

England 2-1



Monarchy

Monarch comes from the Greek words *monos* (alone) and *arkhein* (to rule). Monarchy is one of the oldest forms of government in world history. The monarch usually held absolute power over everyone in their kingdom. They became the symbol of a country's political, cultural, and religious identity. In Europe, people referred to monarchs as kings or queens.

Often warlords or people of great power established a monarchy by force and ruled until they died. Usually the closest family member by blood, the eldest son or a brother, would become the next monarch. Seldom did women become

monarchs as women were seen as weak and unable to rule effectively. Yet, many men who inherited the throne proved to be poor leaders themselves. When power passed from one family member to another, the monarchy was called a dynasty—rule by generations of a single family.

Even though rules of succession sometimes existed to pass power from one family member to another, not everyone obeyed the rules. Jealousy, arrogance, or ambition caused family members to kill one another to become the new monarch. Outsiders too sometimes plotted against weak monarchs. Nobles, families, and foreigners exploited opportunities to try to take power and establish a new dynasty.

English Unity

What would become England was a large section of the southern part of the island the Romans called Britannia. Little is known about English prehistory as the tribes that lived there had no written language. Language, religion, and culture varied from place to place. The people lived in simple huts, raised animals, and farmed the land. The Romans thought English culture primitive. Most English history begins with the Romans as they left written records about English life.

Julius Caesar led the first Roman invasions of the island of Britain in 55 and 54 BCE. Eventually Rome conquered the lower half of Britain using violence and negotiation. Rome brought its culture, architecture, language, and religion to the island. For many people, the quality of life improved. Yet, after four centuries of rule, trouble on the continent forced Rome to leave England around 410 CE. Although Rome eventually collapsed, it still had an effect on England. Missionaries of the Roman Catholic Church spread Christianity among the people between the sixth and eighth centuries. It became the dominant religion in England.

Germanic tribes of Angles, Saxons, and Jutes invaded England from the mid-400s until the early 600s. The Jutes had minimal influence on Britain, but the Anglo-Saxons became the

dominant force in England. Eventually Anglo-Saxon kings ruled several competing kingdoms throughout England. Under their rule, Roman culture largely disappeared except for Christianity which the Anglo-Saxons eventually embraced.

Germanic Norse warriors who worshipped Odin and Thor sailed from northern Europe to take English resources. In 793, they sacked monasteries on the coast of Northumbria. Vikings continued to terrorize coastal towns by killing or enslaving the inhabitants and stealing their gold, food, and natural resources. By the mid-800s, the Vikings started to invade, conquer, and colonize. Eventually, the Vikings controlled almost half of England in a territory that became known as the Danelaw.

King Alfred (849-899) of Wessex, the last surviving Anglo-Saxon kingdom, stopped the Viking advance in 871 at the Battle of Ashdown. Hence forward, the Anglo-Saxons called him Alfred the Great. Alfred put in place many reforms to protect Wessex. He improved military defenses, established schools for the nobility to create better leaders, and combined all the laws into a single, written code so that all free persons (many in Wessex were slaves) had access to the same justice. Uniting against a common foe, the Anglo-Saxons managed to overcome the Viking threat. In 927, the grandson of Alfred the Great, Athelstan, became the first king of the whole of England.

1066

On 5 January 1066, king of England William the Confessor died without any children. Three people claimed the throne: Harold Godwinsson, Harald Hardrada, and William of Normandy. Officials chose Harold Godwinson to be king. He was crowned on 6 January 1066. William of Normandy claimed that he was promised the throne in 1051 by King William the Confessor upon his death. King Harold expected the worst and prepared for a Norman invasion from northern France.

Unexpectedly, Hardrada invaded England with the help of a Viking army and seized the town of York. In a remarkable show of speed, King Harold marched his army northward and

surprised Hardrada at Stamford Bridge on 25 September 1066. King Harold won the battle and killed Harald Hardrada. This was the last time the Vikings ever threatened England. Yet the immediate crisis continued. Three days later, William of Normandy with his army from northern France landed on the south coast of England. King Harold then marched his battle fatigued army south to meet the threat.

On 13 October, King Harold arrived with 5,000 soldiers but saw he was outnumbered by William's 7,000 men. So King Harold took a defensive position on top of a hill near Hastings. Holding the high ground gave King Harold an advantage against Norman foot soldiers and cavalry.

On 14 October 1066, the Battle of Hastings began. Both sides clashed in a bloody confrontation that lasted all day. According to legend, the Norman archers let loose a volley of arrows that fell on the English position. King Harold took an arrow in the eye and died. William won the battle and immediately took advantage of the situation. He marched his army to London and took over the city. On 25 December 1066, the Archbishop of York at Westminster Abbey crowned William king. Harold was the last Anglo-Saxon king and William became the first Norman king of England. The Norman invasion was also the last time a foreign power successfully invaded England.

Now known as William the Conqueror, King William made changes. He threw the Anglo-Saxons out of power across England. King William declared all land belonged to the crown and introduced the people to feudal society. The king gave land to the nobles who rented land to peasants. Nobles promised to support the king with tax money and soldiers. To further protect England, the Normans built castles everywhere to send the message the Normans were in charge. From this point on, the Vikings no longer threatened England. French became the language of the court. Over time, it mixed with the German spoken by the Anglo-Saxons to become a new common language called English.