Constructing Kingship; The Capetian Monarchs of France and the Early Crusades

Despite their presence in the popular imagination and their undoubted importance in the narrative of medieval history, the Crusades have for a long time sat apart from mainstream medieval historiography. Traditionally, the Crusades themselves are as peripheral in the minds of historians of Europe as they were geographically. As a result, they are either treated separately or consigned to a cursory mention when they take a major political figure out of the theatre of European politics. This detachment of the study of the Crusades from the rest of European history has happily been challenged in recent decades, and *Constructing Kingship* continues this trend.(1) James Naus attempts, in the latest entry in the 'Manchester Medieval Studies' series, to bring the Crusades home, so to speak, and to analyse their role in the development of the ideology of Capetian kingship in 12th-century France. The book's timespan covers the period from the latter years of Philip I's reign (1060–1108) to the end of that of his great-grandson, Philip II Augustus (1180–1223). In choosing this period, Naus deliberately avoids examining France's most famous crusader king, Saint Louis IX, and focuses instead on the development of the ideology which created in Louis IX the impetus to devote so much of his life to the crusading ideal. The result is a bite-sized book (only 140 pages of text, including endnotes) which offers some fascinating suggestions about the projection of Capetian power in the 12th century, but ultimately leaves the reader frustrated by its brevity and unwillingness to fully explore many of the issues it raises.

The book's central thesis is that throughout the 12th century, as a reaction to challenges to royal authority and prestige, the traditional sacral kingship of the French monarchy became fused with the crusading ideology. This commitment to the ideals of the crusaders became an indispensable element of the Capetian kings' claim to be 'most Christian rulers'. The fusion of kingship and the crusades, Naus argues, was primarily the result of the works of royal propaganda produced by Abbot Suger and his successors at the royal monastery of St-Denis in the mid-12th century. After a short introduction Naus begins by describing the French monarchy's political and spiritual position on the eve of, and in the aftermath of, the First Crusade, in two chapters comprising a section entitled 'Crisis'. The works of Suger's Dionysian programme are analysed in the two central chapters which for the core of the book, in a section entitled 'Response'. There is no separate conclusion: the final chapter, on Philip Augustus' attitudes towards the Crusades, ends with a short section linking the themes of the book onwards to the better-studied reign of Saint Louis.

The first of the book's major weaknesses appears early, in the very first chapter, entitled 'Framing the Capetian miracle'. The 'Capetian miracle' referred to is the dynasty's very survival in the 11th and 12th centuries, before the dramatic expansion of royal power which followed the reign of Philip II. The Capetian monarchy on the eve of the Crusades, as Naus presents it, was barely clinging onto existence. The monarchy was buttressed against the power-hungry castellan lords of the Ill-de-France only by the support of the church (in particular the abbots of Fleury and St-Denis, and the Archbishops of Reims) and the aura of 'sacral kingship'. This is the classic view of the 11th-century Capetian kingdom, but it is one which has been increasingly challenged in recent years.(2) Although these debates are by no means resolved, Naus does not even engage with them, except through the occasional remark acknowledging their existence (pp. 17, 49). This is disappointing, because the weakness of the French kings, relative to the local castellans, is the key motivation for any of the trends in the development of royal power identified later in the book. This motivation is set out in the second chapter ('The First Crusade and the new economy of status'). It argues convincingly that returning crusaders, belonging overwhelmingly to the lower nobility, received a huge boost in prestige and status as a result of the expedition, threatening the monarchy. As a result, the monarchy, and writers seeking royal favour, sought to attach some of this prestige to King Philip I. This was achieved through his children's marriages to prominent Crusaders (or their children) and by a selective re-writing of the role of Hugh of Vermandois, Philip's brother, in the First Crusade. Philip I's reaction to the returning crusaders is presented well by the author, but the argument that this was a reaction to a perceived aristocratic threat is made far less convincingly. Naus' failure to clearly justify his characterisation of Philip's rule as weak and vulnerable severely blunts the force of his argument.

The beating heart of this book is to be found in the third and fourth chapters, which analyse the role of the writers of St-Denis, and above all that of Abbot Suger, in promoting a new image of the Capetian kings in the reigns of Louis VI and Louis VII. After making the important observation that upon Philip I's death in 1108, St-Denis was in intense competition with rival churches, especially Fleury, for royal favour, Naus proceeds to offer a masterful close reading of Suger's *Gesta Ludovici Grossi,* which occupies the bulk of chapter three (appropriately titled 'Suger of Saint-Denis and the ideology of crusade'). Drawing in particular on the work of Gabriel Spiegel and Matthew Gabriel, Naus shows how the complex construction of Suger's text served to highlight royal prestige in a way which 'fused traditional Carolingian ideas of sacral rulership with newer ideas inspired by crusading to create a highly selective narrative of Louis' reign' (p. 70). Through detailed analysis of selected episodes from this narrative, multiple strands of meaning are exposed in Suger's conception of royal power, including a strong undercurrent of imagery, ideas and language drawn directly from accounts of the First Crusade. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the 'crusading window' in the main basilica at St-Denis and its place within the architectural programme instigated by Suger at the abbey. This inclusion of material evidence, in addition to the textual, bolsters Naus' main argument that the abbot of St-Denis was crucial in embedding crusading ideal into the royal image. Suger and St-Denis continue to play a starring role in the following chapter, dealing with 'Louis VII and the failure of crusade'. Through analysis of Suger's unfinished biography of Louis VII, his protégé Odo of Deuil's *De prefectione Ludovici VII in orientem* and various letters between Suger, Pope Eugenius III and Bernard of Clairvaux, Naus convincingly shows that despite the doubts of modern scholars, Suger was an active

promotor of Louis VII's crusading efforts as part of St-Denis' efforts to construct a crusading image for the Capetian kings. Despite Louis' spectacular failure on the Second Crusade in the late 1140s, Suger worked continuously until his death to encourage the French king to undertake another crusading venture. The final section of the chapter, which tracks Louis' engagement with the crusading movement in the late 1150s and 1160s, argues that even after Suger's death, the crusading imperative he had instilled within the king remained.

The final chapter, on 'Philip Augustus, political circumstance, and crusade', is a jarring change of analytical lens, from the focused analysis on key texts characteristic of the previous chapters, to one based primarily on an analysis of the political narrative. It discusses Philip Augustus' reputation as a reluctant Crusader and argues that this is ill-deserved. It has been derived, Naus contends, almost entirely from hostile Anglo-Norman accounts of the Third Crusade, who were motivated to shift the blame for Richard I's failure to capture Jerusalem onto a scapegoat. Philip's early departure from the crusade after the siege of Acre made him the perfect target for Anglo-Norman writers and the historical mud they had slung has stuck. Naus examines this incident, as well as Philip's involvement with each of the other crusades launched during his lifetime (the Fourth, Fifth and Albigensian crusades), and concludes that Philip was overall supportive of the crusading ideal. Philip and his court believed that the Crusade should be supported by the Capetian monarchs, but was held back from participating fully by political circumstances back home in Northern France. Naus concludes that Philip's support for the crusades was a balanced one, which needed to be considered alongside the monarchy's broader obligations to strengthen the kingdom and to defend the church internally. Naus' arguments would be far more convincing, however, if he included details of the political situations which hindered Philip's ability to participate in crusading. Vague 'threats' from and 'conflicts' with the Angevin rulers and other magnates in Northern France are frequently mentioned, but little space is given for outlining how exactly these specific pressures and crises prevented Philip from acting. The omission of these details is all the more puzzling given that Naus is more than willing to give a rich, detailed, two-page political narrative of the events in the Holy Land leading up to the Third Crusade (pp. 118–20). In contrast he devotes no more than half a paragraph, or five sentences, to the succession to the county of Flanders in 1191: supposedly the crisis which was the biggest motivation for Philip's abandonment of the Third Crusade (p. 126).

Constructing Kingship is a valuable book which engages seriously with a theme, the impact of the crusades on royal action and ideology, which has been, as Naus points out (pp. 6-7), overlooked for far too long. Its central thesis is a stimulating argument which will hopefully inspire further research on this topic, and throughout the book Naus highlights many fascinating links between the crusades and the Capetian monarchy which are rarely considered together. The highlight of the book is undoubtedly the third chapter's marvellous textual analysis of Suger's *Gesta Ludovici Grossi*, which sheds important new light on one of 12th-century France's most important narrative sources. This is bracketed by equally stimulating and insightful readings of French crusading chroniclers, such as Robert the Monk and Guibert of Nogent in chapter two (pp. 45–9) and Odo of Deuil in chapter four (pp. 93–6), showing that Naus is at his strongest when deeply engaged with the textual sources. It is in these sections that readers will find the most value in this work.

Other sections of the book stand in sharp contrast to the excellent textual analysis, however. The opening and closing chapters suffer from not having a central text (or group of texts) upon which Naus can build the analysis. His reluctance to engage in either the details or the debates of French politics in the period, as mentioned above, also makes the arguments presented in these chapters far weaker than elsewhere in the book (although it by no means invalidates them). The unwillingness to engage with the monarchy's political role more generally is perhaps the greatest flaw of this book, affecting even the strong central chapters. Naus makes a highly compelling argument about the Dionysian construction of Capetian kingship, but fails to expand on how this was employed and used by the kings themselves: royal diplomatic as a source of evidence is conspicuous by its absence throughout the book. With so little attention paid to the wider French context of events, in contrast to several long sections on the politics of Crusading (e.g. pp. 87–90, 118–20), this feels in many ways like a book on France written by a specialist in the history of the Crusades. Many

stimulating insights which are raised by the textual analysis, such as the church's role in working together with Louis VI in pursuit of peace and justice, are never raised again, with the result that the reader may query whether the Dionysian programme of crusading kingship was ever put into practice. The book, in this way, seems to fall between two methodological stools: halfway between a textual study of Dionysian royal propaganda and a broader political study of Capetian kingship, it lacks the depth and detail to fulfil either role fully. At times it feels as if one is reading a series of journal articles, loosely tied together in chronological order. The result is that the reader is left unsatisfied, with the feeling that so much has been left out or glossed over that more questions than answers remain. Whether it is the result of time pressures, the lack of an over-arching vision or perhaps simply over-zealous editing, the overall impression is of a book which has failed to live up to its undoubted potential.

The small, hardcover volume is handsomely presented, with the text laid out neatly and clearly. This reviewer noticed only one typographical error (the unfortunate attribution of Thomas N. Bisson's *The Crisis of the Twelfth Century* to Dominique Bathélemy, p. 25, n. 6). The choice of endnotes (at the end of each chapter, no less) over footnotes for citations is both puzzling and frustrating in a scholarly work which relies so heavily on the analysis of text (and the accompanying references). It certainly decreases the utility of the book for the study of the texts in question. This having been said, these analyses are of such high quality that any scholar studying the works of Suger, or the reigns of Louis VI and Louis VII, will find them indispensable. Given the book's small size, high price-tag and disappointing shortcomings in other areas, however, they would be best advised to do so with a library copy of *Constructing Kingship*.

Notes

1. For example, M. Cecelia Gasposchkin, *The Making of St Louis; Kingship, Sanctity and Crusade in the Later Middle Ages* (Cornell, NY, 2008); Marcus Bull, *Knightly Piety and the Lay Response to the First Crusade: The Limousin and Gascony, c. 970 – c. 1130*, (Oxford, 1993).Back to (1)
2. For examples of recent scholarship on power-hungry castellans, see Dominique Barthélemy, *The Serf, the Knight and the Historian*, (Ithaca, NY, 2009), or for a re-appraisal of the supposed weakness of the early Capetians, see Geoffrey Koziol, 'The conquest of Burgundy, the peace of God, and the diplomas of Robert the Pious', *French Historical Studies*, 37 (2014), pp. 173–214, esp. pp. 179–80. Both works have extensive further bibliography on the debates in question.Back to (2)

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