

THE
CONNELL GUIDE
TO



THE
NORMANS

“What fantastic guides these are – I wish I’d
had them when I was eighteen.”

EMMA THOMPSON

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW IN
ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by Daniel M.G. Gerrard

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The Anglo Saxon world

The inheritance of Wessex

The pagan Viking invasions of the ninth century very nearly destroyed English civilisation, but they also created the foundations of the English state. Coming first as raiders, later as conquerors and settlers, they looted and burned their way across the English countryside. In particular, they devastated the once-thriving monastic church that preserved and propagated learning, art, and culture in the Middle Ages.

In doing so, however, they swept clean the board of high politics. Where once there had been a mosaic of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms – Wessex, Kent, Mercia, East Anglia, Northumbria, Essex and Sussex – by the end of the ninth century only Wessex remained. In consequence, the king of Wessex, Alfred the Great (who died in 899) was able to present himself as the leader of a unified Christian resistance, and even to experiment with the language of a unified nation as *Rex Angul-Saxonum* (King of the Anglo-Saxons).

Wessex, however, was a relatively compact kingdom on the English south coast. The reconquest of Viking territory that began in Alfred's reign was based on strenuous campaigning, and the building of fortified towns (*burhs*), and it demanded a remarkable effort of military and political organisation, sustained for decades. Culminating in

the reigns of Alfred's successors Aethelstan (d. 939) and Edgar "the peaceable" (d. 975), England emerged as by far the most powerful polity in the British archipelago, and with approximately its modern territorial extent. English kings claimed a wider overlordship of the British Isles, even using the title *Basileus* (the title of the Byzantine emperors), and could make marriage alliances with the most powerful European monarchs. They also had perhaps the most sophisticated, systematic and intensive system of administration anywhere in the medieval west.

The new kingdom was unusual in several important respects:

1. It was organised into standard units. The Shire (which eventually came to be presided over by a royal official, the Shire-Reeve – *Sheriff*) was divided into sub-units, known as hundreds. Each hundred was composed of a number of *Hides* (a unit of agricultural production in theory approximately representing the land that could support one family or one plough team).
2. This systematic organisation allowed for the systematic use of resources. In theory, for example, one soldier could be levied from every five hides for the *fyrð* (army). A system of national taxation (itself a deeply unusual phenomenon in the period), the *Danegeld*, originally protection money used to pay off the

Vikings, was also levied on the hide.

3. The only coinage produced in England was royal. On the continent, the greater nobility often chose to mint their own coins, meaning that in many places, there were many different forms of coinage in circulation. In England, the standard coin was the silver penny. These were low-value (indicating that they were used in everyday transactions and hence that the English economy was highly-monetised), and were produced in vast quantity. They were also recoined every few years (i.e. they were collected, melted down, and remade). The king, naturally took a cut at this point.
4. English kings made national, written lawcodes. These varied a good deal in content and tone, and there has been a good deal of debate over the extent to which they were enforced, but they were an important step in developing a system of law. The codes also regulated aspects of trade, and levied lucrative fines from malefactors.
5. The English aristocracy were less territorial than their continental counterparts. Although English society was dominated by a warrior nobility whose sons could reasonably expect to occupy approximately the same social status as their fathers, they remained to some extent royal officials who could be moved, promoted, or demoted as the king wished. This prevented the

emergence of an entrenched senior nobility capable of defying royal authority.

In short, the English monarchy that emerged in the middle of the tenth century had been equipped by the struggle against the Vikings with a remarkably systematic administration capable of extracting resources in silver and men from across the nation and enacting justice in the king's name. Until recently, historians tended to believe that much of this system long predated Alfred the Great's day,* though George Molyneaux has challenged that position by arguing that the state apparatus only took shape in the mid tenth century**. Historians have, however, been consistently impressed with the administrative and technical achievements of the late Anglo-Saxon state. Nevertheless, the Anglo-Saxon state was successfully invaded and conquered not once, but twice in the course of the 11th century.

Cnut and the Conquest of 1016-17

The name of King Aethelred "the Unready" (d. 1016) is associated almost exclusively with crime,

* The most significant exponent of what he called the "Maximum view" of the Old English state, emphasising both its achievements and its antiquity was James Campbell. See his essays collected in *The Anglo-Saxon State* (2000).

** See G. Molyneaux, "Why were some tenth century English kings presented as rulers of Britain?" in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 21 (2011), pp. 59-91 and *The Formation of the English Kingdom in the Tenth Century* (2015)

chaos and catastrophe, but this is somewhat unfair. The king could neither have predicted nor prevented the renewal of large-scale Viking attacks led by Danish kings on England in his reign. He responded sensibly to the crisis by marrying Emma, the daughter of Duke Richard of Normandy, creating a marriage alliance that denied the Vikings use of Normandy's ports for their attacks.

The famous English defeat at the Battle of Maldon (991) did not lead to political collapse. Indeed, Aethelred fought the Vikings for more than 20 years, and his eventual defeat may owe as much to political division as military difficulties; both sides saw repeated defections in this period, but the defections of Ealdorman Eadric Streona of Mercia and Earl Uhtred of East Anglia to the Danes were probably the most significant. When Aethelred died in 1016, he was succeeded by his son, Edmund "Ironside", who suffered a major defeat by the Danes at Ashingdon, leading to a temporary division of the kingdom. When Edmund died, the Danish prince, Cnut, finally succeeded him unopposed.

The Danish conquest had taken a whole generation, and was hardly conclusive. Cnut came to the throne of a country exhausted by war as much because he survived Edmund Ironside as a result of military victories. It should be little surprise that he tried to present himself not as a foreign conqueror, but as an English king. His first political act was to wed Aethelred's widow, Emma. The leaders of the English church were left in place, and supported the

new regime with their authority and expertise. Though extensive lands were given to Cnut's Danish followers, the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy was not wholly disinherited. Crucially, as ruler of Denmark, Cnut could offer the English guaranteed protection against renewed violence from across the North Sea, a promise made more certain when he added Norway to his holdings in 1028.

Though Cnut was keen to present himself as the candidate of continuity, he oversaw a quiet revolution in the structure of the English state that would have long-term consequences. He simply could not supervise the whole of his widespread dominions in person. His solution was to impose a new layer of government in England, carving the country into four large Earldoms (Wessex, Mercia, Northumbria and East Anglia) with substantial autonomy. Wessex, the heartland of the Anglo-Saxon monarchy, was entrusted to a man of obscure background called Godwine.

Cnut's system worked as long as the king lived. His prestige, the loyalty of the earls, and the substantial resources he could draw on as an international ruler kept England under control, but in November 1035 he died and his legacy began to unravel.

Harold I, Harthacnut, and Edward "the Confessor"

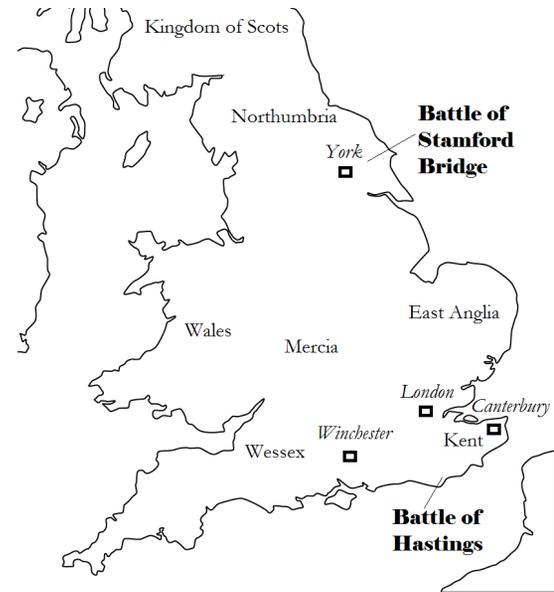
The politics of the period 1035-1042 are deeply obscure, but the key points are these: in 1035, Cnut

was succeeded by Harold I (“Harefoot”), probably because his brother Harthacnut was in Denmark and unable to press his claim. Alfred, an exiled son of Aethelred II, attempted to launch an invasion of England from Normandy, but was betrayed by Earl Godwine of Wessex and murdered. When Harold died in 1040, he was succeeded by his brother Harthacnut, who like Cnut combined the kingship in England with that of Denmark. He summoned his half-brother Edward back from Normandy. The new king’s prospects looked good, but he too died suddenly in 1042.

Edward (later known as “the Confessor”) had a position in English politics quite unlike that of any previous king. Although he was unquestionably the legitimate heir of the ancient Wessex monarchy, he was in some respects an alien in his own country. During the reigns of Cnut and Harold Harefoot, Edward had lived in exile with his mother’s family in Normandy.

The youth of medieval kings was an important period, the time when they established a loyal network of followers. As an exile, Edward effectively skipped this period, coming to his throne with no following and no military reputation. He was unmarried, childless and middle-aged.

To his great misfortune, he also inherited the political structure of four great earldoms established by Cnut and maintained by Harthacnut. Unlike Cnut, however, Edward had neither the military prestige, nor the ability to draw on armies raised in



England in 1066, showing the most significant regions and cities, and the most important battlefields.

Scandinavia, to buttress his position. Even in retrospect, it is difficult to see what he could have done to match the rising power of Earl Godwine of Wessex.

Godwine understood his opportunity perfectly well. In 1045, Edward married Godwine’s daughter Edith. In two generations, Godwine’s family had gone from obscurity to alliance with one of Europe’s most ancient royal houses! How enthusiastic Edward was to marry the daughter of an overmighty earl who had murdered his brother, Alfred, cannot be known, but can perhaps be guessed. In truth, we know nothing about Edward and Edith’s domestic arrangements except that Godwine’s evident ambition that he should be the grandfather of kings

was not to be fulfilled. It is the central fact of Edward's political life that he and Edith produced no children.

The crisis of Edward's reign began in 1051. Although he had little room for manoeuvre in secular politics, one undoubted royal prerogative was the appointment of bishops. Unsurprisingly, Edward chose a Norman, Robert of Jumièges, for the key position of Archbishop of Canterbury. In doing so, he blocked the advancement of Abbot Aethelric, Godwine's favoured candidate for the post.

Shortly afterwards, a fight broke out at Dover between some of Godwine's followers and those of Count Eustace of Boulogne, one of Edward's relatives and allies. The country appeared to be sliding toward civil war, and Godwine and the king both raised armies. Surprisingly, though, Godwine's position suddenly collapsed. Earls Leofric and Siward, when finally pressed by military crisis, chose to support the king, and, according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Godwine's troops refused to fight fellow Englishmen. Godwine and his sons fled into exile.

Edward's period as the master of England was brief and of little lasting consequence, but we can perhaps glimpse a faint outline of what might have been. Edith was bundled off to a convent. A reissue of the coinage showed Edward apparently in military mood, wearing a helmet. In any event, Godwine and his sons returned from exile with two

new armies in 1052. London defected to the earl and the king's power collapsed as swiftly as Godwine's had the previous year.

In theory, there was then a reconciliation between king and earl. In practice, the crisis seems to have broken whatever power remained to Edward. After 1052 he is hardly mentioned in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and Edith returned to court. Robert of Jumièges was exiled for causing discord, and the archbishopric passed to Stigand.

Godwine's death in 1053 did nothing to revive Edward's independent rule. Instead, Godwine's son Harold took over his father's position and cemented it. In the next five years, no fewer than three of Harold's brothers received earldoms. The power of Earls Leofric and Siward was eclipsed and England became something very like a family firm. Harold won stunning military victories over the Welsh in the 1050s, and was sufficiently secure in his position to be able to travel outside the kingdom, visiting Rome, Flanders and Germany. The only real failure of his power came in 1065 when a rebellion broke out in the north over the misrule of his younger brother, Earl Tostig, but Tostig was forced into exile and order soon restored.

At the end of 1065, Harold's position seemed solid, his domination of English politics apparently unassailable, and the future of Godwine's dynasty secure. The government of England, however, still continued to be conducted in the name of King Edward, the heir of the ancient Wessex dynasty. On

4th or 5th January 1066, however, the King died and Anglo-Saxon England came crashing down.

France and the Dukes of Normandy

Across the Channel lay a polity of quite different type and history. Where the development of the English monarchy can be thought of as an evolutionary response to Viking pressure, that same pressure had accelerated the breakdown of the French monarchy in the tenth century, encouraging the development of an independent aristocracy whose power was based on castles.

The duchy of Normandy (the land of the Northmen) was founded as a Viking territory in northern France. The first Norman duke, Rollo, had carved the territory out of the lands of a feeble French monarchy in the mid tenth century. There are no signs of hostility between Normandy and England before 1066. Aethelred's alliance had proved durable, and Norman merchants enjoyed privileges in English law.

The Latin word *dux* (the origin of the French *duc* and the English *duke*) originally meant "general", and the Normans enjoyed a formidable reputation as warriors. Although vassals of the French king, the dukes were for the most part functionally independent rulers. In practice, the kings of France controlled a relatively small (though rich) slice of territory between Paris and Orléans. To the west and south, the counts of Anjou had emerged as a

comparable force to the dukes of Normandy. The county of Maine had the misfortune of being caught between its more powerful Norman and Angevin neighbours.

As David Bates has pointed out, much of the history of France in the mid 11th century is the story of the struggle for supremacy between those three powers – Normandy, Anjou, and France.* When one of the three seemed to be on the verge of achieving pre-eminence, it would be checked by an alliance of the other two. While that balance of power guaranteed perpetual struggle, it also gave all three an interest in each other's survival.

The most striking example of this came in 1042 at the Battle of Val-ès Dunes. After a long period of disorder during the childhood of the young Duke William of Normandy, in which major rebellions by the nobility of the duchy had seriously disrupted the ducal government, William was beginning to reassert his dominance. How severe that disorder was is a matter of debate. The leading historian of the Conqueror, David Bates, argues that it was less pronounced than was once thought. Even so, it was doubtless substantial. Much of the credit for William's victory at his first major battle, however, probably belongs to the intervention there of an army commanded by the King of France, Henri I.

Duke William was a ruler of a very different sort from Edward the Confessor. He was heir to neither

* David Bates, *William the Conqueror* (1989)