

Nothing Breton is Norman
The Paradox of Conquest by Inversion
An Essay
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Introduction

Enigmatic Scandinavian raiders deemed “Men of the North” or *Normans* alighted upon the shores of the Sein in the 10th century, the ripple of their impact is felt over eleven hundred years later. And that legacy, when considering the weight of Hastings and the downstream Empire it would beget, is worldwide. However, worldwide phenomena often forgets its neighbor (in the same ways that childhood classmates or rivals of popular celebrities are forgotten). In that vein, this essay examines the Norman impact more regionally or locally, focusing on their legacy with respect to the Celtic kingdom of the Bretons. The Continental cousins of the Welsh suffered an exodus of both Royals and elite fighting aged men on account of William the Bastard’s conquest of England, and with them traveled the legends and histories of the Once and Future King, brought back to the Welsh, and given to the world, for better or worse, because of the Normans. Back in Brittany the landscape itself forever bares massive, fairytale like architectural footprints of the These three areas of impact will be explored but also serve as a backdrop to examine the Norman’s unique method of *conquest by inversion* and the centuries long argument over whether *anything* is truly Norman.

France Plays Host To Two Very Different Settlers

There is great irony when studying Brittany and the Normans synoptically. They were both settlers in France. But there ends the similarity. Almost paradoxically the Normans, in the 10th century, appeared suddenly and vanished gradually whilst the Bretons, more than six centuries earlier, appeared gradually yet endured; an intact People Group complete with language, culture and custom to this day. Marjorie Chibnall (1915-2012), who was a preeminent Medieval scholar and translator who contributed significant academic content and editorial work in translations of primary source chroniclers such as Oderic Vitalis (who wrote his chronicles during the early to mid-twelfth century), teaches on the ethnic and clear origins of the Bretons in her own book *The Normans*:

The Roman conquest of Britain increased cross-Channel commerce; it also provoked a southward movement of British people escaping from Roman dominance into western Amorica, where they settled among the indigenous peoples and gave their name to Brittany.¹

The Bretons have a clear-cut ethnic origin and purpose for their migration (s) into Gaul. Moreover, they have known, lasting attributes; Christian, Celtic and speaking a Brythonic tongue. University of Cambridge Faculty Member Caroline Brett plainly summarizes this in her essay, *Brittany and the Atlantic Archipelago, 450–1200*:

¹Marjorie Chibnall, *The Normans (The Peoples of Europe Series)* (Blackwell Publishing, Oxford 2006), pg. 6

These were the centuries that saw the redefinition of the peninsula as ‘Brittany’, the introduction of a British Celtic language and the formation of a distinctive society and Christian culture.²

By sharp contrast, the Normans have little (on the surface) that is distinctive; no clear ethnic origin, nor clear purpose for settlement. Their origins and purpose are uniquely muddy, murky and often embellished by their contemporary chroniclers. Chibnall states:

But of the Normans, The Norman people – the gens *Normannorum* of the chroniclers – were of exceptionally mixed blood. When in the 12th century the historian Orderic Vitalis attempted to define what was meant by ‘Normans,’ he explained that they were ‘men of the North...whose bold roughness had proved as deadly to their softer neighbors as the bitter wind to young flowers.’³

If a contemporary scholar, writing within a few generations of the events he is covering, struggles to define who the Normans are (beyond the attributes of being rough and deadly to their neighbors), how much more difficult one thousand years hence? British historian R.H.C Davis’s short book *The Normans and Their Myth* summarizes the remarkable career of the enigmatic Scandinavian settlers who, within two hundred years assimilated into the Frenchness in France, Englishness in England, synthesized Sicilian and Arabic culture in Sicily, and appropriated the structures of sophisticated aristocracy from their Breton neighbors at home. They did conquer and expand, but by methods and magnitude that might be unique and never repeated.⁴

The Principle of First Mention – Marriage Not the Sword Binds Them

If a ‘Norman method’ for conquest can be defined, it appears to start with an act of assimilation into the would-be vassal kingdom. In the earliest days of Norman emergence, it was Christian Baptism for the purpose of receiving a French Duchy. For Brittany, the earliest primary source that connected the kingdoms was a marriage. Richard II, great-grandfather of William the Conqueror, around 996-1000, marries Judith, daughter of Conan I. This primal connection is found in Book III of Orderic’s *Historia Ecclesiastica*⁵ and is sharp contrast to the same historian’s references of the Norman’s ‘ravaging France’. Far removed from this condition,

² https://www.academia.edu/80037340/Brittany_and_the_Atlantic_Archipelago_450_1200, Caroline Brett

³ Marjorie Chibnall, *The Normans (The Peoples of Europe Series)* (Blackwell Publishing, Oxford 2006), pg. 4

⁴ R.C.H Davis, *The Normans and Their Myth* (Thames & Hudson, 1976)

⁵ Vitalis, Ordericus. *The Ecclesiastical History of England and Normandy*. Translated by Marjorie Chibnall, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1968-1980) This citation is a summary of the theme of this section of Orderic’s History.

Orderic cites the pride of the noble bloodline herein established with the Bretons ‘through his ancestor Abbo the Breton’⁶ (Book III, chapter 2) and one chapter later gives account of Osmond Drengot, a Norman noble fleeing to the safety of Brittany following a manslaughter (Volume 2, Book 3, chapter 3).⁷ While political marriages, even amongst bitter rival nations, is not unique, the conquered typically morph with the conqueror. From Orderic’s primary works and the impressions of later scholars, the reverse seems to be the case. The Normans gain a foothold through marriage, friendship and ‘reverse’ assimilation. The notion of friendly beginnings via marriage also means that, although the Normans vanished and the Bretons endured, the Bretons were changed by the Normans (genetically, at minimum) and in that regard, the Normans endured through them. This theme could be recapped and recited throughout their every influence in the western world, magnified by the follow local examples.

Friends With Friction

Orderic’s 2nd Volume chronicles what could be rendered a ‘peaceful phase’ from circa 996-1040. During this time intermarriage abounded and a mixed aristocracy including the Frankish kings, the House of Anjou, and the Counts of Blois came together into blended soup that, along with the Breton nobility back through Judith and Conan, produced William the Conqueror. William, when a boy, lost his father Robert the Magnificent to the Crusades, and the remnant Dukes potentially killed William’s protector, Alan III Duke of Brittany, causing the relationship to fracture. Young William survived years of tempest and did ascend to his Dukedom. However, by that time the Normans have turned inward, and the Bretons drifted allegiance to the House of Anjou giving way to William, once fostered under the custodial care of the Bretons, now launching a full invasion against them.⁸ The 1060s, which could fairly be described as ‘the eve of William’s Conquest of England’ saw intense fighting with the Celtic Duchy and a full scale invasion in 1064 where the Normans earned the victory over Conan the Second.

The Exodus of Royalty and What It Meant to Those Who Remained

That the Bretons had a complex relationship with the Normans with dramatic twists and turns of intrigue amongst the Duchy that resulted in several Bretons providing a full flank of the Norman’s first wave attack on England during the famous 1066 Battle of Hastings⁹ is well covered academic territory. Less explored are the subsequent conscripts to quell and manage ongoing Anglo-Saxon revolts that did have the net effect of a Breton migration to England in the

⁶ Vitalis, Ordericus. *The Ecclesiastical History of England and Normandy*. Translated by Marjorie Chibnall, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1968-1980) This citation is a summary of the theme of this section of Orderic’s History.

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Michel Brand’Honneur, *Becedia*, The Breton Migration Linked To The conquest Of England In 1066 (2023) < <https://bcd.bzh/becedia/en/the-breton-migration-linked-to-the-conquest-of-england-in-1066> > [accessed 13th May 2026]

late 12th century. Doctor of Medieval History, Michael Brand'Honneur published an online essay, in English, regarding this. In it he writes:

It follows that 1066 marks the beginning of a Breton migration to England that extended into the 1130's. It is estimated that the English descendants of the Bretons represented around 5% of the English nobility, which could in turn tally with the 250 knights of Breton originally cited in the 1166 Great Charter.¹⁰

Although “knights” are cited, a census of the subjects or total fighting aged men is not given. However, another Professor, Katharine Keats-Rohan of Oxford provides a concise quote in her essay *The Bretons and Normans of England 1066-1154: the family, the fief, and the feudal monarchy*, stating ‘Small the numbers involved may have been; insignificant they were not.’¹¹ The manifold impact was an establishment of Breton lands and sub-kingdoms in England (under Norman dominion) and a co-efficient reduction in the strength of Brittany back home. Returning to Brand'Honneur, "The great majority of these migrants settled definitively in England. They married, as early on as the first generation, into the Norman and Anglo-Saxon aristocracy and seemingly, quickly lost their ties with their Breton relations."¹² While the majority of migrants were of the cadet, warrior and secondary aristocracy (leaving a concentration of the primal lines of Brittany intact on the Continent), there was a generational ripple (as one could extrapolate from modern times, such as the loss of Welsh young men in World War 1) that rendered Brittany weakened, depleted and generationally handicapped when fighting for its sovereignty, and existence, against the French long after the Normans vanished from history's stage.

Bringing the Once and Future King to the World

King Arthur is arguably the most famous person in the history of the world. There have been over one hundred films made about him, scores of plays and musicals, and thousands upon thousands of books dedicated to the great Arthuriad. He is written about more than Caesar, Abraham Lincoln and Ghengis Kahn combined. And the germ seed of making Arthur an international phenomenon has significant connections to the complex relationship between the Normans and Bretons.

The Bretons gradually occupied their sliver of the Continent over a period of three centuries, and were a well-established kingdom during the Arthurian Age of 484-579 A.D. The

¹⁰ Michel Brand'Honneur, *Becedia*, The Breton Migration Linked To The conquest Of England In 1066 (2023) < <https://bcd.bzh/becedia/en/the-breton-migration-linked-to-the-conquest-of-england-in-1066> > [accessed 13th May 2026]

¹¹ Katherine Keats-Rohan, *The Bretons and Normans of England 1066-1154: The Family, The Fief, And The Feudal Monarchy*, (Nottingham Mediaeval Studies 36, 1992), p. 42

¹² Michel Brand'Honneur, *Becedia*, The Breton Migration Linked To The conquest Of England In 1066 (2023) < <https://bcd.bzh/becedia/en/the-breton-migration-linked-to-the-conquest-of-england-in-1066> > [accessed 13th May 2026]

Bretons had sister-cities with the Welsh (from whose stock they came), such as Cornouaille, they shared saints, legends and above all, a common enemy; the Saxons. Five hundred years hence, the Bretons had their opportunity to exact some measure of revenge or justice against the Germanic invaders and joined somewhat unlikely bed fellows (the Normans) in their efforts of conquest. This is an oversimplification of a complex issue but for purposes of setting the stage, the Bretons 'returned' to their ancestral lands and less than a hundred years later, the famous Geoffrey of Monmouth (of Breton ancestry) gave the world the origins of Arthur as we know of him today. That King Arthur was Welsh, and his history, lore and tradition was thriving in Wales in Cymru is provable by works such as *Colwch and Olwen*, but it was Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the King's of Britain* that was explosively popular. Geoffrey's illustrious (and notorious) work was completed in 1136 A.D, the timing of its compilation and release is critical.

Henry I, fourth son of William the Conqueror had just passed away, the indomitable and pesky Welsh were not to be easily subjugated, and an era of anarchy was a real possibility on the British Isles. Although contested and debated by scholars and too broad for the scope of this essay, Monmouth, a man of Breton lineage living and working in Wales, might have moved Arthur intentionally to Cornwall to avoid further inciting the more powerful Normans against his Celtic people. Modern author Michael Faltra, who translated Geoffrey's works, makes the following comment in a journal called *The Chaucer Review*:

Geoffrey of Monmouth writes during a period of great instability in regard to — among other things — the status of the Norman territories in Wales.

With the death of Henry I in 1135, and the contested accession of the ineffective Stephen to the English throne, Norman expansion into Wales not only came to a halt but actually began to lose ground.¹³

The position asserts that Arthur, who was growing in popularity due to native Welsh lore and Breton transplanted content, could be British (note, this word is used here in the original intent, meaning 'of the Britons') but not specifically Welsh. He continues:

Moreover, Arthur's blaze of glory stands in sharp contrast against the history of evils which Vortigern and others had called down upon Britain, and, most importantly, it invokes what must have been, to the Historia's Norman audiences, the quite dangerous and quite attainable notion of Briton or Welsh resurgence.¹⁴

If this position is true or partially true, it has remarkable ramifications, felt a thousand years later. The tale of history's most famous character was given to the world, and at the same

¹³Michael Faltra, *The Chaucer Review* Narrating The Matter Of Britain: Geoffrey Of Monmouth And The Norman Colonization of Wales (Penn State University, 2000) < <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25096117> > [access 12th May 2026], pg. 61

¹⁴Michael Faltra, *The Chaucer Review* Narrating The Matter Of Britain: Geoffrey Of Monmouth And The Norman Colonization of Wales (Penn State University, 2000) < <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25096117> > [access 12th May 2026], pg. 72

time possibly muddled on account of Norman-centric matters. This benefits Tintagel's tourism revenue to this day but contrawise hurts Caerleon's. Beyond this, as every culture loves and appropriates Arthur, the version of him through Norman reconfiguration gave modernity the chivalric, courtly version most commonly associated today. However, as the Normans were "French to the French" and "Breton to the Bretons", the packaging of a Norman Arthur is truly the biproduct of their inversion strategy, resulting in a French and Breton Once and Future King.

From Camelot to Castles. The Normans Big Impact on Architecture

A strong legacy left by the Normans can still be walked upon, touched and examined. Their three hundred years of friendly beginnings coupled with reverse assimilation followed by military might left physical remnants of that might via large, grand castles and fortresses in every nation and kingdom in which they dwelt, including Brittany. Returning to Michael Brand'Honneur works, in 2015 he wrote a book cataloguing motte styled castles in Rennes and other spots in France and Brittany. He then remarkably cross-references them with the Bayeux Tapestry, and draws strong conclusions that they are thereupon recorded and of absolute Norman origin:

Since it is impossible to study the phenomenon of castles in the Rennes region due to the lack of sources prior to the 11th century, let us compile an initial list of castles from when written records become more abundant. This documentation relies primarily on practical documents, annals, and chronicles. However, we must also consider the exceptional source that the Bayeux Tapestry represents for Brittany. These castles are mentioned there using vocabulary common at the time: castrum, castellum, turris, or oppidum . Eleven fortified sites can thus be identified.¹⁵

This forensic scholarship is remarkable, but it also again elevates the theme that the Normans possibly had *no* unique style of Castle or architecture. This means that the style was more akin to that of the French or the Breton aristocracy and was simply greater in magnitude, power and presence. Château de Fougères is a vast fortress while the dominant Château de Vitré guards the eastern borders of Brittany. There are some features that the Norman's repeated (motte and bailey, sometimes octagonal Roman towers) but no fixable Norman style.

Writer Leah Shopkow, when offering a critical review of Marjorie Chibnall's work, concisely captures what might be the only purely Norman characteristic. First, she poses the question (a common one):

¹⁵ Michel Brand'Honneur, *Manors And Castles In The County of Rennes*, (Presses Universitaires de Rennes, OpenEdition Books Edn, 2015) <<https://books.openedition.org/pur/11260>> [accessed 13th, May 2026], Chapter 2 Detailed Outline Introduction

After a century and a half of their occupation no region outside of Normandy could be said to be "Norman" any longer, and even French Normandy was integrated into France once its fate diverged from England's. So what made all these people "Normans"?¹⁶

She turns to the scholar, Chibnall for a strong answer, 'was the military unit that was "Norman."¹⁷ Beyond romanticized and murky Viking origins, it does appear that the 'method of conquest' is really the only thing that was Norman. She continues:

Normans built castles, created military dependencies, and used these to occupy the land. Then they intermarried with the local people and adapted to local customs, changing the people they settled among but also in the process changing themselves.¹⁸

Chibnall's assessment is acutely true in Brittany where the mark of the Normans is both nothing and everything. What Brittany is today cannot be divorced from the Normans yet no Normans (outside of those living in Normandy who call themselves the name) remain. This paradox renders the Norman legacy lasting, mysterious and important, everywhere.

¹⁶ Leah Shopkow, *Speculum*, The Normans by Marjorie Chibnall, Review, (The University of Chicago Press on behalf of the Medieval Academy of America) Apr. 2004, Vol. 79, No. 2 (Apr. 2004), pg. 466

¹⁷ Leah Shopkow, *Speculum*, The Normans by Marjorie Chibnall, Review, (The University of Chicago Press on behalf of the Medieval Academy of America) Apr. 2004, Vol. 79, No. 2 (Apr. 2004), pg. 466

¹⁸ Ibid, pg. 467

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