

## **Events leading to the Norman Conquest (911-1066)**

### **Rollo - 911 - 927**

The long road to the Norman Conquest began many years before 1066. In 911, the French King Charles II (the Simple), tired of Viking harassment on the northern and western coasts of France, decided to make peace with the Viking leader Rollo. Rollo had invaded the north of France years before, and had severely harried the French territories, sometimes sailing up the River Seine as far as Paris, reeking havoc, and laying all to waste in his path. Finally, in July of 911, the Frankish forces managed to defeat Rollo in a battle close to Chartres. Rollo was in a defensive position, and accepted the terms offered to him by Charles, at the treaty of Saint-Clair-sur-Epte. He would convert to Christianity, he would protect the northern French coasts from attack by Danish forces. Finally, he would pledge allegiance to the King of France. In return, he received a large segment of land starting at the boundary of the river Epte (a tributary of the Seine), and reaching far to the North, even covering parts of Brittany<sup>1</sup>. This land would soon become known as Normandy. However, if Charles had estimated that now Rollo and his men would settle into their new home, and become peaceful, he was mistaken. The Norsemen frequently crossed the southern boundaries, into French territory, and pillaged and ransacked everywhere they went. They were respected and feared by all, and it soon became obvious that allowing them to settle in Northern France had been an enormous error. After Charles was deposed by Robert in 922, Rollo considered that his oath to the King of France had ended, and so began a period of expansion to the West. In negotiations with French barons he was given Le Mans and Bayeux. But Rollo was not yet satisfied. In 925, the Normans attacked Picardy.

### **William I - 927 - 942 (Longsword)**

William succeeded his father Rollo, and was confronted with a revolt from within. The Normans felt that William had become a little too Gallic, and not strong enough in his support of his own people. He married Luitgarde, daughter of Count Herbert of Vermandois, and from then on became his loyal ally, even though his father had always opposed him. William pledged loyalty to Louis IV, King of France, and the lands that had been pledged to Rollo were confirmed. In 942, William was ambushed and killed by followers of Arnulf, with who he had been in conflict, while at a peace conference.

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<sup>1</sup> At first glance, this may seem a rather high price to pay, rather like ceding your back yard to the enemy. However, the unification of France was still centuries away, and giving such a large chunk of territory to the Vikings did not seem too expensive, especially when they already came and went at their leisure.

## **Richard I - 942 - 996**

Lothaire had been King of France since 954. Under the guidance of Thibault the Trickster, Count of Blois and Chartres, he agreed to attack the Normans on their own ground, and so stop the carnage that had occurred for nearly 50 years. He authorized Thibault to build an army, and to enter Normandy with the idea of stopping the Normans for ever. And so, in 963, two armies, one headed by Thibault, and the other headed by a trusted commander, Rotrou, invaded Norman territory.

When Rotrou (Rotrou I), commander of one of the armies of Thibault, Count of Blois and Chartres, attacked the Normans in 963, and was forced to cede the town of Bellême, he could not possibly have foreseen that his descendants would take sides with the Normans in the Conquest of England, just 100 years later. The House of Blois & Chartres and their vassals, the Viscounts of Châteaudun, were subservient to the Kings of France, and as such were continually at war with the bellicious Normans, who were directly descended from the Vikings, and whose favourite past-time appeared to be pillaging their neighbours. The Normans would storm across the border, whenever they felt like it, descend into the rich plains of l'Île de France, ransacking and burning, and then retire behind their border to the safety of their Mottes and Baileys <sup>2</sup>. There appeared to be no solution to this problem until the King of France, Lothaire, ordered Thibault to take steps to halt the Norman incursions. And so begins the saga of the De Nogent family. Rotrou, under orders from his liege Thibault, builds a Motte and Bailey of some stature just across the border, on a high plateau, at a small developing town called Nogent-le-Château <sup>3</sup>.

## **Richard II - 996 - 1027 (The Good)**

Richard was the eldest son of Richard I. He must be considered different from some of the Normandy Dukes. He was deeply religious, and had much in common with Robert II, King of France. He found himself at war with the English, in the form of Ethelred (the Unready, 968-1016). The Danes continually attacked the English coasts, and often

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<sup>2</sup> Motte - . Early Norman castles were of the 'motte and bailey' type. A motte (or castle-mound) is an artificial mound of earth, surrounded by a ditch and fortified by timber walls. To the Normans, a castle meant a safe haven from the hostile local population and a protected base from which they could strike at will at those who displeased them. Once an area of land was taken, a castle was built and manned, holding all within riding distance under their sway. The motte was a fortification which could rapidly be built (of wood) and later improved. A ditch was dug and the earth removed used to make a mound or 'motte'. On the mound, a tower (keep) was raised. On the inside lip of the ditch, a wooden palisade was erected and the enclosure or 'bailey' created was used to house both men and horses. A motte and bailey castle was a disposable item. The Normans frequently abandoned such constructions, whilst those erected at important sites were subsequently replaced by more extensive examples in stone.

(Geoff Boxell - Domesday & the Normanisation of England)

<sup>3</sup> Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. The best way to stop the Normans was to use mechanisms of their own invention. A fortification of the "motte/bailey" structure, placed in a strategic position could only hinder the Normans in their sallies across the border.

sought haven in Normandy. The Normans, remembering their roots, were well disposed to their Danish "cousins", which explained the state of war with the English. In an effort to reduce friction between the two countries, Richard engineered the marriage of his sister Emma with Ethelred, and one of their children was Edward (the Confessor). Much later, when Edward died in 1066, these minimal blood ties with England were to give William I (the Bastard as he was known) a vague excuse to consider himself a potential King of England.

### **Richard I - 1027**

When Richard I died in 1026, his eldest son Richard became king, but suddenly died within the year. His brother Robert was suspected of foul play, but nothing was proved.

### **Robert I - 1027 - 1035 (The Magnificent)**

Robert was the second son of Richard I, and was considered to have been involved in the early demise of his brother Richard. He was much more in line with traditional Viking belligerence, and even assembled an army against his own uncle, Robert, Archbishop of Rouen and Count of Evreux, forcing him into exile. For this he was excommunicated. His cousins Edward and Alfred, sons of his aunt Emma and Athelred, King of England, were living in Normandy, and at one point, Robert actually prepared an invasion of England, on their behalf. However, he decided to postpone his invasion until his return from Jerusalem. He made his illegitimate son William, his heir, and then went on his pilgrimage to Jerusalem, but died on his return journey.

### **William I - 1035 - 1066 (The Conqueror)**

When William became Duke of Normandy, there were several claimants to the English throne, after the death of Edward the Confessor, including his own tenuous claim. Insisting that Edward had promised the English throne to him, and bypassing all the other claimants, William prepared an invasion of England. With many Viking and other mercenaries, William was able to muster an impressive force, and to defeat Harold Godwinson at the battle of Hastings, on the October 14, 1066.

### **During this period, over the southern border of Normandy, into the Perche :**

After the loss of Bellême in 963, the developing House of Rotrou was continually at war with the Bellême family, until an attempt at appeasement took place in about 1043, when Rotrou II, Rotrou's great-grandson, Viscount of Châteaudun married Adelaïde de Bellême. This marriage was probably arranged by Yves de Bellême, bishop of Sées (Adelaïde's uncle), with the object of curbing the animosity between the two families. It does not appear to have been successful, but some good finally emerged from this union. Geoffrey III de Mortagne, the son of Rotrou II, found common interests with Roger de Montgomery, his cousin by marriage to Mabel de Bellême. Because of these new

interests, the House of Rotrou eventually changed alliance and sided with William when he invaded England <sup>4</sup>

### **Outside of the borders of the Perche, into the Kingdom of France :**

The increasing power of the Normans were beginning to worry Henry I, King of France. He had already tried several times (1054 and 1057) to invade Normandy, but without success. When Edward the Confessor, King of England, died in January, 1066, there were three claimants to the throne, including William, Duke of Normandy. Although Williams claim was by far the most tenuous, and Harold Godwinson <sup>5</sup> had been proclaimed king in accordance with the wishes of Edward, William decided to take the matter in hand. As his personal army would certainly not stretch to an invasion of England, he resolved to bolster his own means for war with many mercenaries. With promises of much booty, he managed to add to his forces a large number of soldiers from far and wide. William amassed an enormous fleet of ships, and together with his army of mercenaries, invaded England in October 1066. The House of Rotrou, in the form of Geoffrey III of Mortagne, Rotrou de Nogent (future Rotrou de Montfort), and Fulke de Nogent (later given the sobriquet Fulke of Bellême), accompanies the troops of William to England, in an armada of more than 600 ships. Roger de Montgommery <sup>6</sup>, contrary to some stories, who provided a substantial part of the invading fleet, did not in fact accompany the invading army, but was entrusted the control of Normandy by William.

The dice have been thrown. An invasion of England by the Normans, envisaged for some time by several Dukes of Normandy, will finally be successful. The future of England and France will be intricately entwined for many generations. The de Nogent family, although they do not know it, will choose England as a stepping-stone towards their future home in Ireland, more than 100 years later.

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<sup>4</sup> Both sides gained enormously from the alliance. Geoffrey, apart from the possibility of gain in the Conquest, stabilised his northern border, allowing him to concentrate on other ventures. William made a powerful ally south of his border, and, with the help of more mercenaries, increased his chances of success in England.

<sup>5</sup> Harold is the closest of the claimants to the City of London, and makes a hasty dash there to be crowned King, before the others have time to react. William completely ignored this event, and promptly invaded England.

<sup>6</sup> Roger de Montgommery was already an extremely powerful man in his native Normandy and had been a close friend of William since William was a teenager, as he was his cousin. He was present at the Council of Lillebonne in 1066, and agreed to contribute 60 ships to aid the invasion plans of England. He returned with William from Normandy in 1067 and he was summoned to attend Christmas at Gloucester with the king where he was awarded his honours as one of William's most trusted men. It was after King William had held his Christmas Court at Gloucester and awarded Montgomery the Earldom, that he ordered him to build a castle on the Arun to protect the inland reaches.