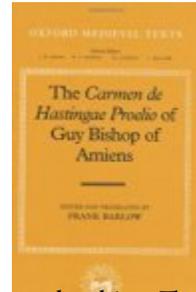


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Frank Barlow, ed. *The "Carmen de Hastingsae Proelio" of Guy Bishop of Amiens*. New York and Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999. xciv + 55 pp. \$73.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-820758-0.

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The "*Carmen de Hastingsae Proelio*" (the "*Song of the Battle of Hastings*") is a poem of 835 surviving Virgilian lines, known basically from a single copy in Brussels BR ms. 10615-729, fols. 227v-230v, an early twelfth-century miscellaneous anthology from the Abbey of St. Eucharius-Matthias in Trier (a medieval direct copy of 66 lines also survives, but lacks independent textual value). The *Carmen* describes William the Conqueror's invasion of England from the arrival of his fleet at Saint-Valery-sur-Somme until his coronation at Westminster (i.e. the events from September through December of 1066, where the text breaks off). Although the surviving poem is anonymous and untitled, it has been identified as the "*metricum carmen* describing the battle of Senlac [on this term for "Hastings" see Barlow, p. lxxvii] in imitation of the epics of Virgil and Statius" which Orderic Vitalis, in his *Historia Ecclesiastica* III, in a section written around 1124/ 25, attributes to "Guy bishop of Amiens" (1058-1074/ 75). Barlow strongly defends the probability of this much debated ascription (see pp. xxvi-xl). He edits the poem with a facing translation and a lengthy introduction. The Latin text itself—necessarily a "relatively straightforward" transcription—is little changed from the original Oxford text presented by the late Catherine Morton and Hope Munz in 1972; the new translation is slightly less purple and more literal than theirs; the introduction has been almost entirely redone.

For both professional historians and amateurs interested in "1066 and all that," the *Carmen* might seem somewhat disappointing. Form, meter, and heroic mode eclipse concrete detail. Of the departure, for example we read that:

... all arrive rejoicing, and run instantly to take up position. Some step the masts, others hoist the sails. Many

force the knights' horses to clamber on to the ships. The rest hasten to stow their arms. Like a flock of doves seeking their lofts, the throngs of infantry rush to take their places on the boats. O what a great noise suddenly erupts from that place as the sailors seek their oars, the knights their arms! Then a thousand trumpets sound, and resound, their various calls. There are pipes with their reeds and zithers with their strings; drums bellow like bulls; and the loud cymbals chime in. The earth shakes; the heavens quake; the ocean is amazed.

Much is glossed over in the midst of such epic grandeur: Bishop Guy does not even mention the move from Pevensey to Hastings or the exact site of the battle. Some omissions and vagueness may be explained by his situation as a Frenchman who did not participate in the events he described, although he was informed through his acquaintance with some of the participants, through a possible London connection, and through a later visit to England where he appears briefly in the entourage of Queen Matilda. Limited knowledge may at times have forced him to be "creative."

Yet Bishop Guy's perspective is interesting. He was educated at Chartres, well enough to handle classical meter competently. A scion of the counts of Ponthiou, he was neither Norman nor English. He recognizes, better than most later authors, that what we see retrospectively as the "Norman Conquest" was achieved by an invasion force of Normans, Angevins, Bretons, and men from the Low Countries—in fact, Guy appears to sympathize most with the French, whose military efforts at Hastings he features more prominently than those of the Normans themselves. His William is less polished than the more politically correct William of later historiography: as the epic style dictates, William is a "fighting general," a heroic

warrior who personally kills Harold's brother Gyrth and helps kill Harold himself. He achieves victory by systematically ravaging the countryside. At Hastings he apparently takes no prisoners and leaves unburied the English dead.

In relation to the other accounts of the Conquest, however, the ultimate importance of this poem may lie less in its distinctives than in its points of tangency. These are so many that Augustin Thierry, in the forward to his *Histoire de la Conquête de l'Angleterre*, concludes that "except for some details of little interest, the things which it recounts can be found elsewhere" (7th ed., p. 2). Yet, since it appears to have been written earlier than any other account, perhaps prior to 1070, it may well have helped to shape later versions. This is true in regard to William of Poitiers (d. ca. 1087/1101), whose *Gesta Guillelmi* has many points in common with the *Carmen* (Barlow, xxv-xl, argues more convincingly for William's dependency on the *Carmen* than R.H.C. Davis and Marjorie Chibnall argue—in *The "Gesta Guillelmi" of William of Poitiers* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1998], xxvii-xxxv—for mutual dependency on a common source). As has been noted, Orderic Vitalis cites this poem explicitly. Thus it may have played a role in Conquest historiography analogous to that played in crusade historiography by the *Gesta*

*Francorum*, an account which, simply by virtue of being first, affected the shape of the histories that followed, even those with independent authority and sometimes better knowledge of particular events. Because of the *Carmen's* place in the historiographical tradition, it merits careful consideration.

Yet many readers of this Oxford Medieval Text may be less interested in the *Carmen* itself than in Barlow's introduction. It would be hard to find a more informed scholar than Barlow, author of around a dozen books and major editions concerning the era of the Conquest. His introduction, nearly twice as long as the poem itself, carefully contextualizes the poem by comparing it to all the major alternative sources. The three-page list of abbreviated references could itself serve as a point of departure for any student interested in beginning research on some aspect of the Battle of Hastings—here are listed the major primary sources, in the best editions, and the major scholarly treatments of the associated problems. As a state-of-the-art look at the historiography of Hastings, this little book is hard to surpass.

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