

## Origins of the Nugent Family

Contrary to many references (often copied without verification), the Nugent family, or more precisely the "De Nogent" family did not stem from Normandy. In the area of the PERCHE, about 140 km. South West of Paris, just below the border of Normandy, a minor noble family was first remarked by historians in a typical manner, that of basking in the light of more noble, even royal, families. In the darkness of the second half of the 10th century, few families were of sufficient importance to be cited in documents of this time. Emerging out of this darkness, we hear of the existence of a certain Rotrou, whose origins are unknown. Certain historians believed him to be a direct descendant of Yves de Creil (father of Yves de Bellême), while others have placed him as a "fidelis" (giving allegiance to) of a certain Thibault, Count of Blois and Chartres. We are left to speculate about the real roots of this, the earliest known reference to this famous family.

### **Origin 1 - Cited in official Perche Internet sites, and many historical documents.**

Thibault "the Trickster", Count of Blois & Chartres was ordered by the King of France (Lothaire IV) to set up a garrison close to the Normandy border to keep an eye on their "troublesome neighbours". The exact date of this enterprise is not known, but it is now estimated to be just after 975 <sup>1</sup>. It had become necessary to halt eventual incursions made by the Normans, particularly those of Duke Richard I and Richard II, into the plains accessing L'Île de France and Paris. Thibault delegated this responsibility to a certain Rotroldus, or Rotrou, who (research tells us) was from a minor noble family in the Perche. Rotroldus built the first earth and timber fortifications or "*motte*", in a well-situated position on the left bank of the river Huisne. It is suggested that the site chosen had previously been occupied by a castle, which had been destroyed by the Danes. These fortifications encouraged the growth of a settlement which years later became known as Nogent-le-Rotrou (*Novogentium Rotroci* or "Rotrou's New Town"). Subsequent sons of the Rotrou family extended the original fortifications, making the castle similar to that which we can see today. The "Rotrou" family were apparently rewarded by a marriage into the House of Châteaudun (about 985), later becoming Viscounts of Châteaudun, and began to extend their power and control of the area around Nogent-le-Rotrou. Limited in their expansion to the East (encountering resistance from their own lords, the Counts of Blois), they turned to the North-West, and slowly but surely conquered and invested Corbon, Mortagne, and finally Bellême. The development of this power faction was conducted by several generations of the Rotrou family, over a period of nearly 200 years.

### **Origin 2 - Cited by certain historians**

In a translation from the French, of the introduction to the Rotrou family, O.E. Des Murs (*Histoire des Comtes de Perche de la Famille des Rotrous* - 1856) sheds a little light :

---

<sup>1</sup> Although some sources insist upon an earlier date for the Nogent fortifications, recent detailed reading of French documents (De Romanet, et alia) can now allow us to place the foundation of Nogent-le-Rotrou between 975 and 980, rather than immediately after the debacle of 963.

(Pages 63-64)

*"We come now to the true genealogical origins of Rotrou and of his direct descendants. Most authors, as we have seen, do not agree on the true year of appearance, and of the descendancy of the Rotrou family, or rather, the majority agree to begin at about 1004, with Geoffrey I. It is however difficult to admit that because we cannot positively identify a living Rotrou at the time of King Lothaire, about 965, known as Count of Perche and Bellême by WACE, as Count of Corbonnais by BENOIT, and appearing in no less than 6 official acts of Sainte-Pierre de Chartres at distinct times in 978, 985, 986, 988 and 991, in the company of Countess Leutgarde, the widow of Thibault-the-Trickster. To be sure, although these acts certify the existence of a certain Count of Perche whose name was Rotrou, we cannot be silent about this knowledge under the pretext that we ignore who was his father, or whether indeed he had any children. That we have difficulty in establishing the affiliation from Rotrou to Geoffrey I, we cannot deny.....".*

Des Murs considers that Orderic Vitalis (and another later historian, Bry de la Clergerie) is totally in error when he claims that Rotrou is a cousin of Robert de Bellême, and thus a descendant of the Talvas family, and that furthermore Guérin [*de Domfront*] was the great-great grandfather of Rotrou III, Count of Perche. He insists that it would be an insult to the memory of the House of Rotrou to associate it with "such barbarous, monstrous, dishonorable and depraved" individuals such as those of the Talvas (Bellême) family. Des Murs continues :

*..... "Between 943 and 978, was a time of extreme struggles between the King of France, Lothaire, supported by Thibault-the-Trickster, and the Normans, governed by Richard 1st, Duke of Normandy. [At a date estimated at 963,] Lothaire encouraged Thibault to attack Normandy. Thibault assembled a powerful army in two parts, one of which was commanded by a certain Rotrou, who attacked Sées, while Thibault, at the head of the second army attacked and took Evreux. However, Richard [with the help of Danish mercenaries], not only repulsed these attacks, but counter-attacked and pillaged all in his path, nearly up to the gates of Paris, before retiring. Rotrou, the right-hand man of Thibault, was obliged to support the down-turn of the fortunes of Thibault, and as a result of this disastrous campaign, was obliged to cede Bellême, which fell into the hands of Richard." <sup>2</sup> .....*

*".....to recompense Rotrou for his losses, and to reward him for his services, Thibault ceded to him Nogent-le Châtel (which much later became known as Nogent-le Rotrou), under the auspices of the County of Chartres, but obliged to do military service, thus obtaining a forward post, totally devoted to preserving the lands from all possible attacks from Normandy."*

Although we cannot refute the possibility that the Rotrou family and the Bellême family were related in some way, the flagrant hostility shown between the two houses over a prolonged period, seems to deny this. Several marriages between the two Houses are certainly posterior to the first references to Rotrou, already at war for many years, but perhaps destined to pacify the long-standing animosity between the two families. It is certainly through these later blood lines that some historians

---

<sup>2</sup> *It would seem obvious that, if Rotrou lost the town of Bellême, then he must have held it previously ..... Thus, certain references to Rotrou having had the title "Count of Perche", would seem to be justified .....*

connect the house of Rotrou with that of Bellême, although the time-lines can easily be shown to be incoherent. It is strange that many French historical documents clearly separate the House of Rotrou from that of Bellême, while only one, clearly partisan, concludes that Rotrou descends from the House of Bellême. A document written around 1853 by a reputable historian and genealogist (Edmund Burke) supports this concept and has propagated it, certainly through the Internet and many associated Nugent sites. However, the two contesting theories do in no way contradict any of the other the facts concerning the House of Rotrou that are to be found in other documents of this site. We leave the reader to choose his own solution.

After Thibault's loss of Bellême in 963, Richard "awarded" the town to Yves de Creil, with the instructions that he should defend it against all attacks. Yves was a master archer, and a competent builder of attack and defence mechanisms (catapults, etc.). He had also been instrumental in freeing Richard from house-arrest, after he had been defeated in a battle against the King of France, some years earlier. Yves was thanked for his good work by the attribution of the Lordship of Bellême, which would remain in the family for several generations. However, as a vassal of Richard, Yves had obligations, and following the rules applied at the time could equally be dispossessed of Bellême, if he did not satisfy his liege.

We can surmise that Rotrou was Count of *[a large part of]* the Perche up to 963, and from then on, although dispossessed of Bellême, continued to use the title of Count of Perche. If Rotrou's immediate descendants did not justify the title of Count of Perche, they were, without contest, Counts of the Corbonnais *[Mortagne]*, which included more than half of the Perche. The Rotrou dynasty must now wait until 1150 before it officially recovers the Bellémois. It is obvious, that from a very early date, the House of Rotrou and the House of Bellême were unreconcilable enemies.

We must be a little sceptical about the origins of Rotrou that are implied here. Many historians write about the building of the Perche during this time, and about the *[self]* attribution of the title "Count of Perche" by Geoffrey III de Mortagne in about 1100. The historian O. E. des Murs suggests that our first known Rotrou was already Count of Perche during the second half of the 10th century, and that he was forced to cede a part of the Perche, specifically Bellême, after the disastrous campaign of 963/964. Confusion arises here as to the real Lord of Bellême. Yves de Bellême is clearly noted as having existed, but not necessarily noble, as a "Seigneur" should be. We must question the level of control over Bellême that Rotrou maintained, if any, before he apparently "lost" it about 963. He is noted as being Thibault's "head of armies". We are left to wonder why such a powerful Lord, with such a large domain as "the Perche", was practically unknown at this time, and that we have to content ourselves with vague references to Rotrou during this period. We also must be suspicious of attributions of the title Count of Perche at this time. Rotrou was clearly defined as being a vassal *[fidelis]*, though highly trusted, of Thibault, Count of Blois & Chartres. The later marriage of his daughter Melisende into the House of Châteaudun<sup>3</sup> was clearly a promotion, or at the very least, a "Thank You" for services rendered, and his long-standing devotion. In this light, we must surmise that Rotrou, although he was reputed to have "lost" the town of Bellême in the war with the Normans, his "control" of this town must have been through the auspices of the Count of Blois. Unknown as he was, in the latter half of the Xth century, the title of Count of Perche would thus

---

<sup>3</sup> This is just one of the possibilities of the early De Nogent descent (see - Melisende Hypotheses)

seem a little premature, unless, of course some deeper truth has escaped us, or has been hidden through the passage of time !

However, we are sure that Rotrou existed at this period :

*".... that in an act dated the 23rd year of the reign of King Lothaire [which would place us in the year 963], relative to the foundation of the Monastery of Bonneval, there is a mention of several donations made several years before, one by the Viscount Geoffrey, recently deceased, to "buy back" his soul, and that of his wife Hermengarde, another by the son of the aforesaid Viscount, named Hughes. The first document carries the signatures of King Lothaire, Count Eudes, that of Count Geoffrey, and a certain Rotrou."*

We are, however, left with the mystery of the rank, the importance and the early descendancy of this Rotrou, except to admit that he must have been of some importance, to be a signatory on this charter. We can assume that he is parallel to the family of the Viscounts of Châteaudun, and that his family had no marriage ties *[as yet]* with these Viscounts. At this moment in our presentation of the family of Rotrou, we will not yet investigate his descendancy. We will see in a later chapter that there are several hypotheses concerning the "family tree", and that certain questions remain unanswered *[even today]* about who was the father of who, and their indisputable names, without wishing to complicate the issue by giving dates of birth and death to those members of the early family. However, it suffices to say here that the documents cited above agree with the hypothesis of the Rotrou descendancy established by Vicomte de Romanet in his book of 1902.

It is now commonly believed that the Rotrou family were originally associated with the Viscounts of Châteaudun, possibly being minor nobles who were rewarded for their faithfulness, by marriage into the Châteaudun family. Most historians agree that the Rotrou family truly appear in history about the year 1004. Although known in the history books of their own country as "the House of Rotrou", their descendants, when they left France, were given the appendage "De Nogent", simply to indicate their origin.

Another famous historian (Edmund Burke), author and compiler in the 19th century of some of the most important books concerning British Peerage seems to have been responsible for what we consider to be a major error concerning the Nugent lineage. In several of his works, he cites the origins of the family as being from the House of Bellême (specifically Evas *[Yves]* de Bellême, around the year 930). Burke may well have been convinced by a book written in 1620 by Bry de la Clergerie, Laywer at Bellême, and an obvious partisan of the House of Bellême. However these theories were clearly refuted by a later work by the Vicomte de Romanet, who trashes all such suggestions concerning Rotrou's origins. In fact, although there did exist a **later** marriage with a daughter of the House of Bellême, and there is thus a direct *[female]* line back to Evas de Bellême, the De Nogent origins were much more clearly associated with the House of Châteaudun. For many years, over several generations, the Rotrou family continually showed antagonism to the Bellême family, with frequent attempts to take control of the Bellême strongholds. To be precise, for more than a century (1000-1100), the animosity between the House of Châteaudun and the House of Bellême was declared in the form of open war. In their attempts at expansion, the House of Châteaudun descendants (Geoffrey II, Rotrou II, Geoffrey III and Rotrou III) attempted to overcome the House of Bellême, and incorporate it into

their expanding empire. In 1043, Rotrou II married Adelaide of Bellême as part of the plans to expand, but the control of the Bellême estates was certainly not forthcoming. The decision by Rotrou II to switch allegiance from the King of France, and to take sides with the Duke of Normandy was an extremely judicious decision. When William invaded England in 1066, many knights went with him, including several brothers of the Rotrou family. As a result, the new King of England, and his immediate descendants allowed the House of Rotrou to expand into a powerful dynasty. Descendants of the Rotrou family declared themselves to be "Counts of Perche" for many years, before actually gaining control of Bellême, although Bellême was an integral part of the Perche. The only descendant of the De Nogent family who has Bellême in his name is Fulke de Bellême [*and this itself is disputable*], one of the sons of the afore-mentioned Rotrou III. As Fulke is commonly believed to be the beginning of the branch which became the "Nugents" (his children settled in England), it is highly likely that the Bellême appendage to his name was made at the very end of his life, possibly after the Siege of Remalard in 1078. Apart from this, there appears to be no logical reason for the association of this Fulke to the town of Bellême. It was William the Conqueror's son Henry who symbolically attributed the House of Bellême to Rotrou III (*The Great*) in the early years of the 12th century (1114), allowing him control of the estates, but retaining the Castle of Bellême for himself. And it was not until 1158 that Bellême was finally conceded to Rotrou IV, thus bringing the Rotrou dynasty to the height of its power.

So in about the year 963, did the French side of the Rotrou family step out of the darkness and into the limelight, relinquishing it nearly 200 years later, as they played their cards and lost, against a developing French nation.

The affairs of the Rotrou family in England had suffered a similar fate, as Thomas, the Vth Count of Perche, was killed at Lincoln, in an attempt to maintain his lands in England and bolster the diminishing prestige of the House of Rotrou.

It is salutary to note that the family grew from nothing to a major power faction under the auspices of the French and English royalty, and were then reduced to nothing by the same mechanisms, several centuries later. Happily, descendants of the family who have settled in England, although they retire into the shadows for more than a hundred years, reappear with brilliance when they accompany King Henry II to Ireland in 1171.