

Normans: 1066 and Afterwards

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William the Conquerer did not win England in a single day.

English resistance and rebellion continued for years after the battle of Hastings in 1066.

The Battle of Hastings, fought in the late Autumn of 1066, is one of the most famous events in medieval history, generally regarded as a significant turning point in the development of English culture and the English language. 1066 is the Year of the Conquest, in which William, Duke of Normandy, defeated Harold, King of England, in a battle that lasted through most of the day. This fateful event marked the beginning of two centuries of Norman rule in England. However, William of Normandy did not win England in one single day. Even though he was crowned on Christmas Day in that same year, it cannot be said that William had fully conquered England until 1071. English resistance and rebellion is recorded in the Anglo Saxon Chronicle, and testifies to continued unrest for several years after the battle. Even his own nobles, who had followed him from Normandy, rose against him at one stage.

William had destroyed the English army at Hastings, and Harold of England was killed during the last stages of the battle on Senlac ridge. According to the Chronicle, William then returned to his fortifications at Hastings and waited for the English to come and surrender to him. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle says he waited to see "whether the nation would submit to him." It soon became apparent that they were not going to come, and William then sent to Normandy for reinforcements. When these arrived he strengthened his beachhead as far as Dover and then, after encountering little resistance in these areas, began the march to London. The records of the Domesday Survey show that many of the manors and villages in the South East were still devastated almost twenty years later as a result of William's march to London. Three hundred separate manors are shown to have declined from their pre-Conquest value by one third.

According to Furneaux, William and his army followed the south bank of the Thames until they reached London. Although London was not then the capital, it was the nerve centre of commerce and communications. He who controlled London also controlled the land as far as the Humber.

The Earls of Mercia and Northumbria had been in London, trying to organise a defence. The Anglo Saxon Chronicle tells us that Edgar, grandson of Edmund Ironside and, according to Furneaux, probably a child of no more than ten years of age, was quickly elected and crowned king. William and his army arrived at London Bridge soon after this, and the English sallied forth to drive him off. Their attempt was unsuccessful, and the defenders fell back across the bridge. William did not pursue them, apparently having decided that he wanted to enter London as the acknowledged king, not as a conqueror. He appeased his men by allowing them to burn and pillage the suburb of Southwark, and then set about terrorising the English into submission. His army rampaged through Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire, destroying everything they came across. This tactic worked - Winchester, the capital, surrendered. William then crossed the Thames near Wallingford, in Berkshire, and received the submission of the Archbishop of Canterbury. According to Furneaux, historians differ in their opinion of this act. Archbishop Stigand may have been attempting to protect his manors in Surrey, or he may have been preparing the way for the surrender of Earls Edwin

and Morcar, the only remaining opposition of any significance. William continued to isolate London by moving north and separating the city from the surrounding shires.

The Earls of Northumbria and Mercia finally submitted to William at Berkhamsted in Hertfordshire, bringing the young Edgar with them. William was, in name at least, the ruler of England. However, according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, when the archbishops of Canterbury and York, the bishops of Worcester and Hereford, the chief men of London, and the Earls of Mercia and Northumbria all begged William to accept the crown, he declined. Another chronicler, William of Poitiers, tells us that it was only after being urged to accept by his Norman supporters that he eventually agreed.

He was crowned in Westminster Abbey on Christmas Day, 1066. According to the Chronicle, the shouts of acclamation led his guards to believe that there was an attack on the king, and they began to set fire to the surrounding houses as an emergency measure. One Norman monk recalled the event fifty years later. "As the fire spread rapidly, the people in the church were thrown into confusion. Crowds of them rushed outside, some to fight the fires, others to take the chance to go looting. Only the monks, the Bishop, and a few clergy remained before the altar. Though they were terrified, they managed to carry on and complete the consecration of the king, who was trembling violently" Langdon-Davies writes: "The king had reason to tremble, for the situation in England was highly volatile and the population was generally quite hostile to him"

Even before his coronation, William had begun to build castles to control the population. The Tower of London is primarily his handiwork, one of the first stone keeps to be built in Britain. Elsewhere, timber and earth fortifications were thrown up at strategic points to ensure that the people of the surrounding districts remained loyal. These earthen mounds, called mottes, can still be seen today at places such as Oxford, Thetford, Berkhamsted and Windsor

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle says that William returned to Normandy in 1067. By this stage he may have felt confident that he could return home to sort out matters there without losing his new kingdom. If so, he misread the mood of the people.

Revolt had broken out in the West. A certain "Eadric the Wild" and the Welsh attacked the Norman garrisons in Hereford. According to the Chronicle, William not only imposed a heavy tax upon the people, but also "allowed his men to harry wherever they came" (ASC 1067) William himself marched upon Exeter and besieged it for eighteen days. The Chronicle tells us that he lost "a great part of his host" in the fighting. Eventually, the people of Exeter surrendered to William, who had "made favourable promises which were badly kept." They had also been let down by their own leaders.

In Northumbria, where William attempted to reward his followers with titles and land, the Chronicle records this reaction: "1068. In this year king William gave earl Robert the earldom of Northumbria, but the inhabitants opposed and slew him, and nine hundred of his men. Prince Edgar came to York with all the Northumbrians, and the citizens came to terms with him. King William marched from the south with all his levies and ravaged the borough, slaying many hundreds, and Edgar returned to Scotland" (ASC 1068/9)

During this year, there was also trouble in the south. The sons of Harold had earlier fled for safety to Ireland, and now returned "unexpectedly .. with a pirate host, and straightway

harried that part of the country" (ASC 1067/8) They attacked the city of Bristol, which managed to repel them, and then moved into Somerset. Here, they fought against the local levies, commanded by Eadnoth, and "many good men were slain there" Harold's sons were forced to withdraw in the face of this strong local resistance.

Furneaux writes sympathetically of William's reaction to these revolts. He claims that William attempted to satisfy both his Norman supporters and his Saxon subjects by acting with justice and consideration. He confirmed Edwin and Morcar in their titles as Earl of Northumbria and Earl of Mercia, gave land to his followers only from the estates of those Saxon nobles who had fallen at Hastings, and confirmed all other traditional owners in their possessions. The new landowners were ordered to accept the rights and obligations of the previous owners, and the laws and customs of England were retained. The only significant change made by William was the abandonment of English as the language of administration and its replacement with Latin. All this, says Furneaux, helps to explain his disappointment and bitter reaction to the revolts which now broke out. These were not a national resistance movement. The English rebelled "against strong centralised rule; each earl and thegn wished to retain his freedom to plunder and despoil his neighbours, as he had done for centuries, as the Norman barons had tried to do before William curbed them" (Furneaux p 188) This opinion contrasts with the traditional view of 'Norman versus Saxon', but there is little real evidence for it. It may be true that "the rebellions were confused and incoherent" but this is not proof that they were motivated merely by a desire for plunder and independence from authority.

In the summer of 1068, three sons of king Sven of Denmark arrived with a fleet of two hundred and forty ships and was joined by Earl Waltheof, who had been confirmed in his position by William. "Forming an immense host... they all resolutely advanced on York and stormed and destroyed the castle, seizing innumerable treasures therein, slaying many hundreds of Frenchmen.." This betrayal seems to have angered William, for he devastated the northern lands - "utterly laid waste that shire" - and remained in the north all that winter, eventually capturing and executing Earl Waltheof. Again, the Domesday record indicates the extent of this destruction. Manor after manor in the north is recorded in the Survey merely as "waste." The Chronicle also mentions that "bishop Æthelric was accused, and taken to Westminster, and his brother, bishop Æthelwine, outlawed." This must have been punishment for their support of the northern revolt.

William was forced to build castles at York, Warwick, Nottingham, Lincoln and Cambridge. His troops were forced to live like an army of occupation - living, eating and sleeping in their military units. The Oxford Illustrated History of Britain estimates that there were ten thousand Normans living amongst a mostly hostile population of 1 or 2 million Englishmen.

In 1071, the last English act of defiance was acted out by Hereward, in the fens of Norfolk. King Sven returned with his warriors in 1070, and this time the East Anglians joined him in revolt. Their leader, Hereward the Wake, sacked Peterborough and then withdrew to the Isle of Ely, an area surrounded by the swampy fenlands of East Anglia. Here he was joined by Earl Morcar. Earl Edwin also came out in opposition. William bought off the Danes, then laid siege to Ely. Morcar was taken prisoner, Edwin killed by his own followers, and Hereward escaped to become a figure of legend and a symbol of national resistance to a later age. It is still a point of debate, however, as to whether Hereward was an heroic patriot or a brigand in search of loot.

William used brutal and cruel methods to subdue resistance, razing entire villages and slaughtering their inhabitants. According to the Chronicle "The king set a heavy tribute on poor folk, though nevertheless still let his men harry all that they went over" (1067). At the siege of Exeter, William "promised them good and did evil" (1067). Even though he relied on his Norman barons for support, he occasionally used English laws to limit their power. This provoked a revolt amongst his own followers, which he managed to defeat.

"1075. In this year king William gave the daughter of William Fitz Osbern in marriage to earl Ralph; this same Ralph was a Breton on his mother's side, and English on his father's side, and was born in Norfolk. The king gave him the earldoms of Norfolk and Suffolk. ... Earl Roger was present at the wedding, together with earl Waltheof and bishops and abbots, and they plotted to depose the king from the realm of England."

It is interesting that the Chronicle does not give any explanation for this sudden plot, which was destined to be unsuccessful. "The details of the scheme were soon made known to the king in Normandy. Earl Roger and Earl Ralph were the principals in the foolish plot, and they won over the Bretons to their side, and sent east to Denmark for a pirate host to support them." Surprisingly, the English seem to have remained loyal to William.

Far from "winning a kingdom in a day", William I had to face many years of opposition and strife before he could consider himself the ruler of England. The North was a particular source of trouble, and he had to deal with numerous insurrections there. Time and again, William showed great wisdom in dealing with the rebels and, although he was very harsh on the people, was a wise and just ruler. Many seem to have recognised him as being the only one who could keep the country together. In spite of the many revolts against his rule, the Chronicle tells us that he also led combined Norman/English forces against the Scots (in 1072) and against the French province of Maine. Clearly, many Englishmen had accepted him as their king.

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