

2019

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Recommended Citation

Stroud, Patrick (2019) "The Comedia Normannorum: Norman Identity and Historiography in the 11th-12th Centuries," *Butler Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 5 , Article 10.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/bjur/vol5/iss1/10>

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THE COMEDIA NORMANNORUM: NORMAN IDENTITY AND HISTORIOGRAPHY IN THE 11TH-12TH CENTURIES

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Introduction—How Symbols and Ethnography Tie to Historical Myth

Since the 1970s, historians have tried many different methodologies for exploring texts. Because multiple paradigms tempt the historian's gaze, medieval texts can often befuddle readers in their hagiographies and chronologies. At the same time, these texts also give the historian a unique opportunity in the form of cultural insight. In his 1995 work *Making History: The Normans and their Historians in Eleventh-Century Italy*, Kenneth Baxter Wolf discusses a text's role in medieval historiography. A professor of History at Pomona College, Wolf divides historical commentary on medieval primary sources into two ends of a spectrum. While one end worries itself on the accuracy and classical "truth" of a source, the other end, postmodern historiography, uses historical records "to tell us how the people who wrote them conceived of the events occurring in the world around them."¹ The historian treats a medieval text as a launching pad for cultural analysis. Because any individual writes history in the context of his or her culture, no matter the time period, we can analyze rhetoric and symbol as windows into cultural perception and creation.

If text has cultural context worth analyzing, then textual symbol should serve as the beginning point for cultural analysis. Although a historian may not know the meaning behind a text or the author's intent, the historian can at least notice tropes and images, nuggets of textual expression that, when cracked and prodded, hold flakes of culture. After panning a text for symbol, the historian can identify how a particular text exists as a reflection of its culture. Whereas one self-contained image poses little value to the historian, recurring symbolism over decades of texts hints at something deeper—that these symbols are pieces of a culture's identity.

¹ Kenneth Baxter Wolf, *Making History: The Normans and their Historians in Eleventh-Century Italy* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 1.

The “culture” of medieval historiography is mostly analogous to “ethnicity,” a term that anthropologists as well as social historians have molded and defined through decades of serious critique. As Nick Webber begins in his work on Norman identity, social scientists and postmodern historians of the 1970s saw ethnicity less as an “objective reality” and instead molded ethnicity into a “subjective phenomenon” of deliberate choice; in short, contemporary historiographers “emphasise the importance of ethnicity as *something that was claimed* by those within a group, and attributed *by those outside it*” [emphasis mine].² When textual sources portray a particular people as an “ethnicity,” the reader bestows the title; in the end, exterior observers legitimate the claims of a people.

After changing the meaning behind “ethnicity” in historiography, medieval historians of the 1970s then turned their heads towards *gens*, a Medieval Latin term meaning “people” or “family line.”³ Much like more-modern texts with the term “ethnicity,” medieval authors also categorized societies into *gentes*, the *gens Normannorum* (the “Norman people”) being no exception.⁴ As such, when medieval historians define a *gens*, they attribute ethnicity to a people who previously claimed it through their political, social, and cultural practices. What was once a concept argued between a society and its contemporaries is now a courtship between a historical source and its reader. A historian reads a text, notices its claims in the form of symbols, and then induces an identity around those symbols.

The Norman peoples of northern Francia from the 10th through 13th centuries exemplify a culture that promulgated its cultural identity through textual symbol. In terms of historical context, the Normans were a mix of Norse and Scandinavian peoples who gradually migrated to the coastal region along the English Channel during the 9th and 10th centuries. Eventually, these Vikings carved out their own duchy from the Frankish region of Neustria, becoming a mostly independent state by the 11th century. From their new Frankish home, these peoples gave themselves a cultural name—Normans—and quite quickly expanded their political influence, first to Sicily in 1061, then to England in 1066, and then to the Holy Land during the First Crusade (1096–99) and other regions of Europe. Despite thousands of miles of geographic separation between Norman states,

² Nick Webber, *The Evolution of Norman Identity, 911–1154* (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2005), 3.

³ Webber, 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*

however, these Norse–Frankish peoples still exhibited a certain “Norman-ness” or *Normannitas*, a cultural identity that spread throughout their holdings in the medieval world. The Normans crafted this *Normannitas* when they first set foot in Francia, as a means of both defining their own culture and comparing their culture to that of their European peers.

Paradoxically, this *Normannitas* also includes self-acculturation, or the voluntary change of cultural practice to make a certain ethnicity or *gens* seem legitimate in relation to other local cultures. While Norman texts define qualities that the Normans both valued and disliked, Normans were also highly adaptive to the cultures of their neighbors, often changing their histories to accommodate the cultural practices of their immediate peers. Wolf connects this historiographical looseness to many other historiographies that immediately followed the fall of the Roman Empire, in which “barbarian” cultures grasped for ways to connect their societies to both Roman history and their conquered subjects.⁵ The Normans used their histories to reform their cultural identity in much the same way: to connect their conquests to local culture, and to tie Norman social hierarchies into the existing historical narrative of a given region. When they first came to Francia, the Normans morphed their histories, adapting those histories to the societies they conquered, to legitimize Norman expansion into medieval Europe. The Normans used this historical rhetoric to prove that they belonged in medieval Europe as much as any other people. As they adapted to European cultural mores, the Normans shed their atypical behaviors—polygamy and paganism, for example—and portrayed themselves as legitimate Christian state holders in medieval Francia.

In its quest to combine *Normannitas* with local cultures, Norman historiography uses three overarching categories of cultural symbols. The first of these is churches. After the Normans converted to Christianity, Norman hagiographies, church construction, and liturgical reform all enforced a social hierarchy that the Normans created after their conquests. This prevails especially in the ducal origins of most Norman church power, as monasteries and other religious communities derived their land from grants, royal taxes, and laws. The second of the categories is castles, a common trope of Norman state building. Following conquest, Norman leaders constructed motte and baileys, fortresses, towers, and other architecture of a militaristic nature—a practice they learned from their Frankish neighbors—to remind their subjects of Norman occupation and to

⁵ Wolf, 4.

further the perception of their right to rule.⁶ By extension, Norman castles also reflect another key political symbol: law. At the same time, law occupies a third category of cultural symbol: that of texts. Written work is the assessment and observation of other statements of legitimacy; Norman laws and Norman histories are a gradient between political statements of legitimacy and texts that embody cultural values. Through analyzing the roles that these symbols play in Norman identity, we can see how the Normans systematically and conscientiously affirmed their *gens* and forged connections to their subjects. The Normans propagated a rhetoric of cultural legitimacy through these symbols; churches, castles, and texts reflect not only the cultural identity that the Normans built in contrast to their neighbors but also the cultural practices that the Normans adopted through self-acculturation.

The Normans in Normandy—Geography and Conversion

Whereas most historiography distinguishes between the history of a place and the history of a people, proper analysis of medieval Norman identity conflates both ideas. The racial mix of the settlers of northern Francia required the Normans to construct their identity out of geographical determiners instead of genealogical factors. Before crafting a culture eponymous with their region, however, the Normans had to take steps to appear equal to other Frankish societies by asserting Christian motifs; the Normans had to first prove that they belonged among the states of Christian Medieval Europe before they could fully explore their cultural identity within Normandy. Early Norman historians buy into this acculturation by writing on the Normans' "Frankish" characteristics—i.e., their Christianity. After asserting their Christianity as a means of gaining acceptance into Europe, Norman historians then identify key pieces of *Normannitas*, including their martial abilities and egalitarian law.

The Document at Fécamp

The story of Norman occupation in "Normandy," or "the land of the Normans," begins in the ninth century. In terms of historical record, the account of Fécamp is one of the earliest documents we have that mentions the Normans as a society in France. Written by an anonymous source of Norman or Frankish origin,

⁶ Eleanor Searle, *Predatory Kinship and the Creation of Norman Power 840–1066* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 239. Searle calls castles "Europe's most powerful instruments of social control" in the medieval world. This practice started in Europe, primarily through Frankish states, and then through Normans.

the source of Fécamp illustrates how Charles of France recognized a Viking settlement in northern France around the mid-10th century. The author portrays the early circumstances of this “Norman” settlement: “[The Normans] are given the seven farthest maritime provinces by the gift and concession of Charles, the king of France, which they may improve by a settlement of their labor from abroad, and defend and protect against the invasions of assaulting barbarians.”⁷ Medieval historian Leah Shopkow identifies these beginnings of Norman historiography as the first steps toward an “ideological existence” in terms of early *Normannitas*.⁸ This ideology starts to manifest itself upon the characterization of Rollo, a proto-Norman Viking who receives a land grant from Charles the Simple of Francia. As the Fécamp source and Shopkow explain, “Rollo received a grant of territory consisting of Rouen, its surroundings, and the Pays de Caux,” a strip of land east of the Seine along the coast. A concession to stop Viking aggression so close to Francia, Charles the Simple’s land grant at least partially defined a space for the Viking settlers who cohabitated the area with their Latinate–French-speaking neighbors.⁹ These Scandinavians “came upon the Frankish scene in the 840s as raiders, and, when they could, as settlers.”¹⁰ Before Charles the Simple’s concession, Normandy did not exist as a political entity, nor was there “any unified duchy that could be transmuted into Normandy”—the Normans had to carve out a political space in which to live.¹¹

While Shopkow categorizes the Fécamp source with multiple criteria, I feel that two concepts best define how this source demonstrates the early stages of Norman identity construction: political gains and cultural reform. First of all, the Fécamp document begins the narrative of the Norman community with a political act: Charles the Simple bequeathing a geographic expanse to a particular group of Viking invaders. Military conflict precipitated this political act; the Normans received this concession partly because of their constant raiding. At the same time, a cultural factor must have existed to distinguish these particular Scandinavians from other groups. By differentiating proto-Normans from other Scandinavians, the Fécamp source casts Normans as culturally changed from their ancestors. The historian can take this contrast as a symptom of acculturation; the Normans must

⁷ Anonymous, “The Document at Fécamp,” as cited in Leah Shopkow, *History and Community: Norman Historical Writing in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 8.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Searle, 1.

¹¹ Ibid.

have made some conscious effort to make themselves appear culturally closer to the Franks than did other Germano-Norse communities.

The Normans continue their cultural change by offering to convert to Christianity. The next portion of the Fécamp source illustrates this point: “When the Normans, renewed by the grace of spiritual sacraments, had accepted their provinces, they called them Normandy, ‘North’ meaning ‘wind’ in their language. First Rollo, then second William, the son of Rollo, held the dukedom of this land.”¹² The chronology of this passage is critical; as the author of the Fécamp piece notes, the Normans accepted Christian sacrament before they seized Charles’s land grant. Christian expression may exemplify a symbolic expression of European *gens* as opposed to the previous pan-Scandinavian qualities of the proto-Normans. The historian can read this specific sequence of events in two ways: that the author of the Fécamp document, probably a vernacular Latinate-French speaker with ties to Francia as well as the new Normandy, emphasizes the Normans’ Christianity as a criterion for their claim of the region, or that the Normans felt it prudent to convert to Christianity in order to legitimize their rule, thus bringing them closer to the local culture of their coinhabitants. As Shopkow hints, these “converted pagan(s) comprised a foreign settlement”; in political terms, the Normans had now expressed themselves through the Frankish proclamation, but they had also deliberately highlighted their ability to forge a connection to their future subjects through their Christianization.

The Normans’ decision to name their land from their Scandinavian roots also evokes cultural distinction. The Normans most likely constituted only a landed minority in “Normandy” by AD 911.¹³ Despite this, the Normans copied their linguistic practices when naming Charles the Simple’s former state; this combined with Norman changes to place-names from Latinate-French origins to Scandinavian labels for regions in which the Normans occupied. By the time of the first Norman histories some century later, however, place-names and linguistic practice regressed to the French vernacular of the majority.¹⁴ In fact, the Normans took special care to note the “Roman” language that they express in their later histories; despite their Danish linguistic origins less than a few decades before, these Normans actively adopted the language of their subjects, along with the formal Latin of the medieval elite and church communities. By the time of Dudo of Saint-Quentin, the first known Norman historiographer, Normans were using the

¹² Ibid.

¹³ R. H. C. Davis, *The Normans and their Myth* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), 21–22.

¹⁴ Ibid.

place-names and language of their Latinate-French speaking peasantry for all things except the name of the region itself. The historian can view this as a parallel for other Norman social and cultural practices; although the early Vikings of “the land of the North Men” opted for culturally familiar terms by the time of Charles of France, the century between Norman establishment and Norman historiography transformed the Normans into French Christians who presented their language, as well as their history, as parallel to that of the rest of Neustria.

The linguistic choices that the Normans made have European parallels in their methodology. As medieval historian Nick Webber expresses, the Normans embraced “the close relationship” between “ethnonyms and toponyms”—or the language used to refer to a people and the name that those people use for their political region.¹⁵ In the context of medieval ethnography, many other European *gentes* use the same word for both their people and their state; in fact, Webber takes special care to emphasize the parallels between “Normans” and “Normandy” with “Burgundians” and “Burgundy” or with “Franks” and “Francia”—all medieval states of the same region.¹⁶ In this sense, we can analyze the Normans’ decision to name their duchy after their people as yet another piece in the Normans’ deliberate acts of acculturation. While some historians emphasize the Scandinavian qualities of Norman state-naming, I think that the Normans’ decision to title their region in the same manner as their Frankish or Burgundian peers says more about their desire to parallel European values than their own linguistic origins. This easily ties to our categorization of Norman symbols of identity. With text as an evaluation of other cultural statements, the title of “dux Normannorum” (Duke of the Normans) may be a cultural statement in and of itself; just like “le roi des Français” of medieval Francia, the Normans are rulers of a people, not a region—dukes of Normans, not of Normandy, and legitimized rulers of that culture.¹⁷

The Norman migration to northern France exhibits the early qualities of Norman identity. British historian R. H. C. Davis expands on how the early Normans used geography as the taproot to their identity. Rather than expounding geography and culture as a dialectic, Davis rejects analyzing “ethnicity” and genealogical factors when drawing a picture of the Scandinavian peoples who began living in northern Francia in the 10th century.¹⁸ Instead, Davis believes we should look at Norman historical development and the first sources of Norman

¹⁵ Webber, 7–8.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Davis, 59.

history as pieces of a “creation myth.”¹⁹ This Norman historical writing also ties to a kind of rhetoric meant to blur the lines between conquered and conqueror. Having won a piece of land from the Franks through appearing religiously similar to them, the Normans learned to adopt church symbols as part of their identity.

In this vein, we should consider Norman historical writing as a means of expressing political, social, and cultural meaning but not a specific genealogical or racial condition. When the Normans arrived in France, they amalgamated their already multicultural origins with the residents of mainland Francia. Although some of the Normans who would become extensive property holders had closer ties to Scandinavia than others, Franks, Britons, and these new Normans all shared titles in the social and political sphere of Normandy.²⁰ Because of our inability to distinguish these landed classes through a racial lens, the historian must abandon viewing *Normannitas* as a racial term. Instead, Normans comprise only one piece of the social and cultural matrix of early medieval France; rather than enforce their Scandinavian practices, the Normans instead acculturated to Frankish norms and practices.

As both Davis and Wolf express in their secondary texts, the Normans matched other medieval historiographies that narrate cultural assimilation as a means of connecting a conqueror society’s cultural norms with the practices of its subjects.²¹ Like previous histories from Francia following the fall of the Roman Empire, Norman sources take the most likely oral histories from their Scandinavian beginnings and juxtapose those stories with Frankish values such as Christianity. In this sense, the historian should read the earliest texts of Norman history as an attempt at presenting Norman narratives as parallel to previous Frankish experiences, as a means of legitimizing the Normans’ inclusion into the political tapestry of medieval France.

Dudo of Saint-Quentin’s *De Moribus et Actis Primorum Normanniae Ducum*

In the timeline of Norman histories, Dudo of Saint-Quentin’s *De moribus et actis primorum Normanniae ducum*, or *Customs and Acts of the First Norman Dukes*, pioneered historical accounts of the Normans as the first known text describing their rule from within Normandy. Unfortunately, we know too little of

¹⁹ Ibid., 19.

²⁰ Ibid., 36.

²¹ Davis, 19; Wolf, 4.

what this monk from Saint-Quentin did for much of his life in the late 10th and early 11th centuries. Medieval historian and Latin scholar Eric Christiansen combines the factors that Dudo provides about himself along with other historical evidence to construct a picture of this Norman-Frankish author. A relatively well-to-do resident born around AD 965, Dudo ascended to head cleric of Saint-Quentin in Picardy in February of 1015.²² From what we can gather, count Richard I of Évreux commissioned Dudo's work around 994–996; by the early 1020s, Dudo lay down his pen, releasing a collection of books on geography, aristocracy, and the history of his religious community from the arrival of the early Normans to their fully fledged state. Ultimately, Dudo's work outlines the beginnings of Norman migration into Francia from Scandinavia, their destined creation of a state, and the first dukes who ruled this state.

Dudo's source fits into a period in which the Normans were taking active steps toward mirroring Frankish cultural and linguistic practice. In this sense, Dudo reflects the Normans' transition into a legitimized *gens* of Europe instead of a pagan outsider people living in Francia. In fact, Webber cites the use of the "ethnonym" of "Normandy" in Dudo's work as a statement that "marked the ethnogenesis of a new people."²³ Dudo affirms the Normans' assimilation into European customs and traditions as the beginning of their European rather than Scandinavian lives after a few generations in Francia. To fully embody such a change, Webber argues, the Normans needed a new word for themselves—hence, Dudo's *Normanni*.

After his beginning invocation and a few prayer verses, Dudo begins his history with a description of the Germano-Norse peoples from which the Normans descended, as well as a potential explanation for their migration to northern France. Dudo begins this description with an apostrophe to the peoples of Scandinavia:

Spread out within the huge space between the Danube and the edge of the Scythian Sea, there dwell savage and barbarous peoples, which are said to have sprung forth in various different ways from the island of Scanza [Scandinavia], hemmed in on both sides by the Ocean, like a swarm of bees from a hive, or like a sword from a scabbard; as barbarians will.²⁴

²² Dudo of Saint-Quentin, *History of the Normans*, trans. Eric Christiansen (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1998), ix–x.

²³ Webber, 21.

²⁴ Dudo, 129.

Dudo began writing his accounts in a time when “men were still alive whose fathers could have remembered Rollo,” the proto-Norman hero of definite Scandinavian origins.²⁵ In less than a few generations after the Normans carved out their state, Dudo, a Norman-Frank, scorns the non-European, or “savage,” origins of the *gens*—a rapid change in sentiment. In little more than a century, the Normans have gone from a pagan people to a European landholding community that produces texts that mock and criticize their earliest oral mythos.

One of the first symbols that corresponds to our three main categories of Norman identity comes to us in Dudo’s characterful address of Scandinavians: the “sword.” As the opening invocation references, Dudo likens the barbarians of Scandinavia to a sword in a scabbard; this simile contains the Normans in a bond made through military language. Although we cannot fully connect only Dudo’s comparison to a piece of Norman identity, the trope of arms and armaments as a symbol in Norman historiography begins here, in the very earliest of Norman texts.

Law and custom also motivated Norman expansion. At first, these motivations came from Viking social mores in response to overpopulation concerns; Dudo cites the chief cause of Norman exodus to northern France as one of practicality, as Norman polygamy left many Normans landless and covetous of the political power of their relatives: “Now these people burn with too much wanton lasciviousness, and with singular depravity debauch and mate with as many women as they please . . . when [their children] have grown up, they clamour fiercely against their fathers for shares of property.”²⁶ Again, Dudo criticizes the historic cultural practices of the Normans. Although the Normans had once been pagan polygamists, their 10th-century Frankish Christian customs directly conflicted with their former identity, leading to Dudo’s harsh commentary. As he continues, we see that the Normans resorted to a “very old custom” of exiling children via luck of the draw.²⁷ Again, we must consider Dudo’s commentary in tandem with his criticism; if Dudo scorns the polygamy of the early Normans, he must also react to early Norman custom in a way that mocks its antiquated nature. As Webber identifies, after the Normans settled in Francia, “Scandinavian custom met Carolingian law”; as a means of adopting Frankish cultural practice, the Normans rapidly changed their legal and social customs to parallel those of their European neighbors. Dudo

²⁵ J. J. Norwich, *The Other Conquest: The Normans in the South, 1016–1130* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 6.

²⁶ Dudo, 129.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

logically sees Norman polygamy and the customary reaction to it as foreign concepts, as neither is part of Norman identity by the time of his writing.

Still, Dudo continues with his chronology. The Viking warrior Rollo, the proto-Norman of Dudo's narrative, is a victim of Scandinavian exile custom. Although Rollo was most likely Norwegian,²⁸ Dudo begins Rollo's exploits by telling of his exile from Denmark with a band of men: "Francia was considered an almost empty desert, and the terror-stricken people were dreading the arrival of the Northmen like the unpredictable rumblings of a thunder-clap."²⁹ In this vein, Dudo considers the political and cultural climate that the Normans must have faced upon their arrival in Francia; as the Normans did not yet mirror the practices of Europeans, Dudo assumes that the medieval people of Francia would greet Rollo and his men with typical response: armed resistance. Assuming Rollo's motives to be hostile, the Franks take up arms against the exiled Normans in the same way that they had against Hasting, another Viking leader depicted in *de moribus*.

Though the Franks' resistance of the Normans' arrival in Neustria seems like a logical course of action because of potential hostility, we can also examine Dudo's chronology in cultural terms. At this point, the Franks deny the Normans because of the Normans' Scandinavian cultural origins. Because they appear like any other Viking raiders, the Normans seemingly threaten the Franks' European society. As Dudo's text hints, these Normans must change their appearance from barbaric Norsemen to peaceful Franks if they truly wished to cohabitate with their northwestern European neighbors. This includes the very way that the Normans report their history; as Christiansen explains, the Normans rejected copying their Old Norse poetic style for any historiography made in Normandy, instead opting for the written chronology that Dudo mimics from other Frankish and English historical writing.³⁰

Like the account of the Fécamp document, this evidence of Norman change in custom comes to us in the form of Christianization and baptism—important concepts in the Church symbolism of Norman identity. The Normans in Dudo's work cannot or will not persevere in northern France until they take steps toward acculturation to Frankish values, including conversion to Christianity. Rollo and his exiles seek ways of returning to Scanza [Scandinavia] or of finding success in

²⁸ Shopkow, 70.

²⁹ Dudo, 136.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, xvii.

northwestern Europe. As Dudo writes in his opening invocation, the Normans have a destined course of action:

Wealth will be showered on Rollo, affluence on his be conferred;/Once there is peace between Francia's sons and the Dacians,/Then will [Fortune] breed and give birth . . . /Kings and archbishop, dukes also and counts, nobles of high rank:/Under whose rule, Christ-led, all the world will rejoice & prevail,/and by whom churches will everywhere be increased in number.³¹

The symbol of the church dominates this passage; in the form of verse, Dudo predicts the Normans' future gains as a product of their decision to convert to Christianity. Because of this, we can classify Dudo's narrative as part of our three main pieces of Norman identity: that of churches and the actions associated with them as a means of blurring cultural divisions and promoting Norman presence in northwestern Europe.

Rollo's ultimate decision to convert to the religion of his Frankish peers came after the English king Aethelstan advised him to accept God and pursue Christian peace over barbaric raiding. Dudo begins his account of Aethelstan and Rollo by describing the English king as "adorned with a reputation for all kinds of goodness" and "a most worthy protector of the holy church."³² Dudo echoes the religious qualities that the 11th-century Normans will value by placing special emphasis on Aethelstan's role as "protector of the holy church"; if Dudo portrayed a king as a morally good leader because of his ability to strengthen the Christian church, then he must have valued church security as a piece of his medieval identity. As Dudo wrote within the monastery of Saint Quentin, this comes as no surprise.

After sending envoys to Aethelstan, Rollo met with the English king as a guest in his court.³³ With sadness, Rollo's envoys informed Aethelstan of their exiled condition as they cursed their inability to return to Scandinavia, as well as the recent storms that had stopped their marauding of Francia. It is when Rollo and Aethelstan finally meet in person, however, that Dudo's chronology defines the Normans' search for Christianity; Rollo and Aethelstan "embrace," with the English king giving a speech to his new friends: "Let us agree on a treaty of peace, and be joined in one faith./ . . . Stay on, I earnestly beg you, here in the confines of

³¹ Dudo, 144.

³² Ibid., 147.

³³ Ibid.

our land.”³⁴ After welcoming his guests, Aethelstan quickly invites the Normans to partake in the “health-giving waters of baptism,” with the enticing offer to “take from the kingdom” that Aethelstan rules.³⁵ In this passage, the English king promises peace and political treaties with Rollo and his Normans, on the condition that they also accept Christian conversion. In fact, the English king goes so far as to offer part of his own land to Rollo and his men, provided they reciprocate his religious practices. Ultimately, the proto-Normans stay in England as Christians in AD 912.³⁶ In a seeming instant, the Normans go from roaming exiles to Christian gentiles and treaty-holding guests of England; this transformation proves just as important in Dudo’s perception of Rollo’s band, as the Vikings’ baptism leads to their success in Francia.

Through their act of cultural assimilation, the Normans appear more “European” to the English court, despite their Scandinavian marauding origins. This change in perception becomes obvious after Aethelstan regards the “barbaric” qualities of the other peoples of Scandinavia; as terms of the Normans’ treaty with England, Aethelstan petitions Rollo, “[If] a dire and ferocious people should at one time or another assail me, evil-doers who keep no faith and observe no agreements, bear me what aid you can.”³⁷ By the ninth century, England’s greatest threats of “dire and ferocious people” involved Celts and Viking raids; if this is the case, then we must remember that the court of England has just welcomed exiles from the very region that Aethelstan fears. Because of this startling change in perception, we can assume that Dudo’s story defines the Normans’ conversion as the beginning of their identity as western Europeans. Because they consciously decided to assume the ruling religion of medieval Europe, the Normans can now hold political treaties with their future neighbors.

As in the timeline of the Fécamp source, the Normans in Dudo’s work prevail in Europe only after they become Christians. In one passage, Rollo recalls a dream he presumably received from the Lord about attacking the Franks; in a prayer, Rollo emphasizes that God granted him “a vision” of Christian Normans sacking Francia, and that becoming “a believer in Christ” would “rein in the fierce tide, let the disasters die down,” and allow the Normans to finally sail east to the Frankish kingdom.³⁸ Like an archetypal miracle story, the fierce Channel seas immediately calm after Rollo’s prayer, allowing the Normans to disembark in

³⁴ Dudo, 148.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid, 149.

Walcheren, just north of modern-day Normandy.³⁹ Again, a cultural expression precedes Norman success; the Normans, Christians bolstered with political legitimacy through their treaties with England, now have divine favor in their travels to Francia.

After a few months, Rollo and his men settle down in northern Francia, where the Christianized Viking sleeps uncomfortably because of a new dream from the Lord. As he sleeps, Rollo “seem[s] to behold himself, far higher than the highest, in a Frankish dwelling.”⁴⁰ From atop a mountain, the proto-Norman sees “a spring of sweet-smelling water flowing”; after bathing in the water, Rollo imagines his unclean body “made whole from the contagion of leprosy.”⁴¹ Following his purification, the warlord “saw about the base of [the mountain] many thousands of birds of different kinds and various colours, but with red left wings” which were so numerous “and so far and so wide that he could not catch sight of where they ended.”⁴² The first part of Rollo’s dream is heavy with Christian symbolism; Rollo clearly baptizes himself in the pure waters of Francia. Additionally, birds played numerous roles in Christian art, from the bird of Mary to swans and other protective birds being parallels to Christ.

As Rollo rested in the spring’s splendor, the various flocks of birds flew “one after the other in harmonious incoming flights and sought the spring on the mountain, and washed themselves, swimming together.”⁴³ The baptismal theme of the dream continues, only this time as a unifying factor for birds of different species; much like the Normans’ multicultural makeup, these varied birds all flock together under one banner: that of Christian practice. Rollo’s dream progresses:

When they had all been anointed by this miraculous dipping, they all ate together in a suitable place, without being separated into genera or species, and without any disagreement or dispute, as if they were friends sharing food. And they carried off twigs and worked rapidly to build nests.⁴⁴

Dudo’s extensive narration on Rollo’s new dream hints at multiple qualities of proto-Norman identity, ranging from religious expression to castle symbolism. Historian Nick Webber transcends the bird motifs of the dream and focuses on the

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 146.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 146.

passage's portrayal of the Norman *gens* and its future expansion; as Webber writes, "the birds signify empire, in this case a unity of many races and cultures in one grouping."⁴⁵ By giving Rollo another dream, Dudo allows the proto-Norman warrior to envision his future of his people as Christian-European stateholders; despite the Normans' "polyethnic" background, the amorphous Scandinavians will merge with the other "birds" of Francia to make a harmonious state akin to "friends sharing food." Additionally, these cultures now have something in common, in the form of shared baptism, a prominent symbol under the church motif of Norman identity. As Webber highlights, Dudo may be using Rollo's first dream as a Christian European as a means of making a new "origo gentis," or "ethnic origin story"; as the Normans lack a recorded history other than various Scandinavian oral myths, Rollo's dream creates a "semi-mythical past" to "rival that of their neighbors," the Franks, Britons, and English.⁴⁶ Instead of a classical foundation myth, Dudo begins the story of the Normans with imperial visions from God—thus reflecting the themes of castle and church.

The Normans morphed their cultural identity to hide their non-Christian-European origins through self-acculturation. This parallels other examples of "immigrant identity," in which newcomers entwine their cultural practices with those of the majority; though some cultures bicker and war when they meet, Norman-Frankish cohabitation followed a path of "change in the nature of one or both of the identities in an area that allow[ed] them to coexist."⁴⁷ When the Vikings arrived in northwestern Europe, the "vulnerable" qualities of their Scandinavian identity, the most atypical pieces of their cultural practices, including polygamy and paganism, withered and fell off of the main structure of *Normannitas*.⁴⁸ The Normans instead embraced Christianity as a gesture of change. We can suppose that, like other "immigrant identity" practices, the Normans rejected their seemingly barbaric practices because of their ambition to resemble their Christian European neighbors.

The chronology of the birds' metaphoric baptism also follows previous sources. As in the Fécamp document, in Dudo's account of Rollo and Aethelstan, the Normans successfully make relations with their neighbors only after they first cope with Christianity. In Rollo's dream, the birds successfully join together only after they have accepted the holy waters, a direct parallel to the Normans'

⁴⁵ Webber, 25.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 18.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 19.

experiences in England and northern Francia. Church motifs again dominate Dudo's depictions of Norman identity and cultural change; before the Normans or Rollo's birds can dine "as if they were friends" with their new acquaintances, they must first join together in baptism.⁴⁹

Finally, we must point out that the birds integrate in order to construct "nests." Although Dudo does not specify these constructions, I would postulate this passage as another piece of Norman castle symbolism. Later sources of Norman historiography will juxtapose Norman expansion into a new region with the creation of fortresses and castles; therefore, it seems logical that the earliest Norman histories would at least hint at this occurrence. Through this lens, we can form a timeline of events of the Norman "birds," who go from cursed pagans to healed Christians composing a multiethnic state and then legitimize their occupation of that state through "nests," or fortifications that prove and enforce their occupation.

Although Dudo's history presents the beginnings of Norman interactions with the Franks, the Normans managed to seem "Frankish" to most of Europe by the beginning of the 11th century. As both Webber and ethnographer Cassandra Potts conclude, the Normans rapidly blurred the line between newcomers and semi-indigenous inhabitants.⁵⁰ Though this transition may have posed difficulties to the Normans at first, the Christianized Scandinavians morphed into quasi-Frankish state holders in fewer than one hundred years. As Webber writes, the "two distinct *gentes* in the Norman territory"—those of Scandinavians and Franks—quite quickly merged as " 'the product of a difficult but ultimately successful union between these newcomers and natives,' these 'Norman rulers' and 'their Frankish subjects.' "⁵¹ This new identity, which Dudo has made careful pains to highlight in his long passages on Rollo's quest to finally get to France, entrusts itself on a specific piece of territory—Normandy, the land of Normans—and the state surrounding that region. Dudo reiterates this concept in the form of textual history, a medium that legitimizes cultural expression as permanent phenomenon; by the time that this early history publishes, there is no distinct barrier between "Scandinavian" and "Frank"; there is only "Norman."

As the first recorded Norman history, Dudo's text presents a narrative of acculturation and legitimization: The proto-Normans, a warlike people of Norse background, arrive to the Frankish mainland with bitterness and bloodshed. They soon convert to Christianity, adopt the language of their immediate neighbors, and

⁴⁹ Dudo, 146.

⁵⁰ Webber, 21.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

generally buy into the local culture of their peers. In this sense, outsiders bestow cultural practices to the Normans in Dudo's narrative; the French and English educate the Normans in "proper" European mores, which the Normans adopt as legitimate cultural practice. The Normans, wishing to legitimize their presence in Europe, manipulate religion, law, and other characteristics of their subjects and their peers in order to make their occupation seem as fitting as that of any other European people.

William of Poitiers's *Gesta Guilelmi*

The only descriptions of William of Poitiers that survive to this day come from small passages in his work and a mention from Orderic Vitalis, who said William was a Norman monk from Préaux. William of Poitiers was most likely a chaplain to William the Conqueror; along with his religious work, William of Poitiers also wrote the *Gesta Guilelmi*, or a chronology of the deeds of the Norman duke. William of Poitiers takes Dudo's story of the Norman comedy and advances it further, progressing from Vikings who conquer a portion of Francia to a new *gens* that finds itself ruling a respectable chunk of medieval Europe. William of Poitiers bridges the gap between the Normans as freshly settled Vikings and as new conquerors of England, Sicily, and Italy, and he also reacts to previous Norman historiographies and the histories of his peers. His commentary ends not long after Duke William ascends to the throne of England at Christmas of 1066.

At the very beginning of the text, William of Poitiers outlines key pieces of Norman identity when considering the Normans' recent role as Christian state holders in medieval Europe. The object of William's praise, Duke William ("the Conqueror"), exemplifies these criteria through his statecraft. In an apostrophe to the audience, William of Poitiers enumerates the Norman duke's Christianity and legal prowess, two central qualities of Norman acculturation: "[William] began with the utmost zeal to protect the churches of God, to uphold the cause of the weak, to impose laws which would not be burdensome, and to make judgements which never deviated from equity and temperance."⁵²

In his introduction to the ruler, William of Poitiers succinctly defines William the Conqueror's character as one of legalism and Christianity. This extends beyond personal matters; William the Conqueror combines his political policies

⁵² William of Poitiers, *The Gesta Guillelmi of William of Poitiers*, trans. Marjorie Chibnall and R. H. C. Davis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), i.6.

with these practices, using both of them as key pieces of his identity.⁵³ We can thus already see the way that Normans such as William exploited law and religion to affirm their political and social power; William of Poitiers subtly emphasizes this point by introducing William the Conqueror as a Christianizing and legislating force.

The same drive for using religion and law as legitimizing forces erupts from William the Conqueror's own mouth later in William of Poitiers's chronology. Quoting the Latin I Corinthians, William meditates on his role in the state and concludes, "praeterit enim figura huius mundi"—"the fashion of this world passeth away"—that political and social reforms affect only temporary situations.⁵⁴ With true permanency deriving from religious philosophy, the state should, "in the midst of the warlike activities and domestic occupations," concentrate "his greatest efforts to things divine," including building churches and granting legal power to the Church.⁵⁵ Because we can confirm his membership in a religious community, we allow William of Poitiers certain leeway in endorsing the powers of the Church; at the same time, the centrality of Church power in William's depictions could demonstrate the role of the Christian church as a key tenet of Norman identity and state formation by the late 11th and early 12th centuries.

Leah Shopkow reasons that William of Poitiers's special attention to Duke William's character as a microcosm of his state explains the author's genre. As she writes, William of Poitiers composed his text as a "series of moral tests" that challenged his ruler to embody the critical concepts of Norman identity—specifically, political stability, legal prowess, and religious health.⁵⁶ Like late-medieval and Renaissance "prince manuals," William of Poitiers's text advises a monarch through didactic literature. If William of Poitiers embraces church power and political hierarchy, then these criteria must reflect the value system of his community. With texts representing the society that produced them, Norman identity must conform to this kind of symbolism; the Normans latch onto law and religion to prove their power and carve out a territory to call home, all while using text to affirm and assess these statements. William of Poitiers values law and religious practice in his appraisal of William the Conqueror; the monk identifies William the Conqueror as a good ruler because he adeptly navigates these two pieces of Norman identity.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 79.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Shopkow, 91.

Because he writes as the Normans recuperate from their mass conquest in England, William of Poitiers perceives the Normans as unique; however, he compares the Normans with the English and the Franks through a moral lens rather than a cultural one. In fact, William of Poitiers completely ignores the genealogical differences between Normans and Frankish or English peoples, instead choosing to compare them as peers that differ in character rather than history. After lauding the fearlessness of Duke William and the Normans, William of Poitiers describes the tyrannous Frankish kings as “fortified in their proud recklessness,” a progeny of men devoted to egotism and waste. While acknowledging the Franks’ abilities in combat, William of Poitiers finds the Franks immoral and unbecoming of proper Christian rulers.⁵⁷ William of Poitiers repeats this negative commentary when later addressing the English, Normandy’s new subjects. After Edward succeeds to the English throne, he accepts Harold as a hostage to “check the resistance of the whole English people” from their natural “fickleness and perfidy,” and their inherent will to revolt.⁵⁸

The historian interprets these passages in a number of ways. At first, we recognize William of Poitiers’s focus on the martial activities of the Normans’ peers; the Franks are capable fighters who are capable of “reducing our whole land to a dreadful desert” if provoked, and the English often reject foreign occupation, as demonstrated through William of Poitiers’s studies of Roman history. The Normans may value arms and military success as critical to their respect of their European neighbors. On the other hand, William of Poitiers’s commentary may delve much more deeply than superficial martial concerns and may instead reveal how William views the Franks and the English; because William does not cite the Normans’ unique origins in comparison to the Franks and English, he is mediating between the culture of other Europeans and that of the Normans, who have now acquired enough political and cultural stability to rank with the other peoples of the region. William does not acknowledge anything dissimilar about the Normans when discussing other *gentes* in his work.

In fact, the Normans had grown such roots in Normandy by this time that they regarded it as their historic home, with Christianity as their original custom. As William of Poitiers denounces any state that “forbids or makes difficult the building of churches in their lands,” he counters this point with a startling passage: “But our *native land* [*patria nostra*] praises the Lord in many churches built by the

⁵⁷ William of Poitiers, i.30.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, i.41.

gracious favour of its prince, William, and enriched by his ready liberality.”⁵⁹ Not only did William fund new churches to propagate Norman Christianity, he also “willingly gave unrestricted authority to anyone wishing to make donations; he never inflicted any injury on the saints by taking away anything whatever that had been bestowed on them.”⁶⁰ By focusing on Christianity, William of Poitiers not only obscures his people’s Norse origins but also audaciously asserts their centuries of settlement in Francia and their unfaltering worship of God. Considering that the Normans were pagan foreigners only a few generations before William’s writings, these histories mask Norman cultural origins and present the Normans as similar to their neighbors. William of Poitiers’s text confirms Norman attempts at presenting themselves as cultural equals to their European neighbors; while the Normans were still newcomers to this region of Europe, Norman historiography already presented the Normans as indigenous people who outperformed their peers in military, political, and religious reform.

This focus on church formation also ties in with Norman rhetoric surrounding religious reform. After William the Conqueror’s campaign in England, the victorious king considered his options for his recovered inheritance. In the midst of his planning, a contingent of bishops and religious officials visited the duke, begging him for a Norman presence in the English church; Stigand, the archbishop of London, “did homage to [William], confirmed his fealty with an oath,” and beseeched the duke to reform the church with Norman practices.⁶¹ Whether or not this passage tells the truth, the Normans propagated and enforced this kind of rhetoric in their histories to enforce their occupations. Through religious rhetoric, William of Poitiers has convinced the reader that the churches of England desired Norman reforms, a quality that could easily legitimize Norman presence in the British Isles. With churches under their control, the Normans projected cultural and social influence.

By the time of William of Poitiers, the castle symbol of Norman identity had reached critical mass, becoming not only a key icon of Norman occupation but also one of the first endeavors that the Normans undertook upon expanding to a new region. After border disputes with the Frankish king, Duke William warred with his southern neighbors. The Franks, “anxious to put an end to discords that were so burdensome for them,” fearfully acquiesced to Norman demands after some of their armies succumbed to Norman arms. Following the peace,

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, i.50.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, ii.28.

“immediately, and in [the peace assembly], the duke issued a command ordering the captains of his knights to be ready to enter the territory . . . to build the castle of Ambrieres.”⁶² This reaction to build castles and fortifications seems almost knee-jerk, an autonomic response that the Normans had adopted for both practical and thematic reasons. In a physical sense, motte and baileys and other fortifications protect a ruling lord and his court. At the same time, castles also function in the political spectrum; they shelter the lord’s estate and segregate at least a portion of it from the countryside in which he rules. Additionally, and most importantly, castles embody political and social dominion. Through castles, a conqueror people can constantly remind its new subjects of their position in a social and political hierarchy. These conquerors can quite literally oversee this chain of rank from atop their structures.

William of Poitiers does not limit himself to Norman conquests in Francia; after the Battle of Hastings in 1066, Duke William contemplates his political position as potential king of England, a rebellious state full of aforementioned “rebels.” William confers with select churchmen and nobles of the English countryside about how to proceed with integrating the kingdom into Normandy.⁶³ After his advisors and acquaintances reiterate William’s skill in political juggling, the new king proceeds to London. Again, the castle plan appears after William seizes the state: “He hoped above all that once he had begun to reign any rebels would be less ready to challenge in and more easily put down. So he sent men ahead to London to build a fortress in the city and make the many preparations necessary for royal dignity.”⁶⁴ Whereas Dudo of Saint-Quentin introduced the Norman “birds’ nests” as nebulous symbols of settlement, William of Poitiers gives castles form and function as the means of securing Norman conquests and also of affirming Norman state control. This piece of Norman identity now exerts its full influence over the Norman conquests; when the Normans arrive in a new land, they build castles and other fortresses to assert their presence.

Along with castles, laws can project political hegemony. Additionally, laws can personify cultural perception because they are texts with political and social qualities. After landing in England, Duke William speaks with a group of monks about his reasons for coming to the island; after Harold usurped his position as king of England, the Norman duke felt that he had the legal right to pursue war regardless of cultural differences between the English and the Normans:

⁶² Ibid, ii.32.

⁶³ Ibid, ii.29.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

[Harold previously] made himself my vassal by giving his hands to me, and gave my surety with his own hand concerning the kingdom of England. I am ready to put my case against him to judgement, by the law of the English or of the Normans as he prefers.⁶⁵

We could easily define William's reasons for coming to England as a case of contract law; by swearing to honor Duke William's claim to the throne and giving the proper oaths, Harold entered into a contract with the Norman ruler. By usurping the throne, Harold broke that contract, a fact that William thought either English or Norman law would uphold. Additionally, William's potential deferral to English law indicates something about the Normans' willingness to adopt foreign legal practices; William the Conqueror's rhetoric parallels previous Norman reactions to local law, like the Vikings' embrace of Carolingian law. Studies in common law practice reiterate this notion; not long after the Normans conquered England, their legal traditions enmeshed with English common law practices.⁶⁶

The Normans in England—Orderic Vitalis's *Historia Ecclesiastica*

William of Poitiers's narrative on William the Conqueror's travels in England reminds us that the Normans conquered a lot more than a plot of land in medieval Francia. In fact, the Normans used the same legitimizing tactics for creating Normandy that they did when expanding into other portions of Europe, including the Kingdom of England in 1066. A contemporary of William of Poitiers, Orderic Vitalis, also incorporates Norman identity symbols into his history. Written a few decades after William of Poitiers's work on Duke William, Orderic Vitalis's *Ecclesiastical History* ranges from descriptions of the religious communities of 12th-century Normandy to generalizations on the Norman state and cultural character, as well as the Normans' recent conquest of England.

Historians know only a little of Orderic's life, with the author presenting only scant details on his upbringing in his own chronology.⁶⁷ Probably born in 1075 in Shrewsbury, a town in Shropshire, an English province directly east of Wales, Orderic likely did not experience the Norman conquest of England until around 1071. As Chibnall writes in her translation of the *Historia*, "The Norman conquest was a slow process"; when the still-rebelling Englishmen of Shropshire finally

⁶⁵ Ibid, ii.12.

⁶⁶ Langbein, John, Renee Lerner, and Bruce Smith, *History of the Common Law: The Development of Anglo-American Legal Institutions* (New York: Aspen, 2009), 4.

⁶⁷ Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, trans. Marjorie Chibnall (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 1.

acquiesced five years after the Normans first made landfall, the province went to Roger of Montgomery, a Norman councilor of Duke William.⁶⁸

Roger of Montgomery's first actions as lord of Shropshire not only effected Orderic's later vocation as a monk but also demonstrated the typical Norman response to gaining new territory: "In the first phase of the Norman settlement" of Shropshire, Roger of Montgomery took special care in using "church prebends [lands and taxes given to religious communities] to provide for the clerks of his household."⁶⁹ Much like those in previous Norman histories, Roger of Montgomery flocked to religious authority to reinforce his new gains; as a means of aiding his new social hierarchy, Roger of Montgomery had the abbeys and churches of Shropshire house his clerks. Additionally, the Shropshire church lands became gifts to many of Roger's new clerks, including a Saxon chapel that went to Odelerius, a Norman who served as a bureaucratic figurehead of the province's religious community.⁷⁰ These Norman conquerors in England practiced the same tactics of their Scandinavian ancestors from the 10th century by using Christianity as a way to reinforce their new gains, only this time in a new land.

A visiting monk to the now-Normanized abbey of Seez recommended a ten-year-old Orderic a clerkship in the abbey of Saint-Evroul, in central Normandy.⁷¹ Orderic became deacon of the abbey when he was 18, and he spent much of his adult life studying in the grounds of his new home.⁷² Sometime around 1110, Orderic's superiors at Saint-Evroul asked him to write a history of the monastic community and Normandy at large, a collection of writings that later became the priest's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, a history that "left its mark on historical traditions" for all Norman historiography after its publication.⁷³

The English-born Orderic saw the Normans as a good people, but their culture required certain controls to "tame" them; the fact that these controls mirror our central tenets of Norman identity is not coincidental. William of Poitiers had already recorded that the Normans incorporated castle and legal symbols into their conquest of England; these symbols were added to by writings about the control that Norman law had over their barbaric character. William contrasts how the Normans act with and without law: "If the Normans are disciplined under a just and

⁶⁸ Ibid., 2.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 3.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 5.

⁷² Ibid., 23.

⁷³ Ibid., 31, 1.

firm rule they are men of great valour”; at the same time, “without such rule they tear each other to pieces to destroy themselves.”⁷⁴ Because of their love of “rebellion” and “sedition,” Orderic concludes, “[the Normans] need to be restrained by the severe penalties of law, and forced by the curb of discipline to keep to the path of justice.”⁷⁵ Like his contemporaries, Orderic presents law as a defining feature of Norman identity; law not only encompasses Norman cultural expression but also can ground the Normans into behaving like their European peers. Without law, Orderic supposes, the Normans would regress to their barbaric, pre-Christian nature. As Shopkow writes, Orderic “counterbalanced” most Norman qualities; while Orderic noted the Normans’ inherit “avarice, greed for power, inconstancy, frivolity, and a taste for wrongdoing,” the monk also lauded their ability to become “audacious and courageous” after adapting to the networks of medieval Europe.⁷⁶ Orderic appreciates how the Normans have used law to adapt themselves to European customs. As an Englishman commenting on Norman behaviors, Orderic Vitalis shows how the Normans have gone from barbaric marauders to Frankish state holders to new occupants in England—all thanks to their ability to blur cultural lines through castles, churches, and laws.

The Normans in Sicily—Geoffrey of Malaterra’s *The Deeds of Count Roger of Calabria and Sicily and of His Brother Duke Robert Guiscard*

Half a decade before the Norman Conquest of England in 1066, a group of Normans under Robert Guiscard (*Viscardus* being Latin for “the Wily One”) fell into ruling the island of Sicily after taking the region from its Arab leaders. Originally sent to Normandy as soldiers for hire, Robert Guiscard and his men seized Sicily, creating the first Christian state of Sicily in some centuries.⁷⁷ Much like the Normans in the conquests of Normandy and England, the Normans in Sicily introduced their occupation through religious and political means. After building their castles and churches like proper Normans, Wolf explains, the Normans turned to their third symbol to explain their recent expansion: texts. As Wolf writes, “by the end of the [11th] century, three different chroniclers, operating quite independently of one another, had each produced his own full-length account of the

⁷⁴ Orderic Vitalis, 4:83, as cited in Shopkow, 101.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Shopkow, 101.

⁷⁷ Geoffrey of Malaterra, *The Deeds of Count Roger of Calabria and Sicily and of His Brother Duke Robert Guiscard*, trans. Kenneth Baxter Wolf (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 2.

conquests in Italy and Sicily.”⁷⁸ Of these three, the work of Geoffrey of Malaterra, a Norman priest in Sicily, comprehensively outlines the Norman conquest of Sicily and attaches that narrative to the whole story of Norman development.

Geoffrey of Malaterra probably came to Sicily at the end of the 11th century as an “ecclesiastical recruit enlisted by Count Roger,” Robert Guiscard’s brother, “in his effort to reestablish the Latin church” in Muslim Sicily.⁷⁹ Along with his conversion work, Geoffrey compiled the story of Norman expansion until 1099 in his *Deeds of Count Roger*. Whereas other histories tell only the story of the Normans in Sicily, Geoffrey places the Norman conquest of Sicily into part of an overreaching story of Norman development. This story begins as far back as Rollo, the proto-Norman hero; as Geoffrey writes in his source, the Normans first came to Europe “on account of [the richness of Francia], Rollo and his men set out from both banks of the [Seine] and began to subject the inhabitants of that region to their dominion.”⁸⁰ Despite the geographical and cultural transformation through decades of Norman rule in Sicily, Geoffrey of Malaterra still connects his history to previous Norman conquests. Geoffrey writes to connect Norman history into a contiguous tale, from Normandy to Sicily to England and beyond—all with the same methods of castles, churches, and texts.

Geoffrey parallels Rollo’s desire for riches in Francia with Roger’s reasons for sailing to Sicily centuries later, while also incorporating Norman symbols of churches and law. As Geoffrey writes, Roger first considered warring in Sicily for its economic value but then changed his thinking to consider the religious benefits of seizing a non-Christian state:

[Roger] figured that [taking Sicily] would be of profit to him in two ways—that is, to his soul and to his body—if he could, on the one hand, reclaim the region, which has been given over to idols, to divine worship, and on the other—speaking in more temporal terms—appropriate for himself the fruits and revenues of the land, which had been usurped by a people disagreeable to God, and dispose of them in the service of God.⁸¹

By this time, the Norman story does not even acknowledge the Normans’ previous paganism. Although Rollo certainly came to Francia at first for plunder, Geoffrey

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, I.1.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, II.1.

considers the Normans' conversion to Christianity as swift and permanent, thus making the Normans fully legitimized Christians who are capable of hunting down non-Christians like the Muslims of Sicily. Additionally, Roger expresses the same ties between Norman state and Christian church that the Normans used in Normandy and England: If he can successfully sack the land, Roger will appropriate his conquests to the Christian church, much like Roger of Montgomery in England and other Norman elites.⁸² Yet again, the Normans used church rhetoric to explain their motivation for conquests. When Norman historians recorded these symbols into histories, they used these claims as pieces of Norman identity construction.

The Normans adapted to Sicilian law through acculturation, much like their experiences with Carolingian law in Normandy and common law in England. The best example of this comes in Geoffrey's accounts of the siege of Palermo: As the Normans wait outside the city walls, Palermo's Muslim inhabitants fear that the Normans will make them "relinquish their law" if the Normans win the city.⁸³ As a protection from this, the city sends an envoy to the Normans, asking for "assurances that they [will] not be coerced or injured by unjust of new laws."⁸⁴ Roger graciously accepts this offer, which motivates the city's occupants to surrender Palermo. Again, the Normans respect the symbol of law in the cultures of their subjects, seeing it as a legitimizing institution. The fact that the majority of this legal system comes from Arabic law also shows the Normans' capacity for religious provisions; by promising to not infringe on Muslim legal practices in Palermo, the Normans recognize the hierarchical power that Islam has on the state of Sicily. Were the Normans to fully destroy that hierarchy, they would risk jeopardizing their new expansion.

The events following the surrender of Palermo also correspond to the typical Norman responses to conquest. As soon as the Muslims agree to surrender the city after learning that their laws will not disappear, Roger seeks out the nearest church to change it into a Christian cathedral; Roger's men quickly find "the church of Mary," a building in Palermo "which had been an archbishopric in ancient times" before the Muslim occupants turned it "into a temple dedicated to their superstition."⁸⁵ Through prayer and Christian ornaments, the Normans quickly "[revive] the cult of the Christian religion as much as possible" by reconsecrating the church of Mary.⁸⁶ After addressing their church motifs, the Normans then work

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., II.45.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

toward castles; Roger sends out a band to assess the military qualities of the city's fortifications, and the new count immediately begins "strengthening the fortress and disposing of the city as he [sees] fit."⁸⁷ Much like in previous Norman histories, the Normans in Geoffrey's text jump to churches and castles to enforce their most recent gains and assert their connection to their subjects.

These first sources that depict Norman conquests in Sicily and England follow the same pattern of Norman conquest used when these multiethnic peoples first made landfall in Europe. Much like those in the 10th century, the Normans who arrived in Sicily and England quickly sought out laws, churches, and castles with which to enforce their conquests. These very symbols were present in early Norman historiography in Dudo and other sources, and they continued to reflect Norman identity in the 11th and 12th centuries. More than likely, these patterns continued into Norman historiography as the Normans progressed into the Holy Land and other smaller settlements in medieval Europe. After first carving out their own culture by looking at their peers in Francia, the Normans spread their culture through the same means they used to define it.

Conclusion—The Discourse between Historical Source, Symbol, and Audience

The Normans exploited history as a means to an end. The Normans certainly took advantage of historical text to confirm that they belonged in Europe as much as any other *gentes* of medieval Europe. Geoffrey of Malaterra puts it most succinctly; in his commentary on the roles of the historian, the monk of Sicily records:

In the tradition of the ancient philosophers and for the sake of future generations of men, it became customary to transmit for posterity the deeds of valiant men, recording them with honor, so that the things remembered, along with the names of those by whom they were done, would not be lost to silence, but rather, committed to letters, would be read and made known to future generations, in a way that would make those who accomplished such deeds come to life through such memorials.⁸⁸

If history both affirms cultural expression and preserves those statements for future generations, then the historian creates memory. Malaterra sees the historian, rather

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Geoffrey of Malaterra, 8.

than an analyzer of chronological milieu or a commentator on rhetoric, as the gateway to the past. In this respect, the reader of history judges all history. While the chronicler can assert the truth, the reader must search a historical source and find it worthy. The audience of a historical text plays a central role in all historiography; historical sources that engage and persuade the reader as to the verisimilitude of the past simultaneously change the past.

The Normans were not a specific people. These Norse-Scandinavians claimed only small pieces of family genealogy, spoke whatever language was of the nearest majority, adopted the legal codes of their subjects, and worshipped the god of their peers. The entirety of Norman expression unifies under one idea, however: a common story. Rather than turn to politics or racial makeup as the source for cultural identity, the Normans instead turned to history—a history that they morphed, molded, and re-created as they gathered more and more people under the banner of *Normannitas*. As Davis puts it, “if peoples are formed, not by race or language,” but instead through a common story, “they can remain peoples only so long as that experience is kept alive,” a process done by “handing on the story” through text and tradition.⁸⁹ The life-span of *Normannitas* lasted only as long as people practiced this historiographical looseness. As the 13th century dawned, the French reabsorbed Normandy into Phillip II’s kingdom. The storytelling died soon thereafter, as Normandy lived on as France; without the duchy, the Normans no longer had a place through which they could tie their histories. *Normannitas* shriveled, and the peoples of England, Sicily, and Normandy became “English,” “Sicilian,” and “French” within a generation—the final act of Norman acculturation.

From Dudo of Saint-Quentin in the 10th century to Geoffrey of Malaterra in the 12th, Norman identity conformed to central qualities that survive in these histories despite geographic separation, cultural dissociation, and political difference. Castles, churches, and texts prevail; regardless of degree of separation, the Normans incorporated political, religious, and historical symbols into their identity. Ultimately, all of these central qualities orbit the theme of cultural accommodation. Few other medieval societies acculturated on such a systematic and rapid scale as the Normans did; in a matter of generations, these multiethnic Norse settlers became brave Christian Franks, pious Sicilians, and equitable English lords. Because of their cultural assimilation, the historian cannot ethnically define *Normannitas*. Instead, he or she may only outline the symbols that the Normans used to record themselves in their historiographies. With this in mind,

⁸⁹ Davis, 15.

Norman studies must cope with only defining the Normans in postmodern terms: as state crafters who legitimized their gains through religious rhetoric, political iconography, and historiographical representation.

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