

THE MIDDLE AGES

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1-THE NORMAN CONQUEST

In 1066 the Battle of Hastings took place . It was the most famous date and the most famous battle in English history. "The year that William Duke of Normandy crossed the channel and king Harold got an arrow in his eye." The English sometimes need to be reminded that William conquered only England: The Battle of Hastings didn't put him on the throne of Scotland or Ireland or Wales. But if the people of Scotland or Ireland or Wales thought that what happened at Hastings was just an English affair, they were in for a very nasty shock. The Norman Conquest changed everything, for everyone.

Saxon England didn't have any firm rules about who should be king. Basically, when the old king died, the Crown passed to whoever could (a) show that they had some sort of blood claim, and (b) grab the crown before anyone else got it.

By the time Edward the Confessor died on 5 January 1066 childless, the King's council—the Witan, a sort of Saxon Supreme Court, chose Harold Godwinson as his successor. Harold was the man on the spot ; he had already shown his bravery and ability. Though he had no royal blood, he seemed suitable for the throne of England. Moreover, Harold said that Edward's dying wish had been that he, Harold, should have the crown (there were no actual witnesses to this event, but the claim was good enough for the witan. Before he died, Edward had brought many Normans to his English court from France. These Normans were not liked by the more powerful Saxon nobles, particularly by the Godwinsons.

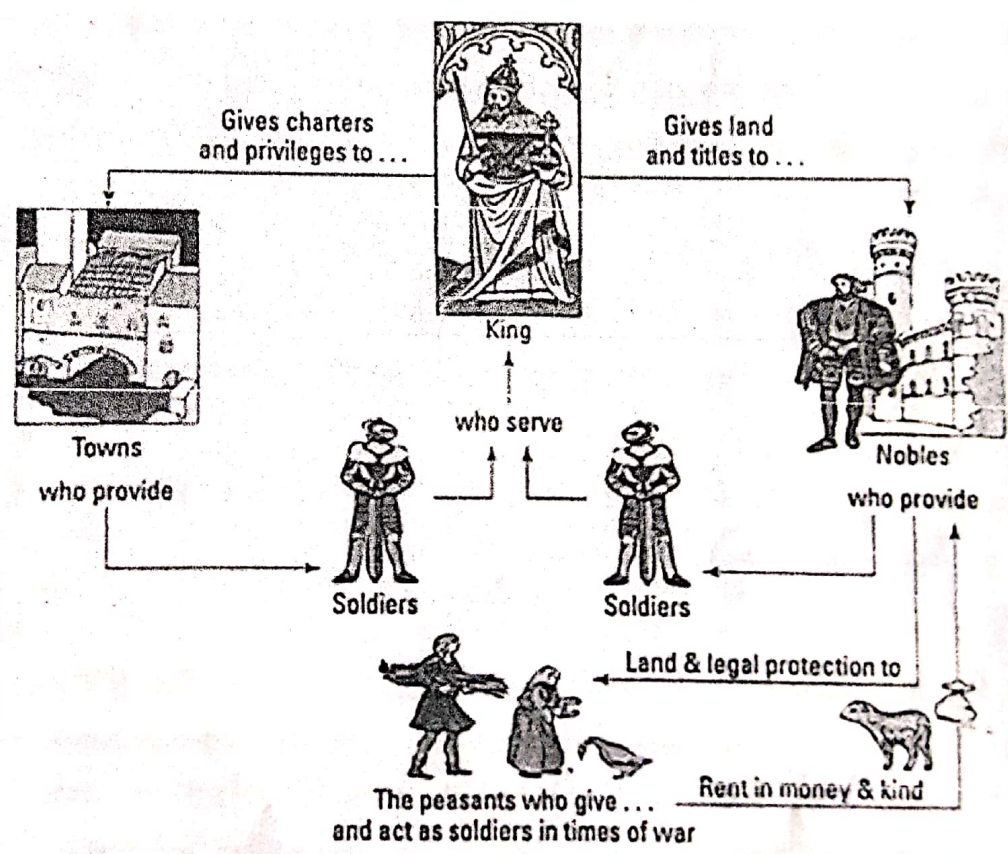
Duke William of Normandy claimed the right to the English throne for two reasons. First, he said that King Edward had promised it to him. Second, he said that Harold had promised him not to take the throne for himself. The story goes back to 1064, two years before he was crowned King, Harold was shipwrecked close to the Norman shore. William treated Harold as an honoured guest, but when He wanted to go home, he made him put his hand on a box and swear an oath to help William become King of England after the death of Edward. After Harold had sworn the oath, William asked Harold to open the box. At his surprise, the boxes contained Holy relics. Swearing an oath on holy relics was the most solemn type of oath there was. Once home, every churchman Harold asked assured him that an oath taken under false pretenses doesn't count. Yet, William wouldn't see it like that. Further, Harold had pledged himself to to

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marry William's daughter, but once away from Rouen, he married the sister of the earls of Mercia and Northumbria. (Edwin) (Mortcal)

In fact, there were two other men who did not like Harold's succession: Harold's own brother Tostig and King Harold Hardrada of Norway. While Harold waited on the south coast for the Normans to attack, Harold Hardrada and Tostig landed in the north. Harold quickly advanced, surprised and defeated them. Three days later, William landed at Pevensey. Harold left London and reached Caldbec Hill, not far from Hastings. The fight cost him his life, and William the Conqueror was crowned king of England in Westminster Abbey on Christmas day in 1066.

2-FEUDALISM



No sooner was William crowned than his men set to work building the Tower of London, a massive fortress meant to warn the Londoners against trying anything on: The Normans, the tower said, were here to stay. Resistance burst in many places, but William was able to deal with all threats. William I (1066-1087) constructed castles in order to watch all towns and smash any future rebellion. He also authorized reliable barons to build their own castles from

their own resources. William had promised his barons land in England. But, to prevent them from trying to get above himself, he created the feudal system in England.

The feudal system was based on the tenancy-not ownership- of land. First, William declared that all the land in England belonged to him. Then he appointed many of his trusted barons as tenants-in-chief. The King was the owner, and from him his tenants-in-chief held their estates in return for their loyalty, services, money and goods. The king gave large estates to his most trustworthy nobles who were supposed to provide the king with a lot of men in time of war. Therefore, the Baron gave part of his lands to freemen or Knights who thereby bound themselves to his needs for fighting men when he or the king called for them. In their turn, the Knights assigned a fraction of their manorial demesnes to Villeins down at the bottom of the feudal system ; the word villein gives us villain, which gives you a pretty good idea of what the Normans thought of them. These were the peasants who had to work the land and pay dues in the form of food or services whenever demanded. The serfs were not free to leave the estate, and were often little better than slaves. There were two basic principles to feudalism :every man had a lord, and every lord had land. The king was connected through this 'chain' of people to the lowest man in the country.

3-THE DOMESDAY BOOK In 1086, William ordered the compilation of the Domesday Book: a detailed survey of all the manors of England, showing who held them, their size, number of villeins, amount of stock and value. This showed the power of every tenant, and how much could be extracted from him in taxes. The enquiry was so thorough that 'not even one ox or one cow or one pig escaped notice'. People described the inquisition as day of judgement, and the final assembly of documents as Domesdaybook.

The investigation was divided into two phases. First it surveyed all the lands of the different shires of England concerning plough lands, habitations, men bound and free, those who lived in cottages and those who have their homes and held lands in the fields, and horses and other animals. Second, other commissioners were sent into the areas which were already investigated and were they were unknown to check the first survey and report the 'guilty' to the king.

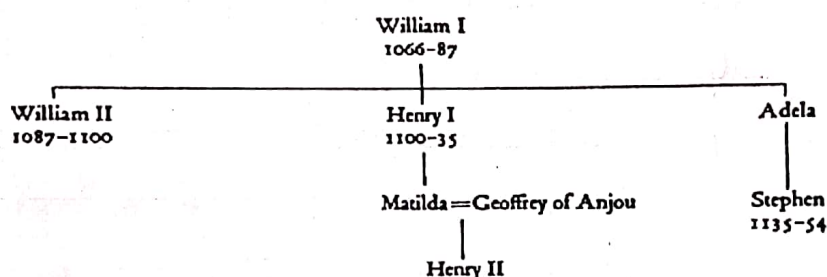
Thanks to the Domesday Book we know much more about England than about any other part of eleventh- century Europe. It shows, for example, that William wiped out all the English nobility. By 1086, twenty years after the Norman Conquest, there were hardly any rich landowners of English birth left in England. Over a quarter of the country belonged to the king and his family, the barons shared about 2/5 and the church held the rest in addition to other

levies and service obligations. The populace had to pay 1/10 of annual increases in profit and productivity for the upkeep of the church.

William I was very religious, and had strongly supported the church in his dominions. On his death bed (1087), he made many gifts to the church ; left Normandy to his oldest son Robert and his sword, sceptre and the English crown to his second son William.

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The Normans were great builders in the massive round-arched Romanesque style. Besides the tower built by William I in London, William II constructed great castles in different places to keep down the English. These parish churches, cathedrals and monasteries of the period were enriched with carvings and windows filled with the splendid stained glass that is the unique contribution of the Middle ages to the art of Europe; and the monasteries were the schools and libraries that kept learning alive during this period.



King William II (1087-1100) was said to be kind, brave and generous. However, most monks thought he was evil because contrary to his father who used to give a great deal of money to the church, he was taxing the church heavily and spent the money on other people and projects. William Rufus was killed in August in the year 1100 by an arrow while he was in the New Forest.

William's younger brother Henry seized the crown (1100-1135). Henry I gave England peace and unification, and his most characteristic was the Court of Exchequer, for the better collecting of taxes. He also divided the *Curia Regis* into specialized departments staffed by trained men. In Saxon times every district had its own laws and customs, and justice had often been a family matter. After the Norman conquest nobles were allowed to administer justice among the villages and people on their lands. They had freedom to act more or less as they liked. More serious offences, however, were tried in the King's courts. Henry I introduced the

idea that all crimes, even those inside the family, were no longer only a family matter but a breaking of the “king’s peace”. It was therefore the king’s duty to try people and punish them. Henry wanted the same kind of justice to be used everywhere. So he appointed a number of judges who travelled from place to place administering justice. These travelling or “circuit” judges still exist today. In this way the king slowly took over the administration from the nobles. At first the king’s judges had no special knowledge or training. They were only trusted to common sense. Many of them were nobles or bishops who followed directly the orders of the king (he was known for the high standards of his law courts). By the end of the twelfth century the judges were men with real knowledge and experience of the law. Judges travelling from one place to another administered the same law wherever they went. The law they administered became known as “common law” because it was used everywhere. Henry left no legitimate son. So, he made the nobles promise that his daughter Matilda would inherit the throne, but after Henry I died in 1135 they broke their promise and arranged for Henry’s nephew Stephen (1135-1154) to be crowned king instead.

Civil War

Matilda and her husband, Count Geoffrey Plantagenet of Anjou, decided to fight for her right to succeed. The result was another war of succession; order crumbled into chaos; it was each baron for himself, and villagers and tenant farmers were subjected to horrors. This civil war lasted twenty years, then a compromise was reached: Stephen could keep the throne, but when he died his own son would not be allowed to succeed. The next king would be Matilda’s eldest son, Henry Plantagenet.

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III- KING JOHN AND MAGNA CARTA

King John (1199-1216) was unpopular because he was cruel, selfish and very greedy. In fact, John shouldn't have been king at all. When Richard died, the next in line was Geoffrey's little boy, Arthur of Brittany, but John seized the throne, imprisoned Arthur, and later had him murdered just to be safe. John took many cases out of the feudal Lords in England and tried them in the King's courts and taking the money for himself. In order to enlarge his own income, John increased the amount of money to be paid to him by a feudal Lord when his daughter was married and by nobles before they could inherit their fathers' land. In case there was no heir, John kept the land for a long time before he passed it to another noble family , to benefit from its wealth. The merchants were taxed at a higher level than ever before.

John got into a mess with the Church as well. The lesson John learnt from the Becket business was to make sure he got the right archbishop. That meant not to accept one foisted on him by the pope. On the death of the archbishop of Canterbury, he nominated a reliable friend of his ' John Grey', and refused the order of Pope Innocent III to accept ' Stephen Longton' as archbishop. The Pope denied the validity of John's choice and placed the whole England under the interdict in 1208. John remained defiant until 1213, when the threat of a French invasion with the Pope's blessing obliged him to accept Longton and offer the Pope temporal and spiritual sovereignty over England.

Next, the French started attacking John's Angevin and Norman lands. He lost Anjou, Poitou, and Normandy. The barons all agreed on one thing : King John was a disaster. Something had to be done. In 1214, they started spurring revolt against the king in support of baronial rights and liberties. The Anglo-Normans and Angevin lords made John agree to Magna Carta, the Great Charter of English liberties at Runnymede, near Windsor, in June 1215. The charter was to safeguard the barons own privileges, guaranteed few freedoms for the ordinary citizens, and eventually certain clauses found way into the accepted principles of English life and legislation. First and foremost was that the king was not above law. Sooner, John tried to

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-thomas
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Archbishop
(1162-1170)

annul this document, resorted to the use of force and plunged the country into civil war. John died in 1216 ; his son Henry III who was only 9 years old succeeded to the throne.

Simon de Montfort, Earl of Leicester, married the King's sister Eleanor in 1238 and became one of the royal favorites. He urged Henry to implement the principles embodied in Magna Carta. Meetings were held whenever matters of state warranted discussion. County and city representatives were invited to represent local interests. Despite the fact that these meetings were generally convened in order to find ways to raise taxes, they could, still, be regarded as the first steps towards a true parliament.

In 1258, tension between the King and his nobles broke out upon the King's demand of financial support. When the King decided to defy and rule as he chose, a number of barons went to war against him under the leadership of Simon De Montfort. In 1264 the King and his son were captured. De Montfort set a parliament to administer the country ; however, his fellow barons were unsatisfied with the members of this parliament and found the earl himself too dictatorial. Edward could escape, raised an army, defeated and killed Simon at the battle of Evesham in 1265, and run the Kingdom with the consent of his father, Henry. Edward I was the first king to create a representative institution which could provide the money he needed. This institution became the House of Commons (a mixture of gentry and merchants). After he returned from a long crusade, Edward was coronated in 1274, two years after his father's death.