

**Loïc Chollet, Les Sarrasins du Nord. Une histoire de la croisade balte par la littérature (XII<sup>e</sup>–XV<sup>e</sup> siècles), Neuchâtel (Éditions Alphil-Presses universitaires suisses) 2019, 544 p., 4 cartes, nombr. ill. (Histoire), ISBN 978-2-88930-282-6, CHF 39,00.**

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While medieval crusades have always fascinated scholars and students, the last 20 years have seen an intensification of interest in their northern version: wars in the Baltic region which were viewed as crusades by the Teutonic Order which led them and by the many European knights who voyaged to fight first the Prussians and then the Lithuanians. Loïc Chollet has here provided an excellent and balanced introduction to the sources and scholarly literature of the Baltic Crusade for those unfamiliar with the topic and, for the specialist, very useful discussion and analysis of both lesser-known and famous French sources dealing with the Baltic pagans.

My one caveat is about an editorial decision: that the Latin and German sources when quoted in translation are set off from the text in exactly the same way as citation of the original Old French sources. A non-specialist might not even know what was the language of the originals. If quoted in modern French, perhaps the original text could have been in the footnotes. However, I appreciated the useful albeit schematic maps, the full index, the extensive footnotes, the clear organization and above all the very thorough coverage of sources and scholarship shown by the bibliography.

The first part of this book has an excellent overview of the background and context of Christian wars against the Baltic pagans – early attempts at conversion, the establishment of the Order of Swordbrothers and the Teutonic Order, justifications and criticism of these military monastic orders' wars, as well early sources about the peoples of the Baltic area. These chapters, presenting a thorough summary of the sources and current research, would serve as a good introduction to the Baltic crusades for students and for specialists in other crusades.

Part two has a more detailed discussion of the participation of European and especially French and English nobles in the military expeditions (*reyse*) led by the Teutonic Order – using the research of Werner Paravicini and others, with the addition of Chollet's own insights on the light Old French sources shed about motivations of these knights. With some discussion of the Teutonic Order's chronicles, based on previous historiography, the main focus is on French and English sources, mostly in Old French, such as Jean Froissart, Philippe de Mézières or Guillaume de Machaut, but



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also Jacques d'Esch, Jean d'Arras, Cabaret d'Orville, Guillebert de Lannoy, and sources about English nobles who travelled to Prussia. Full quotations of the relevant passages are very helpful, especially in these »lockdown« times when access to libraries is difficult.

Also here is a review of the scholarship and sources which demonstrate that the pagan Lithuanians, the objects of the fourteenth-century crusade, became in the sources noble adversaries suitable to a chivalric milieu.

Part three, aptly titled »The quest for honour«, discusses the importance of the Baltic crusade for European knighthood: its immense popularity, the identification of the Lithuanians as alternate »Saracens« and the motivations of the »guest crusaders« who came to help the Teutonic Order. Here there might have been more weight given to religious motivations and religious themes in the poets under discussion. Nevertheless, Chollet's work is important because it gives a fresh perspective on the way that Guillaume de Machaut and other poets writing in Old French used the Baltic crusade as model and paradigm for moralization and for romance – evidence of the way the image of the pagan Lithuanians seized the medieval chivalric imagination.

This leads into the final part of the book, »A world of honour and ice: the imaginary Balts« on the image and imagination about pagan Lithuania in medieval French literature. There the Baltic area was perceived as a land of ice and impassible, swampy forests, and partly as a wilderness devoid of inhabitants. When reached, the inhabitants are seen often as versions of chivalric European knights, their nobles viewed with respect as providing worthy enemies whose defeat redounds to the victor's honour. Of course, the reality of most *reyse* was less romantic, mostly consisting of brutal raids which aimed to slaughter unprepared villagers – but their description would be outside the purview of this book, which is concerned with the literary image.

Chollet traces the classical and medieval *topoi* which informed the romantic image of pagan Lithuania while intelligently negotiating the vexed question of how a literary topos or cliché can nevertheless to some extent describe an actual situation. As he writes, if a chronicler liked to tell stories to amuse his readers, that does not mean that everything he wrote was false (p. 25). Chollet concludes that the authors of chivalric literature focused on and remembered those elements of the pagans they fought which reminded them of classical or medieval themes. These elements could in fact have existed, yet were also mythologized. Here I would have liked to see more discussion of the actual climate and geography of Lithuania which may indeed have influenced authors who themselves travelled there, but I realize that this is a difficult and vast topic. A chapter is devoted to examining the chronicle, documentary and archaeological evidence for the actual society and religion of the Lithuanians, a topic bedevilled by controversies between romantics and positivists, where Chollet charts an admirably moderate course.

Mittelalter – Moyen Âge (500–1500)

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Finally, Chollet ponders the question of how the Baltic crusade and especially the »imaginary Baltic world« of literature helped to create a European vision of alterity and of a frontier of Christianity – a frontier at which by the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century baptized Lithuanian princes themselves fought the »infidel«. Thus, in Loïc Chollet's words, »an enemy became a partner« in an Europeanisation partly driven by the literary conceits born of a bloody reality.

To sum up, »Les Sarrasins du Nord« is a solid contribution to the study of the Baltic Crusade and Old French literature. I hope that this book can be widely read and perhaps translated into English to give a wider audience this fresh look at the Baltic crusade and the poets who immortalized it.



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