Towards the end of the tenth century in the province that had recently become known as Normandy, named after the ‘North Men’ who had come from Scandinavia, the third generation leader Richard I, count of Rouen (943–96), commissioned a dynastic history. Like any third generation successful entrepreneur, Richard wished to erect a monument celebrating the exploits of his father William Longsword (928–43) and his grandfather Rollo (d. 928) - not a memorial stone decorated with a short inscription and some essential names hewn out of rock, as was common in Denmark, Norway and Sweden, but a lengthy written memorial in Latin prose and poetry on parchment in the fashion of Carolingian historiography. The nouveaux riches of Rouen had left their stone carving behind and instead opted for the most sophisticated – in places over the top – language that a clerk from northern France could provide. The man in question was Dudo of Saint-Quentin, a well-trained administrator from the Vermandois. Dudo accepted the commission and in due course addressed various members of the Rouen dynasty in lavish poetry: Richard I’s sons Richard II and Archbishop Robert of Rouen, his half brother Ralph of Ivry, and his wife Gunnor. Apart from the Historia Normannorum [HN] Dudo also drafted charters for the counts, and around 1015 was rewarded with an estate. Dudo’s history of the Normans was an instantaneous success. Some 15 manuscripts have survived, most from the 11th and 12th centuries. Moreover, the text, in a revised and abbreviated form, became the basis of the Gesta Normannorum Ducum [GND](The Deeds of the Dukes of the Normans), by the monk William of Jumièges. He updated the history up to c. 1070 just after the conquest of England by William the Conqueror. Thereafter Orderic Vitalis in c. 1113 and Robert of Torigni in c. 1139 revised and updated the GND most extensively, with some minor revisions added by others somewhat earlier.

Although Dudo’s HN has been available in a scholarly edition since 1865, by Jules Lair, no thorough investigation has ever been made into the manuscript basis of the text. For Jules Lair the most important aspect of his work was making the text available to fellow historians but he was not terribly interested in the manuscripts for their own sake. He was also unfortunately responsible for the loss of one of Dudo’s manuscripts borrowed from the municipal library in Alençon. We may be grateful that at the moment his house went up in flames he had not more manuscript treasures on loan. In any case, several more manuscripts were identified as containing Dudo’s text in due course, but it was not until the 1980s that Gerda Huisman wrote a short article providing a provisional hand list and (as it turn out erroneous)
classification of the manuscripts. When in 1998 Eric Christiansen published his magnificent English translation of Dudo’s history, based on Lair’s edition, he provided a wealth of critical notes on the text plus an impressive commentary on Dudo’s poetry. Meanwhile, my own editorial work on the GND (published by 1995) helped to shed light on some aspects of both the textual and manuscript tradition of Dudo’s work. This then was the sum total of the manuscript and textual scholarship on Dudo when Benjamin Pohl, a talented young scholar from Bamberg, began his investigations. And the results of his work are nothing short of astounding.

The most important discovery Pohl made was that the oldest manuscript, dating from the second half of the 11th century from Jumièges, now Rouen BM 1173/Y11 (siglum R), had been prepared for illustrations. The layout of this manuscript, with its many blank sections, had baffled historians (including myself) not least because some of the blank space straddled two facing pages. None of the blank spaces corresponded with the revisions made by William of Jumièges, so textually they made no apparent sense, while illustrations, too, seemed out of the question due to the bizarre spacing. With the help of ultra-modern lighting techniques, however, Pohl established traces of drawing on two folios proving beyond doubt that the blanks had been prepared for illustrations. This is a sensational discovery made the more impressive because of further work, recently published in Anglo-Norman Studies 37 (2015) arguing convincingly that Dudo from the outset had planned a chronicon pictum, that is a history in Latin prose and poetry with illustrations and explanatory captions. Thus what Pohl had set out to investigate in the absence of an autograph manuscript, namely the manuscripts of a dynastic history of the dukes of Normandy, turned into a revelatory study of what such a detailed codicological and paleographical investigation of manuscripts can reveal of an author’s intention. The Jumièges manuscript had been prepared for illustrations, but apart from the two I mentioned they were never finished. The discovery is exceptionally important because illustrated chronicles are very rare in the early and central Middle Ages. Where Dudo found the inspiration to mix Latin prose and poetry with illustrations is a riddle that remains to be solved, although the unique cultural setting of the ducal court at Rouen, with its Franco-Scandinavian ties combined with close English contacts must lie at the root of the innovative forces that inspired the Vermandois clerk. To what extent the ducal family themselves were involved is another area that still requires further work. The matriarch of the family, Gunnor (Richard I’s wife) is praised for her powerful memory, while Ralph of Ivry (Richard I’s half-brother) is enigmatically called the relator. By highlighting Gunnor’s and Ralph’s oral involvement (telling stories and remembering names and places) Dudo hints at the important role the two contemporaries of the first commissioner of the text played as his informants or perhaps as shapers of what they expected a chronicle to look like. Did they do more than give information about ancestors and also press for images? Nothing of the sort had seen the light in Western Europe, and not even the Carolingian or Ottonian court had produced anything as attractive as a chronicon pictum.

What other conclusions could be drawn from the manuscript tradition of Dudo’s text? Pohl points out that Dudo’s HN continued to be read even after the GND provided a variously updated history of Normandy by the middle of the 12th century. However, the scribes’ capacity to cope with Dudo’s Latinity, particularly in his poetry, declined enormously. In 12th-century England, for example, the version of the text, including the poetry, posed immense problems as scribes failed to recognize the many varied poetic meters and indiscriminately copied poetry and prose as one continuous prose text without making any concessions to the reader. As a result much of the poetry became completely incomprehensible. As Pohl observes, this tells us something very important about the education and scribal skills of the monks of monasteries such as St Albans and St John at Colchester where neither scribe nor scriptorium supervisor were knowledgeable enough to appreciate the complexity of Dudo’s Latin.

In the fourth and final chapter, entitled ‘Innovation’, Pohl provides a fresh analysis of the contents of the HN together with those of the GND in all its redactions against the background of modern scholarship on ‘cultural memory’. One of the most significant aspects of this chapter concerns the convincing case he makes that Dudo used, in one form or another, knowledge of the medieval stories about the conversion of the first Christian emperor of the Roman Empire, Constantine. By comparing Rollo with Constantine, Dudo provided for the young Norman dynasty an imperial context, in both military and religious terms,
culminating in the presentation of Rouen as a second Rome. It is necessary to stress the demand for the legitimization of the rulers of Rouen, as counts and Christians, especially in the eyes of the contemporary Franks who at Reims were still deeply skeptical about the immigrant upstarts in western Francia (to the extent that Richer of Reims famously recorded the death of Richard the first as a 'pirate leader' (dux pyratarum)). It was Richard II, son of Richard I, who kept Dudo by his side, and supported him in the implementation of his father’s wishes for the family story to be penned. Not only was the family portrayed as Christian, but their conquest of Normandy was interpreted in post-Constantinian imperial terms, that is, as divinely sanctioned.

Pohl’s book, lavishly illustrated and with many helpful diagrams, is an impressive debut from a medievalist of considerable talent. I have no doubt that we will hear more from him, though I suspect it will be very hard for him to repeat the stunning discovery that Dudo was the first historian to write an illustrated Latin chronicle. The scale of intellectual innovation Dudo wrought in Rouen in collaboration with his employers and informants, second and third generation immigrants themselves, says something about the power of change migration can effect. Bristol may now count itself lucky with its new scholar from Bamberg.

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