

King William I of England



Born: 14 Oct 1024 Falaise, FRA

Married: Matilda of Flanders

Died: 9 Sep 1087 Convent of St Gervais, FRA

Parents: Robert the Good & Judith of Brittany

William I of England (c. 1027/1028 – 9 September 1087), known as William the Conqueror (French: *Guillaume le Conquérant*) was Duke of Normandy from 1035 to 1087 and King of England from 1066.

To claim the English crown, William invaded England in 1066, leading an army of Normans to victory over the Anglo-Saxon forces of Harold Godwinson at the Battle of Hastings, and suppressed subsequent English revolts in what has become known as the Norman Conquest.^[1]

His reign brought Norman culture to England, which had an enormous impact on the subsequent course of England in the Middle Ages. In addition to political changes, his reign also saw changes to English law, a programme of building and fortification, changes in the English language, and the introduction of continental European feudalism into England.

As Duke of Normandy, he is known as *William II*. He was also, particularly before the conquest, known as William the Bastard.

Early life

William was born in Falaise, Normandy, the illegitimate and only son of Robert I, Duke of Normandy, who named him as heir to Normandy. His mother, Herleva (among other names), who later had two sons to another father, was the daughter of Fulbert, most likely a local tanner. Later in life the enemies of William are said to have commented derisively that William was as stinking as a tanner shop, and the residents of besieged Alençon hung skins from the city walls to taunt him.

William is believed to have been born in either 1027 or 1028, and more likely in the autumn of the later year.^[2] He was born the grandnephew of Queen Emma of Normandy, wife of King Ethelred the Unready and later of King Canute the Great.^[3]

Duke of Normandy

By his father's will, William succeeded him as Duke of Normandy at age seven in 1035 and was known as Duke William of Normandy (French: *Guillaume, duc de Normandie*; Latin: *Guglielmus Dux Normanniae*). By the rivaling Norman noblemen, who had better claim for duke, the usual plots to usurp his place cost William, who was supported by King Henry I of France, three guardians, though not Count Alan of Brittany, who was a later guardian. William was knighted by Henry at age 15. By the time he turned 19 he was successfully dealing with threats of rebellion and invasion. With the assistance of Henry, William finally secured control of Normandy by defeating rebel Norman barons at Caen in the Battle of Val-ès-Dunes in 1047, obtaining the Truce of God, which was backed by the Roman Catholic Church.

Against the wishes of Pope Leo IX, William married Matilda of Flanders in 1053 in the Cathedral of Notre Dame at Eu, Normandy (Seine-Maritime). At the time, William was about 26 years old and Matilda was 22. William was a faithful husband who cherished his wife for life, their marriage produced four sons and six daughters. In repentance for what was a consanguine marriage (as in "same blood"), William donated St-Stephen's church (l'Abbaye-aux-Hommes) and Matilda donated Sainte-Trinité church (Abbaye aux Dames). However, King Henry became concerned because the noble marriage of William increased the power of the Normans too much. Consequently, Henry attempted invading Normandy twice (1054 and 1057), to no avail. William's half-brothers Odo of Bayeux and Robert, Count of Mortain played significant roles in his life. He also had a sister, Adelaide of Normandy, also through Robert and Herleva.

English succession

William believed that once the childless Edward the Confessor was dead, he would be the rightful king of England. Particularly, William argued his blood relatedness, linking himself to Emma (Ethelred's wife). It is probable that Edward, who was Robert I's cousin, had promised him the throne. William claimed that this had occurred while visiting London in 1052. Also, it is known that in 1064, the powerful Earl of Wessex Harold Godwinson, who was an English paladin for the Saxon culture against the Normans, had pledged his allegiance to William. Confronting the count of Ponthieu, William had rescued Harold, who had shipwrecked, and together they defeated Conan II, Count of Brittany. On that occasion, William knighted Harold, and deceived him by having him swear loyalty to William over the concealed bones of a saint.^[4]

The vacancy of the English crown, which was left after Edward the Confessor died, was to be ferociously disputed by three European figures (William, Harold, and Viking King Harald III of Norway). In January 1066, by Edward's last will, and by the vote of the Witengamot, Harold Godwinson was crowned King of England as Harold II by Archbishop Aldred, and immediately the new monarch raised a large fleet of ships and mobilized a force of militia, arranging these around the coasts to anticipate attack from several directions.

Norman invasion

The first would-be attacker was Tostig Godwinson, Harold's brother, but he was successfully defeated by Edwin, Earl of Mercia at a battle on the south bank of the Humber.

Meanwhile, William submitted his claim to the English throne to Pope Alexander II, who sent him a consecrated banner in support. Then, William organized a council of war at Lillebonne and openly began assembling an army in Normandy, consisting of his own army, French mercenaries, and numerous foreign knights who expected plunder or English land. To each man, William promised both lands and titles of nobility after their victory. William gained the support from many knights and gathered a considerable army of 600 ships and 7,000 men at Saint-Valery-sur-Somme. But because of the heavy militia presence on the south coast of England and the fleet of ships guarding the English Channel, it looked as if he might fare little better than Tostig.^[4]

However, once the harvest season arrived, Harold withdrew the militia on September 8 because of falling morale and dwindling supplies, and he consolidated the ships in London, leaving the English Channel unguarded. Then came the news that Harald III of Norway had landed ten miles from York with Tostig, which forced Harold and his army to head north. After a victory against the forces of Earls Edwin of Mercia and Morcar of Northumbria at the Battle of Fulford, Harald and Tostig were defeated by Harold's army at the slaughterous Battle of Stamford Bridge on September 25.

Weeks of unfavourable weather affected the English Channel, delaying William's departure but granting Harold additional time, who moved out of the nearby English coasts. William arrived with his army in

Pevensey Bay (Sussex) on September 28, and then he moved to Hastings, a few miles to the east, where he built a prefabricated wooden castle for a base of operations.

Battle of Hastings

Main article: Battle of Hastings

On October 13, William received news that the already weakened army led by Harold was approaching from London, and at dawn the next day, William left the castle with his army and advanced towards the enemy, which was numerically similar and which had taken a defensive position atop the Senlac ridge (about seven miles from Hastings, at present day Battle, East Sussex). Harold disposed the English soldiers, over the route which connected to London.^[4]

The Battle of Hastings lasted all day. Along the ridge's border, hiding behind a large wall of shields, all English soldiers stood so effectively that, initially, William's army could not even reach the high enemy, suffering a large number of casualties. However, to pursue the many fleeing Normans, many English soldiers broke their ranks so disorderly that William, whose horse had collapsed, could lead some Norman knights who were followed by the rest of the Normans back into the battlefield. Thus, the battle was even while the English wall of shields weakened progressively, to disappearance. Then, William launched an effective wave of arrows over the shields, which decided the Norman victory irrevocably. This resulted in the deaths of Harold—who was likely killed by an arrow by a severe eye-wound—and two of his brothers, Gyrrh and Leofwine Godwinson. At dusk, the English army made their last stand. By that night, the Norman victory was complete, and the remaining English soldiers fled in fear.

March to London

For two weeks, William waited for a formal surrender of the English throne, but the Witenagemot proclaimed the quite young Edgar Ætheling instead, without coronation though. Thus, William's next target was London, approaching proudly through the important

territories of Kent, via Dover and Canterbury, inspiring fear in the English. However, at London, William's advance was beaten back at London Bridge, and he decided to march westward and to storm London from the northwest. After receiving continental reinforcements, William crossed the Thames at Wallingford, and there he forced the surrender of Archbishop Stigand (one of Edgar's lead supporters), in early December. William reached Berkhamsted a few days later where Ætheling relinquished the English crown personally and the exhausted Saxon noblemen of England surrendered definitively. Although William was acclaimed then as English King, he requested a coronation in London. As William I, he was formally crowned on Christmas day 1066, in Westminster Abbey, by Archbishop Aldred.^[4]

English resistance

Although the south of England submitted quickly to Norman rule, resistance in the north continued for six more years until 1072. During the first two years, King William I suffered many revolts throughout England (Dover, western Mercia, Wales, Exeter). Also, in 1068, Harold's illegitimate sons attempted an invasion of the southwestern peninsula, but William defeated them.

For William I, the worst crisis came from Northumbria, which had still not submitted to his realm. In 1068, with Edgar Ætheling, both Mercia and Northumbria revolted. William could suppress these, but Edgar fled to Scotland where Malcolm protected him. Furthermore, Malcolm married Edgar's sister Margaret, with much éclat, stressing the English balance of power against William. Under such circumstances, Northumbria rebelled, besieging York. Then, Edgar resorted also to the Danes, who disembarked with a large fleet at Northumbria, claiming the English crown for their King Sweyn II. Scotland joined the rebellion as well. The

rebels easily captured York and its castle. However, William could contain them at Lincoln. After dealing with a new wave of revolts at western Mercia, Exeter, Dorset, and Somerset, William defeated his northern foes decisively at the River Aire, retrieving York, while the Danish army swore to depart.

William then devastated Northumbria between the Humber and Tees rivers, with his Harrying of the North. The region ended up absolutely deprived, losing its traditional autonomy towards England. Then, the Danish king disembarked in person, readying his army to restart the war, but William suppressed such threat with a payment of gold. Subsequently in 1071, William defeated the last rebel focus of the north through an improvised pontoon, subduing the Ely island at which the Danes had gathered. In 1072, he invaded Scotland, defeating Malcolm and gaining a temporary peace. In 1074, Edgar Ætheling submitted definitively to William.

In 1075, during William's absence, the Revolt of the Earls was confronted successfully by Odo. In 1080, William sent his half brothers Odo and Robert, who stormed Northumbria and Scotland, respectively. Eventually, the Pope protested against the excessive mistreatment which had been exerted by the Normans against the English people. Indeed, until overcoming all rebellions, William had conciliated with the English church although he persecuted it ferociously afterward.

Reign in England

Events

As was usual for his descendants also William spent much time (11 years, since 1072) at Normandy, ruling the islands through his writs. Nominally still a vassal state, owing its entire loyalty to the French king, Normandy arose suddenly as a powerful region, alarming the other French Dukes which reacted by attacking it persistently. As Duke of Normandy, William was obsessed with conquering Brittany, and the French King Philip I admonished him. Nonetheless, in 1086, William invaded Brittany, forcing the flight of the Duke Alan IV. A peace treaty was signed, and William betrothed Constance (who was poisoned a few years later) to Alan.

The mischief of William's elder son Robert arose after a prank of his brothers William and Henry, who doused him with filthy water. The situation became a large scale Norman rebellion. Only with King Philip's additional military support William was able to confront Robert, who had based at Flanders. During the battle in 1079, William was unhorsed and wounded by Robert, who lowered his sword only after recognizing him. The embarrassed William returned to Rouen, abandoning the expedition. In 1080, Matilda reconciled both, and William revoked Robert's inheritance.

Odo caused many troubles to William, and he was imprisoned in 1082, losing his English estate and all royal functions, except the religious ones. In 1083, Matilda died, and William became more tyrannical over his realm.

Reforms *See also: Domesday Book*

William initiated many major changes. He increased the function of the traditional English shires (autonomous administrative regions), which he brought under central control; he decreased the power of the earls by restricting them to one shire apiece. All administrative functions of his government remained fixed at specific English towns, except the court itself; they would progressively strengthen, and the English institutions became amongst the most sophisticated in Europe. In 1085, in order to ascertain the extent of his new

dominions and to improve taxation, William commissioned all his counselors for the compilation of the Domesday Book, which was published in 1086. The book was a survey of England's productive capacity similar to a modern census.

William also ordered many castles, keeps, and mottes, among them the Tower of London's foundation (the White Tower), which were built throughout England. These ensured effectively that the many rebellions by the English people or his own followers did not succeed.

His conquest also led to French (especially, but not only, the Norman French) replacing English as the language of the ruling classes for nearly 300 years.^{[5][6]} Furthermore, the original Anglo-Saxon cultural influence of England became mingled with the Norman one; thus the Anglo-Norman culture came into being.

William is said to have eliminated the native aristocracy in as little as four years. Systematically, he despoiled those English aristocrats who either opposed the Normans or who died without issue. Thus, most English estates and titles of nobility were handed to the Norman noblemen. Many English aristocrats fled to Flanders and Scotland; others may have been sold into slavery overseas. Some escaped to join the Byzantine Empire's Varangian Guard, and went on to fight the Normans in Sicily. By 1070, the indigenous nobility had ceased to be an integral part of the English landscape, and by 1086, it maintained control of just 8% of its original land-holdings.^[7] However, to the new Norman noblemen, William handed the English parcels of land piecemeal, dispersing these wide. Thus nobody would essay conspiring against him without jeopardizing their own estates within the so unstable England. Effectively, this strengthened William's political stand as a monarch.

William also seized and depopulated many miles of land (36 parishes), turning it into the royal New Forest region to support his enthusiastic enjoyment of hunting.^[8]

Death, burial, and succession

In 1087 in France, William burned Mantes (50 km west of Paris), besieging the town. However, he fell off his horse, suffering fatal abdominal injuries by the saddle pommel. On his deathbed, William divided his succession for his sons, sparking strife between them. Despite William's reluctance, his combative elder son Robert received the Duchy of Normandy, as Robert II. William Rufus (his third son) was next English king, as William II. William's youngest son Henry received 5,000 silver pounds, which would be earmarked to buy land. He also became King Henry I of England after William II died without issue. While on his deathbed, William pardoned many of his political adversaries, including Odo.

William died at age 59 at the Convent of St Gervais near Rouen, France, on 9 September 1087. William was buried in the Abbaye-aux-Hommes, which had been erected by him, in Caen, Normandy.

According to some sources, a fire broke out during the funeral; the original owner of the land on which the church was built claimed he had not been paid yet, demanding 60 shillings, which William's son Henry had to pay on the spot; and, in a most unregal postmortem, William's corpulent body would not fit in the stone sarcophagus.

William's grave is currently marked by a marble slab with a Latin inscription; the slab dates from the early 19th century. The grave was defiled twice, once during the French Wars of Religion, when his bones were scattered across the town of Caen, and again during the French Revolution. Following those events, only William's left femur remains in the tomb.

Legacy

William's invasion was the last time that England was successfully conquered by a foreign power. Although there would be a number of other attempts over the centuries, the best that could be achieved would be excursions by foreign troops, such as the Raid on the Medway during the Second Anglo-Dutch War, but no actual conquests such as William's.

As Duke of Normandy and King of England he passed the titles on to his descendants. Other territories would be acquired by marriage or conquest and, at their height, these possessions would be known as the Angevin Empire.

They included many lands in France, such as Normandy and Aquitaine, but the question of jurisdiction over these territories would be the cause of much conflict and bitter rivalry between England and France, which took up much of the Middle Ages, including the Hundred Years War and, some might argue, continued as far as the Battle of Waterloo of 1815.

Physical appearance

No authentic portrait of William has been found. Nonetheless, he was depicted as a man of fair stature with remarkably strong arms, "with which he could shoot a bow at full gallop". William showed a magnificent appearance, possessing a fierce countenance. He enjoyed an excellent health; nevertheless his noticeable corpulence augmented eventually so much that French King Philip I commented that William looked like a pregnant woman.^[9]

William is known to have had nine children, though Agatha, a tenth daughter who died a virgin, appears in some sources. Several other unnamed daughters are also mentioned as being betrothed to notable figures of that time. Despite rumours to the contrary (such as claims that William Peverel was a bastard of William)^[10] there is no evidence that he had any illegitimate children.^[11]

1. Robert Curthose (1054–1134), Duke of Normandy, married Sybil of Conversano, daughter of Geoffrey of Conversano.
2. Richard (c. 1055 – c. 1081), Duke of Bernay, killed by a stag in New Forest.
3. Adeliza (or Alice) (c. 1055 – c. 1065), reportedly betrothed to Harold II of England.
4. Cecilia (or Cecily) (c. 1056 – 1126), Abbess of Holy Trinity, Caen.
5. William "Rufus" (c. 1056 – 1100), King of England.
6. Agatha (c. 1064 – 1079), betrothed to Alfonso VI of Castile.
7. Constance (c. 1066 – 1090), married Alan IV Fergent, Duke of Brittany; poisoned, possibly by her own servants.
8. Adela (c. 1067 – 1137), married Stephen, Count of Blois.
9. Henry "Beauclerc" (1068–1135), King of England, married Edith of Scotland, daughter of Malcolm III, King of the Scots. His second wife was Adeliza of Louvain.

Every English monarch down to Queen Elizabeth II is a descendant of William the Conqueror.^l



The tomb of William the Conqueror in Caen



- [Accord of Winchester](#) signed [1072](#) by [William the Conqueror](#) & his wife. This elevated [Canterbury](#) over [York](#) as to whose archbishop would be the highest primate in England. The large Xs are the 'signatures' of William & Matilda, the one under theirs is [Lanfranc](#)'s, and the other bishops' are under his. from en wikipedia.

THE NORMANS

WILLIAM I

1066-1087



THE COAT OF ARMS OF WILLIAM I

There is some confusion as to whether two or three lions were featured on William's coat of arms, but two is the usual number. The use of three lions was not confirmed until the reign of Henry II in 1154.

BORN THE ILLEGITIMATE SON of Robert, Duke of Normandy, William inherited his father's duchy in 1035 at a young age. By 1047 he had established a reputation as a brilliant commander, one who was never to fight a battle he did not win nor besiege a castle he did not take. In 1051 he visited Edward the Confessor in England, where he was promised the succession to the English throne. When Edward was succeeded by Harold, Earl of Wessex, in January 1066, William felt cheated, brought a Norman army over to England, defeated Harold at the Battle of Hastings and was crowned King of England. Now known as "the Conqueror", William subdued the local population by confiscating Anglo-Saxon estates and giving them to his Norman followers. William died in 1087 after falling from his horse while besieging the French city of Nantes.

 WILLIAM I

- ◆ **Born** Falaise Castle, Normandy, 1027/28, illegitimate son of Robert of Normandy and Arlette of Conteville.
- ◆ **Married** Matilda of Flanders, Cathedral of Notre Dame d'Eu, Normandy, 1050/52, 10 children.
- ◆ **Acceded** 14 Oct 1066.
- ◆ **Crowned** Westminster Abbey, 25 Dec 1066.
- ◆ **Died** Rouen, Normandy, 9 Sept 1087, aged 59/60.



CONTEMPORARY REFERENCE

The writ above was issued by William I to Ralph, Sheriff of Surrey, concerning the dues owed by Pyrford Manor. Its importance is that it is one of the few contemporary sources to make reference to the great Domesday Book.

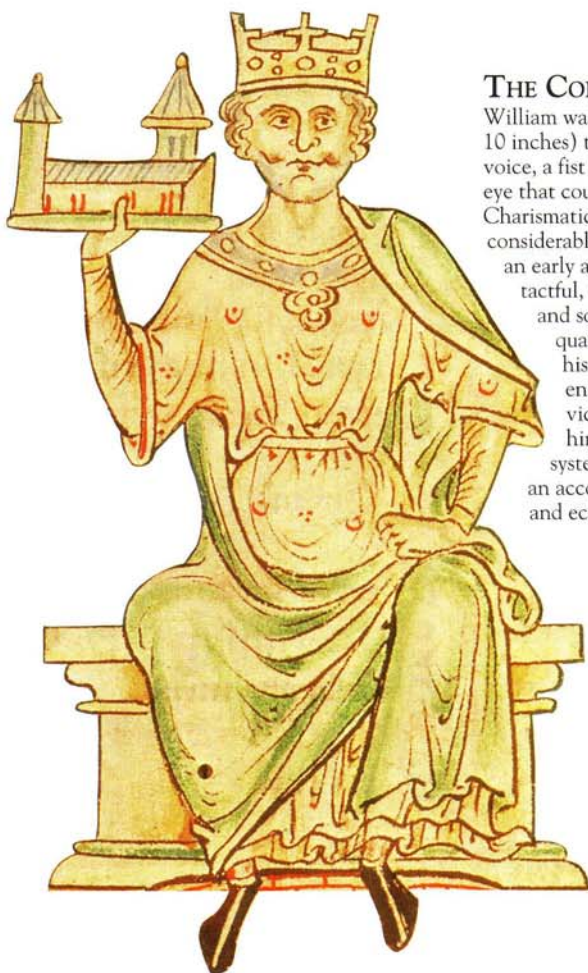
DOMESDAY BOOK

Consisting of two volumes – one a survey of the prosperous counties of Essex, Suffolk and Norfolk and the other of the rest of England – the Domesday Book is shown (right) on the replica of the casket in which it was kept upon its completion in 1086.

A GREAT SURVEY

In 1085 William sent out commissioners to all the counties of England, except those in the far north, to make a record of the population, extent, value, state of cultivation, ownership and tenancy of the land. The commissioners paid great attention to detail, even recording the numbers of livestock in each shire, and wrote the facts and figures up in what is known as the Domesday Book. One of the most interesting facts to emerge was the size of the population, which stood at some two million.





THE CONQUEROR

William was about 1.8 metres (5 feet 10 inches) tall, thick-set, with a rasping voice, a fist that could fell an ox and “an eye that could quell the fiercest baron”. Charismatic and demonstrating considerable powers of leadership from an early age, he became a patient, tactful, courageous, devout, ruthless and sometimes cruel king. Such qualities inspired loyalty among his followers and fear among his enemies, made him constantly victorious in battle and enabled him to introduce the feudal system, strong government and an accompanying political, social and economic stability to England.

WILLIAM I

This portrait of William is unlikely to be realistic, for it was not drawn until the 13th century, when it appeared in the Great Chronicle of Matthew Paris. The church William holds in his right hand represents his ecclesiastical patronage.

THE NORMAN NOBILITY

When William landed with his army on the shores of England in 1066, he was accompanied by most of the leading nobles of Normandy and a number of church dignitaries. Among these were two of William’s half-brothers (one of whom, Odo, was created Earl of Kent and later became Bishop of Bayeux) and several personal friends, including his childhood friend William FitzOsbern. After William’s victory at Hastings, many of his followers were rewarded with huge tracts of land, confiscated from the Anglo-Saxon nobility, and they were licensed to build castles.

WILLIAM AND HIS NOBLES

This manuscript illustration depicts William accompanied by members of the Norman nobility.



EVENTS OF THE REIGN 1066 – 1087

- ♦ 1066 William and his Norman army defeats Harold II and the Saxons at the Battle of Hastings. Harold is killed and after subduing the rest of the country, William is crowned King of England on Christmas Day.
- ♦ 1067 William suppresses a Saxon revolt in the southwest of England.
- ♦ 1068-9 After putting down a revolt led by Edwin and Morcar, grandsons of Leofric of Mercia, William lays waste to the northern counties of England.
- ♦ 1070 Stigand, the Anglo-Saxon Archbishop of Canterbury is dismissed by William, and the Frenchman, Lanfranc of Bec, is appointed in his place.
- ♦ 1070 Archbishop Lanfranc lays the foundations of Canterbury Cathedral after the earlier building is destroyed by fire.
- ♦ 1071 William defeats a revolt led by Hereward the Wake in East Anglia, thus putting an end to Saxon resistance to his rule.
- ♦ 1072 William invades Scotland and compels Malcolm III to pay homage to him at Abernethy.
- ♦ 1073 Archbishopric of York subordinated to Archbishopric of Canterbury.
- ♦ 1078 William begins the construction of the White Tower at the Tower of London.
- ♦ 1079 William begins the construction of a Norman Cathedral at Winchester.
- ♦ 1079 Robert, William’s eldest son, leads a rebellion in Normandy, but is defeated by his father at the battle of Gerberoi and his life is spared.
- ♦ 1079 New Forest enclosed by William as a royal hunting area. Severe Forest Laws against trespassing introduced.
- ♦ 1080 William refuses to pay homage to the Pope.
- ♦ 1082 Odo, Bishop of Bayeux – William’s half-brother – is arrested for conspiracy.
- ♦ 1085 William orders a survey of the shires of England; the information is recorded in the Domesday Book.
- ♦ 1086 The Domesday Book is completed and William gathers all the feudal lords and tenants-in-chief of England to renew their oath of fealty to him at Salisbury.
- ♦ 1087 William dies of his injuries after falling from his horse while besieging the French city of Nantes.