



BIOGRAPHY:

William THE CONQUEROR

THE KING OF ENGLAND

William I, King of England and surnamed the Conqueror, was born in 1027 or 1028. He was the son of Robert, Duke of Normandy and Herleva, daughter of a simple tanner. When he was seven years old, his father intended to go on a pilgrimage. Since he had no legitimate sons, he named him as his heir.



The great men of the area paid honor to him and a year later his father died. Suddenly he was the heir of a great kingdom. Several powerful lords tried to kill William, but his guardians, who were knights, protected him, sometimes with their own lives. He worked hard and became a knight at a very young age. King Henry of France placed the sword upon William's shoulders himself.

In 1047, when he was just 20, the lords who had pledged to serve him rebelled. He was chased throughout the night, but he rode faster and made it back to his castle before they could catch him. He went to King Henry for help who sent him an army and they defeated the rebels. William was firmly in charge of the duchy his father had left him.

The debt to King Henry was repaid the next year when Count Geoffrey of Anjou tried to overthrow King Henry. William and his vassals fought for the king and defeated Geoffrey and captured an important border fortress as well.

In 1051 William visited England. He made a good friend of Edward, King of England who liked the young warrior. Edward liked William so much he decided to name him to be his heir, since King Edward had no children.

King Edward had two relatives named Harold and Tostig who were brothers. Each thought he deserved to be named king on Edward's death. This created a big conflict.

While he was in England, he met the daughter of the Earl of Flanders, and proposed to marry her. It took two years, but he finally married her, even though the Church opposed it.



THE BATTLE AT HASTINGS

In 1054, Harold was shipwrecked and captured on the shores of Normandy on his way to visit King Henry of France. Even though he was held a prisoner, Harold and William became friends and Harold became engaged to William's daughter, Agatha. When Harold wanted to return to England, William made him take an oath to support William's claim to become King of England.

When Edward, King of England, died in 1066, Harold did not support William's claim. William decided to

invade England and seize the throne. He had a lot of trouble talking his vassals into going to war, but William promised them great rewards if they supported him. It took several months to equip ships and gather the provisions. William insisted that his lords bring their own horses. Pope Alexander II gave William his blessing also issued a bill declaring that William was the rightful heir to the English throne.

There is a pictorial record of the invasion of England found in the Bayeux Tapestry which had been commissioned by Bishop Odo of Bayeux, William's half brother. It is a 231 foot strip of embroidery that depicts the events. The Bayeux Tapestry is one of the best resources we have to know what knights wore into battle.



WILLIAM'S LAND AT THE TIME OF HIS DEATH.

Meanwhile the two brothers, Harold and Tostig, went to war against each other. Tostig got the support of the King of Norway who appeared on England's northern shore with a fleet of dragon ships. Harold made a quick march to the north and defeated and killed his brother, Tostig and the King of Norway. Then, without a rest, he and his weary and wounded men turned around to fight William at Hasting, a coastal town.

On October 14, 1066, on a hill later called Senlac, Lake of Blood, the two armies faced off. They were nearly matched in number. They fought throughout the day and into the night. Finally, a Norman arrow killed Harold and the battle was over. By Christmas Day, William had seized London and was able to proclaim himself King in Westminster Abbey. It took him another 5 years to complete the conquest of England.

Once peace was established, William sent for Matilda who was crowned the first Queen in Westminster Abbey. Matilda was the first queen because the wives of earlier kings had been called "Lady."

To collect information about his new kingdom, William ordered a list to be made of all the fiefs he had granted and off the people and possessions in these fiefs. This survey of national resources was known as the Domesday Book. After it was completed, William declared that everything in the book belonged to him, as king. It became a valuable basis for taxation and central administration.

William the Conqueror understood the problems with feudalism and took care that it didn't undermine his own authority. He scattered the estates of his great vassals to prevent them from bonding together against him. He demanded an oath of allegiance to him directly from every landholder. And he had an accurate knowledge of all the properties and assets within his kingdom.

William was also careful to maintain the English laws and institutions. By doing so, he was able to rule both England and Normandy, natural enemies, and force each to depend on him for protection against the other. With this power, he was probably the most absolute monarch that had ever sat upon the English throne.

At the age of 67, William was still a warrior. He died in 1087 after being wounded in a battle against a rebellious vassal from Normandy.