

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

Essay, Identity and Myth: The Normans and Their World (HPHI6009, HPHI7001)

Due: 16/03/25

Sara Klenke, 2408440

Dr. Katie Hawkes

The Normans, originally from Scandinavia, settled in the north of France. They initially shared a distinct identity based on their history and traditional characteristics. However, their identity evolved over time due to imperial expansion, intermarriage, and cultural blending with local populations. This adaptability led to the erasure of distinct Norman features, shaping a dynamic and fragmented Norman identity. The extent to which a shared sense of identity united the Normans could be understood as a blend of similarities and differences that evolved and changed over time and were shaped by their origins in Normandy and their expansion into the British Isles and Sicily.

To conceptualise a Norman identity, it is essential to address the origins of the Normans in Normandy. According to Dudo of Saint-Quentin, Rollo, soon-to-be leader of the Normans, had been facilitating raids up and down the northern coast of France for many years.¹ In the north of France, he met Charles the Simple, King of the Franks, who bestowed upon him Rouen and its surrounding lands in hereditary succession.² The estimated date for this was in and around 905 or 906.³ However, Rollo, feeling greedy, pushed the King for more land and was offered land west of Rouen in exchange for his conversion to Christianity and his marriage to one of Charles' daughters.⁴

While this history has its flaws, as Dudo was writing a hundred years after the death of Rollo under the commission of Richard I,⁵ it is still relevant in understanding how Normans viewed their origins and roots in Normandy. The establishment of Rollo and his followers in Rouen followed a similar pattern to other Viking settlements in parts of Northern Europe. These

¹ Leonie V. Hicks, *A Short History of the Normans*, Tauris & Company, Limited, 2016, 13.

² Hicks, *A Short History of the Normans*, 13.

³ Hicks, *A Short History of the Normans*, 13.

⁴ Hicks, *A Short History of the Normans*, 13.

⁵ Benjamin Pohl, "Poetry, Punctuation and Performance: Was There an Aural Context for Dudo of Saint-Quentin's *Historia Normannorum*?" *Tabularia (Caen)*, no. 16 (2016): 179.

features included land in exchange for conversion to Christianity, the ceasing of violence, and intermarriage with the noble elites in the region.⁶ However, origins such as these meant that the Normans were seen as greedy, untrustworthy, and violent by their contemporary neighbours.⁷

Normandy was the centre of the Norman sphere until the middle of the twelfth century.⁸ The decentralisation of Normandy was partially due to the dwindling of migrations from Normandy to the British Isles and Sicily but also partially due to intercultural exchange within France.⁹ Elite Normans tended to settle quite quickly into their new lands on the outskirts of the Norman sphere, and they were involved in much cultural exchange and adaptation.¹⁰

One could see how Norman's identity shifted and eventually lost its foothold by looking at Norman's expansion. First, in England, William the Conqueror, a Norman Duke, won the Battle of Hastings and the English crown in 1066.¹¹ Prior to William making his way to England, he faced challenges to his rule in Normandy due to his illegitimate status.¹² He faced political chaos and uncertainty in Normandy until the 1060s, when he established relative peace and stability, winning him many loyal followers.¹³ William's Norman rule led to the recognition of Norman autonomy, dominance, strength, and pride.¹⁴

His strong leadership allowed William to expand his sphere of influence into England and establish his rule as the first Norman King of England.¹⁵ William used many techniques to solidify his rule, including diplomatic intermarriage, which was seen in other parts of the

⁶ Hicks, *A Short History of the Normans*, 13.

⁷ Hicks, *A Short History of the Normans*, 18.

⁸ Bates and Curry, *England and Normandy*, 30.

⁹ Bates and Curry, *England and Normandy*, 30.

¹⁰ Bates and Curry, *England and Normandy*, 30.

¹¹ Melissa Sartore, "Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Similarities in the Norman Influence, Contact and 'Conquests' of Sicily, Southern Italy and England," *Al-Masaq* 25, no. 2 (2013): 186. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09503110.2013.799951>.

¹² Sartore, "Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Similarities," 186.

¹³ Sartore, "Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Similarities," 186.

¹⁴ Sartore, "Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Similarities," 187.

¹⁵ Sartore, "Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Similarities," 188.

Norman sphere.¹⁶ William also legitimised his rule via the Bayeux Tapestry, which presented his invasion of England as a holy war and argued that Harold II swore on religious relics that William would be the next King.¹⁷

After the Norman conquest of England, the upper ranks of Anglo-Saxon English nobility were replaced almost entirely by Normans.¹⁸ For example, in the Domesday book, only four of 180 listed tenants-in-chief were of Anglo-Saxon descent.¹⁹ Also, only four per cent of the land listed in Domesday remained in the possession of indigenous landowners.²⁰ Finally, by the death of William the Conqueror, only one of the fifteen bishops was an Englishman.²¹

During the mid-to-late tenth century, Normans in England maintained their connections with the rest of the Norman sphere. When William invaded England, troops from southern Italy and Sicily accompanied him at the Battle of Hastings.²² Communication between the Normans in the British Isles and the Normans in the south was facilitated in a number of ways; at first, by religious pilgrimage, and later by Normans on crusade.²³

The Norman expansion into Italy had similar features yet was quite different in nature. Sicily, before the Norman conquest, had been previously under Byzantine and Arab rule.²⁴ Due to this, there were Arab Muslims and Berbers, Jews, and Greek Byzantine Christians living in the area at the arrival of the Normans.²⁵

¹⁶ Sartore, "Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Similarities," 189.

¹⁷ Sartore, "Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Similarities," 197.

¹⁸ Burkhardt and Foerster, *Norman Tradition*, 45.

¹⁹ Burkhardt and Foerster, *Norman Tradition*, 45.

²⁰ Burkhardt and Foerster, *Norman Tradition*, 45.

²¹ Burkhardt and Foerster, *Norman Tradition*, 45.

²² Sartore, "Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Similarities," 190.

²³ Sartore, "Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Similarities," 190.

²⁴ Karen C. Britt, "Roger II of Sicily: Rex, Basileus, and Khalif? Identity, Politics, and Propaganda in the Cappella Palatina," *Mediterranean Studies* 16, no. 1 (2007): 22. <https://doi.org/10.2307/41167003>.

²⁵ Britt, "Roger II of Sicily," 22.

Roger I became Count of Sicily in 1091 following his conquest of the island.²⁶ Instead of forcing the inhabitants of Sicily to convert to Christianity, Roger took a much more tolerant approach. He incorporated Muslims into his armies, relied on Greek Byzantines to help in his administration, and recognised the multicultural nature of his empire.²⁷ Showing his political expertise, Roger signed peace treaties to allow Muslims to continue practising their religion and sponsored several Greek monasteries, which helped him win the loyalty of both groups.²⁸

Roger I's son, aptly named Roger II, maintained multiculturalism in acquiring the Kingdom of Sicily. Up until 1130, Roger II was simply a Count. However, by swearing fealty to the schismatic pope, Anacletus II, Roger II became King of Sicily.²⁹ Roger II united Sicily and the southern Italian peninsula under a single rule, founding a multiethnic state.³⁰ This was further highlighted by the fact that the 'Norman' ruling class, made up of Latin immigrants, tended to meld with existing cultures through intermarriage.³¹

Roger's rule was marked by cultural integration and a need to legitimise his kingdom. Roger's mother, Countess Adelaide, had resided in a largely Greek-populated region and imparted this influence to her son.³² Roger's educator also displayed great respect for Byzantine governance and culture.³³

Roger's rule had Latin-western features but also features seen in the Greek-Byzantine Empire and the Arab-Muslim empires.³⁴ These features mirrored the diversity of his subjects. While Sicily was full of Arab-speaking Muslims, there were other areas of Roger's kingdom,

²⁶ Britt, "Roger II of Sicily," 23.

²⁷ Britt, "Roger II of Sicily," 23-4.

²⁸ Britt, "Roger II of Sicily," 24-5.

²⁹ Britt, "Roger II of Sicily," 24-5.

³⁰ Stefan Burkhardt, and Thomas Foerster, *Norman Tradition and Transcultural Heritage : Exchange of Cultures in the "Norman" Peripheries of Medieval Europe*, 1st ed; Ashgate, 2013, 19.

³¹ Burkhardt and Foerster, *Norman Tradition*, 19.

³² Britt, "Roger II of Sicily," 24.

³³ Britt, "Roger II of Sicily," 24.

³⁴ Burkhardt and Foerster, *Norman Tradition*, 20.

like Calabria and Apulia, which comprised a majority Greek population. In the north part of the kingdom, many practised Latin traditions that originated from Normandy.³⁵

Roger II was born and bred in the region that he ruled and was very much a product of his surroundings. While he was definitely conscious of his Norman ancestry, his political style was much more similar to Byzantine and Islamic methods.³⁶ For example, Roger had to legitimise his rule in the face of questions raised by political and papal opposition. He did this by crafting royal imagery, which was in line with Byzantine and Islamic styles of ruling.³⁷

Another clear example of Roger II's influence by Byzantine rule was in the structure of his government. Roger kept Greek Byzantines in his court, and they helped him in setting up his administration.³⁸ Leaning into the Byzantine style, Roger liked the idea of the emperor being considered Christ's representative on Earth, so he situated himself in this position.³⁹ Subsequently, placing himself so close to God diminished papal authority and gave him more political authority and legitimacy.⁴⁰

Official documents and inscriptions were produced in Latin, Greek, and Arabic.⁴¹ In these examples, different dates were displayed based on how each distinct religion calculated the year.⁴² Even George of Antioch, one of Roger's chief officials, was definitely bilingual in Greek and Arabic and quite possibly could also speak Latin or French.⁴³

Despite all of this cultural adaptation and arguable assimilation, evidence suggests that Roger remained aware of his Norman ancestry.⁴⁴ Roger's royal court was not decidedly

³⁵ Burkhardt and Foerster, *Norman Tradition*, 19.

³⁶ Britt, "Roger II of Sicily," 25.

³⁷ Britt, "Roger II of Sicily," 25.

³⁸ Britt, "Roger II of Sicily," 25.

³⁹ Britt, "Roger II of Sicily," 25.

⁴⁰ Britt, "Roger II of Sicily," 25.

⁴¹ Burkhardt and Foerster, *Norman Tradition*, 21.

⁴² Burkhardt and Foerster, *Norman Tradition*, 21.

⁴³ Burkhardt and Foerster, *Norman Tradition*, 30-1.

⁴⁴ Burkhardt and Foerster, *Norman Tradition*, 35.

Byzantine nor Arabic, but it was not entirely Norman either. Roger's court existed in a space that was between the East and the West, where the Eastern Empire and the rest of Europe met.⁴⁵

Similarly to the Normans in England, Normans in Sicily maintained connections with the rest of the Norman sphere. Rulers of the Kingdom of Sicily were known to employ members of the Anglo-Norman Kingdom and the Duchy of Normandy.⁴⁶ Further highlighting this connection, the Sicilian Normans introduced Norman traditions via inheritance laws.

Under Franco-Norman Law, the dower of women was one-third of their husband's estates, as opposed to the one-quarter common in Lombard law.⁴⁷ Normans also were partial to primogeniture, that being that succession goes to the first-born son.⁴⁸ Both of these features of Norman law became increasingly widespread among the newcomers to the region as well as many elites.⁴⁹

In terms of Normans and their identity, evidence suggests that they saw themselves as a distinct group.⁵⁰ Their conscious uniqueness has been difficult to deny; however, the question more often has been this: How long did this uniqueness from the other cultures and kingdoms they encountered remain 'Norman?'

Some suggest that Normans outside of Normandy rejected the concept of *Normannitas* due to its association with treachery, distrust, and violence.⁵¹ There was evidence of Norman rulers abandoning Norman– and Frankish– practices in both Italy and England within just a few generations of the establishment of Norman influence in the regions.⁵²

⁴⁵ Burkhardt and Foerster, *Norman Tradition*, 31.

⁴⁶ Burkhardt and Foerster, *Norman Tradition*, 36.

⁴⁷ Burkhardt and Foerster, *Norman Tradition*, 50.

⁴⁸ Burkhardt and Foerster, *Norman Tradition*, 50.

⁴⁹ Burkhardt and Foerster, *Norman Tradition*, 50.

⁵⁰ Hicks, *A Short History of the Normans*, 176.

⁵¹ Hicks, *A Short History of the Normans*, 176.

⁵² Hicks, *A Short History of the Normans*, 175.

The dilution of Norman identity throughout the Norman sphere is undeniable. There were several reasons for this. The first reason was intermarriage, as seen throughout the sphere.⁵³

William of Malmesbury commented on the tendency of Normans to intermarry with those that they had conquered.⁵⁴ This intermarriage blurred the differences between Norman culture and the indigenous culture, and this resulted in the adoption of a mixed facet of Norman and indigenous culture.⁵⁵ Norman identity, particularly in the south, was based on the acknowledgement of their origins in Normandy paired with solidarity with the inhabitants of their conquered lands.⁵⁶

In Sicily, the use of the term *Normannus*, referring to a Norman cultural identity with ties to Normandy, was rare by 1130.⁵⁷ While, at the time of the conquests, Normans referred to themselves or each other directly as Norman, later generations began referring to themselves as the children of Normans, and eventually, the practice of referring to themselves as Norman at all largely disappeared.⁵⁸

In England, Norman rulers had begun to adopt a new 'English' identity by 1180.⁵⁹ While the Normans in England may have changed more of the administrative aspects of rule than their counterparts in Sicily, they still blended their culture and identity with those they ruled. Eventually, their identity was built on something else entirely.⁶⁰

When chronicling the crusades, writers that did not belong to the mainstream Norman sphere did not acknowledge Norman involvement as Norman but instead tended to lump Normans in with the rest of the French.⁶¹ In these chronicles, there was little mention of a shared

⁵³ Burkhardt and Foerster, *Norman Tradition*, 42.

⁵⁴ Burkhardt and Foerster, *Norman Tradition*, 42.

⁵⁵ Burkhardt and Foerster, *Norman Tradition*, 43.

⁵⁶ Burkhardt and Foerster, *Norman Tradition*, 192.

⁵⁷ Burkhardt and Foerster, *Norman Tradition*, 41.

⁵⁸ Burkhardt and Foerster, *Norman Tradition*, 41.

⁵⁹ K. J. Stringer, and Andrew Jotischky, *Norman Expansion : Connections, Continuities and Contrasts*, 1st ed. Ashgate Pub, 2013, 11.

⁶⁰ Stringer and Jotischky, *Norman Expansion*, 11-2.

⁶¹ Stringer and Jotischky, *Norman Expansion*, 208.

Norman identity, and Normans from outside of Normandy were identified by the region in which they resided.⁶² Therefore, by the First Crusade, contemporary chroniclers did not recognise the Normans outside Normandy as united by a shared identity.

Normans in Normandy highlighted their links to Scandinavia to differentiate themselves from their Frankish counterparts.⁶³ In Normandy, political links to the Scandinavians served as a tool to legitimise the Norman rule, while religious links were diminished due to their pagan nature.⁶⁴ Normans were unique in that they were no longer Vikings, as they maintained a mostly sedentary lifestyle within the duchy, but they were not Frankish either.⁶⁵ This meant that some facet of Norman's identity had to exist.

However, there was a lack of interest in highlighting Norman's links to Scandinavia in southern Italy. Instead, Sicilian Normans tended to highlight their ties to the Duchy of Normandy, if they highlighted these ties at all.⁶⁶ For some Anglo-Norman writers, who wanted to maintain a wider Norman sphere, the Normans in Sicily were a part of a larger Norman realm.⁶⁷ It is interesting to note that Roger I was the last Norman ruler of Sicily to have stepped foot within Normandy.⁶⁸

Despite all of these differences, there were similarities between Normans throughout all parts of the Norman sphere. In both the northern and southern parts of the Norman empire, the Normans were known for their military prowess. In the south, Normans were strategic, attacking

⁶² Stringer and Jotischky, *Norman Expansion*, 226.

⁶³ Hicks, *A Short History of the Normans*, 178.

⁶⁴ Hicks, *A Short History of the Normans*, 178-9.

⁶⁵ Hicks, *A Short History of the Normans*, 180.

⁶⁶ Hicks, *A Short History of the Normans*, 182.

⁶⁷ Hicks, *A Short History of the Normans*, 183.

⁶⁸ Britt, "Roger II of Sicily," 25.

specific seaports and using the Mediterranean to their advantage.⁶⁹ The Norman military takeover in Sicily was much more gradual than their victory in England.⁷⁰

In England, the Normans faced more difficult waters in the English Channel.⁷¹ Some argue that William's methods used to transport men and horses via the sea may have been influenced by what the Normans in Italy did a few years prior.⁷² Notably, both the Normans in the north and the south used ships that had already been built to facilitate their conquests rather than new boats for this purpose.⁷³

Another similarity between the two conquests, as well as in Normandy, was that the Normans followed a pattern of gaining territory and then building a fortification to maintain that territory.⁷⁴ In England, castles followed a motte-and-bailey format until later years when they were replaced by stone.⁷⁵ In Italy and Sicily, stone castles were popular from the beginning but served the same purpose as in other parts of the empire.⁷⁶ Eventually, eleventh-century Norman Romanesque architecture was surmounted by new styles across England, Normandy, and Sicily.⁷⁷

The conquests in both England and Sicily had distinctly Norman features and characteristics that were comparable and achieved similar results.⁷⁸ These similarities existed due to continuity, communication, and contact between different parts of the Norman sphere. However, beyond a shared history, any concept of a shared identity between these regions

⁶⁹ Sartore, "Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Similarities," 191.

⁷⁰ Sartore, "Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Similarities," 191.

⁷¹ Sartore, "Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Similarities," 193.

⁷² Sartore, "Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Similarities," 193.

⁷³ Sartore, "Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Similarities," 194.

⁷⁴ Sartore, "Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Similarities," 197.

⁷⁵ Sartore, "Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Similarities," 197.

⁷⁶ Sartore, "Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Similarities," 197.

⁷⁷ Bates and Curry, *England and Normandy*, 30.

⁷⁸ Sartore, "Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Similarities," 203.

diminished more and more as each generation took the reins.⁷⁹ Eventually, Norman features fell out of popularity, and many elite roles became filled less and less by Normans.⁸⁰

If the Normans had a shared sense of identity before they expanded past their borders, their expansion would have resulted in its diminishing. Norman identity did not exist in a vacuum; instead, it evolved into something not distinctly Norman. While their identity was initially rooted in their Scandinavian roots, tendency for brute force and war, and willingness to convert to Christianity, these anchors tended to lose their hold over time, resulting in Norman traditions blended with those of the local populations. Normans created their own English customs in England, while in Italy and Sicily, Normans took on Byzantine and Arabic characteristics. Over time, Normans outside of Normandy began to identify with the communities they grew up in. Overall, the Normans in different parts of the Norman sphere lacked any sense of shared identity within just a few generations.

⁷⁹ Sartore, "Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Similarities," 203.

⁸⁰ Bates and Curry, *England and Normandy*, 32.

Bibliography

Bates, David, and Anne Curry. *England and Normandy in the Middle Ages*. Hambledon Press, 1994.

Britt, Karen C. "Roger II of Sicily: Rex, Basileus, and Khalif? Identity, Politics, and Propaganda in the Cappella Palatina." *Mediterranean Studies* 16, no. 1 (2007): 21–45.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/41167003>.

Burkhardt, Stefan, and Thomas Foerster. *Norman Tradition and Transcultural Heritage : Exchange of Cultures in the "Norman" Peripheries of Medieval Europe*. 1st ed; Ashgate, 2013.

Hicks, Leonie V. *A Short History of the Normans*. Tauris & Company, Limited, 2016.

Pohl, Benjamin. "Poetry, Punctuation and Performance: Was There an Aural Context for Dudo of Saint-Quentin's *Historia Normannorum*?" *Tabularia (Caen)*, no. 16 (2016): 177-216.

Sartore, Melissa. "Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Similarities in the Norman Influence, Contact and 'Conquests' of Sicily, Southern Italy and England." *Al-Masaq* 25, no. 2 (2013):

184–203. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09503110.2013.799951>.

Stringer, K. J., and Andrew Jotischky. *Norman Expansion : Connections, Continuities and Contrasts*. 1st ed. Ashgate Pub, 2013.