

The Norman Conquest didn't change ordinary people's lives very much



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When William the Conqueror won the Battle of Hastings, he became King of England in 1066. This changed the political landscape of Europe and the course of world history. For the English aristocracy and religious leaders, the world turned upside down as William replaced them with his handpicked Normans. But what was it like for ordinary people in England? A recent study suggests that, for them, not much changed under the new regime.

We usually see the Norman Conquest from the lofty and often perilous view of nobility and clergy. The roughly 2 million

(based on a 1086 census) ordinary people who lived through the upheaval left behind no written records to tell us how they felt or what they experienced. To understand what their lives were like during the Norman Conquest and the years of political, economic, and social upheaval in its wake, archaeologists have to turn to other kinds of evidence.

For the new study, Elizabeth Craig-Atkins (University of Sheffield), Richard Madgwick (Cardiff University), and their colleagues cobbled together part of the story from the bones and teeth of medieval Britons, as well as animal remains and microscopic residues left behind in cooking pottery. Together, those lines of evidence revealed what—and how well—people ate in the years on either side of the Norman Conquest. The results suggest that food supplies got a bit scarce during the conquest and the sporadic fighting that followed, but some aspects of life didn't change much in its wake.

“Despite the huge political and economic changes that were happening, our analysis suggests the conquest may have had a limited impact on most people's diet and health,” said Craig-Atkins.

Kings come and go; cabbage is forever

If you want to know about ancient people's lives, sometimes it's best to go straight to the source. So Craig-Atkins and her colleagues examined bones from 36 people who lived around Oxford in the centuries before and after the Norman Conquest, from 900 to 1300 CE.

Malnutrition sometimes reaches right down to the bone: in children who don't get enough vitamin D over a long period of time, growing bones are weak and bend into abnormal shapes, a condition called rickets. Left untreated, scurvy, the vitamin C deficiency that plagued sailors for centuries, can

eventually cause osteoporosis in some places and unusual bone growth in others. Iron deficiency anemia can make the bones around the eye socket porous and fragile.

Of course, diseases of malnutrition don't always leave a signature on their victims' skeletons. Bones tend to reveal only the most severe, long-term cases. A bad winter probably won't leave you with bone lesions from scurvy, but a bad several years might. Possibly for this reason, skeletal signs of diseases like scurvy and rickets were rare in people from early medieval Oxford, both before and after 1066. That suggests the general lot of English commoners didn't get much better or much worse after William the Conqueror landed on the British coast, at least from the standpoint of putting food on the table.

That, in turn, means that people probably weren't dealing with economic depression, displacement from their homes, or the other social, economic, and political disasters that can make it hard to get enough food. In other words, the common people may have been a lot more secure than English nobles and clergy during the late 11th century.

But many people probably felt a short pinch. Craig-Atkins and her colleagues found evidence for that in the teeth of people who had been young children during the transition to Norman rule. Even a short period of malnutrition or serious illness can disrupt the development of a child's teeth; the layer of enamel that gets laid down during that disruption is thinner than normal, causing what's known as a linear enamel hypoplasia. Its presence suggests some sort-term fluctuations occurred in the English food supply, which apparently improved once things stabilized.

"There is certainly evidence that people experienced periods where food was scarce," said Craig-Atkins. "But following this, intensification in farming meant people generally had a more steady food supply and consistent diet."

Bringing home more bacon, less dairy

A closer look—zoomed in to the molecular level—of the medieval skeletons shed some light on those eating habits. For example, nitrogen-15 tends to get passed along from plants to grazers to predators more than the lighter isotope nitrogen-14, so the relative amounts of those two isotopes in a person's bones can suggest how much of their diet came from meat rather than plants.

Stable isotope ratios in the bones of people living in medieval Oxford suggested that people's diets included meat and vegetables in about the same proportions after the conquest as before it. That means the standard medieval English diet of grains, vegetables like cabbage, and meats like beef and mutton probably didn't change much—either in its content or in the portion sizes in the average trencher. But Craig-Atkins and her colleagues suggest the conquest may have wrought some more subtle changes to England's agriculture and thus to people's diets.

Other than bone, there's no more candid glimpse into a person's daily life than their dirty dishes, even a thousand years or more after the fact. Fatty acids preserved in the clay can help archaeologists tell whether a pot contained milk, fermented dairy products, or meat, and whether that food came from sheep, pigs, or cattle. When Craig-Atkins and her colleagues examined fragments of medieval ceramic cookware from around Oxford, they noticed a couple of changes in the wake of the 1066 regime change.

Cabbage and meat from sheep or goats remained staples of people's diets, but the archaeologists found much more evidence of dairy fats before the conquest than after. And after the conquest, fatty acids from pork turned up much more often in Oxford ceramics. So the researchers turned to animal

bones to understand why pork consumption might have increased after the Norman Conquest.

Craig-Atkins and her colleagues did the same kind of stable isotope analysis on pig bones as they'd done on the human bones. But whereas people's overall diets didn't change much after 1066, life for pigs was apparently quite different. Pigs from after the Norman Conquest seemed to have eaten more animal protein, and their diets didn't vary as much from one pig to the next as they had before. That suggests pig farming became a more standardized practice, and also that it intensified, which would have made pork much more accessible than it had been before.

But that was the most notable change. "Aside from pork becoming a more popular food choice, eating habits and cooking methods remained unchanged to a large extent," said Craig-Atkins.

The study reveals at least one way in which the Norman Conquest directly impacted the lives and daily meals of the common people, even as the political change sweeping the country largely left their lives much as they'd always been. Of course, that doesn't tell us how people felt about the new regime or its local impacts, what they worried about, or what they hoped for. It doesn't tell us how the English language began to change under Norman rule. But it does offer some insight into the basic fabric of an ordinary person's life during a pivotal moment in history.

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