

The Cycle de la Croisade: Vernacular Historiography

In the past research into cyclification processes almost always centred on the Arthurian cycle while the Charlemagne texts received far less attention and the Cycle de la Croisade was virtually neglected altogether. Such neglect was unjustified for several reasons. First, the Cycle de la Croisade is an excellent example of a well structured cycle. Furthermore, the direct and indirect functions and objectives of the Cycle de la Croisade are inextricably intertwined with its origins and the way it was received so that the opportunities for research, be it from philological, historical or anthropological points of view are vast. Finally, what should not be overlooked is the fact that with the Crusade texts cyclification started early on: a Cycle de la Croisade existed in an early form before the Vulgate Arthurian cycle came into being.

The definition for “cycle” adhered to in this paper is: a coherent collection of stories united by a central theme and brought together in a clear and stable narrative overall structure. To postulate that a cycle exists, that there is “proof of manuscript” is in my opinion a *conditio sine qua non*.¹ The Cycle de la Croisade fully meets the requirements of the definition, at every stage of its development. Before expanding on the evolution, purpose and function of the Cycle de la Croisade I would like to mention something about the cycle’s constituent texts.

It is evident that the development of the Cycle de la Croisade was protracted and gradual.² The oldest branches, *La Chanson d’Antioche*, *La Conquête de Jérusalem* and *Les Chétifs* were probably written during the first half of the twelfth century. By the end of that same century Graindor de Douai had put these branches together to form the “trilogy” that is nowadays known as the “cycle rudimentaire”. Shortly afterwards, between 1170 and 1220, this trilogy

¹ This does not mean that we cannot speculate on possible cyclic collections: it implies that we cannot with certainty prove their existence as “medieval entities”. Cf. G.H.M. Claassens, ‘The status of the “Deuxième Cycle de la Croisade”: a preliminary note’, in *Olifant* 17 (1992), pp. 119-33.

² Most of this fundamental data is collected in K.H. Bender and H. Kleber’s *Le premier cycle de la croisade. De Godefroy à Saladin: entre la chronique et le conte de fées*, Grundriss der romanischen Literaturen des Mittelalters, vol. III: Les Epopées romanes. Tome 1/2: l’épopée en France. Facs. 5 (Heidelberg: Winter, 1986), pp. 35-87. It has a comprehensive bibliography including all editions of the mentioned texts. For a somewhat different view of the genesis of the cycle see R.F. Cook, ‘“Chanson d’Antioche”, *chanson de geste: Le cycle de la croisade est-il épique?* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1980).

was appended to five new branches: *La Naissance du Chevalier au Cygne*, *Le Chevalier au Cygne*, *La Fin d'Elias*, *Les Enfances Godefroi* and *Le Retour de Cornumarant*. In this set of five branches things are related about the youth of Godefroid de Bouillon and his legendary grandfather the Swan Knight and modern critics have given this the generic name "épopées intermédiaires". In the second half of the thirteenth century a number of continuations were added to the "cycle rudimentaire" and "épopées intermédiaires" combination: *La Chrétienté Corbaran*, *La Prise d'Acre*, *La Mort Godefroi* and *La Chanson des Rois Baudouin*. These continuations of *La Conquête de Jérusalem* outline the history of the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem up until the time of the accession of the Muslim ruler Saladin at the end of the twelfth century. The cycle in its most extensive form is to be found in a Flemish manuscript from around 1275 that is preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris under the shelf mark fonds français 12569. There are indications however that the cycle did not end with the story of Saladin's rise.³

What is most remarkable is the fact that in this vast cycle texts of a widely divergent character were amassed. *La Naissance du Chevalier au Cygne* combines the epic form with the narrative of a "conte de fées" and thus bears a striking resemblance to an Arthurian romance. In terms of form and content the *Chanson d'Antioche* has many characteristics of a chanson de geste and, just like in *La Conquête de Jérusalem*, a strong hagiographical element. In the *Jérusalem* continuations by contrast the hagiographical element is replaced by a formal historiographical structure so that these continuations have much more in common with the verse chronicle form. The integrating of the separate branches into one cycle may be termed successful. The resultant cycle has a high degree of coherence without the unique character of the individual branches being blurred. This "unity in diversity" is effected, amongst other things, by a certain degree of uniformity at formal level: the "laisse monorimée" in alexandrines is dominant within the cycle. This stylistic characteristic proves that evidently similar literary forms and techniques can be used to create different kinds of texts which can subsequently be combined to form a larger structure.⁴ In my view this greater structure of the cycle is dominated by its primary function which is, to provide a vernacular history of the crusades (I will come back to the secondary functions later). This primary function consists of the following characteristics: 1. The Cycle de la Croisade which gives in the vernacular a full history of the first and most successful crusade was written at about the same time as its Latin

³ In certain incomplete manuscripts (London, British Museum, the Additional MS. 36615 and Turin, Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria MS. L-III-25) traces of "a Saladin text" have been preserved, cf. P.R. Grillo, 'Considérations sur la version de Londres-Turin des continuations du premier cycle de la croisade', in K.H. Bender, éd., *Les Epopées de la Croisade. Premier colloque international (Trèves, 6-11 août 1984)* (Stuttgart: Steiner Verlag, 1987), pp. 91-97. We might deduce from the Middle Dutch Crusade epic tradition that the Cycle de la Croisade could have been extended with "a Roman de Saladin" and "Roman de Cassant". Cf. G.H.M. Claassens, *De Middelnederlandse kruisvaartromans* (Amsterdam: Schiphouwer en Brinkman, 1993), pp. 98-104.

⁴ In my opinion this invites us to reconsider our modern terminology. Concepts like "chanson de geste", "roman courtois" and "roman chevaleresque" do not seem to properly integrate the aspects of "form" and "contents".

counterpart. Unlike the story of the *expeditio crucis* that was not accessible to the *illiterati* the Cycle de la Croisade was accessible to an unschooled public and as such it functioned as a parallel historiography. Such parallelism also emanates from the mutual textual relationships between the Latin chronicles and the Cycle de la Croisade.⁵

2. The cycle's time scale is very clear-cut and realistic. The story of the Swan Knight has its roots in "the mists of time" but with the arrival of Godefroid de Bouillon on the scene a concrete, traceable, linear time structure comes to dominate the cycle. What one should not forget here is, that for most of the audience, the crusades constituted contemporary history in which they as individuals were undoubtedly somehow involved. I am certain that medieval audiences must have viewed the stories in the cycle as an account of "wie es eigentlich gewesen" (Leopold von Ranke): exact reports of how things really were.⁶

3. For the greater part the cycle has a "multiple protagonist" (the *christianitas*; the whole of Christendom) thus forming a link with sacred world history. The story of the crusades may be seen as a "tranche" of the unfolding of God's master plan relating to creation.

4. With the addition of the Swan Knight legend to the "cycle rudimentaire" the accent shifts to dynastic historiography (with a regional flavour) because the biographical c.q. genealogical element is stressed. The dynastic element is further emphasized in the *Jérusalem* continuations. These biographical, genealogical and dynastic elements give the cycle as a whole a high degree of coherence. What is more important though is that it also provides a clear link with world history, the life and death of consecutive individuals creates a strong impression of continuity within the "chain of generations".⁷

This brings me to the actual genesis of the cycle and to its secondary functions and purposes. At every stage of its development the cycle underwent revisions in its content. As was stated above the history of *christianitas* on its way to Jerusalem, as told in the "cycle rudimentaire" became a genealogical-dynastic history of Godefroid de Bouillon when the "épopées intermédiaires" were added. When subsequently the cycle was extended with *Les continuations de la Conquête de Jérusalem* one could detect a return to history: once again the cycle became an open ended linear historiographical narrative. To a large extent this development would seem to be determined by the social and cultural environ-

⁵ Cf. S. Duparc-Quioc, 'La composition de la *Chanson d'Antioche*', in *Romania* 83 (1962), pp. 10-15, 225-37 and 247; C. Cahen, *La syrie du Nord à l'époque des Croisades et la principauté franque d'Antioche*, Bibliothèque Orientale I (Paris: Institut Français de Damas, 1940), pp. 12-16.

⁶ Which implies that I will regard the Cycle de la Croisade (and not only this cycle) as a narrative/historic historiography *avant la lettre*. Cf. F. Ankersmit, 'Een moderne verdediging van het historisme. Geschiedenis en identiteit', in F. Ankersmit, *De navel van de geschiedenis. Over interpretatie, representatie en historische realiteit* (Groningen: Historische Uitgeverij Groningen, 1990), pp. 126-48.

⁷ Cf. A.J. Gurjewitsch, *Das Weltbild des mittelalterlichen Menschen* (München: Beck, 1982), pp. 98-187. See also F.J. Schmale, *Funktion und Formen mittelalterlicher Geschichtsschreibung. Eine Einführung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1985), pp. 30-32 and 109-11.

ment that generated the cycle. It is therefore quite probable that the “cycle rudimentaire” had its origins in Flemish-Picardian noble circles⁸ whereas the “épopées intermédiaires” that were added to the cycle were commissioned by duke Henry I of Brabant (d.1235).⁹ The *Jérusalem* continuations were perhaps written at the instigation of members of the Picardian nobility who had been very much involved in the First Crusade and the Kingdom of Jerusalem though connections with Brabant would also seem plausible at this point.¹⁰

In each of the respective situations and at each stage of its development the cycle functioned in a different way. The “cycle rudimentaire” celebrates the achievements of Christians, particularly the Flemish and Picardian contingent, and it acts as an *excitatorium* for a new expedition on the eve of the Third Crusade. When the “épopées intermédiaires” were added the combination still functioned as an *excitatorium* but in this case for the German crusade of 1197 in which only duke Henry I of Brabant achieved a degree of military success. Apart from this the extended cycle also helped Henry’s European politics. By incorporating Godefroid de Bouillon into the genealogical tree of the ducal house of Brabant Henry created for himself the opportunity to usurp Godefroid’s claims to the Lotharingian heritage (as did Henry’s successors after him).¹¹ Clearly much research still needs to be done into the *Jérusalem* continuations but it does seem plausible to postulate that they were meant to evoke the glorious years of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem just at a point in history when the kingdom’s very existence was under serious threat.¹²

The Cycle de la Croisade was not unaffected by general developments in twelfth and thirteenth century vernacular literature (e.g. the emergence of the roman courtois and the rise of prose). In this respect the cycle did not evolve at a similar rate to the “matière de France” and the “matière de Bretagne”.¹³ The oldest known prose version of this cycle dates from around 1275 (Paris, Bibliothèque National, ms. f. fr. 781) and it gives a clear insight into the way in which the cycle was perceived at that period.¹⁴ The legendary character of the Swan Knight received negative criticism from the second half of the twelfth century onwards (in the chronicle of William of Tyre) but the branches that dealt

⁸ Cf. S. Duparc-Quioc, *La Chanson d’Antioche*, 2 vols. (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1976-78), II, pp. 228-34. See Duparc-Quioc, ‘La composition’ pp. 240-41 and L.A.M. Sumberg, *La Chanson d’Antioche, étude historique et littéraire. Une chronique en vers français de la Première Croisade par le pèlerin Richard* (Paris: Editions Picard, 1968), pp. 321-23.

⁹ Cf. Claassens, *De Middelnederlandse kruisvaartromans*, pp. 47-50.

¹⁰ Cf. P.R. Grillo, *The Jérusalem Continuations. Part II* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1987), pp. xxxiii-xxxv. See also Claassens, *De Middelnederlandse kruisvaartromans*, p. 71.

¹¹ Cf. Claassens, *De Middelnederlandse kruisvaartromans*, pp. 119-20.

¹² The appearance of the continuations coincides with the final hour of the Latin Kingdom, culminating in the fall of Acre in 1291.

¹³ This is another reason why the Cycle de la Croisade (as well as other vernacular literature on the crusades) deserves more attention in the discussion on the development of medieval vernacular literature in general. Cf. Claassens, *De Middelnederlandse kruisvaartromans*, pp. 364-89.

¹⁴ Cf. J.A. Nelson’s paper from the 26th International Congress on Medieval Studies (May, 9-12 1991, Kalamazoo, Michigan). I am grateful to Professor Nelson for providing me with the text of this paper which is currently being prepared for publication.

with the history of the crusades were viewed as historiographically valid well into the thirteenth century.¹⁵

Though it is true that the genesis of the Cycle de la Croisade was influenced by trends in vernacular literature this was not the single most important factor. The mechanism that steered the development was not an autonomous literary one. In my opinion historiographical and propagandistic factors were far more important than the changing landscape of literary fashion. As I see it the historio-sociological approach would seem to be the best approach to adopt when further investigating the Cycle de la Croisade and other narrative cycles in medieval literature. It is my contention that the Arthurian cycle should not be seen as the classic example of cyclification for the simple reason that with literary giants like Chrétien de Troyes Arthurian literature was exceptional by any standards. In other words we should not be prevented from looking at ordinary cycles (such as the Cycle de la Croisade) with an open mind just because the “perfect” Vulgate Cycle stands in our way.

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¹⁵ In a manuscript dating from around 1275 (Paris, Bibliothèque National, ms. f. fr. 786, fol. 92r) the combination “cycle rudimentaire” and “épopées intermédiaires” is called a “roumans”, in the literary sense of the word.