

Chapter 4 – NORMANDY

Unlike Brittany, Normandy had no 'national' identity until the beginning of the 10th century. And, it changed shape and size over the years so the map on page 10 is the best guide to its dimensions.

From the middle of the 9th Century, the Vikings had regularly raided the coastal towns and the towns and cities up the long navigable rivers of what is now northern France. They had robbed and destroyed monasteries and plundered towns. Also, they had taken advantage of the civil wars in the Carolingian Empire to gradually take control of a substantial area of the north.

In 885 a large fleet of Viking ships attacked Paris under the leadership of Siegfried; one of his lieutenants was Rollo. When Siegfried was paid off and left, Rollo stayed stubbornly behind. Eventually, he was bought off and persuaded to go further up the Seine and onto the river Yonne to attack Burgundy. It was Rollo and his followers that settled what became Normandy.

Rollo Rognvaldsson (846-931)

Although the Danes provide another theory, Norwegian and Icelandic historians believe that Rollo was one and the same as a person called Ganger Hrolf, son of Rognvald Eysteinnsson, the Earl of More in Western Norway.

In 911, Rollo and his Norsemen attacked Paris again, but were repelled. They then branched off the river Seine onto the Eure and laid siege to Chartres. A combined force from West Francia defeated them on 20 July 911 at the Battle of Chartres.

It was obviously not an outright defeat because afterwards at Saint-Clair-sur-Epte, on the borders of the area controlled by Rollo, a treaty was signed with Charles III (879-929), 'The Simple', King of West Francia.

It should be stated here that Charles' nickname was given to him not because he lacked intelligence, but because he dressed and lived simply. He understood quite clearly that Rollo and his Vikings were not going to go away.

Rollo did agree to become a vassal to Charles but, in return, he was formally and legally confirmed as ruler of the territories between the Epte and the sea, roughly equivalent to today's Haute Normandy. He was also entrusted with keeping the banks of the Seine free from attack. Additionally, he was given Brittany and the hand of the King's daughter Gisela in marriage.

Rollo became a Christian and was baptised as Robert. Although some historians used the Latin term 'dux' (which literally translated means leader) to describe him, he actually had the rank of Count.

There may have been some complications at home as Rollo was already married to Poppa (872-938), the daughter of Berengar (847-896), Count of Bayeux, Senlis and Rennes. Rollo captured Poppa when he attacked Bayeux in 896; her father was killed in the fighting. She was still very much alive and had borne him a number of children.

Although Rollo kept his word in protecting the banks of the Seine, he continued 'Viking' style attacks further up the coast in Flanders.

When Charles was deposed in 922, Rollo provided him with an army but this was defeated at a battle near Soissons, 100 kilometres north east of Paris, on 15 June 923. Charles' opponent, Robert I (866-923), King of West Francia was killed but Charles was captured and imprisoned.

Rollo then considered that his oath to the King was void and he started to expand his sphere of control. By negotiation he acquired Le Mans and Bayeux and, in 924, he took the whole of the Bessin, the area around Bayeux. Then he took his army north into Picardy.

The Normans adopted the local language, married into the local families and became more settled and 'respectable'. Rollo established his capital at Rouen and divided the land between his former chieftains who adopted local customs and took local titles.

He handed over responsibility for Normandy to his son, Guillaume, in 927 and he died in 931 having successfully established a new 'nation'.