

A Tale of Two Conquests – a look at the Norman Conquests of England and Sicily.

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The Normans

Who were the Normans?

The Normans officially get their start in 911 AD when Rollo the Walker signed a treaty with Charles the Simple of Frankia. Rollo and his group of Viking Norse and Danes were given the area that would become Normandy in exchange for their fealty, conversion to Christianity, and to defend this land against further invasion by their Scandanavian cousins [1].

The Normans would very quickly adopted Frankish customs and language. They also would adopt Frankish/French feudalism.

In general, the Normans were a passionate people. They dreamed big and thought big. They brought with them distinctive architecture and music. They became amongst the best heavy cavalry of the time. They were also filled with the desire to expand beyond their lands. Lower level knights were often land poor and became mercenaries. The people they conquered would often be forced into Norman culture (obviously the Normans were not alone in this). During the next few centuries, Normans would conquer England, Sicily, Antioch, Cyprus, parts of Ireland, parts of Scotland, parts of the Byzantine Empire, and parts of Africa. In many of these cases, the Normans would eventually go “native” and become part of local population under other rulers.

For this class, we are primarily concerned with the de Normandies, the ruling ducal family of Normandy and the de Hautevilles, one of those land-poor knights.

Conquest of England

There is a lot written about the Conquest of England, much of it Norman propaganda. The central myth is that Edward the Confessor promised William of Normandy that William would be his heir to the throne of England. I say myth because it is very unlikely to be true. Both men knew very well how one becomes King of England and this promise, which probably was never made, was not how it happened.

Becoming King of England

During this time in English history, you became King of England by the Witan voting you to be King. The Witan was a council made of the English earls and other nobility. They primarily were looking for a monarch of the royal blood who would work to secure their interests. Someone who respected traditions and who could reward their loyalty with new land, new titles, or new income. By the time of the Conquest, another way to become King had shown itself, conquest. Swein Forkbeard and Cnut had both conquered England and the Witan legitimized their rules. Prior to this though, it was not necessarily the son of the current monarch who would become King. It was often a brother or an uncle as well.

William de Normandy

William de Normandy, also called William the Bastard, and of course, later William the Conqueror, had a hard life.

William was the only son of Duke Robert of Normandy. His father never married, probably holding that possibility out as a political marriage if needed. There is evidence that Robert almost married one of Cnut's daughters but that never actually happened. William did end up with 2 half brothers and at least one half sister [2].

Robert went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 1034. William was ~ 7 years old then and Robert had all of his barons swear to support William's claim should something happen while he was gone. Robert would die in Nicea while trying to return to Normandy [3].

Over the next 13 years, William would be under several guardianships while others competed for his duchy. Finally with the backing of Henry of France, in 1047, William was able to defeat Guy of Brienne and assume control of Normandy. It would take a few more years to quiet smaller rebellions and establish order but William did just that. One of the major factors in William's growing power was his marriage to Matilda of Flanders. This gave him good support in a neighboring duchy with powerful connections [4].

With Normandy secure and its star rising, William set his sights higher. In growing up, he saw the mess the collection of French duchies were. His sometimes allies became enemies. His enemies became fawning allies. The French King played all sides to keep his Dukes from focusing on him.

The de Normandies had played host to the exiled English royal family during the reigns of Sven and Cnut. Where France was chaotic, England was relatively peaceful. England was rich. And as recent history

had shown, a strong man could take her. This undoubtedly appealed to William. He would never be King of France and only a crazy person would want to manage that headache. But King of England? That just may be. There is some evidence that William's father, Robert, was making similar plans.

The Promise

Central to the Norman mythology is that Edward promised England to William. Unfortunately, there really isn't a good time that this might have happened. While Edward was in exile in Normandy, it doesn't seem likely he would be making anyone an heir since he didn't have anything to leave him. William visits Edward around 1051 in Canterbury [5] so it could have happened here. But again it seems unlikely as Edward might still have children. The best guess is that Archbishop Robert made the promise (whether real or not) to William and presented William with Godwin's hostages. The problem is that William doesn't mention this promise until 1064. That is 13 years later. Why not make it more well known if that really happened? Edward also may have promised to make Sweyn II of Denmark his heir [6]. A few years before his death, Edward tried to have Edward the Exile recalled in order to make him an heir. Lastly, on his death bed, on 5 January 1066, Edward supposedly commended his widow and the kingdom to Harold's "protection" [7].

So this promise is pretty iffy and now we need to think about why William is mentioning it and who his audience is for mentioning it.

William needs the support of his barons if he is to invade England. William has forces of his own but he needs the forces of his barons to have a large scale invasion. We do finally see where this promise comes into play. We will never know what Harold swore to William. But William insists that Harold swore to uphold his claim to the English throne and William gets the Pope to excommunicate Harold as an oathbreaker [8]. With papal support, the Norman barons jump on board and support the invasion [9].

The Conquest

This class isn't about the battles so I will leave that. We know that William wins. But it is not an easy victory nor an easy conquest. It is at least 1076 before a variety of revolts and rebellions are quashed. William did confirm some English nobles their lands but the Godwins' lost all of their possessions and they owned quite a bit of England by that point.

Between 1066 and 1086, 4500 English thanes have been replaced by 180 barons, only 2 were English. There were 1400 middle landowners, only about 100 of which are English. In 20 years, upper English society is basically Norman. In the Early 1100, William of Malmesbury writes, "It is the habitation of strangers and the dominion of foreigners. There is today no Englishman who is either earl, bishop, or abbot. The newcomers devour the riches and entrails of England and there is no hope of the misery coming to an end."

It is only in 1362 that English becomes the official language in Parliament and Courts of Law again.

Henry IV, in 1399, is the first King of England since Harold Godwinson to be a native English speaker.

William in particular had to respond to a series of rebellions and therefore deal harshly with those who rebelled. It is not until Henry II that the English seem to be content with the new situation.

Conquest of Sicily

The Conquest of Sicily was principally accomplished by one Norman family, the de Hautevilles. To understand the Conquest, it is important to understand the Normans in general and the de Hautevilles in particular. But more specifically, it is important to understand The Great Count Roger I and then Rogerius Rex, Roger II and how they were different than the typical Norman.

The de Hautevilles

The de Hautevilles started as part of Rollo's force in the founding of Normandy. They settled in the southern part of the duchy. The thing most notable about the de Hautevilles was their fecundity. Two generations from Rollo, Tancred de Hauteville had 14 children, 12 of them sons, on his small estate. Tancred had 5 sons by his first marriage, the oldest being William Iron-arm, and 7 sons by his second marriage, the oldest being Robert Guiscard. Roger would be youngest of all 12 sons. There was no way to divide the estate such that anyone was going to get a reasonable inheritance [10].

Fortunately, some of the sons learned of opportunities in the South of Italy. This area had long been under Byzantine control and many Lombards also made their home there. Politically, it was a mess but more importantly, the Byzantines were determined to reclaim Sicily from the Arabs. Here, the eldest de Hauteville, William Iron-Arm, joins up with the Byzantine forces and has some success in Sicily before court intrigue puts an end to the Byzantine invasion. This is around 1035. William sees first hand the riches and potential ease of conquest that Sicily offers. After falling out with the Byzantines, William works as a mercenary for the Lombards against the Byzantines until then too, court intrigues put a stop to these fights. William manages to get the title of Count of Apulia but the position has little power [11].

In the meantime, more of the de Hautevilles have made their way down to Italy to seek their fortune. This time, it is Robert Guiscard (Robert the Crafty), the oldest of the second set of brothers, takes the stage. It is around 1047. William is campaigning in Apulia. He sends Robert to Calabria. Calabria is much less prosperous than Apulia and Robert has to work harder to earn fame.

The Normans are behaving as we typically think of Normans. Super confident, brutal, and greedy. But fierce. Not much can stand in the way of a heavily armored Norman charge, not even other Normans. The Lombards had taken Byzantine gold to stop rebelling and had come to the conclusion that their Norman mercenaries, neighbors, and in some cases, lords were worse by far. At least the Byzantines just overtaxed them. The Normans burned their crops, stole their riches, raped their women, and killed their children. A new pope, Leo IX decides that unruly Normans make poor neighbors and forms an army out of an alliance with the Holy Roman Emperor and the Byzantines. Leo's army is often tricked by the wily Normans and Leo himself ends up being made a captive. The Byzantines are driven out of Italy for good [12].

It is around this time that Roger, the youngest of the de Hautevilles, enters our story. Roger was in love with Judith D' Evreux, a first cousin once removed from William the Conqueror. Judith's father would not agree to a marriage with this landless knight and so Roger went south to prove his worth. This is about 1057. Roger campaigned with Robert quite a bit. As was typical, while the brothers de Hauteville (all of them) often had common cause, they often distrusted and fought with each other. The Norman dreams of grandeur often lead to competitions to see who could be at the top.

A new Pope brought new opportunities. Nicholas II makes an alliance with the Normans this time. Robert gains the title of Duke of Apulia, Calabria, and future Lord of Sicily. He and Roger are invited by an Emir in Sicily to help attack other Emirs in Sicily. This they do and they manage to take Messina and start campaigning against Palermo.

Palermo at the time is the third largest city in the West, after Constantinople and Cairo, at ~250,000 people. With a good port and a sound navy, a land siege was just not going to be effective. Added to that, the de Hautevilles' camp was overrun with tarantulas! Roger and Robert are forced to retreat and Robert sets his sights on Constantinople itself.

Due to the successes he has had, Roger finally get to marry Judith. However, they are quickly besieged shortly thereafter and this is where Roger learns a lesson that so many de Hautevilles or even Normans never do; respect for the locals. Roger comes to understand that the local populations are much more numerous and much more knowledgeable about their areas than the Normans ever will be. There is a time for the iron fist but there is also a time for the velvet glove. The siege is finally broken and Roger gives lenient terms to the besiegers. Word of this spreads [13].

Roger is able to get a fleet built in Salerno and Naples by his brother Robert and can besiege Palermo. Palermo fairly quickly surrenders. Roger again offers generous terms. Accept a Norman castle in the city and swear fealty to Norman rule. In return, you can continue worshipping as you wish and trading as you wish.

The call for the First Crusade goes up and Roger is one of the only significant rulers to not answer the call. Much of the riches of Sicily are from trade with Muslim North Africa. To allow religious warfare would be to strike at the heart of his people's wealth. Roger is able to convince his Muslim trading partners to stay out of the conflict as well.

Roger goes on to become the Great Count. He learned from the Greek, Latin, and Arabic advisors and treated all with respect. He did have to drive out Arabic and Berber lords to enforce his rule. But once that is done, he let the people have their freedom as long as they acknowledged him as his ruler [14].

Like other de Hautevilles, Roger had many children. In this case though, it was mostly daughters. He had 17 children by three wives and one was a bastard. Of the first 14, two were sons. One died young and the bastard was also a leper. Near the end of his life, his third wife had 2 sons and a daughter. The oldest son, died young at 12, in his regency for Sicily. But the last son, Roger II, goes on to finally be King of Sicily and one of the most celebrated kings in history: Rogerius Rex.

Conclusions

The two conquests are similar in that they both involve Norman nobles, with the blessing of the Papacy, conquering an important island. Both conquests result in a strong central government. They are different in that the nature of the “native” population of those islands were different. The nature of the conflict was different. The nature of the Norman men were different. And therein is why they results were different.

There were significant differences between the de Normandie’s and the second batch of the de Hauteville’s. William, even though an orphan and past around, grew up in the back-stabbing and vicious French courts. Becoming strong, he learned and enforced that one ruled by strength and strength alone. Robert Guiscard, Roger, and then Rogerius Rex apparently learned different lessons. They were incredibly charismatic and they were generous. They shared the meager fare of their troops and often gave all that they had to other causes. It took more than strength to rule.

In England, the result is a superimposition of Norman culture on top of a repressed Anglo-Norse population. Integration was slow. Rebellions last until the 1150’s when Henry II finally takes the throne. But the national identity remains broken until the middle of the 1300’s. It is around 1360 that English becomes the official language again.

William probably wanted a place he could rule easily. France was out of the question. But a strong man could take England. England was rich and used to a strong central government. What William didn’t count on was resistance. The English didn’t really rebel all that much against Swein or Cnut. In part, the English were used to the Norse. Many were part Norse themselves. And the land was much more distributed in those days. The Godwins had been consolidating their holdings and many of those ended up in Harold’s control. So when William conquered, he ended up with something like 70% of England just by taking Harold’s lands. Then the Domesday where he technically takes control of all of England. The nobles don’t really become English; they try to force the English to be Norman.

In Sicily, the Normans themselves assimilate into the “native” culture quite quickly. Norman culture becomes part of the Sicilian identity but only a part. The nobles learn Arabic and Greek. Arabs, Greeks, and native Sicilians occupy all parts of the government and society. Rebellions are few and small. Sicily, being closer to the centers of power in the Medieval period, becomes a pawn in those games. In 1266, the glorious age of Sicily comes to an end in the Medieval period. Sicily continues and becomes more intergrated but it is not the major power it once was. It is still important and wealthy but not spectacular as it once was. Sicily would often be overshadowed by Naples in the future “Kingdom of Sicily” and the “Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.”

Roger II in particular understood that to make this country work, he needs to be a part of it; not the other way ‘round.

Which was the more successfully conquest? That does depend what you consider a “success.” It is hard to argue with England. Over the next 1000 years since the Conquest, England was never conquered again. Several times over that period England was a major military, cultural, and economic influence

over the rest of the world. Sicily on the other hand was a bright flame for a bit more than a century then fell off.

England is on the edge of the known world and after the Viking Age, not on the way to anywhere else. It was rich, isolated, and with the weather, it could be hard to get to. But more importantly, William established a strong line of rulers who had little trouble with heirs. Sicily was also rich but not isolated and easy to get to. It was on the way to everywhere important. Everyone wanted it. But more importantly, various Norman Sicilian rulers were often looking past their borders to the Byzantine Empire. Heirs were often a problem, especially after William the Good.

We have to then conclude that England was the more successful Conquest even if Sicily's flame burned brighter. England's burned far longer and better.

References

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- [3] Douglas William the Conquerer pp 35-37
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