



Francesco D'Angelo, *Il primo re crociato: La spedizione di Sigurd in Terrasanta*. Roma: Editori Laterza, 2021. x + 212 pp. ISBN 9788858143803

Reviewed by KURT VILLADS JENSEN

The first king to go a crusade to the Holy Land was Sigurd Jorsalfare of Norway (1089?–1130). The crusaders' bloody conquest of Jerusalem in 1099 had been led by very high-ranking nobles from Western Europe, but kings only afterwards recognized the potentialities of crusading and began investing time and money in defending religion and gaining political prestige.

The young Sigurd of Norway left Bergen in 1107 with 60 ships and a large contingent of warriors, fought against Muslims in Western and Eastern Mediterranean, and returned four years later to Norway. On a single ship and with only few men left, but with a splint of the Holy Cross that Jesus had died on, and with a reputation for valiant deeds that is still alive now 900 years later.

The general course of events of Sigurd's expedition is well known, to researchers and a broad public outside academia, but with the book by D'Angelo we are now on a much more solid ground than before, and on a much more interesting ground. D'Angelo from La Sapienza university in Rome is well-known internationally as an expert on Scandinavian medieval history and Nordic literature, and he analyses Sigurd's crusade in a much broader context than it has been done earlier. It concerns both the general crusading background, and the question of whether Sigurd and other Scandinavian fighters for the faith were proper crusaders or simply continued an old Viking raiding tradition. Complicated questions with no simple answers, but D'Angelo's discussions are excellent and balanced and will be an inspiration for further research within the field.

The sources for Sigurd's crusade are of very diverse nature, and in collecting them and sifting information from tendencies, D'Angelo demonstrates excellent knowledge and acute methodological consciousness. Some sources are in Latin and contemporary or almost contemporary with Sigurd, some are Nordic from the thirteenth century but containing skaldic verses which D'Angelo with caution accepts as composed by Sigurd's contemporaries. These sources are supplemented for the earlier period with Runic inscriptions, for the stay in the Holy Land with the Damascene Al-Qalanisi's chronicle from the mid-twelfth century.

Sigurd's first major battle was in 1108 against the duke or count of Galicia who had broken an agreement to deliver provisions to the Norwegians – an agreement that must have been made before Sigurd arrived in Spain which illustrated the solid and well-functioning communication system of the twelfth century. Count Raimondo of Galicia had died in 1107, and D'Angelo suggests that the adversary of Sigurd was actually Count Henrique of Portugal. It is possible, but it could also have been Raimondo's army controlled by his widow Urraca or his father-in-law, Alfonso VI. It would fit much better with Sigurd's later conquest of the Muslim fortress of Sintra in Portugal which must have been done in cooperation with Count Henrique who was very active in the area in those years.

Sigurd let Sintra's Muslims choose between baptism or death. Forced conversion was not part of the early crusading movement and became only more commonly accepted with Bernard of Clairvaux's promulgation of a Baltic crusade in 1146–1147 and his famous statement concerning the Baltic pagans that 'either their religion or their people shall be destroyed.' That Sigurd forced the Portuguese Muslims to become Christians is either surprisingly early in the history of the crusades, or it may be an anachronistic assumption of the Nordic source relating the episode, which was from the 13th century where forced conversion had become daily practise in the Baltic crusades. D'Angelo suggests that the thirteenth century Nordic sources formed Sigurd in the image of the missionary kings of Norway to whom violence was a perfectly acceptable argument in a religious dispute. It sounds convincing, but it could also had been interesting to have had D'Angelo's reflection upon a possible Bernardine influence on the missionary thinking of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Sigurd continued to Mallorca and fought against Muslim pirates who had a stronghold in an inaccessible cave on a mountain. He had his men carrying a boat up the mountain to a plateau above the pirates' hiding place from where it could be filled with warriors and lowered down in ropes to the entrance of the cave. The pirates were killed, and Sigurd became famous for his innovative ruse. Much more interesting is D'Angelo's suggestion that Sigurd's Balearic expedition in 1109 may have been part of the Pisan crusade towards Mallorca of 1113, or at least in practise paved the way for the Pisans by pursuing the pirates.

The fleet moved from Mallorca to Sicily where Sigurd was warmly welcomed by the local Norman ruler, Duke Roger. According to Nordic sources, Roger arranged a splendid banquet for Sigurd and served him personally at the table. Sigurd, clearly aware of contemporary – that is thirteenth century – chivalrous behaviour took the duke by the hands and led him to the most prominent place at the table, and created him king. This story is not only dubious, but must be an outright fabrication, but is

followed in Snorri's account by a list of descendants of Duke Roger including the great Emperor Frederick II of Germany and Sicily (+1250), Snorri's contemporary. Why was this important, what was actually the idea of Sigurd's Sicilian intermezzo?

D'Angelo's thorough discussion of this question is splendid, and positions relations between the Normans and the Scandinavians in a well reflected and balanced historical and medieval historiographic context. Some motives could have been to show in the 13th century that Sigurd and the peripheral Norway was accepted internationally and fully part of a chivalrous European culture; that kingship was firmly established in Norway already under Sigurd and elevated above any duke no matter how mighty he was; that even Emperor Frederick II somehow owed his title to a Norwegian king, etc.

The goal of Sigurd and his men was Jerusalem and the Holy Land where they were very well received by King Baldwin II of Jerusalem and Sigurd provided the naval support to Baldwin's conquest of the strong fortress of Sidon. As a reward, Sigurd was given a piece of the Holy Cross that Jesus was crucified upon, and he swears to place it in Nidaros and to work for establishing a Norwegian archbishopric. The sources for this episode are all written after the elevation of Nidaros to archepiscopal see in 1153 and may or may not reflect concerns at the time of Sigurd.

After the Holy Land, the Norwegian groups continued to Constantinople where Sigurd allegedly was received in 1111 by the emperor with splendour and privileges to an extent which shows that some of the episodes described were Norwegian fantasies and never could have happened. Sigurd was allowed to enter the city on horse and through the Golden Gate, Nordic authors claimed, although that gate was strictly reserved for higher ranking rulers and members of the imperial family. The marvelous reception continued with a game in circus to the honour of Sigurd where the Norwegians could admire the decorations showing many mythological figures including the Asa-gods, perhaps Snorri's Trojans emigrating after the Trojan war and coming to the north and founding the Scandinavian kingdoms? D'Angelo's investigation of Sigurd's adventures in Constantinople is again excellent methodologically and demonstrating his strong knowledge of pertinent sources.

Many different traditions and motives are weaved together in the Nordic retelling of Sigurd's crusade. One is probably an attempt to show Sigurd as better than the Danish King Erik Ejegod who had also received a splendid banquet in Constantinople from the emperor, who had also got a relic of the true Cross, and who had also been on an expedition to the Holy Land but died on way on Cyprus in 1103. All that Eric did, Sigurd did better, D'Angelo suggests as one key to understand the sources better.

Sigurd was a Janus-figure. A creation of Norse authors in a transition period, in 'a continuous dialectic between the old world of the Vikings and the Varangians, and the new world of pilgrims and crusaders'. It is the very great merit of D'Angelo to have demonstrated this on a much more sophisticated level than has been done earlier, and to have done so in a language that makes this important period in Norwegian and Scandinavian history accessible to the international scholarly world.

The Germanic languages of Scandinavia can be precise, they can be poignant, especially New Norwegian, but without a targeted effort they are seldomly pretty. Italian has as many other Romance languages a natural elegance and beauty. It is a pleasure to read Francesco D'Angelo's book on Sigurd the First Crusader King.

Kurt Villads Jensen, professor of medieval history at Stockholm University. Email: kurt.villads.jensen@historia.su.se.