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Review of Jason T. Roche, *The Crusade of King Conrad III of Germany:
Warfare and Diplomacy in Byzantium, Anatolia and Outremer, 1146–1148*

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JASON T. ROCHE, *The Crusade of King Conrad III of Germany: Warfare and Diplomacy in Byzantium, Anatolia and Outremer, 1146–1148* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021), 365 pp. ISBN 978 2 503 53038 3. €94.00

The starting point for Jason T. Roche's study is the brief but consequential assessment of the German King Conrad III (1093/4–1152) in the historiographical discourse of the nineteenth century. The negative view of the first Hohenstaufen king held by German historians stemmed from the anachronistic categories by which they measured medieval monarchs against contemporary political hopes and desires. Nineteenth-century historians cast medieval rulers as heroes or failures in a story of progress and modernization that culminated in the modern nation state. Their verdicts were based on how much those rulers contributed to the centralization of monarchical power in the Middle Ages, a process they saw as essential to the rise of the nation state. Conrad III did not measure up well in this respect; not only was he accused of being unable to settle his conflict with the Guelphs to the advantage of the kingdom, but he was also held responsible for the disaster of the Second Crusade (1147–9). Nineteenth-century accounts of his reign revolved around the *idée fixe* of a 'decisive battle' against the Guelphs and the Seljuks, the lack of which seemed to demonstrate Conrad's personal incompetence and weakness as a leader. In this way, historians established the notion that the king had 'failed', in part due to his supposedly spontaneous decision to join the crusade in Speyer in 1147 under the influence of the monk, scholar, and preacher Bernard of Clairvaux (c.1090–1153).

This picture is only now beginning to change in modern German historiography. And British and American historians in particular have been reassessing the image of Conrad's crusade in recent years, in line with the greater interest traditionally shown in the crusades by English-speaking researchers.¹ Roche takes this trend to a new high

Trans. by Jozef van der Voort (GHIL).

¹ E.g. Jonathan Phillips and Martin Hoch (eds.), *The Second Crusade: Scope and Consequences* (Manchester, 2001); Jonathan Phillips, *The Second Crusade: Extending the Frontiers of Christendom* (New Haven, 2007); Jason T. Roche and

point and a provisional conclusion. His book—which is well worth reading—is a reinterpretation of the historical accounts written by the French monk Odo of Deuil and the Byzantine imperial secretary John Kinnamos (c.1143–85), the two main sources for the history of the Second Crusade. His close examination of the intentions of these two authors allows him to develop a new understanding of their narratives. By modelling the challenges involved in supplying both the German and French armies and by adopting a range of interdisciplinary approaches, he manages to produce an overall picture with many persuasive new interpretations that also take into account contemporary ideas of rank and honour.

The introduction situates the topic in the wider research literature, offers a brief guide to the contents, and summarizes the book's ten chapters (pp. 28–31). The first chapter is then devoted to the sources. Roche departs from older research in asserting that the early hints at national difference that have often been noted in Odo of Deuil's history are primarily a product of the author's desire to ascribe the crusade's failure to Greek treachery and a lack of discipline among the Germans, thereby holding his own admired and pious king above reproach. Instead of finding more reasonable explanations, Odo decided to present the Greeks and Germans as malicious scapegoats, thereby subscribing fully to the negative ethnic stereotype of *furor teutonicus*, or Teutonic fury, established by Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis in Paris (c.1081–1151) in his *Gesta Ludovici Grossi*—a work of which Odo's own account was intended as a continuation. This was his solution to the unenviable task of explaining the failure of his godly king's venture in the Holy Land.²

The history by John Kinnamos, by contrast, emerges here as a kind of prose encomium. Drawing on his deep familiarity with the tradition of panegyric speeches at the Byzantine imperial court, and against the background of tensions between Holy Roman Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa (c.1122–90) and the Byzantine Emperor Manuel I

Janus Møller Jensen (eds.), *The Second Crusade: Holy War on the Periphery of Latin Christendom* (Turnhout, 2015).

² On Odo of Deuil, see also Michael Kister, 'Die Bewältigung des Zweiten Kreuzzugs: Odo von Deuil und der schuldlose König', *Portal Militärgeschichte*, 20 Feb. 2023, at [<https://doi.org/10.15500/akm.20.02.2023>].

Komnenos (1118–80), Kinnamos' account, which was written around 1176, tells the story of the Second Crusade with the same rhetorical, cultural, and historical self-understanding that had shaped and informed the Ancient Greek view of foreigners as 'barbarians'. The barbarian crusaders' arrogance, cowardice, and inability to master their emotions are contrasted with Manuel's imperial virtues, which lend themselves to victory. In this way, Kinnamos perpetuates the rhetorical strategies deployed by the anonymous author known as Manganeios Prodromos in numerous verse encomia written to legitimize Manuel's unexpected accession to the imperial throne in 1143. The Byzantine official and historian Niketas Choniates (c.1155–1217) drew on Kinnamos' narrative in his own work, but did so with very different intentions and in light of the sack of Constantinople in 1204—a disaster he ascribed to the sinfulness of the Komnenian emperors, as reflected in their response to the crusaders' godly enterprise. For different reasons, but in consistent ways, the three main sources thus obscure the historical events and therefore need to be read very critically. This calls the standard account of Conrad's crusade into question, given that it rests largely on straightforward retellings of these three texts.

The rest of the book runs chronologically from Conrad's departure on crusade to his return from the Holy Land. The second chapter discusses how the ground was prepared for the crusade politically. Roche follows recent scholarship in viewing Conrad III's decision to join the crusade in Speyer not as a spontaneous act, but as a carefully prepared decision that was dependent on Bernard of Clairvaux's success as a peace broker. He rightly describes the securing of peace and a line of succession in the empire 'as a major success for Conrad III' (p. 78). Yet when he claims, echoing Eleni Tounta,³ that Conrad sought to emulate the Byzantine example and free his imperial sovereignty from papal influence (see especially pp. 65 and 75), Roche underestimates the influence of the tradition, dating back to the reign of Otto I (912–73), that the East Frankish and German king should be crowned emperor by the Pope.

³ Eleni Tounta, 'Thessaloniki (1148)–Besançon (1157): Die staufischen-byzantinischen Beziehungen und die "Heiligkeit" des Staufischen Reiches', *Historisches Jahrbuch*, 131 (2011), 167–214, at 177.

Drawing on the *Database of Crusaders to the Holy Land*,⁴ chapter three highlights thirty-one nobles—some from the Hohenstaufen-Babenberg kinship group surrounding Conrad III and others from the competing Guelph group around Welf VI (1115–91)—alongside a further fifty-five participants in the crusade. By comparing information on the 1184 Diet of Mainz provided by the French cleric and chronicler Gislebert of Mons (c.1150–1225) with Frederick Barbarossa’s account of his first expedition to Italy, Roche estimates the total number of participants in Conrad’s crusade to have been 9,000 combatants and 3,000 non-combatants. Models of the logistical challenges show that when this army camped outside a small town (*kastron*) for just five days, it would have consumed enough provisions to feed the town for a month (p. 100). As such, the crusaders’ hope of being able to purchase supplies overwhelmed the networks between small towns and their rural surroundings, especially in western Anatolia. The advancing crusaders must have made logistical arrangements along the *Via militaris* to Constantinople that were similar to those known to have been used by the Byzantine emperor to supply his own troops, although these are not explicitly mentioned in the sources. Yet Emperor Manuel’s additional gifts of food could not defuse the potential for conflict caused by poor exchange rates and increased food prices.

Chapter four is devoted to the march to Constantinople. Specific incidents, such as in Philippopolis and Adrianople, and Conrad’s arrival in the palace and park complex known as the Philopation, illustrate the extent to which the chroniclers’ narratives were distorted by their failure to understand the logistical strain the crusaders were under. This also underpins Odo’s depiction of the unreliable Greeks and the greed and *furor* of the German crusaders, who marched on ahead of the French army.

The fifth chapter, on the German crusaders’ encampment outside Constantinople, contains several astute new interpretations. Based on his essentially convincing argument that the armed clashes between the crusaders and Byzantine troops during the former’s advance were not due to enmity between Conrad III and Manuel I, but a product of logistical difficulties (p. 141), Roche rejects the typical assumption,

⁴ J. S. C. Riley-Smith et al. (eds.), *A Database of Crusaders to the Holy Land: 1095–1149*, at [<https://www.dhi.ac.uk/crusaders/>], accessed 22 Feb. 2023.

derived from Odo of Deuil and John Kinnamos, that the two rulers did not meet in person. Instead, he suggests that a 'clandestine meeting' took place (p. 153; see also p. 156) and argues that the version of events put forward by the chronicler Arnold of Lübeck (c.1150–1211/14), who claimed that the two monarchs met outside the city on horseback, is historically accurate because 'it was in their mutual interests to meet' (p. 141; see also p. 330). Roche's suggestion that the earlier meeting between Emperor Alexios Komnenos (1057–1118) and the leaders of the First Crusade may have served as a model for Manuel's meeting with King Louis VII of France (1120–80) is just as worthy of consideration as his highly plausible assertion that Manuel Komnenos and Conrad worked together closely. All in all, the idea that the two emperors met is by no means far-fetched.

Yet Roche's arguments in support of his case are unconvincing in multiple respects. First and foremost, his discussion of the sources on this point is unsatisfactory. Although he explains away the version of events presented by Odo of Deuil and John Kinnamos by suggesting that their Byzantine informers were simply unaware that a meeting between Manuel and Conrad III had taken place, we are supposed to believe that eyewitness accounts nonetheless reached Arnold of Lübeck and other Latin authors. This is circular reasoning, which takes as a given what has yet to be proved. Furthermore, a review of the texts that Roche only cursorily summarizes in his footnotes and does not discuss in depth (p. 142, n. 10 and p. 154, n. 53) shows that—contrary to his assertions—some of them do not mention a personal meeting at all. This is true of the *Historia Welforum Weingartensis* (c.1170), Helmold of Bosau's *Chronica Slavorum* (1163–72), Gerhoch of Reichersberg's *De investigatione Antichristi* (1160–2), and the *Notae Pisanae* of 1128, 1148, and 1154. A few texts do state that Conrad and his entire army(!) were ceremonially received by the *rex Grecorum* (the *Annales Palidenses* of c.1164–1421, the *Chronicle of Petershausen*, and the *Annales Magdeburgenses* of 1176–88); yet this would not have involved a personal meeting and refers only to the activities of Manuel's envoys, who acted in his name. For the same reason, Roche's interpretation of Conrad's message to Abbot Wibald of Corvey is also unconvincing (p. 153, n. 52).⁵ As

⁵ Friedrich Hausmann (ed.), *Die Urkunden Konrads III.* (Hanover, 1969), no. 194.

for the few sources that do mention a meeting between the two emperors (the *Annales Herbipolenses*, the *Chronicon* of Romuald of Salerno around 1180, and Arnold of Lübeck), it is important to keep the narrative function of this claim in mind. After all, the portrayal of a personal relationship between Manuel and Conrad makes for a highly effective contrast with the Byzantines' subsequent treachery. Indeed, Arnold of Lübeck goes so far as to cite Conrad's refusal to visit Manuel as a motive for the Greek betrayal. Is this an accurate reflection of historical events, or merely a narrative pattern that contrasts friendship with treachery? A more in-depth analysis is required here. Second, Roche is undoubtedly correct to argue that the crossing of the Bosphorus must have been negotiated in advance and that the crusaders' supply shortages forced their hand. Yet a personal meeting would not have been necessary for this—or indeed for the presentation of gifts. Third, Roche underestimates the ceremonial barriers to what would have been the first ever meeting between a Western and an Eastern Roman emperor. Would a secret meeting before the walls of Constantinople, attended by just a few high-ranking witnesses (p. 153), really have been compatible with the strict ceremonial protocols of the Byzantine court, which Roche rightly emphasizes (pp. 144–6)?⁶ The later meeting between the two emperors after Conrad's return to Constantinople from Ephesus was no doubt facilitated by the relative privacy of his arrival by boat.

However, these objections do not detract from Roche's persuasive suggestion that Conrad III crossed the Bosphorus before Louis VII's arrival simply because the already difficult logistical situation would not have permitted two large armies to be supplied simultaneously. Roche also rightly casts doubt on Kinnamos' account of Conrad's defeat at the hands of Byzantine troops at his camp in Pikridion (modern-day Hasköy).

The sixth chapter, which is structured thematically rather than chronologically, is devoted to the topographical and geopolitical conditions in western Asia Minor, as well as its settlement history. Supplying an army on the largely depopulated and infertile Anatolian plateau, which had been settled by Turkish nomads, would have

⁶ See Martin Vučetić, *Zusammenkünfte byzantinischer Kaiser mit fremden Herrschern (395-1204): Vorbereitung, Gestaltung, Funktionen*, 2 vols. (Berlin, 2021).

involved almost insurmountable logistical challenges. In his reconstruction of Conrad's march to Nicaea, his failed advance to Iconium, and his subsequent return to Constantinople in the seventh, eighth, and ninth chapters, Roche identifies the difficulty, not to say impossibility, of supplying the troops as a common theme and the Achilles' heel of the entire expedition. By placing these logistical challenges centre stage and exploring them in great detail, he convincingly and permanently disproves the standard historiographical speculations over Conrad's personal shortcomings as a leader, the lack of discipline among the German crusaders, and Byzantine–Seljuk alliances as reasons for the disastrous course of the crusade. Instead, the operation was doomed by a combination of supply shortages, physical exhaustion, and the unfamiliar fighting style of the Turks. Odo presumably learned that Conrad and his council of princes had discussed these factors, and that the decision to retreat had been accompanied by the usual reflections over questions of honour and disgrace, not from some survivor of the failed campaign (pp. 262 and 265), but from Barbarossa, whom Conrad later sent as an envoy to Louis VII's camp in order to inform the French king of what had happened.

In chapter ten Roche offers a political explanation of Conrad and Louis' attack on Damascus in July 1148 – a move that historians have always seen as problematic – claiming that it was motivated by a desire to avert the threat of an alliance between Aleppo and Jerusalem. In order to explain the subsequent failure of the expedition, he once again stresses reports of logistical difficulties that have long been ignored or misunderstood. Evidently, the Christians, who had set out at short notice and without adequate supplies, planned to feed themselves from the gardens outside Damascus during what they hoped would be a short siege. When the Damascenes managed to thwart these plans, the crusaders still hoped to storm the walls after improvising a new encampment in a different location. Yet here too they encountered water and supply shortages, forcing them to abandon the siege. This account can be verified with reference to the sources – something that cannot be said for the usual speculation that the crusaders withdrew for fear of encountering an approaching Muslim relief force.

Roche's book impresses with its broad research base, as well as its author's historiographical sensitivity and comprehensive knowledge

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of the sources. Above all, he avoids many of the errors committed in older research by convincingly analysing the intentions behind the three main historiographical sources and exposing their skewed and biased perspectives. (A similarly cautious reading of the *Annales Herbipolenses*, written by an anonymous crusader, could deliver further insights.) Roche's detailed discussion of the logistical and supply problems that dogged Conrad's crusade are also of fundamental importance for research on military history and the crusades in general. The only flaw at the end of this smart, exciting, and inspiring book is that it lacks an index of people and place names.

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