

Catholic Church a forceful presence in every area of life. The role of the church in the new European civilization was quite evident in the career of a man named Samson, who became abbot, or head, of the great English abbey of Bury St. Edmunds in 1182. According to Jocelyn of Brakelond, a monk who assisted him, Abbot Samson was a devout man who wore “undergarments of horsehair and a horsehair shirt.” He loved virtue and “abhorred liars, drunkards and talkative folk.” His primary concern was the spiritual well-being of his monastery, but he spent much of his time working on problems in the world beyond the abbey walls. The monastery had fallen into debt under his predecessors, and Abbot Samson toiled tirelessly to recoup the abbey’s fortunes by carefully supervising its manors. He also rounded up murderers to stand trial in St. Edmunds and provided knights for the king’s army. But his actions were not always tolerant or beneficial. He was instrumental in driving the Jews from the town and was not above improving the abbey’s possessions at the expense of his neighbors: “He built up the bank of the fish-pond at Babwell so high, for the service of a new mill, that by keeping back the water there is not a man, rich or poor, but has lost his garden and his orchards.” The abbot’s worldly cares weighed heavily on him, but he had little choice if his abbey were to flourish and fulfill its spiritual and secular functions. But he did have regrets, as he confided to Jocelyn: “If he could have returned to the circumstances he had enjoyed before he became a monk, he would never have become a monk or an abbot.” ←

The Emergence and Growth of European Kingdoms, 1000–1300

Q FOCUS QUESTIONS: What steps did the rulers of England and France take during the High Middle Ages to reverse the decentralizing tendencies of fief-holding? What were the major political and religious developments in Spain, the Holy Roman Empire, and northern and eastern Europe during the High Middle Ages?

The domination of society by the nobility reached its apex in the High Middle Ages. During this time, however, kings began the process of extending their power in more effective ways. Out of this growth in the monarchies would eventually come the European states that dominated much of later European history.

In theory, kings were regarded as the heads of their kingdoms and were expected to lead their vassals and subjects into battle. The king’s power, however, was strictly limited. As we saw in Chapter 8, he had to honor the rights and privileges of his vassals, and if he failed to observe his vassals’ rights, they could and did rebel. Weak kings were overthrown or, like the later Carolingians, replaced by another ruling dynasty.

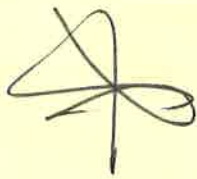
Nevertheless, kings did possess some sources of power that other lords did not. Kings were anointed by holy oil in ceremonies reminiscent of Old Testament precedents; thus, their positions seemed sanctioned by divine favor. War and marriage alliances enabled them to increase their power, and their conquests enabled them to reward their followers with grants of land and bind powerful nobles to them. In the High Middle Ages, kings found ways to strengthen governmental institutions and consequently to extend their powers. The revival of commerce, the growth of cities, and the emergence of a money economy eventually enabled monarchs to hire soldiers and officials and to rely less on their vassals.

England in the High Middle Ages

At the beginning of the eleventh century, Anglo-Saxon England had fallen subject to Scandinavian control after a successful invasion by the Danes in 1016. King Canute (kuh-NOOT) (1016–1035) continued English institutions and laws and even supported the Catholic Church. His dynastic line proved unable to maintain itself, however, and in 1042, the Anglo-Saxon line of kings was restored in the person of Edward the Confessor (1042–1066). After his death, the kingship was taken by Harold Godwinson, who belonged to one of England’s greatest noble families.

A cousin of Edward the Confessor, William of Normandy, however, laid claim to the throne of England. William crossed the English Channel with his forces in late September. The Anglo-Saxon forces of Harold Godwinson were in northern England, where they had defeated an invading Viking army, and had to return quickly to the south to face the new invaders. The Anglo-Saxon and Norman forces met on October 14, 1066, at Hastings, in one of the most famous battles in English history. Both forces numbered about 7,000 men. The Anglo-Saxon army, consisting mostly of foot soldiers armed with shields, swords, and battle-axes, created a shield wall at the top of a hill. Opposing them were the Norman forces of archers and the heavily armed knights that were a product of the fief-holding order that we examined in Chapter 8. Exhausted from their march from the north, the Anglo-Saxon forces fought bravely but were gradually worn down by the charges of the Norman knights. The battle lasted almost the entire day, but after the death of Harold Godwinson on the battlefield, the Anglo-Saxon forces fled. William then began his advance to London, where he was crowned king of England at Christmastime.

WILLIAM OF NORMANDY After his conquest, William (1066–1087) treated all of England as a royal possession. Based on the Domesday (DOOMZ-day) Book, which William commissioned in 1086 by sending out royal officials to ascertain who owned or held land in tenancy, modern historians have estimated that the Norman royal family took possession of about one-fifth of the land in England as the royal demesne (domain). The remaining English land was held by nobles or the church as fiefs from the king; each of these vassals was in turn responsible for supplying a quota of knights for the royal army. The great landed nobles were allowed to divide their lands among their subvassals as they wished. In 1086, however, by the Oath of Salisbury Plain, William required all



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William of Normandy



Norman Conquest of England. The Bayeux (bah-YUH or bah-YUR) tapestry, a wall hanging of woolen embroidery on a linen backing, was made by English needlewomen before 1082 for Bayeux Cathedral. It depicts scenes from the Norman invasion of England. The first segment shows the Norman fleet beginning its journey to England. The second segment shows the Norman cavalry charging the shield wall of the Saxon infantry during the Battle of Hastings.



Musée de la Tapisserie, Bayeux/With special authorization of the city of Bayeux/The Bridgeman Art Library

subvassals to swear loyalty to him as their king and liege lord. Henceforth, all subvassals owed their primary loyalty to the king rather than to their immediate lords.

Thus, the Norman conquest of England had brought a dramatic change. In Anglo-Saxon England, the king had only limited lands while great families controlled large stretches of territory and acted rather independently of the king. In contrast, the Normans established a hierarchy of nobles holding land as fiefs from the king. William of Normandy had created a strong, centralized monarchy. Gradually, a process of fusion between the victorious Normans and the defeated Anglo-Saxons created a new England. Although the Norman ruling class spoke French, Anglo-Saxon and French gradually merged into a new English language as the Norman-French intermarried with the Anglo-Saxon nobility.

William maintained the Anglo-Saxon administrative system in which counties (shires) were divided into hundreds (groups of villages). Within each shire, the sheriff was the chief royal officer responsible for leading the military forces of the county, collecting royal tolls, and presiding over the county court. William retained the office but replaced the Anglo-Saxon sheriffs with Normans. William also more fully developed the system of taxation and royal courts begun by the Anglo-Saxon and Danish kings of the tenth and eleventh centuries.

The Norman conquest of England had repercussions in France as well. Because the new king of England was still the duke of Normandy, he was both a king (of England) and at the same time a vassal to a king (of France), but a vassal who was now far more powerful than his lord. This connection with France kept England heavily involved in Continental affairs throughout the High Middle Ages.

A NEW DYNASTY In the twelfth century, the power of the English monarchy increased substantially during the reign of Henry II (1154–1189), the founder of the new Plantagenet (plan-TAJ-uh-net) dynasty (see the Film & History feature on p. 270). Henry was particularly successful in developing administrative and legal institutions that strengthened the royal government. He continued the development of the **exchequer** (EKS-chek-ur), or permanent royal treasury. Royal officials, known as “barons of the exchequer,” received taxes collected by the sheriffs while seated around a table covered by a checkered cloth that served as a counting device. (*Exchequer* is derived from the French word for chessboard.) The barons gave receipts to the sheriffs, while clerks recorded the accounts on sheets of parchment that were then rolled up. These so-called pipe rolls have been an important source of economic and social information for historians.