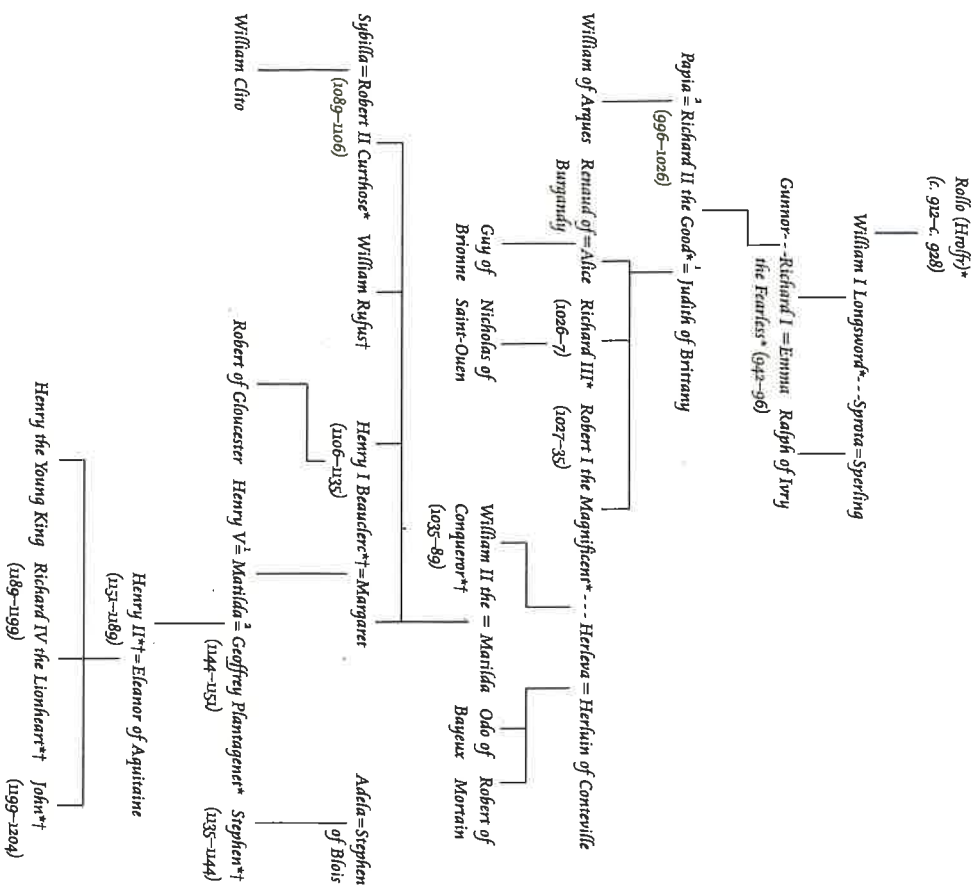


The Dukes of Normandy (911-1204)



Leah Shepley "History & Community:
Norman Historical Writing in the Twelfth
& Thirteenth Centuries" (Washington, 1997)

2 Introduction: Historical Writing and the Norman Community

Historians are themselves caught in the web of history. Paul Veyne ends his consideration of classical historical writing, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths*, by asserting that, like the ancient Greeks, we modern people also believe our myths.¹ His point was not that we believe evident fictions but that our fictions are not evident to us because they are sustained by what he calls "programs of truth," systems which help people distinguish what is true from what is not. These programs of truth, however, also sustain belief in things that, viewed through a different program, would be untrue. Not all programs of truth are historical—some are religious or philosophical or scientific—and not all societies find history useful.²

1. Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths*, trans. Paula Wisning (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 129.

2. See Donald E. Brown, *History, History, and Human Nature: The Social Origins of Historical Consciousness* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988), 19-41, for a discussion of the Indian situation; also Y. H. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 7. Both of these works address

but historical programs of truth govern the assumptions historians and readers share about what constitutes "true" history. These programs of truth belong to the intellectual *longue durée*. Histories are borne along by them like ships carried by prevailing winds, until a shift in the breeze sends them off on another tack.

While speeded forward by these gusts, however, each ship encounters local currents and eddies and each captain trims the sails in an idiosyncratic way. If histories are written within the framework of widely accepted programs of truth, they are also a response to arrays of circumstances unique to particular times and places. Histories have, to use Gabrielle Spiegel's felicitous phrase, a "social logic" and are produced by a "moment of choice, decision, and action that creates the social reality of the text, a reality existing both 'inside' and 'outside' the particular performance incorporated in the work, through the latter's inclusions, exclusions, distortions, and stresses."³ As Spiegel has shown for French vernacular prose texts of the early thirteenth century, there is nothing "natural" about a work of history.⁴ When a sea voyage seems propitious, the captain launches the ship, often at the behest of its owner. Like sailing a great vessel, writing a history requires both training and skill, a marshalling of considerable resources, and a weather eye to the currents and winds of politics.

Historians do not, however, have to negotiate the sea and wind entirely alone. The ships of history sail in fleets. The sailors share with their fellow travellers not only the general lore of the sea but also advice about particular stretches of water. The ships coming later wallow in the wake of those that have come before.

The Normans were in their origins great seafarers, so it is only

the question of why some cultures either did not produce history or did not write works we would accept today as "historical."

3. Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages," *Speculum* 65 (1990): 84; on "social logic," see also *Romancing the Past: The Rise of Vernacular Prose Historiography in Thirteenth-Century France* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 9.

4. Spiegel, *Romancing the Past*, 2, raises this explicitly with respect to the use of vernacular prose, but the understanding that all aspects of a work have ideological implications runs throughout her work.

fitting that their historians comprised a sizeable flotilla consisting of some stately ships that sailed out toward the ocean and a multitude of small craft that hugged the shore. All felt, to a greater or lesser degree, some of the great winds that blew consistently between late antiquity and the fifteenth century, but all were driven by the local tides as well and experienced the wash of the ships that had passed through these waters before. The task of this book is to describe some of the vicissitudes of the Norman voyage in the larger sea of medieval history.



historical methodology

Most studies of medieval historical writing have striven either to address the medieval historian's program(s) of truth or the web of circumstances surrounding the production of one or a few individual histories. The former project has produced a number of broad syntheses, covering all aspects of historical writing in the Middle Ages, and some studies of medieval historical genres. Studies of individual historians have also been extremely numerous.⁵ Each type of study has its advantages and its flaws. The syntheses shed a light on the commonalities of medieval historical practice, but they tend to rob individual histories of their integrity and to

5. See, for example, Herbert Grundmann's *Geschichtsschreibung im Mittelalter* (reprint; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963) which has deeply influenced the discussion of medieval historical genres, although his categories have been criticized. Bernard Guenée, *Histoire et culture historique dans l'occident médiéval* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1980), and Franz-Joseph Schmale, *Funktion und Formen mittelalterlicher Geschichtsschreibung: Mit einem Beitrag von Hans-Werner Gatz* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1983), have contributed the most recent studies of the methods of historians and the meaning of history. Of the genre studies, most notable are probably Anna-Dorothea van den Brincken's *Studien zur lateinischen Weltchronistik bis in das Zeitalter Ottos von Freising* (Düsseldorf: Michael Triltsch Verlag, 1957) on universal chronicles and Michel Sot, *Gesta episcoporum, gesta abbatum* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1981). Amos Funkenstein's *Heilsplan und nationale Entwicklung: Formen der Gegenwartsbestimmung im Geschichtsbild des hohen Mittelalters* (Munich: Nymphenburger Verlagshandlung, 1965), which concerns the shift from apocalyptic to evolutionary thinking among medieval historians, is one of the best of the thematic studies. The studies of individual works or historians are too numerous to list without being entirely arbitrary.

reduce them to anecdotes.⁶ Studies of particular histories treat individual works in loving detail but sometimes at the cost of failing to situate them within a larger context. The thick description of a history can be highly resonant, but it is in itself not sufficient to show what was common to many historians, what reflected an individual's particular genius or ineptitude, or indeed why the study of medieval histories matters at all.⁷ A few studies have treated groups of works, such as Gabrielle Spiegel's *Romancing the Past*, which examines four French prose histories, and Nancy Partner's *Serious Entertainments*, which uses three English twelfth-century historians to examine the writing of history in this period. Partner's interest is in the way historical writing changed with the passage of time in England. Spiegel, in contrast, is more interested in what the writing of history says to and about one specific group who produced and read histories, the Franco-Flemish elite of the early thirteenth century.⁸

As an alternative to these approaches, I offer an intermediate course, a study of a local "historical culture," the historical writing produced by the inhabitants of one community, that of Normandy in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.⁹ Although histories are written by and sometimes for individuals, they are products of a community's life and views. This is true in an obvious way, because the

6. See Roger Ray, "Medieval Historiography through the Twelfth Century: Problems and Progress of Research," *Vision* 5 (1974), 58–59.

7. Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 21, comments in regard to the microscopic aspect of ethnographic description, "That is not to say that there are no large-scale anthropological interpretations of whole societies, civilizations, world events, and so on. Indeed, it is such extensions of our analyses to wider contexts that, along with their theoretical implications, recommends them to general attention and justifies our constructing them." The weakness of some studies in this regard is well illustrated by Peter Ebdury and John Rowe's *William of Tyre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), which is a rich study of William's history but does not show how his work relates to that of his contemporaries.

8. Nancy Partner, *Serious Entertainments: The Writing of History in Twelfth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

9. The term "historical culture" comes from Guenée, *Histoire et culture historique*.

individual is shaped through socialization within a community, but it is true in a number of other ways as well. Communities are the repository of memory for their members, and in the Middle Ages, when history was what Paul Veyne calls a "vulgate" or a tradition, a report of what people remembered, history was more directly the expression of a community than it is today.¹⁰ Indeed, the maintenance and creation of traditions and histories is one way in which societies, communities, seek social order.¹¹

Medieval communities came in all sorts. Some were extremely local in character such as the community of a monastery and the body of people who interacted with it. Patrick Geary has argued recently that this sort of association, enacted through rituals of donation and participation in monastic life, played a fundamental role in preserving the pasts of the medieval elite, most of whom did not participate in the writing of history until the rise of the

10. On history as a vulgate, see Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths*, 5–15, esp. 9ff. For a modern view of the social function of memory, see James Fenness and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), ix–x, and for comments on the relationship between history and memory, *ibid.*, 144–46. The classical Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. Francis J. Ditter and Vida Yazdi Ditter (New York: Harper, 1980). There is a vast literature on memory and history, some of which tends to see the two forms as oppositional. See, for example, Yernshalmi, *Zakhor*, for a discussion of memory and history in the Jewish tradition and Amos Funkenstein, "Collective Memory and Historical Consciousness," *History and Memory* 1 (1989): 12f., for a response to Yernshalmi. See also, Pierre Nora, "Entre mémoire et histoire: La Problématique des lieux," in *Les lieux de mémoire*, ed. Pierre Nora, vol. 1 (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1984), xv–xlii, for an extremely hostile view of history.

11. See S. N. Eisenstadt, "Some Observations on the Dynamics of Traditions," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 11 (1969): 451. Eisenstadt defines the acceptance of traditions as "the givenness of some actual or symbolic past event, order, or figure as the major focus of . . . collective identity." Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 45, makes similar remarks about history: "Historical discourse makes a social identity explicit, not so much in the way it is 'given' or held as stable, as in the ways it is *differentiated* from a former period or another society." De Certeau's remarks are explicitly about modern history, which makes the past into an object separate from the present, but his observation about history creating or stabilizing social identities is certainly true of medieval histories as well, as Gabrielle Spiegel's work has shown.

vernacular.¹² Monasteries were the site of much medieval historical writing, and local issues were often played out in histories before the monastic audience. Towns were another kind of local community; they produced both Latin and vernacular historical texts, and they did so in great abundance from the fourteenth century on. At the other extreme were the larger political communities. These were not initially communities at all, in that the inhabitants only gradually came to see themselves as having a shared existence. In the thirteenth century, however, the nation began to be imagined into being as a community. When this happened, chroniclers like Matthew Paris at Westminster and Primate at Saint-Denis were present to chronicle its existence. There were abstract communities as well, such as the community of Christendom (a community which seems to have emerged around the time of the First Crusade) and the community of the learned. These abstract groupings certainly influenced individuals but more subtly than the bodies that allocated resources or provided regulations or laws. For medieval France in the central Middle Ages, however, the community of the county (when the county did in fact constitute a community, which was not invariably the case) often loomed large on the horizon.¹³

12. Patrick Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 48–51, argues that the Carolingian elite family, which might have held lands widely spread across the empire, began to fragment into branches during the tenth century. As the family lost contact with the monasteries where their memory was preserved, it lost its recollection of its own past. Geary (79) points to Fulk le Réchin of Anjou's comment in his fragmentary history of the counts of Anjou that he did not know much about his ancestors because he did not know where they were buried. For an illuminating study of the nexus between the elite and monasteries, see Stephen White, *Kinship, Customs and Gifts to the Saints: The Laudatio Parentum in Western France* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

13. For a wonderful discussion of all these types of communities, see Susan Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe, 900–1300* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984). For a discussion of French regional and national identities, see Brigitte Bedos-Rezak, "French Medieval Regions: A Concept in History," *Historical Reflections* 19 (1993): 51–66, as well as the other essays in that volume. Bedos-Rezak points out that in proposing a study of the French region, she is not suggesting a particular size or definition of region (153). Indeed, the essays in the volume concern

In recent years scholars have paid considerable attention to the differences between the counties of France, the varying processes by which they formed, and the diverse bases upon which they were built. The process always involved the efforts of one or more important families, most often the descendants of the Carolingian elite (although the families did not always remember this), to enhance its power.¹⁴ However, the strategies used by the families varied, and thus the results varied also. Not all attempts to amass land and authority resulted in the creation of permanent counties or coherent communities. The Herbertian family of Vermandois, for example, amalgamated a large number of holdings in the tenth century, although these were eventually divided among the sons of Herbert II (d. 943). The counts of Blois and Champagne, however, were descended from them.¹⁵ Some counties, like Berry, did not enjoy stable boundaries for a long time, and its development changed direction in the late eleventh century.¹⁶ The authority of the ruler of a county ebbed and flowed over time, and no ruler, whatever he styled himself, whether marquis, consul, count, prince, or duke (all titles used by the Norman rulers), had irresistible authority.¹⁷

pagi and villages, as well as counties, and one essay, by Jeremy duQuesnay Adams, "The *Regnum Francie* of Sugier of Saint-Denis: An Expansive Ile-de-France," *ibid.*, 167–88, considers the evidence in Sugier's writing that "Francia" was beginning to describe more than simply the Ile-de-France.

14. For a summation of the process, see Jean Dhondt, *Études sur la naissance des principales territoriales en France (IX–X^e siècle)* (Bruges: De Tempel, 1948), 1–79. For some qualifications, see Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities*, 229–31. The work of Karl Ferdinand Werner has clarified the descent of some of the important tenth-century families. See Karl Ferdinand Werner, "Untersuchungen zur Frühzeit des französischen Fürstentums (9.–10. Jahrhundert)," *Die Welt als Geschichte* 18 (1958): 256–89; 19 (1959) 146–93; 20 (1960): 87–119. On the failure of memory of these families, see Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance*, 50.

15. On the Herbertians, see Werner, "Untersuchungen zur Frühzeit," pt. 3, 87–115; also Michel Bur, *La Formation du comté de Champagne, 7. 900–7. 1150* (Nancy: University of Nancy, 1977), 87–123.

16. Guy Devalloy, *Le Berry du X^e siècle au milieu du XIII^e* (Paris: Mouton & Co, 1973), 61, 233–34.

17. On these titles, see Karl Ferdinand Werner, "Quelques observations au sujet des débuts du 'duc' de Normandie," reprinted in *Structures politiques du monde féodal (VI–XII siècles)* (London: Variorum, 1979), 698–701.