

The Chanson d'Antioche: An Old French Account of the First Crusade

Review Number:

1203

Publish date:

Wednesday, 1 February, 2012

Editor:

Susan Edgington

Carol Sweetenham

ISBN:

9780754654896

Date of Publication:

2011

Price:

£70.00

Pages:

448pp.

Publisher:

Ashgate

Place of Publication:

Farnham

Reviewer:

Simon John

In the Middle Ages a series of Old French knightly-spoken poems known as *chansons de geste*, devoted to the subject of crusades, took shape in the north of France. In the past few centuries these texts, sometimes known collectively as the Old French Crusade Cycle, have been subjected to critical scrutiny by literary scholars and philologists, almost all of which has been published in French. However, aside from a few notable exceptions, Anglophone historians of the crusades have been notoriously reluctant to engage with these texts in their research. There can be little doubt that this disjuncture between historical and literary scholarship in modern work on the crusades exists in large part because of the considerable linguistic challenges posed by Old French. The publication of Susan Edgington and Carol Sweetenham's English translation of the *Chanson d'Antioche*, the earliest and by far the most well-known *chanson de geste* of the Crusade Cycle, will begin the process of redefining the boundaries of modern scholarship on the crusades.

Before discussing the actual translation itself, it is worth noting that the authors include in this volume a comprehensive 97-page critical introduction to the text that not only sets it in the context of the Crusade Cycle as a whole, but locates it within the wider milieu of the *chansons de geste*. In fact, this introduction represents the most extended critical appraisal of the Crusade Cycle yet carried out in English, and as such, is an important contribution to scholarship in itself. The narrative of the *Antioche* commences with the departure of the first contingents of crusaders for the Holy Land, which historically took place in around the spring of 1096. The greater part of the narrative is devoted to the First Crusaders' siege of Antioch, which began on 20 October 1097 and lasted until 28 June 1098. Even the most cursory reading of the text can

support no other conclusion that it is highly romanticised: invented, exaggerated and distorted events and personalities intermingle with recognised history throughout.

As any scholar who has dealt with the *Chanson d'Antioche* even in passing will know, this text is subtended by extraordinarily complex historiographical traditions. Edgington and Sweetenham use their introduction to tackle this tradition in considerable detail (pp. 3–48). At some point between 1180 and 1200, the *Antioche*, which had previously only existed in spoken form, was amalgamated along with the *Chanson des Chétifs* and the *Chanson de Jérusalem* into a unified trilogy of epic songs pertaining to the First Crusade. The *Jérusalem* picks up the story of the First Crusade where the *Antioche* ceases, with *Les Chétifs* acting as a kind of romantic interlude in between. While a number of previous scholars dated the execution of this trilogy to the period around 1180, Edgington and Sweetenham set out a compelling argument that it actually dates from the early 13th century, perhaps the time of the Fourth Crusade. They assert that the exploits of the St-Pols feature strongly in the extant text perhaps because their descendents played some role in its production in the period around 1200 (pp. 20–4). However, there can be no definitive conclusions on the dating of the text. As Edgington and Sweetenham note, this trilogy of *chansons de geste* formed the basis of the Crusade Cycle, with additional songs being added to it throughout the 13th century.

The *Antioche* survive in nine manuscripts, no two of which are identical. Edgington and Sweetenham provide a helpful list and description of these manuscripts, pointing out some of the major differences between them (pp. 36–9). In 2003 Janet Nelson published an edition of this song as part of the monumental University of Alabama *Old French Crusade Cycle* series.⁽¹⁾ However, scholars generally prefer Suzanne Duparc-Quioic's earlier two-volume edition of 1977–8. Unlike Nelson, Duparc-Quioic based her edition on what is thought to be the earliest manuscript.⁽²⁾ In this edition the song comprises 9,582 lines structured into 374 *laissez* (verses of varying length). Edgington and Sweetenham have based their translation primarily on Duparc-Quioic's edition, though very usefully they include an appendix of translations of passages which appear only in the Nelson edition. These passages are clearly labelled and notated, which should allow those scholars who wish to deal with the Old French to navigate easily between the two editions.

Edgington and Sweetenham do not shy away from addressing by far the most contentious subject in the historiography that surrounds the *Chanson d'Antioche*: its authorship. The reworking of the *Antioche*, *Chétifs* and *Jérusalem* in the period between about 1180–1200 is traditionally and fairly securely ascribed to a certain Graindor of Douai. Graindor is mentioned explicitly in a number of the manuscripts, generally in a context that affirms that he played a key role in their production, if not as the author, then perhaps as their *remanieur* or 'reworker'. The subject of the authorship of the original spoken version of the *Chanson d'Antioche*, however, is one of the most hotly-debated questions of medieval scholarship. The French scholars who first began to look at the *Antioche* in the 19th century found particular significance in a remark made towards the end of the song, wherein the narrator lists a number of Muslim lords who fought in one of the battles of the First Crusade, before stating that 'the author of the song – Richard the Pilgrim, from whom we have it – knew the names very well' (p. 312). While this Richard is mentioned nowhere else in the *Antioche*, in the 150 years since the publication of the first critical edition of this text, his name has nonetheless come to dominate critical understanding of it. A number of 19th- and early 20th-century French scholars asserted on the basis of this single passage that Richard the Pilgrim must have been a participant of the First Crusade. The corollary to this line of thinking was that the *Antioche* was therefore to be regarded as the most important eyewitness account of the expedition, since it was a vernacular text written by a 'man of the people'. A series of scholars and authors have contributed to the rich traditions surrounding Richard the Pilgrim by offering their own opinions on what who Richard was and why he wrote his *chanson*, basing their argumentation only on evidence internal to the text. Edgington and Sweetenham sketch out path through this complex strand of historiography (pp. 49–56), noting that Richard's name has become the basis of 'vast and tottering edifices of speculation' (p. 312, note 531).

On the subject of Richard the Pilgrim, Edgington and Sweetenham adhere to the arguments put forward in Robert Francis Cook's key 1980 study of the *Antioche*.⁽³⁾ Cook's study did not so much as demolish the evidence for the existence of Richard the Pilgrim (and therefore call into question the attendant historiography which surrounds him), as it did to show that in fact there simply is no credible evidence for

his existence *to be* demolished in the first place. As Edgington and Sweetenham note, it was fairly standard practise for authors of romantic texts to assert the authenticity of their work on the basis that it had drawn from an earlier unverifiable source. The *Chanson de Roland*, the most famous of all *chansons de geste*, includes a comment that it was based on an earlier text written by a certain Turoid, who is otherwise unknown (pp. 4–5). Edgington and Sweetenham draw on a considerable knowledge of the conventions of medieval literature to make the forceful case that Richard the Pilgrim was probably invented to manufacture authenticity. It will be interesting to see what response is made by French scholars, who are traditionally rather protective of the *Antioche*, seeing it as an early example of their nation's literature.[\(4\)](#)

The crux of Edgington and Sweetenham's critical interpretation of the *Antioche* is that rather than speculate on what form the song took before it reached Graindor of Douai, modern scholars should instead concentrate on critically examining the text that survives. Scholars who subscribe to the theory that the *Antioche* was originally composed by Richard the Pilgrim hold that it can be used to help establish what actually happened on the First Crusade. By exorcising the ghost of Richard the Pilgrim, Edgington and Sweetenham discount this approach toward the text. They note that the text 'is at best of limited historical value as evidence for any aspect of the First Crusade' (p. 49). What they do show, though, is that the *Antioche* can – and should – be used to show how the history of the First Crusade was popularly understood in the late 12th and early 13th centuries. To propound their argument, they devote a great deal of their critical introduction to setting the text within its context of contemporary literature, examining its style, form, content and ethos. Their conclusion is that this text can be shown to conform first and foremost to the conventions of the *chansons de geste*.

Of course, the chief purpose of this volume is to provide a translation of the *Chanson d'Antioche*, and in this regard it can be considered as a resounding success. The translation itself is lucid and engaging, rendering a number of difficult Old French passages into readable English. Comprehensive critical notes accompany both the introduction and translation, meaning that scholars will be able to follow up any points of interest via the secondary literature. Of particular interest to scholars will be the cross-references to other texts, especially the details that the *Chanson d'Antioche* shares with the prose Latin accounts of the First Crusade. Further investigation of these links will serve to enhance our understanding of how the *Antioche* relates to other texts of the period. On the other hand, scholars who are new to the text and more generally to the *chansons de geste* may find the sheer scope of the introduction somewhat overwhelming. The translators, though, have accounted for this by dividing it into clearly labelled chapters and subchapters, thereby enabling readers to move fairly easily between the different sections as required. Scholars who wish to deal with the manuscripts may want to know that the manuscript referred to here as British Museum Add. 36615 is now held in the British Library, and its current classmark reflects this. However, that these minor points are the only notes of criticism to be offered here goes some way towards illustrating just how praiseworthy this volume is.

In conclusion then, this volume is a landmark piece of scholarship not only in the field of the crusades but more widely in medieval history. The *Chanson d'Antioche* is one of the most important texts in crusade history, and a significant example of medieval vernacular literature in its own right. The publication of this translation will make the *Antioche* accessible to a large number of scholars across a range of disciplines. The most significant outcome of its publication, though, will be to habilitate a text usually classified as 'literary' into historical scholarship on the crusades. It is not difficult to imagine this volume being profitably used either by undergraduates or by established academics. As this translation of the *Chanson d'Antioche* is incorporated into critical studies in the coming years, our understanding of the crusades will be gradually enhanced.

Notes

1. *La Chanson d'Antioche*, ed. Janet A. Nelson (Tucaloosa, AL, 2003).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *La Chanson d'Antioche*, ed. Suzanne Duparc-Quioç, (2 vols, Paris, 1977–8).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Robert Francis Cook, *Chanson d'Antioche, Chanson De Geste: Le Cycle de la Croisade Est-Il Epique?*

(Amsterdam, 1980).[Back to \(3\)](#)

4. This is a matter which has been addressed in Sarah B. Buchanan, 'A nascent national identity in *La Chanson d'Antioche*', *The French Review*, 76 (2003), 918–32.[Back to \(4\)](#)

The editors would like to thank the reviewer for his thorough and thoughtful reading.

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1203>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/7860>