William sits enthroned
(Bayeux Tapestry)
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1. William the Bastard

William the Bastard, who will be later known as « the Conqueror », was the 7th duke of Normandy (1035-1087) and the most famous offspring of the Vikings who had seized the valley of the Lower Seine.

William was the love child of Duke Robert the Magnificent and a young girl from Falaise, of humble origins, called Herleve or Arlette. He was born probably around the end of 1027.

2. William’s Character

We don’t precisely know what William actually looked like. However, there are numerous depictions of him: seals, coins, illuminations, or even the Bayeux Tapestry.

But the artists were more interested in the official portrayal of the Prince and his symbols of power than in the original features of his look.

A contemporary depiction of William as shown on the Bayeux Tapestry.

William’s seal

3. The Conqueror’s Temperament

The chroniclers from those days don’t tell us much about William’s appearance and features, but provide us with a wealth of details as to his temperament and his own qualities as a statesman.

William displayed quite early on an exceptional talent for the exercise of power: a statesman’s instinct, natural authority, spirit of initiative, ability to devise new solutions. Even though he was at times extremely brutal and pitiless, William was a generous prince, who protected the poor and used his talents to work for peace and justice.

Left : William sits majestically enthroned with his half-brothers around him, Odo the Bishop of Bayeux and Robert the Count of Mortain. His sword is raised, symbolizing both the judiciary and the executive powers (Bayeux Tapestry)
4. The Young Duke’s Legacy

When William was born, Normandy already was a wealthy principality, perfectly integrated inside Europe’s Christian civilization: the Viking remains are scarce and superficial. Thanks to its seafront, Normandy was open toward the Nordic countries and kept up a relationship with England, which the Danish Vikings had conquered again in 1015.

William becomes duke by the age of 8, when his father dies in Nicea (Anatolia) in July 1035, on the way back from his pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Even though William had been named as the legitimate heir by the Norman barons and prelates, he is immediately challenged from his authority by the most powerful among them. Thus begins for Normandy a long period of unrest and anarchy.

5. The Duke’s Peace

On a night of the year 1046, William narrowly escapes from an assassination attempt: he owes his life to a hasty ride from Falaise to Valognes, where he gathers his most loyal allies. With the help of the King of France, Henri I, his suzerain, the young duke crushes the Lower-Norman Barons’ uprising during the battle of Val-ès-Dunes, next to Caen. Starting from there, William sets everything into motion in order to impose his authority in Lower Normandy and accomplish the unity of his duchy. He takes advantage of his military victory to impose “the truce of God” on all Normans, during a council held in Caen in 1047.

This truce limits the use of weapons and places the barons under the Duke’s direct authority, who is the guarantor for public order.
6. The alliances and the Church

Very quickly, the powers of the young Duke of Normandy worry the King of France and the Count of Anjou. William decides to side with the Count of Flanders, Baldwin V. He marries his daughter, Mathilda of Flanders, in the town of Évreux in 1050. The wedding is celebrated despite the ban that Pope Leo IX had stated in Reims in 1049.

The Pope had opposed this marriage as much by political calculation as out of respect for the Church’s rules. He pointed out, at first, the kinship between William and Mathilda. He worried as well about the Norman Fleming alliance, which threatened the Germanic Empire he was leaning on.

Cunningly, William avoids putting himself at odds with Rome. He chooses to support the moral reform of the clergy, initiated by the Pope. Lanfranc, Prior of the Bec-Hellouin, carries out some negotiations and manages to bring William and the Roman Pontiff together. The construction of both abbeys in Caen, in 1059, is the most visible sign of this conciliation.

7. The studying centers

In the Middle Ages, the schools, libraries, and copyist workshops (scriptoriae) are found only inside monasteries or in the neighbourhood of cathedrals. By looting the monasteries and churches, the Vikings had struck a fatal blow to the intellectual bustle. In 1027, Normandy had not yet regained the glory of its Carolingian days: only the valley of the Lower Seine with Fecamp, Jumièges, Saint Wandrille and Rouen had reclaimed their tradition of arts and literature.

William the Bastard and his barons give their support to monastic foundations, in Normandy, among other regions, and thus, help develop the intellectual establishment of the province. The Duke nominates the bishops and abbots, which enables him to promote the most literate clerks, who usually came from abroad (Italy, mostly).

Lanfranc and Anselme’s arrival at the Abbey of the Bec Hellouin will enable the creation of a school that will attract the most famous scholars in Europe.

8. The local administration

In the 10th and 11th centuries, the dukes of Normandy always upheld the rights that belonged to the king: the right to mint coins, to wage war, to build castles, to settle feuds, etc.

During the first part of his reign, William the Bastard had to struggle to restore those rights, which had been weakened by a troublesome minority. He had to carry out a number of sieges to bring back many small lords to reason, who had built castles without permissions.

The Duke organized as well a local administration that was granted to viscounts, and that originated with Richard II (996-1026). These viscounts are then agents of the ducal authority, and are payed not by estate taxes but through collections operated
on the duke’s income. For the great barons and other vassals, the Duke exercises the vassal’s contract and imposes an “ost duty”, which is a form of military draft, limited in space and time.

9. THE ART OF HORSEBACK FIGHTING

The feudal society (11th and 12th centuries) is one of chivalry. The horse isn’t only a means of transport but becomes a fighting comrade at the heart of a battle. This art of fighting on horseback will lead to the creation of a cast of knights with a deeply original ideal.

William the Bastard did develop those cavalry techniques: rapid strikes (as during the Duke’s horse expedition from the Cotentin to Arques in 1052), fake retreats and battle plans based on motion (as in Hastings in 1066).

This tactical advantage explains how the Norman knights could win so many battles on all fields of operation: England, Southern Italy, Sicily, Spain, Middle-East...

William took advantage of this superiority to stop two invasions of the province started by the armies of the king of France.
- in 1054, the French army is stopped at Mortemer
- in 1057, the Angevinian and French soldiers are crushed in Varaville.
10. THE FEUDAL LINKS

Following the Viking invasions from the west and the Hungarian intrusions from the east (9th and 10th centuries), the Carolingian monarchy was unable to guarantee public protection. It had to relinquish large parts of its royal responsibilities to the royal princes, counts or dukes. Even though those royal princes exercise, in principle, the king’s powers, whom they recognize as their suzerain, they carry out their duties quite independently. They consider themselves as the true owners of the vast stretches of land granted by the lord.

At the beginning of the 11th century, the kings of France were very weakened. Their vassal-princes were much more powerful than they were, like the Count of Flanders, or the Duke of Normandy.

The feudal links don’t only bind the king to his regional princes through a contract of faith and services. It is a bond that links each and every prince to the great barons, and each baron to his own subordinates.

11. THE IDEA OF JUSTICE

The peace that the Duke imposes to the province helps law and justice to thrive. If William is at times cruel and merciless toward the rebels, as in Alençon in 1052, or later in England after the Conquest, he proves himself also to be a generous man, aware of his important responsibilities.

Around 1052, William Bussac, Count of Eu and a great vassal, starts a rebellion. The Duke acts swiftly and brings down the rebel, who has to exile. But William the Bastard only attacks the culprit. He spares the rest of the family. Even better, he names the rebel’s own brother, Robert, as head of the county.

Thus flourishes the idea of personal justice that is measured in proportion with the offence.

12. THE FINANCIAL ORGANIZATION

The prosperity of Normandy under William the Bastard’s leadership is due to its financial organization. The Duke had learned how to keep for himself all the important estates, as well as the main tolls on roads and rivers. The development of commerce depended largely on public peace, and brought a lot of money and income to the Duke.

Without these assets, the Duke never would have been able to gather such an enormous army of mercenaries to conquer England.
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... the duchy of Normandy and its dukes

