The History of Brittany from the 13th to the 21st Century

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Introduction

Attempting to present eight centuries of Breton history in one article is of course a daunting task and my aim here is simply to provide an outline highlighting the major trends and events that will enable the reader seeking a historical introduction to better understand Breton history and culture. Covering such a long span of time necessarily implies selecting only the most salient historical events and aspects of Brittany's cultural development. Readers seeking to improve their knowledge of Breton history will find useful references in the bibliography.

Until the Revolution of 1789, there were nine Catholic dioceses in Brittany and Breton history inscribed itself within the administrative framework of the Church. In three of these Breton dioceses (Léon, Trégor, Cornouaille) Breton was by far the dominant language; in the dioceses of Saint-Brieuc and Vannes people spoke Breton and French or Gallo (a romance language with Latin roots), while in those of Nantes and Dol, Gallo or French were spoken, with Breton used in an enclave situated in the area around Guérande. The diocese of Dol was particular in that its possessions were disseminated throughout Brittany and as far as the Norman border. This reflects the donations it had received from the Breton aristocracy.

The use of the Breton language varied through the centuries, with the Breton-speaking areas receding westwards as time went by. The impact that this had on Breton history should not be underestimated: Brittany shares this linguistic plurality with other regions or states like Belgium, Switzerland or Canada and the Celtic countries. The linguistic status of Breton is considerably different though since it is not officially recognised by the French government. This should be kept in mind when considering the nature of Breton cultural and political identities until the present day.

1. The late Middle Ages

At the end of the Middle Ages, two dynasties ruled ducal Brittany. The first was the Dreux, established by the King of France after the decline of the Plantagenêts in the late 12th century. The second was that of the Montforts. The Dukes of the House of Dreux (1213–1341) were fortunate to have reigned during a very propitious period with favorable climate conditions, no catastrophic epidemics and few conflicts or

wars. At that time, Brittany saw its economy develop on a large scale while the embryonic Breton state was constituting itself around the figure of the duke, with the emergence of such government bodies as the Council, the Parliament, the Court of Accounts, the *Hôtel* (attendants in charge of feeding and accommodating the duke and his family) (Coativy 2019), and, very importantly, the representative Parliament, a third of which was composed of members of the clergy, a third of noblemen and another third of city and town representatives (known as the three estates).[1] The Duchy of Brittany reinforced its powerful states by building fortresses along the Breton Marches and engaging in a thriving maritime trade with Spain, England, Flanders and the Baltic states (Touchard 1967).

Since the Duke John III of Brittany (who belonged to the Dreux dynasty) had died intestate and without a male heir, his death plunged the Duchy into twenty-three years of conflict, known as the War of Succession which lasted from 1341 to 1364 (Cassard 2006). Two candidates fought bitterly for the throne: Charles of Blois, who had the support of the King of France,[2] and John of Montfort, followed by his son, supported by the King of England. Charles of Blois was married to Joan of Penthièvre, the Penthièvre family being the main rival of the Montfort dynasty. John of Montfort was the half-brother of the deceased Duke of Brittany, John III. Not only was Brittany in the grip of a civil war, it was also embroiled in the wider European conflict of the Hundred Years War and found itself completely overrun by British and French armies, with disastrous effects on every level — political, economic, social and cultural.

In addition to continous wars, the outbreak of the Black Death in 1348 killed between a third and half of the Breton population, just as elsewhere in Europe. The Bretons may well have believed at that period that the end of the world was nigh, announced by the four horsemen of the Apocalypse that so terrified them: Pestilence, War, Famine and Injustice. There would be recurring outbreaks of plague every ten or twelve years until the end of the Middle Ages. It is believed that it was during that period that the figure of the *Ankou* that symbolises death in the Breton tradition emerged. The word *Ankou* is related to *anken*, 'anguish' (Giraudon 2012), and is etymologically related to the Welsh word *angau* ('death') (*Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru*). The *Ankou* is represented as a skeleton holding an arrow in his hand (rather than a scythe) and as Death's main servant or helper. He became a familiar figure in Breton folklore, where hearing the *Ankou*'s cart's creaking was a portent of death.

The ossuary of La Roche-Maurice which dates from the mid-17th century bears the sculpted figure of the *Ankou* with the accompanying inscription *Je vous tue tous* ('I kill each and everyone of you') written in French, the language spoken by the

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1 These three categories (clergy, noblemen and people) were collectively referred to as "*les Etats*".

2 King Philip VI, who was Charles de Blois'uncle.

priests and the elite. This gloomy figure is reminiscent of the *danses macabres* that emerged during this period and can be seen on the walls of the chapels of Kermaria an Iskuit, at Plouha, in the department of Côte d'Armor, and of Kernascléden (in the department of Morbihan).

After defeating the rival Penthièvre dynasty at the Battle of Auray on 29 September 1364, the Montforts ruled over Brittany until 1491, making the most of the fact that the King of France was being weakened by the war against the English. The Dukes of Brittany could rely on the structures of government that had been established in the past: the Parliament to administer justice, the Court of Accounts to control the finances of the prince's subjects and the representative Parliament where matters of taxation were decided. They could also count on several hundred loyal and efficient *serviteurs* whose role was to collect taxes, supervise the ducal estate, administer justice and defend the region amongst other duties. Thanks to this governmental system, the Duchy was effectively controlled and managed. This ushered in another period of prosperity for Brittany, which at the time was one of the wealthiest regions in Western Europe.

The Dukes of Brittany developed an ideal of sovereignty in order to justify their independence (Kerhervé 1986). They declared themselves 'Dukes of Brittany by the Grace of God' (*Dei gratia Britonudux*). They claimed the right to hear appeals. They minted their own gold and silver currency. They sent diplomats and ambassadors to secure trade agreements with Portugal, England, Flanders, Denmark and other countries or regions. This is symbolically represented in an illumination in the *Book of Hours* of Peter II (1450–1457). In this representation one sees the Duke wearing the royal regalia (red coat lined with ermine fur). Note the hand of God is blessing not only the crown, but also the forehead of the Duke whose feet do not touch the ground. Also, the canopy above his head further symbolises his regal authority.

The royal representation asserted the Duke's authority in the face of the political threat from France. Now that the French king Charles VII had won the war against England, he was turning his attention conquering neighbouring duchies. Other means were used to put the message of Breton sovereignty across, such as the minting of gold coins, for example, which was normally the prerogative of the king. Only the aristocracy and merchant class were able to read and understand the message engraved on the gold florin of Francis II (1458–1488). The inscription read *FRANCISCVS DEI GRACIA BRITONV DVX* ('Francis Duke of the Bretons by the Grace of God') and *DEVS IN ADIVTORIVM MEUM INTENDE* ('Hear me, God, in my sorrow'), an extract from a psalm that continues with the phrase 'and deliver me from all my enemies' (Psalm 59) (fig. 1). The depiction of the Duke wearing the crown and a suit of arms, with the sword in hand, sent a clear message to promote his power and authority in Brittany and abroad (Coativy 2007),

Fig. 1. Gold florin of Francis II (1458–1488) (private collection)

The construction of a series of castles served as symbols of his power. These fortresses also housed the Duke, his family, and a large retinue of approximately 400 servants. This was the case of La Tourneuve in Nantes, which had become the castle of the Dukes after it was rebuilt in the 15th century, as well as the castle of Suscinio in the area of Vannes (Salamagne, Kerhervé, and Danet 2012). This castle is still impressive today even though only a third of the original living area of the ducal period has survived. The prince would not remain in one place however, but would always be travelling around his duchy in order to be seen, manage his lands, administer justice and consume the surplus collected from the farming tenantry.

Contrary to what is commonly believed, medieval Brittany was not an enclave cut off from the rest of the world — quite the opposite. Bretons sailed on the Atlantic, the Channel, the North Sea and as far as the Baltic Sea; likewise, merchant vessels from other countries would come to Guérande to load up on salt. While travelling to Nantes, the German knight Arnold von Harff (Guyonvarch 1984) compiled a glossary of 39 Breton words and 7 phrases showing Breton was still spoken in the area of Héric in 1499. Cartographers worked at Le Conquet, west of Brest (they sometimes represented this city as the centre of the world for their maps). As well as salt, Brittany exported cereals and cloth.

To this day, one can still witness rather peculiar Catholic rites in Brittany which have their roots in pre-Christian times. These practices were tolerated by the clergy, probably to avoid unduly upsetting the faithful. An example of such a belief concerns the oratory built on the beach at Ploumanac'h (Côtes d'Armor) which is dedicated to Saint Guirec (Gevroc in late Brythonic, d. 547), a British saint about whom hardly anything is known (see fig. 2). According to tradition, he was a

disciple of Saint Tugdual (Bishop of Tréguir) and one of the seven founders of Brythonic Brittany. Up until fairly recently, young girls would stick a pin into the nose of Guirec's statue to find out if they would be married before the year was out. To the right of the oratory, at its foot, one can see an Iron Age stele that points to a very long-standing religious practice. The same reasons lie behind the profusion of Christianised Iron Age steles, and, to a lesser extent, Christianised standing stones (*menhir*) dotted around Brittany. There are many examples of this in Breton-speaking Brittany, which are often linked to a fertility cult, like the Christianised *menhir* of Saint-Uzec in Pleumeur-Bodou (Côtes d'Armor) on which the instruments of the Passion of Christ were scuplted and a cross engraved at its top.

Fig. 2. The Saint Guirec Oratory at Trébeurden

At the end of the Middle Ages, the political situation changed: now wanting to rid himself of the regional dukes, the King of France set about reducing their power, and Brittany was one of the last principalities on his list. In 1487, King Charles VIII (1483–1498) went to war against Francis II. The conflict lasted four years. On July 28, 1488, the Breton army was defeated at Saint-Aubin-du-Cormier, near Rennes, yet Brittany continued to resist for another three years. Francis II died one month after the defeat, leaving his eleven-year old daughter Anne to fight on as best she could. Duchess Anne who ruled over an independent Brittany from 1488 to 1491, was forced to marry Charles VIII in December 1491 (Le Page 2015: 7–12).

Several works of art commemorate this union; if some give a romantic view of the event, others show it in a more realistic light. In the 1920s, the Breton artist Jeanne Malivel produced illustrations for the book of another female author, C. Danio (1922: 109; *nom de plume* of Jeanne Coroller, a nationalist activist), among which one finds a remarkably sober engraving depicting the battle of Saint-Aubin-du-Cormier (see fig. 3). Jeanne Malivel belonged to the *Seiz Breur* ('the seven brothers') artistic movement. The tapestry depicting the marriage of Anne de Bretagne adorned the Parliament of Brittany in Rennes, until it was destroyed in a fire that ravaged the building in 1994, was typical of French iconograpjy which still tends to record the marriage of the Breton duchess with the French king as a romantic event. This is very far removed from the reality of the six-month siege of Rennes and the final conquest of Brittany.

Fig. 3 *La bataille de Saint-Aubin-du-Cormier* (The Battle of Saint-Aubin-du-Cormier), by Jeanne Malivel

2. The integration of Brittany into France

From then on, Brittany was gradually integrated into France. Charles VIII would modify or dismantle the institutions of the Duchy and replace the supporters of the Montforts with his own men. Confined in the Val de Loire, far away from Brittany, Anne was left powerless until Charles VIII accidentally died at the castle of Amboise.

She took advantage of the death of her husband in 1498 to restore the judicial system, Parliament, Assemblies and Court of Accounts and returned to Brittany.

In 1499, Anne married Louis XII. This was a successful and loving union — a rare thing at a time when marriages were arranged and not a matter of choice. Anne was given the power to her Duchy, yet not to the point that she could prevent it from being slowly but surely brought ever closer to France. The death of the Duchess-Queen in 1514, one year before that of her husband and without a male heir, opened the way for the full integration of Brittany into France, which would be completed with the Edict of Union of 1532.[3]

At the top level of Louis XII and Anne's tomb, the couple are depicted in a regal and glorious pose, as they were in life, while at the lower level they are shown as naked decaying corpses, characteristic of the *culture macabre* as exemplified in the funerary art of the late Middle Ages. The queen requested that her heart be deposited at the Carmes convent in Nantes, where her parents were buried. The gold, heart-shaped reliquary that holds this highly symbolic royal relic can still be seen at the Musée Dobrée in Nantes. It narrowly escaped being melted down during the French Revolution (Minois 1999).

As a consequence of the Edict of Union of 1532, Brittany became a French province. However, it retained a number of privileges: the Bretons did not pay tax on salt, Breton soldiers could not be sent to fight outside of Brittany and the Bretons were, on the whole, less heavily taxed than the rest of the realm. The province also retained elements of representation such as three estates (clergy, nobility and town representatives), discussed taxes and defended the rights and freedom of Brittany. Those who sat in these council meetings received tokens that they could keep or change into money (the tokens received nowadays by members of the board of directors of large companies are a legacy of this). In coin form, they bore the representation of an ermine or the portrait of the king on one side and the coat of arms of Brittany on the other, associated with the coat of arms of the French king. This period was a prosperous one. Lasting until the mid 17th century, it was marked by the construction of many outstanding religious and secular buildings. One of the most remarkable of these is the parish enclosure of Saint-Thégonnec. Maritime trade continued to be very active and the war against France had barely slowed down the strong growth of the previous period. Things would change, however, with the appointment of Jean-Baptiste Colbert (Controller-General of Finances under

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3   The Edict of Union was the act which enabled the King to make the link between France and the Duchy of Brittany a permanent one. Previous attempts had failed but several factors explain why this one was successful: after forty-one years of turmoil, the Breton population was not only weary but had also largely forgotten the period of Breton independence. Furthermore, the French crown had taken care to rule Brittany with as gentle a hand as possible in order to ensure a smooth transition.

Louis XIV) who banned the exports on which the region's economy depended. This created serious social tensions. The town of Locronan, which had enjoyed great wealth thanks to the export of linen and sails, suffered terribly during this period.[4]

In 1675, the Bretons rose up against the monarphy and excessive taxation which had caused their ruin. Known as the *Bonnet Rouge* ('red cap') revolt, it was eventually put down but left a strong mark in the collective memory. During the turbulent gilets jaunes ('yellow vests') protests of 2018, frequent mention was made to the 1675 revolt (Aubert 2019: 179–198).

Other sources of prosperity could be mentioned, particularly the argentiferous lead mines of Huelgoat and Poullaouën. By the 18th century, thousands of miners had come to depend on them for a living. This mining tradition has practically fallen into oblivion today.

Despite the restrictions introduced by Colbert, several ports remained very active during this period. First among these was the military port of Brest, which played a central role in the wars against the English as well as in the American War of Independence. The second port, Lorient, was essential for the trade with India, China and America. Nantes, the third port, owed its considerable wealth to the triangular trade, that is, slaves taken from Africa to be sold in the French Antilles where colonial products like sugar, tea and coffee were loaded to be sold in Europe. Nantes, but also Saint-Malo, Morlaix and Brest all profited greatly from this triangular trade (Le Bouëdec and Haudrère 2011: 77–91).

3. A region bypassed by the industrial revolution

The Revolution brought the royal period to a brutal end, however, and hastened the political, social and cultural transformation of France. Brittany was torn between the revolutionaries and the monarchists. The former were referred to as the *Bleus* and were active primarily in urban areas, and in a few rural regions like Tregor. The latter, nick-named the *Chouans* or *Blancs*, supported the Catholic Church and the monarchy. These were particularly strong in the Léon and Vannes areas. The war with England and the English naval blockade further weakened maritime trade and, while France was swept along by the Industrial Revolution, Brittany was left behind. The Counter-Revolution and the anti-revolutionary revolts of the *Chouans* were savagely put down.

The brutal period of repression known as the Reign of Terror followed from 1793 to 1794. Jean-Baptiste Carrier, a member of the National Convention, was sent to Brittany following the defeat of anti-Republican army and subsequent imprisonment of 10,000 of *Chouans* in Nantes. Carrier ordered the overflowing prisons be

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4 Ironically, this preserved the old buildings that make the town's reputation today; indeed the inhabitants could no longer afford to knock them down and build new ones, so they were spared.

emptied of their occupants and had thousands of them (along with political prisoners, priests and civilians) drowned in the Loire River. During the worst of the nationwide period of terror, the mass drownings were a horrific but terribly effective method to eliminate political opponents. Eventually, Carrier was personally guillotined at the end of 1794 after the fall of Robespierre with the establishment of the Consulate (1799–1804) and the Empire (1804–1815). The period left longstanding legacy: until very recently, regions of Brittany which traditionally vote left or right, still coincide with the pro-Revolution or *Chouan* areas of the late 18th century. Certain formely pro-royalist regions, such as the Léon, remain more right-wing to this day while other regions of Brittany, such as the Trégor, remain more to the left. With time, these characteristics have tended to fade even if locally the memory of those traumatic events has not.

In the 19th century, large numbers of workers flocked to Nantes, Lorient and Brest, where they were employed in the ship-building and railway industries. Despite this, the rest of Brittany still lagged behind. The only form of industry that developed was fish-processing industry, which largely depended on the female labour force, located in South Finistère ports. Port towns such as Douarnenez still retain a strong Communist tradition. Inland Brittany or *Argoat*[5] however, remained very much rural, with the population depending directly or indirectly on agriculture. The *Argoat* was largely unaffected by the industrial revolution, with the consequence that it remained economically underdeveloped—yet this enabled the area to become a 'repository' for the Breton language and a form of an indigenous culture which was quickly disappearing in other parts of Brittany.

Pioneering artists who would later form the *École de Pont-Aven* (which emerged *circa* 1886), Paul Sérusier and Paul Gauguin being the most famous, were drawn to this 'wild land'. They expected to find a preserved state of primitivity there. Gauguin came to Brittany before moving on to the 'even wilder' Pacific (Cariou 2015: 256). These artists stayed in Pont-Aven but also further down the coast, in Concarneau, where they could find inexpensive lodgings. At the time, Brittany had a negative image, which was epitomised by Bécassine, the cartoon character of a young Breton maid who left her village to find work in Paris. Because of her hazy understanding of French, her Parisian employers look down on her, assuming she is ignorant.[6] In reality, she is honest, forthright and full of common sense. In the 20th century, the figure of Bécassine would become the *bête noire* of the Breton nationalists and regionalists.

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5 *Argoat* ('the hinterland') in Breton refers to the inland and wooded areas (*coat* meaning 'forest'), by opposition to *Armor*, the coastal part of Brittany.

6 Only 10% of the population of Western Brittany spoke French and these lived only in urban centres (Broudic 1999).

Yet for all that, Brittany was not just a remote and underdeveloped province: Breton mariners sailed the world's seas, taking part in the colonial venture or in the cod-fishing expeditions off the coast of Newfoundland. There were two facets to Brittany, and an unfortunate tendency for outsiders to only see the more stereotypical one. In the mid-19th century, thanks to the railway, Brittany was becoming more accessible, opening itself to tourism thus creating new econimic opportunities. Posters aimed at drawing tourists to Brittany still largely relied on clichés (see fig. 5). One cannot fail to note the stark contrast between the fair-skinned lady tourist dressed in the latest fashion and a shadowy native of Western Brittany wearing the traditional costume (*Bragou Vraz)*[7] pointing to the Mont-Saint-Michel (which is actually in Normandy). Bretons who could not find employment in their region, meanwhile, were leaving the region in droves for Paris, where they would step off the train and great cultural melting-pot of the city.

Fig. 4. *Excursions en Normandie & Bretagne* poster promoting excursions to Normandy and Brittany for the Chemins de fer de l'Ouest (French Western Railway) (Musée départemental breton, Quimper)

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7 Large breeches typical of the male Breton dress, but also worn by the *Chouans*.

During the First World War, as an essentially rural and 'backward' region, Brittany was callued upon to provide large numbers of infantry which were used as cannon fodder in the most brutal battles of the war. The names of the dead listed on the war memorials of each parish are disproprotionately high by comparison with their small populations. The death toll of 150,000 is one of the highest casualty rates for the whole of France.

Like the rest of Europe, the region was left to cope with the trauma of war and get back to normal as best as it could. Nonetheless, this human disaster gave rise to a major artistic revival in the shape of the *Seiz Breur* movement mentioned previously, the seven members of which decided to steer clear of the folklore style that characterised the pre-war period and instead modernise art whilst at the same time retaining a strong regional identity. The members of the *Seiz Breur*[8] explored various artforms: painting, sculpture, graphics, design, architecture, ceramics (Le Couédic 2007: 8–31), before the movement, tainted by the extremist involvements of some of the Breton activists, was disbanded in 1947.

Indeed, the successful war for Irish independence (1921–1922) spawned the Breton regionalist movement which, in the interwar period, developed into a nationalist movement. The violence of the First World War, the exacerbation of political doctrines and the political movements that emerged in Germany and Italy partly explain the phenomenon embodied by the Breton National Party (PNB). Ahough relatively few in number, they were active and campaigned for the independence of Brittany. The minutes of the party meetings leave no doubts that they were inspired by Nazi doctrine.

The movement nonetheless attracted many personalities, among them the aforementioned Breton historian Danio. During the Second World War, the Breton National Party would actively collaborate with the Nazi party, but some members then took their distance. For example, Danio pulled out of the movement after 1940 and René-Yves Creston joined the Resistance.[9] Others like Raymond Delaporte and Célestin Lainé, on the contrary, remained close allies of the Nazis, with one simple aim: to play the German card against the French government, as the Irish Nationalists had done in the First World War. While the Germans did exacerbate the existing frictions, they did not give the PNB what it had hoped for: political independence from France (Carney 2019: 399–401). As a result of the actions of the collaborators, the Breton cultural movement had a very negative image in the minds of the Breton people for over 15 years after the war.

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8 The seven members included Jeanne Malivel, Joseph Savina, Xavier de Langlais, Pierre Péron, René-Yves Creston, Jorj Robin and Suzanne Candré.

9 He was part of the Musée de l'Homme network (see Fanch Postic's article in this volume).

4. Moving towards modernity

After the Liberation of France in 1945, Brittany lay in ruins (Brest, Lorient and Saint-Nazaire had been virtually razed to the ground in the bombing raids) and the Breton culture was tainted by the actions of its Nazi supporters. The immediate post-war task was to reconstruct Brittany at all levels. Brittany was rebuilt, but its language and culture were swept aside, apart from the more harmless folklore aspects. Despite these setbacks, the economy recovered, with a diversification of newly developing industries such as the emergence of a communication (and later electronics) pole of specialisation on the outskirts of Lannion, a city located on the north-western coast. Simultaneously agriculture was undergoing a radical upheaval, with the use of new tools, technology and equipment as well as the mechanisation of farming. This led to the rapid expansion of the agricultural sector. A very dynamic agricultural and food production industry soon developed in Brittany, with Breton entrepreneurs selling the products of intensive farming (livestock especially) in France, Europe and the rest of the world. New universities were opened in Brest and Lorient, in addition to the pre-existing ones in Rennes and Nantes. The change was radical and Brittany was not only a tourist attraction but began drawing attention internationally.

A consequence of this economic and intellectual development was also the spectacular revival of Breton culture in the seventies. Much like the *Seiz Breur* movement had done before them, artists such as Alan Stivell, Gilles Servat and Glenmor, who sang in the Breton language, forcefully rejected the quaint and stereotypical tradition of older French-language song-writers, particularly Théodore Botrel[10] (1868–1925). Likewise, the novel forms of writing, poetry and music relegated the comic *cliché* of Bécassine to an inglorious past.

Fig. 5. Sticker promoting the Diwan network of Breton-medium schools

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10   The work of Theodore Botrel gives a vision of a picturesque Brittany but relies heavily on *clichés*. As popular as they had been with non-Bretons, Botrel's songs and writing portray Brittany and its inhabitants as backward.

The negative imageof the Breton language gradually changed into a positive one. In 1977, *Diwan* ('to sprout' in Breton, see fig. 5), the first total-immersion school, opened in Lampaul-Ploudalmézeau in the north-west, fostering a new generation of speakers who admittedly were not native but nonetheless saved the language from oblivion. Indeed, previous to this, Breton had been dismissed as a debased dialect, not a proper language. Furthermore, its reputation had been tarnished by its association in the popular mind with a minority of pro-Nazi nationalists. The cultural and economic regeneration of Brittany is still under way, as can be seen by Brittany's comparatively low unemployment figures and its increasing attractivity and the fact that more people want to settle in Brittany. This is a trend that started before the recent pandemic and continues to the present day.

As stated in the introduction, synthetising 800 years of history is not an easy task. Hopefully this summary will have given the reader a better sense of the most salient periods of Breton history which are part and parcel of Brittany's rich heritage. It is this that draws so many visitors to the country. Those interested in discovering more about Brittany will find a wealth of books on the subject—but unfortunately still too often in French only.

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