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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Tombs is Emeritus Professor of French History at Cambridge, and a Fellow of St John’s College. Most of his writing and teaching has been on French and European history and on Franco-British relations, for which he was awarded the *Palme Académique* by the French government.

ROBERT TOMBS

The English and Their History

Revised edition



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Penguin
Random House
UK

First published by Allen Lane 2014

Published in Penguin Books 2015

Revised edition 2023

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Typeset by Jouve (UK) Milton Keynes

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-802-06423-0

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Preface to the Revised Edition

Much has happened since the first edition of this book appeared in 2014. The 2016 vote to leave the European Union and the unexpectedly bitter conflicts that ensued, the Covid pandemic in 2020–22, the emergence of ‘culture wars’ in much of the West, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and growing economic and political turbulence in the world mean not merely that the book needs to be brought up to date, but also that the perspective of our contemporary history has changed. In retrospect, 2014 was a more optimistic time than today.

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Introduction: Who Do We Think We Are?

In general, this only is allowed,
They're something noisy, and a little proud.

Daniel Defoe, *The True Born Englishman* (1700)

Generally speaking, all the great events have been distorted, most of the important causes concealed, some of the principal characters never appear, and all who figure are so misunderstood and misrepresented, that the result is a complete mystification, and the perusal of the narrative about as profitable to an Englishman as reading the Republic of Plato or the Utopia of More.

Benjamin Disraeli on the history of England¹

The people who took the name 'English', set up an English kingdom, and subsequently named their country England, and those who have lived there after them and thought of themselves as members of an English nation, are in two ways products of history: because of what happened to them and because of the constantly changing ways in which they remembered those experiences. This book explores these two connected themes. Though apparently simple terms, 'nation' and 'memory' raise questions that need to be considered briefly at the outset. What a nation really is has exercised thinkers over the last two centuries: whether nations are ancient or modern phenomena; whether they have some organic existence as cultural, genetic or geographical entities; whether they are political and ideological fabrications; or indeed various mixtures of these.² My view is that most nations and their shared identities are modern creations, the products of literacy, urbanization, and State-led cultural and political unification. But, as Ernest Gellner observed in an influential work emphasizing this 'modernist' view, there are nevertheless some ancient nations.³ Most of the oldest that still survive are on the western fringes of Europe, and one is England. The

concept of an ‘English people’ (*gens Anglorum*) emerged in the eighth century, an English kingdom with its own land (‘eard’) in the ninth, and that land acquired a name, England – or, rather, Englalond – around the year 1000. There are a few much older states in existence, particularly ancient empires and their successor states such as China or Iran. But there are few if any older ‘nation-states’, a political form of which the English turned out to be pioneers – a sizeable political community with some sense of kinship, cultural similarity, participation in government and some representative institutions. The very idea that such peoples or nations have continuous histories over many generations, which we take so much for granted in Western culture, owes much to the pioneering writings of Anglo-Norman clerics in the twelfth century as they tried to make sense of the Conquest. Whether there really is a continuous and meaningful story of a place and its successive inhabitants over many centuries and through many changes is something this book attempts to explore, and we shall return to it in the concluding chapter.

The great labour over many centuries of recording, interpreting, and narrating English history has created a splendid cultural treasure including some of our greatest poetry, drama, prose, painting and scholarship. History is not of course the only way of understanding a society: sociology, political science, economics and anthropology provide many insights, as in different ways do literature and art. But history has the particular quality of examining its subjects over time, proceeding by evidence-based narrative and argument, and it assumes that the past to some extent explains the present. It can thus help us to identify unusual aspects of our society and understand why we think about them in the ways we do.

Recently, many historians have consciously focused on phenomena that overflow national boundaries, and ‘transnational history’ and ‘world history’ have attracted much attention. This is welcome, as a basic fault of traditional national history (and most history ever written falls into this category) is insularity: writing consciously or unconsciously as if the history of a particular nation were self-contained, unique and incomparable, whereas it is inevitably part of much wider ebbs and flows. In the case of England particularly, some historians have come close to suggesting – sometimes with surprising vehemence – that it does not have, or should not have today, a meaningful history at all. The common argument is that it is subsumed into British history,⁴ or even a history of ‘the isles’ – ‘The old Anglocentric straitjacket is bursting at the seams.’⁵ This widespread view is expressed in major works of scholarship and reflected in the 2013 national history curriculum for England. The British perspective is most useful for the seventeenth century, when the island nations were

entwined politically to a unique degree – though even then the insular view risks obscuring the fundamental importance to England of the Low Countries, France, Spain and Germany. Taking a longer view, it is evident that England has never been confined within a British shell. Not only was it, of course, a sovereign kingdom for most of its history; but no less importantly over the centuries relations with Scandinavia, the Low Countries and France, and in modern times with the British Empire, the United States of America and Germany, have been even more important to England than those with the other island nations, even when these formed part of a more or less united kingdom.

Following the various Acts of British unification between 1536 and 1800* and colonial expansion in the eighteenth century, recounting the history of England certainly becomes more complex, especially in international contexts when England was not a separate actor, and historians of this period have often been criticized for using ‘Britain’ and ‘England’ interchangeably – as, indeed, many contemporaries did from the seventeenth century onwards. I hope I have avoided this. Nevertheless, the idea that England does not or should not have its own history is interesting and rather strange: it is unimaginable that the same argument could be made about Ireland, Scotland or France. A history of England seems to unsettle people: the past, it seems, is not dead; it is not even past.⁶ This book attempts to tell the history of England, first as an idea, and then as a kingdom, as a country, a people and a culture, trying to begin at the beginning without assuming any inevitability in what occurred, and trying to explore what is proper to England, and what is shared with its various neighbours.

The second theme of the book is memory. Collective memory as a pillar of national identity was posited by John Stuart Mill in the 1860s and taken up in the 1880s by the French philosopher Ernest Renan, who placed ‘the shared possession of a rich heritage of memories’ at its heart.⁷ As a subject of academic study memory was first undertaken by French historians, whose term *mémoire* suggests not individual recollections but what is sometimes called ‘social memory’ – a public culture, recorded in monuments, books, institutions and symbols.⁸ This book pursues that idea: the history of England is not simply what happened, or what historians believe they can demonstrate, but what a vast range of people, for a great variety of purposes, have recorded, asserted and believed about the past – a

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* Acts of Union with Wales (1536 and 1543), the Union of the Crowns (1603), and the Acts of Union with Scotland (1707) and Ireland (1800).

confused mass of ideas, emotions, words and images, often contradictory, argumentative and divisive.

Much 'memory', individual or collective, is fiction, and no less powerful for that. This book is not a systematic analysis of English social memory – such a thing would have to be a vast collective undertaking.⁹ Nor is it a study of English identity, of which there are several stimulating examples.¹⁰ It is a work of history, and thus of narrative. It does, however, try to do something unusual: to make memory and its creation an inherent part of the story. Hence, it gives particular emphasis to important creators and carriers of memory, such as language, literature, law, religious and political institutions, and of course historical writing itself, from that by Bede, via Henry of Huntingdon, Geoffrey of Monmouth and Shakespeare, to Macaulay, E. P. Thompson and many others. It discusses widely accepted beliefs about the past – for example, concerning Anglo-Saxon liberties, the common law, the significance of Magna Carta, or the causes and consequences of the Industrial Revolution. For more recent times, it looks at the ambiguities and consequences of the Victorian age; at the reasons for taking part in the First World War and the divided memories of that great disaster; and the 'finest hour' tradition of the Second World War and its legacy.

Four memory themes are given particular attention, however. Their connections, spanning nearly all of our history, make up an arc of rise and fall: the long and contradictory aftermath of the Norman Conquest; the interpretation of the Civil War era and its ramification into a 'Whig history' of progress; the history and conflicting memory of empire; and, most recently, the sense of England and Britain as nations in decline. My intention is to show how these ideas originated, what purposes they have served, and how they appear in the light of modern research. The book is, therefore, partly shaped by the stories and images that make up our collective memory. But I have also been concerned with things we have collectively forgotten and which I think we ought to remember. If this seems contradictory, I hope nevertheless it constitutes a coherent story.

Every work of history reflects the experiences, beliefs and personality of its writer. But every serious work of history is also a collective enterprise, drawing on the painstaking research and thinking of hundreds, even thousands, of scholars today and far in the past. Historical novelists, playwrights or film-makers may feel free to tell the story however they wish; but historians are guided and indeed constrained by this research, which dictates much of what can and must be written. It has been an intellectual adventure for me to explore the riches of English historiography, in constant renovation and expansion by historians of many nationalities. Throughout I have

tried to reflect the best modern scholarship, much of it hidden from the public gaze in the pages of learned journals and scholarly monographs and despite its inherent interest too often ignored.

My personal decisions are clearest in the broad shape of the narrative and in its emphases, though here too one can exaggerate the subjective element: in many ways I have not written the book I expected to write. Perhaps inevitably, the last 500 years have come to take up far more space than the previous 1,000. I have also given extra weight to what is unusual in England's history. One could describe a house by saying that it has walls, a roof, doors and windows; but generally more useful is to specify its distinctive style, situation, materials and colours. So with a nation: rather than those features that are shared with all the others, and certainly with those in north-western Europe – many economic and social practices, family relationships, property systems, gender roles, religious beliefs – I focus on specifically English experiences, including great political and international events. Also unique to England are cultural processes and economic innovations at certain moments in time: for example, the late-medieval expansion of written English and the eighteenth-century Industrial Revolution.

These are absorbing questions, not least for me, an Englishman with Irish connections who has spent most of his life studying France. So my approach to England's history has necessarily been without fixed preconceptions and, explicitly or implicitly, it is constantly concerned with wider historical perspectives. I believe it is meaningless to attempt any description of a society – that it was rich or poor, equal or unequal, free or oppressed, stable or unstable – except by comparison with other human societies. The philosopher Thomas Hobbes thought that 'A writer of history ought, in his writings, to be a foreigner, without a country, living under his own law only',¹¹ and this – despite occasional uses of 'we', 'us' and 'our' in these pages – has been my watchword. Besides, had I been a life-long English specialist, I doubt I would have had the nerve to try it.

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Prelude: The Dreamtime

*This, the noblest of islands . . . was first called Albion, then Britain,
and is now known as England.*

Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum* c.1150

The English occupy most of an island: this, we might think, sums up the essence of their history. But only if we add: a *unique* island. It is the main island of one of the three largest temperate archipelagos in the world – with Honshu in Japan and the South Island of New Zealand.* Unlike them, nearly all of it is habitable, suitable for various kinds of agriculture, with few natural barriers, and long fully settled. Most importantly, it is in sight and easy reach of a continent. These seas – between twenty and 400 miles of often rough but predictable water – have been from earliest times a highway for traders, settlers and invaders in both directions. The island overlooked the sea communications between the north and south of that continent and those that would eventually develop between it and the rest of the world. Scarcely less importantly, the English have only ever inhabited the mostly lowland part of the archipelago: they have coexisted with other island peoples. Nor have they inhabited it for long: of at least 11,500 years of continuous human settlement, only some 1,300 can be described as ‘English’.

For all but the most recent fraction of time, the land now called England had no name that we know; nor indeed was it part of an island. The first signs of habitation by the predecessors of *Homo sapiens* – including their footprints in the mud – are as long as 800,000 years ago, when the land was a tropical peninsula and hippos swam in what we call the Thames.

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* Great Britain measures 228,000 square kilometres; Honshu, 231,000, and South Island, 150,000. The only larger islands are tropical forest or semi-arctic tundra (New Guinea, Borneo, Greenland, etc.).

Several cycles of often rapid and extreme climate change swept human life away, then let it trickle back as the ice receded. For as much as 100,000 years, there seems to have been no human habitation at all, partly because a great river valley where the Channel is now made access difficult. But 60,000 years ago Neanderthals were present in what was still a peninsula, and 40,000 years ago the Cro-Magnons, who left flint tools and bones, including their own, some of which show possible signs of cannibalism. They were eliminated by the last ice age, when, about 25,000 years ago, the whole land was frozen over and remained uninhabitable for some 10,000 years. When the ice melted, the physical link with the Continent was worn away by a gigantic flood or floods, which scoured out the Channel when the vast lake that became the North Sea overflowed. The last land bridge – a narrow chalk ridge – may finally have been submerged only some 6,000 years ago, when the new island was already inhabited by people who are genetically the ancestors of most who live there today.¹

The tiny population – a few thousand hunter-gatherers during the first few millennia – grew when from about 6,000 years ago they began burning and cutting down the forests, laid out fields for wheat, barley and oats, and shipped in cattle, pigs and sheep from across the Channel. In four centuries this transformed both the landscape and their own societies. Over several centuries from about 3000 BC, great ritual sites were built throughout the archipelago, the first being in the far northern islands. Large enclosed spaces were made both for ceremonial purposes and for defence, and their similarities indicate cultural homogeneity. There was eventually a particular concentration in the south-west, most famously in the sacred landscape round Stonehenge, built in several stages, and including great stones brought from far away to the north-west. Types of burials and monuments testify to changing cultural practices and beliefs.² As is common in other countries across the globe, the English incorporated these awe-inspiring remains into their national heritage, and first did so as long ago as the thirteenth century. But not until the late sixteenth century was an attempt made to survey ancient monuments and investigate their origins, in William Camden's *Britannia* (1586), and only in the early nineteenth century did serious archaeology begin.

During the Bronze Age (c.2500–1000 BC) the islanders engaged in tin-mining and metalworking, pottery, salt production, and leather and cloth manufacture, which they traded domestically and overseas. Most lived in small farmsteads, large enough for an extended family, with typical roundhouses inside a protected compound. Nothing disruptive seems to have happened over a long period from 2000 to 700 BC, when the climate was favourable and there was cultural continuity. By the time of the Iron

Age, from about 750 BC, the lowland areas had been cleared and settled, and every inch belonged to somebody or was expressly set aside for communal purposes. Some field boundaries are among the world's oldest constructions still in use.³ The population grew to as much as 2 million, and coalesced into political groupings of rural settlements round a larger centre, dominated by a leader with a band of horse- and chariot-mounted warriors. Conflict between them was probably endemic. On the western fringes of the island, homesteads were designed for defence, and there was a central belt dominated by massive hill forts, which probably had a religious and political significance as well as providing storage for food and refuge in times of danger. Figures were carved into chalk hillsides, such as the White Horse at Uffington, the oldest. By about 60 BC several of the tribal polities were issuing their own coinage. An Italian writer described the natives of the coastal regions as 'civilized' and 'especially friendly to strangers' due to their frequent commercial contacts.⁴ Their Druidic religion, however, did involve ritual torture and killing.⁵

A general name for the archipelago, 'Pretannike', appeared in a work by a Greek explorer, Pytheas, who in about 320 BC sailed round the islands in a bold search for knowledge and trading opportunities.⁶ The name, perhaps derived from a Celtic word for 'the tattooed folk' (Caesar later described them as dyed with woad), evolved into 'Bretannia' and 'Britannia'. The largest island became known as Albion or Alba, and the western island Ivernia or Hibernia. The only names we can give the island peoples – 'Britons', 'Picts' (in the remote unconquered north), 'Scots' (in Hibernia), and southern peoples such as 'Iceni', 'Brigantes' or 'Trinovantes' – are versions of the names given to them by the Greeks and Romans. Thus, through the words and ideas of Mediterranean writers such as Pytheas, Diodorus Siculus (c.60 BC) and Tacitus (c. AD 98), the islands and their peoples entered history. Linguistically and culturally they were little different from the Iron Age peoples of north-western Europe generally, known to the Romans as *Celtae*.

It is part of our national myth, thanks not least to Shakespeare, that the sea has been 'a moat defensive' against invasion. In fact, there have been innumerable invasions over the centuries, some of them with profound effects, and very few of which could be prevented until recent times. The benefits of insularity had to be won the hard way.⁷ The history of the island was transformed by Roman invasion in the first century AD, and by the movements of peoples that took place all over Europe for nearly 1,000 years from the third century to the twelfth. Unlike arrivals by land, whose usually slow and burdensome movements could be known, predicted, harried, and blocked, seaborne incursions were swift and unpredictable, covering

in hours what would take days on foot. If opposed they could sail on to find an undefended landfall, and if threatened they could retreat as easily as they had come. Their ships could bring goods to trade, and weapons and horses to fight; they could carry away booty and slaves. They could also bring women and children to settle. But if the sea facilitated the arrival of many small groups, it nevertheless made large-scale invasions difficult and hazardous, and rapid mass colonization impossible. Even the major conquerors – Romans, Saxons, Danes and Normans – were still relatively small bands of warriors, who took possession of the country and its peoples as overlords, but did not exterminate or expel them. Conquests caused huge political and cultural changes; and yet at the material level of land use and settlement life went on. New masters moved into existing communities, often built on existing sites, and interbred.

Much later, British writers invented heroic origin myths set in the mysterious centuries before the Romans came. The most popular and influential was by an Oxford cleric and Bishop of St Asaph, Geoffrey of Monmouth, possibly of Breton descent. His *History of the Kings of Britain*, written in Latin in about 1136, popularized the story of ‘Brut’, the Trojan hero Brutus, who landed in Albion, ‘uninhabited except for a few giants’ including ‘a particularly repulsive one, called Gogmagog’. After driving off the giants, Brutus renamed the island ‘Brutaigne’, or Britain, after himself.⁸ This story emulates that of the Franks and indeed the Romans themselves, who also claimed Trojan descent. Geoffrey’s tales of warlike monarchs with unlikely names such as Gorboduc and Lud were read and believed across Europe and long remained popular. His stories were translated and readapted by later writers – above all the story of King Leir and his daughters, and of King Arthur and the magician Merlin. Geoffrey thus elaborated for the British a prestigious and exciting European lineage, and his narrative remained authoritative for over four centuries.

Before the dawn of the Christian era, the pagan peoples of the southern fringes of the island, far from being the woad-covered savages of legend, formed an old and sophisticated society with close economic and political ties with the Continent. Back and forth went mercenaries, traders, raiders, envoys and refugees. As the Roman Empire spread rapidly north during the first century BC, the island’s rulers faced a dilemma. Some decided their interests lay in making treaties with Rome. Others prepared to resist and strengthened their old forts. Alliances were formed with kingdoms across the Channel, some of which may have been the overlords of southern coastal regions of the island. One reason Julius Caesar gave for his brief invasions in 55 and 54 BC was that warriors from the island were fighting against him as allies of the Gauls. With about 30,000 men, he landed in

Kent and advanced north, crossing the Thames. At first the native kingdoms mounted a joint defence under the man the Romans called Cassivellaunus, but it was brief as some tribes changed sides. The historian Tacitus (*c.* AD 56–*c.* 120) commented later that ‘nothing has helped us more in war with their strongest nations than their inability to co-operate. It is but seldom that two or three states combine to repel a common danger.’⁹ Yet Caesar withdrew, called away by the outbreak of revolt in Gaul.

The island’s autonomy was thus preserved for nearly another century, partly by civil war inside the Roman Empire. But eventually, in AD 43, the Romans mounted perhaps the biggest invasion of the island in history, by some 40,000 men with a detachment of elephants, probably landing in several places simultaneously. The emperor Claudius took symbolic command.¹⁰ Complete conquest took several decades. The process bore the Roman hallmarks of intimidation, ruthlessness and terror. For several years, Caratacus (‘Caractacus’), son of a southern king Cunobelinus (‘Cymbeline’), led a series of guerrilla campaigns as he was pushed further and further west, until he was captured and taken to Rome. Those still fighting, including Druids, retreated to Anglesey, which was stormed and its defenders massacred, in AD 60. But just as this resistance was being crushed, revolt exploded on the populous eastern side of the island – the devastating rising of the Iceni.

Rome’s intention was annexation in the medium term: peoples that submitted without a fight would be allowed to keep most of their lands and for a time some autonomy as client states, but when their rulers died they would be taken over. This was applied to the Iceni, when following the death of their king his widow, Boudicca (‘Boadicea’), was dispossessed. Tacitus adds that she ‘was flogged and her daughters raped’ – presumably to make the point that there was no more Iceni royalty, just insolent natives.¹¹ The revolt spread south and west, towns such as Camulodunum (Colchester) were torched, and many of their inhabitants – especially the carpetbaggers who had followed the Romans in search of quick profits – were massacred, often with gruesome ritual. The Romans, some of whose military units had been wiped out, regrouped, and somewhere in the west-central part of the island their disciplined troops smashed the much larger rebel force and slaughtered as many as they could catch. Boudicca killed herself.

There was no further internal threat to Roman rule. In AD 77 the renowned general Agricola arrived as governor, to extend Roman domination to the west and north, and this campaign formed the core of Tacitus’ biography of Agricola, his father-in-law, and the source of the famous jibe ‘They make a desert and call it peace.’ For fifteen generations Britannia,

subdivided into provinces and districts, was part of the empire. Its material attractions were the agricultural wealth of the southern regions, tin and lead in the west and south-west, tribute, slaves and its strategic importance as an offshore base that might otherwise shelter Rome's enemies. There was also political prestige among the Roman elite in occupying the very edge of the known world, lapped by the unexplored Ocean.¹² Britannia would remain a final outpost, a road to nowhere.

The Romans did not attempt to govern the whole island. The remoter western peninsulas were little touched. The far north was sealed off behind a wide military zone of which Hadrian's Wall was the backbone. Built on the orders of the emperor Hadrianus between 122 and 138 AD, it was one of the great engineering projects of the ancient world, including twenty forts and 300 smaller fortlets and towers. It would have taken a workforce of 15,000–20,000 men some fourteen years to build.¹³ Straight paved roads transformed overland communications, and remained in use for centuries. Trade with the Continent increased. Towns developed as military, administrative and trading centres, most importantly the capital at Londinium, the lowest bridgeable point on the Thames, and regional capitals at Eboracum (York), Lindum (Lincoln) and Corinium (Circencester). Many settlements developed from existing ones, as the native roots of Latinized names such as Eboracum suggest. Most of Britannia remained rural: 80 per cent of the population lived in over 100,000 small settlements and some 2,000 villas, estates of varying sizes concentrated in the south-east. Only 20–30 of these villas were palatial, belonging to a small patrician class of serving and retired Roman officials and soldiers, and to a Romanized native nobility who retained ancestral lands. Smaller villas probably belonged to lesser native families who adopted Roman styles.¹⁴ Imperial links brought literacy, the Latin language and eventually Christianity. At first persecuted (giving Britain its proto-martyr, St Alban) it became the official religion of the empire during the later fourth century. For the Romano-British elites, the empire conferred power and status, and the sense of being part of a great if distant civilization – something which, however dimly, outlasted the empire itself and deeply influenced all its successor states.

The long decline and fall of the empire is one of the greatest and most famous epics in history. From the third century AD, constant factional conflicts, depositions and murders within the imperial elite; attempted military coups (including several by the army in Britain); economic decline; epidemics; and above all uncontrollable movements of peoples caused the empire to fragment, until its western provinces became autonomous kingdoms under 'barbarian' rule. Climatic fluctuations made parts of northern

Europe less habitable and prompted migrations. Long-term events in Asia (such as conflict in the Chinese Empire and crisis in the Persian) caused steppe peoples to move west, among them the terrifying Huns, originally from the borders of China, who first appeared in the West in 376. To help defend themselves, the Romans recruited 'barbarian' troops and brought them inside the empire, where they became political actors in their own right. The empire offered attractions to outsiders, and increasingly easy pickings to the boldest. The neighbouring northern provinces of Gaul and Britain were thus for several centuries exposed to incursions from peoples coming to trade, to raid, to settle and to offer their services as mercenaries in what became a vast protection racket.

Picts from north Britain and Scots from Hibernia raided the Romanized regions. From the third century onwards, those the Romans called 'Saxons' (mostly peoples of north Germany and southern Scandinavia) harried both sides of the North Sea and the Atlantic coast of Gaul, taking loot and slaves, and drowning or crucifying one tenth of their captives as a sacrifice to their gods.¹⁵ The Romans reacted vigorously, stationing more troops in Britain than any medieval English monarch would ever command and building some of the largest fortifications in the empire, including the fortress at Eboracum and huge forts and naval stations on what came to be known as 'the Saxon shore' (*litus saxonicum*), among them Porchester, Pevensey and Dover, and watch-towers as far north as the Tyne. Britain suffered less than many Continental provinces, which were exposed to mass overland invasions, but for that very reason, and because they became involved in the political factionalism of the empire, troops and money were drained away from the island to defend other provinces. In 367 there was an astonishing 'barbarian conspiracy', when Picts, Scots and Saxons succeeded in coordinating their attacks on southern Britain. The attacks were beaten off, but danger remained ever-present.

In 408 came another major Saxon attack. The Roman connection was now more of a drain than a defence, and in 409, according to the Roman writer Zosimus, Britannia was 'obliged to throw off Roman rule and live independently'.¹⁶ The following year, Rome itself was sacked by the Goths. No attempt was ever made to restore imperial rule to Britain. All over the Roman world, power and defence became increasingly localized, as peaceable landlords had to become warlords.¹⁷ Villas and settlements close to the coasts or to navigable rivers were targets for shipborne raiders, brigands and rebelling peasants, and in such places the alternatives were to leave or die.¹⁸

An ancient story, recorded in a ninth-century *Historia Brittonum* and repeated by Geoffrey of Monmouth in the 1130s, is that the 'King of

Britain', Vortigern (the name is probably from a Brittonic term for 'high ruler'¹⁹), engaged Saxon mercenaries led by the brothers Hengist and Horsa to take part in the defence against the Picts, but they tricked and corrupted him, especially through the gift of Hengist's ravishing daughter Renwein (Rowena), and opened a bridgehead for reinforcements and settlers. The story is evidently mythologized, and resembles similar accounts in other countries, but dangers from mercenaries were indeed common, and the legend may echo reality.

Over the fifth century, Saxons moved into the south-eastern and central parts of the island. The extent, timing and nature of this Germanization of Britain are disputed, especially by some archaeologists sceptical of ancient written accounts. Was it a rapid, violent invasion, resulting in the ethnic cleansing of the Romano-British population, exterminated or chased towards the west? So suggests the oldest surviving narrative (c.540), by the monk Gildas, which survives in only two medieval manuscript copies:

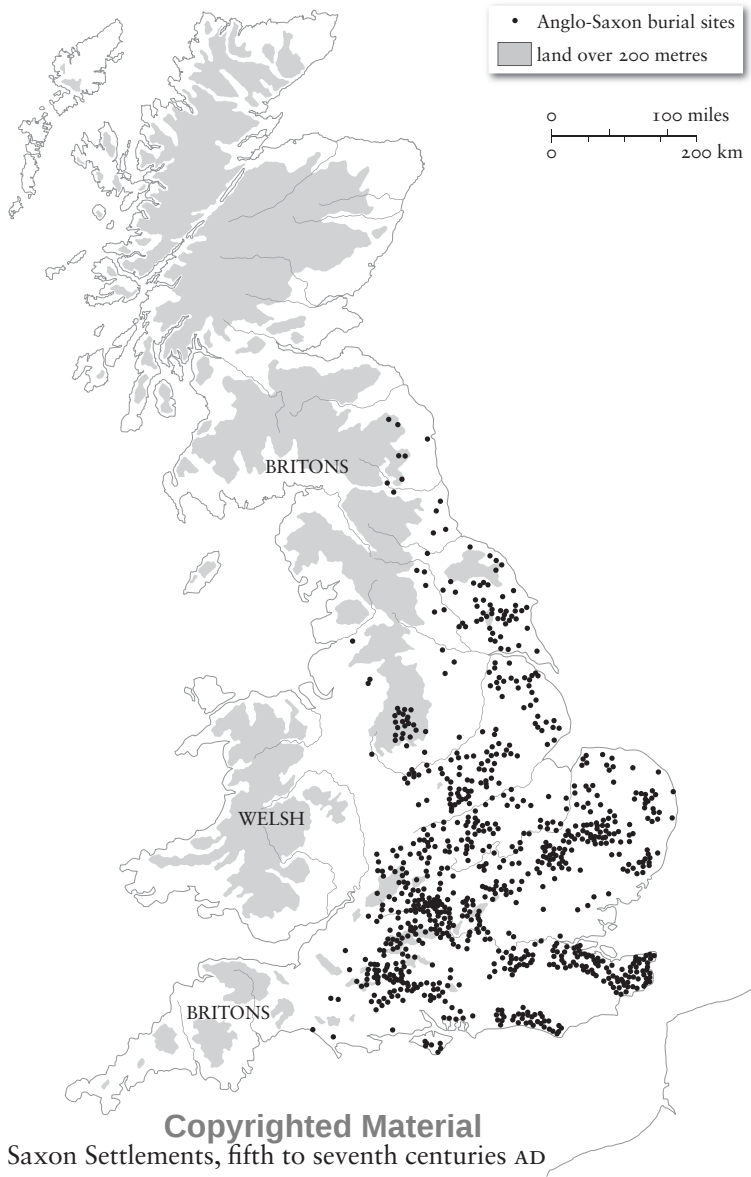
The first wave landed on the eastern side of the island . . . and there they fixed their terrible claws, as if to defend the country, but in fact to attack it. Their German mother-land, seeing them successfully installed, dispatched a wonderful collection of hangers-on and dogs, who, arriving by the boatload, joined up with their misbegotten comrades.²⁰

Or was it a less traumatic process, including gradual settlement in under-populated areas and voluntary cultural emulation by the native majority, which left much of life undisturbed, as some archaeologists believe the material evidence shows?²¹ The question is complicated even now because of its relation to various foundation myths: for example, that which saw the Saxons as the ancestors of the future English nation, which through them inherited liberties and customs brought from beyond the Roman frontier by free Germanic tribes. It is probable that many Germanic war bands – in all perhaps 100,000–200,000 people, equal to 10–20 per cent of the native population – invaded the fertile lowlands of eastern and southern Britain.²² They did not displace the existing population, though they certainly killed or drove out the relatively small Romanized elite. The hoards of treasure since discovered show that many failed to escape with their riches. Towns dwindled or were abandoned – Londinium became a ghost town. Trade collapsed, manufacturing ceased, and coinage disappeared. Some Britons fled to refugee colonies in northern Iberia and what became 'Brittany'. Others held out for a time in the West Country, where Iron Age forts such as South Cadbury were reinhabited and strengthened. The remnants of Romano-British culture eventually found refuge in the very areas that had previously resisted imperial influence: the far west and north of the island, and across the sea



- Anglo-Saxon burial sites
- land over 200 metres

0 100 miles
0 200 km



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1. The Saxon Settlements, fifth to seventh centuries AD

in Hibernia, where an upper-class Roman Briton, Patricius (St Patrick), began to convert the inhabitants to Christianity in about 450. The Saxons were powerful enough to eradicate Roman law and culture, including Christianity, and to impose new beliefs, customs and above all a new language – proof that the change had been a cultural cataclysm.

They settled as warrior lords, intimidating a leaderless and demoralized native population, moving into and exploiting existing peasant settlements, and taking British women as slaves or eventually wives. According to Gildas, they were ‘tyrants’ who ‘plunder and terrorize the innocent’, surround themselves with ‘many wives and whores’, ‘wage wars civil and unjust . . . despise the harmless and humble but exalt . . . their military companies, bloody, proud and murderous men’.²³ In time they became a nobility, distinguished from ‘the common stock’ by ‘appearance, bearing and speech’ – as one young Saxon warrior found to his cost when he tried unsuccessfully to escape death by pretending to be a peasant.²⁴ By the end of the seventh century, three main Germanic kingdoms had emerged, Northumbria, Mercia and Wessex, and several smaller kingdoms, including East Anglia, Essex, Kent and Sussex.

A grim insight into the realities of a life that was nasty, brutish and short is given by studies of Buckland cemetery, near Dover, in use from about the 480s to the 750s. At least 20 per cent of the population died before the age of eighteen. Women’s remains are far more numerous than those of men, as men died away from home in war or hunting. Yet, of those remaining, women had a lower life expectancy due to the dangers of childbirth. The average age of those who died at home was thirty-one; for men, thirty-eight. Only 6 per cent lived beyond sixty. The lucky survivors commonly had dental problems, disabling damage to the joints, badly healed fractures and endemic diseases such as tuberculosis. Among the warrior nobility, the women stood a little more chance of surviving childbirth than among the common people, but the men were more likely to die violently.²⁵

This dangerous and little-known age became the setting for an epic myth. Its origins lie in Gildas’s account of heroic, doomed resistance by the Romano-British, led by the shadowy and possibly fictitious Ambrosius Aurelianus, ‘King of Britain’, who won a great if temporary victory over Saxon invaders around the year 500 at Mons Badonicus – Mount Badon, perhaps Badbury Castle in Dorset. This won the British a generation of respite. Later writers, including the monk Bede at Jarrow in the eighth century and the authors of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in the ninth, tried to fill out the story. This is the context in which fleeting references to Arthur first appear in British annals – as a war leader, as a man who bore a cross as his standard at Mount Badon, and as a man killed in the battle of

Camlann in 537. These are the meagre seeds of the later saga of King Arthur, largely invented by Geoffrey of Monmouth, who claimed to have found it in 'a certain very ancient book' in Oxford. Geoffrey's account, in which 'the fame of Arthur's generosity and bravery spread to the very ends of the earth',²⁶ became the core of a glamorous pedigree for England's rulers. A generation later, in the 1170s, the French writer Chrétien de Troyes added to the mix the fashionable chivalrous themes of tournaments, amorous adventure, the knight errantry of Lancelot and Perceval, damsels in distress, and the story of the Grail. The Angevin kings audaciously claimed Arthur as their forebear. His body and that of Queen Guinevere were 'discovered' in 1191 at ancient Glastonbury Abbey, soon the focus of a related myth concerning Joseph of Arimathea, bearer of the Holy Grail.²⁷ Moreover, Arthur's body established that he was safely dead: no longer could he return to chastise usurpers. Richard the Lionheart claimed to have Arthur's sword. Edward I, after defeating the Welsh in 1283, thought he had brought back his crown. Thus Arthur was linked with England – 'Avalon' became Glastonbury hill, and 'Camelot' perhaps Cadbury fort or Winchester. The legend of Arthur as overlord of all Britain provided a foundation for assertions of English hegemony – or hegemony by whichever Norman, French or half-French ruler sat on England's throne.

The great saga was further elaborated by Thomas Malory (around 1470), and much later by Tennyson, Wagner and even, in a reimagined form, by J. R. R. Tolkien and his many emulators, becoming one of the great and enduring European myths. Thus Arthur took on many meanings. He was the doomed Christian hero holding back the dark tides of barbarism, becoming the acknowledged king of all Britain, and aiming to restore the power of Rome. For early Welsh writers, he was a symbol of pre-Saxon civilization that would one day return, just as Arthur himself, grievously wounded in battle but magically healed and preserved on the Isle of Avalon, would return as 'the once and future king'. He was a symbol of the mystique of royalty, chosen as a boy because only he could draw the sword from the stone. He became the ideal king of the age of chivalry, an armoured warrior with a magic sword surrounded by an order of knights, but betrayed by his queen, Guinevere, and his greatest follower, Lancelot. In some stories, this is linked with a mysterious wound Arthur suffers, and some writers made him the symbol of a failing society. Religious significance is derived from a link with the legend of the Holy Grail. These stories²⁸ – which still inspire efforts to discover a 'historic' Arthur somewhere in the islands – ascribed a unique significance to Britain as not merely a maltreated border province of Rome, but as the centre of a mystical epic. This contributed over the centuries to a sense of unique identity.

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PART ONE

The Birth of a Nation

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England had a troubled birth at a troubled time. During the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries, transforming events of human history were taking place far away: the great Chinese Empire was reunited under the Tang dynasty; the emperor Justinian struggled to re-establish the Roman Empire centred on Constantinople; the new monotheistic religion of Islam began its conquest of western Asia, the southern Mediterranean and Iberia. Britain, along with most of the former Western Roman Empire, had been transformed by an influx of marauding war bands. But, unlike most provinces, it did not come under the power of a single Germanic conqueror with a large army, able to set up an extensive kingdom¹ – such as Clovis, king of the Franks from 481, who dominated Gaul, or Theodoric the Great, who established an Ostrogothic kingdom in Italy in 493, or Clovis's Frankish successor, Charlemagne (r. 768–814), who created a vast if ephemeral empire from the Pyrenees to the Baltic, being crowned emperor by Pope Leo III in the auspicious year 800. Britain's insular position was largely responsible for its piecemeal conquest. Moreover, it lacked a Romanized native elite strong enough to Christianize and organize the invaders. Hence, it became the most fragmented and paganized part of the former Roman Empire.

Angles, Saxons and Jutes (as Bede called them) had arrived over several generations from the north-western fringes of the Continent. Like many of the groups on the move in Europe, they were not necessarily homogeneous ethnic units: it would be mistaken to imagine them as tribes, let alone nations. They were often polyglot armed bands which coalesced round a core group and a successful leader, recruited widely among the ambitious, the bold and the desperate, and were recognizable by some emblem or style of hair or dress. Only after they had settled into a territory under a stable power did some of them develop a distinct identity and a dialect that in some cases became a written language. Even then, group boundaries were loose. Languages were in flux, with Germanic and Latin dialects coalescing

and diverging in different ways. So conditions were not favourable for the development of homogeneous ‘peoples’ or organized ‘nations’. The identities that mattered were either wider – for example to co-religionists – or much narrower: to family and kin-group, to local community, to a war leader. These overrode any larger loyalty, for they made life possible, giving protection, keeping order, dealing out punishment and reward. To be alone was likely to be fatal: even slavery might be better. So the conception of a single English nation was surprising, and its survival improbable. It would be an optical illusion of hindsight to imagine it waiting in the womb of history simply for the right moment to emerge.

I

This Earth, This Realm c.600–1066

By around the year 600 the islands were highly diverse in language, in religion and in the origins of their inhabitants. There were five main language groups: Germanic in the southern and eastern regions, Brittonic, Goidelic (Gaelic) and Pictish, in the northern and western regions, and later Norse, especially in the north-east. These categories – terms invented by other peoples or by later generations – are certainly not how they would have thought of themselves. In the northern and western parts of the archipelago were numerous predatory chiefdoms occupied with raiding, rustling and slaving. The more populous lowland areas were divided into several rival kingdoms, dominated by various north-European lineages, whose power and territory waxed and waned, often rapidly and catastrophically. The larger of them vied for overlordship. The most powerful came to be Northumbria, between the Humber and the Forth, with its main city York, which has been called the natural capital of Britain. Further south was the rising power of Mercia, expanding out from the Midlands, with its royal seat at Tamworth and later a religious centre nearby at Lichfield. It was protected against raids from the west by the huge defensive rampart known as Offa's Dyke – 'the longest and, from an engineering point of view the most demanding earthwork known to European history',¹ partly built under King Offa (r. 757–96), a man important enough to maintain relations with the emperor Charlemagne. The kingdom of the East Angles was protected from inland attack by the Fens and massive earthworks, and other great earthworks exist in the south-west. These huge constructions testify visibly to the power of regional rulers. The kingdom of Kent (the Roman 'Cantium') probably had close ties with the Continent (Julius Caesar had believed that its people were Belgic immigrants). Wessex, the kingdom of the West Saxons, dominated the south-west. There were smaller kingdoms too, such as Lindsey in the east and Deira in the north. This was an unstable mixture, with warfare and raiding a constant feature of politics and culture. Kings and warlords increased their power and reputation by attracting

footloose warriors to their service, whom they had to reward with treasure won by successful aggression.

Yet, from this turbulent mix, the English emerged as what some historians consider the world's first nation, marked out by common political and administrative institutions, wide political participation and a shared identity. They had no single ethnic origin, no common semi-legendary foundation event, no single ruler – and yet they all came to be called English.

THE IDEA

The idea preceded the reality. It has been suggested, a little teasingly, that the inventor of the English was Pope Gregory the Great, in around 580 – though he might have got the idea from the historian Procopius (c. 500–565), who described one of the peoples of 'Brittia' as the 'Angiloi'. Gregory, noticing fair-haired slaves for sale, was told they were Angles: 'Not Angles, but Angels' was his famous pun. Whether or not the story is true, Gregory not only sent a mission of forty monks under the prior of a Roman monastery, Augustine, in 596 to convert these angels with dirty faces from their Germanic heathenism, but he firmly decided that they constituted a single people, and only ever referred to them as 'Angli'.² The organization of the Church that followed Augustine's mission was based unwaveringly on that assumption. There came to be a single Church of the *gens Anglorum*, with two provinces of Canterbury and York. This Church transcended the boundaries of the various kingdoms – the mighty Mercians were only briefly allowed to set up their own province based at Lichfield. No less important, the Church did not include all the islands, but excluded Ireland and nearly all the turbulent lands that would eventually become Scotland and Wales. The English Church would create its own distinctive culture. It adopted Roman practices in dogma and liturgy rather than older British and Irish traditions, as confirmed at the Synod of Whitby in 664. But it venerated British and English saints.

This story was given historical shape by Baeda, or Bede, a monk of the great Northumbrian monastery of Jarrow, who was 'indisputably the greatest historian of the English Middle Ages, and arguably the greatest English historian of all time'.³ His *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, written in Latin and finished in 731, gave an intellectual and religious significance to this still hypothetical nation, as one of the chosen Christian peoples, an instrument in God's plan to spread orthodox Roman Christianity. Widely circulated and authoritative, Bede's *History* first defined an English identity which has proved permanent.

In Bede's account, the 'English people' derived their special significance from their conversion. Their Germanic ancestors, who worshipped several deities, such as Woden, were the longest-lasting pagan peoples in the former Roman Empire. Yet during the 200 years following Augustine's arrival they went from being pagan to being Christian. This is because conversion began at the top, with kings, queens and warriors. Christianity was a source of authority and status, a way of becoming part of that wider and prestigious Roman civilization now primarily embodied in the Latin Church, of leaving behind barbarism, and of drawing on a new source of ritual power. It was also a way of making allies, and of warding off the threat of powerful rivals: dynastic polities that converted early had a much better chance of survival.

So when in 597 Augustine had arrived in Kent, part holy man, part ambassador, he had been welcomed by King Aethelberht, and installed, significantly, in the half-deserted Roman town of Durovernum Cantiacorum – Canterbury. The king and several thousand of his subjects were baptized together, possibly in the Christianization of a pagan seasonal festival. The old gods were not forgotten, but downgraded: Woden was reinvented as a heroic human ancestor. Christianity proved an accommodating creed and a valued support for royal power. Since the time of Offa of Mercia, kings have been sacramentally anointed. The early English Church was uniquely keen on making them saints: some who were killed in the endemic wars were proclaimed martyrs, as long as some of their enemies had included pagans. The Church was happy to accept its share in the booty from successful wars, in the form of penitential offerings, such as endowment of religious houses. Princesses sometimes became their abbesses. Minsters (with functions similar to the later parish churches), monasteries and nunneries, such as Ripon, Hexham, Jarrow, Wearmouth, Whitby, Barking, Wimborne and Lindisfarne, became centres of political, economic and even military power, and the channels for spreading innovations in agriculture, wine-making, architecture and manufacture (textiles, pottery and glass). Some religious communities were comfortable annexes of courtly culture, and were criticized by the pious for excessive eating, drinking and fox-hunting. The English Church came to own about a quarter of all cultivated land – somewhat less than churches on the Continent, but more than enough to make it a great power in the land, and an important influence in Europe, as its missionaries helped to convert northern Germany.

Christianity brought back literacy. The stimulus of the written word produced a flowering of writing not only in Latin, but also in what was later termed Old English, as writing crystallized fluid dialects into a stable

language, with a hybrid Latin and Germanic alphabet. English and Irish Gaelic became the most developed vernaculars in Europe. Sermons and prayers were composed in English. So was poetry, adapting Germanic heroic style to religious use, notably *Caedmon's Hymn* (c.670) and *The Dream of the Rood* (c.700), which imagined the crucified Christ as a warrior dying gloriously in battle. Older sagas took written form, notably *Beowulf*, probably written down in the early 700s, one of medieval Europe's earliest surviving vernacular works. Roman learning was cultivated too, and Northumbria became one of Europe's main cultural centres. At its apex was Bede himself (c.672–735), who produced the greatest volume and quality of writing in the Western world since St Augustine of Hippo in fourth-century Africa. At his monastery at Jarrow he had access to at least 200 books, mostly from Italy⁴ – more books than the university libraries of either Oxford or Cambridge possessed 700 years later. Large parts of the Bible were translated into Old English between the seventh and eleventh centuries; it would be 300 years before they again appeared in the English language.

Other Germanic invaders of the Roman Empire, such as the Lombards, Visigoths and Franks – who had taken over most of Gaul in what eventually became the Carolingian empire – abandoned their vernaculars in favour of local variants of Latin. These later developed as the Romance languages. That the 'Saxons' did not do so in Britain was long taken as proof that they had come in vast numbers and killed or chased out the previous inhabitants, who spoke Brittonic and Latin. As has been noted, archaeological evidence does not suggest an annihilation of the Romano-British population. That the Saxons did not adopt Latin is probably a sign that peripheral Britannia had not acquired a Roman culture strong enough to survive conquest. Brittonic, lacking the international prestige of Latin, was even less likely to survive the dominance of a Saxon warrior caste, whose language prevailed.

The Church did not aim to transform society, but was content to soften its edges. Slavery was accepted: but masters were taught that even the lowliest had souls, and the humble were consoled with promises of heavenly reward. The polygamous habits of virile pagan warriors were somewhat restrained, but the Church's acceptance of easy dissolution of marriage provided partial accommodation to custom. Penances prescribed for bestiality and 'fornication with mother' perhaps show that old habits died hard. The feuding and warfare endemic among what Gildas called 'bloodthirsty, proud, parricidal, warlike and adulterous enemies of God' were certainly not halted, but the Church provided some mediation and sanctuary.⁵ Christianity could coexist with the warrior ethos. The body

parts of defeated kings became relics: the head and hands of Oswald of Northumbria, killed in battle and dismembered by the pagan Penda of Mercia in 642, were venerated. Even the soil from battlefields was believed to work miracles. *Beowulf*, not overtly pagan but not wholly Christian either, shows how Christianized warriors still relished strength, courage, generosity, comradeship and heroic death:

They recited a dirge to declare their grief,
Spoke of the man, mourned their king.
They praised his manhood and the prowess of his hands . . .
They said that he was of all the world's kings
The gentlest of men and the most gracious,
The kindest to his people, the keenest for fame.⁶

Thus, by the 700s, Christians in most of Britain were members of an English Church, which had taken on some of the territorial boundaries and the broad organizational form it was to retain for eight centuries, with its two provinces, its territorial bishoprics and a variety of religious communities, some including priests from Italy and north Africa. Whatever their earthly enmities, living in warring kingdoms, speaking different dialects, and calling themselves by a variety of names, these Christians knew that they were watched over by their own saints, including the seventh-century monk-bishops of Lindisfarne Aidan and Cuthbert, Chad, first bishop of the Mercians, and the abbess Werburga, daughter of a Merician king. They knew they were a single people in the eyes of God – the *gens Anglorum*.

THE KINGDOM

If English identity began as a religious concept, it took political form in response to a deadly external threat, which overturned the political structures of the island and the near Continent: the Vikings. The word means ‘sea adventurers’ or ‘pirates’, another variety of the war bands that ravaged Europe over several centuries. This new menace was engendered by the prosperity of the Carolingian empire and its neighbours, including Britain, which enriched Scandinavian warlords through trade, bringing about the consolidation of Denmark, Norway and Sweden as kingdoms, and then tempting them into a more predatory relationship with the richer countries to the south. Vikings soon menaced every coast and navigable river from the Baltic to the Black Sea, seeking money, treasure, cattle, and male and especially female slaves for the newly expanding Muslim world. Vikings

(whom the English commonly called ‘Danes’) first targeted the wealthy English Church – a reason why monastic chroniclers stressed the horrors of their depredations. The first big and shocking incursion into Britain was the looting of the holy site of Lindisfarne in June 793. News of the sacrilege echoed across Europe: ‘the blood of saints poured out around the altar . . . the bodies of saints trampled on . . . like dung in the streets,’ thundered Alcuin of York, Charlemagne’s court theologian, who suspected it was divine punishment for monkish self-indulgence.⁷ There came a lull during which there were only small sporadic raids until the 830s, when mass attacks began involving up to 100 ships. Recently the Vikings have to some degree been rehabilitated as successful traders. The old Roman Eboracum became one of their capitals, Jorvik (hence York). It recovered from its capture in 866 and even prospered by trade with Scandinavia. Vikings, keen traders though they were, undeniably had a ‘penchant for cutting up their potential customers’.⁸ A legendary ritual for defeated enemies was the ‘blood eagle’ – chopping through the ribs and pulling out the lungs to be draped over the back like scarlet wings, said to have been the fate of King Ælla of Northumbria in 867.

The Viking attacks transformed the islands. The effects on the peasant population, exposed to violence and enslavement, were considerable, even if most were able to go on with their lives. The greater historic impact, however, was political. In some cases warlords and rebels thought they could use the Vikings as allies in factional struggles. They got more than they bargained for: in the far north, an aggressive Norse lordship took over in the Orkneys; other Vikings established a colony that became the kingdom of Dublin, the main base for raiding and slaving in Britain, and eventually part of a Viking kingdom including York. In 850–51, a Danish army tried to winter in Kent, and in 865 a ‘Great Army’ came to stay for good. Vikings took over two of the four major kingdoms, Northumbria and East Anglia, and partitioned a third, Mercia. Wessex, the kingdom of the West Saxons, remained precariously the only intact Christian power. Its takeover of the remnant of western Mercia around 880 marked a geographical and ideological step towards creating a single English kingdom.⁹

That Wessex survived and expanded is bound up with the story of its king, Alfred – a story so like legend that it has often been debunked, but which nevertheless stands up to scrutiny. A 23-year-old Alfred, slight in build, possibly suffering from some mysterious illness, inherited the throne in 871 to command the defence of his kingdom against a rampaging ‘Great Heathen Army’ led by Guthrum, Danish king of East Anglia. Alfred forced them to retreat, but in 875 they launched a new attack, forcing him to flee

into the marshes of Athelney in Somerset. Now the story becomes legend: the king, unrecognized, takes refuge with a peasant – a familiar story in many cultures, showing that the great are also human and vulnerable. In this version – told three centuries later, and popularized only eight centuries later – Alfred, left to keep an eye on the baking but understandably pre-occupied, ‘burnt the cakes’ or bread.¹⁰ What is actually documented is no less gripping: Alfred summoned his men to meet him at ‘Ecgeberht’s Stone to the east of Selwood, and there came to join him all Somerset and Wiltshire’,¹¹ and at Ethandun (Edington) in 879 they attacked and defeated the Danes, who accepted baptism. But they remained formidable enough to be recognized as overlords of a vast tract of the east of the island – the Danelaw – up to the old Roman road known as Watling (‘Waeclinga’) Street, dividing the country from the Mersey to the Thames.

Danish armies, secure in their northern and eastern territories, could and did still invade whenever they felt strong enough. This menace was countered by an immense common effort: the economic and urban structure of Wessex was recast into a regular system of large fortified settlements, ‘burhs’. Some were former Roman towns, some even older Iron Age forts, and some were new. Among them were Exeter, Bath, Bridport, Malmesbury, Shaftesbury, Porchester, Wallingford and Winchester. All were within twenty miles – a day’s march – of each other, and controlled estuaries and river crossings. In times of danger the burhs were garrisoned by organized local defence forces, and there was also a field army, the ‘fyrd’, and a royal fleet.

In 886 Alfred seized London. If we want a birth date for an English kingdom, this is as good as any.¹² So contemporaries seem to have thought: ‘all the English race turned to him,’ said the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ‘except what was in captivity to the Danish men’.¹³ So he seems to have felt himself, inspired by Bede’s *History*. He referred to his people not as Saxons but as ‘Angelcynn’ – ‘Englishkind’ – a term first used in Mercia. Their language was ‘Englisc’. Alfred, at first described in royal charters and on coins as *rex Saxonum*, duly became *rex Angul-Saxonum* in recognition of the union of Mercia and Wessex. He pursued a policy of what today we might term nation-building: ‘he sought to persuade [his subjects] that he was restoring the English, whereas, albeit following a model provided by Bede, he was inventing them’.¹⁴ He commanded a law code combining the customs of Wessex, Mercia and Kent and decked out with biblical teachings and Church laws – an important symbol of unity and status more than an instrument of rule, as in practice most law was oral and customary – ‘folk right’. He sent English coins to succour the poor of Rome. He wanted to increase Christian piety so as to ward off divine punishment in the form



of Viking invasion, and believed this required literacy. He wrote to his bishop at Worcester:

It seems better to me, if it seems so to you, that we . . . should translate certain books, which are most necessary for all men to know, into the language that we can all understand, and . . . that all the young freeborn men . . . may be set to study . . . until a time when they are able to read English writing well.¹⁵

He had Bede translated into English, and probably commissioned an *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* written in English to record the national history. It was later copied and circulated, and added to separately in several religious houses, including Winchester, Abingdon, Worcester, Peterborough and Canterbury; and two versions continued well beyond the Norman Conquest.¹⁶ English became the language of government, permitting more direct contact with the population. It was also the language of courtly culture: nowhere else in Europe except Ireland would have a vernacular high culture for another three centuries. Written English texts, often precious works of art, would become the property of whole communities, held in great churches, read out publicly on holy days, and also used to record important events, names of guildsmen and freed slaves, and legal decisions, which were written into the margins or on added pages.¹⁷

Alfred set himself the task of becoming not just a victorious warlord but a Christian philosopher-king, acquiring an unusual degree of learning for a layman. He translated (with assistance) some of the Psalms and several classical works, notably Boethius' *Consolations of Philosophy*, to which he added reflections of his own. In more than 1,000 years of European history between the emperor Marcus Aurelius and Alfonso the Wise of Spain, Alfred is the only European ruler we see reflecting personally on the moral duties of kingship.¹⁸ As Father of the Nation he therefore has much to recommend him. He was first called 'the Great' in the thirteenth century, and an unsuccessful attempt was made to canonize him in the fifteenth. But he later became a shadowy figure, except to antiquarians: even his burial place was uncertain, and did not become a site of pilgrimage. The Reformation, keen to explore the nation's origins, recovered him, and the eighteenth century celebrated him as a patriot-king: the song 'Rule Britannia' comes from the masque *Alfred* (1740). In this work he was exalted by the 'patriot' party as a symbol of Anglo-Saxon liberties (see p. 319), as well as founder of the navy and, thus indirectly, of future imperial greatness. The Victorians, not least in histories for children, hailed him as an ideal Christian ruler; and they erected monuments and statues to 'the most perfect character in history'.¹⁹

If Alfred was the first believable king of the 'Angelcynn' and defender

of their 'eard', their land, were they really a nation? In fundamental ways, not. There was no word 'England': the Angelcynn lived in Britain. Royal legal documents, charters, still referred to the kingdom as consisting of Anglo-Saxons, Northumbrians, Mercians, Britons and pagans. Aggrieved lords had few qualms about allying with invaders. The Danes in the north and east were unreconciled, and another mass invasion of Kent was beaten off in 892. After Alfred's death in 899 his nephew Aethelwold tried to enlist Viking support to gain the crown. Nobles and peasants (especially escaped slaves) were ready to run off to Viking bands. The interests of kin, lord and locality (especially former kingdoms such as Northumbria and Mercia, determined to preserve some autonomy) came first. The 'Englishkind' were not unusual in this lack of 'national' solidarity: it was the norm.

Alfred's death led to multiple Danish invasions, and the beginning of a long grinding struggle to break their power. In the decade after the bloody battle of Wednesfield (Staffordshire) in 910, in which twelve Danish leaders were killed, Edward the Elder, Alfred's only son, conquered the Danish-ruled areas up to the River Humber, and fought off invasions from Dublin and Scandinavia. This was the first lasting setback suffered anywhere by the Vikings. Many of them crossed the sea to where the Frankish monarchy was falling apart, and in 911 established a colony of Northmen – Normandy. In 920, all the rulers of Britain submitted to Edward the Elder as 'father and lord' – a term denoting status, not dominion. Edward's son Aethelstan succeeded him in 924. He conquered the Danish north-east, and he too was recognized as paramount king of Britain. A few years of peace ended with a joint invasion by Dublin Vikings, Scots and Britons, which might have shattered the new kingdom. But the invaders were crushed at Brunanburh (perhaps Bromborough, Cheshire) in 937, where 'Five young kings lay on the battlefield, put to sleep by swords.'²⁰ This victory confirmed Aethelstan as *rex Anglorum* – the first to claim the title 'king of the English', and the first who really ruled the whole people whose existence had been envisaged two centuries earlier by Bede.²¹ Yet Aethelstan almost disappeared from the national memory, overshadowed by the prestige of Alfred, by the sainthood of Edward the Confessor, and, inevitably, by the mystical glamour of Arthur.²²

Lack of evidence makes this one of the most obscure as well as disturbed periods of our history. No political settlement was permanent, or even outlived its author. Each king had to defend or re-create his inheritance. Aethelstan's brother Eadred, who reigned from 946 to 955, was proclaimed 'emperor of the Anglo-Saxons and Northumbrians, governor of the pagans, defender of the Britons', and he maintained control in the north – the northern border reached broadly where it is today. On his death the

kingdom briefly split. A short apogee came during the reign of Edgar (959–75), who succeeded as a child. In 973, he was finally crowned at Bath, in a religious ritual, elements of which have been used ever since; at Chester, British rulers met to accept peace and symbolically acknowledge his primacy by rowing him on the River Dee. There were no invasions. Great power was exercised by Dunstan, Archbishop of Canterbury, later canonized. He increased the power and wealth of bishops and monasteries, and weakened control over them by the nobility – a serious blow to the leading noble families. Combined with an effort to enforce Rome's restrictive marriage laws (couples sharing a common great-grandparent were considered incestuous), which threatened to make many heirs illegitimate, the result was dangerous discontent among the magnates of the kingdom, and even a confused succession to the crown.

But in appearance all was well. The English were prospering through agriculture and trade in conditions of peace and security unknown for centuries. In contrast with post-Carolingian Europe, England had no prolonged or general internal conflict in 200 years. Its kings ruled with an iron hand, punishing disobedient shires and nobles with hangings, ravaging, confiscation and exile. Enforcing law and custom was a job for the people themselves. Law, as was typical of lightly governed societies, aimed at compensation for injury ('If anyone strike another with his fist on the nose, iii shillings') and restraint of blood feuds, by regulating the 'wergild' ('man money') paid by a killer to a dead man's kin or master. Wergild differed according to status: one king issued a proclamation to 'all his people, whether men of a twelve-hundred wergild or of a two-hundred' – meaning nobles and peasants respectively. One of the concessions Alfred had extracted from Guthrum was that the price for killing an Englishman in the Danelaw should be the same as that for killing a Dane. Men were divided into groups of ten – tithings – to protect and police each other, and they bonded through eating and drinking. Ten tithings formed armed pos-
 ses to ride after rustlers and escaped thralls (slaves) living as bandits, and if necessary attack their protectors. Thrall ringleaders were summarily hanged, and their followers were flogged, scalped and deprived of their little fingers – which marked them without destroying their ability to work. In the century before 1066 there was an increase in punishment (usually by death or savage mutilation) for crimes that were increasingly seen not merely as matters concerning individuals and families, but as offences against king and community by breaking 'the king's peace'. There were what now seem oddities: taking the king's wheat led to arrest, but braining one's mother with a candlestick brought only a religious penance.²³ Aethelstan commanded that free women harbouring thieves should be thrown

from a cliff or drowned, and delinquent slaves stoned to death by other slaves ('And if any one of them fails three times to hit him, he shall himself be scourged three times').²⁴ Such harshness was not the whole story. Slaves could be freed as a religious act, as in the following case in the late tenth century of people who had voluntarily entered bondage in time of famine, and which suggests that human feelings could exist even in savage times:

Geatfleda has given freedom for the love of God and the sake of her soul [to] Ecceard the smith, Aelstan and his wife and all their children born and unborn, and to Arkil, Cole, Ecferth [and] Aldhun's daughter and all the people whose head she took for their food in those evil days.²⁵

The Angelcynn were becoming what we might recognize as an embryonic nation. Their boundaries were now broadly established. They had a distinct and fairly homogeneous system of customary law – even the 'Danelaw' was little different – with the king's law over all. There was an English Church with English saints, which prayed for 'the king of the English and his army', and which was beginning the long process of creating the hundreds of small parishes that would for a millennium provide the framework of English society. An opulent coinage was struck, millions of silver pennies bearing the king's head and title. An administrative system was gradually established over most of the country, based on the 'scir' (shire), generally centred on a river port, governed for the king by an ealdorman and his deputy, the 'scirgerefa' (sheriff), tax collector, judge and policeman. The shires would substantially retain their territories and names (such as Devenescire and Nordfulc) for over 1,000 years, with no major change until 1974. There was a regular system of participation in government. The warrior nobility, 'thegns', and free peasants, 'ceorls' ('churls'), met in shire courts and local monthly courts in every hundred (a subdivision of the shire). Tens of thousands of men took part in levying taxes, enforcing the law, hearing royal commands, and when necessary taking up arms. At the age of twelve, every freeman took an oath of loyalty to the king and obedience to the law – a practice that continued for many centuries.²⁶ To represent the whole kingdom, a gathering of thegns and prelates, the 'witan' ('the councillors'), was summoned by the king at various places, sometimes traditional open-air sites, to take part in ceremonies, give advice, settle disputes, try cases of treason, or endorse royal acts. It was crucial at times of danger and of disputed succession. From the 970s it was called the 'Angelcynnes witan', the council of the English people, and King Aethelred's 1008 law code was issued 'on the decree of the English witan'.²⁷ Though there were representative bodies in other parts of Europe, there were few if any national representative bodies like this.²⁸ The ability of

English rulers to raise taxation and manpower was unequalled in Europe, and it required this unique degree of involvement and consent by local communities, including even relatively humble subjects.

The kingdom did not break down into warring principalities – unlike the collapsed Carolingian empire, from which many ‘Anglo-Saxon’ institutions (such as national taxation, juries and oaths of loyalty) were originally copied.²⁹ Nor – most remarkably – did it descend into full civil war, despite blood feuds and factional conflicts. When civil war did threaten, in 1051, it was averted by protests that ‘it was hateful to men to fight their own kin ... and they did not want to leave the eard open to foreigners by slaughtering each other’.³⁰ Priests taught that the defence of the eard was a warrior’s first duty. Loyalty to the eard survived conquests and changes of dynasty. Though there were regional identities and ethnic minorities (such as Brittonic speakers and Scandinavian immigrants), writers were now generally referring to the *Anglii*, and to the West Saxons, for example, as *occidentales Anglii*. In what may be the only surviving private letter from one ordinary member of the Angelcynn to another written some years before the Norman Conquest, ‘brother Edward’ is reproached for ‘abandoning the English practices which your fathers followed’ and copying Danish hairstyles, short at the back and with a fringe over the eyes, a sign that ‘you despise your *cynn*’.³¹

By the year 1000, the eard had acquired a name, ‘Englaland’, which began to be used in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* – though it had various spellings and fanciful supposed origins. Its population was over 1.5 million, densest in the eastern and southern shires. An export trade in wool, an economic mainstay for centuries to come, was being established. The plentiful and uniform silver coinage promoted nationwide economic activity. Roads, bridges and harbours were publicly maintained under royal authority. Investment had accumulated: there were some 6,000 water mills, the most complex machinery of the time.³² For all these reasons, the English kingdom emerged as probably the richest and one of the most powerful European polities, with effective control over the largest territory. It was ruled for more than a century by Alfred’s descendants, who intermarried with Continental royalty, and claimed to be the oldest royal house in Europe, descended from the fifth-century Saxon invader Cerdic.

But the kingdom had a fundamental flaw: the inability to provide secure and orderly succession. In part this was accident: unlike the French Capetians, installed in 987, who managed to produce viable male heirs for centuries, after the death of Edgar in 975, at the age of thirty-two, the House of Cerdic was blighted by too many heirs or too few, by child heirs, and by several untimely deaths – not all from natural causes, as we shall

see. The system for passing on the crown was a dangerous mixture of inheritance, bequest and election. Ideally, this would confer a triple strength: an adult and competent member of the royal family would be chosen by the existing king as his heir and recognized by the witan. But circumstances were not ideal, and then there could be several rival claimants (sometimes brothers, uncles, children) fighting for the crown, and often for their lives – or at least for their eyes, as blinding was one way of disqualifying contenders. The most catastrophic succession conflict, in 1066, led to the subjugation of England.

Such conflicts exposed weaknesses in the new kingdom: regional insubordination, political faction, the rivalry of ecclesiastical and lay rulers, and the discontent of powerful nobles. And this offered easy pickings to international predators, who now homed in on England's wealth to make it the most assaulted part of Europe. The late tenth and eleventh centuries, arguably the worst crisis in England's history, would see at least five attempts to conquer it. Two of them succeeded: first the Danes and then the Normans.

CONQUESTS

When Edgar died in 975, only two years after his coronation and symbolic apotheosis on the River Dee, the new kingdom entered a vortex of political crises. Edgar had two young sons, the half-brothers Edward and Aethelred. They were backed by rival factions drawing on different kinship networks and regional power bases: 'Strife threw the kingdom into turmoil, moved shire against shire, family against family, prince against prince, ealdormen against ealdormen, drove bishop against the people and folk against the pastors set over them.'³³ The young King Edward was mysteriously murdered in 978, becoming St Edward the Martyr – a shocking event, not least because nothing comparable had happened for generations. But now murder, and even blinding and mutilation, became more common. Edward was succeeded by the twelve-year-old Aethelred II (979–1016), who was to have one of the longest and most disastrous reigns in English history. He is universally remembered as 'Ethelred the Unready' ('Unraed' meant 'ill advised'). His big problem, Viking attack, was beyond advice, good or ill. The Vikings had been defeated, but they had not disappeared. They had been shut out of England and much of mainland Europe over the previous decades by stronger defences. From their bases in Dublin and the Isle of Man, as well as from Scandinavia itself, led by the kings of Denmark and Norway, they were seeking a softer target, which England's political

turmoil now offered. After England had been free from Viking attack for nearly a century, and had let its defences decay, Aethelred's reign became a losing battle to fight or buy them off. It took them twenty years to conquer England.

Hundreds of raids followed Aethelred's succession: 'let us loyally support one royal lord,' urged Aethelred, 'and all of us together defend our lives and our country'.³⁴ He took a fateful step in 991, making a treaty with Richard, Duke of Normandy, to deny a base to raiders who were using Norman harbours for shelter and the capital, Rouen, as a market for English loot and vast numbers of slaves. The Duchy of Normandy was autonomous, and its duke enjoyed personal power as great as any Continental prince, at a time when the disintegration of the Frankish kingdom had brought the rise of highly violent and unstable principalities. The Normans, descended from Vikings, had abandoned all but vestiges of their Scandinavian culture, but were proud of their aggressive military ethos and their berserk violence in battle. This would carry their young men as mercenaries, conquerors and finally rulers to southern Italy, Sicily and the British Isles. An English alliance with Normandy was both necessary and dangerous. It was cemented by the marriage of Aethelred to Emma, the duke's daughter.

In 991 came disaster, when a fleet led by King Olaf Tryggvason of Norway was confronted by an English army under ealdorman Byrhtnoth at Maldon in Essex.³⁵ Byrhtnoth allowed the invaders to come ashore to fight. He may have wanted to tempt them to land rather than letting them sail away elsewhere. His defeat and death became the subject of a long poetic lament, of which a substantial fragment survives. It contains an early expression of patriotism, when Byrhtnoth defies the Vikings:

Listen, messenger! Take back this reply
 . . . that a noble earl and his troop stand here –
 guardians of the people and of the country, the home
 of Aethelred, my prince – who will defend this land
 to the last ditch.³⁶

After Maldon, Aethelred's councillors urged him to buy the invaders off. This had often been done before, but it had never cost so much. Vast sums were raised by a universal land tax, the first of its kind in Europe, both to pay for soldiers and ships and to bribe the enemy: the Danegeld. Over the next twenty-seven years, over £250,000 was raised – an astonishing sum many times the king's normal annual income, and testimony to the unparalleled administrative efficiency of the English kingdom, with its local institutions and wide participation. The weight of taxation drove many

free peasants into servitude. But the tax was also levied on the nobility – rare in Europe, and in the long term this was a considerable political unifier.³⁷ What happened was made proverbial by Rudyard Kipling as the archetypal act of weakness that makes the danger worse:

And that is called paying the Dane-geld;
But we've proved it again and again,
That if once you have paid him the Dane-geld
You never get rid of the Dane.

The Danes decided that if the English were so rich, they were worth conquering completely. Aethelred tried unsuccessfully to end the internal threat by ordering a massacre of Danes in England in 1002. There was a European-wide famine in 1005, which may have encouraged invasions. In 1006 the king of Denmark, Sveinn 'Forkbeard', began a series of major raids with 'plunder, burning and killing – and all England lamented and shook like a reed-bed struck by the quivering west wind'.³⁸ In 1009 'all the nation' was called to pray and do penance. In vain: Canterbury was besieged and captured; Archbishop Aelfheah was taken hostage – 'he who was earlier head of the English race and of Christendom was a roped thing' – and subsequently murdered during a drunken feast.³⁹ Aethelred, Emma and their three children fled to their allies and kinsmen in Normandy. Sveinn landed again in 1013, probably with help from residents of the Danelaw, took London, and thereupon died, as soon after did Aethelred. Their respective sons and heirs, Cnut and Edmund 'Ironside', so called because he possessed 'tremendous strength and remarkable endurance in warfare',⁴⁰ fought each other to a standstill. But Edmund died or was killed in 1016 (by one account, 'stabbed twice with a sharp knife in the private parts' while in the lavatory⁴¹). Cnut ('Canute') became king.

The kingdom of the English, after some 130 years of existence, thus became part of a North Sea empire. The Scandinavian influx into the British Isles over the whole Viking period was probably greater than any other population movement until that of the late twentieth century.⁴² The Danish conquest, almost as bloody and disruptive in the short term as that of the Normans would be half a century later, was accepted by the conquered as inevitable. Cnut had the sense to make concessions in victory: he promulgated a code of laws 'determined and devised by the witan', and sent a public letter written in English to 'all his people . . . with friendship', promising to be a 'gracious lord' and to espouse the laws 'which all men have chosen and sworn to'. He buried the murdered Archbishop Aelfheah, regarded by the English as a saint, at Canterbury. He also (bigamously) married Aethelred's Norman widow, Emma. Cnut was now one of the most

powerful European monarchs. In 1027 he went to Rome to take part in the coronation of the Holy Roman Emperor, Conrad II, a summit meeting of the greatest men of Europe, and he made sure the English knew that he had been treated with honour. His wisdom was proclaimed in one of the most famous of English historical stories, recounted a century later by Henry of Huntingdon: 'King Canute' showed his flatterers that he could not hold back the waves, proclaiming that 'the power of kings is empty and worthless', and that God was the only true king.⁴⁴ The main reason the English accepted Cnut was their hope that he could hold back the waves of Viking attacks through his simultaneous possession of Denmark and Norway.

In attempting to govern his unwieldy domains, Cnut made a major change in English governance. He created four regional earldoms (the Danish word earl replaced the older ealdorman). These great offices were sufficiently important for some of their holders to be remembered over the centuries. Siward of Northumbria appears in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Leofric, Earl of Mercia, was the husband of perhaps the most famous Anglo-Saxon lady, Godgifu – 'Lady Godiva', who by tradition rode naked through the streets of Coventry to persuade him to forego a tax increase. Godwine of Wessex, who had risen rapidly as Cnut's main English collaborator, fathered the last Anglo-Saxon king (though with a Danish name), Harold II. The danger, as the history of the Godwines showed, was to create over-mighty subjects whose power could challenge that of the king, and hence complicate an already unstable system of succession.

Cnut's death in 1035 began a struggle between two of his sons, Harold I, 'Harefoot', and Harthacnut. Aethelred's two sons, Edward and Alfred, heirs to the Anglo-Saxon royal line, refugees with their Norman ally, tried to return. Earl Godwine – 'a mighty earl and a ruthless traitor'⁴⁵ – is suspected of having simplified the succession problem with a brutality that shocked even contemporaries: the 'aetheling' (prince) Alfred was seized when he landed in Kent in 1037, handed over to Cnut's son, Harold I, and maimed and blinded to destroy him as a potential king – an act from which he died. This seems to have been tacitly condoned by Godwine's fellow earls: it was above all necessary to avert civil war. In 1042, Aethelred's surviving son, Edward, became the undisputed king after the early deaths of Cnut's unlamented sons. Edward was far from ideal. He was little known, was far from being a heroic warrior, and was middle-aged, unmarried and without an heir. His only advantage – apart from the dubious one of unusual piety, hence his title 'the Confessor' – was that he embodied the alliance with the Normans, now the main barrier against the Scandinavians. He had spent most of his life as an exile in Normandy, and was on

excellent terms with the Norman dukes. In 1044 he married Edith, daughter of Earl Godwine, but, perhaps not to anyone's great surprise, produced no offspring. In retrospect, Edward's twenty-three-year reign (despite sporadic Welsh and Norwegian raids) seemed a golden age, the last flowering of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom and its culture, crowned by the rebuilding of the royal abbey of St Peter, the 'West Minster', consecrated in 1065 as the coronation site of English kings. Its Burgundian 'Romanesque' style was entirely new for England, and the greatest architectural enterprise here since Roman times; its church was the biggest in northern Europe.⁴⁶ For future generations Edward's reign became a subject of nostalgia, and for future rulers a source of legitimacy, hallowed by his canonization in 1161.

The golden age had an obvious tarnish: the absence of an agreed successor. The heirs of Cnut would certainly assert their claims by force when the time came. Godwine's family – accumulators of vast estates in the south and Midlands, and now joined to the king by marriage – were emerging as possible claimants too. King Edward's closest allies and friends were the Normans. He had already appointed Normans to important bishoprics, and had granted land to Norman nobles. In about 1050 Edward seems to have decided to bequeath the crown to Duke William of Normandy: a logical outcome to the problem of succession, and perhaps the best available.

Edward's closeness to the Normans nearly led to civil war. In 1051 there was a violent clash between Norman knights and local people at Dover, and when Edward ordered Earl Godwine to punish the town, he refused. The king and Godwine both gathered troops, but few thegns were prepared to embark on civil war. The Godwines were briefly outlawed and forced into exile; but so powerful had they become that they found allies and hired a fleet, and were able to return triumphantly the following year. Again, there was no stomach for civil war. The king gave in, and his leading Norman supporters were banished. In 1053 Harold Godwineson succeeded to the earldom of Wessex, and his brothers became earls of Northumbria, East Anglia and Kent. They were now largely running the country on the king's behalf. In 1064 or 1065 Harold turned up in Normandy in obscure and endlessly debated circumstances. A plausible version is that he had gone to secure the freedom of his nephew, held hostage by William.⁴⁷ Harold arrived after a chapter of accidents (a shipwreck, capture by the Count of Ponthieu and rescue by the Normans). He was induced to swear solemn allegiance to William, and went off fairly amicably with him to wage war against the Bretons.

In December 1065, King Edward lay dying, muttering alarming prophecies. What actually happened is obscured by contemporary claims and

counter-claims. Over the years, Edward may have considered bequeathing his crown to several possible candidates, including William of Normandy and the kings of Norway and Denmark. Now he decided, or was persuaded, to choose Harold Godwineson, the closest contender. Edward died on 5 January 1066. Harold was crowned the following day in the new Westminster Abbey, consecrated nine days earlier. He seems to have had popular support, and had been hastily elected by the *witan*. No doubt the pure ambition of the rapacious Godwine clan was a driving force: but also the kingdom was facing the imminent threat of a Norse invasion, as well as attacks by the Welsh and Scots, and it urgently needed an active leader. Harold's succession set in motion a Norman invasion too, as Duke William claimed to be Edward's rightful successor and accused Harold of breaking his oath. Securing the Pope's approval, he began raising an army.

So began King Harold's short and bloody epic of 'forty weeks and one day'. He led a forced march north, over twenty miles a day, to confront Norwegian invaders, led by King Harald 'Hardrada' ('the Ruthless'), warlord and poet, who had sailed up the Humber. Harold's estranged brother Tostig had joined the invaders – a sign of how limited the idea of 'national' and even family loyalty was among a cosmopolitan and factious nobility. Harold surprised them, many without their armour, at Stamford Bridge near York on 25 September 1066 in perhaps the most complete annihilation in medieval military history.⁴⁸ Hardrada and Tostig were both killed and their army of several thousand men was almost wiped out. This was an event of European importance, as it ended the era of great Viking invasions. Three days later Duke William, aged thirty-eight, ferried an army in hundreds of ships and boats the seventy miles from the Somme estuary to Pevensey in Sussex.⁴⁹ Harold rushed south with all the men who could keep up.

William's invading army – perhaps around 8,000 warriors – was made up of Normans and other adventurers tempted by a well-publicized speculative enterprise against a richer country, offering land, treasure and wealthy English brides. William's army was thus a bigger and better-led variant of the war bands that had ravaged Europe for centuries, and it formed part of what has been called an 'aristocratic diaspora', in which ambitious warriors, mostly from the fragments of Charlemagne's Frankish empire, invested in horses, armour and weapons, and set out to conquer wealth and land round the periphery of Europe. By 1350, twelve of the fifteen monarchs of Latin Christendom – including those of England and Scotland – were of Frankish descent.⁵⁰ So England, and later Wales and Ireland, shared the fate of Iberia, the southern Baltic and the Slavic borderlands. What was unusual in the invasion of England, and to

contemporaries shocking, was that it was not a pagan or heretical territory, but a powerful and respected Christian kingdom. Hence it was important that William could claim, fairly plausibly and possibly sincerely, to be its rightful king.

The deciding factor was not right, but might, in the most famous battle in English history. Yet little is certain about the precise unfolding of events 'at the grey apple tree'⁵¹ seven miles from Hastings, on Saturday, 14 October 1066 – not even whether Harold really was killed by an arrow in the eye. Harold massed his men close together in what a French chronicler called 'a human fortress'⁵² and let the invaders attack him. The battle was unusually hard fought and the invaders were suffering heavily from the axes and spears of Harold's men. When William's horse was speared and he was thrown to the ground, the Normans thought he was dead and started to run. William rallied them by pulling back his helmet to show his face and shouting unanswerably that 'if you run you'll all die'.⁵³ What finally won for William were his armoured cavalry, the close-range shooting of his archers – the two arms that were establishing themselves as dominant in medieval warfare, neither of which the English had – and the numbers and freshness of his warriors. According to another French chronicler, Guy of Amiens, William sent four mounted warriors through the fray to kill Harold, and they cut him to pieces; the embroidered Bayeux tapestry seemed to show him with an arrow in the eye; and later the Anglo-Norman historian William of Malmesbury combined the stories to show him hit by an arrow and then dismembered on the ground.⁵⁴ However it happened, Harold and his two brothers Gyth and Leofwine were killed, as were three of Edward the Confessor's nephews. The English nobility was smashed: 'Just as the forest is cut down by the axe, so the English forest was destroyed.'⁵⁵ Perhaps 3,500 English and 2,500 Normans were dead.

What happened after the battle was even more important. As we have seen, the English kingdom had been in crisis, with several aggressive claimants to the crown: civil war and invasion loomed over the country. William had a plausible claim to be king, and the association with Normandy, already close, was the best guarantee of security. Harold and the Godwine faction were not universally liked. So after Stamford Bridge and Hastings, with Harold dead and his warriors slaughtered, the English might have accepted William as king just as they had accepted Cnut half a century earlier, and for similar reasons. Quite quickly, influential Englishmen, including Archbishop Aldred of York, rallied to William, who was crowned on Christmas Day 1066 at Westminster Abbey. English soldiers joined his army. English officials kept their posts. Harold's sons, launching sea-borne raids from their refuge in Ireland, made little impact. By 1068 Edgar the

aetheling (grandson of Edmund 'Ironsides') had made his peace with William, who was offering pardons and even marriage into his family for surviving English nobles.

If this had continued, the Norman Conquest might have had little more impact than that of Cnut, especially as the number of William's followers was fairly small – far fewer than in earlier Germanic and Scandinavian invasions. English society and culture might have been little changed. On the other hand, William had his greedy soldiers to reward, and they were hastily building wooden castles with forced labour to ensure their hold on the conquered territory – buildings never before seen in England and for which there was no English word. 'When the castles were built, they filled them with devils and wicked men . . . they levied taxes on the villages . . . they robbed and burned.'⁵⁶ Thousands of colonists followed in their wake. There was a prolonged free-for-all at local level as the victors advanced up to the still fluid and disputed northern and western marchlands. William's coronation itself provided an unfortunate and unintended symbol of ethnic division. When Normans and English in the audience shouted ritual acclamation of the king in their own languages, Norman soldiers outside, misunderstanding the English shouts as threatening, went on the rampage and set fire to several houses.⁵⁷

It was probably determination to defend local power and property against Norman encroachment that caused scattered resistance in Northumbria, Mercia, Wessex and East Anglia. In 1069 Edgar the aetheling and surviving English earls, especially those from the north, where local autonomy was most jealously guarded, fought back, led by Earl Waltheof of Northumbria. So did local thegns such as Hereward in the fenland round Peterborough and Ely. The lack of options available to the English – and the limited extent to which this can be seen as a 'national' uprising in modern terms – is shown by their alliance with the Danes, and their willingness to accept the Danish king, Sveinn Estrithson, as Cnut's heir. The Danes now launched their very last invasion, almost 300 years after their first. Welshmen too joined the northern rebels: 'all the people of the land, riding and marching . . . greatly rejoicing'.⁵⁸ York was taken and its Norman garrison slaughtered, Waltheof 'cutting off their heads one by one' as they tried to escape.⁵⁹ The Danes, now welcomed by the local people, helped Hereward to capture Peterborough in 1070 – but they then departed with the abbey treasure.

William acted ruthlessly to punish and eradicate opposition. What was remembered as 'the harrying of the North' – a scorched-earth policy – left expanses of the Midlands and the north devastated, and many killed or starving. This was unusually brutal even by the harsh standards of the

times. The monk-historian Orderic Vitalis some sixty years later described 'helpless children, young men in the prime of life, and hoary grey-beards alike perishing of hunger'.⁶⁰ Much of the land was still deserted a generation after.

William's own attitude seems to have changed. If he had ever intended to create an Anglo-Norman partnership, it was now abandoned. He gave up trying to learn English. He stopped using English in documents in 1070.⁶¹ He spent little time in the country from 1072 until his death in 1087. He purged the English Church, and he dispossessed the English nobility wholesale: England was now to be ruled by Frenchmen. The monasteries – in which lay people stored their wealth for safety – were plundered. William made the unprecedented claim that every acre of England now belonged to him by right of conquest, to be given as he wished to reward his followers and make them his dependants.

Where did this leave the Angelcynn, after the fourth great transforming invasion of the island? Why is 1066 the most famous date in our history? Because it caused the most traumatic political, social and cultural rupture. 'No other event in western European history of the central Middle Ages can be compared for its shocking effects: the carnage on the battlefield, the loss of life and the consequent political upheaval.'⁶² Across Europe, writers recorded their shock and indignation at the bloodshed. Conquest meant wholesale national degradation. Before 1066, the English were widely regarded, not only by themselves, as 'a glorious and splendid people'.⁶³ Some might have considered them as a little too civilized: the Normans found English prisoners well-dressed, long-haired and beautiful, much given to combing their locks – unlike the Normans' own shaven and crop-headed style. The English could claim to be 'a people greater, richer and older' than their thuggish, illiterate conquerors.⁶⁴ English kings had probably been wealthier than most of their post-Conquest successors. But after 1066 the English as a whole – the 'natives' (*nativi*), as they were generally known – would come to be considered a people of peasants using a crude vernacular, the butt of mockery. This influenced later views of the Conquest, even to the present day.

The Conquest annihilated England's ruling class, physically and genetically. Some 4,000–5,000 thegns were eliminated by battle, exile, or dispossession in the biggest transfer of property in English history. In the words of an English chronicler, 'some were slain by iron, others placed in prisons . . . many were driven from their native land and the rest oppressed'. Some fled to Scotland or Denmark, others became mercenaries as far afield as Byzantium, where they served in the imperial guard and set up a small English colony near Nicea. Harold's daughter married a Slavic prince. The

last English earl, Waltheof, was beheaded in 1076. Most simply sank in society. English widows and heiresses were forcibly married to William's followers. Others entered nunneries 'out of fear of the French' – including the future Queen Edith (wife of Henry I), 'to preserve me from the lust of the Normans which was rampant'.⁶⁵ As a later chronicler told it, 'noble maidens were exposed to the insults of low-born soldiers, and lamented their dishonouring by the scum of the earth'.⁶⁶ A generation after the Conquest, all significant power and wealth were in new hands.

We can dimly imagine the psychological effects of the sudden imposition of some 15,000 new masters with a foreign culture, whom the English called 'French' or 'Roman'. English churchmen, the nation's spiritual and cultural leaders, were removed from the highest offices and replaced principally by French or Italian prelates. Within a generation, only one bishop was English, and only two great abbots. English saints, the highest symbols of local and national identity by whose merits God 'adorned the island munificently',⁶⁷ ceased for a time to be honoured. Lanfranc, former abbot of Bec in Normandy and now an imperiously reforming Archbishop of Canterbury, despised the English and had doubts about 'the quality of the sanctity' of their saints – admittedly, not invariably dazzling. The new Norman abbot of St Albans demolished shrines and burned relics.⁶⁸ When monks at Glastonbury resisted the imposition of Norman liturgy in 1083, soldiers killed or wounded several, shooting arrows down from the choir loft, and, relates the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 'blood came down from the altar onto the steps and from the steps to the floor'.⁶⁹ English libraries disappeared. The Church became the most visible channel for the cultural dominance of the new rulers, through endowments and vast new buildings. This was to atone for the sin of the Conquest, and literally to consecrate the new order: William had the high altar of his new Battle Abbey built on the spot where Harold fell. It was also an unparalleled way of showing off new riches, status and power.

All this might resemble cultural annihilation as well as political revolution. But fundamental elements of the past survived. Some of the greatest English saints were soon back in favour, and St Edward the Confessor in time became the national and royal patron. This served the conquerors ideologically, maintaining a fiction of continuity, which insisted that the Conquest was the assertion of legitimate succession.⁷⁰ But it also helped to reassert the Englishness of the Church, the core of national culture in which English was still used and written. The system of government remained too, passed on to William by English clerics and office-holders clinging on to their jobs: the shires and hundreds with their officers and regular courts; and councils of nobles and prelates tenuously descended

from the witan. The Normans added nothing to it because it worked, and helped them to rule. But it was a system that differed fundamentally from those on the Continent, including Normandy itself. This was so in two ways, both of which shaped England's future. First, it was fairly uniform and covered most of the country, and so tended to counteract the fragmentation of authority that had splintered European kingdoms and empires into a chaos of feudal principalities: 'The sheriffs, though called vice-comites, were to be the king's officers; the shire moots might be called county courts, but they were not to be the courts of counts.'⁷¹ Second, it had a wide degree of participation, not only of noble magnates and great prelates, but of lesser knights, sheriffs, and even free peasants in hundred courts – perhaps one man in twenty took part.⁷² So ancient forms of representation that were snuffed out by kings and noble magnates on the Continent survived in England.⁷³ This was the reality behind the myth of 'Anglo-Saxon liberty', for myths are rarely entirely fictitious. Institutions that had been born with the nation, and made the nation, survived. England under the Normans was still recognizably England.

2

The Conqueror's Kingdom

They built castles widely throughout this nation, and oppressed the wretched people, and afterwards it continually grew very much worse. When God wills, may the end be good.

Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, 1066

Though the Conquest preserved many institutions, it yet changed the way England was ruled. Before, government had depended largely on consent; now it was dominated by force.¹ Unlike his predecessors, the Conqueror claimed to be the lord of all the land: this was the political revolution of the Conquest. Vast areas remained directly in the possession of the Crown, and all holders of land owed their rights and allegiance ultimately to him. The *witan* as the 'council of the English people' soon disappeared, except perhaps in memory, and although assemblies were still summoned, they became gatherings of the king's main feudal tenants, usually called 'concilia' (in French *conciles*) or, later, 'parlements'. This word – which could simply mean discussions – came to denote formal meetings of the king and his magnates.² The four great earldoms set up by Cnut were abolished, and power was concentrated in the king's hands. The Conqueror claimed all the powers enjoyed by Edward the Confessor, and retained local administration under new management.³ For all these reasons, kings of England were far more able to enforce the rights they claimed than were the other great monarchs, the kings of Francia and the German emperors, and this effective power of government was a fundamental characteristic of subsequent English history. That power is demonstrated by Domesday Book (1085–6), which set the seal on the Conquest by giving the king precise information on 13,400 named places he now possessed. The far north – Cumberland, Westmorland, Northumberland and Durham – were not included, as their possession was disputed and tenuous at best.

Domesday Book was so called, said a later royal treasurer, because 'its decisions, like those of the Last Judgement, are unalterable'. As a comprehensive survey of a country, it is 'unrivalled, not only in medieval Europe, but anywhere at any time'.⁴ The aim was probably to sort out the chaos left by land-grabs that had followed the post-Conquest rebellions, to clarify the value and tenure of what the king owned, to facilitate taxation, and to bring the country under the rule of written law. Sworn juries were assembled to provide information on their districts (common practice in England and Normandy), and this information was recorded in Latin by royal commissioners, who often misunderstood English terms.⁵ The king 'sold his land on very hard terms – as hard as he could,' recorded the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*,⁶ and his harshness was passed down to the conquered English peasantry.

Domesday Book listed the different types of land and its use; minerals and manufactures; fisheries; 6,000 mills; productive people (nearly always only adult men) and their status, from earls to villagers, or 'villeins' (109,000), and slaves (28,000); and animals, from plough-teams of oxen to bees. And it said how much all of this was worth. It shows England as a rich and developed agricultural country, with its forests already reduced to twentieth-century levels, nearly all today's villages already in embryo, and as much land under the plough as in 1900, using 650,000 oxen.

The royal family directly held 20 per cent of the land, the church had 25 per cent, and a dozen magnates controlled another 25 per cent – less concentration of wealth than under the Godwines. Effectively the country was controlled by about 250 people: the king, the great prelates (chosen by him), and about 170 barons with landed incomes of over £100 per year – practically all newcomers. Below them were the holders of the remaining 30 per cent of the land: some 2,000 foreign knights, William's followers, and 8,000 other new settlers, some of them the rank and file of the conquering army, others who had followed in the conquerors' wake, and the surviving English free peasantry. Of nearly 2 million English, only four Englishmen (none of whose names are familiar today) were still major landowners, and only about twenty had incomes of over £20 per year.⁷

Despite political conflict and heavy taxation, much of England was prospering, and some credit must go to its post-Conquest rulers. Most fundamentally, they provided greater security against raids and invasion – the Norman Conquest was, of course, the last such. Their ambitious buildings created jobs and trade. Castles provided the focus of trading centres, and towns multiplied and grew. Exports – especially of wool to Flanders, and also of foodstuffs and minerals – flourished, and trade expanded with southern Europe. This expanded existing ports such as

London and Ipswich, and created a string of new ones – Newcastle, Hull, Boston, Lynn and Portsmouth. In agriculture, the Normans introduced rabbits in carefully controlled warrens and fallow deer into the forests.

Social, economic and political control of the land and its people – what in the eighteenth century would retrospectively be termed the 'feudal system'⁸ – was given a more centralized and rigorous form after the Conquest swept away many existing rights and eliminated the English thegns. The Conqueror at once granted land – 'fiefs' or 'fees' – to his barons in return for their services, military and political, symbolized by the ceremony of homage, a public oath of allegiance. They in turn granted it to their own followers, for similar allegiance and services: England's 50,000 square miles could supply about 7,500 knights' fees of on average six or seven square miles. At the lowest level, 'natives', 'Anglici', 'rustics', 'serfs', 'villeins' (the words overlapped) were allotted land and protection in return for rent, labour and other services. Many thousands of previously free English landholders became legally subject to the new lords. Recalled an early historian, 'it was even disgraceful to be called English'.⁹ Over 70 per cent of tenants were villeins, holding 15–40 acres, or 'cottagers' with five acres or less; and many of the former employed paid labourers or slaves.¹⁰

All land and all men were now legally part of this hierarchy, which was buttressed by an ideology of lordship, duty and loyalty, of which the cult of chivalry and the Arthurian romances would later be the most idealized example. In theory, it gave rights as well as duties to all (even, to a limited extent, to villeins). 'Glanvill' (the 1180s treatise on law traditionally attributed to Henry II's Chief Justice, Ranulf Glanvill) stated that 'the bond of trust in lordship should be mutual'.¹¹ However unequal the relationship, it did give some protection to dependants, and established a principle of reciprocity. The most unpopular landlords were not barons but monks: the monasteries were efficient and impersonal exploiters with long memories and clear consciences. The military foundation on which feudalism was supposedly based – service in arms was the prime duty owed – was never fully applied, and money was always a substitute. Towns and their inhabitants were always partly outside it.

The English version of this 'feudal system' was unlike that elsewhere in Europe. The post-Conquest Crown recognized no powers or rights independent of the king. Nor did barons possess large continuous territories, but only scattered holdings. England escaped the trend that tormented the Continent: central authority did not fragment, but was strengthened. Great barons could never create autonomous and warring principalities. They had no jurisdiction over their vassals higher than that of the king's judges. A French historian comments that 'the great success of medieval England

was to combine an early centralization of justice with recognition of local liberties, buttressed by popular juries'.¹²

What about the majority of the population? Pre-Conquest society was later idealized as embodying 'Anglo-Saxon liberties', but it was nevertheless very violent, subject to heavy taxation and compulsory labour, and about 12 per cent of the people were slaves – a status that the Normans gradually abolished in England, then in Wales and later in Ireland. It was also exposed to invasion and internal conflict. Even so the Conquest was disastrous for English peasants as a whole, through the direct effects of war, greater impositions, and the subjection of many thousands of freemen to serfdom. The luckier ones managed to remain as free tenants (14 per cent of those listed in Domesday Book), or held subordinate positions as estate managers, foresters, huntsmen and minor royal officers. The Conquest may have increased a common sense of Englishness among the subject population: the old divide between Dane and Saxon seems to have disappeared. Many must have realized that their personal fate was linked with that of the country. When testifying about local affairs, jurors in the twelfth century sometimes spoke of 'the Conquest of England' or referred to the time 'before the Normans conquered England'.¹³ In some places, the customary rights of Anglo-Saxon days were successfully claimed, and long after 1066 peasants appealed to privileges granted by the Confessor, Canute or even Offa.

There were two groups of Englishmen, and some women, who retained power, wealth or status. The first group were townspeople. Although the Conquest led to an influx of urban immigrants, the English remained a strong presence, including among the most prominent groups – moneyers, goldsmiths, moneylenders (among whom there were also Jewish communities), merchants and royal officers. They were the only significant English group whose wealth and influence could approach that of the French landed magnates, with whom some of them mixed even at the level of the royal court. There were occupational hazards, however: in the 1120s many moneyers were castrated and had their right hands cut off by Henry I for debasing the currency. The second group were churchmen. As we have noted, the highest ranks of the clergy – commanding immense economic and political as well as spiritual power – were closed to Englishmen. But the lower levels – parish clergy, cathedral canons, archdeacons, monks, nuns, hermits and anchoresses – remained strongly and sometimes predominantly English in background and culture. Their oral teaching (mostly in English) and writings (in English, Latin and French) maintained English religious and cultural traditions. Some, notably William of Malmesbury (c.1090–c.1142), librarian of Malmesbury Abbey, and Henry of

Huntingdon (c.1088–c.1157), hereditary clergyman-squire of Little Stukely and archdeacon of Huntingdon, both of mixed French and English parentage, were responsible, as we shall see shortly, for writing a new English history which helped to define the post-Conquest nation.

There were no more major revolts by the English after the harsh repression of 1069–70; but the heavy 'murdrum' fine levied on local communities where a Norman was murdered (and any victim other than a serf was assumed to be Norman unless his 'anglaiserie' was proved) is evidence of continuing localized violence by the English against their new lords, not least from outlaws in the forests.¹⁴ The lack of larger conflict may have helped gradual reconciliation, or at least acquiescence. Among the aristocracy, if there was frequent political division, it was relatively restrained, and less violent than under the Anglo-Saxons, with the notable exception of the period of the 'Anarchy' of Stephen's reign (see pp. 62–3), far worse than anything during the Anglo-Saxon kingdom. Nevertheless, not a single earl and hardly any barons were executed or murdered for political reasons for more than 200 years.¹⁵ Political murders and mutilations practically ceased. By contemporary European standards, post-Conquest England was a haven of peace.

The Normans built the grandest, the most experimental, the most expensive buildings in a variety of styles, surpassing the greatest on the Continent. The new Winchester cathedral (begun in 1079) was the longest in western Europe; London's White Tower (c.1080) was the biggest keep in western Europe; Westminster Great Hall (1097) was the largest secular covered space; Norwich castle (c.1100) was the most ambitious secular building in northern Europe; Christ Church priory, Canterbury, possessed the greatest glass windows in all Europe. Probably more cut stone than in the Pyramids was used in this, the most concentrated construction effort in England between the Romans and the Victorians, amounting to the greatest per capita investment ever seen in England until the Industrial Revolution.¹⁶ Quite a lot, built in haste, fell down – some of it quite soon (towers at Winchester, Ely, Evesham, Bury St Edmunds, Chichester). But what remained was stupendous, matched then only by Rome itself, Constantinople and Kiev, and it includes many of our greatest cultural treasures. But what the English at the time would have seen were 'massive, stark, bright, uncompromising foreign structures, which transformed the English landscape'.¹⁷ Building also meant destruction, and this too was intentional. Down came the Old Minster and palace at Winchester, seat of the kings of Wessex. Nearly all the great Anglo-Saxon churches, monasteries and minsters were demolished, and nothing of them remains above ground in any English cathedral. By 1100, all were new or rebuilt in Romanesque

(‘Norman’) style – Canterbury was modelled on Saint-Étienne, in Caen. The effort extended to buildings embodying a less spiritual form of power: about 500 castles were thrown up in fifty years – roughly one every ten miles – and at least ninety were of stone, serving both security and prestige. These were something new in England: the Anglo-Saxon nobility had not needed to live in fortresses, and the ramparts of burhs had protected the whole community. But Norman castles threatened as much as they protected, and they made the new rulers invincible: only one castle ever fell to an English rebellion, the temporary structure at York in 1069.

Buildings and land came to embody new family identities. Wealthy Anglo-Saxons had spread bequests widely among relatives to maintain the cohesion of an extended clan, very conscious of far-flung degrees of kinship. Norman wealth went into stones and mortar: according to William of Malmesbury, the Saxons had lived richly in ‘mean and despicable’ houses, while the Normans lived frugally in ‘noble and splendid mansions’. The practice grew of transmitting land where possible to a single male heir by primogeniture – a social revolution. The family became smaller and more vertical, and attached to a particular place. Names and titles reflected this change. Unlike in Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian societies, which used Christian names and patronymics (for example Harold Godwineson) or identifying names based on characteristics or occupation (Thorkell the Tall, Eadric the Steersman), the Norman elite adopted permanent family names derived from land, castle or ancestor (Hubert de Vaux, Roger de Chateaufort, Richard Fitzgerald). For the rest, individual nicknames (from place, job, physique – John Wood, Robert Smith, Thomas Becket) in time became permanent family surnames.

There was no greater cultural conquest than in language. Working shortly before 1066, a thousand writers and copyists of English have been identified. This may sound few, but it is several times the number writing Italian texts in Renaissance Italy.¹⁸ The Normans eradicated written English as the language of government and undermined it as the language of literature, and spoken English ceased to be the language of elite society. This change was confirmed by England’s attachment to the Angevin empire in 1154. It was long believed that English largely disappeared except as a peasant dialect. Walter Scott, in *Ivanhoe* (1819), made the famous point that English became the language of the farmyard (swine, ox, calf) and French that of the table (pork, beef, veal). But this does not mean that English was crude, and French sophisticated. As we have seen, Old English and Irish were the most developed of Europe’s vernaculars. English had a standardized written form by the late tenth century, whereas French had no written literature at all until – ironically – it was pioneered in

post-Conquest England, as we shall see, perhaps in imitation of Anglo-Saxon literature.¹⁹ Replacing English required two languages: Latin, for legal, administrative, ecclesiastical, commercial and intellectual contexts; French for verbal communication among the new elites. The sophistication of English government drove a high level of lay literacy.²⁰ 'Unless a man knows French he is little thought of,' wrote the chronicler Robert of Gloucester in about 1290; 'but low-born men keep to English and to their own speech still.'²¹

Spoken English thus survived. Moreover, it soon predominated in everyday speech: the Normans needed it to communicate with the great majority of the population. Often within a generation, smaller landlords not only became bilingual in French and English, but English – except among the highest nobility and at court – probably became their first language. Knowledge of French remained an essential social attribute, but noble children had to be sent to France to learn it properly. Bilingualism became a mark of 'English' identity among the descendants of the Normans. Trilingualism (with Latin) was the norm for the educated. In practice, there was a hybridization or 'creolization', with the languages being mixed together, creating huge changes in vocabulary and grammar. French and Latin words were imported into English, though more slowly than Scott's example might suggest. For example, in the popular verse history of Britain, Layamon's *Brut* (c.1200), a rare example of non-religious literature in English, there are only 250 French loan-words in 30,000 lines.

So written English too survived. It retained certain grass-roots legal functions. In important monastic outposts, notably Worcester, Hereford, Winchester, Canterbury, Peterborough and Exeter, which we can properly call patriotic, it was propagated as the way of teaching the people.²² The monks of Peterborough abbey were the last who continued to write the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, until 1154; but they stopped using formal English in 1121, when it was replaced by local dialect – a sign of how quickly the old formal language was forgotten. By the end of the century, very few could still read it. In 1230, a monk at Worcester was trying to learn it – the West Midlands seem to have maintained a tradition – but by 1300 Old English had become an 'ydioma incognita'.²³ Yet English, in older and newer forms, continued to be written in religious centres such as Worcester and Hereford. Even after the Conquest, the production and use of vernacular texts was rarely paralleled anywhere in medieval Europe. These were not luxury products, but were for everyday use in prayer, preaching and ritual, and hence for the mass of the people English remained the intimate language of belief and salvation. This is one of the things that prevented it, changing though it inevitably was, from becoming a dying peasant

dialect. The French-speaking elite often mocked it as uncouth, and so using and writing it was somewhat subversive. One Worcester scribe left a list of the notable churchmen who ‘taught our people in English’; and he added, ‘not dim, their light: it fair glowed’.²⁴

English continued in place names, though little in personal names. There is perhaps nothing that distances us more instinctively from the pre-Conquest English than names: Ealdgyth, Aelfgifu, Colswein, Eadric, Waltheof (even if a few were revived during the Romantic period – Karl Marx called one of his sons Edgar). Our names since the 1100s have been overwhelmingly Norman, a personal form of cultural conquest through snobbery: William (which became the most common), John, Richard, Robert, Margaret, Mary, Emma. In a significant conciliatory gesture, the sons of Henry III were christened Edward and Edmund, signalling a link with the pre-Conquest monarchy; and the former became King Edward I in 1272.

The Conquest thus began to transform much of English culture. But it is likely that Latin, the common language of Christendom, would in any case have been increasingly used in legal, devotional and intellectual matters, as was happening across Europe: even before 1066, despite the prominence of the vernacular, there was more writing in Latin than in English. Choices of names would also probably have changed, as elsewhere in Europe, as the Church encouraged more uniform devotions. French would have come into greater use among the educated and the fashionable, especially in courtly and chivalric literature. This was not only because of the Conquest; the peak of borrowing from French came three centuries after 1066, a consequence of the cultural magnetism of Paris and the other great French cities, which affected all of western Europe.

There was a dazzling literary revival in England in the century following the Conquest – but in Latin and French. It was probably the English tradition of vernacular writing that encouraged the development of writing in French.²⁵ Some of the earliest works of French literature came from England or had English connections. The famous *Chanson de Roland*, an epic poem of Charlemagne’s battles against the Saracens, was first written down in England in the early twelfth century. The first historical work in French was Geoffroy Gaimar’s history of the English, the *Estoire des Engleis* (c.1136–7), an accessible work in fashionable French verse based on the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. English authors – or authors in England, often of mixed Anglo-Norman families – attained a European influence greater than ever before, and rarely equalled since.

Their most important works were histories or historical romances in Latin – the first major works of English history since Bede 400 years before. William of Malmesbury’s *Gesta Regem Anglorum* (c.1126) was a

continuous history of England from the arrival of the Saxons to Henry I, and Henry of Huntingdon's *Historia Anglorum* went from the mythical arrival of the Trojan hero Brutus to 1154, just before the author's death. The most extraordinary of these works went beyond English history, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c.1136), 'one of the supreme achievements of the historical imagination', which transformed English visions of the past.²⁶ As noted earlier, Geoffrey and his emulators plunged into legend and fantasy to create a prestigious new common Anglo-British epic. It became one of the most popular historical works in the European Middle Ages, far more widely read even than Bede, and is the only historical work known to have been in the possession of great nobles.²⁷ It also produced popular spin-offs. The Jerseyman Wace, a monk in Caen, produced in 1155 a popular French version of the saga, called the *Roman de Brut* (Brutus), which, among other things, added the story of Arthur's Round Table. Significantly, he often translated *Britannia* as *Engleterre*. Layamon ('Lawman') prepared his English translation of *Brut* in the early 1200s – an oddity, as even patriotic writings (such as the *Roman de Waldef* – about Earl Waltheof) were usually in French. Walter Map, a Herefordshire priest at Henry II's court, wrote a French version of the Grail and Lancelot stories (c.1180). A later prose version of *Brut* was very widely read in Latin, French and above all English – more copies survive than of any other medieval manuscript, and it was repeatedly printed by Caxton after 1480.

Thus for more than two centuries English after 1066 almost ceased to be the language of secular literary culture, as the elite no longer commissioned major works in English. A rare exception, such as Layamon's *Brut*, was perhaps an early sign of a new appetite for literature in English. But especially in the religious sphere English writing – sermons, psalms, saints' lives, poetry, songs – continued as one element of a bilingual or trilingual culture. One of the most famous pieces of early music – 'Sumer is icumen in / Lhude sing cuccu' – is a song written down in Reading Abbey in about 1250, using the same tune as a hymn.²⁸ English did not therefore decline into a merely spoken range of peasant dialects, as was traditionally thought. This was the basis of its later extension into political and literary uses, as we shall see.

THE CONQUEST IN HISTORY

Early interpretations of the trauma of conquest testified to ideological confusion and a collapse of morale. Churchmen accepted that it must have been God's will that the English should lose 'their safety and honour' and

'should no longer exist as a people'.²⁹ It had to be punishment for some heinous English sin: 'slaughter and treachery' such as the murders of Edward the Martyr in 978 and Alfred in 1037; or Harold's oath-breaking; or just typical English depravity – the clergy's 'drunkenness and the neglect of the Lord's house', and nobles making their slaves pregnant and then selling them abroad.³⁰ Stories circulated that Harold had survived Hastings and wandered off to live as a hermit – 'the quietist literature of a defeated nation', picked up centuries later by Kipling.³¹

A more defiant tone appeared in the story of Hereward 'the Wake' – perhaps meaning 'the Watchful', though also perhaps a much later addition. The original *Deeds of Hereward*, written in English and translated into Latin (the version that survives), appeared roughly fifty years after the events described. The story, based on eyewitness accounts, focused on the Fenland uprising, and Hereward's defence of the Isle of Ely, which William in person finally captured by building a causeway across the marshes. This was the first heroic tale of English resistance, and it has survived some 900 years.

The twelfth-century works of William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntingdon were more than simply a literary phenomenon: they were pioneering works that gave England a history.³² Many details we piece together about the more obscure periods before the Conquest depend on their researches, using written chronicles (some now lost), traditions, songs and eyewitness accounts. They were writing at a time, says William himself, of vociferous disputes about the Conquest³³ – the first great historical debate in our culture. It permanently shaped the way we understand England's past, with the Conquest not an end or a beginning, but only an episode in a continuing story. William stressed that his history was written 'for love of my country'. He had been commissioned by the 'English' queen, Matilda II, great-granddaughter of Edmund Ironside, whose marriage to Henry I in 1100 united pre- and post-Conquest royalty, and this obviously influenced his approach. He promised to be even-handed between Normans and English, and this too had a profound effect on later interpretations. William and Henry certainly did not write triumphal histories of the Normans (no English writer ever wrote a Norman-centred history), but nor were they vindications of the Anglo-Saxons. Indeed, they marginalized Anglo-Saxon achievements, such as those of Alfred, which had to be rediscovered centuries later. As clergymen, these authors accepted the Conquest as God's punishment for English treachery, pride, lust, sloth and gluttony. In order 'to wipe out the English nation', concluded Henry, God had chosen the Normans because 'they surpassed all other people in their unparalleled savagery', which he amply documented.³⁴ However, he praised Norman

religious reforms. William welcomed an influx of French culture brought by the Normans, but also described Hastings as 'a day of disaster for our dear country' and lamented that 'England has become the habitation of outsiders'. Layamon wrote that 'the Normans, with their evil power . . . harmed this nation'.³⁵ Geoffroy Gaimar was critical of William the Conqueror, and praised Hereward as a hero.

These writers in their very ambivalence met a psychological and political need for a history of England that would transcend – even gloss over – the rupture of the Conquest, and construct a positive, unifying English identity for later generations. It would show 'wretched England, long since destroyed' recovering its identity and pride: 'England arise! Or rather, rise again!'³⁶ Thus, they helped to invent not only the notion of a continuous history of 'England our island', but the very idea of national history as a single narrative of a place and its successive inhabitants reaching far into the past, and continuing despite successive invasions, changes of dynasty and transformations of culture.³⁷ In thus contributing to the way human beings conceive of collective national identities, their influence far beyond England was enormous and permanent.

The Conquest and its outcomes kept returning over the centuries as a crucial historical theme, and some of its ramifications will be seen in Chapter 6. The idea of a continuing 'Norman yoke' – an oppressive legal, social and political system imposed by the Conquest and suppressing an 'ancient constitution' embodying the rights of 'freeborn Englishmen' – appealed to some of those resisting the prerogative claims initiated by the Tudor and Stuart monarchs. The idea also attracted religious radicals during the seventeenth century, among them the leader of the 'Diggers', Gerrard Winstanley, who used it to attack the system of landownership. It was a strong element in the beliefs of supporters of the 'Good Old Cause' of the Commonwealth after the Restoration in 1660, and it remained a feature of English and American Whig propaganda in the eighteenth century, famously in the writings of Thomas Paine. From this perspective, England's political history since 1066 was that of a struggle to regain the 'ancient constitution' from the Crown, and even from Parliament, which some saw as the voice of Anglo-Saxon liberties, but others as merely another part of the 'Norman yoke'.³⁸ Late-eighteenth-century radicals claimed that the rights lost in 1066 had still not been restored, despite the revolutions of 1642, 1688 and 1776. In the nineteenth century, the demand for the rights of 'freeborn Englishmen' appealed to democrats, Chartists and to romantic Tories such as Benjamin Disraeli, whose 'two nations', the rich and the poor, originated as 'the conquerors and the conquered'.³⁹ There are echoes today: it was claimed in 2011 that people with Norman surnames such as

Lacy or Glanville are wealthier than people named Smith, Mason or Shepherd.⁴⁰

This view of history as rupture and continuous conflict had opponents, however. Many seventeenth-century parliamentarians and royalists equally downplayed the Conquest: neither wanted the Stuarts to be seen as the heirs of a conqueror, though for opposite reasons. Parliamentarians feared it might give legal grounds for absolutism, and royalists because it made the Crown seem tyrannical.⁴¹ So they insisted that William and his successors had been bound by the ancient laws of the Anglo-Saxons – or, at least, that those laws had soon been restored by Magna Carta. The great nineteenth-century Oxford medievalist Bishop William Stubbs believed that the Anglo-Saxon *witan*, surviving as folk memory, was reborn as Parliament, and that Magna Carta showed that the nation ‘becomes one and realizes its oneness’.⁴² The idea that the trauma of the Conquest had rapidly been overcome had roots in the twelfth-century works of William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntingdon. So did the view that conquest had cured Anglo-Saxon vices and brought cultural benefits. This appealed to later generations as part of a national history of continuity, reconciliation and progress: it had all turned out for the best. Thomas Carlyle asserted in 1858 that the Normans had forced ‘a gluttonous race of Jutes and Angles . . . lumbering about in potbellied equanimity’ to undertake ‘heroic toil and silence and endurance, such as leads to the high places of this Universe, and the golden mountain-tops where dwells the Spirit of the Dawn’.⁴³ The idea that the Conquest had brought benefits fed British imperialism: conquest, while inevitably painful, could in the long run be good for the conquered. Stubbs argued too that the Conquest had saved England from the Europe-wide trend towards feudal fragmentation, which reduced France and Germany into warring statelets – a not implausible view, though it underestimates the cohesion of pre-Conquest England.

Another influential Victorian, Edward Freeman, believed that the conquerors were soon absorbed racially by the English – 1066 meant only ‘the temporary overthrow of our national being . . . in a few generations we led captive our conquerors’.⁴⁴ Rudyard Kipling celebrated this idea in stories and poems for children:

I followed my Duke ere I was a lover
To take from England fief and fee;
But now this game is the other way over –

But now England hath taken me!⁴⁵

The most popular story of conflict and reconciliation is the saga of Robin Hood, the Sheriff of Nottingham, Prince John and King Richard the

Lionheart. The link between Robin and the Lionheart was invented by a sixteenth-century Scottish historian, John Major, elaborated by Walter Scott in his enormously popular *Ivanhoe* (1819), and thence transferred to films and television. This version sets the story in the 1190s, makes Robin an outlawed Saxon yeoman and his merrie men the embodiment of Saxon freedom struggling against Norman oppression, epitomized by the cruel and decadent John and his henchmen. King Richard, though Norman, has somehow acquired Saxon virtues; and when he secretly returns from captivity, he is acclaimed by the loyal Saxons. Richard subsequently reconciles Saxons and Normans, who, says Scott, became 'completely mingled'.

These ancient questions long engaged historians, and still do. Was the Conquest a long-term subjugation making England an oppressed colony?⁴⁶ Or did Saxons and Normans quickly integrate to form a new English nation – and an aggressive one that soon began a 'thousand-year Reich'?⁴⁷ Did fundamental institutions of Anglo-Saxon England survive? Would changes in language, law and government have happened anyway, as the whole of Europe evolved under the influence of Catholicism and French culture? How did conquest alter England's relationship with its island neighbours and with the Continent? How these events are interpreted has always affected the fundamental sense of what Englishness is. What recent scholarship tells us is that the rupture of conquest was traumatic but not complete. The principle governing institutions and the unity of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom survived, and were even strengthened by a powerful monarchy. The tradition of the witan and of a national community perhaps did survive or at least 're-emerged' to strengthen claims to rights and representation in Magna Carta and parliaments – though Roman law and the influence of the Church were also important.⁴⁸ The English were politically, economically and culturally subjugated, but their spoken and written language continued, as did their religious traditions. Though the conquerors soon began to pride themselves on being 'English', lapping up patriotic English history and assimilating the few surviving English landowners, the majority of the 'natives' long remained culturally distinct and politically unrepresented.

The Conquest further concentrated royal power: this was one of its historic consequences. But it could not provide stable kingship. It did not cure the problem of disputed succession: descent, bequest, election and coronation could still potentially conflict, and the death of every monarch posed a danger. The situation was further complicated as England and Normandy were at first considered separate inheritances. Every post-Conquest monarch for 150 years suffered rebellions, mainly due to

family rivalry. Moreover, the unique power now claimed by the Crown led to attempts to bring the king under the rule of law, as enshrined in Magna Carta. Above all, the troubled link with Normandy and with other parts of France placed a recurring strain on English politics. English kings were often away pursuing Continental interests. Their use of England as an endless source of money for wars caused rumbling discontent, and was the greatest single reason why kings had to seek the consent of their subjects through parliaments. The gradual loss of French territories would also lead to conflict in England. For all these reasons, of the eighteen kings who reigned between the Conquest and the accession of the Henry VII in 1485, only eight died peacefully – an unusually turbulent record by western European standards.* Yet, paradoxically, post-Conquest England as a whole, below the level of its rulers, was in general more peaceful than its neighbours, less ravaged by war between great nobles, by foreign invasion, or by general lawlessness.

FROM NORMAN CONQUEST TO ANGEVIN EMPIRE

England, the richest part of the archipelago, had long been the target of raids and invasions, as we saw in Chapter 1. Both Hadrian's Wall and Offa's Dyke had tried to seal its land frontiers against attack. Alfred's successors had tried to reach a *modus vivendi* with their turbulent island neighbours. The Anglo-Saxon method was to claim a loose suzerainty, by alliances and ceremonies as well as by arms, as when in 973 Edgar was rowed on the Dee by a crew of kings (see p. 33). This assertion of primacy among the rulers of the islands did not imply an ambition to govern them. Until the Conquest, England's main political and cultural links had been with Scandinavia.

Geopolitically, the Normans wrenched England permanently onto a new course. Now it became a French colony, but one whose wealth and status (it made the Duke of Normandy into a sovereign monarch) made it a contender in western European power struggles. So it would continue, with brief intervals, for the whole of its history. This had an immense effect on domestic politics. England's relations with the other inhabitants of the

* Henry I, Stephen, Henry II, Henry III, Edward I, Edward II, Henry IV and Edward IV. William the Conqueror, John and Henry V died of natural causes, but while on campaign. Four – possibly five – were murdered (Edward II, Richard II, Henry VI, Edward V and perhaps William Rufus); two died in combat (Richard I and III).

British Isles were also changed for ever. The Conquest, and its disturbed aftermath in the northern counties, provided an opportunity for repeated invasions across its northern and western frontiers. On the other hand, the Norman conquerors and those who followed in their footsteps soon spilled over into the Welsh and Irish principalities in a continuing quest for land and wealth.

England was relatively unified and secure. Its neighbours at that time and for long after were not. Ireland contained over a hundred 'kings'. The Welsh were split between clans grouped loosely into three main kingdoms. These feuded incessantly, resolving inheritance disputes by blinding, castrating and killing.⁴⁹ To the north were Brittonic, Scandinavian and Gaelic peoples, whose territories – Strathclyde, Galloway, Man, Argyll, Moray – were separate domains. They came gradually under the sway of the kings of Alba (the Gaelic name for Britain), descendants of the ninth-century Cinead mac Ailpin ('Kenneth MacAlpine'). 'Scotland', in its modern sense, dates only from the 1200s.⁵⁰ These were warrior societies, violent even by Norman standards, which raided and traded in slaves.

The northerners invaded in 1070, profiting from the disorder of the Conquest – one of many occasions when Scots, English, Welsh and French would take advantage of each other's problems. A series of attacks from across the northern and western borders, aimed at establishing hunting grounds for loot and slaves, horrified the English and Normans:

They slaughtered the sick in their beds, women who were pregnant or in labour, babies in their cradles or at their mothers' breast and sometimes they killed the mothers too. They slaughtered worn-out old men, feeble old women, everyone who was disabled . . . They carried off their plunder and the women . . . stripped, bound and roped together . . . Their fate was either to be kept as slaves or sold on to other barbarians.⁵¹

The conditions for future enmity were being established.

William the Conqueror died in 1087, while fighting against his neighbour the king of France. The dukedom of Normandy (the family patrimony) went to his eldest son, Robert 'Curthose', and the crown of England to his second son, William 'Rufus'. He was killed in mysterious circumstances in the New Forest in 1100, and his younger brother hastily seized the throne as Henry I to forestall Robert. Henry, to win English support, promised in his coronation charter to restore and follow the laws of Edward the Confessor, and he at once married Matilda (a descendant of the House of Cerdic, originally named Badgifu or Edith). This was regarded by English writers as the restoration of the ancient line of kings; but some Anglo-Normans mocked the royal couple as 'Godric and Godiva'. Thus

began a new cross-Channel conflict. Robert invaded England in 1101, and Henry invaded Normandy and captured his brother at the battle of Tinchebrai in 1106, on the fortieth anniversary of the battle of Hastings. Some regarded this as a kind of English revenge, but its real importance was to maintain England within a cross-Channel realm. Henry spent much time in Normandy, delegating the government of England to Matilda and Roger, Bishop of Salisbury.

Though Henry I had reunited England and Normandy, the number of potential claimants to the throne – brother, daughter, nephew, illegitimate children – was increasing. The situation was aggravated by the drowning in 1120 of the king's heir and only legitimate son, William Adelin (along with an illegitimate son and daughter, and many courtiers) in the *Blanche Nef* ('the White Ship'), which a drunken helmsman steered onto a rock in the Channel. The eventual outcome, following Henry I's death in 1135 in Normandy after eating a surfeit of lampreys,⁵² was a prolonged civil war. The antagonists were another Matilda, Henry I's daughter (and dowager empress of Germany by marriage), and Stephen of Boulogne, grandson of William the Conqueror, who carried out a neat coup d'état while Empress Matilda was in France. Stephen persuaded the citizens of London to support him, the Archbishop of Canterbury to crown him, and the keeper of the royal treasury to hand over the keys. But Matilda and her supporters (backed by her new husband, Geoffrey, Count of Anjou) fought back. The Scots, as usual, took advantage of the political chaos in England to invade. They were defeated in 1138 in Yorkshire, at the Battle of the Standard, by a Norman and English army led by the Archbishop of York, carrying local religious symbols as their standard. This battle has been described as a catalyst of post-Conquest English identity in the face of the common enemy. Yet England was still facing a long civil war.

This sporadic conflict between Matilda and Stephen in Normandy and England from 1139 to 1153 brought to the fore the tensions of the rickety Anglo-Norman system, especially the difficulty of reconciling ambitious and resentful English, Norman and Angevin magnates. England, during what the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* described as 'nineteen long winters', underwent a prolonged breakdown of royal authority such as was more common on the Continent, but which was unique in English history – a long-remembered ordeal known as 'the Anarchy'. 'I do not know nor can I tell all the horrors nor all the tortures that they did to wretched men in this land.' The warring barons 'laid a tax upon the villages time and time again . . . When the wretched people had no more to give, they robbed and burned . . . you could well go a whole day's journey and never find anyone occupying a village, nor land tilled.'⁵³ There were devastating invasions by

the Welsh and Scots, killing and looting as far south as the Tyne. The Anarchy finally ended in 1153 when Matilda's son Henry was recognized by both sides as Stephen's future heir. That order was rapidly restored is testimony to the underlying strength of English governance.

Strictly speaking, Norman rule in England now ended: the House of Anjou, commonly called the Plantagenets,* succeeded in 1154 in the energetic person of Henry II, aged twenty-one, also descended from the Wessex House of Cerdic. He had already inherited the Duchy of Normandy and the counties of Maine and Anjou. Even more important – and a turning point in English and European history – three years previously he had taken the bold gamble of swiftly marrying the formidable Eleanor (Aliénor), heiress of the vast Duchy of Aquitaine and the counties of Poitou and Auvergne, whose marriage to Louis VII of France had just been annulled. She had to escape the French and elude two ambush attempts on her way to the altar. The marriage brought England into what has been called the Angevin empire, a vast agglomeration now stretching from Northumbria to the Pyrenees, and potentially the greatest power in western Europe.

This Continental connection, a French historian has recently suggested, made another history of Europe conceivable, with the British Isles politically integrated with the Continent.⁵⁴ In practice, however, what actually happened was that England was immediately drawn into an Angevin power struggle against the relatively new and still puny kingdom of France. Its Capetian kings had few powers and little money. But – even though this seemed merely theoretical – they were the kings to whom for nearly a hundred years the Plantagenets had owed feudal allegiance and homage for their various duchies and counties. On 5 February 1156, Henry, thirteen months after his coronation, met Louis VII of France at the border of Normandy and did homage to him for Normandy, Anjou and Aquitaine. There were subsequently several attempts at conciliation and at uniting the two dynasties by marriage. But eventually, from around 1170, the Capetians set out to undermine Angevin power. Henry and his troublesome sons Richard and John spent most of their time outside England resisting rebellion and encroachment. This rivalry with France would dominate English policy towards Europe for over 300 years. The ensuing heavy taxation would decisively affect England's domestic politics. And the Continental link would prolong the cultural pre-eminence in England of France and the French language,⁵⁵ while shifting its focus from Normandy to France itself, centre of the cult of chivalry and origin of Gothic architecture.

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* From the family symbol, *planta genista*, a sprig of broom.



Henry II, 'a stocky, strong, restless, energetic, passionate man',⁵⁶ intelligent and well-educated behind a bluff exterior, capable of charm and good humour as well as dangerous rages, was one of England's most formidable and driven rulers. He was constantly on the move, to see and to be seen: he celebrated Christmas in twenty-four different places, crossed the Channel twenty-four times, and in all spent over fourteen years in Normandy, thirteen in England, and seven in Anjou and Aquitaine.⁵⁷ His consistent purposes were to reassert the legal authority of the English Crown and restore peace and order after the disastrous years of the Anarchy, to clear the Scots out of northern England, and to secure his Continental domains. But these tasks – above all the last – were too much even for him: thirty-five years of unceasing struggle wore him out, and he died a broken man at the age of fifty-six.

Arguably, his tendency to define and insist on the letter of his rights aggravated problems – admittedly, the bureaucratization and legalization of power was a European-wide tendency at this time, as both Church and lay princes began to employ university-trained administrators. In England, Henry's reign is usually seen as the genesis of the Common Law, a defining English institution. What actually happened, and what was later thought to have happened, is equally worthy of consideration.

Under the Anglo-Saxons, law had been fairly uniform in its main lines, and decentralized in its enforcement, through sheriffs, shire courts and collective self-policing through tithings, oath-taking and sworn local juries who identified criminals. After 1066 the Normans introduced complication – different laws for French and English, new forest law, Church courts using canon law, courts under the jurisdiction of local lords, and trial by combat. The Anglo-Saxon system continued too, including the sheriffs and county courts, the tithings, and the use of ordeals (by ducking in water or by carrying a hot iron) by which God signalled who was in the right. As before the Conquest, if locals could not cope, the king's men might intervene in a brief flurry of savagery: in Leicestershire, in 1124, 'they hanged . . . more thieves than had ever been hanged before . . . in all forty-four men in that little time; and six men were blinded and castrated'.⁵⁸ Usually, however, locals literally did it themselves: in one recorded case from the 1170s a Bedfordshire man got his next-door neighbour convicted (wrongfully) of stealing from his house, and did the blinding and castrating in person.⁵⁹

Henry II's drive for law and order saw the introduction in the 1160s of travelling royal judges, who were increasingly professional lawyers, on 'eyres' (journeys) to hear cases involving the Crown, and in the 1170s permanent royal courts began to sit at Westminster, developing

standardized 'writs' (court orders in the king's name) to initiate a range of procedures before royal judges. Writs were the basis of the system, and could be purchased for a modest sum by any plaintiff to summon an adversary before a royal court.⁶⁰ Thus originated in practice as well as in theory the universal primacy of royal justice: the 'Common Law'. It was gradually extended to cover every place and every free layman within the kingdom, irrespective of ethnicity. The unfree (serfs or villeins) did not have equal access to royal courts, particularly as concerned land tenure; but royal courts decided in disputed cases whether a man was free or serf.⁶¹ In serious criminal matters, moreover, royal justice extended even to the unfree, because Henry extended 'the King's Peace' to cover 'all times, the whole realm, all men'.⁶² This contrasted with much of Europe, where what is commonly called the 'feudal revolution' fragmented jurisdiction. A long-term divergence also began between English and Continental legal principles.⁶³ In Europe, law would either remain local, a patchwork of differing customs, or become transnational by borrowing Roman law enshrined in the Code of Justinian (AD 530). The English Common Law was the first national system of law in Europe. It was a hybrid of Anglo-Saxon and Norman customs and Roman theories, using French terms and concepts – debt, contract, heir, trespass, court, judge, jury – and (until 1731) keeping records in Latin. It was primarily concerned with land rights, based on the careful recording of precedents set by the decisions of judges who, to a large extent, laid down the law as they went along. This practice was formalized in the first great book of English law in use for at least three centuries, 'Bracton' – traditionally attributed to one of Henry III's judges, Henry of Bratton (d. 1268), and based on the compilation of precedents. Thus the Common Law evolved over time, rather than deriving from a single code, as Roman law did.⁶⁴

Henry's policy of asserting the legal rights of the Crown did not make him popular. Eyres were sudden, frightening descents that not only tried legal cases, but generally asserted royal power, including by aggressive imposition of higher taxes and feudal exactions. Mere suspicion brought ordeal by water or hot iron. Royal justice also led to a clash with the Church, when in the Constitutions of Clarendon (1164) Henry legislated for political control over the Church, including royal jurisdiction over those clergy (and bogus clergy) who committed crimes. This caused an angry breach with his close friend and trusted chancellor, Thomas Becket, whom he had made Archbishop of Canterbury in 1162, and who had unexpectedly become an intransigent defender of ecclesiastical privilege. Their trial of strength culminated in Becket's murder on 29 December 1170 in Canterbury Cathedral.

An archbishop's brains splattered across the cradle of English Christianity was an unparalleled sacrilege. It was also the exemplary martyrdom of a man who had played out in his life the Christian drama of repentance and salvation, abandoning wealth and power as the king's favourite to become an ascetic, an aggressive exponent of Church supremacy, and three years after his death a canonized saint. Yet this, one of the most famous and dramatic death scenes in medieval history, will always be surrounded by uncertainty. There is no firm evidence that Henry, in Normandy, uttered the notorious call to 'rid me of this turbulent priest', though he probably said something similar.⁶⁵ It is not clear that the four knights who killed Becket premeditated his murder. It may be that Becket welcomed martyrdom, and his motives have inspired reinterpretation down to modern times: most poetically in T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) and Jean Anouilh's less subtle *Becket* (1959). The murder caused international outrage, from which the French court naturally tried to profit, urging the Pope to draw 'the sword of St Peter'.⁶⁶ But moderation prevailed: Henry was allowed to perform seemingly heartfelt acts of repentance in 1174, including being flogged by the monks of Canterbury. The capture the very next day of the king of Scots, who had invaded England, proved divine approval: William I 'The Lion' was taken 'shackled under the belly of a horse' to make formal submission to Henry. The dispute between king and clergy ended in a compromise that Becket's unbending sanctity had prevented: the clergy (and those claiming to be such) won certain legal immunities until the Reformation, and vestiges remained even until 1827.

Becket, although born of Norman immigrants, became England's favourite saint, a symbol of resistance to an alien crown, in contrast with those countries whose national saint was a canonized monarch, such as the French St Louis and the Bohemian St Wenceslas. Thomas's shrine on the site of his martyrdom became one of the great pilgrimage centres of Christendom. Even Louis VII of France came to pray for his sick son in 1179, and doubtless enjoyed the embarrassment caused to Henry II. English kings had to bow the knee too, until Henry VIII vindictively destroyed the shrine in 1529. The cathedral expanded to accommodate the cult. Its new French style (which the seventeenth century dubbed 'Gothic') was supervised by a French architect, Guillaume de Sens, until he fell off some scaffolding; it provided a model for English architecture for a generation. The Canterbury pilgrimage as a social phenomenon provided Geoffrey Chaucer with the central theme of the most famous work of medieval English literature.

In the 1170s began two decades of sporadic rebellions by Henry's sons, abetted by his wife, Eleanor, Louis VII of France, the Scots and

discontented barons. Even more than personal resentments inside a seriously dysfunctional family, the basic reason was the inherent instability of the Angevin possessions. They were not really an 'empire', but a collection of dynastic acquisitions intended in the course of time to be divided among the heirs. But how and to whom? Jealous neighbours were eager to profit from family dissensions. There was an even deeper problem. Henry was trying to preserve a multinational dynastic confederation straddling two kingdoms. But the kingdom of France was pursuing greater royal power: indeed, Henry was doing the same himself in England. So he and his sons inevitably came into conflict with the similarly ambitious Capetians. Within a generation of its establishment, the Angevin 'empire' was being pulled apart.⁶⁷

As John of Salisbury, Bishop of Chartres and Becket's biographer, noted, 'The French fear our king and hate him equally.' Henry's nemesis was France's most successful monarch, Philip II 'Augustus' – 'a cheerful face, a bald pate, ruddy complexion, given to drink and food, prone to sexual desire, generous to his friends, stingy to his foes, skilled in stratagems'.⁶⁸ He dedicated his long reign (1180–1223) to increasing the power of his puny kingdom at the expense of his over-mighty vassals. At first, relations with England appeared friendly, with plans for a marriage alliance between Henry's son Richard and Philip's half-sister, Alix, but in 1186, when this failed to materialize, Philip became aggressive, and disputes over respective feudal authority turned into low-level conflict. He cut down the great elm tree where kings of France and dukes of Normandy traditionally met to negotiate. He cultivated Richard, even sharing a bed in token of friendship, and persuaded him that his father planned to disinherit him. This provoked a family civil war, in which Richard was aided by Philip. In 1189, Henry II, ill and exhausted, had to acknowledge defeat. In a final meeting with Philip, propped up painfully in the saddle, refusing to dismount and sit, he accepted all Philip's demands: for homage for his French lands, for money, above all to name Richard his sole heir; and two days later, on 6 July 1189, he died. Despite his thirty-four years of unrelenting effort, the Angevin 'empire' was beginning to topple.

This was not at first evident. King Richard I, 'the Lionheart', was crowned in 1189 amid scenes of popular rejoicing and vicious attacks on Jews – a usual by-product of Crusading fervour. Richard, who would spend only six months of his ten-year reign in England, was eager to join the Third Crusade, part of the widespread European reaction to the recapture of Jerusalem by the caliph of Egypt, Saladin (Salḥ-ed-Dīn Yusuf ibn Ayub), in 1187. A fellow Crusader was his former accomplice and friend, Philip of France, but a series of personal, political and national disputes soon

ended their always shaky alliance. As a Crusader, Richard won a brilliant if chequered reputation. He was a vainglorious product of the warrior culture and little else. Certain events of his life have entered legend: his chivalrous encounters with Saladin; his capture of Acre in 1191 followed by failure to retake Jerusalem; his secret journey back from the Holy Land and arrest by Duke Leopold of Austria, whom he had insulted; his discovery by his faithful minstrel Blondel de Nesle, who sang outside his prison (fiction, alas); his £100,000 ransom requiring an enormous tax levy on England (not fiction, and reluctantly paid); and his release in February 1194 – ‘The devil has been let loose,’ warned Philip. His sudden arrival in England in March interrupted his intriguing brother John’s attempt to usurp the crown, with the help of the French, who invaded Normandy. (This is the time of the legendary meeting of Richard with Robin Hood.) John fled to France, and Richard soon left England for good to pursue a long and at first successful struggle against Philip Augustus and his allies, which was cut short in 1199 by a crossbow bolt fired from the castle of a rebellious Aquitainian vassal. Richard, in a characteristic gesture, forgave the captured crossbowman from his deathbed – who after Richard died was flayed alive by his men.

Richard’s international reputation, cultivated during his own lifetime, long remained potent. It combined glamour as a royal model of the new aristocratic culture of chivalry – he was ‘bold and courteous and bountiful’, in the words of a French minstrel⁶⁹ – with his unique reputation as the only Christian warrior who could defeat Saladin. The ‘Lionheart’ image also fed on the Arthurian legend, at this time attaining a Europe-wide circulation through the works of the French writer Chrétien de Troyes (see p. 17). It was in Richard’s reign that the bodies of Arthur and Guinevere were ‘discovered’ at Glastonbury, and he carried a sword called Excalibur when he went on Crusade. But the longest-living part of the Richard myth comes from his later association with the Robin Hood stories, in which his bravery, goodness and common touch personify an ideal English king, in contrast with the ‘Norman’ vices of the cruel and duplicitous Prince John and his unscrupulous sheriff.

THE COMMUNITY OF THE REALM

John became king in 1199. He has left a uniquely bad reputation, all the darker in contrast with his brother’s gilded legend. He murdered, probably with his own hands, his young nephew, Arthur, who was supported for the throne by the barons of Brittany, Anjou and Touraine. John was detested

for his efficient rapacity and unlovable personality. But his role in English history is enormous, largely through his failures. His nemesis was his former abettor Philip Augustus, who in 1202 used his legal authority to provoke a decisive conflict. John had arrogantly slighted one of his French vassals, Hugh of Lusignan, by marrying his betrothed, Isabelle of Angoulême, and Philip, as king and feudal overlord, summoned John to appear at his court to have the dispute judged. When John ignored the summons, Philip used feudal law to deprive him of all his domains in France. The resulting war forced many barons reluctantly to choose sides or lose their lands: they were obliged to be English or French – they could no longer be Anglo-Normans with lands on both sides of the Channel. In 1204, after an eight-month siege of the great Château Gaillard, built by Richard to dominate the valley of the Seine in Normandy, and which Philip's men finally captured after climbing in through the latrines, the French conquered Normandy. In 1205, they were threatening to invade England. The kingdom of France – its income 70 per cent greater with the wealth of Normandy – became one of the dominant powers in Europe, and so it remained for six centuries. Of the Conqueror's duchy, only the Channel Islands remained to the English Crown, given legal autonomy to keep them loyal. The Angevin 'empire' was reduced to England and turbulent Aquitaine, from the River Dordogne to the Pyrenees.

John was obsessed with regaining Normandy. He spent ten years travelling the length and breadth of England personally extorting money for war – a longer presence than any king since 1066, and not welcomed. Baronial families, the Church, Jews and the general population were all exposed to his use and violent abuse of the powers of the Crown: he more than doubled his revenue in England, the highest level of exploitation since the Conquest. Expedients included selling justice, seizing lands without process of law, imposing arbitrary fines, and ransoming widows by the threat of forcible remarriage. There was worse: the wife and eldest son of one recalcitrant baron were starved to death in the dungeons of Windsor; three sons of another were killed, two after being castrated, and a seven-year-old by hanging.⁷⁰ Meanwhile, the conflict with France had become a complex and extended European war, as both sides sought allies. John recovered Poitou, but when at last, in 1214, he invaded France, he had to turn tail when his German and Flemish allies were crushed by the French at the battle of Bouvines on 27 July 1214 – almost as famous a date in French history as the battle of Hastings in that of England. John's hopes collapsed.

Had John been victorious in France he might have defied resistance in

England, but after Bouvines there was a rebellion supported by great barons, lesser knights, clergy and town burgesses (London was the rebels' biggest stronghold). It was inevitably exploited by the French, the Welsh and the Scots. The revolt had many causes, but most important were John's methods of raising money. In the longer term, it could be seen as a crisis of the system: after 1066, as noted earlier, the Crown asserted rights that left all landowners vulnerable. The rebels wanted to bring the king within the law. The result was Magna Carta, the 'great charter', sealed by John in June 1215 at Runnymede, a meadow beside the Thames near Windsor, one of the traditional meeting places of the pre-Conquest witan – a significant piece of symbolism. It addressed a miscellany of grievances against royal abuses: concerning inheritances, administration of justice, tenants' obligations, rights of widows, liberties of towns, privileges of the Church, protection of foreign merchants, and demands for labour to maintain ramparts and bridges. The Charter even called for uniform measures of ale. Most of it now seems quaint, if not incomprehensible ('In what case a Praeceptum in Capite is not grantable'). Yet lurking among the thickets of legalese were glittering phrases: 'We will sell to no man, we will deny or delay to no man, either Justice or Right'; 'No Freeman shall be taken, or imprisoned . . . but by lawful Judgement of his Peers'.

'Judgement of his peers' has come to be synonymous with trial by jury. But the link is coincidental. Nominating a group of men (sometimes but not always twelve) to give an opinion on oath was an ancient practice, Anglo-Saxon and Carolingian. But this was an instrument of authority, not a safeguard of individual liberty. Juries were there to provide information, as in the making of Domesday Book or by identifying suspected criminals. The inquest jury in Britain and the grand jury in the United States are existing examples. Shire court verdicts were given by everyone present – often over a hundred people – amounting to trial by public meeting. Criminal trials, as in other countries, were decided by various forms of ordeal, to which popular opinion remained attached (as in the ducking of suspected witches centuries later). It seems to have been the authorities who began to have doubts about trial by ordeal, as so many shady characters were getting off. The decisive change came not from Runnymede but from Rome, where in the same year as Magna Carta the Fourth Lateran Council banned priests from taking part in ordeals – prayers and blessings of the water and the iron were essential to the ritual. At first, the king and his judges did not know what to do, other than keeping suspects locked up indefinitely ('yet so that they do not incur danger of life or limb'), encouraging them to leave the kingdom, or taking securities for future

good behaviour.⁷¹ Eventually judges handed responsibility for deciding guilt or innocence to an already familiar institution: the jury.* *Vox populi* replaced *vox Dei*. Roman law was different: it required either two concurring witnesses – rarely practical – or confession of guilt, and so inquisitorial procedures were adopted, with routine use of torture, and juries became obsolete across Europe. Torture was something the Common Law neither needed nor accepted, as became a source of national pride. But suspects were at the mercy of jury prejudices, and trials were very summary, usually just a few minutes even in the nineteenth century. Yet the system gave the accused some safeguards – they could object to jurors, juries had to be unanimous to convict, the acquittal rate was quite high, and acquittal was final. Above all, the jury gave some protection against arbitrary judgement by the state – though only in 1670 were juries given immunity from punishment for bringing in the ‘wrong’ verdict. So Magna Carta, the Common Law and the jury system together became accepted over the centuries as what was commonly termed ‘the palladium of our liberties’.

Magna Carta has been called the first written national constitution in European history, though charters between rulers and ruled were not uncommon at the time in France, Catalonia, Germany, Normandy and indeed England. In important ways Magna Carta *was* unique, however. Its restraints on the Crown (though later claimed to be the ‘gode olde lawe’ of the Anglo-Saxons) were unprecedented and profound. It took the form of a contract between the monarch and the ‘community of the realm’ – ‘everyone in our kingdom’ – and it ascribed permanent rights and powers to that community, even its humblest members. It made clear that the king was under the law, and it planned a system (a council of twenty-five barons) to force him to obey it, with the whole community being bound by oath to help them. Consent by ‘the common council of our realm’ was required for taxation. Magna Carta was not, of course, egalitarian, but it was inclusive, granted to ‘all free men’, and also giving to every man and woman without distinction the right to justice, protection from arbitrary demands for money, goods or labour, and protection against forced marriage. It was permanent, applying ‘in all things and places for ever’.

Over the centuries, Magna Carta has been given both too much and too little importance. It was reaffirmed thirty-three times, and regularly read out ceremonially in public, acquiring status as fundamental law. After declining in significance in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, it was revived by seventeenth-century opponents of the Stuarts and by

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* Trial by battle persisted in theory – one ingenious murder suspect invoked it successfully in 1818, after which Parliament hastily abolished it.

eighteenth-century American revolutionaries as the foundation of the rights of 'free-born Englishmen'; the United States Supreme Court has frequently cited it in recent decades.⁷² William Pitt the Elder described it as the 'bible of the English constitution'. Margaret Thatcher compared it favourably with the acts of the French Revolution's Declaration of the Rights of Man. On the other hand, it has been debunked as a narrow legalistic document defending only the privileges of the barons. In fact, it showed little concern with purely seigniorial rights.⁷³ However narrow some of its detailed provisions, its broad principles (inspired by canon law, custom, and earlier charters and coronation oaths) had open-ended implications. It guaranteed legal rights in phrases that became familiar watchwords. This confirmed its importance and enhanced its myth as the first great public act of the nation, a source of power and legitimacy in later political struggles. Its guarantees of essential liberties are still on the statute book 800 years later, and in recent English jurisprudence on the constitution it has come to be recognized as one of the fundamental laws of the land.⁷⁴

John fought desperately with words and weapons, both before and after he was forced to seal the Charter. He proclaimed himself a Crusader to try to gain immunity, declared the Pope the feudal overlord of England and Ireland, and appealed to him to annul the Charter (which he did, proclaiming that it 'shames the English nation' and was 'null and void forever'). John hired foreign mercenaries and required all barons to take an anti-Charter oath. The rebel barons, facing defeat, promised Northumberland, Cumberland and Westmoreland to Alexander II of Scotland if he would intervene, and offered the crown of England itself to Louis, son of Philip Augustus. This was the first of several occasions, from 1216 to 1256, on which the possibility arose of England and France being politically joined. The Scots came south, and Louis arrived in May 1216 with a French army, promising to act 'for the common good of England'. He was welcomed into London as a liberator. Alexander paid homage to him as King Louis of England. His soldiers, however, were soon accused of being 'wicked plunderers' who 'set villages alight, did not spare churches or cemeteries, took and despoiled all kinds of men, and by harsh and hitherto unheard-of bodily tortures, compelled them to pay the heaviest ransoms'.⁷⁵ Both sides in the civil war claimed to be defending England.

Then in October John lost his war chest and sacred relics in the Wash, and opportunely died of dysentery. His nine-year-old son, hailed by a contemporary poet as 'a tiny spark of minute beauty, the sole hope of the torn kingdom',⁷⁶ supported by the papal legate and England's most renowned knight, William the Marshal, was quickly crowned Henry III using his mother's bracelet – John had lost or sold the crown. He would reign for

fifty-six years. Support for Louis, at first widespread among the barons, began to fade, and Henry's supporters proclaimed that they would 'deliver England from the French'.⁷⁷ The papal legate actually declared a Crusade against Louis and his partisans. The French were defeated at Lincoln, and fugitives slaughtered by English villagers. A French fleet with reinforcements was captured or sunk off Sandwich and its commander hanged. Louis wisely gave up, and was compensated with a large cash payment. As part of the deal, an amended Magna Carta was issued in the name of Henry III. It was issued again, along with a charter of forest rights, in 1225 – this was its final agreed version, approved by former supporters and opponents of King John. 'Here then,' comments a modern historian, 'was the final reconciliation.'⁷⁸ Until, of course, the next time.

Henry III came of age and in 1232 carried out a coup d'état against his own officials. He had great visions, and wanted a government of his own men. He aimed to restore the personal power of the Crown and play a great role in Europe, and he called in like-minded administrators and soldiers from Poitou, his mother's home – soon notorious as 'the Poitevins' – and also later from Provence (where his wife came from) and Savoy (home of his mother-in-law). These men were capable and tough. His Savoyard uncle, Boniface, whom he made Archbishop of Canterbury – the last foreigner ever to occupy the see – ended a disagreement with one prelate by felling him with his fist. Henry had no doubt of his right to appoint anyone he liked as his servants, reflecting a Europe-wide trend for career administrators instead of the traditional baronial officers and counsellors. Many were university trained: universities were established in many parts of Europe, including Bologna, Paris and Oxford, in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. But to appoint foreigners to major offices reminded the English that they were a subject people: and subjection now extended to the nobility as well as the 'natives'. On the other hand, Henry named his sons after English royal saints, Edward and Edmund. He built a Palace of Westminster and a new Westminster Abbey, housing the shrine of Edward the Confessor, as the centre of English government. He forbade the English Church to introduce the Inquisition. All his judges – the men who had most contact with the people – were English. So his use of French ministers was purely pragmatic. English barons, led by Richard the Marshal, objected; when Richard was murdered in 1234 there was an outcry, and for a time the leading 'Poitevins' were removed.

What brought on a crisis was Henry's European policy. He tried to win back Normandy, but was defeated by the French in July 1242 at Taillebourg and Saintes. His attention turned south, where his domains in Gascony provided a link with potential allies against the kings of France

(he had marriage links not only with Provence and Savoy, but also with Castile) and a stepping-stone towards the Mediterranean. The rulers of Savoy, who controlled access to Italy, recognized him as their overlord in 1246. He made deals with the Welsh and the Scots (who received part of Northumbria) to keep the borders quiet. But his activities in southern Europe grew ever more complex, far-reaching and expensive. In 1253, for the first time, each shire was ordered to elect two knights to attend a council in April, along with the magnates and prelates but meeting separately from them, to agree to taxation on behalf of the lesser landowners. This was later seen as another landmark in the history of Parliament, though nothing much happened as the assembly broke up without agreement.

England, although peripheral, was one of Europe's wealthier countries thanks to its agriculture, developed commerce and wool exports. Henry was eager to use these resources to exercise power at the heart of the European world, in Italy, Germany and even Jerusalem, to make the Plantagenets the greatest dynasty in Christendom. Pope Alexander IV encouraged this vaulting ambition as an instrument in the papacy's epic struggle with the imperial house of Hohenstaufen: 'We wish to exalt the royal family of England,' he wrote in 1255, 'which we view with special affection, above the other kings and princes of the world.'⁷⁹ Moreover, since King John had declared England a papal fief, its kings were theoretically his vassals. The Pope made Henry's son Edmund titular king of Sicily and southern Italy, and in 1257 arranged for his brother, Richard of Cornwall, to be crowned king of the Romans in Charlemagne's imperial capital of Aachen. This proclaimed him heir to the crown of the Holy Roman Empire, which, apart from its prestige, had powers in parts of Germany and Italy.

There were three huge problems with this European adventure. First, Henry had promised to pay the Pope the huge sum of 135,541 marks (so precise because it supposedly represented the money expended by the Pope to conquer part of Sicily), which of course would largely be paid by the English – and if not, Henry would be excommunicated and England placed under an interdict, both humiliating and inconvenient. Second, this was only the first instalment of what his European ambitions would cost, because he would have to fight to secure both Sicily and the empire – and he had also promised to go on Crusade. Third, Henry's megalomania would probably provoke a war with France and a French invasion; and the confusion provided another irresistible opportunity for the Welsh and the Scots to go on the warpath.

In April 1258 seven leading barons secretly took an oath to bring the king under control. Their leader was Simon de Montfort, Earl of Leicester, originally one of Henry's French entourage and his former governor of

Aquitaine. He was the son of another Simon de Montfort, leader of the terrible Albigenian Crusade, which fifty years earlier had taken fire and sword to the Cathar heresy of southern France. Like his father, Simon II was a frightening figure: a great but impecunious and greedy *seigneur*, a renowned warrior, a man simultaneously racked by unbending religious fervour and rapacious personal ambition. Henry is supposed to have said to him, 'I fear thunder and lightning terribly, but by God's head I fear you more than all the thunder and lightning in the world.' The conspirators confronted the king at Westminster Hall and induced him to call a 'parlemen' at Oxford on 9 June to reform the state of the realm. From our viewpoint, both sides represented different mixtures of tradition and modernity. Henry stood for an ancient idea of absolute monarchy going back to the Romans – the barons consequently banned the teaching of Roman law. But his methods were 'modern' – using a professional bureaucracy. The barons demanded to exercise their traditional duty of advising the king; but in doing so they adopted radical ideas of communal rights. Their motives of course were complex and diverse – from resisting tax increases to restoring the peace of Christendom – but all agreed that the king must be restrained by his subjects. Magna Carta had said this, but Henry had ignored it. Now the terms were to be tightened.

Those who came to the Oxford parliament in June 1258 were asked to take an oath in the name of 'le commun de Engleterre'. Communal oath-taking was an ancient practice. It had been done in 1205, when all males over twelve were ordered to take an oath to defend the kingdom against a possible French invasion, and in 1215, when an oath was taken to uphold Magna Carta. So *le commun* implied everyone, for all had a right and duty to take part in public affairs, at least in an emergency. This had sweeping consequences: the Provisions of Oxford, which Henry swore to accept, provided for elected committees to supervise the royal government, and for regular public 'parlemen'. Moreover, Henry, as 'king on Engleneloande', promised this in English to his 'loandes folk', the people of the land – the first document issued in the king's name in English since the Conquest.⁸⁰

But in 1261 Henry, supported by the Pope and Louis IX of France, renounced the agreement. Armed conflict began in 1263, and at the battle of Lewes on 14 May 1264 Henry was taken prisoner. The *Song of Lewes*⁸¹ (a long Latin poem) asserted that 'The community of the realm [*communitas regni*] should advise and let it be known what everyone [*universitas*] feels, for their own laws are most familiar to them . . . the customs of the realm passed down from father to son.' The king's son Edward escaped and raised an army. Montfort found support in London, among the clergy,

lesser knights and landowners, and even among peasants. But clashes of interest and political complexities wore down rebel support. The two sides finally fought it out at Evesham on 4 August 1265, and the rebel army was crushed. A phalanx of twelve knights had the task of killing Montfort. He watched them coming towards him through the chaos of battle: 'How beautifully they advance,' he said, 'our bodies are theirs, our souls are God's.' His body was castrated and dismembered, and his head carried off on a lance. Under his armour, he was found to be wearing a hair shirt, the penitential self-punishment of the Christian ascetic. He became a popular miracle-working saint.

Our understanding of the importance of the drama of the 1260s turns upon the interpretation of words. Later generations saw it as a landmark in the history of Parliament, a high point in the history of English freedom. Was 'le commun de Engleterre' the beginning of 'the Commons', a summoning of representatives of the people to take part in government? Many French and Italian towns had *communes*, which were civic governments. But this one concerned the whole of England. The nearest English expression was 'loandes folk'. However translated or interpreted, the sense was that everyone had some right and duty. For example, the villagers of Peatling Magna in Leicestershire fought their own little skirmish in the name of the 'community of the realm' against a royalist band in 1265, just after the battle of Evesham, and later took the dispute to the king's court (they lost).⁸² Perhaps we could take this as another birth of England, as a formally recognized, if embryonic, political community. Or perhaps a rebirth. The Conquest distorted what has been called a constitutional tradition begun with the 'Angelcynnes witan': after 1066, when councils or parliaments met, they did so as the vassals of a foreign lord, not the representatives of a free nation.⁸³ But after 1200, these councils took tentative steps towards identifying themselves as representative of the whole community, in opposing the European priorities of their rulers and the heavy taxes required to finance them. After a gap of 200 years, a common English political identity began to re-emerge.

Five Centuries after Bede

What was this political community of Engelande – or *Engleterre* – and its people, 500 years after Bede's history of the *gens Anglorum*, and after 250 years of being ruled by Danes, Normans and Frenchmen?¹ Remarkably, the English still seemed a recognizable group (or so said foreign observers) who were rich, open-handed, convivial and rather vulgar – as a censorious French observer put it, 'above all other peoples, drinkers, gluttons, and profligate wasters of all temporal goods'.² There was a persistent story that Harold's men at Hastings had been suffering from hangovers. Continentals recognized the English by dress and manners; many apparently believed they had tails – a story that originated in a French history of St Augustine.

We should not suppose, however, that this survival of an English identity was inevitable. As an American historian has recently remarked, 'the tremendous strength of Englishness in our own world view can make the survival of that identity [seem] almost natural or foreordained'.³ But it was not. Bede's *gens Anglorum*, politically fragile, were repeatedly invaded and conquered. Much of eastern and northern England was ceded to invaders. The whole country briefly became part of a Scandinavian empire. It was soon after taken over by a Norman warrior class, incorporated into a large Continental conglomeration, and came close to being united with the kingdom of France. Its leaders were eliminated, its language lost status, and its new elite and those who aspired to join them primarily used Latin and French. In such circumstances, ethnic identities can disappear, just as Britons were replaced by, or grew into, Anglo-Saxons, and Gallo-Romans into Franks.

That Engelande did not become Grande Normandie or France Occidentale argues that its identity had been strongly established well before 1066, and that the idea of Englishness had sufficient attractive power to persuade descendants of Danish and Norman conquerors that they were,

and wished to be, English. That identity was in part based on a powerful sense of England as a place,⁴ in which its island position was obviously important. Though the sea gave easy access to incomers and though the northern border was vulnerable, the boundaries of England were mostly recognized and fixed from the ninth century – more than a thousand years before those of most European countries. Its shires and many of its settlements are older still – Hampshire, for example, predates any of today's European states⁵ – as are some of its fields, roads and even buildings. It also had distinctive cultural foundations – a language, of course, and an ancient Church with native saints – including Alban, Swithun, Dunstan, Neot, the miracle-working virgins Aethelthryth and Werburga, and Bede himself, all proudly listed by Henry of Huntingdon. Not coincidentally, it was the clergy who became the main transmitters of English identity through preaching and prayers, and not least through writing its prestigious, celebrated, and partly invented history. Women too passed on language, arts and traditions, as marriage between Norman men and English women became common. The towns acted as melting pots for French immigrants and English burgesses, who retained wealth and influence after the Conquest, when the native nobility was eliminated. In rural society, there seems to have been integration in the middle ranks, where some English landowners and free tenants survived the Conquest, and were soon indistinguishable from the smaller French feudal tenants. People of English descent took French names; people of French descent spoke English. Three or four generations after Hastings, they were becoming harder and harder to tell apart. King John's loss of Normandy forced a choice: landowners who stayed in Normandy had their English lands confiscated.

For all these reasons, by 1200 at the latest the descendants of the victors of Hastings (with the exception of a small number of cosmopolitan aristocrats with lands in several countries) had become English, by speaking English, describing themselves generally as English, adopting what were thought of as English manners (including drinking), and expressing pride in their English lineage, gilded with the glories of Brutus and King Arthur. When the chancellor Thomas Becket was sent on an embassy to Paris in 1158, he was determined 'to show and demonstrate the opulence of English luxury': this included bringing lavish presents, a choir singing English songs, and two wagonloads of ale, 'that clear, salubrious drink, better in taste and colour than wine'.

Much depended on context. Then as now, people had multiple identities. When consorting with or fighting the French the lords of England were 'Engleis'. They seem rather like Dutch colonists in South Africa calling themselves 'Afrikaaners': they remained very different from the *nativi* or

Anglici – the wholly English majority. When a legal treatise of 1179 commented that ‘Nowadays . . . the nations are so mixed’, it added significantly, ‘I speak of free people.’⁶ We cannot know much about what the natives thought of their newly minted ‘English’ rulers. There are very occasional signs: outlaws in the forests; riots against French liturgy and against French visitors who denied that King Arthur was a real person; cheering for an ‘Englishman’ (Anglus) to win a joust. Perhaps above all there is the veneration of two men of French origin who became popular English saints because they defied the king – Thomas Becket and Simon de Montfort.

The Englishness of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century elite was in any case very different from Englishness before 1066, whose culture there was no effort to rehabilitate or revive. Sir Lancelot replaced Beowulf as a literary hero. Relations with the outside world were transformed. England before 1066 had been on the defensive, and relations with island neighbours (despite their regular raids or invasions) had been generally cautious. The Norman Conquest made a crucial change. Before 1066 the kingdom served principally to defend the country, the eard. After 1066, England served to support largely absentee kings in their pursuit of external power. The Normans extended their conquest to the Celtic lands and entangled England in endless conflicts on the Continent. This was the real ‘Norman Yoke’.

Its burden created the embryo of a national polity: the *communitas regni* appealed to in Magna Carta and then again in the barons’ revolt of 1258. This ‘community of the realm’ – ultimately everyone – united in asserting rights against their rulers, especially when those rulers treated England’s interests as secondary. As the barons protested to the Pope in 1258, ‘a prince owes all his duty to God, very much to his country [*patria*], much to his family and neighbours, and nothing whatsoever to aliens’.⁷ Loyalty to the country could conflict with loyalty to the king, and a sense of foreign oppression became a feature of English identity.

What was unique about England lies in the realm of politics: the early development, in response to Viking invasions, of a powerful kingdom occupying a defined territory, with a system of government in which a large part of the population participated, whether they liked it or not – through courts and juries, through tithings, through labour, taxation and military service, through the use of royal coins, and, for the powerful, through royal councils and parliaments. Some historians have suggested that this made England the prototype of the nation-state.⁸ Similar institutions to those of England had existed at times in other parts of Europe, particularly under the empire of Charlemagne, but they were swept away. In England they survived. Being a powerful and yet vulnerable kingdom, able to raise taxes

and impose law and order, and yet subject to disputed royal succession and foreign invasion, its kings needed the support of their people, and the people high and low needed to control the actions of their kings. Anglo-Saxon institutions, some of very ancient origin, were preserved and developed by the post-Conquest monarchy, which extended royal justice and created a Common Law. The country of Bede's *gens Anglorum* was never divided up into autonomous and warring feudal territories. Instead, the 'community of the realm' imposed the rule of law on its powerful and rapacious post-Conquest monarchs to a degree unique in Europe.

The Common Law and Magna Carta were seen not as revolutionary innovations, but as restatements of ancient principles. The distinctness of the Common Law became a source of pride. The lawyer Sir John Fortescue's *De laudibus legem Angliae* (In Praise of the Law of England), written in the 1460s, even asserted that the Common Law was the most ancient in the world, unchanging custom that had survived all England's conquests.⁹ But only from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries did this take on weighty ideological significance: the law was claimed to be above and beyond royal absolutism and hence the safeguard of liberty. This significance it has subsequently retained, at least subliminally. Moreover, by an unpredictable historical twist, 'the insular and arcane learning of the small band of lawyers who argued cases in a corner of Westminster Hall became the law by which a third of the people of the earth were governed and protected, the second [after Roman law] of the two great systems of jurisprudence known to the world'.¹⁰

Continuity is crucial in this story. Many of the jumbled ingredients of nationhood – beliefs, myths, institutions, customs, loyalties – that were already present in the ninth century were revived or reinvented in the twelfth. Thereafter they gained in potency because they persisted, deriving legitimacy from their ever-growing antiquity, enhanced by linking them with the real or mythical pasts of St Edward the Confessor and King Arthur. England's laws and institutions came to seem untouchable and immutable, as if in the nature of things, dating from time immemorial. They could then be seen, in Edmund Burke's famous phrase of 1791, as creating 'a partnership between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born'. In such ways nations and identities are 'constructed': that is, made by people, and not determined by geography, genes or blood.

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PART TWO

The English Unleashed

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The next three centuries saw the English unleashed: against their neighbours; from humiliating bonds of lordship; at times, against their monarchs; from the culture that had predominated since the Norman Conquest; against the Church; and against each other. Wars for defence and conquest were fought on every land border, and across the sea in France, Flanders, Ireland and Spain. The subject status of villeinage (see pp. 92–3), one of the targets of the 1381 Peasants' Revolt and a source of constant local resistance, largely disappeared, four centuries earlier than in most of Europe. Four kings were overthrown and killed, the nobility weakened, and ordinary people thrust their way into politics, claiming both ancient rights and a new voice. A modernized English language replaced French and Latin as the first language of politics, business, literature, law, even religion. The power and wealth of the Latin Church and its clergy were questioned. These upheavals coincided with – indeed, were connected with – devastating wars and social and economic catastrophe: population pressure, famine, plague and depopulation. Yet hardly, if ever, was the existence or unity of the nation, or the functioning of its institutions, seriously threatened. Despite everything, this was not a time of war of all against all. Revolts and civil wars aimed not to destroy but to restore what was believed to be the proper working of kingdom, Church and society. The worst civil violence was short, and the rule of law, however imperfect, was quickly restored.

Some of this history is linked with European and global changes: famine and plague, due to volcanic eruptions and microbes. England became briefly a great European power, though later outdistanced by a resurgent France and the new power of the Habsburgs. Geography distanced it from the mighty confrontations between Islam and Christianity in the Mediterranean world, the economic and intellectual focus

of Europe. Most of humanity was still fragmented by distance: great empires in China, India and Africa were shrouded in myth. Only at the very end of the period did Italians, Spanish and Portuguese begin epoch-making contacts with east Asia and the western hemisphere. England, shaken by internal conflicts, by then had been left on the margins.

3

A Well Good Land

Engelond his a wel god lond, ich wene ech londe best.

Robert of Gloucester, Chronicle, c.1300.

The country recovered quickly from the civil war of the 1260s. Edward I informed the Pope in 1275 that he aimed at ‘bettering the state of the English Church and the reform of the kingdom, and . . . a general increase in the well being of the people’.¹ This was a time of transforming growth, far beyond the control of rulers. The quantity of money in circulation tripled, due to commerce, credit, the spread of cash rents, the growth of towns, export earnings and growing population. Agriculture was becoming more commercial, with surpluses of corn, livestock, wool, timber and other raw materials being sold. All types of land were carefully used and managed for different purposes; even barren sandy heaths were ‘turned into gold’ by large-scale rabbit warrens.² One of the biggest money-earners was wool, of which some 12 million fleeces were exported annually in the early 1300s, mainly from peasant flocks; and transporting this quantity – up to 6,000 tons – required tens of thousands of horses, large numbers of carts, and ships. There were now 800,000 oxen and 400,000 (much faster) horses, multiplying the muscle power of the male labour force six or seven times. The road system, expanding from the Roman roads still in use, was even denser than in the twenty-first century, and permitted quick and easy communications. There are many recorded examples of long journeys averaging twenty or thirty miles a day – Edward I’s record was thirty-four miles in 1300 with court and household.³ Speeds did not significantly improve until the railway age.

The most recent agricultural and social revolution, beginning before the Norman Conquest, was the spread of the collective open-field system, as populations grew into areas less densely settled and suitable for arable cultivation, and for example where heavier soils required more labour.⁴

Here each village's land was divided into two or three huge open fields, with cereals the main product, and with one field left fallow in turn for grazing, manuring and recovery of the soil. The great fields were often ploughed into a 'ridge and furrow' pattern – the easiest way to use big teams of oxen – whose undulations are visible today under the pasture to which many fields were later converted. Households owned strips of land in each field, which they cultivated individually, but with the rules for ploughing, sowing, harvesting and grazing laid down collectively. Similar community agriculture also developed in parts of France, Scandinavia, Germany and eastern Europe.

The open-field system reached its peak in the 1300s, when it covered between a quarter and a third of England in a great belt descending from the north-east, through the Midlands, to Dorset and Hampshire. This central zone of 'planned countryside' contrasted with the areas of 'ancient countryside' to the west and east. The difference spanned the centuries, and still remains:

On the one hand . . . the England of hamlets, medieval farms in hollows of the hills, lonely moats and great barns . . . ancient trees, cavernous holloways and many footpaths, fords, irregularly shaped groves with thick hedges . . . an intricate land of mystery and surprise. On the other hand . . . the England of big villages, few, busy roads, thin hawthorn hedges . . . a predictable land of wide views, sweeping sameness and straight lines.⁵

'Planned' central England was a country of villages, each with a church, houses in uniform plots, and gardens along a street or round a green for common grazing. It was a stable system, economically and socially, with security being purchased by immobility: village boundaries lasted for centuries.

The 'ancient countryside' to the west and east featured scattered farms and isolated settlements. In the west of the country there was more grazing land. In East Anglia and south-eastern England, densely settled regions, there was more intensive agriculture, using fields marked out by Iron Age or Roman settlers – some still extant today, bounded by hedges a thousand years old.⁶ Already, large areas of wetlands had been drained and cultivated. Rural Norfolk in 1300 was as developed and populated as it would be in 1800.

Economic growth allowed more peasants to marry earlier, as they could support a family by combining a smallholding with wage-earning and trading – for example, women spinning and brewing ale (the most widespread village business), and men mining, woodcutting or weaving. Relatively prosperous peasants owned livestock, carts and ploughs, and

lived in houses of improving quality – there are houses from the 1280s still occupied today. They bought furniture, pottery and clothes. They ate puddings and pies, bread and porridge, and drank ale. The population tripled in 200 years, reaching up to 6 million by 1300 – also a level not attained again until the eighteenth century.⁷

People on average were taller than in the early nineteenth century (the low point) but slightly smaller than today: the average man was around 5 foot 7¼ inches (171 cm), and the average woman 5 foot 2½ inches (159 cm). This reflects diet and health throughout childhood. Girls and boys were cared for equally; there is no sign that girls were unvalued, as in parts of southern Europe. A significant proportion of people suffered from sinusitis, tuberculosis or anaemia (partly due to intestinal parasites) and almost everyone had toothache. Hard physical labour took a toll on limbs and joints. There were occurrences of leprosy and malaria. Diseases (including eye infections and blindness) arising from insanitary conditions, unclean water and vermin were endemic, though of course levels of immunity to infection were high and food allergies absent. Many monks, fitting popular legend, were obese. Agriculture was a dangerous occupation, as even relatively minor accidents – an infected cut, a kick from a horse – could prove fatal. So average life expectancy at birth for men was just over thirty, and for women just under – similar to several African countries today. But people who survived childhood, whether peasants or nobles, now had a good chance of reaching their forties, and those who reached fifty would probably live on to old age.⁸

Population expansion created new rural settlements, with farms won from woodland, heath and marsh. It also entailed new trades and migration to mushrooming new towns, of which there were over 800 in England by 1300, compared with eighty in Wales and fifty in Scotland. Towns were created more rapidly than at any other time in our history, with over fifty established between 1200 and 1320, including Weymouth, Salisbury, Leeds and Liverpool. Many were planned as an investment by lay or ecclesiastical lords. Houses and gardens were often built on uniform plots, held by rented ‘burgage tenure’; the pattern can still be seen in small towns today. By 1300, about 20 per cent of the population lived in towns – similar to present-day Cambodia. By far the biggest town was London, the second-largest in northern Europe, after Paris, with perhaps 80,000 people. Next came Norwich, with 20,000. A few other important towns (Lincoln, Coventry, Oxford) had about 5,000; but most had under 2,000 people. Towns were above all markets, the main source of profit for their inhabitants and landlords. Some became centres of trades and manufacture, developing specializations maintained for centuries. Unlike in Flanders or Italy, English

towns could not rule or coerce their hinterlands: they had to compete to offer services. Many held annual fairs, and the more important ones – St Ives, Stamford, Boston, Winchester, Northampton – drew merchants from the Continent. The largest export items were wool (England was Europe's major source of fine wool), followed by other raw materials – hides, grain, tin and lead – and cheap cloth. England imported luxury goods, including woollen and silken cloth, furs, spices and wine – a peak of 5 million gallons in 1308 from Aquitaine.⁹ The big towns, many of them sea or river ports, were international trading centres and powers in the land, especially London, which had salaried military forces, fortifications and unequalled manpower, and controlled cash and credit.

A town – usually termed 'borough' – was defined by having a charter from a lord or sometimes the king, giving certain privileges, such as holding a market. Towns were attractive to the discontented, the desperate and the fugitive, as well as the enterprising and the ambitious. It was possible to make a start there as a servant or apprentice – roughly a quarter of the urban population. That towns were dirty, crowded, smoky and smelly goes without saying – Shitelane in Winchester was well named¹⁰ – and their burgesses frequently ordered clean-ups. Stray pigs were a traffic hazard. Most buildings were wood and thatch, and vulnerable to fire. However, these were not particularly medieval characteristics, and the general atmosphere must have resembled towns in poorer parts of the world today. Towns were also cultural and religious centres. They acquired prestigious origin myths and legends (the most famous being Coventry's Lady Godiva story; and Colchester claimed to have been founded by Old King Cole – one of Geoffrey of Monmouth's characters). They were not chaotic places: they had systems of government, and many confraternities and guilds with social, charitable, religious and political functions, which linked their settled inhabitants together. Religious festivals, processions and plays (such as the York and Wakefield mystery plays) displayed corporate unity and dignity – participation was compulsory.

The conception of legitimate power was that it came from above, ultimately from God. Disorder was due to sin and divine disfavour. Legitimacy also came from the past: rights, status, property, laws – all were inherited. So desirable changes were conceptualized as a return to a pristine original. The ideal was of a stable, ordered hierarchy, in which all knew and accepted their position. This would be manifested in acts, symbols (including legally regulated differences of clothing and jewellery – knights were not allowed to wear gold rings), words of affection and subordination, and deferential gestures. The servants of great lords would kiss objects before handing them to their master. One landowner ensured being treated with respect