

In search of Viking ship-yards

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Vikings ravaged Europe embarked in wonderful fleets. These fleets have been described by Christian chroniclers. However, the existence of these fleets has been challenged by Historians who couldn't imagine how they were built and financed. According to these Historians, chroniclers exaggerated the figures of enemy fleets to justify the failure of their kings and of their God. The fact is that never any important Viking ship-yard has been discovered. Does it mean the chroniclers really lied ?



Shipyard of William the Conqueror. Detail of Bayeux tapestry.

January the first, a friend of mine got his birthday. As a present he received an ancient ax. He sent me a photograph. The ax had been

found in baie de Seine and had belonged to a 19e century collectionneur from Rouen. My friend wanted to know if it could be a Viking

ax. I was not a specialist, but I had some books. It was not the typical Viking war ax, but I knew this model, it was represented on the Bayeux Tapestry. It was the ax of a carpenter, a boat builder. Such axes had already been discovered in France in river beds of Loire, Seine, Dordogne and Saone, North of Lyon. Others had been discovered in Charente maritime. But the most remarkable discovery had been made in the years 2000 in the bed of river Charente at Taillebourg, near Saintes, where 3 axes of this type have been discovered among many artifacts of Scandinavian origin...



Picture of my friend's ax found in baie de Seine.

Some believe they may not be Scandinavian, but Frankish. The fact is that an ax of this type has been discovered in the Alps, far away from the traditional hunting ground of Norsemen. There is a simple way to prove its Scandinavian origin : if such axes exist in Scandinavia, there will be no more doubt. The question is : have such axes been discovered in Scandinavia ? Vikings were boat builders. Normally, many similar axes were to be found in Viking ship-yards all over Scandinavia. I had never oriented my quest in this direction..., and I got a huge surprise : not only such axes had never been discovered in Scandinavia – which would favor a Frankish origin-, but no ship-yard had ever been identified... What was the meaning of all this ?

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Unbelievable fleets and ghost ship-yards !

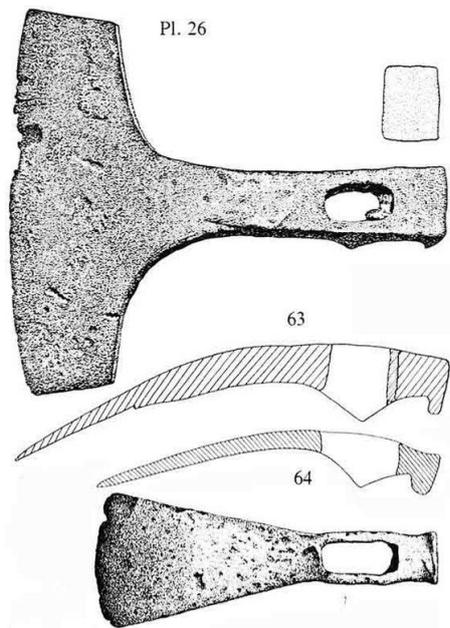
Vikings were remarkable seamen and skillful carpenters. They managed to submerge Europe with incredible fleets. They assaulted Seville with 80 ships in 844, Paris with 120 ships in 845, attacked England with 350 ships in 850, and Paris again with 700 ships in 885. Some say these fleets never existed and were invented by unreliable chroniclers anxious to diabolize their Pagan enemy.



Detail Bayeux tapestry

Many Historians don't believe in these figures. Peter Sawyer developed a theory according to which the chroniclers exaggerated their number to "dramatize" their testimony. All over Europe monks would have deliberately increased the reality... *"The probability is that the Micel Here (the great army which invaded England), the largest force ever described in detail in ninth century English sources, was well under 1000 men. There is nothing in the ninth-century sources to suggest that the Viking armies were ever larger than this and the probability is that most, if not all, the raiding bands were about three to four hundred men."* (Sawyer, p125). Albert D'Haenens is following Sawyer in his analysis : *"En tenant compte des possibilités limitées de*

transport et de l'inutilité pour les Normands de s'encombrer de contingents plusieurs fois supérieurs aux entités adverses , on en arrive à avancer raisonnablement que les bandes danoises devaient compter habituellement de trois à quatre centaines d'hommes et que, comme le suggère P. Sawyer, leur nombre ne dépassa jamais le millier. » (D'Haenens, p.21). If you take into account the limited capacities of transportation and the uselessness to embark a number of warriors far more numerous than their enemies, you can reasonably imagine that Danish bands counted three to four hundred men and that, as suggested P. Sawyer, their number never reached one thousand."



Adze coming from the toolbox of a kraftman discovered in the dried lake Mästermyr, Gotland. Statens Historiska Museum, Stockholm.

To justify his point of view, Sawyer is mentioning the battle of Brissarthe opposing in 866 four hundred Norsemen and Bretons to the Frankish cavalry, a "battle" which caused the death of the two main Frankish war chiefs. In his mind, this figure given by *Annales Bertinianni* are trustable... and justify his opinion.

The only problem is that these same annals mention 120 ships on the Seine in 845, 252 ships in Frisia in 852, two fleets of 200 and 60 ships in 861... As Sawyer is telling us that they were hardly more than 1000 warriors, that means there would be 4 crew members per ship, or more exactly canoes...

Honestly, Sawyer cannot be serious when he's pretending that. Brissarthe was not a pitched battle, but a trap in which Hastein attracted Frankish officers... to execute them. You cannot compare figures of an ambush with those of a pitched battle. All the demonstration is biased.

We don't believe in a plot led by rigging monks aiming to cheat Historians of the following centuries. If the monks had been liars, they should have invented for every attack the number of ships involved. In 841, they don't say how many ships attacked Rouen. In 844, they keep silent on the number of ships which rowed up river Garonne to Toulouse; in 856, they don't mention the fleet commanded by Björn when he seized Paris... If they "invented" so easily figures, they –or their followers- should have given fantasist figures without any scruples for every attack. They didn't. In some cases, they kept silent. This means that when they have no information, they say nothing and when they have, they say it. Monks didn't lie and if they write 350 ships appeared in England in 851, they have the best reasons to write so.

To prove the unreliability of chroniclers some remark that *Chronicon Fontanellense* is mentioning in 845 a fleet of 120 ships while *Annales Bertinianni* are mentioning only 100... This would be the definite proof you cannot trust figures given by these chroniclers... Big smile.... « *Les Normands, avec 100 vaisseaux, entrèrent le 20 du mois de mars dans la Seine, et ravageant tout de côté et d'autre, arrivèrent sans résistance à Paris* » (ASB 845). The Latin

text is telling : “ *Nothmannorum naves centum viginti mense martio per Sequanam...* ” : translation “ *in March, 120 ships of Norsemen entered river Seine ...* ” Those who point the difference of figures to discredit these texts cannot be serious.



Detail of Bayeux tapestry.

The lack of imagination of Historians...

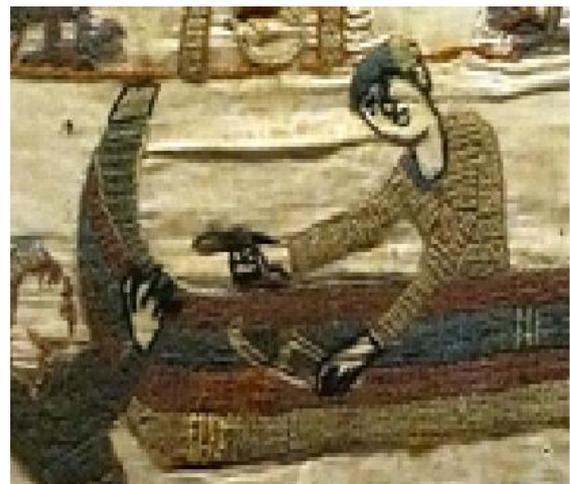
Now many Historians don't trust these testimonies. Not because there are contradicting each other –they don't contradict each other at all-, but because our dear Historians cannot understand how Norsemen could have financed and built such fleets. There are two main ways to create such fleets. Either you ask tens of smaller chiefs to join you in your adventure –this is the common opinion-, or as William the Conqueror did, you build somewhere a huge fleet.

The first option is not one : you cannot defy Carolingian Empire, Cordoban Emirate and Byzantine Empire with divided troops and ships of different sizes, of different shape and age, sailing at different speeds, embarking crews of various number. To be efficient, a fleet needs to be homogeneous in size, ships and crews. It's common sense.

The only solution to create homogenous fleets is the second one : somewhere somebody ordered the construction of fleets and financed them. French Medievalists have a very good case to reject this second option : to finance such a war effort, you need money. And by that time, in this agricultural world, money comes from the tax you get from the peasants who work hard in your kingdom. In Scandinavia, there was no organized state able to collect tax on a large scale, no kingdom rich enough to finance such an effort. Without any organized kingdom able to finance them, these fleets are impossible.

Historians who link financial power to the land do not know the Viking world.

Viking fleets have not been financed by taxes, but by trade. These fleets are not the fact of a king, but of a *Seaking*, a lord who rules the seas, in other words a ship owner who earns money by trade... We know that all Scandinavian kings were getting their money from the port –and so the trade route- they controlled. A *Saekonung* did the same! The chief who built these fleets took over strategic ports to finance his war effort.



Detail of Bayeux tapestry

We can explain how he proceeded, but it's another subject.

Now the question is : where these fleet were built ?

The fact is that in 2017, no Viking shipyard has ever been discovered... in France or in Scandinavia. However they existed. In 862, *Annales Bertiniani* mention : Weland « descendit avec toute la flotte danoise jusqu'à Jumièges, où ils s'arrêtèrent pour réparer leurs bâtiments et attendre l'équinoxe du printemps. » Weland « went down river with all the Danish fleet to Jumieges, where they stopped to repair their boats and wait for the spring equinox ». Vikings had a shipyard downstream of Rouen.

In 866, « Les Normands s'éloignent au mois de juillet de l'île située proche du monastère de Saint-Denis (Jeufosse), et descendant la Seine, gagnent un lieu commode (Oissel, Jumièges) pour réparer (chantier naval) leurs navires et en faire de neufs ». In July, Norsemen are leaving the island close to the monastery of Saint Denis (Jeufosse) and going down the Seine reach a convenient place to repair their ships and build new ones.

In 1871, Abbot Cochet is mentioning holes near Conihout-sous-Jumieges that the inhabitants used to name “trous fumeux” –the name still exists- (smoky holes) or “trous de fer” (iron holes). These holes were ovens to melt iron ore. Archeologist Laurent Mazet-Harhoff considers they could be the remnants of the ship-yard mentioned in *Annales Bertinianni*. The Archeologist is noticing an interesting place name nearby : on the other bank of river Seine, we find Les Malmains. Now, the word *malm* is ore, iron ore. Les Malmains is not a true plural. We think the original name was Malmains with a “singing s”. In our opinion, *Malmains* is *malmhus*, the house of the ore. The presence of these “trous de fer” let us believe that *malmhus* may have

been a Viking word to name a forge... Now, on river Dordogne, there is a place name Malmussou. We recognize *malmhus*. The suffix “ou” has only one possible translation : ey or ö, island. *Malmhusö* is the island of the forge. If we discover iron ore on this former island, it would confirm the Scandinavian origin of this name and its meaning.

Further south, near Mimizan, around the coastal lake of Aureillan, in the Pays de Born, there are several earthworks that surround the bottom of the lake to protect it from land attack (See A Viking base in Mimizan). These earthworks are located at La Guirosse (*L'Asgeirhus*), Loubeyres (*Lou Bierhus*), Marès (*Marhus*), Lanty (*L'Hastein*). Aureillan like Royan is a reference to our friend Ragnar. The chart of Mont de Marsan, discovered around 1830, clearly points at Mimizan as the main Viking base in Gascony. “Norsemen were keeping their ships in the bay of Mimizan”. French Linguists have no doubt. Mimizan refers to a Gentilice named Mimesius who had a villa nearby. It's the traditional approach of French place names... We have another suggestion. Mimizan appears in old maps written *Maomisam*. In a Scandinavian context, the suffix “am” reveals a port : *hamn*, *havn*. Further north, in Medoc, Lesparre appears written *Sparram*, *spar-hamn*, the port of the spur. The fact is that under the castle built on a spur, there was a Medieval port... If “am” is a port, what is *maomis* ?

In our mind, *maomis* is a phonetic *malmhus*... *malmushamn*, port of the forge, in other words : ship-yard... And when you see these earthworks referring to the main war chiefs lying on nearly two kilometers around it, you can imagine it was not a small one...

Was Mimizan the ship-yard of the invasion ?

The fact that the sandy coast of Aquitaine was covered with huge virgin oak forests was of course of great interest for these shipbuilders looking for aged oaks. The fact that there was iron ore in Mimizan was also interesting. Most of the earthworks are located at Pontenx-les-

Forges... If we add it was a swampy area crossed by a sole Roman road, you discover that this place was easy to defend and connected to the Hinterland... Not too bad to locate a strategic ship-yard!

This ship-yard was not a late one. It was an early one. “ *Afonso II, king of Asturias, received the help of the king of Pampelona and of the Mayus of the coast* ”. Mimizan lies on the “coast” of Pampelona. This text mentions the presence of Pagans in Gascony as soon as 795... The names of Ragnar, Björn, Hastein, Asgeir and Mar –chiefs mentioned in chronicles- let us believe that the base was erected at the latest around 835, five years before the invasion of Gascony.

Mimizan was a ship-yard, but it was not the only one... In the river mouth, near Bayons/Gironde, there is a Marmisson. On the coast of Bordeaux, you find Maubuisson. On the coast of Royan, there is Maumusson. For us, no doubt: these were *malmhushamn* too...

These place names would reveal that the fleets that ravaged Europe have never been built in Scandinavia where oak forests were the property of the people and useful for those remaining home, but abroad where huge virgin oak forests existed, on the shores of Aquitaine. Peter Sawyer notes : “*keels were generally made of oak and the longest known is twenty metres: it is unlikely that many oaks in Scandinavia could have yielded straight timber much longer than this. When the replica of the Gokstad ship was made in 1892*

Canadian oak had to be imported for the keel as no suitable timber could be found in Norway” (Sawyer,p.78). Sawyer considers this element as another proof that huge fleets were impossible to build... He’s right. They were impossible to build... in Scandinavia.

Conclusion

If Archeologists want to find Viking ship-yards, they have to look for them in the right places and these places are not in Scandinavia... but on the shores of France. Sadly, French Archeologists and Historians do not seem very anxious to discover their Viking History. Jean François Mariotti who led the prospection of river Charente at Taillebourg couldn’t mention his discovery of a Viking port: he could just mention that such a port –where so many Viking artefacts have been discovered- could hardly belong to a monastery during that trouble period... If he had said more, he would have been crushed by his colleagues...

The existence of such shipyards would raise many questions : if a chief ordered the construction of the fleets that rushed into Europe, it would mean that what we call Viking invasions were in fact a war... a war led by a man with a political ambition What would have been his ambition ? Could this ambition be related to what William Calculus is telling us : Björn had “*to conquer a residency overseas* ”. The existence of Pays de Born around Mimizan and Pays de Bearn in the Pyrenees let us think so.

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