

1066:

The Limits of our Knowledge

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As the most pivotal and traumatic event in English history, the Norman Conquest continues to generate controversy and debate, especially among those who know little about it or enjoy passing judgement on the past. Who had the better claim to the English throne, William the Conqueror or Harold Godwinson? Was Harold out-generalled at Hastings or simply unlucky? Was William a war-criminal or just a typical warrior of his time? Confronted with the abundance of such hardy perennials, wags might be tempted to quote the apocryphal words of Chinese premier Zhou Enlai, asked in the 1970s about the significance of the French Revolution: it's too early to tell.

The real problem, of course, is that 1066 was a long time ago. When we move back almost a millennium into the past, the evidence is not that good. Eleventh-century England was a literate society, but literacy existed only in pockets. Other societies at the time – those in Scandinavia, for example, with which England was intimately involved – were scarcely literate at all. Much was left unwritten, and much that was written has long since been lost. In comparison with the later Middle Ages, the survival rate for eleventh-century evidence is awful. By the thirteenth century royal government was producing vast amounts of written material every day; the royal chancery had more than a hundred clerks producing thousands of documents, many of which can still be read in the National Archives. Thus the itinerary of Edward I (1272–1307), compiled and published in the 1970s,

fills three large printed volumes. But by way of sad contrast, the itinerary of William the Conqueror (1066–87) fills only three printed pages, because government archive from the eleventh century is virtually non-existent. Despite the immense importance of William's reign to English history, we can barely say where he was from one year to the next.

We are not, thank goodness, solely reliant on official documents. We also have monastic chronicles, and these can go some way to making good the deficit. But with such chronicles we are at the mercy of the monks who wrote them; we have always to take into account their tendency to interpret events as the unfolding of God's great plan, and sometimes their political bias as well. Also, as with the archive, we are often confronted with quite insuperable gaps. Take the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, our principal source for what was happening in England both immediately before and after the Norman Conquest. Sometimes it is extremely garrulous, but at other times infuriatingly tight-lipped. Describing, for example, the arrival of a Viking fleet in 1057 led by the son of Harold Hardrada, the Chronicle comments: 'a pirate host came from Norway. It is tedious to tell how it all happened'. The same taciturn attitude infects the Chronicle at other critical junctures. 'The king arrested Bishop Odo' is all it has to say about William's detention of his notorious half-brother in 1082, while the sum total of its entry for 1084 is to record the death of the abbot of Chertsey. For other years –

crucial years – it has no entries at all.

The insufficiency of our source material means that vast tracts of the Conquest story lie beyond our reach and must forever remain a mystery. To take perhaps the most celebrated example of all, consider the old chestnut about whether King Harold was killed with an arrow in the eye. At first glance, it seems certain that the story must be true: not only is it alluded to in several chronicles, it is also famously depicted on that most wondrous survival, the Bayeux Tapestry. But the closer you look, the more the arrow-in-the-eye story itself starts to look like a piece of embroidery. In the first place, the chronicles that mention it are somewhat vague: Harold is variously said to have been hit in the eye, the brain or some unspecified place. They are, moreover, all written some time after the event, the earliest dating to the beginning of the twelfth century. Contemporary chroniclers, by contrast, even those that supply long and detailed descriptions of the Battle of Hastings, do not mention the arrow story at all, and one of them relates a very different version of events, wherein Harold is hacked down by a dedicated Norman death-squad. The only contemporary source to feature the arrow is the Bayeux Tapestry, and the Tapestry is famously ambiguous (Is it really an arrow? Is it really Harold?). Its testimony is also fatally undermined by its demonstrable debt to other artistic sources. The scene that depicts Harold's death appears to derive from earlier manuscript illustrations of the biblical king Zedekiah, punished by



Nebuchadnezzar by having his eyes put out. The inescapable conclusion is that we have no good contemporary evidence for the arrow-in-the-eye story, only a pictorial source of dubious worth, which may in turn have spawned a later chronicle tradition.¹

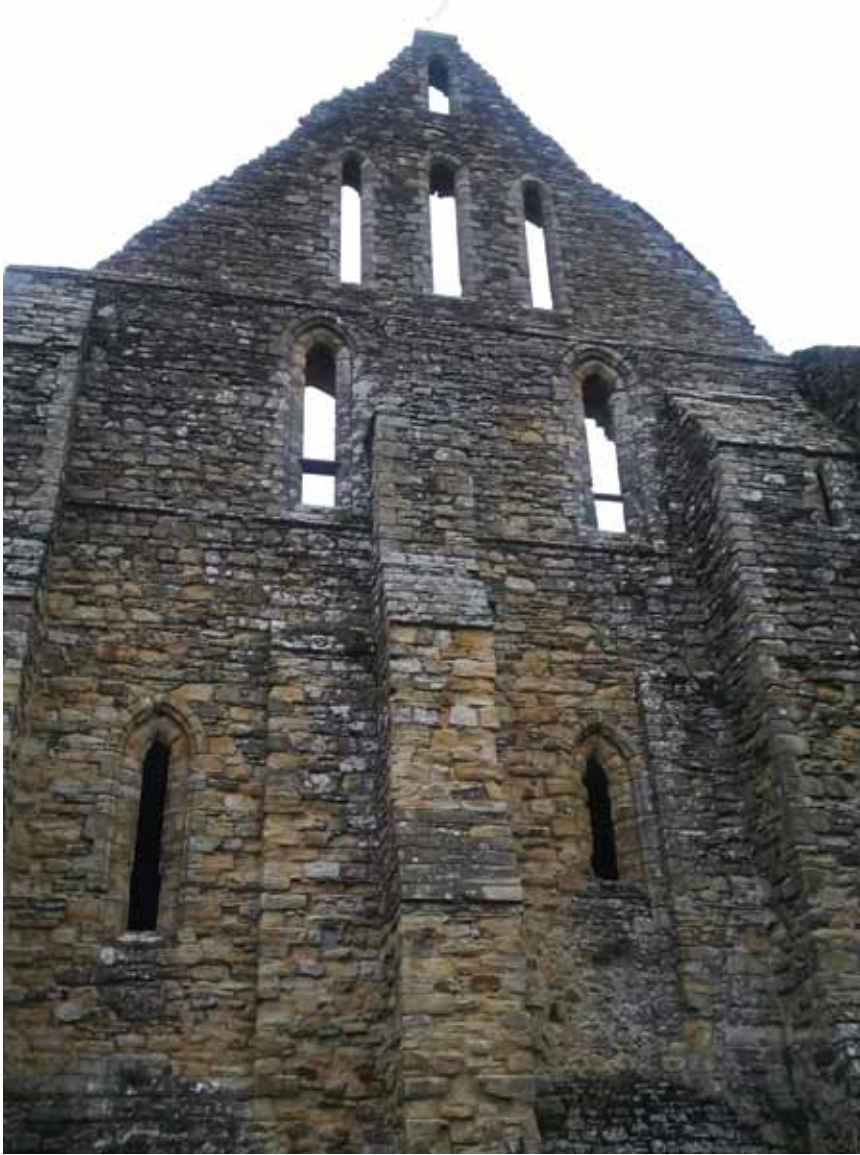
You never know: one day someone may dig up a skeleton, perhaps at Waltham Abbey, perhaps on a hill near Hastings, surrounded by obvious trappings of royalty, an arrowhead rattling inside its skull. But despite the excitement generated by the apparently certain identification of dead medieval monarchs, even the best-intentioned archaeology can sometimes take us in the opposite direction of historical truth. In the late 1950s, experts in Caen decided to crack open the tombs of William the Conqueror and his queen, Matilda, and as a result it was widely reported that, while he was an impressive 5'10", she was a diminutive 4'2". Widely reported, but not accurately reported. When the disbelieving royal gynaecologist Sir John Dewhurst looked further into the matter, he discovered that the French archaeologists had actually concluded that Matilda had

been 5' – a result far more compatible with the fact that she bore at least nine children. But in any case the heights of both Matilda and William were only estimates, in her case extrapolated from the size of part of her pelvis. If indeed it was her pelvis. Since tombs at Caen were desecrated on two separate occasions, their contents scattered by Huguenots in the sixteenth century and revolutionaries in the eighteenth, any conclusions about the size of the Conqueror and his queen must surely be so qualified as to be all but worthless.²

Apart from the Bayeux Tapestry, the Conquest period boasts one other world-famous piece of evidence in the form of *Domesday Book*. A record of landholding in England compiled and collated in 1086, Domesday is justly famous: running to two volumes, 832 folios and somewhere in the region of two million words, it has justly been called 'the most complete survey of a pre-industrial society anywhere in the world'.³ As a source it could hardly be more different from the Tapestry, which is artistic, ambiguous and derivative. Domesday is crammed full of personal names, place names and figures, a

veritable mine of information. Here, at last, is the cold hard data which can confirm or deny the hearsay and opinion of the chronicles.

But Domesday itself is a fairly intractable source. It says a lot about its nature that, after more than a century of rigorous scholarship, historians are still not agreed on what it was made for, or indeed precisely when it was made. With careful winnowing by experts alive to its limitations and idiosyncrasies, Domesday can be made to yield valuable (albeit qualified) answers about the nature of English society as it existed both before and after 1066. But without such cautious handling it too can create more layers of misinformation. Over a century ago, for example, a scholar called Francis Baring posited that it was possible to chart the course of William's armies by looking at Domesday's recording of 'waste' (*vasta*) – the assumption being that such devastation had been caused during the campaigns of 1066. It all looked very clever and well substantiated, but was completely discredited by a more careful scholar, John Palmer, some twenty years ago. Nevertheless, books continue to be



Battle Abbey, Sussex: despite recent controversy, contemporary voices assure us it was built 'on the very spot' where King Harold was defeated.

written that follow the Conqueror along the detailed but bogus routes sketched out by Baring.⁴

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Biography, however, and you'll discover that his surname is not recorded until the twelfth century, as Harefah, and probably arose from confusion with the Norwegian king, Harold Fairhair. The same applies to the legendary

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– not least the personalities of some of the key players. Consider, for instance, Harold Harefoot, son of King Cnut, who succeeded his father in 1035 and ruled until 1040. King of England for the best part of five years, and yet, because of the reticence of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, we know precisely nothing about him – no contemporary source offers us so much as a single adjective. Look him up online and you'll discover that Harold's colourful surname apparently signified that he could run as fast as a hare, a happy notion put about by an American writer called Albert Le Roy Bartlett in his *Essentials of Language and Grammar* as recently as 1899. Look the same king up in the *Oxford Dictionary of National*

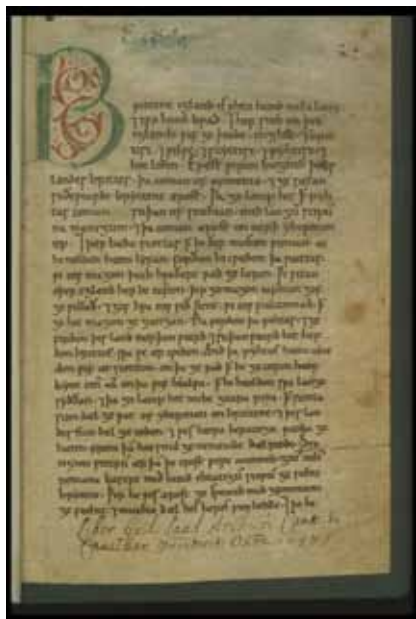
English hero Hereward the Wake, whose cognomen was once thought to betoken an unusual level of alertness, yet almost certainly arises from his supposed connection with the later medieval Wake family.

Naturally, the fact that we cannot recover anything of these characters' personalities does not deter some from trying. After all, people have been making up stories about the Conquest from the moment it happened, and continue to do so today in the form of historical novels, television dramas and so on. But as the Conqueror's contemporary biographer, William of Poitiers, so aptly points out, poets are allowed to amplify their knowledge in

any way they like by roaming through the fields of fiction. Those who claim to be historians, by implication, ought to exercise greater restraint, yet the temptation to fill the gaps with psycho-history often proves irresistible. One of the most popular books on the subject in recent times has been *1066: The Year of the Conquest* by David Howarth.

In many respects a charming piece of writing, easy-going and uncluttered, Howarth's book is nevertheless laced throughout with constant speculation about the mental state of its characters, based on nothing more than its author's own questionable reading of their actions and some amateur stabs at psycho-analysis. Discussing the famously childless Edward the Confessor, for example, Howarth comments: 'given the behaviour of Edward's mother, a psychiatrist would not be surprised to find a homosexual son; but to judge by his reputation, whatever instinct he had was strictly suppressed'. That's splendid on two levels: first, in its assumption that homosexuality is caused by distant and unloving mothers; second, in its allusion to Edward's spotless reputation, effectively admitting that there is no historical evidence to support such idle comment. Plenty more follows in a similar vein. When Tostig Godwineson attacks England in 1066, Howarth is quick to diagnose mental illness. 'Certainly if anyone behaved like Tostig today he would be sent to a psychiatrist'. And at the end of the book Howarth is wheeling out the consulting couch again, this time for Harold Godwineson, who (in this version of events) discovers he

The initial page of the *Peterborough Chronicle*, one of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, contains unique information about the history of England after the Norman Conquest.



has been excommunicated by the pope on the eve of the Battle of Hastings, with fatal consequences. 'Harold's own confidence in himself, his cause, his very right to be king, can only have been shaken to its foundation'.⁵

Sadly Howarth is not alone in peddling such nonsense. We find similar cod-psychiatry in *1066: The Year of Three Battles* by Frank McLynn, where Edward the Confessor is described as 'a cross-grained neurasthenic, a neurotic with a tendency to paranoia and possessed of a fearsome temper that often made him impervious to reason... his 'saintly' detachment can be read in quite another way, as the 'schizoid' alienation of the classic lone-wolf'. How do such writers, one wonders, arrive at such vivid diagnoses? The answer, it seems, is by a kind of historical Chinese whispers. McLynn, for example, is adamant that the Confessor, despite spending almost a quarter of a century in exile at their court, owed no debt of gratitude to the dukes of Normandy, because 'he had not been especially well treated'. It is a notion that hardens as the book progresses: later we are told that Edward 'hated and despised' Normandy and 'was in reality livid with anger' at the Normans.⁶ Yet there is not a shred of evidence to support this interpretation. It derives entirely from comments made thirty years earlier by Edward's modern biographer, Frank Barlow, who was equally insistent that his subject had no reason to be grateful to the people who had raised him. 'It would seem just as possible, perhaps more likely', wrote Barlow in a wholly speculative passage, 'that Edward had

a grievance against the Norman court. It would have been a little unfair, but hardly unexpected, if he had claimed that his Norman relatives had kept him out of his ancestral inheritance'.⁷ It would, in fact, have been *completely* unfair, because it is entirely at odds with the evidence. Twice during his exile Edward tried to regain England by force, and on each occasion his Norman hosts supplied him with fleets and soldiers. We can also see that the Normans recognized Edward's status as England's rightful king during this same period, since he is styled with that title in surviving ducal charters.

As this example proves, there is sometimes enough evidence to counter the worst excesses of the why-not-make-it-up brigade; sometimes we can say what happened in the distant past with something approaching certainty. Despite the noisy newspaper headlines in recent months, for instance, we can still reasonably suppose that the Battle of Hastings was fought on the site where Battle Abbey now stands, because the contemporary voices that tell us so are so compelling. 'On the very spot where God granted him the conquest of England, he caused a great abbey to be built'. So says the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in its obituary of William the Conqueror, a passage clearly composed before 1100 by an Englishman who describes himself as having lived at the king's own court. Unsurprisingly, it is a source that goes unmentioned by those who contend that the battle was fought elsewhere.⁸

But the basic truth remains that, when we venture back almost a millennium into the past, there is often far less evidence than we could wish, and certainty remains elusive. Faced with

this fact, responsible historians admit the limitations of their source material, both to themselves and to their readers. William of Malmesbury, one of the greatest of all medieval historians, wrote his account of the Conquest period barely fifty years after 1066 itself, yet occasionally found enormous difficulty piecing together what had actually happened. 'I should like to warn the reader', he wrote, before describing the contentious events of 1051, 'that here I perceive the course of my narrative to be somewhat in doubt, because the truth of the facts is in suspense and uncertain'.

References

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The Norman Conquest by Marc Morris is now out in paperback (Windmill, 2013). Marc has recently made a short film dealing with the same theme, the limitations of source material for the Conquest period, which you can watch at:

www.marcmorris.org.uk/p/films.html

