

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The purpose of this book is to present a clear and concise account of the history of Brittany. It is intended for any English-speaking residents, visitors or tourists who would like a straightforward chronological framework against which to interpret the historical remains to be found in this remarkable region. History, of course, is not straightforward, and Brittany's past is a tapestry of particularly complex weave, with Celts, Britons, Vikings, Franks, French, English and Germans all contributing their threads to the pattern.

My endeavour has been to simplify without distortion and, where selectivity was essential, to choose events or episodes on the basis of visible legacies, as these are likely to be of major interest to the general reader. The cited examples range widely geographically, and include a deliberate mix of famous and less well-known places: it has been my experience that any corner of Brittany will repay exploration with a cornucopia of historical interest.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wendy Mewes studied at the University of Wales and University College London and has a research degree in ancient history. She taught this subject, together with Latin, for nearly twenty years, latterly as Head of Classics at Godolphin & Latymer in Hammersmith. After a spell in Somerset, she now lives in Brittany, in the department of Finistère. Her previous publications include *Finistère: Things to see and do at the End of the World (2004)*, *Walking and other activities in Finistère (2005)* and a novel, *Moon Garden*. See www.reddogbooks.com for further information.

CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE

BC

c.5000	Neolithic period
c.3000	Carnac alignments
c.2000	Bronze Age
c.700	Iron Age - arrival of the Celts
from 56	Roman administration of Armorica

AD

4 th cent.	British immigration begins
late 4 th cent.	End of Roman administration
late 5 th cent.	Peace with Clovis, king of the Franks
800	Charlemagne Holy Roman Emperor
c.831	Nominoë 'missus imperatoris'
843	First Viking attack on Nantes
851	Erispoë acknowledged as King of Brittany
913	Landévennec Abbey sacked by Vikings
939	Major victory against the Vikings
952	Death of Alain Barbetorte, duke of Brittany
c.1160	Plantagenet influence in Brittany
1213	Pierre de Dreux, French duke of Brittany
1341	Wars of Succession begin
1364	Montforts victorious
1488	Defeat of François II
1491	Anne de Bretagne marries Charles VIII of France
1499	Anne marries Louis XII of France
1514	Death of Anne de Bretagne
1532	Union of France and Brittany
1589-98	Wars of Religion
1655	New Parliament building at Rennes
1675	Revolt of the Bonnets Rouges
1789	French Revolution; Brittany divided into 5 depts.
1791	Counter-revolutionary movement (Chouans)
1870	Franco-Prussian war – Conlie incident
1917	American troops arrive in Brittany
1921	Brittany has France's first communist mayor
1926	Breton flag designed
1940-44	Germans occupy Brittany
1941	Loire Inférieure detached from Brittany
1957	Loire Inférieure becomes Loire Atlantique
1978	Wreck of Amoco Cadiz off Finistère
1994	Parliament Building at Rennes burnt down



1 - MEN & STONES

Brittany is well known for its prolific prehistoric remains in the form of large stone structures (megaliths), but these were by no means the first signs of human life on the peninsula.

Palaeolithic

The earliest known palaeolithic (early stone age) site in Brittany is at Saint-Malo-de-Phily where pieces of worked stone date human occupation of the area back to about 700,000BC. Further traces of activity from this period have been found at Menez Drégan on the Bay of Audierne, where cavemen lived around 450,000BC and knew the use of fire. At various sites, such as Mont-Dol, the bones and teeth of animals like mammoth, elephant and rhinoceros have been discovered.

Mesolithic

As temperatures warmed and the sea-levels began to rise to usher in the Mesolithic period (about 10,000BC), hunter-gatherers left evidence of their existence in the form of skeletons and shell jewellery at burial sites on the Ile de Tévéc off the Quiberon peninsula. Occupation of the interior also increased during this time - an atmospheric cave at Roc'h-Toul near Luzec was one of the first excavated sites, with hundreds of stone scrapers and cutters found. Flint tools were worked here from raw material brought from the area of the northern coast, where a seam of flint, at that time exposed, is now covered by the Channel.

Neolithic

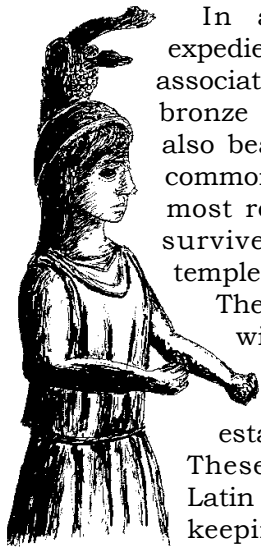
It is neolithic (new stone age) man, however, whose mark remains clearly imprinted on the country today. His world was a naked landscape of raw hills and dense forest: no buildings or towns, no masts or pylons, no roads or fences. The megalithic monuments he has left behind - standing stones, alignments and burial sites - should be looked at

of encouraging harmony and stability with the local population. Archaeology has revealed that there were public baths at Corseul, for example, and a theatre at Kerilien, near Lesneven. Remains of a remarkable aqueduct can still be seen at Carhaix-Plouguer (see p.34). Basilicas (covered law-courts and meeting places) were built at Rennes and Vannes.



Temple of Mars, Corseul

In accordance with their customary expedient practice, the Romans encouraged the association of local gods with their own deities. A bronze statuette of Minerva found at Dinéault also bears on the helmet a swan symbol more commonly associated with Celtic goddesses. The most remarkable Roman religious building to survive, however, is an octagonally shaped temple to Mars near Corseul.



The earliest arrival of Christianity also came with the Romans, and by the time that they gave up control of the region it is clear that churches were already well-established in the eastern part of Brittany.

These followed the tradition of Rome, with Latin as the language of liturgy and of record-keeping. In an early trial of faith, Donatien and Rogatien, two brothers from Nantes, who refused to renounce their faith at the time of Christian persecution by the Roman Emperor Diocletian, were tortured and executed at the end of the 3rd century. A bishop (probably not the first) of Rennes, named Athenius, is known to have attended the Council of Tours in 461.

More than 5,000 rural sites of small villas and farmhouses from this period have been discovered in Brittany, often by chance. An archaeological dig of a medieval settlement near La Feuillée, for example, has turned up some foundations from the Roman period.

Near Roche-Maurice, a villa dating to AD60-80, covered a large area. The house itself was 25m long, with a colonnade,



Bath house, Hogolo

kitchen, various living rooms and bedrooms and a small bath-house. Another excavated in the 1980s at Châtillon-sur-Seiche was essentially a farm complex with baths and a hypocaust (under-floor) heating system. A compact bath-house suite at Hogolo on the coast of Côtes d'Armor would have served a country house nearby.

Some knowledge of individuals in this period can be gleaned from the discovery of Latin inscriptions, such as those dedicating offerings to the gods, or epitaphs. For example, a poignant vignette emerges of Silicia Namgidde, of African origin, who followed her son to Corseul. He honoured her exceptional devotion in an epitaph there on her death at the age of 65.

An unusual and particularly interesting site is the Roman garum factory in the Plomarc'h on the edge of Douarnenez. Here in a magnificent setting overlooking the sea, a pungent sauce made from rotting fish-entrails was produced in very large quantities to satisfy the demand for this essential food seasoning. At Resto, near Lanester in Morbihan, there is another example of a small seasoning enterprise with four stone tanks.



Garum factory, Plomarc'h.

5 - DUKES & A DUCHESS

After the death of Alain Barbetorte came hundreds of years of feuding and rivalry among the nobles within Brittany, and the constant outside intervention of the English and the French royal houses. Political marriages, shifting alliances, battles and bloodshed, territories gained and lost make this a complex period of constant flux.

House of Rennes

The bastard sons of Alain Barbetorte could not consolidate their hold on power in Brittany. Tensions were strong between the counts of Rennes and Nantes who each regarded themselves as rightful dukes. Conan I, the son of Bérenger of Rennes, called himself the Duke of Brittany from 979. He was killed in battle in 992, but his son Geoffrey held onto the dukedom with the support of Richard, Duke of Normandy. In 1008, he was succeeded by Alain III, who managed to keep the count of Nantes under control, but had little success in shaking off Norman overlordship. He did, however, maintain his position for 32 years.

Conan II (duke from 1040-1066) became embroiled in armed conflict with his rivals, who now sought to use Norman power against him. Early scenes from the Bayeux Tapestry show William (the Conqueror) going to the aid of Rivalon versus Conan, who was forced to escape from Dol and flee back to Rennes, leaving William to take Dinan. The Normans, in the event, found the territory too hard-going and left without any consolidation of power there, but they maintained their influence.



Conan escaping down a rope
(from the Bayeux Tapestry)

Many Breton nobles fought with William at the Battle of Hastings in 1066, being later rewarded with lands in England. The Penthièvres, for example, from the area of Lamballe, were given the estate of Richmond in Yorkshire (although it later reverted to the English crown).

Conan II died without heir and was succeeded by his brother-in-law, Hoël, Count of Cornouaille.

House of Cornouaille

Alain IV Fergent, Hoël's son and successor, was the last Duke to be Breton-speaking: in future the court would use French or Latin, a development which inevitably exacerbated the separation between leaders and people. During this period, the bastion of the Breton language retreated westwards.

In 1096, Alain went off for five years on the first crusade and retired to the monastery of Redon on his return. His son Conan III (1112-1148) continued the struggle for supremacy in Brittany in a period of unrest, which was to be taken advantage of by Henry II Plantagenet (king of England, also ruler of Anjou, Aquitaine, Normandy, Maine and Poitou).

Plantagenets

Henry took an interest in controlling Brittany through Conan's grandson, who in England received the dukedom of Richmond, which had been his father's also, in return for allegiance to Henry. Once back in Brittany as Duke Conan IV (1156-1166), he had trouble in keeping control of the counts of Fougères, Léon and Penthièvre, and Henry was forced to come in person to reassert his authority. He took Fougères after a struggle and destroyed the castle. Archaeological excavations have found traces of a tower, which may be the one dismantled in 1166, on a rocky position within the current exceptional château



Remaining tower base - Fougères

French government in political and educational developments. During the *Monarchie de Juillet* there were anti-religious moves in Haute Bretagne, with the Trappist monks at Melleray expelled in 1831 (to find another home in England) and a seminary at Vitré closed in the same year.

From 1870, the French government of the 3rd Republic took an increasingly anti-clerical stance. Many Catholic schools had opened in the 19th century and when some came under threat, the force of local protests required the intervention of troops.

The clergy of Basse-Bretagne remained staunch champions of the Breton language, closely associating it with their faith, and missions continued to keep the religious spirit alive among the masses. In 1902 their robust defence, backed by widespread public support, led to dropping of official attempts to stamp out the use of Breton in church services. A law formally separating Church and State was passed in 1905, however, resulting in further unrest and protest in Brittany.

Tensions

During the period between the Prussian debacle and the First World War, the movement of Breton identity gathered momentum, workers rights' became an economic and political issue, and Brittany began to develop as an attractive tourist destination, with resorts like Dinard, Morgat (on the Crozon peninsula) and Le Baule growing in size.

A law passed back in 1864 had given the right to strike, and this strengthened the growth of workers' movements in Brittany during the latter part of this progressive century. Agricultural labourers, fishermen and shipyard workers were amongst those to benefit from these organised groups. The 1890s saw the beginning of workers' unions in Nantes, St-Nazaire, Brest, Rennes and Fougères, for example, and there were to be more than 1,000 strikes between 1892 and the outbreak of the First World War. A general strike took place in Nantes in 1893, and in 1909 there were violent clashes during the conflict between cannery workers and factory owners in Concarneau.

Further important political developments saw the establishment of the Federation Socialiste de Bretagne in

Nantes in 1900, and the first PNB (Breton Nationalist Party) in 1911.

Reflecting the strong growth of interest in Breton folklore, songs and customs, the URB (Union régionaliste bretonne) was formed in 1898. The aims of this organization were primarily cultural. Their statutes outlined the scope of their interests, which were economic, scientific, literary, linguistic and artistic, and specifically excluded religion and politics.

THE DREYFUS AFFAIR

At the turn of the century, Brittany had a minor role to play in the famous Dreyfus case, when a Jewish French army officer was wrongly accused and convicted of treason. After many protests, including Emile Zola's article 'J'accuse', the case was re-opened. Dreyfus was brought from Devil's Island to a military prison in the rue Saint-Hélier, Rennes, in order to attend a second hearing before the Rennes military tribunal at the Lycée in August 1899. Feelings ran high in the town and Dreyfus' lawyer Labori was shot and wounded in the street. Dreyfus was found guilty again, a verdict overturned in 1904 when he was at last able to return to the army and resume his career.

Overall, Brittany's fortunes were mixed in most areas during the 19th century, with vitality and progress in some areas matched by decline and repression in others. Absorbing struggles between the political factions and between workers and bosses side-lined and obscured the issue of the good of Brittany as a whole. Hopes for better things to come in the new century were soon overshadowed following the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo in June 1914, which led to the outbreak of the First World War.

