England: the Norman Conquest

The eleventh century brought many political and cultural changes to Anglo-Saxon England. In 1013, King Sweyn Forkbeard of Denmark invaded England. Fleeing to his brother-in-law’s holdings across the English Channel in Normandy to regroup, the English King Ethelred was unsuccessful in his attempt to retake the island from Denmark’s king. Upon Sweyn’s death, the throne passed to his son Cnut, who added England to his holdings in Denmark, Norway, and parts of Sweden. He further legitimated his rule by marrying the widow of Ethelred, Emma of Normandy. Eager to re-establish Ethelred’s line after Cnut’s death, English nobles called up Ethelred’s son, Edward the Confessor (r. 1042-1066). When he died without a legitimate heir, the nobility stepped in once again, inviting Edward’s brother-in-law, Harold Goodwin, to take the throne. Harold, however, would not have the smooth transition Edward did. There was a rival claimant to the throne: Harold Hadrada, King of Norway. As the two Harolds battled one another for the throne, William, Edward the Confessor’s illegitimate son and Duke of Normandy, made his way with the blessing of the pope across the channel to English shores near the port of Hastings. From there he would make his stand as the rightful ruler of England.

Victorious over the King of Norway’s troops at the Battle of Stamford Bridge, Harold Goodwin was forced to trek down the island with his army to face William. Having strategically entrenched his army, William defeated Harold in one day on December 14, 1066. A few weeks later he was crowned king. William’s victory inaugurated a new period in English history. It tied the island to the continent in a new way, both culturally and politically. He brought in his own nobles, assigning each a region over which to rule and from whom he collected feudal dues and military service. William also distributed land to monasteries and churches. He kept approximately one-fifth of English land to rule himself. In this way, all land was governed by favor of the king. He did not, however, do away with existing organizational and administrative elements he found valuable in securing his rule. For example, he retained existing land divisions into shires and the royal agents, called sheriffs, who administered them. He also retained the royal writ, or command, which was way for the king to deliver direct instructions to the sheriffs and other administrators of the realm. For the most part, he kept customary laws in place. In order to get a full picture of his new realm, William ordered a complete census of people, resources, land claims, and the extent of each estate dating to the time of Edward the Confessor. Referred to as the Domesday Book, this extensive inventory took its name from the Doms, or courts, and the popular idea that it was so thorough that it was akin to the record upon which one was judged at doomsday.

William’s conquering of England tied the island to the continent in a new way politically. Upon his death, William’s possessions were divided among his sons, with William II Rufus (1087-1107) receiving the English crown. After the latter died, William’s youngest son, Henry inherited the throne. Henry went on to defeat his eldest brother, Robert, in a
challenge for the crown in Normandy. When Henry I’s heir died in a shipwreck in 1120, he left his kingdom to his daughter Matilda (1102-1167), throwing England into a civil war. The opposition rallied behind Stephen of Blois, Henry’s nephew, whom the nobility crowned king in 1135. The two sides compromised by naming Matilda’s son, Henry II Plantagenet (1154-1189), as Stephen’s successor. Henry II’s reign further tied England to the continent, as he added King of England to his titles of count of Anjou, Maine, and Touraine, Duke of Normandy, and, through marriage, Duke of Aquitaine.