's imagery, but arguably he shared his attitudes. He mentions women fighting and the presence of women in the Christian forces to underline the strangeness, the barbarity, the godlessness of the Christians. Ibn al-Athīr seems to have had a far more positive attitude towards the European Christian women in the Holy Land than 'Imād al-Dīn, giving sympathetic and humane descriptions of the plight of individual female prisoners.³⁷ Yet he also mentioned women fighting and the presence of women in the Christian forces to underline the perverted fanaticism of the Christians.

With all this in mind, can we trust these historians' accounts of Christian women fighting during the Third Crusade? The European chronicles give enough evidence to support their accounts of the presence of women in the Christian army, but they say nothing of women fighting. Did the Muslim historians depict Christian women as fighting during the crusade purely to discredit the Christians and to help account for their defeat by the godly, virtuous Muslim, Sultan Saladin?

This is certainly possible, and the fact that crusade historians in general have given very little attention to the accounts of women fighting during the crusade suggests that they have assumed this. It is possible to argue, however, that although the Muslim writers do exaggerate the role of women as part of their scheme of writing, Christian European women may have fought on the crusade. The evidence for this is that Christian women did sometimes fight in Europe.

As popular feminism has tended to regard warfare as a manifestation of patriarchy which women reject, serious scholarly study of women's participation in warfare in medieval Europe has not received wide publicity. Study has also been hampered by the prohibition in the modern western world on women's participation in active warfare; it seems to have been assumed that as women do not fight now, they did not fight in the past. To the casual observer of medieval history, the theoretical limitations placed upon women's participation in public activity by the law and clerical writers seem to preclude women from participation in warfare. However, as Professor Rees Davies has remarked: 'women's position in . . . society was not necessarily as inferior or submissive as the legal texts suggest. On the contrary, they often acted on their own initiative . . . even

³⁶Imād ad-Dīn, 320.

³⁷Ibn al-Athīr, vol. 1, 691.

leading armies into battle, as did the Amazonian Gwenllïan, wife of Gryffydd ap Rhys of Deheubarth, in 1136'.³⁸

There have been a number of recent studies of women's participation in medieval warfare, which show many examples of women's active, physical involvement in warfare during this period. These examples are scattered across Europe and involve many different women from different classes and social milieus, which has made it difficult to classify and quantify them. Historians are forced to fall back on generalisations: 'The examples of women leading troops in armour are far too numerous to list';³⁹ 'a surprising number of female warriors can be found in the medieval sources'.⁴⁰ Yet, as Megan McLaughlin observes, 'women warriors were unusual enough to retain their status as anomalies'.⁴¹ The fact that they were regarded as anomalies by contemporaries has led some historians to doubt whether we can take seriously accounts of noblewomen's involvement in warfare.⁴² Carolyne Larrington's discussion is brief but well balanced if cautious: 'there is some historical evidence for women actually taking to the field themselves', yet 'women may never have fought as a matter of course'.⁴³

Megan McLaughlin admitted that most of her examples of women's active participation in warfare were emergency situations; but she stressed that these cases showed that women were ready and able to take up arms in an emergency.⁴⁴ It is clear that women were expected to defend the family home in an emergency, as Usāma ibn Munqidh describes his female relatives as doing. But they could also be called upon to act as defenders in larger operations. In the early fourteenth century Ramon Muntaner armed the women of the Catalan company to defend Gallipoli when the men of the company were away on campaign: 'our women defended the barbican... in so masterly a manner, it was marvellous. Indeed, a woman was found there who had five wounds in her face from quarrels and still continued the defence as if she had no hurt'.⁴⁵

Clearly some women had sufficient skill in arms to defend themselves in an emergency. Orderic Vitalis describes Judith, daughter of King Henry I of England, shooting at her father with a crossbow when he came to negotiate with her during his siege of her castle of Breteuil in 1119.⁴⁶ But ordinary women could defend themselves as well: Ramon Muntaner describes how in 1285 one Na Mercadera, a woman of Peralada in Aragon, went out of her house armed with a lance and shield so that she could defend

³⁸R. R. Davies, *The Age of Conquest: Wales 1063–1415* (Oxford, 1987, 1991), 128.

³⁹K. Casey, 'The Cheshire Cat: Reconstructing the experience of medieval women', *Liberating Women's History: Theoretical and Critical Essays*, ed. B. A. Carroll (Urbana, Illinois, 1976), 233–4.

⁴⁰M. McLaughlin, 'The woman warrior: gender, warfare and society in medieval Europe', *Women's Studies—an interdisciplinary journal*, 17 (1990), 193–209: 196.

⁴¹M. McLaughlin, 'Woman warrior', 196.

⁴²For instance, E. Searle, 'Emma the Conqueror', *Studies in Medieval History presented to R. Allen Brown*, ed. C. Harper-Bill, C. J. Holdsworth, J. L. Nelson (Woodbridge, 1989), 281–288: 281–3.

⁴³C. Larrington, *Women and writing in Medieval Europe: a sourcebook* (London and New York, 1995), pp. 157–9, esp. 158.

⁴⁴M. McLaughlin, 'Woman warrior', 196–7.

⁴⁵Ramon Muntaner, *Chronicle*, translated by Lady Goodenough as *The Chronicle of Muntaner*, 2 vols. (Hakluyt Society second series nos. 47 and 50, London, 1920, 1921), vol. 2, 540.

⁴⁶Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History*, ed. M. Chibnall, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1969–80), vol. 6, 212–4.

herself if necessary against the troops of King Philip III of France, who were besieging the town. She encountered a French knight, whom she captured.⁴⁷ For Ramon, this incident demonstrated the superiority of the Catalans: even their women had greater prowess than the French. Philip III's campaign in Aragon had been approved as a crusade by the pope; the earlier Albigensian crusaders had also encountered women among their opponents, according to the *Chanson de la croisade albigeois*. The anonymous poet, who was opposed to the crusaders, describes how the leader of the Albigensian crusade, Simon de Montfort, was killed at Toulouse by a catapult operated by ladies, girls and married women.⁴⁸ In this situation the poet seems to emphasize the presence of women among the defenders of the city to underline the unity of the besieged against the hated invaders: even little girls joined in the defence.

A noblewoman could command the defence of a fortress, either in her husband's name or in her own, as Nicola de la Haye, hereditary castellan of Lincoln Castle, did in 1191 and 1216–7.⁴⁹ Megan McLaughlin explains that noblewomen of southern France and Catalonia not only joined in their husbands' campaigns but also possessed their own castles and made use of their own retainers for both offensive and defensive warfare.⁵⁰ This was also the case in the Holy Land: in 1187, Lady Eschiva of Tiberias commanded the defence of her castle of Tiberias against Saladin's besieging forces.⁵¹

A noblewoman could act as general in the field, but here we meet a problem. As the sources do not usually specifically state that the woman general actually fought, historians have tended to assume that they handed over physical leadership of the army to a male commander, and did not fight in person themselves. Yet, as Megan McLaughlin remarks, it is unclear whether many of the male war-leaders in this period actually fought in battle, but they 'were nevertheless recognized by their contemporaries as "warriors"'. She suggests: 'The decisive test would seem to be whether someone was present at and involved in a battle to a significant degree, not the number of blows she struck'.⁵²

Many noble women warriors were widows, who had by necessity to act on their own behalf as they had no husband to act for them; but not all of them. Sometimes a wife would act on her husband's behalf: Jonathan Phillips has cited the case of Countess Sybilla of Flanders who in 1148 led her troops to meet an invasion by Count Baldwin of Hainault; her husband, Count Thierry of Flanders, was absent on crusade.⁵³ Sometimes, however, the noblewoman seems to be acting largely on her own initiative. One of our best sources for this in the period just after the Third Crusade is the *Histoire des ducs de Normandie et des rois d'Angleterre*.

⁴⁷Ramon Muntaner, *Chronicle*, vol. 1, 311–2.

⁴⁸J. Shirley, trans., *The Song of the Cathar Wars: a history of the Albigensian Crusade* (Aldershot, 1996), 172.

⁴⁹*The Chronicle of Richard of Devizes*, ed. J. Appleby (London and Edinburgh, 1963), 30–1; *Histoire des ducs de Normandie et des rois d'Angleterre*, ed. F. Michel (Société de l'histoire de France 18, Paris, 1840; reprinted New York, 1965), 182; M. McLaughlin, 'Woman warrior', 199.

⁵⁰M. McLaughlin, 'Woman warrior', 198, citing A. R. Lewis, *The development of southern French and Catalan society, 718–1050* (Austin, 1965), 275, 391–2 and 404.

⁵¹*La continuation de Guillaume de Tyr (1184–1197)*, ed. M. R. Morgan (Paris, 1982), 43, 44–45, 56.

⁵²M. McLaughlin, 'Woman warrior', 196.

⁵³J. Phillips, *Defenders of the Holy Land: relations between the Latin East and the West, 1119–1187* (Oxford, 1996), 276.

The author of this work was probably a Flemish mercenary who served in the entourage of Robert de Béthune, one of the Flemings who fought for the king of England in the war of 1215–1217. He was writing in the early 1220s, around the same time that IP2 was written, so his attitude to fighting women can be usefully compared to what IP2 has to say about women on the Third Crusade. Much of his material on King John is obviously based on his own knowledge of the king.⁵⁴ What he has to say about Matilda de Braose seems to be based on her popular reputation. According to him, Matilda was an active warrior.

The de Braoses were powerful and influential lords of the Welsh March in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. According to the writer of the *Histoire des ducs*, Matilda 'was a beautiful woman, very wise and doughty and very vigorous. People said nothing about her husband compared to what they said about her. She was responsible for keeping up the war against the Welsh and conquered much from them'. This certainly implies that Matilda fought in the field in person. Presumably her husband was at the king's court while she was carrying on the war, as he was a close friend of King John.⁵⁵ It is interesting that this commentator, writing in the early 1220s, saw nothing wrong in the noblewoman carrying on a war.

However, McLaughlin observed that from the late eleventh century chroniclers and other writers began expressing surprise when women fought, and that by the later middle ages women's participation in warfare became less common. She suggested that the decline in women's involvement in active warfare was due to the changing nature of military organisation from private and domestic to public and professional. This relates to the widely accepted theory that medieval women were restricted to the domestic or private sphere, while men could operate within the public sphere. McLaughlin argued that in the early middle ages the basic military unit was the band of household warriors, who would follow their lady into battle if necessary, as readily as they would their lord. Noblewomen had the opportunity to learn about warfare within the noble household. However, as the domestic military unit was superseded by professional armies, women's role in warfare declined, as they had no opportunity to participate.

This is a useful theory, but objections can be made. How far could we call 'domestic' the military activity of some of the women noted by McLaughlin, or of Matilda de Braose? It is accepted that the *Histoire des ducs* was written by a Flemish mercenary—a professional warrior—who seems entirely happy with noblewomen leading armies. Not only does he praise Matilda de Braose, but he also inserts a rather romanticized account of the wars between King Stephen and Matilda the empress, in which the Empress Matilda and Queen Matilda, Stephen's wife, are the two leading military commanders:

Every day the empress rode with the army, and gave the best and most valuable advice. In the whole army there was not a baron as astute and experienced in war as she was, and there was much talk about her throughout England.⁵⁶

⁵⁴For a modern assessment of this source, see S. Duffy, 'King John's expedition to Ireland, 1210: the evidence reconsidered', *Irish Historical Studies* 30 (1996), 1–21: 6–7.

⁵⁵*Histoire des ducs*, 111. For King John and William de Braose see R. Turner, *King John* (London, 1994), 55.

⁵⁶*Histoire des ducs*, 77.

After King Stephen was captured at Lincoln:

Queen Matilda, the good lady, the wife of King Stephen, who was of very good and straightforward character, had never been involved in war, but remained simply and quietly within her chambers. When she heard the news that her lord had been captured, she was very distressed. However, she did not show her grief in sobs and tears; instead she went to her lord's treasure—he had a great deal of it—and handed it out generously. And she sent for knights throughout all lands, wherever she could get them, and assembled such a great army that she besieged the empress and her son Henry and the king of Scotland and the earl of Leicester and many other noble barons all together in the city of Winchester.

The siege was successful: King Stephen was released, and 'Queen Matilda returned to her chambers and never wanted to get involved in war again, but let her lord deal with it when he was freed'. However, the empress made much more progress in her war against the king than she had against the queen.⁵⁷

This is a romanticised account, written around eighty years after events; but it demonstrates the attitude of the writer, a professional soldier of the first quarter of the thirteenth century who fought on behalf of the kings of England. He saw nothing wrong with a noblewoman leading an army; in fact he gives the impression that he would rather fight under an efficient female general than under an inefficient male general. His only conditions for a noblewoman to act as a commander is that she should be acting within her proper rights, or on behalf of her husband or family. The empress was acting within her rights, for he regarded the empress as the natural heir to England; Queen Matilda and Matilda de Braose were acting on behalf of their husbands, and the empress was acting on behalf of her son Henry.

The empress, however, was depicted here as a widow. In reality the empress' second husband, Geoffrey of Anjou, was still alive when she was campaigning in England in the early 1140s, and had in fact refused to help her. One could speculate that this was actually a factor in her failure to establish herself in England. Did the nobility and Londoners of England in 1141 believe that a woman involved in warfare against her husband's wishes was not acting in a rightful cause and should not be supported?

I suggest that the condition for women to engage in active warfare was not that it should be linked to the domestic sphere as such—primarily, defence of the home and family—but that it should be in the interests of her family and under the authority of her husband, if he was still alive.⁵⁸ Hence Matilda de Braose's warfare against the Welsh was praiseworthy, for it extended the power and authority of the de Braose family. Widows who fought on behalf of their children were praiseworthy, as the Empress Matilda did in the fictional account of the *Histoire des ducs*, or as Queen Eleanor did in reality in 1199 to defend the Angevin lands of her son John against the forces of her

⁵⁷ *Histoire des ducs*, 78–9.

⁵⁸ On this see also M. Chibnall, 'Women in Orderic Vitalis', *Haskins Society Journal*, 2 (1990), 105–121: 114–6.

nephew Arthur.⁵⁹ Married or single women would be criticised for involvement in warfare when they were acting outside the authority of husband or father. It was the authority by which they acted rather than the sphere in which they acted that was significant.

Interestingly, this was also the criterion in canon law for women being permitted to go on crusade: they had to have their husband's consent.⁶⁰ With all this in mind, I turn again to the question of whether women fought during the Third Crusade.

Clearly women in Europe did take up arms sometimes, in certain circumstances, particularly in cases of dire necessity. The crusade was arguably for the greatest necessity of all; the defence of Christendom and the recovery of the Holy Sepulchre from the infidel. What was more, chroniclers made approving mention of women who used weapons against bad or misguided crusaders in Europe; I have cited examples at Toulouse and in Aragon. So is there any reason why women should not have fought on crusades in the Holy Land?

In order to fight legitimately on the crusade they would have to have had their husband's consent to go on crusade, or father's consent if unmarried. A widow could go on crusade without anyone's consent, but Pietro Collivaccino, a notary of the Roman curia under Pope Innocent III who finished his work on canon law in 1209, considered that women's crusading vows should normally be redeemed by a money payment unless the woman in question was wealthy and would be accompanied by a retinue of soldiers. He did not comment on whether she should lead them in person. Presumably, she could if she wished to do so.⁶¹

On this basis, 'Imād al-Dīn's account of the European noblewoman who led her troops into battle has a ring of truth about it. Pietro Collivaccino could almost be discussing her case. The problem is that we know nothing about her apart from 'Imād al-Dīn's reference. She is never mentioned by the European chroniclers; yet, as Megan McLaughlin makes clear, noble women warriors were sufficiently uncommon by the late twelfth century to excite comment from chroniclers. They did not necessarily disapprove of their fighting; in fact often such women are held up as examples of courage to shame their menfolk who have failed to match their women's example. In this case, nothing is said at all. This does suggest that 'Imād al-Dīn's story is false. He had heard, perhaps, that European noblewomen did sometimes lead their troops into battle; and he inserted this story to stress the strangeness, barbarity and ungodliness of the European Christians.

Yet there is another factor to consider. Although European chroniclers did not necessarily disapprove of women fighting – although they did insist in regarding it as unusual – the crusade was no ordinary war. It was a holy war, and women's role in it was problematic. Even though by the early thirteenth century the canonists agreed that in certain circumstances women could take the cross and go on crusade, the problem remained that men regarded women as a source of sexual temptation.

It was for this reason that IPI insisted that although women supported the crusade and

⁵⁹Roger of Howden, *Chronica*, vol. 4, 88.

⁶⁰J. A. Brundage, *Medieval Canon Law and the crusader* (Madison, 1969), 77.

⁶¹Brundage, *Medieval Canon Law*, 77.

encouraged their menfolk to go, they did not go themselves. For the same reason, Ambroise and IP2 were at pains to point out that all the women were left behind in Acre in August 1191, whereas Bahā' al-Dīn's account shows that this was not in fact the case. Again, this was why the compiler of IP2 went to particular pains to emphasize that a woman who was killed while helping to construct siege works was decently married and devoted to her husband, whom she had accompanied on the crusade.⁶² He was so anxious to impress this on his readers that we suspect that he had a particular reason for emphasizing that she was not a sinner.

The Third Crusade was a failure: it did not recover Jerusalem, although the Treaty of Jaffa of September 1192 confirmed the European Christians in their possession of part of the coast of Palestine. In the wake of the failure, chroniclers were anxious to 'put the record straight' in Europe and to apportion blame away from their own side. Ambroise and IP2 blamed the French for the divisions in the crusading army which led to the failure: but supported King Richard's decision not to attack Jerusalem.⁶³ Roger of Howden and Ralph of Coggeshall blamed the French for the failure to attack Jerusalem.⁶⁴

One of the obvious accusations to lay against the crusading army was that it had had women in it, who tempted the crusaders to sin, so bringing God's wrath down on them. The chroniclers of the First Crusade had made this complaint against women in the crusading armies, and some commentators on the Second Crusade had also blamed the failure of that crusade on the misconduct of the women.⁶⁵ Hence Ambroise and IP2 were at pains to play down the presence of women. So it is not very surprising that they made very little mention of women's involvement in hostilities. Some women killed some Muslim prisoners;⁶⁶ IP1 noted that Queen Sybil of Jerusalem helped lead the defence of the city of Jerusalem when it was besieged by Saladin in October 1187⁶⁷—as she ought, as the obedient wife of the captive king (and the rightful heir to the kingdom); otherwise, women played no part in the hostilities.

So we are left marooned between two ideological standpoints. The Muslim historians noted that European Christian women did take part in the fighting, but they wished to stress the godlessness and barbarity of the crusaders and this is one part of that picture. The European Christian historians mentioned women only in passing and minimised their involvement; but they wished to defend the crusaders against charges of immorality so they played down the involvement of women in the crusade.

However, as it is clear that some women did accompany their husbands or sons on the crusade, and as women did take up arms in Europe especially in defence of home or family, it is likely that some women did take up arms during the crusade, at least to defend the crusaders' camp when the Muslims attempted to break into it. Bahā' al-Dīn

⁶² *Das Itinerarium Peregrinorum*, 339–340.

⁶³ Ambroise, *Estoire*, lines 7007–7030; 10597–10626; 10639–10682; *Itinerarium Peregrinorum et gesta regis Ricardi*, 283–4, 393–4, 394–6.

⁶⁴ Roger of Howden, *Chronica*, vol. 3, 182–3; Ralph of Coggeshall, *Chronicon Anglicanum*, ed. J. Stevenson (Rolls Series 66, London, 1875), 38–40.

⁶⁵ Brundage, 'Prostitution', 58–9; E. Siberry, *Criticism of Crusading, 1095–1274* (Oxford, 1985), 45–6.

⁶⁶ Ambroise, *Estoire*, lines 3309–3314; *Das Itinerarium Peregrinorum*, 324.

⁶⁷ *Das Itinerarium Peregrinorum*, 264.

paints a believable picture of the woman in the green cloak firing her bow at the Muslim attackers. It seems far less likely that noblewomen dressed up as men and fought on the battlefield on horseback, still less that they led their troops into battle; such actions would be more likely to attract comment. At the very least, one of the European writers critical of the crusaders would have mentioned these fighting women and blamed the failure of the crusade on their behaviour.⁶⁸

However, it is not unlikely that some non-noble women fought alongside their husbands, brothers, sons and fathers in the infantry, at least in desperate battles like the one on 25 July 1190. 'Imād al-Dīn's shock at finding the body of a dying woman on the field after this battle seems to have been genuine and profound, and unlike some of his other stories involving Christian women, his description of the scene has a ring of truth. IP1 describes this as a chaotic battle, born of the frustration of the common people at the inefficient leadership of the noble commanders.⁶⁹ In such a battle women might have gone out with their husbands, brothers and sons, determined to strike a blow for Christendom. But if we accept the Muslim historians' assertion that women fought in this battle, we could expect the author of IP1 to have mentioned the fact that women took part and blame the defeat on them. Perhaps he did not know; perhaps the inclusion of women is implied in the derogative word *vulgus* applied to the army which went out to engage the Muslims; perhaps he did not mention the women who went because this would only make a bad defeat look even worse. The dead woman clearly was not disguised as a man, as her gender was immediately recognised; but perhaps it was after this incident that the Muslim warriors began claiming that Christian women were dressing up as men to fight, to justify the Muslims' awful crime of killing women.

In conclusion, IP1, the original version of the *Itinerarium Peregrinorum*, is misleading in claiming that women did not take an active part in the Third Crusade. Women of all classes did accompany the male crusaders, and they took an active role in support of the combatants, helping to defend the camp and build siege works as well as the more mundane jobs of the washerwomen. Muslim sources suggest that any independent noblewomen would have used their financial resources to provide troops. Muslim sources also assert that women fought in the crusader battlelines, on foot and on horseback, and that noblewomen led their own forces into battle. For the reasons discussed, these assertions must be treated with caution. As women in Europe did sometimes fight, especially in urgent situations, and given that the crusade itself was the most urgent situation in all Christendom, it is likely that some women did fight. However, as no European Christian sources, not even those critical of the crusaders, mention Christian women fighting it seems unlikely that women played a prominent role in the fighting. Probably they only fought on foot in emergency situations, as when the Muslims broke into the Christian camp, or in the desperate battle of 25 July 1190.

⁶⁸For criticism of the Third Crusade, see Siberry, *Criticism*, 193, 203.

⁶⁹*Das Itinerarium Peregrinorum*, 329–331.