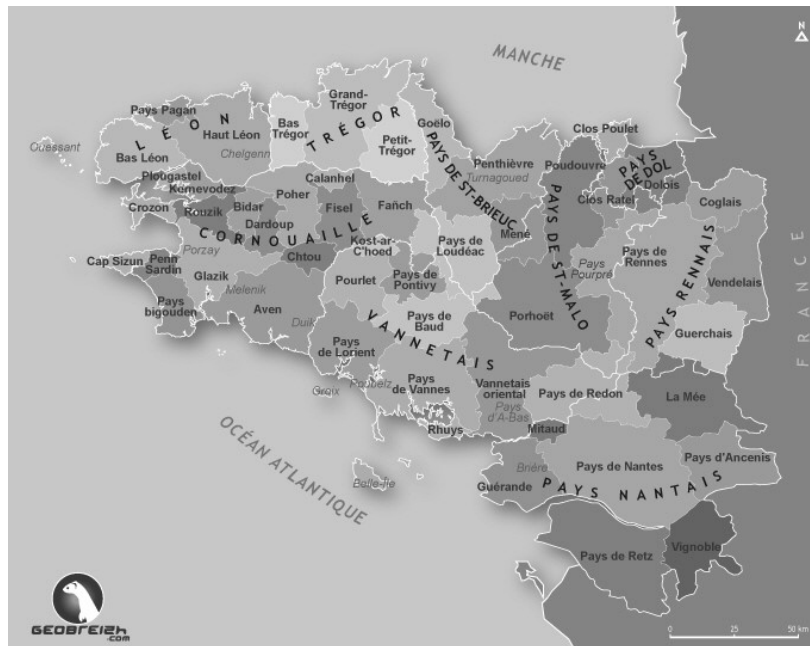


Chapter 2 - BRITTANY



Map of Brittany in the Middle Ages

© Geobreizh.com

The territory which became Brittany was conquered by the Romans in the middle of the 1st Century BC. There was ruthless suppression of any resistance from the local tribes; the defeated leaders were killed and their people sold as slaves.

The Romans called the district Armorica, a term still used in Brittany today and encapsulated in the name of one of the French departments, Côtes d'Armor.

Although Christianity came to Brittany at the end of the fourth century AD, there is little written history available; most of the early manuscripts were lost during the Viking invasions.

Much of the early history of Brittany was passed on from generation to generation by story-telling. Exaggerations and inaccuracies abound much in the tradition of earlier generations of Celts.

The Early Days of Brittany

This story of Brittany really begins with Conan Meriadog (305-367), a legendary British leader credited with being its founder. His parentage is not clear although it seems likely that he was the son of one of the Chieftains of Celtic Britain, but probably not the elder son.

Indeed, the line back from Conan Meriadog seems to be disputed, mixed with myth and fantasy and far from clear. However, the line back to Conan seems to

have been researched very carefully by a number of genealogists. Inevitably, though, something stretching back to 300 AD will have assumptions and errors.

Conan's first wife, Ursula, was the daughter of the Chieftain of the Dumnonii in what is now Devon in England; Conan took that position when his father-in-law died. His son, Cadfan (b.325), by Ursula became Chieftain of the British Dumnonii when his father left Britain.

Conan and his men left for Rome with Magnus Maximus, the Roman commander in Britain who had proclaimed himself Emperor; it was Magnus who was blamed for leaving the Romanised 'middle classes' and the retired veterans of the Roman Army in Britain defenceless.

In fact, he did not take all of the Roman troops but he did take the senior administrators and he transferred power to the local rulers.

Once Magnus Maximus succeeded in being acknowledged as Western Roman Emperor, he gave the area which is now Brittany to Conan and his men. In August 388, Magnus Maximus was defeated at the Battle of the Sava, by the river Sava near Siscia in today's Croatia. When he surrendered later at Aquileia, at the head of the Adriatic in Italy, he was executed.

It is said that many of his loyal commanders and men joined the Bretons; presumably many of them were Britons themselves. It is from this time, that there are stories of a form of ethnic cleansing, when the men of the local tribes were killed and their women were taken as wives and concubines by the new settlers

It has been suggested that Conan's second wife, Dareca, was the sister of St Patrick but this is a myth because Patrick lived in the 5th Century not the 4th. More likely, she was one of these local women. Conan and Dareca are reputed to have had twenty children but this also seems very unlikely unless she was already his wife before the move to Brittany.

The migration of Celts from south-western England, Wales and Ireland to Brittany may have begun as early as AD 300 and largely ended by 500; many of the later migrants were escaping from attacks by the Saxon invaders, who were extending their sphere of influence in Britain.

A number of Christian missionaries migrated to Brittany at this time including the seven founder saints of Brittany. The Irish Saint, Columban, also evangelised Brittany. And, Saint Gildas, at the end of his life, settled on the peninsula of Rhuys, in the south of Brittany

In the Early Middle Ages, Brittany was divided into three kingdoms – Dumnonia, Cornouaille and Broërec. The first two kingdoms derive their names from the homelands of the migrating Britons (now Devon and Cornwall). Broërec derives from Bro-Waroch, and it was the territory of a Breton ruler, Waroch, who controlled the area around Vannes late in the 6th Century.

In 578, Chilperic (539-584), Frankish King of Neustria, sent an army to attack Waroch. The battle lasted three days and the Bretons killed many of the Saxon mercenaries from Bayeux. Eventually, Waroch surrendered, paid homage, gave his son as hostage and agreed to pay an annual tribute. He subsequently broke his oath.

But, in 587, Chilperic's brother Guntram (532-592), King of Burgundy, made Waroch renew his oath and demanded compensation because Waroch had attacked the Nantais. By 588, neither tribute nor compensation had been paid.

So, in 589, Guntram sent another force in. Waroch tried to escape to the Channel Islands but his ships were destroyed and he had to renew his oath and give a nephew as an extra hostage. Waroch and his people maintained their defiant stance but they had become a Frankish vassal state by the time of the reign of Dagobert I (603-639), King of Austrasia.

The rulers of Dumnonia were said to be the most aggressive and expansionist of the Breton territories and there was constant tension with other local leaders. Judicaël Ap Hoel (602-658) was King of Dumnonia during the reign of Dagobert. By then, he had absorbed Broërec into Dumnonia.

In 635, Dagobert ordered Judicaël to visit him at his palace in Clichy, now in the Paris suburbs 10 kilometres north of the centre of the City. Judicaël renewed the oath of fealty to the King and gave Dagobert gifts. But, as a sign of independence, he refused to eat with the King.

He was a very religious man and, around 640, he retired to the monastery of Gaël, 50 kilometres west of Rennes. After his death he was declared a Saint.

Little is known about what happened in Brittany for nearly two hundred years, until the death of Charlemagne, Holy Roman Emperor, in 814. Then a southern Breton leader called Morman tried to gain acceptance as King of Brittany; he had previously sworn allegiance to Charlemagne.

He led a large group of fighters from all over Brittany but his stronghold was at Priziac, about 90 kilometres northwest of Vannes. A large Frankish army assembled at Vannes in the springtime of 818, attacked his stronghold and killed him and many of his supporters.

Wihomarc of Léon, in the north, led another rebellion in 822. Lambert I (765-836), Count of Nantes and Prefect of the Breton March, attacked him but he avoided capture. In 824 another Frankish army invaded, ravaged Brittany but failed to defeat Wihomarc.

In May 825, Wihomarc met Louis I 'the Pious' (778-840), son of Charlemagne and his successor as Holy Roman Emperor and King of the Franks, at Aachen to make peace. Louis pardoned him and made gifts. But, on his return home, Wihomarc was killed by Lambert, ostensibly for making peace with the Vikings.

During this time, there was a widespread rebellion, in the Carolingian Empire, which covered most of today's continental Western Europe except Spain which was controlled by the Muslim Emirate of Córdoba.