

William the Conqueror: From the Battle of Hastings to Feudal England

In September 1066, William, the Duke of Normandy, in modern-day France, took to the seas with his powerful army. He had one goal in mind: claiming the English throne. This is the story of how one savvy Norman catapulted himself from a simple duke to one of the most famous rulers of all time.

0:00

Historical map with an illustration of William, Duke of Normandy on a horse; ships traveling from Normandy to England; Norman standing in front of a wooden table by a coast; Norman dressed regally on a white horse; swaddled baby with text 'William the Bastard'; illustration of parents Robert and Arlette in traditional attire; young boy seated on a throne surrounded by disapproving eyes; group of men scheming; people being attacked.

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In 1028, William the Conqueror, was born. Or rather, "William the Bastard," as he was known at the time. He was the illegitimate son of Robert the Magnificent, the Duke of Normandy, and his concubine, Arlette.

At the age of eight, William inherited his father's title, and a lot of haters. It turns out, a child doesn't make for the most imposing leader. And Norman nobles, looking to advance their own agendas and positions, took advantage of his age. They carried out violent attacks against his tutor and guardians, likely in attempts to get to the young duke.

0:55

William being knighted by a King; illustration depicting a medieval battle; hex-grid layout of a rural landscape under attack; hand moving a knight piece across a map; large church; engraving of William the Conqueror watching his fleet; portraits of William and Harold; William holding a sword and shield surrounded by rows of red soldier figurines; map showing ships traveling along the English Channel to Sussex, overlayed is a fortification and three fire icons.

But young William was determined to prove himself. He was knighted at the tender age of fifteen by the King of France, and quickly set to work honing his military prowess and developing plans to strengthen and unify Normandy, which was plagued by rebellions and anarchy at the time.

By designing simple but ruthless military campaigns and forming a strong alliance with the influential Norman church, William established himself as one of Western Europe's most fearsome and powerful rulers.

Over time, he became viewed as such a powerful ally that, according to some sources, his cousin Edward the Confessor — AKA the King of England — declared William his heir. But on his deathbed in 1066, Edward pulled a bait-and-switch and declared his brother-in-law, Harold, his successor instead. Talk about family drama!

But William didn't take this betrayal lying down. So, just months after Edward's death, William and his army of around 7,000 soldiers sailed across the English Channel from Normandy to England. They landed at Sussex and got to work building defensive fortifications before pushing east along the coast to Hastings, ravaging the countryside and pillaging as they went.

2:04

Map of Great Britain with a crown marker and three Viking Ship cards; oil painting of the battle of Stamford Bridge with blue and purple flags overlayed; engraving of the Battle of Hastings; map with blue soldier figurines and blue flag on one side, and red soldier figurines, red flag, and William the Conqueror on a horse on another side; rows of blue shields; blue soldiers running after red soldiers; red archers; pile of collapsed blue shields; William victoriously standing on a hilltop; coronation of William.

Lucky for William, Harold and his armies were preoccupied with a different invasion: Vikings in the north, who also believed they had claim to the English throne. Though the fight was over by the time William's forces made landfall, it had left the English exhausted.

Three weeks after William's arrival, English and Norman forces finally met, clashing in what's now known as the Battle of Hastings on October 14th, 1066.

The English were strong, despite their exhaustion, but William kept his cool. When Harold's infantrymen formed an impenetrable wall of raised shields, William ordered one flank of his army to pretend to flee, and Harold's gullible infantry chased after them. Then, the Norman archers moved in on the remaining English shields and shot their arrows high into the air, arcing over their defenses.

The assault was successful, decimating the English troops, and killing King Harold. William claimed victory and control of the English throne.

But seizing the crown was the easy part of William the Conqueror's new reign. Keeping England under control was the real uphill battle.

3:07

William seated on a throne surrounded by disapproving eyes; map of England with castles and flames overlayed; red soldier figurines moving through a rural landscape with fire icons over various churches and land; England overlayed with seven coats of arms that become uniform; king seated above seven noblemen that become seven Normans and are connected to the King; map with various figures over different territories; illustration of medieval feudal hierarchy; crown traveling from Normandy to England.

See, there were plenty of other people who thought someone else should rule England, instead of some random duke from Normandy, and William faced multiple uprisings from his new English subjects on top of multiple attacks from Denmark.

At first, William's response was ruthless. He mobilized his Norman soldiers to push out enemy armies from the Northern part of England and even burned down churches and farmland to weaken pockets of resistance that crept up.

William also set about reorganizing the political and societal structures of his new country. He replaced the old English aristocracy, who had ruled their provinces semi-independently, with a group of Norman nobles who swore a direct oath to William himself. This strict hierarchical structure became known by historians as feudalism.

Now, William didn't invent feudalism. It had been in place in some parts of mainland Europe, including Normandy, for years as a way to organize society. It kept monarchs safely on the throne and kept everyone else in their place. But William did bring the system to England, changing the structure of the island for years to come.

4:12

Medieval feudal hierarchy with tiers for King, Nobles, Knights, and Peasants; map with various lines connecting nobles to the king overlayed are icons of weapons, crops, and a shield; medieval illustrations of peasants working the fields and working with livestock; illustration of a military figure amongst peasants.

In William's version of Feudal England, every person in society belonged to a tier, and each tier had clearly defined roles and responsibilities. The King sat at the top of the social pyramid as the guy who controlled all the land. Below him were the nobility, Norman aristocrats who reported directly to William in return for control of a small share of all that land. They were like middle management for their territories, handling all the administrative tasks like making sure farms were productive and that the territories were safe from outside invaders, plus serving as generals in William's military. They wore a lot of hats, literally and figuratively.

The nobility also enlisted military help from knights by dolling out an even smaller portion of their land in return for military service. But this whole system only worked because of the folks on the bottom: the peasants. As a whopping 85 percent of England's population, peasants were responsible for doing all the work that kept society fed, watered, and rich in resources– in return, they received theoretical protection against foreign invaders, but also constant threats of retribution should they be the ones to act up.

5:22

Coins from lower tiers traveling up to the King's tier; text 'Feudalism?'; feudal pyramid that is out of balance and displays a fallen knight; William on a throne overlayed with a knight, nobleman, peasant, and map of England with a question mark; map of England with castle icons.

And everybody paid taxes that were funneled back to William himself.

Now, it's worth noting that while feudalism is a buzzword in plenty of history textbooks, many historians actually lean away from this terminology today. And that's largely because, in reality, societies were never as organized as the feudal system makes them seem. And while it's clear that William was a well-organized, powerful ruler, there's still some debate about whether or not his reforms to England actually counted as the introduction of feudalism.

Feudal or not, England did stabilize under William's rule. And a new social structure wasn't the only organizational change William had up his sleeve.

Castle with red and gold banners; large ornate white castle; motte and bailey castle surrounded by a ditch with an archer atop and blue soldier figurines running toward it.

Quickly after taking control of the English throne, he set about building a hallmark of the era: castles.

These weren't the grand turrets that would come later, but structures known as motte and bailey castles. They were a simple combo of a huge mound of dirt with a wooden tower on top, called a motte, connected to an enclosed courtyard, called a bailey, which was usually surrounded by a large ditch. This gave his military more visibility to see any uprisings coming– and a protected fortress from which to squash them.

6:32

Locals around a motte and bailey wood castle; locals around a stone castle overlayed are icons representing: Hideout, Government, Barracks, and Taxes; map of England with castles and crowns as markers alongside an illustration of William in a crown; map with castle displaying neon signs that read 'Bring It On / Open / Try Me'; William seated at a desk reading from a large text; open book titled 'The Domesday Book' with pages showing records of people, buildings, animals, and land.

Eventually, the castles were upgraded from wood to stone. Stone castles functioned both as hideouts for Norman nobles during an attack, and also as a kind of city hall. When they weren't hiding from angry mobs, the noblemen used castles as a basecamp to house soldiers, collect taxes, and handle matters of state.

To William's subjects, the castles were a reminder that even though he couldn't be everywhere at once, the arm of his authority could. And to rival kingdoms in Northern Europe, castles served as a neon sign with flashing lights that said: The Normans are ready for you.

But conquest was costly for William. So in 1086, twenty years into his reign, he set out to get a sense of his wealth. William put together a written record of everything in his kingdom and how much it was worth —down to every last cow, acre, and person— "person" generally meaning "adult man."

This written record came to be called the Domesday Book.

7:28

Diagram illustrating economic flow centered around the Domesday Book; portrait of William surrounded by icons representing people, livestock, crops, structures, and money; William in his older years seated amongst a large feast; two historical images of William's final days; map of Normandy with a large cross above it; map with England highlighted in orange with a crown icon alongside a portrait of William Rufus, and Normandy highlighted in maroon with a crown icon alongside a portrait of Robert Curthose.

It allowed William to know exactly how much money came in, how much went out, and how much he could extract in taxes. And his hard work paid off: William's dedication to organization not only transformed England, but made him one of the most powerful rulers of the era.

Ultimately though, William's military efforts took a greater toll as he aged. Years of indulging in food and wine had left him weak and out of shape.

The historical sources differ in their report, but in 1087, 21 years after he conquered England, William either fell ill or tumbled from his horse in battle and was badly injured. He died in Normandy soon after at the age of 60.

He bequeathed his French and Anglo-Saxon lands to his sons, cementing his legacy on both sides of the English Channel.