

Lecture 4: The Norman Conquest

The cultural differences between the Anglo-Saxons and Danes were minor. They led almost the same mode of life and spoke two varieties of the same Germanic language (which would become the English of today). In addition, the Danes were soon Christianized. These common points enabled the Anglo-Saxons and Danes to amalgamate politically and thus by the end of the **10th** century, England was one kingdom with a Germanic culture throughout.

The Medieval Period and Norman Invasion when **the Normans** invaded Britain in **1066**, they joined the mainstream of the western European culture. The year 1066 is regarded as the most well known year in the history of Britain because of the defeat of the English army by the Norman army in the close and bloody **battle of Hastings**. Many English soldiers were killed as well as their leader King Harold. Thus, King William of Normandy became King of England on Christmas Day. He is known under the name "**William the Conqueror**". The above date is the most important date because it was the last time in which England was invaded successfully.

Contrary to the Germanic invasions, the Norman invasion was small. They did not build villages and/or military camps. As an alternative, the Norman soldiers who invaded the land were entitled to its ownership and its people together. They imposed a strict **Feudal system**. The barons (great nobles) were responsible in a direct way to the King while lesser lords each possessing a village, were directly responsible to a baron. On the bottom of this system, there exist the peasants who were obliged to follow and obey local lords and were not allowed to travel without the consent of their lords. The peasants were the Saxons who spoke English while the Norman barons and lords spoke French. This led to a new system known as the English **Class System**.

The Normans introduced a strong system of government and hence the Anglo-Norman Kingdom became the strongest political power in the British Isles. Consequently, English monarchs were powerful and could rule even beyond their borders in the 250 years to come. By the end of the **13th** century, the Anglo-Normans could control a huge area of eastern Ireland under the command of the King of England and they controlled Wales as well. Scotland on the other hand

could resist and was independent during the Medieval Era but there had been constant battles and fights to keep its independence.

It is worth mentioning that after 250 years of settlement, English remained the dominant language not French. Besides, it was the English law that was adopted in the land and not the Roman law, which constituted the foundation of the legal system at that time.

Although the Anglo-Romans were the real rulers, they did not settle at large scale in northern and central Wales. Consequently, the culture of the Celtic Welsh prevailed, their poems, Welsh songs and national festivals spread out during the Medieval Era until the present day. The Anglo-Norman lords in eastern Ireland were loyal to the English King; however, they adopted the Gaelic language and customs.

It is true that Scotland was politically independent but English was gradually used and the English customs were adopted mainly in southern Scotland. The Anglo-Saxon presence was fostered by the arrival of several aristocrats who escaped the Norman invasion of England. In addition, the Celtic rulers believed that embracing the Anglo-Norman style of government would make them more powerful. By the end of the Medieval Era, the culture and language in southern Scotland (southlands) was similar to that in England while in the north (highlands), Celtic Gaelic language and culture spread out.

During this period, the parliament started to develop into the Democratic shape that we know today. The word “parliament” came from the French word/verb ‘parler’ which means ‘to speak’ which was first used in England in the 13th century to depict a meeting of nobles called together by the King. In 1295, the Model of Parliament was set for the future by selecting representatives from rural and urban areas.

Language and class: The society was divided into classes during the Normans era. This greatly affected language and the use of words. For example, two words were given to larger farm animals like cows, pigs, sheep, etc. that exist in the Anglo-Saxon language while the words beef, mutton and pork originate in the French language that the Normans brought to Britain. Only the Normans ate meat whereas the poor Anglo-Saxon peasants did not.

Task: in no more than five lines, give a brief description to the Magna Carta, Feudalism, William the Conqueror, Henry II, Richard “Coeur de Lion”, King John, Henry III, Edward I, and Edward III.