

Why were the English unable to prevent the Norman Conquest of England? (Confine your answer to the period 1066-1087)

The Conquest of England by the Normans was not achieved in a single military stroke. With the triumph at the battle of Hastings William the Conqueror gained an important victory but Hastings was just the beginning. The capitals and centres of resistance had to be occupied, English risings and threats from other Nations had to be put down. The castles, which were the military linchpins of the Normans, had to be built and with them the Normans' status of military superiority had to be established. But for all that the conquest of a whole country needed far more than battles, suppression of rebellions and men at arms. Beside William's military strength he used in many cases the more elegant method of diplomacy to subdue the English. William implemented political alliances through intermarriages and replaced key ecclesiastical and secular posts to introduce a new leadership. Furthermore, he ensured the loyalty of his English and Norman vassals by letting them swear fealty and homage to him. Thus based on Anglo-Saxon administrative foundations the conquest was a policy of long duration aiming for political and military stability in England and the acceptance of the Norman leadership.

The battle of Hastings on October 14, 1066 was fought all day and fought to the death. The weapons of the Saxon, and their out of date warfare methods are cited as their main inferiority.¹ But in fact the two armies were almost equal. The Bayeux Tapestry showed both armies with similar weaponry and the size of each force must have been around 6000 men. The Anglo Saxons had a far better strategic position on the top of the hill, whereas the fighting under a papal banner strengthened the motivation of the Normans. However, Harold and his two brothers as well as many important earls and bishops were killed at Hastings. Thus, the battle of Hastings was responsible for the immediate collapse of the Anglo-Saxon earldoms and the loss of the main part of England's ruling aristocracy.

Although William of Poitiers wrote "with the success at the battle of Hastings, Duke William had conquered all England in a single day between the third hour and

¹ C.H. Lemmon, 'The campaign of 1066' in D. Whitelock (ed.), The Norman Conquest: its setting and impact (London, 1966), p. 113.

evening”² there was still a long way to go. William had to control strategic centres and capitals first to enable a long term Norman settlement. First he marched to Dover, then he took Canterbury and Winchester and finally he reached London. In London, he negotiated with the Archbishop of York, Prince Edgar, Earl Edwin and Earl Morcar whom him finally swore oaths of fealty.³ In this case William used diplomacy instead of fighting. Nonetheless, he also, especially in the first years of his reign, had to use his military strength to subdue the English. In 1067-68 the first rebellion was directed against Odo of Bayeux and William Fitz Osbern, who represented William during his absence. Then Exeter rebelled in 1068, which was followed by major risings in the North under the leadership of Gospatric with the help of Edwin, Morcar and Edgar Aetheling. While William held the South of England under control there was little progress in the Midlands and in the North by 1068. In 1069 various rebellions broke out followed by a general revolt in Northumbria.⁴ There were rebellions in Dorset and Somerset in North Wales and Chester and other places in the Midlands. In the autumn King Swein of Denmark sent a fleet and a general rising in Yorkshire took place.⁵ The Northumbrians rose with the help of the Danes, the Scots and the throne claimant Edgar Atheling and captured York where they killed many people.⁶ The harrying of the North was William’s answer and was intended to set an example to all further rebellions. Even Orderic Vitalis, a pro Norman writer, stated that “nowhere else had William shown such cruelty”⁷ and the effects of destruction were even mentioned 20 years later in the Domesday Book. Further risings in the Fens in 1071, and the rebellion of the earls of Hereford, Norfolk and Northumbria in 1075 achieved nothing. Nevertheless, the political threats to the crown were not only native rebellions but also the sense of menace from the Scots, the Welsh and the Danes. In 1072 William was forced to come to Conmore where Malcolm, King of the Scots, finally gave hostage to William in the Treaty of Abernethy. Between 1081 and 1087 the invasion of Cnut of Denmark needed to be put down.

Thus, there were various English risings against the Normans and even if they confederated with other nations the Conquest could not be prevented by military means. On the one hand there was never a united English rebellion with unified

² W. of Pontiers in T. Rowley, *The Norman Heritage: 1055-1200* (London, 1983), p. 17.

³ M. Ashley, *The Life and Times of William I* (London, 1973), p. 45.

⁴ H.R. Lyon, *The Norman Conquest* (London, 1965), p. 106.

⁵ M. Ashley, *The Life and Times of William I* (London, 1973), pp. 84-85.

⁶ M.T. Clanchy, *England and its Rulers: 1066-1272* (Oxford, 1998), p. 26.

⁷ O. Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, M. Chibnall (ed.), 6 vols. (Oxford, 1969-80), pp. 260-1.

forces because of their lack of an eligible leadership and also because the English “were so crushed by their defeat at Hastings” that they simple “posed no real threat to their conquerors”⁸ thereafter. On the other hand the Normans used the military invention of the castles, their “secret weapon”⁹, to respond to risings and threats.

Almost all of William’s campaigns were “accompanied by the building and garrisoning of castles”¹⁰. The castles were primarily built at major centres and at the borders of England. They ensured the Norman’s military and politically superiority because as their administrative and military headquarters they laid a net of fortifications all over England. Castles were mainly established to maintain and extend the Conquest but also to “overawe the urban inhabitants”¹¹ and to protect local markets. The common Motte and Bailey castle could be constructed very fast and defend a small number of Normans against a large number of English, Scots and Welsh.¹² In the Domesday Book 50 castles were mentioned but at the end of the 11th Century probably 80 castles could be found in England. William’s army was thereby able to move into stages throughout the kingdom and the English had nothing with which to respond to these vast military buildings.

In 1066 William claimed the whole land of England as his own, dispossessed many of the remaining Anglo-Saxon earls and then “divided up the chief provinces of England amongst his followers”¹³. For this the vassals owe William fealty and loyalty and so they were asked to do service in his court, fulfil escort and defence duties and fight under Williams’s banner on military campaign.¹⁴ As a result William had replaced the lords of all principal earldoms with his men, who were in addition tied with a holy oath and hence represented his will. Thus England received a new aristocracy where the greater landlords were foreigners and a small elite held the power and wealth of the whole country.

Following this lay pattern the church was reorganised and ‘normanized’ too. In 1070 Lanfranc replaced Stigant, whom the Normans regarded as usurper, as

⁸ V. Nicholas, ‘The Struggle for Mastery: Britain 1066-1284/The English and the Normans: Ethnic Hostility, Assimilation, and Identity 1066-c.1220/From Norman Conquest to Magna Carta: England 1066-1215 (Book)’ in *History Today*, Dec 2003, Vol. 53, Issue 12, pp. 60-61.

⁹ E. King, *Medieval England* (Stroud, 2001), p. 12.

¹⁰ M. Chibnall, *Anglo-Norman England 1066-1166* (Oxford, 1994) p. 17.

¹¹ H.R. Lyon, *The Norman Conquest* (London, 1965), p. 182.

¹² T. Rowley, *The Norman Heritage: 1055-1200* (London, 1983), p. 43.

¹³ O. Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, M. Chibnall (ed.), 6 vols. (Oxford, 1969-80), pp. 260-1.

¹⁴ F. Barlow, ‘The Effects of the Norman Conquest’ in D. Whitelock (ed.), *The Norman Conquest: its setting and impact* (London, 1966), p. 138.

archbishop of Canterbury.¹⁵ Lanfranc, a friend and confidant of William began radically to restructure the organization of the church. With Lanfranc a new school of continental thoughts and developments in scholarship arrived and within 10 years after the Conquest mainly Normans had replaced many bishops and abbots.¹⁶ They also owed knight service and were under royal control. New cathedrals and monasteries were built and showed the power of the reformed church.

This radical transposition in ecclesiastical and also secular aristocracy contributed towards the Norman supremacy and was essential "if the Norman settlement was to be secure"¹⁷. The settlement was additionally supported by various intermarriages between "Norman barons and knights to English women of prosperity"¹⁸. The offspring of these many interconnections can be seen as the "long way to legitimize the Conquest"¹⁹.

All these alternations in the upper classes involved social consequences and changes in customs. In the sacral area the new Norman monks replaced English Saints in the beginning but later on they re-established the most famous and the church began to appreciate the financial support of their pilgrims. In the secular area the spoken language by the upper classes changed from English to French and Latin was used for official purposes. The population had to deal with new lords and also new ecclesiastical leaders, who looked different and spoke another language. Furthermore the Normans had a different culture and introduced a new architecture, which found its expression in huge castles and cathedrals. These buildings were symbols of Norman power and culture and demonstrated their victory.

Before 1066 the Anglo-Saxons had achieved a functioning administration apparatus. This apparatus was mainly taken over by William. He held the royal clerks and their skills, the writ charter, the royal seal, the financial system and coinage.²⁰ William even left most of the personnel untouched. This existing administration helped William to learn "how it [England] was governed"²¹ and gave a sense of stability to the population. There were no basic administrative changes after 1066. Neither were the English confronted with entirely new laws nor was the basic Anglo-

¹⁵ H.R. Lyon, The Norman Conquest (London, 1965), p. 152.

¹⁶ T. Rowley, The Norman Heritage: 1055-1200 (London, 1983), p. 117.

¹⁷ H.R. Lyon, The Norman Conquest (London, 1965), p. 172.

¹⁸ E. King, Medieval England (Stroud, 2001), p. 15.

¹⁹ E. King, Medieval England (Stroud, 2001), p. 15.

²⁰ F. Barlow, 'The Effects of the Norman Conquest' in D. Whitelock (ed.), The Norman Conquest: its setting and impact (London, 1966), p. 144.

²¹ M. Chibnall, Anglo-Norman England 1066-1166 (Oxford, 1994) p. 19.

Saxon shire system changed because it was well established and useful as units of administration and justice. William only added spiritual courts under the chairs of bishops to the county courts and the hundred courts, which remained from the Anglo-Saxons. William made the hundred responsible for every Norman murdered but he was “an administrator, rather than a law-giver”²² as mentioned by the historian M. Ashley. William held three great Councils a year at Christmas, Easter and Whitsun where he wore the crown and settled quarrels which “might have flared up into private war”²³ and so ensured a legal stability. This helped to establish the Norman leadership because traditions remained and so a sense of security and stability was given.

Although the Normans kept the main administrative structure of the Anglo-Saxons they brought in a new sense of development and dynamism. In 1085 William “carefully surveyed his whole kingdom”²⁴ and ordered the Domesday Book to gain information about “all the dues owned in the time of King Edward”²⁵. One of the purposes, some historians argue was primarily a tax assessment. However, the Domesday Book provided William with information about the population, boroughs, woodland and wasteland as well as references to trade such as salt making and fisheries and to infrastructure such as mills and churches.²⁶ The Domesday survey is not entirely completed. London for example is not mentioned at all and references to churches and trade were not always given.

The administrative strongholds beside the castles were the towns and their economic strength. Even though Professor R.R. Darlington stated that, “the immediate effect of the Conquest on many towns was disastrous” because of “the destruction or decay of houses and the temporary diminution of the population”²⁷ many historians rather speak of an increase of towns and trade after the Conquest. The trade between Normandy and England was stimulated and brought profit to the population. However, there can be no doubt that the Normans principally used towns as administrative, strategic and economic forces where they centralized their

²² M. Ashley, *The Life and Times of William I* (London, 1973), p. 203.

²³ H.R. Lyon, *The Norman Conquest* (London, 1965), p. 126.

²⁴ O. Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, M. Chibnall (ed.), 6 vols. (Oxford, 1969-80), pp. 266-67.

²⁵ O. Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, M. Chibnall (ed.), 6 vols. (Oxford, 1969-80), pp. 266-67.

²⁶ T. Rowley, *The Norman Heritage: 1055-1200* (London, 1983), p. 63.

²⁷ R.R. Darlington, *The Norman Conquest* (London, 1963), p. 23.

governmental power. William controlled the administration in the towns; thereby he also controlled the tolls and thus influenced the economy.

To conclude, the reason why the English could not prevent the Conquest was primarily based on two aspects. On the one hand their military inferiority and on the other hand the excessive 'Normanization'. Especially in the beginning, William the Conqueror used harsh military methods to knock down the rebellions and risings. The harrying of the North with its overawing of the whole population showed the military dominance very clearly. The castles enhanced this military superiority and degraded the English as powerless. After the Conquerors had militarily established their authority, they aimed to keep the peace, used diplomacy instead of fighting and respected the old Anglo-Saxon laws. William negotiated with Flanders, Scandinavia and the pope before the invasion then he used diplomacy with the citizens of London, the Danes and King Malcolm. The oaths of fealty and homage bound the Normans and the remaining English and so loyalty was given. William replaced the English lords and bishops and used the existing Anglo-Saxon administration for his purposes. Furthermore, the use of French and Latin, the vast cathedrals and churches in a foreign architecture as well as new Saints must have alienated the English and illustrated the Normans as having an invincible superiority. Although substantial social, cultural and economical changes for the population took place a sense of stability remained. "William became king and took over the government and traditions of the English kingdom"²⁸, as M. Chibnall declared.

However, against this thoroughly long term foreign infiltration accompanied by military power the English could have nothing with which to respond and so the English could not prevent the Conquest.

History Essay
Summer term 2005
Mark: B

²⁸ M. Chibnall, The Debate on the Norman Conquest (Manchester, 1999), p. 117.

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