

1066: *The Norman Conquest of England*

WILLIAM OF MALMESBURY

The year 1066 stands out as one of the most recognizable dates in world history. When the English king, Edward the Confessor, died childless on January 5, 1066, Harold Godwinson, a prominent English noble, was accepted by his fellow barons as king. Although Edward had settled on Harold as his successor, he had earlier negotiated with his cousin, William the Bastard, Duke of Normandy. William, who had survived constant treachery and danger since boyhood, had developed into a ruthlessly efficient and aggressive warrior who now looked to English lands as his birthright.

On September 27, 1066, William embarked his army of seven thousand cavalry and infantry and set sail from the shores of Normandy across the English Channel and landed on the southeast coast near the town of Hastings. Harold Godwinson was prepared to meet him but had been deflected by a Norwegian attack in northern England led by King Harald Hardraade. After defeating the Norwegians at the Battle of Stamford Bridge (near York) on September 25, Harold quickly marched his army to the south where William had already been able to consolidate his landing force. Harold's tired and physically depleted force nevertheless fought bravely at the Battle of Hastings on October 14, 1066, but to no avail. He took an arrow through the eye in the midst of the battle, and the English force fell apart. On Christmas Day, 1066, William the Conqueror was formally crowned king of England, and the Normans began the long-term consolidation of the English countryside. The

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merging of Anglo-Saxon and Norman cultures remained difficult for generations, but William's leadership set the precedent for strong royal authority and efficient administration. William of Malmesbury provides the following account of one of the most fateful battles in military history.

The courageous leaders mutually prepared for battle, each according to his national custom. The English, as we have heard, passed the night without sleep, in drinking and singing, and in the morning proceeded without delay against the enemy. All on foot, armed with battle-axes, and covering themselves in front by the juncture of their shields, they formed an impenetrable body which would assuredly have secured their safety that day had not the Normans, by a feigned flight, induced them to open their ranks, which till that time, according to their custom, had been closely compacted. King Harold himself, on foot, stood with his brothers near the standard in order that, so long as all shared equal danger, none could think of retreating.

On the other hand, the Normans passed the whole night in confessing their sins, and received the communion of the Lord's body in the morning. Their infantry, with bows and arrows, formed the vanguard, while their cavalry, divided into wings, was placed in the rear. The duke, with serene countenance, declaring aloud that God would favor his as being the righteous side, called for his arms. . . . Then starting the Song of Roland, in order that the warlike example of that hero might stimulate the soldiers, and calling on God for assistance, the battle commenced on both sides, and was fought with great ardor, neither side giving ground during the greater part of the day. . . . This alternating victory, first of one side and then of the other, continued so long as Harold lived to check the retreat; but when he fell, his brain pierced by an arrow, the flight of the English ceased not until night.

In the battle both leaders distinguished themselves by their bravery. Harold, not

content with the functions of a general and with exhorting others, eagerly assumed himself the duties of a common soldier. He was constantly striking down the enemy at close quarters, so that no one could approach him with impunity, for straightway both horse and rider would be felled by a single blow. So it was at long range, as I have said, that the enemy's deadly arrow brought him to his death.

William, too, was equally ready to encourage his soldiers by his voice and by his presence, and to be the first to rush forward to attack the thickest of the foe. He was everywhere fierce and furious; he lost three choice horses, which were that day killed under him. The dauntless spirit and vigor of the intrepid general, however, still held out. Though often called back by the kind remonstrance of his bodyguard, he still persisted until approaching night crowned him with complete victory. And no doubt the hand of God so protected him that the enemy should draw no blood from his person, though they aimed so many javelins at him. . . . This was a fatal day to England, and melancholy havoc was wrought in our dear country during the change of its lords.

CONSIDER THIS:

- Do you perceive any bias in William of Malmesbury's account of the Battle of Hastings? How did he describe the conduct of the English force the night before the battle? Compare this to his description of the Norman troops. When and where do you think William of Malmesbury wrote his history? Is truth often a casualty of victory? What is the job of an historian?

THEME: THE VARIETIES OF TRUTH

THE ARTISTIC VISION

*The Bayeux Tapestry**The Norman Conquest and the Sisters of Bayeux*

The story of the Norman conquest of England was stitched into a tapestry for posterity by an order of nuns in Bayeux, a small town near the coast of Normandy. The tapestry was probably commissioned by Odo of Bayeux, the half brother of William the Conqueror, and it is remarkable as a work of art. But the tapestry also had a larger purpose. Through more than seventy scenes covering 231 feet in length, the tapestry argues William's legitimate claim to the English throne and also demonstrates his courage and military efficiency that resulted in his glorious victory over Harold Godwinson. In this scene, Harold is struck down during the Battle of Hastings by a blow that sealed his fate and that of England.

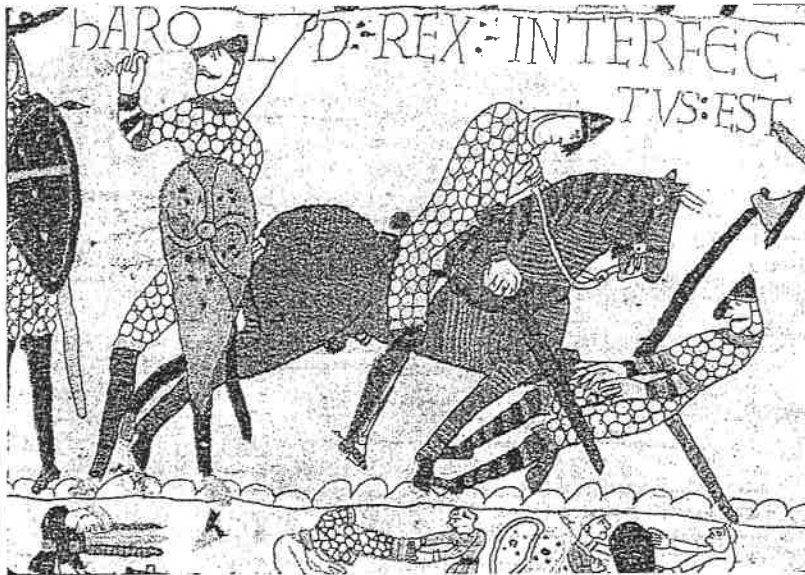


FIGURE 8.5 The death of the Anglo-Saxon king Harold during the Battle of Hastings in 1066. This scene from the Bayeux Tapestry testifies to the brutal realities of medieval warfare. The Norman invader, William the Bastard, with his victory at Hastings became William I, King of England.

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CONSIDER THIS:

- To what extent is this a valuable historical source in addition to a remarkable work of art? Or is it most valuable as a work of propaganda? Do the victors always write the history?

THE BROADER PERSPECTIVE:

- Having twice barely escaped destruction during the French Revolution of 1789 to 1798, the Bayeux Tapestry was exhibited in Paris in 1803–1804 during Napoleon's accession as French emperor. Such a work of art that demonstrated a heritage of French power and

victory would naturally be appealing to a conqueror like Napoleon interested in promoting national unity. The tapestry today remains in the city of Bayeux near the coast of Normandy and has been removed only twice—once during the Franco-German war of 1871 and again during World War II from its beginning in September 1939 to the surrender of Germany in the spring of 1945. Although Paris fell to Germany in both wars, the French protected the Bayeux Tapestry as an important symbol of their national heritage and remembrance of the conquest of England by William of Normandy nearly a thousand years before.