

BOOK REVIEWS



Suzanne Bartlet. *Licoricia of Winchester: Marriage, Motherhood, and Murder in the Medieval Anglo-Jewish Community.* Edited by Patricia Skinner. London: Vallentine-Mitchell, 2009. Pp. xiv + 160. ISBN: 9780853038221.

MORE CLEARLY PERHAPS than most first books, *Licoricia of Winchester* is the product of significant personal dedication. Suzanne Bartlet, the author, passed away after a long battle with cancer before it could be published, and the final preparation of the manuscript was done by Patricia Skinner. Skinner appears largely to have labored on the margins, allowing the book, and the author's priorities, to speak for themselves. Bartlet was not a traditional academic author, having come to her Master's degree program (and this project) by way of her personal interest in the topic following the excavation of part of the Jewish cemetery near her home in Winchester. *Licoricia* was intended to be a work of accessible historiography, designed with a general audience in mind, and in the preface Skinner acknowledges what is surely one of the book's most vexing aspects for a career academic—its sparse footnotes. For both general readers and professional medievalists, the book delivers mixed results. Scholars will be frustrated by the absence of some of the usual evidentiary apparatus for substantiating some of the intriguing historical claims and episodes described, while curious non-specialists may lose patience when details of tangled legal proceedings are discussed without clear enough links to the book's narrative line. However, *Licoricia* displays considerable, hard-won knowledge of medieval bureaucratic systems, legal eccentricities, and financial practices, often laid out with a fair degree of clarity for the general reader. If these displays are sometimes not as attentive to subtleties as the scholar might hope, there is still value in the explication.

For those interested in women's history, the book's discussion of the careers of not one but three Jewish women bankers and their families in the decades

prior to the expulsion of the English Jewish community in 1290 makes for fascinating reading. Given this breadth of perspective, the book's title seems somewhat misleading, though Licoricia of Winchester does ultimately emerge as the thread tying all of these portraits together. Bartlet explains the importance of family consortia to the world of medieval banking, in which Jewish women could play vital roles in carrying on the family business and become wealthy and powerful agents in their own right. We see figures such as Licoricia, her predecessor Chera, and her contemporary Belia (all with links to Winchester) doing much more than advancing loans: they appear in court, sometimes advocating for themselves, travel in pursuit of their business interests, and dispatch agents to handle matters they cannot see to themselves. In a larger Christian social context characterized by complex ties of loyalty and sometimes purchased influence, success had to be earned with difficulty, particularly for Jews who labored under legal and social disadvantages, so that we should view the prominent position of these women as an accomplishment significant on several fronts.

The relative freedom of movement among influential Jewish women may also have had intriguing consequences for the marriage market. Bartlet notes the tendency of these women to remarry as widows and speculates that their success must have made them more than usually desirable as partners, in both the domestic and professional realms. In an interesting turnabout on traditional expectations, she even considers Licoricia's marriage to her second husband, David of Oxford, primarily in light of what her choice indicates about Licoricia's prominence in her community, rather than his. This example also offers an intriguing look into interreligious politics. When David of Oxford sought to divorce his first wife, he appealed to the English secular authorities following a less than advantageous ruling by his own religious court, the *bet din*. This was certainly a high-stakes strategy in the context of Christian religious hostility and the precarious standing of the Jewish community in England. One result of David's action was that English Jews lost the right to hold their own religious courts, a consequence Bartlet notes without, however, signaling the significance of this development (56-57).

This example is representative of one of the book's more serious shortcomings. For all of Bartlet's admirable close attention to the documentary records, her portrait of Jewish-Christian relations is rather meager, despite the suggestive quality of some of the records she discusses. Bartlet acknowledges the difficult position of England's pre-expulsion Jews, caught between the exactions of rulers, on the one hand, and the hostility of Christian neighbors, on the other. However, one wishes for more substantive discussion of this theme, particularly

in relation to the Christians among whom the Jewish community lived. Jews were subject to special taxes, with the community as a whole being squeezed by the Crown for amounts that forced Jewish bankers (who contributed substantial amounts to such communal taxes) to put increased pressure on Christian debtors, particularly among the nobility. However, while Bartlet acknowledges the hostility this could arouse, she does not spend much time elaborating on the popular perception of Jews as tools of royal power and the importance of this association, for example, to the anti-Jewish violence attendant on the Barons' War. She is clearly interested in the complex legal and financial processes entailed in this dense web of relations, but a larger portrait of community tensions is lost.

What is more, despite Bartlet's sympathy for the particular challenges faced by the Jewish figures who populate her narrative, her willingness to accept and repeat distinctly negative characterizations of certain individuals' practices based on the testimony of hostile sources (e.g., 51) becomes troubling. This is problematic because such conclusions often seem to be based on the testimony of Christian opponents involved in legal proceedings where all the participants have a clear investment in the outcome. If Bartlet has accounted for this situational bias in her readings, however, she does not offer enough indications of how she has done so.

The book is also subject to some structural infelicities and rhetorical repetitions that the author might have eliminated had she had time to revise the manuscript once more. Despite these difficulties, however, *Licoricia* is a suggestive portrait, not only of these women's impressive working lives, but also of the world they inhabited, from the workaday struggle to manage their business interests in times of political unrest to the challenge of responding to the changeable expectations of rulers. The book is a worthwhile foray into this world, and it is to be hoped that further work will pick up where this study has left off.

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