Journal of Medieval History 37 (2011) 162–179

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Medieval History

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jmedhist

The *Gesta Roberti Wiscardi*: A 'Byzantine' history?

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Keywords:
William of Apulia
Byzantine Italy
Norman Italy
Robert Guiscard
Alexios Komnenos

A B S T R A C T

In the last 150 years of scholarship, opinions have always differed as to just who William of Apulia was, and for which audience his epic poem the *Gesta Roberti Wiscardi* (completed c. 1099) was written. Many have felt that the work is not only pro-Norman, but vehemently anti-Byzantine. This article reconsiders the arguments about William's poem. Firstly, William seems to have particularly identified with those who exhibited a marked respect for, and association with, the eastern empire. Secondly, it will be suggested that not only did William know Greek — not an uncommon phenomenon in southern Italy — but that he may well have drawn on sources written in that language, perhaps even the same material used by his near contemporaries Michael Attaleiates and John Skylitzes. Thirdly, despite the fact that observers normally emphasise William's preference for the image of *muliebres* Byzantines, it is argued that the *Gesta Roberti Wiscardi* actually underscores their *virtus*.

In the introduction to his 1851 edition of the *Gesta Roberti Wiscardi* [*GRW*], an epic poem of five books completed c. 1099, Roger Wilmans opined that the author, William of Apulia, was not of Norman extraction since the work criticised the *avaritia* of the *gens Normannorum*.[1] William's Lombard origin, felt Wilmans, was evidenced by the conspicuous number of references to Giovinazzo, and hence the poet may well have hailed from this Apulian town. While Ferdinand Chalandon accepted this viewpoint in 1907,[2] it would be challenged by Marguerite Mathieu in her 1961 edition of the *GRW*. She conceded that it was not out of the bounds of possibility that the half-Lombard Roger Borsa — the son

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[1] *Guillermi Apuliensis, Gesta Roberti Wiscardi*, ed. R. Wilmans (Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores 9 [hereafter MGH SS], Hannover, 1851), 239.

[2] Ferdinand Chalandon, *Histoire de la domination normande en Italie et en Sicile*, 2 vols (Paris, 1907), vol. 1, xxxix.

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doi:10.1016/j.jmedhist.2011.02.001

of Duke Robert Guiscard (d. 1085) — could have recruited a Lombard to sing the exploits of his father, but was nonetheless convinced that William, like Borsa's half-brother Marc Bohemond, was a Norman born in Apulia.[3] Almost a decade later, while Laetitia Boehm was less certain about William's ethnicity, emphasis was placed on a non-Italian origin ('Normanne oder Franzose?').[4] More recently, Kenneth Baxter Wolf suggested that William was a Lombard attached to Duke Roger's court.[5] Huguette Taviani-Carozzi has also stressed William's attachment to the Salernitan court, although she designated the poet as being Norman rather than Lombard.[6] Indubitably, the poet's name indicates a French-speaking origin, yet it has been observed that Lombards were known to give their sons and daughters Norman names, the most popular being William and Matilda.[7] Intermarriage was a common practice among the Normans and Lombards in late eleventh-century southern Italy, and it is interesting to note that both ethnic groups also married Greek speakers.[8] It will never be possible to determine William's extraction with any certainty, but given that the ensuing discussion will illustrate his Lombardo-Byzantine sympathies, it cannot be ruled out that he was the son of Greek-speaking, Lombard parents, or perhaps the result of a union between two of the three prominent ethnicities in Apulia.

Much to the chagrin of Geoffrey Malaterra, Duke Roger Borsa seems to have treated the Lombards no differently than the Normans.[9] Finishing his *gesta* probably less than a year or two after the *GRW* — that is, c. 1100–1 — the monk consistently extolled the *strenuitas* ('vigour', 'resoluteness') of his people, a treatment that necessitated a negative portrayal of those whose principalities the Normans had since absorbed. About 20 years earlier, the Cassinese Lombard Amatus wrote that God's chosen had triumphed over his people; the Lombard princes, Gisulf II of Salerno and Pandulf IV of Capua, had forfeited their right to rule on account of their manifold sins.[10] Conversely, William of Apulia tended to write about the Lombards in a positive fashion, including a treatment of Gisulf II that runs counter to the negative portraits by Amatus and Malaterra. Of course, since William claimed to have written at the request of the half-Lombard son of Robert Guiscard and Sichelgaita of Salerno, it would be expected that the poet needed to write respectfully of the duchess' people. Yet William exceeded expectations in this regard. Indeed, he may well have betrayed the feelings of a cultured Lombard aristocrat when commenting on the marriage between Guiscard and Sichelgaita: Gisulf was initially hesitant at the prospect of a union between his sister and the Norman, 'because the Gauls were seen to be a savage, barbarous, cruel and boorishly minded people'.[11] Elsewhere William wrote that Gisulf had been 'robbed of the honour of Salerno' by Robert Guiscard.[12] This is a rather startling comment, for it obviously questions the legitimacy of Norman rule at Salerno. Such a view was held by Robert's enemies, not his admirers. Seizing Gisulf's principality in 1077 had raised the ire of contemporaries, and the act would continue to be

[3] Guillaume de Pouille, *La Geste de Robert Guiscard*, ed. and trans., M. Mathieu (Instituto siciliano di studi bizantini e neoellenici, Testi e monumenti, 4, Palermo, 1961) [hereafter *GRW*], 17–23 (17).

[4] Laetitia Boehm, 'Nomen gentis Normannorum: Der Aufstieg der Normannen in Spiegel der Normannischen Historiographie', *I Normanni la loro espansione in Europa nell' alto medioevo* (Settimane di studio del Centro italiano di studi sull'alto-medioevo, 16, Spoleto, 1969), 623–704 (694).

[5] Kenneth Baxter Wolf, *Making history: the Normans and their historians in eleventh-century Italy* (Philadelphia, 1995), 126–7.

[6] Huguette Taviani-Carozzi, *La Terreur du monde: Robert Guiscard et la conquête normand en Italie. Mythe et histoire* (Paris, 1996), 20–2.

[7] Patricia Skinner, 'And her name was …? Gender and naming in medieval southern Italy', *Medieval Prosopography*, 20 (1999), 23–49 (37–8); Joanna Drell, 'Cultural syncretism and ethnic identity: the Norman "conquest" of southern Italy and Sicily', *Journal of Medieval History*, 25 (1999), 203–13 (196); Joanna Drell, *Kinship and conquest: family strategies in the principality of Salerno during the Norman period, 1077–1194* (Ithaca-London, 2002), 138–9.

[8] Graham Loud, *The age of Robert Guiscard: southern Italy and the Norman conquest* (Harlow, 2000), 286; Drell, *Kinship and conquest*, 138–9; Alex Metcalfe, *Muslims and Christians in Norman Sicily* (London, 2003), 55.

[9] Gaufredus Malaterrae, *De rebus gestis Rogerii Calabriae et Siciliae comitis et Roberti Guiscardi ducis fratis eius*, ed. E. Pontieri (Rerum Italicarum Scriptores, Racolta degli storici italiani dal cinquecento al millecinquecento, 5:1, Bologna, 1928) [hereafter *DRGR*], IV.24, 102.

[10] As noted by Graham Loud, the motif of the sinfulness of the Lombards had been used in the previous century by another Cassinese writer, Erchempert. See 'The *Gens Normannorum* — myth or reality?', *Proceedings of the Battle Conference on Anglo-Norman Studies* [hereafter *ANS*], 4 (1981), 104–16 (112); 'Introduction', in: *The History of the Normans by Amatus of Montecassino*, ed. G.A. Loud and trans. P.N. Dunbar (Woodbridge, 2004), 31.

[11] *GRW*, II.426–8, 154: 'quia Galli / Esse videbantur gens effera, barbara, dira, / Mentis inhumane.'

[12] *GRW*, III.462, 188: 'spoliatus honore Salerni'.