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► To cite this version:

Amicie Pélissié Du Rausas. The Odor of a Holy Fame: The Problematic Charisma of King Louis IX (1214–1270). Religions, 2023, 14 (3), pp.305. 10.3390/rel14030305 . hal-04338132

HAL Id: hal-04338132

<https://hal.science/hal-04338132>

Submitted on 5 Jun 2024

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Article

The Odor of a Holy Fame: The Problematic Charisma of King Louis IX (1214–1270)

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Abstract: By attributing the term “charismatic” to Saint Louis, Jacques Le Goff identified two sources of charisma: sacred kingship and personal holiness. Without denying these aspects of the holy king’s reputation, we should investigate the nature of the charismatic relationship that linked Louis IX to his contemporaries. The sacrality of Louis IX pre-existed him; his sanctity is a post-death construction. What are the attributes of the living character that would allow us to recognize a charismatic personality? This paper argues that the religious aura of the king, which best echoes the Paulinian version of charisma, was sometimes at odds with the political expectations levied on a medieval ruler, which a Weberian definition of charisma helps to define. In this light, the crusades provided a unique setting where the king’s Christ-like qualities and his political leadership could be reconciled. To conduct this argument, this paper proposes to look for the symptoms of Louis IX’s living charisma in the reactions of his contemporaries, based on the re-examination of classical sources on the life of the king, carefully contextualized.

Keywords: Saint Louis; Louis IX; crusades; Joinville; Le Goff; kingship; hagiography; sanctity; charisma



Citation: Pelissie du Rausas, Amicie. 2023. The Odor of a Holy Fame: The Problematic Charisma of King Louis IX (1214–1270). *Religions* 14: 305. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14030305>

Academic Editors: Jaume Aurell and Montserrat Herrero

Received: 31 January 2023

Revised: 17 February 2023

Accepted: 19 February 2023

Published: 23 February 2023



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1. Introduction

Was Louis IX charismatic? For the king’s most famous biographer, Jacques Le Goff, the answer was uncontroversial: “Saint Louis is a charismatic character. This charisma, to the extent that we can define it, derives from the aura that surrounds him for those who are close to him, and from the extraordinary aspect of the image that those who have never met him are presented with. To qualify it, his contemporaries can but fall back on the word saint, but this is an exceptional saint. (...) This charisma is not only an irrational and instinctive quality. It entails specific features, both structural and dynastic, the features of an anointed king and a healer, as well as the individual merits of a holy life recognized by official canonization¹”.

Le Goff circumscribes the charisma of king Louis IX of France to his two-fold identity as an anointed king and as a canonized saint, even though the French historian stressed elsewhere that Louis’ sanctity was not only the product of his royal function nor of his canonization (Le Goff 1991, p. 292). But his discussion of charisma remains focused on the implications of anointment and the type of sanctity that Louis embodied. These two aspects of Louis’ royal persona, however, do not encompass the totality of Louis’ charisma, particularly if one shifts the definition from the religious (Paulinian) frame, to the Weberian one².

In the definition supplied by Max Weber, charisma is the possession of some sort of extraordinary quality that sets a person apart from, and above, other human beings, and endows them with the capacity of exerting a sort of attraction or fascination on groups of followers (Weber 1947, pp. 358–59). While it could be deemed anachronistic to apply this late conceptual frame to the reign of a 13th-century king, the shift is, arguably, justified by the use that contemporary historians have made of the term charisma (starting with Jacques Le Goff) and by Louis’ specific identity as a political leader, too often dwarfed

by his sanctity³. Indeed, the term has become a byword for the personal style of power that characterized the so-called pre-modern states⁴. In this light, the question of charisma applied to a medieval ruler ties in with very basic expectations levied on a king: his personal qualities, of course, but also his capacity at exerting an influence on his entourage, as a leader, and the reactions that his moral “extraordinari-ness” drew. Applied to the figure of Louis IX, a canonized king, these questions must be discussed alongside the king’s celebrated religious aura.

The depth of Louis’ religiosity is well-known: it is what allows his chief hagiographer William of Chartres to introduce his portrayal of the king’s extraordinary religious virtues with “the odor of his most sacred fame⁵”. The image is typical of saints’ lives, harking at the special power of a saint’s body to exhale the holy perfume of God’s grace and salvation, sometimes quite literally, as an extension of Paul’s calling to the Corinthians to be the “good odor of Christ” (2 Cor., 2:15) (Roch 2009, 2010, pp. 73–88). But this stereotyped definition of holy charisma needs to be re-questioned here, for two reasons. First, the “odor” is that of the king’s fame, not of his body, and none of the contemporary narrative sources ever use the topos of Louis’ body exuding a sweet fragrance after the king’s death. Beaulieu is deliberately twisting a conventional phrase of hagiography, and the reason why he does so introduces the second component of the argument: Louis’ fama was not just that of a holy man, but of a holy lay, married, king. Odor famae hints at the aura of something subtle and hidden, a quality that is easily retained by a holy man living in anonymous humility, but more challenging to uphold in the post-Gregorian world, for someone who was such a public figure as the king of France⁶. The objective here is to re-examine his extraordinary religious persona in the light of his kingship, using the prism of charisma to dive in the abundant source material documenting the reign. Moving beyond the subjective recognition of personal charisma, the focus will be on the perceptions of, and attitudes to, Louis IX in his own times, with an emphasis on the different circles of the king’s entourage. Another way of framing this, is to ask how far the charisma of the holy man of God is compatible with the charisma of the ruler on earth. The argument is that Louis IX conflated the religious awe of the man of God, with the expectations levied on a ruler who was both knight and king, not without tensions.

Four points will be made. First, the sources that document Louis’ charisma will be presented, since the material is key to the reconstitution of qualities and perceptions. Following this, a discussion of the many extraordinary qualities of the king will be presented, stressing those qualities which made him stand above his contemporaries. A third part will investigate contemporary responses to these qualities. The concluding section argues that the first crusade of the reign (1248–1254) was the unique moment when Louis’ competing calls to holy humility and authoritarian kingship successfully coexisted, as the French king assumed a spectacular aura that connected charisma with the suffering of Christ as king.

2. The Many Filters on Louis IX’s Personality and Kingship

The layers of writing that have celebrated Louis’ persona and his sanctity are so many that the historical individual is deeply buried, an aspect of the king’s posterity that prompted Le Goff’s massive biography⁷. Without attempting to eschew this entirely, delineating the filters allows one to better read through the elements of charisma which they constructed or avoided.

Hagiographical sources form a great bulk of the documentation. Two Dominican productions stand out because they were composed in the two decades after the king’s death, which saw mounting efforts to bring about the king’s canonization: one Vita by Geoffrey of Beaulieu, the king’s confessor during the first crusade, written around 1273–4 and the other, its continuation by William of Chartres, a friar also attached to the royal court⁸. A third text, the life by William of Saint-Pathus, who was confessor to Louis’ wife Marguerite, was composed in 1303, from the materials of the canonization trial which Saint-Pathus had accessed. The text is an illustration of the king’s holiness, built from first-hand accounts, but offers a slightly less personal rendering of the making of the

king's holiness⁹. All three texts are, unsurprisingly, dedicated to vindicating the king's holiness before and after his official canonization, and therefore conform to the codes of hagiographies, describing the king's piety, generosity and charity. In the life by Saint-Pathus, the political action of Louis is relegated at the beginning of the work, the bulk of which concerns the king's uncommon display of Christian virtues. Even Beaulieu and Chartres, who were trusted royal agents, have regrettably little to say about the stage of power where displays of charismatic objects and attitudes are expected: they have nothing to say on his coronation, the use of prestigious objects, kingly gifts, luxurious tapestries and so on. However, all three texts document contemporary reactions to Louis' sanctity—albeit sometimes, unwillingly. For this reason, they are a precious resource in assessing the charisma of the king.

Other narrative sources have their own agendas. The longest, and by far the most eloquent narratives available for the reign, are Joinville's *Vie de Saint Louis*, in France, and, for the view from England, Matthew Paris's *Chronica Majora*. Joinville's testimony, which Le Goff admired immensely, is essential: it is the "mémoires" of a layman, a middle-class nobleman from Champagne, who assisted the king during his greatest military and spiritual venture, the crusade¹⁰. However, one should bear in mind that when he wrote his *Vie de saint Louis*, Joinville was also an old man living under the not so chivalrous reign of Philip the Fair, with a deep nostalgia of the golden age of Saint Louis. Furthermore, when reporting events that he had not witnessed himself, the old seneschal would often choose, from existing material, small episodes or vignettes designed to showcase a moral quality of the king (Boutet 1998). The details are not invented, but rearranged to extol a particular virtue which sometimes speaks more of the tastes of an early 14th-century court society than of the generation of king Louis himself.

The English chronicler of Saint-Albans is another highly precious source, especially as he dies in 1259, well ahead of the canonization¹¹. Although Le Goff called him—rather unfairly—a "gossip collector", he is generally very well-informed about what goes on at the French court (Le Goff 1996, p. 434). However, like most medieval monastic historians, he writes with an agenda, one that is anti-papal fiscality and anti-royal tyranny. His portrayal of Louis must therefore always be set against the backdrop of his contempt for Henry III, king of England, and of his dislike of the pope and his agents.

Another key narrative source is the life of Louis by William of Nangis, written in the early years of the reign of Philip III. William was a Benedictine monk from the abbey of Saint-Denis, a monastery in the north of Paris with close ties to the Capetian dynasty, and which was rapidly becoming the center of production for the royal historiography¹². William's *Gesta Ludovici* were completed in the early 1280s, before the canonization, and later inserted in the series of the *Grandes chroniques de France*, which had been commenced at Saint-Denis just a decade before. It therefore became the official biography of the king, and a text which comes closer to the celebration of royal leadership than any other.

The Mirror of History (Speculum historiale), composed by Vincent of Beauvais before 1264, is much more disappointing¹³. A Dominican friar and preacher at the royal abbey of Royaumont, the tutor of the king's children, Vincent was well-equipped to become the closest source on the charismatic leadership of his king. His chronicle covers the reign of Louis up to the year 1250, including, parts of the years of crusade. Unfortunately, the text, while packed with useful historical information, is excessively dry when it comes to the personality of the king. Throughout the military campaigns of the early years of the reign, as well as the crusade, Vincent remains factual, writing down the itineraries of the armies and the outcomes of the battles, but never comments on Louis' attitude, persona or indeed, on the reactions to the king. For this reason, the text is used very little here.

The sources on the reign of Louis are obviously more abundant than this. Indeed, they include other narrative sources: produced in aristocratic circles, diplomatic acts—such as charters, seals and registers to be found in the French archives as well as in foreign archival funds—theoretical sources, such as mirrors of princes, letters and teachings attributed to the king or his close entourage, administrative documentation, such as the famous *enquêtes*,

and the dense documentation produced around the king's canonization¹⁴. The choice here is to proceed by source material, rather than by groups of persons. As narrow as the resulting outlook may feel from a historical perspective, the objective is to concentrate on the literary construction of the king's charisma, while keeping the study within reasonable bounds. Occasional forays into non-narrative accounts will be made, when they contribute to enlarging the discussion of the king's charisma in specific groups, such as his family or non-Christian "admirers". The aim remains to focus on those testimonies, which document not only the king's uncommon personality and deeds, but also contemporary and pre-canonization reactions to them, as one of the keys to our interpretation of his charisma.

3. The Many Qualities of King Louis IX

If charisma is, as Max Weber wrote, that which sets someone above others, the sources are rather straightforward in Louis' case: the king was above others in royal dignity, charity, religiosity and justice, and in these domains, he had the power to influence others.

As studies on charismatic medieval rulers showed, the control of a ruler's own image is a crucial feature of his ability to exert charisma. Although this area of Louis' personality is possibly the one that is the least explored in contemporary sources, we can gather a few elements that suggest, at the very least, that Louis held his royal office in the highest respect. Before the crusade, he never shunned the luxurious clothes of the French royalty, as the ceremonies around his wedding to Marguerite of Provence, in 1234, showed (Le Goff 1996, p. 137). In the diplomatic field, he offered a lavish welcome to king Henry III in Paris in 1254, ordering the streets to be cleaned and decorated, putting on a grand royal banquet and offering the English king prestigious, if cumbersome, gifts such as a real, live elephant from the Holy Land—which Matthew Paris drew twice—and a splendid, bird-shaped vase¹⁵. The gifts dwarfed the hundreds of rings, buckles and belts offered by the English king and queen to the French barons. The idea that by giving great gifts, one did not so much diminish his resources as enhance his prestige and his munificence seems to have been well understood by Louis.

Of course, the king's prominence mostly shines through his acts of charity and piety, which chroniclers and hagiographers alike reported at great length. Significant examples include the king stopping to collect the dead bodies of fallen soldiers in the Holy Land, when on a dangerous mission in 1251, finishing the meal of a poor man sick with ulcers, or again, delivering 1000 Parisian pounds for wine for poor people, exceeding 10 times the standard wine alms at the French court¹⁶. The king's charity does not rank, in numbers, with the practice of Henry III, who regularly fed an average of 500 paupers on a daily basis in England, and when in Paris, ostensibly invited the maximum number of paupers to be fed his halls, dwarfing the practices at the French court¹⁷. But Louis was outshining this grand gesture by the intensity of his own charitable practice, since he would frequently invite a small number of paupers to join him directly at the royal table¹⁸. These competing displays of charity highlight the peculiar nature of the French king's charity, which both stemmed from the ritual distribution of largesse as an essential function of kingship and went far beyond it. In the highly idealized narratives of the hagiographers, the king's piety is also duly noted and described in its most outlandish aspects. Beaulieu remembers how his penitent would hear two to four masses a day, a number confirmed and expanded by William of Saint-Pathus, who lists all the masses, high and low, that the king would hear each day of the year, on top of the regular hours that he had celebrated in his chapel¹⁹. Saint-Pathus provides scenes of high visual quality, showing the king traveling on horseback while a clerk would read him the hours when there was no other option, or rushing out of his chambers in the middle of the night to pray the early hours with the rest of his companions following, disheveled and half dressed²⁰. On his return from the crusade in 1254, the king also takes up the fight against blasphemy, punishing blasphemers with hot iron on their lips, as part of his grand moral program for reforming the kingdom. Beaulieu, Joinville and Saint-Pathus all remembered similar arrestations and punishments of blasphemers, who were subjected to the infamous punishment of being exposed in public

with animal guts around their necks²¹. While none of this was a radically new practice, the difference is the new intensity to which the king took these Christian devotions and the precise fact that these intense pious practices were performed by a reigning king.

However, Louis' chief quality—and that which compounded his royal charisma—was his justice. The most visible testimony of this quality is the inquiries launched throughout the kingdom before the first crusade, and repeated after the king's return to France in 1254. The procedure did not put the king into direct contact with his subjects, since the enterprise was mostly delegated to appointed commissioners who toured the kingdom²². Another witness to Louis's justice is Jean de Joinville, who famously recorded how Louis would sit on the ground beneath an oak at Vincennes and hear the complaints of anyone of his subjects. The scene has become so representative of the king's reign that its historical value is hard to pinpoint²³. And yet, what is striking is Joinville's insistence on the king's simplicity of manners, his repeated use of sitting on the floor of his chambers or the grounds of his garden and the closeness that this behavior generated. No indication survives as to its effect on the public, but there is no doubt that occurrences such as these directly exposed the king's body and speech to a wider community, creating an incarnate vision of royal justice.

A final element which compounded the charismatic nature of the king was his particular connection with relics. Here as well, Capetian veneration for those sacred objects predated Louis' reign, but, during the latter, the French kingdom undoubtedly acquired the most prestigious relics of Christendom: the Crown of Thorns and relics of the Holy Cross, bought in 1239 from the financially destitute emperor of Constantinople (Pisiak 2021, pp. 313–85). Such relics were bound to increase the "aura" of the French dynasty: they are the typical objects linking heaven and earth, strongly equating the Capetian dynasty with the body of Christ (Jaeger 2012, pp. 130–33). Accordingly, the majority of narratives on Louis mention them, starting with the hagiographers, who place the relics at the center of their portrayal of Louis' piety. Geoffrey of Beaulieu recounts "Louis' faithful devotion and expense" in obtaining the sacred relics, and how the king led the procession in Paris, barefoot, carrying the precious load on his shoulders for everyone to see, while William of Chartres depicts the sacred processions where "church prelates, members of the orders, the clergy, wearing silken capes, singing hoi praise in the highest, while our pious king would come behind, humbly following with his chief nobility and the whole of the people in devout adoration of these sacred relics²⁴". Less openly hagiographical works tend to stress the increased political prestige of the sacred objects, although strangely enough, Joinville does not mention the relics at all. William of Nangis has a brief account of the translation of the relics in the early-1240s, ascribing Louis' effort at receiving the precious objects to his desire to prolong the peace that his kingdom had been enjoying for several years²⁵. The Benedictine from Saint-Denis, who had recounted earlier how the loss of another invaluable relic in 1232 had been felt as a national calamity, is intent on showing that the relics, old and new, were a divine reward for the virtuous conduct of the king at the head of a sacred nation.

The most eloquent source on the ideological power of the relics in 13th-century Capetian France, however, is Matthew Paris, gifted with both temporal proximity to the events and geographical distance. The English Benedictine narrates in great detail the arrival of the Crown of Thorns in Paris in 1241, which he sees as one of the most conspicuous manifestations of the sacred connection between the French kingdom and "God, who loved, consoled and protected the kingdom of the Franks, with a special love, above all others". The ceremony he describes is truly extraordinary: the king climbs on a wooden structure built for the occasion, with his mother and brothers, and elevates the true cross, saying "this is the cross of the Lord", in front of a great crowd²⁶. The moment captured Paris's imagination, who drew a small vignette of the episode in the margin, showing the king on the wooden structure, holding out the Crown. The climb was of course reminiscent of both the elevation of the Host during Mass and of the ceremony of the coronation, when the king was raised on a throne to be seen by all. This must have been an extraordinarily

charismatic moment, with the king physically raised above the multitudes, holding toward the heaven the greatest token on earth of God's humanity and redeeming salvation plan.

The extraordinary qualities of king Louis were many, and providing the full list of them would amount to little more than rehearsing the medieval hagiographies, leaving the question still pending of the charismatic value of these qualities. Charisma is more than the sum of the virtues of a great man. To get at the charismatic nature of the king's political and spiritual prominence, one must now turn to the responses that the king elicited.

4. Charisma in the Eye of the Beholder?

One such tool of analysis is the reaction triggered by the perceived extraordinary nature of the charismatic personality. Indeed, the relationship between the latter and his entourage is one of the crucial aspects that has been taken from Weber's thinking on charisma, as the editors of the recent volume *Faces of Charisma* pinpointed, to the extent that the "crucial power of determining its meaning [is located] in the eye of the beholder" (Bedos-Rezak and Rust 2018, p. 8). What remains to be investigated is the depth and width of the imprint left by Louis' uncommon spiritual kingship on his contemporaries. The sources show that the response was perhaps more contrasted than the traditional presentation of a holy reign conveys.

There is no doubt that Louis' faith had a direct influence on people who were in contact with him. All of Louis' biographers note that the king had a gift with speech, apparently linked to the king's own love for good sermons and preaching. He was "very gracious with his words" (*gratiosissimus in loquendo*) writes Nangis²⁷. However, it should be noted that this disposition usually manifests itself in the sources when the king is with a small group of persons, if not face to face with one person only. In this reduced setting, Louis seemed to have had a remarkable capacity at setting people's hearts at ease. William of Chartres thus remembers how the king "aroused many hearts to dedicated worship", and how many a troubled soul was set at ease after a conversation with the king. Three decades later, Saint-Pathus expanded on this idea, claiming that the king had a unique way of appeasing people's hearts²⁸. In Matthew Paris's *Chronica*, the hostility between Louis and Henry evaporates in 1254 after the two kings shared some private personal conversation in Paris, a conversation which Henry would remember for a long time²⁹. One thing stands out clearly: Louis was not one for giving rousing speeches to large audiences. Accounts of public exhortations are extremely rare in the sources. Indeed, one of the only instances comes from the announcement of the second crusade, in 1267, as narrated by Geoffrey of Beaulieu. Louis gives a very effective and glorious exhortation, after the legate. But, as Beaulieu goes on to show, those barons who eventually took up the cross were either those "with whom the king had secretly discussed the project in advance", or those "whose hearts God alone had touched"³⁰. In other words, Louis' public exhortation achieved little! In Joinville's account of the same event, a complex passage because Joinville himself refused to go on crusade and suffered its failure from a distance, the king does not speak publicly, but simply organizes a sort of Crown-showing ceremony in the Sainte-Chapelle, bringing out the Crown of Thorns from the upper stage³¹. The king loved sermons and never missed an opportunity of exposing his court to the best preaching of his day. However, the king's voice itself—the one that so fascinated Le Goff in Joinville's text—was best heard in private³².

Direct hints at the influence of the king's personality on others are also found in the sources, beyond matters of faith. Both Chartres and Beaulieu note that the king commanded the respect and love of many, even though he did not give out great rewards and gifts³³. Another hint at the influence that Louis could exert over others comes from the affirmation that the king was a good reader of characters. He is someone who "quite often knew the character of men and what they would do", according to William of Chartres³⁴. Indeed, throughout Joinville's *Life*, Louis is an expert at creating interactions between people, never failing to control the situation altogether. The best-known example of this is the scene where he brings together Joinville, a proud nobleman from Champagne, with Robert de Sorbon,

a social climber from the intellectual elite, and allows both men to test their qualities and their weaknesses in each other's company³⁵. As Joinville himself confessed, the king could avoid taking the advice of others because he was exceptionally good at knowing men's hearts and desires³⁶. No doubt this faculty can be linked to the most celebrated quality of Louis, his capacity at brokering compromises and restoring peace between his unruly lords or foreign princes, as well as between himself and others. The king of France had unique mediation skills—an observation with implications which extend beyond the reach of this discussion—which allows us to ask the question: does having mediation skills necessarily entail charisma?

However, there is a more ambiguous aspect to the response that Louis' uncommon personality generated. Elements of unease, or frankly repelled reactions to the king's demonstrations of piety or charity, are scattered in the sources. Some of these criticisms and resistances have been listed by Le Goff, who highlighted the tension between Louis' faith and the royal dignitas, but insisted on Louis' reactions to his contradictors, concluding that the king generally managed to combine the two³⁷. A thorough survey of the source material suggests that in contemporary eyes, uncommon religious dispositions did not always tally with the expectations levied on royal leadership.

The king's exceptional displays of charity and piety were not always well received. For example, when he eats the food of an ulcerous poor man, minds are disgusted around him; when he tends to the bodies of dead soldiers, in Palestine, his fellow soldiers are revolted; and Beaulieu recounts how people would "grumble" at the king hearing two to four masses a day³⁸. In particular, the moral fight against blasphemy seems to have attracted mixed reactions. In his official *Gesta*, William of Nangis reports that when Louis ordered a blasphemer to be punished with hot iron on his lips, "many people cursed the king and whispered against him" (*moult de gens si maudirent le roi et murmurerent moult contre lui*)³⁹. Decades later, a similar memory crops up in Saint-Pathus's *Vie*, which quotes another blasphemer submitted to the punishment of the animal bowels around his head. A wellknown and respected burgess of Paris, the criminal seems to have attracted the sympathies of the king's close entourage, which advised against the punishment, but in vain⁴⁰. Perhaps the whispered rumors against the king also testify to the novelty of the legislation against blasphemy, which had begun in the 1230s, and followed new pontifical texts; however, the fact remains that Louis was the one who initiated the legislative clamp-down on blasphemy (Leveleux-Teixeira 2011). Nor did the king's fervent prayer life always fit in with court usages. At night, Louis was accustomed to spending time alone in prayer after dismissing his chaplains, leaving those waiting outside of his chambers "increasingly bored", writes Saint-Pathus, who has the most toned-down narrative of all⁴¹.

Beyond Louis' fervent prayer life, other aspects of his personality would strike his entourage as being at odds with the royal image. The king's physical appearance is the first of these. Most testimonies suggest that the king favored excessively plain clothing. The tendency is exaggerated after the crusade, when the king only wore plain clothes and adopted a severe regime of visual and culinary austerity, but it already crops up in Joinville's memories of a banquet in the early 1240s: "the king," he recounts, "was dressed in a tunic made of blue woollen cloth, a surcoat, a coat of red satin lined with fur, and he wore a cotton hat on the head, which looked horrible on him". The materials and the colors look royal enough, but the overall result is paler than the handsome king of Navarre, seated at the same table and wearing beautiful golden and satin tunics⁴². In this vein, it is probably significant that the only well-documented royal solemnity that we have is the English visit in Paris of 1254, when all the festivities were in honor of, and sometimes initiated by, the English royal court⁴³. Indeed, much more typical of Louis seems to have been the indifference he showed to people joyfully greeting him on his way back from Provence after the crusade. Beaulieu even says that the king was "displeased" with all the joy and reverence and "the honours of immense and superfluous expenses which he

saw", and that he hastened to Vincennes, fleeing Paris, to extinguish all the fun prepared for the night⁴⁴.

These anecdotes echo the well-known claim that Louis was a king who liked to live as a monk (un "roi-moine", says Le Goff) to the point that his confessor could claim that Louis had thought of retiring from the world within a monastery, only to be dissuaded from this drastic course of action by his wife Marguerite⁴⁵. The episode may be unlikely, but it certainly reflects the proximity that Louis had with the Cistercians and the Mendicants, who crowded the king's chapel and council⁴⁶. The king himself often adopted the lifestyle and gestures of a religious life. Saint-Pathus, for instance, shows Louis prostrated on the frozen floor of the chapel of Royaumont on the eve of the Nativity, 1254, like any other monk⁴⁷. At Saint-Mand , he would pray Compline with the monks, at Compi gne, he sits on the floor to listen to the preaching of a Dominican friar⁴⁸. These royal displays of monastic piety did not always generate admiration. In one anecdote among others compiled by Le Goff, an anonymous woman derides Louis as "the king of the friars"; and in a piece of student literature circulating in Paris in 1260, the king is mocked for favoring friars over knights, as if the former could do anything to defend his kingdom⁴⁹. Preaching energetically and leading the *vita apostolica*, the new Mendicant friars were certainly fascinating and charismatic, but the king's monkish fascination for them was not, in itself, charismatic.

Louis' charisma was not unequivocal. The fascination that the king's qualities exerted could not entirely suppress the growing unease at his exacerbated religiosity, particularly when it conflated with the expectations levied on the royal function. This hybrid style of kingship is precisely what William of Chartres remembers, when he tries to capture the paradox of the reign: "Many a person marveled—and the wicked grumbled—that one man, so humble, mild, not strong of body or harsh in approach, was able to rule peaceably over such a realm, over such and so many princes and mighty lords especially since he was hardly affable and generous with rewards for some people". In other words, Louis was a great ruler—even though he was not very charismatic⁵⁰!

There was, however, one moment when the tension between faith and politics was temporarily resolved: the seventh crusade (1248–1254), which proved to be a unique moment of charisma in the reign—although, yet again, not without its ambiguities.

5. The Crusade: The Redeeming Charisma of a Suffering King

The seventh crusade occupies a unique position in the life of Louis because it was a time and place when the king's two identities could be truly reconciled: his kingship and his call to be Christ-like.

The seventh crusade is often presented as the king's most glorious failure, in historiographical rhetoric which delights in the use of paradoxes. According to Jacques Le Goff, "the image of saint Louis is magnified by the catastrophe of the crusade. It is illuminated by the beauty of the dead man and goes through a process of death and transfiguration." Ultimately, the crusade proved an "opportunity of growth for Saint Louis, the royal function, his people and Christianity" (Le Goff 1996, pp. 207, 873–74). In turn, Cecilia Gaposchkin has showed how the suffering of the crusade became central to Louis' sanctity in 1270–1300, with the humiliation and the sacrifice of the king being the keys to the sanctification of what was, on the ground, a failed military venture (Gaposchkin 2016; Jordan 1979, p. 141). What remains to be seen is the nature of the contemporary response to the king on crusade, prior to its post-mortem celebration. Evidence suggests that the crusade offered a unique time window, where a temporal ruler could act as a lieutenant of Christ, briefly reconciling his royal and knightly calling, with his otherworldly vocation.

The view from England provides a good starting point. Writing, once again, without any prescience of the future canonization, Matthew Paris gives a vivid narrative of Louis' decision to take the cross in 1244, in which he sees a direct intervention of God. In that year, Louis fell gravely ill and was presumed dead. At the last moment, having taken a vow to take the cross if he were saved, he suddenly improves, "as if risen from the grave",

and recovers his health⁵¹. Paris is obsessed with this episode, which he mentions at least another five times in the space of seven years of chronicles: in 1245, a legate is dispatched “for the crusade that the lord called, with a spirit like one restored to life”; in 1246, Louis is the one whom “God truly resuscitated, or recalled miraculously from the doors of death”; and in 1247, the monk celebrates the king’s project to go “adore the remains of the Crucified, who had resuscitated him”. When several English nobles take the cross, Paris recalls again how “God had revived [the French king] so that he could take back his inheritance from the hands of his enemies”. Finally, in the Holy Land, Louis is called by his barons “our most Christian king miraculously risen from the dead⁵²”. Louis’ vow to take up the cross, if he was healed, is well-attested, but Paris’s insistence on a divine election in the matter is unique. William of Nangis, for instance, briefly says that “Our Lord” was moved to pity by the prayers of the French kingdom and healed the king, but then goes on to attribute Louis’ full recovery to Saint Denis, the patron-saint of his religious house⁵³. That was the official version, as inscribed in the *Grandes chroniques de France*. Where and how Matthew Paris formed his own account of the event is unclear, but the resulting narrative is that Louis was literally chosen by God to go on crusade, a story that resonates with the attributes of the charismatic leader in Weber’s definition.

On the ground charisma proved, again, ambiguous. In purely military terms, the king’s ability to exert a form of commanding influence over others is problematic in the narrative sources. Joinville, unsurprisingly, remembers episodes where Louis did cut a striking military figure, when for instance he arrives after the disaster of the Mansura to rescue his men after the death of his brother Robert of Artois. “Never,” writes Joinville, “have I seen such a handsome warrior, because he was standing clearly visible, from the shoulders up, above all of his men, with a golden helmet on his head and a German sword in his hand”. Thereafter, the king forces the admiration of his men by breaking free of six Turks who had seized his horse⁵⁴.

These excerpts have to be read alongside the more critical reports of indiscipline and unruliness which plagued the campaign. Joinville and Matthew Paris concur in relating how Louis would often not listen to the advice of his council, preferring to rely on his hot-blooded brother, Robert, count of Artois⁵⁵. He is often disobeyed, whether by one of his own men, Gautier de Chatillon, who meets a rash and untimely death, or by the Templars, who rush ahead to save one of their own, heedless of the king’s orders⁵⁶. He completely fails to maintain the peace between English and French soldiers, causing one of the leading English barons, William Longsword, to break off from the crusader contingent, after the king proved himself incapable of doing him justice. William’s parting words precisely question Louis’s royal leadership: “you are not king, when you cannot show justice to your own and punish the wrong-doers [. . .]. Such a king I will not serve again, such a lord, I will not follow⁵⁷.” Maintaining order amidst groups of hundreds of knights from all over Europe was certainly no small feat. Even the holiest of kings could not extinguish the individualistic pursuit of prowess and glory that characterized the world of knights. But the disillusion felt by the English baron and the uncoordinated movements of the crusading armies cannot simply be dismissed as the product of a turbulent chivalrous mindset. In the eyes of those that were under his command, Louis was not an especially charismatic war leader. Joinville himself does not shy away from criticizing the king on several occasions: in Damietta, where Louis changes the rules of booty-sharing, causing many to think themselves “ill-treated by the king who had broken the good old customs”; or, later on, when his attempt at blocking one arm of the Nile river backfires because the king had failed to survey the hydrographical configuration of the land⁵⁸.

A final word should also be said of the depressed atmosphere which settled after the failure of the crusade. Contrary to Joinville, who painted the sufferings and tribulations of the French armies “so that all those who hear may trust in God in their trials”—very much like most of the hagiographers—Matthew Paris has a view that predates the canonization and even the new austere kingship of the 1260s. While he remains favorably impressed by the efforts of Louis and the adventure of the crusade, he does not hide the feelings of

disillusion which engulfed the armies in the East and which reached the French kingdom. Just before the stormy exit of William Longsword, Paris recalls how some French barons grumbled and even started wavering in their faith. The captivity of the king, he says, brought shame and pain to all the Franks (Francorum) and to all the Christians at large, for “it is not said in other selection of histories that the king of France had been captured or defeated, before this one”. Once released, Louis goes to Palestine “*tristis, et inglorius*”⁵⁹. The comments from Saint-Albans are not a personal attack on Louis: they certainly reflect the bitterness of many fervent Christians, who had barely finished celebrating the early successes at Damiette before fate intervened. But they also convey the disaffection which must have been rampant in the immediate aftermath of the defeat, and which is toned down in those later narratives that have had the time to re-inject meaning in chaos.

This disenchanted atmosphere resonates with the occasional signs of reluctance in Louis’ closest entourage regarding the crusade. Blanche of Castile’s, Louis’ own mother, is said to have done everything in her power to discourage her son from his enterprise, including arranging an ecclesiastical ritual to absolve him from his vow. Coming from the person who nurtured the king’s faith and moral persona, the decision testifies, not only to the inner devastation of a mother fearing for a son, but also to the queen’s political judgment on the adventure⁶⁰. Did the king’s brothers, Charles and Alphonse, share the queen’s misgivings? Alphonse was deeply devoted to the crusade, to the point of engaging all his resources into the second crusade of the reign after 1266 (Chenard 2017, pp. 109–10). And yet again, on Egyptian ground, elements suggest that he and Charles of Anjou did not always endorse royal crusading policy. In 1252, for instance, rumors reported that Louis was considering giving back parts of his continental lands to Henry III of England in return for his support to the crusade. According to Matthew Paris, the decision generated the “contempt and hatred” of the king’s brothers, directly threatened in their landed possessions by the measure⁶¹. More generally, the fascination exerted by the royal posture of atonement does not seem to have been the common response within the royal family and closest entourage: as his wife, Queen Marguerite can only have been appalled at the king’s wish to resign his crown and join a monastery on his return from the crusade, as Beaulieu, the king’s confessor, reported⁶². A decade later, Joinville also passes a severe judgment on the king’s decision to embark on his second crusade, blaming him for recklessly abandoning the kingdom that God intended him to govern⁶³. The crusader king did not always manage to extend his charisma to his closest kin.

And yet, Louis’ charisma is not purely a later construct. In the midst of defeat and chaos, the French king grew into his most charismatic persona.

One of the most visible aspects of the king’s crusading charisma is reflected in Muslim eyes. For those who were, by definition, the ultimate others as well as the king’s captors for a month in 1251, Louis’ tranquil and confident bearing during his captivity spoke volumes. Geoffrey of Beaulieu, who was with the king during the crusade and wrote an early hagiography, recalls how the Sarrasins came to see their prisoner “as a most holy, truthful and wise man”, a sentiment that the sultan shares almost literally in Matthew Paris’s *Chronica*⁶⁴. William of Chartres also claims that Louis’s dignified captivity forced the admiration of his captors, to the extent that violent Sarasin soldiers, who were about to massacre their Christian prisoners, were suddenly tamed “at the sight of our glorious king, whom they greeted with hands in prayer”⁶⁵. Joinville, who was also present with the king during his captivity, goes even further in relating that the Turks who had just killed Sultan Al-Muazzam Turanshah (r. 1249–1250) of Egypt, thought of making Louis their sultan, but ultimately decided against their French candidate for fear that he would convert them all, so strong was his Christian faith . . .⁶⁶. Of course, the emphasis on the king’s dignified bearing throughout his humiliation may be a trait of the Christian sources, classically enlarging their hero through the eyes of his enemies. Indeed, as Yann Potin has shown, the Eastern narratives do not generally emphasize the same qualities in their royal prisoner⁶⁷. And yet, the fact remains that some Sarrasins came to the king for conversion, a

phenomenon that has recently been confirmed beyond the hagiographical topos by W. C. Jordan's thorough study on the king's converts in France (Jordan 2019).

To European eyes, the charisma of the captive and suffering king was not lost either. Beaulieu claims that all those who were with the king witnessed "how evenly, how wisely, he behaved in his gestures and responses for as long as he was in the hands [of the Egyptians]", leaving Chartres to paraphrase this in saying that all Christian soldiers were amazed at how confident and unperturbed the king was during his captivity⁶⁸. But perhaps the most stirring reaction to this charisma of defeat is that of Henry III of England, who met Louis in Paris just three months after his return from the East. The diplomatic situation was far from being benevolent, as Henry's vigorous taming of Gascony after six years of unruliness had created alarm on the borders of the neighboring French county of Toulouse and land of Agenais. With a French kingdom at a low point after the death of Queen Blanche in November 1252, the return of Louis had been partly prompted by the fear of a looming English threat. And yet, when Henry and Louis met, family connections were finally activated and strong ties of friendship were formed, largely, it seems, on the basis of the fascination exerted by the French king on his English cousin. In Matthew Paris's account of the royal visit, the two kings converse at length together, but one distressed exclamation by Louis seems to have made a strong impression on Henry: "My friend," says the French king, "it is not easy to express the depth and width of my suffering, in body and soul, for me, a pilgrim for the love of Christ. Everything has gone against me; but I give you thanks, Almighty. Being now back with myself and back within the depths of my heart, I rejoice more in the patience that God's grace gave me, than in what it would have brought me to dominate the world". The passage, in direct speech, reads like spiritual confidence and one can easily assume that those words are here because Henry III reported them back to Matthew Paris on one of his visits to St-Albans, so strong was the impression left on him by this new penitential aura that surrounded the French king⁶⁹.

The crusades were a unique moment in time, when the king's religiosity reenforced his military stature, and vice-versa. The English reaction to the newfound penitential aura of Louis, in 1254, shows that Louis had already transformed his military failure into an act of Christ-like sacrifice. The French king's charisma was a unique blend of royal authority and dignified suffering.

6. Conclusions

After his return from the Holy Land, the king would often recall the dark days of his captivity, "the shameful and outrageous things he had received overseas". His close entourage, however, felt the king "should not recall such things which took him back to his humiliation⁷⁰". The anecdote encompasses the paradoxes of Louis IX's charisma: an anointed king who strove to achieve the greatest humility without compromising the royal dignity, the French king walked a perilously thin line between sacrality and sanctity. The fascination he exerted over his contemporaries was real, as narrative and hagiographical sources show. But the extremely ardent faith that he professed and practiced did not exclusively generate positive responses, particularly where it was felt to encroach on the duties of the royal function.

This paper has confronted the written narratives on Louis to the Weberian definition of charisma, accepting the limits of an anachronic conceptual frame because the frame was felt to produce new thinking on Louis—too rapidly labelled charismatic because he became famous as a holy king. The Paulinian charisma has not been tackled here, and further discussion on this older and more entrenched definition of charisma is in order.

For now, the charisma of Louis IX raises the question of the different temporalities of the reception and construction of charisma, a field of investigation which remains open with Saint Louis and necessitates further investigation in the sources specifically produced after the canonization, such as papal bulls, religious sermons and liturgical prayers. The crusades represented a unique opportunity for the king to unite under his banner his two callings: to be a knightly leader and commander of men, and to walk in the footsteps of Christ's

otherworldly kingship. Even then, the military disaster and the political catastrophe of the captivity of the king created cracks in the king's reputation, cracks that his closest entourage did not like to hear recalled time and again. It is only after the death of king Louis that his drastic suffering blended with his royal identity harmoniously, when the memories of Joinville and the rhetoric of the papal chancery could run free, unhindered by the political consequences of a physically diminished king. During the king's lifetime, one must be content with the assessment of William of Chartres, who pinpointed the unusual nature of the aura of a king who drew people to him even though he did not have the external attributes of a great leader. Perhaps the best word to associate to Louis, then, is not so much charisma, or aura, as his "odor"—something subtle and evanescent, which makes a gradual impression on the senses, as opposed to the imposition of a vibrant personality.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Le Goff (1996, p. 826) (my translation). Aura and charisma are used here by Le Goff as near equivalents, although the two terms have different connotations. See Jaeger (2012).
- ² The distinction is discussed in Aurell (2022, pp. 607–37).
- ³ The classical study on Louis' kingship, and for a long time the only one, is Jordan (1979). Recent studies focusing on the government of Louis IX are (Dejoux 2014; Chenard 2017).
- ⁴ See, among others: Hardy (2018).
- ⁵ Guillaume de Chartres, De vita et miraculis S. Ludovici. In *Recueil des Historiens des Gaules et de la France*, 20, pp. 27–41, p. 27. The standard edition in English is Gaposchkin et al. henceforth *The Sanctity of Louis IX*, here at p. 131.
- ⁶ Le Goff has shown how Louis' model of royal sanctity differed from pre-Gregorian examples: Le Goff (1991, pp. 290–91). See also Folz (1984). On the shift of paradigm from high-born holy men to a generalized defiance towards the civil power, see Vauchez (1999, pp. 34, 67–70).
- ⁷ Le Goff (1996), see the introduction, the conclusion and the section devoted to the texts that have "constructed" Louis IX as Saint Louis, pp. 317–515.
- ⁸ For the Latin text of the *Vitae*, see: Geoffroi de Beaulieu, Vita et sancta conversatione piae memoriae Ludovici, quondam regis Francorum. In *Recueil des Historiens des Gaules et de la France*, 20, pp. 3–26; Guillaume de Chartres, De vita et miraculis S. Ludovici. In *ibid.*, pp. 27–41.
- ⁹ Guillaume de Saint-Pathus, *Vie de Saint Louis*, H.-F. Delaborde, Ed., Picard et fils: Paris, 1899; for an overall assessment of the work, Le Goff (1996, pp. 337–44).
- ¹⁰ The bibliography on Joinville is immense. The classical analysis of the work is the introduction by J. Monfrin in his edition of the *Life: Joinville, Vie de Saint Louis*, J. Monfrin Ed., Garnier: Paris, 1995. For an appreciation of the work, Le Goff (1996, pp. 473–99). For studies on the making of the *Vie de Saint Louis* and Joinville's historical involvement in the reign, see: (Contamine 1997; Gaucher-Rémond 2014).
- ¹¹ Matthieu Paris, *Chronica Majora*, H. R. Luard, Ed., 7 vol., London, Longman, 1872–1883. On Paris' s methods of writing, see (Vaughan 1958; Weiler 2009).
- ¹² The standard Latin edition of the *Gesta* is that contained in the *Recueil des Historiens des Gaules et de la France*, 20, pp. 312–465 (with its early 14th-century French vernacular translation). See (Delisle 1873). On the chronicle tradition at Saint-Denis, see (Spiegel 1978; Guenée 2016; Autrand et al. 1999).
- ¹³ The text is edited in Vincent de Beauvais, *Bibliotheca mundi Vincentii Burgundi, ex ordine Praedicatorum venerabilis episcopi Bellovacensis, Speculum quadruplex, naturale, doctrinale, morale, historiale*. Ex officina typographica Baltazaris Belleri: Douai, 1624, vol. 4, see especially pp. 1278–323.
- ¹⁴ Seals, in particular, create an image of power, as Duncan Hardy has showed with Sigismund of Luxembourg (Hardy 2018, p. 302). The surviving seals of Louis IX having yet to be surveyed and analyzed, a similar approach has not been taken here. An edition of the official acts of the king has long been in preparation. It is currently being supervised by Jean-François Moufflet, whose thesis catalogued some 2382 acts (Moufflet 2007). For the canonization documentation, see (Carolus-Barré 1994). Because the contemporary chronicles of Philippe Mouskès and of the ménestrel de Reims cannot be directly connected to the court and entourage of Louis IX, they have not been included in the survey.

- 15 Matthew Paris, *Chronica Majora*, 4, p. 476. The two drawings are London, BL, Cotton MS Nero D. I, f. 169v, and Cambridge, CCC MS 16I, f. ivr. A survey of the 1254 meeting in Paris can be found in [Carpenter \(2005\)](#).
- 16 *The Sanctity of Louis IX*, pp. 138, 145, 147 (Chartres).
- 17 Matthieu Paris, *Chronica Majora*, v. 5, p. 478. See also ([Dixon-Smith 2002](#), pp. 78–79, 86; [Aladjidi 2008](#)).
- 18 ([Le Goff 1996](#), pp. 628–34; [Dixon-Smith 2002](#), p. 88).
- 19 *The Sanctity of Louis IX*, p. 95 (Beaulieu); Saint-Pathus, *Vie de Saint Louis*, pp. 33–34.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 *The Sanctity of Louis IX*, p. 111 (Beaulieu). Saint-Pathus, *Vie de Saint Louis*, p. 27. Joinville, *Vie de saint Louis*, pp. 557–59.
- 22 As studied by [Dejoux \(2014\)](#), who notably showed that the documentation of the inquiries was never meant to reach the king himself or to be kept as administrative records, only to be used for financial and administrative settlements towards the plaintiffs, thus downplaying the charismatic impact of the procedure on the population of the kingdom.
- 23 Joinville, *Vie de saint Louis*, pp. 179–80. On Vincennes, see ([Dejoux 2020](#)).
- 24 *The Sanctity of Louis IX*, pp. 101 (Beaulieu) and 133 (Chartres).
- 25 Guillaume de Nangis. *Gesta*. In *Recueil des historiens des Gaules et de la France*, 20, pp. 326–327 and for comment, [Pisiak \(2021\)](#), pp. 315, 342).
- 26 Matthew Paris, *Chronica Majora*, 4, p. 90–92; and for comment [Pisiak \(2021\)](#), p. 246).
- 27 Guillaume de Nangis, *Gesta*. In *Recueil des historiens des Gaules et de la France*, 20, p. 400.
- 28 *The Sanctity of Louis IX*, p. 132 (Chartres). Saint-Pathus, *Vie de saint Louis*, p. 19.
- 29 Matthew Paris, *Chronica Majora*, 5, p. 482.
- 30 *The Sanctity of Louis IX*, p. 115 (Beaulieu).
- 31 Joinville, *Vie de saint Louis*, p. 585.
- 32 ([Le Goff 1996](#), p. 479). For instances of Louis enjoying good preaching: Joinville, *Vie de saint Louis*, p. 537; Saint-Pathus, *Vie de Saint Louis*, pp. 21, 37.
- 33 *The Sanctity of Louis IX*, pp. 94 (Beaulieu) and 144 (Chartres).
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 139 (Chartres).
- 35 Joinville, *Vie de saint Louis*, pp. 161–65.
- 36 Joinville, *Vie de saint Louis*, p. 547.
- 37 Le Goff, *Saint Louis*, pp. 814–25.
- 38 *The Sanctity of Louis IX*, p. 96.
- 39 Guillaume de Nangis. *Gesta*. In *Recueil des historiens des Gaules et de la France*, 20, p. 399.
- 40 Saint-Pathus, *Vie de Saint Louis*, p. 27.
- 41 Saint-Pathus, *Vie de Saint Louis*, p. 53.
- 42 Joinville, *Vie de saint Louis*, pp. 205, 545.
- 43 Matthieu Paris, *Chronica Majora*, 5, pp. 478–82.
- 44 *The Sanctity of Louis IX*, p. 108 (Beaulieu).
- 45 The episode has an echo in Saint-Pathus, who claims that Louis thought about becoming a priest should his wife die; *Vie de Saint Louis*, p. 50.
- 46 [Le Goff \(1996\)](#), pp. 331–32, 823). On Louis' connection with the Friars, see ([Little 1964](#), pp. 125–48; [Field 2012](#), pp. 208–23).
- 47 Saint-Pathus, *Vie de Saint Louis*, pp. 40–41.
- 48 Saint-Pathus, *Vie de Saint Louis*, pp. 51–52.
- 49 [Le Goff \(1996\)](#), p. 823). Quote (from Ruteboeuf) in [Little \(1964\)](#), p. 125).
- 50 *The Sanctity of Louis IX*, p. 144 (Chartres).
- 51 Matthew Paris, *Chronica Majora*, 4, p. 397.
- 52 Matthew Paris, *Chronica Majora*, 4, pp. 488, 561, 608; 5, pp. 1, 108.
- 53 Guillaume de Nangis, *Gesta*. In *Recueil des historiens des Gaules et de la France*, 20, p. 346.
- 54 Joinville, *Vie de saint Louis*, pp. 283, 287.
- 55 Joinville, *Vie de saint Louis*, pp. 275–77, Matthieu Paris, *Chronica Majora*, 5, p. 151.
- 56 Joinville, *Vie de saint Louis*, pp. 251, 257.
- 57 Matthew Paris, *Chronica Majora*, 5, pp. 132–34.
- 58 Joinville, *Vie de saint Louis*, p. 263.
- 59 Matthieu Paris, *Chronica Majora*, 5, pp. 158, 175, 280.

- ⁶⁰ (Grant 2016, pp. 129–33), and Joinville, *Vie de saint Louis*, pp. 54–55.
- ⁶¹ Matthieu Paris, *Chronica Majora*, 5, p. 281.
- ⁶² Geoffroi de Beaulieu, *Vita et sancta conversatione*. In *Recueil des Historiens des Gaules et de la France*, 20, p. 7 (latin).
- ⁶³ Joinville, *Vie de saint Louis*, p. 587.
- ⁶⁴ Geoffroi de Beaulieu. *Vita et sancta conversatione*. In *Recueil des Historiens des Gaules et de la France*, 20, p. 16. (Latin). Matthew Paris, *Chronica Majora*, 5, p. 202. See also p. 425.
- ⁶⁵ *The Sanctity of Louis IX*, pp. 135–37 (Chartres).
- ⁶⁶ Joinville, *Vie de saint Louis*, p. 361.
- ⁶⁷ Potin, Y. Saint Louis l’Africain. Histoire d’une mémoire inversée. *Afrique & histoire*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2003, pp. 23–74.
- ⁶⁸ *The Sanctity of Louis IX*, p. 101 (Beaulieu), p. 136 (Chartres).
- ⁶⁹ See Note 29 above.
- ⁷⁰ Saint-Pathus, *Vie de Saint Louis*, p. 25.

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