

Salty Vikings

**SALT AND THE EARLIEST VIKING RAIDS IN FRANCE: WAS
THERE A CONNECTION?**

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'Viking World' Conference 1 July 2016

Nottingham University

To be published in *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 2016

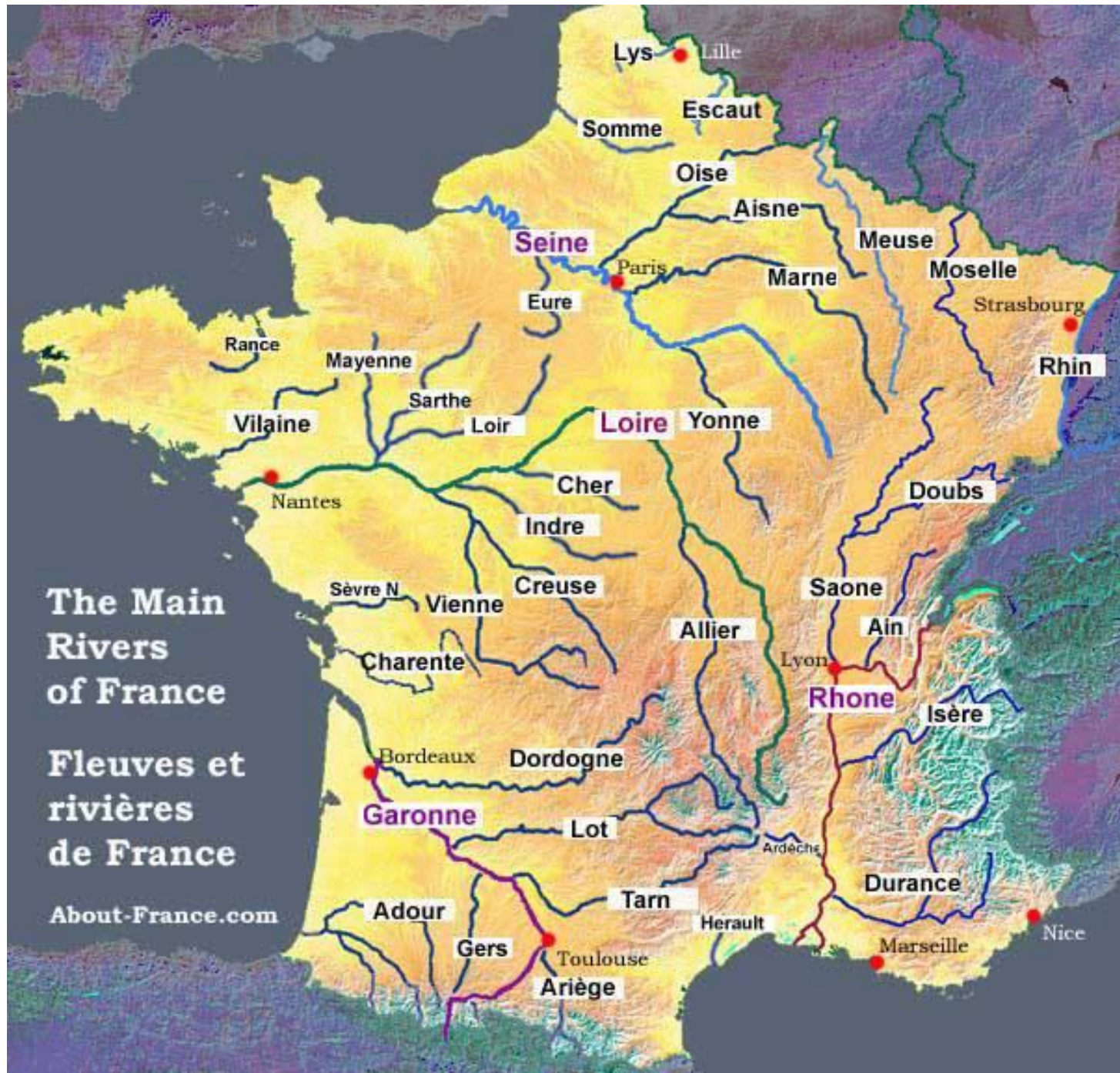






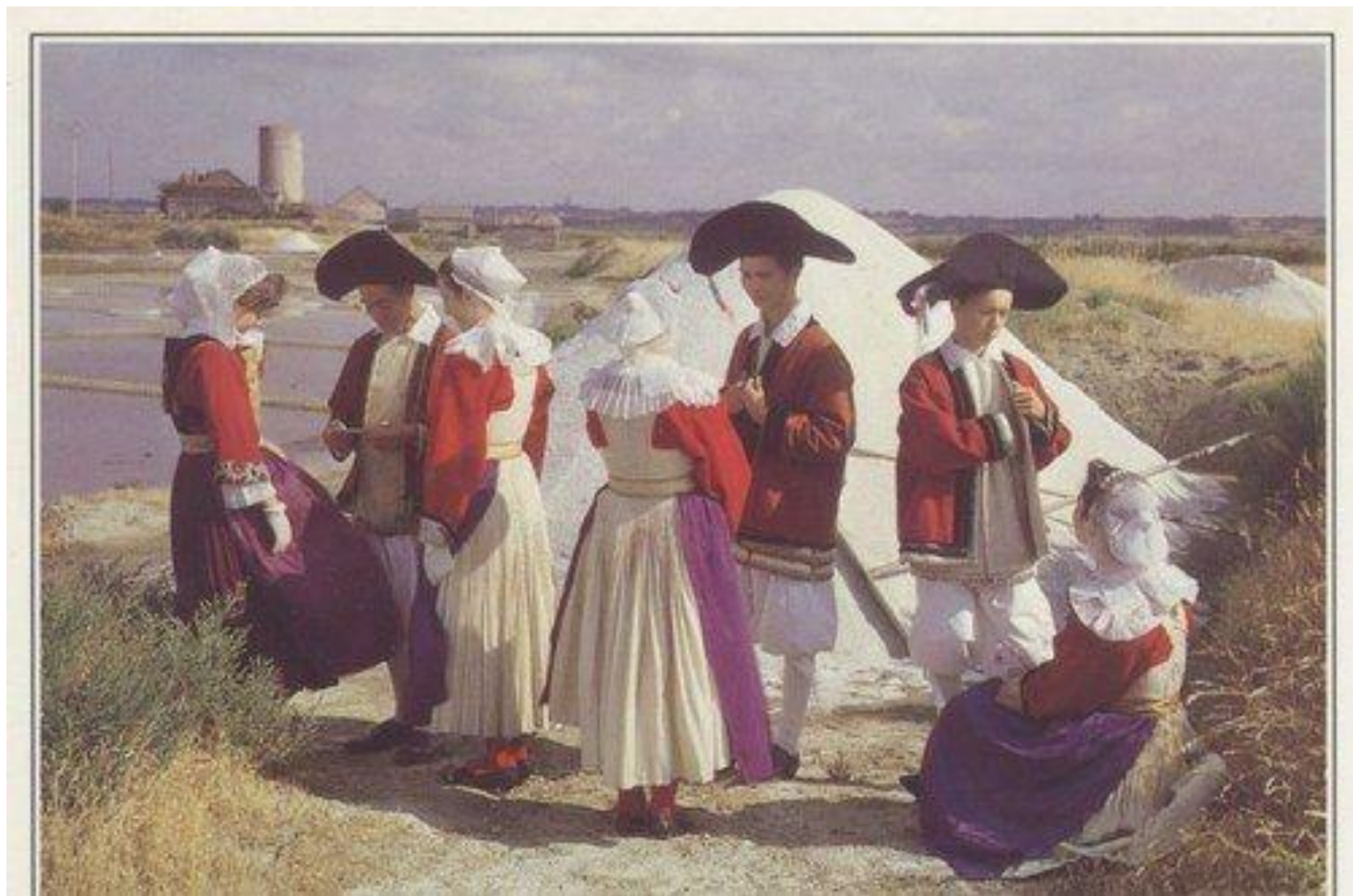






L'île de Noirmoutier









A.D. 799 – First Scandinavian raid

Alcuin wrote to his friend and pupil Arno, the bishop of Salzburg, telling him that pagans had arrived in the ‘islands of the coast of Aquitaine’ and caused a lot of damage (*multa mala*).

‘Paganae vero naves, ut audistis, multa mala fecerunt per insulas Oceani partibus Aquitaniae; pars tamen ex illis periit; et occisi sunt in littore quasi centum quinque viri ex illis praedatoribus. Castigatio est magna horum eruptio, antiquis ignota temporibus populo Christiano; quia forte vota non servant famuli Dei quae vovere solent’ (Jaffé, Dümmler & Wattenbach 1873, 799).

A.D. 820

The Royal Frankish Annals:

From the land of the Norsemen [...] thirteen pirate vessels set out and tried to plunder on the shores of Flanders, but were repelled by guards. But because of the carelessness of the defenders, some wretched huts were burned down and a small number of cattle taken away. When the Norsemen made similar attempts on the mouth of the River Seine, the coast guards fought back, and the pirates retreated empty-handed after losing five men. Finally, on the coast of Aquitaine they met with success, thoroughly plundered a village by the name of Bouin, and then returned home with immense booty. (Scholz 1972, 107-8; Kurze 1895, 153)

Ninth-century Astronomer's Life of the Emperor Louis:

At the same time [820] it was announced to the emperor that thirteen ships from the lands of the Northmen had sailed across the sea and planned to attack and lay waste our coasts. When the emperor commanded that lookouts and guards be arranged against them, they were driven from Flemish soil and from the mouth of the Seine. They turned to Aquitaine, wasted a village named Bouin [*Bundium*] and went home having loaded up a great deal of booty. (Noble 2011, 261; Tremp 1995, 399-400)

Part of foundation charter of Noirmoutier Monastery. A.D. 677

'I, Ansoald, bishop of the town of Poitiers [...] give to my brother Philibert, whom I have established as father of the monastery on the island of Her, a *villa* situated at Ampan on the edge of the sea, with its houses, its buildings, its vineyards, its fields, its inhabitants and its servants of both sexes and its *salines*.'

(Maître 1898, 239-40, my translation)

Saint Philibert



Photo by Salsymay

A.D. 819 - *diplôme* of emperor Louis the Pious

- ❑ In 819, Arnulf, the abbot of Noirmoutier, received a *diplôme* from emperor Louis the Pious granting the new monastic *villa* he had founded a few years before at Déas, just south of Nantes, the right to build an aqueduct to bring water from the nearby river Boulogne (Böhmer and Mühlbacher 1908, n. 687).
- ❑ This satellite monastery became known as Saint-Philbert-de-Grand-Lieu and eventually eclipsed and replaced its mother monastery.
- ❑ The villa of Déas was one of those originally granted to Philibert by Bishop Ansoald in 677 (Maître 1898, 240-42; Poupardin 1905, xxvi n. 2).

A.D. 819 - *diplôme* of emperor Louis the Pious

The 819 *diplôme* makes it quite clear why the new monastery at Déas had been founded: there had already been frequent ‘barbarian’ raids and looting of the monastery on Noirmoutier.

‘Monasterio sancti Filiberti, quod est situm in insula quae dicitur Aeri [Noirmoutier], propter incursiones barbarorum qui frequenter ipsum monasterium depopulantur, foras in pago qui dicitur Erbadellicus, in loco (cujus) vocabulum est Deas, per nostrum consensum atque adjutorium, novum monasterium edificasse [...]’

(Poupardin 1905, xxv; for the full text see: Böhmer and Mühlbacher 1908, n. 687; Migne 1851, PL 104, col. 979-1310)

A.D. 819 - *diplôme* of emperor Louis the Pious

What the *diplôme* of 819 also shows is that Déas had been founded relatively recently – probably in 814 or 815. Thus it is almost certain that there must have been several raids on Noirmoutier in the years before 819, indeed most likely before the foundation of Déas in 814/15 as well.



Saint-Philbert-de-Grand-Lieu, Déas

Déas was a place to which the Noirmoutier monks could escape during the summers to avoid the incursions of the Northmen, which they evidently later did every year, taking all the movable valuables of the monastery on Noirmoutier with them.



Late 820s

The threat of further raids had not gone away, because sometime in the late 820s Hilbod, who had become abbot of Saint Philibert's monastery on Noirmoutier in 824 or 825, started to fortify it against potential future attacks by the Northmen. (cf. Poupardin 1905, xxvii).

'The continual threats caused the abbot of Noirmoutier, Hilbod, to protect the cloister with strong surrounding walls' (Vogel 1906, 63)

A.D. 830?

Under this year the *Chronicon Aquitanicum* says just that the monks had left the island in June (for Déas no doubt)

‘Herio insula a generali monachorum habitatione destituitur, mense junio’ (Pertz 1829, 252-53).

Borrowing the *Chronicon’s* words, the eleventh-century French monk and historian Adémar of Chabannes adds not only that the ‘*Normanni*’ had burnt the monastery but, in manuscript C, that their ships had come to the ‘Aquitanian sea’ (‘*ad mare Aquitanicum*’) because they feared the Saxons! (Lair 1899, 104-6; Chavanon 1897, I. III, c. 16, 131).

A.D. 830 - *diplôme* of emperor Louis the Pious

- ❑ In a *diplôme* dated 2 August 830, the emperor Louis the Pious and his son Lothar I granted the monks, lay people and slaves of the monastery exemption from public service on condition that they pay six pounds of silver yearly to the royal *fisc*. The reason for this exemption was, the *diploma* tells us, that all the people of the newly fortified monastery were needed for its defence and protection against persistent attacks by the Northmen.
- ❑ The *diplôme* says that the monks moved out (to Déas) every year from spring till the end of autumn, which would imply that they had been doing so for some years before 830.
- ❑ Thus all the evidence shows that from around 814 or 815 until 830 the Northmen had come to Noirmoutier and the bay of Bourgneuf on a pretty regular basis.

A.D. 834

In the summer of 834 the Northmen were back again.

As was by now their habit, the monks had cleared out from Noirmoutier in June, but the remains of their holy and revered Saint Philibert were still left in his grave on the island.

A.D. 835

- On 20 August, the day of the festival of Saint Philibert, Northmen landed in just nine ships in a bay called *Concha* on the north side of the island.
- *Concha* was Noirmoutier's *portus* and was situated at the north-west tip of the island, very close to all the *salines* and the monastery and *castrum* – which were on the site of the present-day church of Saint Philibert and the adjoining Château in Noirmoutier-en-l'Île.
- They were heading on foot for the monastery when they were confronted by the Frankish count Rainald of Herbage at the head of a troop of horsemen.
- The outcome of this engagement is uncertain. The local and contemporary *Annales Engolismenses* simply say that Rainald fought with the Northmen on the island of 'Hero'.
- Adémar of Chabannes said that Rainald had fought the Northmen but had fled.
- The monk Ermentarius tells of a great victory for Rainald: the Franks lost only one man and some horses, while the Northmen's losses amounted to 484 men!
- On balance, despite his seemingly gross exaggeration regarding the Northmen's likely losses (particularly as he says there were only nine viking ships) Ermentarius's account is most likely correct in reporting that the Franks had been victorious – a victory over the Northmen which was 'only possible because the tide had gone out, allowing Rainald and his horsemen to cross from the mainland' (Coupland 2004, 68).

La Conche des/aux Normands



A.D. 836

- Whatever the truth of the matter, at least some of the coastal defences the Carolingians had tried to put in place were still working from time to time.
- In the aftermath of this latest raid the monks 'saw themselves being forced to dissolve the last link that bound them to the island' (Vogel 1906, 69).

A.D. 836

- In 836 Abbot Hilbod asked Louis the Pious's son Pippin of Aquitaine for help.
- Pippin replied that he could not do anything because at high tide the island was inaccessible to them but was easy to reach by ship for the Northmen.
- The Franks could not consider defending the island with ships they clearly did not have, at least not in this region.
- In fact 'there is indeed no indication that any Carolingian ruler ever used a naval force at sea against Scandinavian attack' (Coupland 2004, 51).
- Ultimately, fearing that their walls would not survive a major attack, the monks of Noirmoutier reluctantly decided that they must remove Saint Philibert's body (*corpus*) to Déas.
- Hilbod asked Pippin for permission to do so, which was granted, and the saint's bones were removed on 7 June 836.
- The monks left Noirmoutier too.

A.D. 836

Kendrick said:

‘the dangers of its island-position made defence against a Viking fleet a peril worse than precipitate flight. Eventually the wretched and often ruined buildings of the monastery were abandoned, and the island became a Viking-headquarters where the pirates could pass the winter’ (1930, 193).

Actually there is no real evidence that the monastery was wretched and ruined, and as far as we know the Northmen did not overwinter on an Aquitanian island for the first time until the winter of 843/4 after the sack of Nantes.

Sack of Nantes A.D. 843

The Annals of St-Bertin

Northmen pirates attacked Nantes, slew the bishop and many clergy and lay people of both sexes, and sacked the civitas. Then they attacked the western parts of Aquitaine to devastate them too. Finally they landed on a certain island, brought their households from the mainland and decided to winter there in something like a permanent settlement.

(Nelson 1991, 55)

The *Annales Engolismenses* say that these Northmen were 'Westfaldingi' (Holder-Egger 1859, 486).

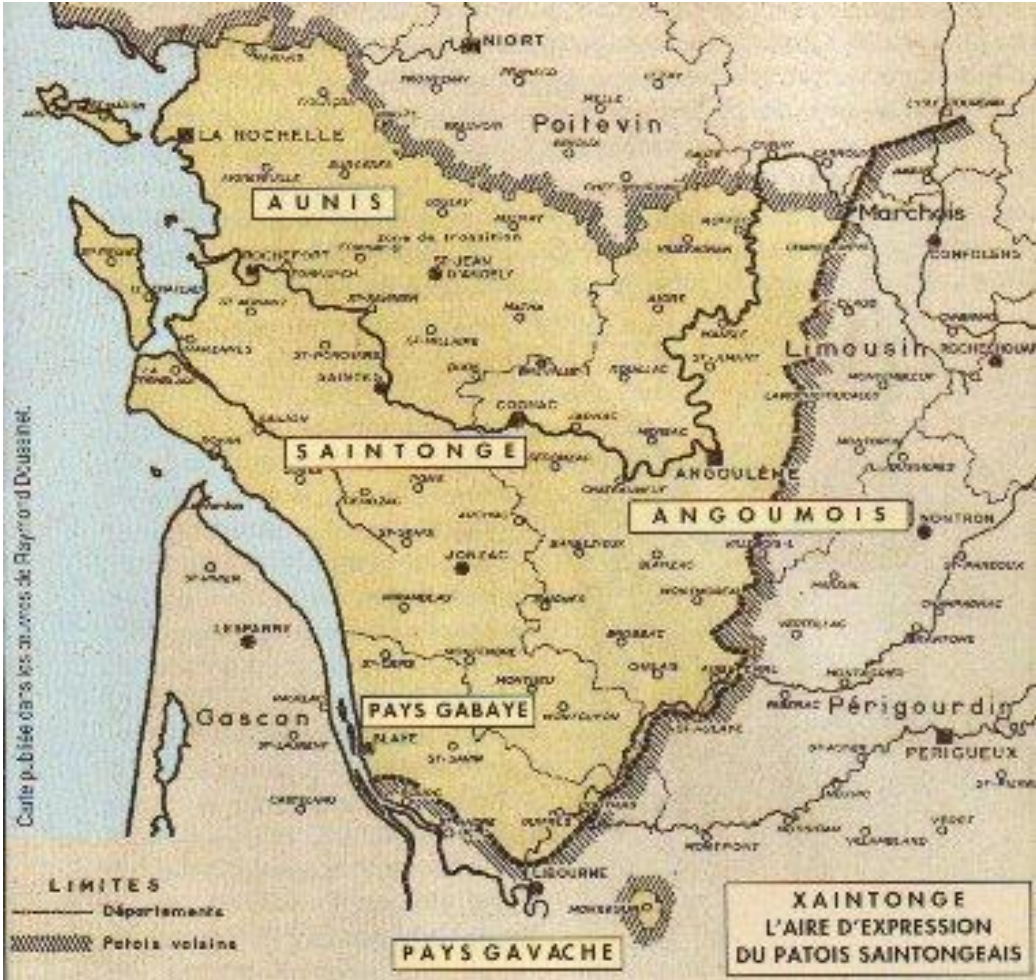
Sack of Nantes A.D. 843



Sack of Nantes A.D. 843

The *Chronicle of Nantes* reports that when the Northmen were done they went to Noirmoutier with their immense spoils, including many captives who they hoped to ransom to their families or sell into slavery. While the Northmen were violently arguing with each other about the fair division of the booty which they had unloaded onto Noirmoutier's beaches some of the captives managed to escape (Merlet 1896, c. 7, 18-19).

Return from Spain 845



What was so attractive about this small area for the Northmen? Why did they keep coming back year after year?

The production of salt

In Europe salt was and is produced by three primary methods:

- ❑ Salt-wells in Central Europe.
- ❑ Salt extracted from cooking peat in Frisia and elsewhere.
- ❑ Solar evaporation of sea water ‘collected in man-made sea-gardens along the Atlantic coast of France and the Mediterranean’.

‘Sea-gardens’, *salines* in French, were situated ‘mainly north and south of the estuary of the Loire, particularly in the bay of Bourgneuf’ in the early medieval period. (Verhulst 2002, 80).

Polish salt miners



Making salt using peat in Frisia

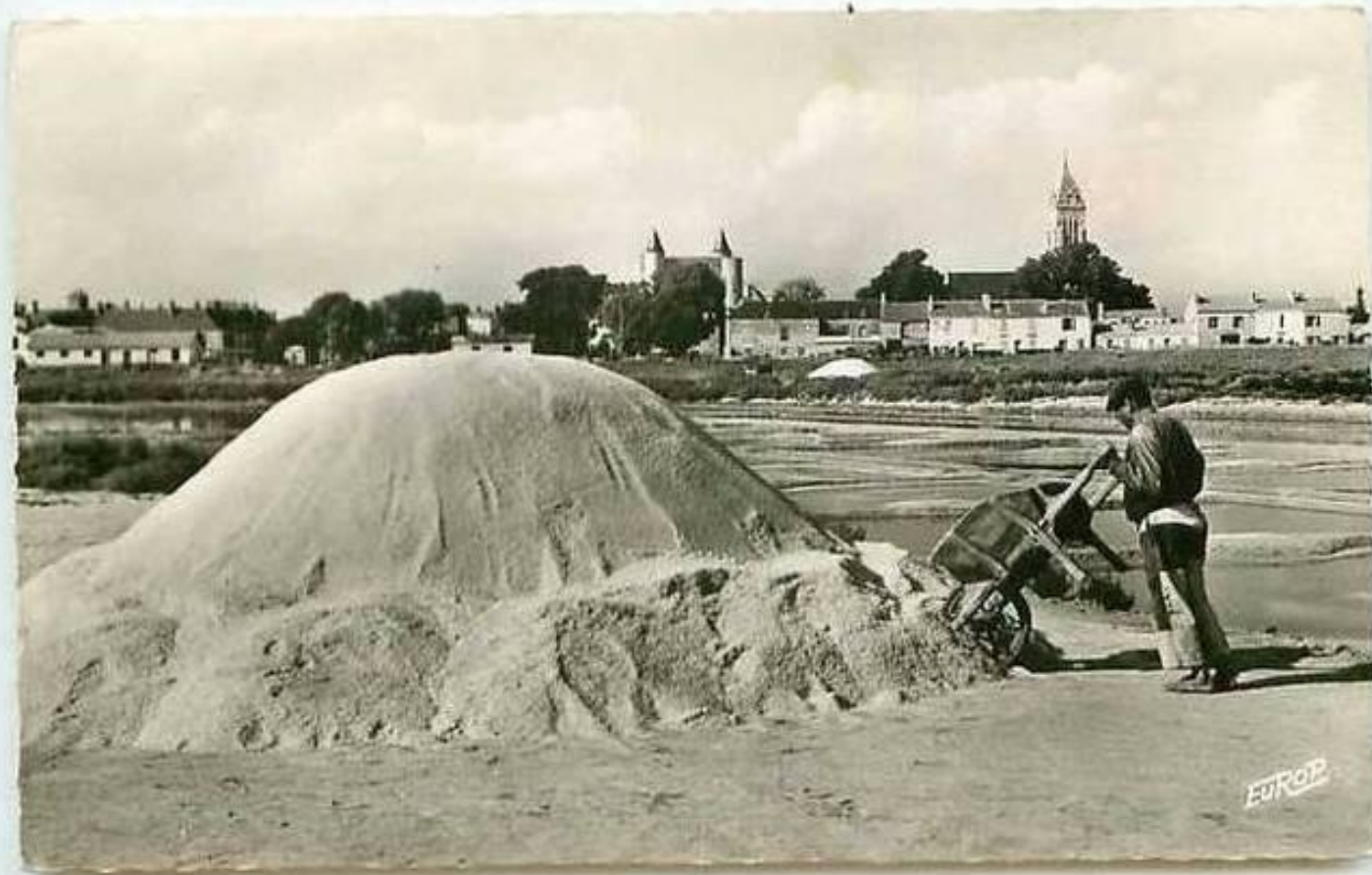


Solar Evaporation





167. NOIRMOUTIER - Les Marais salants - A l'arrière-plan, le Château et l'Église



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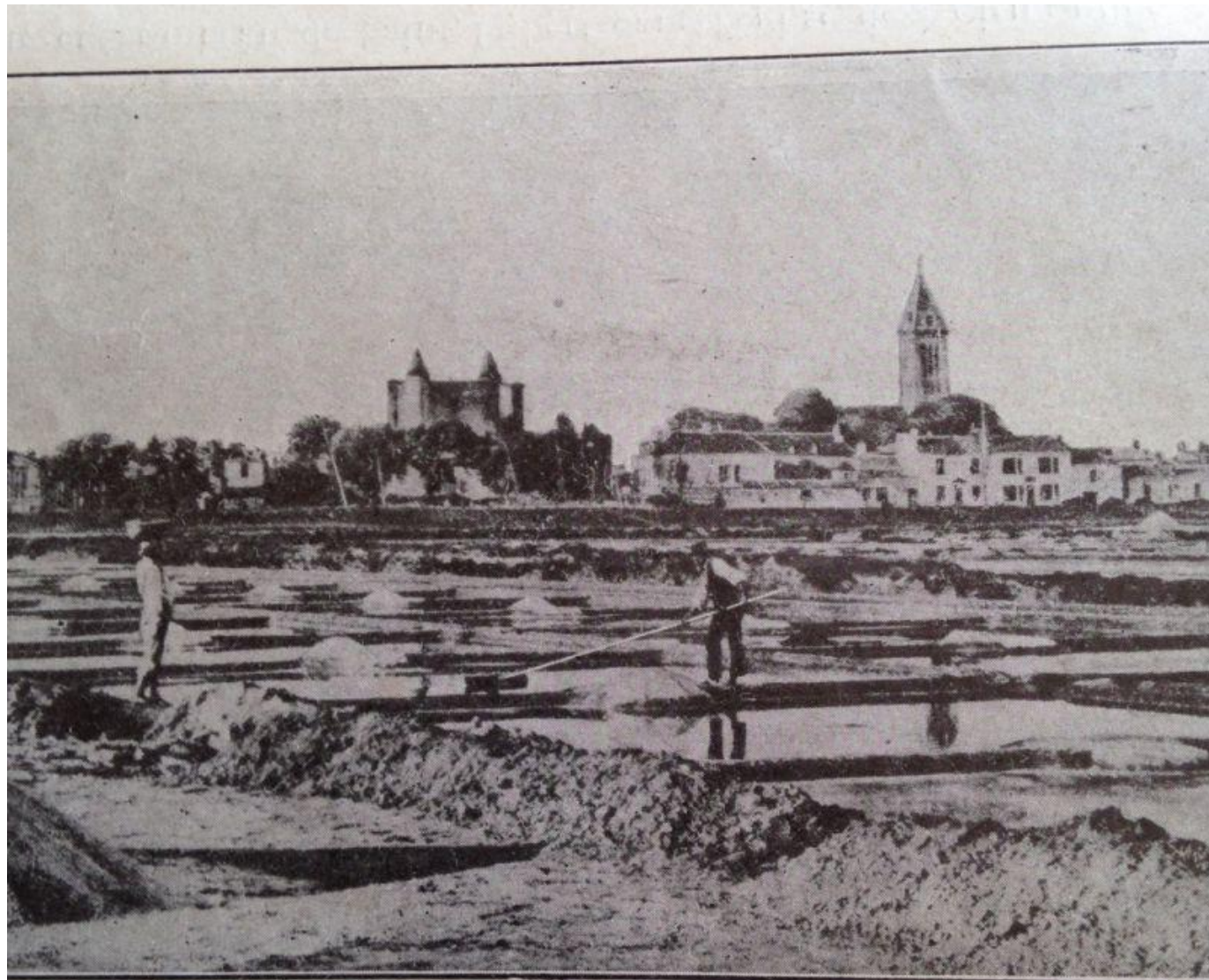
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Vue Générale de la Ville de Noirmoutier

Robuchon



Salt in Merovingian and Carolingian times

There is an abundance of evidence for the importance and extent of the production and trade of salt in the Merovingian and Carolingian periods (see for example Bruand 2002, 2006, 2008; Sarrazin 2008).

Trade in salt from the bay of Bourgneuf

- At the beginning of the eighth century the important abbey of St. Martin at Tours received a rent of 400 pounds of salt from the island of Noirmoutier.
- In the late seventh or beginning of the eighth century, the abbey of Jumièges on the Seine received a delivery of 300 pounds of salt from Noirmoutier
- In about 635 the *Gesta Dagoberti* tells us that the abbey of St. Denis in Paris had bought land producing salt in the *pays de Retz*, the salt marsh area south of Nantes and immediately opposite Noirmoutier, as well as buying salt itself from the bay of Bourgneuf.

‘Instruction of Louis the Pious to his subjects’ - 821

‘Concerning the land at the coast where they make salt. We want that some of them come to our court session and that their account be audited to enable us to settle the dispute between them with equity.’

(Boretius 1883, no. 148, c. 8, 301; Verhulst 2002, 81)

The early medieval salt trade covered a vast space

It is clear from Bruand's and others' work that the early medieval salt trade and the routes it used covered not only all of southern and western France – along the Loire, the Charente and the Garonne - but also stretched to the Seine in the north as well as to Flanders and Frisia.

- ❑ 'What is [...] sure is that sea salt, and principally that of the lower Loire, had conquered a vast space.' (Bruand 2008, 9, my translation)
- ❑ 'Efforts of Carolingian institutions to buy and sell the salt they needed help us to see it travelling by the boatloads up the rivers of Frankland, and by the wagonload over its roads.' (McCormick 2001, 698)

Overseas trade - examples

- ❑ The *Life of Saint Philibert* tells us that there were Irish merchant ships arriving at Noirmoutier in the late eighth century who brought a welcome supply of clothes and shoes for the monks.
- ❑ The *Life of Saint Philibert* also tells of fleets of ships on the Seine heading for the sea and of the 'navigable routes' used by these ships and of 'numerous commercial exchanges'
- ❑ On the Seine, the early ninth-century *Gesta abbatum Fontanellensium* tells of English merchants from the 'island of Britain' trading 'across the sea' with Gaul in 788.
- ❑ The *Gesta* also reports that in about 830 there was a 'glorious coming and going of ships' in the mouth of the Seine and that a fleet of merchant ships came 'from the infinite Ocean also called the Britannic sea'.

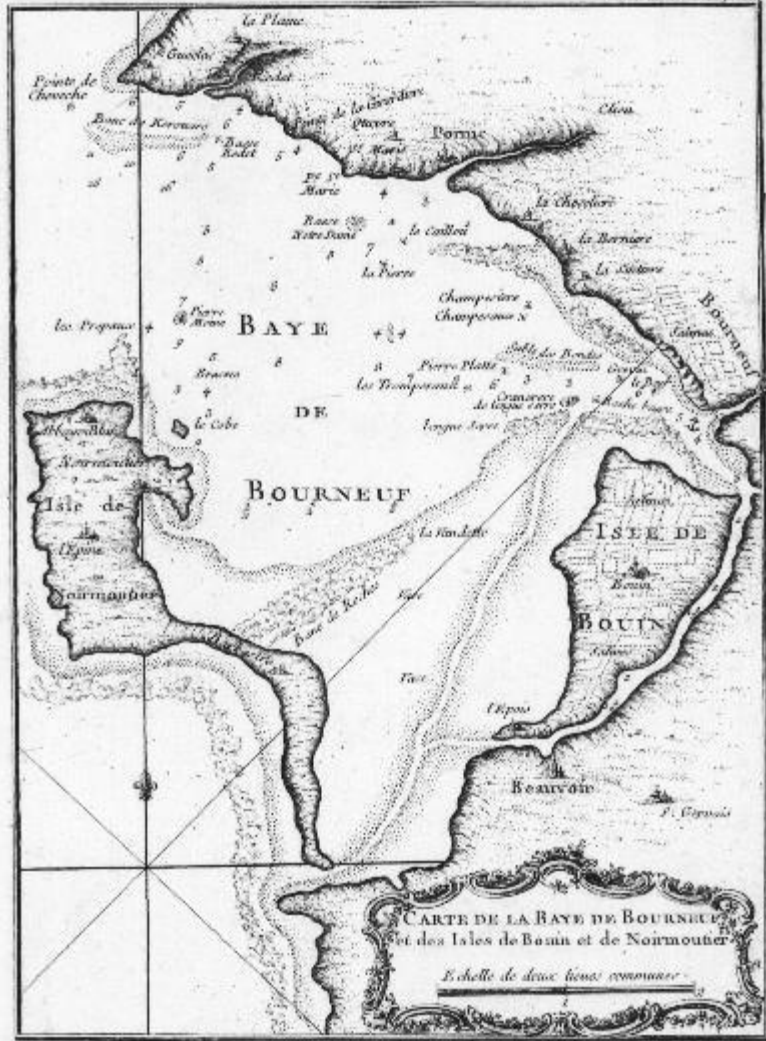
Trade with Ireland

There is an interesting story in the *Vita Columbani*, written by the monk Jonas, who lived with the Irish saint Columbán at the monastery of Bobbio in the Italian Apennines during the latter part of the saint's life. Jonas likely got the information for his *Life* from Columbán's own lips and those of his companions (Krusch 1905, bk 1, c. 2-23, 193-206; Verhulst 1970, 89).

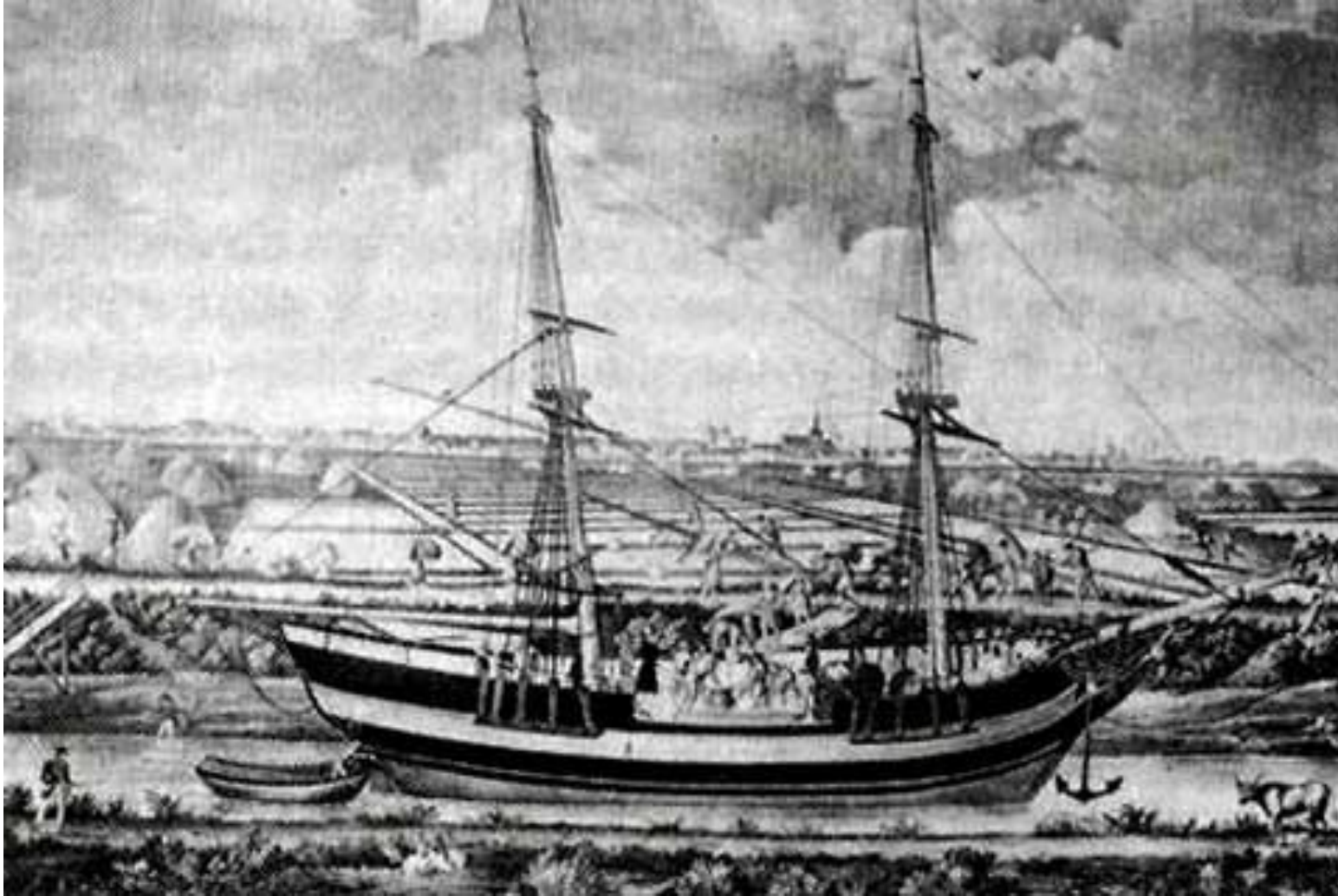
The story tells that while in Gaul in about 610 Columbán and some of his Irish monks had boarded a river trading ship (a '*scafa*') in Nevers, far up the River Loire. When the monks finally arrived in Nantes the local authorities had no trouble in immediately finding Columbán a merchant ship 'which was concerned with trade with the Irish' (*quae Scottorum commercia vexerat*) and which was bound for Ireland (*ad Hiberniam destinare*) to take him and his companions back to Ireland – although eventually Columbán decided to stay in Gaul.

Breton merchant ships carrying salt. c. 835-36

- In the first book of the *Miracles of Saint Philibert*, written by Ermentarius between late 837 and 840, there is an eye-witness account of an event slightly before.
- Ermentarius tells of a group of independent Breton merchant ships (*Brittanniae naves*) who had come on the open sea from Brittany into the bay of Bourgneuf loaded with corn, which they then traded for salt either in the port called *La Fourche* ('*Furcae*' near Beauvoir-sur-Mer) or on Noirmoutier.
- However, while at *La Fourche* to undertake some trade, and without the pilot's knowledge (*gubernatore nesciente*), the crew of one of these ships decided to 'half steal and half buy' ('*partim furando, partim emendo*') some lead tiles which had previously been removed from the roof of Saint Philibert's monastery on the adjacent island of Noirmoutier and taken to *La Fourche* to keep this valuable commodity safe from the constant raids of the 'Northmen'.
- Laden with its cargo of salt this ship then kept getting caught in contrary winds. It was first forced to make landfall at *Concha*, the port of Noirmoutier, where the locals had to supply the crew with provisions because they had 'only salt' on board ('*sed sal tantum deferebant*').
- Having set sail again the ship was blown to the *Île de Batz* (now Batz-sur-Mer on the Guérande peninsula) where, after another abortive attempt to sail back to Brittany, the crew's theft was discovered and they were forced by the intervention of the holy Saint Philibert to repent and return their booty, before finally getting a fair wind and returning home.
- Despite the fact that this merchant flotilla spent a total of twenty-one days at anchor trying to catch the right wind to return home, which indicates the problems of overseas navigation at the time, eventually they were able to set sail for home with their cargo of salt aboard.



The Medieval 'Bay Salt Trade'



Was salt really a Viking target?

Athur Agats

Die Normannen, die bekanntlich ihre Züge in diese Gebiete ausdehnten, sind vielleicht die ersten gewesen, die das französische Seesalz in entferntere Gegenden gebracht haben. Nach ihnen mögen dann öfters Schiffe aus dem Norden nach dem Westen Frankreiches gesegelt sein, um den wichtigen Artikel nach der heimat fortzuführen. (Agats 1904, 46)

(The Northmen, who we know directed their raids to this area, were perhaps the first who brought French sea salt to distant regions. After them ships may have sailed more often from the North to western France in order to take this important commodity back home.)

Was salt really a Viking target?

Emile Boutin

‘C’est pour utiliser les marais de la Baie de Bourgneuf que les Normands s’installeront au sud de l’embouchure de la Loire’ (Boutin 1992, 2)

(It is to use the salt marshes of the bay of Bourgneuf that the Northmen will install themselves south of the mouth of the Loire).

‘Dès le neuvième siècle, le sel de la baie est si réputé qu’il attire et fixe sur nos côtes les Normands’ (Boutin 2010b)

(From the ninth century salt from the bay is so reputed that it attracted and kept the Northmen on our coasts).

Was salt really a Viking target?

Jean-Luc Sarrazin put this attraction in the context of the Atlantic salt trade:

‘Advantaged by its situation and by the renown of its monastery, Noirmoutier was certainly one of the long-distance bases of the Atlantic [salt] traffic. That it had attracted the Northmen in the 820s and particularly the 830s is not at all astonishing.’

(Sarrazin 2008, 110, my translation)

How could the Northmen have profited from salt?

If one of the reasons the Northmen kept coming to the area year after year was salt, how could they have profited from it?

- They could have ransomed it back to the producers, be they of the independent variety or the monks in monasteries such as those on Noirmoutier.
- They may have tried to gain control of the river-based salt trade along the rivers of south-west France: the Loire, the Garonne and the Charente.
- They could have shipped it back to Scandinavia or other parts of northern Europe to sell in one of the *emporium* or 'ports', as they certainly did with slaves.

Could Scandinavian ships carry salt in the ninth century?



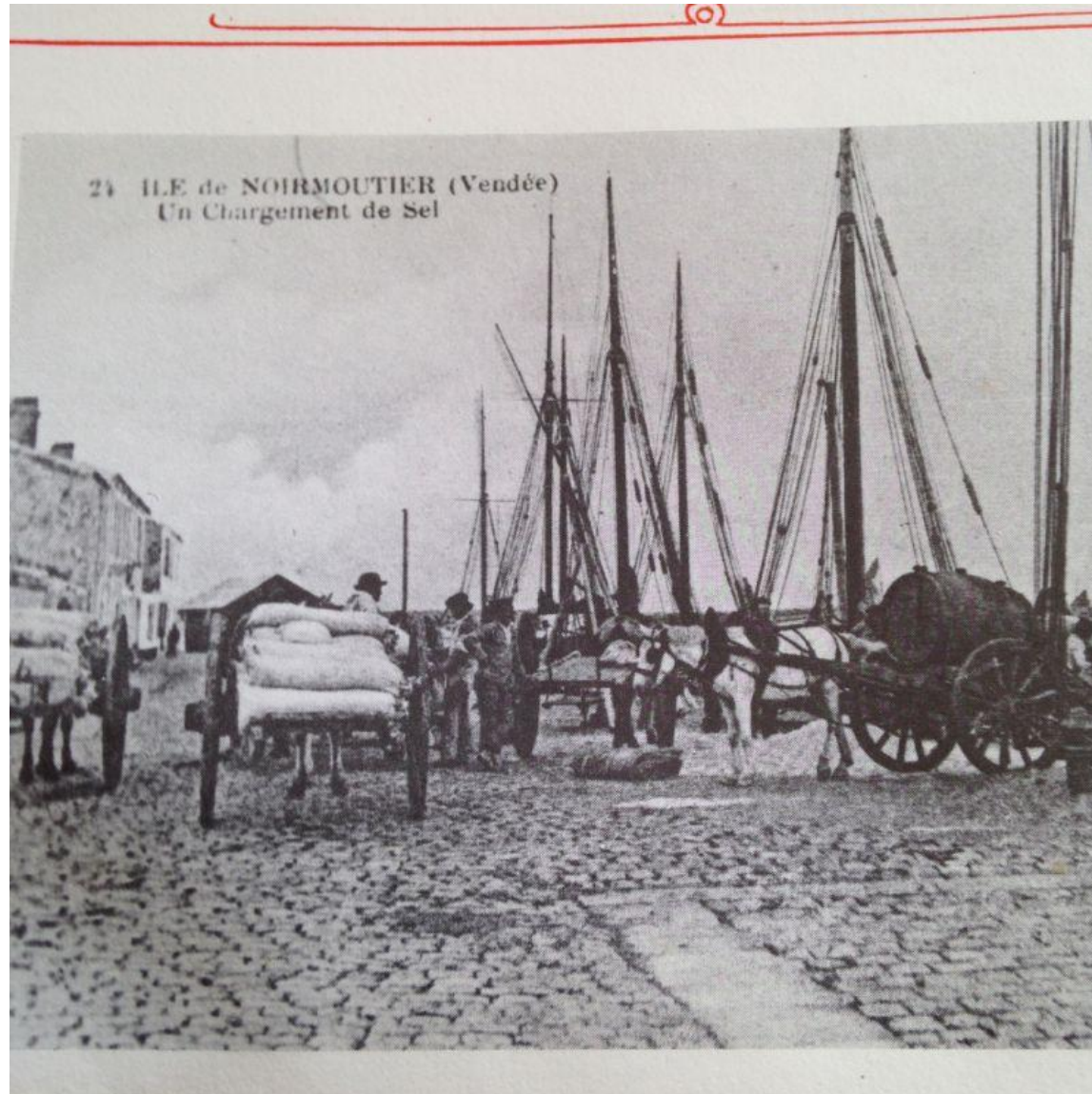
Could Scandinavian ships carry salt in the ninth century?

- ❑ It was at precisely the time of the Scandinavian raids on this part of south-western France that Breton merchants were already loading salt in the bay of Bourgneuf destined for their home market, so the Northmen might just have been joining in.
- ❑ The Scandinavians of the ninth century were master mariners and ship-builders; in fact their ships were renowned for their performance on the high seas and at least as good as Irish or Breton ships. Thus if the Bretons, Frisians and English could transport perishable commodities including salt over the sea there seems no reason to doubt that the Scandinavians could do the same; indeed the Scandinavians were in Frisia for much of the ninth century and would have been familiar with Frisian cargo ships.

Protection of salt in ships



Protection of salt in ships



Could Scandinavian ships carry salt in the ninth century?

- Regarding ‘whether the open boats of the Vikings could transport salt’, Jan Bill, the curator of the Viking ship collection at the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History, says:

‘Since they [the vikings] evidently could transport wine in barrels (Hedeby), they certainly also could transport salt’ (2016, pers. com.)

- An anonymous peer reviewer of this paper says:

‘They [ninth-century viking ships] had cargo capacity, just not on the same scale as later vessels that carried staples like grain and stockfish. As a high-value product, salt (like wine), would be an ideal cargo for the commerce of the age and of course proper packaging for sea travel was not beyond the technology of Viking Age Scandinavia (or elsewhere).’

Conclusions

