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More than two centuries ago, the great English historian Edward Gibbon summed up John of Brienne's life with the typically rotund observation that 'it was only in the age of chivalry, that valour could ascend from a private station to the thrones of Jerusalem and Constantinople'.¹ Whatever one may think of Gibbon's judgement here, John (d. 1237) had one of the most remarkable careers in the entire medieval period. He started out as a relatively obscure figure – spending his early years, perhaps, in a monastic environment before going on to be a knight. In due course he rose to become king of Jerusalem, ruling, in fact, mainly from Acre in the Holy Land. Subsequently, he even topped that rank by becoming Latin emperor of Constantinople. Born to neither, he was the only individual who ever wore both of these, the highest-ranking and most prestigious crowns in the Latin East (albeit consecutively, not simultaneously). In addition, at various junctures in his career he either genuinely went for – or else was wrongly believed to have tried to acquire – a quite astonishing number of other crowns too. This list contains several eye-opening entries: the Armenian kingdom in Cilicia; León in modern Spain; the city of Damietta, in Egypt; Lombardy; even England.

But there is much more to John than an aristocratic opportunist, always on the hunt for a throne. For instance, he is still sometimes presented as a kind of 'heroic geriatric', who achieved his first crown at the quite unbelievably advanced age of around sixty. That is undoubtedly mistaken. It is true, though, that his illustrious monarchical career was confined to the latter half of his life. Moreover, over the course of his career as a whole, he obtained a remarkable string of other titles, offices and posts as well. These included: leader of the Fifth Crusade (1217–21); commander in the 'War of the Keys' against his own son-in-law, the emperor and excommunicated crusader Frederick II; count(-regent) of his own

¹ E. Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, introd. D. Womersley, 6 vols. (London, 1997 [1776–88]), VI, ch. 61.

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ancestral Brienne in Champagne; and rector of the Tuscan Patrimony in the Papal State.

This extraordinary acquisitive life has been touched on by many commentators concerned, above all, with the crusades and the Latin East in the early thirteenth century. Sadly, such subjects retain some relevance for today's world. Until now, though, John himself has languished as a topic of historical enquiry. He has not been properly reassessed for more than seventy years. His unique career calls out for comprehensive re-examination, both in its own right and to open up novel angles on what produced it – namely, a range of crucially important structures and processes, connecting the heartlands of the thirteenth-century Latin West and its frontiers.

This book is a biographical study: a reconstruction and contextualisation of John's career, using it as the starting point to investigate much more. It is worth admitting, at the outset, that the very notion of 'medieval biography' can still come under serious attack to this day. It is all too easy to declare it to be simply impossible, given the nature and scope of the available source material.² But that is no reason for not pushing, as far as we can, in the direction of biography; and, when this fails, we can still reach for prosopography (that is, a collective though more limited 'biography', looking for common features in a given group). We come back to a fundamental point: in the medieval world, the outlook and activities of leading figures were very often dictated by personal and familial motives. This is particularly the case with aristocrats 'on the make', such as John. People such as him, and dynasties such as the Briennes, require detailed treatment in personal and dynastic terms so that they can be properly understood. Such biographical-prosopographical approaches have become increasingly popular over the course of recent years.³ As will be seen, John's career is exceptionally episodic, which makes this method of study particularly fruitful.

A proper reassessment of John's career permits a much better understanding of the complex interplay between the Latin West and East in the early thirteenth century. To be a little bit more precise: this book focuses on the critical gap *after* the reshaping of the Latin East in 1187–1204, to include the start of the epoch of the great cross-Mediterranean dynastic agglomerations of Frederick II and Charles of Anjou (that is, from the middle of the 1220s onwards). The period between these dates is one that

² For further discussion of medieval biography, see D. Bates, J. Crick and S. Hamilton, eds., *Writing Medieval Biography, 750–1250: Essays in Honour of Professor Frank Barlow* (Woodbridge, 2006); and W. M. Aird, *Robert Curthose, Duke of Normandy, c.1050–1134* (Woodbridge, 2008).

³ See G. Beech, 'Prosopography', in J. M. Powell, ed., *Medieval Studies: An Introduction* (New York, 1992), 185–226.

historians have long found somewhat amorphous and hard to categorise. In fact, as we will discover, John's reign as king of Jerusalem is an important marker on the road that led to these agglomerations.⁴

After 1187 the crusading 'movement' quickly approached its zenith. It was considered essential to recover the holy city of Jerusalem, and so restore its *raison d'être* to the eponymous rump kingdom. Although the Third Crusade failed to achieve this, it did help cement one crucial development. Several Western great powers became much more consistently interested and powerful in the Latin East than they had ever been beforehand. Although it is discussed at length in this book, it is worth emphasising here the special role of the papacy. Pope Innocent III may be described as the chief architect of the Mediterranean world that the Briennes burst onto in the first decade of the thirteenth century. Thanks largely to him, the papacy swiftly became much better at promoting and sustaining its protégés, such as John, even when the individuals in question were far away. John's career may even be categorised as a product of Innocent's pontificate. In sum, it is not easily conceivable without the pope's earlier work. This perspective buttresses the view that John's career reflects a period of noteworthy transformation, during which new ways were opening up to pursue personal and dynastic advantage.

The highest-ranking Latin Eastern leaders were the king of what was left of the kingdom of Jerusalem, and – after the climax of the Fourth Crusade in 1204 – the Latin emperor of newly conquered Constantinople. These two naturally sought to assert their positions as leaders in their respective Latin Eastern spheres, fit to rank with their monarchical contemporaries in the West. But the latter goal, at least, consistently eluded them. The Holy Places, City and Land were charged with enormous religio-emotional cachet throughout Latin Christendom. In marked contrast, though, the international status of the king and the earthly realm of Jerusalem were actually quite modest (a lesson, this, in how substantially the same object could be conceived of in two very different ways). For its part, nothing in or about the Latin empire of Constantinople could ever come close to holy Jerusalem's resonance and appeal in the West, for all the 'post-Byzantine' imperial rhetoric that the Latin emperors desperately deployed. In short, although the thrones of Constantinople and, in particular, Jerusalem were conspicuous, they could only really be regarded as inferior when compared to the great polities of the West.

John's career provides the best opportunity we have to compare and contrast both the crowns and realms of Jerusalem and Constantinople,

⁴ Below, 50.

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since we can observe the same individual ruling in each, albeit at different times. (This, in turn, enables us to say rather more, especially about John's reign as Latin emperor.) It is remarkable how little has been done to make such comparisons, or, indeed, to look at the links between the kingdom of Jerusalem and the Latin empire. There is a research project here for an aspiring doctoral student.

One way that Western powers had long been influential in the Latin East was through taking advantage of – and, when possible, directing – the contemporaneous 'aristocratic diaspora'. This label of Bartlett's refers to Western aristocrats 'on the make' in regions far afield from their original homelands. This is something that can be seen not just on the frontiers of Latin Christendom but also in its heartlands, a point exemplified by the Briennes themselves.⁵ This, in short, is a fascinating concept, crying out for refinement – something that can be done only by looking at how it played out in practice.

Probing a little further into the diaspora, it is possible to identify several themes within it that are particularly applicable to John. For a start, he himself can be categorised as a 'not quite first-rank' figure.⁶ This book explores the implications of that echelon's social and geographical mobility. In short, it examines the interface between 'Frankish/French' provincial dynasticism and power, on the one hand, and elite politics at a higher level, on the other. Turning to a second, quite separate theme: over the course of the central Middle Ages, various Western lords were 'parachuted into' the Latin East as expedient leaders in periods of dynastic and/or military insecurity. John himself was a relative outsider twice selected, 'parachuted in' and propped up, largely from the West, to try to work power structures in the East that were essentially beyond his control. Whilst there could be a range of threats to such newcomers' positions, the most obvious is dynastic failure or misfortune. This was what destroyed all John's efforts to sire a line of Brienne rulers in the Latin East. In the end, he was the one and only Brienne king, in clear contrast to, say, the contemporary Lusignan family. However, such rulers and ex-rulers could become 'crown men': attractive prospects for other Latin realms in similar troubled situations. Certainly, this is a good label for John, and it also works, in a slightly different way, for his predecessor Aimery of Lusignan, king of Cyprus and then of Jerusalem too (d. 1205).

⁵ For the concept, see R. Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change, 950–1350* (London, 1994), 5–59.

⁶ This phrase is adapted from H. E. Mayer, *The Crusades*, tr. J. Gillingham, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1988), 243.

To investigate these themes properly, it is necessary to look, at least *en passant*, at a variety of other individuals, families and networks. A number of common threads can be found connecting the Briennes and, for example, the Montlhérys and the Montforts.⁷ Likewise, the longevity of John's military career, and his meteoric climb up the social scale, put him in the rarefied company of contemporaries such as William Marshal, the knight who rose from tournament fields to become ruler of England (d. 1219).⁸ But by far the most judicious comparison to make is not simply with the Lusignans, but with one member of that family in particular: another of John's predecessors, Guy, king of Jerusalem and then lord of Cyprus in the 1180s and 1190s. Guy and John are repeatedly compared as this book proceeds. Likewise, the book examines the sources for vital clues as to what contemporaries were really looking for from people such as John. Admittedly, these notions can be at odds with modern assumptions about the geopolitical realities of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and about the resources necessary to meet those demands. Yet contemporary expectations – whatever we choose to think of them – are fundamental to understanding a career 'on the make' such as John's.

The succouring of the Latin East – above all, of Jerusalem – was regarded as the ultimate enterprise for the entire Latin world. In practice, though, the running in the Latin East could often be made by discrete groups that hailed from specific regions in the West. When we are seeking to explain John's 'implantation' as ruler into two successive, quite different Latin Eastern environments – that is, the kingdom of Jerusalem and the Latin empire – it is crucial to note that, at the time, there were well-placed 'clusters' of his fellow Champenois in both. Each cluster could well have played a decisive part in bringing about John's accession in its realm, and then in sustaining his regime. But this 'cluster factor' was probably more significant on the earlier of the two occasions: John's first great step-up, to become king of Jerusalem. Crucially, this development does seem to have been promoted by the regent of Champagne herself, Countess Blanche (regent 1201–22). All this leads towards an important point: during the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries – part of the zenith of the 'crusading movement' – Champagne loomed much larger across the Latin East as a whole than has often been recognised.

Throughout his reigns in the Latin East, John remained very close to – in some instances, even reliant on – certain Western great powers. In short, he

⁷ For the former comparison, see J. Riley-Smith, *The First Crusaders, 1095–1131* (Cambridge, 1997), 169–95.

⁸ For William Marshal's career, see D. Crouch, *William Marshal: Knighthood, War and Chivalry, 1147–1219*, 2nd edn (London, 2002).

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was a ‘not-quite-first-rank’ figure who sought advantage for himself and his dynasty through straddling *both* political theatres. This points towards how we should interpret not merely his career but Latin East–West relations as a whole in this period. Networks – often to the level of clientage – connected particular Western great powers with leading exponents of the aristocratic diaspora, especially in the Latin East. ‘Clientage’ is certainly the right word to describe John’s relationships, at various stages throughout his career, with the papacy, the Emperor Frederick II, the French monarchy and Countess Blanche of Champagne. It is telling that John’s career can be characterised by these relationships, when he himself was the wearer of the highest-ranking and most prestigious crowns that the Latin East had to offer. Yet this insight permits us to begin to rebut the more blatant models of decline and stagnation that have so often typified analysis of the Latin East from the late twelfth century onwards.

Perhaps the main reason for reassessing John in detail has thus been left until last. His career is both significant and wide-ranging enough for him to find mention in a large number of scholarly works, especially those concerned with the crusades and the Latin East in the early thirteenth century. But many of these short references stumble over basic material, or skim the surface of thorny problems. The classic quick summary of John’s career is provided by Mayer. John was ‘brave and energetic, but by no means a statesman or diplomat of the first rank. His career [is] remarkable for his continual attempts to obtain one crown after another.’⁹ This thumbnail sketch is accurate enough as far as it goes. But statements such as this can easily reduce John to a caricature: always on the make, always on the lookout for a throne. Moreover, the fundamental problem with all such modern vignettes is clear: they are necessarily dependent either on other short references like themselves or on earlier biographical studies that are now thoroughly out of date. This remains true despite, for instance, Fedorenko’s recent effort to survey John’s life.¹⁰

Looking back, it is clear that John was quite widely remembered, at least until the end of the medieval period. Doubtless, his memory was cherished most by his descendants and extended kin group. His sons made a point of styling themselves ‘son[s] of King John of Acre, Emperor of Constantinople’, thus neatly combining something of his two main titles.¹¹ As we will see further, the Franciscan Order also remembered John particularly fondly. The Franciscans probably soon exaggerated

⁹ Mayer, *The Crusades*, 243. ¹⁰ Below, 11.

¹¹ See R. L. Wolff, ‘Mortgage and redemption of an emperor’s son: Castile and the Latin empire of Constantinople’, 76, which can be found most conveniently in his *Studies in the Latin Empire of Constantinople* (London, 1976).

what links there had been between John and the *poverello*, Francis of Assisi himself. Yet they could rightly point to the Emperor John as the first crowned head and the highest-ranking figure ever to join their order.¹² John could even be made to serve the purposes of the late medieval French monarchy, which was always anxious to manufacture extra political capital. A miniature in the *Grandes chroniques de France*, dating from the 1450s, presents a shamelessly blatant ‘royalist’ depiction of the coronation of King Louis VIII in 1223, which John had attended as king of Jerusalem (see Illustration 1). The miniature is surely wrong in depicting John right at the centre of events, where he seems to be crowning Louis’s queen. Yet it is on firmer ground in emphasising the additional lustre that King John’s presence imparted to the event.¹³

More revealingly, during John’s own lifetime he started to become a lead character in certain chivalric-courtly tales. A *récit* by the so-called, and slightly later, ‘Minstrel of Reims’ was widely considered to be close to the truth about John’s early life, until d’Arbois de Jubainville debunked it in the nineteenth century.¹⁴ In another of the minstrel’s *récits*, John appears as the principal member of the audience – that is, as the ‘good king’ who commands a Saracen prisoner to tell a tale about Saladin.¹⁵ Clearly, John quickly became the kind of widely known and well-regarded figure around whom it was fashionable to spin such yarns. Doubtless, what made John specially attractive and useful to the minstrel was his astonishing career trajectory. Telling John’s story anew, chivalric-courtly style, was plainly a way not only of providing good entertainment, but also of reiterating the ideals and aspirations of the knightly caste. This puts us back into the world of William Marshal, of knights on the make.

Nevertheless, it is not really surprising that John has ended up almost completely overshadowed by true ‘crusade giants’, such as Richard the Lionheart and St Louis. John’s is now a name known only to specialists, despite the efforts of certain French scholars to write him up as a sort of national hero.¹⁶ Even in the charming little town of Brienne-le-Château itself, John and the rest of his family are more than eclipsed by the memory of the great Napoleon, who attended the town’s famous *école*, and later fought one of his last battles nearby.¹⁷

¹² Below, 180–1. ¹³ Below, 128. ¹⁴ Below, 26–7.

¹⁵ See *Récits d’un ménestrel de Reims au treizième siècle*, ed. N. de Wailly (Paris, 1876), esp. chs. 16, 21.

¹⁶ See esp. R. Grousset, *Histoire des croisades et du royaume franc de Jérusalem*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1934–6), III, ch. 15.

¹⁷ The principal memorials to John in Brienne-le-Château itself are a small section in the town museum, devoted to his family, and the name of a rather minor street.



Illustration 1 A miniature from around the 1450s, taken from the *Grandes chroniques de France*, depicting the coronation of King Louis VIII in 1223, which John attended as king of Jerusalem (BnF, MS Français 6465, fol. 247)

John's most bizarre incarnation is surely the *premier danseur* role in Glazunov's crusade fantasy ballet *Raymonda* (1898). A work that deserves to be much better known, it has languished in relative obscurity, mainly because it is almost, but not quite, Tchaikovsky. As might be expected, the ballet's scenario bears very little relation to the known features of John's life. It explores the attraction felt by John's bride-to-be, Raymonda, for the mysterious sexy Saracen, Abderakhman. John kills Abderakhman in a duel at the end of Act II, and by the end of the third act Raymonda has forgiven him for this. It seems that John's name was selected for this character primarily because, at a very early stage, it had been decided that the ballet should feature a great deal of Hungarian dancing. John had been the leader of the Fifth Crusade, Hungary's finest hour in the Holy Land, even though it was not actually all that glorious.

The first serious effort to evaluate John's life and career *in toto* was published in 1727 by the Jesuit missionary Lafitau.¹⁸ The nineteenth century witnessed a succession of monographs on the Briennes by the



Illustration 2 Nehemiah Kish (left) as Jean de Brienne in Glazunov's ballet *Raymonda*

¹⁸ J.-F. Lafitau, *Histoire de Jean de Brienne, roy de Jérusalem et empereur de Constantinople* (Paris, 1727).

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likes of Bourgeois, de Montcarmet and Georges.¹⁹ By far the best of these – indeed, the only one to maintain much value into recent times – is de Sassenay's chronological survey of the Briennes 'of Lecce and of Athens' (1869). As its title indicates, this focuses primarily on the later activities of the family's senior line.²⁰ By 1869, though, d'Arbois de Jubainville had begun his pioneering work, which would soon make most earlier treatments of the Briennes redundant. Implicitly criticising Bourgeois and de Sassenay, d'Arbois de Jubainville was well aware of the need for a good history of the family. He wrote, possibly with false modesty, that he did not consider himself capable of providing it. Yet he succeeded in laying solid foundations for almost all modern studies of the Briennes. He collected – fairly comprehensively – the Brienne comital *acta* (charters, letters, etc.), which he published in 1872.²¹ By then he had sited the Briennes much better within their ancestral region, through his own seven-volume behemoth on the subject of the counts and dukes of Champagne.²² He also produced a groundbreaking analysis of John's early life (1868).²³

There was then a wait of more than fifty years before the next great leap forward. 1938 proved to be something of an *annus mirabilis*. It witnessed Bréhier's article 'Jean de Brienne' – which, it must be said, retains some importance today mainly because of the extensive list of sources that appears at the end.²⁴ Much more importantly, Böhm's *Johann von Brienne, König von Jerusalem, Kaiser von Konstantinopel* was published in the same year. *Faute de mieux*, this has been the standard work on John for more than seven decades. Böhm was even better at tracking down little-known sources than Bréhier. Yet his skill at this makes his major omissions all the more glaring. Böhm's study is further marred by occasional embarrassing blunders, such as when he makes the elementary slip of confusing

¹⁹ M. Bourgeois, *Histoire des comtes de Brienne* (Troyes, 1848); E. de Montcarmet, *Jean de Brienne, roi de Jérusalem et empereur de Constantinople* (Limoges, 1856); E. Georges, *Jean de Brienne, empereur de Constantinople et roi de Jérusalem* (Troyes, 1858).

²⁰ F. de Sassenay, *Les Brienne de Lecce et d'Athènes: histoire d'une des grandes familles de la féodalité française* (Paris, 1869).

²¹ 'Catalogue' – see esp. p. 141.

²² H. d'Arbois de Jubainville and L. Pigeotte, *Histoire des ducs et des comtes de Champagne*, 7 vols. (Paris, 1859–69).

²³ H. d'Arbois de Jubainville, 'Recherches sur les premières années de Jean de Brienne, roi de Jérusalem, empereur de Constantinople', in *Mémoires lus à la Sorbonne: archéologie, histoire, philologie et sciences morales* (1868 – not 1872, as is wrongly said by Böhm in his *Johann von Brienne*), 235–47.

²⁴ L. Bréhier, 'Jean de Brienne', in A. Baudrillart et al., eds., *Dictionnaire d'histoire et de géographie ecclésiastiques* (Paris, 1909–), X, cols. 698–709.