

Banbury History Society talk

February 11th, 2021

“Conquered England: the Norman Conquest and the end of the Anglo-Saxon state?”

[slide one: Aethelstan]

Unification

In 927, Æthelstan, king of the Anglo-Saxons, had conquered the Scandinavian kingdom of the Northumbrians centred on York and at a meeting on 12 July at Eamontbridge, by Penrith on the Cumberland-Westmorland border (the frontier between the kingdoms of Strathclyde and England), confirmed peace with pledges and oaths with the chief non-English kings ruling Britain having previously received the submission of the English king of northern Northumbria, based at Bamburgh.¹ These kings included Hywel, king of the West Welsh, Constantine, king of the Scots and Owain, king of Gwent.² At, or soon after Eamontbridge, Aethelstan’s court poet Peter, wrote to the Queen Mother and announces Aethelstan’s creation of England:

“...he now rules with this

England made whole..” (*perfecta Saxoniam*)³

Æthelstan’s charters and coins 927x939 asserted grand styles such as *rex Anglorum* (‘king of the English’), and *rex totius Britanniae/Albionis* (‘king of the whole of Britain.’)⁴

But the wide-ranging alliance brought to bear against Athelstan in 937 indicated the fragility of this imperium. The kings of the Scots, Strathclyde Welsh, the Picts, the King of

¹ Dumville, D. ‘Origins of the Kingdom of the English,’ in *Writing, Kingship and Power in Anglo-Saxon England* ed. By R. Naismith & D. Woodman (Cambridge, 2017), p.72.

² ASC version D, p.107.

³ M. Lapidge, ‘Some Latin poems as evidence for the reign of Athelstan,’ *Anglo-Saxon England* ix (1980), p.98.

⁴ www.esawyer.org.uk; for example, charters S401, S402, S408.

Dublin and Viking leaders from Ireland and the Western Isles, and Northumbrians all came together in battle with Athelstan at 'Brunanburh', their intention to restore the kingdom of Northumbria in York, as a buffer zone between the Scots and south English.⁵ There is no doubt that this was a great battle, perhaps the greatest since the English first came to Britain, remembered decades later as the 'Great War,' and the dead were two of Athelstan's cousins. Michael Wood suggests that the location of the battle was possibly at Wendun, or 'Went Hill'; the River Went was an important boundary stream, the frontier of the Northumbria/Mercia and which crossed the vital Roman road to York between Doncaster and Castleford.

The golden age of Anglo-Saxon 'England' - as seen by some contemporaries - was the reign of Edgar but even he was described as 'ruler of the Angles, friend of the West Saxons and protector of the Mercians;' the coronation liturgy presented the monarch as king of three peoples (two in Athelstan's *ordo* when it was first used), the Saxons, Mercians and Northumbrians.⁶ The coronation at the Roman city of Bath served to articulate pan-British pretensions, and the *ordo* amended to include the prayer that the king be honoured *pre cunctis regibus britanniae* 'above all the kings of Britain'. A meeting followed Edgar's coronation at Bath in 973 with six kings - including the king of the Scots - in Chester who pledged him co-operation.⁷ The assembly at the Roman town of Chester consciously aped the continental gathering at Quedlinburg in eastern Saxony, where Otto I (Holy Roman Emperor since 962) celebrated Easter in the company of the dukes of Poland and Bohemia, along with legates from the Greeks, Hungarians, Bulgars, Danes and Slavs. Edgar had sent an embassy to Otto shortly before and would have known about the Quedlinburg gathering and attempted to copy it at Chester.⁸

⁵ Michael Wood (2013) 'Searching for Brunanburh: the Yorkshire Context of the 'Great War' of 937,' Yorkshire Archaeological Journal, 85:1, p142.

⁶G Molyneaux (2011) 'Why were some tenth-century English kings presented as Rulers of Britain?' *TRHS* 21 p64; G Molyneaux, (2017) 'Angli and Saxones in Æthelweard's Chronicle' *Early Medieval Europe* 25 pp212.

⁷ M Swanton (2000) *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* (2000) pp118-121 versions A, E

⁸ G Molyneaux (2011) 'Why were some tenth-century English kings presented as Rulers of Britain?' *TRHS* 21 p68.

Allegiance to the new kingdom was underwritten by oath. English freemen were expected to pledge their loyalty at the age of 12 from the early eleventh century to the late fifteenth, an oath associated with a tithing or frankpledge which meant taking responsibility for lawful behaviour by one's community as a condition of one's legal rights as a free man.⁹ Oaths of a similar type were sworn to ninth-century Carolingian kings.

England at its fullest extent in the mid-ninth century was bounded by the English Channel to the south, the Cornish and Welsh borders to the west and in the north-west by the kingdom of Dumbarton and the north by the boundary with the Picts; in effect, this was the same dimension as the Roman province, later the diocese of Britain. 'Britain' could therefore mean either the Roman imperial diocese or the island of Britain. The Britons held it to be their own sphere, a place of ethnic and political diversity to include Britoña, Brittany, Cornwall, Wales or British-speaking northern Britain as *Britannia*.¹⁰ The British-speaking 'Britons' were not wholly conquered by 'England' until the 13th century.

Professor James Campbell took the 'maximalist view' that "Late Anglo-Saxon England was a nation state. It was an entity with effective central authority, uniformly organised institutions, a national language, a national church, defined borders....and, above all, a strong sense of national identity."¹¹

[slide two: Cnut and Queen Emma]

The Danish Conquest

The end of this Anglo-Saxon state in 1016 was violent and traumatic. Thirty years of intermittent warfare is recorded in the Chronicles, from the 980s – harrying, burning and slaughter is repeatedly mentioned, followed by huge payments so that in 1013 the conquest by the Danish King Swegen and his son Cnut was seemingly straightforward. London, Southampton, Ipswich, Norwich, Thetford, Oxford, Cambridge, Bedford all burned or ravaged; raiding parties attacking the south coast, Essex, the Humber region,

⁹ Wormald, '*Engla Lond*,' p.7.

¹⁰ Dumville, '*Origins of the Kingdom of the English*,' in *Writing, Kingship and Power in Anglo-Saxon England* ed. By R. Naismith & D. Woodman (Cambridge, 2017), p.82.

¹¹ Campbell, '*The Late Anglo-Saxon State*,' p.47.

Northumbria, Cheshire, Devon, the English lost innumerable battles, entire regions were pillaged, manors and churches destroyed, leading thegns and earls killed in battle and even the Archbishop of Canterbury, Alfaeh, murdered. In a pit near Weymouth, archaeologists found a mass grave of decapitated men thrown into a heap, their heads piled one side; this was dated to around 1000 and they were Vikings, not local people.¹²

Contemporaries and historians condemned King Aethelred *Unraed* as unfit to govern, despite wearing the crown for decades. The repeated Danish invasions reflect the wealth and efficiency of the English state, ironically; military service and taxation came under great strain but continued to function to the very end. Aethelred's personal kingship was judged to be unworthy; his return in 1014 was conditional on governing justly which may reflect a shift towards a different type of kingship, more dependent upon the support of his people than upon divine right.¹³

After Aethelred's death in 1016, his son Edmund 'Ironside' lost the Battle of Ashingdon - Essex - where the slaughter 'of all the English' is recorded, and Cnut built a new minster built on the site, anticipating William the Conqueror's new abbey at Hastings by exactly 50 years. Furthermore, the repudiation of the English royal House by some of the leading nobles and clergy after Aethelred's death who elected Cnut says little for the standing of the monarchy.¹⁴

It was not over yet, though. Edmund and Cnut met on neutral ground at 'Ola's Island' (near Deerhurst by the River Severn in Gloucestershire), the site of an important Benedictine monastery and where St Alphege, murdered archbishop of Canterbury had once been a monk. Two Anglo-Saxon churches survive today at Deerhurst a quarter of a mile apart. The partition of England between Edmund Ironside and Cnut showed the unity of England to be illusory; Edmund succeeded to Wessex, Cnut to Mercia, reverting back to Alfredian era of the 880s, although a 12th century source suggested that the *regnum* remained with Edmund since Cnut's authority north of the Thames was that of a

¹² 'Building the Future, Transforming our Past: 'Celebrating development-led archaeology in England 1990-2015,' Historic England (2015), www.HistoricEngland.org.uk p.22.

¹³ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* (E) p.145.

¹⁴ Lawson, *Cnut: England's Viking King* p.82.

sub-king.¹⁵ It didn't last though, and Edmund's death soon afterwards allowed Cnut to become king of all England as well as Denmark and Norway until his death in 1035.

Almost a century of unified rule of all England by the House of Wessex and before that, three centuries of Anglo-Saxon kingship across what would become England came to an end in 1016. There was no certainty that it would resume. The break in the royal succession had been made, and the consequences of the Danish conquest meant that the future governance of England would be open successively to a another Danish succession (1035), to the surviving member of the Old English royal house (1042), to a native, non-royal magnate (1066) and finally, to a double foreign invasion - Norwegian and Norman in 1066; none of these were inevitable and several alternative scenarios might have played out, including an earlier Norwegian invasion scare and an exiled prince from Hungary. The sacral monarchy of Old England was transformed. The corpse of one king was exhumed and flung in a ditch; another had his tomb smashed to pieces and a third had his bones ground to dust under an abbey church built to mark his defeat. Cross-channel winds, sibling rivalry, murder, hostage-taking and decades-old dynastic alliances played a part. History was being made up as it went along, the customs and rules of succession extemporised depending on the ascendant faction but ultimately it was the sword that was the most decisive instrument.

[slide three: continental cousins]

In Anglo-Saxon England there was no regular institution of the 'designated heir.'¹⁶ Royal succession practices in late Anglo-Saxon England included the following: designating a successor; making a will and implanting the late king's will; the 'election' of those in power, the act of submission and oath of loyalty; the ritual of the king's consecration and

¹⁵ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* (D, E, F) pp.152-3; John of Worcester, in Williams, A: 'Regional Communities and Royal Authority in the Late Old English Kingdom: The Crisis of 1051-1052 Revisited,' *History* 989:329, n.4.

¹⁶ Dumville, D: 'The ætheling: a study in Anglo-Saxon constitutional history,' *Anglo-Saxon England* 8 (1979), p.33.

the coronation oath.¹⁷ Added to this was right by conquest, which Cnut had exercised in 1016 and Duke William would also do in 1066.

The conquests of England in 1016 and 1066 perversely demonstrate the strength of the Old English polity; a wealthy, well-administered entity divided by treachery and regional diversity. There has to be, after all, something intact and identifiable to conquer -the better defined a state with borders and laws, the more complete the conquest; successful invasion does not necessarily equate to a failed state, as the rapid and total conquest of modern France in June 1940 attests.¹⁸ It is therefore a paradox of the late Anglo-Saxon state that its strengths made it vulnerable.¹⁹

Cnut's death in 1035 triggered a succession dispute between his two sons (Harold I and Harthcnut) but their premature deaths led to the chance succession of one of Aethelred's sons, Edward, from exile in Normandy, but who had to swear an oath to uphold Cnut's Laws in 1041 at Hurst's Head (a long shingle spit of land between Hampshire and the Isle of Wight) as a precondition to his kingship and election.²⁰ This was a pre-arranged gathering with the 'thegns of all England' and Dr John Maddicott suggests that it fits the pattern of peacemaking and treaty negotiation in medieval Europe, which were often sited on islands, boats or boundaries. The meeting between Cnut and Edmund Ironside in 1016 on Olney Island, near Deerhurst, was a recent example and the famous rowing of Edgar on the River Dee by eight kings in 973 may have been a treaty made between equals, in neutral space on a boat and at a border point; in 921, Charles the Simple had concluded a peace treaty with Henry I on a boat anchored in the middle of the Rhine.²¹ The sealing of Magna Carta that took place at Runnymede (almost an island) in 1215 was

¹⁷ Baxter, S: 'Edward the Confessor and the Succession Question' in *Edward the Confessor: The Man and the Legend* (ed Mortimer, R. 2009), p.82, note 19.

¹⁸ Horne, A: *To Lose a Battle: France 1940* (1990); Bloch, M: *Strange Defeat* (1949). Bloch was a medieval historian, executed in 1944, and founding member of the Annales school of history.

¹⁹ Baxter, S: 'The limits of the Anglo-Saxon State,' in *The Early Medieval State: European Perspectives* eds. W. Pohl & V. Wieser (Vienna 2009), p.503.

²⁰ Maddicott, 'Edward the Confessor's Return,' pp.650-666.

²¹ Maddicott, 'Edward the Confessor's Return,' p.662.

in this tradition and in modern times, some of us might recall the Regan/Gorbachev summit in the winter of 1986 at Reykjavik, Iceland.

William or Harold?

It is hard not to see Edward the Confessor's reign as a prelude to the Norman Conquest, since the last fifteen of the twenty-four years of his reign were clouded with doubts and controversies over the succession. The problem with Edward's succession crises is that it is teleological: all points lead towards the inexorable and inevitable conquest of England in 1066. It need not have been so, right up until the middle of the day at Hastings in October 1066. But it was, and so the debates pick over the finite details of each chronicle, event and motive of the key players in an attempt to piece together a narrative that holds water. None do. William of Malmesbury in his *History of England* (1120s) pointed out that the facts were uncertain and ever since then historians have failed to agree.²² Most of the details of the succession and the events of 1066 come from post-Conquest Norman sources justifying the conquest but the English sources, sparse though they are, are just as politicised.

[slide four: Harold in Normandy]

In the words of Professor Sir James Holt, William's succession to the throne of England was based on a 'concocted, trumped-up claim' advanced so successfully by Norman propaganda that it has confused historians ever since.²³ Furthermore, William had succeeded to the duchy of Normandy (as a bastard minor) just as the rules of succession were hardening - two generations or so later, he would not have 'stood a chance.' The chief Norman source, Duke William's chaplain, former soldier and eyewitness William of Poitiers, was writing in the 1070s for a wide audience (both English and Norman) and used classical allusions to highlight the legitimacy of duke William's claim; he was familiar

²² Baxter, S: 'Edward the Confessor and the Succession Question' in *Edward the Confessor: The Man and the Legend* (ed Mortimer, R. 2009), p.78-81; D. Bates (2016) *William the Conqueror* pp108-120; 191-200.

²³ Holt, *Colonial England 1066-1215* p. xvi.

with English geography and succession practices and his work was used by 12th century historians of the Conquest.²⁴

William of Poitiers tells us that duke William was responsible for putting Edward on the throne in 1042 – unlikely since duke William was around 15 years old and facing multiple threats in the duchy at that time although the close relations between Duke Robert and Edward would lend it credibility – and, more likely, that Edward designated William his heir, an offer conveyed by the Norman archbishop Robert of Jumieges in 1051 and sworn on oath by the leading English magnates with a son and grandson of Godwin handed over as hostages.²⁵ At a later date, Edward sent Earl Harold to confirm this grant with an oath, and Harold became William’s man on this visit and swore to uphold the claim when Edward died which means that he perjured himself when he took the throne after Edward’s death in 1066. Furthermore, Harold was consecrated by Archbishop Stigand *illegally*, as seen in the Bayeux Tapestry, but William was crowned by Ealdred after an election with English nobles and bishops, completing his rightful claim that started with a papal blessing for the campaign. This post-Conquest Norman triumphalist narrative is riddled with anomalies. It is unlikely that Godwin would swear such an oath on his return to England in 1052 and Harold, at that time earl of East Anglia and leading nobleman, is not mentioned; Harold’s oath on the infamous crossing to Normandy is placed variously at Bayeux, Bonneville, and Rouen.

[slide 5: the oath]

It appears that in this period of the middle 1060s, Edward gradually retired from political life, spending his time in prayer, hunting and in charitable works, a saintly life memorably described in the *Life of Edward*. But if Edward were so withdrawn from governing, and so seemingly powerless under the Godwin fraternity, why would he order Harold to travel to Normandy, probably in the summer of 1064, to confirm his offer of the throne in 1051

²⁴ *The Gesta Guillelmi of William of Poitiers*, ed. R. H. C. Davis & M. Chibnall (Oxford 1998); for a recent reappraisal, see Emily A. Winkler (2016) ‘The Norman Conquest of the classical past: William of Poitiers, language and history’, *Journal of Medieval History*, 42:4, pp. 456-478.

²⁵ Bates, *William the Conqueror* p.110.

to Duke William? There is nothing in the English sources – any version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* or the *Life of King Edward* - about this visit but the Norman sources explain it as an official mission sanctioned by Edward for Harold to confirm the promises of 1051-2 because that is what they wanted everyone to believe.²⁶ Indeed, 22 of the 76 remaining plates of the Bayeux Tapestry – made in England under Norman direction and suitably ambiguous throughout - are devoted to the Normandy ‘mission.’²⁷ The solution to these differences could lie in the hostages sent to Normandy by Edward to guarantee the peace between Edward and Godwin back in 1051-2.²⁸ Taken together, most of the contemporary English and Norman sources, and the later, 12th century sources agree that some sort of promise was made to William and that hostages from Godwin’s family were sent to him as a guarantee for Godwin’s good behaviour after his return to England later in 1052.²⁹ These hostages included Earl Harold’s brother and nephew and he asked the king to go to Normandy to bring them home; the king agreed, but Harold walked into a Norman trap, forced by Duke William to swear on holy relics that he would help to ensure the Norman succession on Edward’s death. This information comes from Eadmer, an English monk at Canterbury, writing in around 1115 and his narrative fits nicely with the scenes in the Bayeux Tapestry.³⁰ Harold returned with only one hostage, leaving his younger brother Wulfnoth behind, who remained under house arrest until 1087, when King William released him.³¹

William of Jumièges (1070) tell us that Edward sent Robert to the duke with a message, appointing the duke as heir to the kingdom, later sending Harold to guarantee the crown to the duke by his fealty and confirm it with an oath.³² William of Poitiers (c1071) echoes this, the initial pledge and Harold’s mission to Normandy, blown off course and captured by Guy of Ponthieu.³³ According to William of Poitiers, Harold swore fealty to the duke and took an oath of his own free will to represent Duke William at King Edward’s court and to use all his wealth and influence to ensure William’s succession.

²⁶ Bates, *William the Conqueror* p.193.

²⁷ Wilson, D. M. *The Bayeux Tapestry* (London 2004), plates 4-26.

²⁸ Baxter, S: ‘Edward the Confessor and the Succession Question’ pp.107-8.

²⁹ Bates, *William the Conqueror* pp.116-117.

³⁰ Van Kempen ‘A mission he bore,’ p.593.

³¹ Bates, *William the Conqueror*, p.119.

³² Douglas, *EHD*, ii, p.215.

³³ *EHD*, ii, p.217.

Whatever did or did not happen in 1064/5, in October 1065 rebellion in Northumbria turned all the best laid plans upside down. Harold's brother, Tostig, was an unpopular Earl of Northumbria and amongst the rebels were Edwin Earl of Mercia and his brother Morcar.³⁴ Harold was sent to negotiate and seemingly failed to find a peace, but Tostig accused him of treachery and fled the realm to Count Baldwin in Flanders again.³⁵ Morcar was appointed to the earldom of Northumbria and so the balance of power shifted dramatically in the north of the eve of 1066; furthermore, and indicative of Harold's ambitions, Harold married Edwin and Morcar's sister, Eadgyth. He was exceptionally well-placed now to either take the throne or accept it, if offered – or in Norman eyes, hold it for William to claim.

[slide 6: the death of Edward]

Shortly after Tostig fled Edward fell ill with a series of strokes and died January 4th or 5th, 1066. The day of his burial before the high altar in his newly consecrated abbey at Westminster, 6th January, 1066, Harold was crowned king in a ceremony that would usually take place some months afterwards.³⁶

The E version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (the most pro-Godwin) says that;

'Earl Harold succeeded to the kingdom of England just as the king had granted it to him, and also men chose him for it.'³⁷

³⁴ Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (C, D, E) pp.190-193

³⁵ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (C, D, E) pp.190-193; version C does not mention Edwin and Morcar's role in the rebellion and emphasises Tostig's oppressive rule.

³⁶ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (C, D, E) pp.192-197; Wilson, D. M. *The Bayeux Tapestry* (London 2004), plate 31.

³⁷ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (E) p.197.

However, the C version, generally hostile to the Godwins, says something rather different:

'the wise man committed the kingdom

To a distinguished man, Harold himself...' ³⁸

Committing or entrusting the kingdom was not the same as granting the kingdom; the D version, does not mention Archbishop Ealdred in Harold's coronation either, a telling silence given Ealdred's links to this version. Version C does, however, uncharacteristically praise Harold as a 'distinguished man...a princely earl, who at all times loyally obeyed his lord...' the first time this (Mercian) version has anything decent to say about the Godwins, possibly because by this time Harold had married Ealdgyth, sister of Edwin and Morcar.³⁹

Another English source close to the events was the *Life of King Edward* which paints the detailed portrait of Edward's deathbed scene used in the Bayeux Tapestry and has Edward say in similar terms to C and D of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*: 'I commend this woman [Queen Edith] and all the kingdom to your protection.' This could mean he was leaving the kingdom *to* Harold or it could mean he was appointing Harold tutor, or protector, *of* the kingdom; it is not explicit and written after the trauma of Hastings, had the best interests of the dowager queen, not the slain Harold, at heart.

The deathbed scene in the Bayeux Tapestry was based on the *Life of King Edward* and is also telling in what it does not tell: three men gather round the dying Edward in bed, a woman at his feet (Edith?); Edward reaches out to touch the hand of the man kneeling on his left (Harold?) and all the inscription says is: 'Here King Edward in bed talks to his faithful followers.'⁴⁰ It could mean that Edward offers the throne to Harold, or tells him to hold the throne for another (Edgar?) or that he is telling Harold to support the succession of Duke William. All of these are possible but the weight of the English

³⁸ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (C, D) pp.194-5.

³⁹ Baxter, 'MS C of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and the Politics of Mid-Eleventh-Century England,' p.1213; van Kempen 'A mission he bore' p.606.

⁴⁰ Wilson, D. M. *The Bayeux Tapestry* (London 2004), plate 30.

evidence (the Bayeux Tapestry, the *Life*, versions C and D of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*) all point towards some sort of protectorship rather than designation of Harold as king. And if he was protector most likely to Edgar, King Edward's great-nephew and royal prince, this poses an intriguing counter-factual scenario, since with Edgar on the throne, Duke William's invasion would never have gained traction and the Old English state would have continued as it had under Edward.

According to Herman of Bury St Edmund's, who was writing before 1070 and for Abbot Baldwin, King Edward's physician and likely to have been at the deathbed Harold won the crown by 'cunning force,' favour and by 'extortion' - it was not clear since the Northumbrians only swore allegiance when he travelled north with Bishop Wulfstan and at the Battle of Hastings itself, version D of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* tells us that Harold fought hard '...with those men who wanted to support him,' which clearly suggests that there were those who did *not* want to support him.⁴¹

[slide 7: Harold's coronation]

If the post-Conquest, near-contemporary English sources equivocate, William of Jumièges (writing c1070, contemporary but after the fact) tells us that Harold 'immediately seized the kingdom.' William of Poitiers says in colourful language, 'this insensate Englishman did not wait for public choice, but breaking his oath, and with the support of a few ill-disposed partisans, he seized the throne,' and specifically says Harold was 'ordained king by the unhallowed consecration of Stigand,' deliberately drawing attention to a potentially illegal coronation.⁴²

However, William of Poitiers also states that King Edward gifted Harold the throne on his deathbed and that the earlier promise made by Edward (during Duke William's visit to England in 1051) and confirmed by Harold (during his visit to Normandy in 1064) gave William the better claim and it is judgement of God at the battle of Hastings that decides the matter. In Norman eyes, a promise of succession could not be legally revoked; the

⁴¹ The *Miracles of St Edmund* (Bates, William the Conqueror p.214); The *Life of Wulfstan* was uncertain as to Harold's popularity (Baxter, S: 'Edward the Confessor and the Succession Question' p.114); for the battle of Hastings, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (D). p199.

⁴² Douglas, *EHD*, ii, p218.

offer made by Edward to William in 1051 was therefore a gift of property in testamentary law, considered binding and irrevocable but in Old English law, a deathbed bequest superseded previous offers and by doing this (if he did) Edward the Confessor knowingly created the situation that could only be solved by war, since both Harold and William believed they had the right.⁴³ Having spent half his adult life in Normandy, Edward would have been aware of these legal differences and by building up the Godwin siblings and deliberately leaving aside Edgar Ætheling (Edmund Ironsides' grandson) he parted company with centuries of English custom and invited catastrophe on the kingdom. With the bones of the sources picked clean by historians we are left with the thought that this was not a conspiracy but instead it looks suspiciously like a *cock-up*.

Edward the Confessor was the first monarch not to produce surviving sons for generations – probably centuries - and Harold Godwinsson, conqueror of Wales, cousin to King Swegen II of Denmark, brother to the ex-queen and brother-in-law to the earls of Mercia and Northumbria and with vast resources at his disposal, could make a strong case for starting a new dynasty, rather like the Capetians had done so in France in 987 with the election and coronation of Hugh Capet, duke of the Franks, also chosen for his vigour and nobility at a time of crisis.⁴⁴ If Harold had won the battle of Hastings, this ambition for a new dynasty could have been realised, re-orientating England in an Anglo-Danish sphere once again - but of course he did *not* win the battle.

The Norman Invasion

Post-Conquest Norman historiography presents Duke William's invasion as blessed by the Pope, taking a papal banner into what was in effect a prototype holy war (a model refined and used with great success in 1095 in what became the First Crusade) and with an inevitable victory.⁴⁵ The reality was that in 1066 there were several possibilities since

⁴³ Baxter, S: 'Edward the Confessor and the Succession Question' p.117; Bates, *William the Conqueror*, pp.118-119.

⁴⁴ Dunbabin, J. *France in the Making* (Oxford 1985), p.37; Hallam, E. M. *Capetian France 987-1328* (London 1980) p.23.

⁴⁵ D. Bates, *William the Conqueror* 2016 pp219-222; William of Poitiers, Douglas, *EHD*, ii, p.219.

the invasions of Cnut had reinforced a pattern of invasion and conquest dating from the near destruction of the English kingdoms in the 870s. The invasion of King Harald Hardrada, in September 1066 was formidable, initially successful and a reminder of northern separatism; the English *fyrð* was wiped out outside York, earl Tostig, Harold Godwinsson's brother, had defected, but Hardrada was defeated at Stamford Bridge in pitched battle weeks later.

[slide 8: the Norman fleet]

Norman invasion planning and logistics were on a massive scale. The detail is in the Bayeux Tapestry for all to see; felling trees, planning the planks by the carpenters, armour – hauberks, helmets, spears, swords - cartloads of food, bread ovens, forges, barrels and skins of wine, horses and the many ships needed to make the crossing; such an expedition far outweighed anything William and his companions had ever done in a lifetime of campaigning on horseback in the forests and borderlands of Normandy, Maine and Brittany and so the planning was all the more remarkable.⁴⁶ It also depended on luck, or they would have said, God's fortune; the right cross-channel winds and navigating the most treacherous currents and coast of northern Europe successfully for the first time since the Roman Empire and the last until 1944, in the opposite direction and even then it was touch and go.

[slide 9: the Norman campaign]

The Battle of Hastings itself was by no means guaranteed to be a Norman victory and does not necessarily suggest a feeble state lacking strong leadership and in need of modernisation. It was a monumental achievement of Harold's leadership and the Anglo-Saxon state to field armies to fight not one but three major battles in the space of one month; having waited all summer, the timing was critical and both invasion fleets arrived in late September. In William of Poitiers' own words, Harold guarded the coast 'with an

⁴⁶ Lewis, 'Audacity and Ambition in Early Norman England,' p.41; Wilson, *The Bayeux Tapestry* plates 35-38.

innumerable army and was possessed of a 'great fleet and highly skilled sailors who had long experience of the dangers and hazards of sea-warfare,' whereas the Normans were apparently building a fleet from scratch.⁴⁷

William himself, in a lifetime of military campaigning, had perhaps only fought two set-piece battles (Val es Dune 1047 and Varaville, 1057) before Hastings. They were rare and risky; William was believed killed during the battle which caused panic and near defeat. Harold's stunning victory over Hardrada would in normal times be celebrated along the lines of another Brunanburh and secured him a legacy of invincibility - but these were not normal times.

[slide 10: the battle; William's banner]

Almost all the nearest contemporary sources for the battle of Hastings were written by the Normans or under Norman direction (William of Poitiers, William of Jumieges, the Bayeux Tapestry); the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles offer only a few brief lines and only two versions mention it, D & E.

On hearing of William's late landfall at Pevensey, Harold turned his tired and depleted troops south to London, not pausing to rest and gather reinforcements, hoping to repeat the surprise victory at Stamford Bridge; in any case, it was in the interests of both parties to force an engagement with winter coming and William's back to the sea. Furthermore, William had already started burning, looting, kidnapping and raping in Harold's personal patrimony to draw him into battle.⁴⁸ William was ready and formed up on the road to London so perhaps Harold was the caught off-guard.⁴⁹ The battle took all day, rare in

⁴⁷ Douglas, *EHD*, ii. p.220; Wilson, *The Bayeux Tapestry* plates 35=36.

⁴⁸ D Bates (2016) *William the Conqueror* pp234-5

⁴⁹ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* version D ('William came upon him by surprise before all his people were marshalled' E ('before all his raiding-army had come').

medieval warfare, and only ended with Harold's death in the early evening. It is likely that the forces at Hastings were more evenly matched than the traditional view of the Norman 'David' against the English 'Goliath' perhaps 10,000 troops on either side.⁵⁰

[slide 11: the battle; Odo's mace]

[slide 12: the death of Harold: an eye for an eye?]

Continuity and Devastation

Between 1066-1071 the new regime seized control of the institutional machinery, imposing a heavy tax in 1067; the coinage system was unchanged in William I's reign and beyond, writs, their function and personnel continued, the famously complete writ to the citizens of London issued in 1067. Continuity had been a feature after Cnut's conquest in 1016, too. William was crowned by Ealdred of York, who had probably crowned Harold using the same coronation ordo. Furthermore, the English were now used to foreign rulers and saw William as an agent of divine punishment; ASC D 'the sins of the people' (commissioned by Ealdred) which echoes Archbishop Wulfstan's Sermon of the Wolf to the English in 1002-3 links the Danish raids to the English sins.⁵¹

The witness lists of two diplomas issued in May 1068 suggest that William might have governed like Cnut, through a joint elite, since they contain vernacular and Latin text and equal numbers of *Franci* and *Angli*.⁵² The earliest writs issued by William were in English and addressed to English officials, such as Eadnoth the Staller and Tofi the sheriff of Somerset in 1067.⁵³ Crucially, Old English administration continued for a while, William confirming rights and lands of Regenbald, Edward the Confessor's priest and 'chancellor'

⁵⁰ B Bachrach (2013) 'The Norman Conquest, Countess Adela and Abbot Baudri' in D. Bates (Ed.), *Anglo-Norman Studies XXXV: Proceedings of the Battle Conference* (2012) pp. 65-78.

⁵¹ Baxter, 'The limits of the Anglo-Saxon State,' p.512.

⁵² Baxter, S, '1066 and Government,' pp.146-7.

⁵³ Douglas, *EHD*, ii, p.430.

in a writ (in English) of 1067 which also refers to 'King Harold,' and another writ which refers to Edward, 'my kinsman.'⁵⁴

[slide 13: Domesday Book]

The rebellions between 1068-71 changed this policy dramatically. Writs were issued in Latin and the new officials were Norman and in Domesday Book Harold is uniformly referred to as 'Earl Harold.' History had been whitewashed. The secular and ecclesiastical elites were purged and Frenchmen dominated royal assemblies from 1075 onwards. The completeness of this is seen in Domesday Book. This was not William's original intention perhaps.

The defeat of Harold Godwinsson at Hastings was therefore secured by a devastating and brutal campaign not seen since the Viking Great Army penetrated central England in the 870s. This was not a repeat of Cnut's conquest after 1016; the following seven years witnessed devastation, plunder and famine in an unprecedented manner. It was a military occupation in a foreign land with little or no pretence to legitimate authority; castles, garrisons and mounted troops patrolled the land. Norman troops ate and slept together in operational units. Following a brief respite, rebellion was crushed in the Welsh border, south-west, East Anglia and most brutally, in the north, Yorkshire, where tens of thousands died and the last Anglo-Danish earl, Waltheof, executed.⁵⁵ The destruction in the North was this time decisive and Lanfranc ensured the primacy of Canterbury over York in 1070. The entity of 'England' was never guaranteed; the Danish alliances with the rebellions of 1069, 70 and 75 could have kept the Normans in the South and the threat of a major Danish invasion in 1085 could well have divided the kingdom.

⁵⁴ Douglas, *EHD*, ii, pp.430-431.

⁵⁵ The reign of William the Conqueror has been comprehensively revisited by David Bates, *William the Conqueror* (2016): "...William was the destroyer of lives, the bringer of a disaster of unnecessary proportions to the English...the scale of human tragedy is beyond our knowing." (p526).

Bishop Ermenfrid of Sitten issued penances on the Normans who took part in the invasion and conquest of England and it reveals the nature of warfare in its ugly glory: one year penance for each man killed, forty days for wounding in the 'great battle;' one year for killing in search of food and three years for killing for plunder during the campaign before the coronation of William; more lenient were rapes and fornication, to be punished as if committed in their own country and theft from churches to be returned or not permitted to be sold.⁵⁶

In one sense, the Norman Conquest can be seen as a Viking conquest after all, since Alfred's palace and cathedral at Winchester were destroyed and his bones scattered.⁵⁷ Cnut's great royal monument in the Old Minster at Winchester was smashed to pieces and thrown out but the site of William's victory at Battle commemorated permanently; Old English poetry was abandoned, surviving by chance in obscure codices, and monastic books destroyed.⁵⁸ Battle Abbey was built on the site of the victory of 1066, just as Cnut had built a minster at Ashingdon. It was the end of Old England. No other conquest in European history has had such disastrous consequences for the defeated.

From 1066 onwards, reigns were dated in charters, letters and statutes high and low as 'after the conquest' for the following five centuries, a permanent reminder of the Norman Conquest in the national consciousness.⁵⁹ (see footnote)

1066 was a major and transformative event in the history of the Latin West due to the nearly complete displacement of the English ruling elite, a feat of valour and prowess surpassed only by the First Crusade in 1099; the conquest of England in 1066 was noted by writers across western Europe, from Bremen, Poitiers, Bamberg and Rome it drew literary praise from poets across north-west Europe and by the 1070s it was clear that their world had changed permanently.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Douglas, *EHD*, ii, pp.606-7.

⁵⁷ <https://www.archaeology.co.uk/articles/news/a-great-discovery-remains-of-king-alfred-or-his-son-found-in-winchester.htm>

⁵⁸ Lewis, 'Audacity and Ambition in Early Norman England,' p.43.

⁵⁹ For example, in the Stratford-on-Avon Guild accounts concerning the endowment of the grammar school, 'the 22nd year of King Edward IV after the conquest' ie 1482 (Myers, *EHD*, iv, pp.916-917.)

⁶⁰ Lewis, 'Audacity and Ambition in Early Norman England,' p.26.

The Norman Conquest 'murdered the written Anglo-Saxon language as surely as it demolished the Old Minster at Winchester.'⁶¹ It was the predominant language of government under Edward the Confessor but very rapidly in the 1070s it was swamped by Latin, which became the main language of record for the rest of the middle ages but since Latin was a clerical language it was supplemented with a vernacular; Anglo-Saxon under William I, Henry I but French for the Magna Carta in 1215, French and English in the baronial reform of 1258-9 and it was French that was more widely used in business transactions, English not pulling ahead until the mid-14th century.⁶² Only one Old English diploma and two writs survive from William II, seven from Henry I, one from Stephen and five from Henry II; almost all are bilingual with Latin; Old English was used locally for manumissions, attested by priests and reeves or the hundred court and occasionally for administration in the north.⁶³

The Norman Conquest resulted in the 'most comprehensive elite takeover in English history.'⁶⁴ Conquest and colonization destroyed the upper ranks of the English landed society so that by 1086 about 8% of the landed wealth remained in native hands; and that landed wealth became sharply concentrated from 37,000 Anglo-Saxon landholders into the hands of 1,150 new tenants-in-chief holding newly cast estates.

All land was now in lordship, dependent on personal and tenure and no tenure without service. Tenancies now descended unfragmented to a single male heir which meant that the material bonding of the old kin-group was dissolved; the church preserved the old ways longest, but the church was subjected to knight-service within six years of the battle of Hastings.⁶⁵ New practices of inheritance and a new law governing tenure, devolution and descent of landed property were established, a break with the English past - a 'revolution.'⁶⁶ This could only be achieved within the existing administrative and legal structures of the old courts and the old law which remained, to be settled locally in manor,

⁶¹ J. C. Holt, *Colonial England 1066-1215* (London 1997), p.13.

⁶² J. C. Holt, *Colonial England 1066-1215* (London 1997), p.13.

⁶³ J. C. Holt, *Colonial England 1066-1215* (London 1997), p.13 (note 63).

⁶⁴ S. Baxter & C. P. Lewis, 'Domesday Book and the transformation of English landed society, 1066-1086,' *Anglo-Norman Studies* 46 (2017), p.343.

⁶⁵ Holt, *Colonial England 1066-1215*, p.5; assuming the writ to the Abbot of Evesham for the five knights was general practice.

⁶⁶ Holt, *Colonial England 1066-1215* p.xiii.

hundred and borough, never reaching the assizes or the courts of common law, which sustained the old procedures. All land was held, directly or indirectly, of the king, and all fealties ascended to him, principles sealed in Domesday and the Salisbury Oath of 1086; William combined the authority of an old English monarchy with a feudal lordship clear cut because it had been imposed amidst conquest.

In 1086, all land was either the king's own land or held by tenants-in-chief, their estates called 'honors' or 'fiefs.' In 1086 the royal demesne (the king) was worth £17,800, 23% of the total; another fourteen landholders held 26% of the total, thus almost half of the kingdom's wealth was in the hands of 15 individuals.⁶⁷ Overall, 90% of the landed wealth of England belonged to 150 people and but within that group there was an inner elite: the king and the five wealthiest tenants-in-chief (including his two half-brothers) controlled 48% of the kingdom's landed wealth and the other 52% by around 140 lords.⁶⁸ [Yes, it's that 48/52 split once again].

[slide 14: Tower of London]

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Old English state survived but its monarchy and its ruling elite were destroyed. The monarchy itself was unable to retain control of the state. Æthelred II was temporarily ejected 1013-14; his son King Edmund partitioned the kingdom with Cnut in 1016 and Æthelred's other son Edward the Confessor swore to uphold the laws of Cnut to assembled nobility before taking the crown in 1042. Edward's inability to ensure a decisive succession in his final years, even with an obvious royal prince in his court left the kingdom at the mercy of his distant relation, the bellicose bastard Duke William of Normandy and the overmighty Earl Harold Godwinsson. Ethnically, England remained 'England' but in its civic form, it the state longer existed as 'England', where we began with Aethelstan's proclamation in 927 and stunning victory at Brunanburh in 937. Its laws and courts continued but in a different language; its churches and monasteries were

⁶⁷ Baxter & Lewis, 'Domesday Book and the transformation of English landed society,' p.378.

⁶⁸ Baxter & Lewis, 'Domesday Book and the transformation of English landed society,' p.380.

replaced and headed by French or Italian monks; its axis tilted decisively away from the Scandinavian world towards Europe, to the new ties that bound England's destiny and would do so for the next five centuries.

The conquests of England in 1016 and 1066 were not aberrations resulting from the odd unlucky battles or incompetent ruler though. The Danish conquest can be seen as a natural conclusion of almost three centuries of invasion and settlement from Scandinavia; the Norman conquest was a consequence of almost a century of closer alliances with Normandy and Flanders. The political unity of England was put to the test and found wanting; the country was divided between two kings in 1016 and loyalties divided between the old kingdoms of Northumbria, Mercia and Wessex. The battles of 1066 and the devastating rebellions of 1068-71 were the concluding episodes of the final conquest which should be seen as a process rather than an event, influenced by and linked closely to, Wales, Ireland, Scotland as well as the wider worlds of the Scandinavia and north-west Europe. England's past had been forged by Scandinavia for centuries and before that, immigration from north-west Europe; after 1075 it decisively shifted to Normandy and from there, into territories in mid and southern France which would shape the future of England into the 16th century.

Thank you.