How History Became Epic but Lost Its Identity on the Way:
The Half-Life of First Crusade Epic in Romance Literature

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This paper examines how the boundary between historic description and epic literature evolved during the lifetime of the Crusade Cycle. The price history paid for its assimilation into epic was a mutation into legend and fantasy until it became barely recognizable as history. This paper looks at three points in that mutation: contemporary to the Crusade; in the Antioche; and in later legendary depictions, including the Second Cycle of the fourteenth century and the Gerusalemme Liberata. A brief tour through historiographical usages in parallel with the chanson de geste form demonstrates the presence of contemporary historical concerns on a background of tradition. The only contemporary event judged worthy of being transmuted into a legend alongside Arthur, Charlemagne and the heroes of Antiquity and the Old Testament, it was transformed through narrative convention and contemporary concerns that divorced the story from history.

Introduction

The First Crusade was unique in the Middle Ages: it is the only post-1000 historical event to have spawned its own epic cycle. Chansons de geste generally have some kernel of historical truth, albeit distorted almost past recognition by literary convention and the passage of two or three centuries.¹ The Old French Crusade Cycle (OFCC) and its descendants are alone in being based on events which were extensively chronicled and on the bounds of living memory; this is particularly true of the Chanson d’Antioche.² As such they, and especially the Antioche, have been seen as a unique text which sprawls across the boundaries of history and literature, in Bender’s words “à la limite des chansons de geste” (Bender and Kleber, Les épopées romanes, pp. 35-36).

¹ Huge literature exists on this well-trodden subject: see e.g., Lejeune, Les chansons de geste; Le Gentil, “Quelques réflexions.”
² In this paper OFCC refers to the texts of The Old French Crusade Cycle. “Cycle” or “Crusade cycle” refers to the wider tradition stretching down to the sixteenth century. The edition of the Antioche used here is Duparc-Quioz’s two-volume edition published by Geuthner; the Antioche has also been edited by J. A. Nelson as vol. 4 of Nelson and Mickel’s edition of the OFCC published by the University of Alabama Press.
This paper looks at how the boundary between historic description and epic literature evolved during the lifetime of the Crusade Cycle. The price history paid for its assimilation into epic was a mutation into legend and fantasy until it became barely recognisable as history. This paper looks at three points in that mutation. It starts by looking at the form of the Cycle at the time of the Crusade: it concludes that there is no firm evidence of a chanson de geste recounting the contemporary events of the Crusade in or around 1100 and therefore no firm evidence of the depiction of historical events in this literary form. It then looks at the *Antioche*, written a century later, which forms the main focus of the paper. The *Antioche* is where history and literature first demonstrably meet in the context of the Crusade. By this time the Crusade was already on the fringes of living memory: its events are used as a metaphor in the exploration of contemporary sociopolitical and literary debates, and the boundary between history and fantasy is already blurred. The third section of the paper looks briefly at the increasingly legendary depictions of the Crusade in the OFCC of the thirteenth century, the Second Cycle of the fourteenth (Duparc-Quioc, *Le cycle de la croisade*; Cook and Crist, *Le deuxième cycle*) and the final sixteenth-century flowering in the *Gerusalemme Liberata* (Tasso). The paper then offers some remarks on why the First Crusade should have become the only event in relatively recent recorded history to form the subject of a whole epic cycle. The conclusion drawn is that the First Crusade did not create a new genre of accurate historical epic: by the time history took on epic format it had already largely mutated into fantasy and metaphor. But in a wider sense the Crusade was unique: the only contemporary event judged worthy of being transmuted into a legend alongside Arthur, Charlemagne and the heroes of Antiquity and the Old Testament.

1. The boundary between history and literature in 1100: case not proven

Was a historical chanson de geste written in 1100 or so, around the time of the First Crusade? If so, it would have been a remarkable document, breaching many of the accepted rules of the genre at a very early stage. The problem is that we in fact know very little of what the Cycle might have looked like around 1100. The only two texts with any resemblance to historical accounts are the *Antioche* and the *Jérusalem*. Of these the latter is largely a rerun of highlights of the *Antioche*, containing at best a few scraps of new historical information. So attention has focussed on the *Antioche*. It is much closer to the historical accounts; it contains much information which is unique or only loosely paralleled elsewhere; and, more indefinably, it has an air of gritty realism at least in some passages. This has led to its acceptance as an authentic

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3 As set out by Bender, “Die *Chanson d’Antioche*”.
4 Hatem calls the *Chanson de Jérusalem* “une imitation, parfois servile, de la *Chanson d’Antioche*** (Les *poèmes épiques*, p. 269). On the limited historicity of the text, see Duparc-Quioc, *Le cycle*, pp. 18-30.
5 On closeness to the accounts of Albert of Aix and Robert the Monk, see Duparc-Quioc, ed., *La Chanson d’Antioche*, vol. 2, pp. 148-70, 108-20 and Knoch, *Studien zu Albert von Aachen*. For unique material, see e.g., ll. 7576-642 recounting the story of Pierre Postel, Eurvin Creel and a donkey, though with an eye to
eyewitness source and even as a diary of the Crusade, but one written as a vernacular chanson de geste. On the basis of one rather flaky reference it has been ascribed to a shadowy author Richard le Pèlerin, who has acquired a biography out of all proportion to the actual evidence.\(^6\) Richard has been portrayed as an innovator, writing a chanson de geste depicting the events of the Crusade from the point of view of a participant, and thus creating a new kind of text: the chanson de geste as a way of portraying contemporary—not past—events.\(^7\)

We have no extant version of this lost chanson de geste. All that survives is the reworking in the current \textit{Antioche}, plus what seems to be source material also used by the German chronicler Albert of Aix. Neither do we have any other evidence of the mysterious Richard’s life and works.

To some extent none of this matters. It is a staple of the chanson de geste to claim obscure antecedents which guarantee authenticity: thus the \textit{Chanson de Roland} is famously ascribed to an otherwise unknown Turold (\textit{Chanson de Roland}, 1. 4002). So Richard’s existence may be symbolic rather than real, as argued by Kleber (“Wer ist der Verfasser”). We know that vernacular poetry was written about contemporary events at the start of the twelfth century: Orderic Vitalis for example describes how William IX of Aquitaine sang “rithmicis versibus cum facetis modulationibus” about his experiences on the 1101 \textit{arrière-croisade}, and according to Gaimar an otherwise unknown David wrote a biography of Henry I (\textit{Ecclesiastical History}; \textit{Estoire des Engleis}). We know too that there were poems about the First Crusade well into the twelfth century. Guibert of Nogent comments that “nichil nisi quod publice cantitatur dicere libuit.” Orderic preserves what looks like an early romance about Bohemond’s captivity and romance with the Saracen princess Melaz. In Southern France Bechada is credited with writing a long vernacular poem about the Crusade which took twelve years. And in c. 1150 Guerau de Cabrera refers to a “[canso] d’Antioca” (Guibert de Nogent, \textit{Dei Gesta per Francos}, p. 83; \textit{The Ecclesiastical History}, ed. Chibnall, vol. 5, 359-79).\(^8\)

So there is plenty of vernacular material around which could have formed source material for a later version of the \textit{Antioche} whether or not Richard actually existed. What we do not know is what form any of circular arguments: does unique equate to reliable? For “realism”, see e.g., ll. 5944-49 for a painful nighttime march or l. 1383 for an entrail-strewn battlefield: again, however, imagination and the conventions of the chanson de geste have to be taken into account.

\(^6\) The only reference is at l. 9014, in the midst of a fantastic list of Saracens. The concept of Richard as diarist of the Crusade was first elaborated by Paulin Paris in his edition of the \textit{Chanson d’Antioc}he in 1848 and in \textit{Nouvelle étude}; it was accepted by Sumberg and embraced enthusiastically by Duparc-Quioc: “Richard le Pèlerin a été l’un des trouvères qui suivait l’armée croisée” (“La composition”, p. 246). It was not seriously challenged until 1980, when Cook argued that “elle n’est en réalité qu’une chanson de geste cyclique” (\textit{Chanson d’Antioc}he, p. 86).


\(^8\) On Bechada see Geoffrey of Vigeois (\textit{Chronica Gaufredi}, pp. 279-342); for Cabrera, see edition in Pirot (\textit{Recherches}, pp. 546-62); for the date, see Cluzel (“A propos de l’ensenhamen”).
these poems took: indeed Bechada’s work seems to have been rather unusual in its size and scope since it merited comment.9 We have no solid evidence that any of them were chansons de geste. The fact that the Antioche is itself a chanson de geste is not evidence that its predecessor was. If there was such an earlier work, it was arguably more likely to have taken the octosyllabic form used by Gaimar in the 1130s or the verse form of hagiographies.

There is also an issue about what the earlier text might have covered. The resemblances between Albert of Aix and the Antioche stop halfway through; from line 6565 onwards the Antioche uses Robert the Monk as its main source.10 This suggests that by the end of the twelfth century only the first part of a putative Antioche still existed. The Jérusalem contains virtually no evidence for an earlier version. So this would suggest either that an earlier version would have stopped short before the highlights of the battle of Antioch and the fall of Jerusalem, unlike any other account of the Crusade; or that only the first part of such a text was preserved. In this connection it is worth pointing that we have no manuscripts of this earlier version.11 This of course does not prove that no such earlier version existed: the Canso d’Antioca and the Histoire de la Guerre de Navarre, for example, both survive in precisely one manuscript each thanks to the accidents of history.12 But it does suggest that if a version did exist it was not popular enough to be worth copying and preserving on a large scale.

In short, we cannot say definitively that there is no evidence for a chanson de geste contemporary with the Crusade. But there is little evidence that such a text did exist, and less as to what it might have looked like or contained. We cannot argue on this basis that the Crusade created a revolutionary new genre which crossed the bounds of history and literature in the early twelfth century. As Cook magisterially sums up: “[…] nous ne savons pas ce qui a précédé. N’empêche pas qu’il a très bien pu y avoir quelque chose; le tout est de ne pas confondre ce quelque chose avec le récit cyclique connu” (Cook, “Les épopées”, p. 98).

9 See discussion in The Canso d’Antioca (introduction, pp. 132-5).
10 Duparc-Quioc’s edition flags up borrowings in detail.
11 As Mickel and Nelson comment in their introduction to the Naissance du Chevalier au Cygne, “it is significant that no single epic associated with the cycle has survived in pre-cyclical form” (OFCC, vol. 1, p. xv).
12 The Canso d’Antioca fragment was retrieved from a remote and mouldering book cupboard by the Spanish scholar Jaime de Vilanueva (Canso, Introduction, p.17); the Histoire was saved from a Pamplona dustbin (Histoire de la Guerre de Navarre).
2. The boundary between history and literature in 1200: history overlaid with fantasy and metaphor

We are on surer ground with the text we actually have: the extant *Antioche*. This was written at the turn of the twelfth century in northeastern France.\(^\text{13}\) It is unclear whether the Graindor de Douai named at line 14 was author or commissioner.\(^\text{14}\) There is no reason to disagree with Duparc-Quioq’s theory that it was composed as part of a trilogy with the entirely fantastic *Chanson des Chétifs* and the *Chanson de Jérusalem*.\(^\text{15}\) It is unmistakably a chanson de geste. As such the events it recounts are overlaid heavily with literary invention and convention. However it also functions at a deeper level: the events of the Crusade become a metaphor for the exploration of contemporary preoccupations. The result is that historical accuracy is already blurred.

*The Antioche: history overlaid with literary convention and fantasy*

In form the *Antioche* is a textbook chanson de geste which follows literary convention closely. Thus language and formulae are familiar: horses have a “crupe tiulee”, weapons are of applewood, and horses and fabrics come from various unlikely places to fit the rhyme.\(^\text{16}\) The metre is the alexandrine and the text is structured around laisses, with the classic techniques of *laisses enchaînées* and *laisses similaires* to underline moments of drama.\(^\text{17}\) Themes from the chanson de geste are also much in evidence: thus the theme of uncle and nephew is prominent both in the relationship of Bohemond and Tancred and in turning the Byzantine Taticius into the nephew of Alexius (Farnsworth, *Uncle and Nephew*).

It also has a strong admixture of fantasy. Despite the crusading subject matter and the familiarity with Islam displayed at some points, the portrayal of Saracens follows all the chanson de geste norms: they worship Apollo, Mahommed and Termagant; they attract the normal criticisms of sloth, cruelty and the rest; and their names are the usual jumble of fantasy and abuse.\(^\text{18}\) And it is striking how much of the text is

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\(^{13}\) Duparc-Quioq dates the text to 1176 on a number of grounds (ed., *Chanson d’Antioche*, vol. 2, pp. 132-39). I have argued elsewhere that it should be dated to around the time of the Fourth Crusade (*Canse d’Antioca*, introd., p. 54; “Antioch and Flanders”).

\(^{14}\) Graindor is referred to in mss. A, B and C; E calls him Hervix; F, G and L do not refer to him at all. L. 15, “*ki nos en a les vers tous fais renovelier*”, is ambiguous.

\(^{15}\) Duparc-Quioq, *Le cycle*, pp. 69-74.

\(^{16}\) See ll. 3032, 4732, 3639 and 4482.

\(^{17}\) See laisses 200 and 201 for *laisses enchaînées* to mark the appearance of the Sultan of Persia; laisses 191-193 for *laisses similaires* where Garsion cuts off his beard as a token to send the Sultan.

\(^{18}\) For possible familiarity with Islam, see e.g., l. 3447, which sounds like an informed description of Mecca. On Saracen portrayals, see Daniel. For stereotyped presentation, see e.g., ll. 4354-94 (Saracen cruelty) and ll. 4475-84 (Saracen sloth and luxury). For Saracen names, see e.g., ll. 9015-26.
occupied by entirely fantastic scenes set amongst the Saracens: for example some 1500 lines of a text of around 9500 lines are devoted to the plight of Garsion and his embassy to the Sultan of Persia.

Historical accuracy comes a distant second to the literary conventions demanded by the chanson de geste. With familiar anachronism the world of the Antioche is much closer to Picardy in 1200 than Syria in 1100: helmets have a “ventaille,” shields have heraldic devices and many of the characters come from a narrow area in Picardy and Northern France. More fundamentally, the reality of what happened on crusade comes second to the wish to tell a good story. For example, Taticius is shown arguing vehemently with the emperor to defend the interests of the crusaders: the historical Taticius was a Byzantine official put in as a trustworthy minder and as such most of the contemporary sources do not have a good word to say for him.

*Historiography meets the chanson de geste*

Where the text starts to look different from other chansons de geste is in the prologue. The themes evoked are familiar in historiography: authorship and antecedents, the authenticity of the text and the *laudatio historiae*. The author goes to great pains to acknowledge his source and its authenticity without ever quite spelling out what it is. There are other accounts, but this one is better because it has the proper beginning; there was at least one other account which was re-rhymed and written down by an anonymous author who did not dare to identify himself; an apparent predecessor Richard le Pêlerin is mentioned in a fantasy list of Saracen kings; the mysterious Graindor de Douai may either have written or commissioned the new beginning or the whole text. The exemplary nature of the text is hammered home: the Crusaders are held up as examples to be followed and it is emphasised that going on Crusade will bring salvation in an uncertain world. None of this is without parallel in other chansons de geste: the Roland for example is clear that Roland’s reward is to be taken to Paradise. What is interesting is the length of the prologue: seven *laisses similaires* amounting to 156 lines, giving length and emphasis to the start of the text. In this respect the text is more reminiscent of historiography than the chanson de geste.

Where the Antioche differs markedly from many chansons de geste is in its use of sources, which is strongly reminiscent of historiographical techniques. Whilst the practice of individual historians might vary, the basic techniques did not. Historians would use one or two sources to give the main structure and facts for

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19 L. 3237 for a “ventaille”; l. 1444 for what seems to be a heraldic device on the shield of Stephen of Blois.
20 Antioche, laisses 38-40; at l. 1158 Taticius is described as lion-hearted. For a more typical view, see e.g., Robert the Monk (IV.13).
21 For discussion in Latin historiography, see e.g., Guénée, *Histoire et culture historique*, pp. 129-45 on auctoritas and truth; pp. 346-54 on history as example. For discussion of these themes in vernacular historiography, see Damian-Grint, *The New Historians*.
22 See ll. 12-15, 78-84, 9014.
23 For praise of the crusaders, see e.g., ll. 108-12: hardly borne out by the rest of the text. On crusade as salvation, see particularly laisse 6.
24 Roland, ll. 2389-96.
their text, often though not always without acknowledgement. They would fill gaps in their material and/or add facts from other sources where they felt so inclined. They would draw on oral memories where available and lay stress on feats by those in their audience or known to them. On occasion they would bring in the fictional and fantastic to highlight key themes and add colour. This is exactly what we see in the Antioche. The first part is often close to but seldom identical with the work of Albert of Aix. The last third is drawn from Robert the Monk, sometimes word for word. The detailed account of Peter the Hermit’s expedition with which the text starts shows a similar concern for sources, with an emphasis on it forming the “vrai commencement” of the text. Other material not found elsewhere is inserted as freestanding episodes such as the heroism of Raimbaut Creton: we cannot say whether this reflects lost material, oral or written, or a vivid imagination. Feats by the local heroes, the St-Pols, feature prominently and may possibly represent eyewitness tradition. In composition the Antioche is indistinguishable from historical works: and this in part accounts for the quasi-historical respect it has been accorded.

So the Antioche of the end of the twelfth century is poised between recent history and literature in a way arguably not quite paralleled in any other chanson de geste. The Jérusalem ostensibly adopts the same approach, although its source material is largely the Antioche itself (Duparc-Quioc, ed., Chanson d’Antioche vol. 2, pp. 130-31). This raises the obvious question: why should these texts take this approach at this time? An answer lies in the debates around what constituted truth and how this played out in history and literature at the start of the thirteenth century in Picardy, northern France and Flanders.

History as metaphor: how the Antioche reflects contemporary concerns

At the turn of the twelfth century Latin historiography continued to flourish, not least as a medium for describing the First Crusade: William of Tyre’s work dates from the latter part of the twelfth century. Equally vernacular prose was gradually acquiring momentum as a medium for historiography; some of the earliest examples such as Clari in fact appeared in Picardy (Robert de Clari, La conquête de Constantinople). So it might seem counterintuitive for the history of the First Crusade to be produced in a form which had not been traditionally used to portray recent historical events. Moreover it was a form which was under attack as an unreliable medium for conveying the truth: as Nicholas de Senlis commented uncompromisingly, “nus contes

26 For example, Enguerrand of St-Pol, unhistorically as far as we know, is credited with finding the ford which allows the Crusaders to get across the Orontes (ll. 2589-669); Hugh is given charge of the Saracen child hostage whose father betrays Antioch to the Crusaders (ll. 5545-47). See Duparc-Quioc (“Recherches”, pp. 771-92).
27 The battle of Rames is patterned on the battle of Antioch, and Sansadoine’s embassy inspires that of Cornumarant.
28 For discussion of the emergence of vernacular prose historiography in Flanders at the turn of the twelfth century, see Spiegel, Romancing the Past.
rimés no est verais” (Chronique dite saintongeaise, p. 256). The chanson de geste was not the obvious medium to choose for portraying the Crusade.

The traditional conclusion is that the Antioche was written as a chanson de geste because that reflected the form of its predecessor: it was a chanson de geste because there were already chansons de geste about the Crusade. However there were sociopolitical and literary reasons for choosing this form which had nothing to do with shadowy chanson de geste predecessors and everything to do with the preoccupations of Picardy and Northern France at the turn of the thirteenth century.

Spiegel has argued that the rise of vernacular historiography in thirteenth-century Flanders is closely linked to the insecurities of the nobility and the need to forge an identity under heavy pressure from France. This manifests itself in a nostalgic focus on the glory of past achievements and on the genealogy which links them to the present. This blending of past glory with the present is exactly what we see in the Antioche and functions at a number of levels.

The participants on the Crusade are held up explicitly as exempla to be followed. They are described as “gentil” and “pros,” and almost always shown in a good light. Equally though they are repeatedly identified as “nostre”; the Crusade may have been a century ago, but the author makes it abundantly clear that the Crusaders are intimately linked with his audience and acting almost like an extension of them. The close identification of audience with action is underlined by the constant use of formulae like “es vos”.

It is also underlined by the fact that virtually all the participants come from a narrow area of northeastern France, with names which would have been familiar to the audience of 1200: St-Valéry, Mons, Ghent, and Ribemont. And the undisputed heroes of the text are the St-Pols father and son. They appear in episode after episode and are credited with pivotal actions such as Enguerrand finding the crucial ford across the Orontes on arrival at Antioch, as well as their own column in the climactic battle. They get only a passing mention in other sources: indeed Enguerrand seems to have died early on in the Crusade. But in contrast, on the Fourth Crusade Hugh of St-Pol was one of the main leaders alongside Baldwin of Flanders. The St-Pols of a century ago merge seamlessly into the St-Pols of 1200. Thus throughout the text contemporary glory is reflected onto past ancestors, whose exploits in turn prefigure the achievements of the present.

The Antioche uses two further sets of associations. Godfrey is described as Charlemagne’s descendant: the First Crusade is thus linked into past Carolingian glory. And, going back a further 800 years, the

\[\text{Spiegel characterizes such writing as a “verbal substitute for a social past irretrievably lost” (Romancing the Past, p. 81).}\]

\[\text{For examples picked out at random, see ll. 38, 106-12 for praise; l. 1147 for “nostre”; ll.1428 and 1507 for “es vos”.}\]

\[\text{Raymond of Aguilers, e.g., describes the appearance of his ghost (Le “liber” de Raymond d’Aguilers, p. 109).}\]

\[\text{See Phillips, The Fourth Crusade. Hugh, for example, persuaded Louis of Blois to honour his commitment to the Crusade (pp. 104-05) and led a contingent in battle alongside Henry and Baldwin of Flanders (p. 165).}\]

\[\text{Ll. 7437-38.}\]
Crusaders are cast as avengers of Christ through the Vengeance of Christ theme which begins the poem and on which the anonymous *remanieur* lays such stress. The Crusaders thus acquire the prestige of heroes of classical antiquity, presented alongside the ancient Roman heroes Titus and Vespasian as the avengers of Christ, whilst the taking of Jerusalem on the Crusade becomes a mirror image of the taking of Jerusalem in the first century.

This complex interplay of past and present at several levels has a double function. It preserves awareness of the past and sets it against the sweep of universal history, with the First Crusade set alongside and a successor to the heroism of the Carolingian and Roman past. It also invites the present day audience to identify itself with the heroes of a century ago and by implication back to Titus and Vespasian. The Picardy of 1200 is invited to imagine itself in the company of heroes; it shares their names and background; it is urged to regard them as exempla to be imitated; and tacitly it is encouraged to make the link between events now, a century ago and back to Roman times. This acquires particular resonance in the context of the Fourth Crusade, where the Flemish and Northern French were prominent participants.

So why write history in the form of a chanson de geste?

The *Antioche* thus fits closely the uncertainties of 1200 in Northern France and Flanders; it takes a historiographical approach to its source material and shares the aspirations of contemporary historiographers. So why write it as what is indisputably a chanson de geste?

To some extent this may be a non-question. Vernacular verse had a long pedigree as a way of portraying actual events, in the Anglo-Norman *regnum* at least: there were the universal histories of Wace and Gaimar, accounts of specific events such as Jordan Fantosme and biographies such as the life of Thomas Becket by Guernes de Pont-Saint-Maxence and William Marshal. So there were plenty of antecedents. However the *Antioche* is not just a verse account of the Crusade: as argued above it uses all the classic formulae and topoi of the chanson de geste with a hefty admixture of fantasy. And it does this at precisely the time when a debate about the respective merits of prose and verse as a means of recounting the truth was a live issue. The poet of *La mort Aymeri de Narbonne*, in a passage imitating Bertrand de Bar-sur-Aube’s description of the three *gestes*, commented that “nus hom ne puet chanson de geste dire / Que il ne mente la ou li vers define / As mos drecier et a tailler la rime” (*Mort Aymeri de Narbonne*, ll. 3055-7). Clari writes in prose but prose which is heavily formulaic and reminiscent of the chanson de geste. Other histories of the time such as Philippe Mouskes are written in verse (*Chronique rimée*). At the turn of the twelfth century the debate about what constituted history and how it should be written in the vernacular was bubbling fiercely: there was no reason

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34 The theme of the Vengeance of Christ occupies seven laisses and recurs as a leitmotif throughout.
35 Baldwin of Flanders was to end the Crusade as Emperor of Constantinople, and nobles such as Conon de Béthune, Hugh of St-Pol and Henry of Flanders were important participants; for Flanders generally, see Phillips, *The Fourth Crusade*, p. 89.
36 See the conclusions of Dembowski (*La chronique de Robert de Clari*, pp. 117-25).
not to write the Antioche in verse. But what is striking is that it is written so strongly within the conventions of the chanson de geste, almost going out of its way one feels to annoy Nicolas de Senlis: we are presented with a tent which could contain 20,000 Saracens, a sword forged by Wayland and a magnetic idol of Mahommed, not to mention the man-eating dragon Sathanas in the Chétifs and the unlikely spectacle of the dreaded Corbaran of the Antioche repeatedly bailed out by the Christians.  

One reason for choosing the chanson de geste form is simple entertainment and accessibility. We know from Lambert d’Ardres that stories of the Crusade continued to be told a century later alongside tales of Arthur, Charlemagne, Tristan and his own genealogy (Chronique de Guines, p. 217). The heroism, humour and fantasy of the Antioche alongside the endless accounts of battle which form the staple of the chanson de geste and a strong narrative line make for a highly entertaining story. The same can be said of the wider OFCC.

Another reason lies in the fact that the chanson de geste by convention recounts past heroism, not present. By 1200 the events of the Crusade were on the edge of living memory and the participants long since dead. So the events lent themselves to idealisation and stylisation in the chanson de geste in just the same way as earlier Carolingian power struggles: Duggan has analysed this process in detail. The chanson de geste provides a stage on which current conflicts can be played out under the guise of past events, safely distanced from obvious connection with the present. Exactly the same is happening in the Antioche. Godfrey of Bouillon and to some extent Robert of Flanders, both local to northeastern France, appear as heroes; the French Stephen of Blois is mercilessly pilloried.

A third reason lies in exhortation to go on Crusade, particularly if we accept that the text is contemporary with the Fourth Crusade (which had strong Flemish participation). The prologue to the Antioche is explicitly exhortatory. If the aim was as a recruiting tactic to encourage contemporaries to see themselves in the same mould as the First Crusaders, what better way to do it than to present them tacitly as epic heroes?

So there were good reasons to choose the chanson de geste format for the story of the Crusade regardless of what format original sources might have taken. The particular blend of history and literature we see in the extant Antioche is closely linked to the time and circumstances of its composition. By this stage the events of the Crusade were at the fringes of living memory. So they can be portrayed in the format of the chanson de geste with a heavy overlay of literary convention and fantasy; and the chanson de geste format itself serves as an arena in which contemporary preoccupations can be safely explored. A century on, there was already a clear divergence between what had happened on the Crusade and its textual portrayal.

37 See ll. 4866-76 for the tent; ll. 4165 for Wayland; ll. 4886-93 for the idol of Mahommed.
38 “Medieval epic as popular historiography: appropriation of historical knowledge in the vernacular epic” (Duggan, “Medieval Epic as Popular Historiography”, pp. 298-99).
39 As explored, e.g., by Kay: “chansons de geste […] put in question both social violence and the symbolic fabric on which a masculine social order might claim to rest” (The Chanson de Geste, p. 21).
3. The boundary between history and literature in the later Middle Ages: history and legend merge

During the early thirteenth century the Antioche and its companion texts the Chétifs and the Jérusalem became the nucleus of a new epic cycle: the OFCC. Godfrey, the first ruler of Jerusalem, was cast in the role of hero. As with other epic cycles, the hero and by extension the events of the Crusade acquired a legendary prehistory giving details of his ancestry in the form of the Chevalier au Cygne texts. The Crusade also acquired its own posthistory in a few versions.

The OFCC—in sharp contrast to any predecessor it may have had—was clearly very popular throughout the thirteenth century. It exists in several variations: “there were probably as many attempts at a unified poem as there are cyclical manuscripts” (Naissance du Chevalier, Introd., p. xv).

The process of turning history to legend continued the double precedent set by the Antioche of use of the fantastic and reflection of the contemporary. The texts were written as chansons de geste, replete with fantasy, Saracens and heroic achievements. What was new was their development into a full epic cycle along the lines identified by Heintze, through linking of legends, addition of new material and cross-reference to other cycles (“Les techniques”). In the process historical fact virtually disappeared: even the Jérusalem and Chétifs, generally seen as forming part of the original nucleus of the OFCC, have at best tenuous connections with the events of the Crusade, and the later additions have less if any historical foundation.

The use of the Crusade as a way of exploring contemporary preoccupations also continued. An epic cycle needed a hero. Godfrey had not been particularly preeminent in the firsthand sources for the Crusade or even in the Antioche, which treats the leaders even handedly with the exception of the unfortunate Stephen of Blois. The creation of the cycle saw Godfrey picked out as the hero reflecting the glory of the wider dynasty of Bouillon and its line of Godfreys. As hero he was in short order supplied with an appropriate enfances and genealogy as demanded by the principles of cyclification.

The OFCC thus used historical events as an inspiration for a literary cycle in keeping with thirteenth-century literary and socio-political trends. It was this increasingly legendary version of an increasingly remote Crusade which would form the basis for the Second Crusade Cycle in the fourteenth century. The legends would find a final reflection in Torquato Tasso’s Gerusalemme Liberata in the sixteenth century. By this time the events of the Crusade survived only in outline, serving as a framework on which to hang the stories of Rinaldo and Armida and others.

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40 See Mickel’s discussion in the introduction to the Enfances Godefroi (pp. 56-69); also Winkler, “La terre sainte”.
41 “Matters of genealogy are the alpha and omega of literary cycles” (Bossy, “Afterword”, p. 203).
42 Cook and Crist, Le deuxième cycle, p. 9: the Second Cycle was “une version profondément remaniée du premier Cycle de la Croisade”.

25.1-2
4. Why did the First Crusade become an epic?

By this stage the participants of the First Crusade would barely if at all have recognised themselves and their achievements. Yet the OFCC and its successors were the only one of the great epic cycles to be inspired by recognisable historical events, and Godfrey was the only post-Carolingian historical figure of the Middle Ages to be elevated to the ranks of the Nine Worthies. This suggests just how overwhelming was the sense of reverence created by the First Crusade. Perhaps Robert the Monk, writing in 1107 or 1108, comes nearest to encapsulating the sheer sense of wonder and miracle felt by contemporaries: “what more miraculous undertaking has there been (other than the mystery of the redeeming Cross) than what was achieved in our own time by this journey of our own people to Jerusalem?” For a brief instant celestial and terrestrial touched, and the junction was marked by miracles such as the Holy Lance and the intervention of the saints in battle. The Crusade spawned more accounts than arguably any other event in the Middle Ages, and its implications were to reverberate right down to the Renaissance. Epic events need an epic portrayal. To that extent at least the Crusade can be said to have transcended the bounds of genre.

Conclusion

Trotter has argued that the Crusades are always depicted in terms of the literary and social conventions of the time: they do not create their own genre, they work within the terms of existing genres. The events of the Crusade cannot be portrayed independently of contemporary attitudes: of necessity the portrayal reflects and mutates with them. None of the epic depictions of the First Crusade transcend this rule: history is portrayed through existing literary conventions and forms. But in the process the rules governing the boundaries become blurred. If literature is defined as the portrayal of the imaginary, using recent recorded historical event as its subject stretches the conventions of the chanson de geste to the limit. Equally, if history is defined as the portrayal of the actual, the depiction of events became increasingly mythologised just like

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43 On the Nine Worthies see Keen (Chivalry, pp. 121-24). These comprised three figures from antiquity (Hector, Alexander and Julius Caesar); three from the Old Testament (David, Judas Maccabeus and Joshua); and three from post-antiquity (Arthur, Charlemagne and Godfrey). Their first appearance in writing is in the early fourteenth-century Voeux du Paon. By this stage Godfrey himself had become a legendary figure, his actual achievements long in the past and overshadowed by his mythical origins: as the most recent of the worthies he “symbolised the fact that the story of chivalry’s divine mission in the world was still in process” (p. 123).

44 Historia Iherosolimitana, Prologue: “sed post creationem mundi quid mirabilius factum est praeter salutiferae crucis mysterium, quam quod modernis temporibus actum est in hoc itinere nostrorum Iherosolimitanorum?”

45 “An autonomous tradition of Crusade literature […] only survives within pre-existing epic, romance, lyric or dramatic traditions. As a result it is obliged to adapt to their conventions and requirements, which it thereby reinforces and perpetuates” (Trotter, Medieval French Literature, p. 249).
the Carolingian subject matter of the classic chanson de geste until they became barely recognisable as recorded historical events.

Ultimately the First Crusade became the only event in the entire Middle Ages to create its own epic cycle and elevate its hero Godfrey to the ranks of the Nine Worthies. But it did not start to do so until the events were well outside living memory and had been thickly overlaid by legend, fantasy and literary convention. The First Crusade did indeed redraw the boundary between literature and history: but by the end of the process in the sixteenth century the boundary had been eroded to invisibility. History became epic, but at a price: the loss of its identity as recognisable historic fact.
Works cited

Primary Texts


**Secondary Texts**


*Olifant*


