

# Armed Bands on Both Sides of the Channel: Can We Track Individual Viking Gangs?

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## **Armed bands on both sides of the Channel (865-899): can we track individual viking gangs?**

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In the last third of the ninth century, a number of large viking armies were active on both sides of the English Channel, either in Northern Frankia or in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.<sup>1</sup> As opposed to previous viking gangs who had been raiding the coasts of Gaul and the British Isles over the previous century, these vikings threatened the very existence of established powers and conquered vast areas both in the Isles and on the Continent: in Frisia, in East Anglia, in Mercia, in Northumbria, and finally in Normandy in the early tenth century, newcomers were able to establish important and often lasting power bases. Since the early twentieth century at least, there has been a consensus in historiography that these “new” vikings were broadly the “same” people, who operated on either side of the Channel, depending on the circumstances.<sup>2</sup> If they met strong resistance or even failure in one sector, those highly mobile people would be ready to move away, crossing the sea in order to harry and/or try to conquer another, less prepared, region. It has also often been said that these vikings “of western Europe” originated more precisely from Denmark, that they were Danes rather than Norwegians or Swedes: that would set them apart from other Scandinavian pirates and settlers, who at the same time would have sailed to the coasts of the Southern and Eastern Baltic and to what would in time become Russia (in the case of Swedes), or to Northern Britain, Ireland and the islands of the North Atlantic (in the case of Norwegians).

I do not think it would be wise to challenge completely these two main received ideas — that most of them “came from Denmark” and that they were “the same vikings” in England and in Frankia — but I believe it is still useful to question them not as a broad vision of “what really happened then”, but by considering more specific points. I will not be bringing here brand new ideas on what happened around the southern half of the North Sea and in the English Channel in the late ninth century, but I would like to question some methodological assumptions which

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<sup>1</sup> For general accounts of the vikings, see among many other titles: HAYWOOD, 1995; ROESDAHL, 1998; BAUDUIN, 2004; HALL, 2007. I write “vikings” with a low-case initial, because the Norse and Anglo-Saxon words *vikingr* and *wicing* did not refer to a people, but to an activity, even a way of life: we would not write “the Pirates” or “the Sailors”. See JESCH, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> The seminal work here is VOGEL, 1906. See also, for a more detailed regional account, D’HAENENS, 1967, and for a short summary, D’HAENENS, 1970.

until recently were common in the historiography of the viking invasions in the West. Of course, there is nothing illegitimate in the ambition to write a “master narrative” of that phenomenon, but if the “big picture” of Danish invaders operating indifferently on both sides of the Channel is partly true, it is nevertheless deeply misleading when it is not explained and qualified properly.

Hence the main question I would like to ask: can we actually track viking gangs as they moved along the seaways, up and down rivers, and across land? If we want to answer that, we really have ask at least three different sub-questions, the answers to which will not be the same. 1/ Can we really perceive vast movements of large viking armies? That is: where did those “new” conquering armies come from, and did they actually move back and forth across the Channel? 2/ Can we follow individual vikings? That is: are there people, whom we can identify as vikings, whose “international” career we may be able to follow over the years? 3/ Can we track specific viking gangs? This question is, I think, the hardest but potentially the most rewarding one. As we will see, viking armies seem to have been composed of smaller units, which we may call “gangs” or “armed bands”: those units joined and congregated to form larger armies, such as the “Great Army” that appeared off the coasts of East Anglia in the autumn of 865. The question of whether we can follow those smaller components in their moves is a difficult one, because it means we must understand how they were created and how they worked. Indeed, I will not be drawing a very encouraging conclusion: the very structure of these groups, on which recent work has been shedding much light, makes it very difficult to track them in their travels.<sup>3</sup>

### **Viking armies**

Let us begin with the vaster movements of “armies”. For more than a century (indeed, since Walther Vogel published in 1906 his masterful study on “Northmen and the Frankish Empire”), historians have used written sources, especially annalistic sources, in order to follow the track of “the vikings” in the areas where they operated as raiders and conquerors. In England, those sources are the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* together with its associated texts (for example Asser’s *Life of King Alfred*), but also later works such as the *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto* (tenth-eleventh century). In Frankia, the main written sources are the many sets of annals which might be described as spin-offs from the earlier *Royal Frankish Annals*: that is, *Annales Vedastini*,

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<sup>3</sup> For recent descriptions of such gangs, see RAFFIELD et al., 2015, and RAFFIELD, 2016. I use the notion of “armed bands” in the way I defined it in earlier publications: e.g. GAUTIER, 2012, and GAUTIER, 2013.

*Annales Bertiniani*, *Annales Fuldenses*, *Annales Xantenses*, and their numerous analogues and continuations.

The “big picture” which arises from culling those sources is indeed rather obvious, and it explains the common wisdom on the subject. We may rely here on the very useful chronology established by Albert d’Haenens in his great little book on the viking invasions in northern Frankia, complemented by Pierre Bauduin’s recent study on “the Frankish world and the vikings”.<sup>4</sup> Between 850 and 866, viking raids were frequent in the Seine valley, but after that date, they ceased altogether for more than a decade, with the exception of a single action in the winter of 876-7. In the meantime, vikings were active on the Loire, and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* tells of a “Great Army” (*micel here*) of “Danes” (*Dene*) or “pagans” (*hæðen*), who roamed over England from 865 to 878, when they were finally beaten and forced to make peace with King Alfred of Wessex.<sup>5</sup> The following year, that is in the spring of 879, vikings appeared again north of the Somme and south of the Meuse (that is, in today’s Belgium and Northern France), a region which until then had known only sporadic raids. Viking operations there lasted until they were beaten by King Arnulf of the East Franks at Leuven in 891. As for the Loire vikings, they seem (at least according to a later source, Richer’s *History*) to have been defeated by king Odo of the West Franks at Montpensier in the Auvergne in 892. Finally, in the autumn of the same year, a large viking fleet set sail from Boulogne, on the Frankish side of the Straits of Dover. This is precisely when the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* tells of the arrival of large viking *here* in Kent, which Alfred had to tackle in the following years.<sup>6</sup>

So, if we follow that chronology, the picture appears limpid: “the vikings” had been attacking the Seine and Loire valley in the 850s and early 860s; they “came to England” in the autumn of 865, and stayed there until the spring of 879; at that date, having been beaten by Alfred, they “sailed to Frankia” and ravaged the regions between the Somme and the Meuse until 892; after (and because of) their defeat in Leuven, they “went back” to England, where Alfred had to deal with them all over again. We should add that the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* often calls them Danes (*Dene*), while Frankish texts dwell on the family links between some of its leaders and Danish dynasts. This seems to vindicate the received opinion: those vikings came from Denmark, and once they had arrived in the West, their movements over the English Channel reflected the

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<sup>4</sup> D’HAENENS, 1970: 11-14; BAUDUIN, 2009. There are (broadly valid) cartographic representations of these movements of “larger” viking armies in HAYWOOD, 1995: 60-9.

<sup>5</sup> A classic description of the movements of the “Great Army” may be found in STENTON, 1971: 246-57. For a more recent and controversial view, see McLEOD, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> For detailed accounts of Alfred’s wars against vikings, both before 878 and 892, see SMYTH, 1995 and ABELS, 1998. For the text of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, I used BATELY, 1986.

capacity of Christian kings to oppose them effectively: when kings were good and strong, the vikings left.

Unfortunately, such a “big picture” is fraught with difficulties. To begin with, it has long been recognized that, in Anglo-Saxon sources at least, “Danes” is a generic name for all kinds of Scandinavians: we cannot assume that all “Danes” were from today’s Denmark.<sup>7</sup> It is true that Frankish sources mention figures such as Godfrid, Sigfrid or Rodulf — all of them kinsmen of Roric, a well-known Danish dynast of the mid-ninth century, and of Harald Klak, a Danish king who had concluded an alliance with the Franks in the 820s.<sup>8</sup> But even if the leaders were Danes, what of the men? The close entourage of such leaders may have been composed of kinsmen and clients from their home region, but that does not mean that the whole army was. Moreover, we must admit that over such a long period the armies simply cannot have been composed of the same men. About thirty years elapsed between the arrival of the “Great Army” in England in 865 and the renewed viking activity there in the mid-890s. Basically, a very simple observation must be made : a middle-aged warrior who participated in the 865 invasion was probably dead thirty years later, and many of the men who invaded Kent in 892 cannot have been part of the army which had left in 879, let alone the one that invaded in 865. In the meanwhile, armies kept moving, splitting and merging. New groups kept appearing and reinforcing armies (chroniclers are always aware of that), and existing groups kept recruiting men.

So, where did the new recruits come from? Some of them may have indeed come from Denmark or other Scandinavian lands, some may have been turncoat Franks or Anglo-Saxons, runaway slaves and discontented peasants, but many of them were probably the sons of vikings who had been operating in the West over the last decades. The *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*, written in the late tenth and eleventh century, gives the 865-879 invaders the name of *Scaldingi*.<sup>9</sup> One common understanding of that word has been that it refers to the Danish dynasty of the *Skjöldungar*, in Old English *Scyldingas*, who were mentioned in *Beowulf* and in several much later Norse sources. But an alternative explanation (proposed since the nineteenth century, but more recently and cogently defended by Alex Woolf) has it that the name refers to the river

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<sup>7</sup> Similar observations have been made for other regions, particularly Ireland. For a detailed discussion of the (mis)use of ethnic and national labels in some modern studies of the vikings, see DOWNHAM, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Several studies focus on some of those characters, especially because some of them later developed into half-legendary heroes in Icelandic sagas. See BAUDUIN, 2009; ROWE, 2012; and recently LEWIS, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> *Historia de sancto Cuthberto*, ch. 7, 11 and 12: see JOHNSON SOUTH, 2002: 49-53.

Scheldt (in Latin *Scaldis*):<sup>10</sup> *Scaldingi* were “the vikings of the Scheldt”, just as there were “vikings of the Seine” and “of the Loire”. If that interpretation is right, they were probably a portion of the vikings who had been present in Frisia for some decades, since one of their leaders, Roric, had been granted dominion there by Emperor Lothar I in the early 840s.<sup>11</sup> If we follow Shane McLeod’s suggestion, it means that many of the warriors who landed in East Anglia in 865 had never actually lived in Denmark (or, come to that, in any Scandinavian country), but had grown up (at least from a very young age) in a Western environment with which they were quite familiar.<sup>12</sup> This goes a long way towards explaining why they converted so quickly to Christianity in the 880s and 890s, and why they adapted so easily to their new English terrain.

Indeed, we know that many men stayed in England in the 870s, as surely many did in Frankia in the 890s. So the commonly held idea that vikings only went when they were defeated by Christian kings must be challenged, or at least qualified. We know very well that, in 878, Alfred arranged for the viking leader Guthrum and his army to *stay* in England (more exactly in East Anglia), and many of them did. More surprisingly, it seems that after his victory in the summer of 891, Arnulf did not exploit the situation: he went back to Bavaria (his main power base), leaving the vikings at their Leuven camp, where they stayed and from which they conducted expeditions for another year and a little more. Finally (if it indeed happened<sup>13</sup>) Odo’s victory in 892 at Montpensier was not against the vikings of the Seine and the Somme who had “come from England” thirteen years before, but against vikings of the Loire basin, who had been conducting independent expeditions over the last decades from bases near Nantes and Angers, and on the island of Noirmoutier. Viking armies kept splitting and merging. Did those defeated vikings of the Loire area join their colleagues from the Leuven and Amiens camps who sailed from Boulogne towards England in 892? It is indeed possible, but it means that the army which set sail in that year was, again, something quite new.

## **Viking leaders and warriors**

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<sup>10</sup> WOOLF, 2007: 72 ; see also LEWIS, 2016: 22-5.

<sup>11</sup> BAUDUIN, 2009: 181-2. For a general view of vikings in Frisia, see LEBECQ, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> McLEOD, 2014: 168-9. Other vikings in the “Great Army” probably had strong connections with Ireland, and may have been operating there for some decades. I do not have space here to include a discussion of those Irish connections, but they should definitely be included in the “big picture” as much as in the life-stories of individual vikings. DOWNHAM, 2007, tries to make sense of what we know of a particular kin-group, active both in Ireland and in England within the “Great Army”; ROWE, 2012, follows the same vikings in their own time and in later legend.

<sup>13</sup> See below for a discussion of the historicity of that episode.

Will our task become easier once we turn to the question of the moves of individual vikings? Here of course, the paucity and the very nature of the written sources only allow us to follow “kings” and “jarls”. Men such as Inguar, Healfdene, Guthrum, Godfrid, Sigfrid, Rodulf, Hæsten and Rollo seem to have been quite famous in their own time, and Christian chroniclers did not hesitate to mention their names. Indeed, in the following centuries, medieval authors themselves tried to track the movements of those viking heroes (or anti-heroes), and sometimes they did it with a lot of imagination.<sup>14</sup>

The example of Hasting (also known as Hæsten, probably Hásteinn in Norse) is revealing.<sup>15</sup> He is mentioned in a handful of mid- and late-ninth century annals entries (most significantly in the *Annals of Saint-Vaast* and in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*), but his literary fortune came much later, with Dudo of St Quentin’s *Ways and Deeds of the Earliest Norman Dukes*, written around the year 1000, where his adventures represent the main argument of Book I. Dudo described him as a wily and clever viking, and included the famous episode (inspired by motif of the Trojan horse) in which he sacked an Italian city by pretending he had died and by hiding in a coffin.<sup>16</sup> If we follow Dudo, Hasting’s career seems to have been a very long one: beginning in the mid-830s, he roamed over the whole of western Europe until he died in England in the mid-890s. This would mean that he died at the age of 80 (at the very least), still leading an army. Of course it is not strictly impossible, but it is rather unlikely. Could there be in fact several Hastings (even only two, for example a father and a son)? Who knows? But this case shows that we should not trust Dudo or any other late author blindly: Janet Nelson, for one, is very prudent, and she limits what we know of his career to little more than the one last decade (that is, after 880).

Now if we consider only his moves in that shorter period, we see that Hasting operated in three successive regions: on the Loire before 882; between Seine and Scheldt until 892; and finally in south-eastern England, where he died in or shortly after 893. It means that Hasting, who had appeared north of the Seine in 882 after some previous activity further south, was probably not among the vikings who had come over from England after Alfred and Guthrum had reached an agreement four years before, particularly if he was the son or a kinsman of an earlier Hasting, who is had been raiding on the Loire in the 850s and 860s. If it was indeed the case (which I think likely), the “younger Hasting” of the years 880-893 was actually not “from Denmark”,

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<sup>14</sup> ROWE, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> For new assessments of Hasting’s career and literary fortune, see NELSON, 2004; BAUDUIN, 2009: 358-9; BOUET, 2012; and SIMEK, 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Dudo, *De moribus*, book I: see LAIR, 1865 for Latin text, and CHRISTENSEN, 1998, for an English translation.

and not even “from Scandinavia”: he was probably born in Frankia, and had lived all of his life there. So his individual movements were not those of the “big picture”: not a complex back-and-forth movement from Denmark to Frankia, then to England, then back to Frankia, and finally back to England, but a much more straightforward south-north career, from the Loire to the Seine to Picardy to Boulogne to Kent — end of story.

The example of Hasting shows that our sources barely allow us to try and reconstruct the life and career of a viking leader,<sup>17</sup> but what of the movements of ordinary viking warriors? Here of course, texts prove totally useless: they are too elite-oriented to help us follow the fortunes of the rank and file of armies. One interesting alternative has recently come from the analysis of stable isotopes in the teeth and bones of buried vikings: it aims to inform us, through the establishment percentages of some isotopes (particularly those of strontium) on the place where an individual grew up, and it has become frequent in discussions of migration.<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, currently there are very few individual burials which can be identified with some degree of certainty as those of viking raiders, invaders or settlers,<sup>19</sup> and whose bones have also been the object of isotope analyses. I know of no example in France or Belgium, and there are still very few in the United Kingdom. In the last synthetic article published on that topic, Ben Raffield was only able to consider a dozen individuals (interestingly, both male and female); the figure is similar to that in Shane McLeod’s earlier paper on “Warriors and women”, which retained only thirteen burials.<sup>20</sup> So we must remain very prudent here, because of a great risk of circular reasoning. Still, one conclusion we may draw from this very limited sample is that those buried people, who in their lifetime were probably viking warriors or settlers, were not all from Denmark, or even from what today we call Scandinavia. For example, one woman who was buried at Repton when the “Great Army” was there in the winter of 873-4 had grown up in the Baltic region of the European continent, or even further south: it does not mean she was not of Scandinavian origin — there were Scandinavian settlements on the southern coast of the Baltic Sea — but she did not come from what we call Denmark. During the same winter, a man who

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<sup>17</sup> Many other attempts have been made in that direction. Most recently, LEWIS, 2016, reconstructed the career of Rodulf “of Frisia”, whom he thinks should be equated with Ubba of the “Great Army”. If that is correct, here again we have here a leader who, like Hasting, was probably born in Frankia within a lineage of Scandinavian origin, and whose career encompassed both sides of the Channel (as well as Ireland).

<sup>18</sup> The principles of isotope analysis are explained in POLET & ORBAN, 2001.

<sup>19</sup> What would make a skeleton “viking”? “Pagan” elements in the perceived burial rite? “Scandinavian” grave-goods? The presence of a barrow? There is no simple answer to that question. See HARRISON, 2015, for a sensible discussion.

<sup>20</sup> RAFFIELD, 2016; McLEOD, 2011.



had probably grown up in Sweden was buried at Repton, near another man who was actually from the west coast of Denmark.<sup>21</sup>

We should add that isotope analyses are useful if we want to know where people grew up, but that they cannot tell us anything about where they had been traveling and raiding once they had become adults. If a viking's warring life could last as long as thirty years (and I think it is safe not to postulate much longer careers), one individual could have raided or even tried to settle a variety of places before dying. If we return to our example of Hasting, the Norman historian William of Jumièges (who wrote in the mid-eleventh century) claims that in 882, the viking had been granted land and authority in Chartres by a king of the Franks (probably Louis III);<sup>22</sup> if that is true, he quickly changed his mind and travelled north to Picardy, where he went a-viking again.

### **Viking gangs**

The Repton cemetery, with both male and female individuals of rather different geographical backgrounds buried not far from each other, suggests that the “vikings” in one particular group may have come from a variety of places. This brings me to my last point, the question of viking gangs. Ben Raffield in particular has recently explored the structure and functioning of these communities of warriors, and I myself have tried in other publications to understand it in the wider context of early medieval Europe. Viking armies were composed of smaller, much tighter bands, composed of a few ships and crews which could probably be counted in hundreds of men: their members were united by oaths, common life, comradeship, and (to some extent) fidelity to their leader,<sup>23</sup> which does not mean that internal competition and even treason never happened.<sup>24</sup> This institution was probably called *lið* (or maybe *hirð*) in Old Norse,<sup>25</sup> and a few contemporary written sources refer to them.

For example, the *Annals of St Bertin* mention that, in the winter of 861-2, a large viking army had to overwinter in North-Western Frankia: in order to make the most of the local resources in what was probably a difficult situation for the invaders themselves, “they split up according to their brotherhoods into groups allocated to various ports from the sea-coast right up to Paris”

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<sup>21</sup> McLEOD, 2011: 346.

<sup>22</sup> William of Jumièges, *Gesta Normannorum ducum*, I, 10 and II, 5, quoted by BAUDUIN, 2009: 290; see also BOUET, 2012: 217.

<sup>23</sup> RAFFIELD et al., 2015; RAFFIELD, 2016.

<sup>24</sup> I insist on that dimension in GAUTIER, 2012 and GAUTIER, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> “Probably”, because the texts which mention them are either contemporary, but in Latin, or in Old Norse, but much later.

— this is Janet Nelson’s translation, but the Latin text reads *suas sodalitates*, literally “their companies”, “their teams”, “their sworn gangs”, “their bands of comrades”.<sup>26</sup> Of course, “brotherhoods” is not a bad translation at all, but there is no concept of kinship in the word *sodalitas*: this is why I prefer the phrase “bands of comrades” to Raffield’s (admittedly more elegant) “bands of brothers”. Indeed, the very idea of sworn groups of men, based on oaths rather than kinship, had a notorious profile in Frankish texts of that time, particularly in legal texts, both royal and ecclesiastical, as in several capitularies of Archbishop Hincmar of Rheims, the very author of this section of the *Annals*. Formal associations such as guilds and other sworn fellowships, established in defiance of a superior authority (the king’s or the bishop’s) or at least perceived to have been established in that way, were condemned as *conjuraciones* (literally “oath-taking groups”), *conventicula* (“little gatherings”) or “*commessiones*” (“table-sharing groups”).<sup>27</sup> The entry for 861 in the *Annals of St Bertin* was indeed the first one written by Hincmar after the death of the previous writer, Bishop Prudentius of Troyes. The presence of those *sodalitates*, referring here to viking groups operating within the kingdom in defiance of the king’s peace, in the very first description the new author made of the vikings is very telling.<sup>28</sup> Just before that, Hincmar had explained how sixty viking ships had gone up an unidentified tributary of the Seine to a fortress already besieged by other Northmen, with whom they had “bound in association” (*in societate iunguntur*). In the eyes of the Frankish authorities (and, probably, equally in the eyes of their Anglo-Saxon counterparts), the vikings appeared like illegal gatherings, bound by illegal oaths and common mischief, which could occasionally bind with other gangs in order to create larger armies and work more mischief, before splitting again into their original components.

How were those gangs created? It is a difficult question. Our problem here is that their basic instability makes it almost impossible for us to follow them. We should not imagine that those gangs were homogeneous groups who “naturally” followed their leaders because they were (for example) their kinsmen or their fellow countrymen. The ethnic (or at least geographic) variety of viking gangs is confirmed by the analysis of the skeletons of a later (probably late tenth century) mass grave, found in 2008 in Weymouth, on the coast of Dorset. Isotope analyses

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<sup>26</sup> *Annales Bertiniani*, year 861: see WAITZ, 1883: 56, for the Latin text; and NELSON, 1991: 95-6, for the English translation. See also RAFFIELD, 2016: 324-5, for a commentary.

<sup>27</sup> See the classic study by OEXLE, 1982: 3-6.

<sup>28</sup> Admittedly, the connotations of *sodalitas* were not as negative as those of *conjuratio*, *conventiculum* or *comessatio*: it could for example refer to “legitimate” monastic groups. But I think its use in this particular context (referring to vikings) does echo Hincmar’s condemnation of sworn association in several of his other works.

showed that the men who were killed there (probably a whole gang, or at least a substantial part of it) had grown up in a great variety of places in Northern Europe, from the Southern Baltic and Russia to North of the Arctic Circle.<sup>29</sup>

So following the moves of one leader may not always give us clues as to the whereabouts of “his” gang. Let us take for one last time the example of Hasting. It seems that he abandoned his earlier southern terrain in the Loire basin in 882: at that date, maybe following an agreement with King Louis III of the Franks, he moved north to the Seine basin, and then into Picardy. But did all his gang follow him? I have no answer to that, but it is rather striking to observe that, after their seemingly crushing defeat at Montpensier in 892, viking gangs stopped harrying the Loire area (where they had been active almost without a break for the last five decades). In the same year, a huge army set sail from Boulogne for England, under the leadership of Hasting. Did former members of his Loire gang join him then? Did other gangs (maybe former allies of his) leave the Loire region (where their raiding would have become more hazardous and less profitable) and join up with him in that new venture? The problem is that the chronology is not easy to reconstruct, and actually it does not seem right. The contemporary *Annals of St Vaast* do mention Odo’s expedition in Aquitaine, which would provide the right context for a battle at Montpensier; but they record the king’s presence in the South only *after* telling of Hasting’s departure of from Boulogne. That seems rather reasonable: we may infer that the king went south only after he had seen the Northmen off. But to add to the confusion, there are proofs (from diplomas) that the expedition to Aquitaine began in June 892-3,<sup>30</sup> whereas the *Annals of St Vaast* say that the vikings left Frankia “in autumn” (*tempore autumni*).<sup>31</sup> Probably the author of the *Annals* was working geographically, and not chronologically... So when could the battle have taken place? Maybe we could squeeze it in August or September of 892, in the course of Odo’s campaign (he had first gone to Poitou, then to the Auvergne). But if that is the right chronology, it does not leave much time for the defeated vikings to reorganize and join other gangs (including one led by the “younger Hasting”, possibly a kinsman of one of their former leaders) in Boulogne. Maybe the right answer to that conundrum is that the battle, which is not mentioned by any contemporary source, never happened: a conclusion which was already reached by Édouard Favre in the late nineteenth century.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> LOE et al., 2014; BOYLE, 2016.

<sup>30</sup> FAVRE, 1893: 146-9.

<sup>31</sup> *Annales Vedastini*, year 892: see SIMSON, 1909: 70-3, for the Latin text.

<sup>32</sup> The story of the battle of Montpensier (*Mons Panchei*) was told by Richer of Reims (who was writing just before 1000), in his *Histories*, I, 6-8: Latin text and English translation in LAKE, 2011: 24-7. FAVRE, 1893: 232, considered the whole episode a fabrication. On the other hand, FAVRE, 1893: 146-

That particular case of the battle of Montpensier, and of the possible insular destiny of the viking gang (or gangs) that met defeat there, is a good example of the many problems that beset historians whenever they are trying to track individual viking bands. Contemporary writers in Frankia and Anglo-Saxon England were well aware of the specific structure of viking armies, with their numerous and highly divisive components; they knew about their *sodalitates*, but they were not interested in keeping track of them. What really mattered to them was either the formation of the much more dangerous large armies, or the fate of individual leaders with whom local powers might be negotiating. They were ready to tell how two armies met to create a larger one, which a year later split into three groups, but they never bothered to record which original component went this or that way after the army had dissolved. They would tell how one particular leader died in battle, but they would not mention who led his men, or what his particular gang did after that leader's death.

So I'm afraid any conclusion is bound to be rather inconclusive. Following "large armies" has proved partly misleading, for ninth-century vikings did not move in stable large gatherings; following leaders is fraught with many difficulties of identification; and following individual rank soldiers has proved impossible (at least given our current archaeological data). In order to reconstruct the actual moves of vikings, the ideal solution would be to track the seemingly more coherent "armed bands": but it seems that our sources, written and archaeological, are just inadequate for that.

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9, shows very well that Odo was in Aquitaine and Auvergne from the summer of 892 and until sometime in 1893: so the possibility remains that the battle did take place. On that (too?) ornate story, see also BAUDUIN, 2009: 29-30.

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