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The Norman Frontier in the Twelfth and Early Thirteenth Centuries

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This is a splendid book, weighty, richly documented and densely argued. The title might suggest a book of focused, perhaps rather limited scope. But the Norman frontier was a broad zone, and a long one, running from the Channel coast and the Picard uplands at Le Tréport all the way to the border with Brittany at Le Mont-Saint-Michel, via Gisors, Pacy-Sur-Eure and Verneuil-sur-Avre. As the author observes, it traverses some very diverse areas of France. Besides, the book deals with the frontier in its broadest sense, looking almost as much at the 'French' side of the border ? at the Beauvaisis, the French Vexin, the north-western reaches of the Chartrain, the Perche, Maine and north-eastern Brittany ? as at the Norman side. In addition, to highlight certain features and problems specific to the Norman frontier, many aspects of frontier society are discussed in comparison to what was happening deep within the duchy, in Norman society in general. The result is a book which is full of insights about the entire duchy, particularly its governance, its laws and customs, and its aristocratic society, in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. A general history of this period in Normandy is badly needed, and this book provides the nearest thing to that since Powicke's magisterial *The Loss of Normandy*, the second edition of which was published almost 50 years ago in 1961. (1) Indeed, the last part of Power's book, which deals with the political history of the Norman frontier, in effect provides a new narrative of the collapse of Normandy in 1204, incorporating recent research, to set alongside ? and often correcting ? Powicke's classic account.

The exercise of power, whether ducal or royal, or ecclesiastical, or aristocratic, and the conflicts of governance and lordship in areas where loyalties were likely to be sharply divided, form the focus of this book. The author explores how the political divisions between Normandy and its neighbours shaped the communities of the Norman frontier, and, conversely, how the frontier impacted upon power structures and strategies of lordship and governance. The discussions of the development of custom and jurisdiction, and of

ecclesiastical boundaries, particularly archdeaconries, within the frontier zones, are particularly rich and suggestive.

What underpins so much of the work in this book on power structures and frontier communities is the astounding depth and breadth of research into the prosopography of the aristocracy of the Norman frontier zones. It pays huge dividends. It is what allows Power to produce a narrative so much more detailed and exact than Powicke's. The author himself says at one point that he is aware that he is writing microhistory. This is true, but the book is well written and carefully structured, so that the reader never feels lost in the wood for the trees.

But there are dangers in the method. The author is intensely aware of, and places great emphasis on, local society, on neighbourhood, on the importance of neighbourly interconnections, and on what he calls 'endemic localism'. He demonstrates this particularly in an extended and impressive chapter on suretyship. It is his answer to the methodological problem raised by the general question of what a frontier is (he provides a clear analysis of recent discussion of this problem), and by the particular question of what the frontier of Normandy really was and meant. He notes the existence of some families which developed strategies for dealing with a clearly delimited border, but time and again his meticulous researches have uncovered local societies which interacted across the borders, within the frontier zones, behaving much of the time as if the border did not exist. This allows him to unpick the borders of the polity of Normandy, but it leaves him with the problem that in dismantling one type of geographical delimitation to social intercourse (a political one), he builds another geographical delimitation ? the neighbourhood. In most cases, I am in thorough agreement with his conclusion as to his social neighbourhood delimitations, but it is not the answer to the problem as to what the Norman frontier was and why. It simply shifts the argument on to a larger scale map ? and one where such delimitations, while undoubtedly real and observable, are even more inscrutable and incomprehensible than the borders of crude political expediency.

Indeed the thrust of the book is to dismantle the borders of Normandy. In many ways this is not difficult. It is easy enough to show that the Norman borders were never hermetically sealed. Even where the border was marked by a river, the rivers in question ? the Epte, the Bresle, the Avre ? are meandering streams rather than raging torrents. Custom and language were both somewhat inexact in their reflection of the accepted border of the duchy. The dioceses of Rouen and Sées extended some way beyond it. All this is true. But Power comes perilously close to saying that Normandy had no real frontier at all, or no more of a frontier than Champagne or Flanders. This is surely to go too far. Not least because there is ample evidence ? evidence which Power lays before the reader, but usually only to argue against it ? that contemporaries thought there was a difference between the duchy of Normandy and the Kingdom of France, and, indeed, between the Normans and the French. Clearly contemporaries also thought there was a difference between the duchy and its people, and the lands and peoples of Perche, Maine and Brittany, which lay to the south; though the differences there were fogged by the fact that the Norman dukes had long attempted to influence, control or rule these areas too. And the Normans did not stop seeing themselves as, and being regarded by other Frenchmen as, different after the duchy was absorbed politically into the kingdom of France in 1204. Perceptions, and perceptions of identity, matter, and have their own meaning. The problem is that they can rarely be pinned down with the sort of meticulous forensic research and analysis at which this author excels. Indeed it is Powicke, rather than Power, who, in a subtle and suggestive final chapter, sets the whole question of what was Normandy, and what it was to be Norman, in the thought world and the cultural and intellectual context of the years around 1200.

But there is so much in this book that it is unfair to cavil at what is not. This is an important book which makes a major contribution to the study of the political history, the governance and administration, and the aristocratic society, not only of Normandy and the Angevin Empire, but also of Capetian France in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Notes

1. F. M. Powicke, *The Loss of Normandy, 1789?1204: Studies in the History of the Angevin Empire* (1913; 2nd ed. Manchester, 1961). Back to (1)

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