
Reviewed by Sarah Davis-Secord (University of New Mexico)

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

This book follows a long line of works meant to satisfy general interest among Anglophone readers in subjects related to medieval England, from the conquest of 1066 through the Crusades. The Normans, as they are collectively if somewhat deceptively known, are a regular subject of both popular and scholarly writing, and this book will appeal to similar audiences. Written in a lively and engaging style and containing a large number of black-and-white images, plates, and maps, the book is enjoyable to read. Rowley relies upon narrative historical sources, a broad swath of scholarship, and material evidence from archaeological finds and remaining buildings. It is clear that Rowley has done an impressive amount of reading, although there are no citations, which is the nature of a book intended for general readers. He does present a short set of further readings divided by chapter, although most of the books therein are quite dated. Although the maps are clear and helpful, some of them are strangely labeled (using outdated or odd spellings like “Moslem,” “Fatimite Caliphate,” and “Selcuk Empire”).

The subtitle of the book is “A History of Conquest,” but Rowley does not mention arms, military organization, or tactics until page 41, and then only briefly. Throughout the book, Rowley does discuss the uses of horses in warfare and castles in ruling, but writes just as much about towns, monasteries, and forests as he does about military affairs. On balance, the book contains far more information about monasteries, culture, and ducal/royal politics, which is quite true to history but may disappoint readers looking for a military history-oriented work based on the subtitle. Overall, this book’s great preoccupation is with Norman “achievements” in the realms of both politics and culture.

The book is divided into eight chapters, beginning with the origins of the Vikings and their settlement in Normandy and ending with the decline of the Norman Sicilian kingdom. Along the way, Rowley covers the conquest of 1066, short histories of each Norman king, the architecture and literature of both England and Sicily, the connections between England and France, and the rela-
tionships between conquering Normans and local populations (referred to with outdated terms like “Anglo-Saxon,” which has fallen from favor for its racist overtones, and “Saracen,” which is a derogatory term that should not be used as a synonym for “Muslim”). Norman activity in the Crusades and North Africa is, perplexingly, included in a chapter about the Normans in “southern Europe,” as though Syria, Tunisia, and Constantinople were located in Europe. The effect of this choice is, to some degree, to contradict Rowley’s argument that Norman individuals were active across large expanses of territory beyond just England and Europe. In terms of the basic narrative of events and culture in Norman Sicily and Italy, Rowley does a fine job. Some of his interpretive moves, however, leave room for improvement. For example, in his profile of the first king of Sicily, Roger II, Rowley tells readers that he “had a strong oriental strain in his character” and that he “lived his personal life in an Ottoman fashion” (p. 185), both of which statements are simultaneously meaningless and smack of orientalist Islamophobia.

The decision to incorporate Norman adventurers, crusaders, and rulers in southern Italy, Sicily, North Africa, and the Levant in such a book is not a new one. For more than a century, scholars have sought to understand the connections and comparisons between the conquerors and kings of the Norman states in the Mediterranean region and those who captured and ruled England. Charles Homer Haskins’s 1915 work, *The Normans in European History* featured, as does this book, two final chapters on “The Normans in the South” and “The Norman Kingdom of Sicily.” However, there is little to suggest that the Norman kings of Sicily and Africa cared very much to foster links with the Normans of England or, for that matter, with those of Normandy itself. The Sicilian Norman kings’ primary interests were directed toward the Mediterranean and, even when they sought wives from and political connections with Latin Christendom, the majority of those were with places other than England or Normandy. And likewise, it is clear that the royal family of the English Normans considered the southern Normans quite beneath them in terms of birth and status. The substance and meaning of any possible connections between southern and northern Normans are left unexplored in this text.

Rowley also does not justify his choices in response to decades of scholarship that has cast doubt on the coherent sense of “Normanness” (or *Normanitas*) among the various groups who moved out of northern France and into England and Mediterranean spaces. R. H. C. Davis, in *The Normans and Their Myth* (1976), explicitly interrogated the question of who the Normans were and whether their sense of common identity was anything more than a self-crafted ideal that was useful only so long as it was believed by those who promoted it. The fact that the “Norman” conquest of Italy and Sicily was spearheaded by members of a minor landholding family from Normandy, who were not at all related to the ducal family that came to rule England, does not seem to matter to Rowley’s story. Nor does the fact that the warriors, monastics, administrators (both lay and ecclesiastical), and settlers who moved into Sicily and southern Italy were French or Italians in equal number to persons from the Duchy of Normandy. In addressing the question of Norman identity, Rowley states that there is a “general perception” that Normans were Vikings who converted to Christianity (with no interrogation of what a “Viking” was or means, although this too is a term that has come under considerable scrutiny), but argues that there was very little “Viking blood” in the duchy’s rulers by time of the invasion of England (p. 9). So what ties these stories together, beyond the fact that one-time residents of the northern part of France moved to, conquered, and, for some time, controlled disparate regions of the premodern world? Rowley does not hazard a guess, and readers are left wondering if it is perhaps a simple coincidence. Altogether, the book is heavier on narrative than on theory, which is perhaps best
suited to its intended audience. Readers looking for a general overview of the conquests, rulership, and culture of the people commonly known as Normans will not be disappointed.

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