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Book Review

Geoffrey Fisher

Professor John France of Swansea University owns a lofty reputation in medieval military history circles. His book, *Western Warfare in the Age of the Crusades, 1000-1300*, is an attempt to shed light on the socio-economic characteristics of medieval warfare. France's book presents three fascinating arguments.

First, his discussion about how medieval Europe fought its wars encapsulates how warfare at this time consisted of haphazard engagements. European medieval society was comprised of decentralized governmental systems. France calls the spheres of power in European society the *mouvances*. These consisted of well-heeled medieval families. For example, the Counts of Anjou ruled from Western France, the Baldwins ruled in Jerusalem, the Dukes of Brabant ruled from the south of the Netherlands, and the royal houses of Hohenstaufen and Capetians ruled from Germany and France, respectively. All of this economic, military, and political dispersion made it difficult for any one family to maintain a lasting hold on the European continent. If the political and military leaders wanted to fight wars, then they had to conduct it through indirect means, namely raiding, pillaging, and ambushing one's opponents. This indirect way of war made a lot of sense since limited logistical abilities of the state restricted large-scale warfare. In addition, a direct conflict jeopardized the nobilities' position of power should the outcome be negative.

The second argument France discusses is the primacy of the castle. He dedicated two chapters to castles and fortifications and how they impacted wars and sieges. The primacy of the castle can be found in its construction. Castles protected the inhabitants from both domestic and foreign threats. For instance, the castle's walls assisted in helping to protect governments from rebellion by the native populace as well as external coercion.¹ The castle's defensively strong characteristics often held the advantage in battle and medieval governmental infrastructure helped to maintain the castle's prominent role in European society. France writes that castles held "a military purpose—to defend the life and goods of

its owner and to provide his troops with a base.”² The number of castles increased throughout the Middle Ages and reinforced this basic component of war.³ One of the benefits of the castle in a war was that it protected the troops from enduring enemy attacks. For example, after ransacking the surrounding landscape the enemy grew tired. Protected from the initial attack, the rested garrisoned troops inside the castle sallied out and laid waste to weakened opponents. During the medieval period, conducting a siege against a garrisoned castle often led to a long and protracted expedition. If a ravaging army decided to besiege an enemy's castle, they left themselves vulnerable to attack from relief forces. This created a situation where those conducting the siege found themselves surrounded by the besieged and their allies.

The third argument comes at the end of his book where France recognizes a paradox in medieval society. It was highly militarized, but at the same time, it lacked war academies. France is correct to point out that a lack of instruction in war solidified the power of the nobility. When medieval armies did go to war, their political and military leaders sought out conservative objectives. These leaders knew that their armies did not have the resources to conduct an extended war.

His list of sources is impressive. The historiography represented draws from a list of well-known medieval military historians. Bernard S. Bachrach, Kelly Devries, Stephan Morillo, Helen Nicholson, and Michael Prestwich are a few of his secondary sources.

Although this book has an illuminating thesis and fascinating historical arguments, one is bound to find a few criticisms. First, the reader may find that France's book lacks a prologue and an epilogue to introduce and conclude with his main thoughts to the reader. Second, he refers to many battles without equipping the reader with an adequate supply of maps. The great number of battles and sieges France lists makes it easy to get lost in the text. If he had focused only on the most consequential engagements, readers might not get easily lost. Third, the content is advanced and this creates confusion for newcomers to the discipline. For instance, it is easy for the newcomer to get lost when France is discussing the Maciejowski Bible and stone machicolations and how they relate to his central thesis. Diagrams of machicolations in use can be helpful to the reader. For the above reasons the work is in need of revision.

In closing, John France's book deftly blends the *mouvances* in European society. The socio-economic infrastructure of European culture led to the inability of military and political leaders to execute a plan that resulted in a decisive conflict. Even though the medieval world might seem distant in our technological society, the study of warfare during the Middle Ages is the study of hegemonies

vying for control over the continent. European culture needs to acknowledge that "hegemonic" warfare is a historical legacy of Western identity.⁴ Any student who is specializing in medieval warfare would do well to place France's book on their bookshelf.

Notes

1. John France, *Western Warfare in the Age of the Crusades, 1000-1300* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1999), 83.

2. *Ibid.*, 84.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Garret Fagan and Matthew Trundle, eds., *New Perspectives on Ancient Warfare: History of Warfare* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 215, accessed November 1, 2015, <https://books.google.com>.