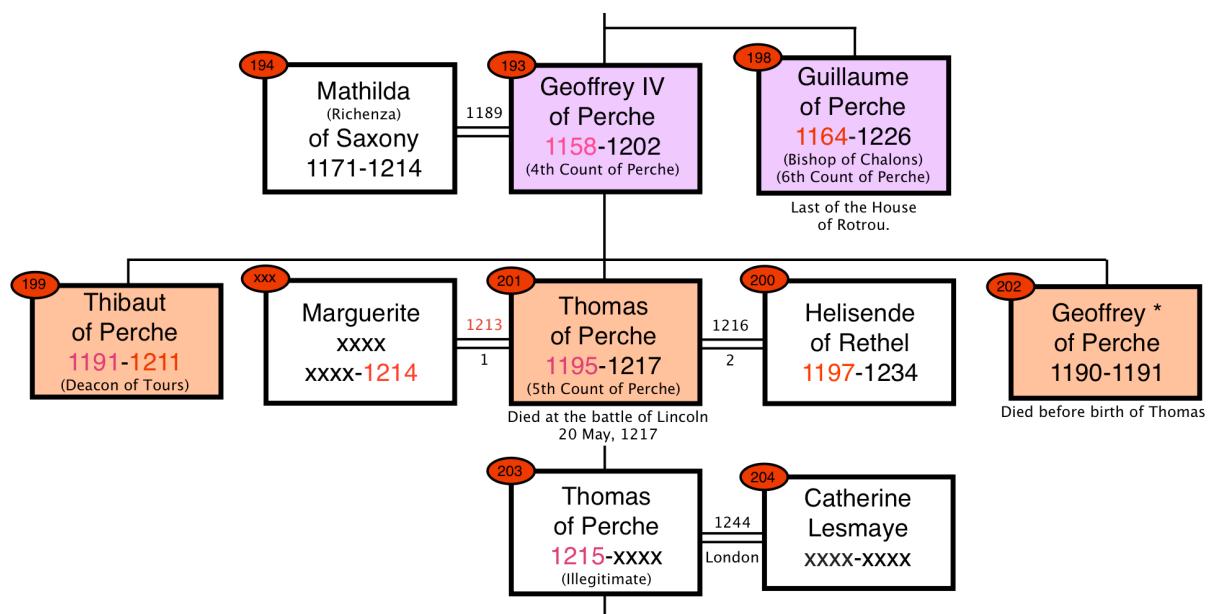


The Last Count of Perche



The only thing we can say about the demise of the Perche Dynasty in France, was that it should never have happened. From the moment Guillaume de Perche became Count, the House of Rotrou in France was doomed. The last Count of Perche was in effect, a non-event. Guillaume was declared Count of Perche upon the death of his nephew, simply because there was nobody else. But Guillaume (1164-1226) was Bishop of Chalons and as such, could have no legitimate children. And so, although Thomas de Perche may not have been the last of the House of Rotrou ¹, we can safely say that he died while looking after the affairs of his county, while Guillaume from 1217 until his death in 1226, certainly did nothing in this direction.

After the death of Thomas' father, Geoffrey IV, in 1202, the affairs of the Perche were definitely heading from bad to worse. Geoffreys' widow, Mathilda, did all she could to maintain the properties that she owned in England. She was obliged to pay off a small fortune in fines incurred by her husband, but nevertheless, King John [*Lackland*] had set his eyes on her properties ², and slowly but surely over the years, whittled away English interests in the Perche to nothingness. Mathilda died in 1210, and John immediately closed in on Mathildas assets. By 1214, nothing is left of the considerable wealth which successive counts of Perche were able to build in England.

¹ Did Thomas have children, and if so were they illegitimate ? Was there no other option than to declare Guillaume as the future Count of Perche ?

² The old saying "Blood is thicker than water" does not seem to have been respected in this case. Although Mathilda was John's niece, he systematically spoiled her of her interests in England.

Historians are unsure about the birth date of Thomas, the son of Geoffrey IV. He becomes Count of Perche after the death of his father, and so must have been born before his brother Thibaud, and before 1202, the that Geoffrey died. He must have been very young, when he set about the difficult task of rebuilding the affairs of the Perche. He supports Prince Louis (future King Louis VIIIth of France), son of Philippe Auguste (Phillipe II, King of France), in his invasion of England in a desperate attempt to conquer the throne. If this enterprise succeeds, the power of the Perche will be re-enstated in full. But Thomas is killed at the battle of Lincoln, on May 20th, 1217, and the House of Rotrou is doomed.

Thomas had been married previously to an unknown Marguerite, who apparently died young. Thomas then married Helisende de Rethel in about 1216. As Thomas' son, also called Thomas was born in about 1215, he would appear to be illegitimate. For this reason, the title of Count of Perche falls upon the only remaining candidate, an uncle of Thomas, Guillaume, Bishop of Chalons. Thomas was certainly very unlucky. Three of his uncles, Henri, Stephen and Rotrou were all dead by 1205, and his two brothers Thibaut and Geoffrey also died young. When Thomas is killed at Lincoln, the only possibility for the next Count of Perche is a "dead-end", a "cul-de-sac". The King of France must be standing in the wings, tickled pink at the idea of picking up the County of the Perche in the not-to-distant future ³. With both the King of England and the King of France preying on the riches of the Perche heritage, the French side of the Rotrou dynasty is heading directly to oblivion.

And so the French House of Rotrou recedes into the darkness of a troubled European theatre, less than 200 years after its appearance in the second half of the 10th Century. Fortunately (for us) , the secondary line of the family have already left England, and are happily installed in their new lands of Ireland, and their sons will descend down, through even more troubled times, to the present day

..... for which we should all be eternally grateful !

³ The Law of Reversion allows the King to appropriate all lands and titles when no male heir exists. As Guillaume is over 50 years old at the death of Thomas, the French King, Philip II, may not have to wait too long to take control of the Perche. As it happens, he dies in 1223, and so it is his son Louis VIII who wins the prize.