ROYAL STUDIES JOURNAL

2019 VI

Louis VII and His World

Michael L. Bardot and Laurence W. Marvin (eds.)

Leiden: Brill, 2018

Review by: Sean L. Field

WINCHESTER UNIVERSITY PRESS

Louis VII and His World. Edited by Michael L. Bardot and Laurence W. Marvin. Leiden: Brill, 2018. ISBN 978-90-04-31516-7. x + 188 pp. $100.00.

King Louis VII of France (r. 1137-1180) remains strangely understudied. There is no English-language biography or full study of his reign, and solid monographs in French by Marcel Pacaut (1964) and Yves Sassier (1991) nevertheless add up to a rather meagre bibliography. As the editors of this slim but enticing volume note, Louis suffers by comparison with his more famous contemporary Henry II of England, and with his own better-known father and son, Louis VI and Philip II of France. Louis VII occupies a rather "lackluster" place (146, Amy Livingston's assessment) in the historiography, as the French king who lost his wife Eleanor (and her Duchy of Aquitaine) to Henry II, and who blundered his way to ignominious defeat in the Second Crusade. If a modest trend toward rehabilitation can be found in recent synthetic works on twelfth-century France, Louis has yet to light any historiographical fires.

One reason for the absence of much historiographic interest may have to do with the nature of the surviving narrative evidence. As Michael Evans points out in his essay, the mid-twelfth century is rich with English chronicles, but poor for French ones. The best-known narratives sources are Odo of Deuil's *De profectione Ludovici VII in orientem*, and Suger's short "Life," which covers only the first years of the reign. Moreover, only an average of twenty acts per year are extant from Louis's reign (105–106). On the positive side, this provides a compact body of evidence to study. On the negative, it can leave the feeling that Louis VII's reign failed to generate interest or innovation. The current collection develops three themes; while none of them seeks to revolutionize our image of Louis VII, two do begin to present him in a new light.

The first theme actually reinforces the impression that Louis VII was rather a non-entity by returning to his undeniably uninspiring role as a military leader. John D. Hostler's essay suggests that Louis relied on advisors and councils to make military decisions, in particular turning to Cistercians. Laurence W. Marvin's essay re-affirms that Louis was not a decisive commander, at least not on the Second Crusade. These presentations provide detail and reasoned argument without overturning previous assessments.

The second theme discernable here, however, is a modest trend toward more effective government under Louis VII; one might call it a kind of creeping Capetian competence. Michael L. Bardot discusses evidence for a new policy of creating royal depots to store grain and wine; this development allowed the king to better control royal grants concerning these staples. This trend probably had little to do with Louis personally, however, since the first

evidence of this new policy cited by Bardot comes from 1134, while Louis VI was still alive. Though Louis VII was already co-king with his father at this point, he was still only about fourteen years old and unlikely to be personally introducing innovations in the details of staple storage. Bardot's meticulous evidence gathering still makes a valid point; wider trends toward administrative competence across the increasingly literate, numerate, and educated twelfth century were indeed felt in Louis VII's France just as in Henry II's England. Steven Isaac shows Louis's sharp interest in the economic possibilities of communes and their relationship to the royal economy, arguing that slow progress sowed the seeds of King Philip II's later successes. Yves Sassier builds on his own earlier work to show how Louis's three interventions in the Auvergne helped to further the abstract idea of the *corona regis* and the importance of implementing the "king's peace." The only essay here published in French, it is rather a shame that it was not translated into English, since Sassier's work should be more widely read by Anglophone audiences.

The third theme, which is somewhat more diffuse, builds on the second to suggest that the Capetian "world" around Louis VII was innovative, intellectually vibrant, and inherently forward-looking. Michael R. Evans argues that Eleanor of Aquitaine was a non-factor in Louis's early reign. Given her later reputation as a dynamic force in Henry II's Angevine Empire, historians have tended to assume that her hand lay behind various actions at Louis's court. Evans is convincing in demolishing earlier arguments based more on wishful thinking than facts. On one hand, one then wonders whether Eleanor did anything at all while Queen of France; if certain arguments have been based on negative stereotypes about medieval women scheming on behalf of their families, do we not now run the risk of arriving back at a stereotype of medieval women as powerless? But on the other, removing Eleanor as the secret force behind the throne diminishes the sense that after her departure Louis's reign was a pale reflection of Henry II's.

William Chester Jordan's essay on the "afterlives" of two Capetian co-kings asks why Philip "the Young," the eldest son of Louis VI who was crowned during his father's lifetime but whose early death left Louis VII as the heir to the throne, was remembered as a "numbered" king of France at Saint-Denis. The answer is that Philip (unlike Louis VII) was buried at Saint-Denis, and hence the monastery's thirteenth and fourteenth-century historians had a vested interest in calling him "Philip II." Moreover, although the Capetian practice of co-crowning fell into disuse, no one knew if the practice might someday be revived—if so, it was important for Saint-Denis to keep alive the claim to be the burial places of such co-kings even if they predeceased their fathers. One implication of this argument is to link Louis

VII's world more closely to the age of St. Louis. We may know that Philip Augustus (the "real" Philip II) was the last Capetian prince to be crowned during his father's lifetime, but men and women in thirteenth-century France may not have been so sure that the practice belonged only to the past.

Marshall E. Crassnoe assesses Louis's relationship with the canons of Saint-Victor during the golden age of Hugh, Richard, and Andrew of Saint-Victor. Study of Louis's diplomas shows that early in his reign he showered favour (though it was "never altruistic") on Saint-Victor, and that after 1150 his role shifted mainly to confirming gifts given by others to the abbey, as well as Saint-Victor's own purchases. Placing the monarchy in this role of guarantor was another form of creeping competence, while at the same time Louis VII's support played its own role in the intellectual renaissance of twelfth-century Paris.

Finally, Amy Livingston's understated essay nicely connects several of these themes. Louis VII may never have been a fearsome warrior, but the quietly successful careers of the two lords of Beaugency studied here depended on the stability and growth of Louis's reign. For Livingston, "The commercial economy combined with disengagement from the politics and wars of the realm, turned the lords of Beaugency from landed warriors to land lords who collected rents" (165). In other words, against the grain of the dominant historiography, for lords like Simon and Lancelin of Beaugency, Louis's reign was indeed a time of transformation.

SEAN L. FIELD
University of Vermont