Philippe de Mézières’s Anglo-French Crusading Order and BnF f. fr. 2456

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Philippe de Mézières is a central figure in the political and intellectual history of the fourteenth-century Mediterranean world. His zeal for holy war against militant Islam shaped everything in a long professional career. He was Chancellor of Cyprus from 1358 to 1369, playing an essential role in crusade-related diplomacy with the greatest secular and ecclesiastical leaders of his time. Upon returning to his native France in the early 1370s, he established himself as an indispensable royal counselor in Paris and became the most powerful advocate of the 1396 truce between England and France that facilitated a multinational Christian expedition against the Turks in eastern Europe. Philippe’s prolific writings, along with his passionate campaigning for a crusade led by his international religious-military society, the Order of the Passion of Jesus Christ, earned him friends and followers from east to west and even suggest his participation in a late-fourteenth-century network of European literary exchange (Hanly). This cluster’s emphasis on international cultural and political diffusion across borders makes him a natural choice. In this essay, I will focus on the testimony gleaned from a particular manuscript – Paris, BnF f. fr. 2456. This codex contains a devotional text on the Lamb of God and was likely executed in a Parisian workshop between 1390 and 1395. The examination of its textual and iconographical details – which include the coat of arms of one of the leading officials in Philippe de Mézières’s Order of the Passion of Jesus Christ, namely the Burgundian nobleman Jean de Blaisy – suggests a number of fascinating connections between this book and the sphere of his transnational crusading society.

From the time the twenty-year-old undertook a pilgrimage to Jerusalem during his first sojourn in the Middle East in 1347, Philippe de Mézières envisioned a united Christian crusade to “liberate” the Holy Land. After serving for several years in France against the English, he returned to Cyprus in 1359, and was soon named Chancellor to the new king, Peter I of Lusignan (r. 1358–69). The two were instrumental in the mounting of the expedition against Alexandria in 1365, a venture that required years of planning and that sent them to all the European capitals in search of support. During that time, Philippe would have been able to establish the intellectual “network,” I theorize, especially in England, Burgundy, and Italy. Philippe was in Venice several times during this period, and it must be there that he met Francesco Petrarca. Their contact is documented by Petrarch’s epistle to Mézières, which is collected in the Letters of Old Age. Philippe, for his part, translated the Latin story of Griselda, which Petrarch had adapted from Boccaccio’s Italian-language tale at the end of the Decameron, and incorporated the story into two later works, along with a salute to the author, “his special friend from long ago.” This acquaintance with Petrarch enhanced his

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international profile while the Chancellor of Cyprus was still in his thirties. But Philippe's familiarity with the poet laureate and his writings, at a time when few people in France and England were reading him, seems even more significant in the context of his connections with French and English writers a quarter century later.  

Having abandoned Cyprus after the murder of King Peter in 1369, Philippe had returned to Paris by 1373, where he sought to persuade King Charles V (r. 1364–80) to proclaim a new crusade, one that might accomplish what the abortive Alexandria campaign failed to do (Iorga 416-43). The king rejected the crusade on political grounds, but retained the learned and experienced former Chancellor as a personal advisor and tutor to his son and heir. Charles VI (r. 1380–1422) came to the throne as an eleven-year-old in 1380, and, in the first year of his personal rule, called for a truce with the English and for a new campaign against militant Islam in the East; Philippe’s continued exhortations had not been in vain. In 1384, he returned to an idea he had first conceived at the time of his pilgrimage to Jerusalem almost forty years before and composed a second version of his “rule” for his Chevalerie de la Passion de Jhesu Christ. The “Order” was a military-religious coalition modeled after the chivalric orders, sworn to the creation of an ideal Christian society through obedience and discipline, and to the liberation of the Holy Land (Paris, Bibliothèque Mazarine 1943, fols. 45 r°-101 r°). His Songe du vieil pelerin of 1389 set these principles – Christian peace and unity as prerequisite to a “holy war” against militant Islam – into a vast allegorical and geographical context (Mézières, Le Songe). His next composition, the allegorical Épitre au roi Richart of 1395, more pointedly exhorts the King of England to join a crusading coalition of French and English armies led by their two kings and knights of the Order of the Passion; the expedition would take place during a peace solemnified by the wedding between Richard and the daughter of Charles VI. It is in this Épitre that Philippe incorporates one of his versions of the Griselda story he found in the work of Petrarch: given that Richard II was slated to marry the six-year-old daughter of Charles VI, the author suggests the malleable youth could become as exceptional a mate as the patient Griselda (London, BL Royal 20 B VI, fol. 49 r°; Mézières, Letter, 115: “le solempnel docteur et souverain poete, maistre François Petrac”).

The mid-1390s also saw the composition of a third and final redaction of his “rule,” in the conclusion of which Philippe names four “evangelists” who have been advocating truce and crusade and lists the group’s first members. This roster, in many cases a veritable “who’s who” of contemporary European aristocracy, also includes some less-prominent figures whose social connections support the thesis that the Order of the Passion had intellectual, as well as political, repercussions. For example, the document includes the name of a knight from Richard II’s camera regis, Lewis Clifford, friend of Geoffrey Chaucer; the names of three other courtiers who would have been known to Chaucer appear here as well (Hanly 312). Philippe’s strategies proved effective in the near term: a peace treaty was finalized; Richard II married young Isabelle of France by proxy in March 1396; and in April, a huge but undisciplined