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Book Review: Mercenaries in Medieval and Renaissance Europe

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Janin, Hunt, with Ursula Carlson. *Mercenaries in Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland and Company, 2013) 220pp. softcover, \$39.95. Kindle \$14.99.

Janin has written on a range of subjects, including medieval history, while Carlson is an emerita professor at Western Nevada College. Their thesis is that little scholarly attention has been focused on mercenary soldiers in medieval and renaissance Europe, roughly the eighth to seventeenth centuries, so their study uses many contemporary accounts to present a mosaic of vignettes to highlight the era's events, employers, and paid professional soldiers. While sources are cited in the endnotes per the norm, parenthetically embedded notes in the text to explain even the most basic points of military terminology and history confirm this is an introductory work most likely intended to supplement textbooks for high school or undergrad level survey courses.

The authors state that war was the central fact of life and political power in a society organized for fighting. Military doctrine was inspired by the fourth century Roman, Vegetius, whose writings included rules for sieges, admonitions for discipline, and aphorisms like 'everything is difficult before you try it.' Military service was based on personal ties between lord and subject and land holding. Armies usually had a core of skilled knights and their household retainers, low skilled local militia fulfilling feudal obligations, and professional mercenaries usually hired for the duration of a campaign. In classical Latin 'mercenarius' means 'hireling,' which had negative connotations due to the biblical depiction of hired shepherds caring little for their flocks.

Sources indicate, not surprisingly, that mercenaries were usually adventurous or desperate young men with little to lose and much to gain. Some rose to fame as members of the Varangian Guard of the Byzantine Empire or the 'condottieri' (free companies) that devastated fourteenth century Italy. They were expensive to hire and dangerous to fire in a time when it was difficult to tell the difference between noble knights and cutthroat brigands. Economic prosperity could decrease their supply and their use was controversial and condemned by the church's Third Lateran Council (1179) and the celebrated Magna Carta of England (1215).

Mercenary tools of the trade are considered with the five categories of weapons: edged weapons like swords and daggers, blunt force

weapons like maces and clubs, pole arms like spears and pikes, missile weapons like bows and crossbows, and other weapons including psychological or siege weapons. Two of the most famous mercenary weapons were the English longbow and Italian crossbow that factored significantly in battle. Swiss pike men became the ultimate infantry warriors until superseded by firearms that could be widely employed by unskilled men and pierced most armor.

Unfortunately, the vignettes are uneven and suggest that many should have been cut or otherwise had their text expanded. For example, the one for the 1346 Battle of Crecy is eminently satisfying (104-108) but that for the 1477 Battle of Nancy involving the Swiss (146) is far too cursory. This may be reflective of the book's hurried tone, with irritatingly repeated statements like "not described here in great detail" (152) and "to make a long and complex story short" (158). It also leads to errors like referring to warrior Scottish-Irish Gallowglas' first recorded appearance being in 1290 then later stating on the same page (93) that they were important in twelve century Irish warfare. Finally, discussion of 'Schwedentrunk' (Swedish Drink), a torture method used in seventeenth century Germany in which liquid excrement was poured down a victim's throats being likened to "water boarding in present times" (167) rings as unnecessary twenty first century political posturing.

The inclusion of photographs, illustrations, and maps would have been beneficial, albeit the index and chronology are good, as are the appendices, one a glossary of armor terms and the other a commentary on Swiss mercenaries. Sources such as contemporary accounts of Frenchman Jean Froissart (ca. 1337-1405) and the Byzantine princess Anna Comnena (1083-1153), balanced with works by modern scholars such as John France and Michael Mallett, are excellent; however the fact that nearly half of the two hundred plus endnotes are of web sites give pause, especially since half of these are from Wikipedia and difficult to verify. Overall, this nicely packaged and concise work is of some utility on the high school or undergraduate level, but of modest appeal to the general reader and with little to offer the military enthusiast or academic specialist.

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