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Review of *A Cultural History of the Medieval Sword: Power, Piety and Play* by Robert W Jones

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Robert W Jones, *A Cultural History of the Medieval Sword: Power, Piety and Play*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2023. xii + 221 pp, 25 illustrations. ISBN: 978-1837650361 (hardback). Price £30.00.

In *A Cultural History of the Medieval Sword*, Robert W Jones has produced a compelling analysis of sword culture between 1100 and 1500, unpicking many of the myths and assumptions current in popular understandings of the subject. Disentangling the contradictory and misleading ideas about swords and sword use is a significant challenge, but the work is both persuasive and readable, as well as benefitting from high-quality images accompanying the text, many of them in colour.

Jones begins with an analysis of the mystical qualities held (or supposedly held) by swords. Here, he deconstructs the idea of a magical medieval sword as it frequently appears in modern fantasy fiction, arguing that genuine medieval swords rarely held significance as mystical objects in their own right. In medieval romances, named swords, such as King Arthur's *Excalibur* or Roland's *Durendel*, were rare, and did not typically hold magical properties. Meanwhile, while real swords were typically crafted according to sacred geometric principles, inscribed with protective and healing mottos, and received holy blessings from priests before battle, they acted as conduits for God's grace.

The following chapter looks at the sword as an object seen to wield and transfer power, examining casual exchanges and losses of swords reputedly belonging to King Arthur while posing the question: 'Why were … monarchs so casual with their handling of such an important and iconic sword?' (p. 37). From here, Jones examines the connection between coronation swords and the historic past, as well as the role that swords played in inauguration rituals and the making of a knight, before discussing ceremonial swords and their function as displays of monarchical, noble, or mayoral authority, rather than use in combat. This category of sword use is strikingly impersonal – as Jones puts it, the sword is 'tied to the title and not to the individual' (p. 58) – and indeed this is borne out in the development of the executioner's sword, which had emerged as both a tool *and* a badge of office by the sixteenth century.

The third chapter is a case-study of the falchion, a curved sword that medieval sources typically used to establish an ancient or heroic genealogy for their bearer, particularly as falchions were commonly shown being wielded by the ancients in medieval iconography. Yet this connection to an ancient past could bleed into 'otherness'; as Jones notes, falchions were often depicted in the hands of Islamic forces or even weapons of Hell. This is underscored in Jones's analysis of the medieval texts *Robert le Diable* and *Sir Gowther*, the heroes of which are born from a pact with the devil and,

wielding a falchion, embark on a path of murderous destruction until repenting and receiving papal absolution.

Chapter Four, 'The Civilian Sword', is perhaps the strongest in the entire work. Jones attempts to uncover the extent to which ordinary civilians owned and regularly wore swords, using sources ranging from muster rolls, inventories, wills, and weapons bans, to visual and poetic sources such as *The Canterbury Tales*. Particularly compelling is his analysis of violent deaths in the fourteenth century, looking closely at spontaneous acts of violence and concluding that because deaths caused by swords were relatively low (only as high as eleven percent in London, while knife attacks accounted for forty-two percent), 'this would suggest that whilst medieval men and women might readily have a knife or dagger on their belt, a sword was far less likely to be to hand in the heat of the moment.' (p. 102).

Beyond violent weapons, Jones also uses this chapter to examine 'buckler-play', a medieval craft popular from the late fourteenth century, akin to juggling and acrobatics. Regarded as, at best, a signal of middle-class boorishness, the use of sword and buckler was especially attractive to students and apprentices as the progenitor of fencing, although it was not until the fifteenth century that fencing schools or guilds gained formal recognition.

The fifth and sixth chapters complement one another, focusing on both training in the sword and its literal use in combat. In both cases, unfortunately, Jones concludes that the source evidence is too slim to draw any definite conclusions. Although he examines a large variety of sources – romances, hunting treatises, tournament descriptions, fight manuals, biographies, coroner's rolls, forensic archaeology, and marks on surviving weapons – modern knowledge of the reality of medieval sword training and use is limited. Perhaps his most compelling conclusions in these chapters emerge from his analysis of late medieval fight manuals, arguing that the language used in them suggest an emergent sword use among the middle classes which eventually achieved wider legitimacy over following centuries.

The final chapter, "Recreating 'Medieval' Swordsmanship", focuses on how modern fighters pursue and achieve an 'authentic' medieval swordplay in their craft. Although somewhat at odds with the other chapters, focusing on Victorian and later recreations of a medieval cultural form, it is nevertheless a useful reminder of how modern understandings of this form have been shaped by our own assumptions and biases. Films, theatre, re-enactment swordplay, and Historical European Martial Arts all attempt reproductions of medieval swordsmanship; their disparate results and successes highlight the difficulties inherent in doing so.

As with many works that attempt a cross-century, pan-European cultural analysis, *A Cultural History* does occasionally risk working in too broad strokes. The bulk of Jones's

analysis comes from English records, while (with some exceptions) German, French, Italian, Polish, and other European sources appear more often as supportive evidence; likewise, the sources he uses apparently incline to the latter end of the period. Nevertheless, this is a forceful work of scholarship and an important addition to the growing body of work on historic swords and sword-use.

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Steve Tibble, *Templars: The Knights Who Made Britain*. London: Yale University Press, 2023. xviii + 334 pp. 31 illustrations, 5 maps. ISBN: 978-0300264456 (hardback). Price £25.00.

Following on from his *Crusader Armies* in 2018 to *The Crusader Strategy* in 2020, Steve Tibble has turned his attention to the most famous Crusaders of all: the Knights Templar. *Templars* also takes Tibble outside of the Latin East as he focuses on the Templar's activities in both Britain and the Holy Land, creating a dual history of the order. In some ways the book succeeds at this goal, and it certainly brings Tibble's considerable expertise on the subject matter to bear, but in other places its overall structure and focus becomes jumbled and results in a book that does not entirely live up to its potential.

Tibble has made a considerable study of the Crusades and his breadth of knowledge of the subject matter is on display in *Templars*. Readers will find an abridged history of the Crusading movement, largely focusing on the period after the formation of the Templars in the early twelfth century and continuing through the loss of the last vestiges of the Latin East to the Mamluks, with an emphasis on matters with a strong Templar presence. In addition, the book includes a history of Britain at the same time, breaking up the Crusade narrative by describing what was happening back in Europe and the impact that this could have on efforts to sustain Crusading in the east. This structural choice is a helpful reminder that Crusades did not happen in a vacuum. The emphasis Tibble places on the diplomatic role that Templars often fulfilled in Europe and how that desire for European peace fit in with their overall mission of directing European violence towards enemies in the Holy Land is particularly noteworthy.

The book's strongest part is its final third, which covers the suppression of the Templars. This event has long been dominated by a focus on King Philip IV's raids on