

The Norman Conquest : Its Main Causes and Effects On British Society and Politics (1066-1071)

Hermas-Christian GANDOUNOU* and Basile Marius NGASSAKI**

Abstract

This article shows how Britain had undergone many changes since the Norman Conquest. Though British civilization was and remains extremely diverse and varied, this article uses the common experiences of English to provide and to lay a solid foundation for understanding and appreciating Britain's rich diversity and creative achievements. Therefore, this article will focus on the capital aspects of the socioeconomic and political development of the British society after the Norman invasion.

Keywords

Norman, Feudalism, English.

Résumé

Cet article montre comment la Grande-Bretagne a connu beaucoup de changement depuis la conquête normande. Quoique la civilisation britannique soit et demeure extrêmement diverse et variée, cet article utilise les expériences communes pour fournir et trouver une base solide afin de comprendre et apprécier la riche diversité britannique et des accomplissements créatifs. Ainsi, cet article sera basé sur les aspects capitaux du développement socio-économique et politique de la société britannique après l'invasion normande.

Mots clés

Normand, Féodalisme, Anglais

Introduction

The period from 5000 BC to 1290 AD is a period of invasions of Britain. It had been invaded by the Romans, Anglo-Saxons and

* Doctorant, Faculté des Lettres, Arts et Sciences Humaines, Université Marien Ngouabi (Brazzaville, Congo).

** Professeur titulaire CAMES, Faculté des Lettres, Arts et Sciences Humaines, Université Marien Ngouabi (Brazzaville, Congo).

Vikings. They influenced the social, political, religious and other aspects of the country. It started with Caesar's invasion about 800 BC. It was then followed by a series of other invasions such as : The Roman invasion from 55 to 54 BC, Severan invasion of Caledonia from 208 to 210 AD, Carausian Revolt from 286 to 296 AD, and Great Conspiracy from 367 to 368 AD. The invasions which have mostly affected the modern Great Britain are: Anglo-Saxon invasion in the 4th century, the invasion of the Great Heathen Army from 865 to 878 AD, Cnut's invasion in late 1016, and Viking invasion in the 9th century.

Toward the close of the Old English period, an event occurred that had a greater effect on England than any other in the course of its history. This event was the Norman Conquest. It was on the 28th of September 1066, that Britain was invaded by Norman troops under the command of William of Normandy - William "the Conqueror".

So, the present paper aims at showing the impact of this invasion in the development of the modern England. That is the reason why we will resort to the socio-historical approach to conduct our research. Our hypotheses are based on the fact that any invasion always brings changes in different aspects of life of the colonised community.

In this regard, the emphasis will be put on the following aspects: society, culture, politics and architecture. Beforehand, a word will be said about the main causes of the Norman conquest.

1. The main causes of the Norman conquest

Edward the Confessor's modern day reputation is that of a gentle man and peaceable man. Yet, his death sparked off the bloodiest periods in English history, as rival claimants to the throne of England battled it out, and the man who was ultimately successful and ambitious. In the wake of Edward's death, there were then three strong candidates for the English throne. As we are going to see, succession principles were far from clear cut and each of these candidates had points in their favour: Earl Harold, the powerful Earl of Wessex, brother-in-law and friend of the late king, did not have royal blood but he was an adult magnate at the heart of English government and the brother of the widowed queen; Harald Godfred, king of Norway, the young son of Edward the Exile. He was child with no significant successor and so

no immediate prospect of being able to rule independently; Duke William of Normandy, the late king's mother, Emma, was a close kinsman of the late king but he was a foreign duke with no powerbase in England.

This part is divided into two sections. The first section is concerned with the lack of choice of British to crown the new king. Our investigation will be mainly focused on the downfall of the monarchy in England. In the second section, we will deal with the ambitions of Duke William.

1.1. The downfall of monarchy

Edward the Confessor was born in 1003 to King Ethelred II and Queen Emma. Little is known about his early years but, after the Danish invasion of 1013, Edward and his family were exiled and fled to Normandy. In this case, Marc Norris (1996, p 64) writes that England had been conquered by Vikings, and its ancient royal family were in exile- in Normandy.

They returned one year later but were exiled again in 1016. With the support of Earl Godwin, the most powerful nobleman in England, Edward was able to return in 1041 and was crowned king the following year. In 1045 Edward married Edith, daughter of Earl Godwin. In 1051, King Edward had been on the throne for nine years and so far, his reign had been peaceful and he had proven himself to be an able and successful monarch. But, despite a happy union, rumours abounded that his marriage to Edith had yet to be consumed. This created a potentially serious problem - who would succeed to the throne when Edward died?

Edward had devised a solution to this problem: secure the succession by promising the throne to William, the Duke of Normandy. The two men were distant cousins and William had visited Edward at his court in England sometime in 1051. On the death of Earl Godwin in 1053, dominance in England passed to his sons who became leading figures in English politics, ruling many of England's territories. As reported by French writers, King Edward sent Harold, his brother-in-law and the most powerful of these sons, to Normandy in 1064. If we have to believe the writers, the purpose of this trip was to confirm Edward's succession promise made to Duke William in

1051. Harold's journey to Normandy did not start well; he was shipwrecked north of Normandy, in the region of Ponthieu, and captured by the local Count, Guy. The Bayeux Tapestry (nr), which records this drama, tells:

On hearing the news of his imprisonment, Duke William rushed to Harold's rescue. Harold then accompanied William into battle and was knighted. Later, at William's palace in Rouen, Harold swore an oath to the Duke over holy relics. The exact words of the oath remain unknown but contemporary writers were convinced that Harold promised to protect William's claim to the throne and do all he could to ensure his succession. With the promise made, Harold returned to England

King Edward had been sick since November 1065. Despite a brief recovery, the illness returned on Christmas Eve. Although he was able to attend the Christmas Day banquet, Edward's illness caused him to miss the consecration of Westminster Abbey, his most famous project. It was not yet customary in England for the monarch to name his successor, although the king's son was usually chosen. This responsibility was left to the Witan, the king's council of advisers, who were present while Edward lay dying. Choosing a new king was a serious business and, as Edward's marriage had not produced a son; the Witan had developed a strict criterion to help them choose the best man for the job. First of all, the new king had to be an Englishman, as the Witan did not want England to be ruled by a foreigner. Secondly, he must be of good character and, finally, be of royal blood. The king was free to nominate a successor but the final decision rested with the Witan. The First Omen? Shortly before his death, King Edward began to speak. He told those around him of a recent dream where two Norman monks, that he had once known, told him that God had placed a curse on England. In the same view, Marc Norris (1996, p. 78) quoted that Edward had lived a celibate life, indeed, he preserved with holy chastity the dignity of his consecration, he lived his whole life dedicated in true innocence.

One year and one day after his death, devils would bring fire, sword and war to punish the country for the wickedness of its earls and clergy. The curse would only be lifted when a green tree, felled halfway up its trunk, and with one part cut off and taken three furlongs

away, would re-join and grow again. The Archbishop of Canterbury dismissed his dream as the ravings of a man close to death but others began to worry. After all, Edward was an extremely pious man with a reputation for prophesying the future. But the dream was soon overshadowed by Edward's next action. He offered his hand to his brother-in-law, Harold, and placed the kingdom of England into his protection. After these important announcements, Edward fell back into a coma and died during the night of 5 January 1066. The following day, the Witan unanimously confirmed Harold as the new king of England. Not only was Edward's choice but he was the most powerful man in England, of good character, a proven soldier and, above all, he was English. There was no mention of Duke William and the alleged promise that was made in 1051, nor Harold's confirming visit to Normandy in 1064. Thus, on 6 January 1066, King Edward was buried in Westminster Abbey and Harold Godwinson was crowned King Harold II of England on January 6th 1066. So, at first glance, the crown of England passed without problem from Edward to Harold. What nobody could predict, however, was how dramatically things were about to change.

However, Harold Godwinson was not the only person with a claim to the English throne in 1066. Succession in Anglo-Saxon England differed from the later practices of heredity and primogeniture; any nobleman of royal blood could stake his claim to the crown. It was then left to the Witan to make a decision. At the time of Edward's death, there were several men who, whether Harold realised it or not, had as strong a claim as he did. The other main contenders were: Harald Hardrada, King of Norway – his claim was based on the alleged promise of the English throne by King Harthacnut (Edward's predecessor) to King Magnus (Hardrada's father), Edgar the Aetheling – he could trace a direct line from the ninth century king, Alfred the Great; Duke William of Normandy – his great-aunt Emma had been married to two English kings and was Edward's mother.

Harald's claim was certainly tenuous, and the Witan felt very strongly about a foreigner taking the English crown. Edgar, on the other hand, may have been blue-blooded but was still a boy and lacked any support in England. Being a foreigner was one of the barriers for William but being illegitimate and not of royal blood gave him an even weaker claim. But there was more to William's claim

than his ancestry. Firstly, he argued that Edward the Confessor had promised him the throne during his visit to England 1051, and, secondly, he asserted that whilst in Normandy, Harold had, over holy relics, promised to back William's claim to the throne and help him to succeed. In William's eyes, Harold had broken his promise, proved himself a usurper and left him no choice but to invade England and take the throne by force. And this is where the story of 1066 really begins.

1.2. William of Normandy's ambition

William the Conqueror, the future William I of England, was born between 1027 and 1028 at Falaise in Normandy. As the product of a brief relationship between his father, Robert, the Duke of Normandy and his mother, Herleva, the daughter of a local tanner, William came to be known as the Bastard by his contemporaries. After the death of his father in 1035, the boy William inherited the Duchy of Normandy with his great uncle acting as regent. Due to his illegitimacy, there were several Norman magnates who refused to accept the young William as the rightful heir and in 1040 they hatched a plan to murder him. The plot failed but William's guardians were killed. In this respect, David Bates (2001, p 83) states:

Several of these plots involved gaining control of the young duke. William's father had taken the precaution of naming several guardians for his son, but one by one they were assassinated.

Indeed, by 1045 William was old enough to take control of the Duchy and successfully crushed the first threat to his power in 1047 at Val-es-Dunes. It was after a visit to his distant cousin, King Edward the Confessor, in 1051 that William alleged he had been promised the throne of England. This was later confirmed with Harold's Godwinson's visit in 1064. After King Edward's death and the coronation of Harold as Harold II in January 1066, William prepared to invade the country. Then, he invaded England after the death of King Edward the Confessor because he believed he had the most right to be King of England. But King Harold II had himself crowned king instead.

2. The effects of the Norman conquest

The Norman Conquest heralded many changes in the way England was ruled and the way the English people lived their lives. William was a more powerful king than his Anglo-Saxon predecessors were, largely because the unique circumstances of the conquest meant that the whole land in England was held from him directly. In the same view, Marc Morris (1996, p. 58-59) states:

William's reign did indeed prove to belong, but it was far from peaceful. While he wore crown, England experienced greater and more seismic change than at any point before or since. The years immediately after his coronation were ones of almost constant violence, filled with English rebellion, Norman repression and even Viking invasion. Huge areas of the country were laid waste with fire and sword, especially the North, which was harried into submission without mercy during the winter of 1069–70. The old ruling elite of England were swept away in their thousands and replaced by continental newcomers, who spoke a different language and had very different views about the way society should be ordered. Hundreds of castles were constructed all over the kingdom to enforce Norman rule, and every major abbey and cathedral was ripped down and rebuilt.

The reign of William the Conqueror appears to be tumultuous for England in general. Drastic changes will transform the British society at the level of sociology, culture, politics and architectures.

2.1. The effects on British society

The most aspects of the British society which have been influenced by the Norman invasion are : migration, marriage and language.

2.1.1. English Emigration

Following the conquest, many Anglo-Saxons, including groups of nobles, fled the country for Scotland, Ireland, or Scandinavia. Members of King Harold Godwinson's family sought refuge in Ireland and used their bases in that country for unsuccessful invasions of

England. The largest single exodus occurred in the 1070s, when a group of Anglo-Saxons in a fleet of 235 ships sailed for the Byzantine Empire. The empire became a popular destination for many English nobles and soldiers, as the Byzantines were in need of mercenaries. The English became the predominant element in the elite Varangian Guard, until then a largely Scandinavian unit, from which the emperor's bodyguard was drawn. Some of the English migrants were settled in Byzantine frontier regions on the Black Sea coast, and established towns with names such as New London and New York.

2.1.2. Immigration and Intermarriage

An estimated 8000 Normans and other continentals settled in England as a result of the conquest, although exact figures cannot be established. Some of these new residents intermarried with the native English, but the extent of this practice in the years immediately after Hastings is unclear. Several marriages are attested between Norman men and English women during the years before 1100, but such marriages were uncommon. Most Normans continued to contract marriages with other Normans or other continental families rather than with the English. Within a century of the invasion, intermarriage between the native English and the Norman immigrants had become common. By the early 1160s, Ailred of Rievaulx wrote that intermarriage was common in all levels of society.

2.2. Culture

Any contact between two peoples always lead to a mixture of their respective culture. And language is the most influential aspect. This is what happened to the language spoken in England. Actually, the English language suffered as a result of the Norman Invasion as French and Latin became the new languages of the government, Church and the nobility. English was now associated with the uncivilised and uneducated. The Normans also brought their drinking habits with them; gone were the days of the famous Anglo-Saxon mead-hall, eclipsed by the new French fashion of wine-drinking. One of the most enduring cultural changes was the adoption of French names, at the expense of the more traditional Anglo-Saxon ones. In an

attempt to imitate their new conquerors, many English chose to abandon the traditional names like 'Godwin', 'Harold', or 'Ethelred', in favour of French names like 'Guillaume', 'Henry' or 'Robert'. Even in the last decade, William still features in the top 10 baby names for boys in England and Wales. These are just a few of the changes brought about by the new regime. But it was changes like these which left an indelible scar on the country and would ultimately ensure that England and her people would never be conquered again.

One of the other most potent legacies of the Norman Conquest came in the form of Anglo-Norman, introduced to England from across the channel as a northern dialect of '*Old French*', a Gallo-Romance dialect spoken from the 9th century. This replaced the traditional old English and brought with it many French words still in practice to this day ('coup' and 'debut' to name a couple). The '*Old English*' language suffered greatly as a result of the events of 1066, with French and Latin becoming the new languages of the government, the nobility and the Church. Ultimately, these languages became greatly associated with the higher classes and more sophisticated style of life that the Normans aimed to bring with them. In contrast, Old English struggled with the cultural shock, being brandished a language of the poor, the uncivilised or uneducated. Alongside this switch to a more Norman style of communication, a further indication of the cultural shift brought by the invasion can be found by analysing the use of 'Norman' given names of new-borns in England after 1066, especially male names. So-called 'Norman names', such as Richard, William, Robert and Henry, became much more popular as England adjusted to the post-conquest style of life and society.

The cultural change will have a serious impact on the British politics.

2.3. The effect on British politics

Within five years, the Normans had conquered all of England. The rulers of England thought of themselves as English, not French. This period was a time of great changes in government. This will affect the position of the elite and the governmental systems.

2.3.1. Elite replacement

A direct consequence of the invasion was the almost total elimination of the old English aristocracy and the loss of English control over the Catholic Church in England. William systematically dispossessed English landowners and conferred their property on his continental followers. The Domesday Book (nr) meticulously states:

The impact of this colossal programme of expropriation, revealing that by 1086 only about 5 per cent of land in England south of the Tees was left in English hands. Even this tiny residue was further diminished in the decades that followed, the elimination of native landholding being most complete in southern parts of the country.

Natives were also removed from high governmental and ecclesiastical office. After 1075 all earldoms were held by Normans, and Englishmen were only occasionally appointed as sheriffs. Likewise, in the Church, senior English office-holders were either expelled from their positions or kept in place for their lifetimes and replaced by foreigners when they died. By 1096 no bishopric was held by any Englishman, and English abbots became uncommon, especially in the larger Monasteries.

2.3.2. Governmental systems

The main aspects which have been affected at the political level are based on the murdrum and feudalism.

2.3.2.1. The murdrum

A legal innovation was the murdrum. This law meant that a village or hundred had to pay a fine if it could not apprehend a murderer or prove the victim was English. It served as both a measure to protect the migrating Normans but also as revenue-generator, like many of the laws introduced there was always room for manipulation: was an Anglo-Norman English or Norman? These ambiguities were exploited by the crown for revenue. It also drew a legal distinction between the English and the Normans that would have hindered integration.

William took quite a reforming move when he empowered the Lanfranc and other bishops to hear canon law cases in a place of their choosing rather than secular courts. Again this was a departure from previous custom which had seen these cases heard in secular courts – usually the hundred court. William's ordinance anticipated the development of ecclesiastical courts, and it showed that William wanted to move the English church forward through reform and out of the stasis it was believed to be in. Most of William's changes reflect the fact England was now very much part of a French political sphere and his changes in legislation could be said to be bringing England in line with many Norman customs.

2.3.2.2. Feudalism

It used to be assumed as a common place of history that the Normans introduced feudalism into England. At last there came a reaction, and we were taught that feudalism in England was already so far advanced that the Normans merely gave a slight extra impetus to its complete development. As a matter of fact, the advocates of these contradictory doctrines did not mean quite the same thing by feudalism, or at least they concentrated their attention on different aspects of it. The basis of feudalism was the doctrine that the whole land was the property of the king and that the individual landowner was not in the full sense an owner, but held his land as a tenant of the king, by the grant of the king, on recognised conditions of military service. Where this had not been the case originally, when the landowner had been there before the king, before the land had formed a part of the king's dominion, the same position had been arrived at by the process of Commendation; that is, the landowner had done homage to the king and become the king's man, himself surrendering his land to the king and then receiving it back on condition of military service.

2.4. Architecture

William the Conqueror's one of the ambitions is to urbanize English cities, towns and villages according to the continental architecture. For this reason, measures will be taken to introduce new ideas and visions in the fields of land and wealth, landscape and buildings.

2.4.1. Land and Wealth

When Duke William first approached his men with the idea of invading England, he received a cool reception. It took the promise of foreign lands and titles to persuade them otherwise. After the Battle of Hastings, William kept this promise and rewarded those who had fought alongside him at the expense of the native English aristocracy. By this point, William had been king for 20 years and whatever his motivations for completing a survey on this scale, it shows a dramatic reversal of English fortunes. For example, William controlled 17% of the land in England (double that of his one of his Saxon predecessors, Edward the Confessor) and the Church owned a mighty 26%. The remaining 54% of land in England was controlled by the aristocracy. Statistics from the survey show that 40% of the total land was concentrated into the hands of ten laymen and twelve members of the clergy. It was with these few men that the real power lay and not one of them was of English descent.

2.4.2. Landscape

Castles may seem synonymous with Medieval England but, prior to 1066, not one castle could be found in the whole of the country. It was the Normans who brought the castle to England and they commenced building within days of their arrival. Such fortifications became symbols of Norman dominance and served a dual purpose; they housed the new aristocracy and provided a base from which the Normans could effectively establish control. Estimates suggest that William I built up to 86 castles in his 21-year reign. These structures dramatically altered England's landscape and many of these castles can still be seen today. The Normans also remodelled many of England's churches and cathedrals to create some of the country's most monumental and impressive structures. The cathedrals of Ely and Durham are some of the finest examples of Norman buildings in England. William was also responsible for building the White Tower in London, with the primary function of defending his supply ships sailing up the Thames River. It was an immense structure using specially imported stone from Normandy. The building work was supervised by Gundulf, the Norman Bishop of Rochester, but the

labour was provided by English men of the shires. The country had never seen anything like it.

2.4.3. Buildings

A lasting legacy of the Normans is their architecture. England has majestic Norman churches, abbeys and castles that provided a footprint for much of the early English architecture that was to follow. It is impossible not to be awed by the magnificence of Norman Architecture. They built their churches like castles. They brought stone across the Channel from quarries around Caen, white stone that when new, shone and glistened and could be seen for miles. A great example of a Norman Cathedral is at Ely in Cambridgeshire. Like a wedding cake, layers and layers of decoration as if the stone masons were in competition with each other. The Normans brought their own stone masons with them from France and so in style, French Norman churches and English Norman churches look similar. A study of Hampshire Norman architecture shows how the style developed in Britain over time.

Conclusion

To conclude on this paper, it is relevant to note that the aim of this paper was to describe the main causes of the Norman invasion and its effects on British society and politics from 1066 to 1071. So, the Norman Conquest opens Britain to European influences, especially in the church where they swept away the English clergy and replaced them with men from Europe. England could not now escape the authority of the Pope and it is during this Norman period that they created Canon Law. This was a church law which affected every Christian in Britain including the monarchs. Church authority ruled overall and the clergy were removed from the royal courts. It was probably the church revivals that would have greatest impact on British society during the Norman period and the greatest of these, the monastic revival.

The evidence of the Norman invasion is scattered throughout the British countryside and in her towns, so much so, that we probably take for granted these thousand-year-old monuments, the parish

church. A cultural transformation on this scale would not be seen again until the 19th century; the conquering of England by William of Normandy marked a moment of huge significance for British culture. The Norman invasion of England brought a new culture which mixed and intermingled with that developed by the Anglo-Saxons, to cultivate a society which has seen language, politics, architecture and governmental systems develop into the structures and aspects of society that we see even to this day. It was the Normans who brought castles to English shores, commencing building within days of the conquest. These fortifications, of which 86 were said to be built in William the Conqueror's 21-year reign, established themselves as symbols of Norman dominance. Among those included in the Norman's rapid assembling of castles include Warwick Castle, Dover Castle and Carlisle Castle, all of which still stand strong today. Alongside the dominance they illustrated, these castles housed the rich and powerful, providing a base from which the aristocracy could establish control of their new conquest effectively. Yet, many profound changes occurred in English social and political life, Although Great Britain is now radically different from its pre-20th century history, and it still has many influences from the past.

References

- BATES David, 2001, *William the Conqueror*, Stroud UK, Tempus.
BATES David, 1982, *Normandy Before 1066*, London, Longman.
BENNETT Matthew, 2001, *Campaigns of the Norman Conquest. Essential Histories*, Oxford, UK, Osprey.
CHIBNALL Marjorie, 1986, *Anglo-Norman England 1066–1166*. Oxford, UK, Basil Blackwell.
CHIBNALL Marjorie, 1999, *The Debate on the Norman Conquest. Issues in Historiography*, Manchester, UK, Manchester University Press.
CROUCH David, 2007, *The Normans: The History of a Dynast*, London, Hambledon & London.
CRYSTAL David, 2002, *"The Story of Middle English"*. *The English Language: A Guided Tour of the Language* (Second ed.), New York, Penguin.

- DANIEL Christopher, 2003, *From Norman Conquest to Magna Carta: England, 1066–1215*, London, Routledge.
- DOUGLAS David C., 1964, *William the Conqueror: The Norman Impact Upon England*, Berkeley.
- KANE Thomas S., 2000, *The Oxford Essential Guide to Writing*. New York, Berkley Books.
- MARC Norris, 1996, ‘*The Norman Conquest: The battle of Hasting and the Fall of Anglo-Saxon England*, Longman.