Introduction

The origins of the Vikings who settled in Normandy are, today, well known to historians. Undoubtedly a majority of these invaders were Danish, but a great contingent of them was more specifically Anglo-Danish. Documentary, literary, onomastic and lexical sources all converge on this very point. Indeed, many Vikings did not come directly from Scandinavia, but from their colonies in England whence it would have been easier to reach what would eventually become Normandy. This Anglo-Scandinavian influx, which continued up to the eleventh century, contributed greatly to the special cultural complexion of the Viking settlement of Normandy.

However, the Vikings also followed another sea route to the coast of France, one which was less direct and, because of this, certainly less used. This route belonged to the Norwegians who, from their settlements in Scotland and Ireland, sailed either directly to Brittany or Aquitaine, or indirectly (because the Cornish peninsula presents an obvious obstacle) to the Channel Islands and the coast of The Cotentin (Normandy). The late Lucien Musset clearly demonstrated, a little over thirty years ago, the presence in West Normandy of Celtic anthroponyms associated with Viking settlements (Musset [1978] 1997). In light of this tribute to Barbara Crawford, it would be good to see his work updated. It would have to be synthesised, for the reader’s benefit, and completed with scattered data that would not only have to be collated, but also refreshed by more recent research.

Some Celtic and Celto-Scandinavian Anthroponyms in West Normandy

Lucien Musset’s study of attested Celtic anthroponyms in the Normandy of the eleventh and twelfth centuries uncovered at least six names of
people whose Irish or Scottish origins were certain. Here follows a brief list:

The name Beccán, found in Lancashire and Iceland in a definite Norwegian context, came to Normandy in the twelfth century through two individuals whose family settled in Condé-sur-Noireau in the department of Calvados. The name Donecan, Latinized into Donecannus, was especially well distributed in West Normandy and corresponds to the Old Irish Donchad and to the Scottish name Duncan. Documented in the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, it belonged to ten individuals of whom some may well have been of the same family. Another example, Murdac, was also well represented in West Normandy as early as the eleventh century and comes from the Old Irish Muiredach. Yet another, Pâtric, comes from the well-known Irish name Pátraic. But the most famous Irish anthroponym in Normandy is undoubtedly Néel, for it is the origin of Néel, the family name of the viscounts of The Cotentin. Adopted by the Scandinavians themselves in the form Njáll, it was exported as far afield as Iceland, where it succeeded in establishing itself in local usage. In Normandy it appeared in the Latinized forms Niellus (whence the modern form Néel) and Nigellus. The first viscount of The Cotentin is mentioned in an original act dating from the period 1013–20 as Nielli vicecomitis. It is clear that the popularity of this name is due to its hereditary character, becoming common in the family of the viscounts during the eleventh century.

Even more revealing of the Celto-Norwegian presence in West Normandy are the place-names incorporating Celtic anthroponyms. Formed using the element -ville, from the Latin villa, meaning ‘rural estate’, or a Scandinavian noun, these primary formations date from the time of the Vikings. Two toponyms with -ville give the name of a Celtic person: the first, la rue Doncanville in the Saire Valley (Donecanvilla, c. 1150–60), contains the recognizable anthroponym Donchad, and the second, Digulleville in La Hague (Deguillevilla, c. 1200), is the only example in Normandy of the Irish name Dicuil. It is important to note that


2 Let us not forget that toponyms ending in -ville in Normandy, formed between the eighth and twelfth centuries, were often compounds containing a Scandinavian personal name. Whilst this type of toponymic compound already existed before the arrival of the Vikings, their settling in Neustria would have made the practice widespread through the drafting of property statements or other forms of deed that indicated the name of the new owners.