

## Brittany

*Brittany* is the name of the north-western peninsula of modern France.

The people known as Bretons came from what is now southwestern England on the island of Britain in a series of migrations from the fourth to ninth centuries, most heavily between ca. 450 – ca. 600, moving into an area of Gaul inhabited by Latin-speaking Romanized Gauls. They brought with them their Celtic language and culture, which continue today in Lower Brittany. In Upper (eastern) Brittany, Latin eventually evolved into Gallo, a dialect of the French *langue d'oïl*. This has always been the language of the current capital city of Rennes and the historic capital of Nantes, Brittany's largest city.

Brittany consists of the modern départements of Côtes-du-Nord, Finistère, Ille-et-Vilaine, Morbihan, and Loire-Atlantique. The first four départements are in the région of Bretagne (Brittany), and Loire-Atlantique is part of the Pays de la Loire. More often, Breton language and culture are divided into the four traditional episcopal regions, Tregor, Cornwall, Leon, and Vannes. In Breton these places are Treger, Kerne(v), Leon, and Gwened; in French they are Tréguier or Trégor, Cornouaille(s), Léon, and Vannes.

There is probably some cultural continuity between the Armorican Gauls and Breton immigrants; more extreme claims, for instance that the Vannetais dialect of Breton is a lineal descendant of Gaulish, do not hold up to scrutiny. There have been many modern attempts to reclaim the ancient past. The départements, the main political divisions of France, were created in 1789, and in Brittany they follow the borders of the Gaulish tribes, or the best eighteenth-century approximation of them, rather than the diocesan borders which had been the main divisions up until that point. The tribes themselves have left their mark on Breton place-names. Both Rennes (Breton *Roazhon*) and Redon take their name

from the *Redones*; Vannes (Breton *Gwened*) is from the *Veneti*, who also left their name to Gwynedd in North Wales. The *Namnetes* are recalled in Nantes (Breton *Naoned*), and the *Cruriosolites* in Corseul.

Modern Brittany's geographical borders date to the 840s, when a Breton count named Nominoë took advantage of political instability in the Frankish empire and his own region to take power in Brittany. After a series of revolts in the late eighth and early ninth centuries, Louis I (the Pious) appointed Nominoë *missus*, a royal ambassador with limited political powers in the name of the king, in an effort to bring the region under control. Nominoë seized power, instead, and fought for an independent Brittany. His heir Erispoë negotiated a treaty with the Franks after the decisive battle of Ballon in 845, making Brittany a *regnum* 'kingdom' within the Frankish empire. Paleographic evidence from Breton Latin manuscripts confirms Brittany's dual links with Frankish and Insular Celtic cultures. The borders of Brittany continued to expand under Nominoë's son Erispoë, and achieved their greatest extent under Erispoë's murderer and heir, his cousin Salomon.

Internal divisions and Viking incursions prevented Brittany from maintaining this union, though the border between Brittany and France has remained relatively stable ever since. The Vikings had established their own kingdom in Normandy under Rollo in 911, and a Viking kingdom was established in Brittany in 914. Brittany was reconquered in 937 by Alan Varveg (French, *Alain Barbetorte*), but Brittany never regained its status as a kingdom. Instead, the province became a duchy divided into various counties.

The line between French and Breton speech has been receding westward since the ninth century, and the expression of Breton culture has been hindered by the powerful

influence of the Frankish court. Brittany was    century.  
finally annexed to France in the sixteenth

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