

Benoît de Sainte-Maure, Three Anglo-Norman Kings. The Lives of William the Conqueror and Sons by Benoît de Sainte-Maure. Translated with an introduction and notes by Ian Short, Toronto (Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies) 2018, VIII–227 p. (Mediaeval Sources in Translation, 57), ISBN 978-0-88844-307-6, USD 25,00.

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This book is another of Ian Short's many contributions to making twelfth-century historical writing in vernacular French accessible to a much wider audience. An authoritative translation is accompanied by an impeccable literary introduction, taking us into a complex literary world of historical writing which made claims to be factually accurate while it was accompanied by panegyric and rhetoric. Using as his principal source Robert of Torigni's version of the »Gesta Normannorum Ducum« which was completed by 1139, Benoît is identified by Ian Short as an author who presents himself as an intermediary between Latin and vernacular historical writing (p. 7). He also rightly emphasises, as others have also done, that Benoît's huge work is a »Histoire« and not a »Chronique« (p. 6, note 20), the word used in Carin Fahlin's edition on which all continue to rely and to which he makes a small number of amendments.

This book contains a translation of only a quarter of Benoît's poem, lines 33,445 to 44,544 devoted to the lives of William the Conqueror, Robert Curthose, William Rufus, and Henry I. The sections devoted to the earliest Viking incursions into France and the Norman rulers before William the Conqueror's father Duke Robert the Magnificent are briefly described in the Introduction on p. 21–22. Given the extent of the interest in the history of Normandy before 1066 and related matters, readers' appetites must certainly have been whetted for more. However, given the poem's scale, to translate only a quarter of it is entirely legitimate.

Ian Short skilfully makes his way through many of the controversial issues relating to Benoît's history, the most notable of which are surely its relationship to Wace's »Roman de Rou« and Henry II's decision to replace Wace by Benoît and the two historians' different approaches to their subjects. In developing Françoise Vieillard's conclusions, based on a study of the surviving manuscripts of the »Roman de Rou«, that Benoît used its first version and that Wace and Benoît were writing almost contemporaneously with each other, with Benoît starting work in 1165 approximately five years later than Wace, an English readership is presented with a significant reappraisal of historical writing in the early years of Henry II's reign.

The likely context for composition therefore becomes participation in the period of the 1150s and 1160s when interest in the Norman past and their conquests was especially dynamic, something that is epitomised by Robert of Torigni's »Chronicle«



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and Wace. These sections and the text of the »Histoire« provoke the thought that the notion of Benoît as a monk cloistered in a monastery in the Touraine may need reassessment. If he started work in 1165, why should he have been interested in writing a history of the dukes of Normandy? And how did he obtain access to, for example, the »Gesta Guillelmi« of William of Poitiers, the »Historia Ecclesiastica« of Orderic Vitalis, the early version of Wace's »Roman de Rou«, and the information that shaped the remarkable account of Duke Robert the Magnificent's courting of Herleva, as well as other parts of the narrative that have no obvious literary source? While the extent of knowledge of the »Gesta Guillelmi« and the »Historia Ecclesiastica« is too often under-estimated, his diligence in seeking them out is notable as also is the sheer power of the narrative of the courtship and its rejection of much that Orderic wrote on the subject. With all this in mind, the comments on »the process of assimilation which saw the Normans identify with the English and their culture« and the resort to that vague word *Normanitas* (p. 7–8) strike me as being likely to be ill-judged. Albeit that more prosopographical research is needed to illuminate cross-Channel movement, it is surely better to think in terms of an elite celebrating their history and the *renovatio imperii* of Henry II.

The book benefits from an informative set of notes, although a few would have benefitted from elaboration or reflection. Thus, to describe Duke Robert's relationship with Herleva as an »illicit liaison« runs contrary to what we know of the unions of every Norman ruler from Rollo onwards and a great deal of modern scholarship. To describe Count Guy of Brionne's father as »one Rainald« (p. 193) is to overlook evidence accessible in Burgundian charters. There are occasional mistakes, with Michelle Szkilnick's name misspelt at p. 7, note 21 and Elisabeth van Houts's at p. 26, note 40. Drawing attention to such slips is a reviewer's responsibility. But the chief one is to express admiration for this fine translation and to thank Ian Short for another contribution that will expand further collaboration between historians and literary scholars and deepen understanding of the 12th-century world.



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