

*à Jacques Ménard au nom de  
le tradition orale et écrite*

**CAHIERS D'ÉTUDES DES RELIGIONS POPULAIRES - XV**

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**ORAL TRADITION**

**Study and select Bibliography**

**by**

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**Université de Montréal**

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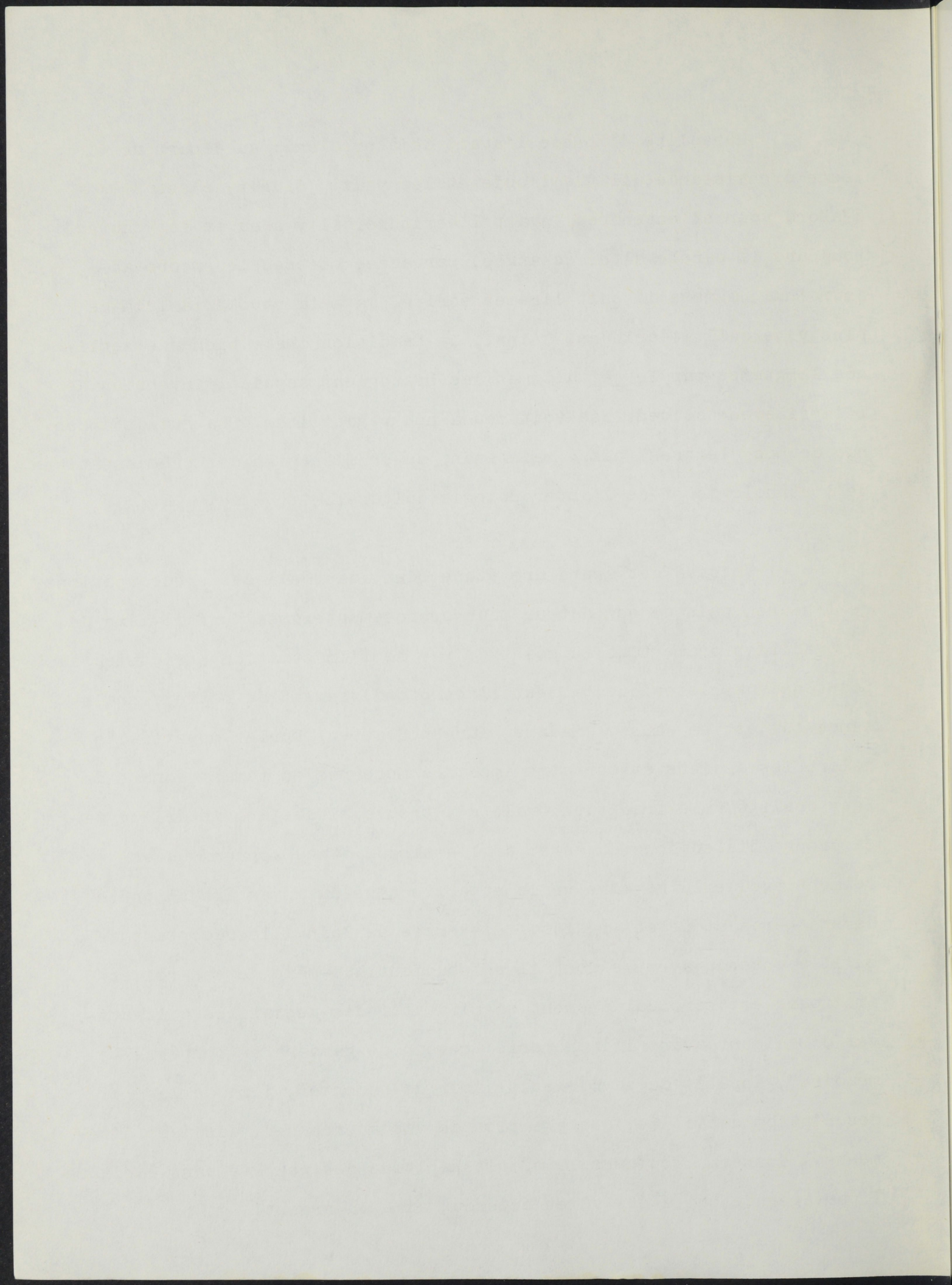
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Héraclite d'Ephèse l'avait déjà proclamé: au départ de toute connaissance, il y a l'ouïe et les yeux. Savoir, c'est d'abord voir et entendre. Avant l'écriture, il y a eu et il y aura toujours la parole dite, échangée, partagée. Le peuple encore aujourd'hui, même s'il sait lire et écrire, va à la parole, à l'image, plus vite qu'à l'écriture. Ainsi, la tradition orale bien que négligée longtemps par les érudits et les historiens depuis l'invention de l'imprimé en Occident, se voit peu à peu réhabilitée. La grande inconnue de nos "lettres" passe maintenant au premier plan des préoccupations de l'ethnologie et de l'anthropologie culturelle.

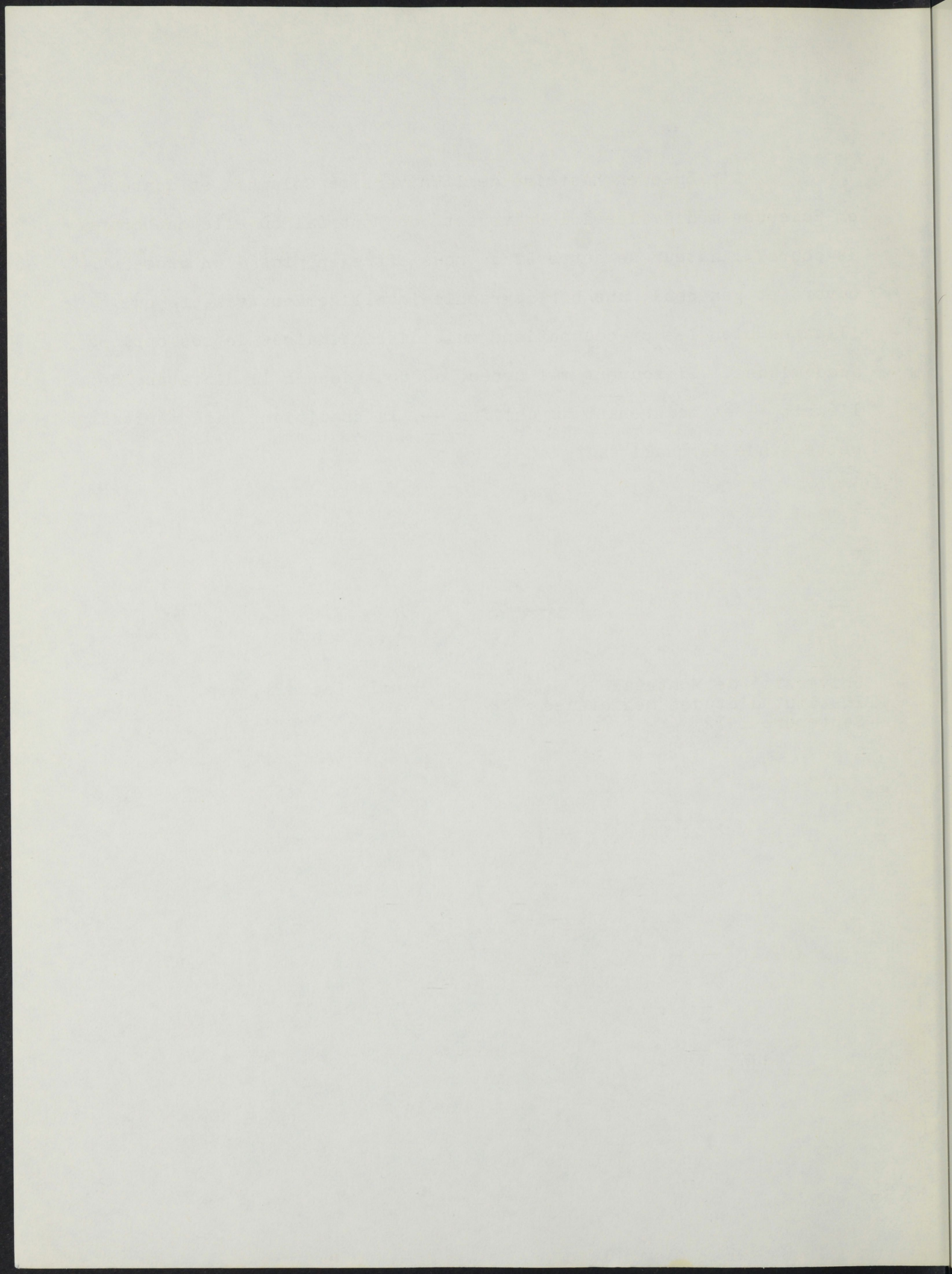
Voici à cet égard une étude bien adaptée à ces préoccupations de l'heure, puisque son auteur nous propose un examen du fait même de la tradition orale tant au point de vue de l'information stricte qu'au point de vue historique. C'est l'approfondissement de notre connaissance qui est en cause. Madame Maureen Slattery Durley nous invite à relire les anciens et certains imprimés modernes en tenant compte de leur oralité. La tradition orale s'y trouve située à l'intérieur de sa propre dialectique du vu et de l'entendu. On y apprend où et comment évolue la mémoire orale et collective du moyen âge si prête de ses héros et de ses récits. L'exemple de Joinville racontant ce qu'il a entendu avec ce dont il se souvient lui-même de son roi et ami Louis est particulièrement significatif des mentalités collectives d'Occident avant l'imprimerie: besoin de garder "en perpétuelle mémoire", appétit du savoir et plaisir de raconter, joie de la description détaillée, des exemples de vie à proposer, des avertissements à donner. Toujours la simple habitude des peuples sans écriture à partager ce qui a été vu et entendu, aimé ou craint!



Diplômée en histoire de l'Université Columbia et docteur en Sciences médiévales à l'Université de Montréal où elle est chargée de cours, l'auteur de cette étude nous offre en plus d'un exposé ouvert et généreux, une bibliographie intelligemment sélecte qui illustre bien les préoccupations multidisciplinaires de ses options académiques. Si souvent mal menée, surtout depuis la dictature de l'écrit — et maintenant du chiffre —, la tradition orale méritait cette étude de qualité.

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Septembre 1972

Benoît Lacroix, o.p.





## INTRODUCTION

Oral tradition is a newly considered source in the historical discipline devoted to the study of documents since Ranke first laid its scientific foundations.

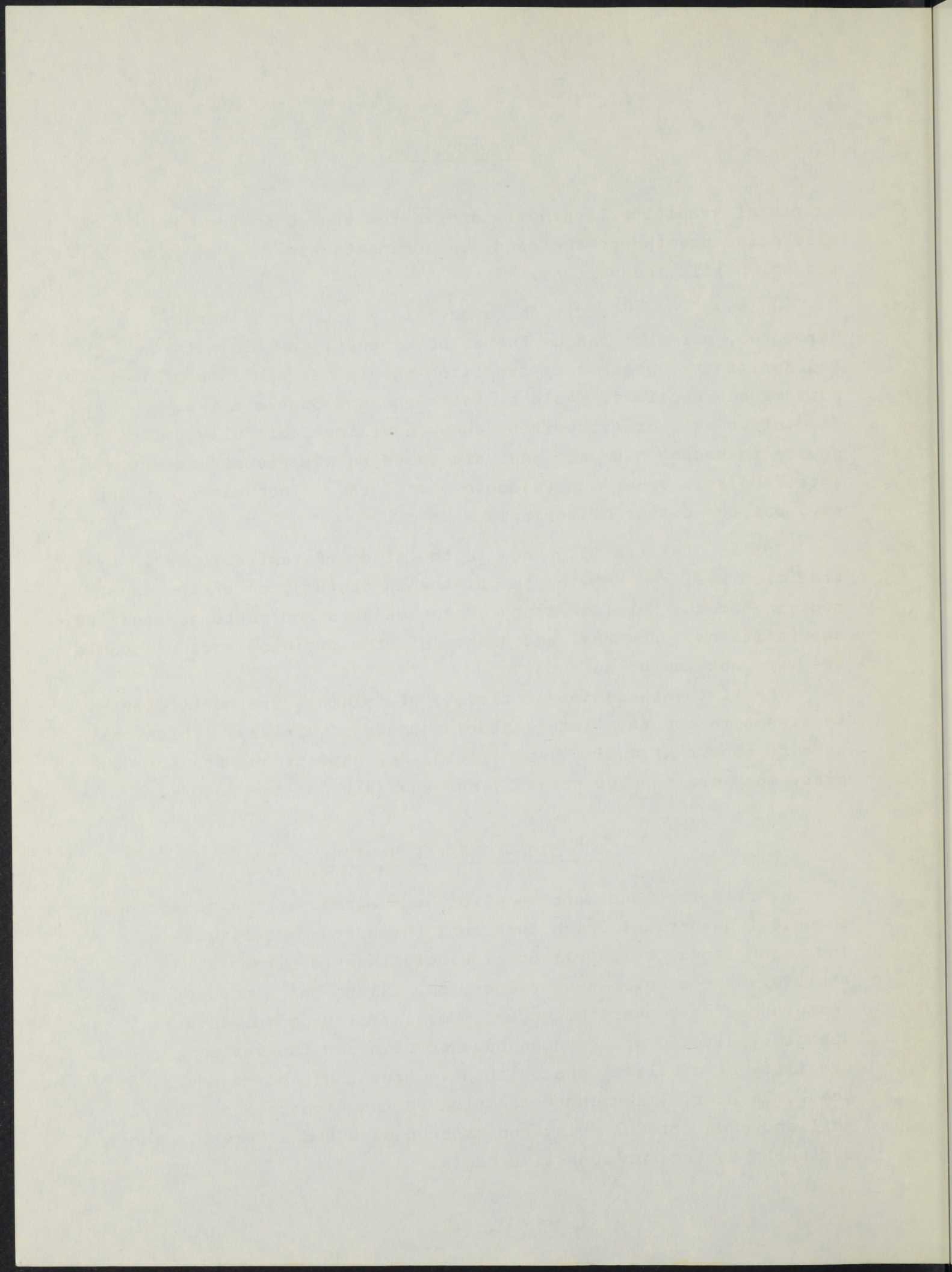
However, oral tradition is certainly not new to history. Herodotus, our picturesque father of history, was given to the indiscriminate use of oral tradition in his descriptions of the customs of Egyptians, Lydians, Parthians and Greeks alike. Thucydides used oral tradition as an auxiliary, carefully selected source to second his main analysis based on his visual witness as a trained soldier of the Pelopponesian Wars. (Thucydides, by the way, was the better historian.)

Nor is oral tradition new to the study of "antiquities". Oral tradition was, as early as the sixteenth century, one of the major sources for the folklore study of the manners and customs, memories, superstitions, proverbs, and events of "the ordinary sort of people who were not taught to read." <sup>1</sup>

The sixteenth century interests of folklore are particularly pertinent to the twentieth century methods of history. Which only goes to show that as in every discipline, some truths are for the past, some are for the present, and some are for the future.

## THE SIDE-LANES OF HISTORY

Henri Marrou and Jacques Ellul have warned of the 'atrocious technical barbarism' which threatens our western civilization, and which leads the intellectual disciplines to either blind positivism or an over-seeing idealism. Along the highroads of Western history, everything seems desolate, outmoded, outworn. Spengler, Sorokin and Toynbee have scrutinized the variety, the fragility of civilizations which have grown, blossomed and died. Comte, Spencer, Taine and Renan plucked the flowers from their soil and made careful daisy-chains of causes and effects in their dedicated search for 'objective' facts.

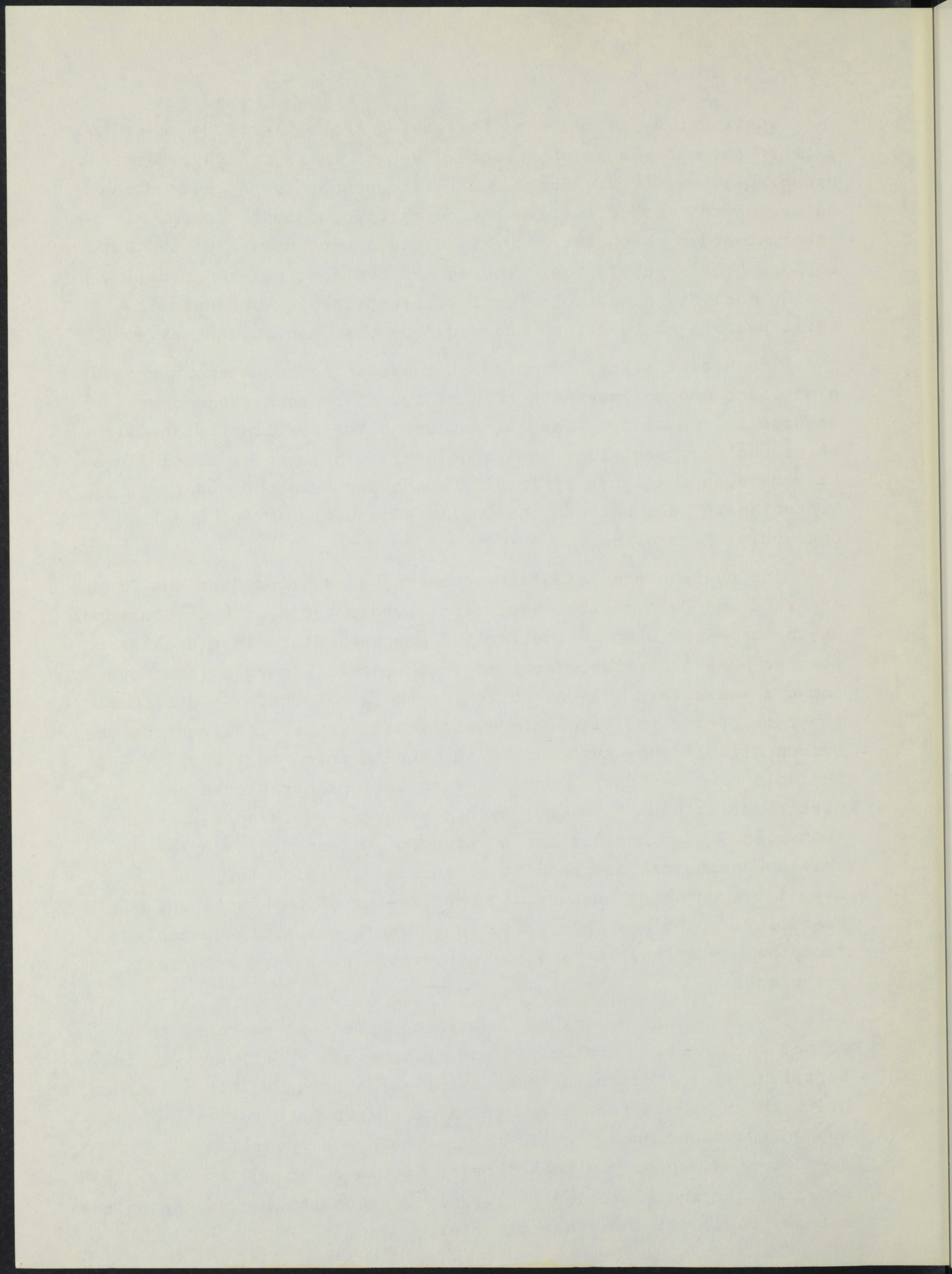


Instinctively modern man is leaving the well-trodden ways to explore the side-lanes of history. Each in their own way, Bergson, Freud, Dilthey, Croce, Sorel and Pareto sought to understand the nature of the subjective experience as opposed to the purely material order which the natural sciences had imposed on the external world. "The psychological process had replaced external reality as the most pressing topic for investigation." <sup>2</sup> What actually existed could no longer be severed from what men thought existed.

Concurrent with this movement towards the human among modern historians and philosophers of history, there is a tremendous upsurge in the study of man's past among the auxiliary disciplines of psychology, sociology and ethnology. These three disciplines have developed methods of inquiry which can help the modern historian to pass between the Scylla of positivism and the Charybdis of idealism.

The overwhelming single fact which has emerged from the findings of Freud and Jung is that historical events begin with the personal psyche to merge with the collective psyche. Historians who search for the human spiritual problems which underlie past events have found an auxiliary science to refine their efforts. As a result, the role of the individual in history has been revitalized and the person himself more symbolic of the age in which he lives. The reliable oral confession and its associations has become an historical attendant to the psychic process. Erikson's work on Luther, and Freud and Bullitt's study of Wilson are examples of this psychological approach to historical individuals. They go beyond the document as fact, to the creator of the fact, and his mentality. Just as history is, in Marrou's words, inseparable from the historian, it is also inseparable from the historical personage.

If historical events begin with the personal psyche, they do not end there. Historians can all too easily fall prey to the Sartrean error of reducing the essence of a being to his existence, the Nietzschean temptation to reduce an objective fact to its subjective experience. While the reliable and revealing oral account of a representative or major figure of an age is valuable material for the historian well-familiarized with the psychological method, it is not the final material.



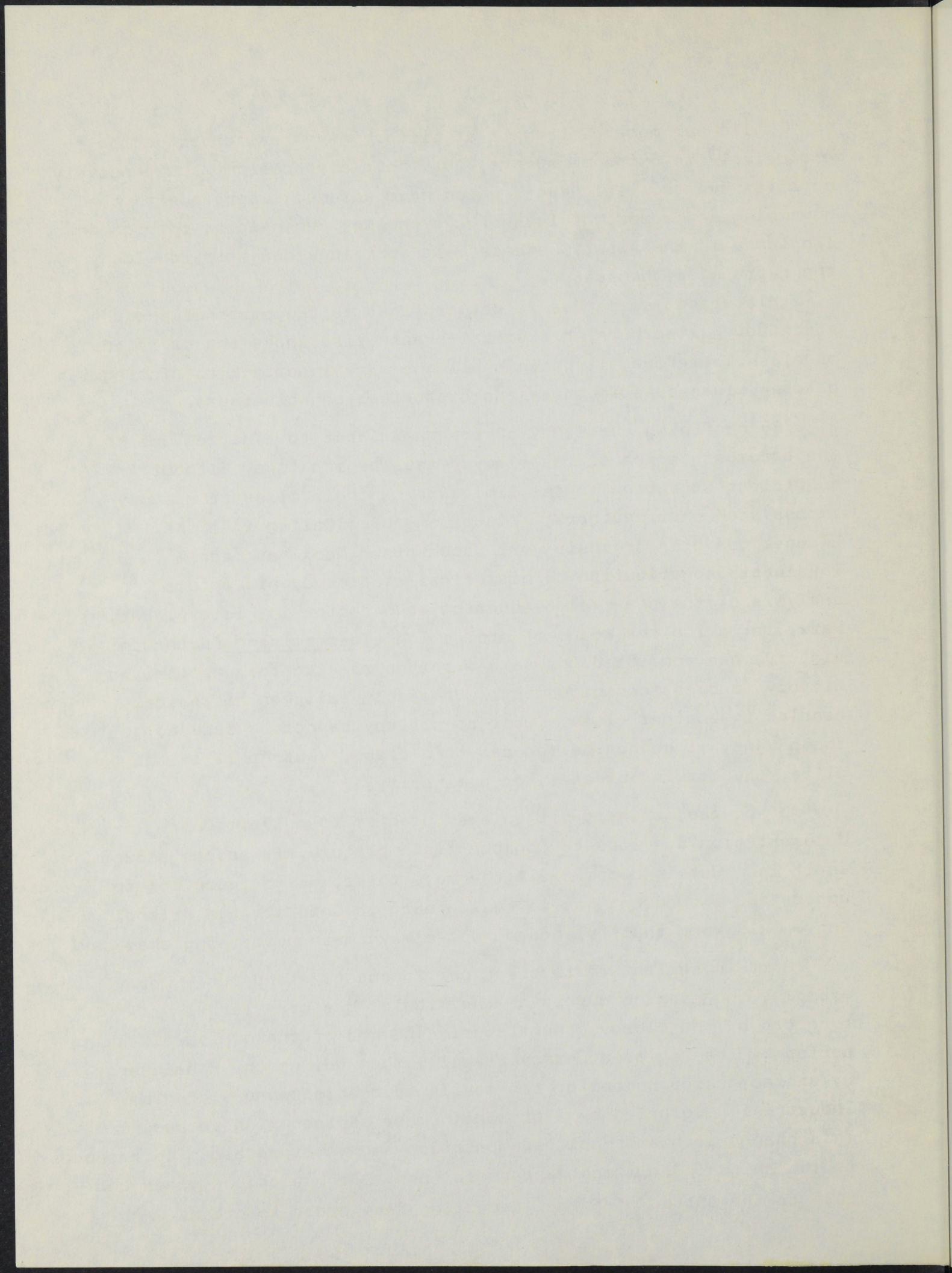
While our modern attempts at history have been directed too exclusively to external events, they have also dwelt too extensively on élite events, i.e. events which have assumed importance to the governing and educated classes. Psychology can help to correct the imbalance in the first instance, and sociology can help to widen the narrows of the second.

Historical awareness is not confined to the powerful and the educated. Furthermore, historical events rise above the divisions of class. Therefore, it becomes all the more important to distinguish between class-consciousness and historical consciousness.

By confining our study of the human past to a narrow use of the documents which élites always leave behind them, without sufficient attention to the limits which their class origin may impose upon their authors, historians have fallen into the unconscious bias of their very documents. Marx has made an invaluable contribution to historical studies by his astute analysis of the means of production as a factor in history. But, Marx, in making the means of production a determining factor in history, has committed the same error he reacted to: he limited history to class consciousness. He simply switched historical handles to another class. Just as history cannot be reduced to the psyche, it cannot be reduced to a class, whether it is the élite, the working classes, or a minority.

Of course, this is not an easy problem to solve. Our documentation previous to the twentieth century, is scarce enough as it is. But it becomes all the more important to learn how to understand a document as we would learn to understand a friend. And we all know that friends do not always mean everything they say!

Certain salient features of our documents stand out. For example, the passing events of the Middle Ages were largely recorded by the clergy, then towards the end of the mediaeval period by the lay aristocracy as well, then during the Renaissance by an increasing number of the mobile bourgeoisie and since the Industrial Revolution by a growing number of labouring voices. This change in historical documentation and interpretation corresponds to the shift in political and social power from class to class and also to the spread of formal education from order to order.



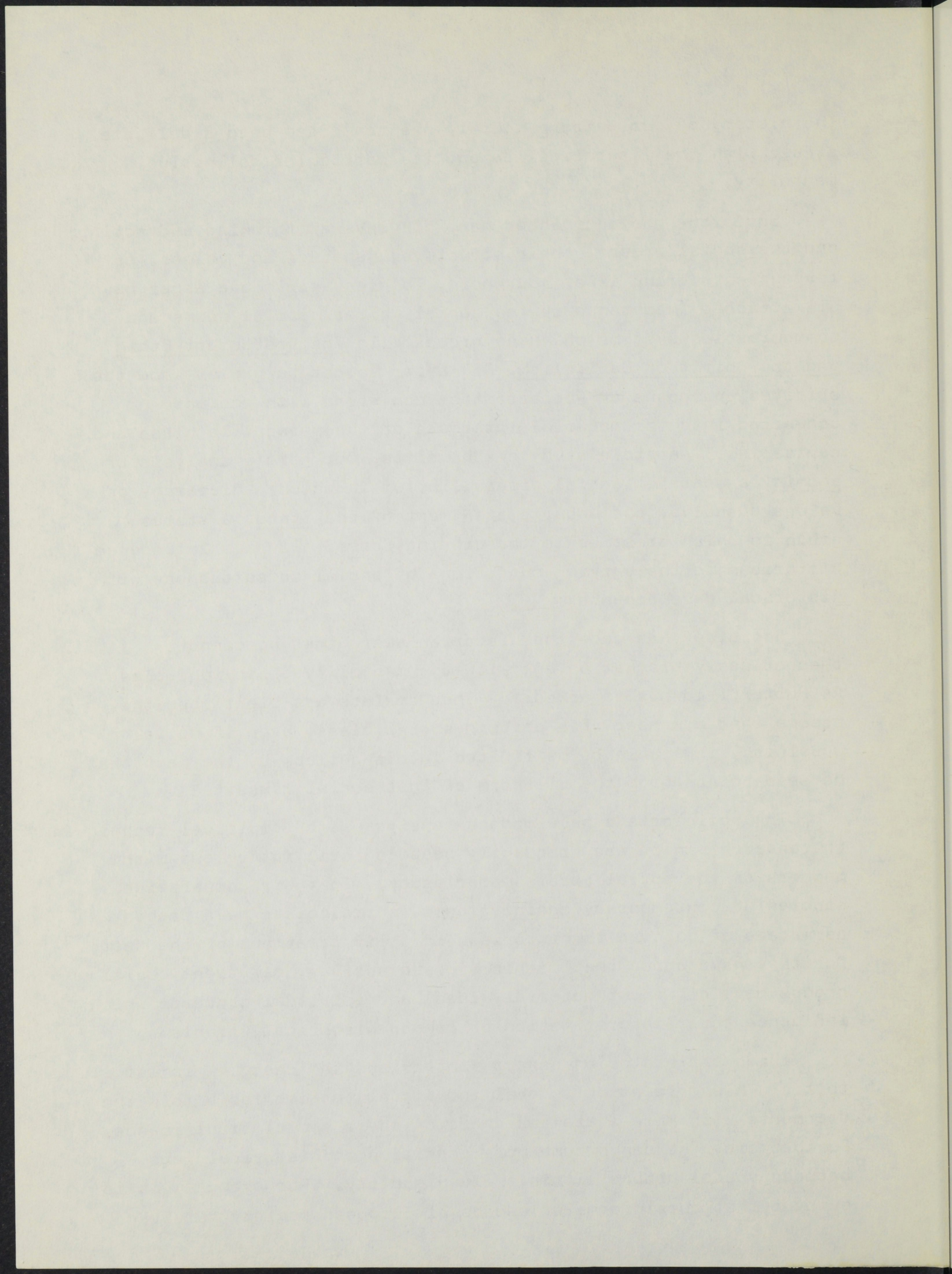
The history of our Western society has too often been a delicate affair with the literate élite and its particular collective mentality.

Sociology has approached man, his ways of thinking and acting; and the social orders, their structure, function and values, as responses to group life. Durkheim, Tonnies, Wirth and Weber have all attached importance to the social values, social norms and communication systems of human groups. In The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Max Weber sought to explain how the spiritual purposes of Protestantism converged with and were converted into the material interests of the mercantile class and capitalism. Pareto's study of the élite, Durkheim's analysis of anomie, a state of social disequilibrium in which a hierarchy of values dissolve, and Weber's treatment of the Stand, a status group in which prestige is the binding force, all have introduced historians to the varying conditions of social consciousness within historical developments.

Sociology has made the historian aware that he cannot thoughtlessly blanket an age with the mentality of any one class. As Butterfield has remarked: "The Marxists are right when they assume that a member of a certain social class, even if he is unselfish, is liable to be limited in his outlook by the fact that he sees things from the platform of that social class." <sup>3</sup>

The sociologists have made extensive use of empirical techniques of research, which are frequently based on oral interviews with members of the social strata under study. In their comparative studies of contemporary social groups, sociologists have probed new areas of concern to historians in their treatment of the past, for they have shown that within a given society, different social groups have different material, ideal and spiritual concerns which influence their interpretation of common historical problems.

While the historian cannot "interview" the past, he is led to train his perception to oral and visual testimonies within the documents with more acute awareness of their social significance. Furthermore, he can become more sensitive to historical lags between social groups within a given society. For example, it is evident that rural forms of mediaeval European society survived





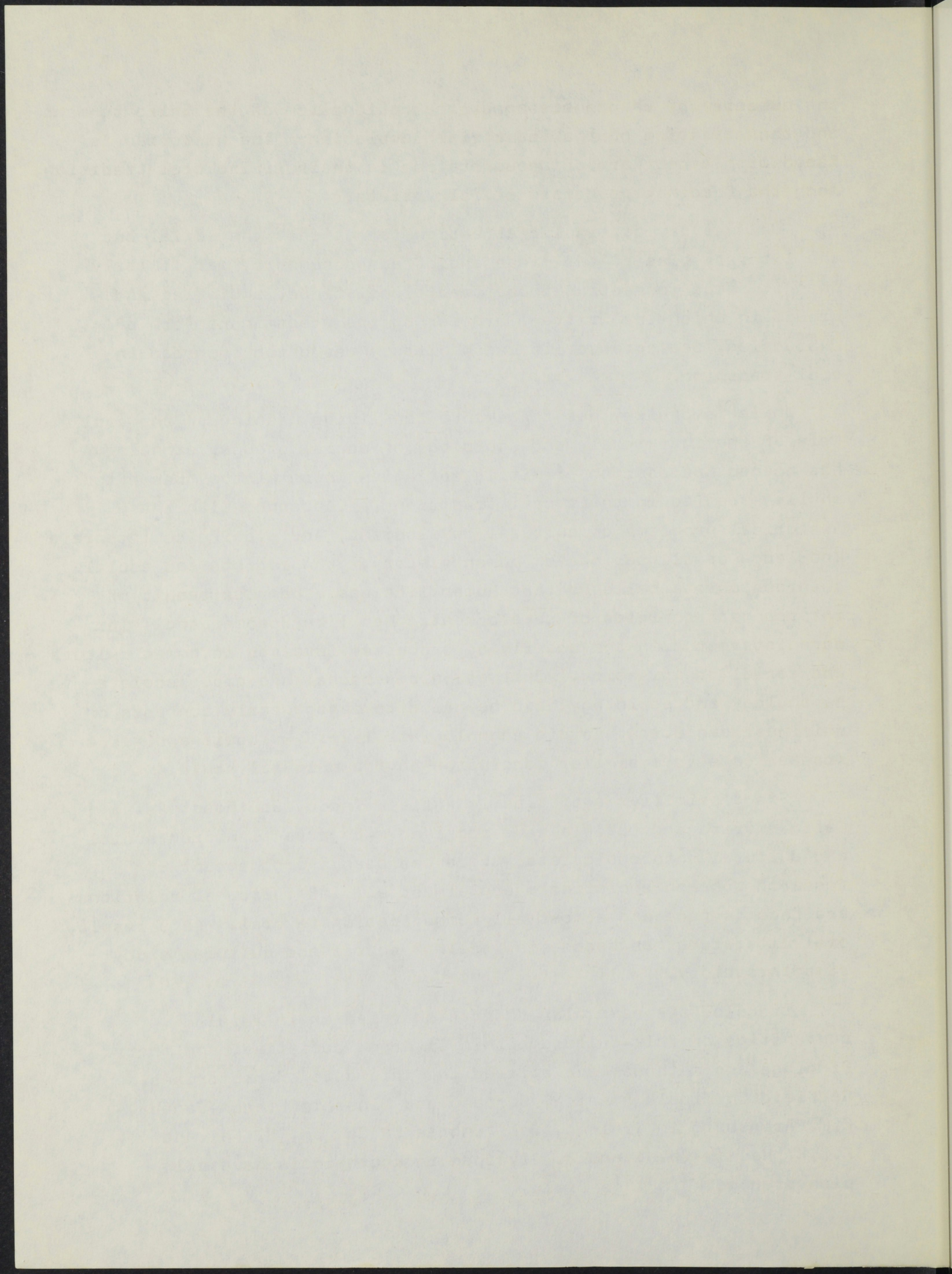
the humanism of the Renaissance, the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the scientism of the Industrial Revolution. The historian is faced with a new form of documentation in their living oral tradition, long the fascinating domain of folklorists.

We must pay particular attention to not only the social but the literary bias of our minds and of our documents, particularly when it comes to meeting those traditional times, societies and groups in which the written word is not the predominant form of expression, and moreover in which history was often recorded in oral tradition.

While psychology has reawakened the living meaning of the oral word of the individual, and sociology, of social groups, ethnology has opened the door to primitive societies whose history was often wholly embodied in their oral traditions. Concerned with the historical problems of cultural development, and wishing to integrate knowledge of all periods of human history, ethnologists and social anthropologists believed that human life was a complex result of interconnected fields of development. Men like Spencer and Tylor were interested in the underlying processes involved in human culture and social organisation. Just as on a personal and group scale, psychology and sociology have been led to reject early concepts of unilinear evolution, so did ethnologists like R.H. Lowie and A.L. Kroeber come to a similar conclusion on the cultural scale.

Since primitive societies in Africa, India, Southeast Asia, Latin America and Oceania have received much attention from social and cultural anthropologists, there has been a good amount of research done on societies where almost all interpersonal relations are face to face and almost all communication is oral. As a result, oral literature has become in itself a social and cultural study of anthropology.

Ethnologists have also undertaken research in rural communities of folk-culture within literate societies, and their findings and methods have stirred the interests of historians. Redfield in Middle America, Barbeau and Miner in French-Canada, C.M. Arensberg in Ireland, J.F. Embree in Japan, H. Fei and F.L.K. Hsu in China and A. Aiyappan in south India have all pioneered work in this field.



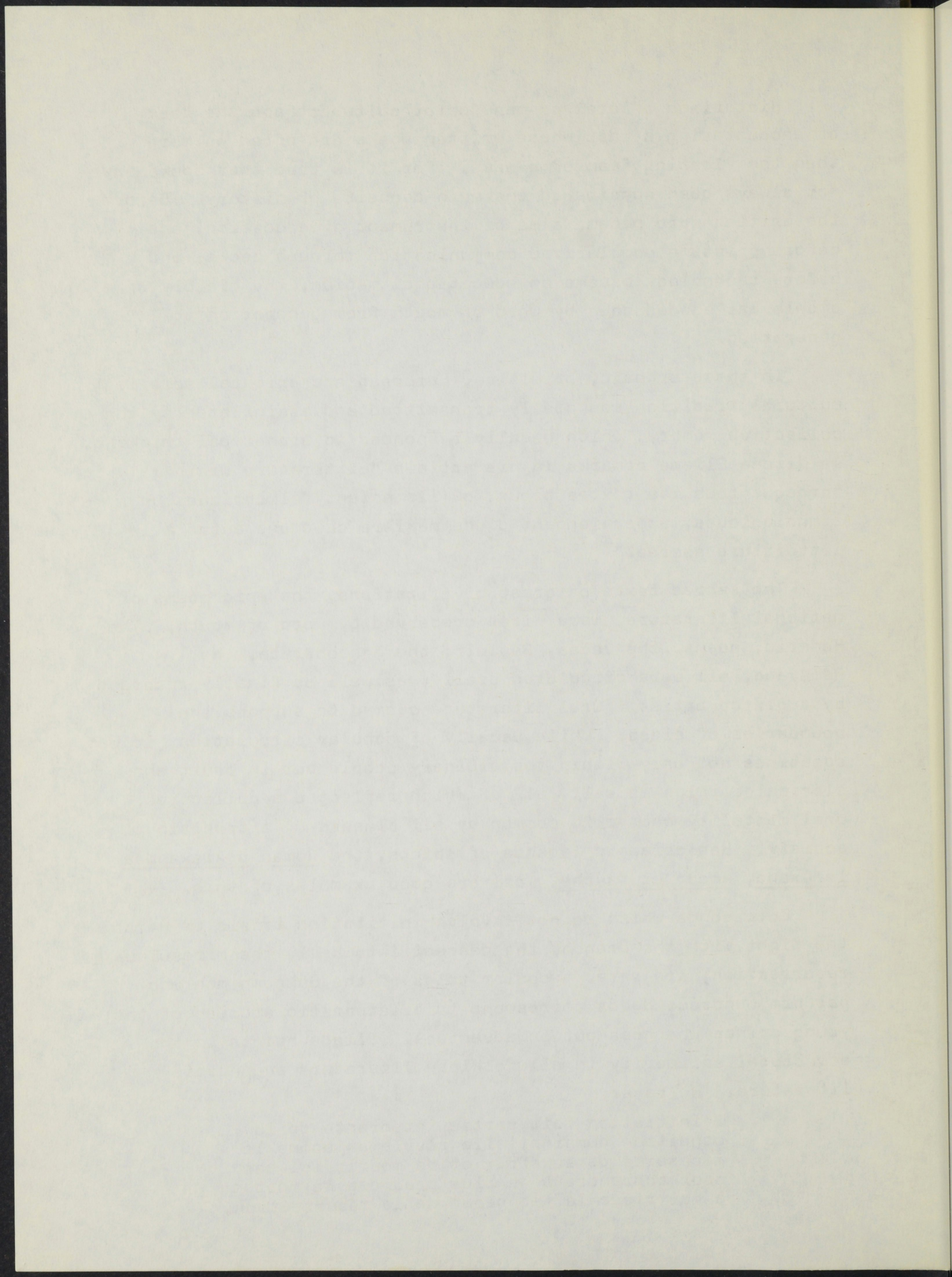
Historians of oral or manuscript cultures face the task of encountering a past whose written works are often no more than the floating foam of a wave. For it is true that books have not always been considered the main deposits of history. Before the written word became a major instrument of education, and before printing popularized communication through books, and before technology became an educational medium, the history of a people was handed down by word of mouth from generation to generation.

In these archaic, primitive, European and oriental societies, cultural tradition was orally transmitted and assimilated by the collective memory, which usually responded to archetypal thinking. As Mircea Eliade remarks in his article "Littérature Orale": "presque tous les textes oraux, qu'ils soient folkloriques ou ethnologiques, appartiennent d'une manière ou d'une autre à la littérature sacrée."<sup>4</sup>

The sacred texts of great civilizations, the epic poems of national literature, were first preserved by word of mouth. The Homeric poems, the Vedas, Beowulf, the Mahâbhârata, the Râmâyana, all were circulated orally, as well as finally recorded by a gifted artist. Oral literature seemed to surpass the boundaries of class. While usually of popular circulation, it was sometimes not only within the ordinary people but in court and clerical circles as well, all of which reflected a collective oral mentality shared in common by all classes of a traditional society. Hagiographic legends of saints, the Roman d'Alexandre le Grand, Amour et Psyche, all are good examples of this.

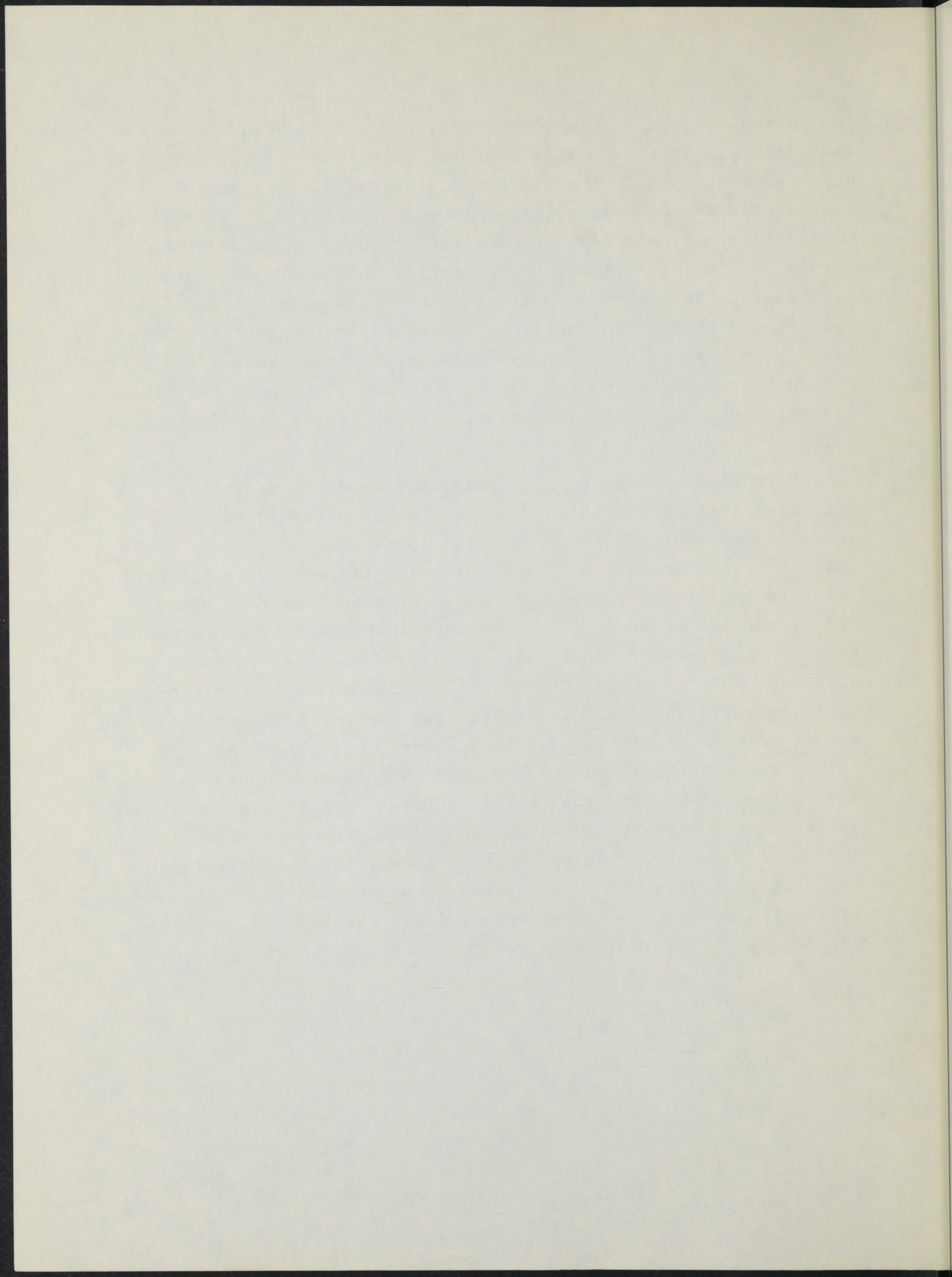
Epic songs which do not involve initiation trials of Heros: the fight with the Dragon, the descent into Hell, the miraculous resurrection, are rare. Popular tales of the unknown man who perform wondrous deeds correspond to aristocratic stories of the young prince who goes out on adventure. Eliade points to the structural solidarity in all folklore literature and heroic literature. He says:

l'initiation fait partie intégrante de la condition humaine; elle révèle en somme la nécessité de souffrir et de mourir ici-bas pour apprendre à ne plus craindre la mort et à maîtriser la technique de la résurrection.<sup>5</sup>



Mircea Eliade treats the eternal present of oral literature and history. This cannot be confused with the historical time of human events. Yet in showing how historical time is often assimilated through eternal archetypes in traditional societies, Eliade clears a path for the historical study of the workings of events in these societies. For example, epic and heroic oral literature often recount real events and historical persons and transfigure them by the collective memory and imagination. When history is transformed into exemplary myth, these very myths become an auxiliary source for the historian. For it happens that the historian has to try to see traditional societies from their point of view.

Psychology, sociology and ethnology have all drawn the historians' attention to the living history attached to the mentality of individuals, groups and societies. Moreover, these three disciplines have utilized methods which relied on the oral words of individuals, oral interviews with members of a group, oral tradition of societies. The impact of their findings has been felt in all areas of modern life. So much so, that there is currently a fad for oral communication, community 'experience' and psychic realities of all kinds, without much critical appreciation for the deeper significance of their work. It cannot be over-emphasized that historians are called upon to give more perspective to history than either current fads or past experience allowed for. History cannot be reduced to the mentalities surrounding events. But by the same token, the historian must not neglect the heart of the matter: the personal, social and collective mentalities which experienced, created and reflected on the res gestae of history are like our door of entry to the past.



I

THE MEDIAEVAL HISTORIAN AND  
ORAL AND WRITTEN TRADITIONS

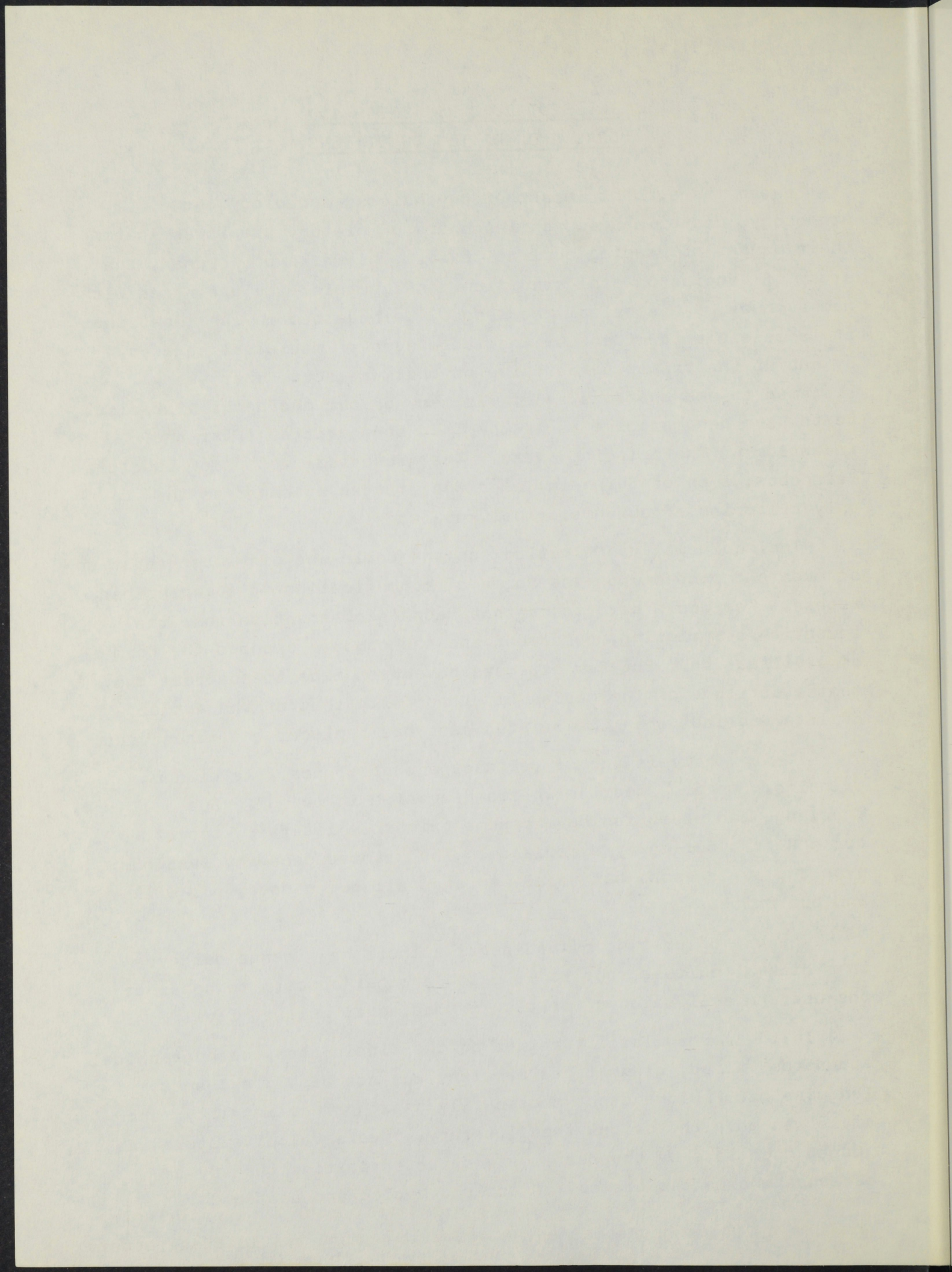
Under the evident impact of psychology, sociology and ethnology, historians and philosophers of history are investigating their manner of reading ancient texts. The works of McLuhan, the study of Vansina on oral tradition confirm this: we are faced with new avenues of historical knowledge. We have become convinced that it is possible to widen our knowledge even of mediaeval sources, by adding the triple perspective of what was seen, what was listened to and what was read. So many of our mediaeval historical texts have been studied as if they had been written after the invention of the printing press. The historical method of Langlois Seignobos, even of Bernheim, used the written document as the only criterion of our historical knowledge.

The mediaeval man's outlook on the world and his interpretation of events depended upon the forms of communication to which he had access. Few would care to contest Bacon's observation that the invention of printing, gunpowder and the compass changed the form of civilisation. But few attempts have been made to contrast the mental attitude of the mediaeval author with that of the author of later periods when the printed page had replaced the manuscript.

It is difficult for us to imagine what it was like without printing. We are immersed in its pervasive influence. Our knowledge and education have become primarily literary, too often cut off from our daily experience. The printed page involves our eyes and our reason, but rarely engages all our senses, our will and our faith.

The use of writing by mediaeval authors has opened our eyes to mediaeval culture, but it is quite another concern to consider the use and evaluation of writing in mediaeval culture itself.

In the vernacular literature of the Middle Ages, orthographical standards varied, grammatical accuracy was not highly esteemed, language was fluid and not necessarily a sign of nationality, and style was more rhetorical than literary. Mediaeval literature was judged much less by the formal standards of critics than by an audience who wanted a story of action. Voice and gesture





contributed to character portrayal. Anachronism and allegory created drama. And the art of narrative was based on an auditory method of communicating and exchanging ideas.

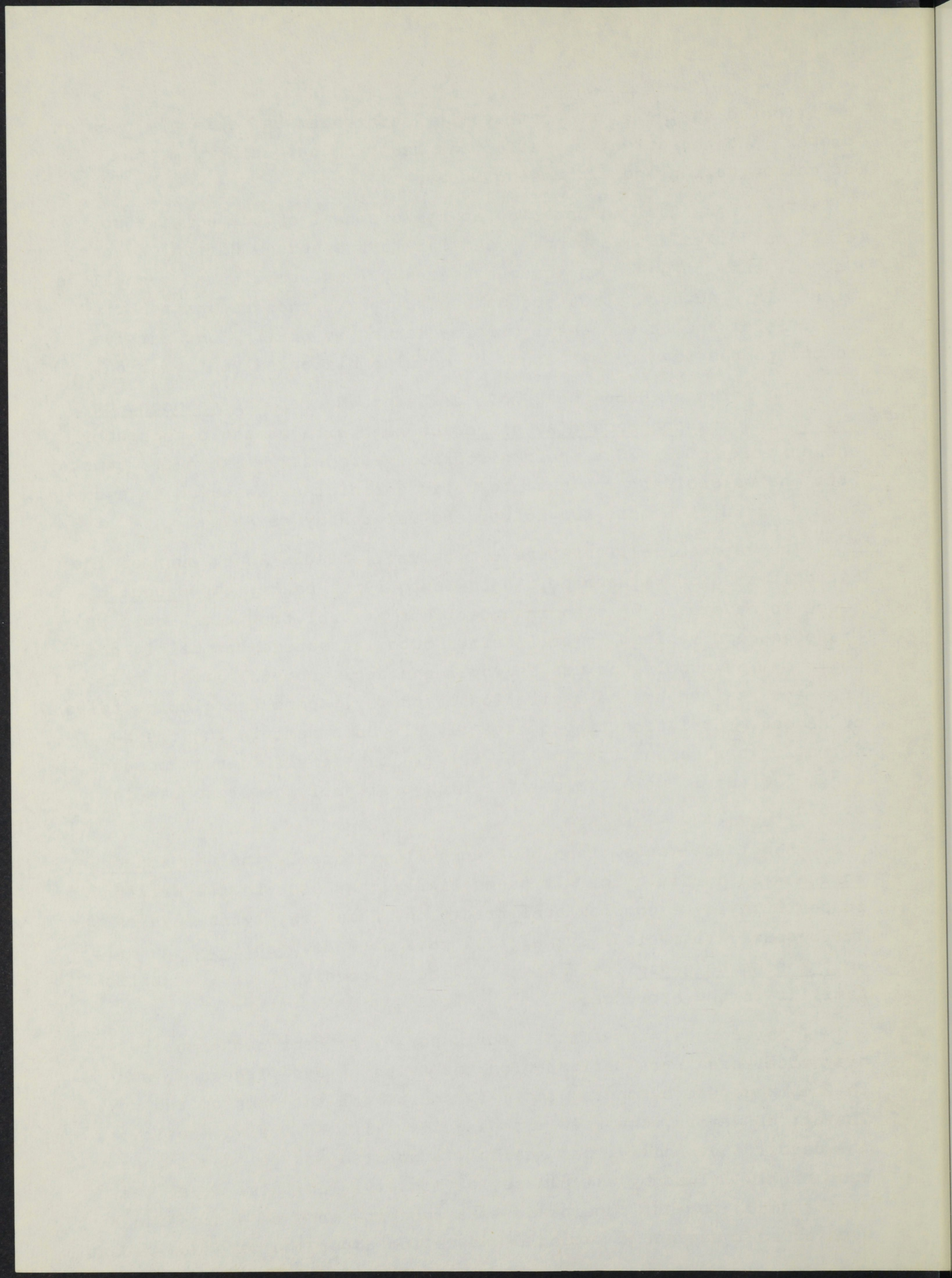
The historical information at the disposal of the cultivated class was mixed with legendary and fabulous events. Current events usually came to be known through hearsay, local gossip and travelling minstrels. Authoritative accounts of direct witnesses and reports in official and governmental circles served to clarify but rarely to change the day to day nature of popular historical information.

The works of Wace and Benoît de Sainte-Maure, the chansons de geste and the chansons d'aventure abounded with romantic geography and epic exploits. But their historical perspective was quite remote from the valuable though obscure Latin chronicles preserved in such abbeys as Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire, and Saint-Remy de Reims.

The vernacular literature of the early Middle Ages, such as the Germanic song of Hildebrand, Anglo-Saxon lyric poetry and Beowulf seems to have been written in order that an oral tradition would be preserved and recited in oral form. Such literature was mainly composed by lay people for use in royal and noble courts. Noble feasts were entertained by the recitation of poetry, songs and glowing tales of heroes. Oral tradition constantly played a part in the transformation and composition of the material. Yet all that we possess are a few surviving examples of a rich oral heritage preserved in writing.

The oldest masterpiece of French literature is the Chanson de Roland - an heroic epic. It seems likely that beneath its written composition lay a complex oral tradition. Romances, lyric lays of the troubadours, liturgical drama, religious legends, fabliaux as well as chansons de geste drew on a living reservoir of oral tradition familiar to the audience.

Those compositions with a contemporary or near contemporary historical base were derived from the tales of eye-witnesses, and they were spread by <sup>word of</sup> mouth, the main source for the news of the day. The art of memory, the keen witness, the skill of oral composition, the descriptive homily, and musical, sculptured and painted images were highly valued by all classes of society. In those days, the written word was not considered as a separate mode of expression or even as an independent method of education among the literate orders



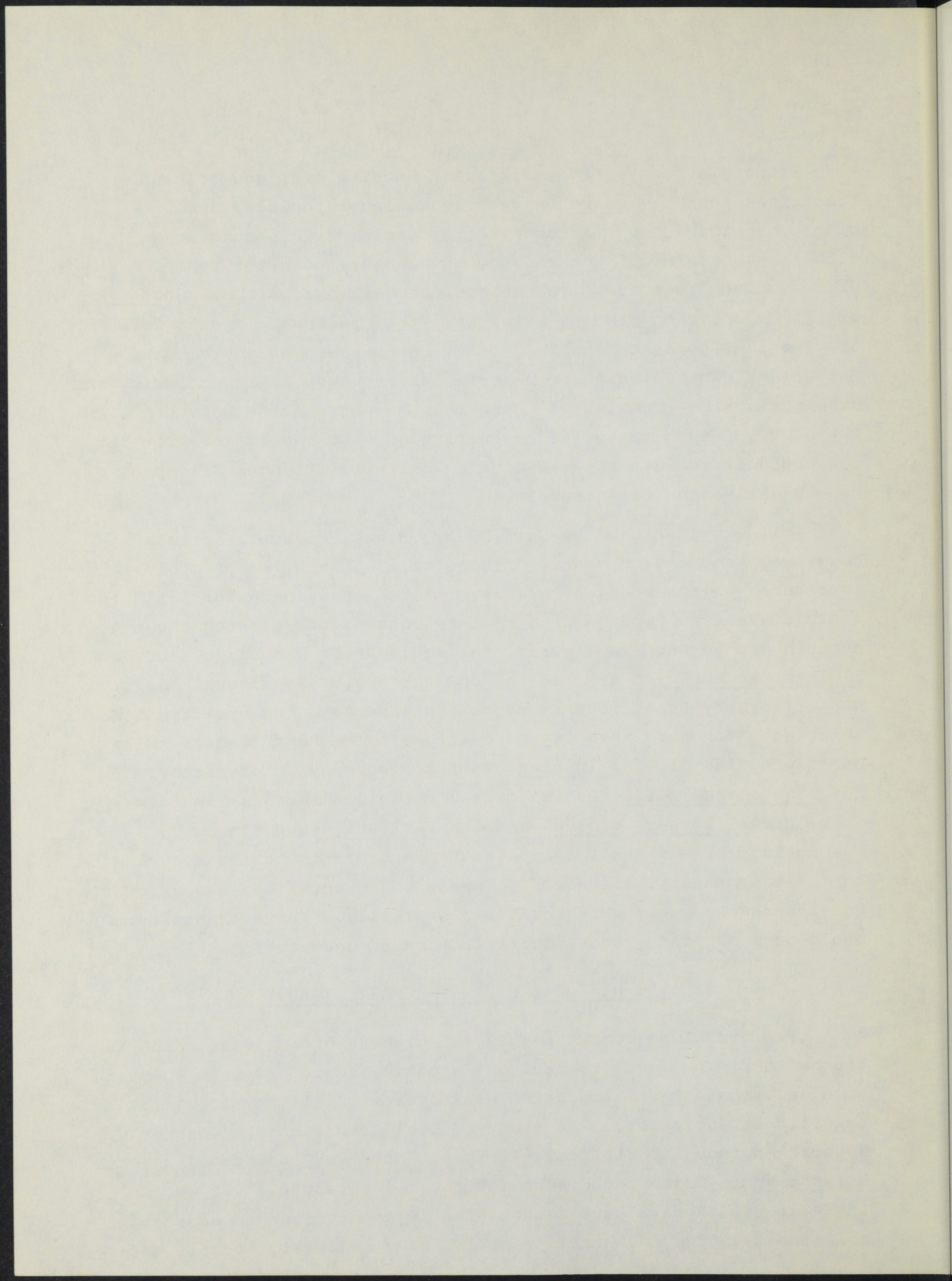
of society.

It was in such a fluid milieu of mingled oral and written traditions that the genre of the vernacular chronicler and biographer took shape. History first appeared in French prose with the beginning of the thirteenth century when the influx of returning Crusaders like Geoffroi de Villehardouin, brought with them a rising tide of tales from the Crusades. These stirred the imagination of the nobles, provided pleasure at their festive gatherings, enkindled their memories or provoked their curiosity and perpetuated the examples of chivalrous bravery in the Holy Land. In the study of such texts, we are called upon to reverse our literary pre-suppositions and see the Middle Ages with Etienne Gilson as "une civilisation de la parole."<sup>6</sup>

With the works of Le Goff, Duby, Bloch, Bossuat, Bezzola, Huizinga, Frappier, Rychner, Dragonetti, Auerbach,<sup>7</sup> we have been introduced to the study of mediaeval literature in rapport with the mentality and conditions of a society whose roots stretched out beneath and beyond its literary foliage. After Lacroix's study of l'Historien au Moyen Âge, we can no longer study mediaeval historiography as a literary genre isolated from the oral traditions which so often furnished its foundation.<sup>8</sup> The fund of oral tales underlying the literary genres of historiography, hagiography, the chansons de geste, lyric poetry, religious legends and folklore, drama, romans, contes and the fabliaux, suggests a methodology of comparative literature in order to better understand the oral mentality, its heroes, themes and events. Some appreciation for the development, techniques and mentality of oral transmission would be a necessary counterpart to such an undertaking.

#### THE HISTORICAL VALUE OF ORAL TRADITION

Oral tradition concerns the oral witness of the past which is transmitted from mouth to mouth. Recently, there has been a wealth of discussion on oral tradition as a source of history in traditional societies. The study of oral tradition has been undertaken today in Biblical,<sup>9</sup> African,<sup>10</sup> Homeric,<sup>11</sup> Scandanavian, German, Anglo-Saxon and French mediaeval literature.<sup>12</sup> In each of these areas, experts have scientifically endeavoured to assess the role and techniques of oral tradition as a cultural, social, and



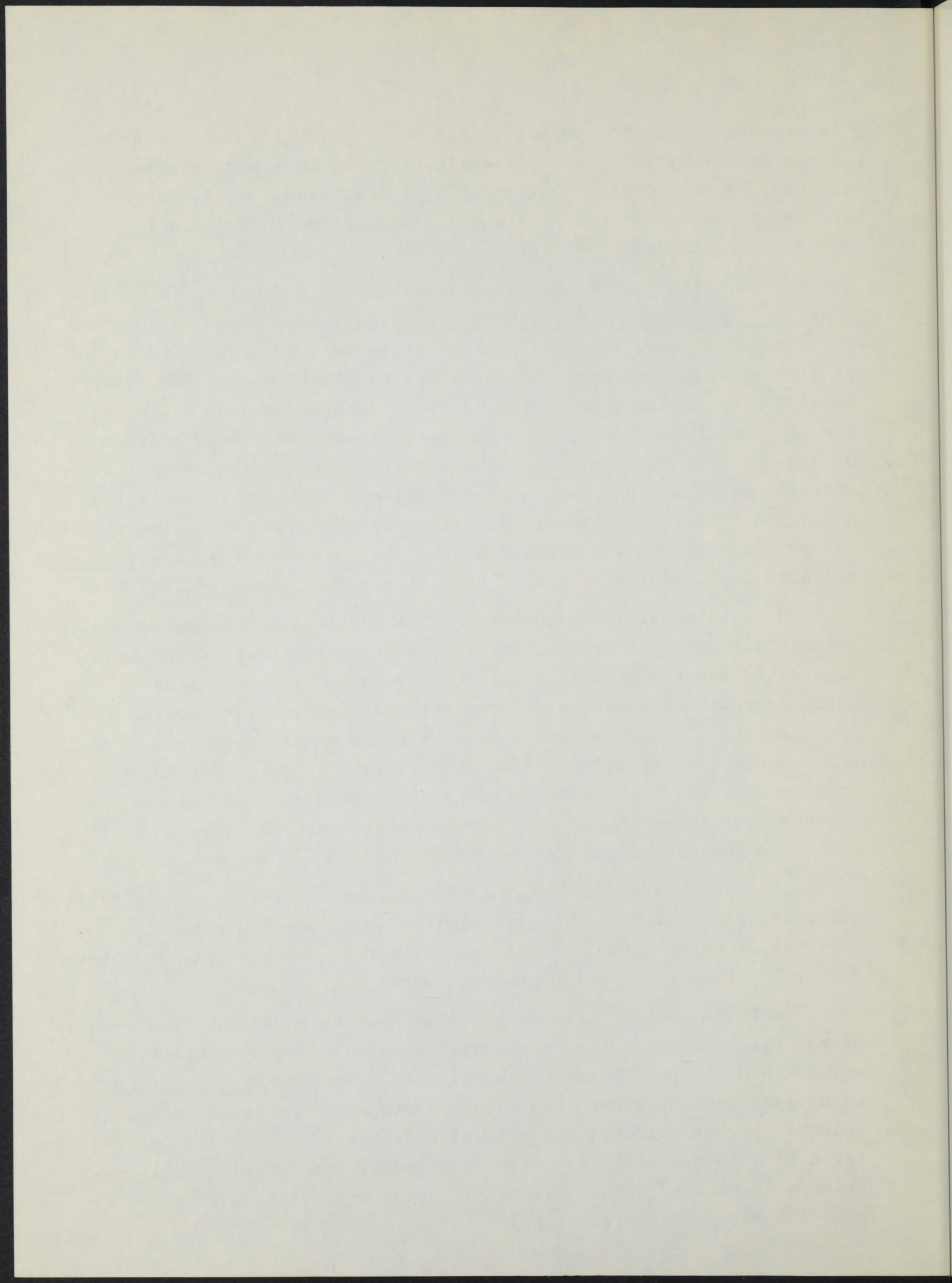
religious guide to the mentality surrounding the literary record of people and events. If there is anything which in a word sums up the most important contribution of oral tradition to the history of traditional societies, it is this: it brings contemporary values to contemporary facts.

A specialist in African oral tradition, Jan Vansina, in De la Tradition orale, essai de méthode historique,<sup>13</sup> has shown us that the value of oral tradition is always relative to a particular social content of events and their interpretation within a specific social milieu. For example, the royal poems of Kuba and Rwanda exaggerate the prowess of the kings and omit their defeats and in so doing tell us something of the character of exaltation surrounding kings in the official milieu. In speaking to an active public and in reflecting a collective belief, the oral witness only mentions that which will win the adhesion of all the participants. For these reasons, the raconteur reflects his social milieu more than a writer of literary tradition.

While cultural values determine the historical meaning of events in both literary and oral milieux, we enter a different dimension of culture in a world of oral tradition. Vansina introduces us to a world in which time is not divided mathematically but according to the recurring flow of seasons, festivals and cosmic changes - to a world whose history is more static, dramatic, symbolic and fatal - whose truths are tied to the beliefs of ancestors, whose events are clothed in rituals of the past, whose people walk in robes of idealized character.

It is in this sense that the structure of oral tradition reflects its particular culture. The title, time and space environment, episodes, themes, ritual motifs, and manner in which a tale develops mirror the traditions which create events.

The techniques of oral composition have been astutely analyzed by Milman Parry and A.B. Lord in Homeric studies aided by their field-work of non-literate bards in Yugoslavia.<sup>14</sup> In the Singer of the Tales, Lord discusses the common but flexible stock of themes and formulas from which a narrator creates his work as a moment of re-creating a tradition for a given audience. Expansion, adornment, and ritual details develop a tale to suit the situation; themes and patterns remain the same to preserve the tradition.



In his fine work in early Christian hagiography, Hippolyte Delehaye has discussed some qualities of the oral memory. It retains simple, limited, similar incidents.<sup>15</sup> The popular memory records more of a type than an individual, preferring to unite under one head or title those deeds and qualities which belong to many. And finally, the oral memory relies on external signs to aid it: a monument, castle, feast or name-place, aid and preserve the oral tales attached to great men.

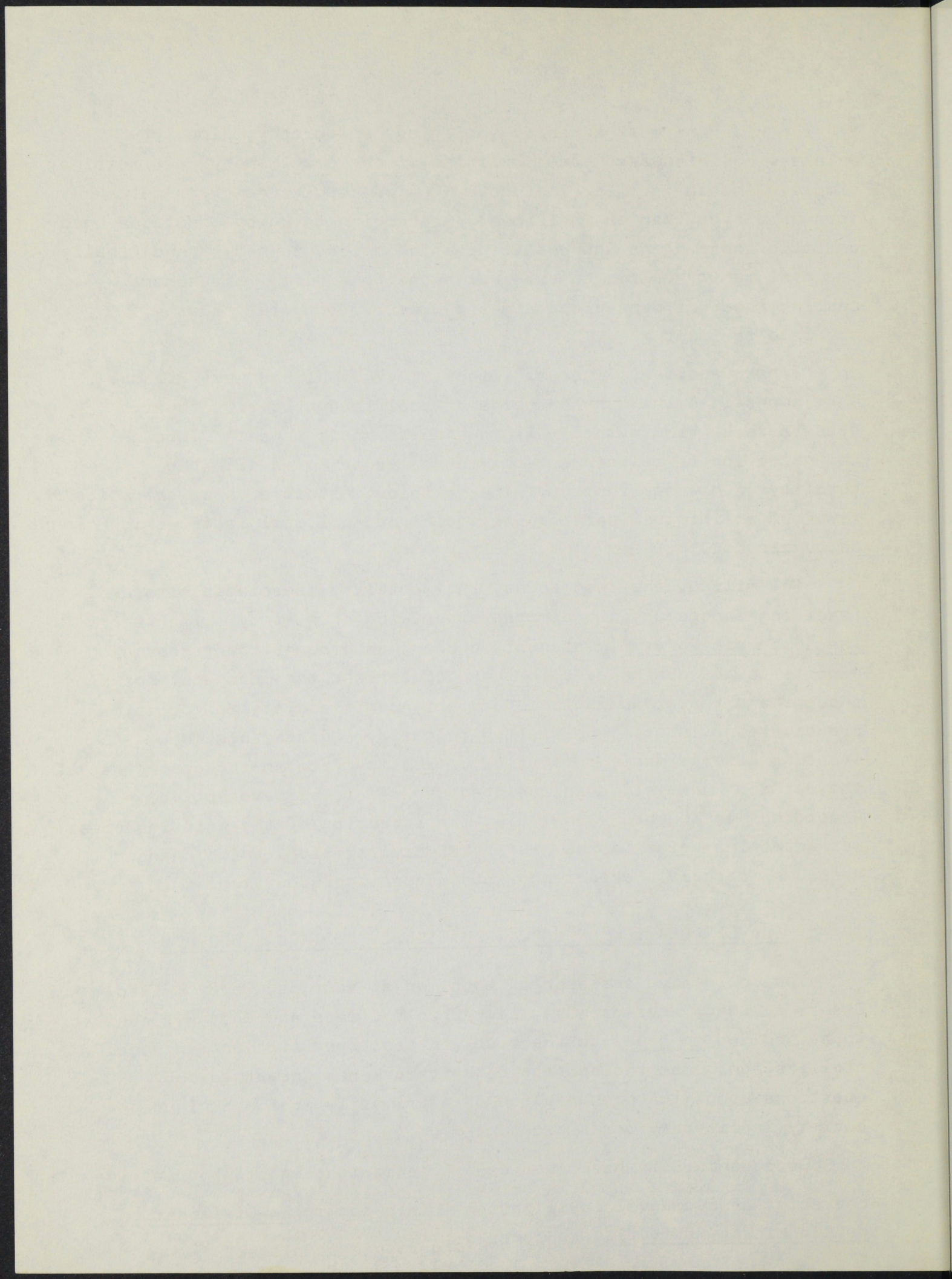
Jung, Cassirer, Ricoeur, Eliade, Lévy-Bruhl and Levi-Strauss have emphasized that the patterns of oral thought derive their dynamic force from myth: religion in its basic sense.<sup>16</sup> Through the narration of religious myth, man comes to terms with the totality of his environment. The religious nature of oral tradition is often an integral part of its social and cultural impact which cannot be overlooked.

The milieu, the techniques, the mentality associated with oral tradition engage us in a diverse experience of history. In his The Gutenberg Galaxy<sup>17</sup>, Marshall McLuhan has brought the research of experts to the public eye. He has popularized the idea that forms of thought and the organization of experience in society and politics are divergent in oral and written cultures. He has shown how printing altered man's perception of reality from an integrated use of the ear and the eye, to an isolated use of visual perspective. According to McLuhan's analysis, the invention of the printing press was a turning point in the history of civilization, which changed mediaeval corporate experience into modern individualism.

#### THE EXPLORATION OF ORAL TRADITION IN MEDIAEVAL SOCIETY

The collective research of such men as Vansina, Parry, Lord, Cassirer, Jung, Levi-Strauss, Lévy-Bruhl, Eliade and Delehaye has yet to be applied en gros to the study of oral tradition in mediaeval civilization. But the spirit of their work has unearthed many questions about the presentation of a primarily oral and visual society in literary terms alone.

Jacques Le Goff has given us a fine insight into the primitive character of mediaeval civilization in his work: La Civilisation de l'occident médiéval. He remarks:





Bien sûr, il ne s'agit pas d'oublier que le Moyen Age, ou plutôt une petite élite médiévale, savait aussi écrire, mais ce Moyen Age essentiel est plus près de la vérité, d'une époque où l'énorme majorité - illiteratus, "illettré", avec un sens plus ou moins large comme on verra, était synonyme <sup>18</sup> de laïc, noble ou paysan - était unalphabète.

Sociology, anthropology and ethnology are the sisters of a mediaeval history which seeks to elucidate the illiterate world behind the literary remains. The primitive structures of mediaeval life are related to the material, biological and mental conditions of all its people and their folklore.

For his part, Benoît Lacroix has emphasized the major role of oral tradition in mediaeval historiography, Foucher de Chartres, Guibert de Nogent, Baudri de Bourgeuil, Orderic Vital, Guillaume de Malmesbury, Girard le Cambrien, Raoul Niger, all, for the most part, wrote their history of the Crusades without going on Crusade themselves:

De Grégoire de Tours et jusqu'à Villehardouin, Joinville ou même Monstrelet, la tradition orale règne en maîtresse, tellement qu'on se demande si une interprétation du moyen âge est encore valable sans la connaissance des mécanismes de la transmission orale. <sup>19</sup>

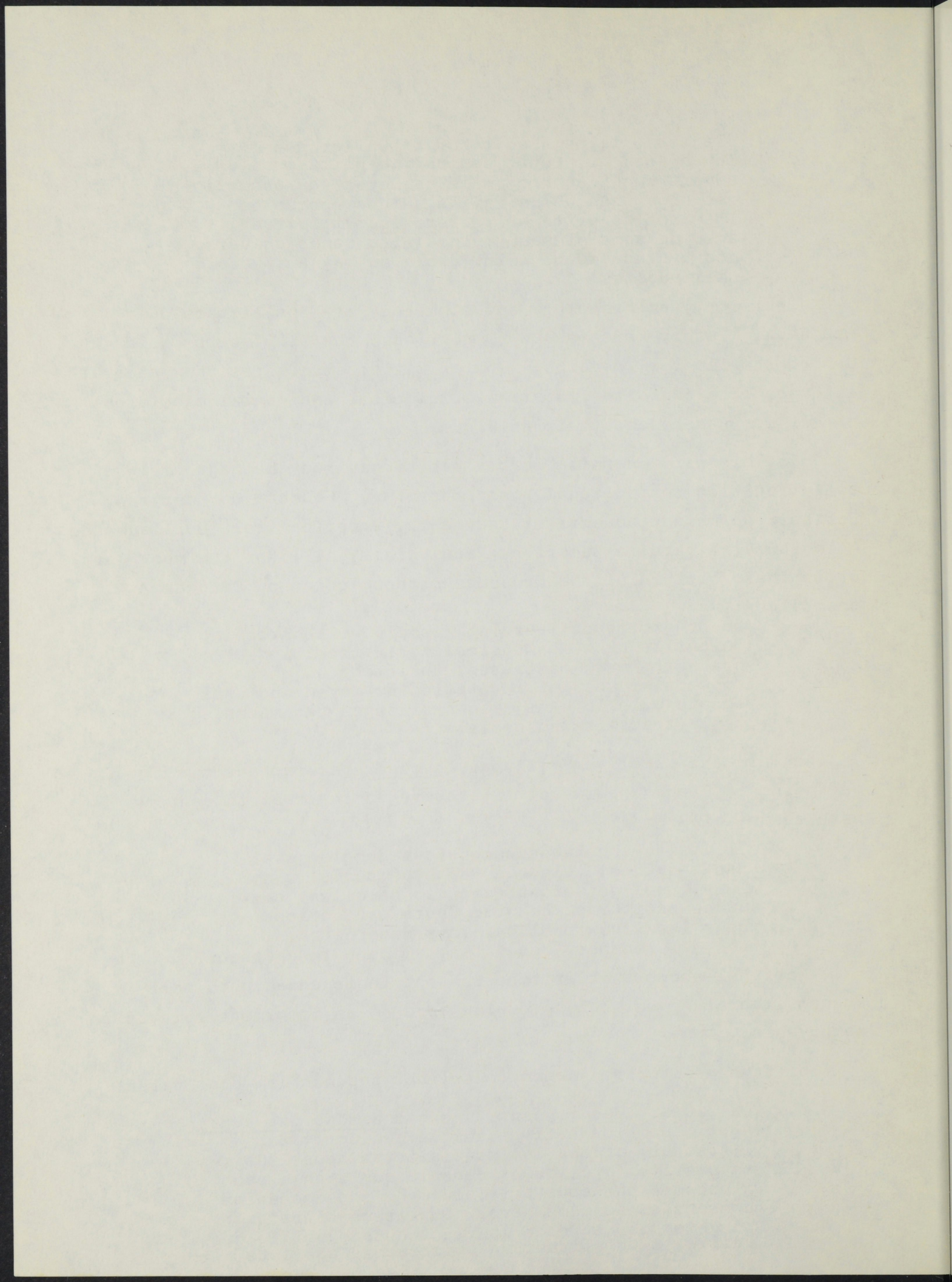
As Marichal says, many literary genres practised at the beginning of French mediaeval literature in the twelfth century were essentially oral:

Il y aura longtemps encore des jongleurs et des trouvères, tels que Rutebeuf ou Colin Muset, qui gagneront leur vie en allant eux-mêmes réciter ou chanter leurs productions dans les lieux publics, lors des foires, des pèlerinages, des fêtes, ou dans le château. <sup>20</sup>

Marichal shows that writing was not indispensable to early French literature but began to play more of an important role as a memory-aid.

Written manuscripts began to collect and confirm oral tales:

La plupart des manuscrits des chansons des geste sont, comme déjà ci-dessus le manuscrit de l'Arsenal, ce que les spécialistes appellent des manuscrits 'cycliques' dans lesquels on a réuni plusieurs chansons primitivement indépendantes consacrées au même héros, Guillaume d'Orange par exemple, et dont la réunion tend vaille que vaille, à constituer une biographie complète. <sup>21</sup>



Groups, roles, and types were more important than individuals in mediaeval oral tradition. This did not diminish the exemplary heroism of saints, kings and adventuresome knights, but they often appear as prototypes. Les gestes des roi, some of which treat Charlemagne as the Crusader par excellence, rely on social, cultural and religious rituals to extol him as the ideal type of Crusading king. The glory attached to an heroic type involved a large amount of folk-motifs which were a uniting factor in a world of:

l'isolement, l'analphabétisme, les dangers de guerre, l'incertitude des frontières, les mauvaises communications, la rareté des écrits, les longs voyages sur terre et sur mer, les retours d'expéditions, les séjours à l'hôtellerie, les veillées, la prédication populaire... 22

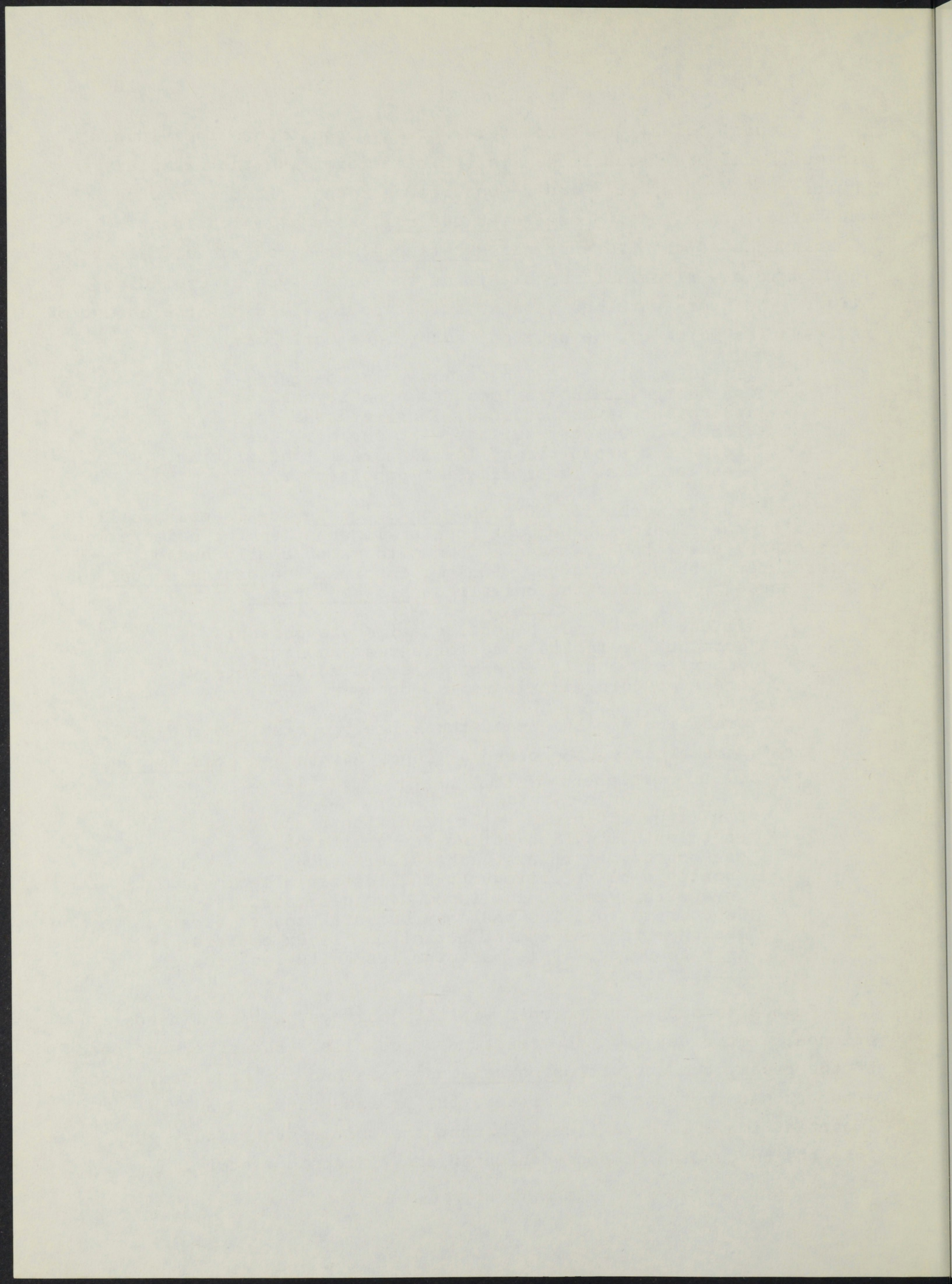
Just as the evolution of a chanson de geste cycle was usually guided by the simple and popular idea of lineage, so the celebration of ancestry seems to have been a common theme of orally based literature. The genealogy of kingship inspired the gestes du roi, noble ancestry inspired the chivalrous mise en prose.

Il est normal que de nobles seigneurs passent commande de récits chevaleresques évoquant, sinon leur ancêtres personnels, du moins leurs prédécesseurs dans la voie d'honneur. 23

Oral tradition had its own authorities, centres and subjects. The great, the elderly, the clergy, kings, saints and prud-hommes, all were trusted harbingers of oral news.

Les lieux officiels de la tradition orale sont les puits, les portes des villes et des bourgs, le relais, l'hôtellerie du monastère où se retrouvent d'illustres pèlerins, voyageurs, vieux chevaliers, même des rois... La cour du roi, les châteaux du voisinage et bientôt les chambres des dames, autant de 'lieux choisis' pour converser et se raconter les faits les plus pittoresques. 23b

Favourite subjects included visits, journeys, wars and deeds of princes, victories, defeats, feasts and councils. But after the deeds of the great, the subject par excellence remained the Crusades. Long after it had lost its first ardour, the Crusade remained an important image in oral tradition past the thirteenth century and into the Burgundian Crusade dreams of the fifteenth century.



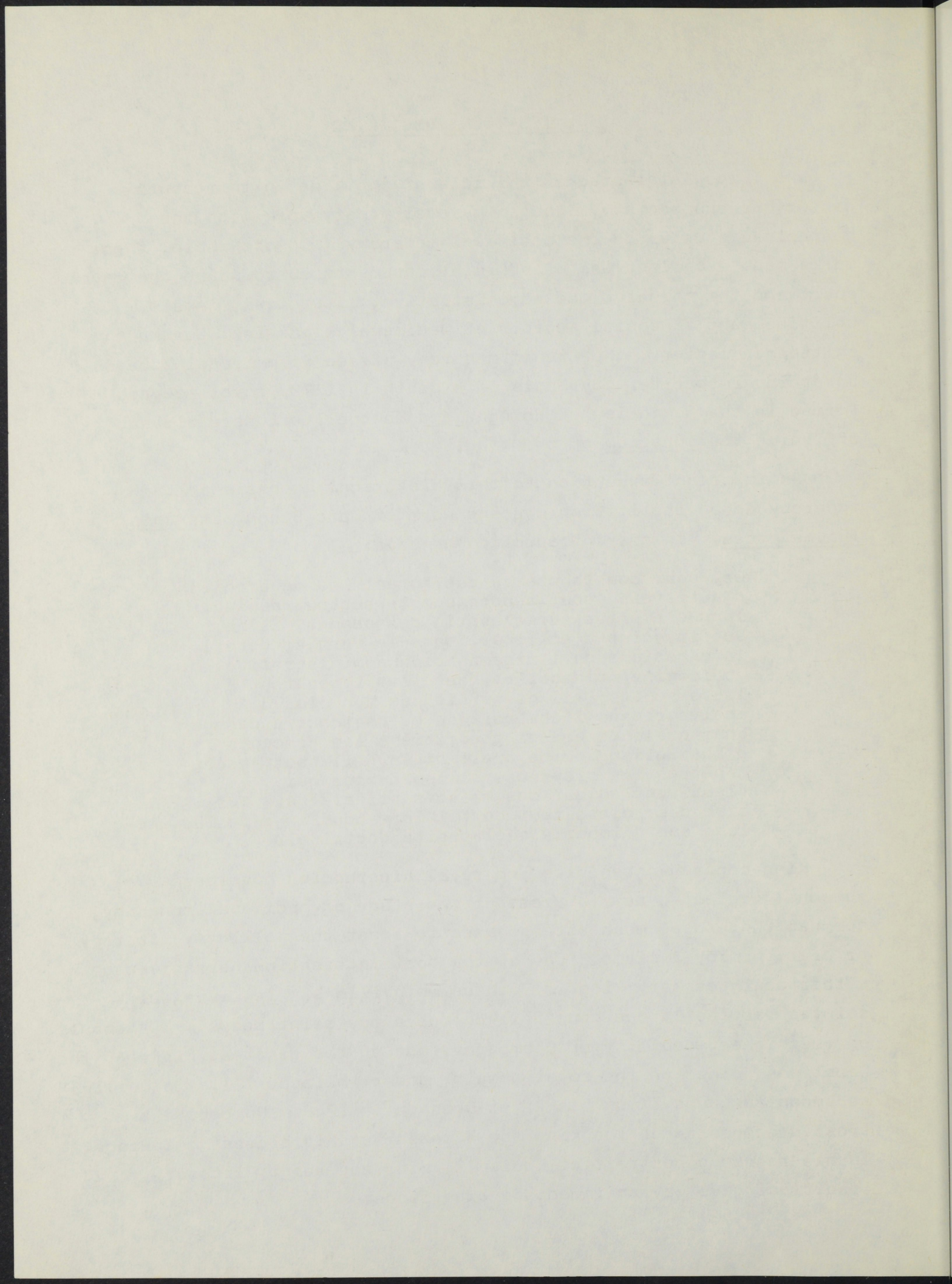
ORAL TESTIMONY ON A KING

As I was interested in the role of the king in thirteenth century French society, I began my preliminary work with the historical studies on the mediaeval monarchy. On the whole, these works made excellent use of official documents surrounding the royal court and they treated the administrative, liturgical, legal, political and financial aspects of mediaeval kingship. During the thirteenth century, the French monarchy passed from feudal towards sovereign authority. By Louis IX's death in 1270, royal lawyers formed in the Roman law of Bologna and Montpellier, were already affirming the imperium of the king.

An important exception to this historical emphasis on the monarchy as an institution was the work of Marc Bloch, Les Rois Thaumaturges. In his introduction he says:

Or, pour comprendre ce que furent les monarchies d'autrefois, pour rendre compte surtout de leur longue emprise sur l'esprit des hommes, il ne suffit point d'éclairer, dans le dernier détail, le mécanisme de l'organisation administrative, judiciaire, financière, qu'elles imposèrent à leurs sujets; il ne suffit pas non plus d'analyser dans l'abstrait ou de chercher à dégager chez quelques grands théoriciens les concepts d'absolutisme ou de droit divin. Il faut encore pénétrer les croyances et les fables qui fleurirent autour des maisons princières. Sur bien des points tout ce folklore nous en dit plus long que n'importe quel traité doctrinal. 24

King-centred chronicles and royal biographies have been somewhat neglected as a source for the study of mediaeval monarchy, nor has there been much attempt made to treat the folklore, literary or oral, of royal lives. One of the most interesting narratives on a thirteenth century king is Jean de Joinville's "le Livre<sup>23</sup> des saintes paroles et des bons faiz de notre roy saint Loos". A member of the highest nobility of Champagne, one of the greatest fiefs of the Capetians joined to the royal domain under Philippe III, Joinville accompanied Louis IX on his first Crusade in 1248. He became a trusted companion of the king and a member of his closest entourage. In his renowned portrait of Louis IX, king and saint, literary traditions gave way to immediate experience.

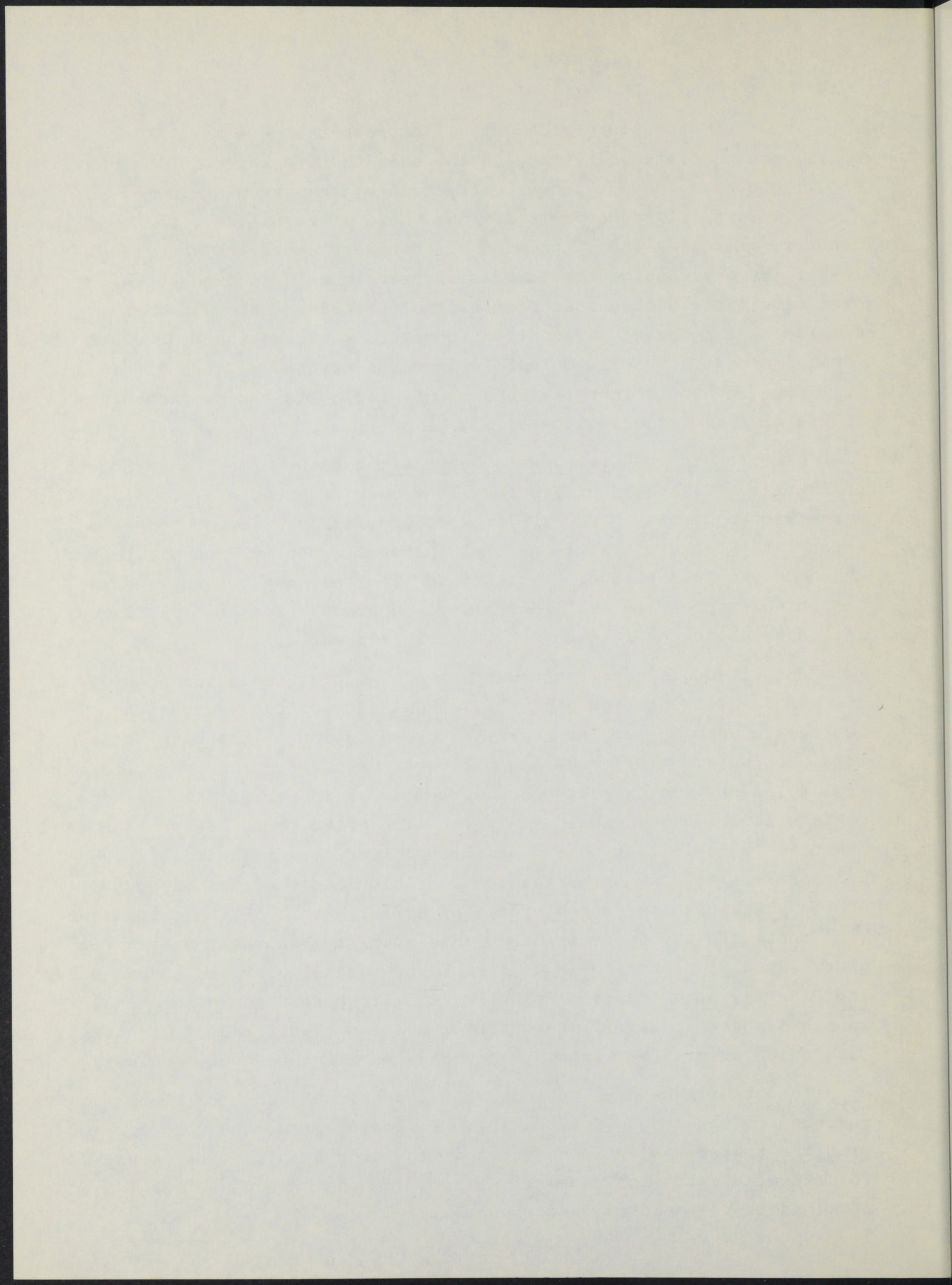


The interpretation which Joinville brought to his hero, King Louis, was conditioned by many of the same factors which influenced the king because he was contemporary to him and shared a similar milieu. Joinville's portrait of King Louis IX is filled with the candour, precision and excitement of the spoken word and the visual image. He was less concerned with literary models than he was with oral traditions handed down from his forefathers. Joinville displayed King Louis' personality in simple conversation and vivid recital of deeds. While Joinville used the written source of Guillaume de Nangis' compilation on the king, this was supplementary to his oral and visual witness.

Like La Vie de Guillaume le Maréchal, and the memories of Robert of Clari and Villehardouin, Joinville's work confided his memories to a restricted circle of courtly friends and family. Though composed in French, they were of little general interest except to the milieu for which they were destined. Yet that is precisely why they are of absorbing interest today. Their lively character and natural flavour introduce us to the intimacy of the author's world.

Joinville was a reliable witness of the traditions surrounding the king. He identified his oral, visual and written sources and we treated each in turn as a partial presentation of the king related to a particular environment and heritage. After reading Joinville's oral tales of kings and King Louis, we can no longer dismiss as unhistorical the "mystical" king, the king of religious veneration based in the beliefs of his nobility and linked to their collective conscience. Nor can we, after reading Joinville's visual account of the king, dismiss from history the worldly magic of the chivalrous king rooted in the expectations of his nobility and their search for glory, at a time when their political and feudal power was on the wane. And finally, after reading Joinville's written sources on the king, we can perhaps wonder if the official written traditions of kingship with which we are familiar were not less familiar to noble society.

In Joinville's oral sources, the traditional noble folklore surrounding the king comes to life. Through it, we came into contact with the traditional role expected of the king by his noble peers, the rituals associated with his person, and the historical meaning of kingship in the eyes of his nobility.



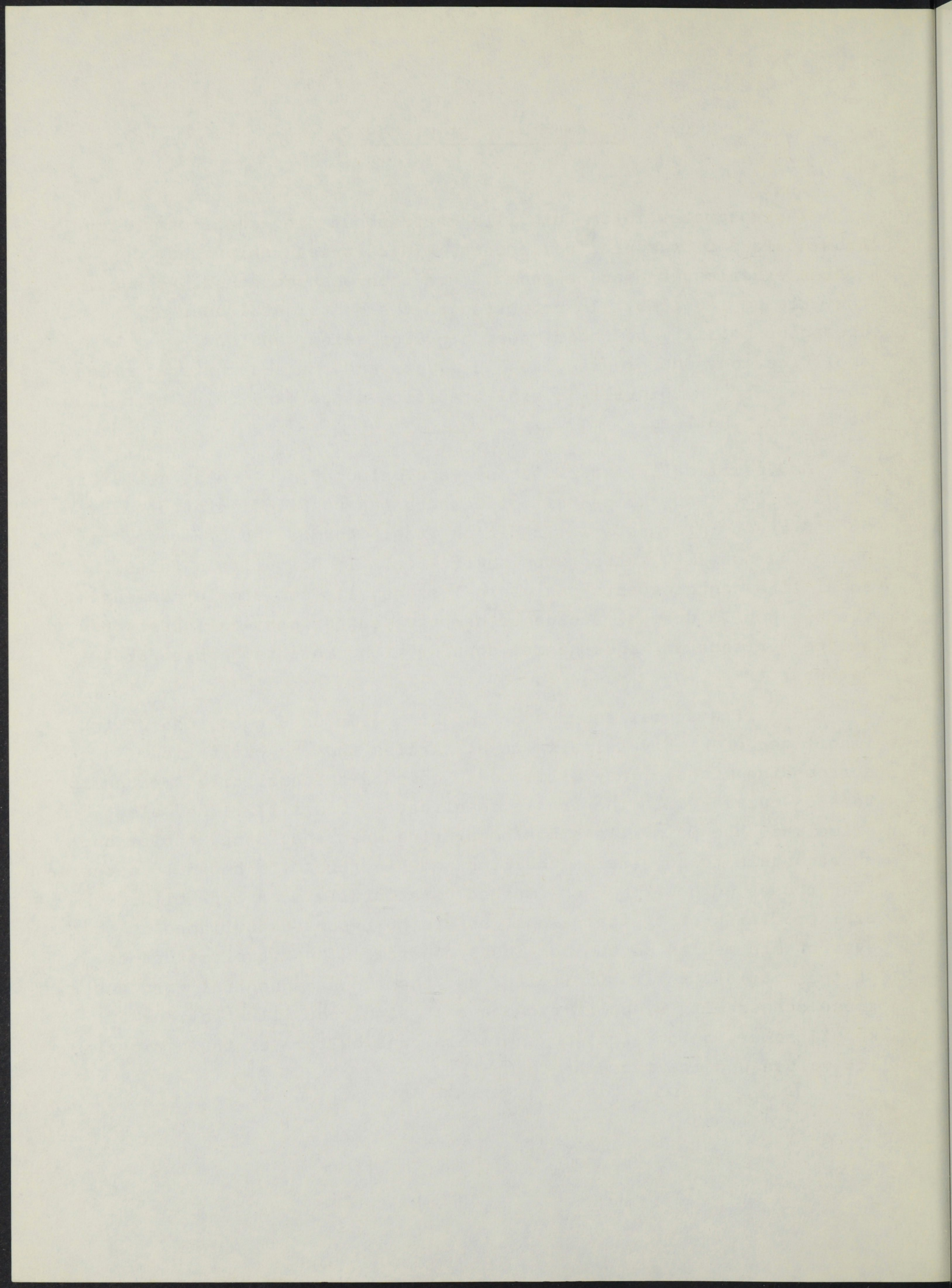


A NOBLE MYTH OF KINGSHIP

The anecdotes which Joinville heard about King Louis came largely from noble and Crusading companions. These tales reflect how the nobles experienced what happened, more than what happened. As such, they are an invaluable introduction to the mental attitudes of the Crusading nobility to their monarch. Digression, analogy, amplification, anachronism, cosmic events and the supernatural clung to the tales of Joinville's oral tradition as so many chips of colour to a mosaic pattern.

Mediaeval daily experience was a cluster of movements, activities, direct sights and sounds for which there was no fixed point of view, no efficient interpreter. Tradition itself formed the framework in which the nobility interpreted their king. In Joinville's tales, royal life contained its own plain lessons, its own simple pleasures, its own public dramas, its own redemptive sufferings - all part of a long heritage of kings handed down from the knights' noble forefathers.

Joinville's oral sources on the king give us a good idea of the importance of kingly tales in royal circles and the exaltation surrounding kings. They allow us to compare the qualities treated in foreign rulers, with the traits described in Louis IX. They also illustrate how Joinville's contemporaries used anecdotes, fables and short morals to popularize the king and his role. We begin to perceive the process of how the king emerged first orally as a type within an oral tradition of typical kings, before he became established in the eyes of his nobles as an individual monarch. The ritual structure of these tales, their simplicity, and their non-sequential word and space scenes with symbolic exchanges of signs and illustrations of kingly power, throw light on the noble oral culture of those times, its values and its modes of thought.

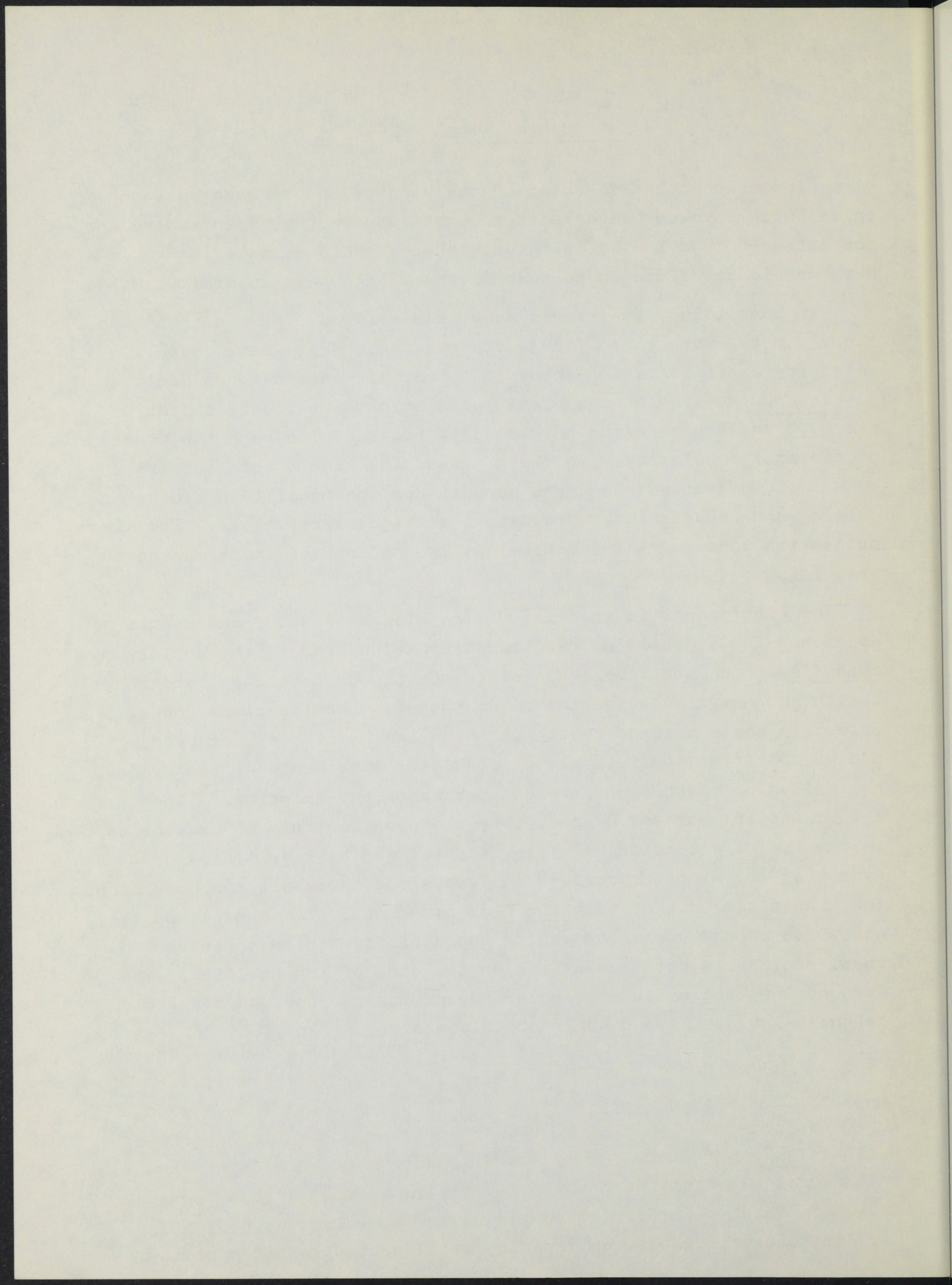


THE KING'S NAME

Clustered around the name of the king of France were various tales which invoked his name as a substitute in the human sphere for the action of God in the spiritual sphere. Here we note the hermeneutic and didactic purpose of the king's name in oral tradition.

In some tales, the king's name is simply used as a sign of the story's moral veracity: "le jour d'une feste Notre-Dame, que li sainz roy i estoit..."<sup>26</sup> In other tales, his name defends God's justice on the side of the great lords beyond the recall of the clergy,<sup>27</sup> and God's favour on knightly "proesce"<sup>28</sup> beyond the bounds of clerical regularity. In these cases, the king's name appears as a magical word to summon God's support for the nobility's truth, justice and prowess above provost, clerk and clergy alike. The king's protection appears as the nobles' Divine defense of their waning prestige.

The king's name is associated with places of power and sights of abundance in Joinville's oral tradition. The king is the worldly parousia of the nobility. His vengeance can destroy them, or his wealth and power can save them. On the way down the river Rhône, Joinville spots a razed castle standing against the sky at Lyons and he hears the fearful tale of its fate: the wrath of the king has fallen on a noble who ravaged merchants and pilgrims.<sup>29</sup> When the Crusaders approach Cyprus, they see great barrels of wine piled in the fields encircled by hills of wheat and barley. They hear that the king has arrived on Cyprus and these are his provisions.<sup>30</sup> The king's name evokes both the fear and wonder of a magical deity possessed of the power and wealth the nobility aspire to share. The royal magic does not always fall on the side of the nobility. The name of the king calls on a power beyond their order, beyond its defense, yet not beyond their worldly dreams of glory.



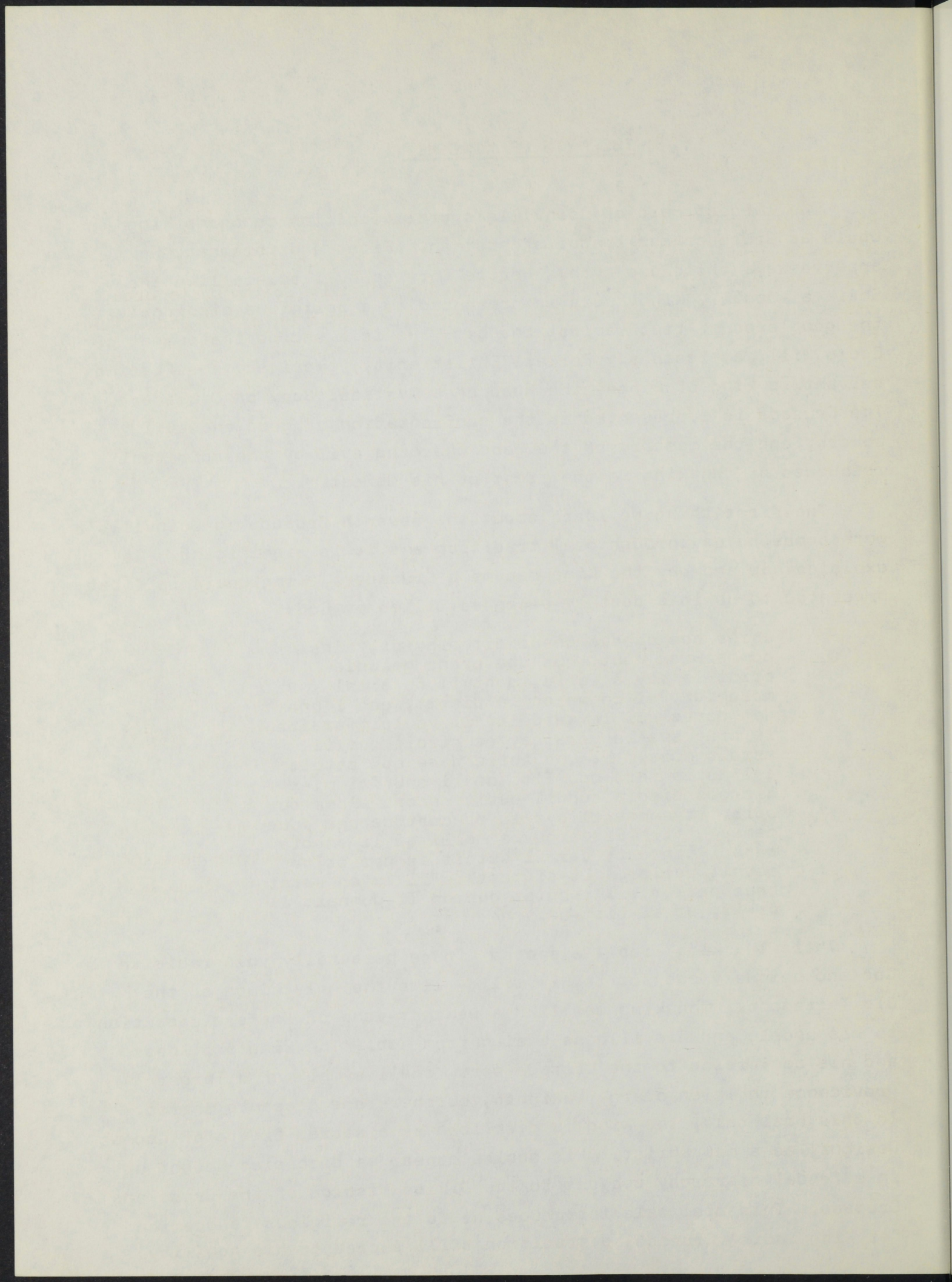
THE MYTH OF KINGSHIP

The largest part of Joinville's oral tradition concerns King Louis as Crusader and leader of his men. First and foremost, he appears as a religious myth. Before foreign evil rulers like the Shaik al-Jabal<sup>31</sup>, King Louis is presented as a religious missionary, the good seed of truth amidst the bad. He is a sacred instrument of God's Will, a missionary for all Christianity, a priest, a suffering servant, a king of kings, the Head of a Mystical Body of Crusaders. The Crusade is represented as the confrontation of good and evil powers, and the mastery of the good over the evil by the spiritual resources of the king in the midst of his defeat.

The first thing we learn about the seventh Crusade in Joinville's work comes to us through oral tradition and it is significant. It explains how and why the king became a Crusader. King Louis is first presented to us in a deathly sickness willed by God:

Après ces choses desus dites avint, ainsi comme Diex vout, que une grans maladie prist le roy à Paris, dont il fu à tel meschief, si comme on le disoit, que l'une des dames qui le gardoit, li vouloit traire le drap sus le visaige, et disoit que il estoit mors. Et une autre dame qui estoit à l'autre part dou lit, ne li souffri mie; ainçois disoit que il avoit encore l'ame ou cors. Et comme il oyt le descort de ces dous dames Nostre-Sires ouvra en li et li envoya santei tantost; car il estoit esmuyz et ne pouoit parler. Et si tost qu'il fu en estat pour parler, il requist que on li donnast la croiz, et si fist-on. 32

There the king lies - a sacred figure personally vulnerable to God and uniquely subject to His Will - like the holy kings of the Old Testament. The king was like a weather-vane of God's disposition to his people and his illness a sign from God. The king's illness and his conversion to the Crusade were small symbols of a larger Providence in which clergy, knights, burghers and peasants shared. In this oral tale, the king is described as a sacred figure of God's Designs, as a new Christ. His nobles appear as disciples caught up in a feudal hierarchy subject to the Divine Mission of the Cross and Crusade. This oral tale introduces us to the religious foundation for King Louis' Crusade, a tradition still sacred to his nobility.



The king's health, the king's gifts to foreign rulers, the king's neglect of custom, the king's majestic victories in battle over the Saracens, the king's sorrowful defeat and retreat from Mansura, the king's bitter temptations and tortures while imprisoned by the evil Saracens, the king's refusal to take a blasphemous oath to lose his Faith and save his kingship - all are recorded in Joinville's oral tradition as sacred signs from God, moral lessons on a mystical theme beyond the terrible defeat of the Crusading army.

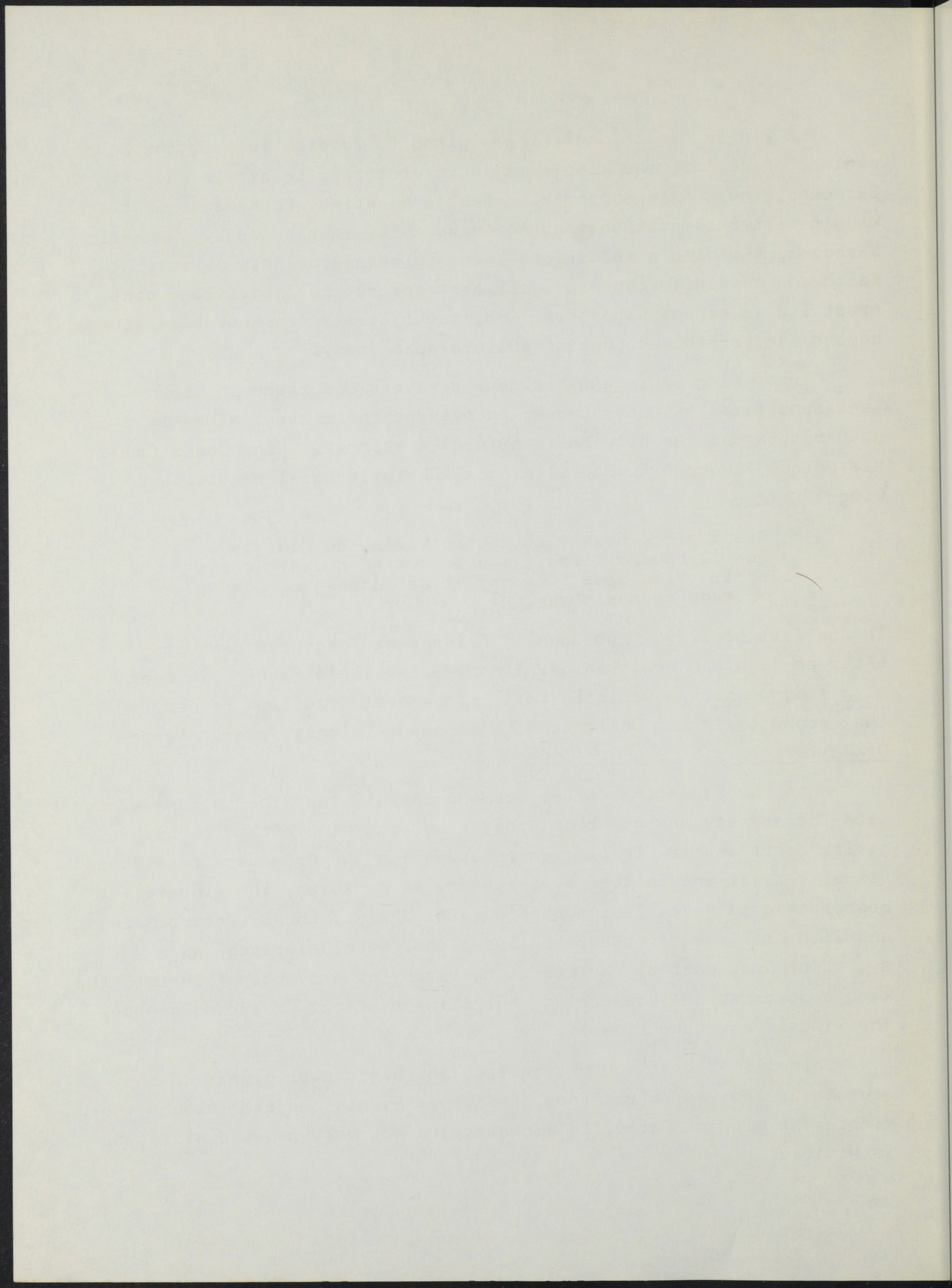
First, King Louis and his Crusaders are described in Old Testament terms as God's Chosen people and their king. They land at Damietta and the city falls without a whimper. King Louis found his unique favour with God within the Christian oral tradition of kings:

Grant grace nous fist Nostre Sires, de Damiete  
que il nous delivra, laquel nous ne deussiens pas  
avoir prise sanz affamer; et ce poons-nous Jehans  
ou tens de nos pères. 33

In the fall of 1219, King John of Brienne had captured Damietta after an eighteen month siege. Simon, Joinville's father had been with King John when Damietta fell. This oral tradition graced the second taking of Damietta with renewed Almighty Power. Gesta Dei per regem !

When the Crusading forces are successful, the king is represented with the majesty and power of God: a warring king of battle brave, giving heart to his fighting comrades. When the Crusaders face their dismal retreat and capture by the enemy at Mansurah, the king is represented as a New Testament figure of Christ, the Suffering Servant, one with his Crusading Body. <sup>34</sup> Above the feudal hierarchy as a symbol of God, part of the feudal hierarchy as a symbol of Christ, the king appears as the creator and fulfillment of all Crusading events. The king is an event himself.

Joinville's oral sources narrate the historical events of the seventh Crusade as refractions of Eternal Events centred through the king. The king of Joinville's oral tales not only makes history, he is history.





### CONCLUDING REMARKS

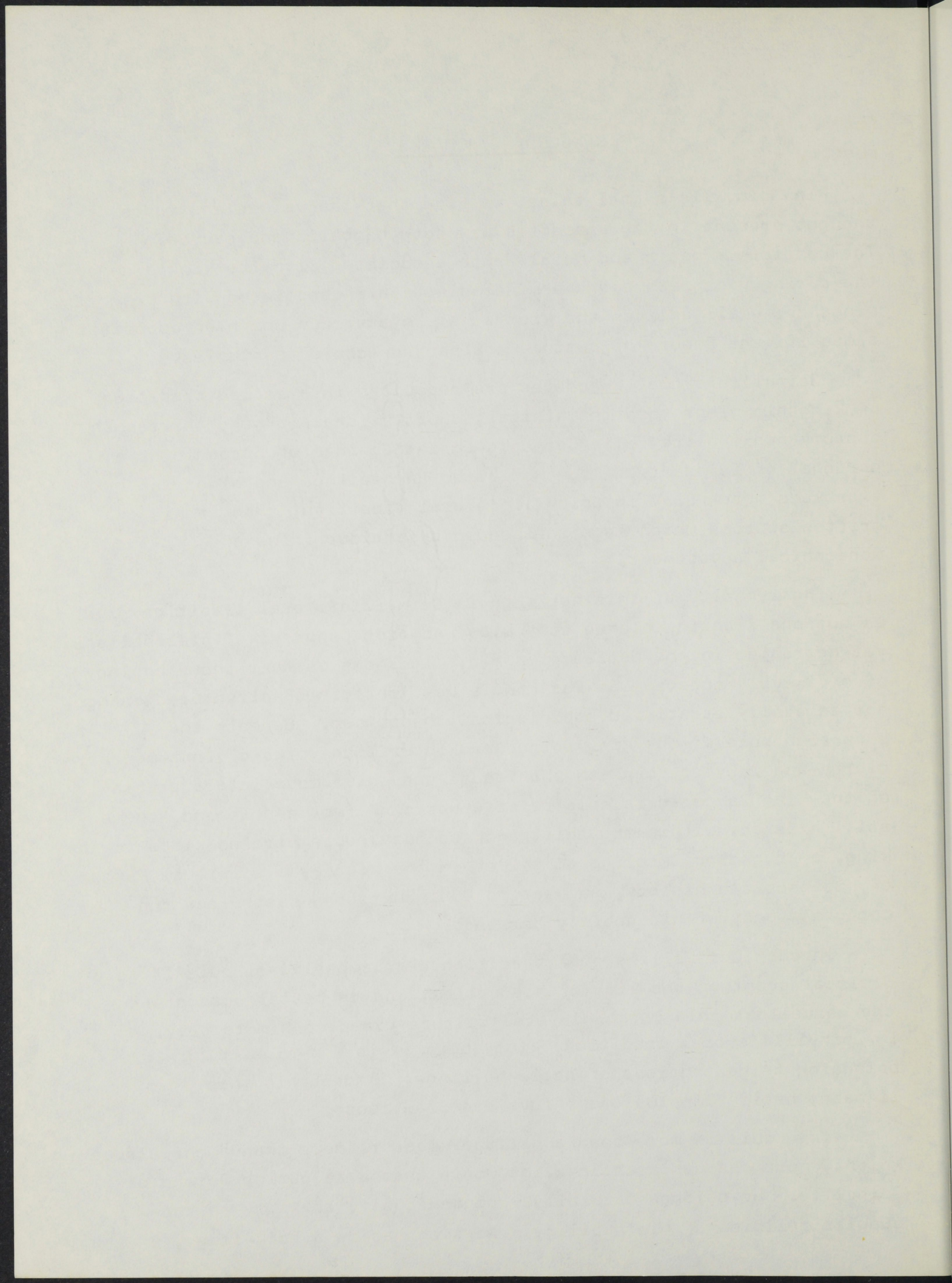
In Joinville's oral tales, we find that the values and modes of thought present in the anecdotes are both barbaric and sacred. The capricious magic and moral truth associated with the king's name, the daring victories and the miserable trials associated with his presence - all enliven the king as a mysterious union of opposites - a magnificent figure of custom - a sacred echo of centuries.

Joinville's oral anecdotes are recounted in a sacred tradition of kingship older than the ethical, courtly ideals of the thirteenth century noble élite. The Germanic-Christian idea of Lordship as a personal office derived from God based on heritage and blood is expressed more fully in Joinville's oral tradition, than in his written sources which were influenced by antique forms of monarchical government.

The tenacity of this heritage in Joinville's oral tradition give us but one fleeting glance at a wide and rich panorama of oral beliefs, yet untreated in the mediaeval world. It shows us that the ethnology of mediaeval kingship was far from a neat pattern of structured change, nor an easily stratified sociological phenomenon. Beneath the sovereign role of the king introduced in written works of contemporary clergy and lawyers, beneath the feudal and chivalrous interpretation of the king favoured in aristocratic works of fact and legend, there still existed, within the thirteenth century noble circles close to the king, a preceding Carolingian belief in the king as a spiritual Father of his people's history, subject to God, unwritten custom and the corporate body of his noble's heritage.

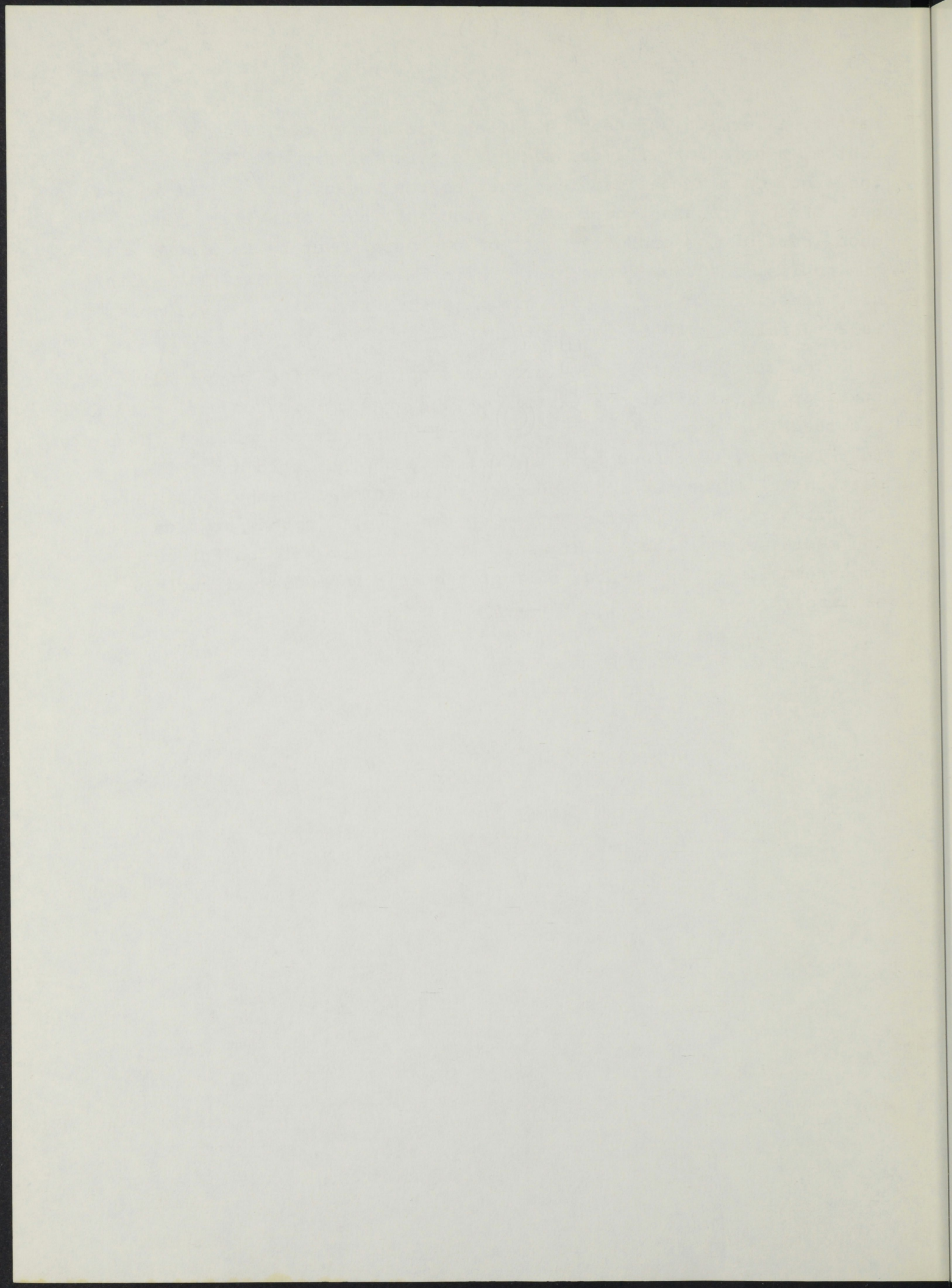
Through Joinville's oral tradition we glimpse king Louis IX as a Biblical event on the lips of his nobles, and we better understand the marvellous role which his oral culture expected him to play. In Joinville's oral tradition, king Louis IX is a typical king belonging to generations of noble heritage. And within this lineage, he is "li plus grans roys des Crestiens".

King Louis is more than a military leader, more than a chivalrous knight, more than an ascetic saint, more than a favouring friend of Joinville. He belongs naturally, spontaneously, lovingly to the popular religion of his nobility. As such, he is a folk-image, a



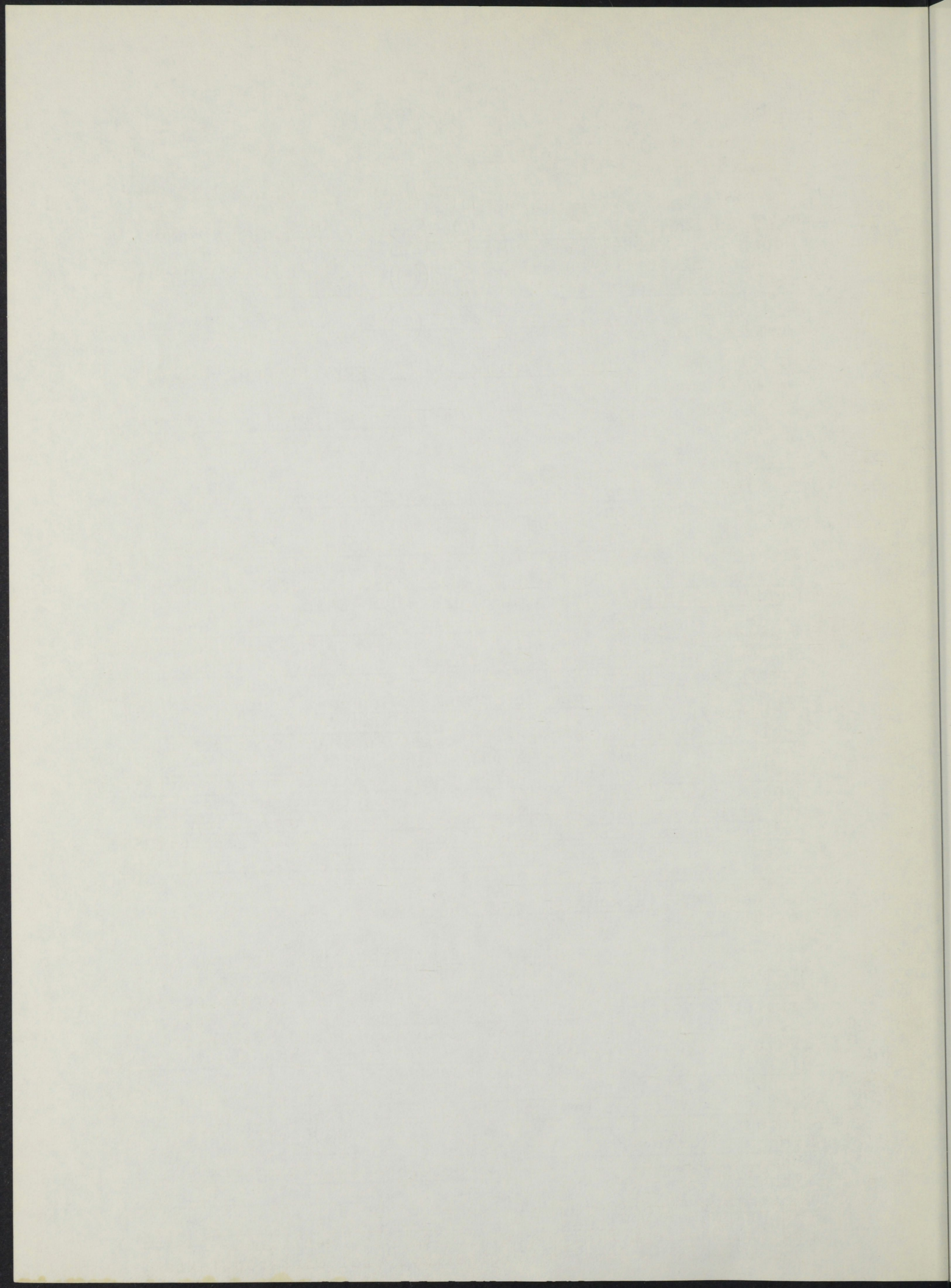
father, a lord, a shepherd, a judge, a legend of old, a beloved custom, a grandfather's grandfather's grandfather. He is part of the land, part of the castles, part of the dread, part of the expected, part of the troubled, part of the abundant, part of evil, part of good, part of the ordinary, part of the hero. But he is always with his nobles, and they share him, create him, exchange him, dine with him, meet through him and see him in their fires at night. The 'king' is a religious myth in the mouths of his nobles.

The study of noble folklore surrounding the king in Joinville's royal portrait is but one example of the manner in which oral tradition recorded in a document may contribute to our understanding of the past. In this case, we gained some insight into the barbaric and religious patterns of thought which Joinville's Crusading contemporaries had inherited in their interpretation of the king. Further studies into the mediaeval folklore of kingship would be most helpful for our comprehension of the sacred role of the king in mediaeval society at large.

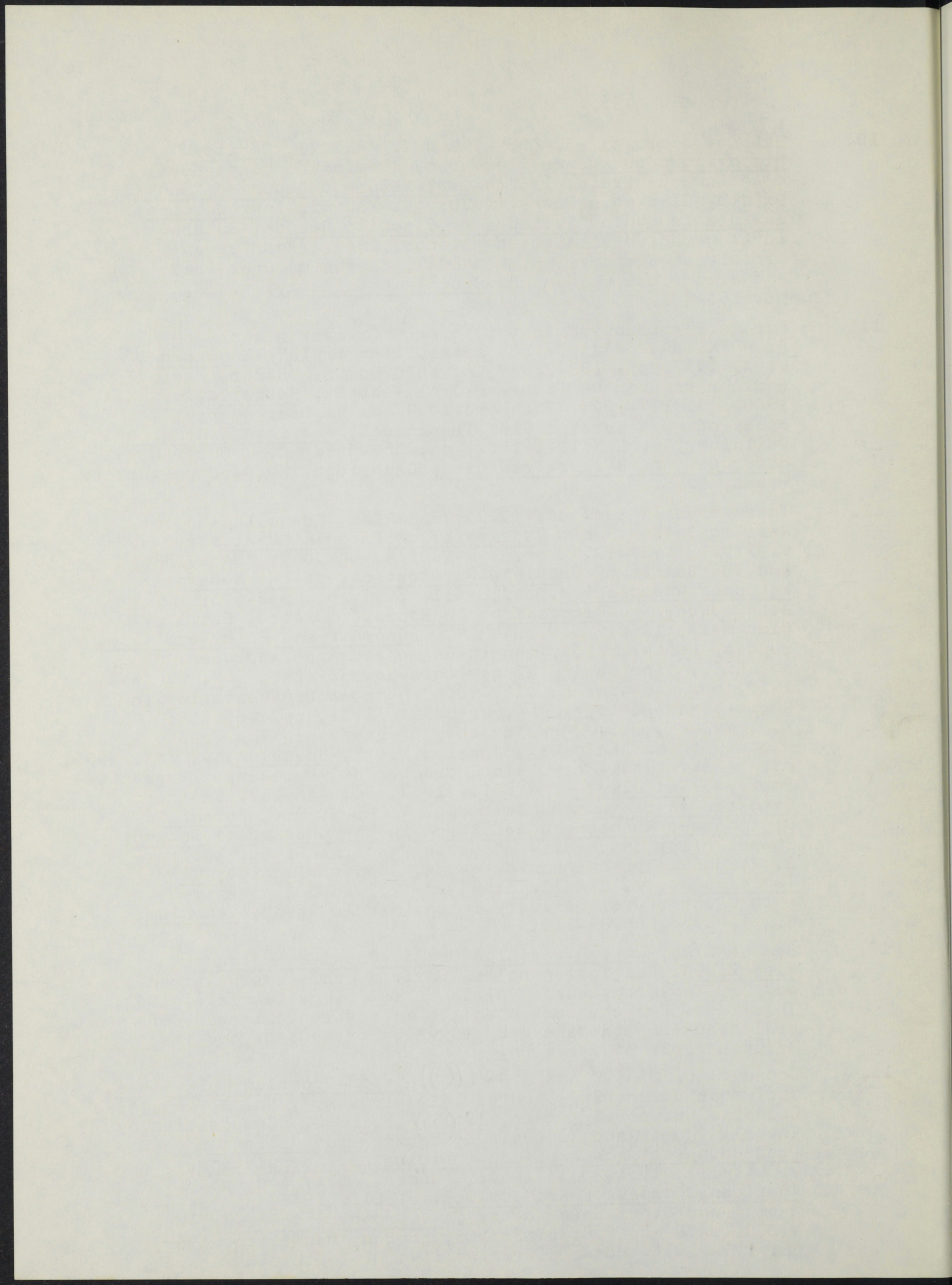


FOOT-NOTES

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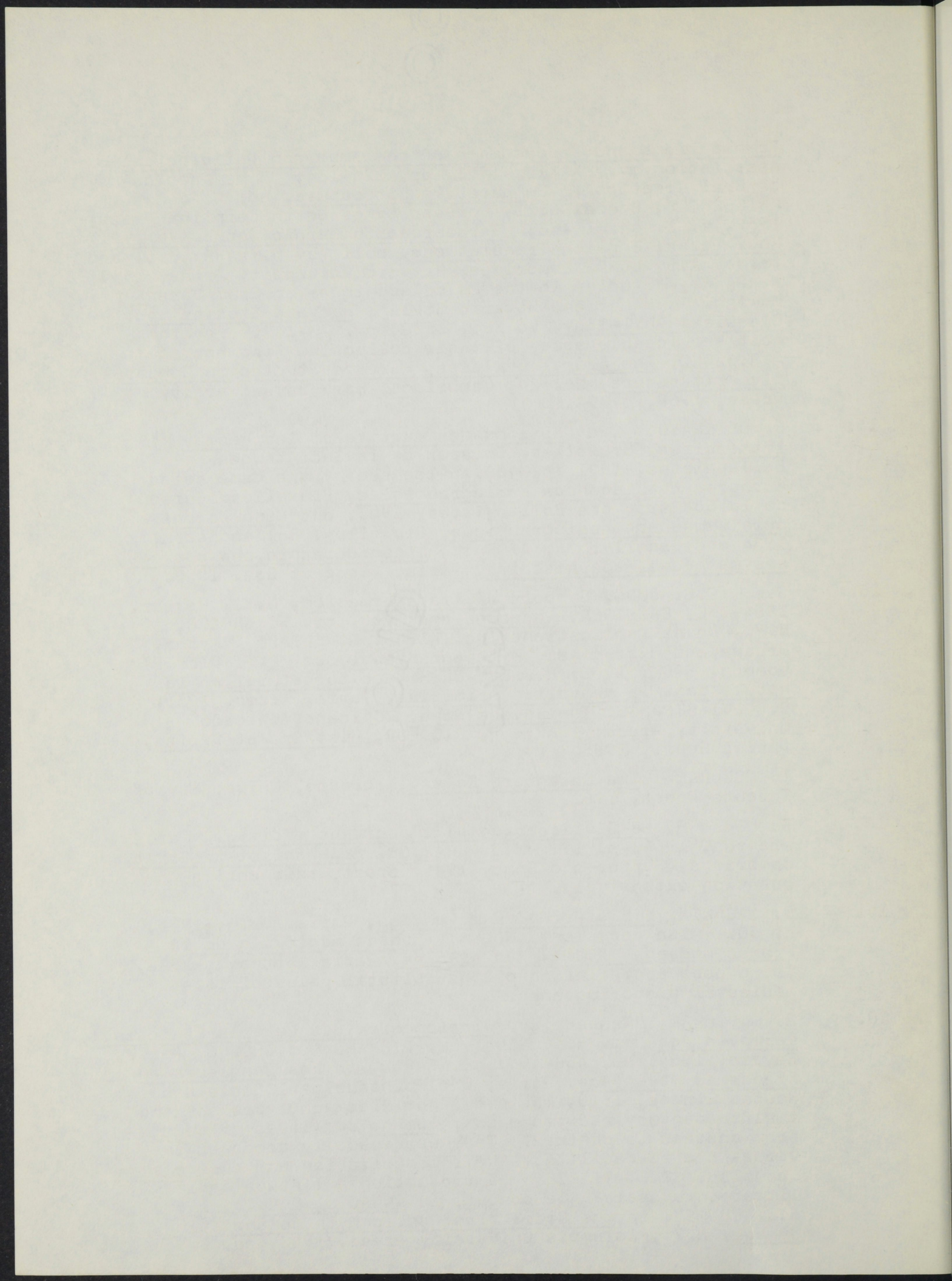


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13. Jan VANSINA, De La Tradition Orale, Essai de Méthode Historique, Belgique Annales, Série en Sciences Humaines, No. 36, Tervuren, Musée Royale de l'Afrique Centrale, 1961. This is by far the most complete methodological study of oral tradition to date and its value extends beyond its African field of research.
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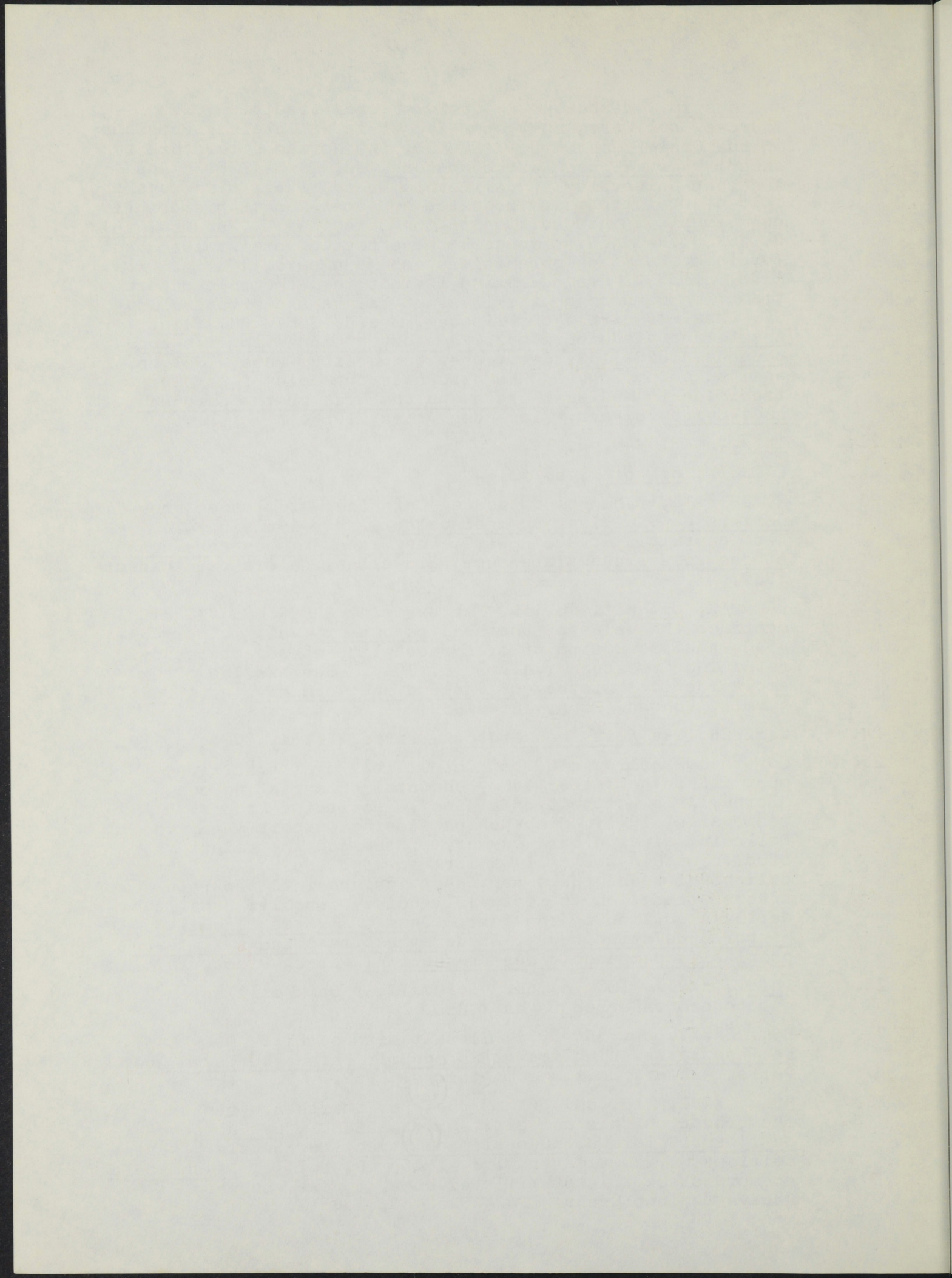




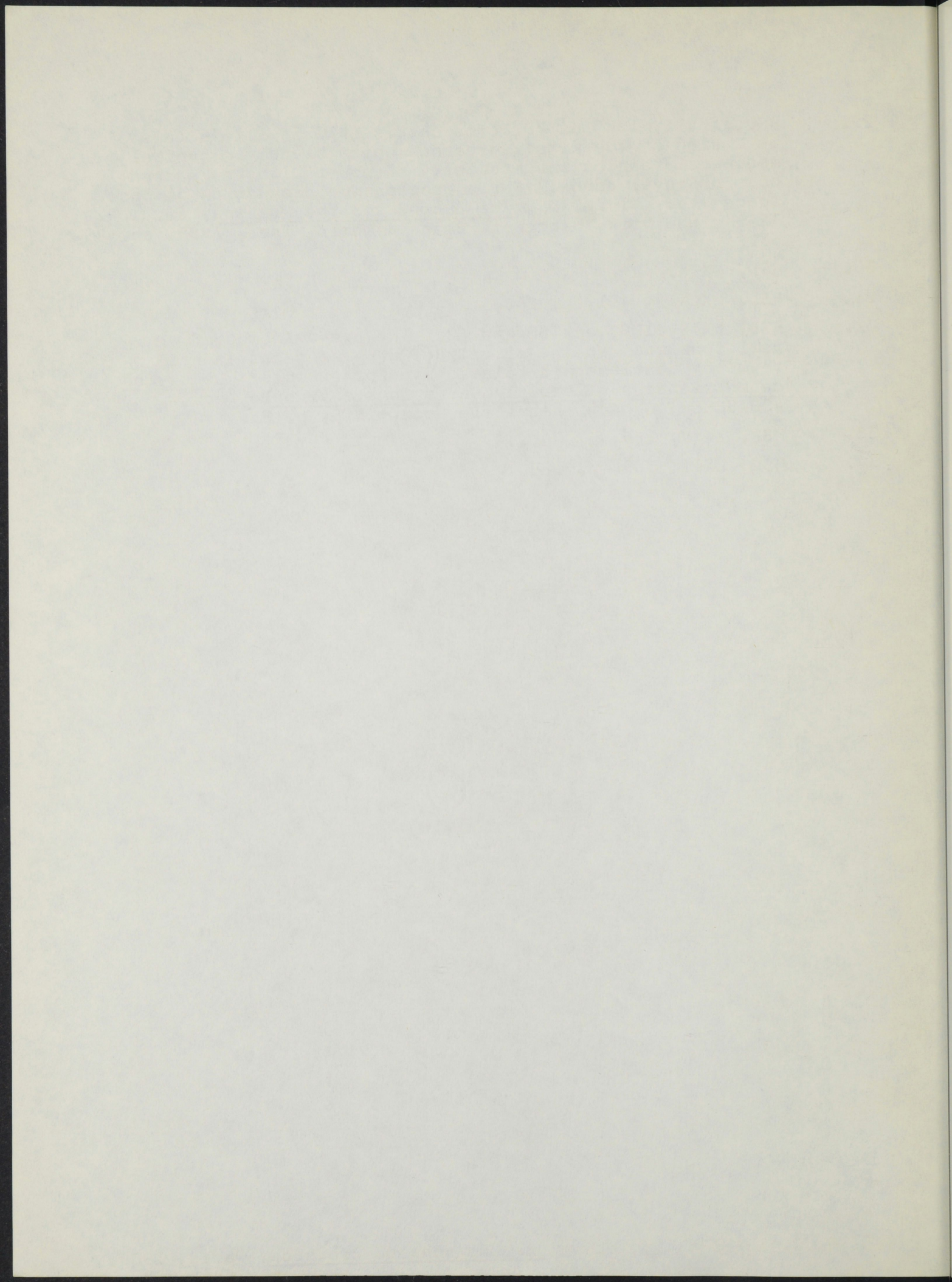
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18. J. LE GOFF, La Civilisation de l'occident médiéval, Paris, Arthaud, 1964, p. 17. H.J. CHAYTOR, From Script to Print, Cambridge, Heffer and Sons, 1945, treats this entire question extensively.
19. B. LACROIX, L'Historien au moyen âge, Paris, Vrin, 1971, p. 50. Also consult M. MOLLAT, Genèse médiévale de la France moderne, XI<sup>e</sup> - XV<sup>e</sup> siècles, Paris, Arthaud, 1970, for a good appreciation of the cultural value of late mediaeval historiography.
20. R. MARICHAL, "Manuscrit", Dictionnaire des Lettres Françaises, Le Moyen Age, ed. R. BOSSUAT, L. PICHARD, G. DELAGE, Paris, Fayard, 1964, pp. 488-494. E. FARAL, in Les Jongleurs en France au Moyen Age, Paris, Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Etudes, 1910, has shown how "les jongleurs" of the twelfth century recited poems, romans, and lives of saints from château to château. They were usually composed in verse-form to facilitate their memorization and recital. See also: M.L. TENEZE, "Introduction à l'étude de la littérature orale: le conte", in ANNALES, E.S.C., 1969. R.S. LOOMIS, in The Grail from Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol. N.Y., Columbia University Press, 1963, pp. 8-9,



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22. LACROIX, op. cit., p. 53.
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- 23.b LACROIX, op. cit., p. 55. For example, ORDERICUS VITALIS mentions the value of the oral raconteur (vol. 1, pp. 453-454), and the custom of oral recounting of adventures by returning Crusaders (vol. 3, p. 301). See his The ecclesiastical history of England and Normandy, ed. FORESTER, 4 vols, London, Bohn, 1854-1856.
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25. For the detailed study of Joinville's oral tradition, I must refer the reader to my doctoral dissertation on "Joinville's Portrait of a King", Institut d'Etudes Médiévales, 1971. Since space does not permit more, the following gives a bare summary of some of the points studied within Joinville's work on king Louis IX. For delightful reading and pertinent insight into the role of oral tradition in mediaeval society consult: Natalis de Wailly's edition of the text: Jean, sire de Joinville. Histoire de saint Louis, Credo et Lettre à Louis X. Texte original accompagné d'une traduction. Paris, Didot, 1874.
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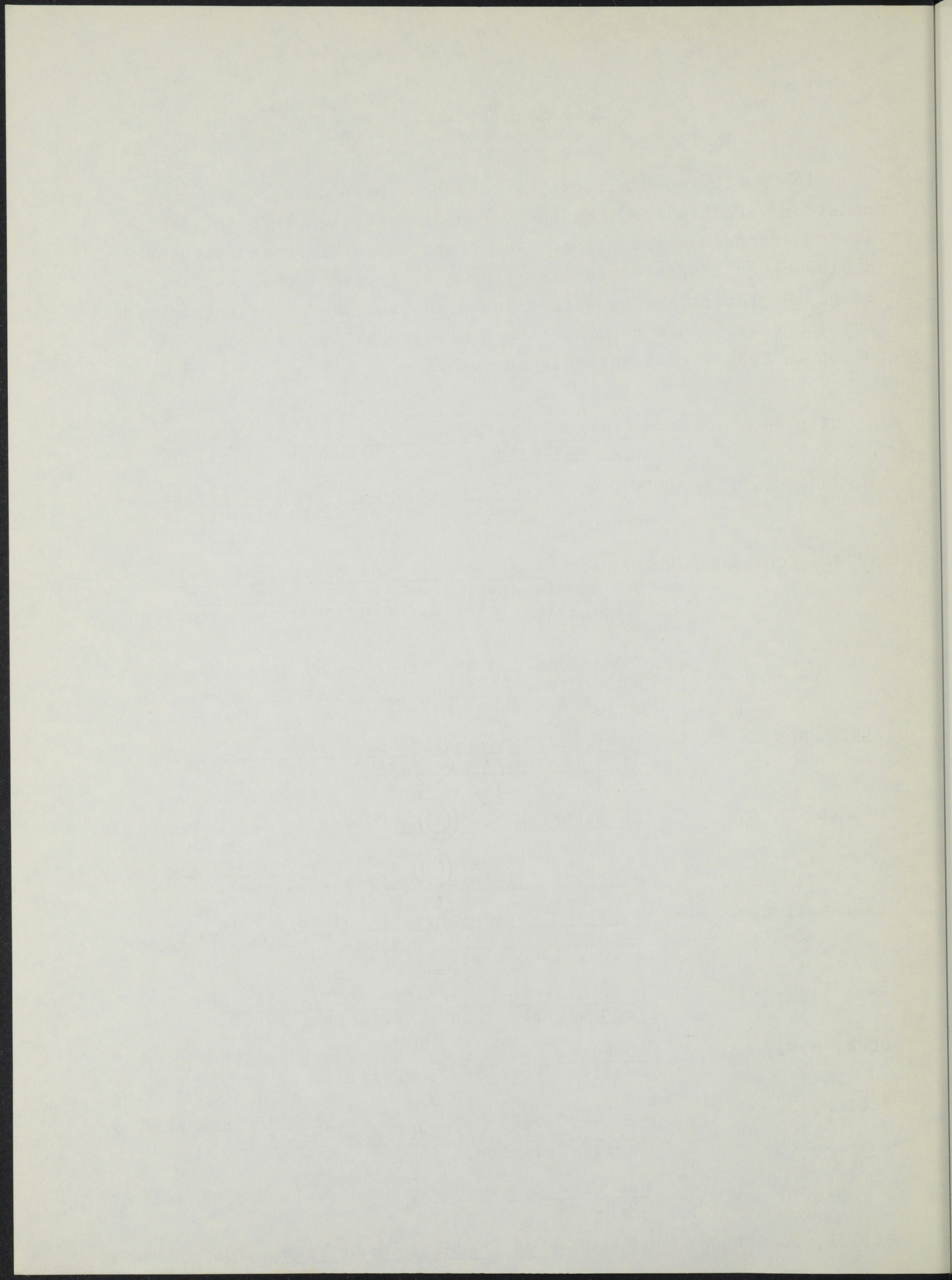
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32. HSL, XXIV, 106, pp. 60 and 62. The pre-eminence of religious zeal in the pilgrimage of a king was an epic theme of Charlemagne's tales. See for example: Le voyage de Charlemagne a Jerusalem et a Constantinople, ed. P. AEBISCHER, Genève, Librairie Droz, 1965, p. 35.
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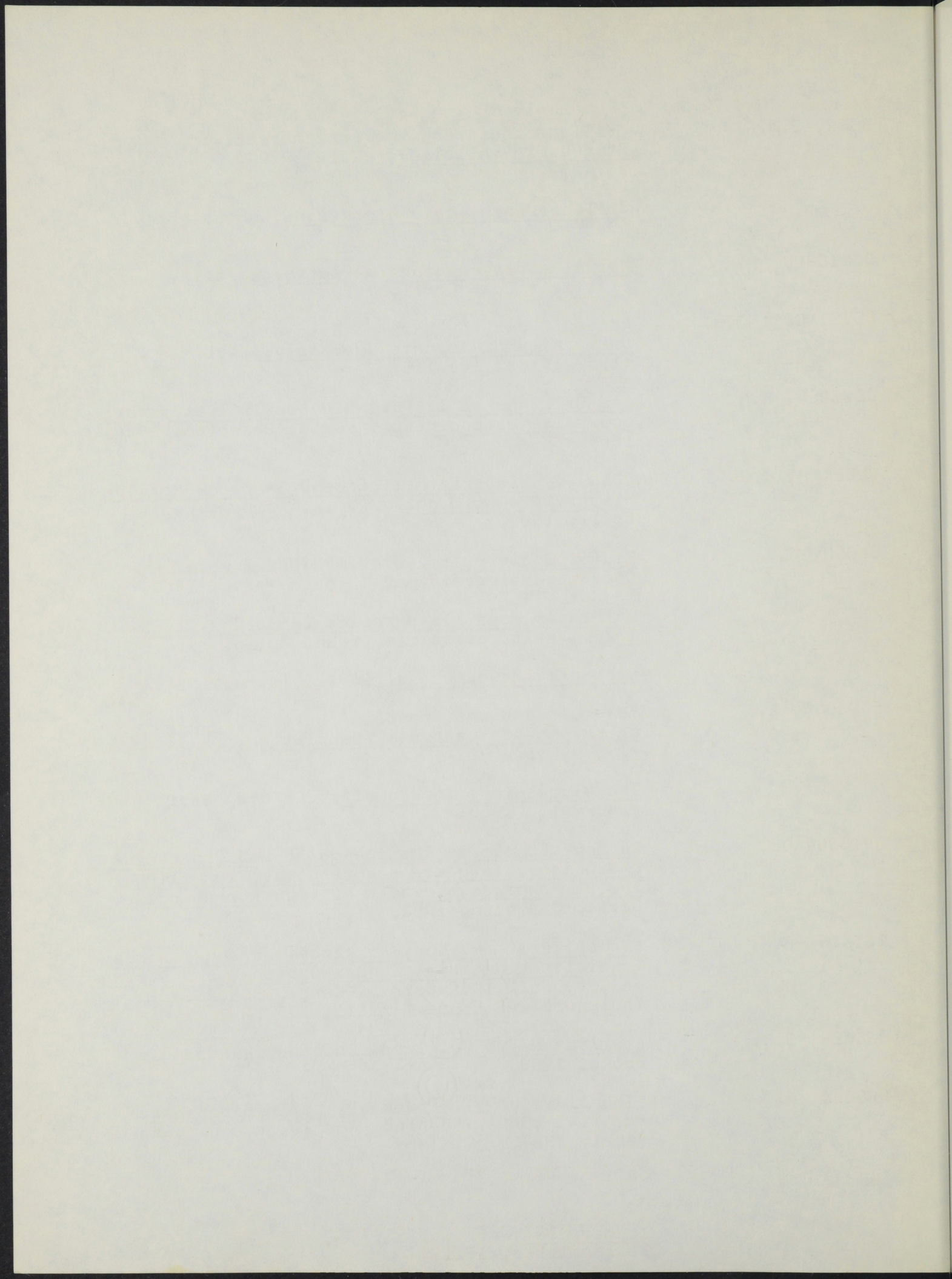
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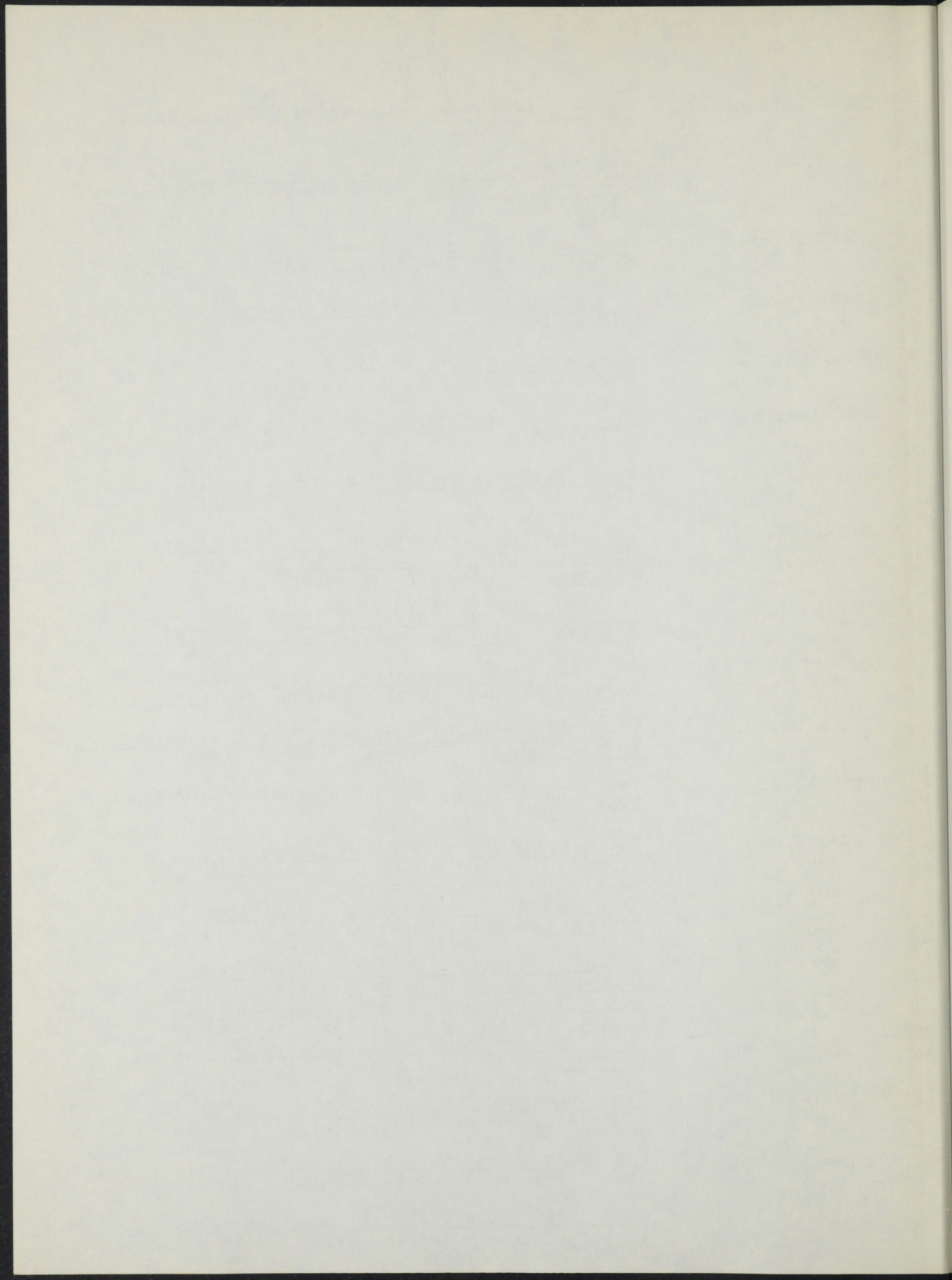




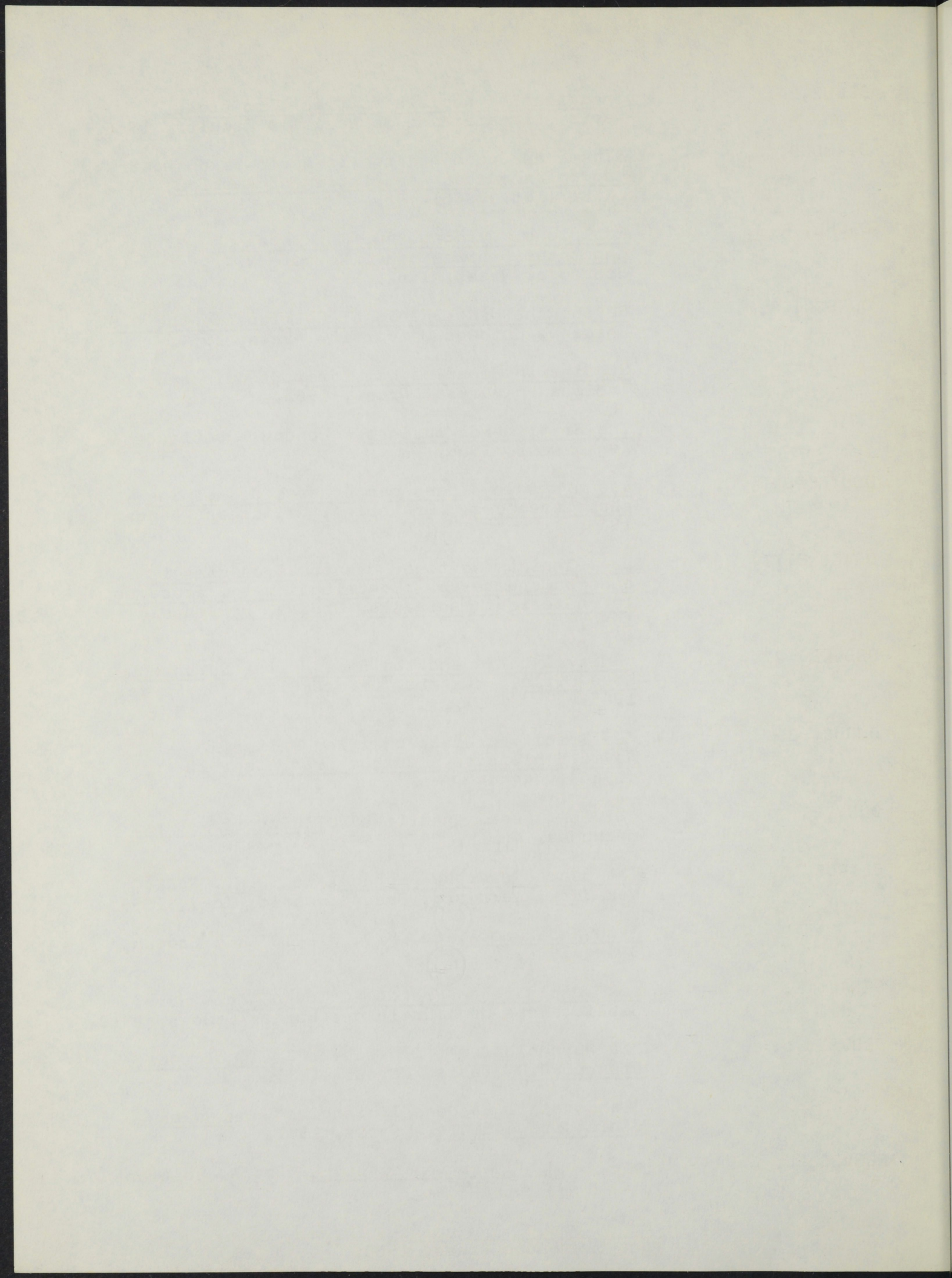
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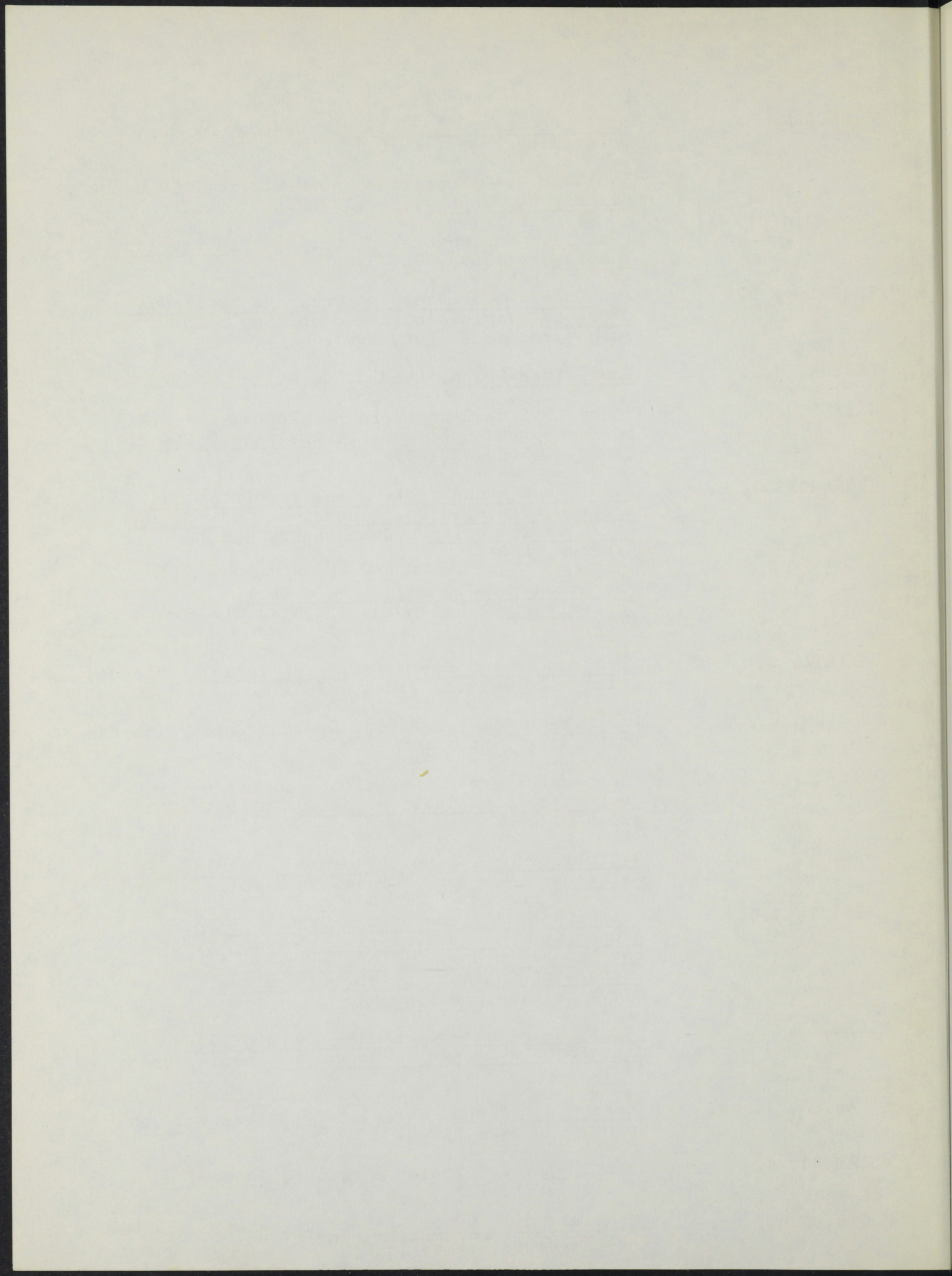
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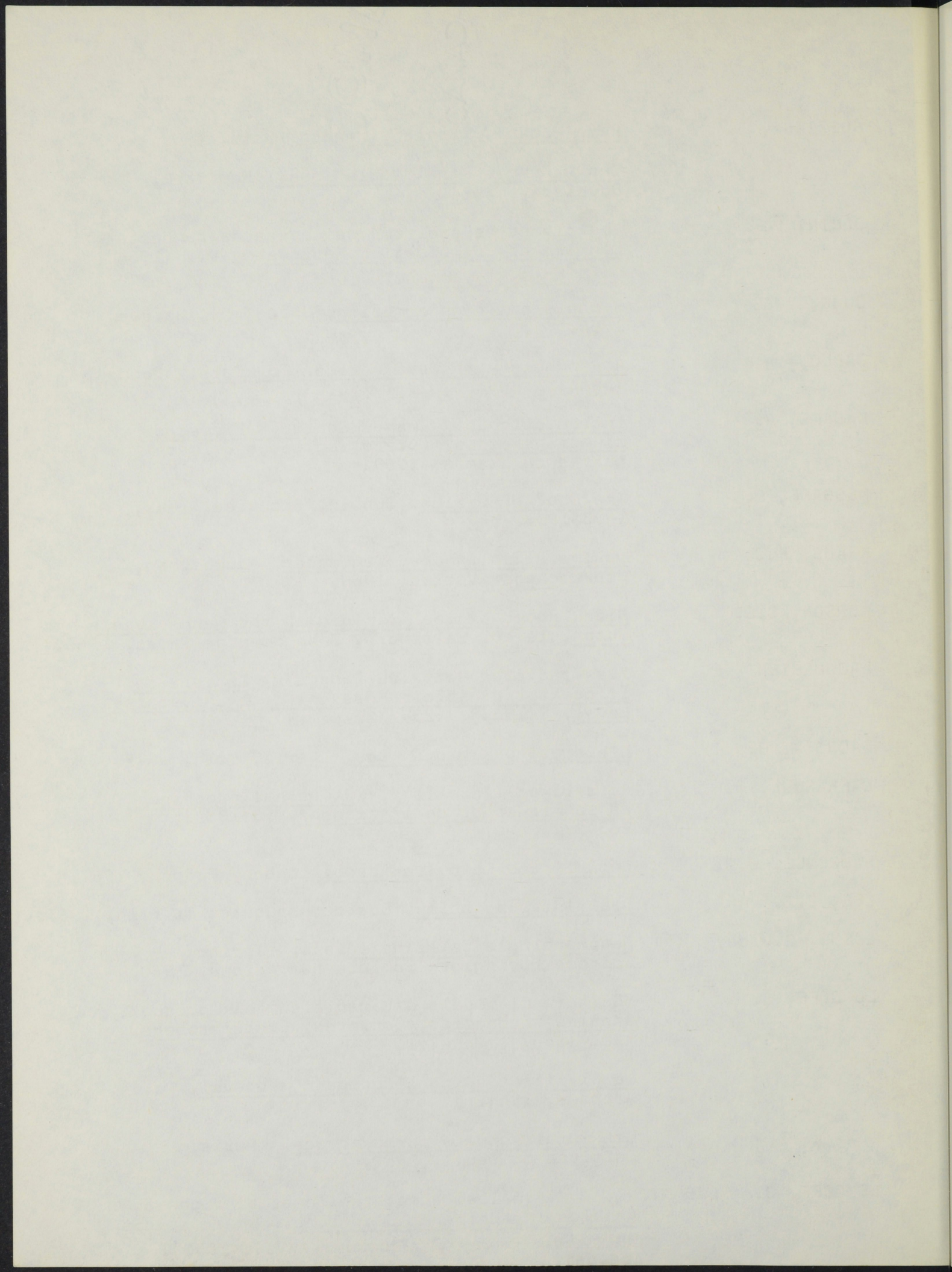


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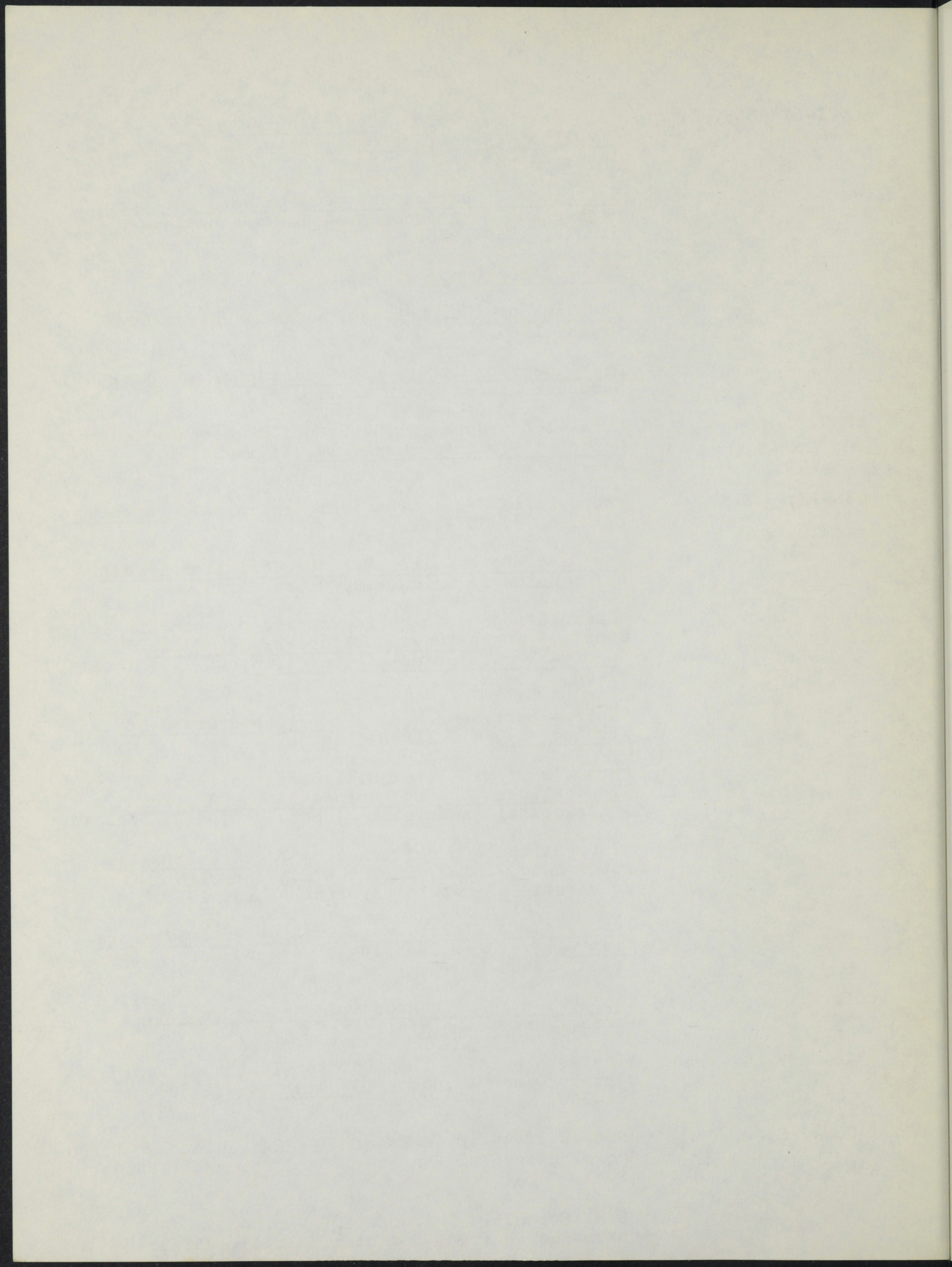




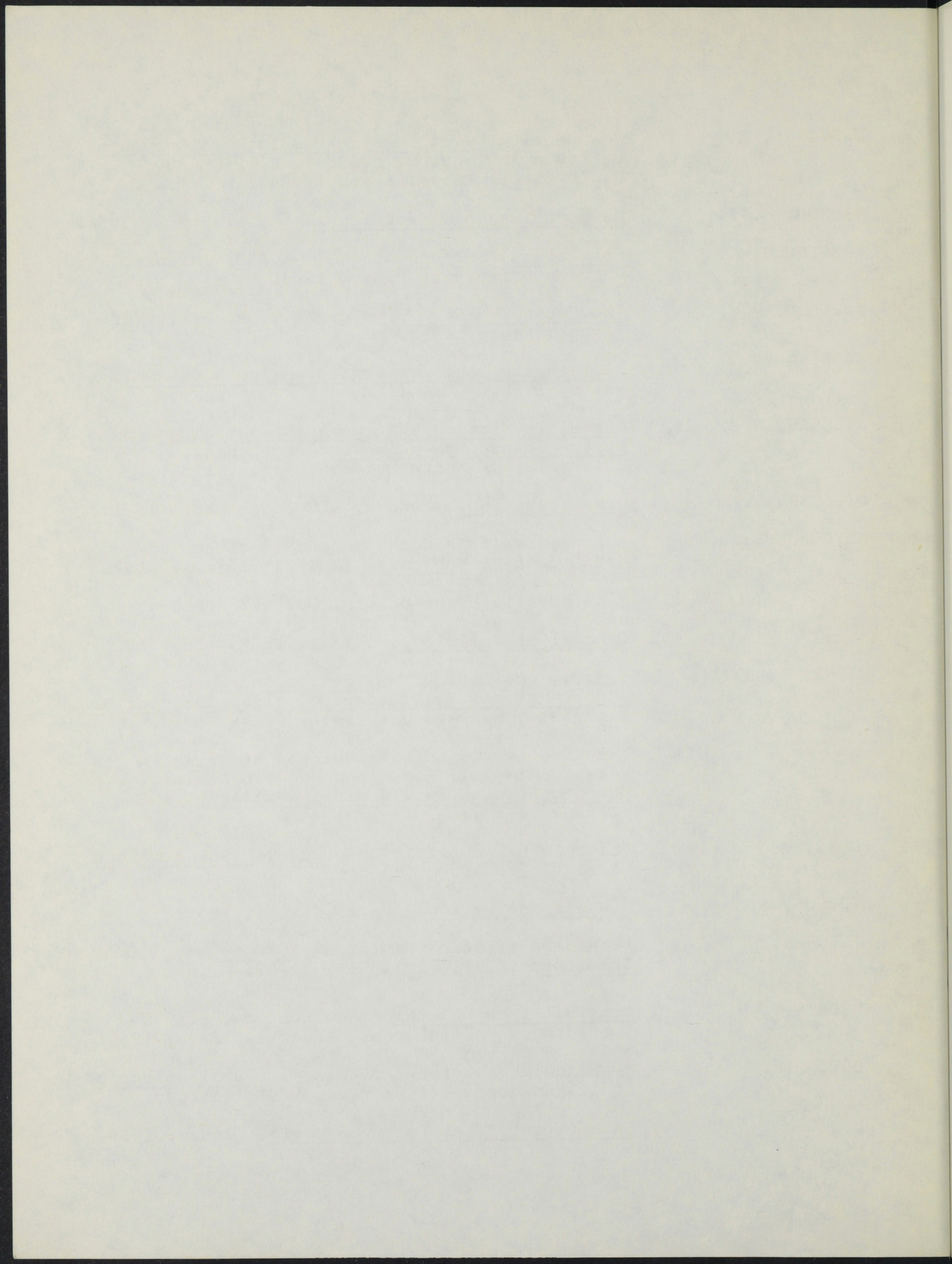
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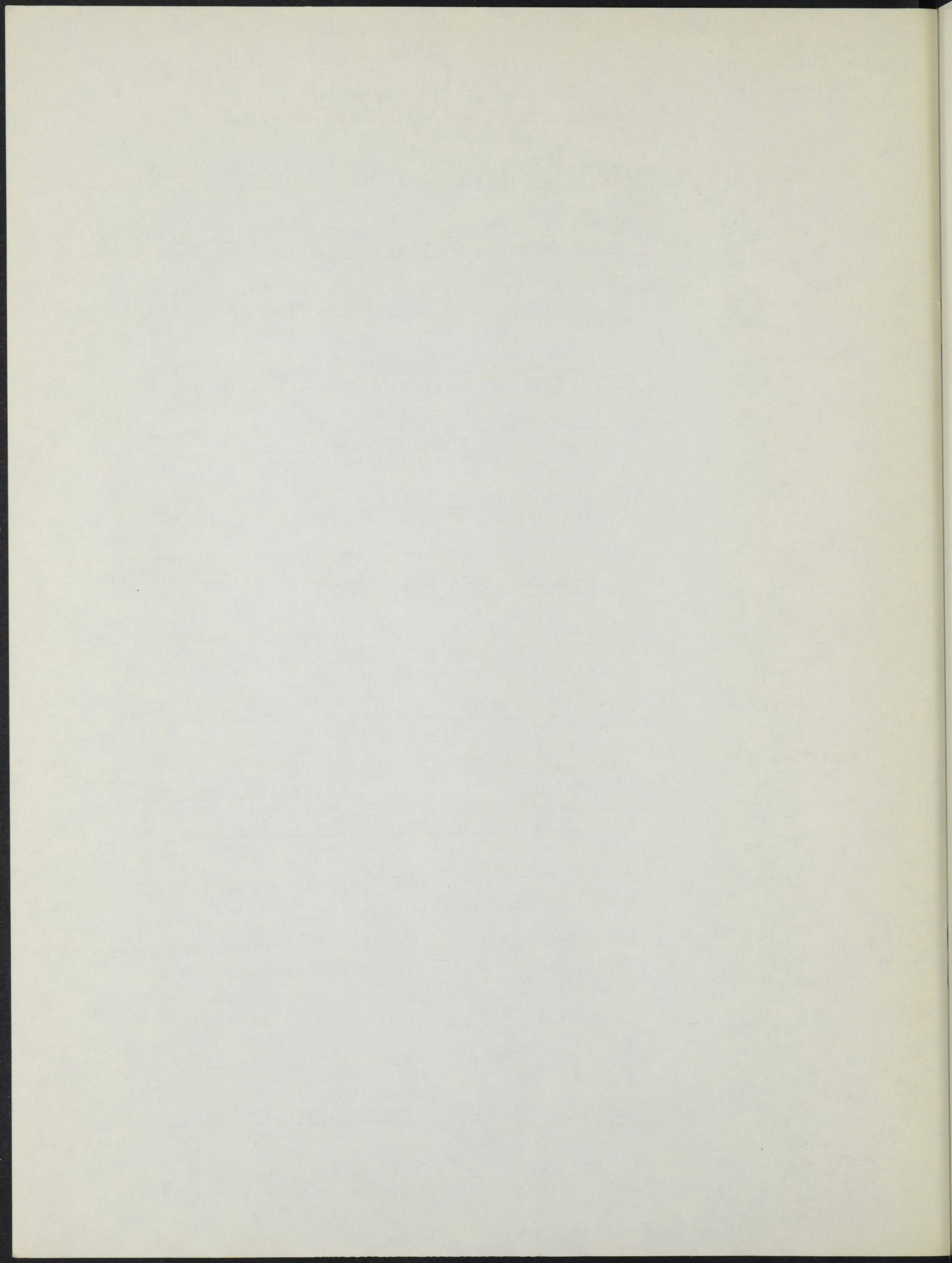
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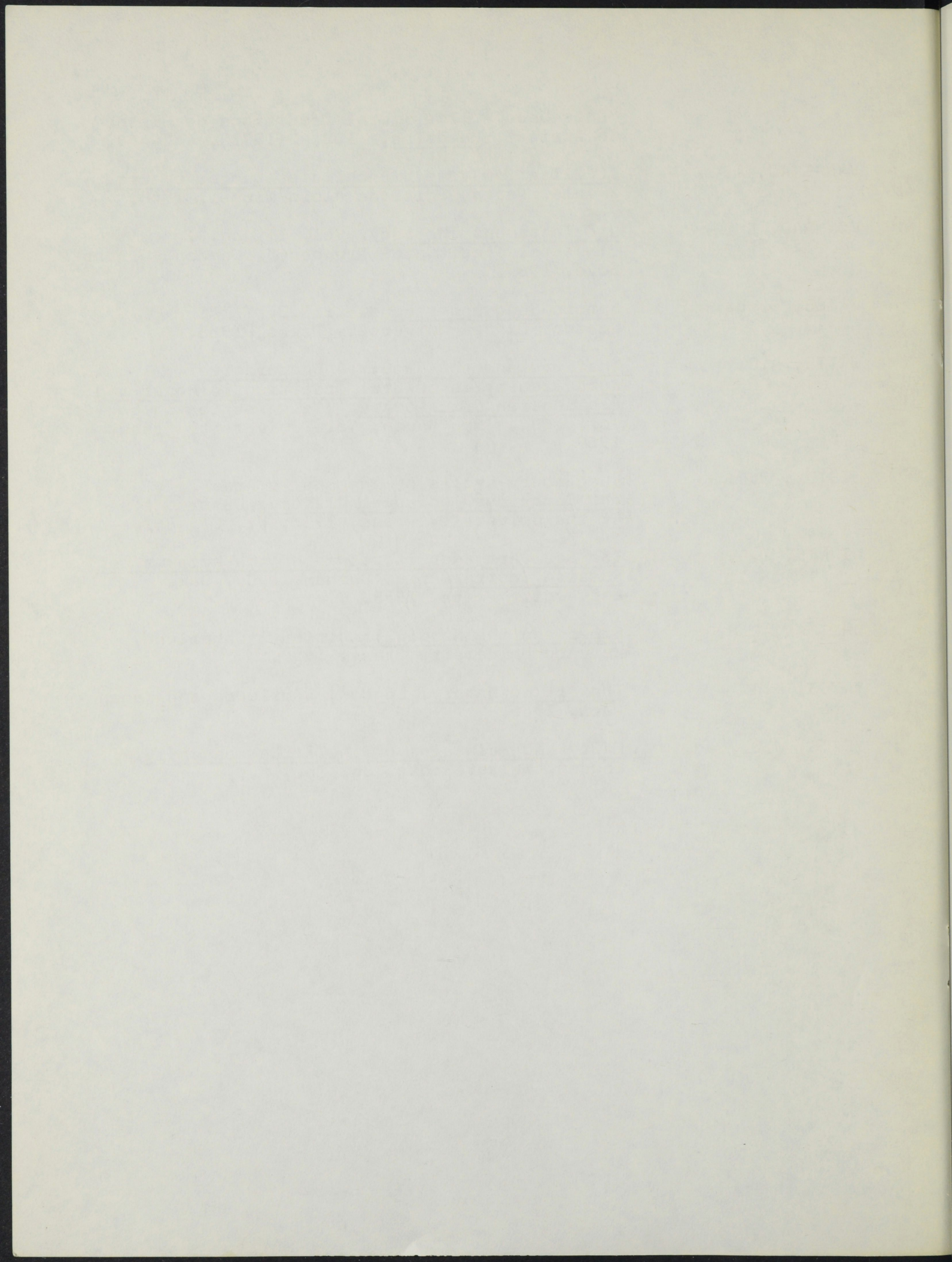
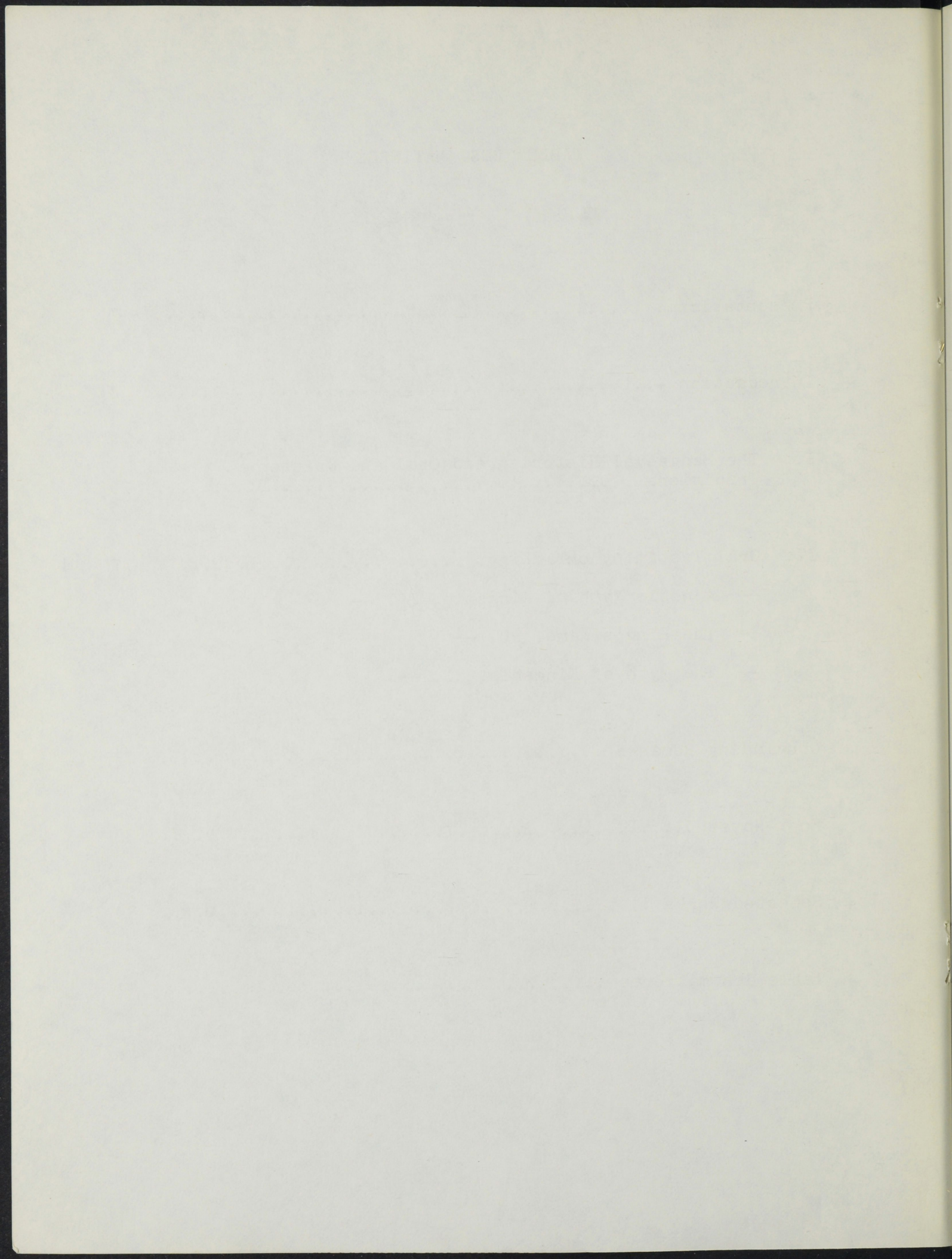
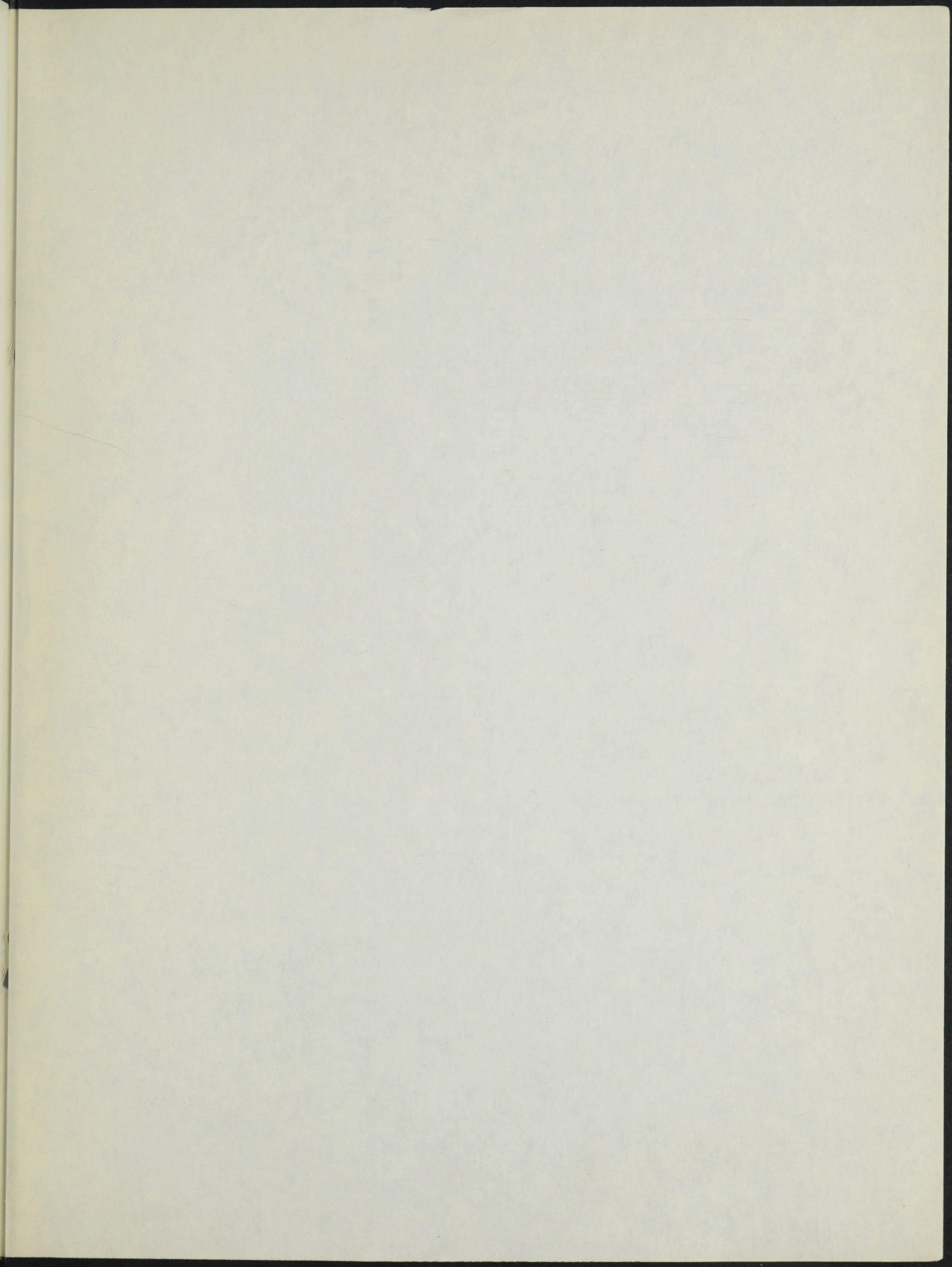


TABLE DES MATIERES

Présentation .....	1
Introduction .....	3
I. The Mediaeval Historian and Oral and Written Traditions .....	10
II. Oral Testimony on a King .....	17
— A noble Myth of Kingship, 19. —	
— The King's Name, 20. —	
— The Myth of Kingship, 21. —	
Concluding Remarks .....	23
Foot-Notes .....	25
Selected Works .....	30
Table des matières .....	40





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