History

A Revolutionary Reform:
How William the Conqueror Conquered the Church

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Few historical figures have had as significant of an impact as William the Conqueror. The Conquest in 1066 is one of the most well-known and discussed events in history. It marks the Norman invasion of England, William's defeat of Harold at the Battle of Hastings, and his coronation as William I, King of England. This description is largely how he is remembered. This great Norman warrior crossed the English Channel and conquered the whole of England. However, what William accomplished in the twenty-one years of his reign, made a lasting and significant impact on the countries future.

The aspect of William's rule that this work is primarily focused on is his effect on the church. The changes to the church in England can only be described as revolutionary. William's governance of the church had a massive impact on England's future and has been studied by a multitude of historians. If we wish to illustrate the revolutionary significance of William's church reform, we must examine not only the differences between the Norman and Anglo-Saxon churches but also the enormity of the impact William's church reform had on the landscape of England's future. The significance that William's church reform had on the future of England, as well as a clear understanding of the differences between the Anglo-Saxon and Norman churches, can be found in the works of modern historians.

One of the foremost historians on William the Conqueror was Frank Barlow. Barlow's writings on the English church are extensive and lay the ground work for later scholars in the field, some of whom were his own students. There are three Barlow texts that are essential for research of William's Church reform. The first of which is *The Feudal Kingdom of England from 1042-1226*. Frank Barlow lays out every aspect of Norman rule in extensive detail, including a section on the reform of the church. Barlow argues that the conversion of the English church from a loose organization of churches into a strict controlled unit under William was a direct attempt to tie the English church to the continent. He stated: "the changes made in the English church after the replacement of the English by foreign bishops in 1070 were designed both to give it greater structural coherence and to reform its culture on the Norman pattern."[i]

In *The English Church 1000-1066*, Barlow offers the reader a complete diagram of the formation of the English church before the conquest and talks about different events that took place within the narrow time frame of the sixty-six years that the book covers. Barlow divided the text into independently organized works covering the different elements of the church. He discusses the persons involved with the church and how they interacted with the kingdom as a whole. The key for us is a section on England's relationship with the Papacy. Anglo-papal relations were not a priority before the conquest but would later form, as Barlow sates, "a bridge to a new age."[ii] Barlow points out that the Pope before the conquest of 1066 had almost autonomous control over the church and their officials. As we know, this would be one of the major elements of the church to change under William I. Barlow points out that papal supremacy had been in place for almost two centuries. Thus one of the reasons why William's reform of the church was so revolutionary was due to his turning of the system of papal control completely on its head.

David C. Douglas also contributed significant scholarship on the conqueror. A professor of Norman England at Cambridge and Oxford. Douglas contributed arguably the quintessential biography of William I.[iii] Here he makes his arguments on William's relationship to the church and his reforms. He states; "No aspect of the career of William the Conqueror is of more interest – or more importance – than the part he played in the history of the western Church between 1066 and 1087."[iv] Douglas stresses the fact that William made his changes to the church while also holding on to and emphasizing traditional values, which kept his changes from causing significant outrage.[v] This is what made William such an interesting and significant ruler.

Other Historians of Norman England include C. Warren Hollister and M.T. Clanchy. Hollister reinforces the arguments of Douglas in his work, T*he Impact of the Norman Conquest*, but points out that the Normans treated all aspects of their rule as they treated the church. He describes; "the conquering Normans contributed much and preserved much."[vi] He later poses the question; "Do the conquerors transform the subject culture or are they transformed by it?"[vii] In terms of William's church reform, it is clear that he was a transforming force. In M.T. Clanchy's work, England and its Ruler, he presents an argument that the hierarchy of the English church went through drastic change under William and was strengthened by it. However, he points out that for the peasants or village priests, "Nothing perhaps changed for better or worse."[viii]

David Bates, one of Frank Barlow's students at Exeter, has also contributed scholarship on William I and his Church. In his 1989 work, *William the Conqueror*, Bates offers us an overview of all the various changes that were insti-

tuted under William's reforms, as well as a look into William's charter and how he viewed the faith. Bates defines William's personal faith as having two levels of operation. Firstly, he argues that William believed that there was an established tradition that "a ruler possessed responsibilities for the protection and organization of the church within his area of authority."[ix] William believed that he was responsible for the faith of those under his rule. William saw this as an established practice handed down from Frankish rulers like Charlemagne in the late eighth century.[x] Bates points out that these rulers would fight wars on behalf of Christianity, and in doing so, expected to have control over church appointments in their regions.[xi] These types of practices were continued by rulers like Alfred the Great and Edgar the Peaceful, therefore William felt the manor of rule, was one he was entitled too.

Second, Bates argues that William believed a ruler was responsible for his own soul just as much as any other Christion. William thought that his soul was at stake just as much as anyone else's and that his lifetime of warfare seriously put him in jeopardy. The result of this usually came in generous gifts of money or land to the churches, as was customary since a prince with 'blood' on his hands needed holy men to pray for him. It was his way of compensating for his sins. [xii] What Bates has shown us, with this explanation of William's personal faith, is that he was a ruler who was strict and enacted his reforms, but at the same time grew the church and made it stronger in England by donations of land and money. If a ruler embraced and supported the church, he could rule the church.[xiii]

Before we explore the changes William made to the church, we must first look at the condition the church was in before the conquest of 1066. Christianity in England traces all the way back to Romans who introduced it to the Celts. The Romans left, but Christianity remained and the Celts spread the religion, particularly during the fifth and six centuries. During the seventh century the church was organized by Augustine of Canterbury, by the command of Pope Gregory I, mainly following the Roman style of the church. This clashed with the Celts own style of Christianity that they had developed in Rome's absence. The Celts were primarily monastic in their faith, whereas Rome was more hierarchical, which lead to disagreements between the two.[xiv] During the latter half of the tenth century, following the Danish conflict, the Benedictine reform movement took place, led by St. Dunstan.[xv] The goal of this reform was the revival of church piety. The manner in which this was achieved was by removing secular canons, who were viewed as corrupted by local land owners, and replacing them with celibate monks who would answer ultimately to the Pope. England was deeply divided on this issue, so much so that it weakened the country, leaving it more exposed to Viking attacks.[xvi]

The church was organized into dioceses, with local priests, which were was sustained by the people. It consisted of two main independent provinces, Canterbury and York. There were also subordinate dioceses in each province. By 1042, there were as many as thirteen south of the Humber and only one north, primarily because of the political landscape and wealth disparity. Barlow described the church as "appearing more a loose confederation of bishoprics under the king than as an independent hierarchal organization."[xvii] The Anglo-Saxon church was disorderly and unorganized, especially compared to other systems on the European continent. It was never able to set up a working unified administrative system, rather it depended on the individual bishop or archbishop.[xviii] Bishops were often regarded as the spiritual equivalents to earls and dioceses often engaged in the affairs of the kingdom. The church and crown had a close relationship, as the various kings were extremely pious, and their rule was theocratic. This led to larger provinces and dioceses encompassing smaller ones, leading to all kinds of political conflict. William the Conqueror would bring order to the chaos. Another aspect, which is particularly significant, is the church's relationship with Rome. Amidst all of the disorganization, the Anglo-Saxon Church was still dedicated to the Pope. It did not have strong ties to Rome at this time, but before any king, church loyalties fell with the Pope.[xix] This would also soon be challenged.

The Bishops in England were almost autonomous, and they preached papal supremacy. Bishops only on occasion worked with each other. Despite the large amount of power the pope had, he rarely interacted with England; he was simply the top of the hierarchy. The Anglo-Saxon community showed so much love and obedience to Rome that it gave the various Popes a very high opinion of their power in England. They viewed the English almost as subjects to the papacy. This kind of mindset is what would lead to conflict between William and the church later on.

Pilgrimage to Italy was common, especially among the elites, but common people made the trip as well. There was even an English settlement in Rome known as the Schola Saxonum. However, until 1058, Rome was basically just for show. Barlow described it as "beauty without piety, authority without ethical purpose; and the papal court, by selling privileges, set a bad example to prelates."[xx] This changed after Leo the 11th in 1046; the popes began to rule again, and England felt the Burdon which was brought.

There became two permanent business establishments between England and Rome under the new, more controlling Popes. The first was that England would be forced to pay tribute to Rome, and the second involved its archbishops' requirement to take the pallium. The tribute was especially shameful to

the English. Technically a long standing custom in the Christian faith, tribute, like so many of the former customs, and rules, had not been enforced on the Anglo-Saxons. The oath of allegiance, which the recipient of the pallium takes today, apparently originated in the eleventh century. The pallium represented in Anglo-Saxon England the dominance of the Pope; it symbolized his power and demand for loyalty. It was not, however, viewed as oppressive by the English. In fact, they viewed it as an honor that they were owed for faithful service within the church.[xxi] This would begin to change during the mid-eleventh century, as the relationship between the papacy and England began to turn over controversy amongst the churches Roman reform and the acts of archbishop, Stigand of Canterbury, that Rome disapproved of.[xxii] The falling out between the English Church and Rome would give William a platform to seek approval from Rome for his invasion.

Following the Norman Conquest, William made a number of changes to Church. He claimed religious control over England. He wasted no time ousting the majority of the Saxon bishops and church officials, replacing them with Normans. Most notably was his installment of Lanfranc of Bec as the Archbishop of Canterbury. Lanfranc's rule was law in the church, and he and William worked closely in organizing it.[xxiii] William only wanted one church hierarchy, therefore the Archbishop of York was brought under the authority of Canterbury. In order to understand all of the complexities, and to see just how revolutionary William's reform was, we have to look at the historical record of William and the church, before and after the conquest. In order to effectively achieve this goal one must examine the works of the writers of the time.

We begin this exploration of the histories of William's reign by examining one of the earliest writers on the subject. William of Poitiers was a French priest who became the Chaplain to William the Conqueror. William accounted the Norman Conquest in his work the *Gesta Guillelmi* (The Deeds of William, Duke of Normandy and King of England).

The Deeds of William, written well after the events of 1066, cover the events that took place before and during the conquest, as well as the rebellions William faced as Duke. The account details what was a fractured Duchy. The local Norman lords were constantly waging private wars, whereas the Anglo-Saxon Kingdom across the Channel was relatively stable. The Domestic turbulence forced Duke William to confront and subdue his nobility.[xxiv]

One of the most noteworthy historians to build off the work of William of Poitiers was Orderic Vitalis. A Benedictine monk and chronicler, Vitalis was not interested in William of Poitiers long winded and passionate discussion of Wil-

liam I. In fact, being born English, he knew the Anglo-Saxon side of the story and pointed out the injustices of the conquest. However, he praised William when it was called for, making Orderic the closest thing to a neutral source that we have from that time.[xxv] But what does William of Poitier contribute to the discussion on William's church reform? In terms of specific information, *the deeds of William* does not give an extensive amount of detail; the work is primarily focused on the conquest and the events prior to it.

What William of Poitiers does offer, is an understanding of William I's personal religious belief, stating that "this wise and Christian man was firmly convinced that the omnipotence of God, which wills no evil, would not allow a just cause to fail, particularly since his intention was not so much to increase his own power and glory as to reform Christian observance in those regions."[xxvi]

It is understandable that William would convince himself that god was on his side, which would give the personal justification for the later reforming of the church, as he saw himself as God's chosen leader of England. Historians would later reaffirm this point. However, William of Poitiers inadvertently indicates that the motivations for the conquest may not have been purely religious, and they were not without a desire for glory. He essentially believed that with god on their side, they could achieve a legendary triumph. *The deeds of William* is an extremely important work in terms of understanding the mind set and motivations of the Conqueror.

Of equal importance are the accounts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronical*, as it gives several accounts of events that took place in dealing with the church. One example being a telling of the relationship between Lanfranc of Bec and Thomas of York, and the subsequent falling out between the two when Thomas had to swear loyalty to Lanfranc.[xxvii]

This is one of the less violent stories told. According to the chronical in 1083, under the orders of one of William's abbots, Thurston, Norman soldiers broke into the abbey at Glastonbury and attacked the monks inside, killing three, and injuring eighteen. This was apparently in sighted when the monks complained about mistreatment by their Norman abbot.[xxviii] The *Anglo-Saxon Chronical* is filled with stories like this one. It tells of William's abuses of the church and has very little positivity in speaking about his reform. William was personally committed to the welfare of the church, and at the same time maintained strong relations with the papacy before 1066. These were all essential elements leading up to the conquest.[xxix]

Following the conquest, Penance was imposed on vassals who fought for William in 1066. Soldiers would have to perform some pious work for a set period of time. The penance would be assigned by a Bishop and approved by the Pope. The Penances were fairly serious. Bates points out that among other regulations, "anyone who had killed in the Battle of Hastings was required to do a year's penance for each victim slain, and everyone who injured and killed, but did not know the number of victims, was to do penance for one day a week for the rest of his life or build a church."[xxx] This helps to explain why there was such growth in church development during this period. By 1075, there were thousands of Parish churches in England.[xxxi] William of Malmesbury stated that "everywhere you could see churches rising up in the villages and minsters in the towns and cities, built in a style of a new kind."[xxxii]

William took to this atonement process as well. He gave a multitude of gifts to the churches and founded an abbey at the site of the battlefield of Hastings, which is now known simply as Battle. In 1070, it accrued what can be viewed as the final physical phase of this atonement process. The Pope sent legates to England for a visit in 1070 as a conclusion to the gift of the papal banner in 1066. This visit basically gave a seal of approval to the change William wanted to make to the church. The climax of the trip was a special coronation of William performed by the legates at Winchester, furthering William's claim of holy legitimacy. The strict atonement process that William imposed clearly indicated the need within him to validate his conquest as "legitimate christen warfare."[xxxiii] William took atonement for the conquest seriously, and he would bring the same, serious quest to restructuring the church under a framework of legitimacy under God.

The hierarchy of the Anglo-Norman Church in England was simple: God at the very top, followed by William. William treated the church officials in England about the same way as he treated the aristocracy. There was, for a time, co-existence until the revolts of 1068-69, which resulted in the deposition of the mass majority of bishops and abbots. The earliest of these being the archbishoprics of Canterbury and York, which were held by Stigand and Ealdred. Ealdred, who had crowned William, died in 1069, and Stigand was removed from his position in 1070, where he was held as a political prisoner until his death. Four other English Bishops lost their positions in 1070, leaving only three that had held their positions before 1066.[xxxiv] Abbots were less ruthlessly treated and usually held their positions for life under William; the only exception being if they participated in a rebellion. Entire religious communities were punished as well. The abbey of Abingdon was plundered for its support of the English rebel Hereward the Wake.[xxxv] The entire process of replacing church officials was conducted in a legitimate way. William made sure of it, but that did not make him any less ruthless in doing so.

Stigand was replaced by Lanfranc of Bec as the Archbishop of Canterbury. Lanfranc was a lot like William in the sense that he had a great deal of confidence in his own knowledge, but at the same time, he used patience and his intelligence for his advantage.[xxxvi] He would often caution restraint to the hotter tempered of Norman officials. His desire to heal the wounds from a battled and beaten church, thus returning it to the grace and service of God, was clear.[xxxvii] In 1070 Lanfranc proposed to William that York be brought under the control of Canterbury and the new Bishop, Thomas of Bayeux, should swear loyalty to Lanfranc. He agreed, as it furthered William's goal of having the church in England under a single source of authority.

However, the argument was not settled with the King's decision. Thomas would complain directly to the Pope in person when he and Lanfranc made a pilgrimage to Rome in 1071. The Pope referred the issue back to William, demonstrating a clear example of how William was changing the way Kings could deal with the papacy. William made the decision, but the Pope had an illusion of authority in the case, which satisfied the honor of both sides, but gave William ultimate control. The Pope was uneasy with the idea though and declared that the power over York would not be passed down to Lanfranc's successors.[xxxviii]

After 1066, William ruled both the Churches of Normandy and England. In Normandy there were major councils held in Rouen in 1070, 72, and 74.[xxxix] There was also one at Lillebonne in 1080, which is of particular interest because of legislation that came out of it, strengthening ducal authority. Based on the Norman model, William held major councils in England. They took place at Winchester and Windsor in 1070, London in 1077, and Gloucester in 1080 and 1085. [xl] William attended the majority of these councils, which usually resulted in the strengthening of both the churches power and his own. The outcomes of these councils really began to increase the amount of loyalty English churchman had for William; he was making their church stronger. William had developed a unified Anglo-Norman clergy.[xli] If we think about the various conquests and conquers throughout history, how many can we argue were able to achieve something like successfully unifying the religious houses of the victor and the vanquished? This was a monumental achievement, and it was not a complicated idea. If one is too rule over a land, or a church in this case, why not make them stronger and more powerful, instead of pillaging and abusing?

As the strength of the Anglo-Norman clergy grew, along with William's power and influence, the relationship with Rome began to deteriorate. Most notably, so when Gregory the 7th succeeded to the papacy. Gregory represented a radical wing of a papal reform movement, later known as Gregorian Reform. Papal authority became much more demanding and not nearly as sympathetic or

willing to compromise as Alexander II had been.[xlii] He did not like the power that William had within the church, nor the fact that he was viewed as its figurehead. Gregory's goal was to centralize the church, with Rome being the center, and institute his moral reform. He appointed permanent legates to act on his behalf, who clashed with officials that William usually dealt with personally. William maintained a calm state of mind and worked with Gregory to the best of his ability. For about a decade after 1073, embassies were constantly being sent back and forth from Rome, France, and England.

William's rule over the church was periodically challenged but, for the most part, Gregory VII respected William I.[xliii] One example of compromise between the two was when Gregory demanded a tax, known as Peter's pence,[xliv] The Pope also insisted that William basically swear fealty to the Pope by becoming a vassal.[xlv] William agreed to pay the annual tax. He even apologized for not paying it in the past, as it was an Anglo-Saxon tradition to do so, but respectfully refused to become a vassal because there was no precedent for it. William would never swear fealty to a Pope. Gregory agreed and there was never a significant conflict between the two. The reason that this is so relevant is because things did not go so well with other rulers in Europe who were less involved in the church then William. Henry the 4th of Germany and Philip of France were both excommunicated from the church because they would not cooperate with Gregory. Henry actually launched military campaigns against Gregory and nominated an anti-pope.xlvi William had more power over his church and was able to avoid such a conflict.

William I strove to save his soul from the consequences of his conquest. He made his atonement by strengthening the church and as a result dominated it during his reign. He replaced unruly church officials with ones he could control. He set up a system of councils that had been very successful in Normandy and straightened his power and the church itself. The Anglo-Norman clergy became more loyal to William. William set the standard for how to satisfy a pope, while still able to maintain control of the church, virtually setting up a screen between England and Rome. William's reforms can only be described as revolutionary, with an impact that would last for hundreds of years, as the rulers who came after him would strive to achieve comparable levels of greatness.

In his work, *The Secular Jurisdiction of Monasteries in Anglo-Norman and Angevin England*, Kevin Shirley declares of William's successors; "Operating under a belief, that they had a unique obligation to protect the church, and given the practical need to ensure that monastic vassals fulfilled their obligations to their lord and to the king, the Anglo-Norman monarchs resolved litigation involving religious houses within the royal hall, and through the assemblage of the king's great men."[xlvii]

We must remember that William's church reform may be the most understated achievement of his life, especially compared to things such as, the military structure, the castle system, or the battle of Hastings itself. William the Conqueror is one of history's most legendary figures, He is one that has been discussed, studied, and criticized, by a plethora of scholars for a thousand years. However, his rule over the church was the most significant element of his reign, as it shaped the future of both the church and crown in England.

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