

Abstract:

This paper analyzes the build-up of the Norman Conquest and the consequences of King Harold of England's death at the Battle of Hastings. Comparing the strengths and weaknesses of both the Anglo-Saxons and Normans under William the Conqueror to determine what should've been the likely result of Hastings it puts into perspective the impact of Harold's demise on the Conquest and history as a whole.

The Norman Conquest and the impact of Harold's death

The Battle of Hastings sparked the end of the Anglo-Saxon era of England with Duke William II's victory over King Harold. The Anglo-Saxon and Norman armies fought in what would be one of the largest single battles in European history up to that point. William's victory over Harold was decisive but by no means guaranteed. William and Harold were both strong generals, and both the Anglo-Saxon and Norman armies had strengths and weaknesses in their positions. Yet when King Harold died in battle, the Anglo-Saxon force broke, leading to William winning the battle and England itself soon after with little conflict. Without such good fortune for the Normans, what would've been the outcome of the conquest is far harder to judge. Had Harold not died, the answer to Hastings and the conquest as a whole would shape up far differently compared to the reality. Assessing the events that set the stage for the battle, the military strength of both sides, and what happened at Hastings itself will judge what would've been the most likely result had Harold lived.

English and Norman situations prior to the invasion

The Duchy of Normandy directly prior to the conquest of England was a strong and secure local power that was in a prime position to launch an overland invasion of England. When William the Conqueror first took charge of the duchy around a young age the duchy was very unstable and attempts on the on the young duke's life were rampant. William persevered through these early struggles, staved off several threats to Norman territorial and government stability, and expanded Norman territory where he could. William won his first major battle at Val-es-Dunes in 1047 against a rival lord, and also defeated a rebellion led by his uncle William of Arques, supported by King Henry I of France in 1053. Further coalitions against William supported by Henry and other enemies were defeated in both 1054 and 1057 by William's firm

opposition.¹ True security would not come to Normandy until 1060 with the deaths of Henry I and Geoffrey Martel, William's most significant enemies, within a few months of each other. It was the fortunate deaths of these two at the time that would be the greatest boon in securing the duchy from future threats during the invasion of England. King Henry was replaced by the child Philip I, whose court signed peace with William shortly after ascending. William would face no great external threat to his rule up to the invasion of England, and would expand and fortify Normandy's borders in conflicts with neighbors such as Anjou, Maine and Brittany.² Further consolidation of William's rule and the expansion of the Norman military during these years of conflict would play a great part in preparing the Norman duchy for what would become the invasion of 1066.³

The Norman invasion of England itself was built up over a long period of positive and negative relations along with William's massing of forces by 1066. Normandy and England had grown increasingly tied together up to William's own birth with the marriage of Ethelred II to the daughter of a Norman duke in 1002. William of Jumieges wrote that William's father Robert planned an invasion of England to support Edward the Confessor's claim to the throne against Cnut in the early 11th century.⁴ Edward, upon assuming the throne, introduced Normans into the aristocracy and church ranks of England, and at one point may have designated Duke William as his heir to the throne based on a distant relation in 1051. The strengthening of William's position in Normandy at the start of the 1060s followed the bolstering of his claim to take the throne of England with the death of Count Walter of Maine, Edward's nephew, as another claimant.

¹ Jim Bradbury, *The Routledge Companion to Medieval Warfare* (London, and New York: Routledge, 2004), 144.

² David Bates, *Normandy before 1066*, (London, and New York: Longman, 1982), 81.

³ *Ibid.*, 85-86.

⁴ David C. Douglas, "William the Conqueror: Duke and King," in *The Norman Conquest: Its Setting and Impact*, by Dorothy Whitelock, David C. Douglas, Charles H. Lemmon and Frank Barlow, 45-76, (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1966), 58.

Harold, at the time the Earl of Wessex, made a famous visit to France in 1064 and swore an oath to support William's claim to the English throne as portrayed by the Bayeux Tapestry.⁵ However, when Harold later seized the throne for himself after King Edward's death, this triggered the long build-up towards a direct Norman intervention in English affairs. William coerced his vassals into supporting an invasion and giving more than their standard obligations to provide for ships in the invasion.⁶ Diplomatically, William was supported by many sides across Europe for an invasion of England with Guilleme de Poitiers chronicle's reporting that the Papacy supported the Norman invasion and showed that possibly in the form of a papal banner that is still a contested issue over the nature of its existence. Poitiers also wrote that William enjoyed the friendship and support of Emperor Henry of the Holy Roman Empire.⁷ Through these relations William built up a powerful coalition of internal and foreign support to seize the throne of England for his own with added legitimacy. This allowed him to work off the past century of Anglo-Norman relations and finally connect Normandy with England irrevocably.

To compare, King Harold and the Anglo-Saxon monarchy also suffered domestic instability solved by strong leadership. Harold's coronation was on January 6th 1066 the day after the death of King Edward the Confessor. Edward himself only nominated Harold as his successor over his relative, Edgar Aetheling, on his deathbed with Harold having a dubious claim to the English throne through his sister. There was considerable opposition to Harold's coronation among those against his claim that would fuel narratives for decades after, with the historian William of Malmesbury writing a half a century later that the people of Northumbria

⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁶ Marc Morris, *The Norman Conquest: The Battle of Hastings and the fall of Anglo-Saxon England*, (New York: Pegasus Books, 2013), 145.

⁷ Sten Körner, *The Battle of Hastings, England, and Europe, 1035-1066*, (Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1964). 218-219.

initially refused to accept Harold as king. The C version of *the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* also notes that there was little quiet in England when Harold took the crown.⁸ While the threat of revolt against Harold's new reign was considerable, Harold worked quickly to neutralize the largest domestic threat. The two strongest vassals of the crown, brothers Morcar and Eadwine, earls of Northumbria and Mercia respectively, were appeased by Harold with prior arrangements. Eadwine and Morcar, weeks before Harold's ascension, had led a rebellion against Harold's brother Tostig. Harold led negotiations with the two that led to Morcar replacing Tostig as earl of Northumbria. By early 1066, Harold also married the Earls' sister Ealdgyth in a political match-up to secure their loyalties further.⁹ Through his decisive leadership Harold could prevent his strongest vassals from turning on him when an invasion of the island was to occur.

The external threat to England was known to Harold who prepared to fight off a foreign threat to the throne. William of Poitiers wrote that Harold had spies in Normandy who forewarned him of an invasion and the general build-up of William's forces would've indicated a coming invasion. Unfortunately for Harold, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* reported a comet came over England upon arriving at Westminster from a trip to York. According to the Chronicle, 'a portent such as men had never seen before was seen in the heavens.'¹⁰ This caused a great deal of fear in England over grave portents coming soon which many interpreted as coming true in the form of William's invasion. A hostile fleet did arrive in England shortly after, but instead of being the expected Norman force, it was a raid led by Harold's exiled brother Tostig. This raid was followed by an invasion of the north led by Norwegian King Harald Hardrada who forged an alliance with Tostig in hopes of conquering England in vein of the King Cnut. Hardrada's army

⁸ Morris, *The Norman Conquest.*, 140-141.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 136-137.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 146.

made good progress initially in defeating Earl's Edwin and Morcar at Fulford dealing great damage to their levies. Harold moved to stop the Norwegian attack after this defeat and fought them decisively at Stamford Bridge near York on September 25th, killing Hardrada and Tostig in a bloody battle. The Norwegian survivors left England after swearing an oath to Harold never to return with the north now being secure from invasion. It was only a few days after Stamford Bridge that William finally made his move and landed an invasion force at Pevensey in southern England.¹¹ Harold rushed south to confront the invading Norman army leading to the battle of Hastings between him and William.

Military Power and Skill in the Conquest

The Anglo-Saxon army at the time of the Conquest was a strong force with a long, successful military history. Going back to the reign of King Alfred during the height of the Viking Age raids on England, Alfred instituted a number of reforms to combat the Norsemen. These reforms included putting some of the army on horseback and the expansion of the English navy.¹² Anglo-Saxon England had suffered its share of defeats up to Hastings but its military had a score of impressive victories including under Cnut who used English forces to conquer Norway in 1026 and Edward the Confessor who from 1052 to 1058 saw the most successful invasion of Wales since Roman times. The Welsh victory was noticeable, as it showed how the English army could sustain a long and detailed campaign without suffering in military ability.¹³ England's army was not invincible, as the continuing threats of Scandinavian and later Norman invasion show. but it was not unprepared for these threats either. The C text of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 165.

¹² M.K. Lawson, *The Battle of Hastings: 1066*, (Stroud, Gloucestershire, and Charleston, South Carolina: Tempus Publishing, 2002), 124-125.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 127

notes that in 1066 Harold ‘gathered greater land and naval forces than had ever been seen before.’¹⁴ This reflected the scale of preparations Harold made against invasions to claim his precarious throne and showed the unusual extent of England’s own military might at the time of the conquest.

Upon arrival at Hastings, The Anglo-Saxon army was weakened and impaired compared to its standard capabilities. Exact numbers for the Anglo-Saxons at Hastings are hard to come due to differing accounts, with primary sources such as one monk sent from Harold to William stating there were 1,200,000 men in the English army as the high end of such guesses.¹⁵ Among modern historians, the numbers range anywhere from 6,000 to 25,000 depending on the source.¹⁶ No matter the exact amount, the losses the Anglo-Saxons had suffered at Fulford and Stamford Bridge no doubt hurt their military capacity. Harold hastened to confront William directly and ordered the mobilization of his southern levies and rushed south with the remainder of his housecarls to blockade the Normans at the Hastings peninsula to cut them off from supplies by the time of winter.¹⁷ Harold in his fast and responsive attempt to cut off the Normans was attempting to replicate his decisive victory at Stamford Bridge and win the war quickly and possibly to prevent the humiliation of William occupying the southern lands that were mostly in Harold’s domain. This led to Harold’s army having only a minimal amount of time to stop in London for supplies and some troops before enacting a fifty-seven mile forced march to Hastings. William of Jumieges, William of Poitiers and Orderic Vitalis all wrote that Harold intended to take William by surprise, possibly even by night attack. This haste had material

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁵ Körner, *The Battle of Hastings*, 268.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 128

¹⁷ Bernard S. Bachrach, “Battle of Hastings” in *Medieval England: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Paul Szarmach, M. Teresa Tavormina and Joel T. Rosenthal, 106-107. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 106.

disadvantages as the troops would likely be fatigued and all the levies might not have arrived with the E version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* stating that Harold had fought William ‘before all the army had come.’¹⁸ This swift movement also deprived the Anglo-Saxon force of many troops beyond the standard axe-wielding levies with no large amount of cavalry troops along with a lackluster number of archers.¹⁹ This would have given the Anglo-Saxons a compositional weakness and many newly-arrived peasant levies would likely be poorly trained and equipped as a result of how fast-paced Harold wanted to respond.²⁰ The composition of his army and how fast he attempted to block William pushed Harold into fighting on defense at Hastings where his infantry army would be at the best advantage given the setbacks he had to endure, not because it was the standard of the Anglo-Saxon army at the time.²¹

The Norman army at Hastings was a more well-rounded force in terms of origin and army composition. The conquest army was a cosmopolitan force consisting of men across modern-day France. Guy of Amiens’ *Carmen* speaks of William addressing men from Francia, Brittany, Maine and Normandy itself before Hastings with Orderic Vitalis included Flemings in the army.²² This reflected the appeal William’s invasion had to many warlike men and his reputation as a good commander and generous lord caused many such men to join in hopes of land and booty. It is hard to know from sources how many non-Normans comprised the army but it is likely that many of William’s men were experienced soldiers who would be more well-equipped than the standard English peasant levy. Excerpts from the Bayeux Tapestry showing

¹⁸ Allen R. Brown, “The Battle of Hastings,” in *Anglo-Norman Warfare*, ed. Matthew Strickland, 161-181 and 273-277. (Woodbridge, Suffolk, and Rochester, New York: The Boydell Press, 1992), 168.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 171.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 173.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 171.

²² Lawson, *The Battle of Hastings*, 161.

Norman archers not wearing armor and possibly much of the infantry do show this did not apply to the army as a whole. The Norman duchy did have many mailed knights among its vassals that William had access to.²³ It is impossible to know how much mailed knights proportionally made up the Norman army even with their prominent role in the Bayeux Tapestry. But it is certain that the Normans had far more archers than the Anglo-Saxons at Hastings along with their mounted knights.²⁴ The mounted knights would give the Normans the ability to have mobile assaults at Hastings against their English opponents as a source of support to generally well-armed infantry.

William and Harold were skilled commanders of their time but both lacked experience for a single decisive large-scale battle. The battle of Hastings was a large-scale battle that neither of the two were greatly familiar with due to the rarity of such battles at the time. Prior to Hastings William had never engaged his army in a set battle against a large enemy force and instead when on the offense sowed terror in enemy lands by seizing and destroying important infrastructure whether they be vineyards or castles.²⁵ Harold himself had a history of fighting rebels to the English throne prior to becoming king and Stamford Bridge provided some context of a larger battle yet his assumption of William's approach to battle may have influenced how he approached Hastings. During 1064 William launched a campaign against Brittany that was accompanied by Harold and the 'cautiously conducted' war of attrition as William of Poitiers describes it may have influenced how Harold judged William's maneuvers.²⁶ William was not confined to that style of warfare alone but the Brittany campaign was a standard campaign that resembled many under the Duke. Harold's decision to confront William and face him as he did

²³ *Ibid.*, 176.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 178.

²⁵ John Gillingham, "William the Bastard at War," in *The Battle of Hastings: Sources and Interpretations*, ed. Stephen Morillo, 95-112. (Woodbridge, Suffolk, and Rochester, New York: The Boydell Press, 1996), 102.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

Hardrada may seem rash but given the constraints of holding an army up in wartime and the thought that William would attack anywhere if he stayed solely on the defensive makes this decision understandable in context.²⁷ Given the history of both commanders Hastings was a relatively new encounter for both which showed in how they acted in the battle itself.

Hastings: What happened and what could've been

Harold and William met on the field near Hastings in a position initially favorable to Harold. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* D section writes that at first 'William came upon him [Harold] unexpectedly, before his army was set in order.' William's scouts had prevented Harold from sneaking up on the Normans entirely but William could not ambush Harold either so both sides rushed to arms.²⁸ After William and Harold committed their pre-battle speeches to their armies, the Anglo-Saxons seized a nearby hilltop and after abandoning what horses they had formed a in the 'shield-wall' formation with Harold at the center of the thick line. William's force stood at the foot of the hill in three lines. The first consisting of foot soldiers armed with arrows and crossbows, the second consisted of mailed men-at-arms and the third was the cavalry.²⁹ After the trumpets were sounded on both sides the Norman infantry advanced with support of archers that poured arrows on the Anglo-Saxons forces. Despite killing many Englishmen the shield-wall held and the Norman infantry floundered as the cavalry took their place.³⁰ The steep slopes on the ridge of the hill and south of Harold's own position along with the roughness of the uncultivated ground according to the *Camden* made the area unsuitable for cavalry. According to William of Poitiers 'the English weapons easily penetrated shields and

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 110.

²⁸ Lawson, *The Battle of Hastings*, 176.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 179.

³⁰ Morris, *The Norman Conquest*, 180.

other protections' which allowed the Anglo-Saxons to fend off the cavalrymen.³¹ The initial assaults failure led to the Bretons and other auxiliaries on the Norman left to fall back which triggered other movements spurred by rumor that William was killed already. Harold had chosen a position that made it extremely hard to outflank him by cavalry showing a strong adaptability to William's tactics which put the early parts of the battle in his favor.³²

The tide of the battle was against the Normans but the leadership of William and the Norman's military discipline allowed them to persevere until Harold's death sold victory to the Normans. The rumor that William was dead was quickly quashed by William himself running towards those leaving and lifted his helmet revealing himself telling them he was alive.³³ The *Carmen* tells that this was a planned feint to lure the Anglo-Saxons out of the shield-wall that went wrong while William of Poitiers says it was a true rout. After this the knights committed another assault that was unsuccessful leading to what Poitiers described as an actual feigned flight afterwards. Whether there was one flight or two and if they were planned or not makes little difference as the result was that substantial numbers of Anglo-Saxons abandoned the shield-wall to chase the retreating Normans down and were cut down and compromised the integrity of the shield-wall. The breaking of the shield-wall and the continued Norman ranged assault on the Anglo-Saxons inflicted severe damage on their forces and position.³⁴ By the time nightfall was arriving to the battle news spread throughout the Anglo-Saxons that Harold had died as possibly depicted by the Bayeux Tapestry through an arrow to the eye. The Anglo-Saxons broke at this news afterward and retreated disorderly. The end result was a great amount of death as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle D* stated there were severe casualties for both Normans

³¹ *Ibid.*, 181.

³² Lawson, *The Battle of Hastings*, 192.

³³ Brown, "The Battle of Hasting," 174.

³⁴ Morris, *The Norman Conquest*, 183.

and Anglo-Saxons but that ‘the French *remained masters of the field*.’³⁵ William had persevered and rallied his forces and Harold’s death was just what William needed to ensure total victory of not just the battle but the war itself.

Thesis and Conclusion

If Harold had not died, then it is likely that no matter if he won the battle or lost it he would’ve won the war overall. Harold and a substantial portion of Saxon leadership including Harold’s brothers Earl Gyrrh and Leofwine died at the battle. Even with the massive losses in the Anglo-Saxon upper class William still received no direct surrender from the remaining upper class until a month after Hastings after making threatening moves towards London. The attempt of remaining nobles to get Edgar Aetheling on the throne was no salve to the defeated English yet William still feared a great resistance led by the potential claimant reportedly.³⁶ If Harold were to have not been killed at Hastings the potential for stiffer Anglo-Saxon resistance to William is easy to imagine. A victory at Hastings is easy to imagine if the tables were turned and William was killed in one of the bloody charges while Harold remained safe or if the parts of the Anglo-Saxon line held against the feint flight. Or any number scenarios where the strong Anglo-Saxon infantry barely edges out against the combined Norman infantry and cavalry under Harold when he would’ve been dead in our world. That would get the hard fought yet decisive victory Harold had achieved against Hardrada earlier that was likely plausible to Harold himself. Even if Harold could not win at Hastings if he could survive and retreat to raise new forces and rally his vassals William would have faced a far longer and more taxing campaign.³⁷

³⁵ Sten Körner, *The Battle of Hastings*, 267.

³⁶ Morris, *The Norman Conquest*, 194-195.

³⁷ Stephen Morillo, “Hastings: An Unusual Battle,” in *The Haskins Society Journal*, v. 2, ed. by Robert B. Pattinson, 95-103. (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1990), 103.

William's victory in the war would be incredibly precarious given he does not achieve the decisive victory he aimed for against the Anglo-Saxon monarchy. William's forces were likely fighting for loot and plunder as much as they served William's own interest. A spectacular failure of a major battle at the start of the campaign could kick the legs out from under the Norman army. Any support William had achieved from forces such as the Papacy or Flanders would likely be abandoned after a period if the writing's on the wall of his campaign. William's best hope in the case of an indecisive victory or at worst defeat at Hastings would be a continuation of his continental warfare, ravaging and seizing important points in the land in order to force a peace. If Harold simply waited William out at that point or stops his attacks with an Anglo-Saxon army that would be able to resupply and restock on men far easier than William's maritime supply routes would be able to. The Anglo-Saxon navy could also in such a scenario completely cut off the Normans from the mainland as English naval superiority was a concern of some of William's vassals prior to the invasion.³⁸ William's enemies on the mainland including rival lords or his own vassals may take advantage of this to take pieces of Normandy for themselves further incentivizing a possible retreat from England in this scenario. In any world where Harold lives at Hastings the likelihood of William winning the war even if he wins the battle becomes incredibly unlikely.

It can be said that Hastings and its aftermath was decided mainly on the fates of the two men leading either side. The Anglo-Saxon and Norman leaders ruled strongly through tumultuous times and led armies hardened by war after years of conflicts. The experiences and conditions William and Harold endured prior to and during Hastings influenced their decisions that would ultimately decide the fate of Hastings. Strong military discipline and leadership

³⁸ Morris, *The Norman Conquest*, 143.

pushed events to happen the way they did as the initial tide of the battle shifted from Anglo-Saxon to Norman edge. The sheer fortune, or misfortune, of Harold dying at the right time for William, and the wrong time for the Anglo-Saxons, finally pushed what was a lead for William into the only victory he needed to secure his conquest of England. Without Harold's death, even a victory at Hastings for William would not lead into a scenario nearly as favorable to him for the remaining war, no matter what occurred. To summarize, while the events of Hastings show that William 'should've' won the battle, most likely the war itself would almost certainly end in Harold's favor had he not died on the field of battle that day.

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