

Current Approaches to Medieval Historiography

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Abstract

In recent decades a variety of approaches have been adopted to wring as much meaning as possible out of medieval chronicles and narrative histories. Moving past the use of these texts merely as source material to reconstruct the history of the Middle Ages, scholars have begun to focus to an increasing extent on topics such as authorial intention, social and political function, audience, and textual transmission. This essay charts the development of new approaches to medieval historiography, focusing on: 1) the analysis of fictional elements in history; 2) the relationship between politics and history; and 3) the return to manuscripts as primary sites of historical communication.

Introduction

The construction of the past arises out of the needs of the present. This statement, while admittedly broad, and possibly self-evident, is nonetheless a fair summary of the current direction of scholarship on medieval historiography. That the past was – and is – constructed by historical texts, rather than simply reflected in them, is no longer seriously in doubt, though historians continue to disagree about how this should affect our exploitation of written sources. Nor, in most cases, did the impetus for committing an account of events to writing in the Middle Ages stem from a general desire to preserve the memory of the past for posterity. Rather, history tended to be written in response to specific circumstances and intended for specific audiences. It could be nakedly polemical and designed to serve the immediate, practical ends of patrons or institutions, or written simply to exist in an abstract way, but in every case it was intended to concretize a particular vision of the past and give it the reality and (semi-) permanence that only a written text could provide.

The generic features of medieval historiography – didactic moralism, a belief in divine providence as the guiding hand of history, a ready acceptance of the miraculous, a focus on warfare, politics, and the Church to the exclusion of almost everything else – have always posed a challenge to historians seeking to write the history of the Middle Ages. In the first half of the 19th century, the exploitation of written documents – including narrative sources like histories – became the methodological basis for the new *Geschichtswissenschaft* developed by Leopold von Ranke and his disciples.¹ To exploit these sources as the basis for an accurate reconstruction of the past, it was necessary to strip away rhetorical amplifications and legendary accretions, and to try to control for obvious partisanship and bias. Medieval histories were to be exploited as *Quellenmaterial* above all; the intentions, mentalities, and social context of their authors were relegated to secondary consideration.

The dominant trend in recent scholarship, by contrast, has been to move away from viewing the text primarily as a source from which to extract historical data and to focus instead on understanding medieval histories in their own literary, social, and political contexts. To a degree that is not always appreciated, this shift in emphasis has only been possible because of the work of previous generations of positivist scholars who toiled to create the editions and historical

studies (embodied in series like the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* and the *Regesta imperii* in Germany, the Rolls Series in England, and the *Recueil des historiens des Gaules et de la France*) that are indispensable to current scholarship on the Middle Ages.² Only after this foundation of scholarship had been laid could historians begin to take a more nuanced and speculative view of the motivations and mentalities of medieval chroniclers. Johannes Spörl's 1933 article 'Das mittelalterliche Geschichtsdnken als Forschungsaufgabe' is credited with focusing sustained attention on the medieval chronicler as a proper subject for historical inquiry for the first time. Thereafter, renewed impetus was given to the study of medieval historiography – and in particular the authors of medieval histories – by German scholars working in the tradition of *Ideengeschichte*, or History of Ideas.³ Helmut Beumann's 1950 study of Widukind of Corvey (d. after 973) was particularly influential.⁴ By combining meticulous historical scholarship with an appreciation of the literary features of the *Res Gestae Saxonicae* and Widukind's intellectual world, Beumann showed the value of focusing on the author and his context, and helped inspire the prodigious output of monographs and articles that have appeared in recent decades. Since Beumann, considerations such as authorial intention, literary and rhetorical techniques, social and political function, patronage, intended audience, textual transmission, and reception have become central to any assessment of medieval historiography.⁵ In what follows, some of the chief areas of enquiry of modern scholarship on medieval historiography will be examined. Given the chronological and geographical breadth of the topic, some boundaries will be necessary. Hence, Byzantine and Islamic historiography are not touched upon, and the focus will be on histories written in the heartland of the Latin West: England, France, Germany, the Low Countries, Spain, and Italy.

Truth and History

A central problem for those who study medieval historiography – and particularly for those who use it as source material to reconstruct the past – is the conspicuous gap between what medieval authors said history should be and what the texts themselves tell us that it actually was. On the one hand, medieval chroniclers seem to have had no doubt that history should be true.⁶ In the oft-cited definition of Isidore of Seville (*Etymologies* 1.41.5), history comprised 'true things that actually happened' (*res verae quae factae sunt*), as opposed to *fabulae* (things that could not have happened because they were impossible), and *argumenta* (things that could have happened, but had not), and those historians who directly addressed their readers almost invariably vouched for the truth of what they were writing.⁷ On the other hand, this was a much weaker controlling principle than it might appear to be at first glance. For while it is clear that history and fiction were conceptually distinct in the Middle Ages,⁸ medieval histories are full of obviously fictional elements, including invented material (speeches, secret conversations, letters, and battle scenes), miracles, type-scenes, and partisan deformations of the truth. Reconciling the belief that history should be true with the obvious fictionality of so many of our texts has thus been a major preoccupation of recent scholarship.⁹

Most obviously, political or social pressure, or simply bad faith, could lead the chronicler to distort known facts, or invent them, in the interest of his overarching goal. These sorts of biases are most readily apparent in plainly encomiastic histories like William of Poitiers' (d. ca. 1090) *Gesta Guillelmi*¹⁰ or undisguised polemics such as the *Liber de Bello Saxonico*,¹¹ but bias of one kind or another is evident in every historical text. Apart from partisanship and bias, certain generic features of medieval history writing offered a wide scope for fictions and falsehoods to creep into historical narratives. In the first place, there was a near-universal acceptance of the miraculous and the fabulous, so that even sober and sophisticated historians like William of Newburgh and William of Malmesbury could speak with apparent seriousness about

vampires, necromancy, or talking statues. Monika Otter has suggested that these sorts of tales were employed as an oblique commentary on the problematic nature of history-writing itself,¹² but it may be simpler to see them as manifestations of a pre-scientific mentality. Second, the standard for accepting a tradition as historically valid in the Middle Ages was very different from our own.¹³ The legitimacy of a historical tradition depended less on its inherent credibility than the authorities that transmitted it.¹⁴ Consequently, rumor, legend, hearsay, and oral tradition were primary sources for medieval historians. Third, history had from a very early period been colonized by rhetoric (though history was never a branch of rhetoric), and the Ciceronian view of history as a *narratio* subject to rhetorical amplification and invention remained influential throughout the Middle Ages.¹⁵ Rhetorical *inventio* – the ‘discovery’ of material appropriate to a speech or narrative – was part of the heritage of Classical Antiquity, and the theory of *narratio probabilis* or *verisimilis* presented in handbooks like Cicero’s *De inventione* and the pseudo-Ciceronian *Rhetorica ad Herennium* effectively licensed the use of plausible fictions to give any kind of narrative account credibility.¹⁶

Since the 1970’s, the literary–rhetorical character of medieval historiography has come to be seen not simply as an obstacle to extracting factual data from the text, but as a feature of medieval thought to be studied in its own right. Thanks to the work of scholars like Roger Ray, Nancy Partner, and John O. Ward, it is generally recognized that the fictionality of medieval histories was not necessarily the product of bad faith and slipshod working habits (though both are amply documented) as the result of a different set of assumptions about what history was and how it should be written.¹⁷ Medieval authors were well aware of the distinction between past events (*res gestae quae factae sunt*) and historical narrative (*narratio rerum gestarum*), and recognized history to be in some sense a literary construct.¹⁸ Fiction, moreover did not simply make history more entertaining, it gave it a greater depth, by allowing the author to penetrate into the thoughts and motives of historical actors.

It has been a longstanding belief of medieval historians that the fictionality and bias of narrative histories do not pose an insuperable problem to using these texts as sources to reconstruct the past. Rhetorical excrescences could be stripped away, miracles discounted, and obvious bias and partisanship controlled for, so that through careful sifting, grains of hard historical fact could be winnowed out from the surrounding chaff. Such a belief implies that beneath our texts lies a world of objective fact, which the texts themselves mediate, however imperfectly. Beginning in the 1970’s, however, the so-called ‘linguistic turn’ sought to problematize the relationship between text and historical event by positing that language did not reflect an objective reality, but rather actively constructed it.¹⁹ The consequences for history as a discipline were theoretically profound, since if what was commonly accepted as historical fact was in reality an artifact of language, there could be no hope of accurately reconstructing the past from written sources.²⁰ The most influential text associated with the linguistic turn for the discipline of history was Hayden White’s *Metahistory*, which argued, through an analysis of the 19th-century histories of Michelet, Ranke, Tocqueville, and Burckhardt, that history was not, and could not be, a transparent medium for the recounting of facts, but was instead a literary construct that made use of the same types of narrative forms as fiction. White’s heuristic of the four modes of emplotment (romance, comedy, tragedy, and satire) was used as an interpretative tool by Walter Goffart in his seminal *Narrators of Barbarian History*. Since then, while the idea that history is in some sense an ‘emplotment’ has been generally accepted,²¹ few have tried to employ the precise schema proposed by White. Moreover, it is also not at all obvious, as White and others have suggested, that historical events represent nothing more than ‘a large unstructured field of data’ open to any kind of emplotment,²² since historical actors and their immediate audiences presumably understood their own actions in terms of a plot at the time that they were carrying them out.

The legacy of the linguistic turn remains a contested one. It is now generally accepted that the techniques of rhetorical and literary criticism can yield important conclusions about the practice and purpose of medieval historiography. At the same time, the more radical manifestations of the linguistic turn and the associated postmodern approaches to history have not won universal acceptance. A more serious challenge to the evidentiary value of medieval historiography has been posed by Johannes Fried, for whom it is not so much the obfuscatory nature of language as the unreliability of memory and the concomitant problem of transmission of information in an oral society that renders historical texts suspect.²³ In an oral society, Fried argues, memories are subject to a continuous process of deformation (*Verformung*) caused not only by the adaptation of historical memories to current social and political conditions, but also by the working of the brain itself, which changes and remakes memories every time they are accessed.²⁴ Against such thoroughgoing skepticism of the value of written sources, it has been pointed out that there were, in fact, external controls against the deformation of memory in the Middle Ages, including the knowledge and beliefs of contemporary audiences and the expectation that the historian's account would conform to a standard of credibility.²⁵

In spite of continuous assaults on the evidentiary value of medieval historiography, most historians have continued to employ the traditional methods of *Quellenkritik* developed by German scholars of the 19th and 20th centuries: reading sources critically and skeptically with an eye to bias, exaggeration, and invention, while at the same time accepting that there was a real past that is mediated to us in our written sources. As Walter Pohl has noted, 'There is some relationship between what happened and the image we construct of it, and there are rules about what we may and what we may not imagine.'²⁶ At the same time, it is important to recognize that a whole series of potentially distorting factors and processes could intervene between the occurrence of an event and its transmission in writing, including the inevitable distortions of oral transmission, the agendas of historians themselves, and their literary reworking of the facts they had to hand. It was not simply bias and conscious intentionality that shaped the way that medieval historians constructed history, but the interpretative framework through which they received and processed information. The historian – whether hearing about, reading, or directly witnessing an event – perceived and filtered it through his own conception of history, and only later rendered it into narrative form through a more deliberate process of composition. As Hans-Werner Goetz has emphasized, both the conception of history and its subsequent construction through narrative are distinct processes that must be analyzed and interpreted separately.²⁷

Politics and History

The most conspicuous trend in recent scholarship on medieval historiography has been the focus on the political dimensions of history writing. Gabrielle Spiegel, Gerd Althoff, Patrick Geary, Hans-Werner Goetz, and others have called attention to the 'present-centered' nature of medieval histories and the centrality of their legitimizing and/or polemical functions.²⁸ Medieval histories, it is emphasized, were called into existence by specific historical circumstances²⁹; they were frequently written in response to crises³⁰, and they were closely tied to the concerns of the present.³¹ History served to create and foster communal, national, and/or institutional identity, to stake concrete claims to property and status, and to advance partisan agendas.³² Even seemingly objective chroniclers were influenced by political considerations.³³ The use of sources, moreover, was frequently characterized by a search for precedents to support whatever argument the author was trying to make.³⁴

The agendas of many medieval histories lie close to the surface. In the preface to the late 12th-century *Chronicle of Ramsey Abbey*, for example, the anonymous author states that he

had made a compilation of the monastery's charters in order to safeguard Ramsey's title to its holdings after the anarchy of King Stephen's reign.³⁵ This motive was common to many such cartulary-chronicles, which combined reproductions of charters with historical narrative, embedding a documentation of the monastery's holdings within a broader history of the institution. In other cases, political motives can be readily deduced from circumstances and content. It is clear, for example, that one of Adam of Bremen's (d. ca. 1085) chief goals in writing his *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen* was to defend the claim of the archbishopric of Hamburg-Bremen to evangelize the Nordic lands.³⁶ Often, however, bias can only be teased out through a careful reading of the text against the background of contemporary history. To choose but one example, Simon MacLean has demonstrated how the Mainz continuation of the *Annals of Fulda*, which has generally been taken to be a more or less objective account of the years 882–887, was in fact a carefully constructed piece of political commentary designed by Archbishop Liutbert of Mainz to denigrate King Charles the Fat, who had declined to retain Liutbert as archchaplain after his accession to the throne of East Francia in 882.³⁷

It was not simply narrow bias or partisanship that determined the composition of medieval histories, but a general tendency to use the past to justify and legitimize the present.³⁸ The *Grandes Chroniques de France*, for example, a royally sponsored history of France compiled by the monks of Saint-Denis from 1274 onward, goes out of its way to stress the commingling of Capetian and Carolingian blood in the person of King Louis VIII (r. 1223–1226), son of the Capetian king Philip Augustus (r. 1180–1223) and the putatively Carolingian Isabella of Hainaut.³⁹ The *Grandes Chroniques* thus served to link the Capetians to the dynasty that they had replaced on dubious terms in 987 and further helped to legitimize the territorial expansion of the 13th and 14th centuries by implying that the acquisition of new territory constituted a recovery of lands formerly held by Charlemagne.⁴⁰ More recently, Jaume Aurell has emphasized the legitimizing function of history in his study of high medieval Catalan historiography.⁴¹ The *Gesta comitum Barchinonensium* (1180–1184), for example, was written by the monks of Ripoll to provide an authoritative and appropriately glorious genealogy for the counts of Barcelona, who became rulers of Aragon with the marriage of Count Ramon Berenguer IV (r. 1131–1162) to the daughter of King Ramiro of Aragon in 1136.⁴² The later Catalan chronicles of King James I 'the Conqueror' (r. 1213–1276), Bernat Desclot, and Ramon Muntaner in turn served to legitimize the expansion of the kingdom of Aragon, while the autobiographical chronicle of King Peter IV 'the Ceremonious' (r. 1336–1387) sought to justify its author's aggressive and authoritarian rule.⁴³

Studies of episcopal *gesta* have tended to reach similar conclusions about the importance of practical, political concerns to the composition of these histories. In his study of seven episcopal histories from the 11th and 12th centuries Dirk Schlochtermeyer argued that all were written as a reaction to the Investiture Controversy.⁴⁴ Stephanie Coué has stressed the practical and instrumental nature of episcopal biography, arguing that episcopal *vitae* written in 11th- and 12th-century Germany were not composed with a primarily exemplary function in mind (i.e., to depict their subjects as models of sanctity), but rather to address specific controversies or political questions.⁴⁵ Scholars of hagiography – a genre that cannot be neatly distinguished from historiography in the Middle Ages – have also focused to an increasing degree on the political dimensions of their texts.⁴⁶ In her analysis of the development of the competing cults of Saints Romanus and Nicasius at Rouen, for example, Felice Lifshitz has shown how the monastery of Saint-Ouen and the cathedral of Rouen promoted the cults of different saints as part of a struggle for spiritual authority in the second half of the 11th century.⁴⁷ Samantha Kahn Herrick has sought to show how Latin saints' lives of the 1020's and 1030's were written to legitimize the authority of the Norman dukes in regions (the Bessin, the Evrecin, and

the French Vexin) outside of the political core of the duchy of Normandy. Karine Ugé has similarly argued that history served a utilitarian function for monastic communities in Flanders (specifically, Saint-Bertin and Saint-Rictrude of Marchiennes), who wrote history in response to specific circumstances – often internal or external crises.⁴⁸ In all these cases, history functioned as a ‘usable’ past that both solidified the internal unity of a community and allowed it to represent itself to outsiders.⁴⁹

Many more examples could be cited, but the point is clear; history could be, and frequently was, a tool of political argument. Yet the quest to explain the composition of medieval histories in terms of concrete political motives has given rise to a tendency to single out one aspect of a history’s *Tendenz* and elevate it to the governing principle of the entire work. This has in turn led to arguments about whether histories should be read as narrowly tailored responses to specific circumstances or more broadly conceived documents whose composition cannot be neatly ascribed to a single motive. Gerd Althoff, for example, has argued that the earlier of two *vitae* of Queen Mathilda of Germany (d. 968) was written specifically to admonish Otto II (r. 973–983) to respect the endowments made to the Saxon convent of Nordhausen by Mathilda on the occasion of his marriage to the Byzantine princess Theophanu.⁵⁰ The text’s most recent editor, however, has argued that Althoff’s focus on Nordhausen is too narrow and fails to do justice to the complexity of the work.⁵¹

The clash between tightly focused political readings and broader holistic interpretations is particularly conspicuous in the case of comprehensive narrative histories for which it has proven difficult to find a single, generally accepted view of the author’s purpose. Bede’s (673–735) *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* is a good example of how such debates have played out. Traditional readings have seen Bede as an idealist,⁵² a cloistered scholar and exegete,⁵³ and a Church reformer ‘remote from the practical world of royal and ecclesiastical government.’⁵⁴ Setting himself squarely against this consensus, Walter Goffart has argued instead that the *Ecclesiastical History* was a politically motivated tract written specifically to refute the view of Northumbrian history promulgated by followers of Archbishop Wilfrid of York, and in particular Stephen of Ripon’s *Life of Wilfrid*.⁵⁵ Goffart’s interpretation has not won universal acceptance, but no one can deny that it is grounded in a comprehensive knowledge of the literature and history of the period.

Geoffrey of Monmouth’s baffling, pseudo-historical *History of the Kings of Britain* has inspired similarly diverse interpretations, some of which focus on contemporary politics and some of which do not.⁵⁶ It has been read as an elaborate parody,⁵⁷ an attempt to give the Welsh a respectable national history during a period of revolt against their Anglo-Norman overlords,⁵⁸ and as ‘a history in which the new Norman masters of Britain could take pride.’⁵⁹ Against the background of these debates, it should be emphasized that a history might stake out certain political positions, but this is not the same thing as saying that it was written specifically to advance a political agenda. Bede, for example, may well have been trying to throw shade on Wilfrid in certain parts of his work, but this does not necessarily mean that he wrote the *Ecclesiastical History* as an anti-Wilfridian polemic. Political bias and authorial intention do not always overlap neatly.

Even if we can identify the biases of individual texts, explaining how they actually functioned – who was meant to read or hear them and in what context – has proven much more difficult. For the Carolingian era, Rosamond McKitterick and Janet Nelson have argued persuasively that Latin historiography was intended for, and accessible to, the court-centered political elite, including secular elites who could read and understand Latin.⁶⁰ In the post-Carolingian era, however, when Latin had become severed from the Romance vernaculars, the accessibility of Latin histories to non-clerical and non-monastic audiences remains a thorny question. Lambert of Ardres, for example, reported that Count Baldwin II of Guines (r. 1169–1206),

for whom he wrote his *History of the Counts of Guines and Lords of Ardres*, could not understand Latin and had to commission vernacular translations,⁶¹ while Gerald of Wales (ca. 1146–1223) complained that writing in Latin limited the audience for history.⁶² It is true that Latin histories could be and were made accessible to non-Latinate audiences through translation and paraphrase, but it is equally true that Latin's advantages (universality and prestige) were offset to some degree by accompanying difficulties in vertical communication.

The problem of communicating Latin texts to non-literate audiences, coupled with the practical difficulties of disseminating texts before the widespread availability of paper in the 14th century and the invention of the printing press in the 15th, render the widespread use of the term 'propaganda' to describe medieval histories highly problematic.⁶³ Histories with a conspicuous political agenda can usually more accurately be described as serving the function of identity formation, political commentary, or encomium and panegyric. The composition of a text to reflect and concretize a community's beliefs about itself is not necessarily an act of propaganda, since the dissemination of such a text may be very limited indeed. The *Grandes Chroniques de France*, for example, were undoubtedly written to promote a particular (and historically dubious) view of the French monarchy, but there was evidently no effort made to distribute the text throughout the kingdom, since it hardly circulated south of the Loire.⁶⁴ Even vernacular histories intended to be read at court cannot casually be classified as propaganda. Peter Damian-Grint has argued convincingly that certain allegedly propagandistic features of Benoît de Saint-Maure's *Chronique des ducs de Normandie* were in fact generic features of didactic historiography that would have been recognized as such by its audience.⁶⁵ And while propaganda aims to disseminate broadly a tendentious view of the past for political aims, panegyric or encomium serves in the first place to ingratiate the author with his subject.

Medieval authors and their audiences were keenly aware that the written word was the only guarantee of permanency. The Carolingian exegete Hrabanus Maurus wrote in a poem that 'Only letters are immortal and ward off death; only letters renew the past in books.'⁶⁶ The 12th-century chronicle of Biburg Abbey began with the admonition that 'time and forgetfulness do away with everything; only writing can sustain memory.'⁶⁷ Rather than envisioning historical texts in every case as political arguments addressed to contemporaries, we might better understand them as arguments addressed to posterity, that is, as efforts to make certain kinds of memories permanent. The use of writing to ensure that important events would be remembered in a certain way may constitute a kind of 'diachronic' propaganda, but this should be distinguished from more traditional 'synchronic' propaganda, which only really became possible with the advent of mass media.

Text and Context

In the last two decades one of the most promising developments in the study of medieval historiography has been the refocusing of attention on the textual and codicological context of medieval histories.⁶⁸ In an age before the printing press, texts were inherently unstable; every act of copying changed the text in some way and was in some sense a rewriting. Every manuscript, therefore, presents us with a unique site of historical communication in which texts are rewritten, excerpted, abridged, and/or combined with other texts in different ways.⁶⁹ The valorization of the manuscript owes something to the 'New Philology' of the 1990's, which defined itself in contrast to traditional Classical Philology.⁷⁰ The latter had as its principal aim the reconstruction of the earliest recoverable form of a text through the establishment of a *stemma codicum* and the comparison and emendation of the best manuscript witnesses. New Philology, by contrast, asserted the importance of the manuscript, rather than the edition, as the critical site of philological inquiry. The tangible contributions of New Philology are

debatable,⁷¹ but one salutary result has been the renewed focus on the manuscript as a primary object of study. Copies, variant versions, compilations, excerpts, translations, commentaries, and other sorts of 'derivative' works are recognized as having their own particular value. The increasing importance ascribed to individual manuscripts rather than composite editions can be seen, for example, in Neil Wright's editorial project to publish the most important versions of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* and Julia Crick's descriptive cataloging of the manuscripts.⁷²

Autograph manuscripts of medieval histories have always been accorded special treatment, not only because of their unique value as textual archetypes, but because the physical evidence they contain (corrections, revisions, marginalia, etc.) can tell us a great deal about the messy process of history writing in the Middle Ages.⁷³ Richard Landes has performed detailed detective work on the vast autograph corpus of the Aquitanian monk Ademar of Chabannes (988–1034), paying particular attention to the successive revisions he made to his *Chronicle*, a source of primary importance for our knowledge of southern France in the tenth and early 11th centuries.⁷⁴ More recently, Jason Glenn has based his detailed reconstruction of the stages of composition of Richer of Saint-Rémi's (ca. 950–1000) *Historia* on an ingenious reading of the author's autograph manuscript.⁷⁵ In cases where no autograph survives, traditional methods of literary and historical analysis continue to produce new and important insights. Jeff Rider, for example, has analyzed the compositional process of Galbert of Bruges in his study of that author's history of the murder of Count Charles the Good of Flanders (the *De multro, traditione, et occisione gloriosi Karoli comitis Flandrianum*), basing his insights on the internal evidence of the text and Galbert's own description of his working methods.⁷⁶ Rider has advanced a convincing reconstruction of Galbert's process of composition: from jotting down notes on wax tablets, to transferring these to parchment, to eventually recasting his entire work as a *passio* of Count Charles.

Just as the revisions made by a single author to his text over time provide a window into the compositional process and the changing goals of the historian, studying the copying and rewriting of historical texts can reveal how these works were adapted and repurposed in different contexts. The most detailed theoretical work on rewriting has been undertaken under the direction of Monique Goullet and Martin Heinzelmänn in their work on early medieval hagiography.⁷⁷ Using the work of Gérard Genette as a guide, Goullet has developed a taxonomy of *réécriture* to describe the kinds of changes – quantitative, formal, and semantic or conceptual – made between 'hypotext' and 'hypertext' (the original and revised versions of a text, respectively).⁷⁸ Among the most important conclusions to emerge from her work are that the information supplied by authors in paratexts (prologues, prefaces, dedicatory epistles, etc.) frequently does not correspond to their actual practice,⁷⁹ and that rewriting – even when it was couched in purely formal terms – almost invariably resulted in more profound conceptual or ideological transformations of the text.⁸⁰

The conclusions drawn from the work of Goullet and others on hagiography have important implications for the study of medieval historiography writ large. The majority of medieval historiographers were to some extent compilers of other people's work.⁸¹ So important was compilation to the composition of histories, in fact, that only in the late 12th century did a sharp distinction between *auctor* and *compilator* begin to be drawn.⁸² Even after that, rather than viewing it as an ancillary and less prestigious branch of the historical art, historians tended to boast of the advantages of compilation.⁸³ Compilation, however, should not be understood as the mindless copying of earlier written sources, since the decision of what to reproduce and how to reproduce it (copying verbatim, excerpting, rewriting, or combining several sources at once) often entailed a sophisticated approach to using prior sources.⁸⁴ Aimoin of Fleury (d. ca. 1010), for example, who compiled a history of the pre-Carolingian Franks probably

intended for Robert the Pious (r. 996–1031), used a wide range of sources, including Gregory of Tours, Fredegar, the *Liber Historiae Francorum*, and the *Gesta Dagoberti*, but rather than simply stringing excerpts together in chronological order, he combined and rewrote them in a deliberate and skillful manner.⁸⁵ Historical compendia and composite chronicles are often of little interest to historians except insofar as they recount otherwise unattested information, but they are a potential gold mine for students of medieval historiography, since they allow us to see how medieval historians reworked, altered, and combined their sources to meet the needs of their own day.

The codicological context of a history or group of histories is also increasingly being used as a tool to identify the purposes to which these texts were put. Rosamond McKitterick has used manuscript evidence to assess the milieu in which Carolingian-era history books were created and the audiences for which they were intended.⁸⁶ In an important article arguing for a return to the codex as a site of historical meaning, Walter Pohl has examined three manuscripts that originated at Montecassino between the ninth and 11th centuries – a law codex, a manuscript of the Benedictine Rule, and a historical compilation – to determine why they were assembled and how they were used by the monastic community of Montecassino.⁸⁷ Helmut Reimitz has explored how Merovingian-era historical texts such as the *Histories* of Gregory of Tours, the *Chronicle* of Fredegar, and the *Liber Historiae Francorum*, which advance competing versions of the Frankish past, were in the ninth century incorporated into a single, unified view of Frankish history that served to validate and legitimize the Carolingian rise to power.⁸⁸ These same texts could be subtly altered and reinterpreted in the service of contemporary political needs. The version of the *Liber Historiae Francorum* contained in Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, MS. lat. 473, for example, which was written at the monastery of Saint-Amand, evidently served to legitimize Charles the Bald's (r. 843–877) abortive acquisition of the kingdom of Lotharingia in 869–870 by effacing any mention of the Austrasians, the previous inhabitants of the kingdom.⁸⁹ A particularly valuable recent codicological study is Marek Thue Kretschmer's analysis of Bamberg, Staatsbibliothek, MS Hist. 3, a composite manuscript containing a series of chronologically linked histories spanning the fourth through the tenth centuries.⁹⁰ One of the texts contained in the manuscript is a version of the *Historia Romana* (an expansion and continuation of the *Breviarium* of Eutropius by Paul the Deacon later supplemented by the work of two other authors) rewritten in a register of Latin more closely approximating the vernacular. Kretschmer's analysis of the origin of the manuscript (tenth-century Italian) and the context in which it was first brought to Germany suggest strongly that it was part of the cross-cultural traffic between Germany and Italy that began with the coronation of Otto I as Roman emperor in 962. The text, he suggests, derived from the interest of the Ottonian emperors in Roman history and was intended to be read in a court.⁹¹

Conclusion

The last three decades have seen a steady growth in books and articles on medieval historiography, both general syntheses and more narrowly tailored studies of individual authors, texts, and manuscripts. From this profusion of scholarship some useful general conclusions may be drawn. In the first place, there is now a generally understood need to ground our understanding of medieval histories in the political and social context in which they were written. Every text was the product of a particular time and place and was directed at a specific audience. Because the principal topics of medieval historiography were secular politics and the Church, and because the institutions that sponsored the production of history were themselves inextricably bound up in the ruling order, history was almost invariably political in its content and themes.

This does not mean that history was 'propaganda' in any recognizable sense of that word, but it was an attempt to impose a particular understanding of the past on contemporaries and on posterity. Second, to understand why history was written and how it was used in the Middle Ages, we must look not only at editions of texts but at the manuscripts themselves. How texts were written and copied, how they were abridged, augmented, or changed in the process of translation, and how they were ranged alongside other texts are all questions that must continue to occupy students of medieval historiography. Finally, we must remain aware that the intrusion of fictional elements into historical narratives was not simply the product of credulity, bad faith, and a lack of methodological rigor, but stemmed instead from a wholly different attitude to history and its purposes.

If our understanding of medieval historiography has been deepened and enriched by recent scholarship, it nonetheless remains true that medieval histories still resemble a foreign landscape – sometimes comfortably familiar, at other times bizarre and resistant to explanation. Two questions in particular stand out as avenues of further research: the audience of medieval historiography and the unity of medieval histories. The question of who read, or listened to, medieval histories, and in what contexts has been addressed through the analysis of form and content,⁹² and through the interpretation of meta-historical statements (e.g., the comment in the *Annals of Steterburg* that Henry the Lion used to have histories read aloud to him during the night).⁹³ The recent turn towards studying manuscripts as vectors of historical communication holds out even greater promise of identifying the audiences of medieval history.⁹⁴ A second problem is the degree to which medieval histories can and should be read as unified wholes. The question is not only important in the case of annals and universal chronicles, where narrative unity is rendered virtually impossible by the conventions of the genre, but also in the case of narrative histories whose subject-matter is broad enough that they seem to defy any attempt at a unifying interpretation. The attempt to find an overarching unity in the *Histories* of Gregory of Tours, for example, has occupied scholars for over a century, yet there is no consensus about Gregory's purpose.⁹⁵ The same holds true for Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, Paul the Deacon's *History of the Lombards*, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, and countless other major historical narratives of the Middle Ages. It is probably the case that for many of these histories there is no single hermeneutical key that will explain every aspect of the text. Walter Pohl has recently given us an important reminder that unity is not always to be found in medieval texts, which were often characterized by ambiguity and contradiction.⁹⁶ 'Constructing the past,' he notes, 'was usually was not a leisurely and self-assured tailoring of a perfect-fit history, but a troubled and sometimes desperate effort to make ends meet in the light of adversity and controversial debate.'⁹⁷

There is, of course, no obvious reason why medieval histories should have been unified by a central interpretative structure or argument; the assumption that they were derives from modern assumptions about history writing. Writing down important events known to the author in the order in which they occurred may simply have been the default mode of historiography in the Middle Ages. The medieval chronicler, Gabrielle Spiegel has observed, 'apprehended history itself as a perceptual field, to be seen and represented instead of constructed and analyzed, an object more of perception than of cognition.'⁹⁸ Even a work like Otto of Freising's *Chronicle*, which employs the Augustinian concept of the two cities as a structuring principle, is noteworthy more for the diversity of events it records than for its narrowness of focus or explanatory schema.

Spiegel's conclusions are not necessarily at odds with the equally important observation that medieval historians tended to view their works as textual constructs.⁹⁹ Somewhat paradoxically, mimetic fidelity to the past in the Middle Ages allowed for rhetorical amplification and *inventio* while tending to reject explicit explanation and analysis of cause and effect. One of the most

important legacies of the last few decades of scholarship has been to make us increasingly aware of the difference between medieval and modern habits of thought, and it continues to be one of the most important prerequisites for scholarship going forward.

Short Biography

Justin Lake's research focuses on medieval historiography and rhetoric, and the intersection between the two. His book on the West Frankish historian Richer of Saint-Rémi (ca. 950–1000) examined how literary and rhetorical concerns, rather than purely political motives, shaped the way that Richer crafted his *History*. More recently, he has edited an anthology of classical and medieval historical prologues for the University of Toronto Press. His current research focuses on the prologues and prefatory epistles to medieval histories. He received his BA in Classics from Amherst College in 1999 and his PhD in Medieval Latin Philology from Harvard University in 2008. He has taught at the University of Houston and is currently Associate Professor of Classics at Texas A&M University.

Notes

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¹ See in particular W.J. Mommsen, ed., *Leopold von Ranke und die moderne Geschichtswissenschaft*.

² For a synopsis see Van Caenegem, *Guide to the Sources of Medieval History*, 185–205.

³ Lammers, *Geschichtsdenken und Geschichtsbild*.

⁴ Beumann, *Widukind von Korvei*.

⁵ Ray, 'Medieval Historiography through the Twelfth Century.'

⁶ Johanek, 'Die Wahrheit der mittelalterlichen Historiographen.'

⁷ Simon, 'Untersuchungen,' II.89.

⁸ Fleischman, 'History and Fiction.'

⁹ Partner, *Serious Entertainments*; Beer, *Narrative Conventions of Truth*; Fleischman, 'History and Fiction'; Morse, *Truth and Convention*; Wolfram, 'Einleitung, oder Lügen mit der Wahrheit'; Otter, *Inventiones*.

¹⁰ Beer, *Narrative Conventions of Truth*, 13–22.

¹¹ See Althoff and Coué, 'Geschichtsschreibung und Krise.'

¹² Otter, *Inventiones*.

¹³ Guenée, *Histoire et culture historique*, 129–147; Fleischman, 'History and Fiction.'

¹⁴ Guenée, *L'historien et la compilation*, 127; Melville, 'Kompilation, Fiktion und Diskurs.'

¹⁵ Ray, 'The Triumph of Greco-Roman Rhetorical Assumptions.'

¹⁶ Lake, 'Truth, Plausibility, and the Virtues of Narrative.'

¹⁷ Ray, 'The Triumph of Greco-Roman Rhetorical Assumptions'; Partner, *Serious Entertainments*; Ward, 'Some Principles of Rhetorical Historiography.'

¹⁸ Ward, 'Some Principles of Rhetorical Historiography,' 107–108.

¹⁹ In general see Clark, *History, Theory, Text*.

²⁰ Spiegel, 'History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text'; Partner, 'Historicity in an Age of Reality-Fictions'; Stein, *L'Après et son double*.

²¹ See, e.g., Aurell, *Authoring the Past*.

²² Otter, 'Functions of Fiction,' 114.

²³ Fried, 'Die Kunst der Aktualisierung'; 'Die Königerhebung Heinrichs I.'

²⁴ Fried, *Der Schleier der Erinnerung*.

²⁵ Althoff, 'Geschichtsschreibung in einer oralen Gesellschaft'; D. Bachrach, 'Memory, Epistemology, and the Writing of Early Medieval History'; B. Bachrach, 'Ademar of Chabannes as a Military Historian.'

- ²⁶ Pohl, 'History in Fragments.'
- ²⁷ Goetz, 'Die Gegenwart der Vergangenheit'; 'Der hochmittelalterliche Geschichtsschreiber und seine Quellen'; Geschichtsschreibung und Geschichtsbewußtsein im hohen Mittelalter; 'Constructing the Past.'
- ²⁸ See, e.g., Spiegel, *The Past as Text*; Althoff, *Insenierte Herrschaft*; Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance*; Goetz, 'Die Gegenwart der Vergangenheit.'
- ²⁹ Althoff, 'Causa scribendi und Darstellungsabsicht.'
- ³⁰ Althoff, 'Fiktionen in mittelalterlicher Historiographie'; Althoff and Coué, 'Geschichtsschreibung und Krise'; Lifshitz, *The Norman Conquest of Pious Neustria*. More generally see Southern, 'Aspects of the European Tradition of Historical Writing: 4. The Sense of the Past.'
- ³¹ Goetz, 'Die Gegenwart der Vergangenheit'; Schneidmüller, 'Constructing the Past.'
- ³² Goetz, 'Die Gegenwart der Vergangenheit.'
- ³³ Goetz, 'Der hochmittelalterliche Geschichtsschreiber und seine Quellen.'
- ³⁴ Goetz, 'Der hochmittelalterliche Geschichtsschreiber und seine Quellen.'
- ³⁵ W.D. Macray, ed., *Chronicon abbatiae Ramesiensis*, Rolls Series (London: Longman, 1886), 4.
- ³⁶ Goetz, *Geschichtsschreibung und Geschichtsbewußtsein*, 250–259.
- ³⁷ MacLean, *Kingship and Politics*, 24–47.
- ³⁸ Spiegel, 'Political Utility'; Goetz, 'Die Gegenwart der Vergangenheit'; Schneidmüller, 'Constructing the Past.'
- ³⁹ Guenée, 'Les Grandes Chroniques de France'; Spiegel, 'The *Reditus Regni*.'
- ⁴⁰ Guenée, 'Les Grandes Chroniques de France'; Spiegel, 'The *Reditus Regni*.'
- ⁴¹ Aurell, *Authoring the Past*.
- ⁴² See also Aurell, 'The Power of the Form.'
- ⁴³ Aurell, *Authoring the Past*.
- ⁴⁴ Schlochtermeyer, *Bistumschroniken des Hochmittelalters*.
- ⁴⁵ Coué, *Hagiographie im Kontext*.
- ⁴⁶ Fouracre, 'Merovingian History and Merovingian Hagiography'; Head, *Hagiography and the Cult of Saints*; Remensnyder, *Remembering Kings Past*; Lifshitz, 'The Politics of Historiography'; Lifshitz, 'Beyond Positivism and Genre'; Herrick, *Imagining the Sacred Past*.
- ⁴⁷ Lifshitz, 'The Politics of Historiography.'
- ⁴⁸ Ugé, *Creating the Monastic Past*.
- ⁴⁹ Ugé, *Creating the Monastic Past*.
- ⁵⁰ Althoff, 'Causa scribendi und Darstellungsabsicht.'
- ⁵¹ Schütte, *Untersuchungen*, 70–75.
- ⁵² Wormald, 'Bede and Benedict Biscop.'
- ⁵³ Mayr-Harting, 'Bede's patristic thinking as an historian'; Ray, 'Bede, the Exegete.'
- ⁵⁴ Thacker, 'Bede's Ideal of Reform.' See also Higham, *(Re)-Reading Bede*, 53–100.
- ⁵⁵ Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History*, 235–328; 'The *Historia Ecclesiastica*: Bede's Agenda and Ours'; 'L'Histoire ecclésiastique et l'engagement politique.'
- ⁵⁶ Gillingham, 'The context and purposes of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*'; Levelt, 'The Ambiguity of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*.'
- ⁵⁷ Flint, 'The *Historiae Regum Britannie*'; Brooke, 'Geoffrey of Monmouth.'
- ⁵⁸ Gillingham, 'The context and purposes of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*.'
- ⁵⁹ Wright, 'The *Historia regum Britannie*' of Geoffrey of Monmouth, vol. I, xix.
- ⁶⁰ McKitterick, 'The Audience for Latin Historiography'; Nelson, 'History-Writing.' See also Wormald and Nelson, eds., *Lay Intellectuals in the Carolingian World*.
- ⁶¹ J. Heller, ed., *Historia comitum Glisnensium*, MGH SS 23 (Hanover: Hahn: 1879), 598. See Shopkow, *The History of the Counts of Guines and Lords of Ardres*.
- ⁶² J.F. Dimock, ed., *Expugnatio Hibernica*, in *Giraldi Cambrensis opera*, vol. 5 (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1867), 410–411.
- ⁶³ Guenée, 'Les tendances actuelles'; Graus, 'Funktionen der spätmittelalterlichen Geschichtsschreibung.'
- ⁶⁴ Taylor, *English Historical Literature*, 53.
- ⁶⁵ Damian-Grint, 'Propaganda and essay.'

- ⁶⁶ *Carmen* 21 in E. Dümmmler, ed., *Hrabani Mauri carmina*, MGH Poetae 2 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1884), 186, lines 9–10.
- ⁶⁷ O. Holder-Egger, ed., *Fundatio Biburgensis*, MGH SS 15.2 (Hanover: Hahn, 1888), 1085.
- ⁶⁸ Mortensen, 'Change of Style and Content.'
- ⁶⁹ Melville, 'Le problème des connaissances.'
- ⁷⁰ Wenzel, 'Reflections on (New) Philology'; Fleischman, 'Philology, Linguistics, and the Discourse of the Medieval Text'; Spiegel, 'History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text'; Busby, *Towards a Synthesis*.
- ⁷¹ Ziolkowski, 'Metaphilology'; Paden, 'Is There a Middle in the Road?'
- ⁷² Wright and Crick, *The 'Historiae regum Britannie' of Geoffrey of Monmouth*, vols. I–IV.
- ⁷³ See, e.g., Hoffmann, 'Autographa des früheren Mittelalters.'
- ⁷⁴ Landes, *Relics, Apocalypse, and the Deceits of History*.
- ⁷⁵ Glenn, *Politics and History*.
- ⁷⁶ Rider, *God's Scribe*.
- ⁷⁷ Goullet and Heinzelmann, *La réécriture hagiographique*; Goullet, *Écriture et réécriture hagiographiques*; Heinzelmann, *Livrets, collections et textes*; Goullet, Heinzelmann, and Veyrard-Cosme, *L'hagiographie mérovingienne*.
- ⁷⁸ Goullet, *Écriture et réécriture hagiographiques* 107–199; 'Vers une typologie des réécritures.'
- ⁷⁹ Goullet, *Écriture et réécriture hagiographiques*, 148.
- ⁸⁰ *Écriture et réécriture hagiographiques*, esp. 35–36 and 147–148. See also Sanders, 'Le remaniement carolingien de la *Vita Bathildis*.'
- ⁸¹ Melville, 'Le problème des connaissances.'
- ⁸² Guenée, 'L'historien et la compilation au xiii siècle.'
- ⁸³ Guenée, 'L'historien et la compilation au xiii siècle.'
- ⁸⁴ Melville, 'Spätmittelalterliche Geschichtskompendien'; 'Kompilation, Fiktion und Diskurs.' Diesenberger, 'How Collections Shape the Texts.'
- ⁸⁵ Werner, 'Die literarischen Vorbilder des Aimoin von Fleury.'
- ⁸⁶ McKitterick, 'The Audience for Latin Historiography'; 'Political Ideology'; *History and Memory*.
- ⁸⁷ Pohl, 'History in Fragments.'
- ⁸⁸ Reimitz, 'The Social Logic of Historiographical Compendia.' See also McKitterick, 'Political Ideology.'
- ⁸⁹ Reimitz, *Ein karolingisches Geschichtsbuch*; 'The Social Logic of Historiographical Compendia.'
- ⁹⁰ Kretschmer, *Rewriting Roman History*.
- ⁹¹ Kretschmer, *Rewriting Roman History*.
- ⁹² B. Bachrach, 'Writing Latin History for a Lay Audience'; Tyler, 'Talking about history'; Mortensen, 'Stylistic Choice in a Reborn Genre.'
- ⁹³ G.H. Pertz, ed., *Annales Stederburgenses*, MGH SS 16 (Hanover: Hahn, 1859), 230.
- ⁹⁴ See in particular McKitterick, 'The Audience for Latin Historiography'; Kretschmer, *Rewriting Roman History*.
- ⁹⁵ Shanzer, Review Article of Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours*.
- ⁹⁶ Pohl, 'History in Fragments.'
- ⁹⁷ Pohl, 'History in Fragments,' 353.
- ⁹⁸ Spiegel, 'Genealogy.'
- ⁹⁹ Ward, 'Some Principles of Rhetorical Historiography.'

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