**The Struggle for Power: The Sons of William the Conqueror**

Sections

* [Robert Curthose](https://spartacus-educational.com/U3Ahistory6.htm#section1)
* [Division of the Kingdom](https://spartacus-educational.com/U3Ahistory6.htm#section2)
* [Death of William II](https://spartacus-educational.com/U3Ahistory6.htm#section3)
* [Reign of Henry I](https://spartacus-educational.com/U3Ahistory6.htm#section4)
* [**References**](https://spartacus-educational.com/U3Ahistory6.htm#references)

[William the Conqueror](https://spartacus-educational.com/MEDwilliam1.htm) left his wife [Matilda of Flanders](https://spartacus-educational.com/NORmatilda.htm), in charge of [Normandy](https://spartacus-educational.com/MEDnormandy.htm) when he left for England in 1066. In March 1067 William returned to Normandy. As a precaution, he took as hostages, Prince [Edgar Etheling](https://spartacus-educational.com/MEDedgar.htm), [Eadwine](https://spartacus-educational.com/Edwin.htm), Earl of Mercia, [Morcar](https://spartacus-educational.com/NORmorcar.htm), Earl of Northumbria, [Stigand](https://spartacus-educational.com/NORstigand.htm), Archbishop of Canterbury and Harold's brother, [Wulfnoth Godwinson](https://spartacus-educational.com/Wulfnoth.htm). William evidently hoped that he had removed all the English leaders who might have led revolts against the Norman government. (1)

While he was away, several disturbances broke out. The first revolt took place in Wales was directed by [Eric the Wild](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eadric_the_Wild) and the rebels failed in their attempts to capture the newly-built Norman castle at Hereford. This was followed by a more serious rebellion in Kent that was led by Count [Eustace of Boulogne](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eustace_II,_Count_of_Boulogne) who was dissatisfied by the land that had been granted to him by William. After Eustace's failure to capture [Dover Castle](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/dover-castle/) he escaped back to his territory in Europe. (2)

William arrived in December 1067 and led his army into Devon and Cornwall. He laid siege to [Exeter](https://spartacus-educational.com/ITexeter.htm) and after eighteen days the residents surrendered. The [Anglo-Saxon Chronicle](https://spartacus-educational.com/MEDchronicleAS.htm) states that "he made favourable promises to the citizens which were badly kept". (3) William ordered a castle to be built in the town and left behind a garrison to guard against further unrest. (4)

Further rebellions took place in 1069. In January, [Robert de Comines](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_de_Comines), the new Earl of Northumbria, was burned to death in the bishop's palace in [Durham](https://spartacus-educational.com/ITdurham.htm). This was followed by a rebellion in [York](https://spartacus-educational.com/ITyork.htm). William had little trouble dealing with the insurrection and after severely punishing the rebels he built a castle in the town. (5)

William also had to deal with raids on the north led by King [Sweyn](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sweyn_II_of_Denmark) of Denmark. In September 1069, Sweyn's fleet sailed into the Humber. William's army forced the Danes to retreat and then crushed another uprising in Staffordshire. He then burnt crops, house and property of people living between York and Durham. The chroniclers claim that the area was turned into a desert and people died of starvation. The revolt finally came to an end when William's troops captured Chester in 1070. [A. L. Morton](https://spartacus-educational.com/JmortonAL.htm) argues that "the greater part of Yorkshire and Durham was laid waste and remained almost unpeopled for a generation". (6)

In 1071 another revolt broke out. Led by [Hereward](https://spartacus-educational.com/NORhereward.htm) the rebels captured the [Isle of Ely](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isle_of_Ely). He held out in the fen country for more than a year. During this period Earl [Eadwine](https://spartacus-educational.com/Edwin.htm) of Mercia and Earl [Morcar](https://spartacus-educational.com/NORmorcar.htm) of Northumbria, were killed. William personally led the Norman army against Hereward. He managed to escape but William punished the rebels he caught with mutilation and lifelong imprisonment and built a new castle at Ely. (7)

William returned to Normandy in 1073 and later that year conquered Maine. While he was away [Waltheof](https://spartacus-educational.com/NORwaltheof.htm), the Earl of Northumbria, began to conspire against him. [Geoffrey of Coutances](https://spartacus-educational.com/NORcountances.htm) led the fight against the uprising and afterwards ordered that all rebels should have their right foot cut off. Waltheof was arrested: "His motives, even his actions, were uncertain at the time and have been contentious ever since. Waltheof certainly did not rebel openly. It may have been simply (as one later version had it) that he knew about a conspiracy against the king and was slow in reporting it, or (following another account) that he went along with the plot when it was first put to him, only to have immediate reservations and throw himself on the king's mercy." William had him executed - the only time capital punishment was inflicted on an English leader during his reign. (8)

**Robert Curthose**

[Robert Curthose](https://spartacus-educational.com/NORcurthose.htm), was William's eldest son. Unlike his father, he was a short man and this gave him his nickname 'Curthose' (short boots). He was described by [Ordericus Vitalis](https://spartacus-educational.com/NORvitalis.htm) as "talkative and prodigal, very bold and valiant" with a loud voice and a fluent tongue". (9)

Robert, who was now in his early twenties, fought with his father to defeat his enemies in 1073. Robert suggested that William should return to England and he should be allowed to rule [Normandy](https://spartacus-educational.com/MEDnormandy.htm). William, now in his forties, refused with the words: "Normandy is mine by hereditary descent and I will never while I live relinquish the government". Robert was unwilling to accept this decision and joined forces with discontented elements in Brittany, Maine and Anjou. (10)

Robert Curthose

Robert gained support from Roger of Clare, the son of [Richard FitzGilbert](https://spartacus-educational.com/NORrichardfitz.htm) and he made his base at [Gerberoy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gerberoy). William and his army attacked Robert in December 1078. During the battle William was wounded in the arm and was forced to flee the battlefield. [William of Malmesbury](https://spartacus-educational.com/NORmalmesbury.htm) claims that it was the greatest humiliation suffered by William in his whole military career. (11)

William returned to [Rouen](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rouen) and was forced to enter into negotiations with his opponents: "An influential group of senior members of the Norman aristocracy including Roger of Montgomery, Hugh of Granmesnil, and the veteran Roger of Beaumont at once strove to effect a pacification in the interests of Robert and his young associates, many of whom were the sons or younger brothers of the negotiating magnates." (12)

William agreed to withdraw but in 1080 he made another attempt to regain his kingdom. According to one source, another battle was prevented by the Church: "While the two armies were in face of each other, drawn out for battle, and many hearts quailed at the fearful death, and still more fearful fate after death which awaits the reprobate, a cardinal priest of the Roman Church and some pious monks, intervened by divine inspiration, and remonstrated with the chiefs of both armies." (13)

It is claimed that William's wife, [Matilda of Flanders](https://spartacus-educational.com/NORmatilda.htm), intervened in the dispute and the two men were reconciled. The two men took part in an invasion of Scotland. On his way back Robert established a new Norman fortification at Newcastle, and he remained in England until at least the early months of 1081. (14)

[Odo of Bayeux](https://spartacus-educational.com/NORodo.htm) had been left in control of England while William was in Normandy. In 1082 William heard complaints about Odo's behaviour. He returned to England and Odo was arrested and charged with misgovernment and oppression. It was also claimed that Odo was preparing an expedition to Rome to become pope after [Gregory VII](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pope_Gregory_VII). Found guilty he was kept in prison for the next five years. (15)

**Division of the Kingdom**

In later life [William the Conqueror](https://spartacus-educational.com/MEDwilliam1.htm) became very fat. In 1087 William was told that King [Philip I](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip_I_of_France) of France had described him as looking like a pregnant woman. William was furious and on mounted an attack on the king's territory. On 15th August he captured Mantes and set fire to the town. Soon afterwards he fell from his horse and suffered internal injuries. [Ordericus Vitalis](https://spartacus-educational.com/NORvitalis.htm) said that as he was "very corpulent" he "fell sick from the excessive heat and his great fatigues". (16)

William was taken to the priory of St. Gervase. Close to death, he directed that [Robert Curthose](https://spartacus-educational.com/NORcurthose.htm) should succeed him in Normandy and [William Rufus](https://spartacus-educational.com/MEDwilliamII.htm) should become king of England. William said on his deathbed that "I tremble when I reflect on the grievous sins which burden my conscience, and now, about to be summoned before the awful tribunal of God, I know not what I ought to do. I was too fond of war... I was bred to arms from my childhood, and I am stained with the rivers of blood that I have shed." (17)

William the Conqueror died on 9th September, 1087. His body was taken to Caen to be buried. According to [David C. Douglas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_C._Douglas), the author of [*William the Conqueror: The Norman Impact Upon England*](https://www.amazon.co.uk/s/ref=nb_sb_noss_2?url=search-alias=stripbooks&field-keywords=Douglas,+William+the+Conqueror) (1992), the "attendants actually broke the unwieldy body when trying to force it into the stone coffin, and such an intolerable stench filled the force it into the stone coffin, and such an intolerable stench filled the church that the priests were forced to hurry the service to a close." (18)

William Rufus was not a popular ruler. It was recorded in the [Anglo-Saxon Chronicle](https://spartacus-educational.com/MEDchronicleAS.htm): "He (William Rufus) was very harsh and severe over his land and his men, and with all his neighbours; and very formidable; and through the counsels of evil men, that to him were always agreeable, and through his own avarice, he was ever tiring this nation with an army, and with unjust contributions. For in his days all right fell to the ground, and every wrong rose up before God and before the world. God's church he humbled; and all the bishoprics and abbacies, whose elders fell in his days, he either sold in fee, or held in his own hands, and let for a certain sum; because he would be the heir of every man, both of the clergy and laity." (19)

The division of the Conqueror's lands created political difficulties as most Norman lords held estates on both sides of the Channel. [Odo of Bayeux](https://spartacus-educational.com/NORodo.htm) commented: "How can we give proper service to two mutually hostile and distant lords? If we serve Duke Robert well we shall offend his brother William, and he will deprive us of our revenues and honours in England. On the other hand if we obey King William, Duke Robert will deprive us of our patrimonies in Normandy." (20)

In 1088 some [Normans](https://spartacus-educational.com/MEDnormandy.htm), including [Odo of Bayeux](https://spartacus-educational.com/NORodo.htm), [Robert of Mortain](https://spartacus-educational.com/NORmortain.htm), [Richard Fitz Gilbert](https://spartacus-educational.com/NORrichardfitz.htm), [William Fitz Osbern](https://spartacus-educational.com/NORosbern.htm) and [Geoffrey of Coutances](https://spartacus-educational.com/NORcountances.htm), led a rebellion against the rule of William Rufus in order to place his brother, [Robert Curthose](https://spartacus-educational.com/NORcurthose.htm) on the throne. However most Normans in England remained loyal and Rufus and his army successfully attacked the rebel strongholds at Tonbridge, Pevensey and Rochester. The leaders of the revolt were exiled to [Normandy](https://spartacus-educational.com/MEDnormandy.htm). (21)

In February 1091, Rufus personally led an army into north-eastern Normandy against Robert Curthose. Robert accepted defeat and negotiated a peace on terms highly favourable to Rufus. In essence, their treaty provided for the division of Normandy between them, to the total exclusion and disinheritance of their younger brother, [Henry Beauclerk](https://spartacus-educational.com/MEDhenry1.htm). Rufus and Curthose then marched westward against their brother, forcing Henry to withdraw to the mountain-top abbey of Mont-St Michel. Curthose and Rufus besieged their younger brother until April 1091, with water running short, Henry agreed to relinquish the abbey and departed Normandy. (22)

Robert accompanied Rufus to England in autumn 1091. He returned to Normandy in December but had difficulty controlling his territory. He renounced the treaty with his brother William, who in February 1094 returned to Normandy and throughout 1094 and 1095 the conflict between the brothers was evenly matched. Orderic Vitalis indicates that Rufus controlled more than twenty castles in Normandy. (23)

William Refus now formed a new alliance with his brother Henry and by 1096 was under his control. Robert joined the First Crusade and was one of those involved in capturing Jerusalem in July 1099. Robert married Sybilla of Conversano, daughter of [Geoffrey of Brindisi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geoffrey,_Count_of_Conversano), Count of Conversano on the way back from Crusade. (24)

**Death of William II**

On 2nd August 1100, King William Rufus went hunting at [Brockenhurst](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brockenhurst) in the New Forest. [Gilbert de Clare](https://spartacus-educational.com/NORclareG.htm) and his younger brother, Roger of Clare, were with the king. Another man in the hunting party was [Walter Tirel](https://spartacus-educational.com/NORtirrell.htm), who was married to Richard de Clare's daughter, Adelize. Also present was William Rufus' younger brother [Henry Beauclerk](https://spartacus-educational.com/MEDhenry1.htm). (25)

[William of Malmesbury](https://spartacus-educational.com/NORmalmesbury.htm) later described what happened during the hunt: "The sun was now declining, when the king, drawing his bow and letting fly an arrow, slightly wounded a stag which passed before him... The stag was still running... The king, followed it a long time with his eyes, holding up his hand to keep off the power of the sun's rays. At this instant Walter decided to kill another stag. Oh, gracious God! the arrow pierced the king's breast. On receiving the wound the king uttered not a word; but breaking off the shaft of the arrow where it projected from his body... This accelerated his death. Walter immediately ran up, but as he found him senseless, he leapt upon his horse, and escaped with the utmost speed. Indeed there were none to pursue him: some helped his flight; others felt sorry for him." (26)

Tirel escaped to France and never returned again to England. Most people expected [Robert Curthose](https://spartacus-educational.com/NORcurthose.htm) to become king. However, Henry decided to take quick action to gain the throne. As soon as he realised William Rufus was dead, Henry rushed to Winchester where the government's money was kept. After gaining control of the treasury, Henry declared he was the new king. (27)

Supported by [Gilbert de Clare](https://spartacus-educational.com/NORclareG.htm) and [Roger of Clare](https://spartacus-educational.com/NORclareR.htm), Henry was crowned king on 5th August. Although Robert threatened to invade England, he eventually agreed to do a deal with Henry. In return for an annual payment of £2,000, Robert accepted Henry as king of England. (28)

In 1105 King Henry invaded Normandy and took [Bayeux](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bayeux) and [Caen](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caen). He returned the following year and besieged [Tinchebray Castle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tinchebray), that was held by [William of Mortain](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William,_Count_of_Mortain), who was one of the few important Norman barons still loyal to Robert. After a few days Duke Robert arrived and tried to break the siege. The battle only lasted an hour. Most of Robert's army was captured or killed. (29) It has been called the most important battle since [Hastings](https://spartacus-educational.com/NORhastings.htm). (30)

Henry decided to imprisoned his brother in the [Tower of London](https://spartacus-educational.com/LONtower.htm). He spent the next 28 years in prison. [Christopher Brooke](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/12163443/Professor-Christopher-Brooke-obituary.html), the author of [*The Saxon and Norman Kings*](https://www.amazon.co.uk/s/ref=nb_sb_noss?url=search-alias=stripbooks&field-keywords=Christopher+Brooke,+The+Saxon+and+Norman+Kings), has argued that "to imprison a great noble for life was rarely done; to imprison an elder brother almost never." (31)

**Reign of Henry I**

After the death of William Rufus, Henry married [Matilda of Scotland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matilda_of_Scotland). He acknowledged being the father of more than twenty bastards but was determined to have an legitimate heir. According to [William of Malmesbury](https://spartacus-educational.com/NORmalmesbury.htm), Henry was very much in love with his new wife. Matilda gave birth to a daughter, [Matilda](https://spartacus-educational.com/MEDmatilda.htm), in 1102 and a son, [William](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Adelin), in 1103. (32)

Matilda was a devout Christian. According to her biographer, [Lois L. Huneycutt](http://history.missouri.edu/people/huneycutt.html), "Matilda was particularly interested in the care of lepers, and on one occasion washed and kissed the feet of a group of sufferers who had been invited into her chamber. She built a leper's hospital outside London and patronized several other institutions dedicated to their care. Her good works included the construction of several bridges in Surrey and Essex and a public bathhouse at London's Queenhithe. Matilda is also known for her literary and musical interests." Matilda died in 1118. (33)

King Henry I

Henry was someone who was capable of extremely cruel acts. One of the worse cases involved the children of his illegitimate daughter, Juliane. Her husband, Eustace de Pacy came into conflict with Ralph Harnec, one of Henry's officials. In 1119, exchanged their children as hostages. Ralph claimed that one of his children lost their sight while in captivity. Harnec demanded vengeance and Henry agreed that he could take out the eyes of his own two granddaughters. [Ordericus Vitalis](https://spartacus-educational.com/NORvitalis.htm), the only source of this story, commented, "innocent childhood, who had to suffer for their fathers' sins." When she heard the news about her children, Juliane used a crossbow in an attempt to assassinate her father. (34)

Henry only legitimate son, [William](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Adelin), was granted the title the Duke of Normandy and was groomed to become the next king of England. When he was ten years old, he began to attest royal documents and became the instrument of his father's diplomacy. According to [William of Malmesbury](https://spartacus-educational.com/NORmalmesbury.htm), he was "trained for the succession with fond hope and immense care". (35)

In November 1120 Henry and William returned from Normandy by boat. "Henry sailed first, having turned down the offer of a new ship - the White Ship - from Thomas Fitzstephen... followed in the new vessel. But the inebriated crew and passengers were in no fit condition for a night voyage, and the ship was rowed onto a rock outside the harbour of Barfleur. William was put into a small boat and would have escaped had he not turned back on hearing an appeal for help from his bastard sister, whereupon the boat was overloaded by others seeking safety, and sank." (36)

Henry now married [Adeliza of Louvain](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adeliza_of_Louvain) in the hope of obtaining another male heir. Adeliza, was 18 years-old and was considered to be very beautiful, but Henry was now in his fifties and no children were born. After four years of marriage he called all his leading barons to court and forced them to swear that they would accept his daughter, [Matilda](https://spartacus-educational.com/MEDmatilda.htm), as their ruler in the event of his dying without a male heir. (37)

[William the Conqueror](https://spartacus-educational.com/MEDwilliam1.htm) had abolished capital punishment in preference for blinding and mutilation and other less fatal forms of punishment. Henry rejected this idea and brought back the death penalty for certain crimes. For example, in 1124, he had 44 thieves hanged on the same day. The following year he ordered that "moneyers who issued false coins" were to be mutilated without having the right to a trial. (38)

In 1128 his brother [Robert Curthose](https://spartacus-educational.com/NORcurthose.htm) was transferred to [Devizes Castle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Devizes_Castle) and during his last couple of years was held in [Cardiff Castle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cardiff_Castle). It is claimed that he attempted to escape but his horse was bogged down in a swamp and he was recaptured. To prevent further escapes, Henry had Robert Curthose's eyes burnt out. (39)

King [Henry I](https://spartacus-educational.com/MEDhenry1.htm) died on 1st December 1135. During his rule of 35 years Henry had little difficulty holding on to power. One biographer has commented: "Henry was a hard man who knew how to keep men loyal; he may not have won their hearts but they looked forward to the rewards he had to offer and they certainly feared his wrath... Careful, sober, harsh and methodical he chose his servants from men of a similar stamp... But from 1102 until the end of his reign there was no revolt in England. A king who could keep the peace for over thirty years was a master of the art of government." (40)