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Viking weather-vane practices in medieval France

By Susanne Lindgrén and Jehuda Neumann

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This paper discusses the apparent influence and, even, spread of Viking weather-vane practices to countries outside the Scandinavian area. Churches, not only in Normandy but even in distant parts of France gilded their weather cocks, a custom unknown in countries removed from direct Viking influence, e.g. Italy. The status-symbol value of the weather-vane also spread to medieval France: only members of the signeurial class were allowed to flaunt weather-vanes on their castles and lodgings.

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The antiquarian and archeological literature on Viking weather vanes and a consideration of the Icelandic Sagas lead to the following three principal conclusions:

- a. The vanes were highly ornamented.
- b. As a rule, the vanes were gold-coated.
- c. The vanes were a kind of status symbol.

As to the latter, the Sagas indicate that only the larger warships were permitted to flaunt vanes. Moreover the observation that the Grimsta vane was found in a grave which differed from the others about it by the size of its mound, and by the oval of stones around it (Biörnstad 1958, pp. 2-3), suggests that the grave was that of an important personage and that the vane was buried with him on account of his superior standing, i.e. this observation too implies that the weather vane was a sort of a status symbol.

In view of the fact that the Vikings conquered territories in the British Isles, Ireland and France and actually settled in some of

these areas, the following questions arise: Did the Vikings preserve their weather-vane practices in their new countries? Did these practices influence the nations among which they settled? Did they influence the nations which resided in territories *adjacent* to those they colonized?

It appears that the afore said questions can be answered in the affirmative in the case of medieval France. A study of contemporary sources indicates that the custom of gilding the vanes, and the bestowal of a status symbol on the vanes are evident in medieval France even in the east of the country, well away from the areas colonized by the Vikings. We have some indications for England too but the evidence is scanty. In contrast, in other countries of western, central and south-western (Italy and Spain) Europe which were distant from the areas settled by Vikings, the above customs were not in force. We know of one exception and this exception is merely apparent, see below.

Viking weather-vane practice influences in France

That the practice of gilding the vanes and their importance as status symbols went with the Vikings on their conquests is best illustrated by the case of Normandy. It will be recalled that about the year 900 a Viking force led by Rollo conquered an area of north-western France roughly coinciding with Normandy. Gradually, the force of conquerors, plunderers and tribute-collectors became a group of settlers. The Vikings intermarried (they had, in any case, far too few women with them) with, and merged into the local population, adopting the local language and enriching it with words of their original tongue. In 911 Charles the Simple, king of the western Franks, ceded Upper Normandy to Rollo. By treaty, Rollo and his successors were made rulers of the area. In 912 Rollo did homage to Charles whose "vassal" he now was and converted to Christianity. In effect, he was the first Duke of Normandy. In 923 he enlarged his dominion by acquiring the Cotentin Peninsula and some adjacent areas, including Bayeux and Coutances (Dép. de la Manche), a city that will be mentioned in the next paragraph. The former Vikings and the local population, now merged into one, became the Normans who in 1066 successfully invaded England under the leadership of William, Duke of Normandy, a 5th generation descendant of Rollo. For a brief review of the subject, see, e.g., Jones (1968, pp. 229–232) and a map (due to T.D. Kendrick) on p. 230 of the same text; see also map on p. 67 of Graham-Campbell (1980).

As a first example of the adoption of Viking weather-vane customs, especially that of gilding the vanes, by the Normans, we cite the case of the Cathedral of Coutances. It is related in the story of Gaufridus (Geoffroi I^{er} de Montbray, 1049–94), Bishop of Coutances (see pp. 78–79 in Delisle 1877) that the magnificent Cathedral of the city was inaugurated in the presence of William, the future Conqueror, in 1056 amidst great pomp. The account continues (p. 79): "Anno namque Dominicae incarnat. MXCI, indict. XV, IV nonas novembris, cum esset idem praesul Constantiis in aula episcopali quam fecerat et plantave-

rat, terrae motus factus est et fulgura exstiterunt nimia, ita ut *gallum deauratum* qui majori ecclesiae turri eminebat minutatim conscinderent..." (Our Italics.) In other words, on November 2nd, 1091 there was an earthquake and severe lightning smashed the *golden cock* to pieces.

A few lines below the passage (p. 79) in the story of Bishop Gaufridus quoted above, it is recorded that when the Bishop perceived that his death was imminent, he sent for a craftsman from England to have the Cathedral repaired and the gilded cock restored: "...fecit...*deauratum gallum*, quem praedictum fulgur destruxerat, studiosè restaurari, majoremque (majorique turri) superimponi..."

As a second example we cite the case of the Benedictine abbey of St.-Pierre de Châlons, near what is now Châlon-sur-Saône, Dép. Saône-et-Loire, i.e. eastern central France, over some 500 km away from the Normandy-Cotentin area. The monk author Guillaume (Guillelmus Cabillonensis Monachus; Cabilonum is one of the several Latin names of Châlon-sur-Saône; in the French literature he is referred to as Gui de Châlons) relates (Patrologia Latina, vol. 134, col. 1017) that in the evening of 25 August 965: "Dum vespertas cantaremus... subito valde fragore coelum intonuit... Tria fulgura visa... terribilia nimis: quae percusserunt tria haec monasterii nostri; turrim signorum, quam rustici cloccarium dicimus... Haec de turre percussa sunt: similitudo galli in summo pono: ipsum pomum *cum omnibus subaurationibus* et ornamentis..." (Our italics.) That is, three terrible flashes of lightning struck the cock atop the "apple", the apple itself, with all the gilding...

A further interesting example involving William the Conqueror, is described in the next Section.

William the Conqueror fixes a gilded weather vane on his command ship

Our third example for the use of gilded weather vanes is connected with William, Duke of Normandy who, shortly after the time when he affixes a gilded weather vane to his command ship, sails to invade England.

We are thus dealing with an event which took place about 150 years after Rollo's conquest of Normandy.

The Anglo-Norman writer Wace (*Nouvelle biographie générale*, Vol. 46, 1866; also called Vace, Wacce, Waice, Wage, Guace, Gasse, Guasco — all these variants of Eustace) who was born c. 1120 on Jersey and died about 1180 in England, whose father appears to have been a carpenter in the host of craftsmen assembled by William at Saint-Valery-sur-Somme to build his invasion fleet, and was at a time a prebendary at Bayeux, wrote a metric chronicle *Le Roman de Rou* (Rou = Rollo) composed in the Norman-French language. This chronicle describes the exploits of the Dukes of Normandy, beginning with Rollo, through William and the conquest of England up to the eighth year of the reign of Henri I. In lines 6435 to 6452 of the recent edition of the *Roman* (Wace 1971, Vol. II, p. 124) by A. J. Holden, Wace relates how William and his warriors waited impatiently at Saint Valeri (Saint-Valery-sur-Somme of our days, near the south-eastern end of the English Channel), about 100 km away from the site of the Battle of Hastings, for a favourable wind to carry them to England's shores. They were eager for booty. They bring out the reliquary shrine of Saint Walaric from the abbey founded and named after him, place the shrine on a carpet in the field and pray. They shower the casket with their denarii and pray for a wind that will enable them to cross over. Soon thereafter a favourable wind begins to blow. The Duke then places a lantern on the top of his ship's mast so that the rest of the fleet can keep station and next, fixes a *gilded weather vane* on the mast. The following is a copy of the earlier named lines in the language of the chronicle as per the A. J. Holden edition:

- 6435 A Saint Valeri longuement
sejornerent por avoir vent,
as barons a mult ennoïé;
pois ont tant le covent préié
que la chasse Saint Valeri
6440 mistrent as chans sor un tapi.
Al corsaint vindrent tuit orer
cil qui deveient mer passer,

- tant i ont tuit deniers offert
tot le corsaint en ont covert;
6445 emprés cel jor assez briement
orent bone oré e boen vent.
Une lanterne fist li dus
mettre en sa nef el mast desus,
que les altres nes la veissent
6450 e emprés lui lor cors tenissent;
une *wirewire doree*
out de coivre en somet levee.

From the point of view of the present paper, the most relevant lines are 6451-2. As the editor points out in a footnote to the page (p. 124), other versions of the chronicle have *wirewite* instead of *wirewire* and these are but the Old Norman forms for weather vane deriving from the Icelandic: *vedrviti* (e.g. Falk, 1912, p. 42; further, see Section 7 below). "*Doree*" means, of course, gold-coated. The vane itself is made of copper ("*coivre*") and, according to line 6448, William places the vane on the mast.

Italy

Above we cited two cases from the literature of the 10th century in France indicating that the cocks of churches were gilded. And, as we have just seen, the weather vane fixed by William the Conqueror on his command ship too was gilded.

These instances of gilding the weather cocks probably represent a Viking custom, for, to the best of our knowledge, it was not customary to gild the cocks in countries which were not directly influenced by the Vikings though one *apparent* exception, viz. the case of the St. Gallen Monastery in Switzerland, will be mentioned later. In support of our statement that it was not customary to gild the weather cocks in countries unaffected by the Vikings, we quote two cases from Italy.

In 820 Rambertus, Bishop of Brescia, northern Italy, had had a *bronze* cock atop his church. This is related by the Florence-born Ferdinando Ughelli (1595-1670), Abbot of the Saints Vincent and Anastasius Cistercian Monastery at Aquae Salviae (Tre Fontane, Rome), author of the multi-volume study *Italia Sacra sive de Episcopis Italiae et insularum adiacentium* (1652). The objective of this major

work was to describe the lives and deeds of the Bishops of Italy. In Vol. IV, col. 735, he tells us that Rambertus, who was Bishop from 814, built a monastery and dedicated its church to certain monks of the past. Then he continues: "... Adhuc spectatur Brixiae *gallus aeneus*, quem Rampertus... collocandum... curavit in sacrae Turris fastigio cum hanc inscriptione sexto suo Episcopatus anno ibidem incisa" (our italics). Next follows the inscription which says, *inter alia*, that the cock was set up in 820 ("D.N. Iesu Christi P.M. Octogentesimo vigesimo..."). We thus see that it is explicitly stated that the cock was made of bronze ["aeneus" could also mean made of copper]. No gilding is mentioned. As to "Brixiae", Brixia is one of the several variants of Brescia's Latin name.

An even more striking case is that of the medieval Basilica of St. Saviour in the Lateran, Rome. In his book *Liber Pontificalis*, Vol II, Abbé Duchesne (1955, p. 301, lines 22-24) tells of an incident which occurred during the pontificate of Paschal II who was Pope 1099-1118: "Rome [sic], Lateranis, in basilica Salvatoris, fulmen turrim sacram percussit, partem culminis et *gallum aeneum* vento versatilem campanasque deiecit, et quassato angulo eiusdem basilicae sepulchrum papae quod erat inferius destruxit. Edem sancti Pauli ex tribunali igne de caelo tactam, ut et tecti plumbum conflaretur et trabes visibiliter arderent..." (Our italics.) We have cited more than relates to the weather cock in order to bring out the prominence of this basilica which despite its prominence, had no gold-coated cock. Aeneus means, of course, made of bronze (or copper).

The case of St. Gallen Monastery's Abbey

We made the point above that, to the best of our knowledge, the gilding of weather cocks was not practiced in countries outside the immediate influence of the Vikings and added that we are aware of one exception. This exception is the abbey church of the great monastery of St. Gallen, Switzerland. The St. Gallen monk Ekkehard IV (c. 1000-c. 1060) in his *Casus sancti Galli* (1980, pp. 117-118 or Ch. 53 of the book) tells us of an incident

which happened on May 1st 926, when the heathen Hungarians irrupted into the monastery for the purposes of plunder:

53. Ingruunt tandem pharetrati illi, pilis minantibus et spiculis asperi. Locum omnem perscrutantur solliciti; nulli sexui vel etati certum est misereri. Inveniunt solum illum in medio stantem intrepidum. Quid velit curque non fugerit, mirati, ferro interim parcere necatoribus iussis, primipilares per interpretes interrogantes, fatuitatis monstrum ubi sentiunt, omnes illi risibiles parant. Aram lapideam sancti Galli, quod prius crebro talibus frustati nihil intus nisi ossa vel cineres cum invenissent, nec tangere curant. Requirunt tandem a fatuo suo, ubi thesaurus loci sit conditus. Quos cum ille alacer ad gazophilati duceret occultum ostium, effracto illo nihil ibi nisi candelabra et coronas deauratas reperientes, quas in fugam festinantes reliquerant, deceptoris suo alapas dare palmis intentant. Duo ex illis ascendunt campanarium, cuius cacuminis *gallum aureum* putantes deumque loci sic vocatum non esse nisi carioris metalli materia fusum, lancea dum unus, ut eum revellat, se validius protendit, in atrium de alto cecidit et periit. (Our italics.)

Thus, the warrior-plunderer Hungarians believed that Gallus must be the deity of the place and that, therefore, the *gallus* (cock) at the top of the spire must be made of pure gold. Two of them tried to climb the spire but lost their foothold and crashed down to the ground. It is evident from the description that the weather cock was gold-coated but, we suspect that the learned Ekkehard imputes to the warrior-plunderers too much knowledge of Latin... The first Hungarian ruler to convert to Christianity was Géza and this happened in 975, some 50 years after the incident at St. Gallen. It is not likely that many Hungarians knew Latin about 926, and certainly not those who went on forays.

Where we first made reference to the case of St. Gallen, above, we qualified this exception by the adjective "apparent". We applied this qualification, for there is a possibility that the great monastery of St. Gallen was in fact under Viking influence. The founding of this religious house goes back to the Irish monk St. Gall from Bangor, Co. Down, Northern Ireland. Gall, who was born c. 550, came to the area to convert the heathen Ala-

manns to Christianity and it was his activities which led to the monastery's establishment. According to L. Bieler (1965, pp. 1090–1091), who until recently was Professor of Palaeography and Late Latin at University College, Dublin, all through the early history of the St. Gallen monastery, it "had close links with Ireland especially during the 9th century and acted then as a channel for Irish influences on the Continent". Now, in the 9th and 10th centuries parts of Ireland, including a major part of Co. Down, were held by Norwegian Vikings as was the Dublin area. For the Viking attacks on, and occupation of parts of Ireland, see, e.g., Jones (1968, pp. 204–208; Graham-Cambell, 1980, pp. 26–28, including map).

The weather vane as a status symbol in medieval France

The status-symbol role of the weather vane in medieval France, and not in Normandy alone, is an almost certain outcome of Viking influences. Enlart (1904, p. 177) in Vol. II, Pt. 1, of his *Manuel d'archéologie française* states that the mounting of weather vanes on lodgings was the privilege of the *seigneurs*, i.e. of the noblemen ("le droit de surmonter son logis de girouettes était un privilège seigneurial", girouette = wind vane). Moreover the French historian and genealogist Claude Le Laboureur, (1658, p. 193) of the middle and second half of the 17th century, says in his *Discours de l'origine des arms ets.* that only "gentil-hommes", i.e. noblemen and gentry, were allowed to place weather vanes at the top of the towers and pavillions of their castles. Gay (1887, p. 779) in his *Glossaire archéologique de Moyen Age et de la Renaissance*, Vol. 1, after quoting Le Laboureur's work, states that as a result of the nobility's privileges, the vanes and their ornamentation presented an artistic appearance. He adds that the craftsmen of the 15th century distinguished themselves especially in the execution of exquisite "cut-out" ("découpures") vanes. Presumably, the term "découpures" is equivalent to the method of ornamentation referred to under the name "openwork" in the archaeology of the Vikings.

A point of etymology

Already Falk (1912, p. 42) pointed out that the Old French, or, what would be even more appropriate, the Old Norman word *wirewite* for weather vane (this word, or rather the form *wirewire*, occurred in the passage quoted from Wace's *Le roman de Rou* in Section 5 above) derives from the Icelandic term *vedrúti* and that, in turn, the New French word *girouette* derives from *wirewite*. Interestingly enough, some etymologists of the French language reject the possibility that the term *girouette* derives from the Greek-Latin term *gyrus* (γῦρος) which has the meanings "circle, ring, orbit, circuit". With reference to this rejection, see, e.g., von Wartburg's Vol. XVII (1966, p. 421) or Gamillscheg (1969, p. 480). Godefroy's Vol. IX (1938, p. 700), in his entry "girouette", quotes (only) *wirewite*. The term *girouette* is attested in the literature of the early 16th century, see Bloch and von Wartburg (1960, p. 291). If we accept these views of etymologists, then we can say that the New French term for weather vane is due to a Viking influence.

The gold-coated weather cock of medieval Winchester's Cathedral

This final, brief, section relates to medieval England. Despite the fact the Viking settlement in England did not extend south of a line from London northwestwards (see, e.g. map in Graham-Cambell 1980, p. 27) and thus Winchester was not directly affected by the Vikings, an additional manifestation of what was probably a Viking influence is that the weather cock of the medieval Cathedral was gilded. This is stated in Wulfstan's *Wulfstani Cantoris narratio metrica de Sancto Swithuno* or *the Metric Narrative about St. Swithun*. Wulfstan was a monk and Praecentor (or Cantor) at the Benedictine Cathedral Priory of Winchester about the year 1000. He composed the above account about 993. The opening section of the narrative is an epistle to Alphege (Aelfheah), Bishop of Winchester 984–1005 (Archbishop of Canterbury from 1005; murdered in 1012 by Danish Vikings). In this opening section he has some captivating lines about the Cathedral's weather cock. In lines

189–190 of the edition recently prepared by A. Campbell (1950, p. 71), Wulfstan writes: "additur ad specimen, stat ei vertice *gallus*, / *aureus* ornatu, grandis et intuitu", or a gold-coated cock stood at the top (of the Cathedral's tower) as a beacon: he made a magnificent sight.

In his volume *Building in England Down to 1540, A Documentary History*, Salzman (1952, pp. 235–236) collates a number of records, mainly from the later Middle Ages, where weather vanes are mentioned. His material implies that the gilding of vanes was not a generally accepted procedure. Nor does it appear that the vane was a kind of a status symbol. Of the cases where the vanes were gold-coated, we will mention but two.

In the *Fabric Rolls of York Minster* (1858, p. 88) for the year 1485, the following statement occurs: "Thomae Gray pro j magna pelve et ij aliis peciis pelvium pro *les faydes* in novo campanili in fine occidentali dictae Eccl. 5s. 10d. Johanni Colan pro factura *les faydes* . . . pro j quart, auri tunsi pro eisdem, Willelmo Webbe pro *deauracione* eorumdem et pro *les staples* de ferro pro dictis *les faydes*, 8s. 8d." In this text *faydes* is a variant of the more modern term vanes. (The text is a mixture of faulty Latin and English with some Franch definite articles /"les"/.)

In *The History of Hampton Court palace*, Vol. I, *Tudor Times* (Law 1903, p. 346) we read the following in connection with the "Exterior of the Hall": "Payd to Henry Blankston, for *gyldyng* and payntyng of 2 *vanys*, serving the bests of freston stondyng at the endes upon the haull, oon of the Kynges armys, the other of the Quenys, wrowghte wyth fyne golde and in owyle, price the pece, 4s. "Another item involving a gilded vane appears on p. 348.

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Vikingatradition i bruket av vindflöjlar i medeltidens Frankrike

Särpräglad skandinaviska drag vad gäller bruket av vindflöjlar spreds även till länder utanför Skandinavien. Till dessa särdrag kan räknas seden att förgylla dem och att användandet begränsades till personer i hög social ställning.

Mest markant är inflytandet i Normandie, som omkring år 900 erövrades av vikingar under Rollos ledning. Wilhelm Erövraren, hertig av Normandie, och ättling till Rollo i femte led, placerar en förgylld vindflöjel på sitt skepp när han seglar med sin flotta för att inta England.

Kyrkor, inte bara i Normandie, utan även i avlägsna delar av Frankrike förgyller sina kyrkflöjlar, ett bruk som inte var känt i länder

som inte var utsatta för direkt påverkan från vikingarna, t.ex. Italien. Även vindflöjelns inbörd av statussymbol spreds till medeltidens Frankrike: endast för rikets feodaltherrar var det tillåtet att ha vindflöjlar på slott och bostäder.

Det finns dessutom källmaterial från 900-talet gällande Winchester i England, som visar att domkyrkans vindflöjel var förgylld. Det finns ytterligare vittnesbörd rörande England under ett mer framskridet skede av medeltiden. Det förefaller dock som om det inte var ett allmänt vedertaget bruk att förgylla vindflöjlar och det är inte heller klart om vindflöjlar hade funktion av statussymbol.