

First appearance of the Rotrou Family

Neustria, or "Neptrocus" appears in Latin chronicles of historical description, and the Francian Kingdom covers the north-west of existing France, and which has as a capital, Soissons.

This term appears during the VIIth Century, used by the monk *Jonas de Bobbio*, to define the kingdom to the west, after the "sharing out" of these territories between the Merovingian Kings.

Mentioned for the last time in the Treaty of *Saint-Clair-sur-Epte* in 911, when an ill-defined territory was ceded to the Viking Rollo, which was eventually to constitute "**Northmannie**" or "**Normandy**", the terme Neustria would disappear with the Carolingian Dynasty, and the emergence of the principalities of Anjou, Maine, Blois and Orleans.

It may have been by chance that our distant ancestor Rotrocus (we know him as Rotrou), stepped into the limelight from the shadows of the Xth Century. It may also have been inevitable that this young, and no doubt ambitious soldier rose through the ranks to become commander of one of the armies of Thibault, Count of Blois and Chartres. Whatever the reasons for the appearance of this future House of Rotrou, certain wheels had been set into motion in the middle of this century which would allow him and his descendants to gain recognition, marry firstly into noble families, and finally into royalty. After much research, I have been able to build a justifiable account of the very first days of the Rotrou dynasty, as we will come to know it, which eventually spanned more than 10 centuries, across France, England and Ireland, and counting Lords, Viscounts, Earls, and even Kings in its family line.

The Very Beginning

We must start, if you will, in the uncertain and changing moments of the Xth century, around 950, when the fragmented countries of Europe were slowly but surely moving to national unity. Many of the European countries were simply a conglomerate of micro-kingdoms, or at best, a mixture of power factions dominating by force, a weak and passive serfdom.

Taking a cursory look around France at this time, we cannot remain silent about the "reorganisation" which was slowly taking place in an awakening environment. To refer to one, but nevertheless vitally important "event", which certainly influenced the course of affairs in France, we will turn our interest to what had happened in Northern Europe in recent times.

In 911, Charles the Simple, King of France defeated the Viking leader Rollo, and forced him to sign the treaty of *Saint-Clair-sur-Apte*, whereby Rollo would become his vassal, and also convert to Christianity. For these concessions, Rollo was given land around Rouen, the heart of which would soon become the Duchy of Normandy. On hindsight, this would appear to be an invitation to the wolf to come and dine with the sheep. The Vikings were certainly not known for their peace-loving attitude towards others. Charles could not possibly perceive of the consequences of this treaty, on the future of France and England for centuries to come. The Vikings were here to stay !

Without a doubt, the influence of a certain King Othon upon coming events in France, cannot be ignored. Otton I, known as "Othon the Great" was born in Walhausen in Saxe in 912. He became King of Germanie and Oriental France ¹, after the death of Henry 1st in 936. He reigned for nearly 40 years, during which he was known for his vision and prestige, by his political management, by his military successes, and by his many administrative reforms. He is considered as the true founder of the Roman/Germanic Saint Empire. His influence upon French "affairs" is without contest, as he stabilised the western boundary with Germany.

On the 10th of August, 955, Othon wins near Augsburg, a victory over the Hungarians, which will finally liberate France, Italy and Germany, of their insistent invasions. The changes that took place in the state of the population, concerning the art of war, had already put a stop to the ravages of the Normans and the Sarrasins, but those of the Hungarians had lasted for much longer. The year before, they had already breached the eastern boundaries of France, and were threatening them once more until Othon defied them. These lightly clad horsemen, accustomed to a simple life because of the nomadic Sarmate that they crossed during their rapid incursions, found pittance in the countryside of Europe, whilst being incapable of overcoming a castle stronghold. Their impudence and lack of planning pushed them forever forward, with no thought of retreat. Their defeat in 955 rapidly brought them to heel.

It is during the second half of the 10th Century that the situation in France becomes much clearer. The eastern boundaries of France become more stable, as the Hungarian incursions cease. However, the ambitions of the Dukes of an expanding Normandy prove to be more and more serious, causing the King of France to make a drastic and dramatic decision. We may say that the kingdom of France saw one of its major problems replaced by another.

Lothaire succeeded his father Louis IV to the throne of France, at the age of 13, in the year 954. At this time, because of the stability of the countries frontiers, the main occupations of France were the wars with vassals within the kingdom, especially the Dukes of Normandy. Lothaire was strongly influenced by Thibault I, known as "the Trickster", Count of Blois and Chartres, who was the motor of all the intrigues and the local wars, and who troubled the tranquility of Neustria and France. Thibault paid homage to the young King Lothaire, who was seduced by the ruses and dishonest tactics of his vassal, but nourished high ambitions, far in excess of his weak position as King. Thibault acquired a great influence over this young king, and became, for him, a dangerous counsellor. Lothaire could only turn his ambitions towards Normandy, encouraged by Thibault, who also had a vested interest in the region.

The current Duke of Normandy, Richard-the-Fearless, grandson of the Viking Rollon, had been kept under strict house arrest some years before, by the previous king of France, Louis IV, who had seized Normandy several years previously, in an attempt to quell the belligerent attitudes of these Viking settlers. Richard had escaped in 944 with the help of faithful allies, including Ives de Creil ². From this moment on, he was on his guard against any treachery from the French King and his followers. At two distinct times, Lothaire, together with Thibault, laid plans to ambush Richard, with the object of taking him prisoner. It probably came as no surprise to Richard when Thibault, with his forces split into at least two armies, invaded the territories of

¹ The western part of future Germany, bordered by the Rhine.

² This is the first time we hear of Ives, future Lord of the House of Bellême, and who would soon be handsomely rewarded for his efforts.

Normandy in 963. The army lead by Thibault overcame the town of Evreux, but as they retired, they were pursued by the Dukes forces, who then pillaged the Chartrain ³ and the Dunois ⁴, and defeated the French forces at Ermendreville ⁵, "where the massacre was so terrible, that 640 soldiers were killed and nearly all the others wounded, before fleeing into the surrounding forest". The second army commander, a certain Rotrou, failed in his attempts to quell the Normans, and was forced to cede the town of Bellême, which, according to some historical sources, he had held previously ⁶.

Although he had gained an unequivocal victory over Lothaire and Thibault, Richard feared a protracted war, because many of the French lords were his enemies, and could be convinced by Lothaire to take up arms against him. He turned to Harald, King of Denmark, who had already come to his assistance twenty years before. Harald sent Richard an army of Norman pagans who, under Richard's command, sailed up the River Seine, leaving havoc and desolation in their path.

J.C.L. Sismondi, in his book "Histoire des Français (1821) (in French) quotes :

"Men and women alike were enchained and taken prisoner, villages were pillaged, towns were ravaged, castles were demolished, and the lands were reduced to nothing, and in all the dominions of Count Thibault, there was not even a dog left to bark against the enemy".

The local bishops hastened to meet at Laon, and sent messengers to Richard, begging him to put an end to the misfortunes and griefs of their Christian flock. Count Thibault, fearing that he would be abandoned by his ally the King, chose, on his own behalf, to make peace with the Normans, and offered to return the town of Evreux that he had captured. Lothaire, Richard and Thibault met at Givalde ⁷, and all Richards demands were met, and peace was reestablished with the Normans. Thibault, in his war against the Normans, showed how he had become known as the Trickster, for, in this local war, he had taken control of the Château de Couci, and land which belonged to the Archbishop of Reims. The new archbishop Odalric promptly excommunicated Thibault, to force him to return his ill-gotten gains. Thibault thus was obliged to submit to the authority of the Church, and returned all that he had usurped, to their rightful owners. Thibault would be hard-pressed to recover his prestige after his recent down-turns. However, to think that Thibault had played his last trump cards, was to consider his potential far too lightly.

Thibault quickly recovered his senses and his political acumen. He suggested to Lothaire that it would be a good idea to set up fortifications just south of the current

³ Chartrain - A geographical area around the city of Chartres, including Chartres Métropole, Pays Courvallois, Vallées de Maintenon, Les Vallées, Val Drouette, Val de Voise, Val de l'Eure, Orée de Chartres, Pays de Combray, Bois Gueslin.

⁴ Dunois - A geographical area of 53 townships of about 920 km², centred approximately around the city of Châteaudun, covering Arrou to the West, Villiers-Saint-Ouen to the East, Vitray-en-Beauce to the North, and Array to the South.

⁵ Ermendreville, now disappeared, was somewhere in the outskirts of the town of Rouen.

⁶ Rotrou is purported, in many documents as "having lost control" of Bellême. If this is true, then he must obviously have "held it" at some previous time. Would this explain why Rotrou was known as the Count of Perche, even before becoming known in the year 963 ?

⁷ Givalde, like Ermendreville, no longer exists. I cannot determine its location.

border of Normandy, to prevent any future incursions of their "troublesome neighbours". As this did not impinge upon the treaty of peace with the Duke of Normandy, Lothaire took an active part in this venture.

Many documents concerning medieval France locate the Perche as part of Normandy. As a result, some historians refer to the Rotrou family as "of Norman origin". However, the Perche was a clearly defined county south of the Normandy border, and we will not hesitate to stress the fact that the Rotrou Family was certainly not of Norman origin⁸. In this County of the Perche, the tiny, but geographically strategic⁹ village of Nogent-le-Châtel¹⁰ was chosen as a base for these fortifications, and Thibault, made an effort to pacify his trusted army commander Rotrou, and to pay him back for his loss of control of the town of Bellême, by naming him as Lord of this growing settlement. This was just the beginning of the rise to fame of the future House of Rotrou. Due to the influence of Thibault over another of his vassals, the Viscount of Châteaudun, the daughter of Rotrou would soon marry into the Châteaudun family, and their son would, by chance, become Viscount of Châteaudun. The House of Rotrou is slowly climbing the ladder of notoriety which will culminate with marriage into royalty.

Olivier Romanet de Beaune (the Vicomte de Romanet) builds a scanty background for Rotrou de Nogent, in his book, in French, "Géographie du Perche et Chronologie de ses Comptes" (1890), and quotes several of his sources.

.....*"Des Murs"*¹¹ makes reference to a charter of 963 relative to the foundation of the Priory of Bonneval, where a witness to the signature, a certain Rotrou, is cited. This Rotrou is probably the same as the one referenced in six charters of the Cartulary of Saint-Père, the first of which is dated the 5th February 978, and the last, suggested as being before 996. In the early documents, he is referred to as a simple witness whose name is Rotrocus (Rotrou). In the last, he is now known as Rotrou de Nogent (Rotroco de Nogiomo) who makes a donation of land at Thivars, and who is known as a knight and vassal of Odo (Eudes), Count of Chartres. We may thus conclude that this Rotrou was Lord of Nogent-le-Rotrou and the surrounding territories, and that he held this domain on behalf of the Count of Chartres.

⁸ Lucien Musset in his book "Annales de Normandie - Volume 12, Page 204" clearly states this. "En dépit du découpage départemental, le Perche n'a jamais appartenu à la Normandie" - *In spite of [later] border redefinitions, the Perche was never part of Normandy.*

⁹ Nogent was situated at natural crossroads between neighbouring towns, and provided considerable financial benefits in tithes and tolls. Situated on the extreme edge of the high ground, in a bend of the river Huisne, the Château of St. Jean overlooks 5 valleys, the roads to Le Mans, Chartres and Châteaudun, and, as such, is a natural access to Normandy, Maine and L'Ile de France.

¹⁰ On the river Huisne, Nogent was first built on a hill where a chateau had originally existed. This town, destroyed earlier by the Normans, was initially called Nogent-le-Châtel. Rotrou Ist, Count of Perche, rebuilt it at the base of the hill, and so it took the name that it holds today, Nogent-le-Rotrou. The largest town of the Greater-Perche, once reputed to be the principal town of the County, was divided into two distinct towns, Nogent-le-Châtel and Nogent-Saint-Denis, both belonging to the Counts of Perche, of the House of Rotrou. Geoffrey, one of the Lords, ceded the lordship of Saint-Denis to the Benedictine Monks, of the Cluny Order, a fine building whose priory alone was worth 14,000 pounds of rent, and which served only Nogent-le-Châtel. These two towns, by mutual expansion, became linked, and form today a considerable town, large enough to contest the title of capital of Mortagne.

¹¹ Marc Oeillet des Murs - "Histoires des Comptes de Perche" - 1856 (Page 108).

Rouillard¹² tells us that this domain had been assigned to Rotrou at about 980 by Odo, who had thus ceded it to "one of his most trusted and faithful knights". Another historian, Ozeray¹³ indicates that Odo, Count of Chartres, ceded part of his lands (the Abbey of Saint-Père) to one of his knights named Rotroldus.

And so, even if all agree that the fortifications of Thivars would later become known as Nogent-le-Rotrou, the date of this venture would seem to have taken place between 970 and 980, and not immediately after the debacle of 963.

Both Odolant-Desnos¹⁴ and Wace¹⁵ agree about the cession of the domain of Nogent-le-Rotrou, and also refer to Rotrou as being "Count of Perche".....

And so Rotrou makes a timid but remarked entry into history in these troubled times. He will be seen discretely as a witness to several cartulary acts of Thibault, and later those of Lieutegarde (Thibaults' widow), and then Odo (Thibaults' son), up to his death in the closing years of the Xth century. Nogent-le-Châtel will one day become known as Nogent-le-Rotrou, proof of the mark left upon this town by the succeeding members of the family.

Few documents were left to history from Rotrou's own hand. Geoffrey Koziol, in his book "Begging Pardon and Favour - Ritual and Political Order in Early Medieval France", sheds a little light upon the first known of the Rotrou dynasty :

*"Another example from the same year is offered by **Rotrocus**, a vassal of the Counts of Blois. A man on the rise, he had been entrusted with the protection of [the County of] the Perche by his Counts, and would soon marry his daughter to the Viscount of Chateaudun ¹⁶. Much later, his descendants would become Counts of the pagus ¹⁷. But in 999, he was still only a proud man with great ambitions :*

" Rotrocus seculari miliciæ deditus et Odonis comitis fidelitati"

I, Rotrocus, given to worldly knighthood, and devoted in fidelity to Count Odo".....

The first of the House of Rotrou was indeed proud and ambitious. He set the pace that was to be followed by his descendants, during the next eight centuries, starting in France, and moving on to England, then Ireland. Through a thousand years, the descendants of this, our first known ancestor, would leave their mark wherever they set foot.

¹² Sebastien Rouillard - "Parthenie, ou l'Histoire de l'Eglise de Chartres" - 1609.

¹³ Michel Ozeray - "Histoire du Pays de Chartrain" - 1856.

¹⁴ Pierre-Joseph Odolant-Desnos - "Mémoires Historiques de la ville d'Alençon" - 1787.

¹⁵ Wace - "Roman du Rou" - 1174

¹⁶ It is, in fact, not sure that Melisende, Rotrou's daughter, married the current Viscount of Chateaudun (Hugh II). She probably married Geoffrey, Hughs brother, or possibly even another little known cousin, Foulques. Whatever, into the family did she come !

¹⁷ Pagus - territory, area defined by clear boundaries, district, community, loosely associated to the English "Shire", or a Swiss "Canton", possibly a "County", as we know it today.