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*This book is dedicated to the memory of*

*Robert Ignatius Burns, S.J.*  
*(1921–2008)*

*without whom, not.*

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to their west and south, who claimed to have inherited political autonomy from family links with the old Carolingian line. The new dynasts were thus able to expand into central and eastern Europe with a new corps of followers. Second, they parceled out these new territories as ecclesiastical fiefs instead of direct bequests to their new loyalists. This way, the Saxon kings earned the support of the German clergy while still providing “career paths” for the men who had conquered the new territories for them. As ministeriales—civic officials engaged in the day-to-day administration of the ecclesiastical fiefdoms—these laymen soon developed a conception of themselves as a distinct legal class, an intrinsic element of the state, and they began to compose and codify the evolving customs of their activities. The creation of the German state as a permanent institution living according to its own laws—not as a group of people possessing individual privileges of governance—marked an enormous conceptual leap in political theory and action.

## THE RISE OF CAPETIAN FRANCE

Western Francia at the end of the Carolingian era stood in even greater disarray than the German territories to the east. Here the Vikings had attacked longest, most often, in greatest numbers, and with deadliest effect. Here, too, the internal strife between warlords reached its zenith, until what had once been a single Frankish kingdom had devolved into a messy sprawl of hundreds of petty principalities. The closer one got to Paris, the greater the mess. Large independent duchies, such as Rollo’s duchy of Normandy, established in 911, or the duchy of Aquitaine under Ramnulf I (d. 867), had already broken away and gave only the slightest lip service to their vassalage to Paris. But in the central regions near Paris, the independent states grew smaller and smaller. The royal *desmesne* itself was one of the smallest in France. In 987, when a local baron named Hugh Capet finally overthrew the last Carolingian ruler and took over the government for himself, the royal *desmesne* consisted only of the cities of Paris and Orléans and the thin strip of land that connected them. Hugh’s reign lasted only nine years (r. 987–996), and he failed to accomplish much during it, but the *Capetian dynasty* that he founded went on to rule France for over three hundred years. For nearly half that span the Capetians were arguably the poorest and weakest royal family in western Europe: they could not purchase loyalty, since they had practically no land to give away as fiefs, nor could they command loyalty, since their baronial neighbors were on the whole wealthier and more powerful than they. The great nobles of southern France never even bothered to appear at the Capetian court until well into the twelfth century.

The first Capetians proceeded cautiously, since they could not risk giving any of the magnates a reason to get rid of them. Instead, they focused on administering their own *demesne*. Hugh, his son Robert II “the Pious” (r. 996–1031),<sup>9</sup> and grandson Henry I (r. 1031–1060) developed a tightly centralized system of governing the royal lands and showed little hesitation in seizing ecclesiastical revenues whenever they could. This practice helped solidify their control of their own lands but did little to extend the reach of their power. Two innovations, however, changed that. First, each new ruler ensured his son’s succession by crowning him as co-regent during the reigning king’s own lifetime. This early inheritance helped guarantee an orderly passing of the crown and gave the inheriting son several years of valuable experience before taking over the reins of government for himself. (Whether out of good biological luck or sheer doggedness, the Capetians never failed to produce a male heir through eleven straight generations.) Early inheritance gradually eroded the Frankish custom of elected kingship that had started to emerge during the Carolingian decline and freed the monarch from having to curry favor among the electing nobles, who generally were willing to accept a permanent Capetian dynasty precisely because of the family’s weakness. Better a weak monarch who left them alone, they reckoned, than a powerful one who tried to lord it over them.

The Capetians’ second innovation was hardly a new practice but one that they pursued with extraordinary dedication: aggrandizement through marriage. They scoured the French countryside in search of estates, counties, and principalities, whether large or small, that had fallen into the hands of childless young widows or unwed noble daughters; holding out the offer of social prestige through a union with royal blood, they married as many heiresses as they could to their various brothers, sons, nephews, and cousins in order to bring the women’s dowries under Capetian family control. Many baronial families—the smaller ones at first—leapt at the chance to link their families with the royal line, and so long as the Capetians limited their efforts to exert power to those lands that belonged to their family, the more powerful barons voiced little complaint. The process was a slow one, but it worked. In the course of three or four generations, the royal *demesne* had increased substantially, even though it consisted of a far-flung sprawl of discontinuous territories. But by the start of the twelfth century, under Philip I (r. 1060–1108) and especially under Louis VI “the Fat” (r. 1108–1137), the monarchy had become strong enough to overrun some smaller baronies and so begin the process of linking together their *demesne* lands into a patchwork quilt. As this quilt grew, the kings parceled out fiefs to those willing to perform fealty and homage. Louis VI was the first Capetian to issue charters from his own royal

<sup>9</sup> Hugh Capet’s grandfather had briefly held the throne in the early tenth century and is known as Robert I.

chancery, a sure sign of the growing recognition of the king's central authority. Prior to this development, Frankish kings had commonly affixed their seals to documents that had been prepared by the parties involved in any particular dispute or transaction. The change was more than symbolic: henceforth, the king did not merely confirm decisions made by others; he effectively made the decisions himself and handed them down from his own court.

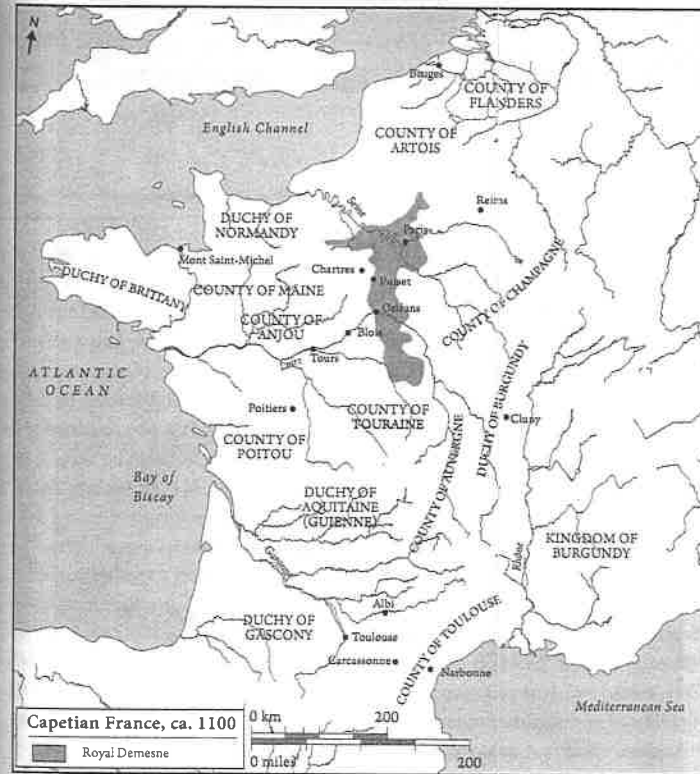
But the great lords of the south still held out. These figures—the lords of Poitou, Aquitaine, Gascony, Quercy, Toulouse, and Auvergne, among others—offered only token allegiance to the crown and generally went their own independent ways. At least they never openly rebelled, as the German magnates seem to have done at every chance they could against the Saxon and Salian emperors. The Capetians' big chance came in 1137 when Duke William X of Aquitaine offered his daughter and heiress Eleanor to Louis VI's son, the soon-to-be Louis VII (r. 1137–1180). Aquitaine was the largest and wealthiest of the southern principalities and the center of a vibrant court culture. Poetry, music, some science, and philosophy all thrived here, making it one of western Europe's great cultural centers. Eleanor herself was an exceptional character: intelligent, proud, energetic, and strong-willed. She was also renowned for her beauty:

*Were all the lands of Europe mine  
Between the Elbe and the Rhine,  
I'd regard them all as worthless charms  
Could [Eleanor] lay in my arms*

ran a popular song.

Eleanor's marriage to Louis VII was unhappy, although Louis was clearly in love with her in his way. He had a gentle and meek nature—as his father's second son he had never planned to be king, nor had he been trained for it—and he ill-suited Eleanor's passionate, cosmopolitan character. She is reported to have once complained that Louis was more fit for a life of endless daily prayer than for one of long nights in a queen's bed. In the aftermath of Louis' disastrous attempt to lead a crusade (1147–1149), the marriage was annulled and Eleanor married Count Henry of Anjou, the soon-to-be King Henry II of England (d. 1189). The Capetians' advance southward had stalled. Nevertheless, they had managed to reorganize and centralize monarchical power over much of northern France, to introduce a fairly comprehensive system of feudal relations, and to raise the prestige of their family and throne.

For all his pious dedication to the Church, Louis VII did take action to limit its legal jurisdiction within France. The Second Lateran Council of 1139 had prohibited clergy from participating in trials involving torture or capital punishment



Map 9.2 Capetian France, ca. 1100

(for crimes such as murder, rape, or arson), but within France many churches continued to do so nonetheless. Louis issued dozens of charters to individual churches condemning their activity and subjecting them to heavy fines, which resulted in a significant broadening of the recognition of royal power. The central court remained inchoate, however. Since the Capetians were itinerant, the government traveled with them, a practice that made it difficult to develop highly evolved institutions. Few royal officials emerged with clearly articulated duties; instead, particular tasks were doled out on an ad hoc basis. No central treasury existed. No central archive existed. Individuals seeking royal justice often had to spend months simply locating the royal court, which might be anywhere in the realm. Until a permanent center of administration was established—which



A charter by Louis VII of France, showing the royal seal. The text reads, in part: "A number of Jewish converts to Christianity recently approached me who, led on by the Devil, declared their desire to return to the Jewish faith. Recognizing the terrible ignominy this would bring to the name of Christ and the contempt it would show for the Christian religion, I decreed that so presumptuous a crime must be prohibited by the awesome weight of a royal command. And therefore I declare and affirm by my royal authority that henceforth any Jew who has been renewed in Christ by grace of baptism yet presumes to return to his old error shall not be suffered to remain anywhere in my kingdom. If any such be caught, they are to be sentenced to capital or corporeal punishment. . . . Done at Paris in the year of the Lord's Incarnation 1144." Source: Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource

would not be until the very end of the twelfth century—French government would remain more chaotic and fluid, more personal and susceptible to influence, than in most kingdoms.

## THE ANGLO-NORMAN REALM

A united kingdom of England was a long time in coming. Under Alfred the Great, an awareness of England as a unified whole, with centralized institutions of government to match, came briefly into being, but the need to placate the Danes stood in the way of realizing that dream. The creation of the Danelaw itself had annexed over one-third of England proper to the kingdom of Denmark, and over the course of the tenth and early eleventh centuries still more of England fell under Danish control. Resistance to the Danes centered on the old line of Wessex kings, but the English generally recognized the military superiority of the Danes and preferred to compromise and pay tribute rather than take the field against them. Who could blame them? The Danes were renowned for their ferocity and fearlessness—an image that they carefully cultivated in order to keep their subjects in line. Their popular sagas commemorated savage heroes like Bui of Børnholm, who once, when he received a vicious sword-blow that sliced off his chin and lips and loosened most of his teeth, merely spat the useless teeth to the ground and said with a laugh: "I suppose the women of Børnholm won't be so eager to kiss me now!" Later in the saga, Bui, after a profitable raid on England, was forced to abandon ship in a storm. Even though he had since suffered having both of his hands chopped off, he refused to part with his treasure chest—so he stuck his arm-stumps through the chest's handles and leapt with a laugh into the sea.

In 1013 the Danish king Swein set sail for England, having decided to put an end to Wessex and all of non-Danish England. He brought with him his seventeen-year-old son and heir Canute. The Wessex king Ethelred the Unready<sup>10</sup> (d. 1016) fled to Normandy with his two sons, and all of England surrendered. Swein died the following year, and Canute, needing to secure his Danish crown, returned briefly to the continent. When he arrived back in England in 1015, he found that Ethelred had returned and, with his elder son Edmund Ironside, was trying to organize English resistance. Canute quickly defeated the English, probably had Edmund killed, and after Ethelred's death married his widow Emma. (The fact that Canute was already married seems not to have bothered him; we do not know what either of his wives felt about the matter.) Canute thus became

<sup>10</sup> In Anglo-Saxon *unred* means "ill-advised" or "poorly counseled."

the undisputed ruler of a united England (r. 1016–1035)—but of an England itself united, dynastically, with Denmark. Later conquests added Norway, parts of Sweden, and Estonia to his realm and earned Canute the self-proclaimed title of “Emperor of the Northern Seas,” under which he attended the 1027 imperial coronation of Henry II of Germany in Rome; Canute was the first Scandinavian ruler ever to receive an invitation to the papal court.

Canute was a Christian, nominally, though he may have been more intrigued or amused by the faith than genuinely committed to it. When he lay on his deathbed in 1035, he begged his Christian clergy to perform memorial masses for his soul, but after these clerics had tearfully left the room, Canute ordered a group of pagan priests to perform a series of human sacrifices in order to appease the Nordic deities. Whatever his beliefs, he lavished money on the English Church as a way to ease his acceptance by the Anglo-Saxons, restoring many crumbling foundations and creating many new ones. At the same time he retained iron-fisted control over ecclesiastical appointments and saw to it that the Church served his ends as well as God’s. He also issued a new codification of English law, one that recognized and confirmed Anglo-Saxon customs and privileges.

England seemed poised to join a Scandinavian confederacy-in-the-making; the island’s commercial ties had centered on the North and Baltic seas since the ninth century anyway. But Canute’s two sons possessed none of their father’s talent or drive, and while they squabbled over the Danish throne after their father’s death, the Anglo-Saxon *witan*, or nobles’ council, recalled Ethelred’s second son from Normandy and placed him on the throne. Edward the Confessor (r. 1042–1066) would be the next-to-last Anglo-Saxon king of England. He was a capable and pious man of nearly forty, but conditions in England were not in his favor. Having lived in Normandy since the age of three and being half-Norman himself (his mother Emma had been a Norman princess prior to marrying Ethelred [and Canute]), he understood Norman ways and institutions better than English ones, spoke Norman-French better than Anglo-Saxon, and was accustomed to the feudal model of royal-noble relations instead of the “first among equals” tradition of the English aristocracy. Still, most Englishmen accepted him as the legitimate heir of Alfred’s royal Wessex line.

Not everyone did, however. Some powerful magnates kept their distance from Edward and offered only the most tenuous displays of loyalty. When Edward, in the 1060s, appeared likely to die childless, these barons began to prepare openly for a fight for the crown.<sup>11</sup> By the time of Edward’s death in 1066, two main rivals remained: Harold Godwinson, the earl of Wessex, the legally crowned monarch (r. 1066) and Duke William of Normandy, the bastard son of

<sup>11</sup> According to some reports, Edward took a vow of celibacy just prior to his marriage.

one of Edward’s cousins, who claimed (probably spuriously) to be Edward’s own choice as a successor. Both men had spent several years courting support from influential figures within England and without, and they finally settled the matter in a dramatic battle at Hastings in southern England. William had sailed his army across the Channel and landed unopposed while Harold was busy fighting off a Norwegian invasion in the north of England. Hearing of the Normans’ landing, Harold quickly led his soldiers on a forced march down the length of England. At Hastings William’s army routed Harold’s exhausted men, and on Christmas Day 1066 William was crowned king of England (r. 1066–1087) in London’s Westminster Abbey. Norman rule got off to a rather shaky start, since the new conquerors were not only despised by the general populace but also enormously outnumbered by them. At William’s coronation, in fact, nerves ran so high that when the crowd inside Westminster Abbey let out a shout as the crown settled on William’s head, the company of Norman soldiers stationed outside the building feared the Anglo-Saxons had begun a counterattack—and so they went on a rampage, slaughtering citizens in the street and setting fire to a good portion of central London. William himself, a chronicler informs us, stood shaking and sweating at the head of the abbey, not knowing whether to expect an assassination attempt, to attack his own marauding troops, to join in the mayhem, or to flee for his life. In the end, the soldiers rioted for a day or two before William could restore order. The task of finding a way to govern then began.

Given the Normans’ small numbers, only two real options existed: either they could adopt Anglo-Saxon ways, creating goodwill and assimilating into English society as quickly as possible, or they could compensate for their small numbers by the application of brute force, thereby compelling Anglo-Saxon submission. True to his nature, William chose the latter. He had grown up in a violent world—before he had even turned eighteen he had survived at least three assassination attempts back in Normandy—and believed that nothing inspired obedience and loyalty as well as fear. On top of this, he had a monstrous temper whenever he felt that he had been offended or his rights had been trampled. During one of the many rebellions that had marked his rule in Normandy prior to 1066, for example, the people of Alençon had taunted William by covering the wooden walls of their town with animal hides soaked in vinegar. This was done in part to protect their walls from William’s flaming arrows, but it also mocked William’s illegitimate origins (his unmarried mother had been the daughter of a leather-tanner). Enraged by the insult, William had stormed the town, sacked it thoroughly, and ordered the right hand and right foot of every adult male inhabitant cut off. He was not a man to settle for reasoned compromise if a violent alternative existed.

He spent several years subduing pockets of resistance, of which there were many, especially in the north of England. These tended to be relatively small



Map 9.3 Medieval Kingdoms

rebellions led by lesser nobles, since many of the local aristocratic families had died out, emigrated, or been replaced by Danish warlords during the turbulent years immediately prior to William's conquest. Nevertheless, resistance occasionally proved dogged enough to require strong measures, and William ordered Alençon-type punishments for numerous villages and towns in northern England. He confiscated lands on a grand scale, driving indigenous baronial families into ruin and parceling out the estates to his own followers. Much of the land he kept for himself; ultimately, somewhere between one-fifth and one-fourth of all the real estate in England belonged personally to him. Whether the lands remained part of the royal demesne or whether he granted them out as fiefs, William built fortified strongholds everywhere in order to keep an eye on the locals and to serve



Detail of a battle scene from the Bayeux Tapestry. Late eleventh century. The magnificent tapestry was woven around 1080 to commemorate the Norman victory over Harold at the battle of Hastings. The tapestry, consisting of connected panels of embroidered linen, extends over seventy meters and is fifty centimeters in height. This detail depicts the Saxon foot soldiers confronting the Norman cavalry. Source: Giraudon / Art Resource NY

as physical emblems of Norman power. (The most famous of these structures is the Tower of London.) He was especially careful to construct a network of castles across the southern districts of Kent and Sussex in order to ensure an easily defended retreat path to the Continent, should the need for one ever arise.

Unlike the Capetians' first haphazard efforts at creating feudal links with their followers, the distribution of fiefs in England took place rapidly and according to a plan. Since all the land belonged to the king by right of conquest, so were all fiefs held either directly or indirectly by the throne. William distributed lands to the approximately one hundred eighty leading nobles—mostly Normans, but with a few Anglo-Saxons thrown in—who had rendered the greatest amount of service to the throne and subsequently became known as *tenants-in-chief*. But the need to prevent these great landholders from obtaining potential power bases from which to challenge the king led William to divide these large fiefs into many separate territories. Thus the earl of Percy, for example, held a tenancy-in-chief that was scattered among no fewer than forty counties from Cornwall to Northumbria. The sprawl of his (and other chief tenants') lands over so wide a territory had two important repercussions for Anglo-Norman England. First, there was relatively little subinfeudation. Fewer than eight hundred lesser nobles

held fiefs from the tenants-in-chief, and virtually none of them held territories large enough for further subinfeudation. This meant that the total number of enfeoffed nobles in England was a manageable corps of about one thousand families, a large enough population to help control and govern the realm but not so large a group that the royal administration could not keep an eye on all of them. Second, the tenants-in-chief had to professionalize the maintenance of their own territories, since they could hardly run them all themselves. Large corps of bailiffs, stewards, sheriffs, reeves, and other officials soon dotted the landscape and provided avenues for modest advancement by diligent locals. Just as significantly, the realm-wide basis of major tenancies meant that the chief tenants themselves remained concerned for the well-being of the entire kingdom rather than just their own parochial corner of it—since those parochial corners did not exist. This fact contributed significantly to the development of the English parliament, since the nobles came to represent the kingdom itself and not just their own privileged group and its status within it.

The new regime proved both generous to the Church and dismissive of it. As had been their practice in Normandy, the Normans in England actively supported churches and monasteries and lavished lands, annuities, and privileges upon them. Such generosity no doubt sprang from a genuine commitment to the faith but also owed much to a cold-eyed recognition of the Church's utility in fostering social cohesion; since all the land in England was the king's, so too were all the lands bestowed in such large measure on ecclesiastical houses. Ultimately the crown gave roughly one-fifth of England's land to religious houses, but such gifts served to strengthen the monarchy more than the Church, since the crown made it clearly understood that the churches themselves were in fact vassals of the king. William and his successors kept firm control of all ecclesiastical appointments and never hesitated to confiscate from any disobedient house the lands they had been granted after the conquest. When Pope Gregory VII (r. 1073–1085) tried to remind William that England was technically a fief of the Church given to him by the papacy (an arrangement to which William had agreed in order to secure papal approval of his invasion), the king responded by issuing a declaration known as the *Triple Concordat*, which asserted that without royal permission, no authority claimed by the papacy could be exercised within the kingdom of England. For the time being, the Holy See could do nothing about William's intransigence.

The centralization of power under the monarchy drove a wedge between the new rulers and the Anglo-Saxons. English political custom prior to 1066 had been based on a high degree of local independence, with social cohesion resulting from a common culture, language, and religious practice. But the Norman settlement did away with much of earlier tradition. Norman French replaced Anglo-Saxon as the language of court and government (for two hundred years



*Domesday Book: The mother of all tax audits. The Domesday survey was an inventory of virtually all the wealth in England shortly after the Norman conquest. It itemised landholdings, heads of households, family sizes, acres of crop fields, sizes of flocks and herds and everything else down to the number of tools and vehicles in any given village. Here are two pages from the section on Northamptonshire. Source: Allecto Historical Editions (London). Bridgeman Art Library International*

after 1066 no king of England could speak English or would admit to it if he could). Old English as a written language virtually died out; driven underground, it survived largely in oral usage. By the time the French monopoly was broken and English resurfaced in the thirteenth century, it appeared in writing in a vastly different form—the so-called *Middle English* familiar to us in the works of Chaucer and Langland. French architectural styles and French musical style also came to the fore and altered English tradition. The old Saxon liturgy and calendar of saints' cults declined as well, to be replaced by the new liturgy and practices emanating from the continental Church reform movement. Such changes angered the English, who continued to resent their foreign rulers long after they had stopped rebelling against them. Nearly the last act of William's long reign confirmed and codified the subordinate position of the English in Norman society.

In 1086 William ordered the compilation of an inventory of all the land and property in England. It was an enormous enterprise—the first such inventory in European history—that symbolized the ruthless efficiency of Norman centralism. It measured the farms, counted the sheep in each flock, inventoried the tools

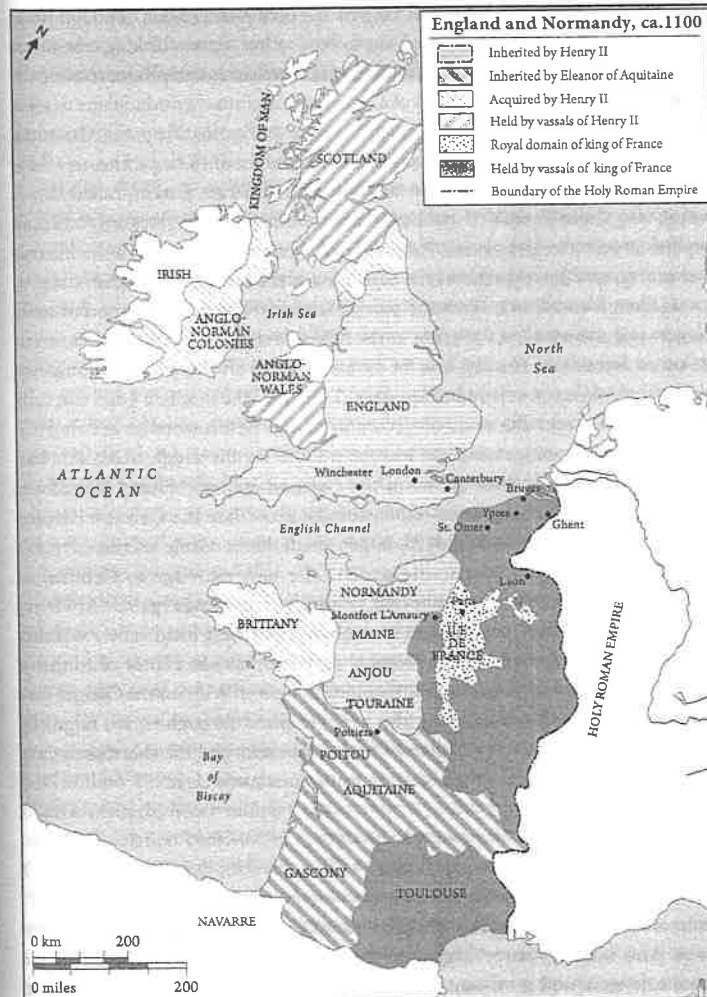
available, named the peasant tenants, and catalogued the rents due from each. It is a treasure trove of information that, under computer analysis, is now revealing fascinating insights. Among other things to which we could point, this survey, known as the *Domesday Book*, drove home one powerful specific statistic: well more than three-fourths of the people in the countryside (that is, excluding the urban populace) were legally classified as serfs.

Fearing perhaps that his sons would rip his dominion apart if he did not apportion it to them himself, William's will divided his possessions carefully. The eldest son, Robert, received the duchy of Normandy; William II, better known as William Rufus (r. 1087–1100), became king of England; and young Henry inherited a lump sum of money and a handful of grand estates. William Rufus and Henry easily outdid Robert in cunning and ambition. Whereas Robert's greatest dream was to be a chivalrous knight par excellence and a faithful servant of the Church, his younger brothers had eyes only for the acquisition of power. When Robert in 1095 pawned his duchy to William in order to raise money for his participation in the First Crusade (1095–1099), his days as an independent ruler were over. William quickly took advantage of Robert's long absence and put Normandy under his autocratic control.

Surviving accounts assure us that virtually all of William Rufus' subjects hated him. "He went to bed every night a worse man than he had been when he awoke, and he awoke every morning a worse man than he had been when he went to bed the night before," wrote one contemporary. He probably was not as bad as all that. The animosity resulted as much from a growing consciousness of the changes introduced into England by the feudal system as it did from William Rufus' personal demeanor or behavior. After all, while he was certainly capable of physical violence, he never came near his father's level of brutality. What irked his subjects was instead his hyperlegalistic bent, his penchant for taking advantage of the smallest legal details in order to manipulate and control his subjects. For example, William Rufus quickly seized on a vassal's tiniest failing to perform his feudal duties to the crown as an excuse to negate the entire contract, confiscate the fief, and re-award it to a more subservient vassal. This meant that even the newly installed Norman barons did not feel secure in their holdings and that the crown regarded its feudal nobles in a far more servile light than did the nobles themselves. The strain of initiating a new social and political system became clear in William Rufus' reign. No one mourned when he died in a hunting accident in 1100.

But few people celebrated when the crown passed to Henry I (r. 1100–1135), for he was a cruel and dissolute sensualist.<sup>12</sup> Conspiracy addicts have tried for

<sup>12</sup> He is known to have sired at least twenty-two illegitimate children by as many mistresses, and he once worked out his anger with a certain townsman by personally heaving him over the city walls. In 1125 he discovered that several workers in the royal mint were adulterating the coinage with base metals; Henry ordered them to be castrated.



Map 9.4 England and Normandy, ca. 1100

centuries to implicate Henry in his brother's death, but the greater likelihood is that Henry—who was part of the hunting party when William Rufus died—simply saw his chance and acted quickly. He left his brother's body lying in the woods, dashed to Winchester to seize the royal treasury, and then raced to

Westminster Abbey to be crowned king by the bishop of London. Though never a very admirable person, he turned out to be a rather successful king. He threw Ranulf Flambard, William Rufus' most hated tax collector, into prison; recalled the popular exiled archbishop Anselm of Canterbury; and married Matilda, a descendant of the ancient Wessex line, in order to placate the Saxons. He presided over the formation of the *Exchequer*, the fiscal accounting office of the royal treasury.<sup>13</sup> He introduced a more or less comprehensive system of itinerant justices, called *justices in eyre*, who staged regular courts throughout the kingdom and gave commoners an opportunity to voice grievances. Administration proved surprisingly to be Henry's true calling, and his reign marks the beginning of the centralized English state.

His reign ended in tragedy, however, and was followed by a period of strife known as the *Anarchy*. As so often in the Middle Ages, what triggered the trouble was a succession crisis. Henry, for all his amorous efforts, produced only two legitimate children: a son and a daughter. The son, William, had been carefully trained to take over the reins of government, but he drowned at sea in 1120. Henry was grief-stricken and at a loss for what to do: his daughter Matilda had been married at the age of eleven to the German emperor Henry V, and her succession meant the absorption of Norman England into the German Empire. But Matilda was widowed in 1125, which made her a viable successor to her father. Matters seemed temporarily settled. Her new marriage to Geoffrey of Anjou, the Normans' traditional enemy, however, upset things again.<sup>14</sup> At Henry I's death in 1135, barons, churchmen, and townspeople were divided over whether to accept Matilda and Geoffrey as regents for their new son Henry or to throw their support to a rival, Stephen (r. 1135–1154), the son of William the Conqueror's daughter Adele. Stephen won, but the struggle lasted throughout his reign. By 1154 the irregular nature of England's feudal networks and the shortcomings of its embryonic centralized administration were abundantly clear.

## THE SPANISH KINGDOMS

Spain also underwent a radical transformation in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. This is hardly surprising, since the Iberian Peninsula was the site of the greatest, longest, and most continuous interaction between Muslims, Christians,

<sup>13</sup> The Exchequer derived its name from the checkerboard table-covering used by the department's auditors, who would tabulate sums by moving markers up and down its columns. The checkerboard worked in a manner analogous to an abacus, knowledge of which had entered Latin Europe via the Islamic world.

<sup>14</sup> Her second marriage was a stormy one, which may have been due to a difference in ages that was the reverse case of her first marriage. When she married Geoffrey, Matilda was twenty-five, while he was only fifteen. He seems to have resented her treating him like the adolescent he was.

and Jews. The Arab conquest of 711 had been the last of the great Muslim victories, and it had brought under their control a site ideally suited to the culture they imported. The large highland plain of the peninsula's interior consists of arid soil that receives much sun and little rainfall; although it provided good pasture and scrubland for herding, it did not offer much by way of agricultural potential until the Arabs and Berbers arrived with their centuries-long traditions, born in the desert, of managing scarce water resources through new crops and effective administration of wells, aqueducts, and irrigation systems. With these innovations, the land bloomed as never before. The more fertile and urban coastal plains provided access to industry, commerce, and civic tradition. The Spanish Muslims also took advantage of their links with the North African Berbers and quickly began to trade for, and then wholeheartedly plunder, the large supplies of gold, spices, and slaves available in sub-Saharan West Africa. With the sudden influx of capital and cheap labor, Muslim Spain—called *al-Andalus* ("the land of the Vandals," in a dismissal of Visigothic claims to political legitimacy)—began a rapid ascent as one of the western world's wealthiest and most cosmopolitan realms. Its zenith was reached during the reign of Abd ar-Rahman III (r. 912–961), whose capital city of Cordoba rivaled Constantinople and Baghdad as one of the most splendid and prosperous cities in the world. Its population stood at well over one hundred thousand.

Al-Andalus became famed for its agricultural abundance—wheat, rice, citrus fruits, olives, and grapes, especially—and for manufactures like leather, wool, cotton, silk, steel, and paper. Its population of roughly eight million was diverse and highly skilled. A thin over-grid of thirty thousand to fifty thousand Arabs made up the political and military elite who dominated the courts, the schools, the mosques, and the urban mansions. Beneath them was a class of roughly a half-million Berbers brought up from North Africa; they provided the corps of civic officials, lesser military commanders, and lower clerics. The great bulk of the population consisted of indigenous Hispano-Romans and Visigoths (all Christian) and Jewish professionals (merchants, physicians, scribes, scholars, and financiers). By the tenth century, a sizable population of black slaves also existed; tax records put their number in Cordoba alone at over eight thousand.

Islamic law defined the subject Christians and Jews as *dhimmis*, or "protected communities," which meant that so long as they did not proselytize or practice their faith in public they were legally protected from persecution. Nevertheless, Muslim Spain was not a utopian haven of tolerance. Tensions regularly bristled across religious lines, and while Christians and Jews did not normally face outright persecution from the state, they did have to contend with occasional pogroms, severe restrictions on their actions, and considerable popular violence. The Muslims generally aimed at winning the religious contest by attrition: by cutting the



*Avila. The town of Avila, in Castile, dates to Roman times. The city walls, famous in their own day and now among the best preserved in all of Europe, were built in the eleventh century. Source: Gianni Dagli Orti / The Art Archive at Art Resource, NY*

he had never even read the works of Aristotle, much less actually translated or commented upon them. As the Christian scholars who translated Ibn Rushd, and then Aristotle himself, into Latin discovered, philosophy could be a dangerous thing in Christendom as well.

A kaleidoscopic image of society thus started to emerge in Spain by the twelfth century. A polyethnic and multireligious land, it embraced both a knightly and a feudalistic structure in the rural regions of the upland plains, a looser and more free-flowing system of land tenure along the battlefield and a strongly localized communal scene along the Mediterranean coast and in the urban settlements along the shifting frontier. Reconciling and harmonizing the different traditions that made up Spain's political, social, religious, and cultural legacy proved difficult over the centuries but contributed much to making it one of the more dynamic and intriguing, if more than usually puzzling, worlds of medieval Europe.



*A view of the Italian city of San Gimignano. Cramped for space within the town, urban elites built high-towered residences to show off their wealth and power: medieval McMansions. Source: Photo Andrea Pistoletti © Tips Images / Alamy*

## THE ITALIAN SCENE

Change gripped the Italian peninsula as well. By the middle of the twelfth century, Italy too had well-developed traditions of communalism and monarchy, of liberal near-egalitarianism and hierarchical paternalism. As a natural crossroads for the cultures that made up the Mediterranean basin, Italy displayed surprising degrees of tolerance across religious and ethnic lines, along with often-astonishing degrees of repression and violence. In a general sense the political and social traditions of the Italian peninsula from the eleventh century on reversed the basic pattern established throughout continental Europe—within Italy the communal-urban model dominated in the north, whereas the feudal-monarchical model became (with some modifications) the norm through most of the south. By the middle of the twelfth century, however, both northern and southern Italy had witnessed dynamic economic growth, intellectual advance, and institutional development.

The communal-urban pattern of the northern peninsula represented to a certain extent merely a revival of the normative style of life that dated back for centuries. The terrain of Italy, with its coastal clusters of merchant settlers and its rugged mountains that divide the interior into discrete rural units, accounted for much

of this traditional localism. But a nexus of forces released in the eleventh century ignited the rise of the urban communes; these forces included a fast-rising birth rate, increased agricultural production, the liberation of trade following the breakup of the Islamic Empire, and the rediscovery of Roman law. As the population of northern Italy grew, so did the demand for food. Some of the technological advances in farming mentioned earlier—the wheeled plow, crop rotation, the use of horses as draught animals instead of oxen, and so on—produced higher yields than before. But even more important for northern Italy was the extension of arable land made possible by the draining of marshes and fens, the clearing of forests, and the irrigation of arid lands. Many of these newly developed areas existed outside of or marginal to the established estates of the old aristocratic families and the ecclesiastical estates of the great monasteries, which made possible the development of a large class of individual landholders, small farmers who held their lands freely without the manorial ties characteristic of northern Europe. But these new sites needed an influx of capital in order to become productive, and they provided impetus for the development of banking and financial interests within the cities. Moreover, the increased volume of agricultural produce provided incentives for the entrepreneurial merchants, who now had a steady supply of goods to trade on the opening Mediterranean market. In other words, the agricultural renaissance of northern Italy eroded the last vestiges of manorialism and created a proto-capitalistic rural economy amid a sprawl of merchant cities, whereas the agricultural renaissance of northern Europe occurred largely as the consequence of manorialism.

Prosperity meant a steady stream of people into the cities. Established municipalities like Milan, Genoa, and Pisa became even larger, while tiny hamlets like Padua and Verona became, by the start of the twelfth century, established cities in their own right. South of Rome new coastal communities like Gaeta and Amalfi competed with ancient establishments like Naples and Rome itself. Slowly but steadily the shipping lanes of the Mediterranean became filled with Italian merchant vessels carrying goods from one end of the sea to the other and making Italy the leading economic force of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The German emperors retained their claim to overlordship of northern Italy and were usually (and begrudgingly) recognized by the Italians whenever the imperial army happened to cross over the Alps, but most of the time the cities had *de facto* independence. Organizing themselves into communes (urban republics with administrative jurisdiction over the surrounding rural zones), they enjoyed near-complete autonomy—a fact recognized even by the German imperial chronicler Otto of Freising (d. 1158):

*In governing their cities and administering public life they are as wise as the ancient Romans themselves. They love liberty so much that they are governed by consuls who eschew arrogant power instead of by monarchs. . . . These consuls*

*are chosen from among each of the cities' classes and are replaced in office virtually every year so that none of them, driven by lust for power, becomes a tyrant. As a result, since virtually the whole land is divided among the cities, each city requires its bishop to reside within the town itself; more than that, hardly any nobleman or magnate can be found anywhere who does not recognize the city's authority. Because of their ability to hold sway over all these lands and leaders, each city is accustomed to refer to the rural lands belonging to the lay and ecclesiastical lords as the city's own contado. In fact, in order to make sure they keep their aristocratic neighbors in line, these cities do not hesitate to bestow knightly status and noble titles upon citizens of low birth, even mere tradesmen whom other nations avoid like the plague when it comes to public respect and honors. But because of all this, these cities surpass every nation on earth in wealth and power.*

Otto did not hide his envy, but he also made a point of emphasizing that Italian republicanism ran contrary to what northern Europeans regarded as the naturally and divinely appointed order of things—a hierarchical society of landed lords ruling the peasant masses. He singled out for criticism the Italians' tendency to obey their German master only when the imperial army was in town.

*Nevertheless these city-dwellers, forgetting the noble traditions of their past, show signs of their barbaric flaws. They boast that they live "according to the rule of law" but they do not obey true law, for they show little if any respect for the princely orders to which they ought to defer and which they should willingly obey. They do not even live according to the integrity of their own laws [i.e., recognizing imperial overlordship] unless they confront [the emperor's] authority in the person of his vast army. And while they will occasionally force a citizen to "obey the law" and will sometimes force an opponent into submission "according to the law," they themselves routinely remain hostile to the very person whom they ought to accept as their own kindly ruler, when all he is doing is to demand what is rightfully his.*

Civic institutions developed quickly; indeed, their appointments resemble those of a modern municipality: a central administrator akin to a modern mayor (called a *podestà* in medieval Italian) who served a one-year term of office, an elected council of legislators, commissioners of public water works, directors of road maintenance, tax assessors, judges, public health officials, and police corps. The structure of communal government varied a bit from city to city, but the broad outlines remained similar enough that northern Italy quickly spawned a large class of professional municipal administrators who passed from commune

to commune, serving terms of office in each before moving on to the next job in the next city.

The laws they lived by, which so irked Otto of Freising, were hybrids made up of local customs and privileges, but they came to share a common core. In the late eleventh century a complete and intact manuscript of the *Corpus iuris civilis* (the *Corpus of Civil Law* compiled by the emperor Justinian in the sixth century) was discovered in a library in Pisa. While knowledge of Roman law had never died out entirely in Italy—it had never ceased to be taught in partial form at the law school in Ravenna, for example—it had survived in practice only in bits and pieces. The rediscovery of the complete *Corpus* immediately excited legal scholars, and the book became a subject of academic study, but it eventually began to be put into practice by the communes, too. After all, what the *Corpus* represented was a comprehensive legal code for the administration of municipal republics based on industry and commerce. What could be handier? From roughly the middle of the twelfth century on, Roman law began to be implemented in northern Italy and coastal Spain, and from there it spread to other parts of Europe.

A very different scene developed in southern Italy. A tug-of-war between native Lombards, the Byzantines, and the North African Muslims had long dominated this region's political fortunes. The arrival of Norman adventurers in the 1020s broke the stalemate, however. These were men of the same stock as the Normans who in 1066 sailed across the English Channel under William the Conqueror. They seem to have come to Italy first as pilgrims passing through on their way to the Holy Land, but local leaders soon enlisted them to fight as mercenaries in the three-way struggle. By the 1040s, the Normans had begun to fight for themselves and to carve out zones for their own rule. A frontier atmosphere predominated as northern barons eager for glory, plunder, and independence hurried to the lower peninsula. The most successful of these was a cattle rustler turned prince named Robert Guiscard (d. 1085), who knitted several of these independent Norman baronies into a larger unit. The papacy saw the potential value of an adventurer like Guiscard, who might serve as a foil against the claims of the imperial Germans, and appointed him a vassal of the Holy See. Meanwhile, Guiscard's younger brother Roger "the Great Count" began to establish a Norman power zone in Sicily, where he had started to campaign as early as 1061. The Sicilian conquest was complete by 1091, and Norman-style feudalism was imposed. Roger the Great Count died in 1101 and left Sicily in the hands of his wife Adelaide; she retired from the scene when their son Roger II reached manhood and took over the government in 1112. Roger II also inherited Guiscard's peninsular territories in 1129; thus was created a vast new realm at the very heart of the Mediterranean. On Christmas Day 1130, Roger II assumed royal status, with a grand coronation in his capital of Palermo.



*Mosaic from the central apse of the cathedral at Monreale, Sicily. Twelfth century. The mosaics of Norman Sicily are among the most splendid produced in the whole Middle Ages. Here we see an image of Christ Pantocrator standing majestically above a scene of an enthroned Madonna and child, who are flanked by angels, apostles, and saints. Elements of Greek artistic tradition (in the portraiture as well as the Greek lettering) combine with some Islamic elements (in the elaborate geometric tracery) to produce a harmonious and powerful work of art. Source: Giraudon / Art Resource, NY*

This Norman-Sicilian kingdom ended when the dynasty's direct line died out in 1194. But while it lasted, it stood out as one of the wealthiest and most powerful kingdoms in Latin Europe, thanks to the trade that passed through Sicilian harbors. As in England, the Normans governed their realm with a heavy hand. Feudal practices and institutions did not fit well in Mediterranean Europe, where they ran counter to traditions of local autonomy in the countryside: the urban coastal centers were accustomed to their own communal ways, and the polyethnic and multireligious nature of the kingdom made for a cosmopolitan but also continually tense social scene. Historians have frequently romanticized the extent to which the Norman-Sicilian kingdom managed to harmonize these antagonisms.

If Muslims, Greeks, Lombards, Sicilians, and Normans, town-dwellers, country rustics, and royal administrators found it possible to live together and to prosper, this was more the “harmony” of people who got along because they knew that they would face serious reprisals if they did not than it was an oasis of mutual respect. Nevertheless, for at least a few generations, these communities from around the Mediterranean did share a common ground that was not, for once, a battlefield.

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