**Faculty of Letters and Languages – M’sila** **Department of English**

**Level:** Second year license **Course:** British Civilization

**Instructors:** Bennaa Youcef

**Lecture Four: The Norman Conquest and Feudalism**

**1. The Norman Conquest**

The Normans were Vikings by origin, coming from Normandy, where their ancestors had been expelled by Alfred the Great in late ninth century. In 1066, when Edward the Confessor the last Saxon king died, leaving no heir, William duke of Normandy usurped the throne from Harold Godwinson.

The Norman Conquest is a turning point in the British history, since it cut all links to Britain with Scandinavia, linking it instead with the Continent (France). The Norman Conquest was the last successful invasion of Britain till now. Although William was crowned king, his conquest had only just begun, and the fighting lasted for another five years. There was an Anglo-Saxon rebellion against the Normans every year until 1070. The north was particularly hard to control, and the Norman army had no mercy. When the Saxons fought back, the Normans burnt, destroyed and killed. It took a century for the north to recover.

Few Saxon lords kept their lands and those who did were the very small number who had accepted William immediately. All the others lost everything. By 1086, twenty years after the arrival of the Normans, only two of the greater landlords and only two bishops were Saxon, William gave the Saxon lands to his Norman nobles, After each English rebellion there was more land to give away. His army included Norman and other French land seekers. Over 4.000 Saxon landlords were replaced by 200 Norman ones.

**2. Feudalism**

William was careful in the way he gave land to his nobles. The king of France was less powerful than many of the great landlords, of whom William was the outstanding example. In England, as each new area of land was captured, William gave parts of it as a reward to his captains. This meant that they held separate small pieces of land in different parts of the country so that no noble could easily or quickly gather his fighting men to rebel. William only gave some of his nobles larger estates along the troublesome borders with Wales and Scotland. At the same time he kept enough land for himself to make sure he was much stronger than his nobles. Of all the farmland of England he gave half to the Norman nobles, a quarter to the Church, and kept a fifth himself. As a result England was different from the rest of Europe because it had one powerful family, instead of a large number of powerful nobles. William, and the kings after him, thought of England as their personal property.

William organized his English kingdom according to the feudal system which had already begun to develop in England before his arrival. The word 'feudalism' comes from the French word *feu,* which the Normans used to refer to land held in return for duty or service to a lord. The basis of feudal society was the holding of land, and its main purpose was economic. The central idea was that all land was owned by the king but it was held by others, called 'vassals', in return for services and goods. The king gave large estates to his main nobles in return for a promise to serve him in war for up to forty days. The nobles also had to give him part of the produce of the land. The greater nobles gave part of their lands to lesser nobles, knights, and other 'freemen'. Some freemen paid for the land by doing military service, while others paid rent. The nobles kept “serfs” to work on their lands. These were not free to leave the estate, and were often little better than slaves.

There were two basic principles to feudalism: every man had a lord, and every lord had land, the king was connected through this 'chain' of people to the lowest man in the country. At each level a man had to promise loyalty and service to his lord. This promise was usually made with the lord sitting on his chair and his vassal kneeling before him, his hands placed between those of his lord. This was called 'homage', and has remained part of the coronation ceremony of British kings and queens until now. On the other hand, each lord had responsibilities to his vassals. He had to give them land and protection.

When a noble died his son usually took over his estate. But first he had to receive permission from the king and make a special payment. If he was still a child the king would often take the produce of the estate until the boy was old enough to look after the estate himself. In this way the king could benefit from the death of a noble. If the entire noble's family died the land went back to the king, who would be expected to give it to another deserving noble. But the king often kept the land for some years, using its wealth, before giving it to another noble.

If the king did not give the nobles land they would not fight for him. Between 1066 and the mid fourteenth century there were only thirty years of complete peace. Therefore feudal duties were extremely important. The king had to make sure he had enough satisfied nobles who would be willing to fight for him.

William gave out land all over England to his nobles. By 1086 he wanted to know exactly who owned which piece of land, and how much it was worth. He needed this information so that he could plan his economy, find out how much was produced and how much he could ask in tax. He therefore sent a team of people all through England to make a complete economic survey. His men asked all kinds of questions at each settlement: How much land was there? Who owned it? How much was it worth? How many families, ploughs and sheep were there? And so on. This survey was the only one of its kind in Europe. Not surprisingly, it was most unpopular with the people, because they felt they could not escape from its findings. It so reminded them of the paintings of the Day of Judgment, or 'doom', on the walls of their churches that they called it the 'Domesday' Book. The name stuck. The Domesday Book still exists, and gives us an extraordinary amount of information about England at this time.

**3. Kingship: a Family Business**

When William died, in 1087, he left the Duchy of Normandy to his elder son, Robert. He gave England to his second son, William, known as 'Rufus' (Latin for red) because of his red hair and red face. When Robert went to fight the Muslims in the Holy Land, he left William II (Rufus) in charge of Normandy. After all, the management of Normandy and England was a family business.

William Rufus died in a hunting accident in 1100, shot dead by an arrow. He had not married, and therefore had no son to take the crown. At the time of William's death , Robert was on his way home to Normandy from the Holy Land. Their younger brother, Henry, knew that if he wanted the English crown he would have to act very quickly. He had been with William at the time of the accident. He rode to Winchester and took charge of the king's treasury. He then rode to Westminster, where he was crowned king three days later. Robert was very angry and prepared to invade. But it took him a year to organise an army.

The Norman nobles in England had to choose between Henry and Robert. This was not easy because most of them held land in Normandy too. In the end they chose Henry because he was in London, with the crown already on his head. Robert's invasion was a failure and he accepted payment to return to Normandy. But Henry wanted more. He knew that many of his nobles would willingly follow him to Normandy so that they could win back their Norman lands. In 1106 Henry invaded Normandy and captured Robert. Normandy and England were reunited under one ruler.

Henry I's most important aim was to pass on both Normandy and England to his successor. He spent the rest of his life fighting to keep Normandy from other French nobles who tried to take it. But in 1120 Henry’s only son was drowned at sea.

**Exercises**

1. Define the following terms: Normans - Feudalism - Knight - Serf - Homage.

2. Write a paragraph in which you answer the following questions:

What was the purpose of the Domesday Book? Why is it significant in the British history?

**REFERENCES**

Mcdowall, David. 2008. *An Illustrated History of Britain*. New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.