

# *the* **Bretons:** *Saints and* **Migrants**

As Celtic Life International correspondent  
Steve Melia explains, the Celtic coast of Brittany  
holds many secrets...





In the fifth and sixth centuries, as the Roman Empire collapsed and the Anglo-Saxons pushed westward, some of the native Celtic population fled across the English Channel to the peninsula which now bears their name: Brittany. Their descendants would speak a Celtic language, Breton, from the same Brittonic branch as Welsh and Cornish. They would create independent kingdoms, build churches and monasteries, fight amongst themselves and eventually unite against the threat from the Frankish empire to the East.

I had cycled for two days to reach Exeter, heading towards Plymouth and the ferry to Brittany. In a small park, Rougemont Gardens, stands a red sandstone tower, named after a man with a shameful role in this story, if his medieval biographer is to be believed. According to William of Malmesbury, Athelstan, King of Wessex and most of England, “cleansed” the city “by purging it of its contaminated [Celtic] race” before fortifying it with towers and surrounding it “with a wall of squared stone.”

The sandstone walls which surround the gardens today were rebuilt by the Normans on Athelstan’s foundations. Athelstan’s tower stands in a forgotten corner, surrounded by rubbish, and sprayed on one side with graffiti. I was struck with mixed feelings. What a terrible desecration of such an important monument, but perhaps that fate is partly deserved.

I remember the roads near the port of Plymouth used to be lined with prostitutes but there was no sign of them when I arrived. They have moved online according to the local paper, whilst smart new apartment blocks are gentrifying the derelict sites that used to surround the bay. I joined a long line of other cyclists in the queue to board the ferry. It was an overnight crossing, arriving at 8am in Roscoff.

Most of the vehicle drivers turned left towards the main road network, leaving the quiet road into Roscoff to the cyclists and foot passengers. Most ferry ports are good places to get away from, but Roscoff is an exception. It is called a town but is smaller than some English villages. Its centre is lined with granite buildings dating back to the 16th century, including a church with an elaborate tower, ostentatiously oversized for such a small town. It was built during the “Breton Renaissance” of the 1700s, a time of peace



La Fuite du Roi Gradlon

and prosperity, when the Breton elites set aside their struggle for independence and began to integrate with the rest of France. Over the next few days, I would marvel at many others and learn how churches have been central to Breton history.

The fields in that area mainly grow green vegetables, and the smell of fresh cabbage often reminds me of the road from Roscoff to Saint-Pol-de-Léon. The traffic was busy to start with, but that soon changed. France has a similar population to Britain spread over more than twice the surface area, with a similar density of minor roads. That makes most of them, and the villages they pass through, very quiet.

My first stop was in Landivisiau, which has a strange monument that I much wanted to see. Behind the town’s church is a lavoir, a line of three shallow basins used for washing clothes. Above the source of the water is a stone panel, carved with primitive Christian images. Its origin is uncertain, but it is believed to have come from the desecrated tomb of Francois de Tournamine, who died in 1529 and became known locally as Saint-Bidouzin. The waters are believed to have magical powers – for example, if a lady’s corset pin floated in the water, it would prove her virtue.

“ **There are several hundred local saints in Brittany, pre-dating the official procedures for canonization by the Vatican. Magical stories, influenced by earlier pagan beliefs, surround them.** ”

Many are linked to those early migrations, and also linked to the next place I was heading towards.

To reach the Abbey of Landévennec you have to cross the River Aulne onto the Crozon peninsula. A new bridge had been built since I last came this way. Google Maps was still showing a cycle route over the old bridge - which was demolished in 2014.

The abbey was reportedly founded in the fifth century by Saint Guenolé, who was born in Wales and migrated with his family to Brittany, where he was educated by a monk and inspired to set up a monastery. We know this from an account of his life, written by the Abbot of Landévennec in the ninth century, now held in New York’s Public Library. The same document also describes his prowess as a surgeon; when a goose plucked out the eye of his younger sister, he cut the bird open, put the half-digested eye back in the socket and miraculously restored her sight. The monks and abbots of Landévennec wrote many such hagiographies - biographies of saints, who mostly came from Britain or Ireland. For some of them, the hagiographies are the only evidence of their existence.

The village of Landévennec lies at the tip of a small peninsula, surrounded by water. I arrived early and went for a coffee at the Awen Breton Cultural Centre. After my recent tour of Welsh-speaking Wales, I was struck by one big difference here: in the village shops and cafes, even in the cultural centre, everyone spoke French; the only Breton I heard was in the songs playing over the sound system.

The old abbey abuts the modern village, close to the shoreline. A small museum over-

looks the ruins, where I met Bernard Hulin, its director since 2011. He is one of those specialists I have been privileged to meet in museums around Europe: keen to share his knowledge, his passion, and hours of his time.

The abbey, he explained, was built, damaged, and rebuilt seven times before the revolutionary government sold it to a businessman looking for stone. Today it belongs to the new abbey, which was built on the hill behind, when the monks returned in the 1950s. The site and most of the items in the museum were excavated between 1978 and 2002. The earliest foundations date back to the fifth century, which corroborates one element of Saint Guenolé's story.

Of the Breton migrations, he says:

"This is one of the least documented periods of our history. None of the texts of the time talks about mass migration and there's no archaeological evidence for it, although there are some clear differences between East and West Brittany at that time. In the West, the houses were circular or oval and the few scraps of pottery we find are similar to British styles. There probably wasn't a mass migration, although something clearly happened. That is the result of a long campaign which ran until the early 20th century and has, unfortunately, borne fruit. The French state always wanted a single national language, and they used the education system to eradicate other languages."

**“As in Wales, children heard talking the local language would have a board hung around their necks to humiliate them. Only here, it seems, the campaign was more successful.”**

Walking around the museum Bernard pointed out that some of the information boards were out of date. One of them talks about a mass migration.

"Why don't you change them?"

He grimaced.

"We have long-standing plans to refurbish the whole museum, but we lack the funds. We are always looking for donors."

The next case contained a replica of a hagiography written by the monks of Landévennec.

"The originals have been dispersed all

round the world. I have a dream - to bring them all back."

One case displays a medieval skeleton, buried within the walls of the abbey, a powerful benefactor, possibly a prince, Bernard believes.

"We have over 200 skeletons in storage and a long-term aim to analyse their DNA and their tooth enamel, if and when we find the funds."

From a high point in one corner of the site, you can look down over the ruins towards the sea. Of all the different periods of its occupation, Bernard explained, they have chosen to showcase two: the ninth and the sixteenth centuries, both times of peace after conflict, when the abbey was rebuilt. The earliest foundations lie reburied at lower levels.

The most intact structure is a chapel dedicated to Brittany's mythical first king, Gradlon. Like King Arthur, he might be based on a real person, or he might exist only in the realm of legends. Either way, I would see and hear a lot more about him before I left Brittany.

In the most famous Breton legend, he was living in the city of Ys, on an island in the Bay of Douarnenez. Ys is Brittany's Atlantis. Influenced by Gradlon's daughter, Dahut, it had become a city of vice. Amongst her many lovers, one was Satan in disguise. On one evening of wild debauchery, she gave him the keys to the city. He opened its gates to the ocean, submerging Ys for all time. Gradlon escaped on horseback. What happened next differs in different versions of the legend, but that moment has inspired artists ever since. I passed a sculpture of it in Argol, nearby, and Bernard told me to look out for another example in Quimper.

The next day I rode to Guilvinec on the south coast. Thanks to a vast tidal range, the beaches around Brittany are wide, long, sandy, and unbelievably quiet in September - totally different from the Mediterranean coast. The water is not as warm, of course, but at 19 degrees it was warm enough to swim in.

Bernard gave me some research articles about the Breton migrations, and I found more online. They disagree on many points, but everyone seems to agree that there was a migration of some sort. The genes of people living in west Brittany differ from those in the east. They have more in common with Wales

and Southwest England. There are stronger genetic links with Ireland, but they seem to go further back in time, to the Bronze Age or Neolithic. Perhaps that is when the Celtic languages first arrived. Ben Guy argues that the later migrants were mainly peasants from areas where the Anglo-Saxons were advancing, particularly Dorset and Somerset. They brought the language that would become Breton. That discovery changed my plans for my next article and my route home, through Somerset.

It was a fairly short ride from Guilvinec to Quimper, a small city and capital of the Department. There were two more things I wanted to see there before moving on. In its medieval centre stands the magnificent gothic cathedral of Saint Corentin, dominating the views as you approach along the river. Between its two slender spires stands a statue of a man on horseback: King Gradlon. Amongst its many stained-glass windows, one features Saint Guenolé, the founder of Landévennec.

Across the square, in the Musée des Beaux Arts, hangs a nineteenth century painting: *La Fuite du Roi Gradlon*. I had seen it online but there was something intensely moving about seeing it in real life. You can feel the terror of the two horses trying to flee the advancing waves. Beside the king is a monk, Saint Guenolé, turned towards him with his hand raised to the sky. The voice of God is speaking through him, telling Gradlon to throw his daughter off the horse and into the sea.

I had set out to write two articles: this one about the historical migrations and the next one about Brittany's legends, but I discovered that the two were inextricably linked.

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