



# The early Middle Ages

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## 4 Conquest and feudal rule

*The Norman Conquest • Feudalism • Kingship: a family business • Magna Carta and the decline of feudalism*

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### The Norman Conquest

William the Conqueror's coronation did not go as planned. When the people shouted "God Save the King" the nervous Norman guards at Westminster Abbey thought they were going to attack William. In their fear they set fire to nearby houses and the coronation ceremony ended in disorder.

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 1070. 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. When the Saxons fought back, the Normans burnt, destroyed and killed. Between Durham and York not a single house was left standing, and it took a century for the north to recover.

Few Saxon lords kept their lands and those who did were the very small number who had accepted William immediately. All the others lost everything. By 1086, twenty years after the arrival of the Normans, only two of the greater landlords

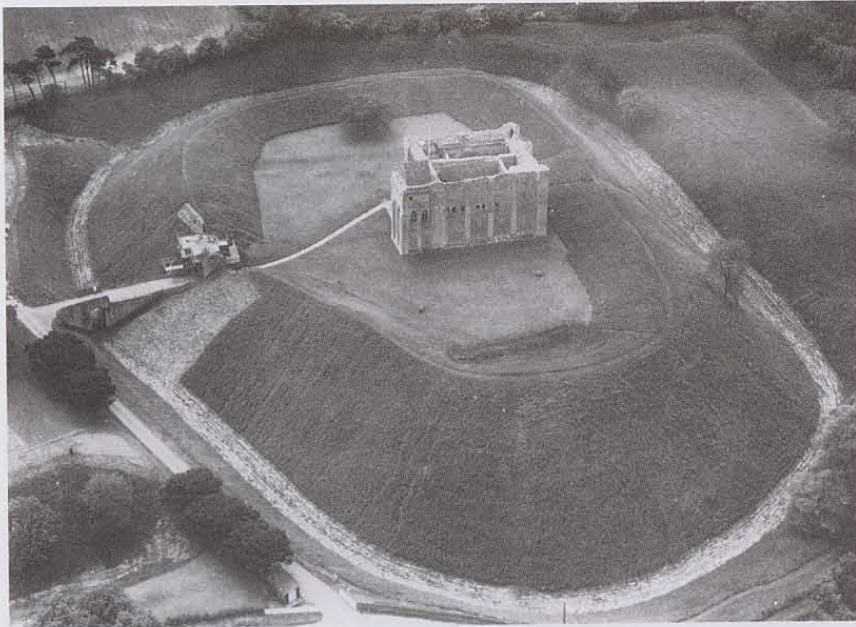
and only two bishops were Saxon. William gave the Saxon lands to his Norman nobles. After each English rebellion there was more land to give away. His army included Norman and other French land seekers. Over 4,000 Saxon landlords were replaced by 200 Norman ones.

### Feudalism

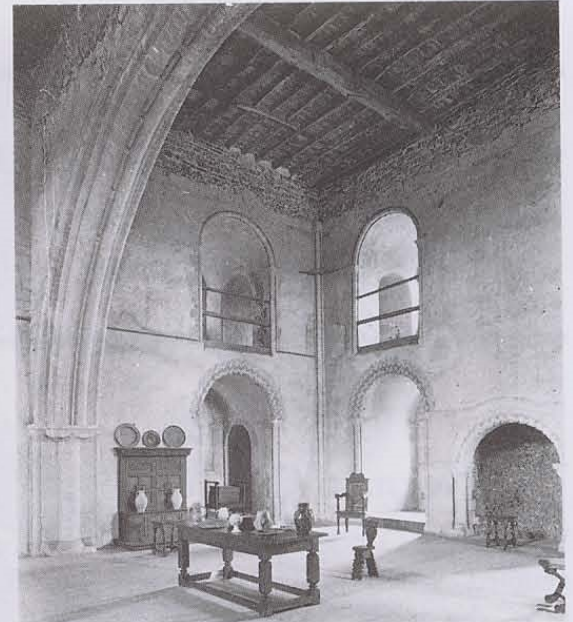
William was careful in the way he gave land to his nobles. The king of France was less powerful than many of the great landlords, of whom William was the outstanding example. In England, as each new area of land was captured, William gave parts of it as a reward to his captains. This meant that they held separate small pieces of land in different parts of the country so that no noble could easily or quickly gather his fighting men to rebel. William only gave some of his nobles larger estates along the troublesome borders with Wales and Scotland. At the same time he kept enough land for himself to make sure he was much stronger than his nobles. Of all the farmland of England he gave half to the Norman nobles, a quarter to the Church, and kept a fifth himself. He kept the Saxon system of sheriffs, and used these as a balance to local nobles. As a result England was different from the rest of Europe because it had one powerful family, instead of a large number of powerful nobles. William, and the kings after him, thought of England as their personal property.

William organised his English kingdom according to the feudal system which had already begun to develop in England before his arrival. The word

*An argument between King Henry II and his archbishop, Thomas Becket. Behind Becket stand two knights, probably those who killed him to please Henry. The picture illustrates the struggle between Church and state during the early Middle Ages. The Church controlled money, land (including towns and feudal estates), and men. As a result, the kings of England had to be very careful in their dealings with the Church. They tried to prevent any increase in Church power, and tried to appoint bishops who would be more loyal to the king than to the Church. Becket died because he tried to prevent the king from gaining more control of Church affairs.*



Castle Rising in Norfolk, a fine example of the stone-built keeps the Normans built in the early twelfth century. These replaced the earlier Norman “motte and bailey” castles, which were earth mounds surrounded by a wooden fence or pallsade. A stone-built keep of the new kind was extremely difficult to capture, except by surprise. Keeps of this kind had a well, providing fresh water for a long siege.



The great hall in Castle Headingham, built in 1140, gives an idea of the inside of a Norman castle. The floor was covered with rushes or reeds, cut from a nearby marsh or wetland area. The walls were decorated with woven woollen embroidered hangings, for which England was famous. The furniture is of a much later date. In Norman times there was probably a large but simple table and chair for the lord of the castle. Others sat on benches, or might have stood for meals.

“feudalism” comes from the French word *feu*, which the Normans used to refer to land held in return for duty or service to a lord. The basis of feudal society was the holding of land, and its main purpose was economic. The central idea was that all land was owned by the king but it was held by others, called “vassals”, in return for services and goods. The king gave large estates to his main nobles in return for a promise to serve him in war for up to forty days. The nobles also had to give him part of the produce of the land. The greater nobles gave part of their lands to lesser nobles, knights, and other “freemen”. Some freemen paid for the land by doing military service, while others paid rent. The noble kept “serfs” to work on his own land. These were not free to leave the estate, and were often little better than slaves.

There were two basic principles to feudalism: every man had a lord, and every lord had land. The king was connected through this “chain” of people to the lowest man in the country. At each level a man had to promise loyalty and service to his lord. This promise was usually made with the lord sitting on his chair and his vassal kneeling before him, his hands placed between those of his lord. This was



A thirteenth-century knight pays homage. The nobility of Britain still pay homage to the sovereign during the coronation ceremony. Ever since the Middle Ages, west European Christians have used the feudal homage position when praying, a reminder of their relationship to God, their lord and protector.

called “homage”, and has remained part of the coronation ceremony of British kings and queens until now. On the other hand, each lord had responsibilities to his vassals. He had to give them land and protection.

When a noble died his son usually took over his estate. But first he had to receive permission from the king and make a special payment. If he was still a child the king would often take the produce of the estate until the boy was old enough to look after the estate himself. In this way the king could benefit from the death of a noble. If all the noble’s family died the land went back to the king, who would be expected to give it to another deserving noble. But the king often kept the land for some years, using its wealth, before giving it to another noble.

If the king did not give the nobles land they would not fight for him. Between 1066 and the mid-fourteenth century there were only thirty years of complete peace. So feudal duties were extremely important. The king had to make sure he had enough satisfied nobles who would be willing to fight for him.

William gave out land all over England to his nobles. By 1086 he wanted to know exactly who owned which piece of land, and how much it was worth. He needed this information so that he could plan his economy, find out how much was produced and how much he could ask in tax. He therefore sent a team of people all through England to make a complete economic survey. His men asked all kinds of questions at each settlement: How much land was there? Who owned it? How much was it worth? How many families, ploughs and sheep were there? And so on. This survey was the only one of its kind in Europe. Not surprisingly, it was most unpopular with the people, because they felt they could not escape from its findings. It so reminded them of the paintings of the Day of Judgement, or “doom”, on the walls of their churches that they called it the “Domesday” Book. The name stuck. The Domesday Book still exists, and gives us an extraordinary amount of information about England at this time.

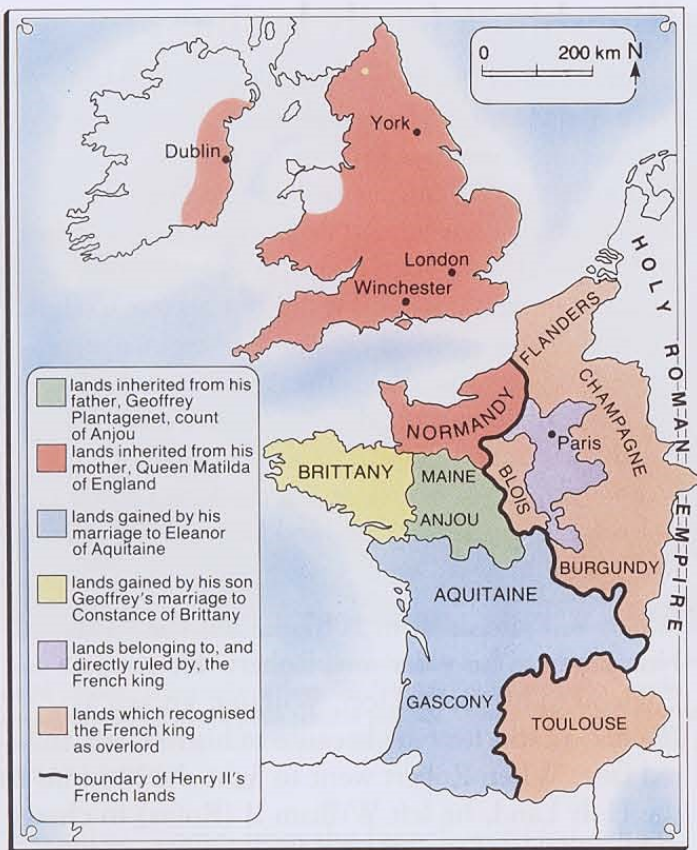
## Kingship: a family business

To understand the idea of kingship and lordship in the early Middle Ages it is important to realise that at this time there was little or no idea of nationalism. William controlled two large areas: Normandy, which he had been given by his father, and England, which he had won in war. Both were personal possessions, and it did not matter to the rulers that the ordinary people of one place were English while those of another were French. To William the important difference between Normandy and England was that as duke of Normandy he had to recognise the king of France as his lord, whereas in England he was king with no lord above him.

When William died, in 1087, he left the Duchy of Normandy to his elder son, Robert. He gave England to his second son, William, known as “Rufus” (Latin for red) because of his red hair and red face. When Robert went to fight the Muslims in the Holy Land, he left William II (Rufus) in charge of Normandy. After all, the management of Normandy and England was a family business.

William Rufus died in a hunting accident in 1100, shot dead by an arrow. He had not married, and therefore had no son to take the crown. At the time of William’s death, Robert was on his way home to Normandy from the Holy Land. Their younger brother, Henry, knew that if he wanted the English crown he would have to act very quickly. He had been with William at the time of the accident. He rode to Winchester and took charge of the king’s treasury. He then rode to Westminster, where he was crowned king three days later. Robert was very angry and prepared to invade. But it took him a year to organise an army.

The Norman nobles in England had to choose between Henry and Robert. This was not easy because most of them held land in Normandy too. In the end they chose Henry because he was in London, with the crown already on his head. Robert’s invasion was a failure and he accepted payment to return to Normandy. But Henry wanted more. He knew that many of his nobles would willingly follow him to Normandy so that they



Henry II's empire.

could win back their Norman lands. In 1106 Henry invaded Normandy and captured Robert. Normandy and England were reunited under one ruler.

Henry I's most important aim was to pass on both Normandy and England to his successor. He spent the rest of his life fighting to keep Normandy from other French nobles who tried to take it. But in 1120 Henry's only son was drowned at sea.

During the next fifteen years Henry hoped for another son but finally accepted that his daughter, Matilda, would follow him. Henry had married Matilda to another great noble in France, Geoffrey Plantagenet. Geoffrey was heir to Anjou, a large and important area southwest of Normandy. Henry hoped that the family lands would be made larger by this marriage. He made all the nobles promise to accept Matilda when he died. But then Henry himself quarrelled publicly with Matilda's husband, and died soon after. This left the succession in question.

At the time both the possible heirs to Henry were on their own estates. Matilda was with her husband in Anjou and Henry's nephew, Stephen of Blois, was in Boulogne, only a day's journey by sea from England. As Henry had done before him, Stephen raced to England to claim the crown. Also as before, the nobles in England had to choose between Stephen, who was in England, and Matilda, who had quarrelled with her father and who was still in France. Most chose Stephen, who seems to have been good at fighting but little else. He was described at the time as "of outstanding skill in arms, but in other things almost an idiot, except that he was more inclined towards evil." Only a few nobles supported Matilda's claim.

Matilda invaded England four years later. Her fight with Stephen led to a terrible civil war in which villages were destroyed and many people were killed. Neither side could win, and finally in 1153 Matilda and Stephen agreed that Stephen could keep the throne but only if Matilda's son, Henry, could succeed him. Fortunately for England, Stephen died the following year, and the family possessions of England and the lands in France were united under a king accepted by everyone. It took years for England to recover from the civil war. As someone wrote at the time, "For nineteen long winters, God and his angels slept." This kind of disorder and destruction was common in Europe, but it was shocking in England because people were used to the rule of law and order.

Henry II was the first unquestioned ruler of the English throne for a hundred years. He destroyed the castles which many nobles had built without royal permission during Stephen's reign, and made sure that they lived in manor houses that were undefended. The manor again became the centre of local life and administration.

Henry II was ruler of far more land than any previous king. As lord of Anjou he added his father's lands to the family empire. After his marriage to Eleanor of Aquitaine he also ruled the lands south of Anjou. Henry II's empire stretched from the Scottish border to the Pyrenees.



Four kings of the early Middle Ages: (top row) Henry II, Richard I, (bottom row) John and Henry III. Richard's shield carries the badge of the English kings. The three gold lions (called "leopards" in heraldic language) on a red field still form two of the four "quarters" of the Royal Standard or shield today.

England provided most of Henry's wealth, but the heart of his empire lay in Anjou. And although Henry recognised the king of France as the overlord of all his French lands, he actually controlled a greater area than the king of France. Many of Henry's nobles held land on both sides of the English channel.

However, Henry quarrelled with his beautiful and powerful wife, and his sons, Richard and John, took Eleanor's side. It may seem surprising that Richard and John fought against their own father. But in fact they were doing their duty to the king of France, their feudal overlord, in payment for the lands they held from him. In 1189 Henry died a broken man, disappointed and defeated by his sons and by the French king.

Henry was followed by his rebellious son, Richard. Richard I has always been one of England's most

popular kings, although he spent hardly any time in England. He was brave, and a good soldier, but his nickname *Coeur de Lion*, "lionheart", shows that his culture, like that of the kings before him, was French. Richard was everyone's idea of the perfect feudal king. He went to the Holy Land to make war on the Muslims and he fought with skill, courage and honour.

On his way back from the Holy Land Richard was captured by the duke of Austria, with whom he had quarrelled in Jerusalem. The duke demanded money before he would let him go, and it took two years for England to pay. Shortly after, in 1199, Richard was killed in France. He had spent no more than four or five years in the country of which he was king. When he died the French king took over parts of Richard's French lands to rule himself.

Richard had no son, and he was followed by his brother, John. John had already made himself unpopular with the three most important groups of people, the nobles, the merchants and the Church.

John was unpopular mainly because he was greedy. The feudal lords in England had always run their own law courts and profited from the fines paid by those brought to court. But John took many cases out of their courts and tried them in the king's courts, taking the money for himself.

It was normal for a feudal lord to make a payment to the king when his daughter was married, but John asked for more than was the custom. In the same way, when a noble died, his son had to pay money before he could inherit his father's land. In order to enlarge his own income, John increased the amount they had to pay. In other cases when a noble died without a son, it was normal for the land to be passed on to another noble family. John kept the land for a long time, to benefit from its wealth. He did the same with the bishoprics. As for the merchants and towns, he taxed them at a higher level than ever before.

In 1204 King John became even more unpopular with his nobles. The French king invaded Normandy and the English nobles lost their lands there. John had failed to carry out his duty to them as duke of Normandy. He had taken their money but he had not protected their land.

In 1209 John quarrelled with the pope over who should be Archbishop of Canterbury. John was in a weak position in England and the pope knew it. The pope called on the king of France to invade England, and closed every church in the country. At a time when most people believed that without the Church they would go to hell, this was a very serious matter. In 1214 John gave in, and accepted the pope's choice of archbishop.

In 1215 John hoped to recapture Normandy. He called on his lords to fight for him, but they no longer trusted him. They marched to London, where they were joined by angry merchants. Outside London at Runnymede, a few miles up the river, John was forced to sign a new agreement.

## Magna Carta and the decline of feudalism

This new agreement was known as "Magna Carta", the Great Charter, and 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 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. At Runnymede 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 recognised Magna Carta, until the Middle Ages ended in disorder and a new kind of monarchy came into being in the sixteenth century.

There were other small signs that feudalism was changing. When the king went to war he had the right to forty days' fighting service from each of his lords. But forty days were not long enough for fighting a war in France. The nobles refused to fight for longer, so the king was forced to pay soldiers to fight for him. (They were called "paid fighters", *solidarius*, a Latin word from which the word "soldier" comes.) At the same time many lords preferred their vassals to pay them in money rather than in services. Vassals were gradually beginning to change into tenants. Feudalism, the use of land in return for service, was beginning to weaken. But it took another three hundred years before it disappeared completely.