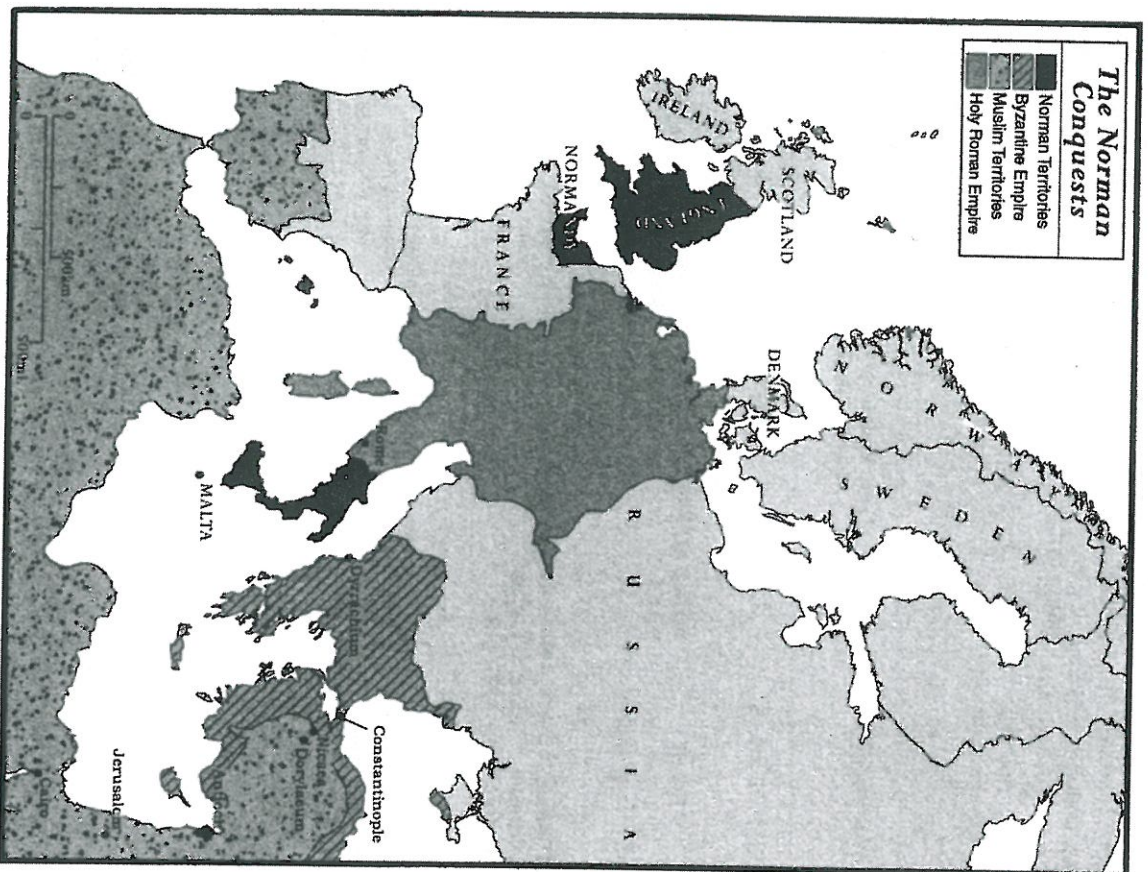


E. Atkov, the Normans in their Histories: Propaganda, Myth & Subversion

E. Atkov (Westminster, 2001)



Introduction

No good song is ever sung about a traitor. All peoples curse the apostate and the betrayer as a wolf, and judge him worthy of hanging, and they tie him on the gallows if they can and brand him with every sort of abuse and insult.¹

(Orderic Vitalis, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.314)

THROUGHOUT the ninth century, vikings assailed the Frankish coast, burning and looting centers of Carolingian civilization and learning. In 911 King Charles the Simple, great-great-grandson of Charlemagne, ceded Rouen at the mouth of the Seine to Rollo, the leader of one marauding band. Charles hoped that these vikings, blessed with land and the salvation of Christianity, would keep their pagan brethren away from the Seine and away from Paris. The Rouen vikings, however, sometimes did just the opposite, calling in their Scandinavian kin to threaten Paris when the French king menaced them. Less predictably, the counts of Rouen became the dukes of *Normannia*/Normandy and forged a powerful domain, with far-flung interests and connections. Rollo's great-great-grandson conquered England; Norman nobles wrested southern Italy from Lombards and Byzantines, and eventually defeated the Arabs to create the Kingdom of Sicily; and on the First Crusade, Normans under Bohemond took Antioch and made a Norman principality in Syria.

Under Rollo's descendants Normandy survived at the center of this expansion for nearly three centuries until 1204, when the French King Philip Augustus snatched the ducal title and authority from the English King John.² Those remarkable three hundred years begged for historians not only to cele-

¹ For Orderic's *Ecclesiastical History*, references are to volume and page number in the edition of Majorie Chibnall (Oxford, 1969–80), 6 vols. (hereafter cited as *EH*). Except where indicated, all translations are my own.

² Henry I (duke from 1106 to 1135) died without a legitimate surviving son, but direct descent from Rollo continued through Henry's sister, Adela, whose son Stephen claimed his grandfather's dominion over both England and Normandy. Count Geoffrey V of Anjou challenged Stephen, claiming sovereignty on behalf of his wife, Henry's daughter Matilda. By 1144 Geoffrey had overrun Normandy and entered Rouen, where the archbishop declared him duke. But in 1150 Geoffrey gave Normandy to Matilda's seventeen-year-old son Henry. Upon Stephen's death in 1154, the young man ascended the English throne as Henry II. The years of Geoffrey's regency (1144–50) thus interrupted the lordship of Rollo's heirs, who nonetheless regained control with Henry II, great-grandson of William the Conqueror by the female line.

brate Norman achievements but also to verify the legitimacy of Norman princes and to authenticate the rights of Normans to inhabit and dominate their lands. Many writers took up the challenge, beginning in the late tenth century with Dudo of Saint-Quentin, a cleric and ambassador from Verdun who claimed a commission from Duke Richard I and his son Richard II. This series concluded with the twelfth-century vernacular histories of Wace and Benoît, supported by King Henry II of England. In between came a wide variety of works, including William of Jumièges' epitome and continuation of Dudo, William of Poitiers' panegyric of William the Conqueror, William of Apulia's verses on the conquests in southern Italy, the anonymous *Gesta Francorum* ("The Story of the Franks") by a crusader who set out for Jerusalem with Bohemond's army, and the masterwork of the monk Orderic Vitalis, the *Historia Ecclesiastica* ("Ecclesiastical History").³

These histories employ various styles, poetry or prose or a mixture of the two, in Latin that may be classicizing or inspired by Christian devotional texts, or in the French verse of emerging romance. Despite such diversity, these histories form a distinct literary tradition marked not only by their common focus on the Normans but also by their tendency to mine one another for data and inspiration. For nearly two hundred years Norman historians wrote their own revisions and continuations of the *Gesta Normannorum Ducum* ("Story of the Norman Dukes") begun by Dudo.⁴ Although neither the author of the *Gesta Francorum* nor the chroniclers of Normans in Italy and Sicily knew that tradition, their works nonetheless became an integral part of it when twelfth-century historians like Orderic and Wace wove their tales into pan-Norman narratives.

Because Normans left a voluminous historical record in a virtually continuous sequence, it should be easy to answer the question, "Who were the Normans?" But this problem continues to vex Norman scholarship, provoking heated debate.⁵ Today historians still puzzle over these questions:

- 3 The word *Gesta* meant "deeds" or "exploits" in Classical Latin, and came to acquire the sense of "heroic story" or simply "story" [J. F. Niemeyer, *Mediæ Latinitatis Lexicon Minus* (Leiden, 1976), 467].
- 4 Elisabeth M. C. van Houts, "The *Gesta Normannorum Ducum*: A History without an End," *Battle* 3 (1981), 106–18. Leah Shopkow, *History and Community: Norman Historical Writing in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Washington, D.C., 1997), explores a broad range of works written in Latin on the history of Normandy.
- 5 The seminal work is R. H. C. Davis, *The Normans and their Myth* (London, 1976). See also G. A. Loud, "The 'Gens Normannorum' – Myth or Reality?" *Battle* 4, ed. R. Allen Brown (Woodbridge, 1982), 104–16, 204–209; David Bates, *Normandy before 1066* (London and New York, 1982); Eleanor Searle, *Predatory Kinship and the Creation of Norman Power, 840–1066* (Berkeley, 1988); Cassandra Potts, "Aique unum ex diversis gentibus populum effecit: Historical Tradition and the Norman Identity," *Anglo-Norman Studies* 18, ed. Christopher Harper-Bill (Woodbridge, 1996), 139–52; Ian Short, "Tan Angli quam Franci: Self-Definition in Anglo-Norman England," *Anglo-Norman Studies* 10 (1987), 72–75. Thomas, "The Norman Conquest and the

What criteria marked a person as a Norman, and what were the indisputable qualities of Normanness? How Scandinavian did Normans remain? How Frankish did they become? How different were they from their neighbors? And finally, since Normans were so successful at conquest, why did they then disappear as a distinctive ethnicity by the early thirteenth century?⁶

A few Norman historians, especially beholden to their patrons or awestruck by conquest, defined Normans through the broad strokes of panegyric. So William of Poitiers celebrated the hero who conquered England, while Amatus, Malaterra, and Ralph of Caen, respectively, commemorated victors over southern Italy, Sicily, and Syria. Their histories transformed Normans into the champions of Christendom. But most historians of the Normans subverted the text of achievement and legitimization with subtexts of treacherous leaders and a lawless society. From Dudo to Wace, monks and courtiers alike expressed similar disillusionment with the Normans and their princes.

Although they had read neither Dudo nor his successors, observers like William of Apulia and the anonymous author of the *Gesta Francorum* nevertheless reached the same conclusions. Their Normans can be fearsome warriors, like *Hugo Insanus* ("Mad Hugh"), the crusader who defended a fortress tower single-handedly against a Turkish attack, or like another Norman named Hugh, who greeted a Byzantine envoy at Melfi, in southern

Haskins Society Journal 10 (forthcoming). Two volumes by David C. Douglas offer an overview of Norman history that builds on the classic studies of Ferdinand Chalandon, Charles Homer Haskins, and Carl Erdmann: *The Norman Achievement, 1050–1100* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969) and *The Norman Fate 1100–1154* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1976).

- 6 Charles Homer Haskins opened the debate with this positive assessment of Norman assimilation [*The Normans in European History* (New York, 1966; reprint, Boston and New York, 1915), 247 (page citations are to the reprint edition)]: "Wherever they went, they showed a marvellous power of initiative and of assimilation; if the initiative is more evident in England, the assimilation is more manifest in Sicily. The penalty for such activity is rapid loss of identity; the reward is a large share in the general development of civilization. If the Normans paid the penalty, they also reaped the reward, and they were never more Norman than in adopting the statesmanlike policy of toleration and assimilation which led to their ultimate extinction." On the submersion of Norman identity in post-Conquest England, see Hugh M. Thomas's forthcoming work on assimilation and ethnic identity in England after the Norman Conquest. In southern Italy, as Joanna Drell has shown in her study of charters from the Principality of Salerno ["Cultural Syncretism and Ethnic Identity: The Norman 'Conquest' of Southern Italy and Sicily," *Journal of Medieval History* 25 (1999), 187–202], aristocrats sometimes identified themselves as Normans, but they did so in dwindling numbers through the twelfth century. Noting that "the chief effect" of the Norman invasion of southern Italy "was to add further elements to an already disintegrated land," G. A. Loud ["How 'Norman' was the Norman Conquest of Southern Italy?" *Medieval Studies* 25, ed. Antonia Gransten (Nottingham, 1981), 30] even asked "... how far was it really a conquest?"

Italy, by knocking his horse out from under him with one bare-fisted punch.⁷ But Normans could also play a subtler game, surprising their enemies with a more artful ruse. The histories recount many victories achieved by treachery. A favorite Norman stratagem was the feigning of illness or death in order to escape danger or to penetrate a stronghold. Duke Richard I, Robert Guiscard, Roger I of Sicily, and Bohemond all claim some version of this legend.⁸ The Norman hero appears as trickster as often as warrior.

Norman historians perpetuate the image that deceit as much as ferocity contributed to their successes. In hostile territory, when their enemies outnumbered them, trickery could bring about the victory that arms could not. But once the battles end, what kind of citizens do the tricksters become, and what kind of societies will they build? According to their own historians, the Norman people were unruly, their communities volatile. Indeed, the very traits that had ensured their conquests worked against the creation of stable and satisfying societies, exacting an emotional toll from people who could neither trust nor be trusted. If we take Norman histories as the benchmark, the evidence suggests that the interior life of Normans was as unsettled and unsettling as the societies they created. In their histories, Normans come to exhibit varying degrees of malaise, pessimism, and anxiety over the inability of warriors and tricksters to become stable rulers or liegemen.

Are these histories or the men and women they describe any different from others in the medieval west? Until more of those histories are studied as literary works, I cannot answer that question. This book treats only the Norman tradition. It may help to remember, however, that all medieval historians wrote with ethical intent, in this resembling their Roman predecessors. Sallust (86–35 B.C.E) shaped his *Jugurtha* and *Catiline* to expose the moral decline of Roman society. His ethical stance influenced later Roman historians including Tacitus, who himself attacked the criminality of the Julio-Claudian emperors.

Medieval writers rarely knew those Roman histories but found their own ethical models in the Old and New Testaments, which present patterns of a fortunate human condition devolving into betrayal through sin, followed by “punishment, exile, and the hope of restoration.”⁹ Augustine pioneered the way for the new Christian historians who considered it their duty to unmask

evil and highlight redemptive virtue. So Gregory of Tours denounced the cruelty of the rulers in chaotic Merovingian Gaul while a generation earlier, Jordanes played a more subtle game in criticizing the Goths. In an exemplary study of history as literature, Walter Goffart has shown how Jordanes’ habit of evasion undercuts the formal praise of his narrative.¹⁰ Jordanes’ *Getica* (“Gothic History”) relegates the greatest Gothic lords, even Theodoric, to minor roles and thus depreciates their accomplishments. Countless medieval historians besides the Normans honed their craft by reading Jordanes.

If Normans were not alone among medieval peoples in displaying violence or treachery, Northmen and the first Normans were ahead of the curve, precipitating the collapse of law and order in late tenth-century France, which Thomas Bisson aptly calls “a crisis of fidelity in the millennial generation.”¹¹ By the example of their success, first Northmen and then Normans schooled their neighbors in the fine art of violence as a strategy as well as a way of life. Although treason and deception are important themes in much of medieval literature and thus not the exclusive possession of Normans, these themes held particular resonance for Norman historians, who sought the social origins of this pathology among their own people and identified stages of its development.¹²

When I began to study the Norman histories, I simply planned to survey their own tradition from its beginnings in the epic history of Dudo to its final flowering in the vernacular romance histories of Wace and Benoît. My aim was to present a literary interpretation of Latin and Old French texts which have not always been read with attention to language and tone. I wanted to

¹⁰ *The Narrators of Barbarian History (4.D. 550–800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon* (Princeton, 1988), especially 62–68.

¹¹ Thomas N. Bisson, “The ‘Feudal Revolution,’” *Past and Present* 142 (1994), 27. This brilliant article probes the revolutionary changes in patterns of violence and power in western Europe, from the tenth century to the twelfth, showing how “wilful, exploitative lordship, including that addicted to violence, became an institution even as it was discredited in the eleventh century,” until such bad lordship became normative and expected in the twelfth. Concerning the violence attributed to vikings, Niels Lund has argued that vikings distinguished themselves *not* for their plundering of Christian Europe, a practice established before they entered the scene, but rather for their success at a game played with gusto by their southern neighbors [“Allies of God or Man? The Viking Expansion in a European Perspective,” *Viator* 20 (1989), 45–59]. J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, on the other hand, assessed the viking incursions by the panic they inspired in their Christian victims and the devastation they wrought on towns, countryside, and people of Francia [“The Vikings in Francia,” in *Early Medieval History* (Oxford, 1975), 217–36]. From the evidence in Frankish sources, Wallace-Hadrill concluded that contemporaries were not exaggerating when they claimed unpunished savagery in viking attacks. As we shall see, the vikings’ Norman heirs refined viking models to terrorize their own foes and each other as well.

¹² On the theme of treason in medieval literature, see Emanuel J. Mickel, *Ganelon, Treason and the Chanson de Roland* (University Park, P.A. and London, 1989). Mickel places Ganelon’s treason trial within its historical, literary, and legal context.

⁷ Anonymous, *Gesta Francorum et aliorum Hierosolimitanorum*, ed. and trans. Rosalind Hill (London, 1962), 8.20 (hereafter cited as *Gesta Francorum*); Geoffrey Malaterra, *De rebus gestis Rogerii Calabriae et Siciliae Comitis et Roberti Guiscardi ducis fratris eius*, ed. Ernesto Pontieri, 2nd ed., vol. 5, pt. 1 (Bologna, 1925–28), 1.9 (hereafter cited as *Historia Sicula*).

⁸ Marguerite Mathieu has reviewed instances of this myth in her edition of William of Apulia, *La geste de Robert Guiscard* (Palermo, 1961), 46–52.

⁹ Susan M. Shwartz, “The Founding and Self-betrayal of Britain: An Augustinian Approach to Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*,” *Medievalia et Humanistica* n.s. 10, ed. Paul Maurice Clogan (Totowa, N.J., 1981), 33–53, at p. 35.