

## Chapter Nine

# THE NORMAN KINGS

THE state which William I created called for strong kings to exercise power over it. Fortunately he was succeeded by two of his sons who were just such men, but disaster was to strike later when his grandson seized the throne. As in the case of the Anglo-Saxon kings there was no such thing as primogeniture, the automatic succession of the eldest son. The crown passed firstly to the king's second son, William Rufus, next to his third son Henry I, and finally to his grandson, Stephen. Both on the first and second occasions it should have gone to William's eldest son, Robert, and on the last to the Conqueror's granddaughter, the Empress Matilda and her son, the future Henry II.

When he died in 1087, William left Normandy to Robert, and chose his second surviving son, William, to rule England. He was later nicknamed Rufus, most likely on account of his red hair. Many of the nobles consequently found themselves serving two masters, having lands in both countries. This decision of the Conqueror to split his inheritance was not liked and soon after his accession William Rufus was faced with a rebellion led by Bishop Odo of Bayeux designed to put Robert on the throne. It was crushed. Indeed William Rufus was even more savage than his father. He was a monarch who lived entirely for the battlefield, on which he was fearless. Greedy and immoral, he meted out strong justice and eliminated anyone who defied him. He exacted from his tenants-in-chief everything he could: large fines on the succession of an heir to an estate, the right to custody of that heir and his lands if he was not of age and also the right of disposing of any heiress in marriage. All of these measures were used to exact money.

William's deadliest foe was the church for which he had little time, being, unlike his father, far from pious. When a bishop or an abbot died, William, instead of appointing a new one, left the post vacant and took over the revenues for the crown. As a result the church denounced him as a monster. But under him the Norman rule of England was consolidated. When he was accidentally killed while hunting in the New Forest in August 1100 it was seen by many, not surprisingly, as the judgement of God on a wicked tyrant.

William Rufus never married and on his death the crown should have passed to his elder brother, Robert, but that did not happen. William's younger brother, Henry, happened to be part of the fatal hunting party, and within days he seized the royal treasury and had himself crowned king. During his reign the system created by William I reached its climax. And once again, that it did so was a direct reflection of the qualities of the king, for he too was a cruel and violent man who spent his life either fighting or hunting. When he snatched the crown he issued a charter promising the barons that he would make amends for the deeds of his brother, but it meant nothing. To win the English he married an Anglo-Saxon princess descended from Alfred, but that too meant little. Henry continued his brother's policy of exacting everything he could from his vassals, above all money to pay for his expensive continental wars. When his brother Robert invaded England he bought him off with a pension, but in doing this he was only buying time for it was his intention that Normandy should be his too, and in 1106 he defeated his brother at the Battle of Tinchebray. Henry took over the duchy and put Robert in prison, where he died.

Despite his shortcomings Henry could be a skilful administrator. His reign also saw the development of the 'exchequer', when a committee met during the king's frequent absences abroad to oversee and audit accounts.

Henry, however, was afflicted by a major problem. His only son William was drowned at sea crossing to Normandy. Although he had married again there was no son, so that he was left only with a daughter, Matilda, who was married to the Holy Roman Emperor, Henry V. Henry I's last years were clouded by all the problems of securing his daughter's succession. Firstly her husband died, and she was left childless. She returned to her father's court, where Henry summoned all his tenants-in-chief and made them swear to acknowledge her as his successor. His hope was then to obtain a grandson and so he married her off to a man ten years her junior, Geoffrey Plantagenet, Count of Anjou. Matilda herself was arrogant and by no means popular with the king's vassals. To this unpopularity was now added a man who ruled over a state which was Normandy's enemy. The Angevins and the Normans had always fought each other and now the latter were faced with the possibility of the leader of their traditional foe being their king. They did not like it.

All of this explains why, when Henry I died in December 1135, no one opposed the crown being seized by Stephen, the son of the Conqueror's daughter, Adela, Countess of Blois. Stephen had always been a favourite of his uncle, who made him the greatest landowner in England, but he lacked the attributes of a strong king. Affable, popular and generous, he was a good knight but he did not know how to wield the rod of iron which was essential to keep the unruly barons in order. The



*Henric nati pelago perit ad aqua  
filia que remanet impiale tenet.*



*Henricus primus genuit*

*William  
qui perit  
in mari*

*Henric  
qui perit  
in mari*



*Matilda  
dam in  
patrie*

*Henricus  
qui obit*

*Henric  
Fecit se  
cundi*

A fourteenth century royal family tree depicts Henry I with, below, an inset scene of the loss of his son, William, in the White Ship which foundered on its journey to England in November 1120. When told, the king fell senseless to the ground with grief.

result was anarchy. Some of the barons went over to Matilda, others were loyal to Stephen. Worse, in the absence of firm royal power, the barons began to fight private wars with each other. A monk records what this meant for the people of England:

'When the traitors saw that Stephen was a good-humoured, kindly, and easy-going man who inflicted no punishment then they committed all manner of horrible crimes. They had done him homage and sworn oaths of fealty to him, but not one of their oaths was kept. They were all forsworn and their oaths broken. For every great man built him castles and held them against the king; and they filled the whole land with these castles; and when the castles were built, they filled them with devils and wicked men . . . Never did a country endure greater misery, and never did the heathen act more vilely than they did . . .'

For over two decades England was devastated. Stephen had lost control.

In the end the barons began to look with more and more favour on the Angevins and in 1144 Geoffrey, Count of Anjou, conquered Normandy. Five years later he passed the duchy onto his son by Matilda, Henry. The new Duke of Normandy was both shrewd and intelligent. On his father's death he gained Anjou and then, the following year, he married a great heiress, Eleanor, who brought Aquitaine. At the age of nineteen Henry was already the ruler of a large part of western France. Next he began to threaten Stephen by attacks on England. Stephen's own son died and, bowing to the inevitable, he adopted Henry as his heir a year before his own death in 1154. Henry came to the throne as the first of a new dynasty, the Plantagenets.

Over sixty years divide the death of William the Conqueror from that of Stephen. A rigid structure had been seen to work well and then fall apart depending on the character of the king. That was to apply until well into the seventeenth century. But by 1154 much else had changed. Two generations had passed since the Conquest and the invaders had become natives. Now all English society had to respond to changes which were affecting every country in Western Europe.

The Anglo-Saxon and the Norman church had been at the service of the state. The kings were sacred beings set apart like the priesthood who led their people in devotion to the church and also appointed both bishops and abbots. The king presented them on appointment with a staff and a ring, symbols of their office. The staff, called a crozier, symbolised their role as the shepherd of their flock. They then did homage to the king and received their lands in the same way as any of his lay tenants-in-chief. By the close of the eleventh century the church was undergoing a revolution, asserting the dignity of the priestly office and the power of the popes as direct successors of Christ through St. Peter. Bishops and abbots were henceforth to be appointed for their spiritual leadership and not because they would be capable royal officials

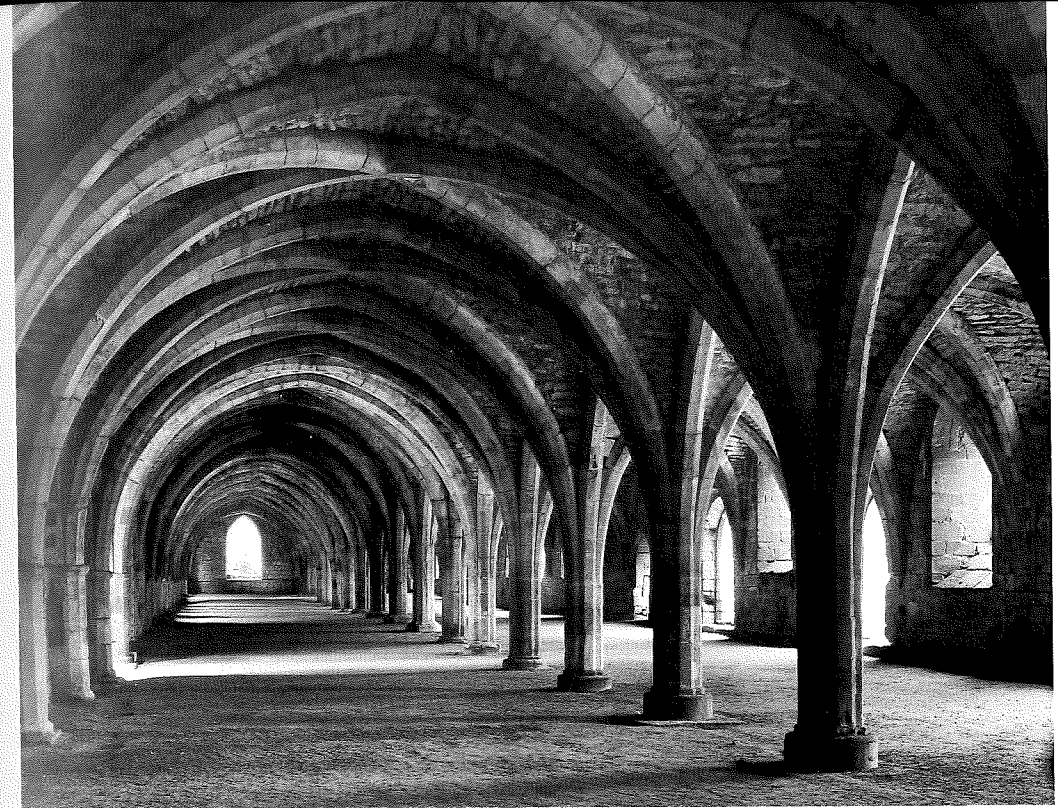


running the government. They were no longer to purchase their positions. All of this struggle to separate the church from the control of the state was to become focused on the one act of the king giving the office holder his staff and ring.

Even before 1066 the pope had forbidden this but it was to take many years before his decision was to become fact. In England it first surfaced in 1093 when William Rufus, thinking he was dying, filled the vacant see of Canterbury with a learned and saintly man, Anselm, abbot of the monastery of Bec in Normandy. Anselm refused to be invested by William and both king and archbishop appealed to Rome, beginning what was to be a never-ending series of disputes. In the reign of Henry I a compromise was reached: the king no longer gave the cleric his ring and staff but retained the right to receive his homage. But neither side was happy. When Anselm died in 1109 Henry left the see empty for five years.

At the same time that the battle lines were being drawn between clergy and laity, the church was undergoing other dramatic developments. This was a golden age for monasticism. Between 1066 and 1154 the number of religious houses rose from forty-eight to nearly three hundred with most belonging to the new reforming orders. Of these the Cistercians were to leave the imposing monuments we see today in the ruined abbeys, for example of Tintern or Fountains. The Cistercians were reformers who sought out the most desolate and remote valleys where they farmed the land and built their austere churches. In contrast to the rich splendour of the Benedictines, the interiors were devoid of decoration and the emphasis was on simplicity. The monks were 'dressed as angels might be' in habits of undyed wool, and lived a life of poverty. Simultaneously with this passionate revival of monastic life celibacy was enforced upon the clergy. Both before and after the Conquest priests had often been married but now this was banned, reinforcing those who took holy orders as a caste apart from ordinary men.

More monasteries meant more learning for they were centres of teaching. They were international, as they belonged to orders which had houses all over Europe and spoke and wrote the common *lingua franca*, Latin. The twelfth century was an age of intellectual ferment which saw the emergence of universities. Learned men moved around with as much ease as today. One such was Adelard of Bath who lived through the period from William Rufus to Henry II. He was a student at two great French cathedral schools, Tours and Laon; then he travelled in Greece, Asia Minor, Sicily, south Italy and probably Spain. He knew Latin, Greek and Arabic and spent his life translating books on philosophy and science which were to open up new avenues of thought. Not only were universities such as Oxford emerging as centres of learning, but also grammar schools for members of the laity. Soon it was realised that to be



educated not only opened up a career in the church but increasingly elsewhere.

Neither the king nor his nobles learned to read or write for they kept secretaries. As the government became more complicated, it called for men who were educated. What were parts of the royal household gradually began to take on the character of what were later to be government departments. The royal chapel provided church services for the court but as its clerics were literate they, under the chancellor, did the paperwork of government. The chamber included the private and sleeping apartments of the king and came under the chamberlain and the treasurer. The king still kept some of his money under the royal bed but most of it was in the treasury. The accounts were done twice a year in the exchequer called after the chequerboard, a table resembling a chessboard on which addition and subtraction could be demonstrated. Afterwards the accounts were written up on a huge roll of parchment. The earliest surviving one is from 1130 and the system continued almost until Queen Victoria's time.

Royal government was active in the form of justices on tour holding court all over the country, the direct ancestor of our assize courts. In each shire the king was represented by a sheriff whose duty it was to see that taxes were collected and delivered to the exchequer. The country was in fact becoming more prosperous. By royal grant,

The cellarium of Fountains, the great Cistercian Abbey whose ruins now form part of the grounds of Studley Royal, Yorkshire. Fountains was founded in 1132 and rebuilt in the second half of that century after a fire.



fairs began to be held and as trade and industry developed guilds were formed in the cities and towns. By 1130 weavers' guilds existed in London and four other towns reflecting the importance of the wool trade, particularly the export of wool itself to Flanders where it was woven into fine cloth.

It was during this period too that the warrior became first and foremost the knight. This was a society about and for men, in which women did not figure beyond influence, although they could be highly educated. A knight was a man of gentle birth trained in the martial arts whose role was devotion to Holy Church and to justice. War was his profession but it was war fought according to a complex code of rules. No one was allowed to fight during Lent or at Christmas. The likelihood of actually being killed was remote, for the aim was always to take knights of the opposing side captive and exact a large ransom for their release. The people who did suffer were the ordinary population. If the knights were not engaged in campaigns they staged tournaments, combats exactly like a battle but minus any killing. The chronicler Odericus Vitalis describing a battle in 1119 catches the atmosphere of this age of knights:

'For they were clad entirely in iron, and they spared each other for the love of God and for the sake of their fellowship. Nor did they seek to kill the fugitives but rather to take prisoners. Christian soldiers do not thirst to spill their brothers' blood, but, God willing, rejoice in lawful victory for the good of the Holy Church and the peace of the faithful.'

It was this atmosphere which made it possible for knights from all over Europe to unite in the crusade, with the common cause of delivering the holy city of Jerusalem out of the hands of the Infidel. In England the knightly ideal was coloured too by the romantic stories of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table which gained currency during this period, providing a pattern of behaviour for men to emulate for the next five hundred years.

Oxen drawing a plough, an illustration from an eleventh century calendar for the month of January. Behind the ploughman follows a sower scattering seed.

