

All the Bandits of Normandy

Wealth, Vikings, and the Economic Rationality of Rollo's Career

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Abstract

Both economic modelling and historical research have much to offer each other. An interdisciplinary approach combining these two could help explore whether economic rationality and the strong desire for wealth have driven Viking expansion. In this context, it is relevant to look at the work by economist Mancur Olson and his classic two-bandit model. Here, the two extremes of *roving* and *stationary* bandits drive the wealth rationale from raiding to ruling (Olson 1993). However, this two-bandit model may be expanded to include more bandit types. As argued by Svendsen (2020), four main bandit types evolved in Viking Age England. Thus, the contribution of this paper is to apply this four-bandit model to the historical case of Viking Age Normandy and the economic rationality of Rollo's career around year 900 AD.

The first step is the Olsonian *roving bandit*, who executed Viking hit-and-run attacks and raided Paris and its neighborhood in particular. The second step is the *gafol bandit*; *gafol* is payment for leaving Paris in particular. The third step is the *heregeld bandit*; *heregeld* is a tax to support an army for hire to protect a given area—in this case first and foremost Paris against other Viking raiders. The fourth step is the Olsonian *stationary bandit*, i.e., Rollo as the strongest military leader among the Vikings eventually ends up as the ruler of Normandy after following the previous three steps with extraordinary energy.

As the local French rulers were unable to monopolize violence and defend their realms against Rollo and his men, the demand for local protection grew stronger. As Rollo's time horizon grew from this demand, so did the accumulated wealth of more formal taxation in the judicial area of Normandy. His rulership and monopolization of violence arguably created win-win situations between him and the local French population. As Rollo provides protection in return for taxes, both citizens and the ruler are better off. In contrast, without rule of law and security provision, production will be disturbed. Therefore, it is crucial to prevent arbitrary plunder and unpredictability in the economy. As demonstrated in game theory, a better economic outcome than anarchy must always exist, namely when a new ruler like Rollo establishes and enforces *the rule of law*.

Applying such economic modelling to the Viking Age is often complicated by the significant absence of written evidence concerning the nature of plunder, taxation, and the motivations of the actors involved. The Vikings simply did not keep written records as did most other European countries at that time. However, France is a relevant case as written records exist; especially Dudo and his *Historia Normannorum* (written between 996 and 1015 AD). Thus, the main research question is: *Can the four-bandit model by Svendsen (2020) help explain the economic rationality of Rollo's career in Normandy?* The historical evidence seems to suggest that the answer is yes. However, this result should be tested even further in future research.