

Dudo of St Quentin, *Gesta Normannorum*

**Chapter 10: Rollo sees the town of Rouen and determines to settle there in fulfilment of his
dream-vision**

An Extract Commentary

Prepared For:

Medieval Prose in Wales (HPCS6019)

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March 22nd, 2026

Source Text Extract

Dudo of St Quentin, *Gesta Normannorum*

Chapter 10: Rollo sees the town of Rouen and determines to settle there in fulfilment of his dream-vision

Thus in the eight hundred seventy sixth year from the lord's incarnation, noble Rollo, forsaking the bed of the River Schelde on the advice of his *fideles*, launched his sails before the ship-bearing winds and came by ship to Jumièges, having traversed the deep where the cerulean whirlpool of the Seine, flowing with its crystal-clear courses and lapping the fragrant grasses of its elevated banks and, going to the open main of the inundating sea, discharges itself, and is often repelled, according to the intervals of the moon, by a more swollen billow of the sea itself. And seeing the monastery of Saint Peter and reckoning the place to be holy and embellished with abodes of monkish habitation, he hesitated to linger there, but steered his ships to the other side of the river, to the chapel of Saint Vedast, and he placed upon the altar of Saint Vedast the body of a certain virgin, Hameltrude by name, which he had carried there with him, and a name from the virgin's name has forever stuck to this chapel. And that place is called at Saint Hameltrude by the residents. Thus the inhabitants of Rouen, poor men and destitute merchants, and the dwellers in that region, hearing that a plentiful multitude of Normans was at Jumièges, came of one mind to Bishop Franco of Rouen, in order to take counsel about what to do. But Franco immediately sent to Rollo, that he might give a guarantee of safety to himself and to those abiding in the district. Truly Rollo, ascertaining that there lingered in the town and in its territory none except a defenceless mass, gave the bishop a guarantee of safety on the strength of his own assurance. And then, pursuing a course of navigation beneficial to himself, he came to Rouen and secured his ships, plentifully furnished with a very large warband, at the gate which is connected to the church of Saint Martin. Moreover, coming down off the ship and surveying the town at a swift pace, he saw its monuments laid in ruins, and large stones torn away from sanctuaries, churches shaken from their foundations and walls smashed on every side, and a small and defenceless band, and he began to be perplexed in spirit. And to fasten his sight in sole contemplation,

recalling the vision which he had had beyond the sea.

Commentary Text

Although titled as a *Gesta* ('the Deeds or Acts of'), Dudo's History of the Normans reads as a romantic saga or epic prose, rather than a dry recital of 'begottens' or rote listing of battles, conquests and placenames common to *Medieval Annals*. The work, whether viewed as literature or history, is of importance to Norman studies due to its contemporary compilation and account of the nomadic conquerors' origins in what came to be known as Normandy. This short work examines an extract from Chapter 10, which describes the peaceful first arrival in Rouen. It delves into; what the text reads with minimal to no external references (to garner what a new learner to Norman Studies might glean from the extract alone) and then expands to include some scholarly insights, specifically on the author's motive for being commissioned to publish the work.

Chapter 10 of *Gesta Normannorum* begins with an entry that allows the reader to fix the date of historical event (876 A.D) then proceeds with a lengthy and rich sentence that reveals much about the author, the Norman Dynasty's founder, and an intriguing final character in the saga.

Dudo utilizes The Incarnation to fix the date of the Norman seaborne journey, establishing quickly the Christian overtones of his work. It is not a secular history that reads 'eight hundred seventy-six years after the Birth of Christ' but rather acknowledges 'the Lord'¹ followed by the first description of the Norman chieftain as '*the noble Rollo*' who forsook his endeavors, leaning upon recommendations from his devout followers to sail to a new land. A focused analysis of just these opening lines informs the reader that Dudo is a Christian, that the *History* is written to be favorable towards the Normans, which is revealed almost instantly as he finds Rollo to be a noble man who is; a good leader, not given to rashness, a collaborator honoring the advice of his kinsman.

In the same sentence, which extends to approximately half of the entire extract, Dudo provides triangulation points to inform the reader as to 'the where' of the Norman's seminal journey. He documents them forsaking the bed of the River Schelde and sailing to Jumièges. As with the opening lines, there is much to unpack in Dudo's account about 'the from where to where' statements. The Normans were engaged in activities along the riverbed of the Schelde (whether raiding, trading or commerce is not indicated) and then Rollo was advised to give that up and sail to Jumièges.

¹ Felice Lifshitz, *Fordham University*, Medieval Sourcebook: Dudo of St. Quentin (c. 965-died before 1043): *Gesta Normannorum*, written btw. 996-1015 [Translation], (2019) <<https://sourcebooks.web.fordham.edu/source/dudu-stquentin-gesta-trans-lifshitz.asp>> [accessed 22nd March, 2026]

Dudo exhibits great skill in packing tremendous meaning in short, crisp sentence fragments. Having briefly established Rollo as a noble leader on a selfless quest, Dudo then spills far more ink on the natural elements than on the characters themselves. The romantic, saga-like bravura of the *Gesta* ensues:

‘having traversed the deep where the cerulean whirlpool of the Seine, flowing with its crystal-clear courses and lapping the fragrant grasses of its elevated banks and, going to the open main of the inundating sea, discharges itself, and is often repelled, according to the intervals of the moon, by a more swollen billow of the sea itself.’²

Dudo’s motive is not explained but the weight of his elaborate description makes water, or perhaps more specifically, the River itself a character in the epic. The writer’s biblical allusions to *the deep* (the primordial sea) conjures imagery of the Nordic visitors traversing great distances from a vast, dangerous or mythic otherworld. Dudo then localizes the description, providing ornate details about the spectacular phenomena when the flood tide rushes into a shallow, narrowing river estuary. The outbound flow of the local river is overcome by inbound sea water, causing momentous waves. Tormod Kinnes, whose website provides a translation of the *Gesta* (note, this is not a scholarly work but does provide academic sources and is a reliable reference guide) defines the event as, ‘When great tides were running, the seas enter the Seine estuary from the Channel and reversed the flow of the river and caused a mighty rush of waters: it was called a "mascaret."’³ The extract alone doesn’t indicate if the mascaret is a metaphor for conquest, neither does it offer other self-interpretation, but it reveals that this character, the river, carries great weight to the Norman Matter.

Dudo then masterfully conceals more than he reveals once more by sharing how that the ships bring Rollo by Jumièges, an inland commune, but the Viking lord, perceiving the holiness of the place ‘hesitates to linger there’⁴ and instead steers his ships to the other side of the river. Approaching the extract alone, the reader might draw the conclusion that Rollo, a Viking heathen, might have a superstitious reverence for Christianity or conversely, which has more weight when examining the abstract’s immediate context, that Rollo was already a Christian before his arrival upon France’s shores. The historian to this point renders the Normans as honorable, reasonable men undergoing their own diaspora. This is fortified in the next line as the company is in possession of the relics of a virgin, called Hameltrude, that was placed upon the altar of Saint Vedast. Yet again, the *Gesta* is full of encrypted morsels, each of which merit their own essays, as Dudo uses a technique of rendering something recent as old to give it authority. His history was likely written within a hundred years of the events that he describes, yet he

²Felice Lifshitz, *Fordham University*, Medieval Sourcebook: Dudo of St. Quentin (c. 965-died before 1043): *Gesta Normannorum*, written btw. 996-1015 [Translation], (2019) <<https://sourcebooks.web.fordham.edu/source/dudo-stquentin-gesta-trans-lifshitz.asp>> [accessed 22nd March, 2026]

³Tormod Kinnes, *The Gold Scales*, Tales From Dudos Norman History, (2019) <<http://oaks.nvg.org/dudo5.html>> [accessed 22nd March, 2026]

⁴Felice Lifshitz, *Fordham University*, Medieval Sourcebook: Dudo of St. Quentin (c. 965-died before 1043): *Gesta Normannorum*, written btw. 996-1015 [Translation], (2019) <<https://sourcebooks.web.fordham.edu/source/dudo-stquentin-gesta-trans-lifshitz.asp>> [accessed 22nd March, 2026]

inserts that ‘the virgin’s name has forever stuck to this chapel’⁵. Dudo has prepared literature that he knows will be read centuries later and is forging antiquity in advance; *ancient, noble, quest, sacred waters* are the word associations connected to the Normans in just a few short sentences of the chapter.

In nearby Rouen, the villagers learn that the Normans have arrived and are nearby. Here Dudo gives the reader a sense of ‘how many?’ citing ‘a plentiful multitude of Normans’⁶ and later in the paragraph a ‘plentiful warband’⁷. The locals beseech their Bishop, Franco, for help and he immediately calls for Rollo, requesting a guarantee of safety. Far from being a marauding hoard of pillagers, the Viking Chieftain is again portrayed as reasonable, merciful and considerate. Dudo the Historian becomes Dudo the Literary as he claims, and captures, understanding of Rollo’s thoughts and motives upon viewing the defenselessness of the inhabitants. The portrayal is that of Christian Protector coming upon weaker hosts, being beset by ruins and having no fighting force.

The Chapter concludes with Rollo in solitary contemplation, the scene at Rouen driving him to introspective consideration of a vision he had across the sea, prior to the journey.

On its face, Dudo gives a romantic account of Normans under the leadership of a noble, merciful, kind man who is negotiable, reasonable, and driven by visions and at least friendly to, if not an instrument of the Christian faith. Parascoping back from the extract alone, and learning something about its author, many scholars view the work as pseudo-history, or propaganda to elevate the myth of Christianized Norman virtue. Dudo of Saint-Quentin was commissioned by Rollo’s own grandson, Richard I, making the work, if propaganda or pseudo-history, to be within one generation of the events it describes. The ‘Pagan vs Christian’ and ‘when Christian?’ debate seems to be a pervasive theme. Leah Shopkow, contributing an article for the *Journal of Medieval History* in 1989, writes:

‘De moribus tells the story of the conversion of the Normans beginning with their first, persistently pagan leader, Hasting. Hasting pretends to convert to Christianity, a diabolic parody of the true conversion of Rollo that is to come.’⁸

Dudo seems to write Rollo’s later conversion backwards into the historical timeline, making him a sort of ‘Christian before he knew he was Christian’ and a symbol of Norman fidelity to the faith at a time when Paganism persisted. Richard I wanted a Christian pedigree, and it appears that Dudo was his educated, well-equipped bard to bring about the same. Shopkow continues, ‘Richard I chose to keep Dudo in Normandy because he recognized that Dudo was a useful intermediary between the Normans and the still somewhat alien culture Richard was

⁵ Felice Lifshitz, *Fordham University*, Medieval Sourcebook: Dudo of St. Quentin (c. 965-died before 1043): Gesta Normannorum, written btw. 996-1015 [Translation], (2019) <<https://sourcebooks.web.fordham.edu/source/dudu-stquentin-gesta-trans-lifshitz.asp>> [accessed 22nd March, 2026]

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Leah Shopkow, *The Carolingian World Of Dudo Of Saint-Quentin*, *Journal Of Medieval History* : March 1989 (1989), p. 28

trying to emulate'.⁹ Dudo was writing at a time when sacrifices to the old gods were occurring at Norman funerals¹⁰ and the pressure to both capture some authentic pedigree while dealing with political and ecclesiastical intrigue was paramount. His prose achieved his Commissioner's aim, whether true, false, or somewhere betwixt and between, creating the image of civilized men from the North, vision-quest sent to occupy, and protect a new land using Christian governance.

⁹ Leah Shopkow, *The Carolingian World Of Dudo Of Saint-Quentin*, Journal Of Medieval History : March 1989 (1989), p. 32

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 34

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