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“Access is Power: Financing the Second Crusade in France”

Let me begin by saying that as a medievalist, I am very happy to be in the company of such a diverse group of scholars. I would like to first offer some introductory comments on medieval land ownership. Then I will suggest an explanation for why historians have been slow to use land charters as a primary source for the history of the crusades. After setting the stage for the Second Crusade, I will then discuss some of the disputes that arose between monks and crusaders regarding property lines. And finally, I will conclude by arguing that access to and control over the written word—the ability to read and write—determined the outcome of many of these disputes.

I. Medieval Land Ownership

Medieval notions of land ownership differ widely from our own. In twelfth-century France, landowners demonstrated their possession of land by using it, just like the generations before them. How did they determine where one person’s property ended and another person’s began? Land charters, wills, and other descriptive sources indicate that landowners subscribed to an ambiguous notion of property lines. For instance, two neighbors might share a property line demarcated by a large rock. The edges of rivers, ponds, and lakes, the base of a mountain or a hill, or even the edge of a forest, could all serve as meeting points between two property owners.

How did families remember these boundaries from generation to generation? One way of doing this involved firmly implanting it in a young person’s memory. Several land charters indicate that families brought their children to the property line, told them what determined the property line, and then immediately inflicted a small amount of physical pain. By associating the property line with a traumatic experience, many parents hoped that their children would clearly

remember where the family’s land ended. Given the importance of land and maintaining the family’s possessions over the long term, it is unsurprising that many parents repeated this practice for a number of years.

It is easy to see how this system of land ownership could cause some problems. We know that, given enough time, the edges of rivers, ponds, and lakes shift and change. In a subsistence economy based on agriculture, a distance of a few feet over several generations can become disastrous. Additionally, how does one define where the base of a hill or mountain really begins? And how can a new farmer truly know that the “straight line” from the large rock remains the same “straight line” that his great grandfather would have accepted? Furthermore, despite the efforts of parents, certainly some children forgot where their family’s land ended. The edge of a forest is also not so straightforward; farmers can cut down trees and uproot bushes, effectively expanding their property little by little every year.

II. Crusade Historians and Land Charters

Before diving into the historiography of crusade charters, it is helpful to briefly consider how historians understand the crusades. They do not even agree on a common definition (Riley-Smith, 1994 & Constable, 2001). One school of thought, the “traditionalists,” defines a crusade as any military expedition to the Holy Land from Western Europe sanctioned by the papacy (Gillingham, 1988). Under this view, the movements to abolish Catharism in southern France, expel Muslims from the Iberian Peninsula, and defeat pagans in the Baltic States constituted a variation from the “real” crusades. But another school of thought, the “pluralists,” understands a crusade not in terms of where the military expedition traveled, but in what the participants thought of themselves. This approach allows historians to study crusading as an enduring characteristic of Western European religious life spanning seven centuries.

Beginning in the 1980s, the “pluralist” school began using new sources to answer new questions. How did crusaders, who were not members of the royal army, pay for their own expeditions? Giles Constable (1994), one of the first historians to realize the usefulness of land charters, wondered how any one person might navigate such an enormous and unexploited body of evidence. After several decades of conducting research on a wide variety of topics, Constable had saved a number of relevant charters from around France. Fortunately, twenty-first century technologies—high-speed Internet and digitized manuscript collections—allow a new generation of scholars to search thousands of documents for keywords in a matter of seconds.

Constable’s work nevertheless stands as benchmark for future crusade historians. Indeed, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, popular histories used Constable’s work to briefly describe how crusaders paid for their journeys. For example, Jonathan Riley-Smith devotes just one paragraph to the topic in his widely used textbook, most of which is spent detailing the taxes levied on French churches by King Louis VII.

A major turning point for crusade charters came in 2001. Until Corliss Konwiser Slack published her collection of translated documents from northern France, crusade charters remained buried in cartularies. Slack performed a noteworthy service to her colleagues by gathering thirty-one of these dispersed documents and publishing them in a single volume. Her stated purpose is to allow other scholars to use these sources as they see fit, a task that Jonathan Phillips, among others, has readily accepted. For instance, Phillips (2008) uses Slack’s publication to demonstrate that laypersons typically took up the cross as entire social units: fathers, brothers, cousins, and friends went on the Second Crusade *en masse*. The combination of new technologies and charter-anthologies promises to bring additional insights into twelfth-century crusading.

III. Crusaders and Monks: Financing the Second Crusade

By the 1140s, European Christianity was in the midst of a period of revival. Old religious orders were undergoing a series of new reforms—the Cistercians had broken away from the Benedictines and were moving into southern France. For the first time, military religious orders began exerting more and more influence over continental Europe—the Templars and Hospitallers were both acquiring property throughout France.

Pope Eugene III launched the Second Crusade in the midst of this religious fervor. According to the charters, thousands of crusaders “burned with zeal” to fight the enemies of Christ. But they had a problem: since they were not part of the royal army, they had to pay for their own expeditions. Going on crusade was certainly expensive. The first expense would have been obtaining weapons, not to mention armor, shields, and horses (Constable, 1982). Throughout the journey to the Holy Land, they needed food, clothing, and shelter. In addition to providing for the needs of their bodies, many crusaders also made provisions for their spiritual health—monetary donations in exchange for the prayers of monks was a necessity (Phillips, 2007). Since many crusaders were knights, they probably brought along a number of servants, which only multiplied the cost. And on top of all this, a severe famine in 1146 caused the price of wheat to skyrocket. This depleted most people’s savings, making it that much harder to raise money (Phillips, 2007).

It is here that historians can uniquely study the intersection of market forces and religious enthusiasm. On the one hand, the majority of crusaders did not possess the ability to finance the crusade. They owned land, but prospective buyers also lacked money due to the recent famine. On the other hand, religious orders wanted to buy land in order to strengthen their possessions in France. Unlike local farmers, these international religious institutions were well positioned to

absorb the costs of the famine of 1146. Indeed, influential monks preached the need for going on crusade in the first place. It can hardly come as a surprise, given this confluence of events, that religious houses rapidly acquired untold amounts of property as a direct consequence of the Second Crusade.

How did monasteries acquire land? Whenever a crusader wanted to sell his property, a monk would record the transaction in an official record book, also called a cartulary. These documents describe the piece of land coming into the monastery's possession, why the crusader wanted to sell it, and the names of people who witnessed the agreement. It is difficult to understate the importance of authorship: monks wrote the documents, maintained them in their privately owned library, and interpreted the language when there were disputes.

Authority over the written word provided monks with the ability to manipulate information as they saw fit. Wido of Bré wanted to “fight the enemies of Christ in Jerusalem” on the First Crusade, so in order to raise money he sold his land to the Benedictine monastery of Vigéois in 1096 for one hundred shillings. This substantial amount of money suggests that without help from the monks, Wido would not have been able to go on the crusade (*Cartulaire de l'abbaye de Vigéois en Limousin (954-1167)*, no. 113, 67-69). Fifty years later, Peter of Bré, Wido's grandson, wanted to join the Second Crusade. Unfortunately, Peter lacked both the money to pay for himself *and* land that he could sell. As a last resort, he alleged that the monks of Vigéois had usurped more land than his grandfather had originally donated. After seeing the text that described Wido's original donation, Peter agreed to drop the allegation (*Cartulaire de l'abbaye de Vigéois en Limousin (954-1167)*, no. 316, 213-214).

In this particular situation, it is impossible to know if Peter's allegation was accurate. Caution is prudent here: for many of the crusaders, including Wido and Peter, a single reference

in a charter constitutes the only shred of evidence we have about their existence. It nevertheless seems fruitful to make a few speculative interpretations. Peter’s strategy was certainly popular among other crusaders. Whenever someone leveled a complaint against a monastery, the monks frequently tried to arrange for a “quitclaim.” In exchange for an agreement to drop the complaint, monks agreed to provide a “gift of charity”: money. In other words, Peter’s actions indicate that he wanted to raise a quick sum of money in a short amount of time—but without giving up anything tangible.

In this interpretation of events, then, Peter cynically raised a false claim against the monks of Vigéois in the hope of receiving monetary compensation. But if we are to accept this interpretation, then we quickly run into a problem of sources. The only information regarding Wido and Peter derive from cartularies—documents written by monks, the very people who had something at stake in this dispute.

Given the rates of literacy in the Middle Ages, it seems likely that Peter could not read or write. How could he have possibly understood the text of Wido’s donation without the aid of a literate monk? It is just as likely that the charter of Wido’s transaction with the monastery—and the one hundred shillings the monks paid to him—was a forgery. Peter would have had no way of knowing that he was looking at a twelfth-century forgery of an eleventh-century transaction. It was the monks, who had access to and control over Wido’s charter, who ultimately won the disagreement.

The strategy of disputing a monastery’s patrimony was not unique for crusaders. Pilgrims, who also needed to raise money for their journeys, frequently used the exact same tactics. Predictably, this resulted in similar outcomes. Isembart de Thouargé wanted to go to Rome with his friend, Hubert L’Hussier, but he needed to first raise some money (*Cartulaire de*

l'Abbaye de Saint-Aubin d'Angers, II, no. 826). Isembart disputed the terms of a donation that his uncle, also named Isembart, had made to the monks at Saint-Aubin. He claimed that the monks had taken more land than his uncle had originally intended.

Isembart's complaint is interesting for two reasons. First, the scribe recording it describes Isembart in overly negative terms. Second, Isembart's uncle was still alive. It therefore seems entirely possible that Isembart consulted with his uncle about the terms of his transaction. In other words, Isembart probably had a good reason to complain to the monks of Saint-Aubin. According to the charter, both men came to the monastery together. The monks, however, refused to give Isembart anything in exchange for his quitclaim. Once again, the literate scribes with access to information won the argument.

It is important at this point to remember that monks did not always easily dismiss the complaints leveled against them. One very brief charter from modern-day Saint-Salvador in the Limousin region indicates that Ebalus of Bort gave the Benedictine Abbey of Tulle the right to inherit his land after his death. But his son, William, disputed the donation before leaving for Jerusalem on crusade. The abbot of the monastery secured William's quitclaim for the sum of thirty shillings (*Cartulaire des Abbayes de Tulle et de Roc-Amadour*, no. 119).

Something similar happened to the monks at Dunois monastery in 1096. Guernonatus and his son, Peter, “falsely claimed” to own a piece of property near the village of Berfodus (*Cartulaire de Marmoutier pour le Dunois*, no. 152).¹ According to the author, these men forfeited their claim because they were “wanting to go fight the enemies of Christ in Jerusalem”

¹ The verb is “*calumniabantur*,” line 2.

(*Cartulaire de Marmoutier pour le Dunois*, no. 152).² But the monks also give them “six ounces of coins.”³

At first glance, both of these complaints seem to indicate that laypersons could extract money from monasteries. However, they also suggest that the monks of Saint-Salvador and Dunois refused to admit that the land was not originally theirs. The monks did not buy the land; Ebalus and Guernonatus simply forfeited their rights to ownership. Even when it seems as though monks have lost the dispute, they most likely won.

In all of these disputes, it is crucial to keep in mind the religious motivations behind each person. Scribal monks believed they were defending the livelihood of a sacred institution. Laypersons believed they were participating in a divinely sanctioned activity, like going on crusade or pilgrimage. Indeed, undoubtedly some of the same monks who engaged in disputes were nevertheless encouraging laypersons in these activities. Despite these intentions, it remains true that access to and control over information ultimately determined the outcome of all four disagreements.

² The exact phrase is: “*vellent in Jerusalem cum exercitu Xristianorum ire contra paganos.*”

³ The wording is: “*VI. libras Blessensis monetæ.*”

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