Conquerors and Conquered: Early Perspectives of the Battle of Hastings

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On 14 October 1066, the balance of power on the British Isles shifted when William the Bastard defeated Harold II, the last Saxon king of England, on the field of battle at Hastings. The outcome of a battle or the succession of one ruler from another is easy to define and catalog. However, when the reason for and interpretation of the event become the focus, then the voice of the historian may define the next generation's understanding and perception of the world created by the outcome. The historiography of the Battle of Hastings provides a glimpse into the mind of those writing the history. The ethics, economics, and social norms of the historians are presented to the reader as their work interprets the past. The generation that fought at Hastings and the generations which followed provided future generations with the root system which supported a tree of knowledge. The world in which Hastings occurred can be heard within these voices of conquerors and conquered.

The concept of divine will played a major role in the Middle Ages. The Anglo-Saxon versions of the invasion spoke of divine punishment, while the Norman versions exalted divine retribution and worldly valor. The most visual and well-known history of the event, the Bayeux Tapestry (c. 1080), is wrapped in mystery. The patron, or patrons, of the tapestry can only be speculated upon. Prominent early sources concerning Hastings included *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the pro-Norman works of Wace, and the Anglo-Norman interpretations of William of Malmesbury and Orderic Vitalis. The histories of the Battle of Hastings offered in the decades following the conflict offer the modern world more than just the events of the day; they provide a glimpse into how a story may be told differently

based on the point of view of the storyteller.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle told of a nation of people that was paying for sins and the misdeeds of their leaders. Captured within the early historiography of the conquest of England was a tale of missteps, retribution, and harbingers of doom. Coincidently, the year 1066 witnessed the return of Halley's Comet. Man had long viewed comets as the harbingers of doom. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle,* originally commissioned by Alfred the Great around 890, compiled the works of many church educated authors that spanned generations of effort. Indeed, there are chronicles originating from monasteries around the kingdom reporting simultaneously upon the events of the same years. Among the events of the year 1066, it was reported that "all over England such a token seen as no man ever saw before."[1] The conquered Saxons discovered a world in which they became second-class citizens. Unlike the majority of the Viking raids from the previous centuries, this new group of invaders sought more than possessions, wealth, or a mere foothold on the isle. The Normans came to rule, and altered the culture and kingdom of England in the process.

One telling feature of the Saxon account was the manner in which the combatants were identified: King Harold and Earl William, King Edward's cousin. Although clearly written after the events of the battle, the Saxons still viewed Harold's claim as legitimate — referring to Harold as King and William as the lower station of earl. Religion played a vital role in eleventh century Europe, and if a king was crowned by someone who had been excommunicated, that king's reign would be invalidated. The Worcester version of the *Chronicle* confirmed the legitimacy of Harold due to his having been crowned by Ealdred, archbishop of York; conversely, Norman sources claimed that Harold was crowned by Stigand, archbishop of Canterbury, who had been excommunicated.[2]

The Saxon account described Harold as gathering a large force, but William "came against him unawares, ere his army was collected; but the king, nevertheless, very hardly encountered him with the men that would support him."[3] The Normans won the day "as God granted them for the sins of the nation."[4] The Saxons delayed submission to the victorious William. It was believed that God wanted nothing better for the sins of the Saxons than Norman lords harassing the populace of England and causing increasing levels of misery. The *Chronicle* delivered a religious morality tale in its effort to explain the loss of Saxon England. In the Middle Ages, the losing side of a conflict or a population suffering plague viewed the misery as divine punishment. Harold's lack of his full forces and having fought in a major battle at Stamford Bridge just a few weeks before Hastings could rationalize the hard-fought loss described by the Saxons. But that rationalization always came second to divine punishment. For the Saxons, defeat was a predestined divine punishment that neither tactics nor size of force could overcome.

Not surprisingly, the details of the very same battle described by the vanquished as divine punishment were viewed as divine will by the victorious Normans. Often performed by entertainers known as *jongleurs,* songs of heroic deeds and lineage, *chansons de geste*, enjoyed immense popularity during the Norman era and were often centered on the age of Charlemagne. A sense of the importance of these songs can be gained by noting that the *Domesday Book* (1086) mentioned William's *jongleur*, Berdic, by name, and told of lands given to him as reward for service. "In Normandy, a country with a resurgent aristocracy advancing from conquest to conquest, one of the strongest influences was the sense of lineage; the intense interest in family history was fostered by *chansons* in court or castle, and by narrative charters, recording the ancestry of founders in religious houses."[5] Ascribed to Guy, bishop of Amiens, the *Carmen de Hastingae*

Proelio became the *chansons* related to the battle.

The notions of heroic acts and divine justification were found in the writings of the Normans in reference to the conquest of Saxon England. William of Poitiers, personal chaplain of William the Conqueror, wrote of Harold's sister Edith, wife of King Edward, validating that Edward had wished William become ruler of England. William of Poitiers called Harold a tyrannical ruler and chastised his usurpation of the throne; moreover, he made the claim that the Conquest freed the English from slavery and tyranny.[6] The main argument for Harold's treachery descended from the Norman assertion as seen in the Bayeux Tapestry that Harold swore an oath of fealty to William while in Normandy on a mission from Edward. William of Poitiers's account demonstrates the danger of trusting those authors who were too close to the historical actors, and the biased nature that lies within man's desire to justify his patrons.

An important Norman source of the events of the invasion was Wace (c. 1115- c. 1183), a Norman poet, who wrote in the Norman tradition of songs of heroic deeds and lineage. This could be seen within his two works: *Roman de Brut* (1150-1155), which was more a romance than a history, and *Roman de Rou* (1160- c. 1174), which detailed the greatness of the Norman dukes and the subsequent conquest of England. Wace described that Edward, on his death bed, warned the Saxons that he had promised England to his nephew William despite the desires of the English aristocracy to have Harold rule them. Wace described William as trying to reason with Harold by reminding him of the oath made by Harold in Normandy and by offering to fight in single combat for the throne, but "Harold said he would do neither; he would neither perform his covenant, nor put the matter in judgment, nor would he meet him and fight body to body."[7] Wace portrayed the two sides the night before the battle in stark contrast; the Saxons were depicted as

drunkards and the Normans as pious and penitent.[8] While, on the surface, this may be construed as a vindication of the Saxon account of divine punishment, the Saxons never questioned Harold's right to the throne; the Saxon account also did not mention any specific sins or drunken behavior. The Normans sought to present the divine justice and right of rule that legitimized their conquest, and were more specific in their criticisms of the conquered than the Saxons were in self-reflection.

The Norman Conquest transformed England in numerous ways. William divided the lands of England among those who fought alongside him. The Normans also brought religious reform across the English Channel. As with any influx of new people into an area, marriages between the cultures were consummated and the Anglo-Norman world was born. "Some Saxon landholders adapted themselves to the requirements of Norman fighting; there was intermarriage with the invaders, and the remodeling of the church respected most of the ancient ecclesiastical endowments but channeled them to different recipients."[9] As England changed and two cultures began the slow merger into one, so did the historiography. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* gradually faded into oblivion around 1154. The Norman accounts of bravery remained; however, a new breed of historian grew within these accounts of bravery. The new historians of Anglo-Norman England often descended from a mixed heritage of both Norman and Saxon. Yet, the historiography continued to seek divine providence in the outcome of the conflict. William built a church on the site of his victory over Harold and encouraged the ecclesiastical reform within England. The blending of the two cultures and reform within the churches and monasteries of England provided a new version of the Battle of Hastings to be written – a version that found the divine vindication of the Norman victory, yet managed to provide dignity to the defeated Saxons.

William of Malmesbury (c.1095-1143) contributed to the new Anglo-Norman histories written by those of both Saxon and Norman blood, his mother being a Saxon and his father a Norman. His interpretation walked the fine line of observing the positives in Norman England while longing to connect to the Saxon history of England. William saw the English church pre-1066 as too secular and praised the Norman influence in revitalizing the church. William of Malmesbury acknowledged William of Normandy as Edward's chosen heir; however, he also granted Harold praise by speaking of a sound and just ability to rule. "Still, not to conceal the truth, Harold would have governed the kingdom with prudence and with courage, in the character he had assumed, had he undertaken it lawfully."[10] William of Malmesbury also attempted to be fair and honest with his approach to William the Conqueror. "For my part, as the blood of either people flows in my veins, I shall steer a middle course: where I am certified of his good deeds, I shall openly proclaim them; his bad conduct I shall touch upon lightly and sparingly, though as not so as to conceal it; so that neither shall my narrative be condemned as false, nor will I brand that man with ignominious censure, almost the whole of whose actions may be reasonably excused, if not commended."[11] William of Malmesbury represented the noble efforts of an impartial historiography of the events at Hastings; however, the political landscape within England in the generations after the battle still did not allow for a truly neutral assessment.

William of Malmesbury sought to correct the erroneous accounts of Hastings that he found in both Saxon and Norman histories. William, like many of those writing in Anglo-Norman England, portrayed Harold as an opportunistic usurper. While he did maintain that Harold was suitable for the throne, William supported the Norman claim to England. He wrote that the inflation in numbers

of the Saxon army, which he described as prevalent in Norman accounts, did not increase the glory of the Norman Conquest, but instead it diminished it through its inaccuracy.[12] William's account also mentioned how the Saxon will to fight died with Harold. "The effect of war in this affair was trifling; it was brought about by the secret and wonderful counsel of God: since the Angles never again, in any general battle, made struggle for liberty, as if the ... strength [of] England had fallen with Harold, who certainly might and ought to pay the penalty of his perfidy, even though it were at the hands of the most unwarlike people."[13] William's assessment was not meant to belittle the Normans but to speak of the tenacity of a brave, yet small, army of Saxons defending their homeland. His indication of the Norman people as unwarlike was meant to show them as just and not belligerent conquerors. Yet, the notion of Normans being unwarlike was contrary to the spirit of the popular *chansons*. William of Malmesbury, though, offered the positive and negative from both Saxons and Normans.

Another of the Anglo-Norman historians and a contemporary of William of Malmesbury was Orderic Vitalis (1075-1142). Like William, Orderic was a monk. He wrote during a period of great contention. Succession questions had yet to be decided for the manner in which the kingdom and the duchy of Normandy would be divided. After William decided on how to divide his territory, he lived to regret it when his oldest son rebelled against him in an attempt to control all of William's land. Orderic painted a Norman picture with his words on the events of the year 1066. In his account of the Conquest, Orderic saw Harold as the perjurer and William as the liberator of the English. His attempt to provide a true history became entangled with the Norman love of the *chansons*. "How quickly elements taken from them might creep into the accounts of eye-witnesses and so into the pages of serious history ap-

pears repeatedly in Orderic's work."[14] Orderic considered Saxon England to be headed toward ruin and the Normans as the great saviors and reformers. "The Normans, although they may have been warlike, troublemaking, ambitious, and deceitful, reformed the English monasteries and upgraded the church on the isle; such sacred and moral considerations must prevail in judgment of past events."[15] Orderic, like William of Malmesbury, had a Norman father and an English mother, however Orderic wrote less of Saxon virtue than William. The Anglo-Norman histories existed as a more honest account of events than of those directly involved in the conflict, but the background of the individual still influenced the interpretation.

Housed in Bayeux, France and commissioned by an unknown patron, the Bayeux Tapestry is the most visual source of the events of the year 1066. The tapestry was likely commissioned by Bishop Odo of Bayeux (c.1030 – 1097) and crafted by Anglo-Saxon artisans in Kent. Alternate patrons could have been Count Eustace of Boulogne (c. 1020 – 1087), another nephew of Edward the Confessor, as well as the tapestry being created as a gift to Odo from the monks of St. Augustine. As mentioned, numerous versions of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* were written and St. Augustine's abbey was one of the locations for this venture. The tapestry presents an intriguing mixture of historiography. A Norman or French patron commissioned a tapestry illustrating the glory of the conquest which in turn was then crafted by those who had been conquered. It is valuable to note that Harold is referred to as 'Harold Rex' in the tapestry's depiction of his accession to the throne, which does not present him in the light of a usurper. Throughout the images portrayed on the Bayeux Tapestry, the viewer becomes empowered to interpret the scene as one pleases. If, as the saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words, then the tapestry becomes the most volu-

minous tome on the topic. "The truth behind Harold's mission, and with it King Edward's crucial wishes towards the end of his reign, was recorded at St. Augustine's not, on this occasion, in ink scratched upon parchment but with colorful stitches pierced through white linen cloth."[16] The early chronicles did not mention the manner of Harold's death at Hastings; however, the tapestry shows death coming from an arrow to the eye – possibly the first mention of the cause of death. "The story first appears, or seems to appear, in the Bayeux tapestry; it was first recorded in writing in the otherwise unimportant account of the battle by Baudri of Bourgueil in 1099."[17] It may be impossible to know how the arrow story came about. The tapestry displays a scene of an arrow and one blow from an advancing knight striking Harold. It seems logical that the images of the tapestry influenced the written records that followed.

While the tapestry portrays a vivid account of the actions between Harold and William, it does not give the whole story. "Its pictorial story of Harold and William and the events leading up to and including the Battle of Hastings is a historic treasure of authentic eleventh century detail such as dress and armor and weaponry, but what it tells of Harold is open to serious question."[18] While the picture paints a thousand words, the words come from the viewer's own interpretation. Motives and opportunities of those involved in the events are lost in the viewing of the tapestry. Moreover, the images chosen in the eleventh century will not have the same meaning to an audience from other eras. With a Norman or French patron and Saxon artisans, the tapestry became a device in which to include subversive images while supporting the cause of the patrons. "It may also be seen as the work of a designer who did not see the issue in quite such black and white terms as his patron."[19] In many ways, the tapestry became both a Norman *and* Saxon source of the battle, but the tapestry can only provide its images as a skeleton of the sto-

ry. Written text has provided the story of Hastings with flesh.

The historiography of Hastings has many sides. The Saxon chroniclers found fault in defeat with the sins of the people and the supposed perjury of Harold's oath of fealty to William. In truth, it is easy now to see fault with the unclear succession plans laid forth by Edward; however, in the eleventh century no fault was to be found in Edward. Those who fought alongside William or benefitted from the Conquest elevated William to the status of a liberator and savior of the English from the tyranny and oppression of the usurper Harold. The following generations were able to write more honestly about those involved, yet even then blood and position stood in the way of objective reporting. The heroic spirit of the Normans demanded that songs of lineage and great deeds be sung to honor those at Hastings. Those of mixed blood skirted the fine line between open acceptance of Harold's right and abilities with the truth of William's successful policies in England, despite their brutality. The landscape had changed drastically. The history is in the eye of the beholder.

What was the world like in which the history of Hastings was written? A strongly religious atmosphere gripped the British Isles and monastic reform was prevalent. Those conquered searched for meaning in defeat and found it in the sins of its people and in Harold, the king who failed to protect them from the Norman oppressors. The conquerors found vindication and justification in what was felt to be rightfully theirs. For the Normans, England had been promised to them and the attempt to steal it from them served only as a minor bump on the road to London. William evolved from a derisive reputation as a Bastard to a laudatory reputation as the Conqueror. Those who served him desired to commemorate the occasion with a tapestry extolling the greatness of the conquest. The generations which followed, those of mixed blood, searched for a

more honest history, yet the entanglements of politics and society often interfered. The world of the historians of Hastings was one of retrospective divine justification and retribution. The question of succession and rule had been decided on the field of battle by divine right. The world made sense and England was to be thankful for its Norman lords. While there were still gentlemen in England filled with contempt and hatred, the successive generations of mixed heritage and Anglicizing of the Norman lords softened the blow. The Battle of Hastings reshaped the landscape of Europe and shifted the influences of the British Isles away from Scandinavia and towards the European Continent. Those who wrote of this lived in a world of change and uncertainty. The historiography of Hastings, whether from the conquerors or from the conquered, found common voice in actions while arguing the motives, oaths, and heirs of a dying culture and kingdom. The Saxon world had ended, replaced by a Norman one – but the conquered Saxons never quite disappeared.

Notes

[1] Rev. James Ingram, trans., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (London: Everyman Press, 1912), 119.

[2] Marjorie Chibnall, *The Debate on the Norman Conquest* (Manchester, UK: Manchester Press, 1999), 12.

[3] Ibid, 121.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Marjorie Chibnall, *The World of Orderic Vitalis: Norman Monks and Knights* (Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 1996), 175.

[6] Chibnall, *The Debate on the Norman Conquest*, 12.

[7] Wace, *Roman de Rou*, trans. Edgar Taylor (London: William Pickering, 1837), 87.

[8] Wace, 89.

[9] Chibnall, *The World of Orderic Vitalis*, 4.

[10] William of Malmesbury, *Chronicle of the Kings of England*, trans. J.A Giles (London: H.G. Bohn, 1847), 250.

[11] Ibid, 254.

[12] William of Malmesbury, 252.

[13] Ibid, 252.

[14] Chibnall, *The World of Orderic Vitalis*, 204.

[15] Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 114-115.

[16] Andrew Bridgeford, *1066: The Hidden History of the Bayeux Tapestry* (New York: Walker Books, 2005), 308.

[17] David Howarth, *1066: The Year of the Conquest* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1993), 182.

[18] Benton Rain Patterson, *Harold and William: The Battle for England , A.D. 1064-1066* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2001), xviii.

[19] Harriet Harvey Wood, *The Battle of Hastings: The Fall of Anglo-Saxon England* (London: Atlantic Books, 2008), 230.

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