Stephen of Rouen's Draco Normannicus: A Norman Epic
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Abstract

When the Normans of the 10th to 12th centuries celebrated their achievements they wrote in the gesta tradition, singing the deeds of their vigorous leaders who carved out a settlement in Neustria and then went on to conquer the English. One particular branch of these gesta histories has been traced by Elizabeth van Houts. In this particular sequence, a chronicle begun by Dudo of St. Quentin was continued by William of Poitiers, William of Jumièges and Robert of Torigny, who was a monk at Bee in the 1130s. Because Robert did not continue his chronicle beyond the death of King Henry I, van Houts has called these chronicles ‘a history without an end.’ There is, however, a final chapter to the saga of the Normans in Neustria. It is the Draco Normannicus, a poem written in the 1160s by a younger contemporary of Robert’s at Bee, Stephen of Rouen. The Norman chronicles provided Stephen with his sources for a reworking of Norman history, in which he places the deeds of Henry II against the backdrop of the gesta of the king’s Norman forebears.

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Stephen of Rouen (died c. 1169) (French Étienne de Rouen, Latin Stephanus de Rouen) was a Norman Benedictine monk of Bec Abbey of the twelfth century, and a chronicler and poet. The dukes of Normandy commissioned and inspired epic literature to record and legitimise their rule, and Wace, Orderic Vitalis and Stephen were among those who wrote in their service. Stephen is known for his Latin verse chronicle Draco Normannicus (“Standard of the Normans”), a chronicle running from the eleventh century to 1169; it draws on Dudo of St. Quentin and William of Jumièges. Poetically it is supposed that he was influenced by the Ilias of Simon Chèvre d’Or. Stephen’s work includes an elegy addressed to Waleran, Earl of Worcester, and he also made an abridgement of Quintilian.