The Western narratives of the First Crusade

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The templates for western European historical writing themed around the crusades were established by the exceptional outpouring of historiographical material in the wake of the First Crusade (1095-1101). Modern historians of the First Crusade have at their disposal a greater range and depth of narrative source material than that available for any series of events or processes of comparable duration in ancient or medieval history.¹

The accounts of the campaigns of Alexander the Great are perhaps the most directly analogous corpus, but the texts that survive today are far removed in space and time from the now lost accounts by certain of Alexander's companions, whereas the morphology of textual composition, transmission, and adaptation, from so-called 'eyewitness' accounts to retellings aspiring to literary and conceptual sophistication, is far more securely evidenced in the First Crusade historiographical tradition. Indeed, the shock of the new that informed many contemporaries' responses to the First Crusade, first its ideologically innovative message and then its accomplishments in the field, mapped onto and subtended an unprecedented flowering of historical writing in the first three decades of the 12th century. This burst of historiographical creativity tends to be overlooked in general surveys of western European historiographical culture, on the assumption that crusading and by extension its manifestations in texts were *sui generis.*²

A strong desideratum of future research on the First Crusade histories must be to integrate them more fully within those movements


of elite culture that fall under the general heading ‘The 12th-century Renaissance’.

The greater part of the historiographical effort that was stimulated by the First Crusade was directed towards the telling of the story of the crusade in Latin prose, in some instances complemented by verse sequences interspersed within a predominantly prose delivery. As resources for modern historical research, the Latin prose account has assumed the status of the preferred, naturalized medium in which 12th-century literate culture chose to narrativize the crusade. The fact that this medium did indeed become a widespread vehicle for telling the story of the crusade, which can now seem obvious and somehow inevitable, is not without interest for our understanding of the memory of the First Crusade as a cultural property. But there is a corresponding danger of undervaluing ways of communicating and fixing the memory of the crusade in forms other than Latin prose. For example the verse retelling of the events of part of the crusade by Gilo of Paris and an anonymous continuator around the second decade of the 12th century, the Historia vie Hierosolimitane, can easily be sidelined as a merely ‘literary’ exercise in mimicking classical poetics.3

But in fact this work was participating fully in the wider circulation and reworking of texts that characterized western Europe’s reception of the crusade as a write-able commodity in the first decades of the 12th century, and it was accordingly part of that broader historiographical enterprise.

In fact, the Latin prose tellings of the crusade that dominate the surviving record misrepresent the overall picture, for two principal reasons. First, in a largely illiterate society much of the communicative loading of memories of the First Crusade must have been oral. The forms in which stories were conveyed orally are largely lost to us, and are only fitfully and imprecisely glimpsed in their impacts on the written record. Much of the accretion of detail that attached itself to crusade texts as they were successively copied and recopied seems to have been the work of scribes attuned to memories preserved within aristocratic family networks. In the forms in which the texts permit us to glimpse them, these memories appear to have been second-order, encapsulated stories that could attach themselves to a master narrative without significantly changing its overall plot architecture.