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## Was there a specifically viking frontier? Some first thoughts on three Frankish cases

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# A viking frontier?

- 1) Ninth-century Frisia (c. 826 - 885): A family affair.
- 2) Nantes and Brittany c. 919 – 939: Places to raid from.
- 3) Early ‘ Normandy’: A lucky survival.

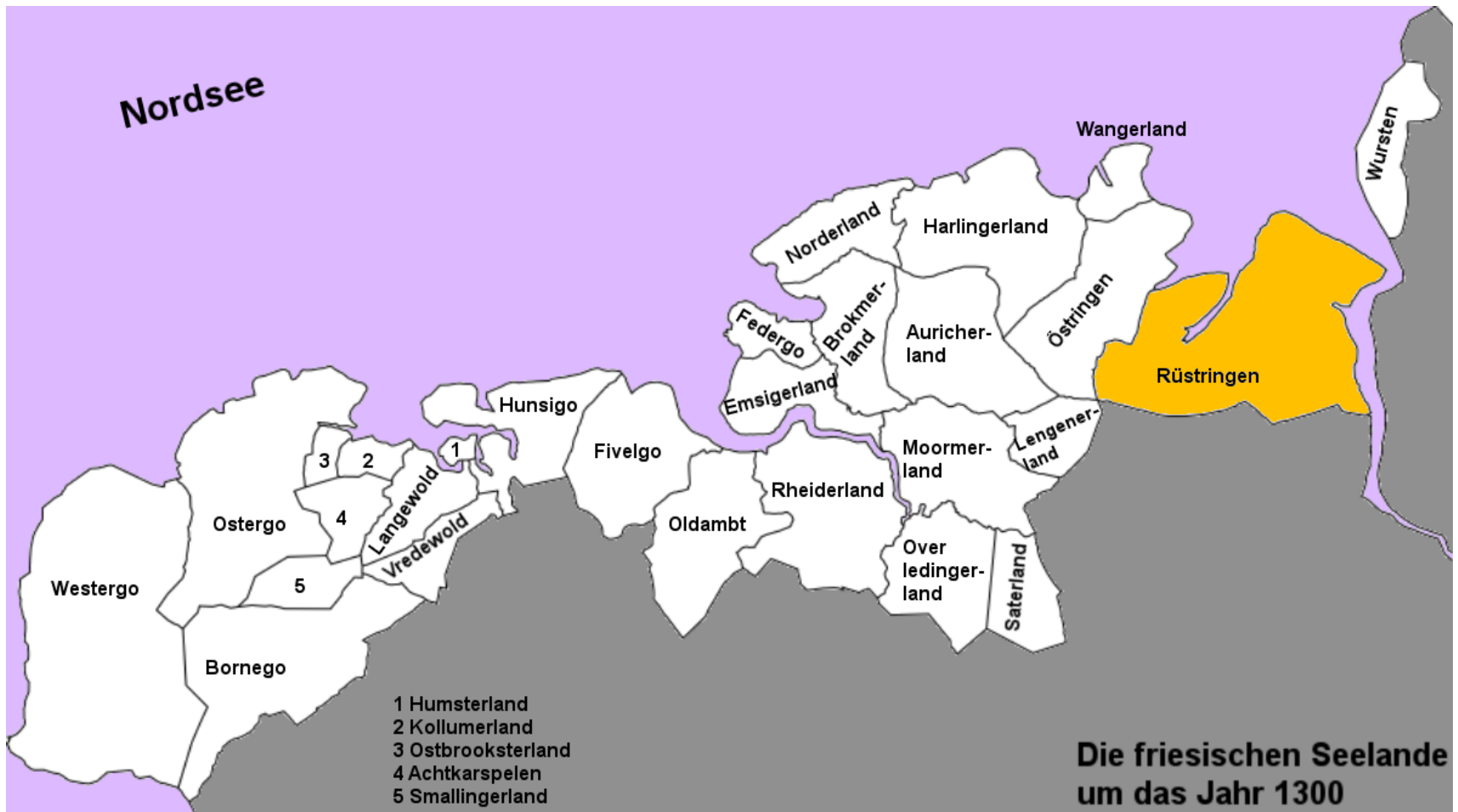
# Ninth-century Frisia

## Frisia Magna



# Ninth-century Frisia

## Later Frisia



# Ninth-century Frisia

Some of the exiled royal Danish family

- ❑ Harald 'Klak' (son of Halfdan) (d. c. 852)
- ❑ His brother Hemming (d. 837)
- ❑ Godfrid Haraldson (d. after 855)
- ❑ Rorik (d. after 873) and brother Harald Junior (d. mid-840s), sons of brother of Harald Klak (Hemming ?)
- ❑ Rodulf (d. 873) – son of Harald the Younger
- ❑ Godfrid II (d. 885) – close relative

# Ninth-century Frisia

Harald Klak's baptism at Mainz in 826



# Ninth-century Frisia

Carolingian coastal defense and early  
Scandinavian attacks on Frisia



# Ninth-century Frisia

837

‘The Emperor [Louis the Pious] put the coastal defences of Frisia in order.’ (AB)

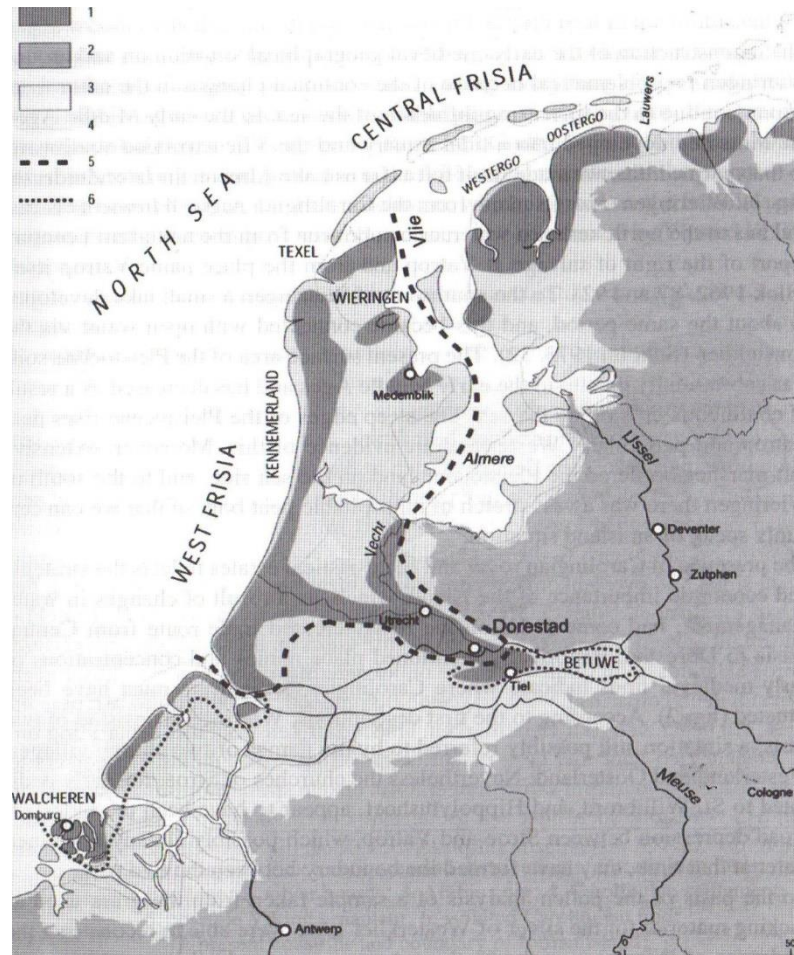
‘The Northmen at this time fell on Frisia with their usual surprise attack. Coming upon our people unprepared on an island called Walcheren, they slaughtered many of them and plundered even more. They stayed on the island for a while, levying as much tribute as they wanted. They they fell on Dorestad with the same fury and exacted tribute in the same way. When the Emperor heard about these attacks, he postponed his planned journey to Rome and wasted no time in hurrying to the fort of Nijmegen close by Dorestad. When the Northmen heard of his arrival there, they withdrew immediately.’ (AB)

During this raid the Danish *dux* Hemming, son of Harald, (*ex stirpe Danorum, dux Christianissimus*) was killed together with a leader called Eccihard (Thegan continuation)



# Ninth-century Frisia

Areas 'controlled' by the exiled royal Danes





# Ninth-century Frisia

837

‘Ships were built against the Northmen.’ (AF s.a. 838=837?)

‘Now the Emperor summoned a general assembly and held an inquiry with those magnates to whom he had delegated the task of guarding that coast. It became clear from the discussion that partly through the sheer impossibility of the task, partly through the disobedience of certain men, it had not been possible for them to offer any resistance to the attackers. Energetic abbots and counts were therefore dispatched to suppress the insubordinate Frisians. Now too, so that from then on he would be better able to resist their incursions, he gave orders that a fleet should be made ready to go more speedily in pursuit in whatever direction might be required.’ (AB)

# Ninth-century Frisia

838

‘The Emperor [Louis] was planning to proceed [to Nijmegen] as arranged so that through his presence, the sort of damage that occurred in previous years because of the pirates’ savagery and our men’s fecklessness might now be avoided.’ An assembly of faithful men was held and quantities of equipment and supplies were distributed around the coastal areas.’ (AB)

‘ While this was happening Danish pirates sailed out of their homeland but a sudden severe storm arose at sea and they were drowned with scarcely any survivors.’ (AB)



# Ninth-century Frisia

## These coastal defences did not work

839

‘Some pirates attacked part of Frisia and imposed great suffering on our frontier territories.’ (AB)

840 -841

‘Lothar, to secure the services of Harald [the Younger], who along with other Danish pirates had for some years been imposing many sufferings on Frisia and the other coastal regions of the Christians, to the damage of Lothar’s father’s interests and the furtherance of his own, now granted him Walcheren and the neighbouring regions as a benefice. This was surely an utterly detestable crime [ ... ]’ (AB 841)

At this time as well Harald and his brother Rorik were first granted Dorestad in benefice (see AF s.a. 850)

# Ninth-century Frisia

## Later history of the Danes in Frisia: 850 - 885

- ❑ Rorik returned to attack Frisia in 850 and seized Dorestad, which Lothar I had to (re)grant him 'on condition that he would faithfully handle the taxes and other matters pertaining to the royal fisc, and would resist the piratical attacks of the Danes'. (AF 850)
- ❑ Rorik and his cousin Godfrid made a first unsuccessful bid to take the Danish throne in 855, after which they 'remained based at Dorestad and held sway over most of Frisia'. (AB 855). Rorik tried again in 857, with more success.
- ❑ The true viking Rodulf.
- ❑ Godfrid II (d. 885). In 882 Charles the Fat granted Godfrid 'Frisia and the other regions that Roric had held'. (AB) Godfrid entered into a plot with Lothar II's bastard son Hugh and was murdered in 885.

# Ninth-century Frisia

## The nature of the Frisian 'viking' frontier

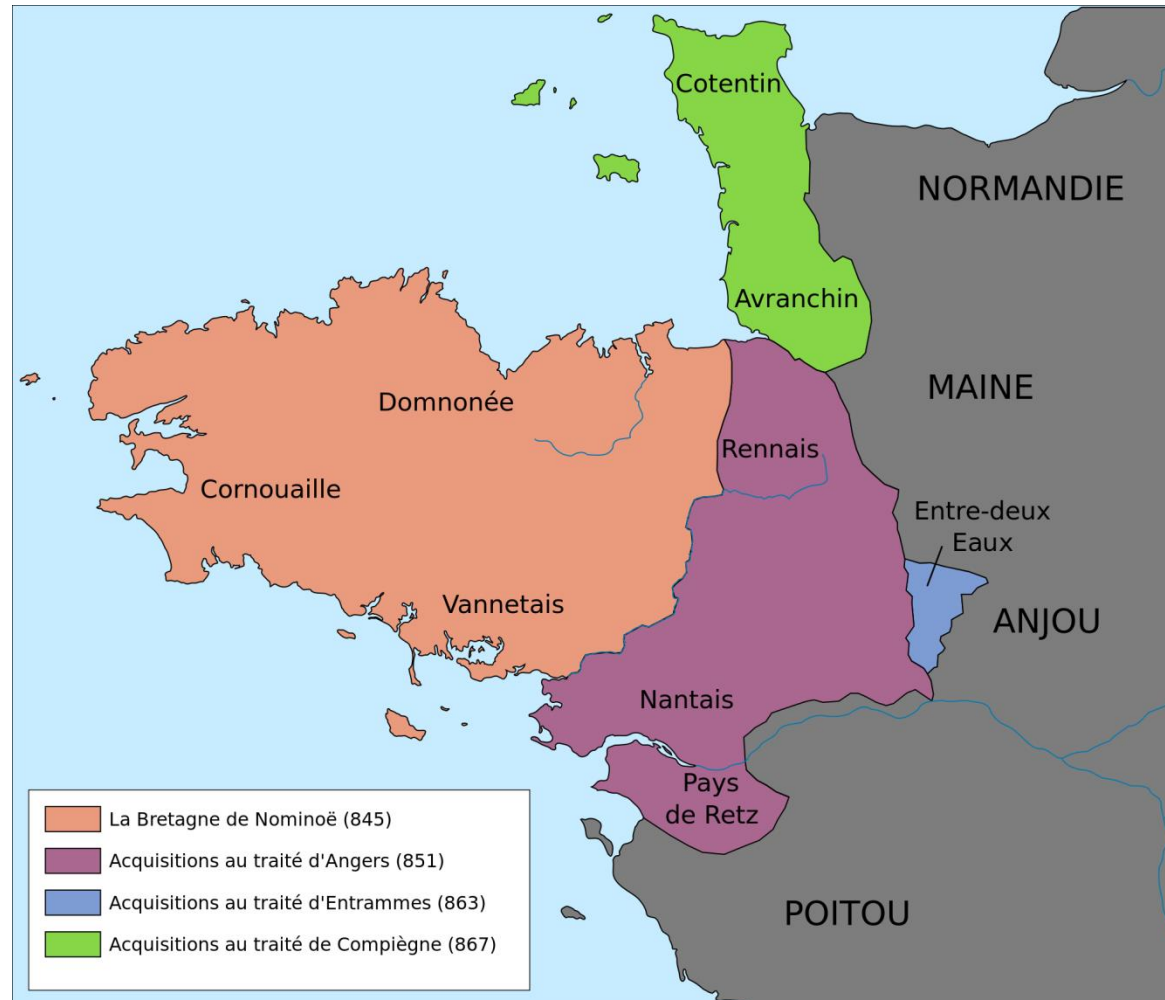
- ❑ The Franks tried to use the Northmen as gamekeepers in Frisia, as coastal defenders against attacks by their compatriots.
- ❑ This rarely worked out well for the Franks.
- ❑ Sometimes the Franks used the Northmen in their family fights.
- ❑ But having gained the grants of *safe areas* the Danish exiles repeatedly used them as springboards from which to try to regain their royal position in Denmark, and as bases to raid further afield, for example in England, Francia and possibly Ireland and Aquitaine.
- ❑ The hinterlands around their various ship-bases were just no-go areas for the Franks, and which could be used by the Scandinavians to exact tribute.
- ❑ Scandinavian 'settlement' was limited to in and around their ship-bases and left no permanent imprint.



# Nantes and Brittany c. 919 – 939

‘In the year 919 [ ... ] the Northmen ravaged, destroyed and annihilated all of Brittany in Cournouaille, which is located on the seashore. The Bretons were abducted and sold, while those who escaped were driven out.’ (Flodoard of Reims)

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# Nantes and Brittany c. 919 – 939

‘In the year 921 [...] for five months Count Robert [of Paris] beseiged the Northmen who were operating on the river Loire. After he received hostages from them, he conceded Brittany to the Northmen, which they had devastated, along with the *pagus* of Nantes.’

(Flodoard of Reims)

# Nantes and Brittany c. 919 – 939

‘In the year 923 [ ... ] the Northmen raided Aquitaine and the Auvergne, William, the duke of the Aquitanians, and Raymond [count of Toulouse] fought against them, and 12,000 of the Northmen were killed there.’

(Flodoard of Reims)

# Nantes and Brittany c. 919 – 939

But this land grant was hollow and worthless because later in 923:

‘Ragenold, the *princeps* of the Northmen who were engaged on the river Loire, had for a long time been stirred up by Charles’s frequent messages and now crossed the Oise and raided Francia, joined by many from Rouen’ (Flodoard)

Ragenold had left the Loire and taken the lead of Rollo’s Northmen!

# Nantes and Brittany c. 919 – 939

- ❑ The Battle of Soissons in 923 – flight and exile of Charles the Simple.
- ❑ Death of King Robert the Great and choice of Rodulf of Burgundy as king of West Francia.
- ❑ The Northmen played both sides – making and breaking oaths, demanding more land and receiving tribute.

## **Eventually in 924:**

Rollo's Northmen were granted 'Maine and the Bessin'

## **BUT**

'Ragenoldus with his Northmen laid waste the lands of Hugh [the Great], between the Loire and the Seine, because they had not yet been given possessions inside the Gauls' (Flodoard)

'William [of Aquitaine] and Hugh [the Great], son of Robert, made a security pact for their lands with Ragenoldus, and Ragenoldus and his Northmen set out into Burgundy' (Flodoard)



# Nantes and Brittany c. 919 – 939

❑ Ragenoldus's Northmen were confronted in early 925 by Burgundian magnates at *Mons Calaus* on the upper Seine. But despite losses they managed to escape and, probably, returned to the lower Loire. Ragenold may have been killed here. (Cf. Flodoard; Aimoin of Fleury, *Miracles of Saint-Benedict*).

❑ In 927: 'The Northmen of the Loire were besieged for five weeks by Heribert and Hugh. After hostages were offered and accepted and the *pagus* of Nantes was conceded to them, the Northmen agreed to peace with the Franks.' (Flodoard)

# Nantes and Brittany c. 919 – 939

Efforts to expel these Northmen continued:

‘In the year 930, the Northmen of the Loire were attacking Aquitaine with plundering expeditions, but king Rodulf almost annihilated them in a single battle in the *pagus* of Limoges.’ (Flodoard)

The Bretons also rose up. On 29 September 931:

‘The Bretons who had remained subdued by the Northmen in Cournouaille rose up against those who were holding them in their power. It was said that they killed all the Northmen who were found among them, and the first who died was their commander (*dux*), Felecan.’ (Flodoard)

# Nantes and Brittany c. 919 – 939

The Northmen responded:

‘The Northman Incon, who was staying on the Loire, invaded Brittany with his men. He gained possession of the region after defeating, plundering, killing and expelling the Bretons.’ (Flodoard s.a. 931)

Contrary to a certain ‘Norman’ historiography this repression of the Breton revolt was not a two-pronged affair involving the Northmen of the Loire and those of the Seine.

# Nantes and Brittany c. 919 – 939

- ❑ In 936 the exiled Breton Alan 'Barbetorte' returned from his exile at King Aethelstan's court, as did Louis IV d'Outremer.
- ❑ By 939 Alan had managed (with help) to expel the Northmen from Brittany and Nantes.

# Nantes and Brittany c. 919 – 939

The nature of the Nantes/Breton 'viking' frontier

The concessions made to Ragenold by the Franks (Brittany and the Nantaise) were:

- Granted in attempts to stop raiding in Nuestria/Francia
- Recognition of Frankish impotence to defend the areas
- In areas they did not control
- Used sporadically as raiding-bases by the Northmen
- Never really settled
- Of very limited duration

# Early 'Normandy'

Saint-Clair-sur-Epte 911



# Early 'Normandy'

Saint-Clair-sur-Epte 911





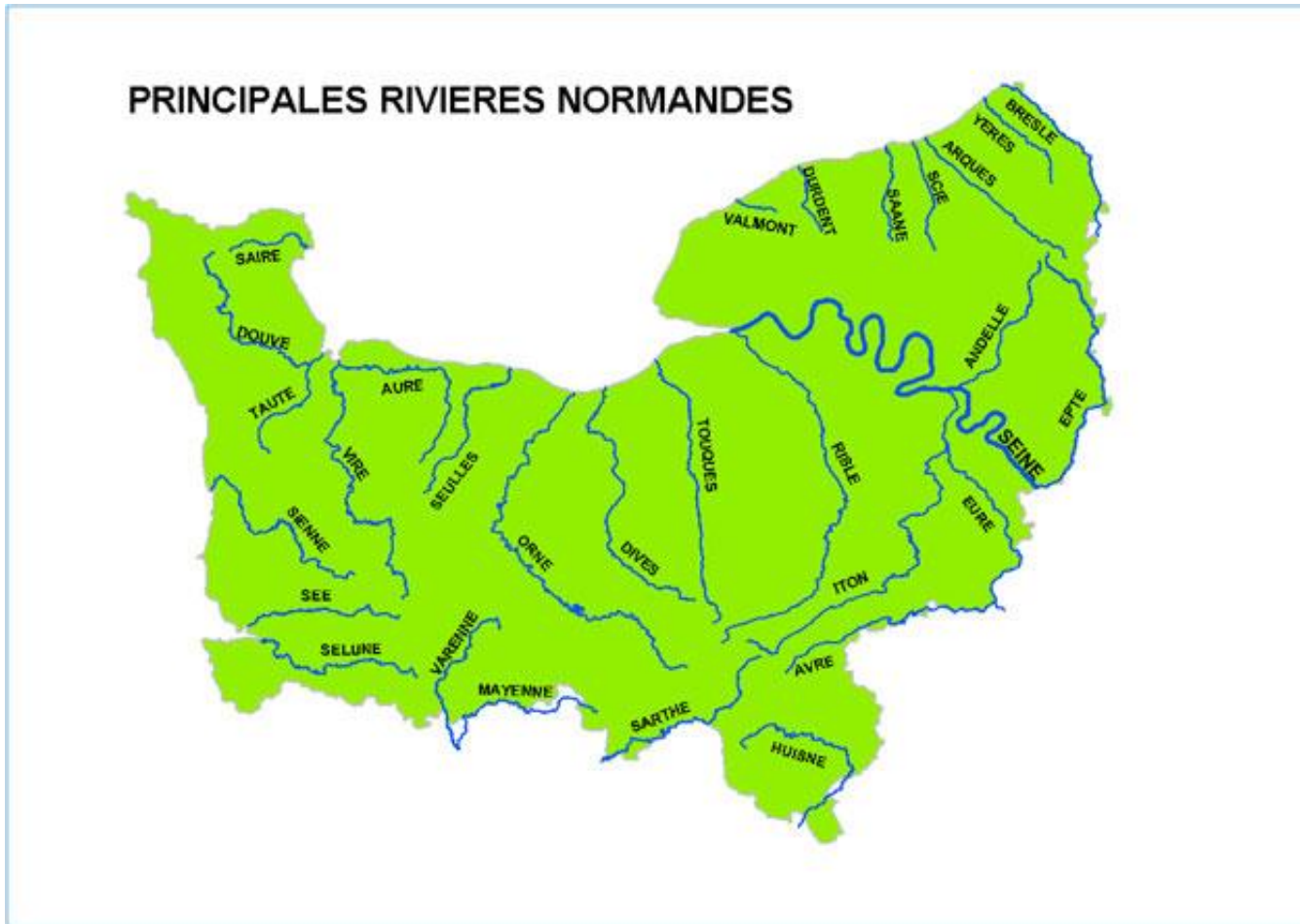
# Early 'Normandy'

## The extent of the first land grant

- ❑ In 923 King Rodulf and the Franks 'crossed the Epte and entered the land that had been given to the Northmen when they had come into the faith of Christ shortly before, so that they might cultivate the faith and have peace'.
- ❑ Rodulf then devastated these lands 'with fire and sword' because the Northmen had broken the peace they had agreed earlier because King Charles 'had promised them a vast amount of land' (Flodoard, *Annals*)
- ❑ After the battle/seige of Chartres 'the Northmen 'accepted to receive Christ against the concession to their profit of certain *pagi* along the coast, with the town of Rouen, which they had almost totally destroyed, and other towns'. (Flodoard, *HRE*)
- ❑ In 925 the Northmen were holding the *castrum* of Eu on the river Bresle (bordering Picardy)

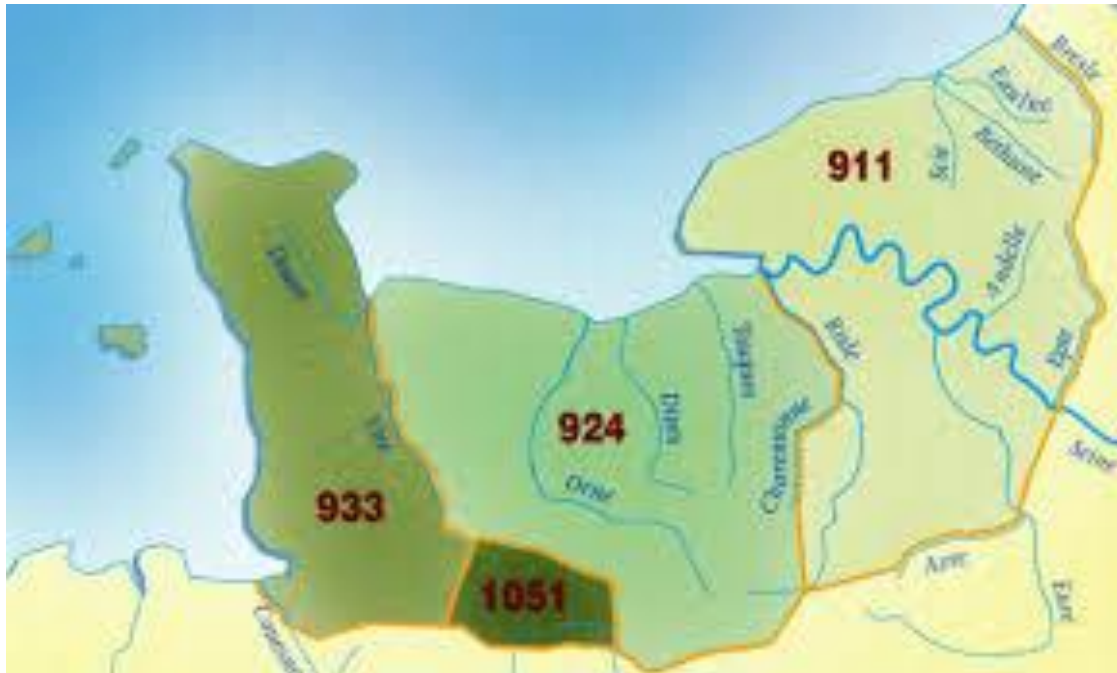
# Early 'Normandy'

The extent of the first land grant



# Early 'Normandy'

The three-stage expansion of early Normandy is a myth



# Early 'Normandy'

- ❑ Since at least 923 the Northmen had been demanding more land 'beyond the Seine' from King Charles and then from Rodulf, in return for their support (Cf. Flodoard s.a. 923)
- ❑ In 924: 'The Northmen made peace with the Franks by oaths, due to the efforts of Count Hugh, Count Heribert, and Archbishop Seulfus because King Rodulf was absent. However, with the king's consent, more lands were conceded to the Northmen in a pact of peace, that is, Maine and the Bessin.' (Flodoard)
- ❑ In 933: 'William [Longsword], the *princeps* of the Northmen, committed himself to the king (Rodulf), who then gave William the land of the Bretons that was located along the sea coast.' (Flodoard)
- ❑ Both these 'western' concessions were immediately contested and never took effect. The concessions were hollow sops given by the Franks of Rodulf – go and take them if you can!
- ❑ The Northmen of Rouen actually spent the next decades (920s – 940s) trying to expand into Picardy, resisting the counts of Flanders and the attempts of the Franks to wipe out their irritating small 'colony'.

# Early 'Normandy'

## The nature of the first *Norman* 'viking' frontier

- ❑ In 911 the concession was made to recognize the impotence of the Franks on the lower Seine and along the neighbouring sea coasts
- ❑ Plus to prevent further attacks deeper into Frankish territory (which failed)
- ❑ The latter concessions 924 and 933 were hollow and theoretical, and never came to be until much later in the tenth century. They were made by King Rodulf in desperate times to try to get/keep the support of the Northmen
- ❑ For decades the Franks (and Flemish) tried to wipe out this irritating small 'colony'
- ❑ That 'Normandy' survived was pure luck

# Three frontiers compared – some thoughts

Although there were many differences all three 'viking frontiers' had similar features

- ❑ All were forced grants made at times of inner-Frankish strife, rivalry and chaos – sometimes with the intent of gaining Scandinavian support
- ❑ They all recognized the reality on the ground
- ❑ In areas where the Northmen had established or could establish secure ship-bases for further raiding and land grabs
- ❑ The ill-defined hinterlands (frontiers) were areas from where the Scandinavians could extract tribute from the local population without fear of Frankish opposition
- ❑ There was little/no extensive Scandinavian settlement within these frontiers – this came later in 'Normandy'
- ❑ For the Franks these concessions were often hollow and meaningless but they were always seen as temporary expedients – areas to be retaken later
- ❑ Attempts to use the Northmen in Frankish fights were only occasionally and fleetingly successful
- ❑ Turning poachers into gamekeepers rarely worked!