




*John of Brienne: King of
Jerusalem, Emperor of
Constantinople, c.1175-1237,*
Guy Perry
(Cambridge, Cambridge
University Press, 2013).

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John of Brienne: King of Jerusalem, Emperor of Constantinople, c.1175-1237. By Guy Perry. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013. 221 pp. ISBN: 978-1-1070-4310-7. £55.

uy Perry has in this engagingly-written work produced an excellent biography of John of Brienne (Jean de Brienne), a relatively little-known medieval figure who led one of the most fascinating of careers and whose life encapsulates the notion of a rags-to-riches story. John was a younger son of a baronial family of regional importance but not of wider European prominence. He was through marriage and good fortune catapulted to international fame to become the only individual to hold the crowns of both the Kingdom of Jerusalem and the Latin Empire of Constantinople, though not concurrently. John is one of those characters who seems to have moved about the medieval landscape coming into contact with all the significant personalities that his age had to offer, from Philippe II Augustus and Frederick II, to Pope Gregory IX and Saint Francis of Assisi. This biography, written seventy years after an earlier one was published, presents the first focused attempt to study the events and significance of John's career, allowing Perry to make great use of the advances in historiography since then. The work is separated into chapters detailing the different stages in John of Brienne's life, starting with the Brienne family in Champagne in the late twelfth century and moving on to his time as king of Jerusalem and commander of the Fifth Crusade. The book also includes his return to the Latin West and the conflict with Frederick II. The description of John's life ends with his reign as emperor of Constantinople in the 1230s. Perry's work then concludes by offering an examination of John's personality and general character as displayed through his rather eventful life. The breakdown into such an episodic pattern is quite natural as it is dictated by the history of John's life, and it allows the narrative to flow rather freely from one situation to another. This division is reinforced by the availability of source material, which although sometimes scarce Perry uses well to help craft an account of John's career. The chapters are incisive and clearly convey John's role in events without becoming too bogged down in detail best left to other works. Two appendices are included, detailing little known *acta* from John's career that are not included in the editions of collected sources that have been traditionally consulted.

Perry's central theme is redefining John as a 'crown man' and dispelling the caricature portrayal of him that has dominated from Edward Gibbon (1776-88) to Hans Mayer (1972), that though very valorous John was deficient in political ability and a second-rate king. While John did pursue a series of crowns it was not solely for dynastic aggrandisement but as part of a wider 'aristocratic diaspora', as noted by Robert Bartlett, that occurred across the

Latin Christendom at this time. John, like many others, was ‘not quite a first rank’ figure, but one that was necessary and ideal for the roles required of him. John had land, men, money and connections in the Latin West that could be employed to secure the Latin East. Most importantly of all he was not mired in the acrimonious political rivalries of the Latin East and so could act as peacemaker as much as general, diplomat and king of Jerusalem. Perry thus brings John away from the caricature and adds greater dimension to him. The work successfully blends the detailed aspects of a biography together with the wider medieval world in which John existed. John’s movement about Europe and the Mediterranean offers a window on the politics and culture of the societies he inhabited. Perry readily discusses these societies and John’s importance there, notably his home region of Champagne and the Latin East. The work also sheds new light on often-neglected areas of Frankish history in the Levant and the Aegean. John can therefore be appreciated, not only in his greatest royal roles, but also within a wider European context. Perry offers a brief comparison with other contemporary ‘crown men’ who achieved similar fame and success, particularly Guy de Lusignan a previous King of Jerusalem. While Perry’s book opens and concludes with this very relevant contrast, little has been done to bring this comparative assessment to the fore. The comparison remains implicit but is never tackled head on. This is also the case with the references to Frederick II and Charles de Anjou, who are, like John, seen as the creators of conglomerate overseas domains. John continued to administer the county of Brienne as its regent while simultaneously ruling in the Latin East. Although John can be seen as a forerunner of what Frederick and Charles were later to accomplish, this is not brought out in sufficient detail. While the nature of a biography demands a direct focus, such comparisons could have been examined further without meandering authorial digression. Though Perry does not become too tied up with details of the greater contexts of Champagne, Jerusalem, and Constantinople, his book could have benefited from a little more background of these respective areas. This would have both highlighted the impact John had on them and provided a wider scope to the challenges he had to overcome, which could reveal more about his personality. Perry is very well aware of the limitations of writing a medieval biography and that written source material is often less than adequate for the task. The work is at times overly reliant upon the Old French continuations of William of Tyre, which have proved a minefield for all historians studying the Latin East in this period, and perhaps need to be scrutinised in greater depth. Perry skilfully overcomes some of the limitations of chronicles by bolstering them with charters, numismatics and other legal source material. Though some holes remain within the narrative that must be left to informed speculation, Perry pushes to make the most of what evidence there is for John of Brienne.

In all, Perry's work is a superb reassessment of the extraordinary life of John of Brienne and offers an excellent point of departure for further investigation into the affairs of the Latin East and Latin West and where they overlap. The book contains more than enough for those concerned with the details of John's fascinating life, and appeals to those with wider interests in Champagne and the Mediterranean world. This biography will fit well alongside other works such as Bernard Hamilton's *Leper King and his Heirs*, or Peter Edbury's *John of Ibelin and the Kingdom of Jerusalem*. It has much to offer, both for those unfamiliar with the topic, like undergraduates, and those with greater expertise in the field. The book is first rate, even if John of Brienne was not.

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