CALL FOR PAPERS

The forgotten invasion: the English expedition of Louis of France (1215-1217) in its European context

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In autumn 1215, after the collapse of the political consensus which had led to the issue of Magna Carta, the English barons turned to the French king for military support. By this time, Philip Augustus himself was unwilling to be directly involved in English affairs, but his son and heir, Lord Louis, the future Louis VIII, accepted the offer of the English throne from a group of the barons. Louis gathered together an expedition to support the rebellious barons, and to make good his own claim to the throne, and landed in England in May 1216. After more than a year of fighting, marked by defeats at Lincoln (May 1217) and Sandwich (August 1217), Louis was forced to accept a treaty imposed by the regency government led by William Marshal, and to leave England. Detailed narrative accounts of the expedition have been provided by Charles Petit-Dutaillis in his Étude sur la vie et le règne de Louis VIII (1187-1226), published in 1894, and more recently by Sean McGlynn and Catherine Hanley. Nevertheless, many aspects of the expedition remain to be explored. Recent work on Capetian France has focussed on Louis’s contributions to the Albigensian Crusade, while historians of medieval England have concentrated on the impact of Magna Carta, and on the life of William Marshal. Lord Louis’ inglorious expedition tends to be forgotten by French historians, and can seem like a footnote in the grand narrative of English history, which increasingly focuses on the community of the realm.

It is time for a fresh assessment of Louis’ expedition to England. It must be seen in the context of a dramatic rebalancing of the power politics of north-west Europe, as the alliance between the kings of England, the counts of Flanders and the Emperor Otto was smashed by Philip Augustus at the Battle of Bouvines in 1214, and as the recently independent Flanders came under Capetian control. Had Louis’s expedition succeeded, the Capetians would have succeeded to the English throne, with the prospect of a double kingdom. The failure of the expedition, and its disappearance from collective memory, should not lead us to underrate its importance for an understanding of the political relationships of north-west Europe: the kingdoms of France and England, of Scotland and Wales, the principalities and lordships of the Low-Countries, and of the Empire – for all those polities where the English Channel was not so much a border as a great hub of trade and communication.

The recruitment of Louis’ troops has not been studied in depth. In-depth prosopographical and archival study is required to throw light on the members of Louis’ household and entourage who acted as administrators and diplomats; on the knights and the mercenaries who fought for him; and on the seafarers and merchants who provided ships. The preparation of fleets and the crossing of the Channel needs to be re-evaluated not only in the political and social context, but also the environmental context – the shifting profile of the coast on both sides of the Channel, and the attempts by contemporaries to manage the changing waters, and to develop ports and landing places. An expedition which saw both naval and land warfare, with the probable use of new military technologies (the counter-weight trebuchet), is in need of new research and evaluation, as is the relationship of Louis, his entourage, his armies and the English political community, especially the community of the city of London.

The diplomatic implications of the expedition deserve renewed attention, not just in terms of the perennially difficult relationship between the kingdoms of France and England, but also more widely, for instance on relationships with the Empire. Louis’ attempt to take the English throne raises juridical issues of rights of succession, and legitimacy. The expedition needs to be placed in the context of long-term transformations in the realities of power, in Britain, but also in the area covered by the former Lower Lotharingia, where regional and royal dynastic polities formed, fragmented and reformed into the later Middle Ages. Moreover, the expedition needs to be placed in a broad economic, religious, cultural and artistic context reflecting the circulation of people and ideas.
In short, we invite an interdisciplinary (history, art history, archaeology, geomorphology, castellology etc.) approach, which will take account of new documentary sources, or the reinterpretation of those already known, in a transregional perspective, to cast new light on this forgotten expedition, and explore the full political implications of the expedition, not least for the Capetian realm, where it was so quickly written out of history. What impact did the expedition, its aspirations and failure have on Louis himself, on the Capetian family, and within Capetian France? What does it tell us about identities and imagined communities?

The project will extend over three years (2022-2024). It will open with a workshop organised by Elisa Mantienne (University of Lorraine), on the recruitment and the aristocratic and knightly family connections of the expedition. A round table at Leeds IMC 2022, chaired by Stephen Church (University of East Anglia), will focus on the reconfiguration of frontiers and polities.

Two conferences, at the University of the Littoral de Boulogne-sur-Mer (spring 2023), and at London and Dover (summer 2024), will aim to deepen our understanding of this multifaceted expedition. We invite those who are interested in giving papers at the conferences in 2023 and 2024 to submit a title and an abstract, before the 31st January 2022, to the following address: louis-project@hotmail.com. Papers will be given in French and English.

For more information: https://louisproject.hypotheses.org/

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