

K. Baxter Wolf, 'Making History: The Normans  
and their Historians in  
Eleventh-Century Italy'

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## Introduction

The narrative histories that are the focus of this study can be made to yield information about the past in two fundamentally different ways. On the one hand, we can take them at face value as descriptions of the events they recount. With the judicious application of critical reading techniques, we can correct for the biases of their authors and be left with a reasonable approximation of the order and contours of the events themselves. To speak in more historiographical terms, we can, to some degree, distill a "chronicle" of events from the contemporary narratives by carefully stripping them of their more fictive literary trappings.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the same histories can be used to tell us how the people who wrote them conceived of the events occurring in the world around them. In this case the biases laid bare by source criticism are not weeded out but are appreciated in their own right for what they can tell us about the conceptual categories that the authors employed to make sense out of their worlds, past and present. These categories—reflected in the author's choice of material as well as the way in which that material has been fashioned into a story to be shared with an audience—are as worthy a subject of historical study as the events that they seek to comprehend, for they help us to appreciate the ways in which people living in a particular time and place construed their world and located themselves within it. Again in the language of the profession, this approach treats the narrative histories as textual artifacts that must necessarily reveal something about the mental processes of both the artisans who produced them and the audiences who appreciated them.<sup>2</sup>

As distinct as these two basic approaches are, they cannot be considered in complete isolation from one another, for both rely on the same tools of source criticism. Each must make use of the same basic critical techniques to separate "what really happened" from "how it was described" before being able to privilege one category of data over the other. In so far as both approaches assent (at least tacitly) to the possibility of effecting this separation, each must see its chosen data in something of a dialectical relationship with the other. Thus for historians opting for the

first approach it is necessary to appreciate the narrative setting within which the events are presented and adjust for it. Conversely, historians choosing the second approach must have some sense of “what really happened” in order to appreciate the ways in which the events might have been narrativized.

The contemporary histories of the Norman conquest of Italy and Sicily have been the subject of repeated studies of the first type. The aim of their authors has been simply to reconstruct a plausible account of the events that made up the conquest. The best example of this approach is still the magisterial *Histoire de la domination Normande en Italie et en Sicile* of Ferdinand Chalandon (1907). But a number of others have appeared in the meantime, three of the more recent being Wolfgang Jahn's *Untersuchungen zur normannischen Herrschaft in Suditalien* (1989), Pierre Aubé's *Les empires normands d'Orient, XIe–XIIIe siècle* (1983), and H. E. J. Cowdrey's *The Age of Abbot Desiderius: Montecassino, the Papacy, and the Normans in the Eleventh and Early Twelfth Centuries* (1983).

Attempts to use these same texts to recreate the interpretative structures imposed by their authors are less common. The Italian scholars who were the first to edit and study these sources traditionally offered assessments of their *valore storico* that included identifying the archaic elements of eleventh-century historical writing that distinguished it from the more “scientific” approach to which they themselves subscribed.<sup>3</sup> But this kind of approach lent itself to a dismissive and/or apologetic attitude about the patterns and constructs that characterized historical thought in the past, an attitude that precluded any real appreciation of them in their own right. In her address to the medievalists gathered at Spoleto in 1968, Laetitia Boehm called attention to the absence of more sympathetic and synthetic treatments, observing that “a history of Norman historical writings that focuses on their underlying themes has yet to be written.”<sup>4</sup> Ovidio Capitani reiterated her point at the Lincei lectures in 1974, noting that “despite everything, we seem only recently to have convinced ourselves not to judge the Norman chronicles solely as a reservoir of factual information but to view them as an expression of the cultural and political interests of their age as well.”<sup>5</sup> But while each offered some interesting observations and suggested future lines of inquiry, neither Capitani nor Boehm took on the task of initiating a full-blown study of the Norman histories. To date Vincenzo d'Alessandro stands out as the one who has done the most to fill this gap, thanks to his close reading of the earliest of

the Italo-Norman histories, but so far he has not produced any broader comparative study.<sup>6</sup> The tantalizingly-titled “*Mentalità ed evoluzione della storiografia normanna fra l'XI e XII secolo in Italia*” delivered by Massimo Oldoni at the 1975 conference on Count Roger suffers from precisely the opposite problem: it is far too broad and cursory an overview for a subject of such magnitude.<sup>7</sup>

Another promising—if unintentional—step toward appreciating the structural aspects of the Norman histories was taken by R. H. C. Davis with the publication of *The Normans and Their Myth* in 1976.<sup>8</sup> Davis's point was to challenge the conventional wisdom of his day that regarded the Norman conquerors of England, Italy, and Antioch as “a separate and distinct people” capable of conquering and settling disparate regions far from home while still retaining their identity as Normans. In the process, Davis all but reduced the idea of “pan-Norman” identity to a fiction created by medieval historians like Orderic Vitalis and perpetuated by modern historians like Haskins, Jamison, and Douglas. For our purposes, the most significant part of Davis's approach is the importance that it placed on appreciating contemporary Norman histories, not for their “historical accuracy,” but for the “evidence which they supply for the beliefs and aspirations of the Normans at the date at which they were written.”<sup>9</sup> But although Davis pointed his readers in this new and exciting direction, he too stopped short of actually leading them down that path. The combination of the breadth of Davis's scope and the brevity of his book simply did not allow for any depth of analysis in this area.<sup>10</sup>

It was with such “false starts” in mind that the present study was conceived. It has been designed to provide an in-depth, comparative analysis of the first generation of narrative histories produced on behalf of the Norman conquerors of Sicily and southern Italy. I have deliberately limited myself to those histories produced in the so-called “conquest period” in an effort to underscore the remarkable creativity of their authors, who managed to fashion *ex nihilo* full-blown histories of these parvenu invaders and, in the process, made them look like they actually deserved to rule what they had taken largely by force.

In terms of both function and structure, the eleventh-century histories of the Normans in Italy are very similar to the works of the so-called “barbarian historians” that appeared all over Latin Europe in the wake of the dissolution of the western Roman empire. Just as Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, and Isidore of Seville historiographically elevated the Ostro-

goths, Franks, and Visigoths to the status of legitimate heirs to the Romans, so Amatus of Montecassino, William of Apulia, and Geoffrey Malaterra transformed the Norman invaders of southern Italy and Sicily into the rightful heirs of the Greeks and Lombards. The consistent task of the “barbarian historians,” regardless of when they were writing, was to effect a historiographical “conquest” concomitant with the territorial ones achieved by the barbarian rulers. They did so by appropriating and refashioning the history of the conquered for the benefit of the conqueror. This was a two-part process. It involved, first of all, explaining how it could be that a traditionally indomitable, longstanding power like the Roman or Byzantine empire should come to yield before upstart “barbarian” forces. Second, it required the transformation of the raw military power of these barbarians into something resembling the legitimate political authority once exercised by the powers they displaced. In short, these historians had to recast the barbarians—who had always played peripheral, antagonistic roles in histories dedicated to the Roman empire—as the protagonists of their own historical dramas. Put another way, they had to tell an entirely different story about the past, one which offered an *apologia* for their unanticipated success against the protagonists of a previous generation of historians.<sup>11</sup> In the process, each of these authors effectively made history and bestowed it on a people that did not have one before.

Late Antiquity is the most promising period for studying this process, for it was a time when the political unity of the western Roman empire was giving way to a patchwork of individual kingdoms dominated by non-Roman peoples, many of which came to recognize the value of producing self-justifying historical narratives in the Roman tradition. Pierre Courcelle’s pioneering study, *Histoire littéraire des grandes invasions germaniques* (1948),<sup>12</sup> assesses narrative aspects of late antique histories as well as other sources in this period. Walter Goffart’s *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550–800)* (1988)<sup>13</sup> focuses more closely on the work of four late antique historians—Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon—showing how each promoted the legitimacy of a barbarian people through historiographical construction. My own *Conquerors and Chroniclers in Early Medieval Spain* (1990)<sup>14</sup> analyzes the histories of John of Biclaro, Isidore of Seville, and two of their Spanish-Christian continuators from the eighth and ninth centuries with many of the same questions in mind.

Later periods in Latin European history, being on the whole more

stable in geo-political terms, may not be able to boast the same wide distribution of such histories. On the other hand, those conquests that *did* take place after the millenium often attracted the attention of more than one historian simply because by the eleventh century history as a genre had become much more popular among Latin authors. The Normans who, as Davis wryly observed, never seem to have tired of writing about their achievements,<sup>15</sup> were particularly well represented in the historical writings of this period. And none of the regions that the Normans conquered produced as many histories as quickly as did Italy: in fact, no less than three, full-length narrative accounts of the Norman conquests dating from the last quarter of the eleventh century. Moreover, not one of these three appears to have been written with any direct knowledge of the other two.<sup>16</sup> This means that modern readers are afforded the rare opportunity of seeing how three different historians effected the transformation of the Normans from a “barbarian invader” to a legitimate power in Italy and Sicily. These three independent exercises in historiographical legitimization presumably reflect something of the range of conceptual possibilities open to a late eleventh-century mind for giving an upstart people its own history. It is this range that I hope to illustrate in this study.

The first chapter offers a concise but complete account of the Norman conquests in Italy and Sicily based on the principle sources that have survived. This overview is designed to provide readers not only with a summary of Norman history in this region, but with a basic “chronicle” of events which will allow them to appreciate more fully the various ways in which these same events were construed by the contemporaries who wrote about them. I am sensitive to the epistemological pitfalls inherent in such an exercise. My own overview of Norman history, inasmuch as it will take the form of a narrative account, has no more claim to veracity, philosophically speaking, than the contemporary narratives that are the focus of this study. Each in its own way attempts to tell a story, and stories are not (necessarily)<sup>17</sup> inherent in the subject matter that informs them, ensuing as they do more from the mind of the story-teller than from the events themselves. It is, in other words, more consistent with the spirit of this project to regard the overview chapter as simply another narrative account, subject to the same fundamental liabilities as any other, distinct from its eleventh-century counterparts only in that it was written for a different audience. Whether my readers choose to treat this initial chapter as an account of “what really happened” or as a narrative designed to be con-

vincing to professional historians living in the late twentieth century, they will find the distance between it and the eleventh-century accounts great enough to allow for an appreciation of the peculiar ways in which eleventh-century minds conceived of the past.

The second and third chapters attempt to reconstruct the earliest, antagonistic views of the Normans preserved in papal and Casinese sources. For the most part the papal images fall into the category of letters and apologetic treatises defending the policies of Leo IX and Gregory VII, both of whom expended a great deal of energy trying to dislodge the Normans from southern Italy. Only when Gregory VII is forced to work with Robert Guiscard to protect himself against Henry IV do we begin to see any softening of the rhetoric applied to the Normans. The monastery of Montecassino had its own share of difficulties with the Normans, specifically with those ensconced in the region of Campania, and its monks produced their own negative images of the Normans. These disparaging views of the Normans provide us with something of a "before picture," which allows us to appreciate not only how the Norman conquests were narrativized when the writing of history was in the hands of their enemies, but how far the later, more sympathetic historians had to go in their revisionist efforts to transform the Normans into protagonists.

The fourth chapter considers in detail the pivotal work of the Casinese monk Amatus who, sometime shortly after 1078, completed the very first history dedicated specifically to the Normans in Italy. Sponsored by Abbot Desiderius, who twenty years before had accepted the Norman Richard of Capua as the protector of Montecassino, the *Historia Normannorum* transformed the Normans into a positive force in Italian history. The fifth and sixth chapters treat the other two histories of the Normans in Italy: the *Gesta Roberti Wiscardi*, written by William of Apulia, and Geoffrey Malaterra's *De rebus gestis Rogerii et Roberti*. Both of these accounts were written in the waning years of the eleventh century at the request of Norman leaders: the former sponsored by Roger Borsa, the latter by his uncle, Roger of Sicily. In the case of each of these three full-blown histories, I will begin by reconstructing, as much as the sources will allow, the historical circumstances that led the author in question to record his impressions of the Norman presence in Italy. I will then move on to a detailed consideration of the text itself, in an effort to uncover and appreciate the narrative patterns that its author imposed on the events in his attempt to make the conquests make sense to himself and to his audience.

## Notes

1. For an optimistic assessment of the viability of this prospect, see Morton White, *Foundations of Historical Knowledge* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965). Others have been less confident that such a distillation can, in fact, yield truly objective history. Such criticism has not, however, had any discernible impact on the way most historians today write history. For a concise history of the evolution of historical relativism and its (relative lack of) effect on the discipline, see Lionel Gossman, "History and Literature: Reproduction or Signification," in Robert H. Canary and Henry Kozicki, eds., *The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), especially pp. 26-39. Gossman observes (p. 32) that "despite decades of demonstrations by philosophers and by historians themselves that history is a construct, the belief that it is an immediate representation of reality, and the historian's own complicity with this belief, have remained remarkably vigorous."

2. I borrow the term "artifact" from Hayden White's "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 81-100, but I use it differently. For White, a piece of historical writing can be considered a literary artifact in so far as it partakes of the "fictive" structural elements commonly associated with pieces of literature. Thus his classic treatment of the works of nineteenth-century historians (*Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973]) concerns itself with the deep structures of the narratives: whether, for instance, a particular account of the French Revolution is being presented in the mode of irony or that of synecdoche ("Historical Text as Literary Artifact," p. 58), and what precisely it means to "decode" and "recode" such narratives. My own approach uses the artifact idea more broadly, as a way of extracting information about the *mentalité* of the author and his audience by appreciating the specific ways in which the events described in the text are ordered and shaped. Walter Goffart, author of *The Narrators of Barbarian History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), says essentially the same thing, only more elegantly, when he writes: "An author approached as though he were a body of ore is prized mainly for pure metal content. One taken seriously in his own right stands a chance of having *his opinions and literary talent valued as an integral part of the information he conveys; he may just possibly be seen not only as a reporter of the past, but as a component of the past that he transmits*" (p. 15; emphasis my own).

3. Ernesto Pontieri's prefatory study of Geoffrey Malaterra's *De rebus gestis Rogerii* (Bologna: Nicola Zanichelli, 1925-28) is typical in this regard. See also Michele Fuiano, "Guglielmo di Puglia," in his *Studi di storiografia medioevale ed umanistica*, 2nd ed. (Naples: Giannini, 1975): 1-103 [first published in 1960].

4. "*Nomen gentis Normannorum*": Der Aufstieg der Normannen im Spiegel der normannischen Historiographie." *I Normanni e la loro espansione in Europa nell'alto medioevo*, Settimane di studio 16 (1968) (Spoleto: Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo, 1969), p. 631. In her words: "eine Geschichte der normannis-

chen Geschichtsschreibung unter Einbeziehung der angedeuteten Themenkreise müsste erst noch geschrieben werden."

5. "Specific Motivations and Continuing Themes in the Norman Chronicles of Southern Italy in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries," *The Normans in Sicily and Southern Italy*, Lincei Lectures 1974 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 4.

6. See in particular his study of Amatus's *Historia Normannorum*, in his *Storiografia e politica nell'Italia normanna* (Naples: Liguori, 1978), pp. 51–98 [first published in 1971]. See also: "Roberto il Guiscardo nella storiografia medievale," in *Roberto il Guiscardo tra Europa, Oriente e Mezzogiorno*, Potenza-Melfi-Venosa, 1985 (Galatina, 1990), pp. 181–96.

7. In *Ruggiero il gran conte e l'inizio dello stato normanno*, Bari, 1975 (Rome: Il Centro de ricerca, 1977).

8. *The Normans and Their Myth* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976).

9. Davis, *The Normans and Their Myth*, p. 50.

10. This is a particular shortcoming of the chapter on the Normans in Italy and Sicily, pp. 71–100. Davis's thesis inspired a number of elaborations and rebuttals, but most of them managed to leave untouched his observations on the constructed nature of Norman history in their efforts to assess the "Normanness" of those areas conquered by the Normans. G. A. Loud's 1981 article, "How 'Norman' was the Norman Conquest of Southern Italy?" *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 25 (1981): 13–34, is a case in point. Loud's concern was to determine whether the dominant role in the conquest and settlement of southern Italy was indeed played by Normans. His relative lack of concern with the historiographical construction of Norman identity is reflected in the type of evidence upon which he built his case: charters, onomastics, and genealogy, rather than the contemporary histories, which, as Loud observed, "must clearly be taken with some care" (p. 20).

11. Boehm, *Nomen gentis normannorum*, p. 641.

12. 3rd ed. (Paris: Etudes augustiniennes, 1964).

13. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988.

14. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1990.

15. Davis, *The Normans and Their Myth*, p. 15.

16. Pontieri, in Geoffrey, pp. xv–xix.

17. David Carr in his *Time, Narrative, and History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) has challenged the notion, subscribed to by narrativist philosophers of history like Hayden White, Paul Ricoeur, and Louis Mink, that past events have no intrinsic storylines, by positing narrative structures inherent in the actions of the individual historical actors themselves.

## I. The Norman Conquests in Southern Italy and Sicily: An Historical Overview

The establishment of Norman control over all of southern Italy and Sicily, a process which was completed by the early 1090s, is all the more remarkable when one considers the degree of political fragmentation that characterized the region when the first of the Normans set foot there in the 1010s.<sup>1</sup> At that time the mainland was effectively divided between those areas—essentially Apulia, Calabria, and the Basilicata—that owed their allegiance to Constantinople, and those governed by one of the three Lombard dynasties centered in Benevento, Capua, and Salerno. The principal exceptions to this rule were the western ports of Naples, Amalfi, and Gaeta, which had managed for the most part to retain their independence from empire and Lombards alike. Participation in the struggle for hegemony in southern Italy, however, was not restricted to the powers that actually resided there. The papacy and the German empire each regarded the region as falling within its own sphere of influence and each intervened as frequently as its other interests would allow. Moreover, while the heyday of Muslim attacks had passed a century before, the potential threat of invasion from the emirates of Sicily and Tunisia remained.

### I

It was within the context of one of the perennial uprisings against Byzantine rule in Apulia that the Normans first appeared on the scene. The Lombard Melo, who had already been responsible for at least one rebellion in Bari (1009–1011),<sup>2</sup> was soliciting assistance from the Lombard princes to resume his efforts when he came into contact with a group of Norman émigrés, probably in the year 1016. The sources are far from unanimous regarding the circumstances that brought the Normans and Melo together. For his part Amatus of Montecassino recounted how a