

Means, Motive, Opportunity: Medieval Women and the Recourse to Arms

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[**Students:** This paper has not been prepared for publication which means that the discussion is compact, and the notes abbreviated. A bibliography has been added, including some publications that have appeared since the paper was read, to help anyone who wants to follow up on specific points.]

Why did medieval women go to war? The usual explanation is that such actions take place in crisis situations when the absence of male authority creates a power vacuum and class temporarily trumps gender—the lady defending the castle while her husband is away on crusade motif. I do not think that the sources support this model¹ and by considering the small but growing body of work on military actions undertaken by women in the Middle Ages I hope to be able to either establish a new model or to at least refine the extant model to something more useful. These studies almost arranged themselves into groupings.

I: Crusades, Women and

Crusade studies are a lively field of research, and a number of studies on women participating in crusading military actions have been published. “Seek and ye shall find” seems to apply here. And there is (apparently) a good deal to find. From the Battle of Dorylaeum (1097) onward, the sources demonstrate that women kept finding opportunities to directly participate in this meritorious warfare.

¹ Cf. Truax, “Anglo-Norman Women,” has listed instances of women acting on their own, using their own troops, etc. while their husbands were living and present, sometimes supporting opposing sides.

By the time all this [carrying out Bohemond's orders] was done, the Turks were surrounding us on all sides, throwing darts and casting javelins and shooting arrows from a surprisingly long distance. . . . Our women were a great help to us on that day since they kept bringing water for our embattled men to drink and bravely comforted them as they resisted.²

One assumes that the Turks did not gallantly hold their fire while the women were performing this non-combatant task.

The Third Crusade provides what is probably the best-known example, thanks largely to lively descriptions coming from the Muslim historians Baha al-Din and Imad ad-Din. As Helen Nicholson showed, their reports of women actively fighting and dying were intended to emphasize the barbarity of the Franks and the fanaticism of Christians which so perverted the natural order.³ In contrast, the Christian writers are at pains to emphasize the virtue of the Crusaders, their worthiness to accomplish their holy objective. They regard the absence of women as a prerequisite for virtuousness, and so the accounts are quite different. It is, e.g.,

²The Norman Anonymous who wrote this description was a layman and a combatant. Fulcher of Chartres, also present, was a cleric and probably did not take part in the fighting; his account does not mention the bucket brigade. Albert of Aachen who was neither a combatant nor present—he was a small child at the time—describes the women dolling up in the hope of being spared. *Gesta Francorum*, 3.9. <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/gesta-cde.html#dory> . Cp. Fulcher of Chartres, 1.11, 12, pp. 85-87; Albert of Aachen, 2.39, pp. 329-30; France, *Victory*, p. 180.

³ Nicholson, "Women on the Third Crusade," p. 341-42.

reported that all women except *old* (emphasis mine) washerwomen were prohibited from following the army on the march from Acre to Arsuf. The only touching they will undertake is delousing the men.⁴ This contrasts with the lovingly lascivious account of Christian prostitutes given by Imad ad-Din.⁵ The Christian reports of women in action are reticent: a woman killed while working on an engineering project, some shipwrecked Turks butchered by women--who did it badly due to lack of both strength and proper weapons.⁶

Yet the Muslim reports, stripped (*ahem!*) of the rich rhetoric, are informative. Writing about the siege of Acre, both Imad ad-Din and Baha al-Din report finding women dead on the

⁴Ambroise, ll. 5686-91; *Itinerarium peregrinorum*, 4.9, p. 235.

⁵Imad ad-Din, pp. 202-03. Massé felt obliged to censor this explicit passage; cf. Gabrielli, pp. 204-07.

⁶*Itinerarium peregrinorum*, 1.34, p. 89. A woman struck by a sniper's dart while working to fill in the ditch at Acre asked that her body be added to the fill, 1.50, p. 106; Ambroise notes that there were many women (*meinte femme*) doing this work, ll. 3630-55.

field after the abortive attack on al-Adil's camp on 25 July 1190.⁷ Both comment that they heard of other women killed or captured in the same action. They would have no reason to note those who didn't come to a similar end. During a Muslim raid on the crusaders' siege camp (2 July 1191) a woman archer is reported to have wounded a number of attackers before being killed. Her wooden bow was presented to Saladin who marvelled, whether at the woman's skill in archery or the crudeness of her weapon is unclear.⁸ The *Itinerarium peregrinorum* mentions no women taking part in either event; the failed raid of 1190 is explained as being due to the rashness of the *vulgus* who would have been good soldiers if only they had had some good leaders to direct them.⁹ Leaders who presumably would have not allowed those women to join in the attempted looting.

⁷Baha al-Din, p. 119, reports seeing two dead women and hearing of two more taken prisoner; cp. Imrūd ad-Dīn, pp. 239-40. Both men walked the field after the fighting. The account of Ibn al-Athir was not consulted for this paper. Cf. Nicholson, "Women," for relevant citations.

⁸Baha al-Din, p. 158; Imrūd ad-Dīn, p. 312.

⁹*Itinerarium peregrinorum*, 1.40, pp. 94-96, for the raid of 25 July 1090.

The Christian accounts of the Fifth Crusade are an interesting comparison.¹⁰ During the siege of Damietta in 1219, al-Kamil attempted to relieve the city by the bold move of sending his troops and supplies right through the siege camp at a time when the Templars and Hospitallers would be at prayer. The effort failed when a woman (*quedam femina*) spotted them and raised the alarm. Very few got through to the city, and even fewer escaped alive. Some who tried to flee back through the camp were slaughtered. The *Gesta obsidione Damiate* explains that the successful defense was no accident. Almost everyone in the camp including women and merchants was liable to guard duty with penalties for failure to perform or carry weapons while on duty. These penalties could include maiming, confiscation and excommunication. The woman who gave the alarm was presumably on assigned guard duty and appropriately armed. An additional detail in John of Tulbia's account and in the *Liber duelli*—that the fugitives were killed by the *women* of the camp—is thus a definite possibility. The *Gesta obsidione* and related 5th Crusade sources contrast with the *Itinerarium peregrinorum* in that the women are reported as being integrated into the camp routine, including defense. The Muslim sources, of course, do not call attention to these women who are alive and victorious.

Additional accounts of women acting in a crusading context occur in the sources for the

¹⁰Powell, *Anatomy of a Crusade*, pp. 161-62; idem "The Role of Women," pp. 294-301. *Gesta obsidione Damiate*, chaps. 52-53, pp. 110-11; John of Tulbia, p. 135; *Liber duelli*, p. 161-62.

Baltic Crusades.¹¹ In these sources, the Teutonic Knights and the Sword Brothers do not consider the ability of women to function in a number of military contexts as an indicator of spiritual laxness. Far from it! That “nowhere was the fragility of their sex apparent” during the defense of Elbing in 1245, that women fight “manfully” (*viriliter*), shows the favor of God—or of the Devil when the women are on the other side.

To these can be added such incidents as the extraordinarily lucky women operating the rock-throwing artillery piece (*petraria*) that killed Simon of Montfort at the siege of Toulouse (25 July 1218) during the Albigensian Crusade,¹² Margaret of Beverly—who had the extraordinarily bad luck to fulfill her vow in Jerusalem just as it came under siege by Saladin,¹³ and the women who defended the walls of a castle held by the Catalan Company at Gallipoli, although against the Genoese, not the Turks.¹⁴ Orderic Vitalis, who dispenses so many anecdotes of this kind, gives an example from the Reconquista. Sibyl, the wife of Robert Bordet, patrolled the walls of Tarragona (ca. 1124-31) while her husband was off seeking troops and a

¹¹Mazeika, “Nowhere Was”; Peter von Dusburg, 3.48, p. 78.

¹²Wm. Of Tudela, p. 172; Peter of Les Vaux-de-Cernay doesn’t mention the women, chap. 612, pp. 277.

¹³Maier, “The Roles of Women,” pp. 64-67; cf. Schmidt, “Perigrinatio periculosa’.”

¹⁴McMillin, “Women on the Walls,” pp. 123-136; *Chronicle of Muntaner*, vol. 2, chap. 227, p.538, 540.

papal grant, both of which he got.¹⁵

What these varied descriptions have in common is the *ad hoc* nature of much of the activity. Most of these accounts are not of noblewomen commanding their own troops, but of commoners—with the exception of Sybil and possibly some of the artillery crew at Toulouse. It can be assumed that the archer was familiar with her weapon and that the women of Toulouse had at least been taught how to fire the *petraria*, but the others appear to have at best rudimentary preparation and most lack proper equipment. Male authority figures are not completely absent, but they are in short supply. The Teutonic Order and the Catalan Company are out raiding when the Pomeranians and Genoese attack. The crusaders in their siege camps are suffering badly from disease and deprivation, morale is low and the commanders have lost control of the *vulgus*. These are the women who get to see some real fighting, and—another detail that links these accounts—these are the women who risk dying for it.

The Italian Amazons

A somewhat different series of reports, more limited in time and place, comes out of Italy in the latter half of the 11th century. Adelheid of Turin, Beatrice of Lorraine, Matilda of Tuscany and Sichelgaita of Salerno were women of wealth and position and a lifelong habit of authority.¹⁶ Yet not all women with such means used them as forcefully as this group. Each of these women undertook at least one direct military action.

¹⁵Orderic, 13.5, vol. 6, pp. 402-05; McCrank, “Norman Crusaders.”

¹⁶Eads, “Women and Military Power.”

Adelheid of Turin is credited (or discredited, the action resulted in the imposition of a penance) with the attack and burning of Asti in 1070.¹⁷ The last of her three husbands, Oddo of Savoy, had died in 1060. The eldest of their five children, Peter, was a young man in his 20s, but he escaped blame for the action. In 1076-77, it was Adelheid and her second son, Amadeus, who met and accompanied Henry IV and Queen Bertha, her elder daughter, to Canossa. Since Peter died in 1078, he presumably was unfit for winter travel in the Alps. Amadeus, too, is almost unheard of afterward and died early in 1080. Henry IV again turned to his mother-in-law when he attempted to negotiate with Matilda of Tuscany in 1082.¹⁸

Adelheid had other in-laws. Frederick of Montbéliard, for example, was a first cousin of Matilda of Tuscany, a second cousin of Henry IV and married to Adelheid's grand-daughter. He appears in both Adelheid's charters and Matilda's. Adelheid had adult male relatives, but it was she who negotiated the terms for the far-from-ceremonial escort of Henry IV across the Alps, and she whom Henry called on to conduct talks with Matilda. She clearly outranked the men in her life.

Beatrice of Lorraine, a niece of the empress Gisela and a removed aunt of Henry IV, is credited with a number of military actions in the early 1060s when Bishop Cadalus of Parma

¹⁷Previte-Orton, pp. 227-30; Rossi and Gabotto, pp. 91 ff; Andenna, pp. 96-97; Arnulf of Milan, 3.9, p. 18.

¹⁸Eads, "Mighty in War," p. 159, 164; idem, "Geography of Power," pp. 378-79; Benzo of Alba, 6.4, p. 663.

sought to become Pope Honorius II. Beatrice hindered his passage through the Apennines by means of ambushes and other tricks. In 1064, she brought troops to provide security for a synod being held at Mantua. Cadalus' attack failed, and the synod eventually decided in favor of his rival, Alexander II.¹⁹

At this time, Beatrice had a living husband, her second, Godfrey the Bearded, and an adult son-in-law, his son, also Godfrey. Godfrey the elder is known to have been in Germany conferring with the regency court in 1061-62 and is not mentioned in the sources for the 1064 action at Mantua.²⁰ Godfrey (and Beatrice) clearly had confidence in her ability to handle such matters.

Beatrice's daughter, Matilda of Tuscany (Matilde di Canossa), is unusual in the number of actions credited to her and the long period over which they occurred, 34-40 years or more depending on where one begins. Matilda's biographer, the monk Donizone of Canossa, deliberately avoided mentioning either of her husbands, and some later biographers attempted to portray her as a virgin saint, claiming that her two marriages were chaste. What is lost in this pious fiction is almost every trace of her military establishment. We know more about her notaries than her castellans. The 13-year-long widowhood after the death of her first husband in 1076 and the youth of her second husband (Welf V of Bavaria, 17 or 18 years old) gave

¹⁹Goez, *Beatrix*, pp. 72 ff, 206-08; Benzo of Alba, 2.1, p. 612, 3.27-29, pp. 632-34.

²⁰Goez, pp. 157-64; Meyer von Knonau 1, 379 ff; Benzo of Alba, 3.27-29, pp. 632-34; *Annales Altahenses maiores*, 814-15.

credibility to this picture. But, she had relatives other than Henry IV, relatives with whom she was not at war. And a small army could be recruited from the witnesses to her numerous surviving charters, but almost none of them is associated with the description of a specific action. Hugo del Mansi, whose betrayal led to a defeat for her troops in 1091, is clearly named, but the fact that he is an in-law is omitted.²¹ Matilda survived two wars with Henry IV (1081-84 and 1090-97). She died with her Italian possessions intact despite being deposed by the emperor, having no heir and facing the rise of the communes. She clearly did not conduct all the raids, sieges, defenses, etc. alone. But we still don't know who did. To get a clearer picture of her operations, it remains to "chercher l'homme."

Sichelgaita of Salerno presents an even greater challenge. The story of her exploits is both fascinating and specific. She prevented troops from fleeing a battle; she commanded at least one siege. In her case it is not so difficult to figure out what she did as to determine why she did it. She had a husband, and he was one of the most competent predators of his generation. It may be difficult to imagine Robert Guiscard as a power vacuum, but the realities of his situation made him one. Norman Italy was at least tumultuous, and he had rivals for power. He could conquer Salerno, but he needed his wife, Sichelgaita, a daughter of the legitimate ruling house, to play a prominent role, to remind the Salernitans of continuity rather than conquest. Robert needed her, strange as it seems to us, to insure the reliability of the Salernitan troops. And she needed to make it clear that her son, Roger, was a grandson of Prince Guaimar IV as

²¹Donizone, 2.6, ll. 586-88, p. 67. Matilda's husband Welf V was a grandson of Azzo II of Este; Hugo was Azzo's son by a subsequent marriage.

well as a son of Robert Guiscard, and that he would inherit all of his father's patrimony—Apulia, Calabria and Salerno—in spite of the son of Robert's first marriage, the formidable and very much present Bohemond.²²

Judith of Evreux, the first wife of Robert Guiscard's youngest brother, Roger the Great Count, is a less imposing figure. Geoffrey Malaterra emphasizes her youth and high birth rather than her heroism; he makes her rather timid. But, she was apparently also observant even while freezing and starving during the siege of Troina during the winter of 1062-63. The enemy warded off the cold with alcohol, and were predictably defeated when a sortie of Roger's very sober troops caught them literally napping. Henceforward, Judith personally commanded the defense of Troina, and the city was a reliable base for Roger during the long conquest of Sicily.

With matters arranged to his satisfaction, and the city of Troina now securely under his control, the count left his wife and troops there, and set off for Calabria and Apulia to secure replacements for the horses which they had lost. Although she was still a very young woman, his wife took charge of the *castrum* with great energy and care, going round it daily to see what needed to be done and ensuring that they remained on their guard. She encouraged the others whom her lord had left behind when he went away, and to ensure that they served her properly she spoke kindly to them, promising them many rewards when her lord returned. But she reminded them not to act carelessly now that the danger was over, in case something similar happened again.²³

Maria of Gaeta may barely make the cut. The sources are not adequate to determine what role she played in the struggle for the duchy. That she attempted to stand against the Normans of

²²Eads, "Sichelgaita."

²³Geoffrey Malaterra, 2.19 ff.

Capua would seem in itself to deserve further study as she had neither Sichelgaita's lineage nor a comparably aggressive husband.²⁴

These noblewomen contrast with the women crusaders by their class, their resources, the types of actions they undertake, their roles in these actions, and their survival rate. Sichelgaita and Matilda may have taken a wound; none is mentioned for Adelheid or Beatrice.²⁵ In the absence or unreliability of the male authority, they became that authority, and no one seems to have missed it.

III: The Empress Virago

A final example is a series of actions undertaken by one woman. From 1135-54 the empress Matilda attempted to claim the crown of England designated for her by her father, Henry I. Marjorie Chibnall's work on women in Orderic Vitalis had whetted the appetite for a thorough analysis of Matilda's campaign in her biography of the empress, but if readers had anticipated a warrior empress they were disappointed. The campaign has numerous moments of high drama including narrow escapes, captures and the participation of King Stephen's wife, Matilda of Boulogne, especially after his capture at Lincoln (1141). Yet in 1138-39 Queen Matilda had taken charge of the siege of Dover while Stephen attacked Hereford, a division of

²⁴Skinner, esp. pp. 153-57. [Primaries are *Amatus* and *Chronicon Cassinensis*.]

²⁵Eads, "Sichelgaita," p. 75; William of Apulia 4, ll. 425-31. On Matilda of Tuscany, "usque ad sanguine . . . certare," see Anselm of Lucca, *Contra Wibertum*, p. 5.

labor comparable to 1080 when Robert Guiscard moved against Taranto while Sichelgaita held down the siege of Trani.²⁶ The queen's role is foregrounded after Stephen's capture to downplay the role of the hated foreign mercenaries, especially William of Ypres.²⁷ The empress' husband, Geoffrey of Anjou, was taking care of business on the continent. He never showed up in England where he would be even more of a liability than William, and his role in the field was taken by Matilda's half-brother, Robert of Gloucester. The problem is that Robert was only one of many available male relations, the numerous Fitzroys and her uncle, the King of the Scots. With so many men available what historian would assume that the woman had a hand in her own campaign or consider that her brothers advised her on local conditions but that she made the decisions? Yet, it seems that the failure of the campaign is attributed to aspects of her personality, such as the imperiousness that turned the Londoners against her, rather than any

²⁶Orderic Vitalis, 13.37, vol. 6, pp. 520-21; Chibnall, p. 78, where Queen Matilda is not mentioned; Bradbury, p. 58 with *illo*; Crouch, pp. 78-79; Eads, "Sichelgaita," p. 84-85.

²⁷William is negatively portrayed from the beginning. The Norman nobles resented him; he is held accountable for the devastation around London in order to prevent Matilda's coronation, for the burning of Andover and Wherwell abbey during the move to encircle Winchester and for sensibly fleeing the field at Lincoln where Stephen was captured. Aged and blind, William became Henry II's scapegoat. Crouch, pp. 66-67, 184-86; Chibnall, pp. 102, 113; Bradbury, pp. 24-25, 46-47, 94-97, 107-110, 17-73.

unsound strategic decisions made by her brothers or uncle.²⁸ In this brief paper, it can only be suggested that the sources be reconsidered. The empress it seemed had too many men at her disposal, masking her own authority and drawing out the conflict until her son, Henry II, grew up and Stephen's oldest son died. There was no clear cut victory and no clear cut role for the empress. Too many men.

Conclusions

So, where does this leave the study of women and the conduct of war in the Middle Ages? First, the old model—if one can call it that—is clearly no longer tenable. It seems, in fact, reversed; the husband was able to go on crusade only because he knew his wife was able to defend the castle. Everyone here can cite sources reporting that at times women undertook military actions, but these same sources seldom bother to explain *why* they did it, and instead and comment on the woman's personal qualities, for good or for ill, while giving no information as to her military goals. But, military actions have goals—strategic, operational, tactical—and these do not change when women undertake the action. The answer to the question, “Why?” is to be found by examining the sources in terms of these goals using the basic tools of military history rather than by focusing on what the men were not doing.

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²⁸On Matilda's shortcomings as a military leader, Chibnall, p. 97; her haughtiness and mishandling of the citizens of London, pp. 104-05; *Gesta Stephani*, pp. 120-23.

[**Students:** Translations have been included where available. Anonymous works are alphabetized either by title or pseudonymous author. Some of these sources have been translated more than once, and many are excerpted either online or in source collections. New translations appear regularly. The catalogue, the reference librarian and open stacks are your friends.]

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