

By the face of Lucca



Was William Rufus the victim of a tragic hunting accident or was his harsh rule in England enough to provoke his assassination?

As the sun began to set over the New Forest on August 2nd 1100, William Rufus, King of England, his brother, Henry, and a group of barons were enjoying the thrill of a stag hunt. A beast darted through the forest between the king and his baron. Walter Tirel, Count of Poix, draw back his bow, took aim and fired. His arrow sped through the forest, scorching the hairs on the back of the beast and ended its murderous route in the chest of the King of England. Shocked and speechless Rufus tried vainly to extract the arrow before collapsing to the ground. Tirel, fearing reprisals fled the country. His brother left immediately for London and the crown, stopping only at Winchester to seize the royal treasury. Rufus' body was left in the forest for servants with a farm cart to carry to the church of St. Swithan, Winchester. The dead king received a perfunctory funeral with very few mourners. It marked the end of a controversial thirteen-year reign. It was said that Rufus 'was ever agreeable to

Left: William Rufus according to a twelfth century manuscript. © British Library, MS Royal 14 C.VII, f.8v

Below: William II's accession to the throne of England, here occupied by the last undisputed Saxon king, Edward, might have restored a measure in autonomy to England had Rufus' reign been more successful. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry. By special permission of the City of Bayeux.

evil men's advice' and rumours soon spread that 'accident' was really murder.

William Rufus was crowned William II at Westminster Abbey on September 26th, 1087. The event marked the end of the union of England and Normandy: a union, which had been created twenty-one years earlier. On his deathbed William the Conqueror designated the 27-year-old prince heir to the throne of England largely in recognition of Rufus' loyalty. The dying king and duke, listening to the advice of his Norman barons reluctantly divided his realms between his two eldest surviving sons. Robert Curthose inherited the dukedom of Normandy. His second and, more favoured son, William, received England. The youngest son, Henry, received a bequest of

5000 lbs in silver and an alleged, mysterious promise of greater wealth and power in the future in a united Anglo-Norman empire. The next nineteen years were to brother fight brother to reunite the Conqueror's legacy under their patrimony.

Rufus' first actions as king were both magnanimous and self-defeating. In accordance with his father's wishes, Rufus' secured short-term support within England, left his fortune vastly depleted and freed a future foe: Bishop Odo of Bayeux. William I had arrested Odo, his brother, a few years earlier for corruption within England. Rufus was rewarded for his clemency in Easter 1088 when Odo led a bloody rebellion to replace William with Duke Robert. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, in a

rare display of loyalty to Rufus, sanctimoniously compared Odo's treachery to that of Judas Iscariot. Driven by concerns for their future, many great Norman landowners on both sides of the Channel were easily persuaded to take up arms against the new king. They had been inconvenienced by the separation of their continental and English possessions, which was forcing them to pay taxes to two opposing overlords. It was inevitable that the dilemma would eventually force the barons to choose between their overlords.

With resentful memories of the Conquest still strong England and driven by the fear of yet another Norman duke invading their state, many of the indigenous English and newly assimilated Danes were quick to

