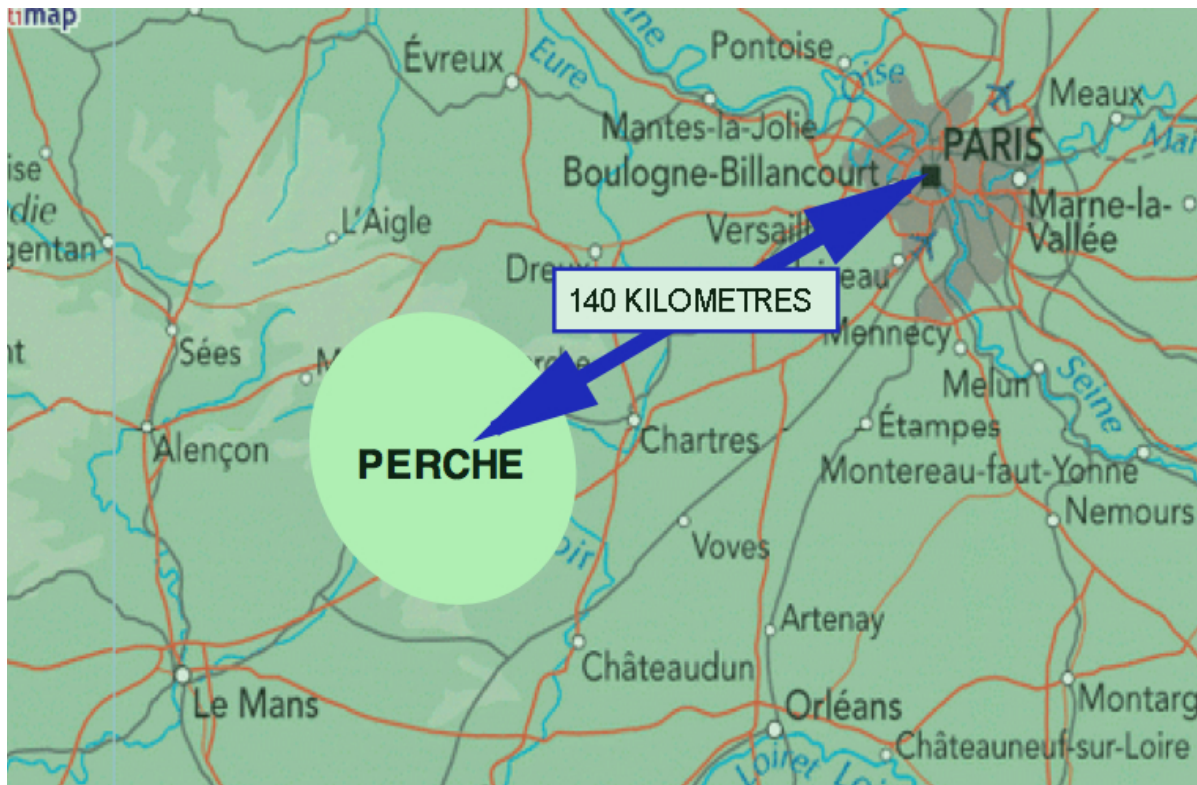# A History Of The Perche

The Perche : Its origins, and the creation of the County of the Perche.

Location of the County of the Perche

Today, the Perche is defined as a former province of western France which extends over the departments of Orne, Eure, Eure-et-Loire and Sarthe, which evolved from the County of the Perche during the French Revolution. The Perche is bounded by Normandy to the North and West, Maine to the South-West, the Vendomois and Dunois to the South and Beauce and Thimerais to the East.

However, this area of France has a long history, and was known as the Perche [1] even before Roman times as an impenetrable and swampy forest area of north-west France (although the country of France did not yet exist at this period). Celtic tribes moved into this area about 700 BC, but they did not control the area, for other tribes (the *Ligures*[2] and the *Ibères*[3]) had been already settled there for some time.

---

[1] In Latin at this time - "*Saltus Perticus*".

[2] *Ligures* - one of the three great barbarous tribes of Celtic origin and probably of Indo-European language. Although apparently known in Greece and in Northern Italy, they appear to have adventured as far north as France, together with the *Ibères*.

In 58 A.D. Roman legions decided that possession of the Perche was absolutely necessary in order to conquer and control the areas of Armorique, and the area which would one day become Normandy. Roman occupation *[of these territories]* was not successful without some difficulty, so strong was the resistance of the tribes already occupying this region.

About 285 : Invasions from tribes from the East, across the German border.

About 406 : More barbarian tribes tried to invest the area, amongst which we find the *Suèves*[4] and the *Alains* [5].

About 420 : Another invasion - that of the *Francs* whose leader was *Childéric* and whose son *Clovis 1st* will ensure the Frankish domination.

Several centuries later (in 845) the Vikings arrived, this time from the North, in true Viking fashion, destroying castles and monasteries, pillaging everything they could find, and causing the local inhabitants to flee in terror. The Carolingian army, used to offensive action, were not very efficient against these mobile bands. Their defences were static, behind trenches and earthern palissades. Thus we find in 853, a certain County of the Corbonais, at Mortagne [*au Perche*], whose head was the first ancestor of the true Counts of Perche. Corbon was the most ancient town of the Perche. The area had given its name to the Corbonnais, raised to the level of a county, and which included most of the Perche. At the time of the destruction of Corbon in 963, Mortagne inherited the title of chief town of the County.

As the memory of the town of Corbon was forgotten over the years, the town of Mortagne became the most important of the whole area of the Perche, which became large enough to be called a county. The early Routrou family held the title of Counts of Mortagne, and even Counts of Perche (as the Corbonnais eventually became to be known)

Not being able to perpetuate the souvenir of the Corbonnais, by conserving its name, the Perche was progressively used to symbolise the County of Mortagne; the latter was carried for some time by the early Rotrous, who were indifferently entitled Counts of the Perche, or Counts of Mortagne, which, in fact was the same thing.

---

[3] *Ibères* - Apparently the ealiest settlers of the Iberian Peninsula, of pro-Celtic origin, it is is not sure whether their penetration reached the north of France. However, their association with the *Ligures* at the times indicated, appear to have some foundation.

[4] *Suèves* - After migrating from Elba in Italy to the Rhinelands, and then to the Iberic peninsula, the *Suèves* and the *Alains*, try their chance across the borders into France, but are assimilated into the local tribes around 589.

[5] The first mention of the "*Alains*" tribe was due to a 1st Centurry historian Flavius Josephe ..... "the *Alains* are a tribe of Scythes, emanating from the banks of the Tanais and the swamps of Méotide, that is to say, between the Don and the Sea of Azov (Southern Russia). In 375, date of the "Great Invasions", some of them fled before the Huns, and settled in Germanie. Early in the Vth Century some migrate into the Iberic Peninsula and from there into France, attaining Normandy and Britanny, but leaving little trace on the territory of Gaulle.

The First Counts of Perche

The Counts of Perche, self named, rather than being given the title, all belonging to the Rotrou Family, find themselves actively involved, not only in all the major events of national history, but also in the history of Europe. They will suffer the birth of Normandy; they will assist, powerless, in the fall of the Carolingians, and will in vain refute the arrival of the Capetien monarchy; they will assist William the Conqueror in his conquest of England, they will cross swords with the Maures in Spain, and the Sarrasins in Palestine; and finally, they will become allies of the royal families of France, Spain and England. For more than a century, the Counts of Perche and their enemies, the Lords of Bellême, will successively pronounce themselves for and against the Kings of France and England, and the Duke of Normandy. This period is also marked by the pious construction of Abbeys, Monasteries, Asylums, and the notification of Cartulary documents (rules, laws and customs), which were monuments of the legislation of that time.

Rotrou III (The Great) : « a model of chivalry»

The history of Rotrou III is certainly one of the highlights of the Middle Age, one of the richest and the most chivalrous. Rotrou III, son of Geoffrey III, *[self-styled]* Count of Perche *[Numbering systems may vary - Many refer to him as Rotrou II, son of Geoffrey II]* undertook long and perilous campaigns whose object was simply "Faith, Glory and Prestige". He was quoted by Chateaubriand as a model of chivalry. We owe him the foundation of the Abbey of Thiron, as well as the establishment of the Order of Saint Benoit at Corbion (Moutier au Perche). Although a vassal of the King of France, because of his marriage with *[Mathilda]* the daughter of the King of England, he supported the latter in his combats with his own sovereign.

From the time of Rotrou IV, who administered the County of the Perche under the reign of Louis VII (the Young) and Philippe Auguste, and up to the last of the Rotrou family *[Guillaume 1226]*, the Counts of Perche, in harmony with their alliance with the French crown, will exclusively occupy themselves with the interests of this royal house.

[When the last of the male line of the Rotrou family had no male heir, the lands were forfeit to the French Crown by the law of Reversion]. Blanche de Castille became Countesse of Perche [6].

The *[French]* King Louis IX, having received the County *[of the Perche]* from his mother, ceded it as a privilege to one of his children. This system, whereby the King gives to a close relative, honours and feudal fees, while conserving real authority, was used in the Perche until the French Revolution. The County of the Perche, called Le Grand Perche, included the lands of Bellême, Mortagne and Nogent *[-le-Rotrou]*. As for the five Baronrys of the south, they became the "Perche Gouet".

---

[6] Blanche de Castille was a distant cousin of Geoffrey III de Mortagne, 1st Count of Perche (through Julienne de Perche, Margaret de l'Aigle Rotrou, Alfonso VIII de Castille)

Historical Landmarks

1114 : Creation of the County of the Perche.

1226 : The Country became a possession of the French crown. Part of the County was removed to create the County of Alençon.

After 1325, both counties were held by a member of the House of Valois.

1525 : The last Duke of Alencon dies, and the Perche returns to the Crown.

1450 : End of the Hundred Years War in the Perche. A period of reconstruction and development of the manors.

1558 : Drafting of "*La Coutume du Perche" [the Customs of the Perche]* (a series of laws of the County).

1634-1662 : Many Percherons immigrated to Canada to work on the estates of the St. Lawrence River. Today, most French Canadians have some ancestors who came from the Perche.

1791 : Division of the Perche into 4 departments :

   Eure et Loir (28)
   Orne (61)
   Sarthe (72)
   Loir et Cher (41)

[This is not an exact division. Each of these four departments contain territories external to the 'The Perche'].

In spite of this fragmentation, the Percheron Identity is alive to this day, magnified by the glorious history and singularity of this territory.

The *Fédération des Amis du Perche* expresses, since 1947, the desire of the Percheron inhabitants, to preserve a patrimonial and cultural identity, confirmed since 1998 by the creation of the Regional Park of the Perche.

Towns referred to in the History of the Rotrou Family

Map showing: Lassy, Conde-sur-Noireau, L'Aigle, Huisne, Chateauneuf en Thymerais, Domfront, Sées, Mortagne, Gallardon, Corbon, Alençon, Chartres, Bellême, Nogent-le-Rotrou, Illiers, PERCHE, Montmirail, Chateau de Nogent-le-Rotrou, Châteaudun, Vibraye, Ganelon, Freteval, Blois