

FROM THE NORMAN INVASION TO THE DOMESDAY BOOK

Key Words and Related Topics

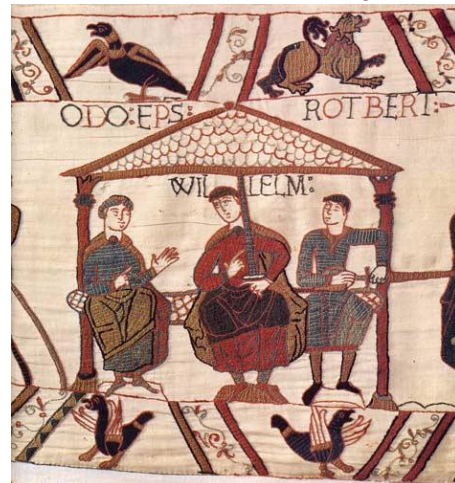
Temario de la Guía Docente: 1. The origins and evolution of English institutions

- Anglo-Norman culture: the coexistence of several languages and cultures: Latin, French and Late Old English / Early Middle English, and Celtic. The first two were the languages of political power and the Church, the third and fourth were the languages spoken by the general native population (depending on the region, and on the period).
- The mythical foundation of the British Empire (the transfer of political and cultural capital from classical Rome Empire to Britain, the myth of King Arthur)
- The foundations of Britain: military, religious, political and administrative (the construction of castles, churches and cathedrals, the Domesday Book, the administrative organisation of an incipient state)

Introduction

In this unit we will learn about some founding events in the narrative of English national identity. One of them is the Norman Conquest, whose defining moment was the Battle of Hastings in the year 1066. In the traditional English imaginary this date plays a role similar to the year 1492 for narratives of Spanish national identity. It triggered a series of events that would determine the subsequent evolution of the country. We shall see how this invasion of a French-speaking élite led to a rich and complex social and political reality in England where several languages and the cultures they informed coexisted.

We shall also see how this new reality gradually led to the creation of political and administrative institutions which ended up as the foundations of a modern state. This is why the Domesday Book plays such an important role: it was the first time that data were gathered on a massive scale about the country that the new dynasty had to rule. This is a fundamental step for the construction of the complex administrative structures required for the establishment of proper political institutions.



William the Conqueror, Bayeux Tapestry

Finally we shall see how in this founding moment English culture already appropriates the cultural capital and the political prestige that hailed from Classical Antiquity and from the values and “culturemes” of Christian Medieval Europe. These two trends can be found in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s history, in which the origin of the nation is traced back to the myth of Troy and the founder of the Roman Empire. Monmouth also mentions one of the mythical founding fathers of the nation: King Arthur, who embodies the ideal of the Christian knight and its concomitant values.



The Normans prepare for the invasion, Bayeux Tapestry

TASK. Read the following text by Richard Bates and try to answer the following questions:

1. Who were the main competitors for the English crown? Who was the English king before the Norman Conquest?
2. Which was the basis of William the Conqueror's claim on the English crown?
3. Who could make a similar claim?
4. What kind of Norman population settled in England after William the Conqueror's victory at Hastings in 1066?
5. How did the invasion change the geo-political situation of England?
6. Which were the cultural consequences?

[1]

Norman Conquest. William the Conqueror's victory at the battle of **Hastings** in October 1066 was followed by six years of campaigning, which irrevocably established the new king's grip on England. In the succeeding decades, the Norman kings and their followers expanded their power into Wales and Lowland Scotland. The sequence of events which led up to William's victory is uncertain, because of the existence of accounts which are contradictory and irreconcilable. It is undeniable that at some point, probably in the year 1051, an arrangement was made which William believed entitled him to claim the English succession as **Edward the Confessor's** legitimate heir. From William's point of view, it was irrelevant that Edward had made a similar promise on his death-bed to **Harold Godwinson**, since Harold had visited Normandy in 1064 or 1065 as Edward's ambassador and sworn an oath to accept William's succession. However, since this story is told exclusively in Norman sources and since later English sources cast doubt on both the purpose and the nature of the visit, it may not be the whole truth. The massive support which Harold enjoyed in 1066 shows that the English regarded him as a popular and rightly chosen king. William's belief in the legitimacy of his kingship, which was buttressed by the support which the papacy gave in and after 1066, conditioned many of the developments which followed the battle of Hastings; not only was William's kingship legal, but so also was the settlement of thousands of Normans, Flemings, Bretons, and other Frenchmen which he sanctioned. A massive take-over of English land and resources accomplished within a framework of notional legality was largely complete by 1086, the year when Domesday Book was made.



William of Normandy arrives in England. Bayeux Tapestry.

On a longer-term perspective, it is arguable that the Conquest was the last in a series of conquests of lowland Britain and itself had relatively little impact on a broader evolutionary process of economy, society, landscape, and language. The newcomers were a small military élite who were gradually assimilated into Britain and whose connections with the continent were severed with the loss of Normandy in 1204. On the other hand, it is not unreasonable to think of the Norman Conquest as a decisive shift within this broader process; the England and the Britain which emerged from the Norman military take-over were surely significantly different from the one which would have developed if Harold had won. There can be no doubt that William and his successors governed through mechanisms which were essentially those of the late Old English kingdom. The new aristocracy claimed to exercise the same rights and powers over their peasants as their English predecessors had done. Not everyone, however, would accept this appearance of continuity at face value. William I, William II, and Henry I all intervened with increasing frequency in the shires; it is far from certain that Harold and his successors would have made the same use of the existing structures. At a local level, many estates were reorganized, apparently in the short term depressing the fortunes of the peasantry. It was also the case that the Conquest's creation of the cross-channel Anglo-Norman realm sucked England into the feuds between the territorial rulers of northern France and can be linked over centuries to the outbreak of the **Hundred Years War**. The new connection with France also established cultural connections which ensured that England's place in the 12th-cent. renaissance was more closely linked to developments in France than it would otherwise have been. The Conquest extracted England from the Scandinavian political orbit which had brought about the earlier conquest by Sweyn Forkbeard and Cnut and Harold Hardrada's invasion, defeated in 1066 by Harold Godwinson at the battle of **Stamford Bridge**. It is doubtful whether Wales, Scotland, and—ultimately—Ireland would have been as intensively colonized from England but for the presence there of a new aggressive aristocracy.

David Richard Bates "Norman Conquest" *The Oxford Companion to British History*. Ed John Cannon. Oxford University Press, 2009. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press. Universidad de Granada. 22 September 2011. <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t110.e3100>



Edward the Confessor (to the left, sitting on the throne, and holding the scepter, *Edward Rex*, in the tapestry) and Harold (called in the tapestry *Dux Anglorum*), shown riding a blue horse and holding a falcon in his left hand.

TASK. Look closely at the Bayeux tapestry at www.bayeuxtapestry.org.uk.

Which language is used in it? Who do you think would be interested in having it embroidered? Which of the following purposes do you think that led to embroider the Bayeux tapestry? Justify your answer.

- Decoration
- Historical record
- Political Propaganda
- Religious proselitism

Would you say the Bayeux tapestry is part of British or French cultural heritage?

Now watch this video from Simon Schama's documentary *A History of Britain*. You can see the documentary here (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o-iFjpmiSdI&feature=related>). We are interested in

the section that goes from 3'50'' to 9'00''. This video relates one episode in the narrative displayed by the tapestry. Watch and listen carefully, and answer the following questions:

1. Who are the two main protagonists of this episode?
2. What do the Saxons look like in the tapestry? Who is their leader?
3. What do the Normans look like? Who is their leader?
4. The video mentions an oath described in the tapestry. What oath is this? And what difference of opinion exists on its nature, and its relevance?

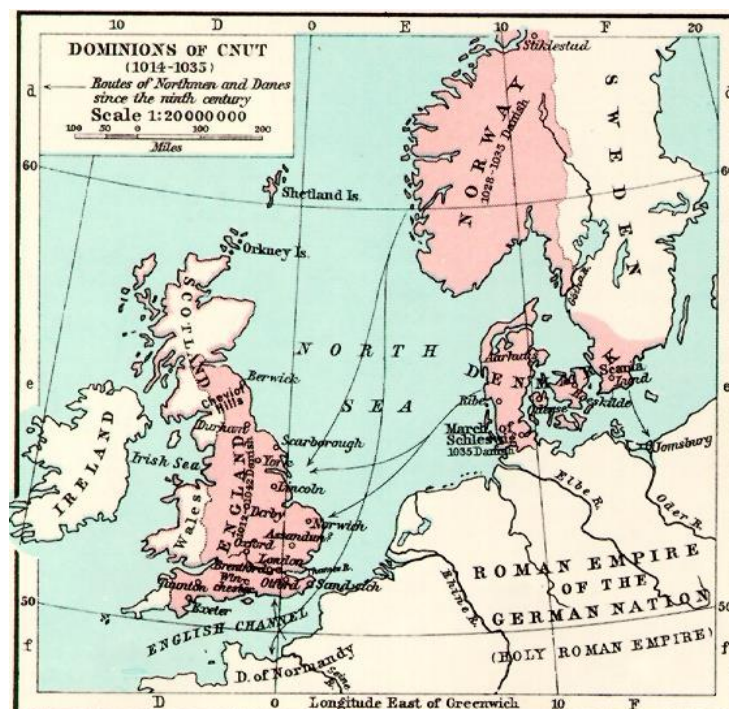
Briefly summarize the story told in this episode (and compare with its account in the website that describes the tapestry in detail).

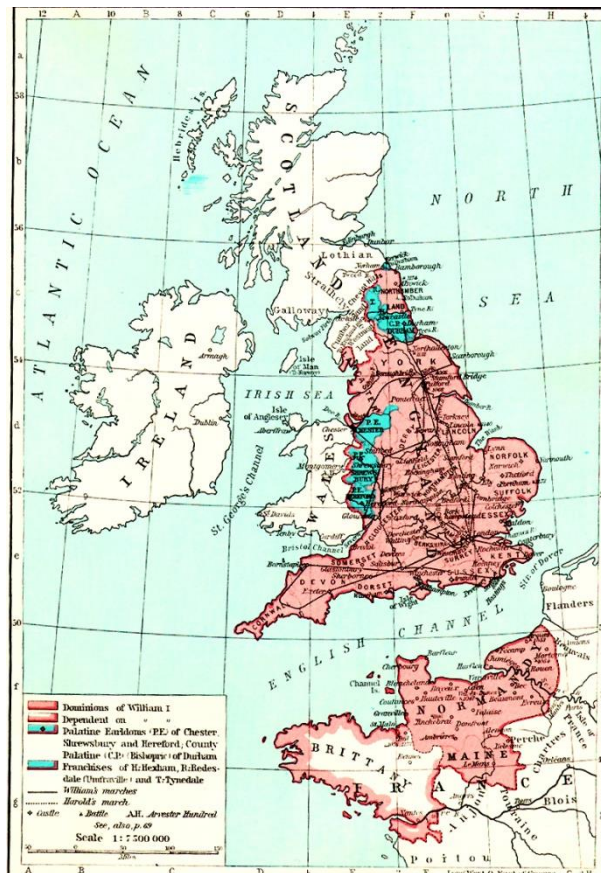


Harold's oath: William of Normandy is represented sitting on a throne, and Harold appears to the right, in the process of taking the oath. Bayeux Tapestry.

TASK. Geopolitics and culture. Before and after the Norman invasion.

- How did the geopolitical situation of England change after the Norman invasion?
- Look at the map with the pattern of the Norman dominions? What does this map tell you about current regional, linguistic and political diversity in Britain?





TASK. Read the following texts ([2] to [5]) about the Domesday Book and answer the following questions:

1. What is the Domesday Book?
2. Which was its purpose?
3. What kind of society does the Domesday Book reveal?
4. What is feudalism? Describe the main features of the feudal system.
5. Why does one of the texts say that “knowledge is power”? How is this related to the Domesday Book?
6. Which were the immediate political and military purposes of the survey?
7. Why is the Domesday Book still such a relevant icon? What is its cultural and historical relevance?

[2]

Domesday Book was the result of the great survey commissioned by William the Conqueror at Gloucester at Christmas 1085. The main manuscript, so-called Great Domesday, written by a single scribe, contains the final version of the surveys of all English counties south of the rivers Ribble and Tees, with the exception of Norfolk, Suffolk, and Essex. These three counties make up Little Domesday, a more detailed, unedited draft text which, for reasons which remain unknown, was not reduced to the final Great Domesday form. Domesday Book's name, given to it in the generations immediately after the survey, shows that it was a source of awe and wonder. During the Middle Ages it continued to be consulted on numerous legal and tenorial matters. It is a fundamental source for all types of historical enquiry and is of importance for geographers,



Copies of Domesday Book
and the safe where they used to be kept

Winchester, were omitted. The survey's purpose and the method of its compilation are subjects of debate. The current emphasis is on a financial purpose, since it seems to be primarily concerned with resources and assessments. However, its value as a register of title must not be overlooked, even if the disputes which it records were often not resolved. It is clear from chronicle references that the preliminary results were brought to William, perhaps by 1 August 1086 in preparation for the famous **Salisbury Oath**, and certainly before he left for Normandy in the autumn. The production of the final Great Domesday text, however, took much longer and was probably not concluded until early 1088. Sets of commissioners toured the kingdom and heard evidence from juries representing shire and hundred courts. The kingdom was divided into circuits, of which there were probably seven. The basic order in which the material was to be set out was predetermined. The most complex modern discussions concern the methods by which this material was collected. While it is clear that some was in existence before the survey was made, the emphasis in recent discussion is on an intense editing process at local level, involving documents of various kinds and the participation of the local representatives. Computer-based studies of Domesday Book's contents are starting to yield impressive results on all kinds of subjects, but the complexities of its terminology and its statistics still baffle investigators.

David Richard Bates "Domesday Book" *The Oxford Companion to British History*. Ed John Cannon. Oxford University Press, 2009. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press. Universidad de Granada. 22 September 2011. <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t110.e1351>>

[3]

The Domesday Book

The great castles and churches that were the visible imprint of the Conquest on England are deceptive in suggesting its monolithic character. Although William had certainly delivered on his promises to transfer the entire estate of the English land-holding classes to his own vassals, this did not preclude the greatest of them from challenging his rule. As conqueror and king he was no more immune from family conspiracies than he had been as duke. At one point, his own eldest son Robert was in rebellion; at another, his half-brother, Odo of Blois, the Bishop of Bayeux, for whom the tapestry had been made, his closest companion and the man he unhesitatingly appointed regent when he travelled abroad, was also involved in a plot, reputedly going so far as to attempt a march on Rome to make himself pope. The Count of Flanders and another Cnut of Denmark all continued to harbour ambitions on his new realm.

None of this prevented the king from carrying on the business of the kingdom, however. At Christmas, 1085 he held court at Gloucester and launched what may be the most extraordinary campaign of his entire reign: the campaign for information. His immediate need was to impose a geld—the land tax he had inherited from the Anglo-Saxon kings, which would pay for the defence

¹ Geld: "The tax paid to the crown by English landholders before the Conquest, and continued under the Norman kings." (*Oxford English Dictionary*)

of the realm—but the compilation of Domesday Book was much more than a glorified audit. It was a complete inventory of the kingdom up to the Tyne, shire by shire², hundred by hundred: who owned what on the eve of the Conquest and who owned what now; how much it had been worth then and how much it was worth now. Beyond the immediate pragmatic need for money, William’s instinct—remarkable for someone usually thought of as more or less continually in the saddle—was that knowledge was also power. William the Conqueror was also the first data-base king.

His servants got him that knowledge at what, in the eleventh century, passed for warp speed. The king, wrote Orderic Vitalis:

sent his men all over England into every shire and had them find out how many hundred hides there were... or what land and cattle the king himself had in the country or what dues he ought to have from the shire. And he had a record made of how much land his archbishops had and his bishops and abbots and earls... so very narrowly did he have it investigated that there was no single hide nor indeed [a shame to relate but it seemed no shame to him] ... was one ox or one cow or one pit left out that was not put down in his record

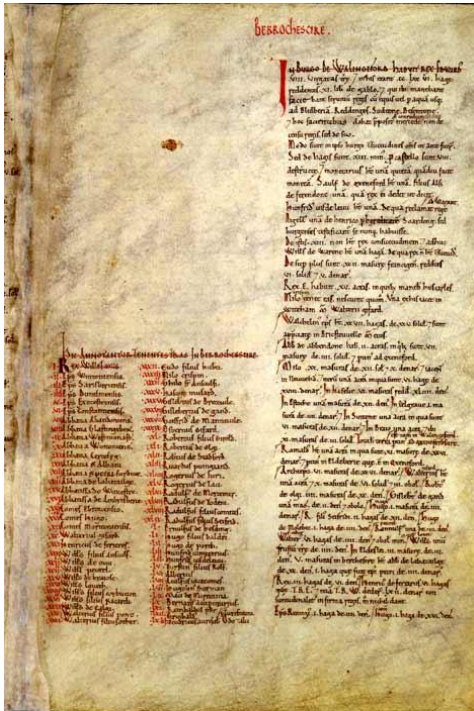
At Old Sarum on Lammas Day in 1086 William was presented with reams of densely packed, cross-referenced information, material that had been gathered first at the local level, then brought to the hundred, and finally compiled by a commission of the shire before being made into the books. Some of that material was taken orally from villeins or priests. But much of it must have been taken from pre-existing written documents like geld-books, and what we usually think of as a monument to the brisk efficiency of Norman government probably owed as much to the advanced information-retrieval machinery left in place by the Anglo-Saxon state. So the world of the older England lingers on, captive ghosts, recorded on the pages of Domesday Book: the thegns³, the sheriffs, the hides. And when William was presented with the book, it was as if he had reconquered the kingdoms all over again, this time statistically, and thus in a form that no disgruntled motte-and-bailey barons would ever overcome.



So although they were distinct events, the two ceremonial moments at Old Sarum defined post-Conquest England and its monarchy in a perfectly complementary way. First it was the oath, taken by all the magnates, nobles and gentlemen (on the eve of yet another campaign): ‘and all the people occupying land who were of any account whatsoever in England, whosoever’s vassals they might be... all submitting to him and swore oaths of allegiance that they would be faithful to him against all other men.’ But then there was The Book, from which, should it ever be necessary, William would have the information to coerce, fine or confiscate, should any of his own vassals waver in their loyalty. For centuries afterwards the strength of government in England was this partnership (never easy or uncomplicated) between the power of the landed classes and the authority of the

² The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “shire” as “In Old English times, an administrative district, consisting of a number of smaller districts (‘hundreds’ or ‘wapentakes’), united for purposes of local government, and ruled jointly by an ealdorman and a sheriff. Under Norman rule, the division of England into shires was continued, the Anglo-Norman *counté*, Anglo-Latin *comitatus*, being adopted as the equivalent of the English term. At the present day *shire* is rare in official use, but is current as a literary synonym for *county* (chiefly restricted to those counties that have names ending in *-shire*). The counties of Wales, and most of those of Scotland, have *-shire* as the ending of their name, but the word is now rarely employed in speaking of them. The counties of Ireland were often called shires in the 16–17th c., but the use is now obsolete.”

³ A thegn refers to one of the King’s warriors, a landholder that served the king also as a knight and a military officer. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as “One who in Anglo-Saxon times held lands of the king or other superior by military service”



state; the guardians of the green acres and the keepers of the knowledge. And between them, posing as a neutral, professing to understand each of their concerns, was the eternal umpire: the sovereign.

(Simon Schama, *A History of Britain*, vol. 1. London: BBC Books, 2003, pp. 100-101)

[4]
The Domesday Book

The Domesday Book - compiled in 1085-6 - is one of the few historical records whose name is familiar to most people in this country. It is our earliest public record, the foundation document of the national archives and a legal document that is still valid as evidence of title to land.

Based on the Domesday survey of 1085-6, which was drawn up on the orders of King William I, it describes in remarkable detail, the landholdings and resources of late

11th-century England, demonstrating the power of the government machine in the first century of the new Millennium, and its deep thirst for information.

It was an exercise unparalleled in contemporary Europe, and was not matched in its comprehensive coverage of the country until the population censuses of the 19th century - although Domesday itself is not a full population census, and the names that appear in it are mainly only those of people who owned land.

Used for many centuries for administrative and legal purposes, the Domesday Book is the starting point for most local historians researching the history of their area and there are several versions in print which should be available through good reference libraries. Despite its iconic significance, it has been subjected to increasingly detailed textual analysis by historians who warn us that not everything it says should be taken at face value.

Providing definitive proof of rights to land and obligations to tax and military service, its 913 pages and two million Latin words describe more than 13,000 places in England and parts of Wales. Nicknamed the 'Domesday' Book by the native English, after God's final Day of Judgement, when every soul would be assessed and against which there could be no appeal, this title was eventually adopted by its official custodians, known for years as the Public Record Office, and recently renamed the National Archives.

The official who wrote *Dialogue of the Exchequer* in 1179 wrote that 'just as the sentence of that strict and terrible Last Judgement cannot be evaded by any art or subterfuge, so, when a dispute arises in this realm concerning facts which are written down, and an appeal is made to the book itself, the evidence it gives cannot be set at nought or evaded with impunity'. It was a landmark in the triumph of the centralized written record, once set down fixed forever, over evolving local oral traditions.

[...]

Some historians have seen the immediate cause [for the compilation of Domesday Book] lying in an invasion threat from Denmark and Norway and William's urgent need for accurate information about the military and other resources at his disposal.

The first general population census of 1801 had a similar requirement behind it at a time when England was threatened with invasion from Revolutionary France.

Twenty years after King William's successful invasion of England, and the mass re-distribution of land amongst his followers, it was time to consolidate and define. This survey and audit would clearly establish who held what, in the wake of the Norman Conquest itself; it would also clarify what rights and dues were owed to the King, and would settle the liability of his great barons to provide military resources, in soldiers or cash, for a monarch whose campaigning season never ended.

[5]

Discover Domesday – The National Archives

(Source: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/domesday/discover-domesday/>)

Domesday is our most famous and earliest surviving public record. It is a highly detailed survey and valuation of all the land held by the King and his chief tenants, along with all the resources that went with the land in late 11th century England. The survey was a massive enterprise, and the record of that survey, Domesday Book, was a remarkable achievement. There is nothing like it in England until the censuses of the 19th century.

In 1066 William Duke of Normandy defeated the Anglo-Saxon King, Harold II, at the Battle of Hastings and became King of England. In 1085 England was again threatened with invasion, this time from Denmark. William had to pay for the mercenary army he hired to defend his kingdom. To do this he needed to know what financial and military resources were available to him.

At Christmas 1085 he commissioned a survey to discover the resources and taxable values of all the boroughs and manors in England. He wanted to discover who owned what, how much it was worth and how much was owed to him as King in tax, rents, and military service. A reassessment of the tax known as the geld took place at about the same time as Domesday and still survives for the south west. But Domesday is much more than just a tax record. It also records which manors belonged to which estates and gives the identities of the King's tenants-in-chief who owed him military service in the form of knights to fight in his army. The King was essentially interested in tracing, recording and recovering his royal rights and revenues which he wished to maximise. It was also in the interests of his chief barons to co-operate in the survey since it set on permanent record the tenurial gains they had made since 1066.



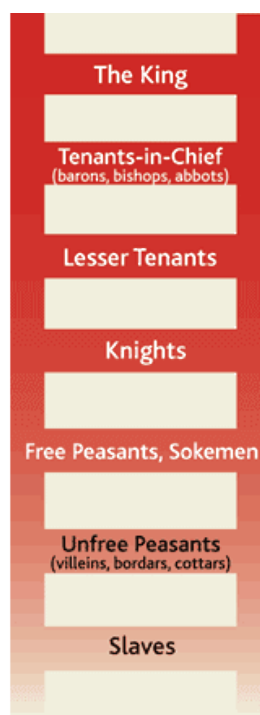
Three States of Feudal Society: those who pray (the clergy) those who fight (the knight in armour) and those who work (the peasant, holding a spade)

[...]

The nickname 'Domesday' may refer to the Biblical Day of Judgement, or 'doomsday', when Christ will return to judge the living and the dead. Just as there will be no appeal on that day against his decisions, so Domesday Book had the final word – there was to be no appeal beyond it as evidence of legal title to land. For many centuries Domesday was regarded as the authoritative register regarding rightful possession and was used mainly for that purpose. It was called Domesday by 1180. Before that it was known as the Winchester Roll or King's Roll, and sometimes as the Book of the Treasury.

[...]

Domesday Book reveals an elaborate feudal structure of landholding from the King down. Under the feudal system land was supposedly held directly or indirectly from the King who stood at the top of the feudal ladder. The King granted land called fiefs to the tenants-in-chief beneath him - his chief barons, bishops and abbots. This was partly as a reward for helping him to conquer the kingdom, partly to keep their loyalty, and partly to ensure that certain difficult geographical areas were being securely held for him. In return he received their loyalty and service. This service usually came in the form of supplying the King with a number of men-at-arms and knights for a specific period should he wish to raise an army. In turn the barons could parcel out the land given to them to their own sub-tenants who likewise owed them loyalty and service – again usually military. Domesday is thus more than a legal and fiscal document. It is also a feudal record in which the description of the land follows the feudal hierarchy.



The social hierarchy with the King at the top. Under the feudal system he granted lands to his tenants-in-chief below in return for various services, usually military. The tenants-in-chief likewise granted lands to their tenants (sub-tenants).⁴

TASK. Read the following text ([6]) and answer the following questions:

1. What is a lingua franca?
2. What do we mean by a “vernacular” language?
3. Enumerate the different languages spoken in Anglo-Norman Britain.
4. In which situations or for what purposes was each of them used for?
5. What kind of cultural, social and political values were attached to each of these languages?
6. How does *The Play of Adam* exemplify the linguistic and cultural situation of England?

⁴ Source: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/domesday/discover-domesday/interpreting-domesday.htm>

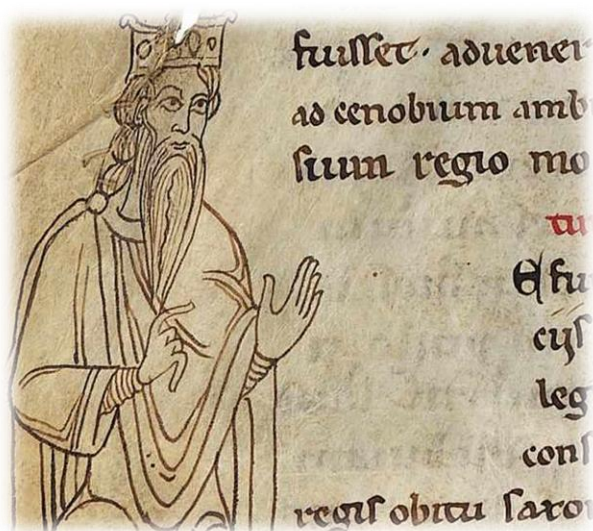
[6]

On the multilingual and hybrid nature of Anglo-Norman Britain

“The presence of a French-speaking ruling class in England created exceptional opportunities for linguistic and cultural exchange. Four languages coexisted in the realm of Anglo-Norman England: Latin, as it had been for Bede, remained the international language of learning, used for theology, science, and history. It was not by any means a written language only but also a *lingua franca* by which different nationalities communicated in the church and the newly founded universities. The Norman aristocracy for the most part spoke French, but intermarriage with the native English nobility and the business of daily life between masters and servants encouraged bilingualism. Different branches of the Celtic language group were spoken in Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Cornwall, and Brittany.

Inevitably, there was also literary intercourse among the different languages. The Latin Bible and Latin saints’ lives provided subjects for a great deal of Old English as well as Old French poetry and prose. The first medieval drama in the vernacular, *The Play of Adam*, with elaborate stage directions in Latin and realistic dialogue in the Anglo-Norman dialect of French, was probably produced in England during the twelfth century.

The Anglo-Norman aristocracy was especially attracted to Celtic legends and tales that had been circulating orally for centuries. The twelfth-century poets Thomas of England, Marie de France, and Chrétien de Troyes each claim to have obtained their narratives from Breton storytellers, who were probably bilingual performers of native tales for French audiences. [...] Chrétien is the principal creator of the romance of chivalry in which knightly adventures are a means of exploring psychological and ethical dilemmas that the knights must solve, in addition to displaying martial prowess in saving ladies from monsters, giants, and wicked knights. Chrétien, like Marie, is thought to have spent time in England at the court of Henry II.



King Arthur, from a 12th-century manuscript copy of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*

Thomas, Marie and Chrétien de Troyes were innovators of the genre that has become known as ‘romance’. The word *roman* was initially applied in French to a work written in the French vernacular. Thus the thirteenth century *Roman de Troie* is a long poem about the Trojan War in French. While this work deals mainly with the siege of Troy, it also includes stories about the love of Troilus for Cressida and of Achilles for the Trojan princess Polyxena. Eventually, ‘romance’ acquired the generic associations it has for us as a story about love and adventure”.

(S. Grenblatt, gen. ed. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 8th ed., vol. 1, New York & London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006, pp. 7-8)

TASK. Read the following text and answer the following questions

1. Which was Geoffrey of Monmouth’s ambition as a historian?
2. Describe the two main threads and cultural traditions that Geoffrey of Monmouth brings together in his *History of the Kings of Britain*.

3. Find information about the concept of *translatio imperii*. What does this expression mean? How does it relate to Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*?
4. Why do you think the historians of the British Empire, centuries later, might be interested in Geoffrey of Monmouth's account of the origins of Britain? For what purposes?

[7]

Geoffrey of Monmouth and the myth of King Arthur

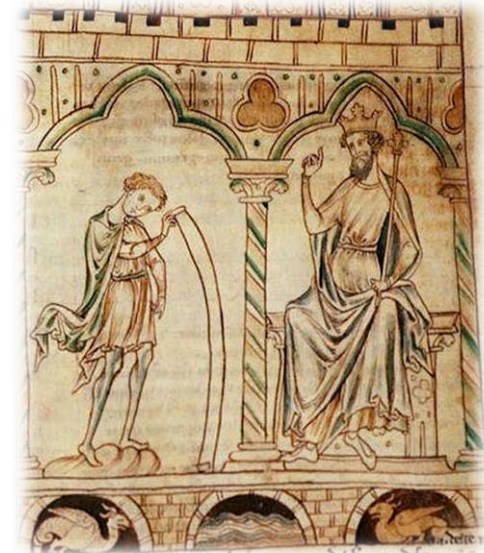
On how the transfer of cultural and political capital from Classical Antiquity and Celtic mythology lies at the roots of one of the founding myths of British national identity.



King Arthur and Excalibur

been first civilized by Brutus, the grandson of Aeneas, the Trojan prince who had founded Rome. Brutus's northern Tiber was the Thames, and on its banks he had, apparently, established *Troia Nova*, New Troy, destined to be the capital of a great multi-national empire. After his death, Brutus's sons, Loelinus, Jamber and Albanactus, had divided the island among them, creating, respectively, Loegria (England), Kambria (Wales) and Albany (Scotland).

Much of Geoffrey's *History*, however—and by far the most famous part—was devoted to the epic of a British hero, prophesied by the Welsh magician, Merlin. That dauntless champion had liberated the country from the plague of the barbarian Saxons, invited into Britain by the tyrant Vortigern following the departure of the Romans. Vortigern had built a tower, which repeatedly subsided, baffling his counsellors until Merlin enlightened them that the tower had been precariously constructed directly above a subterranean pool in which slept two dragons. Thus sank the state of Britain, its roots gnawed by monsters, until Arthur, the son of Utherpendragon, arose to rebuild the country on the firm foundations of Christian chivalry and martial courage. Once the Saxons were expelled from the length and breadth of England, Arthur turned his attention to the Picts and the Irish, who



Merlin reads his prophecies to Vortigern
From a 12th-century manuscript of Geoffrey of
Monmouth's *Prophetiae Merlini*

were subdued in short order. York, the target of their devastation, was rebuilt to the greater glory of God. Men of distinction now flocked to his court, where ‘even a man of noblest birth thought nothing of himself unless he wore his arms and dressed in the same way as Arthur’s knights. At last, the fame of Arthur’s generosity and bravery spread to the very ends of the earth’. At the height of his reign, Arthur extended his power to encompass an entire northern empire, stretching from Scandinavia to Gaul and out into the wide, chill sea to Iceland. At Caerleon-at-Usk, in the most ancient heart of Britain, a thousand ermine-clad noblemen assembled before Arthur and Guinevere and celebrated in tournaments and feasting the Britain that had become the centre of the world, a country that ‘reached such sophistication that it excelled all other kingdoms in its affluence, the richness of its ornaments, and the courteous behaviour of its population’. Such idylls, Geoffrey the expert fabulist knew, are beautiful because they are mortal. In the end, Arthur’s golden age must be ended by the treachery of his nephew, Mordred, and Britain thrown back into the murky misery of paganism.

The *History of the Kings of Britain* was, of course, an outrageous fantasy, but by the time its author, now known as Geoffrey *Arthur*, became the second Bishop of St Asaph (in what is now Denbighshire) in 1152, his manuscript had already reached the wide readership that would endure for centuries. Geoffrey had learned about Arthur from his patron, Robert, Earl of Gloucester, who, in turn, had been told the story by another protégé, the librarian of Malmesbury Abbey. The librarian had visited Glastonbury Abbey, where the Benedictine monks were convinced that the hero’s body lay somewhere on the premises, although just precisely where they could not say. Geoffrey understood that the times called for heroic romance and an epic of wise governance, not least because Robert of Gloucester was a combatant in the civil war that was then tearing the country apart. That war was bitterly and unrelentingly fought for nearly twenty years between the rival grandchildren of William the Conqueror.”

(Simon Schama, *A History of Britain*, vol. 1. London: BBC Books, 2003, pp. 105-106)

TASK. Read the following text ([8]) and answer the following questions:

1. How did the process of assimilation between the Norman élite and the native population?
2. Which were the main contributions of the Normans to British culture?
3. In which sense was each of these contributions aimed at strengthening Norman power in Britain?

[8]

What Did the Normans Do for Us?

By Dr John Hudson (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/>)

Medieval England was in thrall to the powerful, French-speaking élite installed by William the Conqueror from 1066. As land-owning lords, the Normans dominated politically and economically, building grandiose castles to symbolise their strength. So how did England preserve its emerging national identity despite this crushing new influence?

National identity

Writers in England in the twelfth century displayed national prejudices with no sign of shame. For the mid-twelfth-century author of the Deeds of King Stephen, Scotland was a potentially wealthy land, but its inhabitants were brutal, barbaric, and 'filthy'. The English could be equally unpopular with others, and were also criticised by their own: 'the English are noted among foreigners for their persistent drinking' wrote the learned John of Salisbury. Such a capacity to identify and contrast peoples by distinguishing characteristics is a feature of a sense of national identity.

Yet such developing views are the more striking because England had been conquered twice in half a century, in 1016 by the Scandinavian Cnut, in 1066 by the Norman William the Conqueror. For much of the next century and a half England, and to a lesser extent the rest of the British Isles, would remain part of an assemblage of lands spanning the English Channel. And if the assemblage had a centre, that centre was Rouen, in Normandy.



Ely Cathedral. Interior.

How, then, did the identity of the English emerge, given the imposition in 1066 of a continental governing class? Some, such as William the Conqueror's archbishop of Canterbury, said they hoped to learn to be Englishmen. However, such immediate and deliberate adoption of a culture—even if it was whole-hearted—appears uncommon. Rather the assimilation was more gradual, and had many causes of which the following are just three. In part, assimilation resulted from aristocratic families dividing their lands between different branches, with separate English and

Continental branches developing. In part it stemmed from inter-marriage with the English. In the late 1170s the royal treasurer could write that 'with the English and Normans living side-by-side and intermarrying, the peoples have become so mingled that no-one can tell - as far as free men are concerned - who is of English and who of Norman descent.' And in part it derived from a process whereby the inhabitants of England distinguished themselves from those in less economically developed parts of the British Isles, who were condemned as ecclesiastically, socially, and culturally backward.



At the same time, other elements we might suppose to be characteristic of national identity were absent. Land-holding crossed borders, not just between England and Normandy but also between England and Scotland - the contenders for the Scottish throne in the 1290s were descendants of major Anglo-Scottish families. Language was still less an indicator of identity. The supposedly barbarous twelfth-century Welsh lord might display feats of multilingualism which few today could rival - with knowledge of Welsh, French, English, and perhaps Latin. French indeed unified the aristocracies from the Capetian realm of France to southern Scotland. It was in French that much of their entertainment literature was written, for

example the great epic *The Song of Roland*, the earliest manuscript of which has an English origin.

Castles, cathedrals, monasteries

Together with epics such as *The Song of Roland*, churches and castles have been essential in forming our vision of the Middle Ages. They are the built images of the first two of the three orders into which writers in the Middle Ages often divided their society: those who pray, those who fight, and those who work. The Normans had an enormous influence on the development of both castles and churches in England. There had been large scale fortified settlements, known as burghs, and also fortified houses in Anglo-Saxon England, but the castle was a Norman importation. Numbers are uncertain, but it seems plausible that about 1,000 had been built by the reign of Henry I (1100-1135). They took many forms. Some were towers on mounds, surrounded by larger enclosures - often referred to as motte and bailey castles. Others were immense, most notably the huge palace-castles which William I built at Colchester and at London; the White Tower at London remains the typical child's image of a mediaeval fortification. These were the largest secular buildings in stone since the time of the Romans, over six centuries before. They were a celebration of William's triumph, but also a sign of his need to overawe the conquered.

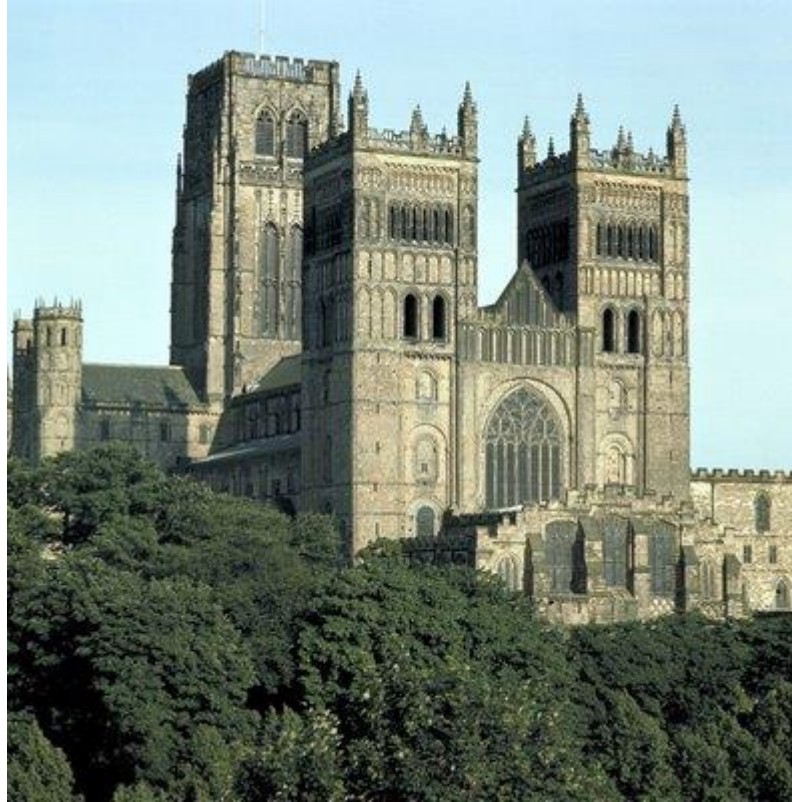


Ely Cathedral

Churches too were built in great numbers, and in great variety although sharing the Romanesque style with its characteristic round-topped arches. The vast cathedrals of the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, vast in scale by European standards, emphasised the power of the Normans as well as their reform of the church in the conquered realm. Buildings such as Durham cathedral suggest the strength and vibrancy of the builders' culture in rather the same way as the early sky-scrapers of New York. The Normans also continued the great building of parish churches which had begun in England in the late Anglo-Saxon period. Such churches appeared too in the

rest of the British Isles and can still be seen, for example at Leuchars in Fife. A lord might display his wealth, power and devotion through a combination of castle and church in close proximity, again as still spectacularly visible at Durham.

Particularly striking is the close proximity of many great churches, a characteristic too of eleventh-century Normandy. One of the most telling examples is the group of border abbeys in southern Scotland - King David I's foundation of Jedburgh, still-impressive and crowning its hill; the Premonstratensian house of Dryburgh, providing a fittingly romantic resting place for Sir Walter Scott; the Cistercian house at Melrose; and most spectacular of all in the splendour which even the limited remains indicate, another royal foundation at Kelso. And behind such buildings must lie considerable wealth.



Durham Cathedral, also built under William I (begun in 1093)