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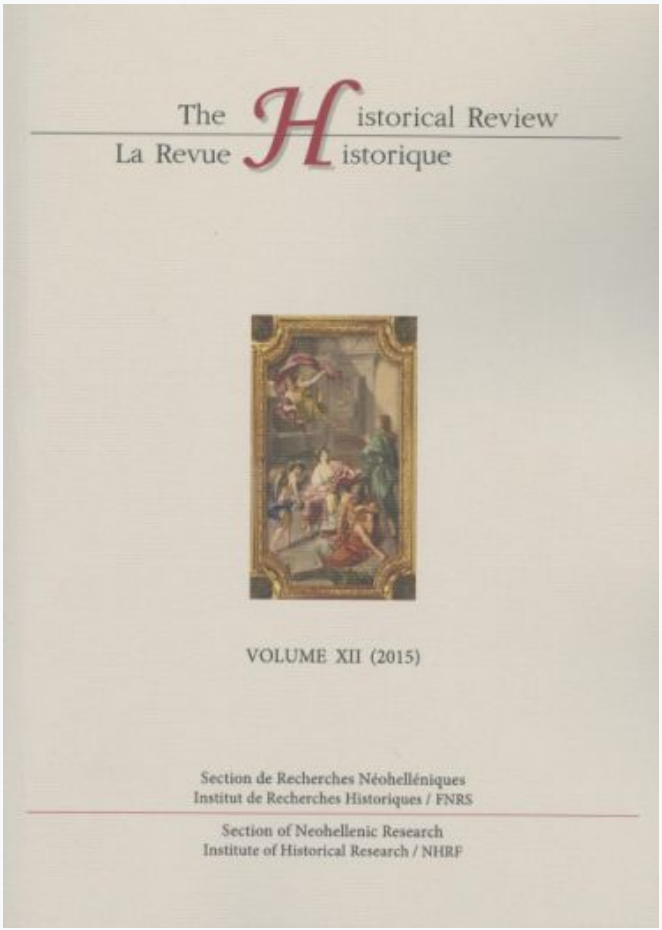

David Bates, The Normans and Empire: The Ford Lectures Delivered in the University of Oxford during Hilary Term 2010

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Critical Perspectives
Approches Critiques

David Bates,
THE NORMANS AND EMPIRE:
THE FORD LECTURES DELIVERED IN THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD
DURING HILARY TERM 2010,
Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, 256 pages.

Thanks to their expansion from the Duchy of Normandy to Southern Italy and Sicily, England and the Middle East (Principality of Antioch), the Normans are perhaps the most intensively researched medieval people. Their distinct identity – the "Normanitas" – and their ability to abandon it in order to assimilate themselves into the cultures of the peoples they conquered constitute emblematic modern historiographical myths that have even presented this medieval *gens* as a precursor of European unification.[1] Unlike the expansion to Southern Italy and Sicily, which was accomplished by mercenary knights mostly from the Duchy of Normandy, the architect of the conquest of England (1066) was the Duke of Normandy himself, William the Conqueror. The specific circumstances in which the conquest of England had taken place and the consequent political unification of the Duchy of Normandy with England prompted the medievalist John Le Patourel (1909-1981) to employ the concept of empire in his study of the new political entity.[2] The innovative view of his book notwithstanding, the term "Norman Empire" was widely challenged, partly because of the long-lasting division of rule between the Duchy of Normandy and the English throne.[3]

Although David Bates, a specialist in Norman studies with a professional career spanning over forty years, had equally argued against the use of the aforementioned term, in these lectures he brings up anew the *imperium* debate, lending a new perspective to the study of the Norman Kingdom. Unlike previous

[1] David C. Douglas, *The Norman Achievement, 1050-1100*, London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1969; Mario d' Onofrio (ed.), *I Normanni. Popolo d'Europa, 1030-1200*, Venice: Marsilio, 1994.

[2] John Le Patourel, *The Norman Empire*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976.

[3] See the discussion in the book under review, pp. 1-7.

researchers, Bates does not associate the Empire with a particular homogeneous ethnic community, namely the Norman one, and at the same time constructs a coherent methodological framework of analysis, which in my opinion constitutes the greatest strength of the book under review. The author applies analytical tools of the social and political sciences, as well as of cultural history, to study the "Empire" from 1066 until its dissolution in 1204. His primary research question, which gives the book its inherent coherence, concerns the powers which sustained "the cross-Channel world", despite the long-lasting division of rule between Normandy and England. Instead of studying forms of government and institutions, the author inquires into social and cultural dynamics through a close examination of the archival material and narrative sources.

Taking his cue from a basic definition of empire as a power transcending a single state and imposing itself by violence on non-consenting peoples, Bates perceives the new political entity as a system of cross-Channel networks formed among the rulers and the élites which nonetheless extended to lower social strata. The network analysis presupposes the reconstruction from the archival material of individual life stories which highlight the élites' personal interests, aspirations and strategies, as well as the fluidity and multiplicity of identities in this cross-Channel communication. Two concepts are of specific research value in this analysis. The first concerns "hard power", that is to say the use of extreme (according to medieval standards) violence on the part of the Norman conquerors against their new subjects. The second concerns "soft power", namely acts that legitimized the Norman conquest, such as the patronage of religious houses, the erection of magnificent buildings, ritualized performances and so on – what the author, drawing on studies of the modern British Empire, calls a "civilizing mission with a long-lasting effect".

After having set out his methodological tools (Chapter 1), Bates applies the network analysis to inquire into how the élites, those involved in this cross-Channel world, "experienced the empire" (Chapter 2). The focus is on the individual lives of members of the Norman élite who settled in England after the conquest and were endowed with new lands wrested from the native inhabitants, without however abandoning their properties and social relations in Normandy. The deliberate use by the author of the term "experience" is intended to denote the complexity of personal identities as they were shaped and re-shaped through the acceptance of a new *patria* – it should be borne in mind that in pre-modern medieval communities one's place of abode structured personal identities, mixed marriages (although rare among the élite) and cross-Channel interests. At this point two more analytical concepts, closely related to each other, are brought into the discussion, namely "diaspora" (leaving one's own homeland, establishing relationships somewhere else) and "trauma" (only in one case), without, however, adding anything new to the well-structured identity argument. In the same chapter Bates successfully points out the personal interests and aspirations (based "on the exploitation of a defeated people") which, from the very

beginning of the conquest, contributed to the unification of the two sides of the Channel. Even individuals from the lower social strata who never abandoned Normandy, or English people who were able to exploit the hard and soft forms of power employed by the conquerors, could equally make great personal gains through commerce and other activities and therefore shape their own experiences of the Empire. At the end of the chapter the author continues the identity discussion and strengthens his previous argument by focusing this time on the medieval historians of the Empire, their personal life stories and their narrative representations of the conquest.

The "maker of empire", William the Conqueror, is the protagonist of the third chapter, which focuses on his use of hard and soft power and his interaction with the other agents of the conquest (both conquerors and defeated people), as well as the way in which this interaction constructed patterns of politics and social behavior. The author sheds light on the political and military means employed by William to create what he calls "the central pillar in the edifice of empire", namely a dominant élite with cross-Channel estates that formed multiple cross-Channel networks. Bates seems to be highly preoccupied with the use of extreme violence on William's part and successfully shows that even the medieval historians who praised the king had difficulty coming to terms with his conduct towards the vanquished. Of particular interest is his argument concerning William of Poitiers' *Gesta Guillelmi*, namely that the historian left his work unfinished because he could not accept and could therefore not bring himself to compile a narrative of the Conqueror's violence.

The period between William the Conqueror's death in 1087 and the year 1154 is characterized by serious succession struggles and a long-lasting division of rule between the Duchy of Normandy and the English throne. The question therefore arises as to how the maintenance of the newly created Empire became possible (Chapter 4). Bates rejects the notion of political and cultural homogeneity and employs the concept "hegemony" as a more appropriate means of perceiving the multiplicity of power networks and cultures. In a framework defined by the use of hard and soft power, as well as by multiculturalism and multiple personal identities, rulers, aristocratic courts, cathedrals and monasteries were linked to each other in a way that secured the survival of the Empire. The author once again narrates individual life stories to highlight the importance of the cross-Channel élites in underpinning the inherent structure of the Empire, since its interests, aspirations and therefore strategies depended directly on the cross-Channel communication.

Bates' approach renders the notions of "core" and "periphery" fluid (Chapter 5). Even if Normandy could be perceived as the core, mobility and cross-Channel interests created personal perceptions of core and periphery which, according to the author, were shaped through the formation of a variety of imperial, regional and local networks. In this way Bates incorporates in his analysis such "peripheries" as Wales, Scotland and Ireland, stressing their own "core" character and the role they played in the stability of the Empire. Besides, cultural

transfers (language, legal structures, cults of saints, etc.) flowing in multiple directions highlight the inadequacy of identity labelling.

In contrast to the fate of modern empires, the end of the Empire created by the violent conquest of England came about suddenly as a result of the collapse of the founding core, when King John Lackland (*reg* 1199-1216) lost Normandy (1204, surrender of Rouen) to the French king Philip II (*reg* 1180-1223). In the last chapter of the book under review, Bates turns his attention to the years 1154-1204 to explain the dissolution of the Empire. Although the author himself states that this chapter "is an argument built around probabilities", the analysis here lacks the depth which characterizes the previous parts of the book. Nevertheless, it features points that could open up new avenues of research. In line with his main argument, Bates describes the end of the Empire through the challenges faced by the cross-Channel élites. Their lack of autonomy as a result of royal policy and the various interventions of the French kings who were themselves called upon to support the pretenders to the English throne, namely the sons of King Henry II (*reg* 1154-1189), undermined their political and social status and eventually affected their ability to "experience the empire".

Bates' The Normans and Empire is undoubtedly a very interesting book. Armed with a solid methodological framework, the author provides an interpretative schema for the "Anglo-Norman" Kingdom that succeeds in bringing out its inherent constructive forces. Far from understanding the Empire as an impersonal, homogeneous, and therefore ossified, political institution, Bates focuses on the life stories of those who experienced the Empire and presents it as a living organism, the unity of which was continuously shaped by the interaction between the multiple and complex self-perceptions, aspirations and strategies of its individual parts.

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