

Study Unit Introduction

William I (c.1028-1087) (Duke of Normandy 1035-1087; King of England 1066-1087)

Known as the Bastard or the Conqueror exemplified with unsurpassed clarity a favoured theme of medieval writers, the unexpected turns of Fortune's wheel. He overcame adversities of birth, circumstances and opposition to seize the most glittering prize of the century and to die the most feared and respected ruler of his age. His deeds resounded through Europe and remain to this day a source of controversy and debate, of admiration and horror. If in no other respect, the accession of a duke of Normandy and his heirs to the English throne fundamentally altered the perspective of English politics by opening an inescapably intimate continental dimension which formed a major theme of English history for the next few centuries and provided the chief distinctive feature of post-Conquest English history.

Born the illegitimate son of Robert the Devil, duke of Normandy and Herleve, daughter of Fulbert of Falaise, allegedly a tanner, William was recognised in 1034 by the Norman magnates as heir to the duchy on the insistence of his father, who was about to embark on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Robert's death in Asia Minor on his return from the Holy Sepulchre in 1035 provoked a long and bitter struggle for power within and beyond the ducal dynasty during which ducal authority crumbled and from which William himself barely escaped with his life. It is said that his guardians were less fortunate: two were murdered; another poisoned and a fourth, the seneschal Osbern, killed in the very room in which the young duke was sleeping. William's survival largely depended on the assistance of Henry I, king of France, whose intervention culminated in the defeat of the anti-ducals rebels from Lower Normandy at Val-és-Dunes in 1047. However, in the face of continued internal dissent, the rise of a hostile Anjou to the south and a change in French policy, William's position was precarious until a French invasion was repulsed at Mortemer in 1054.

William's subsequent consolidation of control over both church and magnates depended crucially upon military success and his consequent ability to reward loyalty, attract support and punish opposition. Northern France, a patchwork of competing lordships and conflicting claims of allegiance, offered considerable scope for a vigorous and well-organised power. Between 1054 and 1064 William extended his influence and authority to Ponthieu, the Norman Vexin, Brittany and Maine. A Flemish alliance was achieved by his marriage (c.1051) to Matilda (d.1083) the diminutive but forceful daughter of Baldwin V, count of Flanders. William also allied with the counts of Boulogne. This network of alliances proved vital when William planned his invasion of England. Norman expansionism was considerably assisted by the chance of the deaths of Henry of France and Count Geoffrey Martel of Anjou in 1060. Both had been hostile to William's advances but were replaced respectively by a sympathetic minority government in France and a succession dispute in Anjou.

William, as all medieval rulers, relied for his success on co-operation with leading landholders and the church. The Norman military aristocracy was of recent creation and heavily dependent on ducal patronage. The church was dominated by prelates appointed either from the ducal and other noble families (such as William's uncle Mauger at Rouen or his half-brother Odo at Bayeux) or by ducal appointment (such as Lanfranc of Pavia at Bec and Caen). William's skill lay in identifying mutual self-interest: lands and military activity for the lay aristocracy; ducal patronage for ecclesiastical reform, endowments, buildings and the fashionable Truce of God movement for churchmen. The Truce of God movement, supported by William's government as early as 1042, required knights to swear to keep the peace for specified periods and to police that agreement, if necessary by taking arms against transgressors. For William this was a highly convenient combination of political control, social cohesion and ecclesiastical authority all under ducal protection.

The eleventh century saw acquisitive lords and knights from Normandy seek their fortunes far beyond the confines of the duchy, in the eastern Mediterranean, southern Italy, and England. William's great-aunt, Emma, a daughter of Duke Richard I, married, in turn, Ethelred the Unready (king of England 978-1016) and Cnut (king of England 1016-1035). Her son by Ethelred, Edward, spent his exile after 1016 at the Norman court and after becoming king himself in 1042 he introduced a number of Normans into England, notably his nephew Ralph the Timid as earl of Hereford and Richard Champart of Jumièges successively as bishop of London and, briefly, archbishop of Canterbury. Whether the childless Edward offered William the inheritance of the throne in 1051-1052, as Norman propagandists insisted after the Conquest, must remain speculation. Despite some

evident falsehoods in the Norman version, it is possible that Edward took the opportunity of the disgrace of the powerful Godwins to cement an Anglo-Norman alliance and solve the chronic uncertainty over the succession. However, other sources, no less partisan and unreliable than the Norman chroniclers, tell different stories. Perhaps it is worth noting that in 1051-1052 Edward had a number of male relatives closer in blood than William; that William was far from secure in Normandy; that it would have been gross political folly for Edward to close options so soon and so completely; and that, despite later Godwin special pleading and Westminster Abbey hagiography, Edward himself could have expected to have heirs, especially as he had just put aside his first wife presumably in the hope of a second, fruitful marriage. If an attempt is made to reconcile the various accounts, Norman, Scandinavian, Godwin and non-Godwin English, then Edward must appear the most eccentric, foolish and politically profligate and devious ruler in English history, promising his throne to anybody, indeed everybody, as whim and circumstance dictated. The fact is that there are no trustworthy sources for the period leading up to 1066. All are to some extent wise after the event and concerned to justify or explain or refute. Above all, the Norman writers, William of Poitiers and William of Jumièges are apologists determined to establish William's claim. But as they wrote after 1066, their interpretation cannot, as many modern historians have done, be taken at face or perhaps any value.

What can be suggested is that by 1064 William was interested in the succession to England as a natural further extension of his power, especially as he could - and did - assert a dynastic claim. Edward may actually have been trying to secure William's support for a non-Norman inheritance by sending to him Godwin hostages and then, in 1064, Harold Godwinson himself, the leading magnate in England. It is clear from Norman and English written sources, and the Bayeux Tapestry (perhaps devised under the patronage of Odo of Bayeux at Canterbury, a suggestion lent some support by its similarities to the account of 1066 by the Canterbury monk Eadmer) that the 1064 embassy of Harold was a diplomatic triumph for William. Eadmer even records Edward's sharp displeasure at the turn of events, an image perhaps preserved in the Bayeux Tapestry's cringeing figure of Harold reporting back to an admonishing Edward. According to the Norman sources, Harold had sworn to be William's man and to help him secure the English succession. Whatever the truth, just as he confidently insisted on the legitimacy of his rights to overlordship in Brittany, the Vexin or Maine, William portrayed himself as believing in his absolute right to the English throne, a posture lent subsequent validity by friendly propagandists, supported by the verdict of events.

On hearing that Harold had been crowned king of England after Edward's death (January 1066), William began elaborate preparations. In a series of councils he attracted the support of his nobles. He publicised his claim at the Papal Curia, emphasizing the oath-breaking of Harold and the irregularities of the English church, which would be grist to the slow, sure-grinding mills of the holier-than-thou, purist elite then in control of the papacy. He received the blessing and a banner from Pope Alexander II, a signal, as he saw it, of the justice of his cause. Throughout, William laid claim to what modern historians call the moral high ground: at Hastings he wore a necklace of holy relics. His patronage of militant clerics and the Truce of God movement bore spectacular fruit.

William's wealth, reputation and carefully laid diplomacy attracted lords, knights and mercenaries from all over France and, it was said, beyond. Throughout the summer of 1066, ships were built and fitted in the Channel ports; equipment and horses were gathered. Modern assessments of the scale of William's enterprise tend to be conditioned by the weight of evidence. Yet, as we do not have much information about earlier amphibious operations, which, in English history, go back at least to Edwin of Northumbria's attack on the Isle of Man in the 620s, we should be wary of investing William's preparations with a uniqueness which may only be apparent because of the surviving evidence. Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Franks, Danes, Swedes and Norwegians, all had invasion fleets. Was William's so different?

William had not only isolated Harold diplomatically, but had also probably been in contact with Harold's brother Tostig and Harald Hadrada who were themselves planning an attack on England. A bloody crisis was inevitable, the tension being heightened by the appearance of Halley's Comet in the spring of 1066. In August William assembled his fleet in the River Dives, but contrary winds, and, perhaps, knowledge of English defences, delayed his sailing. The fleet was transferred to St Valéry on the Somme whence, at dusk on 27 September, it embarked for England, arriving, unopposed and intact, at Pevensey the next morning. The English defensive forces in the south had been disbanded on 8 September, as William probably knew, and Harold was in the north, having just defeated and killed Tostig and Hadrada at Stamford Bridge (25 September). The ensuing campaign showed William's skill and his luck in equal proportions. Establishing a fortified base at Hastings, William

proceeded with the normal medieval tactic of concerted pillaging with the intention of drawing Harold to precipitate action. It worked. Arriving with a hastily levied army, Harold offered battle immediately. The battle of Hastings, fought on Saturday, 14 October 1066, left Harold and his brothers dead, his army destroyed and the road to London and the crown open. William had barely survived the battle himself, but he acquitted himself well as a field commander in what was his first pitched battle in sole charge (Henry I took the lead at Val-ès-Dunes and William was not at Mortemer). The rarity of set-piece battles is a feature of warfare in this period, some great warlords, for example Henry II of England (1154-1189), never fighting any battles at all. Hastings reminds us why.

After a cleverly conceived and ruthlessly executed campaign of devastation, William forced the submission of the surviving English magnates, led by Aldred, archbishop of York, the legitimist claimant, Edgar Atheling and the earls Edwin and Morkere. The military *fait accompli* was sanctified on Christmas Day, 1066 when William was hallowed king of the English in Westminster Abbey, a scene of reconciliation and acceptance, William being attended not only by his French companions but also his English nobles and bishops. By adding an arc to the crown of Edward the Confessor, a sign of almost imperial pretensions, William indicated the grandeur of his designs in the British Isles.

The manner in which William held his kingdom was as impressive as the way in which it had been won. Between 1067 and 1075 a succession of rebellions were dealt with firmly. In one nine month period in 1068 the new king subdued Exeter, parts of the West Country and Midlands and York. The northern rising in 1069, when native earls allied with Scandinavian invaders, led to a winter campaign of deliberate cruelty. The so-called Harrying of the North lasted three months (January-March 1070), embraced parts of Wales, Lincolnshire, Yorkshire, Teesdale, Chester and Stafford, and left areas of Yorkshire wasted for a generation. Calculated violence was a noted and consistent instrument of William's policy. Twenty years earlier he had ordered that thirty-two citizens of Alençon have their hands and feet cut off, ostensibly because they had jeered at his illegitimacy, but more probably to encourage loyalty from this vital frontier town in southern Normandy. By the end of 1071, the Danish fleet had been paid off and Hereward the Wake flushed out of his base at Ely. William's regime fell heavily on French as well as English, but its effectiveness was not in doubt, as witnessed by the suppression of the 1075 revolt of the French earls of Norfolk and Hereford in the king's absence.

Although there was little threat from Wales, the king of Scotland, Malcolm III Canmore, eagerly fished in the troubled waters of English politics. In response, in 1072 in an effort to secure his northern frontier as he had his northern subjects, William launched one of his most remarkable campaigns. In a classic demonstration of the use of concentrated military aggression in pursuit of political advantage, William marched his army, shadowed by a fleet, up the east coast as far as the Tay where, at Abernethy, a cowed Malcolm was forced to come to terms. This, as all William's military success, was based on the employment of disciplined troops, mainly household knights and mercenaries, mobility and castles, such as those at Hastings, Exeter, Dover, London, Newcastle, Warwick and York built variously as part of aggressive military strategy, as focal points for controlling an occupied country and as centres of administration.

From 1072 William could concentrate on France, in particular his ambitions in Brittany, Maine and the Vexin. Defeats at Dol (1076) and Gerberoi (1079) at the hands of Norman rebels, the disloyalty of his brother Odo and his eldest son Robert Curthose, placed William on the defensive in his later years, which makes his achievements in England the more remarkable.

With interests so far flung, William had to rely on a small group of faithful magnates, men such as his half-brother Robert of Mortain, William FitzOsbern, Roger of Beaumont, Bishop Geoffrey of Coutances and Archbishop Lanfranc. Their consistent support says much for William's ability to inspire loyalty. After the risings of the late 1060s and the execution of Earl Waltheof in 1076 for complicity in the 1075 rebellion, attempts to reconcile the surviving English lords were abandoned. By the end of his reign power and property had shifted wholesale from Englishmen to Frenchmen or Normans. The Domesday Survey of 1086 recorded only 5 per cent of the land held by members of the families of pre-Conquest owners, not all of them English, and only two Englishmen, Coleswein of Lincoln and Thorkell of Arden, held land directly from the king. The church presents the same picture. After 1070 many English bishops were dismissed and no new Englishmen were appointed. William and his archbishop, Lanfranc, introduced reforms in ecclesiastical law and diocesan organisation based on continental models.

The tenurial, aristocratic and ecclesiastical revolution was sweeping and profound, but it was consequent on the replacement of English with French landlords and the new interests of the rulers rather than on any deliberate or accidental alterations of the structure of society, landholding or law. William did not introduce a new system of 'feudalism'. English thegns had held land in return for military service for centuries, their obligations becoming more regulated as the demands of central government became more effective. If William and his successors introduced a more precise method of assessing obligation, *servitium debitum*, and the so-called knights' fee, that was because of their need for defined resources to support their wars. The technology of war in pre-1066 England was not so very different from that in pre-1066 Normandy, as shown, for example, in the Bayeux Tapestry and descriptions of thegns' military equipment contained in Old English law codes. The new rulers were careful to assert that their land was held in all respects in the same way and with the same rights as those enjoyed by their English predecessors. Even the great Oath of Salisbury (1086), seen by some historians as demonstrating the feudalisation of England, can be compared with the general oaths imposed by English kings over the previous century. What undoubtedly changed, not immediately but inexorably, was the idiom describing and defining tenurial relationships among the landed elite and, in a similar process, the language and articulation of the law. An early example of French management of an English system of rule is found in the record of the Penenden Heath inquiry (c.1072) into the rights in Kent of Archbishop Lanfranc and Odo of Bayeux. Although the case involved two leading tenants of the king, it was heard in the traditional English shire court. Although the presiding justice was the Norman Geoffrey of Coutances, he called upon the legal knowledge of the deposed English bishop of Selsey, Aethelric: English law in a French context. What affected the French rulers was suitably rearticulated. What did not, namely the activities of the mass of the population, for example the manorial system, continued to develop as if Hastings had not been fought.

In 1066 England possessed a mature structure of government, administration and law, in most respects the superior to those of France and Normandy. William always insisted that he was a legitimate English king who respected English customs as surely as any of his predecessors. He wanted England to exploit not to change. Many historians have claimed that the Normans 'modernised' England. Recently, however, it has been observed how incompetently the new rulers managed traditional mechanisms of royal control, for instance the shire system and the coinage. Certainly, William's chief concern was less to understand the intricacies of English administrative habits than to obtain money in order to enhance and protect his position, especially in France. This desire attracted contemporary accusations of avarice and extortion. But, as the last crisis of his reign illustrates, William was no simple-minded thug.

At Christmas 1085, faced by the prospect of a huge Danish invasion and a fresh continental campaign, William and his advisors ordered the compilation of the Domesday Survey, which appears to have had the dual purpose of identifying the bases for innumerable disputes over possession of land and of reassessing income from property preliminary to a new, increased land tax. The resulting Domesday Book, although overtaken as an immediate administrative weapon by William's death, stands as a unique monument to English governmental tradition and Norman political initiative, and provides information unparalleled for any eleventh century kingdom. At Salisbury, on 1 August 1086, William, about to depart for Normandy, extracted oaths of loyalty from his tenants-in-chief and their followers (one source says their knights; others their tenants).

Such harnessing of clear perceptions of political and fiscal needs with vigorous military and administrative action is typical of William's role. If not all his ambitions were achieved, if Maine and the French Vexin remained outside his grasp, if luck had played a vital role throughout his career, William's achievements remain stupendous. Determined, energetic, ruthless, William possessed a personality and practical intelligence which, more often than many rulers in history, allowed him to dominate his contemporaries and to control his destiny, from the precarious life of a hunted bastard to the most powerful position in western Europe. William's success transformed the political map of Europe and the course of English history. The Norman Conquest gave English politics a fresh context, English government and law a different language, English society a new ruling class, and English culture an additional perspective.

William himself was impressive in manner and, on the evidence of a surviving bone recovered after the desecration of his tomb during the French Revolution, tall (c.5ft 10ins). Contemporary physical descriptions are almost entirely formal, although he may have had a noticeably harsh voice, and, like so many medieval aristocrats, have run to fat. A man of at least conventional piety, he was an active and generous patron of the church. He died at St Gervais near Rouen on 9 September 1087, his final illness possibly resulting from a riding

accident suffered during a characteristically vicious attack on Mantes. Active to the end in pursuit of his interests, William was a man who seized his opportunities with unrivalled vigour, and, as many contemporaries said, with unrivalled cruelty as well. Whatever judgment is made on the nature and extent of his influence on his time and his new kingdom, whether he is regarded as cypher or architect, William the Conqueror was and is one of the most notable figures in English history.

“William I (c.1028-1087)”, Who's Who in Early Medieval England, 1996 ed.

Printed from History Study Center © 2001-2018 ProQuest LLC. All Rights Reserved.

