

## Lecture 25 – Political Reform of the High Middle Ages

The third thread of change associated with the High Middle Ages was to be found in the political realm. Throughout Western Europe, definitions of kingship were changing during the period.

### England

The Anglo-Saxon king Edward the Confessor (r. 1042–1066) died in 1066. He had no children and three men believed they should be his successor. The contenders were: Harold, earl of Wessex, an Englishman close to the king but not of royal blood (his sister Edith was Edward's widow); Harald Hardrada, the king of Norway, who had attempted to conquer the Danes and now turned his attention to England; and William, duke of Normandy, believed that Edward had promised him the throne 15 years earlier. On his deathbed, Edward had named Harold of Wessex to succeed him, and a royal advisory committee confirmed the nomination.

Harold defeated the invading armies of Harald Hardrada at Stamford Bridge, near York, in the north of England. When William learned that Harold had been anointed and crowned, William (1027–1087) prepared for battle. Appealing to the pope, he received the banner of St. Peter and with this symbol of God's approval launched the invasion of England, filling his ships with warriors recruited from many parts of France. When Harold heard that William's invasion force had landed, Harold turned his forces south, marching them 250 miles and picking up new soldiers along the way to meet the Normans.

The two armies clashed at the battle of Hastings on October 14, 1066, in one of history's rare decisive battles. Both armies had about seven or eight thousand men, Harold's in defensive position on a slope, William's attacking from below. Most of Harold's men were on foot, armed with battle-axes and stones tied to sticks, which could be thrown with great force. William's army consisted of perhaps three thousand mounted knights, a thousand archers, and the rest infantry.

At first William's knights broke rank, frightened by the deadly battle-axes thrown by the English. But then some of the English also broke rank as they pursued the knights. William removed his helmet so his men would know him, rallying them to surround and cut down the English who had broken away. Gradually Harold's troops were worn down, particularly by William's archers, whose arrows flew a hundred yards, much farther than an Englishman could throw his battle-axe. By dusk, King Harold was dead and his army utterly defeated. One of the best pieces of historical evidence of the Norman conquest of England is found in the Bayeux Tapestry, a 220-plus foot piece of embroidered cloth commissioned by William's half-brother and hung for the dedication of Bayeux Cathedral in 1077.

Some people in England gladly supported William, considering his victory a verdict from God and hoping to gain a place in the new order themselves. But William - known to posterity as William the Conqueror - wanted to replace, not assimilate, the Anglo-Saxons. During William's reign, families from the continent almost totally supplanted the English aristocracy. Although

the English peasantry remained - now with new lords - they were severely shaken, as 20% of the people in England died as a result of the Norman Conquest and its immediate aftermath.

Although the Normans destroyed a generation of English men and women, they preserved and extended many Anglo-Saxon institutions. For example, the new kings used writs - terse written instructions - to communicate orders, and they retained the old administrative divisions and legal system of the shires (counties). The Norman kings also drew from continental institutions. They set up a graded political hierarchy, culminating in the king, whose strength was reinforced by his castles and made visible to all.

Because all of England was the king's by conquest, he could treat it as his booty. William kept about 20% of the land for himself and divided the rest, distributing it in large but scattered fiefs to a relatively small number of his barons and family members, lay and ecclesiastical, as well as to some lesser men, such as personal servants and soldiers. In turn, these men owed the king military service (and the service of a fixed number of their vassals) along with certain dues, such as reliefs (money paid upon inheriting a fief) and aids (payments made on important occasions).

Apart from the revenues and rights expected from the nobles, the king of England commanded the peasantry as well. Twenty years after his conquest, in 1086, William ordered a survey and census of England. The king's men conducted local surveys by consulting Anglo-Saxon tax lists and by taking testimony from local jurors, men sworn to answer a series of formal questions truthfully. From these inquests, scribes wrote voluminous reports filled with facts and statements from villagers, sheriffs, priests, and barons. This survey was popularly called Domesday because, like the records of people judged at doomsday, it provided facts that could not be appealed. These reports were summarized in Domesday itself, a concise record of England's resources that supplied the king and his officials with information such as how much and what sort of land England had, who held it, and what revenues - including the lucrative Danegeld, which was now in effect a royal tax - could be expected from it. The Domesday Book was the most extensive inventory of land, livestock, taxes, and population that had ever been compiled in Europe.

The Norman Conquest tied England to the languages, politics, institutions, and culture of the continent. Modern English is an amalgam of Anglo-Saxon and Norman French, the language the Normans spoke. English commerce was linked to the wool industry in Flanders. St. Anselm, the archbishop of Canterbury, was born in Italy and served as the abbot of a monastery in Normandy before crossing the Channel to England. The barons of England retained their estates in Normandy and elsewhere, and the kings of England often spent more time on the continent than they did on the island.

Henry I (r. 1100–1135), son of William the Conqueror, was married to Matilda of Scotland, AKA Edith, daughter of Malcolm III and granddaughter of King Duncan (of *Macbeth* fame). Henry was left landless upon his father's death and struggled with his brothers for land and power until finally seizing the throne upon one brother's death in a hunting accident. He was known for efforts in strengthening and modernizing the royal administration. Henry's only legitimate

son to reach adulthood, William Adelin, died in a shipwreck in 1120 (as referenced in *Pillars of the Earth*). Before his death, Henry called on the great barons to swear that his only surviving child, his daughter Matilda (Maud), would rule after him. The effort failed; the Norman barons could not imagine a woman ruling over them.

Civil war soon erupted. The throne of England was fought over by two French counts: Geoffrey of Anjou, Matilda's husband, and Stephen of Blois, Henry's brother-in-law. Many were glad to see Stephen of Blois (r.1135–1154), Henry's nephew, take the throne. With Maud's son, the future Henry II, only two years old when Stephen took the crown, the struggle for control of England became part of a larger territorial contest between the house of Anjou (Henry's family) and the house of Blois (Stephen's family).

Continual civil war, known as the Anarchy, (1139–1153) in England benefited the English barons and high churchmen, who gained new privileges and powers as the monarch's authority waned. Newly built private castles, already familiar on the continent, now appeared in England as symbols of the rising power of the English barons. Stephen's coalition of barons, high clergymen, and townsmen eventually fell apart, and he agreed to the accession of Maud's son, Henry Plantagenet of Anjou. Thus began what would be known as the Angevin (from Anjou) dynasty.

Henry's marriage combined the enormous inheritance of the duchy of Aquitaine to the English crown, which already encompassed Normandy, Anjou, Poitou & Brittany. Although he remained the vassal of the king of France for his continental lands, Henry in effect ruled a territory that stretched from England to southern France. When Henry II became king of England, he immediately set about to undo the damage to the monarchy caused by the civil war. He destroyed or confiscated the new castles and regained crown land. Then he proceeded to extend monarchical power, above all by imposing royal justice.

The stiffest opposition to Henry's extension of royal courts came from Archbishop Theobald of Bec and the church, where a separate system of trial and punishment had long been available to the clergy and to others who enjoyed church protection. The punishments for crimes meted out by these church courts were generally quite mild. Protective of their special status, churchmen refused to submit to the jurisdiction of Henry's courts. Henry insisted, and the ensuing contest between Henry II and his hand-picked archbishop, Thomas à Becket (1118–1170), became the greatest battle between the church and England in the 12<sup>th</sup>-century.

The conflict simmered for six years, with Becket refusing to allow "criminous clerics" - clergy suspected of committing a crime - to come before royal courts. Then members of Henry's entourage murdered Thomas in his own cathedral on December 29, 1170. The desecration unintentionally turned Becket into a martyr. Although Henry's role in the murder remained ambiguous, he was forced by the general outcry to do public penance for the deed. In the end, both church and royal courts expanded to address the concerns of an increasingly litigious society.

Henry II (r.1154–1189) was the driving force in extending and strengthening the institutions of English government. In the 12<sup>th</sup>-century, the kings of England were the most powerful monarchs of Europe in large part because they ruled their whole kingdom by right of conquest. Their government was the most institutionalized in Europe. The royal government functioned smoothly, with officials handling all the administrative matters and record keeping. The very circumstances of the English king favored the growth of an administrative staff: his frequent travels to and from the continent meant that officials needed to work in his absence, and his enormous wealth meant that he could afford them.

Under Henry and his sons Richard I (r. 1189–1199) and John (r. 1199–1216), the English monarchy was omnipresent and rich. Its deep reach into English society derived largely from its eyre system of justice and its administrative apparatus. Its wealth came from court fees, income from numerous royal estates both in England and on the continent, taxes from cities, and customary feudal dues (reliefs and aids) collected from barons and knights. These dues were paid on such occasions as the knighting of the king's eldest son and the marriage of the king's eldest daughter.

The Plantagenet monarchs preferred to hire mercenaries both as troops to fight external enemies and as police to enforce the king's will at home. Enriched by the commercial economy of the late 12<sup>th</sup>-century, the English kings encouraged their knights and barons to pay a tax in lieu of service. This tax, called scutage, allowed a knight to "buy out" of the military service and put their time to better use.

Richard I was known as the Lion-Hearted for his boldness. By the age of sixteen, he was commanding his own army, putting down rebellions against his father. Richard was also a primary commander in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Crusade (which we will discuss in a future lecture), winning victories, but was unable to reconquer Jerusalem. He died in Normandy, defending his possessions on the continent.

Richard's successor, John, has been widely faulted. Even in his own day, he was accused of asserting his will in a high-handed manner. To understand John, it is necessary to appreciate how desperate he was to keep his continental possessions. In 1204, the king of France, Philip II (r. 1180–1223), confiscated the northern French territories held by John. Between 1204 and 1214, John did everything he could to increase crown revenues so that he could pay for an army to win back the territories. He forced his vassals to pay ever-increasing scutages and extorted money in the form of new feudal dues. He compelled the widows of his vassals to marry men of his choosing or pay him a hefty fee if they refused.

Despite John's heavy investment in this war effort, his army was defeated in 1214 at the battle of Bouvines. The defeat caused discontented English barons to rebel openly against the king. At Runnymede in June 1215, John was forced to agree to the charter of baronial liberties that has come to be called Magna Carta, or "Great Charter."

The Magna Carta was created as a conservative document defining the “customary” obligations and rights of the nobility and forbidding the king to break from these customs without consulting his barons. It further maintained that all noblemen in the land had certain rights that the king was obligated to uphold. In this way, Magna Carta implied that the king was not above the law. It was not an egalitarian document which guaranteed rights to all Englishmen – only to the nobility. The growing royal power was matched by the self-confidence of the English barons, certain of their rights and eager to articulate them.

### France

The 12<sup>th</sup>-century kings of France were much less obviously powerful than their English counterparts. Yet France, too, took part in the monarchical revival. Louis VI (r. 1108–1137) was a tireless defender of royal power. We know a good deal about him and his reputation because a contemporary and close associate, Suger (1081–1152), abbot of Saint-Denis, wrote Louis's biography.

Louis VI drew revenues from Paris, a thriving city not only of commerce but also of scholarship. Officials called provosts enforced his royal laws and collected taxes. With money and land, Louis dispensed favors and gave gifts that added to his prestige and his power. Together, Louis VI and Suger had created the territorial core and royal ideal of the future French monarchy.

Whereas the power of the English king led to a baronial movement to curb it, the weakness of the French monarchy ironically led to its expansion. Forty years later, in 1180, the French crown passed from Louis VII to his young son, Philip II (grandson of Louis VI). When the new king came to the throne, the royal domain, the Île-de-France, was sandwiched between territory controlled by the counts of Flanders, Champagne, and Anjou.

Contemporaries were astounded when Philip successfully gained territory. He wrested land from Flanders in the 1190s and Normandy, Anjou, Maine, the Touraine, and Poitou from King John of England in 1204. After Philip's army confirmed its triumph over most of John's continental territories in 1214, the French monarch could boast that he was the richest and most powerful ruler in France.

### Holy Roman Empire: Germany and Italy

Henry IV, emperor and king of both Germany and Italy into the early 12<sup>th</sup>-century, was a powerful ruler who began his reign by commanding important resources of both the church and the state. Henry IV (1050-1106) became king of the Germans as child, but had to defeat rebellious Saxons to emerge as Holy Roman Emperor in 1084. He had the right through ministerium (kingly protective oversight of the church) to appoint and invest important churchmen, many of whom worked for him as governmental ministers. He also profited from the wealth of silver mines and imperial estates in Germany as well as from flourishing trade in northern Italy.

Henry IV came into conflict with Pope Gregory VII vis-à-vis role of ministerium and the right of investiture. Gregory was a highly principled pope with blinding zeal; he argued that the Petrine Doctrine invested the church with power over worldly rulers. Henry viewed ministerium as an inherited right which dated back to Constantine; and argued that it was his role to be the protector and overseer of the church! Thus, a battle between principle and tradition was born as each of these uniquely stubborn men was absolutely convinced of the righteousness of his own position. Over the course of their conflict Henry begged forgiveness from Gregory and pardon of his sins in 1077 at Canossa and later drove the pope into exile in 1084.

During the Investiture Controversy, the two sides (imperial and papal) of the German ruling elite were represented by two noble families. Leading the imperial party were the Staufer clan; opposing them were the Welfs. Exhausted from constant battles, by 1152 all parties longed for peace. In an act of rare unanimity, the nobles elected Frederick I (r. 1152–1190), who was called Barbarossa, as king. In Frederick they seemed to have a candidate who could end the strife: his mother was a Welf, his father a Staufer. Contemporary accounts of the king's career represented Frederick in the image of Christ as the cornerstone that joined two houses and reconciled enemies.