

The Role of Saxon Noblewomen

Enquiry: How much did England change during the Norman Conquest?

Ms Dawson



Saxon noblewomen were very important people, as they and their families held lots of land. It is difficult to tell exactly what their experiences were like, because their stories were not always written down. However, there is some evidence to suggest that Anglo-Saxon noblewomen were more equal to men before the Norman conquest in 1066 than afterwards. Saxon noblewomen were expected to marry, and a suitable marriage would be discussed with her family. However, there is evidence to suggest that women had some say in this matter and that a marriage would be arranged with their permission. Evidence suggests that in some cases women were able to own and **inherit** land, and could give it away in a **will**.



However, Anglo-Saxon women also had limits on their power. They were able to own and inherit land, but they were not equal to men. The number of women who owned land was much smaller than the number of men who owned land. Generally, the land was controlled by the woman's husband and she would only come to be in charge of it if she was **widowed**. The problems didn't stop there – **widows** would be pressured to get re-married because they possessed land which was very desirable. In some cases, if a Saxon nobleman died then the land would pass on to his eldest son and the widow would become her son's responsibility. This meant that Saxon noblewomen were **vulnerable** if their husbands died.



After 1066 when the Normans took over England, lots of Saxon noblemen were killed at the Battle of Hastings. This meant that there were lots of vulnerable widows in England. William used this to his advantage, to help him gain control of the land in England under the **feudal system**. He ordered the widowed Saxon noblewomen to marry his Norman lords, who would then be given control of the land. The women lost the right to pass on land in a will, because technically it all belonged to William. On the death of her husband, the control of the land would pass to the eldest son, who by marriage would be a Norman.



This was difficult for the Saxon women to refuse, as it was a way of keeping themselves safe. Their previous husbands would have been considered **traitors** for fighting against William, so if they refused to marry a Norman lord then they too would be considered a traitor. They were given a choice to either marry a Norman lord, or to become a **nun**, meaning that they'd lose their home. Young, unmarried Saxon women whose fathers had fought against William at Hastings had a similar experience. This system helped William to gain complete control of the land in England, and to force the remaining Anglo-Saxon nobles to swear loyalty to him.



Although many of the Saxon noblewomen agreed to marry Norman men, this did not mean that they liked the Normans. They simply didn't have much choice. They found one way to quietly **rebel** against the Normans: through language. William and his Norman lords came from Normandy, and they spoke French rather than English. As the Normans were in charge, the Anglo-Saxons were at risk of losing their language if the Normans forced them to speak French. Anglo-Saxon noblewomen were part of the reason that the English language survived – they were proud of their language and continued to teach it to their children.



Comprehension Questions

1. What made Saxon noble women very important?
2. Describe one way in which Saxon noble women were more equal to men before the Normans took over.
3. What problems did Anglo-Saxon widows experience before the Normans took over?
4. How did the Normans treat Anglo-Saxon women after the Norman Conquest?
5. How did this help William to keep control of England?

Challenge: How did Anglo-Saxon noble women resist Norman control?

Anglo-Saxon women resisted Norman control by...
They may have done this because...



Glossary

Inherit: To get something after the person who owns it dies

Will: A document to state who will get your belongings when you die

Widowed: To be left without a husband because they have died

Widow: A woman whose husband has died

Vulnerable: At risk

Feudal system: William's system of exchanging land for loyalty

Traitor: Someone who has betrayed

Nun: A women who belongs to God, typically can't own anything or marry

Rebel: To go against orders



Extension Question

How much did life change for Saxon noblewomen after 1066?

Use the sentence starters and key words below to answer this question

Sentence starters:	Key words
<i>In some ways life changed/did not change for Saxon noblewomen because...</i>	Land
<i>To explain this further....</i>	Marriage
	Feudal system
<i>For example...</i>	Inherit

