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William M. Aird, *Robert Curthose duke of Normandy (c. 1050-1134)*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2008. xx + 328 pp. Abbreviations, maps, genealogy, bibliography, and index. \$99.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 1-84383-310-9; \$34.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 1-8483-660-5.

Review by Stephanie Mooers Christelow, Idaho State University.

In this work, William Aird offers an account of the life and struggles of Robert Curthose, William the Conqueror's eldest son, would-be king of England, and challenged duke of Normandy. This is the first biography of the duke since that published nearly a century ago by C. W. David in 1920 and one of the few treatments to appear in print during the late twentieth century, although landmark studies of Robert's brothers and kings of England, William Rufus (1087-1100) and Henry I (1100-1135), contain significant analyses of Curthose and Normandy during their reigns.[1]

The most influential twelfth-century historian is Orderic Vitalis, a monk of St- Évroul, Normandy who portrayed Robert Curthose as lazy, pathetic and inept [2], a depiction accepted by C. W. David. David argued that Robert Curthose's failures rested on his deficient temperament and his actions endangered the stability of one of France's most important principalities. However, as a result of his thorough and meticulous research, Aird finds it necessary to counter these negative images of the duke. He contends that Curthose was a skilled diplomat, a good governor, a pious Christian and a heroic crusader, and he sets out to establish Robert's good character through a review of the surviving evidence.

The biography follows the chronology of Curthose's life and career from infancy and youth to old age and death. Throughout, Aird considers Curthose within the social context of post-Conquest Normandy. Chivalry and Christianity formed models for aristocratic behavior; feudalism dominated public affairs; and family loyalties, ambiguous though they were, informed one's future.

During his youth, Curthose exhibited the stereotypical behaviors of French youth: he learned to fight and to hunt, as well as to enjoy courtly pastimes. His likely childhood emotions, his affective relationships and his education were probably those of his peers. Chapter one, "Childhood," builds an image of young Curthose from a relative paucity of sources. Its conclusions often take the forms of inferences from these sources to suggest that Curthose epitomized the society in which he lived. Attitudes toward ceremony, siblings, parents and friends shaped Curthose's mentality and prepared him for the political life that he would embark upon when he came of age.

As with many children of the upper nobility, Robert was employed by his father, William, duke of Normandy (1035-1087) and king of England (1066-1087) to facilitate political alliances and to reduce conflict among William's opponents. Chapter two, "The Dutiful Son," outlines

Curthose's training for the governance of Normandy, both as his father's representative and as a possible heir to the duchy.

In chapter three, "The King's Son," Aird reveals Robert as intent on gaining the political control of Normandy. While this may have been likely in 1075 when William was putting down a major revolt in England, the likelihood diminished with William's victory over rebels and his return to the duchy. Both Robert and his father responded impatiently to one another during their disputes, but Robert displayed an impulsiveness that resulted in his quitting the duchy, appeals for help from his overlord, King Philip I of France, and war with his father.

Chapter four, "The Duke of Normandy, 1087-1096," describes a progression of successes and failures as Curthose attempted to assert authority in Normandy after his father's death in 1087. Robert's management of Normandy may epitomize the duke's strengths and weaknesses. A generous man, Curthose seems to have shared decision-making with his courtiers and his limited wealth with his allies. During his active reign, Curthose dispensed justice and devised policies at seasonal meetings of his court. Reliance on administrative structures was not an emphasis in his government.

We can picture the constant struggles and frustrations created by Curthose's dealings with William Rufus and with uncontrolled elements in his realm. Aird reveals an embattled duke who eagerly embarked on the First Crusade in 1095. He suggests that an ingrained piety was responsible for Robert's decision, but it is possible that Robert perceived his departure as a way to avoid further conflict.

Chapter five, "*Miles Christi*: The Soldier of Christ, 1095-1099," is an enthralling account of the seven-month journey to Constantinople, the return of captured lands to the Byzantine emperor, and the successful sieges of Antioch and Jerusalem. The many and varied sources that Aird marshals make possible a blow-by-blow account of the crusade and Robert's attempts to negotiate policy among his allies. Aird offers a vivid description of the crusaders' travel through unaccustomed climes, their ugly encounters with death, and their struggles to acquire food. Arduous though Curthose's crusading years were, they represented the finest of the duke's life. Aird depicts Curthose in his element, an inspiring leader of men. Throughout the long ordeal, Curthose "demonstrated courage of the highest order as well as the ability to command forces successfully in the most adverse of circumstances" (p. 189).

When he returned to Normandy in 1100, Curthose must have perceived the damage that his prolonged absence had caused. The "Crusade created a divide between those who went and those who stayed at home" (p. 201). The latter seemed unwilling to offer the duke the respect due him as a successful warrior, and the opposition of Norman youth intruded new contests for power. Curthose also faced the realities of Henry I's seizure of the English throne and Henry's determination to extend his authority to Normandy. Chapter six, "The Returning Hero, 1100-1106," is a sympathetic account of a weakened and weary man unable to give all his attention to his opponents. Curthose could not govern Normandy and secure peace in the duchy at the same time as he endeavored to win the English throne from Henry I.

Even so, Robert Curthose responded boldly to these challenges with an invasion of England and a successful negotiation with Henry to recognize Robert's possession of the duchy. A peaceful visit to England to intercede on the behalf of one of the enemies of the king, however, resulted in the escalation of hostilities between the brothers. Charges against Robert of invasion,

subsequent negotiations and an honorable return home were followed by Henry's assault on Normandy. Henry's destruction of Norman strongholds, the duke's helplessness as he lost the support of his friends, and his humiliating defeat at the Battle of Tinchebrai in September 1106 culminated in Curthose's capture and imprisonment.

Chapter seven, "The Captive," relates what little is known of Robert's twenty-eight years in confinement during which his loss of Normandy and the death of his son, William Clito, must have troubled him. Nonetheless, Aird suggests that Curthose enjoyed the benefits of house arrest: retirement, relief and reflection.

William Aird delves into issues relevant today. Attitudes toward one's parents and siblings and familial relations lie at the heart of Robert's activities. His reliance on his mother for support against his father, and on his sister, Adela of Blois, for arbitration between her brothers indicates that women were powerbrokers. Robert's sincere piety and his simultaneous enthusiasm for war are reflected in the activities of jihadists today. Depression and mental illness have rarely been discussed with respect to people who lived during the middle ages, although the existence of personality disorders among them has been suspected. The loss of loved ones and the expression of grief are phenomena that help us to appreciate Robert Curthose's responses to the deaths of his wife and his son.

Chapters three through six are based on a variety of narratives and together present a convincing and rich reconstruction of Curthose's life. Obstacles to piecing together a plausible story occur in chapters one, two and seven, where Aird is forced to rely on secondary accounts to fill in the outlines of Curthose's earliest and latest years. As a result, Aird raises possibilities that become certainties in the telling. If "the surviving examples of the eleventh-century visual arts are also considered, Robert and his brothers and sisters had access to vibrant and stimulating cultural resources" is one example this tendency (p. 36).

The bias inherent in contemporary narratives is problematical as well. Orderic Vitalis' history, completed in the early 1140s, reflected in large part his experiences in Normandy while Curthose was duke. Oral tradition and the memory of unrestrained Norman youth created a story in which Robert was vilified and Henry I lauded. Orderic's near contemporary, William of Malmesbury, a monk of the English abbey of Malmesbury, had an indistinct perception of Normandy's situation under Robert Curthose. His *History of the English Kings*, as Aird explains, was somewhat more favorable to Curthose.[3]

Aird's tour de force is a deft reconstruction of complex events and their significance. What may be missing is a reconciliation of Curthose's abilities with the disappointments that marred his reign. If Curthose was the adept diplomat, the skilled strategist and the heroic knight, why did his life end as tragically as it did? Aird himself was concerned to address this problem. The biography contains evidence which may resolve the issue of Curthose's ultimate failure. First was his insistence on possession of Normandy even while his father was alive; his creation of an atmosphere of distrust between him and his brothers; and his preoccupations with limiting the power of William Rufus and, thirteen years later, that of Henry I. Next, social conditions affected Robert's failure. Throughout his tenure as duke, Robert struggled to contain the private wars conducted by the Norman nobility. His decision to join the First Crusade enabled the competition for estates among them to escalate. Third, although Robert was a brave and skilled crusader, he was unable to reconcile divergent interests in the duchy upon his return home. In one of his most sensitive treatments of the duke, Aird points to the physical and mental wounds

likely inflicted on Robert as a cause of his lethargy. Later, Aird notes that Robert's "predisposition to piety, enhanced by his pilgrimage to Jerusalem, produced in him a disengagement from the world" (p. 235). Last, in an assessment of Robert's personality, Aird comments on his tragic life. "Effective lordship required more than military skill, eloquence, affability and the ability to deliver astute counsel. Adherence to notions of fidelity, honour and trust were handicaps if strong princely government was the aim" (p. 286). Robert's qualities were not conducive to survival in twelfth-century Normandy.

Considerations beyond personality and political conditions might have been applied here. Aird acknowledges that Henry I possessed clear advantages in his final battles with Curthose: money, weapons and allies (p. 232), all of which rely upon institutions of government. But administrative practices are dealt with fleetingly in this biography. And whereas administrative records help to explain the successes of William Rufus and Henry I, they are dismissed in this account. Charters produced by chanceries were relatively few; treasury accounts missing if written at all; and land surveys products of the pre-Conquest past. However, a central administration did exist in 1087 along with local authorities who adjudicated disputes and who probably collected taxes. Administrative records, such as charters with their witness lists, give evidence of meetings of ducal courts.[4]

Curthose was not known for his practicality or his creative approach to government. He was short of money to fund his enterprises on at least three occasions. This could suggest an inefficient treasury and a relaxed ducal court. The limited numbers of grants and confirmations to survive his reign may suggest that Curthose lacked finesse in the awarding of patronage which he might have utilized to reduce baronial warfare. Last, Curthose's personal style of government, which relied on the goodwill and shared governance of duke, counts and courtiers, may have been inadequate to the challenges the duke faced in Normandy.

The biography invites questions on a number of issues that might be raised in other venues. What were the social and economic impacts of Robert's rule on Normandy? To what degree did his politics represent a continuation or a departure from those that preceded and followed him? Is it possible that Curthose responded to rather than shaped the events of the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries? This absorbing book will be read and referred to, quoted and criticized by its readers. It stands on its own, not as a rejoinder to influential writers of the past, but as the standard source for the life of Robert Curthose and of Normandy.

NOTES

[1] C. W. David, *Robert Curthose, Duke of Normandy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1920). For more recent studies, see Stephanie L. Mooers, "Backers and Stabbers': Problems of Loyalty in Robert Curthose's Entourage," *Journal of British Studies* 21(1981): 1-17 and Judith A. Green, "Robert Curthose Reassessed," *Anglo-Norman Studies* 22(1999): 95-116. Key studies of William Rufus and Henry I are: Frank Barlow, *William Rufus* (London: Methuen, 1983); C. Warren Hollister, *Henry I* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001); and Judith A. Green, *Henry I, King of England and Duke of Normandy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[2] Marjorie Chibnall, ed., *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969-80), 6 vols..

[3] William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. R. A. B. Mynors, completed R. M. Thomson and M. Winterbottom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[4] David Bates, *Normandy before 1066* (London and New York: Longman, 1982), pp. 147-188.

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