**Domesday England**

Today we’re going to talk about what England looked like at the time of the Norman Conquest and a little more about the ways in which the Conquest changed England. We’re fortunate to have a source that allows us to do this in a fairly systematic way. That source is the Domesday Book (not called that by William but by contemporaries who thought it was a sign of the end times).

Domesday Book is one of the most remarkable products of the Norman Conquest.  It was created in 1086 near the end of William the Conqueror's reign, for two reasons: tax assessment and dispute settlement. William needed to know more about the country he had conquered, and especially its taxable wealth. And as soon as he began granting out English lands to his followers, arguments had begun to break out over who owned what. In between putting down revolts in England and fending off attacks in Normandy, William had to spend a lot of his time adjudicating land disputes in his new kingdom.

In early 1086, he ordered a survey of England. By the end of the year, Domesday Book was largely finished, or at least as finished as it ever got. (Actually 2 books: Little Domesday and Greater Domesday)  It provides us with two snapshots of England: one of England in 1066, on the day when King Edward the Confessor was “alive and dead” (TRE = tempus regis Edwardi), and another of England in 1086. It records what conditions were like in England on the last day of Edward’s reign, and what they were like after twenty years of Norman rule.

The prosperity of England in 1066 was remarkable. In the eleventh century, all of western Europe was experiencing an economic revolution and the beginnings of commercial prosperity. England seems to have been ahead of the crowd in this development.

In 1066 England already had several important cities that lived largely on trade and industry. The largest city, London, had about 15,000 people. Other cities were smaller: York had 8 to 10,000, Norwich, another trade center, had a bit over 5,000.  These may sound small to us, but at the time there were very few cities in western Europe outside of Muslim Spain that had populations over 20,000 people, and they were all in Italy.  Judging by 11th c. standards, England had some bustling urban centers, and many of the smaller towns were economically significant as well. There were thirty-two towns in England with 1,000 or more people, and they constituted a commercial network that lasted until the fourteenth century.

England was also ahead of the curve in the quality of its currency. Since the tenth century, the coinage all over England had been uniform, based on the silver denarius or penny (hence the abbreviation d. that is still in use today).  Royal efforts to maintain control over the purity and weight of the English denarius had been very successful, making it the best currency in western Europe at the time. And the strength of the English currency helped encourage commercialization and trade.

What was this trade? Domesday book does not address this question directly. From archaeology we know that Norwich produced pottery and York produced iron, and there is plenty of evidence for cloth-making all over England.  Wool was already a thriving business: domestic animals are recorded in the assessment of manors in Domesday Book, and sheep are by far the most numerous.

Commercial prosperity in England, as elsewhere in medieval Europe, was based on agricultural prosperity. Domesday Book shows us a country that, by the standards of its time, was well developed. Almost every town and village that exists in England today was already settled in 1066.

While there was no great untapped wilderness, there were extensive woodlands, and they were a resource that was carefully managed.  The king supervised most of this management, because he controlled the "**forest**." The forest was not a wooded area per se. The word "forest" is derived from the Latin "foras", which means outside, and refers to a system of royal parks that were outside of the normal administrative framework of the kingdom. Farming, woodcutting, or other exploitation was only allowed under strict regulation in areas that were designated as forest. William the Conqueror didn’t invent the idea of forest, but he is notorious for creating more forest, and for enacting incredibly punitive laws against poaching. Killing the king’s deer was punishable by blinding under the Conqueror, and his son William Rufus went even farther, he changed the penalty to death.

Agriculture in 1066 is only shown in passing in Domesday Book. Cultivating grain was very important, and the surveyors were charged with finding out how many plowlands and plowing teams there were for each manor. Fishing was a big business in some areas, and livestock was also very important. Aside from sheep, pigs were the most important animals raised for meat. The woods were used to provide acorns and other food for pigs (**pannage**). Surprisingly, there were almost no cows kept in England: only enough, it seems, to breed oxen for plowing since horses were rarely used for farm work.

The High Middle Ages -- the period from A.D. 1000 to about 1350 was also a period of technological innovation. One innovation that emerges clearly in Domesday Book is the use of mechanical water mills that were used to grind grain into flour, as well as for things like sawing lumber, fulling cloth, and forging iron. There were about 6,000 of these mills in England in 1066.

It would be nice to know how many people lived in England at this point, but since this is basically a survey for tax assessment purposes we only have a list of people who paid taxes or were assets attached to the estates of taxpayers. There are 268,984 such people mentioned, almost all of them male, and none of them children. From this we can estimate that there were about two million people in England in the late 11th c. There are about 55 million today.

Domesday book also reveals that governmental organization was very strong in 1066. The **geld (previously known as the Danegeld)**, or defense tax levied on the land, had been collected for almost a century through the system of shires and hundreds. All of the land in the country had a set tax obligation (usually 2 shillings to the hide), which was recorded in documents that were used by the makers of Domesday Book. In fact, the English government was incredibly literate by 1066. The king had a writing office that compiled and kept records and also issued short, efficient documents in English called writs that told the sheriffs and other officials what the king wanted done.

Beside this governmental organization there was a web of personal obligations that tied nearly every person in the country to a great landlord. England was divided not only into shires and hundreds, but also into **manors**.  A manor was a property whose owner or lord enjoyed a certain amount of jurisdiction and economic lordship over the dependents who lived on his land – this system of economic exploitation is called **manorialism**. The classic manor is one where there is a **demesne** or home farm, run directly by the landlord (or his **bailiff**) for his direct profit. Attached to the demesne are plots of land worked by the landlord's dependents – peasants who owed him rent and labor services (known as corvee). Manors were owned by the royal family, by nobles and knights, and by churches, monasteries, bishops, and abbots. Whoever the lord of a particular manor was, the manor was run for their profit.

As its most basic, a manor was a bundle of rights over land and people, held by a lord. The lord received rent as well as services from the people on his land who were in a sense his property. These manors, whatever they looked like, were effectively governmental subdivisions of England. Geld, for instance, was assessed by shires and hundreds, but it was actually collected at the manors.

Almost everyone in England was a dependent attached to a manor. To begin with, England was still a country with many **slaves**, people who were property pure and simple and who could be freely bought and sold.  Slaves did most of the manual labor on demesne lands in the late 11th century.

Above the slaves but still in a very poor position were people called **cottagers and bordars**. They were peasants who usually had a bit of land, but not enough to live on. They had to work for more prosperous peasants and on the lord’s demesne lands in order to support themselves.

The average peasant, the **villein,** had a more substantial holding. Villein is a Norman word, and it implies a lack of freedom (it’s also where we get our word villain). In 1066 the same people were probably called **geburs**, and were counted as free. The gebur or villein usually had a fairly large plot of land, maybe a **hide** (we don’t know exactly how big a hide was but it seems to have been about 120 acres), maybe only a quarter of a hide; he also had some plow oxen (you needed eight oxen to pull a plow), making him a valuable resource for his lord as his oxen, his plows, and his labor were used to work the lord’s demense. Plowing service was a heavy burden, and it was the basic duty that this class of men owed to their lords. Besides plowing service and rent, in produce, money or both, villeins often owed the lord a variety of other miscellaneous services.

Even after geburs became villeins, they weren’t slaves, but they weren’t exactly free either. They could not leave the manor or get married without their lord’s permission, but they could purchase that permission fairly easily. In most legal matters they were subject to their lord’s manor court; they couldn’t go to the shire or hundred court. Almost half of the people recorded in Domesday Book are classified as villeins

Above the villeins were a number of **people who were technically free,** who had some status in the hundred courts and the shire courts, **but were still under someone's lordship or patronage. These were sokemen and holders of thegnland (longterm leases).**

**Sokemen and holders of thegnland were free men who commended themselves to a lord. They were members of the middle class, politically and economically, as were townspeople who were known as burgesses.**

The only “full citizens” were the lords at the top of society, the tenants-in-chief who had no lord but the king. **They held jurisdiction rights (called “sake and soke” - the right to hold a judicial court and retain the fines imposed) over their tenants**, over their poorer neighbors, and even over whole communities. They were rich and influential. They served as the king's sheriffs, they rented royal estates from the king, and they got special tax breaks that were unavailable to the bulk of the population. To call them citizens is almost misleading. They were **lords plain and simple and there were very few of them.**

We have no precise figures for how many there were in 1066, but **in 1086 there were only about 200 "tenants-in-chief," or direct tenants of the king.** There can only have been a few more in 1066 -- even if there were 1000 holders of sake and soke, that would be only one half of one tenth of one percent of the estimated population of 2 million.

From Domesday we can see that England was a highly stratified society both before and after the Normans came. Although the English king was much stronger than his contemporaries in western Europe, the English aristocracy was also very powerful, and everyone else in the country was subject in one way or another to this small upper crust.

A few hundred years later, when Parliament was fighting with the King, people would argue that England had been a free country before the imposition of Norman rule, but this was mostly a fantasy. Anglo-Saxon England was far from being a democratic paradise. There had been slaves and unfree peasants in Anglo-Saxon England, and a small, privileged elite had controlled most of England’s resources well before the Norman Conquest.  William the Conqueror had certainly placed England under a Norman yoke, but as far as most people were concerned, this Norman yoke had just replaced the old Anglo-Saxon yoke.