‘Hoc enim non fuit humanum opus, sed divinum’: Robert the Monk’s Use of the Bible in the Historia Iherosolimitana

Carol Sweetenham

“Since the creation of the world what more miraculous undertaking has there been (other than the mystery of the redeeming Cross) than what was achieved in our own time by the journey of our own people to Jerusalem? ... This was not the work of men; it was the work of God”.1 It is with these resounding words that Robert opens his account of the First Crusade. The crusade was miraculous in the most literal sense of the word: God had favoured and supported the Franks, his chosen people, to recover His Holy City Jerusalem. Whether or not this was the original message in Urban’s preaching, it became increasingly clear to the crusaders as they made their way to Jerusalem and success followed on success that they should interpret their enterprise as a divine one.2 This paper explores how Robert draws on the Bible to support this interpretation of the crusade. It starts by setting Robert’s work in the wider context of the Benedictine Cluniac interpretation of the crusade as a background to his use of the Bible. It then examines Robert’s presentation and interpretation of the events of the crusade, his use of the Bible and the way in which he draws on it to illuminate and legitimate the events of the crusade.

The Benedictine Cluniac Interpretation of the First Crusade

The intertwining of the crusade and the Cluniac order has been extensively explored, and this paper does not revisit this territory. The First Crusade was a

1 Robert the Monk, Historia Iherosolimitana: The Historia Iherosolimitana of Robert the Monk, ed. Damien Kempf and Marcus Bull (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2013); Carol Sweetenham, trans., Robert the Monk’s History of the First Crusade (Guildford: Ashgate, 2005) Prologus. “Post creationem mundi quid mirabilius factum est preter salutifere crucis mysterium, quam quod modernis temporibus actum est in hoc itinere nostrorum Iherosolimitanorum? ... hoc enim non fuit humanum opus sed divinum”.
2 Jonathan Riley-Smith, The First Crusade and the Idea of Crusading (London: Athlone Press, 1986) 16–17; 30 “it was not until after the crusade was over that a coherent and internally consistent body of thought was to be distilled”.
strongly Cluniac enterprise. It was launched by Urban II, a Cluniac by background; the initial preaching tour was dominated by Cluniac establishments; and the Pope's legate Adhemar was a key figure on the crusade.3

The recasting of the *Gesta Francorum* by three Benedictine monks in the first decade after the crusade should be seen against this background. Baudry of Bourgueil, Guibert of Nogent and Robert each used the *Gesta* as a basis for accounts of the crusade. Baudry, abbot of Bourgueil and Bishop of Dol was an established author and high-status cleric.5 Guibert of Nogent, whilst abbot of a much smaller priory, was also an established author.6 Whilst we know nothing about Robert beyond what he tells us, he was either a monk at St Remy of Reims or one of its daughter houses, at the time one of the richest and most prestigious abbeys in France, in close proximity to the royal cathedral at Reims.7 So all three came with strong *auctoritas*. And all three tell a similar story: the *Gesta Francorum*, their source, was written in too naïve and unsophisticated a style; it lacked the proper beginning; and therefore it did not do justice to the extraordinary achievement of the crusade. All three therefore rewrote it, correcting these perceived defects.8

None of the three have much quarrel with the substance of the *Gesta*. All retain the same narrative arc and balance of events. Each, of course, adds

---

8 Riley-Smith, *Idea*, 135–52. RM, *Sermo Apologeticus*; GN, *Praefatio*, "verbis contexta plus equo simplicibus" ("woven from words simpler than would have been desirable", my translation), followed by a long explanation about how this did not do justice to the events of the crusade; BB *Prologus* p.4, "nescio quis compilator, nomine suo suppresso, libellum super hac re nimis rusticanum ediderat; veritatem tamen texuerat, sed propter inurbanitatem codicis, nobilis materies viluerat ... accessi igitur hoc ad stadium, non inanis glorie cupidus, non superilis tumae inflatus, sed quod successive placeat Christianitiati" ("some compiler who did not give his name had written a book about these events but one which was too rough and ready; although he had set out the fabric of the truth, he had cheapened the nobility of the material by the lack of sophistication in his text ... so I turned to studying it, not because I wanted meaningless glory or because I was puffed up by pride but for the good of the Christian faith", my translation).