



ST. MARY THE VIRGIN

Sovereign Military Order of the Temple of Jerusalem

Women in the Crusade Movement

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Prepared by



Dr. Chev. Peter L. Heineman, GOTJ, CMTJ
2020 Avenue B
Council Bluffs, IA 51501
Phone 712.323.3531 • www.plheineman.net

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INTRODUCTION



Women in the Crusade Movement

Apart from considering the evidence for women joining crusade expeditions as pilgrims, fighters or camp followers, women's contributions away from the battlefields and the impact women had on the propaganda, recruitment, financing and organizing of crusades and their roles in looking after families and properties as well as providing liturgical support at home for crusaders on campaign were vast. This publication gives an overview of the roles women played within the medieval crusade movement, as particularly illustrative examples, the experiences of two prominent female exponents, Margaret of Beverley, who went on crusade in the 1180s, and Catherine of Siena, an ardent and outspoken promoter of the crusade in the 1370s.

The Crusade Movement

The history of women in the Middle Ages has in the past few decades received much attention from scholars investigating women as individuals or social groups, their perceived roles and varying experiences in many walks of medieval life. One such area is the medieval crusade movement. The majority of studies are concerned with the military roles of men and women on the battlefields of the crusades and the way in which (male) medieval authors described the crusade as a fundamentally male activity. The female crusade experience is difficult to assess because crusade chroniclers, as a rule, represented participants in terms of stereotyped gender roles, which largely obscured women's contributions. As a number of the contributors show, women on crusade were represented not in their own right but with reference to an ideal of the crusader who was male, pious, obedient to God and fearless in battle.

The relative dearth of scholarly work concerning women in the crusade movement is matched by an almost complete absence of substantial studies on the role of women in medieval warfare in general. At least up to the 14th century, medieval warfare was in essence based on feudal structures, which meant that aspects such as military training or the recruitment of warriors usually happened within the context of household and family. This gave medieval women, generally speaking, much better access to and greater familiarity with all aspects of warfare than in post-14th-century Europe, when warfare became increasingly professionalized and technical and was therefore further removed from the everyday experience of the majority of women. It thus comes as no surprise that, despite the bias of medieval sources, which tend to portray warfare as a fundamentally male activity, texts of the 10th to 13th centuries occasionally mention the active participation of women in warfare.

Recent developments, particularly in gender history, emphasize the connections and mutual interactions between women's and men's roles in times of war and peace, on the battlefield and on the home front. Gender roles in military contexts are perceived as having an impact on gendered behavior in civilian life and vice versa, in the same way as gendered experience during war time is said to shape the roles of men and women in everyday life in times of peace.

The roles of women within the crusade movement are exemplified through the experiences of two prominent female exponents, Margaret of Beverley, who went on crusade in the 1180s, and Catherine of Siena, an ardent and outspoken promoter of the crusade in the 1370s.

Margaret of Beverley



Figure 1 Margaret of Beverley and Thomas of Froidmont

Margaret of Beverley (c.1150 – c.1215), also known as Margaret of Jerusalem, probably represents the best documented case of one woman's experience on crusade.

Margaret's brother, the Cistercian Thomas of Froidmont, recorded her story in his *Hodoeporicon et pericula Margarite Iherosolimitane*. The *Hodoeporicon* tells Margaret's life from her birth during a pilgrimage to the Holy Land around the middle of the 12th century to her death as a nun in the Cistercian monastery of Montreuil-sous-Laon around 1215. Written in the form of an opus geminum, i.e. divided into a prose and a verse section, Thomas mentions the principal stations of his older sister's life.

The monk Thomas was born in Beverley, England. His parents both dying in his childhood, he was raised and educated by his sister Margaret, who was eleven years his senior. When he was adolescent he entered the service of Thomas of Canterbury, going with him also to France, in their flight from persecution in England. At this time, towards 1165-1166, Thomas entered the Abbey of Froidmont in the Diocese of Beauvais, probably after the example of his patron, who took the Cistercian habit at Pontigny. Thomas gave himself ably, in the solitude of the cloister, to the cultivation of poetry. Thomas of Froidmont's sister, Margaret, after extraordinary adventures, came to find him in his monastery. Thomas, as is monastic practice, reserved publication until Margaret's death, giving the work as her Elegy.

The text describes Margaret's crusade in the following manner. Margaret took the cross as an adult and left for the Holy Land, arriving in Jerusalem just before the city was besieged by Saladin's forces in the late summer of 1187 in the aftermath of the battle of Hattin. During the siege, which lasted for 15 days, Margaret fought with the defenders on the ramparts of the city and was wounded in the process.

During this seige, which lasted fifteen days, I carried out all, she said, 'of the functions of a soldier that I could. I wore a breastplate like a man; I came and went on the ramparts, with a cauldron on my head for a helmet. Though a woman, I seemed a warrior, I threw the weapon; though filled with fear, I learned to conceal my weakness. It was hot', Margaret went on to say, 'And the fighters could have no rest. I was giving the soldiers at the wall water to drink, when a stone, like a millwheel fell near me; I was hit by one of its fragments; my blood ran. But my wound quickly healed, because someone immediately brought medicine, though the scar remains. Your feastday, O St Michael, came and went sadly, without song. What could we offer in your honour, when we were so filled with fear?

Despite this, Margaret was captured by some Muslims soon afterwards and spent 15 months in captivity as a forced laborer. In early 1187, a Christian burgher of Tyre finally ransomed her and 24 fellow captives.

An unlucky treaty took me in the Holy Places into the hands of the enemy. I was taken prisoner, but on paying some guineas, I was set free. I joined a group of others likewise redeemed.



Antioch

was an ancient Greek city⁴ on the eastern side of the Orontes River. Its ruins lie near the modern city of Antakya, Turkey, to which the ancient city lends its name. Antioch was called "the cradle of Christianity" as a result of its longevity and the pivotal role that it played in the emergence of both Hellenistic Judaism and early Christianity. The Christian New Testament asserts that the name "Christian" first emerged in Antioch. It was one of the four cities of the Syrian tetrapolis, and its residents were known as *Antiochenes*. The city was a metropolis of a quarter million people during Augustan times, but it declined to relative insignificance during the Middle Ages because of warfare, repeated earthquakes, and a change in trade routes, which no longer passed through Antioch from the far east following the Mongol invasions and conquests.

Margaret then decided to go on pilgrimage to the tomb of her patron saint, St Margaret at Antioch, which was, however, delayed because she had no money and had to spend some time working as a washerwoman. At Antioch, Margaret again got involved in fighting between a Christian and a Muslim army; she was reported to have taken part in the plundering of the dead Muslims after the battle, before continuing her journey towards Tripoli. On the way, she was once more taken prisoner by a Muslim who recognized some of the plundered items she was carrying...

We walked', she continued, 'towards Lachis, believing we were safe. But we found ourselves amidst the enemy. I was subjected to a difficult sentence for the love of Christ, who wished me also reduced to pious servitude. But I did not give in to the torment. My inviolate faith always won the victory. I was forced to carry out humiliating tasks; I gathered stones, I chopped wood. If I refused to obey, I was beaten with rods. I endured the blows, the threats, the heat, the cold, in silence. My chains rusted from my tears. The work and the slender diet tired my limbs. The long days were boiling hot and rest was rare and brief. The day of the Virgin's Purification, which ended the term of my sorrows, was a day I'll not forget. Do you know who bought our freedom? A Tyrian, a pious, benevolent man, redeemed us. A son had just been born to him whom he had desired. His joy caused our liberty. The happy day of the Feast of the Virgin ended for me fifteen months of slavery.

...but was finally freed again.

I drew apart', she said, 'avoiding the towns and public places. In the fear of being captured, I walked always in hiding. I was garbed only in a sack that I had worn when captive: it was short and light, without colour or warmth; it scarcely covered my nudity; it was a burden at that time not having other clothing. All I had left was a Psalter; it was my one companion in the midst of this wilderness; it was all that I possessed. A loaf of bread sustained me for five days. Hunger then forced me to have recourse to roots of plants. For five days I ate nothing that humans would use to satisfy their hunger; I lived however I could. Alone, troubled, lost, I saw nothing except solitude. I had twelve streams to cross. What to do? Would the fear of dying make me risk the danger of dying? I saw no bridge anywhere. The fords that I tried filled me with terror. I could not turn back. I feared staying there and becoming a meal to the wild beasts. Fear eventually made me bold. I crossed the first river, then I crossed them all.

She finally reached Antioch. While staying there, the Muslim armies, which had already taken her prisoner in Jerusalem, came also before the walls of this city. This was the most dangerous moment for Margaret; someone accused her of stealing a knife that she had found. She was arrested and to be executed. It was recorded:

'What shall I do?' said Margaret. 'I want to escape but cannot on either side; around me are sentinels, no door is open. I'm afraid of everything, the looks, the words, of those surrounding me. I don't understand any Turkish words. Not knowing what to do, seized with the greatest sorrow, I pronounce the name of St Mary. At this name the chief of the Infidels is amazed, this faithless man become benevolent and pious, and turns towards the others. "See", he says,

"She invokes Mary". He orders me to return. This order displeases the others, but I am only a little scared. I leave and give you thanks, O Virgin Mary. It is through you I was delivered at Lachis, it is through you I am again freed here. Honour and glory be to Mary!

Margaret, escaped from this danger, returns to visit the Holy Places, and as a result of the Peace Treaty that was concluded in 1192 between Richard I and Saladin, she is able to return with the English Crusaders through Europe. She goes to St James of Compostela, then to Rome, and finally to France.

Arriving at the French frontier, I learned', said our pilgrim, 'that my brother had become a monk. I came to Beauvais, I learned where he was: they showed me Froidmont. I found him at last. He scarcely recognized me. I told him the name of our father, also of our mother. "My father had three children. You see in me the only daughter he had. The other brother was taken to heaven soon after baptism. Why do you hesitate any longer. It was Sybilla who gave us to the light of the day; she was our mother. Hulnon was our father". Then he believed me; we burst into tears together. I told him my adventures; my story had him break out in sighs. He exhorted me to leave the life of the world, and showed me the way to the monastic life'.

Margaret took her brother's advice, and thanks to the generosity of Louis, Count of Blois and Clermont, she entered a convent in the Diocese of Laon, called Montreuil or the Holy Face. After such a stormy life, she passed the rest of her days in peace.

With regard to Margaret's crusade, the sacrificial suffering was represented by her willingness to accept the mortal dangers of war and her readiness to endure captivity and poverty. These sufferings were salutary because Margaret underwent them in the spirit of following Christ (*consecutio Christi*), one of the central elements of crusade ideology: 'She took the cross, to follow Christ as a Christian.'

If we presume that Margaret left on crusade around the middle of the 1180s, it is probable that she was travelling alone or with a group of other pilgrims independent of a crusade army proper. We do not know whether she expected to be involved in warlike action. Even though no major crusade campaign was being organized at the time, Margaret could well have followed other individual crusaders who expected to serve with the armies of the Kingdom of Jerusalem.

Regarding the way in which Margaret was involved in the fighting at Jerusalem, Thomas's text describes how she fought on top of the walls like a 'heroine' (*virago*) and how she was wearing a helmet 'like a man', even though she used an upside down cooking pot instead of a real helmet; Margaret was portrayed as 'a women who feigned to be a man, like tufa pretending to be sapphire'. This description shows many parallels with portrayals of other female crusaders involved in the fighting during sieges. The description of Margaret of Beverley's experiences on crusade thus fits the traditional stereotyped image of the female crusader that narrative sources convey. Margaret's purported role during the siege of Jerusalem and the description of her captivity reflects typical experiences attributed to women captured during the wars in the Holy Land

A Male Occupation

The most poignant expression of this designation of crusading as a male sphere can be found in an often quoted passage of the *Itinerarium peregrinorum* (in full, *Itinerarium Peregrinorum et Gesta Regis Ricardi*) referring to the preparations for the Third crusade:

The enthusiasm for the new pilgrimage was such that already it was not a question of who had received the cross but who had not yet done so. A great many men sent each other wool and distaff, implying that if they exempted themselves from this expedition they would only be fit for women's work. Brides urged their husbands and mothers incited their sons to go, their only sorrow being that they were not able to set out with them because of the weakness of their sex.

ITINERARIUM REGIS RICARDI is a Latin prose narrative of the Third Crusade, 1189-1192. The first part of the book concentrates on Saladin's conquests and the early stages of the crusade, with a long description of the expedition of the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa. The rest of the book describes King Richard I of England's participation in the crusade.

Here, crusading was not only defined as a fundamentally male activity, participation in the crusade was in fact designated as an element of maleness. In contrast, women were said to have been barred from the activity of crusading on account of an alleged lack of bodily strength, even though they were portrayed as enthusiastic supporters of the crusade. The text of the *Itinerarium* thus constructed a division between the male sphere of the crusade as a military expedition and the female sphere of the crusade's home front symbolized by the activity of spinning. Here, as in other narrative accounts of the period, women and female behavior on crusade were, as a rule, not represented in their own right but were set against the ideal image of the male crusader, who was male, pious, obedient to God and fearless in battle, an ideal elsewhere also encouraged by crusade sermons. In these texts, women's roles on crusade were set against such male ideals and patterns of behavior. Either women were said to have shed their femininity by assuming male roles when fighting side by side with men in situations of special need, or they were depicted performing ancillary tasks enabling their male co-crusaders to fulfil their own roles as soldiers.

By the same token, women among the train and camp followers of crusade armies were primarily categorized into different groups offering specific services for male crusaders, such as washerwomen, cooks or prostitutes. Women's experiences on crusade were rarely described as achievements or sufferings particular to women, just as female behavior on crusade was only seldom acknowledged as acts performed by women independently.

Given the nature of the available sources, it is difficult to say how many women participated in the crusades and why they did so. The roles ascribed to women in contemporary texts are the following ones. Mention was made of women in the train and among the camp followers, who were involved in various kinds of logistic



Figure 2 Harlots being driven out of the Crusader camp

activities. In this, crusade contingents did not differ from other medieval armies, but it would be rash to assume that because of their activities as washerwomen, cooks or prostitutes these women were not religiously motivated when joining a crusade army. Even though we do not know whether they took the cross and thus looked at the crusade as a primarily spiritual experience, there is no obvious justification to presume that they did not. Another group of female crusaders mentioned were women, usually of the higher nobility, who were leading their own contingents of (male) retainers. They thus chose a military role contributing to the overall war effort of the crusade armies, even though few of these noblewomen would probably have taken an active part in the fighting. Only in isolated cases do we hear of women who, having some sort of military training, joined the crusade armies as armed fighters. Again, this is not a

phenomenon confined to the crusades (see publication *Women of the Cross*), but there is no clear indication of how common such fighting female crusaders were.

Despite the fact that women could theoretically veto their husbands' decision to go on crusade, women did not always hamper the recruitment of crusaders. Eleanor of Aquitaine, the wife of King Louis VII of France, who went on the Second crusade, was actively recruiting many crusaders when touring her native lands in the run-up to the crusade. In 1216, a group of women from Genoa caused their husbands to follow their own examples in taking crusade vows.

Women's roles in supporting the crusade on the home front also include finance. Female family members were sometimes involved in paying the expenses of their husbands' or other family members' crusades. Women who controlled funds from dowries or legacies could make an independent contribution towards covering the sometimes enormous costs of crusades. In such cases, women acted as part of the family collective when selling or mortgaging common assets in order to provide cash for the crusade of a family member.

Women may also have been responsible for a significant amount of the crusade finance supplied by the redemption of crusade vows from the 13th century onwards. The most profitable area of redemption payments seems to have been the use of testamentary legacies for redeeming crusade vows, in which both men and women were involved. From the point of view of the papacy, the great advantage of redemption payments over other sources of crusade finance was their easy availability, since payment was often made on the spot and directly passed on to local crusaders; in contrast, income taxes levied to support the crusade often took years to collect.

Another important task which women on the home front got involved in was the care of families and the administration of properties during the absence of male family members on crusade. Despite the legal privileges and protection granted by the Church to the families and properties of crusaders, estates had to be managed efficiently and if necessary fought over in the courts. Among the higher nobility, women's tasks as administrators of the family estates often went hand in hand with their taking over their husband's political offices for the duration of the crusade. Well known examples are the countesses of Flanders in the 12th century, and Blanche of Castile, the mother of King Louis IX of France, who took over the government for their respective husbands and sons.

All in all, recruitment, finance, care for the family, administration of estates and praying for crusaders in the field provided women at home with numerous opportunities for giving significant support without which crusade expeditions might not have happened. At least from the 13th century onwards, the practice of vow redemptions, the possibility of paying regular financial subsidies and the participation in the many public prayers and processions were ways for women to contribute to the collective military effort of the crusades on the home front.⁸³ While doing so, a woman could still take on an active individual role as a penitent, becoming a *crucesignata* by taking a crusade vow and gaining a plenary indulgence without joining a crusade army.

Catherine of Siena

In the later Middle Ages, women at times occupied prominent roles in promoting the crusade on the home front. One outstanding example of a woman who responded particularly enthusiastically to the appeal of the crusade and put a huge effort into promoting an expedition to the Holy Land in the second half of the 14th century was Catherine of Siena, who died in 1380 and was later made a saint.

Caterina di Giacomo di Benincasa was born on March 25, 1347 (shortly before the Black Death ravaged Europe) in Siena, Republic of Siena, to Lapa Piagenti, the daughter of a local poet, and Giacomo di Benincasa, a cloth dyer who ran his enterprise with the help of his sons. The house where Catherine grew up in still exists. Lapa was about forty years old when she gave premature birth to twin daughters Catherine and Giovanna. She had already borne 22 children, but half of them had died. Giovanna was handed over to a wet-nurse and died soon after. Catherine was nursed by her mother and developed into a healthy child. She was two years old when Lapa had her 25th child, another daughter named Giovanna. As a child Catherine was so merry that the family gave her the pet name of "Euphrosyne", which is Greek for "joy" and the name of an Euphrosyne of Alexandria.



Figure 3 St. Catherine of Siena



Black Death

also known as the Pestilence, Great Bubonic Plague, the Great Plague or the Plague, or less commonly the Great Mortality or the Black Plague, was one of the most devastating pandemics in human history, resulting in the deaths of an estimated 75 to 200 million people in Eurasia, peaking in Europe from 1347 to 1351. The Black Death probably originated in Central Asia or East Asia, from where it travelled along the Silk Road, reaching Crimea by 1343. From there, it was most likely carried by fleas living on the black rats that traveled on Genoese merchant ships, spreading throughout the Mediterranean Basin, reaching the rest of Europe via the Italian peninsula. The Black Death is estimated to have killed 30% to 60% of Europe's population. In total, the plague may have reduced the world population from an estimated 475 million to 350–375 million in the 14th century. It took 200 years for Europe's population to recover to its previous level, and some regions) only recovered by the 19th century. The plague recurred as outbreaks until the early 20th century.

When Catherine was sixteen, her older sister Bonaventura died in childbirth; already anguished by this, Catherine soon learned that her parents wanted her to marry Bonaventura's widower. She was absolutely opposed and started a strict fast. She had learned this from Bonaventura, whose husband had been far from considerate but his wife had changed his attitude by refusing to eat until he showed better manners. Besides fasting, Catherine further disappointed her mother by cutting off her long hair as a protest against being overly encouraged to improve her appearance to attract a husband.

A vision of Saint Dominic gave strength to Catherine, but her wish to join his Order was no comfort to Lapa, who took her daughter with her to the baths in Bagno Vignoni to improve her health. Catherine fell seriously ill with a violent rash, fever and pain, which conveniently made her mother accept her wish to join the "Mantellate", the local association of Dominican tertiaries. Lapa went to the Sisters of the Order and persuaded them to take in her daughter. Within days, Catherine seemed entirely restored, rose from bed and donned the black and white habit of the Third Order of Saint Dominic. Catherine received the habit of a Dominican tertiary from the friars of the order after vigorous protests from the tertiaries themselves, who up to that point had been only widows. As a tertiary, she lived outside the convent, at home with her family like before. The Mantellate taught Catherine how to read, and she lived in almost total silence and solitude in the family home.

For Catherine, the crusade was closely bound up with the figure of Christ and its metaphorical meanings. Crusading primarily meant paying service to Christ and for his bride the Church. In 1375, Catherine wrote to John Hawkwood, a mercenary leader working in Italy, suggesting he stop fighting other Christians and enter the 'service of the good gentle Jesus as a repayment for all the sins we have committed against our Saviour' and join 'Christ's companies' on crusade in order to free the holy sites from the hands of 'the unbelieving dogs'. Around the same time, she asked Joan of Anjou, the queen of Naples, 'in the name of Christ crucified to come to the aid of Christ's bride [i.e. the Church] in her need with your possessions, your person and your counsel' and to join her, Catherine, on crusade in order 'to die for Christ'. To a group of nuns from Fiesole, Catherine suggested, also in 1375, that they go to Jerusalem and seek martyrdom there: 'I am inviting you to shed your blood for him [i.e. Christ] just as he shed his for you.' Her frequent exhortations to Pope Gregory XI to speed up his preparations for the crusade were also worded in terms of the obligation of the Vicar of Christ to follow Christ's wish. In fact, in practically all her letters of the 1370s concerning the crusade, Catherine spoke of the crusade as a service for Christ and his Church.

In the terms of Catherine of Siena's particular brand of mysticism, crusading was above all seen as a service for Christ the Crucified, who shed his blood for the salvation of humankind. For her, going on crusade was one way of getting in touch with the redemptive powers of Christ, symbolized by his blood. Catherine's christocentric approach to the crusade was by no means new for the second half of the 14th century. The emphasis of the idea of imitatio Christi, presenting the crusade as a penitential exercise and a vehicle of personal salvation, was already well established as a central element of the ideology and propaganda of the crusades by the middle of the 13th century.

Catherine died in Rome, on April 29, 1380, at the age of thirty-three, having eight days earlier suffered a massive stroke which paralyzed her from the waist down. Her last words were, "Father, into Your Hands I commend my soul and my spirit. She was buried in the (Roman) cemetery of Santa Maria sopra Minerva which lies near the Pantheon. After miracles were reported to take place at her grave, Raymond moved her inside the Basilica of Santa Maria sopra Minerva, where she lies to this day.

Pope Pius II, himself from Siena, canonized Catherine on June 29, 1461.



Figure 4 Sarcophagus of Catherine beneath the High Altar of Santa Maria sopra Minerva, Rome

As examples of women involved in the armies and the home front of the crusades, the stories of Margaret of Beverley and Catherine of Siena clearly show that gender roles within the crusade movement varied and changed according to context and that women's contributions went far beyond their involvement in other medieval wars. Despite the fact that gender divisions did exist and gender roles were promoted to cement these divisions, the crusades were fought by men and women, not only because some women did participate in the military campaigns but because women's involvement on the home front played a large part in making "men's crusades" happen.