

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

To question the extent of how much the Normans felt united over the shared sense of identity is a subject that must be explored to understand the growth and spread of Norman culture and dominance. In order to comprehend the topic in question, it is important to look at the definition of identity, examine who the Normans were, when they first appeared in recorded history, and when the Normans ceased to exist, as well as when and how they integrated into French society and opinions of other historians, before coming to a conclusion.

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, identity is defined by “who a person is, or the qualities of a person or group that make them different from others”.¹ This is the basic idea of the Normans being identified by anything from their culture, ideals, religion, to the way they look and their combat styles. This is what separates them from other communities or countries and peoples, giving them an individual idea of who they are and where they fit into a social climate. Normans were from the land of Normandy and descendants of Norse Vikings who had integrated into French society.² The mix of Norse, Franks and Gallo-Roman heritage created a new type of ethnic and cultural background that became known as “Norman” and continued to evolve and develop through time.³

The Normans, originally Vikings, gained political authenticity after the siege of Charters in 911 AD, when the leader of the Vikings, Rollo, agreed to swear fealty to the King of West Francia, King Charles III.⁴ Rollo was given the title Duke of Normandy, and the land near the English Channel. Rollo had to be baptised into the Christian religion so he could officially settle in Normandy⁵ and in exchange for this land he would have to provide protection against any further Viking invasions on Francia.⁶ Rollo became the very first Duke of Normandy and Count of Rouen.⁷ Before the arrival of Rollo, Normandy’s population was considered ‘Frankish’, however Vikings had already started settling in Normandy in the 880s and were divided by colonies, with some in the East of the Seine Valley area and others in the West of the Cotentin Peninsula. They were also separated traditionally by ‘pagus’, which is a Roman word for dividing a designated rural subdivision of tribal territory like villages and farms.⁸ As time went on the then Norsemen shifted to Normans and had completely switched into Catholicism, and their language eventually turned into a type of French that still survives to this day.⁹ Moreover, the Normans adopted the medieval principles that the rest of France had, and began working with them to use the hierarchical system in both

¹ The Cambridge Dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/identity>.

² R. Allen Brown. *The Normans*. Boydell & Brewer LTD, T.H.E. Boydell Press, 1984.

³ L. Mendola and V. Salerno. *Sicilian Peoples: The Normans*. Best of Sicily Magazine, 2015.

⁴ “Norman”. Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Norman-people>

⁵ “Robert I, King of France”. Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Robert-I-duke-of-Normandy>

⁶ Neveux, Francois. *A Brief History of the Normans: The Conquest that Changed the Face of Europe*. Translated by Howard Curtis. Constable & Robinson Ltd: London, 2006 (Translation in 2008).

⁷ Chibnall, Marjorie. *The Normans*. Blackwell Publishing, 2008.

⁸ Hornblower, Simon. Spawforth, Antony. Eidinow, Esther. *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Oxford University Press, 2012. p. 1062.

⁹ “Norman”. Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Norman-people>

Normandy and then England which was then dominated by the Normans.¹⁰ The 'new' Normans were now officially seen as rulers that were culturally and ethnically diverse from Old French aristocracy. Due to the Norse Vikings marrying French women, the Normans had become effectively French biologically as well as culturally, religiously, and geographically. This was solidified as they were settled in Francia, embraced French customs and language and finally, they also adopted the Frankish religion, Catholicism.

However, although it can be said the Normans were similar to the people of Francia, they maintained their need to invade and conquer, which can be believed to come from their Viking ancestry. The Normans became well known for their occupying of lands and war strategies. The Normans invaded Southern Italy in 1017, mainly by two prominent families who had arrived in the Mediterranean and were descendants of Tancred of Hauteville and Drengot family. In 1047, William Iron Arm, the leader, and a member of the Drengot family invaded and was eventually given the title of Count in the capital of Melfi by Prince Guaimar IV.¹¹ The family therefore attained the principality of Capua, and Emperor Henry III legally ennobled the leader of the Hauteville family, Drogo, as the "Duke and Master of Italy and Count of the Normans of all Apulia and Calabria".¹² In 1061, the Normans officially landed in Sicily, however unlike in England, it took them a few years to capture and control this land.¹³ This was done under the leadership of Robert Guiscard, an Hauteville, and his brother Roger the Great Count; the Normans also seized Malta and the Saracens at this time.¹⁴ This was considered one of the Norman's greatest expansion of their enterprise.¹⁵ In 1130, Roger's son went on to be crowned by Antipope Anacletus II, King Roger the Second of Sicily.¹⁶ Nevertheless, in 1194 Sicily collapsed and was taken by the Germanic dynasty of the Hohenstaufen.¹⁷ The Norman legacy was solidified by their building of castles, citadels and cathedrals.

Another historical conquest was England. The Normans were neighbours with England and only separated by the English Channel, as well as having known of their existence long before. England and Normandy yielded their connections and bonds through a marriage between Emma, the sister of Duke Richard II of Normandy, and King Ethelred II of England.¹⁸ By 1066, William of Normandy invaded England, claiming the English crown, and won a mammoth victory at the Battle of Hastings, which gave him the nickname William 'the Conqueror'.¹⁹ He dominated and united the whole of England three years later.²⁰ The

¹⁰ Searle, Eleanor. *Predatory Kinship and the Creation of Norman Power, 840–1066*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1988. p. 89.

¹¹ Brown, R. Allen. *The Normans*. Woodbridge, Suffolk UK: Boydell Press, 1994.

¹² Brown, R. Allen. *The Normans*. Woodbridge, Suffolk UK: Boydell Press, 1994. p. 106.

¹³ *The Normans in Sicily*. <https://www.wondersofsicily.com/sicily-normans.htm>

¹⁴ Dupont, Jerry. *The Common Law Abroad: Constitutional and Legal Legacy of the British Empire*. Getzville. New York: Wm. S. Hein Publishing, 2001.

¹⁵ *The Normans in Sicily*. <https://www.wondersofsicily.com/sicily-normans.htm>

¹⁶ Dupont, Jerry. *The Common Law Abroad: Constitutional and Legal Legacy of the British Empire*. Getzville. New York: Wm. S. Hein Publishing, 2001. p. 793.

¹⁷ *The Normans in Sicily*. <https://www.wondersofsicily.com/sicily-normans.htm>

¹⁸ Chibnall, Marjorie. *The Normans*. Oxford: Blackwell publishing, 2000.

¹⁹ Chibnall, Marjorie. *The Normans*. Oxford: Blackwell publishing, 2000.

²⁰ Chibnall, Marjorie. *The Normans*. Oxford: Blackwell publishing, 2000.

ruling class of England was Anglo-Saxon but was mostly replaced by the invading Normans and the Normans merged with the English natives, incorporating their languages, customs, and traditions.²¹ Marjorie Chibnall claims in her book, "writers still referred to Normans and English; but the terms no longer meant the same as in the immediate aftermath of 1066."²² Two hundred and seventy-one years later, during the Hundred Years' War, Norman aristocracy often now identified as English. Therefore, between 1337 and 1453 the Normans were now believed to be English. However, it can be argued that the Normans stopped being Normans in the year 1204 when they lost the land of Normandy to the French.²³ The Normans also captured The Iberian Peninsula, North Africa, Byzantium, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Cyprus, and the Canary Islands during the height of their power.

In terms of internalised identity, the Normans were popularly associated by other groups with the conquest of England, their military expertise and scheming.²⁴ It was recorded and written by both Dudo of Saint Quentin and William of Jumièges that the Normans became immensely proud of these descriptions of themselves.²⁵ This was valued by the Normans and slowly became associated with aspects of their culture and society.²⁶ Each group and branch of Normans, for example in England or France, had a different idea of what made a Norman, compared to how Southern Italian and Sicilian Normans perceived external identity.²⁷ Furthermore, the Normans were disliked²⁸ due to their constant conquering of lands and domination of their settlements. This gives the idea that any sources or written accounts found from the time, and who were not Normans or who were even perhaps suppressed by them would have had a negative opinion of them. This would change and affect the accounts in question.

Norman culture spread from law and architecture to the arts. Between the tenth and thirteenth centuries, the Normans' customary law was developed and still survives to this day through Jersey and Guernsey's legal system. The law was separated into two customs, the first being a very ancient customary and the second, a great customary of Normandy. Architecture was of huge importance in Norman culture, as it displays a new stage and type of design historically. Their buildings were in a unique Romanesque style and can be found in England, Italy, and Ireland.²⁹ They also built castles and keeps with characteristics from Northern France, profoundly altering the military landscape, which arguably is one of the things the Normans are most famous for. Their buildings were distinguished by rounded arches, especially over windows and doorways.³⁰ The Normans also incorporated elements of Islamic, Lombard, and Byzantine building techniques into

²¹ Chibnall, Marjorie. *The Normans*. Oxford: Blackwell publishing, 2000.

²² Chibnall, Marjorie. *The Normans*. Oxford: Blackwell publishing, 2000. p. 62

²³ Keen, Maurice. *The Hundred Years War*. BBC, 2011.

²⁴ Webber, Nick. *The Evolution of 911-1154*. The Boydell Press: Suffolk, 2005.

²⁵ Webber, N. *The Evolution of 911-1154*. The Boydell Press: Suffolk, 2005.

²⁶ Webber, N. *The Evolution of 911-1154*. The Boydell Press: Suffolk, 2005.

²⁷ Webber, N. *The Evolution of 911-1154*. The Boydell Press: Suffolk, 2005.

²⁸ Webber, N. *The Evolution of 911-1154*. The Boydell Press: Suffolk, 2005.

²⁹ *Norman Style*. Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/art/Norman-style>

³⁰ Bloxam, Matthew H. *The Principles of Gothic Ecclesiastical Architecture*. Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1841.

their own, known as Norman-Arab architecture within the Kingdom of Sicily.³¹ An example of Norman Art can be found in the Bayeux Tapestry which depicts the events and journey of the Norman conquest of England. The tapestry is embroidered³² and can be seen as an example of the Normans using Romanesque patterns in other things rather than just their architectural designs.

The Normans became one of the greatest powers in the Middle Ages through their political means and military force that could not be rivalled by any other.³³ They also left their mark on languages, mixing in Latin, Old French and Danish to wherever they were, resulting in hybrid languages such as English.³⁴ Upon expanding the Norman empire and taking more land, it can be said this was the start of the split and separation of branches of Normans. In the end, the Normans had taken so much land that they began fighting with themselves over these regions, backing the popular and famous families they supported rather than expanding for their Normandy and her empire.³⁵ This all came to a head in 1053, when the Pope led an army to stop the Normans causing chaos throughout Italy, however the Pope failed and was captured, showing how truly strong and powerful the Normans were when the branches united against a common enemy.³⁶ The Normans set an example for political, social, economic, cultural, and military power and shift in their day, changing the course of history.³⁷ An example of this is in 1215, when Anglo-Norman barons made King John of England sign the Magna Carta, which officially and permanently hindered the power of the monarchy.³⁸ Although they now identified as English, the barons had a strong sense of personal connection to their Viking forefathers.³⁹

In conclusion, it can be said that Normans shared a sense of identity through where they were originally from, Normandy, and being descendants of Vikings. They also maintained their religious beliefs and faiths no matter where they were geographically. Normans retained their architectural designs; however, they would incorporate popular styles depending on which country or regions they had invaded and conquered. Despite their origins, they succeeded in developing and integrating into multiple societies. Initially becoming a branch of Frenchmen and then once they had settled into occupied lands, with time and assimilation, they slowly become a part of that culture, society, and peoples. An example of this is Normans being in England for decades and their kin identified as English. This also happened to those who settled in Sicily, identifying as Italian. To an extent the Normans did share a massive sense of identity, this was maintained no matter where they were. However, with time and incorporating themselves into a country's society and economy, they slowly identified stronger with that country rather than their Norman

³¹ Mendola, L. & Salerno, V. *Sicilian Peoples: The Normans*. Best of Sicily Magazine, 2015.

³² Saul, Nigel. "Bayeux Tapestry". *A Companion to Medieval England*. Stroud, UK: Tempus.

³³ From Norsemen to Normans. Sons of Vikings, 2020. <https://sonsofvikings.com/blogs/history/from-norsemen-to-normans>

³⁴ From Norsemen to Normans. Sons of Vikings, 2020.

³⁵ From Norsemen to Normans. Sons of Vikings, 2020.

³⁶ From Norsemen to Normans. Sons of Vikings, 2020.

³⁷ From Norsemen to Normans. Sons of Vikings, 2020.

³⁸ From Norsemen to Normans. Sons of Vikings, 2020.

³⁹ From Norsemen to Normans. Sons of Vikings, 2020.

ancestry. This suggests that with time and mixing of cultures, through marriage and reproducing, fewer and fewer people identified as being Norman. The loss of Normandy in 1204⁴⁰ also contributed to the downfall of identifying as Norman. This was due to the fact they could not be Normans without the land of Normandy. Nevertheless, their legacy is evident and helped shape the foundations for modern day Europe.

⁴⁰ Keen, Maurice. *The Hundred Years War*. BBC, 2011.

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