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## WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR

*c.* 1027 - 1087

In the year 1066, Duke William of Normandy, with only a few thousand troops behind him, crossed the English Channel in an attempt to become ruler of England. His bold attempt succeeded—the last time that any foreign invasion of England has been successful. The Norman Conquest did far more than obtain the throne of England for William and his successors. It profoundly influenced all subsequent English history—in ways and to an extent that William himself could scarcely have envisioned.

William was born about 1027, in Falaise, a town in Normandy, France. He was the illegitimate, but only son of Robert I, Duke of Normandy. Robert died in 1035, while returning from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Before his departure, he had designated William to be his heir. Thus, at the age of eight, William became Duke of Normandy.

Far from assuring him of a comfortable position of wealth and power, the succession put William in a precarious position. He was only a little boy, and he was the overlord of feudal barons who were grown men. Not surprisingly, the barons' ambition was stronger than their loyalty, and a period of severe anarchy followed, during which three of William's guardians died violent deaths, and his personal teacher was murdered. Even with the help of King Henry I of France, his nominal overlord, William was lucky to survive those early years.

In 1042, when William was in his mid-teens, he was knighted. Thereafter, he took a personal role in political events. After a long series of wars against the feudal barons of Normandy, William finally succeeded in gaining firm control of his duchy. (Incidentally, his illegitimate birth was a distinct political handicap, and his opponents frequently referred to him as "the Bastard.") In 1063, he succeeded in conquering the neighboring province of Maine, and in 1064, he was also recognized as the overlord of the neighboring province of Brittany.

From 1042 to 1066, the King of England was Edward the Confessor. Since Edward was childless, there was much maneuvering for the succession to the English throne. From the standpoint of consanguinity, William's claim to succeed Edward was rather weak: Edward's mother was a sister of William's grandfather. However, in 1051, Edward, perhaps influenced by William's manifest ability, promised William the succession.

In 1064, Harold Godwin, the most powerful of the English lords, and a close associate and brother-in-law of Edward the Confessor, fell into William's hands. William treated Harold well, but detained him until Harold swore a solemn oath to support William's claim to the English throne. Many people would not consider a promise extorted in this fashion to be either legally or morally binding, and certainly Harold did not. When Edward died in 1066, Harold Godwin claimed the throne of England for himself, and the Witan (a council of English lords which often took part in deciding the succession) chose him to be the new king. William, ambitious to extend his realm and angered at

Harold's breach of his oath, decided to invade England in order to impose his claim by force of arms.

William assembled a fleet and an army on the French coast, and in early August of 1066, he was ready to set sail. However, the expedition was delayed for several weeks by unrelenting north winds. Meanwhile, Harald Hardraade, the King of Norway, launched a separate invasion of England from across the North Sea. Harold Godwin had been keeping his army in the south of England, prepared to oppose William's invasion. Now he had to march his army to the north, to meet the Norwegian attack. On September 25, at the Battle of Stamford Bridge, the Norwegian king was killed and his forces routed.

Just two days later, the wind changed in the English Channel, and William promptly transported his troops to England. Perhaps Harold should have let William march toward him, or at least he should have fully rested his troops before offering battle. Instead, he quickly marched his troops back south to fight William. The two armies met on October 14, 1066, at the celebrated Battle of Hastings. By the end of the day, William's cavalry and archers had succeeded in routing the Anglo-Saxon forces. Near nightfall, King Harold himself was killed. His two brothers had been killed earlier in the battle, and there was no English leader remaining with the stature to raise a new army or to contest William's claim to the throne. William was crowned in London that Christmas day.

Over the next five years, there were a series of scattered revolts, but William suppressed them all. William used these revolts as a pretext to confiscate all of the land in England and to declare it his own personal property. Much of it was then dispensed to his important Norman followers, who held the land under feudal tenure as his vassals. As a result, virtually the entire Anglo-Saxon aristocracy was dispossessed and replaced by Normans. (As dramatic as this sounds, only a few thousand people were directly involved in this transfer of power. For the peasants tilling the soil, there was simply a change of overlords.)

William always contended that he was the rightful King of

England, and during his lifetime most English institutions were retained. As William was interested in obtaining information concerning his new holdings, he ordered that a detailed census of the population and property of England be taken. The results were recorded in the enormous *Domesday Book*, which has been an invaluable source of historical information. (The original manuscripts still exist; they are now in the Public Record Office in London.)

William was married and had four sons and five daughters. He died in 1087, in the city of Rouen, in northern France. Every monarch of England since then has been his direct descendant. Curiously, although William the Conqueror is perhaps the most important of all the kings of England, he himself was not English, but French. He was born and died in France, lived almost his entire life there, and spoke only French. (He was, incidentally, illiterate.)

In assessing William's influence upon history, the most important thing to remember is that the Norman conquest of England would not have occurred without him. William was not the natural successor to the English throne, and save for his personal ambition and ability, there was no historical reason or necessity for the Norman invasion. England had not been invaded from France since the Roman conquest a thousand years earlier. It has not been successfully invaded from France (or from anywhere else) in the nine centuries since William's day.

The question then is: just how great was the effect of the Norman Conquest? The Norman invaders were relatively small in number, but they had a great influence upon English history. In the five or six centuries before the Norman Conquest, England had been invaded repeatedly by Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian peoples, and her culture was basically Teutonic. The Normans were themselves of Viking descent, but their language and culture were French. The Norman Conquest, therefore, had the effect of bringing English culture into close contact with French culture. (Today that may seem a natural thing; however, in the centuries before William the Conqueror, most of England's

cultural contacts had been with northern Europe.) What resulted in England was a blend of the French and Anglo-Saxon cultures, a blend which might not have occurred otherwise.

William introduced into England an advanced form of feudalism. The Norman kings, unlike their Anglo-Saxon predecessors, thereby had at their command a force of several thousand armed knights—a powerful army by medieval standards. The Normans were skilled administrators, and the English government became one of the most powerful and effective governments in Europe.

*William the Conqueror at the Battle of Hastings.*



Another interesting result of the Norman Conquest was the development of a new English language. As a result of the Norman Conquest, there was a large infusion of new words into English—so large, in fact, that modern English dictionaries include more words of French or Latin origin than of Anglo-Saxon derivation. Furthermore, during the three or four centuries immediately following the Norman Conquest, English grammar changed very rapidly, largely in the direction of greater simplicity. Had it not been for the Norman Conquest, present-day English might be only slightly different from Low German and Dutch. This is the only known instance in which a major language would not exist in anything like its present form, were it not for the career of a single individual. (It is worth noting that English is today quite plainly the foremost language in the world.)

One might also mention the effect of the Norman Conquest upon France. For roughly four centuries thereafter, there was a long series of wars between the English kings (who, because of their Norman origin, held substantial land in France) and the French kings. These wars are directly traceable to the Norman Conquest; prior to 1066, there had been no wars between England and France.

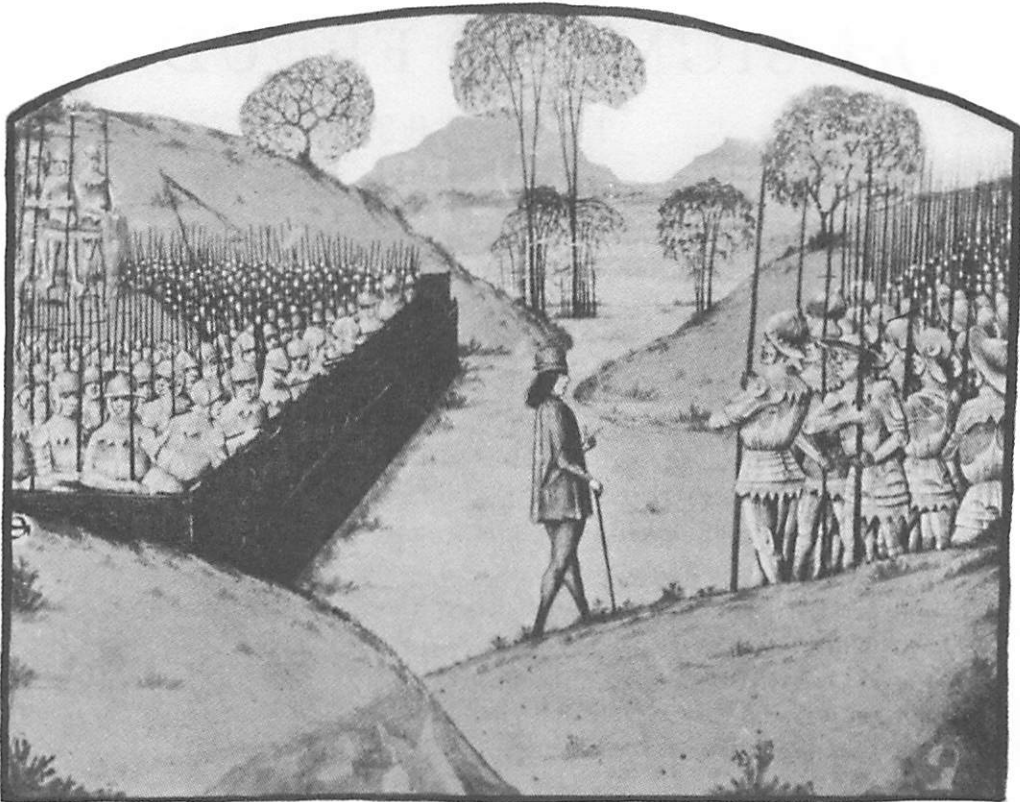
In many ways, England is substantially different from all the continental European countries. Both by her acquisition of a great empire and by her democratic institutions, England has had a profound influence upon the rest of the world, completely out of proportion to her own size. To what extent are these aspects of British political history a consequence of William's activities?

Historians are not agreed on just why modern democracy developed originally in England, rather than, say, in Germany. But English culture and institutions were a blend of the Anglo-Saxon and Norman, and this blend resulted from the Norman Conquest. On the other hand, I hardly think it reasonable to give the despotic William too much of the credit for the later growth of English democracy. Certainly, there was precious little

democracy in England in the century following the Norman Conquest.

With regard to the formation of the British empire, William's influence seems more clear. Prior to 1066, England had invariably been on the receiving end of invasions. After 1066, the roles were reversed. Thanks to the strong central government which William established and which his successors maintained, and to the military resources which this government commanded, England was never invaded again. Instead, she was continually engaged in overseas military operations. It was therefore natural that when the power of Europe expanded overseas, England eventually acquired more colonies than any other European state.

One cannot, of course, give William the Conqueror the credit for *all* later developments in English history; but surely the Norman Conquest was an indirect factor in much of what later occurred. The long-term influence of William is therefore very great.



*The first known painting of the Battle of Hastings.*