

William II (1087-1100) - Establishing Royal Authority



Introduction

William I died in 1087, in Normandy. Robert his eldest son was given the Duchy of Normandy; William Rufus his second son was given the crown of England, whilst Henry the youngest son was given only £5000 in gold. It is interesting to look at how and why William I divided his land. Firstly, regarding Normandy, he has no choice but to give it to his eldest son Robert.

French law stated that the inherited land of a duke or king must pass to his eldest son. However, England was a different matter. This land had been acquired through conquest and therefore William I could if he so wished give it to any member of his family. Land that was bought or gained through marriage could be distributed in the same way.

William I had not forgotten the treachery shown by Robert when he had rebelled against him in Normandy. William had also been challenged to single combat by Robert, a fight in which Robert would have killed his father, had somebody else not intervened. Therefore he was more than happy to give William Rufus the English crown, particularly as he felt that William was better suited to dealing with the problems that a king would face in England. William Rufus inherited much of his father's energy and military skill and these would be needed over the years ahead!

William II succeeded to the throne of England in 1087. William has gone down in history as one of the bad guys, but just like King John we have to look objectively at the facts before making a decision. Nicknamed Rufus either because of his flaming red hair or his bad temper, he never married and had no children.

What problems did William II face?

1. Robert was unhappy at just being given the Duchy of Normandy. He wanted the crown of England as well.
2. Many of the barons owned property both in England and Normandy, and they found themselves in a difficult position. Serving two masters was not possible and they risked offending either brother by siding with the other and of course might lose their land if they did so.
3. The Pope wanted to make the papacy the dominant power in Europe, and believed that he could tell the Kings and Emperors how to rule their country.
4. The treasury was empty. Ruling England was proving expensive. The Domesday Book had just been published and William II and his advisors now had a clearer idea of who owed what taxes.

Conflict with the barons

William enlisted the help of a man called Ranulf Flambard and between them, they began to make the taxation system more effective.

- Danegeld, an old tax was reintroduced but this time in order to prepare for an invasion from Normandy rather than Denmark.
- All possible feudal dues, tallages and taxes were extracted from barons and bishops alike. Many of these were exorbitant. They included; **Relief** - payment that had to be made by the heir to the Lord of the manor before he could take over his father's land. **Wardship** - When the heir to the Lord of the manor was too young to take over, the King would take over the land until the heir became of age. Of course, the King kept all the revenues. **Aids** - Payments made to the King on special occasions such as when the Lord's son was knighted, the Lord's daughter got married.
- Shire courts levied heavy fines, confiscation and forfeitures were harshly enforced

Rebellion

Many English barons accused William of cruelty and greed and looked to Robert for help.

- The first rebellion took place in 1088 and was led by Bishop Odo helped by, Robert of Mortain, Richard Fitz Gilbert, William Fitz Osbern and Geoffrey of Coutances. However most Normans in England and the Saxon fyrd remained loyal and Rufus and his army successfully attacked the rebel strongholds at Tonbridge, Pevensey and Rochester. Robert failed to land in England, and the rebels were easily crushed.



- William invaded Normandy both in 1091 and 1094. Robert was defeated on both occasions.
- A second rebellion took place in 1095. Again, it failed, but this time all the rebel barons were exiled and had their lands seized by William.
- After this second rebellion, William bribed some Norman barons into supporting him and therefore destroying his brother's support.
- By 1096, Robert began to realise that he was fighting a losing battle. He decided that greater fortune and fame lay in going on Crusade. Robert sold Normandy to William for 10,000 marks and then went off on the First Crusade.

It is interesting that whilst William II was ruling both Normandy and England, that there were no major rebellions. 1087 -1096 and 1100-1106 tell a very different story!

William and Scotland

- Malcolm III, King of Scotland supported Robert and invaded Northern England.
- William felt that he had to take action and in 1093 he invaded Scotland, defeated Malcolm in battle and forced him to recognise him as his overlord. Westmoreland and Cumberland were returned to English rule.
- Later in 1093, Malcolm again revolted but this time was killed in battle.
- Malcolm's brother took the throne.
- William fearing similar trouble from Donald, removed him from the throne and replaced him with Malcolm's son Edgar.
- By doing this William ensured that there would be peace in Scotland for the meantime.
- William II's handling of Scotland was more successful than his father's and indeed many of his successors.

William and South Wales

- William's father (William I) had placed his trusted friends in strategic locations where it was felt trouble might break out. One of these areas was the border with Wales.
- The barons given land here were called 'Marcher Lords'. They were given additional powers.
- William II actively encouraged these barons to build castles and to invade Wales.
- Any land they captured they could keep. This plan allowed him to conquer much of troublesome Southern Wales without having to raise an army of his own.