THE WRITTEN WORLD

Past and Place in the Work of Orderic Vitalis

AMANDA JANE HINGST

University of Notre Dame Press
Notre Dame, Indiana

© 2009 University of Notre Dame Press
Monks, Orderic Vitalis said, need only two things to survive: wood and water. Historians need three: money, books, and friends. The first was provided by a Jacob K. Javits Fellowship from the U.S. Department of Education, which supported four years of my graduate study, including two years of work on the dissertation that became this book. The University of California, Berkeley, also provided financial support through the Fletcher Jones Fellowship and the Dean’s Normative Time Fellowship.

The books, medieval and modern, needed for this study came from libraries around the world. The Département des Manuscrits (division occidentale) at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, graciously allowed me access to Orderic Vitalis’s autograph manuscript of his Historia Ecclesiastica as well as many other treasures. Thanks are also due to the staffs of the Bibliothèque de la ville in Rouen, of the Mediatèque de la communauté urbaine d’Alençon, and of the British Library, all of whom were consistently helpful and understanding. Catherine Hilliard, the librarian at St John’s College, Oxford, kindly gave me permission to use images from one of that library’s manuscripts and helped to provide me with photographs. Back in the United States, staff members at the many excellent libraries of the University of California, Berkeley, provided me with a wealth of assistance, as did those at the Flora Lamson Hewlett Library at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley and at the John M. Olin Library at Washington University in St. Louis. The Robbins Collection in the Law Library of the School of Law at
the University of California, Berkeley, gave me a quiet and congenial place to work as well as access to some rare reference materials.

From my California days I must also thank Geoffrey Koziol, my graduate advisor, and Susanna Elm, Steven Justice, Jennifer Miller, R. I. Moore, Maureen Miller, and the participants in the California Medieval History Seminar at the Huntington Library in May 2004, where I presented a version of chapter 1 of this study. From St. Louis, I want to thank Joe Loewenstein and everyone involved in the Interdisciplinary Project in the Humanities at Washington University in St. Louis, where I spent two lovely years teaching as an Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow. I still can’t believe how much I learned.

Charity Urbanski has read my work, given me reliable counsel, and was my companion through Normandy; I couldn’t have done it all without her (especially since I can’t drive a stick shift . . .). David Spafford, Ruth Jewett-Warner (who gave me an invaluable gift at a particularly opportune time), Dan Warner, Rebecca Moyle, Viðar Pálsson, Mike Carver, and Mark Pegg all provided suggestions, hospitality, and support. With Jocelin of Brakelond, the late Robert Brentano taught me how to look for the world in a single text. He died before this study was anything more than a vague idea—my work, and the world, are the poorer for his absence. Thanks also to Barbara Hanrahan at the University of Notre Dame Press for her enthusiasm and support, and Matthew Dowd for his careful attention.

Orderic reminds his readers that “the state of the world is driven by change.” My family has cheered me on through many changes over the years, and I owe them more than I can say. My sister Rachel Hingst always reminds me that I have choices, and that the world is wider and more varied by far than medieval geographers could ever have imagined. My parents, Warren and Susan Hingst, have supported me through some unconventional choices, and have never doubted that I could do this, all the more so in those many moments when I did doubt. So this book is dedicated to my father and my mother, with love.
“In the year of our Lord 1118, on the vigil of the birth of the Lord, a violent gale leveled many buildings and woods in western regions,” the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman monk and historian Orderic Vitalis opened the twelfth book of his Historia Ecclesiastica. He immediately went on. “After the death of Pope Paschal, Giovanni of Gaeta, previously chancellor and master of the Roman pontificate, was elected pope as Gelasius and canonically consecrated by the Roman clerics against the wishes of the Emperor. Then Archbishop Bourdin of Braga, called Gregory VIII by his partisans, was intruded into the Church of God with imperial consent. This then grew into a grievous dissension,” and, like the storm that chronologically and narratively ushered in the schism, “a fierce persecution rose up and violently disturbed the Catholic people.” But this did not exhaust the significance of the gale that had marked the changing of that year. “At that time in Brittany the Devil appeared to a certain woman lying in bed after childbirth, and taking on the image of her husband he brought the food for which she had asked.” Deceived by the illusion, she ate. “A little while later her husband returned, heard what had happened, became very much afraid, and came back with a priest. The priest, invoking the name of the Lord, touched the woman, sprinkled her with holy water, and told her what to say if the impostor were to return. Satan came again, and following the instructions she questioned him”—inquisuit, a questioning in search of truth. “‘Right before Christmas a very great gale resounded dreadfully, and greatly terrified us,’ she said. ‘What did it portend? It destroyed churches and homes, flung the tops of towers to the ground,
and cut down innumerous oaks in the woods.’” The laywoman’s words, remember, were scripted by the Breton priest and devised by the learned priest Orderic as a query into the nature of things obscure. “Satan replied, ‘It was decreed by the Lord that a great portion of mankind would perish, but the powerful prayer of the heavenly host persuaded Him to spare the men and command that huge trees fall instead. However, before three years pass there will be terrifying tribulation on the Earth, and very many illustrious people will succumb to destruction.’” Having learned what she wished to know, the woman splashed some holy water on the Devil and he disappeared.²

Orderic scraped nineteen lines of his graceful brown script off the parchment surface of what is now folio 157v of MS Latin 10913 in the Bibliothèque nationale de France so that he could squeeze the story of Satan’s inquisition by a postpartum Breton woman in at this point in his Historia. The erasure is so complete that it is impossible to eke out any glimpse of the previous text, and it can be dated no more precisely than between the mid-1130s and Orderic’s death circa 1142.³ Between the schism that follows immediately in the gale’s narrative wake and the appearance of the Devil in Brittany run some twenty-three lines concerning the conflict between England’s King Henry I and his rival Louis VI of France and eight more on the fate of Pope Gelasius, who in 1119 “passed quickly away like a morning frost touched by the breath of God.”⁴ The tale is immediately followed by another evil sign, this one in England at Ely where a mysterious Jerusalemite ordered a pregnant cow to be sliced open to reveal three piglets; the deaths of Count William of Évreux, Queen Edith-Matilda, and Robert, count of Meulan followed, Orderic reported.

Modern historians have tended to pass over these stories, these portents that dot the Historia Ecclesiastica as they do so many medieval histories, and hurry on to the portions of Orderic’s account alleged to be more accurate, more believable, more real.⁵ Even Mark Twain, of all the unlikely critics, scorned the cosmic interpretations offered up by twelfth-century historiography, observing about Orderic’s younger English contemporary Henry of Huntingdon, “Sometimes I am half persuaded that he is only a guesser, and not a good one. The divine wisdom must surely be of a better quality than he makes it out to be.”
pretation of God’s plan was not a skill prized highly by Twain. “I could learn to interpret,” he grumbled, “but I have never tried, I get so little time.” Perhaps Twain would have preferred Orderic’s *Historia Ecclesiastica* to Henry of Huntingdon’s *Historia Anglorum*. “I am unable to penetrate the divine judgment by which all things happen,” Orderic warned his readers, “and I cannot lay open the secret causes of things, but simply collect the historical annals requested by my companions. Who can penetrate the inscrutable?”

But the story of the Devil’s startling revelation of humanity’s escape from the Christmas gale was neither inscrutable nor incidental to Orderic. It was important to him, important enough for him to go back in his *Historia* and rub out something else. It was important because the storm betrayed the consubstantiality among the elements of God’s creation. Trees and men, Earth and humanity—the heavens and Earth fashioned by God on the first day of His Creation were recognized by Orderic to possess an elemental and persistent involvement with the humans made on the sixth. Human history was not played out on the Earth but with it. While people could read the actions of the physical world—meteorological and astrological, routine and marvelous—as portents and elements of God’s plan, the connections between the mortal and the terrestrial, though deeply felt and intrinsically sympathetic, were correlative rather than causative. They happened “at intervals of time through the hidden causes of the world itself,” as the redoubtable Augustine of Hippo wrote, though “nevertheless determined and regulated by divine providence,” of course. “That autumn was stormy in Normandy,” Orderic said of the year 1106, “with thunder and rain and war,” three parallel symptoms of the chaos affecting the human and earthly elements of God’s creation.

The recording of these portents was a classic element of the medieval historical tradition, but in the twelfth century some writers, like Orderic, relied increasingly on these traditional historical components—storms, comets, meteor showers—as a way of testifying to the depth of humanity’s historical experience of creation. This historiographical impulse coincided with the revived interest in natural philosophy that blossomed in the cathedral schools. The historian, like the philosopher, looked to plot the relationship between the fleeting generations of
humanity and the stability of the world’s terrain. The elemental rapport between the Earth and humankind that made omens historiographically significant laid the foundations for the historicized geography that shaped twelfth-century historical writing and is especially pivotal and evocative in Orderic Vitalis’s wide-ranging *Historia Ecclesiastica*. The use of geography—the physical terrain of the world, both actual and imagined—as an organizing principle distinguishes the historical narratives that flourished in the twelfth century, and even a few of those from the eleventh, from the annalistic tradition of the earlier middle ages in which the progressive march of years dictated the narrative of events. These earlier, annalistic histories, such as those by Flodoard and Richer of Reims, were by no means unsophisticated, but they were primarily unconcerned with the impact of geographical space on human society through time.

The high medieval historian, on the other hand, was, in his own way, always a geographer. The meaning of geography was not then, nor is it now, found in borders or capital cities or population figures, but rather in the intimacy between human activity and physical space, the ways in which each reciprocally imbues the other with meaning. Human society, made up of three-dimensional material bodies as it is, could not exist without a material space to cradle and shape its eccentricities and intimacies, its diversity and violence. Nor could human memory survive without the strong pull of the spatial to spark recollection at so many levels, from a peculiarly shaped hill reminding a prehistoric hunter of a dangerous animal that lurked nearby to the highly technical topographical mnemonics perfected by professional mnemonicists and by medieval scholars.

High medieval historians both explicitly and intuitively recognized geography’s significance for the understanding and narration of human affairs. And this organizing geography of twelfth-century chroniclers was not merely historical, not a simple recapitulation of the spatial layout of the past. Rather, these writers *historicized* the places and spaces of their works, recognizing and exploiting the intimacy between human activity and the physical landscape as it developed meaning through time. The exegete and theologian Hugh of Saint-Victor, an exact contemporary of Orderic’s and a man of intense historical inclination though not quite
a historian himself, set out the essence of this relationship. “There are three things upon which the investigation of things done especially depend,” he instructed in the prologue to his very schematic chronicle, “namely, the people by whom things were done, the places in which they were done, and the time at which they were done,” a triumvirate that provided a foundation for both historical recollection and historical meaning. The terrain of the Earth, in contrast with the transitory passing of human lives and memories, offered a physical continuity that allowed the passage of time to be plotted on the contours of the Earth’s topography through both a cultural memory and written history of place. The Earth’s landscape thus provided a persisting structure in the anthropological sense, in that the inertia of the topography of an area, its long-term recognizability, allowed people to attribute a cultural and historical significance to their physical surroundings that could stretch far into the past, even to time mythical and immemorial. But at the same time the inevitable changeableness of human society—“the state of the world is driven by change,” as Orderic noted—meant that people continually adapted the meaning imbued in the landscape to their own cultural needs, sometimes by trying to erase the memories linked to certain locations, to wipe the landscape clean, but more often by reinterpreting the terrain’s meaningful past in the light of present concerns. It is this complexity, this balance between inertia and change, that gives the word “landscape” its uniquely flexible meaning, encompassing at the same time the material terrain (as in landscape architecture), an artistic representation of that terrain (a landscape painting), and the spatial quality of a human institution (the political landscape).

This history grounded in the terrestrial world recognized no incompatibility between the human soul in its quest for salvation—the fundamental plot of medieval historical narrative—and the material surroundings that shaped, organized, and historicized this quest. “The eternal Creator wisely and beneficially governs the changes of time and events,” Orderic explained in his Historia Ecclesiastica. “This we see plainly in the winter and summer, and we sense it no less in the cold and the heat; this we weigh carefully in the rise and fall of all things, and we can rightly probe it in the great variety of God’s works. Thus manifold histories are produced concerning the many sorts of events that happen
on the Earth every day, and sharp-tongued historians are provided with much material for the telling.’ 24 This, the temporal experience of humanity with God as enacted in the landscape of Christendom, was to Orderic the meaning of historical writing and the motive for his work. 25 In this passage Orderic came very close to Hugh of Saint-Victor’s definition, setting out the what (eventi, events), where (in mundo, in the world), and when (coditie, daily) of historical investigation. 26 It was not just the events but their situation on the Earth and in time, their historicized geography, that made up human history. The unraveling of the vagaries of human life in the Historia Ecclesiastica required Orderic to envision his world’s terrain—past and present, physical and social, natural and architectural, political and ecclesiastic—in all its suppleteness and adaptability, its hauntingly spatial embodiment of the past, and also its practical applicability in the recasting of the current geographies of power as seen from his desk in the scriptorium at the Norman and Benedictine monastery that modern historians refer to as Saint-Évroult but that Orderic invariably called by the toponym of Ouche. 27

“Considering what has happened in the past, I strongly believe,” averred Orderic in the prologue to his life’s work, “that someone will rise up who will be much more astute than I and more able to explore the consequences of the various things that happen throughout the world, and who will perhaps draw something from my slips of parchment, and from others like mine, which he will kindly introduce into his chronicle and narration for the edification of the future.” 28 Orderic’s vast Historia Ecclesiastica, all 602 folios of extant autograph manuscript containing eleven of the work’s thirteen books (supplemented by an almost-contemporary copy of the absent two), is considerably more than a few “slips of parchment.” 29 These vellum pages are corralled today into three bulging and unattractive modern volumes held in the Département des manuscrits, division occidentale, at the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris—two bound in bruised red leather, known as MS Latin 5506, parts I and II, which contain books I and II and books III through VI, respectively; the other encased in battered brown, MS Latin 10913,
with books IX through XIII prefaced by four orphaned folios of the Historia Francorum senonensis mistakenly bound in. These parchment pages are of unassuming and slightly irregular size, from 14 x 23.5 cm to 15.5 x 24 cm, just slightly larger than a standard sheet of stationery or a largish paperback book. They normally hold thirty-three or thirty-four lines of text, occasionally increasing to thirty-five or thirty-six, and sometimes Orderic even managed to pack in as many as forty-four. The quality of the parchment varies, slightly better in MS Latin 5506 (II) where Orderic began his historical work, a little worse towards the end of the Historia when he was writing much more quickly and running through more material. The folios range in color from a deep cream to a tea-stained brown, and throughout they display missing corners and carefully patched tears, often revealing their animal origins by some residual hairiness and the appearance of skin. The original Historia Ecclesiastica was, in its quality, the paperback book of the monastic scriptorium, practical and private rather than stylish and intended for display. Orderic’s beautiful handwriting, however—in ink tinted most commonly a medium brown though occasionally veering towards orange or black and with intermittent capitals in red, blue, and green—gives the pages a certain unaffected attractiveness that goes beyond the materials themselves.

Orderic’s distinctive hand, with its rather angular quality, its peaks and practiced curves, echoes the elaborately knotted Anglo-Saxon and Celtic art of his native England, where he was born on 16 February 1075 in the fortified marcher town of Shrewsbury and where he learned to read and write as a child under the tutelage of the English priest Siward. Half-English himself through his mother, who apparently died while he was still too young for the memory of her to be fixed in his adult mind, Orderic called himself Angligena, English-born, for the rest of his life. His father, Odelerius of Orléans, was a Frenchman who had traveled to England after the Conquest of 1066 as a priest in the household of Roger II of Montgomery, one of William the Conqueror’s closest friends and allies. Though sent as an oblate to the Benedictine monastery of Ouche in Normandy when he was ten years old, Orderic nevertheless maintained a strong affection for the land of his birth, one evident
throughout his *Historia Ecclesiastica* and also in his copy of another ecclesiastical history, that of his idol Bede, which Orderic himself carefully and lovingly inscribed on large, beautiful, white parchment.34

But Orderic was not, like William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntingdon, the contemporaries with whom he is often grouped, an English historian. By his late twenties or early thirties he was already engaged in a major revision of William of Jumièges’s iconic Norman chronicle, and this work plunged him into the history and myths of Normandy, his adopted home.35 “Brought here from the furthest reaches of Mercia,” he said from his Norman cloister, “a ten-year-old English-born boy, an uncultured and ignorant stranger mixed in with knowing natives, inspired by God I have tried to bring forth in writing the deeds and events of the Normans for the Normans.”36 In the beginning these Normans were just his fellow monks and the patrons of his abbey of Ouche, for Orderic’s *Historia Ecclesiastica* had a modest start as a foundation narrative of the abbey in its Norman milieu, commissioned by Ouche’s abbot Roger of Le Sap around 1114.37 But the world outside the cloister kept intruding, and Orderic, too talented to be bound by the conventions of monastic institutional history, realized that he had to write more.38 In the end even the Norman world, which had for more than two centuries been stretching itself from the moors of northern England to the Moorish lands of Sicily, was not wide enough for Orderic to achieve his historiographical vision. And so what began as an account of an obscure Benedictine abbey hidden away in the forested Norman Pays d’Ouche grew into a chaotic, intense, monumental yet detailed, politically astute, and profoundly Christian work in thirteen books that, in its final form, began with a *Vita Christi*, lingered long with the fractious and roving Normans, followed the first crusaders to Jerusalem, reveled in the lives of various saints, critiqued the kings and princes and prelates of the age, and ended with an intensely personal prayer.

This building up of the Christian world through time did not come easily or quickly. The Benedictine life, with its relentless communal liturgy, did not allow much personal leisure, and it took Orderic almost thirty years to complete his thirteen books. The first two (which received their current designations as books III and IV after Orderic re-
organized his work in 1136 or 1137) were composed between 1114 and 1125 and dealt primarily with the abbey and its political surroundings. Orderic next, around 1127, set out in book V the lineage of the archbishops of Rouen, Normandy’s only archepiscopal see. The early 1130s saw the composition of the bulk of book VI, again with a focus on the abbey, and also books VII and VIII on the Anglo-Norman world. Book IX, which covered the First Crusade, was written no later than 1135, the year that Orderic also took up again the history of England, Normandy, and the Holy Land in book X. Books XI and XII continue in the same vein, a history of Christendom as Orderic knew it, and were written in large part between 1135 and 1137. At the same time, Orderic compiled the new book I, which began with a vita Christi based on the Gospels and continued with a chronicle of ecclesiastical and secular affairs, and also worked on book II on the acts of the apostles and the lineage of the popes. The historian then capped off his Historia Ecclesiastica around 1137 with a prologue at the beginning to introduce the work and book XIII at the end, which continued the story of Christendom’s history. The bulk of the Historia Ecclesiastica was thus complete by 1137, when Orderic was sixty-two years old. He added some material up until 1141, and probably died soon after. The name Ordricus appears in memorial in the abbey of Ouche’s calendar on 13 July, written in a small, clear, trained hand in unfading dark brown ink.

The medieval genre of history writing has not been neglected by modern historians. Many scholars, more than it would be possible to list here, have probed the techniques and tropes and reputation of history as literature, and have looked into the medieval historian’s understanding of evidence, of precedence, of historicity. They have examined the subjects, subgenres, redactions, continuations, and circulation of histories over the centuries of western historical consciousness, and have provided an intensely detailed and invaluable scholarly tradition on the form, function, and meaning of historiography during the middle ages. As a historian Orderic was, in many ways, typical of his eleventh- and twelfth-century age—typical in that he followed the precedents of the
great Christian historians like Eusebius, Jerome, Orosius, and Bede, but also in that he joined some of his contemporaries in reshaping the genre of history writing to make it more responsive to the concerns of the time.42

But Orderic did not write his *Historia Ecclesiastica* to provide the future with an example of the genre of history writing. He wrote it to provide the future with a vision of his world, a vision that, he believed, the future could not do without. To Orderic the genre of history was a means, not an end. Historians “reveal the past to future generations ungrudgingly,” he wrote, and they “have willingly gathered together writings for the continuing benefit of the future.”43 The fullness of history, Orderic knew, could not be preserved intact; the limitations of writing and of the human spirit prevented it. But he believed that, even so, “benevolent future generations, if they could restore it and could recover the lost pieces, would, briskly shaking off their idleness, rise up and willingly strive after the flower and fruit of the unseen work and ardently search with diligent discernment.”44

This fiercely optimistic vision of history demands that the modern historian try to reach beyond the *Historia Ecclesiastica* as a representative of a literary genre and into the world of which Orderic’s history is a relic, still powerful if sometimes uncooperative and occasionally obscure.45 Cloistered in his scriptorium in Normandy’s hinterlands, Orderic participated in his world by means of written and oral sources, materials that in modern jargon might be boiled down to the word “texts.” In this he was no different from present-day historians, whose vision of Orderic’s world is also contingent upon texts—often the very same texts that Orderic used and that he anticipated would be read in company with his own textual production.46 Orderic never doubted that he could know his world to the best of human ability (true knowledge being reserved only for God) by means of texts, that the world of the text, written and oral, was real to one who understood the power and limitations of human language and society. Both the power and the limitations were, and are, great. But within those limitations a real world, a human and physical world, a world of actions and landscape and meaning, could still be made. And Orderic’s world can still be found, at least some version of it, in the eight-hundred-year-old parchment pages of his *Historia Ecclesiastica*. 
But why should the twenty-first century care about Orderic’s world? Why should this obscure Norman monk—who quietly dwelled far from courts or crusades, whose ancestry and life were unremarkable, and whose history was apparently too unwieldy for wide circulation—still matter? Nearly every modern scholar of the high middle ages could no doubt comment on Orderic’s usefulness, for the wide and anecdotal nature of his *Historia* has made it a favorite of historians who mine it for information about everything from aristocratic prosopography to battlefield tactics to Church councils. This, though, is utility, not significance. Orderic’s significance lies simply in who he was, a man of the eleventh and twelfth centuries—an educated man, yes, an intelligent man, perceptive, eloquent, creative, sympathetic, judgmental, hopeful, worried, joyous, tormented, and at peace, but still just a man. He was not a king, a bishop, a heretic, a criminal, a soldier, or a saint. He was just a man, a monk no different from the rest—“neither better than good men nor worse than bad ones,” as Orderic would quote his abbot’s saying about another ordinary man who lived through extraordinary times. Orderic was an ordinary person, and that is why he should matter. His thoughts were as complicated, fragmented, and inconsistent as those of any other individual, his loves and hates as arbitrary and as passionate. He may not have been famous in his own day, but neither are most of us, and that doesn’t make our views of our age any less meaningful, moving, representative, or unique. Orderic is important because he cared enough to spend a lifetime writing history for anyone who would listen. The fact that people didn’t listen then does not mean that we shouldn’t listen now.

“I am occupied with probing and laying out the fate of the Christian people in the modern world,” Orderic explained, “so I aspire to call this present little book an *Historia Ecclesiastica.*” And it is—a history of the Church in the broadest sense of humanity’s experience with God on Earth. Despite his isolation in a Benedictine cloister on Normandy’s southern marches Orderic’s historiographic gaze swept through Christendom from end to end, with long attention to the Anglo-Norman lands that the historian knew intimately as home. Christendom was, for Orderic, not just a community of believers but a meaningful and material landscape, a terrestrial manifestation of God’s Church on Earth, a geography of salvation. Orderic wrote this landscape into the narrative of his
Historia, sometimes implicitly, sometimes plainly, always with the recognition that space and time were inseparable, that humanity and geography together made up the material of human history. Orderic’s Historia is one of the most revealing products of an intellectual tradition that increasingly saw Christendom’s topography not merely as a stage for human action but as a consequential participant in the world through time. It is a particularly fertile source for the study of this spatial negotiation. As a member of an Anglo-Norman community united through politics and family while unmistakably divided geographically by the English Channel as well as by language, ethnicity, and power, Orderic was well-aware of the entanglements of past and place. Through the uniquely encompassing, intelligent, vibrant, and personal vision of his narrative, Orderic captured the results and also the process of this renegotiation of Christendom’s meaningful landscape.

“Geography,” says Yi-Fu Tuan, one of the discipline’s most influential modern thinkers, “is the study of the earth as the home of human beings.” Orderic, at various times and under various circumstances, might have called many things home—his monastery, Normandy, England, the inhabited world as defined by classical geography, Christendom, the cosmos. All of these took part in the geography of the Historia Ecclesiastica. And like any home, Orderic built his upon unremarkable foundations: the tropes of desert sanctity that defined Christendom’s monastic traditions; the geographical models laid out by classical thinkers and adopted by medieval historians; the cultural trends of crusade and Christology that permeated the intellectual atmosphere of his lifetime. But Orderic then took these commonplace foundations and built a world like no other. It was a world that saw in monastic tradition the building blocks of place, that viewed classical geography as something that could be both manipulated and shattered, that used crusade to talk not about the Holy Land but about a homeland, and that saw in Christ’s life and death an all-encompassing model for human history in the material world. Orderic Vitalis’s Historia Ecclesiastica exposes the ways in which an individual could take the cultural, social, spatial, and intellectual norms of his time and transform them into a geographical vision that is ordinary and unique, traditional and revolutionary, emblematic and eccentric, all at the same time. In most ways Orderic’s geographical home was shared
by others of his age, with the same hills and streams, the same landscapes, the same limits, and the same conventions. But this shared world abounds with a remarkable color and shimmer, a glory and violence that can be seen only through individual eyes. Yes, Orderic’s world, his home, is the idiosyncratic vision of an unusual man, but that is just the point. His geography demonstrates how the cultural and intellectual trends of a society can become the personal and intimate experience of an individual. It is this singular entanglement of heritage and immediacy, and of past and place—a geography of monastery, community, regnum, Christendom, and cosmos—that unfolds here as Orderic Vitalis takes his readers on a tour through the history and landscape of his world.