

How useful is Domesday Book as a source for the impact of the Norman Conquest upon England?

William I, nearing the end of his reign, found himself in a difficult position. Despite having conquered England and successfully settled there with an abundance of the Norman elite, a great deal of his conquered land was subject to dispute.¹ According to Robert Fitz Nigel, Domesday was ‘in order that every man be content with his own rights and not encroach unpunishment on those of others’.² Whether Domesday was commissioned primarily out of fear of invasion or to settle disputes that had raged since the Norman Invasion of England in 1066, what is clear is that the resulting documents of the Domesday Inquisitions provide an abundant source of data on land holdings, farming capacity, relationships between tenants and disputes over land holdings.³ What use, however, are these Domesday documents in understanding the impact of the Norman Conquest upon England?

This essay will argue that Domesday Book as a source encompasses its wider context, that of the Domesday Inquisition process and as a result the documents that were borne of that process, namely Great Domesday, Little Domesday, Exon Domesday as well as the Jurors compilations in Ely and Cambridgeshire. Through these documents, the uses of Domesday Book in gaining and understanding the impact of the Norman Conquest in England will be explored in terms of taxation, disputes of land holdings, manipulation of evidence regarding holdings as well as its value as a source for prosopography. Domesday Book will be considered in terms of how historians have used it, what their application reveals as well as where appropriate issues in historiographical debate and at times the limitations the source presents.

¹ Robin Fleming, *Domesday Book and the law: Society and legal custom in early medieval England*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) p. 1.

² Fleming, p. 3.

³ Fleming, pp. 3–5.

If the process of Domesday is to be understood in terms of usefulness as a source for the impact of the Norman Conquest in England, first an understanding as to why the process was commissioned must be established. This question has been raised and debated by a plethora of academics, and the question of whether Domesday was intended as a Geld Book or record for taxation is one of the key theories put to the test. David Roffe has argued that the Domesday Inquisition was a process commissioned entirely without the end aim of producing Domesday Book, a point that has been debated thoroughly by his contemporaries including J. C. Holt.⁴ Amongst his controversial proposition on the writing of Domesday Book, Roffe presents a sound argument as to how far Domesday Book can be regarded as a geld document. Rather than aimed at producing a definitive reference for taxation, the Domesday Inquisition was an administrative tool that measured productivity of the land along with the tax earning potential of said land. Between the Domesday Inquisition and the composition of Domesday Book, a considerable abbreviation of the information occurs. Exon Domesday reveals a formula for recoding volumes of land in the structure: 'X hides of land with room for X ploughs'.⁵ The corresponding record in Great Domesday simply states, 'Land for X ploughs'.⁶ In displaying how Great Domesday abbreviates Exon Domesday, Roffe illustrates the Inquisition process and composition of Great Domesday as separate events and reveals how impractical Great Domesday would be if solely intended as a geld. V. H. Galbraith has also argued that there is more to Domesday than a collection of information and composition of documents. Rather, Exon Domesday and the subsequent abbreviations found in Great Domesday reveal careful digestion and precise ordering of the information collected.⁷ What is clear from this evidence is that the Domesday process was not simply

⁴ David Roffe, 'Domesday: The inquest and the book', in *Domesday Book*, ed. by Elizabeth Hallam & David Bates, (Gloucestershire: Tempus Publishing, 2001) p. 30.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ V. H. Galbraith, *The Making of Domesday Book*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1961) p. 111.

asking questions and writing down the answers. The Domesday process cannot simply be seen as the collecting of information and composing of a document to refer to for tax purposes. There is a tax element, in that the king and his tenants develop a record of tax potential for the land, but, this as much opens the door for mitigation regarding tax from a tenants perspective much as it informs William the Conqueror the potential the lands of England have for producing returns through tax. Domesday, in the form of the Inquisition and books, offers a source that is useful in revealing dialogue between the king and the tenants occupying land within England.⁸

The content and organisation of Domesday Book offers an insight into the Normans as conquerors and settlers within England. Analysis of land holdings recorded in Great Domesday by K. Keats has revealed an aspect of the social nature of the Normans as settlers. Keats established that prior to 1066, Néel de Sant-Sauveur had fallen out of favour with William I; however, records in Great Domesday clearly show former men of Néel's to be tenants of Baldwin de Muelles in England. This evidence reveals a socially progressive side to the Normans as invaders and settlers in that disposed members, in this case Néel, can be excluded from new settlement and their subordinates may be enabled and permitted to enter into new loyalties in the form of tenancy under new lords.⁹ It is possible to see here, using Domesday Book as a source, that the Norman Conquest in England had profound effects, not only for the English whose territory the Normans acquired, but also affected the fate of Normans who had fallen out of favour with William I prior to the Conquest by providing a new dimension of social exclusion, and as such, a new form of punishment.

Great Domesday and its related documents offers, in many instances, a unique access to information regarding land holdings and the problems the Norman Conquest developed in

⁸ Roffe, pp. 30–31.

⁹ K. S. B. Keats, 'Portrait of a people; Norman Barons revisited', in *Domesday Book*, ed. by Elizabeth Hallam & David Bates, (Gloucestershire: Tempus Publishing, 2001) p. 134.

this area. An entry regarding Westminster Abbey reveals that land in Upper Tooting was held by Swein in the time of Edward, but by the time of William, was held by the Abbey. The entry contains a greater deal of information also, revealing that the Earl of Waltheof had taken the land and mortgaged it to Æthelnoth who had in turn gifted it to Westminster Abbey.¹⁰ Cases such as this one in Domesday Book offer a unique insight into the complexity and upheaval that Norman Conquest had on land holdings in England dating back as far as the regency of Edward the Confessor. The entry also reveals levels of detail regarding claims to land that the estates that were claiming them, themselves, failed to record.¹¹ Without Domesday, a large proportion of evidence regarding the challenges to land as a result of the Norman Conquest simply would not exist.¹² In this sense, Domesday is an essentially useful document in understanding the impact of the Norman Conquest in England regarding terms of claims and challenges to land holdings.

Domesday Book can also be useful in understanding the uneasy period of land acquisition and colonisation that faced the Normans after Hastings in 1066. Some cases brought to the Domesday Inquisition are solely questions of rights to land holdings between Norman settlers themselves, and as such, are disputes regarding land holdings that are at most twenty years old. In one case, Bertran de Verdun had fallen victim to invasion of his lands in Suffolk by Geoffrey de Mandeville while he was away in France on behalf of William I.¹³ Another case reveals concern not only for land, but also livestock on lands. William Specke suffered theft of his men's horses from William de Warenne.¹⁴ From these entries in Domesday Book, the document is useful for gaining an understanding of how the Normans behaved in post-conquest England as well as revealing a way in which the disputes were

¹⁰ Fleming, p. 55.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 57.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Fleming, p. 68.

¹⁴ Fleming, p. 68.

handled in terms of law. It is possible to see Norman settlers laying claim to lands they had gained in the Conquest and also that the borders of these lands were in many cases being challenged and threatened by other Tenants-in-Chief.

The information contained within Domesday Book, however, can be as much a source for manipulation of evidence as it can be regarded a unique source. Stephen Baxter has argued that the jurors' names from Ely and Cambridgeshire can be found to be those of loyal supporters of magnates within the counties, particularly the Abbott of Ely and Picot the Sheriff.¹⁵ In addition to these counties, a significant area of historical research has centred on the Church of Worcester's fee entry for Domesday. Baxter has argued that compared to the wider text, the Church of Worcester's fee entry differs significantly in formula for displaying holdings as well as in the vocabulary used.¹⁶ Peter Sawyer, another prominent historian who has written extensively on Domesday, has stated that the Worcester Domesday is consistent in every entry apart from that for the Church of Worcester.¹⁷ Elements in how the church's entry differs centre around its emphasis on how tenants behaved in the time of Edward and that the current tenants behave in the same manner. Baxter argues that the difference in emphasis is significant as it reveals an attempt in the fees of the Church of Worcester to make an example for the present day.¹⁸ Baxter's example is from the case of the Sheriff Cyneweard and he argues this entry in Domesday is directed toward Urse d'Abetot, who succeeds Cyneweard, in an attempt to set the Bishop's expectations for behaviour.¹⁹ Despite this, there is significant evidence to argue that even if this were true in Ely and Cambridgeshire, it certainly was not commonplace. Baxter has pointed to evidence in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle that commissioners were selected to work in counties where they had no or little

¹⁵ Stephen Baxter, 'The Representation of Lordship and Land Tenure in Domesday Book', in *Domesday Book*, ed. by Elizabeth Hallam & David Bates, (Gloucestershire: Tempus Publishing, 2001) pp. 82–84.

¹⁶ Baxter, p. 83.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 85–86.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 86.

ties. Furthermore magnates rarely held all their lands in one county, which in turn would make manipulation of jurors almost impossible.²⁰ From this it is possible to see that although the Domesday process had been designed to prevent the manipulation of evidence, in some cases it was possible for magnates to yield an uncomfortable degree of influence over the recording of land that held their interests. It is evident that Domesday Book can be useful in understanding the issues that arose in post-conquest England, also revealing the degree to which recordings in Domesday Book were not only of interest to the king but also those who were being assessed, who in some cases, went above and beyond to protect their assets.

Domesday Book is a treasure trove of information simply with its incredible list of names of people and their position relayed by the listing of their relationship to the Tenant-in-Chief. The ordering of Domesday Book names from the king to Tenant-in-Chief, to Under Tenant and so on down to numbers of slaves in snapshots from three periods of time; in the reign of Edward, in the reign of Harold and now in the reign of William.²¹ Great Domesday presents a challenge in that, frequently, only personal names were recorded. However, by combining information from Great Domesday with related documents that are less abbreviated such as Exon Domesday and Inquisito Eliensis, a greater level of detail can be found about individuals or groups of society.²² From these sources it is possible to follow the successes or failures of some families, familial origin for the higher status tenants as well as to assess the degree of social mobility possible for different levels of society. Keats has argued that this approach could further be extended to include sources such as charters and pipe rolls which could be used to gain an understanding of tenurial relationships between Tenants-in-Chief and their own tenants, as well as the Tenants-in-Chief relationship with

²⁰ Ibid. p. 30.

²¹ Keats, p. 122.

²² Ibid. p. 123.

greater magnates or the king.²³ From this, it can be seen that Domesday Book in conjunction with other primary sources relating to those named potentially could be an effective source for a prosopographical approach. Holt has however highlighted a potential limitation with regards to using Great Domesday in isolation for this purpose. Originally a response to Roffe's theory on dating Great Domesday, Holt has highlighted a potential problem in using Domesday Book to research specific people at a specific period of time. Holt argued that in some cases information is not always entirely accurate, such as in the case of Geoffrey Fitz Peter who had been using the title Earl of Essex before it was officially bestowed upon him.²⁴ As such, it is possible to see that although Domesday Book can be useful as a source in understanding the impact the Norman Conquest in England had on family, it is not a source without its limitations or risks. Even with this in mind however, Domesday does present a unique and abundant source of information regarding who people were and where people were, socially as well as geographically.

In conclusion, it has been argued that in many cases Domesday Book can be a useful source in understanding the impact the Norman Conquest had on England. Domesday Book however, has to be appreciated in its broader sense. It is not simply one binding of folios, it is a collection of documents sometimes repeating themselves, sometimes abbreviating and refining the information. What is evident is that these unique documents can be used to gain an understanding of the impact the Norman Conquest in England had on administrative approaches to taxation, the development of a legal system to deal with land holding disputes, the level of importance the Domesday process was to significant magnates and institutions as well as being a vast potential source for prosopographical research in post-conquered

²³ Ibid. pp. 123–124.

²⁴ J. C. Holt, '1086', in *Domesday Studies: Novocentenary Conference, Royal Historical Society and Institute of British Geographers 1986*, ed. by J. C. Holt (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1990), p. 24.

England. Domesday does begin to shine a light onto the concerns of the Normans in England and the sheer massive extent to which they were willing and able to go in addressing those concerns.

Dale Cutlan, 780626@swansea.ac.uk

Written for *War and Society in the Anglo-Norman World (HIH252)*

Bibliography

Baxter, Stephen, 'The Representation of Lordship and Land Tenure in Domesday Book', in *Domesday Book*, ed. by Elizabeth Hallam & David Bates, (Gloucestershire: Tempus Publishing, 2001) pp. 73–102.

Fleming, Robin, *Domesday Book and the law: Society and legal custom in early medieval England*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

Galbraith, V. H, *Domesday Book; Its Place in Administrative History*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1974).

——— *The Making of Domesday Book*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1961).

Hallam, Elizabeth M, *Domesday Book Through Nine Centuries*, Reprint Edition, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1986).

Holt, J. C, 'Domesday Studies 2000', in *Domesday Book*, in *Domesday Book*, ed. by Elizabeth Hallam & David Bates, (Gloucestershire: Tempus Publishing, 2001) pp. 19–24.

——— '1086', in *Domesday Studies: Novocentenary Conference, Royal Historical Society and Institute of British Geographers 1986*, ed. by J. C. Holt (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1990), pp. 41–64.

Keats, K. S. B, 'Portrait of a people; Norman Barons revisited', in *Domesday Book*, ed. by Elizabeth Hallam & David Bates, (Gloucestershire: Tempus Publishing, 2001) pp. 121–140.

Roffe, David, 'Domesday: The inquest and the book', in *Domesday Book*, ed. by Elizabeth Hallam & David Bates, (Gloucestershire: Tempus Publishing, 2001) pp. 25–36.