

Commentary on Membrane 4 and 5 of the British Library's 'Royal MS 14 B V'

This piece of art is a genealogical family tree depicting the family of Rollo, Duke of Normandy, and his descendants. It is two parts of a detailed genealogical record of the English Kings and was commissioned sometime in the thirteenth century by an unknown artist. The physical copy of this family tree can be found in the British Library and has been since being gifted to the institute by King George II of England in 1757.¹ Rollo was a fierce man of Viking heritage and was the first ruler of the Norman peoples in France. The piece of land along the Seine River would later become Normandy was gifted to him and the Norman people by King Charles the Simple of France in the year 911.² Rollo would gain the title of Duke of Normandy and pass that title down to his descendants.

As stated, the image is a family tree of Rollo and his descendants. It begins with Rollo at the top and continues with William Longsword and Richard I. It goes on to chronicle Richard I's seven children and numerous grandchildren, before ending with William the Conqueror.³ This family tree includes pictures of every person, different from other family trees that only had names. This family tree of Rollo is basic compared to the family trees of today as it only includes direct blood descendants of Rollo and not spouses. It also does not include any extended family, just the main line of succession. In addition to the family tree, the image also has a brief piece of writing in what is assumed to be either Latin or French. Decorating the family tree is two scenes, a hunting scene and a scene of a woman interacting with an animal that appears to be a dragon.

This family tree manuscript is very detailed and done in a variety of colours. That is very significant, as a colourful manuscript reveals a lot about who commissioned it. The use of colours identifies the wealth of the manuscript. Colours were very expensive to produce as they involve pigments derived from various organic and inorganic materials, such as flowers and metals. Gemstones were often used to create colours, such as blues from ultramarine and yellows from orpiment, and could be expensive.⁴ The use of different colours also denoted how wealthy the commissioner was. It took a certain status of person to be able to afford a multicoloured manuscript and those manuscripts containing gold and silver were even more expensive.⁵ The manuscript creation process was an expensive venture, as paints had to be handmade using a variety of materials. A craftsman would need to source the materials from

¹ The British Library, 'Detailed record for Royal 14 B V', Catalogue of Illuminated Manuscripts [online], available from <http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/record.asp?MSID=18940&CollID=16&NStart=140205>, accessed on 08 November 2018.

² R.H.C. Davis, *The Normans and their Myth*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), p. 19.

³ London, British Library, Royal MS 14 B V, Membrane 4 and 5: Rollo and his descendants.

⁴ The Fitzwilliam Museum, 'The Illuminators' Palette', COLOUR: The Art and Science of Illuminated Manuscripts [online], Available from <https://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/colour/explore/2>

⁵ The Fitzwilliam Museum, 'Painting in Gold and Silver, COLOUR: The Art and Science of Illuminated Manuscripts [online], Available from <https://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/colour/explore/9>, accessed on 08 November 2018.

around the known world.⁶ The more complex the manuscript, the longer it took and more expensive it was.

Aside from the obvious cost associated with illuminated manuscripts like this one, illuminated manuscripts became a status symbol. An illuminated manuscript commissioned by a ruler represented the wealth and stability of their country. The King or Duke or whomever could afford to devote a significant amount of money to the manuscript, money that was not needed elsewhere and was superfluous. It also gives credence to the idea that the country was well developed and able to explore distant lands. Up until the twelfth century, you needed to be able to visit the faraway lands of Asia and Africa and the Near East to get materials needed to create some of the more striking colours. When the Holy Lands were taken over by the West in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, the trade routes to Asia were more widely accessible. Hard to come by materials such as indigo and ultramarine became more readily available.⁷ That led to different shades of colour available for more common use and not just available to those of the extreme upper classes. Using the example of indigo and ultramarine, more shades of blue were able to be used in the illuminated manuscripts after the Normans reclaimed the Holy Lands. This manuscript of Rollo and his descendants uses different shades of blues most likely created with indigo and ultramarine, and reds. Blues and reds are strong colours, that had a variety of meanings. Red, for instance, often represented the power of the Holy Spirit.⁸ The red is used in Rollo's family tree to make connections between the generations of Normans. Considering the symbolism behind the colour red, it can be hypothesized that the red connections between generations are meant to represent the influence of the Holy Spirit's power in the descendants of Rollo. Blue also had links to divinity, symbolising potential danger and anything odd or unusual.⁹ Links between the generations on the family tree are also blue, which was probably done to symbolise the dangerous nature of Rollo's descendants.

Certain colours were often associated with certain ideas or people. The deep purple colour often seen in ninth and tenth century manuscripts is such an example. The hue of purple seen in Eburnant's 'Christmas service in gold, silver and purple' from the late tenth century is associated with the bold purple of the court of the Byzantine Empire and is made of cheap lichen extract.¹⁰ This manuscript of Rollo's family tree, having been done using different shades of different colours, creates a physical representation of the wealth of the family tree's commissioner, who was most likely a Norman descendant or someone who deeply revered the Normans.

This family tree was most likely created to give legitimacy to a future Duke of Normandy or other man who wanted to prove himself. It was important during this time

⁶ The Fitzwilliam Museum, 'The Trade in Colours', COLOUR: The Art and Science of Illuminated Manuscripts [online], Available from <https://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/colour/explore/3>, accessed on 08 November 2018.

⁷ The Fitzwilliam Museum, 'The Trade in Colours', COLOUR: The Art and Science of Illuminated Manuscripts [online], Available from <https://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/colour/explore/3>, accessed on 08 November 2018.

⁸ The Fitzwilliam Museum, 'Colour and Meaning', COLOUR: The Art and Science of Illuminated Manuscripts [online], Available from <https://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/colour/explore/14>, accessed on 08 November 2018.

⁹ The Fitzwilliam Museum, 'Colour and Meaning', COLOUR: The Art and Science of Illuminated Manuscripts [online], Available from <https://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/colour/explore/14>, accessed on 08 November 2018.

¹⁰ The Fitzwilliam Museum, 'The Illuminators' Palette', COLOUR: The Art and Science of Illuminated Manuscripts [online], Available from <https://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/colour/explore/2>

period to be able to say that you were the son of this king or the grandson of that emperor. Many people in Europe during the time of the Normans would trace their ancestry back to Charlemagne, to show how great they were and to give legitimacy to their opinions. The people who commissioned this piece would be doing the same, displaying their greatness through their Norman ancestry. After this thorough analysis of the explicit and implicit meaning behind the family tree itself, the scenes adorning the family tree must also be studied.

The two scenes decorating the family tree, as previously stated, are a hunting scene and the woman with a dragon. The first scene depicts the hunt of a stag by a hare and a dachshund.¹¹ The scene was probably included to represent the strength of Rollo's line, how they were fierce hunters and warriors. The stag is a symbol of the Roman goddess of the hunt, Diana.¹² By including the stag, the artist is attempting to get the audience to believe that Rollo's descendants are fierce warriors that even Diana runs from them. I am unsure why the other animals were chosen, as the hare and the dachshund are not fierce animals. The woman and the dragon drawing is very interesting scene. The gender of the person is unclear, but I believe it a woman. She appears to be playing with the dragon and petting its nose.¹³ Discounting the dragons are not real argument, this could represent the strength of Rollo and his descendants. How the women of Rollo's family, the weakest of all his descendants, are strong enough to tame a dragon.

This family tree manuscript tells us many things. It speaks to us about the wealth of the commissioner and their views about the greatness of the Normans depicted on the family tree. By examining the colours and how they are used, we can see the great respect for the Normans had by the commissioner of this piece. This manuscript also tells us of the Normans great feats, of how they could tame rabid mythological beasts. This family tree tells us a lot about the Normans and about the person who commissioned this piece.

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¹¹ London, British Library, Royal MS 14 B V, Membrane 4 and 5: Rollo and his descendants.

¹² <https://classics.uncg.edu/course-resources/mythology/olympic-panthreon/artemis/>

¹³ 'Membrane 4 and 5: Rollo and his descendants', image taken from the source reader.

Bibliography

Primary Source Materials

London, British Library, Royal MS 14 B V, Membrane 4 and 5: Rollo and his descendants.

Secondary Source Materials

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