

**CHAPTER**  
**14****HISTORYMAKERS** **William the Conqueror**  
*Warrior King***Section 3**

*“He was a very stern and harsh man, so that no one dared do anything contrary to his will.”—description of William the Conqueror, in The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*

William the Conqueror, duke of Normandy and king of England, spent almost his entire life at war. He proved himself an able administrator as well, but his significance stems most from the cultural and political impact of his conquests. Upon gaining control of England, he brought feudalism there and established a dynasty.

William was born around 1027 in Normandy, a region of northwest France. He was the illegitimate son of Robert I, known as Robert the Devil. When William was a boy of seven, his father prepared for a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Before leaving, he had William recognized as his successor because of the dangers of the journey. Coincidentally, Robert died on the return trip. As a result, rival leaders, ignoring William’s status as heir, fought for control of the kingdom. However, William emerged from the civil war victorious.

In adulthood, William was an imposing figure, standing six feet tall and towering over most other people. He also had intelligence and political skill. He arranged a diplomatic marriage with Matilda, daughter of the count of Flanders. She proved a good match as she aided William throughout his career and often ruled in his absence.

In 1051, William traveled to England to visit his cousin King Edward the Confessor. Edward had no children, and William later claimed that the king promised that William would succeed to the throne after Edward’s death. Some years later, Harold, a powerful English earl, was shipwrecked on the coast of Normandy. Seizing his chance, William held Harold captive until he received Harold’s promise to support William’s claim to the throne. After Edward died, the Anglo-Saxon nobles of England chose Harold as the new king. He ignored his earlier pledge to William and accepted the crown.

William prepared for revenge, using both diplomacy and military skill. First, he won the backing of the pope for his right to be king, making his claim appear more legitimate. Then he prepared an army to invade England. In addition to his own forces, he convinced a brother of Harold to invade the north of England while William invaded from the

south. While Harold was busy defeating his brother in the north, William was able to land on the opposite shore. In response, Harold quickly advanced with his army toward William. However, the Anglo-Saxons were already tired from fighting one battle and made even more weary by the rapid march. In addition, William’s soldiers were mounted on horses, while Harold’s Anglo-Saxons fought on foot. The Normans won the Battle of Hastings decisively, and Harold was killed. By the end of the year, William had reached London and been crowned king.

For the next few years, William campaigned throughout England. He suppressed revolts against Norman rule, punishing anyone who resisted his power. According to one historian, after the last revolt in southern England, William “fell upon the English of the north like a raging lion.” He also moved to consolidate his power in other ways. He seized the land of the Anglo-Saxon nobles to break their power and then gave the estates to his own supporters. Of course, he kept about a quarter of the land for himself. With this approach, William brought the practice of feudalism to England.

William then turned to ruling his new land. He had crown officials travel throughout England to count every piece of property in the kingdom, so the king would know what to tax. The result, collected in records called the *Domesday Book*, provides a vital picture of England under early Norman rule.

William spent his last years in relative peace. However, he returned again to the saddle in 1087 to suppress a revolt in his French lands. Old and overweight, he was thrown from his horse and died from his injuries.

## Questions

1. **Recognizing Facts and Details** What was the basis of William’s claim to the throne of England?
2. **Using Sequential Order** What steps did William take to win control of England?
3. **Drawing Conclusions** What was significant about the changes William made to land ownership in England?