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# The Battle of Hastings

(14th October 1066)

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## Introduction

On 28th September 1066, a large army drawn from across northern France and led by the Norman Duke William the Conqueror landed at Pevensey. They quickly established a fortified base and moved inland, destroying the countryside as they went. On 14th October 1066, they attacked the army of the English King Harold Godwinson at Senlac Hill in Sussex. By the end of the day, the English King and much of the English nobility lay dead and William was able to begin his advance on London. He was anointed and crowned William I on Christmas Day and the trajectory of English history was radically changed.



*Scene from the Bayeux Tapestry depicting mounted Norman soldiers attacking Anglo-Saxons who are fighting on foot in a shield wall*

## How do we know about the Battle of Hastings and the Norman Conquest?

We have more evidence for the Battle of Hastings than for any other European battle of the high middle ages. This is partly because England in this period produced more documents (and in particular, more narratives) than other parts of the continent, and partly because the effects of the battle were so decisive and dramatic. The sources are particularly useful because they approach the campaign from

different national and ideological perspectives. We have the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* (written in English monasteries), a flattering if unreliable poem called *The Song of the Battle of Hastings* and a long embroidery called *The Bayeux Tapestry*, which tells the events of the battle in dramatic visual form (and so tells us a lot about things like the kinds of weapons, armour, and ships that were used). Most importantly we have the *Deeds of William*, a detailed ‘official’ account of William’s life written by his chaplain, a former soldier. Although all of these sources have their biases and agendas, we can learn a great deal by comparing them. *The Deeds of William* in particular was written by an expert with access to excellent

sources of information. We should take its account very seriously.

For several generations afterwards, writers in both England and Normandy returned to the subject of the Norman Conquest to secure their claims, or simply to try to understand why God had brought about such a dramatic change in their country. Those writers could draw on oral and written accounts that have been lost to us.

Although there is much that our sources do not tell us (how many soldiers fought on each side, for instance), there is a great deal that we do know about the invasion of 1066 and its climactic battle.

## Why was the battle fought?

The last of the ancient line of English kings, Edward the Confessor, died in January 1066. He had no children (hence his later reputation as a saint). In this period, it was quite normal for claimants to fight one another over the kingship when the old king died, but the circumstances of 1066 were unusually complicated. Edward seems to have promised the succession both to William the Conqueror and to Harold Godwinson, England's most powerful nobleman, at different times. The Norwegian King, Harald Hardrada also claimed the throne through his relationship to Cnut, the Viking conqueror, and Edward had a close male relative, Edgar Aetheling, but Edgar was too young to mount a military

challenge. After Edward's death, Harold moved quickly to secure the throne.

When William launched his invasion of England, Harold was in the north, where he had crushed the forces of Harald Hardrada at Stamford Bridge (25th September). Both Harold and William had good reasons to want to end the campaign quickly in a decisive battle. If Harold could defeat William, he would make his hold on the English throne secure before William could destroy too much of the English countryside or mount an attack on London. If William could defeat Harold, he would not only secure the kingship for himself, but avert the risk of his army being caught in unfriendly territory as winter closed in.

## Why did the Normans win the battle?

Harold began the battle with some important disadvantages. In particular, his army had already fought a gruelling battle against Harald Hardrada in the north, before marching at great speed to the south coast to confront William. He must have lost a great many men in that earlier battle and may have lost more in the long march south. It is likely that the force he brought to the battlefield at Hastings was substantially smaller than an English royal army in this period would usually have been. It was

certainly more tired. The Normans also brought with them their famously effective cavalry and their archers (both of which Harold lacked). Probably in recognition of these problems, Harold's battle plan seems to have been defensive, taking up a position on Senlac Hill in the hope that he could use his heavy infantry in a strong position to cancel out his enemy's superior strength. If he could hold that position, the Normans might eventually break themselves trying to attack the English 'shield wall' up a hill. The author of *The Deeds of William* emphasised how unusual it was for the two armies to fight in such different ways, "with one side attacking in different ways and the other standing firmly as if fixed to the ground".

Harold's approach very nearly worked. At one point, it appeared that William himself had been killed in the fighting and his army began to flee, with English troops pouring down the hill after them. William was forced to remove his helmet to show his men that he was still alive. They turned around, and caught the English who had broken formation. At this point, William seems to have realised that if his men attacked and then pretended to flee, English soldiers could be tempted to leave their strong position in pursuit and be cut down. He repeated the manoeuvre at least once more, fatally undermining the strength and organisation of the defenders on the hill.

*Opposite: William the Conqueror*



Harold's tactics depended on iron discipline and a tight, cohesive formation. As the English army began to break apart, it became much more vulnerable to Norman cavalry. It is unclear whether Harold was actually wounded by an arrow in the face or whether he was killed by one of the Norman knights on horseback, but by the evening, the English army had broken up and its remnants were being pursued from the field by the Norman horsemen.

## What were the results of the battle?

The Battle of Hastings devastated English resistance to the Norman invasion. Not only was Harold himself killed, along with his brothers, Gyrth and Leofwine, but a large proportion of the English nobility, who had fought alongside their king, were also wiped out. There were, of course, still some English leaders after 14th October. The northern earls and Stigand, the Archbishop of Canterbury tried to organise resistance around Edgar Aetheling, but the casualties at Hastings included many of the men who might have been the leaders of an English counter-attack, if only they had survived.

With the English army broken at Hastings, William was able to secure his grip on the south coast of England, occupy London, and have his

anointing and coronation as King of the English. Almost as importantly, such a dramatic, devastating victory could only be attributed to the assistance of God. As a result, William's argument for the legitimacy of his rule was given a huge boost. William gave appropriately magnificent thanks to God for the victory, building Battle Abbey over the site where Harold fell.

## Why does the Norman Conquest matter?

William tightened his grip on England quickly. Within a few years, the surviving English nobility had been replaced by Normans. Control of the English church was handed over to Norman bishops and abbots too. Although none of the rebellions that followed were able to shake off Norman domination, they did bring down a series of bloody reprisals that caused great material and human destruction, most famously the "harrying of the north".

In the longer term, the Norman Conquest changed the cultural and political orientation of England dramatically. The English language was revolutionised by the addition of countless new words from French, including most of the language that we use to talk about politics and government. New artistic and architectural styles imported from the continent transformed the appearance of

England's towns and churches, while the castle (perhaps the Normans' most important technical introduction) became the centre of much social and military life. While the England of the early middle ages had been influenced a great deal by the culture of Scandinavia, the England that emerged after 1066 was much more influenced by France. Indeed, the King of England was now a European ruler, deeply involved in the politics of France and of Western Europe, and would be so for the rest of the Middle Ages. Eventually, the Normans would colonise or overrun most of the rest of the British Isles, pulling those areas more fully into the European mainstream too.