The Impact of the
Norman Conquest

William the Conqueror was a gifted warrior-states-
man, tenacious in the pursuit of his goals, cruel or magnanimous as it suited
his purposes, and phenomenally energetic. A monk of the next generation
described him in these words:

> He was tall, extraordinarily fleshy, with a fierce look, and a forehead bare
> of hair, with arms of such strength that nobody else could draw his bow,
> though he himself could bend it while his horse was at full gallop. He was
> majestic, whether sitting or standing—though the protuberance of his belly
> deformed his royal person—of robust health, addicted to the pleasures of
> hunting.[1]

Having won his gamble at Hastings, William moved unerringly toward
the completion of his conquest. He knew that London was the key to En-
gland, and shortly after the great battle he advanced northward toward the
city. Finding London Bridge too well defended to permit his crossing the
Thames and assaulting the city directly, he led his army westward—devastat-
ing the countryside as he went—until he reached the town of Wallingford in
Berkshire. Here he crossed the Thames and advanced eastward on London.
Before he reached the city he was met by a number of London citizens and
other notables—such as Archbishop Stigand and earls Edwin and Morcar—

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[1] From William of Malmesbury. *Acts of the Kings of the English.* The most complete
and satisfactory biography is David C. Douglas, *William the Conqueror* (Berkeley,
1964), which also provides an excellent account of pre-Conquest Normandy. Frank
Barlow, *William I and the Norman Conquest* (London, 1965), is a good summary
that presents William as a man with the values and talents of an able but essentially
ordinary baron.

who made their submission to him and surrendered the city. On Christmas Day, 1066, Duke William was crowned king of England in the new Westminster Abbey, with all the pomp and ceremony that traditionally accompanied Anglo-Saxon coronations. All present, both Norman and English, promised their allegiance to the new king, and William, for his part, undertook to abide by the laws in effect during Edward the Confessor's reign and to rule in the tradition of the Wessex kings.

The Conquest Consolidated

To an extent, William abided by his promises, but it soon became clear that more than words would be required to pacify his new kingdom. In the months and years following the coronation many Englishmen continued to resist him or revolted against his rule at every opportunity. The Scandinavians too, despite their calamitous defeat at Stamford Bridge, continued to risk new invasions of England. To complicate matters, the kingdom of France and the county of Anjou were gradually recovering their former strength, and William had to devote much of his energy to continental campaigning to protect his Norman duchy. In short, William's new Anglo-Norman state was threatened by many hostile forces, both internal and external, and his energy was taxed to the limit in the defense of his far-flung domain.

During the five years following the Conquest, William and his lieutenants were kept occupied by a series of English rebellions, some of them coordinated with amphibious attacks from Scandinavia. William of Malmesbury, writing several decades later, comments on the savage measures the Conqueror took in defense of his crown:

> Perhaps the king's behavior can be excused if he was at times quite severe with the English, for he found scarcely any of them faithful. This fact so irritated his fierce mind that he took from the greater of them first their wealth, then their land, and finally, in some instances, their lives.

In the course of these revolts Edwin and Morcar turned against the Conqueror, and both lost their lives. A ruffian named Hereward entrenched himself against William on the Isle of Ely and plundered the surrounding countryside until he was at last suppressed by the Normans. Despite his savage sack of Peterborough Abbey, Hereward later became a glamorous figure in English patriotic legend.

William used both kindness and cruelty in consolidating his new realm, but in retrospect it was his cruelty that predominated. Obliged to besiege the town of Exeter, he allowed its citizens to surrender on generous terms. But he replied to a major revolt in Yorkshire by a campaign of ruthless devastation, transforming vast areas of that once-prosperous county into wastelands in order to break northern England's will to resist. Contemporary writers speak of hundreds of rotting corpses in the Yorkshire countryside and thousands of starving refugees.

ENGLAND
AND NORMANDY
AFTER 1066

SCOTLAND

Melrose
Jedburgh

Tynemouth
Newcastle
Durham
Richmond
Whitby

IRELAND

IRISH SEA

York
Gt. Fulford
Stamford
Bridge

Pontefract

NORTH
SEA

ENGLAND

Chester
Rhuddlan
Deganwy
Nottingham
Lincoln

Shrewsbury
Montgomery

Crowland
Elmham
Lichfield
Thorney
Norwich
Peterborough
Thetford
Warwick
Huntingdon
Ely
Eye
Northampton
Fakenham
Worcester
Cambridge
Hereford
Evesham
Clare
St. David's
Winchcomb
Berkhamsted
Gloucester
St. Albans
Dorchester
London
Bristol
Westminster
Wallingford
Malmesbury
Canterbury
Bruges
Ghent
Wells
Salisbury
Rochester
Dover
Glastonbury
Winchester
Battle
Romney
Wissant
FLANDERS
Montacute
Ramsey
Bosham
Chichester
St. Bertin's
Sherborne
Hastings
Exeter
Selsey
Pevensey
Boulogne

Isle of Wight

ARTOIS

English Channel

St. Valéry

PONTHIEU

Rouen
Gisors
Bayeux
Dives
Caen
Oise R.
Coutances
Falaise
NORM
Evreux
Paris
Avranches
Mantes
FRENCH
Domfront
Chartres
Seine R.
Dinan
Dol
Alençon
Bellême
ROYAL
Gael
Rennes
MAINE
BLOIS
DEMESNE
BRITTANY
LeMans
Blois
Loire R.
Angers
Tours
ANJOU
TOURAINE
FRANCE
POITOU
Poitiers
AQUITAINE

Rhine R.
Meuse R.

During these restless years William's task was rendered all the more difficult by the fact that he had to divide his time between England and Normandy. His ultimate success in subduing England was due to several interrelated factors: (1) English opposition was never properly coordinated. Almost from the beginning William was able to summon substantial portions of the English fyrd to fight in his behalf against English rebels. (2) While William was rising to power in pre-Conquest Normandy, he had won the firm support of a rising new feudal aristocracy; after the Conquest he could usually depend upon these powerful Norman aristocrats to defend his interests both in Normandy and in England. As holders of vast estates in the conquered land, they had both the power and the motivation to uphold the interests of the Norman monarchy. (3) William himself exhibited remarkable energy and resourcefulness in these years and demonstrated an almost uncanny ability to buy off his enemies, win their loyalty through generous terms, or terrorize them with his cruelty, as the occasion might demand. (4) Both William and his aristocratic followers built numerous castles in England. These fortresses, which had long been a characteristic feature of the Norman landscape, were smaller, tougher, and far more numerous than the Old English burghs. Although crude by later standards, usually consisting merely of an earthen mound surrounded by a wooden palisade and surmounted by a square wooden tower, they were nevertheless exceedingly difficult to capture by assault. Accordingly, they became bastions of Norman power and stark symbols of Norman authority in the conquered realm.

The Anglo-Saxon revolts ended around 1071. Thereafter the English were loyal to William and his successors, and in later years the Norman kings often employed Englishmen to help suppress rebellions by Norman barons. Nevertheless, even if the Conqueror did intend in 1066 to allow members of the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy to share the wealth and governance of England with his Norman followers, the revolts of 1066–1071 forced him to adopt a thoroughgoing policy of Normanization. As a consequence, the Old English aristocracy was virtually disinherited, and the spoils of the Conquest passed almost entirely to the king, his great Norman nobles, and other continental lords who had supported the invasion. Not only was the Anglo-Saxon secular aristocracy dispossessed; the great abbeys and bishoprics of England also passed, with few exceptions, into the hands of Norman prelates.

The effect of the Norman Conquest upon England has long been one of the most hotly contested issues in English medieval scholarship. That it resulted in a transformation of aristocratic society there can be no question, for it brought to power a French-speaking nobility accustomed to knightly cavalry warfare and castle building and different in many respects from the aristocracy of Anglo-Saxon times. But the aristocracy, powerful though it was, constituted only a tiny fraction of the population. What of the rest?

English towns were growing in size and economic importance before the Conquest and continued to grow after it; on the whole they seem to

have been little affected by the dynastic and aristocratic revolution. If Scandinavian commerce declined, commerce with the continent increased. So, although the century or two following William's invasion witnessed an extensive growth in towns and commerce, this expansion was a product, not of the Norman Conquest, but of the vast economic changes that were affecting all Europe.

Peasant life, too, went on much as before. In the long run, the Norman Conquest probably tended to make the peasantry more uniform than in Anglo-Saxon times, raising the status of slaves and lowering that of freemen. Gradually, both were absorbed into the middle range of dependent farmers or serfs; they were bound to a manorial lord, tied to their land, and obliged to give a portion of their produce to their lord and to work certain days of the week on his demesne. But such changes occurred slowly, and they are difficult to trace with certainty. Eventually the buoyant economy of high medieval Europe seems to have resulted in a gradual elevation of the status of serfs, both in England and on the continent.

Architecturally, the Norman Conquest brought visible and impressive changes to the face of the land. Besides the numerous crude wooden castle towers built on artificial mounds, the Normans erected a few castles of monumental proportions—great square keeps with heavy stone walls, such as the Conqueror's Tower of London and the early-twelfth-century tower that now stands in ruins overlooking the cathedral at Rochester. Under the Conqueror and his sons there occurred a great program of church building in the Norman Romanesque style which had already been introduced into England in Edward the Confessor's Westminster Abbey. Almost every cathedral was rebuilt in the new fashion,[2] along with a great many village and abbey churches. In the early days the style was heavy and stark, but by the opening years of the twelfth century it was becoming more decorative. Complex geometrical designs were carved around portals and arches and sometimes—as at Durham—on the stout supporting columns. Interiors were dark but painted in bright colors and often decorated with frescoes, some of which survive at St. Alban's Abbey and elsewhere. As architects grew in skill and daring, wooden roofs gave way to stone vaulting. Much of this Norman construction still stands: in small churches, such as Iffley and Kilpec, and in large ones, such as Norwich, Gloucester, Durham, and Tewkesbury. Their thick walls, columns, and round-arched arcades—their solid towers and dominating proportions—evoke a feeling of strength unique in English architecture and bear witness even now to the power of the Normans.

Yet in architecture, as in so many other areas, major changes would have come to England even if Harold had won at Hastings. The Romanesque style was spreading across Western Europe in the later eleventh century, although not always with the massive proportions favored by the

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[2] A cathedral is, technically, the headquarters church of a bishop and his diocese.
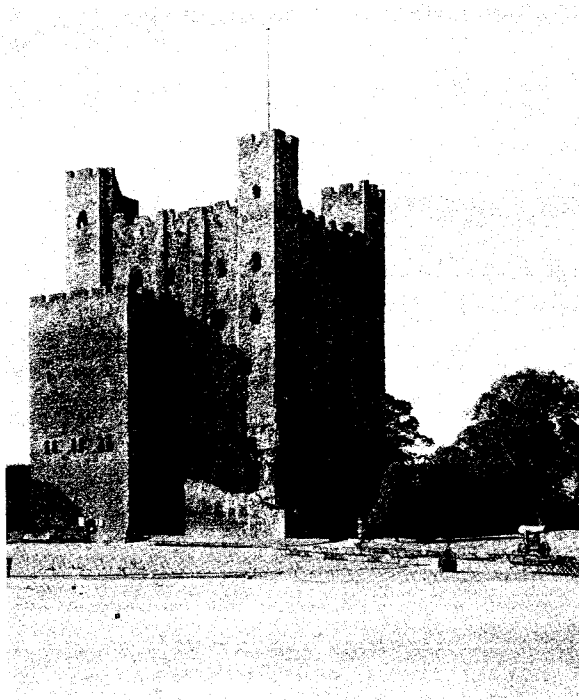
ROCHESTER CASTLE, KENT
Probably built by Gandulf
the Norman in 1077, this
immense example of Norman
Romanesque military archi-
tecture has walls twelve
feet thick. *National Monu-
ments Record.*

Normans. It is important to remember that the Norman Conquest occurred
at the beginning of a notable epoch of European expansion—economic, po-
litical, military, religious, cultural, and intellectual.[3] This profound creative
upsurge has been termed "the renaissance of the twelfth century," but in
fact it affected the entire period between the mid-eleventh century and the
end of the thirteenth—the period conventionally called the High Middle
Ages. France was the core of this remarkable cultural development—the
source of Gothic architecture, the site of the great University of Paris, the
home of many of medieval Europe's most distinguished scholars and writers,
and the birthplace of the Crusades and military adventures that expanded
the frontiers of Western Christendom. It has been suggested that because
the culture of the High Middle Ages was pre-eminently French, the conquest
of England by a French duchy had the effect of making England much
more susceptible to the great creative trends of the era. This is an attractive
theory, but it is also a dangerous one. Ties with the continent had been

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3 The bibliography on the High Middle Ages is immense. See in particular C. H. Haskins,
The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century (Cambridge, Mass., 1927); R. W. Southern,
The Making of the Middle Ages (New Haven, 1953); Friedrich Heer, *The Medieval
World: Europe, 1100–1350* (J. Sondheimer, tr., Cleveland, 1962); Christopher Brooke,
The Twelfth Century Renaissance (London, 1969); C. W. Hollister, *The Twelfth-Cen-
tury Renaissance* (New York, 1969); and Sidney R. Packard, *Twelfth Century Europe*
(Amherst, 1973).

strong ever since the conversion of England to Christianity; with or without the Norman connection England would have been deeply influenced by the culture of high medieval Europe. The effect of the Norman Conquest in this respect must remain imponderable.

We should keep this in mind as we turn to the problem of Norman influence on the English Church. William came to England with the blessing of the reform papacy on his head and holy relics around his neck. Harold's archbishop, the usurper Stigand, was offensive to the papacy, and in time William deposed him. Stigand's successor was a skillful ecclesiastical states-man named Lanfranc—a noted scholar, abbot of the newly founded Norman monastery of St. Etienne in Caen, and one of William's most trusted advisers. Under Archbishop Lanfranc the English Church began a thoroughgoing reform in keeping with the policies of the reform papacy. Simony, the buy-ing or selling of ecclesiastical offices, was banned, and the marriage of clergy-men, long uncanonical but widespread nevertheless, was expressly forbidden. New monasteries were founded, old ones were reformed, and cathedral clergy began to follow more stringent rules. Finally, William issued an ordinance that expanded the judicial authority of bishops in England, thereby contributing to the development in the following century of a highly organized system of ecclesiastical courts separate from the courts of shire and hundred.

One might well conclude that the Norman Conquest had a momentous effect on the English Church, bringing its practices closely in line with the notions of continental reformers. It could be argued, on the other hand, that Church reform would soon have come to England even without the Norman Conquest. The greatest of the eleventh-century reformers, Gregory VII, did not become pope until 1073; and it was not until his pontificate that the reform movement attained its full momentum. The reform ideas of Pope Gregory VII were bound to affect England, and the most that can be said of the Norman Conquest in this respect is that it hastened the process.

It should be added that King William and Archbishop Lanfranc were by no means as advanced in their concepts of church reform as Gregory VII. Pope Gregory and many of the reform cardinals who surrounded him were convinced that such evils as simony and clerical incontinence were products of a basic flaw in Christian society. To them, it was profoundly wrong that the appointment of clergymen should be in the hands of lay lords, as had long been the case in Western Europe. In the tenth and eleventh centuries it was customary for kings and dukes to select their archbishops, for counts to select their bishops, even for manorial lords to select their parish priests. Indeed, until the 1050s it was by no means uncommon for the Holy Roman Emperors to appoint popes. To lay lords, control of the Church seemed essential to their power, for the Church held vast tracts of land, and church-men often occupied key positions in the administrative and military systems of secular governments. To Gregory VII and his supporters, however, it seemed necessary that the Church should assume its proper position at the

head of society. Spirit, they argued, is greater than matter, and the spiritual authority of the Church ought to take precedence over the worldly authority of kings and magnates. Accordingly, churchmen should judge laymen, not the reverse, and the Church should be supreme in the Christian commonwealth. Only then could Christian society assume its rightful order.

The gulf between papal and secular opinion on this crucial matter resulted in a protracted and often violent struggle. Pope Gregory VII, who had long contended against simony and incontinence, raised the explosive issue of lay control in 1075 by issuing a formal ban against lay investiture. This ban and the bitter Investiture Controversy that followed focused on the ceremony by which a bishop was invested in his see. Traditionally, a lay lord formally bestowed upon the initiate bishop a ring, symbolic of his marriage to the Church, and a staff, symbolic of his pastoral duties as shepherd of his Christian flock. Symbols had profound meaning in the Middle Ages, and in forbidding laymen to invest new bishops with the ring and staff, Gregory VII was in fact striking at the vital principle of lay control of the clergy.

Since Gregory's chief opponent in the Investiture Controversy was Henry IV, king of Germany and prospective Holy Roman Emperor, the fiery pope was not in a position to press the issue in England or Normandy. He could not fight all Europe at once. William the Conqueror, who had no intention of loosening his grip on the Anglo-Norman Church, was treated deferentially as a friend of the papacy and a sincere opponent of ecclesiastical corruption. The issue of lay investiture did not explode in England until a generation later; during the Conqueror's reign it remained dormant.

Nevertheless, certain tensions were bound to arise in Anglo-papal relations. William and Gregory VII were both dedicated to church reform, but they had radically different ideas on the question of ecclestical supremacy. Gregory, for example, assumed that the supreme spiritual position he claimed for the papacy carried with it broad secular powers. He succeeded in getting a number of important Christian princes to acknowledge that they were papal vassals—that the pope was their overlord. Indeed, he demanded the allegiance or "fealty" of the Conqueror himself, along with a request for the resumption of a papal tax known as Peter's Pence. William replied politely but firmly:

> Your legate, Hubert, Most Holy Father, coming to me on your behalf, has admonished me to profess allegiance to you and your successors, and to think better regarding the money which my predecessors were wont to send to the Church of Rome. I have consented to the one but not to the other. I have not consented to pay fealty, nor will I now, because I never promised it, nor do I find that my predecessors ever paid it to your predecessors.[4]

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[4] From the translation in *English Historical Documents*, II, ed. David C. Douglas and George W. Greenaway (London, 1953), p. 647.

With this assertion, the issue was abruptly closed. William and Archbishop Lanfranc continued to work toward the reform of the English Church, but the work was accomplished under strict royal supervision.

The Problem of Feudalization

The most vigorously contested scholarly problem relating to the Norman Conquest is the question of whether William the Conqueror introduced a "feudal revolution" into England—that is, whether the new Norman aristocracy established a network of feudal institutions in a previously nonfeudal land.[5] Many nineteenth-century scholars were inclined toward the view that feudalism developed gradually in eleventh- and twelfth-century England, and that the Norman Conquest merely hastened somewhat a development that was basically inevitable. During most of the present century, however, the opposite view has prevailed: feudalism was introduced by the Normans quite suddenly, pre-Conquest England was fundamentally unfeudal, and without Norman intervention it would probably have remained so. Today this feudal-revolution hypothesis is under strong attack by some scholars and is being stoutly defended by others.

In order to understand the problem, one must explore carefully the nature of medieval feudalism. At heart, feudalism consisted of a complex of personal and territorial relationships between members of a warrior aristocracy. It combined the old Germanic notion of the loyalty of a comitatus member to his lord with the early medieval concept of service in return for land tenure. In its developed form, feudalism involved a relationship between two aristocratic warriors—a lord and a vassal. The lord granted a parcel of land to his vassal and undertook to protect the vassal's interests. The vassal, in return, gave his allegiance (homage and fealty) to his lord and agreed to render him services of various sorts—most notably, knightly military service. The estate granted by the lord to his vassal was known as a fief or *feudum*—from which our word "feudal" is derived.

Feudalism was emerging in the Frankish kingdom during the eighth and ninth centuries, at a time when Frankish military tactics were placing increasing emphasis on the heavily-armed horseman. The cavalryman, or knight, required a fine horse, arms and armor, and above all a great deal of training in the art of mounted combat. In short, the rise of heavy cavalry

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[5] On this issue see C. W. Hollister, *The Military Organization of Norman England* (Oxford, 1965). The classical account of the Norman Conquest as "feudal revolution" is F. M. Stenton, *The First Century of English Feudalism, 1066–1166* (2nd ed., Oxford, 1961). Radically different views are expressed in H. G. Richardson and G. O. Sayles, *The Governance of Mediaeval England* (Edinburgh, 1963), pp. 22–135. All the various points of view are represented in *The Impact of the Norman Conquest*, ed. C. W. Hollister (New York, 1969). A good, recent summary is R. Allen Brown, *Origins of English Feudalism* (London, 1973).

necessitated the creation of an important and fairly numerous military elite. But this tactical change coincided with a time when money was in short supply. Some knights were simply fed and maintained in their lord's household; but gradually it became customary for a king or a magnate to "pay" his knights by granting them land in return for their service.

The practice of paying for service with land was by no means limited to the military sphere. The tenure-service relationship extended also to the fields of administration, justice, and even farming. A great landholder was expected, in return for his wealth in land, to assume the essential functions of public administration and to operate courts of law, as well as to provide knights for the army of his overlord. A peasant farmer, in return for his right to farm a particular plot, was required to contribute his labor on certain days of the week to the tilling of his lord's demesne land. Thus, in a money-poor society, wage service was secondary in importance to tenure service.

With the decline of central authority in Carolingian France during the Viking age, the desperate need for local defense against the lightning raids of the Norsemen resulted in an expansion and intensification of the lord-vassal relationship. Independent freeholders were forced to seek the protection of local lords, often becoming their vassals and giving them their lands. The lord would then return the land to his new vassal to be held as a fief in return for homage and fealty and knightly service. Or, if the freeholder was of the humbler sort and owned only a small farm, he might find himself sinking into the ranks of the dependent peasantry. It should be understood that the fief-holding vassal did not ordinarily labor on his own lands; he drew his wealth from the obligations of his serfs to pay him a proportion of the yield of their fields and to work on his demesne fields. There existed, therefore, an immense social chasm between the vassal and the serf; the serf was not directly involved in the network of relationships we call feudal, which principally concerned the aristocracy. But on the other hand, the feudal aristocracy depended ultimately on the toil of its serfs, and the entire feudal system rested on the economic foundation of peasant labor. Without serfs, a fief would be valueless.

During the Viking age there was a growing tendency for fiefs to become hereditary. This was particularly true of the extensive fiefs held by the great vassals of the Frankish kings—the dukes and counts. And although a powerful monarch like Charlemagne might expect the devoted loyalty of his chief vassals, it was far from certain that the sons, grandsons, or great-grandsons of these vassals would be equally loyal to Charlemagne's descendants. It is one of the characteristics of feudalism that loyalty tends to weaken with the passage of generations. This characteristic was aggravated during the Viking age, when the French kings often seemed helpless to defend their realm, and the great vassals were, from the military standpoint, on their own. Hence, the ninth and tenth centuries witnessed a steady disintegration of public authority. Administrative and judicial responsibilities and royal revenues passed increasingly into the hands of dukes, counts, and local

warlords, who built castles, fought the Vikings, and ignored the sovereignty of the king. With the fractionization of sovereignty and the rise of small, semi-independent feudal states, it became increasingly common for feudal lords to fight one another when they were not fighting the Vikings. Private war became the curse of feudal society.

Every important feudal lord, even though a vassal of a higher lord, aspired to have a large army of his own. Hence, a vassal frequently divided a portion of his fief into smaller fiefs, which he granted to subvassals. This process, known as subinfeudation, sometimes went down through as many as twenty degrees, with subvassals functioning as lords of sub-subvassals who, in turn, were lords of sub-sub-subvassals, and so on down to the lowly vassal who held a single "knight's fee." And even the lowest vassal was a lord of sorts—a landlord over the serfs on his fee. Every vassal, therefore, was a lord as well; and every lord, except the king of France himself, was a vassal of some higher lord.

This description may seem sufficiently complex, and yet it is an over-simplified abstraction of the actual situation. Often a vassal had two or three lords, each for a different part of his holdings; should two of his lords go to war with one another, he was faced with the perplexing question of which one to serve. If a lord was dissatisfied with his vassal's service, or if a vassal was dissatisfied with his lord's protection, then lord and vassal might wage war against one another. There are even cases of a lord's receiving a fief from his own vassal, thereby becoming his vassal's vassal. The following charter may suggest some of the fantastic complexities that could occur in the feudal "system":

> I, John of Toul, affirm that I am the vassal of the Lady Beatrice, countess of Troyes, and of her son Theobald, count of Champagne, against every creature living or dead, excepting my allegiance to Lord Enjourand of Coucy, Lord John of Arcis, and the count of Grandpré. If it should happen that the count of Grandpré should be at war with the countess and count of Champagne in his own quarrel, I will aid the count of Grandpré in my own person, and will aid the count and countess of Champagne by sending them the knights whose service I owe them from the fief which I hold of them.

By the eleventh century, feudal France was beginning to regain a measure of coherence. The power of the French crown remained restricted to a modest territory in north central France embracing Paris and Orleans—the Ile de France—and the French monarchs exerted little or no authority over the lands of their vassals. But the great vassal states themselves were gradually becoming centralized and well governed. The counts and dukes of such feudal principalities as Anjou, Champagne, Blois, Flanders, Poitou, and Normandy were succeeding in bringing their own vassals under control. If they could not eliminate private war in their states, they could at least reduce it considerably; and through the establishment of networks of castles

and exploitation of various feudal and nonfeudal revenues, they acquired the strength and wealth to dominate their lands.

It was only in the eleventh century that the obligations a vassal owed his lord became explicit. In Normandy, at least, the number of knights a vassal owed from his fief came to be specified exactly. In addition to supplying the stipulated number of knights, a vassal was obliged to join his lord's retinue on important ceremonial occasions and to serve in his court. Every important lord had a feudal court, in which he exercised jurisdiction over his vassals and heard appeals from subvassals. The vassal also owed his lord certain monetary payments known as aids. These were rendered on special occasions, such as the marriage of the lord's eldest daughter or the knighting of his eldest son. Vassals were also obliged to pay the lord's ransom should he be captured by an enemy.

The lord's authority over his vassal was further emphasized in four additional privileges: (1) the right to veto the marriage of a vassal's widow or heiress to his fief; (2) the right to occupy a fief during the minority of a deceased vassal's son and to serve as guardian of the young heir; (3) the right to collect a payment, known as "relief," when the fief passed from a deceased vassal to his heir; and (4) the right to repossess the fief should the vassal die without heirs. These rights are characteristic of the highly-developed feudalism of northern France in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Although far from universal in their application, they are of particular interest to us because they became customary in post-Conquest England.

During the later eleventh and twelfth centuries, feudal obligations became increasingly exact. A vassal was now understood to owe his lord a certain number of knights to be used within a specified area (say, within the frontiers of Normandy) for a specified number of days per year (usually forty). Paradoxically, this tendency toward legal systematization appeared concurrently with two other tendencies that ultimately proved subversive to feudalism: strong centralized states and a money economy. As states grew in strength, feudal autonomy declined, and the authority of feudal courts was slowly undermined by the growth of royal justice. And with the expansion of commerce and monetary wealth, tenure service was gradually giving way to wage service and a new economic order was coming into being. From the standpoint of legal definitions the later eleventh and twelfth centuries are the "classical age of feudalism"; but from the political and economic standpoints they mark the beginning of feudalism's decline.

Prior to the Norman Conquest, the feudal customs described here were mostly limited to northern France. Even there, a bewildering degree of diversity prevailed, and a significant amount of territory remained outside the feudal structure altogether, being held unconditionally by free landowners. On the other hand, feudal institutions were already beginning to spread—into parts of southern France, eastern Spain, and the lands in southern Italy that Norman military adventurers were beginning to bring under their control. In the century after 1066 feudalism made its way into Germany, the

Crusader states of the Holy Land, and many other districts of Western Christendom; and each region exhibited its own peculiar feudal characteristics. Most scholars would add that the post-Conquest century witnessed the advent of feudalism in England. It is beyond doubt that post-Conquest England was a feudal state; but scholars differ as to whether the genesis of English feudalism was sudden or gradual, and whether or not post-Conquest English feudalism was anticipated significantly in the development of Anglo-Saxon institutions.

At first glance, one is struck by the fundamental differences between Anglo-Saxon England and feudal France. The shire and hundred courts, the danegeld, and the five-hide fyrd were all, basically, *public* institutions of a sovereign monarchy; whereas the feudal armies, feudal courts, and feudal aids were *private* in nature—products of a system in which privileges and responsibilities once exercised by a royal government had fallen into private hands. But it is unsafe to stress this dichotomy too strongly. The public orientation of Anglo-Saxon institutions had been strongly modified by the spread of private lordship. Great magnates and prelates received royal land charters granting not only extensive territories but also important jurisdictional rights. Many of the lords of Anglo-Saxon England operated the hundred courts within their territories and led their own contingents of the fyrd. But even so, the courts continued to function as units of a national legal system that remained fundamentally public; and the fyrd was still, both in theory and in practice, a national or royal army whose role was limited to the defense of the realm and the service of the king. One might cite certain exceptions to this statement—such as the military confrontation beween Earl Godwin and King Edward in 1052—but in general Anglo-Saxon lords did not lead their fyrds against one another; pre-Conquest England, unlike France, was remarkably free of private war. And even in Edward the Confessor's final years, when Harold Godwinson attended to the defense of the realm, the chroniclers often took the trouble to point out that Earl Harold led the fyrd "by the king's order."

The lord-vassal relationship of feudal France undoubtedly existed in essence in pre-Conquest England. The practice of thegns and other men promising their loyalty—"commending themselves"—to lords was widespread, and the intensity of such relationships is clearly demonstrated in the devotion of Ealdorman Byrhtnoth's men at Maldon. No French lord could ask for better vassals than these. In short, the personal relationship of lord to man was derived from a Germanic tradition shared by both England and France. But although the Anglo-Saxons had their own equivalent of the feudal vassal, it is doubtful that they possessed anything resembling the fief. The personal aspect of feudalism existed in Anglo-Saxon England; but the territorial aspect probably did not.

Even here, however, there is room for argument. Beginning in the tenth century, the bishops of Worcester are known to have granted "loan lands" to be held by tenants for life or sometimes for "three lives"—the life

of the tenant, his heir, and his heir's heir. In return for the tenure, the recipients were obliged to perform a rather miscellaneous group of services to their lord, the bishop of Worcester. Among their obligations was military service, to be rendered at the normal rate of one man per five hides. The Worcester tenants were not knights in the strict sense of the word: they were not trained in cavalry warfare, they were ignorant of the art of castle building, and of course the bishop of Worcester would not have dreamt of leading them against a local enemy except in the service of the king. Still these loan lands might perhaps be described as fiefs if one is willing to define the word rather broadly. Whatever their differences from French vassals —and they were many—the Worcester tenants did, after all, hold their lands conditionally from their lord in return for service. It has been argued that the Worcester loan lands were not typical of Anglo-Saxon landholding; other scholars would reply that the existence of loan lands elsewhere in England is hidden from us by the disappearance of relevant records. Thus the argument goes on. It is interesting up to a point. but ultimately the question of whether Anglo-Saxon England was feudal depends on how broadly one is willing to define the word. "Feudalism," like "democracy," though useful in some respects, is a fuzzy term.

One might wish to say that William the Conqueror established feudalism in England, or perhaps simply that he instituted a far more thoroughgoing feudal regime than England had known before. He and his great barons dotted England with castles and introduced the private feudal court alongside the older courts of hundred and shire. He introduced the highly significant concept, unknown in either Anglo-Saxon England or pre-Conquest Normandy, that all the land of England belonged either directly or indirectly to the ruler. Operating on this philosophy and angered by the protracted English rebellions, he confiscated immense tracts of land. Much of this land he added to the royal demesne—the territory controlled directly by the crown. The remainder he granted as fiefs to trusted military followers. In the course of this vast process of redistribution, the lands of several thousand thegns were consolidated into large fiefs held by about 180 great Anglo-Norman barons—tenants-in-chief who held their land directly of King William. Most of these fiefs consisted of widely scattered estates rather than compact territorial blocks; and although the scattering of baronial estates had the effect in later years of attenuating local particularism, William apparently had so such object in mind when he distributed the lands. On the contrary, the scattering seems quite accidental, arising from the fact that pre-Conquest estates themselves tended to be scattered and from the further fact that the distribution was made in piecemeal fashion as the estates of one rebellious Anglo-Saxon lord after another fell successively into the king's hands.

By the 1070s William had assigned arbitrary quotas of knights' service to virtually all the lands outside the royal demesne, whether held by secular or ecclesiastical vassals. These quotas were sufficient to provide the king with a total force of about 5,000 knights. Aside from a handful of exempt

abbeys, every English tenant-in-chief now owed a specific number of knights to the crown and was obliged to perform many of the additional feudal duties already exacted in Normandy. In the years that followed, William's great vassals undertook to support the knights they owed the crown by creating smaller fiefs from portions of their larger ones. Thus, the process of subinfeudation occurred in England much as it had at an earlier time in France. English aristocratic society soon took the form of a complex chain of lord-vassal relationships.

Feudalism in Norman England, being the product of a single will, was far more orderly and thoroughgoing than its French counterpart. Above all, it was rigorously subordinated to the interests of the ruler, who was at once sovereign king and chief lord at the apex of the feudal pyramid. This lord-king—*dominus rex* as he was called in contemporary documents—exerted a control over his potentially turbulent vassals such as feudal France had never known. In part, this authority was a product of the Conqueror's own forceful personality, but it also owed much to his skillful use of Anglo-Saxon traditions. He preserved the danegeld, as one might expect, and exploited it thoroughly as a unique and highly lucrative source of royal revenue. He also preserved the Old English fyrd and summoned it to his service on occasion. He tempered the centrifugal forces of feudalism by calling upon the Old English custom of universal allegiance to the crown. In England, the sub-vassal owed primary loyalty not to his immediate lord but to the supreme overlord—the lord-king. In 1085, William summoned the more important landholders of England to a great assembly at Salisbury in order to receive their oaths of allegiance. In doing so, he was following a venerable English tradition that had been exemplified long before in the oath King Edmund demanded of his subjects. Further, William permitted his great vassals to build castles, as they had been accustomed to do in Normandy; but recognizing that these fortresses were potential centers of insurrection as well as strong points in England's defensive system, he allowed them to be built only by royal license. Finally, and still following Anglo-Saxon tradition, he took much of the fun out of feudalism by refusing to permit private war. The knights of England, like the soldiers of the Anglo-Saxon fyrd, were to serve the king alone.

Thus, Norman England was deeply influenced by the royal centralization achieved by the Anglo-Saxons; yet it was more cohesive under William the Conqueror than it had been in Anglo-Saxon times. In a very real sense, the Anglo-Norman monarchy was greater than the sum of its parts, for the English and Norman traditions on which it was built were strengthened and enlarged by the Conqueror himself. William's claim to ultimate ownership of all English land, which went far beyond the claims of any lord in feudal France, was equally unprecedented in England. It is far from certain that fiefs were normally regarded as hereditary under William the Conqueror; and even though they were usually passed on from father to son, the Norman kings denied their vassals the security of *legally* hereditary tenure by charg-

ing arbitrary and exceedingly high reliefs when the fief passed to an heir. In effect, these monarchs allowed a son to succeed his father only by royal sufferance, and at an exorbitant price.

Feudalism had arisen long before to meet the needs of a money-poor, intensely particularistic society. It was now adapted to a society ruled by a relatively strong monarchy—a society that enjoyed a vigorous commercial life and an expanding money economy. Thus, the feudalism of Norman England gave way increasingly, as time went on, before the steady growth of royal government and the progressive substitution of wage service for tenure service. The Conqueror himself had made good use of mercenary soldiers in his great invasion, and as the decades passed, mercenaries became steadily more important to the English military system. Furthermore, before the end of the eleventh century it was becoming customary for some tenants to pay money to the crown in lieu of feudal military obligation; and this military tax—known as scutage—was usually employed by the post-Conquest kings to pay the wages of mercenaries. With the development of scutage, the fundamental feudal obligation of knightly service was converted into a new source of royal revenue. The feudal structure persisted—the feudal aristocracy remained powerful throughout the Middle Ages—but the basic principle of tenure service was gradually dissolving.

The Administrative Contributions of William the Conqueror

With a vastly augmented royal demesne, with danegeld revenues flowing in regularly, and with a tight control over a loyal feudal aristocracy, William ruled England with unprecedented authority. And like his Anglo-Saxon predecessors, he ruled with the advice of a royal council. The council of the Norman kings—the *curia regis*—represents a drawing together of two parallel institutions: the ducal court of Normandy and the Anglo-Saxon Witenagemot. William's counselors are described in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as his Witan; like the Old English Witenagemot, the Anglo-Norman curia regis could be either the small and more or less permanent council of household officials and intimate friends or the larger and more formal council of great magnates. But it would be profitless to argue that the curia regis was more English than Norman. The councils of England and Normandy were similar, and William's large, formal councils, attended by the greater tenants-in-chief, were predominantly Norman in personnel and feudal in mood. They represent neither a violent break with the Anglo-Saxon past nor a conscious accommodation to it.

While on their numerous visits to Normandy, the Norman kings left the administration of England in the hands of some trusted subordinate who was necessarily empowered to act in the king's name. William the Conqueror delegated his authority to different men at different times—to loyal magnates, to some trustworthy household official, or to a powerful churchman such as Archbishop Lanfranc. In later reigns, this vice-regal authority came to be

assigned permanently to a particular individual who, in the twelfth century, assumed the title *justiciar*. But the Conqueror, with his boundless energy, preferred to rule for himself or to delegate authority on an ad hoc basis. With the possible exception of Lanfranc, no one person shared William's authority for any significant time.

The power and vigor of English royal government under William the Conqueror, unmatched in Western Christendom, is illustrated vividly in William's greatest administrative achievement: the Domesday survey. As the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* describes it,

> the king had important deliberations and deep discussions with his council about this country, how it was peopled and with what sorts of men. Then he sent his men all over England into every shire and had them determine how many hundreds of hides there were in each shire, and how much land and cattle the king himself had in the country, and what annual dues he ought to have from each shire. He also had recorded how much land belonged to his archbishops, his bishops, his abbots, and his earls, and— though I relate it at too great length—what and how much everybody had who was a landholder in England, in land or in cattle, and how much money it was worth. So very thoroughly did he have it investigated that there was not a single hide or virgate [a quarter of a hide] of land, or even (it is shameful to record but it did not seem shameful to him to do) one ox or one cow or one pig which was omitted from his record; and all these records were afterwards brought to him.

The Domesday survey, later consolidated into two large volumes known as Domesday Book, would have challenged any modern government. For its age it was altogether unique. Although by no means free of errors and omissions (London and several other towns are left out), it is nevertheless an essentially trustworthy and immensely valuable historical source. It is organized by shires and, within each shire, by the estates of the royal demesne and the fiefs of royal vassals. Although cows and pigs were omitted from the final record, Domesday Book undertakes to list the name of every manor, its assessment in hides, its value both in 1066 and at the time of the survey (1086), and the number and social status of its tenants. Any social, economic, or institutional history of Saxon or Norman England must begin with this astonishing survey.

The Conqueror died in 1087. Injured while in the midst of a continental campaign, he was brought to Rouen, the chief city of Normandy; there he settled his affairs, made his last confession, and died. He had planned originally to leave England and Normandy to his eldest son, Robert Curthose ("Short-boots"). But Curthose had rebelled against his father and was, indeed, in rebellion at the time of the Conqueror's death. William would probably have left both England and Normandy to his second son, William Rufus ("red-faced"), but friends of Curthose persuaded the dying king to abide by the Norman custom of primogeniture and leave the Norman duchy to the eldest son despite his rebellion. Thus, reluctantly, William the Conqueror

split his dominions, leaving Normandy to Robert Curthose and England to William Rufus—King William II. To his youngest son, Henry, the Conqueror granted a treasure of £5,000 (the equivalent of several million dollars today). The struggles of these three sons over the next two decades resulted finally, as we shall see, in the reunification of England and Normandy.

Of William the Conqueror's ability there can be no question; but judgments of his character have varied widely. He enforced justice and kept the peace, but he was avaricious and could be savagely cruel. A modern biographer describes him as "admirable; unlovable; dominant; distinct." [6] A similar ambivalence is to be found in the judgment of a well-placed contemporary observer—an Anglo-Saxon monk who had once lived at William's court:

> This King William of whom we speak was a very wise man, and very powerful and more worshipful and stronger than any king before him. He was gentle to those good men who loved God, but stern beyond all measure to those who resisted his will. . . . And he was such a stern and violent man that no one dared go against his will. Earls who resisted him he placed in chains, bishops he deprived of their sees, abbots of their abbacies, and thegns he imprisoned. . . . Among other things we must not forget the good order he kept in the land, so that an honest man could traverse his kingdom unharmed with his bosom full of gold. No one dared kill another, however much he had wronged him, and if any man raped a woman he was immediately castrated.
> He ruled over England and by his cunning it was so investigated that there was not one hide of land in England that he did not know who owned it, and what it was worth, and then set it down in his record. . . . Certainly in his time people had much oppression and very many injuries:

> > He had castles built
> > And poor men hard oppressed.
> > The king was very stark
> > And took from his subjects many a mark
> > Of gold and more hundreds of pounds of silver,
> > That he took by weight and with great injustice
> > From his people—with little need for such a deed.
> > Into avarice did he fall,
> > And loved greediness above all . . .
> > Alas! Woe, that any man should go so proud,
> > And exalt himself and reckon himself above all men!
> > May almighty God show mercy on his soul,
> > And grant unto him forgiveness for his sins.

> These things we have written about him, both good and bad, that good men imitate his good points and entirely avoid the bad, and travel along the road that leads us to the kingdom of heaven. [7]

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[6] D. C. Douglas, *William the Conqueror* (Berkeley, 1964), p. 376.

[7] From the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, A.D. 1087.