

The Norman Saga: The Bias of the Norman Myth

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Introduction

Histories and chronicles played a crucial part in the dissemination of the Norman myth throughout Europe. It all started with Hrolfr¹, later known as Rollo, the first Duke of Normandy. His Dudo de St. Quentin, William of Jumieges, Orderic Vitalis and Geoffrey of Monmouth are some of the examples of authors responsible for this dissemination. The Normans left a legacy in History as conquerors, they invaded Sicily, they invaded England changing the history of that country forever. However they also left the legacy of storytelling. Many of their Histories were more of a reflection of the times it was written and their actors than of the history of the Norman itself. By sponsoring some of the writers, the Dukes of Normandy created what today is called the Norman myth where it can be argued that a lot of the historical facts were twisted to put the Dukes into a more heroic and glorious light, which sometimes distanced them from reality. So, on this essay it will be argued that yes, the histories did play a biased role in the dissemination of the Norman Myth.

Making the Norman Myth

The *Gesta Normannorum* by Dudo of St. Quentin indicated the concept of the Norman Myth. The Text was written around the years of 996 to 1015² Sponsored by Richard I and had finishing warrant during the ruling years of Richard II³ It can be argued that Dudo invented the concept of the Norman myth. His text was full of similarities with the literary devices many times used in Hagiographies such as the idea of predestination when it was presented in

¹ Crouch, Dave. *The Normans: The History of a Dynasty*. (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2002) p.1

² Dudo St. Quentin, *Gesta Normannorum*, ed and transl. Lifshitz Felice (Fordham University, 1998)

³ Natario Thiago, *The Construction of an Identity in Early Normandy: Ethnogenesis of the Gens Normannorum (A construção de uma Identidade na Primeira Normandia: A Etnogênese da Gens Normannorum)* Scandia: Journal of Medieval Norse Studies. p.404

the story that Rollo was destined to rule Normandy. It also had some significant influence on classical works of ancient Rome. All those attributes help to build a great story, but it pushes the text even further away from reality.

I have disposed to send it to your majesty so that the falsities might be lopped off; and if there be any truthfulness in it, it be confirmed by your authority in order that the marvellous recompenser of rewards who has placed the exceptional marquis Richard in the paradise of his glory, might establish you adorned with an everlasting garland among the choruses of all the saints as a senator of the heavenly court, just as he has raised you up as a pillar of his holy church.⁴

Dudo's work is a reflection of his time and the influence of the Norman rulers over their own narratives than of what actually happened when Rollo became the first Duke of Normandy. When analyzing Dudo's from the understanding to whom he was writing to, is it possible to comprehend that the dukes of Normandy wanted to leave a legacy that was not fully Frankish, and not fully Viking, but something unique. However it is known that the actual history did not happen the way Dudo described. Rollo's invasion of Normandy was not predestination but merely a smart action during a time of instability and violence⁵. The real deeds of Rollo were much less heroic and christianized than when compared to the story Dudo created. Nevertheless, it does not mean that they were not impressive or not relevant to European history. But, it removes that the Normans had an idea of how they wanted to be perceived in history, and they made sure that what was written about them fit those wishes, creating the Norman Myth.

⁴ Dudo St. Quentin, *Gesta Normannorum* [Preface and reasons for writing], ed. and transl. Lifshitz Felice (Fordham University, 1998)

⁵ Crouch, Dave. *The Normans: The History of a Dynasty*. (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2002) p. 1

Following the works of Dudo of St. Quentin there was William of Jumieges. Not a lot is known about him nowadays apart from the fact that he was a monk of Jumieges and wrote his work probably as a continuation of the works of Dudo and by the request of William I, also known as William the Conqueror, later in the 12th century it had additions made by Orderic Vitalis and Robert Torigni⁶. The *Gesta Normannorum Ducum* was probably written around the 1050's and the work glorified the deeds of the Norman Conquest of England⁷, adding to the idea of the Norman Myth.

1. Since in the preceeding part, we have exalted with worthy tokens of praise the most precious jewel of Christ, Richard, duke of the Normans, and added him as befitting to the ring of the eternal king, it seems worthwhile that the carbuncle originating from the first as in name, so in the eulogy of famous virtues should occupy the next set-ting: Richard, his son, greatly distinguished by his military victories and certainly not less worthy of praise and exaltation. He, by his famous name scattering the beams of his brilliance into the several corners of the world, within the boundaries of his own duchy vastly increased good works and so made the Norman fatherland an almost united church of Christ.⁸

This passage is a great example of the bias that the text might have possessed. It can clearly be interpreted as a continuation of Dudo's work not just because of the theme in contingent to tell the story of the Norman dukes but also in the style of always making sure to favor the dukes. It also kept the idea of dynasty and control over their territory, their power was so well established that it made it possible for them to expand their lands. William of

⁶ Albu Emily, *The Normans in Their Histories* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2001), p. 51

⁷ Albu Emily, *The Normans in Their Histories* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2001), p. 51

⁸ The *Gesta Normannorum Ducum of William of Jumieges Orderic Vitalis and Robert Torigni Volume II* ed, M.C. Van Houts Elisabeth (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) p. 7

Jumiege, Orderic Vitalis and Robert Torigni helped keep the Norman myth alive once more fitting the true facts to the format of their text, which favored the Norman Lords. The text is then once more a reflection of their time and the influences around them, then of what actually could have happened in the event described in the text.

William of Malmesbury could be considered as one of the least biased writers when addressing the Norman Myth. Born probably in 1095 or 1096⁹ William of Malmesbury was a monk and historian, responsible for many works such as *Gesta Regum Anglorum* (Deeds of the English Kings), *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum* (Deeds of the English Bishops), and *Historia Novella* (New History). *Historia Novella*, was a three book collection that continued his works and followed historical events from 1128 to 1142 until the period of the Anarchy during the reign of King Stephen¹⁰. However, the text analyzed in this essay will be the *Historia Novella*, that presents some rather interesting aspects.

[...]my part, as the blood of each people flows in my veins, I shall steer a middle course; where I am certified of his good deeds, I shall openly proclaim them; his bad conduct I shall touch upon lightly and sparingly, though not so as to conceal it; so that neither shall my narrative be condemned as false, nor will I brand that man with ignominious censure, almost the whole of whose actions may reasonably be excused, if not commended. Wherefore I shall willingly and carefully relate such particulars of him as may be matter of incitement to the indolent, of example to the enterprising, useful to the present age, and pleasing to posterity.¹¹

⁹ Winterbottom, Michael (2010). "William of Malmesbury and the Normans". *The Journal of Medieval Latin*. 20: 70–77. doi:10.1484/J.JML.1.102101.

¹⁰ Davis, Henry William Carless (1911). "William of Malmesbury". In Chisholm, Hugh (ed.). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Vol. 28 (11th ed.). Cambridge University Press. pp. 675–676

¹¹ Malmesbury William, *A History of the Norman Kings (1066-1125) with the Historia Novella or History of His Own Times (1126-1142) Volume III.-Part I.* transl. Rev. John Sharpe, ed. Joseph Stevenson (University College, Durham: The church Historians of England, 1854) p.217

Starting with this passage from the very beginning of the text. Unlike the other authors analyzed in this essay William of Malmesbury left it clear to the reader that he did care about being objective and realistic with his writing. Addressing the bad deeds and the good deeds of the rulers which he was telling the story. This presents an improvement in the concept of the Norman myth, which even though this work fits in this group it separates from the other as a maybe more trustworthy source of the time. However, the text still presents some characteristics that match other works surrounding the idea of the Norman myth.

[...] had by her this boy, named after his great-great-grandfather, William, whose future glory was portended to his mother by a dream, wherein she imagined her intestines were stretched out, and extended over the whole of Normandy and England; and at the very moment, also, when the infant burst into life and touched the ground, he filled both hands with the rushes strewed upon the floor, firmly grasping what he had taken up. This prodigy was joyfully witnessed by the women gossiping on the occasion; and the midwife hailed the propitious omen, declaring that the boy would be a king.¹²

It is possible to see in this passage that the story device of predestination and prophetic dreams has returned. It is also an interesting contrast with what William of Malmesbury had previously said about trying to be realistic. He clearly used some inspiration from previous texts. And by using those devices once more he strengthened the Norman Myth and the solidification of the Norman dynasty as a force of God, as something that was meant to happen. Especially because he was talking about William the Conqueror, who was born a bastard. So, by adding this predestination and the prophetic dream to the story it only helped

¹² Malmesbury William, *A History of the Norman Kings (1066-1125) with the Historia Novella or History of His Own Times (1126-1142) Volume III.-Part I.* transl. Rev. John Sharpe, ed. Joseph Stevenson (University College, Durham: The church Historians of England, 1854) p.218

William to strengthen his and his descendants' claim to the throne of Normandy and later England. This contradicts the previous words said by Malmesbury, but also showed how the idea of Norman Myth was still embedded in historical writing in Malmesbury's time.

Conclusion

Histories written about the Normans in the Middle ages were responsible for building the idea of the Norman Myth, a concept full of historical bias, outside influence and different influences such as Hagiographies and Classical works of Ancient Rome. Predestination, prophetic dreams, heroic deeds. All those literary devices helped authors such as Dudo of St. Quentin with *Gesta Normannorum*, William of Jumieges, Orderic Vitalis, Robert Torigni with *Gesta Normannorum Ducum*, and William of Malmesbury with *Historia Novella* to create histories that fit the request of the Norman Dukes and later, the Kings of England. However, it is easy to see nowadays that most of what was written in their works can not be trusted as a historical source. It can be trusted as an example of the writing style of their times, and how far was the influence of the monarchy in history. The Normans, by sponsoring texts that had to fit in the narrative of them being portrayed as glorious and important heroes, serves to us to understand their desire for an identity and a legacy as a powerful, well established dynasty that was able to conquer different parts of Europe and had their history live on. It shows us the desire to be unique among the Frankish and Norse, blending both cultures and creating something new and worth studying. The idea of the Norman Myth although quite biased it still represents the beliefs, practices and culture of those times in the Middle Ages. The Normans are a great example that Medieval historical writing was many times mixing fact and fiction, but that it is still an undeniable valuable source of research if one knows how to interpret.

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