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The Normans: Power, Conquest and Culture in 11th-Century Europe

By Judith A Green

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The Normans never lose their fascination with historians and history buffs alike. In the space of a few months in 2022 we have already seen two major titles from leading publishers: Judith Green's, under review here; and Levi Roach's *Empire of the Norman: Makers of Europe, Conquerors of Asia* (John Murray Press, Hatchette UK.) While Roach's is presented as the first global history of the Normans, taking their story well into the thirteenth century, Green's offering is more sharply focused on this remarkable race in eleventh-century Europe—still a task of huge proportions.

Famously, the Normans—the "Norsemen" Vikings of Scandinavia—established themselves in northwest France in 911, when the Frankish king Charles the Simple granted Rollo the Duchy of Normandy. From there, they made their indomitable mark on the European scene, most famously in their conquest of England (1066 and all that) but also in the Mediterranean, especially Sicily and Naples. The Normans did not elevate to monarchy only in England. However, it is no longer certain that the dynasty did actually begin with Rollo in the early tenth century. Just as with other races (as they liked to be seen), they had their own foundation myths, brilliantly promoted by Dudo of St-Quentin in the early eleventh century.

The book's first chapter focuses on medieval writing about the Normans, their identity, and the myths of *Normanitas*. As Green notes: "A remarkable body of historical composition was generated by the Normans" reflecting how the Normans both saw and portrayed themselves (6). Dudo of St-Quentin kicked things off with his approach which saw them develop, in Green's words, from pagan "pirates to Christian princes;" it was "an exercise in repackaging" to fabricate a long lineage reaching back to Troy (7, 8). Here we have brief summaries of the works of William of Jumièges, Orderic Vitalis, Wace, Benoît de Sainte-Maurice, and Stephen of Rouen, whose dramatically entitled poem *Norman Dragon* is not so well-known but, Green argues, was influential in Norman circles. And these are just some of the writers for the Normans in Northern Europe; in Southern Italy and the South we encounter Amatus

of Montecassino, Geoffrey Malaterra, and William of Apulia. The First Crusade is also covered and, in the chapter's longest section, England. There are plenty of historical debates on these writings, briefly addressed here, with Green guardedly claiming that "by the later twelfth century it seems that the ruling elite did identify themselves as English rather than Norman" (33). John Gillingham and Hugh Thomas have long been right about this.

Much of the *Normanitas* phenomenon relies on the famed bellicosity of the Normans themselves: supreme warriors, wily tacticians, and brave knights. Recently, this has come under some questioning, as Green is aware. Classical and biblical tradition combined with contemporary tastes were influential on Norman writers creating an emphasis on such martial qualities. (There is no inclusion of Thomas Chadwick's interesting PhD of 2017 on this topic.) Green tempers the military genius of the Normans, arguing that their understanding of warfare was unlikely to have been superior to anywhere else, not least in troubled France. Indeed, they had a lot to learn about siege warfare, increasingly important with the proliferation of castles. She explores the fortunes of familial units as swords for hire, such as the Giroies, Grandmesnils, Crispins, and Tosnys. Harder to explain is how this military diaspora had no negative impact on the ever-growing power of ducal Normandy, emanating from the counts of Rouen; the fact that "the ties that bind were a fluid mix of bonds of friendship and kinship" certainly helped, as did mutually beneficial material considerations (50).

While the conquest of England is the most striking example of the Normans' military success, Green affords due attention to their hardly less impressive achievements in southern Europe, where they took advantage of the fractious political situation in Italian and papal affairs. They applied their usual ruthlessness, surely a key to their success, their cavalry victory at Civitate in 1053 consolidating their reputation as fearsomely effective soldiers, reinforced by Roger de Hauteville's conquest of Sicily by 1090. (A kingdom was established by 1130.) Restlessness, ambition and security concerns saw them take Malta, enter North Africa, and become involved in the Byzantine Empire. And then there was the whole business of the First Crusade and the leadership of Bohemond, and the most successful—and unlikely—military victory of all. Their dynamism was truly extraordinary.

This willingness to take risks—encouraged by their warrior culture—paid the greatest dividends in England, Green emphasizing the gamble the Duke William of Normandy took to win his crown. The extent to which he truly felt entitled to the throne by right remains undetermined. Everywhere they went, "the Normans were above all successful in war" (127); without this, they would be of relatively marginal interest to historians. The *rex* as *miles* remained the most important role of all rulers. Green reminds us that the infamous heavy cavalry shock charge of the Normans was relatively rare; it was "their mastery of sieges and their ability to assemble fleets and to use them both for transport, in sieges, and in battle, which really stands out" (221). In this, she is synthesizing the wealth of research into Norman warfare across Europe. Green again places the Normans within the context of their time, accentuating how their aptitude for war was enhanced by rapid learning and assimilation: her main interest is how this became reflected in the practice of practical power, where again the Normans "were not innovators" (159). But, as patrons of the Church, the Normans proved themselves to be more original, being "at the heart of developments which were reshaping the church in the Christian west" (174). However, in this regard, the mitigation is that they were conventionally associating themselves "with contemporary ideals of reform in the church" (165). Everywhere, their ambitious programme of ecclesiastical construction marked their piety and power, as did their castles. This is the subject of Green's last chapter. Here she warns that "the assumption that stone towers in England must necessarily postdate 1066 has been shown to be shaky" (203); nonetheless, "one of the areas of starkest change was the rebuilding after 1066 of all the major cathedrals and abbey churches, bar Edward the Confessor's Westminster Abbey" (215). It was not just castles that announced the new power in the land. In this chapter, as throughout, it is the Normans' authority and how they wielded it that most interests Green.

While this huge topic will always require more space, what impresses about Green's work is its succinctness and readability. While it is occasionally frustrating not to have more details and analysis, this is nonetheless a remarkably successful and engaging account of the mercenary raiders who became dukes, princes, and kings. Green ends with the important conclusion that "there was no single Norman world"

(222). Indeed so, it being so vast; no wonder some historians speak of a Norman empire. The book explores these worlds with calm authority and clarity.

Were the Normans the unstoppable force of fate as portrayed by David Douglas? Or were they opportunistic chancers of R. H. C. Davis, who absorbed other cultures to create their own identity? Green opts for the latter, judging that key to their success was that "they were arch-opportunists in an age of opportunism" (85).

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