

Department of Foreign Languages/English Division

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British Civilization

Level: 2nd year LMD

Lecture Four: Origins of the British People 3: The Normans and the Middle Ages

Introduction: Norman invasion

William presented himself both as the legitimate heir of Edward the Confessor and as the conqueror of England. Although William was now crowned king, his conquest had only just begun and the fighting lasted for another five years. There was an Anglo-Saxon rebellion against the Normans every year until 1070s. The small Norman army marched from village to village, destroying places it could not control and building forts to guard others. It was a **true army of occupation for at least twenty years**. The north was particularly hard to control and the Norman army had no mercy.

The lands of the resisting English elite were confiscated; some of the elite fled into exile. To control his new kingdom, William granted lands to his followers and built castles commanding military strong points throughout the land. Other effects of the conquest included the court and government, the introduction of the Norman language as the language of the elites, and changes in the composition of the upper classes, as William enfeoffed lands to be held directly from the king. There was little alteration in the structure of government, as the new Norman administrators took over many of the forms of Anglo-Saxon government. The organization of the kingdom into shires also remained, and the title *earl* remained the highest secular honor and responsibility that could be given to a subject. The English ruling class was replaced by Norman, Breton, and French nobility.

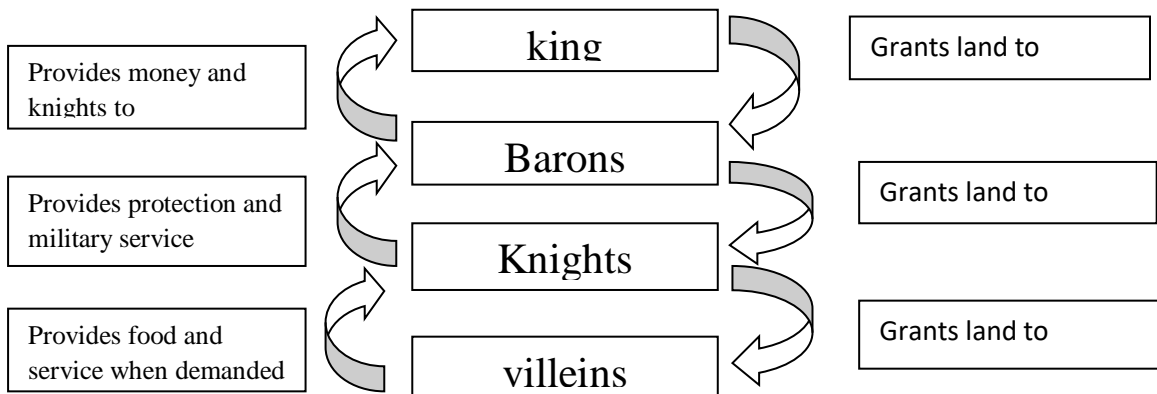
The conquest tied England to the French cultural sphere and essentially severed the Scandinavian connection. For centuries afterward, the English elite were mostly French in descent, French in culture, and avidly engaged in French politics. England was open to French cultural tendencies as well—in language, religion, architecture, literature, and many other areas. This political and cultural orientation to Europe was accompanied by an economic orientation. The dominant English export was now wool for the clothiers of Flanders, who valued fine English wool above the wool of Flanders itself. The wool trade had roots in the Anglo-Saxon era but expanded after the conquest. Flemish payment for wool in silver helped England maintain a high-quality currency, with little of the debasement of precious metal common in most European countries. Wool continued to be the most important English export until the Industrial Revolution of the 18th century.

William took inventory of his kingdom in the Domesday survey ordered in 1085 and recorded in the Domesday Book completed before his death in 1087. The Domesday Book was a written description or inventory of all the productive land in the kingdom; it named about 13,400 places. Although its coverage was not quite complete, it was the most all-inclusive and precise document produced by any medieval government, and it remains an enormously important source for historians.

Feudal England under the Normans

The Norman regime was based on different principles than that of the Anglo-Saxons. William the Conqueror and his heirs wanted to prevent the development of large, semi-independent

territorial lordships such as the Anglo-Saxon or Scottish earldoms or the Duchy of Normandy itself. Rather than giving away huge blocks of territory, the Norman kings dispersed the lands of the great feudal lords in smaller parcels. Building on Anglo-Saxon centralism, they imposed a very tight feudal structure where all lords swore allegiance to the king and all land was held feudally—that is, in return for services, usually military services. The aristocracy was small: About half the income from the country went to around 200 barons, the rest to the king and the church. The king also owned land outright in every part of the kingdom, giving him a presence throughout his realm.



The king controls everything under the feudal system. He owned all the land and he is the only responsible to lease it to those men he could trust. In return they had to swear an oath to remain faithful to the king at all times.

The Barons are those who leased land from the king. They were known as lords of the manor as well. They had complete control over this land. In return for the land they had been given, the barons had to serve also on the royal council, pay rent, and provide the king with knights for military service when needed. They can also divide their lands on the knights as they wish.

The knights were given land from the baron in return for military service when demanded by the king. They had to protect the baron and his family, as well as the manor from attack. The knights kept as much land as they wished for personal use and distribute the rest to villeins (serfs).

The villeins, sometimes known as serfs, were given land by knights. They had to provide the knight with free labour, food and service when demanded. They had no rights and were not allowed to leave the manor. They were a little better than slaves.

Magna Carta and the decline of feudalism: "the Great Charter of the Liberties"

It is a charter agreed to by King John of England at Runnymede, near Windsor, on 15 June 1215. First drafted by the Archbishop of Canterbury to make peace between the unpopular King and a group of rebel barons, it promised the protection of church rights, protection for the barons from illegal imprisonment, access to swift justice, and limitations on feudal payments to the Crown, to be implemented through a council of 25 barons.

This new agreement was known as "Magna Carta" , was an important symbol of political freedom. The king promised all "freemen" protection from his officers, and the right to a fair and legal trial. At the time perhaps less than one quarter of the English were "freemen". Most were not free, and were serfs or little better. Hundreds of years later, Magna Carta was used by Parliament to protect itself from a powerful king. In fact Magna Carta gave no real freedom to the majority of people in England. The nobles who wrote it and forced King John

to sign it had no such thing in mind. They had one main aim: to make sure king John did not go beyond his rights as feudal lord.

Magna Carta marks a clear stage in the collapse of English feudalism. Feudal society was based on links between lord and vassal. The nobles **were not acting as vassals but as a class**. They established a committee of twenty-four lords to make sure John kept his promises. That was not a "feudal" thing to do. In addition, the nobles were **acting in co-operation with the merchant class of towns**. The nobles did not allow John's successors to forget this charter and its promises. Every king recognized Magna Carta, until the Middle Ages ended in disorder and a new kind of monarchy came into being in the sixteenth century.