WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR: BACKGROUND

William was the son of Robert I, duke of Normandy, and his mistress Herleva (also called Arlette), a tanner’s daughter from Falaise. The duke, who had no other sons, designated William his heir, and with his death in 1035 William became duke of Normandy.

William was of Viking origin. Though he spoke a dialect of French and grew up in Normandy, a fiefdom loyal to the French kingdom, he and other Normans descended from Scandinavian invaders. One of William’s relatives, Rollo, pillaged northern France with fellow Viking raiders in the late ninth and early 10th centuries, eventually accepting his own territory (Normandy, named for the Norsemen who controlled it) in exchange for peace.

Just over two weeks before the Battle of Hastings in October 1066, William had invaded England, claiming his right to the English throne. In 1051, William is believed to have visited England and met with his cousin Edward the Confessor, the childless English king. According to Norman historians, Edward promised to make William his heir. On his deathbed, however, Edward granted the kingdom to Harold Godwineson (or Godwinson), head of the leading noble family in England and more powerful than the king himself. In January 1066, King Edward died, and Harold Godwineson was proclaimed King Harold II. William immediately disputed his claim.

BATTLE OF HASTINGS: OCTOBER 14, 1066

On September 28, 1066, William landed in England at Pevensey, on Britain’s southeast coast, with thousands of troops and cavalry. Seizing Pevensey, he then marched to Hastings, where he paused to organize his forces. On October 13, Harold arrived near Hastings with his army, and the next day, October 14, William led his forces out to battle, which ended in a decisive victory against Harold’s men. Harold was killed-shot in the eye with an arrow, according to legend—and his forces were destroyed.

BATTLE OF HASTINGS: AFTERMATH

After victory at the Battle of Hastings, William marched on London and received the city’s submission. On Christmas Day of 1066, he was crowned the first Norman king of England, in Westminster Abbey, and the Anglo-Saxon phase of English history came to an end.

French became the language of the king’s court and gradually blended with the Anglo-Saxon tongue to give birth to modern English. (Illiterate like most nobles of his time, William spoke no English when he ascended the throne and failed to master it despite his efforts. Thanks to the Norman invasion, French was spoken in England’s courts for centuries and completely transformed the English language, infusing it with new words.) William I proved an effective king of England, and the “Domesday Book,” a great census of the lands and people of England, was among his notable achievements.

Upon the death of William I in 1087, his son, William Rufus (c.1056-1100), became William II, the second Norman king of England.