

# Orderic Vitalis

DATE OF BIRTH 16 February 1075  
PLACE OF BIRTH Atcham, near Shrewsbury  
DATE OF DEATH Unknown; probably after 1142, on 13 July  
PLACE OF DEATH Abbey of St Evroul, France

## BIOGRAPHY

Orderic was born in Mercia in 1075 to a Norman father and English mother. His father was a clerk in the retinue of Roger of Montgomery, later the earl of Shrewsbury. Orderic was given a rudimentary education at a newly-built local abbey, before his father sent him away at the age of ten to the abbey of St Evroul, never to see him again.

Despite his importance as a historian, little is known of Orderic except a few details that can be gleaned from his own work, so his life at the abbey is something of a mystery. His studies at St Evroul probably lasted until he was 18, when he was made a deacon. However, he continued working with books throughout his life, spending much time in the scriptorium, first copying others' works, then composing his own. His output was considerable, as many manuscripts bearing his handwriting survive, and these include lives of saints, liturgies, hymns, biographies and histories.

Orderic spent the rest of his life at the abbey, only venturing into the wider world on abbey business, from which experiences spring some of his most powerful descriptive passages. This meant that he was not immune to the realities of life outside; the turbulent politics of the locality ensured that could not be the case. Thus, he was well able to understand the political backgrounds to the events he described in the *Ecclesiastical history*, while his travels to other ecclesiastical institutions enabled him both to see the places he was describing, and to exchange ideas with others.

The date of his death is unknown. The *Ecclesiastical history* ends with the year 1141, so it must have been 1142 at the earliest, while the obituary of St Evroul (MS BNF – Lat. 10062, fol. 19v) records the death of a monk called Ordricus on 13 July, in an unnamed year. While this does not refer to Orderic for certain, having two monks

with this English name at St Evroul at the same time would have been very unlikely (see Chibnall, *Ecclesiastical history*, i, p. 113).

### MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

#### *Primary*

All that is known of Orderic Vitalis comes through his own writings, and is almost exclusively contained in the preface to Book V and the epilogue of the *Ecclesiastical history*.

See also MS Paris, BNF – Lat. 10062, fol. 19v.

#### *Secondary*

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L. Musset, 'L'horizon géographique, moral et intellectuel d'Ordéric Vital, historien anglo-normand', in D. Poirion (ed.), *La chronique et l'histoire au moyen âge. Colloque des 24 et 25 mai 1982*, Paris, 1984, 101-22

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H. Pellerin, 'Ordéric Vital, moine de Saint-Evroult et historien normand', *Lingua e stile* 24 (1974) 5-13

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## WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

*Historia ecclesiastica*, 'Ecclesiastical history'

DATE Mainly between 1123 and 1137, with additions until 1142

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Latin

## DESCRIPTION

The *Ecclesiastical history* was written, at the request of the abbot of St Evroul, as an historical record of the abbey, but it soon grew to become a much wider historical work. Starting with the life of Christ, the Apostles and subsequent popes in Books 1 and 2, it describes the events in a chronological framework that adds little to previous writings. It is with Book 3 that the work starts to take shape as an independent source, as from here to Book 6 Orderic wrote particularly on the Normans and the history of the abbey of St Evroul until 1083. Books 7 to 13 contain much wider material, dealing with events across the known world, from 1083 until Orderic's own lifetime. The *Ecclesiastical history* gleaned information from many sources, including the Bible, the Church Fathers, Bede, Eusebius, Paul the Deacon, William of Poitiers, the *Annales Sancti Ebrulfi*, and any number of saints' lives, as well as documents and charters from the abbey itself, and the recollections of more mature monks of the various institutions he visited. While the work was started some time before, it is clear that the majority of it was written between 1123 and 1137, with additions and revisions made from then until 1142.

Orderic's history was designed to provide future generations with examples of how to act morally, as well as bringing glory to God for His deeds throughout history. In Orderic's eyes, it was written to both the residents of his abbey and other ecclesiastical institutions, and to the notables of France and the Anglo-Norman realm. As such, it followed the ideas of Norman heroic traditions, though with an added Christian interpretation, which meant the chronicle has, in some parts at least, the feel of an epic. His use of dramatic speeches and miracle stories intensifies the events described, and while this, along with his propensity for including material fairly uncritically, especially when compared with a writer such as William of Malmesbury (q.v.), means that while to the modern reader Orderic's history is full of incredible stories, it does nevertheless reveal much about the events and society in which he lived.

The 13 books of the chronicle run to six volumes in Chibnall's edition and translation, and Books 9 and 10 are the main sections that refer to Islam and Muslims. There are occasional reports of Muslims in earlier books, but it is in the report in these books of the First Crusade and the foundation of the crusader states that the Muslims are represented. Orderic Vitalis' account is based on that of Baldric of Bourgueil, archbishop of Dol, which he took and condensed, while slightly changing some of its themes. Baldric's account was, in turn, based to a large extent on the anonymous *Gesta Francorum* (q.v.), so Orderic's account comes at third-hand.

There has been little study of the First Crusade account in the *Historia ecclesiastica* because the chronicle is used mostly in the field of English history, and because it contains little new material on the First Crusade. The account of the First Crusade and the image of Muslims within it have therefore received little scholarly attention.

#### SIGNIFICANCE

While Orderic's account of the First Crusade is factually similar to his source, Baldric of Bourgueil, it is the differing presentation of the Muslims that is important. Writing several decades after the First Crusade and the foundation of the crusader states, Orderic demonstrates that the Crusade was a unique, monumental event in history, in which the diverse people of the West came together to overthrow the Muslims, who are presented as an eschatological force. The large amount of space given to the Crusade shows how important he, and probably therefore others in Western Europe, regarded the liberation of Jerusalem from the Muslims.

#### MANUSCRIPTS

See Chibnall, *Ecclesiastical history*, i, pp. 118-23

#### EDITIONS & TRANSLATIONS

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P. Kierkegaard, *Historiske Beretninger om Normanner og Angelsaxere*, 3 vols, Copenhagen, 1889-96 (Danish trans. of extracts from Le Provost's edition)

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