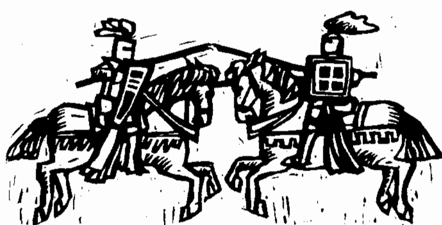

Late Saxon England

3

King Alfred's work of reconquest and political consolidation was carried to its climax by his talented successors during the first three quarters of the tenth century.[1] At Alfred's death in 899, Wessex passed to his son Edward (899–924), whom later historians called Edward the Elder to distinguish him from a subsequent monarch of the same name. Edward the Elder and his sister Ethelfleda, Lady of Mercia, pursued an aggressive military policy against the Danelaw, strengthening Alfred's burghs and founding a number of new ones in the midlands to consolidate their conquests. One of the new burghs of this age was Oxford, a significant commercial and intellectual center in later years, whose name betokens its humble origin. By 918, all the Danish settlers south of the Humber had submitted to Edward the Elder's rule, and the death of Ethelfleda that year resulted in the permanent unification of Wessex and Mercia under Alfred's dynasty.

Edward the Elder was succeeded by his able son Athelstan (924–939), a skillful military leader who, turning back a major invasion of Yorkshire by Norse Vikings from Ireland, extended his sway across Northumbria to the Firth of Forth. By the time of Athelstan's death, virtually all England was under his control. His successors consolidated the conquest, put down revolts, and repulsed invasion until, by 954, England stood united under the Wessex dynasty of English kings.

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[1] The works cited in Chapter 1, note 5, and Chapter 2, note 1 are also relevant to the present chapter. In addition, there are two very readable studies by Christopher Brooke: *The Saxon and Norman Kings* (New York, 1963); and *From Alfred to Henry III, 871–1272* (New York, 1961).

The Consequences of Political Unification

Yet the word "united" is perhaps too strong to describe England's situation in 954. The country was united politically (although with much local autonomy remaining), but not socially or culturally. The Anglo-Saxon inhabitants of northern Northumbria, who had managed to retain a precarious independence during the age of Danish invasions, had long been isolated from their brethren to the south and remained a people apart. And the numerous Danish settlers in Yorkshire, East Anglia, and the Five Boroughs remained socially and culturally distinct. The process of amalgamation between Dane and Englishman required several centuries to complete.

The immediate effect of reconquest and political unification was a generation of peace, well-being, and fruitful activity in the areas of royal administration and ecclesiastical reform. Anglo-Saxon England's happiest years coincided with the reign of King Edgar the Peaceable (959–975). In the words of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle,*

> His reign was marked by greatly improved conditions, and God granted that he lived his days in peace; he did his duty, and labored zealously in performing it; he exalted God's praise far and wide, and loved God's law; he improved the security of his people more than all the kings before him within the memory of man.

From another source we learn that Alfred's navy had developed by Edgar the Peaceable's time into a well-organized fleet that maintained constant coastal patrols, suggesting that Edgar was not only a man of God but also a vigorous and intelligent military strategist who took strong measures to protect his land from Viking assaults.

Edgar's reign also witnessed an impressive movement of monastic reform that paralleled reform movements occurring on the continent. Throughout its history medieval monasticism followed a pattern of decline and reform. Like all human institutions, it tended to decay with the passage of time from simplicity and fervor to luxury and complacency; yet over the centuries it proved capable of periodic revitalization through successive waves of reformist enthusiasm. The reinvigoration of continental monastic life brought about by the Carolingian renaissance had run its course by the tenth century, but the laxity of tenth-century monasticism was challenged by a religious movement centering on the new Burgundian monastery of Cluny. Founded in 910, Cluny developed, under the leadership of dedicated and long-lived abbots, into a vital center of ecclesiastical reform. The Cluniac monks followed an elaborated version of the Benedictine rule, but they abandoned the traditional Benedictine principle of autonomy. Instead, Cluny became the mother house of an ever-growing congregation of reformed monasteries subject to the direction and discipline of a single abbot.

The great champion of monastic reform in King Edgar's England was St. Dunstan, Abbot of Glastonbury, who became archbishop of Canterbury

in 960.[2] Dunstan had no connection with Cluny, or with continental reform movements, but some of the other English reformers of his day were deeply influenced by the example of Fleury, a Cluniac house on the Loire. The English reformers worked with considerable success toward the strict enforcement of the Benedictine rule in English monasteries, but had no wish to associate formally with the Congregation of Cluny. As a result of their efforts, old monasteries were reformed and reorganized and a number of new ones were built. And the traditional Benedictine duties of poverty, chastity, and obedience were strictly enforced. King Edgar cooperated fully with his ecclesiastical reformers. Perhaps he recognized, as Alfred and Charlemagne had recognized long before, that a vigorous Church could contribute much to the political and social welfare of the realm. And he doubtless shared the belief of his times that the welfare of the Church was one of the major responsibilities of a Christian king.

The Development of Anglo-Saxon Institutions

Edgar's reign was followed by a second round of Danish invasions, the accession to the English throne of the Danish king, Canute (1016–1035), the re-establishment of the Wessex dynasty under Edward the Confessor, and, finally, the Norman Conquest of 1066. Before turning to these events it will be well to examine the development of political, social, and economic institutions in Anglo-Saxon England.

The kindom of Wessex in Alfred's day was subdivided into large territorial blocks called shires (or counties). It may be that the Wessex shires represent areas settled long before by individual West Saxon war bands. The Latin word *comitatus,* which originally meant a war band, became the medieval Latin word for "county"; our word "shire" is based on the Old English *scir,* which once meant the local war band or fyrd. Whatever its origins, by Alfred's time the shire had emerged as the administrative district within the kingdom of Wessex.

As the Wessex kings expanded their authority into Mercia and the Danelaw, these districts, too were organized into shires on the Wessex model. Some of the new tenth-century shires correspond to old kingdoms or sub-tribal districts—Norfolk, Suffolk, Kent, Sussex, and Essex, for example. Others were organized around important towns, after which they were named: Bedfordshire, Northamptonshire, Cambridgeshire, Worcestershire, and so on. Four of the Five Boroughs—Lincoln, Leicester, Derby, and Nottingham—became nuclei of new shires. The process of "shiring" the Danelaw was progressing rapidly in the late ninth and early tenth centuries, and it was virtually complete by the time of Athelstan's reign.

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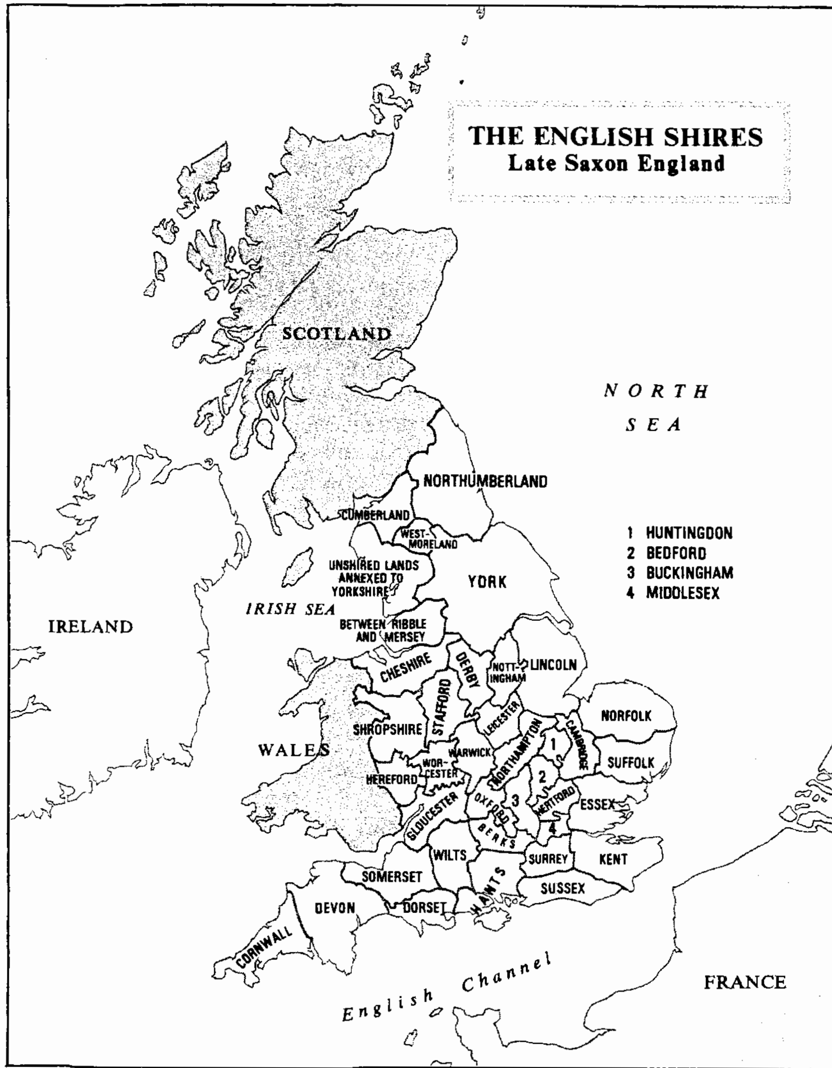
[2] See Eleanor S. Duckett, *Saint Dunstan of Canterbury: A Study of Monastic Reform in the Tenth Century* (London, 1955). Also, Eric John, *Orbis Brittaniae,* pp. 154–80.



The shires of Alfred's time were governed by officials known as *ealdormen.* It was the ealdorman who led the warriors of his shire to join the royal army or to defend the shire against sudden Danish attack. The ealdorman was at once a royal official and a local aristocrat. He led the fryd and governed the shire in the king's name, and only at times when the monarchy was weak, did he assert a dangerous degree of independence. As time went on, one ealdorman began to exert authority over several shires, and administrative and military command of an individual shire then passed to another royal official known as the *shire reeve* or *sheriff*.

The chief officer of the shire, whether sheriff or ealdorman, presided in the king's name over the shire court, which convened twice yearly to try important cases. The personnel of the shire court consisted of important freemen of the district, who supplied relevant evidence and declared ancient custom. Guilt or innocence, however, was determined neither by the members of the court nor by the presiding sheriff or ealdorman but rather by the process of compurgation—the solemn oath of the accused assisted by the sworn testimony of kinsmen or friends known as oath helpers—or by recourse to one of the ancient ordeals. Run by local freemen and presided over by an official of the king, the shire court was at once a royal and a popular institution—an assembly in which monarchy and local freemen joined to provide justice (of sorts) for the land.

The late-Saxon shire was also normally divided into smaller territorial units called hundreds. Like the shires, the hundreds originated in Wessex and spread with the expansion of the Wessex monarchy. The hundreds too may have been military in origin, perhaps representing a group of one hundred warriors that served within the larger comitatus; but on this matter the evidence is far from clear. By the tenth century the hundred was a territorial administrative district centering on a hundred court. Similar in purpose and organization to the shire court—and presided over by a royal reeve—the hundred court met more frequently, normally once a month, and played a more intimate role in the affairs of the average freeman. Ordinarily, the hundred court, like the shire court, represented a mixture of royal and popular justice; but in time jurisdiction over many hundred courts passed into the hands of great private lords, both lay and ecclesiastical. These powerful landholders were granted by royal charter the rights of jurisdiction in their districts (contemporary charters refer to these jurisdictional rights as *sac* and *soc*), and their representatives took the place of royal officials as presidents of the hundred courts they controlled. The abbot and monks of Bury St. Edmunds, for example, gained jurisdiction over more than a third of the hundreds of Suffolk, and by the late eleventh century more than half the hundreds in Worcestershire were in the hands of three abbeys and a bishopric.

The hundred was typically (although by no means always) composed of one hundred hides. We have already seen that originally the hide was regarded as an estate sufficient to support the family of an individual warrior.

The late-Saxon hide, however, was not a unit of standard size, but an assessment unit on which fiscal and military obligations were based. Of two estates of identical area, one might be more productive than the other and therefore be assessed at more hides than the other. Moreover, hidage assessment was often erratic and unfair: some districts were assessed more severely than others, and sometimes, through royal generosity, an estate would have its hidage assessment diminished. A forty-hide estate might become a twenty-hide estate without being reduced by so much as a foot of land.

By the tenth century, and perhaps long before, the one-hide estate had come to be regarded as insufficient to provide the necessary economic support for a properly equipped warrior and was replaced by the estate of five hides. The profession of arms was the supreme aristocratic vocation in all Germanic societies, and the typical Anglo-Saxon aristocrat—the holder of a five-hide estate—was known as a *thegn.* In time of war, every five-hide unit was obligated to provide a fighting man for the army (or sometimes the navy), and although the owners of small estates within a five-hide unit might occasionally pool their resources to send a particularly well-equipped freeman as their representative to the fyrd, the normal five-hide warrior was a member of the thegnly aristocracy. The almost universally accepted relationship between status and arms in this violent age insured that the society of Anglo-Saxon England—influenced so deeply by the hard necessities of war—would be profoundly aristocratic.

Still, the varying military requirements of tenth- and eleventh-century England required, on occasion, the service of groups other than the thegns. In time of invasion every freeman was obliged to take up arms in defense of his locality. These ordinary freemen formed a motley but massive force around the nucleus of the five-hide warriors. At other times, the territorial five-hide fyrd proved insufficiently flexible or battle-ready and was augmented or replaced by full-time professional warriors. These might be simple mercenaries, or they might be landless household soldiers maintained on a permanent basis by the king or some great lord. In the course of the eleventh century these landless professionals became increasingly important. One such group, the "housecarles," who were instituted by Canute and retained by Edward the Confessor, formed the nucleus of the Anglo-Saxon army at Hastings in 1066.

Five-hide thegns, ordinary freemen, and landless professional warriors—these were the components of the Anglo-Saxon army. But a mere review of this organizational scheme fails to do justice to the powerful emotional factors that underlay the military structure of this age. In the tenth century, the ideology of the old Germanic comitatus was still very strong. Military prowess, absolute loyalty to lord, and honor among warriors remained the supreme aristocratic virtues. Indeed, in all Germanic literature the comitatus ideology is nowhere more powerfully illustrated than in a late tenth-century Anglo-Saxon poem, the *Song of Maldon;* it describes a fierce battle in 991 in which an invading Danish host defeated the fyrd of Essex led by its lord, the Ealdorman Byrhtnoth.[3] Toward the battle's end, Ealdorman Byrhtnoth was killed and the English nearly defeated. At this desperate moment,

> Then Byrhtwold spoke, he brandished his spear,
> raised up his shield; he was an old henchman;
> full boldly he taught the band of men:
> "Thought shall be the harder, heart the keener,
> mood shall be the more, as our might lessens.
> Here lies our earl, all hewn to earth,
> the good one, on the ground. He will regret it always,
> the one who thinks to turn from this war-play now.
> My life has been long. Leave I will not,
> but beside my lord I will sink to earth,
> I am minded to die by the man so dear."

Byrhtwold's speech is preceded by others in a similar vein. Inspired by these appeals to the traditional heroic ideal, the Anglo-Saxon attack the Danes, and in the midst of the fray the manuscript of the *Song of Maldon* breaks off abruptly. The author was doubtless embroidering his data and exaggerating Byrhtwold's eloquence. Nevertheless, the story reflects the highest aristocratic ideals of a people still tied to their bellicose past and dominated by the concept of lordship.

The development of Anglo-Saxon institutions can be understood as the gradual evolution of a Germanic warrior society toward territorial stabilization and administrative coherence. The fundamental element in this evolution was the rise of a centralized monarchy. Among a people to whom loyalty to one's lord was an almost holy virtue, the king endeavored to secure for himself the pledged allegiance not only of his ealdormen, sheriffs, and personal thegns, but of all freemen in England. In the dooms of King Edmund (939–946) it is commanded "that all, in the name of God . . . shall swear fealty to King Edmund, as a man should be faithful to his lord, without dispute or treachery, in public and in private, loving what he loves and shunning what he shuns." Thus the powerful bond of allegiance between an ealdorman and his thegns and household followers—attested so vividly in the *Song of Maldon*—was subordinated to the still higher duty of all free Englishmen to render loyalty to their monarch.

This principle of universal allegiance to the king was essential to the maintenance and progressive extension of royal control over England. The ealdormen must be royal officers, not independent potentates; and when they lead the fyrd of their shire they must do so—as Byrhtnoth did—in the king's name and in the king's service. Indeed, when the fyrd was summoned on a regional or national scale its normal leader was the king himself. As lord

[3] A modern English prose translation of the *Song of Maldon* is contained in Margaret Ashdown, tr., *English and Norse Documents Relating to the Reign of Ethelred the Unready* (Cambridge, 1930); the present excerpt is from the poetic translation by Kemp Malone.

of the Anglo-Saxons, he was necessarily the supreme war leader of the people in arms.

In time of war the king was expected to be braver and fiercer than any of the warriors he led, but in time of peace he sought to temper the violence of his people. In his coronation oath, Edgar the Peaceable made these commitments:

> In the name of the Holy Trinity I promise three things to my Christian subjects: First, that God's Church and all the Christian people of my realm shall enjoy true peace; second, that I forbid robbery and wrongful deeds to all ranks of men; third, that I exhort and command justice and mercy in all my judgments, so that the gracious and compassionate God who lives and reigns may grant us all His everlasting mercy.

In effect, Edgar is appealing from the militarism of Germanic culture to the pacifism of the Christian tradition. The Germanic king must lead his folk in war, but the Christian king must keep the peace.

The concept of the king's peace developed slowly. Anglo-Saxon England had no policemen, no professional lawyers or judges, no comprehensive legal codes; consequently, acts of private violence were much more common than today—the rule rather than the exception. Crimes of violence normally fell under the jurisdiction of the popular courts of shire and hundred, but almost from the beginning there existed the concept that violations of the peace committed in certain places or at certain times were subject to a direct royal fine. At first the king's peace extended only to the limits of the royal household, but in time it came to cover the shire and hundred courts, major roads and rivers, and churches and abbeys. Since the royal household had no permanent headquarters but was constantly on the move, the king's peace moved too, sometimes protecting one area, sometimes another. By the time of Henry I (1100–1135), the king's peace extended throughout the entire shire wherein the king was temporarily residing. And the king's peace was also gradually extended to cover all crimes of violence committed during the liturgical seasons of Christmas, Lent, Easter, and Whitsuntide. In the twelfth century, as we shall see, royal justice expanded significantly at the expense of popular and private justice and evolved ultimately into what Englishmen call the Common Law. The gradual spread of the king's peace in Anglo-Saxon times may be regarded as an early expression of this momentous legal concept of direct royal jurisdiction.

Anglo-Saxon law, like the law of most primitive societies, was far less precise, less logically constructed, more obscure, cumbersome, haphazard, and complex than the law of modern states. It was a patchwork of many local customs, varying from region to region, and only through the gradual expansion of the royal government did it achieve, long after the Norman Conquest, a degree of uniformity. Yet even in Anglo-Saxon times, the royal government endeavored, haltingly, to preserve and expand its area of jurisdiction. The power of the Anglo-Saxon kings was felt in the local courts of hundred and shire, made up of local worthies but presided over by the king's reeve. And the dooms, although far from comprehensive, constitute early efforts toward achieving a modicum of legal uniformity through the exercise of royal authority.

As the scope and functions of the Anglo-Saxon monarchy expanded, the royal administrative machinery became steadily more elaborate. In the earliest days, the retinue of an Anglo-Saxon monarch normally included a number of military followers or "companions" and some servants to look after the stables, maintain the royal wardrobe and bedchamber, supervise the food supply, and prepare the meals. The king's income was derived chiefly from the rents and harvests of his own vast estates—his demesne. Rather than transporting food to a central royal residence, the king traveled from estate to estate across his scattered demesne, consuming as he went. In these circumstances, the minimal administrative duties of the royal household could easily be handled by the chief servants.

With the passage of time, the royal treasury grew, royal military organization became more elaborate, and royal land gifts came more and more to be committed to writing. Moreover, it became increasingly desirable for the king to communicate with his regional officers by written rather than verbal messages. Since literacy remained largely a priestly monopoly, the growing secretarial duties were assumed by the royal chaplain and his priestly staff, which had been a part of every royal household since the conversion. In the eleventh century the king's chapel-secretariat came to be known as the chancery (from "chancel," the space in a church reserved for officiating clergy); and its chief officer, the chancellor, became in later years one of the chief officers of state.

The writing office of the late Anglo-Saxon kings was in some respects the most efficient royal chancery of its time in Western Europe. Like other chanceries, it prepared elaborate charters for the transfer of land and privileges. Its unique contribution to the history of administration was its invention of a type of short document known as a writ—a direct, economical statement of a royal command to a subject, usually written in English rather than Latin and (by the eleventh century) bearing an imprint on wax of the king's Great Seal to prove its authenticity. The writ was sufficiently short and simple to serve as a highly effective instrument in the everyday business of government:

> King Canute sends friendly greetings to Bishop Eadsige and Abbot Alfstan and Aethelric and all my thegns in Kent. And I inform you that my will is that Archbishop Aethelnoth shall discharge the obligations on his landed property belonging to his episcopal see now at the same rate as he did before Aethelric was reeve and after he was reeve up to the present day. And I will not permit that any wrong be done the [arch]bishop whoever may be reeve.

> King Edward sends friendly greetings to Bishop Stigand and Earl Harold and all my thegns in East Anglia. And I inform you that I have granted to

[the abbey of] St. Edmund, my kinsman, the land at Pakenham as fully and as completely as Osgot possessed it.[4]

Writs were used much more commonly after the Norman Conquest than before (and were normally in Latin rather than Old English), but they were originated by nameless clerks in the chanceries of the Anglo-Saxon kings. The idea of a brief, written, authenticated command seems obvious enough, but in the largely illiterate society of Saxon England it was a new and powerful means of bringing literacy and precision to royal government.

Other offices of the royal bureaucracy developed out of various branches of the household serving staff. The master of the stable—the constable of later times—supervised the royal hunt and eventually became a leading officer in the king's army. The chief servant of the royal bedchamber and wardrobe evolved into the later chamberlain; and, since the king customarily kept his treasure in his wardrobe (or sometimes under his bed), the chamberlain assumed important financial responsibilities. In the course of the eleventh century the monarchy adopted the policy of leaving the bulk of its treasure at Winchester, the chief town of Wessex, and carrying on its travels only enough money to meet current expenses. The royal officer in charge of the Winchester treasure came to be known, appropriately, as the treasurer.

The chancellor, the constable, the chamberlain, and other household officials such as the steward and the butler—although not known by those names until after the Norman Conquest—rose in importance with the growth of the Anglo-Saxon monarchy to become dominant figures in the royal administration. Besides performing their own special functions, they served the king collectively as a trusted and intimate advisory body, accompanying him on his endless perambulations through the country. Together with such other magnates and important churchmen as might be present, they functioned as a pocket council, administering the king's justice and attending to the varied and ever-growing business of royal government.

Occasionally when unusually important business arose—such as the issuing of a series of dooms or the undertaking of a major military campaign—an Anglo-Saxon monarch would call many of the great magnates of the realm, both lay and ecclesiastical, to join his normal household advisers in counseling him or giving their formal support to his policies. We have already encountered references to large councils of this sort on the occasion of King Edwin's conversion in 627 and in King Alfred's statement that he had shown his laws "to all my Witan who declared that they were all pleased to observe them." The terms *Witan* or *Witenagemot* (council) might apply to either the small household group or the larger and more formal assembly of magnates. The Witenagemot, both small and large, probably had its

[4] Translated from Old English by F. E. Harmer, *Anglo-Saxon Writs* (Manchester, Engl., 1952), pp. 184, 158.

roots in the primitive Germanic tribal assemblies; but the limitations of our sources prevent us from tracing its evolution with any precision until the tenth and eleventh centuries. We know from occasional references that it existed in early Anglo-Saxon England, but we can say little of such matters as its normal size, composition, or functions. Indeed, as the fuller sources from the late-Saxon period disclose, the Witenagemot, whether large or small, was an exceedingly flexible and informal institution. It was in no sense, of course, a representative assembly. It possessed no formal right of veto over royal policy, but was strictly advisory. It had no official members so far as we can tell, but simply included whatever important household officers and great men happened to be available and, on the more significant occasions, a miscellaneous group of lords. Still, the sources make clear that the Witenagemot played a crucial role in Anglo-Saxon government. Many historians today, in endeavoring to dispel the romantic myth of certain nineteenth-century scholars that the Witenagemot was a protodemocratic national assembly, have tended to underestimate its importance. To be sure, no Anglo-Saxon king was legally bound to follow his Witan's advice, but few monarchs were so foolish as to flout it. In an age lacking precise definitions of constitutional relationships, the deeply ingrained custom that the king was to govern in consultation with his Witan, implicit in almost every important royal document of the period, is sufficient to make the Witenagemot one of Anglo-Saxon England's fundamental political institutions.

The expanding monarchy of late-Saxon England was able to draw on an increasing variety of financial resources. The royal demesne remained the chief source of income, and, as the growing towns were normally regarded as belonging to the king's demesne, exactions from burghers poured into the royal treasury along with dues from the royal estates. The monarchy delegated responsibility for the fiscal exploitation of its demesne estates and towns to royal officials—reeves—who were assigned a fixed tax quota or "farm" to be collected from the districts they supervised. Any dues in excess of the quota belonged to them. As commerce quickened, it became increasingly common for the monarchy to receive a portion of its demesne dues in coin rather than in kind; for during the last several decades prior to the Norman Conquest, Anglo-Saxon England enjoyed a circulation of currency that was unusually brisk by continental standards.

Besides demesne revenues, the late-Saxon monarchy was enriched by a kingdom-wide land tax. What began as a symptom of military weakness and the monarchy's endeavor to purchase security from Viking marauders ultimately became one of the most important sources of royal income. In 991 King Ethelred, appropriately nicknamed the Unready, imposed a tax, the danegeld, to raise protection money against the Danes. This tax, like military service, was assessed on the basis of hides of land.[5] It was not re-

[5] Often at the rate of two shillings per hide.

stricted to the royal demesne but embraced all the lands of England. Eventually it became a significant source of strength to the English monarch, for in later years danegeld funds were used to hire soldiers and meet various other royal expenses. As the first general land tax in Western Europe since Roman times, the danegeld illustrates perhaps more vividly than anything else Anglo-Saxon England's progress toward royal centralization and administrative sophistication.

Continental monarchs, like English monarchs, employed agents to collect dues from demesne estates. And on the continent, as in England, central administrative bureaucracies were slowly evolving out of household staffs. But the late Anglo-Saxon royal administration was more coherent in organization and broader in scope than any other contemporary government in Western Christendom. In the centralization of its administrative structure, as in the relative efficiency of its tax system, England stood in the vanguard of a movement which, during the coming centuries, would transform the loosely structured Germanic monarchies that stretched across Christendom into well-organized states.

Town and Field

The century prior to the Norman Conquest was a period of accelerating commercial activity produced by the general political stability of the age. With commerce came the rise of towns, smaller at first than those of Roman times—and dirtier—but from an economic standpoint far healthier. Unlike the administrative and military towns of the western Roman Empire, which functioned as economic leeches on the countryside, the towns of late-Saxon England—and their continental counterparts—produced more than they consumed. It has already been suggested that many Saxon towns evolved out of the military burghs or boroughs of Alfred and his successors; but the rise of towns was an economic phenomenon, a product of England's wealth and vigorous commerce. A vast amount of urban development lay in the future —in the decades and centuries following the Norman Conquest—but evidence suggests that the elaborate guild systems of a later day were already in their formative stage in the late-Saxon period and that borough courts may have been functioning as early as the tenth century.

Typically, the town paid a regular tax to its local lord or to the king and received such privileges as the right to have its own court and to operate a market—a center of supervised buying and selling. The market became the commercial nexus not only of the town but of the neighboring countryside as well. Towns were a source of wealth to the monarchy, and, particularly in later years, the English kings favored them in many ways. Their emergence and growth were accompanied by slow but significant changes in the social and economic order. An economy based on exchange of goods gave way to a money economy, and the parochialism of the early Middle

Ages was eroded by the rise of international commerce. In the High Middle Ages—the twelfth and thirteenth centuries—the towns would become the foci of a rich, vibrant culture. Perhaps the greatest glories of high medieval civilization were the cathedral and the university, and both were characteristically urban phenomena.

But in the tenth century one could not know that the struggling urban communities had such a future before them or that they would one day be agents of momentous social change. They were still mere specks on an agrarian landscape—overgrown villages surrounded by walls. Probably fewer than ten Anglo-Saxon towns had more than 3,500 inhabitants. Norwich, Winchester, and Lincoln may have had 6,000 or more; York perhaps 8,000; only London—the chief commercial center—compared in size to a modern town. The townsmen went about their daily tasks; the aristocracy fought, trained, and dreamed of war; but the chief business of the Anglo-Saxons remained what it had been for generations past and what it would be for centuries to come: the raising of crops.

Among the romantic myths of nineteenth-century historical scholarship was the legend of the stalwart Anglo-Saxon farmer, communing with the good earth, fighting against invaders like a Massachusetts Minuteman, and laying the foundations of democracy by participating fearlessly and intelligently in village councils and hundred courts. Historians have since concluded that most Anglo-Saxon agricultural workers were probably slaves or inarticulate, semi-servile tenants. Men such as these were virtually ignored in contemporary documents, but without question they represented the majority of Englishmen in late-Saxon times and long afterward. They played no real role in local or hundredal administration; nor were they permitted to bear arms, for the possession of weapons was by tradition a mark of free status. Their influence on English constitutional development was minimal, but their contribution to the economy was vital. And their lives were hard beyond all imagining. An Anglo-Saxon writer of the late tenth century attributed these words to a fictional peasant of his times:

> I work hard. I go out at daybreak, driving the oxen to the field, and then I yoke them to the plow. Be the winter ever so stark, I dare not linger at home for awe of my lord; but having yoked my oxen, and fastened plowshare and coulter, every day I must plow a full acre or more. I have a boy, driving the oxen with an iron goad, who is hoarse with cold and shouting. Mighty hard work it is, for I am not free.[6]

Not all farm workers lacked personal freedom. At the top of the peasant hierarchy was a class of free farmers known as *ceorls*. It was this class the nineteenth-century scholars had in mind when they made their allusions

[6] *Aelfric's Colloquy*, G. N. Garmonsway, ed. (London, 1939), ll. 23–35.

to Anglo-Saxon grass-roots democracy. But the ceorls were neither as democratic nor as numerous as previously believed. Rather than being "typical Anglo-Saxon peasants," the ceorls were a peasant elite. They bore arms and, on occasion, fought in the fyrd alongside the aristocratic thegns. They usually owned their own farms, and most of them owned slaves. They enjoyed status before the law and were assigned a wergeld of 200 shillings. Beyond these few generalizations we cannot go, for the contemporary sources disclose very little about the free peasantry except to make clear that the term ceorl was applied rather loosely to agrarian freemen of widely differing economic levels.

At the next level up in the social hierarchy were the thegns, sharply differentiated by their 1,200-shilling wergeld but otherwise as heterogeneous as the ceorls. The thegns, as we have seen, constituted a warrior aristocracy; yet there is clear evidence that many of the lesser thegns were little better off economically than the wealthier ceorls. Some of them seem to have labored in their own fields as a matter of course, but ordinarily their involvement in agriculture was limited to supervising the labor of their subordinates.

Both ceorls and thegns participated in local administration and in the popular courts, and such experience was doubtless useful in later centuries in giving these classes a certain degree of political sophistication. But they made their chief contribution to the realm by defending it in battle and participating in the humble but essential task of food production.

The development of Anglo-Saxon agriculture was an immensely significant process. The Anglo-Saxons transformed the Romano-British agrarian system, with its squarish fields and single-family farms, into the system of communal agriculture, village communities, and strip fields that persisted throughout the Middle Ages and beyond. The key to this transformation was a new plow, far heavier and more effective than the light scratch plow used in Roman Britain and throughout most of the Roman Empire. The origins of the heavy plow are uncertain and have been much debated (it may have come westward from the Slavic inhabitants of the eastern European plains); we know only that it was widely used by the Germanic peoples who settled in the formerly Roman lands of northern Europe. In its fully developed form, the heavy plow was a wheeled machine with a large iron plowshare, a knife fixed in front of the share to direct the movement of the cut, and a device known as a moldboard that heaved the sod to one side, creating an artificial drainage pattern of ridges and furrows. The great virtue of the new plow was that it opened up to agriculture vast areas of rich clay soils and poorly drained lowlands that had defied the old Roman scratch plow. With these heavy plows, the Anglo-Saxons were able, for example, to till the fertile clay plains of East Anglia that had been wastelands in Roman times.

The heavy ploy required a large ox team to draw it—normally eight oxen, two abreast. And with the large team came a new, much more efficient harness than was commonly used in Roman times. Most important, the heavy plow and eight-ox team transformed the size and shape of the fields. The small, square fields of Roman Britain gave way to much larger fields, divided into narrow strips suitable to a plow and a team that was difficult to turn around. Since a single strip usually consumed a day's plowing (sometimes half a day's), the difficult process of reversing the plow's direction was minimized or avoided altogether.

The plow also prompted a shift from single farms to agrarian villages and communal agriculture. A single peasant family could seldom afford to own a heavy plow, much less an eight-ox team. Thus, ownership of plows and oxen came to be shared by a village community. Typically, the village was centered on a village green, or a well or pond, and was surrounded by great fields—divided into strips like the stripes of an American flag. These strips of land were not held in common by the village community but were apportioned among individual villagers. Since the various strips comprised a single agrarian unit, however, it was necessary for a village council (perhaps dominated by a local thegn) to make decisions on such matters as crop rotation, boundary disputes, and the apportionment of plows and oxen.

Accordingly, the village was the fundamental agrarian unit of medieval England; but alongside it there existed another, more artificial unit—the estate of the thegn or higher noble, in later days known as a manor. Normally a single village was a single manor. But occasionally a manor encompassed several villages, and a single village sometimes included parts of several manors. The village and the manor differed in that the village was an agrarian entity—a cluster of houses surrounded by fields—whereas the manor was a unit of lordship—an estate controlled by a single thegn.

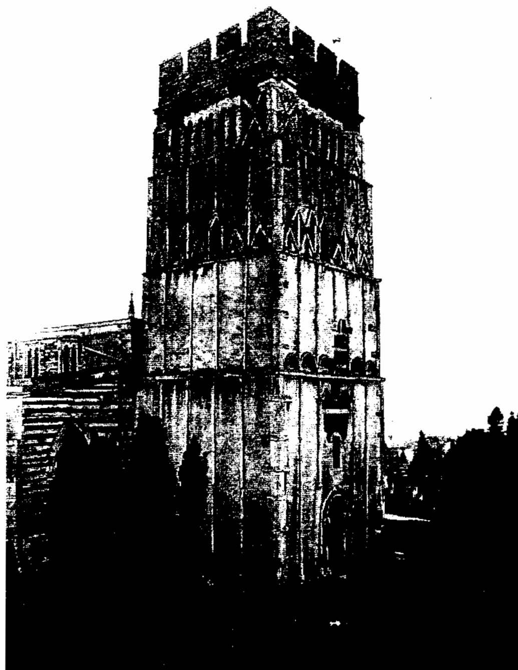
The thegn usually exercised strong political, judicial, and economic authority over the peasants on his manor. He operated a manorial court to settle disputes and punish crimes. He often controlled the village water mill and charged his peasants for its use. He was entitled by custom to tax his peasants in various ways and to collect a portion of their crops (later commuted, in many cases, to a payment of money—a rent). And the lord had his own strips, called his demesne land, interspersed among his peasants' strips in the village fields. Peasants were normally obliged to labor on their lord's demesne for a certain number of days per week (the exact number depending on local custom, the season, and the peasant's status). The lord did not ordinarily do farm work himself, but depended for his income on the taxes and labors of his peasants.

The details of agrarian organization and class structure varied bewilderingly from one district to another. Kent remained throughout the Middle Ages a land apart, with family farms instead of the more usual village community. Throughout much of the Danelaw there were many more freemen than elsewhere. In Northumbria the manor was slow in developing. Other local variations existed, too numerous to discuss here. Whatever the

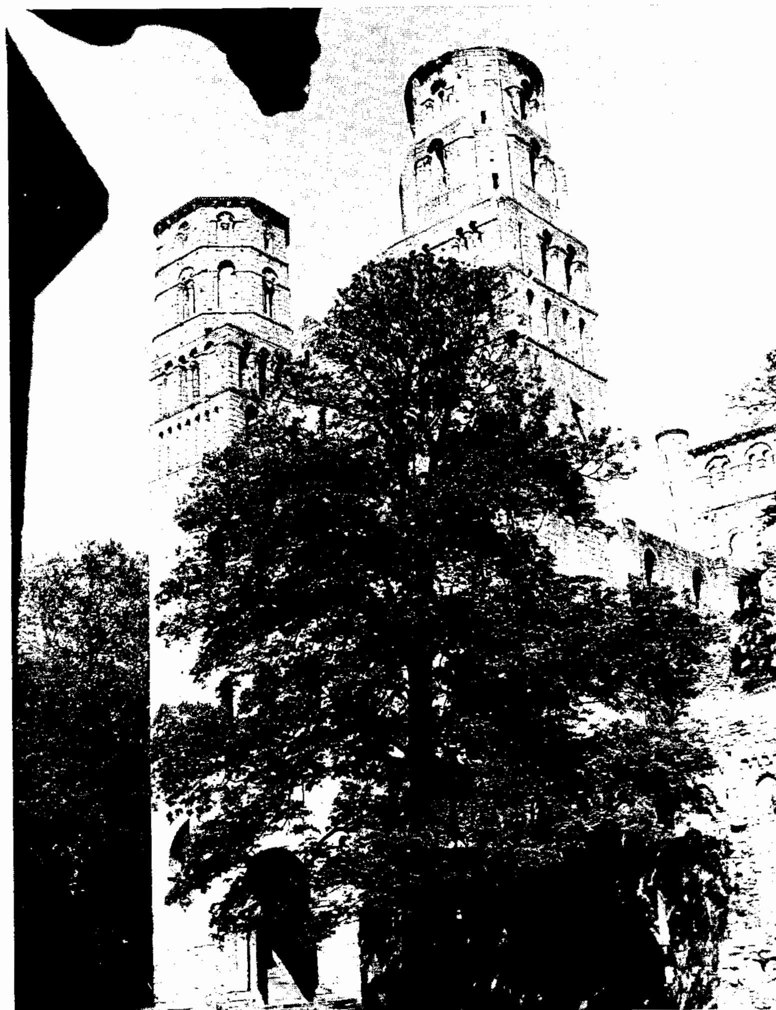
details, however, the agricultural achievement of the Anglo-Saxons cannot be gainsaid: they transformed forests into fields, established the village community, fixed the peasant on his plot, and vastly augmented the bounty of the land.

Late-Saxon Art

In the arts, too, late-Saxon England demonstrated signs of a maturing civilization. No large Anglo-Saxon churches survive—most of them were torn down and replaced in the generation or two after the Norman Conquest—but descriptions by contemporary writers, confirmed by modern excavations, attest to the existence of spacious, well-designed cathedrals in episcopal centers such as Canterbury and Winchester. And there survive many village churches dating wholly or in part from Anglo-Saxon times. Although influenced to a degree by the styles of Carolingian France and, later on, the Rhinelands, they show in their proportions and in the rhythm of their textured surfaces a strong native originality. The church tower at Earls Barton, for example, is a bold, assured expression of a distinctive Anglo-Saxon style. The last great church of pre-Conquest England, Westminster Abbey, was built in the Norman Romanesque manner under the personal



EARLS BARTON CHURCH, NORTHAMPTONSHIRE
The towers are late 10th century; the battlements were added much later. *National Monuments Record.*



RUINS OF JUMIÈGES ABBEY, NORMANDY, C. 1066
The original Westminster Abbey was built by Edward the Confessor in a very similar style. *Rapho Guillumette.*

LATE ANGLO-SAXON ART
A crucifixion, from the Gospel Book of Countess Judith. *Pierpont Morgan Library.*

supervision of Edward the Confessor (1042–1066). Although totally rebuilt by Henry III in the thirteenth century (again in the style of contemporary France), its original appearance can be imagined by looking at the majestic ruins of the Norman abbey of Jumièges, built at about the same time and in much the same style: vast and massive, its great round arches and heavy columns convey a feeling of solidity and permanence.

Tenth-century English monastic reform, associated with such figures as Dunstan and Edgar the Peaceable, produced an original body of religious literature, written in the Anglo-Saxon language and intended for laymen as well as churchmen. A number of manuscripts of the period are illuminated in decorative styles that show the influence of both continental and earlier Northumbrian traditions. Tenth-century Winchester was the center of a highly original style of manuscript illumination that draws from Carolingian models and yet is thoroughly distinctive in its fluid outlines of human and animal figures, its fluttering draperies, and its soft pastel colors. In the eleventh century, the Winchester style developed a degree of emotional intensity unparalleled in Europe. The poignant crucifixion from the Gospel

Book of Countess Judith (Winchester, c. 1050–1065) betokens a profound change in the mood of medieval piety—from the awesome to the human, from Christ in majesty to Christ suffering. Perhaps better than any other contemporary work of art, it shows the level of technical skill and emotional depth possible in the closing years of the Anglo-Saxon era.

The Second Danish Invasion

A century after Alfred turned the Danish tide at the battle of Edington, disaster struck England. It was a disaster that few at the time could have recognized as such, for in the year 978 England was apparently as prosperous and secure as it had been during the previous generation. Under Alfred and his able descendants the monarchy and the kingdom had made notable progress. But now, in 978, the crown passed to an incompetent heir—Ethelred the Unready (978–1016). The cataclysmic events that followed his accession proved once again the importance of adequate military and political leadership to a medieval state.

"The Unready" is really a mistranslation of Ethelred's nickname. The medieval term is *Unræd,* which means "no council" or "bad council." *Ethelred* itself means "noble council," and thus *Ethelred Unræd* makes a fine pun in Old English but a very obscure one in modern English. Some scholars have tried to compromise with "Ethelred the Redless," but that doesn't help much. We will stick with "the Unready," which catches the original punning spirit and makes some sense—even though it is not precisely the original sense.

According to the twelfth-century historian William of Malmesbury, Ethelred's troubles began early:

> Archbishop Dunstan, indeed, had foretold his unworthiness, having discovered it by a filthy sign: for when Ethelred was a tiny infant, just as he was immersed in the baptismal font, with all the bishops standing around him, he defiled the sacrament with a copious bowel movement. At this, Dunstan, being extremely angered, exclaimed, "By God and his mother, this will be a sorry fellow!"

Ethelred was timid, banal, and indecisive. He fell heir to the throne as a boy of ten, and although he reigned for thirty-eight years, he remained a child to the end. Like Peter Pan, he never really grew up. The kingdom he inherited was prosperous and well-governed by the standards of tenth-century Europe; but the long process of amalgamating the Scandinavian settlers of the Danelaw into the fabric of Anglo-Saxon society had barely begun, and the loyalty of these Anglo-Danes to the English monarchy was still tenuous. Without external pressures Alfred's dynasty would doubtless have survived Ethelred's incompetence, but the age of the Vikings was not yet passed. Within a couple of years of Ethelred's accession the raids resumed.

The early years of the reign were marked not only by Danish raids but also by the rising power of the Anglo-Saxon ealdormen at the expense of the royal government—an inevitable consequence of weak rule. As this trend toward decentralization progressed, the Danish raids steadily increased in intensity. The new raiders were often organized into tight military brotherhoods—war bands along the lines of the old comitatus but with stricter rules and more predatory goals. The Viking brotherhoods of this era seem to have been modeled on a warrior community which, according to Norse legend, was founded at Jomsburg near the mouth of the Oder in Germany by King Harold Bluetooth of Denmark.[7] The Vikings of Jomsburg—the Jomsvikings as they are called—had strict regulations regarding membership and conduct; these they enforced in their own military court. Under the general direction of the Danish monarchy, they often displayed fierce independence, undertaking plundering expeditions on their own or selling their services to the highest bidder. One of the most savage and bloodthirsty Danish raiders in Ethelred's reign, Thorkell the Tall, seems to have been a Jomsviking; and for a time Ethelred himself was able to purchase the services of Thorkell's band against the attacks of other Danes.

In spite of this independent spirit, England's second Viking invasions were far more closely governed by the Danish monarchy than the first. In Scandinavia, as in England, royal power had made impressive gains in the tenth century. When the invasions reached their climax they had become, in effect, an integrated effort on the part of the Danish monarchy to conquer England.

It would be a mistake to ascribe the success of the second Danish invasions, as is sometimes done, to an inherent weakness in the Old English state. The failure of the Anglo-Saxon military effort resulted from the disloyalty of the Anglo-Danes combined with the ill fortune of being ruled by an incompetent king. Contemporary writers dwell repeatedly on the wavering loyalties of the Anglo-Danish aristocracy; and the futility of Ethelred's leadership is illustrated vividly in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle:*

> And when they [the Danes] were in the east, the English army was kept in the west, and when they were in the south, our army was in the north. Thereupon all the counselors were summoned to the king, and it was decided how the country should be defended. But if anything was decided then, it did not last even a month. Finally there was no leader who would collect an army, but each fled as best he could, and in the end no shire would even help the next.

Desperate to forestall disaster, Ethelred adopted the expedient of appeasing the Danes with bribes. In 991, the same year that Ealdorman

[7] Many of the better known Vikings of this era were given nicknames: Swein Forkbeard, Eric Bloodaxe, Ragnar Hairy-Breeches, Halfdan the Generous with Money but Stingy with Food. An Icelandic musician was called Einar Jingle-Scale; a Norwegian poet, Eyvind the Plagiarist.

Byrhtnoth scorned the Danish demand for tribute at Maldon, King Ethelred paid the first danegeld. In later years danegelds were paid repeatedly; they served merely to emphasize to the fierce seamen the degree of England's weakness and the extent of its wealth.

In 1013, King Swein of Denmark, son and successor of Harold Bluetooth, threw all his resources into a campaign of conquest, and Anglo-Saxon England, now badly demoralized, fell quickly into his hands. The old Danelaw gave Swein its firm support, and the English, disgusted with Ethelred the Unready, offered only mild resistance. Ethelred fled to Normandy. His son, a skillful and courageous young prince named Edmund Ironside, fought on for a season but was killed in 1016, whereupon the Witan concurred in the accession of a Danish king to the throne of Alfred. Swein having died in 1014, his son Canute became the new king of England.

The Reign of Canute (1016–1035)

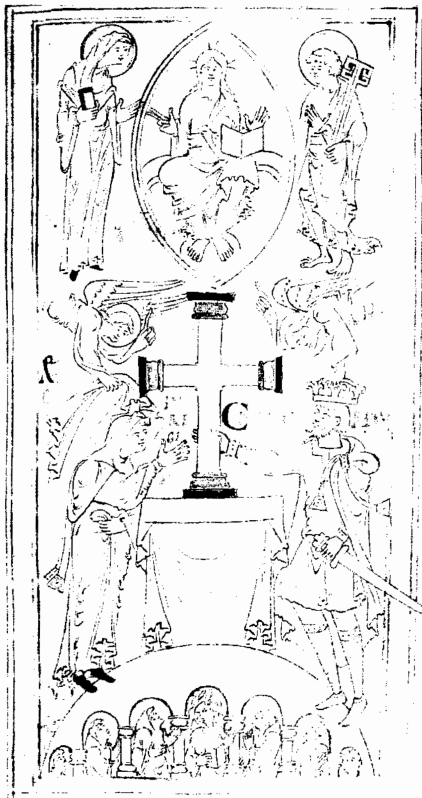
King Canute was a far better monarch than Ethelred the Unready. His contemporaries called him Canute the Wealthy; later generations knew him as Canute the Great.[8] A Norse saga writer provides a half-legendary description of him: he was tall and strong and had blond hair, keen eyes, and a long, narrow nose—slightly bent—that marred his good looks.

The new king was a product of civilizing forces that were just then transforming the Norse world. In 1016 Viking states from Iceland to Russia were in the process of embracing Christianity; and in Scandinavia itself the rise of royal power was bringing political coherence to the northern lands of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Accordingly, Canute ascended the Anglo-Saxon throne as a civilized man and a Christian. Alfred's dynasty was temporarily unseated, but in Canute's reign security and prosperity returned to England and the monarchy continued to grow in strength.

As it happened, Canute ruled Norway as well as Denmark, and his accession to the Old English throne made him master of a great empire girding the North Sea. It was an ephemeral empire, to be sure, held together by the fragile bonds of allegiance to a single man; but while he lived Canute was the dominant political figure in northern Europe.

England was by far the wealthiest and most civilized land in his empire, and Canute spent most of his reign there. Aware of the achievements of his Anglo-Saxon predecessors, he ruled in the Old English tradition, respecting old customs, issuing dooms, and supporting the Church. He won the vigorous support of the clergy by granting them land and treasure and providing them with an environment of peace in which to work. In the words of one contemporary observer, "Merry sang the monks of Ely as Canute the king rowed by."

[8] On the reign of Canute and his Anglo-Scandinavian "empire" see L. M. Larson, *Canute the Great* (New York, 1912).



KING CANUTE AND QUEEN AELFGIFU The royal couple are shown presenting a gift to the New Minster at Winchester, while Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and St. Peter look down approvingly. *British Museum.*

Canute succeeded far better than his Anglo-Saxon predecessors in bringing unity to the land, for Englishmen and Anglo-Danes supported him with almost equal enthusiasm. Indeed, perhaps only a Scandinavian king could have won for the English monarchy the unquestioned loyalty of the Danelaw. At a council at Oxford in 1018, Canute is described as formally declaring peace between Danes and Englishmen and bringing an end to their former strife. The king's Witan swore to uphold Christianity, to love Canute, and to observe the laws of King Edgar.

King Canute was a Dane, and he acted as such. He divided his kingdom in Danish fashion into several large districts ruled by earls (a name derived from the Old Norse *jarl*); and he brought to his court a bodyguard of Scandinavian housecarles—a sizable group of trained warriors organized along the lines of the Jomsvikings, with their own elaborate regulations and their own judicial assembly. But in most other respects Canute ruled much as an able Anglo-Saxon might have done. Hundred courts and shire courts continued as before, towns grew even more rapidly through the stimulus of an increased North Sea commerce, and agrarian life proceeded unaffected. Indeed, Canute carried his Anglo-Saxon traditionalism to the bedchamber by marrying Ethelred's widow, a strong-minded Norman princess named Emma, who quite clearly preferred her second husband to her first.

On Canute's death in 1035, his empire was divided between his two sons; they ruled England in turn, briefly and badly. When the last of them died without heirs, the Witan chose as its new king a member of the old Wessex dynasty, the long-exiled son of Ethelred and Emma. In 1042 the dynasty of Alfred was re-established peacefully in the person of Edward the Confessor.

The Reign of Edward the Confessor (1042–1066)

Edward, paradoxically, was even less an Englishman than Canute. Between the ages of twelve and thirty-six he had lived in exile in Normandy, the homeland of his mother. In these years he had become deeply Normanized. A pious man of limited political acumen, he spoke French by preference and installed Norman favorites in his court and kingdom. "When King Edward of holy memory returned from Francia," his biographer writes, "quite a number of men of that nation, and they not base-born, accompanied him. And these, since he was master of the whole kingdom, he kept with him, enriched them with many honors, and made them his privy counselors and administrators of the royal court." [9] Thus the Norman Conquest of England, although consummated on the field of Hastings in 1066, had its begining in 1042. Such, at least, were the feelings of many Englishmen of the time who loved Edward but not his Norman favorites or his Norman customs.

Under Canute the earls had been strictly controlled, but under the weaker Edward they began to assert their autonomy. Some of the great English earls became prime representatives of the growing Anglo-Saxon resentment against Norman infiltration. The most powerful of these magnates was Earl Godwin of Wessex, who managed to place his sons in several of the other earldoms and even engineered a marriage between his daughter Edith and Edward the Confessor.

The political tensions of the Confessor's reign reached their climax in 1051–52, when Earl Godwin and his allies briefly turned against the king in open rebellion. The affair may have arisen from a dispute over the succession. The Norman sources (which are not entirely trustworthy in these matters) indicate that in 1051 Edward, who was childless, designated as his heir Duke William the Bastard of Normandy, his relative and friend. It may be that Earl Godwin himself aspired to the throne and was driven to des-

[9] *Vita Aedwardi Regis: The Life of King Edward*, Frank Barlow, ed. (London, 1962), p. 17. On the reign in general, see the excellent biography by Frank Barlow, *Edward the Confessor* (Berkeley, Calif., 1970).

perate measures by Edward's decision. Whatever the reasons, in 1051 Godwin rebelled against the king. The immediate cause was an incident that occurred at Dover, an important seaport in Godwin's Wessex earldom. A French lord, Eustace of Boulogne, was returning through Wessex from a visit to the royal court, possibly as an envoy from Duke William. When he came to Dover, the townsmen rioted and killed some of the knights in his retinue. King Edward demanded that Godwin punish the townsmen. Godwin refused and assembled an army, perhaps hoping to force Edward to dismiss his Norman coterie and change his succession plans. But Godwin quickly discovered that Edward had the backing of all the magnates except the Godwins, and the earl and his sons had to flee the country. In 1052, however, they returned, rallied support to their cause, overawed Edward with a show of military power, and forced him to reinstate them.

The Godwin clan had won an important bloodless victory. Edward was humiliated and, bowing to the wishes of the earl, sent home most of his Norman supporters. Among these was Robert of Jumièges, Archbishop of Canterbury, who was forced to abandon his see. Archbishop Robert was replaced by a creature of the Godwins named Stigand—a vainglorious popinjay of a man who presided over the English Church with a singular lack of distinction. From then on Edward became more and more a figurehead. The real power was exercised by Earl Godwin and, after Godwin's death in 1053, by his son Harold Godwinson, who succeeded to the earldom of Wessex.

Harold emerges from the writings of his age as a more attractive, less crassly ambitious figure than his father. Between 1053 and Edward's death in 1066, the king and the earl seem to have worked together on reasonably good terms. Harold behaved with proper deference toward Edward, did most of the necessary frontier campaigning, and left the monarch to his favorite pastimes—hunting, churchgoing, and directing the construction of the great Romanesque abbey at Westminster. Harold proved himself a man of political talent and exceptional generalship, and in the years of his power the kingdom flourished.

By the standards of mid-eleventh-century Western Europe, England on the eve of the Norman Conquest was prosperous and well-governed. The Church was thriving, the military organization was efficient, towns and commerce were growing, and money was circulating to a degree unknown on the continent. Despite enduring diversities in law and custom between one region and another, Anglo-Saxon England had achieved a genuine sense of national unity, which contrasted sharply with the state of political chaos and endemic private warfare that persisted throughout most of France. A vivid illustration of England's growing feeling of national cohesion is to be found in a passage from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* under the year 1052. On Godwin's return from exile, both he and King Edward had large military forces behind them, and for a time there seemed every possibility of open battle. But, as the *Chronicle* explains, the chief military leaders on both sides decided against a test of arms: "It was hateful to them that they should fight against men of their own race, because very few worthy men on either side were not Englishmen." As this passage makes clear, Bede's vision of the English as a single people was by now shared by the laity.

The Reign of Harold and the Norman Conquest

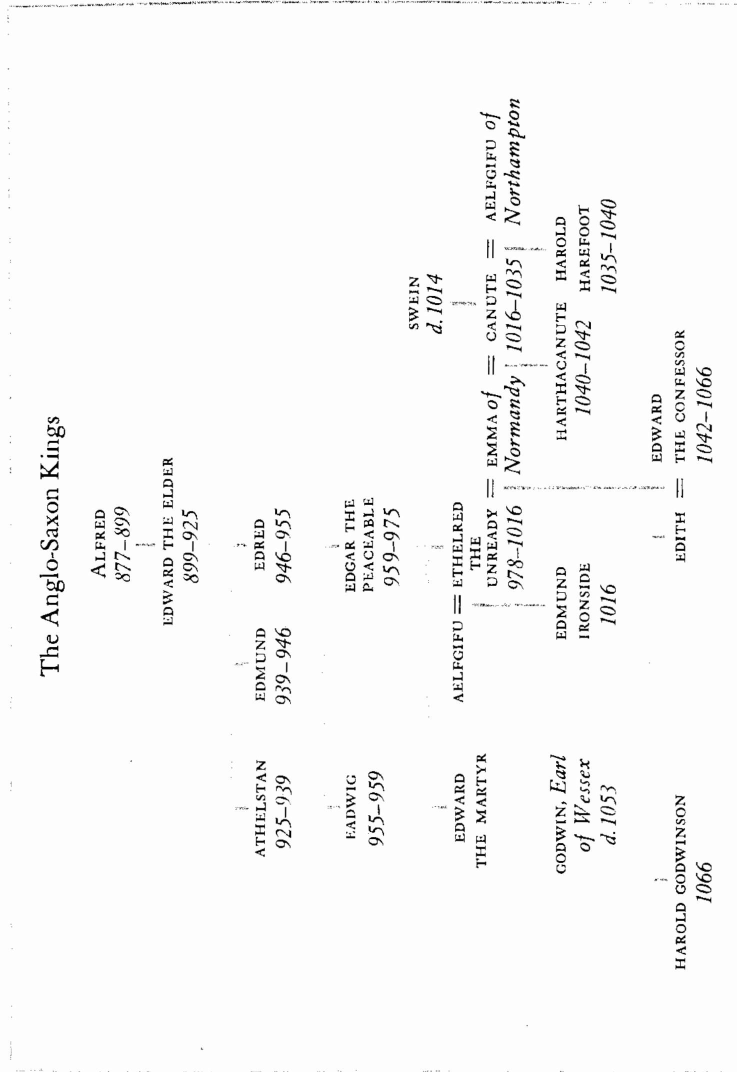
King Edward the Confessor died in 1066. He is reputed to have remained chaste throughout his marriage to Godwin's daughter Edith; whether this is true or merely a pious excuse for a childless marriage, his death brought to a head the problem of the royal succession.

There were three serious candidates for the Confessor's throne. Earl Harold Godwinson had been the most powerful man in England for the previous thirteen years and had proven his capacity. Edward is alleged to have designated Harold his heir on his deathbed, and on the day after Edward's death the Witan chose the earl as king. In the absence of a royal son, Harold's position as heir designate of King Edward and his selection by the Witan gave him a strong claim. He also had a certain tenuous connection with the throne through his sister Edith, who was Edward's widow, although he was not himself of royal blood.

Duke William the Bastard of Normandy was distantly related to Edward through his great-aunt, Emma, the Norman wife of Ethelred the Unready and Canute. William also stood on his claim that Edward had earlier designated him heir to the English throne. It is quite possible, of course, that Edward had designated William in 1051 and Harold in 1066. Finally, William claimed priority over Harold Godwinson on the basis of a peculiar episode that occurred in 1064. Harold, visiting the continent, had fallen captive to a petty lord who had released him into Duke William's custody. William treated Harold as an honored guest, but it is by no means clear that the earl was free to leave the Norman court. At length, Harold took a public oath to support Duke William's claims to the English throne on Edward's death. Hence in 1066 William and his supporters regarded Harold as an oath breaker; and by both the Christian and the feudal ethics of the day the violation of a pledge was regarded with profound contempt.

Harold Hardrada, King of Norway, was an illustrious Norse warrior whose skill at arms had won him fame from Byzantium to Scandinavia. As ruler of Norway, he too claimed dominion over England as successor to Canute. Harold Hardrada's claim was perhaps the weakest of the three, but his immense military reputation must have made the English deeply apprehensive. It was clear that Harold Godwinson would have to fight for his new crown.

Beyond the rivalry of Harold Hardrada and William the Bastard, Harold Godwinson had two additional liabilities. In 1066 the papacy in Rome was in the process of reasserting its authority over the European



Church. As a jealous guardian of proper canonical processes, the papacy could not accept the deposition of Robert of Jumièges as archbishop of Canterbury in favor of Stigand. The appointment of a new archbishop before the old one was dead was a flagrant violation of canon law. Hence the papacy was hostile toward Harold Godwinson, who supported Stigand and whose father had engineered his usurpation. Duke William exploited this hostility, winning full papal support for his projected conquest of England. William's invading army was privileged to carry the papal banner which, together with the Norman claim that Godwinson was a perjurer, placed the duke in an exceedingly strong moral position and made his invasion a kind of holy war.

Harold Godwinson's second liability was his brother, Earl Tostig of Northumbria. Tostig was an unpopular lord who was overthrown by a Northumbrian revolt in 1065. The revolt appeared to have strong popular backing and was condoned by Harold; Tostig never forgave his brother. The Northumbrians chose as their new earl an important magnate named Morcar, brother of Earl Edwin of Mercia and unrelated to the Godwin clan. Harold's passive role in this affair seems to have won him the gratitude of the two powerful brothers, Edwin and Morcar; but Tostig, now in exile, was reasonably secure at home, but he had more than his share of dangerous enemies abroad.

Normandy, on the eve of the Battle of Hastings, was a well-organized feudal state whose duke controlled his vassals to a degree unmatched elsewhere in France.[10] During the century and a half since its establishment in 911, the Viking state of Normandy had embraced Christianity, absorbed French culture, adopted the French language, and based its military and political organization on the principles of French feudalism. Normandy in 1066 was a land of feudal castles and feudal knights whose cavalry tactics contrasted sharply with the infantry tradition of the Anglo-Saxon fyrd.

Evidence relating to pre-Conquest Norman history is far from abundant, but it is sufficient to suggest that the high degree of ducal control and centralization Normandy enjoyed in 1066 was to a considerable extent a product of William the Bastard's own statesmanship. Winning a significant victory over his rebellious barons in 1047, he spent the years thereafter subordinating the Norman nobility to the ducal administration and working toward the elimination of private warfare, which had long been endemic among the feudal baronage.

But strong as William was, he was not strong enough to win for Normandy a position of hegemony in northern France that would provide him with the necessary security to undertake a major invasion of England. He

[10] A thorough, highly technical account of eleventh-century Normandy is C. H. Haskins, *Norman Institutions* (1918). On the scope of Norman expansion in the eleventh century—into southern Italy, Sicily, and the Holy Land as well as England—see David C. Douglas, *The Norman Achievement* (Berkeley, 1969).

achieved this hegemony quite by accident when his two chief rivals, the count of the neighboring feudal state of Anjou and the king of France, both died in 1060. France fell to a child king, and Anjou entered a period of disputed succession. In the meantime William had insured the support of the prosperous neighboring county of Flanders by marrying the daughter of its count in 1053.

On Edward the Confessor's death, therefore, William was in a position to make good his claims to the English throne. Good fortune provided the opportunity, and William had the courage, imagination, and greed to grasp it.[11] The barons of Normandy agreed to the daring enterprise at a council early in 1066, and William set about to augment his Norman force with volunteers from all over Europe. Adventurous knights flocked to his standard from all quarters—from Brittany, Maine, Flanders, Aquitaine, central France, and even southern Italy—drawn by William's already formidable military reputation, by the generous wages he promised, and by the hope of treasure and estates in the conquered land. But despite the support of his duchy, the growing size of his army, and the moral backing of the papacy, William's projected invasion was an audacious gamble. England was far larger and wealthier than Normandy, and it was ruled by a warrior-king of ability and resolution.

Harold Godwinson, however, had a staggering task before him. Beset by enemies, he could not predict the place, the time, or the source of the first attacks against his kingdom. At it happened, the initial assault came from his brother Tostig. In May 1066, Tostig emerged from exile to begin harrying the coasts of southern and eastern England with a sizable body of followers. Tostig's men were turned back by local contingents of the fyrd, and he was obliged to retire to Scotland. Obviously incapable of doing serious damage on his own, he entered into an alliance with Harold Hardrada and merged his forces with those of the Norse king.

By midsummer, Duke William's army was ready for the invasion, and only the persistence of contrary winds prevented his crossing the Channel. Godwinson had meanwhile assembled the fyrd in southern England and had stationed a large fleet off the Channel shore. But week after week the winds remained contrary for William, and the English watched their coasts in vain.

Midway through September Godwinson was forced to dismiss his army and fleet. There is some evidence that service in the fyrd was limited by custom to two months. By mid-September the term had expired, provisions were exhausted, and the warriors wished to return home for the harvest. The

[11] Much has been written on the Norman Conquest. Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (3rd ed., Oxford, 1971), contains a good summary; see also C. W. Hollister, *Anglo-Saxon Military Institutions* (Oxford, 1962), especially pp. 147–52, and H. R. Loyn, *The Norman Conquest* (London, 1965). On the background and aftermath of the Conquest see R. Allen Brown, *The Normans and the Norman Conquest* (London, 1969). A vivid contemporary account of the battle of Hastings is Guy of Amiens, *The Carmen de Hastingae Proelio,* Catherine Morton and Hope Muntz, eds. (Latin with English translation) (Oxford Medieval Texts, 1972).

contrary winds had served William after all, for Harold now had only his housecarles to guard the shore.

Immediately after disbanding his army, Godwinson received news that Harold Hardrada had invaded Yorkshire in northern England. Hardrada's army consisted of three hundred shiploads of Norse warriors, in addition to Tostig and his considerable following. The combined force moved toward the key northern city of York. On September 20, 1066, Hardrada's host encountered the northern fyrd led by the two earls, Edwin and Morcar, at Fulford Gate, two miles south of York. The battle of Fulford raged for the better part of a day, and in the end the local fyrd broke before the invaders. Receiving the submission of York, Hardrada then apparently conceived the idea of incorporating a number of Anglo-Danish Yorkshiremen into his army. He withdrew to a strategic crossroads called Stamford Bridge, seven miles east of York, to await hostages from the conquered city.

Godwinson reassembled his army as best he could on short notice and rushed northward. Five days after Fulford, on September 25, Godwinson's army arrived at Stamford Bridge, caught the Norwegian host by surprise, and after a long and savage battle succeeded in crushing it. Tostig and Hardrada were both killed, and the battered survivors of the three-hundred-ship host returned to Norway in twenty-four ships. Stamford Bridge was perhaps the greatest military triumph in Anglo-Saxon history. An ominous Scandinavian threat of twenty years' standing was removed, and the mightiest Viking warrior of the age lay in his grave.

Two days after the battle of Stamford Bridge the Channel winds changed at last, and the Norman invasion began. At nine in the morning on Thursday, September 28, the Norman fleet entered Pevensey Bay in Sussex, and William's army disembarked at leisure on an undefended shore. Immediately the Normans occupied the important port of Hastings and proceeded to build a castle there to protect their avenue of escape should the war turn against them. Modern historians, with the advantage of hindsight, have sometimes assumed that the Norman victory at the battle of Hastings was inevitable. But William, lacking the gift of foreknowledge, was far from certain of the outcome. Indeed, he could hardly have known at the time whether his enemy would be Harold Godwinson or Harold Hardrada.

On news of the Norman landing, Godwinson acted with almost frenzied speed. Within thirteen days he settled affairs in Yorkshire, pulled together his tired and decimated army, and marched 240 miles from York to Hastings. From the standpoint of military strategy, Harold's haste was a serious error. There was no real reason for it, since William was too cautious to proceed far from the Sussex shore until he had done battle with the English. Perhaps Godwinson was overconfident after his victory at Stamford Bridge; perhaps he was solicitous of the defenseless people of his former earldom of Wessex, who were being ravaged by the Normans. Whatever his reasons, he was obliged to face William with an exhausted army far below normal strength.

On Friday, October 13, William's scouts sighted King Harold's army,

THE BAYEUX TAPESTRY (LATE 11TH CENTURY)
The appearance of Halley's Comet alarms King Harold (center) and his subjects. Harold's fear of the Normans crossing the Channel is depicted by the ships on the lower border.

In this detail, the English foot soldiers atop their hill (right) are successfully repulsing a charge of mounted Norman knights.

and on the following day there occurred the most decisive battle in English history. The battle of Hastings was fought on Saturday, October 14, from dawn to dusk. For the English it was the third major battle in less than four weeks. Edwin and Morcar and their troops had been too badly mauled by the Norsemen to join Harold on his southward march, and there had been insufficient time to summon the full complement of the southern fyrd.

Harold's army, depending on the traditional infantry tactics of the Anglo-Saxons to turn back William's cavalry, took a strong defensive position on the crest of a low hill, the forward line standing shoulder to shoulder in the form of a shield wall.[12] Repeated Norman cavalry charges were repulsed by this shield wall during the course of the day; and although the arrows of Norman archers took many lives, the Anglo-Saxon line remained firm. At one point in the battle the Normans fled in panic until their duke rallied them and ordered them to turn on a body of pursuing English, who were then savagely cut down. There is some evidence that on one or two later occasions the Normans feigned flight in order to draw more of the English out of their shield wall. At length King Harold himself was slain, and with the coming of dusk the shield wall broke at last. The English fyrd, now leaderless, fled into the Sussex forest.

William's triumph marks the end of Anglo-Saxon England and the beginning of Norman England. It remained for William to consolidate his conquest and establish firm rule over the kingdom. Hastings left England kingless, disorganized, and all but defenseless against the Norman host.

The great battle and its background have been described in some detail in order to see beyond the traditional view that Hastings represented the inevitable victory of an up-to-date continental feudal state over an effete, insular culture, exhausted of its inspiration and militarily antiquated. On the contrary, the Anglo-Saxon army gave a good account of itself under the most adverse conditions; and Anglo-Saxon civilization retained to the end its precocious political organization and rich cultural vitality. On the sturdy foundation constructed by Theodore of Tarsus, Alfred the Great, Edward the Elder, Edgar the Peaceable, and others like them, the Norman kings would build the most tightly organized Western European state since the days of the Romans.

[12] After the Conquest, William built Battle Abbey on this spot. The site is presently occupied by a school for girls.

DURHAM CATHEDRAL. *British Tourist Authority.*

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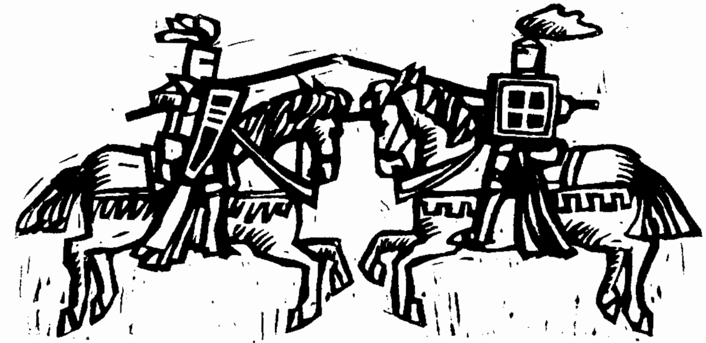

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