

Dominique Barthélemy, La bataille de Bouvines. Histoire et légendes, Paris (Perrin) 2018, 542 p., 8 p. de pl., ill., cartes, ISBN 978-2-262-06531-7, EUR 27,00.

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This is an exceptional study which reaches far beyond the battle of Bouvines which is its nominal subject. It is divided into three sections, all of which testify to Barthélemy's mastery of historical scholarship and deep understanding of medieval society.

In Section 1 Barthélemy suggests that Bouvines was little more than a skirmish which got out of hand, arising from an attempt by an uneasy coalition of his enemies to ambush Philip Augustus' rear guard as his army crossed the bridge over the Marque in its retreat from Tournai to Lille. Although surprised, Philip forestalled this by sending his cavalry against the enemy emerging from the woods. The attacking coalition, strung out through the woods, was never able to deploy their full force, and their main attack, in which Otto of Brunswick played a major role, was in consequence beaten off.

The decisive action was that on the French right, south of the Tournai to Lille road, between the French and coalition cavalry. This cavalry action ended when Ferrand, count of Flanders, was unhorsed and obliged to surrender. Moreover, as Barthélemy tells it, even this was far from a bloody battle. He notes that the sources do not mention many killed. Indeed he suggests that knights did not kill one another, although they did kill one another's horses, and certainly we hear of the mounts of Odo of Burgundy and Ferrand of Flanders dying.

It is also likely, as he suggests, that major elements of the coalition army never engaged or perhaps fled the field without seeking to fight. For Barthélemy is quite right to point out that armies were not highly disciplined forces at this time. Rather, they were all uneasy alliances, and usually reluctant to take the risks of battle. He argues that for most of the army this campaign was simply as an opportunity to make some feudal adjustments. For Barthélemy doubts the story that the leaders of the coalition intended to kill King Philip – something which, he suggests, would have been an embarrassment for them. He is also sceptical of the whole story of enemy troops unhorsing and almost killing the king, especially as this act is usually attributed to German foot – of whose presence there is absolutely no proof.

Barthélemy is a distinguished historian of French feudal society, and that is the lens through which he examines this battle. And war in feudal society was, as he rightly says, a form of communication in disputes which were essentially about feudal adjustments. Equivocal relationships were inherent in this society of aristocrats. Thus Renaud of Dammartin, the arch-traitor of Capetian legend, was captured during the battle of Damme in May 1213 when the royal fleet was destroyed, but freed by sympathizers in the royal army. The count of St Pol was regarded with deep suspicion by the Capetians, and he could easily have ended up on the other side. The duke of Brabant joined the coalition unwillingly and seems not to have fought at all at Bouvines. All this, taken together with a brilliant and penetrating analysis of the manners of aristocratic society,



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enables Barthélemy to present us with a minimalist picture of the battle of Bouvines.

The sources are indeed very silent on the subject of casualties and very loud on the number of important prisoners taken by the victorious French, and the author argues that this bespeaks a very limited and brief conflict. I am not entirely convinced of this minimalist view of the battle. In general the pursuit of limited adjustments certainly did produce limited war, at least between aristocrats and their immediate retainers, but petty quarrels could turn savage. When William of Bretueil was captured during his quarrel with the Goël family he was badly mistreated and had to pay a huge ransom which he recovered »with the help of ransoms, captives and plunder taken from the country people« (Ordericus Vitalis, ed. M. Chibnall, vol. 4, p. 287–296). Of course »country people« were not gentry, but even conflict within the elite was sometimes savage.

Barthélemy cites a passage (112) of Gilbert of Mons as showing that knights killed horses rather than one another, but this skirmish actually developed into a general conflict in which 80 knights of Hainaut and 340 of Brabant were killed. Severity of conflict depended on the perception of the issues at stake, and in 1214 these were great for some of the combatants. The men of the empire, like the Lorrainers, probably felt little commitment, although Otto of Brunswick stood to gain much by a victory. King John was seeking a restoration of the lands lost in 1204, which is why his men in this army wanted a battle which would stand a chance of success because the English attack in Poitou has drawn off many French troops.

Philip would have been very conscious of this threat. In a really striking analysis Barthélemy examines Philip's dealings with Flanders to explain why many Flemish knights may have been embittered towards the French king. Overall, I suspect that the coalition leaders intended more than merely to damage Philip's rear-guard, but it is very possible that many in the coalition army were reluctant to fight, and fairly certain that once surprise was lost their army was poorly handled. And Barthélemy is surely right that the battle was a confused affair in which neither force fully deployed into line of battle. And most certainly he is correct to assert that the real novelty of the battle was the careful way in which the Capetian exploited it for propaganda purposes. Philip paraded his rich haul of prisoners, amongst whom Ferrand of Flanders and Renaud of Dammartin were the stars, and staged a triumphal entry into Paris. But this was only an element in royal public relations.

The most important source for the battle was William the Breton, a royal chaplain who was present at the battle and included a dramatic account in his Latin prose »Gesta Philippi Augusti« written between 1216 and 1220. Unsurprisingly, the »Gesta« is deeply admiring of Philip. The king is shown in the thick of the fighting, unhorsed by the enemy and saved only by the self-sacrifice of the knights of his maisne. Barthélemy has doubts about this tale and points out that the St Quentin fragment barely suggests the king was in the thick of the fighting. However, in William's Latin poem, the »Philippidos«, composed between 1221 and 1226, Philip appears as the valourous and righteous king, reluctant to shed blood especially on a Sunday, but defiant of his wicked enemies.

In the »Gesta« William tells us that the coalition leaders had determined on a battle in which they agreed they would kill Philip, but in the »Philippidos« he adds the story that they devised a division of the French kingdom. Quite rightly Barthélemy dismisses these stories, whose



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obvious purpose is to magnify victory and to glorify Philip. Interestingly, he notes that William, for all his devotion to his master, seems to betray a certain sympathy for Renaud, otherwise regarded as the great betrayer who deservedly died in a French goal.

In Section 2 Barthélemy discusses the other sources for the battle, often in relation to the narrative of William the Breton. These present us with a battle fought almost entirely by the lords and knights of the French realm. William mentions the sergeants, but their role is very limited, and his is an aristocratic victory. This is amplified by the Anonymous of Béthune and cried aloud in the French poem of Philippe Mousket composed around the middle of the 13th century in which Philip is reported to have taken off his crown to encourage his great men. The »Minstrel of Rheims« has an account which totally ignores even the charge of the sergeants of Champagne which opened the battle and presents us with »un Bouvines des barons« (p. 260).

This emphasis on the importance of the great magnates was not wholly welcome to the Capetians. Barthélemy insists that the victory of Bouvines did not change radically political relations at this level of society, and he cites the »fronde des barons« (p. 175–183) experienced by Blanche of Castile at the start of the regency and the resistance even to St Louis when he trespassed upon their interests. A very different emphasis from all these very secular accounts is imparted by the Lorrainer, Richer of Senones, writing in the mid-13th century, who presents Bouvines as a victory over the wicked Otto of Brunswick, provided by divine providence as symbolised by the *Oriflamme*. The analysis of the sources in this book can only be described as full and remarkably scholarly and original. This is the very model of a historian sifting through the detritus of a past age to bring us a real understanding, and most particularly, an understanding of the workings of high politics in the feudal age.

In the Third Section Barthélemy surveys the place of Bouvines in French history.

In the 13th century accounts, this was a purely aristocratic victory, despite the hints of determined fighting by sergeants, mounted and infantry, on both sides. But a century later French warfare demanded able footsoldiers. William Guiart was a sergeant who fought in the French victory over the Flemings at Mons-en-Pévèle. His »Branche des royaux lignages« rediscovered, or perhaps invented, their role in the battle. The royal legends of Bouvines continued to be cherished by the French monarchy through the early modern period, though Voltaire was dismissive of the glorification of the knightly elite.

Interest in the role of the militia in the city communes revived in the 1820s when a divided France saw Bouvines as an antidote to its divisions and a fine contrast to the »souvenir cuisant« (p. 377) of Waterloo. Later in the century Bouvines was transformed into a battle between Germany and France, as this rivalry came to dominate European life. As a result, the armies of Bouvines were stamped with the impression of the mass mobilisation which characterised France before 1914. This bellicose reflection came to a sharp end before the realities of 1914–1918 and by the time of the 800th anniversary had been overcome by a much more tranquil spirit. Overall this section is an absorbing tour through French history. Occasionally it is entertaining, notably when Barthélemy dismisses the attempts of the »états-majors« as he calls many military historians (p. 391–402), to impose an imagined order on the chaos of Bouvines.



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This is a very big book which covers an immense amount of material, always demonstrating a sure grasp of telling detail. The house of Perrin is to be congratulated on a very well produced volume, especially as it contains a generous number (17) of colour plates. The index is divided helpfully between a medieval and a modern section which saves the reader a lot of time, and there is an excellent bibliography. But above all this is a work of scintillating scholarship by a master of the art of history.



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