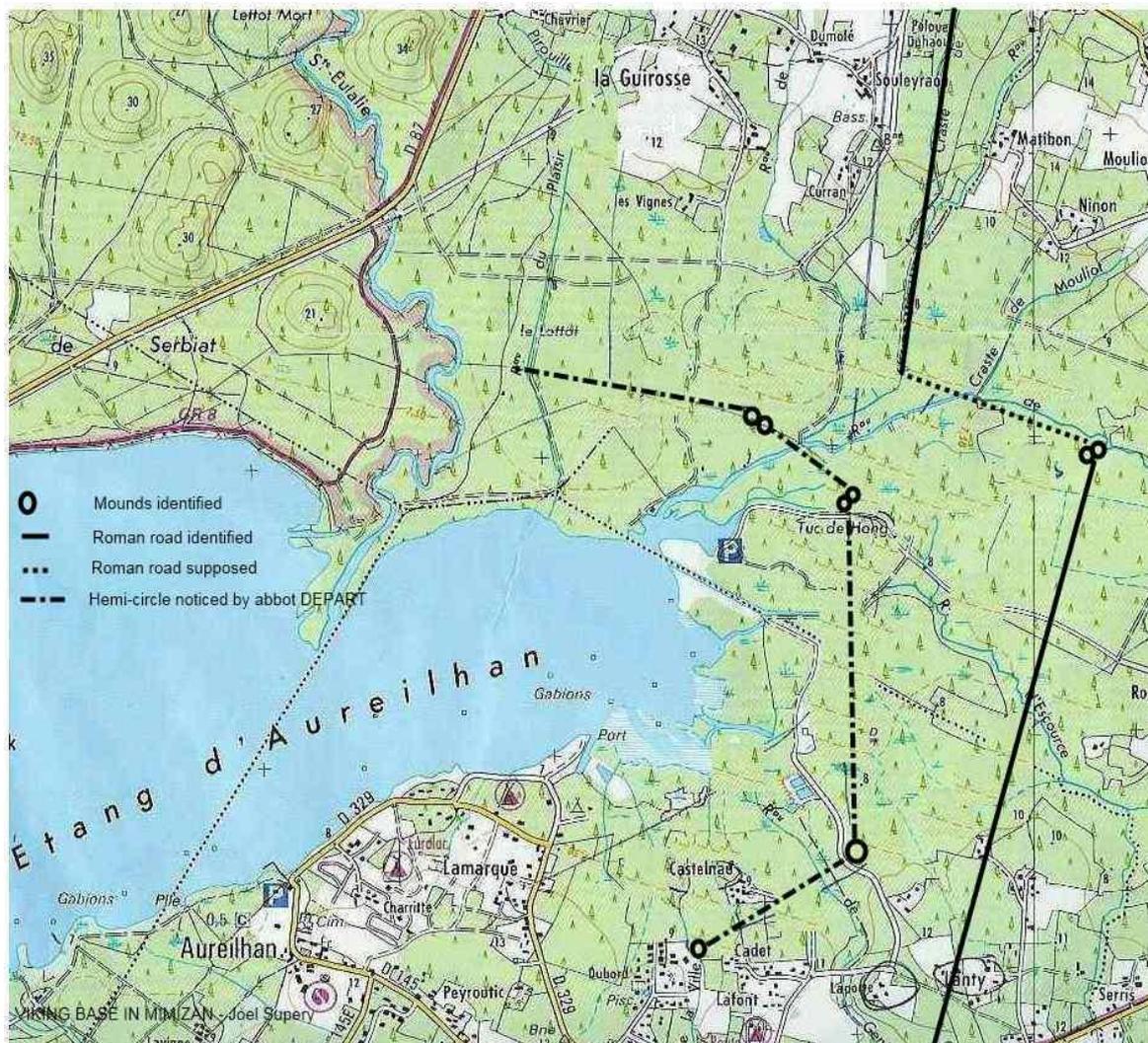


# A Viking base in Gascony?

3 janvier 2010

*Vikings have been launching massive attacks on the coasts and rivers of Europe. Fleets described counted frequently 60, 120 or 240 ships. These fleets able to enter in rivers thanks to their numerous crews had to be backed and supplied with food, drinks, and equipment. These supplies and the cargo ships dedicated to carry them were stored in places somewhere along the coast, in a naval base. We may have identified one of these bases in Gascony, France.*



*On this map, the Roman coastal route from Pampelona-Dax-Bordeaux and the mounds known today. The parking place may have been the heart of the base.*

As soon as 795, Mayus (name given to the Norsemen by Saracens) are mentioned on the Northern shore of Spain in Asturias <sup>i</sup>. By 799, 115 Norsemen are killed in an island of Aquitaine, which must be Noirmoutier. By 810, Louis the Pious, king of Aquitaine, fortified the mouth of river Charente. By 816, Mayus allied with Gascons and Basques are defeated by Sarracens<sup>ii</sup>. These mentions suggest the existence of a route running along the coast of Southern Europe. On this coastal route, Scandinavian fleets needed to anchor every night in a safe place. Norsemen had to visit natural ports of call all along the coast. Some of these ports could easily become naval bases with shipyards and barracks.

We know they had such a base in Walcheren Island, threatening rivers Rhine, Scheldt and Maas. Robert WACE<sup>iii</sup> suggests that they had a base in Cherbourg, at the top of Cotentin peninsula, from which they could assault the coast of Wessex and the rivers Seine and Somme. We have reasons to believe that the main base in the North of the Bay of Biscay, was neither in Noirmoutier Island, nor in Groix Island, but rather in Quiberon Peninsula –we'll come back to this point in another article ( voir *Groix, la tombe d'un roi des Mers?*). From this base they could raid rivers Vilaine and Loire. The fortifications at the mouth of Charente by 810 suggest that Norsemen had a threatening base in Oléron or Ré island. From this base, they could also raid rivers Garonne and Dordogne.

Further south, on the coast of Gascony, a long stretch of white sand, there are no more islands or peninsulas. However, we know that they invaded Gascony sailing up river Adour. Where were they coming from?

#### **A base in Mimizan, according to the *Bréviaire de Lescar***

The *Bréviaire de Lescar* -lost today-, quoted in 1640 by Pierre DE MARCA<sup>iv</sup> mentions: « *Every year, preparing a fleet, Visigoths were coming across a sea surrounded by land and arrived at Mimizan from where crueller than wild beasts they were ravaging, according to their habit, the whole of Gascony* ». Visigoths dominated the area

between 412 and 507. "Visigoths" is the usual term adopted in Gascony to describe Germanic invaders. The « *sea surrounded by land* » may describe the Baltic Sea. The interesting information is the name « Mimizan ». Could Mimizan have been the base from which they launched their assault on Gascony?

The coast of Gascony is a long stretch of white sand, without island or peninsula to take refuge. It looks very much like the coast of Jutland. On such a coast, Danes used to have their ports inland (Ribe). However, the choice of Mimizan may seem strange. There is no river there, only a 40 kilometers long chain of coastal lakes connected to the sea at Mimizan. The area is sandy, swampy and empty. However, installing a base in the lake is not a bad idea. While the tide is 4 to 5 meters on the coast, it is hardly 60 centimeters at the bottom/end of the lake. That means that you can anchor a fleet in this protected bay and keep it from the rough tempests of the ocean. This aspect is very important as far as merchant ships are concerned. The merchant ship or *kauskip*, which *knorr* is the most famous type, couldn't be stranded on the beach with its load. The weight of the cargo would have dismantled the fragile clinker built hull. These merchant ships had to stay afloat. One can suppose that the fleets sailing to Spain as soon as 795 –and before- used to stop there.

Mimizan was interesting for another reason: this coastal area had been active during the Roman period and the coastal Roman route from Dax to Bordeaux was passing nearby. The two main cities of Gascony were easily accessible. A base there would have been easy to join from the sea (9 kilometers from the coast to the bottom-end of the lake) and could easily access to the Hinterland thanks to the Roman road. In the same time, it was protected from a land attack by the swamps.

The information given by the *Bréviaire de Lescar* is perfectly acceptable. If we intend to look for a Viking base on the coast of Gascony, Mimizan is a good place to start with. What can we expect to find? Place names and, if we are lucky, mounds and other earth works.

## Ancient earthworks around the lake.

Now around the eastern side of the lake of Mimizan also called Etang d'Aureilhan, close to the ancient Roman road, strange earth works which origins are unknown still exist. By 1810, THORE<sup>v</sup> described the «Tuc de Houns», the «mound of the Huns» with these words «remains of an old castle built on a mound». He's adding that 20 years before this mound was far from the lake, but since it has become an islet which is raising 4 or 5 meters above the water level.

By 1884, the abbot DEPART<sup>vi</sup> from Mimizan, got interested in these mounds. The abbot identified other mounds in the swamps surrounding the lake. He's mentioning from South to North: Tuc du Castelnaud, Tuc de Lanty, Tuc de Houns and Tuc du Castet. He discovered two other mounds more inland: Tuc des Sarrasins and Tuc de Monge. The abbot suggested that these mounds were built according to a scheme. By 1884, he used these words:

*“Around the northern and North-east shore there are four groups of mounds quite close one from the other. There are positioned on a line representing half a circle... Two of these mounds are located in the commune of Aureilhan, in the area of Castenau and Lanty, with 4 or 500 meters between them. Both of them are mounds of clay 5 or 6 meters high above the ground and surrounded by a deep trench which earth was used to build the mound. The diameter at the summit is around 12 to 15 meters... One kilometer from the last of these mounds, there are two others partly located in the lake. These twin mounds (Tuc de Houns) must have been separated by a «large trench» and were maybe connected between them by a drawbridge... The fourth group, named Tuc du Castet, was identical to the former ones. It is located at nearly 500 meters from the latter one in the commune of Sainte-Eulalie in a prairie of the small farm Laguirosse.»*

The abbot suggested that this defensive system developed on 2 kilometers on the oriental shore of the lake must be considered as Carolingian and created to prevent Norsemen from going up river. He wrote: “Charlemagne ordered by 810 to build towers and fortresses at the mouth of the rivers... We cannot believe we are wrong when saying that their construction is due to the people of these countries to defend the ancient Roman road which passed there and especially to resist the Norsemen coming in the port of Mimizan »<sup>vi</sup>.

These fortifications would have been erected by Louis the Pious, son of Charlemagne and king of Aquitaine. Texts mention the fortification of the mouth of river Charente, 200 kilometers north of Mimizan by Louis. So why not?

By 1977, Jean-Bernard MARQUETTE<sup>viii</sup>, a Medievalist, studied these mounds and completed the statements given by the abbot nearly one century before.

*The mound said of Castelnaud is 36 meters of diameter, but only 3 meters high. This mound is crowned by a ring large of 10 meters and surrounded by a trench of 6 meters large. The mound of Lanty is much more important: a circular and tronconic mound, 6 meters high and which diameter is 70 meters. At la Guirosse, Marquette looked for the Tuc de Castet and discovered two rectangular earth works which size was 22mx8 and 22mx40. 2 to 4 meters high and surrounded by a common trench, but very damaged because of the people taking clay here. At this point, MARQUETTE disagrees with the abbot who described them as «very similar» to the Tuc de Houns.*

By 1977, while cleaning the area for culture, a fifth mound named Tuc de L'Eglise was discovered<sup>ix</sup>. It was located on the ancient Roman road at Saint-Paul-le-Vieux, the old village abandoned because of the increase of the lake level. This mound is close to areas called Bestaven and Loubeyres. On all these mounds have been discovered Roman remains and especially tiles. Those who erected these mounds used Roman materials.

Their local origin has never been challenged. J-B MARQUETTE just say: «The presence of these numerous mounds around the lake proves the importance of this area as soon as the 11<sup>th</sup> century, if not before”<sup>x</sup>. Strangely enough, the historian doesn't try to explain their presence by the lake or the Roman road. He's just interested in the feudal aspect of these mottes, seats of lordship in the following centuries. He doesn't try to comment the origins mentioned by the abbot DEPART. He ignores the question.

These structures are very old and can be presumed dating back to the Viking Age as did believe the abbot. The prudence of MARQUETTE is however logical as the Frankish origin of these works seems very questionable.

## Unlikelihood of Frankish origins.

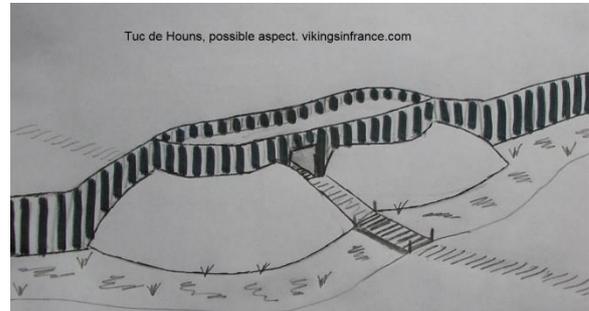
The « rivers » which flow into the lake are not 10 meters large. A longship could even not use its rows. Is it credible that so many mounds were built by the Franks or the Gascons in this depopulated and swampy area to prevent invaders from entering the land? The response is all the more clear that rivers Adour, Garonne, Dordogne and Charente are royal routes to enter inland. By another way, if the Gascons -or Franks- had wanted to prevent the Danes from landing in the bay, they should have built their fortresses between the sea and the lake in the channel, in the narrowest place to stop the fleet before it could enjoy the security of the lake. The fortifications were built on the inland shore of the lake. That means their purpose was not to prevent an enemy from coming from the sea, but to protect the lake from a land attack. These fortifications were built by seamen who wanted to protect their harbor.

The abbot DEPART is suggesting that a drawbridge could have existed between the twin mounds. Twin mounds are known elsewhere in Europe, but in Mimizan, they are not really twins, they are more exactly Siamese. Their circular bases touch each other. Such a drawbridge seems very strange. Why installing a drawbridge between two Siamese mounds? Maybe the abbot considered that one mound was the « Basse Cour » of the other mound the "Haute Cour", but these mounds had the same size.

In our mind, these Siamese mounds were not linked by a drawbridge, as suggested by the abbot DEPART, but rather by a door. These Siamese mounds could have been a gate, a fortified gate. The protected way entering the base was passing between the mounds. There are three pairs of mounds, but only two (Houns and La Guirosse) seem to belong to the base. On the map above, one can clearly see that these mounds have been erected in a swampy area. One can imagine that the base was surrounded by a wooden wall, logs planted in the swamps.

Two ways seem to have entered the base (the way in and the way out). The abbot told us that these mounds formed a half-circular shape. At the center of this half-circle, one can see a little bay. Beside it, an artificial island with a triangular shape with some 60 meters sides. This island became the parking place of the fishermen (see Googlemap). The road that reaches the parking is built on a kind of jetty. The road

passes close the Tuc de Houns, but not in the middle of it. In fact, the Vikings were not erecting such jetties to make roads in swampy areas. They were just putting logs in the mud to create ways in wet lands. The Scandinavian ways discovered by archeologists in Dublin, York or Hedeby are more or less 140 cm large.



*This drawing is a pure speculation of what the gate (Tuc de Houns and maybe Tuc de Loubeyres) may have looked like. The platform could have been 10 to 15 meters large and 30 to 45 meters long. The garrison was living there, above the swamps.*

The Tuc de L'Eglise, discovered by 1977, is too far away to belong to an eventual naval base. This mound, also known as Tuc de Loubeyres, is located in Saint-Paul-Le-Vieux, an abandoned village because of the increase of the waters of the lake. Now, the ancient Roman road between Dax and Bordeaux along the coast (there was another road more inland) was passing there<sup>xi</sup>. We believe the Siamese mounds of Loubeyres may have barred the Roman road. This fortified gate would have permitted the Danes to control this commercial and military strategic road.

In the South, the Roman road was passing even closer (350meters) from the Tuc de Lanty, the most powerful mound with 70 meters of diameter. In our mind, these mounds were in the same time protecting the naval base and controlling the Roman road. Like the abbot DEPART, we believe that the Roman route and the lake explain these mounds.

Why our vision would be better than the abbot's?

## Scandinavian place names in Mimizan?

In this country called Pays de Born, just South of the famous Bassin d'Arcachon, place names are Germanic. We find, "Marcat", "Lamarque", "Marcon", "Marquedey", "Merquedey". They could come from the Scandinavian word *märk*,

seamark. The fact is that the mouth of the channel is very difficult to see on this sandy coast covered with dunes. A seamark was necessary to signalize it. The bell-tower of Mimizan, built on the channel, was very famous. There was an old seamen prayer saying: « *Protect us from the song of the sirens, the tail of the whale, And the Belfry of Mimizan* »<sup>xii</sup>. Whale hunting ceased around the XVe century in the Bay of Biscay. This prayer is older.

The belfry of Mimizan, called *lou clocher des marins*, was so huge that it could be seen over the dunes which are today 30 meters high. The abbot DEPART wrote about this tower which had been destroyed by a hurricane in 1770: « *This tower must have had many functions, but very few religious ones* ». The first tower may have been erected by the Norsemen as a seamark and whale hunting tower. We can see such a tower in Capbreton. And a copy built around 1930 can be seen at Ciboure in the port of Saint-Jean-de-Luz. These two ports were famous whale hunting bases in the past.

In Capbreton, every Christmas Eve, the inhabitants burn a symbolic wooden tower in front of the huge belfry of the church Saint Nicolas. They call this tradition “Feu de la torelle”. This fire is supposed to commemorate a victory of the locals... over the Vikings... In fact, we believe that such seamarks were the most spectacular buildings made by the invaders. They became the symbol of their presence. Burning the tower could have meant “we got rid of the Scandinavian domination”. The fact is that the country came back to Christianity only after the victory of the Gascons over the Vikings by 982. The choice of the December 24<sup>th</sup>, the day before the birth of Jesus, could symbolize the passage from the Pagan Night in which Gascony stayed for more than a century to the Christian Light.

The double word “Marquedey” and “Merquedey” suggest the word *maerk*. These words may be evolutions of °*Märkhede*, the valley of the seamark.

This is not the only place name. Close to the channel, we find la “Lette du Raz”. “Raz” comes from *ras*, stream. These channels in Gascony are called « Courants ». “Lette” is the name given to the flat land between two dunes. It could come from *slätt*, small plain or “°L’Hede”, the valley. In Médoc and in Charente, such a plain is called Lède.

On the « Courant de Sainte-Eulalie », linking the lake of Aureilhan to the lake of Parentis, we find the place name « La Habe ». This word also may come from *hafr*, trap, fishing net. It may indicate a fishery.

Other names sound very Scandinavian. “Carquebin”, for *kirkeby*, “La Dune de Labèque”, South of Mimizan, may refer to a Scandinavian *bekk*, brook. In the past, local coastal brooks were called “la Becq”. The names “Gouat-mort”, “Chat”, “Aüchets” seem to come from *gat*, passage, commonly translated by *gatus*, then chat (cat). In the dunes, a place is called “Lette du Marcat d’Aüchets” which translation could be “small plain of the seamark of the passage”. “Bourgau” (*Borg*, castle), “Champagne” (*Kaupang*, market)<sup>xiii</sup>, “Matot”, “Tastot” (*toft*, farm) sound also very Nordic.

But, there are other interesting names in the area. These names may refer to the chiefs who invaded Gascony. There are many single names as “Guilleman” (*Wilman*), “Guiraout” (*Gerröd*), “Gombaut” (*Gunbjörn*), “Hendille” (*Endill*), “Gilles” (*Gili*), “Vigon” (*Vigi*), “Esting” (*Hastein*), “Lescaire” (*Asgeir*, called *Asker* in Aquitaine).

Our research led us to propose a new reading of local names. We suggested that the names with the suffix -os, supposed Aquitanic until now, may in fact be Scandinavian and refer to *hus*, house. We find strange coincidences. Bardos, (*Bard*), Arengosse (*Hearing*), Bournos, (*Björn*), Estignos (*Hastein*), Arnos (*Arni*), Bedos, (*Ved*), Biscarosse, (*Viskar*), Bilos, (*Bili*), Balanos, (*Blann*),s, Guillos (*Gili*), Hordosse, (*Hord*), Julos, (*Juli*), Ygos, (*Ygg*) etc... In the area of Mimizan, we find “Archus”, (*Harek*), « La Guirosse », (*L’Asgeirhus*), « Serris », (*Sejer*), « Marès », (*Mar*), « Loubeyres », (*Lou Bierhus*, *Bier*).

Bier is the Frankish name of Björn the son of Ragnar, who according to William Calculus and Duddo had to conquer a kingdom overseas. The “Tuc de Loubeyres” controlled the Roman road. If “Loubeyres” refers to Björn, then it could mean that Björn was « the great chief » of the invasion in Gascony by 840. This assumption seems to be confirmed by the name of the country. Mimizan was the main port of “Le Pays de Born”. It could be the Country of Björn.

Hastein (Esting) followed Björn in Mediterranean Sea in 858, Asgeir (Laguirosse) took Bordeaux in 848<sup>xiv</sup> and probably Saintes in 845, Mar (Marès) was killed nearby Angoulême by 863<sup>xv</sup>. If we are right, these place names

suggest that these Viking chiefs were operating together as soon as 840 –and before-, which of course changes completely our understanding of Viking invasions in France and Europe. This would mean that since the very beginning Viking armies operated with a commune strategy aiming a political goal: conquering a kingdom for their chief Björn<sup>xvi</sup>. Viking invasions were a war.

For several reasons, many people (historians, archeologists, linguists) reject the hypothesis of a Viking base. The fact is that Germanic invaders have never been popular in France. However, excavations on these mounds may be pointless. They were occupied until the 12<sup>th</sup> century and as noticed Marquette, they have been “mined” by the locals for centuries. There is little chance to discover Scandinavian artifacts on these mounds, but in the Lake and the swamps... there are for sure many treasures as Mimizan remained a major medieval port of Gascony until the moving sands condemned the harbor. Excavations in the lake may be very interesting...

Of course, if such “Siamese mounds” were to be found in other swampy areas frequented by the Norsemen, then, there would be greater probability of a Scandinavian origin for those of Mimizan.

Joël SUPERY

Joel Supery, “Le Secret des Vikings” Les Equateurs, 2005, 226p, 19€ ; “Les Vikings au coeur de nos Régions”, Yago, 2009, 526p, 22€..

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<sup>i</sup> Alberto PEREZ DE LABORDA « Guia para la historia del Pais Vasco hasta el siglo IX » Editorial Txertoa, Donostia-San Sebastian, 1996, IBN AL ATHIR, p342 ; IBN IDHARI, p350 ; ANONYMO DEL SIGLO XIV, p364

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid. IBN HAYYAN, p314

<sup>iii</sup> By 945, a fleet waited several weeks in Cherbourg before launching an offensive in Normandy and capturing the king of France. Robert WACE (1100?-1180 ?), “Roman de Rou”, Tome I, verse 3609-3610

“De Costentin manda Heroult Privéement  
Ki à Chieresbore out séjourné Lungement »

<sup>iv</sup> Pierre DE MARCA (1594-1662), archbishop of Toulouse, author of a famous « Histoire du Béarn » by 1640

<sup>v</sup> THORE « Promenade sur le Golfe de Gascogne », 1810.

<sup>vi</sup> L-A DEPART, curé-doyen de Mimizan, « Mimizan, Notice historique », Bulletin Borda, 1884, p145

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid. p148

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<sup>viii</sup> Jean-Bernard MARQUETTE, « Le Pays de Born à la fin du XIIIe siècle » Bulletin Borda, 1977, n°365, p55

<sup>ix</sup> Jean BOURDEN et Serge BARRAU « Un site de l'époque romaine au lieu dit Tuc de l'Eglise, commune de Saint-Paul en-Born ». Bull. Borda, 1980, n°380, p575

<sup>x</sup> Ibid. p87

<sup>xi</sup> Serge BARRAU et Jean BOURDEN « Voie romaine en Pays de Born » Bulletin Borda 1979, n°373, p15.

<sup>xii</sup> René CUZACQ « Les Landes Pittoresques » Editions Jean Lacoste, Mont-de-Marsan, 1969, p22  
« *Que Diou nous preserbi Dou cantic de la sirène-  
Dou coudic de la balène- Et dou clocher de  
Mamisan* »

<sup>xiii</sup> In France, Champagne and Campagne are supposed to come from the latin *Campus, field*. However we have reasons to believe a Scandinavian origin is very likely. In Gascony we find “Le Campagne” which is very strange and Caupenne. Caupenne is translated by *cava pena*, the hollow mountain. *Kaupang* could be the origin.

<sup>xiv</sup> According to the Chronique de Fontenelle which mentions Oscherus, latin transcription of Asgeir

<sup>xv</sup> Annals of Angoulême and the Chronique d’Aquitaine mention the death of Maurus, latin transcription of Marr.

<sup>xvi</sup> William CALCULUS-GUILLAUME DE JUMIEGES, Chroniqueur normand du 11<sup>e</sup> siècle.

« Histoire des Normands », Liv. I, Chap.V, Editions François Guizot, Paris, Brière, 1826, p 11.

« *Ce roi rappelant les lois de ses ancêtres, força son fils nommé Bier, à la Côte de fer, à sortir de son royaume, avec une immense suite de jeunes gens et avec Hastings, son gouverneur, homme rempli de méchanceté en tout point, afin que se rendant en des pays étrangers, Bier conquît par les armes une nouvelle résidence* ».