

Medieval English Law & Government Reading Questions (7.6.5)

William the Conqueror

William, Duke of Normandy, was a French noble who claimed the English throne. After he won the **Battle of Hastings** in 1066, he became known as William the Conqueror. As the new ruler of England, William brought French customs and laws to England and linked the nobility of England and France together, which would later result in the start of the Hundred Years' War.

William & his successors introduced a new system of laws to England. They replaced "**common law**" (laws based on local customs and traditions) with "**royal laws**" that were the same all across the country. Although courts were not influenced by local leaders, they could still be affected by the king. For a time, the king of England was above the law and could do as he pleased in the land. This would not change until the **Magna Carta** required that everyone (including the king) follow the same set of laws.

- What was one result of William the Conqueror's takeover of England?
- How were "common law" and "royal law" different? Which do you think would be fairer for people and why?



The Magna Carta (1215)

A quote from the Magna Carta (signed by King John in 1215) is provided below.

"For a trivial offence, a free man shall be fined only in proportion to the degree of his offence, and for a serious offence correspondingly, but not so heavily as to deprive him of his livelihood.

No free man shall be seized or imprisoned, or stripped of his rights or possessions, or outlawed or exiled... in any other way, nor will we proceed with force against him, or send others to do so, except by the lawful judgment of his equals or by the law of the land.

To no one will we sell, to no one deny or delay right or justice."

- How are fines for crimes determined under the Magna Carta?
- Under the Magna Carta, what must happen before the law punishes someone?
- What does the last sentence of the Magna Carta mean?



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The English Civil War (1642-1651)



The English Civil War was fought between the supporters of the English Parliament and the supporters of King Charles I. Charles I believed in the “**divine right of kings**,” which was the belief that kings were chosen by God to rule on earth and had absolute power to do as they pleased. The war broke out when Charles I suspended Parliament and began illegally collecting taxes to raise money. Eventually, the war ended with the capture, trial, and execution of King Charles I in 1649 by Parliament. As a result of the war, **monarchs**, or kings, could only rule with the approval of Parliament.

- What were the two sides that fought each other during the English Civil War?
- What was “divine right” and why did it upset members of England’s Parliament?
- What were the causes and effects of the English Civil War?

The English Bill of Rights (1688)

After the English Civil War, Parliament passed a bill of rights to define what kings could and couldn’t do. A passage from the document is provided below:

“1. That the ...suspending of laws, or the execution of laws, by [royal] authority, without consent of parliament, is illegal...”

4. That [raising taxes] ...without grant of parliament...is illegal

5. That it is the right of the subjects to petition the King...

6. That the raising or keeping a standing army within the kingdom in time of peace, unless it be with consent of parliament, is against law...

All and every person and persons that [obeys the Pope in Rome] or shall profess the [Catholic] religion... shall be excluded and be for ever incapable to inherit, possess or enjoy the crown and government of this realm.”

- According to the quote on the left, what were five changes the English Bill of Rights made to England’s government and people’s rights?
- Do you agree with all of the changes the English Bill of Rights brought about? Why or why not?

