

THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN IDENTITY IN EARLY NORMANDY:
ETHNOGENESIS OF THE GENS NORMANNORUM

A CONSTRUÇÃO DE UMA IDENTIDADE NA PRIMEIRA NORMANDIA: A
ETNOGÊNESE DA GENS NORMANNORUM

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Abstract: The idea of a Norman ethnic identity, of a *Normannitas*, has long been discussed by contemporary historiography. Nonetheless, this field of studies seems always to be caught up between two distinct types of discussion and theoretical basis: one more focused on Late Antiquity/Early Middle Ages and the other on the Late Middle Ages. Stressing connections between 10th and 11th century Normandy and the classical past, we propose applying the *ethnogenesis* concept and the extensive research it spawned on the construction of late antique ethnic identities to deepen our understanding on the forging of an early Norman identity. Acknowledging the extensive discussion over Scandinavian influence or Frankish continuity in the formation and development of the Norman duchy, we propose a different approach to Dudo of Saint-Quentin's *Gesta Normannorum*, viewing the text more in connection with a late-antique tradition of historical writing on 'barbaric' *gentes*. Seeing the work through that lens, this paper utilizes recent research by Lesley Abrams, Mark Hagger and Fraser McNair on 10th century Normandy and attempts to understand how the construction of a *gens normannorum* identity could have been instrumental to the Norman dukes in their seeking to establish authority over a diverse group of elites, arguing that they did so through an idea of *Normanness* completely centered on and emanating from the ruling Rollonid lineage.

Key-words: *gens*; Norman identity; Early Normandy; Dudo of Saint-Quentin's *Gesta Normannorum*.

Resumo: A ideia de uma identidade étnica normanda, de uma *Normannitas*, vem a muito sendo discutida pela historiografia contemporânea. Não obstante, este campo de estudos parece sempre estar preso entre dois tipos distintos de discussão e base teórica: um mais focado na Antiguidade Tardia/Alta Idade Média e outro na Baixa Idade Média. Reforçando as conexões entre a Normandia dos séculos X e XI e o passado clássico, propomos aplicar o conceito de *etnogênese* e as extensas pesquisas sobre a construção de identidades étnicas tardo-antigas para um entendimento mais aprofundado sobre a construção de uma identidade normanda. Reconhecendo a extensa discussão sobre influência escandinava ou continuidade franca na formação e desenvolvimento do ducado normando, propomos uma abordagem diferente para a *Gesta Normannorum* de Dudo de Saint-Quentin, mais em conexão com uma tradição tardo-antiga de escrita histórica sobre as *gentes* "bárbaras". Enxergando a obra por esta lente, este artigo se utiliza das pesquisas recentes de Lesley Abrams, Mark Hagger e Fraser McNair sobre a Normandia de século XI e busca compreender como a construção de uma identidade de *gens normannorum* pode ter sido instrumental aos duques normandos em sua busca por estabelecer sua

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autoridade sobre um grupo diverso de elites, argumentando que o fizeram por meio de uma ideia de “Normanitude” totalmente centrada na, e emanando da, linhagem governante.

Palavras-chave: *gens*; identidade normanda; Primeira Normandia; *Gesta Normannorum* de Dudo de Saint-Quentin.

1. *Ethnogenesis and the gens normannorum*

In the past few decades efforts aimed at the comprehension of the construction of ethnic/noble identities in the Middle Ages have been benefiting from decisive analysis regarding the *gens/gentes* and *regnum/regna* concepts, as well as their conformation and application in the late-antique and early-medieval sociopolitical environments. From the latter half of the 20th century onwards, historiographical research on this topic has witnessed a great complexification of our understanding on the formation of medieval ethnicities and peoples.

Fundamental for this shift to take place was the work of German scholar Reinhard Wenskus who, harshly criticizing traditional historiography for its view of the ‘barbaric’ peoples as stable and biologically segregated ethnic entities, proposed the hypothesis of *ethnogenesis*. With this perspective Wenskus brought about a rupture with the dominant perspective of the ‘barbarians’ blood unity, toward a greater focus on the elements of political nature and of ancestral tradition (Frighetto, 2012, p. 425–426) over which took place the construction of those ethnic identities.

Currently we are able to perceive, along with Hans-Werner Goetz (2003, p. 5), that under the impact of *ethnogenesis* research on late-antique and early-medieval ethnicities have no longer been veering toward the search for peoples’ origins, as if they were static unities, but looking at their transformations over decades and centuries. Bearing in mind that *gentes* are groups formed by tradition rather than biological descent, current researches have been seeking to understand them as political communities in the making, observing their central relationship to *regnum* and also the self-perceptions they sought to format and project (Goetz, 2003, p. 5).

In view of this process we deem essential, in dedicating to the study of medieval *gens* and ‘peoples’, bearing in mind that ethnic communities are the result of historical processes

and, to put it plainly, historical processes in themselves (Pohl, 1998, p. 8). This emphasis on the aspect of construction is one we consider fundamental to comprehending the constitution of identities in the Early Middle Ages, especially considering that the writing of history, namely, the conformation of a common past, played a crucial part in these processes.

With regard to studies on the Normans, the emphasis on the aspect of construction seems predominant. For instance, when writing the book 'The Normans' for the series 'The Peoples of Europe' by Blackwell Publishing, Marjorie Chibnall opened this widely publicized work with the straightforward affirmation: 'The Norman people were the product, not of blood, but of history' (Chibnall, 2000, p. 3). Albeit recognizing that such is true in some sense of all peoples, the author proceeds to highlight to what degree the Normans, *the gens normannorum*, were a people composed of many others and of exceptionally mixed blood. Along all their history, Chibnall (2000, p. 4) emphasizes, the Normans' main distinctive characteristic was not any sense of ethnic unity, but their allegiance to a Norman leader.

Throughout the 11th and 12th centuries these Norman leaders, whether they were counts, dukes or kings, greatly expanded their power and influence, inspiring and funding chronicles of their deeds which fostered this perception of a glorious *gens normannorum* in different moments of Norman history (Johnson, 2006, p. 153). And it was precisely this will of the Norman leaders, reflected in the abundance of historiographical writing they sponsored, which inspired and fomented so much scholar debate over the years, mainly centered on whether the Normans actually formed one people, one *gens*, through a perceived sense of common origin, regardless of where they were located after the expansion years (Van Houts, 2000, p. 8). Hence the debate over the persistence or not of a *Normannitas* in Normandy and elsewhere has greatly dominated studies on the Normans and their history.

In an attempt to summarize disputes which involved many authors and have extended over more than forty years, we can look at the main disagreement between R.C.H. Davis on the one side and Graham Loud on the other. In his 1976 book *The Normans and Their Myth* Davis argues that the Normans displayed no consistent or particular sense of self-awareness during the 10th and 11th centuries but were rather more focused on attempting to be

as Frankish as the Franks themselves. Greatly compressing his point of view, Van Houts (2000, p. 10) points out that Davis suggested that the myth of what being Norman meant had actually been a product of Norman decline in the 12th century, a creation of Orderic Vitalis and other contemporary historians, who in turn projected this distinct self-perception back to the earlier two centuries. Graham Loud, in his turn, argues for perceivable Norman self-awareness in 11th century Dudo of Saint-Quentin's *Gesta Normannorum* and, for the purpose of this article, it is his perception we will more broadly explore hereafter.

In his 1981 article 'The *Gens Normannorum* - myth or reality' Loud responds Davis's thesis by questioning the relevance of Orderic's Ecclesiastical History in Norman self-perception, given its very limited circulation in Normandy (Loud, 1981, p. 107)². In all, he suggests that there was indeed a Norman myth but that it was promulgated much earlier than Davis presumed, in the early 11th century *Gesta Normannorum*. To support his proposition Loud remarks that Dudo's text was widely known in Normandy, with copies found in Fécamp, Jumièges and St Evroul, besides Bury St Edmunds in England and several other locations. Furthermore Dudo's relevance would go beyond the readership of his own work, seen as his precedence in Norman history writing made him influential for all following Norman historians, with the *Gesta Normannorum Ducum* being complemented, revised and recapitulated within one conceptual framework by William of Jumièges and Robert of Toringy, as part of a continuous historical tradition (Loud, 1981, p. 107).

Regarding the 11th century Loud once more contrasts Davis' notion of Dudo's emphasis on the land of Normandy and not on the people, affirming that the author did talk more of the *gens normannorum* than of the *regnum Northmanniae* (Loud, 1981, p. 108). Comprehending the notion of a *regnum Northmanniae* as a mere claim of Norman autonomy against the Franks, Loud explores on how Dudo always referred not to the *dux northmanniae* but to the *dux northmannorum*, in a perceived universe and tradition of several *gentes* of which the Normans were one. This emphasis, Loud (1981, p. 111) continues, by the Norman authors

² The author backs that up by pointing out that, despite Orderic having contacts in Worcester and Croyland, his work never made it to England. Furthermore, there are only two known 12th century copies of the text, one being Orderic's own monograph (Loud, 1981, p. 107).

on the distinct innate features of their *gens* was not exceptional but a matter of accommodating into a standard conceptual pattern of the Early Middle Ages.

A key element to the Normans' conception of themselves was therefore the idea of a common descent, which Dudo's work promptly provided. Other recognized *gentes* had their origin, posits Loud (1981, p. 113), and thus the Normans needed one for themselves. Hence using a classical literary tradition and concepts derived from Isidore of Seville Dudo's history concatenates many disparate elements into a *gens normannorum*, giving the Normans a glorious Trojan origin that connects them to the ancient world. In doing so, concludes Loud (1981, p. 116), Dudo was not at all creating a new pattern, but conforming the Normans to a pre-existing one.

It is this paper's proposal, henceforth, to follow on the footsteps laid out by Graham Loud and others, starting from the *ethnogenesis* concept to better understand the construction of the *gens normannorum* as a political project posited by Normandy's dukes in the late 10th and early 11th centuries. We will first explore a little closer the transformation of the *gens/gentes* concept in Late Antiquity, then analyze existing debates over early Norman identity and groundbreaking new research of 10th and 11th century Normandy by Lesley Abrams and Fraser McNair, which help developing a deeper understanding of the context in which Dudo of Saint-Quentin's *Gesta Normannorum* emerged.

Before that however we should like to reaffirm the strictly political framework of our analysis, focusing on the Rouennais court's projected self-perception and how the Rollonid dynasty governing Normandy used this identity as a political tool. Furthermore we do not propose the 10th and 11th centuries' *ethnogenesis* as *the* Norman identity for the whole history of the duchy, but as *a* Norman identity which we perceive as having been constructed in a specific environment for a specific moment. We follow Ewan Johnson's (2006, p. 164) assertion that constructions of Normanness are too fluid and contingent to context for a consideration of one Norman ethnicity for the whole of the Middle Ages.

2. Late Roman and early medieval conceptions of *gens/gentes*

When claiming the existence of a certain *gens* inside the broader scenery of a Christian *ciuitas*, late-antique and early-medieval authors were utilizing a contemporary and Christian power rhetoric, but one that also referred back to Roman traditions. It is fitting thus to briefly analyze the previous understanding of *gens*, especially in relation to the Roman political vocabulary and practices those authors evoked while retaking and reapplying said concept.

Following the analysis of Friguetto (2012, p. 421–422) we can perceive that in late first century B.C. Roman written sources the term *gens* appears tied to the familial groups enjoying the highest of social status, in connection to the *ciuitas* past. This factor is quite relevant to our comprehension of the concept for there was, in the Roman world, a straight connection established between the most powerful *gentes* of the political scenery and a legitimizing stance built over the depth of these families' ancestral histories. However, Augustus' ascension and the removal of several members of the Roman traditional aristocracy led to the rise of newer families in the political scene as well as a reformulation of the *gens* concept, progressively more related and integrated to the *nobilitas* itself, less rooted in ancestry and more in a prestigious contemporary political agency (Friguetto, 2012, p. 422–423). This process coincided with an approximation between the Roman world and the 'barbaric' aristocracies, resulting in a gradual insertion of these groups in the provincial administration and, consequently, in the broader political group of the *ciuitas* and *nobilitas*.

In Late Antiquity the concept of *gens* was appropriated by these 'barbaric' elite groups and reframed to fit their most pressing interests, that is, the construction of a noble identity highlighting the most prestigious lineages and families inside a given political context. In later centuries however the formulation of *gens* was not restricted to such noble groups but, in fact, amplified and imposed over other *gentes* inside a *regnum*, seeking to promote the direct association between a given *gens* and its authority over the political entity they ruled. Inside a broader notion of what constituted a *christiana ciuitas*, Christian authors (many of whom originated from Roman families) assisted the elites in crafting an ethnic identity inside a new

community, supported by ancestral traditions, that integrated Roman and 'barbaric' aristocracy groups into one Christian society (Frighetto, 2012, p. 428).

This process was reflected in and also constructed by the period's plentiful historiographical production, which actively pursued a standardization of those societies by granting them a common past and treating these newly-formed ethnic groups as one single *gens* (Goetz, 2003, p. 42). Broadly applied through this whole period, *gens* receives a deeper formulation by Isidore of Seville, who defines four criteria – which will remain quite influent through all of the Early Middle Ages – by which *gentes* could be distinguished amongst themselves: law, language, origin and customs (Goetz, 2003, p. 44).

This is not to say however that ethnicity was completely fabricated by late-antique authors: distinguishing groups of individuals based on ethnic characteristics was a commonplace practice in ancient ethnography and in the biblical world view, which merged and turned into a system by Isidore (Pohl, 1998, p. 3–4). It is also important to highlight that unlike our contemporary understanding of ethnicity as a construction, medieval authors generally did not perceive *gentes* as historical processes, but rather as entities that simply 'were there' since biblical times and, although they could migrate and settle in other lands, did not change as a group (Goetz, 2003, p. 59). It was part of the Christian-medieval thought processing, then, to see socio-political communities as *gentes* which had several particularities and differences among themselves.

The novelty was that the new 5th and 6th century military elites, by reaffirming their differences from the Romans and from other 'barbaric' *gentes*, turned ethnic discourse into a key component of political power in the late-antique and early-medieval world (Pohl, 1998, p. 2–3). In this scenario names, narratives and laws were used to affirm the existence of a distinct ethnic group and reinforce the political identity of a people, while at the same time reaffirming its authority claim over the old *res publica* provinces. Hence unlike the sentiments of identity existing inside small 'barbaric' groups, the larger ethnic communities were not in any form 'natural', but abstract means of categorizing people and groups over which powerful political institutions were built (Pohl, 1998, p. 3–4).

In the new Christianized kingdoms the ethnic identity rhetoric served as basis for the power and privilege of a certain *gens*, which sought to integrate several *gentes* under one single political unity (Pohl, 1998, p. 4-5). Thereby Roman-'barbaric' elites intended to signify and instrumentalize a complex reality into a simpler political and rhetorical universe of 'us' and 'them', kingdoms and nations. Projecting a Frank or Goth identity, for instance, meant to claim superiority over other groups inside the territory ruled by the Frank or Goth *gens* (Pohl, 1998, p. 6). Simultaneously, the construction of such discourses demanded reaching a very delicate balance once it was necessary to elaborate characteristics that could render one specific *gens* as a privileged political group uniquely apt to rule a *regnum*, without at the same time excluding the other *gentes* that integrated and would come to integrate it (Pohl, 1998, p. 6-7). In short, this identity had to be at the same time exclusive and inclusive, seeking to sustain one group's political privileges while still being broad enough to accommodate all of those who had been recently conquered and comprised under it.

It is also imperative to take into account the relevance of Christianity inside this power rhetoric, for it implied that a governing *gens* would be as responsible for the *regnum's* 'common good' as for a good spiritual governing that would lead the entire *populus* to salvation (Frighetto, 2012, p. 432). The sovereign's authority gained thus an aura of divine concession, granting the *gens* holder of noble power the weight of having been chosen by God to lead and safeguard Christianity inside its territory (Frighetto, 2015, p. 182-184). That implied the creation of a collective identity that could encompass all the *populus* into one single Christian community. This community should be in turn headed by its victorious *gens*, capable of imposing a common identity and a collective memory over the others (Frighetto, 2015, p.187-189).

That being said, we deem useful to bring two more points argued by Walter Pohl in his introduction to *The construction of communities in the Early Middle Ages: Texts, Resources and Artefacts*, about historical language and the construction of communities. Firstly, it is important to emphasize that language is never a mere reflex of the world but an active means of its construction, there being no sense in segregating text, knowledge and discourse on one side and social reality on the other. Thus it is worth emphasizing that the ethnic identity

consolidation processes imposed a specific view over the past in the same measure as the writing of said past had an important part in the creation of this *gens* identity in its present (Phol, 2003, p. 3). The ‘invented’ origin myths and the oral tradition memories were fundamental to the construction of new identities, granting them the essential idea of a shared common past (Phol, 2003, p. 4). Therefore what we intend to access when analyzing early-medieval historical texts is not a mere expression of this process, but a discourse that contributed to the shaping of it.

3. *Ethnogenesis* in Early Normandy

In the almost 40 years that have passed since the publication of Graham Loud’s text a lot more has been discussed and discovered about the political context of the Norman 10th and early 11th centuries, the era of the duchy’s establishment and consolidation. Nevertheless the extensive existing scholarship on Norman ethnic identity still seems to be very much caught up in the period of the conquests after the mid-11th century, and not that much attention has been paid to the earlier ethnic conformation. Therefore although much has been discussed about a ‘Norman Myth’ in England, Italy and 12th century Normandy, significantly less thought has been paid to the idea of a constructed early Norman identity.

Consequently, while extensive research has been done on the subject of Norman identity and Norman history, the field has rarely engaged with and appropriated the much more theoretically developed body of studies regarding *ethnogenesis* in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. Given its temporal and spatial location in history, historiography on Normandy always seems to be caught up between the frontiers of one field of studies and the other, between, for instance, studies of the so-called *Viking* Era and Latin Christianity; the decline of Carolingian Empire and the formation of a unified kingdom in England; the context of ethnic formations in Late Antiquity and the expansion of Christendom in the Late Middle Ages.

As Katherine Cross diagnosed in her 2014 Ph.D. thesis *Enemy and ancestor: Viking identities and ethnic boundaries in England and Normandy, c. 950-c. 1015*³, modern concepts of ethnicity have exerted a slower impact on Viking and Norman studies, for the field has been caught up in between two distinct discussions of ethnicity in the Middle Ages (Cross, 2014, p. 34-35). While the latter has more to do with the Late Middle Ages and the concept of frontier involved in the conflicts and contacts on the border of Christendom (Cross, 2014, p. 36), the former is precisely the debate over the *ethnogenesis* of ‘barbaric’ peoples, which has highlighted the aspect of political agency and the understanding that ethnic identity is open to change and instrumentalization.

Hence, although this scenario has been changing through the 2010s, research on Early Normandy has been too tied to and dominated by a debate between two contradicting pictures of the duchy: the ‘Scandinavian’ and ‘Frankish’ perspectives. The first one of these is more prominently represented by the late American historian Eleanor Searle, who strongly defended the thesis that the Normans were not only clearly distinguished from their Frankish neighbors but proud in displaying their victorious Scandinavian heritage over them. Viewing Dudo of Saint-Quentin’s *Gesta Normannorum* as a victory poem sang in Scandinavian tradition for the old settlers and the newcomers, she believed the Viking takeover of Normandy had had deep and lasting impact on the socio-political structure of the region.

Even though many other historians followed or at least took Searle’s findings into account to balance and complement the ‘Frankish’ line of thought, it has remained predominant in studies of Early Normandy throughout the latter half of the 20th century. This current stands for a Norman institutional, cultural and social continuity with the Carolingian past, viewing the Scandinavian settlement as a brief change of command at the top, with the abandonment of their distinct culture in favor of assimilation to the Frankish world (Cross, 2014, p. 24). Along those lines, David Bates, Jean Yver and Lucien Musset are some of the important names who proposed this perspective, seeing a powerful short-term Scandinavian

³ Cross’s thesis has been republished (as of April 2018) by York Medieval Press under the title *Heirs of the Vikings: History and Identity in Normandy and England, c.950 – c.1015*. Regardless of that all reading and quotation made in this paper is to the original thesis publication of 2014.

impact up until the beginning of the 11th century, which eventually gave way to a long-term continuity with Frankish practices (Van Houts, 2000, p. 8-9)

The above cited Elisabeth Van Houts herself, one of the most prominent names in the study of Norman history, proposes in her 2000 book *The Normans in Europe* an acceptance of the continuity model, while at the same time highlighting the deep awareness later Normans continued to have of their Scandinavian heritage and disposition to display these themes well into the 11th century (Van Houts, 2000, p. 9). Dudo's *Gesta Normannorum* itself, as the first long comprehensive narrative produced in Normandy about its own past has been extensively studied by both sides of the debate without much consensus, seen at the same time by Searle as a clearly Scandinavian saga and by other scholars, such as Felice Lifshitz and Leah Shopkow, as much more connected to a Carolingian hagiographical tradition.

At the same time it has been pointed out all around that the work is not of much use in analyzing the 10th century period it narrates but rather a later one, in which the *Gesta* was actually composed, of the Rollonid dynasty political consolidation and maturation and the ethnic identity they wished to forge and express. Therefore, along with Graham Loud himself and more recently Ewan Johnson⁴, we propose a shift in the conceptual framework of Dudo's text toward seeing it as an *ethnogenesis* process carried out by the Norman court in a time of expressive Rollonid power over Normandy. Along the lines of the text the Norman past is narratively consolidated through idealized accounts of the dukes' political actuation, for the purpose of creating an idea of *gens* that simultaneously reinforces the singularity of the ruling lineage and radiates such identity to all of their subjects.

The coincidence between Rollonid ascension and a hiatus in Frankish annals writing through the beginning of the 10th century made the *Gesta Normannorum* virtually the first written account on the early years of Norman history. As such the Norman court was able to virtually erase the actuation of other *Viking* groups in the region and narratively squeeze all of them under the Rollonid dukes' *gens normannorum*. Thus, although Dudo of Saint-Quentin

⁴ More precisely in his 2006 *Texts and Identities in the Early Middle Ages* book chapter 'Origin myths and the construction of medieval identities: Norman chronicles 1000-1100'.

projects a much more crystallized view of the Norman past in placing the *Viking* chieftain Rollo (911 – 928/933) as the duchy's founder in a definitive accord with Charles the Simple, other evidence points to a much slower, complex and diverse development of the Norman political entity.

Despite indications that his *Viking* warband had been roaming around northwestern Francia long before 911, through all of his reign Rollo's authority seems to have been very limited to the city of Rouen itself. Recent studies have shown that there were a significant number of other independent *Viking* groups roaming around the region since the late 9th century, which the Latin sources generally described as *normanni*. Thus far from being a great lord and ruler over all of those *normanni* in a large territory, Rollo seems to simply have been the *jarl* who was capable of overpowering others in the restricted area of Rouen and its surroundings (Abrams, 2013, p. 45), until the 911 agreement with Charles the Bald provided him with some, albeit weak, recognizable legitimacy over the region. And although Rouen was central to their posterior political predominance, in providing Rollo and his descendants with richness far greater than available to any other group, there were still many other *Viking raids* roaming around the rest of the territory the *Gesta* claims they had always dominated (Hagger, 2013, p. 429–430).

Nevertheless, to what serve as indicators the territory's material culture and evolution of place-names, Normandy seems to have been an exception in regard to the *Viking* territories founded abroad, insofar as very little recognizably Scandinavian material culture has been archeologically documented (Abrams, 2013, p. 45). On the other hand this is far from constituting a rupture of bonds between the Rollonids and the Scandinavian territories, given that both Richard I (942 – 996) and Richard II (996 – 1026) (and such the *Gesta* itself corroborates) had crucial *Viking* allies during key moments of their rule (Abrams, 2013, p. 47).

The issue therefore does not seem at all to have revolved around an abandonment of Scandinavian connections and an 'acculturation' toward insertion into a Frankish political system, but rather originated from an attempt put forth by the Rollonid lineage to assert their full autonomy through the establishment of a new identity that was neither Scandinavian nor

Frankish, but a Christian *gens* totally centered at and emanating from their lineage. It seems clear that Normandy in fact had an identity and political conformation that were quite different from other northern Frankish territories in the same period, with a deeply ducal-court centered administration (Abrams, 2013, p. 60). Furthermore the dukes' economic and political power was largely derived from their contacts with the Scandinavian world, be it through the usage of Rouen as a harbor for the commerce of *Viking* plunder or the military alliance with Scandinavian war bands throughout the 10th and 11th centuries.

All of these tensions erupting from Christian dukes having a strong and undeniable recent heritage of pagan invaders are undoubtedly present in Dudo of Saint-Quentin's *Gesta Normannorum*. Nonetheless the text does not refrain from recognizing certain pagan war chiefs as Norman allies while their Christian Frankish neighbors are almost in totality treacherous and unfaithful. That is not to say however that Dudo defines his Normans as purely Scandinavians, but that he bypasses both the Scandinavian and Frankish elements in order to present the Normans as an overcoming of both.

Moreover, asserting how Frankish the Normans were disregards the depth to which ethnic identity was in itself a construction, product of power relations and discourse. Through the *ethnogenesis* lens, extensive research on the constitution of the Merovingian kingdom has shown that before the time of Clovis the Franks were far from constituting a unified group or even a 'confederation of tribes' (Goetz, 2003, p. 310). Furthermore Roman Gaul, both before and after the decline of the *imperium*, was in essence a mixed civilization composed of 'barbaric' and 'Romanized' populations (Goetz, 2003, p. 316) who were politically dominated by the Merovingian dynasty. From their strong political actuation and historical writing, in, for instance, Gregory of Tours' History, a *gens francorum* was created and broadly imposed, also promoting an omission of the many other leading groups and *stirpes regiae* that had previously existed (Goetz, 2003, p. 319).

Highlighting the similarities between the Frankish and Norman *ethnogenesis* processes is not to say that Dudo of Saint-Quentin was fully aware of this aspect but rather that in constructing an origin and definition for his *gens normannorum*, he was himself tapping

into the same late-antique historical tradition. Like the Merovingian lineage before them, the Rollonids were conquerors ruling over a very mixed and diverse territory with many disputing groups and pretended leaders, out of which they had managed to firmly come out on top. As Marjorie Chiball (2000, p. 17) put it: 'as the first history of the Norman people, Dudo's work was a response to the need felt by all invaders of the Roman Empire to be accepted as an integral part of the imperial world'.

Like many historians writing of 'barbaric' conquests before him Dudo went as far as he could in connecting the *gens normannorum* to the classical past, albeit always with a Christian outcome in the back of his mind. Besides establishing a thin connection with a Trojan past through Rollo's forefathers, an almost mandatory *topos* of late-antique historical tradition, Dudo more directly connects his Normans to the Roman past when affirming that Rollo's birthplace was the land of Dacia. That can partly be assigned to ignorance for, as Ewan Johnson (2006, p. 155) aptly put it, the settlers' *Danishness* was too broadly known to be simply ignored but also too distant from learned models to be properly accounted for.

Dudo's solution is therefore two-fold: by allocating Norman ancestry to the Dacia of Jordanes' *Getica* he approximates the Norman origin to better known models, connecting the *gens normannorum* to a more accepted tradition of 'barbaric' *gentes*. In this way, Dudo extends his Normans historical background for several centuries and fits them into a Roman-Christian tradition, almost as if allocating the pillaging years between the Trojan/Roman origins and the Norman Christian present as an interlude the *gens normannorum* went through (Van Houts, 2000, p. 4-5). Very fittingly to a late-antique perception of ethnology Dudo thus portrays the Normans simply as another *gens* who, through Rollo's leadership and God's active guiding, managed to find its way into Christian salvation in Normandy.

Rollo himself is portrayed as a classical founding figure. Even though Dudo never goes as far as literally connecting him to a Trojan past, echoes of a Virgilian tradition are very well documented throughout the text as the *Viking* raider Hrólfr is turned into Rollo, a prototypical Aeneas figure who is forced out of his homeland and travels far and wide in search of a peaceful dreamland. In constructing Rollo's proto-Christian nature Dudo narrates

how God showed him Normandy through visions, a land where he would prosper and rid himself of his leprous paganism. In a description that very much resembles that of the *Donatio Constantini*, besides seeing himself purified of leper in the water fountain of Christian baptism, Rollo also sees himself on the apex of a mountain ruling over a peaceful multitude of birds of diverse classes and species, all peacefully submitting to his command (Dudo of Saint-Quentin, *Gesta Normannorum*, Folios 17v–19r)⁵.

In what serves as a foundation myth for the *gens normannorum* throughout the narrative, Rollo is inspired by God to see himself as the rightful leader of a diverse and multiple kingdom, where he and his descendants are to rule under God's guidance. The rest of Dudo's narration for Rollo's journey then goes out of its way to depict how Normandy was won by him and his followers through their force in arms and divine assent, instead of a Frankish treaty concession. The whole construction of Normandy's founding in the text has the express purpose of downplaying the influence and importance of the Franks, portraying Normandy as God's gift to Rollo and even his conversion to Christianity as owing much more to his own merits and divine guidance than to the actions of any Frankish bishop or ruler.

Rollo's period is thus characterized as an important first step of the *gens normannorum* toward full Christianization, process that will be concretized by his son William Longsword and his grandson Richard I through the pages of the *Gesta*. Acting once more as a converted pagan Constantine-like figure, Dudo's Rollo immediately reestablishes the Norman church and concedes to it a great portion of land in his recently acquired reign (Dudo of Saint-Quentin, *Gesta Normannorum*, Folios 29v–32r). That sets the tone for the entire work in its construction of a new identity for its *gens normannorum*, one that is neither Scandinavian nor Frankish but related to those in a field of other existing *gentes*, eulogistically distinguished by Dudo's work through the divinely inspired actuation of its *princeps normannorum*.

⁵ Most of the reading and quotation done in this paper is to Félice Lifshitz 1998 English translation, for it is the only one openly available online. Consultations in Latin have been done on Lair's 1865 edition.

4. Richard I (942 – 996) and the crystallization of Norman identity

Besides the insertion of the *gens normannorum* in a well-known and recognized field of classical Christian *gentes*, Dudo of Saint-Quentin also draws much of its characterization and distinction from the idealized narration of its leaders' deeds, especially those of his patron, Richard I. Fundamental to this process of consolidating Normandy under the Norman *gens*, in the rhetorical as well as political field, in his more than fifty-year long reign Richard was responsible for an almost complete refoundation of Normandy (Hagger, 2013, p. 430). Although Dudo does not admit it, for doing so would mean to contradict the existence of a divine plan for the *gens normannorum*, it was only under Richard that the Rollonid ducal family truly began to impose its authority over the territory Dudo claimed was conceded to Rollo⁶. Only by the end of Richard's own reign and that of his son, Richard II (996 – 1026, estimated period in which the *Gesta* was written), the duchy of Normandy reached its more traditionally recognized borders, with a growing yet not complete control over Lower Normandy.

At the moment of his death in 996 Richard I had managed to subdue most of the Norman elite around himself and his lineage. Although he attained such end through many different strategies, one of the main ones and most accessible to us through written sources, argues Fraser McNair (2015, p. 309), was the creation of the Norman *gens* as a way of galvanizing, that is, creating, heading and legitimizing a political community governed by him and his court. This strategy would have started to become more evidently utilized from 940 to 960 after a severe political crisis stroke Normandy in the aftermath of William Longsword's sudden death in 942. During such crisis, one of the main factors that guaranteed young Richard's great political victory and ascension as Norman ruler was the Rouen ducal court's alliance to several newcoming *Viking* groups. The period's political instability, alongside the newcomers' presence, would have made the appeal to an ethnic language centered on the

⁶ Even then Richard II was only thinly extending his authority over Brittany through his marriage with count Geoffrey's sister, Judith, during the minority of Brittany's heirs (Crouch, 2002, p. 36-37). Regardless of that, Dudo assigns the whole of Brittany as a concession to Rollo in 911, with successive Breton leaders depicted as swearing allegiance to the Norman dukes throughout the 10th century.

Norman court an even more pressing and present demand, aimed at unifying such disparate elites under the duke's command (McNair, 2015, p. 310).

While William Longsword seems to have utilized a strategy of power rhetoric closer to the Carolingian tradition, as indicated by his more regional self-expression as 'count of Rouen' in coins and scarce texts from the 940s (McNair, 2015, p. 312), the following years brought about a substantial shift on the part of Richard and his allies. William's precocious death allowed Rouen's neighbors to take advantage of Richard's minority and advance over Norman territory, diminishing the court's authority. The Rollonids even briefly lost nominal control over Normandy as first one Herluin, count of Montreuil, and then one Ralph Torta were assigned by west-Frankish king Louis IV as Rouen's regents in the early 940s.

While we have very little record and few textual accounts from the period following Richard's ascension, the 960s were more plentiful of charters which show it as a crucial moment for Normandy's history, mainly defined by the conflict between Richard and Theobald the Trickster. Waged approximately between 960 and 966, the Norman War was a decisive moment for the consolidation of Norman power over a large portion of territory west and north of Rouen, since the conflict eventually resulted in Theobald's death and the extension of Rollonid authority over his lands (McNair, 2015, p. 313–315). Once again, Richard's *Viking* allies played a decisive part in his victory.

It was largely as a way of appealing to these numerous newcomers elites which settled in powerful positions inside Norman territory after 966 that Richard and his court began to crystallize a notion of Norman ethnicity by the reformulation of the *normannorum* endonym as an identity extendable to all the elites under their rule. A very significant part of this gradual process was the change in nomenclature promoted by the Norman rulers, who started utilizing more ethnic titles like *comes/marchio/dux normannorum* instead of 'count of Rouen' in later 960s charters (McNair, 2015, p. 315–316). Leaving behind the more territorially restricted authority indicated by the title of 'count', Richard was projecting himself as the legitimate representative of a *gens normannorum*, and demarcating his authority over a territory likewise named.

A very significant document for the analysis of this process is a charter issued by Richard's authority to the Saint-Denis monastery in 968. Again referring to Richard as *marchio normannorum* the charter recurrently establishes the distinction between Franks and Normans and juxtaposes them by addressing 'both *gentes*, to wit, the Franks and the Normans' (McNair, 2015, p. 316–317). The charter thus enacts a division between those who were considered to be followers of Richard, *princeps normannorum*, thereby understood as Normans, and the Frankish men obedient to Hugh Capet, who is addressed as *dux francorum* (McNair, 2015, p. 317). Such distinction established between Normans and Franks should not be read as animosity (seen as Richard I and Hugh Capet were known allies) but a stressing of Richard's *gens normannorum* distinction and position as undisputed rulers of their region inside the broader scenery of the *regnum francorum*.

The demand for a historical account of the Norman past, which would become the *Gesta Normannorum*, emerges therefore at the end of Richard I's reign as a consequence of, but also an active part in, this long process of definition of a distinct identity. Although Dudo alleges the writing of the text came as a demand from Richard himself, in 995, it was during the prosperous reign of Richard II that the text was written, a period of even deeper Norman expansion and consolidation. The text however does not make reference to the author's contemporary period but rather uses the first three Rollonid leaders (anachronistically styled 'dukes') as a thread for the Norman history. Narratively creating a common past for the *gens normannorum* the text reinforces and crystallizes the Rollonid position as the one and only governing force of the territory also thereby named (or renamed): Normandy.

And interestingly enough Richard I's period and the duke himself are the key narrative aspect in the definition of a Norman identity in Dudo's text. While a first portion of the work is dedicated to Hastings, an unrelated *Viking* leader used as an almost bestialized depiction of what the Christianized Norman dukes *were not*, the second and third parts are dedicated respectively to Rollo and his son William Longsword. Although they both play their part in the definition of a Norman identity, Richard I is clearly the center-piece of the work, occupying almost half of its length and functioning as the perfected version of what a Norman leader should be in Dudo's portrayal.

While Rollo's association with the classical past has already been discussed, Dudo's depiction of his son William is worth analyzing in connection to the definition of a Norman identity. Even though Dudo goes out of his way to portray Rollo as a merciful and god-abiding proto-Christian, in addition to his generosity to the Norman church after his conversion, his born paganism was too strong to omit. William Longsword on the other hand is portrayed as the most devout of men, bearing through his entire life an intense desire to abandon his worldly role and live as a monk.

In Dudo's narrative William is respected by all of those around him as a true leader for all of the Christian *gentes*, being the sole responsible for raising Louis IV to the Frankish throne and always coming through as his most important and reliable ally. This characterization also allows Dudo to justify William's death in 942 not as a political mistake, born out of territorial disputes against his neighbors, but as an act of envy from the treacherous and diabolically inspired Arnulf of Flandres. Betrayed for his utmost Christian desire for peace, Dudo's William dies as a classical Frankish martyr.

And although there is profound admiration for the figure of this supposedly holy man there is also veiled criticism, for his failures build up to Richard's success in all fronts. Even if William brings a necessary balance to the construction of a *gens* marked by its broadly-known pagan origins, the way in which he fails is even more relevant to the consolidation of Norman identity. Nurturing an intense desire for peace, Dudo's William is a reluctant leader who needs to be pushed by his peers to protect Normandy from internal and external threats. Even after his power rises and he is respected by all surrounding *gentes*, he spends very little of his time as Norman leader in Normandy, neglecting his reign and *populus* in the name of his allegiance to Louis. This proximity and trust put on Frankish allies proves catastrophic for Normandy, for William leaves it completely vulnerable to royal intervention after he is killed by Arnulf.

The whole narrative of Richard's life is consequently centered on Norman resistance to Frankish aggression and attempt to intervene in Norman affairs, as king Louis tries time and again to take the Norman *regnum* for himself. Even after Richard finally ascends to power,

Dudo gives a probably exaggerated account, to say the least, of an attempted invasion to Normandy by the combined armies of Louis IV's Franks and Otto I's Saxons. Even after this large-scale invasion is repelled, king Louis' son Lothar and the new *Gesta* arch-enemy, Theobald of Chartres, are moved by unjustified anger and envy in their attempts to destroy Normandy and reclaim its territory. Building a picture of a leader cornered and lacking options to the defense of what was rightfully his, Dudo recounts how Richard calls on a horde of Dacian allies, who ravish Frankish territory and ultimately offer to conquer the entire kingdom for Richard to rule over.

This moment, which serves as an epic conclusion to Dudo's narrative, represents the full maturity of Richard and the *gens* he and his ancestors have spawned. In recounting his invoking of ferocious Dacian war bands, Dudo gives a show of the Normans' full power and divine favor in keeping the reign that is legitimately theirs. In refusing to take the Frankish realm for himself, on the other hand, Dudo's Richard reaffirms Norman position as neither inferior nor superior to the Franks, but simply autonomous. What follows then is the concretization of a three-generation long process of Norman construction as the Christian *princeps* of pagan heritage converts almost the entirety of the Dacian army with words alone, convincing them to stop ravishing Francia and, a large portion of them, to convert to Christianity and remain in Normandy as Richard's *fideles* (Dudo of Saint-Quentin, *Gesta Normannorum*, Folios 82r-87r).

Even though Richard would actually live and govern for another 30 years, that is the point where Dudo chooses to finish his *Gesta Normannorum*, the last piece of the puzzle in the consolidation of 11th century Norman identity. Dudo's *gens normannorum* is neither Scandinavian/Dacian nor Frankish, but a group selected by God to well govern Normandy under its Rollonid *dux normannorum*. Normanness, in this context, was a politically motivated category, created as a tool to encompass a diverse group of elites under the authority of the Rollonid duke and the pretext of maintaining Norman authority and power.

Quite representative of what being Norman meant inside this logic is Ralph of Ivry, one of the most powerful men in the Rouen court and identified by Dudo as one of his *relators*

for the composition of the *Gesta*. Half-brother to Richard I, Ralph was a man of mixed origins: his mother Sprota was a Breton and his father Esperleng was what we can generically denominate Frankish (McNair, 2015, p. 323–324). Thus when he is featured in the 968 charter and in the *Gesta* as Richard's *fidele normannorum* it is not so because of any type of bloodline distinction, but simply because he was the *princeps normannorum*'s supporter. The same could be said about the territory's previously-established Frankish elites or the Scandinavian newcomers who, having no kind of blood relation to Richard I, could be placed under a Norman identity simply for orbiting around the duke. Therefore the notion of *gens normannorum* was distinct yet broad enough to shelter this extremely heterogeneous group of elites in the Norman territory.

5. Final considerations

Constructions of ethnic identities have played a fundamental part in the political legitimation and power projection of ruling elites from varied territories and periods throughout the Middle Ages. Hence establishing a connection between the thoroughly developed research field of *ethnogenesis* and the study of Early Normandy can prove extremely beneficial to a deeper analysis of Dudo of Saint-Quentin's *Gesta Normannorum* and 10th to 11th century constructions of Norman identity. Focusing on this aspect and on the political developments of 10th century Normandy may prove fundamental in going beyond the dispute between the 'Scandinavian' and 'Frankish' currents and seeing early Norman identity as a more complexly defined category.

Far from disregarding research on what may have been the reality of Scandinavian settlement in northwestern Francia, viewing Norman ethnicity through the lens of *ethnogenesis* allows for a glimpse of the Rouen court self-perception and projection of power. The prior tradition of ethnological thinking and history writing provided Dudo and the Norman dukes with an important tool toward the desired unification of a politically and ethnically diverse territory. The *Gesta Normannorum* was as much a reflex of as an acting part in the construction of the *gens normannorum*, building a narrative of its leaders' deeds in order to craft Normandy

as a political unity forged by divine plan, with the Rollonid *prineps normannorum* as God's chosen to lead its *populus* into salvation.

Aggregating elites from the most varied origins in its territory, Normandy and the *gens normannorum* are excellent examples of how ethnic early-medieval identities were all but natural or biological. They were rather the culmination of a series of political strategies envisaging the creation and support of a political community, featuring a very well defined and legitimized leadership. They were therefore political and, above all, historically constituted processes of legitimation and consolidation of ruling elites over the territories constituting a *christiana ciuitas*.

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