

## 1027 – 2027 : The World in which William was Born

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*Manuscript Vatican Reg. lat. 123 (mid-11th century, Ripoll, Catalonia), fol. 143v-144r.*

We do not know exactly the date of William the Conqueror's birth. It seems that the future Duke of the Normans and King was born between mid-1027 and mid-1028. His mother's name – Arletta or Herleva – is mentioned only in much later sources; as for his father, Duke Robert 'the Magnificent', he had but recently succeeded his brother Richard III, who had died on 6 August 1027 in circumstances that remain uncertain.

The year 1027 was rich in political events. On Whitsun Day (14 May), the young Henry – that is, the future Henry I, King of France – was anointed in Rheims, his father King Robert II being still alive. Forty years after Hugh Capet's accession, the new Capetian monarchy was now firmly established and its legitimacy was no longer disputed. Several princes of the realm, including Richard III, attended the ceremony. Not long before, on Easter Day (26 March), Emperor Conrad II had been crowned in Rome. This new emperor inaugurated a new dynasty, that of the Salians, having succeeded Henry II, last of the Ottonians, who had died without an heir in 1024. This succession had been disputed, particularly in Italy, but Conrad had been able to curb opposition and receive the imperial crown. Among the princes who attend the event was Cnut the Great, King of the Danes and of the English. In a letter addressed to his Insular subjects during his stay in Italy, Cnut told of his pride for participating in the event and being received by grandees from all Europe, and he also mentions the fact that it was for him

an occasion to visit Rome as a pilgrim, something he had wanted to do for a long time. This visit may be seen as a climax in the reign of the Danish king, who had become one of Europe's most powerful rulers. His power was by then undisputed in England, where he had been able to coopt some of the country's elites: Earl Godwine, one of his most prominent supporters, had married one of the king's kinswomen and their second son, the future King Harold II, had been born a few years earlier. Cnut had himself married Emma of Normandy, the widow of his Anglo-Saxon predecessor Æthelred II and the sister of Richard II of Normandy (which made her young William's great-aunt), and their son Harthacnut was then still a young boy. Emma's children from her earlier marriage, including the future Edward the Confessor, were then refugees at the Norman court, where they probably had many occasions to meet William in the years of his childhood. But at that time, they were no major threat to Cnut, who focussed on other plans: the main one was to establish control over Norway. It was done the year after (1028), when some of the Norwegians rebelled against their king Olaf Haraldsson, who was defeated in the battle of Stiklestad and forced to flee. If we are to believe William of Jumièges, Olaf had actually been baptised in Rouen in the mid-1010s; after his death in 1030, he was considered a martyr and rapidly became Norway's national saint. If we take this game of chronological concordances a little further, the year 1027 was also that of the deaths of Gaimar III of Salerno, one of the first Southern Italian princes who called upon Normans, and of Romuald of Ravenna (on 19 June), that is St Romuald, founder of the order of the Camaldolese hermits, a reformer of Western monasticism who probably influenced the spirituality of John of Ravenna... who himself succeeded William of Volpiano at the Norman abbey of Fécamp in 1028.

A broader perspective over the fifteen or so years that surround the year 1027/8 allows us to mention the following events: the death of Emperor Basil II, one of the most important Byzantine rulers, in December 1025; the disintegration of the Umayyad Caliphate of Cordoba in 1031; Richard of Verdun's great pilgrimage, which brought 700 pilgrims (including Normans) to the Holy Land in 1026; King Sigtrygg Silkenbeard of Dublin's own pilgrimage to Rome in 1028, in the wake of which, having returned via Cologne and Canterbury, he founded the bishopric of Dublin; the deaths of Wulfstan II, archbishop of York (28 May 1023), of Fulbert of Chartres (10 April 1028) and of Adalbero of Laon (27 January 1030), three of the most important ecclesiastical and intellectual figures of the time. Several major construction works in Western Europe were also started in the same period, including the abbey church in Fleury (Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire) after the fire of July 1026, the cathedral of Speyer (one of the grandest Romanesque buildings) around 1030, and the abbey church of Mont-Saint-Michel in 1023 (which was the subject of a recent conference in Cerisy).

These few events, all taking place around the time of William's birth, are enough to show that the world in which the future duke and king was born was characterised by interacting relationships and dynamics. Of course, nobody at that time could have guessed that here and then were woven the threads of events and motions that would span the next century, nor would they have anticipated the connexions which today's historians see between them.

Our conference will draw inspiration from the methods of so-called 'connected history', here simply defined as an approach that aims to establish links between different national or regional historical traditions which have long remained isolated and tries to avoid a perspective that would focus exclusively on Normandy or France. We want to stress mobilities and their consequences, connexions and transfers between diverse

human communities. Because of this global perspective, we do not wish to exclude any discipline or methodology (history, art history, archaeology, philology...) that helps exploring this world in which William was born. This is also why we wish to gather scholars from many horizons, countries and disciplines, in order to discuss the following topics.

## **1/ Knowing about the world**

Geographical knowledge was not, in the early eleventh century, as reduced as it has been said to be. In the Islamic world, in the Latin West or in Byzantium, representations of the earth are known both in maps and texts. The British Library's 'Cottonian World Map' was made around 1025/1050; it is roughly contemporary with the Bibliothèque nationale de France's 'Saint-Sever *mappa mundi*', illustrating a manuscript of Beatus de Liebana's Commentary on the Apocalypse. More broadly, in the century that ended with the First Crusade, knowledge of the world informed Western representations of the Other – Eastern Christian, Muslim, Jewish or pagan – that were undergoing radical transformation. We particularly aim to understand how the Normans and the populations with whom they came into contact perceived each other. By the late tenth century, members of Rollo's dynasty were still regularly perceived and stigmatised as descendants of pagan pirates of the North, but they increasingly appeared as Latin Christians like any others, even as models of Christian behaviour.

Proposed themes:

- Knowledge of the world.
- Cartography.
- Knowledge and representations of Others.

## **2/ Moving through the world**

Many roads allowed travellers from Normandy to reach other regions, and the Normans were keen to use them. There were maritime roads towards Britain, Ireland or Scandinavia, but towards Aquitaine, Iberia and, beyond that, the Mediterranean – especially Southern Italy, Byzantium and the Holy Land. There were also roads over land and up and down rivers, and travel often combined several means of transport. We will follow attested circulations and retrace the itineraries followed by people, commodities and ideas. We also wish to focus on the places where connexions were made and on the people who enabled them, especially in the case of Normans: in an English lawcode that mentions Norman merchants in London in the first decade of the eleventh century, or in Warner of Rouen's poem *Moriuht*, in which Rouen is shown to be a port where slave trade was still in operation. Pilgrimage routes are also among those we want to highlight: to Rome of course, but also to Puglia and Monte Gargano (where the cult of St Michael echoes contemporary developments in Normandy), to Compostela (where pilgrimage to St James's relics precisely took off in the eleventh century), to Constantinople (where a wealth of relics attracted people in ever greater numbers) and to Jerusalem (and here we should not forget that Duke Robert the Magnificent died in 1035 while he was travelling back from the Holy Land).

Proposed themes:

- Itineraries, routes over sea and land.
- Circulations, connexions, networks.
- Trade.
- Pilgrimages.

### **3/ Places, gender, life and death**

Rodulfus Glaber's terrifying pages on the famine of the years 1031 to 1033 remind us of how precarious life was then for most of the population. The economic and demographic balances of the time, and the growth that characterised the West in the Central Middle Ages have all been reconsidered through new approaches based on notions of need, resources and the relationship between humans and their environment. The role played by lordship and coercion, work and the peasantry's initiative, technology and innovation, money and its circulation are also among the factors that should be interrogated. Varied approaches of 'material culture' have revealed new issues, which open more generally to questions about the relationship between humans and objects. Archaeological sites, newly excavated and published, help us answer them and bring new informations on conditions of life and residence: among them, the fortified settlement of Colletière in Charavines (Isère), occupied between 1006 and 1040, the castrum of Andone (Charente), abandoned in the 1020s, or the moated residence of Pineuilh (Gironde)... Both in urban and rural settings, churches and their cemeteries were increasingly polarising the lives of communities. Exchanges and connexions between the living and the dead remained a crucial preoccupation of kin- or church-based groups. Thousands of charters record gifts made to ecclesiastics 'for the sake of souls' (pro anima) or in memory of founders, donors and their families. It is well-known that women played an important role in such memorial practices, and the conference will allow participants to explore more broadly their agency in the social changes of the time. Here, William's birth may not be such a significant date, but the perspectives explained above are an occasion to develop comparative studies which will place Normandy in broader contexts.

Proposed themes:

- Connexions with the environment.
- Material culture.
- Ways of life, settlements.
- Connexions with the dead and the other world; memory of the deceased.

### **4/ Believing, thinking, creating**

Even if the pagan beliefs and rituals imported by Scandinavians in the tenth century do not seem to have survived in Normandy, the duchy probably was not immune from what Dominique Barthélemy has called 'the great awakening of heresy': indeed, the whole kingdom was concerned in the early eleventh century, for instance when the 'Orléans heretics' were denounced in 1022, as told by Rodulfus Glaber or Ademar of Chabannes. There was also a movement towards reform of Benedictine monasteries in the spirit of Cluny: in Normandy with William of Volpiano and his successors, but also beyond the eastern and north-eastern borders of the kingdom with Richard of Saint-Vanne in Verdun and Abbo Poppo in Stavelot. A new ecclesiastical elite worked

towards the consolidation of lay power, weaving networks of confraternity and fostering exchanges in the fields of liturgy, ideas, sciences and arts. This was also a time of development for episcopal schools, for copying and illuminating religious and non-religious manuscripts, and for creating new works in the fields of theology, historiography and poetry: we may mention here again Fulbert of Chartres and Adalbero of Laon, to whom Dudo of St Quentin dedicated his prosimetrical and panegyric history of the earliest Norman dukes. New architectural technologies were also experimented at that time, for example in the abbey church of Mont-Saint-Michel (the construction of which began in 1023) or in the cathedral of Chartres (the restoration of which started in 1024). The conference will allow participants to question or revisit beliefs and categories of thought, spiritual and intellectual debates, traditions and innovations in literature and the arts, all visible in the early eleventh century.

Proposed themes:

- Religious practices and beliefs, Christian and pagan.
- Religious and cultural networks.
- Production and circulation of manuscripts.
- Circulation of ideas and knowledge, and of artistic processes and techniques.

## **5/ Norman men and women of the 1020s**

The Normans of the 1020s may be approached through varied sources that allow us to better understand aspects of the society of that time. More than a year after the duchy had been founded, they shared the ways of life, the language and the beliefs of the Franks; all traces of the Scandinavian past of the province were rapidly fading. The conference will revisit these transformations and how they affected the inhabitants of the duchy. Who were Norman men and women in the 1020s? Did they share common identities, affiliations, cultural values, and how did they express them? A crucial factor of cohesion in the duchy and between its inhabitants was the power wielded by the ducal dynasty. How was the dukes' authority manifested and how did it frame society and its diverse components, both lay and ecclesiastical? To which extent can we perceive the action of social networks based on kinship, friendship, alliances or loyalty in their different forms (including feudal-vassal)? What agency did women have in these networks? Which aspirations, which contestations can we see emerging or circulating in this society? The conference will allow us to revisit the current image of a dynamic principality, where public order resisted better than elsewhere and where peasant communities benefited for more a favourable status or condition.

Proposed themes:

- Norman identity.
- The role played by the Norman dukes and their kin.
- The social and political fabric of the duchy of Normandy.
- Men and women in the duchy of Normandy.

## **6/ Norman men and women in the kingdom of France and in Europe**

As mentioned above, Normans are well-attested both in the kingdom and in the wider world. Some of them returned quickly, others remained in exile for long periods before

coming back, others settled permanently abroad. Take Roger de Tosny, who went to fight Saracens in the county of Barcelona, where he married around 1020 the daughter of Countess Ermesenda, but finally came back to Duke Richard II. In 1022, Emperor Henry II drafted 24 Normans to serve the nephews of Meles and fight the Byzantines, investing them with the county of Comino in Chieti province: we do know some of their names, such as Torstin Scitel or Hugh Falloc (this one later a companion of Robert Guiscard). Others settled with Prince Gaimar, while the Duke of Naples gave Rainulf his sister's hand, fortifying for him the county of Aversa in 1030. On the other side of the Channel, a Norman queen, Emma, the daughter of Richard I, reigned twice, first as Æthelred II's consort and then as Cnut's: long before 1066, a Norman princess wore the English crown. Many Norman knights were also looking for military employment or marrying into the greatest families, both in Northern and Southern Europe.

Proposed themes:

- The Normans in neighbouring principalities.
- The Normans in Southern Italy and in the Mediterranean.
- The Normans in England and in the Insular world.

Our conference will give priority to proposals that combine several of the approaches outlined above and help presenting a dynamic vision of the world in which William was born and understanding how the future 'Conqueror' made it change.

The conference will host two kinds of contributions: 30-minute presentations followed by discussions; and posters on specific case studies, which will be presented by their authors in a special session. We welcome proposals by early career scholars: the 'Centre culturel international de Cerisy' is an ideal venue, fostering discussion and allowing them to receive advice from members of the scientific board or from other scholars attending the conference.

Proposals for papers or posters must be sent **before 1 June 2026** to all organisers: Pierre Bauduin ([pierre.bauduin@unicaen.fr](mailto:pierre.bauduin@unicaen.fr)), Alban Gautier ([alban.gautier@unicaen.fr](mailto:alban.gautier@unicaen.fr)) and Marie-Agnès Lucas-Avenel ([marie-agnes.avenel@unicaen.fr](mailto:marie-agnes.avenel@unicaen.fr)). Applicants should submit two separate files: a 1-page abstract, clearly stating how the proposed contribution may fit within one or several topics outlined in the call for papers; and a 1-page CV.