Early England Kings

England in the High Middle Ages

Angles and Saxons, Germanic peoples from northern Europe, had invaded England early in the fifth century.  King Alfred the Great had united various kingdoms in the late ninth century, and since then England had been ruled by Anglo-Saxon Kings.

The Norman Conquest

On October 14, 1066 in army of heavily armed knights under William of Normandy landed on the coast of England and soundly defeated King Harold and his foot soldiers at the Battle of Hastings. William was crowned King of England. Norman Knights receive parcels of land, which they held as fiefs, from the king. William made all nobles swear an oath of loyalty to him as the sole ruler of England.

The Norman ruling class spoke French, but the marriage of the Normans with the Anglo-Saxon nobility gradually merged Anglo-Saxon and French into a new English language. The Normans also took over existing Anglo-Saxon institutions, such as the office of sheriff. William took a census, known as the Domesday Book. It was the first census taken in Europe since Roman times and included people, manors, and farm animals. William also developed more fully the system of taxation and royal courts begun by earlier Anglo-Saxon kings.

Henry II and the Church

The power of the English monarchy was in large during the reign of Henry II, from 1154 to 1189. Henry's increase the number of criminal cases tried in the king's court, and also devised means for taking property cases from local courts to the royal courts. By expanding the power of the royal courts, Henry expanded the king's power. In addition, the royal courts were now found throughout England, a body of common law - law that was common to the whole kingdom - began to replace the law codes that vary from place to place.

Henry was less successful at imposing royal control over the church. He claimed the right to punish clergymen in royal courts. Thomas a Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury and the highest ranking English cleric, claim that only Roman Catholic Church courts could try clerics. An angry king publicly the desire to be rid of Beckett: “who will free me of this priest?”  Four knights took the challenge, went to Canterbury, and murdered the Archbishop in the cathedral. Faced with public outrage, Henry backed down in his struggle with the church.

Magna Carta

English nobles resented the ongoing growth of the king’s power and rebelled during the reign of King John. . At Runnymede in 1215, John was forced by the nobles to put a seal on a document of rights. It was called the Magna Carta, or the Great Charter. Feudal custom had recognized that the relationship between the king and vassals was based on mutual rights and obligations. The Magna Carta gave written recognition to that fact, and was used later to strengthen the idea that the monarch's power was limited, not absolute.

In the 13th century, during the reign of Edward I, an important institution in the development of representative government- the English Parliament- also emerged. It was composed of two knights from every county, two people from every town, and all the nobles and bishops throughout England. Eventually the Nobles and church lords formed the House of Lords; Knights and townspeople, the House of Commons. The parliaments of Edward I granted taxes, discussed politics, and passed laws.

The Hundred Year’s War

Plague, economic crisis, and the decline of the Catholic Church were not only problems of the late Middle Ages. War and political instability must also be added to the list. The Hundred Years War was the most violent struggle during this period.

The War Begins

Trouble began over the duchy of Gascony in France. England possessed it, and France wanted it. King Edward III of England was also the duke of Gascony and a vassal to the French king. However, when King Philip VI of France seized the duchy in 1337, Edward declared war on Philip. Thus began the Hundred Years’ War between France and England.

The war began in a burst of knightly enthusiasm. Trained to be warriors, knights viewed battle as a chance to show their fighting abilities. The Hundred Years’ War, proved to be an important turning point in the nature of warfare, however. Peasant foot soldiers, not knights, won the chief battles of the war.

France’s heavily armed noble cavalrymen, or knights, viewed foot soldiers as social inferiors. The English also used heavily armed cavalry, but the relied on more large numbers of peasants, paid to be foot soldiers. English soldiers were armed not only with pikes, or heavy spears, but also with longbows. The longbow had a greater striking power, longer range, and more rapid speed of fire than the crossbow (Formerly the weapon of choice).

Crecy and Agincourt

The first major battle of the Hundred Year’s War occurred in 1346 at Crecy. The larger French army followed no battle plan and attacked in a disorderly fashion. The English archers devastated them. As the chronicler, Froissart described the stunning English victory: “with their longbows the English continued to shoot in to the thickest part of the crowd, wasting none of their arrows. They impaled or wounded horses and riders, who fell to the ground in great distress, unable to get up again without the help of several men.”

The Battle of Crecy was not decisive, however. The English simply did not have enough resources to conquer all of France. Nevertheless, they continued to try. The English king, Henry V, achieved victory at the Battle of Agincourt in 1415. The heavy armor-plated French knights tried to attack Henry’s forces across a muddy field. They were disastrously defeated, and 1500 French nobles died in battle. The English were masters of norther France.

Joan of Arc

The seemingly hopeless French cause now fell into the hands of Charles, heir to the French throne. Quite unexpectedly, a French Peasant woman saved the timid monarch. The daughter of the prosperous peasants, Joan of Arc was deeply religious person. She experienced visions and believed that saints had commanded her to free France. Though only 17, Joan’s sincerity and simplicity persuaded Charles to allow her to accompany a French army to Orleans. Apparently inspired by Joan’s faith, the French armies found new confidence and seized Orleans. Joan had brought the war to turning point but did not live to see its end. The English captured Joan in 1430 and turned her over to the Inquisition on charges of witchcraft. At the time, visions were thought to be inspired by either God or the devil. Joan was condemned to death as a heretic. Joan’s achievements, however, were decisive. Although the war dragged on for another two decades, defeats of English armies in Normandy and Aquitaine led to a French victory by 1453. Also important to the French success was the use of the cannon, a new weapon made possible by the invention of gunpowder.