

Authorial Intention in Medieval Historiography

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Abstract

Since the mid-20th century, scholars have focused increasing attention on the context of medieval historical writing and the intentions of medieval historians. Analyzing the intentions of medieval authors is a delicate task, one that requires attention to questions of genre, language, form, mentality, and intended audience. A central problem is that medieval historians tend to describe their goals in terms of literary commonplaces, or *topoi*, which can mask as much as they reveal. For this reason, recent scholarship has tended to focus on the political motives of medieval historical writing. While this development has had a largely salutary effect on our understanding of medieval historiography, we should be wary of categorizing medieval histories as ‘propaganda’ or assuming that they were always written as unified statements of purpose. Finally, we should take into account the personal and egoistic motives that historians may have had for writing. The most successful efforts at understanding authorial intentionality to date have combined historical and literary approaches, considering the author both as an agent of the institution on whose behalf he wrote and as an individual with his own personal motivations.

Introduction

Why did people write history in the Middle Ages? This question is at once easy to answer and difficult to do justice to. Easy, because we have hundreds of statements by medieval authors directly addressing the question of why they wrote, which, when taken together, can give us something like a global ideology of medieval historical writing. Difficult, because the explanations typically invoked by medieval historians – the commemorative and moral-exemplary functions of history, commands from superiors, the urging of monastic or clerical brethren – give us only limited insight into the circumstances that actually drove them to write. Trying to understand the unstated motives of medieval authors is a daunting task, and one that is bound up with a host of other equally thorny issues: genre and function, audience and performative context, the value of prologues as evidence for authorial intent, and the mentalities and modes of thought of medieval authors. Even after taking all of these factors into consideration, we are advised to approach the question with a heavy dose of humility, since even authors themselves are not necessarily aware of all of the motives prompting them to write. As Guibert of Nogent (ca. 1060–1124) wrote in the prologue to his *Deeds of God through the Franks*, ‘What shall I say about intentions, when for the most part they prove so inscrutable that they can scarcely be discerned by the examination of the inner self.’¹

The medieval chronicler – as opposed to the product of his labors – only became a significant focus of scholarly attention in the 20th century. Attitudes towards medieval historiography from the Renaissance through the end of the 19th century were characterized by a pervasive lack of appreciation for the achievements, intentions, and intellectual preoccupations of medieval authors.² Humanist scholars, who held up classical historians like Livy and Tacitus as models, were dissatisfied by what they saw as the characteristic features of medieval historiography: stylistic crudity, lack of organization and thematic clarity, and an uncritical approach to writing history. They were content to mine medieval histories for source material, but showed no

interest in authors as individuals. The same attitude prevailed during the 17th and 18th centuries, when the Bollandists and Maurists were laying the foundations for the critical study of medieval history, and in the 19th, when history was established as a professional and scientific discipline in Germany by Leopold von Ranke and his disciples. The editorial philosophy of the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, which was established under the auspices of the *Gesellschaft für Deutschlands ältere Geschichtskunde* in 1819, reflected the 19th century's prevailing interest in medieval historiography as *Quellenmaterial* above all else.³ Duplicative or irrelevant sections of medieval histories were left out of the MGH's early editions, while derivative material was printed in a smaller typeface. These decisions made sense from the perspective of 19th-century positivist historiography, but they gave a distorted picture of the aims of medieval historians and contributed to a comparative lack of interest in the author as an object of study. A landmark in redressing this neglect was Johannes Spörl's 1933 article 'Das mittelalterliche Geschichtsdenken als Forschungsaufgabe,' which argued that medieval histories should be evaluated as literary works and the intentions of their authors taken seriously.⁴ The challenge laid down by Spörl was answered in impressive fashion by Helmut Beumann, whose 1950 study of Widukind of Corvey remains the benchmark for monographs on medieval historians.⁵ Since Beumann, a steady stream, and now a spate, of studies devoted to medieval historiography have appeared, with increasing attention paid to the specific circumstances of historical writing and the individual intentions of authors.

Given the vastness of the topic, the scope of this essay will necessarily be limited. In what follows, the focus will be on the types of questions that need to be addressed when evaluating authorial intention in medieval historiography and how the debates surrounding these questions have been framed. An effort has been made to strive for chronological and geographical breadth in the authors and works considered, but Byzantine and Islamic historiography have been excluded from consideration, and there is a focus on the heartland of the Latin West, i.e., France, Germany, Italy, and England.

Genre

The question of why medieval historians wrote, and what they were hoping to accomplish, cannot be divorced from the subject of genre, since the form that a historical work took is an obvious and important clue to the intentions of its author. History in the Middle Ages was really a collection of subgenres – annals, chronicles, narrative histories, biography, genealogies, *gesta*, catalogues, etc. – the boundaries between which are notoriously unclear.⁶ Unfortunately, medieval authors themselves are not particularly helpful guides to distinguishing between different types of historical writing. While general comments about the function of history are common in prologues, theoretical speculation about the taxonomy of historical genres is very rare. In his *Etymologies*, Isidore of Seville (ca. 560–636) divided historical writing into *ephemeris* (day-to-day accounts), *kalendaria* (monthly accounts), and *annales* (yearly accounts), and drew a further distinction between *historia*, which dealt with the author's own time period, and *annales*, which reported on the past.⁷ These definitions were grounded in Classical Antiquity, however, and were largely irrelevant to the practice of history writing in the Middle Ages.⁸ More useful is the broad distinction between history and chronicles articulated by the English Benedictine Gervase of Canterbury (ca. 1140–ca. 1210), who distinguished between the historian and the chronicler or annalist based on the form of their narrative: the historian employed 'rhetorical flourishes' and proceeded 'in a roundabout and elegant manner,' while the chronicler or annalist adopted 'a direct and straightforward course' and eschewed stylistic ornamentation.⁹ This was not necessarily an original observation – Cicero had drawn a distinction between 'mere annalists' and rhetorically

trained historians in the *De Oratore* – but it is useful nonetheless for being one of the most detailed statements on the subject by a medieval historian.

Modern scholars have sought to divide medieval histories into categories based on form, content, and presumed audience. Herbert Grundmann's influential classification included eight genres: vernacular historical poetry, national history (*origo gentis*), world chronicles, annals, *vitae*, *gesta*, regional and urban chronicles, and Latin historical poetry.¹⁰ The series *Typologie des sources du moyen âge occidental*, established by Léopold Genicot in 1972, includes volumes on annals, universal chronicles, genealogies, *gesta* of bishops and abbots, local and regional chronicles, and histories. A different, and more finely articulated, set of categories is found in R.C. van Caenegem's *Guide to the Sources of Medieval History*.¹¹ Bernard Guenée has argued for the relevance and utility of a threefold division into histories, chronicles, and annals, with the distinction between the latter two categories collapsing in the 12th century.¹² The more recent trend has been to question the usefulness and applicability of genre distinctions as an interpretative tool.¹³ Franz-Josef Schmale has emphasized the importance of mentality over genre, specifically the difference between the authors of past history (*Vergangenheitsgeschichte*) and contemporary history (*Zeitgeschichte*).¹⁴ Hans-Werner Goetz has expressed skepticism about the possibility of accurately classifying histories according to genre, arguing that any such attempt must be based first and foremost on the intentions of the author and the material that he chose to include, rather than narrower, formal criteria.¹⁵

There are admittedly dangers in using genre as a heuristic. Gregory of Tours's *Histories*, for example, have frequently been treated as 'national history' in the *origo gentis* tradition, but Martin Heinzelmann and Walter Goffart have demonstrated clearly that Gregory did not conceive of his work as a national history of the Franks, though it was used this way by later readers.¹⁶ Moreover, historical writing often took the form not of independent works that can be easily assigned to a particular genre, but of miscellanies and compilations comprising other histories (or excerpts thereof), letters, poems, charters, and lists. The compilers of such collections have at least some claim to be considered historians in the same way as more obviously original authors, and the intentions of specific manuscripts, as opposed to historical texts, have become an increasingly important object of study.¹⁷ Nonetheless, the fact that different kinds of historical writing were clearly intended for different audiences and felt to be useful in different contexts suggests that we should not dispense entirely with the effort to sort medieval histories into categories.¹⁸ This kind of classification is not simply an academic exercise, but an attempt to understand the expectations that authors and audiences shared about different types of historical writing. Different historical genres had different functions, and the function of the text and the intention of its author are closely related, if not identical. It behooves us, therefore, to try to understand the generic features of different kinds of historical writing.

Perhaps the most difficult genre to understand from the standpoint of intentionality is annals, a form of history writing in which the author set down notable events (the deeds of kings and princes, battles, portents, miracles, meteorological phenomena, information about harvests, etc.) without drawing causal connections between them. The traditional, and still generally accepted, explanation for the origin of annals is that they developed from entries in Easter tables,¹⁹ although this hypothesis has recently come under attack.²⁰ The generic features of annals – they are usually anonymous and the author is typically a nonpresence – pose a challenge to our attempts to understand why they were written and how they were used, but some general observations may be advanced. Matthew Innes and Rosamond McKitterick have noted that Carolingian-era annals served to create 'an institutional memory,' and this conclusion can be expanded to encompass annals more generally, whether the institution that produced them was a monastery, a city, or a royal court.²¹

The compiling of annals became a desideratum when a community felt the need to create such a memory. Hence, the *Royal Frankish Annals*, which cover the period from 741–829, were written to create an authoritative Frankish past at the apogee of the Carolingian empire, while the communes of northern Italy began to compile their own civic annals in the late eleventh century, a period of rapid economic growth and increasing political autonomy.²²

Related to, and not always easily distinguishable from, annals are universal chronicles, which derived ultimately from the *Chronological Canons* of Eusebius of Caesarea (263–339), as translated into Latin and continued down to the year 378 by the Church Father Jerome (ca. 347–420). The universal chronicle sought to encompass the totality of human history within a single chronological framework, synchronizing events from sacred and secular history and reckoning up the total passage of years from Creation or Abraham.²³ Schemata such as the four world empires (the theory, derived from the dream of Nebuchadnezzar at Daniel 2:1–45, that four great kingdoms would successively hold temporal power before the advent of the kingdom of God) and the six ages of mankind (an idea articulated by Augustine that the six periods of world history corresponded to the classical six ages of man) sometimes make an appearance as well. The universal chronicle graphically depicted the history of the universe as the unfolding of God's plan for mankind, and it linked the events of the author's own day to the stream of universal history. Local, regional, and national chronicles were similar in form, proceeding in chronological order and generally eschewing commentary or interpretation, but were more limited in scope.²⁴ Many such chronicles began as universal histories but progressively narrowed in to focus on one region or city. Jacob Twinger von Königshofen (1346–1420), for example, wrote a vernacular chronicle that embedded a history of his native Alsace and home city of Strasbourg within a much larger universal history.²⁵

At the risk of oversimplifying, we can advance some general conclusions about the functions of other historiographical genres. Histories of monasteries and churches were written to document an institution's founding and provide an authoritative record of the estates and privileges with which it was endowed. Episcopal *gesta* sought to compile a complete and authoritative list of bishops as a means of linking a see to its glorious foundations (usually dated to the age of the apostles), while monastic historians emphasized the saintliness of their institution's founder and the notable deeds of subsequent abbots.²⁶ Secular biography typically had panegyric or encomiastic aims, and could be used as a means of political commentary. Genealogies – whether simple catalogues or fully-fledged histories organized by generation – served various overlapping goals: the legitimization of a family's claim to their patrimony, enhancement of their status, clarification of the line of succession, and consolidation of group identity.²⁷ National histories were undertaken to provide an authoritative account of a kingdom or principality, helping to give the people a common past and legitimizing the claims of the dynasty that commissioned them. Nor should hagiographical works be excluded from consideration, since there was no firm boundary between history and hagiography in the Middle Ages. *Miracula*, *passiones*, and *vitae* demonstrated the power of God as it operated in the world through holy men and women, both during their lifetimes and afterward at their tombs and through relics. They also had more concrete aims: to promote the cult of particular saints, advertising the power of their relics, encouraging donations to the institutions that housed them, and warning potential malefactors tempted to encroach upon their patrimony. These categories hardly exhaust the varieties and functions of medieval historical writing, nor do they tell us anything about the many works that can only be classified as 'narrative histories.' Still less do they give us any insight into the particular circumstances and motives of individual authors. Nonetheless, the fact that many types of medieval historical writing followed fairly stable templates that to some extent dictated what authors wrote suggests that genre should not be wholly discarded as an interpretative tool.

Audience

If genre can give us some sense of the function of a text, knowledge of the audience for which it was written can bring us even closer to the intentions of the author. Unfortunately, we are not particularly well informed about the performative context of most medieval histories, particularly those written in Latin, a language that ceased to be anyone's mother tongue between the seventh and ninth centuries (the period during which this change took place is controversial), but remained the dominant language of historical writing until the 14th century. On the one hand, many histories were clearly intended for the internal consumption of monasteries, cathedral churches, or communities of canons regular, where they would be received by audiences that used Latin as part of their daily existence. Orderic Vitalis (1075–1142), for example, wrote his *Ecclesiastical History* for his brethren at the Norman abbey of Saint-Évroul and intended it to be read aloud as part of the monastic *lectio*.²⁸ Similarly, most of the English chronicles of the 13th and 14th century, including the great works of Matthew Paris and Thomas Walsingham at Saint-Albans, were written as official records for the benefit of a monastery or cathedral church and rarely circulated outside of a limited area.²⁹ At the other end of the linguistic spectrum were 'historical' works written in the vernacular and intended for laymen. While popular historical traditions had always circulated orally, only in the 12th and 13th centuries did German and the Romance vernaculars establish themselves as written languages that could serve as vectors for historical literature. In the 12th century we find a flowering of vernacular historical epics such as the Anglo-Norman *Song of Roland* (ca. 1100), Gaimar's *Estoire des Engleis* (ca. 1135/1140), Wace's *Roman de Rou* (ca. 1170), and the Middle-High German *Nibelungenlied* (ca. 1190/1205). The 13th century saw the rise of vernacular national prose historiography in England, France, and Spain, with the composition of the Anglo-Norman prose *Brut*, the *Grandes Chroniques de France*, and the *Estoria de España*, while in the 14th century Jean Froissart (1337–ca. 1405) wrote his massive and influential *Chroniques* in French rather than Latin for the consumption of his noble patrons.

Between the poles of histories written in Latin for the internal use of monasteries and churches, and vernacular epics and chronicles intended for laymen, are the great number of Latin histories commissioned by, dedicated to, or intended for secular rulers, as well as works presumably intended at least in part for lay audiences. How did they understand them? Gauging the extent to which Latin histories were accessible to laymen is a difficult question, one that requires us to take into account the intelligibility of Latin to native Romance speakers during the early Middle Ages, the degree of lay literacy at any given time period, region, and stratum of society, and the means of communicating Latin texts to non-literate audiences. On the first question, Roger Wright and Michel Banniard have argued that down to the ninth century (and later, in some areas such as Spain), a situation of 'complex monolingualism' prevailed in the Romance-speaking lands, such that Latin texts could be rendered comprehensible to the uneducated simply by reading them with the local, vernacular pronunciation.³⁰ Others, such as József Herman, have judged the decisive break between Latin and Romance to have taken place earlier.³¹ What is indisputable is that Latin was permanently severed from the Romance vernaculars by the Carolingian-era linguistic reforms inaugurated by Alcuin, among others, at the end of the eighth century. Thereafter, as Latin and its affiliated vernaculars drifted further apart, Latin histories became increasingly incomprehensible to non-literate audiences in the form in which they were written.

For the Carolingian period, there is evidence to suggest that Latin histories were intelligible to, and written for, literate lay audiences. Rosamond McKitterick has argued that literacy was widespread among the Carolingian laity, and history in particular was consumed by

laymen,³² and Janet Nelson and others have pointed to the ‘court-centered’ nature of Carolingian historiography.³³ Indeed, the entire culture of Carolingian historical writing seems to have presumed a lay audience for history. Charlemagne himself could speak Latin fluently and had ‘the histories and deeds of the ancients’ read to him at mealtimes.³⁴ Charlemagne’s biographer Einhard was a layman, as was Nithard, who wrote an important history of the civil wars following the death of Louis the Pious in 840.³⁵ At the courts of Charlemagne, Louis the Pious, and their successors history functioned as a means of education, debate, political commentary, and image formation.

With the collapse of the Carolingian empire at the end of the ninth century, however, the need for literacy as an administrative tool for laymen disappeared, and from this point on we can rarely presume a knowledge of Latin among lay rulers. In the 11th century there was a precipitous growth both in literacy and the role of written texts, so much so that the period 1000–1050 has been seen as marking the transition between an oral society and a written one.³⁶ We can assume a wider literate audience for Latin texts written in the later 11th and 12th centuries than in the preceding centuries, therefore, but the evidence for knowledge of Latin among laymen in general, and secular rulers in particular, is ambiguous at best. The *Annals of Steterburg* report that Henry the Lion (1129–1195), duke of Saxony and Bavaria, ‘ordered the ancient texts of chronicles to be collected, written down, and read aloud before him, and he frequently passed whole nights without sleep in this activity,’ but it is unclear whether the chronicles were read to him in Latin or translated into German.³⁷ Lambert of Ardes reports that Count Baldwin II of Guines (r. 1169–1206) surrounded himself with ‘clerics and teachers’ with whom he discussed philosophy and the interpretation of scripture, but Baldwin did not understand Latin and had to commission vernacular translations to be read aloud to him.³⁸ Gerald of Wales (ca. 1146–ca. 1223), one of the most prolific authors of the 12th century, complained of the limited audience for histories written in Latin. In a letter to King John of England (r. 1199–1216) accompanying a copy of his *Expugnatio Hibernica*, he suggested that someone translate the work into French in order to acquire the audience and the reward that he had been unable to obtain.³⁹

The topic of literacy is not a side issue, but bears directly on the question of the audience for medieval histories, specifically whether they were intended for a narrow monastic and clerical elite, or a broader circle of readers that included laymen.⁴⁰ Even if we can rarely presume a knowledge of Latin among lay audiences, however, Latin histories could be, and were, made accessible to them through translation and paraphrase. In the dedicatory epistle to his four-book history of the conquests of Robert Guiscard and Roger I of Sicily, for example, Geoffrey Malaterra beseeches anyone ‘who reads aloud or translates’ his book to attribute errors in the text to his sources rather than to the author.⁴¹ Geoffrey goes on to note that ‘the duke himself [i.e., Roger] exhorted me to use plain language that was easy to understand, so that what I was saying would be clearer to everyone,’ suggesting that the work was written to be accessible to a wide audience rather than simply as a prestige object.⁴² Similarly, the 12th-century historian of the Piast dukes of Poland known as Gallus Anonymus states in the dedicatory epistle to the third book of his history that his work must be ‘read out by a true interpreter.’⁴³ Latin was hardly an impenetrable barrier, therefore, and its prestige and universal intelligibility gave it advantages as a medium for history writing even after the development of historical prose in the vernacular in the thirteenth century.

An instructive example of the way that debates about audience play into interpretations of an author’s purpose (and vice versa) can be found in the history of the dukes of Normandy written by Dudo of Saint-Quentin.⁴⁴ Dudo, a canon of Saint-Quentin in the Vermandois, wrote his *Gesta Normannorum* between 996 and 1020. He claims in a dedicatory epistle addressed to Bishop Adalbero of Laon (ca. 950–1031) that he undertook it at the behest of

Duke Richard I of Normandy (r. 944–966), and that he continued it after the duke's death at the urging of his son and heir, Richard II (r. 996–1026), and his half-brother, Raoul of Ivry. The work was not written to be easily understandable, however. Dudo employs abstruse vocabulary and a mannered *prosimetrum* (alternating prose-and-verse) form, and theories about his purpose in writing have had to take into account the accessibility (or lack thereof) of his work to its potential audience. Bernard Bachrach has argued that parts of Dudo's history, at least, were intelligible to the members of the Norman ducal court who comprised its principal audience, and that Dudo made a concerted effort to get military matters right in order to appeal to them.⁴⁵ Leah Shopkow, on the other hand, maintains that Dudo's patrons 'did not read and probably did not understand Latin,' and has instead emphasized the monumental and symbolic importance of the work.⁴⁶ Lars Boje Mortensen has pointed out that the vocabulary, syntax, and narrative structure of the *Gesta Normannorum* made it better suited to serve as a school text than as a script for recitation at the Norman court.⁴⁷ Felice Lifshitz argues that it was intended to convince Adalbero of Laon (a learned prelate who would have understood and appreciated its mannered style) of Richard II's right to inherit and hold his father's patrimony.⁴⁸ Eric Christiansen maintains, based on the rhetorically ostentatious style of the work, that Dudo's 'first concern was aesthetic, not historical or political.'⁴⁹ While there is no consensus about the purpose of Dudo's history, therefore, any plausible theory about why he wrote has to take into account his intended audience and the means of making the work available to them.

Prologues and Topoi

The logical place to look for answers to the question posed at the beginning of this essay is in the statements of medieval authors themselves, which are generally found in prologues, prefaces, and dedicatory epistles. This kind of analysis must be undertaken with care, however, because much of what medieval authors have to tell us takes the form of conventional rhetorical formulae, or *topoi*.⁵⁰ In classical rhetoric and dialectic a *topos* (Lat. *locus*) was a source of argument, literally a 'place' where speakers could find arguments suitable to their purpose.⁵¹ Examples include 'from opposites' (e.g., if temperance is a virtue, then lack of self-control is harmful) and 'the more and the less' (e.g., if even the gods lack complete knowledge, how much more so must mortals).⁵² In his monumental *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*, Ernst Robert Curtius (1886–1956) employed the term *topos* to denote a literary commonplace, and this usage has since become widespread. Prefatory *topoi* served a number of interrelated goals. Expressions of modesty and hesitancy, which are ubiquitous in medieval historiographical prologues, were intended to paint a sympathetic picture of the author and ingratiate him with his audience. The *topos* of commission, in which the author referred to a request or command to write, served to ward off potential charges of arrogance or presumption by assigning responsibility for writing to an outside party. Requests for corrections were a way of honoring the dedicatee and expressing a becoming modesty, while claims to have relied only on authoritative sources or credible witnesses served to assure the audience of the truth of what they were about to read or hear.

More relevant to our investigation is the fact that historical prologues also frequently contain statements about the purpose and utility of history. These tend to focus on its commemorative and moral-exemplary functions as a means of preserving the past from the ravages of time on the one hand, and holding up a vast panoply of human behavior for inspection on the other. Herodotus invoked the commemorative function of history in the opening passage of his *Histories*, and the idea of rescuing important deeds from oblivion

and committing them to memory in writing remained a commonplace of historical prologues throughout Antiquity and the Middle Ages. In the 14th-century, the English chronicler Henry Knighton noted that 'history could be called in a certain sense immortal, since it recalls to memory and brings back to our thoughts what had been consigned to oblivion'.⁵³ The moral-exemplary utility of history derived from its function as a vast storehouse of examples from which men could learn to shape their own conduct. In the preface to his history of Rome, Livy noted that history contained 'lessons of every type of experience,' from which the reader could choose what to imitate and what to avoid, and some variation of this statement occurs repeatedly in medieval historical prologues. Bede, for example, noted in the prologue to his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, that 'if history relates the good deeds of virtuous men, then the hearer is moved and prompted to imitate their goodness, whereas if it records the evil deeds of the wicked, then the faithful or pious hearer or reader is similarly roused to avoid what is harmful and perverse'.⁵⁴ The didactic value of history had particular importance for secular rulers, for whom histories could serve as a kind of 'school for princes.' Frechulf of Lisieux dedicated the second half of his *Chronicle* to the empress Judith, designating the work for the education of her son, the future emperor Charles the Bald.⁵⁵ Widukind of Corvey dedicated one redaction of his *Saxon History* to Mathilda, the 11 year-old daughter of King Otto I of Germany, so that she could become 'more glorious' by reading about her famous ancestors. And in the 13th century, the monk Primat emphasized the moral-exemplary value of the *Grandes Chroniques de France* for his Capetian royal patrons.⁵⁶

In spite of – or perhaps, because of – their formulaic nature, the topoi of historical prologues are useful for illustrating the basic assumptions that undergirded the writing of history in the Middle Ages. By the same token, the fact that many prologues are woven together out of rhetorical conventions employed to ingratiate the author with his audience raises serious questions about their evidentiary value. How are we to know, for example, if an author's claim to have written at the request of his dedicatee is an accurate reflection of the conditions under which the work was written, or merely a polite fiction intended to flatter the recipient and absolve the author of responsibility for writing? Between the equally untenable extremes of naively accepting whatever authors tell us on the one hand and rejecting their claims wholesale on the other, there remains a reasonable middle ground. Every statement must be read both within the context of the work itself and against the literary and historical background in which the work was written, since the importance of what an author says – or does not say – sometimes only becomes important in its historical context. The value of this kind of approach is exemplified by the work of Helmut Beumann, not only in his monograph on Widukind of Corvey, but in his studies of the prologue to Einhard's *Vita Karoli Magni* and the topos of anticipated criticism in the Early Middle Ages.⁵⁷ Detailed study of the way that topoi evolved over time can also reveal subtle changes in attitudes about the practice of history.⁵⁸ Bernard Guenée, for example, has argued that prologues provide evidence for a shift from history as a primarily rhetorical exercise to a professional and technical discipline over the course of the 12th and 13th centuries.⁵⁹ More recently, Steven Vanderputten has demonstrated that the prologues to monastic chronicles written in the Low Countries from the tenth to the 15th centuries mirror broader trends in the development of history as a genre, and show Benedictine monks grappling with their changing role in society and their decreasing relevance to high and late medieval intellectual culture.⁶⁰ The interpretation of authorial statements is a necessarily speculative endeavor, but by adopting an approach that is both historical (in that it demands a close investigation of the circumstances surrounding a work's composition) and comparative, a maximum amount of meaning can be extracted from prologues, prefaces, and dedicatory epistles.

History and Politics

Whatever value prologues possess as a key to understanding authorial intention, their limitations are also plainly apparent, since to a large degree convention dictated what an author should and should not say. In seeking to tease out the unstated motivations of medieval historians, recent scholarship has tended to focus overwhelmingly on the political utility of history, not merely attempting to draw attention to overt bias or polemical intent, but looking for the political element in all manifestations of written memory. Patrick Geary has observed that all memory serves a purpose, and is thus political in broader sense.⁶¹ Gerd Althoff has emphasized that medieval historiography tended to be 'present-centered'; that is, historians were prompted to write by specific circumstances rather than by an abstract desire to preserve events in memory or provide *exempla* to an audience.⁶² Similarly, Hans-Werner Goetz has drawn attention to the political nature of historical consciousness in the Middle Ages.⁶³ As a result of this shift in attitude, works that have traditionally been viewed as the product of disinterested scholarship, or whose purpose remained opaque, are increasingly being read as products of a particular time and place, with specific agendas waiting to be discovered.⁶⁴

There are good reasons for this focus on the political functions of medieval historical writing. In the first place, history could be used to legitimate all kinds of claims – whether they had to do with politics, ecclesiastical primacy, church property, or the virtues of a particular saint. As John of Salisbury noted in the prologue to his *Historia pontificalis*, 'The knowledge of chronicles helps to establish or nullify rights and to confirm or invalidate privileges.'⁶⁵ Monastic charters, for example, were sometimes embedded within larger 'cartulary-chronicles' that served both to record the history of an institution and safeguard its titles to the estates and privileges with which it had been endowed. History functioned generally as a means of identity-formation for monasteries, cathedral chapters, noble families, principalities, cities, kingdoms, and peoples.⁶⁶ It could be made to serve as a form of political commentary as well, a function that emerges most forcefully in the Carolingian era, when the existence of a centralized court (and later, courts) and literate lay audiences made historical texts an important means of framing political debates.⁶⁷ Chronicles could even be searched for historical precedents to be used in legal or political disputes. An oft-cited example is the 'Great Cause' of 1291, when King Edward I of England (r. 1272–1307), prior to adjudicating the disputed succession to the throne of Scotland, wrote to some 30 monasteries of his realm, instructing them to search their chronicles for information about the past history of England's relationship with Scotland.⁶⁸

The Late Middle Ages also saw the full development of history as an instrument of nationalist ideology, with the proliferation of national histories and official chroniclers. The *Grandes Chroniques de France*, written at the royal abbey of Saint-Denis from 1274 onward, was patronized by the Capetian monarchs,⁶⁹ and in the 15th century, a monk of Saint-Denis held the salaried position of 'chroniqueur de France,' an office only abolished during the Revolution.⁷⁰ King Alfonso X the Wise of Castille (r. 1252–1284) supervised the composition of an official history, the *Estoria de España*, and a century later King Pedro IV of Aragon (r. 1336–1387) commissioned the composition of the *Crónica de san Juan de la Peña* as the official history of his realm. The dukes of Burgundy patronized court historians, and in 1455 Philip the Good appointed Georges Chastelain official chronicler of the Burgundian court.⁷¹ In 1434, King Duarte of Portugal appointed Fernão Lopes as official chronicler of the kings of Portugal. Notably, there was no such official historiography in Late Medieval England.⁷²

While this focus on the political dimensions of history has greatly enhanced our understanding of the context and function of medieval historical writing, some caveats are in order. In the first place, it is necessary to distinguish purpose (*Absicht*) from bias (*Tendenz*).⁷³ To have identified the political stance of a text is not necessarily to have understood the reason

why it was written. Nor should we overestimate the political utility of historical writing. The word 'propaganda' is sometimes used to describe any text with a marked political bias, but the indiscriminate use of this term is highly problematic.⁷⁴ Before the widespread availability of paper in the 14th century, and the invention of the printing press in the 15th, the difficulty of copying manuscripts severely limited the diffusion of historical texts.⁷⁵ Nor was the chronicle a particularly effective vehicle for the widespread or rapid dissemination of information. More practical means of mass communication were ceremonies (assemblies, consecrations, funerals, etc.) and circular letters dispatched from a ruler to local authorities, who could have them publicly posted, read aloud by heralds, and declaimed in sermons.⁷⁶

Rather than propaganda, most medieval histories with a marked political bias would be better described as functioning in the realm of identity formation, political commentary, or encomium and panegyric. Dudo of Saint-Quentin's *Deeds of the Normans*, for example, is quite clearly written to celebrate the dukes of Normandy, but to categorize it as 'propaganda' begs the question of how its ideas, couched as they were in ostentatiously learned Latin, were supposed to be disseminated, and to whom.⁷⁷ Even official history cannot necessarily be described as propaganda. The *Grandes Chroniques de France* served as the official history of the kings of France from 1274 onward, but if the purpose of this work was to impose a single, royally-sponsored view of the French past on the entire realm, it cannot be judged a success, since its influence south of the Loire was limited.⁷⁸ It may be helpful here to distinguish between synchronic propaganda (i.e., the deliberate, widespread dissemination of tendentious information on behalf of an institution or a ruling power) and diachronic propaganda, which operated by controlling the way an event, a ruler, or any other historical subject was remembered by future generations. For if history was not a particularly effective medium of communicating ideas across a wide spectrum of society in a short span of time, it was a superlative means of establishing certain beliefs about the past at the expense of others, a fact of which medieval historians were no doubt aware.

Conclusion

The best assessments of authorial intention today are multifaceted, employing a variety of different methods, including critical reading of prologues, attention to the form of the text and its possible audience, analysis of plot and themes, source criticism, study of manuscripts, and careful scrutiny of the social and political context of individual works and their authors. Though many of its conclusions are controversial, Walter Goffart's *Narrators of Barbarian History* shows the benefits of an approach that combines meticulous historical scholarship with an appreciation of the literary features of narrative historiography. The political uses of history must be carefully considered, but we should not be too quick to ascribe narrowly political aims to our texts. 'Constructing the past' in the Middle Ages, as Walter Pohl reminds us, was a messy business, and reading historical texts as the expression of a unified and consistent point of view risks ignoring the contradictions and ambiguities that characterize many histories.⁷⁹ One of the most penetrating recent insights into medieval historical writing has been Gabrielle Spiegel's observation that the seemingly random and unstructured nature of many medieval chronicles derived from the belief that the historian was being most faithful to his material when he set down a wide range of events in chronological order without obtrusive commentary or causal explanations. 'The chronicler,' writes Spiegel, 'apprehended history itself as a perceptual field, to be seen and represented instead of constructed and analyzed, an object more of perception than cognition'.⁸⁰ This is a powerful observation that simultaneously helps to explain why so much medieval historical writing looks chaotic and ill-formed to us and cautions us against being too quick to view medieval histories as unified statements of purpose.

Finally, in considering the intentions of medieval historians, we should also take into account the ways in which writing could serve the interests of authors themselves. Autobiography as a genre was virtually nonexistent between the time of Augustine's *Confessions* (ca. 397–400) and Guibert of Nogent's *Monodies* (ca. 1115), but a significant number of medieval histories incorporate autobiographical material in their work, either as the product of a common 'autobiographical urge,' or as a way of crafting a particular image of the author to be disseminated to contemporaries and left for posterity.⁸¹ And as with any kind of literary activity, writing history could be a way of winning prestige, gaining patronage, and obtaining other forms of remuneration. Self-interested motives are almost never admitted to in our texts, but the frequency with which they are denounced or attributed to others suggests that medieval authors were keenly aware of the possible benefits of writing. In the ninth century, Einhard spoke disparagingly of those who wrote about the deeds of great men because they had been 'seduced by a desire for enduring fame.'⁸² By the 12th century, references to literary ambition appear with enough frequency to suggest that some authors, at least, now perceived this as an acceptable motive for writing. In the preface to book 1 of his *Chronica Boemorum*, for example, Cosmas of Prague (ca. 1045–1125) invites his dedicatee, Archdeacon Gervase, to rewrite his work 'to make your learning known to posterity and win a glorious reputation to be remembered down through the ages'.⁸³ Gerald of Wales (ca. 1146–1223) devotes most of the prologue to his *Topography of Ireland* to a meditation on literary glory.⁸⁴ And Guibert of Nogent admits openly to having pursued his studies out of a desire to win 'fame and literary distinction, and through these things...high status and wealth.'⁸⁵

The personal utility of histories for its writers should not be over-emphasized of course. The authors of medieval history were typically beholden to the interests of monasteries, cathedral churches, or patrons, and their works were often designed to further monastic, episcopal, dynastic, or royal interests. But we should nonetheless be cognizant of the ways in which medieval authors could use their texts not only to serve their institutions and patrons, but to serve themselves as well. We should, in other words, pay attention to the 'social logic of the text' in all its dimensions.⁸⁶

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 *Dei gesta per Francos*, 82.

² Spörl, 'Das mittelalterliche Geschichtsdenken.'

³ See, for example, *Archiv der Gesellschaft für ältere deutsche Geschichtskunde* 1 (1820), 19–21.

⁴ Spörl, 'Das mittelalterliche Geschichtsdenken.'

⁵ Beumann, *Widukind von Korvei*.

- ⁶ Schmale, *Funktion und Formen mittelalterlicher Geschichtsschreibung*, 105–123.
- ⁷ *Etymologiae* 1.44.1–3.
- ⁸ Guenée, ‘Histoires, annales, chroniques.’
- ⁹ Stubbs, ed., *The Historical Works of Gervase of Canterbury*, vol. 1, 87–88.
- ¹⁰ Grundmann, *Geschichtsschreibung im Mittelalter*, 7–51.
- ¹¹ Van Caenegem, *Guide to the Sources of Medieval History*, 17–54.
- ¹² ‘Histoires, annales, chroniques’; ‘Histoire et chronique. Nouvelles réflexions sur les genres historiques au moyen âge.’
- ¹³ Roest, ‘Medieval Historiography’; Deliyannis, ed., *Historiography in the Middle Ages*, 1–13.
- ¹⁴ Schmale, ‘Mentalität und Berichtshorizont.’
- ¹⁵ *Geschichtsschreibung und Geschichtsbewusstsein im hohen Mittelalter*, 110–124.
- ¹⁶ Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours*; Goffart, ‘From *Historiae* to *Historia Francorum*’; Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History*, 119–127.
- ¹⁷ Pohl, ‘History in fragments.’
- ¹⁸ Ray, ‘Medieval Historiography through the Twelfth Century,’ 35–42.
- ¹⁹ Poole, *Chronicles and Annals*; McCormick, *Les Annales du haut moyen âge*; Ó Cróinín, ‘Early Irish Annals.’
- ²⁰ McKitterick, *History and Memory*, 97–99; McKitterick, ‘Constructing the Past,’ 110–113.
- ²¹ Innes and McKitterick, ‘The writing of history,’ 200.
- ²² Coleman, ‘Lombard City Annals.’
- ²³ Von den Brincken, *Studien zur lateinischen Weltchronistik*; Krüger, *Die Universalchroniken*.
- ²⁴ Van Houts, *Local and Regional Chronicles*.
- ²⁵ Jakob Twinger von Königshofen, *Chronicle*.
- ²⁶ Sot, *Gesta episcoporum, gesta abbatum*; Kaiser, ‘Die Gesta episcoporum.’
- ²⁷ Duby, ‘Remarques’; Genicot, *Les Généalogies*; Shopkow, ‘Dynastic History,’ in Deliyannis, ed., *Historiography in the Middle Ages*, 217–248.
- ²⁸ Ray, ‘Orderic Vitalis and his Readers.’
- ²⁹ Taylor, *English Historical Literature*, 53–55.
- ³⁰ Wright *Late Latin and Early Romance*; Banniard, *Viva Voce*.
- ³¹ Herman, ‘The End of the History of Latin.’
- ³² *The Carolingians and the Written Word*, 211–270; ‘The Audience for Latin Historiography.’
- ³³ Nelson ‘History-writing at the courts of Louis the Pious and Charles the Bald.’
- ³⁴ Einhard, *Vita Karoli Magni*, chs. 24–25, 98–100.
- ³⁵ Nithard, *Histoires*.
- ³⁶ Stock, *The Implications of Literacy*.
- ³⁷ *Annales Stederburgenses*, 230.
- ³⁸ *Historia comitum Ghisnensium*, 598.
- ³⁹ *Expugnatio Hibernica*, 410–411.
- ⁴⁰ See, e.g., Schmale, *Funktion und Formen*, 146; McKitterick, ‘The Audience for Latin Historiography.’
- ⁴¹ Malaterra, *De rebus gestis Rogerii Calabriae*, 3.
- ⁴² Malaterra, *De rebus gestis Rogerii Calabriae*, 3.
- ⁴³ Gallus Anonymus, *Chronicle*, 123.
- ⁴⁴ See Dudo, *De moribus*.
- ⁴⁵ Bachrach, ‘Writing Latin History for a Lay Audience’; Bachrach, ‘Dudo of St Quentin and Norman Military Strategy.’
- ⁴⁶ Shopkow, *History and Community*, 185.
- ⁴⁷ Mortensen, ‘Stylistic Choice in a Reborn Genre,’ 100–101.
- ⁴⁸ Lifshitz, ‘Dudo’s Historical Narrative.’
- ⁴⁹ Christiansen, *Dudo of Saint-Quentin*, xx–xxi.
- ⁵⁰ See Simon, *Untersuchungen*; Janson, *Latin Prose Prefaces*.
- ⁵¹ Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.23; Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 5.10.20.
- ⁵² Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.23.1, 2.23.4.
- ⁵³ Henry Knighton, *Chronicle*, vol. 1, p. 2.
- ⁵⁴ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, prol., vol. 1, 5.
- ⁵⁵ Frechulf of Lisieux, *Chronicle*, 435–437.
- ⁵⁶ Guenée, ‘Les Grandes Chroniques de France,’ 192.
- ⁵⁷ Beumann, *Widukind*; Beumann, ‘Topos und Gedankengefüge’; Beumann, ‘Der Schriftsteller und seine Kritiker.’
- ⁵⁸ Guenée, ‘Histoire, mémoire, écriture.’
- ⁵⁹ Guenée, ‘Histoire et chronique,’ 7–8.
- ⁶⁰ Vanderputten, ‘From Sermon to Science.’
- ⁶¹ Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance*, 12.
- ⁶² Althoff, *Inszenierte Herrschaft*.

- ⁶³ Goetz, 'Die Gegenwart der Vergangenheit.'
- ⁶⁴ See Goffart, *Narrators*, 235–328.
- ⁶⁵ *Historia pontificalis*, 3.
- ⁶⁶ Dunbabin, 'Discovering a Past.'
- ⁶⁷ Nelson, 'History-writing at the courts of Louis the Pious and Charles the Bald.'
- ⁶⁸ Stones and Simpson, eds., *Edward I and the Throne of Scotland*, vol. 1, 137–48.
- ⁶⁹ Guenée, 'Les Grandes Chroniques de France'; Spiegel, *The Chronicle Tradition of Saint-Denis*.
- ⁷⁰ Hay, 'History and Historians.'
- ⁷¹ Small, *Chastelain*, 91–127.
- ⁷² For a possible exception see Gransden, 'Propaganda,' 369–370.
- ⁷³ Schmale, 'Mentalität und Berichtshorizont,' 1; Graus, 'Funktionen der spätmittelalterlichen Geschichtsschreibung,' 15.
- ⁷⁴ Guenée, 'Les tendances actuelles,' 57–65.
- ⁷⁵ Graus, 'Funktionen der spätmittelalterlichen Geschichtsschreibung,' 30–31.
- ⁷⁶ Guenée, 'Les tendances actuelles,' 60.
- ⁷⁷ Lifshitz, 'Dudo's Historical Narrative,' 106–107.
- ⁷⁸ Taylor, *English Historical Literature*, 53.
- ⁷⁹ Pohl, 'History in Fragments.'
- ⁸⁰ Spiegel, *The Past as Text*, 100–101.
- ⁸¹ See Rubenstein, 'Biography and Autobiography.'
- ⁸² *Vita Karoli Magni*, 1.
- ⁸³ *Chronica Boemorum*, 3.
- ⁸⁴ *Topographia Hibernica*, 3–8.
- ⁸⁵ Benton, *Self and Society*, 78–79.
- ⁸⁶ See Spiegel, *The Past as Text*, 3–28.

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