

To what extent were the Normans united by a shared sense of identity?

Most countries within our modern era are unified under a shared identity, no matter where you are in the world you can bond with someone thanks to nothing more than being from the same country. However, when we look back in history to when nations spanned islands and continents, it's hard to imagine that those identities were the same when comparing two geographically different regions. This essay will be looking at the identity of the Norman people and to see if during their expansion into different regions, whether that be the Iberian peninsula or post 1066 Britain just how much they had in common in regard to a shared identity from their conception as a Norman people and how that identity changed when having cultural exchange with host countries and comparing the differing groups to each other, to pinpoint exact differences and whether a shared identity still existed and in what capacity,

To first get a grasp of what it means to be a part of a shared Norman identity, we must first look at what we can consider to be the defining factors that can be of use to identify what we would consider to be a Norman. The most prominent of these traits can be seen after the founding of the Duchy of Normandy, during this time the Viking settlers began to socially assimilate into the French world, it is this ability to adapt to their new cultural environments that arguably is their greatest strength, especially due to how rapidly the Viking settlers would pick up the traditions and ways of life that belong to their host countries. There are three main ways the Normans began to integrate within French society, they would begin to prominently make use of the French language and over time, making it the standard language of communication between the Norman people. The second is an adoption of the Christian faith (specifically Roman Catholicism) as opposed to their Norse heritage, leading to a Norman wide conversion of religion, further integrating themselves within French society.¹ The third is a literal integration between both the French and Viking societies by having both groups of people mix freely and the following generations that would come from this union become more French/Norman rather than that of Scandinavian/Viking settlers, with these new generations being brought up with the assimilated culture rather than having to adapt to it as Rollo and his settlers did.² Although these are the traits found through the assimilation into a native culture, there are some that belong back to their Scandinavian origins, mainly their lust for fighting and adventure, as can be seen by their many exploits away from France post 911ce, with the most well-known of these exploits being the Norman invasion of England in 1066. With these traits of the Norman people and by extension their method of expansion would later be culminated as Predatory Kinship, that lays out the methods of how the Normans would foster relationships with allies and how they would utilise non blood relation in a similar way to Nordic clans, to unify under a singular leader focusing on consolidating power as opposed to utilising a feudal system³. It is these traits that will be used to compare different the different groups of Normans to even see if there is such a practical concept as a shared Norman identity between the different groups before considering the idea of just how unified these groups by their shared heritage were and to what extent did they share these factors.

¹ Albu, E., 2001. *The Normans in their histories: propaganda, myth and subversion*. Boydell & Brewer.

² Bates, D. (2011) *Normandy before 1066*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

³ Searle, E. (1988) *Predatory kinship and the creation of Norman Power, 840-1066*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

The Norman conquest of England was the culmination of the predatory kinship mentality as during 1066, the current Duke of Normandy, William, sets to invade England in hope of securing the English crown as sworn to him by Harold Godwinson over holy relics after it as promised to William by King Edward the Confessor.⁴ The events follow Hardrada's failed invasion from the North, after Harold's victory he is later drawn out to face the Norman forces after the invading army pillaged and burned the English countryside⁵, and as such showing the Norman penchant for violence as a means to secure their goals. The difference in England when compared to the original Normans generations prior is that the invading Normans didn't assimilate into the culture as they had before but rather brought the culture of Normandy with them. Importing a ruling class and essentially forcing the native Anglo-Saxons to assimilate into the Norman society, although what happened was more akin to a mixing of both cultures defined by class. Rather than taking the English language to use, they instead made French the dominate language of the English court, a decision that has had lasting effects on the English language.⁶ As such from this alone we can see that the Normans deviated from their original methodology of rapidly assimilating into the culture but rather inserting themselves into the structure of the English throne as they were prior to arriving on the shores of England. When looking at the religious aspect of Norman assimilation, it once again shows deviation from what we can assume was the status quo, as by the time William had arrived in England the country had been a predominantly catholic state for years.⁷ However, looking back into the warrior mentality help by the Normans, their invasion was even blessed by Pope Alexander II, as William had sought papal permission due to the prior oath made for the crown.⁸ This all does show to the extent that the Norman would weaponise belief to their own advantage as the swearing over holy relics and they papal blessing would aid in rallying those to the legitimacy of Williams cause. However, the Norman use of violence would continue to be used after the Battle of Hastings to quash rebellions fuelled by anti-Norman sentiment, with the majority of such conflicts having been concluded by 1075, with the country firmly under Norman rule.⁹ It would take many generations for the lines between Norman and English to fade, with the eventually outcome being that of a Norman assimilation into becoming what is now known as English, with this as the case, the Normans did eventually utilise one of their most defining qualities and culturally shift to reflect their hosting nation.¹⁰

Unlike the Norman conquest of England, the conquest in southern Italy was a slow process, taking almost two hundred years.¹¹ This slower approach contrasts when looking at their history of rapid conquest and assimilation, the reasoning for this when compared to the English conquest stems from the fact that these excursions were not planned, but rather the work of

⁴ Bayeux tapestry. <https://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/harold-makes-solemn-oath>

⁵ Freeman, E.A., 1873. *The history of the Norman conquest of England: its causes and its results* (Vol. 2). Clarendon Press for Macmillan and Company, New York.

⁶ Diana, A., *A History of the English Language*.

⁷ Redgate, A.E., 2014. *Religion, politics and society in Britain, 800-1066*. Routledge.

⁸ Morton, C., 1975. Pope Alexander II and the Norman conquest. *Latomus*, 34(Fasc. 2), pp.362-382.

⁹ Bates, D., 2016. *William the conqueror*. Yale University Press.

¹⁰ Golding, B., 2013. Anglo-Norman England. In *Conquest and Colonisation* (pp. 166-182). Palgrave, London.

¹¹ Brown, G.S., 2015. *The Norman conquest of southern Italy and Sicily*. McFarland.

may disorganised groups all seeking glory within southern Italy.¹² The groups would eventually ally with each other and other groups to begin the steps towards unification. However, Sicily wasn't a unified state/kingdom until 1130 when an agreement was struck between Rober II of Sicily and Pope Innocent II, however with this unification it wasn't the case that the Norman populace were bound by identity but rather by negotiated relationships between each other and different groups around the region.¹³ It was during this time that while the Normans were settled in Sicily, there was an overhaul to church system of southern Italy, as the Normans essentially became the centralised power of the region, their religious influence spread too. Gone were the practices of the Greek Orthodox church, instead they were replaced with the Roman Catholic denomination.¹⁴ However, the Normans did not seek the conversion of other faiths, they instead still allowed other practices and were quite tolerant of such things, possibly due to the nature of the unification of Sicily or just a more lenient tolerance towards other cultures. It was during this time that the Normans finally began to assimilate into the surrounding cultures, as the Kingdom of Sicily was a cultural pot, the Normans developed into a hybrid culture assimilating into both Arab and Greek cultures.¹⁵ As it stands currently the trend of Norman violence and assimilation continues away from the shores of England and France, further cementing this ability to adapt to surround cultures a key tool to the Norman identity. Although much like the example shown in regard to England, assimilation does happen eventually, The Normans displayed a trend of essentially using a table Norman methodology to insert themselves into the cultural environments and to establish a solid foot hold within the regions before beginning to assimilate and expand their own culture with that of their neighbours.

The Norman activities in the Iberian Peninsula, mainly focused on their craving for adventure and combat as opposed to the assimilation of and settling previously looked at, with them serving as mercenaries during their earlier activities within the region, working for both the Muslim regions and the Christian Kingdoms. Even with this being the case the roaming Normans were gifted land as payment due to participation in events within the region¹⁶. It was later on that the Normans begin to ally themselves with the papal forces in the area, and due to participation in such crusades in the area, priorities shifted from raiding and adventure and evolved into Papal backed combat with a focus on conquest rather than assimilation with other cultures.¹⁷ With this being the case, the activities of the Normans in Iberia perfectly showcase the Viking aspect of their identity with a clear focus on adventure and warfare, in order to gain personal wealth and glory in comparison to conquest being used as a tool of greater gain.

¹² Fernández-Aceves, Hervin (2020). *County and Nobility in Norman Italy: Aristocratic Agency in the Kingdom of Sicily, 1130-1189*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

¹³ Douglas, David. *The Norman Fate, 1100–1154*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976

¹⁴ Loud, G.A., 2007. *The Latin Church in Norman Italy*. Cambridge University Press.

¹⁵ Drell, J.H., 1999. Cultural syncretism and ethnic identity: The Norman 'conquest' of Southern Italy and Sicily. *Journal of Medieval History*, 25(3), pp.187-202.

¹⁶ Lucas Villegas-Aristizábal (2017), 'Spiritual and material rewards on the Christian-Muslim Frontier', *Medievalismo* 27, pp. 353–376.

¹⁷ Villegas-Aristizábal, L., 2021. The Changing Priorities in the Norman Incursions into the Iberian Peninsula's Muslim–Christian Frontiers, c. 1018–c. 1191. In *The Normans in the Mediterranean* (pp. 81-119).

The idea of a Norman people as a narrative device or myth does hold some credence as each of the groups looked at do have factors that match up with each other and can make it look like a unified people. It has been established that much like their origins, they have an unprecedented ability to adapt into the cultural environments they're faced with as their conception of the Normans as a people comes from assimilation with the French populace and this is reinforced in later periods with the eventual assimilation of Anglo-Norman England as the lines between French and English fade away, and even further when looking at how the Normans in Sicily were tolerant and even embraced their multicultural surroundings. Even when we look at their other defining factor of a love for conflict and a battle prowess that traces back to the offer that would settle them in Normandy, they are seen as a people who enjoy the thrill of adventure and conflict, with this eventually evolving into a form of "higher purpose" under papal orders during crusades. Even using conflict as a means to advance their own political standing such as the sacking of the English coast as bait to draw out Harold Godwinson, this shows that at times conflict was a tool and not a consuming desire. With all this being said, were the Normans united over their shared traits? I would argue yes, with their shared history of a Viking heritage, sworn to protect Francia from fellow raiders while being a vassal state of the French king. Each Norman group has also had close ties to the Roman Catholic Church, whether it be receiving blessing or aiding in crusades and receiving rewards from the Church. However, I think the most important factor to consider when considering how unified these groups were, was how they all referred to themselves as Normans, or at least were referred to as such by other. This shows that each group considered themselves as such and as a result show a unified sense of identity purely by how they identify, adding to the evidence during the events of Sicily, there is no record I could find of the differing Norman factions involved in the region ever engaged against each other and as such it is my belief that this shows a solid foundation of that even regardless of which Norman territory they hailed from, they were all Norman.

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