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Module: Making History, The Normans and their Myth in the European Middle Ages

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Book Review: Lisa Reilly, *The Invention of Norman Visual Culture: art, politics, and dynastic ambition* (Cambridge, 2020)

When studying the Normans and their impact on the medieval world, it is almost impossible not to come across examples of the visual culture they created. Whether it be the grand cathedrals that dominate the English landscape or intricate embroideries that depict conquest narratives, the evidence of Norman culture dominates medieval Europe. However, few historians have addressed Norman visual culture in a unified and contextual way. Therefore, Lisa Reilly's *The Invention of Norman Visual Culture* stands out from much of the discussion on the Normans by presenting us with new and conceptual ways of studying the Normans and their identity. In her book, Reilly argues the existence of a conceptual link in the emergence and creation of Norman visual culture throughout the regions they conquered. Ultimately, Reilly proposes that despite visual differences, 'the purpose and process behind their creation were shared' (p. 11).

The introduction of the book sets out this argument, while also providing background to who the Normans were, and some key case studies that will be discussed in detail throughout the following chapters. Additionally, the introduction moves on to explore broad concepts proposed by other historians about connection within the development of history. Homi Bhabha's concept of *cultural hybridity* and Eric Hobsbawm's discussion of *invented traditions* are specifically emphasized and expanded throughout the book.¹ This allows Reilly

¹ Bhabha proposed the concept of cultural hybridity as culture's 'in-between' in, Homi Bhabha, 'Culture's in-between', in Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London, 1996), p. 54; Hobsbawm proposed the concept of invented traditions as a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past in, Eric Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions', in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 4.

to reinforce her argument that the Normans used both cultural hybridity and connections to the past in their visual culture in order to intentionally establish their own identity as legitimate Christian rulers. Furthermore, the introduction demonstrates the limitations of both past studies on medieval art and architecture, and specialized works focusing on one of the regions under Norman rule. Despite being touched on by a few historians, such as Barbara Raw and Eric Fernie, no unified work considering the process behind Norman visual culture exists throughout medieval historiography.² Therefore, Reilly distinguishes herself from previous works on Norman visual culture in her aim of ‘acknowledg[ing] the complex process of Norman cultural production and [recognising] it as an integrative one’ (p. 32).

Following this introduction, Reilly structures the main portion of her work by region. Starting with Normandy, Reilly gives context to both the origins of the Normans as Vikings settled into northern France, and to the origins of Norman identity, which she attributes to the work of Dudo of St. Quentin.³ By analysing his work and the intentions behind it, Reilly shows how the first Normans established a deliberate identity for themselves as legitimate Christian rulers of diverse peoples. Subsequently, basing herself on the works of other historians, like Maylis Baylé, Reilly compares specific examples of Norman architecture, such as the west ends of Bernay Abbey, Jumièges Abbey, and the Abbey of Saint-Etienne in Caen, in order to show links to Carolingian architecture, which explain how the Normans deliberately developed a visual culture comprehensible to diverse cultures, reflecting the

² Barbara Raw mentions that pictures consist of more than their surface layout and how it is necessary to consider the meaning of pictures in, Barbara Raw, ‘What do we Mean by the Source of a Picture?’, in Carola Hicks (ed.), *England in the Eleventh Century: Proceedings on the 1990 Harlaxton Symposium* (Stamford, 1992), p. 285; Eric Fernie mentions the limitations of architectural historians who restrict themselves to an examination of evidence ‘as symptom rather than as cause’ in, Eric Fernie, *Romanesque Architecture: The First Style of the European Age* (New Haven, 2014), p. 8.

³ Reilly specifically mentions the account of Rollo’s vision from a French mountaintop of a flock of, which he interprets as marking his destiny to lead diverse peoples, found in, Dudo of St. Quentin, *History of the Normans* trans. Eric Christiansen (Woodbridge, 1998) p. 30.

Norman identity created by Dudo.⁴ In the next chapter, Reilly describes the Norman conquest of England, and how the uncertainty surrounding the rule of William I led to his patronage of art and architecture in order to present himself as a legitimate Christian ruler. Focusing on analyses of Durham Cathedral and the Bayeux Tapestry, Reilly shows how the intentional incorporation of Anglo-Saxon, Norman, and in the case of the Bayeux Tapestry, Scandinavian, stylistic influences demonstrate William's desire to foster a sense of continuity to gloss over the interruption caused by Norman conquest. The following chapter on Norman Sicily follows in a similar process as Reilly provides background to the rule of Roger II, the first Norman king of Sicily, and his need to reinforce his legitimacy to the diverse cultures of the Mediterranean. Reilly's focus in this chapter is on the Capella Palatina in Palermo, the Cefalù Cathedral, and Roger II's Coronation Mantle, all of which she breaks down, revealing how their diversity of sources and use of *spolia* speak to an international audience and promote the Norman message of legitimate kingship. Reilly finishes her book with a brief conclusion in which she specifically highlights the comparison of the Bayeux Tapestry and Roger II's Coronation Mantle. This comparison reinforces how the Normans reflected the myth of their identity in their visual culture by creating art and architecture that intertwined diverse cultures into an entirely new visual culture used to legitimise Norman rule over diverse peoples.

The concept of the deliberate and self-conscious way the Normans establish their own identity is the source of much writing about the Normans. R.H.C. Davis' *The Normans and their Myth*, is a prime example of the argument that the Normans created a unique image of themselves in each region they conquered. Although Davis briefly touches on the visual culture of the Normans in his argument, most of his references to this Norman identity stem

⁴ Baylé proposed that Norman architecture has roots in early Carolingian architecture in, Maylis Baylé, 'L'Architecture Religieuse Romane', in Maylis Baylé (ed.), *L'Architecture Normande au Moyen Age: Les étapes de la création* (Caen 1997), p. 30.

from the analysis of works of Norman chroniclers, rather than an exploration into the creation of Norman visual culture.⁵ Other works that do explore Norman visual culture; like Carola Hicks' 'The Borders of the Bayeux Tapestry,' which discusses the evidence of a range of sources in certain aspects of the Bayeux Tapestry, or Hoffman's 'Pathways of Probability,' which describes the necessary 'weaving together of an entire network of connections' in order to understand Roger II's coronation mantle; only look at art and architecture in a classified and local way, rather than in the broader context of Norman history.⁶ Therefore, Lisa Reilly's *The Invention of Norman Visual Culture* is unprecedented in her exploration of the processes and intentions behind Norman visual culture, placed within the larger unified context of Norman history. Reilly's examination of prominent pieces of art and architecture throughout Normandy, England, and Sicily provide good case studies for reinforcing her argument, as she weaves together examinations of their style and sources with historical circumstance and intention. Although, the book occasionally focuses excessively on the historical context surrounding the Normans, thus, breaking the flow of Reilly's argument. However, this context is useful in providing background to those with little knowledge of the Normans, therefore, making the book easily accessible to anyone with only general knowledge of medieval Europe. Ultimately, Reilly was successful in creating a comprehensive argument throughout her book that not only ties together wide-ranging themes of Norman identity, but also provides a complete analysis of the creation of Norman visual culture throughout all the regions they conquered. Moving beyond that, Reilly pushes

⁵ R.H.C. Davis specifically mentions the importance of works by Dudo of St. Quentin, William of Jumièges, and Orderic Vitalis in establishing the 'Norman myth' in, R.H.C. Davis, *The Normans and their Myth* (London, 1976), pp. 49-70.

⁶ Carola Hicks, 'The Borders of the Bayeux Tapestry', in Carola Hicks (ed.), *England in the Eleventh Century: Proceedings of the 1990 Harlaxton Symposium* (Stamford, 1992), p. 265; Eva Hoffman, 'Pathways of Probability: Islamic and Christian Interchange from the Tenth to the Twelfth Century', in Eva Hoffman (ed.), *Late Antique and Medieval Art of the Mediterranean World* (Malden, 2007), p. 329-330.

her argument into discussions on the ways continuity and connection exist within the creation of culture and history, causing readers to reflect upon the craft of history itself.

Bibliography

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