

You are required to write two commentaries on one short textual extract (1250 words)

Commentary 1

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 Jumieges, 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 Jumieges, 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.

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

Introduction

This extract depicts a key moment in the creation of Norman Identity. Dudo's account of the arrival of Rollo in Rouen in AD 875, written in the early 11th century, is described in such a way that the reader is led to believe the Vikings, under the direction of Rollo, were responsible for a transition of Rouen from chaos to a place of proto-Christian order.

There is no mention of any violent seizure of Rouen by the arriving Vikings, as had previously been recorded as their traditional *modus operandi* when taking over new territory. Instead, Dudo had managed to present a version of history of mythical proportion that completely ignores the 'Great Heathen Army' of the Vikings and instead weaves a new version of history on which the Norman rule over France can be justified.¹ Dudo was commissioned by Duke Richard I of Normandy, who was the grandson of Rollo, to write a history of the Normans legitimizing their rule which started with the arrival of Rollo.² Following Duke Richard I death in 966 his son and heir, Duke Richard II asked Dudo to complete the work, indicating that this was a highly important work to the Norman Court at that time.³ In fact, the document was to become the basis for the Norman myth that has endured through the centuries.⁴

Close Reading and Language: The Sanctification of Rollo

The Christian and biblical references in the passage have been very carefully and deliberately chosen by Dudo to distance Rollo from the raiding Vikings or 'Northmen' and to portray him as someone who was moved to make the journey to Rouen based on an image he received from God. This vision, mentioned at the very end of the passage, is very important as it links Rollo's pagan past to his Christian future, one that he had not fully embraced when he arrived at Rouen, but one he was about to embrace. Describing him in this way was a deliberate choice by Dudo as it portrayed Rollo and his conversion to Christianity as an event on a human level, rather than something that was done for political gain. One specific example of how Dudo phrased things for this reason is the opening sentence "the eight hundred seventy sixth year from the lord's incarnation."⁵ This simple choice places Rollo within the Christian calendar, immediately distancing him from his Pagan past.

Dudo also paints a very lyrical almost Eden-like scene into which Rollo arrived, '... the cerulean whirlpool of the Seine, flowing with its crystal-clear courses and lapping the fragrant grasses...'.⁶ This again was a very deliberate decision by Dudo portraying the land as a 'Promised Land' that was waiting to be taken, an image which educated

¹ Winroth, Anders, *The Age of the Vikings* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2015), <
<https://archive.org/details/ageofvikings0000winr/mode/2up?q=heathen>>, [Accessed 28 March 2026], p.52

² Eleanor, Searle, *Predatory Kinship and the Creation of Norman Power, 840–1066* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 62-63

³ Ibid, pp. 61-63

⁴ Ibid, p. 62

⁵ Dudo of Saint-Quentin, *History of the Normans*, trans. by Eric Christiansen (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1998), Chapter 10

⁶ Dudo of Saint-Quentin, Chapter 10

medieval readers would be able to recognise. It also softened the approach of the much-feared Viking long-boats by the usage of the phrase ‘ship-bearing winds’, making their arrival something that was of the divine, rather than an omen for impending destruction.⁷

The most important event in the passage is the depiction of Rollo’s interaction with the sacred. When Rollo sees the monastery of St Peter, he decides to respect this as a place of religion and crosses to the other side of the river to moor his ships. Dudo completely fails to mention that the Vikings sacked Jumièges Abbey some four decades earlier in 841, instead he manages to paint them as restorers rather than destroyers of the churches and abbeys. However, what Dudo did achieve was to bestow upon Rollo the image of a ‘pious pagan’. This image is further strengthened or elevated to that of a protector of the church when he places the body of the virgin Hameltrude upon the altar at Saint Vedast. This causes the place to be known as Saint Hameltrude by the local residents, thus linking a Viking ruler with the area, providing the first ‘Normanisation’ of the local geography.

Close Reading and Language: The Architecture of Ruin

Dudo very carefully frames the town of Rouen and its inhabitants as being in a state of ruin. He calls the people, ‘the poor men and destitute merchants’ and ‘defenceless masses’ which suggests that there is a leadership vacuum that Rollo is pre-destined to fill.⁸ Dudo describes the town itself as being in a state of physical ruin with, ‘monuments laid in ruins, and large stones torn away from sanctuaries, churches shaken from their foundations and walls smashed on every side’.⁹ Here Dudo is using a physical description of the destruction of Rouen as a metaphor for the decline of the Carolingian world. By aligning Rollo’s reaction to the state of Rouen, ‘perplexed in spirit’ to one of sympathy rather than one in which Rollo sees an opportunity for plunder, he creates a vacuum into which Rollo can be seen as an arriving saviour.¹⁰

Rollo’s interaction with Bishop Franco is the point in the extract at which Dudo elevates Rollo from a pirate to a prince. Dudo achieves this by using Bishop Franco as a diplomatic bridge. The bishop’s requests a ‘guarantee of safety’.¹¹ In medieval times, this type of guarantee would have been the basis of social relations and authority. The fact that Rollo was able to grant this guarantee ‘on the strength of his own assurance’ frames this as a

⁷ Dudo of Saint-Quentin, Chapter 10

⁸ Dudo of Saint-Quentin, Chapter 10

⁹ Dudo of Saint-Quentin, Chapter 10

¹⁰ Dudo of Saint-Quentin, Chapter 10

¹¹ Dudo of Saint-Quentin, Chapter 10

peaceful and diplomatic transfer of governance, when in fact it would have been a forced surrender.^{12 13}

Omissions

Dudo depicts a sanitized version of the Vikings and omits to describe any of their pagan lifestyle or ritual. Whilst Dudo acknowledges that Rollo arrived at Rouen with a large warband, there is no reference to the deployment of these men, and the entire passage is free from any reference to fighting. The description of the transfer of governance omits to mention the then current practice of Dangelde or payment that was demanded by Viking raiders in return for peace.¹⁴

Intertextuality

The depiction of the ruins at Rouen draws deeply from Classical literature, and particularly Virgil's Aeneid.¹⁵ Dudo makes a very clear parallel between the way in which Rollo surveys the ruins in Rouen and the way that Aeneas surveys the ruins of Troy in The Aeneid. The 'vision which he had had beyond the sea' refers to something that appears earlier in the work of Dudo in which he notes a dream that Rollo had in which he sees himself on a mountain in France, healed of leprosy.¹⁶ By branding this dream as a 'vision', Dudo is putting Rollo's fate on par with that of a Roman epic.

Identity and The Norman Myth

The Normans did not just 'happen' they are skilfully crafted and created into existence by a process known as 'ethnogenesis', meaning the creation of a new ethnic identity. In his work, Dudo called Rollo and his warband who arrived in Rouen in AD875 'Normans', although they did not obtain the legal title under the Treaty of Saint-Clair-sur-Epte until AD911.¹⁷ Dudo did this to establish them as Normans right from their point of arrival and to rebut 11th century Frankish jibes that they were 'Dux pyratorum' or 'pirate dukes'.¹⁸

Closely associated with Norman identity is the 'Norman Myth' that they, has a gens, had a unique and specific ability to adapt that allowed them to assimilate easily wherever they went and that they were natural born leaders. Dudo associates both traits in Rollo,

¹² Dudo of Saint-Quentin, Chapter 10

¹³ Searle, Eleanor, *Predatory Kinship and the Creation of Norman Power, 840–1066* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), <<https://archive.org/details/predatorykinship0000sear>>, [Accessed 28 March 2026], p. 16

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 16

¹⁵ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. by John Dryden, <<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/228/pg228.txt>>, [Accessed 28 March 2026] (Book I)

¹⁶ Dudo of Saint-Quentin, Chapter 10

¹⁷ Eleanor, Searle, *Predatory Kinship*, pp. 40–47

¹⁸ Richer of Reims, *Histories*, ed. and trans. by Justin Lake (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011)

first when he engages with Bishop Franco and secondly by showing him as ready to step up and build a new future for Rouen.

Conclusion

Dudo must be praised for the way in which he was able to tell the story of the AD 875 Viking arrival in Rouen in such a way that it was completely sanitized of any violence. By careful use of language and re-framing of the truth, he was able to rebrand Rollo, a Viking war-leader, into a Christian duke and the founding father of the Norman dynasty. Dudo provided the 11th century Norman court with a history that filled their need for legitimacy and gave them a foundation on which to justify the rule of the Norman dynasty over the Seine valley. This was achieved by careful framing of several key areas including the sanctification of Rollo, the portrayal of Rollo as a saviour rather than a raider and describing the conquest of Rouen as a 'diplomatic transfer'. Dudo's work is the undeniable genesis of the Norman Myth.

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