

Rollo

For other uses, see [Rollo \(disambiguation\)](#).

Rollo (Norman: *Rou*; Old Norse: *Hrólfr*; French: *Rol- lon*; c. 846 – c. 930 AD) was a Viking who became the first ruler of Normandy, a region of France. He is sometimes called the 1st Duke of Normandy. Rollo emerged as the outstanding personality among the Norsemen who had secured a permanent foothold on Frankish soil in the valley of the lower Seine. Charles the Simple, the king of West Francia, ceded them lands between the mouth of the Seine and what is now the city of Rouen in exchange for Rollo agreeing to end his brigandage, and provide the Franks with protection against future Viking raids.^[1]

Rollo is first recorded as the leader of these Viking settlers in a charter of 918, and he continued to reign over the region of Normandy until at least 928. He was succeeded by his son, William Longsword in the Duchy of Normandy that he had founded. The offspring of Rollo and his followers became known as the Normans. After the Norman conquest of England and their conquest of southern Italy and Sicily over the following two centuries, their descendants came to rule Norman England (the House of Normandy), the Kingdom of Sicily (the Kings of Sicily) as well as the Principality of Antioch from the 10th to 12th century, leaving behind an enduring legacy in the historical developments of Europe and the Near East.^[2]

1 Name

The name Rollo is generally presumed to be a latinisation of the Old Norse name *Hrólfr* – a theory that is supported by the rendition of *Hrólfr* as *Roluo* in the *Gesta Danorum*. It is also sometimes suggested that Rollo may be a latinised version of another Norse name, *Hrollaugr*.^[3]

Rollo is generally identified with one Viking in particular – a man of high social status mentioned in Icelandic sagas, which refer to him by the Old Norse name *Göngu-Hrólfr*, meaning “*Hrólfr* the Walker”. (*Göngu-Hrólfr* is also widely known by an Old Danish variant, *Ganger-Hrolf*.) The byname “Walker” is usually understood to suggest that Rollo was so physically imposing that he could not be carried by a horse and was obliged to travel on foot. Norman and other French sources do not use the name *Hrólfr* and the identification of Rollo with *Göngu-Hrólfr* is based upon similarities between circumstances and actions ascribed to both figures.

The 10th century Norman historian Dudo records that Rollo took the baptismal name Robert. A variant spelling, *Roul*, is used in the 12th-century Norman French *Roman de la Rou*, which was compiled by Wace and commissioned by King Henry II of England (a descendant of Rollo).

2 Origins & historiography

Rollo was born in the latter half of the 9th century; his place of birth is unknown.

The earliest well-attested historical event associated with Rollo is his leadership of Vikings who besieged Paris in 885–886.

Perhaps the earliest known source to mention Rollo's early life is the French chronicler Richer of Reims, who claims (in the 10th Century) that Rollo was the son of a Viking named Ketill.^[4] In terms of onomastics, it is interesting that Richer also names – without explicitly linking him to Rollo – a man named Ketill as being the leader of subsequent Viking raids (in 888), against areas on the coast of West Francia, between the Seine and the Loire.

Medieval sources contradict each other regarding whether Rollo's family was Norwegian or Danish in origin. In part, this disparity may result from the indifferent and interchangeable usage in Europe, at the time, of terms such as “Vikings”, “Northmen”, “Danes”, “Norwegians” and so on (in the Medieval Latin texts *Dani vel Nortmanni* means “Danes or Northmen”).

A biography of Rollo, written by the cleric Dudo of Saint-Quentin in the late 10th Century, claimed that Rollo was from Denmark. One of Rollo's great-grandsons and a contemporary of Dudo was known as Robert the Dane. However, Dudo's *Historia Normannorum* (or *Libri III de moribus et actis primorum Normanniae ducum*) was commissioned by Rollo's grandson, Richard I of Normandy and – while Dudo likely had access to family members and/or other people with a living memory of Rollo – this fact must be weighed against the text's potential biases, as an official biography. According to Dudo, an unnamed king of Denmark was antagonistic to Rollo's family, including his father – an unnamed Danish nobleman – and Rollo's brother Gurim. Following the death of Rollo and Gurim's father, Gurim was killed and Rollo was forced to leave Denmark.^[5] Dudo appears to have been the main source for William of Jumièges (after 1066) and Orderic Vitalis (early 12th century), although both include addi-

tional details.^[6]

A Norwegian background for Rollo was first explicitly claimed by Goffredo Malaterra (Geoffrey Malaterra), an 11th-century Benedictine monk and historian, who wrote: “Rollo sailed boldly from Norway with his fleet to the Christian coast.”^[7] Likewise, the 12th-century English historian William of Malmesbury stated that Rollo was “born of noble lineage among the Norwegians”.^[8]

A chronicler named Benoît (probably Benoît de Sainte-More) wrote in the mid-12th Century *Chronique des ducs de Normandie* that Rollo had been born in a town named “Fasge”. This has since been variously interpreted as referring to Faxe, in Sjælland (Denmark), Fauske, in Hålogaland (Norway), or perhaps a more obscure settlement that has since been abandoned or renamed. Benoît also repeated the claim that Rollo had been persecuted by a local ruler and had fled from there to “Scanza island”, by which Benoît probably means Scania (Swedish *Skåne*). While Faxe was physically much closer to Scania, the mountainous scenery of “Fasge”, described by Benoît, would seem to be more like Fauske.

The claim that Rollo was the brother of a King of Norway, Harald Finehair was made by an anonymous 12th-century Welsh author, in *The Life of Gruffudd ap Cynan*.^[9]

Rollo was first explicitly identified with Hrólfr the Walker (Norse *Göngu-Hrólfr*; Danish *Ganger-Hrólfr*) by the 13th-century Icelandic sagas, *Heimskringla* and *Orkneyinga Saga*. Hrólfr the Walker was so named because he “was so big that no horse could carry him”.^[10] The Icelandic sources claim that Hrólfr was born in Møre, western Norway, in the late 9th century and that his parents were the Norwegian jarl Rognvald Eysteinnsson (“Rognvald the Wise”) and a noblewoman from Møre named Hildr Hrólfsdóttir. However, these claims were made three centuries after the history commissioned by Rollo’s own grandson.

There may be circumstantial evidence for kinship between Rollo and his historical contemporary, Ketill Flatnose, King of the Isles – a Norse realm centred on the Western Isles of Scotland. If, as Richer suggested, Rollo’s father was also named Ketill and as Dudo suggested, Rollo had a brother named Gurim, such names are onomastic evidence for a family connection: Icelandic sources name Ketill Flatnose’s father as Björn Grímsson,^[11] and “Grim” – the implied name of Ketill Flatnose’s paternal grandfather – was likely cognate with *Gurim*. In addition, both Irish and Icelandic sources suggest that Rollo, as a young man, visited or lived in Scotland, where he had a daughter named Cadlínar (Kaðlín; Kathleen).^{[12][13]} Moreover, Ketill Flatnose’s ancestors were said to have come from Møre – Rollo’s ancestral home in the Icelandic sources. However, Ketill was a common name in Norse societies,^[14] as were names like Gurim and Grim. It is also possible that the later sources were attempting to suggest an otherwise undocumented link between the historical figures of Rollo and Ketill

Flatnose, by way of little-known, possibly apocryphal figures like Grim, Gurim and the Ketill said to be Rollo’s father.

3 Biography



Statue of Rollo in Rouen. There are two bronze replicas of this statue: one at Ålesund (Norway) and the other one at Fargo, North Dakota (United States)

Dudo tells us that Rollo seized Rouen in 876. He is supported by the contemporary chronicler Flodoard, who records that Robert of the Breton March waged a campaign against the Vikings, who nearly levelled Rouen and other settlements; eventually, he conceded “certain coastal provinces” to them.^[15]

According to Dudo, Rollo struck up a friendship in England with a king that Dudo calls Alstem. This has puzzled many historians, but recently the puzzle has been resolved by recognition that this refers to Guthrum, the Danish leader whom Alfred the Great baptised with the baptismal name Athelstan, and then recognised as king of the East Angles in 880.^[16]

Dudo records that when Rollo took Bayeux by force, he carried off with him the beautiful Popa or Poppa, a daughter of Berenger, Count of Rennes, took her in marriage and with her had their son and Rollo’s heir, William Longsword.^[17]



Rollo's grave at the Cathedral of Rouen

There are few contemporary mentions of Rollo. The earliest record is from 918, in a charter of Charles III to an abbey, which referred to an earlier grant to “the Normans of the Seine”, namely “Rollo and his associates” for “the protection of the kingdom.”^[18] Dudo retrospectively stated that this pact took place in 911 at Saint-Clair-sur-Epte. In return for formal recognition of the lands he possessed, Rollo agreed to be baptised and assist the king in the defence of the realm. Rollo took the baptismal name Robert. The seal of agreement was to be marriage between Rollo and Gisla, daughter of Charles. Dudo claims that Gisla was a legitimate daughter of Charles.^[19] Since Charles first married in 907, that would mean that Gisla was at most 5 years old at the time of the treaty of 911 which offered her in marriage.^[20] It has therefore been speculated that she could have been an illegitimate daughter.^[21] However a diplomatic child betrothal need not be doubted.^[22]

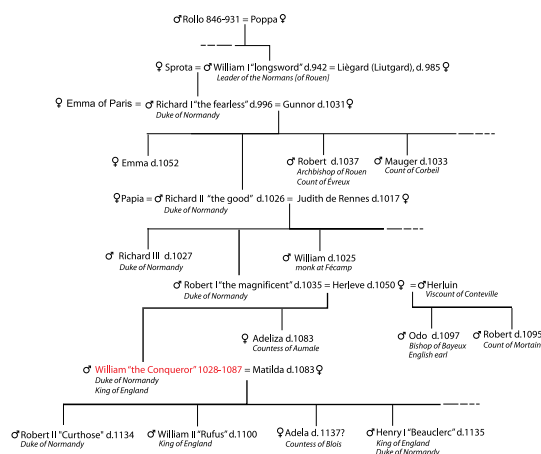
After pledging his fealty to Charles III as part of the Treaty of Saint-Clair-sur-Epte, Rollo divided the lands between the rivers Epte and Risle among his chieftains, and settled with a *de facto* capital in Rouen.^[23]

Charles was overthrown by a revolt in 923, and his successor, Robert of Neustria, was killed by the Vikings in 923. His successor, Ralph, conceded the Bessin and Maine to Rollo shortly afterwards, the chronicler Flodoard tells us.^[24]

Rollo died sometime between a final mention of him by Flodoard in 928, and 933, the year in which a third grant of land, usually identified as being the Cotentin and Avranchin areas, was made to his son and successor William.^[25]

4 Descendants

Rollo's son and heir, William Longsword, and grandchild, Richard the Fearless, forged the Duchy of Normandy into West Francia's most cohesive and formidable principality.^[26] The descendants of Rollo and his men assimilated with their maternal Frankish-Catholic culture and became known as the Normans, lending their name to the region of Normandy.



A genealogical chart of the Norman dynasty

Rollo is the great-great-great-grandfather of William the Conqueror, or William I of England. Through William, he is one of the ancestors of the present-day British royal family, as well as an ancestor of all current European monarchs and a great many claimants to abolished European thrones.

One daughter of Rollo, Gerloc (also known as Adele), who married William III, Duke of Aquitaine, was mentioned by Dudo. According to William of Jumièges, writing in the latter-half of the 11th century, Gerloc's mother was named Poppa.^[27]

According to the medieval Irish text *An Banshenchas* and Icelandic sources, another daughter, Cadlinar (Kaðlín; Kathleen) was born in Scotland (probably to a Scots mother) and married an Irish prince named Beollán mac Ciarmaic, later King of South Brega (Lagore). A daughter of Cadlinar and Beollán named Nithbeorg was abducted by an Icelandic Viking named Helgi Ottarsson,^{[28][29]} and became the mother of the poet Einar Helgason and grandmother of Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir (protagonist of the *Laxdæla saga*).

A genetic investigation into the remains of Rollo's grandson, Richard the Fearless, and his great-grandson, Richard the Good, was announced in 2011 with the intention of discerning the origins of the historic Viking leader.^[30] On February 29, 2016, Norwegian researchers opened Richard the Good's tomb and found his lower jaw with eight teeth in it.^[31] Unfortunately, the skeletal remains in both graves turned out to significantly predate Rollo and therefore are not related to him.^[32]

5 Depictions in fiction

Rollo is the subject of the seventeenth-century play Rollo Duke of Normandy written by John Fletcher, Philip Massinger, Ben Jonson, and George Chapman.

A character, broadly inspired by the historical Rollo but including many events before the real Rollo was born, played by Clive Standen, is Ragnar Lothbrok's brother in the History Channel television series *Vikings*.^[33]

6 See also

- Clan Rollo
- Dukes of Normandy
- Normandy
- Normans
- Viking Age
- Vikings

7 Notes

8 References

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- [3] Robert Ferguson, *The Hammer and the Cross: A New History of the Vikings* (2009), p. 180.
- [4] Richer, book 1, chaps. 4 and 28
- [5] *Dudo of St. Quentin, History of the Normans*. ed. and trans. Eric Christiansen. Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press 1998, chap. 5. Dudo's terminology is confused. He uses Scandia for the Scandinavian peninsula and confuses Dacian and Denmark.
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- [9] *The history of Gruffydd ap Cyman”, the Welsh text with translation, introduction and notes by Arthur Jones. Manchester University Press 1910.*
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- [16] *Dudo of St-Quentin: History of the Normans*, trans. and ed. Eric Christiansen (Woodbridge 1998), p. xiv; Robert Ferguson, *The Hammer and the Cross: A New History of the Vikings* (2009), pp. 177-182.
- [17] Dudo, pp. 38-9.
- [18] *The Normans in Europe*, trans and ed. Elizabeth Van Houts (Manchester 2000), p. 25.
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- [20] Ferguson 2009, p. 187.
- [21] Pierre Bauduin, Chefs normands et élites franques, fin - Début siècle, (181-194), in Pierre Bauduin (éd.), *Les Fondations scandinaves en Occident et les débuts du duché de Normandie*, Publications du CRAHM, 2005, p. 182.
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- [26] Eleanor Searle, *Predatory Kinship and the Creation of Norman Power, 840–1066* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1988), p. 89.
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10 Further reading

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