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0521571723 - The Norman Frontier in the Twelfth and Early Thirteenth Centuries

Daniel Power

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INTRODUCTION

In the twelfth century the borderlands of the duchy of Normandy enjoyed an importance reaching far beyond the rolling hills and narrow rivers that skirted the duchy. Thanks above all to the astounding achievements of its most famous ruler, William the Conqueror, Normandy had emerged in the previous century as one of the most powerful and important principalities in western Europe. However, its land frontiers were often troubled by warfare between the dukes of Normandy – who were more often than not also kings of England – and their neighbours, especially the Capetian kings of France. These conflicts imbued the province's borders with exceptional political significance. Just as significant, however, was the complex relationship between the duke and the aristocratic élites that dominated the frontier districts, which had far-reaching consequences for the history of the duchy and its neighbours.

The Norman frontier has often attracted the attention of historians of Normandy as one of several distinctive facets of the Norman 'state',¹ but much less attention has been paid to the societies that inhabited the marches of the duchy. The period of Plantagenet or Angevin rule in Normandy (1144–1204) has been particularly neglected, despite its importance to the history of the Angevin 'empire'. Count Geoffrey of Anjou overran Normandy in the 1140s with the aid of the lords of the southern frontier, establishing a dynastic 'empire' that under Geoffrey's son Henry II (king of England 1154–89) and grandson Richard I (1189–99) would surpass all others in western Europe in its brilliance and power. Sixty years after Geoffrey's conquest of Normandy, the collapse of Angevin supremacy also owed much to developments upon the Norman frontier. In April 1202 King Philip II Augustus of France (1180–1223) declared that the duke of Normandy, King John of England (1199–1216), had forfeited his possessions in France. In March 1204, after one of the most famous sieges of the Middle Ages, the fortress of Château-Gaillard in the marches of eastern Normandy fell to a French assault. Encouraged

¹ See below, pp. 10–13, 23–5.

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by his success, within three months Philip Augustus subdued the whole duchy, ending its effective independence and breaking up the Angevin territories. King Philip's triumph was only possible because ducal control over the frontier regions of southern and eastern Normandy had already crumbled over the previous decade. So the Norman frontier lies at the heart of the rise, greatness and fall of the Angevin empire. The political society of the Norman frontier in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries forms the subject of this book.

HISTORICAL FRONTIERS

'Frontiers' and 'frontier societies' have become a popular subject for historical investigation in recent years.² As the dominant statist paradigms of nineteenth- and much twentieth-century historical writing have fallen into disfavour, the history of societies at the fringes of cultures or territories has grown in popularity. Many such studies have been inspired by North American notions of frontiers as zones of transition between a settled and an unsettled area, or, by extension, between civilisations; others have concentrated upon frontiers in a conventional European sense, as the physical and imagined divisions – whether linear or zonal – between settled populations, usually determined by political allegiance.³

Political frontiers reveal much about the polities which they delimit. Rulers often face the greatest tests at the fringes of their territories, where their control can be challenged most easily by neighbouring powers, and the measures that they adopt in response demonstrate the overall effectiveness and limitations of their power.⁴ The study of frontiers also has a role to play in the history of ethnic and political identities. It is no accident that many of the greatest national leaders of the past, from

² The historiography of frontiers is vast. For an introduction to pre-modern historiography on the subject, see Power (1999b, 1–12), while Berend (1999) independently reaches broadly similar conclusions (cf. Berend 2001, 6–17); see also Abulafia 2002.

³ For these two sorts of frontier, see Power 1999b, 6–12. Other historians adopt slightly different schemes for categorisation, although the basic contrast between zones of cultural interaction and political divisions remains: Lord Curzon distinguished 'frontiers of separation' from 'frontiers of contact', and a number of German historians differentiated between 'frontiers of separation' (*Trennungsgrenzen*) and 'converging frontiers' (*Zusammenwachsungen*): see Kristof 1959, 273. Manzano (1999, 35–6) suggests 'unstable' and 'enclosing', which together equate to what are here called frontiers in the 'European' sense, and 'expanding' frontiers, comparable to the American sense. Frontiers in the North American meaning of the term are not necessarily 'expanding', however: for a reinterpretation of the American frontier in a more stable phase of its history, see R. White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (Cambridge, 1991).

⁴ Cf. Toubert 1992, 16: 'la frontière apparaît ainsi comme le meilleur indicateur de l'état de l'Etat' (his italics).

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Joan of Arc to Napoleon, came from regions that lay at the extremities of the territories with which they chose to identify; their fervent espousal of that identity indicates that at the fringes of a kingdom or province, identity and conceptualisation of territory are not vague optional ideas but a fact of daily existence.⁵ For their part, frontiers of settlement or cultural interaction have proved enduringly popular with historians ever since the American historian Frederick Jackson Turner published his ‘frontier thesis’ at the end of the nineteenth century, as zones where the mingling of cultures reflect settlement patterns and agriculture, language, social customs and law.⁶

Since historians have identified so many different types of frontier, the validity of this term as a tool for analysis is open to question. There is a danger that treating a particular area as a frontier from the outset can be too deterministic.⁷ It may appear anachronistic to speak of a frontier at all for the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, since the English word and many of its cognate terms did not evolve until the late Middle Ages.⁸ In addition, all medievalists are aware of the existence of enclaves and pockets of jurisdiction, liberties and rights (whether seigneurial, communal or ecclesiastical), ties of lordship and dependence that were unterritorial in nature, vast stretches of uncultivated lands and ‘waste’ separating villages, all of which existed in recurrent situations of weak political control and prevailing violence. Medieval power often appears very diffuse, easily slipping away to hitherto peripheral regions, so that a ‘frontier’ could be rapidly transformed into a core territory or ‘metropolis’. Thomas Noble, for instance, has depicted the ninth-century Carolingian lands as a core of Frankish territories surrounded by a ring of client *regna*: but he also suggests that the two chief successor states to the Carolingian Empire that emerged in the ninth century, the future France and Germany, were founded upon three of these same peripheral *regna*, Bavaria on the one hand and Aquitaine and Neustria on the other, whose rulers divided the old Carolingian heartlands between them.⁹ In other words, the centre of the Empire, those Frankish *Kerngebiete* that had been a fulcrum of

⁵ Cf. Evans 1992, 497.

⁶ For frontiers in the North American sense in medieval historiography, see Burns 1989; Berend 1999, 56–64; 2001, 6–12; Power 1999b, 9–12. For Turner’s thesis, first published in 1921, see F. J. Turner 1921, 1–38.

⁷ J. M. H. Smith 1992, 3. The same author has, however, written an excellent comparative survey of the *fines* and marches of the Carolingian Empire: see J. M. H. Smith 1995.

⁸ Febvre 1928; Power 1999b, 4, 6–7. Sénac (1999) traces the origins of *frontiera* as a military term in eleventh-century Aragon, but it would not enter French until the thirteenth and English until the fourteenth century. For older terms such as *marca*, see below, pp. 13–15, 24–6.

⁹ Noble 1990, 347.

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western European politics since the sixth century, were now coming to be dominated by their frontiers. In the following century the Ottonian dynasty was transformed from the defenders of the Saxon March into the rulers of the East Frankish kingdom within a generation. Furthermore, between the late tenth and the early twelfth centuries, power and authority disintegrated across much of Europe, in the process known as *encellulement* (literally 'breaking up into cells') that in the eyes of many historians tended to reduce effective power to the level of the castelry.¹⁰ Could the borders of the kingdom or of its constituent principalities be of any importance when power and authority were often so fragmented and devolved?¹¹

Yet 'frontiers' of sorts did exist in the Middle Ages. While no one can deny the ease with which scholars, traders, warriors and peasants moved across the territory between the Pyrenean region, the Alps and the Rhineland, this same period of Latin Christian expansion was also one in which the division of western Christendom into separate kingdoms proved lasting. The divisions within this territory could have great political and social significance and contemporaries were also often very aware of them. Medieval political frontiers often proved to be very durable indeed, and the interaction of a dominant power with local élites at the fringes of its territory could be very distinctive. Rulers frequently had to appease the landowners at the fringes of their territories in order to retain and cultivate their loyalties, or to give their local commanders a freer hand in dealing with the military exigencies that arose at the frontier. As a result, the frontier lord could accumulate power and privilege from the advantages of his location. Paradoxically, for some other frontier regions the very reverse was true: the ruler resorted to ruthless suppression as the best means of controlling his borderlands. The Welsh Marches represent a fair example of the first set of developments,¹² while the Norman Vexin in the twelfth century more closely resembled the second;¹³

¹⁰ For *encellulement*, see especially Fossier 1982, i, 288–595, and Poly and Bournazel 1991; regional examples of this supposed process include Duby 1971, 137–262; Devailly 1973, 168–76, 317–49.

¹¹ E.g. Duffy 1982–3, 38; Manzano 1999, 36–7.

¹² For the privileges of the Welsh marcher lords, see Edwards 1956; Otway-Ruthven 1958; R. R. Davies 1979; Meisel 1980, 103–27. In contrast to the argument adopted here, Edwards argued that Marcher privileges reflected the differences between pre-Norman England and Wales and had little to do with royal concessions. Davies, on the other hand, stresses the rough-and-ready creativity of the Normans in the face of the military exigencies of the March as well as the role of the kings of England in the formation of the March. Either way, the Marcher lords' retention of such extensive prerogatives, at a time when the royal officials and the Common Law were together ironing out local differences in England proper, was aided by their remoteness from the centres of English royal power and the continuing Welsh threat.

¹³ Green 1984, 61.

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but in each case, the political and social institutions of the region were affected because it lay at the frontiers of a principality.

As for the term 'frontier', much of the difficulty with the English term arises from the variety of concepts which it evokes. It tends to imply zones of strong contrasts, usually located at the limits of colonisation and settlement, whether literally in a wilderness, or metaphorically, as in the case of Latin expansion in the Mediterranean. Cognate terms in other European languages, however, invoke rather more restricted concepts and tend to have much stronger political than demographic connotations. *Frontières* and *Grenzen* may divide densely populated territories which are similar in most respects, but separated from one another by political organisation and by a rhetoric of difference. Although most of these terms have acquired their modern sense in the context of early modern statebuilding, their more restricted connotations allow them to be used, with qualification, for medieval political divisions, whether linear or zonal.¹⁴

Care is therefore needed both in the use of frontier terminology and in the treatment of so-called frontiers and frontier zones. In the following pages it will often be necessary to resort to these expressions as shorthand terms for the districts at the limits of the territory which the dukes of Normandy ruled, whether or not there was a recognised delimitation of territory such as a river or boundary markers. This generalisation has some regrettable but necessary shortcomings. Terms such as *fines* and *marca* in Latin or *marches* in French were frequently used in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries to indicate the borders or borderlands of Normandy,¹⁵ but the full significance of the political divide between Normandy and its neighbours requires a much broader swathe of territory to be considered here than the districts immediately abutting the boundaries of the duchy (where these existed).

In modern English the term 'frontier' also conveys wider figurative meanings of conceptual division, the view of 'like' and 'unlike', 'same' and 'other'. While the term was not used in this sense during the Middle Ages,¹⁶ it has enabled historians to draw comparisons and contrasts between very different countries and ages. The rhetoric of Norman identity forms an important aspect of the history of the communities who dwelt at the fringes of Norman territory.

¹⁴ Power 1999b, 6–9, and 1999c, 111–21; see Toubert (1992) for medieval *frontières* in general, and for the derivation of *Grenze*, see Nicklis 1992.

¹⁵ Below, pp. 13–15, 24–6.

¹⁶ The earliest example of the figurative meaning in English given by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, vi, 218, is from Andrew Marvell's *The Rehearsall Transposed* (1672–3). *Le Robert: Dictionnaire historique de la langue française* (Paris, 1992), i, 849, dates figurative *frontières* to the eighteenth century.

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THE NATURE OF THE NORMAN FRONTIER

Normandy has no natural unity. This basic fact reverberates through the history of the duchy. Its cohesion was founded upon naked political power and tradition, not topographical features. Upper (eastern) Normandy, geologically part of the Paris Basin, is predominantly a land of arable agriculture and nucleated villages; the Evrecin and Norman Vexin can even be regarded as tongues of the great wheat-growing plain of northern France. In contrast, Lower (western) Normandy forms part of the Armorican Massif, linking it geologically to Brittany rather than Upper Normandy. Now a country of orchards and cattle-rearing, its settlement is characterised by scattered hamlets. In addition, the Avranchin, Cotentin and Channel Islands enjoyed numerous contacts with Brittany, and the Norman coastal districts with England and Flanders. The southern frontier did not then approximate to the northern limits of French viticulture, as it does today. 'The vine is not unknown there', Dudo of Saint-Quentin commented rather diffidently in his description of the province.¹⁷ Today vines are cultivated around Vernon, and in the twelfth century the stretch of the Seine valley extending from there downstream to Gaillon was the most important wine-producing part of the duchy; but other areas, notably the Sélune valley near Avranches, were also well provided with vineyards, and only the Cotentin, Pays d'Auge and Pays de Caux produced no wine at all.¹⁸

The duality between east and west would have political, social, economic and cultural significance. Upper Normandy, based around the valleys of the Seine and its tributaries, was oriented towards Paris and the Ile-de-France. The records of Jumièges, Saint-Wandrille and other abbeys in the Seine valley abound with privileges and concessions from the lords of *Francia* who controlled traffic upstream, and show that there was a lively trade along the great river and its tributaries.¹⁹ In contrast Lower Normandy was drained by the Sarthe, the Mayenne and their tributaries which linked Domfront, Argentan or Alençon with the Loire provinces of Anjou and Touraine and beyond to Aquitaine. There are other manifestations of cultural differences between the east and west. The romanesque Frankish suffix *-court* is confined to placenames in Upper Normandy and

¹⁷ Dudo, 166.

¹⁸ Delisle 1851, 418–52, remains an indispensable gazetteer of viticulture in medieval Normandy and the French Vexin. Other examples, such as those in the Norman Vexin given by Deck (1974, 138), would not alter the geographical range significantly.

¹⁹ For exemptions on the Seine, see the charters and cartularies of Fécamp and St-Georges-de-Boscherville (BMRO, Y 51, Y 52), Le Valasse (ADSM, 18 HP 28), Bonport (*Ctl. Bonport, passim*), St-Wandrille (*Ch. St-Wandrille*, 2e partie) and Jumièges (*Ch. Jumièges, passim*); below, pp. 95–6, 304–5.

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neighbouring provinces, whereas the central medieval suffixes *-ière* and *-erie* are primarily western phenomena, found in Brittany, Maine and Anjou, and western Normandy without regard for the border of the duchy.²⁰ So Normandy was subject to many different, often contradictory cultural and economic influences. It is a testimony to the Normans' sense of political and cultural identity that the duchy was so cohesive, for geographically united it was not.

If the duchy had no natural unity, nor did it enjoy 'natural frontiers' – so far as such a phenomenon can be said to exist anywhere²¹ – apart from the English Channel. Physical features certainly served as boundaries but were not major obstacles to communication and contact between neighbouring populations. There are several deep river valleys along the Norman borders, such as the lower courses of the Epte and Eure; but in some places the boundary rivers barely dent the surrounding plain, notably the Avre above Verneuil. By far the greatest river valley and natural obstacle in the region, the valley of the Seine, runs more or less at right angles to the borders of Normandy and formed the focus of the province and a link with Normandy's eastern neighbours, not a barrier between them. The hills and forests of Normandy's southern borders may at first sight appear to be a natural obstacle, and the forests skirting the duchy were indeed more extensive than today.²² According to Orderic Vitalis, the castle of Bréval (between Ivry and Mantes) lay 'in silvestra et deserta regione' in 1092, and the treasure-train of Geoffrey of Anjou was ambushed in the wood of Malèfre near Alençon in 1136; yet all trace of these woodlands has disappeared.²³ Nevertheless, the idea that there was a genuine 'forest frontier' by 1135 seems hard to maintain; even the great wooded ridge that extended from the county of Mortain to Perche, marked by high-founded fortresses such as Domfront and broken only by the valley of the Sarthe, was more likely to serve as a notional limit comparable to the rivers in the east of the province, rather than an insuperable natural barrier. Toponymic evidence from one of the more remote areas along the southern frontier, the Passais, shows that it was already relatively densely settled by 1000.²⁴ In the mid-thirteenth century herdsmen were accustomed to driving their beasts from Ambrières in northern Maine to pasture at Tanques, west of Argentan,

²⁰ For the toponymy of these regions, see Fossier 1968, i, 152–9; Louise 1992, i, 44–71, 76–9; Pichot 1995, 86–94.

²¹ Sahlins (1990) gives a weighty critique of the concept and significance of 'natural frontiers' in French history.

²² Deck (1929, 11–24) describes the great *défrichements* in the Forest of Eu between the late twelfth and the fourteenth centuries; see also Fossier 1968, i, 310–30; Chédeville 1973, 110–16, 142–7; Louise 1992, esp. i, 35–9, 84–95; ii, 75–88; Pichot 1995, 35–43, 72–109.

²³ Orderic, iv, 290; vi, 474. ²⁴ Louise 1992, i, 48 (map), 50.

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and we may suppose that this practice dated back deep into the region's history.²⁵

The frontier was of relatively little importance in some other ways. It is true that, in contrast to the lands to the east, there was no servitude in Normandy, a characteristic imputed at least in part to its Scandinavian inheritance;²⁶ Normandy also had its own system of land measurement which more or less halted along the borders.²⁷ Other economic factors point to the integration of the duchy into northern France, however. Norman coinage never had a monopoly in the province in the way that the penny sterling had in England: even after the money of Anjou became the dominant coinage in the second half of the twelfth century, the money of Le Mans continued to be used regularly for accounting purposes in the southern half of the duchy, while in the east, the coinages of Paris, Dreux and Beauvais were also all used regularly, a challenge to Angevin hegemony within the duke's own territory.²⁸

The Norman frontier represented no great divide in terms of dialect either. It is true that the Romance tongue of northern France categorised as 'Old French II' (c.1100–c.1350) was highly regionalised, and in the mid-thirteenth century Norman was regarded as one of the main dialects, with specific cultural connotations which were noted, for instance, by Roger Bacon.²⁹ It is also apparent that by the accession of Philip Augustus (1180), the spoken language of the Capetian court was regarded as in some ways superior to that of other provinces: 'My language is good, for I was born in *France*', Guernes de Pont-Sainte-Maxence assured his Canterbury audience in c.1173,³⁰ while the baron and poet Conon de Béthune

²⁵ QN, no. 468.

²⁶ Musset 1986, 339, and 1989, 317; Gouttebroze 1995, 413–18. For legal aspects of the Norman frontier, see below, chapter 4.

²⁷ For the close coincidence between ducal authority and the region where the acre was used, see Navel 1932, 152–66; Musset 1989, 317–18; Niermeyer, 13. For arpents, its 'French' equivalent, in Norman frontier regions, see ADOR, H 3630 (meadow at Essay, c. 1200); ADE, E 2657 (arable land at Marcilly-sur-Eure, 1231); Delisle 1851, 537 (woods, vineyards and meadows, chiefly in the Seine valley and Norman Vexin); cf. *ibid.* 536, for the use of the *jugus* and *jornalium* to measure arable land in three frontier zones (Eu, the southern Evrecin, and the lands of the count of Alençon).

²⁸ Dumas 1979 and 1986. Power (1994, 275–312) gives a much fuller consideration of this topic than has been possible in the present work.

²⁹ For 'Old French II', see Pope 1952, 9–10; for its main dialects, see *ibid.*, 486–505, and Einhorn 1974, 135–141. Roger Bacon's comments are reproduced in Brunot 1966, i, 310 and n.: 'Nam et idiomata variantur ejusdem linguae apud diversos, sicut patet de lingua gallicana quae apud Gallicos et Normannos et Picardos et Burgundos multiplici variatur idiomate. Et quo proprie dicitur in idiomate Picardorum horrescit apud Burgundos, imo apud Gallicos viciniore.' Cf. Lodge 1992, 78.

³⁰ *La vie de Saint Thomas le Martyr par Guernes de Pont-Sainte-Maxence*, ed. E. Walberg (Lund, 1922), line 6165; 'Mis languages est bons, car en France fui nez.' For his Francien dialect, see p. clxv. Cf. Brunot 1966, i, 329; Rickard 1974, 49.

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complained that he was mocked at the Capetian court on account of his Artesian dialect, 'for I was not brought up in Pontoise'.³¹ However, it is impossible to know what the distinguishing features of twelfth-century dialects were, where and when exactly they occurred, and how sharp the divide was. The very notion of a linguistic frontier was refuted by one of the leading experts in the study of Old French.³² Individual traits which have been discerned from extant texts do not necessarily follow political borders: one of the supposed indices of the divide between Francien (the dialect of the Ile-de-France) and other provincial dialects united northern Normandy, including Caen and Lisieux, with Picard dialects, but separated this part of the duchy from the southern districts of Normandy, Brittany, Maine, the Chartrain, and the Ile-de-France.³³

In any case, none of the provincial dialects used in Old French literature was 'pure'. It has been suggested that this reflected a prevailing desire to imitate the written *bon usage* of Francien,³⁴ but few 'Francien' texts survive before the mid-thirteenth century: most of the literature of this period is written in what are regarded as primarily Norman, Anglo-Norman, Champenois, Picard or Tourangeau dialects.³⁵ With such poor evidence, it is impossible to demonstrate that the Norman frontier had a linguistic significance. Much of the groundbreaking categorisation of Old French dialects in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries presumed that the triumph of the dialect of the Ile-de-France as a national language was as assured as the rise of the French monarchy.³⁶ The

³¹ *Les origines de la poésie lyrique d'oïl et les premiers trouvères: textes*, ed. I. M. Cluzel and L. Pressouyre (Paris, 1962), 56: 'La Roïne n'a pas fait ke cortoise/ Ki me reprist, ele et ses fieus, li Rois./ Encoir ne soit ma parole franchoise,/ Si la puet on bien entendre en franchois;/ Ne chil ne sont pas bien apris ne cortois,/ S'il m'ont repris se j'ai dit mos d'Artois,/ Car je ne fui pas norris a Pontoise.' Cf. Lodge 1992, 77. In the mid-thirteenth century, Philippe de Beaumanoir's English heroine in *Jehan et Blonde* spoke French, but 'you could tell from her speech that she was not born at Pontoise' (Rickard 1974, 50).

³² Pope 1934, 19–20; she did, however, concede the existence of a marked 'northern' dialect, of Walloon and Picard, which in some features incorporated northern Normandy (19–20, 500).

³³ Brunot 1966, i, 310, 321, 326, and Pope 1934, 487: *ca-* of vulgar Latin remained hard in northern Normandy and Picardy (e.g. *castel*), whereas it became soft in the southern French Vexin and Ile-de-France (and hence modern standard French), southern Normandy and the Loire region (e.g. *chastel*). The dividing line, the so-called 'ligne Joret', cut across Normandy from Caen through Lisieux, Bernay and Evreux to Mantes. The superbly detailed maps of linguistic forms compiled by Dees (1980 and 1987) from thirteenth-century charters and literary texts reveal many subtle variations in written French between Norman and neighbouring dialects (as well as many similarities), but the author's decision to treat Normandy as a single unit when compiling the maps necessarily exaggerates the significance of the duchy's borders.

³⁴ Brunot 1966, i, 328–31; Rickard 1974, i, 47, 50–1, 52–3; Delbouille 1962, 9–12.

³⁵ Brunot 1966, i, 327; Rickard 1974, 52.

³⁶ E.g. Brunot 1966, i, 330–1 (originally published in 1903): 'Il est désormais facile de voir qu'un jour ou l'autre il y aura en France une langue nationale et que ce sera celle de Paris et de ses environs.' Rickard (1974, 51–2) detects a wider linguistic awareness among authors which he calls the 'pre-dialectal unity of the *langue d'oïl*', but this view is refuted by Dees (1985 and 1987, vii–xvi).

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tendency of sociolinguistics to minimise traditional classification of dialects also greatly reduces the significance of regional difference.³⁷ Even the Norman–Breton border had no linguistic dimension, for the eastern parts of the duchy of Brittany were fully integrated into the northern French world in the Angevin era; the Breton language was largely confined to the western ends of the peninsula.³⁸

The chief significance of the Norman frontier was in terms of power. The borders of Normandy passed through a variety of districts, each with its own characteristics, and differing combinations of forests, rivers, hills and human habitation. To dwell close to the French king's fortresses must have been a very different experience from living in a remote corner of the hills east of Domfront. Between Verneuil and Neufmarché, the Norman border was normally a 'hot' frontier, subject to raiding and siege warfare with a depressing regularity. The reason was simple: Paris and Rouen, the chief cities of the two most powerful princes in western Europe, both lay within forty miles of the Epte, Eure and Avre, and no landowning noble could ignore that basic fact. Elsewhere, the Norman frontier was often far less strife-torn. The Breton frontier might sometimes be disturbed by localised violence, but after 1064 the only major reported conflicts occurred in 1173, 1196 and 1202–4. The border with Perche, ill defined and violent in the late eleventh century, probably remained at peace for much of the twelfth century but 'heated up' from 1150 onwards. What held these different regions together was their common place on the peripheries of the Norman principality. Their political communities, the aristocracy who dominated local affairs and who dealt with the Norman dukes and neighbouring princes, are the key to understanding the character and significance of the Norman frontier in the last century of ducal Normandy.³⁹

THE NORMAN FRONTIER: ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT

When Jean-François Lemarignier, Jean Yver and Lucien Musset sought to explain the precocious development of the Norman 'state' by comparison with other French principalities, the Norman frontier was an integral part of their theories.⁴⁰ As early as the eleventh century, they argued, the

³⁷ Cf. Lodge 1993, 71–4. ³⁸ Everard 2000, 7–16.

³⁹ Although Given (1990, 252–3, 259) and Reuter (2000, 85–6), amongst others, argue persuasively that aristocratic power cannot be understood without reference to the humbler sections of society, it has not been possible to give extensive attention here to the peasants and townspeople of the regions concerned.

⁴⁰ Lemarignier 1945, 9–33; Yver 1952b, 310–11 and 1969, 309–12; Musset 1962–3 and 1989. All three authors drew heavily upon Génestal (1927, 38–44); for critiques, see Tabuteau 1988, 223–6, 391–2.