Society and Culture in Medieval Rouen, 911-1300

Review Number: 1559  
Publish date: Thursday, 13 March, 2014  
Editor: Leonie V. Hicks  
Elma Brenner  
ISBN: 9782503536651  
Date of Publication: 2013  
Price: £90.20  
Pages: 403pp.  
Publisher: Brepols N.V.  
Publisher url: http://brepols.metapress.com/content/vl46l0/  
Place of Publication: Belgium  
Reviewer: Benjamin Pohl

This volume of collected essays explores the social and cultural history of the city of Rouen between the ‘foundation’ of Normandy under Rollo in 911 and the end of the 13th century. As David Bates points out in the book’s preface, Rouen so far has not received the attention which scholars have readily paid to other great cities throughout the Anglo-Norman World – including several other cities in Normandy, such as Caen, Bayeux and Lisieux. Undoubtedly, therefore, the present volume represents a welcome addition to the already existing range of compendiums devoted to important places and institutions in medieval Europe, as it caters to a long-standing desideratum within contemporary Anglo-Norman scholarship. The introduction written by the two editors is well researched and offers an accurate and detailed representation of the current state of research. As Leonie Hicks and Elma Brenner are able to show, studies on medieval cities and the complex dynamics which governed their social, political and economic life have experienced something of an upsurge during recent years. Whilst some areas of the Medieval Latin West have profited significantly from this latest scholarly ‘trend’, Normandy as a whole, and Rouen in particular, still offers new ground to be covered. Notwithstanding several decades of active research in the field of early Norman history, archaeology, literature and culture, Normandy’s urban phenomena have often escaped the attention of experts. This is not, however, due to a shortage of available source materials. ‘There is,’ as Hicks and Brenner argue, ‘still much to learn about the society and culture of medieval Rouen, particularly from the city’s rich archives, architectural remains, and archaeological deposits’ (p. 1). Combining studies on historical and literary texts with investigations into Rouen’s material culture, the present volume claims to offer new and innovative insights into the multifaceted life which existed within this specific medieval city – a claim which is in many ways achieved.

Structurally and thematically, the chapters in this volume are divided into three sections, the first of which explores ideas of space and representation, both internally (that is, within the city and amongst its inhabitants) and externally (thereby situating Rouen in a larger context). Opening this first section is Bernard Gauthiez’s chapter on ‘The urban development of Rouen, 989–1345’. Gauthiez discusses the physical development of Rouen and its city limits over the course of three and a half centuries, whilst offering a series of graphic reconstructions of the evolving city plan. Gauthiez’s arguments in favour of a gradual westward expansion of the city including the building of a new ducal residence and a bridge over the Seine from as
early as about c.1000 are well presented and compelling. Similarly, Gauthiez is able to show how during later centuries, Rouen’s significance shifted gradually from a ‘capital city’ to an important centre of economy and trade. Once again, he traces these new urban functions and the emergence of a new social and economic elite primarily through developments ‘on the ground’, which is frequently corroborated by written documents. Overall, therefore, Gauthiez’s analysis is extremely useful in locating the urban topographical development of Rouen during the Middle Ages alongside that of other major cities such as, for example, Fécamp, Bayeux, Caen and Paris. What might have been another interesting perspective to consider, in addition to the many sources already discussed by Gauthiez, is the possible depiction of these developments in visual representations of the city during the late medieval and early modern periods, for example, in contemporary works of art.

The second chapter is Fanny Madeline’s study on ‘Rouen and its place in the building policy of the Angevin Kings’. Madeline calls into question modern scholarly perceptions of Rouen as a distinguished ‘capital city’ during the 11th and 12th centuries – including those argued for by Gauthiez, both in the present volume and elsewhere – in favour of an alternative view, which incorporates a larger network of urban institutions operating in conjunction with one another. By analysing patterns of ducal and royal itineraries during the reigns of Henry II, Richard I and John, as well as the development of patronage over the city, Madeline discusses Rouen’s changing role as one amongst several contemporary centres of Angevin government. Royal patronage in particular is presented as being intrinsically linked with the erection of building features such as, for example, Rouen’s city walls, thus being a key feature in the city’s gradual expansion and topographical transformation. Madeline concludes her study by pointing out that most of these developments were not unique to Rouen, but in fact rather common in other centres of Angevin power and administration. Her study certainly represents a strong contribution to the volume, not least by providing a contrasting view to those argued for in previous scholarship.

The third chapter is provided by Elisabeth van Houts’ textual analysis of ‘Rouen as another Rome in the 12th Century’. Focusing on two 12th-century works of Latin verse written during the reign of Geoffrey of Anjou and his wife, the Empress Matilda, the short poem Rothoma nobilis (named here after its opening line) and Stephen of Rouen’s Draco Normannicus, van Houts is able to demonstrate that these Anglo-Norman poets compared, and sometimes even equated, Rouen with Rome as part of a programmatic literary and political vision. Their writings are shown to have been informed by a notion of translatio imperii, which served to elevate Rouen to the fame of its Roman namesake in both secular and spiritual contexts. In a close analysis of Stephen of Rouen’s account of Rouen’s conquest by the Viking Rollo, especially with regard to the existence of a bridge across the Seine and its strategic significance to the city’s defence, van Houts argues convincingly that the Draco Normannicus represents an ‘updated, chivalric, and classicised version’ (p. 118) of events, which differs significantly from those provided by earlier generations of (Anglo-)Norman writers. Van Houts analysis of Rouen’s role in Norman poetry from the 12th century represents an intriguing case study and counts as one of the most essential contributions to the present volume. What remains arguable, however, is her observation that earlier writers such as William of Jumièges and Dudo of St. Quentin were not inspired to produce comparisons of Rouen to Rome in the same way as Stephen of Rouen and the author of Rothoma nobilis seem to have been. Whilst this might hold true with regard to the Gesta Normannorum ducum, Dudo’s Historia Normannorum certainly shows more than just ‘a hint of a translatio imperii theme’ (p. 104), as I have argued elsewhere.(1) In fact, we can find in Dudo strikingly similar notions of Rouen as being the political and spiritual centre of the Norman cosmos, and birthplace of the gens Normannorum, which might provide fruitful points of comparison to, if not indeed inspiration for, the 12th-century texts.

Concluding the first thematic section is Leonie Hicks’ contribution ‘Through the city streets: movement and space in Rouen as seen by the Norman chroniclers’. Hicks investigates the possible motivations behind medieval chroniclers’ characterisation of Rouen as a cosmopolitan city, marked by linguistic and cultural variety and defined through the respective movement and special awareness of different social groups. Hicks demonstrates that many of these writers use space as a crucial means of defining relationships between rulers and their territory, different socio-economic protagonists within the city, as well as between Rouen and its
neighbouring regions. Ultimately, the chapter reveals how this benefits the reader of medieval historiography, namely by creating mental images of the city amongst the texts’ audiences.

The second section of the volume is dedicated to the role of ‘Rouen as a religious centre’. It is heralded by Richard Allen’s chapter “Praesul praecipue, atque venerande”: the career of Robert, Archbishop of Rouen, 989–1037”. Through an investigation of building activity within Rouen, focusing primarily on religious architecture, Allen argues that the city’s transformation into a centre of cultural and religious significance was achieved during, and as a direct result of, Robert’s episcopate. The arguments he presents are coherent and compelling, and the chapter shows how Robert’s episcopate, even in the absence of a sepulchral monument to his death inside Rouen Cathedral, helped essentially in shaping the city’s appearance and increasing its standing amongst the centres of religious and political power around the turn of the first millennium and beyond.

The sixth chapter is a study by Grégory Combaldert on ‘Archbishops and the city: powers, conflicts, and jurisdiction in the parishes of Rouen (eleventh – thirteenth centuries)’. An important part of Combaldert’s argument concerns the acquisition of rights and property within the city of Rouen by Norman abbeys for reasons which are, as he demonstrates in several cases, of a financial nature. This monastic infringement on archiepiscopal power is made visible through a comparative analysis of charters – some of which are identified as forgeries – and forms part of a larger socio-economic discourse in which both archbishops and monastic protagonists played a crucial role. Following individual case studies of, for example, the Parishes of Saint-Cande le Vieux and Saint-Paul, Combaldert concludes by identifying three distinct periods in the relationship between Rouen’s archbishops and the local monasteries. Together, they are shown to mark a development in which monastic rights, though granted in considerable numbers before c.1130, were increasingly contested and, by the beginning of the 13th century, had often given way to archiepiscopal interests.

The third and largest section of the book comprises studies on Rouen’s ‘Social networks’. The first chapter in this section is ‘Women, property, and power: some examples from eleventh-century Rouen cartularies’ by Kirsten Fenton. Fenton’s main focus is on women’s access to and control of property, which she identifies as crucial factors in discourses on female power in the Middle Ages. Gathering examples both from the Rouen cartularies and other sources, both narrative and documentary, Fenton offers a series of case studies of women involved in property transactions and scrutinises the particular circumstances in which these woman can be seen as acting both alongside as well as independently of male personnel. Whilst these examples are certainly intriguing and justify the contribution of a separate chapter to the volume, Fenton’s study is somewhat descriptive, offering relatively little in terms of original and transferrable analytic results. As she herself admits, ‘important questions remain as to how far the terminology used to describe female roles within these contexts is a reflection of actual practice’ (p. 243). Yet, these questions arguably should lie at the heart of a study seeking to produce a better understanding of social realities in the face of the surviving documentary evidence. As a result, Fenton’s chapter, whilst offering the potential to shed new light on an important topic of Anglo-Norman scholarship, remains one of the weaker contributions to the present volume.

Chapter eight is Manon Six’s study on ‘The burgesses of Rouen in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries’, which investigates the emergence of a new ‘merchant’ class and its significance to Rouen’s urban dynamics. A particularly interesting part of Six’s argument concerns the activities of professional lay scribes, who are shown to have taken over much of the literary production formerly fulfilled by monastic scriptoria, especially with regard to the drafting of legal and administrative documents. The chapter is clearly argued and provides compelling evidence to suggest that, by the end of the 12th century, a new urban elite had emerged in Rouen, taking up power alongside the ducal officers and other ‘traditional’ socio-political groups.

The ninth chapter is Daniel Power’s investigation of ‘Rouen and the Aristocracy of Angevin Normandy’. Power’s study of political power struggles and propaganda between Rouen’s burgesses and the members of
the local aristocracy offers an intriguing perspective into the social dynamics which governed day-to-day life in Normandy’s urban centres. The Norman aristocracy’s urban interests, which Power shows to have been paramount despite their predominantly rural resources, are demonstrated to have been responsible for a *modus vivendi* which, whilst being marked by ‘an aristocratic discourse of disdain’ (p. 284) towards the burgesses, regularly allowed for close cooperation between both camps.

Chapter ten is provided by Paul Webster, focusing on ‘King John and Rouen: royal itineration, kingship, and the Norman “Capital”, c. 1199–c. 1204’. Webster argues persuasively that Rouen occupied a crucial position on King John’s itinerary around the turn of the 12th century. Even when the king did not reside within the actual city, he is shown frequently to have arranged his visits in concentric circles which allowed him to remain no more than a day’s travel away from Rouen and thus stay in touch with local men of importance such as, for example, the mayor and sheriff of the city. Webster shows that John’s relationship with the city and its elites was one of mutual dependence and commitment virtually up to the time of Rouen’s capture by Philip Augustus in 1204.

Elma Brenner’s study on ‘The care of the sick and needy in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Rouen’ provides the penultimate chapter of the volume. Having defined the terminology used to describe these distinct social groups and their position within Rouen’s urban spectre, Brenner then discusses the topography and location of institutions catering to their needs. Following a case study of specific houses such as, for example, the leprosia at Mont-aux-Malades and Salle-aux-Puelles, Brenner is able to identify a complex welfare system in Rouen, whose maintenance and effectiveness relied heavily on the communal government.

The final chapter of the volume is co-authored by the two editors and dedicated to ‘The Jews in Rouen in the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries’. Essentially, this chapter offers a comprehensive re-evaluation of the current state of research, which serves to identify and contrast predominant arguments in contemporary scholarship. It points out important desiderata and provides progressive impulses for future studies.

Taken as a whole, this volume constitutes a fine piece of Anglo-Norman scholarship, conducted in an area which, so far, has rarely received the attention it deserves. The chapters cover a wide range of topics and scholarly disciplines, thus creating a stimulating and multifaceted discussion on the various crucial aspects of Rouen’s social and cultural life. Possible additions would have been a more comprehensive discussion of Rouen’s rich archival material, especially the manuscripts inherited from important Norman scriptoria such as Fécamp, as well as a prosopographical study which might have served to point out and map personal links and networks between the city and the wider Anglo-Norman world. The absence of such chapters does not, however, belittle the editors’ achievement in having put together a well-structured volume which is both informative and innovative in its approach.

**Notes**

The editors are happy to accept this review and do not wish to comment further.

1. See B. Pohl, ‘*Translatio imperii Constantini ad Normannos*: Constantine the Great as a possible model for the depiction of Rollo in Dudo of St. Quentin’s *Historia Normannorum,*’ *Millennium Yearbook on the Culture and History of the First Millennium C.E.*, 9 (2012), pp. 297–339, as well as my chapter on Rouen as nova Roma in B. Pohl, *Dudo of St. Quentin’s Historia Normannorum: Tradition and Innovation*, to be published by Boydell & Brewer. [Back to (1)]

**Other reviews:**
Medieval Histories  

**Source URL:** https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1559

**Links**
[1] https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/83410