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978-0-521-76099-7 - Flanders and the Anglo-Norman World, 1066–1216

Eljas Oksanen

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

In the teaching, study and dissemination of history, a strong and perhaps inescapable tendency to organisation along national lines prevails. This propensity is witnessed by any number of undergraduate curricula, catalogues of research libraries and shelves of high-street bookshops. The role assigned to medieval historiography, in particular, has been to chart the early emergence and development of modern states and their institutions.¹ This study examines a relationship that does not fit the approved pattern. It concerns a regional principedom that is today no sovereign state – which does not even fully lie within the bounds of any one contemporary state – and a transmarine accumulation of territories that many have been inclined to view as destined to be pulled apart by the centrifugal forces that shaped modern England and France.

A study should strive to reflect the character of its era. Over the course of the late ninth and the tenth centuries in the western third of the former Carolingian Empire, in what was to become France, political authority devolved to a great extent to local institutions, castellans and lords. Simultaneously and subsequently the region was to be gradually consolidated by the more successful members of its higher nobility. Among these local princes were the dukes of Normandy and the counts of Flanders, who came to assume regalian rights formerly the province of Carolingian kings, and who ill tolerated the interventions of the royal dynasty in Paris. By the eleventh and twelfth centuries there had evolved in both Normandy and Flanders a strong sense of local affiliation, supplemented by identification with regional dynastic history. While these local identities coexisted with other, more widely shared classifications – linguistic, religious, political and so forth – they did help to set the various territorial principalities apart from each other, as well as from the ‘French’ France around Paris. Up until the end of the twelfth

¹ The scholarship on nationalism is considerable, but for introductions to this point see P. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton, NJ, 2002); P. Heather, *Empires and Barbarians: Migration, Development and the Birth of Europe* (London, 2009), pp. 1–35.

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century, the French king was merely first among equals in the small handful of regional rulers who governed the kingdom and, in terms of real power, often not even that. When the dukes of Normandy also became kings of England, he was utterly overshadowed. Rather than reinforce historical narratives centred on the modern concept of 'state', I therefore hope to provide an international and interregional point of view with which to consider the history of north-western Europe.

The focus of this book is on the interactions and exchanges between the county of Flanders and the Anglo-Norman world, from the Norman Conquest of England in 1066 to the political upheavals of King John's reign (1199–1216). Defining the precise boundaries of an enquiry within this general frame is to a degree a matter of judgement. I use the phrase 'the Anglo-Norman world' to highlight a particular context. The term 'Anglo-Norman' itself was coined in the eighteenth century, and, other than possibly the term *Normanangli*, used exclusively by the Warenne chronicler in the 1150s, has no medieval counterpart.² In my usage, the Anglo-Norman world refers to a sphere of political, social, cultural and economic exchanges that was created by the union of England with Normandy in 1066, and which endured in various guises through to the early thirteenth century. These ties made the Anglo-Norman union something that we might call realm, a *regnum*, but it must also be appreciated that they did not imbue it with an inherent, overreaching political and social unity or identity of the kind we might imagine characterising a modern polity; the monarch of England did not rule over the duchy because he was its king, but because he was its duke.³ In choosing this focus I do not wish to sideline from this discussion the broader Angevin lands of Anjou, Aquitaine and Brittany, or the other territories governed over or claimed by the Norman-descended rulers of England through this period. But when Flanders reached

² *Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. J. Simpson and E. Weiner, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1989), vol. 1, pp. 466–7. On *Normanangli*, see pp. 233–4 below.

³ This matter has been subject to debate and reinterpretation. J. Le Patourel, most famously, in his landmark *The Norman Empire* (Oxford, 1976), argued for the existence of a 'complex but coherent political structure which the Normans build up in northern France and Britain during the eleventh and early twelfth centuries' (p. v). Along these same lines, see also C. Hollister, who promoted a 'tightly integrated Anglo-Norman state' in his 'Normandy, France and the Anglo-Norman *regnum*', *Speculum* 51 (1976), 202–42, at 241. This view has since been powerfully criticised, however, by scholars who have pointed out that England and Normandy did not possess a unified body of justice or such administrative institutions as the exchequer, and that below the level of the greatest magnates the elite was largely divided by the geography. See especially D. Bates, 'Normandy and England after 1066', *EHR* 104 (1989), 851–80; D. Crouch, 'Normans and Anglo-Normans: A Divided Aristocracy?', in D. Bates and A. Curry, eds., *England and Normandy in the Middle Ages* (London, 1994), pp. 51–67; J. Green, 'Unity and Disunity in the Anglo-Norman State', *Historical Research* 62 (1989), 115–34.

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westwards it was usually to England and Normandy, the county's closest neighbours.

At its simplest level, then, the selection of this topic is justified by the lie of the land. First, the southern Low Countries have occupied a substantial piece of first-class geopolitical real estate for a thousand years. The region of medieval Flanders was sandwiched between three major centres of European political gravity – England, France and Germany – and has remained in a pivotal position into modern times. The deadliest battlegrounds of the Western Front were situated near the medieval Flemish cloth-manufacturing centre of Ypres. A generation later, the German westward advance in the Battle of France began with a sweep through the Netherlands and Belgium before swinging south. And today the administrative centre of the European Union dwells in Brussels.

Second, the southern Low Countries form the part of continental Europe closest to the British Isles. At its widest, from the port of Bruges to the Thames estuary, the distance between England and the Flemish coast is some 140 kilometres, a day's journey for a swift ship driven by favourable winds. At the westernmost corner of the southern Low Countries, where the domains of the counts of Boulogne lay and the continental landmass sharply juts out towards the Kentish coast, the English Channel narrows down to a strait only thirty-five kilometres wide. Here the nearness becomes a visible fact: on a clear day a visitor to the ancient seaport of Wissant will be able to spy the cliffs of Dover rising above the horizon. These south-western coasts have been an important nexus of travel to the British Isles since Roman times.⁴ In 1067 the raiding party of Count Eustace II of Boulogne sped across the Channel in the early morning hours to catch the Norman garrison in Dover by surprise; today the Channel Tunnel takes the traveller from Calais to Dover in just thirty minutes.⁵

The most important factor in cross-Channel relations is the physical geography of north-western Europe. The British (especially the English) have traditionally understood their location in terms of self-containment. The Isles lie at the very edge of the continent, close enough almost to touch, yet above all defined in the popular imagination by their separation from it. This isolation was as much an illusion in the Middle Ages as it is today: for a century and a half after the Battle of Hastings at no point did the English body politic turn their eyes away from the Continent.

⁴ P. Grierson, 'The Relations between England and Flanders before the Norman Conquest', *TRHS 4th series*, 23 (1941), 72–6.

⁵ William of Poitiers, *The Gesta Guillelmi of William of Poitiers*, ed. and trans. R. Davis and M. Chibnall (OMT, Oxford, 1998), pp. 182–4.

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During this period the English Channel must not be conceptualised as a peripheral boundary marking a border, but as a central conduit that could carry a traveller from one half of the realm to the other. The proximity of Flanders to England and the English Channel thus meant that the county was situated very close to the heart of the Anglo-Norman world.

This centrality was enhanced by the county's closeness to territories belonging to the kings of France and Germany. Historically, Flanders represented the northernmost tip of Carolingian West Francia, a relatively short journey away from the royal seat in Paris. The counts of Flanders, as the rulers of a powerful principality not far from the core royal lands, were heavyweight players whom the Carolingian kings, and from the tenth century their Capetian successors, were forced to treat with caution and respect. The degree of fealty that the counts expressed to the kings of France fluctuated over the course of the centuries, and at all times they effectively acted at their own discretion. Independence did not, however, ensure political untouchability, and military and diplomatic engagements with the Capetian dynasty in Paris played an integral part in the shaping of Flemish relations with England.

The location of the county at the north-eastern border of France also opened the territories to the east of Flanders to Flemish political designs. From the late eleventh century the counts laid claim to territories across the German border, making them vassals not only to the French kings but also to the German imperial crown. While the French connection was indispensable, the German marches also represented a significant avenue of expansion. The counts' territorial ambitions in the east resulted both in numerous wars and in alliances with their neighbours in Hainaut and Brabant.⁶ The Flemish chronicler Galbert of Bruges even claimed that Count Charles (1119–27) had been a favoured candidate in the 1125 German royal election. In truth it is improbable that Charles would have been considered a serious contender, but his very involvement is proof of his position among the great eastern magnates.⁷

Flanders was a border region politically, culturally and linguistically. The bulk of the comital demesne, and the traditional base of the

⁶ D. Nicholas, *Medieval Flanders* (London and New York, 1992), pp. 46, 49–52; E.-L. Ganshof, 'La Flandre', *Histoire des institutions françaises au Moyen Âge* (Paris, 1957), 208, 351; J. Dunbabin, *France in the Making, 843–1180* (Oxford, 1985), p. 209; T. de Hemptinne, 'Vlaanderen en Henegouwen onder de erfgenamen van de Boudewijns 1070–1214', *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, 2nd series, 2 (Haarlem, 1982), 372.

⁷ Galbert of Bruges, *De Multro, Traditione, et Occasione Gloriosi Karoli Comitis Flandrianum*, ed. J. Rider, *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis* 131 (Turnhout, 1994), pp. 11–13; Galbert of Bruges, *The Murder of Charles the Good*, trans. J. Ross (repr. Toronto, 1998), p. 90, n. 2.

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Flemish counts' power, lay in the north; their treasury and much of their administrative apparatus was located in the town of Bruges by the north-western coast. Southern Flanders, roughly corresponding to Artois and part of the greater region of Picardy, fell within the counts' sphere of political influence, but exhibited a greater degree of local autonomy. This internal division was reflected in the history of the county's exchanges with its neighbours, and the ambitions of southern magnates sometimes directly clashed with those of the comital house in the north. During the reign of King Philip II of France (1180–1223) Flemish Artois was finally lost to the French crown.

The political fault line roughly corresponded to the western edge of the frontier between Romance and Germanic language areas. During Carolingian times it had gradually emerged at the south-western corner of the Low Countries, along the rivers Authie and Canche; thence it had curved north along the river Lys, up to the level of Lille. By the twelfth century the western frontier of the linguistic region had shifted. Probably as a result of land reclamation and resettlement, the French language area pushed north, rendering the region between the rivers Canche and Aa linguistically heterogeneous. The process was influenced by the strong attraction to French literary and chivalric culture in the local and comital courts. In northern 'Flemish' Flanders, the aristocratic and ecclesiastical elites, and most probably its far-ranging merchants as well, were functionally bilingual.⁸ Mastery of French was essential for any Fleming in dealings with the Anglo-Norman secular upper class, but considerable advantage was also derived from the closeness of Old English (less so Middle English) to medieval Dutch.

The position of Flanders among the powers and polities of north-western Europe combined centrality with liminality. The Straits of Dover were crucial to international travel, not only connecting the southern Low Countries to England, but also serving as the route from Scandinavia to France, Spain and finally the Mediterranean. Where Viking raiders had once sailed down the Atlantic coast, in the twelfth century Scandinavian crusaders like King Sigurd of Norway (1103–30) passed through the Channel on the way to the Holy Land.⁹ In the same period the great seasonal fairs of Flanders became the hubs of a burgeoning international commerce, linking England to continental trade routes that

⁸ L. Milis, 'The French Low Countries: Cradle of Dutch Culture?', in Milis, *Religion, Culture, and Mentalities in the Medieval Low Countries* (Turnhout, 2005), pp. 340–9; Milis, 'The Linguistic Boundary in the County of Guines', in *ibid.*, pp. 353–68; Nicholas, *Medieval Flanders*, pp. 89–90.

⁹ Snorri Sturluson, 'Sigurd the Crusader and his Brothers Eystein and Olav', *Heimskringla, or The Lives of the Norse Kings*, trans. A. Smith (New York, 1990), p. 607.

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extended through Germany to eastern Europe, and through France to the Mediterranean.¹⁰

As a stepping stone between England and the Continent, Flanders was unquestionably of great strategic importance, a gap in Anglo-Norman control over the coastal perimeter surrounding England. In the north, the Scandinavian royal houses had maintained claims to England throughout the Viking Age, manifesting themselves as late as 1066 in the Norse invasion by Harald Hardrada and the Battle of Stamford Bridge.¹¹ But, though Scandinavian designs on England lingered after Hardrada's defeat, they had faded by the beginning of the twelfth century.¹² In the south, the kings of England ruled over Normandy as its hereditary lords, and, during the second half of the twelfth century, over Brittany, Anjou and Aquitaine as well.¹³ While this control was not absolute – the threat of baronial rebellion plagued the English monarchs throughout the Central Middle Ages, and at various times rival branches of the royal dynasty held Normandy – it nevertheless allowed for significant strategic control over the waterways to England.

Flanders represented a permanent chink in this armour, a gateway through which an enemy power might strike at England and drive a wedge between the continental and the insular possessions of the Anglo-Norman kings. This precarious position demanded a kind of political balancing act from the counts of Flanders. All the county's great neighbours commanded resources superior in scale, be they diplomatic, economic or military. Yet the position of Flanders did not doom it to be torn apart in a three-way tug of war. In conflict lay also opportunity.

¹⁰ See discussion at pp. 148–9 below. ¹¹ ASC (C, D, E) 1066.

¹² William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum: The History of the English Kings*, ed. and trans. R. Mynors, R. Thomson and M. Winterbottom (OMT, Oxford, 1998), vol. 1, pp. 478–80; ASC (E) 1085. For Norman relations with Scandinavia, see L. Abrams, 'England, Normandy and Scandinavia', in C. Harper-Bill and E. van Houts, eds., *A Companion to the Anglo-Norman World* (Woodbridge, 2003), pp. 43–62.

¹³ See J. Gillingham, *The Angevin Empire*, 2nd edn (London, 2001).

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EARLY POLITICAL FORMATION

The origin of the medieval county of Flanders, with her wilfully independent rulers, is to be found amid the disintegration of the Carolingian Empire in the mid-ninth century. Charlemagne's great realm was divided between his grandsons in the treaty of Verdun of 843. The westernmost portion, assigned to Charles the Bald (king of West Francia 840–77), would eventually coalesce into the kingdom of France. But in the ninth and tenth centuries its integrity was challenged externally by Viking and Saracen raids, and internally by dynastic rivalries and by the ambitions of regional magnates. At this time the southern Low Countries were divided into administrative units called *pagi*. These were held for the king by local leaders called, by the Merovingian period, *comites* or 'counts'. The progenitor of what became the Flemish comital dynasty, Baldwin 'Iron Arm' (before 863–79), was one of these local counts in the region of Ghent. Little is known about the family before the 860s but Baldwin entered the pages of history amid one of the great international scandals of his time.¹ Around Christmas 861 he eloped with Judith (d. 870), the oldest daughter of Charles the Bald. Baldwin may well have abducted Judith rather than wooed her. But it is also possible that Judith, recently widowed for the second time and placed by her father in the monastery of Senlis, considered this match her last chance for an independent life. Perhaps their romance was even a genuine one.

¹ Ganshof, 'La Flandre', pp. 11–16; A. Koch, 'Het graafschap Vlaanderen van de eeuw tot 1070', *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, 2nd series, 1 (Harlem, 1981), pp. 355–60; R. McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms under the Carolingians* (London and New York, 1983), pp. 248–54; Nicholas, *Medieval Flanders*, pp. 13–14, 16–17. For overviews of France in this period, see D. Bates, 'West Frankia: The Northern Principalities', in *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. 3, c.900–1024, ed. T. Reuter (Cambridge, 1999) pp. 398–417; E. Hallam and J. Everard, *Capetian France 987–1328*, 2nd edn (Harlow, 2001), pp. 1–32; J. Dunbabin, *France in the Making 843–1180*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 2000), pp. 1–16.

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Mindful of Charles's ire the pair fled to Rome. There, through the intervention of Pope Nicholas I, Charles was eventually persuaded to pardon his errant daughter and her suitor and the couple finally celebrated their wedding in 863. As part of the marriage settlement Baldwin was awarded the *pagus Flandriensis* – the district around Bruges – and later Ternois and the Land of Waas. These territories in northern Flanders were the kernel of Baldwin's dynasty, and the base from which his successors consolidated their overlordship over their neighbours to the south and east. The name 'Flanders', to designate the territory of the counts, was adopted from the *pagus* in the late ninth century.

The early Flemish counts were kin not only to the Frankish kings, but also to the kings of Wessex in Anglo-Saxon England. Countess Judith had been the widow of both the West Saxon rulers Aethelwulf (reigned 839–56, d. 858) and Aethelbald (856–60).² Wessex comprised much of southern England, including Kent, which made the southern Low Countries the closest continental neighbour of the kingdom. An alliance to unify the coastal areas on both sides of the Channel against Scandinavian raiding parties was a natural development. The establishment of transmarine ties had probably motivated Judith's English marriages.³

The external pressure created by the Viking assaults pushed the political formation both in England and Flanders along similar lines. The destruction the Scandinavians wrought upon lands situated closer to their travel routes ultimately benefited the West Saxon and the Iron Arm's dynasties. In the southern Low Countries, the Viking raids opened an opportunity for Baldwin's successors to extend and consolidate their influence in the maritime provinces.⁴ In England, the Scandinavian 'great armies' of the late 860s and the 870s did not engage merely in pillaging along coasts and rivers, but also conquered, reduced and settled the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of East Anglia, Mercia and Northumbria. Only Wessex, the southernmost of the English kingdoms – ruled by Alfred 'the Great' (871–99), Countess Judith's stepson – managed to weather the onslaught. As in Flanders, in England the Viking ravages opened long-term opportunities. Alfred's tenth-century successors, rebranding his dynasty as rulers of

² On Judith's career, see J. Nelson, 'Aethelwulf', *ODNB*; H. Sproemberg, 'Judith, Königin von England, Gräfin von Flandern', *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 15 (1936), 397–428, 915–50.

³ P. Stafford, 'Charles the Bald, Judith and England', in *Charles the Bald, Court and Kingdom*, ed. M. Gibson and J. Nelson (British Archaeological Reports, International Series 101, Oxford, 1981), pp. 137–44.

⁴ Koch, 'Het graafschap Vlaanderen', pp. 361–5; Nicholas, *Medieval Flanders*, pp. 17–20.

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all the English, conquered and annexed their former neighbours, uniting Anglo-Saxon England under a single crown.⁵

Early Anglo-Flemish ties were reaffirmed by the marriage of Alfred's daughter Aethelfryth to the Iron Arm's son, Count Baldwin II (879–918).⁶ From its very inception the lords of Flanders could thus boast a prestigious lineage that descended from two western European royal houses, and served to set the count apart from and above the other territorial lords in the region. This distinction was reinforced by a series of similarly high-profile marriages in the centuries that followed, through which Baldwin's dynasty maintained its status as one of the great princely houses of Europe, positioned but one step below the royal families themselves.⁷ During the long reign of Baldwin Iron Arm's grandson, Count Arnulf I 'the Great' (918–65), the territory controlled by the count of Flanders expanded greatly southwards, beginning to assume the shape it would take in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. This southward drive eventually collided with the similar ambitions of the dukes of Normandy, themselves descendants of the the Viking leader Rollo: the two dynasties competed over influence in Ponthieu, Artois and Picardy.⁸ The clash of interests was dramatically illustrated by Arnulf I's assassination of Duke William 'Longsword' during a peace conference in 942.⁹

The dynasty's land grab in the south added an additional layer of complexity to the tapestry of relations between Flanders and its neighbours. Arnulf's father, Baldwin II, had split his domains by creating his younger son Adalolf count of Boulogne (918–33), a territory covering much of south-western maritime Flanders. After Adalolf's death in 933 Arnulf I denied his nephews their inheritance, but his control over Boulogne started to slip after the death of his son and designated heir Baldwin III in 962. A brief uprising and the sponsorship of King Lothar of France (954–86) restored Adalolf's son Arnulf (Count Arnulf I of Boulogne, 962–c.988) to his patrimony. What hope remained of restoring Boulogne to the main branch of the Flemish comital dynasty was lost in the civil crisis following the elder Arnulf's death three years later and the succession

⁵ The literature on this topic extensive, but a broad-ranging introduction is provided by P. Wormald, 'The Ninth Century', and E. John, 'The Age of Edgar', both in *The Anglo-Saxons*, ed. J. Campbell (London, 1991), pp. 132–91.

⁶ Grierson, 'Relations', 85–7.

⁷ A celebration of this high lineage was written in the late eleventh century by the Norman chronicler William of Poitiers, *Gesta Guillelmi*, p. 30.

⁸ Nicholas, *Medieval Flanders*, pp. 39–40; J. Dhondt, *Les origines de Flandre et de l'Artois* (Arras, 1944), pp. 40–5.

⁹ *OV*, vol. 3, pp. 80, 307; Rodulfus Glaber, 'The Five Books of the Histories', ed. and trans. J. France, in *Rodulfus Glaber Opera* (OMT, Oxford, 1989), pp. 162–5.

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of his four-year-old grandson Arnulf II (965–88) in Flanders. Around this period the counts of Boulogne also acquired the county of Lens located within Flemish Artois.¹⁰ Boulogne itself eventually fragmented into smaller territories. By 988 the coastal county of Guines had broken off.¹¹ A few decades later the Boulonnais region of Ternois was likewise detached and split between Flanders proper and the newly formed county of St Pol.¹² By 1065 the county of Hesdin, bordering Ponthieu to the south, became independent of St Pol.¹³ Yet more local fragmentation took place. A little later, under Arnold I ‘the Advocate’ (d. 1094), for instance, the small lordship of Ardres gained effective independence from the county of Guines.¹⁴

The political legacy of Arnulf II’s reign thus included the formation of lesser principalities within the geographical territory commonly regarded as part of Flanders. In the historiography of the southern Low Countries these principalities have long been regarded as properly part of the greater Flemish dominion, and their rulers as vassals of the Flemish counts either in fact or in principle. Recent work by Heather Tanner has demonstrated, however, not only that the south-western magnates operated independently of their supposed Flemish overlords, but that they do not appear to have done homage to the counts of Flanders at all. The counts of Boulogne, for instance, were established as direct vassals of the French monarchy. Their ambitions and those of other potentates varied accordingly, and were often at odds with or entirely hostile to the efforts of their supposed Flemish overlords.¹⁵ These quasi-Flemish regions played an important role in the political history of the region. This is true in particular for the county of Boulogne, which was both the most powerful of the smaller counties and geographically the closest to England. The political balancing act that the Flemish counts conducted with their greater neighbours was often mirrored by the alliances that the lesser territorial princes cultivated in England. Anglo-Flemish political relations during the Middle Ages cannot be satisfactorily examined without taking into account the tangled skein of local dynastic ties, ambitions, mutual interests and rivalries that wound around the whole of north-western Europe.

¹⁰ H. Tanner, *Families, Friends and Allies: Boulogne and Politics in Northern France and England c.879–1160* (Leiden and Boston, 2004), pp. 29, 33–4, 39–40, 61–2.

¹¹ Dhondt, *Les origines*, p. 53; J.-F. Nieuws, *Un pouvoir comtal entre Flandre et France: Saint-Pol, 1000–1300* (Brussels, 2005), pp. 37–9.

¹² Nieuws, *Un pouvoir comtal*, pp. 43–7. ¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 65–70.

¹⁴ Lambert of Ardres, *The History of the Counts of Guines and the Lords of Ardres*, trans. L. Shopkow (Philadelphia, 2001), pp. 28–9.

¹⁵ Tanner, *Families, Friends and Allies*, pp. 4–6, 58–63. See also Tanner, ‘The Expansion of the Power and Influence of the Counts of Boulogne under Eustace II’, *ANS* 14 (1991), 251–86, 261–79.