

# VIKINGS IN FRANCE AND ENGLAND: MILITARY, PECUNIARY, AND REGIONAL ASPECTS THAT LED ONE SETTLEMENT TO MEDIEVAL DOMINATION, 800-1200

Danielle Turner

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A Viking invasion of the French coast witnessed by Saint Aubin, who became the ninth-century Bishop of Angers, appears in the *Life of Saint Aubin*. *Life of St. Aubin*, manuscript, c. 1100 (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France), in *Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga*, ed. William Fitzhugh and Elisabeth I. Ward (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 117.

**Danielle Turner** juxtaposes Viking raiding and settlement in medieval France and England to answer the question why Normandy (on the French side) became a major player in the medieval world, while the Danelaw (on the English side) did not. The perceptions, importance, and recordings of Viking pillaging and invasion varied between the two regions, creating a long-term residence for the Norsemen in one and ending in a massacre in the other. Turner utilizes a variety of sources including chronicles, annals, and first-hand accounts of the Viking attacks: *The Anglo Saxon Chronicle(s)*, *Gesta Normannorum*, *Annals of St-Bertin*, *Flodoard of Reims*, *Annals of Fulda*, *Royal Frankish Annals*, *Dudo of Saint-Quentin's* works, and *History of the Franks*.

Most people know the stories of Viking raiding and plundering, but historians must make inquiries beyond popular belief. For generations, scholars wrote about raiding, warfare, and long-term effects of Viking settlement, but failed to answer the question of why this succeeded in France and failed in England. The Viking Age occurred from approximately 800 to 1100 CE, starting with the raid on the Lindisfarne Monastery in England and ending with the Norman Conquest of 1066. The classification “Viking” often denotes the entire Scandinavian people.<sup>1</sup> Northmen venturing for plunder and power represented only a small portion of the Norse population, most of which lived as farmers. The main reasons scholars deduced for the departure of Vikings from Scandinavia include determinism in technology, environment, demographics, politics, and ideology.<sup>2</sup> During this time, few people referred to Francia and Anglia as France and England; however, these terms appear here as general labels for the modern geographic areas. Differences in military defenses and responses to raiding and settlement resulted in massacre in England, but allowed for growth and power in France, culminating the Viking Era with the Norman Invasion.

Annals and chronicles of medieval France and England justified this perspective. *The Annals of St-Bertin* and *The Annals of Fulda* provide key information on the attacks from the French side. Both serve as principle sources for ninth-century France. *The Annals of St-Bertin* report on happenings in the west and *The Annals of Fulda* function as their eastern counterpart. Prudentius of Troyes

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wrote early entries in the *Annals of St-Bertin*, and after his death in 866, Hincmar of Rheims continued the work until the reports ended in 882.<sup>3</sup> This text illustrates Viking attacks and responses of the French because the writings came from areas of Viking activity. Although composed further away from raids, *The Annals of Fulda* still include many details on their invasions. Both sources mostly recount the acts of secular rulers with an outlook based more on the court than clergy or monastic matters.

Another significant primary source for this period from France, *The Gesta Normannorum Ducum*, focuses on the deeds of the Norman dukes. Frankish annals and histories together provide a detailed account of Viking movements from

the perspective of Europeans. Dumville argues “events and processes of the Viking Age did greatly stimulate chroniclers, challenging them to record events of a character previously un-

known,” opening possibilities for further research.<sup>4</sup> For primary sources on England, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* remains an invaluable manuscript since it covers events from approximately 494 to 1154. The chronicle focuses primarily on military and political matters from a West-Saxon view, though some of its entries remain questionable. A new view of the Viking raids, settlement, and outcomes emerges through studying the primary sources.

France and England both experienced Norse raiding and settlement, but different elements occurred from the beginning, leading to the Norman Invasion in 1066. Few doubted the power of Viking ships and attacks, and French annals contain numerous entries regarding the raids and how they met little or no resistance. When the weakened Frankish King granted land and a duchy to the Vikings in exchange for protection, he al-

<sup>1</sup> The people now known as the Vikings did not use that word to describe themselves during the period in question. The term most likely comes from either the Old English *wicing* or the Old Norse *vikingr*, which both refer to raiders or pirates. For more information, see Gareth Williams, “Raiding and Warfare,” in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor & Francis, 2008), 193. The name might also refer to the “people from the Vik,” the name for the bay area of southeastern Norway around the Oslo fjord. See Robert Ferguson, *The Vikings: A History* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 4.

<sup>2</sup> J. H. Barrett, “What Caused the Viking Age?” *Antiquity* 82, no. 317 (2008): 672.

<sup>3</sup> *The Annals of St-Bertin: Translated from the Edition of Léon Levillain (1951) and Félix Grat (1940)*, trans. Janet L. Nelson (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1991), 10. Hereafter, this source appears as AB.

<sup>4</sup> David N. Dumville, “Vikings in Insular Chronicling,” in *Viking World*, ed. Brink and Price, 351.

lowed a long-term residence which ultimately facilitated Norman domination of the medieval world. The Vikings faced stronger resistance attempting to penetrate England because of Anglo-Saxon preparation for attacks from the sea. Constant battles with the English over Danish settlements ended in a massacre, and the Normans, who derived from the original Viking settlers, claimed this territory in their invasion. These regional differences from the beginning eventually shaped the Norman Conquest of 1066, which became the culmination of the Viking Age.

## Military Defenses

The Vikings met little military resistance while raiding in France, but encountered an evenly matched army when attempting to infiltrate England. Lack of opposition in France resulted from Charlemagne exhausting military resources as a result of his long campaign to create a vast empire.<sup>5</sup> The French found themselves thoroughly unprepared for the Viking incursions. Their land contained numerous waterways that made infiltration easier and Viking ships became well-known for their strength, durability, and range. Accustomed to attacks from the sea, the English applied stronger military defenses to counter Viking raiders. Both societies endured the attacks, but differences in their responses created a notable impact on the outcomes of the assaults.

The Vikings sailed up the Seine River to the former capital of France during the infamous Siege of Paris in 845 without meeting any confrontation.<sup>6</sup> *The Annals of St-Bertin* reports on this incident: “Charles made efforts to offer some resistance, but realised that his men could not possibly win. So he made a deal with them: by handing over to them 7,000 lb [of silver] as a bribe, he restrained from advancing further and persuaded



This Viking hoard of silver, known as the Curedale and buried in Lancashire in the early 900s, represents the type of Danegeld received from the French. Viking Silver Hoard, c. 905 (British Museum: 2003), in Birkebæk, Frank, *Vikingetiden i Danmark* (Viborg: Nørhavan Book, 2003), 135.

them to go away.”<sup>7</sup> This represents one of the first examples of extracting the Danegeld, or payment from rulers expecting the Vikings to leave their territory. This entry remains particularly fascinating because of the recognized king’s inability to offer significant resistance against the raiders. The Vikings’ victory in besieging Paris alone holds significance because this attack occurred on a large city, unlike previous smaller assaults on coastal monasteries. Lack of French military preparation along with the strength of the Viking fleets ensured a clear win for the raiders.

France’s waterways proved critical in Viking raids and the French could not defend their towns. An entry in *The Annals of Fulda* from the year 835 states, “The Northmen came up the Loire to plunder the city of Tours in Gaul and set fire to the church of St Martin the Confessor among other buildings, meeting no resistance.”<sup>8</sup> This passage mentions the Vikings sailing up a large river in France to plunder a big city and encounter no re-

<sup>5</sup> Neil S. Price, “Laid Waste, Plundered, and Burned: Vikings in Frankia,” in *Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga*, ed. William Fitzhugh and Elisabeth I. Ward (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press in association with the National Museum of Natural History, 2000), 117.

<sup>6</sup> The capital eventually went back to Paris, but at this time, it resided in Aachen.

<sup>7</sup> AB, 60.

<sup>8</sup> *The Annals of Fulda: Ninth-Century Histories, Volume II*, trans. Timothy Reuter (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 34-35. This source subsequently appears as AF.





The Lindisfarne memorial stone commemorated the first official Viking raid in 793 at Lindisfarne Priory on the northeastern English coast. Petroglyph, c. ninth century, in *Vikings*, ed. Fitzhugh and Ward, 128.

sistance, almost mirroring the earlier entry from *The Annals of St-Bertin*. In this case, they not only plundered a monastery but also the church of a Saint. Viking raids became well-known before this time, yet the country could still not muster an army to protect their land. They likely saw this lack of military vigor as weakness on the part of the French and remember it when the time came to seek settlement.

Accounts from *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* suggest the English put up a stronger defense against the Viking raids. The chronicles state in “836 (833) [,] King Egbert fought against the crews of 35 ships at Carhampton, and a great slaughter was made there, and the Danes had possession of the battle-field. And two bishops, Herefrith and Wigthegn, and two ealdormen, Duda and Osmod, died.”<sup>9</sup> English chronicles constantly report who held the battlefield at the end of the fight and possible deaths of important figures. This entry indicates the Vikings attacked from ships as they did in France, but as an island, England experienced more assaults from the sea. The victors of these battles fluctuated back and forth for many

years from the Vikings to the English, suggesting the Vikings encountered a stronger military defense in England compared to France.

A few years later, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* resumed its annual reports on the actions of the army against the Vikings. For the year “838 (835) [,] a great naval force arrived among the West Welsh and the latter combined with them and proceeded to fight against Egbert, king of the West Saxons. When he heard that, he then went thither with his army, and fought against them at Hingston Down, and put both the Welsh and the Danes to flight.”<sup>10</sup> In this example, the ruler resisted not one, but two armies. Viking scholar Robert Ferguson argues *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* may exaggerate the amount of English resistance the Vikings faced.<sup>11</sup> Even though this source seems obsessed with who won each battle in many entries—perhaps overstated—it also reports the killing of important figures from the raiding armies, a claim supported by other sources. More times than not, the Danes end in possession of the battlefield. The Anglo-Saxons put up a stronger fight, but they still ended up pushed back on their own land.

Upon examination of their annals, a stark contrast exists between France and England in response to Viking attacks. The Vikings often met no resistance from a French army since Charlemagne wore out the country’s military years before. The English displayed greater strength against the raids, but in the end, they too failed to stop invasions of their land. Differences in reactions to the attacks demonstrated each country’s military strength, suggesting France as an easier target than England.

## From Raiding to Settlement

Settlement emerged from contract in France through political fragmentation and mostly battles in England. Charlemagne’s grandsons tore his empire apart and left northern lands open for the taking amidst their warfare with each other. This land became known as Normandy and gained recognition as a duchy under the leadership of the

<sup>9</sup> *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Revised Translation*, ed. Dorothy Whitelock (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1962), 41. The abbreviation ASC denotes this source hereafter.

<sup>10</sup> ASC, 41.

<sup>11</sup> Ferguson, *Vikings*, 7.

Viking, Rollo. Constant unrest and resistance in England allowed for a Viking settlement, though many of the English remained uneasy about Norse colonization on their land. They displayed their discontent through continuous battles and massacre of Norse settlers. Anders Winroth successfully argues Viking leaders “took every opportunity to carve out foreign lordships for themselves” that certainly happened in France and England.<sup>12</sup>

Abundant amounts of political unrest in France allowed the Vikings to establish a settlement among the chaos. The first chapter heading of Book One of the *The Gesta Normannorum Ducum* reads “How the strength of the Franks, which long had been vigorous, changed, so that they were not capable of resisting the ferocity of the heathens.”<sup>13</sup> At this time in France, the kingdom consisted of three realms, each ruled by Charlemagne’s grandsons. Charles the Bald controlled the western part, Louis the German ruled the eastern region, and Lothar, who later died heirless, reigned over the middle kingdom.<sup>14</sup> Dudo of St-Quetin also states the fighting between Charlemagne’s grandsons for the middle kingdom further depleted France’s ability to defend itself against invaders.<sup>15</sup> Vikings possessed a well-timed opportunity to control land in northern France due to the political fragmentation and weak resistance.

In a treaty from 911, King Charles the Simple granted land in northern France to Rollo, the Viking leader responsible for most of the attacks, though this document no longer physically exists. However, remnants of this original agree-

ment appear in an excerpt from another text—the Charter of King Charles the Simple, 14 March 918, which states “we give and grant this abbey of which the main part lies in the area [*pagus*] of Meresais on the River Eure to Saint-Germain and to his monks for their upkeep, expect that part of the abbey [’s lands] which we have granted to the Normans of the Seine, namely to Rollo and his companions [*comitibus*], for the defence of the kingdom [*pro tutela regni*].” This treaty illustrates a recognized land conceded to Rollo and his men for their supposed defense of France from other Vikings. The ancestry appears from the name of the territory, *les Normands* in French, meaning Northmen or Normans.<sup>16</sup> Georges Duby argues the king intended

the land as a gift “to be held ‘as an allod in perpetuity’. An allod was an inheritance which was not subject to any overlord.”<sup>17</sup> Rollo and his kinsmen not only managed to establish a acknowledged duchy bloodline in Normandy, but also maintained a certain level of independence and control over the mouth of the Seine River, promoting expansion of their power.

In England, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records that in “870 (871) the raiding army rode across Mercia into East Anglia, and took up winter quarters at Thetford. And that winter King Edmund fought against them, and the Danes had the victory, and killed the king and conquered all the land.”<sup>18</sup> Vikings seized King Edmund’s territory, renamed the Danelaw, by killing him and taking the land by force. The many battles between 892 and 900 resulted in the boundaries of the Danelaw.<sup>19</sup> Some terms and borders as a result of this

<sup>12</sup> Anders Winroth, *The Conversion of Scandinavia: Vikings, Merchants, and Missionaries in the Remaking of Northern Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 53.

<sup>13</sup> *The Gesta Normannorum Ducum of William of Jumièges, Orderic Vitalis, and Robert of Torigni*, ed. and trans. Elisabeth M. C. van Houts. vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 9. This manuscript bears the abbreviation GND.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Heather, *Empires and Barbarians: The Fall of Rome and the Birth of Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 460.

<sup>15</sup> GND, 11.

<sup>16</sup> Edward James, *The Origins of France: From Clovis to the Capetians 500-1000* (London: Macmillan Education, 1982), 37.

<sup>17</sup> Georges Duby, *France in the Middle Ages 987-1460: From Hugh Capet to Joan of Arc*, tran. By Juliet Vale (London: Blackwell, 1987), 82.

<sup>18</sup> ASC, 46.

<sup>19</sup> Colleen E. Batey and John Sheehan, “Viking Expansion and Cultural Blending in Britain and Ireland,” in *The North Atlantic Saga*, ed. William Fitzhugh and Elisabeth I. Ward (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press in

fighting are outlined in the Treaty of Alfred and Guthrum, but unlike the recognized territory of Normandy, this remained hotly contested and did not receive the same privileges.

Unrest and fear of the English people regarding the Viking settlement climaxed at the Brice's Day Massacre. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* reports on the event: "1002 And in that year the king ordered to be slain all the Danish men who were in England—this was done on St. Brice's day—because the king had been informed that they would treacherously deprive him, and then all his councillors, of life, and possess this kingdom afterwards."<sup>20</sup> When King Æthelred the Unready learned of these threats, which jeopardized his safety, he acted promptly. In a normal situation, the King might punish those few men responsible for plots; however, in this case, his anxiety connected to a whole people. The king held enough power to carry out swift justice and the people acted on their own worries about the Viking settlement. The countless deaths of the Danes on St. Brice's Day serve as a testament to the English distress.

The Vikings gained a stronger hold on territory in France than in England. Political unrest in France left room for Vikings to establish their own territory in Normandy. This region stood at a strong defensive position at the mouth of the Seine River and remained a recognized duchy by the king, enabling them to operate with some independence. In contrast, Vikings in England established the boundaries of the Danelaw mostly through war. Instead of becoming a recognized duchy, the people stayed upset and scared about the Norse settlement, leading to the massacre of the Danish men, while Normandy continued to thrive.

## The Fall of England to the Ultimate Viking Victory

The Danelaw in England fell and Normandy took over a larger geographical area than accomplished by their Viking predecessors in the

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association with the National Museum of Natural History, 2000), 131.

<sup>20</sup> ASC, 86.



A statue of Rollo the Viking, first Duke of Normandy, still standing today in Rouen. Man vyi, photographer (Rouen: 2009).

Norman Conquest. The English finally reclaimed all their land just before William I, Duke of Normandy—a descendent of Rollo—conquered them. The year 1066 marks the end of the Viking era with the Norman Conquest becoming the ultimate Norse victory. The Duchy of Normandy held on to the Kingship of England for many generations.

The year 954 ended the Danelaw when “the Northumbrians drove out Eric, and Eadred succeeded to the kingdom of the Northumbrians” reports the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.<sup>21</sup> This entry

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<sup>21</sup> ASC, 73.





The Bayeux Tapestry memorializes the influential Battle of Hastings during the Norman Invasion of England in 1066. *Bayeux Tapestry*, embroidered cloth, c. eleventh century, photograph by Dan Koehl.

refers to when the English drove Eric Bloodaxe out of their country. A high level of resistance remained until they pushed out the Viking rule. In France, however, they successfully held onto their territory in Normandy. Although border disputes existed, the French never regained their land in Normandy and this region existed as a thriving duchy.<sup>22</sup> Normandy's power kept growing leading to the takeover of Britain.

*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records on the Norman invasion of 1066, "When King Harold, who was in London, was informed that Tosti his brother was come to Sandwich, he assembled a naval force and a land force larger than any king had assembled before in this country, because he had been told as a fact that Count William from Normandy, King Edwards kinsman, meant to come here and subdue this country. This was exactly what happened afterwards."<sup>23</sup> The largest army ever assembled in England gathered, yet still

could not repel the invaders. Even the author of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* notes that the Norman's arrival completely subdued the country. "His [Williams] victory at the battle of Hastings was complete: Harold, his adversary, was killed and William, duke of Normandy, became king of England."<sup>24</sup>

William I became the first person to serve as both Duke of Normandy and King of England after he subjugated Britain in the Norman Conquest of 1066 at the influential Battle of Hastings. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* contains a bloodline chart showing the title "Duke of Normandy and of King of England" lasted for three generations after William I. However, William's royal bloodline chart ends when the chronicle does in the early 1200s, suggesting that his family ties might go further in history.<sup>25</sup> In time, the Duchy of Normandy disestablished, but the territory still maintains the same borders today. William I's descendants dominated the English royal bloodline for several centuries.

<sup>22</sup> For annals on actions of Normandy at the time before the Norman Conquest please consult, *The Annals of Flodoard of Reims, 919-966*, ed. and trans. Steven Fanning and Bernard S. Bachrach, *Readings in Medieval Civilizations and Cultures*, vol. 9 (Peterborough, Canada: Broadview Press, 2004).

<sup>23</sup> ASC, version C, 141.

<sup>24</sup> Duby, *France in the Middle Ages*, 30.

<sup>25</sup> See ASC, Table 10, "The descendants of William I," 215.

The Duchy of Normandy's acquisition of England resulted from the region's powerful growth. The English drove out Eric Bloodaxe and maintained a hold of their land until Normandy took over most of the country in 1066, proving that its settlement contained more power. William I not only conquered England, but also kept his bloodline in the kingship of England for a long time.

## Conclusion

From the beginning, countless differences existed in the responses of France and England to the Viking raids. These differences allowed the settlement of Normandy to grow in power and ultimately take over England. According to French annals, lack of military vigor resulted in weak resistance to Norse attacks. Through this and the political fragmentation created by Charlemagne's grandsons, the Vikings secured a piece of land recognized as a duchy by the French king and managed to operate independently. Relentless battles between the Norsemen and English resulted in the creation of the Danelaw, but did not cease until the Danes lost hold of their settlement. During the Norman invasion of 1066, Normandy "was the best organised and most powerful state in Gaul."<sup>26</sup> This year marked the great conclusion of the Viking age. Normandy became a major player in the medieval world and conquered a significant amount of territory, including England.

Regarding future studies, other areas of historical and anthropological interest seem enticing to explore to better understand the differences that allowed one settlement to thrive much more than the other. For example, archeology could unlock more information about the settlements, as well as the battles that enabled their foundation. Scholars produced numerous linguistic and DNA studies proving the long-term impact of Viking settlements. Nevertheless, scholars can approach the issue of why Normandy grew while the Danelaw fell from a number of different angles, so primary sources remain quite relevant.

Normandy achieved enormous results from the Norman Invasion of 1066 and it also held onto these achievements through successive ages. As Neil S. Price states, "It is remarkable that by the early tenth century Normandy had acquired the boundaries that it retains today as a French province."<sup>27</sup> The area still maintains a large city at Rouen, which served as capital during the region's time as a Duchy.<sup>28</sup> Although Normandy started as a Viking settlement, its strength and great impact still reverberate throughout the modern world.

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<sup>26</sup> James, *Origins of France*, 39.

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<sup>27</sup> Neil S. Price, *Vikings in Frankia*, 123.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.





**Danielle Turner** completed her BA in history with a minor in anthropology at California State University, Fullerton, in fall of 2014, and plans to continue her studies in graduate school with a focus on medieval Scandinavia. As well as earning membership in Phi Alpha Theta, Theta-Pi chapter, she participates in the Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Study and is a founding member of the Dansk Akademisk Netværk i Amerika. Turner presented her “Vikings in France and England” paper at the 2014 Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Study conference at Yale University and the 2014 Southwestern Social Science Association conference in San Antonio, Texas.