Normans

The Middle Ages, 1996

The Normans started as VIKING raiders from Scandinavia and ended up as the rulers of Normandy, a province in western France. From 1066 to the early 1200s, their descendants also ruled England. In addition, they founded small states in Sicily and the Middle East during the 1200s.

Around 820, Vikings sailed up the Seine River to raid the French countryside. The raids continued until 911, when King Charles the Simple of France made a treaty with Rollo, the Viking leader. In exchange for becoming Christians and protecting France from other raiders, Rollo and his followers received a large tract of land between the English Channel on the west and Paris on the east. Because the Vikings were called Northmen or Normans, their region came to be known as Normandy. Rollo and his descendants ruled as dukes of Normandy. Some Vikings became Norman [aristocrats*](#) , but nearly all of their subjects were French. The early dukes were extremely wealthy, partly from Viking plunder, partly from trade, and partly because they received rents from the church for their territory.

Anglo-Norman Kingdom

The Normans were a restless, active people who traveled to many parts of the Mediterranean world, but their greatest adventure was the conquest of England. A royal marriage—the English king Ethelred II the Unready married Emma, the daughter of Duke Richard I of Normandy in 1002—paved the way for the Norman conquest. Their son Edward the Confessor became king of England in 1042. The reign of this half-Norman king brought many Norman traders, settlers, and churchmen to England. It also provided Normans with a claim to the throne of England.

In 1066, Duke William of Normandy—known as WILLIAM I THE CONQUEROR —invaded England in 1066 and destroyed the English royal claimant and aristocracy at the Battle of Hastings. He then took London and had himself crowned king of England. For a century and a half, England and Normandy formed a [dynastic union*](#) . After 1154, the ruler who was the king of England and the duke of Normandy was also the count of the French province of Anjou. These kings were called the ANGEVINS, and they strengthened the ties between England and Normandy.

Changing Hands

Although the Angevin kings recognized the kings of France as their overlords, they ruled their lands with a high degree of independence. In 1204, however, King Philip II Augustus of France invaded and conquered Normandy, turning the dukedom into a province of France. The Angevin

king, John, continued to rule in England, and the political connection between England and Normandy was broken.

Because of its location on the English Channel and its historic ties with England, Normandy was involved in the Hundred Years War between France and England (1337–1453). In the early years of the war, the Angevins drew up a plan for a new Norman conquest of England, but the plan came to nothing. During the 1350s, parts of Normandy were occupied by English troops, and, in 1417–1419, King Henry V of England conquered Normandy. The English ruled Normandy for three decades, reviving the former connection with England and founding the University of Caen. In 1450, however, France reconquered Normandy, abolished the title "duke of Normandy," and made the province once more a secure part of the French kingdom. The early, independent dukedom survives only in a body of laws dealing with land ownership and inheritance. Shaped by the early Norman dukes and the Angevin kings, these Norman laws for centuries differed slightly from those of France's other provinces. (See also [England](#) ; [France](#) ; [Hastings, Battle of](#) .)

Definitions

* aristocrats people of the highest social class, often nobility

* dynastic union two or more territories with separate administrations but under the same rule

See map in (vol. 4).

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