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## 6 Decontextualizing Stories to Construct Historical Texts: Bernat Desclot's Representations of the Past

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We know nothing of Bernat Desclot's life except that he wrote a chronicle at the end of the thirteenth century that narrates the central events of medieval Catalan history. He appears only twice in the chronicle: at the beginning, when he declares himself the author,<sup>1</sup> and in chapter 159, where he testifies as a witness to one of the most dramatic events of his narration, when the king is about to be wounded by an arrow in battle.<sup>2</sup> His name has not been found in any of the records of his time, a fact that contrasts sharply with the abundance of information about other Catalan historians and chroniclers of the period, such as Ramon Muntaner and the kings Jaume I el Conqueridor (James I the Conqueror) and Pere IV el Ceremoniós (Peter IV the Ceremonious). This dearth of information has naturally inspired much critical speculation. For instance, as Miquel Coll i Alentorn suggests, Desclot may have been someone called Bernat Escrivà, a member of the royal chancellery.<sup>3</sup> It seems ironic that one of our greatest medieval historians, primarily responsible for our knowledge and understanding of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Catalan and Occidental Mediterranean history, has himself been erased from history. Or, in the context of this essay, perhaps the man who called himself "Bernat Desclot" chose to disappear from historical records in order to become a part of the legend he himself created. The absence of information on his personal life and identity may be a key to understanding how one remembers, articulates, and reconstructs history.

Bernat Desclot wrote *Crònica*, officially titled *Llibre del Rey en Pere de Aragó e dels seus antecessors passats* (Book of King Peter of Aragon and of His Ancestors) in Catalan from 1283 to 1288, after the great victory of Catalonia in Sicily, in 1282. It narrates the history of the county of Barcelona and the principality of Catalonia from the first conquest of Mallorca (1114) to the death of King Pere el Gran (Peter the Great), in 1285. It centers on the deeds of Peter (1276–85), who became a celebrity in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries precisely because of Desclot's chronicle: Dante praises him in his *Purgatory*,<sup>4</sup> and he appears in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. Desclot's chronicle is part of the Catalan historiographical tradition of the *Quatre grans cròniques* (Four Great Chronicles) and has some parallels with the other three texts of this cycle: the autobiographical account of King James I (*Llibre dels fets*), written about the same time as Desclot's chronicle (1244–74); the chronicle of Ramon Muntaner (1325–36); and the autobiographical account of King Peter the Ceremonious (1375–83).<sup>5</sup>

Composed of 168 chapters, the *Crònica* opens by describing the circumstances of the union between the County of Barcelona and the Kingdom of Aragon (1137) and continues with legendary stories from the time of the counts of Barcelona, Ramon Berenguer III (1097–1131) and Ramon Berenguer IV (1131–62), and the kings of Aragon, Alfons el Cast (Alfonso the Chaste, 1162–96) and Pere el Catòlic (Peter the Catholic, 1196–1213). Desclot then centers the narration on the reign of James I (1213–74). Beginning with a physical and spiritual description, Desclot records the king's turbulent history: his struggles with the Aragonese nobility; his conquest of Peniscola, Mallorca, and Valencia; his conflict with Castile for the domination of Navarre; the problems with Sicily; the fights between Charles d'Anjou and the Hohenstaufen; the Murcia campaign; and, finally, the king's death. Desclot follows this narration with an account of the magnificent deeds of Peter the Great, particularly his expeditions to Tunisia and Sicily.

Desclot's chronicle contains three general narratives: stories connected with the history of the count-kings of Barcelona in the twelfth century, specifically those concerning Ramon Berenguer IV (chapters 1–10); tales that describe the reign of James I (chapters 11–73); and accounts of the reign of Peter the Great (chapters 74–168). Each of these three parts is based on a particular set of sources. The first section is composed essentially of four tales, based primarily on legendary sources: the tale of Guillem Ramon de Montcada and his decisive intervention in the foundation of the Catalan-Aragonese dynasty; the events that led to the conception of James I in 1207, a king considered a "conqueror" because of his repeated victories against the Moors; the description of the important battle of Úbeda, or Navas de Tolosa (1212); and, finally, the story of the "Bon Comte" (Good Count) of Barcelona (Ramon Berenguer IV) and the empress of Germany that affirmed the right of the count of Barcelona to claim Provence. The second section, on James I, uses primarily historiographical sources: oral epic poems that relate the conquest of Mallorca, popular tales, and other historical chronicles of the time. Apart from these historiographical sources, Desclot also uses in this second section the legendary tale of the first conquest of Mallorca (1114) and some archival records. In the third part, he builds upon an eclectic combination of personal memories, oral information, and chancellery records. Some critics speculate that Desclot obtained such documents through his employment in the king's court.<sup>6</sup>

Between 1949 and 1951, the Catalan scholar Miquel Coll i Alentorn published the authoritative critical edition of Desclot's *Crònica*, still in use today.<sup>7</sup> The first of Coll's five volumes is a comprehensive commentary on the chronicle, based on a systematic inquiry of the historical text: its content, sources, style, language, date of elaboration, the figure of the chronicler, later historiographical influence of the text, the manuscripts, translations, editions, historical studies, and the methodology Coll employed for this critical edition. After this publication, other Catalan historians and literary critics such as Jordi Rubió i Balaguer, Martí de Riquer, Ferran Soldevila, and Manuel de Montoliu analyzed diverse facets of Desclot's *Crònica*, but none of them significantly improved or developed the paradigms already presented in Coll's study.<sup>8</sup>

In 2006 the literary critic Stefano Cingolani published his own exhaustive investigation of Desclot's chronicle, analyzing it chapter by chapter. He also compared the text's final version with a draft he discovered.<sup>9</sup> Cingolani's study presents interesting new perspectives

and especially shows how we can profitably engage the *Crònica* through an approach that reinforces the multidisciplinary function of the text. Cingolani's serendipitous discovery of Desclot's first draft—which precedes the version Coll used—has modified our historiographical perception of this text and its author's role as a historiographer. Comparing the versions allows us to deepen our knowledge of the rules that dominated historical writing at that time: the approach to sources and how these were sought and employed, the selection and dissemination of historical information, and the very process of historiographical creation as it moved from a first draft to its revision through various transformations, often as a result of changing literary criteria or ideological positions.<sup>10</sup>

Building upon the work of these scholars, Coll and Cingolani in particular, this essay explores Desclot as a historian and regards his *Crònica* as historical writing influenced by its writer's capitulation to invention—what we would today call “fiction.” Central to this inquiry is the way that Desclot negotiates the facts of history and necessary fiction, looking to his ability to create legends, privilege sources according to the circumstances of the event at hand, invent stories, and even reflect on the form of historical narration. I propose to delineate the figure of the medieval historian using a comprehensive approach that engages not the events of his life but the ways in which he works to develop his texts and their forms of narration. In sum, I read Desclot's *Crònica* from the perspective of what we now call the historiographical orientation of a historian. From this perspective we can better understand the narrative and historical strategies of medieval historians and in particular their re-presentation of history by decontextualizing past events and giving them new life in the present through the form of historical texts.

## The Function of Narrativity in Medieval Historiography

Recent developments in theoretical and practical approaches to medieval historiography offer new paradigms for this analysis. Here I engage the new theoretical historiographical conception generally denominated the New Medievalism in my analysis of Desclot as a medieval historian.<sup>11</sup> Based on the epistemological speculations entailed by this conception, one can arrive at an image of Desclot that emerges from what Hayden White called metahistorical assumptions: “a deep structural content which is generally poetic, and specifically linguistic, in nature, and which serves as the precritically accepted paradigm of what a distinctively historical explanation should be.”<sup>12</sup> The innovative nature of this approach to medieval historiography enriches our understanding of the craft of history. Before the 1970s, historiographers gave limited attention to the rhetorical and literary dimensions of historical texts. Today, however, we understand, for instance, how aspects of form require us to consider the historian's metahistorical assumptions. What is more, new historiographical perspectives, such as those proposed by Gabrielle Spiegel, Paul Strohm, and Lee Patterson based on the *formal* similarities of between historical and literary texts, invite us to read Desclot not only as a classical “medieval chronicler” but also, and more appropriately, as what we today would consider a “modern” historian. This approach leads to a revaluing of the *form* of historical texts, permitting us to engage their metahistorical dimension in depth.<sup>13</sup>

In this context, the weight of “presentism” is crucial. Though historians strive to attend to the contexts of the past, it is not easy to function independently of the paradigms of the present. For this reason, contemporary critics have noted the complexity in the construction of medieval, modern, and even postmodern historical discourse: “The transformation of a chronicle of events into a story (or congeries of stories) requires a choice among the many kinds of plot structure provided by the cultural tradition of the historian.”<sup>14</sup> This connects with the postmodern caution regarding the function of language as mediator between the historical object (the context of the past) and the historian (the context of the present). The “historical text” that results from this operation is a different reality, equidistant from the context of the past and the context of the present. As a result, the closer the text is to the context of the past, the more a historian is considered “scientific” or “constructionist,” and the closer the text is to the present, the more he is considered a “postconstructionist” or “postmodern” historian.

Although the distinction between “constructionist” and “postmodern” addresses most obviously the changes experienced in the historical discipline during the 1970s, it is a non-temporal categorization and therefore also useful for understanding other historiographical periods. I apply the term “constructionist” to historians who maintain a single scientific method, the systematic application of which leads us to the historical “truth.” The term conveys the belief that history results from a conceptual dialogue between the historian and the past. In theory, then, the result of historical research is more or less accurate, depending on the objectivity of the procedure. That is why the constructionist historian (the subject) tries to establish the greatest critical distance possible from his or her historical research (the object). Empiricism and positivism lend nuances to constructionists’ concepts of history, because these methodologies provide them with a platform from which to read and write the past with ostensible objectivity. Constructionism has been challenged by postmodernism for its naïve empiricism and its claims that historical interpretations can be based “on observable evidence alone, with the historian standing outside history, outside ideology, outside pre-existing cultural narratives, and outside organising concepts.”<sup>15</sup>

Jacques Derrida, however, maintains that “there is nothing outside of the text.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the linguistic and narrative forms of the present mediate our experience of the past. Derrida and other literary critics do not deny the existence of extradiscursive entities, or our ability to refer to and represent them in speech or text. Nor do they suggest that everything is reduced to language, speech, discourse, or text. They do stress that linguistic referentiality and representation are more complicated than we realize, based on the expansion of the linguistic turn in the 1970s.<sup>17</sup> These concerns have consequently influenced historians, who have become increasingly attuned to the complexities of the two terms in the equation that determines a historical text: the metalinguistic dimension of the text (i.e., the unreferential linguistic codes within which the text is constructed) and the referential function of discourse. The first possesses discursive and linguistic substance; the second, “real” substance.

As discussed below, Desclot challenges an established “modern” and rational rule for history by using (fictional) legends on the same epistemological level as (factual) sources like chancellery records or historiographical texts. With the rise of the Enlightenment, modern historians rejected legends as sources of historical knowledge, favoring rational, factual

sources. Nonetheless, they could not elude narrativity as a way of representing history, or “emplotment”—what literary critics call the structure of the plot—as a more basic level of explanation.<sup>18</sup> Roland Barthes argued that narrativity itself is the effective content of the “modern myth,” or, in other words, of ideology.<sup>19</sup> If this is indeed the case, we face the problem of “presentism,” because, as Clifford Geertz asserts in his intellectual autobiography, “myth . . . describes not what happened but what happens.”<sup>20</sup> Certainly one can argue that there are historical texts without ideology, but in historical texts (classical, medieval, modern, or postmodern) that are more comprehensive in scope than the monograph or archival report, we find metahistorical elements uncritically accepted as paradigms.<sup>21</sup> This metahistorical dimension of historical writing is the structure of the plot (emplotment), which, as I argue, becomes the unifying element of Desclot’s narration.

Medieval historiography uses narrativity in the same way modern historiography does. That is why it is difficult to liberate modern historiography from the uncritical premises that we have projected onto medieval historiography, considering it “irrational.” One of the objectives of this essay is to reconsider a misunderstanding of medieval chronicles, and insights gained from the study and reassessment of modern historiography may help to shed light on the problem. Some contemporary critics, for example, have discerned fragility in modern historical knowledge, suggesting that it is closer to the medieval than we might expect. Narration, they claim, is epistemologically fragile, and its practice weakens the factual authority of the historical genre. Julia Kristeva, following Louis Althusser, regards historical narrative as an instrument by which society authorizes its own oppression. Derrida, for his part, cited narrative as the privileged “genre of the law.” Jacques Lyotard attributed the postmodern condition to the breakdown of a narrative knowledge that is purely customary in nature. Sande Cohen represented narrative consciousness as the incarnation of a purely reactive mode of thinking and the principal impediment to critical and theoretical thought in the human sciences.<sup>22</sup>

On the other hand, Hayden White, Laurence Stone, Dominick LaCapra, James Henretta, and Bernard Bailyn (among others) have defended the function of narrativity not only as a mode of apprehending historical reality but also as an antidote to the lack of credibility of other historical methods, like statistics or record keeping.<sup>23</sup> Two testimonies on the function of verisimilitude of the narrative for the historical texts are illustrative. Fredric Jameson attempted to reenergize Marxism by stressing the “narrative” status of history over its scientific status.<sup>24</sup> The hermeneutical philosopher Paul Ricoeur, in his comprehensive endeavor to synthesize modern Western historiographical thought, set forth a veritable metaphysics of narrativity and defense of its adequacy, not only for historical representation but also for the representation of the fundamental “structures of temporality.”<sup>25</sup>

In this debate, narrativity is conceived as more than a medium for transmitting messages that might be conveyed just as well by other discursive techniques. It is not just a problem of “form”; it is also a problem of “content.” Ricoeur maintains that narrative, far from being only a form, is the manifestation in language of a distinctively human experience of temporality.<sup>26</sup> Jean-François Lyotard and Alasdair McIntyre defend the social function of the narrative. Others on the postmodernist front, such as Barthes, Kristeva, Derrida, and Cohen, argue that narrative is the still undissolved residue of mythic consciousness in

modern thought. White concludes that “far from being considered only a form, narrative is increasingly recognized as a discursive mode whose content *is* its form.”<sup>27</sup>

The critical approach of (post)modern literary critics to narrativity allows us to reconsider the function of the historian as a mediator between the past and the present. The manner by which historians represent the past becomes the content of that past. The portraits of the kings James the Conqueror and Peter the Great that emerge from Desclot’s chronicle reflect the past (the content: the deeds of the kings) in the present (the form: the historical text via narration). Once he had collected the records, Desclot structured his historical narration on a dominant trope. This trope, of a linguistic nature, serves as the paradigm in language for the representation of historical reality. Desclot was able to take advantage of his position as mediator between the past and the present because he had the key to the “interpretation” of history, choosing among continuities, transitions, and integrations. This structure can be applied to medieval or modern historians because all employ the same tool to represent the past: narrative language. This has two consequences: first, that the epistemological distance between medieval and modern historians appears less pronounced than we have assumed; second, that historical writing uses the same form (narrative) as literary fiction to represent reality but under the condition that it not appear mythical, imaginary, or “unrealistic.” However, in a given historical text like Desclot’s chronicle, it is not always easy to establish clear boundaries between myths and facts and between imagination and reality, even assuming a historian’s integrity and good intentions. While myth, fiction, and traditional historiography all use a narrative mode of discourse, they function on different levels of “reality-imagination.” The veracity value is the same, however, because myth and fiction *refer* to the real world, tell truths about it, represent it, and provide useful knowledge of it.<sup>28</sup> This leads to the obvious question: is Desclot less “realistic” than Eric Hobsbawm because he uses myths to construct his *Crònica*? The answer would be affirmative, but only from the point of view of a twenty-first-century historian. As the New Cultural History has demonstrated, “realism” is always culturally determined and varies substantially from culture to culture.

In this context, it is significant that the field of literary criticism has become the primary site of debate over the term and concept of “realism.”<sup>29</sup> This debate, however, has entered historical discourse through the arguments of historians like White, Spiegel, and LaCapra, who have alerted us to the literary dimension of historical texts. Indeed, if one applies the traditional debate of “literary realism versus literary modernism” to the discipline of history, it is possible to see how the transition from realism to modernism led to the repudiation of narrative by constructionist historians. Analytical language and statistical methodology replaced narrativity as a way to represent historical reality in the 1950s and 1960s. The emergence of postmodernism eventually restored the legitimacy of narrative language in historical representation, as Lawrence Stone predicted in his celebrated article of 1979.<sup>30</sup>

Certain connections between postmodern and medieval historiography have not escaped notice.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the multifaceted dimension of Desclot’s chronicle—drawing upon numerous diverse sources and highlighting the narrativity of his composition—would suggest that the connections pertain as much to the practice of history writing as to the theory of historiography. Apart from the modernist and constructionist period in the mid-twentieth

century, when quantitative, schematic language was prevalent, historians have always opted for narrative form to construct their historical texts.<sup>32</sup> History's tendency toward narration draws historical writing closer to literary composition than to scientific recording. Yet for Marxists, Annalists, Structuralists, Quantitativists, and other modernist and constructionist historians, this proximity between historical and literary discourse has been seen as a manifestation of deterioration of the epistemological validity of the historical discipline. In hindsight one can now observe that, paradoxically, modern historians' abandonment of narrativity was an expression (on a formal level) of the rejection of historical reality (on the level of content). The result was the loss of "objectivity" and "realism," which were precisely the aims that they wanted to stress in their scientific, rather than narrative, conception of history and history writing.

This alerts us to the imperative to read medieval historiography as a realistic historical artifact. When Desclot employs diverse sources to construct his historical account, he is trying to find the best information for each period that he wants to historicize. He draws upon legend and myth for the remote past and uses historiographical sources and chancellery records for more recent periods. He chooses each source based not on its level of truthfulness but on its formal reliability. This criterion diverges radically from what professional historians today might consider valid. The belief is that today's historian has more sophisticated means, gained through specific academic training for application to historical research, and that the historian's results find validation in the academic community. For a deeper understanding of medieval practices, however, one must take into account the means and circumstances of the medieval historian's work.

One of the ways in which we misunderstand medieval historiography is that we tend to assume that narrative is exclusively a form of literary discourse, that literature deals in imaginary, rather than real, events, and that historical studies must purge themselves of narrative and use it only to provide supplementary details of historical reality or to make the account more comprehensive or pleasant. In this naïve view, the historical text should be unproblematic, neutral, and capable of representing the past rigorously, enclosing historical reality within its confines. Theorists such as Ricoeur and practitioners such as Spiegel have reminded us that we historians cannot ignore the general theories of discourse developed within modern literary theory. New conceptions of language, speech, and textuality permit reformulation of the traditional notions of narrativity, reference, authorship, and codes. Contemporary (postmodern) history writing has shifted from a quest for the "real" to a search for the comprehensible. Historians now represent history as an interpretative act rather than as a "realistic" reproduction. This underlies Barthes's criticism of modern historiography—the structuralist historiography of the *Annales* tradition; for Barthes, the very interest of historiography resides in its ability to evoke the intelligible rather than the real.<sup>33</sup> White carries the argument further, affirming that structuralist history is no more realistic than traditional history: "if it is a question of the intelligible rather than the real, narrative is just as effective a discursive instrumentality for producing it as the dissertative mode favored by every scientific historiography."<sup>34</sup>

## The Treatment of the Sources: Desclot's Re-creation of Events

Desclot's purpose in writing history, as he explains at the beginning of his *Crònica*, is to relate the "great deeds and the conquests carried out against the Saracens and other diverse peoples by the noble kings of Aragon, who were of the high lineage of the count of Barcelona."<sup>35</sup> He wants to tell us the great *feyts* (facts, events, deeds) and conquests of the kings of Aragon and counts of Barcelona. As noted above, he bases his narration on three sources—legend, historical texts, and chancellery records—depending on the particular content he wishes to describe. Desclot refers to his sources at the beginning of certain chapters but only in generic terms, employing expressions such as "the story says" (*diu lo comde*).<sup>36</sup> He makes no other attempts to substantiate his information or expound on his sources.<sup>37</sup>

The first ten chapters draw especially upon legends, which has the effect of girding Catalonia's history with a certain grandeur. The first story concerns Guillem Ramon de Montcada (chapters 1–3). This quasi-fictional Catalan knight (see below) was said to play a decisive role in the marriage of the count of Barcelona, Ramon Berenguer IV, and the princess of Aragon, Petronella. He reportedly convinced Aragonese nobles of the suitability of the count for their new king. Since the successful marriage granted the count the title of king of Aragon in 1137, it is considered a turning point in Catalan history. Indeed, one cannot overstate its significance as a foundational moment for Catalonia, for the Barcelona counts—who were the *primus inter pares* among the other Catalan nobility—clearly distanced themselves from their erstwhile peers from this time onward. They continued to live in Barcelona, and since they had always promoted Mediterranean expansion, their new royal titles gave them legitimate justification for their aggressive initiatives. Numerous chronicles written and disseminated between the end of the thirteenth and the middle of the fourteenth century (e.g., James I's autobiography, Desclot's chronicle, Muntaner's testimony, and Peter the Ceremonious's autobiography) provided important historical support and narrative justification for Barcelona's policy. The expansionist policy, as much as its recording in chronicles, fits within a competitive context of other lineages, such as the Plantagenet, Capetian, Angevin, and Hohenstaufen, all of which were also keen on a narrativization of their actions.<sup>38</sup>

The marriage episode, however, rests upon a historically shadowy figure, namely Guillem Ramon de Montcada. His prominent Catalan lineage offers Desclot a pretext to include him in his chronicle and to embellish his role in the marriage legend.<sup>39</sup> Yet Guillem Ramon de Montcada was not a single person but a composite of two knights of the same name, unified in popular imagination. Troubadours preserved and perpetuated the memory of one Guillem Ramon, while the monks of Santes Creus recorded another noble Guillem Ramon in their archives.<sup>40</sup> The legendary Guillem Ramon was in all probability created by a monk of Santes Creus—where one Guillem was buried—to emphasize the importance of the local figure. The stories of the invented Guillem were spread, in large part by poets, who subsequently celebrated the figure in verse. Their poems appear to have been adapted by Desclot as the opening story of his chronicle. The evidence of assonances that the historian Ferran Soldevila has located in Desclot's text could explain the prosification of the epic version, transformed by Desclot in content and form to celebrate Catalonia's glory.<sup>41</sup>

Literary critics today have tended to show more skepticism regarding the existence of

Catalan “cançons de gesta,” leading to a reconsideration of the marriage legend’s function in the chronicle.<sup>42</sup> For instance, Stefano Cingolani has compared the first and second versions of Desclot’s chronicle and concluded that this tale is most probably based on the Castilian *Crònica latina de los reyes de Castilla*. There remains nonetheless a strong political and ideological dimension. Desclot wants to generate an atmosphere of military conquest and lineage, and the deployment of this legend becomes a most fruitful framework for the story of the foundation of a Catalan-Aragonese dynasty.<sup>43</sup>

In this regard, Desclot’s own writing helped to perpetuate the legend, as his version of the Guillem Ramon story became the official source for both verse and prose versions of this account until the fifteenth century. The *Flos Mundi* (composed at the beginning of the fifteenth century) by Bernat Mallol and the *Llibre de les nobleses dels reis* (middle of the fifteenth century) by Francesch both rely on Desclot’s narrative.<sup>44</sup> Desclot therefore not only appropriated a legend but re-created it.<sup>45</sup> The original historicization of the story of this marriage gave the future legendary versions their authority and power. Once more, a concise historical narration opens the door to future imaginative re-creations of the same event, as Vivian Galbraith posits about the English historical tradition.<sup>46</sup>

Medieval Catalan historiography already had an outstanding example of a mythical foundational marriage in the tale of the union between the first count of Barcelona, Guifré el Pelós (Wilfred the Hairy), and Guinedilda, narrated in the *Gesta comitum barcinonensium* in the second half of twelfth century.<sup>47</sup> Obvious parallels between Wilfred and Ramon Berenguer IV lend continuity to the traditional importance of marriage myths for Catalan history. Yet more important still, Desclot’s decision to include the quasi-fictional knight Guillem Ramon in his tale, and his particular manipulation of the story, provide him with the same tools that the writer of the *Gesta comitum* employed one century earlier, allowing Desclot to draw the parallels still closer. Desclot radically transforms Guillem Ramon, from the murderer he was in some accounts to the central character in the foundation of the Catalan and Aragonese kingdom, with his decisive role of mediation.<sup>48</sup> Desclot credits him with brokering the marriage deal, for he successfully persuaded the Aragonese nobles of the advantages of their princess’s union with Ramon Berenguer IV, “the most excellent knight and the most virtuous and of the highest lineage in all the world.”<sup>49</sup>

The fictional story of Guillem Ramon’s exile to the Aragonese court and his significant contribution to the marriage illustrates the supremacy of the Catalan nobility over the Aragonese. This justifies the former’s claim to the title of king, much as determination of Guifré’s identity had moved the Catalan barons to accept him as a count.<sup>50</sup> When Guillem Ramon asks Ramon Berenguer to accept the marriage with the Aragonese princess, the count responds that he prefers to retain the title of count and will not claim the title of king, which he is willing only to pass on to his son: “I wish not to be called king as long as I live. For now I am one of the greatest counts of earth, and if I were to be called king, then I would not be among the greatest but rather the least of them.”<sup>51</sup> This detail reveals Desclot’s desire to emphasize the magnificence of the count of Barcelona and, by extension, the superiority of Catalonia. He portrays the count as actually refusing a kingship for himself, though he retains the claim for his son, Alfonso the Chaste.

The story of the founding marriage between Ramon Berenguer IV and Petronella is

not the only story embellished by Desclot that generated future legends. The narrative of the conception of James the Conqueror (chapter 4) generated even more subsequent versions.<sup>52</sup> The first to narrate this story was James I himself, in his *Llibre dels fets*, recorded with remarkable sobriety: “Our father, King Don Peter, did not wish to see the queen, our mother. And it happened that one time the king, our father, was at Lattes, and the queen, our mother, was at Mireval. But a noble by the name of Guillem of Alcalá came to the king and besought him so insistently that he persuaded him to go to Mireval, where the queen, our mother, was staying. That night, when they were both at Mireval, Our Lord willed that we should be conceived.”<sup>53</sup> James probably adapted this tale from an Arthurian or other romance cycle, where commonly a story of conjugal substitution heightened the mythical character of a king’s or count’s birth. This is the case in the poem *Berte aus grans pies*, which tells the story of Charlemagne’s birth, as well as the legend of Tristan, in which Isolde replaces Brangiana. The conception of Galeas in *Lancelot* follows a similar pattern, as does Arthur’s birth in the Merlin legends.<sup>54</sup>

Desclot expands James I’s spare narrative to construct a story in which the king’s conception becomes a key determinant in the survival of the Catalan-Aragonese dynasty. One can summarize Desclot’s narrative as follows: Peter the Catholic refuses to see his wife, Maria of Montpellier, as he is involved with another woman from Montpellier. Maria, aware that she needs to conceive a child in order to preserve the dynasty, plots with a butler to lie in the king’s bed one night when he is expecting his mistress. That evening, after a splendid banquet with his knights, Peter retires to his chamber, expecting to find his mistress. Throughout the night, to preserve her anonymity,<sup>55</sup> Maria refrains from speaking, and only at dawn does she reveal her identity to her husband. She then orders Peter to write down the day and the hour of their assignation, because nine months later their son James will be born.<sup>56</sup> From the original sparse plot recorded by James, Desclot has employed historical imagination and narrative eloquence to enrich the mythification process of a national hero.

Desclot’s rendering of James’s conception had a remarkable reception in Catalonian literary and historical tradition. Several Catalan poets wrote verse versions of the account, assuring its diffusion to a wider audience, and even Languedoc’s *jongleurs* sang about it.<sup>57</sup> Historical texts of the fourteenth century also revived the legend. Thirty years after Desclot’s chronicle, Ramon Muntaner produced a more complex version of the conception in which the entire community of Montpellier participated in the event: people prayed during an entire week for the successful deception of Peter; Masses were celebrated in honor of the Holy Mother; and the Saturday before the encounter between Maria and Peter was declared a day of fasting. In Muntaner’s version, the city’s barons assume the butler’s role, orchestrating Maria’s substitution for the mistress. The barons stay close to the scene, keeping vigil and praying with lighted candles in front of the bedroom door. They are also the first to enter the room in the morning and draw up a notarized act of witness to the event. Afterward, the people of Montpellier protect Maria until the baby’s birth, safeguarding her child from the accusation of illegitimacy, according to a custom typical of that time.<sup>58</sup>

Martin Aurell notes that the story’s success stems from its potential reading on three levels: it is, at once, exciting folklore, a portrait of urban life, and a testimony to religious

faith. The story's folkloric character arises from the incorporation of numerous signs with mythical reminiscences: the extraordinary birth of the hero, the scenario of the conjugal substitution, and the invocation of seasonal rituals, such as by setting the action on 1 May, the traditional date for fictional marriages. Its urban appeal lies in the role of Montpellier's citizens—invested protagonists of the story, especially its consuls, citizens, and representatives. In effect, the crucial character is not a single person, like the butler in Desclot's account, but an entire community that prays and schemes. The narrative's religious component lies in the supernatural dimension conferred upon the birth and in the crucial significance of prayer and fasting to achieve the desired outcome.<sup>59</sup>

### The Mythicizing Power of Historical Texts

The invention of Guillem Ramon de Montcada's story and the re-creation of the tale of James I's conception reveal the mythicizing power of historical texts when they are carefully crafted. From the end of thirteenth century onward, the use of historical imagination emerges as a legitimate means to articulate historical narratives in Catalonia, replacing the chronicle compilations of twelfth-century genealogies (e.g., the *Gesta comitum*) and the chronicler-witness accounts of mid-thirteenth-century autobiographies (e.g., *Llibre dels fets*).<sup>60</sup> The emphasis granted to troubadour poems as generators of historical stories enabled historians like Desclot and others after him to harness extant literary sources for the creation of their own, new historicized legends.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, a close examination of the evolution of literary and historical writing in medieval Catalonia suggests that the process was probably quite different from what has generally been accepted.

The immense popularity of the story of the first count of Barcelona, Guifré el Pelós, narrated at the beginning of the *Gesta comitum barcinonensium* and in numerous subsequent versions, demonstrates the priority of the historical over the fictional in generating legends within the Catalan tradition. The proliferation of legendary narration in the pages of the *Gesta*, as well as the swell in historical writing in Catalonia after the *Gesta*, reveals that Guifré's tale was not an exception. The chronicles of James I, Desclot, and Muntaner, all written between the mid-thirteenth and mid-fourteenth centuries, also demonstrate an interest in creating legends in the guise of historical narration. Those chronicles in turn spawned additional versions in both fictional (literary) and historical texts. It would even appear that historical texts in medieval Catalonia held greater authority or influence over the generation of myths and legends than did other writing genres, including poetry and fiction. The historical imagination, as exercised first in chronicles, became a crucial element for the creation of historical-legendary tales. The authority of the historical genre in which the legends originated henceforth imparted a heightened sense of accuracy and veracity to those tales. This priority of the historical tradition emerged with the growing authority of the counts of Barcelona, who sought to exploit such tales for the broader exercise of political power and territorial expansion. Whereas the great influence of French epic poetry in Catalonia might have led to an asphyxiation of local literatures—indeed, the function of historical narration in medieval Catalonia is similar to that of epic poems in other European traditions<sup>62</sup>—the strength of local traditions that the counts encouraged enabled historical narratives to

emblemize the “real” for Catalonia as authentic narrations presented in the most credible of genres.

Other stories from the first part of Desclot’s *Crònica* confirm this observation. Desclot’s version of the legend of the “Bon Comte de Barcelona” (Good Count of Barcelona), a story of suspected adultery and redeemed honor (chapters 7–10), is based on earlier precedents. Desclot’s account of the “Bon Comte” has historical roots in the story of Judith, the second wife of Louis the Pious, who was rumored to be illicitly entangled with Bernat of Septimania, count of Toulouse, as well as in the legend of Gundeberga, wife of the Langobard king Carolaldus.<sup>63</sup> The legend of the “Bon Comte” would go on to be popular in numerous literary forms, yet Desclot provides the earliest and most important Catalan version, confirming the precedence of historical narrative over literary composition.

Desclot’s version relates the story of the German empress falsely accused of adultery by two envious members of her court. Condemned to the stake, she waits for a courageous knight willing to engage in a judiciary duel to save her, but no one dares to challenge the accusers. One of the empress’s confidants, a troubadour, travels around the European courts looking for a brave volunteer. Finally, the troubadour reaches Barcelona, where the count resolves to accept the challenge and heads to Cologne with Bertrand of Roquebrune, a Provençal knight. Bertrand, however, abandons his friend the night before the duel, so the count is obliged to fight both accusers by himself. He pierces the first accuser with a lance, killing him instantly; seeing the quick slaughter, the second accuser panics, refuses to fight, admits his wrongdoing, and releases the empress. She forgives her accuser graciously, and the dueling count receives the honors of the emperor, who invites the count to his table. After a great banquet, the count steals off in the night to return to Barcelona. The empress reveals to her husband the count’s identity and sets out in search of her rescuer. She brings the count back to the emperor’s court, where the latter rewards him with gifts, including possession of Provence, for which he is appointed marquis. The people of Provence welcome their new marquis with enthusiasm.

The meaning of the story is fairly clear. Just as the intervention of Guillem Ramon represented the confirmation of the royal title of the counts of Barcelona and the mythical conception of James I became a sign of the providential dimension of the Peninsular expansion against the Moors, this story provides imperial validation of Catalan presence in southern France. It shows Catalonia’s principal enemies at that time—the Moors to the south, the French to the north, and the German empire to the east—yielding to Catalan authority. More precisely, the legend of the empress allows the chronicler to compose an explanation for the emperor’s loss of Provence. Desclot replaces the romantic dimension that dominated earlier literary versions of the tale with the political thrust of this historical account.

Desclot does not reveal the name of the “Bon Comte,” but the character seems to be an amalgam of Ramon Berenguer III, who annexed Provence through his marriage with Dolça, the daughter of Count Gispert, and Ramon Berenguer IV, who claimed for his son the title of king of Aragon by marrying Petronella of Aragon.<sup>64</sup> Desclot is certainly adept at creating an imagined character from tales about two historical figures. The core of the story, however, rests upon the firm literary tradition of the “adulterous empress” as disseminated at the beginning of the ninth century,<sup>65</sup> although Desclot bends that tradition to his own ends. In

the hierarchical Carolingian world, for example, only divine intervention could have restored lost order if the empress was accused of infidelity, whereas in Desclot's hands the character of the "Bon Comte" restores the empress's honor and reaps from that act even greater honor for himself.<sup>66</sup> Desclot's elaboration of this particular tale also carries an implicit connection to local circumstances: Bernat of Septimania figures in the remote origins of the genealogy of the counts of Barcelona. His inclusion in Desclot's new legend thus provides the story with historical specificity.<sup>67</sup>

There were historical—specifically Catalan—precedents for the type of justice that Desclot describes in his tale. The laws laid out in the *Usatges de Barcelona* (1149–51) include references to ordeals like those evoked in the "Bon Comte." The *Usatges* compiled three types of ordeals applied in cases involving women suspected of adultery: knights had to suffer a judiciary duel, as in Desclot's story; bourgeois had to walk on embers; and peasants had to sit in a cauldron of boiling water.<sup>68</sup> At least one scholar, Jordi Rubió, has connected such local customs to the story of the "Bon Comte" and also pointed out connections to Ramon Berenguer IV. Desclot, owing to his employment as a chancellery scribe, had first-hand knowledge of the donation of Provence by Frederick Barbarossa to the count of Barcelona in 1162.<sup>69</sup> Desclot mentions these documents explicitly at the end of his narrative and even mentions their golden seal: "Thereafter the charters were drawn up and confirmed and duly sealed with the golden seal of the emperor."<sup>70</sup> A reference such as this surely lends added veracity to his story of the "Bon Comte." What is more, the existence of an earlier historical text certifying the marriage of Ramon Berenguer to the princess (as the genealogical *Gesta comitum barcinonensium* relates) provided Desclot with a textual grounding for his new take on the "Bon Comte."<sup>71</sup>

Desclot could choose from any of these traditions that, in any case, were well entrenched in the collective imagination and, more importantly, contained solid historical references. As a historian, he sought to reinforce the link between the count of Barcelona and the most powerful ruler at the time—the German emperor—which helped to legitimize Barcelona's territorial expansion. A century earlier, the author of the *Gesta comitum barcinonensium*, in order to lend legitimacy to the Catalan royal dynasty, had emphasized the Carolingian blood that flowed through the veins of the Catalan counts. The nostalgic remembrance of Catalonia's (past) southern French expansion was probably a ploy to rationalize the (present) Mediterranean expansion. The wave of Catalan military action was reaching its climax at the time Desclot was penning his chronicle, just a few years after the conquest of Sicily by Peter the Great over Charles of Anjou and the papacy (1282).

### Presenting Historical Narration: The Recontextualization of the Past

Following the story of the "Bon Comte," the narration shifts radically from legendary stories to factual events. A transitional sentence at the end of the chapter 10 alerts the reader of a shift in Desclot's strategy: "And now we shall cease to speak of the good count of Barcelona and shall tell of Prince James, the son of King Peter of Aragon."<sup>72</sup> A specific name (James, the son of Peter the Catholic), which would have been well known to all the readers, comes now to supersede the generic designation "Bon Comte," which had dominated the preceding

story. That seems to announce a new approach to the chronicle. The four stories in the first part do not strictly heed chronological order but instead seem to proceed according to logical, rather than chronological, steps; fictitious elements hold sway over “facts,” and legends have the upper hand over “history.” The substance or message of a story is more important than its place in a temporal progression. With chapter 11, however, and the story of James I’s coronation (1213), Desclot orders his narrative according to the sequential deeds of the king and those of his son, Peter the Great. Chronology returns in force.

However, the changes in the content—from the telling of the four first legends to the narration of the facts of James the Conqueror and Peter the Great—are not accompanied by changes in the form. Beginning with chapter 11, Desclot uses sources other than just legends—oral tradition, historical texts, written records, and personal memory—but the form of the narrative nevertheless remains the same. Paradoxically, his style increasingly assumes an epic tone as the work progresses, particularly as he narrates more contemporary deeds, such as Peter the Great’s stand against the French king at Bordeaux, the military exploits of the Almogàvers, the campaigns in Northern Africa and Sicily, and the heroic resistance against the French invaders. One might argue that it is the form of the narration and the linguistic style that confers coherence and unity to the whole chronicle, producing a consistent plotment through a variety of different tropes that provide Desclot’s historical text with necessary credibility.

This unity in the form also prevails over the different identities of Desclot as an author: he functions as a historian (specially when he tells the history of James and Peter the Great), as a notary public (when he reproduces legal and diplomatic documentation, as in his account of the confrontation at Bordeaux), as a teller of legends (particularly in the four legends at the beginning), and even as an eyewitness (by his own admission), as the meticulousness of his accounts of battles attests.<sup>73</sup> When he recounts the battles, his narrative style recalls that of other Catalan and European chroniclers of his era. At the same time, however, he reveals a knowledge of archival documentation, perhaps a felicitous by-product of his chancellery experience, that no other Catalan (and few European) chroniclers have. In several passages, he appears even to have faithfully transcribed verbatim a chancellery record, as in the chapter on Peter the Great’s defiance before Charles of Anjou in Bordeaux.<sup>74</sup> The Desclot projected in his historical text is more an intellectual than a knight, but his unblemished patriotism provides the epic orientation for his historical narration.

Although he performs as four different authors (historian, notary, teller of legends, witness) and uses four different types of sources (historical texts, records, legends, memory), Desclot has only one method that allows him to construct a coherent and unique historical text: he decontextualizes past stories and re-creates them in the present through historical narration. Decontextualizing the content of the past permits him a renewed narrativization in the present. By liberating the stories of the past from their original space and time, Desclot can reinvent them and provide them with a new context, to satisfy the demands of the present. This is how Desclot re-presents the past. One could argue that historians have always done the same in their historical texts; indeed, the continuities in historical discourse are stronger than the breaks or discontinuities. Chroniclers like Desclot, however, offer the clearest examples of this principle, because historians *have* to deal with the past, with facts

that exist in an indeterminate place between reality and fiction, a *limbo* between history and literature.

The method of decontextualization of the past is based on the creation of a unified emplotment that is present throughout the account. The narrative then becomes the *form* through which all historians bring to fruition their access to the past. The content of historical texts changes because of differences both in topics and in sources employed, but the form has a permanent character, namely its narrative composition. Desclot wrote his chronicle in a very specific narrative form, called “chancelleresque prose” by Catalan scholars. His *Crònica* diverges radically from other contemporary Catalan chronicles such as James I’s *Llibre dels fets* and Ramon Muntaner’s *Crònica*. While both the king and the knight narrate passionately, using memory and oral testimonies to construct their historical narratives, Desclot chooses solemn prose to describe the remarkable figure of Peter the Great. Martí de Riquer notes that an epic style characterizes the entire text, from the legendary tales of the first chapters to the specific descriptions of the deeds of King Peter the Great, narrated at end of the chronicle.<sup>75</sup>

This unifying function of the emplotment gives Desclot more freedom as an author than James the Conqueror had as autobiographer or Ramon Muntaner as national hagiographer. James and Muntaner write from an unvarying perspective. Desclot, on the contrary, uses shifting points of view to define his position in relation to his story. Historical facts are usually narrated in the third person, but he also uses the first person when he wants to position himself as storyteller—“And now we shall cease to speak of . . .,” “And now we shall speak of . . .”<sup>76</sup> The shifting point of view clarifies the distinction between the historical facts he recounts and the historian who recounts. His strategy may be defined as that of an authentic historian who puts into practice the formal procedures that makes historical narration reliable.

Historians perform as authors when they write history. This means that from the point of view of the form—not the content—the distinction between novelists and historians is arguably an artificial one. Both create their fictional or historical texts after a careful selection process that includes the choice of words, tone, and links between the episodes described. They know that what distinguishes a simple “chronicle” from a (historical or fictional) “narration” is the causal links between words, more than the words themselves.<sup>77</sup> These causal links give us the clues to the historians’ metahistorical assumptions, because they realize narrative emplotment.

This epistemological orientation can be discerned clearly in Desclot’s text. He reveals his narrative choices more perceptibly than other medieval (and even modern) historians, as when he inserts expressions that demonstrate his nonneutral mediation as a historian. For example, he does not tell us the reasons for Guillem Ramon de Montcada’s exile. Yet more interesting than this omission is the fact that he makes it clear that he willfully chooses not to tell the reader, in spite of knowing the causes of the exile: “And it came about for a certain reason, which I care not now to relate, that the count of Barcelona expelled him from his land and drove him into exile.”<sup>78</sup> In this case, he speaks in the first person, establishing his position as the narrator of the story and thus the one authorized to recount it as he sees fit. In another example, Desclot introduces at the end of the chapter on the battle of Úbeda his tale

of the “Bon Comte.” He explains that the tale is important for understanding the legitimate rule of Peter the Catholic as marquis of Provence, since his ancestor the “Bon Comte” had acquired that territory through personal prowess.<sup>79</sup> Desclot clearly states that he includes the story to demonstrate Catalonia’s past dominion over Provence and to defend the rights of Peter’s descendants. On other occasions, Desclot turns to the authority of others to support his narrative, frequently employing the expression *diu lo conte* (“the story tells”) at the beginning of chapters.<sup>80</sup>

Hayden White distinguishes three levels of conceptualization in the historical work: chronicle, story, and plot. Desclot’s historical text *appears* at first sight to be a chronicle, yet his negotiation with the past does not merely recover historical data to render it more comprehensive to a particular audience, nor is it a simple arrangement of events in chronological order. Desclot organizes the events in his account in order to explain historical reality more than merely record it. Having dictated and written (*dictà e escriví*) the great deeds of the kings of Aragon, he wants to interpret them. The original *chronicle* and the potential *story* finally become *history* when Desclot systematically characterizes and selects some events as inaugural motifs, others as terminating motifs, and yet others as transitional motifs.<sup>81</sup> The way Desclot narrates the showdown between Peter the Great and Charles of Anjou (chapter 100) illustrates how the historian locates different elements of the story—the two kings, the reason for the confrontation, and the rules of the duel—on different levels to give them multiple meanings and link them in logical and chronological order.<sup>82</sup>

In Catalonia, the simple recital of events in the twelfth-century *Gesta comitum barcinonensium* is transformed into a completed diachronic narration in Desclot’s chronicle. One reads the text, however, as though dealing with a synchronic structure of relationships. The plot emerges from this increased complexity of the historical account. In this context, Desclot the historian negotiates with the fictional elements of his formally historical story. He not only “finds” his stories but also “invents” them when data are incomplete, the difference between “finding” and “inventing” constituting the key to the distinction between history and fiction, as literary critics claim. This is especially perceptible in the first part of the chronicle, where he constructs his stories based on legends and oral tradition. Desclot is thus not a passive historian who merely retells the events of the past but an active writer who re-creates and manipulates information about the past. By rewriting stories from the past, Desclot sought to influence the content, reception, and future use of the narrative.

Based upon the study of Desclot’s chronicle and other related historical texts, I propose that, from classical to postmodern historiography, the continuities of historical discourse are greater than the discontinuities. The strategies of Desclot as historian—the ways he conceives and constructs history, particularly his negotiation of sources (legends, historiographical texts, records)—lead me to believe that it would be advantageous to think in terms of *longue durée* for our approach to medieval and early modern historiography.<sup>83</sup> For one thing, historians do not have a unified method that, correctly applied, guarantees scientific and objective results; neither historiographical practice (the writing of history) nor historiographical science (the historical discipline) has experienced a “Copernican revolution,” as in the physical sciences, that could offer claims to a fully objective approach. It would also be incorrect to consider the medieval historian’s project as radically different from

our own. One tends to regard the medieval historian as a kind of miniaturist who carefully draws the finest details of a past reality; his work thus seems static, frozen in a nonrational world typical of the premodern cultures. Yet all historians, whether medieval, modern, or postmodern, construct their texts via narrativity, and consequently the similarities between their historical projects are far greater than the dissimilarities. The formal continuity of historical discourse permits us to read medieval historiography in new, multidisciplinary ways, deploying methodologies from history and literature. A reading of Desclot that liberates him from modern historiographical conventions offers clearer perspectives on medieval historiography as it simultaneously pluralizes our approach to history.

