



Sibyl, Queen of Jerusalem

1186–1190

By Helen J. Nicholson

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The history of the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem in the later years of the twelfth century is well trodden ground for all historians of the crusades and the Latin East. The tangled court politics of King Baldwin IV, the rise to power of the Egyptian Sultan, Saladin, and the calamitous defeat of Frankish forces at the battle of Hattin provides a highly dramatic narrative that has routinely fascinated historians' attentions. Indeed, no history of the Crusades, or the kingdom of Jerusalem, is complete without an in-depth analysis of this crucial period, and new publications exploring these years and its myriads of historical characters from every possible angle regularly appear in both popular and academic print. Given the substantial size of the historical literature that currently exists upon this period, one might be forgiven in thinking that there is relatively little left to be explored or anything new that can be said. Helen J. Nicholson, in her masterful and insightful biography of Sibyl, Queen of Jerusalem 1186–1190, demonstrates the errors of such an assumption and highlights that there is still so much for scholars to say on this period.

Queen Sibyl of Jerusalem (reigned 1186–1190) was a participant in some of the most turbulent and decisive events in the history of the Latin East. Her reign saw bitter factionalism at the Jerusalemite royal court, a near civil war, a defeat in battle that almost annihilated her kingdom, and the beginnings of the Third Crusade. She was a contemporary of some of the greatest figures of the twelfth century medieval world, including Richard the Lionheart, Eleanor of Aquitaine, Frederick Barbarossa, and Saladin. Yet, until now she has never been the subject of a dedicated biography. The history of the kingdom of Jerusalem in the later twelfth century has been told primarily from the perspective of the men around Sibyl, including her father King Amalric, her brother King Baldwin IV, and her husband Guy de Lusignan. Sibyl has always been present in the historical narrative, but that narrative has never been about Sibyl, and her role has always been that of a supporting character. Nicholson's book firmly places Sibyl, and her perspective of events at the centre of the story and brings Sibyl to life in a way that has not been done before. Nicholson provides an astute dissection of the intrigues of the Jerusalemite royal court in the 1170s and 1180s and offers a refreshing new entry into the current historiography that demonstrates why more attention should be given to this queen of Jerusalem.

The book is structured chronologically, with eight chapters following the life of Sibyl, from her earliest years as a member of the royal house of Jerusalem to her death at the siege of Acre during the Third Crusade, with each chapter covering a key era of her life. The first two chapters chart the history of her family, her childhood, and the medieval crusading world of the Latin East into which she was born. As with all medieval biography, a general lack of detailed source material covering childhood limits what can be said for certain about Sibyl. Nicholson deftly overcomes this issue by carefully examining the lives of Sibyl's female relations and other contemporary aristocratic women, for whom we have more surviving historical evidence, to give a strong impression of the kind of childhood Sibyl was likely to have experienced and how this may have impacted upon her later reign. It is with chapters three and four covering Sibyl's marriages and her acquisition of the county of Jaffa and Ascalon that we first begin to see Sibyl emerge as an actor on the political stage, albeit one directed by her father, brother, and successive husbands. Though a dearth of source material limits our ability to discern Sibyl's own motivations and intentions directly, Nicholson provides an excellent critique of the key medieval chronicles, that are our leading sources, exploring how they present Sibylla, how they order events, and how this has impacted upon historians understanding of the historical narrative and Sibyl more generally. Therefore, by reading between the lines we can develop a better understanding of Sibyl and the possible reasoning behind her actions.

Chapters five and six provide a highly detailed, almost blow by blow account of the factional politics and intrigues at the Jerusalemite royal court in the 1180s and Sibyl's early reign. It is in these chapters that we gain a better understanding of the political influence Sibyl was able to wield and her own agency in events. Much of the discussion inevitably concerns the politically powerful men in Sibyl's life and their motivations, but Nicholson consistently establishes how Sibyl fits into their decision-making processes. Indeed, it is in these chapters where the volume's greatest strengths lie. While the politics of the kingdom of Jerusalem in the 1180s has been discussed at length by historians, by centring the narrative on Sibyl, Nicholson provides an insightful and refreshing interpretation of events. Again, through careful analysis of the remaining source material we can see more clearly Sibyl's influence on the course of the kingdom's politics which had a long-lasting effect upon the history of the Latin East. These highly detailed chapters are crucial to understanding Sibyl's royal authority as a medieval queen, but they will also have a wider appeal to scholars who wish to get to grips with the complex history of the Latin East in this period by providing a more nuanced and perceptive analysis of the Latin kingdom's

politics. The last two chapters consider the final years of Sibyl's reign, from the disastrous defeat at Hattin in 1187 to her death in 1190. Again, Sibyl likely had a greater role in events than historians have traditionally attributed to her. Nicholson concludes the chapter with an exploration of the historic and literary afterlife of Sibyl and how this has changed overtime.

The greatest challenge in writing a biography of Sibyl is the general lack of source material on her directly. Surviving charter material for Sibyl is limited, and the key chronicles covering her life and reign are centred on the actions of the important men about her. Consequently, though Nicholson does an excellent job of keeping Sibyl at the forefront of discussions, Sibyl as a historical personality never really leaps from the pages in the same manner as biographies of other contemporary royal women for whom we have more historical evidence. Nicholson must rely on an amount of speculation to help fill in the gaps about Sibyl's life, but this speculation is firmly grounded and well-reasoned. By exploring the people, politics, culture, and world in which Sibyl existed, Nicholson overcomes the limitations of the lack of source material and highlights the historical space that Sibyl should have occupied. We may never get a detailed image of Sibyl, but Nicholson provides us with the clearest depiction of this medieval queen to date.

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