The Anomalous King of Conquered England

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The Norman Conquest brought to England not only a new king, but in many ways a new form of kingship. Considering the person, institution, and idea of the king in conquered England, one might observe that in every category there are difficulties. The Norman and Angevin kings were foreign to the country in some profound ways; William I’s brief attempt to learn the language aside, they did not speak English; and in the eleventh and twelfth centuries they spent much if not most of their lives on the Continent. At the same time the institution of kingship underwent important changes, in legal theory, administration, and the practice of lordship. And in the cultural realm there are some striking anomalies in the idea of kingship and its literary expressions, not least the surprising absence of King Arthur in romance writing in England, while his legend flowered on the Continent. In this essay I will discuss some of the problematic idiosyncracies of kingship in post-Conquest England, and suggest that these strands may be brought together into a coherent whole. The picture which emerges paradoxically illustrates that in the face of numerous, unprecedented challenges to English kingship, the idea and the institution proved to be astonishingly robust. As a result, however, consequences for the person of the king were not so predictable.

Turning first to the Conquest’s implications for institutional change, it is worth setting out the most extreme case for a complete break from the past. This is provided by George Garnett’s 2007 book Conquered England, which has a section entitled “The King as an Anomaly”.1 His argument is a minutely-constructed, and controversial, account of the status of the Norman and Angevin kings of England in the period following 1066. In short, he suggests that their situation relied upon a series of paradoxes, which the chroniclers and legal innovators of the period did their best to accommodate, conceal, or overcome.

1 The kernel of these arguments first appeared in Garnett’s article “Coronation and Propaganda”.

Garnett observes that William claimed England as the direct successor of the Confessor, on the understanding that Edward had bequeathed it to him, in the manner of a parcel of land; he then made good this hereditary right at the moment of his coronation and anointing. But neither part of this process conformed to pre-Conquest English practice. English kings were recognised as such before their coronations; the ritual did not create the king. And the Anglo-Saxon kingdom was never the king’s property, to dispose of entirely as he would; while the king possessed some significant control over the distribution of estates held *ex officio*, apparently changing the holders of earldoms at will, he nevertheless made no assertion of ownership over all the land of England. Thus despite his claim to continue the Old English line, William transformed English kingship, creating a unique and anomalous situation of great royal power; but also of instability. An inherent weakness lay in the combination of the two claims: for if all tenure was stated to be derived from the king, and yet a successor only became king at the moment of coronation and anointing, then the period of interregnum between a king’s death and the new king’s coronation carried explosive legal implications. What happens to tenure when there is no king? Garnett argues that this legal crisis created the conditions by which a royal succession conflict would be transmitted and multiplied throughout aristocratic society, as each landholder sought to confirm and renew his rights. Contemporary chroniclers such as Eadmer, in attempting to explain this matter, believed that the situation must have arisen from the importation of usual practice in Normandy. But in this assumption Garnett demonstrates that Eadmer was wrong; it was in the unique, *sui generis* circumstances of the justification of William’s seizure of England that this anomalous kingship was forged.

The full implications of this argument are in dispute; Susan Reynolds has noted simply that there is not sufficient evidence to support the notion that the king actually owned all the land of the kingdom, in a fully practical and legal sense; and there is undoubtedly a chaotic and *ad hoc* character to the politics of the period, which makes the distillation of tenurial theory an uncertain business. Perhaps the most serious difficulty with the thesis, in fact, is this attention solely to legal theory, removed both from the pragmatics of political behaviour, and from the numerous other

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2 See Baxter, *Earls of Mercia*.
3 Reynolds, “Did All the Land…?”.  
4 Some of these questions are opened up in the review by Judith Green.