

# The strange death of King Harold II:

## Propaganda and the problem of legitimacy in the aftermath of the Battle of Hastings

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How did King Harold II die at the Battle of Hastings? The question is simple enough and the answer is apparently well known. Harold was killed by an arrow which struck him in the eye. His death is depicted clearly on the Bayeux Tapestry in one of its most famous images: as the battle draws to a close, Harold stands underneath his name in the inscription 'Hic Harold rex interfectus est', head tilted backwards, clutching a golden arrow which protrudes from his face. The scene is so celebrated that it has become one of the iconic images of British history and the 'arrow in the eye' story, for many of us, is synonymous with 1066 and all that. And so it should be, since Harold's death at Hastings brought about the demise of Anglo-Saxon England and precipitated the greatest turning-point in the history of the British Isles.

Despite the popularity of the 'arrow in the eye' story, historians have not reached a consensus on how Harold was killed at Hastings. In fact, some of the greatest historians of the Norman Conquest, such as Sir Frank Stenton and David Douglas, were less than convinced by the 'arrow in the eye' tale, and others, such as Henry Loyn and Frank Barlow, rejected it entirely. At the heart of this controversy lies the ambiguity of the earliest Norman sources. Both William of Jumièges and William of Poitiers, who were writing during the late 1060s and 1070s respectively, skip over Harold's death. William of Poitiers' 'Deeds of William [the Conqueror]' contains the most detailed account of the battle, and his knowledge of military affairs, informed by his own experience of fighting for the duke in his youth, is impressive. But he does not pay much attention to Harold's death, an unusual

oversight since it was undoubtedly the decisive moment in the battle: as the conflict draws to a close, he notes, in passing, that Harold, his brothers and many nobles had been killed. William of Jumièges has Harold killed in the first attack, 'pierced with mortal wounds'.<sup>1</sup> Since he used the word 'pierced' some might assume that he was intimating that Harold had been struck by an arrow; but his language is so imprecise that Frank Barlow has suggested that the phrase is nothing more than a literary cliché. It is generally assumed that his placing of Harold's death at the start of the battle was a mistake, but Elisabeth van Houts, the modern editor of his work, has pointed out that the original Latin text at this point is not faulty, and so he must have been trying to convey to his reader that Harold had died early on.

Such is the extent of the confusion that some historians, including Harold's biographer, Ian Walker, have suggested that the manner of his death had been so distasteful or ignominious that both authors had deliberately avoided the topic. The fact that an alternative story to the 'arrow in the eye' tale was beginning to emerge in the early twelfth century, a generation after the battle, suggests that the ducal court had censored the earliest accounts of the Conquest. In this version, Harold meets a grisly end; having been blinded by an arrow, he is unceremoniously hacked to the ground under the blows of Norman knights. But the 'hacking episode' in this story can be traced back to the *Song of the Battle of Hastings*, a poem written by the French bishop, Guy of Amiens, as early as 1067. Bishop Guy says nothing about an arrow hitting Harold. Instead, Duke William himself gathers together three other knights and

they cut Harold to pieces. The absence of the 'hacking episode' from the earliest Norman accounts and its subsequent inclusion in the histories written in the early twelfth century is suggestive. It is conceivable that the Norman court withheld it during William's reign because his advisors were concerned that the manner of Harold's death would have undermined the legitimacy of his own accession.

But many historians do not endorse this version of his death. It can be found in its most developed form in Wace's verse history of the Normans, written in the 1170s, but its appearance here has only weakened its plausibility. There is, in general, a reluctance to accept evidence from verse histories because the distinction between fact and fiction is often less clear in poetry. But in recent years attempts have been made to revitalise the integrity of the work of both Bishop Guy and Wace. Given this development, a reconsideration of the evidence for Harold's death is called for. This investigation will re-examine the 'arrow in the eye' story before considering the 'hacking episode' and the possible reasons for its suppression in the aftermath of William's victory.

### The Bayeux Tapestry and the 'arrow in the eye' story

Probably because it is pictorial, the Bayeux Tapestry's version of Harold's death is predominant. As Duke William lifts his helmet to prove to his men that he is still alive, dozens of archers enter the lower border and begin to fire at Harold's position. The French knights attack the men who surround the king, and as the lower border is taken over by scavengers who are stripping the dead bodies, Harold is hit in the eye by an

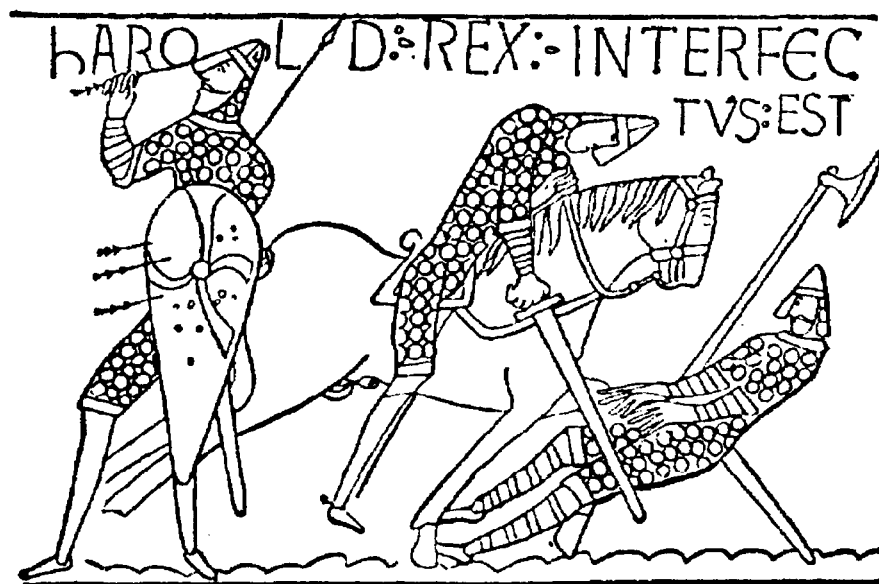


(Above) Harold's death in the Bayeux Tapestry; he seems to be pulling a golden arrow out of his eye.

(Right) Some historians have argued that both the standing and falling figures under the inscription are Harold. But if the standing figure originally held a spear rather than an arrow, it is likely that Harold is in fact the second figure, who is being hacked to pieces by a Norman knight.

arrow which he clutches with his right hand, and a second figure is knocked to the ground by a knight. The inscription 'Harold rex interfectus est' appears above the figure with an arrow in his face and the falling figure behind him.

This depiction of Harold's death is apparently the earliest appearance in either England or Normandy of the 'arrow in the eye' story. We can be fairly certain of when the Tapestry was made because it is generally accepted that William the Conqueror's half-brother, Bishop Odo of Bayeux, was the patron of the work. This identification rests upon the evidence found within the Tapestry itself. First, Bishop Odo plays a key role in its story: he advises the duke, he blesses the meal before the battle and he rallies the troops as the rumour of the duke's death spreads. Second, three individuals appear in the story (Turol,



Ward and Vital) who can be identified as Domesday tenants of Bishop Odo. Third – and most convincing – is that the Tapestry has always been associated with Bayeux cathedral. Its first appearance in the historical record was in an inventory of its possessions compiled in 1476. Since Bishop Odo was imprisoned in 1082, the Tapestry must have been made between 1066 and the year of his downfall. Although recent scholarship has suggested that the Tapestry was made for a great hall,

a fitting occasion for the presentation of such an impressive decoration during this period would have been the dedication of Bishop Odo's new cathedral at Bayeux in 1077, and so it can be dated to that year.

The 'arrow in the eye' story soon appeared in other accounts of the battle. Its earliest appearance in literary sources came around the year 1080 when Amatus, a monk of the abbey of Monte Cassino in southern Italy, reported Duke William's victory at Hastings after he had

Stigand at Harold's coronation



'gougued out his (Harold's) eye with an arrow'? Closer to home, Baudri, abbot of Bourgueil, in the poem he wrote for William the Conqueror's daughter before 1102, recounted how the battle came to an end after Harold had been fatally struck by an arrow. Shortly before 1118, when William of Malmesbury had begun his *Deeds of the Kings of the English*, the 'arrow in the eye' story had taken its place among the other legends surrounding the Conquest. It was as much a part of his version of events as Duke William's offer of single combat to Harold or the drunkenness of the Anglo-Saxons on the eve of the battle. In his opinion, the arrow had bored into his brain, presumably through his eye. Slightly later, Henry of Huntingdon repeated the 'arrow in the eye' story, as Harold is struck after Duke William had ordered his archers to fire into the air.

It has been suggested that Baudri of Bourgueil, William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntingdon may have seen the depiction of Harold's death on the Bayeux Tapestry and supplemented the official account provided by William of Poitiers and William of Jumièges by including the 'arrow in the eye' story. By this rationale, Amatus of Monte Cassino may have heard the Tapestry's story of the battle from someone who had viewed it. But this interpretation is flawed because we cannot be certain of the authenticity of the scene in its current form. And this is the crux of the 'arrow in the eye' story. Harold's death, as it can be seen on the Tapestry today, was heavily restored in 1842. It is thought that only the head and shoulders of the figure identified as the king grasping at the arrow is original; the rest of the scene is the work of the restorers. Therefore, we cannot be certain whether Harold is meant to be the figure apparently pulling an arrow out of his face or the figure being knocked over by the knight. It is logical to suppose that the 'arrow in the

eye' figure standing beneath the name 'Harold' is the king, but many historians have preferred to identify Harold as the falling figure, not least because the inscription above is squeezed into the scene so that it ends directly above this figure's head. A case could be made for each. It is not unusual to have a character depicted directly below his name in an inscription; examples can be found for Duke William and Bishop Odo. But it seems significant that the artist carefully placed the inscription in Harold's death scene so that it finished above the falling figure. One way out of this predicament is to assume that both figures represent Harold. As N. P. Brooks and H. E. Walker argued in 1978, the duplication of characters is quite common on the Tapestry, and so the artist had intended to show Harold being hit by an arrow and then getting knocked to the ground. Further evidence to support this was put forward by David Bernstein in 1982. He found a horizontal line of stitch-holes extending from the face of the falling figure, as though an arrow had at some point been there. Remarkable as his discovery was, Bernstein was perhaps too eager to find evidence to support the blinding motif he thought the artist had in mind; the holes are now thought to have been the result of a mistake by a nineteenth century restorer. Given this uncertainty over the content of the scene, the 'arrow in the eye' story is thrown into serious doubt.

We do have some idea of what was originally depicted on the Tapestry. Around 1729, Antoine Benoît made a drawing of it for the French historian Bernard de Montfaucon; Benoît's drawings formed the basis of two different engravings of the Tapestry published by Montfaucon in 1730 and Antoine Lancelot, in 1733. These engravings possess immeasurable value since they permit a glimpse of the Tapestry before the major restoration

work of the nineteenth century. Both clearly show that, in its albeit damaged condition in the early eighteenth century, the 'arrow in the eye' figure was holding something longer than an arrow; in fact, he appears to be brandishing a spear, in imitation of the figure to the left of the standard-bearer. In his excellent survey of the engravings, M. K. Lawson pointed out that neither Montfaucon nor Lancelot, who were both well aware of the 'arrow in the eye' tradition, identified this figure as Harold. It took nearly one hundred years for an antiquarian to recognise the arrow. In Charles Stothard's drawing, published in 1819, the figure is unambiguously clutching an arrow, but Lawson has suggested that Stothard himself may have decided to manipulate the scene to fit the 'arrow in the eye' story, or that the Tapestry had already undergone some repairs by the time he made his drawing.<sup>3</sup>

As it appears now, the figure looks awkward. Frank Barlow noticed that the arrow itself does not appear to enter the figure's head. The grip of his hand is also unusual, and if one takes a closer look, it is clear that the shape of his hand is identical to the hand of the warrior who is standing to the left of the standard-bearer which holds a spear. Furthermore, the alignment of the arrow is inconsistent with the logical trajectory required if it had fallen from the sky. Doubt also surrounds the inscription in this scene. A convincing case has been made by Lawson that the inscription 'Hic Harold rex interfectus est' is not original and that instead it may have read 'Hic Harold rex in terra iactus est' ('Here King Harold has been thrown to the ground'), which would clearly relate to the falling figure.<sup>4</sup> So much uncertainty surrounds this controversial scene that it can no longer be accepted that the Bayeux Tapestry supports the notion that Harold was killed by an 'arrow in the eye'.

### The 'Hacking' of King Harold

If Harold was not killed by an arrow, how did he die? The answer is in fact depicted on the Tapestry in the scene we have been discussing, since the figure underneath 'interfectus est', who has been knocked to the ground by a Norman knight, is Harold. The knight appears to hack at the leg of the prostrate king, an image that brings to mind William of Malmesbury's description of his death, in which a knight is disgraced by William the Conqueror for slashing the king's thigh after he had been hit by an arrow. A more dramatic version of this story can be found in Henry of Huntingdon's history. He refers to a group of twenty knights, who had sworn to each other that they would seize Harold's banner,

who managed to break through the Anglo-Saxon line and kill the blinded Harold with his two brothers. Later still, in the 1170s, Wace, a canon of Bayeux cathedral, incorporated this version of Harold's death into his long account of the battle. Quite early on, in accordance with William of Jumièges' statement, Harold is hit in the eye with an arrow which he pulls out and throws away. Later in the day, as the battle rages, Wace has Duke William himself looking for Harold. As the Normans gain the upper hand they burst through the line; Harold is hit in the neck and then a knight strikes his thigh. Duke William is closely involved in the action, but Wace admits that so many knights had surrounded the dead king he did not know who had struck the fatal blow.

The historical value of Wace's history of the Normans has not always been clear. Distracted by his use of verse and vernacular French, the authenticity of his evidence had been doubted as long ago as the nineteenth century. Incontrovertible proof of its unreliability is the apparently implausible list of those who had fought for the duke at Hastings. But Matthew Bennett and Elisabeth van Houts have done much to improve Wace's reputation in recent years. The controversial list itself has been shown to highlight his conscientious research; rather than being conjured out of thin air, the list is a reflection of the local traditions he had collected in his homeland of Lower Normandy. Wace preserved folklore and local legends, historical sources that had no place in the more scholarly work of William of Poitiers. Rather than being a weakness, his inclusion of these traditions enhances the value of his work. He preserved a popular version of Norman history that had been kept alive at the lowest levels of society through songs and oral tradition and had developed without any interference from the ruling élite. He was very selective over what he included in his work, and he diligently tried to verify popular stories himself. He went, for instance, to the fountain of Barenton in Brittany to find the fairies the local people had seen there; but after finding nothing, he admitted that he had 'sought foolishness' and ridiculed himself for it.<sup>5</sup> He used information from eye-witnesses or their descendants. In his account of the Battle of Hastings, he refers at one point to information provided by those who had been at the battle and 'who saw the dead bodies', and earlier in the poem he recalls what his father had told him about the size of the Norman fleet; 'I remember it well,' Wace said, 'though I was a young lad.'<sup>6</sup> Wace's version of Harold's death alludes to what had actually happened.

The original place of Harold's tomb at Waltham Abbey Church.



Confirmation that Harold had in fact been hacked to death can be found in Bishop Guy of Amiens' *Song of the Battle of Hastings*, which has been dated to 1067. In the poem, Duke William sees Harold from afar and calls three knights to his side; having assembled, they charge at the king and cut him to pieces. Since its rediscovery in 1826 at the Royal Library in Brussels, the poem has attracted a great deal of controversy. The monk Orderic Vitalis had seen it in the early twelfth century, but scholars had reported its disappearance as early as the seventeenth century. Debate continues to rage over the poem's usefulness, with some historians such as R. H. C. Davis, M. K. Lawson, and Jim Bradbury having rejected its account, and others, most notably Frank Barlow, Henry Loyn and Emma Mason, who have been less sceptical. Davis thought that Bishop Guy's version of Harold's death was the most implausible part of

the poem, which confirmed that it was little more than an experiment in literary skills written as long as 74 years after the battle. But Frank Barlow and Elisabeth van Houts have convincingly argued that the poem was written in the aftermath of the battle, and Barlow has even described it as the source of all of the earliest Norman accounts.<sup>7</sup> In fact, it probably contains the purest version of the story. Its appearance at the ducal court may have even prompted the production of an official account, in the form of William of Poitiers' work, in which Harold's death could be left out. Unlike William of Jumièges and William of Poitiers, Bishop Guy was not working under the influence of Duke William's court. His version of events is entirely independent of the constraints imposed upon their work, and so it should not be a surprise that his account is different. But the similarities between it and Wace's account are striking, not least the duke's prominent

The site where King Harold II died. Behind the abbey ruins, the battlefield.



role. They permit only one conclusion: that Harold had been killed in a barbaric manner, possibly at the hands of Duke William himself and, as a result, his death had not been elaborated in the official accounts of the battle.

### Rumour and propaganda

The 'arrow in the eye' story is conspicuous by its absence from the earliest, official accounts of the battle. The Bayeux Tapestry is responsible for popularising this version of Harold's death, but it had not originally included this image. Nevertheless, the story appeared in literary sources as early as 1080 and featured in the histories produced during the twelfth century. And yet by *circa* 1118, the story had been modified to include the 'hacking episode' and by the 1170s it was acceptable for Wace to attribute a part in this disreputable incident to William the Conqueror himself.

Two questions remain: where did the 'arrow in the eye' story originate and why would the 'hacking episode' have been suppressed? Baudri of Bourgueil and the other writers who subscribed to the 'arrow in the eye' story could not have gleaned it from the Tapestry. It is possible that they had deduced the manner of Harold's death from the prominent role of the archers in the battle, whose contribution stands out in William of Poitiers' account, and which must have been well known in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. But it is more likely that the story began life as a rumour before it was circulated by the ducal court as the cause of Harold's death. For Duke William, it was a convenient way for the king to have met his end. If Harold had been killed by a fateful arrow, his death could be directly attributed to the will of God. Duke William and the Normans were exonerated from any blame, and the Anglo-Saxons could be appeased to some extent by the portrayal of their king as a hero, since he could only be killed at a distance by a chance arrow.

But why withhold the 'hacking episode'? Surely it enhanced Duke William's reputation rather than damaged it? The problem for the Normans both before and after the battle was that Harold had been anointed at his coronation. The ceremony of anointing was used by the Church to set apart those in its orders from the secular world. Since biblical times, it had also played an important role in the coronation of kings. The anointing of Harold, therefore, was as good as an official endorsement of his 'regnum' by the Church. Duke William had realised that Harold's coronation had legitimised his accession. Following the ceremony on 6 January, the ducal court embarked upon a diplomatic offensive

to win papal approval for the invasion. An official version of the events leading up to Harold's coronation was concocted in order to justify Norman aggression. This propaganda, which achieved its most eloquent expression in the work of William of Poitiers, set out to blacken Harold's name not only by accusing him of wilfully breaking the oath he had sworn to Duke William, but also by undermining the legitimacy of his accession by vilifying Archbishop Stigand of Canterbury, who had performed the coronation ceremony. But the anointing of Harold presented a particularly thorny problem for the papacy because the Church had already approved his accession. Stigand's nefarious activities were sufficient to obtain papal blessing for the invasion, but uncertainty surrounded Harold's status after William's victory. By the time of the Domesday survey, Harold's reign had been expunged from the historical record; William's reign had begun in principle immediately after the day King Edward was alive and dead. But this solution was arrived at gradually, and there is some charter evidence from the early years of William's reign which suggests that William had initially recognised Harold's legitimacy.<sup>8</sup> Put simply, Duke William did not know how to treat the memory of the dead king.

This uncertainty may have been shared by the papacy. It took four years for Duke William to be officially recognised as king of England. At Winchester, in 1070, the papal legate, Bishop Ermenfrid of Sion, crowned William in a symbolic gesture of the papacy's approval of his coronation. But this must have been a solemn occasion rather than a celebration. Stigand was deposed at the same council and at some point the legate confirmed the penances imposed on those who had taken part in the battle. The penances were to be performed over several years. This climate of spiritual atonement must have prevailed in England for much of William's reign. It was in this environment that the earliest historians of the Conquest were working. Given the penitential mood at court and the ambiguity of Harold's status in the aftermath of the battle, the censorship that prevented William of Poitiers and William of Jumièges from describing how Harold had been hacked to death is entirely plausible. As they worked on their accounts of the battle, the Normans were still trying to work out how to resolve the legal problems created by Harold's legitimacy. The new king did not want to be implicated in Harold's violent end nor could he afford to undermine the legitimacy of his own accession by admitting responsibility for an anointed king's death. Soon after the battle, Bishop

Guy of Amiens celebrated William's role in the slaying of Harold. But his tale was smothered by the semi-official 'arrow in the eye' story, which had appeared by 1080, when Amatus of Monte Cassino recorded the battle in his chronicle. However, the 'hacking episode' was kept alive in the popular consciousness, and different versions of it appeared in the chronicles of William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntingdon. Wace's careful research uncovered what had really happened, as it was remembered in the duchy. Harold was hacked to pieces by a group of knights led by Duke William himself, and the fact that it was successfully suppressed during his lifetime should remind us of the efficacy of Norman propaganda and the precarious political situation in England in the aftermath of William's victory at Hastings.

### Further reading

*The Carmen de Hastingsae Proelio of Guy Bishop of Amiens*, ed. and trans. Frank Barlow (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1999).

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Wace, *The History of the Norman People*, trans. Glyn S. Burgess with notes by Glyn S. Burgess and Elisabeth van Houts (Boydell, Woodbridge, 2004).

### References

- <sup>1</sup> *The Gesta Normannorum Ducum of William of Jumièges, Orderic Vitalis and Robert of Torigni*, ed. and trans. Elisabeth M. C. van Houts, vol. ii (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995), p. 169.
- <sup>2</sup> Amatus of Monte Cassino, *The History of the Normans*, trans. Prescott N. Dunbar, rev. and ed. Graham A. Loud (Boydell, Woodbridge, 2004), p. 46.
- <sup>3</sup> M. K. Lawson, *The Battle of Hastings 1066* (Tempus, Stroud, 2007), pp. 228-29 and pp. 255-60.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229 and pp. 262-64.
- <sup>5</sup> Wace, *The History of the Norman People*, trans. Glyn S. Burgess with notes by Glyn S. Burgess and Elisabeth van Houts (Boydell, Woodbridge, 2004), p. 162.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 182 and 163.
- <sup>7</sup> *The Carmen de Hastingsae Proelio of Guy Bishop of Amiens*, ed. and trans. Frank Barlow (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1999), pp. xc-xci.
- <sup>8</sup> George Garnett, 'Coronation and propaganda: some implications of the Norman claim to the throne of England in 1066', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5<sup>th</sup> series, 36 (1986), pp. 91-116, at pp. 99-100.

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