
H-France Review Vol. 8 (March 2008), No. 44

Ronnie Ellenblum, *Crusader Castles and Modern Histories*. Cambridge, U.K., and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xi + 362 pp. Figures, maps, tables and index. £50 U.K. (cl.). ISBN 0-521-86083-0.

Review by Denys Pringle, Cardiff School of History and Archaeology, Cardiff University, Wales, UK.

In this thought-provoking study, Ronnie Ellenblum sets out to challenge current approaches to the study of Crusader castles, which he sees as hamstrung by out-dated nationalist and colonialist ways of thinking. He argues that their architectural development should be understood more in terms of a continuing military dialogue between East and West than of architectural borrowings, and that their geographical distribution may be better explained in terms of Frankish settlement than of a desire to defend frontiers.

Part one of the book examines the development of "nationalist discourse" in the study of the Crusades from the start of the nineteenth century, when the Crusades began to be rehabilitated from the moral censure laid on them by preceding generations of scholars--both Protestant and Catholic--and seen instead for the positive influence that they had exerted on European civilization as a whole. From the 1830s onwards, the European perspective of the Crusades came to be narrowed to an exclusively French one in the writings of Joseph-François Michaud, who compared their achievements to those of Napoleon in Egypt and Charles X in Algeria in his own day. Other nationalist Crusade narratives subsequently developed in Germany, Belgium, and England around the respective heroic characters of Frederick Barbarossa, Godfrey of Bouillon, and Richard the Lion Heart, who incidentally *was* born in England (*pace* p. 27) at Beaumont Palace, Oxford, in 1157. These narratives were also pursued in the spheres of architecture and archaeology by the government-sponsored expedition of J. N. Sepp and H. Prutz to attempt to retrieve the remains of Frederick Barbarossa from Tyre in 1874, and in Melchior de Vogüé's *Les églises de la Terre Sainte* (Paris, 1860), which sought amongst other things to demonstrate the essentially French character of the churches built by the Franks in the Holy Land.

The nationalist models articulated in the writings of Michaud and de Vogüé naturally led to a view of the Crusades as colonial conquests and to the "colonialist and post-colonialist discourse" which, as Ellenblum sees it, was to pervade Crusader studies whether overtly or implicitly down to the present time. In part two he looks first of all at colonial and anti-colonial approaches to the question of how far the European settlers were integrated with the local population. To Emmanuel Rey, Gaston Dodu, and Louis Madelin, the Frankish settlement of Palestine--like the French colonization of Algeria--resulted in a happy co-existence between the settlers and the subject population that worked to the benefit of both. C. R. Conder, on the other hand, maintained that the replacement of oppressive Muslim rule by the more tolerant regime of the Franks bestowed on the Holy Land similar economic benefits to those given India by the British Raj.

From the 1950s, however, such pro-colonialist views were less fashionable and were replaced by approaches that, though still colonialist in character, cast the Franks as a domineering elite set apart within their fortified towns and castles from the rural native population. The principal exponents of this new model were R. C. Smail and Joshua Prawer, whose approaches Ellenblum has already discussed in an earlier book, *Frankish Rural Settlement in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem* (Cambridge University Press, 1998). As Ellenblum argued there, the model relied on several unproven assumptions regarding the

state of insecurity in the kingdom induced by military threats from without and within, the small size of the Frankish population relative to that of the native population, the predominantly Muslim identity of the native population, and the tendency of that population and the indigenous Christians to side with the Franks' Muslim enemies in times of military crisis. The result, according to Praver, was that the Franks were predominantly urban dwellers who only rarely established rural settlement. Settlement in the countryside was restricted to fortified castles, from which lords could manage their estates and defend their territories.

Ellenblum then tries to show how the "colonialist" approach, involving assessments of the relative contributions of European and oriental influence, has defined research agendas in questions such as those relating to the origins of the concentric castle and the development of the counterweight *trébuchet*. He sees such approaches as leading to a dead end. Similarly pointless, to him, are arguments about the extent to which Crusader cities resembled European or oriental ones; the widely accepted views of Praver concerning the oriental character of the Crusader city is dismissed as inadequate. He then proceeds to ask whether or not it is possible to distinguish between Frankish castles and cities. This part of the discussion is somewhat confused by Ellenblum applying the term "city" to settlements that most medieval historians and archaeologists would call "towns," even asserting erroneously that this reviewer has argued that "any place which had a court of burgesses was a city" (p. 87). Other mistakes include the claim that John of Ibelin's list of places having burgess courts includes the "new towns" of Bayt Suriq, al-Ram, Khirbat al-Burj, and al-Qubayba (pp. 87-8) and his implication that this reviewer's two published lists of Frankish towers and hall-houses were intended to define categories of settlement (pp. 90-1), when it should be plain enough that their purpose was no more than to help define building types and allow for easy comparison between surviving examples.

Despite such misrepresentations, however, Ellenblum is quite correct in saying that in order to understand better Frankish settlement (which appears to interest him as a geographer more than architecture), it is important to distinguish between towns (including cities), castles, and villages; and this he attempts to do. In practice, however, his methodology appears to be just as "intuitive" as those of the earlier scholars whose work he criticizes. His principal innovation is to give more weight to the criterion of whether a site is mentioned as a "castle" in contemporary Latin or Muslim sources. From (unnamed) Latin sources he identifies seventy-seven *castella*, *castra*, *praesidia*, and *civitates*. Muslim sources, principally 'Imād al-Dīn and Abu Shāmā, also mention fifty-one of the same "castles," besides a further five not mentioned in Latin sources. Unfortunately he does not tell us which Arabic words for "castle" he is relying on; in any case, like the Latin terms, they may not have been applied with much consistency, with the result that even from a literary viewpoint it is not entirely clear what these sites may have had in common.[1] Ellenblum then adds to his list some other places that were fortified and some that were ecclesiastical centres, such as Nazareth, Bethlehem, and Lydda (as it happens, each had a fortified cloister and/or bishop's palace), bringing the total to ninety-seven, including sixteen to nineteen places that he regards as "cities."

This is certainly an interesting if somewhat arbitrary way of weeding out the lesser fortified sites from the principal ones. However, if it is true, as Ellenblum implies, that places were classed by contemporaries as "castles" more for the level of regional services that they provided than for their degree of defensibility (pp. 101-02), then the whole exercise becomes questionable. In fact, there appears to be no justification for this view. Sites such as Sinjil, Sebaste (Sabastiyya), St. George de Labene (al-Ba'ina), and Manawat, which Ellenblum says were "certainly not castles," were listed by 'Imād al-Dīn as military centres that fell to the Muslims after the battle of Hattin; each was fortified in some way or other. This is not to deny that the "castles" listed by Ellenblum had functions other than purely military ones. He appears to want to have it both ways, however, by listing sites that contemporaries evidently regarded as fortified and then arguing that their defensive properties were not important.

Nonetheless, his characterization of these "castles" as middle-ranking settlements, hierarchically placed

below the cities and above the much larger number of smaller villages, hamlets, and isolated farms, offers a useful perspective on their potential economic, administrative, religious, and domestic functions and services--particularly when it is understood that those did not have to be performed within the fortification itself. Since it is clear, however, that outside the royal domain lands around Jerusalem and Acre--where Frankish rural settlement was intense, the vast majority of villages (*casalia*) in the kingdom were occupied predominantly or solely by native Christians, Muslims, Samaritans, or Jews--it may be asked how far this new approach actually takes us away from the old model of Prawer and Smail, which saw the Franks as living predominantly in cities (*civitates*), towns (*villae, burgi*), and castles (*castra, castella, praesidia*).

In part three, where he discusses the spatial distribution of "castles," Ellenblum moves into territory in which he appears more at home. He begins with a critique of the "colonialist" model of border defence involving castles (put forward by Rey and Prutz and developed by Deschamps, its deconstruction by Smail and partial rehabilitation by Prawer and M. Benvenisti). He goes on to examine the nature of political borders in the Middle Ages, and develops further Smail's view that castles marked the centres of regions dependent on them (in effect lordships, although Ellenblum does not say this) rather than boundaries. He then attempts to relate the chronology of castle-building to the military history of the twelfth century. In the initial conquest stage (1099-1115), there were frequent military engagements; twenty-one castles or cities were taken over by the Franks and another eight established. In a second phase (1115-67), the kingdom was relatively peaceful, and we find some ten castles built by 1124 and another forty-five between 1124 and 1167. Most of these were built in areas that were relatively secure, rather than in regions of military confrontation. The third generation of castle building (1168-87) corresponds with the period when the military threat posed by Nūr al-Dīn and his successor, Saladin (Salāh al-Dīn), was growing and the military initiative began to pass to the Muslims. In this period castles in the frontier regions or those exposed to attack were constructed or refortified on a grander scale.

Understandably enough, it is possible to disagree with a number of the dates for individual castles put forward in this analysis. Indeed, Ellenblum's tendency to ascribe dates on the basis of the first written mention of a castle has the inevitable effect of making many castles appear much younger than they should be. In some other cases the sources are misread. For instance, the Frankish castle on Jazirat Fara'un, in the Gulf of 'Aqaba, is first mentioned when Saladin took it in 1170 and had probably been established in the 1160s (rather than 1115) at the same time as Darom (Dayr al-Balah) near Gaza; there is no evidence for any castle in 'Aqaba itself in the twelfth century. On the other hand the castle of Mirabel (Majdal Yaba) is first mentioned in 1152, when Baldwin III took it from Manasses of Hierges; although it had evidently been built before that, there is no reason to date it to 1122. Such quibbles apart, the overall picture presented by this analysis of military activity and castle building is convincing and adds considerably to our understanding of the likely motives of the builders.

In part four, Ellenblum examines the "dialogue" between siege tactics and fortifications. He insists quite rightly on the need to view the development of fortifications in the context of the ongoing development of siege tactics on both sides and the changing balance of power. Although this approach is not quite as novel as he supposes (being implicit in much earlier writing about Crusader castles and explicit in scholarly discussions of Hellenistic and Byzantine *poliorcetica*), his detailed analysis of Frankish and Muslim siege warfare during the course of the twelfth century is extremely valuable. During the first part of the century the Franks were able to maintain an upper hand not by superior technology, but by superior logistics by land and water and by their ability to call on the services of skilled craftsmen to construct towers and trébuchets. By 1124, if not before, they were also using the larger more powerful counterweight trébuchets. The superiority of their field army could prevent Muslim resupply of besieged outposts and allow for relatively lengthy sieges. The Muslims, on the other hand, lacking field superiority, relied on frontal assault and mining in the hope of capturing a place before Frankish help could arrive. Although they used artillery for defence, they rarely used it for attack before the 1150s.

From then, however, under Nūr al-Dīn and Saladin, they took to using more powerful trébuchets in attack like the Franks.

It was in this period (Ellenblum's phase three) as the balance of power began to shift that the Franks started constructing castles designed to withstand lengthy sieges. These castles are often "concentric," i.e., they have two circuits of walls, one inside the other. Their walls are typically thicker than earlier castle walls, and their towers and walls higher to give better protection to those within and to afford their trébuchets and archers an advantage in terms of range. They were backed by vaults, providing a fighting platform above and "bomb shelter" below. Before them were a moat and often a *glacis* (or *talus*) to guard against mining. Improvements were also made to the design of arrow-slits (and one should add machicolations); posterns became more common, to allow for sorties; and ample provision was made for the storage of food and water. To illustrate one of the new castle types, Ellenblum gives a useful summary in chapter sixteen of his unpublished excavations at Vadum Jacob, a castle built and destroyed within six months in 1178-79. He argues that, although unfinished, it too was intended to be a castle of concentric design; this appears very probable, though his thesis might perhaps have been better supported by analysis of a more complete example such as Belvoir or even 'Atlit. In fact the book contains little architectural description; and although a number of castle plans are provided (pp. 183-85), they are too small to be of much use and in some cases (e.g., Burj al-Habis, Belmont) the scales are incorrect. Readers who want to consult the original publications will also be disappointed to find that the source of the illustrations is not acknowledged.

Chapter seventeen completes the historical narrative of the military lead-up to Hattin, where Saladin destroyed the Frankish field army, leaving the remaining castles to fall like dominoes without hope of assistance, although some like Belvoir and Karak held out longer than others.

The concluding section, which summarizes the book, tends to reinforce one's feeling that the main protagonists in this book are not the Franks and their Muslim enemies but the author on one hand and the last 150 years of Crusade scholarship on the other. Although the introductory historiographical review contains many useful insights and is of great interest in its own right, it may be questioned how far the "nationalist," "colonialist," and "post-colonialist" trends that Ellenblum identifies exerted much influence after the 1950s or 60s, and whether his deconstruction of them significantly advances our present understanding of Crusader castles. Ellenblum's principal contributions in this respect are in helping broaden the possible meaning of what castles meant to contemporaries (and therefore to us), focusing attention on their role as settlements, and relating changes in castle design more closely to the developing techniques of siege warfare and to the relative military and economic resources available to both sides. It may be left to readers to judge whether these approaches are as "revisionist" as the author appears to think, or whether they are simply building on foundations laid by many other researchers over many years.

NOTES

[1] Compare the much clearer discussion by Alison Wheatley, *The Idea of the Castle in Medieval England* (Woodbridge, U.K., and Rochester, NY: York Medieval Press 2004), pp. 19-43.

Denys Pringle
Cardiff School of History and Archaeology, Cardiff University, Wales, UK
PringleRD@Cardiff.ac.uk