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Wielding his wooden baculus—normally a symbol of authority—as a weapon, Bishop Odo leads the knights of his half brother, William the Bastard (Duke of Normandy), in an effort to break through the Saxon phalanx on Senlac Hill in The Battle of Hastings, 1066, by Tom Lovell.



HIGH GROUND AT STAKE

Occupying the ridgetop was Harold, his shield wall surely invincible. Attacking up the slope was William. The outcome would be truly historic. . . .

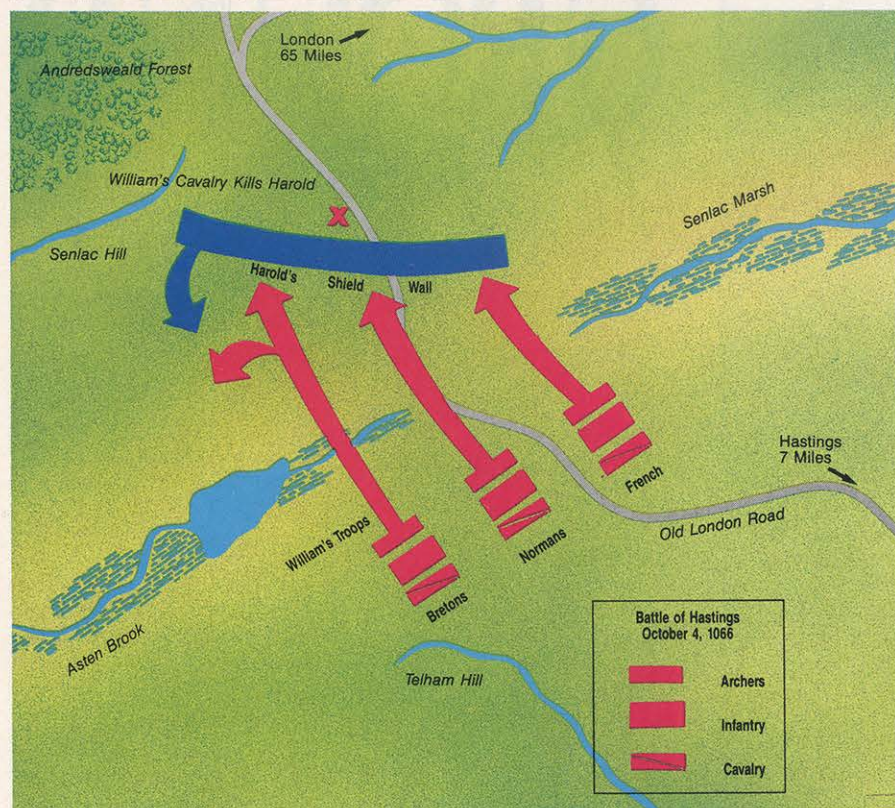
By Don Hollway

In the city of York the celebration had gone on for days. Revelers thronged the streets, and the sound of rejoicing went on late into the autumn nights—and nowhere with more gladness than in the great hall where sat the king.

For Harold Godwinson it was the supreme moment. Only the previous week the city had been conquered by Norwegian invaders whose king, Harald Hardrada, contested Harold's right to rule. But in the greatest battle England had ever seen, Harold's Anglo-Saxon army then had surprised and slaughtered the Norsemen at Stamford Bridge. Only Duke William of Normandy now remained to challenge Harold. And, with no Norman invasion apparently threatening, Harold seemed at last undisputed king.

But then came the rude shock the evening of October 1, 1066—a weary rider brought news that Duke William had invaded after all! His army was already laying waste the countryside around Hastings, to the south. Worse, Harold's already once-mailed troops were three times farther than William's from London. The king sent messengers ahead to gather reinforcements and at dawn led his exhausted men south to defend his crown for a second time in just days.

The stage for this particular confrontation, however, had been set long before. The drama of disputed succession went back to when the line of Anglo-Saxon kings descending from Alfred the Great had culminated in Edward, called the Confessor. But Edward, half-Norman and raised in Normandy, was not well liked by the native aristocracy led by his father-



TOP: In this section of the Bayeux Tapestry, Harold Godwinson occupies a disputed throne. ABOVE: William's initial tactics at Hastings were conventional: soften up the Saxon formation with missiles, break it up with infantry and complete the rout with cavalry. The failure of that strategy compelled him to use more imagination.

in-law, Godwin Earl of Wessex. In 1051 the earl and his sons staged an unsuccessful revolt, and Edward exiled them. During this high point of Norman influence at the Anglo-Saxon court, young Duke William paid a visit to London.

The man granted an audience with King Edward had come a long way from an illegitimate birth in perennially embattled Normandy, where the warlords habitually feuded with each other and with every duke who tried to unite them. The title had passed to William at the age of 7 or 8, even though he was Robert I's illegitimate son by the daughter of a local tanner. Sensitive about his birth, William reacted in his siege of Alençon when its people sought to protect their walls from Norman fire with vinegar-soaked animal skins. William took the skins as a personal insult. After he overcame the town by night assault, he had the citizens' hands and feet cut off.

by circumstances into conflicting paths, both he and Harold laid plans for the invasion that must surely follow.

Many of the Norman nobles were unconvinced an invasion could be mounted. After all, no one had conquered England since the Romans. But William used promises of land and loot to rally his reluctant barons and to recruit mercenaries from all over Europe. He also secured the blessing of the pope, a development giving his cause credibility among European powers.

Harold at first had little trouble organizing the defense of England. It seemed God was on his side. "At that time," says the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, "throughout all England, a portent such as men had never seen before was seen in the heavens." A comet, which men later named Halley's, appeared in the sky in mid-April of that year. With such a "long-haired

Aside from such cruelty, he was, at 23, a natural leader. Distantly related to Edward, he was Norman and he felt secure enough at home to aspire to rule England. To the childless king, he could have seemed a natural heir to the English crown, and though no official agreement was made, William went home with the impression it would be his.

But the Anglo-Saxon earls soon returned to power and forced Edward to banish the Normans. Godwin died soon after, and his son Harold inherited his position as Earl of Wessex, the power behind Edward's throne. Good-natured and likable, Harold proved an able diplomat and commander, fighting so skillfully in Wales that the Welsh delivered their king's head as a peace offering. As virtual ruler of England he came to be known as *Dux Anglorum*, Duke of the English, and *Dei Gratia Dux*, Duke by the Grace of God, and even *Subregulus*, Underking.

By 1064, Duke William was well aware of the threat the earl posed to his ambition. When Harold came to France on a diplomatic mission and was taken prisoner by a neighboring count, William secured his release. The two men seemed to take an instant liking to each other. Harold joined William on a raid into Brittany; the duke knighted him in the Norman fashion. This in itself implied the earl owed William allegiance—it seems, furthermore, that Harold swore an oath of fealty on the bones of a saint. If he ever had any royal aspirations, the contention long has been, he relinquished them that summer in Normandy.

On the other side of the Channel, meanwhile, Edward suffered an apparent stroke on Christmas Eve 1065, reviving only long enough to designate Harold Godwinson his heir. Whether he really reneged on an oath of fealty to William will probably never be clear. Events moved fast—the assembled English nobles confirmed Edward's decision. Edward was buried, and Harold was crowned the very next day.

Duke William, as leader of an always warring realm, could hardly ignore such an affront to his honor. And so, locked

star" as a sign of change and misfortune, few men could doubt Harold's warnings.

The call to arms drew men from all over southern England. Each earl brought along his personal retinue of bodyguards, or housecarls. These professional soldiers, well equipped with knee-length hauberks of chain mail and yard-long, kite-shaped shields, were expert with all weapons, especially the great, two-handed Viking battle-ax and the short, single-edged blade called the seax (or "sax"). They had fought with Harold in Wales and formed the hard core of his army.

The rank and file came from the peasant levy called the fyrd, vast in number but inexperienced and poorly armed. Worst of all, their tour of duty was limited to about two months, cut short by the need to return to their farms in time for the harvest.

So Harold found his army, perhaps the most powerful in Europe at that time, dwindling in strength as the summer came and went, with no sign of the expected Norman invasion. In fact the Normans, who were no sailors, were awaiting a favorable wind to carry them to England. The Norwegians attacked first, drawing the English north and leaving the southern coastline undefended. As a result, the Normans landed unopposed at Pevensey on September 28.

Harold brought his battered force back from Stamford Bridge on October 6. While his men regrouped in London, the king visited the shrine of the Holy Cross at Waltham, where a miraculous stone crucifix of unknown origin supposedly stood.

Historians and strategists have since faulted Harold for not waiting longer in London to rebuild his forces. Possibly the enemy army was simply larger than he expected, or the victory in York made him overconfident, but more likely Harold simply wanted to pin the Normans down. Hastings, at the foot of the north road to London, stood on a peninsula between the tidal River Brede and the harbor of Bulverhythe. If Harold's army could block any Norman advance overland, and his fleet stop any retreat or resupply, winter would win the war for Harold.

The site on which he chose to do battle could not have been better suited for his purposes. The only road out of the peninsula was straddled by a crossridge, flanked by ravines impassable by cavalry. Behind the ridge rose the forest of Andredsweald; at its foot lay a marshy valley that the Anglo-Saxons in their Germanic tongue called *Santlache*, "sand lake." The French later corrupted this name, as they did with most of the Anglo-Saxon language, to *Sanguelac*, "lake of blood." Today the site is known as Senlac.

On the evening of Friday, October 13, after a hasty, 60-mile march from London, Harold's army took command of the ridge. His men, it is alleged, spent the night drinking and singing bawdy songs. More likely they were exhausted. And in their camp some miles away, the Normans used the time, if their own chroniclers are to be believed, in prayer. For his part, William, unprepared for a long campaign in enemy country, could be thankful Harold had offered battle so soon.

Early on the sunny Saturday morning following, the two armies, each more than 7,000 strong, faced one another across the valley of Senlac. Along the crest of the ridge stood the Anglo-Saxons, arrayed behind a wall of overlapping shields 600 yards across and bristling with spears. The housecarls, prepared for the most severe punishment, manned the front line, with fyrdmen six deep behind them. Harold's brothers, the Earls Gyrth and Leofwine, probably commanded the flanks. Harold himself stood in the midst of his host, beneath the dragon standard of Anglo-Saxon kings and his personal banner, gem-encrusted and emblazoned with a fighting man.

William and his host had to rise early and march six miles to confront their foe. Now, seeing the flags, Duke William swore that if he were victorious he would build an abbey where they stood.



Harold Godwinson routs an invading army jointly led by his rebel half brother, Tostig, and King Harald Hardrada of Norway at Stamford Bridge on September 25, 1066.

The Normans were deployed into three divisions, each with archers, infantry and cavalry—and all in the valley. On the left, the mercenaries of Brittany, Maine and Anjou followed the Breton Count Alan Fergant. On the right, Count Eustace of Boulogne commanded the French and Flemish. William's Normans formed the center, led by his own half brother Bishop Odo, who later commissioned the famous Bayeux Tapestry depicting the battle. The duke set up his command post across the valley, beneath the papal banner.

William at first donned his mail hauberk backward, seemingly an evil omen. But the duke just laughed as he turned it around. "My dukedom shall be turned into a kingdom," he said.

Before the battle commenced, a Norman minstrel by the name of Taillefer begged William's permission to strike the first blow. As the two armies watched, he then cantered his horse up the hill to the shield wall, singing and tossing his weapons in the air. So dumbfounded were the Anglo-Saxons by this display that he managed to kill at least two of them before being himself overwhelmed.

It was about 9 a.m. "The terrible sound of trumpets on both sides," wrote Duke William's chaplain, William of Poitiers, "signalled the beginning of the battle."

The duke's strategy, if unimaginative, was classic: soften up the enemy with artillery, send in the infantry to break the line, then turn the cavalry loose on the scattered survivors.

Line abreast, the Norman archers trudged up the slope. The Bayeux Tapestry shows them, some well equipped, even armored, but carrying short, short-range bows. At 50 paces they formed up, drew and let fly, shooting up the incline. The arrows clattered harmlessly on the wall of overlapping shields. But they went unanswered by the Anglo-Saxons, few of whom knew how to handle a bow. In England, hunting was



In this inaccurate Victorian-era rendering, Harold's housecarls throw back the first Norman onslaught. The Saxons' most effective weapon was the long-handled Viking ax.

a privilege of the rich. The housecarls could only stand and take it while the Normans feathered their shields with volley after volley.

Though the English line remained largely untouched, William sent forward his infantry. The mailed foot soldiers advanced past the archers, but before they could come to grips with the English, it was their turn to be showered—with lances and javelins, throwing axes and even, from the poorer ranks, stones tied to sticks. Then, with each side calling on God's help and shouting insults in a language the other did not understand, the two lines smashed together. Blood spattered the knee-high grass, and the crash of weapons echoed across the valley, soon to be drowned out by the cries of wounded men.

In this contest of infantry the housecarls proved superior. Before his footmen gave way, however, William ordered his cavalry to their aid. In a wave the knights charged up the slope, pitched their javelins ahead of them, and rushed at the shield wall.

Chivalric tradition had not yet taken root in England. The men of the fyrd preferred to fight in the old-fashioned Viking way—on foot, man to man. But if the Anglo-Saxons were unused to fighting cavalry, the Norman knights were unprepared for the Viking ax, with which an experienced man could behead a horse or split a mounted knight to the saddle.

Now, the shield wall's hedge of spears held off the Normans' trained chargers while the housecarls stepped clear for room to swing their murderous axes. The screams of dismembered war horses added to the din.

With the full strength of both sides engaged, the slaughter went on until after noon. The battle at that point began to go against the Normans. The Breton division fell back first, the horsemen reining their animals about and galloping back down the hill, through

their own infantry and archers, who then joined the flight, too.

Whether this retreat was real or not remains debatable. Normans had used the technique of feigned retreat before, in France and Sicily, and may in fact have picked it up from the Bretons. However, it is generally thought that this first flight at Hastings was genuine, in no small part because the Bretons fled straight down into the Senlac marsh.

The men of the English right wing saw the knights below struggling with their mired horses, and to the left the exposed flank of the Norman army. The raw recruits in the fyrd could not resist the opportunity. Dropping their spears, drawing their seaxes, they plunged down the hill to the attack.

Outflanked, the Normans in the center panicked and fell back, and then the French. In the confusion a rumor went through the army that Duke William had been killed!

Duke William, in fact, was still at his command post on Telham Hill. Seeing his attack collapse, he mounted his horse and spurred down into the melee. On the Bayeux Tapestry he's seen waving a wooden club called a *baculus*—capable of breaking bones through armor and an authority symbol left over from pagan days—and raising his one-piece conical helmet to show his face: "Look at me well! I am still alive and by the grace of God I will yet prove victor!"

Under his curses and threats, the Norman right and center steadied, for unlike the left wing they had not been pursued. Most of the Anglo-Saxons still held the ridge; only those on the left had disobeyed their king's orders and deserted the defensive position.

COMBINATION OF CIRCUMSTANCES

Not one, but two earlier confrontations had a sapping effect upon Anglo-Saxon King Harold's prospects for meeting the invasion of Normandy's Duke William in 1066. Best known was the Norse incursion, stopped at Stamford Bridge just days before the Normans landed at Pevensey.

But before that, there also was the putative "invasion" mounted by Harold's half brother, Tostig Godwinson, recently deposed from his duke's rule over Northumbria. He had been across the Channel, had visited with William, and in May of 1066 returned to his estates on the Isle of Wight with 60 ships, then began coastal raiding in Sussex and Kent, at Sandwich and on the Humber.

Defeated in battle with peasant fighters, the fyrds, of the north, his "fleet" reduced to 12 vessels, he then had to flee to sanctuary in Scotland.

All that activity did not significantly deplete Harold's fighting forces. What was significant, though, was his sus-

picion that Tostig was the vanguard of William's long-expected invasion. As a result, Harold had his ground and sea forces on full alert for fruitless weeks. At the end of that time, supplies were running out, and many of his men were due to return home—their terms of service were expiring.

In sum, Harold disbanded his coastal fleet and his fyrd forces just as Norwegian King Harald Sigurdsson struck in the north, accompanied by Tostig.

The last of the great Viking monarchs, Harald—also known as Hardraada ("Hard Ruler")—had fought all over the world, including a stint as commander of the elite Varangian Guard of the Byzantine Empire. His loose claim to the crown was supported by Tostig. Also related by marriage to Duke William, Tostig had received little sympathy from either kinsman when exiled by King Edward for tyrannizing his earldom of Northumbria.

But now, encouraged by Tostig, Hardraada had assembled a fleet of 300

Perhaps that was the fatal mistake by inexperienced troops. Or perhaps the mistake was that the rest of the English army did not support them. Certainly the Normans had been thrown into confusion—at that moment a concerted charge downhill might have upended horses and spilled knights to the ground, where the knife-wielding fyrdmen could finish them off.

But no order came to attack. Either Harold did not realize his opportunity, or perhaps, as he fought on foot in the middle of a huge army, his order was lost.

Instead of the Norman left, it now was the English right that was exposed. William saw his chance and sent his horsemen charging up across the slope and into the gap. The attacking fyrdmen found not their own men, but enemy knights behind them. Surrounded, some managed to make a stand on a little hillock—which still rises from the valley—but the swirling hordes of knights cut them down.

Both sides now paused to regroup. Each man checked himself for wounds gone unnoticed in the heat of battle, counted friends lost and those still alive, wiped the gore from notched weapons, or perhaps washed down a bit of food while he had the chance. For no one reckoned the battle over yet; despite the carnage, nothing had changed. Duke William had nothing to lose by a second assault.

It began about midafternoon, but the battle now was between housecarls and cavalry. Again the crest of the ridge became a whirling meat grinder of slashing blades. This time it was the Norman right that "broke," a retreat that almost certainly was faked. The English left wing dutifully pursued. Duke William, once again favored with good luck, immedi-

ately sent his knights around again to cut off and annihilate the unwary Anglo-Saxons.

Now dead Normans littered the top of the ridge, and dead English the slope. Probably 1,000 Anglo-Saxons had been killed in each of the two or possibly three abortive counterattacks, including both of Harold's brothers. Before Gyrrh died, he managed to put a spear into William's horse, one of several killed under the duke that day. The duke, apparently thinking Gyrrh was Harold, shouted, "Take the crown you have earned from us!" and struck him down.

But the Norman infantry had been cut to pieces, and the cavalry decimated, all for nothing. The English yet held the ridge, those in the rear ranks moving forward to fill the gaps in the line. The battle would become one of attrition.

In the valley, Duke William faced the prospect of defeat. It seemed he could throw his knights against the housecarls all day, but unless he carried the fight to the ill-prepared fyrdmen sheltering behind the mounted English, the day would be lost. In the end he went back to his original plan, ordering his archers to attack again. But this time he commanded them to fire their arrows, not into the shield wall, but over it, in a high arc and down onto the heads of the Anglo-Saxons.

For the first time the mass of men behind the shield wall felt the full fury of the arrow barrage. There was no cover; the men were packed so tightly that even the dead could not fall. Only a minority wore armor or carried shields; no helmets protected their heads from the descending clouds of shafts. Even the housecarls had to raise their shields for protection, an action that then exposed them to direct frontal fire. Their line shortened, and as it did, the two ends pulled away from the ravines protecting the flanks. For the first time, the Normans found it possible to go around the shield wall.



Fyrdmen who left the Saxon wall of shields to pursue Duke William's retreating cavalry find themselves undone by a ruse, as the Normans turn on them.

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After eight hours of fighting, Harold Godwinson falls victim to one of the arrows fired in a high arc over the Saxon shield wall by William's archers. It took another four blows to finish the Saxon king, although he was probably dead after the second one.

And now William ordered forward one last assault. Up the hill went the Norman knights, many of them by now fighting on foot. They waded forward through grass blood-soaked and tangled with severed limbs, coming to grips with the housecarls while still-mounted Normans swept around and behind the Anglo-Saxons.

For some time, though, the issue remained in doubt. The English line bent back on itself, round the banners of royalty and the king. Duke William, fighting his way around the English right, spotted Harold as the king stood chopping down Norman knights. The duke began to work toward him.

With his defenses crumbling around him, Harold Godwinson awaited the inevitable. At about 4 o'clock, perhaps sensing that his moment—and England's—had come, he turned his face heavenward, only to receive an arrow in the eye.

Harold, face covered in blood, managed to pull out the shaft and hurl it aside, but could not continue the fight. And at that moment four Norman knights—some sources say William was one of them—finally burst through the defenders and set upon the wounded king. The first drove a spear into his chest; a sword blow from the second nearly decapitated him and drove him to the ground. He was probably already dead when the third and fourth delivered their blows.

With the king slain, the Anglo-Saxon resistance collapsed, though many of the housecarls probably fought, as was their way, to the death around the body of their commander. The survivors fled into the woods behind the ridge—even so, they still managed to trap and slaughter some of the pursuing knights in a ravine later named by the French the *Malfosse*, or "Evil Ditch."

Harold's body, stripped of its armor and thrown on a heap with the other Anglo-Saxon dead, was so mutilated as to be barely recognizable. Rejecting offers of ransom for the corpse, Duke William had it wrapped in purple and taken for burial on the shore at Hastings.

Neither was William, crowned king of England that Christmas at Westminster, to have an easy time defending his new empire. Most historians regard the Norman rule in England as beneficial in the long term, but in those early years, few Anglo-Saxons would have agreed. William ruthlessly crushed all opposition, replacing the native nobility with his own, dividing up the country among them and studding it with Norman castles. Still, rebellions continued for half a decade. Viking raids, encroachments by the French, and revolts led by his own son also kept William's armies busy. In 1087 he died of a riding accident while at war in France.

At its greatest extent the empire he founded reached from Scotland to the Pyrenees. More important to history, though, England, previously considered part of Scandinavia, had been brought into the European fold. Within a few hundred years Normandy itself again fell under French sway, but by that time the Normans had themselves become Anglicized. The dynasty of William, born the Bastard but called by history the Conqueror, lasted for more than three centuries, but his legacy remains to the present day. □

Don Hollway writes from York—not Godwinson's York of old, but York, Pennsylvania, of the New World. As further reading please try J.F.C. Fuller's Military History of the Western World (Vol. I) or F.M. Stenton's Anglo-Saxon England.