

FOLLOW THE VIKINGS

THE NORMAN HERITAGE, MOLISE, ITALY



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The Normans, Normanni (Italian) came from an area in north-western France named after them. Normandy 'land of the Northmen' was created by Viking raiders in the early 10th century under the leadership of Göngu-Hrólfr / Rollo, the 'Roujarl' (Count of Rouen). Within 100 years of establishing the Duchy of Normandy some of Rollo's descendants were looking for new conquests further afield. The arrival of the Normans in Italy has been shrouded in mystery for centuries. Some say the first Normans were pilgrims returning back from the Holy Land, others say they were mercenaries banished from their homeland. Whatever the truth maybe, their impact on the Italian mainland and the island of Sicily was as dramatic as their conquest of Anglo-Saxon England by William the Conqueror in 1066 AD. The region of Molise, became one of their power-bases with traditions and customs still active today over a 1000 years since their arrival in the 11th century.

The first arrivals

The Benedictine monk Amatus of Montecassino records that the first group of Normans in southern Italy were pilgrims returning back from Jerusalem. En route back to Normandy they stopped off at great port of Salerno. At the exact same time a Saracen army sent from the Muslim Emir of Sicily attacked the town as retribution for none payment of tribute money. Knowing the fate of the town, the unarmed Normans pilgrims galvanised themselves into action and asked Guaimar a local lord to furnish them with armour and weapons. Now in the service of Guaimar 'the men of the North-wind' drove off the Saracen attack and forced the besiegers to retreat back to Sicily.

Guaimar was so impressed that he asked the Normans to stay and encourage more of their compatriots to come to the 'land of milk and honey'. Another chronicler, William de Apulia describes that the first Normans were also pilgrims. In his account they were visiting the shrine of Saint Michel located at Mount Sant'Angelo (Unesco Heritage) on the Gargano Peninsula in the region of Puglia. Saint Michel was indeed one of the Normans favorite warrior saints whom they also worshiped in Normandy at the island abbey of 'Le Mont de Saint Michel'.



Norman knights depicted on the Bayeux Tapestry © Ville de Bayeux, France

The 'De Hautevilles'

By the middle of the 11th century Norman mercenaries were becoming a major power player in the turbulent politics of central and southern Italy. The most prominent family were the De Hautevilles, who like all the Normans claimed descent from the Vikings before them. Coming from a small village in Normandy, William 'Iron-arm' and Drongo were the first of their family to seek fame and fortune in Italy. After them, followed their half-brothers Robert and Roger. Within a decade of battles and plundering, the Normans faced a coalition of Lombard Italian nobility and even the Pope in Rome with Germanic 'Swabian' mercenaries who intended to force them out of Italy for once and for all.



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At the battle of Civitate in 1053 AD the Normans, although outnumbered reversed the odds against them and defeated the coalition army, They even captured and took prisoner Pope Leo IX. With their position stronger even ever before, the Normans would never again face a substantial threat to their power in Italy. By 1059 AD Robert Guiscard emerged as the de-facto ruler of the Normans in Italy and obtained the title Duke of Apulia and Calabria. Along with his brother Roger, they conquered the island of Sicily from the Saracens and became the 'iron fist' of the Popes in Rome.



Above illustration: Norman cavalry charge at the Battle of Civitate 1053AD © Ben Baillie

De Moulins = Molise

In the south of Normandy at the village of Moulins-la-Marche, the frontier between Normandy and France was protected by Guimond II Lord of Moulins and Bonmoulins. In the mid 11th century Guimond chose the wrong side in the civil war between Duke William II (later William the Conqueror) and the rebel Norman barons. When Duke William crushed the rebellion, Guimond begged for forgiveness. William spared his life, but confiscated Guimond's lands for five years. He then decided to make an example of Guimond and denied his many sons their noble inheritance and titles. Not one of them would become Lord of Moulins and Bonmoulins.

Most of them left the Duchy and headed for southern Italy to start a new life.

The name Moulins became Molise over time and is still the name of a region in Italy today. Guimond's eldest son Rodolfo I / Rudolf de Moulins arrived in Boiano in 1045 AD and became the Count there and took part in the battle of Civitate. Guimond III was excommunicated in 1067 by Pope Alexander II with two other Norman knights, Guillaume de Hauteville and Turgis de Rota, for attacking the lands of the church near to Salerno. The de Moulins intermarried and their descendants still live in the Molise region today. A true testament to the blood of the Vikings!



Above: The coat of arms of the Molise region (1978) which incorporates the eight pointed star of the Molise County and the de Moulins/de Molisio family coats of arms



Above: Ugo (I) (red dress) de Moulins ,Count of Boiano, makes a donation to Abbot Saxo (blue dress).

Visit and discover the Norman heritage in Molise region!



- 1- **Boiano** – Important place of the old Samnites, of the Romans and of the Norman Rodolfo de Moulins. Visit the old-Norman castle of Civita.
- 2- **Sepino** – Home to one of the ten archaeological parks in Italy and one of the most beautiful villages in the country. ‘Site of the heart’ of the FAI (Fondazione Ambiente Italia). The village is built on the ruins of the old Norman castle. In this village Ugo was born, son of Roberto (Count of Sepino and regent of the county of Bojano), who became lord of Campobasso and who gave the name Molise to this Region.
- 3- **Isernia** - Important place in the Roman era, the second provincial capital of Molise. Very interesting Paleolithic museum
- 4- **Trivento**- Visit the nearby magnificent Romanic Church of Santa Maria in Canneto (703 AD) and later.
- 5- **Venafro**- Pandone castle of Lombard origin which houses the National Museum of Molise.
- 6- **Campobasso** – The capital of the Molise Region, the Monforte castle (built on a Norman castle). The old city and Samnite/Roman museum are a must see.
- 7- **San Giuliano del Sannio**- An important document of the Norman era was discovered in this village. Moreover, Roberto, son of Rodolfo Count of Boiano was buried in this village.
- 8- **Macchia Godena**- The name of this village in the language of the Vikings means wood sacred to Odin. Spectacular Lombard/Norman castle, once owned by a French Knight ‘Barrasio’ in Angevin times.
- 9- **Limosano**- An ancient hilltop town. The Lombard and then Norman castle lies at the heart of the medieval centre that also includes three ancient churches.



The Norman legacy today.....

The rich cultural heritage and legacy of the Normans can still be experienced in Molise today. Held every year are three main events with a historical Norman theme:

1. **BOIANO: 18th June** Historical re-enactment and theatrical play about the history of the Rodolfo de Moulins family.
2. **SEPINO: A few days before the July 24th** (The feast of Santa Cristina, Patroness of Sepino) Historical re-enactment and procession of the use of the relics of Santa Cristina for amorous and political reasons between the de Moulins and the Altavillas families.
3. **SEPINO : December 31st - 1st January** Musical bands, called "I Bufù", with very primitive and home made instruments play and parade throughout the night and the following day to celebrate a good end of the year and a good start to a New Year!



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