



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY CIC

# PARIS SIEGE

THE GREAT VIKING SIEGE OF PARIS 885-886 AD

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# Siege of Paris

## Introduction

In the recent TV series Vikings, Ragnar Lothbrok's attack on Paris was a visual masterpiece in portraying a dramatic and brutal fight which was certainly entertaining, but what really happened? Was the film a true representation of what had occurred?

At the risk of being seen as a spoilsport, I firstly have to state that there is no verified evidential material that supports that he actually existed.

## The Gesta Danorum

The Gesta Danorum written by a Danish historian, Saxo Grammaticus, written in 1185, stated that one Ragnar, a King of Denmark, fought a battle against the Frankish King and Holy Roman Emperor, Charlemagne who lived between 768 and 814 AD.

Grammaticus went on to record that Ragnar eventually met his end at the hands of the King of Northumberland, Aelle, who ruled between 862 until 867 AD.

Now given that the siege of Paris began in 885 AD, some 18 years after Ragnar's death in Northumberland, when he was allegedly thrown into a pit of venomous snakes, it is clear that something doesn't add up. Given that the siege took place 71 years after Charlemagne's death, again casts serious doubts about Grammaticus capability in establishing accurate facts. Atypical of early medieval chronicles.

The Vikings had actually entered an undefended Paris in 845 AD having defeated a Frankish army at the battle of Charlevalle. Some sources suggested that Ragnar was the Viking leader during this event, but in any event, there was no siege and the Vikings entered the city unopposed. They entered Paris on Sunday the 29<sup>th</sup> of March where they burned down the monastery of St Germain-des-Près after looting it.

## Charles the Bald

The Frankish King, Charles the Bald, eventually brought the Vikings off with a payment of 7000lb of silver. The Vikings left the city on the 18<sup>th</sup> of April but looted churches, Towns and monasteries en-route back to the coast. However, when they embarked on their ships, an unidentified epidemic hit them and many of them died, including one Ragnar.

## Sons of Ragnar

Now if we look at Ragnar Lothbrok's sons, namely Ivar the Boneless, Bjorn Ironsides, Ubba, Sigurd snake-in-the-eye, Halfdan and Hvitserk, who, according to Viking legend, had killed King Aella in Battle in 867 AD, supposedly in response to the murder of their father, which was 21 years after one Ragnar's death from disease after the first attack on Paris.

As can be seen, the TV series has taken these events and adapted them for entertainment value but they don't reflect the actual facts. Was Ragnar Lothbrok therefore a real person? Well, I'll let the reader make up their own mind.

## Viking Attack

Frankish sources, do however, tell of a Viking attack in 855, which aimed to capture Paris. The leaders were said to be Bjorn Ironside and another Viking called Sigtrygg. They were initially defeated by Charles the Bald but the Frankish army then had to deal with an invading army led by his own brother, Louis the German. This allowed Bjorn Ironside to re-group and he forced an entry into Paris in 856 and looted the city.

*'The Saga of Ragnar Lodbrok, and The Tale of Ragnar's Sons'* are Icelandic sagas, written in the late 13<sup>th</sup> and early 14<sup>th</sup> century and these tales seem to be a mish-mash of events that did take place but the chronological order is clearly mixed up.

## Rollo

In the series, Ragnar's brother was Rollo. The real Rollo was the first Duke of Normandy, who ruled from 911 until 928 AD. His Norse name had been Hrolfr. Again, poetic licence in the TV series.

## 885

The most notorious attack on Paris was the one that began with the Vikings arriving in the Seine in 885. There is a contemporary account of what would happen written by Abbo Cernus who was a young monk and Deacon from the Abbey of St. Germain-des-Pres. He wrote in his chronicle, the *Bella Parisiacae Urbis*, the battle of the city of Paris, these words

"LET NO MAN SPEAK OF THIS FIGHT AS IF HE KNEW MORE". INDEED, NO MAN SO MAY SPEAK OF THESE EVENTS MORE TRULY THAN I, FOR I SAW EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENED WITH MY VERY OWN EYES".



Île de la Cité,



The attacks were relentless but during lulls in the fighting, the Vikings would bring captives down to the river banks where they would slaughter them in sight of the defenders.

The Vikings then sent fire ships, filled with burning pitch into the Grand Pont which caught fire, however, this bridge was made of stone and that night the garrison from Grand Chatelet sallied out and extinguished the fires. They also managed to destroy a number of the battering rams.

### **886 February**

On the 6<sup>th</sup> of February 886 part of the wooden bridge in the middle of the 'Petit Pont' had been destroyed by a massive flood which had left the garrison still holding out in the Petit Chatelet. The Vikings now intensified their attack on this tower, eventually setting it alight, the garrison retreated across what remained of the bridge but they could not risk trying to swim across the river. They had no alternative to surrender. Once they did, they were promptly butchered by the Vikings.

With the defenders of Paris now trapped in the city, Sigfrid took part of the army and attacked and looted Le Mans and Troyes. He ravaged the countryside causing the populations to flee, killing any he caught.

The Franks launched a sortie against the main Viking camp but this was repelled and the Franks retreated back into the city. They would have to hope that a relieving army would come to their aid.

### **886 March**

In March a Frankish relief force under the command of Count Heinrich of Fulda arrived but he realised that his force was too weak to try and lift the siege and he duly retreated.

One of the Viking leaders, Sigfrid was then brought off and he agreed to take his followers and leave Francia. Sinric, however remained and his force still outnumbered the defenders of the city. The siege continued into the summer and the defenders were getting more desperate. The city was now suffering from famine and disease. Bishop Gauzlin died and Count Odo decided that he had to get reinforcements. Somehow, he managed to get out of the city and was able to gather some troops. He fought his way through the Viking army and managed to get his reinforcements into the city. During this episode, the Viking leader, Sinric was killed, however the siege would continue. It is not known who the new leader of the Viking army was.

### **886 August**

In August 886, the 18<sup>th</sup>, Count Heinrich of Fulda, returned at the head of the vanguard of the Frankish Imperial army. It was ambushed by the Vikings and Heinrich was killed.

On the 28<sup>th</sup> of August 886 the Emperor Charles the Fat arrived with the Imperial army. The Viking army on the right bank of the river Seine were routed. The siege was broken, but a considerable number of Vikings had survived and presented a viable threat. Charles paid them off and employed them as mercenaries, using them against other rebellious subjects within the Frankish Empire.

Such was the nature of early medieval warfare.

### **887**

In 887, Charles the Fat was deposed as Emperor. He died the following year. His successor, Charles the Simple would see the Carolingian Empire disintegrate and the nations of France, Germany and Italy emerge.

## 888

Odo, the Commander of the Paris Garrison during the siege would become King of France in 888.

The Northmen continued to raid and plunder the Western European main lands but Odo inflicted a huge defeat on them at the battle of the Montfaucon forest in 888. During the battle a Viking axeman swung his axe at Odo taking off the top of the Royal helmet.

The war went on and Odo continued to fight various Viking armies. He died in 898 and was succeeded by Charles the Simple, who had previously been the last Carolingian Emperor.

## 911 AD

In 911 AD, a Viking warrior brought a warband to France. Within time he became the Duke of Normandy. His name was Rollo. He is also known as Hrolf Granger which meant Rollo the walker. He was so named because legend has it that he was of such a huge stature that no horse could carry him.

There are some who claimed that he had been at the 885, siege of Paris but that is disputed, however, whatever the truth of the matter, Rollo was the founder of the dynasty of the Normans.